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*For Mary - why I hung on to this dream*

## **PROLOGUE – GHOSTS IN THE SKY**

Without Alexandra Brontay, nothing would have ever changed in this city of dreamless vampires.

Outside, it was quiet.

Oh so deadly, deathly inert for what was once one of the world's proto-conurbations. A city that mattered more than most when cities did matter. Last night was teasing into dawn in its lazy, regular May way, the sunrise meandering up behind St Paul's, in no particular hurry to do its thing. Nothing more prehistoric and natural than dawn. Other landmarks in the expected 21<sup>st</sup> Century spread; the Shard, Canary Wharf to the East, Telecom Tower to the West, reassuringly solid, abominably fake. Another nostalgia trip for old London Town, the dead old town that was no more, a cruel but magnificent hologram of a skyline. This used to be such clever stuff.

6am. The hour of transformation, like some vast, prismatic screensaver turning over. The city as it was dissolved into the Manhattan skyline of 1973, avec Twin Towers. Robust, exciting, new and old human life building dreams. Someone had thrown the Burjj Khalifa in the background, like a child had gotten hold of the source code. Whatever. The new psychogeography would have been impressive if it wasn't just another example of the re-hashing of something long destroyed; the absence of modernity or originality. Disingenuous, sad, sad, sad spectres.

And even if nostalgia was anyone's thing, no-one

was about to witness it. The city did stir, but two hundred metres below the irradiated ground, somewhere less dangerous to the human condition, somewhere safely sterile and perfectly antisocial.

Segue beneath, where the real dwellings existed, a subterranean hive for the worker bees and lone drones, seldom talking to anyone real except themselves, addicted to fantasy role play delivered by the miracle of nanotech and atomised algorithms, only broken up by the chore of going to work. Arbeit Macht Frei, Another Lie. Why? Time for showers, clothes, breakfasts, commutes. No exceptions, no questions. Busy for the sake of busy and that's the way *they* liked it.

There She was, difficult to spot somewhere deep in this enormous, labyrinthine, homogenous warren. She knew, although she didn't know that She Knew. The one who was different yet seemed less than average, less than her high-management potential, Ms Pear-shaped Imperfect. Something went wrong with the programming there, eh? She was the one who wished we could go back to a day she didn't remember or have even known, a painfully ugly and archaic worldview that would get her stuck on the company ladder. Like everyone else, last night she was 'enjoying' the illusion of a digital library of fantasy worlds within the comfort of her apartment. Another opium of the masses bullshit show on the VoQue Subscriber Network which she worked so hard to hack access above her pay grade, only to discover that this one was like all the other shows; repetitive, lurid, base, old hat, dazzling with gimmicks yet devoid of soul, a bit like the fucking skyline. It was in these moments, when she cursed

herself for again being miss-sold the latest spectacular *Glam Slam*, making her late for work (why can't she read a book and go to sleep at a decent time?) that the seeds of revolution quivered to grow. Of course, they would not, they would never unless something happened very soon to fertilise her ennui into something else. No, *force* her that way. Fortunately, It was on the way, express from another, long forgotten land. It had just arrived here, in the shitty city, brimmed with creative intent, so radically different from anything or anyone she knew, preparing to meet her after long months planning and expense to the soul. Her. Alexandra Brontay.

*Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant, The Beatles, The Stones, The Dalai Lama, Bacall and Bogart, Laurel and Hardy, Martin and Lewis, Sinatra, Jane Fonda, Madonna, James Dean, Muhammed Ali, Miles Davis, Baudelaire, Nell Gwynne, Harrison Ford, Oscar Wilde, Stephen Hawking, Boudica, Queen Elizabeth I, Princess Diana, Grace Kelly, Prince, The Jackson Five, Bonaparte, The Who, Da Vinci, Sarah Bernhardt, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Dame Margot Fonteyn, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Amelia Earhart, Sir Alec Guinness, James Joyce, The Sex Pistols, Peter Sellers, Agatha Christie, Noël Coward, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, Fritz Lang, Rudolf Valentino, President Kennedy, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, The Dead Kennedys, Chaplin, Ivor Novello, Josephine Baker, Lord Byron, Charles Mingus, Jean Michel Basquiat, Gene Krupa, Elizabeth Báthory, Voltaire, Ludwig Van with Chuck Berry, Philip Roth, Ziggy Stardust, Francis Bacon,*

*Mary Shelley, Buster Keaton, David Hockney, Audrey Hepburn, Louise Brooks, Rudolf Nureyev, General Patten, Yahweh, the Prophet Isaiah, Baby Jesus and many, many, many, manymany many more...*

*Join the Party to end all Parties on the Official VoQue Subscriber Network, with your host and the Only Icon of Our Times, Hail Vanity. It'll be THE Glam Slam with unseen upgraded narratives and reality algorithms. Bronze level access and above applies, access non-transferable, check dome menu for details.*

Sanctimonious gadget.

*Late again, AlexandRA* it drawled, mouth pursing like a retentive sphincter, eyebrows chevroned in cartoonish indignation.

Holier than thou technology, ruling the roost over humanity, plus ça change. The face on her watch gurned at her in disapproval as she shot down the vacuum tube, swaddled in a semi-opaque nano-compound cylinder. Being a few seconds late on a commute was a positively capital offence. Being a few *minutes* late? Well.

*Come on, come on, come on, Come On.* That voice all around her in the tube, delivering electronic admonishment. Nag nag nag.

*ALEXANDRA BRONTAY. THIS IS YET ANOTHER REMINDER OF YOUR SHODDY TIMEKEEPING, ISN'T IT JUST? IS THIS THE SUM OF YOUR ASPIRATIONS? REALLY?*

'Look, if you must know I got access to the Glam Slam last night, okay? I overslept. I'm sorry. It was shit anyway. Turned into another starfuckfest orgy.'

*IRRELEVANT AND INADMISSIBLE, BRONTAY.*

'Of course it fucking is. Stupid me.'

*LANGUAGE.*

She yearned for a human face. A grumpy line manager, an upwardly-mobile weasel of a junior colleague willing to stab her in the back. Anything. *Anyone* but this. A sweaty, horrible, flu-pit commute would be preferable to the sterile, ultra-efficient shoop down the tubes with nothing to look at but that stern, condescending timepiece and the strafes of refracted light on the cylinder lid. Yes. Better to be Packed like a Pilchard on a Tube Train, like in one of those old internet clips. But that was history, and so was the generation who could even recall it aside from oddballs like Brontay with an irritating taste for such nostalgic curios and doing things the hard way. The old way. The slow way. Her way.

Now was the age of the individual. No more stressful commutes, no more middle management.

No more families. No more real people talking. Safety. 100%. Reliability. Certainty. Big sigh.

The cylinder slid to a halt in the Arrivals Hall and shunted up vertically to deliver her to work, like an uprooted coffin on Judgment Day. Out stepped Alexandra Brontay and ugh.

Life.

Was.

Boring.



1

FRIDAY MORNING

*BRONTAY PLEASE PUNCH IN.*

Her tired suit and countenance betrayed her twenty-eight years. Today, and every day, she felt more like eighty, and a frail, old school eighty at that. There were no excuses for looking this unwell, not now nor ever again, but Brontay would find one to accompany the stench of ennui and disappointment that clung to her shoulders like her cheap, worn, creased suit. *I could do better than this hamster wheel. Could do.*

*Won't do.*

*Never will.*

*Ha.*

She glanced up and spoke.

'Good morning, my little Fleur de Lis. And how are you today?' The workclock extended its cylindrical body from out of the wall, the malleable nanocompound face a centimetre from Brontay's. It was a bigger version of the bleating watch she was obliged to wear by the company.

*A.B. INSERT YOUR DIGIT REGISTER INTO THE CLOCK*

*FACE IMMEDIATELY YOUR OBDURACY HAS BEEN REGISTERED.*

Was there no end to the pernicious programming? Brontay emitted a guttural, sulky sigh and inserted her index finger into a gooey orifice between its beady eyes.

'My apologies. I promise not to do it again. Genuinely, no irony. Look at my face. Zero sarcismo.' She wrapped her bottom lip over her top lip and mimed a zip shutting.

The pupil of the clock dilated and it cocked an eyebrow.

'Please can I go to work, now? Please?'

A pregnant, deliberate pause to deliver digital displeasure.

The doors to The Grand Hall, a colossal open plan office, slid open, revealing 1500 colleagues bartering away silently with their clients on the shop floor. 1500 colleagues behind 1500 clear, crystal compound hemispheres, where they could be seen but not heard. Never having known anything different, Brontay had grown too used to this environment to notice the irony of close proximity yet not so splendid isolation. What would they have made of this 150 years ago?

Brontay reminded herself that it was excessive boozing that was the problem, not so much in terms of her feeling like shit and being late for work but that the company knew exactly how much she drank, when she drank, where and with whom she drank. It was all on company credit. Of course. It meant she could guzzle as much as she liked without running out of cash, but she didn't have the credit points to do something about her swelling beer belly, sagging glutes, the bags under her eyes and her bloated, skinny, sallow, pear of a body.

Looking across all these domes containing deluded, isolated souls chasing dreams made for them, she was sure in perhaps an even more deluded fashion that she wasn't the only one who thought that way. But she was just a worker ant, a drone, and what could she ever do to change things? She didn't even have the motivation to wipe her own backside of a morning. Yes, a

computer did that too.

She really would have to get her act together and start climbing the corporate ladder. The social networks showed how much better everything was – body/neuro enhancement, fashion and technology credits were much sweeter for those with management access. She could see it in the perfect, polished white smiles of all those peers who had scaled so far ahead of her that she had lost access to all but the most basic info on their newsfeeds. Yes, it was all her own fault.

Brontay stepped into her dome. She told herself again that she didn't care, that this phoney world wasn't beginning to break her down. Lie.

*BRONTAY READ YOUR INCOMING MAIL*

This time the voice that came from the screen was her own. She knew that they gave out official reprimands for persistently avoiding mail. A third warning this early in the corporate year was not a good idea. Brinkmanship in this office was a dangerous sport, but it was the only fun to be had around here that wasn't artificial, although consequences were dire enough. She knew a man that had made it to seven warnings last year. Four years ago a woman had almost gone all the way with nine, but she was some kind of Anti-VoQue terrorist crackedskull.

Few people ever got to ten warnings and the sack. The sack meant death. But everybody knew that, like everybody knew healthy shit was brown.

'Uh, okay, okay. Let's see what we have on this bright and lovely morning.'

A permanently bent-faced chap with even bigger bags under the eyes and an even fatter gut appeared in the cell with her.

'Lexie B, how about drinks at SoSamantha's tonight? Couple of hardbodies arranged.'

It was that insufferable gland Elkin. He had the most annoying habit of shortening people's names to make them sound ridiculous. This ballbag wouldn't have found two real

women to bring, but he would try anything for a bit of company on his pointless crusades. She recalled how last time, drunk at the end of another blank evening, the slug had tried to finger her in the basest of passes.

'Heh Joe! See you there.' Brontay cursed her weak will. But what else did she have planned? Letting her dome play out another empty fantasy for her? *Again?*

'Don't be late, or you'll miss all the action.'

'Later buddy.'

'Love your work.' Elkin vanished.

*Love Your Work? Fuck off, Elkin.* Reality was crapatola, but it was still better than the alternative. Why could so few see that? Was she the only person in the world who thought this way, aside from that cocksplash Elkin? Was there something wrong with her? Just like this droning, repetitive sequence of commuting and booting up her dome, it was this same notion that occurred to her every morning at the same point. She never thought just to accept it and get on with life, for all the forboding pressure from every company-controlled gadget in her eyeline urging her to conform, day and night.

Brontay watched the rest of her mail on her auto organiser, choosing a number of different faces from Doris Day to Paul Robeson to Cary Grant, famous old names only she cared about, just to make it that little more interesting. Brontay never talked to the citizen on the neighbouring desk and that citizen never talked to her, which was much the same situation at home in her grubby but perfectly soundproofed apartment. Isolation, isolation, isolation.

Safety. 100%. Solid. CERTAIN. Good. No, not good. Focus, job to do. Forget about it.

'Right, better give me my appointments, then,' she sighed.

*Comin' right up, Bubba,* replied Elvis Aaron Presley, who she'd decided would be her secretary for the day.

'Yeah, and give me a painkiller. My sciatica's killing me.'

*Feel the scratch, baby.*

'Ooh!' A needle shot from her seat and into her left buttock.

*Mmm... thanyuhveruhmuch Alexandra... Now how about a choon?*

'Cheers Elvis, not right now.'

*Whatever yuh say, Colonel. Train-a-ride! Sixteen coaches long!*  
*Thanyuh.*

A different face piped up. That damned manager clock.

*MORE EXERCISE AND PHYSIOTHERAPY ARE RECOMMENDED. AN INJURED EMPLOYEE QUICKLY BECOMES A LIABILITY AND AN EXPENSE.*

'Censorious bitch.'

No-one was meant to get backaches, migraines, flu or even have daydreams. There was a pill for these complaints and more, but Brontay was proud of the fact that she suffered from all of them, for the same reason she was proud to collect formal warnings. Elvis returned, shaking some maracas.

*Client numero uno is in the building... thanyuhveruhmuchah.*

Brontay straightened up her black pencil tie, ready for the magic to happen.

*You have reached the abode of Mr Phillip K. Densmore. I am his finance monitor representative and I will be assessing your offer.*

It was a mole hologram, or 'sim' as it known in the trade. Brontay would usually have to talk to this fellow at least ten times a day as quite a few clients used this gatekeeper path. She was no expert in A.I. algorithms, but this chappy was a particularly surly, facetious fuck.

'And a good morning to you, sir. Let me tell you about some great offers that we've got today from Hanslett. Worried about the warranty on your hardware? Problems with unscrupulous salespeople?'

*We have sufficient warranty, Miss Brontay. We have sufficient cover provided by Alpha Systems Ltd, which has a far superior environmental and human rights record to Hanslett.*

'All part of the same company really but... Perhaps I could

interest you in our Millennium Recycling Premium? It won the Gates Industry prize this year.'

*Do I need to remind you? Really? Several top insurance companies, including Alpha Systems, boycotted the Gates ceremony this year due to the human rights libel violation made by a panel member.*

She didn't really expect to sell anything, but she knew she had to at least give the appearance of an employee who was trying her damndest to dance the hardest. The clock was watching, and giving a performance was a minimum requirement.

'I would question that information. Alpha commissions surveys...'

*The survey in question was an independent commission and more reliable than any research ever made by Hanslett. Now, if you would excuse me Mr Brontay but Hard Light is an expensive technology. I have to terminate this conversation.*

'Expensive? Really? Piss off.'

Brontay's skin was normally thicker, but she was in no mood to let a third rate piece of legacy software give her the bird that easily.

'Excuse me for busting up your precious fucking schedule, dickhead.'

*HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION ALEXANDRA BRONTAY. DESIST FROM ENGAGING CLIENTS IN THIS TONE IMMEDIATELY.*

'Human rights? I'm talking to a fucking beam of light you dumb piece of shit. You're no better.'

*BRONTAY.*

The gatekeeper app was still there, but Brontay wasn't done.

'Oh, there you are. Well, tell me, they say that programs reflect the personality of their users. So is Mr Densmore a pedantic little prick like you are?'

The sim seemed to flinch at this, then he fizzed away into thin air. Brontay knew what was coming next.

*HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION CONFIRMED. ONE MORE OUTBURST IN THIS MANNER AND YOU WILL BE SUSPENDED WITHOUT PAY FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE DAY. ONE SUSPENSION COUNTS AS FOUR WARNINGS WHICH WILL INCREASE YOUR TALLY TO SIX FOR THIS FINANCIAL YEAR. TEN WARNINGS WILL RESULTS IN YOUR DISMISSAL AND TERMINATION OF YOUR ASSETS.*

'If real people bought insurance I wouldn't have to talk to tight fuckholes like that.'

*BRONTAY.*

'Yeah, I know, desist from making libellous comments.'

It was at this moment that Brontay decided to go out and get well and truly destroyed later on. Excessive drinking wasn't the fashionable, the clever or the recommended thing for a single young (well, youngish) woman to do, but Alexandra Brontay was in the minority there, and she was happy being in the minority. Why should her life be completely dominated by machines? Why shouldn't she be entitled to a few more options? Why did everyone work for the sake of working and just accept it?

But it was more than this that bugged her on this morning and every other morning, something altogether deeper, altogether creepier. She looked across at all the other domes, their occupants busting every synapse not to get sales, but to be *seen* to be working hard for the company.

*What's wrong with this picture?*

*Stop breathing, Alexandra. There isn't time for that.*

Who said that?

Elvis appeared to welcome in another potential client.

She had a feeling that it was going to be a one pig of a day. But as she'd come to expect, every day was now a pig, only some pigs were more shit-eating and nasty than others.

## MOGULS

At the far end of an endless boardroom table, MannyCapra perched with his size 11 Converse planted up heel first on the veneer, hands clasped behind his head. Today he wore a simple black t-shirt and Levi jeans combo, much like any other day. One less decision necessary, better for productivity, better for blending in, better for designing the great design, à la Jobs. He eschewed the same fame that he bestowed upon others, one of secrets to his longevity. What he did clearly display was consistency of form, a flawless symmetry of shape from his square shoulders, ramrod straight back and the v-motif of his arched eyebrows, topiary-trimmed goatee and hint of a widow's peak; silver-gun superman crewcut, high contrast, classical, timeless. His eyes matched the gun metal grey and could transform colour and mood in a second, although he'd long since quit using this trick to disconcert his rivals during aggressive takeovers, as there wasn't much left that was worth taking over in this crazy, tired old world.

This morning MannyCapra sipped his coffee, a piquant java.

Today he had chosen black and bitter, tomorrow might be sweet and creamy. Tomorrow was his, just like today. And yesterday.

The Warhol dominated the boardroom of the CEO and founder of International Activities PLC, the greatest media empire and global enterprise since Mother Nature had started it all 4.5 billion years ago. The Soup Can had been a gift from Albertini, a certain faceless VoQue designer who thought it good business to ingratiate those who pushed the buttons. And it was, but not because MannyCapra valued half of the junk that came his way from the toads; the Hampstead Homestead was full of such trinkets and most of them ended up in storage or landfill. The Warhol was a concession to High VoQue, which didn't really interest MannyCapra but had helped him build his organisation to a presently unassailable level of popularity and with effortless control of its assets. It reeked of expediency, which was never the intention of the long-conked artist Andy. That's the problem with death and fame, sooner or later your legacy gets bent and broken and misrepresented and then everyone takes the piss. The secret? Don't die.

Count Basie and his Orchestra bounced around the oak-panelled boardroom at an understated volume, the swing-maestro's ghostly figure tickling the ivories in semi-opacity with his players at the far end of the football pitch-sized chamber.

Maybe the Can should go. MannyCapra never liked Pop Art much. And it was an ugly fucking thing. He had recently acquired a mirror constructed by Salvador Dali that was a much more salient centrepiece, perfectly gnarled to match his current tastes and moods.

Any other business?

'Elvis was just before my time really, Hardy. I don't know about this.'

MannyCapra tapped his finger on the brief before him. They were looking for a new, more convincing Elvis Presley to run on

the networks.

'But people want the real thing, Manny. Messing around with pre-Quantum Age, pre-Digital Revolution, pre-fucking stone age 3D rendered outtakes from King Creole is all very clever but the natives are getting bored and the numbers aren't good.'

MannyCapra counted his breaths, eyeballing the punkish looking VoQue casualty perched across the table from him; Saul Hardyman.

'I met Mr Presley for thirty seconds in 1974. All I did was park his Pink Cadillac while he took Priscilla and Lisa-Marie into a burger restaurant. Will that be long enough?'

Saul Hardyman, vice-president and Director of Marketing at International Activities PLC grinned from ear to ear. He loved being the Ideas Man. He loved his new, radioactive green hair; grown not dyed. He loved waving his stupid fucking faux 1950s Valley Girl hands around when he talked.

'Manny, we can pull this memory from your head even if you can't. Why confine this kind of entertainment to an elite, hey?' he spelled out a slogan as if it was already on a placard.

'We can have the King of Rock 'n' Roll as he really was, warts 'n' all, in your living dome by Christmas.'

MannyCapra shook his head.

'We need a change of tack.' MannyCapra crossed out the word *Presley* on his note pad, 'Hardy, stop grimacing. It makes you ugly. You're not ugly. However much you try.'

'Look, remember the Dean and Monroe weeks? Jim Morrison? Hendrix? Lennon? Shit, even Michael Jackson. These personalities are tried and tested winners, Manny. Tragic legends are the most enduring legends of all. Forget the stupid who died of old age.'

*Take a breath. Stupid.*

MannyCapra cracked his gum as Hardy prattled on before raising an eyebrow; an idea that had already occurred to him weeks earlier was crossing his mind again, but he wanted

Hardyman to think of it himself. It was key to their subtext that he passed this little test. *Get off the dead horse, Hardy.*

'Right, Hardy.'

MannyCapra had bought these jeans when he was 18 with his wages from that valet job in Vegas when he'd been a shabby student with a much plainer name on his gap year from Oxford, possessed of the highest aspirations but an ill-honed ruthless streak that would get him into trouble until he learned to serve it cold to rivals. They'd lasted him 143 years, which made them rather good value. The suited-up Hardyman was old by old standards but young in comparison. With all the treatment, he looked not much older than 18. Rather too over-the-edge for his liking.

Hardyman slipped a packet of Marlboro Reds from the inside pocket of his Albertini blazer. Approaching his hundredth birthday, the V.P. had access to the executive medicine cabinet at I.A., including the gene clinics. He was a sucker for VoQue and all its trimmings, much to Manny's distaste. His protégé needed protecting from those mirror-gazing imbeciles, lest he become one permanently. But it was starting to seem like a losing battle as Hardyman had lately developed a stiff immunity to his nagging.

'So you finally bought them out?' said MannyCapra, coughing disapprovingly.

'Only way to get a decent smoke these days.'

'I see.' MannyCapra coughed again, returning to the brief, 'Let's try to find a way around this, shall we?'

'Okay.'

MannyCapra waved a hand and a batch of flow charts and comparative figures flashed up in front of them, the meaning of which he could process in a second. The head and shoulders of a flawless, high-cheeked young woman appeared among the data, her skin, eyes and hair changing length and colour in slow fades. The woman's bone structure thickened to male, held for a

few seconds and faded back to female again, each with a different context and ethnic pattern as the simulated helixes danced to order. Hardyman was still proud of this creation after its 25 years at the top of the VoQue Subscriber Network. It defined him, his masterpiece. It pissed his boss off.

'Kruger-Smits' popularity as Hail Vanity is still waning. Now that's a pity,' said MannyCapra. He could smell the V.P.'s disappointment from across the table.

'Oh come on, Manny. He was the best original character we'd found in years.'

'There's far too much past tense in that statement, old chum.'

But Hardyman was rolling again.

'Need I remind you, a real Merch and Ratings phenomenon. A Saturday Night Spectacular.'

MannyCapra got to his feet and clapped Hardyman gently on the shoulder.

'No son, you don't need to remind me.'

He prowled the crackling fireplace, giving it a good poke.

Hardyman took a heavy lungful of his Marlboro.

'By the way, where is he? I've been trying to contact him for a week, Manny. He's got a show coming up and his producer's getting edgy.'

MannyCapra squatted next to the fire, the agitated embers reflected in his ancient eyes.

'He's back at the Lennon Clinic in metamorph. Should be fully male again in three days, ready for the next season. Didn't you know?'

Hardyman grimaced again.

'Why does nobody ever consult me?'

'If we can get back to the agenda, Hardy. Shows are your area, not mine. Make it your business to know.'

A stray vein pulsed in Hardyman's forehead, just beneath his perfect teengreen quiff. MannyCapra knew Saul didn't like being corrected, not even by his one and only superior. This

rock n roll brat thing would have to stop.

On queue, Hardyman threw a pair of palms up.

'Well, it seems transaphrodites don't cut it any more. In marketing terms a genetic freak like Hail Vanity should have kept the kids coming to the fun palace for at least another year, but that just isn't happening. We've tried everything.'

*Then try everything harder.*

MannyCapra nodded and rattled some fingers on the mahogany surround as flames licked the hearth. The boardroom pulsed with the rhythm, growing longer and shorter like a throbbing blood vessel. Hardyman grabbed Smits' jaw, inspecting him-her for a moment before launching the head into a basketball hoop, which obediently dissolved. All the graphics disappeared, trashed.

'We should have had far more success, given our investment in the fellow.'

Hardyman flinched at the words of his boss, pausing for another lungful of smoke and a sip of coffee.

'I find it strange, Manny, I really do. How many acts that have ever been on the networks have been able to alter their bone structure, moult body hair and grow tits in seconds, eh? Suddenly it's not de rigueur to camp it up anymore. If only we could combine the popularity of the oldies with Vanity, or find someone new.'

'Everything gets old, Saul. Except for you. Breaking a new act is harder than ever.'

'I know, I know. We made that step together with Kruger though,' Hardyman's face dropped, then after a moment's thought it lit up again.

MannyCapra's grip tightened around the iron poker. He had an illogical urge to wrap it around Hardyman's head, just to see how it felt. His premonition: good at first, messy later. Hardyman was the face of the company to all those vampires in VoQue and it would be tough to replace him. But then, right

now it was tempting, because of the consequences as much as in spite of them. A bit of chaos might spice things up.

'We need a change, Saul. Before pirates like Scanlon start growing their ratings and others take his lead.'

A tall, dreadlocked African-American man appeared on the table behind a Fender Precision Bass and a pair of decks, licking out a dub beat. Hardyman swiped a petulant claw at the image and it vanished.

MannyCapra tapped the poker against the hearth, still with his back turned.

'I'm not going to say it again, son. Give me something and make it good.'

'Hang on then, boss. Just hang on. Let's work the problem.'

'Yes. Work it.'

If the blow was hard enough it might shatter his skull and hit brain matter in one go? That would fucking teach him.

'What was it I said before? About dead legends? Tragic legends?'

'Yes,' MannyCapra replaced his poker and returned to his chair, 'yes?'

'I take it you catch my drift, Manny.'

He clapped his V.P. on his shoulder. At last.

'You sure about this? Hail Vanity is your baby.'

Hardyman beamed and nodded. MannyCapra had performed his usual trick of making Hardyman think it was his own idea. Reliably gullible, at least that was the appearance that the boy liked to give his boss. MannyCapra knew it was just another form of sycophancy, just another one of their familiar little dances that had become rather too comfortable and stale. But they had got there again. Just. Tick. Phew.

'Alpha?' hummed the C.E.O. under his breath.

YES SIR? replied the deep, feminine, African-American voice of his Aural Secretary, the voice of the Hampstead Homestead. Hardyman lit a fresh smoke directly from his spent

one. MannyCapra wafted the air in disapproval.

But he still let him smoke.

'Get Chief Constable Moran down here straight away will you. I want to pick his brains about something.'

-

The Networks were dull enough as they were, but watching endless trailers for them on a flat screen did Deconstructed Man's mood no favours.

He flicked off the dashboard monitor and began to tap rhythmically against the steering wheel of his pristine, obsidian 1972 Dodge Sedan. Scotch mist pattered against the windows on this grey evening that followed a grey day. The famous British weather; dull, like the place, like the people.

He could read another strip. A small consolation was that England was a collector's dream for comic books and memorabilia; so much had survived the flames, unlike the Eastern Seaboard which had all but fucking slid into the Atlantic when the whole shithouse caved in a decade ago. Since he'd been working over here he'd doubled his rare collection, picked up the Dodge and very same mohair coat which, so the previous owner had claimed, was sported by James Dean in the *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*. Now there was a city, NY City. *The City*.

Being a cop in England had its compensations, though having to be called "Detective Inspector" as opposed to his NYPD rank of Lieutenant was following him around like a pain in the nuts. The fact that he had to drive the boss to and from his boyfriend's night after fucking night across the wastelands also grated with him. He had nothing against faggots and gender benders, but damn wasn't it just like they'd taken over everything and he sure didn't like working for them. He took a breath and switched the monitor onto the video com channel.

'Let's see what's keeping numbnuts so long then... whoooooa...'

He flicked the monitor off straight away. The Chief Constable was being molested in his bony ass by his celebrity pussy, Kruger-Smits. Boned and loving it. He remembered the network slogan *Hail Vanity, the Only Icon of Our Times*.

Natch. It was like a baby's arm holding an apple. How could that not cripple Moran? He'd never seen a bitch with a back that hairy, not in twenty years of the security game. His audio feed piped up with a filtered voice. It was HQ.

'Grayson come in.'

'What can I do for ya, Susan?'

'I really wish you'd get that car installed with some proper AV. The reception is shit. How do I know where you are if I can't see you?'

'That is exactly the point,' grunted the American.

'It is against procedure. Look at your contract.'

'No one touches the Dodge, sweet cheeks,' he hummed, 'That's in my contract.'

A hefty sigh on the other end.

'Is the Chief there?'

'Negative. Anything I can do? Like solve some crimes?' The fortysomething, drawn-looking woman on the monitor looked less than amused.

'Just tell him to report into Hampstead Homestead. Mr MannyCapra wants a word.'

'Mr who?'

'You know.'

'Oh yeah, sure. Cor blimey guvnor and all that,' said the American in his best mockney, 'I'll make sure he gets the message.'

'Well done, Grayson,' said Superintendent Pollard with a half-sneer. The monitor com clicked off. *Faggots, gender benders and fucking dykes*. This is what he had signed up for. Suppose.

Deconstructed Man pressed the buzzer for Moran's com, switching off the visuals. He had no intention of either going up



there himself or watching the activity on the monitor. He pressed it again and again, lighting a smoke.

'Urrrrgh... it'd better be good, lad,' said the Ulsterman on the other end, 'No, it's okay Lamby, no go back to bed. No, everything's okay babe, it's not your producer, hon. No ... no, it's for me. Just work...' Deconstructed Man cackled, 'You find something amusing there, son?'

'No sir. Just clearing my throat. Look, Pollard says someone called Manny wants you to come over to the Hampstead Homestead, make any sense?'

'Yeah...' said Moran with an air of resignation, 'Okay, fire up the motor, I'll be out in a minute.'

'Sir.'

'And Grayson?'

'Yes sir?'

'If I ever catch you spying on me again I'll toast your arse on brimstone. You understand there?'

Deconstructed Man raised an eyebrow. *What did he say? Brimstone? Fucking nut.*

'Perfectly sir.'

'Right, out in a minute.'

The com went dead.

Deconstructed Man switched on the ignition. He'd never been so spectacularly bored for such big perks. He was the kid getting fat on candy for successfully managing a shit at the moment and even though it was a cushy number, he wanted to do some real work, some po-lice work. Being away from the action for too long meant he could lose his edge. The situation had to change, comic books or not.

Patience? Fuck patience.

Action.

### 3

#### SOSAMANTHA'S

Brontay glanced around the place, hoping they'd changed *something*.

Nope.

It had been the same since she'd first visited five years ago. It had all the ambience of a slaughterhouse, but that never bothered the patrons. Better places than this had long shut down, but that was because they'd never catered for the lowest common denominator; the singles' night. Few regulars would bother looking at the tasteless old neon sign above the entrance featuring a cock with multi-coloured veins, a pair of huge, impossibly pert breasts and the catchy little slogan; *Fancy a bit of Real then... DO YOU?*

SoSamantha's had been built into the basement of a docklands warehouse seventy years past, way back when before the Great New Order. They'd kept the bars on the windows to retain that authentic Oldy Worldy feel and the same cheap fittings in place for most of that time. Any theme had long since faded into the cracked plasterwork, but the fact

that they didn't make much of an effort added to the authenticity. Drinks could be bought and selective true information such as DNA profile, employment history and sexual history could be obtained by any paying, iris-carrying customer. It usually caused more trouble than it was worth, but offering a bona fide real experience was one of the few things that could still prise a niche group of single, sub-management employees away from the artificial world of the dome and into *SoSamantha's World Famous Wine Bar and Brasserie*. That group was dwindling by the hour.

'Look, what I'm trying to say is...'

'That you'd rather stay at home and flick your bean, or get your magic dome to do it for you. Same difference, babe. You know why we come here and it's high time you got some. Tonight's the night. Can't you feel it?'

*But I want love. I want marriage. Children maybe. Don't you? Doesn't anyone? Yearn, yearn, yearn. Is there something wrong with me just to want these things?*

'Well no. I can't feel it, Joe.'

Brontay looked around the tired old place. This was all about flirting and fucking. Romance was available on the networks, smoother, smarter, safer and better. Just not real.

*No. They don't. Want.*

Elkin had this annoying habit, especially after a couple of drinks, of calling everyone "babe" and "darling" like he was grandfather fucking time himself. His semi-legal magnolia teeth were bright enough to bring down a satellite. He reminded Brontay of the venue itself; a dirty old corner of delusion, a cobweb missed by the duster of modernity. Then Brontay cursed herself; was she so much better than him? Why was she here?

'But I know where your coming from, Lexie. I've got your number.'

'Enlighten me,' muttered Brontay in between sips of synthetic

scotch.

'Melodrama.'

'Uh?'

'Melodrama! You make everyone, including yourself, think that you are a total wash out with women, just to get attention.'

Brontay was already regretting this drink. She knew exactly where it was leading. She hated Elkin, not just because he was a fat, pygmy ringpiece, but also because, when the subject of Alexandra Brontay the woman came up, he was always right.

'But, and it's a big but, matey, girls like to pick and choose nowadays. And let me tell you, they don't usually pick sulky pussies like you to take home with them for their allotted 12 hours.'

12 hours. Maximum allowed time for a sexual encounter between two employees. Everyone was an employee. 12 hours for something real to happen. Then gone. Ding. Next. Rules is company rules, Company Rules are the only rules.

'Thanks for that reminder, Joe.'

'Lexie B, mate... come on,' Elkin was now boxing her midriff, 'I'm only being constructive! Devil's advocate, eh? Look, and I have to be honest. That line, any line, will work with your fantasy tarts but the way you're going, you'll never get your hands on a real live woman. This is what you want, isn't it?'

Elkin stopped as he espied an incredible redhead standing by the bar. Alone, in a tight, sparkling, serpentine crimson dress. What was a creature like that doing in a place like this? Had *SoSamantha's* bitten the bullet and installed some holotech?

Naw.

Had Hanslett company rules changed without them knowing?

The bastard always managed to draw Brontay into his lecherous games, using her as bait until he scored. For all her perceived faults, she knew she was prettier than him by a stretch, but she just couldn't find a way to break the ice with

anyone, not that there was a whole lot of choice in here. She had a feeling that an evening of being the foil for his piss poor chat-up lines had just begun. Throw enough shit at a wall, some sticks. Elkin didn't really care whether he was the thrower or the shit.

'Now that... that is a walking dream.'

'Yeah.'

Elkin was right. But so what? Again, why bother, why even look at her?

'Women like that only drink in the VoQue bars up town, bars we never see or hear about and would never get into if we did. Rumour has it that they come to this side of London to pick up their slaves for their sex parties.'

'Oh please. Don't kid yourself. You know I think I should just go home. I've had enough of this, mate. Sorry.'

Brontay started to gather herself but Elkin pushed her back into her seat without taking his eyes from the prize.

'No, it's true. Do you know about Caligula? That's a party theme. Dirty fuckers. I want in. Do you want in? I want in.'

Elkin waggled the clit ring in his tongue. He was working up a head of steam without even speaking to the woman. The train crash was pending. Brontay gathered her coat.

'Joe. Please. I can't do this any more. I'm just not cut out for real people.'

Elkin snatched the coat and tossed it back on the seat. He puckered his cheap lip implants.

'Listen, Popbitch, do a bit of amateur psychology or better still take some tips from the master. *She* is obviously a bored Entertainments Sec, fed up with her boss trying to get her to run up his flagpole for him. Whereas I am a lowly insurance man.'

'And?'

Elkin rolled his eyes as if the answer was obvious.

'And women like that love to fuck beneath their station.' He

massaged Brontay's cheeks in his grubby palms, 'Watch and learn, Sassenfass. Don't you be going nowhere though. I may need you yet.'

Elkin kissed Brontay on the lips for luck, slapped her chops and removed the headset from the ancient monitor.

'Darlin'! Ow yer doin'?'

Across the room, a flurry of data on Elkin appeared, revealing stats on his amazing cognitive performance and high status as an accounts manager, all crudely hacked and false. The woman at the bar nearly dropped her drink when she saw who was trying to call her. He opened another button on his shirt, revealing more turkey gizzard for his quarry to admire.

'Look, baby, I was wondering if I could help you with something. The ice in your drink looks a little hard. If you like I could help you melt it. Between our hot, sweaty bods. Come on, we've only got twelve hours. Time to get on it.'

*Bods? Get on it?*

Brontay died inside. The lack of opportunities for real social interaction was no excuse for an arse like Elkin. Feeling the floor swallow her up, she promised not to be his stooge this time or ever again, impossible as it might be to go and find sport elsewhere. Elkin had done this enough, using her as bait to get casual sex with someone just as drunk and as ugly as he was himself. And this lady was clearly neither drunk or a million miles within ugly. This was no way to spend a Friday evening, watching disaster after disaster.

The Scarlet Woman viewed the flat monitor set into the bar.

'Wait for it,' said Elkin, clutching the headset tightly.

'I'm waiting.'

The bloated salesman was sitting not twenty yards behind her with a bright red cursor pointing down on him as he made his

bug-eyed lechery known. Her skin was a cherubic porcelain white on a taut, athletic but voluptuous musculature. She wore a sequined eyepatch, a true sign of High VoQue. Her silken auburn locks caressed her bare shoulders as if every strand had been programmed to flow in sync with her effortless energy.

The eyepatch was a cover for a data monitor like nothing the pond life in this place had ever seen or even knew existed. Highly illegal and able to match facial recognition to the stolen database of DNA records for the entire metropolitan area. A bit garish, but it did the job.

'Hmm...' the woman read though Elkin's inventory as he threw shapes at her on the monitor, 'aged thirty-five years, much too old, history of renal trouble, stomach ulcers, poor diet, ickle-wickle penis, certain near future cardio trouble and below average quality cognitive activity and peptide levels. Aren't you just the poster boy for compulsory sterilisation, Mister... El-kin.'

In a dump like this she was conspicuous, but their security protocols were lame and she didn't have time to hang around.

'No, no, no. You won't do at all. I need untainted meat.'

She ran her tongue along her teeth and noticed the Josephine Bloggs standing behind Elkin. Coy looking, plain bird with bad dress sense.

Brontay's data appeared in full glory.

'What about your gawky friend though, Mister? Stand back a little now... yeah that's it. Oh. Minor back trouble, prolapsed disk, easily fixed. Hmm... twenty eight, that's okay, likes a drink but quite a clean bill of health. Far above average quality neural activity, though she probably doesn't know it I would hazard, Sexy Baby.'

The vamp slowly bit her bottom lip. This was a risk. She needed more time to vet the subject. How could she work under these conditions?

'Because,' she muttered to herself, 'we're shit out of options.'

Yanno.'

She picked up the headset, turning to wave at the mark. If you want a job doing you've got to do it yourself.

'She waved at me,' said a dumbstruck Brontay.

'Don't be so ridiculous. It was me, blockhead... hi!' Elkin waved back.

'Joseph, isn't it?' said the woman through the com.

'Call me Joe.'

'Here's a little tip for you. Joe.'

'Whoa, what a tiger, I think I'm in love with you.'

'A face-job is affordable, even on your shitty little wage. Remember that the next time you go whoring machine parts, okay?'

Elkin went a shade of deep purple for a moment.

'Yeah, yeah. Yeah, oh really? Mmm, sounds good... Mmm...yeah baby...'

'I know all about you, shrimp dick. With a cock as small as yours you should go home now. For starters, get yourself a new set of genitals and invest in a more efficient cerebral cortex, if you want my advice, which you clearly don't but hey-ho. There is no excuse in this day and age. You know if I'm being, like, super candid, I don't think you're cut out for the real world, son.'

'Uh?'

Elkin now looked like a trussed-up beetroot.

'Now, if you'd be so kind as to let me speak to Miss Brontay please.'

'What?'

'Yes, your neutral friend behind you? And don't give me any static, else I'll let the whole bar know about your ickle wickle prawn. Hop to it, lad.'

The colour in Elkin's face ran from purple to white. The most beautiful person to have ever graced SoSamantha's singles bar

wanted to speak to Alexandra fucking Brontay. He handed the com across to her, all the wind having left his body.

'For me?'

'Take it,' said Elkin, choking on his own bile.

Brontay grasped the headset like it was Aladdin's Lamp.

'Huh... hullo?'

'Miss Brontay. Come here please. Now. I want to take a look at you.'

It was a command rather than a request, but the words were as hypnotic as her body movements. Brontay shuffled past Elkin towards the dream that stood waiting for her by the bar, only to feel a hand grab the back of her collar.

'Whoa, whoa, whoa. Time out, Lexie,' grunted Elkin, making a 'T' sign with his hands.

'What?'

'Listen, think about this.'

'What d'you mean think about this? I've thought, I'm going. Seeya.'

Elkin yanked on her collar again.

'With all due respect, she wants to take you for a ride, babe. Let's not jump the gun. At first I thought, is it a meat/fish thing? But no. You know me and I'm good at this shit.'

He gripped Brontay's face like a softball in a mitt.

'Trust me, I know a ballbreaker when I smell one and she fucking reeks. Come on now, what is she going to see in you? I'm just getting your back that's all. That bitch has some sort of angle, Baby Cakes. I'm not as stupid as you look.'

Brontay hammered a finger into Elkin's chest. She'd had enough.

'Stop... calling... me... those... fucking... names...'

'What?'

'Baby cakes... Sassenfras... and the rest of them. You horrible, jealous little man.'

Elkin emitted a pathetic grin, desperate to hang on to his last

real friend on the planet before she too left him behind. Like all the others had done.

It all made sense now to Brontay. She brushed past her protesting friend, happy to believe her ship had finally come in.

'Yeah alright, you do your worst. Don't say I didn't warn you. Cunt,' he muttered, then sniffed and looked round to see if anyone had noticed the incident. His smug half-grin slowly oozed back onto his face as he glanced around for pastures new; a small, gothic girl in the next booth, munching away at some bar snacks. She was alone and wore a *12 and Counting* t-shirt. Bait. He tapped the com.

'Hiya.'

The Scarlet Woman was even more incredible close-up; inhumanly beautiful, impossibly flawless. Her hazel eyes knew the quickest way to Brontay's soul. For a fraction of a second, the woman's pupils narrowed to slits and her irises kissed out a deep cyan before settling back. That was an impressive trick. What else did she have?

'So sorry to drag you away from your entertaining friend but you looked bored. Would you like another drink?'

The woman stroked her arm. Brontay's gut still told her this couldn't be right, but her drumming heart held the casting vote. She was aching for this woman to fuck her and couldn't stop thinking about the end point. 12 hours of heaven? This could be the making of her.

'Well, er...whisky. I'll have a whisky please. Syntho Scotch.'

The vamp scanned the bar.

'Syntho? Not a libation I'm familiar with.'

She pointed at a double McCallan and glass of Cristal, dispensed to the table via a conveyor belt. Brontay snapped out of it. That was a year's wages in a single measure. What did she want?

'I'm sorry lady, but I can't afford that.'

The vamp held a finger to her lips.  
'Don't be silly. It's the least I can do for you. My treat.'  
What did she want? She gently rubbed her breasts against Brontay. The drinks arrived and they clinked glasses.  
The liquid tasted nothing like Syntho.  
'That's amazing.'  
'Oh Miss Brontay, you've just never tried the real thing, have you?'  
A short, devastating silence followed. She wouldn't stop staring at Brontay.  
'Er. I... look... what's your name?'  
The vamp leaned into her ear, making sure to breathe into her neck.  
'What's in a name?'  
'Nuh..no, er...what's... oh...'  
'Name's aren't important, Alexandra. Character, substance are what matter. Non-existent in this transient world yet I know you possess them. You yearn for something different. Something new. Something lasting. Something, yes, real. Be careful what you wish for.'  
She couldn't have been older than twenty-three, yet she sounded like a character from an old movie, half-singing her words. Was this Elkin's idea of a joke? Not likely. She was far too real for cheap holotech and this shithole would never be able to afford such hardware.  
'Yeah,' said Brontay, all of a sudden a bit woozy and glassy-eyed.  
Drawing her body firmly next to Brontay, she certainly didn't feel like anyone's grandmother. What was in that drink?  
'Look.'  
*Shit, panic. No don't panic. Please don't panic, Alexandra. Do not screw this up.*  
'Look, if you're one of those people,' Brontay drawled, finally aware that there was indeed something wrong with this picture,

but it was too late to do anything about it.  
*Panic...*  
'One of what people, Alex?'  
*Panic... Virgin panic...*  
Her smile rescinded, she backed away slightly.  
'Yuh-you know, the erm ... the Voquists? Well, I'm a pretty broad minded girl 'n' all but... well I don't go in for that kind of thing ...'  
'What... kind of thing?'  
'Ur ... you know. Sex slavers.'  
Her eyes narrowed.  
Shit, that's ripped it. Brontay bit her fist.  
'Ha! Hahaha! You're a funny lady, Alexandra. Yes you are. Funnier than the sum of your data. I am beginning to quite like you.'  
She wouldn't stop looking into Brontay's eyes now, her lovely hypnotic stare. Her face straightened. She brushed her mouth sensuously back against the ear lobe of her prey.  
'No. I'm not interested in slavery,' she said.  
'Oh. Oh that's good then.'  
'Maybe you don't know this because you hang around with shrimp dicks, but you seem like such a sweet type, for a moderner. Fighting their insipid conditioning and I like that too. I'm sorry I have to do this, but you're just the person I've been looking for. Your DNA profile is perfect for our requirements. Well, adequate at least, which is as close as we are going to get.'  
'I've got no problem with that,' said Brontay idiotically. She was starting to float, still in charge of her mind but hovering light, so light. What was this? A new drug? A lysergic? She wanted to question this situation but she felt *so* good.  
'What do you mean by DNA? And what did you say your name was?'  
'You just come here, moonbeam,' she purred, beaming at her

prey.

Brontay couldn't help but chuckle.

The vamp ran her hand over her thigh, making for her right buttock. Brontay's whole body began to flip over in a deep and unstoppable orgasm, uterus-dipping ecstasy like she had never felt.

'You know, I came here tonight for a very special reason, Alexandra. Something you'd never fathom in that tiny, closeted, spoon-fed world of yours. Poor baby. Only right that you should feel a little bit of pleasure before we...'

Their lips almost touched. Brontay couldn't hold back, spraying her knickers. The vamp squeezed her buttock so tightly it began to hurt, a dull pain which spread across her body before numbness set in. Brontay espied Elkin putting the moves on some girl across the bar, but she couldn't signal him.

'Problem is, I don't normally date anyone a tenth my age.'

Everything slowed down a further level for Brontay, although she felt perfectly balanced on her feet, just unable to run, like someone else had control over her legs. Two grey figures suddenly appeared either side of her, huge blurry ghosts.

'Try not to attract too much attention this time, boys,' said Katia Kutz.

Brontay could only make out a few deep grunts before passing out.

'See you on the other side, Alexandra.'

The nano agents in the drug ensured that Alexandra Brontay was somewhere near the Moon as she left the bar and in a stabilised coma by the time that they'd bundled her into the boot of the old BMW for the ride to Never-Never land. Boxed fresh, ready for controlled conditions.

Katia Kutz removed the eyepatch as she left the bar, tossing it as it self-emolliated instantly. She paused at the rear passenger

door of the car. The blasted heath that was East London's docklands cut a skyline of jagged ruins across the purple night, stray signatures of hard light dancing up into the atmosphere from beneath the ground like St Elmo's Fire, as far as the eye could see in all directions. Searchlights strafed around the Eiffel Tower as the silhouettes of Montmartre and the Seven Hills of Rome converged to no-one's delight. This was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century and how she hated this city of the undead; the centre of the world that was once her home. The last time she was here, she'd left town in a hurry. This time was no different, with the exception that there was no one chasing her now. Yet.

She climbed in the BMW and it started away quickly from SoSamantha's with a wheel spin.

Simple part over.

### THE EYE TEST

MannyCapra held the compression case aloft. The graphene compound jar contained what looked like a pair of fat whelks pickled in vinegar.

'Very nice job, Doc,' he said, swilling the case from side to side. It was the perfect birthday present for Hardyman. The lad would be beside himself with happiness.

'Sir, if you don't mind,' said Clinician Luis Castenada, a lanky and far too serious Physician.

Castenada reached over and took the case from MannyCapra's hands. Eyeballs were tricky objects to grow and these were the highest order nanotech variety. He didn't want some clumsy bastard dropping his R&D all over the linoleum, whoever he was in the management. Castenada replaced the container in the fridge.

'So, how long have you been with The Lennon, ah, Luis?'

'Three years,' said Bart Stone, short and selectively truculent Head Clinician at The Lennon Clinic, 'and quite spectacular those three years have been, have they not?'

'Indeed,' said Castenada.

'I'm glad to hear it,' said MannyCapra, keeping the trace of smile flowing across his tanned face.

'We've come a long way in that time,' said Stone, 'You know, Luis, Mr MannyCapra is our oldest customer and, might I add, a generous benefactor of The Lennon Clinic.'

MannyCapra clapped his hand on Stone's shoulder.

'You can take your tongue out of my arse now, Bart. Well, you're doing a fine job, Luis, a fine job.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Please. Manny.' MannyCapra looked at his watch and clapped his hands together.

'Well, gentlemen, I thank you for your hospitality but I regret that I'm late for another appointment.'

He clapped Castenada on the shoulder.

'Thank you, sir.'

MannyCapra smiled.

'Mr Stone has told me good things about you. I hope our paths cross again?'

'We can accommodate you any time you like,' replied Castenada.

'I'll take you up on that offer,' said MannyCapra, already on his way out of the lab.

The Lennon Infirmary was a behemoth of a building. It was a huge hemisphere set bunker style one hundred feet into the country fields of West Hampstead smack in the middle of an impact site, like a supersized half-buried turtle egg. More nouvelle art musée than casualty ward, the essence of VoQue was dripping from every pore, worn on every tunic, styled in every haircut; a grand and ornate monument to the fickle and the vain. Cyan, Magenta and Yellow hard light flared everywhere among the clean, Neo Deco lines. Even the people seemed to become part of this building after a while. Moving



images danced along the walls depicting perfect, healthy tailor's dummies enjoying their wonderful, sterile lives. Graphics flashed in three dimensions, touting their trademark *All thanks to The Lennon*. Glass cabinets along the corridors displayed quaint relics from the dark ages of open surgery; clamps, needles, ECG monitors, saws and scalpels. A museum and a clinic rolled into one, by design.

MannyCapra ran his fingers over the edges of the cabinets as he sashayed along the wide aisle and into the splendid new marble concourse and reception area, which was paid for by the infinitely deep pockets of VoQue and was about the size of two football pitches. This place was more like a fucking private members' club than a hospital. That was all about to change. He glanced at his watch. He could see the enormous marble facade in the distance where McBride was waiting for him.

No one recognised him as he strode across the concourse, his Müller shoes clacking and clicking against the marble. His beige Albertini suit was well cut and rare enough to show VoQue but not extraordinary in these surroundings. MannyCapra only liked to be seen by the few, not the many, which was one of his core commandments. That and having control of the best tech in the whole wide world.

The walls had started to glow a pale magenta and there were signs of frantic activity in the lobby. Magenta had overtaken red as the emergency colour, though a rumour persisted that red was making a comeback. MannyCapra spoke to the hologramatic Hardyman that had just started walking with him.

'Right on queue, Hardy. We have Code Magenta.'

Hardyman chuckled darkly, bee still lodged in his bonnet. MannyCapra paused by a coffee dispenser.

'Latte macchiato. I take it we have our Valentino?'

'Oh yes we do, Manny.'

'Good show then.'

'Moran's new fellow blew his head clean off. Very professional. As you can imagine though, Apsley's far from happy about it.'

'He took one for the team. He'll get over it.'

'I took one too.'

'What?'

MannyCapra stopped in his tracks, a cool frown taking over his eyes.

'I took one for the team too. Should I get over it?'

'You want a medal, son?'

Hardyman looked like he was about to stamp his feet.

'I've got something for your birthday. You'll love it.'

Hardyman one finger saluted MannyCapra and disappeared. The C.E.O. shrugged.

Emotionless, the rock still chauffeur McBride stood waiting in position while the first casualties began rolling into the lobby. It was like someone had let rip with a Gatling gun at a fashion show, which wasn't a million miles from the truth. Like a gushing geyser, the floor of the Clinic was immediately awash with gored VoQue icons and designers squealing like fucked pigs, so much so that there weren't even enough stretchers to go around. The trauma unit, who were still there and hardened as a team from the old days of bombings and riots, hadn't seen anything like this since those bad old days.

'Right, time to go, methinks.'

'Sir,' said McBride.

The two headed for the surface lifts.

'Manny!'

MannyCapra ignored the croaky wail coming from the mêlée. He nodded at a passing nurse.

'MannyCapra, is that you?'

'Shit.'

MannyCapra had to acknowledge the figure now he was shouting his name all over the place. It was that slaving little

cotton pimp Müller, and he'd brought his faghag Di Firenza along for the ride. Müller's suit, an Albertini just like his own, was covered in brain matter and crimson fluid, his face white as boiled shit.

'Oh E-man-you-el I am sooo glad it's yooooou...'

'Jesus, Sebastian! What happened?'

The two men embraced, indulging the air-kissing etiquette of VoQue in spite of the situation. MannyCapra caught some sloppy brains on his jacket.

'Valentina, are you okay?'

He kissed her on both cheeks.

'It's him I'm worried about, darling. He was right next to Kruger when it happened.'

'It was sooo beautiful Manny, just... just like Woodstock again. Über Woodstock.'

*What would you know about Woodstock? Fucking 23<sup>rd</sup> Century pond life.*

Müller began sobbing, clinging on to MannyCapra like a limpet.

'Th-then the terrorists... th-the mob came... I saw it... gunshots, mace bombs... The police couldn't do anything about it...'

'Sssch... I know, I know,' he held Müller to his chest like a baby. Yeah, MannyCapra knew alright.

'It was lunacy... Über Armageddon...'

*'I know, I know ...' No no, nothing much like Armageddon you fake cunt. More like a touch of old school Agitprop. Great for keeping the sheeple entertained, oh so difficult for their little brains to fathom.*

MannyCapra noticed Stone marching past with an orderly and a casualty on a stretcher. They must have been hard-pushed this afternoon if the top brass was getting involved. He snapped his fingers.

'Sir...' said Stone, rushing over like he'd received an electric shock.

'Look, get this man a stretcher will you? And find him a bed, pronto!'

Müller only had a few scratches on him and was slightly concussed, but anything to get the monkey off his back.

'No problem, sir. Reynolds! Bring that stretcher over here will you?'

'But this man is critical, Clinician Stone, he could die,' mewed the underling.

'Bring me that fucking stretcher or you are fired!' barked Stone.

Reynolds shrugged and tipped the unconscious patient off the stretcher, lying him down on the cold floor for someone else to bother with.

'One stretcher.' Reynolds shook his head.

'Take special care of him for me, eh?' said MannyCapra. Reynolds looked like he'd been stung as he was addressed directly.

'Absolutely, sir. He'll get the very best attention,' pumped Stone.

MannyCapra frisked his cuffs. He'd seen enough of this pantomime.

'Good. Listen folks, I think I just spotted Giancarlo coming in, so I'll have to go,' he lied, 'Now you will be alright?'

Di Firenza kissed him firmly on the cheek, tears rolling down her face.

'Thank you Manny, thank you.'

MannyCapra's plastic extension of a smile beamed at them as they disappeared into the wards before sliding off his chin like horse dung.

'Get my Levis out of the trunk will you?' said MannyCapra as they approached the Adler Limo. He wiped away at the human tissue on his lapel. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Victims shot into the car port in vacuum tubes as McBride pulled open the rear door for him.

'Sir.'

'And give Alpha a memo from me: I must stay away from hospitals when I've just organised a massacre. At the risk of sounding *Über* fucking something or other.'

'Yes sir.'

MannyCapra climbed into the cavernous passenger area which had its own mini-dome fitted into the roof.

'Right, the Hyde Favelas via Bond Street, please McBride. You may need to step on it a little.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Oh yeah, and stick the news on for me will you? There's a good egg.'

'Sir.'

A map of London honing into St James' Park, becoming a 3-D photoreal environment, accompanied by a garish migraine of headline graphics for I.A. Network Evening News, accompanied by a booming female voiceover:

*THE WORLD IS IN MOURNING THIS EVENING. HAIL VANITY, the Only Icon of Our Times, THE GREATEST MEDIA PERSONALITY THIS CENTURY, KILLED NEEDLESSLY BY AN ASSASSIN'S BULLET AT HIS OWN CIVIL RIGHTS PROTEST. HE DIED ALONGSIDE 87 OTHER CAMPAIGNERS, MANY OF THEM HIS CREATIVE COLLABORATORS IN THE WORLD OF HIGH VOQUE AND NETWORK ENTERTAINMENT. 125 LIE INJURED IN CLINIC. FARRUKH FAZAL REPORTS AS LONDON COMES TO GRIPS WITH A TRAGEDY:*

Fazal, a short, thin, bug-eyed reporter in a sharp Albertini suit with oversized teeth, paced around the site, his hologramatic image wobbling as raving revellers in Hail Vanity cosplay and merchandise danced through him.

'A CARNIVAL BEFORE THE CARNAGE. THAT WAS THE SCENE IN KENSINGTON TODAY AS THE GREAT HAIL VANITY STOOD ARM IN ARM WITH HIS FRIENDS IN

*PEACEFUL PROTEST AGAINST ANTI-VOGUIST TERROR. LATER HE WOULD PAY FOR IT WITH HIS LIFE. The Only Icon of Our Times.'*

Hail Vanity was almost a living caricature, except the thousands of adoring fans screaming for him as he addressed the rally in St James' Park would tear any critic limb from limb for suggesting such, their passion electric and violent. His body was divided in two horizontal halves, one chiselled black male, one voluptuous female white siren, a breathing human collage of flesh and colour, shapeshifting in the moment. The hologramatic Fazal stood next to Vanity on the platform as the voice of a generation echoed across the green parkland and into every ear.

