

SHREDDER

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Thank you for your support.

For You... Yes, all of you

Thank you.

CLUSTER FUCK...

DATE: 21/07/10
OPERATION: STRANGLEHOLD
LOCATION: UNDISCLOSED...

Rain falls from the night sky and pummels the empty street, streaming from the cracked pavement and forming fast running rivers in the grime caked gutters. The overbearing heat of the day can be forgotten as the downpour cools the air, bringing with it a freshness that hasn't been experienced for months.

But no one comes out to dance in the streets, there are no celebrations...

Not here...

...Not now.

This is a place of fear, a city held in the grip of war. To walk the streets at night is to sign your own death warrant, to do so in the day is to play a dangerous game of Russian Roulette. Only those with a purpose, those who dare to try and benefit from conflict risk standing out in the open after dark.

Two such warriors run out into the centre of the road, their lower faces covered by loosely tied scarves. One of them holds his weapon, ready for use yet the other has slung his rifle across his shoulder. They pause momentarily and look back, seeing those who pursue them.

“Shit!” The hissed curse is not heard over the sound of the rain.

Three armed men step from the shadows of the ruined shop front, weapons raised and unwilling to wait for surrender.

They open fire, flashing muzzles clashing against the blue forks of lightning from the tumultuous sky. Those being chased stand little chance, their bodies pirouetting as bullets tear through flesh, shatter bone and pulverise internal organs.

As they fall to the soaked ground the air is filled with the acrid aroma of cordite and copper as thick blood puddles around the corpses, only to be washed away by the heavy rain.

No one is there to witness the execution and the three armed killers turn their backs on their victims with no guilty in their posture as they fade back into the shadows a moment before the street is illuminated by the headlights of an armoured Humvee, the first in a convoy of three.

The first vehicle swerves to miss the two corpses but the second and third show no such respect for the dead, bumping over the bodies without slowing. All three Humvees reach the end of the street and turn into the next, heading towards the sounds of combat.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

The rear of the lead Humvee hasn't been designed for comfort and those riding within are prepared for it. It's what they've been trained to do and it's what they're paid to put up with. If they wanted comfort they'd take a holiday.

Four men all sit in silence, three of them waiting for the fourth to talk.

Corbin Keene knows why they wait and he's glad of the respect they show him, remaining quiet whilst he formulates a plan of attack. His face is illuminated by the Adam

Tablet held in his grasp, highlighting the rough stubble covering his chin and the scar that runs from his right eye to the base of his ear lobe.

Keene swipes his finger across the touch sensitive screen, bringing up a blueprint of the building they are approaching. He double taps the centre of the screen and the diagram zooms in to show the ground floor in more detail. He studies it for a moment and then shuts the Adam tablet down, placing it on the empty seat at his side.

He looks around the tight confines of the Humvee and then raises a hand to the earpiece hanging loose at his neck, taking it between thumb and forefinger and placing it firmly into his ear. He taps the earpiece, a habit he finds impossible to kick.

"Campbell, Rogers... ETA in five minutes," Keene announces via the throat mounted mic.

"Roger that, Keene." Campbell's reply comes through the earpiece, distorted by static but understandable.

"We follow the brief to the letter... no deviations," he says. "Units One and Two secure the area to the North and South, full quarantine scenario." He pauses, looking at the three soldiers sat opposite him. "I'm with Unit Three... in and out... no more than fifteen minutes."

"Business as usual," Campbell laughs before signing off.

Lightning cracks the sky outside and Keene closes his eyes, leaning his head back in an attempt to relax before arrival at their destination.

Sat opposite him are three seasoned professionals, Brent, Jenkins and Masters. They have fought together many times and they work like a well oiled machine...

Most of the time.

Jenkins leans forward and taps Keene on the knee before continuing. "I don't like this, Keene," he says with a raised voice. "I got that feeling in my water."

"Maybe you should try sitting down to piss," Keene replies without opening his eyes.

Brent and Masters both laugh, causing Jenkins to glare at them. "Fuck you!"

"Maybe you're due on," jibes Brent.

"You need a tampon, Jenkins?" chuckles Masters

"Wankers," Jenkins turns back to Keene, looking for support.

"Enough," Keene barks at them. "I need you focused." He opens his eyes, realising he has no hope of gaining that moment of calm he searches for.

"I mean it, Keene," Jenkins says. "I got a bad feeling about this one... We've got

nothing to go on but a location? What the hell are we doing here?"

"We're doing what we do best... cleaning up someone else's fucking mess." Keene points angrily at Jenkins. "So you take that bad feeling and stow it somewhere I don't have to listen to it."

The Humvee grinds to an abrupt halt and Keene once again taps the earpiece as he stands up. "All units move out."

Keene pulls on his helmet and moves to the rear of the Humvee, throws open the doors and jumps out into the rain drenched night. He is quickly followed by the others.

"I still got a bad feeling," Jenkins mumbles to himself and shakes his head.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

The entrance hall to the building is silent and empty. The only sounds come from outside, the steady thrum of rain and the intermittent bursts of gunfire. The power is out but the walls are illuminated by the headlights pointed towards the building.

The front door is kicked open with vicious suddenness, the top hinge giving way with a squeal of screws tearing free of wood. The door swings wide, hits the wall and comes to rest at an odd angle.

Jenkins and Brent enter first, keeping low as one of them heads left whilst the other takes the right. Both hold their automatic weapons raised, sweeping them from side to side in a fluid motion, fingers resting on triggers ready to squeeze at the slightest provocation.

Jenkins looks over at Brent and nods an '*all clear*'.

Brent looks back over his shoulder and makes a circular hand motion, a silent message to Keene and Masters that its safe to enter.

Masters enters in a similar way to Jenkins, crouched low and rifle raised, but Keene walks in as if its just another day at the office. He wastes no time looking around and then heads towards the stairs with confident strides.

"I want a full sweep," he states without taking his eyes off the staircase. "Jenkins, ground floor... Brent, second floor... Masters, third floor." Keene starts up the stairs.

"What about you, boss?" asks Masters.

"I'll take the penthouse." Keene continues upwards as Brent and Masters drop in behind him, leaving Jenkins to his own devices.

Keene doesn't raise his rifle until he steps out onto the Penthouse landing, using his thumb to activate the barrel mounted light. He pans the beam across the carpet, a thick pile that once held a vibrant pattern but has been walk down over the years.

Keene moves forward with a caution he would never reveal to his men. They need to see him as strong and fearless, they don't need to see their leader ever show hesitation. The landing isn't long and holds only one door at the far end. Keene raises the rifle and keeps the light focused on the door handle as he edges closer.

After a few steps the carpet becomes wet underfoot and Keene pauses, crouching down and running a glove covered finger across the sodden fabric. He rubs the liquid between finger and thumb, feeling its oiliness before raising the finger to his nose and taking a sharp sniff.

"Shit," he curses out loud, wiping the soiled hand on the hip of his combat pants.

Keene stands again, hoists the rifle into a usable position and heads straight for the door, the carpet growing spongier with each step. He reaches the door and waits for a second, listening for any sign of life.

Only when he's sure nothing awaits him on the other side does he reach out, take the handle and push the door open. He sees what the penthouse holds and can manage only two words. "Jesus Christ."

Keene doesn't enter the room, just stands in place and takes in the scene of desecration spread out before him. The floor is littered with human detritus, flayed skin, broken bones and shredded offal spread across the room like something from an Andy Warhol nightmare.

The room is suddenly lit by a flash of lightning and, for the briefest of moments, it reveals the line of heads sat on the sofa. Keene doesn't have time to count them all but takes a guess at more than twenty, each one missing their eyes.

"What the fuck?" Keene passes the barrel mounted light over a rack and is sickened by what hangs from it.

The number of blood filled bags outnumbers the heads but Keene has no time to wonder at the meaning of it all. He reaches up and taps the earpiece.

"Masters... You clear down there?" Keene asks, his eyes darting around the carnage filled room.

Nothing down here but rat shit and dust," comes the crackled reply.

“Brent... report status,” Keene snaps the order.

“Three dead,” replies Brent through the earpiece. “Smells like they been that way for a few days.”

“Jenkins?” only static comes as a reply. “Jenkins?” Keene asks again, a slight stammer of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

“Ground floor's clear, but I've located a basement,” Jenkins finally answers. “I'm going to check it out.”

“Brent, get down there with Jenkins,” Keene orders.

“There's some... do... ere.” Jenkins voice breaks up.

“Jenkins, hold back and wait...” Keene leaves the sentence hanging as a something in the penthouse catches his attention, a shimmer of black within the shadows.

“Kee... I... Bodies... least... Dozen,” Jenkins tries to explain but the connection is poor.

Keene raises the automatic rifle and plays the light across the room and its grizzly contents, moving steadily from left to right.

“Fuck... missing... where... eyes...” Jenkins sounds scared. “What the fu...” Jenkins voice is replaced by gunfire.

Lightning flashes and reveals the silhouette of a muscular male, naked from the waist up and glistening in a coating of wet red fluid. Keene takes a step back into the hallway as the figure opens its mouth in a silent scream, blood flowing over its lips and down its chin.

Lightning flashes again and Keene sees that the man is looking straight at him with eyes that cannot be real. There are no pupils and no iris, both eyes the colour of liquid mercury.

“Get on your knees,” shouts Keene but the man isn't listening.

Keene opens fire as the man charges towards him, bullets tearing into his stomach, chest and face. The man keeps coming, twitching with the impact of each bullet. Keene's finger is still on the trigger when the man collides with him.

The blow lifts Keene off his feet and sends him backwards, his head making a crushing impact with the wall. Unconsciousness takes him before he hits the floor.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene comes around slowly only to find himself laid on his side at the base of the wall. He pushes himself into a sitting position and takes a quick mental check.

No bones broken...

Vision... 20-20

What the fuck was that thing?

Keene releases the chin strap on his helmet and then removes it from his head, throwing it to one side before rotating his neck from left to right and then back again, flinching as a hot poker of pain lances down his left hand side. He raises a hand and taps at the earpiece.

“Jenkins... Brent... Masters?” White noise is his only reply.

Keene leans to his right and retrieves the automatic rifle, checks it over with the speed and efficiency rarely seen. Once satisfied with the weapon's operation he gets to his feet, stretches and then looks around. The first thing he sees are the fresh hand prints on the wall, leaving a trail that leads down the stairs.

“Masters... You hear me?” Only the crackle of dead air. “Shit!” Keene blinks once and then takes the stairs at a run, only stopping when he reaches the third floor.

“Fuck!” Keene sees the blood first and then the severed arm. He knows the tattoo on the forearm.

“Keene,” says Masters through the earpiece. His voice is weak.

“Masters... What the fuck happened?” Keene kicks out at the severed arm, sending it sliding through the slick of bodily fluids. “Jenkins is dead.”

“Come... See... for... Self,” Four words and then the line goes dead, the steady hiss of static once more.

“Masters,” growls Keene, on the move again, following the smeared blood that tracks down to the second floor.

Keene reaches the second floor and slows as he pans the light from left to right, revealing Brent's corpse, the throat slit and the eyes missing. He heads over to the dead body and leans down, reaching inside Brent's t-shirt and pulling at the dog-tags hanging at his neck. The chain snaps and Keene wraps it around his gloved hand as he heads down to the ground floor.

“Masters... Give me your location now!” Keene snarls in anger and frustration.

“With Jen... Down... Basement.”

“I'm coming.” Keene pulls the mic from around his throat and throws it aside as he crosses the entrance hall.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene takes the steps into basement with a cautiousness not shown earlier. He knows that something is very wrong in this place... something that goes beyond the horrors of war.

He is greeted by the sound of rhythmic thumping, a steady heart beat that pulses through the very walls of the building. As he nears the bottom of the stairs the sound grows louder... dirtier... wetter.

“Jenkins?” he asks, knowing the question is pointless.

Jenkins is hanging upside down from the ceiling of the basement, his ankles bound so tightly that the electrical cable used has sunk through the flesh and is rubbing against bare bone. His stomach has been torn open, the contents piled on the dusty floor. His remaining arm dangles loosely, the finger tips brushing against his own innards.

“Fuck me!” Keene crouches down and studies the holes where Brent's eyes should be.

“Its wonderful, isn't it?” Masters asks and Keene looks up to find the source of the thumping sound.

Masters is stood next to another hanging corpse, the third in a line that numbers more than thirty. He has his rifle slung over his shoulder and holds a vicious looking blade in his left hand.

“They should have told you why we were sent here.” Masters slams the blade into the corpse and begins to use the blade to saw upwards. “Maybe then we wouldn't have had to die.”

“What are you talking about, Masters?” Keene looks passed Masters.

He is intrigued by the strange object that appears to float in the far corner, an eight foot tall tear drop, opaque in nature and seamless in design.

“I never realised how beautiful death could be.” Masters leaves the knife embedded in the corpse and turns to face Keene, raising his rifle.

“Lower your weapon, Masters,” Keene shouts.

“So beautiful,” sighs Masters. “Let me show you.”

Both men squeeze down on the trigger at the same time, filling the basement with the deafening retort of automatic fire.

The last thing Keene feels is the burning sensation of kinetic lead ripping into his torso.

HEAD HUNTED...

DATE: 16/08/15
OPERATION: RETIREMENT
LOCATION: YORK...

Keene sits at the bar, wanting nothing to do with the other patrons. He comes here every night and he does so for one reason and one reason only... To forget.

He's seen too many things and he has no wish to remember any of them. History should be left in the past but it refuses to do so, haunting his dreams with visions of bloodshed, of death and of unimaginable horrors.

Keene uses the contents of the bottle to block the memories, to blur the nightmares. He pours another glass of the liquid anaesthetic and then slams the bottle back on the bar.

He doesn't look up at the sound of the door, his gaze fixed on the glass in front of him. He may not look up but he takes in everything about the new arrival without showing any interest. It's a gift he's honed over the years of covert operations.

Noel Clarke is older than Keene by at least two decades but he's clearly a man who looks after himself, his frame solid, his stance healthy. From his suit alone it's apparent he has money and plenty of it. Keene notices all of this and more before Clarke has reached the bar, taking his place next to Keene.

"Just a glass, please," Clarke asks the barman and then glances at Keene. "My father once said that a man should never drink alone."

Keene still makes no attempt to acknowledge Clarke's presence, taking the glass and downing the contents in one gulp. "Mine told me never to talk to strangers... so why don't you piss off?" Keene refills the glass.

Clarke ignores the request, takes the bottle of Southern Comfort and fills both glasses. He then looks around the bar, only just masking the look of disgust on his face.

"Your father was a wise man... It's a shame he's no longer with us." Clarke takes a careful sip of the alcohol and savours it on his tongue before swallowing.

"You think you knew him?" Keene growls, his hand forming a tight fist.

"More than you realise, young man." Clarke pauses and empties his glass. "He's one of

the reasons I'm here.”

Keene takes a deep breath, grabs the bottle and stands up. He finally turns to look at Clarke, hatred boiling within his eyes. “I don't give a shit.” Keene drinks straight from the neck of the bottle. “Whatever you're selling I ain't buying.”

Keene pushes Clarke aside and makes his way unsteadily to the door. The older man watches him go, straightening the lapels on his designer suit, a smile on his face.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene staggers, looking the worse for the mixture of alcohol and fresh air. He still holds the neck of the bottle as if its an old friend but its now almost empty. The street lamps here are far and few between, large areas of shadow broken by infrequent splashes of orange glow.

Into one of these areas of light step three heavily built men, each one twice the size of Keene.

“Well, well... what do we have here?” One of them asks, a nasty grin on his face.

“Looks like a pussy to me, Jonsie,” replies one of the others.

“I'm not looking for trouble, lads.” Keene eyes them up and then reaches into the back pocket of his jeans with his free hand. “So I'm going to make this easy on you.” Keene holds up his wallet so they can all see it and they throws it at Jonsie's feet.

“What the fuck is this?” Jonsie taps the wallet with the toe of his shoe.

“Take it and walk away... no one gets hurt.” Keene takes a swig from the bottle. “What do you say?”

“Have you heard this guy, Smith?” Jonsie asks over his shoulder.

“He just don't get it, does he, Brown?” Smith nudges the heavy at his side and they both chuckle.

“You've got us all wrong, mate.” Jonsie steps over the wallet, cracking his knuckles.

“The whole point is that someone gets hurt.” He jabs a finger at Keene's chest.

Smith and Brown are slowly moving their way around the edges of the illuminated area, placing themselves on either side of Keene, a manoeuvre he's seen many times.

Keene's entire posture changes within the blink of an eye, the drunken gait replaced with that of a deadly killer. He swings the bottle up and round with lightning speed, smashing it into the underside of Jonsie's jaw.

Jonsie falls to his knees, grasping both hands to his neck, attempting to staunch the heavy flow of blood. He tries to call the others but manages only a wet gargle, blood flecking his lips.

Before Jonsie collapses face first Keene has moved on to the second of his attackers, throwing his elbow backwards and crushing Smith's nose, satisfied with the sound of rupturing cartilage.

Smith's eyes roll in his head, showing only the bloodshot whites that are tinged with the yellow of jaundice. He falls to the ground like a sack of shit.

Keene spins on Brown, the ragged end of the broken bottle raised, only to find himself staring down the barrel of a gun. "Does that make you feel safe?" he asks, not lowering the bottle.

"Alwa..." Before Brown can finish Keene attacks, darting forward and grabbing Brown's wrist, twisting until bone breaks and the gun is dropped.

"Should have walked away," Keene says before ramming the broken glass into the exposed veins of Brown's wrist and pushing him away.

"Bravo," applauds Clarke, stepping out of the shadows. "Very impressive, Mr Keene."

