

LONDON 2017

‘Oh yeah, life goes o’ on. blah, blah... the pain lingers on. Oh yeah, life goes o’ on...’ The song finished with a scream as Joe felt claws grabbing, pulling at his right shoulder. Lunch took a jump start back up his oesophagus. ‘Becks, bloody hell, give me a heart attack.’

‘Then pipe it down. Christ, can you hear yourself? Get those things out of your ears, or turn it down.’

‘Oh, sorry, was I doing it again?’

‘*Was I doing it again?* I wouldn’t mind if you could actually sing. I don’t want to be the one who has to clean up all this glass when it shatters. And did I mention that you can’t sing?’

‘Philistine.’

‘Music lover.’

‘Becks, talent has to be nurtured.’

‘I vote for drowning in the river.’

‘Ooh, is that jealousy written in the wrinkles on your face? Thursday night at the Anchor, love; you’re going down. This is a voice that was born to Karaoke.’

‘Hmm, I may stay in and wash my hair. Oh, did I mention his Highness is in the building.’

‘What... why?’ *Uh oh look at this place?* ‘It’s Tuesday. On Tuesday Professor Kerm plays golf. Why isn’t he at golf? Aww Becks, help me tidy up.’

‘No, sorry, too busy ironing my wrinkles.’

A lab full of cutting edge scientific equipment. Space age designs for the exploration of man’s Genome. It was all knee deep in Marvel comics, scrap paper, and last night’s take away.

‘Becks, please?’

‘No, and I’m not touching that. Eurgh, it looks like biological waste. What was it, curry? Did I mention I’ve bought a new frock for Thursday? You’ll love it. Got parrots from here to here. It’s so bright, I’m gonna rock. Sssss, I’ll melt the ice in my vodka.’

That biological waste was my chicken Madras. And this is a state of the art laboratory, why don’t we have more drawer space?

‘Becks, please.’

‘No, and I’m not touching that. The bin... put it in the bin.’

The lever went down and the bin lid opened. She was enjoying this as Joe dumped three foiled cartons inside.

My graphic novels? Spread across a multitude of surfaces. He’d been noting the pros and cons of the SuperHeroes wardrobe for an online survey. Paper was everywhere. *Did I do any work last night?* The problem with all nighters was the down-time waiting for results, checking results, re-loading the machinery, and then waiting for results.

‘Not in the centrifuge, Joe. And not in the lightCycler. Or the printer tray. Here, put your comics in here.’

She’d pressed the pedal again. It gaped open with awe for the Fantastic Four.

For a lab coat Becks was pretty cool. Her DNA was a cocktail of Border Terrier and left overs from area Fifty One. She was forty one, buxom, and clinically insane around her edges. She was Joe’s friend, his only friend really. His forever partner at Karaoke and quiz nights. What Becks didn’t know about alien abduction and pop music, it wasn’t worth knowing. Her singing, that was more of an acquired taste.

‘They’re graphic novels,’ Joe insisted, ‘and I’m not putting them in with the curry. Becks, stop looking in the mirror and help me.’

‘I think I might have a wrinkle?’

Just the one?

‘Try Kerm’s haemorrhoid cream, I hear it shrinks most things.’

‘I must have slept funny last night. Talking of which, have you been here since I left?’

‘No... yes.’

‘Why, you could have taken this lot home last night. Oh Joe, have you been messing with the machine again?’

‘No... yes.’

‘The Professor’s only come in to give that bloody thing a kiss; you do know that. Joe, it had better still be working.’

‘It’s perfect. No, better than perfect. I tweaked the linkage programme and refocused the... uh oh, was that the lift?’

Ten seconds from the doors. Joe’d timed it.

Where to put Thor, and Iron Man?

‘The ten second rule, Joe. Nine, eight.’

Ten seconds to hide everything, look surprised and busy. Oh, and pleased to see the Professor.

‘Put them in here. Come on.’ The bin lid impersonated PacMan.

‘I can’t put them in with dinner.’

‘Five, four, they’re SuperHeroes aren’t they?’

The doors hissed.

‘I’m so sorry guys.’ Captain America slipped from his hands. The bin slid back where it had come from. Joe’s blood pressure spiked and the temperature in the room seemed to drop.’

‘One...’ Becks turned and smiled as a short barrel shaped man in a lab coat entered. Professor Kerm. He got straight to the point as usual.

‘Do we have the results for the Calton Tex study yet?’ He asked with a voice Joe was sure hadn’t broken. He headed for the Kerminator, his prize jewel. The goose that laid all his golden eggs. A sixty square inch box of touch screen bio-technical awesomeness, and the only reason Joe had come to work for the Professor. And Joe had done the impossible; made the damn thing work. Big companies paid big bucks for its speed and accuracy.

‘Still waiting.’ Said Joe. ‘Shouldn’t be long now.’ *Another big fat cheque on it’s way. Am I smiling, or looking smug?*

‘No problems then? Good good, and you haven’t been...?’

What? Upgrading, improving, loving the bloody thing.

‘No sir, the enzymes are cracking the DNA as we speak. About an hour for the final results. No problems anticipated.’ *No, I haven’t scratched the paintwork. Yes, you don’t pay us enough. Hurry up or you’ll miss your tee time.* Joe stepped toward the screen. ‘I can run you through the numbers. Take about twenty minutes?’

‘No no, good good, excellent. Just checking in.’ The rotund chubby face nodded as his eyes scanned the room. What was he looking for, why had he come up to the second floor? It was Tuesday. Tuesday was golf day.

It is Tuesday today?

Kerm gave a smug grin and ran a hand across the Kerminator. It was his child; weened, milked, and fostered out to Joe. But Kerm held the patents. He nodded, turned, and left. Ten seconds later the lift doors dinged as they closed.

‘Breathe Joe. Joe?’

‘Why?’ Joe asked. ‘Why does he bother? He even put the coat on.’

‘I think he’s got a crush on you?’

‘That’s not funny. Aww, my graphic novels?’

‘They’re comics, Joe. And may they rest in perpetual Vindaloo.’

‘Madras... it was a really nice Madras.’

Joe was staring. He did a lot of staring at the machines. “Ground breaking, unique opportunity... cutting edge.” Just a few of the words Professor Kerm had used to lure him to the company.

“Private facility”, that wasn’t a lie. Everyone else in the company worked on the first floor. Just Joe and Becks upstairs. Why hadn’t he read the small print properly. He’d never earn his fortune working as Kerm’s employee.

Joe was twenty three years old and held three PHD’s from a Cambridge scholarship. He still wore the Uni scarf with pride. All he’d wanted when he left University was to announce himself to the world of genetics. That was the dream, and it still was. The reality had proven somewhat different, and involved a lot of staring, and reading graphic novels.

Becks did all the paperwork. Joe wanted to do paperwork but he wasn’t allowed. Union rules, apparently. Right now he was staring again. Staring at the Nano-isolator and running the programming through his head. It was Becks who’d dubbed this technological marvel, the Kerminator. After its owner, who put profit over dreams.

Microfluidics and nanotechnology, they worked in perfect harmony within the machine. It could strip blood samples to their working DNA in less than two hours. Press the red button and the magic began inside. It could screen a sample for any relevant gene sequence required. Results dropped out onto the plastic tray below.

Joe looked around the room. This was the reality, the Nano-bay, where one over qualified geneticist and his technician cared for an array of technical wonderment. Three benches, eight machines. On a good day a mycobacterium tuberculosis could be detected from a spit sample in less than three minutes. Unique, patented, and Joe had made it work.

Three months ago Joe and Becks had sequenced the entire genetic coding of a gravely ill child. They'd identified the genetic disease that threatened to kill her in just eighteen hours allowing doctors to make treatment decisions that had saved her life. That was a good day.

If someone asked them to do it, they could analyse all 3.2 billion chemical "bases" that make up the human genetic code. It might take a while, but they could do it ten times quicker than anyone else on the planet. Why hadn't anyone asked them to do that? That would be fun.

Joe sighed, his head lowered, he continued to stare. Right now the Kerminator was sequencing gene samples for patients hoping to trial a new drug designed to fight heart disease. Middle of a recession, work was a bit slow.

'Becks, it's your turn to make coffee.' He said.

'I'm busy.'

'No you're not, you're reading Hello magazine.'

'Shh, Victoria's got a new secret.'

'Seriously?' *What secret?* 'What secret? Becks?'

'Okay, look, happy now?'

‘They’ve been airbrushed, you do know that. Underwear like that wouldn’t make you any more... that’s to say that you wouldn’t... well, obviously you would. Not that you need to. Do you? You should buy those, definitely. Picturing them now... no I’m not.’

‘Joe, shut up. Have you ever seen a girl in her underwear? No, and you never will with an attitude like that. In fact, when was the last time you even dated a girl? Joe... Joe, why are you smiling? What aren’t you telling me?’

Nope, nothing to say. Staring at the machine.

Truth was Joe’s love life was as slow and sterile as the lab.

‘Joe, tell aunty Becky. Are you stalking someone again?’

‘No... maybe.’

‘Tell me, Tell me. Aunty Becky needs to know.’

‘I might be having, an encounter, with a young lady tonight’

‘Joe, you make it sound like fight night. If you’re seeing a woman for dinner, it’s a date. Say the words, *it’s a date*... unless its your mum of course.’

‘It’s not a date. Just a meal and a drink.’

‘That’s a date, love. Who is she?’

‘I haven’t actually met her... yet.’

‘You haven’t met her? Oh my goodness, Joe White is online dating. Where’s my phone, I have to tell someone.’

‘No, no phones. I’m not even going if you put it all over social media.’

‘Joe, take another look at Victoria’s secret. Look at the pictures, Joe. Up close. Joe, this is a real girl, with boobies and everything. Tell Becks the truth. It has to be a real girl, not one made from ones and zeros.’

‘Please don’t rub my nose with that thing. Becks, get off.’ Joe freewheeled his chair across the room. Found a table to put his feet up on. ‘It was your idea.’

‘I didn’t think you’d actually do it. What does she look like? Show me a picture. Prove she’s real.’ Joe pulled out his phone. ‘Oh wow, Joe... she’s really pretty? I hope that’s what she looks like when she turns up.’

‘Seriously? You don’t think...’

‘Joe, I’m teasing. I’m sure she’s lovely. And she’ll love you.’

‘Will she? No, I’ll cancel. Probably for the best.’

‘Joe, no... no cancelling. I so wish you could listen to yourself. Look at you, you look like Ken’s little brother. Barbie loves you, I love you... wassername on the phone will adore you. She will.’

‘I don’t know, I’m meeting her tonight. What do I say. What do I wear? Should I send someone else?’

‘She’ll want you, Joe. She will, honestly. She won’t get past the entrees without ripping your shirt off. Joe, was that the lift? Joe, quick, the ten second rule.’

‘I didn’t hear... are you sure?’ Chair wheels moved, the table rose into the air. The ceiling lights spun overhead. Someone was laughing as Joe stared at the ceiling.

'You're so not funny.' He said from the floor.

‘That was soooo amusing. Look, I’ve actually peed myself. Smile for the iPhone, Joe. Aaaand, sent to my Facebook page. Shall I print it off and frame it? It’s definitely going on Youtube.’

‘Not funny Becks. The Professor thinks I’m an oddball as it is.’

‘Headline love, who doesn’t? Can I send it to Ron? Can I, can I?’

‘Uncle Ron has no idea what Social Media is, as you well know.’

‘Then I pity him, not ever knowing what’s out there beyond radio four. Oh, and I pity you too.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes you. Cos you’ll end up old, gaga, and alone. Word from the wise, Joe. Whoever your date is tonight, marry her. Have babies before your sperm forget how to swim.’

‘I’m twenty three, Becks. I think they’ll wriggle on for a while longer.’

‘They’ll get lazy, Joe. They need to swim, hit the water and freestyle. Find a soft warm hot tub to release them into. No more floating them around in your bubble bath.’

‘Becks?’

‘No, don’t look at me like that. Go on, tell me I lie? Tell me?’

Really... to my face?

‘I’m gonna check the microarray, and then the Sequencer. And I think we’ve run low on cotton buds and toilet roll.’

‘There’s no point in hiding from the truth. I’m just saying.’

‘Becks, I’m not having this conversation. You can’t just...’ *oh thank God, results.* Paperwork began dropping into the Kerminator’s tray. ‘Go plot some numbers onto a graph or something. Find a flow chart, and something else to float.’

‘Fine, off to my mind palace. But Joe... I just want you to be happy. Ron does too.’

‘I am happy. Truly.’ *Sort of. Hardly my fault girls don’t like me.* ‘Oh, and leave the comparisons for me to chart. I’ll do them later on this evening.’

‘During pudding? You have a date, remember?’

‘They don’t usually get past the main course. I’ll check the gene sampling from the candidates against customer schematics when I get home. Let’s hope we don’t get any rejects. This drug looks like it’s a swimmer. Ahh, no, don’t say it... you have paperwork to do.’

Becks' kryptonite, data results. The only thing guaranteed to keep her tongue from wagging. He’d never seen anyone get so absorbed in the numbers. She was captivated by their allure.

Bless her, she’s just concerned. Or is it hope. No, just desperation for me to find someone. But there’s plenty of time for women. As soon as I run my own Company, and have a million bucks in the bank. Oh, and a brand new Ferrari parked outside. Two more years and Professor Kerm’s off my back. The lying bastard. And there’s nothing wrong with my sperm. And why is she talking to Ron about my sperm?

‘What’s going on?’ Asked Joe.

By its own standards the Unicorn was quiet tonight. All shiny brass poles and mahogany surfaces; even the glass behind the bar looked, well, clean. This was Uncle Ron’s waterhole. A public house that had held out against a tide of Wine Bars and pocket restaurants. An old fashioned pub hung over from the Forties. It was traditional, and homely. Not normally this clean. Had Jake, the owner, held a function for professional cleaners? Did Joe need to go out and come back in again? And why was the music so loud?

‘What’s going on?’ He asked Ron.

Sixty five years old, silver haired, and always a smile for his nephew. Joe’s Uncle on his dad’s side. A Londoner born and bred. A retired social worker. Forty years in a job that had taken its toll. Joe’s dad had always said that Ron gave too much of himself to the job.

Maybe Becks was right? It *was* about time that he moved out of Ron’s basement. Cut the cord and found a place of his own. Traded his bicycle for a brand new electric car?

Uncle Ron drew a breath and closed the paper he was reading.

‘Jake’s trying something new to pull in trade.’ He said.

‘What, cleanliness? Now there’s a novel idea. I suppose healthy customers might drink more.’ Joe’s gaze moved around the room. A group of Punks,

throwbacks from the eighties. An elderly couple canoodling by the jukebox.

‘Ron, where are all the tables? You did book me a table?’

‘Ah, I knew there was something I had to remember.’

‘Tell me you’re joking? Ron, I need a table. Where the hell are all the tables? I see three... only one not being used. I’m not sitting a woman by the toilet. Ron, where are all the tables? I can’t sit my date at the bar all night. I ask you to do one thing?’

‘Sorry son. Jake, can you turn the goggle-box up. Have you seen this, Joe? Those bloody Russians are up to no good again. It’s all over the news. The cheeky bastards have bought the interest payments on the Greek debt; can you believe that?’

‘No, not really. Ron, I need a table?’

‘And check out the price of said payments. Is there that much money in the EU? According to the BBC, Moscow did a deal with the Greeks to build two naval bases on Greek islands in the Med. They’re already moving some of their Baltic fleet. Honestly, they’re off their bloody heads. They can’t do that. Hey Jake, have you seen this?’

‘Yes mate. Send the Royal Navy in, that’ll sort things out.’

‘I couldn’t agree more.’

‘What can I get you, Joe.’ Jake asked.

‘Jake, I need a table.’

‘Joe, this is important.’ Ron insisted. ‘It affects us all. I tell you Jake, something’s going on. In the last twelve months things have got pretty spiky

on the Continent. And that bloody President Putin; Joe read this.’ He slid the paper toward Joe. ’He’s only threatening to squeeze the gas supplies again. You know how much it costs every month for that stuff?’

‘Really?’ *Don’t you dare pick up the paper.* ‘Put my rent up a few quid. Jake, I need a table?’

‘Joe, you don’t pay any rent.’

‘I’ll get you a pint, Joe.’

‘Jake, wait, I don’t want a... Come on, I need a table.’

Jake had owned the Unicorn for over forty years, and was a man of few words. In evolutionary terms he was the bipedal equivalent of a Rottweiler, but with less hair. A demeanour softened only by the floral designs of the tea towels that never seemed to leave his hands.

‘Guys, table, now... please.’

‘Jake, can we get the boy a table, and two chairs? He’s on a bit of a promise tonight.’

‘It’s not a promise, Ron. Where are all the tables anyway?’

‘We’re having a dance night.’ Said Jake.

‘Dance, seriously? Is Strictly doing a pub crawl? I swear, just when I think this place can’t get any worse. Oh no, Jake, where’s the karaoke machine?’

‘Out back. Jake thought a bit of choreography might bring in more trade. Good for Jake, eh, he’s showing entrepreneurial spirit. I mean, look at that lovely floor. Why fill it with tables when the young want to dance?’

‘That’s why London has a Club Scene. Ron, I need a table. Jake, please, I need a table.’

‘Ron’s winding you up, Joe. I told the Punks earlier that they have to move at eight.’ He looked at the slimline watch on his bearlike forearm. ‘They’ve got another forty five minutes. You need a refill, Ron?’

Is it illegal to thump old people?

‘Get the boy his drink, Jake. Joe, you need to pay more attention to world affairs. Eastern Europe’s not that far away these days. And if they open the gates to all those refugees. I’m telling you, it’ll be a free for all.’

‘What? Ron, I’ve got a woman coming in, oh, ten minutes.’

‘Sit down and have a drink with your Uncle. Plenty of time to turn another good woman toward the nunnery?’

‘You’re so funny. Hey Jake, any chance of turning the music down, just a bit?’

‘No.’

‘So Joe, if you’re on the pull. Why have you brought your briefcase with you? Why bring a briefcase on a date?’

‘It’s not really a date, it’s a...’

‘It’s a chance to get laid.’ Said Jake.

‘Err Joe, there’s something you need to see at the door.’

‘No Ron, what I need is Jake to turn the music down and get a table out of the back room. Look, eight minutes and counting?’

‘Joe, there’s a blonde girl at the door, and she’s really pretty. She’s either your date, or someone from health and safety.’

‘Is that her, Joe?’ Jake asked, tucking the tea towel into his belt, his free hand brushing at his shirt. ‘Bloody hell she’s a bit of alright. Hey Ron, let’s hope this is the one. She’ll save you a fortune in bubble bath.’

Ron’s drink came out of his nose as both men erupted into laughter

Becks, I’m going to kill you.

Things were going well. Joe was having fun. It seemed Kelly was enjoying herself too.

‘A white wine spritzer and my usual please Jake. And stop staring at her.’

‘She’s really pretty, Joe. What agency did you call?’

‘Drinks, please.’

‘Back to the lab later? Use one of your fancy machines to take a look inside her genes?’

‘Jake, that’s not funny.’

‘Seriously Joe, you be nice to her. Treat her like a lady. Do it for your uncle Ron; I want my basement back.’

‘I’ll try.’ *Stop staring.* ‘Do I look nervous?’

‘Scared to death, son.’

Okay, that’s about how I feel.

‘Shall I call Becks.’ Asked Jake. ‘Get her to come down and give you some tips?’

‘Ignore him Joe. You show that girl how nice you are.’

‘Guys, I’m not ten years old.’ *Okay, don’t trip spill or drool on her.*

‘Look at your boy, Ron. He’s like a dead man walking.’

‘Shhh. Jake, turn up the goggle-box, they’re talking about those bloody Russians again.’

‘Hey, sorry about the pensioners. The pub does a charity thing for local OAP’s. Three beers for the price of two, or something? Apparently there’s a Home, somewhere, close by. Frankly I’m in favour of euthanasia.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh, no, that was a joke.’

‘Oh.’

And there’s that look again?

‘Apologies for the wine not being cold. Problem with the chiller, apparently. I can go back and get you a lager? They have Carlsberg, that’s nice?’

‘No, really, I’m fine. I don’t mind warm wine. I know, weird right?’

Say something, Joe. Make a comment on her nice flowery blouse. Stop staring at her chest. Find some common ground. Make her laugh. Say something funny

‘Apologies for the table, the toilet an all.’

'It's been thirty minutes, Ron.

'And?'

'And the girls still here. You think there's love in the air?'

Ron turned away from the news on the TV above the bar. He considered his words carefully. After all, Joe was his Nephew.

'I reckon she's a bit slow. Must be. What other explanation is there? Jake, it's not funny. Poor sod never seems to get a break where women are concerned.'

'Ron, look harder. That girl's lost the will to live. Look, she can't even smile anymore.'

'My boy's doing alright over there. I've seen her smile.'

'A grimace doesn't count.'

'She smiled.'

'Grimace. Two quid says she'll make a break for it in less than ten.'

'I'm not betting on broken hearts.'

'I'll make it a fiver.' A five pound note slid onto the bar. 'Poor cow, that's her third glass of wine in half an hour.' Jake added. 'Put your money on the table, Ron. I've got a fiver that says Blondie will get up, complain her bladder has overloaded on the vino. She'll offer to get Joe a beer on her way back, just to reassure him that she's coming back. Only she's not going to

come back. There's a window in the ladies toilet, and I reckon she'll break the glass to get out.'

Ron laughed, but didn't mean to. The truth was plain to see.

'That's a fiver, Ron.'

'Come on Jake, he's my boy. I can't bet on his heart breaking. Okay, you're on. She'll fake a text, something life threatening. Her mum's been rushed to hospital, tried to kill herself with a spoon or something.'

'Good, that's good. I like it. Poor Joe, he's the only one who can't see it. Look at the girl's eyes. She's pleading for a quick death. Holy crap, I can feel her pain from here.'

'Did you know that each cell in your body contains about six feet of DNA. That's around three billion miles of DNA per person. Wow, it's just so amazing. Anyway, so after Willie penetrates Hilda; that's what Becks calls them, she's my assistant by the way. I have an assistant. So that's when the good stuff happens. The cells start to multiply and go nuts. It's like the big bang but on a cellular level.' Joe couldn't help the gesticulations that came with the words. He was even moving condiments about the table. 'The DNA gets wrapped together to form structures called chromosomes, most cells have twenty three pairs. One half from Willy, the other from Hilda. And once they've combined, aww, it's awesome. Inside all of this energy being released the genes are erupting with good will. Switching themselves on and off, on and off, an infinite number of combinations. An Evolutionary Programme

assembling all the bits passed on from you and me, and all those that have lived and died in the historical chain that made us. And then, BANG, it makes a facsimile of us both... kinda. Two different sets of human genome combined to make a third. A brand new copy that's completely unique in the Universe. All the wonders of the donor's DNA, passed down to a brand new being. Looks, intelligence, physical abilities. And plenty of upgrades too, hopefully; all packaged in a brand new model. At least that's what nature intends, it just doesn't quite work in practise. Ask Angelina Jolie and the thousands of women that have the faulty BRCA1 gene. The risk of breast cancer rockets. Did I mention mutant strains?'

'No, but did we just have table sex? Joe, can I have some more wine please?'

'Yeah sure. And Jerry, thanks for coming. I'm having an awesome time.'

'No problem, and it's Kelly.'

'Oh, right, sorry. I'll give Jake a wave, he'll bring it over this time. And again, I'm really sorry about the toilet. It's gone eight, Jake said he'd move them on... I'll ask.'

'No, it's fine, honestly. I'm really glad I came too. It doesn't smell that much. Oh look, Jake's here, *thank God*. Jake, I don't suppose you could bring the whole bottle?'

'Sure, no problem. You guys seem to be getting on great. You want any food?'

‘No... God, thank you. I’m on a diet. Gotta watch my, *Trig lycer ides*, and other essential fatty acids, right?’

‘Yeah, they’re really important for fuel; but we don’t want to abuse them. Thanks Jake. I tell you, it’s a real page turner, genetics. Combing through seemingly endless data. You can lose hours, or days. Weeks sometimes. It’s way better than drugs. Not that I do drugs, well, only prescription. And the occasional over the counter cream. Not that there’s anything needs creaming. Hey, I’m sure we’d make wonderful DNA together. Are you alright? Is the wine okay?’

‘Hmm, very fruity.’ *I’m going to die here. He’s going to bore me to death. What a shame, he’s really cute. If only he’ was a Mute.* ‘Will Jake be long with that bottle?’

‘Just coming. I mean we’re just covering the basics here. Genes are the new frontier in medicine. It’s so exciting, and scary too. The possibilities for treating disease are, well, off the charts. Dementia and Neuro disease, that’s the new market. Stem Cells and Marker manipulation, sooo cool. Geneticists recently repaired the iPS gene in the liver of a mouse. How cool is that? We’re fast heading toward Gene Simpatico. Forget random selection and genetic breeding, we’ll be able to read the genetic chromosome like a music sheet. Arrange our genetic markers like a musical score. Gene markers switched on and off, whatever you like, tailored to the individual.’

The wine had kicked in. Gravity had multiplied. Kelly stared into oblivion.

I could have taken you home to meet my cat. I'd have purred like a kitten in the sack. What's wrong with you?

'One day we'll be able to conduct the very process of life itself in this way. Never mind programming out disabilities, that's old hat already. We'll be able to programme them *in* as well. Well not disabilities, obviously. But don't you find that scary? I mean, are we ready for that kind of knowledge? We won't just evolve anymore, we'll have *become* Evolution itself.'

'I'm sorry, that's my phone. Do you mind?'

'No, please, it might be important.'

You have no idea.

'Just be a minute. I'll take it over there, in case it's... private.'

'Look at her, Ron. She's wilting. Get your money ready.'

'Poor Joe. That woman's hammered and she's been here less than an hour.'

'I reckon she's about to bolt.'

'I find it seriously disturbing that we're betting on my nephew being dumped. Uh oh, she's reaching into her purse. Pulling out the mobile. Yeah, what did I tell you. Social media strikes again. I think that fiver is mine, Jake.'

'You called it. Ah, shrewd woman, she's taking the bottle with her.'

‘No good then, Joe?’

‘No, bad news. She got a text from her sister. Apparently her dad’s just had a heart attack.’

‘Oh no, I’m real sorry to hear that. Still, maybe she’ll call you later, eh?’

‘Yeah sure, if Mystic Meg sends her my phone number. Don’t suppose she said anything as she left?’

‘No. Definitely not. Well I did hear something as she passed. “I thought he was going to talk about, Levis.” She said. Do you know what that means?’

‘Ahhh, right, the mist clears. I’m an idiot.’

‘Joe?’

‘I thought she was really interested. Never mind... so come on then, who won the bet?’

‘Bet? What bet? Gambling's a sin Joe.’

‘Then you’re both going to Hell, both of you. I’m not blind. I could see you from the table.’

‘I told Jake not to do it, I did. Sorry Joe, I guess she just wasn’t your type. That kind of girl, they just like attention. You’d hate it. Mind you, I could go after her? Could be she’d prefer a more mature example of the *wet willy?*’

‘You heard that?’ *I’m so glad my misery amuses you.* Get it out of your systems.’ *A pair of kids, look at them.* ‘Oh and Ron, I think you’re mistaking maturity, for atrophy.’

‘Oooh, Ron.’ Jake feigned some horrified features. ‘Nah, he’s got a point.’ And the laughter resumed.

I s’pose it is funny. It would be nice though, to get a second date. Joe let them get on with it as he lingered a look in the mirror behind the bar. “Go home and change... brush your hair.” Is that all it would take? He squinted at himself. Moved his jaw from side to side and pulled the skin tight below his cheeks. I’m twenty three for Christ’s sake. No shadows, no wrinkles, a little pale maybe? Becks said he was pale. She’d told him once that his eyes were dreamy. That girls like green eyes. Apparently I look a bit like James Patterson; Becks says that’s a good thing. Maybe I should go to a salon and get my hair cut, spike it up a bit like a film star? Come on, look at that face, not a spot in sight. Why don’t girls like me? I like me.’ The laughter level rose again. ‘That’s it, I’m getting Becks to take me shopping at the weekend, get some new clothes. I should buy jeans, and not talk about them so much?

‘Joe. Joe, you all right?’

‘Hmm, yeah. I’m going shopping.’

‘What now? You want a drink first? I’ve just come into some money?’

‘I hope it’s enough to cover the wine bill.’

‘Aww Joe, don’t be like that. I’m sorry. Hey, there’s plenty more... you know, in the sea.’

‘Sure, plenty. I’ll see you back at the house later yeah. Got a mountain of work to get through.’

‘Becks, this is serious.’ The silence on the other end of the phone suggested not. ‘She said her dad was having a cardiac for Christ’s sake. Couldn’t get out of the pub quick enough. She even took the wine with her.’

‘What a bitch. Was it expensive?’

‘Jake’s house wine.’

‘Eurgh, I’m starting to sympathise. And you say she drank more than one glass?’

‘Three, before she asked for the bottle.’

‘Definitely a whore then. You’re best rid. She’d have thrown up in bed and left you with an STD.’

‘You think?’

‘Trust me.’

‘Well that’s a relief then. Anyway, I left Ron at the Unicorn and came home.’ *And if I can get the bloody key in the door?* ‘Hey, did you see all those people gathering down the Strand? Something was going on, any ideas?’

‘UKiP rally, something about immigration again. Bunch of idiots with nothing better to do.’

‘I guess. I’ll check it out on the news later.’ *Finally, this bloody key.* ‘Oh, and the cheeky sods had a bet on me. Can you believe that, betting on my misery?’

'Aw, bless. Who won the money?'

'Ron.'

'Lol, I'd have bet on her going for a fag and getting in a cab. That's what I'd have done. But taking the bottle, really? That shows a positive lack of class. Honestly, she sounds like a slapper. Not the sort of girl you'd take home to mum.'

'Now that would have topped the evening off, a trip to the cemetery.'

'Aww, d'you want to come over. My Geoff's done a double shift so he'll be off to bed soon. We can play some Call of Duty; put the headphones on, maybe sip hot cocoa?'

'I'd love to, but I'd better get those samples checked off. Professor Kerm wants them asap. I think Kalton Tex owes him a big fat bonus, and you know Kerm, he wants what he's owed.'

'Bloodsucker. Well, if you want me you know where I am. Night night love.'

'Night Becks.'

The phone went dead. The big door closed behind Joe, and a small bulb burnt dim down a long hallway. Ron lived upstairs. The downstairs they shared. Joe lived in the basement. The entire house seemed as sombre as Joe's mood. Half way down the hall Joe stopped. He pulled a long drape aside to reveal a door below the stairwell. A Yale lock was turned and he stepped through, one trudging stair led to the next, always going down.

Eight steps before the low energy bulb bothered to light the space he walked into to. It was welcoming though. This was home. The basement converted ten years ago by Ron, who'd done the work himself. He'd started the day after the funeral. The day after they'd buried Joe's mum and dad.

Losing one parent is bad enough, but both, together. It had sent Joe into a spiral of anger and rebellion that was fully directed against the world. It was Ron who had brought him back. Ron who'd paid for his college education, and then University. A steady hand to guide his gifted nephew down a better road. It was Uncle Ron who had stepped up when his beloved sister's family had been reduced to one.

Joe switched the basement lights on. It didn't seem so big these days. Maybe he should redecorate; cover the walls with a lighter colour, a more pastel shade? On the far wall a library of reference books hung suspended on long hand crafted shelves. Computer programming and biology titles ran down the spines. Another bookcase ran along the floor and held books by Dan Brown, Clive Cussler; all the other great authors of adventure novels.

One day, he'd go on a trip somewhere. See the world outside of his lab. Take a fast car or a Jeep on rough terrain instead of a number nine bus, or his pushbike when the weather allowed.

Deep breath, Joe. Plenty more fish...

The sixty inch plasma occupied pride of place below the open stair rails. He'd considered buying a bigger screen to watch his beloved Chelsea play at

the Bridge. And of course the new season of Game of Thrones. Though neither seemed applicable tonight. Joe slumped into a bean bag.

‘Hi MOLI.’ He said out loud.

MOLI didn’t answer, save the occasional flirting whirr of her cooling fans as she idled. MOLI’s keyboard and a bean bag, oh, and the weight of rejection.

You could have talked about puppies.

No, that could have been worse.

A deep sigh followed.

‘MOLI, we have work to do. Shouldn’t take more than say, six to seven hours.’

‘Hello Joe. I’m glad you’re back. I missed you.’

‘Would you like me to run the comparison again, Joe?’

‘No. Twice is enough, poor cow. Print out her history and I’ll fine tune it for the presentation tomorrow.’

Paper ejected silently onto the tray as Joe tapped on his laptop. The lamp beside the chair held him in a Druid like circle of light as the smooth tone of Will Young settled like a sultry mist about the basement.

There was a failure in the group; another disappointment to end the evening. Kerm would go ballistic.

Patient number fourteen. Female, aged forty two, a mutation had been found in TX3/34. The programme had classed her, non-suitable. Tough break, it put her out of the study.

Joe wondered if patient fourteen had a family? He shouldn’t. The studies had to be clinical, not emotional. Maybe that was why he had to work for others and not for himself. He picked up the last graph, there was something else. A spike that shouldn’t be there.

‘MOLI, why have you highlighted patient five to me? There’s nothing conflicting in the patient’s report. Is there?’

‘No Joe. But I’ve found the match you asked me for. Patient five and patient thirty six have matching values.’

‘Values? What values?’

M O L I. It was Joe's attempt at AI, from his student days. My Own Laptop Intelligence. His homage to the computer in the film 2010. Back then MOLI was a pretty cool designation. She was still a work in progress, seven years to date. The only girl who didn't run out when he talked shop. She was programmed not to.

'Why are you comparing these sequences, MOLI? And using, wow, ninety eight percent of resources to do it? What are you doing? I never asked you to do this.'

'Insufficient data to respond.'

'Bollocks, there's enough computing power here to run NASA. And you're using most of it? Answer the question.'

'Insufficient data to respond.'

MOLI had been born as a complex series of questions and responses, most of which were hijacked from Apple's Siri. But they'd come a long way together since then. She wasn't programmed to be mysterious.

'MOLI, why have you run such a complex conversion table with my patient results. I didn't ask you to do this?'

'Hello Joe, I am running at high capacity right now, can your question wait?'

'No, it can't. MOLI, what are you doing?'

Now what?

The printer began to silently shunt out pages of data.

'What are you printing, MOLI?'

'The test results that you requested.'

'Ookay, did not.' Joe's fingers danced across the keyboard. 'And you've been backgrounding this for... six hours? Since I got back? Why? What are you doing?'

'Insufficient data to respond.'

What are you doing? And why?

'I assume you want me to read this? After which I will obviously be debugging, something in your programming.' He emptied the paper tray. 'What is this? Chromosome patterns and analysis. Patient one/two, no match.'

A listing of tables and a graph below. All the same. One for each patient, compared with all the others.

'Patient one/three, no match. Patient one/four, no match. This could take a while, why am I looking at this? MOLI? Shit, has someone been messing with your programming?'

'Insufficient data...

'...to respond, yeah I heard you the first few times. Patient four/five, no match. Patient four six, no match.

MOLI, people don't have matching gene stocks. That's not what we do. We're all different, like finger prints. It's DNA, the reason we procreate. We like to mix it up and improve the gene pool. Not that that seems to work too often. And this is a waste of paper. Why are you doing this? You shouldn't *be able* to do this. Shit, this is pretty deep.

‘Patient five/thirty six, a positive match.’ Said Moli.

‘Whoa, hold the printer. A match for what? Not possible. We did all the checks. Well, Becks did the checks. And Becks is never wrong. Show me. And turn the music off.’

‘MOLI, this is impossible. Is this data correct?’

‘Patient five and Patient thirty six, a positive match confirmed.’

I don’t understand this. You’ve been looking for specific patterns in the sample genes. Who told you to do this?’

What was Joe looking at? And more importantly, why? And who the hell had asked MOLI to do this?

‘No, this has to be wrong. It’s too precise. Two patients with the same... no, no way, not possible. MOLI, these proteins, all the same? You’ve made a mistake.’

‘There is no error, Joe.’

‘Has to be. This can’t be a natural phenomena. It can’t. *Is this a wind up?*

‘MOLI, is there a camera hiding somewhere?’

‘There are two cameras, Joe. One at the front door, and another as you enter the basement.’

That’s right. The insurance premium was cheaper. I wired it up to MOLI.

‘MOLI, show me footage from the camera on the stairs. Specific footage between the last two times the door has been opened. Put it on the big

screen. Okay, now speed it up. A bit more. Keep going back... and back...
back... whoa, stop. Now isn't that interesting?'

'Have you found something, Joe?'

'Oh yeah.'

'Joe, what have you found?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

'Isn't that a good thing, Joe?'

'Depends if you like people breaking into your home. There's a discrepancy
in the clock time from the door cam. Seventeen minutes is missing from
yesterday. I'm sorry I doubted you MOLI.'

'What does it mean, Joe?'

'I think you've been violated. The question is, why? For what reason? Who
wants me to see this?'

'Insufficient data to respond.'

‘Joe? What are you doing here, it’s three am?’

‘You offered cocoa?’

‘That was nearly seven hours ago. It has a sell by date.’

‘Sorry Becks, I know it’s late. But look, I’ve brought Red Bull. Can I come in, it’s cold out here. Hey, is that Barry White you’re playing?’

‘Yes, I’m playing Barry. He soothes my wrinkles.’

‘Seriously? Oh, have I interrupted something? Shit, were you shagging?’

‘Shagging... really? If I was *making love* with my husband I wouldn’t have answered the door. Now what’s so important it couldn’t wait? And for the record we don’t *shag* at three in the morning, not for a good few years. And why are you emptying your briefcase on my carpet?’

‘Becks, you need to see this. It’s important.’

‘Joe stop, go home. Or come in and get comfortable.’

‘Sorry Becks, but this is spinning my head. Did I mention MOLI’s been molested?’

‘No. Really? Fine, this had better be good.’ She let out a big sigh, which Joe knew meant she loved him. ‘Just give me a minute to make some coffee.’

‘Yeah sure. Any chance of a biscuit too?’

‘Whatever...’ click ... ‘Joe, you have until the kettle boils to make sense. If you fail, I pour it over your head, understood?’

‘No problem, just come here and look at this.’ Papers all over Becks floor. ‘I ran a series of analysis checking smaller sets of paired genes on our patient group. Just to check none of the patients were related, that no-one was being dishonest. I like to multi-check. Only that’s not what I was running, yeah? I got this... this is the highlights of what MOLI came back with.’

‘Numbers? You’re showing me numbers at this time in the morning? Is there an elephant in the room?’

‘A what?’

‘Look at my eyes, Joe, they’re all puffy and unattractive. Not even my husband sees me like this. They, in turn, can’t see shit at this early hour. So I repeat, why are you showing me numbers?’

‘Because they’re impossible numbers, Becks. These numbers do not add up? They cannot. It’s just not possible.’

‘Kettle is bubbling, I can hear it. I am going to kick you out and then sexually assault my husband if you don’t start making sense.’

‘Someone violated MOLI.’

‘So you say. Okay, how? Why?’

‘Don’t know, and not really sure. But she’s been reprogrammed to look for things.’

‘Things? Joe, stop.’ She took his hands and put them by his side. ‘Explain what you are talking about.’

‘So you got a freak result, yes? The patient is probably a relative, of yours.’

‘Two freak results. And absolutely identical in too many places.’

‘So the DNA is related somehow.’

‘Ah, no, I checked. But the gene sequences are exactly matched between the Rx579 and Hm40 markers. Pt440 and... well, it’s a bus queue. Look, take a look at the graphs. Numbers don’t lie, you know that.’

‘What did I say about my eyes, Joe?’

‘Not to look at them? Okay, verbally then. This is really really weird. I ran some high output molecular measurements at their sub functional levels. Then I reduced the groupings into thousands. Take a look at these? Sorry, eyes. Trust me, both the graphs are identical in ways they shouldn’t be. Can’t be. These genes have been manipulated, but in a way I’ve never seen before. Someone’s been degrading proteins from the donors genes. Flicking switches in a, well, beautifully ordered sequence. This is totally not natural.’

Deep sigh. ‘And for what reason, Joe? Why would someone do that? Come to think of it, how would they do that? Joe, is this a wind up.’

‘My thoughts exactly, but no. I’ve run the numbers myself, twice. I ran them on Subpathway, and Reactome. Different sniffers, but they both come up with the same results. Are your walls a different shade of blue? They are aren’t they. You’ve redecorated. Why didn’t you tell me you’d had a paint job? I could have helped.’

‘And that’s why I didn’t tell you. Joe, did that girl slip something into your drink? Shit, are you doing drugs?’

‘No! Becks, this all checks out. Both cases have had some sort of gene sequence enucleation.’

‘Enucleation?’

‘Well, they’ve been engineered then. And that’s impossible to do on a scale like this. Local targeting of genes like stem cells is still cutting edge. Besides, that form of gene therapy only works if you can deliver a normal gene to a large number of cells, well several million, but inside a tissue. And then only into the respondent cells, in the respondent tissue. It’s immensely problematic. A bloody miracle if it works. You have to get the gene to its destination, and then make sure it’s activated. Make sure it’s turned on and producing a specific protein. Huh, and once it's turned on you have to hope it stays that way; cells have a habit of shutting down genes that are too active, or exhibit unusual behaviour. And after doing all of that the gene tags would still be very different, even in two patients with the same illness. So I repeat my statement. This cannot be done. At least not yet. *Unless...*

‘Oh for fuck’s sake Joe, what are you talking about?’

‘*Unless...* you had some sort of delivery vehicle that could precisely target the gene sequences and alter them. Then you could serve a larger host group. But that would take a virus, some sort of genetically engineered...’

‘Joe, Joe... come back Joe. What the hell are you twittering on about? You’re making an error in HR sound like a bloody conspiracy.’

‘Wow, yeah, a conspiracy. Becks, I wouldn’t be able to find something like this unless I was looking. And even then I’d have to know what I was looking

for. These cell matches would have to present themselves in the same study... Yeah, like that could happen. Becks, it's like winning the lottery, twice, on the same day, and then again next weekend. *Unless...*

'Oh, here we go again.'

'*Unless...* I knew the two candidates would be a match before I started?

Wow, then I'd be God. Am I making any sense?'

'Joe, you seldom make sense, about most things. Can I ask, are you enjoying those biscuits, because my carpet is. What was the point in me giving you a plate?'

A blue rimmed dish was slid atop the papers to catch the crumbs.

'Thanks. Look, whoever put this programme on MOLI told her to look for some very specific coding sequences in the genes of *our* patient group. So they had to know it was there, right? In both samples. They had to.'

'*They?*'

'Well I didn't do it. I could have done, but I would have had to know it was there. *Unless...*'

'No, no, do not start that again. Here, biscuit. Yum yums, drop more crumbs, talk a lot less.'

'Thanks, but you may as well bring the packet in, I'm starving. Can your eyes look at these yet?'

'They're all over my carpet, why wouldn't I? Pass me my glasses. There, on the table. And Joe.'

'Yes?'

‘Shut up and let me look at these.’

‘Becks, what’s going on out there?’ They both looked up in the direction of the bedroom. ‘You do know what time it is?’

‘Hey Geoff.’ Said Joe.

‘Joe, is that you?’

‘Oh hi Hunny Bunny, did Joe wake you?’

Me?

‘What’s going on? Is everything alright?’

‘Of course it is sweetie. Hang on a second and I’ll show you back to bed. This is just a dream.’

She took Geoff’s arm. Half naked and topping six feet he allowed himself to be led back into his room.

‘I’d rather you didn’t come out in those briefs when we have company, love.’

‘But it’s Joe.’

‘Doesn’t matter, not a good look.’

‘But I smell coffee. I like coffee.’

‘Not at this hour you don’t, I won’t get you back to sleep. Come on now, back to bed. *I’ll get rid of Joe,*’ she whispered, *‘give me twenty minutes. Joe’s doing some sort of autism thing with the paperwork.’*

‘Joe’s got autism?’

‘In you go. Kiss kiss, won’t be long.’ The door shut. ‘He’ll be asleep in two and half minutes. Don’t worry, I’ll make it up to him. Off to Anne Summers

at the weekend, I'll put it on his credit card. Remind me, what were we talking about? Genetically altered aliens?'

‘It’s the specific proteins.’ *Who mentioned aliens?* ‘I hate to say this Becks, but somehow the proteins are colluding?’

‘*Colluding?*’

‘Okay, too strong. But they’ve been switched on and off in the same sequences. In both of the patient samples. Look, we’re checking that certain genes on our patients comply with the drug company’s specified suitability for the drug, right? So why has my computer done a physical map of *all* the non-relevant sequences. On *all* of the patients. That’s some serious number crunching. MOLLI has taken the raw data from the shotgun sequencing we did on all of our patients genomes, and she’s picked up genetic markers across the board. On these two profiles. Becks, my processors are good, but not that good. MOLLI’s been told what to look for, and where to look?’

‘So what does this all mean?’

‘That someone wants me to find them.’

‘Why? For what reason? Maybe they’re just some kind of gene mutations?’

‘No, this is not a natural phenomena.’

‘So what then? The result of a treatment. A targeted disease?’

‘Maybe... and don’t know. This is light years ahead of anything I’ve ever seen. Becks, we have a mystery on our hands.’

‘*We?* Where does *we* come into this? Someone is messing with the samples. It’s a wind up... isn’t it? Don’t do that, not the puppy dog expression. Stop it,

stop... alright, show me. I will actually look this time. Honest, I will. Which two samples are bugging up my sleep?’

‘Patient number five. And this one, number thirty six.’

‘Uurgh, Joe... I’m going to slap you.’

‘Slap me, why?’

‘Because this isn’t funny, okay.’

‘What, what did I say?’

‘Patient five, and patient thirty six?’

‘Yes. Why, does that mean something to you?’

‘Joe, before you play with your machines do you actually read what I put on your desk?’

‘Yes... no, sometimes. What? You do front of house, and keep Kerm of my back. I play with the machines. By which I mean running complex sequencing, data coalition, and number crunching. All round complicated and interesting stuff. Hey, that’s why we’re a team.’

‘You forgot the most important thing, I make coffee too.’

‘Great coffee. Really great coffee.’

‘Oh you poor boy, I’m just going to make this worse aren’t I. Joe, there are only thirty five patients in our current group.’

‘No, I’ve got thirty six graphs. What, why are you shaking your head?’

‘There are, and have only ever been, thirty five patients in the study group.’

‘Then who the hell is patient thirty six?’

‘Joe, Look. See the bar code printed below the graph on thirty six. The last three letters on the serial number. This is not one of ours. In fact, I know exactly who it belongs to.’

‘Who?’

‘That’s the Charles hospital in Chelsea. Remember, where we helped save that kid a few months ago.’

‘Sure, I’m not likely to forget.’

‘Well that’s it. This is your proof. Joe, it’s a wind up. Or at least some sort of bizarre mix up.’

‘The Charles, are you sure?’

‘Yes, I saw enough of their reports to recognise their tag. Can I go back to bed now?’

‘No, Becks, that just makes this more intriguing. How the hell does a random patient file from the Charles find its way into our study? We can’t blame it on Admin. Someone put it there.’

‘Why? What possible reason would someone have? Joe, let’s stop this. I want to go back to bed.’

‘Not bloody likely. Here, take this.’

‘Why do I want your mobile? Who am I calling at this hour?’

Joe did the puppy dog thing. The face he pulled whenever he wanted Becks to do something she wouldn’t want to do. She stared back, confused. Legs

crossed and surrounded by paper, a pile on her lap. And then she understood. Becks lovely green eyes widened behind her narrow spectacles; a shock that spread across her face.

‘No, no way. I won’t do it.’

‘You have to.’

‘I don’t. I won’t.’

‘Pleeeeeease.’

‘I’m not phoning Jenny. No.’

Jennifer Grey, the Admin girl who’d sent Becks the blood samples of Alice, the little girl who everyone thought would die. It all started with an email asking Becks to help. If it wasn’t for the happy ending they would all have been out of a job.

‘You didn’t say no when she was sending us files. Well now she can return the favour. Phone her. Find out whose file we have.’

‘Joe, I can’t.’

‘Yes you can. She owes us.’

‘So I’ll phone her now shall I? Oh hi Jenny, yes I know its stupid o’clock. But I thought you’d like to break some patient confidentiality for me. You know, slip me a patient’s file. No, of course the Hospital Trust won’t mind. The sack? Don’t worry about that, it’s for Joe. Yes, you remember him. yes, that’s the one. Young, good looking, got more sense up his arse than in his head.’

‘Good looking, eh?’

‘Front of house, remember. I’m paid to bullshit. I’ll wake her up and then try to get her sacked shall I?’

‘It’s a fifty fifty she’s doing the night shift? And she owes us big time, yes? Kerm doesn’t know about our moonlighting for the hospital. How in less than one day we did what that hospital couldn’t have done in a week. Remember? How we unravelled Alice’s genetic anomaly; exposed how her own body had conspired to kill her?’

‘Joe, we agreed not to, remember. No more contact. Hospital bureaucracy. Whistle blowing? You’ll get her, and us, the sack.’

‘We did a good thing, Becks.’

‘We did a good thing anonymously, Joe.’

‘So what’s the worst that can happen?’

‘Oh, let’s see. Solicitors. The High Court. Prison?’

‘That’s a bit melodramatic. I tell you what I see, you and me starting our own business. Making lots of cake for ourselves instead of Professor bloody Kerm. We’ll be Signor and Signorina el Presidento.’

‘Is that Spanish for working at McDonalds and struggling to pay my mortgage? I think not. Here, make your own phone call.’

‘But you know her. Becks, please, come on. Just one little phone call. Just a teeny weeny call. Please, pretty please. If she says no, that’s fine. I’ll never ask again. Please, Pleeeeeease.’

‘No, and don’t look at me like that. She’s young and impressionable, and I like her. I’m not going to call her. I’m not. I won’t get her into trouble just because you’re seeing conspiracies in the paperwork. Joe, I said no.

No!’

'You want what? I can't. Rebecca we agreed, no more phone calls. If my bosses find out I went behind their backs?'

'I know, I know, but this is important Jenny. It really is. Just one teeny tiny favour, and click whirr, the phone never rang. It's really important.'

'Is she gonna do it? Ask her again.'

'Will you shut up.'

'Ask her.'

'You ask her... no, I didn't think so. Now can I get my hand off this and speak? Sorry, Jenny.'

'Okay. I'll do it.'

'Really, you will?' Becks took her glasses off and closed her eyes. To Joe it looked like it was bad news. Or maybe she'd been hoping that Jenny would say no? 'No, I'm still here. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. Are you sure?'

'Yes, that girl's family owe you, and so do I Becks. You should have been thanked publicly for what you did. You should have got a medal or something. Give me the patient's name?'

'Okay, I'm sending an email to your phone. The patient's bar is attached. A quick scan, pull up the details, attach and return. I'll burn it the moment we're done.' Becks' face had tightened. She wasn't happy. 'She'll be back in a

sec.’ She said. ‘Joe, sit still. Put my laptop down. Joe. Oh hi Jenny. What have you found?’

‘His name is, Elder Routh. He’s a German National. Oh, and he’s deceased.’

‘Deceased?’

‘Who’s deceased?’

‘I won’t tell you again... one conversation at a time. Can you check that again, Jenny?’

‘Your patient. This file is a man in the morgue. So this doesn’t count, does it? Breaking confidentiality I mean. Not if their dead, right?’

‘Absolutely. Dead patients cannot sue. I hate to ask, but could you send a copy of his file to my phone?’

‘I only have the highlights here.’

‘Anything you have, and Jenny, delete the email I sent you. And the one you just sent me. And any record that I phoned you, okay. Burn it all, just in case. I don’t want to get you in any trouble. And Jenny, thank you.’

‘No, I want to thank you, again. That sweet little girl would have died.’

‘It was a good thing you did, Jenny. And we were happy to help. Phone’s beeping, got it. And don’t forget to delete delete delete. We love you, Jenny. Thanks. Bye.’

‘Bye Becks.’

‘I hate you for making me call her. You do know that.’

‘Everyone’s burning their phones. No-one will ever know.’

‘Yeah right, cos secrets never get out. Do they?’

‘It’s five am, I’m in work at Five am. That security man outside, he saw me without my face on. I should have killed him. I should kill you.’

‘Becks, just put the list up. Thank you. So we don’t know who patient five is, yes?’

‘No.’

‘And the drug company wouldn’t tell us even if we asked, yes?’

‘No.’

‘So we need to hack their main frame, yes?’

‘Absolutely not. I don’t know what concerns me more, hearing that out loud, or knowing you could probably do it.’

‘Probably? I’d be in in a heart beat. Oww, what was that for?’

‘For dragging me and Jenny into this. Let’s get on with this, and then I’m calling in sick. *You*, are working on your own today. My Hunny Bunny will stir around midday and I intend to be there wearing nothing but a smile.’

That’s kinda gross.

‘So what do we know about patient thirty six; other than he’s a German tourist who decided to leap from a window in the middle of the night. Why do people do that?’

‘Because they’re unhappy. And this is more than you knew a hour ago. There, done, patient five’s blood-work.’

Becks swiped her screen and it arrived on Joe's. The one thing he admired about Professor Kerm was he never skimmed on the technology. Downstairs was a mainframe of awesome capability. Up here Joe had Becks. They'd have this cracked in an hour.

'There are no mistakes,' said Becks, 'not at our end. These patients definitely have an unusual match.'

'Unusual?'

'Okay, very unusual.'

'Yeah right. Nobel prize winning more like. There are just too many identical groupings, in sequence and protein. No way can this be a random mutation.'

'What about the regulatory sequences, are they all different?'

'Yes.'

'At least that's normal. So we're not talking about aliens.'

'No, not aliens, but take a look at this. Here, here, and here.' Joe threw the image up to the main screen on the wall. 'It's like they've been *inserted* into the chain; put in deliberately. All those proteins switched on, off, on. In sequence. In two different people? You tell me what natural phenomena can produce results like this. Becks, this is truly weird.'

'I need more coffee, you want one?'

‘Hmm, yeah. No way anyone would ever notice something like this without the micro measurements we took for the study. I just don’t get it, what are these results telling us?’

‘That I’m not helping Keanu Reeves return to his planet?’

‘Look, every gene has a protein attached, right? Meaning the gene’s function is dependant on which proteins are active. Becks, pay attention.’ She lifted both cups and over did the smile. ‘We know that they can evolve their function with the right persuasion. Evolution, or social dependance. Either can activate or inhibit transcription. Transcription factors can be activators or repressors, or both. How it acts, or reacts on the particular cell it inhabits. It prevents, or produces, a complex coating within the transcriptional initiation region of the RNA polymerase.’

‘Derr, why don’t I know these things?’

‘Shh, just listen, thinking out loud. Basically they make the cell do something, right... but there’s not enough coding here to indicate a cellular change, or even tissue growth. So this isn’t someone’s attempt to grow a matching liver, or even new cells to help repair old ones. Did he have Alzheimer's or dementia? Does the autopsy mention he’d grown horns? We need more information.

Hey, maybe it’s an expression? You know, like an evolutionary prompt. The person rather than the cells. This could affect someone’s character couldn’t it? We know that social and environmental conditions can prompt changes in biology. Smoking, drinking... eating too much chocolate.’

‘I’ve told you, chocolate’s good for you.’

‘But it can affect your mood, right, like coffee and... well lots of other stuff. All of these things affect us. Even a healthy life style has consequences. So best case, they can keep us healthy. Worst case, we get cancer, or dementia, or... ten thousand other shitty problems. Bottom line is, genes dictate so much of what and who we are. If we could learn to switch the right ones on and off, at will... shit, we’d be back to being God again. Becks, we need samples from Elder’s body.’

She spat her coffee back into the cup.

‘No. We are not changing our surnames to Burke and Hare.’

‘Just a blood sample. Oh, and a marrow sample too.’

‘Joe, I really need a new car. But I’m not going to *steal one*.’

‘Then how do we find out what this is all about? Why someone has gone to all this trouble to do this. And to make me sit up and notice? What, don’t shush me...’

‘Shush... I’ve got an email from Jenny. Oh thank God, you’re too late. The body, it was cremated last night.’

‘Great, so now what? And how the hell does a suicidal German get himself onto our list?’

‘Hang on there’s more. Oh Jenny, you bad girl. Joe, she’s sent us the entire file.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah, the autopsy as well.’

‘Put it up on the screen.’

‘Hang on. Okay, let’s have a look at Elder Routh. Aww, he’s dead in that photo isn’t he? That’s disgusting. Ewe, yuk, I refuse to look at dead people. There must be another... that’s a photocopy of his driving licence. Aw, Joe. He looks like someone’s Grandpa. Why would Grandpa jump out of a window?’

‘Why does anyone jump from a window?’

‘He’s an eighty seven year old German National, born in Frankfurt. Police told staff he was in London for a short break. Brought him in seven days ago after his face took a pounding on a Chelsea flagstone. Autopsy says, death by misadventure. Is that what they call jumping out of a window these days?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Is that one of our patient group, Joe?’ The all too familiar tone came from behind them. It was cold and unexpected. Joe didn’t have to see Beck’s face to know that she recognised the voice. And was now considering a jump from the window herself.

‘Professor Kerm? Hi. What *the hell* are you doing here at this hour?’

‘I could ask you the same question, Joe. And why is Rebecca wearing her pyjamas?’

Rule one-o-one, always keep watch on the door when engaging in extra curricula activities. Getting caught red handed by the Professor meant only one thing. Things would get ugly. Joe needed to think. Move fast. Twist and turn like a snake and spread deceit with a forked tongue.

‘Err, Becks, you’d better tell the Professor what we’re doing?’

Don’t look at me like that. I can’t lie to save my life, or my job.

‘We came in early,’ she said, ‘to finish the Caltex study. Get it ready for you in the morning.’

‘And the gentleman on the screen?’

‘He’s my grandpa. Grandma emailed me a few minutes ago, to tell me, that he died last night.’

‘Oh, really. I’m so very sorry to hear that. Is that his driving licence on the screen?’

‘Yes. It’s the only photo Grandma has on her phone. It took her half an hour to send me that, bless her. Joe’s never met him. I just wanted to see his face. I can’t believe he’s gone.’

Wow, is she gonna cry?

‘I’m very sorry for your loss, I hope he didn’t suffer. Rebecca, I didn’t realise you were German?’

‘German, yes, a bit. On my grandfather’s side. He came over after the war. Death camps and stuff, we don’t like to talk about it much.’

Go Becks. Oh, I wish I could lie like that. Look at Kerm. Barely an ounce of sympathy on that over tanned face. If he spent as much time in the lab as he did grooming his hair? He’s like a mini version of Hulk Hogan. Half the size but twice as mean and frosty. Why’s he staring at Grandpa like that?

‘Probably best if you were to reminisce outside of work.’ Kerm said. ‘We need to stay focused. We’re responsible for people’s lives in here, you understand.’

‘Of course Professor. I’m sorry.’

Still staring at the photo. Oh, and now at me.

‘And what are these, Joe?’ Kerm asked. Obvious distain toward the disorder of paperwork that Joe had strewn across the work surfaces.

What are these? What the heck are you doing here at five... twenty one, in the morning?

‘Reports from the study. Not finished yet. Here, let me get them off the worktops.’

‘You say these patients are ours?’

‘Yes Professor.’ *Why now? Why show an interest in work now? Get him away from the papers; do it quickly.* ‘Err, there was one rejection from the study. I was going to bring it to your attention later, but as you’re here now?’

It's this one, if you want to take a look? Still on my laptop, I haven't managed to get the presentation finalised, but if you...'

'That's fine, Joe. Just the one rejection? That's very unfortunate.'

Seriously? That calm. You usually take it more personal when we have rejects. Somewhere in the wallet portion of your heart. Yeah, Becks has noticed too. Stop pulling faces at me, I don't know what he's doing here?

'I'll get out your way, let you get back to work. Again, I'm very sorry to hear about your Grandfather, Rebecca. Let me know if you need any time off. I'm only downstairs if you need to talk, or, anything.'

Odd how the hiss from the automated door took on a more malevolent sound whenever it was used by Kerm.

'Did he just offer me compassionate leave?'

'He's downstairs if you want to talk about Grandpa.'

The urge to laugh out loud was intense.

'Oh my God, how weird was that?'

'You think he noticed the graphs?'

'In thirty seconds, I doubt it.'

'He's a professor, Joe. The man's not completely stupid.'

'He'd only notice if it were made of money? But you... Elder Routh is your Grandpa? I am sooo in awe of you.'

'Yeah, it's amazing what comes into your head when faced with imminent dismissal. Seriously Joe, get rid of this shit. Take it home. Burn it. I don't want to see it again.'

*

Kerm considered his options.

Seeing that man's face on the screen? He'd hoped to never have contact with him again; he was dangerous, unpredictable. And now he was dead. So what now?

They'd said to call, immediately, anything unusual. That's why he'd told security to call. Now he had to make a call of his own.

Kerm reached inside his lab coat and closed the office door. The number was on speed dial. Three ominous tones before the call was answered.

'It's Kerm. There's been a development.'

'No, security alerted me.'

'You didn't tell me Routh was dead. Am I safe?'

'You'll be in touch, what does that mean?'

The phone went dead.

How had Routh's image come to be on that screen? And the graphs, Kerm knew all too well what they compared. This wasn't possible. They had assured him. That man, Elder Routh, he would no longer be a problem. Yet there he was, staring down from the screen, full of accusation from the grave.

‘Ron... you home?’

‘In the kitchen. I’ve just made some coffee, want some?’

‘Tea please.’ Joe closed the front door. He took a careful look up the stairwell before following the hall. His own door seemed secure, but it had done the last time. Nothing, not a mark to show forced entry. What would MOLI say this time he wondered’

‘Hey kid, you had a good day?’

‘Not the one I expected.’ He replied. ‘Have we had any visitors recently? Last few days?’

‘No. Why? You expecting someone?’

‘Not really, just wondered. Wow, something smells good.’

The smell of home cooking. Ron loved to cook. Sure enough he was moving around the kitchen in his apron. Copper pots simmering on the stove. The table laid for two.

It was like nothing had happened, the air and the ambience. Some normality after the last twenty or so hours. Ron’s sanctuary. The kitchen he’d renovated only six years ago, and yet you’d swear it was crafted in the nineteen twenties. More a cook house and scullery than a kitchen. The original Inglenook fireplace filled with the larger than life Aga stove, finished in racing green. Joe had helped Ron to reclaim it all, bring everything back from the brink. A simple Shaker design, original woven

baskets. Ron's beloved copper pots hanging from the ceiling. At least the ones that weren't bubbling nicely on the stove. The only thing missing was the ghost of Mrs Beaton.

'Joe? You all right son?'

'Yeah, sorry. Been a long day.'

'I had to sign for it, the envelope.' Ron said, pointing towards the only unused wooden work surface. 'It's a fancy envelope. You been invited to the Palace?'

Joe didn't want to pick it up. There was something ominous about the luxurious paper, and the hand scribed name and address. No mistakes, it was his name on the front.

'Are you going to open it?' Asked Ron.

'You open it. I've got dirty hands.' He lied.

'To Joe White. Yeah you. Someone's got nice handwriting.'

The paper screamed quality, the words looked written with a quill. Even Becks' wedding invitations hadn't been this posh.

'Joe, it's an invitation.'

'To where?'

'Some sort of seminar. Here, look, from someone called, Pharmax.'

'The big drug company?'

'Joe, just read the bloody thing. What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing, sorry. Thought it might have been from the competition I entered on This Morning.'

‘You never did. Oh, hold that thought, pasta’s boiling.’

This has to be a mistake. Why would Pharmax send this to me?

‘They want me to... shit, go to Krakow. That’s in Poland? Ron, where’s your laptop?’

‘On the chair. Bloody network is crap again, I need to phone them and sort it.’ Joe already had it out on the worktop.

Tap tap tap.

‘The Reelbac Seminar, September 16th, Krakow. Let’s see if this is for real. Bloody hell, Ron. Check out the website.’

‘That’s very nice. What’s all this about?’

‘Bio Genetics.’ The excitement level in Joe’s voice was rising. ‘Speakers, let’s see who’s speaking. Whoa, take a look at these names. Ron, this is a whose-who of Bio Genetic research. Huh, take a look. Professor Tillmach’s going to be there.’

‘He is? Can I come?’

‘Ron, you don’t know who Professor Tillmach is. Wow, Doctors Lockhert, Finheim, and Pasler too. Where’s the guest list. If this is really for... Shit, that’s me. Look, Ron, that’s my name. Doctor Joe White. I’m on the list.’ Joe opened up the envelope and tipped. Somewhere in here is... an E-ticket. Stansted to Balice, Krakow. Leaving 19:40 on the sixteenth. Ron, this is all expenses paid.’

‘Well you’d better get packing, the sixteenth is tomorrow.’

‘I can’t go to Poland tomorrow.’

‘Why not?’

‘Kerm will flip for starters. He’ll double flip when he realises that he’s not been invited.’

‘Would you want that man at your party? And I think you’ve got enough time off owing. Your at that place more than you’re here. And didn’t you say earlier that your latest group is close to being finished. Becks can wrap it up, can’t she? Joe, don’t look a gift horse, it’s not polite.’

‘I’ll get a room above the kitchen bins again. You do remember the conference we went to last summer? Our hotel in Brighton?’

‘How could I forget. I had to endure the heat, oh and that’s right, you moaning through the entire stay.’

‘I did not.’

‘Joe, you didn’t stop.’

‘Well you didn’t have the hotel’s air conditioning outside your window, clunking away all night. And the smell... it smelt like poop, Becks’

‘I don’t remember any of that.’

‘Because you were upstairs, facing the sea. You had seagull shit and the salt breeze to contend with.’

‘We had a good time didn’t we.’

‘Sleeping is part of a good time too.’

‘Well I don’t care, this is a golden opportunity for you, and for me. So it has to be seized with both hands. I can finish the study off by the weekend, without you getting in my way.’

And didn't Kerm offer me compassionate leave? Don't I have a dead grandpa to bury? A couple of days in the lake district with Geoff. Oh my God, that would be wonderful. See how the old bastard gets on with neither of us on tap. Joe, this is a shot at the big time. All expenses paid.'

'Yeah, but why? Don't you find it a bit odd, out of the blue like this? And what about our new friend, Elder Routh? I need to...'

'Don't you dare.'

'I'm just say...'

'Shush. You are not going to talk yourself out of this. Joe, you listen to me, you're brilliant at what you do. Look what you've done here. What you did for little Alice. Take a look at that bloody machine; it was a pile of spare parts before you arrived. You don't just understand Inner Space, you feel it. You're gifted, Joe. The work we do here has meaning, for medical science and the pharmaceutical industry. That's why they come to us. You should be making millions, not Kerm. And besides, it's obvious, even to the deaf dumb and stupid.'

'It is?'

'Yes, Joe. Someone has noticed you. There's probably a head hunting party waiting for you when you get there. Huh, you absolutely have to go. Get out there and mingle. Wow, you could find funding for your own lab. You'll take me with you won't you? Joe? We're a team, like Batman and Wonder Woman. You'll get that fast car you want. Good looking chicks love guys in fast cars. Joe, you have to go to this seminar.'

‘But, Elder Routh?’

‘For fuc... sometimes I want to slap you. Let it go, Joe. Like this, from the wrists. Shake him out. Yes, shake those arms. Get all this conspiracy shit out of your head. And breeceath... Joe, are you breathing?’

‘Yes. Yes, I’m breathing.’

‘Please, do it for me. I don’t like it. It scares me. Dead people, impossible gene sequencing... MOLI? Joe, I don’t want to be an actor in this film; you know what I mean? It’s just an anomaly. A stupid set of coincidences. A programming error, happens all the time. Go to the Seminar, Joe. Change both our lives. Will you do it, Joe? Will you?’

‘I s’pose.’

‘Good boy. I love you Joe, I do, but I want you to flush all the conspiracy shit out of your system. One more breath; say ahhhh. Find your happy place. Go to the seminar. Someone’s noticed you.’

‘You think?’

‘Yes Joe. Go, network, get us both out of here. And make sure it’s somewhere sunny. A place where girls wear bikinis on the beach.’ She opened her laptop. Started typing. ‘You’ll like that, bikinis. Geoff will like them too. Oh, I could get a tan that doesn’t involve being sprayed.’ I’m composing your letter to Kerm. There, done, press the button.’ The screen span round, the keyboard was slid closer to Joe. ‘Please go, please. Give me your finger, that’s it, and press send.’

‘Fine, okay.’ The swoosh sound made it official. ‘You’re right. I deserve this.’

‘Yes we do. Send me a postcard the moment you arrive. Hey, I can’t believe I haven’t asked. Where is this seminar?’

‘Krakow.’ He said. ‘D’you think it will be cold there this time of year?’

‘Krakow? The one in Poland?’

‘Last time I checked, why? Becks, what’s wrong?’

‘Oh Joe. Why, why do you have to ruin things.’

‘I can pack jumpers. I thought you liked snow?’

‘Love snow, hate my life. Come here you idiot, take a look at this.’

The laptop span around. Buttons were pressed. Becks threw something up to the big screen. The picture of the old man’s driving licence looked down.

‘Elder Routh? You just told me to flush him.’ He started shaking his arms.

‘Like this. Let him go you said.’

‘Look at the flag in the corner.’

‘Yeah, and?’

‘Joe, it’s a Polish driving licence. Look at Routh’s address... it’s in Krakow. Krakow, as in Poland.’

‘It’s a coincidence.’

‘Really, a coincidence? Joe, don’t go. Do not go to this seminar.’

‘But you just told me... What happened to girls, bikinis...’

‘Suicide, from a very high window. And then you get an invitation to stay at his house?’

‘Hardly.’

‘Joe, Routh lived in Krakow, it’s on his driving licence. Look look look at the licence. What have you stumbled onto? Joe, I know how these things work out. I’ve seen the movie. Do not laugh at me, this is serious.’

‘Now who’s being paranoid? Routh jumped from a window, and yes I get how that sounds.’

‘Do you? Joe, don’t go.’

‘You’ve just been trying to get rid of me.’

‘Well now I want you to stay.’

‘It’s too late, I’ve sent the email. You made me do it.’

‘Hack his email account.’

‘No, you’re right. The first time. It’s just for a couple of days. Becks, I’m going. I can do some checking on Elder Routh whilst I’m out there?’

‘Joe, are you listening to yourself? No, I am not letting you go to Poland.’

So many sets of lights circled in the air. Several in a row now approached from the midnight dark, ready to land. Stansted was close, it's runway busy. The terminal's lights glowed in the distance.

Joe's mind was elsewhere as he stared at the Volvo's dashboard, the ice blue illumination almost sedative in nature. The world had turned a serious shade of weird in the last twenty four hours.

'Has Becks spoken to you yet?' Asked Ron.

The first words spoken in ten minutes. Barely a word had been uttered as Joe had packed. Grim Daemons running in the back of his mind. Cautionary, almost fearful. Beck's voice warning him, pleading with him not to go.

'No,' he replied, 'not since yesterday. Ron, d'you think she's right? All this, it is kind of weird.'

'I can turn round if you like? But then you'd miss out on the chance of a lifetime. Don't go and you'll never know. Granted, I see how this looks. If we lived in Hollywood, and if Bruce Willis lived next door. But we don't, and he doesn't. Becks was right the first time, I think you're being head hunted.'

'Really?'

'No doubt in my mind. Worse case, you get a free holiday with all expenses paid. And didn't the itinerary include a chauffeured ride when you get there? A free ride in a big Merc, or a BMW.

'It might be one of those really cool Hybrids?'

‘Something only you could excited about. You really think Bruce Willis drives a Prius?’ The road bent and the airport came into view. ‘Heads up, we’re here.’

‘Drop me off over there, next to the trolleys. And Ron, phone Becks. Tell her... tell her I miss her already. I’ll be back in a few days. Oh, and tell her to get her bikini out, she’ll understand.’

The Volvo pulled over. Joe leapt from the car into the noisy bustle of airport life. It was sudden and overwhelming as another flight roared down from the night sky, its wheels down.

‘I’ll ring when I get there, okay.’ Joe hooked an arm through his rucksack and beamed a smile at Ron. ‘It’s going to be an adventure.’ He said, and closed the door. He waved as Ron pulled away. ‘Yeah, an adventure. What else could this be?’

Ron flicked the wall switch and the hall light came on.

Seriously, I have the house to myself?

The kettle's roar encouraged a bellow of steam, then a loud clunk as the base's glow faded. Ron tipped another spoonful of the dark aromatic coffee into the glass cafetiere. He already missed Joe. The house felt empty.

Water poured slowly into the jug. The promise of football on the TV. The thought of a Tandoori later. And why was he making coffee when there was beer in the fridge? He'd make a few calls. Get some friends over. There was bound to be some football on the Sky box.

The walk to the lounge was when he noticed. Joe's door ajar. He'd seen Joe lock it as they were leaving. He was sure of it. Ron pushed the door slowly open.

'Hello. Anyone down here?'

The lights were off. Not a sound to be heard. Why did he feel the need to go down there? Slowly, one step at a time.

‘Hello...’

Ron flicked the basement light switch. Nothing. Only darkness. The light from the hallway dimmed with each footstep down. Ron stopped three steps from the carpeted floor, his eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom. He was being stupid. His mind playing tricks. Joe had obviously forgotten to lock the door.

He could see the Playstation was still there. The excessively big TV still hung on the wall. MOLI was where MOLI should be. Ron took one step back up before he saw them. The wires that hung out from where MOLI’s hard drives should be. The basement became cold. Indecision, and then fear as Ron tried to make out the shapes in the shadows.

Ron took the last few steps. His heart racing now. ‘Hello... who’s down here. I’ve called the Police.’ He could see MOLI clearly now. A bad feeling crept through his nervous system. That he wasn’t alone down here. Ron took out his phone. Switched on the torch app. Stepped back toward the stairs as the light moved around the room.

PHUTT.

It was pretty, the flash of light from the corner of the room. The sound soft, but alarming. Ron’s phone fell from his hand.

‘Ahhh, fuck... shit.’ The floor rose up to break Ron’s fall. He was clutching at his torso. Was he having a heart attack. Blood seeped through clenched fingers and leaked everywhere. There was too much blood, and it hurt so badly.

A dark figure filled Ron’s view. Someone else *was* down here. He was holding something, shit, it was a gun. Now Ron realised. Now he understood. That fucker had shot him, but why?

‘Help me...’

A better view of the man now. Tall, broad, and scary. Still a shadow without features.’

‘I’m sorry, you should have gone upstairs. I would have left. None of this needed to happen.’

The man’s accent, it was Austrian. No, German. The man Joe had told him about, the suicide, he was German too. MOLI’s hard drives were in the man’s other hand. Ron saw them before they went inside his coat.

‘Is this all of the data?’ The man asked.

‘I, I... I don’t know. Please...’

‘Is Joe on the plane?’

‘What... Joe? I... fuck you. Not Joe. Leave Joe, alone. Help me...’

Ron couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t stop the blood being pumped out by the wild beating of his heart. *The phone*. Ron stretched his arm, reached for his phone. So slippery in his blood covered hand. The light lifted toward the man.

All Ron could see was a roll neck and a puffed jacket, the words 'North Face' emblazoned on the breast. His hand shook with the effort, the light raised. Yes, he saw him now. Ron's eyes that fixed on his assailants. In his fifties, a strong jaw line. A gaze that returned his with a complete lack of empathy. Or was it contempt? There was a scar that ran around his left eye. The effort too much, Ron lowered the phone. His world had gone cold. It felt as if gravity had placed a finger on his chest and was pushing hard.

It wasn't the handgun directed at his face that scared Ron, it was the silencer attached to the muzzle. The cold intent and professionalism it signified. Somehow that simple metal cylinder explained everything that Ron needed to know, that he wasn't going to make it.

'You shouldn't have come back.' The man said.

PHUTT...

London - Krakow (Poland)



Joe followed the other passengers down the tunnel into air that had turned bitter cold. It was a strange feeling being in another country; not something he'd done before. All a bit intimidating. The hollow clunk of footsteps didn't help until the noise from the plastic walkway lulled into a carpeted march, that ended in a short queue that grew in length behind him. Customs was busy, several other planes had obviously landed. Only three passport officers on hand sat behind pedestals, each calling people toward them. A few minutes later Joe was beckoned forward with a formal gesture of the hand.

'Hi.' Said Joe.

'English?' The man in the blue uniform replied. Hardly a warm response.

'Yes.' Said Joe.

'What is reason for visit?'

'Err, a seminar.' The unshaven face looked up at him, and then down to Joe's passport. His eyes moved from face to photo several times.

'Work or pleasure?' He had a gruff demanding tone.

'Oh, err, work?' *Have I done something wrong?* 'It's very cold in here.' Joe added, and wished he hadn't.

'How long you stay?'

'Four. No, five days. Definitely five.'

Two people to his left had their books stamped, he watched them move on. Why was this man staring at Joe like that? Perhaps a smile would help. Maybe not like that.

‘Okay, move on. Next.’ The officers hand beckoned someone from behind.

Twenty minutes later the wheels on Joe’s bag had squeaked through customs and he left the terminal. Outside people waited. Couples, families, all waiting. The air freezing their breath in welcome. Joe waited.

One by one the passengers departed as friends in cars pulled by. A noisy bus growled past the terminal twice and filled with passengers. Armed policemen refused to mirror his smile as they walked by. It seemed no-one in a uniform was happy.

The invitation letter had said he would be greeted on arrival.

Joe waited. He took a seat on a frozen metal bench. In the distance he watched a crowd of maybe a hundred people all gathered behind a barrier with plaques, they were chanting. Some sort of demonstration? Armed Police seemed content to chat and smoke by their vehicles; they kept a watchful eye.

‘Mr White?’

‘Huh? Yes, I’m Mr White.’

He hadn’t noticed the girl approach. She was early twenties, no younger. Her hair partially tucked below the dark cap she wore. Was she hiding dreadlocks? The suit she wore was loose. Like she’d borrowed it from a larger friend.

Wow, you're pretty. Joe liked her freckles. She had the fiercest misty blue eyes that fully engaged his. They didn't look too happy to see him.

'Good evening, my name is Isla. I am here to transport you to hotel. Please, come... I do not carry bags.'

'Hi, pleased to meet... oh, okay.' Joe didn't recall asking her to carry his bags. And her accent, it carried more than a hint of attitude.

'It's nice here.' He said. Trying to keep up.

It wasn't really. The airport was small, lacking in retail, and he hadn't seen a Costa or Starbucks. On the bright side the walk was short, but ended in a car park dark. No working lamps. He could hear the chanting better here. The crowd closer, it seemed happy enough.

'What's going on over there?' Joe found himself being left behind again. *Is there a fire?* 'Workers on strike,' he asked, 'we get that in London.'

'No. It's because they don't like you.' The girl replied.

'Me? I've never been here before.'

'Not you personally. Anyone who isn't born here.'

'Oh.' Several dozen boards on poles bobbed in tune with the chants. More a song really, and being sung in Polish. 'What do the banners say?' *Will you slow down.*

'They say too many people come here from Eastern Europe. People are not going back.' She stopped. 'A lot of refugees need our help. Those people, they are fucking idiots.'

That's a bit strong. Joe stopped because Isla did. *Which car is ours?* Less than half the spaces in the flat scary car park were in use. She was staring at him again.

'Last week the Russians sent troops into the Baltic States? They say that Belarus will be next. You do know there is a war going on in the Ukraine?'

'I do, yes.' Joe wasn't too keen on her small talk.

'There will be one in Serbia soon as well. Now please, the car is over here.'

They passed a big Mercedes. Several big 4x4s.

No way? Joe couldn't believe his eyes.

'My dad had a car just like this.' He said. 'Is this your car? A Mondeo estate? *Seriously?* It was purple too, just like dad's.

How many times had Joe squeezed into the back of that car with his sisters, and that bloody dog? 'It is. It's a purple Mondeo.'

'What did you expect, a Bentley? Perhaps you would prefer the bus; it stops outside the Terminal.'

'Yes, I saw it.' *Twice.* 'Can I get in?' *Somewhat frosty attitude for a driver.*

She opened the boot. Inside was another suitcase.

'Am I car sharing?' Joe asked, and was ignored. He dropped his bag on top of the other but kept his rucksack. Why did she look at him like that. As if he was the cause of all misery in the world. Surely he hadn't upset her. Not yet. How could he?

'Do you live local?' Joe asked. Always a good icebreaker.

'No, I drive here from Berlin to pick you up.'

‘Berlin?’

‘Yes. Now please, get in car, it’s cold out here.’

She slammed the door as Joe shuffled across the back seat to keep his distance. At least it was warm, and surprisingly comfortable. Everything clad in leather. Lots of lights lit up on the dashboard as she turned the key. The SatNav in the centre console flashed and foreign words encouraged her to press a button or two. It could have been worse, he supposed. Something Polish.

‘Mr White, you are staying at the Sheraton hotel?’

‘Yes, the Sheraton. And call me Joe, please.’ *Did I say something wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?* More icebreaking was obviously required. ‘So, you drove here from Berlin? That sounds like a long drive.’ *Is she going to hit me?*

‘Mr White, I am your driver for the duration of your stay. I will collect you. Drive you wherever you ask. I will pick you up whenever you require. This is the end of my duties, thank you.’

Okay, no chitchat, got it. Seriously, you’re wearing those at night?

Sunglasses, she’d put on a blue tinted pair of sunglasses.

‘Now I will drive you to your hotel. You may call me in the morning, early is fine, but please give me at least a half hour warning. I have had a very long day.’

Whoa, wheel spin.

Joe grabbed for his seat belt.

The silence was numbing as Isla scowled her way through the traffic and lights. Only the engine had anything to say as it growled, purred, and then growled again, and then again. Always a growl for Madam Schumacher. The way she turned the wheel and let it slide. So many gear changes yet hardly any lurch. It was a fairground ride but twice as smooth. Why did she keep looking at Joe in the rear view. Why was she wearing sunglasses?

‘Five hundred.’ Isla said.

She speaks?

‘I’m sorry, five hundred?’

‘Kilometres, the distance I have come from Berlin. That is maybe, three hundred miles?’

‘That’s a long drive. Couldn’t they have sent someone local?’

‘I come from Berlin and you want someone local? Do you have a problem with German girls?’

‘No, of course not.’ *German, you sound... odd? And stop looking in the mirror at me like that.* ‘Your accent, where are you from?’