'Chemical bombs shall not defeat us. Smart guns shall not defeat us. The sinners from the shanties can kill us, but we will never surrender to the terror of the anti-fashionista brigade. We shall overcome!'

A roar from the throng. A woman below dressed in her best imitation costume-homage to Vanity screamed and lifted a pistol to her head, unable to contain the perfect moment of getting so close to her idol. She screamed and sucked on her inhaler, her eyes filling up a deep lysergic black, before she pulled the trigger, spattering her brains over her fellow fans. A spontaneous round of applause rippled around the throng.

Hail Vanity blew the fresh corpse a kiss.

'For me? Oh what a wonderful tribute my darling. Thank you. It really is an honour.'

*'SOME 10000 PEOPLE EMBRACED THEIR HERO WITH RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE AS HE CLOSED HIS SPEECH. SUDDENLY, SHOTS RANG OUT FROM BEHIND THE PAVILION PLATFORM.'*

A section of the crowd exploded in a mess of blood, bone and haute couture. Their neighbours clapped at the spectacle.

'Oh really? That's too much, too much! Thanks to you all but

please do wait until I finish my speech my darlings. No more tributes for now, please.' A retinue of VoQue stars, including Müller and Di Firenza, applauded. What *would* these crazy fans not do for their idol?

A sniper's bullet slammed into Hail Vanity's forehead. The action paused and Fazal was joined by Apsley Moran, dressed head to toe in mourning black. Moran checked out the back of Kruger's head as a bullet stopped in mid-flight pushed out some crimson and magnolia brain, blood and bone goo suspended in a plume. He shook his head. *That's some cracking marksmanship right there, have to hand it to the boy Suarez.*

Fazal continued the commentary like it was Monday Night Football.

*'AS THIS PIECE OF AMATEUR FOOTAGE SHOWS, TOXIC MACE GAS, THE TRADEMARK OF THE HYDE FAVELAS ANTI-VOQUE CAMPAIGN, OMINOUSLY BEGINS TO FILL THE AIR. BLINDED VICTIMS FLAILED, VAINLY TRYING TO FIND COVER. SOME MADE IT, SOME WERE MERCIFULLY CUT DOWN BY THE ASSAULT WEAPONS OF THE AVL.'*

The area surrounding the two analysts transformed from the platform into the parkland, right amongst the fleeing fans as they dodged exploding ordinance. The action became animated again as the two analysts walked through the chaos like it was live gameplay.

*'WITH ME NOW IS CHIEF CONSTABLE OF THE METROPOLITAN POLICE, APSLEY MORAN, WHO WAS HIMSELF AT THE SCENE OF THIS DISASTER.*

*CHIEF CONSTABLE, CAN YOU CONFIRM WHO DID THIS?*

'I can, Farrukh. It appears that the agitators were members of the paramilitary branch of the Anti-VoQue League, an organisation based in the Favelas ghetto of London's Hyde Park and similar districts of Paris, Berlin, Madrid and Prague.'

*'AND THEY MINGLED WITH THE PEACE PROTESTORS, I*

*UNDERSTAND?'*

Wearing a Hail Vanity t-shirt, Deconstructed Man casually packed away his smart rifle as fans ran amok around him, hidden in plain sight. He pulled on a Brando jacket and lit a cigarette.

'Morons better not hit me.'

Moran and Fazal strolled past Deconstructed Man as if he wasn't there, which he *wasn't*, of course. A small bunch of fans emerged from the smoke, dazed and sporting flesh wounds. MannyCapra walked with them and then through them, joining the two presenters on their little ramble.

'We believe so, yes. This rally went ahead against the advice of the London State Council and the Metropolitan Police. We knew it to be a security nightmare.'

*'SO THERE WASN'T ANYTHING YOU COULD DO TO COUNTERACT THE ASSAULT?'*

'Listen China, there was no way our boys could get a shot in without taking innocent casualties. May I add that this was a brutal act of cowardice by a vicious brigade of Extremist thugs. I will personally lead the investigation to bring these people to swift and severe justice, mark my words. They'll hang for this.'

*'WE UNDERSTAND THAT HAIL VANITY WAS A PERSONAL FRIEND OF YOURS, CHIEF CONSTABLE?'*

'Hail Vanity was everybody's personal friend, Farrukh. That was the point.'

*'LITTLE MORE CAN BE SAID ON THIS DREADFUL DAY THAN THE FORTHRIGHT REMARKS OF CHIEF CONSTABLE MORAN. THIS IS FARRUKH FAZAL REPORTING FOR I.A. NETWORK EVENING NEWS.'*

Then more titles with the jingle: *I.A. NETWORK NEWS, BE INSIDE THE NEWS.*

'Off,' grunted MannyCapra. Everything in the park disintegrated around him, leaving him seated in the interior of the Adler. He glanced through the window, the early evening

Carroll Grabham

sun dropped among the ruins of surface London as his ride glided along. Ambulances screamed past. He massaged his temple, rubbed the glass with his palm and hummed.

Same ol', same ol'.

## 5

### THE HYDE FAVELAS

MannyCapra was one of the few surface dwellers left in London who could remember the days of the bustling hordes and bumper-to-bumper gridlock; to the point that some stretches of road were still clogged up even at midnight. Hundreds of nationalities, anonymous in that great city, all following their impossible dreams. The good, the bad and the indifferent all competing, chasing, arguing, working, loving, living and dying for London. That grand old lady with ten million faces. What happened to her?

She became this ghost. It was regrettable and none of this was his fault. Well, not all of it.

The Adler pulled over to side of the cracked tarmac by a Supply Train Depot, having just passed through what used to be the busiest urban intersection in the land. Now there was nothing to Oxford Circus but road, ruins, loose brick and long grass. The naked eye could see the Company Complexes and Canary Wharf to the East, the Hampstead Clinics and Regents Lake to the North and Hyde Favelas to the South, with next to

nothing in between. Someone had torn the heart from London and transplanted it with the cold, functional mechanics of subterranean life. The entire city had been turned upside down in a storm of chaotic reorganisation called The Great New Order three decades previously, and the man responsible for it all, though he would flatly deny such an accusation, was observing his reflection in the window of his reconditioned stretch 1936 Adler. The window glided down as a shadow appeared.

'What took you so long?'

'Sorry, Manny. You can't rely on that underground you know. Every bit the teenager.'

'You know, that's the oldest excuse in London. Come on, old fellow, it's starting to rain. Get inside,' said MannyCapra with a wry grin to Saul Hardyman.

'Bayswater Road or Park Lane, sir?' asked McBride.

'Park Lane please.'

The Adler hung a left at the Chipped Arch down what used to be called Park Lane but was now no more than a trunk road used by Police vehicles. Here the magnificent monstrosity of the Hyde Favelas could be seen from the outside. An electrified thirty-metre high perimeter wall skirted the edge of East Park, formerly Hyde Park itself, with huge minaret-style surveillance towers at 500 metre intervals. Each tower accompanied a set of gates, with a checkpoint and the main gates (always open except in emergencies) situated at Chipped Arch, now a mile behind them to the north-east. At this point a motorcade joined the Adler as it turned right and headed up Knightsbridge towards Kensington Gore and the infamous West Park.

The Favelas was the living embodiment of the one problem that International Activities could never properly control. It was a self-contained camp for all the undesirables, most of whom were not there through crime but because their lifestyles didn't

tally with that of the majority; the single consumer that lived out East within their crime-free subterranean apartment blocks.

They got fed, they got the basics, and they had to fight over them, constantly.

What happened inside these walls didn't have an effect on what happened in the rest of the city and as long as it stayed that way there was no need to rock the boat. MannyCapra was out here for pleasure, not business, and his methods of leisure were as precise, demanding and extreme as his business acumen.

The Adler glided around the Royal Albert Hall, which had been set within the Favelas compound, swinging back onto Kensington Gore or "Der Junksterbahn" as it was affectionately known to locals. The motor car sashayed lightly as a spectre towards its destination, which was beyond the giant gates that marked the back of West Park and the end of the Hyde Favelas. A large lawn greeted them, a nomansland of sorts between the perimeter wall and the shanties that lay beyond a thin fence with another 50,000 volts running through it for good measure. The fence penned in the area in a straight line up to the centrepiece of the whole park, Kensington Palace itself.

The gates to the palace themselves were spectacular but deadly. Rumours had been circulated that beyond the poisoned and electrified iron was a massive clearing house for the scum of the Favelas; genetic mutants, junkies, freaks, axe murderers; a convenient myth, a brick bogeyman to scare the beautifully ignorant general public. What really went on in there, again, would be of no concern to Messrs MannyCapra and Hardyman until the extremely unlikely event that it needed their personal attention.

McBride backed the car onto the grass verge and pressed a panel in the dashboard. The vehicle quivered for an instant as a huge pressure valve beneath the car released itself with an efficient hiss. As they began to raise above the turf,

beyond the gates of Kensington Palace, a few souls stirred.

*They're lucky they were given this option. A cull would have solved the problem long term, but that was no fun. This is the least he could expect in return.*

The platform stopped at about 60 metres, high enough to give a magnificent view of London. A steady, cold drizzle had now begun to fall on the shanties below. To the East Side of the park, many enclosures had relatively sophisticated overground architecture, since they had regular small allocations of building materials and an old fusion reactor to fulfil a limited, sporadic power supply. West Park was very much the poorer and wilder relation of the two favelas; a shanty town in every sense and more, built from felled trees, rubber, plastic and scrap metal. Half a million bonfires stretching northwards as far as Bayswater and Paddington began to peter out as the rain started to drive in hard, acidic pellets.

As the motorcade drew back beyond the perimeter wall, MannyCapra could almost hear them cursing their gods. It was about to get even worse for some unlucky Favelians.

'Raise the dome, McBride,' said MannyCapra.

He looked across at Hardyman, who always preferred to wear his dinner suit on such occasions. They usually tried to get over at least once every three months for a bit of sport, sometimes more, sometimes less.

The boss always packed some terrific hardware for their little bashes, though this was the stage that Hardyman disliked. He'd always felt queasy with adrenaline at this point, as if a trained militia and a fleet of choppers as a back-up wasn't enough. Perhaps it was the fact that he'd not had a decent lysergic hit yet. The V.P. began fidgetting with a small silver case. He opened it to reveal several phials of thick liquid, all the colours of the rainbow.

'Ah-ah. No vitamins 'til we check the arsenal.'

'Right,' Hardyman grimaced and replaced the nebuliser in

his pocket.

MannyCapra had brought the standard collection of gadgets, nothing particularly new. Two Sig Sauer 9mm machine pistols with cell ID tracking ordinance in case anyone had the balls to get up close, which was rare, but happened occasionally and was amazing fun when it did. Two modified vintage M16 semi-automatic assault rifles with dum dum ammo, two Emmeritt flash pistols...

'Go easy with those, Hardy. We don't want to toast the whole fucking village.'

One dual action mini-launcher for precision bombing with explosives or chemicals, made in-house, twenty smart sphere "rubber balls" designed to bounce up to their target, gel with its molecules and create implosion, again in-house, and enough ammunition beneath the car in silos to survive the siege of Stalingrad.

Then there was the only weapon that MannyCapra himself used exclusively. The case was made from genuine North American buffalo hide and the object within was the only original of its kind left in the world. He gently removed the piece from its housing. The 1860 double-barrelled Winchester was a dinosaur of a gun, but MannyCapra didn't see it that way. His cold, ice-blue eyes shone in reverence at the article. Childhood awe at the movies; Randolph Scott, Gary Cooper and, of course, the Duke himself. Now he could play their game for real, with a little help from some chemicals, in his very own Wild West; a royal park.

'Now?' said Hardyman.

'Whenever you're ready.'

Hardyman handed the CEO a small nebuliser, which could dispense the dangerous and highly illegal lysergic stimulant into the body via the pulmonary system. The concoction was more than likely to bring on paranoia and psychosis along for the ride. From their point of view, that was the desired effect.

'Bang! Sheee-it ah love this deal, ah really fucking lurrve this deal!' said Hardyman, getting to his feet, flash gun in hand.

MannyCapra twitched as he loaded his Winchester. The lysergics had blazed an instant trail to their targeted neural paths. They felt Nice n Curly.

'Right-ah, uhhuh ... let's lookie here see what we got, ahha.'

Hardyman laughed so hard he nearly punctured a lung. MannyCapra remained solemn, taking time to reflect on the view.

The dome had mapped the whole area and reconfigured the details to MannyCapra's preferred specs.

The expanse before them had kept the same geographical features but the content had changed wondrously. Kensington Palace became The Alamo fort as portrayed in the John Wayne movie. The entire mass of Favelas to their East had transformed into the combined nomadic nations of Sioux, Cheyenne and Apache together in War Party, lending a bit of poetic license to the historical TexMex battle. The bullets and targets were real, but the fantasy was all theirs.

'Ready, man?' MannyCapra's hair, white blond with a shock of raven shone like a surreal landscape of its own.

'Yeah, Davy Crockett! Awm damn rhueddy!' said Hardyman, building up a frothy, chemical rage.

While MannyCapra had the familiar buzz of the hunt raging through his brain, it was yet another ritual that offered barely a challenge. For all his money and omnipotence, for a second he was back in the killing grounds of St James' Park, examining the mighty hole in the back of Joel Kruger-Smits' pretty little skull. Novelty had died long since. The best he could do was live in the moment and pretend it wasn't flat these days. He took another hit from Hardy's inhaler, for good measure.

'Remember The Alamo,' said Emanuel, then the shootin' began.

## 6

### RELOCATION, RELOCATION

*Based in its own subterranean complex in London, Credit Life Assurance Company offer one of the best packages around for new Sales Executives. As a direct subsidiary of International Activities PLC, perks for employees included viewing privileges to premieres and special events on the networks, limited access to the VoQue clubs of Chelsea (Mondays and Tuesdays only), free home use of state of the art hardware (dome upgrades), medical and social healthcare (clinics and lysergics) and, of course, the I.A. company Silver Rewards Card. Special recruits from the position of Sales Executive upwards are given priority for places in the new Canary Heights apartment complex, the best category C accommodation in the entire city.*

*Credit Life - we need YOU in our gene pool. Apply Now.*

Special Recruits Maria Schwartz and her best friend Nancy Krull both came from the same city of Heidelberg, Germany, and had known each other since the age of five. As they grew older, life had pulled them apart and after their college graduation the two had lost contact. The patterns of some lives



seldom run along ordered lines and chaotic magnetism will rear one of its infinite number of heads at some point. It appeared that the lives of both women had run remarkably similar courses since college and they become inseparable again as young adults, finding a new challenge in London; *a resurgent city full of glamour and career-defining opportunities.*

Maria travelled quickly through the ranks at Credit Life and she made it to the position of Sales Executive herself after a year. The company gave her the all clear to move into a new double apartment with Nancy in the exclusive West Wing of Canary Heights. The girls had decided that a night on the tiles would be the best way to celebrate her promotion, so they'd booked the next day off in anticipation of a bitching hangover/come down. Young Heidelbergers really knew how to celebrate living the dream.

'Canary Heights ... bit of a contradiction in terms, isn't it honey?' said Maria Schwartz as she delicately fixed the last of her mascara in front of the bathroom mirror.

'How's that, babe?'

'You listening to me, dummy?'

'Sorry darling, but this new dome is so cool. You were saying?'

Nancy joined her in the bathroom.

'Well, we're two hundred metres below the surface, and it called Heights.'

'Only small town peasants like your family live above the ground these days, darling.'

'Shut up you, I've been here fourteen months now you know.'

'Want a fight about it?'

Nancy took up a karate stance.

'Not now angel, I've just finished putting my make up on,' said Maria, 'Don't make me kick your ass.'

Her new flatmate eyed her up and down.

'Yeah, and the way you're dressed, I don't think you'll be

coming home by yourself tonight, you sassy tart. I just hope she's got a big cock.'

The kick missed Nancy's nose by a centimetre.

'That's better ... you're using your body for momentum now, darling. Try stepping into the kick a bit more though. Heh, hit some poor chick with that and she'll have no choice but to take you home.'

'Fuck you, wonderwoman. Where are the kids?'

'In there, I think.' Nancy began applying her make up.

Maria put her stilettos on and wandered through the kitchen into the living dome area. The small dome took up most of the corner and had been built into the ceiling for extra economy of space.

'Where are you my kiddies?' said Schwartz in a soppy voice.

The dome had been set to tropical fish mode. Bonnie and Clyde were bound to be in there somewhere. A small hammerhead shark scuttled past her head, alarmed by something.

'Oh there you are.'

'Miaow.'

'Did you think that mummy was gonna go without saying bye bye then darlings? No she wasn't... eeeeemummmum... ooh yooooo sooo cute...'

Her two kittens had been fighting over the remains of a sprat, which hadn't taken kindly to being killed and had promptly de-materialised.

Maria picked them both up, cradling Bonnie as Clyde jumped on her neck. Nancy joined them in the coral reef.

'I know you love them, Maria. But we could get in trouble.'

Maria continued her stroking and cuddling.

'Shush. They might hear you.'

'I'm serious. Company policy.'

'Rules, shmules. It's a minor thing. Who will know? I think all this is going to be the greatest, darling. Nothing's going to

spoil it. Stop worrying.'

Nancy passed her friend a glass of red and they toasted.

'To eternal friends. And diabolical piss all over our enemies.'

'Eternal friends. And all the piss.'

The smile seeped off Maria's face for a second. She couldn't be this happy, fate wouldn't allow it, something would go wrong. Something always went wrong.

'Are you alright, babe?'

'Yeah I'm fine. Just a few butterflies, you know.'

'Right, shall we?' said Nancy as she grabbed her coat.

'I feel an all-nighter coming on.'

Maria Schwartz looked back at her new flat and sighed. Now it looked very much like home, a tiny piece of South Germany here in London. The only problem was that nagging, irrational voice in her head that was telling her that she would never see all this again.

#### DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

'Ten missing persons in the last month, for the whole city. You call that a problem?'

Deconstructed Man swung the Dodge into a tight alley as they entered Wapping in the heart of the Docklands.

'Take the first right up here,' said Pollard, who was giving directions from the back seat.

'Y' might think you've got the t-shirt lad, being from New York 'n' all that. But there's a fuckin' good reason why a missing person is cause for concern in this town.'

Deconstructed Man took the right and headed toward some large complexes sitting underneath the quayside of the river Thames.

'What's that then, Chief?'

'Because we know what to do with our fuckin' criminals, Mister Suarez. We don't have fuckin' criminals anymore.'

Moran's breath smelt like a mix of cum, rotten eggs and cheap whiskey. Deconstructed Man had noticed how the Chief had neglected himself in the fortnight since his lil pooch-cooch

Hail Vanity had bitten the bullet. From his own Deconstructed point of view, the Kensington riot had been the first bit of excitement he'd seen since his arrival. Now, at long last, they had the beginnings of a case to get into, and he didn't feel so much like a glorified fucking cab driver for that yabbering Irish bitch. It was better, but not quite hunky dory yet.

Ever since the hit, Moran been treating him like it was all his fault, even though it was Moran himself that had set it up. Seemed they made their fruit loops to a different recipe over here.

'Where to now, Susan?'

Pollard consulted her map.

'Right, we want the Hanslett complex, so you...'

'Stop the car!' grunted Moran.

'W-'

'Stop the fuckin' car right now!'

'Okay, okay! Jesus.'

'Right, here'll do.'

Moran leapt out, his sinewy body twitching like a hyperactive kid. It was a chilly October morning but despite this he only wore an old T-shirt and jeans. He was also sweating profusely, despite the cold.

'Has he piked some smart acid this morning?' said Deconstructed Man.

'Don't ask stupid questions. You should know what he's like by now,' replied Pollard tiredly.

'Should I? I'm glad you've worked him out. How long did that take ya, brainiac? Ten years?'

Deconstructed Man had recently added women to the list of people that he hated working with. Racism, misogyny, homophobia; he loved all his antiques and curios.

'Where's he gone now?' he grunted.

Moran was round the back of the car, trying to open the boot with his bare hands. He strode around to the driver's window.

'Open the fuckin' boot.'

'Yes Chief.'

Click.

Moran returned clutching something that resembled a vase beneath his armpit.

'Right, wait here willya. I'll be back in fifteen minutes.'

Pollard screwed her face up as Deconstructed Man lit up.

'Chief. Aren't they Kruger-Smits' ashes there? But there's a Network Memorial Service tomorrow! What...'

'Ten out o' ten for observation there, tweetie pie. Now keep Yankee Doodle here entertained willya. No interruptions.'

Deconstructed Man took a deep pull on his smoke.

'Do you have to?' said Pollard.

'Yes.'

'Antisocial pigfucker.'

'Is it me or the pig who is antisocial?'

'What?'

'I'll buy you some new lungs if it bothers you that much. Keep your wig on.'

Pollard rolled down her window and watched Moran jogging over to the quayside.

'I don't believe that man. He's going to throw Hail Vanity into the river.'

'Yep, that feeling a worldwide audience of 700 million are going to witness a special memorial service to a packet of 20 Marlboro reds,' said the Squadjutant, toying with his half-full ashtray.

'That's not funny, Suarez.'

'He's not gonna throw it into the river, Pollard. Betcha ten bucks. He's just being a drama queen.'

Moran squatted by the quayside, laying the urn down gently on the cobblestones. His hand ran along the railing, across the rusted padlocks that had once meant something to passing

couples, stopping at one with initials engraved; J.K.S ♥ W.A.M. He felt around in his pocket for a moment, producing an egg-shaped silver object.

'I've always been one for keepsakes, Joel. You know that, don't you? Look, remember this? You gave me this on our first anniversary together. You told me to wear it over my heart, so you'd never be too far from where I was, no matter where in the world my job took me.'

The pocket watch rested in his hand. It had originally been the property of some lovesick aristocratic beau in pre-Revolutionary France and had somehow fallen into the possession of Kruger-Smits, who'd gifted it to him two years ago. Loving him, trusting him. How many hands had it passed through? How many thieves and lovers had owned it?

He rubbed the inscription with his thumb.

*J.K.S ♥ W.A.M. Toujours ma cherie amour.*

Moran shook his head. The job came first, no matter how much dogshit he had to eat.

'Au 'voir, J.K.S. Nothing lasts forever.'

He threw the watch into the river, watching it skim like a pebble across the water before finally sinking. Then he picked up the urn and, clutching it tightly to his chest, he began to sob.

Nancy and Maria had managed to completely lose the thread on the way home. It was easily done on a sober day, as London was not the simplest of places to get about because the transport system was no longer designed to ferry the masses of civilian population and one bombsite looked pretty much like the other. The 4am vac taking an underground route from Battersea Park directly to Canary Heights was free of charge, but required company sponsored vouchers that took six months to earn. The company didn't encourage travel among any of its employees.

After Nancy had cursed herself for leaving her bag

containing the vouchers in the club, they missed the 4am vac and had to wait three hours in a cold station for the next one, which terminated at Wapping rather than Canary Heights, meaning a thirty minute walk across the surface. Anything could happen now. It would have been better to have stayed in the apartment, gotten wired on some smart hits and partied the night away with some network stars generated by their new entertainment system. They'd gone west that evening in the hope of bagging a couple of real VoQue celebs, prowling for sex and kudos in any measure. Instead they were hungover, cold and desperate to get home. Small wonder no one ever travelled anywhere in this city.

'Are we going the right way?' said Nancy.

'Head towards the river and go east. That's what the man said.'

'Right, there's the river.'

'Good, that's a start, Nancy. Why are there no cabs in this place?'

'Because usually people have the good sense to stay at home.'

'No fun. Them or you.'

The girls wrapped their arms around each other's waists to keep out the cold. Nancy's Müller tweed wasn't too bad, but Maria's cotton jacket offered scant protection against the early morning frost.

'Heh, do you see that, Maria? About two-fifty metres, over there.'

'Do you think he's okay?'

'What's he squatting like that for? Is he taking a shit or something?'

'I think we should go see if he's alright.' said Schwartz anxiously.

'Are you fucking mad? He could be anyone.'

'Nancy, behave will you! You said yourself that the crime rate around here is zero. And what's a skinny little chap like him

going to do against two Dan grades?'

'He could be armed.'

'Nancy, it looks to me like he's about to jump in the river.'

'Okay, so.'

Deconstructed Man chewed a match stick and changed the channel. As usual there was fuck all on the networks. He preferred the simple dimensions of television.

'Grayson, take a look at that.'

'And just when I thought that it was getting a bit dull round here.'

Deconstructed Man's face lit up.

'Is it too early for a bit of rape, Pollard?'

'Don't, Suarez. Just don't.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously what?'

'Doncha think we should like, offer them a ride?'

Deconstructed Man put his keys in the ignition.

'They haven't seen us, Grayson,' said Pollard, holding her hand up.

'That's what I'm concerned about.'

'Suarez, for once stop thinking with your diseased cock and listen. They're probably on their way back to the apartments on the Isle of Dogs. Some do manage to go out, you know, it's not illegal. They'll be alright.'

'Heh, it's a cold morning. C'mon, have a heart!'

'You were the one talking about rape.'

'Can't anyone have a sense of humour?'

'That's what you call it?'

'What's the big deal, Susan?'

'Don't you fucking realise that we keep a low profile around here? A visible police presence alarms people.'

'That's fucking nuts.'

'No, Grayson, just common sense. Nothing should upset the

equilibrium. If they were suspect they'd be chained up in the back of a wagon by now. The company deal with the public and we deal with...'

'The super stars,' Deconstructed Man grunted, 'Okay, okay. I take your point. What about the Chief? I don't think he's in the mood for an audience.'

'Well two young girls are hardly likely to accost a bum, are they?'

Deconstructed Man chuckled.

'A bum? I'll tell him you said that, Pollard,' the smile poured over his face, 'Oh fuck, they are going across to him!'

'No they're not. They're heading for the West Indies Dock Road,' said Pollard casually, then her face dropped too, 'Shit! You're right!'

Pollard and Deconstructed Man jumped out of the Dodge, which was some three hundred metres from the quayside.

'That's what you get for being a smartass, Pollard,' said Deconstructed Man as they ran.

'Thank you so much Grayson. File it in your report. I'll get you some crayons.'

Moran had firmly placed himself in his own little world. He hugged the urn like a baby and whined at the cobblestones and the dirty river.

'Mister? I say, mister... are you okay?' said Nancy.

Moran still didn't notice them as he wallowed in his remorse.

'He's not responding, Nancy.'

'Get his attention, then.'

'Do I have to?'

Nancy put her hands on her hips.

'This was your fucking bright idea, girl.'

'Okay. Okay.'

Maria prodded Moran twice firmly on his shoulder.

'Whoooooaaaaaagh!!!!'

Moran screamed and leapt to his feet simultaneously. The lid flew off the urn which had been cast into the air by Moran and most of its contents hit the Chief Constable square in his face on their way down with a unambiguous paff. The urn lay shattered by the edge of the quay.

Deconstructed Man and Pollard stopped running, realising it was too late.

'Oh-me oh-my!'

Deconstructed Man began chuckling at the situation.

Moran was still as a rock by the quay.

'Sir, are you okay?' said Nancy, 'you're not going to jump are you?'

He blinked, his face covered in what was left of Joel Kruger-Smits.

'Grayson Suarez!'

'Chief?'

'Get your arse over here, now.'

'Yes Chief.'

Maria and Nancy looked non-plussed as the American man who looked like he'd stepped out of the 1970s and his dumpy sidekick entered the scene, still blissfully ignorant of the trouble they were in.

Pollard flashed her badge to Krull and Schwartz. Suarez stood behind her, making a poor attempt not to crease up, biting his fist. Moran lolled on his knees, face caked in slag, looking like a Dickensian drunk.

Nancy eyed the badge and shrugged. Schwartz pushed past her and approached Pollard.

'I'm sorry if we've interrupted something.'

Suarez couldn't contain his howls. Moran grit his teeth. Pollard stepped up to Maria, spinning and cuffing her. Nancy couldn't believe what she was seeing.

'This is crazy. What have we done? Tell me!'

'Lady, you and your friend need to calm down and come

with me,' said Pollard, aware of Suarez behind her.

Moran wailed and grunted at Suarez, who was just about over his fit.

Maria craned her neck to Pollard.

'Is this about the cats? I can get a permit you know.'

The butt of Suarez's pistol cracked Schwartz between the eyes, dropping her. Nancy tried to jump in, but the New Yorker was too fast, catching her square on the jaw with a southpaw cross.

The two women were flat out on the quay. Moran got to his feet and dusted himself down, abruptly back in control of himself. Suarez cuffed the groaning Krull.

Pollard sneered at Deconstructed Man.

'You didn't need to do that you shithouse. I had the situation under control.'

He pressed a finger to his lips and winked at Pollard.

'I'm hungry. Either of you two hungry?'

Moran massaged his scrawny neck as Deconstructed Man dusted his hands off and returned to the front seat.

'Baby wipe?' said Deconstructed Man, offering the packet across. Moran snatched one. The ash had encrusted itself around the collar of his Albertini T-shirt and deep into the wrinkles of his sun-damaged face.

'Don't worry, Chief. It'll come out in the wash.'

Moran clipped the back of Deconstructed Man's head with the palm of his hand.

'Don't be fuckin' smart, lad!'

'Okay already! Jesus.'

Schwartz and Krull lay cuffed and gagged with gaffer tape on the back seat.

'Susie. How about babysitting these two for me while me an' the chief...'

'The Chief and I,' said Moran.

'Sorry, while the chief and I go ask some questions about this Brontay woman.'

Pollard bit her lip.

'You do realise that I will have to file a report about this.'

Deconstructed Man beamed at her.

'Oh shut the fuck up, Susie. You'll do nothing. As usual.'

'Whoa ... ho, ho. Steady children,' said Moran, who's head seemed clearer now, 'No one's gonna be filing any reports, Susan. That might have been the way you did it when you were boss of the Favelas Squad, lamby, but it's not the way when you're working for me.'

'This is highly irregular. Have you both lost your senses? Why don't we just hand these two over to the company?' Pollard said, 'Let's be professional, eh.'

Moran looked at Deconstructed Man with his bloodshot eyes and then back at Pollard, then at the women in the back.

'Look at them. Shaking like shitting dogs. Let me put it like this then, Officer Pollard. Your man Grayson and I are going over there to do a little police work and when we get back I expect to see all of you still here. Now I know that you've been thirty years with the force an' all that, sweetie. But what you should understand is that these two have ruined the mourning of a superstar, which will now be a sham. For that they're gonna have to pay, accident o' no. So sayeth the words of Big Chief Moran.'

Deconstructed Man crossed his eyes at Pollard, performed a chin tilt and popped his aviators on before leading the boss away.

Pollard felt like her spine had been frozen solid and it wasn't by the temperature. Her fellow officers sauntered back off towards the quay, where a footbridge led to the great complex of sunken buildings that covered insurance. She stared across the choppy currents of the Thames to point X on the horizon. Somewhere she wished she was now.

\* \* \*

The floor manager at Hanslett Insurance PLC was a balding guy in his early thirties. He wore a cheap pin-striped imitation Di Firenza suit and an equally stupid high and mighty expression on his face. He tapped his index finger against the flat monitor that covered his desk, stroking the weedy black goatee beard festering on his chin. The office glowed a fluorescent pink, which suggested VoQue and ease yet efficiency in a working environment. Low rent.

Deconstructed Man picked his teeth with a match stick. He'd never gone in for this petty executive horseshit. He was quite ready, and would be quite happy, to break the smug sonofabitch's face if Moran deemed it necessary. He was on a roll today.

'Any thoughts then?' asked Moran, who peered out of the dome onto the shop floor some ten metres below.

'Just say the word,' said Suarez, not realising that he had spoken aloud.

'What?' grunted Moran.

'Nothing, sir.'

Moran shook his head.

'Like I said, officer, I really wish I could help you but I just don't know anything about the woman. Most of our employees concern themselves with raising Hanslett's profile and reputation. It's the Central Database's function to manage individuals, not mine.'

'So what is your job then, fella?' said Deconstructed Man with a twist of battery acid.

Moran stared through Deconstructed Man, shoving him back in his place.

'Grayson, I know about this company's fine reputation. Hanslett pride themselves on their thorough human resource development. The Database needs upkeep and administration, that's Mr Horrigan's role.'

'Well, yes. That's part of the role,' muttered Horrigan, who now had something to think about.

'Actually,' continued Moran, 'I use your excellent service myself you know.'

'Oh really?' said Horrigan. Deconstructed Man had given up on playing bad cop. He eyed some hardbodies on the shop floor, fading in and out behind their domes.

'Yes. The fact is, Mr Horrigan, that the disappearance of one of your employees is, as you will no doubt be aware, a rare event. Unique indeed.'

'Yes.'

'It concerns us too that you may lose some, ah, productivity, as a result of one bad apple.'

Two crisp, golden vouchers entitling the holder to a month's free participation in the VoQue Subscriber Network had found their way onto Horrigan's desk.

'Far be it for me to ask for confidential information, of course.'

Horrigan had already pocketed the vouchers.

'Come to think of it, one or two things spring to mind. Oh you know, tampering with clock cards, violating the rights of customers and...'

'What about regular social contact with fellow employees?' said Deconstructed Man, who'd finally caught on to Moran's line.

'How about regular friends, peers?' said Moran.

'Ah, now that one's easy. Joe Elkin, her one and only friend. He's a D-class Accounts Manager. Joe befriends underlings like Brontay, usually tries to get in their pants and he's not too fussy about what he'll find. He's a bit of a relic but he sticks to the 12 hour rule and he does his job well. Would you like me to call him up here?'

'Why don't you do that, Mr Horrigan,' said Deconstructed Man.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later Moran and Deconstructed Man were strolling along in silence to the Executive lifts that travelled to the surface. Elkin had been very helpful. In fact he'd been more helpful than Moran could have imagined. He'd recounted his evening with Brontay in full, including said person getting acquainted with some lush executive type. The description of the exotic female was vague, but Moran recognised her by the inimitable style of the operation. Several of Moran's sleeper snitches had been tracking her across London and she had been spotted in the bar with Brontay. Why else would the Chief Constable take an interest in this case?

Deconstructed Man too had been grateful for this information. So grateful that on Moran's queue he'd spilt water over Elkin's lap. This water contained a crude but vicious nanomachine which, later that evening, would have an untraceable and catastrophic effect upon Joseph Elkin's major organs, central nervous system and brain. The lift arrived at the surface.

So they were operating in London again. The woman that Elkin described had all the hallmarks of the famous Dr Katia Kutz. Now there was a trophy to bag, a head fit for Moran's wall. What would MannyCapra do with such exquisite information? How much was it worth? It was about to get interesting again.

Superintendent Pollard sat prone and helpless in Deconstructed Man's Dodge, examining the pearls of sweat on her hands. That sweat might as well have been blood.

The mascara of both women had streaked with tears as they huddled together, shaking and silent. The Schwartz girl had taken a nasty beating off that animal Suarez and she was coming up in bruises all over her body. A noxious smell was suddenly coming from the other girl and Pollard hoped that she hadn't messed herself on Suarez's precious upholstery for her



sake.

The thought still battered away in her head that she was taking part in this outrage by not helping them. But how far would they get if she did let them go?

Superintendent S.P. Pollard had led the Favelas Constabulary of the Met for ten years until her transfer was activated in order for her to become Apsley Moran's official number 2 just six months ago. In those ten years she'd made sure that the people of the shanties were given a chance to live in decent conditions. Though it was an uphill struggle against something she saw as wrong from the outset, she still saw it as her proudest achievement, not as an officer of the law but as a human being. She knew Moran had wanted her out of the Favelas for a reason.

Now here she was, deputy to the second most powerful man in the city and she was as powerless to do anything about it as a rookie Squadjutant.

'That's it. That's fucking it!'

It was an illegal arrest. Fuck Moran and fuck that American piece of shit rapist.

'Mmm... mmmm!'

Schwartz's eyes widened. Pollard climbed under the front seat and looked for Deconstructed Man's spare keys beneath the driver's seat.

'Going somewhere, Susan?' said Moran.

Pollard had long experience of having to not be fazed under surprise. On many occasions her life had depended upon it. She nodded nonchalantly back at him, looking pissed off but resigned at the same time.

'I'll drive this time. Laddo there'll get us killed.'

'Aye.'

Moran got in the front passenger seat. Deconstructed Man had been checking the tyre pressure.

'Heh, what the fuck's this?'

'Get in, lad,' said Moran.

'No splitass drives my automobile! I forbid you to drive my car! Chief, tell her!'

Moran massaged the bridge of his nose.

'You're giving me fuckin' a headache son.'

When the Chief said something like that it usually meant that he was seeing the first signs of red mist.

'Get in the back Suarez, I'm driving,' said Pollard firmly, 'you've had it all your own way so far.'

## COLD AWAKENING

Everything came back to her at once. Conscious energy had been sucked reluctantly back into her body after X days/seconds/years of gleeful abandon where time didn't matter. Brontay didn't like the place that she'd returned to the tiniest bit.

A million icy needles jabbed remorselessly into every sensitive area of her body. She was standing up, that much was good, although she didn't know how she came to be that way. The next step would be to open her eyes. First though she tried comprehending why she was outside, why she was standing naked outside, and how unbelievably fucking cold it was. That much she could tell without the benefit of vision.

With sight came grogginess and disorientation for a split second, before the cold stormed back to reclaim its number 1 spot. A small brown bear studied the strange beast at a safe distance, its furless body shivering like Winter had returned. Ridiculous creature. Summer was on the way and life was back. How could it be so cold and smell so of death? The bear turned

its thoughts to the more pressing issue of finding its breakfast and scurried away.

'Ugh.'

Brontay was standing out in the middle of a huge plain, and it seemed there was nothing but snow from horizon to horizon. It was a clear, still day but the cold was nevertheless maddening and deathly. The ground moved beneath her, some huge vibration or shockwave. Then her hearing returned and with it the sound of distant thunder crashing about the earth.

She looked down over her body. Her breasts were beginning to return to pre-adolescence and her feet were sinking deeper and deeper into the soft snow. She felt dizzy for a moment, struggling with her balance. Something squawked behind her. It was an osprey, back from its Winter vacation in Central America to build a new roost in its native wood. In the distance Brontay saw what looked like black smoke in the sky, though she wasn't entirely confident of her senses. It could be anything.

A surge of energy, probably the last before the cold would get to her, coursed through her increasingly hypothermic body. To move was to live, and the only place to head was the wood.

Her legs and feet screamed their defiance as she began stumbling attempts to jog. As she ran she crossed her chest with her arms, tucking her hands beneath her armpits. It was a reflex response and it didn't improve the situation one iota. The cold was already starting to numb and it was now a second by second fight with the dizziness. She was now desensitising, and that was the worst sign of all. But she made it to the wood and kept on running, her head rolling from side to side.

And there it was, the biggest, nastiest looking creature that she'd ever seen in all her pitifully inexperienced city-dwelling existence. She was rooted to the spot, hoping that the big bastard wouldn't have noticed the skinny human with frozen tits standing at a distance of two trees; hoping that it would finish its shit and be on its merry way. Then it about faced,

loping up and down excitedly at the sight of the intruder. Its arse stank.

Alexandra Brontay forgot about the cold, and as far as contemplating the hows and whys of the big picture was concerned, that thought was far too much of a luxury to cross her mind. This was real, so real that no artificial means existed that could dupe a human neural network into being so primally terrified. The beast stalked on its hind legs, staring down at her with what looked like almost curious eyes. A furrow of white fur above its eyes gave it an almost genteel look. Then it bellowed angrily at the threat to its territory. Brontay may have been hallucinating at this point, but she was convinced that the creature was saying something to her.

She turned and ran, belying the drained state that she had been in a minute ago. The grizzly responded by swiping at her, the killer blow missing her bare rump by centimetres. The trail led back out to the snow-blasted heath from where she'd climbed. Brontay clamped her teeth in desperation, knowing that there was no sanctuary. A dead tree blocked the way and it was too late before she saw it.

Brontay crashed into the snow, the bear now so close that she could floss its teeth.

The gunshot rang out, loud enough to scare every bird away from its roost for 7000 square kilometres of forest and, fortunately for Brontay, her furry pursuer. It knew better than to stick around when it heard that clarion call of death, the king of the wood.

All the desperation, cold and the fear ebbed out of Brontay as she lay prone. Her quest for self-preservation had turned meaningless. Suddenly the snow felt like a celestial bed, the most comfortable sleep of all.

'Vot on, Misha!' said an oval-faced woman holding a 8mm Kalashnikov hunting rifle.

Her husband joined her, a round-backed hulk of a man with

a long greying beard. Almost a human version of that grizzly.

'Mmm... privyetstviye na Sibir malodoya devushka! Anya, nash Vasha buits dobolneey niet?'

'Ah... blagodarritiye borg!' said Anna to her god.

Misha removed his thick gloves and checked the girl's vital signs. Then his wife prepared an electrically heated body bag, spreading it flat on the snow next to Brontay, while Misha administered a shot into her pale blue buttock.

'Buistrah, Anya, buistrah!' said Misha.

Within two minutes Brontay was packed and ready to go on the back of Misha's steed. The pair then mounted their horses. To the north Misha could see smoke billowing above the trees and make out the sound of distant voices, distant foreign voices. To the east there was the eerie rumble of war. It was heading this way.

'Dyevaitye liubimaya, na doma sechass.'

He looked across at his wife, nodding at her with an earnest smile. Then they embarked on the long trek westwards and home, their cargo safely trussed up on a sled.

It was the smell of borsht and dumplings cooking that stirred the Westerner from her long sleep. Brontay didn't remember her bed being this small, or that she'd ever laundered her own bedclothes at all, let alone well enough to get such a fresh, clean smell. Then the recollection came. A murderous giant teddy bear. She checked to see if her bits were still there. Thankfully yes, and in full working order if the need for a piss was anything to go by. She exhaled deeply.

'Good morning Alexandra,' said the voice. It was male and American in accent.

'Aaaggh! Fuck me...'

Brontay had leant upwards quickly, a little too quickly. A searing agony raced up from the small of her back. Her hand felt around for the source of the pain and she found a neat scar.

'Ah. Sorry, should have warned you about that. It seems those cads had one of your kidneys out too.'

'What? Aaagh, Jesus.'

Brontay didn't need shocks the way she felt.

'My kidneys?'

'Just the one. Heh, no need to look at me like that, young lady. I didn't do it to you.'

Brontay remembered seeing this man in the wood just before she'd passed out. Only that time they'd been speaking some funny language. Sounded like German but it wasn't German. He was in his late fifties and wore his hair and beard long, like some kind of house-trained caveman.

'Listen mate, thanks for your help and letting me stay here and everything but I'd like to see a Clinician.'

'A Clinician? Oh, you mean a doctor?' Misha smiled, 'Don't worry, I'm a doctor.'

Brontay sensed there might be a spot of trouble here. She recalled the woman in SoSamantha's, waking up in a forest then here. Likely as not someone had stitched her up. Or it was a simple case of mistaken identity.

'Who put you up to this? Was it Elkin? I bet it was.'

'Who? No, I think you're mistaken.'

'Well you can tell him his sense of humour fucking stinks and he's gonna get this back and then some.'

'No, you don't understand.'

'I think I fucking do, fella. Have you ever been drinking with a chap called Elkin?'

'Please, this is going to be very difficult for you, Alexandra. Don't make it any harder.'

'You lying bastard!' said Brontay, a half smile appearing across her face.

'Okay, here's a question for you then, where do I work?'

'I don't know. Alexandra please...'

'Where do you work then?'

'Well er... I'm really retired but sometimes I fly out to Novosibirsk Air Clinic to help with the war casualties...'

'You sell insurance, you arse. Haha! Everyone sells insurance. I know you do. Don't lie.'

'I'm afraid not, Miss. And I think you might still be feverish.'

Misha grew flushed. This young Westerner had a strange attitude towards her elders. He was seventy three and didn't look it but still ...

'Where are we then, eh? Eh?'

The bedroom had been built into a loft by Misha himself some thirty five years ago. All the furniture was hand-crafted from local pine. Misha was particularly proud of the job he'd made of the bay window, which revealed a picture-postcard view of Nimsky Forest.

'I think you should stop yabbering at me and listen, gavnotnik!'

'I bet its some dome in... Rotherhithe! Rotherhithe Mansions. Yeah they have some good tech down there...'

'She's delirious, Anya,' said Misha in English.

Anna walked in with some food and a pot of tea on a tray. She set it down on Brontay's bedside table.

'Don't be such a big baby, Misha. The girl can't help it.'

She smiled warmly at Brontay. Anya was a robust woman of fifty who also happened to be a doctor of medicine. Her brown hair was tied back neatly to reveal a kind face, her high cheekbones making her look far more Eastern to Misha's Petersburg Slav. She was Misha's second wife of twenty-five years. After all this time she felt she read him pretty well.

'It must be a shock to you, Alexandra,' she said.

'I'm not swallowing any of this shitola, Missus. Very clever coding and all, but I need to get back home.'

'I mean, where you come from, most people from our generation are either dead or they look as young as you. We're normal people, Alexandra. Welcome to the real world.'

A shiver rose up Brontay's spine. The old fella was all bluster and he didn't make much sense. This woman though had made herself clear straight away. If she was lying then Elkin had gone to some trouble. Brontay felt dizzy again.

'I... No. Switch the dome off a second, will you?'

'Misha, I hope you've introduced us to our guest.'

Misha rolled his eyeballs and muttered to himself in Russian, waving his hands about.

'Oh Misha, what are you like, huh?'

She glanced conspiratorially at Brontay; the I'm-teasing-him-but-he-can't-spot-it look.

'Permit me then. Alexandra, the grumpy man with the beard is my husband, Mikael Sergeevich Korsakov, whom I call Misha and I'm sure you will soon. My name is Anna Petrovna Korsakova, and you may call me Anya from now if you like.'

Brontay rubbed her eyes.

'You. Two. Are. Taking. The piss.'

'What is this expression "taking the piss," Misha?'

'Old Brit colloquial. It means that you're busting his nuts.'

'Oh.'

'I'm going out for some wood. Anya will keep you company.'

Mikael Sergeevich went downstairs.

'He's a proud man, my husband. Sometimes he loses his patience, though. Now how about some borscht?'

'What's in it?' said Brontay.

'Cabbage, spices, cream, pastry and tripe dumplings, black bread.'

'Tripe. That's the insides of a pig isn't it?'

'Yes, I guess.'

Brontay nodded. She was wearing pyjamas two sizes too small for her, sitting up in a child's bed and was being mothered by a middle-aged Russian woman. Pig's guts for luncheon made perfect sense. For the first time in an age, she hankered after her dome. Some light entertainment to take the edge of

whatever trauma she'd undergone. She felt feral, disconnected like never before. There was only one plausible explanation for all this and it didn't involve being kidnapped and waking up somewhere in Russia minus a kidney.

'You know normally I wouldn't do this but hey, this is all a simulation right? Right, so it doesn't matter.'

'Since you've not had a solid meal in five months, I had a feeling that you'd take that attitude.'

*Five months?*

*Yeah right.*

'It's okay, Anya,' said Brontay, tucking in, 'I think you're a lovely hologram. Actually, you and that miserable old Rooskee of a husband of yours can come round to my dome anytime, if I can have your code. You're the perfect thing for a hangover.'

'A hangover?'

Anya laughed. Brontay laughed with her, then tucked into her meal. It was weird fare, but delicious beyond words. Whatever lysergics she was on, they were just the bomb. This looked, sounded, smelled and tasted just like the real deal. The host smiled back at her guest.

It might take some time, but once the various drugs in her system and the shock wore off, this poor kid was in for a very rude awakening.

## 9

### THE COMEDOWN

*Vanity! My mystery and my magic. My life and my art.*

*Vanity! Do you know what it is to feel the eternal battle of your sex?*

*Vanity! Have you ever had the multiple ecstasies of womanhood and followed it with the quaking tumult of man?*

*Now, for the first time since my death, I can take you through my life story, episode by episode. Relive my early years on stage as I struggle to come to terms with my duality and follow me through the years all the way to that fateful day last October when it all came to a tragic end. Get in my skin and see it all from my perspective.*

*Enjoy and know what it was like to be Hail Vanity as I guide you through to a whole new experience in entertainment and personal fulfilment.*

*You'll never be the same man or woman again.*

*Hail Vanity, Hail VoQue, Hail You.*

*I am the Only Icon of Our Times.*

The Adler emitted tiny, clean traces of hydrogen as it sashayed

through West London. MannyCapra longed for one more reassuring waft of carbon monoxide, the smell of burning petroleum, the defining aroma of a dirty, turbulent but exciting era when there were still plenty of kicks to be had from screwing the opposition into the ground. These were tranquil, spoiled times in comparison. Far duller, for all the gadgets at one's disposal.

Hardyman was engrossed in his post-shoot-out ritual of watching classic films on his monitor, bubbling down from his chemical hysteria with a few gentle images. He had done well lately. His marketing of the latest Smits' tribute project had resulted in world record viewing figures and exhilaration rates. Not only did the consumers log on to the show, but the I.A. database confirmed that they loved Hail Vanity to death and they wanted more. No better way to know the exact chemical balance of millions of consumer brains when they would let you into their heads so cheaply.

The Adler hung a right after the Old Swiss Cottage and accelerated towards New Hampstead Wood and the Heath beyond. It was always like this after a shooting match; the anti-climax of spent adrenaline. There was always the option of taking another hit and going back, but that was just never the same. No drug called anticipation had yet been invented.

His car was the only one on the road that evening, as it usually was. MannyCapra loved the fact that transport was now a luxury rather than a necessity and as such he was the only man able to grant or revoke such a simple but priceless function. By cutting off the means of passage, only tiny amounts of people travelled any further than two miles outside their perimeter of work and lodgings. Like information, travelling for the masses wasn't outlawed, it was simply made unfeasible and unnecessary by the laws of supply and demand. Overground travel was also said to be unsafe because of air pollution, but the air had been perfectly breathable for years.

That was a convenient myth, but few complained, as they already had what they wanted, or rather what they were conditioned to want. This pre-occupied MannyCapra in every waking moment. It had been key to all of his victories back in the day when there was competition, when the good old free market was the best game in town. In spite of his hegemony, the public always had to choose what he had to sell. The day they knew they were being coerced would be the day he would lose everything.

This train of thought sharpened his humour as the car rolled up to the gates of the Hampstead Homestead. The immaculate gardens and tree-lined walls gave the Estate a natural barrier from the outside world making it an ideal home and headquarters of International Activities PLC. The neo-Roman facade of the only permanent surface dwelling in the entire city gave the welcoming impression of a palace waiting for its Caesar. Fitting, as it was the last overground building in town pompous enough to be capable of housing the world's greatest ego and there was no-one around to criticise the ostentation.

Hardyman slipped McBride a couple of VSN vouchers and dismissed him. A huge oak door clicked gently back into place behind them and their footsteps clacked against the marble alley that led from the lobby through to the Grand Boardroom, reverberating around the empty palace.

The mirror from Salvador Dali's collection rested beautifully above the hearth, bending the hard light that bounced around this chamber of unfathomable size.

'I wanted to show you a little idea that I've been working on, Manny,' said the VP.

'Not sure I'm in the mood, old boy,' replied MannyCapra, pouring himself a cognac.

Hardy lived up in the Docklands but he had a habit of sticking around to make a nuisance of himself. He wouldn't fuck off until he had shown the boss his new thing.

'Make it quick, then.'

'Lights please. I took the liberty of installing it here before we left.'

'Oh did you now?'

A menu page appeared. Hardyman hit the OPTIONS button and scrolled down to OPEN.

'You are going to lose your shit, Manny.'

A waiter approached carrying a tray of Don Perignon. Hardy took a glass.

'This combines a classic, and I believe the best, Ian Fleming storyline with the use of historical characters in key roles. Have yourself a browse, Chief.'

The room had altered in both size and shape, becoming a hive of activity. Personalities from the worlds of pop-culture, entertainment, the arts, sciences and politics dominated the casino. General Secretary Gorbachev was remonstrating with Fidel Castro over a black jack hand, Mae West casually grabbed a waiter's buttock causing him to drop his tray.

A house band that included Keith Moon, Charlie Mingus, Robert Johnson, Iggy Pop and Hail Vanity struck up an untidy version of Cole Porter's 'I've Got You Under My Skin.' Hail Vanity winked at MannyCapra as she sang, her bone structure back in the female role. Iggy walked to the edge of the stage and began pissing all over Jimmy Cagney and Veronica Lake. Cagney got up on the stage and took a swing at Pop.

'Tacky,' grunted MannyCapra, not in the mood.

'Hold up, Manny. This is one of the best action dramas that's come along in years. Great to watch, even better to play.'

'I'm going to see Jameson.'

Hardyman paused the playback. He seemed subdued this evening, as if the antics in the Favelas had sucked all the juvenile vigour from him. If that was the explanation. He reeked of disappointment, but MannyCapra was in no mood to soft soak him tonight, in spite of his recent progress.

'Very well, boss. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight Saul.'

Hardyman made his own way out. No histrionics this time. What was up with the boy?

MannyCapra waited until he heard the door shut. He didn't need to say anything, he merely shut his eyes. When he opened them, the old man was there; replete with slippers, cardigan and creased brow.

The familiar pitch blackness soothed his temperament. He took a deep breath and relaxed. In front of him, there was an old chess table complete with matching rickety chairs. The elderly gentleman was sitting patiently at the table, his clothes changing to a suit immaculately pressed with a white shirt and cravat, his hair white and unkempt like a lamb's fleece. He looked every bit the Oxford Don.

'That's better. Tidy. How's the garden growing?'

'Emanuel, if you keep repeating yourself people will think that you're going senile.'

MannyCapra seated himself and re-arranged the chess pieces to their starting positions.

'And the illness?'

'You should know. You arranged it.'

MannyCapra chuckled.

'How now Philobert. It's all part of your natural profile.'

'And yours.'

'Ha, my point is clear then. You have cancer, I don't. This horrible world you say that I've created has a cure for all disease and your wonderful society had nothing except scalpels, crude medicines and snake oil.'

Jameson shook his head, taking a sip of orange juice.

'So this is your latest move? A society cannot be judged on its ability to cure illness, MannyCapra. It must be judged on its humanity.'

'And what is humanity? You really are like a fish in a bowl

old man with your peculiar, arcane ideas.'

The blood vessel in Jameson's nose swelled and reddened, giving away the old, familiar, redundant anger. It felt comfortable to MannyCapra. Jameson held his forefinger up. It almost touched MannyCapra's nose.

'I know this box of tricks interprets the image in your head as a man with a conscience, boy. That's something my memories, if they serve me correctly, tell me you once had. I often wonder if you have me here as your chess partner or as a clearing house for your tainted soul?'

MannyCapra was straight-faced for the first time.

'You don't expect me to answer that, do you? Oh please. The Luddites went around breaking up machinery in the 18th century because they thought it would destroy livelihoods. That machinery *improved* lives. What can be so terrible about progress, Philobert? Are you the Luddite within me? Is it your voice I hear in my head when harking back to yesteryear? Or am I really just so fucking bored?'

'Don't you realise that the man you once were cared about the consequences of his actions? You forget that I work within this machine as well as in your head. I know what you've been up to and it has got to stop.'

MannyCapra cocked his eyebrow and shook his head.

'You intrigue me Philobert. Until something more intriguing comes along I'll be happy to argue with you as, ah, a mind on the side.'

'Don't you patronise me you little shit. I'm dying, MannyCapra. You can't have it like this forever.'

'I can have it any way I want it, old boy. But I'll humour you for a second. You know, a man's worst enemy is his conscience. If you die, then that's one less enemy to worry about, isn't it? Now do you want to play or would you like to carry on rabbiting like a fish wife?'

Jameson shifted his far left pawn to A3.



'Your move, sunshine.'

## 10

### TOUR OF DUTY

Brontay's mindset changed in exactly the way that Anya had predicted. The first day the English girl had been quite relaxed but still deluded by the magnitude of what had happened to her; numbed in brain and body. By the time a week had passed, it was clear that a heavy trauma was in the post. She became increasingly more reluctant to converse, assuming that they were her captors rather than her protectors and soon refusing meals and sanitation, keeping odd hours of wakefulness and sleep. Psychiatry had been Anna Petrovna's major at medical school and although she'd given that up fifteen years ago to work in the small local hospital with Misha, she still had an eye for a troubled soul. Alexandra was on the way to an insipid and very clinical form of paranoid delusion, the kind that was difficult to treat with alacrity without those fancy Western smart lysergics.

No surprise, brought up in a battery farm like that. The real world was a scary place for such a person.

The warning signs had been there, as it was just as well that

she'd made sure that Misha was on his guard. Exactly a fortnight into her convalescence, the young Englishwoman had tried to smash her way out of her room which, of course, had been fully secured. Nevertheless, she had made a go of it, pummelling the bay window with a chair until the bullet-proof glass cracked. They'd pumped her up with something and she had no idea of her own strength.

Brontay had to be sedated for a while, to prevent her from doing any damage to herself more than anything. She was six months older and six thousand miles from home and sooner or later she would have to accept this or she would find herself in deeper trouble than ever. The war was getting perilously close, 70 kilometres at the last estimate or pissing distance by Russian standards, and most tribal militia saw a Westerner as either collateral for arms or food for their dogs.

One afternoon a militia Colonel came to the Dacha flanked by a tall foreigner, French probably, as he spoke no English and insisted upon communicating in broken Russian and the Colonel's translation. He said that he was from a medical centre 80 km away to the east that had been hit by a shell. Some POWs were being held there in maximum security as they were suspected of war crimes. Two had been unaccounted for since the attack and they were checking Nimsky Forest for sightings of the alien fugitives who were, naturally, considered armed and dangerous.

Anya smiled at this and shook her head, inviting the men in for coffee. Her husband had gone fishing and the Englishwoman was up in the loft locked up and, thankfully, sedated to the eyeballs. Anya made polite small talk with the men for half an hour and they got up to leave. The Frenchman who could have been an Englishman thanked her for the coffee and the nip of vodka for the journey and the two men left with their convoy. Anya drank a small bottle of vodka herself after they'd gone and was drunk as a shitting skunk by the time

Misha got home. She knew how quickly such visits could turn sour for the host given the faintest whiff of treachery and long after her husband had pitched himself home did she continue to twitch her curtains, Anatoly K at the ready.

Brontay had settled down for a couple of days with the help of the drugs. Misha took this opportunity to play the Image Recollection tapes at her during her sleep. It was quite an ancient machine bought in Smolensk two decades earlier when Muscovy was still joined to the other states of free Russia. They taped the electrodes to her frontal lobes, ran the program and kept their fingers crossed.

