

Small Machines

by

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Chapter 1: Call Terminated

It was a light-deficient night with wind velocities between 89 and 102 km/h.

Darkness always prevailed on level zero in London, but at night, it assumed an even more oppressive quality than during the day. At least on the higher levels you had the relentless light from the giant ad-screens, but the people living down here didn't have much money to spend anyway, so why try convincing them that they couldn't live without the Jeeves2200 butler android.

Although the sun didn't dare venture this far down, the rain had no such qualms, and as a result, it was raining cats, dogs and other medium-sized pets. It was the kind of rain that seemed more like an assault by a malevolent intelligence than a natural phenomenon, and had the man now running through a dark narrow street not been scared out of his mind he probably would have cursed. But as it were, he *was* running and he *was* scared so he didn't.

The man appeared to be around thirty, with thinning black hair and a receding hairline. His features were angular, his frame slight and the way he moved, panic-ridden glances over his shoulder aside, indicated a man much more used to sitting at a desk than performing any kind of physical activity in excess of tapping away at a keyboard.

This might have been a normal sight a hundred years ago, but in the year 2238^{1*} where even the lowest-paid member of the middle class could afford body-sculpting treatments, it was a rarity usually reserved for members of the anti-gene movement or the truly geeky.

His chest was burning and his lungs felt about the size of walnuts. Very small walnuts, filled with lava. The hot kind. The stinging sensation in his side was getting unbearable and his legs were only moving because they hadn't realised that their owner had run out energy a long time ago.

How did this happen? What the HELL was going on? This didn't make sense! Why would anybody want him dead?

All these questions were extremely valid, but when you've just been shot at multiple times by two very serious-looking men who wear sunglasses at night-time, you don't tend to ponder them in a stationary position.

So he kept running through the litter-strewn streets, along boarded up windows, past street lights that were mostly broken or flickering. Above him, the huge buildings seemed to continue into the sky endlessly, oblivious to the decay of their own foundations.

'Shit shit shit shit...' the running man muttered breathlessly. He needed to upload as soon as possible and his neural wireless implant would take too long with this amount of data. He needed a hard-link.

Finally, turning a corner, he saw what he had been looking for: a com-station.

He stopped at the terminal and froze. No sounds. Maybe he had finally lost them. Probably not, it was hard to hear anything over the noise of the rain. They didn't seem like the sort of men who would give up easily. Never mind, he had to focus now. There were things to do and precautions to be taken before it was too late. Turning his attention to the screen he quickly swiped his wrist across the scanner and let out a relieved sigh when it flickered and came to life. He started typing frantically. So much to do, he had to be quick! Patting around the side of the terminal, his hands found what he was looking for. Thank Dawkins nobody had ripped off the neural interface, as was often the case on these public terminals.

1. No flying cars yet. Sorry.

Mankind had made many advances over the last few hundred years, but apparently the desire to break things that didn't belong to them was a human trait, which defied the theories of Darwin. Either that, or vandalism was considered essential for survival by Mother Nature.

The cable came free easily and he inserted the jack into the connector on his wrist. Immediately his eyes glazed over, his shoulders slumped and the screen turned into a series of shifting images and text, changing too quickly for the eye to follow.

A whole minute passed this way before faint footfalls could be heard through the heavy downpour. Around the corner came two men in stylish black trench coats, wearing sunglasses.

They looked almost identical, with slicked-back blonde hair and no discernable trace of emotion on their faces. They came to a complete halt when they saw their target at the terminal. After a brief scan of their surroundings they walked up behind the man, pulled out guns and each fired once into his back. The only indications of their shots were the two small smoking holes appearing in the man's shirt. With the noise of the rain, nothing was heard.

The man at the terminal gave two small jerks in quick succession, raised the corners of his mouth in what looked like a content smile and collapsed to the ground. With the interface cable still attached to his wrist, his right arm was pointing straight up, making him look like a dead man trying to hail a cab, which was 50% accurate.

The two killers gave the screen a quick glance, looked at each other, shrugged and left.

Chapter 2: Rude Awakenings

Sebastian opened his eyes. The sun was extremely bright and without sunglasses he had to blink for a few seconds before he managed to see anything. In the meantime he was aware of the sound of waves breaking and the smell of sand and seawater.

His eyes having finally adjusted he was able to confirm what his senses had been telling him: He was sitting on a beach.

It was one of those beaches you only saw in commercials, where the water is a clear blue, the sand fine-grained and undisturbed, and the only inhabitants some unrealistically beautiful couple eating chocolate or spraying deodorant on themselves.

It seemed to continue endlessly in both directions, and as far as he could see there was no one else around. This was probably a good thing, since he then wouldn't have to explain why he was sitting on a beach in a leather recliner wearing a crumbled suit and a beige trench coat.

Before he could give the situation any further thought, a figure rose out of the water. Not just a figure on second thought, but a magnificent figure. In slow motion a goddess of a woman burst through the surface and pulled back her long blonde hair in one smooth movement. She immediately locked eyes with him and started wading through the water towards him.

Sebastian was mesmerised. All the bouncy bits were bouncing and all the swaying bits swaying, and he was helpless to do anything but sit there with his mouth open in the timeless expression of sophisticated intelligence that has forever been the prerogative of the male gender when confronted with female beauty.

Closer and closer she came until she was right in front of him, at which point she straddled him and put her face close enough to his that he could make out the fine downy hairs on her face.

He puckered up and made his move. His aim must have been worse than he thought though because he apparently missed her mouth. Instead he was surprised to find her licking his face quite enthusiastically. Not that he had any complaints about the situation in general, but his forehead and eyebrows were not among his most erogenous zones, and his face was starting to get wet in a drippy way.

He was about to say something when his vision started swimming, and the blonde slowly went out of focus.

Sebastian opened his eyes again, not realising he'd closed them, and looked into a pair of big brown eyes, five inches from his face. He blinked, and was rewarded with another big sloppy lick across his face from Halfie, his pet terrier.

Bringing himself quickly out of the reach of wet canine affection, he surveyed his surroundings. It was a small, dark and dusty room, filled with bookshelves, filing cabinets and stacks of papers mixed with half-empty take-away containers. He was sitting at a desk that was equally grubby and messy, and the fact that Halfie had been able to balance on top of the office debris, which constituted the entire surface of the desk, was testament to the dog's extraordinary abilities.

Looking at Halfie anyone would think this was a normal, albeit overly affectionate, terrier. If you were only looking at him straight from the front that is. Shifting your vision around to the side of the dog, the fact that he didn't have any fur or skin from his midsection to his tail would convince most people that this was no ordinary dog. Add to this that where you'd expect to see exposed muscle and sinew, shiny intricately interlocking pieces of metal plates and cables were moving around.

Sebastian exhaled deeply upon the realisation that he had once again fallen asleep in his office. Checking the time, it was almost noon, but the room was still dark. He kicked the window and the daylight generator buzzed into life, flooding the room with gentle sunlight through the blinds. The blinds were always down, but opened slightly, as was befitting a musty office belonging to a private investigator. At least if you'd been watching too many black and white movies from the 21st century, which Sebastian definitely had.

The room didn't improve much by the added artificial daylight. On the contrary, whatever spark of optimism might have been generated was quickly subdued now that the thickness of the dust could be more accurately estimated and the take-away remains identified as something that was best left uneaten even when it was fresh, and should probably be shot, burned or buried. Ideally all of the above.

After gently nudging Halfie aside while doing his best to dodge wet doggie kisses, Sebastian fumbled around the desk for the intercom and upon finding it, pressed a big red button and rasped: 'Gladys! Coffee!'

'Right away Mr. Poe!' came the surprisingly cheerful female voice in immediate answer.

Sebastian only had to wait five seconds before Gladys opened the door (shoving aside a collapsed stack of something better left anonymous) and stomped into the room with all the grace of an epileptic vending machine, carrying a steaming cup. Halfie immediately jumped down from the desk and began running around her feet while barking excitedly.

'Careful with the cup this time, don't spill it! I've got some very important documents and leads and... things on my desk,' Sebastian said in a hurry, trying his most authoritative voice and look, including raised eyebrows.

'Yes sir! I'll do my best sir! I'm sure your clients all sleep better, knowing that intimate details of their lives are carefully filed away under several layers of dust and various other debris of your life.'

Somehow she managed to pull this off with complete innocence, once again making Sebastian wonder whether she was taking the piss. Mind you it was a bit hard to read Gladys, with her not having an actual face with which to show expressions and all.

He'd bought her cheaply from a friend of his called Calvin who made a living selling refurbished hardware. This included artificial life forms like Gladys, who for one reason or another had ended up in his hands. It was better not to ask how, unless you were ready for an hour of the most elaborate lying you'd ever heard, but Sebastian did sometimes wonder how a former infantry robot ended up refurbished as a receptionist called Gladys. The military

origin did go a long way to convince him that she was not capable of sarcasm though, and therefore *not* taking the piss half the time.

She precariously balanced the cup on top of the stack of papers which seemed the least likely to topple within the next few minutes, wherefrom Sebastian quickly snatched it, cradled it in his hands and started taking slurping sips. The coffee tasted like someone had made it last week, using last year's beans in a coffee machine from the previous century, and then quickly reheated it for the occasion; which was actually a very accurate description of the process involved. Any modern coffee machine could make perfectly aromatic and smooth-tasting coffee, but to achieve true, authentic, bitter, black cups of horribleness you had to make an effort. And in that department Sebastian *always* made an effort. You couldn't be a proper private eye without plenty of foul-tasting coffee. Just like you couldn't be one without a trench coat, fedora and an addiction to at least two substances (besides coffee) which weren't good for you. People who claimed otherwise were just pale imitations of the real thing. Sure they might "solve cases" and "make money", but they lacked *style* damnit! And where were you without style? Nowhere. Right. Glad we settled that.

'Busy night, working late sir?' Gladys inquired.

'Ehhhhh, yeah.... There were some loose ends I needed to tie up in the Peterson case.'

'Would that be the same Peterson case which was resolved last month and for which we've already been paid?' she continued.

'Errrr, well, I guess that *technically* it was resolved, but there were certain aspects that I didn't feel completely comfortable with, and I thought it would be the conscientious thing to, you know, look into them,' he replied giving her what he thought was his most benign smile. It actually looked more like he was suffering from indigestion and was at that moment suppressing a considerable amount of intestinal gases.

'So you weren't just sitting in your office all night feeling sorry for yourself and drinking Jock Daniels^{2*} then?' she persisted.

'What? Of course not! That would be completely irresponsible given that I haven't got any new cases and really should be working at getting some, now wouldn't it? And when have you ever seen me act irresponsibly? Eh?'

'...' Gladys said.

'...' she continued.

'...' she concluded.

'Oh all right! Enough already! YES I was in the office moping and YES I drank a bottle of Jock Daniels, but so fucking what? I deserve a break once in a while; I'm under a lot of pressure you know!'

For someone without visible eyes, Gladys was extremely good at staring you into submission. He didn't know how she did it, but he had yet to not buckle under the pressure of her faceless gaze.

'Anyway, something will come up. I'm hungry, I'll be at Hong's,' Sebastian said dismissively while getting up, padding his pockets and looking searchingly around the room.

'Your hat is under the third pizza box from the left and you're out of ozone sticks,' Gladys offered helpfully.

Sebastian retrieved the hat, brushing off a few stray crumbs, mumbled a thank you and walked past Gladys towards the door to his office. Exiting the office he entered the tiny lobby, which was Gladys' domain. It consisted of a small, grey metal desk and matching chair right next to the office door, a bright orange bean bag and a picture on the wall depicting a puppy with big, brown pleading eyes. In the far corner next to the main entrance was a small table upon which rested a gurgling, foul-smelling monstrosity, which could only be the coffee-machine. Two large strides were all it took for him to cross the room to the main

2. A drink made with an artificial variant of alcohol called fake-ohol. Intended as a joke item it had none of the positive aspects of alcohol, but all the negative ones. This meant that it would make you lose control of your faculties, but without the usual lifting of the spirit. You would still wake up with a massive hangover though. It also came in a variety of original flavours. Like strawberry.

entrance, closely followed by Halfie. Just as he opened the door, Gladys exited his office and sat down at her desk.

‘Don’t eat too much, it might make you sluggish and prevent you from performing at your peak the rest of the day sir.’ She said dryly without looking up.

Oh yes. Definitely taking the piss.

Chapter 3: Heart Attack with Toast

Sebastian really was quite hung over, but he knew that a Hong special would make everything all right again. Taking the decrepit, urine-smelling stairs one floor down to street level, he ambled out of the building.

The street was heaving with people, and it being the height of summer, the heat, noise and odours of a bustling metropolis was an assault on all senses. An assault armed to the teeth, wearing full body armour and underwear that hadn't been changed in weeks. The streets of London were always busy, but lunchtime was pure mayhem, much to Sebastian's annoyance as it was usually around that time he got up every day, except for the days when he slept in. The air above the street was also a jungle of traffic. A multitude of hover-vehicles^{3*} in all shapes and sizes were whizzing past each other on multiple levels and would surely crash into each other if not for the computer controlled navigation.

Thankfully, his regular watering hole, Hong's, was located directly beneath his office, making the trip there tolerable. He had tried on many occasions to persuade grand-pa Hong to knock a hole through the ceiling, allowing them to feed Sebastian's addiction without necessitating him leaving his office, but for some reason grand-pa Hong didn't think that a direct conduit to Sebastian's office would be a sanitary decision for his establishment. At least that's what Sebastian thought he meant when he said that he'd rather stick his head into a vat of human excrement while singing 'God Save the Queen' than break down his only line of defence against the breeding ground of undiscovered life forms that was Sebastian's office.

Hong's was a traditional all licence store, selling pretty much everything under the sun as well as a fair amount of items over it, to the sides and in the cushions behind it. They never shut, as the Hong family was big enough to keep the counters manned and womanned 24/7. Lunchtime meant that most of the customers there at the moment were there for food though,

3. Of course there are flying cars, it's the future!

and today the line was longer than usual. He'd be damned if he'd stand at the back of that line, so he pushed past the throng of people, Halfie growling and yapping at anyone who didn't move out of the way quickly enough, and made it to the food counter without anyone voicing protests. He did get plenty of British Stares of Disapproval™ though, but they don't mean much to a man who sleeps in his suit.

Behind the counter stood his friend Will, the youngest of the family, and was engaged in what could only be described as glacier-speed coffee making. His older sister Nyala was standing behind him with an expression of extreme irritation and impotent rage on her face. She spotted Sebastian and immediately jumped past Will to the counter and grabbed his arm.

'Please Sebastian! You're his friend, talk some sense into him!' she pleaded, her voice full of hope and relief.

'Ehh, sure... what's the problem?'

'He insists on making that new concept coffee for all the customers even though this is the busiest time of day, and each cup takes him about 5 minutes!'

Throughout the whole sentence her voice had been increasing in volume and pitch, only to end with the last word as a screech that could shatter glass.

'Why does it take him so long?' Sebastian inquired.

'YOU ask him!' she stated firmly, drawing back from the counter with her arms crossed, glaring menacingly in Will's direction.

Will had obviously followed the exchange, and as Sebastian turned towards him he had just finished pushing a steaming cup across the counter to a very eager looking customer. He turned towards his sister with an exasperated look on his face, bringing his open hands together in front of him.

'Look Nyala, grand-pa is backing this 100%! I have his permission to try it out, and you should just let me do it in peace!'

'But it's retarded!' she shouted, veins bulging on her thin neck.

'No it isn't!' Will insisted. 'It's an original concept, good for the soul and people like it!'

'Ehh, what is the concept Will?' Sebastian interrupted.

With a final defiant stare at Nyala, Will turned to look at Sebastian.

'It's something I came up with the other day, and it's brilliant! Get this: Tai Chi Latte...'

He beamed at Sebastian as if he'd just announced a solution to poverty across the globe.

'It combines ancient Chinese tradition with normal coffee and makes the whole thing a spiritual experience!' he explained enthusiastically.

'So... it's normal coffee?'

'Right.'