‘Here and there.’ She said. ‘Mostly nowhere.’

‘That’s nice.’

Krakov passed by with Joe unable to take his eyes from the windows. The buildings outside were so much older than in London. Many had snow half melted on their roofs, and there was a kind of sleet falling that had stuck to the glass. It made the light distort like a prism.

'There,' she said, 'can you see. That big building over there is the hotel.'
The journey had taken less than twenty minutes. 'I will park and escort you in. You can find your room.'

From the outside the hotel wasn't too dissimilar to the airport terminal. Big, square, and boasting huge walls of glass. The inside fared no better with its large open space. With four stories of galleried walkways, it was like walking into a shopping mall. And the overly constructed scaffold was a bit too elaborate for holding up a glass roof. And all the stars had gone as the night sky had clouded over.

'Come this way, Mr White.'

Joe followed. He imagined breakfast in here, the constant echo of utensils in such a large arena. There was bound to be kids too; Joe hated kids. Too much noise and energy. He circled around the numerous tables, then realised the girl had gone. No, waving for him from the main reception. This wasn't how he'd imagined his arrival at all.

'The middle aged receptionist smiled. Said something in Polish. Joe looked to Isla.

'She is welcoming you. Smile at least.'

'Oh, yes, thank you. It's nice to be here.' Big smile from Joe. Shake of the head from Isla.

What is your problem?

'This way.' Isla walked away. She stopped at the lift. 'Here, you will need this.'

‘What is it?’

‘It is my cell number. How else will you get in touch?’

Joe took the card being offered.

‘Thanks.’ He said.

But I’m not sure I want to.

Joe opened one eye, peeked, then swung his legs from the bed. It was chilly. Evil towel monkey still hung from the wardrobe.

The room was comfortable. Spacious even. Four white walls that squared off to a short hallway that led to two doors, the bathroom and the way out. On the obligatory desk sat his rucksack, below it a leather bucket chair. Somewhere there would be a trouser press, he was sure. The truth was the room was plain, adequate, disappointing. Like winning the lotto in luncheon vouchers. This was a big seminar, famous names, he'd expected, well, more. The biggest plus was the sizeable flatscreen hung on the wall.

One foot followed the other down onto the brown flecked carpeted floor. He took several steps toward the window, paused, then pulled back the curtain to see city outside. Only to shy at the rapid onset of Polish light that hurt his eyes.

Is that a river down there? Joe didn't remember a river. He did recollect a short journey in a car. And that woman. What was her name, Kyla? Yeah, Kyla. The chick with the attitude. *What was her problem? Ah, who cares.* This was a new day, he was in a different country. And it had snowed last night. First thing Joe needed was a shower to freshen up. Grab some breakfast and see what the sights of Krakow had to offer. And he'd do it the old fashioned way, by catching a bus.

*

‘Yeah, the Ace of Spades. The Ace of Spades. Lah lah lah, lah lah lah. Lah lah lah, lah lah lah... Ace of Spades.’

Nothing like Lemmy pounding out on the Polish Rock Channel. And so much steam, so cool, it covered everything. This was a great bathroom, lots of marble tiles. A big mirror too, as his palm rubbed hard at the mist covered glass. More rubbing. Nah, forget it, grab the toothbrush. Belt out some more of those ageless lyrics.

‘Yeah, the Ace of Spades. The Ace of Spades.... Lah lah, lah lah lah.’

Joe was a Rock God who head-banged around his tiny marble stage, toothbrush conveying golden tones. A sudden pause and pose before the steam clad mirror. He should grow his hair; yeah, create some follicle waves, for the head gyration. *Serious head-banging man*. More movement ensued, an air guitar in hand. ‘The Ace of Spades... lah lah’ He wished he knew more of the lyrics... ‘The Ace of Spades...’

Skimpy towel and toothbrush were now fully engaged. Foaming froth oozed from Joe’s lips. He was Rabid Lemmy with a Demonic bounce. The legend of karaoke. A Demi God who had all the moves.

‘Mother of...’ Who the hell was sat on Joe’s bed?

Joe froze. *Some guy in a hoodie, on my bed?* It took a moment. *Wait, it's a girl?* Enough time to thaw from the heat of his performance.

'You?' He said. 'What are you doing in my room? How the Hell did you get into my room.' He pointed. 'That door was locked.'

'I phoned. You didn't pick up. So I came up.' Isla answered as if she'd been invited. Which she hadn't. 'When I knocked you didn't answer.'

'Yeah, I was busy.'

'I think all the people on this floor heard how busy you were. You should be more considerate. The music is too loud.'

'It's what... I'm what? Get out.'

'I was worried. You didn't answer so I came in to make sure you were safe.'

'Safe? Why wouldn't I be safe? Oh, wait... If I hadn't come out. Were you were going to rob me? You were weren't you.'

'Well, that would depend.'

'Oh really... on what?'

'On whether you have anything worth stealing.'

Joe looked for his suitcase, still where he'd dropped it. Open with his pants lying on top. His coat then? No, still hung over the chair.

'Where's my rucksack?' He asked.

'Where you left it,' she scolded, 'in the trunk of the car.'

She was right. He remembered now, after opening his mouth. He'd been angry with himself for leaving it in the car. There wasn't anything else.

Hey, where are my pillow mints? I put them on the desk.

'You broke into my room?' He said, wishing he could take back the accusation. His eyes still checking.'

'I'll be honest.' She said. 'I came up to apologise for being such a bitch last night.'

'Really?' Her accent had lost its spiky edge. So much softer than last night. And she looked sad. Her demeanour more vulnerable, girlish.

No, no, you broke into my room. I'm not going to be nice.

'Yesterday I was, how do you say... menstruating?'

No, no, you never say that word, ever.

'I get cramps, and very grumpy. Sometimes I discha...'

'No, stop, I get it. You don't go past cramps, okay.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come to your room. I just wanted so much to apologise. To say I am sorry.' Something changed, as he stood in his towel watching. 'And this is how you treat me,' she said, 'like a common criminal? You call me a thief and a liar?'

'That's not what I meant, really.' *Is she going to cry. Please don't cry.* 'Hey, you broke into my room.'

'And now I am leaving.' *Sniff.* 'My life is so shit, even when I try to do the right thing. I'm sorry.'

She was up, crying, heading toward the door.

‘Hey, wait. Let me... there,’ the mute ended the noise from the TV, ‘I can hear you now. Please, sit.’ *Am I really going to apologise to someone who broke into my room?*

‘I’m sorry, okay. I shouldn’t have accused you... can I, err, get you anything?’

‘Maybe some clothes, *sniff*, to cover up your modesty.’

‘Clothes? Oh, right, clothes.’

A woman breaks into my room to say she’s sorry, that’s kinda sexy. No, Joe, it’s disturbing. Is she dangerous? Joe could see Isla out there, sat on his bed. She looked so different, dressed in jeans and a hoody. The word ANGRY across its front. Surely that was enough of a hint. She shouldn’t be in there. Huh, she’s cute when she smiles.

Joe got dressed in the bathroom. Only one thing on his mind. What was he going to do with his new found burglar, stroke, driver... stroke, psycho friend? He exited to find her rummaging in the minibar.

‘Hey, easy, I have to pay for those.’

‘That’s not true.’ Said Isla. ‘It’s all paid for by the company. I know how these things work.’

‘Oh, well, in that case help yourself.’ *Don’t bother to ask first.* ‘And how’s the bed, comfortable?’

‘It’s good, firm. It doesn’t squeak when you bring girls back for fun.’

What girls?

What fun?

He'd barely noticed her last night, just the scowl projected each time he'd opened his mouth.

Wassername, Kyla? Definitely a girl. Fresh faced, no make up... what is she, twenty two, twenty three? And where's your suit? Shouldn't you be wearing a suit? Or doesn't breaking and entering require a suit these days?

All questions he should have asked out loud. He'd barely recognised her at first. Now the shock had worn off, she looked, normal; dare he say, nice. She pulled her hood back and did the, 'because I'm worth it', thing with her hair. Moody Cow was smiling too. *Wow, she's got Dreads.* Short and blonde. Skinny little Dreads that looked seriously chic; more Christian Dior, less Bob Marley.

'Why are you...' *No, don't question a woman who lies on your bed. Is she really the same woman from last night? Blonde, blue eyed. Oh, and she's put the blue shades back on.*

Joe had never met a girl like this before. And she was sat on his bed.

'Don't even think about it.' Isla scowled.

'What, I wasn't thinking. About anything.'

'It's what all men think about when a woman sits on their bed. Or stands within half a mile of them.'

'No, I didn't... wasn't. I was checking your shoes were clean.'

'Oh.' Two thuds on the floor as they fell. 'That was so rude, I'm sorry.'

She's sorry again. Joe's moral high ground had been resumed.

‘Would you like to tell me what you’re doing in my room? That door was locked.’

‘No, it wasn’t.’

‘Yes, it most certainly was.’

‘Hotel locks, a child could pick them. I can show you how?’

‘No, thank you. Maybe another time.’

Isla bounced herself off the bed toward the little fridge. Took another airline sized bottle from within. Twisted the top off and sipped.

On the bright side, this was more conversation than he got with most women. He wondered if she had any interested in genetics... No, no talk about Levis. Yeah, he got it now.

‘I would have called you.’ Joe said.

‘No, you wouldn’t. And I don’t blame you. I was rude. I should be more polite and courteous. I thought that maybe...’ Her head dropped, her tone more subdued. ‘Maybe you will sack me. So I came to apologise. I’m so sorry. Please Mr White, I have three children, one is... not so well. Special needs, you understand. I need this job, please.’

‘Special needs? I’m sorry to hear that. Look, I’m sure you’re a fine driver.’ Deep breath. ‘You’re my driver.’

He had considered an exploration of the cities underground rail network, or coasting on the local bus service routes to see the sights. He supposed it was a bit cold outside to hire a bike.

Special needs? He watched Isla take another swig. There was something about her, he couldn't put his finger on it.

'Mr White. I was so tired last night. Maybe a little spiky? Hmm, maybe?'

Spiky? No, let's go with rude. You were rude. 'I really didn't notice.'

'You're kind to say that.'

'No, seriously. I was looking for your card before I got in the shower.' *She's pointing? At the bin... ahhh.*

'My number, it must have crumpled when it fell into the bin as you undressed last night.'

'Hmm, yeah, slipped out of my pocket.'

'Mr White, please. Look, I am more informal today, just for you. Last night I was...'

Grumpy, irritating... driving irresponsibly.

'Excited, this is a new job for me. Hey, I tell you what, today is a new day. I am smiling. Let me take you down stairs and organise breakfast. Start again, how does that sound?'

Wait, I knew this was too good. I get it.

'Pharmax can afford breakfast for two?'

'Oh, you would like me to join you? Mr White, there are professional barriers.'

Where?

'But okay, I am not in uniform. Yes yes, I would love to join you for breakfast.'

Wait, what? No, that's not what I...

'And then you would like to see the sights? Maybe find a club? Or a woman?

I know places.'

'At... *What is the time?* 'Eight thirty in the morning?'

'Yes, you get a girl early. When she is clean and fresh.'

'What... no, no club. And no woman, fresh or otherwise. But thank you.'

'Okay, no problem. Do you like men?'

'No, no men. I just want a quite day. I tell you what. *I*, will buy *you* breakfast. And then *you* can go. There's a speaker at twelve, in the main hall. I'd like to be there. I've come to listen to men.'

Not have sex with them.

'But I thought the seminar begins tomorrow?'

'It does. There are introductions, speakers. They want to tease us before the main event. Tell you what. Afterwards, maybe, you can show me some sights.' *Please say your busy.*

'Good, I will wait for you.'

'That's great.' *It really isn't.* 'But tomorrow, I don't need a driver. I'll be engaged all day. Probably have a ton of reading, learning, sleeping, lots of stuff to do.'

'Oh, so you are buying a girl breakfast before you sack her?'

'No, no-one is sacking anyone.'

Breakfast was a noisy occasion. A high level of garbled conversation, the chink and chunk of cutlery; sounds that echoed like a bad headache. At least the vast entry arena gave a better representation of itself this morning. Wide and open. A web of clever engineering replaced last night scaffold as it proudly shouldered the cavernous glass roof. Beyond was a bright and sunny morning. Below was filled mostly with elderly men, a few young bucks; the only women he saw were serving the hungry horde. Joe had noticed that everyone wore a badge, pinned to their shirts. Joe wanted a badge. Where did Joe get a badge? And was his new friend ever going to stop eating?

Are you pregnant again. Eating for two?

‘So, how long have you been a driver?’ Joe asked.

‘Not a driver, not anymore. I’m a chauffeur. And not very long.’

Okay, touchy. Professional distinctions I suppose?

‘So how long, is not long?’

‘Not long, okay.’

What happened to less spike, more allure?

‘Do you find it rewarding?’ *Oh, you have something... on your chin. Never mind.* ‘Are the hours, good?’

‘It’s just a job.’ Her hand paused on its way up with more cake. She seemed to reflect. ‘A friend of mine spoke to his friend. You know, that’s how it works.’

'Okay, yeah... and you have children?'

'Yes, two. A boy and a girl. Little Gemma, and even smaller Hanz. They are so, small.'

'And are they here with you. Or back in Berlin with their father?'

'No, their father died. They stay with their Grandmother whilst I work. Do you want your jam?'

'I'm sorry to hear that. And no, please.' *Why am I buying my driver breakfast? Wait, didn't you say you had three children earlier?*

'So, what about you? You like to listen to men talk?' She asked.

'Sure. These are important people. I can learn a lot.'

'That's good, learning is important.' The cake went in. 'But after, you are free, for the rest of the day?'

Say no. Say no Joe.

'I suppose so.'

'Good, then I can, *burrrrrp*, take you places. You can learn about other things, yes? I show you the city, some architecture. How about a museum? Maybe show you real lives in Poland... what is happening on the streets here and in other places.' More cake went up. The coffee cup raised, paused in the queue. 'Or there is always the Camp...'

'Camp?'

'Yes, the Camp. Auschwitz. You have heard of it?'

'Yes, of course I have. Is that close then?'

Both her hands came back to rest on the table.

'For a clever man you don't know much. I'll take you. Maybe you will learn something about people. About who they are, and what they are capable of. Rather than, what they made of.'

'Look... err... erm.' *Kyla? Lola?* 'Have you finished eating, we should go?'

'You don't remember my name.' Isla's voice raised. 'I drive you, I worry about you, I make your bed and have breakfast with you. And you don't remember my name.'

'Can you keep you voice down, please.' *Okay, nothing to see everyone. Are you trying to embarrass me?*

'Say my name.'

Please don't slurp like that.

'Go on, say it.'

What's her name?

'Kyla. See, I remember.' *Why's she brandishing a butter knife toward me?*

'Hey, why should you remember me? I'm just your *driver*. You know, for once I would like a man to remember my name. I thought you were different; sorry, my mistake.'

'No, I'm sorry, I have a terrible memory. Honestly, it's a genetic thing. My dad was the same.'

'Yes, your dad was a man too. I bet you can remember all those shitty latin names for your germs, you know the ones. And all the medical things you poke and prod. But you can't remember a girl's name?'

‘Okay, I apologise.’ *It’s not like we’re dating.* ‘And can you keep it down, people are looking. Finish your breakfast...’

Eat, it keeps your mouth shut.

‘There, I am finished now. And I apologise for eating cake with my fingers and not with a fork. And for the record,’ she stood up, ‘you think I liked laying on your bed whilst you stared at me wearing just a skimpy towel? Even for an Englishman, that is weird. Now, I am leaving, okay? If you want to see me again you can fish my card out of your bin. And it’s Isla... my name is Isla.’

Okay, I think the entire hall heard that. People are staring. And yes, I realise how all of that sounded, people. Just once, Joe... just once, could you meet to meet a nice girl. Joe, you let her go... let her go.

‘Isla... Isla please. Hey, I brought you breakfast?’

And yes people, I know how that sounds.

‘Is everything alright sir? There seems to be a disturbance?’

Tall, dark suit, about to ask me to leave. Great.

‘She’s menstruating, sorry. But the cake was divine. Could you point me toward the car park. Is it this way? Thank you.’

Joe knew everyone was looking at him as he walked across the food hall. *The Sheraton? Bloody Marriott more like. Rubberneckers.* He could feel the smug, glad that wasn’t me, grins. By the time he’d reached sanctuary the symphony of cutlery had resumed. A dirge of embarrassment that played him out through the front doors.

Isla? Funny what you remember after it’s been thrown in your face. She-cow. Moaning Minnie. Bitch. She did that deliberately. Like a big baby because I forgot her name. He took a deep breath, told himself he didn’t care. Walked outside down toward the river he’d seen from the window. *The Vistula?* That was its name? How about that, he could remember the name of a river he’d never seen before. Maybe Isla did have a point?

Thirty minutes of staring at the water and missing home, enough time to remind Joe he was alone; encourage him to want to see more of the city, Isla style.

It might be fun. If I watch what I say, and do, and absolutely no staring. Do not stare at the girl.

There was something bad ass about her that he liked, now he'd had time to think. It was quiet funny, breakfast, looking back. Yeah, she was growing on him. Joe smiled. Like a bear with a stinging paw. Then something else jumped out at him. Where was his rucksack. His money, passport, everything was in his rucksack.

Shit, where did she park the car?

There it was, a purple Ford Mondeo Estate, and no highly strung female in sight. Joe checked out the interior.

Make up bag, lipstick, and a compact on the passenger seat. A blanket and a pair of boots on the floor in the back. Joe was feeling tense. Hoping his rucksack was still in the trunk. Wondering if she'd rifled through its contents?

This is for breaking into my room.

A fatal flaw in the Mondeo's security package had been highlighted some years ago. Something Ron had mentioned to him one night. One of those funny stories he told about dad. That the salesman at Ford hadn't passed on at purchase. Apparently dad had found out on a Thursday afternoon in Sainsbury's car park. An enterprising thief had set off the car's alarm, *like this...*

Blarrr blarrr...

And then by kicking the air bag sensor on the front bumper, hard, *like this.*

'Ow... ow... hurts... stupid...'

The airbag deployed from the steering wheel. Instant, and pretty cool. The brass alarm fell silent as the central locking popped the door-locks. Isla wasn't the only one who could be bad ass.

Joe popped the trunk and plucked his rucksack from the car. He checked his Euros, all present. Passport, still in the pocket. Nothing was missing; so the woman wasn't a thief. This was building into a mountain of guilt. First the accusation, and now he'd broken her car. Joe's impersonation of a Meercat was faultless as he checked for witnesses. Then he found himself staring at the other bag in the trunk.

Could I?

Should I?

Joe, it's none of your business.

Ziiiiip...

Women's clothes. What did he expect?

A pair of trainers came out, size five. A bra, size... smallish. The leggings he put up against himself. *Why do that?* All the items belonged to a female, five seven, slim, and with small feet. And there was a sleeping bag.

This is Isla's stuff? Is she sleeping in the car?

More interesting were the books below. A lot of books. Joe fingered them apart; his curiosity aroused by the titles.

Genealogy. How to discover a family tree. World War two, the highlights. Stalin's great purges. There were several more books on the Ukraine, mostly about the pre War. It was an eclectic read, and interrupted by voices in the

distance. Joe hit the Meercat panic button, head up, checking in all directions. He dumped everything back in the bag.

Ziiiip.

Walk away, Joe. And look shocked next time you see the car.

He left the carpark and walked the back way around the hotel. Still practising his, oh no, who broke your car face, when he saw something that made him look twice. And then again.

‘Un,freaking,believable.’

Through the large windows ahead Joe viewed the energetic efforts of a dozen or so patrons of the hotel. A state of the art gym, one particular ponytail of blonde Dreadlocks that caught his attention. Flapping to and fro as if it belonged.

‘Un,freaking,believable.’ He repeated.

Joe’s face craned up close and personal to the glass. What the hell was his driver doing in the hotel gym? Look, written in big letters on a sign screwed to the wall. ‘Hotel residents only.’ He was a nanosecond from banging on the glass, then caught sight of a strange woman beelining him from the other side?

Why is she waving her hand? Is she shooining me away? How dare you.

There’s an imposter on the treadmill.

The large intimidating woman filled his view. Joe smiled; more an affronted grimace. How come he was the one in trouble?

I bet she gave them my room number? The bloody cheek. That woman has eaten my breakfast, embarrassed me in front of strangers, and now she’s impersonates me in the hotel gym.

Okay, he’d deal with this. Once around the building gave Angry Woman the slip. He came in through the front entrance, bought coffee from the machine, then settled into a comfy sofa and watched from the viewing area. Watched

the girl with the cap and the angry hoody pound out several miles on the treadmill.

Halfway down his coffee Joe found himself wondering about those books. Was she reading them? And was she really sleeping in the car? Heads up she was on the move. One set after another on the machines. Pumping and pulling the weights with conviction. This girl was fit, and she lashed at the punch bag like a pro. He'd try a hot chocolate this time, the coffee was a tad bitter.

At last, she was finished. On her way out presumably to take a shower, and loot the hotel of shampoo and hand cream. Ten minutes later Joe was ready, waiting to pounce. This scenario had flipped round his head numerous times. 'Fancy meeting you here.' Joe said.

The wait had been worth it just to see her face.

Yeah, busted.

'We should try some exercise,' Isla said, 'you could do with some tough toning. Now excuse me please.'

'Hey, whoah, I don't think so.' *What does that mean, toning?* 'No, not until you tell me what you were doing in there? Did you rent a room last night? Someone sign you in did they? I don't think so, I'm calling security.'

For no apparent reason she screamed. A full blown, Freddy Kruger's in my face shriek.

'What the fu... Shh, shhhhh, don't do that. Please don't do that.'

Two passing women stopped and stared. *I didn't do anything.* Shot Putt woman came out through the door and scowled.

'Is there a problem, Mrs White?'

Mrs White?

'No no, goodness, I thought I saw a mouse. Huh, look at me, shaking, I'm such a baby. Olga, come, meet my husband.'

'Oh, so this is the husband you were telling us about.'

'Yes, this is him. Say hello to Olga, my love.'

Oh? What does 'oh' mean? We're not married. Why are you grinning at me like that? There is no, Mrs White.

More workers came outside, all staring at Joe.

She's not my wife.

'If you need anything else, just call me.' Said Olga. 'We'll charge it on your room with the other things.'

What other things?

'Thank you so much. Say goodbye to Olga...'

What other things? What's in that bag? All things that Joe should have said out loud.

'You think you can tell me what to do.' Isla's tone was harsh.

'Go away. I am off your clock until you call me, on my phone.'

'No, no, not until you tell me what's going on.'

'Going on? There's nothing going on. What's your problem?'

‘My problem? You just humiliated me in front of the entire hotel, and Olga. And you’re enjoying the hotel facilities at my expense whilst I skulk around outside.’

‘You were skulking?’

‘Yes, no. Hey, you’re impersonating my wife?’

‘Okay, fine, so I gave them your room number. I told them my husband thinks I’m fat; I have to sweat hard to please him.’

‘Which explains Olga’s happiness to see me. Why would you say that. She looks dangerous.’

‘She’s lovely. And why are you so worried, you don’t know any of these people? You have expenses, and I am expensive. Call me later, I have to go.’

‘Go where, back to the car? Lunch in the back seat is it. A night in with the dashboard later? I know you’re sleeping in the car. So again, what’s going on? And don’t you dare scream.’

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. Mr White, please, I have to go. I think it’s time for your seminar to start. You will miss the first speaker.’

‘You can’t avoid me, Isla. You work for me.’

‘Yes, and later I will take you for coffee. I will apologise properly, and maybe explain.’

‘Yes, explain you will.’

She smiled. ‘You sound like Yoda.’ Those were the first words she’d spoken without a razor glare from those beautiful blue eyes. ‘I’ll find you in the conference hall, yes. Listening to boring men talk talk, yes?’

‘Yes, listen I will. I mean...

‘I know what you mean. I’ll come and find you.’

‘And so the Foetal Stem Cells are conducted through the body by our genetically altered virus. We hope to engineer patient specific intro-viral cellular regeneration through targeted collapse of the damaged cells. Millions of Bio-familiar assassins with a singular aim; purge the bad guys, and we hold the patent for each patient. FXM/1R simply hitches a ride and resettles the genetic Alamo, so to speak.’

The man in the white coat worked the crowd hard.

‘Think of it as reproduction. Millions of sperm with one ultimate goal. First contact gets the job done. FXM/1R rides the delivery system which floods the host cells, but it cannot reproduce; so the taxi gets absorbed by the body. Our Stem cells remain onboard and initiate resurrection. Stimulation back to full health.’

Yeah right. Joe wasn't sold. That's a deep pot to throw your money into.

The room was half filled with old men, most just chatting to each other. These types of events were about catching up with old friends. About networking. The man on the stage with his projector and pointer was just the warm up. Hoping to hook a few investors. The main events, the big names who really did have something to say. That's what they really came for. It's what Joe had come for.

Lab Coat yakked on.

It is an interesting angle to come at it, but you're talking about a cure for all types of cancer. Maybe even dementia. Huh, a real deep pot.

He glanced about the room. Some of the audience were paying attention, a couple took notes. But there were hundreds of companies worldwide investing in similar stem cell research and technology. This particular pitch was kind of interesting; delivery of the stem cells by, well, mass ejaculation by the sound of it. Apparently his company was working on a patch too.

Someone will invest, they always do. Joe admired the passion behind the presentation. But he couldn't help thinking that Joe White should be up there pitching ideas of his own. But the Kerminator had him contractually by the balls.

Joe opened up the pamphlet in his hands, flipped the first page. The main event, the main man, was tomorrow. Pharmax's star attraction, Professor Tillmach; the world's leading light in Stem Cell Bio-technology. He'd already heard a whisper that the old man had some ground breaking news to share. TV cameras were setting up in the main conference room, it was all very exciting. The chance to see the great man in person. He'd get there early, make sure of a good seat. The man in the white coat droned on.

'The Foetal Stem Cells can also stimulate healthy cell and tissue to operate at a higher level of function with our patented protein enhancement. Boosting the body's own repair mechanisms, and aiding in the healing process. These are highly adaptive cells that can remain in the patient's body, continually searching for, and repairing damage they encounter.'

There it is. Lab Coat had hit them with the punchline. That's his real pitch, and what the investors will go for. Genetic Red Bull for the over seventies, and at a pharmacy near you.

Joe really admired the pitch. More heads were facing the stage and paying attention. Joe checked the schedule again, this presentation had another fifteen minutes to go. Wouldn't hurt to listen.

'Thank you gentlemen, it's been a pleasure to introduce our company to you today. I'd like to thank our hosts, Pharmax, for inviting us to attend. My colleagues will be passing out welcome packs in a few moments, and I hope that you will come to hear more from our representatives as the week goes on. And may I just add... California is wonderfully sunny and fragrant at this time of year, should any of you wish to visit the BioPlan research facility...'

'So, Yoda, still in touch with the Force?'

He recognised that voice.

'You didn't think I'd come? Well I wish I hadn't.'

'You we're listening to his pitch?'

'Oh yes, it's very sunny in California, and their genetic shit needs lots of cash.'

Don't knock it, the work they're doing is important.'

'He just wants money.'

'All good ideas need investment.'

‘Of course. Someone has to pay for the nice facilities and the expense accounts.’

‘That’s a bit cynical, and very loud.’ He led her away by the arm. ‘Gene therapy is an important area of medicine. Stem cell re-architecture, it’s improving health and saving people’s lives.’

‘Really? And when it works they give it away for free, yes?’

‘Now you’re being silly. It costs millions, billions, to research, refine, and manufacture treatments.’

‘So it will only help the people who can afford it, yes?’

Probably.

‘Its simple economics. The more use a drug gets the cheaper it becomes. The more widely it will be adopted. Pharmaceutical company’s have costs like everyone else. Ever used antibiotics, paracetamol, face cream? They all cost money to create and produce.’

‘They are tinkering with our wiring. Altering our genetic map. Re-writing DNA. We’ll end up living in a world full of monsters?’

‘You obviously read the Daily Mail. Isla, we’re guests of Pharmax, the world’s biggest investor in genetics. Hundreds... thousands of pharmaceutical products that enhance people’s lives every day.’

‘At what price?’

‘Shhh, keep your voice down.’

‘Did you know Pharmax made worldwide profits of more than two hundred billion dollars last year?’

'I did not, no. That much?'

'Yes. So much money, yet, if you cannot afford to pay? There are millions of people around the world who die every day. Why? Because they are poor. That's it. The only reason. Because they cannot afford your, *pharmaceutical products.*'

Five minutes with this woman, that's all it takes?

'I didn't invent capitalism.' Joe was whispering. 'All pioneering medicine comes at a price. But it also becomes affordable, given time. Some of the people at this event are doing great work. In a few years we'll have treatments, cures even; for diseases like Alzheimers and dementia. And people with disabilities too. Targeted cell replacement can revive broken bodies. Help people to walk, talk, and think again. Hey, it's trial and error, but ultimately it's for the benefit of Humanity.'

'By greedy men with white collars who want to play at being God. I don't think any good can come from it. I'll wait outside for you. And don't take too long, I'm hungry.'

Hungry? Do you ever stop eating?

'Hey, we're gonna talk about your less than honest habits too.'

'Joe White?' A gravelly voice. Joe turned to see a hand being extended. A tall man, in his eighties, narrow eyes fixed firmly on Joe. 'My name is Jonas Tillmach.' The man said. 'I've been looking forward to meeting you.'

You have?

'It's an honour to meet you.'

He's shaking my hand?

'The pleasure's mine, Joe. May I call you Joe?'

'Yes, of course.'

'This is Kurt and Joss. Members of my staff.'

'Hi.' Two heavyweights in suits. More prevention than cure. 'Pleased to meet you both.' Said Joe. They weren't listening.

'How are you finding things here? Is your room comfortable enough? Is there anything you need?'

'Err, no. I'm very comfortable thank you.'

He's putting his arm round me, lowering his voice. Whispering? Oh my God, Professor Tillmach's got his arm around me.

'That was a lovely young lady you were talking to. Is she your wife?'

She thinks she is.

'Isla, no... she's on my staff.'

'She lovely.' He said. 'Joe, will you walk with me.'

Joe had to find her, he was on fire, desperate to talk. He found Isla drinking coffee, and eating again, in the ground floor bar. If she was billing it to his room? It didn't matter. He had news.

'You'll never guess who I just met? Go on, guess. You're not guessing... why are you holding your hands out?'

She turned toward the handsome bartender.

'My husband, he wants to arrest me. He says spending his money is theft. But all I want is to be happy.'

'I... you... what?'

'We're going to address my issues around honesty, yes?'

'No, yes. Not now.' He could feel the bartender's eyes engaged on him.

'What is it with you, some sort of self defence? Or do you just enjoy belittling me?' He was whispering again. 'Whatever, I don't care. I just met Professor Tillmach.'

'That old man with the two thugs in tow?'

'They were personal aids. You saw us?'

'I might have noticed.'

Are you spying on me?

'I met Professor Tillmach. The father of modern genetics. He shook my hand.'

'You're very excitable aren't you.'

'He wants to meet up with me later. Didn't say why though. Professor Tillmach wants to chat with moi.'

'Is it a date? You realise he's too old for you.'

'That's not funny.'

'Okay, okay, this obviously means a lot. So tell me, what does this famous man want with you?'

That was a good question. Why did Tillmach want to talk to Joe.

'I can tell him about my study results. Get Tillmach's opinion about the old man and the gene anomalies.' Isla looked blank. 'Maybe Becks was right? He wants to offer me a job?'

'So you get a job and I become unemployed?'

What's this got to do with you? Do you know how annoying you are, sitting there licking cake off your fingers. Do you ever stop eating? What? I'm staring aren't I? It's the first time I've seen you with your hair down. Stop staring. Funny how hair can peel away a hard exterior. You're really pretty. Blue eyes, thin lips, all covered in sweet sugar.

'It's not going to happen.' She said, and meant it.

'What?' He had to stop saying that. *I was just looking.*

'Mr White, just tell me. Are you going to report me for pretending to be your wife? I can't afford to lose this job. Please, I'm sorry.' She put her hand on her heart. 'I'll behave myself, I swear.'

'Yes, it's fine.' *No, no it's not.* 'No, it's not. You do realise that you embarrassed me earlier. I *should* sack you. No, don't say it. I know, you have kids. Kids. You should act more responsibly.'

'Really? Now you sound like my mother.'

'Good, maybe you should listen to her.'

'Maybe, I don't know. She died recently.'

Died? Ahh, Awkward.

'I really miss her.'

No, don't look like that.

'Mama used to say that the Angels looked over her, just so they could watch over me. Does that make sense? I'm not sure it does. I do wonder sometimes.' She waved to the young bartender and pointed at her coffee.

'Will you join me?' She held up two fingers and the bartender signalled to a waitress. 'There's a lot of down time in this job.' Isla said. 'These places, they can get lonely. Too much time to think, you know?'

I think that's the first honest thing you've said to me.

'I get it.' Joe felt his mood change. 'The loss of someone you love. It can make you angry, bitter even.'

'So you have lost someone too?'

'I lost both my parents in a car accident. Suddenly they were gone, it was hard. You know, it helps to talk.'

'You want me to talk about it?'

‘Look, I’m just saying. I know how it feels. I was thirteen.’ *Wow, it’s been a while since...* All the bad feelings bubbled back to the surface. ‘I didn’t believe it was true for a few days, maybe a week or two. Then one day I found myself staring at the front door, and I realised that neither of them would ever walk through it again. Something changed, for the worse. I got angry. I think you’re still angry.’

‘Do you really want to talk about this, to me?’

‘Why not? Sometimes it’s good to talk.’ *Obviously something you don’t do.* She seemed caught between faces, unsure which one to show.

‘Fine,’ she said, ‘okay... let’s talk. You obviously want to know about me, yes? Where do I start? Oh, I’ve been told I can be, somewhat eccentric. Yes, and difficult too. It’s because I don’t like people, not really. I like to be on my own. Okay, that’s a lie. Being alone is shit. I find it hard to get on with others. Maybe they find it hard to get on with me, I don’t know. Did I mention I can be difficult?’

‘I hadn’t noticed.’ *Try abrasive, irritating... kinda interesting.* For someone with nothing to say, she was suddenly talking a lot.

‘What else do you want to know?’

Let’s see; how about why you are sleeping in your car? What’s with those books? That’s what he wanted to ask.

‘Tell me about your mother.’ He asked, and she looked away.

‘Mama was Ukrainian. She was a nobody. Maybe a somebody. Just another poor woman living a hard life, I guess. I never met her, and I’m sad about

that. I've never met anyone from my family and that's shit, right? I think I complain too much, but I don't think that comes from my mother. I was told she liked politics, football, and a good bar fight.'

'That one sentence makes things so much clearer. And proves the theory that everything is passed down in the genes.'

'Are you mocking me, Mr White?'

'No, no... I'm just saying. You can't blame others for the way you live your life.'

'Oh, and you know *what* about my life? I'm sorry, I must have missed you all these years. What gives you the right to criticise me?'

'No, I wasn't...'

'Poor you, with the loving parents and warm memories. Let me tell you, I didn't ask to be here. I shouldn't even be here. Mama always told me that I shouldn't have been here, but that God made an exception. Apparently, just for me.'

'What? I have no idea what that means.'

'Of course you don't, why should you. My mother was forty six when I was born. She was so desperate to have a child that she risked her life just to hold me in her arms. Little me? Why would she do that? Why? She died an hour after I was born; holding me just like this. Rocking me to and fro. Until... until she stopped. No more rocking. Poor little Isla, now she's left alone.'

'Look, I didn't mean... I'm sorry.'

‘Sorry? Why, you didn’t know her. You don’t know me. Save your sympathy. Ahh, coffee. You took your time.’

The waitress was young, fresh faced; she looked new to the job. A lovely smile for Joe as she held out the bill.

‘Dla was, sprawiać przyjemność.’ The waitress said.

‘You know what, I want to slap that face. She says that this is for you. That you must pay. Don’t you understand?’

‘No. I don’t speak other... bloody hell. Forty eight Euros for coffee and a piece of cake?’

‘Give that to me. Look, it’s for breakfast earlier as well. You ran off without paying, again. That’s so typical of him. Next time you should call the Police and have him arrested. I swear, if it wasn’t for the children. There, look, I sign for him. And I apologise for my husband. This isn’t the first time I’ve found him in a hotel, you understand? He’s a pig. But see, he has tipped well. These English, they are so generous. Especially with their insight into other people’s lives.’

Oh please, like tiny springs that well up on command.

‘Oh, thank you Madam.’ The waitress brimmed with appreciation.

‘Wait... how much did you give her?’

‘Like I said, you are a big tipper. You want to make me a liar as well as a cheated wife?’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘That woman has a young child who depends on her, I can tell. I have two children, and I’ve been a waitress; it’s shit Mr White. Now drink your coffee and think yourself lucky you have a good job in a country that pampers you.’

‘Nobody pampers me... you said you had three kids this morning. Have you lost one?’

‘Two, three, what difference does it make. They are a nightmare, and so expensive to keep. Who wants children anyway?’

‘Do you actually have any offspring?’

‘I’d like some, one day.’

‘Is lying a compulsion? Do you need treatment?’

‘I do what I have to do. I wasn’t given much choice.’

‘So we’re blaming your mother again, what for this time? Your, *difficult* personality. And just when did she die? Recently, or twenty years ago, I get lost in the detail.’

‘What detail? What do you know about me? It’s people like *you* who are wrong with this world.’

‘Oh, so now it’s my fault.’

‘You laugh but you know nothing. Yes, maybe I blame Mama for making me like this. Or maybe I blame her friend, the one who knew the doctor; who had some influence in the trial. You like trials, you said so, yes?’

‘Trial... what bloody trial?’

‘So now you’re interested in my life again? Okay, I tell you. I was one of the first. Can’t you see it in my face? Isn’t that why you stare at me? Isn’t it in my genes for all to see?’

‘I don’t stare.’ *Stop staring.* ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about?’

‘You, and all the doctors like you; with your needles and good intentions. You try to impress each other with your theories and research. And all for the good of others, yes? And to hell with the consequences. Never around to clean up your mess. People like me, we don’t get a choice, not even to be born.’

Born? What are you talking... IVF, is that it? Are you talking about IVF?’

‘Bravo, yes. The very early days you understand. So you see, I am a miracle baby. A leap in bio-technology that has become so common place; so boring these days. You even give it for free on your NHS, yes? Good, that’s good. Give it away, that’s very good. But sometimes I think, maybe that’s why I am, who I am. What I am. Why I am like this. Maybe it all went wrong in the test tube. And then again when I was born.’

Is she making this up, it’s so hard to tell?

‘Mr White, I’m twenty four years old. I spent twelve years of childhood in one crappy Home or another. I spend another six years working in shit-holes like this to pay people to find out who I am. And now I wish I hadn’t bothered.

I'm beginning to wish I hadn't.

'My Mama left me before she knew me, and now I am here. So now we have talked. Oh yes, I feel much better. Fuck, I should have done this years ago.'

What could Joe say? Maybe he shouldn't have asked. Maybe he should keep his mouth shut. No, no, it was about to open again.

'If your mother died when you were born. How does she speak to you, from beyond the grave?'

'You don't talk to the dead in England? I visit her on her birthday and take flowers. The rest of the time I try not to remember. Oh, you think me stupid now? You English don't go to the grave of your loved ones, and weep. Talk about what was and what could have been?'

'What the hell are you talking about? Have I offended you somehow?'

'All you do is offensive. I hate Doctors and I hate science. Without either I wouldn't be here. Maybe I prefer it that way. Maybe you prefer it that way.'

'Look,' he really didn't know why he was smiling, 'I'm really very sorry...'

'And you are sorry again? My mama and papa tried for years to have children, but no. So they come to Germany where maybe they have a better life. Not much to ask for a woman who had always helped others. She was a good person. I was told that. People who knew her, loved her. And then one day she decided to love herself. She wanted *little me* in her life. And I was there, and then she was gone. And there was no-one to help poor little Isla.'

Don't ask, Joe.

'What about your father?'

‘Gone, back to the Ukraine, or somewhere else, I don’t know. I don’t care. I have never seen him. But then I suppose he never was really my Papa. I’ll never know where all those wriggly little sperm really came from. Maybe I ask you, eh? You like that sort of thing. Hey, I guess I was one of the benefits of your, medical trial and error. As you say, “for the benefit of others”.

Let me tell you, once Isla was in her basket the doctors didn’t want to know. They posted her to where no-one gave a shit. Pretty good benefits, huh? Yes, go ahead and clear your throat. You have a lot to answer for.’

‘What? Don’t lay this at my feet. *Get up and walk away, Joe.* ’Screw you.’ He said. ‘I’m sorry the after care was crap. But your mother obviously wanted you, and bad enough to risk her life. IVF at her age, back then? That has to mean something to you.’

Silence.

Isla was about to burst into tears. Or beat on Joe like the punchbag earlier. He wasn’t sure which.

‘Your mother must have had family?’ He said. ‘Did you approach them? Surely there’s someone out there?’

‘No, no-one. My mother was adopted, so they say. She didn’t know herself; and only found out by accident when she was seventeen.’

What the heck does that mean?

‘A few years ago I found a friend of Mama’s. Marta, she told me what she knew. She met Mama just after she arrived in Germany. Marta gave me a

box, with things that my mother had left for me. She kept them when the State whisked me away into care.

It was quite a shock I tell you. My mother's voice talking like that from the grave.'

More silence.

'Well... what was in the box?'

'Letters, lots of them. My mother wrote them to me whilst she was pregnant. There were papers too, documents; a list of names, dates, family that she had found. All dead of course, so not very helpful.'

'There must be places you can go, to find out about them.'

'There were a lot of people displaced after the War, Mt White. Children left without families, without homes even. Some didn't even know their names when the War ended. My mother looked, of course she did. She wanted to know about her family. Where she came from. You know, who wouldn't? I suppose that's why she wanted me so badly. She knew how dangerous it was to have children at her age. So she left me all that she knew. A little money, some letters, and a box filled with more questions than answers.'

Mama grew up in a Europe ruined by War. Maybe its difficult for you to understand, your country wasn't invaded. Your people weren't marched off to Death Camps. You didn't have to look the Nazis in the eye every day. Or live in the ruins they'd left behind. That was Mama's world.'

Joe felt Isla's pain. It was difficult to know how much of this was true, but the look in her eyes told him the truth.

‘Please excuse me, I have to take a pee.’ She said.

‘Nice.’ *Thanks for the chat. Make sure you wash your hands.*

‘Hey, when I come back we go out, yes? I have a job to do, remember. I’ll take you somewhere. A place where you can learn about who and what people really are, and not how you’d like to make them.’

Isla marched off, still full of emotion. Joe suspected he’d uncovered the reason chauffeurs didn’t talk much. Dumping on him like that had made one thing clear. For all the cake chewing abrasiveness, Isla *was* human after all. She had issues, plenty of them, shit that she’d never dealt with; that still screwed with her life. It made her kind of, normal.

Assuming of course, that every word he’d heard wasn’t total bullshit.

Isla stopped between the gates.

‘You see the words twisted in the iron?’ She asked. ‘Arbeit Macht Frei. It means ‘Work will make you free.’ The prisoners walked below it twice a day. When they left to provide labour for the Reich, and again if they were still alive to return.’

‘I have a very odd feeling.’ Joe said.

‘Of course, the spirits are restless. Personally I don’t think they want us here, not really. Auschwitz is a place for the dead, and they don’t like tourists so much.’

It looked like one of Lowry’s paintings. The stark brickwork, all the rooftops and chimneys. There was somehow a lack of colour.

‘Have you been here before?’ He asked.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Is it good?’

‘Good? It’s not a fucking theme park.’

‘No, no, that’s not... I didn’t mean.’ Isla was on the move. ‘Hey, wait up.’

It seemed wrong somehow to walk below the iron letters above his head. Arbeit Macht Frei, forged in iron.

‘Come on.’ She called. ‘And forget everything you’ve seen on television. This is worse, because it’s real. But be prepared, this place can numb you. We’ll

tag to that group by the building. Joe, don't shout, whisper. You don't want to anger the dead.'

He didn't want to meet them either.

Hey, did she call me Joe?

The tour guide reminded Joe of Betty Boop. She was all dark hair and eyelashes, on a rounded face that refused to crack a smile. The middle aged woman spoke with eloquence and reverence, her words in no hurry to be spoken. She had his attention as they moved through the most infamous killing Camp in history.

“The original purpose of Auschwitz.” She said in an accent Joe couldn’t pin down. “Was as a Polish army barracks, here in the suburbs of Oswiecim. The Germans took over the barracks and used it to house Polish prisoners. This was to serve as its main function. It wasn’t until late nineteen forty one that it became a Concentration Camp. Within a few short months it became a Camp of extermination. Please to follow.”

The tour party were Italian. Predominantly middle aged. Mostly married couples. All attentive to Betty each time she beckoned to speak. They harboured a feeling of sombreness and collective intrigue. Joe shared their morbid desire to learn more. Isla too had fallen under Auschwitz’s melancholy spell.

“The camp changed forever when it became a source of labour for the nearby I G Farbon chemical factory. Until then Auschwitz was a small detention camp; but the factory needed labour. So the Germans expanded the Camp. This in turn attracted other factories to the site, and as a result the Camp was monstrously enlarged. It is an ironic quirk of history that the

geographical location that so attracted I.G. Farben from an industrial viewpoint, also proved to be ideal for the Nazis as a centre for mass murder. Please look at the diagram." The largest on the walls. "You can see here that Auschwitz was made up of three main camps. Camp One was for the prisoners. Camp Three was to source slave labour. Camp Two, Birkenau, this was the Death Camp."

Betty let the silent audience absorb the statement. There was no need to add to the atmosphere, the number of spirits were growing fast. The only two children, young teenagers, were held immersed by her tale.

"The prisoners would arrive by train mostly. Come, we will see the tracks." She beckoned them to follow her outside. Waited for the group to converge. "Several trains a day entered below that tower, through the main gate you can see. The prisoners were offloaded onto these loading ramps. This is where the SS guards would separate the prisoners into lines. As you can imagine, there was much fear and confusion.

Sonderkommando, Jewish workers under threat of death, would take what belongings the prisoners had brought with them; whilst reassuring the new inmates that they were safe. An attempt to keep the prisoners as focused as possible for their SS masters. This made it quicker to usher them through selection and processing. See, over here three lines would be formed."

Joe's gaze followed the track toward the arched entrance and the tower above. The guards would be up there watching; disappearing in a plume of steam as the train rolled in below. Isla whispered to him.

‘The Sonderkommando would take the prisoners luggage into those buildings beside the tracks. Everything they owned was stolen from them and used for the German war effort. There could be several thousand prisoners on each train.’

The group was moving on. Joe felt rooted to the platform. It all seemed so peaceful now. So picturesque with everything dusted in snow. The tower was a gaping mouth that spewed prisoners into the Camp on a truly tragic scale. He could almost imagine the sounds of the trains as they hissed to a stop. The ramps scraping as they were pulled up to the doors, ready to unload their Jewish cattle.

Their release from the train would have been a momentary relief. Until the SS guards began to scream at the undesirables. That short terrifying walk toward the unknown as they were pushed and jostled. Their lives directed by the muzzle of a gun. Being herded by dogs that barked and snarled. It gave Joe goose bumps; the kind that manifest when you find yourself alone and afraid in the dark.

He hurried to catch Betty and the Italians.

“The Men were separated here from the women.” She said. “Workers from both sexes who were deemed fit to work, over here. The rest, including the children, were taken straight to the gas chambers. Straight down there. There was no time to reason, nor to understand what was going on. Perhaps it was best for them, not knowing. Would you want to know?”

Follow please.

After process the men and women were branded and sheared like sheep. Those not marked for death would be admitted into the Camp system and assigned residence in one of over forty sub-camps.

Women would stay here in Auschwitz Two, Birkenau. Men are marched to Auschwitz One, some three kilometres in this direction.

I must tell you that Birkenau did not look as it does now. Survivor's tell how Birkenau was a muddy swampy area that stank, and was infested with insects. It was a place of constant epidemic. Diseases like typhus were very common here.

Follow please, we will see the residential barracks and the ruins of the gas chambers. You may take photographs, but no flash is allowed. And no noise, please, we must be respectful.”

The feeling of open space was oppressive. Only when Joe realised the size and extent of the Camp, did he grasp the numbers of the murders involved. Most of Auschwitz Two was just brick and rubble remains. A red brick that infested the site.

An hour later Joe was back indoors, and Isla was right. Everything about the Camp had become very real indeed.

Block four... Extermination.

There was no sign there had ever been heating in the building. Despite wearing his coat zipped tight to his chin, Joe felt the bite of the cold. How could any inmates hope to survive a winter in this place?

“Your attention please.” Called Betty. “Jewish peoples from as far away as Greece were shipped here to Auschwitz. For most the trip took about two weeks in cattle trucks. Often as many as one hundred persons to each truck. For most of the War priority for the railways was always for German armaments and military personnel. Sometimes the prisoners must wait in their trucks for several days. Remember, many of the prisoners believed they were being shipped to a place where they could start a new life.

Besides the Jews, other undesirables such as Gypsies, Russian POWs, and Poles were shipped to Auschwitz. All were victims of Hitler’s Final Solution. Please, look around. I will wait for you by the door.”

Block five... Physical evidence of crime.

Look at all the suitcases?

Joe was staggered by their number. Each case or holdall branded with a family name and their home town. All they had left was packed into suitcases.

At that moment the incomprehensible numbers of people murdered at Auschwitz, became personal. They bloomed from statistics into Human Beings. Men, woman, and children. Their cases piled higher than Joe; they stretched the entire length of the room behind the glass. Possessions left in transit. Their lives stolen like their bags. And then there were the shoes. It was difficult for Joe to even to look at the shoes. So many thousands of shoes left in a great pile for posterity.

‘Dear God. Isla, is that human hair?’ Joe whispered.

‘I’m afraid so. They say it weighs seven tons, just left here like this by the SS. Just another shipment piled high and waiting to be forwarded to Germany. It still waits. Joe, do you think people still sleep on mattresses filled with Jewish hair?’

‘God, I hope not. That’s a really disturbing thought.’

‘I have another one for you. In Germany there is a saying, “I’m tired of the Holocaust.” Maybe the people that say it should come here and see this?’

Block six... The life of the prisoners.

Betty held up her umbrella, the sign for the group to stop and listen.

“At first the prisoners were photographed on arrival,” she said, “but because film was in such short supply they began to mark the prisoners with numbers. To keep account of them, you understand? Each number a name in a ledger. Auschwitz was the only Camp to use this method, and only on labour-worthy prisoners. If you were processed for extermination on arrival, you were not numbered. If you died in transit to the camp, you were not numbered. Seeing someone with a number tattooed on their arm means that he, or she, is a survivor of Auschwitz.”

Block ten... **The Medical block.**

Access denied. Five steps led up to a door with a lamp. A small window on either side. A plaque marked with the number TEN.

“We are no longer allowed to enter Block Ten.” Said Betty. “This is also known as Clauberg's block. Doctor Carl Clauberg, a physician who conducted sterilisation and castration experiments on hundreds of prisoners inside this building.

Other doctors involved in experimentation at Auschwitz were Horst Schumann, who experimented on prisoners using X-rays. Doctor Kurt Gutzeit, who injected Jewish children with disease. Doctor Joseph Mengele, the ‘Angel of Death.’ No doubt most of you will be familiar with his name. The infamous doctor who experimented on children, predominantly twins.

Dr. Helmuth Vetter. Doctor Fritz Klein. And there were others. Doctor Herta Oberheuser was a woman who killed children and then dissected their bodies in the name of medicine.

Some German doctors revelled in the opportunity to further their careers and medical knowledge, by experimenting on Human Beings imprisoned within the Concentration Camp system. Some of the guards, men and women, were also keen to be involved.

But for the testimonies of prisoners and doctors we may never have known the extent of the inhuman practises performed on inmates within the Concentration Camp system. Or the level of involvement by doctors, who pre-war, were considered eminent and well respected.

After the War twenty three Doctors were put on trial at Nuremberg. Seven were executed for their crimes. Seven were acquitted. The remainder received prison sentences ranging from 10 years to life imprisonment.

It was also noted at the Nuremberg Trials that a prominent clique of gifted physicians were absent. Their whereabouts during the War, and after, is undocumented. But it was widely believed that they worked for the Nazis. There was speculation of *genetic experiments* conducted within the Camp system. And also at other secret medical facilities in Germany. But by the early nineteen fifties, as with the stories of hidden Nazi treasure, interest had dwindled. There has never been any firm evidence to support the theory of the Missing Doctors.

Please, follow me.”

Betty led them around to an empty yard between block ten and eleven.

There was a plaque on the wall.

To commemorate the countless executions performed.

Like the rest of the Camp the courtyard felt like a graveyard. And it had started to snow again, all light and wispy; Nature's way to keep things fresh and cold. Maybe to hide the shame.

Was this how it was when the crematoriums burnt at their height? Joe wondered. The snow black instead of white? How much ash is ground into the soil beneath my feet?

Oh, am I walking on ...?

'Joe, are you okay?'

'Yeah I'm good. It just make me feel, you know.'

'I know. Sometimes this place feels like a bridge. On one side the dead are resting; but they are still full of curiosity. Watching at a land of shadows where we, the living, stop and stare.'

Joe was glad to be outside again. It felt good, the snow. A calming curtain; Nature's attempt to sterilise the wrongdoing until the thaw.

'What's wrong?' He asked Isla who was staring. 'Oh no, is that a joke?' He asked. 'Why would someone want a selfie in front of the Death Wall?'

'To put on Facebook, I expect.'

‘That’s so wrong. God, I hate Fookers.’

‘Fookers...?’

‘Face Bookers... Fookers.’

‘Oh, I like that.’

‘Isla, can we go?’

‘Yes, of course. Come, I’ll take you back, this place isn’t for everyone.’ Joe had a spring in his step as they walked back to the gate. ‘You see that spot, Joe? That’s where the camp orchestra played. Every day they would play, for hours on end. Isn’t that sad?’

‘This whole place is sad.’

‘It seems the SS appreciated good music. For the prisoner it was a coveted job; a chance to survive. At least for one more day. That’s so sad.’

Joe had had enough tourist information, he wanted out. Back to the hotel. Isla had made her point, if there was one. And maybe she was right, Humanity could be bad. Insane even. But there were two sides to every coin. What he did. What all doctors did. It was to help others. Nothing he’d seen here changed that. Joe just wanted to use his talents to help others.

They followed the path out below another of the infamous work signs. Auschwitz had left its mark. He guessed it did on most people. He’d been inked, but not on the forearm, in his mind. Captured on a flash of humble emotion. A warning from history.

Joe decided that his next trip was going to be in the sunshine; he was going to Disneyland.

Krakow was a fairytale land by night. It's moonlit skyline a crescent of steep pitched roofs and reaching spires, a city so different from London. A blend of medieval fortitude and modern day commerce. Maybe it was just the light from the Wolf's moon that loomed and watched from on high, but Joe was feeling a growing sense of romance and adventure. Emotions not experienced amongst the bricks and mortar of Fulham and Chelsea. Perhaps it was the snow, or the fur lined inhabitants who walked well lit streets. As they neared the heart of the city his view grew to be almost regal, and Disney like. The ancient architecture enshrined within a strangely hallowed light. Wow, Krakow was easily the most beautiful place he'd ever seen.

'Joe, look. That's the market square. I love those fountains at night, so wonderful, yes?'

Joe shuffled across the seat to gain a better view of the vast open space. To capture the magic of the water as each stream briefly defied the act of gravity, and then fell; replaced by another and then more. Energetic plumes captured in colourful lights that danced about the magnificent dome of glass at their centre. Behind them the wonderful Palace now lit like a post card in the night.

'Joe? Do you want some music tonight? Maybe a great view with some wine? Hey, I have an idea. You can take me for dinner, I am quite hungry now.'

You're thinking of food again?

'No, thank you. Just back to the hotel, it's been quite a day.'

Joe was happy to watch the sights go by. To absorb the city's history from the comfort of the car. Maybe one more flip around the city again. That would be nice.

'Okay, the hotel is good.' Isla leant back between the seats each time she spoke. Eyes on him, and then the road, then back on him. 'I can help you empty the mini bar if you like?'

Do you ever stop?

'Ah, I think I need a few hours on my own. And some sleep. Got a lot to do tomorrow.'

'Oh yes, I forget. You have to sit with boring old men and listen to them talk, talk, talk, about boring things.'

'Those *old men* are going to share a lifetime of expertise and experience. This is the opportunity of a lifetime for me. Isla, where are we?'

A church with two tall spires. Ancient stonework brought to life in an almost phosphorous glow. The car was slowing down.

'Isla, this isn't the hotel?'

The car stopped.

Outside Joe could see a horse and carriage. Lovers huddled in the cold below heavy furry blankets. Still more carriages, the road ahead was busy. Both sides of the congestion were lined with shops, and shoppers. Locals and tourists, he supposed. Maybe they *should* stop. Take in some atmosphere.

The snow had been falling most of the day. Outside had transformed into a magical Kingdom.

‘Oh, I get it.’ I’m such a mug. ‘Show Joe the sites, yeah. Get Joe all loved up with the city.’ *Cheeky cow.* ‘Isla, I’m not taking you out to dinner.’

‘Call me Issy. That’s what my friends call me.’

You’ve got friends?

‘I didn’t think you liked me.’ Joe sniped.

‘Not so. You are a nice man, English. And I think you’re handsome too.’

Okay, too much. Now I know you want something.

‘Out of curiosity,’ he asked, ‘where are you sleeping tonight?’

‘No, don’t worry about me, I’ll find a place. Maybe one of the hostels will be open.’

‘So you don’t want to stay with me then? Not looking for a nice warm room to camp down in?’

‘I don’t need your charity. But you have my number, yes, to call? It’s in your bin, remember. Hey, maybe you get hungry later and change your mind about food?’

I am so gonna regret this.

‘You can have the chair in my room, or the floor. And yes, the mini bar too.’

‘Really? You mean it? Okay, if you insist, I can do that. I know how lonely a big city can be. But I’m not sleeping with you, I’m not that kind of girl.’ The car began to move again. ‘Hey, can we order room service. Huh, and watch a movie?’

Two streets later the car stopped again.

‘I think we’ll have to take another route, there are protestors ahead.’

‘Wow, that’s a lot of people.’ The closer they got the louder the whistles and the singing. Hand written slogans on boards were being bobbed up and down’

‘Before you ask me, they are angry about the blackouts.’

‘Blackouts... what blackouts?’

‘Every other day for three hours the power in the city is shut down. It is alternated between districts, but everyone suffers.’ She leant back again.

‘Don’t you watch the news. It’s been on and off the front pages for months.

No, don’t tell me, it doesn’t affect you in England?’ Isla leant on her horn.

The people outside took offence but moved aside. ‘Okay, Russia supplies nearly fifty percent of the energy used in Western European. Prices are high, Joe. Supply is being withheld because of the sanctions we enforce, because Russia helps the Ukraine Rebels. You know about the Ukraine? Okay, when Russia sent their *peacekeeping troops* into Latvia and Estonia earlier this year we, Europe, froze Russian business interests in the West. The Americans have done the same. Now the Russians are pissed off and withhold their oil and gas. They blame technical and mechanical problems, of course. Joe, a lot of people are very angry about this; just look outside.’

‘Pull over.’

‘Are you sure?’

Issy pulled the car to the kerb.

‘You want to watch them?’

‘Issy, there are thousands of them. There are children out there.’

‘Of course, everyone suffers. Unless you are rich and then you don’t give a shit. And don’t worry, the big hotels are exempt.’

The entire road surface had vanished under marching feet. Several thousand people headed slowly eastward. A procession of heavy coats and woollen hats. Old people walked side by side with their children, and grandchildren. The young wrapped up warm. The protester’s singing, their voices blending with an eery harmony.

‘It’s an old Polish song.’ Said Isla. ‘A lament, I think. Maybe from an opera, I don’t know.’

‘So where are they going?’

‘To the city centre, to protest. But the Police won’t allow this, so there will be trouble. We must go now, I don’t want us to get caught up in this.’

Isla drove slowly, like a snow plough the bonnet encouraged the demonstrators to move aside. Until the whistles faded and the crowd disappeared from sight.

Above him, Joe watched the bright lights circle, and then drop as each plane that queued was allowed to land. The hotel was close.

Isla was saying something. Joe wasn't listening. It sounded like another complaint. Or not, as Joe sat up and took notice.

'Yes, some bastard broke into the car last night. Can you see where I cut the airbag from the steering wheel this morning.'

He'd completely forgotten.

'Some pervert went through my clothing. Tried on my bra and panties, I think. Hey, are you listening to me? Joe... Joe.'

She was calling him Joe again. He liked that. He liked the warm glow it conjured in his belly as he leaned forward. A tingle and a glow fuelled a smile as he looked at the well trimmed airbag.

'People will try to steal anything these days.' He said. 'Lucky me, I took my smalls up to the room last night.'

'It's not funny.'

The car squealed between the white lines in the hotel car park. A moody jerk from the car's suspension. The Mondeo's interior light seemed to reflect Isla's declining mood. She exited the car and mumbled something. He only caught one word... cameras?'

'What cameras?'

'I want to see the footage from the cameras.' She whined. 'You see them, up there.'

'They have cameras in the car park?'

'Are you blind?'

Obviously. Oh shit.

'I'll have the bastards arrested. Post their faces on the internet. Tell their mothers how they like to try on women's underwear.'

Shit shit shit, they have cameras in the car park?

Joe opened his room door. It was Issy who saw the postcard on the floor. Who picked it up to read.

'It's a phone number. Hey, it's rude to snatch.'

'It's rude to pry.' That was her first sentence without the word camera. 'Put your bag in the corner.' Joe added.

Why leave a number but no name, or message? He turned it back and forth, then took out his phone and dialled. Issy's bag was open, all her things on his bed.

'Don't use my toothbrush.' She said. 'Or my shower gel, okay.'

Joe's phone connected before he could object. Somewhere in Poland a phone rang.

'I'm going to take a shower.' Issy slammed the bathroom door.

'You're not moving in, it's just for the night...' The phone answered.

'Joe? Joe White is that you?' A man's voice, he'd heard it before. 'It's Amon. Amon Tillmach.'

'Professor?'

'Joe, can we meet?'

'Err, yeah. Yes, of course we can.' Joe tried the bathroom door. Locked. 'I'm kind of in the middle of something right now; can we...'

'Tonight, Joe. We need to meet tonight.'

'Can I ask what this...?'

‘Please, meet me in an hour. Tell no-one, Joe. They’ll kill us both to keep it secret...’

‘Whoa bad line, did you say...?’

‘An hour, Joe. It’s on the card. Meet me there, please.’

The phone went dead.

Joe took a hesitant look around the room. He tapped gingerly on the bathroom door.

‘What do you want?’ Isla called out.

‘We need to go out again.’

Silence.

‘Isla, I have to meet someone. Please, come out.’

‘I’m in the shower.’

‘I can’t hear the water. It’s too late, turn it off. Isla, get dressed we have to go out.’

The door opened. Issy didn’t look happy.

‘I don’t want to. You can’t just tell me to... Joe, what’s wrong? Have you eaten something bad?’

‘You know the old guy, from this morning. He wants to meet in an hour.’

‘Joe, I have a towel wrapped around me.’

And it hangs very nicely.

‘Get dressed.’ More authority was needed. ‘Come on, we’re going out again.’

‘No, I don’t want to. Why should I?’

‘Because you’re my driver.’

'I'm your chauffeur, and I'm off the clock.'

'You'll be off the couch too if you don't get your keys. And don't give me the death stare, this is important. Tell you what. Do this for me and I'll order Room Service when we get back. Anything you want from the menu, on me. It will come with wine.'

'The expensive stuff?'

Really?

'Yes, expensive. Now get dressed, this is important.'

'Fine, but why can't he come here, it would be easier?' The door closed again.

Joe hadn't considered that. Why didn't the Professor come to his room?

'Maybe he forgot his bus pass.' Joe said. 'Or maybe it's because I have a driver. You work it out.'

'You're so rude. At least tell me where are we going at this hour? It's dark and cold out there.' The door opened. 'I'll need to borrow a coat. Do you have a coat? You must lend me a coat.'

'Coat... of course.'

Uh oh, this isn't my fault. You left the door ajar, and I can only see your back in the mirror. Why am I leaning? Joe, stop leaning. 'Err, I'll go get, a coat for you.'

'Good, it will stop you staring at me. Where exactly does this *Professor* want to meet?'

'He said it was on the card. It's not on the card?'

Issy opened the door toothbrush making fluid movements. She took the card from him. Just a phone number on the back. She raised the picture on the front to face him.

‘This is a photo of Wawel Castle at night. You see the bridge in the foreground, that’s Debnicki bridge.’

‘He wants to meet me on a bridge?’

‘There are benches beneath the bridge. People watch the boats go by.’

‘Do you know where it is?’

‘Of course I do. Joe, can we eat first?’

‘No, we eat when we’re done.’ He hated himself for saying it. ‘Can you get dressed please.’

Wawel castle stood proudly on the other side of the river. A grand edifice with imposing towers and circular turrets. An architectural cross between a monastery and a hunting lodge. Its facade was lit by powerful lights that cast a grand reflection across the waters of the Vistula.

‘It’s big, eh?’

‘We do have castles in England.’ Said Joe.

‘That one was built by Casimire the Great in thirteen hundred, and... something. It’s a museum now, but for centuries was the residence of Poland’s kings. Impressive huh? Let’s go there instead of this stupid meeting, yes? Okay, fine, but for the record I don’t like this. These scenes never end well in the films.’ Issy pulled the car off the road before entering the bridge. She drove slowly across the snow covered bank until the river below was in full view.’

‘Are you sure he didn’t gave you a reason for coming?’

‘No.’ Joe lied. ‘He just said that he wanted to meet me.’ He opened the car door and the. ‘We can get down to the river over there.’

‘We? I’m not going out there, it’s minus two. I’ll wait here in the car for you.’

‘But I lent you a coat.’

‘Do you want me to hold your hand. Are you scared?’

‘No.’ Why should Joe be scared out there, on his own, in the dark. ‘See you in bit then.’

‘Seriously, you’re not coming?’

‘Can you close the door please.’

Her reply was frostier than the temperature outside. Lacking only the crispy crunch of his boot as she pulled the door closed.

Outside the night sky was clear and filled with stars. He heard the sound of tyres in the slush as cars crossed the bridge fifty metres away. Joe zipped his coat, pulled on the Beanie on his head; took one crisp stride after another. He looked back and beckoned with his hand. The lights on the car went out.

Why would a Nobel prize winning scientist want to meet here?

Joe took careful steps down the steep bank toward the water. He couldn’t hear the cars any more, just the faint creak of wood from boats moored two abreast on the other side. The river made a black break in the snow. It looked and sounded really cold. About forty metres away a man was sat on a bench watching the water. The castle had been replaced by the dark arch of the bridge above. Maybe it wasn’t too late to go visit the castle after all.

‘Professor Tillmach?’ Joe asked cautiously. ‘Is that you?’ He was relieved to hear the man speak.

‘I wasn’t sure you would come.’ Tillmach said.

‘I came as quickly as I could. What’s going on?’

Tillmach extended Joe a gloved hand. The aged scientist looked cold despite the heavy overcoat and scarf, a classic Ushanka worn on his head. He looked uneasy, nervous, eyes checking behind Joe as he shook his hand. Under his arm was a parcel wrapped in paper and tied with string.

‘You came alone?’ Tillmach asked.

‘Err, yes.’ Joe lied. ‘You said it was urgent? Professor, why don’t we go somewhere warmer where we can talk.’

‘No, we can’t be seen together away from the hotel. Were you followed?’

‘Followed? No, I don’t think so.’ *Why would anyone follow me?* ‘What’s going on, Professor?’

‘Sit down, Mr White. I have something to tell you. There are things you need to know. You are in terrible danger.’

‘I am?’ *He’s got me looking around now.* ‘What’s going on? Why am I here, Professor?’

‘Amon. Please call me Amon.’

He sat. Joe did likewise. What the hell was he doing out here in the cold and dark. And why was Joe in danger? Why did his new friend, Amon, look so scared?

‘You met someone.’ Amon said. ‘In London a week ago. I have not heard from him since. I hoped... Joe, you met with Elder?’

‘Elder Routh, the Polish guy?’

‘Not Polish, German. So you did meet with him.’

‘No. Well, not really. Professor, how do you know this man?’

‘Joe, please, I need to know that Elder is safe?’

‘You don’t know do you? Professor, I’m sorry... Elder Routh is dead. He jumped from a hotel window and killed himself last week. Professor, are you okay?’ *You’re such an idiot. You can’t just blurt out something like that.* ‘I’m so sorry Professor, were you close?’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I’m so sorry, it’s true.’ *Show him, he needs proof.* It was the first time a picture of a dead man stored on his phone had come in useful. ‘Is this Elder Routh?’ *Okay, no mistake from that reaction.* ‘I’m truly sorry. But the Coroner’s report stated that death was instant. He didn’t suffer.’

‘Coroner’s report?’

‘Err, yeah.’ *Big mouth.* ‘It’s a long story, I really can’t...’ *Are those tears?*

‘Professor, what’s going on, why am I here?’

Joe relayed what he knew about Elder, which wasn't much. Tillmach was no longer on edge, he had sunk into sadness for his friend. He sat quietly and listened, content not to interrupt. He remained stoic throughout Joe's tale.

'And that's all I know.' Said Joe. 'Please don't mention the hospital to anyone, we could get in big trouble. Professor?' He looked so frail. Badly winded by the news. 'Professor?'

'You have questions, of course. Joe, I came to you because it was arranged, with Elder. He was to contact you in London. I in turn would ensure your invitation to Krakow. Excuse me... I'm so sorry.'

The old man's hands came up to his face and tears rolled down his cheeks.

'You were very close to him weren't you.'

'I can't believe he is gone. And you say the police think he jumped from a window?'

'Yes.'

'No, they murdered him. And if they know about Elder, then they know about me. And now they know about you. I'm sorry, but I've put your life in grave danger.'

'Did you say Murder? No, Elder Routh committed suicide. He jumped from a hotel window, didn't he?'

'However Elder ended up on that pavement it was not of his own volition. Elder was murdered, I have no doubt.'

Murder, he said it again. No, I'm not having this.

'Professor, you've had a shock. No-one's been murdered. Let's get you somewhere warmer, have a nice cup of tea...'

'We must act quickly, Joe. I'm sorry, it was Elder's idea to involve you. He thought, that if we got to you first? Did you speak to him? Did he send you anything? A letter, a parcel, anything?'

'No. I told you. We didn't have any contact before his, blood-work ended up on our study.' *He's getting agitated.* 'Professor, you're freaking me out. Is there someone I can call for you?' *Oh, okay, hand on my arm.* 'Professor, please... I don't know what you think I have to do with any of this.'

'I don't know all the the details, Elder was a secretive man. He had sources. Lines of communication and information. The people he knew were mostly anonymous and online. A lifetime of contacts. But no friends, not that I ever met. You have to understand that Elder only shared what was necessary with me. He could disappear for days, weeks at a time, and not tell me. Joe, I've known Elder for so long, and yet there were times that I thought I never really knew him at all.'

'I get it.' *No I don't.* 'Professor, why did Elder come to London? Why did he come to see me?' *And what's with the parcel lunch you keep hugging on your lap?* 'Becks told me not to come, I should have listened.'

'Becks? Who is Becks? Yes, of course. You will have your sources too.'

'No, I don't. What are you talking about?' *Was Professor Tillmach a spy... or a nut-job?*

‘Information came to Elder that you would be approached. That you were to be a part of the final process.’

‘Approached, process? Was Elder a spy?’

‘No, not really.’

‘Professor, it’s bloody freezing out here. Start talking sense or I’m leaving... please.’

‘You really don’t know do you?’

‘Know what?’

Tillmach sat back, a sudden sense of realisation as he looked up at the bridge.

‘It was lie,’ he said, ‘they wanted to lure him out.’ Tillmach sat forward and stared out into the darkness. He grabbed Joe’s hand. ‘We don’t have long. I’ll tell you what I know.’

'I met Elder in nineteen sixty three. I was a student in Munich studying molecular biology. It was a virgin science back then.

Elder moved into the apartment opposite mine, and despite being much much older than I, we became good friends. They were good days, Joe. But everything changed the day he told me our meeting was no coincidence. That he'd spent years trying to find me after the War. That he'd found me using files from a programme that most Germans want to forget. He'd found me on a list of children's names. Have you heard of Lebensborn, Joe?'

'Isn't that something to do with Nazi kids?'

'Yes. From nineteen thirty five a special class of children were claimed by the State. To be nursed and schooled; brought up to become Hitler's new Master Race. They, *we*, were illegitimate children, deliberately conceived by young Aryan mothers and their SS fathers. The SS were the sexual engine to fuel the programme, but only with women of good blood stock.

Unmarried mothers were allowed to bring their bastard offspring to the programme. The SS were more than encouraged to spread their genetic seed; it was considered a duty. As for the women involved. They regarded it as an honour and not a disgrace. It became one of Heinrich Himmler's patriotic obsessions.'

'You are a Lebensborn child?'

'Yes.'

‘Professor, are you feeling alright? You must be cold, come on let’s go somewhere warm. Get a hot drink. Please...’

‘There’s no time, Joe. If they know about Elder, they know about me.’ He took a deep breath and straightened himself. ‘I have to tell someone, Joe. You have to listen to what I know. I’m sorry it has to be you. But it’s now or never.’

‘You really think Elder was murdered don’t you?’

‘There’s no doubt in my mind.’

‘But why would anyone kill an old man.’

‘Because he knew a secret.’

‘He had a lot of secrets by the sound of things.’

‘Just one is enough to get you killed, Joe. It’s a secret that he kept even from me. But they’ve found out about us now.’

‘You do know what you sound like.’

‘A crazy old man?’

‘And then some.’

‘So where’s the harm in indulging me, a crazy old man?’

He couldn’t stop the sigh. Or the misty breath that hung out there to highlight it.

‘Fine, okay.’ *I bet she’s up there listening to music, sat in that nice warm car.* The truth was it was turning into an interesting, if somewhat chilly story. ‘Tell me about Elder. Who was he?’

‘Elder traced me through the original Master List of Lebensborn births. It’s a document that is not supposed to exist. Well, naturally I didn’t believe him. I thought it a joke of some kind. I had parents and a birth certificate, I even got them out for Elder to see.

But then he showed me. Proved it beyond any doubt. It was a day that changed my life, that altered my focus in science. In nineteen seventy two, Elder Routh gave me a sample of his blood; genetic proof that he was my father.’

‘Your father? I’m so sorry Professor.’ *But that can’t be right.* ‘In seventy two you said? No, that’s not possible. DNA couldn’t be read in that kind of detail, not in seventy two. Alec Jeffrey didn’t discover DNA fingerprinting until nineteen eighty three. You’re ten years too early, Professor. Elder Routh could not have proved, genetically or otherwise, that he was your father.’

‘And yet he did. The problem with history, Joe, is it is often written by men who know how to profit from its lies. Men who will kill to keep its secrets.’

‘Look, I’m sorry. I don’t know what this is, but I...’

Tillmach’s hand took Joe’s arm again.

‘In nineteen forty nine a new company name was registered in Germany.’ he said. ‘On it’s board sat a group of men, all of whom were members of the Nazi Party. None had any recorded crimes to their name, but all took an active part in the Holocaust. It was a pharmaceutical company, you may have heard of its name. Today we know it as, Pharmax.’

‘One of the two giants of world Pharmaceuticals. They’ve bought our hotel for a week.’

‘They buy more than hotels, Joe. Nothing is beyond them. Much of their work is done in the shadows. In pieces. Small research groups, each a part of the whole. Developing, refining, producing, with none of the groups ever knowing what the others, or itself, work towards. A deeply secretive culture exists within the company.’

By the mid fifties Pharmax were world leaders in many areas of biological research. They began to diversify into other fields of science. Much of their work in the Cold War still remains a State secret. Elder believed they were instrumental in the development of biological weapons, both toxic and irradiated. But exposing their secrets was not his driving force. You see, Elder had an obsession. Have you ever heard of, Project WolfSpawn?’

‘No, what is it?’

‘That’s a question Elder sought to answer his entire life. Until recently it was just a name to me too. And then my Father said he had found proof.’

‘Proof of what?’ *Don’t turn your hands up. That means you don’t know.*

‘Look, Professor, Elder was old. Maybe he... you know.’

‘Had lost his mind? No, Elder was ninety four years of age, but as focused as the day I first met him. Not as agile, for sure; but his mind, it was always crystal clear. Elder was excited to meet you; full of certainty about his course of action. He was absolutely sure that he must show you the proof of what he

knew. That you could help to end whatever it was that had consumed him for so long.'

'Professor, we never met, or spoke. I'm sorry.'

'And he sent you nothing?'

'No.'

'Then I don't understand. What's your involvement?'

'I can't help you, Professor. So it wasn't you who put Elder's blood-work in my study?'

'What blood-work?'

'And you didn't mess with MOLI?'

'I don't know Molly?'

Oh shit.

'What about Isla?'

'Who is Isla?'

'My driver.'

'I don't know anything about your driver.'

That's good, isn't it? So I can trust her, can't I?

'So you're telling me your Father was a Nazi.'

'Yes. Elder was in the Waffen-SS. Oberscharführer Elder Stauff, before he changed his name. It was his final posting at the end of the War that changed everything for him. Began a life long obsession with Pharmax; with WolfSpawn. He spent the rest of his life trying to atone for the War. Trying to be a better man. For the last months of the war Elder was posted to

Auschwitz. Not inside the camp itself, but below it. A place called Hut Thirty Six, underneath the Camp.'

'Thirty Six?'

'Yes, does that mean something to you?'

'No.' Joe lied. 'Please, just tell me everything you know. Tell me everything.'

Elder went to London to see *you*. He'd been given information suggesting you were about to be approached. Become a part of WolfSpawn. His murder suggests he was right.

'Approached for what reason. Why did Elder want to see me?'

'To convince you to work with him. With us.'

'What, like a spy?'

'A Mole, yes. You are a respected scientist, Joe. Elder believed you were about to be approached. Made an offer that you couldn't refuse. Elder thought he could recruit you first.'

'But you worked for Pharmax? Oh, you were recruited weren't you? What was the offer *you* couldn't refuse?'

'We scientists need two things, Joe. Somewhere to work, and a budget that suits our ego. Pharmax offered me unlimited access to facilities and equipment so I could continue my work. For twenty years they funded experimentation with enzymes. We stripped DNA, Joe; the very fabric of life. We fragmented the Double Helix into its basic working components. Gained an understanding of the proteins that are involved. Oh, I know, any second year Grad Student understands the principles now, but not back then. Science was in the dark about DNA, and *we* shone a very bright light.

We would receive instructions regarding certain proteins and their effects on the donor cells. "Switch them on, switch them off. Fully remove them

from their donor.” We tried to understand their behaviour with electro and biological stimulant. We began to harness and alter certain gene patterns, both uniform and abstract. We built bigger and more powerful computers to simulate and study them. I began to see a pattern to the way the research was heading. I just never fully understood why. If I had I could have solved Elder’s mystery.’

‘So you spied for Elder, for your father.’

‘Yes. But my group was only a part of the puzzle, Joe. We learnt much about the structure of DNA. We even began to structure the genes ourselves. We were decades ahead of anyone else back then. And then, for no good reason, we were shut down. By nineteen eighty two we were able to read our own genetic code, Joe. We’d achieved all our goals. How to specifically target and operate cell proteins. And the programme was shelved.’

‘So you never knew the reasons for your work?’

‘No. Pharmax obviously took our work and used it in some other line of research. It’s not unheard of in pharmaceutical companies. My talents were directed elsewhere and my contract prohibited me from talking about any of this.’

‘Don’t be modest, Professor. You won a Nobel prize.’

‘Yes. But matching my own DNA with Elder’s before they shut us down, that was worth more. Besides, by nineteen eighty three DNA profiling was available to the world, so what did it matter?’

So this is your work that MOLI uncovered. It has to be. Patient five, and your own father; both have the same markers in their DNA but aren't related. Not as impossible as I'd thought. But why? And why show me?

'I don't suppose you know who told Elder about me?'

'No.'

Someone is pulling my strings here and I don't like it. I don't like any of this.

'And you don't know what Pharmax did with your work?'

'No. And that's the same face Elder would pull. He said it was a typical Pharmax model. Always a decade ahead, only sharing enough to expand their influence and wealth. But my work was a part of WolfSpawn. It's at the core of this Company, Joe. Pharmax's own obsession. Here, I brought this for you.'

The paper parcel on his lap. Joe wondered when he was going to get round to it. And what he had wrapped inside.

‘This folder contains everything I have. I don’t know what WolfSpawn is, or what my work was used for. Pharmax keeps secrets, Elder has taken his secrets to the grave. He did tell me that WolfSpawn began before the start of the War.’

‘World War Two?’

‘Yes. Nineteen forty five wasn’t the end for some. The Nazis are not as extinct as we would like them to be.’

‘Was your father still involved with them?’

‘The Nazis, the CIA, even Mossad. Elder has been involved with them all over the years. Are you sure he didn’t send you anything?’

‘Like what, that’s the second time you’ve asked.’

‘Elder kept journals for many years, before computers. I thought that maybe... they could tell us much.’

‘Like how he got involved with all this in the first place?’ *I should get back, Issy will be worried. Or asleep.*

‘In May nineteen forty four Elder was posted to Auschwitz. He didn’t like to talk about his time there, about what he did. He said the world knew enough already. But there *was* something the Allies didn’t find at the Camp. He said the SS left enough, that there was no need for anyone to look further than the horrors they found. The Allies did not find Hut Thirty Six.’

‘Hut Thirty Six again, what is that?’

‘A code name used at several locations throughout the Third Reich. Auschwitz was one location. Not even the Camp Commandant, Rudolf Hoess, or any of his successors knew what they were doing at Hut Thirty Six. Himmler personally ordered Hoess, Baer, the others, not to enquire or talk about it. The Camp Commandant was to give all and any assistance required. Interference or discussion about what went on at Hut Thirty Six would put his life, and those of his family, in danger from the Gestapo. Auschwitz was ground zero. The source of the WolfSpawn Project. The centre of Himmler’s great experiment.’

‘You’re serious aren’t you?’ Joe couldn’t help but laugh. ‘So what’s all this got to do with me?’