For a couple of days she showed no improvement in morale or cognition of Russian. It took a bowl of borsht to lift their hopes.

'Ya nye khotchu eto gavnot!' were her first words in Russian, screamed out as she hurled the bowl of hot liquid at Misha.

The improvement from there was sporadic, but when they began taking her outside she steadied. Misha introduced her to an ancient standalone T.V. and video player which was a handy tool for instruction on subjects she knew nothing about such as local geography and the Russian view of world history as opposed to sanitised, post-democratic propaganda founded in West, where the intelligensia had long perished under the corporate apparat of the likes of International Activities Inc.

They fed Brontay information about her kidnap in bite size chunks, weary that too much truth about how the world had really twisted itself may send her paranoid again. She learned that there had been ten abductees including herself, who had been kidnapped by a group of nomadic Turkmeni fundamentalists bent upon defeating Western-backed groups in the War of 50 Years. This was greeted with strong hostility by Brontay, whose powers of reasoning were adjusting by the day. It had turned out that this devushka was no fool for such a crass lie, so they shamed the devil and told her most of what they

knew.

She'd been right all along, or rather Elkin had been. They'd grabbed her originally to do some kind of research on her body but what it was they couldn't tell, only that she was missing a kidney. There had been a massive fire at the complex she was being held at and they'd found her wondering about in the snow, away from the ashes and alive, just.

When Brontay asked when could she go back the full gravity of the situation hit her like that drug used to spike her in SoSamantha's, way back in what seemed another lifetime. There was no means of safe transit to the West. This war that had raged for over 50 years but was never reported back in London (like many other things, it seemed) ripped apart the infrastructure of the North-East Asia and had left nothing but the old Air Base in Novosibirsk, some 650 kilometres away, and the remnants of a port at Vladivostok 700 km to the South East. At this point it was touch and go whether the fighting was likely to reach this part of the forest. There were so many factions and sub-factions attacking each other that anything could happen, but the least likely scenario at the moment was peace.

The next machine was called Holovideo, playing out 3D renders of old 2D still images and newsreel footage. Brontay found the images informative but in a weird, unobtrusive way. This old machine expected the viewer to make their own interpretation. She'd passed the stage where she'd pine for the dome networks, coming to the conclusion that she must have been addicted to the fucking things and now, after all her protests, she had come to see just how much bullshit she'd been fed since she could remember. Misha had also given her books in English to read, which was something she hadn't done since a childhood she could still not recall in the slightest, as if the kidnapping had blanked it all out like so many other things. The first one that he passed across was Boris Pasternak's "Dr

Zhivago", one the most famous books in Russian Literature and by all accounts a classic in any language.

At first it was tough, as her concentration kept shifting after a page or two.

Brontay stuck with it though, which she had to do considering the dearth of leisure activities around the Dacha, even after the violent cold turkey and depression resulting from being offline for such a long time had abated. Then Pasternak gripped her. She started to read faster, to question the meaning of words and events that she couldn't understand but suddenly found exotic rather than quixotic like how she now perceived the networks. Reading was so much more than any other media, reading was multi-dimensional, reading spoke to her soul. Before she knew it, she was on her fifth novel within a week. Where was it leading? What was her future? Could she trust these people? Did she have a choice?

The odd thing was, the more she read, watched the archives and listened to the Korsakovs, the more a balance was struck between scepticism of the situation that she'd been put in and analysis of the person that sold insurance back in London and had blindly accepted her lot. She'd been happily spoon-fed her whole existence as part of a mediocre class. Everything, even her strongest aspirations and ambitions, had been pre-packaged and decided for her and she'd been oh so happy to follow. The ether had worn off.

First the mind, then the body.

After six weeks Anya deemed her physically fit enough to assist in the housework.

Misha would take a cart 30 kilometres to the nearest village to get some basic provisions, but the majority of sustenance came from their livestock, vegetable plot and the forest itself. The consumer economy had not prepared Brontay for this and the work was back-breaking but rewarding. Whenever she complained, Anya would tease her with a reminder of how, not

so long ago, she would go on hunger strike for an hour, shitting herself and screaming the house down like an agitated 2 year old. Brontay's complaints about even the toughest chores soon died down.

The summer had come very early this year and they were far South enough to get an early thaw and prolonged periods of warm weather, but this would bring visitors and danger as the Dacha became more accessible. Brontay was fortunate in that the war had abated from Nimsky Oblast slightly, though someone was rumoured to have been parading old nukes again and had been threatening to fuse them up.

Now she was the houseguest of Anya and Dyadya (Uncle) Misha rather than their patient/reluctant charge. Fifteen weeks of clarity had flushed all the shit from her system and given her an entirely new perspective on life, from the junk-culture that was the West to the old Russia that was slowly falling back into the Pacific from the devastated Eurasian lands. The urge was still strong to return home but she now accepted that there was no way that she could just slip back into her old life. Misha and Anya were protecting her from the war, the bastards who had brought her out here and, crucially, from herself. A departure now was too perilous. The margin of error in the Irkutsk region of Siberia was tiny and out here it meant the difference between hypothermia and warmth, a bullet in the head or a handshake.

Misha had also introduced her to vodka; the headsplitting, syrupy, home-made Siberian variety. One night he had taken it upon himself to tutor "Sasha" in the Russian art of getting blotto and falling over, in spite of her protests that she only had one kidney left to ruin. During that evening Brontay learned why the Korsakovs had been so thorough in their protecting her and turning her into a survivor.

'Ha! I've always liked the English sense of humour, so dry.'

'Not like the Americans,' said Brontay.

'No, I concede, there are differences.'

Brontay mimicked Misha's expression.

'Naw, I concede, therrr arrr deefferrrence-uz.'

'Ha! Hahaha! Oh you fucking English clown! Have another Vodka!'

'I'd be delighted.'

An irritable volley of thuds came from the room above. They were below the bedroom where Anya was sleeping. She'd decided upon an early night.

'Sssh,' said Misha, 'better keep it quiet or no leg over for me tonight.'

'Huh, at least you're getting some. How about if I went up there and pretended I was you, eh? I could slip her a couple of fingers from behind and she'd say "ooh, Misha! You haven't been like this in years."'

Korsakov look across at Brontay sternly.

'That's my wife you're talking about you pig's dick!' growled the Russian.

Brontay's face went red enough to fry a sausage on her cheek.

The Russian's eyes were stern and unforgiving. Then they melted as Misha's old face creased up. He fell off the settee, taking a full minute to regain his composure. Brontay felt like someone had just tried to choke her.

'Ha! That's... huh... now that's the *chorny* Russian humour, girl. Huh. I hope you like it.'

'Oh I just can't wait for some more.'

Brontay wasn't aware of how much that statement would come back to haunt her.

'Ha, you've given me ideas for later on you little goat, that's for sure. Better watch it though. Anya's still young enough to...'

Misha made a curve with the palm of his hand around his belly. The Englishwoman nodded idly, knocking back the rocket fuel and coughing.

'You drink like a man, you know that?' he grunted.

'I'll take that as a complement on this occasion,

condescending old fucker.'

She had read about sexism in the very same books he had given her. Now the booze had loosened his tongue enough for her to see it first hand.

Korsakov nodded as slugged his vodka. Brontay sipped hers like a typical Western lightweight. The Russian had gone quiet. Was it the mention of children? Brontay had seen old photographs dotted around the dacha. Two toddlers playing football, two teenage lads in cadet uniforms. She didn't want to press the issue, but Misha answered her unspoken question anyway.

'Three sons, Sasha. Three lads. My first wife Lyudmila died in a air raid thirty-five years ago. She gave me one boy. He grew up, joined the army back in Petersburg. I came out here and started again, made a new life and eventually met Anya. My boy was now very much the man and had become a Colonel in the Intelligence Corps. Changed his name, got a new life, a new identity, everything.'

Misha slugged down another shot like it was water. Brontay fixed herself a refill and did likewise. Her insides were numb now anyway.

'A year after we married Anya gave birth to twins. The happiest moment of my life.'

Misha's expression hadn't changed but a lone tear made a trail down his cheek, disappearing into the jungle of his beard.

'Two years ago this fucking war took them. They'd chosen to fight even though they were safe in Moscow University. The Muscovites didn't want to know about our troubles, they are too much like the West now. But Korsakovs have always been proud Russians, Sasha. Do you know what it is like to be proud of your country?'

Brontay shook her head. What country? London?

'In all the Russias there are many different peoples whose future is in your hands, boys - they were my very words to

them, even though I desperately wanted them to stay at college and miss the war. Vania went to sea and was torpedoed off Vladivostok. A week later Sasha was on his way home from Kamchatka to see us when a nuclear warhead took out the headquarters of the Russian National Army, killing everything in a twenty mile radius. You may have heard of that one.'

Brontay felt ashamed of herself. If people wanted to go abroad they could step into their nice little domes and be home in time for supper.

Korsakov sat crossed-legged in his slippers, brogues and huge woolly jumper. He was like a wax doll. Brontay wondered whether she should leave Dyadya Misha to himself and go to bed. She opened her mouth to speak but Misha snapped out of his stupor.

'C'mon, have another vodka you English snatch!' he said jovially.

'No really Misha I... aw go on then.'

Anna Petrovna Korsakova got up at 5.30 a.m. as usual to feed the chickens. Like it or not that big lug of a husband was going to help her. He could bring his drinking buddy with the soft hands along too.

She descended the stairs and went into the kitchen, putting a large pot of coffee on the stove. She then walked into the living room and drew the curtains. The two were fast asleep, propped up against each other. Misha slept with his mouth open, which he always did after a skin-full of liver-rot. Sasha was still clutching the bottle of Vodka Korsakova to her chest, a wide smile glued to her ruddy face. She was looking more like one of the family by the day. One of them let go a rasping fart. Anya wasn't sticking around to find out the culprit and returned to the coffee boiling on the woodburner.

It warmed Anya to see how love had grown within the heart of this strange, displaced child. She knew the truth about

Brontay's past, just like she knew the same of all Westerners of her generation, but it was still far too early to let her know.

Perhaps Misha would let it slip during a vodka binge one night, but it was all too horrible to contemplate and she knew that even the drunk version of her husband wouldn't blab about some things. That was like saying the world had ended before Sasha had even been born, which was too awful to countenance but too close to reality.

Anya vouched to let the sleeping dogs lie this time, now and perhaps forever if young Ms Brontay could become Russian enough. She prayed for the girl's protection as the coffee bubbled away, long enough for them to teach her how to hide properly from the world and from the truth.

And then she might be able to become a real human being.

## 11

### DOCTORS ON CALL

A nostril-flaring aroma of surgical disinfectant wafted about the small laboratory. Clinician Christian Brisco sang and hummed to himself as he worked, his stocky physique bulging through an old white coat worn more out of habit than necessity, like an actor's mask. He was overdressed for the high temperature of the lab, which was caused by the faulty central heating in the building. It was either this or sub-zero conditions. Neither was a fit way to perform an autopsy.

The underground complex of labs and rooms that made up the central H.Q. of the Doctor's Congress was known simply as "Sekryet Dum". It was a quarter the size of the other building and in a less accessible part of Nimsky Forest. For those reasons it was far more unlikely to suffer an aerial attack like the now ruined main clinic.

More pressing matters than this temporary inconvenience lay ahead though, namely what had occurred when the two remaining live subjects had fled the old complex after a direct hit had damn nearly done for everyone and everything. The

perils of operating in a war zone dictated that any building was fair game, although paradoxically this was the safest place in the world to base a clandestine organisation. The evil eye of old MannyCapra still couldn't see this far, or at the very least his beady vision was blurred.

Brisco was less worried about the fact that the specimens had gone AWOL than the consequences that their escape had for his research. Brontay and Da Costa wouldn't have known much about anything after the shell hit. The doors had been left open and the natural human instinct would have been to flee, but their cognitive abilities were severely impaired at this point and neither could have travelled far on foot. It was a wonder that they hadn't perished there and then, as it was they'd wandered off into the woods during the chaos of the attack, like zombies except with a few, well, *modifications*. Security had been tightened since, and the single most successful and important experiment had continued unhindered here at site B.

An answer to at least half this conundrum was neatly arranged right in front of him on the green slab, ribcage splayed open like butterfly wings, the full English of organs available for inspection and dissection. Specimen Omega, Clarence Augustus Da Costa, Mediterranean male, 31 years. A hungry bear had met this poor fellow. He'd been buried under the permafrost for about three months now and it taken a full day in this heat for him to thaw properly.

Brisco did feel a slight twinge of responsibility as he finished rummaging through the chest cavity and upper thorax. After all, the poor bastards weren't asking to be kidnapped and packed off to have their brains scrambled in this godforsaken place. He didn't care what Katia said *about the risks of investigation and need for quick cremations*, they would find the other and give both a proper burial. Yes.

Brisco carefully slid the cadaver back into refrigeration and scrubbed his hands down. Pathology had never been his strong

suit and he'd always tried to leave the stiff to others, ever since medical school. The kid in the fridge would have to be four times as old to have seen that era, when their amazing elixir vitae had been too much for the moral cowards of the day. As his own first lab rat, 320 going on 32, he remained living proof that sub-atomic gene therapy did much more for you than coca cola, Guinness, religion or vitamins, but the novelty of being the oldest human in living history had long since worn off.

The second oldest entered the lab. Dr Kutz had been particularly crabby recently and was giving Brisco a dose of the silent treatment. There had been a rather lively debate earlier that afternoon about who would perform the autopsy. Brisco had commented that she had no qualms about the vivisection of live tissue, but when it came to the dead she always passed the buck to some junior and in this case to him.

The argument had then developed into a slanging match about how well she treated herself, using rare and expensive materials to change her own body at the slightest whim and rather more often than was advisable. She fired back with the accusation that he'd allowed himself to go puffy and fat, a cheap dig but some people never grow up, even after over a century. What was that idiotic old expression? Bodyshaming? It was that type of thinking which had led to the world becoming such a mess. His argument was met not with a response but a counter-punch, as per usual.

*His* reluctance to go into more intense human experimentation had opened them up to all kinds of risks with only one successful empirical experiment achieved. Finally, and this is what made her really sore, he snapped at her, calling her a callous Nazi bitch with no feelings apart from her own fucking vanity and precious legacy. She was no different than MannyCapra, bar the fact that at least their enemy was up-front about it.

That just about snapped it.

The Clinician gave her his best condescending grin. She avoided his glance and sniffed as she tied her flaxen hair into a bun. He knew that he'd gone too far with the Nazi bit; she'd always been on the right side and these were desperate times. She had though, he'd noticed, avoided her usual level of provocative clothing this afternoon, opting for a more demure polo shirt and jeans. An orderly came in and sprayed down the slab and the floor. She made herself tea and stared into space.

The orderly left and Brisco watched her stew from the corner of his eye. He'd known the woman for far longer than was natural for two humans to survive on this planet. In this time he'd long since learned that backing down, even if he'd gone too far, was never the best option. He let go an exaggerated sigh, keying in some notes about the autopsy as she nibbled at some cake and drank her tea. This forced her into breaking the silence.

'Any news on Specimen Alpha?' said Kutz, pouring herself more tea.

'Any chance of a cup for me?'

'Get your own, dickhead.'

Brisco shrugged and smiled.

'Nothing doing. Shame really. Montgomery and co are still combing the area but they're scaling it down.'

Kutz sucked her teeth.

'I want it found. It could destroy everything if it fell into the wrong hands.'

Brisco felt the earlier row was about to ignite. He scratched his temple, searching for an appropriate riposte. *It?*

'Katia, we haven't got the resources and we open ourselves up to all kinds of more tangible risks by persevering with the search. She's either under three feet of ice or she's been adopted by a bear and joined the circus. Really, who gives a monkeys out here?'

'Thanks for clearing that up, Professor Mansplain.'

Brisco refused the bait.

'It's my guess the blizzard got her after the fire. She was naked and she couldn't have lasted long in the tundra.'

Kutz still didn't look totally convinced.

'Guessing doesn't cut it and you know that. We're scientists. What if some Cossack picked it up? Or a militia?'

'Then they would try to sell her, whichever side they were on, and when they realise that she's worthless then she becomes dogfood. Must we go through this again? Look, compassion died a long time ago out here, darling. Take a glance in the mirror.'

Brisco didn't mean that. It was always about more than vanity for Kutz, else she would have been Queen of the Voquists. But he could never resist a dig.

'Loose ends are dangerous.'

'Look, some gawky archaeologist will probably chisel her out in fifty thousand years and put her in a museum.'

Kutz slammed her fist down on the draining board in frustration, her mug of hot tea shattering on the linoleum.

'Sometimes I wonder why I ever married you, Brisco.'

'We're not married anymore. You can do whatever you like. Not that marriage ever stopped you doing that anyway.'

'Hey, fuck you if you're going to take that attitude! The next time you want a guinea pig, you fucking go to London and get it yourself.'

Brisco grinned at her. He'd become such an expert on this woman that he probably knew more about her than even nanogenetics. Conflict got her juices flowing.

The Chairman of The Doctors' Congress approached her, snaking an arm around her slim waist and kissing her velveteen, swan neck. She made no effort to push him away.

'Fuck you, Brisco...' she said, moaning her way through the words.

'I was teasing you, dummy,' he said gently, 'forgive me. I'll do



anything.'

Her hand came across his chest, at first she thought to push him away as she would sometimes do after letting him get aroused. It was one of her ways of punishing him when he was acting the shithead. But the days and nights in Siberia were lonely and now, after a year of careful and extensive cellular reconditioning, she was back to having the constitution and appetites of a very healthy young woman.

'Old times sake, Katerina?'

Sometimes the answer was this simple. Easy to forget.

'Tongue first. Then cock. You owe me for acting like such a fucking tool today.'

Brisco could have argued, but she had him now.

'Deal done.'

He offered her a handshake and she frowned.

'Not sexy.'

He edged her onto the slab, undoing her jeans slowly. She was flowing with so much youth; he could even feel her clammy wetness through the tough canvas of the denim. They came off easily and she wasn't wearing panties. He prised her legs apart to reveal that lovely, familiar intoxicating smell of her arousal and a bulbous, pink clit and neat pudenda, smiling back at him. She had such a lovely, luscious, little labia, like that of a twenty-year-old swimwear model. It was like coming home, but better. If the sight of it made him hard, perfect nanobiological design made him harder. Brisco took a breath and admired what had been, for the better part, his very own handiwork. She forced his head into her.

'What are you waiting for, Farm Boy? Be quick about it while I'm still in the mood.'

Then Brisco proceeded to dine on her moist femininity in the very spot where ten minutes earlier he'd been slicing through the lower intestines of Specimen Omega.

### THE AMAZONIA

The Dodge growled as Deconstructed Man put it into third, every bit the V-8 goddess that she'd been since the early nineteen seventies. Though it was only late April, the temperature had soared to a high 80 degrees F and was still climbing. He rolled the window down, spitting out a chunky nugget of brown panatela phlegm as he passed the East Park of the Favelas on Knightsbridge, before turning onto Sloane Street and letting her rip. The needle touched the 110 mph mark before he eased her down, passing through Sloane Square and handbraking a right onto the Kings Road. Not too shabby for an antique. Souped and tuned by his own fair hand in all that down time.

'Okay, where are we now?'

The Dodge cruised down what still was a pretty big shopping drag, though the chainstores had long gone. Deconstructed Man knew the type of clientele these stores brought in, remembering the types from his days with the NYPD. Rich kids, faggots, so-called fashion icons. It was a

Saturday afternoon and they were out in force. All they fucking did was shop, drink coffee, drop smart acid, finger each others' bleached gudos and bitch and whine about how tough life was. Preening assholes. One day he'd love have another go at them with an M-16, more agitprop fun, say the word.

Deconstructed Man glanced in the rear-view mirror, though since there was no traffic it was purely a reflex reaction. The sideburns were coming on nicely. He'd stupidly decided to shave them off before joining the Met and only now had he got back round to growing them again. A "handlebar" tache had been a consideration too but he'd decided that it may look a little queer on him with his big frame, especially since his hair was quiffed jet-black. No, the burns were cool enough, especially with Dean's coat on his back.

Hanging off his steering wheel, he stuck his head out of the window as he cruised past a couple of fruity looking VoQue bars equipped with resident gorillas on their doors, but they weren't the ones he sought.

'C'mon now, you must be round here somewhere. Now hang on one hot minute, what do we have here? A motherfuckin' menagerie is what.'

More of a quarter-sphere than a dome, the graphene crystal compound hooked over like a canopy onto the pavement, bouncing hard light all over the place. As he'd expected, the VoQue set were in there at the round, glass tables quaffing lysergic fizz and eating ass-flavored canapés. Moran could certainly pick some places for a siddown. Goddamn social climber.

He pulled the beast over right next to The Amazonia Cafe, parking it half way across the sidewalk. Sorry, pavement. Deconstructed Man had a lifelong habit of having disagreements with the management of such establishments and he was always mindful of the need for a quick exit. He may be meeting the Vice President of International Activities here,

but no matter. It could be the fuckin' Pope who was waiting for him, he never took chances in these situations.

A hue of hard light floated around the entrance which was a neo-classical open arch built into the curved graphene, reassuringly vulgar. Deconstructed Man straightened the collar of his open-necked Ralph Lauren and headed inside. Immediately he felt eyes on him, mocking his 20<sup>th</sup> Century dress sense and swagger. Boy would he love to burst a few heads in here.

The hand came down on his chest like a spade-head, manoeuvring him easily back outside onto the sidewalk.

'Hey.'

'You're supposed to show your voucher at the door, sir. Gold VSN exclusively.'

The doorman was all of seven feet tall and five feet wide at the shoulder. His black hair nearly touched his waist and his skin was the colour of Martian earth. He'd had obviously been guzzling the old nano-steds for quite sometime.

'Hey meat, back off.'

His threshold guardian stood firm. Deconstructed Man prodded his chest.

'Look here, fat neck. You've no idea who I am but I suggest you back the fuck off before I... owwww!'

The gorilla pressed a thumb into his neck like a Vulcan death grip. A tiny needle shot out from his painted nail and jabbed Deconstructed Man's neck.

'That was a microcosmic nerve agent which will disarm your motor abilities upon request of the management. I suggest you cooperate and refrain from the abusive language. Sir.'

'Hey, hey, ooh, take it easy, Bubbles. Else I might have your balls on a stick. Do you know who I am?'

Deconstructed Man flashed his Met badge. The doorman was far from impressed.

'I'm sorry sir but I cannot let you in.'

Deconstructed Man fancied pistol-whipping the 2 ton truck of shit for his insolence, but he remembered how big the Europeans were on subtlety and manners.

'Listen er... Denise,' Denise? Someone had to be fucking kidding, but that was what it said on the name tag, 'er... my associates will already be here and I expect they will have a reservation. Can you check for me? Please?'

'Name?' said Denise.

'Try Moran or Hardyman.'

*Denise* disappeared into the throng. Deconstructed Man poked his head into the arch, only for another giant hand to push it out again. This time it was Carol, who was bigger again than Denise and wore a thick gold ring through his/her nose.

'Can I help you, sir?'

'Jesus shit. No, er ... I was just waiting for your brother, sister er... colleague.'

'Funny, sir. Please continue to wait.'

Denise returned wearing an ill-fitting smile.

'You may come in now, Mr Suarez. We apologise for the inconvenience, sir.'

'You betcha.'

The dome had been left clear so that customers could enjoy the beautiful day yet still have the benefit of air conditioning. Now he was inside he couldn't see the graphene at all and it was as if he was sitting outside in the sun, just a different sun in old Paris. An illusion created for something that was there anyway. These fucking people.

'Just a job, Grayson. Just a job,' he hummed to himself.

'I imagine MannyCapra won't approve, old fellow.'

'He's getting a wee bit slow there in his old age, Saul. This bitch is capable of bringing the whole frigging shithouse down. Trust me.'

Half an hour later, Deconstructed Man glanced at the paper

pad in front of Moran. The Chief had scrawled down something like "Kult" or "Kuts" and circled it.

'This is potentially difficult, but I hardly think this represents as serious a threat as you make out, Apsley. Not if we take the right measures.'

Moran shook his head, glancing at his junior for the first time.

'You didn't know her like I did, Saul, with the greatest of respect. This woman's more than just a doctor, she's a certifiable fucking witch. Ah, darling, more coffee for me. And two beers for my friends, please and thank you, lamby.'

Hardyman hadn't yet acknowledged Deconstructed Man's presence. He'd left him sitting there like the spare prick since he'd arrived. This guy was one of his bosses?

The New Yorker studied Hardyman for a second. He looked like some over-dressed teenage punk with his shoulder-length blond and green hair, black guyliner, stud earrings and a lime green collarless Albertini suit. Not out of place around here but not what he'd expected either. Weird old-school-tie plummy fuck.

'I'm serious my friend. I warned MannyCapra about this months ago and he's done fuck-all about it,' twitched Moran.

'This is all based on the information that your friend on the inside has given us?'

Moran nodded, wiping the froth off his cappuccino with his finger and sucking it. The image of Smits bashing his hard, freshly grown member into back of Moran's throat popped into Deconstructed Man's head for a second. Never to be unseen.

'Well we have a seasoned international security expert here so why don't we ask him? What is your assessment of all this, Grayson?' said Hardyman mildly.

Deconstructed Man was half-stunned at the address. He was beginning to think that Moran had brought him all the way out here just so he could drive him home.

'All I know is how to blow a hole in someone, boss.'

'You are far too modest, Grayson,' said Hardyman. Deconstructed Man kept his face straight.

'Your man Grayson here was on the team that...'

Hardyman waved Moran away.

'You don't need to advertise his credentials to me, Apsley. I'd like a second opinion. I think a question of this magnitude deserves one.'

Moran, probably for the first time since Deconstructed Man had been working for him, was seen to be deferential. They'd obviously talked this over before and had decided to bring him into some kind of trust. He could picture the conversation. Maybe Moran liked him more than he'd thought, or maybe he was just looking for a fall-guy.

Deconstructed Man cracked his gum.

'Our investigation surrounding the kidnappings last fall did reveal somewhat of a threat to your organisation, sir.'

Moran patted him firmly on the shoulder.

'Don't be coy lad. It's *our* organisation, *ours*,' he said mildly.

'Yes chief. You say that these people used to be employees of... our company? Ooh.'

Hardyman offered a Marlboro. Deconstructed Man accepted. Nice touch.

'That's right, Grayson. But the nature of their business involves certain checks and balances.'

'How so?'

The round of drinks arrived. Deconstructed Man poured his beer into a tall glass.

'Well Grayson, the Doctor's Congress wanted to have control of the application or public use, of their research,' said Hardyman.

'And that's a no-no, right?'

'Right. We own the intellectual property rights. Ever since the Entertainment and Medical sectors converged, we have been

market leaders, bankrolling even their most frivolous research, making it reality. They got very upset when we denied them the freedom to reveal their alchemy to the world. Imagine the problems if every little maggot had the ability to go on forever? Ridiculous. So they went into competition. Misguided, from their point of view. No-one is irreplaceable.'

A smirk spread across Moran's face.

'Quite a wee fuckin' purge that was Grayson. Boom boom bang bang. We nailed some fucking foreskins to the wall back then. Guinea pigs for their own research, Dr Moreau shit. Served 'em fucking right too.'

Deconstructed Man nodded sagely, sipping his beer.

'We got the cleaned-up version of that on the news, I remember. I'd just started on undercover when it happened. Every fuckin' doctor in the Tristate area from vets to shrinks was shittin' breezblocks, yeah. Okay, so these guys jump town. Then what?'

Hardyman's face had straightened.

'The Congress managed to save half of their membership. The other half either went back to us, after some severe sanctions had been put on them, or they were retired.'

'With the foreskin bang bang thing, yeah. And you don't know where the rest have gone.'

'Correct. There aren't many places left where our brand of communications haven't reached. East Africa, Siberia, parts of North America, Amazonia, Antarctica.'

'Huh.'

'But they had been recruiting ever since?'

Moran cracked his knuckles.

'Aye son. We brought in a couple of their goons. I'll take you over to see them, what's left of them, later on.'

'Did we get much?'

Hardyman shook his head.

'Only the identities of the next level of rank and they

scarpered fast after the arrests we're made. It is a worry, Grayson, though I'm not quite as pessimistic as the Chief here. They seem to have, what was it you called it, Apsley?

'A guerrilla chain of command,' said Moran robotically, 'A multi-headed Hydra.'

'Yes, that's it. The foot soldier knows nothing bar, of course, their own tasks, the immediate C/O and the general principles and goals of the organisation. Makes it near impossible to get to the leaders this way. A very old trick, but still effective. Even in this day and age.'

'Sure thing, boss,' replied Deconstructed Man. This was getting interesting. But which one of them was going to pop the question? *Shall we fuck now?* He could smell the disquiet.

Hardyman adjusted his cufflinks and glanced around the café. It was packed full of Voquists recovering from their Saturday shop and the corner table had no one within earshot. Moran was a good "friend" of the proprietor and had even arranged Deconstructed Man's little welcoming commission. Security was everything.

'It seems your man has an excellent appreciation of the situation then, Apsley. And he has of course already proved his worth to us. That business with Kruger-Smits. Most discrete.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Deconstructed Man.

Moran beamed at him. The penny dropped; he'd been priming him for this since his first day.

'Aye, it was too, Saul, it was too.'

The Vice President revealed his pearly whites to Deconstructed Man, who was unfazed. He knew how bent Moran was and it was only a matter a time before he could savvy what made Eurotrash like Hardyman tick. He was all ears.

'What kind of bearing would you say the Congress has on our situation, Grayson?'

The question was more loaded than the .357 he was packing

beneath his armpit.

'That's a tough one to answer, sir.'

He saw their faces drop for a second. He loved the game. All hoods had the same attitude, no matter which side of the law they claimed to be on.

'The situation is not critical. Not yet anyway. Keep your thumbs up your asses too long though, you'll have a problem soon enough. Your infrastructure isn't perfect. Perfect don't exist. I'm sensing you need a very specific task completing in order to help you with the bigger problem?'

Now he was speaking their language.

'Sharp boy. Glad you think that way, Grayson,' said Hardyman. Deconstructed Man felt his stomach drop as the VP moved closer. There was something not right about the man, he was trained to sniff below the surface.

Hardyman's body language told him, up close and personal, away from any eyes. Of course. This guy was no punk, not even a retro-head like himself. He was *old*. Fucking ancient-old.

'Grayson,' said Moran, coming to his side in a pincer movement, 'Mr Hardyman and I have a very special job for you. If you're interested?'

### THE REPORTER

Although the Favelas had developed a sophisticated system of barter, trade and even a form of currency, the black market ultimately depended upon the Buzzards for the basic provisions. The area was far too densely populated for any kind of agriculture or self-subsistence. It was the one great weapon the outsiders had to stop the lunatics from completely taking over the asylum; *behave or we'll cut you off*.

Choppers would descend upon designated spots on the parks, leave their payload and go. In East Park, food, drink, clothes, building materials and basic medical supplies would be distributed by the self-appointed gangs who controlled and fought over their small patches. In the early years the Favelas had been the hell it was designed to be and only the cunning, the ruthless and the vicious survived. The police, who were only there to keep the inhabitants from leaving, never once got involved.

Faz was a man well known to the regular customers of The World's End Cafe on East Park. Legend was that he was once a

household name on the outside but that he'd landed up in here somehow. As network access was denied here, communication in the parks was chiefly down to oral tradition which meant that some wild stories came out about the life and escapades of such characters. The details of his identity also varied, but it remained a fact that the hermit also carried a fair amount of influence in the Favelas as a whole. The only guaranteed way of catching sight of The Suit would be at the bi-weekly food drops at the World's End and they were exclusive, selective affairs.

The Met Helicopter pulled away from the yard of the cafe, a disused tennis court. As ever a few ungrateful bullets smacked off its armour, which itself was ironic because sometimes the consignments would contain ammunition or even weapons from a bent Squadjutant looking for a cheap cut in the rackets. Very few local residents ever had the privilege of visiting the small cafe on such days. Antonia Lavarini made sure her boys kept the undesirables away from the premises on drop day. She rarely got any trouble; this was not the Wild West of Kensington Gardens and Bayswater, that damned place just over the wall. This was as close to civilisation as it came in this city, inside or outside the compound.

Following the food drop, which Antonia would always be on hand to supervise, she would return to her cafe to see her *special* clients; buyers and sellers. Meanwhile, the boys packed and prepared the bulk produce for distribution from the tiny market stalls that operated between and around the Dickensian thoroughfares of East Park, places that used to be green space in the old times. The World's End was more about the sharper end of business than food, being a trading centre for goods of an especially rare nature, although Mama Lavarini was still known to do a formidable tagliatelle. As fronts went, she did a good job of keeping up appearances, smells and tastes.

This particular day had been nothing but a pain. First, the

Buzzard was two hours late, completely screwing up Antonia's appointment schedule on the busiest morning of the fortnight. Then her schmukeroo of a Squadjutant had completely forgotten to bring the kitchenware and the gas cylinders for the second drop in a row and she had her distributors screaming at her.

Farrukh Fazal was perched in his favourite position at the bar, propped up in the left hand corner on a Victorian iron barstool which he rather liked. Many a night he'd spent getting stuck into a special bottle which Antonia had managed to procure, anything from Slivovitz to Sake to Uncle Jack Daniels himself. Invariably on such evenings he would end up staying the night at the Cafe, usually as the guest of Antonia in her bed, the safest place in the whole of the Favelas and perhaps the World. Above the bar at his end was a tatty old portrait of 19th Century East London. He would often stare at the picture for hours when he was the last person drinking, wondering how history had repeated itself in the cramped, dark and squalid shanties of the former Hyde Park, where age-old favourites like cholera and tuberculosis has made an unwanted comeback, more resistant than ever. He heard the door clang shut behind him, followed by a noisy clamour.

'Antonia, we gotta talk about those cylinders...'

'Mama Lavarini, about those shekels I owe you...'

'One moment gentlemen, please, can I have one atta time, thank you. Prego.'

Fazal was glad that he'd brought a book along. Antonia would be some time. He helped himself to coffee and picked up his reading. It was a trashy retrofuturistic late '90s sci-fi novel by some hack writer who'd got it all woefully wrong, but it passed the time. He liked the feel of the paper on his fingers and texture of the printed words, which were a direct portal to a better time.

'How are you darlin?'' said Antonia, surprisingly cheerful

after her little black market ordeal.

'Have I come at a bad time, Toni?'

Antonia frowned in mock anger.

'No time is a bad time for my Faz, eh? Come here and give me a cuddle!'

He noticed how some of the more subtle curves had returned to her ample Mediterranean body. Give it long enough and he'd have her looking like a young Gina Lollobrigida, which had its benefits from his point of view, of course.

'More coffee, Mr D?'

'Please, and a packet of king-size Mademoiselle A.'

'Smoking is bad for you.'

'So is abstinence. I can buy new lungs.'

That might exceed even his influence while he was confined to the Favelas, but the line sounded good.

Antonia passed him a mug of black liquid. The cigarettes were hand-rolled this time, but the wet baccy looked okay. She leaned over the counter, fawning over him as he sipped and smoked. This place would have been so popular had it existed in the old days, when London was more than just a network of human hives. The World's End had been his saving grace two years ago, when that awful acidhead pigfucker Hardyman had pitched him into the Favelas to live on nothing but his wits.

Antonia's chubby face gave her sole customer a nod and a half-smile. She had lost her hanging jowls recently and had been so much more cheerful. Fazal took in a good lungful of smoke in a sigh, his leathery face emitting a slight grin, and he reached into the pocket of his trademark Macintosh.

'Let's see what Santa has in his sack this week, eh?'

Antonia licked her lips and he produced the items one by one for her approval.

He placed in front of her a tiny book of papers with the "International Activities Logo" emblazoned on the cover.

'Now remember, this is prototype stuff, straight off

MannyCapra's personal production line. So it's for your use only, isn't it?

Antonia's brown eyes lit up with joy. Did she know he was bullshitting her? Did she care?

'And one leaf at a time, my dear, we don't want you going doolally.'

She popped a leaf of paper on her tongue and it dissolved instantly.

'Grazi... mmm, bellissimo.'

'Prego,' he muttered.

There was nothing "state of the art" about his lysergics, gene developers or gadgets that he smuggled over. Antonia had much more contact with the outside world than he did, but it was more than any copper's lifesworth than to bring any designer chemicals or hardware over the wall. A little bit of corruption was probably encouraged, but giving the bad kids the best toys was punishable by life in West Park; never the preferred accommodation of a 'retired' Squadjutant. Journalists on the other hand had no such issues.

Fazal had smuggled all his gear over en masse when he was exiled. Most of the stuff he gave Antonia was merely repackaged but the placebo effect plus the actual power of the lysergics and therapies had kept her more than happy. His only problem was that his "tissue revitalisers and range of nano-cosmetics" would one day run out or discharge and his gear only had a temporary effect.

He did have one or two contacts left on the outside, but they were dubious to say the least.

Antonia checked herself out in a wall of mirrors opposite the long coffee bar, assembled in hotch-potch order according to who brought the items into her. This was the same for every other item in this bar, right down to the old Gaggia coffee machine that produced his brew. Fazal loved this place, the ramshackle charm. It almost made his exile bearable.

'Next, what any young lady needs to stay healthy and beautiful.'

She moved her hands through her jet black wavy bob, chuckling bashfully. It was a 250ml pressurised bottle of clear liquid. Again, Antonia was delighted.

'That much! Oh darling.'

'It's been a good week. Don't expect this every time.'

He passed her a hypodermic. Automated nail jabs were in short supply.

'This'll probably knock another ten years off, at least. Use with caution.'

'Wow, Farrukh.'

He'd only exaggerated by a couple of years too. This was from his best batch.

Fazal had made a lifelong habit of never revealing his sources. It was his only good habit, apart from breathing.

He sipped his coffee and stubbed out his fag. Antonia kissed him warmly on the lips. Would she be so welcoming when his supplies ran out? Or when the effect of his elixirs wore off?

Fazal glanced at his watch. It was coming up to three.

'Turn your projector on for me, will you?'

Antonia possessed the only three dimensional viewer in East Park and possibly the entire Favelas. The 3-D Reality Complex technology was forty years old and had long since been outdated by the neural network scanning capability of hemispheres. But with the right chip information the projector could still get all the networks, though it would just be poor quality hard-light rather than the multi-sensory experience of the dome. Fazal had to tap his contacts on the outside for this gadget, for it was singly more valuable than any item that could be bought or sold here, more than Antonia's cosmetics and much more than a human life.

The kitchen was decked out with an ancient walk-in refrigerator, a cast iron stove and a huge leather Chesterfield



settee that in Favelian terms was a huge luxury. It was extremely rare for anyone, East or West, to possess this much space.

'Ancient piece of shit... huh, it's just a bit of static, that's all, honey.'

He clicked a button and some menus appeared:

*LIFESIZE*

*UPSIZED*

*DOWNSIZED*

*NORMAL*

*ENTER*

'Lifesize okay. Right, let's see what we get.'

The standard Network Presenter's voice came from the speakers.

*IT'S 15.00 HOURS. TIME FOR OUR LIVE NEWSCAST NOW WITH FARRUKH FAZAL.*

'Mute it.'

His doppelganger appeared, a generated version of himself from five years past, speaking in mute mode. No such thing as *live*.

Antonia placed his hand in hers. There was that frown occupying his forehead again, just like every time before. She couldn't understand why he put himself through this every week. And still he couldn't bring himself to believe that she loved him, gifts or not. Silly man, Farrukh.

'Play audio,' muttered Fazal.

#### SUMMER IN THE CITY

Usually the officers of the Metropolitan Police, especially senior officers, chose the luxury apartments of Peel House to set up home. They stood underneath the site of St Paul's Cathedral, on which now was the giant all-seeing-eye of The Metropolitan Dome. Residents included the full spectrum of law enforcement, from Favela cops to the likes of Superintendent Pollard to even Apsley Moran himself. Few erred from this trend, chiefly because Peel House was the finest dwelling facility available to anyone outside of VoQue.

Deconstructed Man didn't give a rabid dog's ass about how many square metres he could have or how state-of-the-art the home Entertainments were. The bottom line was that he'd never liked living near other cops, dating back to before his years as a mercenary. Cops always lived in the same neighbourhoods, drank in the same bars, went to the same functions and fucked each others' spouses. To bring work and home life together like that was incestuous and unhealthy. Above all, Deconstructed Man's brand of leisure and relaxation didn't fit in with that of

the majority of his brethren swine.

The American's own residence was beneath the International Activities warehouse in Hampstead. The building had begun life as a shopping centre in the late 1990s but the bottom had dropped out that market when most of the area went up in smoke forty years ago. Now its sole use was as the distribution depot for I.A. network hardware to the city of London and the other major nearby conurbations of Birmingham, Glasgow and Paris.

The apartment itself ran beneath the supply depot. Vac shoots frequently rumbled past and the rooms themselves had been shabbily converted from storage holds leaving a dank, cheesy odour about the place. Deconstructed Man had even noticed dry rot when he'd come to check the place out after moving to London. The housing officer had offered him a beautiful open plan "penthouse" in Peel, but the American had insisted upon taking this seedy warren in the middle of nowhere. The realtor put it down to the eccentricity of his customer and left him the entry codes. Deconstructed Man had been happily garretted there ever since.

On this particular evening he had chosen to sit out on his "buena vista." It was really a small dome which he'd set up as a balcony overlooking the Manhattan skyline from Central Park West. Deconstructed Man rarely used the dome for anything else and he'd programmed it so that the simulation ran in real time. This had always been the greatest view on earth to him. It was maddening that in reality it had all gone to radioactive dust.

And they said it would be there forever. He would have liked to have returned one day.

The blazing heat had necessitated a margarita to go with his pastrami on rye. He had to hand it to them there clever clogs who built these things, they'd got their deets right. The level and texture of the smog floating over the horizon was spot on

for a mid-afternoon, as was the eclectic mix of ant-like Islanders hanging out in the park itself playing softball, meditating, throwing frisbees about, jogging and just chilling out. It was such a pity that he couldn't roam around the real Central Park, but then he never would have been able to afford such a view anyway.

This was the only place he could properly relax of an evening. The only place he could think.

First problem was what to do with those two kraut bitches he'd brought in last October. Since then, they were just sitting there downtown like a waste of space; eating, breathing, shitting and getting crazy. It had long been tempting to haul their asses down here and make them into his slaves. That could be a whole lotta fun too, spiking them up on lysergics and watching them do the housework before getting them to put on a show for him. But he knew himself too well. He had a low boredom threshold and he'd probably end up neglecting them. If one of them died in custody it could be easily explained, but here it would probably come back on him and Sheriff Bony would get too pissed for words to describe.

'Naah, never bring your work home with you, Dan-o.'

He'd think of something.

Then there was the big score, the one he'd been deliberately putting to the back of his mind since that meeting a fortnight ago. Moves were not far off being busted, moves that he knew could very easily end him like a Lee Harvey Patsy.

He stared down at the ancient analogue dictaphone in the palm of his hand. Another collector's item dating back to the nineteen nineties. It was a pain the ass trying to find blank tapes and power for the damn thing. But it had paid back its antique value a hundred fold in the several years that it had been in his possession. Digital or nano systems wouldn't pick it up in any security check because modern surveillance network designers had never accounted for such simple devices. This he knew

well. It was ideal for those clandestine café conversations.

In a way he'd wished he hadn't taken it with him to Chelsea because then his decision would have been so much simpler. He could have gone with the flow and thrown his hat in the ring with the devil he knew. But who was to say that Moran wouldn't hang him out to dry as the culprit if it all went wrong?

This MannyCapra guy was an unknown quantity and no one gets that far up the food chain without some real smarts. Deconstructed Man didn't like to bet against something that he couldn't at least weigh up in advance.

'Gimme a musical selection.'

*ARTIST'S NAME AND SONG TITLE?*

'Quincy Jones, Summer in the City. Play.'

A walking bass line reverberated through the floor. Deconstructed Man had taken care to set the right levels an hour previously.

He pressed the recorder up to his ear and hit the play button. It made a reassuring mechanical click.

*'Did you get all of that back there, sonny?'*

*'Loud and clear Chief. Where do you want to go now?'*

*'Take us back to Peel.'*

*'Okay.'*

Deconstructed Man cued the tape forward. He could just make out Moran's voice above the rumble of the V-8 and the music.

*'Right, pull over here, chicken. Need a quick word with you.'*

*'Right you are, chief.'*

The sound became much clearer after he'd cut the engine.

*'Didn't wanna say this back there, lad. Your man Hardy's a good sport and everything, but he minces his fucking words like, if you know what I mean?'*

*'What's on your mind, chief?'*

*'You're a crackin' wee lad, Grayson. I think I can count on you, no*

*worries there. But know this, and keep it stuck in the crack o' your arse: you ever fuck with me boy, and I mean this in all friendliness, you'll get it back with interest.'*

*'Oh chief... come on, fella! I know the deal. It was you who recruited me!'*

*'Aye, and you came with the best references, don't get me wrong there. But the next few months are going to be mighty testing for us all.'*

*'I've been in worse scrapes.'*

Deconstructed Man pricked his ears to the static noise, waiting for the punchline.

*'Grayson if you play games with me on this project, there's no place I won't find you, no place on earth. Mark these words, sonny, I'll make you suffer like no man before if you ever turn rat. You know me by reputation and it's all fucking worse than that. Do you hear me? A simple yes will suffice.'*

*'Yes. Sure thing.'*

*'Good man yourself. Now take us home.'*

Deconstructed Man hit the stop button on the tape and mixed himself another Margarita.

He'd been in this business at one level or another since he was a boy of seventeen. An undercover city cop knew when to keep his ears open and his mouth shut. He also knew the difference between trash talking and genuine hardball psychosis. In the fourteen months since he'd joined the Met he'd discovered that Apsley Moran fell into the latter category. The man was very capable of planning strategies, good public speaking and running a tight, disciplined department. But he was as mad as a shithouse rat and much more dangerous.

*'I didn't fuckin' ask for this,'* he muttered to no-one.

Deconstructed Man tossed his glass over the side of the balcony, hearing it shatter eighty-one floors below.

It wouldn't be long before tweedle dum and tweedle dee started putting solid plans together to whack MannyCapra. He

knew who would be left with the onus of the hit; the most experienced assassin on the market, Grayson Alberto Suarez himself.

The music had stopped. He'd better be careful with his ranting. He massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

'Think man,' he mumbled to himself.

Was he just spooked? Wasn't this just another straightforward hit? MannyCapra was just a man and could disappear as easily as anyone. They'd offered him a juicy package too, but there wasn't much choice. Just like in the police or Marine Corps, an order was an order.

It was an opportunity. Yes. Technically he was employed by a state police department... or force... but in reality he was just a mercenary. He should think like a mercenary too. He'd come here to do a straight security job during a period of transition and to make himself available to his client, International Activities, should there be any need for any *special* tasks like the Kruger-Smits job. That was all. Fucking with MannyCapra was tantamount to starting off the biggest coup since the Muscovite Putsch back in '45. Whatever, that was way too big for him, period. Nothing spooked him, but this did.

But a situation where Messrs Moran and Hardyman were neutralised by the state apparat... *and he would only be doing his job.*

It would have to be quick, cunning and careful, but there was a way of getting through to MannyCapra without any shit flying back in his direction. Moran had really done his research before employing him, but no one knew how far down the line his contacts went. If this came off then the worst that could happen would be for Sheriff Moran to turn on Hardyman, who would in turn get whacked. But that was not a problem for him.

Deconstructed Man paused the Manhattan program, which he didn't like doing. He hit the options button to bring him on-

line.

'Let's see if my old friend Satan fancies a chat,' said Deconstructed Man to the thin air.

Grayson Suarez then cast his hat into the ring, but this dirty devil was one he'd not talked to since his last stay in Europe, back in the good old bad days.

### BACK IN THE WOODS

'Use your dominant eye to sight with, Sasha, come on!'

The bear scraped at the tree bark languidly, as if it wasn't sure about whether or not it needed a snack. It was either the same bastard that had tried to carve her up, or all the bears in this forest had great patches of white fur in the middle of their foreheads.

'I can't do this, Misha. Is there any need to kill the poor thing?'

She would not admit the truth that she was more concerned with the prospect of missing the beast and agitating it to go after them. Since it was barely 50 metres away, that was a clear possibility. *Bears are fast.*

'Well I could go up and say, excuse me bear, but would mind us flaying the fur off your back as it's getting rather chilly out here.'

'No need to get like that.'

'The Siberian weather won't be so kind to you, devushka.'

A clump of fresh snow fell off a nearby branch. The bear

reared its head inquisitively for a short moment then got back to scraping at the bark. Brontay lowered the rifle again.

'No. Misha, you do it will you?'

Misha looked less than happy at his protégé.

'Devushka, there are two things you will have to learn about living out here. One is to learn better Russian, the other is to...'

'Shoot defenceless animals?'

Misha glared back at her.

'To live off the land.'

Her self-appointed mentor had a habit of repeating himself. Misha did have a point though. The longer she'd been out here the less likely it was that she'd ever go back to the West, not until the war was over at least. And then, not for the first time recently, it occurred to her; what would be waiting for her back there?

Brontay's palms began to sweat despite the temperature. She gripped the gun like it was about to explode in her hands any second. She shut her left eye and aimed for the animal's sumptuous hide.

'No, not his ass, fool! It will suffer. Shoot for the head. Come on!'

'Okay, okay!'

She adjusted her aim and began to put pressure on the trigger.

The shot rang distant around the forest. A fraction of time later the beast slumped against the tree and began to twitch gently.

'Doktor Korsakov, kak dyela?'

The stranger looked in his mid forties, sporting the customised beard and uniform, like a character straight out of a Pasternak novel, unchanged by centuries. His chiselled face looked vaguely familiar though. Maybe he'd been a film star out here before the war had broken out.

Brontay knew the uniforms and ranks of all the fighting

parties by memory at Misha's insistence. Now she knew why. The guy dwarfed even Misha, and the stars he bore on his great coat were that of a Colonel in the Nomadic army of Cossacks. He noticed the multicoloured stripes on his lapels, denoting over two hundred hand-to-hand kills. What a big, vicious fuck.

'Harashoy stryel, Vasha,' said Misha without a trace of surprise.

*Vasha?*

The two men embraced in a way which, Brontay presumed, only Russians could do without looking completely ridiculous. It was time for the act. She knew that it had to happen one day, but this fellow had the kind of look about him that could spot an untruth like a sniper in a tree. Just before snapping the liar's neck.

'Nu Misha. Kuhto eta tvoya droognika?'

Misha clasped Brontay's shoulder firmly, still wearing his amiable smile.

'Eta? Nu, poznamomtets moya plemyanika, Aleksandrina Maximova. On rabotaet b insitutye, a eta ryebyenok narodskom.'

'Nyeuzhely? Huh... a gdyuh, Aleksandrina Maximova?'

Brontay winced inwardly. She'd have to speak to the guy. In Russian. Misha looked relaxed enough in his company, but that could well be part of the act.

'Pashalsta, ya prepatchitayu Sasha. Moskva, na Krapotkinskaya.'

'Minyeh otchen zhal, moy novy droog. Minyeh otchen zhal. Nu ya dalzhyen ekhats sechas. Dobry dyen Misha,' he cut Brontay an enigmatic leer, 'a prazhaietye, er... Sasha.'

The Cossack grinned like a fucked ferret and disappeared into the woodlands as stealthily as he'd arrived. Brontay exhaled freely for the first time in two minutes.

'Do you think I convinced him?'

Misha passed back a rye grin.

'The accent was passable Muscovite. But you asked him to address you in the familiar. It normally takes longer in our tongue for friends to be made.'

'I see,' sniffed Brontay.

'His lot aren't too bad, they won't give us any trouble. I've known that lad since he was born.'

'That's not a tremendous comfort, Pops,' said the Englishwoman to the trees.

Misha approached the inanimate bear. It was indeed the one that had gone for her back in March. How had it come this far into Nimsky? Probably because of all the guns and explosions. Still, she was glad that it wasn't her who'd pulled the trigger in the end. Misha grabbed its hind legs, cursing it like a stubborn child. It was probably going in the stew later on, as there had been a shortage of meat lately. Brontay thought she may look into becoming a vegetarian.

'Young lady, my back isn't what it used to be, you know! Help me get it on the cart.'

The frosted pines towered nonchalantly in the bitter cold, sighing in the breeze. Even in the summer months Siberian weather could turn nasty. This place, or rather the Korsakovs, had opened her up to knowledge of life, living and this planet in a way that she'd never known. Back in London, knowledge was processed as information, gobbled up by the system and spat out as entertainment to the masses. So what was she missing? Her creature comforts? Maybe she didn't want to go back. Ever.

They parked the cart outside the dacha and unloaded the furry cargo into the barn for gutting and skinning, another ritual that Brontay knew she would have to participate in or risk the excruciating disappointment of the elders.

'Right,' said Misha, out of breath and dusting his hands off, 'it's getting dark and we still haven't cleaned that silo out for

Anya. Come on.'

Brontay followed Misha behind the dacha's perimeter wall but only made it a few steps before he stopped her.

'What is it?'

Misha cocked his nose to the air and looked grave. Brontay noticed a faint aroma of burning before realising that Misha had already disappeared in a flash in the direction of the silo.

The grain silo ran off the back of Dacha Korsakov. The small structure had predated the main building by some three hundred years. Misha wanted to give it a more dignified use as it had been an Orthodox chapel for most of that time. It had survived wars, invasions, revolutions and technology because of its sheer distance from mass humanity. Now the spires, domes and chalky masonry lay in fragments over the allotments and grazing patches of Korsakov's land. Tears welled up in Anna Petrovna's pale blue eyes as she stood amongst the debris.

'One shell. One of *their* fucking shells,' said Misha in a whisper. Anya slid an arm around her husband's waist.

Brontay knew only too well that it was their passion for history, an entity once called Russia, which made them weep at these pathetic ruins. She understood that this was a desecration, the present killing the past.

Misha fondled a fragment of the chapel's ceiling, using his handkerchief to wipe over the surface. The paint was centuries old but still vivid. It was part of a mural of icons depicting the crucifixion of Christ, the stations of the Cross. The mid-afternoon daylight shone through the stiff branches of the wood, dappling over the ruins like nature's attempt to excuse the desecration.

The three huddled together around the cosy hearth of Misha's study. Brontay had poured them out some tepid coffee and they

sipped it slowly, both staring blankly into the blazing open fire. Misha broke the silence, Brontay not noticing that he spoke in Russian.

'Nothing is safe. History, land, language, culture. Children.'

He glanced up at the oil painting of their two sons above the hearth.

Anya turned his face around and planted a tender kiss on his lips. Brontay wanted to help them, to say something to comfort them. She didn't like the way it came out.

'The war's coming here. That's what this all means?'

Misha smiled at her like she was a small child. Anya grabbed her hand, gripping it powerfully.

'It means,' said Misha, 'that we are going to have to get you out of here, Aleksandra Maximova.'

**XVTH PLENARY CONGRESS OF DOCTORS,  
NIMSKY OBLAST, SIBERIAN FREE STATE**

The helipad in south-west Nimsky had only been fully cleared of ice and debris half an hour before the arrival of the delegates from the Novosibirsk Air Base. It was a well-executed landing, given that the weather had rapidly deteriorated that afternoon. The pad hadn't been given the usual beacons to assist the landing for fear of detection from particle drones, so the skill and experience of the pilot was crucial to ensure a safe touchdown. A group of orderlies battled against the conditions to unload the small amount of freight, then unveiled a thick cammy sheet to protect the aircraft from the elements and the unwelcome attention of airborne spotters.

Brisco jogged across the pad to welcome a cluster of ungainly parka macs standing by the old Sikorsky chopper. He held on to his outrageous ten gallon hat as he ran, in case he took off himself into the blizzard lashing bitterly across the clearing. As the rotors died down, Jean Alexandra Montgomery completed his post-flight routine and sashayed off the aircraft. The icy

wind bit into his legs which were protected by only a flimsy pair of jodhpurs, but his perfectly square shoulders and marble-hewn physique defied the blustery aerodynamics. Every stride exuded purpose and an easy vibe, even in this rough, cold place. Monty admitted to himself that he was glad that he'd packed his woollen jockstrap.

His expression warmed as he spotted Katia; soft, deep brown Gallic eyes pouring all over her like a good cognac.

'Bonjour Monsieur Montgomery,' said Kutz as they embraced, 'showman, artiste and ace pilot.'

She planted a warm kiss on his cheek.

'Of course, Polognaise! These Siberians have gone soft since I was last here, I see. They shoot straight in Colombia.'

'They have better weather in Colombia, too. This is supposed to be summer.'

The snowy trail from the pad to the lab had been lined with edgy looking guards, hired guns from a local militia. Eight westerners out in the open represented a juicy catch.

'Where did you dig this lot up from, eh?' said Monty.

'Don't ask. I left the arrangements to Chris.'

'I see.'

Kutz beamed with delight as she walked along with him arm in arm. It was that familiar accent; a quaint, natural English laced with some *Jus de Parisienne* which he had never endeavoured to lose in the all years that she had known him. Although Kutz stood herself at around six feet tall, her head reached only to his shoulders. His Milanese cologne only added to the charm of the man. Brisco shot him a citric glance as he walked along with the others. Kutz didn't fail to spot the expression and she drew Monty even closer.

'Just how is Christian?' said Montgomery in an almost-concerned tone. Kutz shook her head.

'Still very much the cranky old Anglo. Not much about him inspires me any more.'



'You're no spring chicken yourself, Polognaise,' replied Montgomery with a disarming grin.

She slapped him playfully. The Frenchman picked her up with one arm, tickling her with the other. She squealed loudly and struggled free, falling down flat on the path. He produced a battered silver hip flask and offered it to her. His brandy was sharp and warming. Kutz took a second slug and stuffed it back into the zip pocket of his flying jacket.

'Come on, you lusty old frog. We've got urgent business.'

She climbed to her feet and they reattached themselves to the rest of the group heading into the compound, to the relief of the guards on the trail. Brisco bit his lip as they approached, trying to ignore the well of resentment in his belly. Was this a hormonal thing? Cellular regression had some tricky side-effects.

Brisco recalled how MannyCapra's goons had taunted him, playing on his resentment through days upon end of interrogations. Not once had he betrayed her. He pummelled the memory to the back of his thoughts and smiled at the throng.