Keene crouches and retrieves the gun, pointing it at Clarke.

"Inebriated to the point of disorientation and yet you still handle yourself like a professional." Clarke stops clapping and takes another step forward. "I haven't seen the like since Stephen... You're definitely his son."

"Then maybe he should have treated me like one." Keene lowers the gun, his posture visibly relaxing.

"You fucking prick!" Brown snarls, holding his wrist tightly. "I should..."

"Shut up!" Keene raises the gun and fires once without looking, the bullet smashing into the front of Brown's face only to exit less than a second later from the back in a violent eruption of skull, blood and liquefied brain matter.

Keene turns the gun on Clarke who stops in his tracks and lifts his hands in surrender.

"You're wrong about your father," he says. "I was stood at his side when shrapnel took half his face away... I carried him on my shoulders as he died." Clarke takes a slow step forward and reaches out, resting his hand on the barrel of the gun and pushing it down.

"There's no need for that here... we're both civilised people."

"I'm still not buying," says Keene, tossing the gun onto Brown's dead chest.

“You haven't heard my offer yet... At least give me the chance.” Clarke waits for a reply but Keene says nothing. “Very good,” he says and then continues. “Like you I'm no longer a soldier... I turned my back on active service many years ago... Now I'm more of a businessman.”

“Let me guess... Bible salesman.”

“Very funny, Keene, but no,” Clarke chuckles. “I found it was easier to stay with what I know... I supply services similar to those you used to offer.”

“Killers for hire,” says Keene. “Not a business you can advertise.”

“Not... yet lucrative none the less.”

“And this would interest me how?” Keene stares at Clarke.

“Cutting straight to the deal.” Clarke points at Keene and smiles. “I like that in a man... shows determination.” He reaches into his jacket, pulls out a folded contract and offers it to Keene. “A hundred thousand pounds for two days of your life.”

“I don't do that kind of work any more.”

“And I'm not asking you do to so,” Clarke replies. “I have a team, trained and ready to go... But I want them evaluated before I let them off the leash.”

“Do I look like a Drill Sergeant?” Despite his tone Keene glances at the contract.

“An observer, Mr Keene... That's all I ask.”

“Still not interested,” Keene snorts.

“No need to decide right now,” says Clarke, pulling open Keene's coat and slipping the contract into the inside pocket. “Think on it awhile.” Clarke turns and walks away.

“What about your boys?” Keene asks, but not really caring.

“They're fired, Mr Keene,” Clarke replies without looking back. “I only hire the best.” Clarke seems to become one with the shadows.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Hushed chatter fills the restaurant, the well dressed patrons talking amongst themselves about acquisitions, mergers, the latest haute couture and who was in with what crowd... socialite gossip at its best.

Keene enters, an unexpected arrival wearing jeans and a leather jacket. He heads straight for the dining area, the target in his sights.

“Excuse me, Sir,” blusters the Maître D'

“You're excused,” says Keene, pushing passed the weasely little shit and proceeding to make his way through the islands of tables. The Maître D' follows close behind him, apologises to his customers for the unannounced intrusion.

Keene takes a direct course for a table in the centre of the restaurant. Sat at the table is Clarke alongside three guests, one well dressed man and two, under dressed young women.

Keene stops at the table and waits, saying nothing as the Maître D' busies himself around Clarke.

“Mr Clarke... Mr Burke I am so sorry... But this gentleman was quite insistent.” The word 'gentlemen' is said with a curl of the lip.

“Its nothing to concern yourself with, Jean... I was hoping Mr Keene would find time to join us.” Clarke smiles.

Keene leans over the table and takes a King prawn from one of the young ladies plates.

“Hi,” she says. “I'm Rose.”

“I'm not staying,” says Keene, taking a bite from the prawn and dropping the tail end back on Rose's plate. “I just came to give you this.” Keene locks eyes with Clarke and tosses the contract onto the table.

“Thank you.” Clarke picks it up and sees the scrawled signature across the bottom. “I'm glad you decided to come on board.” He folds the contract and slips it into his jacket.

Keene nods and turns away, leaving by the same route he came, ignoring those who are now whispering about him and who he might be.

“Your transportation will arrive at five hundred hours,” Clarke says in a raised voice. “If you have any special requirements give them to the driver and they will be supplied.”

Keene shows no sign he is listening as he approaches the main door.

“And get a shave, Mr Keene... If you work for me I expect you to show some respect for yourself.”

Keene pauses at the door. He doesn't look back but he gives Clarke the finger before leaving, the door slamming shut behind him.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Its early and the streets are yet to become filled with morning commuters and Keene is thankful for this. He prefers the quiet to the constant drone of traffic and inane chatter.

Keene has changed into clean clothing, fresh black t-shirt and matching combats but

he still wears the same leather jacket over the top. He's also brushed his hair and had a shave, almost resembling the soldier he used to be.

He is travelling light, a force of habit ingrained from years of having no home. Everything he needs is stored inside the heavy duty kitbag sat next to his feet, a limited wardrobe of matching outfits and clean briefs.

Keene looks at his watch, annoyed that its five minutes passed the pick up. He is preparing to return to his apartment when the black Humvee pulls into the street and bares down on him. Keene holds his ground, his stare fixed on the driver's side of the windscreen. If need be he can draw the gun under his shoulder and empty the clip in seconds.

The Humvee squeals to a stop, rocking forward from the abruptness of the action. The door swings open and the driver jumps out, leaving the engine running.

"You must be Keene," he says, holding out his hand in greeting. "They call me Wedge."

"You're late." Keene picks up the kitbag and strides to the rear of the Humvee, yanking open the door.

Keene isn't the first pick up of the day and the back of the vehicle already holds two males and a female, all three dressed in Khaki.

Poole steps up next to Keene and makes brief introductions. "Jester... Poole and the pretty one is Tess."

"Looks like we got one more for the Glory Bus," moans Jester.

Keene throws his back up and then climbs in, Wedge shutting the door behind him.

"Welcome aboard," says Jester but Keene ignores him, taking a seat as the engine revs and they pull away.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Jess sits beside Keene. She is young, athletic and her time spent in combat is yet to leave any physical scars. But not all scars are on the outside and Keene can tell from the look in her eyes that she's seen the true nature of war and what it can force man to do.

Across from Keene, sitting side by side is Jester and Poole. The first is small and wiry looking and Keene can almost smell the '*crazy*' coming off him. He makes a mental note to keep a close eye on this one.

Poole is the stark opposite of Jester, a stock frame that carries a head capped with a

short cut afro. His dark skin glistens under a sheen of perspiration. Poole knows that Keene is weighing him up and allows his face to crack into a smile of gleaming white teeth.

“Hey, my man,” says Poole, thrusting out a hand. “Da name's Poole.”

“Lucky you.” Keene keeps his gaze on Poole, but makes no attempt to take the hand.

Keene never shakes a hand offered in greeting. Its a habit that has served him well. He prefers to watch the reaction of the other person, judging them on the subtlest of gestures.

He notes a waver in Poole's smile and the way he passes his hand over the afro. He also likes the way Poole never once breaks eye contact. In these few seconds Keene realises that Poole is a dangerous man... If you're his enemy.

He quickly decides that he likes Poole, not that he'll ever tell him. In fact Keene can't see them ever meeting again once the next two days are done.

Jester takes a packet of cigarettes from his combats and pulls one free with his teeth before lighting it. He inhales deeply on the smoke, holding it in his lungs and then blowing it out through his nose.

“Well looky what we got here, Lady and Gentleman,” says Jester, his accent thick, Southern American. “We got ourselves what the English call a hard bastard.” Jester takes another draw, this time blowing the smoke in Keene's direction.

“You want to watch that mouth, Jester,” Tess warns. “You've no idea who you're talking to.”

“Then why don't you enlighten me, little lady.” He raises the cigarette to his lips again.

“You ever hear of Corbin Keene?” Tess asks.

The confident smile drops from Jester's face and he lets the cigarette drop to the floor.

“Corbin fucking Keene.” Poole shakes his head. “We all heard da rumours... shit man.” He tries to hide the awe in his voice, but fails.

“Yeah... I heard he flipped out,” says Jester. “Killed three units under his command.”

Keene acts with punishing speed, kicking out with his right foot and grinding the heel of his boot into Jester's chest.

“I tried to warn you,” Jess states, rolling her eyes.

“Fuck you, bitch.” Jester struggles, trapped between Keene's boot and the back of his seat. “Looks like the rumours were true,” he hisses between gritted teeth.

“What else you heard about me?” asks Keene, twisting his foot from left to right.

“That you cut their fucking eyes out and ate them.” Jester's breathing is coming hard

and fast. "That it took a fully armed patrol to take you down."

"You believe that shit?" Keene's eyes narrow. "You think I'm a mindless killer?"

"Fuck man... what do I know?" The bravado has left Jester's voice.

"How'd you like to find out?" Keene asks the question and then stands down, slowly lowering his foot back to the floor.

"Crazy bastard," moans Jester, rubbing his chest. "They're gonna evaluate you as fucked in the head."

Tess laughs, a healthy sound that is out of place inside the Humvee.

What's so fucking funny?" Jester turns on her.

"Who'd you think's doing da evaluations?" Poole slaps his thigh and barks a laugh of his own.

"Screw you," snaps Jester and then slumps in his seat, folding his arms across his chest.

Tess reaches under her seat and pulls out a touch screen tablet... a fourth generation Adam unit, a model Keene has never seen before. "I was told to give you this, Sir." Tess hands Keene the tablet.

"Its just Keene... I stopped being Sir years ago," he takes the tablet, locates the power button and depresses it.

"So Keene... what the fuck really happened out there?" Jester breaks his short silence and Keene looks up at him.

"You can call me Sir." Keene returns his attention back to the high definition screen only to find it waiting for him to enter a password.

"You'll be needing this." Tess hands him a sealed envelope.

"Thanks Kid," Keene takes hold of the envelope but Tess doesn't release it.

"Its Tess... I stopped being a kid years ago." She holds Keene's stare until he nods. She doesn't miss the slight flicker of a smile that teases the corner of his mouth.

END OF TRANSMISSION

ASSHOLES AND ELBOWS...

DATE: 17/08/15

OPERATION: BRIEFING

LOCATION: MOBILE COMMAND CENTRE...

On any other day the clearing would be just that, a clearing in the woods, silent but for birdsong and the whisper of the breeze through the surrounding trees...

...But not today.

Three vehicles are parked up, two buff green Humvees, no markings and no plates. For all intents and purposes they are anonymous. The same can be said of the third and largest of the three, a modified articulated wagon, now a secure Mobile Command Centre.

On the opposite side of the clearing a series of tents have been erected, each one large enough to hold a small, single story building.

The only activity is off to one side of the tents, nearer the tree line. The group of four are all dressed in similar attire, three men and a woman.

One of the them sits on his own, legs crossed as he reads silently from a Bible he holds with one hand. In his other hand he fondles the beads of a Rosary. In a time long ago, before his home country had been engulfed in war he'd been a peaceful man... A Pastor.

The woman is also sat down, but not on the ground. She is resting upon the back of a giant as he does push ups. She uses a small knife to carve away at a piece of wood, slowly shaping it into the curved body of a Goddess. The sun plays over her jet black hair and when she looks up it catches her eyes and they flash red... A Ruby framed by a face of the smoothest caramel.

The giant beneath her pumps up and down on arms the size of tree trunks. He is yet to break a sweat. He once fought for something he believed in, freedom for the place he called home. His ancestors had survived the potato famine but an explosion had ended the family name so he'd taken a new one... Those who know him call him Blight.

The final member of the group is moving around them, toying with the heavy bladed knife in his right hand. He watches Ruby with a glint in his eye and, with the flick of his wrist, the knife leaves his hand and pierces the soil not inches from Blight's face.

The Irish giant jumps up in anger and Ruby is forced to leap from his back with feline agility.

"What's your fuckin' problem, Finch?" snaps Blight. "You coulda had me fuckin' eye out."

"Maybe I'm jealous," replies Finch, retrieving his knife. "Only one Señorita and you're

getting all the attention.” He licks his upper lip and Ruby gives him the finger.

“Maybe its the Irish charm,” Blight drops a mighty arm over Ruby's shoulder.

“Get used to your own company, Finch,” says Ruby. “You ain't got a hope in hell of touching this.” She runs her hand over her hip.

“Fucking tease.” Finch throws the knife, the blade embedding deeply in a nearby trunk.

“You would do well to read from the good book.” Pastor looks up from the Bible.

“And what's your good book say about killing for money, eh Pastor?” asks Blight.

“An eye for an eye, my friend.” Pastor slams the Bible shut and then grins from ear to ear. “A life for a life.”

“Why'd you even bother with that shit?” asks Finch, working the blade free from the sturdy oak.

“It eases my mind to know that forgiveness awaits me.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” says Ruby. “Dios ha muerto.”

“Any belief is better than none at all.”

The conversation is brought to end by the arrival of another Humvee, the tyres kicking up a cloud of dust in their wake.

“Here comes the 'B' Team,” sneers Finch, sheathing the knife and joining the others.

“Loosen up, Finch,” says Blight. “Its only an evaluation... Its gonna be like playing army when you was a nipper.”

“I was more of a doctors and nurses kind of man.” Finch winks at Ruby.

“In your dreams, Hijo de puta,” Ruby snaps back.

The Humvee comes to a sliding, sideways stop, a showy handbrake turn to announce its arrival. The rear door swings open and Keene jumps down, arching his back and looking up at the sun.

“I take it back,” Blight says, instantly recognising the man in black. “This is gonna be anything but a game.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Inside the Mobile Command Centre it is cool, the air kept at a steady temperature by a top of the range environmental control system. Along the entire length of one wall is a series of colour monitors which, right now, show the clearing and its inhabitants.

The monitors are being watched by Chris and Harvey, both nerds of the highest order. As with everything else Clarke only buys the best. The two nerds are, in turn, observed by Valerie, a harsh looking disciplinarian. She scribbles down a quick succession of notes onto a pad and then stands, looking down her angular nose at Chris and Harvey as she heads towards the rear of the command centre.

“Frigid bitch,” whispers Chris.

Valerie hears the hushed insult but chooses not to say anything. She can reprimand them both later and when she does they'll know about it. For now she has work to do.

She reaches a solid, air tight door and knocks on it three times, a rapid rattle of bony knuckle on polymer resin.

“Enter,” Clarke calls from the other side.

Valerie enters the office and closes the door carefully, not wanting to disturb Clarke's current phone conversation any more than is necessary.

“I want those satellite uplinks within the next hour,” demands Clarke. “No excuses... Just get it done.” He ends the call, slamming the receiver down into the cradle and then looks up with a smile.

“Mr Clarke,” She says.

“Valerie... You have news?”

“Keene has just arrived, Sir,” she tells him what he wants to hear. “Everyone is here.”

“Very good,” says Clarke, standing up and making his way around the table. “I best get ready to introduce myself... don't you think?”

“Yes, Mr Clarke, Sir.”

He places an arm around Valerie and the stern look on her face quivers ever so slightly with excitement. “I think we should have dinner, sometime,” he says, leading her out of the office and back into the command centre.

“That would be good, Mr Clarke, Sir.”

“Call me Noel,” he whispers in her ear and then pats her on the rear. “But for now we must get back to work.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene is surrounded by those he's been hired to evaluate and he finds their attention quite daunting. Not that they'd ever know it from the stoic expression on his face.

"I hear you killed more people than the potato famine," asks Blight.

"An overestimation," replies Keene, slinging the kit bag over his shoulder and walking towards the mobile command centre. In his free hand he still holds the Adam unit.

The group fall in line behind Keene and follow him. He can feel their eyes burning into the back of his head.

"He ain't one for talking, then," says Blight to Ruby.

"He's fucking insane if you ask me," offers Jester, rubbing his chest.

"Like Christ he is a man of actions... not words," says Pastor. "He has a cross to bear and it weighs on him."

"I doubt your Almighty would be happy with the comparison," sneers Finch.

They've almost reached the command centre when the door glides open and Clarke steps out to greet them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he says loudly. "I'm glad you could all make it... And Mr Keene." Clarke approaches with his hand outstretched.

Keene pretends he hasn't noticed, taking pleasure in the twitch of annoyance in the upper corner of Clarke's left eye.

"He ain't one for making friends," states Jester.

"I'm here to do a job... not widen my social circle."

"Indeed, Mr Keene." Clarke lowers his hand and steps around Keene. "I would be right in thinking you have read the brief?"

"For what its worth," replies Keene. "How about you tell us what we're doing here?"

"He's got a point, Clarke," Finch steps up to their new employer. "What's all this evaluation crap?"

"By employing you I will be investing a considerable amount of money," explains Clarke. "With that in mind I'd like to be assured that I'm getting what I... and my clients are paying for."

"You've seen our histories... You know we're good for it," says Jester.

"That maybe the case, Mr..." Clarke pauses, knowing from the profile he's read more than once what buttons he's pushing on the man facing him.

"Jester... just Jester."

"Very good, Jester," says Clarke. "This is not the kind of work any of you will be used to." He eyes them all up. "Your orders will be vague, if at all... The enemy will not be what

you're expecting.” He turns back to face Jester. “I need to know you're going to pull that trigger no matter what the target.”

“Just tell me what direction to aim.” Finch mimes holding a rifle. “And... Bang!”

“What if I told you to kill a child, Mr Finch?” Clarke asks. “Would you be willing to take that life?”

Finch hesitates, lowering the mimed rifle.

“I'd fucking do it,” says Jester, an eager grin on his face.

“Then I think we'll have a long working relationship.”