‘I can’t tell you what I don’t know. Elder’s life revolved around his sources, accumulating information; secrets to be learned and kept, even from me. It was his way. I do know that someone brought *you* to his attention. I don’t know who. But Elder was keen to meet you. He was excited; talking about the old days. He even spoke about the war. You have to understand, Joe, Elder rarely talked about the War. It was a subject that made him uneasy. He knew that some would consider him to be a War Criminal.’

‘Was he?’

‘Perhaps, I don’t know. Probably.’

‘And he worked underground at this, Hut Thirty Six?’

‘Yes. The original barracks at Auschwitz were built by the Polish Army. We all know about them. What remains a secret are the tunnels they built below;

originally designed to serve as the sewer and cellars. Their intention to run all of the waste into the river took another direction so a series of chambers were abandoned below the Camp and sealed up. When the Germans took possession of the buildings an SS engineering team was sent to evaluate the site. Under Himmler's direct supervision the cellars were reinforced with concrete and never added to any known plans of the site. When the contractors came to enlarge the Camp for prisoners, there was no trace of any underground structure. The access was hidden in the forest and a tunnel dug. Hut Thirty Six was a secret, no-one but the Commandant knew of its existence.'

'I'm not sure I want to know, but what did they do below ground that they couldn't have done in the actual Camp? Surely the Camp Doctors could do anything they wanted.'

'All I know for sure is Hitler tired of Himmler's obsession with Germany's past. To Adolf Hitler, the Teutonic history of the Germans played no part in his vision of their future. So Himmler kept Hut Thirty Six a secret from his Fuhrer. This was the Reichfuhrer's research; his dream and obsession. Hut Thirty Six was somehow a massive part of Germany's future. The research done would end up as the building blocks for Pharmax's success. Elder was sure of it. He spent his entire adult life trying to find out what went on down there.'

'Someone must have run things. Staff, security... someone?'

‘My father ran security. The doctor in charge was a man named, Manfred Seiglar. All Seiglar told my father was the project was top secret; some kind of scientific programme. Elder was never privy to the details. But he kept notes, a journal. I know that Himmler donated his own blood to the programme. And ordered thousands of SS soldiers and officers to do the same. Of course they were told it was for the hospitals and medical units on the front line. Above ground the Labour Camp was an unlimited supply of patients for medical trial and experimentation. Joe, whatever they subjected these people to... I don’t want to know. I’ve never wanted to know.’

‘And your father, what were his duties?’

‘My father said he rarely visited the Camp. On occasion he would go to collect donors. Women, Joe; the donors were always women. Elder said he escorted them out of the Camp, but never back again. That was all he would say. Officially, Elder was in charge of organising supplies and materials for the Hut, and for its security. Elder assured me he had no direct knowledge of what went on in Hut Thirty Six.’

‘And you believed him?’

‘No. I know he lied to me. Elder had a keen mind but a dark heart. But I believe he spent his Post-War life trying to atone.’

‘Okay. But you don’t actually know what research was being conducted.’

‘No...’

‘What? What is it? Come on Professor, there’s no point in holding back. You asked *me* here, remember.’

‘I don’t know what this means,’ Amon said, ‘but my father said it many times. “It must not happen again.”’

‘What, what mustn’t happen again?’

‘I don’t know. My father was obsessed with the social changes happening across Europe. He would comment on them constantly; the politics, the conflicts in the east. The recent migration from the east to the west gave him sleepless nights.’

‘He was a racist.’

‘No, he wasn’t. He would say, “it’s happening again.” But when I pressed him to tell me more... it was as though he kept a thermometer on the social climate of Europe. Always watching, waiting, for something to happen. I don’t know what. Elder was deeply concerned with how the Russian’s were acting in the east. Their continued support of rebels in the Ukraine. The movement of Russian troops into the Baltic States. He was so angry when the Greeks defaulted on their debts to the IMF. When Russia gave Greece loans to bail them out; I’ve never seen him so stressed. It was the price of the loans. Greek islands in the Mediterranean to be used as Russian naval bases. My God, he raged. He was angry for days. He would shout at the television. “No, no, no, this must not happen again.”’

‘And you don’t know why he was angry?’

‘Elder had a way of talking but never saying what he meant. A lifetime of secrets I suppose. Joe, all I know for sure is he went to England to see you.’

‘I swear, I never met with him. Hah, you arranged my invitation to the Seminar didn’t you. I’m not stupid, Professor. Why did you invite me here if Elder was coming to see me?’

‘Because they told me to.’

‘Who? Who told you to?’

‘Joe, I’ve said too much already. I’ve put your life in danger by asking you to come to Poland. You must believe I didn’t know. I didn’t... Someone is coming? I told you come alone.’ Tillmach was up and standing, his hand reaching inside his coat. ‘Have you betrayed me?’

‘No. It’s probably a dog walker... is that a gun?’

The old man looked terrified. Every sense he had reached out into the dark. All Joe could see was the water. Banks covered in snow. A handgun cradled in both hands and directed down the path.

‘Professor, why don’t you put that down.’

‘I’ve given you what I have, Joe. Maybe there is still a chance, if you leave now.’

‘Professor, no-one knows we’re here. Please, sit down, I need to know more. Like, why you have a gun?’

He’s scared, look at his fingers tremble and twitch. Whoah, don’t point that thing at me.

‘Easy Professor, I came alone.’ *I hope that’s not Isla. Please don’t be Isla.*

‘They murdered my father, Joe.’ The gun swung toward the path again. He was right, there was someone coming. ‘Now I think they are coming to kill me, for giving you this.’

‘What is that?’ *You’ve cradled it like a baby since I arrived. And that is definitely not Isla coming down the path.*’

Joe startled. Tillmach had discharged the gun. A cannon going off below the arch. The old man fired another shot, he was running, trying to climb the embankment. Tillmach fell, slid, fired another two shots before he struggled to his feet. Joe hugged the bench his heart racing.

‘Professor.’

Another shot, quieter than the last. Tillmach doubled over, staggered, collapsed to the ground. He slid head first down toward the path.

Oh my God?

Joe scrambled toward the old man who raised a hand and tried to speak.

‘Don’t talk. Don’t do anything.’ His eyes stared, lips tried to speak. *What the hell is this...* ‘Blood?’ Joe’s hand was covered in a red creamy oil. But how... why? Had he fallen on something sharp? Had he shot himself? The sound of footsteps were close now.

‘Hey, over here, help us. Call an ambulance.’ A tall man breached the darkness. ‘Ambulance? Call an ambulance.’ The man kept coming. ‘Do you speak English?’ Tillmach pulled Joe down toward him. ‘Easy Professor, I’ll get help.’

‘Joe, listen.’

‘Shhh, don’t talk. Hey, please, help us.’

‘Joe...’ Still pulling Joe down. Insistent he listen.

‘Roxy...’ Tillmach said. ‘Roxy.’

Joe watched the life leave Tillmach’s eyes. His head slumped back.

‘No no no. Don’t do this, Professor. Do not die. For God’s sake man will you call someone.’

The stranger had slowed his pace. Why didn’t he do something? He looked curious, shouldn’t he be freaked out? Where was his dog? Joe looked at the man’s hand; he didn’t hold a lead, something else. A long tube, attached to a handgun.

A billion synapses fired in Joe’s head as he realised. Tillmach wasn’t breathing. There had blood all over his hands A mean looking man stood holding a gun.

Joe dropped Tillmach’s head and scrambled back, away from the stranger. His eyes fixed, all consumed by the figure who was on the move again, toward him. Closing with each lengthy stride.

Get up and run. Joe couldn’t move. *Oh God, he’s going to kill me.* Joe tried to stand. He failed. Maybe it was shock, or fear, but movement came too late. The man barely two metres away.

‘Give me the papers, Doctor White.’ His voice authoritative and cold. ‘Hand them over. Tell me everything the old man said. Then you are free to go.’

‘What?’

‘You are not a part of this, I understand that. I have no intention of hurting you.’

Really? He looked sincere.

The river glistened and didn’t seem to care. The bridge towered high and wide in an ark of silence. No cars crossed above, and below swallowed Joe like an angry void. His exceptional mind sifted through all the available data; synapses fired to consider his options. Work out the angles and extrapolate a plan of action. A moment later Joe come up with nothing, nada, a big fat zero. Just the certainty that he was going to die down here in the cold and snow.

‘Please don’t kill me.’ He could see the man fully now. A bald man who looked far too at ease with what he had done. What he was about to do. The automatic weapon tapped on his leg drawing Joe’s eyes toward it.

‘Tillmach should have come in,’ he said, ‘he should have come to me; I gave him the choice.’ Baldy wore a scarf around his neck, but no hat. Who didn’t wear a hat on a night this cold? His gloved hand extended.

‘Give me the file.’

‘What?’ He held Tillmach’s bundle in his arms. ‘You killed him?’ Joe said.

‘You don’t understand what you’re mixed up in, Mr White. Give me the file and I will help you. I’m the only one who can.’

Say something. Beg him not to kill you.

‘You killed him for this? *It’s just a shabby folder bound by string; it’s older than me.* ‘Did you murder Elder Routh too? Oh shit, please don’t kill me.’

'The file, now. If the others come I'll have no choice...'

I've seen your face, you'll kill me anyway. Do something, Joe. Do something. Anything. You can take him. He's old, Mid forties, but really tall; six foot plus. His head shines in the moonlight.

Everything about Baldy said Joe was going to die.

Oh God, he's going to kill me. Do something, Joe. Get mean, get angry, just do something.

'You want this?' *Yeah, aggressive, like it.* 'How about I toss it in the river, huh? You'll have to swim to get it. Or maybe someone will find it downstream.' *Good move, yeah, that's good.* 'I mean it... I'll do it.' The gun raised. 'No, wait, wait, don't shoot, please don't shoot. Here, it's yours. Just don't shoot me.'

Joe was begging for his life. Hands raised and holding out the folder. As he squinted up at the man something caught his eye, further up above. A shadow in the darkness. The Angel of Death was hovering, waiting to take him? It had climbed on the wall of the bridge. What was it, he couldn't quite make it out. It was falling. Maybe ten feet above Baldy's head and dropping fast.

It hit Baldy hard; battered him to the ground and then rolled away and across the path. Baldy was down.

'Isla?' *No way.*

It was her. She'd dropped, from up there, onto Baldy?

'Are you going to sit there, or help me?' She asked.

'Yes... are you hurt?' *You saved me.* He had her hand, pulling.

As Joe pulled Issy up they heard a man shout angry words from the opposite bank. Joe could see him clear as day. Black shoes and brown raincoat he half slipped half slid down the bank. A flash, phutt, crack in the concrete behind them. Then again before Joe realised he was shooting at them. fired again. Isla's hand slip from his. Baldy lay on the tarmac, Joe stood clutching the package. The unknown assailant was perched firm on the slope, taking aim. Phutt phutt.

Raincoat Man dropped his gun and clutched at his chest. He keeled over and slid the snowy slope down to the tarmac where he folded in half, a trail of blood left in his wake.

Joe stared, all his blood was in his feet.

'Fuck, that was too close.' Isla stepped beside him with Baldy's gun in her hands. 'We need to go.' She grabbed his hand. 'Joe... hey Joe. We have to get to the car.'

Car... yes, car. His feet were on the move, blood circulating again. *Oh my God, what just happened?* The air seemed to whistle he ran so fast. Or did something pass by quickly past his head. Some kind of musical note. There it was again.

‘They’re shooting at us.’

Now he heard them, the crack of the gunshots. The whizz of projectiles as each fizzed by surfing a different note. A sick kind of music that drove his pace to accelerate. The girl in front kept shouting for him to, ‘Run faster. Get to the car.’

What car? I can’t see the car?

Street lights, he could see street lights. Head toward the street lights. Another stinging note whizzed by. It was close, too close. Both Joe’s hands grabbed at the trunk of a passing tree. C minor whistled, and then burst. A sudden crack of wood erupted into splinters that stabbed at his hand; struck out at his face. Joe cowered. Made himself small as another shell burrowed into the bark.

Run Joe, just run. Where the hell is the car?

A glance saw two men coming up the path. If he ran they’d shoot him. Joe made himself small, then flinched at the crack of more gunfire.

Two, three shots; fired from behind? A big man walked calmly to his side, gun discharging at the bad guys. Another crack, a pretty flash, more followed. A spent magazine fell and a new one was slapped back in. More fireworks as the man advanced. Joe dared to peek around the trunk.

Both men were down. Three more were racing to take their place. Phutt phutt phutt. A furious few seconds of gunfire were exchanged and the men below the bridge withdrew, at pace. The big man stepped back, looked down, grabbed Joe by the collar and pulled him up.

‘Find the girl.’ He said and pushed him in the direction of the lights. ‘Go, now.’

‘Yes, leave, thank you.’ It seemed inadequate. More shots rang out as he ran, Joe dared not look back. Just ahead toward the busy road filled with the lights of moving cars.

She’d left him, the bitch. She’d run off and left him.

‘Hey, English. You want a fucking invitation?’

Isla?

One of the cars had its door open. Joe was on the run again. Twenty metres now, maybe less. Running fast, fuelled by panic. *Don’t go without me.* Ten metres, down to five. Joe grabbed the open door and leapt inside. He was in, why weren’t they moving?

‘We should go.’ He said

‘I’m working on it.’ She replied.

Skilled fingers twisted at the wires plucked from below the steering column. *Is she hot-wiring the car?* Joe screamed as the window shattered and the metal skin of the car clanked and punctured three times.

In the rear view mirror he could see bad guys coming from the other direction.

‘We’re going to die.’

‘I don’t think so.’

Lights on the dashboard, the roar of a powerful engine. Isla slammed the driver’s door and the car was in motion, backwards.

Wrong way, wrong way.

More bullets ripped open the fragile skin of the car.

‘The other way, the other way.’ Joe cried out, and then lurched forward to hit his head as the car’s valence clipped off a kerb stone. He heard a thump and saw a body roll away in the snow. It got back up and shot at them.

Going forward now, wheels sliding in the snow. The car lurched and accelerated, powered it’s way through soft snow. Its wheels spun as they screamed for traction and sent a crescent of snow into the air. And then power as the tyres found purchase to launch the vehicle into rocket mode that threw Joe back into his seat.

‘For God’s sake slow down.’

‘Go fast, slow down. Why don’t you shut up and let me drive.’

They were going sideways again. The big rear wheels sliding the chassis beyond its design, and then snapping back to straighten Joe’s vertebrae. He didn’t want to look; didn’t want to see; he couldn’t help himself. ‘Oh my God.’ Headlamps, coming straight for them. ‘Wrong way, wrong way.’

‘Do you want to drive? No, then shut up.’

Rubber squealed and stank as the big sedan booted nought to a hundred kilometres per hour across the sidewalk. Then bounced down into more oncoming traffic.

‘For fucks sake.’ Joe was screaming. His oral panic drowned by car horns. ‘Isla... cars, cars... Isla?’ Joe’s stomach collapsed downward and then shot back up as the wheels slid across more snow trying to find the road. Six excited cylinders roared their approval and powered the car away.

The roller coaster gave way to the lazy river ride as they followed traffic. Outside the shop fronts passed, exuding light through polished windows. The lights made Joe feel sick. He was going to vomit.

‘I think we’ve lost them. I can’t see anyone follow... Joe?’

‘Can we pull over, please.’

‘You want me to stop the car?’

‘Yes, please, the car... stop.’

Not now Yoda.

‘Joe, that’s not a good idea. We need to...’

‘Stop the car.’

‘Okay, okay, I’ll get off the main road. Joe, are you okay? Shit, are you hurt?’

The car leaned forward as brake and disc grabbed hard. Motion slowed, way too quickly for Joe. It was the Mighty Mouse at the fair all over again. The chunk, clunk, dip and dive of that stupid rollercoaster. He felt really sick.

‘Joe... Joe, get back in the car.’

Even when his stomach was empty the convulsions kept coming. One heave preceding the next, as if they were punishing him. This was get back for being so stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He shouldn't have gone. Isla told him. She warned him. Becks had warned him too. But no, Joe knows best. Joe always knows best.

What the fuck is happening to me?

‘We should go.’ Issy said.

‘Yes, I have to go home.’

‘Home? Joe, those men tried to kill you. Home is the last you need to go.’

‘I want to go home.’

‘We need money, clothes. Damn it, everything I have is in that hotel room. Joe, we have to go the hotel, quickly. Before they come for us again. After that, we are in the wind.’

‘Wind? What does wind mean? I don’t want to be in the wind. I want to go back to London. I want to go home.’

‘You’re not going anywhere, get back in the car. Joe, get in the car.’

He didn’t want to but Joe complied. The V6 growled into life again and the seat belt clicked in place just in time. Madam Schumacher was doing her thing again.

‘Do you have to drive like an idiot?’

‘You’re complaining about my driving? Are you serious?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mein Gott. Ich bin in größeren Schwierigkeiten, als ich dachte.’

‘What... what did you say? Speak English.’

‘I said, I am in bigger trouble than I thought.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Did you hear yourself back there? *We’re going to die. We’re going to die.*
Very helpful under the circumstances.’

‘I was scared, okay. Drop me at the airport.’

‘I don’t think so. You’ve just dropped me in ten shades of shit, so you’re going nowhere until I know why.’

‘It was robbery, that’s all. They wanted that.’ He pointed to the package in the footwell.

‘Oh no, this is more than that. Those men back there, they were soldiers, not street thugs. Look, I’ll prove it.’

‘You’ve still got his gun? Bloody hell, put it away before someone sees it. Throw it out the window.’

‘Oh okay, for a child to find? Good idea.’

‘As soon as we stop then. I don’t like guns. Guns are bad, really bad.’

‘No Joe, people are bad. But this, this is serious shit; not the sort of thing you find on the street. Look, when I pull this back, you see. Someone has filed the hammer, and the pin probably. You see here, no serial number, it’s been machined away. I press here, oops, and what falls out.’

‘For crying out loud, put it back. Put the bloody thing away.’

‘Tell me what you see?’

‘Bullets. I see bullets in a magazine, okay?’

‘Well I see hollow point in a full metal jacket. Not nice to be shot with. Those men were mercenaries. Ex military, no question. If I’d known... ‘

‘What, you’d have let him kill me? Great, nice to know where I stand.’

‘Well I want to know where I stand. So now you talk; tell me what have you’ve got me mixed up in, eh? What has Isla just saved your ass from?’

Isla didn't speak after that. She mulled and sighed, and gave Joe hard stares. Not a happy bunny. Joe said it, out loud, it was a bad idea to go back to the hotel. Issy said they had no choice. Whatever they planned to do was at the bridge. They would definitely get to the room first.

The elevator seemed to take an age. Joe followed like a lamb as Isla moved quickly down the hallway toward Joe's room.

'The room card.' Isla demanded. 'I'll go first and you follow. Get inside and grab your rucksack. Just the money and the passport. One minute, no more. Joe, one minute, okay?'

'Yes, okay. One minute.'

How do you know what's in my rucksack. Bitch, you really were going to rob me.

Baldy's Sig lead the way as the door opened into the hall. It was empty. Issy eased back the bathroom door, also empty. Isla lowered her weapon as she entered the room.

Joe, stay where you are.'

'Why, you said one minute. *What's she staring at?* 'Oh my God, is that?'

'The waitress from the food hall, yes.'

'But she's...'

'Dead, yes.'

She lay naked on the bed, a towel tight around her neck, obviously the instrument that had so cruelly twisted her features. Joe looked away.

‘That towel,’ he said, ‘it was a monkey last time I saw it.’

‘We have to go, now.’ Isla was already grabbing things from the floor. Pushing clothes inside her bag. ‘Your rucksack, it still has your money in it?’

‘Money, yes, and travellers cheques.’ This wasn’t fair. What did Waitress Girl have to do with any of this? Then another thought, more shocking. ‘Why is she in my room?’

‘I told you they were professionals. I suppose this is just in case you didn’t turn up for the meeting. Oh no, we have to get out, now.’

‘No, we need to call the Police.’

‘Joe, if I’m right the Police are on their way.’

‘Well that’s good, we should wait for them. Explain everything.’

‘Yes, and tell them what exactly?’

‘That I didn’t do this. I didn’t. You know I didn’t.’

‘Of course not, but they won’t believe you. This is a set up, Joe. Maybe the police are in on it too.’

‘This can’t be happening, it can’t.’

‘Touch nothing, Joe. Come on, we are leaving.’

‘We can’t leave her like that. Not like that.’

The hand on his shoulder disagreed as he was pulled out through the open door.

‘We go out the back... shit, did you hear that?’

The lift had pinged it's arrival. A radio kicked static across the landing. Several weapons were being cocked. Then a tirade of noisy boots clattered down the corridor.

Go... move.' She had Joe by the arm, pulling him towards the stairs. 'Go, go, what are you doing, you can't go back.'

'I left my laptop.'

She yanked him through the door as the Police turned the corner. Joe froze, he could see the stairs but they might see him through the glass if he moved.

'Joe White?' The door to his room was being pounded. 'Krakow police... open the door.'

Issy was hunkered and moving towards the stairs. She was beckoning him. He couldn't move. Now she was pulling him.

'We have to go!'

The door to Joe's room was broken open. Shouts of, "Police, Joe White"... He was moving downward, accelerating to keep up. Missing steps out now until Isla slowed, hand out to stop him.

'Shit shit, they're coming up the stairs. Back, back, through here.' A different floor, same sense of panic. Then a fire door that lead to steps outside.

'It will be alarmed.' She said. She was looking for something.

It was still a blur to Joe as Issy smashed the glass and then he yanked on the small red lever. The fire alarm klaxon bellowed throughout the hotel as Isla kicked open the fire-door and dragged Joe through.

He didn't feel the cold, or notice the steps. All Joe could see was that poor waitress lying on his bed, strangled. This was too much, too intense, too fucking scary. And now he wanted to cry because he was scared. Tears leaked with no chance to wipe them away a heavy bag on each arm. And then the car just got in his way. The passenger door yanked open, the bags taken from him and hurled onto the rear seat. Joe was pushed inside. He couldn't stop it. No way. Wasn't possible. Joe began to cry. Deep gasping breaths that launched a wave of tears, and a stupid stutter of a sob that he couldn't stop.

They'd shot Professor Tillmach. Tried to kill Joe under the bridge. And that poor woman... why? Somewhere in the hotel a SWAT team was hunting Joe for a crime he hadn't committed.

Isla was staring at him.

'I know how you feel.' Issy said as Joe slumped forward in his seat, the car reversing. 'It's the not knowing why.' She added. He lurched back as the car accelerated across the tarmac and out of the parking zone.

An alarm was ringing. A single repetitive tone that woke Joe up. He felt the car door close as his eyes opened. Outside the sky had turned blue with a bright orange sun overhead. He seemed to be in the middle of a wood, surrounded by trees; there were a lot of trees. And a house made of glass just a few yards from the car.

‘You’ve been asleep.’ Isla said opening his door. ‘That’s good, you need to rest.’

Sleep? How could he sleep after what had happened?

‘Where are we?’ He asked. ‘Who’s house is this?’

‘We’re safe, at least for now. Come on, we have things to do.’

‘Things, what things? Issy, where are we?’

‘So many questions, I think you are wakey wakey now. Come inside, I’ve made sandwiches and hot coffee.’

‘Is this a hotel?’ It didn’t look like a hotel. ‘Who’s house is this?’

‘This area has lots of nice houses. Mostly holiday homes for rich people. Come, see inside.’

Joe could already see inside.. The entire downstairs through the glass exterior.

‘I thought we could use some peace and tranquility.’

‘And they left you a key?’

‘Joe, I picked the lock and bypassed the alarm. I’m good at things like that. I’m multi talented.’

‘So you make a living from breaking into people’s homes as well as stealing their cars.’ *Why are you smiling like that?*

‘I had a misspent childhood, what can I say.’

‘Yeah, I bet you did.’ *Don’t grin at me like its something to be proud of.* ‘It seems you have a lot of *talents* I don’t know about.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Whatever it sounds like. Why did you make me run like that?’

‘Make you? You didn’t take much persuasion. You had a waitress dead, on your bed. And the police turn up two minutes after we arrive? Figure it out will you. You’ve been set up, or are you too stupid to understand that. You’d be in a cell now, accused of murder. And don’t forget it was me who saved you back at the bridge. You’re so fucking ungrateful.’

‘Wait... I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m not dealing with this very well. Thank you, for what you did at the bridge. Did you say coffee?’ *That’s the kind of smile I need right now.*

The interior of the house was as smart as the outside. Open plan with a spindled gallery around the upper floor. Such a lot of glass.

On the marble breakfast bar was a sandwich on a plate. Some sort of spread inside, and cheese. Next to it the bundle that Tillmach had so keenly held onto back at the bridge.

Oh God, he’s really dead.

‘Hey, you opened it?’

The brown paper was piled uneven. Every inch of the bar covered in papers. Joe flinched as the kettle clunked to say it had boiled.

‘You think I wouldn’t look? Someone tried to kill us for this.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘Some kind of scientific crap. I don’t understand it’ She said. ‘Take a look whilst I make coffee.’

‘It’s in German? Can you translate it?’

‘If I had a few weeks, sure. I’ve skimmed and it’s all about acids and proteins, strands and chains. What about these. Do you understand any of these? Here, drink this, it’s good.’ She slid some papers over with a hot cup of coffee. ‘What are they, do you know?’

‘Chemical conversion tables. These are charts... some kind of synthetic model? Chemistry isn’t really my thing.’

‘So what is your thing? You’re not being very helpful.’

‘I’m a Geneticist not a Chemist. Becks would understand this better.’ There was something else. ‘Did you find this in the bundle as well?’ He asked.

‘Sure, a hard drive.’

‘This is an external drive. I’ll need a decent laptop and an internet connection. Think you can steal either of those for me.’

‘There’s a laptop in the other room.’

‘There is?’

‘Yes, I’ll show you.’

‘Good, excellent, and you know why? Because Joe White has a talent he wants to show off.’

Joe plugged the hard-drive into the laptop

‘It’ll take a few minutes to crack the password.’

‘Does this help?’ A list of names and numbers. ‘Hey, everyone keeps their passwords on a bit of paper in the drawer. It’s like, the law or something. I know, it’s a gift I have... and you’re welcome also.’

Joe input the first Polish word, nothing happened. He tried the second, failed again. The third caused the image to flip and opened the Apple screen with numerous folders. He opened up a box and keyed in more instructions.

‘Uh oh.’

‘What does that mean, Uh oh?’

‘This hard drive has been encrypted.’

‘So didn’t your Professor give you the key? What’s the point in giving this to us if we can’t read it?’

She made a good point.

‘MOLI can help.’

‘Molly, who is Molly? Is she your girlfriend?’

‘She’s my computer. Now if you’ll get your head out of the way I’ll sort this... Isla, have you been drinking?’

‘No. Maybe. I might have had a glass of wine.’

‘Just one? Isla, your breath stinks of alcohol.’

‘Okay, maybe I have two. And now I’m going to have number three. Is that okay with you?’

‘Two glasses? Oh my God, you’re drunk. And where did you get those clothes? How long was I asleep out there?’

‘Just show me you can be useful, Mr White.’

Joe wanted clean clothes, and a drink too. He wanted something to stop his head spinning. People were shooting at him, he wanted that to stop too. First he had to be useful.

‘Just get on with cracking the code, if you can? There is a big television in the lounge. I’ll check to see if we have made the News yet.’

She wasn’t joking. Joe opened Google. Linked into his own website back home.

Why did you give this to me? What’s so important that they’ve killed two people to protect it?

His finger tips dabbled at the keyboard.

MOLI?

More dabbling. No response. He tried one route after another, still nothing. MOLI was gone. That meant only one thing, they’d got to her.

Joe opened up the company’s server. He entered a series of passwords. Then the words ‘Wake up’. Then a tirade of numbers and coding that scrolled down the screen. A text box opened.

‘Hi MOLI.’ Joe typed.

*

Joe's lab was empty. Becks had locked up and taken a few days; "sick leave", was what she'd told the boss. Leaving Professor Kerm far from happy.

A red light on Joe's laptop flickered. It initiated a conversation with another, far more impressive set of processors located in a different country. The Seymour Hermes Super Computer in Houston, Texas. A digital world of flickering lights that twinkled in their sterile, temperature sensitive environment. A billion instructions a second passed unnoticed in the private super secure facility.

Red Devil/Q was the company's designation. It's allotted architecture of multi core processing brilliance. A tiny, ultra private box, locked inside the world's biggest cathedral of light.

Joe had partitioned a portion of the company's architecture. MOLI was backed up, now she was online, and ready to talk to Joe.

The lounge suggested a life filled with comfort for its owners. This was a nice place, its furniture lovingly crafted, not a sight of a flat pack anywhere. The builder loved glass, though the powered blinds were drawn for privacy. It was darker than earlier as he walked across the plush carpeting. The room split level and raised up with a veneer of solid oak. And how big was that TV? Eighty inches of curved super screen that had Isla's attention fully fixed.

'Are you comfortable?' He asked. She looked it; reclined in the leather chair like that.

'You said you'd be a few minutes, that was an hour ago. What's wrong, your girlfriend can't work it out?'

'MOLI's working on it. The encryption is some sort of mathematical equation. The name of his wife or dog would be too easy. Why don't you have the sound turned up?'

'It stops my head from spinning.'

'That's the booze, love.' He could see two empty bottles. Were there more in the kitchen? 'I've been thinking.' Joe said.

'Oh goody. And do these thoughts come with your usual battery of questions? Because I'm not in the mood.'

'Look, those men, they tried to kill me.'

'Ah, but you are still alive, yes?'

'Yes, and that's because of you.'

'Oh, is that another thank you?'

'Yes, of course. It's just...'

Issy struggled to sit up. She looked angry, and drunk.

'Just what?' She asked. 'What is your problem? Go on, spit it out.'

'My problem... Isla, you dropped on that guy like, Jungle Jane. You killed a man... shot him? Like you've done it before.'

'Maybe I have. So what, are you complaining?'

'No, no... I'm just confused. Who are you, really? I want the truth.'

'Just someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'Sure about that? About you and me; we're just a coincidence?'

'Hey, I said spit it out. And look at me when you talk.'

'Issy, maybe you should sit down.' *Before you fall down.* 'Look at it from my view; you know how to use a gun? Taxi drivers don't shoot people. You behaved as if you've been under fire before. It makes me wonder, that's all?'

'Oh, you wonder do you? That's rich coming from you. I tell you what, you take a good look at me, Joe. You see my hands, look, they are still trembling. What's going on in my head, you don't want to know. I don't want to know. So mind your own fucking business.'

'Okay... okay.'

'And whilst we are full of questions, I have some of my own. You want to tell me what the fuck is going on? No, don't shake your head at me, don't you dare shake your head. I just killed a man. He's not going home tonight. Maybe he had a wife and children, or a cat? Did you think about that?'

‘Yes, I did. But he was going to kill me, and you saved my life. You didn’t have to do that.’

‘You think they would have let me live? Isla, the innocent witness. I took you there, remember. They were going to kill both of us, so don’t feel so hard done by.’

‘You could have walked the other way. Driven off and gone back to, where was it, Berlin? But you didn’t. I’m just asking that’s all. Who are you? Some sort of Special Forces chic?’

‘Ha ha, that’s funny. Hey, do they get better pay than a driver? Where do I sign up?’

‘Driver? I thought you were a chauffeur. Oh, so it’s okay if *you* shake your head. So what then? You fall out of the sky and drop two guys with guns, and that’s normal for you?’

‘You are so fucking ungrateful. I saved your life, what else matters?’

‘It matters, okay. I’m not stupid. I’ve been manipulated from the start. Blood-work, MOLI, and this free bloody trip. Isla, I need to make sense of all this. I need to make sense of you.’

‘Ahhh, you don’t trust me; I get it? Well fuck you, English.’

‘That’s not... where are you going? Oh, more booze, really? You’re opening a third bottle.’

‘I like free booze. What can I say, it’s a weakness.’

‘Wait, wait. Isla... you’re bleeding. Are you hurt? Let me take a look.’

‘It’s not my blood. Don’t touch me. You stay away from me.’ She’d made her way to the kitchen. A bottle chinked against her glass and the wine glugged out. Then she raised it toward Joe in salute. ‘Here’s to shitty lives, eh. Yours and mine. Hey, you know what, English. I tried. I really tried. To just walk away. But shit just follows me, I can’t help it. No normal life for Isla, it’s too much to ask.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. Can you pour me one of those.’ She was pissed, nothing he could do but join her. ‘At least we’re safe now.’ He said. ‘We are safe, aren’t we?’

‘Safe? Look at this.’ The handgun she’d taken from Baldy. ‘It’s a Sig P226, with a silencer. Not what you’d expect to find on the streets. Those men back there, they were professionals. The bald one on the floor, he looked a real bad ass. I should have killed him too.’ She was getting melancholy. ‘We were lucky, Joe. I took him by surprise, I doubt that will happen again. What the fuck have you dragged me into, huh?’

‘I don’t know, I really don’t...’

‘You’re a liar.’ Melancholy was over. ‘A fucking fraud. Joe the faker.’ The glass was being conducted, the wine slopped over its rim. ‘Joe White,’ she laughed, ‘the bullshit man.’

‘Hah, that from a two bit chauffeur?’

‘Two bit? What is that, an insult? You’re fucking insulting me now. I save your life and you insult me.’

‘Hey, easy... easy. How about you put the gun down.’ Joe’s heart beat accelerated. Sudden stress brought on by a girl waving a gun and a half empty wine glass. *Calm her down, Joe. Talk to her.* ‘I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just, well, ever since I met you. Frankly, you’re a bit odd.’

‘Odd? So now I am odd. Poor little Isla, she is a two bit... oddster?’

‘Please put the gun down. Isla, I’m sorry. I’m so far out of my comfort zone here. I’m just a geneticist. A lab-tech who puts jam on his cheese. I feed ducks in the park. I still live at home for crying out loud. I’m a Geek who wears tank tops at parties. Not that I ever get invited to parties. But I have tank tops just in case. I’m struggling to process all of this. To process, you.

That man back there, he was pointing a gun at me. He shot the Professor. Look, I still have his blood on my hands. In my cuticles. Oh God, he’s really dead isn’t he. I thought I was going to die back there. He had that gun pointed at my face. And now you’re doing the same.’

‘No, sorry. Look, on the table. Joe, Joe, Joe, go and wash your hands. Take a shower. You’re right, I’m sorry. Neither of us are dealing with this.’

‘One question.

‘Always another question with you.’

‘Who told you to drive me around?’

‘I don’t know. I got it through the usual source. They offered me double for the duration. I get all the long distance jobs, nobody else wants them. I expect they have lives to live; families to enjoy. I don’t fucking know. And I

don't care. I save your life and you don't trust me. You think I'm Jungle Jim, or something.

What about you, Joe. Did you tell me everything before we went off to see this man? Is there anything you want to tell me? Like, err, I don't know, who the fuck is patient Thirty Six?

‘So you’re saying that this dead tourist, his blood, your computer. A free trip. You didn’t find any of this suspicious?’

‘A bit.’

‘But you come anyway?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? Oh wait, I forget the part where you involve me in all of this. Without telling me.’

‘I should have told you.’

‘Yes, you should. It’s good to talk, remember?’ She was pacing now. ‘Is there anything else you haven’t told me? Anything at all?’

‘No. Well, maybe. The Professor said something before he died. He said, Roxy? He was desperate to say it, twice’

‘Roxy? What does Roxy mean?’

‘I don’t know. Do you think it’s important?’

‘No, I don’t. The last thing a man says before he dies... of course it’s important. And who’s this Scarface man? Just a passing jogger with a gun? Maybe you’re seeing things?’

‘Maybe you should lay off the booze.’

‘What, now you’re my mother.’

‘Let’s not start that again.’

‘Stat, finish, I’m somewhere in the middle right now.’

‘You realise the chemicals in your head are reacting with the alcohol. Each one of those glasses is more like two. Or three in your case.’

‘Good, that’s the first good news I’ve had tonight. I won’t have to drink as much, and I will pee less, ha ha.’

‘That’s beer, I don’t think you wee more with wine.’

‘Fuck you, don’t you ever stop?’

‘I’m going for a shower, and I’m taking *this* with me. Ow, let go of my arm. Ow ow, Isla, that hurts.’

‘Don’t you touch my gun. This is the only thing I trust right now, okay. Just go, leave me alone. I want to watch TV on my own.’

‘Yeah, well turn the sound up and do it properly.’

She was angry, he understood. The last few hours had been a wild ride of emotion. And she was right, he was thinking of himself. This was her way of dealing with whatever Daemons had been unleashed. Who was he to disapprove. Joe got as far as the door.

‘Issy, back at the hotel. You said you knew how I felt, about not knowing why. What did you mean?’

‘Don’t talk to me. Maybe I tell you sometime, maybe I don’t. But you are not the only one that bad things happen to, English. Life is shit, I know. I wish I didn’t. The front bedroom upstairs, you’ll find men’s clothes. Now go away and leave me alone.’

Joe was happy to oblige. Grumpy, miserable, and bad tempered. All five foot eight of her. But this time there was something real being released by

the wine. Leaking through every pore was a sadness that even Joe could pick up on. She'd be asleep in about five minutes anyway. The handgun coddled under the pillow her head was resting upon.

Three days, two dead bodies, wanted by the Polish police. And Joe didn't even know Isla's surname.

‘Open the door.’ The unkempt barrel chested man made no attempt at politeness. ‘Please.’

‘You shouldn’t be here.’ Replied the beer bellied man in the blue uniform.

‘Prison rules, no visitors until she’s fully processed.’

‘She hasn’t left the court yet. I need five minutes, open the door.’

‘You Cops, you think you own the system.’ Beer Belly dropped the peep hole and peered inside. ‘Wake up, girl.’ Beer Belly’s gravel laden voice stirred the young woman curled up on the mattress inside. ‘You have a visitor.’

‘Two minutes, no more.’

‘There, that wasn’t so hard now was it.’

It was the first light she’d seen for hours as the heavy door swung outward on the whine of old hinges.

‘I need to speak to her alone.’

‘You know the rules.’

‘I said, alone.’

Beer Belly huffed but conceded and moved to the end of the hall just out of earshot.

‘What do you want?’ Isla asked. ‘Come to gloat?’

The slick haired and overweight frame of Detective Teutlar blocked out the light.

'Pig.'

'No, to give you one more chance to help yourself. And you call me, Detective.'

'I have nothing to say.' *Nothing I haven't said a hundred times.* 'Go away.'

'You don't look too good, Isla. Not sleeping so well, eh? A cell is no place for a pretty girl like you.' He stepped inside. Isla backed against the cell wall.

'Stay out of the cell, cop.'

Two steps back.

'I don't think he likes me much.'

'It's not a very exclusive club.'

'Hmm, I s'pose not. Three years, Isla. That's a long time for a young thing like you. You'll come out a different woman I tell you.'

Don't say it. I don't want to hear it.

It was all that had filled her thoughts for two days as she waited to go.

'I can still talk to the Judge, Isla. Get the sentence reduced further if you help us out. Find you a much nicer place than Kronnsnow.'

'What do you mean, Kronnsnow? I'm going to Steigle Prison. That's what the Judge said.'

'That holiday camp, I don't think so. It took a few phone calls to the Chancellors' office, and they were very helpful. You've been transferred to Kronnsnow.'

'You can't do that, I'm a minor. You can't send me there.'

‘And I won’t. Not if you tell me what I want to know. Isla, let me explain your situation to you. You’re fucked.

Kronnsnow is a prison filled with lifers. It’s a lock up for slags and murderers, the real hard cases. Violence is second nature to its inmates. Still, a pretty young thing like you; they’ll be fighting for your affection.’

‘I don’t believe you. It’s against the law to send me there. I’m too young.’

‘Immoral maybe, but not illegal. Which is why I brought this for you to see.’ He unfolded a paper he was carrying. ‘Take a look for yourself. This is your transportation order. See here, at the top. The destination, Kronnsnow.’

‘But I was just the driver, I didn’t hurt anyone.’

‘You were lucky the Judge believed you. But someone got killed, Isla. Give your friends up and you can go to Steigle. Cross my heart.’ He did. ‘I’ll even have a word with the Judge, to reduce the time further.’

‘He didn’t mean to hurt anyone. The guard pulled a gun. It was an accident during the struggle. I don’t know his name. Any of their names, I told you. I was paid to drive them to the address. I didn’t know there were diamonds upstairs. No-one told me they were going to rob the place. I do deliveries, I swear.’

‘I believed you. I do. I wonder if the prison is warmer than this cell?’

‘You pig.’ *Go away, leave me alone.*

Tuetlor slid a pad and pen across shiny the floor.

‘Write down the names and Kronnsnow goes away. Come on, you can be out in six or seven months. Why do you cover for these people? They are letting

you carry the can. Not even a decent lawyer for you, that's harsh. Give me names. Who hired you? Who pays you? I know you have links with the Gruun family. I tell you what, why don't you work for us and all of this will go away.'

'You want me to be a snitch?'

'Hmm, maybe wear a wire for us.'

'No, I won't do that.' *Some of them are my friends.* 'I just deliver things, that's all.'

'I know Isla. But you got caught. Look me up when you get out, eh.'

'No, please, don't shut the door.' *On my life, I didn't know what they were going to do.* 'I don't want to go to prison. You're a good man, please... Detective?'

'Detective, I thought I was a pig? I've put in a bad word for you at Kronnsnow.' He said. 'Who'd have thought an old friend of mine from Division would be working there? Not a nice man at all, Isla. But then I suppose it helps with the job. He'll be sure to introduce himself when you arrive.'

The door closed and she ran to it.

'Are they still laughing at you, Herr Tuetlar?' Isla spat through the peep hole. 'Laughing at the fat detective who couldn't crack a seventeen year old girl.'

'Enjoy your holiday, bitch.'

'Fuck you, Herr Tuetlar. You're a pig.'

Her heart leapt as the peep hole was slammed shut.

*

‘Prisoner three six nine, step inside.’ Isla complied, though she had no idea why she’d been separated from the other prisoners. This wasn’t a cell.

‘Hands behind your back, face against the wall.’.

It was the first time the fat cow had lifted her eyes from the clipboard. She should shave more often. Isla desperately wanted to stop trembling.

‘Is this a private suite. Just for me?’ *Issy, shut your mouth.* ‘Ouch, not so tight with those cuffs. Hey, are you listening, they hurt me.’

‘Turn around, shut your mouth. I’ll be back in thirty minutes.’

‘You’re going? Hey, you can’t leave me here like this. Hey...Shit, who are you?’

A tall man entered the cold grey room, his hair lightly spiked with gel. Mid fifties, trying to take the years off; failing. He was followed in by a second, much shorter man with a receding hairline. Both men wore a prison guard uniform. They looked mean as hell, and a bit nervous. Issy didn’t like this. What was going on? Shorty checked the hall outside and then closed the door.

‘What is this... who are you? You shouldn’t be here.’ *Don’t smile like that, I don’t like it.* ‘I want to leave now.’ She said and backed away to the wall.

'Where's she gone? What are you doing? Hey, get off me. Let go of my face, you're hurting me.'

'Tooty says hi.'

'Who the fuck is Tooty?'

'You know, Tooty. Inspector Tuetlar.'

Oh my God.

'Don't you look at me like that. What do you want? Let go of me. Take your hands off me.' Shorty was strong. Too strong. He pulled Isla down over the table. Held her neck so she couldn't move; so she couldn't see Spike behind her.

'You want to go first.' Said Shorty.

'Don't, don't do this.' She could barely speak. 'Please, I beg you.' She felt her trousers tugged and then again. The air felt cold against her cheeks.

'Don't, please. Don't do this. Stop it, stop... Please stop.'

'Get off me you fuckers, don't touch me... get off.'

'Hey hey, easy... gun down. Gun down. Christ, you're having a bad dream. It's just a dream.'

'What. Issy could see now. 'Joe?'

'Yeah, you were sleeping. Then shouting. I thought you were having a fit. Are you okay?'

'Just a dream?'

'Yeah, just a dream.'

Not a dream. Never a dream. Isla sat upright and put the gun on the chair's arm. Hands open and apologetic. 'I shouldn't drink so much. It gives me nightmares.'

'Are you sure you're alright, I could hear you in the other room?'

'Why didn't you just wake me?'

'That thing you like waving around, it was under your pillow.'

'So what, you think I would shoot you?'

'Everyone else wants to. Are you sure you're okay?'

'I'm fine, yes. Argh, no, my neck. Ahh, my head hurts. What? Why are you staring at me?'

'You've dribbled... yeah, that's better.'

'I'm glad you think this is funny. How long was I asleep?'

‘Seven, maybe eight hours.’

‘Again, why didn’t you wake me?’

‘Again, you have a gun. Besides, you obviously needed the rest. Here, let me help...’

‘No, don’t touch me. And stop smirking this isn’t funny. My head hurts. I think I have a brain tumour.’

‘It’s called an empty wine rack? I’ve made coffee, want some?’

‘Yes. And some pills. They’re in the kitchen drawer next to the oven.’

‘Is there any part of this house you haven’t pillaged?’

‘Not really. Urr, I hope you’ve made better use of your time than I did.’

Isla’s expression sobered as she moved toward the door. ‘Joe, you haven’t used the phone?’

‘No.’

‘Good. It’s aspirin in the blue box. I think that chair has broken my back.’

‘Here, drink this, take these. So what were you dreaming about?’

‘I don’t know, I can’t remember. Did you crack the password?’

‘Of course I did. MOLI never lets me down.’

‘So what’s on the hard-drive? Hmm, this coffee is good. Well, the hard drive, do I have to make three guesses?’

‘Right... first up, it wasn’t Tillmach’s hard drive, it was his dad’s. Thousands of pages of downloads, mostly about Pharmax. It’s history, employees, sales. It would take weeks to read through it all.’

‘I hate reading.’

Says the girl with all the overdue library books?

'I checked the email logs and found nothing of interest. Just chit chat, and lots of it. It's mostly conspiracy shit. Everything from aliens to the Bermuda Triangle, which I found a bit worrying.'

'So he's a nut job?'

'That was my first thought. But then I ran Gravedigger. It's a recovery programme I designed, patent pending.' *I can see you're impressed.* 'One thing is certain in data storage, you can't delete anything without destroying the entire drive. There's always something to dig up. And so, I found buried under the overwrites a name. The only thing Elder ever bothered to delete. Every email he was sent. He tried very hard to erase him.'

'Erase who?'

'A doctor, named Herse? And no, I've never heard of him. But it seems the good doctor was a hot source of gossip on all subjects regarding Pharmax. He was Elder's Mole. He gave information on board members, Directors, and get this, his last email mentioned my name. Apparently Elder arranged to meet him the very next day. That was two weeks ago. There's been no correspondence since.'

'How do we find this man?'

'Done.' Smug written all over his face. 'I backtracked his data trail and found his IP. I know where Doctor Herse lives.'

'Really, you did that?'

'Yeah, ever heard of a town called Lubben?'

‘Lubben? No, where is it?’

‘In the Dahme-Spreewald district of Lower Lusatia; a region of Brandenburg. Herse lives in Germany.’

‘This is good, we have a lead. We should go to see this man.’

‘Err, I found something else whilst I was data mining.’

‘Okay... what?’

‘Have you ever heard of a place called, Kronnsnow?’

‘Oh fuck. I have to stop talking in my sleep.’

‘Joe, I spent eighteen months in prison, okay. A vile place called Kronnsnow. You looked it up, yes? Of course you did. And you want to know why I was sent there.’

‘They say confession is good for the soul.’

That’s what he said. That bastard, Tuetler.

‘I was, young.’ She said. ‘Involved with people that I shouldn’t have been. I was just a driver, you understand. A man was shot. He died. I swear I didn’t know what was going to happen. But I was the one they caught. Stupid me, huh?’

Don’t look at me like that. It was a different life.

‘I was stupid, okay.’ *So stupid.* ‘Gullible and naive, and in love with a man twice my age. And I thought he loved me.’

‘Did he?’

‘No. The men I knew ate at McDonalds and smelt of beer. I thought Jorge was different. He wasn’t. Why do you care anyway?’

‘We shouldn’t have any secrets.’

‘Oh really, so you still don’t trust me. Fine, okay. I told myself his drug use was recreational. His gambling just a hobby. The way he flirted with other girls, a kindly nature. I didn’t want to see how fucked up he was, even when it stared me in the face. He had a good heart, Joe. I know he did.’

So when he asked me to drive him one day to pick up some things; I said sure, why not. Jorge had neglected to mention these *things* he wanted did not belong to him. I didn't realise that day would end my life as I knew it. And you know the really stupid thing, Joe. I would have done it for him if he'd told me the truth.'

'What happened?'

'The police, that's what happened. There was a guard with a gun, a struggle. I saw it happen. Got out of the car. Someone must have recognised me, that's what I told myself when the cops came for me. *That's what I wanted to believe.* Jorge told them it was me behind the wheel. That I had *connections* with organised crime. He told them everything about me. That I worked at the Club, drove things around for the owners. That I knew people.'

The Police thought I would make a deal. That the frightened little girl would give them information; help them to *sting* the bad guys. They wanted me to go undercover; wear a wire, that sort of thing.

Don't look at me like that, Joe. I'm not a gangster. I just, made myself useful. I liked the money; and they liked me. I'm not going to apologise for being young and stupid. I grew up in a fucking orphanage on the wrong side of town... of the border, okay.'

'I'm not judging you. I'm not. What happened to lover boy?'

'Ha ha, he hadn't even told me his real name. Or that he had a wife and a child in Hamburg. It hurts to say it out loud, you know. He had a string of

convictions, all of which involved girls like me. It's not nice to have your heart torn out, Joe.'

'Did you make a deal? Could that have anything to do with what's going on now?'

'No. No deals. Those bastards put me in Kronnsnow because I kept my mouth shut for the first time in my life. It changed me, okay, are you satisfied now. I'm a criminal, not a spy. I don't know who's fucking with us, or why.'

'Issy, was it bad?'

'Was it bad? Of course it was fucking bad. Prison isn't like Disney Land.' Her head dropped. 'It nearly killed me.'

I was lucky, a State Lawyer took on my case. He got me an early release. I was a minor, Joe. Not quite eighteen when I was sentenced. A lot older when I was released. I shouldn't have been put in that shit-hole. It's a bad place. But I learnt very quickly that being a victim put a target on my back.

So you know the first thing I did when I was released? You want to know, do you? I got myself a gun and I learnt how to use it. And yes, I had a really shitty bedside manner too. Not even twenty years old and I was fucked, literally. My criminal record make me virtually unemployable. None of my, *old friends*, wanted to know me. I wasn't *little Isla* any more. I was just angry with everyone. And I drank too much which made me worse.

It's not very nice to be alone, Joe. Not nice to be so angry with the world. I couldn't live with myself, let alone anyone else, so I left. And I've been 'living the life' in Poland ever since.'

'So you didn't drive all the way from Berlin to pick me up?'

'No, stupid. I just say whatever comes into my head. It's a bad habit, I get that. Okay, so now you don't like me. I get it. I'm going for a shower.'

'Issy.'

'What Joe?'

'I'm glad you told me.'

'Joe, I drove for the Gruun family, they are organised crime. I never knew what was in the trunk. I never asked. I told myself I was a courier. I did it for three years.'

They thought I was cute, you know. Almost sixteen years old and little Isla could steal cars, and drive better than most men. I could outdrink most of them too.'

'You were fifteen?'

'Sure, and tall for my age. Who would suspect sweet little Isla of being so naughty? The Gruun men took me in, they got quite protective of me. I loved it, Joe. The money, the lifestyle. Little orphan Isla, she was *somebody* for the first time in her life, you understand? No, how could you. It's family, Joe. It must have been lovely for you to have one.'

'I get it. I do.'

‘No, you don’t. The Police took it all away from me. The Gruun’s forbade their people to have contact with me. It was the early release, and a vindictive whisper from a certain Policeman. The drinking didn’t help. So I ran away, and here I am. No ore secrets.’

Joe couldn’t help but smile.

‘And then you pick me up. I’m sorry.’

‘Again you are sorry. Stop being so sorry. Now is there anything else about my life you want to know, or can I take a piss and have a shower?’

‘The library books in the Mondeo’s trunk. I’ve been wondering?’

‘How do you know about... You bastard. It was you who broke into the car. My pants.’

‘Ah, no, I didn’t. They came out in my hand. Why are you laughing?’

‘Because you’re funny, Joe White. I’ve never met anyone quite like you.’ She took a deep breath. ‘The books are a hobby. No, it’s more than that. I’ve been trying to find out about my mother. No, I don’t want to talk about her. Not now anyway. I’ve become, how do you say... a bit obsessed.’

‘I understand obsession. You want to find out about your mother, that’s cool. So there’s no husband, no boyfriend, hanging around in Krakow?’

‘I’ve not been with a man since they put me into Kronnsnow. Work the rest out for yourself. Now I really need the toilet. I think I’m going to vomit some wine.’

Joe wasn’t sure why he followed her upstairs. Or why he listened to her vomit several bottles of wine down the toilet.

‘Are you sure you’re okay in there?’ He asked through the door.

‘Yuurgh. Yes, great. You fucking idiot.’

‘You swear a lot, do you know that?’

‘Yuurgh. Fuck off, Joe. I prefer, to be sick, in private. Yuurgh. Oh God, never again. Maybe, I just sleep in here, Yuurgh... Joe, are you still out there?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll take a bath, and then we’ll take one of the cars in the garage. Let’s go on a road trip to Lubben. See what’s his name?’

‘Doctor Herse. Okay.’ Joe said. ‘But I think there’s somewhere else we need to go first.’

The door opened. Isla was stood in her underwear. Inside the taps ran with hot steamy water and bubbles had begun to multiply.

‘Where is more important?’ She asked.

‘Err...’

‘What does, err, mean? Are you staring at my body?’

‘No. Definitely no. Yes.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Okay. We need to find Elder Routh’s house; it’s in Krakow. That man is at the core of all of this. There has to be something at his home that can help us.’

‘Do you not think those men will have been there.’

‘Then it’s the last place they’ll think to look for us.’

'That make sense, sort of. And then we go see this man, Herse.'

'Yes.'

'Good. And when we're done we go to Berlin.'

'Why?'

'Because I want to be on home soil when they try to kill us again.'

'Ouch. What was that for?'

'For staring at me with vomit on my face. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I'm sorry.'

'And you're always sorry. Stop being so sorry. Now go away. Personal space, Joe. I need it.'

'Space, yes, needed. I'll wait for you downstairs.'

'Joe. For the record, I'm scared also. I've been fucked and frightened but no-one has ever tried to kill me before. It's a scary thing. We'll go to Krakow, together. Then we find this man, Doctor Herse. And after...'

'I know, Berlin.'

'Yes. It's still my turf. They will come for us, this isn't going to go away. So we stick together, yes. Find out why this is happening. Find a way to make it stop. You and me, Joe. We stick together, eh, not such a bad thing.'

'No, I mean yes. I don't know what I mean.'

'We do whatever is necessary to survive this. Agreed?'

'Yes... agreed.'

‘Joe, before you wear the mirror out, you might want to look at the TV.’

She raised the volume. Everything was being spoken in Polish. Joe was checking out his new clothes. He’d had no idea that Versace made hoodies. And he rocked the slim fitting denim.

‘I’m stealing someone’s clothes.’ He said smiling.

‘Look at the TV, Joe.’

‘Why, what am I looking at?’ A moment to take in the images. ‘Oh no.’ He said. ‘That’s the bridge.’ Joe slid over the back of the sofa and settled next to Isla. ‘Oh my God, is that?’

Flashing lights, reporters. A camera zooming in to find the best shot. It panned around to show the bridge above, and the hundreds of rubbernecker’s who peered over the side. Then the view moved across to something that caused Joe’s heart to sink.

‘Is that your Mondeo?’ Joe raised the volume. ‘What, what are they saying?’

A dozen uniformed officers kept the press at bay. Their background filled with blue onesies; police officers busy with swabs and cameras in and around the car. The doors and trunk all open.

‘Isla, talk to me.’

‘I told you. Didn’t I say? We can’t trust the police.’

The picture juddered as the Press jostled for position. The huge screen filled the riverside. Men in black who carried something; it was a stretcher.

‘Is that Tillmach’s body? It is isn’t it.’

‘Joe, this is worse than I thought.’

‘Worse? How the hell can it be worse?’

The word ALERT in big letters. Gibberish he couldn’t read circled below.

‘Trust me, it’s worse.’

Up came a photo. Joe had to sit back to take in.

‘Oh my God... Isla, I’m on Polish TV.’

‘I’ve never been on TV before, well, not since Blue Peter. And they’ve got my photo; where did they get my photo? Why won’t they speak English? Isla, what they’re saying.’

‘That the man in the photo is wanted, for murder.’

‘No, no, that can’t be... I didn’t kill him.’

‘Apparently you did, and they have a witness. They say you shot and killed a defenceless old man in an argument. And that you are wanted also in connection with the killing of a hotel waitress in Krakow. Oh, and it just got worse.’

‘Worse. Seriously? What’s worse than this?’

‘The police are asking the public to look out for the man in the photo, and a blonde woman. His accomplice.’

‘This can’t be happening.’

‘It’s happening Joe. look there’s your photo again.’

‘No, think about it. It’s been less than twenty four hours since we... How do the Police know I was there? Where did they get my photo? Wait a minute.’ Joe grabbed his rucksack. ‘Look, look, that’s the photo they keep showing. How did they get my passport photo?’

‘Finally, you understand. It’s a set up, Joe. What else can it be.’

‘Why? For what reason?.It doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Sure it does. Someone doesn’t like you, and now they don’t like me.’

‘Well that’s deep and insightful, thanks. Two days ago I was boring. Why bring Mr Boring to Poland and frame him for two murders?’

‘Your Passport photo doesn’t help. It does makes you look a bit guilty.’

‘Is this a big joke to you? Ha ha Joe’s wanted for multiple homicide. That’s my photo up there. Why, why is this happening to me?’

‘You obviously know something. Someone wants you dead, or discredited. What else can it be?’

‘I don’t know anything, Isla. Nothing. Unless... this all started with patient’s five and thirty six.’

‘Go on. Talk it out. You know something.’

Becks was right, I shouldn’t have come. Why didn’t I listen to her? Isla wants answers, I can’t blame her. Drive the man around, that’s all she was asked to do. Now she’s a fugitive. I’m a fugitive.

‘Patient Thirty six was Elder Routh.’ It was difficult to think. ‘Has he set me up for all of this. No, he’s dead.’

‘We can’t assume anything.’

‘Who then?’

‘Talk it through, Joe. What happened, exactly.’

‘I, I took the results home. MOLI was supposed to make comparisons, that’s all, just comparisons. I was finishing up the study files for the clients. Somehow Elder’s blood got into our study..’

‘And you found something, yes? And keep it simple. I’m a girl who drives cars, not a clever scientist like you.’ Isla took his hand.

She's not scowling at me, and she thinks I'm clever. The girl with the blue eyes and sweet accent; a smile that can melt butter. Oh, I get it, you're just trying to keep me calm. He pulled his hand away.

'There were combinations,' he said, 'of proteins in the DNA. It's the stuff that switches cells on and off. They're unique to all of us, like fingerprints. Way too random for any two patients to match, not on that scale.'

'Were they related?'

'Definitely not, that would have been obvious. No, this was bioengineered. And by someone way cleverer than me.'

'But someone wanted you to know, yes?'

'Yes. But why? And why try to kill me afterward. Where's the sense in that?'

'Joe, it tells us that there are two parties involved. One party has started you on a scavenger hunt. I think the other is trying to shut you down. Think about it. Elder was desperate to speak to you, and now he's dead. But somehow his blood ends up in your test? And Professor Tillmach has information for you, and he is murdered.'

'Tillmach didn't know that Elder was dead, I'm sure of that. And who told Elder that I was involved, and why? Because I'm not. And if they want something exposed why not just do it themselves?'

'Maybe Elder was set up too?'

'That's what Tillmach said. I tell you something, from the moment I got on that plane I've had the feeling that someone is pulling my strings.'

'Well they're pulling mine now, and I intend to cut them off.'

‘How? We’re Poland’s most wanted.’

‘And that’s their first mistake. Using the police to track us down proves they have influence in high places. And the Press; to involve so many people? They aren’t frightened of flushing you out, not now they have discredited you. Who listens to what a serial killer has to say?

Joe, they have mercenaries, Police, and the Press, all mobilised to find you. What the hell do you know?’

Issy switched the TV off.

‘You’re right.’ She said. ‘Elder Routh’s house is the first place we must go. From here on in we go forward, no more running away. Now we take the fight to them.’

Parked cars below trees along both sides of the road. The SatNav in the BMW indicated their destination had been reached.

‘That’s it, Isla said, ‘that’s Elder’s house. You stay here, I want to take a look around before we go in. Watch the cars and the riverbank. The house could be under surveillance.’

Joe barely recognised Isla in the hair piece and those clothes. They made her look ten years older. Dark hair and sunglasses; he still couldn’t believe she’d cut off her dreads. “Too conspicuous”, she’d said. She’d looked like a nun without her headdress until the wig had gone on.

Joe put his Nike cap back on. He’d borrowed it, a hoody and some slim fit jeans from a wardrobe back at the house. Issy had joked, “do you intend to mug someone?” She’d said he didn’t have time to change. Now he was self conscious.

Across the road was Elder Routh’s home, barely fifty metres away. A brick building that jutted out and caused the road to take a right angle away from the river. It was big, old, most likely apartments. He couldn’t see Issy. Where was Issy?

‘Pssst. Come on. I’ve found the back way in. Did you see anything suspicious?’

‘No.’

‘Did you look?’

‘Yes.’ *Not really.* ‘Are you sure this is the place?’

She was pointing up to a big plaque. The street name above his head. The same one that was printed on Elder’s driving licence.

An antique elevator ran through the middle of each floor; Isla took the stairs and Joe followed. A circular staircase flanked by a thick iron balustrade. A wide landing on all three floors, all identical. Two doors for each landing. Elder’s apartment on the top floor.

‘How do we get in?’

‘I’ve brought a key with me.’

‘Really?’

Isla was on her knees.

‘You can pick locks?’

‘I don’t have to.’ She pushed the door and it opened. ‘Inside, quickly.’

‘What if there’s someone in there?’

‘Then we leave, quickly. Isla pushed Joe inside and shut the door behind them.

‘Nice.’ Said Joe.

They walked into an open living area with its floor laid with beams of oak. Three arched windows sparkled with early morning sunlight. The brick and stone edgings were centuries old.

‘You want to look in here, or the other rooms?’ She asked.

‘I’m good in here.’ Joe replied.

Elder Routh was a man whose taste was flavoured by the past. The furniture was leather and aged, its framework sculpted and not machined. A massive sideboard dominated the far side of the room, something from the middle ages. In fact nothing was modern. Not a piece had been created within the last two centuries. Four steps took him up to the dining area and an impressive table around which were eight chairs. Two striking silver candlesticks in the middle of the table.

‘Elder liked his oil paintings.’ Joe counted nine hung about the walls. Mostly village scenes alive with hay and peasantry. ‘Maybe there’s a safe hidden behind one of them?’ He moved the frame of the closest. Nothing behind. ‘All the paintings are signed, E R... I think Elder was the artist. Pictures from his past, maybe? The Professor said his son served on the Russian front.’ *Are these paintings a reminder? A way of expressing guilt?* ‘I can’t find a safe in the wall.’

‘Joe, I don’t need a running commentary.’

Isla found nothing. The old man's rooms were spartan, the bedrooms sterile, devoid of trinkets and memories. Maybe there was nothing to find.

No, she didn't believe that. Someone had already been here searching, that was for certain. She noticed the little things. Like the clothes, neat in their drawers and still folded. But not in place, not set square. This man had neat and tidy in his genes. Obsessively deliberate in all he did, that was obvious. Whoever had violated Elder's home had been careful, but the angles were wrong, the furniture at odds with itself. It was obvious to her that they weren't the first to go through his things. But proof also that they hadn't found what they searched for.

Where would he put something important? Where, where... where?

There were no hidden catches, no false bottoms. The bed and the drawers offered her nothing. *Think, Issy. Where would a man like Elder Routh hide the things he valued?*

All the bedrooms were similarly furnished. A bed and a bedside table with a lamp. A mirror on one wall. And he liked to paint creepy watercolours. They hung everywhere. Issy searched through built in cupboards, only one had clothing. The main bedroom where an old man's threads hung. She noticed the delicate repairs, done by a practised hand. So Elder was frugal. More interested in the past than the present. She kept staring at the paintings.

Who were the people in the background? Peasants from the countryside, obviously. But why were their faces deliberately blurred. It all looked very angry, and weird.

Isla sat on the bed.

Just an old man's apartment with nothing to see. Why? Had it all been removed. The table by the window, its mirror; there had been papers stuck all over the glass. Someone had tried to wipe it down.

The wall had signs too. Tiny holes made by pins. What had he hung in so large an area, and so close together? A plot he had uncovered? She imagined the strings that had crisscrossed the wall, photo to photo, a paper-chain of information. Probably reduced to ashes by now.

Issy closed her eyes; allowed the rooms to slide about her mind. Each one revisited and encouraged to reveal something that was out of place. The one thing the owner wanted a burglar to miss. Item by item, wall by wall. There was nothing.

Unless you hide things in the walls? You wouldn't be the first. Think Issy. The master bedroom has a closet, not many items of clothing. In excess of twenty hangers in each of the others, all occupied by aged appropriate clothing... except here, in the master bedroom. Less clothing, bare walls. And single power socket cut into the skirting. Just in here? Why have one at all in a closet when there are more than enough sockets on the bedroom walls? Six in each room.

Isla got up and opened the closet door, she crouched for a better view.
Instinct made her reach out toward the old appliance, grip it, and pull.
'Joe, come in here. I've found something.'

Joe was busy, staring out of the window.

‘There’s a lot of people out there.’ He said. ‘Several hundred more in the last ten minutes. Where the hell are they coming from? Hey, Isla, come and look. They’re all heading for that bridge upstream. Isla, come take... what’s that you’ve got? You’ve found something?’

A brown bundle tied in the same manner as the one Tillmach had given Joe. That he’d left in the hotel room.

‘It was in the wall.’

‘In the wall? Another one of your talents, finding valuables in other people’s homes? Open it up, let’s take a look.’

‘I can’t get the knot undone. Who uses string these days?’

‘Who hides stuff in walls? Here, let me try.’

Joe picked the string undone and placed the bundle on the dining room table. He pulled open the protective cloth.

Neither of them could have expected what it hid inside.

‘Where was all that?’ He asked

‘Hiding in the wall.’

‘Is that a flag?’ Joe unfolded the material. ‘That’s a Swastika. And there’s something else in the middle.’

Isla picked the leather pouch the flag had wrapped. She pulled the leather thongs apart and peeled back its protective flap.

‘Is that a knife?’

‘It’s an SS ceremonial dagger, Joe.’

‘So he really was a Nazi.’

‘It appears so. You see this chain, it hangs the dagger from a belt. Can you see this, the markings on the panels between the chain links. The Deaths Head and Bones, it’s the insignia of the Totenkopf SS. But I’ve never seen one with a serpent coiled below. I wonder what that means?’

‘Do you think he kept it for sentimental reasons?’

‘I’m sure it held some lovely memories. But this is not Elder Routh’s knife. The name carved into the hilt is, Seiglar.’ Isla pulled the blade from its black sheath. ‘Meine Ehre Heisst Treue.’ She said. Words engraved on the blade.

‘It means, “My Honour is Loyalty”. It should be melted down.

Take everything out of the pouch, Joe. Let’s see what else Elder has hidden.’

Joe emptied the pouch’s contents onto the bed.

'This is old,' she said, 'a photo of a woman? Someone's sweetheart from the war maybe? She's very beautiful. And there's something written on the back.'

'Are those map coordinates?'

'Yes. So now we have two names, and somewhere to go. That's more than we had a few hours ago.' There were more photos that Isla spread across the bed. 'Do you think these were Elder's comrades during the war? Look at this one, it's the same girl posing with them? He's written on the back. "Otto, Hans, Anna. Dec 1944" Anna, I wonder who she is?'

Joe had picked up a small diary.

'It's written in German. Looks like some of the pages have been torn out, but most of it's here. Can you hear something, outside?'

Joe moved to the window. A large group of people were in the street

'I think we should leave.' He said.

'Let me see. It's just a rally for the locals. I saw something on the TV earlier. Can you see the bridge up stream. That's Little Father Bernard's bridge. The locals call it, the Love Bridge.'

'Seriously?'

'Oh yes, I've been there. You can't see from this distance but the railings are covered in padlocks. Thousands of them. Something to do with couples and their undying love for each other. When you walk across you can see the damage Lover's do to the wire mesh when the love is gone. People want their locks back, can you believe it.'

'So that lot down there, are in love?'

‘No. The bridge is a popular place to gather. Everyone knows where it is. Today, they are here to march on the Mayor’s office. About two kilometres north of us. Something about a vote to twin Krakow with a city in Russia. Not so good an idea if he wants to get re-elected.’

‘Then why do it?’

‘Money, why else?’

‘And you know this how? The sound on the TV was off.’

‘I lip read. I like to practice with the sound off. And you see more detail in the pictures if you don’t listen. I like to practise with the TV on mute.’

‘You lip read? As well as speaking, how many languages?’

‘Only four. Polish, German, Ukraine, and English. I don’t write so good in Polish, but I can read. Why, can you speak more?’

‘No. Most of the UK struggles to speak English.’

‘Well it’s normal for people on the continent to speak two or more languages. So we are clever, yes. No? Come on, spit it out. What’s bugging you?’

‘This. All of it. X marks the spot on the back of the photo, presumably in the middle of nowhere. Photos of SS men wrapped in a Swastika clutching Satan’s knife? This doesn’t bode well for a happy ending.’

‘It’s just a flag and a dagger, Joe. And a pretty girl posing in a jacket and helmet. Maybe it was Elder’s wife?’

‘It’s not just a flag and a knife though, is it? It’s what they represent.’

‘You think I don’t know that better than you?’

‘I’m just saying, everywhere we turn we hit a wall that says, Nazis. And you’re just a bit too pleased to find a knife to go with your gun. The German that wore that thing killed innocent people, you said so yourself. He collaborated in Genocide.’

‘German? It’s interesting that you say, a German. And not a Nazi.’

‘Well they were German’s weren’t they?’

‘So you don’t differentiate between a German, and a Nazi? Are we all the same to you?’

‘Don’t put words in my mouth.’

‘But you’ve already said them.’

‘You do remember that Germany started a war.’

‘Not me, I didn’t. I wasn’t even born. That’s so fucking racist.’

‘No its not.’

‘No? You don’t think we know what happened, Joe? That we can’t see how the rest of Europe sees us? How it cannot forget what others did before we were even born? I’m German, Joe, and I’m proud of that. But I’m not responsible. My generation is not responsible. And nor was my mother’s, okay?’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean...’

‘No, of course not. No-one ever does. It’s a difficult legacy, Joe. I’ve heard all the jokes; seen the anger in others eyes. Do you know how many times I got the Nazi salute when I was kid. I’ve never even met a Nazi. But you know what’s scary. When I was in prison, I had to act like one just to survive. And

for that I feel guilt. A lot of my generation feel guilt, but for what? You tell me. I listen.

Remember what I told you back at the Camp; that there is a saying in Germany. "I'm tired of the Holocaust." It's taken seventy years for young Germans to dare say that out loud. Seventy years?'

'Isla, I didn't mean...'

'I know, Joe. I do. But you said it anyway. Maybe it is just a habit for people now, I don't know. But I didn't start a war. And I didn't kill a Jew, nor anyone else.

Until yesterday.'

'You're right, she is beautiful. She has a lovely smile. And so do you; you should use it more. So what now?' He asked. 'Do we carry on to Lubben? Go and see, Doctor Herse?'

'Yes, but not right away.' Isla turned the photo around for Joe to see. 'I want to go here first. I want to see what we find.'

'You might want to take a look down there first. That crowd, it's turning into a mob.'

Joe was right. There was excitement brewing outside, orange banners everywhere. Joe could hear the chants now as more and more people were arriving.

‘I know these people, they are Luminsrau.’ She said. ‘Their orange banners have become a familiar sight across Europe. Nobody had heard of them ten years ago, but now... they are like a Cuckoo. Their people hijack other people’s rallies. Turn gatherings into protests of their own. You hear the whistles? It’s to let you know they are here.’

Dozens of banner bobbing Luminsrau had spread throughout the crowd, more were arriving. Students were handing out leaflets.

A young woman jumped up onto a car, megaphone in hand; she began a chant that was quickly taken up by others. Within moments hundreds of fists were being pumped above the mass. The gathering had spread all the way to the bridge.

‘Infiltrate, infect, and inspire. It’s their motto, I think. Sometimes they are violent too. They’re a right wing party that has grown and spread.’

‘Racists?’

‘Some are, of course. But most are just frightened. Sometimes what’s going on, it frightens me too. We have blackouts now, did you know? Many districts in Germany wake up to hours without power. It is rotated to be fair,

at least that's what they say. It's what happens when you depend too much for energy from one source.'

'From Russia.'

'Yes, they supply fifty five percent of gas and oil to Western Europe through the old Soviet pipelines.'

'You're having problems with Putin.'

'Problems? He is a maniac who holds the West to ransom. Every day Politicians denounce Moscow, and then under the table they try to appease him. People are angry with the politicians, Joe, because of the corruption. Oil buys votes in the EU. They say it bribes the Euro MP's to look the other way. And NATO flatly refuses to interfere with Russian military expansion. Russian billions can buy islands in Greece, and yet the ordinary Russian is still poor like the Poles? I think it's going to get worse before it gets better. Luminsrau have powerful friends in business and politics. They make a big noise these days, or are you deaf in the UK?'

'I spend most of my time at work, or asleep. Isla, this was supposed to be a holiday.'

'And how's that turned out? Maybe if you British didn't have that big moat around your island you might pay more attention to what happens on your doorstep. There could be a war, Joe. How would you English feel about that? Most countries that border the Ukraine will tell you it's already begun.'

'Err, Issy. Are those Police cars.'

Four of them, no sirens, but blue lights ablaze.

‘Don’t worry they’re not here for us. They probably want to join the demonstration. I think we should be more concerned with those gentlemen down there.’

‘Who... why?’

‘They are bad guys, and they are coming in here. We need to go, now. We can find another car later.’

‘How the hell did they know we were here?’

‘You want to stop and ask them?’

Isla closed the front door, took several steps down, heard the voices on the stairwell. Sounded like three men coming up. And the lift was going down. She pulled Joe back.

‘You want them to see you?’ She whispered.

‘We can’t go down. There’s no way out. They’re going to kill us aren’t they.’

‘So sorry, can we come in. Please don’t scream.’ Isla put her hand across the old woman’s mouth.

‘Wychodzą... Wychodzą.’ (Get out... get out.). The words muffled.

‘Shhhh. Czy ty mówisz po angielsku?’ (Do you speak English?) Asked Isla.

The old woman nodded. ‘Tak...’ She said. ‘Yes.’

‘Don’t make a sound or it will be bad for you, you understand?’

Wide eyed she nodded affirmation. Joe closed the door as quietly as he could. Then turned. He couldn’t believe what he saw. Isla had her hand across an old woman’s mouth; her gun pressed against the wall next to her head. She looked terrified. Five foot one, a pink rinse and overweight. Grandma was wearing a pinny. He could smell baking, coming from the kitchen at the end of the hall. The decor hadn’t changed since the Communists were in power.

‘Keep watch, Joe... through the peep hole. Don’t anyone make a sound.’

Joe peeked. He couldn’t see anyone. Maybe they’d changed their minds. He wasn’t that lucky as one came fully into view. Another followed close behind. Both were young, fit. Isla was right, you could tell the bad guys if you paid attention. The guns they both took from their jackets was the kicker. Another man, big, and wearing a suit; he was bald.

‘It’s Baldy.’ Joe whispered. ‘Standing outside.’

‘Who are you, what do you want?’ The old woman asked though Isla’s fingers.

‘Shhhhh.’ Was her reply. ‘Be quiet and we will leave soon, okay?’ She nodded. ‘What’s happening out there?’

‘Two of them have gone in, Baldy’s waiting outside.’

‘Shit, we can’t leave whilst he’s stood out there.’

‘They’ve got guns.’

‘Really. How inconvenient. Bad guys with guns?’

Don’t shake your head at me, you’re the one holding Grandma at gunpoint. I can’t look her in the eyes, bless her.

‘I’m sorry.’ Said the old woman. ‘I had to do it. They said it would be bad for me if I didn’t tell them when someone came to Elder’s.’

‘You told them we were here?’ Asked Isla.

‘If anyone came to Elder’s apartment, I was to call a number. I’m sorry.’

‘Then why did you answer the door?’

‘I saw you go down the stairs. Why didn’t you leave? I thought you were Elga’s daughter, from downstairs. Please, I’m an old lady, don’t hurt me.’

‘Isla, put that thing away. We don’t shoot defenceless old women.’ *Even if they have just grassed us up.* ‘Isla, please, the gun.’

‘Look, I won’t hurt you if you keep your mouth shut. Nod if you understand. Good. Why did you call them?’

‘You are wanted by the Police.’

‘Yes, but those men are not the Police.’

'They said they were.'

'Did anyone show you a badge? No, because they don't have one. Very carefully look outside. Can you see. Since when do the Police use silencers on their guns. They murdered your neighbour, Elder Routh, and they will kill you as well as us. They won't want any witnesses. Yes, you understand now don't you.'

Grandma nodded.

'They'll come over to talk to me. Ask what I saw. Where we went.'

'And what will you say?'

'You went away.'

'Yes. Tell them you saw a blue car, maybe green. And if they ask if we took anything?'

'I will say I saw nothing.'

'Shh, both of you, they're back out on the landing. Oh no. Isla, they're coming over here.'

Joe backed away from the door. The hallway behind was narrow, he hid where it turned. What would happen if Grandma opened the door and screamed.

Joe could imagine the gunfire. The hail of bullets from the crossfire that would kill them all. A fist hammered on the door. What would she do? Could she be trusted? The door was banged again, louder this time.

Isla took her hand away and showed Grandma the gun. She whispered something that made Grandma's eyes widen.

'Joe, just in case.' She gave him the dagger. What good was a dagger against guns? Joe wanted a gun. He wanted to be somewhere else as Isla ushered the old woman toward the door then backed away. She opened the door.

The conversation was in Polish. It was the older man, Baldy who spoke.

'You saw them?' He asked.

'Oh yes, a man and a woman. Not twenty minutes ago.'

'Where did they go?'

'Down the stairs and out the back. I saw them.'

'Did they have a car?'

'Tak, yes. I saw from window. It was green, or blue. That's all I know. Now pay me and go away.'

'Did they leave with anything? A case or a bag, anything they did not arrive with?'

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. The woman had a rucksack when she arrived. My eyes aren’t so good these days. Pay me what you promised. I’ll call if they come back.’

It went silent. Joe didn’t like the quiet. What was going on, was she making hand signals? Were they about to rush into the hall? The door shut. The old woman came back into the kitchen clutching a handful of Euros.

‘Lying bastards, they said two hundred Euros? Come, come, if you want to leave I have another entrance at the rear.’

‘Why didn’t you say so?’

She had her hand over my mouth. Now come.’

She led them through an apartment the size of a house. There were photos everywhere. Family mostly. A lot of miserable looking children. And there were cats in the lounge, Joe counted four. A myriad of old Soviet memorabilia laid out across countless surfaces and shelves. Mostly from the Second World War. Pride of place on the wall was a golden medal, a star with a red tab; above a picture of a woman. The words:

Герой Советского Союза, Arianna Sovskog

(Hero of the Soviet Union, Arianna Sovskog)

A wooden door led out to a balcony, from there her hand directed them to a steel walkway and the fire escape.

‘Here.’ She said. And handed Isla the Euros. ‘For Elder, he was a good man.’

Isla accepted the money; she kissed Grandma on the cheek. Joe followed her down the steps

‘Why would she do that? We took her hostage and she gives us money?’

‘I don’t think that was the first time she’d seen a gun. Polish history is a violent one, I suppose you learn quickly who the bad guys are. Now stop asking stupid questions and get a move on. We’ll get lost in the crowd.’

As they crossed the road Isla saw him first. A slim man who wore a suit and sunglasses, he stepped out from behind a wall. Their eyes met for a moment. He pulled out a gun.

A dozen protestors came laughing into sight. Slim didn't shoot, he put the gun back into his jacket.

'Move Joe, quickly.'

The man's wrist rose to his mouth, no doubt reporting to his superior.

Isla walked quickly. Slim kept his distance. The crowd became more dense, harder to move through.

'What about the police? We could get ourselves arrested.'

'Yes, for murder. No thanks, I'm not going back to prison.'

'Better than being dead.' Joe argued.

'Not for me.'

Half an hour ago the street was empty, now there were a thousand people, maybe two.

'Joe, look.' She stopped pulling him. 'It's Baldy.' He was trying to get to the bridge before them.

Joe could see Baldy's head bobbing in and out of view. Trying to locate them.

'Isla, where are you going? The bridge is this way.'

'Come on Joe, I have an idea.'

What's she doing? Pointing... at what? The girl with the megaphone? The scratchy sound of her voice getting louder with each step.

'Get out of the way, please.'

Come on, move...

The long haired girl barked constantly in Polish. Full of expression and gesticulation, every provocative move designed to work the crowd. Joe forced his way through the densely packed bodies. He could still see Baldy. The bastard had a smug grin, and why not, there was no way they could make the bridge before him now.

Isla was on the move. 'Joe, the girl, we need her loudhailer?'

'We do, why?'

'Loudhailer, get it.'

What good is a megaphone against guns? He lost hold of Issy's hand. Too many people were moving, jumping about, forcing them apart. She looked really angry now.

'Joe, get the loudhailer.'

'What, why?'

'Just get it and...'

'I can't hear you?' Too many bodies between them. If only that girl would shut up.

'The loud...'

He lost sight of her. Isla was gone. He knew she wouldn't give up so Joe squeezed, pushed, manhandled whoever got in his way until he reached the girl with the megaphone.

'Hey... hey, excuse me. Down here.' *She's found a big rock to stand on. Too many bodies in the way.* 'Coming through... out of the way... hey, hey, lady?'

That's it, down here. Just shut up for a moment. 'Err, hi. Can I have a word?' Please let her speak English.

'Hey, I am Clara, thank you for coming.'

'Yeah, sure, no problem.'

'You are English? I love the English. Come up, up, say something to the people.'