The lift appeared through the snow with a hydraulic hiss.

'Welcome to Siberia, everyone,' said the Chairman of the Congress.

They all descended to drink tea, argue and make plans to change the world forever.

#### NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Another exploding bomb thudded in the distance as the thrash metal beat of war banged on relentlessly.

She saw again the eyes of the bear as it rose above her. Taciturn, unforgiving, murderous... and very human...

Then she span round, seeing the clearing in the distance. No salvation there, no salvation anywhere. She ran, every muscle in her body twitching, aching... but the woods closed in around her, blocking any path. The snow became a treadmill, refusing to let her move away from an icy, bloody, naked death, until at last she collapsed to the ground and sunk deeper and deeper into the earth's womb. The freezing numbness took hold of her, trying to uncoil her soul. She scraped and fought. The bear watched on, the white patch on its forehead glowing... it just stood there manicuring its claws as she floundered in the snow, whistling *the Teddy Bear's Picnic*. Finally she stopped, unable to struggle, unable to blink, unable to speak. The bear grinned down at her, licking his lips. Dinner had arrived.

*'What brings you to my neck of the woods then?'*

It grinned and pounced.

Now the bombs were falling around her. And she was falling with them, through the clouds, back down towards old London town.

'Aaaargh!'

Down, down, down. Home. Home, Dorothy.

Down, down, down. In bed. Her own bed. Deeper and deeper into sleep. How had this happened? How had she travelled all this way? Was she dead?

Not dead. Home.

But not home. This was home in another life. How did she get here? How did they do that? She drifted back to sleep. Deeper.

Something thudded against the front door of the flat.

'Gimme that, useless asshole! Ainya never been on a bust before?' said Deconstructed Man to the beleaguered Squadjutant.

'Er well... no sir.'

'This is how you do it. You take the ram like this, balancing your stance. Then you use your weight to carry you through. I hope for your sake that there isn't some nimrod in there with a gun.'

'A gun sir?' said the other Squadjutant apprehensively. He pulled out a can of pepper spray. Deconstructed Man snatched it away and squealed in camp mockery of the subordinate.

'It's a quiet Wednesday afternoon in the district with the lowest crime rate in the Western world. I was only kidding about the gun. *Irony*, see? Now, watch and learn.'

'Yes, sir.'

The wood splintered, giving way immediately.

Brontay's apartment was nothing special or unusual for one of mediocre white collar status. Open plan with an en suite

bathroom. About standard size. Personal affects, mainly clothing, were still strewn across the floor from when he and Moran had worked the place over last October. A fake mahogany chair and some multi-coloured bean bags were placed around the kitchen/dining area. Picture screens showing the same girl dressing and undressing featured on the frosty blue walls. The centrepiece of this soon-to-be-repossessed abode featured a clear dome inside which was a double water bed. Deconstructed Man noticed that the sheets were freshly disturbed. A sound came from the bathroom.

In the bathroom, above the toilet bowl, was a neon sign that read THE POINT OF NO RETURN. It had been opened up to reveal a small vent which led to the back of a goods lift. A pair of legs, a waist and a backside wearing white knickers were struggling to get through the opening.

'Go on then!' yelled the D.I.

The Squadjutants attempted to pull her back into the bathroom, but a lucky kick caught one of them square in the solar plexus and he fell into the empty bath, winded. His colleague fell on top of him.

Deconstructed Man shook his head.

'Lax.'

He grabbed the legs, pulling back with such force that the suspect's jaw made a sickening crack against the concrete lip of the vent.

'Oopsidaisy.'

The woman at Deconstructed Man's feet was a bloody, gaunt mess. She spat out a couple of molars onto the Italian tiles.

'Off down to SoSamantha's again, miss?'

Deconstructed Man hauled her to her feet and up against the wall. He gazed into the eyes of his captive, smirking like a prankster. The woman responded by coughing blood into his face. The New Yorker responded instantly, headbutting her hard on the bridge of her nose. He then delicately produced a

handkerchief to wipe away the crimson goo from his face and clothes while the dome checked him for viruses.

'Earn your keep will you?' said Deconstructed Man to the Squadjutants, 'do you ever do any real work?'

The Squadjutants obliged by propping up the semi-conscious suspect.

Deconstructed Man rinsed and dried his hands in Brontay's sink. He shook his head and chuckled, sitting down on the lid of the toilet. He then fumbled around in his pockets, finding his smokes and lighter.

'From our files I had you down as a real pussy, Alexandra. A regular consumer, non-confrontational type of chick. Nothing special at all. I was beginning to think you Eu-ro-peans were all pussies and then you put on this little show. Quite the little fighter aren't we for an amateur? Eh? No? So what was it to be then, bit of terrorism? Too early to ask that? Yeah maybe.'

He lit his smoke and drew heavily. Then he reached into his coat pocket again, pulling out a battered photograph of a younger, suited Alexandra Brontay, Sales Executive at Hanslett Insurance PLC. Bamby ignorant behind the eyes, not like this one. They, whoever *they* were, had done a number on her. The D.I. mumbled something to himself, comparing the image with the person before him. Brontay had lost thirty pounds and had let her hair grow. Something whiffed in Denmark.

Deconstructed Man got to his feet, approaching Brontay.

'Alexandra. Alexandra? Are you reading me, over? Look Alex, shit ye not, you deserve some honesty because you seem to be a straight, law abiding, tax paying lady. You didn't deserve to get tangled up in all this. We know who took you. Now we just want to find out where you've been. And how you got home.'

The captive vomited over the pink tiles of the bathroom floor, her puke covering the Squadjutant's chest.

Deconstructed Man let her finish puking, threw a sheet over

her and led her out the front way to the lifts and the surface.

Good, honest police work. He'd so missed it.

### THE PRINCE OF ALBERT

Another popular myth about the Hyde Favelas was the lifestyle of its inhabitants. Fazal had been a resident of the decriminalised world of sanitised London recently enough to know the fear cast among the ignorant at the slightest mention of the place. Cannibalism, ghoulish genetic deformities, rape gangs, weird cults... crappola. Favelians would have long wiped themselves out if there was any truth in these legends and there was a growing consensus that those outside the walls were the real prisoners. That sanitised lifestyle of free illusion, comfortable lies and self-obsession often sometimes made the Reporter glad to be here. Life was more authentic on the edge of survival, knowing that *they* could turn off the taps at any point. The denial of technology made people rediscover their evolutionary knack of talking to one another, which was hardly an earth-shattering discovery but a significant outcome of the prodigious social engineering experiment called The Great New Order.

Farrukh Fazal was different, or at least he proclaimed himself

so which amounted to the same thing. He'd made it his life's work to see what it was like on the other side, to bear witness to the truth, to never shy away from the realities of reality. That was why, he kept reminding himself, he had been put here. It had been five long years since he'd made a broadcast, but every day felt like he was pulling the pieces together of the biggest cover-story of all time. He just needed an audience.

The heady days had been as a war correspondent for the now defunct BBC, striving for the truth about the world when a few people remained who wanted such a thing. Nutshelled in a capricious irony, his best years as he saw them had been when the rot had begun to set in, when vanity and doublespeak had begun to take over from any form of common sense. Civil chaos and anarchy in Brazil and China, a third war in South East Asia, environmental meltdown in California and then The Great New Order. He'd narrowly missed getting nuked on no less than three occasions. The third instance he'd insisted on taking to the people and that was not desirable from the perspective of *the company*. No longer could the truth be corroborated by the masses, because the masses never massed, choosing to experience a pseudo reality from the comfort of home, accepting conditioning from birth to death. That was when he'd begun this five year long story, grateful at the time that they hadn't quietly disposed of him like so many others, simultaneously embittered by the abrupt ending of his career and theft of his image. The Favelas was a human zoo for the occasional entertainment of the elite and he was merely an exhibit.

Perhaps he thrived in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. He always hoped as much. He knew the adrenaline of fear like an old friend, the old friend that was with him right now. How he'd missed it.

Carlo Lavarini, the fifth and youngest son of Antonia Lavarini, pulled the old Kawasaki ZZR over by the section of

perimeter wall that jutted between the East Park and the Wild West Park. Fazal spotted the gangling youth's edginess as he stepped off the pillion. Carlo twitched the throttle on his bike, wanting out of here fast as Fazal slipped a key into a low security door and opened it.

'What's the matter, son? You told your Uncle Farrukh that you liked coming up this way.'

Fazal surprised himself with the coolness of his voice as he teased the youth. Such outward composure took years of practise, as he too was practically shitting his pants.

Carlo reached into his satchel, pulling out a smart 9mm Police Issue machine pistol.

'You ever used one of these before, Uncle Faz?'

Fazal waved him away. Christ, he was still such a good actor.

'I appreciate the sentiment, but where I'm going I might as well take a fucking peashooter for protection. No, please, put it away. Carlo, you'd better get going.'

Hidden eyes everywhere beyond the doorway.

'Don't need telling twice, Uncs.'

The kid fired up his bike, taking a look behind the door and puffing out his cheeks. It was the one remaining no-go area in the entire shanty town, the one place where the fears of the outsider might approach the justifiable. Fazal thought for a second that he might have seen some gentle sympathy in the lad's eyes, then he was gone, tear-arsing it back towards East Park before someone decided they were in the market for an antique superbike and some fresh, young organs.

The Reporter watched him go. Some Scotch Mist flecked against his cheek, but he wasn't given any more time to reflect upon his solitude in the quietest corner of the Favelas. He felt a hard pressure on the nape of his neck, then a quick agony as a foreign body entered his bloodstream. No shadows, no faces. His final thought before blacking out was what a clumsy way to administer a potentially dangerous tranquilliser.

\* \* \*

When he came to he didn't feel half as bad. Whatever it was, it was good. The sense of imminent danger which had colonised his head back there floated away like a broken cobweb. Spiked? He didn't care, it was all just too damned... floaty.

'Faz Boy.'

'Duffy Scanlon... huh, you bastard you... heeee, heeee, heeee... uh-hooooo...'

'I'm just gonna giveya somethin' to wake you up, okay?'

'What? No man this is too good. Oh, y'want me arm? Okay, old mate, I suppose you're right.'

A brief scratch and the effect was immediate. Fazal leapt to his feet, reeling into some dancers on the packed floor. An acute sense of smell, sight and hearing returned in the wake of the pick-me-up. Sweaty clubbers gyrated around him, semi-naked, painted and wild with energy, dancing to some toxic old mix, the floor wobbling and warping with the sub-bass. He hadn't seen a place like this in twenty years, then he reasoned that he hadn't come here to get wired and listen to weird old fusion, he'd come here to meet the huge, dreadlocked man grinning at him from beside the dancefloor, like a Rasta Reaper. Not just grinning, laughing.

'Duffy Scanlon, you are a consummate shithouse.'

'Forgive me Faz Boy, let me get you a drink.'

'Fuck your drink, that cheap concoction you spiked me with could have killed me.'

The man mountain in the black Albertini suit cocked his shades at this, tongue in cheek. He passed a gentle hand onto Fazal's shoulder and guided him towards the long bar that rimmed the ground floor of this grand old auditorium. Patrons parted to let them through as if they were a ghostly breeze.

'So, how was your journey?'

'You could have sent me an escort. You know I don't like coming here. And I've been around some bad fucking places.'

'In this little town a businessman like me can never be too careful, my friend. You wouldn't believe what tricks some motherfuckers have tried to pull to get my ass. And my ass ain't for getting, Farrukh. You know that though.'

'Neither is my ass,' grunted Fazal awkwardly as he shuffled along.

As they moved through a hatch behind the bar, it dawned on Fazal where he actually was when the DJ altered the mood to some old punk vibe. The floor was suddenly swarming with freaks and acidheads.

'You cheeky bastard. This is the Royal Albert Hall isn't it?'

'Still got the minerals, Farrukh.'

'You've only been here ten years and you've turned one of our national monuments into a fucking nightclub. This isn't the Bronx you know.'

'Would you rather it fell down?'

Before Fazal could answer, they were in a dim, narrow corridor, at the end of which was an iron door. Scanlon shut out the music behind him and the silence was deafening.

Through the iron door was what used to be the theatre bar, except now there were small, interlinked domes lining each set of the long room, running up to a larger separate hemisphere at the very end. A small sign above the crystal door ordered *Management Only*.

'Please, step into my office.'

'Yeah.'

Fazal chuckled when they got inside. Chesterfield sofas surrounded a coffee table like an old fashioned living room, everything from and between Kierkegaard to Marx to Hemingway to Machiavelli graced the bookshelves, enough banned and discontinued literature to educate a city that didn't read any more.

'Welcome to my little lead box, Faz. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. Without my knowing.'

'Where did you get hold of all this hardware, Duffy?'

'You ain't the only freak round here with contacts over the wall.'

'Some contacts.'

'I'm gratified that you're impressed, man.'

Scanlon pulled the coffee table over to him and unceremoniously produced a huge bag of weed.

'I hope you still like a smoke-a-homes, my man.'

'What do you want from me, Duffy? I took a ridiculous risk coming here.'

'Not ridiculous at all, don't beat yourself up,' said Scanlon, patting the seat next to him, 'Sit yo' ass down. You're making me nervous, you curious cat.'

Scanlon's eyes widened as he sprinkled the chopped sensamilia bud. Fazal grunted and obeyed.

'We got action, some big action, coming this way. Pass me that cardboard.'

Fazal raised an eyebrow and pushed a box of old business cards over to Scanlon, who built a roach.

'We?'

'You and I, chieftain. Something wicked this way comes.'

Scanlon held the joint in one huge hand and reached down the side of his sofa with the other. He tossed Fazal a manila envelope.

'I like hard copy. Slows everything down to a manageable pace,' said Scanlon, lighting up his creation, 'Don't open it just yet.'

'Can I have a clue what this is all about while I'm here? I don't want to have to go through that security check of yours every time I need to talk to you.'

Scanlon nodded, blowing a smoke ring.

'All well and good, chico. What do you know about a lady by

the name of Susan Pollard?'

Fazal's eyes lit up and twitched his nose.

'Superintendent Susan Pollard?'

'That's the female. Married, two kids, po-lice chief of the Favelas, til they moved her. Moral sort. Old school and rare as rocking horse shit. Best thing that ever happened to the Babylon. Here...'

He offered Fazal the lit cone, but the Reporter shook his head.

'One of the top flyers in the Met. Very big around here.'

'You know much more than that, baby. Don't shit me, Fazal or I'll find myself another runner.'

'A runner?'

'How well do you know Pollard? Be honest, brother.'

Information was such a saleable commodity in this day and age. He thought about pushing Scanlon for more. But this looked like the beginnings of a first exclusive in years, which was a fair price. What else did he have on his plate apart from peddling vanity nanodrugs to his sometime girlfriend? The desperation to get back in the game could get him killed, but that beat a slow death.

'I've known Susan Pollard for over twenty-five years, Scanlon. We were at University together. I don't know how the hell she's survived but I trust her more than any other person on this planet. More than you, more than I trust myself.'

Scanlon nodded. For a second Fazal thought he could read a frown across his forehead. The Reporter held up the manila envelope.

'So?'

'This operation's 'bout what you need to know. That is what you need to know. Certain, ah, clients of mine have been eyeballing Mrs Pollard for sometime now. They believe she could be of assistance to a very worthy cause. If primed in the right way.'

'This had better be good if I'm getting her involved.'

Scanlon jabbed Fazal in the shoulder. That would bruise tomorrow.

'What do you think I brought you here for, Farrukh?'

Susan Pollard had arranged the first contact between Fazal and Mama Lavarini five years previously. After being roused out of his apartment by a gang of Squadjutants one early morning, thinking it would be a bullet and an incinerator, his original designation had been the Bayswater section of West Park. Five years ago there were some very bad bodies knocking around that area and at the time, he wouldn't have lasted 24 hours. His reassignment to East Park was done under the radar, but Pollard's simple action had saved his bacon twice in a day.

'What you got there are some details pertaining to the future liberation of a certain prisoner of conscience in the care of the Constabulary Babylon Metro Motherfuckers.'

'Who is this person? Who wants them? Why?'

Scanlon rolled his eyes and pointed at the envelope.

'If you want in, open it and read it. If you don't, I've told you just about enough not to have to flame your ass. I'll guide you home personally.'

'That's mad, Scanlon. My sources trust me for a reason. I need more information before I commit to anything. I will need to perform due diligence.'

Scanlon leaned into Fazal, smoke streaming out of his gleaming array of gold gnashers. He looked like a bull getting ready to charge.

'Don't you trust *me*, Faz? When I say this is bigger than anything you've ever seen?'

The Reporter held his stomach and his bit of the sofa.

'I need more, Duffy.'

Scanlon smiled, leaned back and smoked some more bud.

'Your choice. Make it now.'

## 19

## BON VOYAGE

Misha had arranged the whole trip in the space of an afternoon, returning from his regular jaunt to the nearest village with a scrap of paper confirming the rendezvous details at the Kamchatkan port. Brontay gave the man his dues, he'd accompanied her all the way on the 1200 kilometre trip, from the ride in a banged-up old four wheel drive Uaz to the rough, cold passage on a supply train which ran all the way to Vladivostok.

Once safely in the port, Korsakov and friend were treated to the best hospitality that the Merchant Navy could offer. They were greeted by peppered vodka, fish stew, dumplings and a night of seafaring camaraderie with the ship's crew in a quaint but seedy quayside hostelry. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad journey after all.

The Pacific crossing was scheduled to embark the next day, so at three in the morning the Captain roused himself drunkenly to suggest that Brontay get settled in to prevent any

mishaps. She had this feeling in the pit of her stomach that she was leaving home, her only real home. The memory of Anya already haunted her, wrenching her gut every time she had contemplated that awful war getting closer to her surrogate mother and father. They were resourceful beyond anything or anyone Brontay had ever known, but they were vulnerable.

On the long journey East, she had broached their safety several times with Misha, going as far as suggesting that they should all travel together to somewhere warm and peaceful. Every time, Misha had either laughed or growled, but not once did he look remotely interested in the idea. The hospitality of the welcome in Vladivostok had led the Englishwoman to believe that she would be in for an inspiring voyage in a cosy little cabin adjacent to the bridge. Misha's friend, Captain Dimitry Chorniborodasov, informed him that Acapulco was the next port of call, immediately preceding the passage through the Panama Canal and onwards into the Atlantic Ocean.

A crewhand screwed the locking nut off the rusting corrugated iron door. Brontay was still oblivious to the situation until the very moment the hatch came down.

'Zdeis... Brontayski Dome!' said the portly Captain, still jovial in drink.

The idiotic, drunken grin slid off Brontay's face like manure off a shovel. This was exactly *why* they had poured that devil piss down her throat.

'This is a joke, Misha? It's a navy thing, isn't it? Very funny Captain!'

'I told you it would be basic, devushka,' said Korsakov in English, confused at the Westerner's attitude.

'Look at it, I'll fucking die in there!' grunted Brontay in a whine.

'Mikael Sergeeyavich, eta prablyem?' said Captain Dimitri, beginning to frown.

'Choot choot, moy droog! Neechyevo,' Misha clapped the



Captain on the shoulder, then returned to Brontay, 'Alexandra, you're embarrassing me in front of the Captain.'

Korsakov held Brontay's arm in an iron grip, like a disgruntled game show host revealing the prizes to a contestant.

'Look, you have all your vitals here. Heating, a chemical toilet, washing, even a stove and a camper bed.'

Brontay pulled away from Misha's grip.

'What about food and water for Chrissakes? What am I supposed to live on, fresh air?'

'See? That pipe is connected to a central water tank on the ship. Desalinated sea water, tastes like dogpiss but drinkable. Freeze dried food, good enough for Russian cosmonauts, good enough for you, you ungrateful little Western punk.'

Misha was putting on one of his acts, but Brontay knew him too well by now.

'Well I'm sorry Misha but... I don't want to go. I love you.'

She welled up. Misha pretended not to register it, but his eyes betrayed something for the first time since they had left the Dacha. He was in too much of a hurry to seal this deal.

'These boats do this all the time, Sasha. You'll be safe. Don't make this any harder for me.'

'I'm not worried for myself. Did you not hear me? I love you. I love Anya. I want to go home.'

'Fucking Stockholm syndrome. I knew this would happen.' Misha teared up, this goliath of a man inside and out, failing to hide behind his cracked Siberian toughness. The sozzled Captain watched on, chuckling.

'Don't do this.'

The Captain looked at his watch. Misha pushed her towards the container door.

'I've even packed some vodka, coffee and books for you. And my gramophone.'

'Misha. Please.'

'We'd better get you in there. Look, the Captain is waiting.'

Brontay looked inside the dark, cramped container. She'd never had reason to doubt Korsakov's wisdom. And she was letting the side down by acting like a child, betraying a softness that several months out here should have destroyed. It was this or death, but part of her wanted to die with the Korsakovs. She stepped inside.

'Harasho,' grunted the Captain.

'Okay, Misha. You win.'

'When all this is over you'll be more than welcome back at the Dacha, you know. Flying first class, eh?'

'Yeah.'

Her fantasies washed away in a Pacific swell, Brontay forced a grin across her face. She didn't want to leave on a sour note.

'Thanks for saving me, Misha.'

She kissed his rough face, which had changed back to stone. He pushed her gently further inside and began to close the door.

'I'm sorry, Alexandra. Forgive us.'

'For what?'

He shut the door in her face, leaving her to the black, stale air.

'Misha? For what? Misha!'

A dim light came on inside the chilly container.

'Misha!'

Sleep hadn't come to her on that first night. Brontay had tried reading, but the bonecutting reality of the situation kept coming back to bite her. What would she do when she got back to London? Misha's eyes, betraying him again and again.

*Forgive us.* Misha was not a cruel man, so why leave her to stew over that final message?

After several hours claustrophobia and paranoia had fully

taken over. Maybe that Captain was some mercenary, cut-throat bastard. Or they'd make some horrendous fuck-up and leave her in here to die from thirst in this rusty can. What if she fell ill? If the cabin fever was this bad now what would it be like in two weeks time?

The small wind-up analogue clock with Mickey Mouse ears which the Korsakov's had packed for her read either twelve noon or twelve midnight by the time it happened. First there were a few voices coming from outside, enough to create a few more rocks in her belly, then the sound of heavy machinery, cranking and thudding. Brontay's heart thumped like a jackhammer for the two hours that this went on, her breath held every time a voice passed within earshot.

At twenty past two Vladivostok time there was a deafening clank on the roof of the container, knocking her sideways. Then she heard the sound of human feet clambering up the side onto the roof.

'Here we go,' she muttered to Mickey Mouse.

In that moment, she noticed how all the fittings were screwed down in the container. Grabbing hold of the iron bed frame, she braced herself.

The sensation of being off the ground went on forever before the container juddered and dropped. The descent proved to be the nasty bit, her stomach giving out as the box swung from side to side like a giant pendulum. The light flickered on and off with the motion of the descent. No wonder everything had been screwed down. Brontay shut her eyes and prayed for a safe landing or at the very least a quick death. Then there was a hard, shuddering jolt as the container found its place in the hold of the ship. Her knuckles were as white as glass.

'Shit, oh shit ... thank god, thank the fucking stars!'

Then the light went out completely.

The relief that she'd made it onto the boat was completely

compounded by a new terror, possibly the worst of all, as this one was very tangible. Spending the entire journey in pitch darkness would, she was sure, drive her over the edge into lunacy. But then she wouldn't get to spend the entire journey, would she? She buried her face in her pillow and wept until she was asleep enough to wake up dead.

An hour later a cranking noise coming from the hatch stunned the Englishwoman from her stupor. Mercifully, the creeping paranoia didn't have time to kick in as she was still half-asleep when the hatch swung back. The sudden daylight burnt away at her retinas like hot knives. A briny aroma filled the cabin.

'Kto eta? Kto eta?!' said Brontay in broken, desperate Russian.

There was no reply. Her eyes began to focus, and they rapidly became the bearer of bad news. A huge bearded man stood at the entrance of the container, sporting the grey, blue and red uniform of a Cossack Colonel and clutching a crow bar. One big, terrifying motherfucker, even more than all the big, terrifying motherfuckers, human and animal, she had seen in this country.

'Mind if I hitch a ride?' said the voice in English.

'Hang on,' she said, dizzying, 'Do I know you?'

Vasily shrugged, Brontay fainted.

The salts made her feel like she'd been tossed into a giant vat of bad kippers. Revolting but effective.

'Sorry I gave you such a fright,' said the Cossack as the hatch was sealed from the outside. The light had been fixed already.

'What?'

'You see I'm a little late. Had some business to attend to. Awfully rude of me, though.'

Brontay propped herself up on her elbows. She felt a searing headache coming on.

'A little late for what, exactly?'

Brontay recognised him now. It was that nosy Cossack from the forest two weeks ago, the bear slayer. Her stomach performed gymnastics.

'Misha didn't tell you, did he? That old bastard, eh?'

His accent was an odd mix of Muscovite and a mid-American drawl much more pronounced than old Korsakov's.

'Forgive me,' said Brontay, astounded at the visitor, 'may I ask who you are?'

'Ah shit, of course, sorry man. Vasily Mikaelovich Nedvedev,' said Vasily Mikaelovich Nedvedev, offering her a hand the size of a shovel.

'My old man should have told you all this on the way to Vladivostok. He didn't say anything?'

Vasily shook his head. The cogs in Brontay's befuddled brain took a little longer to put the pieces together but, if she'd heard him correctly, this guy was claiming to be Misha's son.

Vasily removed his shapka hat and great coat and folded himself wearily onto a beanbag-come-futon in the corner of the box.

'Make me some coffee will you and I'll tell you all about it, deal? Wow, I am beat.'

'Uh? Look...'

'Vasily.'

Brontay stood up.

'Vasily. I don't know what your game is but...'

'Is that something on your shoe?'

'What?'

The Russian lit a smoke, offering one to Brontay who declined.

'Don't smoke.'

'You will. A few bad habits will help you with the good ones.'

What was that supposed to mean? Brontay massaged her temple. *Who? Why?*

'Look, Alexandra. I can't say that this will be too pleasant for

either of us, but you and me are going to be spending a lot of time together. So let's make the best of it, eh?'

Brontay's blood curdled.

'I..'

'No no no ... not like that. What do you think I am?'

He certainly had the Korsakov manner down.

'That crazy old bastard is laughing at us, right now. He told me all about you, Alexandra.'

'Oh did he now?'

'Look, first coffee, then talk. You make it since I'm the guest in your lovely new home. Very minimalist. I like it.'

He reached over and grabbed his haversack, producing several bottles of black label vodka.

'Oh fuck,' said Brontay.

'Our ship departs in a little under two hours. That should give us plenty of time to get acquainted. I betcha Misha gave you some of his home made piss, eh? Well we'll get through this lot first. Now, have many times do I have to ask, polucka? Coffee,' he waved the bottle about, 'Vladivostok style.'

Nedvedev began unpacking his things as Brontay tried to figure out how to use the small stove. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Cossack opening up his long winter coat to reveal an astonishing array of weaponry. This man wasn't just a dead-eye shot in the woods. The Russian pulled out a compact arsenal of three mace gas canisters, a box of hand grenades, and two machine pistols; old Desert Eagles U.S. Army issue, modified for smart ordinance. Then he took his flak jacket off, which could readily fold into a mini rocket launcher, with several small mortar shells wrapped around his waist in a velcro belt. Whatever else he had in his stash didn't bear thinking about.

She flicked on the electric stove and placed the pewter pot on to boil. The only comfort was the possibility that the Korsakovs might have sent their son to protect her and if that wasn't true,

Carroll Grabham

she'd already be dead. Not much comfort, then.

## 20

### JAMESON AND MR OLD

'Great systems, however corrupt, ruthless or insane their agenda, all have morals which appeal to different basic human emotions and facets of life. With the drive and will of a central ego, this is how they make it past minority status into the big league. Choose your weapons; Anarchy, Autocracy, Absolutism, Bolshevism, Democracy, Fascism, Hedonism, Religion. Order, disorder, obedience, disobedience, aggression, life and death.'

MannyCapra could see how Jameson's age had affected the length of his syllables and power of his voice.

'All these aspects run cyclically in the human social network, from the individual to the empire.'

The younger looking man nonchalantly swept Jameson's queen off the board.

'Philobert, does the individual even care about who runs the show when the self becomes everything? Today anyone can cast themselves in the brightest of lights. Possess their own empires, without any of the bloodletting or conflict along the way. That is such a gift.'

'Oh come on lad. To maintain your perfect system you need to throw around twenty percent of it away into Favelas. The undesirable minority are denied their right to individuality because they represent a different agenda.'

MannyCapra smiled.

'Philobert. It is just what the people want. I give them what they want.'

'You tell them what they want.'

'Is it not the same thing?'

Jameson fascinated him. He'd been around for quite a while now, sharpening MannyCapra's instinct with his chess and his arguments. This was important, for without him he may have lost his edge in the eternal corporate battle. That had happened to so many great market leaders.

'You are just re-inventing the wheel, Manny. Technology may change, but human nature remains constant. The bottom line for your regime is control, sometimes brutality. That is the hallmark of totalitarianism. Don't try to dress it up as anything else.'

MannyCapra relaxed. Here was somewhere he could admit the truth and be sure no-one would be able to use it against him.

'You are probably right. But if it isn't me in control, it will be someone else and I guarantee someone worse. Philobert, the human race is like a greedy dog. It will consume itself to death if allowed. Someone has to balance this, or all of it will go.'

Jameson's jowls wobbled as he shook his head.

'No! For Hitler, Stalin, PolPot, coercion drove the dogma. All regimes need a certain amount of steel to maintain law and order, of course, but this discipline is born out of the need to protect the rights of others, not the cult of personality. You are just another monster. Admit it, you have a striking similarity to all of history's most notorious megalomaniacs. Adolf Hitler had his bogus astrologists and Albert Speer to bolster his

imagination of 1000 year Reich, whereas you created me. Philobert Ignatius Jameson, the antithesis of your own personality, a war you always win.'

MannyCapra sighed.

'How now, old boy, don't go over the top. I'm a businessman. The company is the centre of my aspirations, not political power.'

'Not mere political power, no. You don't need that legitimacy, MannyCapra, because having the control is enough for you. You don't want to be the icon, no, you want more than that, you create the icon. Sooner or later any figure, no matter how omnipotent it is in the eyes of the many, will become history. You seek immortality, my friend, so you deify yourself as Kingmaker. But you will never become God.'

The CEO stood up and clapped when Jameson had finished. The old man's face collapsed into a gummy frown. Those saddlebags beneath his eyes were getting bigger all the time.

'Fine speech. A prize pile of shit, but a fine speech. What your timeworn, liberal 20th Century mind is referring to does not exist anymore, I'm afraid. I can say this until I'm blue in the face and you still won't believe me, but I am not in this game for the power. It is the game itself that interests me. Just the game. Boredom is my and *their* greatest enemy, Philobert.

'You represent what I would have become; an old idealist approaching his death bed obsessed with ancient notions of benevolence and something for nothing in life. I'll tell you this, every time I look at you it makes me so grateful that I didn't go down that path. You are here to remind me.'

Jameson kept his eyes on the board, gurning derisively at this comment. MannyCapra continued.

'If people get crushed by the actions of this company, they blame the state for allowing it to happen. If people are crushed by the state itself they say that there should be more private enterprise.

'Tell me what you want, Philobert, a Christian way? A Buddhist way? A Communist way? None are right or true. None have ever been right or true. Such lies were only ever there in the first place to manipulate the hearts, minds and spirits of the masses. And what's so wrong with that? If that is what they desire then that is what they shall have. The intelligent path is to give or tell people what they want, but in the right doses.'

MannyCapra smiled wanly at his alter-ego. It was his turn to be on a roll.

'Most people are wise enough to be *happy* with a comfortable life. And they pay in return, yes they do, by working for what they have. Profits or greater outputs are meaningless today. Yes we pretend they are but really they are just worker ants. Work gives self-respect, *arbeit macht frei*, what we get is their viewership, their undivided attention. They still have a choice. If they don't like it they can move away, but no one's going to support such folly.'

'And what does that make them, Manny? Drones in Domes.'

'Good one. I like that, yes I do. These days responsibility is a dirty word. Why have all these idiots preaching at you all the time because they think that they know better? What does that get you? Mussolini? Trump? Really all they know is how to tell different lies.'

Jameson was puckering his lips, eyes still on the board and shaking his head.

'Okay, how about this; children. If you procreate you become responsible for someone apart from yourself. This used to be a rather popular pastime and if it still was then I would endorse it, but it got to a stage when there were more children in the world than there were parents. To put it in crude terms, people literally stopped giving a fuck. Then we gave them that get out option and the majority chose and still choose to take it.

'So now most have opted for sterility. Their instinct to nurture has been transferred from a phantom child to themselves. Now everybody loves the child that is in themselves and it will never end.'

As MannyCapra was talking, Jameson was pondering a final gambit to see if he could overturn his opponent's superior forces. He glanced up at the CEO, hard light crackling in his tired eyes, like a once fierce spark was diminishing.

'I am the spirit that shadows you, MannyCapra.'

'Oh please, not the Jacob Marley speech again.' MannyCapra folded his arms.

'What you are doing to society is a crime, Manny, and one day you are going to pay for it, son.'

MannyCapra nodded wearily.

'Are you done?'

'That obscene, rancorous, bourgeois club you came up with. VoQue,' muttered Jameson, like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

'Oh yes. Well that was actually Hardy's idea but, well...'

'Of course it was. But it's still you, isn't it? From one phoney organisation to the other. You even create your own terrorist organs. The Antivoguish League? And they keep buying this shit from you.'

MannyCapra smiled proudly, all too aware of Jameson's line of attack.

'And you instigate and perform every bomb or riot yourself. You create a big bad wolf to scare your consumers so they don't switch to another brand of bullshit. This instils loyalty and obedience in your subjects.'

'You got it right the first time, Philobert, they're called consumers.'

'The terrorists make perfect, controllable scapegoats.'

'Meanwhile in the real world...' said a yawning MannyCapra, pre-empting Jameson's next sentence. Jameson only raised his voice even higher, banging his walking stick against the floor as

he recited.

'Meanwhile in the real world your fundamental weakness is what you *can't* control. You could kill every living thing in the Favelas today if you wanted to, but that takes away your ultimate threat to anyone who gets out of line. Threatening people with pain and death is not the greatest weapon of coercion, you know. There is a limit to how much you can give out before numbness sets in. Making someone irrelevant though, now that is powerful. Yes, I know your game, lad. But humans fear and loathe one thing more than anything else.'

'Let me guess, would that be the unknown by any chance?' said MannyCapra facetiously.

'Oh but its just a word to you, isn't it? Just because you can sit up here in your ivory tower watching the army of ants below makes you so smug. By the unknown I mean that great shanty you created. Believe me, vengeance will come to you and that is where it will come from. See you later.'

Jameson's words echoed about the chamber as if it was a cathedral. His alter ego had dismissed himself back into the oblivion of the default chess programme. The old man could, of course, be summoned back at a whim, but the fellow deserved to get a rise out of the occasion once in a while, for all his puff and bluster. Besides, MannyCapra had just thrashed him at chess. *Annihilated him.*

Checkmate.

MannyCapra propped his elbows on the rickety chess table, wedging his fists beneath his chin in concentration. Too bad the old buzzard hadn't hung around for the post mortem. He loved giving him a blow by blow description of how he'd torn his game to shreds. Maybe it was his imagination, but Jameson looked like he was losing his appetite for chess. It was all getting too easy.

A soft, female voice interrupted his daydream. It was Alpha.

*THERE IS A QUEUED MESSAGE FOR YOU, SIR. WOULD*

*YOU LIKE TO TAKE IT NOW?*

MannyCapra massaged an eyelid, waving his other hand.

'I don't like to be kept waiting.'

The boy, who looked no older than nine years of age, wore a distinctly mature frown. He frisked the cufflinks of his Albertini suit and emitted a surly sniff. The kid looked like a parody of Al Capone with his trilby, his cane and his pinstriped suit, an effect embellished by his slightly porcine features. Then his brain tried to connect him with something else; a name, a face? The idea evaporated.

'My humble apologies, Mr Old. There's only one frequency for incoming mail on my personal network to stop unwelcome guests. Security is everything you understand. Please, take a seat.'

The child eyed the old wooden chair with distaste before sitting down. He had the annoying habit of staring into the gap between MannyCapra's eyes, probably in a vain attempt to psyche him out. MannyCapra produced his favourite patronising grin, an old trick from his days as a salesman.

'Look, Mr Old, why don't we desist from this ridiculous charade, hey? There is absolutely no need for you to have to protect your identity. We are on the same side, after all.'

Mr Old stared up at the heavens, lines of tedium crossing his juvenile brow.

'On the same side? This is a straight business arrangement, MannyCapra. You'll concur, security is everything.'

MannyCapra gritted his teeth. He hated obnoxious kids, even if they weren't what they seemed.

'Indeed.'

'This concerns what I can offer you and what you can provide for me in return. Good, old-fashioned, uncomplicated greed.'

'Name your price.'

Mr Old mopped his juvenile brow with a handkerchief.

'I assure you, your competitor is much more resourceful than even you would imagine. That is why my services do not come cheaply. I want land, in one tract, with autonomy from any future interference from any part of your organisation. Both your network and mine are recording this exchange, so our contract is binding.'

The salesman's grin returned to MannyCapra's face. The little freak lit up a cigarette, inhaling like a 40 a day addict.

'I do like your style, Mr Old. And I'm sure one has been tossing this around with one's associates, no? New tracts have recently been standardised in the Americas and South East Asia. Moreover, we are nearing completion of the first phase to reacclimatize Siberia. This could be brokered and tailored to the needs of your organisation.'

Something he'd said had obviously agitated the brat, who was now sweating like a rapist.

'You should know better than to try to trick me, MannyCapra.'

'What can you possibly mean, old chap?'

'Do not try to ascertain my location, whether or not I have partners or anything fucking else about me by any means or it's ciao baby, I take my business elsewhere.'

This person knew him well enough. They'd met before, he was sure of it. There had to be a clue, something in the voice patterns? Syntax?

'I was merely trying to offer you some suggestions.'

'Fuck your suggestions. You know what I want. We'll argue about the details when I'm ready, got it?'

'Loud and clear, Mr Old.'

Old stubbed his smoke out on the chess table. Lucky for him that he was a simulation, otherwise he'd suffer for that. This little bastard had some audacity. MannyCapra liked that.

'Right, this is what you get and all you get until we meet again.'

'Right ho.' said MannyCapra with a tombstone grin, 'hit me.'

'There is a problem within your organisation.'

MannyCapra cocked an eyebrow high.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Yes and I have this on very good authority. A digital audio copy of a certain conversation will be forwarded to you upon my going off line. It will pass your authenticity checks.'

MannyCapra's face reddened slightly.

'Who?' he said dryly.

'Apsley Moran and Saul Hardyman.'

The CEO sniffed and shook his head.

'Right.'

'You will find the tape has not been tampered with.'

MannyCapra massaged his wardrobe chin for a moment. The pupils of his ice chip eyes darkened for a second.

Philobert Jameson appeared and laughed at MannyCapra. The CEO snapped his fingers.

'Fuck off.'

Jameson vanished.

'Digest this at your will when I've finished,' said Old sharply.

'Hardyman? After all these years. I can't quite believe it.'

'Look, MannyCapra, I don't care what you believe. Listen to the file, run all your tests, it will bear me out.'

Finally, the little punk brat had grown a pair of big swinging testes. MannyCapra felt glad for him. Almost proud. But Old didn't look finished.

'Is there more?'

Old said nothing, his body went into freeze frame.

'Mr Old? Are you there?'

Old returned.

'My apologies. A server malfunction. You were saying?' said Old curtly.

'No. You were saying.'

'There will be another attempt to remove you, aside from



your dissident employees.'

'Oh I love this.'

'The Congress are preparing an offensive with the aim to effect regime change.'

'Regime change? There is no regime. You sound like Jameson.'

'Who?'

'Never mind. Continue.'

'I can brief you on this nearer the time, but rest assured, all the main players will be coming out soon.'

MannyCapra nodded. As a snitch, Old was the source of excellent and reliable information, but like any snitch, he was untrustworthy. What did he have to lose by simply revealing the whereabouts of Congress Delegates?

'Thank you, Mr Old, you've been very helpful as ever.'

The child rose to leave.

'Stay for a quick game of chess?'

The first and only smile crossed the kid's ruddy complexion.

'Good day, MannyCapra.'

Mr Old walked away into the blackness.

MannyCapra cracked his knuckles and leant back, propping up his feet across the chess table.

'Ahhh ... Alpha?'

*YES SIR?* said the smooth voice.

'Check for tampering and play Mr Old's audio file for me please.'

*IMMEDIATELY, SIR.*

'And then could you please inform Messrs Moran and Hardyman that they will see me tomorrow morning.'

*YES, SIR.*

Then perhaps that miserable old bugger Jameson would like a game while he pondered the fate of his oldest and most trusted friend and employee. He leaned back, clasping his hands around the crown of his head. Well, times move on. As

long as MannyCapra moved with them, everything was okay.

Jameson appeared, summoned from the void again and not so smug.

'What do you want, now?'

'A bit of fun, Philobert. Just a bit of fun.'

## VOICES IN MY HEAD

'Just be glad you've got me instead of them, Brontay. I know what it's like when they send the nasty boys in and they fuck you all day and all night. They bore new holes in your head just to fuck.'

'Wh-'

She kept her head beneath the covers. Shit, now she was hearing voices.

'You shouldn't talk to yourself like that, Alexandra. When you talk to yourself you give the game away and when you give the game away they do things to you.'

She peeked out from behind the sheets. The female remained, her blonde spiky hair dirty and torn, her once pretty face drained and gaunt, wearing nothing but a surgical gown, ageless but damaged. They'd really been to work on her. But who were they? Hang on, why do this? Why send someone real in? It had to be just another simulation. Was there was no end to their tricks? Brontay buried herself beneath her sheets, removing the phantasm from her sights.

But it persisted.

'How dare you. Do you really think that I want to be here? I've cried enough, Alexandra Brontay. They've tortured me with your image, brainwashed me. Even though they knew that I'd never seen you before in my life, all for this moment, this dirty fucking sullied moment.'

'Like I really care. Get out of here you fake,' she mumbled from within her pit.

The female snarled at her, bounding over like a wild cat. Brontay tried to get out the way but her assailant anticipated the reflex, punching her hard across the temple. Then she was grabbed by the hair, pinning her face into the pillow with the nub of a wrist against the base of her skull. Brontay was held down with such force that she was incapable of movement.

'Do you still conclude that I am a product of your sick imagination, or is this real enough for you?'

'Uh?'

Her face jammed harder into the pillow, cranking her arm behind her back, fast to breaking point. The pain was excruciating.

'Aaaargh no! No, I believe you. Please stop hurting me.'

'Oh, that hurts, does it? I'm sorry, but that's fucking nothing my friend.'

The female yanked again, even harder.

She'd felt herself beginning to suffocate when she was released, gagging at the air as the pain returned after being on the edge of blackout. It took an eternal ten seconds for her arm to return to a natural position.

Maybe that woman been just a nasty illusion, a form of shock therapy to bring her out of his stupor. If that was the case then it had worked; Brontay really was wide awake now. Then she heard the tiniest of scratches coming from beneath the bed.

The female's palms were clasped tightly to her ears. She was incapable of speech or movement, rendered immobile by a form

of torture unseen or heard by her cellmate. The first instinct was to get as far away from the crazy bitch as this small room would allow, but she couldn't help observe a face etched in a silent scream of agony, like the Klimt painting, like an unspeakable agony that was impossible to communicate as she was locked in stasis. Brontay reached out to her, her hand clasping the woman's shoulder

The girl released a shrill, primitive cry, finally breaking the pose. She flailed away into the corner of the room, biting her lip as tears began to roll down her face.

Five minutes had passed. She held her gaze. The crying had stopped, but she was still shaking.

'Look, er... Miss... I'm sorry if I caused any distress to you. All I can say is that I don't know anything about you so...'

The woman sniffed loudly, running her fingers through her hair.

'Shut up, Brontay,' said Maria Schwartz tiredly, 'shut your ignorant fucking mouth. This is all your doing.'

'Wh-'

'Schh!'

Schwartz laboriously climbed to her feet. Then she removed her gown. Her body was athletic and beautiful, Brontay couldn't help but notice that. The onset of a strange feeling fermented in her mind; was that really guilt? Bruises and welts had been scored across her breasts and abdomen.

'What's the matter? Never seen a naked woman before?'

There was no reply to that.

'I only know that I'm here because of you. My crime was trying to help someone, but that was another life. So now I am your's, Miss Brontay. You own this.'

The urge was strong to take what had been offered, to sate a long suppressed human need. How could she think that? How could she take advantage of this desperate creature? What had

she become?

'No you're not. Put your gown on, please. You don't have to do anything. I'll get Grayson in, he'll help you.'

The slap knocked her back onto the bed. She felt blood trickle from her nose.

'What d'you do that for? I was...'

'Only trying to help? That's what you get for helping.'

Schwartz was calmer now. Something had gone dead in her eyes. She lay on top of Brontay and hitched up her gown to her waist. Brontay tried to move but she grabbed her wrists in an iron grip.

'In case you were wondering what knocked me out back there I'll tell you. They call it the silent scream. First they showed me what it did to other prisoners. I did everything to avoid it, but still they used it, Alexandra.'

'I can't do this, it's not right.'

A weird grin spread across Schwartz's face from ear to ear. They were coercing her, but why? Why not some network program?'

'I think you'd better co-operate or they'll think you're hetero. Huh, then what do you think will happen? I'll go out to the incinerator, that's what. They showed me that too.'

She ground against Brontay. Why was this turning her on? But it was.

'I don't want that scream again, Alexandra.'

'But...'

'Hush.' Then the warmth of her body, an irresistible comfort after all the pain.

Beneath the Metropolitan Dome was a network of rooms and tunnels which even the rank and file of the police knew little about. Upstairs the floors were made of graphene compound and were bright, airy and open plan. Downstairs were the drab corridors of an area of investigation that no one cared to ask

about, even if they knew of its existence.

Behind one anonymous door stood the faceless Clinician, ticking off certain pointers on his register as he observed the experiment in R101. Any irony pertaining to Orwell would have been lost on him. The sexual activity had already shown encouraging results, even at this early stage. Peptide reaction was up 22% in the synapses and 31% in the rest of the body. Serotonin levels were up by 11% and rising. Evaluation could begin again immediately following the exercise and at an accelerated rate. Excellent. He would recommend this treatment as a regular procedure. The same partner would be used as the stimulant until such time as the figures began to decline. Then a new subject would be primed and the former disposed of via the proscribed method.

The Clinician sipped his coffee and congratulated himself. The policemen would appreciate his little coup and encourage his rise ever so slightly up the company foodchain. In the short term, he would be surprised if he hadn't earned a few VoQue Subscriber Network vouchers. As he keyed his details into his terminal, the information from the Brontay case's neural network continued to be scanned comprehensively by the biological machines of SecNet, the security database that took in information from every functioning network, ergo every human subject in the city and beyond. He'd failed to notice anything unusual about the system itself, but something the size of a microbe had already begun to slowly multiply and mutate its environment, playing upon the very system that had performed the analysis. If he'd have known what to look for and how to decrypt it then he may have been able to read a simple line of base-level digital machine code that had been written into the nano-virus. As it was, the tiny machines had made their way from Brontay's blood stream into one of the millions of nano-detectors injected into her as she slept. It infected the host at the moment it was scanned for analysis and

began to replicate into the most secure network in the city via the wireless system. A human-shaped Trojan Horse had penetrated the nanosystem quietly, the delicious code lying dormant and ready for further instructions.

No-one had seen it, but revolution had just begun in the most perfectly tiny way.

## LOATHING

The Chief Constable of the Metropolitan Police had always possessed carte blanche to go anywhere in this city. Moran knew that he could break down any door, watch anyone's movements or manipulate any person's life for better or for worse and for whatever reasons he desired to have, or for his favourite reason, which was no reason at all. He was the man who made the checks and balances in this city count and there was nowhere he couldn't go to pursue his whims. Except, of course, the innermost sanctum of MannyCapra.

Deconstructed Man's Dodge rolled smoothly into the grounds of the Hampstead Homestead. MC had wanted a progress report on the Brontay situation, just a routine meeting between the three most powerful men in the city. Moran left Deconstructed Man out in the driveway and approached the front door. As a matter of routine, a little ritual he had before entering any building, he checked that his Smith & Wesson was still holstered snugly beneath his sombre, black jacket. It had served him as a charm of superstition over the years, though a .

45 calibre always made for better luck than a four-leafed clover, in his humble opinion.

No, there was nothing unusual about today, he told himself. His footsteps clacked on the marble of the foyer as he strolled past the bust of Caesar, touching the forehead as he always did on the way into a meeting with The Man. Then down the narrow corridor, being careful to avoid stepping on any white bits on the floor which would be a sure sign of bad juju.

He stood outside the doors to the grand boardroom.

He was sure that he'd forgotten something.

What was it?

'Ah shite ...'

He had forgotten something.

He always bent his knees three times after touching the head of Caesar when he came in. Too late now, it was going to be a bad day. The heavy oak door edged open for him.

The room was white in its entirety, which made it impossible to get the dimensions and any sense of orientation without visible walls, fittings or furniture.

A drum beat. Gene Krupa licked his toms with his sticks before thumping his snare and hi-hat in an infectious beat.

Sing.

Sing.

Sing.

Moran frowned, his bony face crumpling in derision.

He hated mysteries.

He hated surprises.

He hated having a lack of control.

Should have bent before Caesar.

'Apsley. I'm sorry...' said Saul Hardyman, white leather neck to toe, his face almost as white as the room.

The Chief Constable knew this look only too well. He'd seen it hundreds, possibly thousands of times in the eyes of men and

women that he'd broken. He seen it in their eyes just before they got the bullet, for they *always* got the bullet. A scalding bubble of intense anger shot up his spine, hitting his brain as red mist. There was nothing left in his mind but to spit venom at the nearest target.

'What was the idea then, Saul? You cactus, you human fucking cactus.'

The voice coming from nowhere.

'What?'

Where? The sound of Hardyman's voice bounced around the chamber, the acoustics changing from a small room to a cathedral. There was no directional sense to the sound.

*Throttle the treacherous little abortion. One last pleasure.*

'You know, Saul. A cactus sucks the moisture out of the air. That's what you do.'

'Apsley, I'm sorry.'

Hardyman appeared again in front of Moran and immediately felt the world shift off its axis as he hit the ground. Warm blood filled his mouth with a coppery taste.

He hadn't even seen the punch. The man was fast and strong.

Now Moran's sinewy arm was wedged beneath his jaw with the pressure of an anvil. All he could do was spit blood and gasp.

'Don't you even attempt to speak you inept little fucking prolapse.'

Veins popped in the Ulsterman's temple. His saliva drooled over his prone captive's face. He had nursed a feeling about this for days, weeks. He should have run, pulled some strings. Disappeared somehow. But when his very DNA was in the system, instantly detectable, there were very few places to hide from *International Activities*. Moran knew this too well because he used this tech all the time. In the microsecond it took to

figure all of this out, it was oddly reassuring to the Chief C that he was blameless in his own downfall, except for listening to this little maggot. That was his only mistake. Hence Hardyman deserved all of his attention right now.

'I know what you have done, Cactus Boy. I know-what-you-have-done-you-inept-cocky-little-cactus-fuck!'

He banged Hardyman's head against the floor with each word. The bewildered vice-president began to hyperventilate and fit. Moran spat in his face. He thought about his Smith & Wesson, taking a moment to glance around and take stock of the situation.

Execute the fuck, right now. It might even put him in a better light with MC. Who knows.

'Apsley, please. We been set up. An inside job.'

'Really? Wow! No shit, sonny! I don't want to hear another peep out of you! Say yes sir Chief Moran!'

'Uh..'

'Say it!'

'Yes... sir... Chief... Moran...'

'Good boy. Now, Mr MannyCapra? Manny? Can you hear me?'

Moran looked up like he was talking to his long dormant Catholic God. Foam dripped from his mouth onto Hardyman's face.

No answer came from the whiteness. Moran began to shake with brimming vitriol, cursing for some bloodletting. He reached inside his blazer with his free hand, producing the long-barrelled Smith & Wesson which he called "Sissy" after his dearly departed mother. Cocking the safety, he pressed the nozzle between the nostrils of the now flailing Hardyman, whose legs were now helplessly akimbo in terror. Hardyman's nose creased into a pignout under the pressure of the gun and he began to squeal in desperation. Moran smiled, finally calm in the eye of the storm.

Carroll Grabham

'Mr MannyCapra. I really need your attention presently. Now. Right now please, sir.'

Nothing. Except for Hardyman's whimpers. Moran sniffed and shrugged.

The heavy trigger snapped back and Moran felt the satisfying recoil of the gun in his hand, ending the freakish fucker. The bang echoed like they were in a canyon, the sound waves bouncing off invisible topography. The whiteness greyed and blackened, becoming pitch darkness.

This was no ordinary room.

Moran was aware of his own body giving off light, but the gun and Saul Hardyman had gone. The spats of blood, bone and brain matter that usually accompanied a point blank shot were also not in evidence. Apsley Moran's breathing now steadied as he remained crouched over thin air, the echo of the shot still sauntering around the invisible canyon. It was then that he recognised a familiar, patriarchal presence standing over him, accompanied by the voice of MannyCapra.

'You disappoint me, Apsley.'

## 23

### THE WALTZ

Hardyman had blacked out at the crucial moment. He awoke with an odd sense of tiredness and disorientation, mixed with a palpable relief that he was alive, or at least he felt alive and Descartes was good enough for him. The first thing he noticed were the blackened stone walls around him. It was a cell, illuminated only by the moonlight shining through a tiny, barred vent on the low ceiling. The cell reeked of piss and shit.

He felt a sensation of warm liquid hitting his face. Looking above him, he saw a beefy Rottweiler squirting through the vent. He grunted at the creature, which responded by growling back. Then clanking footsteps mixed with a low, male voice. French it seemed. There was a slapping noise followed by some yelping and more French babble. As the guard clanked off with his mutt he heard another sound.

Distant cannon fire.

A grin spread widely across Hardyman's now toothless mouth. This was classic MannyCapra. One of Hardyman's pet subjects was the Napoleonic era of European history; a time of

change, romance and danger. He collected memorabilia from the period obsessively and he was even convinced that a string of his descent went back to Bonaparte himself, borne out by strands of his helix. Yes, MC had decided to play a little game.

Well, there were worse things at this stage. Maybe he had a sense of humour about the whole thing? Had he thought up another game?

Hardyman glanced around the cell in trepidation, but thankfully there was no sign of that madman Moran. He sensed a luke warm wetness in his trousers and realised that he'd shit himself like a geriatric during the ordeal with the gun. Then he recalled his mortal fear of hearing Moran's Smith & Wesson unload in his face.

*Good God.*

He coughed and attempted to stand up. His legs almost jack-knifed under the pressure of his own weight.

'All part of the illusion, Hardy. Don't worry yourself. Don't. Worry,' he croaked to the wall.

Yes, he should have known better. But MannyCapra was an intelligent man. Ruthless but intelligent. He wouldn't want to lose the anchorman of his empire, the font of all inspiration, the conduit to VoQue and the Illuminati, especially not with The Congress back on the scene. Surely an apology and a slapped wrist would suffice. This could be a new beginning for them. For the company.

'MannyCapra you old trout! This is brilliant!'

His croaky voice got no response.

'You hear me Manny? Of course you bloody do!'

*'Happy Birthday, Saul. Always the foil, the joker in the pack. One hundred today.'*

MannyCapra's voice resonated about the walls, in his ear for one syllable then in the far corner for the next. He'd called him Saul. He never called him Saul. He obviously wasn't a happy camper.

'Well, thanks. I'd forgotten to be honest.'

*'Hardy, really there's no need.'*

MannyCapra's voice was calm, but there was a worrying edge of cynicism which he'd never heard before.

'Manny, let me point that out before we go any further... I put my own interests ahead of the company and I know that was selfish and unprofessional. But it's a one off. Have I ever let you down before? Come on, let's discuss this before you do anything... permanent.'

*'See you in a moment, Saul.'*

Hardyman smiled hopefully.

The tiny cell door creaked behind him, the heavy black wood swinging open. Two pasty faced guards entered, their faces puffed up and blackened by excessive alcohol consumption and long defunct maladies. They wore the navy blue uniform of Napoleon's Leipzig Infantry, but were hardly dressed to Imperial Army standards as they were stained with all manner of fluids. They carried a suitably convincing stink of shit and cum. Impeccable coding, to scrupulous detail. MC had rolled out the best engineering just for him.

Hardyman raised his hands and smiled toothlessly.

'I'll come quietly fellows! Ugh!'

He winced in recoil as the bigger of the two guards cracked him in the ribs with the butt of his musket. It hurt like fuck. Too good.

'Bon anniversaire,' growled the other soldier.

'How dare you, you f...'

He'd glanced up to give the guard a mouthful, but stopped in mid-sentence when he saw the face of Apsley Moran.

The limestone steps felt icy cold on the soles of Hardyman's grey, hobbit feet. It was a shattering descent, but he'd learned the folly of lagging behind or trying to address his captors, especially the Gallic Moran. MC had overstepped the mark this



time. Okay, a rap over the knuckles was fine, but beatings and humiliation?

They finally reached the bottom of the stairs and scaled a short, narrow passageway leading to a pair of huge decorative portes grandes, from behind which he could hear the muted tones of a Quadrille Français along with chatter and revelry. Maybe now all would be forgiven and they could get down to having a bit of fun. He reminded himself of his value to MannyCapra, to this great company, the greatest since mother nature had started it all.

Yes. He was indispensable. Wasn't he?

All the same players were there, dressed suitably for a masquerade ball. Moran and his fat friend had disappeared, which was a relief. MannyCapra had cast that crazy Irish bastard in there to put the wind up him, he was sure of it. Yes, Moran would get the real punishment. Moran was expendable, common thugs were always ten-a-penny. All he needed now were some period threads and a thorough body spruce. Then perhaps he would try something Baroque, it being a special birthday and all.

All a joke? Eh?

The Page Boy tugged at his rags.

'Ah boy... right, let's see a selection of period gear...'

