

Canary

By David Keener

A dark, hooded figure crouched, hidden in a stand of trees beside a convenience store. The parking lot was brightly lit by the two moons chasing each other across the night sky. The parking spaces in front of the store were full except for the two furthest from the entrance, the closest to the trees.

"Special delivery coming your way." Jameson's raspy voice sounded in Natalia's ear, slightly obscured by static.

Natalia said quietly into her throat mic, "Check."

A small, dark car pulled into the lot and parked in one of the empty spaces.

"Delivery sighted," Natalia said.

"Eyes banished." The store's cams were now looping, sending repeated vid footage for the next ten minutes. For extra security, the two outside cams, both invisible within their glass domes, were now pointed at the sky to ensure that their buffers wouldn't store any residual footage that could be retrieved with suitable high-tech.

A dark-haired man in a suit got out of the car and went into the store. Nobody else was visible. Natalia walked out of the trees, stooped, and slid quickly underneath the man's car.

"In position," she said. She waited patiently for the man to return.

A few minutes later, Jameson said, "Outbound. You are go." A few seconds later, two legs appeared in her narrow view next to the driver-side door.

The man opened the car door. Natalia's arm struck out from under the car and hit the man's leg with a taser. He fell heavily to the ground, dropping his keys and a shopping bag, which burst open on impact. Natalia reached out and covered the man's face and nose with a white cloth. In a moment, he was limp and unconscious. She rolled out from underneath the car, then lifted him into the back seat. Without any wasted motions, she quickly scooped up his groceries, tossed them into the front passenger seat, and used his keys to start the car. She drove slowly out of the lot, crushing a single missed can with a wheel.

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The man stirred and gradually awoke from his drugged slumber. He quickly discovered that he was immobilized, sitting upright in a wooden chair, with his hands secured together behind him, and with his arms and legs tied to the chair for good measure. He was in a dark room lit only by a 3D hologram of the planet Darius rotating slowly above a matte-black, square

computer the size of his hand. The computer rested on a small, wooden table.

"Ah, you're awake," Natalia said. "Excellent." The man peered in the in the direction of her voice, but saw only a dim shadow beyond the illumination of the hologram.

"Who are you?"

"We want you to watch a show."

"You're in a lot of trouble," the man said. "Kidnapping is a major crime. Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Your name is Vincent Turcot, age 36. Eleven years police service with an admirable record, then recruited for the National Investigative Branch, where you've worked for the last three years. Wife, Emelda. Three children, Michael, Ulysses and Abigail. Two dogs, Teddy and Biscuit, and a cat named Precious." Natalia paused, then said, "Seriously, you let your 3-year-old daughter name the cat?"

"Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time," Turcot replied. "Anyway, good job, you've done some research. I'm mildly impressed, but it's nothing you can't get off the net."

Natalia sighed, then said, "Your wife has a tattoo of a rose in a very private place, probably a remnant of her, um, wild years. In fact, she was caught with illicit drugs while she was at university. Since her father was the dean, and it was discovered only by university security officers, it was quietly

covered up rather than being forwarded on to the police. If it came out, your security clearances could be endangered."

"What?"

"You can verify this later, I'm sure."

Turcot asked, "Are you trying to blackmail my family?"

"Don't be absurd. It's just part of our background on you. Frankly, there's nothing we'd want you to do that you could do effectively if you were being coerced."

"All right," Turcot said. "You've got my attention. What do you want?"

"Do you believe in conspiracies, Mr. Turcot?"

"No," Turcot said flatly.

"Too bad."

"I think some people have too much imagination." His tone clearly indicated that he included Natalia in this group.

"I wish you were right," Natalia said sadly. "But sometimes the simplest answer really is a conspiracy." Natalia clicked a handheld device and the hologram changed to show a dark-haired woman in her mid-30's. "Tracy Atkins, a factory worker at Teledyne. They make parts for communication devices. Showed some advanced electronics to some tech friends. Used an alias and released some pictures online. She and her friends all died...accidentally. Subsequently, an advanced virus scrubbed the net of all mention of her and the mysterious devices."

A click, and a picture of an electronic device appeared. Another click, and some sort of intricately designed circuit board appeared.

"Nice pics," Turcot said. "But if they scrubbed the net, how do you have copies?"

"Conspiracy nuts always save stuff like this," Natalia replied. "Sifting through the noise is quite painful, however."

Next, a picture of a burning house.

Natalia said, "Father Michael Standish. Burned to death in his brother's holiday home. He was paranoid, though, probably because he'd figured out the scope of his enemy. He recorded everything, unbeknownst to his attackers, and it was transmitted out on a hidden land line."

Recorded footage played, throwing shadows on Turcot's face, as men in expensive black combat armor and gear smashed their way into a house and subdued the solitary male resident. They injected the man with something that immobilized him and then set the place on fire.

"Next, they killed the man's brother and his wife, Matthew and Carol Standish. Probably because they could positively identify where the footage was shot. Later, the recording was revealed to have been lifted from a horror film and altered as a part of an anti-government hoax. In reality, an elaborate cover-up."

The man watched as the litany of disasters and coverups continued, all calmly narrated by the woman in the shadows. Finally, the show ended, and the hologram of Darius returned, slowly rotating in the darkness.

"There's a conspiracy out there," Natalia said. "It's powerful, rich, entrenched, and dangerous. They've got a higher tech level than can reasonably be explained. All this we know." She paused, then said, "For the rest, I have a theory. Would you like to hear it?"

"Well, this has been entertaining so far," Turcot said. "So you might as well hit me with your punchline."

Natalia walked around the room until she was behind Turcot. Even though he looked at her dark shape as she moved, he still couldn't make out her features.

"Let's talk ancient history," Natalia said. "Let's go back more than seven hundred years ago, to when the aliens crashed the FTL hypernet they gave us and isolated a hundred plus colonized planets into scattered worlds. I think one of those planets managed to sustain their tech level, rather than dropping back into survival mode like the rest of us. I think they're going around from planet to planet and trying to take over, leveraging their tech advantage to do whatever they need to do to assume control." She put her hands on Turcot shoulders, leaned down, and whispered in his ear. "I think we've got an

off-world conspiracy that's slowly taking over our planet.

They're after Darius, and they need to be stopped."

"Poppycock," Turcot said.

Natalia laughed, letting go of his shoulders and stepping back a few paces. "You don't have to believe in the conspiracy," she said. "But I've just handed you twenty-six unsolved murders within the last fifty years."

"You're insane!"

"I don't care what you think," Natalia said. "You're a canary."

"Come again?"

"Ancient Earth legend," Natalia said. "Primitive miners would take a canary, an Earth bird, down into the tunnels with them. The canary was more sensitive to conditions than people were, so if the bird keeled over, it was time to get out."

"I know what a canary is," Turcot said dryly.

"I don't care what you do, Mr. Turcot." Natalia laughed softly. "The computer, all this evidence, it's yours now. Do what you want with it. You could forget about it all, but I don't think your highly-developed sense of justice will let you ignore all these unsolved murders. You can try to find us, but we've covered our tracks really well - that's why we're still alive. You can investigate some of these cases - you've got the

resources, after all. But if you do, if you're not careful, you'll get yourself killed."

Turcot asked, "What do you get out of this?"

"We'll be watching you," Natalia replied. "If you find out something, you're helping us. If your actions make their cover-ups more difficult in the future, you're helping us. If you get yourself killed, you're helping us, because we might be able to trace your killers back to their masters."

Natalia walked across the room, stopping when she was on the opposite side of the hologram from Turcot. She dropped his car keys on the floor, followed by a knife. "Ta, ta, little birdie," she said as she walked out of the room.