'Served very, very slowly?'

'Well, in essence yes I guess, but it's so much more than that, surely you can see that? It's about the experience man! People don't just want to come here, pay their money and get an ordinary product. They want to feel that they've got something special, so that they can walk out of here with their spirits lifted! My Tai Chi Latte does that!' he exclaimed, arms open wide like a magician having just revealed that his assistant hadn't been bisected after all.

'Sorry mate, I'm a down to earth kinda guy, and I prefer my coffee quickly and without any unpleasant mime associations,' Sebastian answered regretfully. He answered this way for two reasons. Firstly, Tai Chi Latte was the fucking stupidest thing he'd EVER heard of, and secondly, Will wouldn't react by spiking Sebastian's next meal with a powerful laxative. Nyala might.

'See? Even your friend thinks it's stupid and he's done some pretty stupid things himself,' Nyala stated happily. 'Will you stop now?'

'Whatever,' Will said sourly while shooting Sebastian a disappointed look. He then went back to the counter and once again engaged in slow-motion coffee making.

Nyala threw her hands up in a capitulating gesture, shaking her head. Sebastian took this as a positive sign that maybe she'd be ready to get him his special now, and thanks to his earlier quick thinking and cowardly siding with her, the meal wouldn't be followed by an emergency trip to the lavvy. He sat down on one of the high chairs in front of the food counter and looked at Nyala expectantly. He was proved right when she turned towards him while redoing her ponytail, which had come loose in her agitated state.

'The usual Seb?' she inquired, giving him a small smile.

'Oh yes please,' he answered with a big toothy grin, anticipation making his mouth water. 'And pack of ozone sticks please.'

She went into the kitchen and Sebastian swivelled around on his chair so he could observe all the other customers while waiting. Will still hadn't finished making his next cup and the waiting customer was alternately checking his wrist display impatiently and eyeing the half-finished cup with the greedy eyes of a caffeine addict. The rest of the queue was performing similar rituals, but instead of going somewhere else for their fix of legal stimulant, they had obviously decided that anything this inconvenient was bound to be amazing, so they didn't budge.

The assortment of goods in the store was truly astounding. The store itself was quite big, about 1000 square feet, with multiple isles crammed full of shelves from floor to ceiling. The shelves contained anything from insta-meals, exotic drinks and no-wash clothes to high-tech devices and hover-car accessories. In spite of all the merchandise they still managed to fit in the coffee station and food counter at the back of the room, although the food counter only had four chairs with room for three.

He heard Nyala approaching the counter from the kitchen and swivelled back to face her. She was carrying a big plate, heavily loaded with an impressive assortment of food. After putting it down she reached beneath the counter and produced a pack of Sebastian's brand of Ozone sticks: Bozone⁴.

Ah, the Full English! Thankfully some things never changed, and Sebastian was also very happy that most people didn't bother with real food anymore but just lived on insta-meals so they'd have more time to rush around. This meant that he was usually alone at the food counter of Hong's, which suited him just fine. The plate consisted of the traditional scorched tomato, runny beans, eggs, rubbery mushrooms, cremated sausages and soggy toast. Nyala was very generous with her portions, but she didn't do too well in the food arrangement

4. "There's nozone like Bozone!"

department. As a result, the plate looked less like an inviting meal and more like a tiny traffic accident, which had been dive-bombed by a diarrhetic seagull. He dug in with relish.

Sure, the sausages and eggs were artificial replicas of the real thing since the farming and slaughter of animals had been banned for almost a century, but Sebastian was sure that the real thing couldn't have tasted better. Apparently this kind of diet was bad for you, but a quick trip to the med-clinic could sort that out for you if it became a problem.

All through the meal Halfie was sniffing around the shop, occasionally stopping to eat a piece of rubbish. This could be anything from a piece of plastic to a metal bolt, it all went into his mouth never to be seen again. Sebastian had never figured out how his small half-furry companion digested his "food", but there was no apparent exit and he'd never seen him leave any small metal or plastic surprises. It was as if the items just disappeared for good. Sebastian kept observing Halfie thoughtfully while wiping up the last of his beans with the toast. He was a strange one for sure, and Sebastian couldn't wish for a more fiercely loyal friend, but ever since that night when he'd rescued him from the installation he'd been wondering if perhaps the small robot dog was even more special than Sebastian gave him credit for. Calvin hadn't been able to find out anything either, as Halfie would object quite aggressively to anything but the most cursory inspection, and that had not revealed any makers mark or serial number. But hey, he had a pet which required zero maintenance and didn't leave any hair or waste products all over his office, so he shouldn't complain.

Leaning back in the chair to give his stomach a bit more breathing space, Sebastian nursed his coffee cup while trying to get Nyala's attention. She was just finishing with a customer, and spotting his waving hand she shuffled over to the food counter and started clearing away the plate.

'Eminently delicious as always Ny,' he said with an ingratiating smile.

'You will be able to pay today right?' she answered curtly while freezing in place and giving him a suspicious look.

'Why whatever are you implying? I'm a very trustworthy individual who always honours his debts!' Sebastian exclaimed indignantly.

Ny's facial expression didn't change while she crossed her arms in front of her and kept staring at him.

'What?' Sebastian shrugged his shoulders while throwing his arms wide, assuming a look of wronged innocence.

'Look, I'd worry less about these unjust insinuations and more about your brother who is currently on his way to the store room to pick up more coffee beans, moving at the pace of a geriatric turtle,' he said gesturing behind her with one hand.

She whirled around instantly and spotted Will doing just what he had described.

'Oh for goodness sake Will, this has gone far enough!' she shouted while marching toward him.

Will was doing his best ignoring her and concentrating on his sap-like pace. She forced him to a halt (which was only a fractional change in speed) by standing in front of him, turning on the full glare.

'You really were dropped as a baby several times weren't you Will? It's not natural to be this stupid.'

'I don't know Ny, maybe I am stupid, but at least I didn't let Seb walk off without paying his bill again.'

Ny's eyes opened wide and she spun around on her heels towards the food counter. Just an empty coffee cup remained, and when she looked toward the entrance she caught a glimpse of Halfie's gleaming posterior leaving the building.

Her shoulders sagged and she slumped down on the floor with her back against the counter, burying her head in her hands. She didn't deserve this.

Sebastian was feeling quite pleased with himself as he walked back into the reception, closely followed by Halfie. Now that he'd had a hot meal he felt a lot more positive about everything, and was certain that today was the day his luck would change.

No sooner was he through the door than Gladys jumped out of her chair and starting talking in what she considered a hushed tone, but in reality could probably be heard next door.

'Mr. Poe! Mr. Poe! We've got one! We've got a new client!' she screeched, barely keeping herself from jumping up and down.

Sebastian pointed at his office door and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Gladys nodded excitedly, accompanied by the sound of hundreds of small servos straining to keep up.

He took the required three steps to reach his office door, opened it and walked in. Gladys had opened the blinds to give the sunlight generator a chance to shine in all it's glory, and she'd also managed to clean away the worst of the mess before leaving the client in here. Sebastian could understand why. For a woman like that, he'd even consider putting on a clean shirt.

She was dressed extremely fashionably in a long, tight, black skirt and a short, small yellow jacket with massive shoulders, leaving her midriff bare. She had the kind of legs which went all the way from her hips to the floor and made an excellent job of it. The rest of her body was perfectly proportioned and as she turned around he could tell that she knew how to use it for maximum effect.

She was wearing a thin black veil which she lifted after turning around, revealing a pair of crystal blue eyes and lips redder than an extremely embarrassed tomato.

Sebastian couldn't do anything except stare, and as she realised that he wouldn't make the first move, she took a step towards him and said: 'Mr. Poe? I need you to find out who killed my husband. Twice.'

Chapter 4: Ka-ching!

‘Ok, let me just run through this again from the beginning, just to make sure I’ve got the facts straight,’ Sebastian said while running one hand through his radish^{5*} hair and thumbing through his spiral-back notebook with the other.

He was sitting behind his desk with his feet up and his shirt wide open at the neck. The coat and hat had long since been abandoned and lay crumbled at one end of the desk. The potential client was sitting in the only other chair in the office, a battered old Chesterfield armchair which Gladys had thankfully sterilised to such a degree that Sebastian felt fairly confident she would not need a tetanus shot after she left.

‘Your name is Victoria Jaeger, with a soft ‘J’ I hasten to add,’ he immediately corrected himself, having been reminded of this fact a few times already.

‘Your husband’s name was Franz Jaeger, 32 years of age, and until one week ago he was working for Tinycorp as an expert in nano bio-technology.’ Sebastian raised his eyes for confirmation of the first basic facts, and upon receiving a slight nod from Victoria, continued.

‘Exactly one week ago you were informed by a Tinycorp representative that your husband had suffered a heart attack which had killed him instantly, and you were asked to come to the Queen Charlotte’s hospital in Hammersmith to confirm this.’

‘After recovering from this substantial shock you did as you were asked and went to the hospital, only to be able to confirm that your husband was in fact dead.’

‘You then went home to inform friends and family as well as start the funeral arrangements.’

At this she looked down and clenched her hands even tighter while biting her lower lip. She was obviously fighting hard to keep her emotions under control. Sebastian paused for few moments to give her time to compose herself. When she finally looked up he could see that she had regained her former cool, and she gave him a small nod.

Sebastian continued.

5. Reddish.

'The following day you were contacted by a detective of the Metropolitan Police who regretfully announced that your husband had been killed the previous evening, and asked you to come to Westminster Hospital to identify his body. Thinking that this had to be some ridiculous clerical error you nevertheless went there to clear up the mistake.'

'Upon arrival you explained the situation to the officer in charge, a detective ... Sam Lowry?' Sebastian looked up at Victoria again for confirmation and received another small nod.

'He was surprised at your story but assured you that this was no mistake. The DNA match was conclusive. He took you to the body so you could see for yourself. He was right. It was your husband once again, lying dead before you. At his point you fainted.'

'Can't say I blame you,' Sebastian mumbled as he turned another page in the notebook.

'When you came to, this Lowry guy explained to you the circumstances in which Franz died. He had been shot twice in the back with a high-powered energy weapon about 2am, probably at the location he was found, which was on level zero in Fulham.'

'You told him what had happened the day before, and he looked it up on his terminal but found no references to your husband dying or being brought to Queen Charlottes. He also checked with Tinycorp who denied having reported your husband dead or having any knowledge about anything happening to him.'

'Since then you've been trying to found out what's going on, but have only been met by silence or denial from all parts involved.'

'Is that correct or did I leave anything out?'

She looked as if she was once again trying hard to suppress tears, but she swallowed once and answered: 'That's all correct, you didn't leave anything out Mr. Poe.'

Sebastian slowly got out of his chair and put his notepad and pencil on the desk while picking up his mug. Mug in hand he nonchalantly leaned his back against the wall, and taking a sip from the mug tried to give her a cunning look over the rim. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the twitch his face made when his taste buds were reminded that the only thing more foul-tasting than Gladys' coffee, was Gladys' coffee cold.

'And what is it you think I can do for you?' he croaked, hoping she hadn't noticed the facial spasm.

Victoria set her jaw and looked him straight in the eye, almost scaring Sebastian with the determination he saw in those cold blue eyes.

'I already told you. These corporate bastards murdered my Franz and then covered it all up. I don't know why or how, but I want you to find that out.'

'And why me? There are hundreds of other information peddlers in this city, and most of them with offices much more impressive than mine.'

'For two reasons Mr. Poe. Firstly, I need to be absolutely sure that whoever I hire isn't in the employ of a larger company who might decide to inform Tinycorp.'

'Well I definitely fit that bill,' Sebastian interjected. 'You can't get much smaller than this fine establishment, and I don't think Tinycorp would even let me into their lobby. What's the second reason?'

'To get the information you need when you're dealing with a company like Tinycorp you might have to do things which could be considered morally ambiguous by certain people, and people tell me you're no stranger to straying across that line...'

'Now look here,' Sebastian pushed off the wall and put the mug down on the desk a bit more forcefully than he had intended, making her give a small start. 'I may navigate in some rather large grey areas in my line of business, I have to... I don't know who you've been talking to, but I will not be involved in anything which is incontrovertibly illegal,' he finished firmly.

'I will pay you very well,' she said equally firmly.

Sebastian did his best to look outraged. 'I'll have you know that I'm not some common thug who'll do anything for money! I have principles to uphold and morals which guide me through this money-grubbing world of ours. If I didn't have that, what kind of person would I be? I'll tell you what kind!' he shouted dramatically while waving an accusatory index finger at her. 'The same kind of scum who would do anything to protect their precious profit margin, including killing your husband!'

He finished his rant in a rather aggressive posture, legs apart, head tilted back and his considerable index finger still utilised to maximum effect by being pointed straight at Victoria.

‘One thousand kilos^{*6} a day, all expenses paid and fifty thousand as a bonus upon successful completion,’ she stated calmly, looking up at him from the chair.

Sebastian didn’t move but remained frozen in the awkward pose. After a few seconds like this he suddenly spread his arms in a placatory manner and smiled ingratiatingly.

‘On the other hand I’m sure that a woman of your stature is capable of making the right moral choices in all matters of life and I don’t see why this should be any different. In short, you’ve got a deal!’

He punctuated the sentence by flicking his outstretched right hand in front of her while maintaining the unnaturally toothy broad smile. She took his hand and shook it in agreement while she stood up, a cautious smile playing on her lips. She started moving towards the door and Sebastian’s eyes were immediately drawn to the gentle swaying of her chair interface. He forced himself to look up when she started talking without turning or stopping, ‘I’ll expect daily reports on your progress and after each report, payment will be transferred to your account.’

‘Sure thing,’ he said lamely as she left the office, went past Gladys and out the front door.

Approximately ten milliseconds after she closed the door, Gladys jumped out of her chair and clonked her way into Sebastian’s office. ‘We have a client, we have a client!’ she squealed excitedly, rotating and clapping her hands like two small windmills fighting.

6. The rest of the world had changed to the common currency of Veldt Dollars (VD’s) 84 years previously, leaving only England with the British Pound amidst massive criticism and pressure from everyone else. Refusing to back down but not wanting to appear inflexible it was decided by parliament to at least convert to metric, thus creating the English Kilo (Scotland, Ireland and Wales having long since gained independence). An unfortunate side effect of this was the instant devaluing of the phrase: ‘A ton of money’.

‘We do indeed, and with the money she’s paying us, Sebastian Poe Investigations could be sitting pretty for a long time! Right, I better get cracking straight away. There is crime to solve and money to be made.’

‘And exactly what money are we talking about here? Hopefully the kind that can pay 3 months back rent to a gracious landlord who in return will not have to forcefully remove your favourite finger,’ came a gruff voice from the direction in which Victoria had disappeared moments earlier.

In the doorway stood the least convincing transvestite ever to grace the streets of London. He was a giant of a man, closer to 7 feet than 6, barrel-chested and with enough body hair to make a yeti envious. His face looked like the face of an old bloodhound having just gotten out of bed on a Monday only to find that he had lost his sense of smell. With badly applied lipstick. He was wearing a blue dress with white dots, which had probably been out of style at the time of manufacture, a granny hat with a veil in front, a pink handbag and huge high-heeled stilettos that could easily function as water slides for a small child.

‘Alice! What an unexpected pleasure,’ Sebastian exclaimed, shooting Gladys a hard glance and then once again exercising his most ingratiating smile. ‘Yes, as you heard, and might have deduced from seeing a classy woman leaving my office just now, I’m on the verge of getting my hands on some dosh, and when I do, you shall be the very first person to benefit from this most fortunate turn of events, I guarantee it.’

‘I know about your guarantees Sebastian, and if I relied on them to make a living I wouldn’t have a pot to piss in!’

‘...piss in, hee hee...’, came a thin voice from behind Alice.

‘So here is how it’s going to work,’ the big man continued. ‘I’ll be back here tomorrow afternoon, which should give you plenty of time to get your hands on some of that credit. Three months rent comes to a total of four and a half tons, and this time you better have it matey,’ he finished, jabbing a finger the size of a salami in Sebastian’s direction.