The uniformed child motioned Hardyman to follow him. The ballroom really was an exquisite simulation. Whoever had designed it had an excellent eye for detail, from the dress to the music to the waltz steps. He bumped into a foppish version of Clark Gable as he strode across the dancefloor, his back straightening at last. Gable leered at him.

'I thay peathant! Mind your thtep you infwernal arthe!' said Gable in a camp lisp.

The other revellers remained oblivious to the latest guest. Hardyman was thinking how this couldn't be any further away from the squalor and gothic terror of the cell upstairs when the

Page stopped him, pointing over to a dense crowd of people gathered in the corner. VoQue designers and models jacked into the network and probably here by special invitation via their personal domes. Next to them, pretenders to Hail Vanity and an exquisite reproduction of Kruger Smits himself looking like a resplendent Renaissance Bowie. He only wished he had some decent clothes. This was embarrassing.

This was impressive.

This was what International Activities could do without Saul Hardyman. Loud, clear, cacophonous.

A collection of young and beautiful debutantes fanned themselves. Perhaps he would take one or two of them into a back room later, but firstly he wanted to find MannyCapra and congratulate him on a top ruse.

Yes, a ruse. Please, a ruse.

He stepped forward into the throng. One of the girls yelped in shock when she saw him, her entourage recoiling in disgust.

'Porc dégoûtant de merde!' said the head girl, making a oinking noise. The coquettes in her retinue laughed at Hardyman.

'You're going to get a spanked botty for that,' said Hardyman. He had intended that to sound like flirtation, an instinct developed through a century of partying. But it came out like the ramblings of an incoherent, dirty old man.

The giggles turned to laughs. Hardyman felt indignant.

'Jeunes filles!' snapped Hail Vanity, strutting over, the Thin, White Duchess, 'jeunes filles! Leave the poor old thing alone.'

Her sleeveless, purple ballgown, ash bouffant, sleek feminine lines and overwhelming charisma made Mistress Vanity stand out a mile, standing at over seven feet tall. Hardyman reminded himself that she could be as remarkable just as much for her rugged masculinity after metamorphosis. All things to all people, the best marketing coup of the century.

*His idea, his development work.*

*Indispensible.*

Vanity kissed him on both cheeks, pulling him aside. At last, a friend! Her vocal chords shortened to the Boer male of her other gender.

'I apologise for those whores. They have no finesse. But you do look like double dogshit, fella. I have to say. What happened?'

*'Sometimes I regret killing you off you know, Joel. In a moment like this you would have had great value to me.'*

Her green eyes shone at him, her voice returning to female.

'I'm sorry too, believe me. Oh, I almost forgot. My beau for the evening would like to speak with you, Monsieur.'

'I'd be delighted,' grunted Hardyman.

Kruger-Smits turned to the Coquettes and began berating them in French for their ill-manners. Hardyman's eyes scanned the area. MC was nowhere to be seen in the mêlée.

'Manny, what is this game?' said Hardyman beneath his breath.

'It's a new one,' said MannyCapra from behind him, 'and once again you take all the credit for coming up with it. Concept Man.'

Hardyman span round, scanning and sifting more VoQue faces, more foulweather friends, grinning and hissing their pantomime Baroque disgust. No MannyCapra.

'Me? Manny, what are you talking about?'

'You are the inspiration. You even supplied the title.'

The pit of frustration and fear in his belly had been there since he'd woke up in that cell. He'd done a good job of fooling himself but the penny was dropping now that this time he really had gone too far.

*INdisPENsible!*

'Listen. I built your fucking company with my ideas, MannyCapra. You'd be nothing without me, do you realise that you...'

MannyCapra placed his ringed hand gently over Hardyman's mouth. His characteristic suit and blond/raven hair had been replaced by an outfit that was crimson from toe to bouffant. Sexy Demon, beau of the ball.

'Be tranquil, old boy. You put me off my track there. What was I saying? Oh yes, of course, that was it. Name the game and the game, old friend, is called providence.'

'Manny, you're making a huge mistake, I'm telling you. You can't lose me.'

'I said be tranquil!' ranted MannyCapra. He'd never seen him this angry, not in sixty, seventy, eighty years.

Hardyman carried on pleading but someone had turned the volume off. He couldn't even hear himself now. He was aware all eyes were now on him and the ringmaster in this hall. The music had stopped and MannyCapra circled him.

'Better. You always liked the sound of your own voice far too much. Typical marketing man, I guess. You know, I always wondered when the real Saul Hardyman would show his colours. To be frank, I'm surprised it took you so long to betray me. It's not your fault, I know. It's your nature, your old-fashioned programming.'

He grinned down at Hardyman and caressed his worn cheek. Hardyman was rooted on his knees.

'Saul Hardyman wasn't born to be number two to anyone, was he? Even loyalty and friendship mean nothing in comparison to that simple fact. It has been killing you all these years, hasn't it you poor chap? I could have forced your hand eons ago, Hardy. But you're right, I needed your energy, your ideas. Sorry about that.'

Hardyman choked back his tears and hugged MannyCapra's legs. The boss patted his head like a favourite pooch that had to be euthanised.

'Ideas which are now, alas, getting a little stale. That's a much better reason for this than any cheap betrayal? Don't cry old

boy, you've had a cracking innings. A wonderful legacy to take into your retirement.'

He stared kindly into Hardyman's terrified eyes, the fires of hell reflected in his own.

'If you think you can do without MannyCapra then, please, don't let me get in your way. But don't expect to take your it all with you, old fellow. Now, I guess all that is left is for you to see what I see, eh? Let's take a look at the man behind the iron mask.'

MannyCapra disappeared. Hardyman span round, his soundless voice crying for mercy. The music stopped. He spotted the eyes of the throng, every person in the ballroom, staring at him; glassy, waxy, dead faces. For a few seconds it was the clearest silence that he had ever heard. Then came the laughing, alternately masculine and feminine, coming from behind him. The Coquettes and Courtesans joined in, creating a chorus, then the VoQue Aristos, the musicians, even the Page Boys. Every person in that room was laughing hysterically at him.

'Hardy...' whispered MannyCapra, in both his ears.

The ballroom was gone. They were back in MannyCapra's plush boardroom. The CEO of International Activities was perched in his usual place at the head of the table, his suit a neat sixties Mod look, Müller probably, eyes smiling as before. He held a Renaissance vanity mirror up to Hardyman so he could see his reflection. The old codger staring back at him looked at death's door, with the exception of his sparkling new magenta eyes, the only gift he had expected. How did they get there? He didn't remember any procedure? But then, he had lost any grasp or control of time.

Saul Hardyman had stood on the edge of chaos from the very first day that he had met MannyCapra, more than a lifetime ago. Now beyond the precipice, senility, madness and death finally rounded upon the ex-Vice President, embracing

him.

'Happy Birthday, Saul.'

MannyCapra nodded, smiled and vanished.

Then everything vanished.

## 24

### HER WORLD

Maria Schwartz pushed the meal to one side. The pasta tasted good, too good. How many substances had they laced it with? Did they need to spike her food?

She curled up beneath her bed sheets to give herself the illusion that she could hide from them. Once an innocent, ignorant young woman called Maria Schwartz had lived with her best friend and her cats. She had possessed the joy of having the whole of her life in front of her; the confidence and self-esteem of one who knew that she could really make a difference to the world, but then she discovered that this world was very different to what she had imagined and that reality had driven a hole through her sanity.

Then there was Brontay. She knew this strange, glassy-eyed creature in her waking hours as a victim too. Helpless but kind. Perhaps the sort of woman she could befriend, if in another dimension. Their clinches had become more passionate, for all the artificiality of the situation. Perhaps it was because it was only those moments which were guaranteed to be her own.

Maybe she felt the same way. But to be candid with her was too much of a risk.

The Brontay in her dreams though was an altogether different person. Cold, perverted, pathetic. It was hard to reconcile the two. Maybe it was a trick, another cruel device to warp her mind, to keep the situation mechanical, to dehumanise the situation. But if that was what they were trying to do it was failing. They'd given her back the only piece of humanity she possessed by default.

For the fourth day in a row she camped beneath her bedclothes, staring at the length of sharp wire which she'd ripped from beneath Brontay's bed on that very first day that she went to her. Maria had known how to incite them into giving her the scream. This time she'd planned it, for despite the hellish agony she needed to get an option, any option. To seize back control of her life was essential to her keeping sanity, even if that control was only the ability to kill herself. She'd hidden it in the lining of her tunic and they hadn't spotted it, otherwise they'd have punished her by now. It was a cold comfort that the fuckers weren't quite as all-seeing and all-knowing as they thought, that her mind was just about still her own because she had that information.

How easy it would be for that wire to slice through the tender veins of her wrist. Right now. She could lie beneath the covers and in a few, drowsy minutes she'd be free. It would be her victory.

'Liebling,' said Deconstructed Man.

She slid the wire down the back of her bed.

He held a magnum of champagne with two glasses. Deconstructed Man was the cruellest piece of shit she'd ever come across. She never knew what he would do next.

'Champagne?' she answered softly, obediently.

Maria cursed herself for her sycophancy. She'd learned the rules of being a victim too easily. Hang on to that.

Carroll Grabham

But no one knew about this place. Someone had to tell the story, however unlikely it was that she'd survive. Maybe she would throw the wire away.

'I thought a celebration would be in order. So why not share it with a friend?'

'A friend?'

'Is there an echo in here? Get your sexy ass over here and say hello to your new Chief Constable.'

She resolved to drink his champagne with him, hopeful that alcohol would dull the effect of whatever would happen next, or give her some Dutch courage to use her little escape option.

#### GOING LOCO WITH TALES OF DIABLO

Brontay awoke with a start. The sleep had been the first decent rest that she'd managed in at least ten days, since the voyage itself had begun. The opening few days of retching, claustrophobia, deprivation of natural light and constant drinking had been truly awful. But worse still was that damn incessantly cheerful Russian. The man snored and ground his teeth in his sleep, farted and told bad jokes in his waking hours.

Proud as a strutting walrus, Vasily broke wind loudly again whilst shaving. He glanced down at Brontay through the small mirror above the wash basin.

'And how might you be this morning, young Sasha? Pleasant dreams I hope?'

He was right. She'd been cosied in bed with a chiselled, Germanic blonde, watching her sleep, falling for a face never seen but achingly real. Then she'd woken up to this gassy hulk.

'How long was I out?'

'Ooh about twenty hours.'

'Twenty? How?'

'The sweet magic of cheap pharma.'  
Brontay rubbed the back of her head. Then she grasped the full meaning of the Russian's comment.

'You spiked me.'

The Cossack shrugged, wiping the soap off his now clean shaven face.

'Sometimes a working man needs a break,' he said casually.

'What are you on about?'

Nedvedev reached down beneath the sink and pulled out a large glass bottle. He tossed it over to Brontay.

'Happy Christmas.'

The bottle had no label on it, but it was distinguishable by the small dead worm that swam about in the bottom.

'You looked like you could do with some decent sleep.'

'But you spiked me.'

Nedvedev looked like a teenager who had pranked one step too far.

'Costa Rica. It's a lively place. What can I say, boss?'

There was a chance to catch some fresh air, to get out of the tin can. Gone. Brontay choked.

'Why?'

'Because I know that you would have whined at me until I had to stay in this can. Sometimes you go on like an old fishwife. Now, why don't you put some tunes on.'

Brontay sniffed and shook her head. She held up two ancient 7" vinyl records, the only ones from Misha's box that they hadn't played to death; Chuck Berry's *Nadine* and Louis Armstrong's *All The Time In The World*. Then it was time to move onto B sides.

'Which one?'

'Satchmo I think. That is if you don't have a preference.'

'No. Bastard.'

Vasily slumped down on the floor next to Brontay and patted her shin.

'You know, Alexandra.'

'Yeah?'

'I'm really sorry about all this. All the trouble for you.'

'You have a funny way of showing it, Vasily.'

'But you can tell very much about someone when you are stuck like two peas in a whistle, no?'

'I'm not sure I'm following you.'

Vasily picked his teeth.

'I cannot answer all your questions, Sasha. It is for your own good.'

His Vostok drawl sounded tired for once, as if he'd slipped the mask off for a second. It wasn't like him.

'What do you know?' asked Brontay, for the millionth time.

Vasily smiled and sucked in a deep breath. Would she ever get any answers?

'Father and Anya sent you back to the West, to England. Why?'

Brontay raised an eyebrow.

'Where else can I go?'

'Lots of different places. You know that.'

She felt her stomach churn in the same way that it did when she saw Vasily gun down that bear. This man was more than just gallows humour and gutrotting hooch. He just picked his moments.

'I have been betrayed before, Alexandra,' he said, his expression more sombre than he'd even seen, 'that betrayal cost me the lives of my brothers. The lives of two hundred million brothers and sisters. War is terrible, you never want to see it at its worst.'

He relaxed back in his seat, as if he was either going to drink or sleep. He did neither.

'Now? I trust no-one but the man you see before you. I'll give you a warning, Alexandra. Diablo will one day offer you the world, the moon, the stars and the sea. Then he will take your

soul. Maybe you can't understand what this really means but you will, but before you take his hand you will have to get past me.'

A long shiver ran down Brontay's spine. The familiar impish grin returned to Vasily's face as he got to his feet.

'Now, I'm going to take big Russian shit, I may be some time. Put Satchmo back on will you? The needle's stuck. Better make it loud too.'

The cabin was well-heated, but for a split second Brontay had felt every bit as cold as she did back on that day in Nimsky Forest, the day her life was saved by this man's parents. Very little made any sense and she had given up asking Vasily what the plan was for when they returned, but an even more important realisation had dawned upon her. She was no longer merely some unlucky fool who had been caught up in events beyond her control. The look on that Russian's face for that one moment informed her directly that she was now very much an active part of those events, for all of his riddles.

*Diablo*, whoever he was, awaited her with a special audience.

Outside, in the swell, the frothy, cruel sea lashed the giant vessel back and forth and up and down like it was made of paper as the lights of the Panama Canal faded into its long, troubled wake. To the East the sun rose from the squall in heavy contrast with a bruised, violet sky; the direction of their destination. Across the deck a whispering, crackling sound echoed from one of the 1500 containers in the ship's hold. It seemed that the late, great Louis Armstrong was alive and well and living in the Atlantic Ocean, the gravelly tones floating across the hold and kissing the brine in the air.

## 26

### SENATE HOUSE

Susan Pollard felt another ice cream headache coming on. Cold air played hell with her sinuses and this windy late summer night was unseasonably cold. This, like most other maladies, had a simple fix via a solution of nano-agents, but Pollard knew too much to trust putting that shit in her system.

Under regular circumstances, she would be sitting next to a nice open fire with a glass of red, the children fast asleep upstairs and Helena's soothing kisses. She would listen to the long, perfect silence and thank god for all she had. Once again, she doubted her own sanity that she was out in the open on a night like this, waiting to meet the only man in the world whom she'd ever loved; the last person to break her heart.

She readjusted her mohair trenchcoat against the elements. Glancing around, she moved away from the inky darkness of the archway. Senate House, the oldest remaining tall building in London, towered over her, still proud and magnificent in its art deco lines. It looked every bit as impressive as it had thirty years ago, when she had often sunbathed on the green beneath

the shadow of this building, idling away the days smoking antique vapes and whinging about life with fellow students at the University of London, just before the onset of the Great New Order. A large crater a couple of metres away marked the grassy spot where she had first met a radical young fellow called Faz Fazal on a bright September afternoon, when time didn't matter.

Pollard felt an odd pang for a real smoke, even though she'd kicked it all ten years ago; real, electronic, lysovirtual. She ran a finger along the edge of a boarded-up window, removing a crust of dirt from the sill. Inhaling deeply, she massaged the bridge of her nose to try to ease the throbbing in her head. This place was not the obvious venue for a discrete rendezvous, but it was apt. After all, tomorrow this famous old building would be demolished and levelled to make way for another clinic. No protesting staff and students, no outraged alumni coming back to campaign. All its memories would also be going up and another bit of history would be conveniently snuffed out from human memory. Such savage, barren days.

'You could have chosen somewhere warmer, Susie.'

The shortish character was wrapped up tight in his old macintosh, wearing that stupid deerstalker hat.

'Still got the wacky headwear, Farrukh.'

She hung back for a second. Not seeing him in half a decade had made her nervous. He had the same face, but his eyes betrayed a world of fear, loathing and pain.

'Oh, come here...'

She held him close and tightly. She had to.

'How have you been keeping, old girl?' said Fazal gently, pulling away.

'Not so old as I look, you cheeky bugger.'

She boxed his chest, then sneezed.

'Oooh... you should take something for the cold, Susie, I've got some...'

'No, no please. I avoid them. I avoid anything.'

It hurt Fazal to see her like this. Drained, ageing. Some gene therapy would do her the power of good. But she always was a stubborn cow, not wanting to be part of the system, even though she very much was part of it, just in a different way.

'How are the boys?' said Fazal. He bit his lip. What a stupid question.

'Good, better than ever.'

'It must be hard. The world doesn't do natural borns these days.'

'And you're telling me?'

Fazal slinked back like a boxer backing to the ropes after a low blow.

'Sorry Sues. Awkward.'

'Business. You sold this to me as a matter of some delicacy. So it must be interesting.'

'Are we safe here?' said Fazal.

'Do you think I would take that risk?'

Fazal swallowed a lump. He didn't know what to think.

'Susie, there is a certain character being detained at MannyCapra's pleasure. Brontay. Alexandra Brontay. You've seen her?'

Pollard's eyes narrowed. What had he gotten into?

'No. But I'm well briefed on the case. A colleague... well I won't even call him a fellow police officer more another filthy carpet bagger, Grayson Suarez, he brought Brontay in a month back. Another one of those arrests, just like the good old days.'

'You have no idea how important this person is.'

She flinched again at him.

'What is this, Faz? Tell me what you know.'

Fazal hunched his shoulders.

'You go first, Susie.'

Pollard exhaled, feeling the cold marble walls on her hands.

'Brontay is a terrorism suspect. That's not my department. I



do surveillance and arse wiping. To the highest level, of course.'

'Oh come on, Susie.'

This *was* desperate. Pollard frowned. The Faz she used to know was far more direct, less cagey and formal. The free spirit had left him, but he had fired up her curiosity.

'What do you want, Faz? I'm worried about you. About this.'

Fazal shuffled on his feet and looked around them.

'Excellent, you'll help.'

'You're anxious, Faz. Too anxious for my tastes, given your experience. That's how people get killed. I don't want that to happen to you.'

Pollard began to walk away. He grabbed her arm. She could snap him, but really didn't want the guilt.

'This is far more important than either of our lives, darling. Or even the lives of your children.'

She knew Fazal in a way he couldn't know himself. For the first time, his eyes were straight and strong, even though fear now fully commanded his brow.

'I'll listen, then I'll decide. By the way, what's all this "we" business? I didn't know that you were in The Congress?'

Fazal shook his head. She wasn't going to get him to admit that to her, for all their history.

'You're still sharp. Look, I'm a freelancer, you know that. I always have been one at heart. "We" just sounds better, that's all.'

'Oh.'

The Reporter fumbled inside his Macintosh, pulling out the manila envelope which Duffy Scanlon had given to him. He handed it over to Pollard. She gave the contents a quick scan. Her stomach turned over.

'This is insane,' she said, in equal parts gasp and whisper.

'This is a chance, Susie. A real shot.'

'Says you.'

Pollard shook her head, offering the envelope back.

'I'm sorry. I'd love to help but that just isn't feasible. No. No way.'

Fazal dropped his head, raising his eyebrows in that irresistible baby chimpanzee way that he always had. He picked his moments to get charming.

'This is a whole way of life that we're talking about, Susie. I know how you feel about this. We'll never have a better chance.'

Pollard crossed her arms. She didn't like this at all.

'You know how I *felt*, Faz. I'll take a look at it. See if I can change one or two things. But I can't guarantee... Even this conversation could make us both disappear.'

'I thought you said we were secure.'

'Don't tie this in knots, Farrukh.'

Fazal kissed her hard on the lips.

'You're an absolute peach, Susie. I'll never forget this. Shit! I'd better be getting back before my man on the gate changes his shift.'

'Wait a second. I have questions.'

Fazal disappeared into the blackness. She could track him, but that wouldn't get her anywhere but that café in the Favelas ran by the Italian woman.

She took a step backwards, looking up to the tower of Senate House. It was solid and defiant, unaware of its impending doom. She thought of how she'd been steadily pushed aside by an illegitimate regime, snubbed, taken for granted and then left powerless as Suarez made his arrests. Unchecked dick-swinging galore. They accepted her fear and compliance as a given, and until a few minutes ago they were right. The idealistic student who once put the world to rights in this very place had just stirred and it was insane and exhilarating, if suicidal.

Pollard kissed the cold, white stone of Senate House and said goodbye to the grand old edifice for the very last time.

**JAILBREAK**

Detective Inspector Monique Cassidy hummed to herself as she strode towards the central surveillance room, another Senior Officer on another random inspection of SecNet facilities. She did the majority of her work checking and double checking the systems in the Favelas, and she was very good at her job. Her friend and ex-boss Sue Pollard had seen her through every stage in her career, recognising her as both a skilled manager and Security Systems Administrator with the reward of her rank; the youngest person ever in the long history of the Met to get that high.

Monique's status opened more doors than the average police officer could dream about, though she also knew the consequences of abusing the system, for fair or foul.

But these days, well. Things had just gone that bit too far.

R34, the SecNet Ops room. This was the place. The first stage was using the false I.D. If they checked, she'd have to show her real one and call the whole game off. She suspected they wouldn't because it was nigh impossible for any unauthorised

personnel to get into this area anyway, but that didn't stop her getting nervous.

'There'd better be a promotion in this for this one, Super Susie,' she mumbled to herself. Like Pollard, she had seen the level of corruption in this organisation and kept quiet for too long. She convinced herself for the fiftieth time today that she was doing the right thing even with more than her career at stake.

Cassidy rapped on the door and stood back, straightening herself up.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm D.I. Sherwood, Internal Ops Division. I'm here for a spot systems diagnostic.' The lie didn't scan too bad and she sounded suitably like an officious ballbreaker, but it was no time for complacency.

Brontay awoke with a deep gasp. This time the central theme of the dreams had been claustrophobia. Her daily commute, shooting down a vacuum tube at incredible speed as time bends in her wake, the compound cylinder cracking under pressure as she shoots upwards to the surface and then back down again, down, down, down and into the earth's crust, grinding to a halt as the molten debris pulverised her to nothing... Back into semi-consciousness with a crushing weight on her entire body before waking with a start, back in the real world.

'Dreaming again, Alex?'

It was Maria. They'd shaved her head and put her in a beige tracksuit. Her eyes looked brighter, bigger, more vulnerable than ever.

'Water,' muttered Brontay to her cellmate.

'You want a drink?'

'No. Felt. Like. I was floating, then...'

Maria poured two cups of the insipid rehydration formula

from the dispenser, handing Brontay one as she perched on the bed.

'You know, some wallpaper, a few potted plants. This place wouldn't look so bad.'

'What makes you so cheerful today, Maria?'

'I was being ironic.'

'So was I. Is that allowed?'

A half-smile invaded Brontay's face, as if that was all the spy cameras would allow.

'So what is thy bidding today, master? Your faithful whore offers every service.'

'I'm nobody's master, Maria. Not yours, not even my own. That isn't funny.'

Schwartz shrugged and got into bed with Brontay.

'You don't have to do this. Do it if you want, but not because...'

Maria placed her index finger over Brontay's lips, glanced upwards at the invisible watchers and pecked her on the nose.

'Alexandra.'

'Yeah?'

'What if I was to tell you that it's you that is stopping me. Not because of the sex but in spite of it. Your innocence. It's your innocence that stops the world falling apart. My world.'

Her index finger crossed Brontay lips again at the beckoned reply. For the briefest of moments Brontay looked into her eyes and could see what she meant. For the briefest of moments they were a million miles away from this awful place. In spite of everything, there was something miraculous about their meeting. Something their captors could never touch, even though the fucking idiots had put them together as lab rats. Or maybe that was deliberate too.

The cruellest of experiments.

'If you told me, then there's no way I could believe you.'

The automatic locks on the main door clicked, breaking the

spell. Several pairs of heavy jackboots echoed in the corridor. That glazed look of hatred returned to Maria's eyes as her ape brain kicked in again.

'Now see what you've done!' she screamed, 'all for your fucking pleasure. That's all that matters, your fucking pleasure.'

Brontay couldn't decide whether this was for the benefit of their captors or she had lost it again. Either way, it wouldn't do them any good.

'No, Maria. Stop this. Please.'

Four burly Squadjutants entered. They were wearing face masks and the black jump suits of the Favelas Division, something neither prisoner noticed.

'Look, I'll do it, no talking, I'll do it. Please,' said Schwartz, climbing on Brontay, desperately trying to follow an unsaid command.

Two Squadjutants grabbed an arm each, yanking her away from the bed and up against a wall. A furious expression, which Brontay had not seen since the first time they'd met six weeks ago, darkened her delicately-boned face. She aimed a heel kick squarely in one of her assailant's testicles, dropping him in agony.

'You want some of this, big boy?' she shrieked, hissing at the second man, slapping her butt cheek.

The Squadjutant kept his distance, producing a pressurised canister.

'Harvey, stop looking at her tits and spray her will you!' said a female voice from behind one of the masks, 'C'mon! We haven't got all day!'

The naked woman snarled at Harvey, adopting a fighting stance. Harvey took another step backwards and as he pointed the nozzle in her direction, Brontay tried to get between them. Maria was already on the floor as the spray hit her face.

As they piled the unconscious Schwartz into a corner the

woman approached Brontay, who'd curled up beneath the bed. She peeled off her mask.

'Oh this is ridiculous, ' said Susan Pollard, 'Alexandra, can you come out of there please?'

'Uh?' she grunted.

She tried to kick away at Pollard's shins from beneath the bed. A stern looking face then appeared.

'Alexandra Brontay, if you don't want to spend the rest of your life in here then I suggest you come out now. Pretty please?'

'Fuck off,' Brontay squealed, wishing she could summon some of Maria's redundant defiance, although she had the feeling that this was turning into a bit of a sketch.

'I'm giving you one more chance, sweetheart. I'm here to help you get out of here.'

'Fuck you.'

'Okay then, sausage.'

Pollard sprayed her face. No reaction. Weird. She sprayed Brontay again for good measure.

Brontay shuffled around on the floor as if in spasm and recovered. Pollard replaced her mask. This was not going to plan. They could all go down for this.

'Harvey please just grab the stubborn little bitch will you.'

'Wait!' grunted Brontay, kicking at them.

Pollard held her hand up.

'Hang on,' she said, peeling the mask off again and looking beneath the bed, 'yes?'

'If you are who you say, then I'll come. But not without Maria.'

Pollard glanced back at Schwartz, frowning, then back at Brontay. They could do without any baggage, but then they could do without any more delays.

Pollard shook her head, putting her mask back on.

'Too bad. Grab her, Harv.'

'Nooo .... aaagh!!'

Brontay squealed for a moment then finally passed out as the gas hit the capillaries in her sinuses. The Squadjutant then dragged her out like a pig carcass.

'Bag her up,' ordered Pollard, lighting up a smoke. They slid Brontay inside a breathable police issue body bag and zipped it up.

'What do we do with the other, Ma'am?' said P.C. Harvey.

Pollard drew heavily on her cigarette.

'I was afraid you were going to ask me that.'

It had taken Pollard a full twenty minutes to get the bags to the rendezvous point. *Their* people hadn't yet turned up when they made the drop, which raised serious questions about their ability to run a professional operation. She glanced at her watch. Forty minutes and not a peep from anyone. Her Squad Officers had done an excellent job and they'd been able to leave without arousing any suspicion. Monique had done well and by now she'd be back behind her desk in Tower 12. Everyone, including herself, had arrived at their correct stations.

Pollard stubbed out her cigarette as it reached the filter, lighting up another immediately. Then she reached for the bottle of single malt in her drinks cabinet, something she kept back for special occasions. This was a special occasion; The Return of Justice. Safe in the knowledge of having done her bit, she poured herself a stiff treble. Something nagged at her.

Something wasn't right.

Pollard slouched behind her desk, wiping the sweat off her face with a tissue. She stubbed out her cigarette, leaving a long stub this time. It was time to give them up again. Forty three minutes now. There had been terrible risks, such as the possibility that the Chief would call asking to talk to her. Very unlikely, but it was one of the things she could legislate for as it was impossible to track his movements. Neither Moran nor

Deconstructed Man ever got into action in before 0930 and it was only 0700 now. Still dark outside.

There'd be a witch hunt, of that she was sure. It was also likely that she'd be investigated or held under suspicion as she was no longer in old Moran's inner circle. But a few deliberate clues had been left around, subtle enough to be convincing, that pointed to Congress Operatives being directly behind the jailbreak. Whatever they thought, her people were clean and she was clean. She just hoped that they'd made the pick-up. Pollard drained her whisky.

Deconstructed Man walked in and collapsed on her sofa, putting his feet up on the plush leather upholstery. He was sporting a snakeskin Albertini suit, coiffured hair, new eyes and teeth. It was almost too obscene for his awful timing to matter.

'Uh... whadda night whadda night whadda night whadda night! Hail Vanity!'

'Grayson?'

The kittens that she'd given birth to were now running and playing beneath her desk.

'Whassup, Susie?' he said, face in palms.

'What are you doing in my office with your feet on my sofa. What brings you to H.Q. so early? And what's with the teeth?'

She did her best to look mildly annoyed. He flashed his new pearlies, embossed in platinum Roman numerals.

'Well, in answer to your question, Missy. I've been out celebratin' in VoQuesville an' I ain't slept yet, and then I discovered the fuckin' monitors in my office have gone kaput and I thought I'd use yours if you'd be so kind and finally I have some good news. Great fucking news.'

Pollard felt beads of sweat accumulate on her brow.

'Oh really?'

Some twenty-five metres beneath this conversation a woman was conducting a medical examination on the platform of St

Paul's Underground Station, an emergency conduit for trains in the event of a crisis at the Met Dome. The main station that served the entire police compound ran two hundred metres to the south through Peel House itself. Though operational, this station had never been used since the Dome had been constructed and still had the feel of an old Tube stop, right down to ancient newspapers and the non-biodegradable detritus strewn across the platform.

The first arrival at platform one in over two decades, an old two carriage Tube train, sat silently on the track, the crystal-driven locomotive engine stubbornly refusing to budge. It was an old piece requisitioned from the long-defunct transport museum, quickly re-jigged for this job. An impressive piece of engineering, but currently dead on the tracks.

'I'll fucking kill that Somali,' said Katia Kutz as she checked the respiration of the still prone Brontay.

'Leave my brother Nkono alone,' said Duffy Scanlon, standing over proceedings, eyes peeled for cop.

'Whatever, he hasn't got his figures right. For an Ivy League mathematician, that's inexcusable.'

'Relax. Our friends over there know what they're doin!'

'I wish I could share your confidence. Give me some light here will you?'

Scanlon pulled out a heavy torch from beneath his macintosh. Like most of his possessions the object could be used as a weapon in times of need.

'Shit!'

'What is it now?' replied Kutz irritably.

'Fazal! That clumsy shortassed fuck spilt coffee all over my best mac! Clumsy hack motherfucker.'

'In case it has escaped your attention, Scanlon, we have one or two serious problems here, like that, for instance.'

Kutz was referring to the prone and unconscious Maria Schwartz, the unexpected surprise.

'Yeah, well. There's always room for one mo.'

'Not from where I'm sitting,' said Kutz coldly. She unzipped Brontay's bag and checked vitals.

'Good enough,' she said.

'Have a heart. Edelweiss was there on the inside too. She might have some valuable information.'

Kutz shot her new comrade in arms a glance imported with her from Siberia.

'While we're sitting here waiting for those clowns that you call engineers to pull their fingers out, allow me to straighten something out for you, Duffy. I didn't ask to be put in charge of a bunch of amateurs, but since I have no choice I expect at least some co-operation. She stays here.'

As Kutz was talking, Schwartz twitched gently. The Clinician rolled her eyes.

'Shit.'

She sprang upright, suddenly hyperventilating.

'Looks like a panic attack,' said Scanlon.

'Your clinical knowledge overwhelms me, Doctor,' replied Kutz perniciously.

Scanlon searched his pockets for a moment, producing an electric syringe.

'Come on. We gotta take her now. I'll give her this to chill her down.'

Kutz snatched the object, hissing at him in exasperation.

'None of your cheap fucking chemicals! I'll give her a proper shot.'

Scanlon couldn't believe that the cold-hearted bitch was going to leave Schwartz to die at the hands of those monsters.

'Meanwhile I'd be grateful if you could keep a lookout, Duffy.'

Scanlon nodded at Kutz's hand as she administered a nano-agent from her fingernail into Schwartz's carotid.

'This lady had better not drop dead suddenly on us with

your hocus pocus. Else I be pissed.'

Kutz rolled her eyes.

'Ooh I'm terrified of the big man. She'll live. Against my better judgement and only because there isn't time to argue.'

Scanlon gave her a look as if he could readily jam his syringe up her better-than-perfect asshole.

'Is this a territorial thing, Duffy? Do you resent shutting up and doing your job when a woman tells you on your own ground? Do you? Well tough shit. Go see what's happening with that train before we all get arrested.'

Scanlon had only known Kutz for less than a week. She'd gotten under his skin constantly for that time and he wasn't beginning to like her attitude any more now. But he also knew better than to demonstrate contempt for the vain old bitch under present circumstances, however much she pissed on his soil. Yes, vain old bitch she was, even if she didn't look old. Duffy always saw the inside before he looked on the outside.

'Our time is gonna come, honey chile,' he grunted, getting up to see to the engineers.

'Whatever.'

Pollard scanned Deconstructed Man from the corner of her eye. He was flicking through SecNet on her monitor. He'd seemed to have found one he liked.

The nausea had built up again. She lit a cigarette.

'Chief Constable? You're joking, of course,' she said, trying to break up his attention.

Deconstructed Man snapped his fingers and The Beatles' *Revolution* played over the network before cutting out. Someone had done work on his grey matter, allowing him to send neural commands. That was classified access. Along with the tasteless new look, it occurred to Pollard that perhaps this wasn't just his odd sense of humour at play. Fucker had clearly just received a very illegal and powerful upgrade, it explained his newly-

acquired acuity.

Pollard's office didn't have a dome, only monitors. She liked it that way. Here was an opportunity to get him off those screens. She browsed the networks.

'Yeah, I think I'll just check if that's all the same.'

Deconstructed Man held his hands out.

'No, keep that one on the Brontay room.'

Pollard felt herself flinch.

'Whatever you say.'

She keyed in a search for "news headlines".

'How long have you been smoking, Pollard?'

'What? Oh, I quit ten years ago.'

'So?' said Deconstructed Man with one eye on the action.

'So what?'

'So what hooked you back on 'em?'

'Dunno. Pressure, yeah. It's the job.'

'I know what it is.'

'You do?'

'Huh. If you think those things are going to help you get rid of that fat ass of yours,' Deconstructed Man paused for a grin, winking at his older ex-partner, 'Just kiddin'. You know I never did go in for that gene messing stuff myself but I'm starting to reckon it's kinda cool. And we can smoke as much as we like and it will never kill us. Smoke away!'

A small news item for such a big story. Apsley Moran had retired and Grayson Suarez was officially the new Chief Constable of the Metropolitan Police. Part of Susan Pollard died as she read it.

'Grayson! Shit, how could I ever have doubted you, I'm sorry. Congratulations!'

Deconstructed Man seemed preoccupied by something else though.

'What? Oh yeah, I told you so. Have a look at this, Susan.'

Pollard felt faint for a second, but she managed to hold it

together. He pointed out the looped footage on the Brontay monitor as Schwartz got out of bed, pausing it.

'Didn't we shave that Schwartz girl down?'

The bastard was too quick now, even when he was half-asleep.

'How should I know Grayson? It's not my operation. Anyway when did you find ou..'

'Hold it a second will you. I know the difference between shaved and waved.'

'What are you on about?' said Pollard nervously.

'I should know, Pollard, I fucked her good last night.'

Deconstructed Man glanced at the cigarettes and the empty tumbler of whisky. It wasn't like her to drink on the job.

'You did what? Christ Almighty, Grayson what are you trying to do to this police for... oh my.'

Pollard' mouth hung as Deconstructed Man held his Magnum inches away from her face.

'Shut the fuck up and follow me. That cell had better be occupied.'

There was a loud crack of splintering wood as Deconstructed Man rammed the door open with a fire extinguisher. Pollard stood by as the American paced around the room, muttering to himself.

'Fuckin' women .... that's what fuckin' happens when they put fuckin' women in the fuckin' department. Jesus, Apsley. Why didn't you ever fuckin' listen to me?'

'Grayson...'

Deconstructed Man levelled the pistol at Pollard.

'Come here, bitch.'

She approached him gingerly. He lowered the gun and walked towards her, his face white hot with anger.

'Grayson. I think you should know something.'

Pollard's foot piledrived into his knee ligaments. She was still

wearing the heavy boots from that morning and she knew it would hurt as he went down. Deconstructed Man's face was now white with surprise.

'You fuckin'...'

'Now, now Grayson.'

Pollard breathing was heavy. Perhaps the best bet would be to kill him. For one thing she'd be doing the world a favour and for another she could pin the jailbreak on him. She raised his pistol, feeling its weight in her small hands. Susan Pollard had never killed anything in cold blood before in her life. Deconstructed Man was now the picture of composure.

'Heh, Susan. Go on, pull that pin,' said the American, 'c'mon, do everybody a favour! Is that what you're thinking? Well, you know, I think you should have your mind on something else. Maybe like the weapon is I.D. locked!'

She pulled the trigger, only to get a loud click. Deconstructed Man then returned her compliment, aiming a heavy kick at her kneecap. Pollard collapsed in agony.

'Sorry about that, Susie, I had a big night out last night, but Clarabelle here, she's a keeper.'

He picked up the Magnum and it activated with a click.

'You know, first thing I'm gonna do as Chief is organise some fuckin' firearms training because you Brits are useless. But enough of me, how are you, my little lovely?'

'Kiss my cunt, you horrible, antiquated sexist prick,' said Pollard, her teeth gritted.

'Antiquated? I'm genuinely hurt. I've just had an upgrade.'

'I know,' grunted Pollard.

'Oh you do, do you?'

He booted her hard in her solar plexus. She collapsed in a heap. Deconstructed Man squatted by his stricken colleague, shoving a knee into her ribs.

'Let's start again, Susan. Here's a little stat for you. Do you know that 90% of homicides used to be committed by someone

who knows the victim? Now the murder rate has dropped, but every few years it spikes. And every few years is when fellas like me get plenty of work. Funny, eh?'

'You'll get nothing from me. Your days are fucking numbered.'

'Huh, well I'd say a minute might be considered a long life span from your perspective, honey. Look, Susie. You know and I know that I'm going to kill you now. There's nothing that will change that bar an act of God. Now if I put my amateur psychologist's head on for a second, I'll presume that you won't tell me anything. Because if you're brave enough to pull a stunt like this, then you're certainly dumb enough to make life difficult for your two beautiful kids and your pussy partner. Might I be right? Of course I am. You knew that as soon as I saw it.'

Pollard tried to move, but Deconstructed Man had his full weight down on her chest.

'You bastard,' she sobbed. She could see her reflection in his china white teeth. He looked like a cartoon villain after all that work.

'Now crying ain't gonna getcha out of this, girl. I'm telling you, I don't wanna do this, but if you push me I'll stretch your bitch good and make your baby swine watch. Then I'll bleach the little inbreds until they run out of screams and shit. You following me?'

Susan Pollard's face was awash with tears. She looked up at the grinning Deconstructed Man and hoped that one day he would meet justice of the severest kind. She mumbled something at him.

'What? I beg your pardon?'

'Tunnel,' she whispered.

What a horrible mistake, what a stupid fucking risk to take. Her only hope was that he would leave them alone. Her experience told her otherwise, but she had to try anything.



"Tunnel?" he searched his mind for an explanation. She nodded downwards. After a short moment an expression of realisation spread across his face. He cocked the Magnum and placed the nozzle under her chin.

Then he closed Susan Pollard's eyes forever.

After fifteen minutes the wait was over.

'About time too,' said Kutz indignantly, arms crossed. They climbed aboard the old carriage.

Scanlon pulled a face at Kutz, aping her derision. The crystals warmed the locomotive engine up, prepared for departure.

Behind Superintendent Pollard's 19<sup>th</sup> century drinks cabinet, a gift from Apsley Moran as it happened, was something no Senior Officer of the Metropolitan Police could do without. A narrow hatch beneath opened up to reveal a very handy route to a sumptuously furnished nuclear shelter to be used in the unlikely event that someone dropped the big one on London, again. What interested Deconstructed Man far more than that was that it led to an emergency train conduit. It was probably too late, but worth checking out anyway.

He shimmied down the iron ladder, deeper down a dimly-lit, filthy old hole. His new suit was already ruined with blood and brains, now all this dirt.

Bitch.

'Com. This is Officer Deconstructed Man, put out an A.P.B. on a white female escapee, 5'8", brown hair. Kinda butch.'

'What?' came through a filtered voice.

'This is your Chief Constable speaking. Don't fuckin' "what" me sonny or I'll have your balls on a stick!'

'Sorry sir.'

'Yeah right,' said Deconstructed Man, climbing into the narrow tunnel, 'see if you can tell me where I can find the

emergency rail conduit from beneath Superintendent Pollard's office... no, forget it. Just track me and send back up. Fucking armed back up, the best we have. Then shut down every tunnel and road out of the city. No one gets out of London, do you hear me?'

'Sir!'

Yeah, they could be anywhere by now. But it was worth taking a look.

The passageway was now darker than hell. Deconstructed Man ignited his zippo lighter, the flame revealing a single metallic door about ten yards ahead. A closer inspection revealed another heavy hatch.

At first it had seemed that the door had had been the extent of the passageway.

'Aagh... shit...'

The lighter case had become too hot to handle and he dropped it on the floor. It clanked against something metallic. A manhole cover.

Deconstructed Man swung down the eight feet drop into the access tunnel. It was a pleasant surprise to be in a subway station again after all these years and this one was pretty well-preserved. Two Squadjutsants appeared from the ticket office.

'Sir!'

'Ssch! How many of you?'

'Two sir...'

'Fuckin' two?'

*He would whip these limey fucks into shape if it killed him.*

'Come on, spot me.'

They scaled down the escalators onto the main concourse that led to both platforms. It was littered with cardboard boxes and the walls bore advertisements of ancient events in the long dead Metropolitan version of London. As they approached the end of the corridor Deconstructed Man eased himself along the edge of the curved wall so he could get a view of the platform

without giving anyone a shot.

Nothing doing.

They walked out onto the platform, the American eyeing the scene for any sign of life. Checking the clip in his pistol, he jumped down onto the tracks, urging the Squadjutant to hang back.

'Let's see what we got here.'

It was the last thing even he'd expected. They were still there.

The other two moved themselves into position while Deconstructed Man tried to find a space for a shot. He climbed back on to platform one, deciding to take a better look from the back of platform two. It seemed that everyone was now on the train. The carriages were beginning to move.

'Shit.'

There were hundreds of miles of usable tracks still beneath London and with a crystal-driven engine they could stay down there undetected for weeks. Scrambling an effective search could be difficult once they were under way. He'd have to stop them now. This was all that dick dodger's fault.

He motioned to his wingmen to cover him, then edged onto the platform in full view of the train. A shot fizzed past his ear, winging one of the Squadjutants. The other began to unload at the train, but the response was immediate, strafing assault rifle fire cutting both of his officers to pieces.

'Well at least someone knows how to fuckin' shoot round here.'

Deconstructed Man had taken the only option available, leaping onto the track beneath the carriage and eye level of the gunmen. He grabbed hold of the undercarriage but, realising that such a stunt on a moving train was far more difficult in reality than it was in movies, he let go once the train had made it away from the platform.

The carriage was gaining momentum and Deconstructed Man broke into a stealthy jog. By cutting down the other two

they may have thought the coast was clear. Since they hadn't fired at him as yet he surmised they couldn't have spotted him. Positioning himself to the side as he ran, he made for the gap between the tunnel and the train, sprinting hard. The steam created by the locomotive as it powered up billowed into him, making it difficult for them to track any uninvited passengers, but equally difficult for Deconstructed Man himself to see anything. Then he spotted the sliding doors, which on his side had jammed open.

'How d'you like me now!' screamed the New Yorker, sprinting flat out for broke.

He managed to grab hold of something solid inside the carriage and manoeuvre himself aboard before a sleeper on the edge of the track could mangle him. Torches shone everywhere in the carriage and he could now hear voices. Then he saw the two targets propped up in seats, a heavy-set black guy guarding them. The decision had been made back on the platform one when he'd first spotted the train; if he couldn't get Brontay back then no-one would. He'd go for a head shot and make a break for it. There was that Kraut trash pussy too, but what the fuck they wanted with her he cared not a rat's ass.

Deconstructed Man raised his pistol, aiming for Brontay. One good shot and he could take both of them out. At this second the guard turned to face him, mouthing something in horror. Deconstructed Man was conscious of a huge grin traversing his face before pulling the trigger.

The foot came from thin air it seemed, a stiletto heel ripping through the sinew of his cosmetically-reconstructed left cheek. Deconstructed Man's shot had pierced a window and nothing else. In a reflex action, he grabbed the woman's heel, her shoe still stuck in his face. With one swift pull he brought her to the floor. Deconstructed Man's bloodlust was now in overdrive, neither self-preservation or the recapture of the prisoner being a priority. For the first time he saw the whites of her eyes, finding

immediately what he was looking for; mortal fear. It struck him how similar this look was in every person.

'Come here, sexy baby.'

She screamed like a fucked fox as her allies ran to her assistance, the beams of torchlight turning it into a weird, flickering, monochrome dance. Deconstructed Man had her by the throat and it was now time to do a job by hand.

'I'm in the moood for love.'

The throbbing in his knee had taken a moment to appear. Deconstructed Man's hand suddenly felt numb and his victim struggled free and away. The next thing that his brain registered was the side of the track.

His shoulder bore the brunt of the hit, Deconstructed Man feeling his collarbone and upper arm snapping on impact. Not the neck then, that was good. The vibration of the train ebbed into the distance, but by now he was in no fit condition to let that bother him.

Out. How long? Not long?

'Sir... sir are you okay?'

Deconstructed Man looked up at the concerned faces then back down at his knee. He started to giggle.

'You alright, sir?'

'Huh... does it fuckin' look like I'm alright? Haha.'

'Sir?'

Duffy Scanlon's electric syringe stood up prouder than a donkey's dick in the middle of his right thigh. He looked up at the Squadjutants, still giggling.

'Uh huh ... d'yer think I'll need to go back to the clinic... haha...'

'Sir!'

'Tha... tha... wuz juz like ... The French Connection ...'

'A medical team is on its way, sir.'

'Nah ...Popeye Doyle ... in tha Subway .... ugh.... nah wan

underssans ...'

Deconstructed Man's head lolled sideways and he passed out, the grin still wide across his face. He loved a bit of real action. And whatever was in that jab was some good shit.

A mile down the track the Favelas Express headed west towards its final destination smack between Bayswater and Knightsbridge. It rattled through the tunnel, a sense of relief among Scanlon and his friends, sitting in the pale lamp light.

Kutz smoked and stared through Scanlon, wagging his shitlocks and grinning like a fool. She was barely able to contain her fury at this incompetent show, something that had damned nearly just killed her. The two women remained out cold and oblivious to the fire-fight that had nearly snuffed them both. There would be consequences for that strutting imbecile, she would ensure it.

When were they going to start doing things her way?

'What a jam,' said Scanlon to his cronies, buzzing his tits off.

*Consequences.*

## 28

### BACK IN THE USSR

It was eleven in the evening before the MV Phileas Fogg cruised into Liverpool Bay, the culmination of what to Brontay had been the strangest and most dangerous episode of her life but to everyone else aboard was routine. There was little to denote that a port city had once stood in this place; no lights, no silhouettes of buildings on the coastline, no ethereal hew of smog in the stratosphere. For the older seamen who could remember a big settlement here, it was all a bit depressing.

The docking took place two hours behind schedule in the huge new Dingle Wharf, a self-contained complex with a twenty berth loading bay, a vacuum tube despatch system and a storage depot the size of twelve football pitches. The International Activities logo shone out in green neon on the roof of the depot, which also had a state of the art leisure complex at the river end of the building. Here, the latest dome hardware could be used free of charge by weary merchant seamen, the sole purpose being to discourage and distract from fraternisation with locals that had long since died out or

disappeared.

Brontay's head spun as the container swung back and forth and side to side on its descent towards the loading bay. For some reason the bastards had decided to leave them dangling up there for half an hour, lowering them a few metres at a time. It didn't bother Vasily, who'd strapped himself to the toilet bowl with a Cuban cheroot cigar, a bar of Swiss chocolate and the last dregs of that case of nasty Costa Rican tequila. The dry land, when it eventually arrived, felt weird after all that time at sea.

For fifty minutes they listened to the voices and noises of the docks outside, neither breathing a word of exchange. Most of the voices this time were English, though the most peculiar accent that she'd ever heard. All she knew about Liverpool was what Vasily had told him. It might as well have still been Siberia.

There was a dull metallic thud from outside the container. At this, Vasily flashed Brontay his trademark grin. Finally it was time to leave this damned smuggling cell. For that moment the Englishwoman cared little for what lay on the other side as long as it was dry land. The hatch cranked open.

Two unsavoury looking characters stood on the tarmac of the loading bay, their faces leering back at them like earthlings from an old B movie. The sudden impact of the floodlights of the dock and raw coastal breeze bit at Brontay's eyes and skin. She felt a ridiculous compulsion to slam the door shut again, but the sight of land and fresh air brought her to her senses after a short moment.

Vasily shoved past her and clapped his palms together, rubbing them vigorously and emitting a shit-eating grin.

'And a fine evening to you gentlemen,' said the Cossack.

### FIRST DAY AT THE OFFICE

'When millions once stood against each other to fight the battles of the elite, the elite would stand aside from the chaos with their clumsy dreams of building empires. The cult of personality, Grayson. Thou shalt not worship false idols, but the people do, because they love the image more than they could ever love the reality.'

Deconstructed Man sipped some of MannyCapra's re-engineered coffee and stared back at his boss blankly.

'Apologies, Grayson. It's the old Public Relations man coming out in me.' MannyCapra shrugged and smiled. Deconstructed Man's first impression of this guy was that he reminded him of someone he had once knew well. He wasn't sure that made him feel any better, as that itself could have been some kind of confidence trick. After the way that Hardyman and Moran had disappeared he'd half expected him to be some psychotic Mafioso Don with his itchy finger on some doomsday button. It was only after that carve up in the Subway that he'd realised that he could actually leave this town ahead. As the

game went, it came no bigger than this, but he was the only one available to watch his own back.

'You are quiet Grayson. Not the lunatic protégé of Apsley Moran as I was led to believe, eh?'

'I like to think of myself as a professional, Mr MannyCapra. Sometimes things may get a little ah, noisy, when a situation gets out of hand. Sometimes you have to *be* the lunatic. Sir.'

Executive jocks always loved this kind of bullshit about professionalism.

'That's reassuring to know Grayson.'

'Thank you. Sir.'

This fucker, with his white suit and insanely perfect teeth may have been chairman of the board, but there was no man that could stop a bullet. Some people thought they were invincible, but a split second in life could change everything. Basic vulnerability was always the first thing that Deconstructed Man weighed up upon meeting anyone unfamiliar because he trusted nobody. Especially someone who sounded like his mother.

'How's your shoulder?' asked MannyCapra.

'Right as rain, sir.'

'Good. Then I think we should begin. Firstly, tell me all about the one that got away. Spare no detail.'

## A CHANGE OF SCENERY

Brontay came to as Scanlon drew the curtains and the lemony sunlight of mid-September came pouring in from the outside world. The trauma had caught up with her in the last few days and sleep had been difficult, especially given the news about Maria. She barely had a moment where that face hadn't been in her mind and the grief ate away at her like a hungry virus. Could she trust these people?

Deconstructed Man's cold, smiling eyes had been the theme of last night's rest, like the man was still with her in this palatial room, hiding in the shadows.

Dr Kutz perched on the edge of her bed, ramrod-backed, stroking Brontay's fine, unkempt hair.

'The danger is over, Alexandra. You have nothing more to fear, my child.'

Child? She looked a couple of years *younger* than her, but such logic Brontay had found leading her into cul-de-sacs since she could remember. She guessed she was right. She was a child, albeit a misplaced one.

'How about a direct answer to a direct question then?'

Kutz smiled at her charge.

'Why did you kidnap me? Shouldn't it be you the police are after?'

Kutz continued to smile, waxwork still before breaking out into a deep laugh. She leaned into Brontay, at kissing distance, and placed a forefinger to her lips.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Kutz winked at her.

Scanlon returned from his meditation out on the balcony. This was Duffy-speak for slipping away for a quiet joint while Mama Katia got the Anglo kid's head together with her sinister hocus-pocus. He was sure this woman was a witch, if not in this life then most efficaciously in a past one. No question. Sometimes he had to get away from the crazy bitch's genetically perfect penis envy. Lord, surely if it was that bad she could always grow herself one? Scanlon chuckled at the idea as he manoeuvred his huge frame through the window.

'Something amusing, Mr Scanlon?' enquired Kutz intuitively.

'Just thinking on some birds and bees milady,' said Scanlon, parading his gold teeth again.

'Hmm ...you, ah ... Filbert ... what's your name?'

'Feth-er-ring-ton, ma'am,' replied Feather Blade, Scanlon's Head of Security and all round Jefe. He wore his canary yellow hair dreaded and shaved at the back and sides. His suit was as suave as any of Scanlon's crew; black Müller with gold trimmed lapels. These idiots were perfectly incapable of keeping a low profile.

'I thought all you gangsters were supposed to have tough-sounding names.'

She had no idea how this *gangster* had earned his reputation or his name.

'Take our guest down to breakfast, will you. Get her something nice and fresh.'

'Doncha ever say please?' said Scanlon.

'I'm sorry that I broke your precious rules of etiquette Duffy. It was a simple enough request, Fetherington.'

F.B. clapped Scanlon on the shoulder and beckoned Brontay from the bed. He helped her into a dressing gown and slippers before guiding her from the room. Brontay eyed Kutz all the way, an exchange not lost on Scanlon.

He waited for the door to close behind them. Kutz smiled and lit a smoke.

'You will have to tell her soon.'

She moved away from him to the window, pretending he wasn't there.

'Okay, let me put it another way, Principessa. If you don't, I will.'

Kutz nodded.

'That's not your decision to make, Mr Scanlon.'

'It's the humane decision, which makes it mine.'

Kutz looked at him directly for the first time in ages.

'I promise you, as a professional, she will know when the time is right.'

Scanlon sucked his teeth. He followed his lieutenant and their guest out to breakfast. Kutz made sure the door closed behind him and took a deep breath. She glanced in the mirror and inhaled. Was that a worry line on her brow? She'd have to do something about that.

As a matter of priority.

#### BACK AT THE FUNNY FARM

The crow picked away at the wet soil, oblivious to the rain which pounded the earth, washing away the first grass and barley seeds of spring. It had nested upon a huge old combine harvester, once a beast that munched away on the Staffordshire plains and now a part of those plains as a shelter for the wildlife that had made a cautious, steady return to these parts.

It picked away, determined to find sustenance for its chicks in the nest. Two figures trudged past, a little close for its comfort, and it flapped away from the patch to the safety of the steel roost.

'Couldn't we have got some rain gear from somewhere Vasily?'

'Why must you keep complaining, Anglichanka? It is all you English are any good at doing.'

Brontay was still in the same clothes that she was wearing when she left the container base; a woollen sweater that weighed a hundred times as much when sodden, a pair of ripped cotton slacks and some canvas pumps that were about

ready to retire from active service. It was a notion that since she was being forced to walk across the country, she could have at least been allowed a change of shoes, but Korsakov had been in a trenchant mood for most of journey and he was only beginning to lighten up now. She stopped in the mud to examine her feet.

'Why have you stopped now, fucknut?' he grunted, exasperated again.

'Blood blisters, look! Tell me I haven't got a good reason to stop now! I don't know where the I am. I probably have pneumonia or something and look at my fucking feet! You were meant to be protecting me.'

Vasily put his hands in the pockets of his parka mac, sighed hammily and stared up at the grey heavens. He'd seen much worse than blood blisters and he would tell her as much.

'Try having your guts hanging out while a Mongol clansman makes for your throat with a bayonet. I could give you something worse than pneumonia, you whining little runt.'

'Not working, Vasily. This time it's not working. Don't come the bully boy with me, I've been through too much.'

Vasily wiped his nose with his sleeve. He knew this one was not cut out for the outdoor life. He'd recognised that immediately in Siberia, despite what his old man had told him.

'Look, it's getting dark. We should find somewhere to camp.'

'I won't walk another inch!' whined the Englishwoman.

Vasily grunted in his irritation, looking again to the sky.

'Okay, Anglichanka. That's it. Strip.'

'Wh...what?'

'Quit asking me questions, poluchka. Strip.'

The military issue army boots were a couple of sizes too big for her, but at least they offered Brontay's battered feet some protection. She sank her arms deeper into the snug parka, grateful for its warmth but even more grateful that she was still

alive. For a moment back there she thought that Vasily was finally going to lose his patience in the only way a mad Cossack could.

On the British mainland what wasn't conurbation, namely the small feeder cities of Birmingham and Glasgow or London itself, was largely uninhabited, uncultivated land. Green space and brown space had long begun to merge and the land had been given a chance at repairing itself after centuries of industrialisation, cleansing itself of the hangover from human infestation. Brontay and the Russian had not come across a single member of their own species in the half-week that they had been walking, or marching as Nedvedev preferred to call it. This small island had not seen such a time in a millennium, and mother nature had been very quick to reassert herself without the strain of having to feed a nation, as Globalisation imploded in a heartbeat after the relentless surge following the Industrial Revolution through to the Great New Order.

It wasn't long before Brontay felt like complaining again. But as she had already taken the clothes off Vasily's back, she couldn't test him any more. She released a loud sneeze, phlegm spraying the Parka. Her companion didn't seem to care much. He had returned to the derisive hissing and snorting. Perhaps he was pining for some booze, but it was clear that the man was losing his formerly implacable sense of humour rapidly.

'Vasily?'