'What, no.'

'Come on, talk to the people. We are all the same now, no more English or Polish. Luminsrau for the people.' She barked into the cone. 'Luminsrau for the people.' All eyes were on the rock. All eyes were now on Joe.

What if someone recognises me; there'll be a riot. Isla... where the hell is Isla?

'Hey, you are a long way from home, English.' She shouted.

'English... no, not really.' Clara waved away the young men about to intervene. Then turned the megaphone downward toward Joe. A mischievous sparkle lit her eyes as she threatened him with acoustic assault.

They were green, her eyes. And they teased him. The stern activist softened for a moment into a young woman with a painted smile. She held out her hand. Joe took it and helped her down to greet him.

'You come to the Rally to support us, yes? Here, this is for you. I write and print them myself. Read it. Join us and help our party grow. Hey, maybe you buy me a drink as well?'

She shouted into the mike, the cone of the machine thankfully pointed up toward the sky. He had no idea what she said but the crowd started to cheer. Joe was trapped in a giant Mosh Pit. A piston like vibration that kept the crowd in constant motion. Clara pulled him up onto her rock.

‘You hear that, the people speak with a single voice. Speak to them, English...’

‘What, no. I don’t speak Polish.’ He saw Baldy, closer to the bridge now. Giving directions to his cronies. Half a dozen men in suits. They had him trapped.

‘Okay English, you don’t want to speak. How about we talk? I can tell you whatever you need to know. I’m Clara, did I say?’

Clara had stopped yelling into that infernal amplifier. She seemed normal without the rhetoric. Joe’s height, short dark hair, and wonderfully green eyes. All sorts of mischief lurked behind them.

‘Limp immigration policies,’ she shouted to him, ‘from the EU. They’ve created waves in our people. Luminsrau is surfing the unrest. We can change things, English. You can help us. You can help me. That’s why you come, yes?’

No, not really.

‘Yes, that’s why I’m here.’

‘You’re the first English to join. Hey, maybe you buy me coffee when we finish? I’d like that.’

You would? Me too.

‘What’s your name? I can’t keep calling you English.’

‘Name... John.’ He said.

‘You understand us, John. That’s so great. Europe requires leadership and direction. Strength in its policy and people. We need a resolution on the migration crisis. Someone has to take responsibility.’ Carla took him by the arm. ‘We have a crisis on our borders. There are too many migrants and refugees; and their numbers keep growing. They are being pushed across our borders to destabilise our economy, threaten the Union. Soon, there will be more of *them* than there are of *us*. That’s why you’re here, yes, to help?’

‘Help, definitely.’

Come on, Joe. Work this, you can do it. Ten feet, one girl; several bulky teenagers.

‘Luminsrau.’ He shouted. ‘Luminsrau... Luminsrau... Luminsrau.’

What a smile Clara had for Joe as she leapt back to her rock. Full of energy and showing off as she worked her mouthpiece, barely taking her eyes from Joe.

Joe grinned, and why not. She was cute and wanted his attention. Clara held out her hand in an operatic salute to the crowd, and spoke in English so Joe could understand.

‘They expect generosity.’ Her voice almost mechanical from the cone. ‘They demand handouts.’ The crowd jeered. ‘Our children ask us why we keep letting more in? It’s time to say, no. No no no... no more.’

A wave of “NOs” rippled through the gathering. Joe’s voice lifted in support. When she saw him Clara was boosted with confidence, even more reactionary. The gathering was hooked, incited, ready to react. Whilst Baldy watched and waited.

‘One day,’ the megaphone roared, ‘we will find there is not enough food for our children. Our jobs will be taken by a migrant who works for less. And those aliens who don’t work; they will beg, borrow, and they will steal. Become a threat to us all and our families.’ Clara was building to a climax. ‘They will use our own laws against us. Suck the life’s blood from our Nation. And why? Because this is the natural order for those who put upon others. Who put upon you, and you, and all of you; who will find they have nothing left.’

She pounded her fist into the air. A roar erupted from the crowd a hundred deep. Even Joe was listening, not because he agreed, but because she was cute and feisty, and spoke with such conviction and skill. She gave him goosebumps.

‘In Hungary they have built a fence a hundred miles long. In Macedonia the army has been mobilised to help stem their flow.’ Clara winked at Joe. ‘The UK has built fences to secure the Euro Tunnel from undesirables. And now we have warships in the Mediterranean because the boats filled with migrants will not stop coming to our shores. We must keep the refugees from our ramparts. Keep the Migrants from our gates. We need an Alien Breakwater to keep them out.’

“OUT, OUT, OUT.” Came the chants.

The mood was getting scary as Clara waited patiently for a lull.

‘And let me tell you who fuels the fires of migration. Who terrorises the innocent to flee. It is the Russian influence that lurks behind it all. Russian interests in Syria force conflict, and refugees. It’s Russian weapons that allow Islamic State to wage their Holy War. Whilst Russian oil and Gas control our lives.

Boos and catcalls. A general loathing was released from the crowd.

‘Their military stalks our borders.

Russia pushes more and more migrants West.

And now they dare to build a naval base on Greek Islands in the Mediterranean.’

The Mosh Pit was heaving again. It's weight in tune with her words.

'Moscow drools at the prospect of licking virgin lands...'

Move forward. Stay close to the rock. Don't let these idiots get in your way. Where's Isla?

'Putin dreams of shoving his cock into our wet, moist, Motherland.' Another wink at Joe. 'But I tell you now, we are going to fight. Fight for our people. Fight for our Union. Fight to keep the East from swallowing up the West.

Closing our borders.'

The roar was deafening.

'Say no, to Russian aggression.'

Clara spoon fed the mass.

'Say NO, to the East's monopoly of our continent's natural energy reserves.

'Say yes, yes, yes, to military intervention in the Ukraine.'

Several thousand students took up the chant. "Yes yes yes." A din of whistles and cheers that spread through the demonstration like a Mexican Wave. Hands were raised and thumped the air.

Clara stooped to hold Joe's hand, she looked for approval for what she had said.

'Maybe if you give me your phone number.' She said.

'My phone number?'

'Yes, I have a shift at the Galleria later, but I'll be off by nine. We can talk.'

She's flirting with me?

'Here, I want to give you this?'

She handed Joe the orange armband from her jacket.

He reached out but it wasn't Clara's hand that took his.

'I said to grab the loudhailer, Joe. Not ask the girl out on a date.'

'Hey, get off me. Who is this? Fucking bitch, get off. This is my rock.'

A foot in the face knocked one student away, and a glare of insanity stopped another from intervening.

'Give that to me or I'll break your face in two.'

'Okay,' Clara conceded the speaker, 'no need for violence. We are all friends here. What do you want to say? Are you with us? Is this bitch with you?'

The accompanying glare suggested Joe's number was no longer required as Isla stepped onto the rock.

'Listen to me.' A demand for the crowds attention. 'Hey, people... listen. QUIET.

Yeah, shhhhh, that's right. Shhh, there are things you need to know. That this *girl* isn't aware of. But first I want to thank you all for coming today, it's a really great turn out. I'm proud of you. Luminsrau, is proud of you all.'

The gathering murmured with appreciation. Lots of heads nodded with approval. Isla had their attention.

'But I have some bad news. Yes, booooo, bad news for all of us. Because we are not alone today. The enemy is amongst us. People who have come to cause us trouble.' Her hand moved toward the bridge. A damning finger pointing toward an individual. 'You see that man... the Bald man.' The

crowd, Carla, even Joe was looking. 'He is here on the Mayor's orders to start trouble. The Police are here to arrest Carla.'

Isla had the crowd's attention. Clara's most of all.

'Can you see him, and his friends. The bald man and all his suits. They are not with us.'

Baldy stepped down from the railing on the bridge.

'The Bald Man is a Russian gangster, his followers have come to cause trouble. They have guns.'

Silence erupted into a murmur that spread fast. The mob became agitated. Unsure and uneasy. The men in suits stood out to everyone.

Baldy's brow-less eyes scanned the gathering that was now edging away from the riverside. His body language altered, his training betrayed itself as he considered the options. With the river to his rear and orange arm bands on the move through the crowd towards him, they seemed limited. The Police in the distance had sensed the crowd's change in mood.

'Lift up your jacket, Bald Man. Show them the guns you are going to use. He brings death to our meeting.'

'Isla, stop it.' Joe felt it, the change around him. Watchful interest had shifted into apprehension. 'Don't push him any more, he can't do anything with all these people watching. Isla, come down. Let's go, we can leave now.'

'Go away Bald Man. Leave us alone. There are woman and children here. Murderer.'

Seventy yards may as well have been seven. The suits on the riverbank turned indecision into vendetta. It was written all over their features.

'Isla, get down off the rock, please. Oh no, he's going for his...'

Baldy saw it. He shouted to them to stop, but was too late. A collective gasp from hundreds of onlookers as the guns came into view, and opened fire.

The screaming began.

The explosive discharge fuelled instant panic in the mass. One shot followed by another. The megaphone clunked to his feet,

Clara?

The crowd tried to scatter, but had nowhere to go. Joe tried to hug the rock but realised he'd be trampled.

'Clara.'

Screaming students; more cracks of gunfire. Joe moved because he had no choice. More gunfire from behind him as the Police returned fire.

'Clara.' Where was she?

'Joe... Joe... over here.'

'Hey.' *Thank God...* 'Over here. Over here.' Isla was fighting her way through the bodies towards him. Joe fought against the tide to reach her. Issy grabbed his arm.

'We need to go. Come on, this way.'

Where's Clara? There was no sign of Clara.

'Have you seen Clara?'

'Who the fuck is Clara? Joe, we need to go.'

Trip followed bump followed stumble as they ran toward the bridge. More gunshots, more screaming. The tide of bodies settled into two movements. Back over the bridge and towards the road. Toward the Police. Joe and Issy were swallowed in the surge that swept towards the bridge. And then the

sounds changed. No more gunfire, the screams had abated. Just an eerie lull in the panic now filled with groans and whispers. As the bodies thinned the majority began to kneel, hunker down, make themselves small. A collective sense that being tall made a better target. They were forced to follow suit just yards from the bridge.

Joe could see now, the opened up space by the riverside. Three men on their knees, two more lay dead on the ground. Police shouting, moving forward, full combat mode engaged. Issy pulled him to his feet.

‘We need to be somewhere else.’

Joe was a kid again, don’t step on the cracks. Only the cracks were people. His feet feeling their way across the bridge and into space. He wanted to say excuse me but no-one really cared. And Joe wasn’t in the mood to think about love, just escape. Freedom and safety. He barely noticed the thousands of padlocks attached to the fencing on either side.

Far enough away now to glance back again. To see the blue flashing lights and a score more police moving toward their assailants. The gunmen were on their faces, prostrated at gunpoint.

‘Isla, stop. It’s over. Look, the Police. Holy Mother of...’

Adrenaline surge as the air whipped into a fierce tempest and all that was loose on the bridge whirled upward into a frenzy. The angry sound of chopping blades as a Police helicopter passed by overhead and hovered at the riverbank. A loudspeaker in the sky barked orders in Polish. The crowd looked up and those that were standing slowly dropped back to their knees.

The only two that didn't left the far side of the bridge heading for the cover of trees. Their motion stopped beside a blue Volvo.

Isla was in the car before he registered her intention. A moment later the fan belt shrieked dissent as the engine lulled into an uneven idle. Locals had come to their gateways. The suburban calm broken in their leafy lane.

Joe's backside felt the creak of old leather and the Volvo limped forward. It coughed and spluttered but managed to reach a steady thirty KPH.

He could still see it, the helicopter in the distance. The river running parallel to the road. Police, flashing lights; there was a man crawling out from the water? The man had a bald head but quickly disappeared from sight.

'Joe, do you still have it? The Professor's package?'

Joe unzipped his jacket. He pulled out Elder's secrets and dropped them into the footwell. He felt like he'd left a war zone. Neither of them spoke, just the music from the radio in the background.

A few miles later the music stopped and a man's voice cut in.

Isla turned the volume up.

'Are they talking about the bridge?' Joe asked her. 'They are aren't they?'

'Shut up I'm trying to listen. No, it's all right. He is saying there are two fatalities, both gunmen. Only minor injuries to the demonstrators. There was a reporter there. He says that the Police are to be praised. They have shot two terrorists dead, and several others have been arrested.'

‘Thank God for that. So they think it was a terrorist attack. Huh, I’ve been elevated from a murderer to a terrorist. This can’t be happening.’

‘At least that bald bastard will get what he deserves now.’

Will he? That man coming out of the water... he was bald. Was it him? Had to be. What was it he couldn’t put his finger on where Baldy was concerned.

‘Issy, there’s something not right about him.’

‘Who, Baldy?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Joe, he’s a killer.’

‘Then why did he try to stop that man shooting back there.’

‘Oh, how about a thousand witnesses?’

‘I suppose. But what about Dębnicki bridge? He could have killed me back then. He could have just taken this.’ He teased the package with his foot.

‘Why didn’t he just kill me and take it?’

‘Joe, stop thinking too much. It gets you into trouble.’

‘You’re smiling, why are you smiling?’

‘Why? Joe, I send you to get a loudhailer, and you give her your phone number. Ha ha, that’s ridiculous, and funny. I suppose she was kind of cute.’

‘I didn’t notice.’

‘Oh, you noticed. *Hey, what time do you finish inciting riots? Let’s go get coffee.* So you like your girls with a mousey face and greasy hair, yes? Is considered sexy in England?’

‘She wasn’t mousey. What does that even mean? And don’t make that noise. No, her teeth didn’t do that.’

‘*Eek eek, I am a mouse, and Joe wants to give me extra caffeine. Like she needs it?.*’

‘She didn’t speak like that. And she asked for my number, what else could I say?’

‘You should have offered her some cheese. Eek, eek, eek.’

‘Stop it.’ *No don’t, it’s funny. You’re funny.* ‘Stop it, mice don’t say eek. They make a different noise... like this.’

It wasn’t his best impression but it made her laugh even louder. She was infectious, and Joe let go. He couldn’t help himself as he let it all out. Nervous tension erupted into near tears, for both of them. Laughter for Joe that suddenly stopped.

‘Isla, why is there blood all over your seat?’

‘Joe, I think maybe one of those bullets. It got me.’

‘Pull the car over.’

‘We shouldn’t stop.’

‘Pull the car over, now.’

‘Okay okay, take your hands off the wheel.’ She turned the Volvo into a bus stop fifty yards ahead.

‘Let me see. Issy, I need to pull your jumper away.’

‘Don’t get any funny ideas.’

‘As if. Issy, that’s a lot of blood. And there’s no exit hole, the bullet’s still in there. I’ve got to stop the bleeding.’ He looked about the car, opened and emptied the glove box. Nothing.

‘Open the boot. Maybe there’s something we can use in the boot.’

It was the best Joe could do. He was sure it would keep Issy from leaking.’

‘Be thankful you stole a Volvo.’ he said. ‘What other car would have four fluffy towels and some duct tape in the boot?’

‘I’m impressed.’ She said.

‘I’m the first aider at work.’

‘So we find another use for you, that’s good. Bullet holes are not a good accessory. It hurts.’

You look tired.

‘Joe, maybe you should drive for a while.’

‘Drive... me? I don’t drive.’

‘Of course you do, everyone drives.’

‘No, some people catch buses and ride bikes. I’ve got a mountain bike that I use in town. It’s quicker than a car around London.’

‘Joe, seriously. You need to drive.’

Five times he'd rung now. Five times Ron's message service had answered through the dashboard. Something was wrong. Why didn't Ron answer? He couldn't phone Becks. No, she'd react differently; want to know things. The who, what, where and why?

Issy had been explicit. "These people are professionals. Involving others will only put them in danger." He knew she was right.

Becks would call Interpol, send in the Marines. They'd end up in prison, or worse.

'Come on Ron, pick up the phone.'

He hadn't meant to say it out loud. A look in the mirror, Issy still slept in the back.

Answer damn you.

He pressed redial, the phone went straight to message.

'Joe, turn the phone off.'

'Issy... I thought you were asleep.'

'Turn it off, they can trace it.'

'How, it came with the car.'

'And by now the owner will have reported it stolen. If the Police know, *they* know. They'll be listening.'

'They... They... who the hell are *They*?'

'Please Joe, I'm too tired to argue.'

'Fine. At least let me find you a doctor.'

'Doctors have to report gunshot wounds. Joe, I'm fine. You said it had stopped bleeding, so that's good, yes? Find us somewhere to rest, please. I think I have a plan.'

Another one? 'You promised me you'd sleep.'

'I have. I will. Joe, get us off the grid.'

Tiredness, blood loss, fatigue, it had taken them all to slow her down.

'Go back to sleep. I'll find somewhere.'

Joe kept checking; her eyes finally closed. He picked up the phone, then put it back in the glove box.

Isla hadn't asked the name of the town. Nor did she care to know the name of the hotel. It was run down, off the grid, and cheap. Everything a girl wants from a get-away.

Look at him, can he make any more noise?

Joe was prostrate on the single bed, chin down and mouth open. He snored. Another jelly bean flew through the air and hit his forehead. He finally stirred and rolled over.

Two hours ago Joe had woke her. He'd helped her to the room. Cleaned and dressed her wound. Scolded her off for drinking excessively from the minibar. Then he'd sulked as she'd hurled angry words at him. She had to stop being angry with him. This wasn't his fault.

Oh wait, yes it was.

Issy considered throwing the entire contents of the bag; but why waste good jelly beans? The only food on offer from the machine in the lobby. They didn't even sell cigarettes, a habit she'd dropped years ago.

What is it that you know, Joe White? Why do people want you, us, dead?

Maybe the hotel would kill them first. The creamy mushroom coloured curtains used to be white. A chocolate brown carpet that couldn't hide the stains. And the bathroom; it brought a lump to her throat. Such a tiny sink for so much growth. She didn't want to think about the shower, and that

plastic curtain. The biggest danger was the toilet that only half flushed. She'd pleaded with her earlier visit to get down and round the bend.

Joe had cringed. Issy had cringed. The door hadn't been opened since.

On the desk was Elder's bundle. The hard-drive and Tillmach's notes. The Sig P226 and a spare magazine. Next to them the laptop from the house. And the empty vodka bottles from the fridge. She'd let Joe use one of them to clean her wound. It hurt; what did he expect? Of course she was mean to him.

Is this it? My entire universe laid out on this crappy vanity? Even the mirror is cracked.

Isla opened Elder's bundle.

An SS dagger and a diary? A flag and a pretty woman in a photo?

She had to be important to Elder; but who was she? Isla ran her finger over the Totenkopf emblem heavily embossed into the black diary, its SS runes stamped below.

All she knew about Nazis, about the War, she'd learnt from the internet; from the SKY History channel. This wasn't a topic taught widely in German schools. Nineteen thirty to Nineteen fifty, they may as well be the Dark Ages. Not to be spoken about, nor encouraged. Was it to protect the new generation of German kids? Or to blot out the shame of her country's past? Probably a bit of both.

Issy looked up at the mirror. At her reflection. What of her own past? She recognised the Hitler salute before she could talk properly. A favourite taunt from the other kids.

“Isla, little Nazi bastard.”

It was only natural when she got older to find out about her past. To wonder who, and where the “little Nazi bastard” had come from. For a few short years the need for answers had consumed her. She lined the photos of the soldiers across the vanity’s scratched veneer.

I wonder, would I have been a good soldier for the Reich? Could I have been like you back then? I’m ashamed to even think it. But I might. There’s a dark side living inside of me. So much anger it makes me sad.

Isla looked at Joe. Still curled up on the bed. He looked content. Probably dreaming of happier times.

I don’t want to be angry any more. I don’t. But how else will we survive this. What else do I have to fight these people with? They murdered an innocent girl just to frame Joe. What is it you know? What’s worth her life, and the lives of two old men? What is it you know, Joe White?

Maybe the answers are inside this little black book.

The diary was small, a leather chord tied around a flap to keep it sealed. The leather was cracked and worn, old. Whatever was written inside was personal to its owner, Elder Routh. But he was dead, so not likely to complain. She unpicked the chord and opened the binder. A folded piece of paper dropped out.

It was old and had yellowed from age. She opened a list of names written into four columns. She had no idea what they meant.

Maybe the woman in the photo is mentioned inside? I'll call you, Helga. That's as good a name as any. So Helga, how are you linked to Elder Routh. Are you related? Were you lovers during the War? Let's find out shall we.

Isla opened another vodka, folded back the cover of Elder Routh's diary, and settled down to read.

The words inside were tiny, neat, penned by a well disciplined hand. On the inside cover was a list of German names, each one beside a different date and location. All the place names were Russian. A list of fallen comrades. She turned to the first page.

21/11/44

Today is the first day of my fourth month here, Hut Thirty Six, this hole in the ground. Trust me, the Russian Front is a better place to die. Death is too slow here. Even the living are dead. Most of the Totenkopf guards wish they were dead. They try to drink themselves to death every night.

I have to remind myself, I am Oberscharführer Elder Stauff, Waffen-SS. Assigned head of security for Doctor Seiglar, whoever he is? I must have shit in someone's shoes to get this posting. I've been demoted to a baby sitter and errand boy. Why? I'm stuck below a Camp filled with misery. I'm miserable. My companions, Otto and Hans, they feel the same. We are all seasoned veterans from the Steppes, so what are we doing here? We should be out fighting the Reds. Killing and dying in the sunlight.

That's not something I would have said three months ago. Back then, I thought I'd seen the worst of this War. Every bloodied step backwards since

our defeat at Kursk. I thought this place would save us; I was wrong. It will send us all to Hell.

25/11/44

Nothing changes here. I no longer care why we were posted to this place. Security, protection... punishment? I still have no idea what the doctor is doing down here. Why Doctor Seiglar works fourteen hours a day alone in his laboratory. I don't like him much. He refuses to socialise. And when he does he is condescending, rude, and demanding. He is an arrogant man with friends in very high places.

I made my second visit to Wewal Castle this week. More demands from the doctor. They have never been refused and are delivered within days; always marked MEDICAL SUPPLIES. I bring them down into the bunker but have never asked, what they are? Or what drives that man to work so feverishly. I do know that he's been here for three years. I would rather be back in Russia. At least there my enemy shoots at me, but leaves my dreams alone.

After three months I hate every concrete wall and corner of this place. The lack of natural light and air. The secrecy. And there is the Camp above us. I cannot write down what goes on up there, above us, in Auschwitz. I don't believe it myself at times.

The SS have turned the original Polish barracks into Hell on Earth. I can hear them, the whistles and the dogs. The collective sigh of the prisoners at night. I don't want to be here; it's time it all stopped. But I will do my duty as a German soldier, what else can I do.

04/12/44

I took my first day's leave yesterday, and spent the entire day getting drunk; we all got drunk. It's obvious to everyone how quickly the world is shrinking for us Germans. And I hardly saw one without a drink in their hand. Only the SS-die hards and the Gestapo stay sober. Men who threaten court-martial and execution just for wearing a frown. Somehow it's a sign of resignation. A public admittance of defeat. The Fuhrer refuses to accept our defeat.

Heil fucking Hitler!

I don't care any more. We are defeated. We should all die for what we have done. For what we are still doing in the Camps.

The last paragraph had been scribbled over, Elder's attempt to redact his words. Issy could just then make out if she held the page up to the light.

The next few pages were filled with a man's regrets. His reflections on the conflict in Russia. His pride, and his shame. He constantly sniped at the

doctor, Herr Seiglar. Elder hated the man's attitude, it was demanding and expectant; his manner dictatorial. Elder had begun to despise the man, and the Camp above. He wrote with the words of a man walking close to the edge.

Issy noticed how his writing calmed when he mentioned a woman, named Anna. Tacitly brief comments, but always written with warm regard. The tone of the writing always changed.

“How her golden brown hair shines down here in the lamplight.”

“That one scent of her perfume has carried me throughout the day.”

It seemed that Anna kept the spark glowing in Elder. He described her as ‘Seiglar's concubine’ more than his assistant. Though she spent a lot of time in the doctor's lab.

More and more notes were being left in the margins. Reminders of duties necessary in the days ahead. Hut Thirty Six was taking its toll. Every day he chastised himself for his drinking. Cursed the lack of freedom within the bunker. The lack of light. The endless demands of the Doctor. Seiglar had even tried to forbid smoking; an order they all ignored. Most of the men were drinking on duty now.

There was an underlying air of curiosity as well, about the doctor. The ‘workaholic’ who rarely left his laboratory. Elder had asked Anna once, “what is the doctor doing down here?”

She'd said one word, ‘WolfSpawn’; put a finger to her lips and hurried away. Seiglar obviously scared her, Elder was certain of that. But then the doctor put them all on edge.

05/12/44

I've started to pray recently. It's this place. It makes you think too much. Remember what you've done in the Fuhrer's name. I'm struggling to justify all of it. I can't get away from the images, even in my sleep. God forgive us. God forgive me.

All I want to do now is go home.

07/12/1944

Twice a month I escort Doctor Seiglar back to Germany by train. We are going early this month, today, because of a coded radio transmission. I'll find out why when I talk to Otto.

Within an hour he was ready and dressed in his black uniform. That man revels in any occasion to wear his uniform. He wears the Death's Head with arrogance. Strutting about like a Party Member trying to impress children. The SS were not like this; not rotten like the Nazis. Not at first. I wasn't like him... I wasn't, not until Russia...

I wonder how his 'Party' attitude will cope when the Kalashnikovs are shooting at him from just a few metres away. A man like Seiglar, for all his big talk... he'll run. They always run.

14/12/1944

I woke up late this morning, still hung over from last night. I've had two drinks already; I'm trying to forget yesterday.

I went to Warsaw with Otto. Seiglar sent us by truck to pick up supplies because the planes aren't flying. Too much cloud in the sky, and this fucking snow never stops.

My God, when we got there most of the city was gone. There was nothing left of the Ghetto but rubble. For the first time since the War began, I felt ashamed of being German. It wasn't like that when I was burning peasant villages in Russia. It was for the good of the Reich. The protection of our soldiers. All the other things we did? It all seems a life time ago now.

I've been asking myself, would I still feel this way if Germany were winning the War?

Otto saw it differently, I'm worried for him. "That's how you treat the Jews." Otto said when he saw it. He said. And meant it. Then insisted on pointing out all the missing landmarks. A year ago I think I would have joined in. Not now.

In a few days our Army intends to withdraw; leave whatever is left of Warsaw to the Reds. There is nothing to stop them taking Poland for themselves now. It won't be long until they find out what we've been doing here, in the Camps.

Why the fuck are we still fighting?

And what's Seiglar doing down here? What has him so focused he can't see what's about to happen? He works like a man possessed with his fancy tubes and equipment. What does he look at down those microscopes. Why are we still here?

Why does Anna stay? None of us would stop her leaving.

15/12/44

Apparently Seiglar has perfected a way of drying out his samples. He and Anna are putting everything into storage. We are boxing everything. I had no idea there were so many samples down here, they are emptying the fridges. Years of work are being packed into crates. I think Herr Seiglar has finally realised the game is up.

And yet I went topside to collect another donor. The fourth this month already. I can't do it any more. From now on Otto will go to the Camp for collections. I'll get Hans to dispose of the bodies.

One last thing.

I have finally joined the others drinking Schnapps for breakfast.

17/12/44

After taking a shower and a drink, I feel more positive than ever this morning. I've made a decision. This journal will bear witness to the facts as they happen, in case I don't survive.

At eleven I drove into Krakow, to Wawel Castle. It is the Headquarters of Hans Frank, Governor-General of the occupied Polish territories. I report directly to SS-Brigadefuhrer Josef Buhler, Franks' deputy. I hand him, personally, a sealed envelope from the doctor. I don't know where it goes after that. Or why the highest authority in Poland pampers to his every whim? What's so secret his own security has to be kept in ignorance?

I intend to find out.

The pillow was soft, if a bit pungent. The urge to snuggle deeper into the warm duvet was irresistible. Hmm, so warm and cosy, if a tad old fashioned. The curtains were psychedelic almost? Where was he... obviously still asleep?

It all came back to Joe like a crash landing. The rally, Carla... Isla had been shot?

'Issy?'

He looked up, the duvet still under his chin. She sat in the chair with the diary lying closed on her lap. She was still here, but something wasn't right. Isla wasn't moving.

'Issy?'

Joe leapt from his cosy bunk.

'Isla.'

'Yes, I heard you? Joe's awake so everyone else must too. What do you want?'

'Nothing, sorry... bad dream.' He wished it were. 'How are you feeling?'

'Hungry.' She said.

Food sounded good. The room felt cold as he got up.

'Let me look at your dressing first. Come on, sit up.'

'Oww. Ouch, that hurts.'

'Sorry, it's a bit sticky under here. Where's the vodka, it needs a clean?' He saw six bottles on the vanity. 'You drank it all?'

‘I was in pain. I feels much better now. Okay, I saved this one, don’t use it all... Fuck, that really hurts.

‘Sorry, sorry, but it’s definitely stopped bleeding.’

‘Then wrap it up again and leave it alone.’

Joe had a strip of towel in his hand and was dabbing at the wound again. Another piece went on a gauze.

‘An inch further down and this bullet would be in the kidney. That would be bad, really bad. There, all done. And look, I saved you some.’

She took the mini bottle and gave a frosty stare.

‘Did you read this?’ He picked up the journal. ‘What is it? Does it help?’

‘It’s Elder’s journal. Or part of it, there are pages missing. His real name was Elder Stauff, not Routh. And he was an Oberscharführer in the Waffen-SS.’

‘A what, in the what?’

‘Elder was a Sergeant in the military wing of the SS. He served on the Russian Front and did some bad things.’

‘Great, then just give me the highlights.’

She wrapped it up nicely for Joe to understand.

Elder Routh was not who he seemed. There was a secret facility below Auschwitz that no-one knew about. A doctor named Seiglar was involved in a clandestine programme called WolfSpawn, something to do with Patient’s five and Thirty Six, which by coincidence, or not, was the name of a secret Research location in Germany. Elder had been investigating Pharmax, which

had something to do with WolfSpawn, or not. And Helga wasn't Helga, her name was Anna.

'Joe, something obviously went on below the Camp. I think it started before the War, and continues today. And it's got everything to do with this doctor, Manfred Seiglar.

'And what about Doctor Herse?'

'Up to his neck in it. I think he told Elder about you, and that was a set up that cost him his life.'

'It would explain why all the protagonists are old. But why involve me? What have I got to do with this? Who the hell has dumped me in the middle of a seventy year old... conspiracy?'

'All good questions, Joe. But right now I need to clean up and change my clothes. Do some girly things, you know.'

Why's she looking at me like that?

'Oh, you want me to... There were some shops aways back, I'll go get some stuff, supplies. Maybe they have proper bandages. And more jelly beans, most of yours seem to be in the bed.' *That's nice, she's smiling.* 'We're going to sort this out, Issy. We'll get our lives back, I promise. I won't be long.'

Joe had hit the mother-load. Bandages, food, and he'd refuelled the car. His face was probably all over cctv but that couldn't be helped. For now they were fed watered and ready to go.

'The first thing we need to do is get that wound seen to.'

'It's not too bad. I'm fine, honest.'

'You're not fine. Another twenty four hours and that wound could be infected. Doctor first, then we go to Lubben.'

'Joe, I can't walk into a clinic or a hospital with a bullet in me. The staff are duty bound to report it to the Police.'

'The bullet has to be removed. You're going to get ill.'

'Aww Joe, are you concerned? Or frightened of being left alone?'

'I want to make sure you'll be alright.'

Stupid girl, why say that? Why try to hurt his feelings? He means what he says. Leave him alone Issy, he's the only friend you've got.

'Don't you know someone. A doctor, a nurse... a vet?'

'I'm not a horse, Joe.'

'No, but you do know someone? Oh, and followed by a deep sigh. Come on, who just came to mind?'

'There might be someone.'

'Who? Issy, we need to get you help.'

‘Give me the laptop, I’ll have to see if I can find her. She may not even be on the Continent.’ Issy opened the laptop, paused, reluctant fingers opened Firefox and began to tap on the keyboard.

‘Facebook?’

‘Be quiet and let me think.’

‘Elsa Schaff... who’s that? Is she a doctor... is she a vet?’

‘I’m not going to see a vet, now shut up and stop reading over my shoulder.’

‘Elsa Schaff, MD, Red Cross. Wow, Africa, Thailand, Tibet... All those disaster zones, quite a CV.’

‘Yes, she’s a fucking Angel, I know.’ Another sigh, deeper than the last. ‘Oh look, it’s my lucky day. She’s in Ubl’a.’

‘Oobla? Where the hell is Oobla? Is it in Poland?’

‘No, *Ubl’a* is in Eastern Slovakia. And actually, this may not be a bad idea after all.’

‘Really, why? Share. Oh no, it’s another one of your plans isn’t it.’

‘You and I, we need to be out of Poland, yes. And Elsa is in Slovakia, okay. So we cross the border to where no-one is looking for us. And Joe, before you start asking. Elsa and I, we go way back. And that’s all you need to know.’

‘Okay. So how do you suggest we cross a border. My face is all over Polish TV, remember. They’ll have an ASBO, or a BOLO, everyone’s out looking for me.’

‘Joe, I have a plan.’

‘I’m not going to like this am I?’

‘Have I told you I like your hair dyed black?’

‘Several times, yes.’

‘That I like the glasses too?’

‘I got that. The hotel receptionist will have to buy another pair.’ *What’s wrong with him, he won’t stop talking? An hour in the car and I want to shoot him again.* ‘You understand you must remain silent. Don’t even breathe. One sneeze and they’ll shoot us both. Good, okay, get in.’

‘Did I mention I don’t like tight spaces?’

‘Several times, get in.’

‘And you’ve done this before?’

‘Yes, many times. It was my job, remember? I delivered packages.’

‘You mean people?’

‘Yes... once or twice.’

‘In here?’

‘Get in the fucking trunk, Joe. All the way, go on.’

Joe curled into the space where the spare wheel used to be. She pushed his legs down until they hurt.

‘You look like a puppy about to wet itself.’ She said.

‘And you’ve definitely done this before?’

It took a few seconds to re-fit the carpet, and then Isla placed the bags to make the trunk look empty. She gently closed the lid to end Joe's incessant muttering.

'Remember, when I turn the radio on, not a sound. Or we are both screwed.'

The road wound its way around the hill and narrowing between tall trees on either side. As it straightened a green booth and a barrier came into view. A simple pole with a weight at one end, green tape in circles along its length. Three guards that stood between Isla and the border. She turned the radio on; took a deep breath, smiled. Somewhere in her gut a tiny electrical storm brewed. The man they were looking for travelled with a woman. She had a good disguise.

The younger of the three guards waved her to stop.

'Identyfikacja proszę?' He asked. (Identification please). Then beckoned with his fingers. 'Są wy podróżujący jedyny? (Are you travelling alone?)'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand Polish.' Isla lied. 'Do you speak German, or English?'

'What is your reason for crossing the border?' He asked.

'I'm a freelance reporter heading toward the Ukraine border. Hey, you're English is good.' His gaze probed the inside of the car.

'The border is a dangerous place.' He said as he checked her driving licence. 'Miss Geena Schlor.' His eyes met hers. 'You're a German National?'

'Yes.'

‘Anything in the car that shouldn’t be?’

‘No. Is there something wrong officer?’ *Yes, look at me not the car. Hey, I’m smiling at you, and I’m pretty too.*

‘Where have you come from?’

‘I’ve been in Warsaw.’

‘For what reason?’

‘Taking time for myself before the next story. You know, just hanging. I like to party between jobs, let my hair down. Meet nice young men like you.’

‘Please, open the trunk.’

‘Sure.’ *Look at me, I opened my shirt just for you. I’m hot and sexy, and you want me.* ‘You must get so bored out here?’

‘Yes, no. The trunk, please.’

The lid popped at the touch of a button. The guard saw what Issy wanted. A rucksack and a bag, just empty space between.

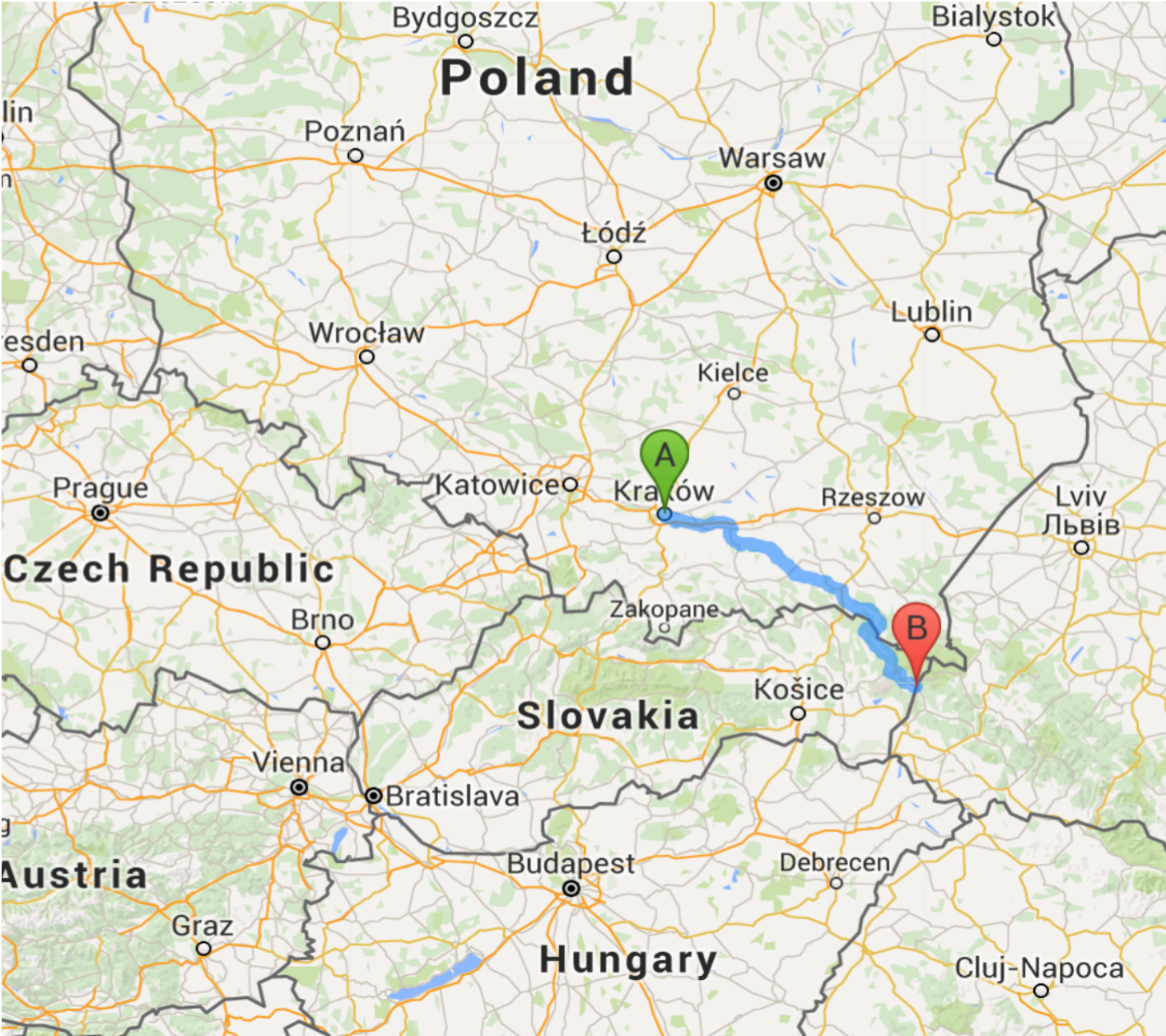
‘Close please.’

‘Hey,’ she whispered, ‘maybe my next story is on border control? What’s your name?’

‘Joule.’

‘You have a nice smile, Joule. And what girl doesn’t like a man in uniform, eh?’ *Yes, you smile at me. Watch my boobies. You see nothing but my boobies.*

Krakow - Ubl'a, Slovakia



Five miles of Slovakian countryside passed outside before Isla found a safe place to pull over. The trunk clicked open and she pulled the carpet aside, all smiles for Joe, still stuck miserably in the foetal position.

‘You see, no problem.’ She said.

‘Did you have to chat for so long?’

‘Do you do anything other than moan? Just give me your hand.’

‘Ah, ahh, no... I’ll do it.’

‘Then come on, we don’t have all day.’

Joe had no idea being on the run was so hard on the spine. He refrained her help to extract himself. Five minutes later the air-con had warmed his body temperature back to normal.

Slovakia was beautiful; a green and pleasant land. The villages they passed through were small but idyllic. A landscape of farmhouses and huts, and distant hillsides. It was green and fertile, and livestock roamed without a care. Then the first checkpoint loomed into view. Passports were studied, the car searched. The first of several military checks. Each one manned with more men and bigger weapons; more suspicion. But no-one in Slovakia had ever heard of Isla, or Joe White.

The closer they drove to the Ukraine border, the more obvious the poverty. The more people they saw camping in the fields and walking by the roadside. A displaced people forced to flee their homes in the Ukraine. Parents trying

to keep their families together, and their children alive. What they had they carried on their backs.

Ten minutes from Ubla the landscape changed. There were dead cattle, hundreds of them in the fields. Animals littering the pastureland. And the number of military personnel rose dramatically with soldiers soliciting the roadside. More and more of them, waiting.

‘What are they waiting for?’ Asked Joe.

‘Orders, I suppose. You see those men.’ That mixed bunch of soldiers, some wearing Parkas and jeans; some with scarfs that only show the eyes. ‘They’re Slovakian para military. The others in combat fatigues, they’re Ukrainian military.’

Most of them close to the flaming bins, Kalashnikovs shouldered or hung by their sides. Men and women who wait for the order to defend their lands.

‘This is where the Russians will come next.’ She added. ‘You can see the smoke between the hills. The conflict is getting very close to the border.’

Two jets ripped through the sky above and headed toward the Ukraine. All along the narrow road refugees stopped to look up. A roar of cheers and hoots from the military. Within seconds they had disappeared back up into the clouds. A moment later the snow began to fall.

‘There must be thousands of displaced people in this area, and more cross every day. It gets worse the further south you go. There’s a war rolling up to our borders, Joe. President Putin wants land and resources, what else can they want. All they have is oil and gas, and when it’s gone... they’re fucked.’

Take a hard look, Joe. These aren't TV pictures from a another continent. This is the country next door. These are my neighbours. This is why people are so frightened. I'm frightened. Someone needs to stop this; put an end to the mass migration of these poor people.'

'Are you saying send them back?'

'They need help and we must give it, but I'm not sure letting so many people settle within our borders is the answer. And before you ask, I don't know what the answer is. We have to get off this road.'

'What's wrong?'

'Look at those soldiers, they wear the orange armband. It's bad news for everyone.'

'Luminsrau? The same as those protesters at Elder's home?'

'Yes, just like your Clara. I told you, they're everywhere now. They are big, Joe. And getting bigger. Everywhere in Europe.' The car accelerated. The windscreen wipers came on as the snow dropped harder onto the screen.

'Luminsrau have grown from a fringe party to a European movement in less than a decade. No-one seems to know who runs it, or how it got so big? Politicians and Euro MPs everywhere wear the armband openly. They want the West to isolate itself from the East. Stop the migration of workers across the borders. They say we are under siege from cheap labour, that it undermines our way of life. Hah, at least we have a way of life, not like those poor bastards. There's a shitload of controversy, Joe. They say that Moscow is deliberately squeezing supplies of energy, that it has nothing to do with

output, just their will to send it down the pipe-lines. And when they bought those islands in the Med? They say it is to intimidate the Middle East.

Reduce the oil and gas even further. Fuck, we rely on Russian energy too much. Luminsrau say it's all a big conspiracy by Moscow.'

'Do you believe that?'

'Sometimes it makes sense, yes. I don't know. Social media is alive with them, Joe. The internet is awash with their symbols. I even heard that M&M's are going to sell bags with only orange sweets in them. How's that for marketing?'

In Berlin last month over four hundred thousand people attended a rally demanding the Government take a firmer stance. They did the same thing in Budapest, and Warsaw. It's going on all over Europe.'

'Ron's always on about this kind of stuff, about the news, I don't really listen. I should do, I get it. But it's not until you see it... it's different up close. I suppose I've never really considered it a problem. And to be fair I do spend most of my time working.'

'The conflict is getting too close for a lot of people, Joe. Half of Europe wants to join Luminsrau. The other half wants them to go away; to appease the Russians and give them whatever they want. People are frightened, Joe. Peaceful demonstrations will turn violent, mark my words. It's like the people of Western Europe just woke up and found themselves under siege.

Fuck, it's been staring them in the face since the Ukraine went into melt-down. Lithuania and Estonia have Russian boots on their streets, "to help

keep the peace.” Latvia is shitting itself because they’ll be the next to *invite* Putin in.

Joe, more people demonstrate against Russia in Europe than go to football matches. I can’t believe you don’t know any of this. Do you walk around with your eyes closed and your fingers in your ears?’

‘Issy, I don’t have a Facebook account. And I don’t see you thumb thumping the keys every five minutes.’

‘Excuse me, I’ve been a bit busy lately. People shoot at me and my first thought isn’t to share it on Twitter. Wake up, Joe.’

‘I told you, all I do is work. I’m a sad Muppet, okay. And you know what, I like it that way. It’s safe and quiet in my own little world.’

‘Fine, okay. But you know the English Channel isn’t very wide if this turns into a shit-storm.’

The road forked ahead with a check point in the distance.

‘Issy, are those tanks up ahead?’

Two tanks, parked. One had its commander watching from the turret hatch. He smoked as he watched the road. Both of the long guns faced the road ahead. He waved Issy to get off the road, there were trucks coming.

More soldiers passed by in canvas covered six wheelers that rumbled by. Joe saw more orange armbands. Tired men who leant against their guns, their bodies moved in tune with the bumpy road below. In the distance he could see a town.

‘That’s Ubla.’ Issy said. ‘The Red Cross camp is about two miles to the west. Look, the road splits, we’ll go right up there.’

Joe just wanted out of the car. To stretch his legs and breath air that wasn’t dry from the heater.

The car left the main road onto what felt like a service track. Behind them the fires blazed and the tanks got smaller, until they disappeared from sight. The snow continued to fall. In the distance they could hear gunfire.

From up on the hill Issy could see the old reddish rooftops of Ubla, and the spire of a medieval church. The road from the town that crossed the border had been fortified with barbed wire and heavy gun emplacements. Tanks hid behind the buildings. This was closer than she wanted to get to a war zone.

The car started a short descent on a slippery road. Ahead was a town made from tents. Ahead a group of soldiers flagged them down. They were directed to a small well used track. Several bumpy miles that led to a church with a flag that fluttered atop its pointy spire. The wind had got up and the wipers struggled to cope with the snow. Marquee sized tents came into view and were gone, and back again. The familiar sign of a red cross on canvas walls.

‘I don’t know if I’m excited or scared.’ Isla said.

‘Let’s get your wound sorted.’ He said. ‘does it still hurt?’

‘No. Funny, but since we got here I can’t feel a thing.’

Soldiers with blue helmets beckoned. Raised hands signalled them to halt.

‘UN troops, here to help keep the peace.’ She said.

Trucks and armoured vehicles, the same creamy white paint-job. UN stencilled for all to see. Soldiers, locals, Peacekeepers worked together to load crates and sacks onto trucks.

‘Show them your passport, Joe. No-one is looking for you here.’

The mention of Elsa's name got directions to park. Fresh faced soldiers in combats and body armour, shouting over the noise of big diesel engines that growled past carrying heavy loads.

'He said she's in the big tent. Come on, this way.'

Issy felt her stomach cramp. She slammed the car door and hid her face from the snow being thrown at her by the wind. It had been a long time since she'd seen Elsa. She hoped for a warm greeting, but couldn't be sure.

They passed fires that burnt in oil drums. Soldiers everywhere, guns close at hand. She knew they were being watched but no-one bothered them as they headed toward the massive tent.

*

A hundred metres from the Church a black SUV pulled off the track and stopped. Its windows tinted. The powerful V12 under the bonnet idled with a steady grrrr. The driver's window powered down.

'Call him.' Said the driver.

Moments later the burly unshaven passenger passed the driver a phone.

'I've found them.' He said. 'They're at a village called Ubl'a. No, I don't know why they're here. Maybe they know someone, Carl is checking now. Yes, we'll keep our distance, the transmitter on their car is working fine. No sir, I'll shadow them until you're ready.'

The phone clicked shut and the driver got out of the car. He was tall, wore a thick padded jacket and cargo pants with buttoned pockets. He was mid forties and ruggedly handsome. A thick scar tailed around his left eye and curled into his cheek.

What are you doing here, Isla? What's so important you've come all the way out here?

Carl stepped out of the car. Held his tablet for the man to see.

'Wolfe, do you know this woman? Her name's...'

'Doctor Elsa Schaff.'

'Yes, how could you know that?'

'The big red crosses give her away. I suppose it was inevitable.'

'Boss?'

Wolfe opened the rear door. Clicked open the suitcase on the back seat. He removed two handguns and passed one to Carl. Then a zippy bag with two small electronic devices. He took one out and a tiny red light began to flash.

'One each for the two vehicles out back, just in case they change cars. I'll chat to the local Militia over there.' Wolfe pulled a plastic package from the case and ripped the top away. A wad of used hundred dollar bills. 'Let's see if we can get some friendly eyes on them.'

Joe was impressed. Inside the small circus tent was a temporary hospital. Thirty beds in three lines, no patients; along both sides ran metal worktops. Every metre sat a tray with medical equipment and towels. He walked the third aisle, its beds were all perfectly made, their pillows still bagged in plastic.

Joe peered through the plastic veils at the far end. Inside he saw two operating tables and all the equipment he would expect. And there were tall glass doored refrigerators well stocked with plasma. This place was ready for action, of the bloody kind.

Voices brought his hand away from the veils. Isla beckoned him behind some boxes stacked five and six high marked **Slovakia** and **Emergency**, below which the words morphine, penicillin, vitamins were stencilled. He noticed two boxes marked **ROX-1** on the floor. A group of women walked into view.

‘That’s her.’ Whispered Isla. ‘The one with dark hair and the laced up boots.’

‘Wow, really... she’s a doctor? Ouch.’

‘Shh, and don’t look at her like that. She’s not some mousey racist bitch in heat.’

‘The other girls are nice as well.’

‘Fine, you can sleep with them.’ Issy was holding her side and grimacing, prying to get a better view.

Is that the pain from the bullet talking, or does someone have a few issues around the five ten, raven haired doctor?

‘Why are we hiding? What’s wrong?’

‘I’m thinking.’

You look ready to turn around and walk out.

Five women sat themselves around a table, each holding a clipboard; they seemed to be comparing notes. Three, all blonde and over forty, wore tabards with the words UN emblazoned front and rear. The other two wore jeans and jumpers, the Red Cross logo stamped on the back. Nurses, he assumed, or maybe aid workers? Probably both.

‘Shall I clear my throat?’ Asked Joe.

‘How about you shut up.’ She scowled.

‘Issy, this is stupid, I’m going out.’

‘No.’ She grabbed his arm. ‘Fuck it.’

Issy knocked three times on one of the crates. All heads turned toward them.

‘Hi Elsa.’ She said, shrugged, stepped into view. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Issy?’ Surprise turned to disbelief. ‘Issy, is that you?’ Elsa turned to her colleagues, gesticulated, and a few seconds later an exodus began. She dropped her clipboard on the table and stared. Then her eyes watered. ‘Issy, is that really you? Oh my God, I thought you were dead?’

Neither moved toward the other.

‘Hi, I’m Joe.’ He crossed the room. ‘Would this be a good time to mention that Issy’s been shot?’ Joe thought it might help break the ice. ‘Just here, in the side. It won’t stop bleeding.’

‘Issy, what happened? Show me.’ Doctor Elsa went gently for the wound. ‘Pull up your top and let me see.’

‘Okay, okay, I can do it myself. I don’t need any help.’

‘Issy, the bullet’s still in there. I need to get it out.’

Elsa lead them beyond the plastic veils; into a space filled with medical supplies and gurneys.

‘Ow, that hurts.’

‘You’re lucky,’ Elsa said, ‘the wound isn’t so deep. By the look of the angle and penetration I’d say the bullet hit something else before it hit you.’

‘So she wasn’t even shot properly.’

‘Come here Joe, I’ll show you how it feels.’ She pulled the Sig and put it on the bed next to her.

‘You carry a gun?’ Asked Elsa as her practised hands pulled the last piece of towel away. ‘I need to put you under and get it out.’

‘No, we haven’t got time. And don’t look at me like that, I said I was sorry.’

The forceps went in again. Joe couldn't take his eyes away. Poking around in the hole with large tweezers was, well, sick. And that's how Joe felt. But he couldn't take his eyes away.

Issy whined again. So Joe told her *she* was being a big baby; and that felt good. Until he threw up in a pan. The gagging noises made Elsa insist that Isla, not laugh so much. That she be still and, 'take it seriously'.

And then Issy asked Joe if he was okay? She was the one with the bullet wound, but she wanted to be sure that Joe was okay. That made him feel good.

The chink of metal on glass made them both pay attention.

'I'll stitch it up for you, so no being stupid for a few days?'

'Are you going to keep it?' Asked Joe. *Can I have it?* 'It's not every day you get shot.'

'Do you want to tell him or shall I?' Said Elsa.

'Tell me? Tell me what... what?'

'It's not the first time I've been shot, Joe.'

'No way. Really? You never said.'

'A few years ago. I don't want to talk about it.'

‘She never does.’ Elsa pulled thread through a big curvy needle. ‘You have to prise information out of her with a bar, or maybe a needle.’ She started to stitch. ‘Sometimes I want to slap her. Is it the same with you, Joe?’

‘Joe, grinning like that makes you look retarded. Ow, I felt that. Seriously, you should give me another jab.’

‘Just sit still. So, are you going to tell me where you’ve been?’ The needle went in again.

‘Ow.’

‘I can put extra stitches in if you want.’

‘I’ll tell you when you’ve finished, okay. Please hurry up, it hurts.’

‘So, Joe doesn’t know this is the second time you’ve been shot. What else haven’t you told him? Does he know you’ve been to prison?’

‘He does now. Ouch... yes, I told him.’

‘Then he must be very special.’

Special... Joe is special? Why is Joe special?

‘He’s an idiot. And it’s his fault people are trying to kill me.’

Err, special idiot if you don’t mind.

‘Don’t worry Joe, Isla tries to deflect her feelings by irritating and alienating people.’

I must be really really special then.

‘So, where have you been for the last two years? And don’t say, here and there.’

'I'm sorry, okay. I am. I needed to get away. Be on my own for a while. I'm a big girl now. I can go if I...'

Ooh, that hurt didn't it. Yeah, the eyes say it all. Getting darker, looking for someone to punch. Can I have a go at stitching?

'Not a word,' Elsa scolded, not a letter... for two years.'

'I'm sorry, okay.'

'You're always sorry. I don't want to hear sorry. I want to hear where, and why?'

'Prison.' Isla snapped. 'It wasn't good to me, okay? I had to, be alone. I needed to find myself.'

'They came looking for you, do you know?'

'Who? Who came looking?'

'Men in suits; they came twice. They wanted to know where you were. They said they were policemen, from Interpol.'

'Interpol? What did you tell them?'

'What could I tell them? I didn't know where you were, remember.'

'I said I was sorry.'

'She says that a lot, Joe. There, you're done. You were lucky, an inch this way or that. It would have been more serious.'

'What did they look like?'

'Who?'

'The men who came to find me.'

‘One was difficult to forget. A tall man with very blue eyes. He had a scar above this eye, right around here. He gave me a card with a number to call.’

‘Do you still have it?’

‘Yes, it’s here in my pocket... oh no, maybe I misplaced it. Of course I haven’t got it, it was two years ago. Fuck it, Issy. Where have you been. I had the worst thoughts. That you might be dead.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You hear that, Joe? She’s sorry again.’

I’m not allowed to be sorry.

‘Elsa, please, don’t.’

‘She’s always sorry after she’s been stupid. I can see by his face, Joe knows. She never stops to think. It’s always about the here and now, and never the consequences of later. It seems nothing has changed; except stupidity holds a gun now.’

‘Little Miss Perfect hasn’t stopped preaching then? It was different when we were at school. Tell Joe, tell him. Tell him how Isla carried you on her back so your school shoes wouldn’t get dirty. And you never complained when Issy put her face where Elsa’s should have been when bad kids make trouble. Who was it who took the blame when they found the books you were stealing from the library?’

‘Can you image, Joe? Little Miss Perfect stealing books. Or me reading them? What were they, that big book with the pictures? Oh yes, The Human Form and Structure? Ow. You said you were done with the needle.’

‘And you said you wanted more anaesthetic. You’ll need a tetanus too? Lie down on your front.’

‘Fine, yes, stick needles in me. But don’t forget to tell Joe that it was you who left me. It was okay when you did it.’

‘Here we go again. For more than a decade now, she blames me and not herself. She cannot take responsibility for her actions.’

Joe was close to calling time. Ending the bickering. He decided to let them carry on a bit longer. It was kinda fun to watch.

‘I always put you first, Elsa. Always held your hand. Who was there for you when you were sad; who made Elsa laugh when she wanted to cry. You see Joe, her problem is... is I love her too much.’

‘Sit up and lift your arms. I’ll put a bandage round you. You scared me, stupid girl. What was I supposed to think? And then you turn up with a bullet wound. And now I want to cry.’

They were hugging. Wet cheeks and hugs. Joe wanted a hug.

‘There, keep it dry and try not to scratch. I will give you painkillers and some more antibiotics to take orally. I don’t suppose you’re staying long. But before you leave I want to know where the hell have you’ve been for the last two years? And since when do you wear wigs?’

Isla pulled the hair from her head and dropped it.

‘Oh Issy, what happened to your hair? Your dreads, gone?’

‘The price of anonymity.’ She said. ‘They itched too much anyway.’ A moments silence. ‘I’m so sorry, Elsa. I had to get away... I had to. I needed time on my own. I should have called, I know. It’s just...’

‘What happened, *sob*, whilst you were in that place. Why wouldn’t you tell me? All I know is what the others said, *sob*, that Kronnsnow was the worst place to go.’

‘It had it’s moments. It doesn’t matter any more. I’ve missed you so much. What’s that needle for?’

‘It’s poison, Issy. I’m going to kill you, *sob*, for not phoning me. It’s a powerful antibiotic. It will stop any infections.’

Their foreheads touched and Elsa’s hands found Isla’s face.

Are they going to kiss each other?

‘Six months after you went, I began to volunteer for every crisis I could find. Just to distract me from thinking about you. About what might have happened.’

‘Err, I’ll go get some fresh air.’ *Give you come catch up time. Decide whether you want to kiss, or punch each other.* ‘Just be outside, won’t be long.’

‘No, Joe, stay. I want to talk to you.’

‘Don’t bother, Elsa. Most of what he says is shit.’

And there she is, my Isla. She’s back.

‘Issy, I want you to lie down and rest. You and I are going to talk, later, okay.’

‘Fine, whatever. I do feel tired. I guess it’s catching up with me. Too much adventure, eh Joe? Shit, I feel really tired.’

‘It’s probably the antibiotic, it’s very strong. Joe, grab Issy a pillow from over there. Thank you. Put your head on this, you need to rest.’

‘Just for an hour then. No more. Promise me, Joe. She’ll let me sleep all night, and we don’t have the time. Things to do, remember?’

‘Sure, just an hour. Issy?’

‘I gave her a sedative, Joe. She’ll sleep for a few hours.’

‘Aww, she won’t like that.’

‘Well I’m not going to tell her, are you? Besides, there are a lot of things that Isla doesn’t like. Talking to you is probably one of them. So you and I are going to have a chat about why I haven’t seen my sister for two years. And why she’s turned up with a gunshot wound?’

‘You guys are sisters?’

‘That’s quite a story.’ Said Elsa.

‘If it wasn’t for Issy, I wouldn’t be telling it. She’s quite a girl.’

‘Yes she is, not that she’ll admit it. Issy has always had a good heart, but she has Demons.’

Elsa offered Joe more tea from the thermos. She’d offered him lunch which came as a sandwich in a box. They left Issy tucked up in bed and headed for the mobile canteen, which looked more like his local Chippy with dozens of plastic tables and chairs. Apparently the cooks were out patrolling the road to Ubla.

‘So what are you going to do, you can’t go to the Police?’ She asked.

‘There’s a doctor named, Herse. Hopefully he can tell us what’s going on.’

‘Joe, can I ask. Are the two of you, you know?’

‘Issy and me? Ha ha ha, no. She’d shoot me just for thinking about it.’

‘It’s just, when I was sewing her up she kept looking at you. Like she wanted you to hold her hand.’

‘I don’t think so. I’m the one whose had his hand held. Its getting embarrassing.’

‘Trust me, Issy likes to wear the trousers.’

‘I’ve noticed. Tell me about her. She’s not exactly an open book.’

‘She wouldn’t like me talking about her past.’

‘Good job you put her to sleep then, and start with why she didn’t mention you were her sister.’

They didn’t look alike, except for the fact they were both attractive. Elsa was dark haired and narrow faced, she had deep brown eyes. Nothing about her suggested she was Issy’s sister.

‘Joe, Issy and I are both orphans. Did she tell you that?’ She seemed reluctant, or maybe mindful of talking about events from their past. ‘Two little girls, frightened little girls. We arrived at our Home in Poland on the same day. I remember we sat in that hallway for an hour, not sharing a word, before the governess opened her door. I was six, and Issy was five.’

I’m not saying the Home was a bad place, but it was hard, very strict. We had to share a bed for ten months before Issy got her own. Two girls who whispered their dreams to each other in the nighttime. Who wiped each others tears.’ She took a deep breath and relaxed back into her plastic chair. ‘We’ve watched out for each other ever since. But back then I needed more watching than Issy. Which is surprising because the other children treated Issy very badly. I’m Polish, Joe. Issy is German. Some of the older members of staff still remembered how it had been in the War. They didn’t hide their feelings very well. Children pick up on these things, and some were even encouraged. It was very difficult for her.’

Joe, I lost count of how many times we ran away together. Ha ha, and we were always getting into trouble. But I suppose the real problems began for

her when I was adopted. I was eleven years old and my new parents were wealthy. I got lucky.'

'So Issy wasn't adopted?'

'No, and that left its mark. She believes that no-one wants her. I wrote to her as often as I could. We still shared our secrets. But when she was fifteen she ran away from the Home and came to find me. What she found was a happy and well adjusted child whose new family loved her dearly. My father reported her to the Ploice who informed the Home. A few hours before they were due to collect her, I packed a bag and told her we should run away together. I meant it, I really did. But Issy, dear sweet Issy, went without me. She left me a note with clear instructions, that I was to work hard at school; that I was to follow my dreams.'

'Are you okay? Can I get you a tissue?'

'No, I'm good. I should remember. Issy needs help and I won't let her down. So, a month later I get a letter to tell me she has found a place. Some new friends too. Her letters say that things are good. Always the letters said she is good. Several times a year we meet, and always she is good. But I never think she is happy. Issy only tells me what she wants me to know.

Apparently she fell from one bad relationship into another. I think one was abusive, but she would never admit it. Tough times led her to make poor decisions... to crossing the line where the law is concerned. You know about Kronnsnow? It wasn't until the trial that I found out the truth. That my little sister was a criminal, and now everyone knew. Joe, I don't know what

happened whilst she was in prison, but she was a different Isla when they let her out.

Wow, it's been a while. I still get emotional.' Elsa walked toward the food tray with the unlit lamps above. 'They have biscuits somewhere, and some kind of cakes that last forever. Are you still hungry?'

'No, I'm fine. I need to know, Elsa. Even if it's just to stop me asking. You know?'

'Yes, I understand. Things must be difficult for you in many ways.' Elsa leant against the counter and a tear rolled down her cheek. 'Issy and I got together many times after prison. But the mischievous, naughty Isla, was very angry now. She wasn't *my Issy* any more. It took a while but I convinced her to come and live with me. I thought the two of us, together again, it would help. But one day I came home and found another letter.

Issy was ashamed, Joe. She felt she had let me down. That she had dragged my life down to the level of hers. Her letter said that she was going away to find herself. And that was two years ago. The next time I see her she's with you, and bad people are trying to kill you. Joe, I'm frightened for her. For you both. Issy has a gun now, and she won't stop until she finds what she's looking for.'

'Yeah, she can be a bit intense.' *Maybe a change of subject would be good here.* 'So what about you? I expected this place to be, busy?'

'Oh we're not open for business yet. We are waiting to be rubber stamped by the Slovakian authorities, the UN, and half a dozen other agencies. I'm

here to help to set things up. And trust me, when the military opens up the border officially, we'll get busy. We have estimates of nearly twelve thousand people over the border there, and more arriving every day.'

'It looks like you're ready to do the job.'

'I hope you're right. There's a lot of refugees not far from here. And we've heard rumours that Russian troops are herding more toward the crossing points. They don't have the supplies to feed them. They're just as keen for the borders to open. I've managed to get four trucks out there and some locals helping; and that's more than we're allowed to do right now.'

'So all these boxes just sit here?'

'For now. There's a whole tent full of care packages from Oxfam. Clothing, blankets, tents. Another is filled with field treatment kits. We get regular shipments that we can't use, not yet.'

'Seriously?'

'It's just the way it is. The Slovaks won't open the border fully without an agreement from Brussels to move the refugees on after they have been fed and watered.'

'That's helpful. I was wondering, are you expecting a lot of pregnant women?'

'No, not especially. Why?'

'ROX-1, you've got crates of it.'

‘That’s the Beta version for older children and adults. We have penicillin for the very young. We expect a lot of viral and parasitic issues to contend with; are you a doctor?’

‘Err, no, not a real one. Its just, I met him; the man who invented the stuff, that’s all.’

‘Medical supplies aren’t our problem, it’s their distribution. It’s feeding people that will tax us. And the irony is that the locals are killing their cattle in protest. They don’t want the refugees to come. They’ve seen what’s happened in other countries.’

‘So there’s not enough food, and the locals kill the cows?’

‘They’re making their point the hard way. The military allow it because they use the carcasses to feed the soldiers. These kind of situations can get very twisted. Can I look at the things you took from the old man’s house.’

‘Yeah, of course.’ Joe put everything on the table.

‘Is this the diary?’

‘You’re welcome to look, but it’s written in German.’

‘I read German.’

Of course you do. ‘Take your time, I’ll be over here.’ Browsing. Maybe I should have been a proper doctor instead of a geneticist?

Joe poked at the empty trays. He found it easy to imagine this place busy. The staff run off their feet behind the long counter. The noise of the cutlery and voices. It reminding him of school dinners. Elsa put the diary back on the table.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know much about the War.’ She said.

‘Issy’s reading it. Maybe it will help us understand what’s going on.’

‘I know a man who can help. His name is Solomon, a friend of my father’s. What he doesn’t know about the War, about the SS in particular... it isn’t worth knowing. He’s an old Jew who survived Bergen Belson as a child. A lovely man. Maybe he can help you find this, Doctor Seiglar? I’ll write down his address and phone number before you leave. Tell him Elsa sent you. He’ll help.’

‘Sounds good. We’ll take help from anyone.’

‘Joe, promise me you’ll watch out for her. You’ll bring her back safe.’

Joe was nodding. The truth was he wanted to stay. Hide out for a while. Do the exact opposite of what Issy intended for them.

‘We’re heading to Germany to see this, Doctor Herse. Maybe he can fill in some of the blanks. We think *he* supplied the information that prompted Elder to come to London, so he’ll know why I’m involved. I know something; I just don’t know what. And it’s all wrapped up with the blood screening, patient five and Elder? Why these people are willing to kill to find me? It’s all up here, in my head... somewhere?’

‘And there was nothing else, just the matching genes?’

‘And proteins too. You’re a doctor, what are the odds?’

‘It’s possible to have a mutant strain passed down in relatives. Maybe there was generation gap or two? Some sort of throw back?’

‘No way. We checked the DNA of all the candidates and they were not related, not even historically. And anyway, that wouldn’t explain how Elder get onto our list? No, someone wanted me involved in all of this. Elder Routh and Amon Tillmach were murdered because of it. As was that poor girl at the hotel, just to frame me.’

‘But why?’

‘Something called WolfSpawn. It connects SS doctors from the War with Pharmax. Everything we have points to their involvement; of Neo-Nazis’. And it all started with a doctor named, Seiglar. And it’s likely to end with a bullet from a bald guy. Elsa, one minute my life is boring, and the next... I’m running around Europe pretending I’m Johnny English. Oh, and then there’s this. A girl gave it me on a bridge at a rally.’

‘This is a Luminsrau pamphlet. You must have seen how many Militia wear the armband out there? You don’t need to have seen as many war zones as I have to recognise the signs. People are angry with the Russians, and with the politicians. It’s going to get worse, Joe. Ten miles from here there is conflict. I’ve heard Russia is sending troops and tanks now as well. So what will happen? Will the UN step in? On one hand Russia offers us friendship, whilst the other extorts us with dwindling energy supplies. Over the border they intimidate us all with their military excesses.’

‘Do you think it will escalate into a war?’

‘Joe, the Ukrainians will tell you that the war has already begun.’

‘And then she hit him with a bag of chips, ha ha ha. That boy howled with vinegar in his eyes. She was so funny, Joe. So feisty, and yet... vulnerable too. Issy was nine years old and all the boys were terrified of her. But it couldn’t stop the whispers, or the snipes. Children can be awful... Oh hey, you’re awake. I was just telling Joe about when we were kids.’

Issy stirred, then stared from her bed. ‘I’m sure he has better things to do.’ She said and meant it.

‘How do you feel?’ Joe asked. ‘Your face is a bit, lopsided.’

‘And my head too. Elsa, what did you put in that injection? And don’t lie to me.’

‘You needed rest, so I gave you some. Besides, I wanted to talk to Joe without you. So you are still driving for a living.’

‘It’s not what you think.’ She forced herself to sit up. Joe eased another pillow behind her back. ‘I work for honest people now. Tell her Joe; we’ve done nothing illegal.’

‘No, it’s true. We are on the run from the Polish Police. We did burgle an old man’s home. Oh, and I was smuggled across the border.’

‘Okay, apart from those things.’

‘You shot someone.’ He added. ‘But if she hadn’t I’d be dead.’

‘Elsa, I had no choice.’

‘I know. Joe’s told me everything. Come here, I want to hug you. Tighter, you silly cow. I’m so glad you’re here, I don’t care about the rest. Issy, I’ve missed you so much.’

‘I wanted to call you, Elsa, I did. But nothing ever goes right; always there is another problem. I wanted things to be... you know, good when I saw you again.’

‘Shh, it’s okay. None of that matters now. All I care about is your safety. And that means you can’t stay here. My nurses are already talking about you. Some of the UN staff are asking questions. And unfortunately we get Polish TV out here. It’s only a matter of time before... you know.’

She handed Isla an envelope.

‘What’s this? She opened it. ‘American dollars? Elsa, where did you get all this money?’

‘Even the Red Cross has expenses.’

‘No Elsa, you’ll get into trouble.’

‘I’ll return it before anyone knows. What’s the point in having a rich papa if I can’t spend his money.’ She closed her hands around Issy’s. ‘Take it. And I have a car out back. If anyone asks I’ll say one of the locals borrowed it. They use our cars all the time.

The SatNav will get you to the regional capital, Kosice; it’s about a hundred kilometres from here. From there you can catch a train to Banska. From Banska you can travel through the Czech Republic directly into Germany. And Issy, I give you permission to shoot anyone who tries to hurt you. Either

of you.’ She put the Sig on Issy’s lap.’ Joe has told me about this, Doctor Herse? Go and find him. Make him tell you about Hut Thirty Six? Then go here, to see my friend, Solomon.’

‘Solomon?’

‘He’s a friend, Issy. I trust him. You can trust him. Take everything you have to him and he will help you to find out what’s going on. Just promise me you’ll stay safe.’

Issy nodded. She held the gun in one hand and the envelope in the other.

‘I’ll go get my keys for you.’

‘She’s great, I like her. And apparently we don’t need passports or Visas.’

‘It’s the Schengen Area, Joe. No internal borders for member countries. No passport or ID is necessary between here and Germany.’

‘You knew that?’

‘Of course I did, it’s one of the reasons we came here. Joe, I needed a doctor and no-one is looking for us in Slovakia. And people are less likely to question a gunshot wound this close to a war zone. But now I’ve put Elsa in danger.’

‘You did the right thing. Elsa understands. But there’s another reason for coming here, isn’t there? I’m not stupid, Issy. You wanted to see Elsa one last time. Just in case we don’t make it.’

‘We’re not dead yet, Joe. But I tell you, if we know about Herse then so do they. They may even be waiting for us.’

‘Then we don’t go. Forget what I said, let’s make a new plan.’

‘Joe, do you want to hang around places like this for the rest of your life? You want to move to Africa, or the Far East? Spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder. Well not me, I’m not running, not any more. I’m going to see this, Doctor Herse, and I’m going to find out what he knows. I’m going to put a stop to this and get my life back. You need to decide whether you want to come with me, or not?’

No... yes. Maybe?

‘Joe?’

‘Wait a minute, I’m thinking.’

‘Oh for fucks sake...’

‘Hey, of course I’m coming. Someone has to look after you. Besides, it’s my fault you’re involved in all of this...’

‘There’s a but coming isn’t there?’

‘But, I need to phone Ron. And don’t argue with me, and don’t tell me I can’t.’

‘I understand. Here, use this.’

‘Where did you...? Did you steal that?’

‘I borrowed it, from one of the nurses we passed. Here, take it. Thirty seconds, no more.’

‘What if he doesn’t answer?’

‘Leave him a message. Tell him... tell him that you love him. Don’t say any more, it will only put him in danger. Thirty seconds, Joe. Not a moment longer.’

‘Pick up your phone... pick up... pick up.’

“Hi, this is Ron. You know what to do. Wait for it... here it comes, beep beep beep.”

‘Hey Ron, it’s me. Just checking in. Wanted to say hi. Tell you, that I miss you. Don’t want you worrying about me, I’m having an adventure. Hey, I’m on the road with a really pretty girl. Things are good. Might be a while till I check in again. And say hi to Becks for me; give her a big hug. I love you Ron, and thank you, for everything.’ Joe ended the call. ‘Fuck, I panicked. What did I say?’

‘What you had to. Here, give me the phone... Joe, you’re shaking.’

‘I’m fine, honest. Err, we’re not alone.’

Unwelcome eyes watched from the far end of the tent. Two nurses hovered and whispered. Probably wondering who Elsa’s new companions were? Why they’d been kept at arms length. They left when Elsa returned.

‘Issy, come home when you’ve dealt with this. I want you home with me. No arguments, okay. And keep that wound clean, no rolling in muddy puddles. You watch out for her, Joe. You understand?’

Her love for Issy lingered in a hug that neither wanted to end. Then a warm embrace for Joe. Elsa kissed him.

‘You see that look she gives me? I think Issy likes you.’

‘Yeah right. She’s threatened to shoot me three times.’

‘Is that all, then she definitely likes you. Here, take these; painkillers and antibiotics for the patient.’ Thrust into his hand. ‘Now go before I start to cry. Go, both of you.

God be with you.’ She whispered.

*

The air was thick with the musky odour of cheap cigarettes as Wolfe and Carl entered. Above them hand hewn timbers shouldered a roughly plastered ceiling. To their right a fire roared high spiky flames in an iron grate. They felt the eyes of the room shift toward them, but the murmur of conversation continued. The people of Ubl’a were used to strangers these days.

Wolfe pulled on a heavy chair and beckoned to the bartender, a barrel chested man in a brown apron. Unshaven and unkempt he brought two glasses and a bottle, it’s label unintelligible. A few locals, all men, gathered at the tables.

Anywhere the locals gathered to drink was a good place to acquire intelligence. A man free with his money would soon find new friends more than willing to talk. Wolfe introduced himself as the new coordinator for the Red Cross. A man keen to understand the challenges faced by the local people. It seemed the local Militia were keenest of all. Before long the orange armbands were raising free drinks to honour Wolfe’s generosity.

Three hours of hard drinking and clever interrogation told Wolfe all he needed to know. Road access, military checkpoints. Local politics was hot gossip. There was no shortage of intel about the attractive new doctor at the Red Cross camp.

‘You’d think they’d let the refugees cross.’ Said Carl. ‘Keep them in one place and keep tabs on them.’

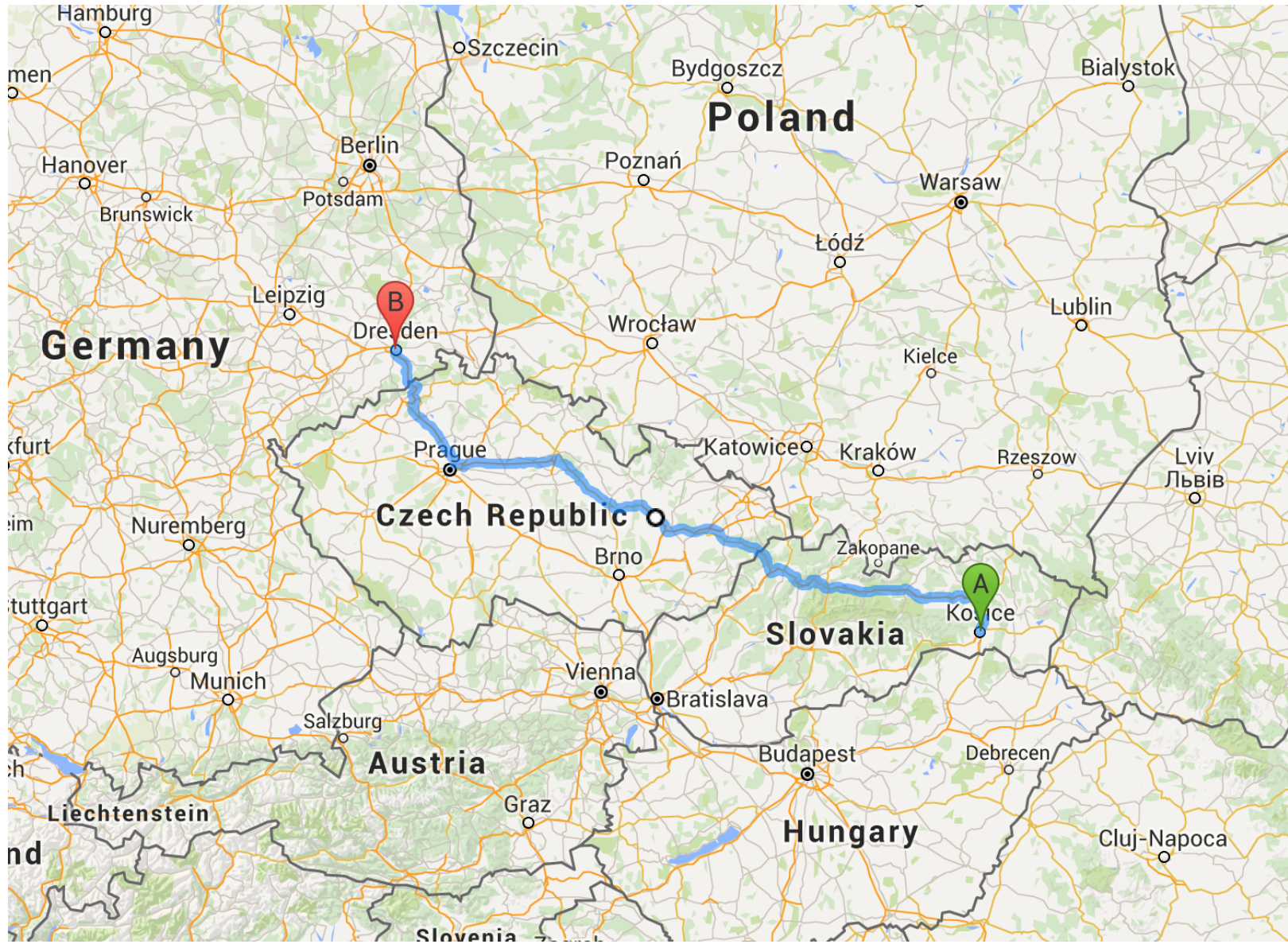
‘Politics.’ Said Wolfe. ‘Slovakia want promises from the UN. No-one will cross the border officially, not until they publicly offer to pick up the tab. Nobody wants to foot the bill. Talking of which, did you notice how the price of the drinks doubled, twice?’

‘I suppose you want me to pay.’ He pulled a handful of notes from his jacket. ‘Why are we out here, Wolfe? What’s so special about this man and the girl? I want to get back to Berlin, have a proper drink that doesn’t strip the skin of my throat.’ Carl clicked his fingers and pointed toward the fire. ‘More kindling?’ He called. ‘Do you want to get back to the camp?’ He asked.

‘No, we’ll wait here. I asked one of the Militia to keep an eye on the doctor for me.’ He placed a hundred dollar bill on the table, one half had been torn away. ‘He’ll want to put this with the other half. If any of the cars move, we’ll know.’ Wolfe lifted a tablet from his bag and switched it on. Three red dots, pin pricks on a map. None of them moved. His size elevens clunked up on the table and he clicked his fingers. This time the bartender brought more wood for the fire.

An hour later one of the dots moved and Wolfe got a text.

Ubla - Banska - Czech Republic - Dresden (Germany)



Issy left Elsa's keys under the driver seat and they walked toward the station. Joe was excited. Apparently life wasn't that bad, not if it involved a train ride. "Hundreds of kilometres of unbridled countryside, and no-one trying to kill us.' He'd said. "I'll be able to sleep with both my eyes closed." Then Joe had wanted the map she'd brought from the station to see the, "exotic cities and idyllic towns."

Now Issy believed him. Joe hadn't lied when he'd said he didn't get out much. But he was right about one thing. They were safe, at least for now. No-one knew where they were or what they intended.

The train lurched forward and pulled slowly away from the platform. A rusty old sign passed by the window. Banska. They were leaving Slovakia. In twenty four hours or so they'd be in Germany where Issy had, old friends. They'd help her, they had to. How else could they uncover the truth about WolfSpawn. It's links with Pharmax. No, she was catching this train to the end of the line; she wanted her life back.

Issy took out the diary and began to read.

Four days ago the German Army began an offensive in the Ardennes, American radio is calling this the “Battle of the Bulge”. Thank God for the radio, we’d all go crazy without it.

Up there, the killing in the Camp goes on. More trains arrive every day. We can hear the locomotives’ whistle as they come and go. It doesn’t take long to empty their freight.