Keene remains silent, disliking Clarke more by the minute. He watches the man as he begins to pace and wonders if he'd be doing the world a favour if he just killed Clarke now. It would be so easy to step up and push a knife through the soft tissue of the lower back, ruining the kidney with a twist of the blade. And even easier to pull a gun and shoot... one squeeze of the trigger... one bullet.

“The next two days will decide whether I retain you on the payroll or cast you aside,” Clarke continues to explain. “The choices you make and the actions you take will be of great importance.” Clarke pauses and points at Keene. “This man will be overseeing the entire project and relaying the required data to myself and my team.”

“What does this test entail?” asks Pastor.

“I shall leave Mr Keene to fill you in on the details.” Clarke turns away and strides back towards the mobile command centre.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene sits behind a small table, scrolling through the details on the touch sensitive screen of the Adam whilst also keeping an eye on the group as they arm themselves from the selection of weaponry supplied by Clarke.

“No expense spared.” Jester picks up two light weight semi automatic Uzi pistols.

“You're not going to hurt anyone with those fucking' peashooters.” Blight grins as he hoists an oversized tactical assault rifle into his arms. “You want one of these... a real man's weapon.”

“We all know I'm the only one with a real man's weapon.” Finch grabs his crotch and thrusts his hips in Ruby's direction.

“Do you ever give it a rest?” Ruby asks as Finch blows her a kiss. “Cabrón.”

“More a distance man myself,” says Wedge, picking up a long barrelled sniper rifle with built in telescopic sights and silencer. “Straight between the eyes from over four hundred metres.”

“I hear you, Hermano.” Ruby picks up an identical rifle and slings it over her shoulder.

“She never calls me brother,” complains Finch.

“That's because she doesn't like you,” chuckles Wedge.

“Fuck you both!” Finch turns away, standing at the opening of the tent and lighting up a smoke.

“If you're done?” Keene slams a hand down on the table and they all turn to face him.

“You sure I've got your attention?”

“All ears, Boss,” says Poole.

Keene looks them over one more time and then begins. “There's a facility to the North-East of here... About an hour on foot.” He pauses, waiting for further complaints but they don't come. “You'll split into groups... Unit One and Unit Two.”

“So far so good,” says Wedge.

“Your orders are to scout the location, eliminate any and all sentries and then gain entry to the main building.”

“Den what, Boss?” Poole asks. “All sounds too easy.”

“Once inside Unit One will secure the main building from external attack... Unit Two will locate and disable the scientific staff.” Keene looks at Jester. “Staff members are not to be hurt... so much as a bruise and you will answer to me.”

“Dat it?” Poole asks, unimpressed. “What we gonna do for da rest of da two days?”

“Secondary orders will be relayed to me by six hundred hours tomorrow.” Keene doesn't want to but adds... “Questions?”

“Yeah, I got a fucking question,” says Jester. “This is an evaluation exercise, right?”

“Correct.” Keene nods.

“Then why are we running with live ammo?”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Clarke sits behind his desk, flicking through papers and drinking from a brandy glass. Life is good and money makes it better. He doesn't seem surprised when the office door smashes open and Keene storms over to his desk.

“What's your fucking game. Clarke?” Keene slams the ammo clip down on the wooden surface, chipping the varnish.

“Did you really expect anything less?” Clarke answers with a question. “Do you want your men walking into a combat zone without the means to defend themselves.?”

“Bollocks... This was supposed to be a glorified training exercise.”

“And it is, Mr Keene.” Clarke leans back in his plush leather chair. “But where is the edge without the threat of death?” He pauses for effect. “Your father taught me that.”

“I didn't sign up for this shit.”

“I don't care what you thought you signed on for.” Clarke pushes the chair back and stands. “We have an agreement and you will honour it.” Clarke walks around the desk. “Every man stationed at that facility knows the risk... they have taken payment and they will fight to earn it... If you've lost the stomach for death get your men to gain entry by stealth... The choice is yours.”

“They're not my men,” Keene snarls.

“Read the small print, Mr Keene... for the next two days they are.”

Keene snatches the ammo clip from the desk, dragging it across the surface and causing damage that can't be repaired.

Clarke watches Keene leave, running his fingertips over the deep scratch left by the ammo clip. “Valerie,” he shouts. “Order me a new desk.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene leads the way through the trees, making no attempt to hide the fact he's there... not yet. The moon is full and the sky is clear, beams of silver breaking through the treetops giving the forest an eerie illumination that clashes with the artificial light coming from the perimeter of their destination...

... Facility 13

They are within one hundred metres of the edge of the woodland when Keene stops in his tracks and drops to a crouched position, raising a closed fist to signal the group to stop.

“Ruby, Finch, Blight and Pastor.” He uses their names as if he's known them years. “You're Unit One.”

“Hey Ruby,” says Jester. “You know what that means, right?” He grins widely. “You get to spend the night with the Finch.”

“Paro!” Ruby curses and spits in Finch's direction.

“Do you think this is a fucking joke?” Keene snaps, spinning to face them. “If you do you can piss off now... I don't have time for liabilities.”

“Just trying to ease the tension.” Finch backs away.

Keene gives it a moment and then turns to face the others. “Wedge, Jester, Tess and Poole,” barks Keene. “You're Unit Two... You know your orders so get moving.”

“What about you?” Wedge asks.

“I'm going to sit here,” replies Keene, settling down on the ground and pulling out a hip flask. “I'm going to have a drink and wait for you lot to drop a bollock.”

“Nice to know you have faith in us.” Wedge turns to leave.

“I had any faith beaten out of me a long time ago.” Keene unscrews the lid on the hip flask and raises it to his lips, drinking deeply. When he's done he finds them still looking at him. “What are you waiting for...? I'm not here to wipe your arse.”

Tess leads Unit Two off to the left as Blight takes point for Unit One. Keene watches them leave.

“Here's to you Jenkins,” he whispers. “And that feeling in your water.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Wedge moves on his stomach through the undergrowth, stopping only when he has a clear view of the facility. He takes the sniper rifle from around his shoulder, flicks down the stand under the barrel and then lays it out in front of himself. He closes one eye, always the left, and peers through the sights, swivelling the weapon silently from one edge of the perimeter to the other.

Like all of the others he is wearing a throat mounted microphone which he touches inadvertently before talking. “I got four sentries,” he says in a low voice. “Two on the move, one having a sly smoke and number four is taking a piss.”

“Equal numbers this side,” Ruby's reply comes in crystal clear through Wedge's earpiece. “Lazy bastards are playing cards.”

“Bet I can take all four before you,” says Wedge, laying down the challenge.

“You're on,” replies Ruby. “On three... One... Two...”

Wedge doesn't wait for three, squeezing off four rapid shots as he swings the barrel from left to right. The rifle makes no sound and each bullet is on the mark, a throat shot that

rips out the voice box before splintering the spinal column.

“I win,” announces Wedge.

“Trampo de mierda!”

“No one likes a sore loser, Ruby.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Fuck you, Wedge,” Ruby curses under her breath, returning her eye to the telescopic sight. If there's one thing she hates its a cheater.

She quickly takes in the four targets, grouped together around the bonnet of a battered Landrover. She considers taking her frustration out on them, maybe kneecap them all first.

Ruby shakes her head, deciding against it. She sighs and pulls the trigger four times, watching each head shot spew a fine mist of red into the night air. They hit the floor without even a grunt, the playing cards scattering around them.

Job done.

She stands up straight, lifting the rifle and slinging it across her back, the movement so fluid it is hard to distinguish where she ends and the weapon starts.

Blight steps up next to her, doing his best to stretch the curly cable on his earpiece so that it will sit comfortable in his ear. “Unit Two... we are heading in.”

“See you on the inside,” responds Jester. “The beers are on me.”

Blight nods at Ruby and they head down towards the perimeter fence, closely followed by Finch and Pastor.

Ruby takes on a crouched position as does Blight, but he may as well not bother, his hulking frame almost impossible to disguise. Ruby steps around the four dead guards, not stopping to check for vital signs. Its too late for that.

Pastor pauses and crouches down next to the first corpse and starts making the sign of the cross above the lifeless face.

“Come on Pastor,” Finch hisses. “This ain't Sunday fucking service.”

Ruby and Blight have already reached the perimeter fence. The Irish giant reaches into a pocket on the lower leg of his combats and pulls out a compact pair of wire cutters. As he starts cutting the fence Pastor and Finch drop into place behind him.

“Pastor, can you cut the power to the lights only?” Blight asks without slowing in his task.

“Should be, as you say, a piece of cake.” Pastor nods his head.

Blight makes the last few cuts and returns the cutters to the pocket they came from. He checks again that his earpiece is secure.

“OK,” he says. “Let's show Keene that we know what we're doing.” He yanks down on the section of fence, creating a makeshift doorway he holds open for the others. “Let's go.”

Ruby gives Blight a cheeky smile, ducks down and slips through, heading off to the right. She is followed by Pastor. Finch is next, crouching low as he slinks away to the left. Blight looks around one last time and then squeezes through, pulling the wire mesh shut behind him.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

A lone guard sits in the main gate house. If it makes you feel better to give him a name we can do so... Rob. It won't make any difference to the outcome.

Rob is sat with his feet up, casually flicking through an adult magazine, admiring the ladies spread out across the pages.

At first he pays no attention to the movement in his peripheral vision but when he does look up he is surprised to see Jester, Poole and Wedge blatantly walking towards the main gate.

Rob stashes the magazine and gets to his feet, noting another, Tess bringing up the rear. He reaches for the holster at his hip but Jester is quicker, pulling out a silenced handgun and squeezing off three successive shots.

The last thing Rob sees is the glass spider webbing and then he twitches as the first two shots hit him in the chest. The third hits him in the side of the neck, puncturing the jugular and painting the inside of the gatehouse a vivid crimson.

Jester steps up to the window and punches loose the shattered glass with a gloved fist. He reaches in and depresses a green button.

Before the gate has fully opened they have all slipped through.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Clarke is pacing back and forth, his hands now placed firmly in his pockets. Valerie watches him, knowing he is nervous. You don't work for a man this long and not learn to

read him.

Chris and Harvey watch the monitors, flicking between cameras as they follow the progress of Units One and Two.

“Both units have breached the outer perimeter, Mr Clarke,” Valerie announces with a hint of excitement in her voice. “Phase one is complete.”

“Very good, my dear,” says Clarke before turning to Harvey. “Patch me through to the buyers.”

“Yes Sir!” Harvey taps away on a keyboard and six of the monitors flicker, the images of Units One and Two replaced with six faces, each one a different nationality.

“Good evening, Gentlemen,” Clarke greets them.

“Mr Clarke,” replies a chorus of various accents.

“I hope you all have your cheque books at the ready,” chuckles Clarke. “Because when you see what I have to offer you will want to be the winning bidder.” The men on the screens applaud him.

Clarke turns away from the monitors and walks over to Chris, resting a hand on each shoulder and leaning in close to his ear.

“Activate Phase Two,” Clarke whispers.

“Activating Phase Two.”

END OF TRANSMISSION

PHASE TWO...

DATE: 18/07/15

PROJECT: INFILTRATION

LOCATION: FACILITY 13...

Deep within the facility, behind locked doors, reinforced walls and wire impregnated glass over two foot thick is a room. The room is sterile, nothing from the outside world enters and, more importantly, nothing from the inside ever leaves. A light mist covers the floor, only a few inches deep, but thick and swirling. It reflects the dull green glow from the lights recessed in the ceiling.

In the centre of the room floats what, at first glance, appears to be a sculpture, a huge

seamless tear drop of opaque glass. Something moves within the tear drop... something humanoid in shape but inhuman in nature. Its outline is blurred, out of focus, but if you were to pass through the glass you would be horrified by the bizarre appearance of the creature's torso, a mass of writing faces from its neck down to its sexless groin. The faces strain against the body that holds them, their mouths screaming silently for release.

The creature's head is smooth, an almost featureless black mirror topped with a Mohawk of porcupine like quills. The mirrored surface of its face is broken only by a mouthful of razor sharp teeth, an obscene grin that screams hunger.

Its arms and legs are lean and muscular, designed for the hunt and for the kill, its fingers tipped with barbed talons.

The creature has no name... It just is. But those who work here... Those who study it refer to it as Project Shredder.

The light in the room changes, flickering from green to red and the Shredder senses the change. Its fingers twitch and flex in anticipation...

...in expectation of release.

The front of the tear drop lets out a hiss and the front swings open, an invisible seam that parts with ease. A thick jelly spills from the bottom of the opening and disappears into the mist. From within the tear drop comes the sound of soft breathing, a slow intake and exhalation of air. The breathing increases in tempo, joined by a new sound...

...A sound akin to rending muscle, tearing flesh and breaking bone. The Shredder cries out in pain, a single scream that is followed by silence.

The Shredder steps out of the tear drop, stretching its back and its arms... no longer the creature of nightmares. It has taken on a new form... A human form.

It rolls its head from side to side, cracking and popping the newly developed tendons as it accesses the memories of the face it now wears. The Shredder smiles. "Masters," it whispers the name, studying its hands as if for the first time.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Helen Moore moves around the lab like its second nature. She spends more hours in this room than she does in her own home. She isn't complaining. She's always felt more comfortable around microscopes and test tubes than she has soft furnishings and garden plants.

Its late but she's still working, along with three others. There's little else to do with her spare time in the facility so more often than not she decides to work through to the early hours of the following day.

As she passes Cole Bateman she nudges him, making him look up from the selection of Petri dishes he's been studying for the last two hours. He sits up, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "That's me done," he says. "If I keep this up I'm gonna end up with a permanent squint."

Mal Strachan moves away from the microscope he's sitting over and looks over at Bateman with a friendly smile. "You having a drink before you turn in?" he asks.

"Now that's an idea," says Bateman. "What do you two say?"

Moore looks across to the other female scientist in the room, Janet Howe who nods her head. "Why not," she says.

"We'll meet you in the canteen in ten minutes," says Moore.

Bateman throws his glasses down next to the Petri dishes and stands up just as the lights blink out.

"Shit," curses Strachan a second before the emergency lights kick in, a pulsing, sickly green. "Bloody tech department again."

Bateman is about to agree when the silence is broken by a scream.

"Jesus." Bateman reaches for the door handle but stops as the sound of gunfire brings an end to the screaming. "Shit."

The door to the lab bursts inwards, smashing into Bateman with enough force to send the cartilage of his nose into his brain. He is dead before he hits the ground. Moore starts screaming as an armed guard, one she sees often yet can't remember his name, runs into the lab. He looks around, his one good eye glazed with shock. The other eye is missing, that side of his face torn open by two ragged gashes that run from his hairline to his chin.

He staggers into the room, followed by two other armed men. They back into the room, taking it in turns to open fire on the corridor outside. The muzzle flashes, mixed with the pulsing green of the emergency lights causes a strobe effect that paints events in a dream like quality.

The two guards reach the centre of the room, still firing at the open doorway when the Shredder steps into view. The guards stop shooting, seeing the naked man and then looking at each other in confusion.

“Fools,” says the Shredder stepping into the room.

The guards see it's eyes, the dull silver sat in the human face and they know something is wrong.

“So futile,” says the Shredder and then charges at them.

The two guards open fire but the barrage of high powered ammunition does nothing to slow the Shredder down. The creature hits them hard, claws tearing them open from neck to navel. As they fall to the floor the Shredder drops upon them, mouth wide open.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Ruby, Finch and Blight converge on a set of double doors at the rear of the facility. All three of them take up crouched positions on either side of the doors, backs to the wall and eyes alert.

“We secure?” asks Blight.

“Area's clear,” says Ruby and Finch offers nothing but a nod of his head.

Pastor runs up and drops down facing all three of them. He pulls up his sleeve and looks at his watch. “Black out in five... four... three.” As he counts he plays with the rosary. “Two... one.”

From somewhere over to their left there is a loud pop... not a bang as you'd expect... just a pop and the lights go out. Blight jumps up, faces the doors and kicks out at the point where they meet. All his weight is behind the kick but they don't budge. He tries a second time with the same result.

“Bollocks,” he curses, ready to try a third time.

“Let a real man at it.” Finch pushes passed Blight, draws a handgun from a shoulder holster and points it at the lock. He pulls the trigger three times and then kicks out, throwing the doors inwards.

“Shit!” snaps Finch upon seeing movement just before the guards inside open fire on him.

Blight pulls out a Desert Eagle, just about the only handgun he can hold without it looking like a toy. He steps into the doorway and carefully lets off two shots and all goes quiet.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

It's been a long, boring night and the guards standing in the reception area are more interested in the young nurse filing paperwork than they are in doing their job.

"Look at the tits on her," one of them says, a leer like smile on his face. "What I couldn't do for them."

The young nurse looks up and curls her lip in disgust and the other two guards burst out laughing. The joviality is brought to a halt as the lights flicker and then die, replaced with the dim glow of the emergency lighting.

"What's going on?" bleats the young nurse.

"Trust Clarke to run the drill a day early... the bastard."

Without warning the main doors burst open and a smoking cannister rattles across the tiled floor, spins on one edge and then comes to rest.

"What the fuck?" The guards start backing away from the cannister, already coughing as the thick smoke fills the room.

As if in reply to the hacked query Tess enters the reception wearing a slimline gas mask. She takes two strides and attacks the nearest guard with a quick succession of well aimed blows to the face and neck. Before he can fall to the floor she wraps an arm around him and hugs him tightly to her front, using him as a human shield as the second guard opens fire.

Bullets tear into the dead guard's torso and Tess feels the impact of each and every one as a dull thud. She raises her handgun and squeezes off one, careful shot that hits the second guard in the centre of his chest, lifting him off his feet as a mist of vivid red stains the smoke filled room.