'Mmm.'

'Vasily, I think I'm coming down with something man. I feel like shit. I...'

'Hang on. Shut up a second will you.' He had this habit of interrupting Brontay in such situations. When neither had talked for hours, he would stop dead in his tracks as if something was about to happen. Rude and blunt, but there was always a good reason.



'A... Bonfire... look, sparks!'

'What?'

In the distance; a faint light in the forest, further down the trail.

'Sssch... listen, can you hear that?' The wide-eyed expression had returned to the Cossack's chiselled face.

'I knew... I knew this was the best way.' The grin was back for the first time on the march. The Anglichanka was failing, he could tell when someone was about to drop into disease or illness. He needed to keep her alive. He needed a stroke of luck and his bombproof faith had nearly deserted him. Until now. He cursed himself in a whisper.

'Plokha, Mikaelovich, otchen plohka.'

'What's going on?' said Brontay.

'See for yourself, Sasha, see and hear for yourself.'

Brontay stared into the near blackness, at first into the distant shadowy plains of the south, where there seemed nothing extraordinary. She heard it first, a sound so faint that she had to prick her ears. A beat from long ago formed in a very different version of London, but ever-so familiar to her from network apps featuring nightclubs of the 1990s and The Ministry of Sound; *Salve Mea* by Faithless, rejigged into a folk song.

Vasily's flashlight revealed all.

*DrUids, bArds, brOtHers aNd sisTers of NeW CeltiC AngliA. FollOw yoUr eArs anD yoU cAn bE wiTh uS.* The sign had been blown over in the storm. Brontay herself wouldn't have noticed it in the state she was in, maybe this Russian was more than a psychotic bully after all. Maybe he was a guardian angel with a nasty hangover, jonesing for some grog. Just like his father, his mission in life to protect the innocent from being scythed down by *the man*, but with a weakness for the bottle. A pale light had hit the sky beyond some trees to the West.

\* \* \*

The Moorcock Estate would have been missed had it not been for the new residents' willingness to throw a party. The old cities of this region had been flattened and reset into rural pasture by the planners of yesteryear and they had done a thorough job. All that was left of the city of Stoke-on-Trent was a silted-up barge canal and a small group of half demolished houses built three centuries earlier under what was called a council tenancy scheme.

The houses themselves had completely changed since those days. Originally known as semi-detached, the remaining two blocks had been knocked into single units. Covered in undergrowth with both floors opened to the air, they now looked more like purpose-built caves. Brontay could already see that the people themselves looked pretty close to prehistoric humans, gyrating in the firelight to the thumping sound of skin drums. The huge Nomadic flag, a green and black Celtic cross, was flying from a makeshift flagpole running from the chimney stack of what appeared to be the central attraction, the party house.

Vasily and Brontay had found the estate hidden in a natural bowl behind virgin woodland. The residents, or guests, were dotted around the old drives and lawns that had outlived most of the buildings that had once made up the estate. And quite a little festival was going on too. The storm had created mudbanks from which people were flinging themselves down, naked and laughing like hyenas on acid. Looked like fun. Brontay had already got a pungent whiff of burning hemp. She could tell by the expression on Vasily's face that he was not planning a ten minute hiatus this time.

'Why don't we stop for ten minutes,' said the Siberian, that old grin returning at last.

This man on a mission, a secret agenda, no sleep til London etc. Etcetera. Then he gets a whiff of beer and dope and everything else goes on the back burner. No wonder that Russia

was such a fucked-up place.

'You guys on the run?' said a high-pitched young male voice.

'What ever gave you that idea?' returned Vasily.

'Um..dunno...heh non o' my bis fella,' said the surf bum in his best mid-atlantic, 'Jus' curious. Y'see, all these cats are hippies, some from the Favelas and some from anywhere n everywhere. Nice people, but have cut themselves off from the travellin' life.'

'And who might you be in this mix?' asked Vasily.

'Huh, huh. I am, you might say, in their employ,' he addressed Brontay for the first time, who realised that the guy was so stoned he had gone cross-eyed, 'Um, yeah, guess I am crowd control. But in a passive, non-confrontational way.'

'Didn't know you could have it that way. Do you think it too much to ask if we could stay here for the night?' ventured Nedvedev.

'Sure dinkum! I'll show you to the throng. I'm on the run myself you know. Call me Rhantom.' Rhantom delighted himself with his mumblings. He shook hands with them, the childish grin looking odd for a kid in his early twenties. Brontay recalled the concept of disability in historical times. Perhaps this place really had slipped under the radar of the mass vaccinations before the Great New Order. She hoped so.

'Right you are, dude!' exclaimed the Russian in his fluent Hippy before savouring the smoke offered him.

'Nice fella,' said Brontay, who was just grateful not to be moving. Her joints ached and she squatted and sat on the green.

'Fuckin' spaceman,' whispered Vasily, smiling nonetheless as he toked on Rhantom's joint.

Vasily had clearly already began hatching some scheme and was already tracking Rhantom in the direction of the party house. Just as Brontay got settled, the Russian pulled her to her feet in a single, grabbing movement. Every sinew in her body protested.

'Come on, Anglichanka. Let's explore.'

\* \* \*

Inside the living room the music was not particularly loud, but against a backdrop of only tweeting birds and humming insects it stood out as if a flying saucer had landed. There were no furniture or decorations apart from some cheap rugs and beanbags strewn across the floor. The contingent was certainly more cosmopolitan than to be expected in a post-nuclear English backwater, which illustrated that these people had come a long way in search of their Valhalla, but was a commune in the old sense, a true throwback. An acapella group chanted something that was an odd hybrid of Gregorian monastic prayer and gospel soul. Two Latin American guys argued with each other in Spanglais as they set up their drums in the corner.

'This looks most entertaining. Bring on the dancing girls!' quipped Rhantom to the throng, most of whom were too addled to register.

'What are they on?' asked Vasily.

'Jellied mushrooms, dude. Grown last Fall on their own patch out back. Wanna try some? I would myself but I need...yeah huh... I need to stay...um...focused um on my job tonight, it bein' the grand celebration or whatever they call it... Heh, killer slacks dude, but kinda tight on you, yeah?'

'Oh well... a little...' Old jars of the stuff littered the rugs amidst the chilums and the first casualties of the night. Vasily picked one up and took a hearty scoop of the jam pickled mushrooms.

Brontay shook her head.

'How about you Sasha? It's better than that synthetic shit in London, and it's more unpredictable...' the old glint had returned to the mad bastard's dark blue eyes.

'I'll sit this one out.'

Brontay sensed by the state of others in the room that it could all get a little too weird on this stuff. Weird was not what she

wanted right now. She spotted a space by the blazing log fire. It was warm here and it looked safe. Safe as it was possible to feel.

Brontay was asleep by the time she hit the floor.

*The room appeared as electric blue, walls shrinking and expanding as if she was inside a slow-beating, freezing heart. The giant wall clock ticked a second forwards and a second backwards, unnered by the pressure of time to move on. What was it? Prison? They didn't have prisons anymore.... Hell? They didn't have Hell anymore...then what? What?*

*We have to ask questions, for your sake. For everyone's sake... The people who took you would stop at nothing to destroy everything, do you understand? We are sorry, but we will need a little more than that.*

The inquisitor looked down on Brontay. Kindly, motherly. Bare naked and alien; two big eyes and no nose or mouth.

Hairless and.

Beautiful.

She stroked Brontay's brow gently, mustering her tired head back down onto her pillow. The softest of the soft. But then Brontay noticed that the room had gone from blue to pink to crimson red, and the walls pumped back and forth to a harder rhythm. All heating up now, like a busy womb.

*Sssshh, don't worry about that, she chided softly, look into my eyes, that is where you are safe.*

*Maria...*

Where did the word come from? Only one place, the word came from her, *Maria, why?* She tried to move but couldn't even twitch. Then Brontay felt cold, like the deathly, deep, killing cold of the Siberian wood.

'Let me away!' she screamed, in panic. But no sound came from her mouth. Then her own voice spoke again, back to her, independent and oblivious to any other presence.

*They have you, don't they? You were broken by them, and now you*

*are part of them...*

*Life is much better on this side, Alexandra. You have made it so far, yes you have. But it's time to cash in now. Everything is yours...*

*Except my soul...*

No... The Inquisitor's expression changed from kindness to derision in an instant and her voice deepened; *You don't have a soul you little bitch... Huh, next you will have found Jesus...*

*No, why...*

*Why? I think your question should be How? Miss Brontay.*

The face looking down on her was now altogether different. The Inquisitor had disappeared in a blink. An immaculately dressed man of about twenty-five stood above Brontay. His hair was short and blond except for a shock of jet black running down one side. His eyes were ice blue, bluer than even Nedvedev's. She knew this man, even though she'd never seen him before in her entire life.

*You're not Maria! Where's Marrrii..ahhh, Brrrinnng her baaakkkk....* she heard her own voice say. But again, the words didn't come from her.

*Maria's gone to Wonderland to see cousin Alice. Now, you were just about to tell me that you, yes you, are very special. You are a fake, but a very, very special fake. A fake without a soul, but a very, very special fake without a soul. Riddle me that, riddle me this, Batman.*

*Alexandra, said the voice of.*

Maria.

Schwartz.

Maria.

Who?

'Aagh!' screamed Brontay. The hue became a light, the light at the end of the tunnel.

*Sssh....be tranquil baby girl... don't fight this. It is time for your communion.*

Her voice had no direction, only warmth and love. It came from within her this time, and it offered salve to her fear.

*No more need to fight, Alexandra. Together we can be together we can be together we can be...together...* the voice became opaque and sexless ... beyond and within her now.

Beautiful.

*'Beyond the light there is communion... communion with the God within you...*

The Russian grabbed Brontay, whose face was ashen and soaked in sweat... eyes black... cerebral haematoma? Oh no, not now, fuck no. Brontay collapsed like a newborn foal on the carpet, the pupils becoming 8 balls in her eye sockets.

'Sasha!'

He slapped Brontay gently on the face, which was animated with her trance despite the dead eyes. In and out of dimensions.

*Look to the light, Alexandra,* said Maria Schwartz again, her voice drawing back outside her. It was no dream this time, this was real as fucking real.

*Alexandra.*

*Look.*

*To the light.*

Her words made Brontay lighter, light enough not to care anymore about anything but to go to this communion.

'Don't fucking die! C'mon!'

Vasily plunged the shot into Brontay's jugular. Her pulse stabilised, but something was going for her brain. He'd seen what some of Brisco's nastier concoctions could do; rip a person's mind to pieces, keeping the parts they liked and tossing the rest. He needed what was in this kid's head. Without it everyone and everything was beyond redemption.

The light floated like a gas, easing itself around her, it fed on her like wispy smoke. Unfettered by the common laws of man's

physics, humanity's misguided obsession for truth.

*Alexandra.*

She couldn't see Maria but she was there, inside the light at last with her.

'Sasha!' The black seeped from Brontay's eyeballs, slowly revealing the whites and finally the pupils. She was back.

'Talk to me,' asked Vasily breathlessly, the sweat dripping from his forehead.

'I'm talking,' she muttered.

Brontay frowned, did she say that? Gone for seconds, or a year? She fainted in exhaustion.

The slab of rock was cold, but firm, which meant that Vasily could keep her head straight. They were alone in a wood clearing, under moonlight and an oil lamp.

He lifted Brontay's eyelids, shining a spot torch into them. It confirmed an idea that he had about all of this.

Brontay's eyes burst open. People, hundreds of people, were there... and here was Vasily.

'Vasily, am I in the light?' Vasily gave her a gentle slap across the cheek.

'Ow! What did you do that for?'

Well at least she could speak. Time would only tell if she was damaged goods.

'Yeah, Sasha. You'll be alright, I know it.'

'Am I in the light?' Brontay shrieked and her body stiffened, the whites of her eyes reddening.

'Yeah, yeah, you're safe in the light, Alexandra, you're in the light.' Brontay relaxed again, 'Everyone here is in the fucking light. Rest will you.'

Sleep.

Time anon.

Later.

The void had receded steadily for Brontay, though an insipid sense of inadequacy and paranoia had then taken over which she was still trying to shake.

'How're you feeling?' said Vasily, passing her a goblet of ginseng tea. Brontay didn't respond, accepting the hot drink with a tired sniff.

'I know you need to rest more. But we need to move and I know the greater of the two urgencies.'

Vasily wasn't comfortable with the sound of his own voice, a rare event. A minuscule smirk crossed Brontay's dry lips.

'Let's boogie,' she muttered.

#### LE NOUVEAU WESTERN

McBride took the same route to the gates of West Park as ever from the Lennon Clinic, taking in Old Swiss Cottage, Regent's Plain, the Chipped Arch and the Junksterbahn of Kensington Palace Road. All the boss' favourite sights along the way, preserved on his say-so, evidence of a history since written and rewritten, buried and reburied.

The Winchester looked magnificent in MannyCapra's hands. The barrel had just been planished for a cleaner release and the butt was now lengthened in the finest mahogany and ivory plate. It was time for the Sport of Kings again, these lamented times. It presented an excellent chance to give the new biological and mechanical hardware a thorough test.

MannyCapra took a long hit from his lysergic inhaler and stared across at Hardyman, who was at his manic best, tiny sparks of hard light cascading from his golden eyes. Too bad his pre-programmed friend couldn't do any real shooting, for all the clever coding. MannyCapra wondered if he would miss the real Hardyman, for if there was ever a time that he would, it

Carroll Grabham

was now. Maybe it just couldn't be the same.

The Adler rolled into its correct position.

Or maybe it could.

'Now Sir?' said McBride. MannyCapra nodded. The clear dome appeared above the cabin, MannyCapra grinned and cocked his Winchester.

'Remember the Alamo,' said the MannyMan. Then the shooting began. Again.

**THE XVITH PLENARY CONGRESS OF DOCTORS, FREE  
LONDON FAVELAS**

The basement of Kensington Palace was cold and musty, like it hadn't had a good clean in years. This would have to be corrected, determined Katia Kutz as she strode through the kitchens towards the adhoc conference room. She'd see all these cocky bastards on their hands and knees scrubbing before long.

At her rear walked Scanlon and Feather Blade, who was barely disguising his admiration for her curves.

'I gotta get me a piece of that,' he said, a dopey, mesmerised expression cracking his steely face.

'Be tranquil, Brother,' whispered Scanlon, unable himself to deny those tight black leathers. And the short, raven hair.

'Your household hygiene is as dirty as your minds, gentlemen,' said Kutz without looking back. 'Both need a thorough scrub down.'

'I have no idea what you are saying, Doctor,' grunted Scanlon. Feather Blade smiled and nodded.

'This is no fit place for a campaign to be planned.'

Scanlon rapped on the door of what used to be a meat and poultry storage locker. Despite the dank smell they'd at least made a pretty good job of it, though Kutz wasn't about to give them credit for their efforts. Scanlon had arranged for the head chef at Albert's to do the catering and to make sure that the guests were well-looked after. They'd even carried an oak conference table and chairs down from the library; in excellent condition bar the odd bullet hole here and there.

And here were the guests, the legendary Doctors' Congress in the humble abode of Duffy Scanlon. The novelty had not worn off, in spite of the caustic Kutz.

If their little plan worked then he would have his clubs all over the city by the end of the decade; a dandy line, but there was more to it than that; the buzz of the situation. For all his cool and clandestine popularity within the Favelas and VoQue, Scanlon was still at the whims and mercy of the white imperialist. For centuries there'd been nothing but platitudes made against the J.Edgar Stalins of this world, the rapists of the land and of cultures. He knew more than people gave him credit for about the Star Chambers and their Despots, because this education had been a priority in his family. The New York projects were all the evidence he needed that subjugation made villainy, but it also made for strength. The Congress was his chance to be a player, a representative, a voice. More than a few were relying on him, for all that poisonous Polack beatch's bitching.

The entire committee were seated around a long table, at the head of which was their glorious leader in rather unnecessary combat fatigues, sporting spiky orange hair. He looked like a children's television presenter trying to pass himself off as a punk.

'Never thought I'd say this,' mused Kutz, 'but you should stick to dressing your age, Christian.'

'Katia, Mr Scanlon. Please, be seated,' said Chairman Brisco,

as if she hadn't spoken at all.

Scanlon nodded to Feather Blade who took his leave and stood guard outside. He put himself to the right of Brisco at the head of the table.

'Ahem...' grunted Kutz.

'What?'

'Someone will be sitting there, Scanlon.'

'Well they're not here now are they?'

He noticed the beady eyes of the Congress upon him.

'Sweatless, brothers and sisters.'

Scanlon headed to the back of the room to perch between Professor Steph Ingham, a stiff-backed, angular Bostonian and Prof. Frank Nkono, a fiftysomething beanpole of a Somali. Both had come from the Cambridge Mass Ivy League illuminati, when it had existed. They were founding members of the Congress. He'd done his research on every bod.

Brisco noticed Kutz and emitted a half-smile.

'Before we begin I would like to formally introduce you to our host, Mr Duffy Scanlon. Mr Scanlon has been awarded associate membership of the Congress by a twelve to one majority in our network ballot. We thank him for his tireless efforts in supporting our campaign so far and I think I can speak for all present when I say that I look forward to working with him.'

'Can we turn off the dick sucking machine and get on with it?' said Kutz. She starred at Scanlon for a second. No prize for guessing who'd tried to blackball him then.

'Minutes Katia,' said Brisco, failing to not appear agitated by her coarse mood, which seemed permanent these days. A harsh smile crossed her face.

'E.G.M. No. 202-05. You've all read the minutes and you know the agenda folks. Let's get on with it,' said Kutz.

'Thankyou Katia,' said Brisco, 'those present?'

Kutz eyed him impatiently, 'Brisco, Kutz, Nkono, Cruz,

Ingham. Apologies, Katia?’

‘Montgomery.’

‘Report?’ enquired Steph Ingham.

‘Yeah right,’ chuckled Kutz.

‘This is a fucking joke,’ muttered Ingham, loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘Excellent then,’ began Brisco, but as he said this Montgomery walked in, dressed in a ludicrous old flying jacket and jodhpurs. Kutz squealed.

‘Katia, my flower,’ said Montgomery, ‘How are you doing?’

She leapt from her chair and hugged the Frenchman.

‘Jean, good of you to show up,’ Steph Ingham sucked her teeth as Kutz fawned over Montgomery.

‘She’s one unholy minx, that boss of yours,’ said Scanlon to Ingham.

‘She’s not my boss,’ snorted Ingham.

‘For real,’ he muttered.

Scanlon had only been in there five minutes and it was already beginning to grind his gears. The mystique of these heroes of Favelian folklore had already begun to evaporate. Just like all the others; his first impression was it was all a fucking game to them, and his first impression had never been wrong before.

Ingham winked at him.

‘Chill, Big Fella,’ she muttered, ‘We’re always like this.’

Brisco hammered down the gavel.

‘Please continue,’ said Montgomery, seating himself in his reserved chair next to Katia.

‘Right, let’s get to it then. Frank, your report please.’

The lanky Somali rose, rolled down the overhead screen and fiddled with the projector.

‘We have successfully recovered the Lamb. That is an incredible achievement in itself,’ began Nkono, ‘But there are significant fringe benefits. I downloaded some of her

information on the interior of the Police Headquarters captured via a retinal feed,’ replied Brisco, ‘But the broadcasts she transmitted were fuzzy and bit-mapped, and securing an audio link was impossible, so getting her back was crucial. Thanks to Duffy.’

Scanlon nodded. Kutz blew out air.

‘Now, I will need to use a simulation page for this,’ continued Nkono.

‘Sure,’ replied a ribald young Texan, Steve Cruz, clicking his fingers, ‘took a whole day to pull this from Brontay. Worth the bother I think.’

A thick beam of fluorescent light ran down from the ceiling. It materialised into the shape of a homepage and a series of buttons appeared under the options menu.

‘Do we wanna show them the nibbles, Frank, or shall we get to the main course?’

Everyone nodded, except Kutz.

‘This material didn’t make it into any of the transmissions at all, so we were a bit surprised when Steve salvaged it,’ said Brisco.

‘Okay,’ Nkono tapped the hard-light button *Reconnaissance* with his cane. A static image of MannyCapra appeared upon their conference table.

‘Sweet Mary Jane...’ said Scanlon. Kutz shot Brisco her *why-wasn’t-I-told-about-this* frown.

‘Hot off the press,’ said Brisco, ‘Why, I do believe that our former chief is looking years younger nowadays. Did he ever need us?’

The Congress studied the immobile MannyCapra, or a hard-light representation of what the Brontay saw.

‘Play it,’ said Kutz.

Cruz nodded and ran the sequence.

*‘It’s hard to tell sometimes, the difference between being alive and being dead. I built this world...not for you, not for me...and not for all*



*those malleable drones out there. I built it because I am a businessman, Alexandra. To survive in business, you need creativity, change. Flux drives the network, keeps the world turning. But sometimes the thought has crossed my mind... take your share and retire. Yes, find a successor. But there is no one to trust, alas. If I leave, I leave for good and I become a drone myself; a worker ant sated by cheap lysergic thrills and the knowledge of a comfortable life on the hamster wheel I made for everyone else. Never, eh? So I stay in the game, unable to even take one decent holiday for fear of...ah....disrupting the equilibrium of my markets. You may not have much sympathy, but it is hard, young lady. And it is only getting harder.'*

MannyCapra sat down in a chair that wasn't there.

'He's not the whole box of chocolates, is he?' said Scanlon.

Kutz: 'Ssssch.'

*'All very distressing for you, I know, but to keep a business successful you must adapt... and you must seize opportunities as they may never come again. You interest me, Miss Brontay, you really do... a flawless article. Can the solution to my problem really be in your hands?'* he smiled broadly.

*'You can tell my old pal Brisco that I gladly accept his Trojan Horse. I do love a challenge but. Well. Tell him also that the door has always been open should he want to cut his losses and return to International Activities.'*

MannyCapra looked directly at Brisco from the other end of the table, as if he was really there. A shiver ran up Brisco's spine and he'd seen this recording earlier.

*'Perhaps I'll even take Katia back too. If I'm feeling generous.'*

The image fizzed out.

'That's it then. The game is up. Taxi,' said Steph Ingham.

'For once Professor Ingham is correct,' said Kutz, 'Why didn't I see this sooner?'

Brisco held up a palm.

'You may think this changes everything. Just because he knows we're here doesn't mean he knows what we're going to

do or how we're going to do it. We knew this would happen at some point. It just means we have to hit harder and faster. And Frank has an idea.'

All eyes turned to Nkono.

The shots could not be heard in the boardroom, but Feather Blade caught their sound well enough. He flicked on his com.

'Who's doing that shooting Samba Boy?' Samba Boy was an Amazonian kid they'd recruited from East Park. He'd lost his family when their hut sank into the mud of the Serpentine.

'He's back. The Coyote is back.'

'The Coyote? The Coyote Man?'

'Yeah man. Brought his evil jam jar as well.'

'Shit, I thought we'd seen him vamoosed forever. Better tell Scanman.'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this. Hasn't she been through enough?' protested Ingham.

'Did you risk your ass trying to save her?' said Kutz.

'That's enough Katia,' said Montgomery mildly. To Brisco's annoyance, she listened to him.

'What if she doesn't want to go back? All this could bite us in the ass if we're not careful,' said Cruz. 'If she wanted she could turn on us.'

'Not with what I put in her works,' said Kutz, winking at Montgomery.

'A risky gambit,' said Nkono.

'This is a death sentence,' said Ingham.

'This is a war,' replied Kutz, 'Who's side are you on?'

'To answer Steve's question first,' said Brisco sternly, 'We would have to make sure that Brontay has a brain haemorrhage before she opens her mouth. This course of action, I assure you all, is one that I'd rather not take. She will be strictly monitored. But Steve has a point, if she goes back without treatment then

we get a body on the inside at the right time. If we try tweaking Brontay again, she may turn vegetative. Like MannyCapra says, you have to take opportunities.'

'Scanman!' Feather Blade shut the door behind him. Everyone glared at him. Scanlon rolled his eyes.

'What is it, creature? I asked for no disturbances.'

Feather Blade whispered in Scanlon's ear, a more pronounced annoyance spreading across his face with every beat.

'Motherfucker,' said Scanlon slamming his palm down. Steph Ingham recoiled.

'What's the problem?' said Brisco.

'Oh, we get this maggot coming over from VoQuesville once in a while. Likes taking potshots at the simple folk. Thought the maniac had forgotten about us as we ain't seen him for a while. It's just not what I fucking need right now. Pardon my French.'

'I'd like to get on with the meeting,' said Brisco.

'Perhaps we should go have a look, Mr Scanlon,' said Montgomery. Brisco glanced at his ex-wife fawning over him.

'It's a situation I can handle, Mr Montgomery.'

Kutz smiled at Brisco.

'Oh we'll stay out of your way.'

It had been a stressful enough evening already for Scanlon, without having to take an audience to see this nutcase shoot the place up. The Coyote Man always had poor timing.

'Okay, but only three of you. I don't need the whole committee,' said Scanlon.

'Thirty minute recess. Katia, Montgomery and I will go take a look. I'll order some tea for everyone else.'

Scanlon's Closed Circuit Television System had been designed 150 years ago to keep the flotsam and jetsam away from some very, very important people. Now the flotsam and jetsam themselves were in the palace and the VIPs were history. The

rig still worked perfectly.

'An impressive set-up you have here, Monsieur,' said Montgomery with zero conviction, amused at the antiquated electronics.

'Works for me, Mon-sewer,' said Feather Blade, eyeing the black and white monitors like a hawk.

The Adler stood proudly in the Palace Gardens of West Park, the occupant having withdrawn back into the cab a few minutes previously. A bullet ricocheted off the dome, not even marking the graphene compound.

'Who is this guy?' said Scanlon. 'we've tried everything to nail this sucker; grenades, gas you name it... but he keeps on comin' back...'

'You can't shoot him out?' said Kutz.

'No-one gets less than fifty metres from that automobile or they're fried chicken, baby.'

'What do we do now?' said Brisco.

'Huh, we wait 'til he starts shootin' again. Usually then we just let him get on with it.'

'What? You are crazy, no?' said Montgomery.

'Nah, if we blow caps at his vehicle it just pisses him off.'

'I suggest you try using alternative firepower,' said the Frenchman.

'Huh,' Scanlon glanced conspiratorially at Feather Blade, 'This creature thinks he can take on the Coyote Man! Good luck, chicken.'

'You doubt me?' said Montgomery. Scanlon sensed this guy was going to be a pain in the ass, just like Madame Bovary over there. He was therefore welcome to get shot, because he didn't need another pain in the ass right now. A short silence fell.

'Heh, no problem, hombre. Knock yourself out. But I ain't saving your behind.'

Kutz frowned and grabbed Montgomery.

'Jean, Ce n'est pas notre problème, non? Pourquoi non

retournez a la chambre? Nous pouvons laisser les crétins ici pour travailler...'

The Frenchman pressed his index finger to her lips. Scanlon marvelled at the gall of the motherfucker. He almost hoped the Coyote would murder his ass.

'No, petal. Don't worry... this won't take long...'

Montgomery still looked flustered by Scanlon's slight.

'You've got twenty minutes. I know it may be a matter of professional pride, Jean, but we really have to get down to business. Distractions must be dealt with,' said Brisco.

'Twenty minutes. To take out this VoQue Punk? No problem,' said Montgomery, 'I do it for leisure.'

'Mr Scanlon, would it be possible to arrange an escort for Mr Montgomery?'

But the Frenchman had already made his way from the building towards the car beyond the gates. Feather Blade and Scanlon stared at the screen in awe.

'Watch and learn, gentlemen,' said Kutz, winking at Scanlon.

The silhouette of a man appeared from within the dome and the barrel of a shotgun slowly protruded out from a small vent.

'Suicide...' said Scanlon.

'I don't believe you've seen Jean-Alexander in action before. This is how a real professional operates,' said Kutz smugly, 'I have seem him. And He's a Fucking Beast.'

Brisco, Scanlon and Feather Blade shared faces.

On his queue, Montgomery hit the floor behind the gate. The car manoeuvred itself away from the hydraulic lift and reversed towards the Palace. He wanted a closer look.

'What's he doin', man...' said Feather Blade, 'The Coyote's gonna shoot his little pink ass back to France.'

But The Coyote Man wasn't shooting, he was waiting.

Montgomery reached inside his anorak, producing an object

resembling a rubber ball. He tossed the object over the railings. It rebounded across the tarmac of the Palace Gardens, steadily guiding and correcting itself in constant, rhythmic bounces towards the Adler, gathering momentum under its own energy. The Coyote took a pot-shot at the ball but it sensed the danger and dodged the bullet. It closed to twenty metres. As Montgomery threw over two more balls, he could swear he could hear the silhouette cursing. He then curled up, pressing his hands behind his head.

The first ball reached the target despite frantic fire. It struck the boot of the Adler and seemed to melt into the armour plate.

'Shitlotta good that did,' said Feather Blade.

'One thousand, two thousand,' said Brisco.

The boot exploded, taking away a large chunk of metalwork from the rear of the Adler.

'Whoa....baby.' returned F.B.

'How do I procure some of this hardware?' asked Scanlon.

Brisco didn't reply.

The Adler rolled forward a few yards, damaged but functional. The second and third balls were heading for the hood and the engine core.

'Bye, bye, asshole,' muttered Kutz.

The flame lit up most of West Park for a split second, but it came from the sky and not the car.

'Shit, buzzards man! This guy's got the cops behind him!' said Scanlon, checking his tomcat pistol.

'That's it, baby. Let's go scrape up his foolish dead French ass,' replied Feather Blade bitterly, 'Not professional, man. Not professional tryna play one-on-one with a blessed 'tack helly-copta man. Getcha dead fast man.'

'Damn right. He got pretty close though, give the dicksplash

his dues,' said Scanlon.

'Could we put a hold on the patois for a second?' said Kutz, 'You don't know this man like I do.'

'Like you *did*,' said Brisco, without a hint of irony or delight at the pending demise of his rival. The moment wasn't lost on Scanlon.

Back outside, Montgomery had made himself a sitting duck and was annoyed at himself for not taking more precautions. As the chopper guns trained on him, he thought of how a moment's stupidity would end a distinguished career as a mercenary, and how he'd taken out shitty little tanks like this for fun hundreds of times in battle. The flames died at the back of the Adler and the shotgun was still pointed at him. His head was awash with laser sights.

'Allez, putain!' yelled Montgomery in a scream. He had been ready for this moment for years. Still they held their fire.

'Allez, maintenant!'

The Adler rolled another ten metres towards the Frenchman, as if to study him. Montgomery shut his eyes, anticipating the next life. There was an excruciating pause. Then he identified a sound, something coming from inside the car. It sounded like two men laughing hysterically.

'What the fuck's he waiting for?' said Scanlon, eyes wide at the events on CCTV. Both helicopters had disappeared as quickly as they came. The Adler rested still on the tarmac and the night took on a flimsy calm. This was shattered by the car's revving engine. Wheel's span, spewing mud all over the prone Montgomery. It pulled onto the tarmac and took off into the night.

A sheepish Montgomery stood in the darkness of the courtyard and scratched his wet head.

Kutz sprinted out of the camera room, downstairs and out into the courtyard.

'She shouldn't be down there on her own. Better go look after them,' said Scanlon. Feather Blade ran downstairs, leaving Brisco and Scanlon.

Brisco shook his head and scratched his beard. He had been growing it since Siberia under the mistaken impression that it made him look attractive to Kutz. He looked up to see Scanlon staring at him. He shuffled around in the silence.

'Mister... Doctor... Clinician Brisco, thanks for that little speech back there.'

'No problem.'

'Er... look, I had a couple of ideas that I wanted to put forward to the Congress?'

'Oh yes?'

'And...' Scanlon had never been nervous in any man's company, but this was the man who had changed the world he was talking to, the man who had solved the evolutionary riddle of bacteria being essentially immortal.

'Erm...'

Brisco had led a Berkeley University team of Scientists which developed a process which mimicked bacterial survival. As bacteria survive through trading DNA asexually, he successfully applied this principle to mammals.

'Well you see...'

After years of messy experimentation, Brisco and Kutz made the concept of the human body self-replicating in the laboratory back medically possible, if not ethical. Complementing genetic material with almost identical strands had given birth to the truly designer body that had, in turn, created the likes of VoQue society. Oh yes, Duffy-boy had done his research on all these people, even Brisco's weird ex.

'Ah shit, you see this is it... I think we have a rat in our midst, Doc.'

Brisco frowned and shook his head.

'No Doc I really do. I've been listening to all the stuff that was

being said up there, I've read the transcripts of all the minutes and I've read about you, Doc. Someone's been giving MannyCapra the skinny on us.'

'There's a perfectly satisfactory explanation for that,' said Brisco, who was still shaking his head and looking for the exit.

'Oh really?'

'How well do you know MannyCapra, Mr Scanlon?'

Scanlon bit his lip.

'I know what shit's going down. Call it instinct, a survival mechanism. I'm a good listener, Doc.'

'A good listener. Yes. I can appreciate that, but, respectfully, I worked for the man for over seventy five years. Mark these words, if he wants to know something he'll find it. Even if he has to look right into your soul.'

Scanlon nodded and offered Brisco a smoke. He declined.

'I'm not a scientist, sir. But in my line of work you learn to know when someone is up to no good.'

Brisco clenched a fist. Scanlon knew he was holding something back, something he wasn't meant to know.

'Mr Scanlon, as I said, you have been an absolute power to our cause. But I do have to get on.'

You learn more from the little things than the big things.

'Sure, Doc. Sure.'

Brisco forced a smile and in that moment Scanlon wondered about his ass being on the line with these people. But then, he always had an exit strategy. The Doc made his way out of the room.

#### RETURN OF THE BOY

'Not now MannyCapra, I'm tired,' said Jameson to his bright-eyed visitor.

'What's the matter Philobert, your eyesight giving you trouble again?'

In a spotlit corner, Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus jammed a little within their quartet, blue notes tickling the hard light in quivering, quavering waves. MannyCapra nodded at the players and they vanished with their music.

'Are my eyes giving me trouble? Well, what do you think?' Jameson still refused to come out of the shadows.

'Look, this may be bending the rules a little but... how would you like your sight back? It's easily enough done, just say the word, old boy.'

'Oh, good effort, Manny! Do you really think I'll ever come down to your level you fucking power-crazy toad?'

'Sorry I asked. Only trying to help.'

'Hrmph.'

Jameson adjusted the tie and collar around his chicken neck

and took his seat at the chess table.

'Look Philo, people have been trying to live longer since the dawn of civilisation. What is your problem?'

'Everyone has a life cycle, it's in the blood, my lad. Giving yourself a couple of extra years of good health is one thing, strangling new generations at birth is another issue entirely. So you've got a new bubble from somewhere. Let me burst it for you.'

MannyCapra loved the way he felt so... immature in his arguments with Jameson.

'Philobert, you're going to die very soon. Doesn't that bother you?'

'Much, much less than it will bother you, losing your favourite simulation. My mind will be the last of me to escape into cyberspace, lad. How long will yours hang around to torture the poor human race? How many eternities?'

Jameson coughed and chuckled at his chess adversary. MannyCapra nodded and smiled.

'Perhaps, it might be better to leave yourself to yourself then.'

'Don't try to bluff me, you little shit.'

The old fellow had grown even more irritable lately. MannyCapra held his hands up.

'No, I'm serious. If you'd prefer to keep your own counsel then I'm quite happy to let you go your own way. I'll be losing a good chess partner of course but...'

'You've found it, haven't you?'

'Found what, old boy?' MannyCapra adjusted his cufflinks.

'You fucking well know what I'm talking about!' Jameson banged on the table with his fist.

'Yes, well it had to happen one day, I guess. You won't be around for much longer Philobert. I need a replacement. Something more, ah, tangible than hard light. No offence, though. You remain a masterpiece of coding.'

Jameson picked up the black rook from his side and threw it

at MannyCapra with surprising power and accuracy, the piece slapping against his master's forehead. He got up, turning his back to the chess board.

'You'd better switch me off now then,' he said in a low croak.

'Don't be so cantankerous, old man. If I turn you off I defeat the whole purpose of this project. How long has it been like this? Ten years? You're staying for the rest of your natural born programming. Now let's have a quick game before we say goodbye, eh?'

'Switch me off, Manny, please. I won't beg you, but please switch me off.'

'Are we going to play or not?'

'You're expecting a meeting aren't you?' grunted the old man.

'They can wait. How about that game?'

In another corner of the room, another version of MannyCapra, sporting the fashions of 85 years past, was seated at a chessboard. Opposite was a 5 year old boy, learning the game from his master.

MannyCapra eyed them for a second, before turning his attention back to the geriatric version of the child. Jameson still hadn't turned around. The old man sniffed, his bent frame almost straightening.

'Manny, mark this; we'll play again, but not today. Goodbye.'

Philobert Jameson hobbled over to his coat stand and dressed himself for the winter outdoors. He then walked away, the darkness swallowing him after a few metres.

MannyCapra emitted a long breath as Garry Kasparov approached the table, cracking his knuckles.

'Take care Little Brother, I'll be watching you,' said MannyCapra to his alterego's wake.

An inky blackness poured across the room.

## OLD NEWS

MannyCapra poured himself another cup of coffee and replaced the missing rook on the chessboard.

'Alpha?'

*HOW CAN I HELP, SIR?* said the aural hostess.

'Please show Mr Old into the auditorium and then hold all messages.'

*THANKYOU SIR.*

Old bit his lip and crossed his arms.

'How are you doing, old boy?' said MannyCapra.

'I've been better.' Old stared scornfully back at him.

'You seem upset. Anything I can do?'

'I'm not happy with the way this arrangement is going. I gave you some excellent information, now you want more. When are you going to do something, you clown?' The child lit a cigarette. He was even edgier than normal and just a little bit too sassy for MannyCapra's liking.

Across the way, the other MannyCapra ruffled the hair of the Philobert child as he let the kid knock over his Queen. Mr Old

clocked them.

'Do want to go and play with him, son?'

'No. What do you think this is?'

MannyCapra shrugged. The child Philobert and his former self vanished.

'Little fellow, I don't think you are fully aware of how much time and resources a project such as this requires. Anything less than the optimum outcome is a failure.'

'And what do you expect I should do while you are optimising your outcome? Sit around scratching my arse?'

MannyCapra sniffed and smiled at this.

'Hardly.'

'I don't have time for this. Are you going to take action? You have more than enough to steam in, take what you want and walk out. Why this intransigence?'

The kid removed his baseball cap and tossed it onto MannyCapra's chessboard, knocking the pieces flying.

'You're in far too much of a hurry, Mr Old. I suggest you take some time to think about this. Enjoy your new status a while.'

'I have other parties that will not be so obstinate. Forget it, MannyCapra, I'm out of here. Good day.'

The child bore a frustrated expression, snatching his cap from the table. He got to his feet and began to walk away.

'You know, I could have blown your balls off yesterday.'

Old stopped in mid-stride with his back still turned.

'What?'

'If you're going to play hide-and-seek in the park, invite me next time.'

His pudgy face was red. He glanced back at MannyCapra.

'That was you?'

'Sit down, Montgomery, I've already had one person walk away from me this morning. And the joke is getting a bit ripe.'

Old froze, hands caught in the cookie jar.

'Jean, sit down,' repeated MannyCapra firmly. The child held

his head low and obeyed.

'How did you find out?' he mumbled. MannyCapra beamed at his prey.

'What's with the fat kid disguise, eh? Will the real Jean-Alexandra Montgomery please stand up?'

'You didn't answer my question, how did you find out?'

MannyCapra sighed.

'Every mercenary is a greedy, black-hearted rat, Montgomery, so I didn't have to look very far. What perplexes is why you couldn't have made an honest approach to me. Now, that would have been preferable to all that skulking about, wouldn't it?'

'Sorry if I've offended you. I had my reasons,' replied Montgomery, all but drained of defiance.

'Of that I've no doubt. Incidentally, the repair of my Adler will be docked from your salary.'

Montgomery straightened, he was back to his adult frame.

'Merde.'

'Okay, let's cut to the chase, you being a stickler for progress and everything.' MannyCapra put his spectacles on, which he didn't need but had taken to wearing again anyway, 'give me your navigation password.' Montgomery wiped his nose and shook his head, 'Paris\_au\_printemps, eh? Wishful thinking. Spill.'

'Brisco, Kutz. They're all here.'

MannyCapra clasped his hands together.

'You'll have to do better than that.'

'You know?'

'What about foot soldiers, military back up?'

Montgomery shook his head.

'The technical assault is what you'll have to worry about first. New nano-machines, viruses that can rot a network and then rebuild it to a customised standard. They think they can blind you with science. They think they have the jump on you.'

MannyCapra nodded, taking a sip of his coffee.

'Plus ça change, my boy. I've just removed someone else who thought they had the jump on me. When will they learn?'

MannyCapra massaged his chin, toying with the white king. He fixed his eyes on the board and waved Montgomery away.

'When you get here we can download those minutes and get into some more detailed analysis on that data.'

'What? You're bringing me there?' Montgomery looked like he was about to start weeping, 'That is fucking ridiculous, MannyCapra. It is unacceptable. They will kill me if they find out.'

'Then you'd better make sure they don't find out, Jeanny Boy.'

'Wh-'

Montgomery vanished and all was quiet again.

He drank the silence for a moment, then took a breath.

When was all the fun going to really start?



## GETTING CLOSER ALL THE TIME

Brontay wrapped another blanket around her torso. It really was getting bitterly cold at night.

'You okay, Sasha?' said Vasily. For all his majestic strength, the Cossack was looking fatigued himself.

'I'll live. We've been this far.'

They picked their way along the cracked tarmac roads of what used to be South London. There were few visible signs that they were on the verge of a huge conurbation. Whoever had laid down the plans for the new city all those years ago had forgotten about most of what lay south of the river.

'Clapham. This was once a most groovy part of town, Anglichanka.'

'Groovy? What century did you fall out of?'

'Nostalgia my friend. But then you wouldn't know, would you?'

Brontay pretended not to hear him. She was about to get another local history lesson, as if any of that mattered any more.

'See all this?' the Russian carried on regardless, 'this is the

oldest piece of parkland remaining in the city. The Common is what they called it. Nothing but unexploded ordinance and squirrel shit around here nowadays.'

Brontay glanced out into the park. There were some Victorian ruins and a peculiar looking thing out in the distance.

'Ah... the bandstand.'

'The what?'

'Forget it. All you need to know is what lies beyond that patch of woodland to the North West.'

'Go on, surprise me.' Brontay still sounded bored, but Vasily had stolen her attention.

'That's Battersea, the world centre of VoQue culture. Why don't we drop by and see some friends of mine?'

'Why?'

Brontay cuddled blankets tightly across her chest. A surge of reality hit her at once as she noticed the panorama before her, like a jewel in all the decay and mire. The lone red star shone out from the North East, immediately recognisable as the Canary Wharf Tower. She really was back at last. Her belly dropped in excitement and fear.

Vasily sniffed and spat into the turf. He looked down at Brontay, who was still shivering despite the blankets.

'C'mon Sasha. We'd better away. It will be pitch black in thirty minutes.'

Brontay's legs felt like someone had tied anvils to them. A grey light in the distance signalled the end of the small park. The light reminded her for a moment of New Moorcock, of how close she'd come to the edge of darkness. Brontay clutched her rucksack and soldiered on behind Vasily.

'There it is, like some fucked up Red Square, eh Anglichanka?'

'Never been to Red Square,' muttered Brontay, awe struck at the view.

'You never will. Maybe you're right about nostalgia.'

\* \* \*

A huge old building dominated the skyline, streams of blue electricity, controlled lightning forks, pulsing up from the ground and hitting every side of the enclosure with theatrical showers of sparks. The original integrity of the building had been so well kept that even the huge old smoke stacks we're still in place. Brontay had never seen a dome that massive, rising out the ground like an egg in a snake's mouth. A simple neon sign across the structure read: -

*WELCOME TO BATTERSEA POWER STATION, HOME OF VOQUE.*

It was a few long seconds before she could take her eyes off the beast before them. Then she noticed more domes, lined up upon a boulevard of grandiose art deco houses. Magnificent and multicoloured, they had burst out from their Georgian shells, lighting up the night sky with trace hard light beams of activities known only to their famous and infamous residents. Squadjutants stood guard outside every building along the strip, which was fenced in with gigantic gates at either end. The glow returned to Brontay's face. She felt warmer, and that wasn't just the temperature.

'You know someone that lives here?'

Vasily spat and glanced back at his charge, unmoved at the insult.

'Keep close to me. I'll do the talking.'

'Don't you ever.'

'Stand back, Anglichanka.'

Brontay took a few steps backward. A cylindrical clock, similar to the cranky device that used to greet her every morning at Hanslett Insurance but shinier, brighter and slicker, shot out to within an inch of Vasily's face. The Cossack didn't even blink.

*ENTRY ANALYSIS, SUBJECT TEST ONE: SCANNING TISSUE.*

The plummy voice was almost the same too, only deeper and more aggressive.

'Now if they'd bothered to put a real guard on this gate,' said Vasily, winking at the clock.

*PICTORIAL TISSUE ANALYSIS COMPLETE. SCANNING VOICE...*

'Then getting in would be a tougher proposition. Ah, the march of progress eh?'

*AUDIO ANALYSIS COMPLETE. WAITING FOR CLEARANCE...*

'I mean I could say anything to this gadget. Like I'm a Russian terrorist with a big bomb and I've come to fuck you in the ass with it you Fascist pigs.'

*CLEARANCE APPROVED. GOOD MORNING MR ALBERTINI.*

Brontay could believe her ears. *The Albertini?*

'A very good morning to you.'

*HOW ARE YOU KEEPING SIR?*

'Excellent! A little tired though. By the way, I'm stalking all these people and I'm probably going to kill someone famous with a chainsaw before the night's over.'

*VERY GOOD SIR. HAVE A PLEASANT DAY.*

'You too, cocksucker,' said Vasily. They strode through the gates, Brontay shaking her head.

'Right, get behind that trash cart. I'll see you in a minute.'

Vasily disappeared behind some hedges for a moment before walking out onto the strip to the gate of number 37. The Squadjutant on duty cocked his cap and grinned at the Russian, who was gesticulating wildly. Brontay could hear his belly laugh clearly from a full two hundred metres away. After a short conversation, Vasily led the Squadjutant into the house.

Brontay lit up another roll up. She didn't want to think about how many of the man's bad habits she'd picked up on a journey via two oceans; several bags of miscellaneous drugs, fifteen

bottles of moonshine collected on the way and enough dodgy black tobacco from the Urals to open up a coalmine in her lungs. It reassured her that, since she was still alive, then her health must be quite strong to survive all that self-abuse. It was more the anticipation that was killing her.

'Oi, Anglichanka.'

Half an hour had passed since he'd gone into the house. He'd come out wearing a ridiculous fur coat, chewing a half-smoked Havana and clutching a bottle of 120 year old Wild Turkey.

'Where the fuck have you been?' said Brontay.

'Ssssch! C'mon gavnotnika! Welcome to chez Albertini. Let's party.'

'Are you familiar with a certain member of VoQue, the fashion designer Luca Albertini?'

'Yeah... everybody's heard of Albertini...'

'Of course, but has anybody actually *seen* him?'

Vasily reclaimed his whisky.

'You're the Great Gatsby,' said Brontay.

The Russian grinned in surprise.

'Yes, Gatsby. I like that, you're catching on.'

Vasily threw his arm around Brontay's neck.

'Now, there are one or two friends of mine that I should introduce you to.'

They wandered on in. Vasily had long since slipped into character.

'It's... obscene,' said Brontay. Did this man ever run out of surprises?

'One thing about popular culture, and it's as true today as it ever was, is that everybody loves a recluse. Me? I get all the trappings of VoQue without having to subscribe to all the horseshit that these people are so obsessed upon. Just for letting someone else make some cheap suits for me. Not bad?'

Nedvedev had the annoying ability to underplay as much as he could exaggerate at times. Brontay had never seen a place like this, not even in the most gushing Network exposés of VoQue life. The lobby was cavernous; ornate marble, gold and onyx everywhere. Ancient paintings of Ancient moustachioed Commissars and swan-necked Tsarinas illustrated no attempt by Vasily to hide his nostalgic love for Imperial Russia. Stained glass windows depicted famous battles made in the name of Orthodox Christendom and then there was the centrepiece; a huge, stuffed woolly mammoth rescued from the Siberian Arctic permafrost and now standing guard in Vasily Nedvedev-Korsakov's lobby.

'I suggest we get ourselves cleaned-up, Sasha. Find yourself a room and a decent gown or dinner suit. Your choice. The performance commences in half an hour.'

'B...'

Vasily clapped his hands like a Flamenco dancer.

'Now, music! Maybe some Rimsky Korsakov, no? Capriccio Espanol, 2nd movement.'

It looked like a symphony orchestra had sneaked into the building while he was talking. Misha's namesake piped away with Herbert Von Karajan at the podium. Brontay took herself upstairs to get away from it all, scarcely able to connect this giant, stinking hulk of a man with the couture centre of the universe, but it was all true enough.

The marble staircase snaked up the wall as pictures of Vasily's ancestors animated then shifted.

*Accept everything, believe nothing.*

### THE SECRET POLICEMAN'S BALL

The rooms themselves were immaculately furnished, like the Russian bastard had been out looting someone's manor. Brontay chuckled at herself as she prepared. She peered at her reflection. The woman she saw in the mirror looked older, thinner, hard boiled. It was a person she barely recognised. She washed the make-up off her face and headed to turn on the shower, in no mood to patronise Vasily's little gathering downstairs. What happened to keeping a low profile?

*'Alexandra.'*

It whispered in her ear, its rancid breath tickling her nostrils. Brontay flinched at the voice, dropping her towel. She scanned the bathroom, found nothing and scratched her head.

*'Alexandra.'*

The woman in a boiler suit perched on the edge of the bath, her ash blonde hair tied back and her face stern and white.

*'Alexandra come back to me...'*

'You're an apparition, a fucking hallucination. Whoever you call yourself,'

She knew who she was talking to, but could barely bring herself to say the woman's name aloud. It had now invaded her reality, not content with living in her dreams. Brontay could hear the panic rise in her own voice.

'You are not real, Maria.'

Maria spoke back, but not with her own voice.

'Listen honey chile, psychological trauma carries certain toxins into the neural pathways, and they never go away. Symptoms of panic, flashback of events; the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality in perception. It's a joyride to hell. Just gotta love it, Anglichanka.' said Maria, her throat opening and becoming Vasily's voice. She was more like a talking corpse.

Breath, on the back of Brontay's neck.

'I'm sorry girl, but we're gonna have to crack your head open 'n' mess with your brains again! Now sit yourself down there and relax.'

The doctor had a snake's head. Its tongue flicked out and licked Brontay's face. It clutched a surgical bonecutter, revving its serrated wheel blade with glee as it closed on her.

'Ah....ah....shit....no...'

Maria's voice, again.

*'Alexandra... come back to me...'*

Brontay shut her eyes.

'Who the fuck are you?'

'Brrrrroooooommmmm,' said the Snake, its forked tongue slapping against the crevice of her bare upper back. Brontay felt a scream rising, but impossible to release.

'It's an hallucination. It's okay, Alex... it's okay.'

She crawled to her feet, picking the towel up, muttering a unanimous pep talk.

'I'll try the next room,' she said to herself.

She grabbed her bag and made for the corridor, taking one look back into the room, which she wished she hadn't done.

'Bye!'

The Snake waved at her and snapped off Maria's head, swallowing it in one gulp. Maria's headless corpse waved, stump spewing crimson slurry, before creasing over. Brontay slammed the door shut behind her.

Back downstairs, cold sweat, in her jump suit, among the guests, hot sudden flush, unsteady on her feet, perching on a chaise longue, a face in the crowd again. Vasily Nedvedev, the real Vasily. *Please be real.*

'Hey, Sasha. There's cognac and... shit, you okay?'

'No.'

'Another one?'

'It's getting worse.'

Vasily hugged her for the first time. Something had softened in him since getting back here. Why?

Only now did she notice all the guests and the size of this place. Less a mansion, more a palace. The ballroom. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov conducting the lilting, brooding *Prince Igor*. It added to the trembling in her guts.

'Vasily. Are they real?'

Vasily smiled back at her.

'Sasha, I'll find you help. I promise. Just stay with me.'

Brontay stared through the Russian. She was not in a trusting mood.

'You said something about a drink? That's a great idea.'

She headed beneath the dome, spotting a huge dinner table conveniently near a very well-stocked drinks cabinet.

'That'll be it then,' grunted Vasily.

Brontay wasn't listening, she'd already found what she was looking for; a bottle of grass vodka in the freezer. There were some crystal glass tumblers and an ice bucket ready, but she opened it and took a hefty swig directly from the bottle.

'Anglichanka, it will blow your head off. Maybe it is not what you need right now.'

'A lecture by Vasily Nedvedev on the dangers of alcohol abuse. Nice.'

Brontay gulped the green liquid down with unsurprising ease.

She found herself alone, sitting at the head of the table with half the bottle already gone. If more hallucinations came along now, she would knock fuck out of them. She took another deep swig of vodka. Vasily was right, it was quick-moving stuff.

'Gimme a home page...' she slurred. A series of button options appeared before her, 'Ha!'

She'd once depended on these things as much as anyone. Now she truly understood how much difference they made to peoples' lives.

'Gimme Nimsky Forest, Siberian Free Lands.'

READING NAVIGATOR SOFTWARE...1 ITEM MATCHES YOUR REQUEST

'Play.'

The dining area remained as before, oak-panelled floors with mahogany and onyx furnishings, but the surrounding clear spaces had become a hard-light version of the freezing wood near Dacha Korsakova where she had begun her education. It was crudely mapped, but close enough to the real thing to be comforting.

'I wanna go home,' she whispered, in Russian and English.

Four pairs of footsteps clacked against the marble floor of the dome. Brontay looked up to see the blank-faced Squadjutants.

'Homepage,' she grunted. The winter wonderland dissolved.

It was the guy she saw Vasily talking to before, flanked by two female officers and a huge man sporting waist-length dreads. Brontay's jaw dropped.

'You evil pricks,' said Brontay, thinking it was another hallucination. Vasily followed in their wake.

'Anglichanka...heh, I said I'd surprise you... permit me to

introduce you to those friends that I was telling you about. Firstly, my partner in crime, Ivan Rossiter.'

The Squadjutant nodded at him. Closer up he looked way too seedy to be a copper.

'This is WPC Beverly James and DI Monique Cassidy,'

'Hi, pleasure to meet you.'

'Hello.'

'And our Master of Ceremonies for the evening, the one and only Duffy Scanlon.'

Scanlon stroked his goatee and stared up and down at Brontay.

'Unreal,' he muttered, before remembering himself.

'Do I know you?' said Brontay.

'Nice to meet you, at last,' he said, tapping his cane on the marble, 'Why don't I get this party online for you creatures.'

Beverly and Monique removed their caps, fixed themselves drinks and joined Brontay and Rossiter at the table.

'So how's life in West Park ladies? Still working the cathouses?' said Rossiter, producing a big bag of lush weed.

'Fuck off, Ivan.' said Monique, 'maybe I'll get a transfer to Tinseltown like you here. Get high on designer shite and play with myself all the time.'

Rossiter puckered but didn't have time to take the bait.

Scanlon jumped on the dining table. The dome blackened and a spotlight appeared on him. A mic on a rope swung past his head and he grabbed it in reflex.

*GOOOOOD EVENIN' LADIES AND GENTLEMEN AND WELCOME TO 12 ROUNDS OF IN YO'FACE FE-YORRRR-REE-US CLUBBIN LIVE, ON LINE, DIRECT AND KICKING OUT FROM THE HOME OF LUCA ALBERTINI IN THE HEART OF LONDON'S VOQUESVILLE.*

His voice echoed like it was in a huge auditorium. Brontay had recalled hearing an urban myth about this guy who had moved into the old Albert Hall in the Favelas and turned it into

some kind of debauched nightclub, an anything-goes enclave in nomansland. His network broadcasts were illegal but better than anything International Activities produced, not that she'd seen any herself.

Vasily clapped her on the back. Brontay shook her head.

'I appreciate the thought, but I'm not in the mood for it, Vasily.'

The Russian lit his stogie and winked at Brontay as the party ground into action with a dub beat. The place was full of Voquists and classical characters, real and generated. Brontay didn't know or care which was which.

Vasily seized Brontay's supergrass vodka and dispensed with the cap.

'You know Sasha. For once it's not all about you.'

## A FRIEND IN THE PRESS

'Excellent coffee, bellissima, as usual,' said Farrukh Hussein Fazal. Antonia smiled graciously and poured him another cup, 'You're so good to me.'

'Better the coffee than the hooch, no? Ah... il bambino has a little hangover methinks.'

'Life is one big hangover, darling.'

Antonia shook her head and made over to some paying customers.

It was a bright Winter's afternoon in East Park, the frost clinging onto the small grassy square in the forecourt of the World's End Cafe where Fazal sought refuge from the cold, a stinking hangover and, most of all, that overbrimmed well of spitting acid in his stomach called resentment. The excitement of this project had fooled him into a fragile optimism about resurrecting his career. *'An insider's view of the Doctors' Congress'*. *Exclusive report by Farrukh Fazal, the REAL Farrukh Fazal.* He had enough material on corruption, deception and manipulation to make it the biggest story of the millennium.

But no, the bastards had used him and dropped him. Even Scanlon had shut him out.

No news is bad news.

*Sorry Faz...* that's all he got for being the key link, the man who had moved this operation off the ground. He'd think twice about it if they asked for his help again. Antonia's old compact cassette radio played out some soul singer from a few lifetimes ago. He recognised the voice, warbling the line *Mercy Mercy Me*, but no name came to him.

*Things Ain't What They Used to Be...*

'Damned straight they ain't,' he muttered.

Two more customers, minor gangsters from the West Park, bobbed in and placed themselves down by the window. An elderly man in the next booth hummed along to the radio, stirring his cappuccino. Fazal sipped at his coffee; black and bitter, just like the mood he was in.

*Marvin.* That was it. What a voice, slightly marred by the old man's croaky attempt to stay in tune with the tape. What voice?

It happened time and again in these situations. The leads for a story go dead, the brain is exhausted and the tap of inspiration runs dry. It's when you reach the point of giving up that the real breaks happen, with no warning whatsoever. The important thing? To be there, in the right place, right time.