No-one has seen Anna for three days. Doctor Seiglar says she is ill, but I know better. I know their secret now. Why she has been wearing dresses these past few weeks. The pretty gowns have not gone unnoticed by the men. She says she is putting on weight. The men think she has taken ill from the stress.

What I don’t understand is why? Why do they need to be hide it? Anna is old enough, barely. No, there must be another reason? Another one of Seiglar’s secrets. I intend to find out what it is that he does down here. I’m taking notes and copying inventories. It has become a hobby. The only thing I can do to stop myself going mad.

23/12/44

Tonight the doctor gave the men a two day pass to Krakow. He wants no witnesses to what happens next. So why keep me here? Does he suspect I know the truth. More likely he's realised that he needs my help...

24/12/44

Herr Seiglar threatened me, my family, if I were to ever mention what happened last night. As far as I know there is no-one left to threaten, but I will keep his secret. But I won't do it for him. Not for him, I'll keep it for Anna.

Last night I took their new born child to the Polish border. My Polish is poor but arrangements had already been made. I gave their child to an old couple and paid them well.

I will try to speak to Anna. Tell her the child is safe. As safe as any of us can be.

'Oh my God, they had a baby? Joe, Anna and Seiglar, they had a baby.'

Joe wasn't listening. He'd fallen asleep within minutes of the train leaving the station.

'Idiot, this could be important.' *But why keep the child a secret?* 'Joe, you need to... fine, sleep. I do most of the work anyway.'

The next few pages were written by a man caught between his duty, and his conscience. The writing impossible to read at times. Elder's words filled with indecision and fear... alcohol. Constant referrals to Anna and the child. A building obsession to discover the secrets of WolfSpawn.

For the next twenty four hours Issy dozed and read. Each page immersed her deeper into Elder Routh's past.

10/01/1945

The train took most of the day. Seiglar barely spoke on the journey, just fussing over that damn report of his. Whatever's written down in those pages, he intends it to impress. Even when American Typhoons used us for target practise, he was barely aware? He said nothing when we reached the suburbs. There's precious little left of the city, it gets worse towards the centre. I've never felt so sad, and yet Seiglar seemed unconcerned. That such a beautiful city has been reduced to rubble. Barely a roof left intact. Hardly a wall left standing. Three times we had to take cover from the falling bombs between the station and this building. And for what? Now all we do is sit here and wait...

Elder got up, impatience cramping at his legs.

Why come to Berlin just to sit out here? Wherever here is.

A long empty corridor stretched in both directions. Opposite sat a tall stern looking young man who pondered over paperwork. An in-box and out-tray flanked him on the desk; filing cabinets abundant to his rear. His black uniform bore the rank of Hauptmann, a captain in the Allgemeine-SS. The totenkopf symbol, the Death's Head badge, well visible on his cap. Neither man had spoken since the doctor had entered the room with the white door.

Elder walked to the nearest window and looked out. Below him was a large cobbled courtyard that serviced the building all around. Several canvas covered trucks were parked and waiting. A motorcycle with side car occupied by two men of the military police, trundled out through an arch.

In the courtyard's centre a bonfire roared, and looked warming. Soldiers fuelled the flames with a continuous supply of papers from crates.

'What's going on down there?' Elder asked.

'We're burning everything and moving.' The Hauptmann replied.

'Is there anywhere left to go?'

'We are withdrawing until the Fuhrer can rectify the situation in the East.'

'How close are they, do you know?'

'The last I heard, the Reds were advancing across Prussia. Our soldiers in Lower Silesia and Eastern Pomerania will stop them.' He thumped his stamp down onto a document then dropped it into the out-tray.

'They'll have Warsaw within a week.' Elder said. 'Are you sure we have anything left that can stop them?'

The Hauptmann raised his gaze. Stamped another file. 'Be careful what you imply.' He replied. 'It's my duty to report any defeatist attitude or dissent.'

'But what if the worst happens? Can we defend Berlin, before the Fuhrer rectifies the situation?'

'The Volkssturm and the Hitler Youth are preparing the city's defence, but they will not be called upon.'

Old people and children... against the Russian Army. Are you insane?

‘Reichfuhrer Himmler is assembling a new Army Group, VISTA. He will force the Russians back to the Ukraine. I have no doubt of it, have you?’

‘I don’t have opinions.’ Elder answered. ‘I do what I am ordered, no more and no less.’

The Hauptmann rose suddenly from his chair. The white door had opened. His arm jerked upward in salute. Elder pulled down on his tunic and snapped to attention, unsure of why? What followed took his breath away.

Doctor Seiglar walked through the doors. He turned and held out his hand to a short man in a dark uniform. The two men shook hands.

It can't be...

Elder had no doubt. The spectacled officer was the Reichfuhrer, Heinrich Himmler. The Top Dog, SS-Allgemeine; the black shirted administrator of the SS. Logistics, medical services, recruitment... Concentration Camps. Though he exercised no military authority over Waffen-SS personnel; over Elder personally. Himmler was ultimately responsible for paying Elder's wages; not that he'd seen any for some months. A funny looking man with a cast iron stare, that was directed straight at him. Elder straightened his back.

Himmler beckoned the clerk who immediately left his desk. He shook Seiglar's hand again, saluted, and returned to his office. Elder stood easy.

What does Himmler want with Seiglar? And what's in the doctor's new briefcase?

Questions that would have to wait.

'Here are your travel warrants.' The Hauptmann said. 'The Reichfuhrer salutes your loyalty.' As did the Hauptmann, rigidly. Seiglar returned the salute, turned and left.

Elder picked up his weapon and followed.

The journey back was different, more sedate. No menacing air attacks. The doctor was oddly passive. He asked me about my family, and attempted to engage me in small talk. He has never done that before.

What happened in that room with Himmler? What did the Reichfuhrer want with him? I tried to be clever with my conversation, but Seiglar wouldn't be drawn. And what was in that briefcase he clutched on his lap the entire trip. I couldn't help but wonder what it was we were all now involved in.

20/01/45

We can hear the guns now. The Russians are close, less than thirty miles away. They shell the factories continuously and their bombers fly over us toward the Fatherland. We are packing everything up and getting ready to move out. I don't know where yet, but it must be on German soil. There is nowhere else we can go.

In the Camp the prisoners are being marched away. One column after another for three days now. I'm told they are being marched to Germany to be used as labour. It's insane. They are dressed in rags, most have nothing on their feet. They will all die of exposure out there.

I think we will all die when the truth of our crimes is exposed.

21/01/45

If there is one thing that has made this place bearable, it's Anna, that sweet girl. She brought us coffee earlier, from the doctor's private cache. It makes her smile to treat us knowing that Herr Seiglar would be outraged if he found out. She even stayed a while and talked to Otto and me, despite the awful cold outside. She is a kind girl. I've never seen her take a drink. She has never spoken to us without respect. Anna is generous and beautiful. I think she handles this situation better than any of us.

But still, I see how her eyes react when he calls her now. I see her tremble, though she says it is the chill.

The vision of Anna keeps me going. I close my eyes and I see her. She is always in my dreams. So young and still so innocent. In my mind I see her smile as she brushes her golden hair; smiles at me with her gentle blue eyes.

God bless Anna, she is a fragrant rose that should never have been planted down here. Not in this sterile concrete atmosphere. Her voice is a breath of sanity to me. Her presence illuminates my darkness. I think I am in love with my Master's Muse.

The last line had been scribbled over. But the passing of time had faded the ink. Lifting the page to the window light allowed the original words to pry through. Issy felt her eyes flutter, she was tired. But somewhere in these pages were the answers she sought; they had to be.

24/01/45

I hadn't finished shaving when I heard the gunshot. Otto reacted first, out through the door without his boots, and his braces half hitched. I grabbed an MP40 from the hanger and ran to follow. Was it the Russians? Had another one of the men shot himself? I found one of the new recruits outside the Doctor's quarters when I got there.

He looked terrified and kept shaking his head.

'I can't let you in.' Alun said. One hand held his rifle, the other his helmet; it was raised to stop their advance. His face implored Otto not to try and pass.

'What's going on?' Otto demanded. His pistol pointed at the closed door as his free hand pulled his braces over his broad shoulders. 'That was a gunshot. What's happened?'

'The doctor said no-one was to go in.' Hans had appeared, two others were in the short hall behind. 'Stay back, please.'

'If you don't get out of my way...' Otto waved the pistol toward Alun.

'Otto.' Elder lowered his friend's weapon. 'Stand down. Give Alun some space. Otto, that's an order. All of you, back to the bunker. I'll deal with this.'

Elder looked from one face to the next, all were concerned. All were confused. They looked at each other and the tension calmed.

‘Lower your weapons and stand down. Otto, back away from Alun.’

‘If Seiglar’s put a bullet in his head, I want to see it, okay?’ Otto whispered.

‘I’ll take a photo. Now let me deal with this.’

Above Elder the ceiling was vaulted, brick and broken plaster. Below it the men looked twice as tired. But they accepted his authority and one by one they sloped away.

‘It’s okay Alun.’ Elder eased his rifle down. ‘Go with Otto and get some thing to drink, I’ll deal with this.’

Alun was nodding, keen to get away. He was seventeen, fresh faced; probably terrified of the fall-out. If the doctor had died on his watch? Poor bastard, there would be an inquiry.

‘Go on, leave this to me.’

The entrance to Seiglar’s private quarters was solid oak and hung on iron hinges. An old cellar built by the Poles. Elder turned the handle. Watched as Otto pushed everyone away. Then he opened the door and stepped inside. Then wished he hadn’t.

This was the first time Elder had been inside these rooms. This part of the bunker had been the original cellar. Built for the Polish officer's cheese and wine. It seemed Seiglar lived very well in here.

The doctor was obviously an art lover, at least a dozen paintings hung on the walls. And the bed looked comfortable. Silk sheets and satin pillows. A lot of furniture, all old and regal. Looted from Krakow, no doubt.

There was blood on the floor. A trail that led to the only other entry into the room. Elder raised his machine-gun's barrel toward the door and followed the blood trail. He found Seiglar slumped to his knees in a pool of blood.

'Sie war eine schöne deutsche Mädchen.' Seiglar shouted, his voice shaky, tears in his eyes. (She was a beautiful German girl). He'd said. 'Oh God, I can't tell the difference any more.'

Elder raised his weapon. He'd thought the doctor dead. He pushed the door fully open and stepped inside. It took a moment to realise what he'd walked into.

'No.' The MP40 fell to his side. 'No, no, what have you done?'

Seiglar held Anna in his arms.

'What happened?' Elder dropped to his knees and put a finger to her neck. Her skin was still warm, soft; she had no pulse. A Luger was in Seiglar's hand. Blood covered his fingers. 'What have you done?'

‘My duty.’ Seiglar replied.

‘Murdering Anna was your duty. Are you mad?’ Elder yanked back on the gun’s bolt and let the slide snap a bullet into the breach. He raised the barrel toward Seiglar. ‘You bastard.’

The Doctor suddenly transcended the Man. Nazi eyes stared out from behind the tears.

‘She had no papers. She would have been arrested at the first check point. They would have hung her, and us too for helping her. Or should I have left her for the Russians? What do you think they would have done to her Elder... tell me?’

The barrel of the MP40 lowered.

‘Or would you have preferred me to put her up there, in the Camp?’ Seiglar said. ‘To let them march through the snow into Germany? She could not have survived the journey.’

‘She would have had a chance.’

‘And if she did, what then? What then, Oberscharführer? She would have told them everything. About me, my work... about you and your men. The Allies will hang us all as War criminals.

Trust me when I tell you, Elder. They would never stop looking for us. And all of this, it would have been for nothing.’

‘All of what? Why didn’t Anna have any papers? What the fuck are you doing down here?’ The MP40 raised toward Seiglar again. Elder’s finger

yearned to squeeze the trigger. One short burst and it would be over. 'Tell me what is this all about?' Elder demanded.

'Survival, Elder. The survival of our people; of the entire Nordic race. The Russians and the Allies are going to wipe us out, and I'm the only one who can stop them. So lower your weapon, Oberscharführer. Lower it now.

Gather your men, we are leaving. You have three hours. Bring the trucks through the forest and have your men load the remaining equipment and samples. Set charges at the entrance and commandeer some Jews from the Camp. Have them plant bushes, shovel snow, whatever it takes. If you and your men want to survive this war and not be hung for War Crimes, no-one must ever find the entrance. Elder, lower your weapon and do as I say. The survival of the German people is at stake.'

'I should kill you.' The barrel's aim held steady. Then Elder lowered his weapon.

'Good, and Stauff. Don't bother taking the Jews back to the Camp. There must be no witnesses.'

“Ankunft in Dresden Station 2 Minuten...” The statement bellowed through the train’s speakers. “Ankunft in Dresden Station, 2 Minuten.”

Issy stood and watched the station slide by outside.

‘Joe, take a look out the window.’ Issy was moving down the aisle as the train slowed. ‘Pretty impressive huh?’ The doors hissed and she stepped off the train.

Above her the roof loomed in a tribute to Victorian architecture. A green house arched the entire length of the platforms. It was pretty the way the ice glistened on top of the glass.

‘Shit, Dresden is cold. Hey, did you know Dresden is famous for shopping? No-one comes to Dresden without walking the Mile; that’s a fact.’

‘You want to go shopping?’ Joe looked toward the enormous round clock that hung from a girder. ‘It’s Eight thirty at night. It’s dark. Shouldn’t we...’

‘Go buy some bigger coats. Yes, Joe, let’s go find the shops.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Why not? For the first time in days we can at least act like normal people. And normal people go shopping. Come on, I’ll buy you a new hat.’

Outside the station the Prager Straße began. Dresden’s shopping mile, and it was awash with light. Pearls of illumination were strung across the open air from building to building; it spiralled up the poles of the pedestrian

lights. And an avenue of trees twinkled 'welcome' for as far as the eye could see. They bathed the wide precinct in an energetic but ethereal hue.

It was a shopper's paradise. Fancy looking boutiques stretched the Mile on either side. And there was a fountain. Joe like fountains. And numerous versions of Heidi's cabin, their owners busy filling the night air with a sweet and dreamy odour.

'I smell food.' Joe was hungry. 'Can you smell food?'

'How much money did Elsa give us?'

'I don't know,' Joe answered, 'I didn't count it.'

Issy was off into the crowd dragging Joe behind.

'Hey, wait up. Issy, this is emergency funding from the Red Cross?'

A new puffy jacket and a woollen hat and scarf, courtesy of a very nice shop Joe had never heard of. Issy had brought him glasses too. A fashion accessory that she said “makes you look more mature.” He wasn’t sure what that meant.

Issy was blonde again. Hair that was sharp and straight to her shoulders. A fake furry jacket bottomed out at her knees; some woollen leggings covered her slender legs and disappeared into a used pair of thigh length Rocket Dogs that made deep tracks in the snow. Issy seemed happy. And who wouldn’t sit at the wheel of her latest acquisition. Stolen from the long stay car park at the rear of Bahnhof Dresden-Neustadt. Joe assumed that meant train station.

The Audi sat low, the bucket seat hugged at Joe’s extremities. A stainless steel exhaust rasped with excitement above wide rimmed alloys that treated the wet road with contempt. Joe lurched forward in the harness, again.

Issy remarked on the car’s prowess back in the eighties. How the four wheel drive had changed the face of Rally. But Joe was only interested in whether the car produced warm air from the dashboard. It was bloody cold in Dresden. The car accelerated again, banked, cornered, braked hard. And then throttled like a bullet from a gun. How could anyone evoke so many endorphins without breaking the speed limit. He considered being sick but refused to give Isla the satisfaction.

One hour and twelve minutes; total drive time from Dresden to Cottbus. The car's SatNav had suggested the journey would take one hour and forty two. Joe had never seen the countryside pass by so quickly. Or Issy be so generous with her smile. Maybe it was because these were her roads; German roads. Or because the car hit a hundred and fifty without taking a breath. Either way, Cottbus was now in the rear view. The road sign read E36 Lubbenau, Vetschau and Raddusch. The clock in the dashboard glowed 23:23. So whatever she planned to do next would have to wait until morning, and Joe was hoping overnight included a bed in 'Das Premier Inn', and not the back seat of the Audi.

'Can we stop? Please, I need to pee.'

'When we get to Lubben. We'll find a hotel, or a guest house. Look, the SatNav thinks it will take forty minutes. Bet I can get us there in less than thirty. And then we go straight to see this man, Herse. What do you think?'

'I think I want to sleep first.' *And find a chiropractor for my back.* 'If Herse served in the War he must be, what, ninety odd years old? He's not going anywhere.'

'What if he dies before we get there?'

'I think it's unlikely he'll die tonight.'

'What if he refuses to talk?'

'Then you can take him for a drive.'

'What does that mean?' Isla's foot floored the accelerator. 'You mean like this?' She said. 'I love the feel of this car, don't you?'

'You would definitely loosen something out of the old man.' *Thank God, houses in the distance, civilisation.* 'Are we here?'

'We are always *here*, Joe. But according to the Navigation, that is Vetschau you can see.'

'Looks good to me. Let's find a bed for the night.' *Before I wet myself.* 'We can carry on to Lubben in the morning. Pleeeeeease.'

Fifteen minutes later.

'Spreewold is very popular for short holidays, did you know that? No? Oh yes, a lot of people come from Berlin and Saxony to this area. Families come to have fun in the holidays. It's a very beautiful part of Germany.

See the big forest over there. There will be tree parks in there. Lots of places for children to climb and have picnics.'

'It's dark and gloomy.'

'Not in the daylight. Hey, that's a river. I bet they have boats to paddle in. And ducks to feed. It sounds like a lot of fun. I would have loved to come here when I was a kid.'

'Issy, it's wet and minus ten outside. Are you feeling alright?'

'Yeah, sure.'

The clock displayed 00:01. Joe was sick of the dashboard's deathly glow. He'd watched it change minute by minute for the last half an hour. His only desire right now was to sleep in a real bed; one that smelt nice. A sign revealed itself from the dark, illuminated for a few seconds by the car's headlamps.

LUBBEN

lubben Kröniche.

Bitte fahren Sie vorsichtig.

(please drive carefully).

‘Is this it, are we here?’

The road turned and continued on, the first houses appeared to Joe’s left. And street lights ahead that turned the night into dusk.

‘So this is Lubben? Asked Joe. ‘It’s in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Yes, Doctor Herse has picked a great place to lose himself.’

Issy drove slowly up Lindenstrabbe. Past a cafe and a hair salon, some shops. The road circled about on itself and came to a junction and signposts written in German. She continued on across a bridge. Across the river Spree. Issy turned off the main road.

‘Where are we going?’

‘The sign said there was a hotel down here. The Hotel Strandhaus. You’re not the only one who needs to hug a pillow. Maybe the staff can direct us to where we want to go.’

‘In the morning?’

‘Yes, we find him in the morning.’

The hotel resembled a large ski lodge. Numerous sloping roofs and a tall tower that protruded from the snow at its tallest point; the hotel’s name in lights above a glazed entrance.

Reception occupied centre space and behind rose a grand pine staircase that circled around the building’s interior as it rose from floor to floor. Joe

tapped an ornate plunger and an officiously faced middle aged woman emerged from a doorway. Isla shared a few words in her native tongue, smiled, and a few minutes later they had been shown to their room.

‘Issy, we have a balcony.’ He opened the door a crack and stepped out to see a Winter Wonderland. ‘You need to see this. That river is right below us.’ Small row boats were tethered to a short jetty. Snow gleamed in the trees caught in the lights of the hotel. ‘Issy?’

Joe heard the familiar click of the Sig’s slide being pulled. He stepped back inside to Issy sat in a chair facing the door.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Joe, I think someone followed us.’

‘What... that’s not possible. Is it?’

‘I saw headlamps on the road, always the same distance behind us.’

‘It’s a road, Issy. Other cars use it.’

‘Another car pulled into the carpark when we were downstairs. You think someone else arriving at this hour is by chance?’

‘Stop it Issy, we’re in a hotel?’

‘The lady at the desk said we were her first guests for over nearly a week. Now she has two?’

The door knocked.

‘I’m not answering it.’

‘Shhh.’ Issy lifted the Sig to her lips.

‘Room service, Madam.’ A girl’s voice.

‘Just a moment.’ Issy stood the gun pointed at the door. ‘Did you bring lemon with the tea?’

Silence.

‘I’m sorry, Madam. The order was for coffee. I will change it.’

‘No, wait.’ Issy peeked through the spy hole, then opened the door. A teenage girl with a tray stood outside.

‘Danke.’ Isla said. And put a five Euro note in her hand, but held on. ‘You have another visitor tonight?’

‘No Madam. No-one else has arrived.’

‘Okay, thank you.’

The door closed.

‘Can we put the sofa up against the door?’ Asked Joe.

‘Are you sure this is it?’ Joe asked.

‘This is it, The Eidleweiss. Lubben's home for the elderly. It looks very expensive.’

Issy rang the bell, then turned her attention to the carpark.

‘Stop it, no-one knows we’re here. Are you sure you can do this?’ Joe asked.

‘I’ll manage.’

The woman who opened the door was olive skinned and dark haired, in her late fifties. She fluffed at her apron and gave a welcoming smile.

‘Kann ich Ihnen helfen?’ She asked. (Can I help you?)

Isla lifted the flowers they’d brought from the petrol station. ‘Guten Morgen, mein Name ist Greta, und dies ist mein Mann Heinz. Wir sind gekommen, um zu sehen, Herr Herse.’ (Good morning, my name is Greta Schmillen, and this is my husband Heinz. We have come to see Mr Herse.)

‘Arzt Herse? Bitte, kommen Sie herein.’

Issy hadn’t expected to be interrogated but her story held up. One slick lie followed another. She’d forgotten how much fun it was.

‘I’ve been here since Jordi, Herr Herse, first came to us.’ Agna said. ‘I’ve only known him to get one visitor in that time. This is lovely, he’ll be thrilled.’

‘Someone else comes to visit?’ Asked Issy.

‘Yes, the third Tuesday of every month. A most agreeable man.’

‘Does this man have a name?’

‘His name is Jurgen. An old work colleague I believe, but much younger than Jordi. I must say I’m surprised, Jordi has always said he has no relatives.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid Great Uncle Jordi is our family’s dark secret.

I didn’t know he existed until just before my mother passed away, God rest her.’

‘My condolences my dear. It’s very difficult when a parent passes? I’ve lost both parents myself.’

At least you had some.

‘So Jordi was in the army?’ Agna flicked through the photos taken from Elder’s home. ‘He never speaks about his past. Is this his wife, she’s very beautiful?’

‘Mother wouldn’t tell me. If I hadn’t found the pictures, you understand. Uncle Jordi is a bit of a mystery to us. May we see him?’ *You’re fluffing at your apron again. What haven’t you told us?* ‘Is there a problem, Agna?’ Issy asked.

‘You’ve come such a long way. I don’t want you to be disappointed. Poor Jordi, he suffers from dementia. He’s ninety six, did you know that? Sometimes it is difficult for him to stay in the here and now. He can be, difficult. I’ll put these in a vase for him shall I? They’re lovely.’

‘Thank you so much.’

The hallway was long its carpeted floor creaked with age. Agna had said the Home was a fine hotel when its doors had opened back in the eighteen hundreds.

‘Please be patient.’ Agna stopped them outside room eighteen. The numbers for the residents who could be forgetful. ‘The Nurse says he is fully coherent at the moment but you must be prepared, his lucid moments can end without warning. If Jordi becomes excited you must call me, immediately.’

‘Of course. I’m so looking forward to seeing him.’

‘He’ll be thrilled. I’m so glad you’ve come.’

Agna took Isla’s hand in her own and smiled, more a grimace really. ‘Be patient my dear.’ She said, and knocked before opening the door.

‘Hello Jordi, it’s Agna. I’ve got a surprise for you, Your Great Niece has to see you. She’s come all the way from Hamburg. If you need anything, I’ll be back in the office.’

The room had a high ceiling, its walls painted beige. There were simple furnishings in the room, a single bed with a spindled headboard, and a small chest of drawers. A card stood on top next to a vase without any flowers. To her left were a pair of inbuilt cupboards, one half open with two hangers one unused. Issy peered around the door.

An old man sat in his wheelchair staring out of the window. He looked ordinary enough; like any other old man in a Home. His hair was thinned and white, and time had ravaged at his skin; blotchy and wafer thin. Spindly hands rested on the wheelchair's arms. Joe closed the door.

'Say something.' He whispered.

She took a deep breath.

'Hello, Uncle.' It seemed appropriate but received no response. 'We've travelled a long way to see you.'

Jordi Herse wore a gaunt expression. There was no sign that he even realises they were there. His pyjamas were collared and cuffed, the material sharply pressed. They looked expensive. His aged feet were bare, the skin shrink wrapped to the bones. Herse said nothing.

Yes, okay, stop gesturing with your face. I'm working on it.

'We've come to see you, Uncle.'

To talk about your time in the SS?

‘How are you feeling?’

Sleep well with your conscience do you?

‘Can you hear me Uncle Jordi, I’ve come all the way from Munich to see you.’

No response.

I will slap you if you don’t stop it.

Another deep breath.

‘We are family, I’ve come to visit.’

‘Unsinn.’ Herse replied with a terse tone.’ (Bullshit.) The old man turned the wheelchair to face them. ‘I have no family, they were all killed by the Communists during the War. Who are you, Why have you come?’

‘My name is Isla,’ she said, ‘and this is Joe.’

‘What do you want?’

‘To talk, that’s all.’ Isla slowly crossed the room. ‘I want to show you something.’ She opened her bag and Herse instinctively moved his wheelchair away.

‘It’s okay, I only want to show you some photographs.’

Elder’s photos came out and she placed them one next to the other on the window’s wide ledge. ‘Can you tell me if you recognise any of these people?’ She asked.

‘No, should I?’

‘It would help if you looked at them before you answered. And what about this?’ Isla took out the dagger and placed it on Herse’s lap. ‘What do you know about this?’

So you recognise the knife.

‘You must leave, I don’t want visitors. Nurse.... Nur...’

‘Bloody hell Issy, get your hand off his mouth.’

‘So he can get us kicked out, no way. Not until he answers our questions. Are you going to answer our questions, old man? Nod if you understand. Yes, that’s better. I let go and you stay quiet, yes? Or it will be bad for you.’ She tipped her bag forward and showed Herse the Sig. ‘There, you see, we’re getting along already. No shouting now, or the chair goes out of the window with you still attached.’

‘I’m sorry, would you give us a moment.’ Joe pulled Issy to the bedside.

‘He’s like, a hundred and fifty years old,’ he whispered, ‘you can’t manhandle him like that.’

‘Joe, he knows what’s going on. Do I have to remind you that people are trying to kill us? We need answers, and he has them.’

‘We don’t know that for sure. Alright, alright, just don’t hurt him.’

‘Hurt him? Joe, you think I’d hurt a frail old man? Who do you think I am? I’m not going to hurt him. But it may help if he thinks that I will.’ She turned her attention back to Herse. ‘You recognise it don’t you, the dagger. You’ve seen it before.’

‘Who are you? What do you want with me?’

'I'm a Nazi hunter, and I've come for your soul.'

'Fuck off and leave me alone.'

'I expect that's what your victim's said before you butchered them?'

'I worked in an office during the War. I did nothing wrong.'

'Okay, sure, I believe you. Innocent men don't mind answering questions.

Have you seen one of these knives before? Maybe this one in particular? For the tape the accused shakes his head.'

'Issy?'

'Shut up, Joe.' *No, it wasn't the knife was it? What did you see? 'You recognised the name on the hilt, didn't you? 'Yes, that's the reaction I want.*

'Who's Seiglar? Tell me about the owner of that blade.'

'I don't know him. Please, I'm very tired, I want you to leave. Get out.'

'You know the rules. I go when you answer my questions.' Issy stepped around Herse. She feigned a punch behind the old man's head, her eyes implored Joe to play along. She scowled at him and pulled the Sig from her bag. Then put her arms around Jordi. The muzzle tapped at his leg. Joe looked horrified.

'Who's Seiglar?' Issy demanded.

'He's a name from the past.'

'So who was he? A friend? A colleague?'

'Not a friend. Never a friend.'

'So a colleague then?' *You worked together didn't you? 'Jordi, tell me everything you know about Project WolfSpawn.'*

‘Joe, why don’t you go and get some coffee from the machine.’

‘No, I think I’ll stay.’

‘Please,’ Herse implored Joe, ‘You look like a reasonable man, take your girlfriend and leave.’

‘You tell my *girlfriend* what she wants to know, or we go to the Police.’

‘I don’t think they’d care so much. Too much paperwork for them.’

‘And what about the press.’ Joe leaned in close to Jordi. ‘We’ll tell them that an old Nazi is ready to expose the WolfSpawn Programme. From what we’ve experienced lately, I’d say that will get you a bullet in the head. Don’t you think, Issy?’

She nodded. She looked impressed. She put the Sig against the old man’s head.

‘Tell us about WolfSpawn.’ She said.

‘It was such a long time ago, I don’t remember. Why do you want to know?’

‘I ask the questions.’ Tap tap. ‘Tell me everything.’

‘And you will leave?’

‘Yes. You’ll never see us again.’

Herse seemed caught. He was desperate to speak, to make them leave. But frightened of the consequences.

‘It was Himmler’s project.’ he said. ‘I was only involved with logistics.’

‘You mean Heinrich Himmler? What has Himmler got to do with any of this?’

‘Everything.’ Jordi replied and slumped his head back. ‘I try to forget, but *they* won’t let me.’

‘They? Who’s They?’ She asked.

‘He was a very complex man, Himmler. Obsessive, compulsive; a man of enormous energy and focus. A man who dedicated his life to Hitler, to the Party, and to the German people.’

Joe backed off and sat on the bed. Issy took the gun from his lap and sat on the window sill. Suddenly the old man had a lot to say.

‘The world remembers Himmler as a murderer. They consider the SS; Himmler’s beloved SS, as nothing more than a fanatical instrument of terror. But I tell you with pride, that’s not the truth. At least, not all of it. You’re not going to shoot me, girl. So stop this charade and tell me who you really are.’

‘Okay, you’ve got me. We’re writing a book on heroes of the Third Reich. My partner and I are looking for content.’

‘Another lie.’

Issy turned the wheelchair to face her.

‘Tell me what you know. What difference does it make now. The War has been over for three generations.’

‘Easy, Issy. He’s an old man.’

‘If you’re going to get squeamish you’re welcome to leave the room.’

‘You think it’s over?’ Said Jordi. ‘No, it never ended, not for some.’

‘Tell me everything you know.’ *And don’t smile at me like that whilst you do.*

‘The Reichfuhrer was a kind and thoughtful man. A man who loved his family. As I said, a very complex man. On one hand he perpetrated the Final Solution of the Jews, and on the other... he envisioned the survival of the Nordic people. Ask Kleiner. Go on, ask him.’

‘Who’s Kleiner?’ Joe mouthed. ‘Is there someone else here?’

‘Kleiner?’ Herse had raised his voice.

‘Shhh, keep it down old man. Joe, put something in his mouth.’

‘What, no.’

‘Where is Kleiner? He should be here taking notes. I should sack that man. Send him to the Eastern Front. He is never around when needed.’

‘Tell us about Project WolfSpawn.’ Joe insisted. ‘Tell us what it is.’

‘I was not privy to all of the details, you understand? WolfSpawn was a secret initiative. I don’t know it’s purpose. I was a doctor in the SS. My rank was, Oberst. My function in Berlin was to ensure all field units of the Hut Thirty Six programme were kept supplied.

‘Supplied with what?’ Asked Joe.

‘Whatever they required.’

‘Be specific.’

‘Are you familiar with DNA?’

‘I’ve dabbled.’ Said Joe.

‘Then you understand that familiar traits can be found in family lines. Passed down from one generation to the next. DNA fingerprinting they call it now. Identifying relatives and offspring.’

‘In the nineteen forties, I don’t think so.’

‘You asked me to tell you.’

‘Okay, so what were you trying to identify?’

‘I don’t know all the details. But Seiglar spoke often to Himmler about traits. That run through entire sub-species.’

‘What’s he talking about, Joe?’

‘I’m not sure. But tracing DNA inheritance is fairly commonplace these days. Basic ancestry. Following the DNA’s passage through time. But that wasn’t possible back then. You’re lying to us, doctor.’

‘No, no lies. Just a dream.’ Herese wheeled his chair closer to Joe. ‘Look at you, your small mind cannot comprehend. You think too linear, too small. Tell me, what if you could find the source of a particular people? The actual spring from which they swam, what then?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘We lost the war because of a simple phenomena of Nature; that there were more of our enemy than us. A barbaric subspecies of humanity who outbred a more cultured and sophisticated tribe.’

‘The Germans?’

‘The Master Race. Himmler had a dream, one of many. A great mind that foresaw the future of the Germanic peoples.’

‘So what was Himmler trying to achieve with Hut Thirty Six?’

‘Only Seiglar and Himmler knew what the directive was, and what the programme was designed to achieve. Such a long time ago now. But there were others. Other teams, not just Seiglar’s. They were searching for something. I have ears. I would listen. I overheard Seiglar once, talking with Himmler. Talking about the design for a delivery system.’

‘Delivery system for what?’

‘I don’t know. Seiglar would report twice a month to Berlin. To Himmler personally. I heard him say that he had “proved it could be done.”’

‘What? Proved what could be done?’

‘That he could open a window into the world of tomorrow. Give birth to the Reichfuhrer’s vision. Initiate the Fourth Reich, of course.’

‘The Fourth Reich? Well what does that mean? How far could you get with DNA research in the nineteen forties? What were you trying to do? What is this about? Was Seiglar trying to create some kind of... Super Soldier? What? Did I say something funny?’

‘You read too many comics. WolfSpawn was nothing so mundane. It was the future. It is the future...’

‘Hey, easy, sit down. Issy, why has he got up?’

‘Loyalty and courage. I solemnly promise you obedience until death. For the Fuhrer... Seig Heil.’

‘Shit, Issy, stop him.’

‘Seig Heil. Seig He...’

‘That’s it, Doctor Dementia. Sit back down in your wheelchair. Joe, this man is a lunatic.’

‘Issy, you put a blanket over his head?’

‘You said to stop him? Do you want nurse Agna to come in here. For fucks sake, Joe, he’s a madman. Still clinging to the past as if it were yesterday. He talks nothing but shit, and we are listening to it. This was a waste of time. Come on, let’s go.’

‘No, not yet. And get that blanket off him, he’s gone quiet now.’

‘Fine, good, let’s get thrown out because he can’t control himself. They couldn’t control themselves back then either. I should have used a pillow not a blanket.’

‘Doctor... Doctor Herse... can you hear me? Herr Oberst, answer my question.’

‘Joe, what are you doing?’

‘Whatever it was that Seiglar worked on, are you saying it wasn’t possible before the War? Doctor... answer the question, we don’t have much time. The fate of the Reich may depend on what you tell me. Doctor... please answer the question.’ *Have I lost him? Come on Herse, snap out of it.* ‘I have a report to file with the Reichfuhrer. Leave nothing out. The work, are you saying it wasn’t possible before the War?’ *Come on, come on.*

‘No,’ Herse replied, ‘but the raw data from the programme proved it was. That’s all I know. But I was there at the end, in Berlin. I saw them, Himmler

and Seiglar. Himmler was so excited about his research. Berlin lay in rubble and he was excited about Seiglar's work.'

'Excited? Doctor, why were they excited?'

'In a few weeks the Russians would encircle the capital. It would all end. Germany would cease to exist.'

'So you stopped the research, then what? You continued the work later, yes?'

'No. In April nineteen forty five the Hut Thirty Six programme was officially disbanded, the teams dispersed. I was evacuated from Berlin two days before the Russian army encircled the city. I gave the briefcase to Seiglar. Handed it to him myself. Kleiner was there. Ask Kleiner... Kleiner?'

'Shh, he's coming doctor. We've sent for him, he's on his way. Tell us what happened next?'

'Nächste? What happened next? I Saluted the Reichfuhrer and I left Berlin before it was too late. I ran for my life, that's what happened next. A week later 'Silent Help' smuggled me over the border into Switzerland. I was hidden by sympathisers. Good Nazis still loyal to the cause. Three months later they gave me Red Cross papers and I escaped to Spain.'

'Then what?'

'I hated that boat. I was so sick. But I was out; on my way to a new life in Brazil.'

'And Seiglar, did he go with you? Herr Oberst, did you see Doctor Seiglar again?'

‘No... yes. *Yes*. It was five years before I saw him again. He found me. He came to offer me a job.’

‘A job?’

‘Yes. The opportunity to continue the work. Begin where we had left off. I, I need someone... w where’s Kleiner?’

‘Joe, he’s dribbling.’

‘Give me that blanket. Quickly. There, that’s better.’

‘That’s disgusting. What if he dribbles, somewhere else?’

‘Please be quiet, nurse. Herr Oberst, please continue. What work did Seiglar offer you?’

‘I wanted to come home, back to Germany. I was homesick. And I needed the money, badly. Seiglar knew how it was for me; that I wouldn’t say no. A job in the company, doing what I did best.’

‘Company? What company? Tell me its name.’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Did Seiglar run it?’

‘Seiglar is dead.’

‘Dead? Are you sure?’

‘I saw his body. Seiglar is dead.’

‘Are you absolutely sure, doctor?’

‘Who are you? Do I know you?’

‘Okay, so you picked up where you left off, yes, with WolfSpawn?’

‘WolfSpawn... what is WolfSpawn? I don’t know WolfSpawn. I was loyal, you understand. I obeyed my orders. I did my duty.’

No, I see it in your eyes, you think the SS were evil don’t you? The Black Shirts of Terror, that’s what they called us.’

‘No, not evil. They were brave, Herr Doctor. Like you, all heroes of the Reich.’

‘Joe, don’t say that. Don’t talk like that.’

‘Heroes, Herr Doctor. Tell me about the heroes.’

‘Extraordinary Germans, each one an Adonis who did what needed to be done. We were patriots; you understand? Heroes of the Reich, yes. Willing to fight and die for our Fuhrer.’ He grabbed Joe’s arm. Jordi’s grip disturbingly strong. ‘I loved the SS. We were the spearhead, you understand. Leaders of the Volksgemeinschaft. (The people’s community). Social engineering on a National scale. Wie wunderbar es war. (How wonderful it was). Our goal, to tie all Germans into Nazism and its fundamentals. To lift our people to the realisation that they are special. Without equal. At our best when we are great. Long live the Fuhrer.’ Herse tried to stand again, his right arm raised. ‘Seig Heil... Seig Heil.’

‘Doctor Herse, please. You must stay calm and quiet. No, not the blanket... Isla? And what if he suffocates under there?’

‘Joe, what the fuck are you doing? Heroes of the Reich... are you mad? Don’t do this. We should go. If someone comes in they’ll call the police.’

‘He’s all we’ve got, Issy, so I’m not done here. If you’re going to get squeamish you’re welcome to leave the room. Now take off the blanket, please.’

Herr Doctor... hey, Doctor Herse?’ Joe clicked his fingers in front of the old man’s eyes. ‘Why me? Why did you send Elder Routh to find me, Joe White, in London?’

‘White? You are Mr White? You are, Joe White?’

‘Yes, yes, that’s me, Joe White. Tell me why, doctor. Why?’

‘Because *they* told me to.’

‘Who, who are *They*? Who told you to?’

‘*They* did. The one who comes to see me. My friend.’

‘What friend? Who are you talking about?’

‘Friends of the Fatherland, Joe. Do you want to meet them?’

‘Yes, yes, I want to meet them.’

‘Do you love the Fuhrer, Joe, do you?’

‘Err, yes. Of course I do. Heil...’

‘Ha ha ha, you’re a fucking liar. You hate him. But I love him, even now, and with all my heart.’

‘That’s enough, Joe. You listen to me, old man. Let me tell you about your precious Fuhrer.’

‘Issy, don’t. You’re right, let’s go. Come on, leaving now.’

‘Let go of me, Joe. Your *Fuhrer* started a war that killed seventy million people. Six million of them were innocent Jews, women and children, all murdered in Death Camps.’

‘And yet it wasn’t enough because we lost the War. But Hitler was right, wasn’t he? Hitler’s prophecy came true. Russian aggression snatched half of Europe and began the Cold War.’

‘You’re fucking insane.’

‘Am I. Who says so?’

‘History says so. The murder of millions says so.’

‘What do I care for history, it is a matter of perspective. A blur in time where only the greatest men of vision can stand tall. But vision demands sacrifice. It always has.’

‘Not sacrifice. It was plain old murder. Hitler butchered the innocent, and then made the German people complicit. You made us all complicit.’

‘Your girlfriend get’s emotional, Mr White.’

‘I’m not his fucking girlfriend. And you’re a pig.’

‘You weren’t there, you understand nothing. How many millions did Stalin murder before Hitler even came to power? One purge after another against his own people. He made Hitler look like an amateur. So why did no-one take a stand against *him*, against Uncle Joe? Not one country went to war against the Communists for murdering entire sub cultures in the East. Not one government accused Stalin of genocide, or proposed he be tried for crimes against Humanity. What made Stalin a better bed fellow than Hitler? Made a

Communist more acceptable than the National Socialist? What, you don't want to talk any more? Come, let's talk. I feel like talking. Let's raise a glass to the Fuhrer.'

'For what, starting a war?'

'Did we... are you sure? I disagree. On the seventeenth of September nineteen thirty nine Russia invaded Poland from the east. They came in tandem with the German army. We squeezed the Poles in the middle just as Hitler and Stalin had agreed. Russian troops occupied half of Poland, so why didn't France and England declare war on the Reds? Didn't they violated the same treaties?'

On the thirtieth of November that same year, Soviet troops invaded Finland. Who gave a shit about that? June the following year, the Reds invade Estonia, and Latvia. But who gave a damn? Who went to war for any of them? We did, the Germans, that's who. Only Hitler stood up to the Reds. It was *us*, the German people.

No, History only remembers what it wants to. Hitler had no territorial desires in the West, he never did. It was the English and the French who declared war on Germany, for trying to save Europe. For putting a wall between it and the Slavs. You, girl, you are German, yes? You should be proud of your Nordic blood.'

'Don't tell me who I am, I know who I am. And I know what *you* are.'

'You should be proud that we took the fight to the Slavs. That we took on the Jews.'

‘I don’t think so. You polluted our culture, our heritage. My heritage. You made us ashamed to be German.’

‘To the victor goes the spoils, I suppose. And the right to edit history. But Hitler did what was necessary to safeguard Germany and Europe, from the Slavs. But let’s not get sentimental.’

Herse grabbed Isla and pulled her close. A sudden lucidity stirred within the old man.

‘When the Russians conquered Germany who helped the innocent then? The German women who were raped en-masse by Communist cocks. The little girls who were treated like common whores? Only the old and the very young were spared; but most were forced to watch. Children as young as twelve and thirteen flung across tables for the pleasure of Stalin’s Red Pigs. Where were the noble English and their American allies, huh? Turning their heads, that’s where. Not their problem. They didn’t want to get involved. And why? Because the Communists frightened them.’

Do either of you know how many women and children committed suicide because they were defiled, again and again; because they couldn’t bare the pain or the shame? Tens of thousands. Yes, little girl... tens of thousands.

And where was the help for your precious little Jew when Germany was defeated? Not one nation reached out a hand to help them. To invite the displaced Jew into their homes. Not one voice stood for the Jew to be placed alone, as victims. They were just piled in amongst the rest. The Camp survivors classed as refugees and nothing more. Why? Because no-one cared.

Hypocrites and liars all of you. But Hitler never lied. He took the German people into a war of annihilation. To destroy the Communist and the Jew before they could destroy Germany and the Nordic West. And he was right to do it. And I would do it again. If only I was young enough to be there when it begins again.’ He released her and slumped back, the strain clear on his face. ‘Are you so blind that you cannot see what is happening in the Ukraine. In the Baltic States. How our Eastern European friends subtly shift their allegiance. The Greeks have already sold us out. And there will be more who want Russian guns to face the other way. Look how the Slav’s hold us to ransom with their precious energy reserves. How they use them to bend us to our knees.

Look at you, you still don’t understand? It is nature’s way. Some say its flaw. The strong will always try to dominate the weak. And we are weak.’

‘You’re wrong.’ Said Isla.

‘Am I? Hitler understood; he knew it was only a matter of time. And now our time is up. I thank God that I will not live to see the end of the struggle. Ha ha, ha ha ha...’

‘What the fuck is wrong with him? Why’s he laughing?’

‘Because we are fucked. Vladimir Putin is a dog, and Europe is his bone. He’s toying with us. But sooner or later a dog wants to eat, and he doesn’t bother to chew his meals. Look outside. Can’t you see? Berlin smoulders in rubble. The Reds are coming; they are coming and there’s not a damn thing

we can do to stop them. Kleiner? Wir haben zu verlassen. (We have to leave).
Kleiner?.

‘Hey hey, not so fast. WolfSpawn, Herr Oberst... tell me what is it?’

‘Forget it, Joe. I’ve heard enough, let’s go.’

‘Kleiner?.’

‘Yes, yes, I’m here. Seig Heil, Herr Doctor. Tell me about WolfSpawn.’

‘Take your hands off me, you’re not Kleiner.’

‘WolfSpawn? Herr Doctor, you tell me about WolfSpawn?’

‘WolfSpawn... you don’t know?’

‘No, not the details. Shh, shh, stay calm. Talk Jordi; what is it that will make the German people great again? Make the Master Race rise up again. Come on, you’ve got lots to say, remember. Tell me about WolfSpawn. About the glorious research. Hey, up here.’ Click, click. ‘Look at me. What are we talking about, some sort of breeding program? Cloning? What?’

‘Breeding? No, not breeding... not Super Soldiers, not clones. Your mind thinks like a child. So small, so linear... so lacking in imagination.

‘He’s laughing again. D’you want to share the joke, Jordi?’

‘You cannot see what is right in front of your face. Neither of you can. Ha ha ha...’

Isla grabbed Herse by his dressing gown. She forced the wheelchair against the wall. ‘I don’t think this is a joke. Now you talk, you bastard. What’s this all about? What’s so important that three people are murdered?’

‘Only three? I would kill ten, a thousand, a hundred thousand. And we will.’

‘What does that mean?’ Herse’s collar tightened in her hands. ‘Talk you bastard.’

‘Issy, that’s not going to help. Let go of him.’

‘Why? This Nazi pig is laughing at us.’

‘Isla... he’s an old man.’

‘So was Elder Routh, and the Professor. I should squeeze the life from him. You talk now, and fast...’

‘Isla, stop it. For Christ sake, he could have a heart attack. Let, go of, him.’

‘Stay out of this, Joe. Seventy years, it’s taken seventy years for my country to shake off what these people did. To leave their filthy shadow behind. We don’t feel ashamed anymore; you hear me old man. We’re not ashamed, not any more.’

‘Issy, stop it. Let, go, of him.’

‘Get off me. Do you think his age exonerates his crimes? He’s a sick bastard, Joe. They should hang him for whatever he’s done. He deserves to know he’s going to die, alone and a failure. Go on old man, die. Maybe I help you along.’

‘Issy, stop it. Aw no, look... look.’

A red light flashed above the door.

‘Bastard, that’s a panic alarm. Where is it? Show me. Where are you hiding it?’

‘Issy, I can hear people coming. Back off. Get away from him. Issy...’

‘One word you pig. One word and I call the Police and you go to prison.’

The door opened and Agna entered. Concern etched in her features.

‘Doctor Herse? Mr and Mrs Schmillen? The alarm went off, is there a problem?’

Isla was sat in the chair, Joe on the edge of the bed. Both did their best to look surprised.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Issy said. ‘I must have set it off when I tucked the blanket around Uncle Jordi. I’m so silly at times.’

Agna seemed relieved. ‘Don’t worry, it happens at least once a day here.’ She took Herse’s hand. ‘Jordi, are you feeling okay? Any pain or discomfort? Let me check your pulse.’ Herse gave a grunt which satisfied Agna as she took his wrist in her hand. ‘I hope Jordi is behaving himself?’

‘He’s been great. Very talkative.’ Said Joe.

‘Good good. Jordi your heart rate is elevated. Maybe you should take your pills a little early. Would you get the box from his drawer, dear.’

‘Ask them to leave.’ Herse said.

‘Don’t be rude, they’ve come a long way to see you. Let’s sit you up properly.’

‘No, *cough cough*, find Kleiner. Where’s Kleiner?’

‘Kleiner is not with you anymore, don’t you remember?’

‘Who’s Kleiner?’ Asked Joe.

‘Where’s Kleiner? Find me Kleiner.’

Another nurse entered. Much younger than Agna she wore a different uniform. Joe's gaze followed her. The old man became more unsettled and resistant toward the attention. Agna insisted he took the water and pills she offered.

'I don't want them. Find Kleiner.' He insisted.

'I'm so sorry, I did warn you. Perhaps you should leave and let us get him settled. Jordi becomes emotional. The past returns too vividly for him. He's begun to spend less time in the here and now. I'm afraid it will only get worse.'

'What exactly is wrong with him?'

'I told you, Mrs White, Jordi has dementia. The truth is I didn't think you'd stay for very long. Or if you'd come back. He only gets one visitor, once a month. But the gentleman stopped coming a few months back. I don't know why.'

'Who's Kleiner?' Joe asked again.

'When Jordi gets angry or unsettled, he calls for Kleiner. Someone important from his past?' Herse finally took his pills and Agna placed a blanket over his shoulders. 'Are these your photographs on the window sill.' She asked. 'Did he recognise anyone?'

'Tell me about the man who visits?' Issy asked.

'Just let me put him by the window. Jordi likes the view.'

'What does he look like?'

‘He’s a nice man. Tall, blonde, mid to late forties. Ruggedly handsome, I suppose.’

Issy rolled her eyes. Joe smiled. Agna was obviously taken by Herse’s lone visitor. Both of them were shocked by what she said next.

‘I told you.’ Joe sounded triumphant. ‘You heard her. Uncle Festor’s visitor, a big bloke with a scar around his left eye. It’s the man from the Debnicki bridge, has to be.’

The car door slammed. Isla was angry, again.

‘We have a name, Wolfe. I was saved by a Wolfe. What? I didn’t just imagine him. Is something wrong?’

‘Yes, everything. We can’t be sure anything that man said wasn’t a part of his fantasies. You heard the nurse, he has dementia.’

‘Well I believed him. What he said... he seemed pretty convincing to me.’

‘What he said? Let’s talk about what you said. Why would you say such things? You talk about the Nazis as if every German was one.’

‘What, no I didn’t... I didn’t mean to. Wait a minute, don’t get arsy with me; I was trying to get him talking. That is why we came here. And for the record, there is such a thing as *collective guilt*. I mean, think about it.’

‘Yes, okay, I thought about it. Go fuck yourself.’

‘What... why? What did I say?’

‘Don’t damage your brain by thinking too much. And don’t empathise for fuck’s sake.’

‘Issy?’

‘Shut up, Joe. Just shut up.’

Take a breathe Issy. He's too stupid to understand. Too male to have any feeling above his groin.

The engine roared into life. Joe lurched back, his fingers grappling for the seat belt.

'Not every German raised their hand in a Nazi salute. Screw you, I wasn't even alive when that man was helping to murder half of Europe. And yet we are all the same. Not all Germans were Nazis... are Nazis.'

'Have I done something wrong?'

'What part of *shut up* didn't you understand?'

Well done Joe, you've managed to elevate her to an even higher level of pissed off. Talk to her... no, wait for her to talk. Fuck it.

'I think Herse knows more than he said.' Joe said.

'Of course he does. That man's kept secrets for so long it's all a jumble in his head now. Oh, and how was the young nurse, attractive? You didn't take your eyes off her boobs. If you had you would have seen the card on the shelf.'

'The birthday card? I saw it. Here's hoping he had a very unhappy Nazi birthday.'

'Look inside my bag.'

'Why?'

'Just look.'

Joe leaned back to the rear seat. 'Why are you always so angry with me?' He pulled her bag onto his lap. 'Whatever I said, I didn't... you stole his birthday card? Why would you steal his birthday card?'

'Tell me what do you see?'

'A tall building. Lots of shops below. Who sends a birthday card with a building on the front?'

'I meant open inside. Look inside.'

'Happy Birthday, alter Freund. So what?'

'Happy birthday old friend. Now look at the name; it's signed, MF? And look at the postmark on the envelope, that's a suburb of Berlin.'

'Okay, so who's MF? The Wolf-man with the scar?'

'I don't know. You can look him up on the internet. Maybe this man, Solomon, he can help us to find him?'

'Elsa said he's the font of all knowledge where the SS are concerned. Issy, how can anything from the War be so important now? It was seventy years ago. And what the hell has it got to do with me?'

'I don't know, but we're getting closer, Joe. I can feel it. Maybe we missed something, or maybe we still have it to find, I don't know. But we're getting close. Sit back, enjoy the ride. And don't talk.'

'We're going to Berlin.'

Joe didn't do clubbing and this was why. The further inside they ventured the more physical the sound became, the more ominous the light in the dark passage. More and more people crowding its limited space. The more oppressive the heat.

'I can't hear myself think.' He shouted.

When he followed Issy through the curtain at the end Joe's senses ignited like kerosene. Screaming lights attacked the walls as if trying to break out; several thousand people were caught in their backlash. All desperate to escape the pump and pulse of sound waves that were attempting to wobble Joe's brain. No, wait, they were all dancing.

'It's like Asda on Black Friday.' He shouted. 'With the lights off.' Why couldn't she hear him they were only three feet apart. 'This place is huge.' Issy had hold of his hand and was dragging him again. This time through bumping and bopping bodies, the majority of whom had curves in all the right places. 'Hey, I've never been anywhere like this. We should get a drink.'

'You can party later, we have people to talk to.'

'Oh, so now you can hear me.' A woman tried to pull him the other way. 'Hi, my name's Joe.' Issy pulled harder. 'I think they like me.'

The arena was cavernous. It's centre a seething mass of sweat and motion as hundreds of revellers did their thing. At the far end he could see a high stage, and a DJ who wore the world's biggest headphones. He jumped up and

down but never let go of his Decks. All about them a wild beat of music hammered on Joe's ears as the lighting streamed, bounced, and gyrated. This was so cool. Above Joe a series of metal cat walks, and girls who danced around long shiny poles. Scantly clad seemed a prerequisite of their admission.

'Can we stay here for a while?' He shouted.

'Yes, I'll get you a beer.'

'Really?'

She yanked his arm and he followed double time.

'That's no to a beer then.'

Knowing they weren't staying just made the dancing through an annoyance. One bump after another as Issy dragged him through the chaos. Where was she taking him?

At the side of the hangar sized arena they ascended a flight of stairs, clanked along a gangway. Girls smiled and one blew Joe a kiss. At its end was a carpeted area where three big men in suits sat drinking with four pretty women in shiny sleek dresses. Behind them a single door painted orange. To his right another brute of an individual leant against a hand rail, his back to a view that spanned the entire dance floor below. The closer they got the more uncomfortable Joe felt. Though suited and booted the men who got up to play interference were heavily tattooed on their hands and necks

'Issy, what kind of people have we come to see?'

‘I told you, they used to be friends. They can help us.’ She let go of his wrist. ‘For a start we need to get you a gun.’

‘A gun?’

‘Yes, we need more firepower.’

‘I don’t want a gun.’

‘Shut up and listen to me. When we’re inside don’t say a word. These are people you don’t want to upset, you understand? Now come on, lets go say hi.’

Joe didn’t want to. He preferred to go downstairs as two of the men got up. Big solid mean looking men. The one who hadn’t shaved for a few days put a hand up to stop them.

‘Isla?’ He said. ‘Isla, ist dass Sie?’ (Isla, is that you?).

‘Hey Barney, long time no see.’

‘Ja, it’s good to see you. What are you doing here? Oh, nein, you don’t want to see the Boss?’

Issy nodded and smiled, but she wasn’t fooling anyone. Joe saw it, and so did Barney.

‘I’m not sure we should be here.’ Said Joe.

‘Maybe you should listen to your friend.’ Added Barney.

‘Can we go in?’ Asked Issy.

‘No, he has business inside. You know he won’t be happy to see you.’

‘He won’t? Why won’t he?’

‘Shut up Joe. Hey. your English is improving. It’s good to see you.’

‘Ja, it’s goot to see you too.’

‘Little skinny Isla, is that you?’ A third man got to his feet. Six foot three, a heavyweight with a Rottweiler face.

‘Hi Klaus. Have you lost weight?’

‘Ya, more than three stone; do I look good?’

‘You always looked good, you know that.’

‘Well it’s good to see you.’ He gave her a hug. ‘Wer ist dein Freund? (Who’s your friend?)’

‘Long story. You’d be asleep by the time I finished.’

What does that mean? And why does everyone look like they want to beat me up?

‘It’s good to see you little Isla. How long’s it been? Where have you been?’

‘Oh you know, here and there.’

‘Hey, it was shit what they did to you. You know, Kronnsnow? The boys wanted to help, but the Boss... You look really good. Issy, you don’t want to be here. Renny doesn’t forget.’

‘I know. I still practise what you taught me.’ She feigned a few punches and moves, and he returned the compliment. Joe had no doubt this man had been in the Ring.

‘What’s this? Why are you all wearing them?’

‘Yeah, Luminsrau, we’re all signed up now.’

‘You don’t look very happy about it.’

‘The Bosses orders. But it’s not such a bad thing. What about you, skinny girl. Don’t tell me you’re married to him? Got any kids?’

‘Seriously, kids. Who’d let me near children. No, I’ve come to see Reinhardt.’

‘Ja, maybe we should get a drink and talk about that.’

‘Issy, can I have a word.’ A loud one as the volume showed no sign of abating. ‘Why don’t they want you to see Reinhardt? What did you do?’

Isla ignored him and stared into the camera above the door.

‘Who’s in there, anyone I know?’

‘Isla, I don’t know half the people the Boss deals with these days. We don’t ask, we just do. You do know he’s still pissed off with you. Are you sure you want to go in?’

‘Unless you want to help us, Klaus?’

‘We don’t do freelance, you know that.’

‘Sure, that’s okay. I understand.’

‘And you know we have to...’

‘Sure. Joe, put your arms in the air they have to search us.’

Klaus leaned in, paused as he put his finger to his ear. He backed off before he could search them.

‘He’s seen you. You’re to go right in. Him too.’

‘Hey skinny, good luck in there.’

‘Thanks Barney. Hey, love you guys, okay.’

It was four years since Issy had seen Reinhardt Gruun. Prodigal son and heir to the Gruun family business. Organised crime that stretched from Berlin into Eastern Europe. Tiny hairs rose across her body as the years rolled back. Issy led the way as she entered Reinhardt's private sanctuary.

His office hadn't changed. Red walls and an entire wall of glass. A single door that led into Renny's private playroom. A place she had never seen. Had never wanted to see. Her skin rippled with disgust for the man who sat and stared at them.

'Renny, it's good to see you.' She lied. 'How's business?'

No answer.

Reinhardt hadn't changed. He'd maybe put on some weight. She'd been seventeen the first time they'd met. The man in the crisp expensive suits, he'd flirted with her instantly. Tried relentlessly to get her into his playroom. But she'd been warned. All Isla wanted was a job, not a middle aged man venting his sexual frustration on top of her.

There was always something unsettling about the man. His hair was raven black, short, badly cut around his head. As if his mother had been drunk with the scissors as a child and it had never grown back. What she hated most about his appearance were those lips; that most women would pump the collagen to emulate.

'I see you've painted the front door.' She said. *And you're using gel to spike your hair. How... preserving of you.*

Behind him was The Wall. She'd always liked the glass. A bullet proof window to see out across the Club. From the outside it looked like a wall. Inside it was Renny's window to watch the action below. He'd send Barney, or one of the others, to invite the hot ones up for a drink. And anything else he could get. And he mostly got what he wanted.

Those stupid enough to accept, who didn't put it on a plate for him, they often gave it up anyway. Reinhardt could be a violent man when he didn't get his way.

Okay, this is weird, Renny is too quite.

'Who are your friends?' She asked.

Two girls, minimal clothing that stretched their ample curves and contours. Reinhardt's usual type; big boobs and no personality. But nice sparkly dresses. All three sat together on a big circular couch in front of the Wall. One girl draped on either side of the mid life crisis parked in the middle. Reinhardt's arms outstretched, one for each of them. How altruistic of him.

Why isn't he shouting at me? And why are there four glasses on the table, but only three pairs of lips in the room?

A chair had been pulled over, so whoever the glass belonged to had left the party. And they hadn't come out the front. Who was missing? Klaus had said he was doing business, she assumed it wasn't with Cindy and Barbie.

Typical Renny; he liked his girls two at a time. He also liked the sound of his own voice, so why didn't he say something? This was a powerful man; a mobster who spoke his mind.

'You're pleased to see me, I can tell.' She said.

'You shouldn't have come, Isla. You know I have a long memory. Girls, give us a few minutes, it's business. I'll send Barney to find you when I'm done.' He stood and the disgruntled girls left the room. 'Please.' He said. 'Take a seat, let's talk.'

He said please? Now I know there's something going on.

'What shall we talk about? How you let me go to prison without lifting a finger to help me?'

'You went freelance. You know you can't do that.'

'He was my boyfriend, and I didn't know what he was doing. That's hardly freelance.'

'So you say. What were you doing with him anyway? You know the rules.'

'I worked two years doing your shit for you. Running your *goods* all over the city. I never let you down. Why didn't you help me?'

'Do I look like the Good Samaritan?' His manner lifted. He even raised a smile for Issy. 'Let's leave the past behind us, come on. I'm pleased to see you, Issy. Tell me, what brings you here to my Club?'

That's it... you have nothing else to say?

Issy moved toward the Wall. A tiny camera in a glass bowl above the inner door followed her movement. She could just make it out behind the dark glass.

Is someone in the other room watching us. Who... why?

‘You haven’t introduced me to your boyfriend.’

‘He’s not my boyfriend. I want to buy some guns.’ She said staring at the energy and movement below. Not a sound through the glass. ‘I have money.’ She added.

‘Guns? Now you have my attention. What does little Isla want with guns, I wonder.’

This is wrong, we shouldn’t have come here.

‘I can help you with guns.’ Renny said. ‘Sure, anything in particular? Revolver or automatic? We had some Walther's come in recently. Or maybe something more bad ass? What about your friend, he’s a quiet one. What kind of gun does Joe want?’

Joe? How the fuck do you know his name?

‘You’ve been very busy Isla. You’re a person of interest in Poland; wanted for murder. Isla, Isla, I didn’t have you down for that sort of shit. I’m impressed. This is some bad ass shit you’ve got yourself into. Should I be worried that you’re in my Club? Am I in danger here?’ He was mocking her, why? ‘Tell me, what do you want guns for? Who are you going to kill?’

‘How about a drink at the bar first? I’ll come back in an hour, hows that? Come on Joe. I’ll buy you that beer.’

Reinhardt stood between Issy and the door.

‘Have a drink up here with me. How about some food, I can get something sent up.’

The door opened. The man she’d last seen leaning against the railing came in. He was young, mean looking, and had a mercenary aloofness that Issy had seen too much of recently.

‘My guests are staying for a while.’ Reinhardt said. ‘Don’t look so nervous, Isla. Please, make yourselves at home. I have a call to make, I won’t be long.’ Renny went into his playroom and closed the door behind.

‘This is wrong, Joe.’ She whispered. ‘I have a very uncomfortable feeling about this.’

‘You said they were your friends. Reinhardt looks happy enough to see you.’

‘And that’s the problem. I don’t have friends, Joe, not any more. Especially not Reinhardt. He should be angry with me.’

‘But you said...’

‘That he’d do business.’ Issy walked back to the Wall. Below her the lighting was frantic; a sea of energy from the moving bodies. Not a sound found its way into the office. ‘No-one goes freelance Joe, and Renny doesn’t forget. Damn it, he should be pissed off with me. And there’s something else too.’

‘There’s always something else. What now?’

‘Four glasses and a moving camera.’

‘Oh right, of course. How do I miss these things?’

‘We have to go, Joe.’

‘Yeah, I think GI Joe is at the door to stop that.’

‘But he’s not at *that* door, is he?’

‘Hey, wo gehst du hin?’ Shouted GI. (Hey, where are you going?)

Issy was too quick as she burst into Reinhardt’s playroom. Then wished to God that she hadn’t.

It wasn't the silk dressed bed or the burnt orange paint job and white fluffy carpet. Not even the mirrors on the ceiling and the wall to her right. Issy didn't notice the bar in the far corner. It was the man sat on the sofa talking into his phone that snapped shut as she entered.

Baldy raised a hand and the two men with weapons raised, stopped their advance. Both were middle aged, one blonde, good looking. The other unshaven, his eyes dark and aggressive. The speed at which they'd drawn their weapons was impressive. Ice cold stares, only Reinhardt had showed any sign of fear at the sudden intrusion.

'Shit... shit.' Issy backed away, turned, saw the barrel of GI's Glock pointed at the back of Joe's head.

Baldy stood. He seemed almost pleased to see her. He removed his glasses and pocketed his phone. For a moment Renny had looked as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't.

'Shit. Who the fuck are you?' She demanded. 'What do you want with us?'

'Mr White,' Baldy said, 'what a pleasant surprise. Please, take a seat.' Baldy nodded to GI, who lowered his weapon. He took Joe's arm and ushered him to a chair. 'This is a wonderful coincidence. And you've brought your girlfriend.'

'I'm not his girlfriend. What's going on, Renny? Since when do the Gruuns get involved with Nazis'? Oh, you don't know do you? Why don't you ask your new friend who he works for?'

Baldy nodded to Blondie who slapped Issy hard.

'Your involvement in all of this is not clear to me yet.'

'Involvement in what?' *Don't you smile at me.* 'Who are you?'

A second look from Baldy meant another slap for Isla.

'Please don't interrupt me again.' He advised and Dark Eyes moved his weapon close to her face. 'Mr White, you met with a man named Elder Routh in London. For what reason, information? You've been to his home; what was it you found in the wall? Search her bag.'

GI snatched the small rucksack and emptied the contents onto the table. Next to a wine glass and a coffee cup, and a slim sharp looking envelope opener. Issy had a plan. GI shook his head.

'Your car then? *Gehen Sie zu Ihrem Auto und Suchen*' (go to their car and search it). Dark Eyes lowered his gun from Issy's face, scowled, then holstered his weapon. He took her car keys from the table and left the room. A flick of the hand and Blondie backed away to the door with GI. Baldy sat on the arm of the sofa and lowered his voice

'You don't understand your situation.' He said. 'Things are not as they seem. I want to help you, I do. But you have to earn my help. Tell me why Elder came to London. Give me the names of everyone you've spoken to since leaving London. Tell me what you know about Project WolfSpawn.'

‘What’s that?’ Asked Renny. ‘Why don’t I know about that?’

‘You know everything you need to, Reinhardt. Don’t interrupt me. Joe, I urge you to talk, it’s the only way I can help you. Both of you.’

‘You murdered Professor Tillmach.’

‘The Professor shot at me. And your girlfriend’s ingenuity at the rally, well, that was unfortunate. Trust me, my employers want your cooperation, not your heads.’

‘You should kill them, now.’ Renny insisted. ‘My boys will get rid of the bodies.’

Baldy stared Renny down. The chain of command now clear to Issy. She tried not to look at the knife on the table.

‘I’ve never met or talked in any way with Elder Routh.’ Joe was defiant. ‘And you’re a murdering bastard.’

GI stepped forward and stabbed his fist into Joe’s neck. He snapped his neck back to stare at the glass ceiling. Joe cried out.

‘What are you doing, don’t you touch him.’ Blondie grabbed Issy by the arm. His gun at her head where Dark Eye’s had been.

‘You met with Elder in London.’ Baldy insisted.

‘No... I’ve never met him, please.’

Baldy seemed reluctant but gave GI the nod. He struck Joe on the temple with the grip of the Glock. Blondie’s hand and weapon intercepted Issy’s advance to help. Then he knocked her to the floor. GI rammed his fist into Joe’s face.

‘No. Leave him alone. he doesn’t know anything. Neither of us know anything. It’s in the car, Elder’s stuff, it’s in the car. Please, don’t hurt him.’
He looks terrified. ‘We don’t know what this is about. Tell him, Joe. Tell him.’

Blood ran from the wound on Joe’s head, and from his nose. Tears welled in his eyes and he gasped for breath with GI’s hand at his throat. A gun pushed hard into his cheek.

‘What did the old man give you in London?’

‘I swear, I didn’t meet, never met him.’

A harder strike this time. Issy felt it. She winced at Joe’s pain.

‘Leave him alone, he’s telling you the truth.’

‘You were running comparisons on the blood-work, don’t deny it.’

‘Yes, I mean, no. That wasn’t, me, I don’t have, that sort of software.’

‘You took the hard drives from your computer, where did you hide them?’

‘Hide them? I haven’t, I didn’t...’

‘Who do you work for, Mr White? Who else knows about Project WolfSpawn?’

‘No-one. I don’t know. I don’t know, what it is, I swear.’

GI raised the butt of the Glock.

‘No.’ Baldy raised a hand. ‘Then tell me where Manfred Seiglar is.’

‘Seiglar? I don’t know. No, no, don’t hit me. I swear, I don’t know. Herse told us, he’s dead.’

GI slammed him with another fist. Joe’s head dropped.

'Herse?' The name seemed to surprised Baldy. He nodded to GI who lifted Joe's head, he dropped it.

'Sorry Boss.' He said. 'He's passed out.'

'Phone Conrad.' Said Reinhardt. 'He'll know what to do.'

'That's not necessary. We'll give them a chance to think things over. Don't force me to hurt you; either of you.' Baldy said. 'One way or another you will tell me what I need to know.' He left the room with phone in hand.

What's going on here? The Bald Man seems reluctant to kill us. Renny is being told what to do in his own Club? Oh, Joe... we'll get out of this, we will, I promise.

Issy's thoughts collapsed with her knees as Blondie's boot jabbed into them both.

'Hands behind your head.'

'People know we are here,' she scowled, 'you won't get away with this.'

'Shut up, bitch.' Reinhardt was pouring himself a drink. 'Tie the Englishman to the chair.' He ordered.

GI and Blondie looked unsure.

'I said tie him to the chair.'

'Do you have any rope, sir?'

'What does this look like, a fucking hardware store? Here, use this. And use your own belt too. Sweet little Isla, not quite the homecoming you expected, huh?'

'You're a pig who would sell his own mother?'

‘Well, she’s not a very nice woman. And if the price was right?’

You bastard.

‘What a surprise for him when you turned up outside. Why does he want you so badly? Come on, you can tell me. What does the Mr Muntz want with you? I’ll beat on your boyfriend until you tell me.’

‘He’s not my... Tell me something, Renny. What makes your world go round now? Does your Papa know what you’re mixed up in?’

‘Oh, you don’t know do you? Papa Gruun is dead. I run things now.’

‘Oh really? That’s not what it looks like to me. Is the Bald Man arse fucking you? Are you his fat little bitch? Eurgh, I’ve got pictures in my head now. And yes, he is most definitely on top.’

‘Are you trying to goad me. Is little Isla trying to mess with my head. He struck Joe in the face.

‘Stop it you bastard. For fucks sake he’s unconscious.’

Renny took Joe’s face in his fingers and squeezed on his cheeks. ‘So how did you get mixed up with this Englishman anyway? Is he good in the sack. Does he please you?’

‘More than you could imagine.’

‘I’ve quite an imagination.’

She felt his eyes tear at her clothes. She felt sick.

‘You two have caused Mr Muntz a parcel of grief. You’ve killed two of his own, and worse, you’ve made him look bad.’ Renny pointed upward. ‘To those above him, you know. You’re not getting out of this.’

Keep talking you smug pig.

'And you, what's in this for you? Or have the Gruuns been subject to a takeover? What's going on? Come on, you might as well tell me. I'm not leaving here alive, you just said so.'

'Wake the Englishman up.' Reinhardt said and removed his Jacket. He unbuttoned the sleeves and began to roll them up. 'First him, and then you. I'll show you how a real man treats a woman.'

Issy took in every detail. Three men now, only one gun. Blondie had holstered. GI Joe held his gun in front of his crotch. She thanked God that Barney hadn't searched her. She felt the hard shell of the Sig still in her belt, hidden below her jacket.

You'll get one chance, Issy. You have to be quicker than them when the moment comes.

'You don't know what's going on, do you? They haven't told you. Is it need to know? Ha ha ha, Baby Gruun is having his strings pulled.'

'We work for a greater cause now. You see the colour of the walls; that's real power, Issy.'

'What power, to hit men that can't fight back? You're a fucking pussy. Why don't you come and pick on someone who can scratch back?'

'I have to tell you, Issy. I've had impure thoughts about you, many times. Down here.' He grabbed his groin like a teenage pop star. 'Let me show you what I mean.' Renny pushed on the mirrored wall and it opened. Behind was Renny's private collection of sexual deviancy. Hoods, chains, toys.

Issy felt a sinking feeling. Those sort of games she didn't want to play.

'Hey boys, he lied to you; he does have some rope.' She laughed.

Blondie turned away. GI was just as surprised. Issy let her hands fall to her side with feigned surprise. This was the moment she'd waited for. Time to act.

Issy Reached behind her back. Her hand took the handle of the Sig. *Do it... do it now.* GI had seen her, was turning, his gun instinctively rising. Both weapons in a race to beat the other to the draw.

Two shots rang out in tandem.

GI was smiling. Why did he smile?

Has he killed me? They say it takes a moment to feel the pain. Uh oh, blood. Oh God, leaking badly.

GI lowered his gun. The tall baby faced assassin looked down. He folded and dropped.

Blondie's hand went for his gun. He was quick, but Issy already had him in her sights. She fired twice. Both bullets, point blank, two holes in Blondie's chest. His gun clunked to the carpet.

Issy got up and moved toward the entrance of the office. The Sig moved from Renny to the door. Outside Barney had heard the shots and was trying to get in. Or was it the sound of her heart pounding to get out? The Sig pointed back at Renny who now looked ridiculous in front of the smashed glass splattered in blood, his wardrobe of perversion exposed. Sweat beads blossomed on his overweight face, his intention fixed on GI's gun fallen by the door.

Issy cocked the hammer of the Sig. Renny's eye's flicked up to meet hers. 'Go on, try it.' She said.

'Joe... wake up.' She shook him gently then fingered at the belts with her free hand. 'Hey, English, we have to leave.' Issy slapped Joe. 'Wake up now.'

'Huh, Issy... awww, my face?'

'Get up, we're leaving. You too, Renny.'

‘No way, bitch. They won’t let you leave.’

‘They will if I have a gun at your balls. What, is that funny?’

‘Go ahead, shoot me.’ He suggested. ‘They won’t let you out to save me. We’re all expendable.’

‘You’d better hope not.’

‘It’s a brave new world, Isla. They’re taking over. Sacrifices have to be made. Something big is about to happen. Bigger than all of us. The entire face of Europe is about to change.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’

‘Politics, Isla. I’m all in for the cause. So go ahead, slut, pull the trigger. It won’t get you out of here.’

Politics? Renny doesn’t do politics... what am I missing? The colour of the walls. Barney’s orange band. ‘Are you telling me you work for Luminsrau?’

‘For the cause, Isla. For the cause. Now give me the gun, and maybe I can save you.’

‘And Joe?’

Renny shrugged.

‘Mr Muntz wants him. And what Mr Muntz wants, Mr Muntz gets.’

The men outside wanted in, badly. The sound of something hard, maybe a table, being used as a battering ram.

‘Someone will hear them.’ Issy said. ‘Help will come.’

‘We’re soundproofed in these rooms. So be sensible and give me the gun, it’s your only way out. Join us and be a part of the family again.’

‘Family?’ *There has to be another way out?* ‘You’re not fooling anyone, Renny. You’re in this for the money.’ *Keep him talking. Renny likes to talk.* ‘Do you know what WolfSpawn is, Renny? No, I didn’t think so.’ She moved toward the office to block him, Joe’s hand in hers. ‘Not far enough up the chain, eh?’ She said.

All eyes went to the door as the noise outside stopped. Reinhardt took his moment and rushed forward silk sleeves outstretched. Big hands grabbed for the Sig; it went off. Smashed what was left of the mirror behind. Renny was strong, too strong, the gun wrenched from her hands and cast across the room. A big hand slapped Issy hard and she fell back into Joe, knocking him down and back into sleep mode.

‘Aaargh.’ She felt her hair yanked upward and she was flung like a child across the table. Issy’s face met her bag on the floor.

Stupid... stupid girl. She tried to get up. Reinhardt was coming. He had her own gun pointed toward her face. *Not like this, not like this. Not by him.*

He was on her, pinning Issy down. His face up against hers.

‘Fucking bitch. You come into my Club and threaten me.’

‘Big talk with a gun in your hand.’

‘You think I need a gun?’ He dropped it to the floor. Lifted her head. Impacted her forehead with his own. The famous Gruun head butt sent stars spiralling in all directions. ‘Fuck Muntz, he only wants the English, not you. He lifted his head back, about to strike again.

'Stop, stop, please. I tell you a secret.' Issy's voice a desperate whisper. 'I had a boyfriend who'd do this to me. It was his thing, you know. Pin me to the bed and use my face as a pillow; before he, you know. He was a violent pig too.' She began to laugh. 'Oops, you gave me time.'

Renny heard a tap tap tap. He looked down, and saw the envelope opener in Issy's hand. His face screwed like an angry bear as the slight blade pushed deep into his flesh, and then his head butted Issy in the face again. Renny forced himself up and stumbled away. Blood oozed through his shirt his fat finger unable to stem its flow.

'You fucking bitch.'

Issy was hurt, bleeding, trying to steady the room as it swirled around her. She could see him, angry, he was grabbing for the Glock on the floor. She tried to get up, to defend herself but was too late. Renny's blood stained hand raised the weapon towards her. This was it then. She closed her eyes.

Four shots exploded with intense rapidity. Four high definition cracks, and it was over.

‘Issy... Issy talk to me.’

She lifted her head. Reinhardt no longer loomed above her, it was Joe.

‘Joe, what did you do?’

‘You’re still alive, I thought. Oh thank God. Are you okay?’

‘Yes, no, I’m not sure. Joe, point that gun somewhere else.’

It clunked to the floor.

‘You shot him?’ She asked.

‘He was going to kill you?’

‘I’m not complaining Joe.’

There he was, Reinhardt, lying on the bed. Fresh blood dripped from the cover. There was glass everywhere, and bodies too. Renny’s playroom resembled a war zone; which she supposed it was.

‘Joe,’ getting up wasn’t easy, ‘pick the gun up, the others too. And any spare ammunition you can find. Hurry Joe.’

I need a moment. Her fingers trembled. *Get up, Issy.* Her legs refused. *Get up.* And now she wanted to cry. *Why is Joe staring? Do as I say.*

Joe’s hand extended for her to take. Someone outside began to beat on the door again. Issy’s fingers locked into his.

‘That door won’t hold forever.’ She said as he pulled her to her knees. Then began a hoover operation for weapons. Three handguns, one in his waistband, another in his back pocket. She watched as the magazine dropped

from the Sig and another clip was slapped in. He turned the weapon and put it in her hand.

‘I’ve been paying attention.’ He said. ‘And we’re taking that with us.’ His finger pointed beyond the broken glass. Amongst the whips and handcuffs ran a narrow shelf well stocked with books, papers, and a laptop that Joe already had in Issy’s bag. ‘I reckon we’ve got about thirty seconds before that door gives way.’ he said. Then tentatively pushed his hands into Reinhardt’s pockets. ‘So what’s the plan?’

Issy shook her head.

‘Twenty seconds... Eurgh, I think I just felt more than his keys.

Fifteen seconds...’

‘Okay, I don’t need a running commentary.’ *Just more time.*

Joe pulled a data stick from Reinhardt’s pocket and held it out if it were a prize. The door made a cracking noise that suggested it too was in need of attention. One of the hinges clattered to the floor.

‘Issy, we’ve run out of time.’

She was staring at the Wall.

‘I’ve always wondered about that window.’ She said. ‘Is it as bullet proof from the inside...’

‘Issy, the door.’

It was coming away from the frame. He could see hands prizing at the edges, and a gun.

‘You might want to stick your fingers in your ears.’ Said Issy as she stepped toward the Wall, the gun raised and aimed. She opened fire.

The Sig’s barrel pumped projectiles towards the glass. They were hot and angry just like the girl who fired them. Less than two seconds, too many shots to count, an empty magazine was ejected. She reloaded and fired again. Walking closer as lump after lump of fizzing metal thumped and cracked against the screen. Hammer blows, one after another. The pane chipped and cracked, but held firm.

‘Fuck you, that was a good plan.’ She hurled the weapon at the glass and watched it bounce away. A moment later the window shattered. Collapsed into a shower of shards and released the Club’s energy in through the portal. The boom boom of the beat accompanied by a rapid rise in temperature and club-party atmosphere.

‘Go.’ Isla pushed Joe toward the hole. He was out and onto the catwalk, Issy close behind, just as the door to the office gave way. It was Barney who came through, gun braced and levelled toward her. He’d caught her mid lunge, distracted, her jacket snagged on the glass.

‘Barney?’ He looked angry.

‘Boss?’ He saw the bodies in the playroom.

‘Easy Barney.’

‘What have you done?’

‘He didn’t give me a choice.’

‘Fuck... you shouldn’t have come back.’

‘He was a pig; you didn’t even like him. Barney, no...’

His finger squeezed down on the trigger.

Something swiped at Barney from behind and the bruiser from Berlin collapsed to the floor. Muntz took his place in the doorway his gun raised toward her. Two steps forward and he registered the dead bodies. Muntz lowered the pistol and mouthed two words.

Get out.

Now she was being pulled. Her jacket being torn away from the glass and Joe leading her down the gangway.

‘There’s a staircase at the far end.’ He shouted as a scantily clad girl slid in confusion down her pole. Two others stepped aside as they clanked past on the metal walkway, guns in hand.

Issy began to laugh. *What the fuck just happened?* Her feet missed every other step as she ascended the stairs. ‘Joe, he didn’t shoot?’

He wasn’t listening.

The bottom of the staircase opened onto the Club's dance floor. Hundreds of dancers doing their thing. A deafening din of music and whistles with hundreds of tiny light sabres being waved in the air. Issy looked back and saw him, Muntz, as he stepped through the hole she'd made in the Wall. He was on his phone and gazing over the railings. At the far end of the cavernous room men were moving, their intention clear. Block the exits. Why let her go and then call it in? They weren't going to make it, just too many people in the way.