‘...tee hee, ‘ave it matey, ahee...’, something squeaked behind Alice again.

‘Of course, no problem,’ Sebastian said nonchalantly while slowly picking up his hat and jacket. ‘Say, is that weasel I hear, scurrying around behind you?’

‘It’s DWEAZIL you loser!’ the reedy voice exclaimed, followed by a small ferret-like head poking out behind Alice’s massive frame. A few moments went by while a ferret of a man pushed and shoved to get around Alice and through the doorway, momentarily getting stuck halfway. After a bit of panicked flailing he finally got through, only to fall flat on his face as he flew into the room. He was as small as his associate was big, and was obviously trying to compensate for this by wearing baggy clothes and as much gold jewellery as he could fit on his fingers, wrists and neck. Sebastian was pretty sure that if was thrown into the Thames, the weight of his ornaments would make sure that he would never resurface.

Defying the laws of physics, he immediately bounced back up unto his feet and immediately started ranting at Sebastian.

‘Where do you get off disrespectin’ me eh? You twat! You loser! You nobody! You just be ‘appy that I follow Mr. Alice’s orders, so I won’t tear off your limbs until he tells me to. Count yourself damn lucky mate!’

Throughout this he was gesticulating wildly, his whole body shaking like a tightly wound steel spring, making his various chains rattle so much that he was drowning out his own words in parts.

‘Say it, don’t spray it mate, little bit of advice for you there,’ Sebastian said while wiping spittle from his face. ‘You know, you really should keep your dog on a leash Alice, especially when he’s rabid. He might frighten small children.’

‘What?! What did you just say?! I.....you.....’cking.....,’ Dweazil sputtered while turning an unhealthy shade of red.

Alice grabbed his shoulder with a resigned expression and pulled him back towards to door.

‘Alright, we’re leaving, but remember, tomorrow afternoon, four and a half tons or I’ll let Dweazil loose on you.’

He once again jabbed his sausage-like finger at Sebastian while fixing him with a hard stare and keeping hold of his struggling associate with his free hand. In this way he slowly exited the room walking backwards, obviously going for maximum ominous effect. An impressive feat in heels.

Sebastian could hear the weasel's indignant protests from the front office as he was being hauled out the main door by force.

'I'm so sorry sir, I completely forgot about them in all the excitement. They arrived shortly after Mrs. Jaeger and I couldn't very well turn them away, so I persuaded them to wait until she left,' Gladys pleaded while wringing her hands.

'Don't worry about it,' Sebastian sighed, 'they were bound to show up sooner or later, and he's not the kind of man to take no for an answer. At least now it looks like we can finally get him off our backs.'

'But sir, you're only getting paid 1000 kilos a day and he wants 4500 by tomorrow?'

'You just let me worry about that, I'll work something out,' he said confidently while putting on his hat and flicking an ozone stick into the corner of his mouth.

'But now I'll have to get started or we'll never see ANY money at all. First stop: the police. And let's hope they won't let any trivial past misunderstandings get in the way of friendly cooperation between professionals.'

Chapter 5: John Smith

This is not good he thought. He was still lying in bed even though he should have gotten up half an hour ago. The screen at the foot of his bed was showing an endless stream of news updates, all filtered by the categories and keywords he had selected, but he wasn't paying any attention to them after that one crucial item.

That uber science geek from work had been killed, shot by unknown assailants. And in such a dodgy location as well. That in itself was shocking enough, but not something that really would affect him in any way. No, the scary bit was that he had seen the guy being

pronounced dead in his lab and carried off by medical staff the day before, and he was pretty sure that he didn't have any smoking holes in his back at that point. Furthermore, Tinycorp was denying any knowledge of what had happened and had stated that Franz Jaeger, as his name was, had left work as usual the day before.

Now the big question was looming before him: Did anyone see him as he observed Franz being carried off? He hadn't had his special power turned on at the time, so they would have been blind not to see him, but then again, sometimes the power was in effect even when he wasn't consciously aware of it.

If they had seen him, wouldn't they have come knocking already, asking him what he saw and telling him to keep quiet? Or maybe they'd just try to bump him off to avoid any chance of him blabbing. He'd seen enough of that place to not put anything past those people in charge. The business always came first and any other considerations second, and although he didn't know of any incidents, he wasn't so sure that even an employee's right to live would be an obstacle if the stakes were high enough.

If they *hadn't* seen him, didn't he still have an obligation to do something with his knowledge, especially as a founding member and leader of GLUM? This was precisely the thing they had all been waiting for, the opportunity to do the right thing and show everyone that they were special, heroes even! He just hadn't really considered the very real possibility of personal injury or an abrupt life deficit due to death before. Heroism would be so much easier if you didn't have to be brave. Damnit.

Ok, no matter what, he couldn't just stay here as that would surely arouse suspicion even if they didn't know, so he had to go to work as normal and just act like nothing happened. Then he could decide later what to do. Maybe talk it over with the guys.

A decision made, John swung his legs out of the bed, got up and quickly dressed after rummaging through a stack of clothes to find something that was relatively clean. Didn't really matter as he would change into uniform at work anyway.

The room was tiny by any standard and would probably cause claustrophobia in an underdeveloped dormouse. It was a fully integrated living unit, which meant that it had

everything you needed to live, but not necessarily anything that would make you want to continue doing so. It was all moulded in one huge piece of some white, matte material, approximately seven by seven by seven feet. The bed, the shelves, the tiny table and two chairs were all part of the mould, which didn't leave much room for redecoration. That was probably as it should be for a room so small you had to leave it to change your mind. There was no kitchen since only people with money could afford proper food and the toilet and bath was shared with all the other residents on the same floor. Like most of these living units it was fully catered and his morning insta-meal was waiting for him in his delivery box.

Quickly checking the mirror and deciding that his appearance didn't warrant any excessive morning ablutions he grabbed his breakfast and ran out the door, the door sliding shut and locking automatically behind him.

Taking the lift down the five stories and exiting into the street John found himself yet again part of the hustle and bustle of Croydon during rush hour. Everybody was going the same direction, making it easy to just join the throng and let yourself be swept away.

Nobody who had to live in Croydon could afford *not* to take the tube. Throughout the 21st century the tube system had gotten steadily worse, with the city paying out more and more refunds due to delays every year. This finally reached breaking point in the middle of the 22nd century when the money received in ticket sales was exceeded by the money paid out in refunds. When that happened the tube was made free for all to use. The problems at this stage were so severe though that people didn't even want to use the service free of charge as walking was faster. This did *not* suit the politicians as usage of collective transport was seen to be pivotal to the image of London. A decision was made to incentivise people by paying them to use the tube; an opportunity that all people below a certain income level jumped at, even if it meant spending more time travelling to work. On the positive side, the tube stations themselves were sparkling wonders of modern architecture and every facility you could possibly want. More than two hundred years of tube renovation money going straight into improving the stations but ignoring the actual trains and tracks, which were

deemed "a bother" to improve, had made sure that you'd be waiting forever for your train in sumptuous surroundings.

Entering New Croydon station, John quickly checked the signal failure counter before going down the escalator: 5 signal failures today. Phew, only 5, that would mean he'd be at work in just 2 hours.

Settling into one of the suede recliners on the platform and activating the massage feature John finally relaxed a bit and convinced himself that everything would turn out just fine.

Chapter 6: A Fair Cop

Having left Gladys to calm down and start getting background information on Victoria, her husband and Tinycorp, Sebastian took the lift up to car-park floors with Halfie.

He needed transportation in his line of business, and anything less than a hover-car wouldn't work, so even though it broke with his image of himself as a good old fashioned gum-shoe who didn't have to rely on modern gadgetry, he had invested in one such flying wonder. To assuage his guilt though, he'd heavily modified its appearance to make it look like a black sedan from the nineteen forties. This had resulted in two things: Firstly it meant he'd had less money to spend on the more critical parts of the vehicle which made the hover bits hover and the car bits car, and secondly a bulky chassis with all the aerodynamic qualities of a badly made brick. The result was a slow, badly/hardly manoeuvrable death trap, but damnit, it look ace.

Hardly anyone drove manually these days, they rather left it in the hands of the navigational computer, and with good reason. Flying a car in multiple lanes and levels in a city like London was no trivial task, and to attempt it for more than a few minutes was not just to invite insanity, but more like asking insanity and the more mentally unstable members

of his extended family to move into your house to take care of your priceless collection of porcelain china dolls.

Never the less, Sebastian would be damned if he'd let his personal freedom to roam wherever he wanted be dictated by a piece of circuitry, so he always drove manually. Also, his nav system didn't work anymore, except for the collision avoidance component required by law.

Gently he flew the car out of the building and joined the traffic, stoically ignoring all hooting and flashing of lights from people going twice as fast as him.

His first port of call was Fulham police station to talk to Detective Lowry about the details of Franz' death. It never hurt to get the details straight from the source, unless he ran into Detective Inspector Clydesdale at the station, in which case there might be a certain element of pain.

He arrived half an hour later and landed on the roof of the building which was home to Fulham's finest. The moment the car touched the ground a drone came speeding toward him, coming to a halt next to the drivers side.

'Welcome to Fulham Police Station, please state your business,' a pleasant heavily amplified female voice came from the drone.

That was the only feminine thing about the machine though, as it mostly resembled a thermos with a terminal attached to the top and a robotic arm hanging awkwardly down one side. It floated about a metre off the ground and gently bobbed up and down. The terminal was visible from inside the car and was displaying what it had just said.

'Sebastian Poe to see Detective Sam Lowry please.'

'One moment please sir.'

The drone remained motionless and silent for about ten seconds and then continued: 'Detective Lowry will see you now, please follow me.'

Sebastian got out of the car, which automatically locked behind him, and followed the small chrome robot as it floated towards the only structure on the roof. Halfie had also

jumped out of the car and now started running around the flying thermos alternating between sniffing and barking shrilly, obviously very fascinated by the subject of its attention.

The drone stopped before the only door in the structure and turned to face (screen?) Sebastian.

'Please instruct your artificial canine to be quiet as we enter the station sir. Failure to do so might result in involuntary remote deactivation by the police AI.'

Sebastian was halfway through a glare that said 'fascist bastard' before realising that it was wasted on the miserable little tin can.

'Sure, whatever you say. Halfie! Calm down!' he barked (ironically).

Halfie froze mid-sniff, cocked his head and looked at him with a puzzled expression which seemed to say 'are you kidding me? I'm a *dog* this is what I *do*,' before apparently deciding it was a fair request after all, trotting over next to him and sitting down. Tongue lolling he gave the drone what Sebastian was sure was a dirty look.

'Please follow me,' the drone merely stated and went into the lift as the door slit open in front of them.

The building had a total of 42 floors, all of them belonging to the Metropolitan Police. London had a population of 91 million people, and keeping them all from killing each other took quite a lot of manpower. Not that the inhabitants were uncivilised, quite the contrary, the challenge was all the civilised ways in which people could get on each other's nerves. Ever since The Great Quantum Leap of 2112, when science had finally come through for humanity and found a way to produce virtually free, clean energy and food for everyone on the planet, most of the world had turned its back on religion, finally realising that the main differences between holy scriptures and 'The New Adventures of Megaman', were that one tended to be a bit wordier and the other had better costumes^{7*}.

Lack of religion did leave a hole in most peoples lives however, as they needed *something* to obsess about and help them find an identity, and football just wasn't for everyone.

The result was countless special interest groups and organisations where people could get together and enjoy their common interest in anything from spatulas to Tibetan harmonic chanting. Due to human nature many of these groups were as fanatical as any religious fundamentalist, which led to many interesting clashes that the police had to sort out.

These included the ongoing feud between The Weapon Lovers and The Weapon Haters. You'd think that fighting between these two particular groups would be unevenly matched, but it was astounding what you could do with office supplies when you put your mind to it.

Another example was The Hairies and The Baldies, or the apes and the eggs as they referred to each other. In their case the clashes mostly consisted of name calling and the odd thrown wig or golfball.

Some people argued that the police force was a bloated, fascist institution with too many people sitting on their arses doing nothing, but they usually didn't argue for long, that is if they still wanted to be able to go from their home to work without being subjected to a daily body cavity search on the grounds of "looking dodgy" which was all the reason they needed to have the law on their side. Not that the country had turned into a police state, it just seemed like it in every way.

The lift stopped on the fifth floor, and if the usual floor hierarchy was to be trusted, this meant that Detective Sam Lowry could only dream of reaching the bottom rung of the career ladder. It also meant that the killing was not being given very much attention, which in itself was odd as Tinycorp definitely had the political clout to get half the police force on this if they wanted.

'This way,' the drone...well, droned, as it floated out of the lift.

7. The one exception to this was Israel and Palestine. Their continuing quarrel was the last bastion of worship of very unlikely mythical characters. In fact the expression 'there is something rotten in the state of Denmark' had long since been replaced in the social consciousness by 'there's trouble in the middle east'. News channels now only reported from the region when there *wasn't* fighting.

They entered a massive open office covering the entire floor with tables arrayed in long rows, only intermittently broken up by paths crossing the rows in a perpendicular fashion.

Most of the tables were occupied by police officers who in some cases were accompanied by sullen-faced detainees, wrists attached to the desk with magnetic cuffs and feet stuck to the floor with ankle versions of the wrist cuffs.

Fans of 20th century police dramas, of which Sebastian was one, would be extremely disappointed by the sterile sight of a modern police station. There were no huge piles of papers, folders and files as the workplace had finally gone paperless only a hundred years after it was supposed to, and no petty criminals were making scenes running around unchecked; the movement inhibiting magnetic cuffs made sure of that. The moment someone wearing the cuffs tried to pull them apart or move beyond a certain speed the wrist and ankle cuffs would snap together instantly, leaving the unfortunate subject in a rather uncomfortable position on the floor. The whiplash caused by the sudden attraction was just an added bonus.

All in all it was as quiet and sedate as any other office environment. How devastatingly boring, Sebastian thought. No colour, no spice. This was exactly why he had quit the force all those years ago and he had no regrets.

Small glass-walled offices, housing what must have been the marginally more important employees, edged the room and it was to one of these that the drone led them. Halfie was still on his best behaviour, only briefly stopping to sniff people's feet and to gobble down any stray pieces of metal.

The office door slid open and the drone hovered to one side.

'Please enter,' it said. 'Officer Lowry will send for another escort when you leave. Under no circumstance must you leave this office unescorted.'

With that friendly message it spun around and floated away. Sebastian entered the fish tank, the door closing behind him.

No big surprise décor-wise, both because this was a police station and there were limits to the flamboyancy you were allowed to display and because the inherent transparency of the walls had allowed Sebastian to inspect the room from the outside. It had a small desk, also

transparent, and two chairs (transparent), one in front of the desk and one behind it. Various personal items inhabited a few shelves^{8*} alongside a few picture frames, cycling through images of what could only be the Detective's family. Judging from the pictures he had a wife and either two kids and a dog or three kids, one of which was extremely hairy and had abnormally large ears. In any case dog-boy was still the most attractive of them as they were without a doubt the most unattractive children Sebastian had ever seen.

If you wanted to, and didn't mind not conceiving your children the old-fashioned way, you could pretty much decide what you wanted your child to look like. Outside the body, eggs and sperm could be scanned and combined virtually and the result seen on a screen. Like a slideshow it was possible to see pictures of the theoretical child at various stages in life as well as get information on their aptitudes and weaknesses. It was not legal to engineer children but you were welcome to pick and choose if you had the money.

The good Detective must have been kicking himself that he hadn't spent the extra cash.

He was sitting behind the desk tapping away at a terminal and only looked up when Sebastian entered the room.

'Mr. Poe, I've heard a lot about you,' he said with an unreadable expression on his face.

'All good I trust,' Sebastian answered with a wry smile.

'Depends how you look at it really. Taken verbatim the information would suggest that you're a scum-sucking parasite with no respect for anything, you were apparently born out of wedlock to a mother who had sexual relations with disreputable characters and, oh yes, you have a fondness for male genitalia.'