"Shut up and get down," Tess orders the panicked nurse as she drops the dead guard to the floor.

The remaining guard fights against the coughing fit and the burning in his eyes, raising his rifle in Tess' general direction but she is ready, her weapon already lined up with his head. "Don't even think about it," she warns.

The guard pauses, weighing up his limited options and then slowly lowers the rifles and then lets it fall to the floor before dropping to his knees and clasping his hands behind his head. "It was only a drill," he stammers.

"All clear," Tess shouts, her gun still levelled on the guard. "Get your arses in here."

Jester strides in first, also wearing a gas mask. Before Tess can attempt to stop him he

raises his gun in a fluid motion, squeezing the trigger once. Its a clean shot that enters just below the guard's left eye and takes off the back of his head.

The young nurse screams and Jester responds, spinning on his heel as he shoots. All three bullets hit the target, two tearing into the nurse's chest and the third snapping her head backwards as it turns her brain into a grey matter smoothie.

“What the fuck, Jester?” Tess yells. “They'd surrendered.”

“Looked dangerous to me, darling,” says Jester with a grin as he steps over the first of the bodies.

“Which part of minimum casualties didn't you understand?” Tess asks. “Keene's going to piss blood when he sees this.”

“Screw you and screw Keene... This is war and I'm playing to win,” snaps Jester.

Poole and Wedge have entered behind Jester and are taking in the area through the large eye holes in their gas masks.

“Ya gonna fuck up ya karma with dis shit, man.” Poole pushes Jester out of his way.

“Yeah, well shit happens.” Jester steps over another bloodied corpse and then heads towards another set of double doors. “Get used to it.” As he pushes through the doors he pulls off the gas mask and tosses it to one side.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Blight grabs Ruby by the arm and pulls her behind him as two armed men run out from a side corridor, weapons raised and firing sporadically in the direction they have just come. They show no interest in Blight or the others, intent on destroying whatever follows them.

“Hey!” shouts Blight.

The two men spin to face Blight, fingers still tightly held down on triggers. Bullets tear into the walls, floor and ceiling.

“Shit!” Blight realises his mistake and opens fire with the tactical assault rifle. The two armed men don't so much as twitch as dance as high powered hollow points tear them apart, leaving little more than tattered mannequins to fall to the floor.

“Come on,” orders Blight, leading the way towards the sound of gunfire and muted screams.

“A little over the top,” laughs Finch as they make their way around the two corpses.

“I'm starting to like you, Blight.”

“Well don't,” replies the man giant. “You and me ain't going to be friends... not in this life and not in the next.”

Pastor lowers his head in respect for the dead and fondles his rosary as he says a silent prayer before carrying on.

Blight stops at the end of the corridor and signals for the others to split up, sending Finch and Pastor off to the left and taking Ruby with him to the right. None of them look back and none of them see the Shredder – now looking like Strachan - step out into the corridor. In its taloned hand it holds Moore's ankle, dragging her unconscious form behind it.

The Shredder stops and sniffs the air, cocking its head to one side as if remembering something from a long time ago. It smiles, the human lips parting to reveal vicious fangs. “Keene,” it whispers.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“You think Jester beat us to it?” Ruby asks as she takes in the bodies that litter the corridor.

“He may be mad,” replies Blight, shaking his head. “But he ain't this fuckin' crazy.”

Blight has to bite back the vomit rising in his throat. He's seen many atrocities in times of conflict but nothing like the massacre spread out before him. These people haven't just been killed, they've been slaughtered, shredded. Any chance of identification is lost forever in a liquefied mass of human waste matter.

Ruby picks up the pace, heading for a ruined door hanging loose in the frame at the end of the corridor. She wants to get this over with and leave, the cloying aroma of blood and expelled excrement making her sick to the stomach. She's seen more death than most but she's never witnessed anything on this scale.

The door has been hit with a great force and hangs at an odd angle, only one hinge keeping it in place. Ruby kicks out at it twice and it snaps out of her way, a wide enough gap for her to squeeze through.

“Holy Mother of Mary,” gasps Blight at what awaits them on the other side.

“She had nothing to do with this.” The sound of Pastors voice makes Blight jump and he spins around to find the Eastern European standing amongst the gruel covering the

corridor floor.

“We check for casualties and then we get the fuck out of here,” orders Blight, stepping back to allow the new arrivals to enter the lab.

Ruby starts working her way along the far side of the room, leaving a trail of footprints in the semi-congealed blood that coats the floor like a giant scab. She comes to the first body, a scientist who's spine has been ripped out through his back. His smock is stained red and the tattered edges make it difficult to distinguish between flesh and fabric.

Ruby lifts his head by the hair, a thick drizzle of blooded tinged mucus forming a bridge from his blue lips to the keyboard under him. The keys have left a series of brick-like indentations in his cheek. She takes one look at the missing lower jaw and the part mauled tongue and decides against checking for a pulse.

Pastor slowly pulls a red hot soldering iron from the neck of a dead guard. Smoke rises from the wound and blood sizzles on the heated metal shaft. Pastor's nose curls at the smell, a rancid aroma like burned pork.

Finch takes the opposite side of the room, trying his best to avoid the drips of body matter that fall from the freshly plastered ceiling. He glances down at the floor and makes a quick count of the loose teeth scattered around his feet. He moves on, using the barrel of one of the Uzi pistols to flip over a severed hand, studying the markings where three fingers have been torn away.

Finch moves on, crouching next to one of the female scientists, wiping blood from her identity tag and reading the name. “Howe.” He reaches out and presses two fingers firmly against her carotid artery, searching for a pulse.

“You got anything?” asks Blight.

“Yeah,” replies Finch. “This ones alive. “But only just.”

Howe's eyes snap open and dart about in terror, searching for something she doesn't really want to see. She sees Finch looming above her, his hand at her neck and panic takes over. “Help me!” she screams lashing out and raking her nails along Finch's cheek.

“Crazy bitch,” growls Finch.

“Locco Perra.” Ruby watches as Finch pulls back his clenched fist, more than ready to bring it down in Howe's face.

Finch feels a hand grasp his wrist and he spins away from Howe, eager to vent his anger on whoever dares touch him.”

“I wouldn't do that if I was you,” says Keene, glaring at Finch.

“Somebody help me,” whimpers Howe, pulling her knees up in front of her chest.

Keene and Finch remain locked until Finch exhales slowly, the tension easing from his tensed arm. Keene nods and releases him before turning to face Pastor. “I want her sedated and under lock and key.”

“I watch her like good Shepard watches flock, yes?”

“And keep that wanker away from her,” orders Keene, indicating Finch.

“I understand.” Nods Pastor. “That one is like wolf.”

Finch lets out a low howl just as Jester barges into the room and looks around. “Fuck... Did I miss all the fun?”

END OF TRANSMISSION

NOT ALONE

DATE: 18/08/15

PROJECT: LOCK DOWN

LOCATION: FACILITY 13...

“We locked down?” Keene asks from his makeshift base of operations as Finch enters the canteen.

“Tighter than the proverbial duck's,” Finch replies, using his elbow to smash the front of the nearest vending machine. “Nothings coming in and nothings getting out.” he starts pulling out snack bars and bags of crisps, tossing them across the room.

“Over here,” Jester holds up his hand and Finch throws him a Snickers bar. “Shit dude, I'm allergic to nuts.” He passes the snack bar to Poole.

“I ain't hungry, man,” Poole says, dropping the chocolate next to the half empty bottle of Jack Daniels supplied by Jester. “Wid what we seen, none of us should be hungry.” He shakes his fist as if about to roll the dice, only to release four tiny bones onto the table top. “Dis ain't good,” he says, studying the bones with a frown before scooping them up again.

“Nice fucking set up they got here,” states Finch, dropping his freshly pilfered stash on the table. “Better than what I got at home.” From his bag he pulls a six pack of Budweiser.

"It ain't bad," agrees Jester, picking up the bottle of Jack and taking a swig.

"You going to join us, big guy?" Finch asks, sliding a bottle of Bud towards Blight.

"I ain't drinking this fuckin' shite." Blight sends the bottle straight back. "Where's the fuckin' Guinness."

The Adam tablet laid in front of Keene lets out a single chime and he glances down, tapping the touch screen and scrolling down with efficient speed. "Don't be getting comfortable," he says, looking up. "We're not finished yet."

"Not finished?" moans Jester. "You're fucking kidding, right... Did you not see that shit in the lab?"

"Why? Did it put the wind up you, Jester?" asks Keene with a grin. "You Yanks are all the same."

Bunch of fairies if you ask me," says Wedge. "Shitting yourself over nothing."

"Nothing!?" snaps Jester.

"Clarke's trying to put us on edge," explains Wedge. "See if we drop the ball under pressure."

"He's right," adds Tess. "We've got to keep a cool head and follow orders."

"Which would be?" asks Ruby, looking at Keene who taps at the touch screen once again.

"You're to set up two base camps," he replies, reading from the Adam. "Unit Two... You're to take the South Wing of the facility." He pauses. "Unit One... You stay here with me."

"What about Pastor?" asks Finch.

"He stays with the woman until I say otherwise."

"Fuck... That puts us down a man," Finch snaps.

"My heart bleeds for you," Tess jokes.

Maybe Keene should send you with us," replies Finch with a grin and glancing over at Ruby. "What do you say to a threesome?"

"Not a fucking chance, Finch," Keene growls.

Finch stands with a scowl on his face, hooking his fingers into the remainder of the six pack.

"You can leave that here," says Keene.

Finch throws the six pack down and storms out the door. Ruby and Blight follow him

without saying a word, only a quick roll of the eyes from Ruby.

“Jester... Wedge,” Tess barks. “You take first watch.”

“Who made you the fucking boss?” asks Jester with contempt.

“I did,” states Keene, leaning back and putting his feet up on the table. “You don't like it then tough shit.”

“Put a woman in charge and the world falls apart.” Jester leaves the room with a whispered parting shot.

“Anyone ever tell you you're an asshole?” says Wedge, following Jester out the door.

“All the fucking time, man... all the fucking time.”

Poole waits until they've gone and then strides over to Keene and sits opposite him.

“We need to talk, boss.” He releases the bones and they scatter next to the Adam tablet.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Pastor sits alone, happy to listen to nothing more than his own breathing as he flicks through the tattered looking Bible. Being alone is something he appreciates now, but it hasn't always been that way. In another life he enjoyed being surrounded by the people he loved... The people who loved him.

That was a long time ago and he's been forced to learn the hard way that its easier to be alone... Safer.

He shuts the Bible, the sound so hollow its heartbreaking. He drops the book in his lap and leans his head forward, closing his eyes for a moment of contemplation.

“Such a sad species,” announces the Shredder as it steps into the corridor.

Pastor's head snaps up, his hand resting on the side arm at his waist. He squints at the shadowy figure, not recognising the naked man now walking steadily towards him. Pastor stands, the Bible held tightly in his other hand.

“I pity you,” says the Shredder.

“You should not be here.” Pastor stands. “This area is restricted.”

The Shredder stares back at Pastor from within the human mask it wears. “I go where I please and none shall stop me.” It continues to approach Pastor.

“My God,” Pastor gasps, seeing the blank silver that fills the Shredder's eyes. “Have you forsaken me?” he asks, holding the Bible against his chest.

“God... An interesting concept.” The Shredder lashes out, grabbing Pastor by the

throat. "Interesting... But ill conceived." Its fingers elongate, the barbed talons sinking into flesh and muscle.

Pastor thrashes as blood pours from his neck, flows down his front and puddles around his twitching feet. The Bible falls from his grip and splashes in the liquid red, the old pages soaking up the fresh blood.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Clarke sits and watches everything playing out on the series of monitors, impressed with his new weapon and what it has achieved in such a short time. It has out-surpassed any initial expectations and has adapted better than the experts had predicted.

Clarke takes a step closer, focusing on the flickering image on a single screen, watching as the Shredder enters the room housing Howe. On the next screen lays Pastor, slowly bleeding out onto the tiled floor.

"I love my job." Clarke smiles at the look on Howe's face as she backs away, realising that the man in the room with her isn't Strachan. "Its perfect," sighs Clarke as she pushes herself into the corner, the Shredder moving closer, reaching out for her with blood covered talons.

"The bids have started coming in, Mr Clarke," announces Chris.

"Excellent," Clarke says, moving along to face the expectant faces of the bidders. "I see I've peaked your interest," he addresses them with a fixed business like smile. "But rest assured this is merely a teaser of the subjects full capabilities."

"Mr Clarke." Takashi Heikado nods a greeting.

"Heikadosan." Clarke returns the gesture with a measured respect.

"Can you please tell us more about the origins of the subject?" Heikado asks.

"I sincerely apologise, Heikadosan, but no," Clarke replies. "Details are classified until the winning bidder has made payment," he pauses a moment. "In full."

"Most unprofessional... I am unused to such forms of business," Heikado snorts in derision.

"If you're displeased then you are free to leave the table, Heikadosan." Clarke nods ever so slightly. "No one will stop you." The annoyance in Clarke's voice is clear, this is his game and they will play by his rules.

"You show a great lack of respect, Mr Clarke." Heikado shakes his head. "You may

consider my interest withdrawn.”

“As you wish.”

Heikado bows his head once and then the monitor turns to static with a burst of white noise that causes Valerie to flinch.

“I want him dead before sunrise,” Clarke snaps, linking his hands behind his back.

“Was that such a wise move, Sir?” Valerie asks. “One bidder down so early in the proceedings?”

“Trust me, my dear.” Clarke winks at her, confidence oozing from every pore. “Once the others see what this beast is capable of you'll loose count of all the fucking zeros.” Clarke returns to the monitors that show the interior of the facility. He watches as a bleeding Pastor tires to pull himself upright.

“They won't know what's hit them.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Pastor knows that death is close, he's seen what it looks like often enough to know its now waiting for him. He can feel his lungs slowly filling with blood, each breath becoming harder, air bubbling at the ragged wound that used to be his throat.

Pastor tries to reach out for the Shredder as it steps passed him, an unconscious Howe slung over its shoulder. His grip is as weak as his breath and his hand falls back with a wet splash into the blood pooling around him, sending out a slow moving ripple across the mirrored surface of thick red.

“Give us this day... Our daily bread,” he prays, blood staining his lips and teeth. “And forgive us our trespass... As we forgive those who trespass against us.” As the words pass his dying lips he lifts the rifle onto his lap and points it at the retreating Shredder. “Lead us not into temptation... But deliver us from evil... For his is the power.... And the glory... For ever and ever.” he breathes wetly. “Amen.” With the prayer said Pastor forces his finger onto the trigger, using his last reserves of strength.

The Shredder stops in its tracks as bullets rip up the floor and walls around it, unflinching yet chuckling softly under its breath. “Where is your God now?” it asks before melting into the shadows.

Pastor drops the rifle, a single tear running down his cheek. The tear of a dead man.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Sorry Poole,” says Keene. “I’ve never been one for superstition.”

“A man with no faith and no beliefs.” Poole scoops up the bones and pockets them, shaking his head sadly. “You have a lonely soul, Keene.”

“I’m not complaining.” Keene offers Poole a grim smile. “It’s kept me breathing this long.”

“Maybe.” Poole nods. “But breathing ain’t living, ma man.”

“I’ll keep that in mi...” The end of Keene’s sentence is cut short by the sound of gunfire, the short retort thundering through the empty corridors. “Shit!” Keene is on his feet before the sound has echoed away.

“Pastor.” Poole is right behind him, joined by Tess before he’s even reached the door.

Wedge is already running back towards the canteen but Jester is sat at the far end of the corridor as if nothing has happened, cleaning his nails with the end of a hunting knife.

“What the fuck was that?” asks Wedge as he slides to a stop.

“Stay with Tess,” orders Keene and then turns to look up at Poole. “You’re with me.” Keene storms off down the corridor, kicking out at Jester’s legs as he passes. “Get off your fucking arse and follow me!”

Jester jumps up with a grin. “About fucking time.” He raises the two Uzis, eager to kill someone... anyone.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene and Poole are running, head to head as they turn into the next corridor. Jester isn’t far behind them but his breathing is ragged and harsh.

Keene slows ever so slightly, taking the opportunity to take in his surroundings, readying himself for what he’s sure they’ll find at their destination. He can smell the blood, the piss and the ripe odour of emptied bowels. He can also hear the sound of soft footsteps, the precision movements of a person not wanting to be detected.

Keene draws a knife from the sheath hanging at his waist, slowing to less than a walk before stopping at the edge of the junction. Poole and Jester stop behind him, hugging the wall and waiting for Keene to make his move.

Keene listens to the footsteps draw closer, picturing each step with well honed senses. He takes a breath and holds it for a moment, only releasing it as the lurker steps into view.

Keene raises the knife against the flesh of a neck, pushing the serrated points against the soft skin.

"If you're gonna kill me?" hisses Finch "You better make it quick." He holds his head still, but turns his eyes to stare at Keene.

"Where's the others?" Keene asks, lowering the blade. "I want everyone accounted for."

"Ruby and Blight are right behind me," says Finch, running a fingertip across the beads of blood left by the knife. "Pastor's with that woman, but he ain't answering my calls."

Ruby and Blight join the others, weapons raised as if expecting trouble from every direction. As soon as they see Keene they relax, happy to let some one else take over, glad to follow orders.

Keene taps his earpiece, pushing it home. "Pastor... report your status." There is no reply, only a faint static hiss. "Pastor... come in... That's a fucking order."

"Like I said boss," whispers Poole. "Bad omens."

"Fuck!" Keene snaps as Poole walks passed him, straight across the T-junction and carries on. "Poole, get back here," hisses Keene, heading off in pursuit of the big Jamaican.