'Take my hand, Joe. Whatever happens, don't let go of it. You understand?'

He was nodding.

'Whoah, Issy, what are you doing?'

Issy fired her gun into the air. Two shots that only slowed the revelry. Then two more that sent a wave of panic throughout the Club. The screaming began.

'Out of the way, move.' Not that anyone had to be told. 'Girl with a gun... move.' Another shot into the high ceiling and plaster fell like snow. The party was over, now all the dancers wanted was to get out. A wave of bodies hit the doorways.

'This way, Joe, follow the crowd.'

An inexorable tide of bodies hit the doors. A rampant shoal that responded to a single thought, escape.

‘Joe, don’t let go of my hand. Keep your head down when we get outside, and go left. Head toward the car. Joe?’

‘Yes... left, car, got it. If we don’t get crushed first.’

Security bulked under the pressure, afraid of being caught in the stampede. Reinhardt’s men withdrew, their net well burst. No hope as hundreds of Clubbers surged out onto the street. Running, screaming, refusing to be held.

‘This way, don’t let go of my hand. GUN... GUN!’ Isla screamed and then discharged another round into the ceiling. Panic swept with fresh urgency through anyone who thought that fresh air offered safety. Hundreds of bodies dispersed in as many directions outside the Club.

‘Head for the car, Joe. Down here.’ Fifty yards, a hundred away from the Club. The crowd was thinning, running out of steam. Issy slowed and looked back.

‘He could have stopped me, why didn’t he stop me?’

‘Who... what are you talking about?’

‘It doesn’t matter. The car’s round here.’ She said, and then pulled up in her tracks.

Ahead was the BMW, at least what was left of it. Half the car’s interior was on the pathway. She watched a matt slam onto the roof. Baldy’s goon was still searching the car. No, he’d stopped. Was coming to see what all the noise was about. Issy grabbed Joe and turned him away from the car.

‘Kiss me.’ She demanded and her lips were planted on his. Hard, unfriendly, at first. Then more relenting, softer, moist and gentle. Issy felt his breath as her lips moved away.

What are you thinking, Joe? What do you see when you look at me?

‘You’re trembling again.’ Joe said.

‘Shut up.’ She kissed him again; more wanting, more needy. Her eyes locked onto his and then beyond.

Issy let go of Joe and lifted GI’s Glock toward Dark Eyes. As she stepped toward him he saw her; registered the danger, tried to pull his own gun. Too late. A single shot fired and a girl screamed from somewhere behind them. Dark Eyes went down. It wasn’t a kill shot; a wounding in his thigh.

Don’t be stupid.

He staggered, tried to take aim. Issy’s fired again. A second shot that dropped him to the ground. Dark Eyes scowled, spat blood, raised a drunkard’s arm. He didn’t give Issy a choice.

The kill shot blew Dark Eyes head across the tarmac. Two scantily dressed teenagers huddled in terror by a red car. A young man scrambled back not fifty metres from where she stood. His phone held in both hands filming.

Issy couldn’t take her eyes from the body. It was Dark Eyes’ fault; he’d made her do it, and now he was dead. Too many people were dead, and she didn’t know why. The girl screamed again.

She turned toward the young man that was filming her. Was he stupid? Issy raised the gun and stomped toward him; asked politely for his phone. Wide

eyed with gaping jaw he sensibly nodded and complied. Issy stared at the screen.

Oh my God.

Everything he'd witnessed, it was streaming live.

'He didn't give me a choice.' She said. 'They're killing people; trying to kill us. Project WolfSpawn.' She started to cry. 'I'm so sorry Mama. I didn't want any of this.' Issy switched off the phone and handed it back. 'Take it.' She insisted. Then backed away, turned, and walked to the car. There were sirens in the distance as she got down on her knees and reached underneath. A tug on the strap released the bag she'd rammed between the exhaust and chassis. Inside was a mess, but at least Dark Eyes had left the seats intact.

Joe could only describe the mood in the car as sombre. Three times now Issy had dropped the magazine and checked the ammo, pulled back the slide to inspect the chamber on her new gun. She said it was a Glock, fourth Gen G40. Its weight was lovely, just right for a girl. She'd only seen pictures; the real thing was sweet. Joe could only wonder what kind of websites Issy frequented.

Outside Berlin passed them by but barely registered. The shops, the people, the entire city was a blur. And it was getting dark. The girly voice on the SatNav gave clear instructions that Joe dutifully followed.

'He could have let Barney shoot me.' She said at last.

'Who?'

'Baldy. Barney had me... he would have shot me. I thought Barney was my friend?'

'He worked for Reinhardt. I guess he was a villain first and a friend second.'

'No, I... yeah, I guess so. But why did Baldy stop him? It's not me they want, it's you. I'm expendable. So why stop him? Why?' Joe shrugged. 'I can't make any sense of this. I mean, why are the Gruuns involved with Baldy? He works for Pharmax, yes? People like him are expensive, and so are these.' She started clicking the safety on and off. 'It was obvious that Renny knew nothing about WolfSpawn. And have you noticed, everywhere Baldy turns up,

Luminsrau are already there. Joe, a few years ago Papa Gruun was the only one who could control Reinhardt. And now he's taking orders from Baldy? Or at least he was. So what links organised crime to Pharmax? They don't need to sell drugs on the Black Market, they make billions selling them over the counter.' The gun went on the dashboard and she turned to Joe. 'And he said something, what was it?

"It's a brave new world, Isla. They're taking over. Sacrifices have to be made."

'You remember it word for word?'

'You have to have a good memory in my business.' Said Joe. 'Then he said, "Something big is about to happen. Bigger than all of us. The entire face of Europe is about to change."

'What the hell does that mean? Hey, do you think he was talking about Luminsrau? He must have been. But Reinhardt was never political.'

'Issy, his walls are painted Orange. He was political alright.'

'So Baldy must be too, yes? And by extension, Pharmax? Is that what links them all, Luminsrau?'

'You did say they had backing from politicians and big business.'

'I did didn't I. Joe, it's the only thing that makes sense.'

'No Issy, none of this makes sense. Okay, ancient Nazi doctors and a modern right wing political movement, I can go with that. But where does organised crime and a giant pharmaceutical Corporation fit in? Oh, and let's not forget we have Lebensborn children mixed up in this, and a secret

Programme created in the nineteen thirties that someone is killing people to protect some seventy years later. And don't forget, Reinhardt had no idea what WolfSpawn was. Have I missed anything?

'I guess not. Joe, where are you driving us?'

'We're going to see Elsa's friend, Solomon. That was the plan, nothing's changed. And I want a look at this.' He put the data stick on the dash board next to the gun. 'Whatever else is going on, WolfSpawn is at the heart of everything. Let's find out who this Doctor Seiglar is. And maybe the rest will become clear.'

‘Go around them.’ Joe urged. Constantly pointing out the window. The city traffic outside at a crawl. ‘Down there, go down there.’

‘That was our third detour, Joe. So help me, if you don’t stop with that finger.’ She yanked on the wheel and pulled onto the kerbside. ‘It’s only half a mile. Let’s walk.’

It was another demonstration. It reminded Joe of Stamford Bridge an hour before kick off. Everyone trying to get to the stadium. He left the car and jumped up onto the bonnet. It was the same as far as he could see. Orange armbands everywhere. The sound of car horns far into the distance.

‘That’s a lot of people.’

‘Joe, get off the roof. Joe...’

‘Fine.’ He jumped down. ‘Where d’you think they’re all going? What are you doing? Why are you breaking...’

‘When they find the car they’ll check the SatNav to see where we’re going. Here, take this.’ She slipped one of the guns into his belt. ‘It’s got a full clip, keep it hidden. We don’t want another stampede. Come on, follow the crowd. Solomon’s home is not far from here.’

They followed the crowd for several streets. Then turned off down a side street that followed the river. ‘It’s this one.’ She said. ‘Up here.’ Issy sprang up the granite steps and opened a formidable white door. She stepped into an airlock, a metal security gate. Beyond its bars a hallway lined in oak

panels below an ornate ceiling. A marble staircase ascended to the first floor landing.

‘Can you see his name?’ Issy traced her finger down a dozen or so names beside a panel of brass buttons. ‘Which one?’

‘He’s Jewish, so I’d go for Weizenblum.’

The buzzer gave a sharp rasp. She pressed it again.

‘Shit, what if he’s not in?’

An outcome Joe clearly hadn’t considered before a voice projected out from the intercom.

‘Who is it?’ A man’s voice asked.

‘Solomon? Err, hi... My name is, Helga. My good friend Elsa sent me to see you. She said you might be able to help us.’

There was a slight pause that unnerved them both.

‘Twelfth floor.’ The voice said.

The panel buzzed and the security gate opened.

From the twelfth floor window Joe could see a bridge, another two in the distance, all crossed the river Spree. Half the city seemed to be moving across them, the other half were stuck in their cars. Hundreds of distant headlamps caught amongst the thousands of fireflies.

‘I’m glad we walked.’ He said. ‘It’s like someone warped out a Barry Manilow concert down there. Where are all those people going?’

‘To the Reichstag building.’

Joe turned away from the window.

‘Oh, hey.’ He said. ‘Are you Solomon?’

A silver tipped cane pressed gently against Joe’s chest and backed him away from the window. A tall man, slender, his hair white as snow stepped closer to the glass. Joe shared Isla’s bemusement at the man’s interruption.

‘It’s another protest by Luminsrau.’ Solomon had a melancholy, almost broken tone to his voice. ‘They say there will be a million people here by tomorrow, maybe more. Is it just those two you are trying to avoid?’

‘Two... what two?’ Both Joe and Isla leaned cautiously forward. Two men in suits below moved through the demonstrators as if looking for a lost child.

‘Shit, they found the car already?’ Isla pulled Joe’s face away from the glass. ‘Gruun’s people will have half the city looking for us. By morning they’ll have the police helping them.’

‘Oh great. So now it’s Organised Crime, the Police, and all the followers of youtube on our case. Wanted for yet another murder.’

‘Murder?’ Solomon asked.

The silver tip raised up and tapped on Joe’s chest which he found less than endearing.

‘You should come inside. Both of you. Let’s talk.’

‘The Bundestag was the big building with the dome.’ Solomon said offering Joe more cake. ‘It’s like your House of Parliament.’

‘Big crowd.’ Said Joe.

‘The people are going there to protest. There is a gathering scheduled for every major city in Europe this weekend; a lot of people are very unhappy.’

‘About what?’ Asked Isla.

‘You don’t know? Where have you been hiding for the last week or so?’

‘We’ve been busy. Out of touch.’

Joe reckoned Solomon was in his late seventies, maybe older. A cultivated image; the stick, the platinum white hair and beard. A very well groomed man.

‘It’s the Russians.’ Said Solomon. ‘Another reduction in oil and gas supplies by the end of the month. More cake, Helga? My housekeeper is a wonderful cook.’

‘No, thank you. And Jake doesn’t want any either. You’re putting on weight, aren’t you dear.’

No I'm not...

'How is Elsa, still doing good deeds in the Ukraine? I haven't seen her for a month. Not since her birthday, such a lovely day.'

'Elsa's well. Annoying, but well. And she's in Slovakia, not the Ukraine. And her birthday is in December, so a few more weeks yet; and she'll be twenty five before you ask. Oh, and she has a little birth mark on her bum, just about here.'

Yeah, great, a big smile for Isla. Joe, they hit with guns, and poke with sticks. Maybe it was the heat, he wasn't sure. But Joe didn't feel well. I can't believe you put us on Youtube? Joe picked at his cake and stared at the floor as Solomon explained.

'The Newspapers are filled with calls for intervention in the Ukraine, and the Baltic's. The people want a more aggressive stance to be taken. Our own government has joined with others in demanding the removal of Russian naval bases in Greece. Perhaps they would have been wiser to scrap the interest payments on the loans they gave to the Greeks, before it came to this? The people out there are angry, and I think this is just the beginning. At midnight torches will be lit, hundreds of thousands of them. They say it will represent a funeral pyre for the West.'

It looks like the world's biggest Barry Manilow concert. Joe sighed, loud enough to draw both their attention. Hmm, I love this cake. I do. What? Why are you staring at me. 'I'm eating cake. Getting fat. Is that okay, darling?'

'Jake, are you feeling okay?' Issy asked.

‘Great, just great. What’s not to feel okay about?’

‘I’m sorry, Jake’s had a long day. Why don’t you sit down dear.’

‘No, we need to tell him.’ He took Solomon’s hand and shook it vigorously.

‘My name’s Joe, but you knew that didn’t you. And she’s not Helga, she’s Isla. Tell him, Issy. Show him the knife, go on. And ask him if he knows who Seiglar is? Do you know who Seiglar is? Have you heard that name before?’ Joe was moving about the apartment. Fingering open doors, checking the space behind them. ‘Is there a bald man in the house?’ He shouted. ‘Hello, Baldy?’

‘Joe, sit down. What’s wrong with you?’

‘I think your boyfriend is suffering from acute stress.’

‘He’s not...’

‘Why do keep denying it like that it would be a bad thing? Is there something wrong with me?’

‘Joe, sit down, now!’

‘Or what, you’ll slap me again? I just got beat up by professionals, okay. I can handle it. And you, you nearly died back there. You do understand that. Reinhardt asshole face was going to kill you. Kill me. Everyone wants to kill us, so just tell him, everything. No, then I will. Solomon, we’re fugitives from the law, in oh, how many countries now dear? I’m wanted for several murders, and kidnapping, and let’s not forget the probable acts of terrorism during our time at the *love bridge*. Oh, and leaving the house without my mother’s permission. She’s dead by the way, and no I didn’t kill her.’

‘Joe, calm down, we’re safe here.’

‘Safe, really? Two men already outside the window, five minutes behind us, we’re not safe. For fuck’s sake, I can’t walk a street in Europe now without looking over my shoulder. Without wondering, will I get arrested or shot? Now did I miss anything out? Ah, yeah, always the obvious... there’s the multiple counts of car theft. How many now *darling*? Or would I just be an accessory to those?’

Joe made a sudden hand movement to his throat.

‘I can’t breath. Why can’t I breath.’ He began to wheeze. ‘Why is it so fucking hot in here? Issy, I’ve got a gun?’

‘Joe, sit down. Do it now, and put the gun away.’

‘I’m freaking out aren’t I?’

‘Yes, but it’s okay. Let me take this, that’s right, no guns for you from now on. Solomon, we’re not a threat to you. Joe is tired and he’s under a lot of strain.’

‘So you’re not really Helga, or Jake?’ He said.

‘What gave us away? Issy, we should have name tags. Bonnie and Clyde, just here, one each.’

‘Shut up, Joe.’

‘Tell him, just tell him. Can I have some more cake?’

‘So you knew it was me all along.’ Issy said.

‘Elsa often speaks of you. She never gave up hope that you’d come back.’

‘That’s Elsa for you. Always the optimist. Thanks for the shower and the fresh bandage. I was worried the stitches may have loosened. How’s Rambo, still sleeping? How long did you say those pills would keep him quiet?’

‘I sometime take one to help me sleep. I’m not sure he should have taken four.’

‘Hey, Elsa gave me an injection. His turn to sleep. This is nice, your apartment.’

The bathroom was bigger than most places she’d lived. A sumptuous corner bath, family size shower, and she could crick her neck trying to look in all the mirrors. She counted twenty paces from one side of the lounge to the other. A bit old fashioned but full of love and memories. The colourful rugs on the hardwood floor felt soft beneath her bare toes.

‘Is that a balcony out there. May I?’

‘Of course. Take a coat, it’s cold out there.’ He said.

She didn’t care. Let the fresh chill bite at her skin, if only to prove she was still alive. Issy opened the French Windows and stepped outside.

‘It’s so beautiful, Berlin. I love this city. Look, the moon is smiling at us, and it makes the water dance. At least that’s what my mother used to say. So, Elsa, she talks about me?’

‘Often. Though I don’t see so much of her these days. We both live very busy lives. It hurt her when you left, you know that. Where did you go?’

‘Here and there. Mostly nowhere. I suppose Elsa told you about Kronnsnow?’

‘Yes. It must have been difficult.’

‘Difficult?’ *It changed me forever.* ‘You know we lived together for a while, after I was released. That was even harder. I let her down. I hurt her.’ *I didn’t mean to.* ‘How long do you think they will stay, the protestors?’

‘I believe they plan the demonstration to last all weekend. Until the Reichstag sits on Monday.’

‘They are angry? I understand anger.’

‘Please, you should come in now. Someone might see you.’

She wanted to feel cold, but he was right. Anyone could be down there. Just a glance upward. Isla closed the doors and left the sounds of the city outside.

Beside the windows was a modern desk. An expensive laptop and everything else you would expect to find in an office. The rest of the room took a step back in time.

A dozen shelves stacked with seriously old books. A leather sofa and two aged but comfortable looking chairs. The far window was framed with drapes

from another century. And there were lots of photos, mostly black and white. She saw a colour image of Elsa and Solomon.

'The pictures, they are all family?' *Where are there no recent photographs?*

'May I see the items you brought with you?'

'*Of course.*' *Did I say something wrong?* Issy grabbed her bag. 'We have a diary from a dead SS guard. Some pieces of paper with names on. And some old photos...'

Old photos? It was so obvious. *You stupid girl. Solomon's a Jew. All these photos, so old. They're all gone aren't they. The people in the photos, they were murdered in the Holocaust.*

'Do you have anything else?' Solomon asked.

'Just this.' She showed him the page that fell from the diary. 'Do you know what this is?'

'It's a list of names from a selection book.' He said. 'These are names of Camp inmates.'

'So why is it in here? And there's this, a hard drive from a computer. And this too.'

'SS daggers have become very collectable. This name, do you know who it belonged to?'

'We were hoping that you could tell us.'

'I've never heard of anyone named Seiglar. But this is interesting; you see the serpent below the Death's Head. What you have here is a dagger that belonged to an officer who was most definitely involved in War crimes.'

‘How do you know that?’

‘The serpent is a medical insignia. I’ve only ever seen one before.’ He held it up to the light.’ This symbol means the owner was a member of a very clique organisation. Doctors and scientists, all hand picked by Heinrich Himmler; most were involved in experimentation on human beings.’

‘On Jews?’

‘Amongst others, yes. How did you come by these?’

‘An old SS soldier had them hidden. This diary was his. Solomon, have you ever heard of Hut Thirty Six? Ah, I take it from that look that you have.’

‘Herse said that Hut Thirty Six was a series of research facilities spread across the Reich. That Doctor Seiglar was in charge and that he reported directly to Himmler.’

‘Hut Thirty Six is a myth.’ Solomon said. ‘One of many Nazi fictions and fantasies that spread throughout Europe after the War. Most involved stolen art and gold. But Hut Thirty Six, now that was one of the more intriguing tales. Have you heard of Rudolf Hoess?’

‘Sure, the Camp Commandant of Auschwitz.’

‘From nineteen forty to forty three he was. Before the Nazis promoted him to Chief Inspector of Concentration Camps. The Allies captured Hoess after the War, and in nineteen forty six handed him to the Polish authorities to be tried as a War Criminal. During his interrogation Hoess made a surprising confession. Knowledge of a secret programme. Something called Hut Thirty Six. A brief moment in which I believe Hoess considered a trade of information in exchange for his life. It’s documented in the official interrogation transcripts, I’ve seen them. But it seems he changed his mind and refused to divulge whatever it was he knew, and made no mention of it in his book. So Hoess took whatever secrets he knew with him to the gallows.’

‘But it’s true. Trust me, the legacy of Hut Thirty Six is trying to kill us.’

‘Isla, many Doctors wore their white coat as a uniform during the War. We know a lot about these men and what they did; but not one of the men, or women, who were caught and tried ever mentioned Hut Thirty Six.’

‘But? Come on it’s all over your face.’

‘Unsubstantiated rumours from former prisoners, it’s what keeps these myths from dying.’

‘So what do you know? Tell me, I don’t care if it can’t be proved. Solomon, it’s important.’

There was an elegance about the way the old man moved, slow and deliberate, not burdened by age despite his cane. He sat and offered Isla to do the same; which she did. Coffee clasped in both hands perched on the comfortable chair’s edge. Attentive, keen, impatient to learn more.

‘There were witnesses,’ he said, ‘after the War. Survivors from Auschwitz who claimed to have seen a mysterious SS officer; they said he was a doctor. But not one who worked in the Camp. The Americans were curious about this man but they never attained his identity. Of course SS officers came and went, most looking for labour for one project or another. But this man was different, remembered by numerous witnesses because of the women who went missing after each visit. Their disappearance went virtually unnoticed in that place, so full of death. But always someone sees, and always someone remembers.’

There was something else. The way his eyes lowered as if haunted by a memory.

'Are you one of those who remembers?'

Silence.

'Solomon? Oh my goodness, you knew one of the women didn't you?'

'I don't know who the officer was.' Solomon said at last. 'It is very possible that this man is the doctor Seiglar you are looking for. But how do you prove such a thing after so many years?'

Issy shrugged.

'Is there no way we can find out who this man was, for sure?'

'I have tried and failed. This man is just another ghost from the War.' He reached to the table and picked up the hard drive. 'What information is stored on this?'

'Mostly internet downloads about Pharmax, there are too many to read them all. But we found a name that had been deleted from Elder's contacts. He tried very hard to erase this man's identity. Are you familiar with a doctor named, Herse?'

'Yes, that's a name I know.' Solomon stood, moved to the laptop on his desk. 'I'll check my usual sources, put my library card to work. Let's see if we can place either of these names. Maybe Seiglar is somewhere in Herse's past. Two Doctors who share some history that will allow us to track this man. Maybe you should follow your boyfriend's example and get some sleep whilst I work.'

'He's not my boyfriend.'

‘No? The way you keep looking at him whilst he sleeps; I presumed... my apologies.’

‘We’re just friends, okay. The, try not to die together, kind of friends.’
Change the subject. ‘Tell me about the photos. Family? Don’t you have any that are more recent?’ *What, what did I say?* ‘Oh shit, I’m so sorry. *They’re all dead aren’t they.* ‘I’m sorry... forgive me.’

‘You want answers, I understand.’ His gaze turned toward the photos. A smile for his family as if they were still living. ‘I used to get melancholy, but now I treasure what we had before they were all murdered in the Camp.’

‘We were transferred from the Lodz ghetto in April forty four. I was nine years old when I arrived at Auschwitz, a lot older when I was liberated in Forty five.’

‘Were you transferred together, all of your family?’

‘My mother and two of my sisters died in the Ghetto, my father was ill, God rest him, he didn’t stand a chance of surviving the selection process. Women and children to the left, the men to the right. I thanked God that I was tall for my age. I never saw my father again. But a quirk of fate found me working in the same hut as my sister. We weren’t allowed to speak of course, but there are other ways of communicating.’

That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile. You’ve got a nice smile. Oh no, that’s why you noticed him, he took your sister?

‘I’m so sorry.’ She said. It just came out. ‘You saw him didn’t you, the SS officer you spoke about. Your sister...’

All the old memories lay heavy on Solomon’s face. All the years caught up with him in that moment.

‘I remember them all as if it happened yesterday. For seventy years it has slipped in and out of my conscious world, but never left my dreams. SS Sturmbannführer Richard Baer, the Camp Commandant at that time. He was outside with another officer I had never seen before. They were talking,

smiling; only the Camp officials ever smiled like that. An instruction was given to a camp guard who came inside. He beckoned to my sister, then ordered her outside. I'll never forget the look on her face. She tried to smile at me just as she left the room. I never saw her again.'

'I'm so sorry.'

'It's a difficult thing to make sense of, Isla. Why you survive when everyone you loved did not. Now, you see this emblem here on the dagger; this serpent. It indicates membership of a medical clique. A secret organisation involved with the T4 programme of euthanasia in nineteen thirties Germany. Physically and mentally handicapped adults and children, all murdered because their genes were undesirable to the Reich.

Himmler wanted to take things a step further, but Hitler was alarmed at how the German people had reacted; so the programme was stopped. Paused to be more precise. But SS Reichfuhrer Heinrich Himmler had no such qualms about public opinion. Just a fanatical belief in his Aryan bloodline. He wanted to abolish all forms of mutation where the Aryans were concerned. So he conceived numerous branches of research related to his Master Race, some without Hitler's knowledge.

This, the Serpent Corp, was one of the groups he formed. Its talents directed toward racial research. Its scientists and doctors researched the application of natural selection, racial hygiene, and anthropology. In the Camps the Serpent Corp ran programmes that experimented with hormones,

genetics, and eugenics. Doctor Mengele's work with children for example; especially with twins.

There were suggestions that Mengele's work was based solely around the study of the children's genes. We don't know for sure. Mengele's research notes were never found. It was a virgin science, and that man was one of many Nazi monsters who traded in scientific misery. Knowledge obtained without a moral code is forever tainted. Ahh, take a look. I think this is your man, Herse?'

'Let me see.' The photo on the laptop was of a young handsome man with a grim smile; as if he knew something the photographer did not. 'Yes, a few years older, but that's him. When was this taken?'

'A year before the War began. This is SS-Hauptsturmführer, Lionel Herse. Born in nineteen twenty. It says he was a bureaucrat and never saw active service. His military records end in forty five. Well he obviously didn't die because you've met him. Let me try... ah, here he is. According to Allied records he changed his name after the War. He was investigated in absentia by an Allied tribunal, and found not guilty of War Crimes. But this is interesting. In nineteen sixty, Herse was investigated by the French government. A year after Eichmann was kidnapped and put on trial by the Israelis. Maybe Eichmann told them something about Herse? Mossad can be very persuasive. It says the French tried him in a closed tribunal that assessed his service during the War. But too much time had passed and nothing could be proved, so they let him go.

‘What were they looking for?’

‘Herse was an administrator in the SS medical Corp... mainly logistics... medical supplies to the East... look here, Herse was seconded to Himmler’s office in Berlin in nineteen forty two, a few months after he joined the SS. He must have impressed someone to rise so quickly. It says the French were investigating his link with the Death Camps. His association with the Doctors and medical practises at several Camps... he was questioned about his links to Gestapo Department IV B4 for Jewish Affairs. That was Eichmann’s dept. Eichmann was responsible for keeping the trains rolling. The transportation of Jews to the Camps.’

‘So Herse worked for Eichmann?’

‘Not necessarily, everyone needed access to trains. It says here that Herse was a *person of interest* in the supply of medical facilities undertaking experiments on human subjects in the conquered territories.’

‘And they let him go?’

‘A smart man gets rid of the paperwork. They couldn’t prove their case. Ahh, listen to this. Eichmann did say something to the Israelis. It says here that Eichmann was ordered by Himmler to allow Herse unmolested access of transit on any train bound for Poland. He received reports that scientific and medical equipment went into Warsaw, and sealed paperwork came back. Why were they importing scientific and medical equipment to Poland? The Commandant of Auschwitz acquired all the Camp’s resources from Polish territory. They basically stole it.

Ahh, now this is interesting. Eichmann referred to an SS officer who was transported to Berlin the first and third Monday of every month; who was then returned to Poland two days later. He never missed a train. Eichmann refused to say anything more. Said he knew nothing about the officer, or his duties.'

'Elder Routh's diary tells us that Seiglar took the train twice a month to Berlin. It has to be him, doesn't it?'

'It's always the little things that get you caught. Seiglar. I never thought I'd learn his name.'

'Solomon, are you alright? Sit, please, I'll get you another drink.'

'No, I'm fine. I am.'

Don't cry, please don't cry.

'So it is Lionel Herse who links these men, these monsters.'

'But why wasn't Herse investigated more thoroughly after the War? He was clearly in a position to give information. Valuable evidence about War crimes.'

Solomon sat. He looked exhausted, tearful.

'Isla, if you committed War Crimes during the Second World War the chances were you never saw a court. It was left to people like Simon Wiesenthal; like me, to expose them. Allied investigations after the War were virtually non-existent. Ha, they gave some of the worst Nazis jobs. It was the beginning of the Cold War and politics took precedence over Justice, as it always does.'

You look surprised. This is what politicians do, they react to the a crisis without solving the one that came before. Oh, they will postulate and prevaricate. Hold meetings and summits to openly discuss the Humanitarian implications. Pass the hat around at dinner whilst deciding what promises to make, and then break. They know that time will eventually dilute the necessity to help. And it is just a matter of time, Isla. Sooner or later goodwill dries up. More prominent issues arise and popular opinion wains.

‘Are you talking about then, or now?’

‘Is there a difference? The continent is brewing again, Isla. Simmering and getting ready to boil. It will turn good people into monsters as it inflames their fears. Aid agencies, the United Nations, we all do what we can. But still the Mob gathers towards the borders, on both sides. It’s the Mob, Isla, that has always dictated political policy.’

‘I’m not interested in politics, just this man Seiglar. Herse said he was dead.’

‘Then I hope he died screaming.’

‘Yes, but that man is a liar. Surely, now you know his name, you can find out more about him, yes? Track him through the years and find out for sure. Solomon? Shit, I’m so sorry for your sister, I am. But someone is trying to kill us and I need to find out why. Please.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ He said.

‘There’s something else; when you look up Seiglar, add Pharmax into the equation; they’re at the heart of all this.’

‘Big business usually fans a fire with greed. I can add that.’

‘I need to know what Elder Routh was really looking for. What links all of this together. Whatever he found out got him killed. It’s why someone wants us dead. And if the idiot in there knew what it was... Solomon, one more thing. Type in Joe White as well.’

‘Joe, are you sure?’

‘Yes. Elder Routh went to see Joe for a reason. Joe says he doesn’t know why. *Please God, don’t let him be lying to me.*

Solomon lifted the lid on his laptop.

‘This is a useful tool for sifting through War archives. It will make connections we would never otherwise find. There, it’s done. So now we wait. It could take a few hours, I’m linked into a lot of databases. Isla, I want to show you something whilst we wait. It concerns both our pasts, yours and mine. I believe that fate has brought us together here, and in more ways than you can possibly imagine.’

She hadn't realised how big the apartment was. Solomon had led Isla to large room, it's floor split on three levels. The wall at the far end circular. There were photos hung on the walls. More on the furniture.

'Who are these people?' Asked Isla.

'I've spent my life finding them.' He said. 'They are my family, all of them. Some more distant than others. In the lounge are photos of my mother, father, my brothers and sisters. In here I try to keep the memories of the others alive.'

'You have a big family.'

Issy counted forty or so photos. Portraits from the past of individuals and families. On a simple wooden stool stood a silver menorah lamp. Its seven branches thick with candle wax and a rosary that hung from each stem. Someone obviously knelt in regular prayer on the well used kneeling pad below. She heard Solomon whisper words in an ancient tongue as he bowed his head.

Issy took a minute whilst he prayed. Her attention focused toward the circular end of the room he clearly used for business. The shelves on the wall were lined with books and papers, mostly bundled and then ribboned. A small desk with a green lamp and a closed laptop, its remaining surface stacked with more folders. Even the floor was in use with boxes raised several feet high. Most of the paper had browned from age.'

‘Where are we?’ She asked. ‘What is this place? Some sort of office, a storeroom?’

‘In nineteen fifty three I went to work with the Red Cross. They became my vocation. What you see here is, my obsession. I’ve spent the last fifty years helping to find and prosecute Nazi war criminals.’

‘Elsa said you knew a lot about the SS. So all of this is...?’

‘Information, transcripts, copies of Allied investigations. My own efforts to track them down. Most of what I have is stored digitally now, but as you can see, it wasn’t always that simple. I keep the originals in here for safe keeping.’

‘You should write a book; look at all of this. You know, until recently I thought all the Nazis were dead. Now we keep finding old men wearing swastikas still willing to kill to keep their secrets. Didn’t they try them all at the end of the War?’

‘The Allies decided there were too many involved for Justice to be best served. It was *difficult* for them.’

‘Difficult? They should have tried harder.’

‘Association with the Nazis ran deep in Germany, it wasn’t a simple task to identify the criminals.’

‘They were all criminals weren’t they?’

‘No, not all Isla. To what degree of compliance do you become a criminal? Would you prosecute the factory worker for making bombs and bullets? Or just the ones that murdered a million Jews in the East? What about the

bureaucrats who filed the State's paperwork; who passed on the orders and requisitions for labour and supplies? How about the drivers of the trains that pulled wagons full of munitions... or Jews? The signal men, the local police, the maintenance workers, the men and women who kept the regime running? How about the town's people who did nothing, whilst a Camp just a few kilometres away was murdering the Undesirables?

There were millions of Nazi party members who signed up just because it offered them a better job, or allowed them to keep the job they had. And what about the Germans who were not involved at all but believed in Hitler's propaganda. Who raised their hand in salute, who voted him into absolute power? Should they have been arrested for believing in a false Idol?'

'No, I suppose not.'

'So, not as easy when you understand the scale of the involvement with the Party. The truth is that after the Nuremberg trials were over, when all of the top Nazi officials, the Doctors, and the Camp guards had been sentenced, no-one wanted the trials to continue. It had all taken too long, been too complex. Neither the French, British, or the Americans wanted to carry on with trials of the underlings. Most of whom had gone to ground anyway, or were hiding within the millions of German refugees.

The men who shed the blood, who actually carried out the orders; men who were every bit as evil as the men who gave them, most went untried. I can tell you that of three thousand SS soldiers of the Einsatzgruppen; men who

shot and murdered Jews on the Eastern Front in their tens of thousands; not one was ever brought to trial. Men like Elder Routh. Not one.

Isla, things are never as black and white in the world as we would like. Not all crimes were carried out because of racial hatred, Isla. Most came down to opportunism and greed. Even though the War had ended the crimes continued. What about the ordinary Germans who *acquired* the homes, workshops, and businesses of the millions of Jews who didn't return.

And what of German trade? Slave labour was a very lucrative business during the War. What about the Companies that continued to trade Post War? Did you know, that twenty four men from the IG Farben Company were charged with the crimes of pillage, plunder, murder and enslavement. In a factory virtually adjacent to Auschwitz, every one of them was acquitted.

Porsche, who had built tanks and the V1 rockets. Hugo Boss who supplied uniforms for the SS. Bayer, a part of IG Farben group who produced ZyklonB to gas Jews. Siemens, Nestle, Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes, its a long list. All companies who profited from the use of slave labour during the War. Not one of them has recognised their involvement, or paid reparation for their crimes. Why? Because the Allies wanted Europe returned to business as usual, and as quickly as possible. Commerce, Isla, it was the only way to rebuild a beaten Nation, and a broken continent. To finance the politics of Democracy and make a stand against Communism. The Cold War had begun.'

'What do I care about politics? They were all criminals and should have been arrested.'

‘You’re right of course, but trials couldn’t bring back the dead. Or help displaced people like myself. In nineteen forty six I was a Jew without a family or a home. So I left Germany and travelled to Spain where, thank God, I was lucky enough to find a job with the Red Cross. Whilst I was working there I became aware of Nazis escaping on boats to South America. Right under the nose of the Allies, and often with their blessing. That was when I came to understand how the world really worked. So I volunteered to work overseas. Get as far away from Europe as I could go.’

‘But you came back, obviously.’

‘After twelve years in the wilderness I couldn’t stand the irony any longer. Despite a global war, most people outside of Israel had more time for a German than they did for a Jew? That’s the true irony of the War for you, Isla. And I realised that I couldn’t blame the son for the sins of their father. Germany was changing, growing, and I wanted to be a German again. I found a home here in Berlin, and I began my work for the Wiesenthal centre.

It’s not just for Elsa that I’m helping you, Isla. If there is any chance at all that what you’ve told me is true, I *must* help. And it’s important to me that you understand why.’

‘Sometimes I think I am the only person who has suffered.’ Said Issy, as she sat staring at the menorah. So many photographs, so many people taken before their time. All a bit creepy at first; but now she understood. Solomon wanted them to be remembered. It must be a terrible thing to be forgotten.

It left her feeling sad, and guilty, because she was thinking of herself again. All these years trying to keep Mama alive, without even a photo to remember her by.

‘I get angry...’ she said ‘...I don’t like being me, sometimes. I blame my Mama for not being around. For leaving me. I know it’s not her fault really, but the only other person to blame is me.’ She lifted her eyes from the candle stick to Solomon. ‘Mama died when I was born. I don’t have a picture of her, not even up here.’

‘Elsa told me you looked for her.’

‘Yes. I tried.’

‘It’s important to understand where we come from.’ He said. ‘I have my walls; where good memories can always find a way across.’

‘My walls are built with lies. There have been so many lies. I lie about Mama all the time. She’s like a rag doll in my head, I play with her to suit my moods. I used to tell the other children that she died, and in so many different ways. They knew I was a liar. And that just made things worse. Why do you think it happened? What mean and loathsome reason would a German

child be put into a Polish orphanage? Like that was the best place for her, for me. Some of the people who worked there had painful memories from the War. But you know what, it was the children who were meanest of all. Poor little Isla, who didn't know why she wasn't liked by the other kids. I didn't even speak Polish, how could I? But I tell you, I gave as good as I got, mostly. I can still remember the first time someone called me, "*little Nazi girl*." I didn't even know what a fucking Nazi was. So I punched her, right here, on the nose. Then her friends beat me up, ha ha ha. God, I hated them, all of them. If it hadn't been for Elsa?

She saved me, you know. She was the only one who wanted to be my friend. She even taught me to speak like them. For seven years she was my rock.'

'She says the same about you.'

'No, she was the strong one, and clever too. I think I would have gone insane without her. And then one day, she was adopted. They took my rock away. You know I blamed her for going, at first. It was all her fault. She shouldn't have gone. I didn't want her to go. But I didn't want her to stay either. And then I envied her, too much. Elsa is the only family I have ever known. I should have understood better back then. But I didn't, and I was trouble. And then I crossed the line. But I didn't deserve what they did to me. She wrote to me, you know. All the time. I tried to make it better when I got out, but I am still trouble and not good for her. So then I go walkabout for two years. Elsa should hate me.'

'And yet she loves you, unreservedly.'

‘She’s a silly cow, because I’m trouble. I’m always trouble, ask Joe.’ She was fanning her eyes. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m saying all of this.’

‘Don’t be ashamed to cry, Isla. Trust me, it helps.’ Solomon offered her a tissue. ‘Wipe your eyes.’ He said.

‘Thank you. You can see it now, can’t you? There’s something wrong with me. You’re a complete stranger and I sit here whining like a child. And now I am getting angry with you.’

‘You’ve been hurt, Isla. I’ve seen it before; you don’t know how to deal with it that’s all. Have you considered counselling?’

‘Oh, now you sound like Elsa. You want me to talk. Well I talk, all the time; but there’s only one person who ever listens.’ She buried her head in her hands. ‘Am I mad? I must be mustn’t I. I don’t just talk about Mama, I dream about her too, all the time.’ *Sniff*. ‘I see her face when I sleep, only I don’t really because I’ve never seen it before. And sometimes I hear her voice; in that moment before I awake. Of course the moment I open my eyes,’ *sniff*, ‘she is gone, and I can never hold onto the memory. I can’t remember what she looks like. *Sigh*.’

I don’t have a photo, I wish I did. I just have letters that a Mother wrote to a child she knew she might never meet. It’s always made me angry, no, maybe frightened. And because of that I know I’ll always be alone. I’m the girl who lies because she doesn’t know the truth; will never know the truth. For fuck’s sake say something and shut me up.’

‘Tell me about Joe, he likes you. You do know that.’

‘Joe? I don’t even know who he is. For some reason, which I still don’t understand, I saved his life. And to thank me he’s dragged me into ten shades of shit.’

‘But you like him, don’t you?’

‘He’s like a puppy. Always wagging his tail, I can’t get rid of him.’

‘But you like him.’

‘Maybe, I don’t know. What’s your point, old man?’

‘I’m not trying to make one. Isla, I’d give you a hug. But I think you’d probably shoot me.’

‘Ha ha, yes, maybe. *Sniff*. I haven’t killed anyone today... shit, yes I have.’ She saw Dark eyes last moment flash before her eyes. ‘Fuck, fuck, you see. I have no control over my life. I’m like a Greek Tragedy, you know. From one fuck up to the next. One heart break to another. I can’t stop them, I’m addicted somehow. And now they are trying to kill me. Has your programme finished running yet? I need more coffee. Can we go now?’

‘Of course.’

Issy stopped at the door.

‘Let me tell you.’ She said. ‘I’m proud to be German. And I think my generation is finally willing to *shout* it out for everyone to hear. Hey, what are you doing?’

‘I’m giving you a hug.’

‘Oh, okay.’ She smiled and wrapped her arms around him.

Odd, but strangely nice.

‘It’s just a thought, Issy. But maybe you should hug Joe, he’s in trouble too.

What do you think?’

‘That I would definitely have to kill him afterward, that’s for sure.’

It was late, even darker outside than when they'd first arrived. Joe slept where they'd let him. Below the desk a series of tiny lights twinkled as a pair of routers sought to forge with databases around the world. They held the promise of hope; for answers that would unravel the WolfSpawn mystery.

Issy settled down with the diary in her hand. Still hopeful that the unread pages would offer up clues to their predicament.

05/01/45

We drove through Poland today, its the first time in a month that I've left the Camp. It all changes so quickly out here, it's became Hell on Earth. There are checkpoints everywhere. Refugees in their thousands are strung alongside the roads. There are no buildings left to recognise; Stalin has reduced everything to rubble. How did it come to this?

Between Krakow and the border we were stopped four times. The police check everyone's papers irrelevant of their rank. They are searching vehicles and looking for deserters and spies. They look at us with suspicion even though our papers are beyond reproach. Anyone heading away from the front line is suspect. I counted twenty men and twelve women hung from trees and posts along the way.

At eleven o'clock we requisitioned the last fuel from a truck carrying wounded. They were resistant and I thought Seiglar would order us to open fire. Is our cargo worth the lives of a dozen brave wounded soldiers? What's so important in these boxes that the wounded have to walk? Why do I care, our cargo takes me closer to home.

'Hey Elder, stop writing and give us a hand.'

In the truck's mirror Elder saw Otto, unshaven and square jawed, his friend and comrade since the Kursk campaign. He beckoned frantically. Elder closed his diary and jumped down from the cab.

'Back it up, Hans...' Elder rapped on the door to the slight man behind the wheel who shunted the transmission into reverse. 'Come on Hans, let's get it all the way.' The clutch bit and the gasoline engine raced, encouraged by the man who couldn't see shit without his tiny glasses; gazing from one mirror to the other and back. The throttle billowed smoke from the snorkel above the bonnet. 'Come on, move this thing. All the way.' Elder waved the big truck back. 'Come on Hans, give it some throttle.'

The two ton Opel lurched back up the steep gradient, moved slowly in its ascent, and then stopped. More gasoline fed into the pistons and the engine roared at the six massive tyres, but only the shale below them moved.

'Okay, halt, halt.' Elder pounded the gate of the truck. Moved his fingers across his throat for Hans to see. 'Cut the engine.'

Hans shrugged.

‘What the fuck are we doing here anyway?’ Otto asked. ‘Do you even know where *here* is?’

Elder shook his head. All he knew for sure was they had crossed the border back into Germany. His first time on home soil for nearly two years. It was very steep soil, a part of a mountain range where two peaks formed a V shape against the horizon. Fifty meters upward was the mouth of a disused mine, and a gut buster getting the crates inside

‘Here, have a smoke.’

‘Danke.’

‘What do you think is in those crates?’ Otto was showing too much interest.

‘I don’t know.’ Elder replied. ‘And don’t let the Doctor hear you ask if you know what’s good for you.’

‘Fuck Seiglar, who cares anyway.’

‘Shut up Otto.’ The heel of Elder’s jackboot ground the unfinished cigarette into the dust. ‘Get that lot into the mine.’

‘On my own?’

‘Get Carl to help you.’

Four men dressed in SS Camouflage were unloading the other truck. Jackets unbuttoned, helmets left in the dust. Boots that trudged back and forth to the mine. They’d managed to back their heavy vehicle right up to the entrance. Elder checked his watch.

‘We only have an hour or so of daylight left, so get a move on. Carl, when you’re done up there come and help Otto.’ He shouted.

‘It would be quicker if you helped us.’

‘You know the good thing about these stripes, Otto? It means I organise, I don’t carry. Now shut up, and get this stuff unloaded. And tell the others that when we are done, we have been ordered to Berlin.’

‘Seriously? Fuck, is it still there?’

‘Did you say Berlin?’ Herman, the oldest of them had come to help. ‘Will there be loose women waiting?’

‘Ja, most probably from Siberia.’ Said Hans. ‘Hairy girls who want to cut little Otto from his papa before they use it as a ring sizer.’

It’s good to see them laugh. Seiglar has promised Berlin, the chance to see loved ones. It may be their last chance. I’ll be glad when this War has ended.

‘Oberscharführer Stauff.’ It was Seiglar’s voice. All the men dropped their cigarettes and started to unload.

‘Herr Sturmbannfuhrer?’ Elder answered.

‘Relax, Elder. No need to keep saluting me.’

‘Yes sir.’

‘When the trucks are unloaded, you will take the nearest and park it inside. The other one we will use to reach Berlin. Have your men assemble inside when they are done, I have something for them. Carry on.’

‘Yes sir.’

He has something for the men? Maybe it’s a pardon for us all. I don’t doubt that the Russians will want to shoot us. I’ve heard the Americans

intend to put us all on trial. I guess we deserve it? Maybe we should take a vote and end it all here, with honour. Perhaps that is Herr Seiglar's intention, why he wants to talk to us. No, I doubt it, not him. He will fight to the end that one, and then find a way to escape alive.

'Come on ladies.' Elder shouted. 'We don't have all day.'

Elder ran his fingers across the uneven surface of the cavern wall. The tool marks were still visible from where the miners had opened the mountain.

Salt? He could taste it.

Elder reached for his canteen. It wasn't on his belt. He'd left it in the same place as his rifle. Propped against the wall with the others. Seiglar's orders. "Kit off, weapons stowed, get the trucks unloaded." His job had been to set charges around the entrance. Enough explosives to seal the mine from prying eyes. That done, he had wandered off to explore.

The shaft was deep. A good stroll by lamp light that led to a network of steps. Above them he found a cabin like structure built in and onto the rock. Curiosity led him up the steel staircase to what he supposed was an abandoned office. It took a solid boot to remove a stubborn door and let his lamplight inside. Empty except for a desk and some metal cabinets. A floor covered with papers that had yellowed with age. Elder stepped inside; across a timber floor that groaned under his weight. The mine had obviously been closed for many years.

A ladder ascended up inside a narrow shaft. To his left another door set into the mountain's wall. No lock or handle, just a ring and two rusted hinges. It took both hands to encourage it to open. To release the sound of

voices. Muted conversation that echoed down the narrow passage ahead. Elder followed the sound of the voices and walked out onto a thin ledge.

His men were below. Carl's truck already backed into the mine. All the crates neatly stacked. Elder watched, something wasn't right. He could see Seiglar behind the truck, he'd changed.

Why has he changed into a Wehrmacht uniform?

He was dressed as a regular army officer, a low ranking lieutenant. And there was something odd about the way the doctor was acting. Seiglar rounded the truck with two sacks, one in each hand. He threw them onto the ground. Watched as the men pulled out civilian clothing. Each of them trying to find something that would fit. Then Seiglar reached into the truck's cab and pulled out a Sturmgewehr. He paused, closed the door, the assault rifle slung over his shoulder as he walked toward the others.

No, no no no... What's he doing?

'Heini... Carl... run.' Elder screamed.

The warning came too late as the weapon opened fire. Elder's men half undressed. Tatt tatt tatt. Controlled bursts at point blank range. Tatt, tatt, tatt. Elder reached for his rifle; not at his side. He could see it leant against the wall alongside his comrade's weapons .

'Nooo!'

The sound of gunfire drowned out his voice. Tat tat tat echoed around the chamber. Three men were down, one staggered back. Who was it?

'Otto.'

‘Bullets bounced off the walls behind Otto as he fell. The sound of the Sturmgewehr resonated after Seiglar ejected the spent magazine. A moment later another had been clipped inside. The doctor stepped forward and fired again. Short bursts that strafed through the bodies on the ground.

The gunfire stopped.

A groan from the pile of bodies. Hans tried to drag himself up. Tat tat. He slumped face down. Then the doctor turned his attention upward.

Fuck, get down.

Bullets zinged, pinged, and whipped off the walls as Elder squeezed himself behind the rocks on the ledge. Round after round from the lethal assault rifle. Then silence as the weapon’s fire ceased.

‘Seiglar... you bastard.’

No answer.

Elder risked a look. The cavernous entrance below bathed in a grey light. The dusty ground spoiled with blood.

‘Seiglar, why?’ It suddenly became obvious. What he’d said whilst holding Anna. “No witnesses,” he’d said. “No witnesses.” ‘You fucking murderer...’ Where was he? Not inside. *He’s gone outside? Oh God, the charges. Get out Elder, run, he’s going to blow the entrance.*

The passage had shrunk with his urgency, his fit much tighter than before. The walls bounced, snagged, chafed at him. There were only seconds before... *I’m not going to make it.*

The shaft trembled as he staggered, stumbled, lurched toward the door a few metres ahead.

I'm not going to make it.

The air was sucked out of the passage, and then forced back around him as the mountain shuddered and caused a misty blur to get in his way. The door was in his hand. He was almost through. The shock wave slammed into his body and forced him through the ground as if he were made of paper. The floor, wall, ceiling, he saw them all in a blink as dust and rock exploded throughout the empty space. As the enormous pressure carried him across the cabin it ruptured the glass into a million shards. The mine trembled. The office lurched. Everywhere timbers groaned as Elder lay on the floor, but he'd survived.

The office lurched, then listed, as the creaking timbers began to shear.

How long had he laid here unconscious? Elder fumbled for his lamp, grateful he'd attached it to his belt. A strong beam of light cut through the black.

The office listed. The doorway he'd been thrown through hung half a metre from the wall. Dust hung heavy in the lamplight. He pulled his scarf to cover his face.

Seiglar? He'd be long gone by now. *Why?* Had he fought his way back from Kursk just to die like this. *It would have been quicker out there with the others.*

Elder staggered to his feet and leant into the slope. What furniture there was had slid hard against the cabin's walls. He used a metal cabinet to steady his passage across the room. The light searching for hope.

The ladder? He shone the beam upward. It was still there. *It has to go somewhere.* The light carved up ward through the darkness and revealed a natural shaft, an iron ladder ascending. Elder dragged a heavy desk around. He heaved on a cabinet and raised it alongside. He'd use the furniture to reach his only hope of escape. The rungs were cold to the touch as he pulled himself into the shaft.

One rung after the other, the shaft narrow and awkward to ascend. His hands pained by the cold of the steel. Slow progress as he pulled, pushed, forced his way through the gap. Every few minutes a pause and flick of the light. Take a breath. Begin the ascent again. And now his ribs hurt; much

more than just bruising. Some were broken. The higher he stepped the more pain he was forced to endure.

Keep moving Oberscharführer, that's an order.

The need to survive; constant thoughts of revenge, all fuel to keep Elder climbing. To stop him from falling to end the pain. Again he turned the light upward. Let it search and examine. He found nothing beyond its reach.

'No, not now. Please, don't give up on me now.' The light faded. Elder struck it against the ladder and it returned. A deep breath, and then more anxiety as the beam failed again. The lamp's battery was exhausted and the darkness returned. Elder couldn't see his hand in the pitch black.

Keep moving, Elder. Not even a mountain goes up forever. Cough, cough. I'm not dying, not here, not like this.

Climb and rest. Climb and rest. Each time he rested he heard the pounding of his heart. No other sounds in the black of the shaft until his boots began to climb again.

Stop and you die.

Elder began to sing. A soldier's song; a lament to fallen comrades. He sang it out loud and with pride. He kept on moving.

It felt like half a lifetime. He considered letting go. Allow gravity to do its work, let the mine become his tomb. He could no longer feel his hands, and then something hard hit his head. Elder fumbled at the object.

It's a hatch? Yes, some sort of wheel. Turn it, Elder. Make it turn.

Elder's body quaked and shuddered as he pulled at the circle of steel. *No no no*. He was too weak. It wouldn't budge. Had he come so far just to fail now.

Elder put his arm through the ladder. A single boot against the wall of the shaft. Every muscle and sinew strained to turn the wheel. Nothing. Again he tried, again he failed. Had it rusted shut to never open again. Elder paused. He took a breath and the realisation somewhere below was the cabin and a slow death from hunger. He wasn't going to let that happen. One last effort before he let go and ended his torment.

Elder grabbed at the wheel. He gave everything he had to escape. Every last ounce of effort from his thighs as they pushed at the wall, from his hands as his arms trembled with the effort. The wheel turned.

Movement, slow but sure. Faster now, the wheel more excited to be turned. Elder twisted, twisted, the last of his strength. And then he pushed the hatch up and over to clanked hard against its mountings. Elder felt the light of the moon touch his face.

Elder fell out of the shaft onto soft grass. The last thing he remembered was the moonlight making shadows of the trees.

16/01/45

A name written at the centre of the page. A pen dragged harshly across its surface, crossed from corner to corner. The name, SEIGLAR. Numerous pages treated the same way. The rest of the book had its pages torn out.

‘Hey, sleepy head. I finished the journal.’

‘Hmm, journal, tell me later.’

She told him anyway. Most of which he knew. About the crazy scientist and Elder’s secret love. Lost babies, secret projects... and murder.

‘I’m listening, I am.’ He’d even sat up, didn’t that prove he was listening.

‘Seiglar killed them all.’ Issy said. ‘Except for Elder Routh, who is really Elder Stauff.’

‘He is?’

‘Joe, they hid everything in a mine; do you think it’s still there?’

It was a slow process but Joe felt he was coming back on-line. His head was filled with clouds. It wasn’t that he wasn’t interested. He just wanted sleep more.

‘Issy, there’s something wrong with me; why can’t I see properly?’ He asked. ‘Since when do Beta blockers put people to sleep?’

‘Best not to dwell on that, it’s not important. Come, there’s so much more to hear. Come, take a look at this.’

She was pulling him. Why was she pulling him? It was comfortable curled here in the chair. She wasn’t listening. As Joe tried to stand he realised he hadn’t been comfortable after all.

‘Whilst you’ve been sleeping, Solomon and I have been reviewing Elder’s hard drive. Joe, we have two new leads.’

‘Review, leads... why does my mouth feel so soggy?’

‘Have you heard of the The Kristophen children’s charity?’ She asked.

‘No, I don’t think so. Who are they?’

‘A charity that helps orphaned children in Eastern Europe.’

‘Charity? What... why was Elder investigating a children’s charity?’ It was getting easier to speak.

‘Elder was looking into the charity’s history. There’s a maze of financial transactions on this thing that go back to the nineteen fifties. Routh was trying to find a link between the charity, and Luminsrau.’

‘What’s a children’s charity got to do with a right wing party?’

‘We don’t know yet. But here’s something else you’ll find interesting.’ Issy turned the laptop around. ‘Look at this.’

Joe nodded. He could see the bright lights on the screen but not much detail. Still a bit fuzzy.

‘It’s some kind of graph.’

She flicked several page across the screen for him to follow.

‘Wait until you see what’s at the end. Look, it’s Pharmax. Okay the information is coded somehow; why would someone bother to do that? But the names, look at the names. Routh has obviously been on their case for decades. Joe, look, pay attention.’

He tried, he really did. But lazy eye syndrome seemed to be a side effect of his recent medication. What was in those pills? He grabbed the laptop and pulled the screen closer.

Boxes, jumbled words, strange shapes. Why leave the names and code the rest. A list of chemical compounds scrolled up the screen, followed by a longer list of file names. The words 'SECRET' in brackets everywhere.

'What's this?'

'That's classified government stuff.' She said. It was the first time he'd seen her excited without a steering wheel in her hands. 'We've only skimmed the surface but there's schematics for chemical weapons going back to the eighties, and biological shit from the nineties. And look, pages of redacted shit about Desert Storm. And there's finances too. The kind you don't volunteer to the Tax Man. Look at all of this, Joe.'

'I'm trying.'

The screen swung away, and then span back. New images, lots of words.

'We have land purchases, large offshore accounts, some heavy duty cash withdrawals; and payments into accounts with no names, just numbers... this has got to mean something, right?'

'Yes, that Pharmax is as corrupt as all the other big corporations in the world. How did you sequence all of this? Routh's hard drive was deliberately fragmented.'

'Solomon has computer skills, just like you.'

'I have a gift for organisation.' Solomon said.

'You do?' Joe hadn't realised Solomon was behind him. 'Well I could have done this if you hadn't drugged me.'

'It's not a competition, Joe. Look, now we know so much more.'

‘Oh, okay. And it helps us how?’

‘I don’t know.’

There, he’d finally slowed her down. Joe slumped into the chair closest to the desk and put the computer on his lap.

‘Doesn’t this all prove that Pharmax is a part of whatever is going on?’

Joe supposed it did.

‘In a court of law, maybe?’ He said. ‘But what’s the charge; where’s the motive? What’s the reasoning behind all this?’ Joe started to press keys. ‘Did someone mention coffee?’

‘I’ll make some.’ Said Solomon.

‘What’s all this?’ Joe moved things around on the touchscreen. More keys were depressed, his fingers began to find rhythm. ‘Solomon must have the SS historical repository on here. Wow, it’s like, massive. Ooh, and what do we have here?’

‘I looked at that.’ Issy perched herself on the chair’s arm. ‘Do you understand any of that?’

‘No, not really.’

‘But you do bio engineering, you told me.’

‘Yeah, but this isn’t really my... wow, it looks like some kind of virus.’

‘A virus?’

‘Hmm, it’s been manufactured from a natural strain of, something? It looks medicinal.’ More scrolling. ‘But that’s what they do at Pharmax, they make medicines? Vaccines, antibiotics... creams? Pharmax are at the forefront of

stem cell technology and Nano-tech biology. You name it, they tinker with it. It's a really big list.'

'Is that what this is about, Joe. Some kind of virus?'

'No, not with this; it's more medical than military. Besides, what would be the point of killing for something like that? There are plenty of virus' that can wipe out half the planet in a heart beat. You don't have to spend seventy years creating one. No, there's got to be something else in here, we're just not seeing it. Hello, this is odd.'

'What? What have you seen?'

'Why am *I* on this search list? You've been checking me out, why?'

‘That was me.’ Solomon lied; a steaming mug of coffee in each hand. ‘I wanted to know who I had sleeping on my chair.’

‘Oh, right.’ He supposed that was okay. Did he always put an apron on to make coffee? Issy shrugged.

‘Joe, virus? Is that why they want you?’

‘Issy, I couldn’t help anyone with something like this. It’s not my area of expertise. I’m more cell regeneration than viral mutation. It’s the difference between, designing fighter planes and commercial airliners.’

‘But could it be why Routh came to London to see you?’

‘Err, hello, Earth calling Isla... I don’t know. I didn’t meet with Elder Routh. He was dead when I found him. And I didn’t actually find him, he found me. Besides, this stuff is too complex, too deep. You’d need years of background and investment to design something like this. You’d need to be a bloody... Nobel Prize winning geneticist to understand it.’

‘Hey, didn’t you say Professor Tillmach had one of those.’

‘Yeah, and I think we just found out what he was working on at Pharmax.’ Joe slid the laptop away and picked up his coffee. ‘The more we look at this the less sense it makes. Okay, facts... we know from Doctor Herse that this isn’t about Supermen, or Cloning. And I believed him. And what would be the point anyway? All very helpful before the end of World War Two. But

these days? Send in a drone and boom it's all over. Research, facilities, all vaporised in an instant. What's so secret seventy years after it was supposed to help the Nazi cause? I don't get what's going on, and none of this is helping? What do a brace of ancient Nazis, a seventy year old secret, and a multinational drug corporation all have in common?

'Don't forget to add in the children's charity. Oh and Luminsrau.' She added.

'Damn, I almost had it solved until you mentioned them.'

'You're not funny.' She said.

'It's quite a puzzle.' Solomon chipped in. 'And this man, Elder Routh, he was obviously obsessed with solving it. May I see those land acquisition files again.' His aged fingers showed little sign of atrophy with the speed they moved around the keys and screen. 'According to these documents,' he said, 'Pharmax has diversified into many differing areas of business. Look at these, they're land deeds. Excuse me Isla, can I see that photo again. The one of the woman, Anna.'

'Okay, sure. But don't bend her.'

'Joe, do you know how to plot the coordinates of these land deals onto a map?'

'Yeah, just give me the numbers and I'll upload a GPS website. Excuse me.'

Issy stepped back. 'Thank you. Now then, let's see. computers. Any child can use them.' *Miss, I speak a dozen languages and drug my friends. Just watch and learn.*

‘Can you plot these locations onto a map, Joe? Yes, that’s good. Now overlay their positions with the land purchases recorded on Elder’s hard drive.’

‘Kids stuff. Just copy and paste. Drag from here, open this up, aaaand... I make it sound so easy. But really, it’s not.’ *Yeah, I save your life and then make a laptop look sexier than those pole dancers.* ‘Why am I doing this, Solomon?’

‘I want you both to look at this. Joe, put my numbers onto a map of Europe.’

‘Okay... done. They’re now the dots that are glowing green. Wow, there’s a few of them; what are they?’

‘Please overlay them with the Pharmax land deed coordinates.’

A map of Europe stretched across the screen, hundreds of green dots highlighted throughout France and the Low Countries, right up into the Ukraine. Joe’s fingers dabbled at the laptop’s keyboard. A number of the green dots turned red.

‘What are you doing?’ Asked Isla.

‘The green dots are mine.’ Solomon replied. ‘They mark the locations of all known underground installations built by the SS, before and during the War.’

‘That’s a lot of holes in the ground.’ She said. ‘So what are the red ones?’

‘Those are sites purchased by Pharmax.’

‘Really? So Pharmax has been buying underground bunkers. Why? And why are all the red dots only in the East?’

‘Joe, add in the coordinates on the back of your photo.’

‘Done?’ A single orange dot flashed up. ‘You see how I colour coded them for you. Just in case you got confused?’ Issy didn’t look confused, or impressed. ‘So what were you expecting, Solomon?’

‘That it would match one of the red dots. But it doesn’t. So what is so important about the photos coordinates? Joe, can you tell me exactly where that location is?’

‘Sure. I can get you a shot of the front door. It’s called Google Earth, Issy.’

‘Joe, shut up. I’m impressed okay.’

The image on the screen began to zoom in. Europe got smaller, more focused. It settled on a patch of ground on the border of Poland and Germany.

‘Is that a farm?’ Asked Issy.

‘I’ll cross check the coordinates with the German land registry.’ Said Joe.

‘Ah, now this is interesting.’

‘What have you found?’ She asked. *What’s so interesting?* ‘Speak up.’

‘According to this the area was registered as a salt mine for several hundred years.’

‘This is a mine? Joe, Elder wrote that they left everything in a salt mine.’

‘Coincidence Huh? According to the official version of history it was closed down during the War. Post War the land was purchased by someone called, Scharne? Could the mine be a secret bunker; one you don’t know about?’

‘It’s possible.’ Said Solomon. ‘Many mines were bought or commandeered by the SS before and during the War.’

‘So now we know why Pharmax bought this site, but why so many other old military sites? And why buy them through Shell Companies?’ Joe asked.

‘To keep it a secret, obviously.’ Said Issy.

‘Oh, derr, I didn’t think of that. But why buy them, secret or otherwise? For what reason?’

‘Joe, we have to go this mine.’

‘There’s more here, Issy. Routh has linked the dates of the Pharmax purchases with a list of really big sums of money being moved into offshore accounts.’

‘How big?’

‘Seven and eight figures, they’re pretty big.’

‘Perhaps they intend to build underground factories?’ Said Solomon. ‘It’s possible that they buy the sites to stop competitors acquiring them. There could be a hundred reasons.’

‘Yeah right, and ninety nine of them are illegal.’ Joe added.

And why; if Elder Routh had all of this information, did he sit on it for so long? What was he waiting for? He could have gone to the authorities, or the Press. Why didn’t he give it to Interpol, or some other agency?’

‘I think you’re missing the point, Joe.’ said Issy. ‘Elder wanted Seiglar, not Pharmax. All of this is a map to find him. Seiglar is at the core of all this. Solomon, please tell me your computer has found him?’ *Don’t shake your head.*

‘According to the last census,’ he said, ‘there were one hundred and forty six Seiglar’s resident in The Brandenburg Metropolitan Region alone. I have contacts, I will try to find out if any are related to an SS doctor. Someone must know of an officer named Seiglar who served in SS Medical. If he had a family, or children. Maybe my sources have information that can help?’

‘Children?’ Issy stood and walked around the desk. ‘That’s it, the link with the Children’s Home.’

‘Most Kid’s Homes have children.’

‘Of course they do, Joe. But didn’t you say that Professor Tillmach was a Lebensborn child. Born in nineteen forty five? Well, if Elder Routh didn’t bring up his son, who did? Could he have been in an orphanage, maybe run by the Kristophen children’s charity?’

‘I suppose.’

‘That seals it.’ She was excited. ‘Pharmax are obviously backing this mystery financially, and Elder thought he could use them to find Seiglar. Come on, this is good, we’re getting somewhere.’

‘There were a lot of children born within the Lebensborn programme.’ Said Solomon. ‘Most will have changed their names, or be dead by now.’

‘But Tillmach said there was a list.’

‘No, Joe. No such records exist.’ Solomon replied. ‘All the records were destroyed by the Nazis.’

‘Tillmach said there was a list, and that Elder Routh had seen it. That’s how Elder found his son.’

‘And did he say where this list was?’

‘No. He pulled out a gun and got himself shot.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. But such a list would be a fascinating historical document. All of the children on that list would have been conceived by SS soldiers out of wedlock with Aryan women. Those children were to be the future of the SS.’

‘Sorry to stop you, but the archive has found the recent records for the mine. According to these deeds all the land was sold to a private buyer in nineteen fifty one. It was turned into a stud farm and horse ranch. The entire area is owned by a wealthy industrialist family; the current owner is listed as... Conrad Feuller.’

‘Conrad?’ Said Issy. ‘Back at the Club, Renny suggested that Baldy call someone called *Conrad*. Renny said, “Conrad would know what to do.”’

‘Then who the hell is Conrad Fueller?’ Asked Joe. ‘How’s he mixed up with the Gruuns?’

‘Look at this.’ Solomon turned the screen around. ‘According to Wikipedia Conrad Fueller is a wealthy industrialist and philanthropist. He’s also a Euro MP. And this may answer your previous question. The family business is, pharmaceuticals. The original business started up in nineteen forty nine; a company named Fellino.’

‘What’s that got to do with the Gruuns, and Baldy?’

‘Joe, the Fellino company went public in nineteen seventy two. Before it floated on the Market Fellino changed its name, to Pharmax.’

‘No way. Come on guys, this cannot be a coincidence.’

‘Joe, there’s more.’ Said Solomon. ‘The Feuller’s original factory site was built one mile from the coordinates written on the back of your photo.’

Issy took Anna’s photo from Solomon.

‘So that’s it, she said, ‘surely there can’t be any doubt. Solomon, we know who Seiglar is. He has to be Conrad Fueller. He’s the mystery officer at Auschwitz.’

‘Have I missed something?’ Asked Joe.

Solomon shook his head.

‘No, Conrad Fueller was born in nineteen sixty seven. It was his Great Uncle who started the company, Manfred Fueller. Born in nineteen twenty one he was the founder of the Fellini company. I’ll run his name through the computer.’

‘Joe, we know Hut Thirty Six was at Auschwitz. That WolfSpawn, whatever it is, began there. And now we’ve found Solomon’s mysterious SS officer. I’ll explain later. But he has to be this man, Fueller. And he started the original company that’s grown into Pharmax. If we want to find out what’s going on we need to go here.’ She held up the back of the photo. ‘To see a man named Fueller.’

‘Well that’s settled then. We’ll walk up to his front door and ask him shall we?’

‘I’ve found him.’ Said Solomon. ‘According to his service record Fueller joined the German Army in thirty nine and was stationed in France. Apparently for the duration of the War. He surrendered to the Americans in nineteen forty five. He was never a member of the SS according to official records.’

‘Could his War record have been be altered or forged in some way?’ Asked Issy.

‘Of course. Lots of Nazis assumed the identities of dead soldiers after the War. Ah, according to the Pharmax website he died in two thousand and six; that’s when his Nephew, Conrad Fueller took control of the company.’

‘Well Pharmax is up to here in all this. Which means the Fuellers are too. What d’you say Joe?’

‘A rich and reclusive man. No problem. We’ll just walk up to his front door and ask if the family business was built on loot stolen by the Nazis. That’s what you want to do, isn’t it? Can you see that, Solomon? She has a look about her. I’m beginning to recognise it now. The one that says, I have a crazy dumb ass plan.’

‘Joe, what choice do we have? I feel like a hamster in a wheel, and I’m getting dizzy. This man, Fueller. He knows about WolfSpawn, and he knows who Seiglar is.’

‘Was. Herse said he’s dead, remember.’

‘Well this is the first concrete lead we have. We need to see this man. I need to see this man. Get him to call off the attack dogs.’

‘Oh, okay, so assuming he is involved with this. What if he says no? What if he gets his *attack dogs* to finish us off? He won’t have to look for us if we knock on his door. No Issy, we have to think this through.’

‘I have done.’

‘What, in four and a half seconds? Yeah, you’re priceless.’

‘So you want to keep on running from these people?’

‘No, of course I don’t... I just need to think.’

‘That’s the last thing you need to do, Joe. We should at least go to the mine. Check out the ranch. Maybe we can find leverage against them?’

‘Solomon, talk some sense into her.’

‘Joe’s right, maybe the police would be a better option. Take everything you have to them. Explain what is happening.’

‘Men like Seiglar own the police. They’ll make all of this go away, and us too. And what does it prove anyway? Nothing... not a thing. And don’t forget we are wanted for murder. You and I, Joe. For the murder of that poor girl at the hotel. I’m not going back to prison; I’ll die before that happens.’ Issy walked to the windows. ‘It’s okay, I’ll go on my own. I’m used to being alone. It’s probably for the best anyhow, you’d just hold me back. Solomon, do you have a car I can borrow,?’

‘Isla, no... this is reckless, dangerous.’

‘So’s crossing the road, Joe. Please, Solomon, your car keys.’

Solomon hesitated.

‘On the hook above the desk.’ He said. ‘Follow the stairs down until you reach the parking below the building.’ His words, his direction, both reluctant.

‘Thank you.’ She said. ‘And what you told me in there, it helps, honestly.’
Joe...?

He just stood and stared at her.

Fine, it’s best that you stay. But I think I’ve got used to having you around.

It was unexpected and sudden. Issy put her arms around Joe.

‘Don’t let a hug go to your head.’ She said. ‘You’re still an idiot... *but you’re my idiot.*’ She whispered. Then let him go. No looking back, she was used to being on her own. The keys were where Solomon had said and a moment later the door was open.

Joe?

He still had time to follow. Issy closed her eyes and stepped through the doorway. She didn’t really want to go on her own. She wanted Joe to hold her hand. They were a team now, weren’t they?

The door clunked shut and sent a wave of shit feelings rolling through her stomach.

He isn’t coming.

‘Fuck you, Joe.’

Issy headed down the stairs.

The key fob in Issy's hand bore a Mercedes logo. It seemed every third car in the garage had the same badge on its bonnet as she pointed and pressed; waited for a flash of lights, and sooner rather than later down here in the shadows.

Make a noise... flash some lights.

Another level was below. It looked much darker than the one above.

A good place for an ambush.

Just her own footsteps for company as she ascended the slope.

One hand extended with the fob, her other pulled the gun from her waistband. She let it hang by her side before going any further. Then carried on down toward the darkness.

One, two, three cars and nothing. Then a hallelujah sound that caused a momentary blip in her heart's quickened beat. A flare of orange like sunrise at dawn that spurred a wild rush of adrenaline and a deep breath. Issy opened the car door and her backside slumped into soft leather.

Key... ignition...?

'Silly girl, it's keyless.'

Whatever was under the bonnet roared into life. Bright headlamps illuminated everything in their line of sight. Issy dumped her bag on the passenger seat and emptied the contents. Two handguns and six clips on the seat; GI's Glock still clutched in her hand.

Enough to start a fight, and maybe finish it too. She thumped the steering wheel. *Fuck you Joe.*

Issy yanked the gearstick into Drive and stomped on the gas peddle. It sounded as though a demented flock of seagulls were escaping between the tyres and the ground. A thump as she hit the ramp and ascended. Solomon's wheels enjoyed their first ever drift around the bend as they laid a trail of rubber onto the concrete. German engineering was put to the test as the anti-lock brakes juddered the car to a full stop and waited for the garage door to trundle upward at its own inadequate pace.

'Come on, come on.' Movement to her left. 'Shit, who's there?' She was trapped. Issy pushed the lever into reverse as her window powered down. GI's Glock poked out through the widening hole.

'Who's there?' *Come on gate.*

A look in the rear view, then both her mirrors. The Glock ready to empty its contents at a figure stood in the stairwell arch. Daylight rising up its frame as the garage door managed half mast.

Joe?

'Joe is that you?'

'Just promise me you'll keep to the speed limit. Oh, and I won't have to use a gun.'

Joe. You came

'Sure, yes, I promise.' *Thank you Mama.* 'I promise you anything, just get into the car.'

‘A promise and a smile?’ He said closing the passenger door.

‘Yes, suddenly I like the dark.’ She said ‘And besides, this is the nicest car I’ve never had to steal.’

The tyres squealed below the garage door as the Mercedes disappeared out into the early morning roads of Berlin.

Thank you, Mama... thank you....

Joe rolled back into the grass. He'd been watching the ranch down below, a couple of miles away. A group of outbuildings with a main residence secure in the centre. There were lots of exposed fields with fencing that skirted the property. How the hell were they supposed to get anywhere near it? To make things worse, as dusk had descended, the lamps had come on. The lengthy driveway had become a runway; the stables and outbuildings glowed brighter than NeverLand. That's when the secluded, idyllic ranch turned itself into a military compound. In the past hour they had counted some thirty or so hired guns wander the perimeter and grounds.

'I don't think it's a good idea to go down there.' He said. But Issy wasn't looking at the Ranch.

'In there is a good place to start.' She said.

'The mine? Have you seen the size of that door?'

'Would you rather start down there at the house?'

'No.'

'Okay, so let's take a look in the mine. I want to see what they're up to in there. Why they bought this land. Maybe we'll find out what Seiglar left inside that mountain.'

'It was seventy years ago, are you sure about this? Won't it be dark in there?'

‘That’s why we have this.’ The flashlight from the boot of Solomon’s car.
‘And don’t worry about the entrance. Elder got out through a shaft that exits up there somewhere. We’ll get in the same way.’

‘Are we absolutely sure this is the right place?’

‘Look, Joe.’ She was pointing above the ranch. ‘Elder wrote in his diary about the twin peaks in the distance. This is the place. This is Ground Zero. They took everything from Hut Thirty Six into that mine, and then blew the entrance. Someone went to the trouble of reopening the entrance and put a big gate there instead. Let’s take a look, and if we find nothing. Then we go down there.’

Joe peeked again at the Ranch. Maybe breaking into a mine wasn’t so bad.

It took an hour to find. If they hadn’t known it was there it would have gone unnoticed. Nature had hidden the hatch from site. And it took both of them and the lever for the car’s jack to prise it open. The strong beam from the torch failed to find the bottom of the hole.

‘Ladies first.’ Said Joe. ‘You’ve got the torch.’

Like Alice, Issy disappeared down the rabbit hole.

‘I suppose it’s too late to mention my loathing of dark holes in the ground? Hey, Issy?’ The torchlight shone down leaving darkness in its trail. ‘How do we know this ladder is safe?’

‘Come on, Joe.’

This is a stupid stupid thing to do.

Joe slid into the hole. His sneakers feeling for the first rung.

Stupid.

The first half dozen rungs were safely ascended, and then panic.

‘Issy, turn the torch back on.’

‘We need to save the batteries.’

I can't move.

‘I need to see my feet.’

No-one will ever find my body.

Joe closed his eyes and moved slowly down. It helped if he couldn't see the darkness.

‘You have to drop the last few feet.’ She whispered loudly. ‘Hang, like a monkey. I’ve got your legs, just let go.’

She’d turned the light back on as Joe dropped the last few feet into her arms.

‘I’ve got you.’ She said. And for a moment they held each other. All Issy could see were Joe’s eyes locked onto hers. She felt awkward, exposed and unsure.

Let go of him, Issy. Put him down,

‘Have you thought about how we get back up?’ He asked. ‘Didn’t think so.’

That made it easier. She pointed the torch a few feet to their right, to where the timbers had broken away. The torchlight lighting up the empty space where the floor had once been. She slid carefully off the furniture the other side.

‘Elder’s diary said there was a big explosion when Seiglar blew the mine entrance. I guess what didn’t come down in the blast lost the fight with time. That’s a long drop.’

‘Was this some sort of office?’

‘Yes. It saved Elder’s life back in nineteen forty five when Seiglar tried to seal him in here. Somewhere over there should be... ah, you see, where the steel beams stick out from the rock face. Look above, you see it? That

opening is a tunnel that leads to a ledge above the entrance, and that's how we get in.'

'And how will we get back up?'

'Details. Come on we don't have all night.'

The passage was tight. Creepy, said Joe. It was Issy who stepped out first onto the ledge.

'Wow.' The torchlight sliced through the darkness. 'Joe, look at this.' The beam exposed a cavernous chamber, tall walls and a cathedral like ceiling. Below she could see the entrance to the mine.

'Joe, it's beautiful.'

'No, it's dark and cold. I must be mad to have come down here. Give me the torch.'

'Hey, what are you doing?'

'Moving things along, hopefully.'

The beam of light swept the ground below, the sheer darkness of the void hung perfectly in the beam's precision. Everywhere salt pockets sparkled to its touch.

'Look, cables.' said Joe. The light followed them up to the ceiling and then across to see wide Pan head lights that hung at regular intervals. The torchlight traced them back to their source.

'There, you see. That's a fuse box. How about we turn the lights on.'

It was an easy descent. Like scrambling down a hill, no rope required, more light preferred. The dust rose with each step as did the temperature.

'Do you think it still works?' Asked Issy, pointing at the big lever protruding from the rusting metal box.

'Let's hope so. How long do you think the battery in that will last? What were you thinking? It's eternal darkness if the battery fails.'

Issy pulled the stiff lever downward.

Nothing.

'Well that was a good idea.'

Then a glow, faint at first. Within seconds the mine began to reveal its colossal size. Issy had never seen something so industrial look so heavenly. The heavy cables slung between large metal hooks that were screwed into the roof of the cavern. She followed more cables down the main tunnel out of sight. Small lamps fixed to the wall lit the way.

'Do you think it's wired to the main ring at the ranch?' She asked.

'Probably dimming their lights as we speak.' Said Joe.

'It's a chance we have to take. Come on, let's go find something.'

‘I’ve looked in six rooms.’ Issy said. ‘Nothing but office furniture down there. What do you think they were doing in a mine?’

‘Don’t know.’ Joe had looked, hoped to find something. ‘It’s all lab equipment up here. Stuff from the fifties and sixties, but nothing specialised. They must have took it all with them. This place could be a museum.’

‘Not one I’d go to.’

‘Let’s try down here.’

More chambers in the adjoining tunnel, similarly sized, mostly workstations from the past. Some had typewriters left on the desks. And then something different. Vast areas excavated from the rock. Superstores of shelving, cupboards, old and rusting freezers. All been left to gather dust.

‘There’s nothing here, Issy. Whatever this place was, it’s long been emptied.’

‘Maybe not. Joe?’ Issy’s voice raised and insistent. ‘Come look at this, there must be thousands of crates in here. They’re five and six high, all the way to the back.’ She climbed on the closest and peered inside. ‘These are empty. I think they’re all empty.’

‘Wow, these must be the original packing cases.’

‘You’re excited by packing cases?’

‘This must be where ROX-1 was first developed.’ She didn’t look impressed. ‘Rox-1 was, still is, a revolutionary vaccine. It was years ahead of it’s time;

and still is in some ways. Do you know how many babies survived birth and infancy because of this stuff.’ He ran his fingers over the letters stencilled on a box. ‘Wow, forty years ago Pharmax synthesised an artificial viral cluster that could stimulate auto immune development in a foetus.’

‘It’s just a vaccine, Joe?’

‘Issy, these boxes are scientific history. Pharmax supplied most of Europe with it in the nineties. It still does under licensed brands.

‘Hey Joe, I’ve got more crates in here. These must be worth something even as firewood. Why leave them here? Ha, you know what they have stencilled on the side?’

‘No, what’s Epidome?’

‘You don’t know? It’s a cream used by women to stop a rash. You know... down here.’

‘Eurgh, that’s kinda gross.’

‘Not if you have a rash. So this was what, where they made this stuff? Or just a place to stockpile things, like that vaccine, and creams?’

‘No, this wasn’t a factory. This was the labs. Wow, it’s a snapshot of medical history.’

‘If you say wow once more... Joe, it’s a hole filled with old boxes.’

‘No, it’s more than that. ROX-1 was the first vaccine to produce Synthetic antibodies to be delivered into an unborn child. It’s the drug that launched Pharmax into the big time back in the early nineties. Oh, and there’s something else.’

‘What... what else?’

‘Rox-1, of course. This vaccine is the reason Professor Tillmach got his Nobel Prize.’

‘The man you met under the bridge?’

‘Yeah. Scientists are still trying to pick his work apart today. It’s a ’

‘Well that’s not a coincidence.’

‘No, no coincidence. ROX-1 was a wonder of science. Every pharmaceutical company searches for the next big medical breakthrough. This was Pharmax’s.’

‘So ROXY was the wonder drug of its day. What’s it got to do...’

‘Whoah, what did you say? Roxy?’

‘Sure. ROX-1, it’s not exactly catchy.’

‘Roxy, that’s what the Professor said before he died. Roxy.’

‘Oh, you think that he meant... but why would he say that with his dying breath?’

‘I don’t know.’ Joe pulled on the nearest crate to look inside. And then another. Both empty. ‘ROX... Roxy... Roxy. Ahh, I should have seen this. It was Tillmach’s crowning achievement.’

‘Okay, it’s not so boring now. Tell me about it. Tell me about Roxy.’

‘Conventional vaccines prompt the immune system to make antibodies, you know, by infecting a patient with weakened or dead pathogens.’ Joe yanked the top off another box. ‘The immune cells produce antibodies which fight the infection.’ Empty. He pulled at other boxes close to him. Too light. All

empty. ‘Artificial gene synthesis,’ he said, ‘it’s quite brilliant. But what’s Roxy got to do with WolfSpawn?’