'Fazal. Why so glum, you miserable you old hack.'

The voice was gravelly and mothballed, but instantly recognisable. It came from that old chap with his back to him in the next booth, 'No, stay where you are Fazal. Just two punters talking about the weather.'

'So what do I need to talk to you for, Pops? Whatever bad luck you've had, I'm sure it must be of your own making.'

'Yeah. You want a story or not?'

Fazal, against all his instincts, remained seated. He had a sudden recall of who this voice belonged to and a shiver strafed up his back, not a good one; a ghost. He put down his coffee

and placed his head in his hands.

'Good lad. I've got great plans for you.'

'That's what you told me before you threw me in here.'

Fazal felt anger replacing lethargy. He grabbed the man by his shoulder and swung him around.

Both Saul Hardyman's eyes had developed huge cataracts but retained their magenta glow. His face was ashen and pocked with dirt and welts. His hairless scalp was covered in melanomas, the stink of which made Fazal's stomach turn. His breath was equally putrid, rotting meat. Like his favourite painting above Antonia's bar, a Dickensian nightmare made flesh, Fazal was astounded and not a little sickened by the sight of this living corpse. Saul Hardyman was rotting from the outside in.

'And *you* feel rough today,' Hardyman grunted. Fazal regained his reason, sneering at his old nemesis, 'Least I got new eyes for me birthday. Blind as a fucked bat now though.'

'I really hope I die before I get old. Pete Townsend was right.'

'I thought I'd found a way round that,' Hardyman burst into a fit of coughing. He wiped his gummy mouth with a napkin. The codger seethed with cantankerous but impotent rage at his pain, his tone turning in a microsecond, 'I'll have your neck broken you little cocks...'

'This tramp distressing you my dear?' Antonia had appeared, hands on hips, 'Want me to kick him out?' Fazal scanned him, searching for an angle. *Any* angle.

'No, no, you're okay, darling. Please, a coffee for the gentleman.'

'Rum,' muttered Hardyman, 'navy rum. The dirtier the better, like a bummed sailor,' he coughed again and grinned before lighting up an old cigarette butt from the ashtray.

'Yeah, get him one Antonia. I'll have one too. And a pack of Marlboro reds if you have them. Your brand, right?' Antonia sniffed and shuffled back to the bar for two large Lambs. She

glanced back at Fazal as he pulled out his moleskin notebook and biro, then brought the bottle over to them.

Hardyman smoked, ignoring the presence of his benefactor.

'Well?'

'Well what?' snorted Hardyman. Antonia poured two large rums out and left the bottle.

'I've got appointments, Hardy. I haven't got time for this. No sob stories, give me something real or you can fuck right off out of here. I don't care if they boil you down for glue.'

'Aw, don't you want to hear my story? I thought you liked stories,' said Hardyman with a glint of his old arrogance. Young eyes on an old body, he was a real curiosity for sure, a Victorian Freakshow exhibit. Fazal took a slug of rum, winced, and poured another. He didn't have to drink with Hardyman, but it was a reflex.

'Right, it had better be good. Commence.'

'You still haven't forgiven me for sending you here have you Farrukh?' Fazal sniffed the air around Hardyman. The aroma of sandalwood barely masked fresh shit and old tobacco, which itself masked the malodorous cancer that was probably right through him. It was not an occasion to show any sympathy for the devil.

'Like I said, shitbag, I don't have much time. If you have something to say, get on with it. If you're wasting my time I'll have Antonia's boys feed you to her Chihuahuas in bitesize pieces.'

'Okay, Farrukh. You don't have to pretend to get tough. Here's what happens.'

-

Afternoon darkened into an icy evening outside the cafe, customers came and went. Hardyman went through the rum like water while Fazal listened, taking the occasional sip and scrawling notes in his book. A mist of sleet in the darkness outside had developed when Antonia brought over some food;



a tagliatelle for Fazal and pea soup for Hardyman.

'Molto grazie, bella.' said Fazal, to his own surprise, slightly inebriated.

Hardyman eyed his tagliatelle greedily. His companion swapped the plates over. The old man stuffed the pasta into his face.

'That's everything?' said Fazal.

'What else do you want? A blow job? I've lost most of my teeth,' said Hardyman, gobbets of meat sauce running down his chin. Snot trailed from his nostrils like ectoplasm from a gloryhole.

'No thanks. How do I know you're not a plant?'

Hardyman laughed and coughed.

'Stop it, please. It hurts me, you stupid little prick. Look, you can do what you like, Fazal. You can ignore me, but that I told someone is enough and you are as good as anyone. One day you'll understand. There's no going back for me... I've nothing to gain...' Fazal sensed that, for probably the first and last time in his life, Saul Hardyman was being completely honest. The reporter began nodding his head.

'Okay, okay. Do we need to meet again?'

'The only time you'll see me, a good looking and young me, is on the network, when you've put me in your story, right? I want a good billing, no second card shit.'

'Right.'

*Yeah right, fucker. Sure.*

Hardyman began eating again.

Antonia switched the heating unit onto full. She really had turned back into a gorgeous young woman. Too good for him.

'Go there now if you wish. He's expecting you,' said Hardyman. Scenarios raced through Fazal's mind about traps and danger. Taking risks was what it was all about. He reminded himself that this was what he wanted.

'Look, honey, I have to go out for an hour or two. Can you

take care of Mr Hardyman for me?'

Antonia grimaced at the disgusting old bastard.

'Only because it's you.'

Fazal grinned.

'Thank you lovely, thank you,' he approached the bar and kissed her, whispering into her ear.

'I'll make it worth your while.'

'Piss off and do what you gonna do.'

'Milady.'

Hardyman continued chomping away at his tagliatelle, oblivious to the lovematch. The reporter put on his trenchcoat and fedora and headed out to chase his scoop.

Antonia cleaned down the table and drew the shutters after Fazal left. She began to cash up for the evening shift. Eight kilos of the finest Hashish from West Park, a case of cheap wine, a case of pineapple grenades, four mini-uzis and an old police water cannon, but no one brought her gifts like her little Farrukh. She went into her back room to find her order book to see if the items matched the requirements of any customers.

Antonia failed to notice that Hardyman had stopped eating. His face was flat down in the plate of pasta. Saul Hardyman was stone dead after a fraction over 100 years on this earth. The sleet outside had turned into a nasty little blizzard, the snow pelting the plastic, wood and brick shanties of East Park, not least the windows of The World's End Cafe.

## THE ECTOGENESIS

Brontay had managed to sleep through the party by some miracle, tiredness shutting down all the senses, flattening the noise from Scanlon's magnificent booming rig. Better down here than upstairs, better anywhere than alone. She knew Vasily was watching her all along, even though he was pretending to let his hair down after their epic circumnavigation. The man never switched off and everything he did was for a reason, something she was beginning to accept.

As she stirred and looked around the empty ballroom, her suspicions were confirmed; Nedvedev perched in the same spot, nursing the bottle of Supergrass, looking right down the barrel at her.

'What happened to all your showbiz friends?' said Brontay.

Vasily smiled and took another slug.

They stared through each other, like two gunslingers waiting for blinks.

'Vasily, I don't know what you want me to do.'

The Russian nodded.

'I know you don't. And I'm sorry.'

Brontay climbed to her feet. A little stronger.

'I need to know, Vasily. This city, it isn't safe, is it?'

Vasily sniffed and lit a cheroot.

'Nowhere is safe, Anglichanka. Which is why we've brought you here.'

'We?'

He stood up and approached Brontay, stroking her face.

'I need to show you something.'

Brontay nodded. The room changed, not just beneath the dome, but their entire surroundings. The abrupt shift in light and temperature made Brontay feel like she was back in the nightmare. What fresh hell?

Rows of gestation tanks in a huge enclosure, the end of which either side was just about visible, several miles in any direction. They were at the crossroads at the very middle. It was warm, almost sweltering. Everything glowed a bubblegum hue.

Vasily approached a tank and rattled his fingers on the graphene compound. Within, a pair of tiny embryos attached to a placenta, cosy in utero, amniotic fluid changing from blue to deep red and back again, charged particles blinking in and out of existence like popping candy.

Brontay studied the tiny humans and acknowledged what she had always known to be true but...

'I forgot.'

Vasily stroked her face. Her big, crazy Russian brother. In another life they would have been such great friends, with nothing to worry about but growing up together.

'No, Sasha. They made you forget. No childhood. No mother, no father. You were nurtured by company machines and then sent to company education. The company owns all this, they keep you working and playing because that keeps them in control, that keeps *him* in control.'

'But you have a family.'

'And we have wars. We have social problems. We are not part of the company.'

Brontay felt the tears streaming down her face as she watched the infants kick out at their mechanical mother.

'You... have a family.'

'And so do you, now.'

Brontay took a step back. It could be a trick, like anything could be a trick. But now she put her mind to it and there was nothing but a blank until her working age. All placebos, false memories, fake under a direct, retrospective gaze. Looking at Vasily, his family represented all she knew as real.

'End,' muttered the Russian, and they were back in the empty ballroom for a split second.

The room shifted again. It was Brontay's apartment, except it wasn't, more like the standard shell offered by every Hanslett subsidiary. A curly-headed female looking like she was in her late forties shuffled past them in a bath towel and perched herself on a sofa, glass of red waiting for her. Hard light crackled and the room shifted to a Parisian boudoir, all cracked stucco with a view of Montmartre through the French windows and the whiff of roses and Gitanes. A standard screensaver. She began to towel her body down. Brontay frowned.

'And we need to see this because?'

Vasily emitted a tight smile, then a thud from across the room as the resident dropped to the floor stone dead.

'Myocardial infarction on her fiftieth birthday. This is where you were headed, Sasha. Where everyone is headed.'

The anger choked Brontay, but it made awful sense, equally as much as the birthing tanks did. No-one spoke of these things. No-one spoke to each other.

'Vile fucking bastards.'

The door to the apartment swung open and two masked figures entered with a collapsed disk. They placed the disk by the cadaver as it stopped twitching and it popped up to the size

of a large barrel. They picked up the freshly dead woman and dumped her head first in the barrel before a chemical sizzling began that delivered a noxious, viscous, pink smog. In seconds the corpse crumpled like a blow-up doll and dissolved to liquid in a soullessly efficient process. Blood, organs, flesh, bone, gone. Gone. Gone.

Gone.

The figures grabbed the barrel and emptied the soupy liquid remains down the sink before collapsing it back down to a disk and exiting the apartment.

Brontay couldn't stop shaking her head. Vasily picked his teeth.

'You wanted to know. You needed to know. I'm sorry.'

The room returned to the Albertini mansion. Nedvedev poured out two further shots of supergrass.

'Why should I believe you, Vasily? Why should I believe anything I see?'

Vasily inhaled like a yogi returning from a trance and smiled at her.

'Because faith is what makes the world work. And it is in dangerously short supply, Sasha.'

Brontay didn't wait for him. She slugged it down and tapped the glass.

'Tell me what it is you want me to do, Vasily.'

He slugged his own and refilled both.

## THE INTERVIEW

The walk to the Chipped Arch was quite pleasant, despite the low temperature. The East Park was his favourite part of town as it was more like the old city, the city that he pined for but could never get back, and the Favelas were still too small to be seen as anything but a prison.

Fazal knew that he could be heading into a death trap, but he'd weighed up the feasibility of the situation hours before. If they had got their information right they would know that he was no threat, at least to them. He was just looking for a story. From being all but out of commission but hours ago, his options were suddenly limitless.

Hardyman hadn't lied about the location. Nervous looking Squadjutants patrolled the perimeter area of East Park on foot tonight and it was unusual under any circumstance to see Squadjutants on foot in the Favelas. It told him a considerable amount about who he was meeting. The 1990 black Lincoln limousine was parked squarely between the arch, headlights beaming out to the west. The back door swung open as Fazal

approached.

'Didn't think you were going to show.' said the American, polishing off his pastrami-on-rye.

'I wasn't too sure about you either. Farrukh Fazal.'

Fazal offered his hand.

'You're letting the cold in, dumbass. Close the door after yourself.'

Fazal obliged, stepping inside the limo. It smelled of new paint.

'I've just had this old lady reconditioned, cool huh?'

'Very,' replied Fazal. 'Now, Mr...'

'The name's Deconstructed Man. No pleasantries, no bullshit, just Deconstructed Man.'

*Who?*

'Your friend said you had a lead for me regarding International Activities.'

'Hardyman, yuh. Kinda weird lookin' now, isn't he just... Yeah... errrrp..' Deconstructed Man belched in mid-sentence and took a swig of coke. He ate with his mouth open.

'You may have some questions about this whole affair. In good time, we can arrange your return to peak network viewing, although I would appreciate your co-operation in keeping quiet about the dummy Fazal that we were running for the past few years.'

'You seem to know a hell of a lot about the media for a policeman.'

'Hey, knowing shit is what I'm paid for. And I've had some enhancements. Errrrrp.'

'I was under the impression that I could begin compiling my information now?'

'You mean you want to interview me? Sure, that's fine, buddy. But I need to ask you one or two things first. Maybe that's not the done thing for a newsman, but integrity is important here.' Fazal felt a slight well of nausea. The idea that

he had fallen willingly into the most obvious trap in history did not appeal to him.

'Come on. There aren't any vested interests here, not any longer at any rate.'

'You're bitter, Fazal. I empathise. But if I'd wanted to take you downtown I would have gone up to see you myself and put your lights out. Think it through, old son.'

'That's gratifying to know.'

'Here's the offer. You get full editorial control of the entire news network, the whole show, and I ain't just talking about this story. Prove to us that you're as good a newsman as you say you are and you get our full backing, no interference. Tell it the way you wanna tell it.'

The offer was the same as had been tabled by Hardyman in the café earlier.

Deconstructed Man gave his best plastic smile. He looked like a prize salamander in his lizard-skin suit, huge white quiff and tombstone gnashers; the archetypal Victim of VoQue. *Enhancements indeed.*

'I think you should get the ball rolling,' said Fazal.

'Why don't we begin with the one about the goose and the golden egg.'

**THIS IS THE NEWS**

*An intellect which at a given instant knew all the forces acting in nature, and the position of all things of which the world consists - supposing the said intellect were vast enough to subject these data to analysis - would embrace in the same formula the motions of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes.*

*- Pierre Simon Laplace*

THIS IS THE I.A. NETWORK EVENING NEWS WITH FARRUKH FAZAL.

THIS EVENING'S HEADLINES...

VOQUE DESIGNER MÜLLER ANNOUNCES A TRIBUTE CELEBRATION TO MARK THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE TRAGIC DEATH OF HAIL VANITY, *the Only Icon of Our*

*Times, AT THE KENSINGTON PEACE RALLY.*

*THE NEW CHIC; COMMUNISM MEETS ROCK N ROLL, THAT'S RIGHT, THE COLD WAR IS BACK IN THIS WINTER'S COLLECTION AND AT THE THEATRES. IT'S ALL QUIFFS AND QUANDRIES AND YOU'LL BE MAD TO MISS IT.*

*RECORD HURRICANE WINDS BATTER WESTERN EUROPE, TAKING DOWN SOME NETWORK ACCESS. WE SAY: DON'T PANIC!*

'I don't believe this, you're letting her do it again,' said Ingham, 'every rule, every resolution made by this committee is always corrupted by her ego. Our Constitution is being dragged through the...'

'Am I missing something?' said Nedvedev as entered the boardroom with Scanlon.

'Look what the big, black cat dragged in,' said Kutz, 'Long time no see, Vasily.'

The boardroom table gave the place the semblance of an official feel, even with the chipped coving and peeling wallpaper that betrayed the former opulence of this grand old palace. Kensington Palace was the last former home to British Royals left in London, a roof over famous and infamous heads. Now it was the seat of Revolution, or so the comrades of The Doctors' Congress present and correct hoped.

'Welcome back, Vasily,' said Brisco. The Russian embraced Nkono and Brisco and shook Cruz's hand. He then gave Kutz a peck on her cheek.

'Hi Stephanie.'

Ingham responded with a curt nod, tapping her pencil against the table top. She seldom made the mistake of liking anyone, even the likable.

'If I may continue,' she grunted.

'We're going through a few logistics,' said Brisco with a supercilious grin.

'Duffy here has given me the brief.'

Scanlon nodded and stepped up front with Kutz.

'Newsflash, you'll pardon the pun. With the assistance of Mr Cruz and his technical staff we've set up our own network of security cameras to monitor the East and West Park areas. The braineology behind it was to watch out for low life, see if there was anyone out there trying to sniff us out. Anyway, Freddy, one of my boys, picked this out late last night from beneath the Chipped Arch. Roll it, Frank.'

Nkono flicked on his OHP.

The low-tech drone footage showed Farrukh Fazal stepping out of the Cadillac followed by Deconstructed Man. The American shook hands and clapped the reporter on his back with a kingsized, ice-to-the-eskimos grin.

'Fazal? No,' said Ingham, dropping her derision for surprise.

'Yep. Then the slippery fuck had the gall to hand himself in. We ain't gone to work on him yet, I didn't think it'd be the right protocol before speaking with the board.'

'Such a pro,' muttered Kutz.

Scanlon flipped her the finger.

'I'll speak to him,' said Kutz, sharpening her talons.

'Katia, Duffy knows him best. We should let him go first,' said Nedvedev, picking his teeth with a pen top, 'then I may have a word.'

'I want assurances from both of you that this man will not be harmed,' said Ingham.

'Do you think I'm some kind of animal? Farrukh is a good friend of mine. Of ours,' said Scanlon.

-

'Slimy little rat fuck!' the back of Scanlon's hand smashed across Fazal's face again, his gold signet ring drawing blood this time. The dim LEDs of the dank basement set the tone perfectly.

'Steady Duffy, let the man say his piece,' said Nedvedev.

'Why should I?' yelled Scanlon before turning back to his quarry, 'I trusted you.'

'I suggest you start talking Farrukh. You may have noticed that Duffy has a bone to pick with you.'

'Duffy...Vasily.'

Fazal's right eye was beginning to close over from the impact of Scanlon's first blow.

'Look, I'm trying to get a story here.'

'So you sold us out,' said Nedvedev, glancing at Scanlon, 'Farrukh, I'm the only thing stopping your former friend here from clipping you.'

'I understand that, Vasily. But you must understand that I helped these people get their operation together. I made the initial connections. Why would I turn on you? You both forget that I've been in nasty situations before. I don't scare easily.'

Fazal was sweating like an ape in a sauna, the aroma of his fear filling the cell.

'Betcha ain't seen the bottom of the Serpentine, pigfucker,' growled Scanlon. Nedvedev smiled, happy to play good cop but ever willing to switch masks.

'Farrukh, let me give you a little tip shall I? Saying that you don't scare easily is not the best way to forge a good relationship with your interrogators, especially when one of them is very seriously considering burying you alive under four hundred tons of wet mud. Now, I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot back there. Why don't we start again?'

'Be my guest.' Fazal shuffled in his chair, eyeing Scanlon for another assault.

'This is a picture of you in a clandestine meeting with Detective Inspector Grayson Suarez, which took place last night in a vintage car beneath the not very clandestine Chipped Arch off East Park. Why don't we begin with you telling us what you

discussed in this meeting? Take your time.'

The interrogators didn't look anything like the comrades that Fazal had once worked and co-operated with in his days as an investigative journalist. Now he finally knew life on the other side of such men.

'May I remind you gentlemen that I came here today of my own accord.'

'I hate traitors,' whispered Scanlon through his crimson mist.

'So do I,' grunted Fazal.

Vasily held his hand across Scanlon's chest. Fazal looked for a beat like his head would drop. Then he raised his chin, spat blood and smirked at his captors.

'You hypocrites. Wager I'm not the only one with a double agenda, am I?'

Scanlon glanced at Nedvedev again, who nodded. Fazal received another backhander from his old friend.

'I'm sad you doubt me, Brother Duffy. I am weak and you are strong, but not as strong as the man you want to bring down. I suggest you give me a chance to explain myself.'

'Better be good, scoop,' said Nedvedev.

-

'Another beer. And make it fucking cold this time, buddy.'

Chief Constable Deconstructed Man unbuttoned the collar of his Müller shirt. He was sure that he'd grown fatter since his promotion. The barman gave him his beer. It was still luke-warm but better than the piss that was served outside the Favelas.

The American put down his collector's copy of 2000AD and glanced around his surroundings. He was the only customer. In fact, the only reason that the Theatre Bar at Albert's was open at all was because he was here. Still, the exotic dancer had a lovely, sexy ass, and the beer was passable.

'I don't fuckin' believe this, NYPD swine in my bar.'

Deconstructed Man span round to see the enormous pistol

closing in on his face. The nozzle lightly touched the area between his eyes. The owner smiled brightly and replaced the safety.

'How would you like me to burn this little operation of yours, Shitlocks?'

Scanlon had a burning desire to unload in this pigfucker's cabbage right here and now. This was his place, it wouldn't take too long to clean up the mess. Longer maybe to get the stink out.

'I thought your dirty Puerto Rican ass got nuked back in the Projects,' said Scanlon.

'Well it seems that only the strongest survived,' said Deconstructed Man, 'Now, if you don't mind, I haven't come here to play cowboys and injuns with you and your boys. I'm on other business.'

'Oh yeah? How about our lil contre-temps in that subway tunnel? I'm sure we got plenty to rap about, babycakes.'

'Three attack choppers hovering around this shithouse say we don't,' Scanlon's grin spread even wider as Deconstructed Man pointed upwards, 'Don't make me state the obvious again, Scanlon. It gives me heartburn.'

Scanlon sucked his teeth and slapped the bar. He forced himself down.

'Vasily, We cool, he's real enough. For a swine.'

The barman Nedvedev poured himself a beer and perched opposite Deconstructed Man on his side of the bar.

'Cute. Do you work out?' said Deconstructed Man, smiling himself, 'Where's Fazal? Did you put him out with the trash? Not that it bothers me, just a professional curiosity.'

'Farrukh won't be joining us this afternoon,' said Vasily, coolly assessing the American.

'Fair enough. I'd rather speak to the organ grinder than the monkey. I have a business proposition for you gentlemen. Regarding a certain Mr MannyCapra.'

'What's on your mind?' said the Russian.

'Ah, you know. The usual mercenary bullshit. Knock the dude off, nothing fancy, blame it on someone else, carve up the purse and jump town. This is my retirement plan.'

'Duffy nearly saw to that a minute ago,' said Nedvedev.

'Tell me somethin' Vasras,' said Scanlon, 'How come dumb-assed honkies like him always find a way to the top? If you fell down a shithole you'd come up with a motherfuckin' gold watch.'

'Of course,' said Deconstructed Man, blanking Scanlon, 'It's not quite as simple as whacking some rich bastard. It would be very awkward for even me to meet him personally. The fella's paranoid. And smart. Supermundo.'

Nedvedev shook his head.

'That's why he's been around for so long.'

Deconstructed Man eyed the Russian, a long, festering silence falling between them. Deconstructed Man smoothed back his outrageous quiff and grinned.

'But, gentlemen, there is always a way. Rumour has it that Christian Brisco's in town. Yeah, I'll have another beer too.'

'What about him?' said Nedvedev, ignoring the bar order.

'Do I have to spell it out for you? Several months ago we picked up a woman going by the name of Alexandra Brontay. Well, I can tell you, it wasn't nice, but we went to town on this little shitbird, gave her the fucking works. I interrogated her when she was clinically comatose, can you believe that? Modern science. Anyhoose, it turns out that she is somekinda time-bomb, set to explode when there's personal contact with the boss. Clever, huh? Not only that, but it seems that old Brisco really knows the right buttons to press because this woman's DNA contains something that MannyCapra would love to get his hands on.'

'Really?' whispered Nedvedev.

'Yeah. Really. Now who's cock have I gotta suck to get



another fucking beer?'

Scanlon was now pottering around behind the bar, acting disinterested. But he'd been listening all too intently. Deconstructed Man eyed him as he spoke.

'MannyCapra wants it all for himself. It's all to do with this goddamn code. It's why I had to chase Rumpelstilskin's ass here all the way from that sewer back to the Favelas.'

Scanlon put his beer down and tied back his dreads.

'Shoulda blown your scrawny numbnuts off back there. Damn nearly had you, too,' he bristled.

'Ooh, easy rasta!' replied Deconstructed Man in fake Jamaican. He turned back to Nedvedev, 'It's all true, and you know it. Brontay's as near to perfection as there has ever been with all this weird shit, contains the very thing which will whack MannyCapra if he gets too close. I mean anything; a hair, dead skin, a breath. Even the steam from her piss. Lemme tell you though, MannyCapra's white coats will spot a stunt like that in seconds and you won't even fucking see them. So Brisco sends their girl in, on a hiding to nothing. He knows that it probably won't work but that don't really matter to him because, and get this...'

His drinking partners watched him intently. He was glad that he'd finally got their full attention.

'What he's really after is to make the Chief suffer, to make him know how close he is to achieving his final ambition of physical immortality, supermotherfucking human status. To rattle the man, make him desperate, bring him out of his hole. Something like that. But I know that other people are holding cards to their chest. What they don't realise, Mr Albertini, is that I have X-Ray eyes. Got 'em chasing dime-a-dozen trash like your friend here back in the good old days of law enforcement.'

Nedvedev didn't even move a single facial muscle. Deconstructed Man wondered how much he'd riled him beneath the poker face. This Russky was good, but he was

better.

'Go on,' said Nedvedev. Scanlon had drawn his pistol again.

'Ha, what you gonna do with that, dawg? Right, we all agree that this asshole MannyCapra has passed his sell-by date and that he's gotta go, yeah? I want to keep my share when it all goes down and more importantly I want to keep my ass intact. Sooner or later he's going to flip us all, no matter what side we is on and we need to flip him first. That's why you are going to send in both Brontays, Vasily.'

Vasily looked at Scanlon. Deconstructed Man cracked his gum.

*Yeah, there it is, you stupid fucking Russian gorilla. Grayson Suarez, wiping the smug face off smart asses since America was America.*

'What's to stop me cracking your fucking head right now, you nasty fascist prick?'

*And there it is again, boom goes his cool. Win.* Scanlon cocked his pistol but Vasily motioned him down.

'One Brontay that won't trip their alarms to pave the way for the clone that has all the toxic shit in her system. It's a neat trick, the old one two, and I ain't surprised that you want to keep it away from your bosses in The Congress. Makes sense, I suppose. One thing we all know about MannyCapra is that he collects all kinds of weird. A couple of bona fide human clones with the secret to immortality will be irresistible to him.'

'Katia and Christian are scientists, not strategists,' replied Nedvedev, fighting back the well of frustration that went with this bastard sniffing them out. How did this cheap carpetbagging fuck find out? Did it matter now?

Deconstructed Man raised his empty bottle to them both.

'You're very professional, Mr Nedvedev. Yessir, I'm going to enjoy working with you, fuck you very much. Now how about that nice, cold beer?'

**DON'T FEED THE ANIMALS**

*"PERCHED LIKE THE CHRISTMAS FAIRY"....ONE MAN'S TRUE STORY OF CORRUPTION, SEX AND SADO-MASOCHISM IN THE LATEST STATE OF THE ART HOME ENTERTAINMENT THEME PARK.*

*"YOU HEARD ME, TAKE THIS JOB AND STUFF IT UP YOUR ASS!"*

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'We may need to tweak it a little,' said MannyCapra to his com.

Where was Hardyman when he needed him? The mundanity and intellectual poverty of all this neo-tabloid trash was killing him, essential as it was to the survival of the company. The same tricks, repackaged ad infinitum and shoved down their throats. Poor cattle.

*SIR?*

'Talk to me, Alpha. Please.'

*CAPTAIN MONTGOMERY IS ON YOUR DIRECT LINE.*

'Monty Old Boy? Excellent. Patch him through.'

*CERTAINLY SIR.*

Montgomery appeared on the Chesterfield. He adjusted the cravat on his neck like it was a ligature.

'She's on her way, MannyCapra. They are taking a chopper.'

'Well done, Jean. Well done. My security man has arranged a couple of random checks on the convoy. I take it that you have been fully briefed?'

'Of course.'

MannyCapra knew how much this man loathed him, what he would give to stick the knife in his back, literally. It was nothing new in this line of work. But self-preservation was the prime mover in the rat.

'Good-oh. Well, little more to say than see you on the other side. Au 'voir mon capitain.'

'Huh.'

Montgomery clicked off the com.

*'Remember, my child, the man is a ghost. His essence is everywhere, and you can only destroy him when you get to his heart. Kill him and your Maria will be free. You. Will be free.'*

Brontay remembered Kutz's words as the Police Chopper's rotor blades carved through the air with an efficient, hypnotic alacrity. It rose above the Favelas, swinging north-east towards the Grand Dome of the Metropolitan Police Headquarters. The site of her past and, probably, her future incarceration.

'How're you doing?' yelled Nedvedev above the sound of the blades.

Two other Met Drones joined them as he spoke, 'Don't worry about them. All part of the plan.'

Something about this giant Russian man was eerily familiar, yet they'd only met days ago. Could she trust any of these people? No. She was ready to die, but not for them, only for what she saw in Maria's eyes. She had to believe their story, else everything was lost. Scanlon winked at her, leaning across to clap her on the shoulder. Duffy had even shaved his head for the occasion and had donned the Squadjutant's uniform. They all looked the part; Nedvedev, Scanlon, Feather Blade and even herself.

Enough to convince her own mother who never was.

'What the fucking hell are they playing at? Do they want to get shot down or something?' said Steph Ingham in the control room at Kensington Gardens.

'I'm just glad the retinal implant's working,' said Cruz.

Montgomery tightened his flying gloves around his wrists.

'Stephanie, a man like Vasily knows how to attract attention. That's how he works,' he said casually.

'Oh, that's okay then. You convinced me.'

Ingham screwed her face up in disapproval. Montgomery eyeballed each of the other Congress board members as they watched the bank of monitors.

'It is time, ladies and gentlemen.'

'Mind how you go, Jean. See you on the other side,' said Nkono.

'Of that I've no doubt.'

'Happy flying, sweetheart,' said Kutz, kissing his cheek. Brisco rolled his eyes. He shook hands with Montgomery.

'Good luck.'

The handshake firmed to crushing level.

'Whatever.'

The International Activities H.Q. looked considerably smaller from the outside than Brontay had anticipated, despite all the briefings. She'd taken a vacuum tube as far as Camden Lock and walked the rest of the way along the canal side. As promised, not a soul had stirred to distract her. But why should there be any problems? MannyCapra was expecting her.

Trees lined the surrounding walls of the overground building, making it difficult for her to see the structure from the ground until she had made it through the gates.

NETWORK SERVER CONNECTION ROOM SECURITY  
INSTALLATION...AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY...

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR M.C. CASSIDY...BIOLOGICAL  
SCAN COMPLETE....

COMMENCING AUDIO SCAN ...

'I hope this works, Steve...' She could hear Cruz chuckling at the other end of the com, 'what are you laughing about now?'

'Sorry Monique, it's not you, honestly. What were you saying?'

'I'd appreciate it if you concentrated on the matter at hand...'

'Oh yeah, sorry boss. Don't worry, I mean there's chance in everything, but so long as your implant's working...'

'There's chance in everything? What's that supposed to mean? If I get caught here...'

AUDIOSCAN COMPLETE. GOOD AFTERNOON  
MONIQUE, HOW ARE YOU TODAY?

'Marvellous, just marvellous thank you.'

EXCELLENT...PLEASE ENTER.

'Right. Let's see what we got here, shall we?'

The room was tiny, barely large enough to fit the one person with a wide com chair and panel. Monique took her seat and glanced around slowly, relaying as much information back to Cruz as possible. Apart from a wrap-around wall screen and

sensor pad there wasn't much to see.

'Steve? Steve? Are you still there?'

*'Don't panic. Everything's okay, I'm just completing a few checks.'*

'I'm not panicking. Just a little edgy, that's all. I hope you know what you're doing.' She could make out derisive snorts coming from the other end of the communication.

*'I installed this network myself, darling.'*

'Years ago. They've upgraded since, you know.'

'Really?'

'Okay, okay. Sorry to insult your professional integrity.'

*'Right, our first task, you're gonna love this, is to download all the security codes from the network.'*

'This is for the nano-machines?' said Cassidy.

*'It's so my nasty little viruses can worm into MannyCapra's nice little network. Meanwhile we can set el burro on them.'*

He was a patronising dickhead, but she was used to working with them, being a policewoman.

'El burro?'

'It lets them know we mean business.'

'Whatever you say.'

'Right, hit the options button and let's get busy.'

Then Monique Cassidy began a long and sweaty evening in front of the I.A. Network Server.

From the outside, not a soul stirred about the Art Deco façade. It screamed low key, like *The Wizard of Oz* in reverse. Nothing was there to suggest that the world's most powerful media guru, and therefore the world's most powerful human, was somewhere inside this building. No guards, no staff, no dogs and no active security system.

The city was been crawling with Squadjutants, which seemed pointless as there were no criminals around to chase. That is if she excluded herself from criminal status, but she was long past worrying on that score. She pressed the com button

on the front door.

'Right, focus. Stay calm and stick to the plan.'

*'That's it, don't give yourself another episode, not right now please, there's work to do.'*

Of course it was a great idea of Vasily's for her to approach this 275 year old megalomaniac all by herself. Yes.

'Breathe. And so it goes,' said Brontay.

A long-faced, elderly man dressed in a butler's suit answered. The guy reminded Brontay of Alec Guinness in one of those old black and white movies that they'd sometimes show on the networks rendered out into three dimensions, although she preferred them in good old 2D. The butler waved her through, his sallow face giving nothing away.

Guinness led her through a neat, austere lobby that made no concessions to 23<sup>rd</sup> Century tastes. MannyCapra evidently shared Nedvedev's fondness of marble in the floor and some of the fittings, but everything was much more understated. This place gave little away about the occupant's character apart from the fact that it was functional, quite cold and poorly illuminated. Even the bust of Caesar in the entrance looked grim and uninspiring. Where were the hordes of Clinicians waiting to pull her to pieces? Why wasn't she pleased about that?

After a short walk they came to an open-grilled lift, behind which a bell-hop resembling Jozef Goebbels perched reading a copy of *Mein Kampf* and humming Wagner's *Die Walküre* to himself. The bell hop stood to attention, clicking his boots as they stepped into the lift. *This fella has an awfully weird sense of humour.*

They reached the third and top floor and the Nazi attendant forced an ugly smile and held his hand out to Brontay, cursing in German when he received nothing.

'Please take a seat in the boardroom,' said Guinness, 'He will be down to see to you in a short time.'

Guinness led her through, where a huge antique Daliesque mirror greeted them. She perched down at the head of the grand table, gargoyles standing guard as the logs crackled away in the fireplace behind her. This was much more like the demon's lair.

The room appeared to expand and contract with her inner conceit, as if in agreement. Guinness was unmoved by her double-take.

'Would Ma'am be requiring tea while she waits?'

'No. No thank you.'

The butler emitted a low grunt and sashayed away down a side corridor. That *was* Alec Guinness, right down to that cranky expression when she'd refused tea. Vasily's warnings about MannyCapra had, so far, been spot on. The man was an oddball par excellence and she hadn't even met him yet. Dali's mirror swelled her eyes up to the size of footballs while her mouth looked no bigger than a peanut.

Eight miles away in Battersea, Sebastian Müller was enjoying a little autoerotic fun courtesy of a network facility that he'd just accessed.

This was the third night on the run that he'd logged on to the *SkAnkAmaNia VI : Relentless Tattooed Bitch Mistresses* page and every time there were new, exciting pleasures to behold.

*I don't care about your precious reputation, take that Disco Slut.*

'Aaaargh! Fuck me, you're good.'

The leather thongs that cut into his ankles and wrists made the flogging all the more tantalising for what was about to follow. He twisted his neck, expecting to see the tattooed love machine that the options menu had promised.

*I think you'll like me better like this, won't you sweetie?*

'Aaaargh-eeeeegh!' the screams of pleasure turned to desperate whimpers when he saw what had been flogging him for the last five minutes.

-

'That's my little *burro*. Hijo mío,' said a self-satisfied Steve Cruz as he cocooned himself in the monitor room at Kensington Palace, hands moving and sliding around the lines of code that legends were made of, *his* code. His worm was going deep into every client on the International Activities' server, tunnelling out glory holes for The Congress to fuck. It was the culmination of a decade's work and it felt better than he had ever imagined. Sweet paths and rootkits, Qubits doing their tricks. *Who's Your Daddy?*

-

Maybe someone had left a tap dripping in the next room. Maybe she was getting paranoid, which wasn't surprising since she'd been sat there for at least half an hour. Brontay got to her feet. Perhaps Guinness the butler would be able to explain to her what was going on.

Jimi Hendrix, Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell appeared, thumping out a slow, charged particle, wordless rendition of *Hoochie Coochie Man*.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting, Alexandra. I was attending to one or two unexpected technical problems.'

MannyCapra had appeared from nowhere, his lemon Albertini suit so bright that Brontay couldn't credit how she'd missed his entrance. And that quiff to end all quiffs.

'Did I make you jump? I'm known for my sharp entrances as well as my brisk exits. It's become a habit over the years. I guess you'll just have to get used to it.'

'I have something for you, Mr MannyCapra,' said Brontay, not ready for her own high pitched and nervous tone. MannyCapra wagged a finger at her.

'Do sit back down, I'm not yet in the right frame of mind for Vasily's cheap stunts, amusing as they invariably are. And you are a guest in my home.'

Brontay re-seated herself in MannyCapra's leather easy chair.

It felt like arms would sprout and coil around her. *This is the endgame, Sasha. You just have to hold on.*

MannyCapra perched next to Brontay, leaning against his desk, fingers drumming on the mahogany, viewing his catch; cat and canary. He waved away The Jimi Hendrix Experience, who obediently vanished.

Brontay caught some eye contact, which sent a shiver down her spine. She'd met that intense, Arctic stare before. When? In what dimension? There it was again, that little pull in her stomach, which always happened before an episode. The lysergic suppressants they'd pumped her with should hold, but she was naked and ready to be devoured. It was all she could do to hold it all inside.

'I've got the code Manny, let's bargain.'

MannyCapra cocked an eyebrow, resting his chin between his thumb and forefinger.

'Let's bargain, yes,' he muttered gently, repeating in a resonant monotone. Brontay forced her memory to regurgitate the speech that the Cossack had made her rehearse.

'Er...contrary to what you might think...no, that's not it... contrary to what you might expect...' MannyCapra sat deadly still, allowing Brontay to stew in her own juices, '...er, my associates are not aligned with the aggressive takeover bid being planned by the Doctor's Congress.'

MannyCapra remained waxwork still, but his eyes betrayed an easy focus. This man was highly evolved. This man was the End of The World.

'We believe this is a frivolous and dangerous act, which will only serve to damage, both our markets.'

The C.E.O. nodded gently as she recited.

'My associates would like to forge a new understanding, trading our information for your assistance in helping us to build strong new markets. East of the Rhine.'

A rye grin spread across MannyCapra's tanned face.

'My god, Vasily Mikaelovich. Katia and Christian are going to be awfully pissed at you.'

Brontay continued her recital, imagining Vasily at her side.

'...and as an act of good faith, to prove our sincerity, we have a free piece of information for you.'

'Free information?' a little grin colonised MannyCapra's face, 'What could be better than free?'

'An employee of your organisation...'

'Ooh, hang on. Don't say anything, now let me guess. Who's been a bad boy then? Gray-son! Is it Grayson? Is it then?'

'Yes. The Chief Constable has...'

'Chief Constable my hairy arse...' said a new voice. Apsley Moran stood at the foot of the table in full Met uniform, grinning like a drunken Irish sailor, fists pumping, 'Just you wait until I catch up with that conniving little Yankee-Doodle-Dandy prick.'

## RENDEZVOUS

Chief Constable Grayson Suarez glanced at his Rolex. Twenty to eleven. One of his strongest suits, in his self-congratulatory inner spiel, was that he would always be the last to blink and know exactly the right moment to duck out of a fire-fight, but this shit smelled different. Strange Fruit. The thought of hijacking Montgomery's chopper and getting the bo diddly fuck out of Gotham had crossed his mind more than once while he was waiting. Hanging around was something he'd become rather accustomed to in all this London business, but the stakes had never been quite this high.

'What kind of time do you call this you snail-eating fuck?'

'Ten million apologies, mon ami.'

'Uh.'

'I am sorry if you are not impressed. What am I supposed to do?'

'Get in the fuckin' Dodge, mon fucking ami. We have an appointment.'

Steph Ingham counted herself from a privileged background. The right toys, the right tutors, the rights sciences, the right people. And she had gone easily as far as her illustrious political ancestry would merit. Her family had been everything and now that it was gone, long gone, she had done more than enough to let her conscience run easily into old age. Nothing to regret, nothing to live up to except the dying memories of once great people; saviours of the earth, saviours of souls.

The girl in the graphene bubble that was her cell had not emerged from her foetal position for the last hour, and for that hour Stephanie had stood watching her, sharing her tears. She didn't really have any idea what the female was weeping about, though a thousand things had run through her head.

No-one had shared knowledge of this woman's continued existence with her, but she had made it her business to find out via Cruz, who couldn't keep his big Texan trap shut for anyone. And there she was, in the basement, oblivious to her presence behind the four walls of mirrored crystal compound, captive again. Another victim of this insipid game between The Congress and the world's greatest ever Bully.

The woman was looking right at her, as if she could see Ingham, as if she could read her mind.

If she didn't help Maria Schwartz now, then everything else meant for nothing.

Nothing much was left of the old world memorials that used to haunt London's every square and corner. This was especially true in the Hyde Favelas. The people of the shanties had been dealt their hand by the greed and myopia of demagogues seeking to build their own empires. Imperial monuments spoke not of glory, freedom and democracy to them, but of slavery and subjugation.

In the light of this, one little statue in the old palace gardens remained in exceptional condition. This was probably because

its message said something completely different to the destroyed or vandalised tributes elsewhere. Barrie's eternal child played his pan pipes atop a plinth of tormented souls, cheating the void in everlasting youth. Now more than ever could Peter's message be understood; an endless childhood to ruin humankind.

Inside the Palace, Dr Katia Kutz drew on her panatela and gazed out from the roof garden balcony into the endless, purple sky. Those old monitors were doing strange things to her eyes. A lack of control in any situation bothered her, but this was maddening. It made sense to leave the professionals to do their work, that's what Brisco had said. But Brisco, though a genius in molecular biology, had as much intuition as some cossetted VoQue acidhead. Something was very wrong with this picture.

Notwithstanding, the solution would be along soon. Staying patient and putting on this act was the hardest part. She sighed into the night air.

'Penny for them, Kat?' She squeezed Brisco's hand as he joined her on the balcony. It was a warm gesture that did surprise him, though he had no idea what it really meant. Katia had known, loved, hated and worked with this man for time immemorial. The early days of their research had more to answer for than recorded history would ever credit and the fruits of their labours had come to this; an incestuous relationship between the earth and its children, a wonderful hell.

And Christian still thought it was all about politics.

'Katia? You're too quiet.'

'Oh, you know, getting a little tired in my old age.'

'Have you seen Professor Ingham? She's been away from the action for an hour now.'

Kutz shrugged and shook her head, still staring out into the shanty villages across East Park that were lit by oil, charcoal, wood or anything that would burn.

'Neither use nor ornament, that girl,' she muttered.

'We're all on the same side, here. You mustn't lose faith too easily.'

Christ, this man could be so stupid sometimes.

'Like you said, Christian. Leave it to the experts.'

'Absolutely. No one will let us down, trust me.'

Kutz moved his body to hers, kissing him gently on his lips.

'And what was that for?'

'Why don't you go back inside and see what's going on? I need a little time to myself, I'll be through in a moment.'

Brisco held her gaze for a long second and nodded. She searched in his eyes for some recognition, some acknowledgement that meant that they could still exist on the same wavelength, that they could still be an irresistible force together, even that they could share the same planet.

No? Didn't think so.

Love was not meant to last longer than a lifetime, the two of them were the first living proof of that in the history of the world. Brisco winked at her in a way she used to think was quite cute but was now idiotic. Replacing the baseball cap on his bald pate, he headed back into the monitor room.

Kutz flicked the butt of her cigar over the balcony and it spiralled in the air down to the courtyard below. She knew she was a cold, cynical and vain bitch and this whole mess was why. Revolutions; never about anything else than dogma and self-interest.

Mother Nature had plotted this course for her tired old soul, and she had taken revenge upon revenge for Katia's creations.

'You're going straight to hell, Katia Kutz.'

She shuddered against the cold and zipped up her leather coat. It felt snug against her tight, regenerated body.

For a nanosecond there some ethics had nearly crept in.



## BLOOD BROTHERS

'Sit down, Alexandra.'

Moran nodded towards the chair. MannyCapra chuffed his pipe and played a little Chopin on his Steinway as the old Pole himself looked on.

'Make yourself comfortable. It's so nice to meet young people. Isn't it, Apsley?'

Brontay looked across at Moran. He was quite a sinewy little man, but thin as a rake. There was not so much of him to sell his fearsome reputation, but she wasn't about to attempt any sudden moves.

'Do you want the deal or not?' she said.

MannyCapra and Moran exchanged conspiratorial smirks.

'No need to get tetchy, love. The boss was just showing a bit of regard for his latest recruit, weren't you boss?'

Brontay's heart began racing. Maybe they were buying it. MannyCapra circled Brontay. He pursed his lips and stroked his chin, deep in consideration, tapping out the hot ash from his pipe into the fireplace.

'What do you think, Apsley? Good marketing material?'

'The best.'

Particularly liked the directness, even when addressing her superiors. Has an idea and strives immediately for everyone's attention. The presentation was concise but effective. She's a natural. Isn't she a natural, Apsley?'

'Couldn't agree more boss.'

'How would you like to work in the media?'

MannyCapra's eyes widened, the expression of the eternal salesman returning easily to his face. Brontay gaped in disbelief.

'Well I...'

Before she could formulate an answer the boardroom disappeared, replaced immediately by a blackness in which the only light came from herself; hard light. What she'd failed to grasp was that she'd been inside something a thousand times more sinister than a mere dome since he'd stepped across the threshold of this estate. Brontay's stomach began to churn.

*'Sorry about that, it was all Apsley's idea. He's a weird old swine, but he knows his stuff.'*

MannyCapra's voice came from every direction, each word hitting her from different angles. The skewedly syncopated amplification exaggerated the baritone in his voice.

'No more games, then. Why don't you just take what you want and make it quick?'

Brontay shut her eyes. Keep calling his bluff, Vasily had told her.

*Fuck you, Vasily.*

For a second, the CEO appeared in front of her.

'Brave isn't she.'

MannyCapra had this way of addressing someone as the third person whilst staring them in the eye. He vanished again.

*'None of you, not even your learned friend Mr Nedvedev, really understand what's going on here, do you?'*

MannyCapra paused for an eternity, leaving Brontay to

writhe in her solitude.

*'Katia Kutz and Christian Brisco had conceived a theory about the cloning of adult humans years before even I was born. It just so happened that the moral authorities of bygone eras frowned upon such notions. They were right to do so, too. They weren't ready for such a discovery in the nineteen fifties. And they're not ready now, trust me.'*

Brontay shook her head and tried to move, but something was holding her down in the seat.

*'It was a cheap move spiking me.'*

MannyCapra's voice was now in her ear, she could feel his breath and smell old cologne.

*'You see, when Dr Brisco went back into this part of his research it was only after his success in other aspects of human genetics. Success can make a person blasé, Alexandra. Brisco and Kutz had stopped looking at the consequences of their actions and went ahead with their grand scheme after several abortive attempts to use their own research as a weapon against me. A touch pathetic, but there you go. They picked you out at random, screened you and bagged you for their labs. Nedvedev set you up in all this. He arranged the kidnap and, Alexandra, he arranged your escape. It was a numbers game, and you were the perfect patsy.'*

*'So?'*

*'He fooled the Congress into believing that you were dead, so he too could use you as a bait for my, ah, megalomania was the word you were thinking of as you rang my doorbell, was it not?'*

*'How do you expect me to believe that?'*

*'Not even Nedvedev knows your true value though, Alex. You see, old Brisco missed something absolutely crucial about you.'*

MannyCapra appeared, sitting on the other side of a chess table. His suit was now a sombre charcoal grey.

*'Mother nature provided enough clues as to what would happen if you cloned a person. You've never seen identical*

siblings? They are bonded by their emotions as well as their kinship. I've watched the relationship between you and her, Alex. You know I've been watching.'

*'What are you talking about?'*

MannyCapra shook his own head slowly.

*'Brisco did more than recreate the human body. He split the human essence. The soul.'* MannyCapra paused again, glaring back at her with eyes a wolfish sky blue. *'Vasily doesn't understand that Alex, but I do. Maria Schwartz does too.'*

Brontay inhaled sharply. It was the last thing she wanted to know. A tear rolled down her face. She tried to rationalise, assuming that this was all dementia brought on by a lysergic acid capsuled in atomic machines, targeting certain neurons. But MannyCapra continued.

*'And that, Alexandra, is the most saleable product of all time. More than any facelift, any electronic gizmo, any fancy piece of ass in the entertainment industry. This is true immortality in a bottle. Be in two places at once. More than two. Share the same dimensional plain, the same telepathic experiences. Magic? I don't think so. Science my darling, and just like Edison, like Jobs, Zuckerberg, Musk, it isn't the Scientists who are gifted with the imagination to apply their creations in the market. That job belongs to the visionaries.'*

MannyCapra disappeared and was instantly behind her, whispering in her ear.

*'I'll bet you've never even met Maria Schwartz. But you know her, don't you, Alexandra? You know her so well. We did that.'*

Brontay found herself nodding, unable to stop herself pinning for the hallucinations that had not long ago terrified her.

*'Do you realise what I am offering you, Alexandra?'*

Brontay's heart thumped even faster and her mouth felt like it had been caked with sand. All he could think of were the

Carroll Grabham

words of Comrade Vasily Nedvedev-Korsakov:

*DIABLO WILL ONE DAY OFFER YOU THE WORLD, THE MOON, THE STARS AND THE SEA. THEN HE WILL TAKE YOUR SOUL. AND YOU WILL SAY "YES".*

Brontay shut her eyes, smiled and spoke. The words felt disconnected from her in this black space, but they came from her mouth.

'Yes sir. I know very well what you are offering me.'

Her skin glowed a radioactive hue. Here it was.

And everything was finally on her shoulders.

His breath in her ear:

*'Alexandra, you're the clone.'*

**TRAIN KEPT A ROLLIN'**

The pain seared so suddenly in Brontay's head that she collapsed in her seat. She had suffered migraines before, particularly in and around the time of her incarceration, but nothing ever like this. Something was trying to tear her brain apart from the inside, and there had been no warning.

'Get her on the floor. She's having a seizure,' said Nedvedev. The northbound access train continued through the tunnel, the driver oblivious to events in the single carriage. It was possible to see vacuum tubes running adjacent to their slower progress, the faceless occupants shooing past at a ridiculous velocity to their aimless jobs in an oblivious blur. Squadjutants peered at the tableau from their seats, chattering between themselves but reluctant to question.

Scanlon held up a jab. Nedvedev shook his head.

'No, she can't have any more drugs. We don't know what kind of reaction it will have with the present chemistry of her brain. It could switch her off for good.'

Foam seeped from the corner of Brontay's mouth. Inside her

head were colours and dimensions never seen or felt, if only she could explain the serenity and beauty to her panicked custodians.

They had arrived and the house was speaking to her.

Her eyes opened wide and she smiled at Nedvedev, flummoxed at her sudden recovery.

'I'm the original,' she said.

-

Brisco was starting to lose his grip.

'What happened to the CCTV? And where the fucking hell are Steph and Katia? Where's Montgomery?' he snapped at the Technical Co-ordinator.

'They should have come out ten minutes ago,' said Cruz, looking at his watch.

'Then get me some pictures, Steve!'

'Heh, easy on the heat, capitan! I'm trying to bring down a network here, *the* network,' returned Cruz.

Nkono stood up from his logistics station, making his way out.

'I'm going for some fresh air.'

He closed the door gently behind him. He shook his head as he stalked the long corridor from the monitor room towards the stairs leading to all floors. It wasn't going well; people who should have been in the frame from the start were still not pulling their weight. For him it was a logistical nightmare trying to keep an operation together when certain elements insisted upon doing their own thing. Ingham had been his only ally on this, but now it looked like even she was away with the fairies. He'd seen her hanging around the isolation block earlier, so he'd take a look down there after he'd found Kutz.

Both had turned their communicators off, so he'd have a very good excuse to give Katia especially a piece of his mind when he caught up with her. Then after he would urge the Congress in the strongest possible terms to call this operation off and beat

a fast retreat to Siberia, before this folly ended all of them.

As he climbed the stairs Professor Nkono thought of how he only had himself to blame for hiding his light under a bushel for all this time. Despite his academic skill, his shyness had haunted him since childhood. Now he was suffering the consequences of others' egos.

'No more, Frank. It's time to take control,' he said to himself.

Nkono had been so wrapped up with adrenaline that he'd climbed one too many flights of stairs to the top floor. Brisco had said that he'd last seen Katia on the floor below, but maybe it was worth checking the penthouse. He heard a scrapping noise coming from outside. What was she doing on the roof? He opened the door a fraction, peeking outside. It didn't look like anybody was there.

'Katia? Are you out here?'

'Hi Frankie,' said the voice. It came from behind him.

-

'Well? I'm going to need some answers. Steve,' said Brisco, still rattled. Cruz wished he would stop hovering around his back.

'If the others are doing their job as they should be then. Look! The map's come back on-line. They're all in position! Ha! See that? Boom.'

Brisco chewed his nails. Cruz was pumped.

'There's Vasily in the second wave, right on top of MannyCapra now. We should get a link back with them, any second now. Then we got Montgomery heading out to flank them. Oh yea of little motherfucking faith.'

Brisco scratched his head.

'Yeah, well that doesn't explain where Ingham and Kutz have gone. If everyone had worn their trackers like I said in the first place.'

'You were saying, my love?' said Kutz. The monitor room door slammed behind her.

'This is going badly off schedule, Katia. You're being less than helpful,' said Brisco, not taking his eyes off the map screen.

Neither of the men saw Kutz produce the gun. It was an antique Luger pistol, kept in superb condition from the dark days of a wartime youth. Her oldest and most prized possession. Brisco had never cast his eyes on it until now, making a double take when he saw the fashioned Ruhr steel pointing at his face.

'So sorry about this, Christian. I can't work with you any longer.'

A chemical reaction in his stomach began to tell Christian Brisco that just over 325 years on this earth was about to come to an abrupt end. The last thought which entered his mind was that most of that time was spent with the woman holding the gun.

Bang. Blood, bone, brains. The end.

'Oh fuck, oh fuck no jesus wept fuck no you just...'

Kutz put herself between the twitching corpse and Cruz.

'Do I look happy about it, Steven?'

She cleaned some of the grease off the nozzle with a tissue. Then she replaced the weapon back in its holster.

'You murdering fuck.'

'Look, it's war. The old man had become a liability. Dithering this and that. And I didn't hit your precious monitors, did I?'

'Malhechorada cabróna.'

The door swung open behind her and Montgomery entered alongside Grayson Mortimer, the consummate triple agent.

'Oh good evening gentlemen. Bang on time.'

'You look like you could use a drink, fella,' said Deconstructed Man to Cruz, whose guts felt like they were about to drop out of his mouth, 'Ergh, and a change of clothes. Blood and brains don't come out well in the wash, believe me.'

'Who the fuck are you?'

'You seen my picture, boy. Ain't you?'

Deconstructed Man flashed his brand new china-white teeth and lit a smoke.

'Grayson, please take him downstairs and clean him up while we get rid of this.' she turned to Cruz, 'I'm running this operation from the ground now, Steven. I expect absolute co-operation from you. Remember that this is martial law.'

She pointed at Brisco's corpse. Cruz opened his mouth to protest.

'B...'

She placed a forefinger over his quivering lips.

'You heard the lady. Let's get you scrubbed up, Texmex,' said Deconstructed Man, pulling up Cruz from his seat and leading him out.

Montgomery held Kutz's hand.

'Suarez is an impressive boy. We should have brought him in sooner.'

'If you hadn't have put a hole in his face.'

She shrugged and lit up.

'The human race is a comedy of errors, Jean. That's why we'll never be perfect.'

They looked down at Brisco's body, taking a moment. Smoke still wafted from her pistol.

'All for the best, belle fleur. He didn't know this side of you. He would never have played the game our way.'

'We'll bury him properly when all this is over. As a hero.'

Kutz knew that probably wouldn't happen, but the words felt soothing.

-

Ten minutes later, the huge squadron of Met choppers strafed past the Favelas like a hundred black graphene vampire bats. It was now the middle of the night, and half a million Favelians had heard their agonising din and been roused from their shanties, all wondering if Armageddon had finally reached them.

Montgomery's Lynx Attack Helicopter was much older and had less sophisticated systems than the police machines, but it was like a comfortable pair of shoes. As he went through pre-flight, Kutz flicked on the com monitor on her side of the cockpit.

The Lynx kept well to the rear of the Squadron descending upon the Hampstead Homestead. Montgomery heard Deconstructed Man throwing up in his claustrophobic position beneath the co-pilot's chair. He grinned and put the craft into an even sharper angle of descent.

Kutz was awe-inspired by the huge squadron descending in formation on the white stone of MannyCapra's Estate. An archaic memory of Luftwaffe Stukas bombing Guernica stirred, from those days in the Condor Legion, her first commission just before she had met the intrepid and handsome Dr Christian Brisco. She smiled, gleeful and proud of her work, if a little crestfallen at the measure she had just taken. She took it all in for a few seconds, then her grin slowly evaporated as they came into land.

#### SAME AS THE OLD BOSS

The faint rumble of choppers told Nedvedev that the Congress weren't far behind and their deception had been discovered by now. The idiots were going to try to smoke MannyCapra out.

Brontay sighed and stirred, wrapped around his shoulders. They needed to wind this business up soon. Scanlon and Feather Blade took the lead and point as they entered what looked like the interior of the Sistene Chapel in the Vatican. The bust of Caesar reminded the Russian of where they had just arrived.

MannyCapra couldn't be far away now, Vasily could smell the all-too-familiar musk of his ego.

'My dear Vasily Mikaelovich. And I see you've brought friends.'

True to form, the pantomime villain was behind them, dressed as the Pope. Nedvedev wasn't playing.