"I know you can smell it, Boss," states Poole, not looking back. "When you deal with so much death you grow accustomed to the scent."

"What's got into Doc Samadi?" Finch asks, jokingly.

Jester turns on Finch without warning, grabs him by the scruff of the neck and slams him against the wall. "I wouldn't doubt him if I was you," he threatens. "That black magic shit has saved my ass more than once."

Keene and Poole have stopped, standing on the edge of the shadows, as if on the lip of the abyss and ready to jump.

"Bad omens," repeats Poole.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Wedge stands at the door to the canteen, waiting patiently for Keene's return and trying his best to hide the fact he is pissed off with being left behind. He glances back at Tess and smiles at her sleeping form, glad to see she has taken his advice.

He checks his watch, surprised to find that only five minutes have passed since Keene and the others left in such a hurry. He stands his rifle against the wall and fishes in his jacket

pocket, pulling out a battered packet of cigarettes. He pulls the last one out, crumples the packet and tosses it out into the corridor.

“Was gonna quit anyway,” Wedge says to himself, about to light up when something catches his attention... A sound.

He listens carefully and the sound comes again, a wet splat that is out of place next to the soft sound of Tess' breathing. Wedge leaves the rifle and takes a few steps in the general direction of the strange noise and cringes, his foot sliding on something pliable and moist.

“What the hell?” Wedge takes a step back and crouches, picking up the object and quickly wishing he hadn't. “Fuck this shit” He throws the eyeball away, standing up and backs into the Shredder, now wearing the face of Pastor.

Wedge spins around. “Fuck me, Pastor... Everyone's looking...” Wedge stops talking, noticing that what he thinks is Pastor is standing naked. “What the fuck are you doin...”

The Shredder snaps out an arm and forces four barbed talons into Wedge's chest, lifting him off the floor and walking him over to the wall. Wedge struggles, fighting against the urge to pass out. He yanks a knife free from his waist and plunges it into the Shredder's stomach.

The Shredder pulls the talons free, taking chunks of flesh with them. Wedge slides to the floor, his life already over and just waiting for his brain to catch up with the news. The Shredder studies the knife handle protruding from under it's ribs.

“Such primitives,” it says with Pastor's voice, taking hold of the handle and pulling the knife free with a smooth motion. Once done it holds the blade up, sniffs at it and then licks at the blood.

“What are you?” chokes Wedge.

“I am annihilation.” The Shredder dives forward, grabs the back of Wedge's head and pulls him forward. Wedge's eyes bulge in the sockets as the Shredder plunges the knife into him again and again, churning up his innards into a gruel of steaming offal.

“Up your's,” Wedge chokes, spraying a fountain of hot blood in the Shredder's face.

The Shredder drops the knife and raises it's hand over Wedge's face. The barbed talons are the last thing Wedge sees before they are thrust into his eyes.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Harvey sits in front of the monitors, his forehead creased as he witnesses the carnage

and wonders how and when he allowed himself to get caught up in this shit. This wasn't what he wanted to do with his life, this wasn't a career in IT. This was murder, plain and simple. On the other hand... the money was good.

Clarke comes up behind Harvey and breaks his train of thought by resting a large hand on each shoulder. "How are we doing, Harvey?" he asks, squeezing slightly harder than is necessary.

Harvey moves the mouse in his right hand, scrolls down and then double clicks at the base of the screen. As he waits a moment he tries to steady the shake in his hand, silently cursing himself for being so nervous.

"The bidding's reached one hundred and fifty million," Harvey stammers.

"And the bidder would be?" Clarke lifts his hands from Harvey's shoulders and rubs them together as a grin creases his face.

"Lybia."

"Strike that," adds Chris. "The French just came in with two hundred."

"Who needs the Japanese?" asks Clarke jubilantly. "When we have the French." He walks over and looks at Valerie, the smile on his lips actually reaching his eyes. "I think you should join me in my office."

"Yes, Sir," Valerie replies, her heart pumping with excitement in her chest.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene and Poole are leading the group and are the first to see Pastor's corpse as they step into the corridor. In the dimness of the emergency lights the body looks far from human, resembling flotsam drifting in a dark still ocean.

"Fucking hell," says Jester. "I'm seriously reconsidering my job options."

"What's wrong, Jester?" Keene asks. "Only fun when you're doing the killing?" he approaches the body and crouches down, retrieving the dog tags from around Pastor's pale neck.

"I ain't got a problem with dying," replies Jester. "But this entire situation is giving me the shits."

"Death wears many faces," says Poole to no one in particular. "When it comes it will wear the face of a stranger."

"I ain't sure which pisses me off the most?" Finch steps between Jester and Poole.

“Pastor's religious spouting or your voodoo bullshit?”

“Show a little respect for the dead,” growls Blight.

“Nothing personal, big guy,” Finch raises his hands in mock surrender. “Just trying to stay sane the only way I know how.”

“I like a good pissing contest as much as the next girl,” Ruby joins the conversation, her glare moving across them all. “But this ain't the time or the place.” She turns away and adds, “You fucking idiots.” under her breath.

Poole is taking little notice of the insults and threats passing amongst the team. He blocks it out, his focus locked on the door to the room behind Pastor's body. He steps around the blood and uses the toe of his boot to nudge the door open, expecting to find another corpse.

“We're missing a body,” Poole says upon discovering the room to be empty.

“She's the least of our fucking worries,” gasps Jester and then doubles over, vomiting his breakfast over his boots.

Everyone turns in unison to see Jester spit the last of his stomach contents to one side. As he slowly straightens up he is joined by Keene who peers into the room that's had such an adverse reaction on a seasoned veteran. He quickly regrets the decision.

The blood on the walls and the ceiling is thick with lumps of raw flesh and muscle tissue. Ragged pieces of scalped hair decorate the elaborate patterns of guts and other organs.

At some point the room has been sleeping quarters, tightly packed bunks running the length of either wall. Now it resembles an abattoir, the bed sheets soaked through with congealing red and stacked high in severed limbs.

“Fuck me” Keene sees the display at the far end of the room and staggers back.

“It seems that death is hungry tonight,” says Poole taking his place at Keene's side and studying the pyre of severed heads, each one staring back from empty eye sockets.

“This can't be happening,” Keene stammers, backing out of the room as memories of a failed mission assault him. “Not here... Not now.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Tess mumbles in her sleep, the incoherent ramblings of a restless slumber. She doesn't stir as the Shredder moves silently towards her, almost gliding across the canteen.

It stops next to her and leans down until its face is almost touching her hair. It inhales deeply and savours the aroma.

Tess shifts position and the Shredder backs away, its human features twitching unnaturally. "Later," it whispers, leaving her alone once again.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene leans heavily against the wall, bent at the waist as he attempts to get his breathing under control. He pulls the hip flask from his pocket and unscrews the cap with unsteady fingers, his mind reeling under the weight of what he fears may be happening.

Jester intervenes, stepping up and slapping the flask out of Keene's hands. It hits the floor and skitters away noisily. "Are you going to tell us what the fuck is going on?"

"Back off!" Keene yells, pulling his side arm free and levelling it at Jester's chest. "I won't tell you again."

"Or what?" Jester asks calmly. "You gonna shoot me?"

"Maybe." Keene and Jester face each other, neither flinching until, eventually, Keene lowers the gun and slumps back against the wall.

"Then you'd better tell us what you know," says Jester, a firmness in his voice that wasn't there before.

"I will." Keene nods. "But not here." Keene holsters the handgun and walks away. As he goes he raises a hand and taps his earpiece. "Tess... Wedge... This is Keene... Come in." He increases his pace, already expecting the worse.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

"Tess... Wedge... acknowledge orders." Keene's voice comes over Tess' earpiece which is laid on the table next to her head. "I said acknowledge orders, now!"

Tess' brow wrinkles, the face of a child held in the grip of a nightmare they are struggling to wake up from. Keene's voice continues to come over the earpiece, a tinny annoyance that finally breaks through the fog of sleep and Tess' eyes snap open. She sits up straight, fumbling the earpiece back where it belongs. "Keene... What's wrong?" Her mind catches up with her body in seconds, awake and alert.

"We've got casualties... Pastor's dead." Keene's anger is tinged with something else, a hesitant fear. "I want you and Wedge ready to move in five minutes." There's a painful burst

of static that causes Tess to flinch. "And get me Clarke online, now!"

"I'm on it." Tess is up and moving across the room, sliding to a stop in the growing pool of blood that is seeping in from the corridor. "Shit." She reaches down to her belt and un-clips the strap on her holster, wrapping her fingers around the gun handle and slowly pulling the weapon free.

"Wedge," she whispers. "You out here?" She steps out into the corridor and scans the area, seeing Wedge's rifle laid at the far end of the corridor, at the far end of the trail of blood that smears its way along the tiled floor.

Tess raises the handgun in both hands and makes her way cautiously towards the junction, eyes alert for all and any movement. She reaches the rifle and makes no attempt to pick it up. The weapon is sat in a lake of clotted bodily fluids and she has no wish to touch it. She edges her way out into the junction and looks both ways.

To the right she finds nothing but threatening shadows and pulsing emergency lights. The trail of blood continues off to her left, an erratic pathway painted in the wake of a dragged corpse.

"Shit," Tess curses, glancing back towards the canteen before making up her mind.

Tess lowers the handgun and retrieves a small LED torch from one of the many pockets in her combats. She turns it on and holds it next to the gun, using the blue light to trace the path of the blood.

"Oh fuck," The smear ends where Wedge's head starts, his empty eyes like two black abysses in his mutilated face. "Fuck," Tess gasps, moving the light over Wedge's torso, revealing the flesh that has been shredded from the bone.

Tess moves the beam higher, illuminating the naked, blood covered frame of the Shredder in human form. She chambers a round into the barrel and draws a bead on the back of the Shredder's head.

"Don't fucking move," she says.

The Shredder stops in its tracks and remains motionless for what seems like an eternity. "Hello Tess," it says, turning around to reveal Pastor's face.

"Pastor?" Tess stammers.

"Try again," it says, its face shifting, turning liquid as it reshapes itself into something new. It only stops morphing once it has shaped itself into a perfect replica of the dead man at his feet.

“Stay where you are,” Tess yells, unable to comprehend what she has just seen.

“You won't shoot me,” taunts the Shredder with Wedge's voice.

“Try me,” warns Tess, her arms shaking as she applies pressure to the trigger.

“But I have something special to give you,” sighs the Shredder. “But not now... soon.”

The Shredder turns around and steps into the hungry shadows, dragging Wedge's corpse behind it.

“Shit!” Tess yells, finally pulling the trigger and shooting blindly into the darkness.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Tell me you have Clarke on line!” Keene barks as he steps through the blood and storms into the canteen only to find the room deserted. “Where the fuck are they?” he shouts, kicking over the nearest table as anger threatens to engulf the fear he is feeling.

“We got blood out here,” Poole shouts from further down the corridor. “Lots of it.”

“Its fucking everywhere,” Finch says from the doorway.

“Get in here,” orders Keene. “All of you!”

As the team filter into the canteen Keene hunches over the Adam tablet, keys in the password and waits. “Come on you bastard.”

“Shouldn't we find Tess and Wedge?” Blight asks.

“Not until I know what the fuck is going on here.” Keene jabs at the touch screen.

“Did you see what happened to Pastor?” snaps Finch “To those people?”

“Yes. I fucking saw them,” Keene growls back. “But we do nothing until I've spoken to Clarke.”

“Then you'd better speak up,” says Clarke, his smiling face filling the screen of the Adam tablet.

“You bastard,” Keene says, looking down.

“By your tone I shall take it that all is going to plan.” Clarke's smile grows wider.

“You can take your plan and shove it, Clarke.”

“Do I sense animosity?” Clarke asks innocently.

“The deals off,” snaps Keene. “I'm bringing my men out.”

“I'm afraid that's not an option Mr Keene,” explains Clarke, leaning forwards. “This evaluation isn't over and I can't allow you to leave until it is.” Clarke's smile changes from faux friendly to genuine smug.

“Whose going to stop us?” Keene feels a hatred for the man that can't be rivalled.

“And which fucking army?” Jester shouts from his place across the room.

“People like you come cheap,” says Clarke, clasping his hands in front of his face.

“You're not the only ones I've hired... You try and leave the facility and you will be greeted with deadly force.” Clarke leans back, satisfied he's made his point.

“You mother fucker,” Jester yells, picking up the six pack and smashing it against the wall.

“My men are dying in here,” says Keene, trying to control the anger boiling in his gut.

“So now they're your men,” Clarke goads. “How touching.”

“OK, Clarke.” Keene breathes slow and deep. “I think we can cut the evaluation bollocks... Why are we here?”

“You've got it all wrong, Keene,” Clarke replies. “This is an evaluation... Only you're not the ones being evaluated.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” spits Ruby.

“How do I put this?” Clarke feigns deep thought for a moment. “You're the bait.”

“Bait!” Keene shouts at the face on the screen. “Is that what we were five years ago... Fucking bait?” He slams his hands down on either side of the Adam tablet.

“Well done.” Clarke claps his hands. “I see you've noticed the similarities... Not that it will help you much.”

“You cunt!” Keene's face is red and the veins in his neck pulse dangerously.

“You were lucky last time, Keene,” Clarke says. “I doubt you'll be that lucky again.”

“This isn't over, Clarke.”

“Yes it is.” Clarke is still smiling when the screen goes black.

“Bastard!” Keene takes the Adam unit and throws it across the room. It hits the wall, bounces off and skitters across the floor. Keene drops back into his seat with a sigh, resting his head in his hands.

“You gonna tell us what the fuck happened five years ago?” asks Jester.

Keene nods slowly. “I'll be needing a drink.”

“I think we all will,” replies Jester retrieving the bottle of Jack.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Jester has found a variety of cups and has shared out the Jack amongst the others. He

keeps the bottle and the last couple of fingers it holds for himself.

Keene has taken his place at the head of the table and the rest have formed a semi circle around him. Finch and Jester are both smoking and Poole is rattling the bones around in his clenched fist.

Ruby is sat next to Blight, leaning against his shoulder as if they are lovers. The atmosphere is tense and no one is willing to break the silence. They all wait for Keene who looks at them all before downing his mouthful of Jack.

“Stranglehold... It was supposed to be a clean up operation... Go in, take out the trash and leave.” Keene pauses and looks into the empty cup before continuing. “It was a fucking slaughter house... The bodies had been ripped apart and I mean fucking shredded.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Before we could figure it out everything went tits up... Three men down in minutes.”

“What was it?” Ruby asks. “An ambush?”

“I still don't know what I saw that night,” sighs Keene. “I've spent five years trying to drink away the memory.”

“Clarke said it was a test,” ventures Blight. “What the fuck did he mean?”

Keene ignores the questions, eager to finish the rest of his tale, to sound it out and try and make sense of what he'd spent so long trying to forget. “It was Masters. At least it looked like him,” he almost whispers. “He was in the basement... Slicing up Jenkins like it was the most normal thing in the world... He was smiling.”

“Fucking chemical weapons,” yelps Finch. “They exposed you to some fucked up shit just to test the efficiency... Happens all the fucking time, man.”

“Maybe.” Keene nods. “Whatever it was it changed Masters and not only on the inside.”

“What's that supposed to fucking mean?” Jester asks, drinking straight from the bottle.

“It was his eyes,” says Keene. “No matter how much I drink I can never forget those eyes.”

No one has noticed but Tess is standing in the doorway, listening to everything Keene is saying.

“It was like looking into the Abyss.” Keene tries to explain.

“Like molten lead,” adds Tess and everyone turns to face her.

“How'd you know that?” asks Keene, his brow furrowed with confusion.

“Because I've stared into those same eyes,” replies Tess “But that isn't the worst of it.” Tess takes two steps forward before her legs give out and she slumps to the floor.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Look at them,” Clarke says, watching Keene and the others on one of the monitors. “They look up to him.”

“Is that a good thing?” asks Valerie.

“Yes, my dear,” Clarke replies with a thoughtful nod. “They will follow him blindly and he will lead them... It's perfect.”

“Clarke turns away from Valerie and paces along the length of the monitors, returning to face the five remaining bidders in his sale of the Century.

“Gentlemen,” he says. “If other business needs your attention I would see to it now.” he pauses, allowing his gaze to move from one face to the next. “Things are about to become very interesting.

“Germany are in the running,” Harvey whispers. “They just entered the race with a bid of Five hundred and fifty.”

Clarke looks up at the monitors and nods his head again as the German representative raises his glass in a silent toast.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Blight carries two large canvas bags from the corner of the canteen, no effort needed from his mighty frame. He takes them to the centre of the room and drops them heavily on the table.

“Help yourselves,” he says, yanking open the zips to reveal the small armoury within.

Ruby is the first to delve in, pulling out handguns and knives. Poole pushes in next and begins to tool up for the fight ahead.

Finch stands off to one side. “I don't get it,” he spits at Tess. “You must be fucked in the head... crazy bitch.”

“I'm telling you what I saw,” Tess snaps. “Its face changed... It was Pastor and then it was Wedge.”

“Fear makes you see funny things,” states Ruby, strapping a machete to her thigh.

“Poole shakes the bones and drops them next to the canvas bags. “And sometimes what

you see brings on dat fear,” he whispers. “Don't doubt her words.”

“Crap.” Finch goes to swipe the bones from the table but Poole grabs his wrist. “Last man to touch me without asking wound up shitting in a bag.” Finch glares at Poole.

“No one but Poole touches those bones,” chuckles Jester.

“Dat's right,” Poole says, releasing Finch and retrieving the bones. “Can't have a honky fucking with ma Juju.”