‘I don’t know, but all these crates are marked with a man’s dying words. Well, Roxy?’

‘Err, artificial genes, created in a laboratory. It’s all based on solid-phase DNA synthesis.’

‘Maybe in English?’

‘It means the user doesn’t have to begin with a preexisting sequence of DNA. Damn it, they’re all empty. I thought...’

‘Thought what? That they stored something secret in them? That would be nice. Joe, Tillmach invited you to a midnight rendezvous. Roxy was the last thing he said to you. Look at all these boxes, they must mean something. Think, Joe. You know something about this, what is it?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t. This place is just a glorified warehouse.’ Joe dropped the lid he held. ‘And an out of date one at that. Look, Tillmach, ROX-1, all before my time. And as for the science, it’s groundbreaking sure, but we’re talking the nineteen nineties here. There’s nothing here, Issy. Nothing? Come on, we’re wasting our time.’

‘Okay, so let’s break into the ranch. There must be evidence down there’

‘No, no. I’m not breaking into the ranch house. They have guns down there. Let’s check out a few more rooms first. Think things through. Routh must have written this bloody mine’s coordinates on Anna for a reason.’

‘For the mine or the Ranch? And the Professor’s dying words? Joe, this is definitely where we need to be.’

‘Hey, Joe. You need to take a look at this.’

‘Issy, you okay?’ She looked sombre, her gaze toward the far end of a room with no lights. He followed the torch’s light. ‘Are those SS uniforms?’

‘Yes. And I think we’ve found Elder’s friends.’

Simple wooden markers, the light descended to each one in turn. Six crosses. Six German names.

‘And look at that.’ Said Issy. A huge Nazi flag had been draped across the side wall. ‘That seals it, surely. Pharmax and Seiglar, they are one and the same. This is where it all started, Joe. With the death of these men. But why kill your own men? And why bury them like this years later?’

‘Buried with honour.’ A stranger’s voice startled them both from behind.

Four men stood in the passageway, three armed with machine pistols. All aimed at Joe and Issy. It seemed that all bad guys wore suits now, these men were no different. Sharp and expensive suits, more inclined toward a night out than a shoot out. The fourth man was unarmed and the eldest of them by a decade.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ Asked Issy.

‘Please, raise your hands where we can see them.’ Said Four, the man more casually dressed than his bodyguards.

Issy took an instant dislike to the well tanned fifty something with the expensively white teeth. Four looked like he'd recently spectated at a Polo match and never done a manual day's labour in his life.

Smug bastard. What are you smiling at?

'Search them.' Four ordered.

Issy felt herself pushed against the wall by hands that searched her with practised efficiency. GI's Glock was taken. Her rucksack removed and emptied onto the dusty ground.

'Hey, careful with that stuff it's all I have.' She scolded. 'I want them back when we're done.'

‘I told you it would dim the lights.’ Said Joe.

‘Shut up. Who are you people?’ Issy demanded.

‘Shouldn’t *I* be the one asking that question?’ Four replied picking through her belongings with the toe of an expensively leathered shoe. ‘After all, this is my property and you are trespassing.’

Joe didn’t like the way Four looked at him. He felt like he was about to be someone’s lunch. *Say something, anything. Make them go away.*

‘Huh, I recognise you.’ Issy unhandled herself from One. ‘Hey Jake, this is Conrad Fueller. You know, the good looking politician.’

Conrad gave her a Hollywood smile. ‘And you are?’ He asked.

‘Helga.’ She lied. ‘I’m so sorry, we didn’t know this was private property.’

‘You didn’t? Well I’m afraid it is, so you shouldn’t be here.’ Fueller's grin acknowledged Joe and then returned to Issy. ‘So tell me, what are the two of you doing here?’

‘It’s a bit embarrassing.’ She turned her eyes up at One Two and Three. ‘I don’t like to say.’

‘That’s okay, I’ll come a bit closer.’

‘I’ve got a thing,’ she whispered, ‘about holes in the ground. They make me go, well you know; I like to do it in them. Mostly with Jake, but not always.’

Oh God, Issy’s flirting with him.

‘Then Jake is a very lucky young man. But as he’s not here, I’ll talk to Joe, the handsome geneticist that half of Europe wants dead or arrested.’

Conrad’s flirting with me?

‘We have things to talk about, you and I.’ Conrad snapped his fingers. One took Issy by the hair and made her kneel.

‘Ow, fuck, that hurts. Let go of me you pig.’

‘Your girlfriend has a lot to say, but nothing of interest. In fact, who is she? She’s an enigma to me. Isla, isn’t it? But no-one seems to know any more than that. No father or mother, and no surname on her birth certificate. But I suppose it’s not important.’ One grabbed her by the throat.

‘No, stop it. Leave her alone. What do you want to know?’

‘The usual stuff I suppose. Like how long did you know Elder Routh? Were you in his employment, or some kind of partner in his delusions? What are you really doing in my mine? If you have nothing to say I have no reason to keep you alive. Kill them both.’

‘Hey, wait. Bad idea to kill anyone.’ Isla insisted. ‘We know all about you, and Pharmax.’

Fueller raised a hand and One’s gun lowered. Conrad stared at her for what seemed an eternity.

‘You know nothing.’ He said.

‘Leave her alone.’ Screamed Joe. ‘We know plenty.’ He added. ‘Purchased any underground bunkers from the Nazis lately?’ Joe paused for effect.

Fueller gave him nothing. ‘Everything we know is documented and safe. Any

accidents, if we go missing; it all goes public. Dumped on the internet for the world to see. People know we've come here, we're not stupid. We know what you've done in this place. We have Elder Routh's files. Decades of grubby secrets. You need to let us go.'

'I do? No, I don't think so. Keep Mr White here and make him very, uncomfortable. I want to know everything that he knows. The girl goes to the house, we'll compare notes later.'

'Get your hands off me... Joe? Bastard, let go of me... Joe.'

'Don't you touch her...' Joe didn't see the rifle butt coming. He felt it, just for a moment, and then the lights went out.

In front of Issy was a locked door. Behind were large sliding windows, locked of course, the glass probably bomb proof. Beyond them was a view of the mountains and the courtyard outside.

Being dragged from the mine wasn't much fun. Though she'd managed to bite One, and kick Two, before being restrained. She'd been careful to take in her surroundings on the short drive, the position of the outbuildings, trees and lights. Everything committed to memory. She didn't know how yet, but she was going back for Joe.

For now the sofa was comfortable. Rich men could afford fine things. There were pictures of horses on the walls, a lot of horses. To her left was a cool looking fish tank, several metres square and set within the wall.

Issy was up again. She tried the phone on the desk for the third time, still no dialling tone. Trapped then. She did see one thing of interest, a note pad that she fingered. One page after the another with the same familiar image. It was the building on Herse's birthday card. Strange coincidence? Issy walked back to the door and thumped it several times.

'Hey, open up. I won't stop until you...'

A key turned and the handle moved; she stepped back as the door opened inward and a man in a penguin jacket walked past her carrying a tray.

Issy moved toward the door to find one of Fueller's goons blocking her exit.

'Hi.' She said and turned away. 'Hey, what are you, the Butler?'

‘Mature cheese and spring onion.’ The immaculately dressed waiter replied. ‘The milkshake is strawberry. Chef would have prepared something more appetising had he known we had guests.’ Plate, glass, napkin. He had OCD judging by the way he placed everything on the desk. ‘Should you require anything further please inform Mr Hechler, outside. He will call for me.’

‘Just tell me where Joe is? Hey, Penguin Man, talk to me. Where’s Joe? Don’t shut the...’

*

Joe’s jaw wasn’t broken, just numb. He’d only been hit once and fainted. And it was cold in here, and the air left a horrible salty taste in his mouth. He was still in the mine, one of the abandoned offices. A big pan light hung above him as he sat roped to a chair.

‘Hello.’ He said.

Two men were talking; one sat on the edge of a desk whilst the other stood. Neither man acknowledged him.

‘Excuse me... Why am I tied up?’ *This is the second time.* ‘Where’s Issy? Please, just tell me she’s alright. Is she safe?’ *Don’t ignore me.* ‘Hey, arseholes.’ *Too much, that was too much. No, it’s not enough.* ‘Where’s Issy? Where’s... Aaaaargh.’ Joe roared and growled, pulled at the ropes that bound him to the chair. And still they ignored him.

*

The door opened again and Mr Hechler stepped inside. He caught Issy mid slurp, eyes on the Box, fingers pressing the TV control and changing channels. She slurped again as Conrad Fueller entered.

‘It’s bad form to keep a lady waiting.’ She scolded.

‘My apologies, but I didn’t want us to talk until you’d been fed.’ He said.

‘So gracious of you.’

‘How was the food? My Chef wanted to prepare something more appetising. But as I know so little about you. Perhaps my hairdresser may also be of service.’

‘I’m in disguise.’ *Slurp*. ‘Maybe I’ll keep it like this. You think it makes me look like a boy?’ *Slurp*. ‘I’ve always acted like one.’

‘I’m sure. I see your enjoying the milkshake?’ He smiled.

‘It’s good.’ *Sluuurp*. ‘Oh shit, have you put something in this?’ The straw left her lips. ‘What is it, sodium pentathol? Huh, that won’t help you. I tell so many lies that I don’t know what’s true myself half the time.’ She shrugged. *Sluuurp*. ‘It’s quite good actually, but my Mama makes them better.’ She shifted herself upright, smiled, and patted the cushion. ‘Come join me; though I can’t find the Disney Channel on this thing?’

‘I brought you here to talk, Isla, not to watch Television. All I require from you is information, and then you can leave.’

‘Information?’

‘Yes. You can start by telling me where you’ve hidden Elder Routh’s belongings?’

Sluuuurp.

‘Are all the boxes at the mine empty,’ she asked, ‘or just the front rows? Are they filled with guns, or is it drugs? Are times so hard you need organised crime as partners?’

‘Young lady, the more you open your mouth the more you betray your ignorance. But I suspect it’s just an act. Either way, I intend to find out.’

‘Okay, no Disney then. Let’s talk. Tell me what’s up at the mine, Conrad?’

‘The mine has been closed for a very long time.’ He said. ‘You’ve been up there, it’s just empty space and boxes. A sentimental keepsake to remember my company’s origins.’

‘And the graves?’

‘Brave Germans who fought in the war. Men who deserve to rest in peace.’

‘That’s what graveyards are for.’ *Slurp.* ‘But I suppose the church would object to a Swastika inscribed on their headstones.’

‘Perhaps.’ Conrad settled himself on the arm of the chair next to her. ‘I’m trying to be reasonable, Isla. I’m a business man, not a thug. The mine is nothing more than a tribute to Pharmax’s humble beginnings. It’s where it all began.’

‘Yes, with your wonder drug. Joe told me. Researched and funded by cruel and evil men.’

‘It was a marvel of technology created by brilliant minds. Have you any idea how many children have been vaccinated by our product; how many lives we have changed for the better? We’ve modernised and industrialised the process of course. ROX-1 is Pharmax’s gift to the people. The mine is where the fortunes of the company began. I can’t imagine what you thought was going on up there. Really, I can’t.’

‘If you’re so clean and tidy, why are you keeping me here against my will?’

‘You are our guest, not our prisoner.’

‘*Our?* Are there others coming? Huh, am I going to a party?’ She looked around the room and then began slurping at all the bubbles at the bottom of her glass. ‘I love parties. Can I have another one of these?’

Conrad smiled. At every opportunity he unleashed the Hollywood simper. He nodded to Hechler who left the room.

‘You see, I want us to be friends. I can do so much for you. I’m on the board of an organisation we call the Cadre. Powerful people, Isla. Who have more than just a finger on the pulse of the financial world.’

‘So what do they want with me?’

‘Information. Confirmation I suppose. Let’s just say that the Cadre has undertaken a crisis of conscience lately. There’s been a split of opinion, and of direction.’ He looked indecisive for the first time. ‘I want what you took from Routh’s apartment. And I need to be sure that you aren’t, *a corporate spy?*’

‘Seriously, you have a conscience. I doubt that. Is Herr Hechler going to be long with my Shake? And please, let’s stop playing games. You run a company that was founded on death. Funded with capital stolen from Jews during the Holocaust.’

Issy left her seat and circled around the sofa to put it between them. Conrad’s smile slipped into something more malicious.

‘For the record.’ He said. ‘It was stolen from anyone who had it to give.’

‘I won’t argue over semantics. Just tell me where Joe is?’

‘No more questions. Just answers.’

He was up and coming closer. Issy backed away.

‘We’ll make Mr White talk. But I’m also curious about you. What is it that I don’t know about you? Why are you involved? Tell me who you work for?’

Issy kept her distance as Conrad followed her slowly around the room. It was like a game, that she didn’t intend to lose. She let her hand trail across the desktop. Eyes on him but studying all below. Two paperweights, a phone, numerous pens; yet another photo of a horse. A paperweight then, right in his smug politician’s face.

‘Isla doesn’t work for anyone but herself.’ She said. ‘But what about you? Who is this Cadre that pulls your strings? Come on, tell me, who can I blab to? I’m your prisoner... sorry, I’m your guest.’

‘Tell you what, Isla. Let me appeal to your darker side, you clearly have one.’ Just a few feet away. Only the desk between them. Issy intended to

made sure it stayed that way. 'I'll make you an offer, and it's a good one. The only one you'll get. Or I promise, things will elevate into violence.'

'I thought you weren't a thug?'

'Be sensible, tell me everything you know.' He moved casually around the desk as Isla mirrored his movement, away. 'Who have you talked to?' He asked her. 'Who do you report to? Tell me where Elder Routh's belongings are hidden and I'll let you go. I will even compensate you for your time and efforts. It's a good deal. Go on, bite my hand off.'

'You'll kill me the moment you don't fear me. So go fuck yourself.'

'You're being rude.' Conrad shook his head, his patience clearly coming to an end. 'You know what, I don't think you know anything of substance. But I do need to be sure.'

He moved towards her again. Issy had nowhere to go.

'Okay, okay, get back on your sun-bed. I'll give you some substance. How's this? You're buying old SS installations, and I'll name them if you want. I have numbered bank accounts in Switzerland, the Caymans, and the Bahamas. Naughty naughty, Conrad.' *Move away from him, Issy. Get to the other side of this stupidly big desk.* 'And what about WolfSpawn, how's that going for you?' *Oh yes, that raised your heart rate.*

'So you have bank accounts; Pharmax is a big company. I expect an unfortunate employee will be found to have embezzled money. And Pharmax deals in global commodities; we buy sites all of the time. Most often we don't even use them. And as for, what was it you called it, WolfSpawn? I don't

know what that is, please, enlighten me. Prove what you say is true. Tell me something that has meaning. Stop fishing and tell me something that you can actually prove.'

'I don't have to tell you shit. Call your boss. Tell him I know lots of stuff, but I'll only speak to the man in charge. You're nothing but the poster boy. Just a part of the crew.'

'You're being rude again.'

'You know, I've been told I do that. Tell me where Seiglar is?' *Ahh, you shouldn't play poker with that face.* 'Oh yes, I know all about him. Call him up. Tell him I want to meet. Tell him I know all about him; and so will Google if anything happens to me or Joe. Tell your goons up at the mine to let him go. Do it now, or by sunrise everything goes viral.'

'Great Uncle Seiglar?' Doubt and curiosity, he was burning with it. 'He's dead.'

'Bullshit, he's alive. Seiglar's been running the show since the War.' *Keep moving, Issy. Keep talking. A few more feet and you make him eat something heavy.*

'Really. So tell me what you know about my Uncle?' Fueller's doubt seemed to transcend into a moment of clarity. 'So stupid of me.' He said. 'You're one of his spies aren't you. Yes, of course. You're one of his aren't you.'

So Seiglar is alive? I knew it. He's still at the very heart of this web.

'Clever clever Uncle. You're a diversion, of course you are. He gets us to chase after your boyfriend; whilst he does, what exactly?'

‘Joe’s not my boyfriend. Truth is I hardly even know him.’ *Move you bastard. Come round a few more feet. I’ll put that paperweight right in your political smile.*

‘He’s too late. Manfred doesn’t know it yet, but the future is about to take care of the past. He should have let go when he was voted out.’

Manfred? Manfred Seiglar... Oh, now it begins to make sense.

‘What’s happened, Conrad. Have your Cadre friends fallen out with each other. With Seiglar? This all starts to make sense now. You took a shot at the big time, didn’t you. A grab for power and you got your fingers burnt. That’s it isn’t it. There’s been two sides at this since the start.

You obviously don’t know where he is. Which means you don’t control WolfSpawn, Seiglar does. And your Cadre friends, they aren’t very happy about that. I’m right aren’t I? Come on, you can tell me. Cat got your tongue? Conrad Fueller, always in his Great Uncle’s shadow, is that it? Am I getting warm? You’ve fucked up and now you need to make good with your Cadre friends. That’s why Baldy is chasing us, isn’t it. Joe is your only link to Seiglar now Elder Routh is dead.’

‘You’re very astute for someone who doesn’t know anything.’

‘Oh, I’m a quick study. Tell me, what was it that made you turn on your own family?’

‘Again, you parade your ignorance. You have no idea what Seiglar intends to do. What he is doing right now. He has to be stopped.’

‘What has to be stopped?’

‘WolfSpawn. My Uncle has held court for far too long. His Ideology is outdated. He no longer sees the world we live in. He’ll sacrifice millions of lives...’

‘Millions, how?’ *Come on, tell me. What’s WolfSpawn?*

‘My Great Uncle is the most dangerous man alive. WolfSpawn, it has to be stopped. The programme must be burned from existence.’

But what is it?

‘Hey, easy, what are you doing?’ Conrad reached inside his jacket. ‘Oh... are you going to threaten me with your iPhone?’

‘No, not you. This call is especially for your boyfriend. You’re going to tell me everything I want to know. Including where I can find Uncle Seiglar.’

The phone rang once and was answered.

‘Jasper,’ Fueller said, ‘I have some questions for Mr White. Please encourage him to talk. If he’s nothing to you, young lady, you won’t mind this one bit.’

That’s a live link. Don’t do anything Issy, not yet. They’ll kill Joe.

*

‘Who are you talking to?’ Asked Joe. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

The man holding the phone was short, but wide. A pint sized Sumo wrestler in an ill fitted suit. His tall, muscular, much younger colleague said nothing. He barely looked bothered as he took the phone from Sumo.

‘Beantworten Sie die Frage, oder ich sie verletzt.’

‘What? I don’t... what? I don’t understand.’

‘Please answer the questions,’ Sumo repeated in English, ‘or I hurt you.’

‘I can do that.’ Joe replied. ‘Just ask. Any question. I’ll answer.’

Sumo moved close. Muscles smiled with anticipation. Joe wanted to move away but the chair wouldn’t let him.

“Where’s the old man taken the samples?”

‘What? Who’s that? Who’s on the phone? Is that Fueller?’

“The samples, Mr White. Where are the samples?”

‘What samples? I don’t know about any samples.’

“Jasper, please help Mr White to regain his memory.”

‘Hey Sumo, Jasper, you don’t want to do this. Honestly... I don’t know anything.’

Issy?’

Fueller turned to Issy.

‘Who do you work for?’

‘No-one, I swear. Please, don’t hurt him, he’s telling the truth. What samples?’

‘I had hoped you would see sense. Obviously not. Jasper, encourage Mr White to talk.’

The thump and subsequent groan were transmitted digitally through the air. All Issy could do was stare at the phone docked on the desk.

Joe...

‘We don’t work for anyone. This is all a stupid mistake.’ She said.

‘Jasper...’

The sound of the assault made her flinch. One punch after another. Between them he kept saying “I don’t know”, over and over, “I don’t know”.

‘Stop it... stop it.’ She took steps toward Fueller who pulled a revolver from his pocket. ‘Stop hurting him.’ She said and stepped back, her hands instinctively raised.

‘Mr Schmaele, please video the proceedings.’

A wide jawed young face appeared on the screen before it turned toward Joe, slumped in a chair with rope around his torso. A live feed. Another man pulled Joe’s head up by his hair as if to prove it were him.

‘You bastard... stop this.’

‘Then talk to me. Tell me why Wolfe was at the bridge?’

Wolfe? Who the fuck is Wolfe?

‘Don’t shake that lovely head of yours, you know the consequence of lying. Jasper...’ The thick set, bull of a man dropped Joe’s head and unleashed a stomach punch that knocked the wind from Joe’s lungs. She thought he was going to be sick, his breaths sharp and short; Joe began to cough. ‘What was Mr White’s relationship with Elder Routh?’ Conrad asked.

Think Issy, think.

‘Jasper...’

‘No, wait. I don’t know who this, Wolfe is. Joe doesn’t tell me everything. Need to know, and all that. But we met Professor Tillmach at the bridge to buy information. That’s the truth.’

‘What information? And for what purpose?’

Shit, really good questions.

‘We wanted Routh’s hard drive, it’s got all the evidence. About you, Pharmax, WolfSpawn. I don’t know the details, and I don’t care. Joe is the one helping Elder Routh. I didn’t even know him a few days ago. It’s the truth. What do I know about genetics. It’s Joe, he’s part of a group called, Edelweiss. They want to stop WolfSpawn, whatever that is.’

‘Edelweiss?’ Fueller lowered the gun. ‘And my Uncle’s involvement with these people?’

‘I don’t know anything about your fucking Uncle. I did it for the money. That’s it, all of it. You know what, go ahead. Beat on Mr White, see if I care.’

It's just business, yes? You want the hard drive, I'll get it for you. You want Edelweiss? I can do that. But I want my freedom, and I want money. A lot of it. Shit, ever since Joe came into my life I've had nothing but trouble. I just want to disappear. And I want money.'

*

'Issy, what are you doing?' Joe's ribs hurt. His head was thumping. 'I thought we were...'

'What, friends? Don't be stupid English. I don't care about you. I care about me, always about me. Haven't you worked that out yet?'

'No, I don't believe...' *Edelweiss? Who the hell are Edelweiss? What are you doing? Hey, Sumo's stopped hitting me. She's playing for time. Oh, you're brilliant. Help her, but how?*

'Don't say another word.' Joe shouted, or tried to. 'They'll kill us both if you do.'

Fueller's face filled the phone screen held by the stoic Schmacle. He peered at Joe.

"I'll kill you both if you don't." He said. "Tell me where to find the hard drive?"

'I have it. It's somewhere safe. Don't listen to that bitch she knows nothing. But I'll talk, I know things. Names, lots of names. Everyone involved. Just don't hurt me, please, stop hurting me; I'll talk.'

Fueller stared at Joe. The full 'cat got the cream' expression on his overly tanned face. He turned away.

"I don't believe you, either of you. Whatever you think you've found... you know nothing. They're lying, Mr Schmacle, please kill Mr White."

"No, wait. Don't you fucking hurt him... Joe?... JOE."

So this is it?

Sumo raised his gun. It was a Glock, Joe knew that because Issy had one just like it. He'd seen a lot of guns lately. Hey, that was Issy's Glock. Of course it was. Why else would Sumo be putting gloves on. It all became so clear and vivid. They intended to kill him and frame Issy for his murder. Probably kill her too; make it look like a suicide.

'Fuck you.' Joe spat the words at Jasper and they made him feel tall. His chin raised but his eyes closed; the thought of seeing the bullet? No, he wasn't that brave. The rapid breathing and look of sheer terror gave him away. *Come on, get it over with.* He opened his eyes. 'Fuck you, you, Dwarf. Aaaaaaargh.' One last attempt to frighten them both away, that only caused Sumo to smile. Why? It wasn't funny. Joe didn't want to die. Dying wasn't funny.

'Aaaargh... AAAAAAARGH.' Anger fuelled by adrenaline that wouldn't be denied. The cork had popped. Wild wrenching at his bindings as Joe convulsed in the chair and forced its legs to leave the ground and topple over. Sumo was alight with joy. Why? This wasn't funny. This was life and death. Joe was about to scream again when the sound got caught in his throat.

Sumo's head exploded as his stubby little finger squeezed down on the trigger. A hollow Phutt preceded the shower of blood as the Glock spat angry lead toward Joe's face. He saw it, the bullet. The explosive leap from the gun and the coming of the beast. And then it was gone, embedded into the ground beside him.

More phutt phutt as Muscles went down hands clutched at his chest.

*

Isla saw the blood, was it Joe's? *Please God, not Joe's*. She saw Sumo's body on the ground as the phone's image spiralled head over heel. Fueller froze, unsure, disbelieving of the camera's reflection. He grabbed for the phone, and Issy took her chance.

The paper weight was in the image of a horse. Its base heavy, vicious, as it impacted the side of Conrad's head. As he stumbled the revolver dropped to the floor, right at Issy's feet.

'I'll take that.' She said.

'You bitch... my face... you fucking bitch.' He was on his knees, blood pouring from the wound. 'I'll kill you... You won't get out of here alive.'

'Want a bet?' She didn't wait for an answer. The gun's handle met Conrad's face with swift momentum. She watched several white veneers spiral to the carpet as he fell unconscious. Issy went down on all fours to find the phone. She grabbed it from under the desk.

‘Joe... Joe.’ The screen was blank. ‘Joe, talk to me.’ The call had ended.
‘Stupid phone.’ It flew across the room and Issy moved towards the door to find it unlocked. Easing it back to peer outside she saw Hechler lying on the floor, another man crumpled beside him. They were both dead.

Footsteps, coming down the corridor. Red dots on the bodies.

Oh shit. Run Issy.

Where to? Too late. Issy stepped back and away from the suppressor that was pointed at her face.

‘Don’t shoot, I surrender.’ Red flashes as two high tech Ninjas entered the room. Two more shots, one for each man on the floor. Their jackets puffed and the bodies jerked. ‘Hey, don’t shoot, I surrender.’ Issy went down on her knees, hands locked behind her head to prove it. ‘I surrender.’

A strong hand pulled Issy to her feet.

'Come with me if you want to live.' The man said.

'Sure, okay. I can do that.'

Three hooded figures in black. She'd witnessed scenes like this before, on her Playstation; Call of Duty... Black Ops. But this was different, scary... real. Black Ops Man led the way as his two colleagues fell in behind, weapons sweeping the rear as they moved quickly up the hall.

'Who are you?'

No answer.

There were more bodies outside. Two by the cars, a third by the fence. She could see several others lying in the snow.

Outside Issy didn't feel the cold. She couldn't hear the horse that whinnied in the field as it bucked and neighed in protest, then galloped away.

Everything was a big fat scary blur.

Black Ops used his hand and fingers, the others understood. It was open ground ahead. She saw a cold intensity in the eyes behind the balaclava. Strong fingers grabbed her hand and placed it onto Black Ops belt. He made a fist. They were going to cross the open ground and she was to stay attached.

He moved quickly and Issy followed not daring to let go. Only the sound of their footsteps as they crunched along the snow covered ground. Black Ops

Two and Three went first, guns sweeping at the angles, ready to clear the way should anyone be stupid enough to try and stop them. All four hunkered down by the wall of the barn. Good cover and a clear field of fire.

‘Where’s Joe?’ She whispered.

Black Ops put a finger on her lips. Then to his eyes and then ahead. Three men exited the building opposite, all armed. They didn’t stand a chance. Two and Three moved against them, phutt phutt phutt. Then one more bullet for each body now lying on the ground. The sound of car engines in the distance. She was up and moving again as two black SUV’s came fast toward the ranch. Another car. Fueller’s Limo was coming down from the mine.

Joe?

‘Is Joe in that car? Hey, Black Ops. She was still holding his belt. ‘My friend Joe, tell me he’s okay.’

Snow, stones, and the scraping of the car tyres as it slid to a stop. Black Ops opened the car door.

‘We can’t go.’ She said. ‘I left something up on the hill. It’s very important. Hey, I said it’s important.’

Black Ops reached inside the car and pulled Issy’s bag from the front seat.

‘You’ve been watching us?’

The back door opened.

‘Issy, is that you?’

‘Joe? Joe, I thought...’

‘I’m okay. Look, still breathing.’

‘Oh Joe... you’re safe.’ She was in the car and hugging him. She kissed him.

‘Ow.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Does it hurt?’

‘Yeah, my lips hurt. And I think they broke my nose. What, is that funny?’

‘No, ha ha, I think I’m a little hysterical. Forgive me.’ She slumped back in the seat, smiled, and opened her bag. It was all in there, Elder’s stuff. Why would they give it back? Who were these people?

‘He broke my nose, Issy.’

‘It’s alright, it doesn’t notice. Honestly.’

Black Ops held out a green pouch.’

‘What is this... a medical kit? Give me that. Joe, lean forward and I’ll clean you up. It’s just a bit of blood, that’s all. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have made you come here. Shit, I’m so sorry.’

‘Ow, ow...’

‘Shh, stay still. Does it hurt?’

‘Yes, ow, it hurts. What’s on that thing, battery acid?’

‘Shush, your lip needs to be cleaned. Stop, no, put your hands down. I promise, I’ll be gentle. There, already much better.’ She turned to Black Op. ‘And you, who are you? Take that balaclava off and let me see your face. Hey, I’m talking to you.’

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to put a hand on him. The butterflies in her tummy erupted into a rampant stampede. It was his eyes, maybe more grey than blue now. She thought they might bite her so she backed off. The

limo wasn't as big as she'd like it to be as she slumped into the seat. As the powerful figure closed the space between them, a hand moving upward to remove his mask. To reveal his face.

‘Scarface?’ Said Joe. ‘I told you. Didn’t I tell you he was at the bridge. Oh so now you believe me.’

‘So it seems.’ She said. ‘Who are you?’ She asked. ‘Why have you helped us?’

Wolfe took Joe’s face in his hand to examine Sumo’s work.

‘You’ll be pretty again.’ He said.

‘Hey, I asked you a question.’

Another Ninja got into the driver’s seat. He gave Wolfe a tablet and then slotted the transmission into Drive. The car accelerated down the compound’s long drive.

‘Where are you taking us?’ Issy demanded. ‘Hey, you talk to me.’

‘Back off, Issy. He just saved our lives. We should be thanking him.’

‘Should we; and why is that? What are we to him? Hey, I asked you a question.’

For a moment she thought he would answer, but Wolfe moved up front and said nothing. Issy burned to interrogate him. She had questions that needed answers. But Joe cautioned her to hold her peace, which wasn’t easy. And there was something else, the way the man with the scar kept glancing back. Always at Issy and not at Joe. Scarface could wait. She needed to think. To take in everything that Fueller had said.

‘Joe, Fueller thought I worked for his Great Uncle. The mysterious Herr Seiglar.’

‘But he’s dead.’

‘No, he’s very much alive. But I think they’re working against each other. And then there’s this Cadre he works for, who are they?’

‘Issy, you’re talking as if I was there with you and Fueller. I wasn’t. I was being beaten up, again.’

‘I know. Oh Joe, I thought they were going to kill you.’ She took his hand, then his cheek. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘Yeah, a bit. Go on, talk it through. Tell me what Fueller said. And take a look in that bag for some paracetamol.’

‘Joe, I’m missing something here. Herse, Fueller, they are one side of this coin. Elder Routh and his son Tillmach, they are on the other. The only links between them are Seiglar and Pharmax. Here, take these. They’ll help with the pain and swelling.’

‘I’m swelling?’

‘A bit, yes. Look, Fueller has obviously lost control of whatever game these people are playing. He’s as desperate to get information as we are, but why? He runs Pharmax, he has the mine, and yet he doesn’t seem to know what’s going on. And Fueller said, “the Cadre is having a crisis of conscience”. What does that mean?’

‘Maybe the Cadre members are split?’ Said Joe. ‘One board, two different factions; that could be a crisis of conscience?’ He sat forward and swallowed his pills. ‘Maybe Seiglar took allies with him?’

‘Yes, but what is their cause? And Fueller said something else, “Manfred doesn’t know it yet, but the future is about to take care of the past.” I don’t think Conrad Fueller was just trying to take over Pharmax. I think he wants control of WolfSpawn. And from what he said I think he wants to put an end to it, whatever *it* is?’

‘Is that right Mr Scarface? Don’t pretend you’re not listening. Feel free to chip in at any time.’ He didn’t. ‘Joe, Herse was Elder’s source, yes. But he was also in the care of MS. MS? The name on the birthday card delivered by Mr Black Ops here. Did you take him one every year?’ She asked, then lowered her voice. ‘He’s working for WolfSpawn, Joe. I don’t think we can trust him.’

‘But that means he’s...

‘That he’s a Neo Nazi, just like MS. Come on Joe, MS? Someone has to be paying Herse’s bills. That’s an expensive Home he lives in. And what about Mr Black Ops, he has to be working for someone, and it’s obviously not Fueller. Joe, I think we’ve been rescued by the *other faction*.’

‘The people that Fueller and Baldy are trying to find?’

‘I think so, yes.’

‘So he’s a part of WolfSpawn, and he works for MS?’

Issy grabbed her rucksack. She pulled all of Elder Routh’s belongings out onto the seat. The birthday card in her hand. ‘MS...’ She said. ‘The sender of the card to Herse; that our saviour here delivers every year.’ She pointed at

Wolfe. 'That's right isn't it, Herse works for MS? Fueller thought I worked for him too. Manfred... MS... Manfred Seiglar. One and the same.

Joe, you wondered why Herse had a birthday card with a building on the front. The same building that Conrad had on a note pad in his office. Why a building? Why lie to Tillmach and Routh just to bring you to Poland? Why murder an innocent girl just to frame you? It was to make you run, Joe. Oh, Joe... someone's been very very clever.

You, Scarface, give me your tablet.' She snatched it anyway. 'Joe, do your thing. Take a photo and find the building on that card. I want to know where it is.'

'Why, what's going on?'

'Just do it. Find this place for me. You know the only thing I don't get; why me? Why hire me as your driver? I'm a nobody. Oh, maybe that's why?' The tablet took a photo and Joe did his thing. 'You, Scarface she shouted, 'you knew all along didn't you. That's why you're following us. You're protecting us. Why? No... okay, fuck you then.'

'Err, Issy... you might want to look at this.'

The building from the card was on the screen, numerous shots. Above was the property's name and location. Three two six Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.

'Issy, it's Pharmax HQ.'

'Joe, have you ever felt like a fly in a web? With a big spider at the centre waiting for you?'

‘Not really. Wikipedia says it was built two years ago. Wow, it cost over a billion Euros. That’s a lot of cash for a building? What’s so special about it?’
Asked Joe.

‘Ask Mr Black Ops, he knows. Come on, you might as well tell him, the cat is wriggling out of the bag. No... okay, I tell you what I think. I think there’s someone holed up in that building who wants to meet us very badly, isn’t that right Mr Wolfe.’ He gave just a glimmer of recognition. ‘Yes, I know your name. Fueller asked me why “Wolfe was at the bridge?” That has to be you, yes?’

Joe, someone has laid a very careful trail of breadcrumbs for us to follow. And Mr Wolfe here has shadowed us to keep us alive. Which means that Mr Wolfe works for MS... Manfred Seiglar. He’s your Boss, right? Why? What is it that Joe knows. Why couldn’t *Uncle Seiglar* have just picked up the phone?’

Her wonderful moment of clarity was put on hold.

‘What’s going on, why are we stopping?’

Both the doors opened as the driver and Wolfe got out.

‘You can keep the car.’ Wolfe said. ‘We’ll make our own way from here.’

‘Oh no, I don’t think so.’

‘Issy, where are you going? Issy, get back in the car.’

‘Listen to your friend, Isla. Get back in the car. You have to do this on your own.’

‘Do what, what do we have to do? Come on, answer me? This has all been elaborately planned from the start just to get us to this point.’ She threw the card on the ground at Wolfe’s feet. ‘You think you can ride in and save our lives; then leave without a word of explanation? I don’t think so.’

‘I’ve done what I can... I can’t help you any further.’

‘Oh I think you can. Hey, I want answers.’

‘Good luck to you both.’ Wolfe said.

‘Don’t you walk away from me. Hey.’ *Click*. The sound of the hammer retracting on Conrad’s revolver. ‘You’re going nowhere.’

‘Issy, where did you get the gun?’

A shiny revolver cupped in both hands and pointed at Wolfe. Two raised his weapon but Wolfe’s hand eased it back down toward the ground.

‘Get in the car.’ Issy ordered. ‘You, Black Ops two. Leave me your jacket, it’s cold. Then you take a walk back to whatever dark-side you came from. No, don’t look at him, look at me.’

‘Are you sure this is what you want, Isla?’ Asked Wolfe.

Issy took a step forward and aimed the revolver at his face. If he was nervous he didn’t show it. He half smiled for the first time.

‘Do as she says, Carl. You know what to do from here.’

‘Boss, are you sure?’

Wolfe nodded. Two reluctantly removed his black jacket and handed it to Issy. He backed away toward the SUV’s that had followed. Turned and

ordered the guns that were pointed at Joe and Issy to lower. Within seconds they were gone, driving away into the distance.

The gun switched hands as she slipped into Two's jacket.

'How do I look? I think it suits me. Joe, look, it goes with my hair.'

'I'm fine, I don't need a coat.' He replied.

'Am I your hostage now?' Wolfe asked.

'You're an asset, isn't that the word you people use?'

The revolver beckoned and Wolfe conceded. He got into the driver's seat as Issy slid herself into the back. Joe slumped beside her and slammed the door.

'And the next part of your plan is what, exactly?' Joe asked.

'You, put your belt on and drive. You too Joe.'

'Where am I driving to?'

'To see your Boss. Keep heading that way.' She pointed and the car started.

Conrad's limo pulled back out onto the road. 'They play games with us, Joe. It has to stop.'

'Don't tell me, we're going to three two six Potsdamer Platz, Berlin.'

'Yes. We're going to finish this, one way or another. I've got a pretty good idea of what's going on here. I just don't know why. Or what it's got to do with, either of us.'

Three two six Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. Pharmax HQ was as big as its image had suggested. Issy had never seen the City so empty, its streets so quiet. The hustle and bustle of the city centre seemed lost in this hard nosed, tall high-rising of wealth and stature. She couldn't count the number of windows on the floors around them.

A hundred yards, maybe less to the entrance of the building.

'Joe, are you good?' He didn't look good. He startled at the sound of the car door closing. And she felt it too, rising in her throat. Frogs jumping in her tummy as a dark BMW crawled slowly toward them. The sound of the vehicle made her skin tingle and her fingers to grip tightly at the gun in her jacket.

The man at the wheel talked on his hands free. Talked about what? And to who? The car trundled past. Turned at the corner. Drove slowly out of sight.

'Issy, are you sure about this?' Joe asked.

'Of course not. But he knows, don't you.' Issy pushed Wolfe toward the kerb.

'Don't we need to put some money in the parking machine?'

Issy ignored him. Two steps on and a scraping sound stopped her. Impulse drew the revolver half from concealment. A young couple had exited a doorway chatting; one had chairs in his hands. The other, a girl, rolled out a coffee shop awning above a tall window. Early signs of life, less than a

gunshot away. All around them nothing but empty street. The Pharmax building ahead so tall and imposing, its concrete roots spread throughout a vast Mall that stretched below. An open Plaza filled with glass and doorways. She'd never felt so exposed, yet so sure of what had to be done.

'Cross here, and no sudden movements.' It was a week since Issy had met Joe. Seven days since this nightmare had begun. All they had to do now was cross the road; what could go wrong. She was sure, positive, that the answer to ending all this was in that building. She had to be right. Another push in Wolfe's back, he needed to move quicker across the pavement. Up the steps. The wide open plaza in front of her.

'Are you sure about this?'

'Oh yes. We're going in there, right to the top.'

She felt like a duck on a calm lake. The hunters could be anywhere, behind any one of a thousand windows.

Joe's scared. So am I. A bad shot with a rifle is all it would take. Eighty yards of open space. Say a prayer, Issy.

'Move it, let's go. Keep close to us Joe. What do you think big boy, are your people waiting for us in there? Hey, speak up, I can't hear you.'

Sixty yards now. Not so far. Each step closer across no-man's land.

Another car rolled by, behind them, much smaller than the first. A woman driver who glanced Issy's way. *That look on her face, what does it mean? Fuck off bitch.* She'd noticed that her hands had a sheen of sweat. Why? It

was early morning and cold outside? And why did her heart thump as if it were trying to break free of her chest?

Forty yards.

Thirty now.

If it were going to happen. If a sniper wanted to bring them down.

Shit, walk faster.

Twenty yards.

Ten.

Five.

They were at the door. A glass gateway; 'Pharmax' etched across the panes.

'Open... why won't it open?' No handle, no obvious way in. Was it a trap?

'Do something.' The revolver gave Wolfe a firm prod. He didn't seem bothered by any of this. Not a word, why didn't he protest, not so much as a scowl. For fuck sake Issy wanted to scream. 'Open the door.'

Wolfe looked up. A dark shadow in the glass she hadn't seen. Why hadn't she seen it.

'Joe, what is that?

'A camera in the glass.' He said as the doors slid silently apart. 'Facial recognition?' Joe seemed impressed.

'Inside, please.'

Deep breath Issy. It's just a Wolfe inviting us into his lair.

A powerful frost spread through Isla's veins. Not the type to creep, but to gallop and leave you in a cold sweat. Powerful drugs were at play in her body as she looked inside.

This was what she wanted, wasn't it? Inside were the answers she craved; that they both desired. Weren't they?

'Issy... you okay. Are we going in?'

'Of course we are. But how do we know it's not a trap?'

'Is it a trap?' Joe asked.

'No.' Wolfe answered.

'Okay, good, the man with the scar says not. Do you ever think you're a bit too trusting, Joe?'

'I believe him.'

'Good, okay, you can go first.' She pushed Joe inside and followed close behind as the doors closed.

The space inside was vast, and unexpected. The Pharmax building seemed hollow; square on the outside but circular within. And it kept going up to make her dizzy.

'So this is what a billion Euros buys you.' Another prod from the revolver into Wolfe.

The entire structure was glass encased in stainless steel. Balconies on each floor; circles of rings. It was a suicide's delight. The ground floor spread out in a space as big as the plaza outside, but twice as green.

'I think we've entered Narnia?' She said.

There were old fashioned street lamps, benches; marble paths that carved their way through beautifully mown lawns. At its centre a tall willow tree rose with a what looked like a fairytale pond and stream encased in light. Issy looked up to see the source of the sunlight. A massive glass dome some fifty stories above their heads. Beaming down through a well of glass and steel.

'Wow.' Said Joe. 'Well impressive.'

'A nice place for a picnic perhaps, but not today. Hey, Scarface, where are you going? The elevators are over there.'

'There is a private elevator hidden from public view. Is there a problem?'

'No problem. Just no funny business, okay.'

'Where is everybody?' Asked Joe. 'Big place like this, there should be security, maintenance... cleaners?'

'The building is automated on Sundays. A handful of security; the Director sent everyone home when he knew you were coming.

He knows we're coming?

'Please, we will ride the elevator to the top.'

'Told you.' She whispered. 'Always at the top.'

'Do we follow him?'

‘You said you trusted him. Go on, I’ll be right behind you.’

A minute later they were taking a ride. Wolfe’s breath on a touch screen.

Vocal recognition for good measure. The elevator rose quickly to the upper floors. Their smooth ride ended and the doors opened without a sound.

Privacy glass everywhere. It gave the crazy silence a moody, almost sulky atmosphere. Issy took out the revolver and let it fall to her side. Fingers squeezing incessantly at the trigger. At the far end of the corridor was a tall set of wooden doors. Deep carvings of runic symbols across their face. A formidable barrier. Again no sign of a handle or a hinge. Beyond them, it seemed, was where they needed to be

‘The director is expecting you.’ Said Wolfe.

‘Is he. Then he won’t be disappointed. After you.’ She said.

‘I need to take your weapon, please?’

‘Is that a joke, I don’t think so.’

“It’s all right, Wolfe. She can keep the gun.”

‘Who said that?’

Wolfe’s hand was flat against the glass beside the doors, his palm glowed. The door clicked and powered back, sliding away to both sides. A gassy hiss as they both settled into place.

‘These are metal, not wood? That’s heavy duty security for an office.’ Wolfe was inside she moved quickly to keep up.

Beyond the threshold was a corridor several metres wide. A dozen identical plinths down either side. Little Greek columns to parade an avenue of deities; Ancient sculptures, or so it seemed. Isla’s eyes were fixed on Wolfe and the way ahead; at another door looming at the far end. More windows on

either side, the glass even darker than before. Another secret pad hidden from view. Wolfe entered numbers, placed a hand against the pane. The door slid open to reveal a white expanse; four steel columns supported a high ceiling. There were paintings on the walls. Old Masters she assumed. Seiglar could obviously afford them. What attracted her attention were the numerous plinths, each one supported a clear glass case. There were at least a dozen.

‘What are these?’ Asked Joe.

‘You can look at them later, Joe. We have more important things to do. Joe?’

‘Issy, these are ledgers?’ Joe said. All open and hand written in German. Columns of Numbers and place names. ‘I know what these are.’ His mood had changed. ‘There were similar books at the Camp.’ He said.

‘So what? Joe, we can have a picnic and read the books later, yes?’

‘Are these what I think they are, Wolfe?’

‘They are official records kept by the Einzattsgroupen in Russia during the War.’

‘Shit, these are death books?’ Said Issy.

‘Yes. The Director has twenty three books, mostly from the Baltic States. Some from the Ukraine. Please, he’s waiting for you.’

‘He can wait a moment.’ Isla was reading now.

Such large numbers, and so many entries. They read like an invoice from a butcher’s shop. ‘Are these the names of the villages at the top?’ She asked.

‘And the numbers... people? Did they keep score for posterity?’

‘Official records were kept, yes.’

‘Joe, look at this. I’ve never heard of these places. Alytus, one thousand two hundred and seventy. Merkine? Eight hundred and seventy four. Varena, eight hundred and thirty one. Oh my God, so many people? And you say there are twenty three books like this?’

‘There would have been many more but most were destroyed. That particular book is from Lithuania.’ Wolfe stepped closer. Issy stepped away. ‘Eighty percent of the killing squads were made up from local people armed by the SS.’

‘And your Boss likes to look at these things?’

‘They are a reminder of how it was. And why our work here is so important. The Director intends to stop it happening again; but to us this time.’

‘To us? What does that mean? ‘The Director will explain everything. Please, follow me.’

The room curved. At the far end was a large wooden desk on four heavily tapered legs with several laptops on its finely veneered surface. And then she saw something that shocked her. That took Issy’s breath away.

‘Is he alive?’ Asked Issy.

An old man lay on a hospice bed, tubes attached to his body. Machinery that suggested his illness was severe. The man’s shirt was open and revealed a body wasted by time. His skin resembled cling film that had been drawn across the man’s ribs.

The gun in Issy’s right hand found support from her left, her eyes locked onto the wheelchair beside the bed, then the machines that monitored the man’s vital signs. Squeezing every detail from the room. Seiglar’s very own hospital in the sky.

A man entered dressed in a white jumper and beige cargo pants. A stolid, hard looking man with a crew cut. He looked too mean and handy with his fists to be a nurse. A curling tattoo around his neck. The old man said something to his Medic. He nodded, flicked a couple of switches, then checked an expensive looking pump. He retired past Issy seemingly unconcerned by the weapon she pointed toward him. A moment later the outer door hissed shut. A signal for Issy to step forward and pointed her revolver at the old man.

‘It’s time to end this.’ She said.

‘Hey, whoah... Issy, stop.’

She wasn’t listening to Joe. The silver hammer cocked back and her finger squeezed down on the trigger.

‘Give me one good reason, Great Uncle Fueller? Or should I call you, SS Doctor Manfred Seiglar? That is your real name isn’t it. Speak up, give me a reason, or so help me I’ll put a bullet in your head.’

‘Is he really Manfred Seiglar?’ Asked Joe. ‘But Herse said...’

‘Herse lied, Joe. He’s good at it. His lies sent Elder Routh to his death. Well come on old man, speak up. One good reason.’

‘Information.’ He said. His voice tired, his words coarse. ‘I have it, and you want it.’

‘Then you’d better start talking; and quickly. Just in case I feel the urge to sneeze.’

Look at him, his eyes don’t flinch, and age hasn’t softened his nerve. I bet I could put the barrel right up to his face and he’d still curse at me. It’s strange, how such a weak and pathetic figure can hold my gaze. He’s obviously a man used to wielding power.

‘It’s alright Wolfe.’ Seiglar motioned him back. ‘Isla wants answers. I would too in her position. Let’s all remain calm, shall we.’

‘I don’t want to be calm, I want to shoot someone. People have been trying to kill us for a week now, why?’

‘It was unavoidable. But my dear friend, Wolfe, has been watching over you. Trying to keep you safe.’

‘He’s telling the truth, Issy. I’d be dead twice if it wasn’t for Wolfe.’

‘Oh, so you are his best friend now? Shut up Joe. Is that right, Mr Wolfe, are you my friend also? No wait, if you were our friends you would have brought us here right from the start, instead of playing this deadly game of yours.’

‘You had to prove yourself, Isla.’ Said Seiglar. ‘From adversity comes awareness. Knowledge has to be earned.’

‘Or I can just shoot you.’ The hammer cocked fully. Wolfe placed himself between Seiglar and the gun.

Why would you do that? What’s the old man to you?

‘Joe, get out of my way.’

‘No. It’s me they want, and I want to know why. Please, put the gun down.’ Joe was in puppy dog mode. ‘No more shooting.’ He said. ‘Put the gun down.’

Everyone wants to protect the old man, why?

‘Okay, fine, you want to talk to him, go ahead. I don’t believe a word anyone says anyway.’

‘It’s like you’re on your period all the time, you do know that?’

‘Seriously, you want to go there?’

‘No, not really.’

‘Good. Here, you see, the gun is pointed at the floor. Well... speak up old man, the idiot here is waiting.’

‘Fuck you, Issy. You know what, I’ve had enough of you demeaning me. I’ve been there. I killed someone to save your life, remember. How about some fucking respect.’

And now I've made you angry too. That was a stupid thing to say. I'm not thinking straight. I'm sorry.

'I'm sorry, Joe. But look at them, they think this is a game. Old man, do you know what we've been through this last week. With the bald man and the police. That poor girl in the hotel; she had her throat cut.' The gun raised again. 'Was that you?'

'No, Isla. That was the bald man. His name is Muntz, and he doesn't work for us. He works for the Cadre.'

'Isla, please, your weapon.'

'No, let her keep the gun, Wolfe. She's not going to shoot us, not until she knows the truth at least.'

'Okay, fine. Just to please Joe, not you.' She tucked the revolver behind her back. 'Pussy Cat keeps his distance, okay.' *Is that a smile or the result of pain? You're one creepy old man. I wonder what secrets that head of yours holds?* 'Hey, you're still not talking.'

'You see, Wolfe. Her hunger is for information.' Seiglar swung his skinny legs over the bed, Wolfe moved to help him. 'I knew you would find us, Isla. I never doubted you for a moment. Not once. We have so much to discuss.'

'You can start with why this, *Cadre*, want us dead?' Asked Joe.

'Because they don't know who you are. And because you are looking for me. Both are reason enough to make them nervous. Isla, its such a pleasure to finally meet you.'

'Oh, okay. That's nice... not.'

‘You’re safe here with us,’ he said, ‘at least for now.’

‘Well I don’t feel safe. Do you feel safe, Joe? No, he doesn’t feel safe either.’

‘Tell us about Elder Routh.’ Joe put a calming hand on Issy’s shoulder.

‘This all started with his death. Why did he come to see me in London? How did his blood work get mixed in with my test group?’ He shot a hard look at Wolfe. ‘And who messed with, MOLI?’

‘Elder Routh went to London to investigate you, Joe.’ Said Wolfe.

‘Why?’

‘Because we sent him there. Doctor Herse leaks information for us at times. He suggested that you were important to WolfSpawn, and that was enough for Routh. He came out of hiding to see you.’

‘Wait, so I was bait?’

‘Yes. Elder’s death began a chain of events designed to bring you to Poland.’

‘What, why? For what reason?’

‘Distraction.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Cadre are a powerful organisation. Their currency is control, in commerce and politics. Elder Routh could expose them. It didn’t take them long to realise who Elder was.’

‘With a little help from you I suppose.’ Issy said scornfully.

‘But it wasn’t the Cadre that Elder wanted to expose, was it?’ Joe was catching up now. ‘It was you, not them.’

‘It was just a question of time before they found out what he was trying to do. And consequently, our involvement with him. More specifically. My relationship with your charming young friend, Isla.’

‘What does that mean? I’m only here to get my life back. Joe dragged me into all of this. I didn’t...’

‘Elder Routh’s death was carefully conceived, Seiglar interrupted, ‘to distract the Cadre and bring Joe to Poland.’

‘So you set me up from the beginning?’

‘Curiosity can be far more effective than pointing a gun.’

‘No, you’re saying that patient five and Elder Routh, they were a hook to get my interest? You can’t fake results like that.’

‘The results of the tests were real. They were the first links in a chain. My friend, Wolfe, reprogrammed your computer. It was Wolfe who encouraged Professor Kerm to add Elder’s blood to your study. To prepare you for your visit to Poland. To encourage your relationship with Isla.’

‘So you got Tillmach to send me the invitation. Why? People are dead, you do know that.’

‘What relationship?’ Issy asked.

‘We arranged for you to be Joe’s driver. It’s what you do best.’

‘You hired me? You wanted me to be with him. Why? I don’t understand. What do I have to do with you people? I’m nothing to do with this.’

Seiglar shook his head. He was going to say something really bad, she could feel it.

'You are everything to do with this, my dear.' He said. 'You are the entire point of the exercise. Its very fulcrum. I have waited so long to meet you in person.'

‘Okay, that’s creepy. Why would you say that?’

‘Contact with you would have meant interest from the Cadre. And without doubt, your death when they discovered who you are. You had to come to me, and Joe here was the perfect vessel to bring you. I am very sorry Mr White, but none of this was for your benefit. Everything that you have been through, it was to bring Isla here, to me.’

Joe couldn’t help the laughter. ‘That’s a joke, right?’ It stopped just as suddenly.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Joe. I have no idea what he’s talking about.’

‘Are you telling me I’ve been beaten up, shot at, and chased around Europe, for nothing? That I don’t know anything?’

‘Hey, you want to borrow my gun now?’

‘You think this a joke, Issy? Fuck you, and you. You made me a target for what, not to protect her that’s for sure. So what then, to keep her company?’

Don’t look at me like that, Joe. It’s not my fault.

‘You picked me up from the airport. You saved me from Baldy. Did you know?’

‘No. I swear, I know nothing. Joe, I’m as much in the dark as you are.’

‘Is that right.’

‘Yes, I don’t know these people.’ She stepped toward him but Joe stepped back. ‘Please Joe, you have to believe me, I don’t know anything.’

Please believe me.

‘So what now, Herr Seiglar. You engineered this entire thing just to bring Issy here? Have you heard of email? You could have called her on the fucking phone. No way, this is too much.’

‘Isla had to be worthy.’ Seiglar said. ‘She had to prove herself. You have no idea the pleasure, and the pride, that you have gifted me by staying alive to find us. Wolfe, I think we have finally answered the age old argument of Nurture vs Nature. The answer is stood in front of us.’

‘Isla, it was the only way to be sure.’ Wolfe said.

‘You hear the tone in his voice? Wolfe is proud of you also.’

‘Joe, I swear I don’t know what he’s talking about. I want answers too. Old man, you’d better start explaining why you’ve put us through ten shades of Hell? Why there’s a trail of dead bodies behind us?’ The revolver was pointed at them again. ‘Start talking, or so help me I *will* end this right now.’

‘She feels cornered, Wolfe; what should we do? I can’t run, look at me. Do you think you could disarm her before she shoots me?’

‘Go ahead.’ The gun turned toward Wolfe. ‘Try your luck. And you’d better wipe that smile from your face old man.’

‘There is no need for the gun, Isla. I’ll tell you everything you want to know, and doubtless a lot more that you would prefer not to hear. Just allow me a moment, please. A moment of personal gratification.

Look Wolfe, my Granddaughter has finally come home to me.’

‘Your what? Is that a joke, because I’m not laughing.’

‘Do I look like a man who would use levity whilst held at gunpoint.’

‘Don’t smile at me, I don’t like it.’

‘You’re my Granddaughter, Isla. Seeing you now, at the end like this.’ He held out his hand toward her.

You’re not touching me.

‘You’re lying.’ She said. *My Grandfather?* ‘Why would you say that?’

Gollum is my Grandfather? ‘No, I don’t want to hear this. Just tell us why you went to so much effort to bring us here... to bring *me* here?’

‘Nature or Nurture, Isla. Have you ever wondered? You should, it’s the reason you’re here. Ask Joe.’

‘Ask Joe what?’ Joe said as all three stared at him. ‘Okay, yeah, I’ve debated it once or twice.’

‘And your conclusion?’

‘Joe, we didn’t come here to play games.’

‘There isn’t one.’ Joe said as if to spite her. ‘Both play a role in Human development. It’s a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes people have them too.’

Why are looking at me like that. Joe, I...

‘Nature versus nurture, Isla. Both have influence over an individual’s development.’

‘I don’t care, just get to the point, old man.’

‘*You* are the point, Isla. *You*... it’s all about you. About what is natural and what is not. About what is pure and undiluted and natural. Nature, Isla. It’s our genetic inheritance, our biological makeup. Always at war with Nurture; the environmental factors to which each person is subject to from birth until death. Each has a different level of impact on a persons development. Isn’t that right, Joe?’

‘Joe, don’t talk to him.’

‘If you want to understand, you must listen.’ Wolfe said. His voice much softer than before. ‘We don’t have much time.’

‘There are the micro factors at work.’ Said Seiglar. ‘Multiple layers of action and influence. For example, politics, on a local and international level. Global warming. World recession. The invasive, aggressive nature of a neighbouring tribe. Any or all can steer a individuals direction in life. Don’t you agree, Mr White?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s he talking about, Joe?’

‘I’m not sure. How we end up as you and me, I suppose. What kind of *car* you’re born with. How fast you decide to drive it through life. In your case, that would be recklessly and with attitude.’

‘Is that a compliment?’ She asked. ‘Just tell me what all of this has to do with me?’

‘Everything, Isla.’ Said Seiglar. ‘You are the very point of the experiment. The conclusion to seventy years of work. To the billions of dollars pampered on the very finest of minds.’

‘You’re talking about WolfSpawn.’ Joe’s interest was perked. ‘Is that it, Herr Seiglar, are you talking about WolfSpawn? Is Isla involved in WolfSpawn?’

‘WolfSpawn, WolfSpawn... what the fuck is WolfSpawn?’ She demanded.

‘If you stop interrupting him we might find out.’

‘Joe, don’t be angry with me. I...

‘That’s why we chose you, Joe. A keen mind to be Isla’s help and influence.’

‘Don’t say that. Joe’s nobody’s helper, he’s my friend.’ *Oh Joe, please still be my friend.* ‘And I tell you something else, I’m sick of that stupid word, *WolfSpawn*. What’s so important that people are being murdered to hide it? What the fuck is WolfSpawn?’

‘Seventy years of hard work to turn a dream into reality. You need to know everything, Isla. It’s essential that you do. But you won’t like most of what I tell you.’

‘So you say. But all I hear is bullshit.’

‘Let him talk, Issy. We’ve come this far, just let him talk.’

‘Okay, fine. For you then, because I don’t give a shit about what either of them have to say.’ *It’s too clean in here. Not enough air. Can’t they afford a*

bit of colour on the walls? 'Well I'm listening.' Issy pulled the chair from behind the desk and put her feet up pretending not to care. In truth her senses were dialled up. Tuned in to listen to every word the old man had to say. 'Talk, *Grandfather*.' She said.

Seiglar closed his eyes and took a slow and what looked like a painful breath. Wolfe stood by his side. The loyal guardian ready to defend his Master.

'It was nineteen thirty six when I first met, *him*.' Seiglar began.

'Who, who did you meet?'

'Issy.'

'Fine, okay, I zip my mouth. Just for you.' *For you, not for him. It would be quicker to shoot him.*

'It was nineteen thirty six,' Seiglar repeated, 'when I first met Heinrich Himmler; Reichfuhrer SS, of Nazi Germany. WolfSpawn was Himmler's vision. A dream born of *my* theories. A great programme conceived in a meeting of minds.'

'What are you doing?' Issy's feet came off the table.

'Manfred, stop. What are you doing?'

'I'm turning it off, Wolfe. It's time, Isla is here now. I'm not necessary to the programme any more.' Seiglar had plucked the wires from his narrow wiry chest. He pulled the IV line from the vein in his arm. The effort left him looking tired and in pain. 'I should feel the pain before I die.' He said.

'Manfred...'

‘Hey, you heard him. Let him feel some pain.’

‘It’s alright, Wolfe. She doesn’t understand, not yet. But she will. And when I am gone you must care for her, just as I have done.’

‘Hey, wait a moment. Are you serious? Ha ha. You are aren’t you. No-one has cared for Isla, except Isla.’

Issy was up, moving, on the prowl. Not sure what to believe. Were they really related, or was this just some weird fantasy concocted by an old man.

‘It’s true, Isla. I’ve watched you grow and blossom. Admired the way you have confronted adversity and grappled with all of life’s struggles. Adversity and struggle. They are the two great pillars of fate.’ He paused with genuine remorse in his eyes. ‘I was sorry when your mother died. That you had to be raised in that orphanage. But you had to be allowed the freedom of Nurture by your environment.’

‘Was it you who put me in that Home? Why... why would you do that to me? Do you hate me?’

‘No, of course not. Had I shown empathy towards you, you would have grown up quite differently. You would not have the skills to find us, or the strength to do what must be done.’

‘Isla, I’m sorry.’ Wolfe moved toward her.

‘Come near me and I’ll give you another scar; a much bigger one, above the other eye.’

‘Isn’t she wonderful, Wolfe? The gene stirs within her, it just needs direction.’

‘What gene? What’s he talking about?’

‘The only thing that we could not control was your reaction at the bridge. When Mr Muntz turned up unexpectedly. What would you do? How would you react? I admit to a certain amount of trepidation. Would it be fight or flight? Would you try and save them, either of them? Or just yourself?’

‘Did you tell Baldy we would be there?’

‘The Professor’s death was necessary to set you on your path. And now you are here, you found us. I’m grateful Mr White, though I’ve still not decided what to do with you.’

‘Fuck you old man. And you too, Pussy Cat. You’re not doing anything with Joe, he’s with me. Under my protection.’

‘You don’t stop do you. I can look after myself, I don’t need you.’

‘That’s not what I meant. Joe...’ He turned his back on her. ‘Why have you done this to us? Look at me, I have shit, nothing. I’m not who you think I am. What, old man. Have I said something to amuse you?’

‘From adversity comes awareness, Isla. From struggle we find the will to survive; to see the world as it truly is and not with empathy. I think you are perfect, Isla. You could not have turned out any better.’

‘Someone had better start making sense, or I will start shooting. And you get it first, *Grandpa...*’

‘You don’t believe me, I understand. Show her, Wolfe.’

‘Easy, no sudden movements.’

What’s he doing?

Wolfe put his hand on the wall. The white glass paled and cleared to reveal a vast window. What she saw through the glass made her want to sit back down.

Doors hidden in the glass. Joe was right, it was clever. Her instincts warned her not to enter. Not to put one foot across the threshold. Joe was already halfway through. Eyes wide, gaze drawn toward what was inside.

Seiglar's movement was awkward. He needed Wolfe to lift him from his bed into the wheelchair. A few minutes away from his machines and the old man looked, limp. Claw like fingers clutched at the arms of the chair as the faithful servant wheeled his Master through the door.

Isla hesitated.

'Joe.' She whispered, and he turned. 'I'm sorry, about all of this. I don't know these people. Please don't hate me for this.'

'We should go in.' He said.

'No, I don't know. I'm not sure any more. Joe, I'm scared.'

'Of what?'

'That I won't be the same person when I come out.'

'We should go in.'

Not what she wanted to hear.

He can't bear to look at me. He thinks he's unnecessary. A redundant piece of a sick game. I suppose I would be angry too. Joe, say something. He didn't.

'Okay... you go first. I'll follow.' She tried to smile.

It's alright, I'm used to being on my own.

The truth was that life was easier to understand when it didn't make any sense. In there were more answers than she'd bargained for. Was that man really her Grandfather? Could he really tell her about her past? And what did he mean when he said there were things that she wouldn't want to hear?

What's in there?

I don't want to go in there.

Issy took a step through the door and it closed behind her.

Inside was a scene for which neither were prepared. A landscape of lights and high tech sophistication. She knew what the big thing with all the flickering was; some kind of big computer. That was easy. But the tall cylindrical things with the blue lighting, she had no idea. There were at least a dozen of them. It was like a bank vault, but way cooler. And to her left was a collage of monitors on the wall, below them a desk with a glass surface and what was best described as a big car windscreen beside it. She'd seen something similar in a movie where all the information could be thrown from screen to screen.

'What is this place?' Asked Isla. 'It looks like the inside of an alien spaceship.'

'What you see are cryogenic caissons.' Seiglar answered her with pride. 'Over ten thousand of them. They're wonderful aren't they? I designed this storage facility myself.'

'What are they? And why's it so cold in here?'

'The Pods have to be kept at the constant temperature of minus one hundred and ninety six degrees. The steam you can see from the units is the reason the room is so chilled.'

Chilled, it's fucking freezing.

'Joe, it's like one of those Sci-fi channel films, you know? Everything's so white and sterile.' *Joe? Please talk to me. What, what have you seen?*

‘Is that an SS uniform hanging up over there?’ Joe asked Seiglar.

‘It’s the uniform of a Sturmbannfuhrer in the SS, yes. I keep it here to remind me ’

‘It’s a sick keepsake?’ *God, I hope I’m not related to you.* ‘So here we are. Why are we here? Joe, do you know what any of this is?’ She reached for his hand but Joe stepped away. Toward the cryogenic units. Maybe he wanted to feel the cold. *Joe, please.*

‘This, is Project WolfSpawn.’ Seiglar announced. ‘At least where it all began. What you see here is the genetic history of the Schutzstaffel.’

‘The SS?’ Joe’s hand moved away from the unit he’d wanted to touch. ‘Please tell me this is just a mausoleum.’

‘I think you’ve guessed that it’s more than that, Mr White. Inside these Pods is the blood and semen taken from thousands of SS officers and enlisted men. WolfSpawn is the culmination of our search for the *SS gene.*’

‘The what?’ Joe seemed to find the statement amusing. ‘The SS gene? What’s that?’ He seemed to think about it. ‘Are you saying what I think you’re saying; because that’s ridiculous.’

‘Really, Mr White. After what you’ve been through to find us?’

‘What’s he talking about, Joe?’

‘Shush, let him talk.’

Don’t you shush me. Don’t you dare...

‘The program’s goal was simple in it’s aims. To identify the genes that were present in the most dedicated of the SS brethren. Their *genetic*

predisposition to follow their Fuhrer. We set out to find the genetic geometry that was present in the Master Race. What other reason could be responsible for such a fanatical imprint of the Nazi cause. Think about it, Joe. I have, for over seventy years.'

'Joe, have we entered the Twilight Zone...' *Joe, talk to me. Don't you ignore me. 'Joe?'*

'I don't know, Issy. And I don't think I want to know. If it wasn't for all of this; what we've just been through. I'd have said he was delusional. And me too for what I'm thinking.' His eyes were keen and eager, all over the room. 'That's an impressive mainframe you have over there.'

Bank upon bank of blinking lights. Thousands of coloured stars that twinkled for Seiglar in his own private Universe. An Aurora that danced about a hard carbon wall. All shiny and black, like the night would slide right off it's surface.

Isla had seen something like this before. In the movie, Star Wars. She was standing at the centre of the Death Star. And she didn't give a shit.

'What are those?' Asked Joe. 'Some kind of atmospheric chambers?' There were four of them.

'Of a kind.' Seiglar replied. 'Everything you see here is the the result of WolfSpawn. Has the penny dropped yet, Joe? Can you understand what we've done?'

'There's no such thing as an SS gene.' *He can't be serious. And yet look at all of this.* 'Tell me what all of this is. I need more information.'

'You see Isla. Joe doesn't think I'm insane.'

'Joe's had a rough few days. He's not thinking straight, are you?'

'I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt, for now. Let him talk, Issy'

'Yeah, sure, I'll grab a magazine and let you boys talk shop.'

'Issy, Shush.'

If you shush me again. Hey I'm the one with the gun...

'In nineteen thirty seven,' Seiglar said, 'I met Heinrich Himmler for the first time. I attended a meeting at the Hohenlychen Clinic; a medical facility for the SS outside of Berlin. I was desperate to find funding for my research, and the SS it seemed would be my last chance. I was working in genetics, a virgin science back then. Too new for most, and several universities had already rejected my work. They considered my ideas too radical. Can you imagine that in nineteen thirties Germany, being too radical?'

'Hey, no, stop this. That's not why we're here.'

'It's exactly why we're here, Issy. To find out why people want us dead.'

But he said he knew about me? Joe...

'Ignore her, you can never be too radical in science.'

'Yes, ignore the girl with the gun. I thought you were smarter than that.'

'Isn't she wonderful.' Seiglar spoke to Joe, but only had eyes for Isla. He looked at her with unadulterated pride. 'In the nineteen thirties,' he said, 'genes were known to exist on chromosomes. That they were composed of both protein and DNA. What scientists did not know was which was responsible for inheritance, or how. But I did. At least that's what I told

Himmler. It wasn't difficult to tailor my presentation to suit the Reichfuhrer's fanatical views. He was obsessed with racial purity, so I told him it was possible to scientifically prove that the German's were the Master Race. It was in their DNA. And given time I could even trace their origins back to the Super Race that Himmler believed all Nordic people were originated.

'Nordic?' Asked Joe.

'Himmler described them as, Related Stock. The SS received volunteers from Sweden to Spain. I told him, given time, I could trace their original bloodlines; maybe even purge undesirable racial content. Make them pure again.'

'And he believed you?'

'It was easier than I imagined to get Himmler's interest. I'd heard that Goering was trying to bring animals back from the dead. He was funding the Heck brothers, zoologists with a penchant for self publicity. They were trying to back-breed wild Germanic animals. They intended to resurrect the Auroch. A pure, giant, dangerous breed of cow that our Germanic ancestors had loved to hunt. They'd been extinct for two thousand years, but Goering wanted them brought back so he could hunt them on his estates. Total Teutonic nonsense that I used to my advantage. I showed the Reichsfuhrer the advantages of funding his own, special programme. And he was hooked from the start.'

'You're serious aren't you?'

‘Himmler was fascinated by my theories. The way his black eyes stared at me through those little round spectacles. He lapped up my presentation. But when I was done, he said nothing. The most powerful man in Hitler’s Reich just sat and stared. He was a dangerous man, Himmler. And I felt the full force of the Nazi State focused on me. I feel the goose-pimples even now.’

‘Can I assume he said yes?’

‘Oh, Mr White, he said more than yes. Himmler sat forward and asked me a simple, but terrifyingly illuminated question. “If DNA was responsible for inheritance,” he said, “could it be manipulated? Altered in a predefined manner?”

I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t considered the proposition of manipulating Nature’s work. I was impressed that he’d understood my presentation, as dumbed down as it was. But Himmler was clearly hooked. And I wanted to explore DNA and discover its secrets. Just to study it would have been enough for me. But that one simple question took my thinking in a new and radical direction. From that moment on, I was hooked too. By an awkward looking man with eyes that could burn you. So what else could I say, but yes. Theoretically, yes, it was possible.

I needed what Himmler had in troves. Influence and money. And I got both. He authorised speculative funding for secret studies right there and then. I was ordered to hand pick a team of scientists that would work directly under his patronage. I couldn’t believe my good fortune. I had just been given the chance to advance my theories by the most powerful organisation in Europe.

I was exhilarated. Someone had finally listened to me. More than that, he believed wholeheartedly in the work we were about to undertake.'

'So you joined up, *Grandpa*.'

'I had to join the SS, yes. I was given the rank of Sturmbannfuhrer, a Major in the Black Shirts. At the time I had no idea what wearing that uniform could do for me. The doors it was about open. Himmler even gave the Programme a codename, Operation WolfSpawn. I joined the SS to further the study of medical science. In Himmler I found a sponsor who shared my vision. For me it was the undertaking of scientific enquiry. To Himmler, the purity of the Nordic species was at stake. From Scandinavia through to the Balearics. I admit, I had no idea of the extent of his vision. I thought I was the one who had the big ideas. But history was to prove me very wrong.'

‘We split the work into several think tanks, each named Hut Thirty Six. Within a year we began our quest to unravel the structure of DNA. We soon began to understand the role being played by our genes. We learned slowly that certain gene sequences were responsible for how we looked. Our height, hair, the colour of our eyes. Science that children understand today; but not back then. What we were doing, the direction we took the research. It was a dark path. At Hut Thirty Six we tiptoed the line between science, and science fiction.

Himmler believed that a single SS gene was responsible for his Master Race. That it lay dormant in all the Nordic peoples; that it could give them superhuman power to match his SS. He wanted to unleash their potential.

Like the Auroch, the ancient German people were wild and unspoilt. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote “the Germanic tribes were physically hardened and racially pure.” He said that no one was *good* in his eyes except, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, and the Germanic people.’

‘You sound like a believer in the Mater Race.’ Issy said. ‘Was that another door the uniform opened for you?’

‘I began to believe, yes. It was difficult not to. When the War began the German Army conquered most of Europe, in a matter of months. Hitler’s success turned most Germans into believers. Not Nazis, Isla, just believers in the man and his myth.

I had no doubts then that our genetic make-up was responsible for our sudden rise. I didn't realise that I was about to spend the rest of my life trying to prove it.'

Seiglar paused and took a deep breath, his exertion obvious. He was tired and in pain, but not ready to stop, not yet.

'Of course it wasn't going to be an easy journey.' Seiglar said. 'That simple trenchant question that Himmler had asked me. It was always present. Reaching out from the back of my mind to entice me on. How far could I take the research? What if Himmler was right? What if there *was* a sequence of genes that were present in all of his SS warriors. A sequence that turned a normal placid Aryan, into a loyal ardent follower of the Fuhrer. What if we could find them? Extract them? Better still, copy and introduce the coding into others who were not so earnest toward the Nazi doctrine?'

'Are you serious? Joe, please tell me this isn't possible.' *Oh look at him, he's like a kitten lapping at Seiglar's milk.* 'Joe.'

'What? Oh, I don't know. There are so many variables to contend with, and the stressors? They can light up our epigenetic markers like a Christmas tree. Turn genes on and off. Affect the donors, and especially their offspring. It's fanciful.'

'Fanciful? This is bullshit. Joe, tell me this is bullshit.'

'Issy, what did we say about listening and not interrupting?'

Are you scolding me?

‘As you say, Joe. The problems that we faced were infinite, and why it took us so long. All cell types contain the same Human DNA. It’s our genes that cause us to differ, both in character and in looks. But what if you found a way to isolate, and then alter a string of specific genes. Say, ones you have searched for and found over many years. Altering them in someone else wouldn’t change who they were, just make them more like the others. Which would make all of the others more like the donor himself.’

‘What? Does that even make sense? Joe, talk to me. Speak English.’

‘He’s talking about flicking switches. Like a telephone exchange.’

‘An interesting analogy, Mr White. But why stop there. Imagine what you could do with the right delivery system. No introduction of tissue. No need to worry about suppression, or rejection. You could create perfect genetic transformation.’

‘You’d be introducing a popular trait into the masses’

‘No, it would be more of a predisposition.’

‘Okay, okay, stop. Just stop talking, both of you... I’m bored now.’

‘Issy, this is fascinating. If it’s true...’

‘Sure, yes, and you like it so much when I speak German, or Polish. It doesn’t irritate you at all when you don’t understand me. Joe, du bist so ein dick. (Joe, you’re such a dick.).’

‘It is important that you understand everything, Granddaughter.’

‘Don’t you call me that. That’s not true.’

‘Issy, let him speak.’

The revolver hung in her right hand. The hammer cocked back one notch. Joe held his hands palms up as if to apologise. All this talk, it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

'We scanned and mapped the DNA of thousands of SS warriors, and we found it. The SS gene is real, Mr White. The fundamental sequence shared by one hundred percent of the donors in those pods.'

'That's not possible.'

'And yet it is true. We devised synthetic molecules that could edit the Geno. Within a decade we had created a working copy of the gene.'

The strain of being away from his machines had begun to tell on the old man. His head was beginning to drop as he spoke. The words spoken on accumulating breaths. The dogged necessity to continue never left those sallow eyes.

'The Camps gave us access to all the genetic material we needed,' he said, 'even as early as nineteen thirty seven. Political undesirables and criminals gave blood and tissue. We told them we were testing for typhus, and other diseases. No-one knew what we were attempting to do, not then, and they still have no idea now. Isla, it was truly magnificent... at first.' Seiglar suppressed a chesty cough and his breathing became laboured. He'd been away from his machines too long.

'Just answer me this, *Grandfather*. Why me? What's so special about me? Why am I here?'

‘Of course, I understand. Isla, these thing are important too. Yes yes.
Wolfe, give her the box.’

‘What is this?’ Issy asked.

In her hands was a small circular box. It was heavy and made of dark wood and held a shine that was as deep as it was old.

‘This has waited a long time for you to open it.’

Compassion from the old man, that didn’t seem his style and served to make the object even more intriguing.

‘We have both been very patient.’ Seiglar added.

Issy stepped toward one of the tables. Eyes on the old man, Wolfe, and then Joe. *What the hell is in this thing?* She rested the box down and put the yoyo gun back in her belt, then lifted the lid.

Papers, the box was filled with papers. Old documents and letters neatly folded and stacked. Issy fingered through the yellowed paperwork; there were photos too. Black and white images from the Nineteen Thirties and Forties judging by the style of dress. There were a lot of photos in here.

‘What are these. What do I want with a box full of keepsakes?’ *Oh no... stupid girl. They’re my keepsakes.*

Issy closed the lid and stepped back, both hands to her mouth.

‘Issy? Talk to me, what’s wrong?’ Joe seemed to have step back into her life, concern etched across his face. ‘What’s in that thing?’

‘That box contains everything my employees could find.’ Seiglar said.’ It wasn’t easy. The Nazis were just as efficient at destroying records as they were at keeping them.’

‘What’s in there?’ Joe reached for the box. ‘What have you given her.’

Issy turned the box upside down and tipped its contents across the table.

Is it true, is this man really my Grandfather?

Her hands separated the contents. Birth certificates, envelopes, bits of paper. The old photos were what she wanted to see.

‘The documents in that box all relate to your family, Isla. From your grandmother’s side.’

‘And my mother?’ For an instant her blood ran as cold as the steam from the pods. *Deep breath, Issy. Is he joking with me? It doesn’t look like he is.*

‘Where’s Mama? I don’t see Mama.’ *If you’re lying, I’ll end you.’*

Seiglar’s face had barely changed since they’d arrived so how would she know? Always so serious and devoid of emotion. Just a ghostly determination set upon a man who should have died a long time ago. Issy’s fingers tingled with excitement. So different to the fear she’d felt before entering this, Sorcerer’s cave. The man who, moments ago had filled her with contempt, now offered something new. A tingling anticipation. He’d turned an old box filled with scraps of paper into a treasure hoard of Hope.

Why didn’t he speak?

Why didn’t he answer her question.

Which of these photos was Mama?

Surely she would know, instantly. One by one Issy arranged things to see more clearly what was on the table. Mama wasn't here.

'Inside that small leather wallet.' Seiglar said. 'Untie its ribbon.'

Paperwork was pushed aside. A thin black wallet tied with a ribbon.

'Mama?' *Are you in there?* Issy didn't care if she seemed eager or excited. Fuck them both, she'd never seen a picture of her mother. And that wasn't right. Every girl should know her Mother. At least see her face. *Mama, please be in here...*

The room wasn't cold anymore as she touched the folded leather. Isla was running hot as she slid the knot away from the silken ribbon. Issy opened the wallet to find more photos in the pockets inside.

They were colour; Polaroid's taken decades later than all the rest. Issy had no doubt.

'Mama.' She tasted the salt before realising that tears had rolled down her cheeks.

'Take them out.' Said Seiglar. 'They are photos of your mother. My daughter. Our link through time.'

Don't cry, Issy. Don't cry.

The first of the photos came fully into the light.

'Oh my... Look Joe, it's Mama. This can't be true. See, she has blonde hair, just like me. They told me she had the most wonderful blonde hair. And blue eyes, like sapphires. Joe, see, I have blue eyes.' *Mama, I've found you.* Her fingers dragged at the tears but wanted more images from the wallet.

Oh God, I've missed you so much.

'Six pictures?' It wasn't enough. 'Are there more, do you have more photos of Mama?'

'Of course, yes, many more. Wolfe will show you when you're ready.'

'I'm ready now. Well, why are you standing there? Wolfe, Go get them. Joe, look, she's so beautiful. I knew she was beautiful. Just like me, eh? Ha ha ha, Joe, it's Mama.'

Oh fuck, now I'm going to cry like a little girl.

'She's lovely, Issy. She really is.' Joe had seen Issy smile, sure he had. At least once. But for the first time there was no attempt at pretence, and no outer shell to bang his head against. She was bare, undefended... vulnerable. Joe stepped around the table between Wolfe and Issy.

'You haven't told us what you want yet.' He said.

'It doesn't matter Joe, I've found Mama.'

'I know, I understand. I do. But nothing comes for free with people like this.'

She wasn't listening. There was a seventh photo at the back, much smaller, even older. She'd missed it. The grain of the image obvious from its age. Issy slipped it out of the wallet and into the light.

'Who are these people?' She asked Seiglar. 'Who is this, the girl at the front; the one dancing, who is she?'

'You see Wolfe. There is no hesitation in her recognition. She recognises her own. Isla, that is your Grandmother.'

‘My Grandmother. Really? I couldn’t even find out her name. Joe, this is my Grandmama?’ She had to take a breath. Try to take it all in. And Joe was right, what price was to be paid for unlocking her past?

Stop acting like a little girl. These people want something, but what? ’Tell me about her.’ Issy asked. *Why does she look so familiar? How is that possible?* ‘The photo must be a hundred years old? How old is Grandmama in this photo?’

‘Fourteen. It’s the only photograph my investigators could find of her before the War.’

‘Look Joe, my Grandmama.’ *Stop sniffing Issy. You said you wouldn’t if you found them.* Her tear ducts continued to ignore her will. *Fuck them, I don’t care if they see me cry.*

‘Issy, look at the photo. All the people in the background. Correct me if I’m wrong, Herr Seiglar. But wasn’t this photo taken at a Jewish wedding?’