At this he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his sizeable stomach while continuing to observe Sebastian with a face devoid of emotion. After a few seconds he continued:

'But seeing as the information came from a man who himself is a right cock, I'll assume you're an ok guy.'

8. Yes you guessed it, transparent.

The corner of his mouth twitched into a small crooked smile and there was a glint in his eyes, which suggested that he was having fun.

Sebastian, who was used to all kinds of derogatory abuse from the police and therefore had expected the worst, relaxed visibly and allowed himself to smile back.

'Clydesdale?' he inquired with raised eyebrows.

'The one and only,' Sebastian's new best friend answered. 'The man couldn't find his own crack with a GPS implant and an extra arm. I don't know why he hates you so much, but I'm sure it's an interesting story,' he concluded while gesturing for Sebastian to sit down in the chair opposite^{9*} him.

'I thought it was a matter of police record what went on between us all those years ago,' Sebastian said.

'Well, it's a matter of record that you apparently broke so many rules they had to invent new ones for you to break, but it was all harmless stuff, I see it happening every day. In your case though Clydesdale was haunting you like a bad hangover for the slightest offence, real or imaginary, so my instinct tells me there was more behind it.'

'Well there was one small thing,' Sebastian said, apparently preoccupied with picking lint off his hat, which he had removed when he sat down.

Sam raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

'Shortly after I started with the police I met this woman at one of those bars where police men, who don't want to hang out with other police men, hang out. We had a few laughs and a few drinks and I managed to get fairly drunk. So when she suggested we go back to her place I thought it was the best idea ever. I guess I should have questioned how such a young girl could afford to live in such a big place, but my mind was elsewhere at the time. After we'd had a bit of fun I did the gentlemanly thing and passed out, only to wake up again an hour later from her snoring. I kid you not, it sounded like the mating call of a two ton rhino with a fatal sinus infection.'

9. Yes, the only other chair in the room, I know, I know. Well done attentive reader.

Sam allowed himself another one of those small crooked smiles at this description and bent down to take two glasses from the bottom shelf. Grabbing the water bottle on his desk he poured them both a glass and beckoned Sebastian to continue.

'I thought I'd avoid the awkward morning-after conversation and just slip out after using the loo. So I leave the room, walk down the hall to locate the lavvy and open the first door I get to. It wasn't the loo. I was confronted by a sight that will haunt me till the day I die: Inspector Clydesdale in a full, skin-tight sensory suit sporting VR glasses and a massive erection. Grunting loudly and making thrusting motions in the air he was obviously running a very enjoyable simulation, or should I say stimulation. I caught a glimpse of it on the terminal and let's just say that old MacDonald would have been outraged.'

Sam started chuckling and reached for his water.

'So the girl was?'

'His daughter,' Sebastian replied.

At this Sam started laughing, making it hard for him to keep his water from spilling.

'So he spots me, takes me for a burglar and immediately charges. Let me tell you, an overweight, puffy-faced angry man in a skin-tight suit running at you with his wedding tackle at full salute was enough to scare me shitless! Despite my police training I couldn't move and he hit me like a ton of bricks.'

'When I came to he was arguing loudly with his daughter, having thankfully put on a robe in the meantime. He'd cuffed me and wanted to arrest me for breaking and entering or invasion of privacy or *something*, but in the end he realised that if I were to give a full statement of what had happened, he would end up being the laughing stock of the station, so he grudgingly let me go.'

Sam was still laughing as Sebastian finished his story and took a large drink of water, making a cheers motion with the glass before setting it down again.

'Very good, very good,' he said wiping tears from the corner of his eyes. 'That made my day mate, thanks for that.'

'How come you never told anyone here?'

'Well I figured that as long as I had some dirt on him he might be on my back but he'd never do anything drastic, and when I left I didn't have anyone to tell. He'd pretty much made sure that nobody would take the risk of being friends with me,' Sebastian said almost apologetically.

'But now that I've passed it on I trust it'll be put to good use?'

'Oh yes,' Sam nodded slowly, 'you can be damn sure of that. But how can I return the favour? You must be here for others reasons than to brighten up my day.'

Sebastian stopped smiling and leaned forward in his chair.

'You're the Detective in charge of the Franz Jaeger murder investigation aren't you?' Sebastian asked,

'That's right,' Sam sighed and rubbed his face with both hands indicating the pleasure wasn't all his.

'Why are you interested?' he asked after a brief pause, looking Sebastian straight in the eye.

'I've been hired by the widow to find out who killed him and why,' Sebastian answered.

Sam gave Sebastian a puzzled look.

'I find that very odd given the fact that she has shown zero interest in working with us on this, and has even been extremely reticent about volunteering information.'

'She appears to have a severe dislike for the corporate world, and therefore doesn't put much faith in the system which merely acts as lackeys for said corporations,' Sebastian shrugged.

'Her words not mine,' he added and winked at Sam.

'I see, well, between you and me it's just as well she's not putting her faith in the police on this occasion and as much as I resent the insinuation that we're mindless automatons doing the bidding of big business, she may not be too far off the mark.'

'How so?' Sebastian said as he sat up a bit straighter and inched towards the table.

'You can count can't you? How many floors did you have to go down to get to my office? This case has been given about the same priority as a Peckham burglary and I get the

distinct feeling the someone with significant pull doesn't want this murder looked at in too much detail.'

Sebastian had come to the same conclusion the moment the lift stopped, but it was always nice to have your theories affirmed. He allowed himself a small self-congratulatory smirk.

'So what *have* you found out, if anything?'

Sam's eyes narrowed slightly as he seemed to be evaluating Sebastian and his intentions. Apparently coming to a favourable conclusion he gave a small sigh and put his hands on the desk while leaning forward slightly.

'Look Poe, I like you. From what I can gather you're the kind of guy who doesn't take any shit and never takes no for answer, and I respect that. Having met you I'm pretty sure you're one of the good guys, but the powers that be tend not to agree with me on a lot of things and, although it hardly seems possible, there are floors below this one and I do *not* want to end up there.'

As he finished the sentence his eyes turned from Sebastian to something behind him over his right shoulder.

'Uh oh, here we go,' he mumbled and sat back in his chair again.

Automatic doors couldn't be slammed open or shut, much to the chagrin of alpha males everywhere, but the swoosh sound accompanying the office door opening had a simmering anger about it.

'What. The FUCK is *he* doing here?!' a bellow reverberated through the tiny office, almost making every transparent surface vibrate.

Sebastian didn't have to turn around to see who it was. He'd heard the voice many times and one of those times even groaning in pre-coital simulated farmyard pleasure. He could hear his heavy breathing and easily imagine his red, puffy face. Oh god, the mental images were coming back and it was not a happy reunion.

'Mr. Poe is here on behalf of the widow Jaeger in connection with a murder investigation I'm working on,' Sam replied stiffly.

'You? Working on a murder case? Who died, a fucking investment banker or summin'k?'^{10,*}

When Sam didn't reply, Clydesdale strode fully into the room, forcing Sebastian to look at him. He looked much the same as the last time he had seen him except redder, puffier and with more veins bulging out angrily from his neck and forehead.

'And you,' he spat, glaring at Sebastian. 'Chasing defenceless widows now are we? That's a new low even for you Poe.'

He didn't rise to the challenge but merely smiled witlessly which luckily seemed to annoy the big ape. Excellent.

Realising that bait hadn't been taken, he turned back to Sam.

'I want that disgrace out of my police station at once and you're not to share *any* case details with him, understood?' he barked.

'Whatever you say sir,' Sam replied in a flat voice.

'There's a good boy,' Clydesdale added and flashed him a patronising smile.

Sam visibly stiffened and Sebastian could tell that a considerable amount of willpower was keeping him in check.

Turning to leave Clydesdale took a step towards Sebastian and leaned over to bring their faces so close together that Sebastian could see the yellow river deltas of blood that were his eyes. 'You've got anything to say to me sonny?' he rasped.

10. For more than a century all banks had been run by artificial intelligences, making any human intervention unnecessary. For legal reasons though there had to be a human element to a lot of transaction finalisations even if it just involved pressing a button when told to do so by the AI. These people were still called investment bankers but were a pale shadow of their former glory days. To add insult to injury the AI's had their arrogance set to maximum as studies had shown that this yielded better results for some reason. The bankers felt the brunt of this as they were patronised all day long, making it the least desirable job in the world.

Sebastian stared straight back without flinching and said calmly: 'Fuck *you*, the horse you rode in on and the whole cavalry behind you.'

Clydesdale's red complexion turned an angry purple and his face started twitching bizarrely. It looked like he was having a seizure but instead he jerked upright and turned towards the door.

Sebastian blew out a lungful of air through completely relaxed lips, creating a passable impression of a content horse.

Clydesdale froze in place for a few seconds before leaving the office and quickly walking towards the lift.

'I can see why he doesn't like you,' Sam said and burst out laughing.

'Yes well, the feeling is more than mutual,' Sebastian added.

Grabbing his hat he made as if to get up, but was interrupted by Sam leaning over and also putting his hand on his hat.

'You in a hurry to be somewhere else?' he asked.

'Seems like I've overstayed my welcome, and since you can't share case details there's not much point in me hanging around.'

He'd raised the pitch slightly at the end of the sentence implying a question, and his judge of character seemed to have been spot on as Sam said: 'Fuck him. After that little display of his I'll help you any way I can. What do you want to know?'

Sebastian relaxed back in the chair with a small smile, leaving his hat on the table.

'Give me everything you have on the case, including background checks, forensics, witnesses and any theories you might have.'

'No problem, I'll transfer it now.'

He turned towards his terminal and tapped away for a few seconds after which a discreet bleep came from Sebastian's wrist. Pulling back his left sleeve to reveal his wrist terminal, or 'wrist' for short as it was mostly referred to, he accepted the incoming data with a touch on the screen.

Unlike most other people, except for the Corporation Against Networking, better known as CAN'T, who didn't believe in the free flow of information, Sebastian wore his wrist externally like an old fashioned watch, and not embedded into his dermal and sub-dermal tissue. He also didn't have his frontal lobe synchronised with his wrist to make him able to control it mentally. This was perceived as being extremely un-cool and impractical, but first of all he didn't want to be physically fused to sodding electronics or have his mind exposed to the world no matter how safe they said it was, and secondly fashion was circular and he was certain that low-tech would come back into fashion soon and then he'd be laughing.

'These files contain the background info and forensics,' Sam said while leaning back from the terminal and once again crossing his arms on his chest.

'As for witnesses, that's really easy as there weren't any, and my theories are complete and utter guesswork. I'll be honest with you, I have nothing to go on and the route of inquiry I'd like to take has effectively been blocked off politically. So seeing as I've got a ton of other work to do which might even result in some people being helped, I'd consider the case unsolved and closed.'

He said this with the weariness of a man fighting a system that always fought dirty and always rigged the game. Sebastian had been there.

'You said you had theories?'

'Nothing more than guesswork.'

'Oblige me,' Sebastian persisted.

Sam gave a small smile and a nod. 'Very well. This stinks of a cover-up, which means someone with pull, which in turn means corporate. Considering the company he worked for and his relatively high profile I'd go for elimination by either competition or even the employer themselves if they thought he was selling information.'

Sebastian nodded. He too had no illusions about the power and ruthlessness of Corporate England or indeed the world. He grabbed his hat and stood up.

'You are a treasure of a man and you have been extremely helpful and gracious and for that I thank you,' he said and made an exaggerated sweeping bow with his hat.

'The pleasure is all mine,' Sam chuckled. 'If you keep me posted on anything you find I'll do the same.'

'Hang on; let me call you a drone. Don't want anybody to get their hosiery in a twist over an unescorted anarchist.'

With that he pushed a button on his terminal and within seconds a drone, identical to the one which had led him here, appeared outside the office

Sebastian touched the brim of his hat with his index and middle finger and gave him a final nod and a wink before leaving the office.

'Lead the way toots,' he told the hovering thermos.

It didn't move but instead replied: 'Unable to carry out assignment until party is complete. Missing: One artificial canine.'

Shit. Halfie! He'd completely forgotten about him. Probably because he'd been quiet which was unusual for him. Had he even entered the office? Sebastian wasn't sure, but he wasn't in there now that much was certain.

He scanned the room but couldn't see him anywhere. As he was contemplating his next move the fire exit door across the room slammed open with a loud crash and through the door came Halfie, closely followed by two out-of-breath policemen. He immediately honed in on Sebastian and came running full sprint, jumping into his arms when he got close enough.

Halfie was mostly metal and polymers and therefore not a lightweight, and as a direct consequence of this Sebastian lost his footing and fell on his arse holding a happy puppy who was acting like everything was back to normal.

It only took the pursuers a few seconds to catch up and come to an abrupt halt in front of him.

'Is...', the officer bent over and rested his hands on his knees for support, trying to catch his breath.

'Is this... your dog sir?' he managed to finish.

He looked very peaky and Sebastian guessed he was not used to this amount of exercise.

'Ehhh, yes... yes it is,' he answered haltingly.

Having regained a bit of colour and appearing to breathe easier, the questioning officer pulled himself upright and tried to assume the traditional stance of authority: Legs wide, hands on hips and head slightly tilted back allowing the eyes to glare.

'And what was it doing in the data centre if I may ask?'

Data centre? As far as Sebastian knew these were usually located near the top of the building for better ventilation, so it would have been quite a trek for Halfie to get up there, not to mention getting past security, which was certain to be considerable.

'I have no idea; he must have gone for a stroll while I was talking to detective Lowry. How did he get into a restricted area anyway? I thought you had that place sealed tighter than a whale's arsehole?'

The two officers shot furtive glances at each other and appeared embarrassed before trying to salvage the situation by going back on the offensive.

'Be that as it may, he should *not* have been allowed to roam around unsupervised!'

Sebastian spread his arms apologetically and said: 'what can I say chaps, apologies? No harm was intended and everything ended well so let's just call it a day shall we?'

With that he got up from the floor, brushed himself off, patted both officers on the shoulder and turned towards the drone, which had been witnessing the unfolding events in complete silence.

'All accounted for now, can we please leave?' he asked with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

'Of course sir, follow me,' the drone replied and glided off.

Sebastian left the two befuddled desk jockeys behind and walked towards the lift closely followed by Halfie.

Luckily they must have decided not to pursue the incident so Sebastian made it to the roof without being stopped.

Arriving at his car he immediately noticed the message light blinking, and looking at the screen he could see that he had been issued a fine for parking slightly outside the prescribed parking space; two centimetres to be exact.

For fucks sake, Sebastian thought, how petty could you get? And why was it called a fine anyway when it was anything but.

Chapter 7: Team Briefing

By the time John arrived at Gunnersbury tube station in Chiswick his paranoia had come back full force. What if they were waiting for him at work? What if he was going to have an “accident” in the garbage disposal room when he was alone? Maybe they hadn’t done anything yet because it would be easier to cover it up on their own territory and they just wanted to lull him into a false sense of security.

Maybe he was tagged. Maybe they knew exactly where he was and would pounce on him the moment he made an unexpected move. Then again, maybe not. He did have a tendency to let his imagination get the better of him, a trait the guys had often berated him for. The best thing to do was probably just relax and try to keep his head down until he could meet with Bruno and Jerry at lunch. This unfortunately meant that Lars couldn’t be there as he was on duty in the kitchen at the time, but this couldn’t wait until after work, he might be dead by then. Even waiting until lunch was risky.

Walking the tiny distance from the station to Tinycorp Towers only took 2 minutes, and the only reason it took that long was that he worked in the northern tower, which was furthest away.

The Towers had originally been six fairly modest office buildings, and Tinycorp had bought the lot intending to tear them down in order to build one great, big monster of a tower^{11*}, not completely without certain phallic connotations. The council had other ideas however and ruled that since this was a preservation area, the buildings couldn’t be torn

down, thus leaving the company with six too-small buildings. In spite of the impressive weight they could throw around, both political and pecuniary, they found the answer to the question of what happens when an unstoppable force meets a council official: The question is moot as nothing moves a council worker if he doesn't want to be moved. The donkey of the political world if you will, but with slightly better teeth. Slightly.