Keene finishes strapping a twin shoulder holster to his torso and slides two hand cannons into them, the weight balancing out the two already at his waist.

“How'd'ya want ta do dis, boss?” Poole asks, sliding a shotgun into a sheath on his back.

“If Clarke wants is to play, then we're going to fucking play.” replies Keene. “But we're doing this by my rules.” He takes two grenades and stashes them in the bulky pockets of his flack jacket. “We head out in twos... Ruby and Finch... Poole and Jester... Tess, you're with me.”

“You forgetting about me?” asks Blight.

“No.” Keene shakes his head. “You stay here and keep tabs on all three units.”

“Always the odd one out.” Blight physically sags. “Same at school, always the last one to get picked for teams.”

“That's because you're big and ugly.” Jester grins.

“You keep in constant contact with all of us and you don't take your eyes off that door,” explains Keene.

“I can do that with my eyes shut,” Blight jokes.

“Anyone enters without making audio contact first and you shoot them in the head.” Keene looks at them all, a passing glance that means everything. “Same goes for all of you... I don't know what's in here with us and we're not taking any chances... You shoot first and apologise later.”

“Fuck that,” says Finch. “Shoot and run.”

“O.K,” says Keene, walking to the door. “Let's do this.”

END OF TRANSMISSION

CAT AND MOUSE

DATE: 18/08/15
PROJECT: SHREDDER
LOCATION: FACILITY 13...

Tess raises a hand and rubs her eyes with thumb and forefinger, realising that she's been studying the back of Keene's head for over half an hour and wondering what makes a man like him *'tick'*.

She's had more than enough time to study his outward personae, the façade of the hardened professional with no wish to let anyone get close. She's seen that and she doesn't buy it because she's also noticed the cracks, the break in his voice when he'd referred to the team as his men.

He's an enigma and she finds that attractive in a man. She doesn't want everything handed to her on a serving dish. She likes to peel away the layers, to discover what's hidden behind the exterior. She lives an exciting life so any man she meets has to make everything else seem dull...

...Plus he has a nice arse.

“You want to share your theories with me?” she asks, deciding now is as good a time as any to break the silence. “Finch's chemical weapons angle seems plausible.”

“Until you think about it,” answers Keene, not taking his eyes off the corridor before them. “If its a chemical dispersal agent then why aren't we running around with fucked up eyes and trying to kill each other?” He pauses to push open yet another door and peers into the empty office beyond.

“But you've seen this before,” she says, unwilling to let it go. “You've got to have some idea.” Its Tess' turn to nudge open a door...

...Empty.

“When I have something solid you'll be the first to know,” Keene says and looks back at her and, in that moment, Tess sees something new in his eyes and she knows she can trust him, that they have an unspoken agreement.

With the moment gone they take either side of the corridor, taking a door apiece and pushing them open cautiously.

“Clear,” says Keene, stepping back.

“Maybe this guy has the answers,” says Tess, eyeing up the corpse sat behind the table. Keene joins her and together they enter the room and, despite the rancid odour, Keene

shuts the door behind them. He thumbs the lock mechanism, securing their privacy.

Tess walks over to the corpse and removes the revolver from its stiffening grip. "He's still warm," she tells Keene.

"Pulse?" Keene asks with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"I doubt it," she replies with a slight smile, turning the dead man's seat to reveal the missing section of cranium.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

"Fuck this shit," snaps Finch. "We should regroup and make a break for it."

"What about Pastor?" Ruby asks, disgusted at Finch's lack of loyalty.

"Pastor's dead," Finch states matter of factly. "I doubt he gives a shit what we do."

"We owe it to him," says Ruby with less conviction than she was hoping for. "We've gotta hunt this bastard down," she adds but she knows that Finch is probably right.

She takes her frustration out on the next door she comes to, kicking it almost off its hinges. The sound of spraining alloy and wood improves her mood and she leans in, flicking on the overhead fluorescents to reveal a well kept kitchen.

"Now we're talking," Finch grins pushing passed Ruby. "If I'm gonna hunt I'm gonna do it on a full stomach." He heads straight for the largest of three fridges. "Care to join me?... Consider it our first date."

"I told you before, Finch," says Ruby. "Not if you were the last asshole on the planet."

"Suit yourself." Finch pulls open the fridge and his expression changes, the colour dropping from his features. "Fuck me," he gags.

"What now?" Ruby asks as Finch throws himself over the sink and brings up three days worth of stomach contents.

Ruby turns on the spot, rifle half raised and ready to fire given a seconds notice. She's seen movement, nothing more than a shifting of the shadows out in the corridor. "Wait here," she tells Finch as she heads for the door.

"Keene said stay together," says Finch, looking up from the sink with vomit smeared on his chin.

"I'm a big girl, Finch," replies Ruby. "I can take care of myself." She leaves Finch spitting bile.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Poole shakes his fist as he walks, the bones making a sound like an annoyed Rattlesnake.

“What are you're bones saying now, Poole?” Jester asks.

“Same as before,” says Poole without looking at them. “They say we is fucked.”

“You're an asshole, man,” laughs Jester.

“If ya don't want ta know.” Poole grins. “Den ya shouldn't fucking ask.”

“Looks like we've reached the end of the road, buddy.” Jester points at the door up ahead, secured with a heavy hasp, staple and padlock.

They take the last few steps with caution, waiting for something that never happens. Poole reaches out and weighs the padlock in his hand, studying the make and design.”

“Allow me,” says Jester.

“Be ma guest.” Poole drops the padlock back against the door and steps back.

Jester hefts his rifle in both hands and brings the stock down on the padlock. The blow has little effect and Poole chuckles.

“Fuck you man,” says Jester, smashing the stock down another three times without success.

“My turn,” says Poole, raising his rifle and levelling the business end at the padlock.

“Shit!” yells Jester, jumping out of the way as Poole opens fire, a short burst that rips the padlock apart. “You crazy bastard.” Jester shakes his head but can't hide the smile on his face.

“Ya just got ta have da right key.” Poole knocks the useless padlock to the floor and then slides the door open on rusty runners.

Jester flicks on his barrel mounted flash light and tracks the beam across the dark confines. “Fuck me,” the both say together.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene is leaning over the desk and flicking through blood stained documents with one hand whilst holding a slimline torch in the other. A twinge in his lower back causes him to flinch and he glances at Tess, making sure she hasn't seen. He hates to admit it but age is catching up with him and he's let himself get out of shape. He makes himself a promise that if he gets out of the facility he'll start to look after himself.

Tess is holding her torch in her mouth, using both hands to search through the filing cabinets. She pulls out thick folders, scans them with the ease of a practiced speed reader and then throws them aside. As she pulls out the last draw she removes the torch from her mouth and looks over at Keene.

“Sod this,” she says. “Nothing but accounts.”

“This guy was no fucking accountant,” states Keene.

“Why, you got something?” asks Tess, leaving the filing cabinet and walking over to the desk.

“I'm not sure,” he picks up the latest file and hands it out to Tess, Showing her a grainy black and white photograph of a bomb damaged structure.

“Let me guess,” says Tess.

“Operation Stranglehold.” Keene taps his finger at one of the burned out windows before turning the page to show the orders for the ordinance and recovery mission. “It looks like Clarke was brought in to sweep my fuck up under the carpet.”

Keene keeps turning the pages, facing the still images of the horrors he witnessed that night. The last picture shows Keene, his body riddled with fresh bullet holes, streams of dried blood staining his pale flesh.

“Jesus Christ, Keene,” gasps Tess. “No wonder you tried to forget this shit.”

“There's more.” Keene takes another file from the desk and starts going through it. “It looks like Clarke pillaged the place... He's been fucking around with whatever he found ever since.”

Tess snatches the file from Keene and studies the pages, her brow creasing. “This can't be right.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Ruby is quickly starting to wish she'd listened to Finch and stayed together. She doesn't like this place. It unnerves her and she doesn't like stalking a prey she doesn't understand. She prefers an equal playing field, the hunted and the hunter knowing their place in the food chain.

“Wedge,” she calls quietly. “You out here?” Something moves behind her, a dark blur within the dim shadows.

“Wedge!” Ruby senses she's not alone and spins around only to find the corridor

empty. "Wedge... we can help you." She starts retracing her steps, cautiously sweeping the barrel of the rifle from left to right.

Off to Ruby's left a door hinge creaks, a nasty grating that is amplified by the darkness. She turns, a smooth movement that leaves her facing the door. She remains in place, waiting for the door to stop moving.

"No ones going to hurt you, Wedge," she says, edging towards the partially open door.

Ruby's attention is so focused on the narrow gap of black between door and frame that she misses the movement behind her.

The Shredder, wearing Wedge's face, steps up silently behind Ruby and grins as she kicks the door open and opens fire on the room within. The Shredder raises a hand above her head and slowly brings it down.

Ruby feels the hand on the top of her head and lets her finger off the trigger. "Wedge?" she asks softly.

"Hurt me?" goads Wedge's voice. "You couldn't if you tried."

Ruby manages to scream once, but its short lived, the pain of the Shredder's talons tearing into her eye sockets too much to bear. The creature lifts her off the floor, holding her head like a bowling ball and shakes her from side to side with vicious abandon, laughing at the sound of her screams.

The Shredder finally launches Ruby down the corridor where she hits the floor and slides to a stop.

"Bastard," she coughs, blind yet defiant as she pushes herself onto all fours and attempts to crawl away from the Shredder.

"You are weak," says the Shredder, kicking Ruby onto her back and then dropping astride her. "You deserve to die." Wedge's face dissolves to show the Shredder's face, a mirrored curve filled with razor sharp teeth.

Ruby's screams only stop as her throat is ripped out and devoured with a hunger that goes beyond greed.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Tess is studying the contents of the file she has taken from Keene. It is now laid out on the desk as she traces the scientific diagram with the beam of the slimline torch.

"Look at this," she says

“What am I actually looking at?” Keene asks, frowning.

“At first glance it looks like a DNA strand but its all wrong.”

Keene looks at her and raises a surprised eyebrow.

“What... I can't be a science graduate?” she asks, clearly annoyed with Keene's doubting of her. “Just look at this.” She runs the beam across the drawing one more time. “DNA is usually made up of two long strands that entwine like vines which are held together by a nucleotide...”

“We can skip the science lesson,” interrupts Keene. “I'll take your word for it.”

“But this is all messed up,” Tess continues unperturbed. “For starters I count at least four main strands.

“So Clarke's paying for research into modifying human DNA.” Keene straightens up, arching backwards. “It doesn't surprise me.”

“You're missing the point, Keene,” says Tess. “This isn't human.”

The sound of static in their earpieces makes Tess jump and she instantly feels stupid for doing so in Keene's presence.

“Keene... You hear me?” asks Jester.

“What you got?” replies Keene.

“We found something in the East wing.” Jester's voice is faint and distorted.

“We're on our way... eta five minutes.” Keene pauses, taking another look at the bizarre DNA. “Ruby... Finch... You hear that?”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Gotta find Ruby first,” Jester says to himself, wiping vomit from his chin with the back of a leather gloved hand.

“What was that, Finch?” asks Keene over the earpiece. “Please repeat.”

“Nothing, Boss... Just thinking aloud.” Finch removes the throat microphone, stuffs it in an unused pocket and draws his gun.

He turns to the door and discovers a naked Ruby waiting for him, A mischievous grin on her face.

“Ruby?” Finch asks, unsure of what he's seeing.

The Shredder uses Ruby's tongue to lick the feminine lips it wears as a mask. It is happy with this female form, likes the shape of it and the heaviness of the breasts. This is a

far more comfortable shell to that of the male.

The Shredder walks over to Finch, swaying its hips seductively from side to side, only stopping when it's almost nose to nose with him.

“This ain't rig...” The Shredder raises a finger to Finch's mouth to silence him. It then leans forward, pressing its lips against his.

Finch no longer tries to protest and allows the Shredder to push him backwards as what he thinks are Ruby's fingers start unfastening his flack jacket. Before he's managed to climb up on the work surface he is topless and the Shredder kisses down his torso before going to work on the belt at his waist.

The Shredder is curious and is unsure of the human feelings now coursing through its mind. It has never worn the façade of a female before and the sensations it is experiencing are not unpleasant. For the first time in years it chooses to have fun before the kill.

Finch lays back as the Shredder climbs astride him, lowering itself onto his firm member. Finch closes his eyes and moans as the Shredder opens its to reveal the granite silver orbs that have replaced the once flaming pupils of Ruby.

Finch feels her moving up and down and he reaches up to cup her left breast, eager to pinch the hardened nipple he knows should be there. The Shredder grins and arches its back, parting Ruby's lips to reveal the vicious fangs as they push out of the gums. It can feel Finch's rising pressure between its thighs.

“Oh Baby...” Finch finally opens his eyes and the moan of pleasure becomes a shriek of fear upon seeing Ruby's visage shift and change. “Motherfucker.” He tries to climb out from under the Shredder as Ruby's breasts contort into the screaming faces of Pastor and Wedge.

“What's wrong?” asks the Shredder, its face melting. “Don't I turn you on?” It lashes out and rips open Finch's chest in a vivid display of blood, chunks of flesh and fragments of shattered ribcage.

Finch tries to scream, but the sound is choked off by the pulverised lung tissue filling his throat. He can only lay there as the Shredder hooks its talons under his chin and peels his face away from the underlying tissue.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene enters the corridor, sees Jester and Poole standing in the open doorway and

slows his pace.

“Get your fucking ass over here, Keene,” urges Jester.

“What you got?” Keene asks as Tess catches up, dropping in line at his side.

“Its better dat ya see dis, Boss,” explains Poole. “Dis ain't da kinda shit a living man wants ta talk about.” Jester and Poole step aside to allow Keene access.

“What the hell?” gasps Tess, unable to believe what she sees upon entering.

“Its a fucking morgue,” states Keene, his breath misting in the cold air of the refrigerated storage room.

He drags his eyes over the rows of glistening body bags, a feeble attempt at estimating the number of dead needed to fill the place. “Shit,” he whispers, giving up after a hundred.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Blight sits at Keene's desk, facing the door as ordered. He's done what he always does when he's nervous and stripped down his Desert Eagle, the pieces spread around the table top. He takes a deep breath, his eyes never leaving the door and rebuilds the weapon from memory, sliding and clicking the individual parts back into a whole.

Blight shows no sign of shock or surprise when Finch steps into view. He finishes rebuilding the gun. The fact that Finch is naked causes the slightest of creases around his left eye, but he controls the tick, slamming the clip into the handle and levelling the gun with Finch's chest.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Blight keeps the gun raised as he stands and steps around the table.

“Wouldn't you like to know,” replies the Shredder, opening its eyes to reveal the truth.

“Holy fuckin' shit!” Blight sees the liquid silver orbs and realises his mistake.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene leads the others along the centre aisle of the body bags. The room is huge and spreads out to the left and right and beyond, lit only by the dim green pulse of the emergency lights.

He walks slowly, checking the printed tags tied to the heavy duty zipper of each bag. He's noted the names and the date on each tag and he isn't shocked.

“They're all from Strangle Hold,” he states, pulling one of the tags free and showing it

to Tess.

“You sure?” she asks, taking the tag and glancing at the date... 21-07-10.

“Look at the name,” Keene says. “This one's Jenkins.” He takes the zipper and opens the bag, pulling it open to reveal Jenkins, eyeless, eviscerated and as fresh as the day he died.

“What the fuck are they doing here?” Jester asks, stepping back in disgust.

“You can blame Clarke,” explains Tess. “He's been doing some experimental work on the side.”

Keene moves to the next bag and checks the tag. “Brent.” He reads and then yanks open the zipper to reveal what is left of the once brave soldier.

“There is no place for da dead ta rest,” says Poole.

Keene finds the bag marked up 'Masters' and rips it open, staring wide eyed at the corpse within. “Not fucking possible,” he snarls.

Masters' corpse looks up at Keene with empty eye sockets, the blood within long since congealed and now sparkling with diamonds of frost. Around the neck the skin is bruised a dark purple, the marks left by elongated fingers. Otherwise the torso is unmarked.

“Looks like he got off easy,” says Jester, looking at the contents of the body bag.

“No... He didn't,” stammers Keene. “I emptied an entire clip into him before he went down.”

“Maybe you missed,” ventures Jester, half joking.

“I didn't fucking miss.” Keene turns on Jester, ready for a fight.

“Maybe it wasn't him you shot,” says Tess, stepping between them.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Clarke is clearly enjoying the show more than he should and the clap of his hands at Tess' deductive skills is accompanied by a bark of laughter.

“Clever girl,” he says. “She's got potential... A shame really.”

“We've got action in the canteen,” announces Harvey.

“Then bring it up, dear boy,” cheers Clarke. “Bring it up.”

The image on the monitors changes and Clarke grins from ear to ear at the sight of Blight facing off against a naked Finch.

“It appears that our little pet is having some fun,” says Clarke. “This could be very

interesting.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

“Where's Ruby?” asks Blight, circling the Shredder. “If you've hurt her.”

“She's in here, with me,” the Shredder says, tapping a finger against its temple. “With all of us.”

“You better start making sense,” yells Blight. “Or I'll kill you where you stand.”

“Maybe this will help.” Ruby's voice comes out of Finch's mouth.

“Fuck me.” Blight staggers back as the Shredder begins to morph, changing from male to female... From Finch to Ruby.

“Bastard!” Blight throws down his gun and takes up a defensive stance, fists raised.

“Come and fuckin' get it.”

“You amuse me,” laughs the Shredder. “Always ready to fight despite the futility of the situation.”

“Fuck you.” Blight moves in, fast and hard, hitting out twice. A right followed up by a left hook to the chin.