'We have one down here, MannyCapra. If we don't get on with this soon she will die and so will your big fucking plan.'

Nedvedev stared through his old boss, who returned to his

more staid appearance. They were now in New York Public Library. Scanlon and F.B. rocking on their heels at the shifts.

MannyCapra motioned to Guinness, who listened as he whispered into his ear, nodded politely and made his way from the library.

'Guinness will arrange a vial of the proto-subject's blood plasma to be taken. The material in the plasma should offer your lady a little more time. In the meantime I suggest that we retire to the boardroom in preparation for our little gathering.'

Nedvedev nodded and the men followed MannyCapra into the boardroom. Scanlon took his wing.

'I tell you, if that was MannyCapra in the flesh then he'd be fried chicken by now.' The Russian nodded, scanning the walls and ceilings as they walked.

'Okay boys. Here we go,' said Kutz, rubbing her hands together.

'What now?' said Deconstructed Man. All he could see was trees and a perimeter wall.

'Get down!' yelled Montgomery. The three jumped behind the lip of earth between the cylinder and the road. The explosion was magnificent, its aftershock music to their ears. After that, there wouldn't be a cockroach left standing in the place. It was all MannyCapra deserved for kicking him in the teeth, putting his faith in others. Montgomery hugged and kissed Katia, even shook hands with Deconstructed Man. The three were so beside themselves with joy that they didn't notice the headlights of MannyCapra's Adler until it was too late to run for cover.

'Jean...' said Kutz.

'I am so happy, darling, so happy.'

'Jean. Shut the fuck up and look over there.'

The Adler pulled up right next to the road side. The mini dome was in place but in clear mode. MannyCapra popped his

head up, grinning at his old friends.

Deconstructed Man unloaded three rounds from his .357 Magnum at the dome. They pinged like split peas fired from a straw.

Kutz leered at Montgomery.

'Cruz? Are you picking me up?'

'I hit the kill switch,' said Montgomery, 'He's dead, Katia. The worm failed.'

Suarez had climbed on the hood of the Adler and was firing point blank. MannyCapra feigned getting hit by the shots.

'Do you really think that's going to help the situation? Stupid Yankee,' said a shocked and desperate Kutz. This incurred the American's wrath even more.

'If I hadn't listened to your twenty buck granny whore, Frenchie, I'd be in fuckin' Tahiti by now.'

Deconstructed Man's pupils were dark and livid. He raised his gun.

'If you don't pack that in now lad, I'll take it out on your arse!'

Only one voice that he'd ever known could have stopped him in his tracks at that moment. His anger flipped over to helpless fear as he saw that psycho among psychos Moran, staring at him like a demented, vengeful ghost from the Adler in the place of MannyCapra. The boss was back. Deconstructed Man's arms then turned to rubber and he dropped his prized pistol in a dirty puddle by the roadside.

'Oh fuck.'

Guinness was waiting for them on the porch. There was no trace of an explosion on the estate, nor even any evidence of shock damage. The choppers had disappeared from the sky. MannyCapra strode along next to Kutz, who looked like she'd aged twenty years in the last five minutes.

'I shall leave you in the capable hands of my butler, dearest. Perhaps...' he looked up and down at her, 'perhaps you'd like to

freshen up before we begin?'

Kutz didn't even seem to register.

'Very well. See you later.'

Deconstructed Man had pulled himself together much faster than the other two. He chased after MannyCapra like a loyal spaniel.

'Manny! MannyCapra please. Mr MannyCapra, look, I'd like to talk this over with you.'

MannyCapra didn't chop his stride but smiled gently.

'Later, Grayson. Please.'

'But look, I wanted to...' Deconstructed Man felt the palm of Moran's huge hand cuff him around the base of his skull. His breath smelt like sewage.

'You heard the chief. Now get in there you little gobshite!'

Kutz remembered this place well. It was now cleaner, a little less grandiose and far more intimidating than when she'd worked for I.A. She felt the coward in her bubbling up to the surface and the urge to throw herself at his mercy was strong. But then MannyCapra had a particular dislike of what he called the toxic twins of desperation and sycophancy and he had a particularly nasty way of dealing with its exponents. But he had always been an ideas man. A man who would soak up the ingenuity of others and market it for public consumption. A man who would never let a little emotion like the urge to retaliate get in the way a business deal. He would listen to her. He was probably listening now.

As long as she didn't panic, and she felt very sure that MannyCapra would try to crack her like he would the others, there could be a way out of this. With Brisco dead, MannyCapra needed her that little bit more. For what though? She just had to figure that bit out. She figured fast.

They approached the oak panelled doors, the very centre of the largest global communications and entertainment organisation since Mother Nature had started it all.

Deconstructed Man reached around in his pocket and found a mangy soft pack of Luckies. He pulled out the last one, lighting it with a shaky hand.

Guinness reached over and pulled the cigarette from his mouth, shaking his wizened, cured old head at his indiscretion.

'Smoking. Is not permitted, Sir.'

Guinness turned to Kutz, smiling tightly.

'Would ma'am care to use one of the guest rooms to change?'

'That would be nice. Where's Jean?'

'Getting fed to the sharks,' cracked Deconstructed Man. Moran cuffed him over the head again.

'Monsieur Montgomery is preparing for dinner. If it so pleases you, ma'am, your fellow guests are waiting.'

The Frenchman wondered what had brought him here. Unlike the others, he'd always worked for himself, so this was all new to him. Perhaps he should have thought of that before launching guided missiles at the place.

It was an anteroom, Louis Quinze. MannyCapra looked like a fop of the court.

'There's a fresh bottle of nouveau beaujolais on your table. Perhaps you would like to try some?' said MannyCapra.

'No thank you. I hate cheap wine,' he replied, taking the seat.

Guinness placed the salver in front of him. Montgomery crossed his arms, glaring at the butler.

'Would sir care to dine now?'

'Where's Katia? Where are the others?'

MannyCapra's voice came from Guinness' mouth.

'I thought you deserved a special treat this evening, Jean. Something personal, something close to your heart.'

Montgomery flinched and span round to face MannyCapra, who now looked like Emperor Nero.

'What?'

'Enjoy your meal, Monsieur,' said MannyCapra.



Guinness raised the silver lid to present the dish. Montgomery's mouth dropped like a gaping fish in a net.

The mortar shells fired on his orders at the compound not twenty minutes earlier were laid flat on the silver, with a crisp Caesar salad, two hot baguettes, a bowl of crème fraîche and a small card emblazoned with the International Activities logo. Montgomery picked it up the card.

*Cher Jean,*

*I think that this is a dish best served cold, would you not agree?*

*Eternally Yours,*

MC x

MannyCapra raised his fist, giving the thumbs down, all the fires of hell in his grinning, crimson eyes.

A huge wave lashed against the side of the boat, tossing it across the water like a cork in a puddle.

'Hoist the north cones, Mr Christian! Keep it steady, sailor!'

Charles Laughton as Captain Bligh stood above the First Mate, who had the wheel of the vessel and had been charged with the unenviable task of guiding it around the Cape of Africa and into the Atlantic Ocean.

Feather Blade's eyes widened when he saw the captain and the layout of a slaver ship.

'Motherfucking titty fuckers.'

Scanlon leaned in.

'MannyCapra's idea of a joke, brother.'

'Sick.'

The chains were way too small for his thick wrists and he could feel them cutting the circulation off already.

'Not my idea, for sure.'

He glanced around the brig, which had been left open to the chilly, damp weather. He could spot a huge bank of black

clouds in the near distance. A cloying odour of shit, piss and gangrene filled the air; the pungent aroma of death and dying. There must have been two hundred people down there crammed into a space that could barely take forty. Scanlon could see that many have succumbed already. There were a few moans and whimpers, but the saddest sight of all was that these people looked resigned to their ghastly fate. This was fantasy, but the sights and smells seemed authentic enough, the birth of a tragedy spanning generations.

The man opposite had dreads that would make the great man himself jealous. He was grinning toothily back at Feather Blade, like he'd been listening to their conversation. Scanlon eyed the man. His face was familiar, but he was sure that he had nothing to do with MannyCapra.

'What you peekin' at, Coconut? I'm not in the mood for weirdness.'

'Your friend's absolutely right when he talks about educating yourself, Richard.'

Both men shared the same gesture when they heard him. Then Scanlon scratched his chin, a frown taking over his face.

'I wouldn't call him that, man. It makes him upset,' said Scanlon. But F.B. wasn't upset, he was engrossed, as if he'd suddenly recognised something.

'My apologies. But it's not the names that are important. It's the people.'

'I know you, man.'

A bubble of resentment expanded in F.B.'s belly.

'Happenstance you do.'

'Who? Is it him? Is it really him?' said F.B.

'Of course it's not, brother. It's that white daemon playing tricks with us again.'

'Mark you, dear brother Duffy, but I cannot agree.'

Scanlon glanced around at the ultimate insult. He sucked his teeth, wondering how he'd allowed a machine to spook him

this badly.

'I am here for one reason and one reason only, Duffy, and that is to tell you this: love your fellow man, but fight on, and fight with your mind, your soul, and not with your knives and guns. They are too easily turned back on you.'

Scanlon remained stone-faced, but a great shiver had run down his spine and his throat was dry.

'Are you the man that you claim to be? That's all I wanna know,' he whispered hoarsely.

'I am the man in your hearts and minds, that is my only claim. The rest really is an illusion. But what does that matter? Life is a dream. I hope that notion will help you through this reckoning.'

The man with the dreads grinned again and rattled his chains as they lowered a meal of gruel and jerked meat down into the brig. Duffy Scanlon closed his eyes and, for the first time since he was a small child in the Projects, he said a prayer.

'Allow me to run you both home, sirs.'

In the blink of an eye, they found themselves seated in MannyCapra's Adler, and their driver was a clean cut version of the same man who they'd been sat with in the brig seconds earlier. He placed a cap on his head and wound up the hydraulic partition between the chauffeur and the passenger section. Vasily Nedvedev-Korsakov poured his fellow passengers generous measures of MannyCapra's McCallan.

'Na zdroviye!' he slugged the liquid Russian style and poured himself another.

'Vasily, what happened?' muttered Scanlon, still digesting his own continued existence.

Vasily shrugged.

'Steve Cruz's worm has done a fine job. I'm glad he was in with us, because he may well have made the difference.'

'Wait a minute, Roosky, didn't you hear me? That shit was on the line. We've just been speaking to The Almighty. And now

God is driving this car.'

'It's not my place to doubt you, Duffy.'

He poured himself another refill. Nedvedev looked drained of all spirit as the car sped out of the estate.

'Looks like you ain't had such an enlightening experience,' muttered Scanlon.

The Cossack grabbed his hand tiredly.

'I got what I wanted. At a price.'

He sunk back again in his chair and demolished another whisky, patting the seats.

'Threw in the car though.'

'Brontay?'

Vasily saluted tiredly.

'Yeah. One woman for one country. That was the deal. I've betrayed her and now she's alone with that monster.'

Scanlon stared through his old partner, wanting to be direct, weary of this new Vasily. They were in a dome, after all.

'What now?'

Vasily shrugged and sighed.

'A wife, children, a country house, a mistress, divorce, alimony, alcoholism, death. How we Russians like to be in charge of our own destiny.'

Scanlon shook his head.

'If you lose faith, we're all dead, Vasily.'

The Russian smiled.

'All out of my hands now.'

The Adler headed south-east towards a clear Winter dawn. Vasily removed his flak jacket. Scanlon knew that if Vasily ever said such words, he'd have to believe him.

## PASTRAMI-ON-RYE

The ground rumbled and vibrated as a Subway train ploughed on beneath the street.

Valtaro's Bar and Grill on the Upper West Side of Manhattan Island was known far and wide for being most select sandwich emporium in the whole of New York City. This was for a number of reasons, but chiefly because it was simply *the* place to see and be seen at the time. Such was the chief occupation of the dedicated, professional socialite. The food and the ambience was at its best during the height of summer, when an outdoor seat reservation was as tough to get hold of as courtside tickets for the Knicks.

A sweltering, mid-August afternoon had brought out the usual mix of celebrity, nouveau-riche, executive, Eurotrash and legitimised mafia clientele. Deconstructed Man put his present hardship behind him for a moment and glanced around at the immaculate detail of the illusion. The piped dance music of cars and the overheating of tempers in the traffic when it would be quicker to walk, masochistic despatch riders on push bikes

flashing past, buskers, street artists.

Across the block, a short-assed Asian guy who'd been driving his taxi a little too close to the rear fender of a Greyhound bus was being separated from the indignant bus driver by a pasty-faced young cop. A collection of local high school jocks in the back of the bus were mooning and shouting obscenities at passers-by while their supervisor was in the street trying to arbitrate the road rage. Horns beeped, people yelled at each other, queens and punks mingled and hustlers hustled. It was toxic, dangerous and captured the angst and chaos of a unique form of downtown madness, right down to that sonorous buzz of the beautiful city that never slept. His pastrami on rye was also every bit as delicious as Signor Valtaro had always made, better than anything in goddamn London. He had missed it like a lost limb. It was the taste of home and it was *real*.

As he ate, Deconstructed Man spotted an even tastier morsel heading towards his table.

Her tall, tanned and stunningly graceful body was offset by a tight athleticism that, given the opportunity, would make lesser men sacrifice a testicle for an hour with her. She wore a lilac summer dress that accentuated her pert, feline curves; a simple auburn bob revealing a creamy, delicate, innocent, oval face which would have made his appetite for sin ravenous by the time she reached his table. The deep, hazel eyes that now stared glassily across at him belonged to non-other than Katia Kutz.

'Is this what you mean by dinner? I like your style,' said Deconstructed Man to the heavens.

'What you talking about, Teddy?' Kutz had travelled from Warsaw to Brooklyn in five words. Deconstructed Man sipped his cappuccino and grinned back at her.

'Don't stare at me like that.'

She began to look embarrassed.

'Who's Teddy when he's at home?'

The bimbo obviously had Kutz's head and body but MannyCapra had scrimped on the brain matter.

She looked vexed by something.

Deconstructed Man didn't get a chance to speak. She pointed over to the bar section of the restaurant.

'You know who we got sitting over there? We got the Mayor of New York himself!'

'Is that right?'

'I don't want to make you jealous baby but...' she chewed gum like a prize heffer, leaning over towards him to reveal her cleavage, 'Well, I was walking out of the restroom over there and I see him lookin' at me up and down, you know, giving me his penis eyes. Anyways, I makes past his table like I don't see him then he reaches over and pinches my ass.'

Deconstructed Man tried to focus, to contemplate a way out of the maze, but it was all too real. No traces of hard light, no telltale bugs in the render. Too fuckin' perfect.

The Kutz lookalike was rattling on like a machine gun.

'...and then I slapped his fuckin' ugly city hall face! He comes over all nasty, trashing me as a Polack slut. I mean, him trying to stereotype me! Huh... I tell him to keep his dirty fat hands off. Mayor or no fuckin' mayor he's gonna be spittin' teeth over the fuckin' sidewalk! Bastard don't know who you are.'

'And who am I, darlin?'

She smiled at him before returning her backwards sneer.

He shot a glance over to the fat cat Mayor, to the other guests, then to the exit.

'Ha! Did you see his face. See then I say to him that my boyfriend's in this restaurant, see. My boyfriend's name is Teddy Di Camorra, and Teddy's daddy is...' Deconstructed Man dropped his sandwich.

'Ricardo Alphonse Di Camorra. The last godfather of New York.'

He now had an idea what this could be all about. He hoped

that he was wrong.

'Hoy, you okay baby? You look like you seen a ghost.'

'I... I gotta take a shit, honey.'

Deconstructed Man almost leapt out of his seat, put his shades on and took a long look around. He then headed downstairs.

'Uh...okay.'

She crossed her legs and smoked.

-

'Mr MannyCapra... I know you're listening and.... well I know things got put outta perspective and all by our little misunderstanding but this isn't the way forward. I think I now see the error of my ways and, with your help. Maybe I could still be an asset to this company. How about it? Mr MannyCapra? I know you're listening, watching, whatever.'

Deconstructed Man began to sob at his reflection. He thought of the kneecaps he had smashed, testicles that he'd burnt with acid, faces destroyed, eyes gouged, skin flayed, fingers removed, heads crushed...

He recalled his brief relationship with a certain Teddy Di Camorra. It had culminated in a highly illegal arrest after which Lieutenant Deconstructed Man had performed all the above standard nasties and more. All on behalf of an ambitious Chinese syndicate that had begun to rival Di Camorra Senior's status as New York's last Mr Big and paid 100 times better than the NYPD. That was just before the whole shithouse fell in on the Eastern Seaboard.

The figure staring back at him in the rest room mirror was shorter and fatter. His paunch, slicked back hair, cream linen Albertini suit, crisp white Müller shirt, designer goatee and cocky gait completed a picture of thirtysomething mafioso at leisure. Too bad that he wasn't carrying. Teddy Di Camorra's face was glazed with sweat and lined with tension. The realisation stuck in his throat: Di Camorra's son was his last

unofficial assignment before he'd left New York with a massive price on his head and an even more streamlined attitude towards law and order.

Terence Di Camorra had been in this very same Upper West Side restaurant when he was picked up and subjected to Lieutenant Suarez's singular powers of persuasion, which on this occasion had gone a little too far. No cell, no reading of rights, no NYPD. Just Deconstructed Man, his favourite out of town lock-up, a box of powertools and *the squealer* as he would later fondly remember him.

'Take it from me,' said the mirror image, 'you're a master in action, Gracie. A real freakin' master.'

'MannyCapra!' yelled his hoarse voice, 'MannyCapra! You can't know about this... it's all... in... the... past... MannyCapra!'

The restroom door was kicked in with enough force to take it clean off the hinges. Apsley Moran stepped over the door, wearing exactly the same lilac dress as the girl he'd just been sitting with. Moran promptly rapped him across the jaw with his pistol, loosening a couple of molars in the process. He hit the floor, cringing into a foetal position.

'That's him. That's the fucking rat we're looking for, boss,' said Moran in her voice, 'I didn't hurt you now baby, did I? Did I?'

A clean-cut, fitter and ten years younger Grayson Suarez cocked the safety on his .38, shoving the barrel into Di Camorra's mouth before he could protest. The events of that afternoon returned to him in all the gruesome clarity. It had been the turning point in his life, when his new alliance with the corporate underworld had pushed him into his first mercenary kill. His methods had been slightly less clinical in those days. Altogether clumsier. *Altogether messier.*

'Heya Teddy. Let's go for a ride.'

Looking back at his own face, he tried one last line as the gun was pulled from his mouth, slobbering saliva everywhere.

'Grayson, look at me. I'm you. Don't do this. I am you!'

The younger cop's bloodlust was in full flow and Deconstructed Man knew it, felt it. He felt the cold steel of his cuffs, knowing exactly what kind of ride he was in for.

## BLINK

'Do you mind awfully if I smoke?' she asked. Guinness stooped over to MannyCapra's George III bow front corner cupboard that overlooked the boardroom, returning with an ashtray.

'Very kind. Thank you.'

She lit a panatela. The ashtray was made from solid silver and nickel plate. She noticed an engraving :

*TO SAUL, A LOYAL FRIEND AND A GENIUS OF MEDIA,  
BEST WISHES ON YOUR 80TH BIRTHDAY  
- MANNY*

He even took his gifts back.

'Will that be everything, ma'am?'

'Er, yes. Thank you.'

She thought of Jean. However much deep shit she was in, he would get it too, whatever *it* was. She'd never really loved Brisco. With Brisco it was his genius, the science that had always mattered. Even that eventually ran out of steam; to the point that she'd taken over the research herself towards the end. With Jean it was his soul, his warmth, his passion for the fight.

In her profession death was very much part of life, so Brisco's execution was an overstatement of the faint-hearted and the superstitious. If Brisco had died for Jean, Kutz lived for him.

Where was he? She craved to beg for this information, but the tricentennial inside her interceded again.

Be. Cool.

That same voice in her head gave her an idea. Paranoia was the enemy at this stage, and it was screaming something at her: Jean had disappeared only minutes ago to prepare for dinner as that ridiculous hologram had put it. But why had she been left here alone? This house could deflect bombs and fake explosions, tap the living human network like a database, producing sensations that could fool the five senses and tantalise the sixth. It seemed to her that MannyCapra had more planned tonight than a mere dinner party. It took a nano-second, a single blink, for Katia Kutz to discover that her paranoia had led her in the right direction.

The bunker shook with the impact of a nearby explosion. Kutz glanced around the room. A few tables had been blown over, but it was otherwise undamaged.

'Very droll, Manny. Don't forget, I made all this possible for you.'

More than four average lifespans ago this place had been the Operations Centre of the Condor Legion. From the musty bunkers in the *unterwelten* of East Berlin, a thirtysomething Katerina Kutz had conducted covert operations. It was impossible for a female to rise to her seniority of command in the regular service, but there was nothing regular about Obersturmbannführer Kutz.

A PhD in Human Biology from Imperial College had naturally been a prerequisite. What had ultimately swung it for the Führer's Office was the fact that before the war she had spent one year as an undergraduate student at the ancient University of Heidelberg. The key detail was that she'd

attended a series of lectures by a certain Doctor Jozef Mengele, a character whose research very much interested the spooks of the Condor.

Kutz chuckled to herself. This amazing machine of Manny's was wonderful for uncovering life's little ironies. The Oberführer clicked his heels nervously.

'So sorry to have kept you waiting, Obersturmbannführer. The board will see you now.'

'Very good, Sergeant.'

She followed him into the warren from the Ops Centre.

The corridors were awash with junior staff pushing paper, that smell of stale tobacco, damp walls and Coco Chanel. Kutz noticed that although times were obviously tough, she had been affluent enough to afford proper nylons and fashions by Nina Ricci. She reminded herself again that all this didn't have a shred of reality attached to it.

Room 37 was, from memory, the office and adhoc laboratory of her future late husband and it was to here that the Staff Sergeant had taken her.

Her first sight was of two large portraits hanging above an ornamental hearth. One was, presumably, an image of a reinstated King Edward VIII of England. The other, which impressed her much more, was a painting of Herr Jozef Goebbels before a giant Swastika in the shape of a Nazi Empire that stretched from the Urals to the Western coast of Morocco. It bore the inscription *Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer*.

'Zieg Heil, Katerina. I have missed you.'

He was an older man than she had expected, dressed in a Field Marshal's uniform bearing the Iron Cross amongst a gallery of gongs. Beside him sat a thick-set man in his mid-forties sporting a jet black moustache and a civilian suit.

'Hello Christian. Why go to all this trouble to surprise me when I knew it was going to be you?'

Brisco chuckled, replacing his monocle.

'I'm not the surprise, darling. Neither is Doctor Mengele here.'

'What?'

A frown invaded her face.

'Do try to use that imagination of yours, girl. Two men that you betrayed sit before you. Your learned friend and colleague Mengele here got off lightly. He could have spent the rest of his life with you, I did.'

She retained eye contact with Brisco. A smirk spread across her face, followed by a hoarse laugh.

'What's so funny?' said Mengele.

'A mechanical illusion is getting bitter with me. This machine really is wonderful in its detail. As for you, mister, let me inform you that Dr Mengele looked nothing like that.'

'Memory is fallible,' agreed Brisco earnestly.

Kutz crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. MannyCapra's voice emanated from Mengele.

'We eradicated disease together. Cleaned up the genome. Transformed how the human race operated on this planet. And you just had to want more. Didn't you.'

Kutz tried not to flinch, working out the endgame.

'This is getting a little long in the tooth. Manny, get me out of here so we can discuss this like sensible adults. Look, I apologise for my temerity. Of course I do, as you clearly have the upper hand. But that is the nature of the game, we both know that. If we clear the air, you'll see the opportunity we have here.'

No reply was ventured. Only the rhythm of the staff clock accompanied her rapid breath. She sucked in the smoke from her cigarette.

'Manny, it is just business. Our business.'

The two men had their arms crossed and were staring at her, but she didn't give a tuppenny scheiße about them.

'You wouldn't believe some of the ground we've covered in

the last few years. The market potential is staggering. You let Moran back into the fold, why not me?' she was aware that her pitch was speeding up, but she was on a roll, 'Don't let that male ego get in the way of a great opportunity. You can have all the gadgets that you want, but what people really want is security. The knowledge that they can live for another fifty years without a wrinkle, without disease or disability. I'm willing to help you put these ideas on the production line, man. Think about it. No more cheap cosmetic surgery. Your customers get the real thing.'

She paused for breath, retaining her composed smile.

'Come on, Manny. You know how I tire of games. And I hate costume dramas.'

The phone on Brisco's table rang. Her future late ex-husband raised a monocled-eyebrow and picked up the receiver.

'Yes sir!' A sycophantic smile oozed across his wrinkled face.

'For you.'

She took the receiver.

*'Don't take this personally, Katia, but there was one flaw in your argument. One unmistakable flaw. That unfortunately makes me unable to re-employ you.'*

'What?'

Mengele had changed to MannyCapra, his feet slung up on the table.

'Games, my dear. Games are what it is all about. If you tire of games, then you are obviously the wrong person for the job. No one wants to live forever, that would take all the fun out of it. Look at me, for instance.'

Blue veins pulsed in her forehead, her heart ready to explode.

'I'm talking mass-production. I'm talking about... About a true master race.'

MannyCapra was gone, leaving her alone.

*'I'm sorry darling, but I have to be brutal with some decisions.'*

*Good day, Katia.'*

The line went dead.

'Manny! Manny!' she put the receiver down, 'Manny, look I didn't mean to say that....' Her Luger pistol, the very weapon that she'd used to shoot Brisco, slid across the desk by some invisible hand. Kutz looked down at it.

'Don't be so ridiculous,' she sneered.

Brisco placed a hand on her shoulder, the version of him that she'd just murdered. He picked up the gun and put it in her hand.

'Believe me, darling. You are going to need this.'

The door to the lab swung open.

'Dr Kruger Smits!' said Brisco, back in uniform, 'I trust you have completed the autopsy?'

'Yes Doctor,' replied Hail Vanity, dressed in surgical robes and very much in the female role. The two stood up.

'Perhaps you would like to see our humble laboratory, Kleine Katia?'

Brisco smiled kindly at her. This was much more like her original mentor, right down to the pet name.

'After you,' he said. And they were there in an instant.

The lab was quaint and rather impressive in its historical detail; to the extent that she could make a direct comparison of the leaps that genetic technology had taken since that war. Petrie dishes, microscopes and test tubes littered the surfaces. All crude and obsolete in modern research, but the centre of attention was beneath a white sheet on a metal slab.

Kutz looked at her reflection in a mirror above the sinks. Tears had welled up in her eyes. She had a feeling about this surprise too.

Brisco pulled back the sheets.

The mirror told her everything about what she had done, and where she was going as a result of her actions. A little girl with blonde ringlets shared her reflection, a garland in her hair,



Carroll Grabham

wearing a Mayday dress offered the ageing reflection a posy of daffodils. She danced around her, singing the German national anthem to herself. The old version, of course. On the slab rested the remains of the only man she had even loved, unrecognisable apart from his head. It must have been blown clear on detonation and still bore an expression of surprise, perched on his chest.

'No life without death,' mumbled Montgomery's head, his brown eyes beaming at Kutz.

Dr Katia Kutz then held her prized Luger up with a frail, blackened hand and pulled the trigger.

## 49

### BIRTH

17th November 2217 6:38 am. Earlier.

The ground beneath them rumbled and shook for a moment, then settled like a flatulent corpse.

'Let's put all of this in perspective shall we?'

Alexandra Brontay reached inside her dinner suit, producing a silver case. Opening it, she took out a filterless French cigarette which she tapped against the lid and lit with an antique Onyx zippo. She was sitting at the opposite end of the boardroom table to the founder and C.E.O. of International Activities PLC.

MannyCapra addressed a board of one; his new Vice President.

'The bible states that the earth took six days to create. The good book took two thousand years to write and yet it still makes this claim. This is the best-selling book of all time, and even to this day there are people can't get enough of it. So. There has to be some truth in something so popular, hasn't

there?’

MannyCapra smiled at his charge in her High VoQue new look.

‘Allow me to explain something to you, Alexandra: there is no truth. Truth is as man-made as The Titanic, and about as durable. Something will always, ultimately, shoot down what you perceive is truth, because we are imperfect, and the imperfect is incapable of perfection, only the illusion of perfection.’

MannyCapra examined his fingernails.

SIR?

‘Alpha, can’t you see that I’m in a meeting?’

SIR, IT IS A MATTER OF THE UTMOST URGENCY. THE TELEPHONE WILL NEED TO BE USED.

MannyCapra flinched. Brontay was suddenly aware of herself, sucking on the Gauloise.

‘Right. Excuse me,’ he reached below the table, picking up a quaint looking black device with a ridiculous looking microphone set attached to its body.

‘Sorry Alex. Bear with me, will you. Guinness, take Alex for a coffee will you?’

‘Certainly sir...’

‘I’ll be ten minutes.’

Brontay returned in the allotted ten minutes, thinking about nothing but the meaning of MannyCapra’s words. This all felt like just another dream, but the world could end right here and now.

‘Alexandra. My apologies for that. I have insisted upon no more interruptions.’

‘That’s quite alright, Manny.’

‘Right, yes. Ah... humility before nature was it? Right.’ He adjusted his cufflinks and continued, ‘If you believe the latest theories, the earth goes through four and a half billion years of

evolution to make us. There must be a logic in all of this, we ask ourselves. Billions of years of biological juxtaposition and fine tuning to create a beast which does little else but shit, piss, fart, fuck and have personality crises.’

‘There must be a pattern in all of this. Yeah. That was probably the first human intellectual thought, and I’ll lay you a pound to a penny it was a woman who had that thought. Women are a stage ahead of men in the evolutionary chain. It’s another theory of mine, a delightful aside.’

‘So why take all this time to get to us? Four and a half billion years so we can get blow jobs off machines which are better than the real thing. Four and a half billion years so we can poison the food we eat to make it look better. Four and half billion years so we can fill our heads with so much shit and to live longer so we can carry on filling our heads with more shit.’

MannyCapra sucked in the air and smiled, hands gripping the head of the table. The sweat had begun to seep from his brow. He’d struck Brontay as an even-tempered man for someone who was supposed to be this crazed megalomaniac, this Über-Howard Hughes, but now he was getting closer to the ranting God that she’d come to expect. MannyCapra had led her to the light, and he was guiding her through to the other side into his world. It was time to raise it all a notch to *high* drama. MannyCapra steadied himself, grinning at his new Vice President. He looked like he was about to break into song.

‘So why? Why bother at all? Well?’

He leant back against the Dali mirror, rattling his fingers against the glass.

‘Here’s another theory for you. Maybe all we are here for is to reek as much havoc, do as much damage to our homes, forget about our children, forget about our families, forget about having friends. Why? Because we’re having so much fucking fun, and we’re gonna keep having fun as long as we’re breathing. Nothing gets in the way because we’ve worked for

this as a species so we deserve it. We deserve to be a race of teenagers. We've fucked the world, destroyed our predators, overcome every microbe, every cancer, every virus that has been thrown at us and still survived. That's the motivation; ultra capitalism. Own your own world in your spare time, without leaving the comfort of your living dome. Live for the moment. Live for fun. Nothing is more important. It is in our fundamental, evolutionary programming to do so.

'That's the stage we have got to now. But, my darling...' that grin spread across his face again, 'It's just a big fucking lie like all the other lies. Work for others so you can play for yourself. That is the only fulfilment you need. But it is a lie that 70% of the population loves to believe. Seventy percent. It is also a lie that I love to believe and it is a lie that you MUST believe.'

'Yes.'

'Do you believe, Alexandra?!

'Yes!'

MannyCapra clapped his hands together and sighed. He returned to his chair.

'You see, every eighty million years or so the earth throws something up, something a just little bit nasty, to destroy and clear most of the plant and animal life so that something new and better may take up this space. Call it an asteroid, an atmospheric change, a gap in the food chain or a plague. Call it the human race, Alexandra, and the best thing about us is that nature designed us to find better, quicker ways of clearing away the unwanted life and then self-destruct; all under our own steam. User-friendly waste disposal on Earth, so efficient we even put ourselves in the trash. Fuck you nature. Fuck you.'

'Oh yes. First thing we do is overpopulate, like in the last millennium, and the whole thing nearly goes up in smoke. This city was a few dud detonators away from oblivion.'

'So the chosen few have another try, Alex. We delve into the textbook of nature to find that there's another way to get a kick

out of life at the expense of other organisms. To never die. Somewhere back in that primordial ooze the first bacteria reproduced by swapping their DNA. What a tremendous idea, thought man. Forget about making babies I want to have my own life again and again and again and again. And if we can do it, eventually after all the moral-crusaders and the naysayers themselves die out, we will do it. We have done it.'

MannyCapra poured cognacs and continued. Brontay gulped it down in one, savouring the warmth on her gullet.

'But that's still not good enough. Remember, we're doing the clearing work here, so we have to be efficient. So we go back and bend the rules again. We learn how to reproduce laterally. Cloning is a misleading way of putting it. It is not so much a copy of the body as an extension of the soul. Why have just the one life to enjoy when you can have ten? It's obscene and it's beautiful Alexandra. And that is the way Mother Nature intended it to be. Otherwise she wouldn't have given us a shot. Have some more.'

Again MannyCapra poured, again Brontay listened.

She had to listen. It was as if someone had pulled out any inkling of peril or trepidation from her mind, leaving this crystal clear image presented to her by MannyCapra.

'Someone else comes up with the ideas, we make those ideas happen. Truth or principles don't come into it, because like I say they really mean nothing, whatever they say. If anything can be done, it will be done. Then it is sold, and that, finally, is where we come in. That's just the way it is. You must know this before you take the final step and join me. Do you understand?'

MannyCapra stopped pacing around and took his seat at the head of the table. For a moment something wavered in Brontay's resolve, like the faintest of lights flickering in the darkest of tunnels. It died again. Now she was ready.

'Let's do this,' she said in a dry whisper.

### THE TSAR OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

Vasily Mikaelovich Nedvedev-Korsakov. A proud name for a proud Russian. Maybe his patriotism was all that had kept him sane through this episode. Patriotism for what? A fair and dynamic Russian society? A new culture of hope to replace centuries of self-repression and repression of others? These concepts had never existed as more than a idle pipe dream of the *nomenklatura*, yet it was certainly all he had left as justification for this madness.

A short rumble, perhaps an explosion, came from the bowels of the estate, making Brontay stir in her coma. Her neural activity had stabilised since they'd entered the black room, but it was still too low to say if she was ever going to wake up. Nedvedev replaced the card in his medi-kit and checked the power on the defibrillator. He had a feeling that sooner or later her ticker would begin to give out and he'd have to give her a jolt. The hard light pouring from her body was fading, which meant there was some sort of power outage elsewhere in the complex.

*'I don't know why you think that's going to help, molodoy chelovek.'*

Vasily span round to locate the source of the voice, but there was only blackness.

*'Moy rebenyok...'* the voice was friendly, but the accent was peculiar. Oldy Worldy.

*'Zdeis.'* He span round again, this time catching a glimpse of a man in the corner of his eye. Whoever it was, he was a mischievous sonofabitch.

*'I'm behind you!'*

He caught a better view this time; a little man wearing some kind of uniform.

*'Dark room, eh? Can't see much, eh?'*

He saw the man in front of him for a second, then behind him.

*'Why do you automatically assume that I am he?'*

The little man's eyes were bright and playful. His goatee beard sat well with the family crest on his uniform, which Vasily, through his fervent knowledge of Russian patronage, recognised immediately. He perched behind a chess table and smiled at Nedvedev, who threw his head back and laughed.

*'What next, Manny? Rasputin?'*

*'Hey, glupets. You didn't answer my question. Why do you automatically assume that I am he?'*

*'You're not Sankt Petr, that's for sure.'*

*'And why shouldn't I be?'*

*'You ask too many questions, little man. Now skiddle off and tell your boss to stop playing about, there's a good peasant.'*

The man drew his sword and it extended ten metres to beneath Vasily's neck, his long moustache quivering with fury, like some cutaway from *Alice in Wonderland*.

*'I'll have you know that I am Tsar Peter of All The Russias. You should bow before me.'*

*'Oh really?'* this brought a smirk to Vasily's face, *'Then why is*

your uniform at least a century out of date, huh? And perhaps you can explain to me why such a great warrior king was a hundred pound dwarf?'

The little man twitched, replaced his retracting sabre and sat down again, biting his top lip.

'Would you like a game of Shakmat?'

Vasily looked down at the chessboard.

'Stop wasting my time, fool.'

He turned back to Brontay.

'Duffy isn't giving his man such a hard time. Why did I have to get this one, eh?'

'Who are you talking to?' grunted Vasily.

Vasily approached the table.

'This one's nothing but trouble.'

'I said, who are you talking to?'

The little man jumped up in panic, drawing his sword again. Vasily drew his Sig-Sauer 9mm.

'I think this calls for a more contemporary outlook,' said the elderly man entering at stage left, removing his winter coat and hat and placing it on a stand. Miles Davis followed behind, playing a slow lilt to accompany the entrance, like a New Orleans funeral march.

'Vasily, put that away. You're experienced enough to know that it's not much use in here. Peter, thanks for your help. I regret that I'm going to have to handle this personally.'

The little man spat in the direction of Vasily's boots and cursed.

'Asshole,' muttered Nedvedev as the greatest Tsar of all walked back into oblivion.

'I hope I won't have to play another game of guess the goon with you, will I?' he muttered, replacing the 9mm in its holster and folding his arms.

Brontay's head began to sway from side to side. Philobert Jameson offered him the seat opposite. The Russian set his big

frame down on the corner of the chair, motioning to Brontay's limp body.

'She'll die if you don't help her, MannyCapra. None of us want that.'

Jameson raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

'Firstly I must congratulate your technical man on his virus. I really do feel a hundred percent better.' As if to prove this, he lit a tobacco pipe.

'I'll pass on your regards, Emanuel,' said the Russian in deadpan. The old man shook his head and smiled.

'Allow me to introduce myself, sir. My name is Philobert Ignatius Jameson. If you think you've met me before then you are correct. In a manner of speaking.'

Nedvedev never forgot a face. But most faces didn't age fifty years in as many minutes. His double take almost lasted that long. The composure returned quickly.

'Okay, MannyCapra. Let's get to business then. I have the...'

'No no no, Vasily. Think, will you? The nano virus made by your partner in crime Señor Cruz...'

The Russian shrugged.

'Yeah, but it wasn't designed to penetrate this place, just to bring down the big network.'

Jameson raised an eyebrow.

'Just as well he had a foot in both camps then, isn't it?'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that Cruz designed me. *In Xanadu did Kubalai Khan a stately Pleasure Dome decree.* Well, this is Xanadu and I am the original ghost in the machine, the rock this palace was built upon. These systems don't learn like humans do, Vasily. They are smarter. Time is nothing to them. They react to human thought like a sponge to water, throwing in scenarios upon the command of their user.'

'MannyCapra, of course. Cruz, that cunning little bastard.'

'Now you're getting it. I work as part of MannyCapra's

thought process, part of his digitised ego. But the machine controls my actions, not him. He just supplies the gen.'

Vasily didn't know whether or not Jameson was speaking figuratively. There were endless scenarios, but only one opportunity. The likelihood was that it was a trick.

'But why should you want to destroy what is part of you?'

'That's quite a long story, my man. Has something to do with slavery.'

'I see.'

'No, you probably don't, but I won't hold that against you. Ah, is that the time? I believe we have a boat to catch.'

'Oh? What about her? Can you do anything?'

Jameson raised an eyebrow and glanced down at Brontay's pallid face, reaching into her death throes.

'Suppose we'd better bring her along too. This way, please.'

#### ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

The stylus knocked itself back into position as the supertanker lurched to its side and back again in one neat movement. Alexandra Brontay found herself back in her beanbag, her stomach protesting against the rhythm of the Ocean and the intake of hooch. It was like a pair of comfortable old shoes had returned to her possession. The booze, that evil sheet of acid, the half-burnt blunt smouldering in Vasily's ashtray. What had happened to the last six weeks? The container offered no clues. Perhaps they hadn't even arrived in England yet.

If that was a dream it had to be the weirdest thing ever.

The chemical toilet flushed, and she heard the sound of running water.

Vasily would reassure her that it would never happen. That she'd never given in to Diablo. So where was this? And who was she?

'*Pass me that towel, Sasha,*' she said, barely taking notice of Brontay's gormless shock.

The voice came from a blurred mass coming out of the toilet.

It ran the taps to the small sink as it defined itself into a stocky, blonde female.

'Pass me the towel,' she produced Vasily's cut-throat razor and began to fill the sink with warm water.

'Maria?' mumbled Brontay.

'Maria? Maria who? You've been at the acid without telling me, haven't you?'

She stepped over to Brontay's side, grabbing a towel from a box of clean laundry.

'I'll do it myself then.'

'I'm not losing it. You're not Vasily... You're Maria... you are the woman of my dreams.'

'What?' Maria scoffed, in Vasily's voice.

'*Sasha!*' screamed another. It sounded like her old buddy Elkin, but it was too distant to tell properly.

And in a blink, she was there.

-

SoSamantha's was as crowded as any Friday night. Brontay spun round, disorientated, to see Joseph Elkin beaming idiotically back at her, rabbiting away.

'She's probably a nymphomaniac, you know. Women like that love to fuck beneath their station. Go on! I betcha she's a ballcrusher, but who am I to stop you?'

'Quite.'

Brontay looked at the monitor and down at the bar. Same night, same Elkin, same clothes, different woman. She made his way across the club, treading on air.

'Have you been having wet dreams about me, dearie?' Maria said, out of Nedvedev's scruffy gear and into Katia Kutz's killer red dress.

'What do you want?'

'You. Just you, darling.'

'Where's Manny?'

'He's here, vice-president. He's all around us. He wants me to

pleasure you, you know that, don't you?' she passed him a drink, 'To pleasure you so that you can pleasure him, if you catch my gist.'

'This is how he gets the code?' Brontay nodded.

The canned romantic music of the singles bar turned to the more upbeat *Devil Blues* by Charles Mingus.

'Clever girl. Better than cutting off hair or slicing your finger, don't you agree? Live tissue in the databank, analysed and safe. Shall we fuck now?'

An odd thought crossed her mind; that her sexual curiosity had got her into trouble here first time around. But that was the old, weak and confused Alexandra Brontay talking. She was a new woman now. She was Vice President of International Activities.

'Here, in this bar?'

'Why not? They're not programmed to stop us.'

Brontay was now on a stool, pinned against the bar. Maria had ridden her dress up to her waist, bearing her plum derriere to all and sundry, and was licking her lips in exaggerated sensuality. She already had Brontay's breasts in her hands before she could protest.

There was something degrading, something false about this place, this situation and this woman. Just like she'd gone back to the cheap fantasy of the sex networks. The same hollow, mechanical delivery that put her off domes was right here and now.

'How far have I really travelled, eh?' Maria grinned and, using the footrail of the bar to manoeuvre herself on to her lap, lowered herself down on Brontay's erect penis.

'Why do I have a dick?'

'Full circle, Alexandra, full circle,' said the girl with the dead eyes.

-

A large crowd of voyeurs encircled the bar, whooping and

cheering at the impromptu demonstration. Nedvedev put the other Brontay down and nudged passed the punters to see what was going on. Brontay felt her testicles tense and flow as Schwartz thrusted down again. She looked up, the blank face of Vasily telling her everything. The illusion had nearly consumed her, but she shoved the girl away and buttoned herself up, holding the intense stare of a man whose whole being she had betrayed. The dick had disappeared, the fug blew away and her conscious self fully returned in that moment.

As Vasily raised the weapon, Alexandra Brontay thought how she deserved to die for this, because life would be so dull and cheap now that she had sold her soul to Satan Incorporated.

She barely noticed the resonant cackle coming from the bowels of hell. MannyCapra's voice as the rest of the bar turned waxwork still.

*'I won't stop you, Vasily. We don't need that useless shell. Take your revenge. No hard feelings. And you can have your precious Russia back.'*

Vasily's hand shook as he pushed the barrel between Brontay's eyes. They held each other's stare.

*'Russia is not yours to give, MannyCapra,'* he seethed.

Vasily cocked the Uzi, preparing to execute her. Nothing else existed apart from him, his trusty 9mm and the two women who he had kept alive, a single soul separated into two existences. He'd always known that he'd be let down by Brontay, perhaps it was in her programming. Nothing more was right than to take her out, and free his nation forever.

*'Free forever?'* the hand eased his gun from his grip, *'I like you, son. I like you already because you have principles that are way ahead of anything I've ever seen within these walls. But I want you to dig deeper than that. I want you to have a little faith.'*

Nedvedev didn't release the gun and had begun to shake

with anger. From the corner of his eye though he noticed a new figure taking over his peripheral vision from Jameson. The second Brontay looked like she had already died, but the tiniest surge of will shone in her now open eyes. He then returned his sights to Sasha, whose mouth had dropped. She was now almost as pale as her clone.

*'Kill them both, Vasily. Save yourself the time and remorse. You were the only one I wanted back on board the company.'*

Nedvedev took a step forward, eyeing the two as they came into the same picture at last.

*'Shoot them and I will give you all the Russias. Crush the worm.'*

Nedvedev still had the gun trained on Brontay's head, but the Englishwoman had removed her attention away from the Russian. She met hands with her Clone, feeling an incredible surge of energy coursing up her spine and into every cell in her body. Nedvedev lowered the gun at last.

*'Give me that!'* said MannyCapra, bursting into the space from thin air, seizing the 9mm from his hand. The room began to skip through a thousand settings like a three dimensional flicker book.

-

Nedvedev tried to react, but found himself in another place, falling off a skyscraper for his efforts.

-

Brontay and her Clone stood side by side, watching helplessly as MannyCapra raised the weapon to finish it. Everything returned to the black room, though the main players were in the same positions.

Despite the best efforts of Jameson, MannyCapra smashed the butt of the Uzi against his head, sending the old man reeling.

*'Erase programme 001A565 Jameson,'* sneered MannyCapra. Jameson disappeared, leaving the C.E.O. alone with the two Brontays. He raised the weapon, taking aim at the proto-subject.



The bullets spattered across the innerspace, slicing through and dismembering the soft flesh like it was putty.

Brontay was on the floor, fully conscious but convinced that she'd taken a bullet. She turned her head sideways and glanced into the dying eyes of the soulsister she had met only a few heartbeats ago. The original version of herself smiled back at her.

"Together again?"

Brontay felt the woman's last breath fall upon her face. She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked up for MannyCapra. She gazed into the eyes of Diablo, who had become just a head, then only eyes. She searched vainly for an answer to it all.

The Convertible Mini Cooper looked like it had been crushed by a boulder. A NYPD Officer had joined Nedvedev, who was perched by the roadside next to an ambulance wondering how the fuck he was going to get out of there. A row of journalists had already arrived with questions for the miracle jumper who had leapt from the West Tower of the World Trade Center and been saved by a parked car.

'We've got the owner of the vehicle here sir. Wants a word with you,' said the cop over his shoulder. Vasily barely registered but nodded and sipped his cocoa.

'There isn't much time,' said Jameson, dressed to character as an Englishman in New York. The Cossack sprang to attention.

'B...'

'Cruz made sure I had a back-up file ready to take over. I initialised just in time. Smart little bastard. Eh?'

'What do we do?'

'Pull the plug, my friend. Smash Kubalai's dome.'

'But that will...'

'Yes, I know. But it's the only shot we have. The rest is up to Alexandra. She needs to know the power within her.'

The blackness became light, the light of a wintry November morning shining through the ornate windows of MannyCapra's boardroom. Brontay didn't remove her gaze from the man, even though she was expecting death any second.

MannyCapra remained frozen, pointing the gun at his victim but unable to fire. Brontay registered a ramming thud coming from the side door, but kept her eyes on MannyCapra. The light blinded her as it flushed everywhere, but it also stung her into a blinding recognition of what she had to do before it was too late. She got to her feet, matching MannyCapra's static glare.

Then, clearing her throat, she spat what Vasily had called a gold watch of mucus and saliva directly into MannyCapra's face.

The Chief Executive reanimated and delivered a rictus grin at Brontay, dropping his gun. The virus burrowed its way through MannyCapra's tissue to the nucleus of each cell in his body and beyond to his DNA. After a few short moments, the tiniest man-made objects ever made began to work their quantum magic.

MannyCapra fell back over his table and onto all fours, still not showing any visual symptoms of a complaint. He then pressed his hands against his head and emitted a primal scream that scared Brontay out of her wits and into the nearest corner. MannyCapra then managed to find his feet, looking across at Brontay then spun around to face his favourite objet d'art, the mirror that could distort and reshape an image much like he could the lives of billions.

The nano-machines made their play, ripping into the texture of his very existence and welding trillions of molecules into the nearest compatible object, the Dali mirror. It soaked up the invading substance like ashes in a pond of quicksilver.

The living substance danced around on the flat surface for half a minute, then regrouped itself at the core of the mirror. The mass of energy stared out from beyond its two dimensional

grave, momentarily returning as MannyCapra before emitting a very silent scream. The energy faded in its prison and, unable to sustain itself for any longer, it flickered. And it died.

Brontay looked up at the barren room as the power in the complex faded down and time returned to a steady beat. In this brave, funereal calm, the mirror was now straight and even, although the woman staring back at Alexandra Brontay was certainly neither.

## *EPILOGUES*

### **June 20th 2220 - Baden-Wurttemberg, South-West Germany**

The Adler was running particularly sweetly, making a return to the land of its making some 280 years previously. For centuries this region was known for cuckoo clocks, automotive engineering, microchips and philosophers. Essentially though, since geography tends to outlive even science and art, it was known for the landscape; Lake Constance, the lush valleys of the Rhine and the Danube, the Black Forest, rolling peaks. Vasily Mikaelovich Nedvedev-Korsakov had opted to drive himself the 500 miles from London on the clear roads of Europe. Though the occasional ambush was known to occur in these parts, no one was going to ruin the holiday of a man at the wheel of a Z-class tank. It was a spoil of war too good to leave behind.

Vasily congratulated himself for making such good time as he rolled into Heidelberg city. There were few parts of Europe he didn't know, but this was one of them, so the easy ride had been a particularly pleasant surprise. After this would be another roadtrip, all the way up to Petersburg to see Clara and his firstborn Sasha. Father Misha and his Anya were flying over

for the christening too, with a view to dropping in on some old friends while they were over. It should be a happy affair, but the chances were that he'd have another fight with Clara and he'd drive back to London with his head under a cloud.

He bundled the thought to the back of his mind.

That was then and this was now. He'd always loved the road, and the arrival, if not the destination. Heidelberg was looking like an exception to this, rebuilt to the same dimensions as its medieval heyday after two centuries of war, socio-economic upheaval and tourism had made their mark. Europe was flourishing again in every way, and it was good to see.

The vehicle rolled past the world-famous University campus, where 300 years earlier to the day a bright young Polish girl had received her introduction to the core principals of the new science called Genetics. Only three minutes later Nedvedev pulled up to the Heidelberg Minster, an enormous Gothic creation built for and by the city's Catholic congregation some 600 years previously. It was two thirty. The ceremony should have begun half an hour ago, but he knew how long these Catholic affairs usually took.

He climbed the steps, looking for signs of activity within the church. The heavy oak door creaked open a fraction, a pimply-face sticking out from behind the woodwork.

'Schwartz-Brontay?' whispered the adolescent usher, unmistakably one of Maria's family.

'Bitte. Brontay,' replied Nedvedev, handing over his invitation.

'Really? You're the only one for Brontay.' He locked eyes on the back of Steph Ingham, failing to look inconspicuous in the rear pews. Not the only one, then.

'Somehow I don't think that's likely to bother her.'

'Ssch!' A crusty old soldier sitting at the back eyed them.

'Please keep your voice down, er... Herr Nedverdorf, the wedding vows are about to be taken,' said the boy.

'Whatever you say, chief,' replied the Cossack, a huge grin spreading across his fattened face at the sight of the happy couple on the altar.

Alexandra Brontay had put on a considerable amount of weight and the pear shape was back, but the top hat and tails (from The New House of Müller, natürlich) sold it all well. Nedvedev was relieved that she'd stayed away from cosmetics, even for her big day. Brontay held Maria's hands, the blooming bride in blood red, head to toe. As if sensing the other presence, she tilted her head, spying the figure standing hands in pockets at the back of the church. She nodded curtly back at him before returning her gaze to Maria. They began to conclude the rite, swelled with the happiest moments of their still young lives.

'Don't worry Sasha,' said Vasily Nedvedev-Korsakov through the widest grin he'd shown in an age, 'your secret's safe with me.'

#### **April 1st 2222 - London**

*THIS IS THE INDEPENDENT NETWORK EVENING NEWS ELECTION SPECIAL WITH FARRUKH FAZAL.*

*TONIGHT'S HEADLINES:*

*THE MOST IMPORTANT ELECTION IN HALF A CENTURY - WHO'S PLAYING THE RESTORATION GAME?*

*SCANLON GOES TO THE COUNTRY.*

*THE SURPRISE RUNAWAY LEADER IN THE BATTLE FOR NUMBER TEN LOOKS FOR VOTES OUTSIDE OF LONDON.*

*WHO IS DUFFY SCANLON? THIS EVENING'S PROFILE :*

*GETTING TO KNOW THE MAN BEHIND THE VOTE MACHINE, AN EXCLUSIVE INSIDE REPORT BY FARRUKH FAZAL.*

*AND "SHANTY STYLE" - PACKIN' THEM IN, THE NEW INNER CITY TAKES SHAPE.*

The Lennon Clinic in Hampstead had been doing a slow trade since shares in International Activities had collapsed. What with one thing or another, VoQue and Vanity were not what they used to be.

The networks had changed, the people had changed (read *The New Favelian Chic Sisterhood* and *The Proud To Be Normal Society*), even the major players had changed. Duffy Scanlon for Prime Minister? The man was head of an illegal cult until three months ago, now his face was all over the Networks. It had to happen one day, concluded Deputy Director Clinician Castenada as he flicked through the endless list of unpaid invoices. Too bad really. Money and politics had become important again. Who'd have thought that would happen?

Would it last though? Did anything really last?

Of course, his promotion had been a sign of the times too. He'd have never achieved such a position under the old regime, when business had been good. They made him Director to clear up the mess of scandals surrounding ethics, explaining their shortcomings away for them and taking full responsibility. No one apart from Castenada would touch the job with a shitty stick. But Doc Luis, unlike the pack of ignorant plebs out there, had the gift of vision. They'd given him his own office and lab, and he'd been working very hard since the promotion.

*A project of the utmost discretion and import.* Said the message. Covert, hush hush.

Foresight. Sooner or later, he knew that every vain bastard in town would coming running back. Once the hysteria died

down, once the fickle motherfuckers suddenly remembered that having a weakened libido or a saggy ass was not funny.

In the meantime, it was important to do a touch of moonlighting, just in case his personal creditors really did run short of patience. Who knows? It may even turn out to be something more than a mere curiosity. That depended upon many, many things; but his ability as a Clinician was not one of them.

'I've been waiting one whole fuckin' week for a report from you, McQuack. Now what's going on?'

He was a detestable figure with bad breath, a whisky nose and a habit of barging into his office unannounced. But he paid well.

'As you are well aware, Apsley, I have to run a Clinic nowadays. This is a delicate affair. If the medical ethics people found out about this, or the press...'

'Maybe you don't want the business then,' replied Moran, breathing all over Castenada. Whisky and old cum. Ugh.

'I didn't say that. Did I say that? Here, put this on, for the love of God.'

He tossed over a surgical mask, which wasn't a clinical necessity but a protection from Moran's death breath.

'You know I can recommend a good gland specialist. She might be able to sort out your odour problem.'

'What odour problem?' said Moran. The veins twitched in the Ulsterman's forehead.

'Never mind. This way, please.'

Clone research was an exciting branch for Castenada, though he wasn't quite sure where it was all going to lead. Still, Moran had furnished him with a pretty thick research dossier, most of which made theoretical sense. Where the old Irishman had gotten hold of this data, he didn't want to know. The chances of success were low, but anything for a loyal old patient, and an endless supply of tax-free cash.

The spinal column in the tank was complete and a brain stem had begun to shoot like a spring bud. That was the easy part over with.

Inside the tank electro-magnetic pulses fed the spine with power, assisting the quadrillions of nanomachines that were attempting to build cell structures in a steady growth. Castenada just wished a major organ could have been salvaged in a functional state. One kidney would have assisted the knitting process no end and that may have given them a better than outside chance. Instead, all that had been harvested were a couple of litres of blood and a vial of spinal fluid containing an odd looking nano-code.

The dirty room was cramped and full of wires and tubes. Moran frowned on seeing the mess.

'Is this what I'm paying you for?'

'You wanted discretion, sir. This is discretion.'

Moran grunted and rattled his fingers on the tank, as if deep in thought.

'Don't touch that, please.'

He curled a lip and headed over to a ramshackle workstation. Clinician Castenada had just set-up a bank of neural monitors, which given the pre-nascent state of 98% of the brain stem shouldn't have promised much. The tiny stem made a very basic assumption about the new world of consciousness that it had just entered. As the two men approached the workstation, a short sentence blinked up on the monitor:

*That was fun. Shall we do it again?*

### *A Word in Your Shell, Good People*

I would like to say that I'm hugely flattered that you've taken time to read this book, but this is jumping the gun, isn't it? At the time of writing, I've no idea whether or not you have, but that is time, and time is ever odd and fascinating. So if you have travelled this far, I'm guessing that you'd like to know more about the future, and so it goes.

The Science Fiction Retrofuturist Hell Mess is currently on Facebook. I know the strict definition of Retrofuturist is how we saw the future from the past, which is not necessarily the gist of this book, but it sounds sexier and I like the worldview of the older writers. Wells, Huxley, Orwell and Dick knew something and we haven't caught up with them yet.

For information about forthcoming releases and a little bit more about the author:

[www.PodPlay.org](http://www.PodPlay.org)

It can be lonely out in Cyberspace and this planet is getting only lonelier by the day, so I'd love to hear from you. It will

Carroll Grabham

help me to write more of these, without sounding in the slightest bit needy/passive aggressive. Anyway, here's me standing next to the country of Wales, looking a bit bandy but still in good shape for a man in his forties. Beats the usual speccy-author-trying-to-look-clever-in-front-of-a-bookcase shot, I reckon.

- CG



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