The cunning solution to this was to leave the buildings as they were but merely extend them a bit upwards. In this case by 66 floors, except for the main tower, which had 67 so that the CEO could be just that bit higher up. The towers were masterpieces of steel and glass, rising elegantly toward the sky. Each one was connected to two others every five floors by transparent^{*12} enclosed walkways making it possible, if a bit of a trek, to walk between all towers without going outside.

John ran his pass through a scanner at the main gate and was let into a small booth. There were several of these scanners and booths next to his to allow for the huge throughput of people. Inside the booth he placed his hands on two circular pads, pressed his face against what looked like a round pillow with holes where the mouth and eyes would be positioned and said: 'John Smith, employee number 32X96K23P11FFFF1-4/B.'

Nothing happened and after a few seconds he repeated the information. Still nothing happened and John sighed. A small screen flickered into life above the face scanner and a stern looking face stared out at him.

'Oh, it's you again Smith, I should have known,' the face said with annoyance.

'Hello hello,' John said with a weary apologetic smile. 'It's just not working for me, and I'm doing all the right things he explained for the 1000th time.'

'Well as I keep telling you there is no way that the system won't be able to identify you based on your face, eyes, breath, handprints and voice. You MUST be doing something

11. This was in spite of the fact that the existing buildings were already appropriately transparent having been built in glass two centuries before.

12. Yes I know, the future is awfully transparent.

wrong!' he insisted, equally for the 1000th time. 'The thing can't pin you down, it just keeps searching and then locks up!'

John shrugged and pulled a "I don't know what to tell you" face. The exact same expression, which had confronted millions of technical support people since computers were invented.

'Alright, I'll override the booth and let you in,' the angry face snapped after which the screen immediately went black again and the booth opened to let him into the grounds.

Apparently this had never happened to anyone else before or after John had joined the company. He found that hard to believe, but it definitely was a pain in the arse.

He joined the general swell of people and steered towards tower 1 where he went around to the back entrance and swiped his card again at a solitary scanner. This time he only had to put his face on a retinal scanner, but like before nothing happened. Again a screen lit up above the scanner and the same guy as before appeared. When he saw John his eyes just narrowed and the screen turned off abruptly, followed by the door next to it opening. This was also part of the daily routine for John.

Security was obviously very tight at Tinycorp. They were the most successful nanotechnology company in the world and produced materials and nanobots for every use you could think of and a few you couldn't, wouldn't or shouldn't.

This was why their security was based on the long-standing tenet of something you know, something you have and something you are, although they did seem to overdo it slightly in the latter category, but there was no room for security holes in big business.

Having finally been cleared John followed the shiny, white and unadorned corridor, took the first right and opened the first door on the left, which led him to a set of stairs. They were the kind of metal mesh stairs you always saw bad guys being shot through from below in old 20th century classic movies; apparently Tinycorp hadn't thought it worth spending money replacing them when they refurbished the original building. If they had, they were sure to have been transparent. He could have taken the lift of course but it was only two

floors down to the changing room and he always felt like a complete dick using a lift to go that small distance.

The changing room was one huge room with long rows of benches and lockers. Everyone working in building services had his or her own locker containing work uniforms (white overalls and white soft shoes) and whatever personal items there was room for. In John's case this was just a Rubik's Cube^{13*} and a small bag with his costume in it; you never knew when heroes might be needed straight after work.

He changed into his overalls and immediately afterwards used his wrist to send Bruno and Jerry a message. It read: 'Lunch@12? I fancy peas.'

The latter being their pre-arranged code, which meant that he had official business to discuss and it would make sure they turned up. With that out of the way he immediately felt better and more at ease. In addition, nothing had happened to him since entering the building and nobody had contacted him so it should be safe to start work.

He was the Deputy Director of Redundant Usage Artefact Disposal and his job consisted of checking up on the garbage drones, doing their job when they failed and getting them retrieved and repaired when they malfunctioned. As with most other menial jobs in this day and age collecting garbage was perfectly suited for drones, but equally as with most other things mechanical they invariably failed or just plain broke down. You'd think that after two and a half centuries with computers and a plethora of mechanical and electronic devices this issue would have been solved, but luckily for John it hadn't, so he could make his rounds secure in the knowledge that every day would see a substantial number of bins that had to be emptied manually, a considerable amount of personal items that had to be retrieved from the clutches of confused drones and a thankfully small number of drones running amok in offices, gleefully emptying any vaguely container-like object in sight.

13. A time wasting puzzle device thought to have been used for torture a couple of centuries earlier.

It was an easy job and some people might have found it boring, but in John's perspective it just gave him all the more surplus mental energy for The League and it also supplied the perfect secret identity.

It was just before noon when he received notification that a drone was malfunctioning on the 26th floor. Fuck! He only had 20 minutes before meeting the guys but the floor was sufficiently high not to be ignored for that long. If he hurried he could still make it, so running to the nearest lift he read the details of the situation on his wrist. Apparently the drone was tripping up people and snickering afterwards. Very odd, usually they didn't exhibit any human emotions like that, probably just a fried behaviour chip.

Arriving on the floor in question two minutes later he walked hurriedly down the corridor, checking the doors as he passed them for office 01-26-28. It was one of the first doors he passed and he breathed a sigh of relief, as he turned left through the doorway.

The only warning he had was a low whirring noise and then he stubbed first one foot and then the other on some metallic object and fell over flat on his face. As he lay there dazed for a few seconds he heard a wheezing giggle behind him. Looking he saw a garbage drone spinning around its own axis, arms raised high in triumph.

'See?' a frustrated female voice came from above.

John looked up and saw a giant of a woman looming over him, hands on her hips and head tilted slightly to the side in the well-known "I bloody told you so" pose. He quickly scrambled to get up and when he did he realised that she was actually quite petite when not observed from the floor. She also had lovely green eyes and the cutest little nose, John thought but quickly reminded himself of the 28 floors separating them and tried focusing on the job at hand.

'When did it start acting strange?' he asked.

'About half an hour ago when I was coming back to the office. It raced in front of me and made me fall over just like it did with you!'

'I thought it was an accident as it then seemed to be resuming its duties, but apparently it was only biding its time because the moment Juliette came back from the washroom it sped halfway across the room just to ram into her legs! She fell over and twisted her ankle and this time the bloody thing chuckled!'

'Juliette?' John asked with eyebrows raised questioningly.

'She's on the desk opposite mine, also accounts, and now she's in the infirmary,' she finished with an accusing stare, seemingly blaming John for the rogue robot.

'Right, I see, well not to worry. I'll deactivate him and take him in for repairs alright?'

'If it's no too much trouble?'

'Oh no, not at all, it's my job after all,' he answered in all seriousness, never having had the knack for detecting sarcasm.

She rolled her eyes and went back to her desk to sit down.

John regretted not getting more time in her company but turned around to face the metallic miscreant. Walking up to the now dormant drone he reached down to flick the main power switch, but at the last second it shot between his legs and out the door while laughing hysterically arms once again raised in the air.

Ok, officially odd he thought and ran after it. Using his wrist he sent a command to the unit to shut down, but to no effect. The chase went on through a large part of the floor, drawing many curious glances from people as they both sped past them. It was no good, he just wasn't fast enough to catch up with it. This was getting ridiculous and he could get into a lot of trouble if he didn't stop this thing running rampant very soon.

Thankfully there was always a last resort solution, which he'd never had to use before. All robots and drones^{14*} had a tiny EMP explosive device installed in their core. This wasn't hardwired to anything so the unit couldn't interact with it. The very useful thing about electro magnetic pulses was that they rendered any piece of electronic equipment within their area of

14. Technically speaking drones *were* robots, but traditionally drones were fairly simple machines with basic capabilities and no intelligence to speak of, whereas a robot could be anything from a secretary to a doctor, possessing limited or advanced AI.

effect useless, and a person with the right privileges, of which John was one, could remotely trigger this device.

Tapping out the needed command on his wrist he looked at the drone for visual confirmation. It was just about to around a corner, still giggling, when a muffled bang could be heard from its direction. The unit stopped dead in its tracks and a thin trail of smoke started to escape from the chassis.

Thank fuck for that, John thought, stopping to catch his breath and allowing his heart to move back into his chest from his throat. Better get the thing recovered. Too bad it was now completely fried, he would have liked to examine its logs to see if he could find any explanation for the strange behaviour. His thoughts were interrupted by a message on his wrist from Bruno: "Where ru?" Crap, forgot all about lunch because of that hunk of junk. He quickly answered: "omw", scooped up the drone, threw it in the nearest utility closet and ran for the lift.

When he arrived in the canteen he spotted them immediately, not that it was hard to spot someone like Bruno, being seven feet tall and broad enough over the shoulders to get him stuck in narrow doorways if he wasn't careful. He waved to get their attention, but they didn't seem to notice him so he just went straight to the food counter. He quickly got the special of the day, which was actually proper food.

Tinycorp did look after its employees and one of the perks was to not have instameals for lunch. Having secured his feast, after finally getting the attention of the guy serving the food, he walked over to the table where his fellow Gentlemen were sitting.

'Hey guys, sorry I'm late,' he said sitting down next to Jerry as a single errant elbow from Bruno could land you a concussion, and Bruno did like his food which wasn't so much eaten as devoured.

'Had a small emergency that I had to take care of,' he explained.

'Which floor?' Jerry asked.

'26th.'

'Ah, not easy to ignore then. Borderline though,' he nodded sagely with a piece of carrot on his fork.

Jerry was quite small of build with dark shoulder length hair, which was parted in the middle. His eyes were close together and he seemed to have a perpetual sardonic smile on his lips. It was the kind of smile that said: "I just shagged your wife and shat in your breakfast cereal, what are you going to do about it?" They were all used to it by now but he tended to get on everybody's nerves quite quickly.

'So,' Bruno said with his mouth full of food, spitting small pieces of bangers and mash all over the table. 'What's this about? You don't often crave peas for lunch.'

John looked around to see if there was anyone nearby, leaned forward conspiratorially and started speaking in a hushed tone. In fact, if there were such a thing as a "covert discussion detection device", the alarms would have gone off immediately.

'Did you hear about the science guy who got killed last week?' he whispered, alternating his gaze between them.

They both looked at him, then each other and shrugged.

'No mate, was it someone important?' Bruno asked.

'Only 64th floor!' John answered with an ample dose of sarcasm.

'It's been all over the bloody channels, how could you have missed it?' he said disbelievingly.

'I only subscribe to the entertainment channels,' Bruno said and looked at Jerry who nodded and said: 'Yeah, me too.'

John stared at them both for a few moments looking a bit lost. This was why he was the leader he thought. Without him to keep abreast of the latest developments in society and to organize and harness their powers nothing would ever get done. It also annoyed him a bit that they didn't know about the killing, as it would make his follow-up revelation seem less exciting, *and* it would need a preamble. He hated having to preamble exciting revelations.

'Ok let me *explain* then,' he said, not even trying to hide his annoyance.

'A few days ago one of our top scientists was found murdered on level zero in Fulham.'

'What was he doing there?' Jerry interjected.

'I don't know, that's part of the mystery but it's not the best part.'

He looked around again and lowered the pitch of his voice about an octave to maximise the dramatic effect.

'I watched him die.'

This was followed by complete silence as they both just stared at him.

'What were you doing in Fulham in the middle of the night?' Jerry asked suspiciously.

'What?' John half whispered and half shouted with incredulity written on his face in upper case letters.

'I'm telling you that I watched one of our most senior scientists die and the first thing you ask is what I was doing there?' he hissed.

'Well you have to admit it's a strange place and time for you to be, especially since you're afraid of the dark,' Jerry said defensively and looked at Bruno for confirmation, which he received in the form of nodded agreement.

'I'm not afraid of the dark,' John said tersely.

'Yes you are,' Jerry reciprocated.

'Am not.'

'Oh yes you are, and how.'

'Am *not*.'

'You so are.'

'No I'm *not*!!'

There was a small pause and then Jerry smiled his special cereal-shitting smile and continued in a singsong voice: 'Yes you aaaaaare...'

John was about to put his hands around Jerry's neck when Bruno said loudly: 'Enough!'

'Jerry you should know better than to use your powers on friends, save it for the bad guys, and John don't be such a child. Continue with your story. Why *were* you there in the first place?'

Bruno's outburst had surprised him enough to make him forget Jerry's goading and instead he started to look a bit embarrassed.

'I wasn't there, that's the whole point. And technically I didn't watch him die, but I *did* see his dead body and it was not in Fulham. It was in this very tower and this very company the day before he was allegedly killed.

Both Bruno and Jerry started to look intrigued, which suited John a lot better. He checked the immediate surroundings again before turning back to the table.

'I was doing my rounds as normal that day and just as I passed one of the big labs on the 64th, the door opened and I looked in. I saw the science guy lying dead on the floor...'

'What's his name?' Bruno interrupted. 'I'm getting really tired of hearing about "science guy".'

John was annoyed about the interruption but Bruno had a point.

'Hang on, let me look it up,' he said and looked at his wrist.

'Franz Jaeger,' he said almost immediately. 'Happy now? Can I continue?'

'Yes, go ahead,' Bruno replied with a straight face.

John stared at him a moment longer for effect and then continued.

'So I looked into the room and saw *Franz* on the floor. There were two medics crouched over him with various bits of equipment and two suits looking very twitchy, one of whom had just opened the door. I only heard the tail-end of the conversation but I distinctly heard one of them say: "... fool, it was a normal heart attack. Make sure it stays that way and that no-one feels inclined to dig deeper, understand?". The guy doing the ordering about then left the room and went off, but I saw him take the lift up, which means floor 65, 66 or even 67!'

'And why didn't they confront you? You were right there!' Bruno inquired.

'I must have turned my power on instinctively,' John shrugged. 'There's no other way they could've missed me.'

Bruno, who had always secretly doubted John's much vaunted power, was sceptical but couldn't offer a better explanation.

'Anyway, I was so shocked I couldn't move and about a minute later the door opened again. This time it was the other suit closely followed by the medics who were carrying a stretcher with a body bag on it. They also didn't see me and went quickly to the lift. One day later Franz was found shot in the back in Fulham. On level zero no less!' John finished.

'So what are you saying, somebody shot him here and dumped him there?' Jerry asked.

'It certainly looks like it don't you think? But why would the suit talk about a heart attack then? Surely a few holes in the back would fairly quickly discredit *that* theory, unless they paid off the coroner of course, which isn't entirely inconceivable,' John replied.

'I just don't get it. Why cover up his death in the first place and why dump him in Fulham?' said Jerry.

'Very odd indeed,' Bruno added looking speculative. 'What do you suggest we do?'

John checked the surroundings again before answering. 'First of all I've been really worried that they saw me after all but only remembered later, or that I might be on the surveillance log. In fact, I'm most definitely on the surveillance log unless my power works on cameras as well, I just don't know. I think they would have made some kind of move if they knew so I'm probably safe for now, but I'd like those logs checked out.

He looked at Jerry expectantly.

'I'll see what I can find, but it's not easy tampering with them if you *are* on there.

'I know, just do what you can. Meanwhile, until we know more we probably shouldn't draw any attention to ourselves but just keep an eye out for anything that could be related.'

They both looked a bit worried but nodded in reply. They all knew that large companies were ruthless and Tinycorp was no exception, so if they were deemed a threat who knew what could happen. It wouldn't involve tea and biscuits though that was for sure. Except maybe if the tea was boiling hot and poured unto a sensitive area and the biscuits inserted somewhere eternally sun-less. The point was, none of them wanted to find out, but they all had a duty to use their powers to help others and fight injustice so that was what they'd do. Even if it meant being slightly inconvenienced.

Chapter 8: Give the Man a Hand

The data Sam had given him didn't amount to much. Sebastian was going through the various bits while flying his car in a very reckless manner. He needed to talk to the doctor at Queen Charlottes whom Victoria claimed to have talked to, but on the way there he'd swing by the scene of the crime for a quick look.