The Shredder hardly flinches, but raises a hand to wipe blood from its now feminine features. The gesture angers Blight and he steps in again a dozen punches to chest, torso and face.

“Are you finished?” The Shredder asks as Blight slumps, catching his breath.

“Up yours,” shouts Blight, charging at the Shredder one more time.

The Shredder strikes out, piercing Blight's side with three out of four of the barbed talons its hands have become. With little more than a flick of the wrist and Blight is lifted off the floor and launched across the room.

Blight hits the wall, bounces off and crashes to the floor. He rolls over without a pause and pushes himself upright, glaring at the Shredder.

“It takes more than that to keep me down,” spits Blight.

The Shredder smiles, razor teeth illuminated in the green light. Blight beckons the Ruby shaped creature and it accepts the challenge with a scream of anger. It hits Blight full on, instantly ripping off his left arm, talons ripping through the joint with ease.

“I'll fucking kill you,” Blight grunts, seemingly oblivious of the missing limb.

“I don't think so,” replies the Shredder, punching out at Blight's throat. Barbed talons

sink into soft flesh and grate against jaw bone as they power up into Blight's skull and exit through the eye sockets. "You shall make a fine addition to my collection," whispers the Shredder as Blight twitches his last.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene has opened over a dozen of the frozen body bags and is now leaning against the last one, fighting the building panic in his gut.

"It had to be him," says Keene. "I was this close when I shot the bastard."

"Not necessarily," replies Tess.

"What the fuck are you trying to say?" Jester cuts in.

"I'm not saying anything," she says. "Just pointing out a possibility."

"You expect me to believe that there's a something walking around this place," Jester says slowly, sarcastically. "And it could look like any one of us?"

"Why not?" replies Tess. "Can you imagine such a power in the right... or the wrong hands?" She pauses, raising an eyebrow. "It's the perfect assassin."

"It ain't no weapon, girl," says Poole. "Dis ting is evil."

"Can you hear yourselves?" shouts Jester. "You're all fucking mad."

"Then explain what I saw in the corridor," Tess shouts back. "I saw it... You didn't."

"She's right, Jester," says Keene. "I was looking Masters straight in the eye when I shot him. I opened him from toe to tit and now he's laid not ten feet away without a fucking mark on him." Keene kicks out at the gurney nearest him and it rolls away on complaining wheels. "Whatever I killed... It couldn't have been Masters."

"OK, let's say I believe you," says Jester. "Which I don't... what the fuck are we going to do about it?"

"We're going to find the bastard," states Keene calmly. "And then we're going to kill it."

In reply to Keene's threat comes laughter from the darkness that surrounds them. The group quickly form a tight circle, standing back to back without any orders being given. Weapons are raised, ready and eager to open fire.

"How did it feel, Keene?" Masters' voice echoes out from the shadows. "How'd it feel thinking you'd killed a friend?"

Jester releases a short burst of fire in the direction of the voice, blinding muzzle flash

revealing a darting movement.

“Hold your fire,” orders Keene, searching the darkness for their adversary.

“Before I came to this world I felt nothing.” Again the voice of Masters. “Killing was merely my purpose, assimilation my credo.” The voice mutates into Pastor’s. “But I felt nothing.”

Poole squeezes down hard on the trigger, dragging the weapon from left to right, bullets tearing chunks from the frozen bodies. The Shredder moves with lightning speed, its true frame only glimpsed in the muzzle flash.

“Shit,” says Jester. “What the fuck!?”

“Then I came here and my eyes were opened.” Finch’s voice now tells them. “Your kind have so much hatred for each other, take so much pleasure in destroying life... It has made me appreciate what I do.”

Tess lifts her rifle but Keene reaches out and paces his hand on the barrel, pushing it down and shaking his head.

“You think that makes you human?” Keene shouts out.

“Do not insult me with such notions,” The Shredder yells back with Ruby’s voice.

“Then what makes you better than us?” Keene asks. “Tell me that, asshole!” Keene takes one of the grenades from his flack jacket and waits, listening carefully.

“I have lived longer than you could ever imagine,” replies the Shredder still using Ruby’s voice. “I have paved the way for the conquest of worlds you will never see and I will do the same here before moving on.”

“You’re nothing but an experiment,” goads Keene. “As much a prisoner here as we are.” Keene tracks the Shredder’s voice as it continues to talk.

“You are mistaken.” Annoyance is clear in the Shredder’s voice, Keene has angered the beast. “I have remained here while I heal... Whilst I grow strong.” The voice moves from left to right. “They have fed me... allowed me to learn more about this world and now I’m ready to bring it to its knees.”

“You ready?” Keene whispers, pulling the pin from the grenade.

“I will assimilate you,” threatens Ruby’s voice. “And then I shall do the same to the one they call Clarke.”

“That’s what you think!” Keene yells, launching the grenade in the direction of the Shredder’s voice.

Tess, Poole and Jester drop to their knees, heads low and Keene joins them as the interior of the morgue is filled with bright light and a deafening explosion that echoes off the unseen walls.

The Shredder can be heard screaming, a symphony of its victims voices.

“Go,” shouts Keene, pushing Tess in the direction of the main door.

“No!” The Shredder calls after them. “You will be eaten alive.”

“Shit,” curses Tess, stumbling forward and almost falling, only kept upright by Keene's hand yanking at her belt. “Thanks.”

“Just fucking move!” he yells, turning round and running backwards as he lifts the automatic weapon and fires blindly.

Poole and Jester follow his lead and do the same, all three of them strafing the area with constant gunfire, the room suddenly a huge strobe machine that reveals the approaching Shredder as if seen through a zoetrope.

“Fuck me... Fuck me,” Jester repeats over and over, squeezing harder on the already fully depressed trigger.

The Shredder charges through the morgue, throwing the body bags in all directions. Anger and the need to kill fuelling it on.

“Fuck me... Fuck me!” Jester chants the curse like its a protective mantra. “Fuck me...” He swings the automatic from left to right and back again, the hammer eventually clicking on empty. “Fuck me...” He looks down, dropping the magazine into his hand. “Fuck me!”

“Jester!” Poole shouts but the warning comes too late.

“Fuck me!” Jester looks up just in time to see the bagged corpse coming straight for him. “Fuck me!” He drops the automatic and raises his arms, taking the brunt of the impact. “Fuck me!” He hits the floor hard, kicks the body bag away and sits up, searching the area in an attempt to get his bearings.

“Jester!” Poole shouts again, opening fire on the Shredder.

“Fuck me!” Jester sees the Shredder coming at him and fumbles with the clip holding his side arm in the holster.

The Shredder screams as it descends on Jester, throwing all its strength into the blow. It feels all four talons pierce flesh, satisfied with the hot spray of blood that hits its face.

“Fuck me!” screams Jester, the pain in his chest unbearable.

“Yes,” hisses the Shredder. “Fuck you.” It lifts Jester off the floor and throws him

through the air.

Jester's world turns upside down, a brief whirlwind of movement before he lands at Poole's feet, already knowing that death is inevitable.

"Come on, man," shouts Poole, grabbing Jester's arm and trying to lift him.

"Get the fuck outta here, Poole!" Jester yells, foamy blood filling his mouth.

"Not gonna happen, man," replies Poole, dropping down to a crouch and pulling Jester close.

"You crazy voodoo bastard," Jester smiles a mouthful of red teeth and then falls limp in Poole's arms.

"You God-damn son of a bitch!" Poole bellows, the words tearing at his throat as he raises the rifle with one hand and opens fire on his friend's killer.

The Shredder feels the bullets as they pierce its skin but it does not fear them... They cannot harm it. The Shredder throws itself at Poole, hitting him with the power of a freight train.

Poole feels the burning grip on his wrist and looks down, seeing the taloned fist rip open the flesh on his arm. This pain is mild compared to what comes next, the Shredder twisting savagely and then tearing downwards, severing the arm at the elbow.

"I don't fear death." Poole manages through gritted teeth.

"You should," snarls the Shredder and then proves its point.

Poole tries not to scream but fails as the beast sinks its fangs into his shoulder, taking away a chunk of flesh and spitting it to one side. Poole continues to beat at the Shredder with his good arm as the Shredder rends him open from the neck down.

"You have spirit," says the Shredder as it encompasses Poole's head with both hands.

Poole tries to answer but manages nothing more than a wet gurgle and a dribble of blood before the Shredder tightens its grip and twists, yanking upwards and tearing Poole's head from his shoulders. The Shredder shudders as it lifts the head to its mouth and sucks the left eyeball from the socket.

Tess looks back and sees what the creature is doing, the sight causing her to lose control. She stops in her tracks and screams like she's never screamed before.

Keene has reached the door when he hears Tess' scream. He slides to a stop and turns back. "Tess!" he shouts.

Tess looks up at the sound of Keene's voice and sees his face for only a second before

the door slides shut between, the darkness enveloping her as the sound of steel against steel echoes around her.

“Keene!” Tess screams his name.

“Guess again,” chuckles the Shredder with Poole's voice.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Clarke has lost the smug look of satisfaction he has grown accustomed to and is pacing back and forth, no longer feeling in charge of the situation. “Shit,” he curses.

END OF TRANSMISSION

NATURE OF THE BEAST

DATE: 18-08-15

PROJECT: FIGHT BACK

LOCATION: FACILITY 13

“Syria and South Korea just withdrew their bids,” says Harvey, unable to mask the hint of panic in his voice. “And all communication has been cut.”

“Fuck!” Clarke blusters, his face turning purple.

“That leaves us France, Germany and Lybia,” adds Harvey, attempting to make it sound like a strong good point.

“What the hell did you expect?” whispers Chris. “Selling a dog without a leash.”

Clarke flinches at the snide comment and reaches round to the back of his waist band. The gun sits at the centre of his lower back and he pulls it silently, levelling it with the back of Chris' head.

Chris feels the barrel press against his skull and goes rigid with fear, his bottom lip trembling as a tear forms in the corner of his left eye. “I'm sorry, Mr Clar...” The sentence is finished by a single bullet to the brain and a spray of blood and brain tissue across the lower screens.

“If I wanted an opinion I'd fucking ask for one,” Clarke swings the gun from Valerie to Harvey. “Now if we lose one more bidder one of you loses their job.” He pauses a moment. “”Understand?”

Valerie and Harvey nod their heads, eyes flicking across to Chris' limp body in recognition of the pension plan that lays along the path of failure.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene is more than prepared for what awaits him in the canteen. He's just witnessed how easily the Shredder took out three of his team without even trying and he knows, that despite Blight's size, he won't have stood a chance against the alien hunter.

His fears are confirmed as he pushes open the door and is greeted with the harsh stench of death, a heady mix of blood, piss, and emptied bowels. The aroma is so thick in the air that Keene swears he can taste it.

Upon an initial scan of the room it looks like the Shredder has painted the room with Blight's internal organs, the floor, walls and ceiling varying shades of red.

Keene pauses to retrieve the dog tags from around what is left of Blight's neck, his fingers sinking into the exposed, raw meat. He doesn't bother to wipe them clean, just pushes them into a pocket as he makes his way over to the canvas bags.

He takes all the ammunition he can carry, filling every available pocket on the flack jacket and the combats. Once done Keene steps back and scans the room, searching for the Adam unit.

"Shit," he says, locating the Adam Unit face down and half hidden under a coil of intestine. He pushes the offal away with his boot and then bends, picking up the touch next generation tablet and wiping oily gore from the touch screen, surprised to find it still working. He lays the unit down on the table and swipes his finger from left to right. "Come on," he talks to himself, scanning through the menus. "You gotta be here somewhere." He keeps searching through the facility blue prints.

He checks each floor plan, using his thumb and forefinger to expand each one before discarding it with a hand sweep to the left. "Where the fuck are you hiding?" Keene is about to give up when he stops and looks closer, once again expanding the image to reveal what he's been searching for. "Got you... you bastard." He taps his finger against the screen, high lighting the doorway to the sub-basements.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene moves cautiously along the corridor, knowing he's not alone in this place. He

knows that one careless move and death could be instant. Its always the same in combat...

...Kill or be killed.

He steps out into the corridor that holds the door to the sub-basements and strafes the area with high powered artillery from Blight's tactical assault rifle, destroying the walls and ceiling and letting the Shredder know there's a new hunter in the facility.

As the dust settles Keene moves quickly, keeping to the now bullet ridden wall. He reaches the door and pauses, listening carefully as he weighs up his limited options. He could quite easily turn around and leave, take down Clarke's men and then kill the man himself... He could walk away and return to the life he had, losing himself in a bottle. Its worked well up to this point.

"Fuck that!" Keene shakes his head, clearing away any thoughts of retreat, thoughts of cowardice.

Before he can change his mind he takes action...

...Decisive action.

He pushes himself away from the wall, faces the door and kicks it open. He steps into the stairwell beyond, aims the tactical assault rifle downwards and empties it with a single, prolonged burst of fire. He doesn't remove his finger from the trigger until the weapon clicks on empty, only then does he throw it to one side.

"Come on you bastard!" yells Keene, drawing the hand guns from the slimline shoulder holsters.

He takes one final deep breath and then takes the stairs at a run, caution pushed to one side as adrenaline surges through his system.

He has to kill this thing, its all he can do now. The events of Stranglehold have haunted not only his sleep but every waking hour since. This is his chance to finish it, to bring an end to the nightmares.

The stairs come to an abrupt end and the change in incline jars Keene's spine. He staggers forward, his breath coming in harsh, ragged intakes. He takes a moment to soak in his surroundings, finding himself in a narrow corridor lined on both sides with cables and steam pipes. He arches his back and flinches at the twinge of pain that shoots upwards. He bites back on the flare up and pushes onwards.

"Keene?" Tess' voice is a weak, low whisper that he can only just hear through the earpiece.

"Tess," Keene says her name, hoping she can hear him.

"Keene, is that you?" she asks and he can sense the pain in her voice.

"I'm coming to get you," he says, already increasing his pace.

"I'm scared, Keene," she says, the tears evident from her tone. "It made us do things..." she sobs. "It raped us, Keene... The bastard raped us."

"Fuck!" Keene pushes himself faster. "Who else is there, Tess?"

"One of the scientists... Howe," she says between the tears before a burst of static threatens to break communication. "The other one's dead."

"We'll make the fucker pay, Tess," Keene tells her. "I promise you."

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene comes to the end of the maintenance corridor, stepping out onto a landing surrounded on three sides by heavy duty handrails. The remaining side is open, a safety chain hanging loose at the top of yet another staircase that leads further down. He walks over to the edge and leans against the handrail, peering over and down.

"Shit!" curses Keene.

"What's wrong?" Tess asks, panic beginning to fill her voice. "Talk to me, Keene."

Keene watches Tess from above, sees her struggling against the bonds at her wrists, her toes only just touching the floor. Howe hangs motionless at Tess' side and Moore's corpse is laid out on the grill work that makes up the floor of the suspended platform they're being held on.

"I need you to stay calm, Tess," Keene tries to keep the anxiety in his voice hidden from her. He needs her to have faith in his words.

"I'm scared, Keene."

"That's good," he replies. "Scared keeps us alive."

"You're full of shit."

"I know," Keene says with a grim smile. "I want you to tell me where it is?"

Tess cranes her neck to look up. "When it finished with us it left," she says. "I think its looking for you."

"Hang in there, Kid," he tells her. "I'm coming down." He heads for the metal stairs, each one clanking under his heavy soled boots.

"I told you not to call me Kid." Tess watches Keene's progress, her face streaked with

dirt and tears.

Keene approaches the bottom of the stairs, quickly taking in the lay of the land before stepping down the final few steps. He searches the shadows around the numerous steam pipes running up through the floor in the platform, aged steel pipes twice the width of Blight and hissing steam from unmaintained joints. The steam mists in the air, raising the temperature and giving the platform an unearthly feel.

Chains, possibly used for lifting at some point in the facility's history have been used to secure Tess and Howe and more hang over the edge of the platform, the heavy links dropping down into the darkness below.

Tess' weapons have been scattered around the platform, stripped from her and thrown absent-mindedly to one side.

As Keene approaches her she lowers her head, maybe to hide the tears or maybe in shame at what has happened to her. He takes in the blood that soaks the crotch of her combats and his stomach turns at the thought of what she's been forced to endure. To die is one thing, to be dehumanised is quite another.

Howe hasn't fared much better, but she's been saved by unconsciousness. Better that way.

Moore hasn't been so lucky, clearly molested before or maybe after she's been murdered, her stomach ripped open and the internal organs sprayed out around her, leaving a congealed cavity where everything had once been.

All of this is absorbed in less than a second, every aspect of the scene logged in Keene's memory in the time it takes to cross the platform.

"It's going to be OK, Tess," he assures her. "But you've got to do exactly as I say."

"I'm sorry. Keene," Tess cries, shaking her head.

"This isn't your fault," he says sternly.

"But I was scared." she manages to say between sobs. "So scared." Her body shakes as tears take over.

"Fuck!" Keene stops in his tracks, less than a step away from Tess and looks around, instantly alert to the steam shrouded shadows.

"It made me lie, Keene," confesses Tess. "Please forgive me."

The Shredder chuckles and the sound is that of Masters' voice. "So predictable." It teases Keene by remaining hidden in the shadows. "Coming to save the girl... so pathetic

and far too late,” it laughs. “She has already served her purpose.”

The Shredder steps out from between the steam pipes, keeping Tess between it and Keene. It makes no attempt to hide its true form and Keene can make out the faces covering its torso, recognising those trapped and writhing in agony.

“You should join us, Keene,” says the Shredder, still wearing Masters' face atop its alien body. “Free yourself to the joy of death.” The Shredder pushes passed Tess, running a taloned hand over the curve of her hip.