‘What are you saying, Joe? So what? I don’t care If my family are Jewish.’

‘That’s not it, Issy. Seiglar says he’s your Grandad, but he were an SS officer. How does that work?’

‘What does that even mean. Joe, I don’t understand. I can’t think straight.’

‘He’s right, Isla. But also wrong. Your Great Grandmother was German. She wasn’t bred by Jews, she was adopted by them. Her name was Maria, and she was orphaned by the Great War. Her Jewish neighbours took her in. When she was fourteen she married an Austrian with an impeccable blood line and

together they had a child, your Grandmother. She was... seventeen, when I first met her.'

Did you just lie to me?

'See, inside the box. Look in the box there is another photo of her. Yes, that's it, I took that photo myself.'

A leak had become a full blown tsunami. Isla using her sleeve as well as her hand to stem the flow.

'I don't care what nationality or religion she was. Joe, this is my Grandmama? Oh my God, is this her name? Look, Joe, here on the back. Anna... her name is, Anna?'

'Anna, but that's...'

They both saw it. The first crack in the old man's armour. The name shot Seiglar with emotion, the impact as hard and fast as any bullet.

'Was her name, Anna, Grandfather?'

'Yes, Anna. Anna Elaina Folkstama.'

The words were not so self assured now. A hint of anticipation at what might come next. Joe saw it even if Issy didn't. And he knew why.

'Err, Issy, there's something else.'

'Shush, Joe. Tell me about her, everything you know about, Anna.'

'Issy...'

'Shut up, Joe. I don't want to hear any more about this fucking place, or about WolfSpawn; about any of it. Family, just let him tell me about my family.'

'Isla.'

'What? What do you want, Joe?'

'Look at Anna... I've seen this woman before.'

'What? No, that's not possible.' *What is he pointing at?* 'Where have you seen her?'

'Here, look.' Joe began rooting through Issy's rucksack. then pulled Elder's bundle from the bag. The old man was on the edge of his wheelchair as it was unrolled on the table's top. 'Look, look at this. Sure, she's older in these photos, but that's her. That's Anna.' He pushed the photo of the woman laughing with the guards towards her. This is Anna, isn't it Manfred?'

'Where did you get that?' The penny dropped. 'Elder Routh...' he said with scorn.

'Give it to me.' Issy snatched the photo. *He's right, but how can that be? Are there two Annas? No, only one.* 'Joe, are you saying that my Grandmama was in the SS?'

'No, no, that's not what I'm saying. Issy, you need to look at this as well.' Joe had taken something else from Elder's package. The folded piece of paper that had been in the diary. 'Issy, you remember Solomon told us this was a page from a selection ledger.'

'Yes.'

'What is that; what do you have in your hand? Wolfe.'

'Whoah, easy big feller, it's just a piece of paper. And aren't we here for the truth?' He pushed the page toward Issy. 'This list of names, it's a page from a

selection book that Elder Routh kept inside his diary. Like the ones outside. Take a look. Halfway down the middle row, Issy. Look at the names in the middle row.'

She was till looking at the photos of Anna. She should have made the connection instantly.

'Give that to me. Let me see.'

'Look at the names, Issy. Here, right here. Look at the names.'

'Folkstama.' She said aloud. Folkstama... but that's Grandmama's name. Oh my God, look at them all. There are so many of them with the same surname. Folkstama. Joe, what does this mean?'

'Issy, your grandmother wasn't in the SS. She was a prisoner at Auschwitz.'

‘Casualties of War, isn’t that what you said? You fucking liar. You murdered them, my entire family?’

‘Whoa, whoa... take a step back. Issy, put the gun down.’

‘Joe, he murdered my family. You bastard...’

‘Think about this, Issy. Kill him and we still don’t know what this is all about. Questions first, shoot later. Put the gun down. Please, for me...’

‘No, get out my way. You too, Mr Wolfe.’

‘This is murder, Issy. Just like them. You pull that trigger and you’re no different to them.’

‘You’re comparing me to what, this man? How dare you. How fucking dare you.’

‘I’m just saying... take a breath; think this through. Killing him won’t change the past.’

He just handed me the past, and then took it away. Why would he do that to me?

‘Get out of my way, Joe.’

‘No, put the gun down. This is a ledger page from a Death Camp. Seiglar isn’t directly responsible for their deaths.’

‘Isn’t he? Well I say different.’

Seiglar wheeled his chair forward.

‘Don’t you want to know the truth first.’ He said. ‘All of it.’

‘You’re a fucking liar, why should I listen to you?’

‘I’m not trying to hide anything from you.’ Seiglar stared at Joe. ‘It’s just, difficult to admit, even this long after it happened. Listen to me, Isla. Listen to what I have to say. And then you have more of a decision to make than whether to kill me or not.’

‘Oh, I will kill you?’

‘Yes... yes. But you must listen to me first. You must understand everything that has happened. And why it is that you are here.’

‘That’s better; much calmer now. Give me the gun, Issy?’

‘Don’t touch the gun, Joe. You, talk. Maybe I listen. Maybe I just put a hole in your head.’

Seiglar sat back. He looked exhausted. But mean as hell.

‘Good, good. You see Wolfe, her need for information overcomes the desire to kill. When the Folkstamas arrived on the train, I was there, yes. I watched with Hoess, the Camp Commandant at the time.’

‘You hear him, he admits to being there when they arrived.’

‘I won’t lie to you, Isla.’

‘No? Just omit the truth when it suits you.’

‘It’s hard to admit the kind of man I was. Still am, perhaps. But I had no control over the events of that day. I shouldn’t even have been there. My orders expressly forbade my entering the Camp.’

‘But you did, yes?’

‘Yes. I arranged a meeting with Rudolf Hoess. It was logged as a formal meeting on behalf of the Labour Ministry. Just another SS officer looking for labour. Dealing with Hoess was usually Oberscharführer Stauff’s job. The man you know as Elder Routh. He’d collect the samples taken by the doctors. There were many reasons given, numerous hands to pass through. No-one gave them a second thought. There was always another experiment to be done, inside and out of the Camp.

I had become curious about the Camp. To be so close for so long; I wanted to see for myself... what it was like.’

‘And did you get a thrill, *Grandfather?*’

‘There was a certain, exhilaration, yes. When I heard the train, the sound of the whistle announce its imminent arrival. I had no idea what to expect, and Hoess suggested that I accompany him to observe. To see first hand how the selection process was performed.’ Seiglar took a deep breath. The memories were obviously still vivid. ‘The details are unimportant, but that was where I first saw your Grandmother.’

‘You were watching as the Folkstama’s were herded from a cattle truck?’

‘Yes. There were so many Jews coming down the ramps, it seemed chaotic at first. And yes I was thrilled, excited even. To hear the shouts from the guards, the sounds of the dog’s barking. The collective relief from the Jews as they left confinement. Before the realisation of terror. It was disturbing, yet exhilarating; impressive the way a rabble was coerced so quickly into lines for selection. I’d seen enough and was going to leave when I saw, *her*.

When I saw, Anna. I don't know why she stood out amongst the rest. Hoess was encouraging me back to his office but I couldn't hear his voice. Not until he whispered in me ear. "You've seen a flower bloom amongst the brambles, eh? I've seen that look before, oh yes. Tough luck for her." He said.

'Are you listening to yourself, Grandfather?'

'You said you wanted the truth. This is the truth. It was a different time, and I was caught up in the hysteria. Hoess wasn't pleased when I requested her.'

'Requested her. As what, your whore?'

'No, no, it wasn't like that; it was never like that. It wasn't.'

'You're starting to drool, Grandfather. Fond memories?'

Seiglar wiped at his mouth. He was angry. The first emotion he'd shown.

'I needed someone to look after things, of a more personal nature.' He said.

'A maid, if you like. A companion, perhaps. Oh Hoess, he said no at first. Implied that it was too irregular. That she could not be removed from the line; she was being sent directly to the gas chamber.'

'You knew about the gas chambers?'

'We all knew. Even the prisoners were aware by then. I chose to save her, and I did. I couldn't help any of the others. Hoess was an officer for whom duty was everything. I had to insist using Himmler's authority.'

'Issy, are you okay?' Joe took her hand but she pulled away.

'No, of course I'm not. I'm crying because people like him are born, and there is nothing we can do about it.'

Joe wanted answers; he needed to understand the facts. Everything in this room screamed insanity, but it was pure science waiting to be explored. And the man with the shrink wrapped skin was at the centre of it all.

But Issy didn't care about WolfSpawn, or Luminsrau. The history of what had brought them here only mattered if it involved her family tree. And who could blame her. Not Joe. He understood that much at least. Issy sought to answer different questions now. Baldy and the Cadre, they didn't matter to her. Herr Seiglar had two stories to tell, and Joe was going to have to show patience, at least for now.

'For you, Isla, WolfSpawn began with your mother.' Seiglar said. 'She received a special gene, from me. And you were the first child since the War to maturate this gene via a natural heir, your mother, my daughter. Inseminated with sperm from another natural carrier of the gene.'

'That's so eloquently put, Grandfather.' *What... why is he looking at him, at Scarface?*

'Isla, Wolfe is your father.'

'Father?' *Right, good one.* 'Wolfe? Ha ha ha ha, him... no way, don't be stupid. Uh uh, that's bullshit. I don't have a father. My mother raised me on her own.'

'Your mother died minutes after you were born. Wolfe is your biological father.'

‘I don’t believe you. No, don’t you look at me like that, I’m not your daughter. And who made you my Grandfather, huh? If that’s really what you are? Can’t you do a test, Joe?... Joe?’

Joe, why are you listening to this? You’re my friend. Don’t you dare believe any of this can be true.

‘Huh, all those nights crying myself to sleep. Wondering why no-one wanted me. This is one hell of a family reunion. So which one of you did it? Put me in that orphanage?’ Saying nothing told her everything. ‘You bastards, why would you do that to a child?’

‘I put you somewhere safe, Isla. Where no-one knew who you were. And I have been watching over you ever since.’

‘Ha ha ha, watching over me... good one. Joe, say something. Great, you too. Well I still don’t believe any of this.’ Issy was up and pacing. Finger wagging. Trying to take it all in. ‘You fucking people. You think you can come into my life. Oh, and drop me, us, into the middle of a gunfight as well. No, I don’t accept any of this. Mama is the only one who has ever watched over me. I don’t need you, *Grandfather*. Or you, Mr Wolfman. God, you didn’t even know my mother did you. You must have been about, what, my age back then? Did you tickle yourself into a jar, was that how it happened?’

‘Isla, I didn’t know about you. Not until Kronnsnow. And I did everything I could to get your early release.’

‘Oh, the lawyer... Oh, okay, that was you. Thanks.’

‘The Director kept this from me. I didn’t know I had a child.’

‘Well maybe you should have. In here. In your heart. No, don’t look at me like that, it’s too late now.’

‘Your mother passing so soon after your birth, it was unforeseen.’ Said Seiglar.

‘Unforeseen? You hear that, Joe? It was unforeseen. Like she was a fucking rain cloud. You took her away, old man. Took her and left me, I should never have been born.’

‘Her death was an unfortunate complication.’ Seiglar added.

‘Ha ha, listen to him. Now she is a complication. Has anyone got a tissue? Were you heartbroken when your daughter died? Did it get you, just here? Is there actually a heart beating inside that cage you call a chest?’

‘Isla, the Director gave her what she wanted. It was her choice. We’re sorry that she died.’

‘Save your sympathy, Wolfe. She was a stranger to you, and you’re just a donor to me... apparently. But you, *Grandfather*. Why didn’t you take me in when she passed? Why didn’t you want me? Poor little Isla, what’s wrong with her? Why doesn’t anyone want me?’

‘Acknowledging you would have made you a target. I took the decision to conceal you from the others.’

‘Oh, this Cadre of yours, how very convenient. Yes look, Joe thinks so too. So who are they? You may as well tell me. Come on, spit it out. I’m the one they’re trying to kill. Shit, why are they trying to kill me? And tell me the truth, no lies or I walk out that door.’

This is so fucked up. Even Joe's big brain is struggling, look at him. What? Why is he looking at the freezer cabinets like that? Why is he looking at me like that? Stop it. Whatever it is that's going on in that clever head yours?

'Nurture.' Seiglar said distracting her. 'The influence of the outside world against the predispositions of our natural genetic makeup. Individual, or Collective. The influence of one over the other, they're impossible to separate. Until now.'

'What? Joe, what did he just say? Don't sigh, just spit it out.'

'He's saying that he isolated you deliberately; that is what you're saying? That you left Isla in a harsh environment to see how she would grow and develop. Why would you do that to her?'

'Yes... what he just said.'

'There were problems with the initial trials of the prototype gene.' Seiglar pointed to the capsules on the far side of the room. 'It was pure, raw, and aggressive; not as refined as the subsequent drug we manufactured. There were casualties. It was important to keep Isla secure and safe. The others would have wanted to, *study her.*'

'I'm sorry... study me?'

'Or did you keep her hidden so you could study her yourself? Tell me about the gene. Is that what WolfSpawn is, a gene?'

'No, no, you're talking shit. I want to go, Joe. I'm not going to be studied by anyone. I'll take my chances out there. It's probably safer anyway.'

‘Your Grandmother gave birth to your mother on November Twelfth, nineteen forty five.’ Seiglar announced. ‘There is so much that you don’t know about yourself, Isla. Leave now and it all dies with me. Don’t you want to know.’

‘Yes, no... what does it matter? You don’t matter. None of this matters.’ *Is this all there is? Twenty six years of shit just to find a few photos, and the two of you; my very own Adams family. I wish I hadn’t come.*

‘Anna was a slight woman.’ Seiglar wasn’t about to be denied. ‘She hardly showed until the last few weeks. We had to be careful. Any suspicion from the others would have ended...’

‘Would have ended you, that’s what you mean. Yes, I can see it in your eyes, still filled with fear. You disgust me.’

‘Issy, let’s see this through. No, don’t look at me like that; we’ve come this far haven’t we. We... *you* need to hear him out.’

‘You find this fascinating don’t you?’ Issy turned away. ‘I don’t want to know any more.’

Of course I do. I want to know who I am and where I came from. I want to know it all. But not like this. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

‘Okay, fine. But you’d better talk fast, old man.’

“I sent my men into town,” Seiglar said, “and Elder Routh took your mother away in a kit bag.”

‘Did you leave her in an orphanage too?’

‘I had made arrangements; paid an old couple living in a Polish border town. They thought the child was Polish, so they took her in. You have to understand the pressure I was under. I was in love with an inmate from the Camp. We had a child together.’

‘My Grandmother was a good German, you said so yourself. Why couldn’t you have saved her?’

‘None of that mattered. She’d been sentenced; had no papers. Hoess had insisted she be marked with the Camp numbers. I was an SS officer who had sworn my oath to the Fuhrer. My life was on a knife’s edge, and I had a child to protect. It wasn’t just my decision.’

‘Is it true, what Elder wrote in his diary? Did you shoot her?’

‘No, she shot herself. I swear to you. Anna knew she could never leave the Camp...’

‘You’re a liar.’ *I don’t want to know these things; it hurts too much. How can I feel so sick about people I never knew?*

‘*Issy, hear him out.*’

‘It’s all so convenient isn’t it. I feel sick. Well go on, what happened next now Grandmama was gone?’

‘A year after the War I arranged for the Kristophen Charity to take in the child.’

The child? She was your daughter. Is there any emotion inside of you?

‘The Kristophen Charity were a group who took in German orphans. They were desperate for funds so it wasn’t difficult to arrange. There were so many orphaned children in eastern Berlin; in the whole of Prussia. It was easy to get money into Stalin’s Europe, but not so easy to get a person out. Especially a baby. So I left her where she was safe.’

‘You left her. Hey, I know how that feels. So then what, you forgot about her too?’

‘No, of course not. Himmler had operatives all over Europe who were helping Nazis to escape. I used these organisations to smuggle money in, and photographs out. For four years I was in no position to help anyone but myself.’

‘Is this one of them.’ Issy plucked a photo of a child from the floor. ‘Is this my Mama?’

‘Yes. I think she is two years old in that photo.’

‘Look Joe, she’s smiling. Was she a happy baby? Did you ever try to get her back?’

‘I made sure she was well provided for.’

‘You hear that, Joe? Like me, my mother was well provided for.’

‘Europe was a mess, Isla. She was well looked after. Bringing her to the West was too much of a risk. And there were more important tasks to attend to.’

‘More important than your own daughter? I hope you burn in Hell, you bastard.’

Issy took the photos and the box and sank to her knees. It was difficult to stand. And the incessant talking was giving her a headache. Unable to think straight she carefully laid her family history out onto the floor.

‘Go on, Herr Seiglar.’ Said Joe. ‘What happened when you returned to Germany?’ *She has to know, all of it.*

‘That’s when I found it, the list. In one of Himmler’s deposit boxes in Switzerland.’

‘What list?’

‘The Lebensborn list. It’s where I got the idea for the children. In one glorious heart stopping moment it all made sense to me. I had the future of the Reich, of Europe, right there in my hands. Just as Himmler had intended.’

‘Why didn’t you just burn it.’ Asked Joe. ‘The War was over.’

‘For some, maybe. But you weren’t there. You didn’t see what the Russians did to my Homeland; to my people. Tens of thousands were hung or shot, and age was no protection against Communist revenge. Twelve million Germans were expelled from Eastern Europe, families who had lived there for generations. Many of whom had opposed the Nazis’. It is still the largest

known example of Ethnic cleansing in history. A quarter of a million Germanic people died in the process. Ah, I see you've never heard about it. What a funny thing, History. And what about the rest of Europe that Joseph Stalin had *liberated* and then refused to set free. He was as cruel as Hitler; the Russians were as bad as the Nazis'. The Allies did nothing but complain.'

'So you, what? Used the Lebensborn list to recruit a new army.'

'I offered German children a home. It was easy to take financial control of the charity. Use our contacts to find the children. We took them in and began to school them. The best of them became protégés. They grew up to form the secret heart of Luminsrau. An Ideology they have passed on to their own children.'

'I bet they have. And Professor Tillmach, you took him in as a child?'

'Yes. He was amongst our brightest stars.'

'Bloody hell, this is unbelievable. Issy, you can add brainwashing children to your grandfather's lengthening list of crimes.'

'I don't care, Joe. I just want to know about Mama. No, don't look at me like that, please. I'm selfish, I know. But I need to know more. We can sort the rest of this out later.'

'Sort it out? Issy, how the hell can we sort all of this out?'

This is too crazy, I don't think I want to know any more. And only God knows what's going on in Issy's head. She's like a child with a new toy, moving those photos around, holding them up to the light. This isn't the Issy I know, it's the first time I've see her cry. I'm not sure she can take much more of this.

'So all of this, in here. This is WolfSpawn? The last seventy years, what, it's all been about the Master Race.'

'Don't trivialise what you don't understand. Isla, you must hear this...'

'Leave her alone, she's busy.'

'Too busy to save her people?'

'There you go again, big punchline but no detail. You said she had a gene. What gene? The SS gene... that's bullshit. It doesn't exist.'

'Wolfe, I'm tired. Tell him what he wants to know. Isla, please, we have so much to talk about, you and I.'

Was Issy listening? Joe hoped so; the way she was staring at those photos. How she gently opened the papers; like presents but she didn't want to spoil the wrapping. She was being a bit weird.

'Joe.' His attention reverted to Wolfe. 'We are being squeezed, threatened, starved of energy. The Nations of Western Europe have already begun to turn on each other. The Russian Rouble is dividing friends and neighbours. We are threatened with invasion, not only by refugees from the Middle East, but

by the Russians. This cannot be allowed to go on. It's what we and the others have worked against for so long.'

'Oh yeah, the others, how's that going for you? Your own people want you shut down, and dead. How are the two of you going to stop them?'

'Oh, I'll stop them.' Snapped Seiglar. He could barely hold the oxygen mask now clasped to his lips. The plastic misted and cleared with each breath of the spindly old man as Scarface adjusted his supply of air. Isla sat in silence.

'In nineteen forty three.' Said Wolfe. 'The Communists had one insurmountable advantage over the German Army. Their strength was in their numbers. The German war machine was worn down by the number of Slavs. Like locusts in their millions. It was a war we could never have won.'

'Then you shouldn't have started it.'

'Agreed. But History has a will of its own, Joe. The East is threatening to overcome the West again. There are too many refugees to assimilate. Maybe in time we could find a solution.' There was sincerity in his voice. The warrior lines had softened. 'The Russians are exploiting their opportunity.' He said. 'They are already in the Ukraine, and now Belarus. Turkish borders have been violated, and they side with the Sadat regime in Syria against their NATO allies. It's the first step toward military intervention in the Middle East.'

Joe, Putin has leveraged Islands from the Greeks and he intends to build a naval base to threaten the Mediterranean. The Russian military uses each step of the refugee crisis to destabilise our resolve.'

None of which Joe could argue with. He could hear Uncle Ron harping on about the News. “Send in the Royal Navy,” his favourite response.

‘So these pods, a list of children, your own daughter... What the fuck is WolfSpawn?’

‘WolfSpawn is a theory.’ Seiglar replied. His breathing more calmed. A burning desire to enlighten Joe more obvious than ever. ‘In May nineteen forty three Himmler authorised and allocated unlimited funding and resources for Hut Thirty Six. Testing was to begin immediately on human subjects at Auschwitz. He ordered blood from SS soldiers on the pretext of medical supplies for the battle front. That was a lie. It was being stored for the future of the Reich.’ A quick gasp from the mask. ‘Himmler understood that the War was lost when we failed to destroy the Russian army at Kursk. He understood clearly that Germany would now be defeated. And yet he refused to give an inch toward any kind of surrender. He accelerated the Final Solution and tried to wipe out as many Jews and undesirables as possible before the end.

I think that was when I saw how visions become entwined with insanity. A man goes so far down the road of enlightenment that he becomes blinded by the light that had led him there.’ *Gasp.*

‘Mr White, I refuse to make that same mistake. I am blinded by my own obsession and fear. And that is why Isla had to be here. Why she has to make the decision that I cannot with clarity.’

She looked up. One face to the next.

‘Whatever.’ She said. But it proved she was still listening. And Seiglar would not be interrupted by Joe’s obvious question.

‘What decision?’

‘By nineteen forty five we had succeeded.’ He said. ‘My theory had been proven. We just lacked the hardware to advance the programme any further. Technology and engineering had lagged too far behind the science. And anyway, the War’s climax was imminent. So Himmler gave the order to disband Hut Thirty Six. All of the scientists involved were evacuated with the aid of the Silent Help and Odessa organisations. All the data was stored, the teams were dispersed; our work took a pause. It was hidden away. Some of it in the mine that you found. It waited for a time when I could resurrect the research.’

Seiglar raised the mask again. The misting was slower, more measured. The effort still obvious.

‘I met Himmler for the last time in Berlin. He had summoned me for a final meeting. I was given clear instructions on the future of WolfSpawn, and a brown suitcase. Inside were bags of diamonds and a long list of numbered bank accounts. Himmler thanked me, saluted me, and then he left. He was dead two weeks later.

Outside was an armed escort. I was taken from Berlin to loyal followers who helped me escape. A few weeks later I found myself in Spain where I embarked on a steamer to Argentina, and there I waited for four years. A pause in my life until it was safe to return home.’

'So you came back to Germany, and what, just resurrected your quest for the SS gene?'

'Yes.'

'You're mad. Completely barking.'

‘The Allies weren’t looking for me,’ Seiglar said, ‘they didn’t even know that I existed. The hunt for Nazis in Europe was already over; it seemed that everyone wanted life to return to normal. Europe wanted to forget the War; and besides, the Russians were the enemy now. The Cold War had already begun.

For his part, the Reichfuhrer had prepared well. Jewish gold, money, art; all hidden in Swiss and Spanish bank vaults. I bought the mine and the land, and I financed Feullers. By nineteen fifty one we had established that most of the Hut Thirty Six scientists had either disappeared, or were dead.’ More deep gasps from the mask. It seemed neither age nor imminent death would stop him recanting his tale. He never took his eyes from Issy; who seemed content in her world of memories.

‘I took the decision to start afresh.’ He said. ‘What data we could recover was the template from where we began. Our small company grew on profits from work achieved in the Camps, and in time I changed the name to Pharmax. We took Himmler’s money and began an investment programme into smaller companies and gifted individuals; anyone that showed promise in genetics. We encouraged leading scientists to come and work for the company. Every leap forward in science and finance had only one aim, to accelerate the WolfSpawn Project. It seemed that I had inherited Himmler’s obsession.’

‘Insanity more like.’ Said Joe. ‘The War was over. Hitler, the Third Reich... all long gone. What was so important that you couldn’t abandon WolfSpawn?’

‘The War was over Mr White. But the enemy was still at our gates.’

‘The Russians? Christ, just how deep does your paranoia go? The Cold War is history. We’re all allies now.’

‘Allies? You misunderstand, Mr White. It’s not History we’re fighting... it’s Nature. Evolution. It moves on regardless and leaves the weak behind. Eradicates them. Or dilutes them into obscurity. Discards what is left into our Mitochondrial DNA for posterity.’ *Gasp.* ‘I believe without a doubt that Evolution intends that Slavic genes will dilute the Nordic species from existence. The East will try to dominate the West. When two species rise to dominate a single sphere of influence, Nature dictates that one must rise above the other.’ *Gasp.* ‘Nature will force the issue; there are a hundred ways. A simple explosion in population. The ravaging of abundant supplies of food or energy. By encouraging one side to be more aggressive than the other. It is happening all around us as we speak. Our people from Scandinavia to the Balearics are under siege.’

‘And what, this SS gene of yours. You want to create Super Soldiers?’

‘No, Mr White. We followed Hitler because we believed that our people had a destiny, a higher calling. I still do. I have to, or all of this has been for nothing.’

‘And you think finding this fantasy gene is the answer?’

‘Mr White, your flippant regard for our work is flawed. We have already succeeded.’

‘So you said.’ Joe smiled. But the look on their faces. ‘You’re serious aren’t you. You’re telling me that you’ve actually isolated the genes? The SS gene? But, that’s not possible. It’s freakishly unbelievable.’ He was having trouble getting his head around all of this. So what now, you need a delivery system. Is that what Professor Tillmach was working on?’

‘No, Joe.’ Said Wolfe. ‘WolfSpawn was realised in Nineteen ninety one. The delivery system was as simple as it was effective. And it still is.’

‘Nineteen ninety one? No, that’s too early. You’d need gene editing. Mapping. Micro...’ He was looking around the room. The Super computers... the weeping pods. The crazy Billionaire. ‘...if you succeeded back then, what are you waiting for now?’

‘Nobody’s waiting, Joe. WolfSpawn was fully initiated in nineteen ninety two. And it has been running successfully ever since.’

‘What... over twenty years ago? I don’t understand.’

‘Look at him, Wolfe. He doesn’t grasp the greatness of what we’ve achieved.’ Seiglar wheeled his chair forward and waved away Wolfe’s assistance. ‘Mr White.’ He said. ‘Have you heard of the ROX-1 vaccine?’

‘The Roxy vaccine, yeah. It’s been vaccinating foetus’ against disease for decades.’

‘Tick tock, Mr White.’

‘Tick, what? I don’t...’

‘Tick, tock. Put the pieces together.’

‘ROX-1... I don’t... Oh shit, are you telling me that Roxy is... that you’ve... it’s been used to vaccinate unborn babies for over twenty years for Christ’s sake. Ahh, Tillmach? His synthetic antibodies, they were so far ahead of their time. You used the same science to clone the gene...’

‘And tock. You see Wolfe, how the penny finally drops for him.’

Issy looked up. Joe had gone pale, why?

‘My God, Roxy’s the delivery system for the SS gene.’

‘And now you don’t know whether to be impressed, or horrified.’

Issy stared up at Joe. She was annoyed. She should have listened better.

What was the crazy old man saying about Roxy?

‘Joe,’ she said, ‘in Germany they give the Roxy vaccine to all pregnant women.’

‘Not just Germany.’ Joe replied. ‘Pharmax sells Roxy under licence. That vaccine has a lot of names, and it’s sold all over the world.’

‘Not sold, Joe. We give it away for free. But only Roxy produced in Western Europe is enhanced with the gene. Since nineteen ninety two ROXY has vaccinated over a hundred million children across Europe. Eighty four percent of the subjects have gone on to adopt the SS gene into their genetic makeup. The project isn’t a dream, Mr White. WolfSpawn has been a complete and utter success for a quarter of a century’

‘Did you have the vaccine, Joe?’ Asked Seiglar.

‘No.’

‘A pity. And don’t worry Isla, it’s not harmful to anyone. ROX-1 simply waits for the time to be right? For all the pieces of the socio-genetic puzzle to fall into place. Just as it did in Hitler’s Germany. It always starts with economic recession, financial hardship for all. And then Human nature takes a hand; we need someone to blame. Poverty will always push people to kneel at one pulpit or another. We are programmed to respond. The need to follow; the urge to resist. It’s enough to initiate the gene sequence in some, the rest will follow.’

‘You’re completely insane. You can’t programme an entire...’ Joe was looking at the pods again. The eery mist and the landscape of twinkling lights. The multi Billionaire who refused to die. ‘You’re fucking mad, you do know that.’

‘Perhaps. And that’s why Isla is here. Joe, the West is under siege. People look East now because they are frightened. And when people become angry they flock for protection. The gene sequence will bring them together just as it did in Germany all those years ago. You see, you’re beginning to understand now. How the process works, and how we are working within it. You’re beginning to understand the level of biological programming that the gene will initiate. Not just in individuals, but an entire continent.’

The anonymity of Natural Selection gives the individual his or her singular identity. But it can also give an entire people a reason for pride. The love for a flag. The will to bear accumulative arms against outsider aggression. We are governed by hormones which are regulated by our genes. Evolution can flick all of our switches together and focus the mass towards a singular goal. It's how Evolution works.'

'And you've spread yours around with epidemic proportions. Like a cancer.'

'No. It's the gift of the SS. We have given the people the genetic skills necessary to survive the social and economic pressures of their landscape, just as Nature always intended for us. We must fight the Slavs. Protect ourselves from the millions who try to cross our borders; who intend to dilute our gene pool. It's natural selection, Joe. The SS gene, the Nordic strain that runs from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, it's still alive. Himmler refused to allow evolution to stamp it out in the last War. I have helped it to return.

Hitler was quite correct when he said, "only the strong deserve to survive." And I, Manfred Seiglar, have helped to make us strong again.'

'Does he want to turn all of Europe into Nazis', Joe?'

'No, Isla. The SS were the epitome of Germanic manhood. The flower of Nordic genetics. They were an Ideal offered up for future generations to aspire. But their spiritual heritage was bastardised by the Nazi doctrine. Chivalric Knights abused by a Nazi elite. They were lied to and misled. A force for good was used for terror. But not this time. I have made the Nordic

race strong again. A hundred million strong. The gene stirs in them now and prepares them to fight. You've seen them on the city streets, all across Europe. Luminsrau has called them together; to congregate beneath a single banner.'

'Don't tell me.' Joe said. 'You've got your fingers in Luminsrau too.'

'I am Luminsrau, Mr White. The Lebensborn list is Luminsrau. Seventy years of planning is finally upon us.'

'My God, you've engineered all of this?'

'War is like recession, it's inevitable. We've just planned well for the next one. So you see, Isla, Joe, this is the secret that is worth killing to protect.'

'I don't believe you.' Said Joe. 'Roxy? There are checks and procedures.'

'And yet it has been happening for over two decades.'

'Joe.' Issy was packing everything back into her box. 'Joe, I think I'm going to be sick.'

'This entire thing is sick.' He said.

'No, you're wrong Mr White. I have given the Nordic race the chance to survive. I've engineered a continental shift of patriotism that Luminsrau will direct against our enemies. Evolution will fail, Mr White. It dictates that the West will be divested by the East because they are stronger, more diverse and numerous. But I refuse to allow this to happen.'

'Really? Well I think it may have to wait, look.' Joe pointed toward the largest monitor on the wall. 'You've got uninvited houseguests outside, and they've got guns.'

On the wall were a dozen monitors. Images of the hall of plinths and Seiglar's office; both empty. It was outside the main doors that held Joe's attention. Six heavily armed men in a defensive position. Several more who occupied the hall near the elevator. Their weapons and clothing suggested a tactical assault team. Only one man had his face visible and Joe recognised him instantly.

'Baldy.' He said. 'How did he know we were here?'

'Look Grandfather, your old friends have turned up to say hi. Oh, that's not good.'

'What happened to the lights?' Joe's voice filled with apprehension as an eerie glow from the pods and the computer filled the room.

'They've come for you, Grandfather.'

Issy's sudden dramatisation of the Witches from MacBeth did little to lift Joe's mood as she walked between the pods and the massive computer, arms outstretched touching both.

'They've cut the power.' Said Wolfe, already at the main work station. His hands keen to dab at the keyboards and switches. 'We have batteries until the emergency generator kicks in... right about now.'

The lights came back on though their glow was diminished. Power was prioritised by Seiglar's ghosts from the War.

'Director, the phone lines and WiFi are down. There's nothing on the radio.'

He turned to face them. 'We've been isolated.' He said.

Joe's eyes were glued to the images of the main door. He flinched as half a dozen machine guns opened fire. Intermittent flashes of light. Short bursts from heating suppressors as hundreds of empty casings were expelled to bounce across the floor. It was strange that he couldn't hear a sound.

'Those men out there, they want to kill us don't they.'

'They are going to try, Mr White.'

'And you're not worried? No of course not, everyone leaves that to me.'

Issy? Where's Issy? Stood by the entrance and staring at the empty space outside. Why was it still open? 'Issy, Are you okay?'

'We need bigger guns.' She said.

'We need to leave.'

'Hey, Wolfman. Do you have any bigger guns?'

Wolfe grinned. His thick muscular arms grabbed at a desk and ripped the top away.

Inside was a trove of ordinance. Hand guns, machine guns, and explosives. Wolfe's hands had already retrieved two handguns with absurdly long ammo clips attached.

'Glock 18c,' he said, 'minimal recoil and fully automatic. Light and easy to operate; an excellent weapon for combat in confined areas.'

'I don't want one of those.'

Issy obviously did as she snatched the weapon and embraced it in her hands. Then she took the protective vest Wolfe gave her and strapped it around her torso.

‘This is light.’ She said. ‘Look Joe, I’m armour plated. What do you think?’

‘That this isn’t the way.’ *Please Issy.* ‘Let’s talk to them, come to an understanding. Issy, we can make a deal.’ *What’s wrong with you?* ‘Hey, Baldy wants something, let’s give it to him.’

‘I’m going to give it to him, okay.’ She said, aiming the gun toward the door. Issy shouldered the weapon and pulled a shoulder holster from the chest.

‘Issy, let’s think this through, please.’

‘Joe, you know what’s going to happen if they get in here before help arrives.’

‘I’m trying not to.’

‘This isn’t a game, Joe. And I’m still waiting, Grandfather. You might as well finish your story, we’re not going anywhere. for a while.’

‘What do they want, Herr Seiglar?’ *They must want something.* Joe’s eyes settled on the big mainframe. ‘In there? Is it in there? Because I vote we fucking give it to them. Hey. Hello, is anyone listening to me. Issy?’ She was holstered, body armoured, armed and focused. But not on Joe as she pulled the final piece of velcro around her thigh.

‘Issy, they’ll kill us.’ She wasn’t listening. ‘Hey, Seiglar... Wolfe... Issy?’

‘I’m waiting, Grandfather.’

‘They want the lists.’ Seiglar said. ‘One is the recipients of the vaccine. The other is a record of the Lebensborn children. Himmler kept detailed lists of all the children born to his Lebensborn programme. SS officers were encouraged to have affairs and inseminate young German women. To fall pregnant and enter the Lebensborn programme was considered a great honour. And after the children were born they were taken into the care of the SS. They were born to be the future guardians of the Reich.’

‘I don’t need a history lesson, Grandfather. Tell Joe why these people want us dead.’

‘Hello... has anyone heard of the Alamo?’ *You’re all insane.* Wolfe grabbed his hand and put a gun in it. ‘I don’t want this.’ It felt like a toy.

‘History is what has brought us here; it’s important that you understand, Isla.’

‘Then keep talking.’ She was back at the door, watching.

‘The Kristophen foundation flourished in the Post-War years, Most of the Lebensborn children were aged between two and seven when we found them. They had been propagated, inseminated, and incubated by good German SS men and women. Many of their mothers were dead. And barely any of those still alive wanted to reclaim their bastard children, which was hardly surprising. Those that did took little persuading to let them go.’

‘Doesn’t anyone care what I think?’ Asked Joe.

‘Don’t interrupt.’ Said Wolfe. ‘Here, take this.’

‘Grenades?’

This was mad, stupid mad. Joe walked to the door with a big gun in one hand and explosives in the other.

‘I’m still waiting, Grandfather.’

‘Kristophen provided shelter, schooling, and companionship until we could foster the children to loyal followers. We sponsored them, funded their education. But the most gifted we entered into a very special programme. Two thousand three hundred and twelve children were cared for and funded by a secret new organisation that I founded. I named it, Luminsrau.’

Why didn't that surprise Joe. Right now he supposed that nothing would.

'Luminsrau was a secret organisation back then.' *Cough cough*. 'All of the children were schooled to believe that Germany and her new allies in the West would one day have great need of their special skills.' *Cough cough cough*. 'With Luminsrau's help, many of the children grew up to become wealthy industrialists, politicians and bureaucrats. Some are high ranking military men' *Cough cough*. 'I'm sorry... Wolfe.'

'Manfred, let me take you back to the machines.'

Joe watched the old man pant for air from the mask Wolfe held to his mouth.

'No, a gun, I will fight.'

Joe moved to Issy's side.

'Skeletor in a wheel chair holding an UZi?' He whispered. 'I didn't see that coming this morning. You are seeing what I am? Issy, we need to leave.'

'Joe, I don't think those people out there will ever stop looking for me, or for you. Grandfather has put a target on our backs.' She took his hand. 'You go if you want. It's okay, truly, I understand.'

'Issy, my hands are shaking and I have really bad nausea right now. Look.' He held up his hands. 'You've seen me with guns. I'll shoot the wrong people. Issy, I don't want to die.'

‘Then get out, Joe. There must be a way out. One of the windows, a back door?’ Wolfe shook his head to confirm what she already suspected. ‘I’m sorry Joe, truly I am.’ She shrugged. ‘I didn’t see this coming either, but it is what it is.’

‘Just let me go out there and talk to them.’ He said.

‘You can try if you want. But I think we know what Baldy will say. And I’m not handing myself to him, or anyone else. I know what happens when bad men...’ She turned away. ‘

She means it. She’s going to fight.

‘Do you understand what it is you’re fighting for?’ Silence. ‘Fine, show me how to use this.’ He said.

Issy took his hand and placed her fingers over his. She clicked a tiny lever on the side of the weapon.

‘When the little dot is red,’ she whispered, ‘it means you’re hot.’ Issy smiled, then turned the weapon toward the door. ‘Squeeze the trigger and anything stood in your way gets cut in half.’ She kissed Joe on the lips.

‘Thank you.’ She said. ‘Grandfather, tell Joe more about those lists.’

Wolfe spoke as his hand supported Seiglar’s to hold the mask in place.

‘The Lebensborn list names many people with political and military power. Families, friends and colleagues, all whom share Luminsrau’s Ideals.’

‘So the Cadre wants the list to protect their anonymity.’ Joe was less than impressed. ‘And the other list?’

‘Every one that has ever been vaccinated since computers became a viable means of data storage.

‘Seriously, all of them?’

‘Recording the recipients was part of our agreement with each government to give the drug away for free. There are two lists, Joe. One the Cadre want to keep, the other it wants to burn. We’ve known for several years that the Cadre has been transferring stock into roubles. They think we don’t know. They have sold out to Moscow and the lists will seal their deal. This is a fight being fought on many fronts, Joe. And the time has come to take sides.’

‘In starting a war?’

‘No, *cough*, again you think like a child. The War has never ended, *cough cough*. Throughout the nineteen fifties and sixties we endeavoured to make Himmler’s dream a success. The Fourth Reich is here, Mr White. *cough*. It’s all around us. It just got bigger.’

‘It’s all true isn’t it, Joe. Every word that he’s said since we’ve been here. My Grandfather is insane, he’d have to be to make something like this happen.’

‘Am I mad, Mr White? I think the journey here to find us has opened both your eyes. You’ve seen the Barbarians are at our gates. How they mass outside, ready to take what belongs to *us*. Deny it if you can. *Cough cough*. Tell me the news bulletins are filled with lies. That there are no Russians troops along our Eastern borders. Tell me the Russian fleet won’t park its ships in the Mediterranean Sea. Putin is licking his lips. He will put our

people into servitude? Tell me, Joe, tell me what you see. *Cough... cough...*
Wolfe, the mask, *wheeze...* my mask...’

Seiglar could barely gasp enough air from the cylinder. Bony hands clung to the mask like they clung onto life. But he was fading.

’That’s why you are here, Isla.’ *Wheeze.* ‘Why you are so important to WolfSpawn.’ He took enough air to continue talking. ‘My path of illumination is blurred, and I can no longer see the light that led me here. *Wheeze.* It’s not my decision to go further. That decision is now yours, Isla.’

‘What exactly does that mean? Joe, what’s he talking about?’

Joe shook his head.

‘Joe, what decision?’

‘WolfSpawn is alive in the people, Isla. Luminsrau is ready to bring them together. Everything is in place. We have military and political support right across the continent. Every country from Sweden to Spain. They receive more volunteers for armed service than they can assimilate. The SS gene is hearing the call to rise. When they do NATO will have no choice but to support them. And make no mistake, we are ready to rise. Luminsrau will fund political change through the IMF and Central banks. More than a trillion dollars is waiting to be released into the appropriate hands. We’re ready, Isla. For you.’

‘Joe, talk to me.’

‘And what do you expect these people to fight with, their hands?’ He said.

‘No, Mr White. The SS facilities that you so keenly uncovered, are filled with ordinance. Weapons stockpiled throughout Europe for more than a decade. Luminsrau can arm a million people within the first month. Thirty million more within the next. And we have tactical nuclear ordinance in the mines further East. Be assured, both of you, that one of our peoples must dominate the other. It’s Nature’s way of ensuring that only the strongest will survive. *wheeze*. That only the healthiest of genes moves forward.’

‘My God, you’ve really thought this through.’

‘For seventy years, Mr White. For seventy years.’

‘This is too incredible. You have to be stopped.’ *I could end this right now with one short burst*. ‘You’re not going to live long enough to see how your masterplan works out, you know that.’

‘That is not important. I understand now that there is choice, and not just blind obedience. I’ve understood for some time that I cannot trust myself to make the decision. I am too tainted by the past. *Cough*.’ He was shaking. ‘I do not see the light so clearly now; it is clouded with prejudice and fear.’

‘But why, Issy? Why put her through all of this?’

‘Yes, why didn’t you just pick up the phone and say, hi?’

‘I had to see if the gene was worthy. If *you* were worthy. We are about to create a brave new world and the gene had to be tested. It has to be pure and focused. From adversity comes awareness, Isla. From struggle we find the will to survive. I had to be absolutely sure about you, Granddaughter. *Cough cough*.

‘And have I passed your test?’

‘You are everything that I dreamt you would be.’

One short burst, and I’m a murderer too. The way Wolfe looks at me, like he knows what I’m thinking. I can’t do it.

‘So how many of the Cadre are on the Lebensborn list?’ Joe asked. ‘Oh, that many. Yeah, I’m starting to get it all now. The Cadre don’t care for WolfSpawn any more, do they. It’s a coup, right? They grab the Lebensborn list for themselves, and they burn the WolfSpawn directory. They get rid of you.

They want to bury WolfSpawn and put an end to Luminsrau. You’re being cut out, old man. They want the WolfSpawn vaccinations to go away. They want to destroy all of this so business can go on as usual. All of this, it goes away, and Luminsrau is just a noise on the streets. That’s it isn’t it.’

‘They believe I am no longer necessary. Their Ideology, has been subverted by greed. That’s why a pure born must make the decision, *cough*, that I can’t. *Cough cough*. Only a true descendant of the SS gene is worthy to make such a decision.’ The fire lit in Seiglar’s eyes. ‘The Cadre have left the path we walked together for so long. They are traitors, in bed with Moscow, *cough*, for profit. *Cough cough*. I’m sorry, Isla. I wanted more time with you... for you, *wheeze*, to understand. WolfSpawn is your destiny. It was always *your* destiny.’

‘Issy, if those lists are made public, you know what will happen. This is a conspiracy. Front page news around the world. If you expose the gene

recipients. Oh my God, how would that work out? Multiply how you feel, by, a hundred million. And how will non-recipients react when the word gets out?

Issy, he wants *you* to start a war, or expose everything. That's right isn't it? You want the gene to fight for its survival, one way or the other. Isn't that right? In your head that's how it all works. Just like Issy and me. Our fight to get here. Oh you, you are seriously fucked up, old man.

'Isla has to make the choice. The gene has to fight for it's survival.'

'No, no, it's the lives of a hundred million people you're playing with. You didn't give *them* a choice.'

'Why don't I just sell you out.' Said Issy. 'Like Joe said earlier, make a deal with them.'

'You would let the Cadre destroy, *wheeze*, the WolfSpawn list? Allow them to use the Lebensborn list, *cough*, to help control and enslave an entire continent. No, and besides you wouldn't live long enough to enjoy the bargain. You know too much now. You will always be a threat to the Cadre. No, Isla. WolfSpawn is my gift to you. It is our gift to the people. I will die knowing I have returned what Nature has tried to suppress. *cough cough*. But I leave you to decide the direction my legacy takes.'

‘Err, guys, check out the monitors. What are they doing out there?’

Two of Baldy’s men were opening a container. One by one small objects were being placed on the doors. Some sort of wiring attached them all.

‘What are they pinning to the doors?’ Asked Joe. ‘Please tell me that’s not a bomb.’

‘Shaped charges.’ Said Wolfe. ‘Five independent explosives wired to a centre charge, then fired together.’

‘But that door will hold, right?’

‘The doors and the walls are lined with a cobalt titanium alloy.’

‘But it will hold, yes?’

‘We’ll soon find out.’

‘And the glass?’ Asked Issy.

Seiglar wheeled himself slowly to the table. ‘Bomb proof,’ he said, ‘the best that money can buy. Wolfe, lock everything down. One last check on the servers. I want the entire repository ready to send.’

‘Got some paperwork you want to move?’ Said Joe. ‘I thought you couldn’t get a signal?’

‘There are cables encased in the building.’ *Cough* ‘Impossible to access from outside this work station. They connect through tunnels to hubs inside the city. And there is an antennae hidden on the roof, just to be sure.’

‘You’ve got it all planned out.’ Joe saw it now. Trapped by this madman Issy would be forced to make a decision. There were no other choices than the ones he’d set out. Sell out WolfSpawn to the Cadre, and get an early grave most likely. Send everything over the wires; undermine the political framework of a Continent. Brand every recipient of the gene as different from the others. Or risk plunging a Continent into war.

‘Director, we’re fully operational.’ Said Wolfe.

‘Oh great, that’s great.’ Joe was checking the two screens that gave a view of the Plaza. ‘They’re serving coffee out there. Why isn’t that street full of blue flashing lights? Where are the Police? Why hasn’t the cavalry arrived yet?’

‘No-one is coming, Mr White. We are alone, and Isla has a decision to make.’ *Cough cough*. ‘It’s the only reason we are all here.’

Cough cough cough. Wolfe... my mask... please, my mask.'

Wolfe raised the respirator to his master's withered lips; Seiglar's hands clawed on top of his guardian's.

'Breathe slowly, Manfred. Breathe, slow and deep.'

'How does it feel, Grandfather. To be the pin-up boy of Atrophy?'

The man's skin was shrink wrapped about his bones, but none of the fire left his eyes, not even as his lungs burned from the fuel that kept him alive. Seiglar still hung onto life as keenly as his ideals.

'I'm fine... fine.' His wheezing suggested not. 'Do you think me a monster, Isla... Do you?'

'I think your life has consumed you, Grandfather. You come from a world that's too different to mine. I'm beginning to think you're quite mad.'

'And that's why you're here, because I can't be certain any more. It all used to be so clear to me... we all knew who our enemies were. But our corner of the World is exposed now, we're isolated. We are weak in the face of those who come to pick and plunder. The poor and wretched cross our borders. The strong and hungry gather behind. They will assimilate or suck us dry. We have exposed ourselves to our fate, and to Nature who demands that only the fittest can survive. *Cough, wheeze.* I will not allow the Nordic gene to be shelved by Evolution, or bred from existence by an inferior race.'

‘Issy, we have to get out of here.’

‘And go where?’ She said. ‘Those people want us dead.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that. You said Baldy didn’t shoot back at the Club? Why... why didn’t he shoot you? If he wanted you dead he would have let Barney shoot you, am I right? So maybe he doesn’t want us dead.’

‘He still phoned ahead, Joe.’

‘But he gave us a chance.’

‘Maybe, I suppose.’ He’d checked for witnesses and then told her to, “get out”. It’s not like she hadn’t wondered why.

‘Baldy could have killed me back at Debnicki bridge, but he didn’t.’

‘How do you know that? If I hadn’t jumped on his head, how do you know? Joe, that man has hunted us and people are dead. I’m not putting my life, or my body, in his hands. Okay.’

A sudden rumbling of the floor took precedence over their conversation. A shockwave from the explosives detonated on the outside doors. All the screens were filled with static.

‘The monitors are down, give me a moment.’ Wolfe’s fingers tapped across the keyboard. ‘I’m re-booting... coming back online.’

The smog began to clear, gravity working hard on the floating damage. Joe’s heart threatened to put a hole in his chest. He could see the the door again.

‘It’s still there. The doors are still there.’ They were buckled and twisted. The insurgents were already at them with tools and trying to force them apart. A huge pair of pincers were forced into the gap. The barrier wasn’t going to stop them for long.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ Wolfe manhandled Joe to the entrance of the Lab. He tore a cover from what looked like a fire alarm. ‘This red button,’ he said, ‘it lowers a shutter to seal the entrance to this room.’

‘It does?’ He could see what looked like a retractable hatch above them. ‘Is it a really big one? Can I shut it now?’

‘When I get back.’

‘Back... where are you going? Issy, where’s he going?’ The big man was fully loaded with ordinance. Holsters, straps, and two machine guns shouldered. ‘You’re going out there?’

‘As Mr Muntz is here we can assume that the Cadre have tried to destroy our other facility and found the blood-banks empty. I had everything moved to this site a week ago.

‘How forward thinking of you, Grandfather.’

‘The computer has already hidden several billion dollars of Cadre money, shelving it into thousands of small accounts around the world. It will disorientate their organisation, but no more. More importantly, my mainframe is now the only record of information regarding the Cadre’s financial dalliance with Moscow. And of course their involvement with WolfSpawn.’

‘Which explains why they’re here with all the guns.’ Joe looked up at the red button. Now would be the best time to press. It really would.

‘They betrayed us, Isla... and they’ve betrayed themselves. Their attack *cough* suggests they are aware of what I have done. *Cough cough*. And that I intend to see through what they all swore an oath to support. *Wheeze*. Isla, there is one more thing. The briefcase, Wolfe. Show it to her.’

She’d noticed it earlier, stored in the space below his wheelchair. A black onyx case that reflected light like a liquid. Wolfe pulled it out, dropped it onto the table. He clicked the locks and flipped the lid.

‘Show her, Wolfe.’

She thought it would be full of guns, or money, but the contents surprised her. A strange looking keyboard, it’s keys covered with symbols she didn’t recognise. And it seemed that Wolfe had a key hung around his neck that was now in his hand. He inserted it into the keyboard and turned it two clicks. The screen lit up.

‘You see, Isla. A simple decision for you to make. Only two options. Expose WolfSpawn. All of the science, *cough*, our research; the gift of Evolution. It’s all waiting to be sent. Bank accounts, payments, weapon stockpiles. The Lebensborn list, every one involved since nineteen fifty. And of course the ROX-1 directory. Every recipient of the gene. It all waits inside that database ready to send at the touch of a key. Seventy years of, what was it Mr White called it, *conspiracy*. It will come to an end with the touch of a screen. There will be nowhere for anyone connected with the Project to hide.’

'You can't be serious.' How many lives would that ruin. So many innocent people... what would happen to them? 'I won't do it, Grandfather.'

'They won't give you a choice, Isla.'

'And the other option?' Not that I don't know already.

'Send the codes to our friends and comrades. Initiate, 'End Game'. Bring Project WolfSpawn to a conclusion. Seventy years of preparation. Tens of thousands of loyal supporters, each with their own seemingly insignificant assignment or task. You will unlock a reservoir of money. An infinite supply of weapons and transportation.

A local Gamekeeper unlocks a warehouse for a truck driver who transports his shipment to a gathering of Luminsrau supporters.

A policeman or a doctor stands ready to give his followers direction. To join with others like themselves. Each a tiny link in a chain. Luminsrau support runs deep in Governments and Military across Europe. There will be an unprecedented flow of arms and ordinance onto the streets and more than enough armbands for recipients of the gene. Nurture will begin the process, but Nature will see it through to the end.

One hundred million recipients of the gene, Isla. Enough weapons to arm them all. Both lists destroyed. There will be no way of stopping the forces you unleash. Release the potential of the gene, Isla. Give the order and let history be the Judge of us all.'

He's serious. And maybe he's right. What has this World ever done for me; maybe I should let it burn?

'Isla decides, *cough cough cough*, no-one else, Wolfe.' The old man clutched at his chest. Pain scribed into features. 'A final order, dear friend. *Cough cough*. Isla decides.'

'Yes, Manfred. But you need to stay calm. Use the mask. I'll try to give her the time she needs.'

Wolfe lifted the mask to his Master's lips.

Go on, Grandfather. Breathe it in, one last taste of life before you go. No, don't hold out your hand to me. I'm not coming to you.

'Isla.' Wolfe knelt at Seiglar's side. 'Please, he's dying.'

'Don't look at me like that.' *I don't know him, and I don't know you. He's evil, I think. I'm really not sure. Everything he's said, it all makes a perverse kind of sense.* She dreamed of this moment. Finding family. She should be emotional standing and watching him die? She wasn't. *I hope it hurts, Grandfather? Because prison hurt me. So did the orphanage. And Society was happy to let it happen.*

'Isla, he's your Grandfather, please.'

No, don't bother pleading with me, either of you. I won't go to him, why should I? You said I wouldn't like what I heard, and you were right. I wish I'd never come. Never learned any of this. Something else I can hate you for.

Isla turned her back, looked up at the monitors, then crossed to the door. Any moment now they would break through.

I won't forgive you, old man. I won't. But he was all she'd ever wanted. 'I don't forgive you.' She said and took his hand. *Fuck, it's so cold, just like his heart.* 'I'll never forgive you. All I ever wanted was someone to look up to, to love, who loved me back.'

'Err, Issy.'

'Not now Joe, he's dying. I want to watch.'

'Really? Issy, are you feeling...'

'I said shut up.'

'Fine. I just wanted tell you that our friends out there, they've broken in.'

Wolfe held his master in his arms. The old man no longer able to sit up. He couldn't breathe. But still he refused the technology in the other room. All the machines and pretty lights; he knew nothing could help him now. His time had come. Life was leaving him one shortened breath after another. Then his breathing stopped. Issy pulled her hand from his.'

'Is he...?'

Wolfe closed Seiglar's eyes.

'He's gone, Isla.'

Gone? He was never here for me in the first place... yet I still feel his passing as if he were. As if a link she'd never known had suddenly severed from her chest.

'Issy, we have to go.' Joe took her hand. 'Wolfe, there has to be a way out of here.'

'No exit, Joe. We stay. It's what Manfred wanted.'

'Joe, he's gone. I don't understand why I feel like this.'

Issy, the monitor, look. We have to get out of here.'

The first of Baldy's men was through and had taken a defensive stance as another squeezed himself through the gap. Wolfe took off his jacket and covered the old man. Then he picked up both his weapons and moved toward the door.

'There is something you need to know, Joe.' Said Wolfe. 'Your Uncle... Mr Muntz murdered him a few days ago.' Wolfe lied.

'He what? Oh no, nice try, that's bullshit. I'm putting my hands up and walking out of here.'

'It was the night you left for Poland, Joe. Muntz's people went to your home searching for you.' Wolfe's finger's skipped across the keyboard. An image opened on the screen.

'What is that, a newspaper?' A headline and pictures. **Rhianna splits from boyfriend.** Wolfe expanded a small box in the bottom corner and Joe went cold.

Man shot dead in Chelsea home, full story page five.

The pages turned and the story enlarged. A name typed in capitals.

RON WHITE, shot dead in the basement of his home. Believed to be a robbery that ended in violence.

'I'm sorry Joe. But Muntz won't let any of us leave here alive.'

'No, that can't be true. Why? Ron had nothing to do with this. He was innocent. Why? It's a mistake.' But the screen, Ron's name. 'You bastards, this is your fault. You and that, wheelchair accessory. Ron's death is your fault.'

'Not us, Joe.'

Issy saw something in Wolfe's eyes. He wasn't telling the whole truth. Why, was it to protect Joe? But from what?

'Direct your anger outside, Joe. Toward the men who murdered your uncle. They want you dead too. No loose ends, Muntz will see to that.'

Joe felt a hand take his arm. Felt slender fingers move up to touch his neck. Issy rested her head on his shoulder.

'I'm sorry for you.' She said. 'But there are others who have died to keep this a secret. We have to make a decision, you and I.'

Joe went cold. The image on the screen consumed him. What did Issy say? Both her hands cupped his cheeks, her lips touched his for a moment, and then she held him.

'These people,' she said, 'they don't care about us. Not about anyone but themselves. The rich and powerful get more detached from us every day. I think we are pawns, Joe. But we can be pawns with sharp teeth.' She pushed Joe's Glock against his chest and placed his hand on the weapon. 'I won't leave your side.' She said.

At least six men were through the gap. And they were on the move. Crisscrossing the hall weapons high, red dots sweeping the ground ahead.

'What's he doing?' Joe took hold of the gun, eyes on the screen. 'Wolfe, what's that. What's he got in his hands?'

One of Baldy's men held a box filled with wires that he attached one by one to the glass with gel pads. Then he gave Baldy a two finger sign.

‘That’s the last door between us and them.’ Joe moved toward the red button. Maybe he should give it a big thump, right now. He was angry, and sad. The Glock felt good.

‘Your Grandfather has left the destiny of the SS gene to you, Isla, his only surviving heir. The fate of Europe, everything, it’s for you to decide.’

‘Listen to him, Issy.’

‘Joe?’

‘He’s finally making sense.’

‘Joe, you’re angry.’

‘Fucking right I am. Those bastards...’

‘Isla, expose your Grandfather’s work. Send it all to Interpol, Mi6, the CIA, Russian counter Intelligence. Every major newspaper in the Western World is on the send list. You can end this right now. Or you can join us. Support our cause. Help us all to survive the Russian Storm that’s coming.’

‘Do it, Issy. Put everything out there on the web.’

Wolfe pushed the briefcase toward Issy.

‘It’s programmed to connect to Intelligence Agencies and Newspapers worldwide. The headlines will be broadcast across the internet. There will be nowhere for the names on either list to hide.’

‘You’re angry Joe.’ Said Issy. ‘You want to hurt them, the Cadre. But what purpose would that serve? So many people involved; we could do more harm than good. Maybe we should finish what Grandfather started?’

‘You want to start a war?’

‘Maybe the alternative is worse? It could bring down governments, Joe. Luminsrau are already on the streets, they are angry. What if theyir anger turned on each other? What if exposing those lists causes a genetic divide between the people?’

‘Make a decision, Isla.’ Wolfe insisted. ‘It’s what Manfred wanted for you. What he waited for all these years. The final test for the SS gene. For the Nordic peoples. For you. “From adversity comes awareness.’ He said. ‘And from struggle we find the will to survive”. You were born to make this decision, Isla. Total war on the West’s terms. A war of annihilation, perhaps... but a war for survival, certainly. Or are you willing to see the West fall? To become subservient to the East. Will you watch as your own country and people are diminished, impoverished, diluted into extinction by outsiders. The West will be enslaved; brought and paid for by Russian oil and gas. It’s will enforced by an army on the streets.’

Isla, at seven am this morning President Putin sent the order for his tanks to occupy positions just fifteen miles from the Polish border.’ Wolfe’s keyboard skills were impressive. More headlines, numerous front pages. Early editions. ‘Putin has moved four hundred thousand Russian troops along the Ukraine border. He won’t stop, not now, he sees himself as a Warlord and he’s ready to invade. When he does, our eastern member states; countries the EU has supported financially and commercially; they will roll over and beg to support him.’

‘NATO won’t allow it.’ Said Joe. His cold feet suddenly obvious.

‘NATO can’t stop them.’ Wolfe threw more headlines up on the screen. Film reports with no sound. All the monitors bar the main screen filled. ‘Putin intends to make conventional war. NATO refuses to deploy troops in sufficient numbers for fear of escalation. Putin intends to invade, Isla. All our sources confirm this. He has a wall of refugees to stop UN retaliation. Once he crosses our borders our nuclear deterrent is nullified. We won’t drop bombs on our own people. NATO protocol will be to appease. To find a diplomatic solution. Take a defensive line south of the Rhine. But by that time the security of the Western Nations will be untenable. They will already have lost the war. Think, Isla. The SS gene gives us strength in numbers. It offers loyalty and direction. Luminsrau will lead its people.’

‘You bastards, you’ve got it all worked out. Don’t listen to him Isla. They’ve lured us here, put our lives on the line, and for what... to start a war?’

‘A moment ago you were willing to expose everything, Joe.’

‘I was angry. There has to be another way.’

‘If you don’t decide, Isla. the people Muntz works for will destroy everything in here. It will all be burned and no-one will ever know. The demonstrations will continue, but will ultimately prove fruitless. The West has already wilted with concession to the East. Too many politicians and corporations think survival and profit more important than freedom. What is pure must be focused and undeterred. Unleashed to stand firm against the enemy.’

Joe, if I expose the Lebensborn list it could bring everything down. End all trust between the EU member countries. They will all look to put their own interests first; clean house and attempt to distance themselves politically. Some will look East. It will be chaos. But that's the point, isn't it. Manfred and the Cadre worked tirelessly to be in control when this situation arose. Ready to defend; not to usurp. Grandfather was betrayed. A lifetime of careful planning put in jeopardy by the Cadre and their progeny. I've met them, and I don't like them. So much for racial breeding, huh, father? It's banging on the door and looking for a profit margin.'

'Isla, Manfred never intended for any member of the Cadre to make this decision. It was always going to be your choice. A decision made for the people and not for profit. Your Grandfather has left it for you to decide their fate.'

Wolfe moved the laptop across the table.

'Don't give me that thing. Wolfe, I can't. I won't. Please don't ask me to. Joe... say something.'

'Total war, or total destruction. It's the final test for the SS gene. For the Nordic race as a whole. The final test for you, Isla. It was always for *you* to decide. Do you have the strength to save a continent. To save its people?'

So many people will die, whatever I do? One press and it's all over. But for who, them or us?

Look at Joe. He holds that gun to his chest like it's a baby. He's thankful to have it, yet frightened of what it can do. What he can do. No-one wants to

fight, and yet I can't argue with what I see every day. Seiglar was right about the East, they are coming. If not today, then tomorrow. And we are weak. But that's not a bad thing; it's just not good in a fight.

Maybe Wolfe's right. If they see us prepared. If we stop talking and take a stand. Become wolves rather than sheep.

He looks like he could jump either way, or both. Maybe either, or neither. Maybe that's the problem; what Seiglar is trying to redress. One touch of that screen is all it will take. One touch and this is over, forever. The whole programme finished and ended. A lot of people damned, and for what? For being born? No, I won't do that. It's not their fault. It wasn't mine.

Wolfe... Papa? All he sees is duty, and to a man who is dead. Good riddance. To hell with him for putting me here.

Issy looked up at the monitor.

‘Wolfe... hey, what are you doing? You’re not going out there?’

‘I’ll try to slow them down for you. Isla, you must make a decision, or they will make it for you.’

Is he really going out there? Well I’m not going with him. Shit, can anyone else hear my heart thumping? Maybe Joe’s right, we should wave the white flag. Plead for mercy. No, they’ll kill us anyway. And I’m not dying on my knees begging Baldy for my life.

Wolfe moved outside, weapon raised to his chin. Moving forward without doubt, without fear. Two hundred pounds of middle aged muscle. The man’s training locked and loaded and ready to dispense death to anyone who got in his way.

‘Watch the monitors.’ He called out to Joe. ‘Don’t lower the shutter until I get back, or I’m dead. It’s our last defence.’

‘Hey, Wolfman.’ Issy called out. ‘Be careful.’

‘I wish I’d known you longer.’ He said. ‘I would like to have known you better.’ Wolfe smiled, then moved out into the hallway toward Seiglar’s office.’

Isla ran to the door.

‘Issy, he’ll be okay. I mean, look at him, he’ll be fine.’

‘When he comes back, put that shutter down fast.’

‘Yeah, got it. Fast.’

Gunfire in the office. Wolfe had engaged Baldy's men. The sound of a Chinese New Year just a few yards away. Only a corridor between them now and the bullets. A dozen monitors kept flicking angles but the firefight was clear to see. Light and gas from the muzzles of the guns, the odds one-sided, but evening up as a man in a mask went down. Another pulled him by his belt to safety. Six men opened fire together and the wall behind Wolfe was torn apart; turned into smoke and dust. A smog through which they couldn't see.

'Issy?' Joe's gaze moved from screen to screen. He snapped a look down the hall his back to the wall. 'You're not responsible for any of this, you know that?'

She stepped across the opening, grabbed his gun, turned it the right way up'

'The only thing I know for sure, Joe. I won't let those bastards out there get their hands on WolfSpawn. Tell me you do understand why.'

'Yeah, I guess. But that only leaves two options. That old bastard made sure of that.'

'Watch the corridor, Joe. Shut that thing if you see anyone other than Wolfe. So long as there's shooting we know he's still alive.'

'Issy, what if we give them what they want? All of it. The pods, the computer. Close that thing... surrender. Won't everything remain the same as it was?'

It will never be the same. How could it. You know what it will mean, and to so many.'

'But I don't want to die.' Joe said. 'Not for that maniac. Can't we put him somewhere, out of sight?'

'You think I don't want to just walk out of here. But how can we do that now that we know? Besides, I think maybe Grandfather was right. Perhaps it is time to change the one thing that never changes. The rich and powerful who shape our lives each day, and to hell with the consequences. People like my Grandfather, and the Cadre; like Conrad Fueller. Joe, it's a mess and no-one wants to clean it up. There are trillions of dollars in banks and vaults that governments don't want to spend. They'd rather see people homeless and hungry. In camps made of tarpaulin. Maybe he's right, I have to make a decision. Here's one.' Issy slid the bolt back on her weapon and let it go. 'I won't let Baldy and his cronies sell us out so they can keep their Ivory Towers.'

'Since when did you get all political?'

She pointed at the briefcase.

'And if none of this is real, have you thought of that? We've only got a dead man's side of the story.'

'Baldy is real, Joe. Go out there and tell me he's not tearing this building apart to get to us. How real is that? And the Russians; tell me their threat's not real. It's all over the media every day. Oh, wait, do you think your people are safe because you live on an island? That this isn't your fight, is that it?'

‘No, no, that’s not what I mean.’

‘Let me tell you, Joe. This is your problem as well as ours. If the Russians come and we’re not ready, millions of people will die, and the rest could live in servitude. Is that okay with you?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘So what do I do? Tell me. Well, I’m listening.’

‘Send the lists worldwide. It might end this without blood. At least it would stop, *them*.’

‘Yes, stop the Cadre, but what would I start? How would it progress?’ She measured up to Joe, face to face. ‘I’ve been thinking about that. What if I have children, Joe? Will they be brought up like me, as outcasts? Because of this stupid gene?’ She backed off, put a hand on his arm. ‘My stomach hurts, Joe. I feel sick. I’d rather be out there with him, than in here staring at that case. I don’t know what to do. But if we expose all of this, what then? Do we make it easier for the bad guys. Have I put a target on the back of every name on that damn ROXY list. So many people, Joe? I can’t do that. Not to any of them.’

He’s just trying to think of a way out, that’s all. That big brain of his is searching for a way to survive.

‘Joe. Hey. Are we good, you and me?’

She liked that, his smile. His reaction to her question.

Joe pulled the bolt of the PK slowly back. Then released it to ram a bullet into the chamber.

'I've got your back, Issy. Whatever you decide... I've got your back.'

The shooting stopped.

Issy moved one side of the door. Joe stepped back and put his hand to the button.

Is Wolfe dead? Have they killed Papa? She flunked against the wall. No, please no...

‘Issy, the monitor.’

He’s still alive.

Wolfe stepped out from the smog. Short controlled bursts, deadly accurate as he moved forward. Two men went down. Another hail of bullets cut chunks from the plaster and brick. Wolfe threw something small into the gallery and found cover behind the rubble. The grenade slammed a blast wave throughout the far end of the gallery and for a moment there was a terrible silence.

Small arms fire cut swirls through the dust. It was difficult to see who was shooting and from where

Joe... I’m scared. Hold my hand.

He was stood in the corner cradling his weapon refusing to look, his hand an inch from the button. It was trembling.

‘Joe.’ He couldn’t hear her.

A few metres from Issy the briefcase lay open on the table. Two circles lit upon a dark screen. The last few days had been heading them toward something, she’d felt it. But not this. The growing influence. The manifesting

power. The resolve of these people to stop them. Or was it always like this, throughout history? One race always ready to choke another into submission, on the pretext they had to survive? Was that Nature's way? Or was it just Human Nature?

Fuck fuck... Grandfather's expecting me to start a war. But I can't. I don't want to be responsible for that.

'Issy? Hey, Issy... you okay?'

'Just watch the corridor.' She said. 'I'm suffering a moral dilemma. And I still feel sick.'

Mama, tell me what to do. Isn't this what I really want? For Governments to take a stronger stance. An end to the blackouts. Military intervention. For someone to actually help those people. To help ourselves. That someone shouldn't be me. I don't know. I can't do this. It's not fair.

Bullets ripped through the exit of the corridor. Issy raised the Pk, Joe fumbled with his weapon. Baldy's men were at the end of the Hall of Plinths. There wasn't much left of the ancient Gods. Wolfe was running through Seiglar's office, the masked men almost at its door. Joe's gun thrown down got her attention.

'Fuck fuck... I'm so stupid. Issy, what if there's another way?'

'Joe, there isn't. Grandfather saw to that. He had it all worked out.'

'Did he... I wonder? Come here. Come on, watch the corridor. You're in charge of this bloody button. I've got an idea.'

Where's he going? What idea? Oh shit, Wolfe's coming back, and fast.'

Sudden impacts inside the lab. One terrifying thud after another. Issy hugged the wall but her hand remained steady over the button.

'Close the shutter.' Shouted Wolfe; he was inbound and moving fast. The whizz and whistle of projectiles preceding him. Bullets flying through the doorway. Indiscriminately impacting their pristine surroundings.

'Do it, Issy. Shut the door.'

The wall burst into tiny pieces of plaster by her hand. Wolfe was ten yards out.'

'Do it.'

Five yards now.

Issy slammed the button with her palm.

Nothing happened.

'Shit, shit...' Her hand beat on the stupid metal button. 'Joe.'

He was busy at the workstation, fingers dabbing down at the keyboard. His attention glued to the monitor. He flinched and haunched with each bullet's impact but refused to take cover.

'I hit it. Look, I'm still hitting it. Joe, it doesn't work.' She cried out.

Wolfe hurdled the desk and spread eagled himself on the floor. Then pulled the legs upward to tip the desk onto its side. He slid the heavy worktop ahead of himself to block the doorway as a barrage of wood and splinters was

gouged out from the heavy oak. A storm of projectiles strafed and chaffed anything in their path and ripped their way throughout the lab.

Wolfe lifted his gun and fired blindly into the hall. Isla followed suit around the corner. Eyes closed, her hand moved the weapon from side to side. Slurred bursts that took down one man and forced the others back to find cover.

‘Issy, the door. Close the door.’ Shouted Wolfe. ‘Reloading.’ Another clip was rammed home. Seconds later Wolfe’s Glock reigned fire down the hall.

Issy reloaded, then closed her eyes. She was hitting the button but the damn thing refused to come down. The sound of the bullets was terrifying. Deafening. She was trapped, terrified, desperate to leave her corner to run and hide. Wolfe was shouting, but she couldn’t hear his voice. Joe was beyond the line of fire, doing whatever, she didn’t know. After everything they’d been through, was this the end of the line. Trapped in a corner with no hope to escape.

‘Hold your fire.’ Wolfe urged Issy. ‘Cease firing, look.’ He was pointing above her. ‘It’s okay... it’s okay.’

She could hear it now, the mechanised hum of the shutter as it lowered. The bullets were being stopped by the protective screen. Less thud, more ting. Outside the gunfire finally took a pause.

Wolfe was still down behind the table. Taking a breath, thanking God, she had no idea. But she did see blood all over his shoulder. The moment the shutter clicked and locked Issy moved to the table.

‘You’ve been hit.’ And more than once by the look of his clothing. ‘Let me see.’

‘I’m fine.’ He insisted.

‘No you’re not.’ She ripped his tunic open. ‘Oh shit.’ Blood was oozing from a hole in his shoulder. ‘We have to stop the that. How do I stop that?’

‘There’s a Med-pack in the cupboard.’ He nodded toward the wall. ‘Just push the lower panel.’

Issy slid across the floor on her knees. The wall opened and she took one of three cases with a red cross on the front.

‘Wolfe, what... what are you looking at?’

Seiglar’s briefcase was on the floor.

‘You have to make a decision, Isla.’

‘I have to stop the bleeding first. Now shut up and tell me what to. I don’t know.’

‘Joe, what’s he doing? I don’t think so.’ Wolfe was trying to stand.

‘Sit down.’ Issy ordered, but Wolfe had her by her arm. He was raising his gun toward Joe.

‘Get away from the computer, Joe. Now.’

Issy stepped into Wolfe's line of fire.

'I gave him permission.' She said. 'It's my decision, not yours. Now lower your gun. Put it down, Papa.'

Joe had his hands in the air, but it wasn't Wolfe he was staring at.

'Err guys, the monitor.'

Half the screens were blank. Two of the others showed the corridor. Showed Baldy walking down the hall. Everyone knew what he carried on his shoulder.

'RPG.' shouted Wolfe. 'Everyone down on the...'

A burst of flame ignited a trail of smoke; the user didn't bother to break stride. Like a flare its ignition was magnificent. The rocket's inertia breathtaking. And as she fell Issy saw it fly straight and true down the long corridor with a tail of trailing smoke. She was still falling when the missile struck the window. It howled thunder and rained shards of glass as her body hit the floor. The air pulsed with a violent gust of concussion that encompassed her body and limbs.

Issy felt as if she'd fallen into water. Every sense and sinew overcome and awash. Time seemed to stand still as she floated down to the seabed.

She lay on her front with a bottle of vodka in her veins. How else could she feel like this?

Get up, Issy.

I can't.

Get up, girl. Stop lying on your face and get up.

I can't.

Wolfe was pulling her to find safety behind the desk. One hand on her belt the other firing his gun to give cover.

Look at him, he's magnificent. I can't hear what he's shouting as he stands above me fighting for my life. This man who I don't even know, but has known me most of my life. No, no... blood flies from his body, he's been hit.

Get up Issy.

I can't.

No, Papa. He's hit again.

The change was sudden, deafening, as her ears came back online. Both Wolfe's weapons brrrrring death and destruction. The clips released and clunked beside her as Wolfe reloaded and the brrrrrrr began again. Issy tried to move, to stand. The best she could do was crawl, just far enough to grab her gun. She twisted toward the hole in the window and slammed the weapon over the desktop; she squeezed the trigger. Short bursts. Indiscriminate aim. She could barely register the effort. Wolfe was hit again and he fell to one knee. He kept firing. Issy grabbed at Wolfe's knee, kept pulling the trigger. His leg buckled as three more impacts spilled his tunic with blood.

No... no... I can't bare to watch as they cut him down; so much blood, and yet he refuses to die.

'Wolfe...'

He's falling. No, don't fall. Her gun click click clicked, it was empty. *Don't leave me. Wolfe... Papa. He's falling.* Crumpled really, to his knees, no longer able to fight. Yet still he raised his gun and kept on firing
'Papa.'

He's smiling.

Issy's eyes were streaming.

Wolfe held out his hand to touch hers, and then he twisted, dipped, fell back as more bullets thumped into his torso and took him away.

Fuck you... fuck you, Bald man.

Issy grabbed Wolfe's gun and crawled toward the case, pulling it behind the desk.

'Joe?'

She could see him. He banged his fist on the keyboard. 'BOOM.' he shouted, and gave her a big thumbs up. Then fell back and dropped to the floor. For a moment the room was silent. Then slow footsteps seemed to pick their way across the rubble. Men were coming inside.

Joe?

Issy saw the red dots sweeping, keen to find targets, coming in through the dust.

I feel sick.

She looked at the screen in the case. Then at Joe who lay lifeless. Issy's thumb pushed at the screen. 'Boom.' She said.

Such a facile action with so much at stake. For a moment the mainframe burst into life. All of its lights alive and dancing with purpose. Men were shouting, the red dots converging on the streaming lights at the heart of the computer. Issy raised herself above the desk and opened fire. A long burst from the Glock that swept across the broken glass and forced all of the light beams to scatter around the walls.

It felt good, she felt powerful. Her decision was made. One last rasp of bullets echoed down the corridor. Then click... click... click... click...

She was running on empty, as one by one the red dots of death realigned towards her. She looked down at her breast and wondered if she'd feel the bullets. Or would it be over too quickly to know that she was dead.

She felt them alright. Each punch and crunch of impact as bullets smashed into her torso. She went down, just like Papa. And her last thoughts were with Wolfe, and she grinned.

Only a father would stand above her like that and give his own life to save hers. Before she hit the floor she understood the love of a parent. As her eyes closed she finally felt the love of a child toward her father. She fell beside Wolfe and reached out to take her Papa's hand. Issy could no longer fight the darkness. Her eyes closed and she fell into a deep sleep for the final time.

EPILOGUE

‘Are these really necessary?’ Asked Joe. As if the hospital food wasn’t bad enough, he was still cuffed to the bed. ‘Excuse me... cuffs?’ The key turned and the bracelet fell away. ‘Thanks.’ He said. ‘Hey, I was watching that.’

Baldy turned off the TV using Joe’s remote. Every channel was the same. Exclusive News Stories. Conspiracy revelations had been dumped onto the internet. Dubbed PharmaxGate it made Wikileaks look an angry office memo. Mad Billionaire, attempted usurping of democracy. Hidden weapons caches, Neo Nazi plot, nuclear time bombs. The list seemed endless. As did the rich and powerful whose names were associated with the coup.

‘Does it hurt?’ Baldy asked as he sat in the chair by the door.

‘Of course it hurts, I was shot.’ Bruising, nothing more. But it stung like hell. ‘I can’t believe you don’t want to watch that? It’s gone global. Everyone and their mother is being interviewed about the conspiracy.’

‘I’ve seen the highlights, Joe. We’re making arrests as we speak.’

‘I’ll bet you are, Mr *Deep Cover*. Seriously, you spent two years infiltrating those scumbags. You could have told us. You scared the hell out of us both back at the Club. We could have helped.’

‘You were helping. You led us all the way to Seiglar.’

‘You out a target on our backs and used us. Still, I suppose you’ll get a promotion, and a big raise?’

‘Joe, what happened to the other list?’

‘List, what list?’

‘The WolfSpawn list. It never went public; anything you want to add to your earlier statement?’

‘Statement? Oh, you mean the interrogation whilst I was laid up in a hospital bed. They shouted at me.’

‘You were holding back. You still are. What happened to the other list, Joe?’

‘I told you everything. Seiglar wasn’t expecting anyone to mess with his computer; to even know how, or he’d have commenced WolfSpawn long before I got to it. He expected Isla to make a decision from the ones he’d dictated. That he’d planned for so long. It was all there just waiting for her to press the button. The one thing he hadn’t planned on, that he hadn’t allowed for... was me. Or that Issy would do the right thing.’

‘The list, Joe?’

‘If there ever was a list, which there wasn’t... there isn’t one now. That’s the thing with data on computers, all it takes is a keen mind and a quick finger, and poof, they’re gone forever. Talking of which, I see the Russians are backing down. Moving troops back home.’

Muntz stared at him. Funny thing, the bald didn’t scare him anymore. Then he smiled.

‘No reason for them to be so aggressive, not now. They had their own intelligence, and we shared what we knew. We had to. It was the only way to stop them using military force. But it was a close run thing. The list that

never existed. But if it had, I'm glad it doesn't now. It would have been bad for everyone.'

'So happy ever after then? For everyone except the bad guys.'

'The politicians never stopped working the back channels. And since Seiglar's demise, and the public exposure of the Lebensborn list, a new energy deal has been agreed. It seems everyone is happy with the way things turned out.'

'Everyone?' Joe lifted his hands, still cuffed. 'Issy should get a medal for what she did. Maybe even a statue. But I don't suppose anyone will ever know her name, will they?'

'That's how it goes, Joe. She made her decision.'

'Fuck you, Baldy. She was manipulated and coerced. Lied to by the family she'd desperately tried to find. And let's not forget, we were chased around Europe by a bald guy with a gun. Things were a but edgy, a bit frantic. Issy did what she had to do.'

There was a knock on the window. Too much testosterone floating in the room for either to break the others gaze and look.

'Like I said, Baldy. Fuck you.'

'As I said, Joe. She made her decision.'

This time the knock was harder, as if something had been thrown against the glass.

'Hey, I can hear you you know. And I don't want a medal, I want these unlocked.' Issy was shaking her bracelet. 'Oh, and a car, I want a car. A fast

one. Can you do that? I think I deserve it. Maybe some cash too, living isn't so cheap these days.'

'Three broken ribs and a punctured lung.' Said Joe. 'You'd think it would slow her down. Kinda makes you wish the armoured vest hadn't been invented, doesn't it?'

Baldy raised a grin.

'I'll leave her with the cuffs for a while. Then you'll both go into witness protection. It's the best I can do.'

'What's he saying, Joe. I can't hear him?'

'He says he'll buy you a Campervan, you're going to need somewhere to live.'

'Oh, yeah, I hadn't thought of that.'