According to the forensics he was shot twice in the back by a high-powered plasma weapon. These weren't standard ordnance and you certainly couldn't buy one as a private individual, which meant either military or corporate security. Even trying to get one from the black market would be close to impossible. Chalk up another point for the corporation conspiracy theory.

He'd been found lying on the street with his wrist still attached to a public terminal, terminal at a terminal as it were. But Sam had had no luck tracing Jaeger's online activities further than asserting that he contacted his home network over a heavily encrypted connection and transferred a substantial amount of data. He'd asked the widow for more information concerning the nature of the transfer but had run against a brick wall no matter how much he pressed her.

Nothing had been recorded on surveillance as most of the lenses in that area were broken and Sam hadn't been able to locate any witnesses, which was hardly surprising as no sane person would be seen at night *anywhere* on level zero. I bet he didn't look hard enough though, Sebastian thought.

Another thing that didn't work on his car was the parking space locator. This functionality was part of the normal autopilot and communicated with the building AIs to find a vacant spot. Hover cars had made parking a lot easier in big cities but there were still an obscene amount of them and finding parking spaces manually across several parking floors in a building could be a challenge. A challenge Sebastian relished however. It was like a mini treasure hunt every time and he *always* found a spot. The only downside was the innumerable attempts by the various AIs to persuade him to accept assistance. They never

took no for an answer and couldn't seem to process the fact that he'd rather not have any help. This instance was no exception.

'Welcome to the Gilliam building,' a pleasant female voice announced through his car speakers.

'Please sit back, relax and allow me to find a suitable space for your vehicle.'

A few seconds went by in silence. Here we go again, Sebastian thought.

'There seems to be a problem with the navigation circuit in your vehicle or maybe it's disabled. Please enable it so I can take control,' the AI said.

'Yeah right, that'll be the day when I hand over the control of my car,' Sebastian mumbled while scouting around the first floor for a space.

'Pardon?'

'Nothing, I wasn't talking to you.'

'Very well sir, standing by while you engage the navigational unit.'

He continued cruising around the floor in a random pattern and it was a few seconds before he was interrupted again.

'Sir?'

'...'

'Excuse me sir?'

'...'

'Yes?' Sebastian replied wearily.

'I'm still not able to communicate with your navigational system, are you sure it's turned on?'

'No, in fact I'm very sure it's not as it's broken.'

'Broken?'

'Yes.'

'...'

'But that makes me unable to park the car for you sir,' the AI said in a distraught voice.

'It certainly does, how very astute of you,' Sebastian replied absent-mindedly while still trying to locate a vacant space. There didn't seem to be any free spaces on this floor so he exited the building and went down a level. Parking floors didn't have any direct access for cars between floors, but then they didn't have any outer walls either, making it very easy to gain access.

'But, but... what will you do?' the voice stammered from the cars' speakers after a brief pause.

'Oh I'll just have to try and muddle through without you somehow,' he answered.

There was another long pause.

'Do you want me to call someone to repair your navigational computer for you sir?' it offered optimistically, trying desperately to return to more familiar territory.

'Nope.'

There was another audible pause.

'Why not?'

'Because I'm quite happy with it in its current state and I'm quite capable of finding my own way around, thank you,' he answered irritably.

'You're... *happy* with it broken?'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

Apparently this had it stumped as Sebastian was left alone for almost a minute before it returned, desperate to fulfil some function.

'I supposed I could tell you where to find the nearest vacant parking space sir?' it said hopefully.

'No thanks,' he replied again. 'I'm doing just fine on my own.'

'I'm very sorry to be the bearer of bad news sir but your success rate up until this point would indicate quite the opposite.'

'Is that so?'

'Well, yes. It would be the logical choice to accept my help in this matter. Do you want me to direct you?'

'No.'

He could almost hear the machine wrestling with all its programming and circuitry before saying weakly: 'Please?'

Sebastian stopped and started banging his forehead against the controller in frustration. Not only had machines infiltrated and taken over every aspect of our lives, now they were also needy! It used to be you had to be married to find yourself in that position. On the other hand he'd now searched two floors with no luck and he wanted to get on with the investigation. It would be a bad idea to still be in Fulham after dark.

'Alright then, tell me where I can find a spot,' he said dejectedly.

'Yes sir, right away!' it trilled cheerfully. 'Go down to the next floor, row G space 41 and you'll find what you need.'

Refusing to express gratitude to the glorified calculator Sebastian remained silent and flew to the designated area where, true enough, he found the long sought for space he wanted.

'Anything else I can help you with today sir?' it asked just as he was about to turn off the engine.

'NO!' he shouted.

'Alrighty then, have a nice day,' it finished happily.

He waited a few moments for the red haze to pass before getting out of the car with Halfie. Taking the lift down he found himself on the busy King's Road minutes later. Level zero was never glamorous and Sebastian's office was not in an especially nice area, but Fulham was a real shithole. For some reason the area seemed to attract the most unsavoury elements of society, and not even in a semi-nice way where you had lots of drinking, gambling and varying degrees of hedonistic behaviour going on, no this was just a horrible place to be with no redeeming features what so ever. The immediate area consisted mostly of small grubby shops selling basic necessities, pawn brokers, bars and a large amount of

suspicious looking people loafing about or clustering around burnt out cars and other debris from the upper levels.

Sebastian pulled his collar up and the brim of his hat down and tried to blend in by looking seedy as well. Checking his wrist for the exact location of where Jaeger was found it turned out to be just around the corner. He got there without being offered dodgy stims or getting hit on the head with something heavy, which was more than he'd hoped for.

He found the terminal and was once again disappointed not to see a chalk outline. These hadn't been used for more than 200 years but they still seemed to be... fitting somehow, Sebastian thought. A perimeter generator¹⁵ just didn't have the same visceral impact when you saw it, although it did have a physical impact if you tried crossing it*.

In this case however it looked like someone had nicked the generator, which was quite ironic.

Sebastian performed a cursory search of the area around the terminal but didn't see anything of interest. He also wouldn't be able to get more information from the terminal than the police had already retrieved, but he did stand a better chance of finding out what Jaeger had transmitted to his house before dying. Victoria was bound to be more inclined to acquiesce to Sebastian's requests.

It was now late afternoon and most other streets would still be bustling with people, but this place was practically deserted now. The odd hunched over person would enter or exit the run down looking pub on the other side of the street. You could just make out the name of it through the layers of grime: The Cock. There was also a picture next to the name for the benefit of people who might get confused. No, not that, a fowl you dirty rotter!

15. Perimeter generators were used by the police to sequester an area from the general populace. It was a small metallic device, which looked like a garden lamp, and it generated a spherical force field around itself with a diameter of about ten metres. If you tried crossing it without authorisation it would be like walking into a wall, although it wasn't powerful enough to stop a bullet.

Every other façade within a 100 metres looked boarded up. Even the pub looked boarded up, but if you looked hard you could just make out two small surfaces that *could* be windows. Whether they had any amount of transparency left in them was another matter though.

Better check it out, Sebastian thought. There wasn't anything else to go on here and he hated having to leave empty-handed. Crossing the street he looked around to see if anyone was observing him; seeing nobody he opened the door and entered.

Like any ground level establishment it was just the lowest floor in a massive high-rise. The owners, or at least some previous owner, had done their best trying to make the soulless concrete rooms look like an old-fashioned pub. A substantial amount of fake wood panelling had been used to create this effect, alongside dark wooden furniture, beer smelling carpet, a wide assortment of pictures of royals from ages past^{16*} and last but not least, insufficient lighting.

The place was about half full and people were sitting in small groups sipping their drinks quietly. A few gave him an extra glance, probably due to the trench coat and fedora, but soon turned back to their pints.

The bar was in the middle of the room, the counter doing a full 360 around a pillar that housed a number of shelves filled with ancient-looking bottles of every kind. The whole place was quite unsanitary even by Sebastian's standards, which spoke volumes in itself considering his own living conditions, and it was not without a certain amount of trepidation and, let's be honest, naked fear that he went to order a drink. He didn't actually want a drink, especially not here, but he did want to ask the bartender some questions and the unwritten rule was that you had to buy something first while you sized each other up. Most people, including the police, would just barge straight in with their questions and they'd get nowhere. You had to follow the natural order of things.

16. The monarchy had finally been abolished in 2110 and Buckingham Palace now housed an amusement park after failing as a museum. Ride the Royal Rollercoaster! Haunt Henry's House of Horror!

As admirable as Sebastian's efforts were when it came to playing it cool, it didn't have quite the desired impact when you tried to order fruit juice.

'You wha'?' the balding, sweaty, urine stained prize of a man behind the bar said.

'You heard me, fruit juice, pear if you've got it but I'm flexible,' Sebastian replied leaning against the counter while pushing his hat back and slowly surveying the room with squinted eyes.

The guy stared at Sebastian for a few seconds, waiting for the punch line. Finally realising that he wasn't joking he said: 'Right, I might have something in the back...'

He disappeared around the corner of the bar and Sebastian utilised the time to observe the clientele a bit more closely.

Very generally speaking there were two kinds of patrons in here: Aging, lonely unfortunates who had been chewed up, half digested and spat out by life and now just wanted to numb the pain and forget the cruel pointlessness of existence, and small time criminals who needed a place to conduct their business and get pissed at the same time.

There seemed to be a lot more of the former than the latter at the moment, which was a good thing; if anyone had seen or heard anything it would have been a regular. Particularly one who would have been sitting next to one of the windows.

Both the window seats were currently occupied. By the left one sat a middle-aged man with long black hair that was starting to go grey. He was wearing shabby clothes and kept nodding off, resulting in his hair dipping into his beer. The man by the other window who looked to be about 70 was nursing a pint and looking through the dirty pane of glass. He was wearing old-fashioned but stylish clothes, which had seen better days but at least they appeared clean. He was holding on to his glass with his left hand, resting his right arm on the windowsill. The resting arm seemed to be bionic but not in a very good state. It was cheap government issue from the looks of it; with fake skin flaking off and occasional small holes pock marking the surface.

Hearing shuffling feet behind him Sebastian turned around only to be greeted by a cloud of grit and dust as the bartender blew a lungful of air unto a small can he was holding.

Sebastian recoiled and started coughing while trying to get away from the worst of it. Slack-faced like before the bartender just kept holding the can up until Sebastian had recovered sufficiently to be able to pay attention and then said: 'Fruit juice, peach,' proceeding to open the can and pour the contents into a dirty pint-glass.

Sebastian eyed the liquid with utmost suspicion. It looked more greyish than peach coloured and also considerably less viscous than you'd like your juice to be.

Having poured all of the content into the glass he threw the now empty can in the bin (or on the floor, who knows) and pushed the glass across the counter towards Sebastian.

'4k,' he stated.

Sebastian wanted to put a large bank note on the counter and then keep his hand on it while he made it clear that the barkeep could have it all if he answered a few questions, but unfortunately cash money didn't exist anymore so he had to do the best he could with what he had. He rolled up his left sleeve, exposing his wrist, and slammed it on the bar in a position where the mouth breather could see it. Giving him a meaningful look he typed in 50k on the short-range transaction screen and circled his right index finger over the commit button. In the best of circumstances this was a poor substitute for the old way of doing it and these weren't the best circumstances, as the bartender didn't even look at the wrist. He chose to ignore this minor hurdle and pressed on with the plan.

'If you could be so kind as to answer a few questions, I might commit this transaction although it is blatantly a lot more than what I owe you, if you catch my drift?' he said conspiratorially and winked.

Old urine stain shifted his vacant gaze to Sebastian's wrist and then back again.

'That won't get you much. What do you want to know?'

'When do you usually close?'

'We don't, there's always someone here. If not me then me mum or me aunt.'

'So you were open at 3am on the 5th of May? That's last Tuesday to you.'

'Yeah,' he replied elaborately.

'And did you know someone was killed just on the other side of street that night?'

‘So?’ he said indifferently and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well did you see or hear anything when it happened?’

‘Nope, already told the pigs, I didn’t see or hear anything.’

‘And what about your customers, did any of them exhibit an awareness of their surroundings that might have been superior to yours?’

The bartender didn’t answer and Sebastian could tell from the slight change in his dull stare that he was trying to process the advanced vocabulary and sentence structure.

‘I meant did your customers see or hear anything?’ he explained after a while when it didn’t seem like the professor was any closer to a result.

Back in the world that made sense he replied: ‘I dunno, why don’t you ask them?’

Sebastian decided that this wasn’t going anywhere and just gave him a blank stare for a few seconds before hitting the commit button on his wrist, picking up his questionable drink and turning to face the room again. His eyes wandered back to the two men sitting by the windows. Dipping your hair in beer was never a good sign when it came to instigating intelligent conversation, but the older guy seemed quite composed and would probably even appreciate the company.

Taking the few steps across the room he stopped right next to the chair opposite his target. ‘Mind if I join you?’ he asked, trying his best to look amiable.

The man looked up and now Sebastian could see that the right half of his face was scarred and his right eye looked artificial. Government issue again.

‘Why of course, be my guest,’ he said happily as his face lighted up.

Sebastian smiled back and put his hat and juice on the table before sitting down. The latter received a puzzled look and a shrug from the old man.

‘Poe’s the name,’ Sebastian said and stretched his arm across the table to shake hands. The man hesitated for just an instant and then swung his right hand forward accompanied by a loud whirring noise. It hit Sebastian’s hand with a slap and then started crushing the life out of its much weaker biological cousin.

Sebastian screamed and tried to wrest his hand out of the excruciating grip with no luck while the old man started beating the apparently autonomous appendage using his other hand with a horrified look on his face.

‘Leggo you bastard leggo!’ he screamed, almost drowning out Sebastian’s wails of anguish. He continued pummelling the thing and as suddenly as it had sprung into action it let go and returned to its former dormant position on the windowsill.

Sebastian immediately withdrew his crumpled hand and hugged it to his chest, covering it protectively with its undamaged left sibling.

‘What the HELL was that?!’ he shouted at the now very concerned-looking, not so gentle man.

‘I’m so, so sorry! I should have known better but I thought it rude to not shake your hand, so I chanced it. Is anything broken?’ the old man inquired, guilty worry suffusing every fold in his face.

Sebastian stared at him for a few seconds in indignant outrage and then looked down to inspect the damage. The hand looked a bit folded lengthwise and he couldn’t move any fingers without blinding pain, but at least it was an equal amount of pain in each, suggesting that no nerves had been severed.

‘Only if I include the bones!’ he snapped while reaching into his right inner pocket with his left hand, retrieving a small flat pouch which he opened to reveal a number of small compartments filled with an assortment of pills and other medical supplies. He selected a small synthine¹⁷ needle-pouch^{*} and injected it straight into his hand. Almost instantaneously the pain went away and Sebastian congratulated himself on having the prescience to always carry his stimpack with him. You just never knew when you might need superior drugs. With his hand twisted hideously out of shape but the pain subdued, at least for an hour or so, he turned his attention back to the destroyer of fine motor skills.

17. Synthine: A synthetic painkiller, extremely effective. Goes from pain to mild discomfort to pleasure in five seconds flat. Needle-pouch: Single use squeezable container with integrated needle for injecting medicine.

'You were saying?' he said acidly.

The old man was still looking extremely guilt-ridden, which did assuage Sebastian's ill will towards him a bit. He was fiddling nervously with his glass using his left hand, while the psycho-arm remained motionless.

'I really am terribly sorry Mr. Poe, but it's the arm you see, it hasn't been right for years and I can't afford to get it looked at. It just randomly seems to acquire a mind of its own and that usually involves crushing things or just wild flailing if I'm lucky. Can you forgive an old vet? The name's Archibald by the way, my friends call me Archie.'

Sebastian had calmed down a bit now the pain was gone and he was exposed to the sincerity of Archie's plea. He gave a small nod and allowed a tiny smile to claw its way through his wary exterior.

'Nice to meet you *Archibald*,' he said emphasizing his full name.

'How did you lose your arm? Is your field of expertise crocodiles or very large dogs?'