“Not going to happen.” Keene keeps his voice level, raising both hand guns and squeezing off three shots from each. All six bullets hit the Shredder in the face, eradicating Master's visage in an explosion of blood and flesh.

“Oh but it will happen,” the Shredder sighs as the ruined face bleeds out, reforming into something new. “With or without your consent.” The Shredder's glass like dome morphs out of the carnage, a faultless mirror filled with deadly teeth.

“Shit!” Keene disposes of both hand guns and pulls a knife, one side of the well honed blade as serrated as the Shredder's talons.

“You really think you can stand against me?” asks the Shredder.

“Maybe not,” replies Keene. “But I'm going to fucking try.” He darts forward, knife outstretched but the Shredder is ready, smashing a back handed blow to his chest.

Keene hits the floor, rolls and comes back up for more, knife raised as the Shredder charges at him. Both man and alien let out a war cry that equals the other. Keene ducks below a swinging talon and swipes out with the blade as he passes.

They come apart and spin to face each other and Keene sees the long wound he has opened up in the Shredder's side, a vicious slash that parts Pastor's face from left to right. Black fluid pours freely over the Shredder's hip.

“You think I suffer pain like your Christ on the cross?” asks the Shredder in Pastor's voice. “You're wrong... I thrive upon it.” It fingers the wound as it talks.

“I know you talk too much,” says Keene, turning his head and spitting to one side. “Why don't you...”

The Shredder lunges at Keene, fuelled on by an anger it can't explain. It slashes downwards, a blow that catches Keene's left shoulder and sends him spinning. He hits the handrail hard, the air beaten from his lungs.

Keene struggles to suck in fresh air as he steadies himself against the handrail with one

hand and feels under the flack jacket with the other. He flinches as his fingers find the edge of the wound, fresh blood soaking through his clothing.

“This ends here and now!” snarls Keene, wiping his hands on his combats.

“I'm sure it will, human.”

They run at each other and meet in the centre of the platform, tearing into each other in a whirlwind of fists, talons and steel. The Shredder lashes out and Keene blocks the blow with his forearm, at the same time plunging the knife into soft tissue of his opponents armpit. As he withdraws the blade the Shredder retaliates with a upward slash from the right.

Keene arches backwards, the tip of the talons swiping across his cheek, cutting open two long gashes that run for his chin to his ear.

“Bastard.” Keene feels the burning wounds and drops to one knee. “We all fucking bleed,” he snarls, stabbing upwards three times, slicing open a female face that sits above the Shredder's pubis.

“Keene!” Tess screams.

The Shredder brings a knee up, smashing the armoured joint into Keene's jaw with a force that should shatter bone. The impact lifts Keene off the floor, throwing him backwards. He hits the floor with a grunt, rolls over and pushes himself into a crouched position.

“Is that all you've fucking got?” he asks, wiping blood from his chin.

The Shredder raises itself to full height, towering above Keene with its arms raised high above its head. It opens it's mouth, emitting a bellow that is made up of every voice it has ever used.

“That's more like it,” says Keene with a grin and makes his move, releasing the stored tension in both legs and jumping upwards without warning.

Keene hits the Shredder with all his weight and is lucky enough to catch the creature off guard, throwing it backwards into the handrail. The Shredder growls, a bestial sound of anger, and brings an elbow down on Keene's shoulder. He ignores the bone shattering blow and stabs out with the knife, thrusting it again and again into the Shredder's stomach.

The alien fights to get free but Keene refuses to give any ground, plunging the knife home again and twisting it from left to right with a vicious corkscrew motion. The Shredder snaps at Keene, its mouth a bear trap of deadly spikes.

It doesn't take long for Keene to feel the energy begin to drain from his body, his arm growing tired and heavy. Despite this he shows no sign in slowing the stabbing motion, doing his utmost to tear the Shredder's stomach wide open.

"You are like a fly," bellows the Shredder using Blight's voice, grabbing Keene around the throat and lifting him from the floor. "I will enjoy watching this world burn." Keene feels his windpipe crushed.

"Fuck you!" Keene, his vision blurring, thrusts upwards with the knife, sinking it into the Shredder's neck, pushing until the tip breaks the leathery skin on the other side.

The Shredder releases Keene, a spasm tearing up its body as it tries to pull the knife from its neck, black oil foaming between its teeth and distorting the screams drowning in its throat.

Keene lands on his knees, fighting for breath. He reaches up and fumbles around the flack jacket, his fingers shaking from the lack of oxygen. He finds what he's looking for and pulls it free. He looks over at Tess and she closes her eyes, nodding her head in agreement. Keene returns the gesture, takes one last deep breath and then pulls the pin from the grenade.

"Fucker!" he rasps as he raises up under the Shredder, gripping the grenade as tight as he can and punching out.

Keene's fist disappears into the Shredder's stomach wound, pushing his arm into the warm innards. It's hard going once beyond the steak tartar that is the wound but he keeps forcing the grenade through and between the alien's organs, only stopping when he's buried up to the elbow in the Shredder.

"What is the meaning of this?" gurgles the Shredder, looking down at Keene and finally pulling the knife free from its neck.

"It's called the end," Keene replies, pulling his arm free and flexing his fingers, the grenade no longer in his grip.

The Shredder throws the knife to one side and turns its mirrored face towards Keene. "What have you done?" It spits foaming black.

Keene kicks out, slamming the base of his boot into the Shredder's chest. The creature feels its centre of balance tip backwards and lashes out blindly before going over the handrail, falling from sight.

Keene drops to his haunches, his back to the railing, ready for the explosion. When it

comes the platform shakes and a wall of flame travels up the outer walls. He waits, counting off the seconds before he deems it safe to move. When he does its with urgency.

“You going to be OK?” he asks Tess, taking her weight with one arm as he releases her with the other.

“I doubt it,” she says. “But I'm alive.” Keene lowers her to the floor. “I'll be fine but you should help her.” Tess nods at Howe.

“Give me five and we're out of here,” Keene says, turning to free Howe but as he reaches up to take her weight her eyes snap open.

“We didn't know,” she hisses between clenched teeth. “Clarke never told us... You have to ...” Her mouth snaps open, the jaw locked rigid as an inhuman scream tears out of her throat.

Keene leaps back to avoid Howe's thrashing legs, watching in stunned horror as her stomach begins to distend.

“Help me!” Howe screams, the tendons in her neck standing out as her entire body convulses. The front of Howe's top rips as her stomach continues to grow, the skin splitting under the pressure from within.

“Fucking hell.” Keene realises that its more than Howe's clothing he can hear ripping. “Tess?” They both watch in horror as two tiny, taloned hands reach out from inside Howe.

“Keene!” shouts Tess, picking up one of the semi automatics from the floor. She throws the weapon to Keene as he turns to face her.

Keene grabs the weapon and turns it on Howe and the creature she is birthing. Bullets slam into her torso, turning it into a mash of torn flesh. The new born Shredder falls limply from the bloody wound, landing with a wet slapping sound. It lays there and whimpers, a soft mewling sound that should elicit pity.

Keene walks over to the creature, looks at it for a moment and then brings his boot down on its head, grinding it into the metal grill work,

Silence hangs over the platform as Keene sits next to Tess. She lays her head against his chest.

“We've got to go,” he says.

“That's going to happen to me.” Tess shakes her head. “It said it was giving us the future.”

Clarke has trashed the interior of the command centre in a fit of anger, his knuckles bleeding from where he's punched the wall repeatedly. He now grips the gun he used to shoot Chris and taps the barrel against his forehead.

"Bastard," he curses, kicking Chris' corpse out of his chair before taking it as his own. "Bastard," he spits again as he watches Keene and Tess on the monitors.

"We can stop this," promises Keene. "But we have to leave now."

"How fucking sweet," says Clarke. "He still wants to be the hero."

"Its over, Mr Clarke," says Harvey. "We've lost them all."

"Oh shut up, Harvey." Clarke raises the gun and pumps three shots into Harvey's face at close range.

"Would you like me to arrange the car, Mr Clarke?" asks Valerie in a quiet voice.

"Not yet, Valerie," says Clarke, turning to face her. "And cancel our dinner plans." Without warning he levels the gun on her and shoots once.

"Mr Clarke?" Valerie looks down with confusion at the bloom of crimson between her breasts and then slumps across the desk.

Clarke leans down and takes the headset from Chris. "You won't be needing this any more," he chuckles. "You're fired." He slips on the headset, adjusts the mic and then approaches the monitors.

"Bravo, Mr Keene," he says. "But I am somewhat disappointed."

"Its over, Clarke," Keene shouts, finding the camera and staring into it. "Get us out of here."

"I can't do that," replies Clarke. "You've destroyed years of study and lost me millions."

"Listen to me, Clarke!"

"No, Mr Keene... You listen to me." Clarke takes charge. "Another five hundred thousand if you walk away from her now."

"Fuck your money." Keene stands. "She needs help..."

"If you take a closer look I think you'll agree that she's beyond our help."

Clarke takes satisfaction in watching Keene turn around to find Tess laid out on the floor, her body twitching as her stomach distends in rapid pregnancy.

"Last chance, Mr Keene," Clarke offers. "Five hundred grand... Its time to pay the Piper."

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene ignores the proposal, dropping the empty magazine from the semi-automatic and slamming a new one home.

“Do it, Keene,” grunts Tess. “Kill me... Before it...” A fresh contraction hits her and her back arches off the ground.

Keene points the weapon at her and waits for the wave of pain to subside.

“What the fuck are you waiting for?” She glares at him, wide eyed as talons push through the taut skin above her waist. “Kill the bastard!”

Keene closes his eyes and pulls the trigger quickly, three shots in rapid succession that take off the top of Tess' head and bring an end to her suffering. The new born Shredder continues to pull itself out of her dead womb.

“Its not too late, Keene,” says Clarke over the earpiece. “Leave now and the money's yours.”

“I said fuck you.” Keene squeezes the trigger again, this time holding it down and keeping his eyes wide open, watching as the Shredder's offspring is torn apart by high powered artillery.

He empties the entire magazine and then replaces it. For a moment he considers pulling the trigger again but then looks at what is left of Tess' blank face and the remaining eye that stares at him blindly. He lowers the semi-automatic and turns away...

... She deserves some respect in death.

Keene crouches at her side and closes the eye with his thumb before pulling the dog tags from around her neck. He wraps the chain around his fist and stands, turning to face the camera.

“You're next, Clarke,” growls Keene and then storms up the stairs.

“You'll never leave this facility alive,” threatens Clarke. “All units, move in.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

Keene has made his way through the facility from memory alone, leaving a trail of dead and dying mercenaries in his wake. Clarke has paid good money for these men but none have been a match for the fury burning in Keene's heart. Each life he takes he marks up as payback for a life already lost.

Masters...

Jenkins...

Poole...

Blight...

Tess...

He counts them off one at a time.

Keene is almost out... at least he thinks he is. Two more corridors and he should be at the main entrance. He's lost track of time but he hopes the night is over. He wants to see the sun and blue sky.

Clarke's hired killers are sloppy and Keene doesn't even break stride as he punches one in the throat and shoots two more. He looks down at the corpses as he steps over them.

They'd have failed his evaluation.

As would the next three.

They enter the corridor with a swaggering casualness that disgusts Keene. They see him charging at them and have only a moment for shock to register on their faces. All three attempt to raise their weapons, but the action comes to late.

Keene drops to his back, sliding on the floor as he opens fire, shattering three pairs of kneecaps. He is up and running again as they hit the floor, aiming the gun at the first of the fallen soldiers who looks back at him with pleading in his eyes. Keene pauses and lowers the gun.

The soldier is no more than a boy... not much older than Keene's son.

He doesn't kill them, moving on and leaving them crippled. He knows he's done them a favour and one day they'll realise it.

Every one of Clarke's men wants to earn the money he pays them and each one loses his life attempting to do so. Keene shows no more mercy, making every shot count. He only stops as he enters the reception area and finds himself facing twelve heavily armed men.

"Did I miss the party?" Keene asks, lowering his weapon.

"You're right on time," says one of them Keene recognises from years ago.

"I'd make it quick if I was you, Reece," Keene says slowly as three more step up behind him.

"You don't scare us, Keene," says Reece. "We've all heard the bullshit rumo..." The sentence is cut dead by the sound of a single gunshot and Reece's head snaps violently to the

left, one side erupting in an explosion of mulched tissue and fragmented bone.

Keene looks around, as surprised as the corpse hitting the floor with half its face missing.

“Get down,” Jester's shout is ragged and pained.

Keene drops to his knees, pulling the two remaining hand guns as he does. He opens fire simultaneously with Jester, turning the remaining mercenaries into dancing marionettes dancing in a bloody rain of lead.

Jester hobbles into the reception, shooting from the hip with a shotgun. Across his back is slung the biggest hand cannon ever seen.

Clarke's men don't stand a chance and they quickly fall to the floor, the puppet strings finally cut. Its over before its started and Jester stands over one of Clarke's men... One who is still breathing.

“Say goodbye,” says Jester, points the shotgun at the man's face and pulls the trigger.

Jester drops down to a sitting position at Keene's side, holding his chest which is a bloody mess, four long gashes that have gone clean through his flack jacket and the flesh below. He looks at Keene and grins.

“I thought you were dead,” says Keene.

“So did I.” Jester flinches. “Hell, I might be... Just don't know it yet.”

Keene throws the two spent hand guns aside and takes two of the semi-automatics from the dead men littering the floor around him.

“You ready for this?” he asks Jester.

“Not really,” he replies, retrieving two semi-automatics for himself. “But I've got nothing better to do.”

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

The sun is up, but its not enough to warm Keene's face as he'd hoped.

More of Clarke's men are surrounding them, covering the ground around the facility.

“That's a hell of a lot of dead men,” says Jester with a smile.

Keene nods, raises a semi-automatic in each hand and opens fire. Jester follows Keene's lead and together they deliver more death as return fire churns up the ground around them.

“Bastard!” Jester yells out as a bullet hits him in the shoulder and spins him around.

“You OK?” Keene reaches out to steady him, keeping him upright.

“I ain't done yet, Boss,” he says, shrugging off Keene.

He throws down both semi-automatics and unslings the hand cannon from his back. He drops to one knee and braces himself, Keene taking up position at his side. “We make it out of here,” Jester says. “The beers are on me.”

“Deal.” Keene grins.

They open fire in unison, shooting anything that moves and some that don't. The crisp morning air is quickly filled with the scent of cordite and a thin mist of red. Jester still has his finger on the trigger long after it's spent all of its ammunition, the barrel whirring as it continues to spin at high speed.

“Enough,” Keene orders, resting a hand on Jester's shoulder. “We're done here.”

Jester nods and throws down the hand cannon. As he stands he flinches, fresh pain shooting across his ravaged chest.

“You're not done!” shouts Clarke. “Until I fucking say so.” He walks in through the main gate, gun raised. “I'm the one calling the shots... not you.” He pulls the trigger.

“Fuck!” The bullet grazes Jester's thigh.

Keene drops the two semi-automatics and storms towards Clarke, his jaw set and his eyes locked on the target. Clarke fires two more shots... The first goes wide but the second hits Keene in the shoulder.

Keene doesn't stop, grabs Clarke by the wrist and twists it backwards, satisfied to hear bone crack. At the same time he smashes his forehead into the bridge of Clarke's nose.

Clarke sags but he remains conscious as Keene twists his hand around again, this time pushing up and forcing the barrel of the gun into the bottom of Clarke's jaw.

“You can't do this, Keene,” spits Clarke. “I own you.”

“I hope you saved the last one for the Piper.” Keene forces Clarke's finger down on the trigger and the gun goes off.

The pressure behind the bullet causes Clarke's face to inflate, ripping the skin away from the underlying tissue. The back of his head explodes in a shower of thick red, flecked with white, yellow and bits of grey.

Keene lets the body drop to the ground, a thin wisp of smoke exiting between Clarke's lifeless lips.

Jester is up and limping towards Keene and, despite everything, has a smile on his

face. "Looks like those beers are on me."

Keene takes Jester's weight and together they hobble through the main gates.

BREAK IN TRANSMISSION

It's taken them over an hour to make it back to the clearing and Jester is looking pale as Keene loads him into the first of the Humvees. Once Jester is strapped into his seat Keene runs around to the driver's side, climbs in and wastes no time in starting the engine. He slams the Humvee into gear and pulls away.

"Where we heading?" asks Jester, leaning his head against the glass of the passenger window.

"There's an RAF base not far from here," explains Keene. "We'll get you seen to."

"Thanks," sighs Jester.

"You going to be OK?" asks Keene as they hit the main road.

"Never felt better," whispers Jester, watching the scenery pass by with eyes of liquid silver.

END OF TRANSMISSION

****INCOMING TRANSMISSION FROM AUTHOR****

It's been a while since I've written an afterword or a foreword for a book. I'm not sure why, but I just grew out of the habit without realising it.

I hope you all accept this as an apology and my way of making up for neglecting you.

2010 has been a busy year and has seen me make many new friends and work colleagues. It has also seen me make enemies... This is par for the course and I take it on the chin. What else can I do. We all make mistakes and must live with and learn from them.

Screenplays are to blame for the lesser output of novels and stories, but this should work out well for us all when the films actually start being made. Shredder will be the first of these films and goes into development shortly. When this happens I may become quiet for a while. Please forgive me during that time.

There's not much else I can say really but I can list a few people I'd like to thank, people who've supported me in one form or another. I can't thank them enough but hopefully this goes some way towards it...

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I could go on and on but I know you're ready to get off. But I must thank you... Yes you sat reading right now. You make it all worth while... Thank you.

Garry Charles Nov 2010