Archie looked puzzled for a moment and then his face lit up as he chuckled. 'No, no, no, a veteran, not a veterinarian. I fought in the great Mars uprising you see,' he clarified matter of factly even though Sebastian knew that the uprising had been the nastiest conflict in recent times, and also the last one to involve humans on both sides. Ever since it was decided to break one of the core laws of robotics "for the greater good", machines had been fighting the battles of the civilised world^{18*}.

Thankfully these battles had been almost nonexistent since the law was changed. Fighting an enemy which was superior to you in almost every way, with the possible exception of sense of humour, but even this depended on the individual in question, just wasn't much fun. Some people predicted that once every nation could afford a synthetic army we'd be back to square one, and they were of course right. Since trade couldn't be restricted, as that would mean less profit and less cheap crap to buy, the world was on the cusp of a new arms race involving synthetic life forms.

He glanced at Sebastian's arm and said: 'Aren't you going to get that looked at?'

18. "Battles of the civilised world." Now if that isn't an oxymoron, I don't know what is.

'I just happen to be going to a hospital after this anyway, so yes, but it can wait a bit. I want to ask you some questions.'

'Oh dear, I suspected this would happen. Are you from the police? You don't look like police.'

'I'm not police no, and don't worry, I won't get you into any trouble. Just a few questions that's it, alright?'

Archie relaxed a bit but still looked worried.

'I guess I owe you that much after what I did to your hand,' he said with regret in his voice.

'Well, I wouldn't want you to feel at all obligated, but yes, you *do* kind of owe me. Big Time.' Sebastian said only half seriously. He liked the old guy in spite of his faulty extremity and its capacity for destruction.

'It's about the guy who got shot isn't it?' Archie almost whispered, leaning forward to get closer to Sebastian.

Sebastian's primal instincts were screaming at him to move away from the man and get as much distance as possible between him and the angry arm, but they were overruled by his desire to find out what Archie had seen. He also leaned forward to meet him halfway across the table. Sitting like this they looked just like most of the other shady characters going about their dodgy business, which was probably just as well. Rather be taken for a small time crook than a copper in a place like this.

'Yes,' Sebastian nodded, barely containing his thrill at hitting the jackpot so soon. 'What did you see?'

Archie glanced around in a textbook conspicuous manner and started whispering. 'I saw the guy coming down the street and stopping at the terminal on the other side of the street where he seemed to be doing something. I didn't pay much notice after that as a lot of people use that terminal, although this time it was a bit odd. Usually no one's around at that time of night. The only reason *I'm* here is that the sleep regulator they gave me in the army is also

broken so I never get tired, and Paul and his sister let me sit here from time to time after they close up. They're good people they are.'

'If that oaf up there at the bar is Paul, then you could have fooled me,' Sebastian retaliated and glanced at the barman who was at this very moment blowing his nose and then proceeding to use the cloth to wipe down the counter.

'Oh I know he can seem a bit brusque, but it's all a show. You have to act tough to survive here,' Archie chuckled and waved a dismissive hand. Luckily it wasn't the bionic baseball bat or someone might have been killed.

'So you were saying you didn't pay him any attention after his initial appearance?' Sebastian urged him on, keen to learn all he needed before the painkiller wore off.

'That's right, I didn't until I saw two sharp flashes of light out of the corner of my eye. Flashes I knew all too well,' he added and gestured towards his right arm with his head.

'Plasma weapons?' Sebastian suggested although he knew perfectly well what the answer would be.

'Indeed,' Archie confirmed and seemed to sag a bit in his seat as if recalling a sad event. He sat still for a moment staring at something only he could see before snapping out of it and clearing his throat.

'So anyway, where was I? Oh yes, I saw the flashes and looked out the window where I saw the man who had arrived moments earlier, crumbling to the ground. Behind him stood these two huge guys, built like brick shithouses they were, wielding identical Fuego XZT Mk2s. They looked around quickly, put away the guns, seemed to check his neck for a pulse and walked off. The poor sod on the ground was still attached to the terminal and his arm was sticking straight up into the air as if he was pointing at a constellation.'

'You seem awfully sure of the weapons they were holding considering they were a good 30 meters away?' Sebastian commented.

'Well I damn well should be. I carried one of those bastards around for 18 years. Mine hadn't been shortened to be used one-handed though, that's just insane. The recoil would break the wrist of most men firing it.'

Sebastian had pulled out a notebook and was scribbling in it as Archie spoke. This was another quirk of his as the press of a button on his wrist would record and transform into writing any spoken word in a 5 meter radius, but once again it just felt *right* doing it like this. It was extremely slow going writing with his left hand and the software translating his hieroglyphs into stored text as he wrote on the ePaper almost certainly was being pushed to its limits trying to decipher it.

‘And what did they look like these two goons?’ Sebastian asked after he finished writing.

‘I couldn’t tell them apart, they looked so much alike. Both huge, as easy to get over as around. I’d say about 2.10 meters and easily 120 kg. They were both blonde with slicked back hair and sunglasses, and they were wearing coats like yours, only black. Oh, and military boots as well.’

Sebastian scribbled on. ‘And you’re sure they didn’t see you?’

‘Yes, quite sure, I always have the lights turned off and you can see the state of the windows for yourself, they’re not exactly high on opacity.’

Sebastian nodded in agreement. ‘Anything else you can tell me?’

‘No, no, not really, but I do have a favour to ask and some advice for you.’

‘Shoot.’

‘Firstly, please don’t tell anyone about me or what I saw? Especially the police.’

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be completely confidential,’ Sebastian said and waved his hand dismissively.

‘I mean it,’ Archie persisted. ‘I don’t want any of this coming back to me, ever. I may not have many years left, but I do insist on living them. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ Sebastian nodded. ‘And the piece of advice?’

‘Don’t get involved in this. Whatever it is, it is not something you’ll survive if you continue, I’m sure of it. These guys weren’t amateurs. Do you have any idea what connections you must have to get your hands on the military hardware they were using, not to mention the body augmentation to fire it without causing injury to themselves? Also, they were wearing

sunglasses at night time, which is never a good sign. It means they're either complete twats who worry too much about what everyone else thinks of them or they're so tough and mean they don't care or need to care what anyone thinks of them. Killers yes, but twats they were not,' he finished, looking pleadingly at Sebastian.

'Don't worry old-timer, I do this for a living. I don't have a middle name but if I did it would be Danger, or possibly Rodney, but the fact remains that it'll take more than two cliché Neanderthals to keep me off this case.'

Archie sighed and looked a bit dejected. 'Well, it's your funeral, but I do hope you reconsider. You seem like a nice enough bloke, and I'd hate to see you end up like the poor professor.'

'Duly noted,' Sebastian said and gave him a big unconcerned smile despite having gotten a tiny bit rattled by Archie's sincere plea.

He started getting up, putting on his hat in the process. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to get my hand sorted. It's been a pleasure and I appreciate the information.'

Archie waved a dismissive hand. 'I'm glad to help, I just hope you change your mind.'

'I'd be lying if I said I would but I appreciate the sentiment.'

He started towards the door but turned around and said: 'Don't worry, this all stays between you and me.'

Archie gave a small nod and the weak smile of someone who still hoped but had stopped believing a long time ago.

Sebastian left The Cock and made his way back to his car. It was now early evening and the crazy ratio on the street had begun to increase, but he made the journey back without incident.

He had planned to call it a day after this and get back to his office to compile an update for Victoria, but the state of his hand required hospital treatment so he figured he might as well kill two politicians with one cricket bat and look into Victoria's story about the first time her husband died.

Driving manually with one hand wasn't easy and as he took off from the parking floor he shut off his com system after the building AI started nattering on about helping him leave. Leaving the building and entering the world of rushing hover-crafts and gargantuan, shiny ad-boards he flew towards Queen Charlotte's Hospital.

Chapter 9: There, There, All Better

It was a short trip to Hammersmith and the painkiller was still doing an excellent job of keeping Sebastian's girlish screams at bay. Landing on manual with one hand proved even trickier than taking off, but mercifully he found a spot straight away. With the wonders of advanced nano technology there was no illness or disease that couldn't be cured. Gone were the days of spending months in a hospital getting surgery and other treatments for the most trivial things. Nanobots existed for curing any illness known to man and the only surgery performed these days was for implants, which had only a minimal recovery time. It would be a matter of hours before you could leave a hospital after having major reconstructive surgery and any scar tissue would be gone after a day or two.

As a result of this it was never hard to find a parking space at a hospital as had been the issue before the advent of superior technology in the health arena.

It was a comparatively small building with only 30 or so floors of which only one was dedicated to parking, namely the roof. Making his way to the entrance, Halfie hot on his heels, he couldn't help but wonder what it must have been like to live in a time when life was almost exclusively lived on terra firma and you could die from all kinds of interesting diseases. 200 years ago Sebastian's meaty pulp of a hand would have been lucky to remain functional and it sure as hell wouldn't have looked pretty even after healing up for months. All these things were taken for granted now, and while there was no denying that not being able to catch something that could make your teeth fall out or your rectum bleed was a really good thing, there was now a certain sterility to life for lack of a better word. There was no

risk involved for anything except outright lethal activities, but with no risk came also no thrill. In Sebastian's view there was no true thrill without the risk of loss. People used to take pride in the risks they took and any physical evidence of it, as long as it wasn't debilitating of course, then you'd just be branded as a bit of an idiot. Ancient tribes would parade scars from battles they'd fought as badges of honour and they'd be admired for it. Sebastian sighed, he'd been born too late, that's all there was to it. On the flip side he could enjoy having sex without fear of his willie falling off.

The woman at the reception gave his hat a quick glance but smiled and asked him how she could help. He showed her his hand and was told to go to a minor injury medical booth on the same floor. He didn't have to go far as the booths seemed to occupy most of the immediate area. They looked like giant eggs and the only outside indication that this wasn't the mislaid offspring of Cluckzilla was the vague outline of a door and a glowing button, which was green in most cases but red in others. He picked a green one and pushed it. The door slid open and revealed a minimalist interior consisting of a seat, a small screen and nothing else. He got in and sat down while the door closed behind him and was relieved to see that the inside of the door had a green button as well. The last thing he saw as the door slid shut was Halfie's lolling tongue as he sat outside waiting patiently. A dim light was coming from the walls and subdued bossa-nova music seemed to come from no place in particular.

'Welcome to the Patel Injury Station,' a male voice with an Indian accent proclaimed. 'Please sit still while I scan your person for injuries.'

A low hum could now be heard but apart from that there was no indication that anything was going on. After about 10 seconds the voice returned.

'Minor injury detected in right hand, multiple bone fractures and considerable damage to flesh, sinew and derma. Estimated treatment time, 31 seconds, estimated recovery time, 42 hours. If you wish to proceed with treatment at this time please confirm by saying "Yes" or by pressing the "Yes" button on the screen.'

At this the screen lit up and displayed just two large buttons with Yes and No written on them respectively.

‘Yes,’ Sebastian confirmed and braced himself for what he knew was coming.

‘Commencing treatment. Please hold your hand in front of you and sit still,’ the voice commanded.

Not visible from Sebastian’s position a small opening appeared in the base of his seat and out of this came a thin metallic-looking tube with a syringe at the end. It curved its way up around him and toward his outstretched hand where it unceremoniously plunged in. The painkiller had started to wear off and it stung, but moments after the liquid infused with millions of tiny nanobots had been injected the pain subsided. The bots were already on the job mending his shattered hand and as an added bonus they were also convincing his pain receptors that everything was just dandy, nothing to see here. When the job was done they would automatically move to his bladder and be expelled that way. Sebastian had always suspected that some of them stayed behind, lying dormant for some sinister future purpose conceived of by the government. He did however prefer his hand to be functional rather than crippled and this was the only way. Besides, Calvin had given him thorough scans on many occasions and had assured him that he wasn’t bugged or infested with tiny tattle-tales or nefarious nano miscreants. This did absolutely nothing to alleviate his paranoia of course.

‘Injection successfully completed,’ the voice happily announced. ‘Please stand by for application of protective cast.’

With that the syringe retracted into the tube and out came another device, which looked a bit like a hairbrush. It started moving around his hand in an intricate pattern and at a rapidly accelerating speed, expelling thin threads of some web-like material. The goo soon covered his entire hand as a second skin and as the hairbrush stopped as suddenly as it had begun and started retracting into the chair, he could already feel the material harden. As it did so it also pulled his bones, skin and flesh into a more traditional hand shape rather than the previous origami version. This was accompanied by some almost inaudible crunching noises, but Sebastian felt nothing.

'Please be advised that the current estimate of healing time is only accurate if the affected area is not put under undue stress in the meantime. Upon completion the cast will automatically fall off. Thank you for using a Patel Industries service, please come again,' the voice added in an upbeat tone.

'Not if I can help it,' Sebastian mumbled too himself and got out of the chair. Pressing the door button and exiting the egg he was greeted by happy yapping from Halfie who seemed to have stayed put for once, and after an affectionate scratch behind the ear he walked back to the reception.

'Everything all right?' the woman asked, smiling pleasantly.

'Apart from the fact that the machine treated the wrong hand everything went swimmingly yes,' Sebastian answered with a big grin.

'You're joking!' she exclaimed, a look of horror on her face.

'Yes,' he replied, still grinning and winked at her.

It took a few seconds before comprehension dawned on her face but then she laughed with relief, putting her hand on her chest.

'You had me worried there!' she said when she'd finished laughing. 'All I could think was "Oh no, not again!"

She started laughing hysterically again and Sebastian's grin froze.

'Again? You mean that actually happens?' he asked, outraged at the levity with which his health was being treated.

'No,' she answered calmly, stopping mid-laugh. She looked at Sebastian with a small smirk playing on her lips and a devious look in her eyes.

It also took Sebastian a few moments to catch up.

'Oh I seeeeee, very good, very good. Very droll,' he said with the polite chuckle usually heard when men meet their future father-in-laws for the first time.

'Silly cow! How dare she! *I'm* the funny one, *I'm* the one making the jokes around here!' he fumed inwardly. Outwardly he was still exhibiting a strained smile.

'So anyway,' he said a bit too abruptly for comfort. 'While I'm here I'd like to speak to Frank Gupta, I believe he's the coroner here?'

All signs of mirth vanished from her face and she went slightly pale.

'I...I'm really sorry, but he....he's dead. Was he a friend of yours?'

'Eh no, he wasn't actually. Dead you say? When did this happen?'

'Last week, he went home early because he felt poorly and the next thing I heard was that he'd had a heart-attack in his home. An awful thing really, he was such a sweet guy,' she finished, looking empathetic.

'Do you have any more details apart from the fact that it was a heart-attack?'

She started to look a bit apprehensive and shot a few glances to her sides. 'I'm not sure it's my place to divulge this kind of information to be honest. Why are you so interested if I may ask?'

Sebastian put both his elbows on the counter and leaned closer while putting on his sincere face. 'Look Penelope, Penny....may I call you Penny?'

'I guess,' she answered, still looking a bit suspicious.

'You see Penny,' he continued in a hushed voice. 'I'm a private investigator in the middle of a major case concerning the killing of an innocent man. At this very moment, as we speak, his widow is sitting at home crying inconsolably because she's lost the love of her life. To her the future is now nothing but a barren wasteland, robbed of the water of love and scorched by the relentless sun of meaninglessness. The only thing that could serve as a minute oasis of hope in this infinite desert of despair would be finding the killers and assuring their conviction. I'm sure that the death of Frank is somehow connected to this case and might not have been mere coincidence at all. I need your cooperation to ascertain this though and it would be of an immense help to me and indeed the dear widow and whomever Frank left bereaved if you could do this.'

He raised the middle of his brow bringing his puppy eyes to full effect and added the final flourish: 'Please Penny?'

As if sensing that his help was needed Halfie whined on cue.

She just looked at him for a heartbeat before saying: 'All right, all right, no need to lay it on quite that thickly. I would have settled for a hundred kilos, but since you went through all that effort I'll let you off with 80,' she finished with an innocent smile.

Sebastian was part disappointed that she hadn't swallowed it all and part impressed by her business acumen, but managed to keep his cool.

'You know it's cynicism like this, which makes the world such a harsh place,' he complained while tapping out the transaction on his wrist, failing to completely suppress a small smile.

'What can I say, information is power and a girl needs to make a living,' she replied still smiling.

A subtle *ding* from her wrist made her check it and after a brief inspection and the press of a button she nodded and looked back at Sebastian.

'So, what do you want to know?'

'I want to know all the details around Frank's death: When did he leave, what time exactly did he die, who performed the autopsy and what did it say and who did he talk to on the day he died. Oh, and I also need to see the records of what dead bodies were admitted that day.'

'Oh is that all? Here's the deal buddy, I give you what I can see in the open records but I'm not transferring anything to you. You never know who is watching and I'm not going into any confidential files, get it?'

Sebastian was a bit taken aback at her business-like demeanour but nodded agreement, as he didn't have much choice.

'Right, let me see what's in here,' she mumbled as she started tapping away on the terminal. 'Frank Gupta left at 22:32 on the 4th of May because he felt poorly. At 23:55 it's been logged that his wife called emergency services and said that he had collapsed. Medics were at his house within five minutes but nothing could be done; he'd suffered a massive brain haemorrhage and would have died on the spot.'

She glanced up at Sebastian who was taking clumsy notes with his left hand and continued when he made a circular motion in the air with his right.

'The autopsy scan took place here and states what I told you, spontaneous brain haemorrhage. He was cremated the next day and apparently scattered^{19*} last Saturday.'

'Is that it?' Sebastian asked when he had finished scribbling.

'Yup, that's all that's in there.'

'And what about visitors?'

'What about 'em?'

'Well did he have any?' he said in a tone that suggested he was talking to a very slow person.

She obviously resented that and gave him a dead stare before returning to the keyboard where she tapped a few keys.

'There were seven visitors to the morgue that day, any particular name you're looking for?'

Sebastian paused for a moment.

'Did any of them arrive at the same time?'

She looked at the screen again. 'Yes, two of them arrived together at 21:53. A Mr. Tango and a Mr. Cash.'

Sebastian couldn't help a very charming snort with laughter at hearing those names. Apparently he wasn't the only one with a penchant for 20th century movies. He was pretty sure he knew who they were, but it would be nice to get confirmation.

'I don't suppose you have access to the security photos of them?' he inquired.

19. Although not all people agreed on the non-existence of an afterlife, a vast majority did now agree that dedicating large tracts of land for people to decompose in didn't do anybody any good, so the options these days were a complete wipe (ashes thrown out), artefact moulding (the ashes were compressed into a shape of the family's choosing) and finally scattering, which meant scattering the ashes somewhere it wouldn't get in people's eyes.

‘Sure do, it’s standard procedure to snap anyone entering the hospital. Let me bring them up for you.’

She tapped a few keys and hesitated while furrowing her brow.

‘That’s odd. For some reason the pictures are all blurry and filled with static. I can see someone’s in the pictures, but that’s about it.’

Sebastian leaned over the counter to get a look at the screen and Penny moved out of the way without comment. Just like she’d said, the pictures were almost useless, but that in itself told him a lot. All Sebastian could tell from them was that the two people were similar and quite big, so his theory still held. Damn nano-clouds, he thought. He’d seen them used before even though they were illegal, but if the two goons were working for Tinycorp it wouldn’t be difficult to shield them from such a fairly minor offence should it be necessary. Nano-clouds were swarms of nanobots, which had a vast number of applications. In this instance they generated an interference field that made it impossible for any camera to focus on anything inside the cloud, effectively rendering them unidentifiable while still appearing normal to the naked eye.

He pulled back from the counter again.

‘And the admissions to the morgue that day?’ he pressed on.

She seemed a bit annoyed by his abrupt questioning but returned to the terminal without comment and started typing again. With a final click she looked up from the screen and stated: ‘None.’

‘None? Are you sure?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Oh no sorry, I’m not, let me perform the exact same search again and I’m sure the result will be different,’ she said innocently but without moving an inch. She just continued staring at him.

‘Alright, alright I get it,’ he sighed and closed his eyes briefly^{20*}. ‘What I meant was, is it normal not to have any admissions for an entire day?’

20. Not so briefly as to merely constitute a blink or a wink, and not long enough to make someone think he’d fallen asleep. Somewhere in between the two.

'Unusual sure, but it happens,' she replied with a shrug.

Sebastian didn't think there was anything else to learn here. It seemed obvious to him that the unfortunate coroner had been visited by the primate duo, and this fact alone lent a lot of credence to Victoria's claim that her husband had been brought here. Why else send two enforcers to a hospital where they make the effort to disguise themselves and where the subject of the visit mysteriously dies a few hours after they leave. There was no way to prove anything though, and if Franz had been in the system at all, Tinycorp had probably deleted the record of his admission. It wouldn't be too difficult for them to hack the hospital's AI.

Bloody machines.

This was why he hated them. Half the time they didn't do what they were supposed to and the rest of the time people were hacking them to make sure they didn't.

Suddenly getting a glimpse of Penny with a curious look on her face, Sebastian realised that his internal deductions and subsequent rant had resulted in him staring catatonically at nothing for just a bit too long to be socially comfortable, and as a result Penny was getting freaked out a bit. He returned to the real world with an easy smile and a tip of the hat.

'Thank you very much kind Penelope, you've been a treasure. I'll get out of your hair now but please contact me if you come across anything related will you?'

She nodded curtly in reply. 'Sure thing, I have your ID from the transaction.'

'And so I bid thee farewell,' he exclaimed performing a sweeping bow and winking before going towards the exit. She gave a small wry smile in return, satisfying Sebastian that his efforts hadn't been entirely wasted.

Back at the office, he settled down behind his desk, taking off his hat and pulling out an ozone stick to contemplate the events of the day. It had only been half a day since the vision that was Victoria Jaeger had graced his office with her presence, and already he had a pretty good idea what was going on. The next step would be to talk to the head geezer at Tinycorp to see if he could make him slip up or at least put some pressure on him. He didn't have high hopes of success as people who made it to the CEO level of a major corporation usually had a

heart the size of a malnourished pea, nerves of a material that made steel feel spongy and the slipperiness of a well oiled eel. He was probably the kind of boss who always had the door to his office open, but only so that it was easier for him to slam it in your face. It never hurt to try though, and who knew, maybe he could also get some information on whatever Jaeger had been working on.

He opened a bottle of Glenfiddly fake-o-hol to reward himself for the excellent work so far and started typing out his update to Victoria on his terminal after clearing away the papers and takeaway boxes under which it was currently hiding. He was completely factual and kept his theories and suspicions to himself, finishing the whole thing in five minutes using his good hand.

20 minutes later he had fallen asleep while browsing through background material on Tinycorp, half the bottle of Glenfiddly still left over on the desk next to him.

Chapter 10: Family Matters

He opened his eyes and immediately realised he was back on the beach, once again sitting in an armchair wearing his trenchcoat and hat. The sun was beating down hard but he didn't seem to feel the heat. Like last time the beach was completely deserted of other people and all you could see were the azure-blue waves breaking on the perfectly smooth, white, sandy beach. He looked towards the sea, licking his lips in anticipation. The wait wasn't long as moments later the goddess broke the surface and slowly wiped the water from her face with closed eyes, completing the motion by running her hands over her long, golden hair. She opened her eyes and slowly started wading towards him, fixing his eyes with a hungry stare. He could have watched that approach for hours; it was a sublime example of nature at its finest. As she got closer he could see her nipples through the miniscule bikini-top and all the little droplets of water clinging on to her bronzed skin. What he wouldn't give to be one of those droplets. Actually, scratch that, what he wouldn't give to be the bikini-top. Oh yes. She

stopped in front of him and started leaning in, putting her hands on the armrests for support. As her lips parted slightly he could see perfectly white teeth and a glimpse of a smooth pink tongue, and he moved his head forward towards those lips just as she said: *beep*

He stopped and so did she. *beep* she said again with a surprised look on her face. Slowly she started dissolving before his eyes, uttering a final insistent *beep* before disappearing completely along with the beach and all the tropic surroundings.

Sebastian opened his eyes again and saw a steaming cup of coffee about ten centimetres from his face. *BEEP* came a loud noise in his ear; it was his wrist telling him he had an important message and his ear was resting directly on it, making the sound louder than what you should have to put up with at the crack of noon. He sat himself up and rubbed his face and eyes repeatedly, feeling like shit. Shouldn't have had that half bottle of Glenfiddly he thought while deep inside his ego was patting its own back for being suck a classic private dick.

Having rubbed his face enough to be able to feel it again he reached for the coffee Gladys had so kindly provided for him in her indefatigably pre-emptive way. The beeps were getting really annoying now and after a sip, and the unavoidable facial spasm which followed, he finally checked his wrist.

'U haf a small kok, wy not make it bigga?' the message helpfully suggested, accompanied by priority flashing.

'You don't say,' Sebastian said out loud. ' Well since I know that to be an unalterable fact I guess that'll just have to come straight out of my ever diminishing self-confidence won't it?'

Fucking spam. You'd think some Jeff²¹ would have sorted that problem out ages ago, but noooo, you still had to live with the countless offers of altered bodyparts, drugs and porn.

21. A person with an unnaturally keen interest in all things technological, often to the regrettable extent where human relations and personal hygiene would suffer.

As he deleted the offending message he saw that he'd also received a reply from Victoria, and it said: 'Well done, pleased with progress. Suggest you speak with Christian Forsythe at Tinycorp next. Victoria.'

Oh you do, do you? Who's the expert in this field if I may ask, Sebastian thought to himself. The presumption of some people! The most annoying thing was that this was exactly what he had intended to do, and as all people (especially men) knew, there was nothing more annoying than being asked to do something immediately before intending to do it out of your own volition anyway. It made you want to *not* do it all of a sudden. In this case however there was no way around it, it was the logical next step. He found the link for Tinycorp's main office and activated it on his wrist. Immediately an immaculately coiffed and styled female face appeared.

'Tinycorp London office, how may I help you Mr. Poe?' the woman asked in a friendly yet very professional tone of voice.

Sebastian knew that your identity always followed you and every action you performed on the net, but it still annoyed the hell out of him to be addressed by his name by some complete stranger who didn't have to disclose *their* identity as they were protected by corporate law.

'Mr. Forsythe's office please,' he replied.

'I need the full name and department please sir.'

'Christian Forsythe. I don't know what the department is, but as he's the CEO I would guess Head Honcho or potentially The Big Cheese?'

She didn't seem to react to his wit at all and just said: 'One moment sir.'

Her face was replaced with a spinning Tinycorp logo for a few seconds after which another equally groomed but much more attractive woman appeared.

'Mr. Forsythe's office, how may I help you Mr. Poe?' she asked, copying the words and timbre of the previous receptionist to a T.

'I'd like to make an appointment to see your boss this afternoon,' Sebastian stated as if it was the most natural thing in the world to get a same day appointment with one of the most powerful CEO's in the world.

'I'm afraid that's not possible sir, he has a very busy schedule indeed and he has no openings for the next two months. Furthermore, to get an appointment you have to make a screening pre-appointment where an assistant will hear what you want to discuss with Mr. Forsythe and then schedule you in according to his findings,' she said in a well-rehearsed manner, this obviously not being the first time she'd had to say it.

'Am I correct in assuming that most of these screenings end with a big boot up the arse of the applicant?' he asked innocently.

'I wouldn't have put it in quite so vulgar terms sir, but yes,' she replied instantly without blinking.

Sebastian smiled.

'Tell you what toots,' he started, assuming the voice of a patient parent explaining its child that if it stopped banging the toy train against the shin of said parent, it might get a sweetie later. 'Why don't you push your buttons and tell Mr. Big Deal that Sebastian Poe needs to see him today, and when he says "who?", as he most certainly will, you tell him these three words: Jaeger, Queen and Charlottes.'

The only reaction to his patronising behaviour was a minuscule crease in the skin between her eyebrows. Before it had time to disappear he added: 'It's alright, run along now honey.'

He could see that she was struggling to make a decision, while at the same time processing his rude behaviour. This was probably because she wasn't used to people talking to her like that. Apparently coming to a decision she said: 'I'm sorry but I can't interrupt him for every random person who comes along with a cryptic message. You'll have to book a screening appointment.'

'As I see it you have two options,' Sebastian said before she'd completed the last word. 'You either turn me away and run the very real risk of me going to the press with information

which could, and probably will, wipe billions off the value of Tinycorp, all because you wouldn't make a ten second call, *or* you make that call now and run the comparatively small risk of your boss being mildly annoyed with you. Now. Run a quick risk-benefit analysis on that and tell me what you think.'

She stared at him with an unreadable expression for a long time before she finally made her move.

'Please hold,' she said and Sebastian was once again staring at the spinning Tinycorp logo. He leaned back in his chair and took another sip of his coffee, smacking his lips in masochistic enjoyment as the hot tar-like substance singed its way down his throat.

It had only been about half a minute before the receptionist returned to the screen, face still calm and collected.

'He will see you for 20 minutes at 13:05 today. Don't be late.'

Before he could respond she cut the connection, leaving Sebastian hanging with a half-opened mouth and a wasted witty remark on his lips. Damn. Still, mission accomplished and as an added bonus he'd made another friend. Now he even had some time to get a much needed meal at Hong's. He was about to get up when his antique intercom crackled and Gladys announced: 'Your mother is here sir.'

Fuck.

It wasn't that he didn't love his mother, he did, but it was the kind of love which flourished optimally with distance. He basically couldn't stand being in the same room as her for more than five minutes, and it wasn't just her superior and dominating personality, her annoying habit of categorising all poor people as lazy or her continuing efforts to persuade Sebastian to join the family business, no, it was the way her mere presence seemed to exude disapproval and disdain for everything he held dear in life. His office, his job, his freedom. With a look and a raised eyebrow she could communicate to the world how she really felt about a hapless piece of furniture which didn't go well with its immediate surroundings. Mind you, Sebastian's office was easy pickings in that respect.

He got out of his chair just as she entered the room, proceeded by at least a foot of hat before she herself became visible. Big hats must be in again, Sebastian thought.

Right behind her came Saunders, her butler slash personal assistant. Since android butlers were cheap, efficient and readily available, it was a sign of pure class to have an actual human as a servant, although it was hard to think of Saunders as a servant. Sure, he always did what he was told, but he still managed to do so with an attitude which made you feel lucky that he'd decided to let you live, for now....

'Mother! How wonderful to see you!' Sebastian exclaimed as he walked toward her with his arms and hands stretched out in front of him. He could tell from her reaction that she didn't buy it but she did allow him to give her a small peck on the cheek even if she didn't take his hands.

'Yes I'm sure you're *thrilled* to see me Sebastian,' she replied drily with a magnificent roll on the r.

'Of course I am, why wouldn't I be ecstatic to see my dear old mommy? After all, it was you who personally hired the people who brought me up with so much love and care,' he said with hurt innocence.

'Oh *do* get over yourself Bassie, that rhetoric gets awfully tiresome after a few decades,' she retorted dismissively.

'Very well mother heart, to what do I owe this pleasure? Can I offer you a seat? A refreshment? To relieve you of your hat? It looks like a gentle breeze would make it break your neck.'

'I'm afraid I have to decline on the first two items for health reasons, i.e. I want to see tomorrow, and as for the hat, that stays on. My hair is in a frightful state as the hairconditioning system in my car is broken.'

She shot a small reproachful glance at Saunders who was standing at attention next to and one step behind her. He didn't acknowledge it.

Sebastian assumed an overly worried expression and said: 'How terrible for you, are you alright? Do you want me to call someone? It must have been literally *hours* since your last styling.'

She fixed him with an icy stare but didn't bite.

'My reason for coming here is nothing more sinister than a desire to see how my boy is doing I assure you. I hold no hopes that you've come to your senses and decided to get a real job in your father's company.'

'Why do you keep calling it my father's company? He died years ago and even when he was alive *you* were the one effectively controlling the everything, I know that,' Sebastian asked irritably.

'Be that as it may, your father started the company and was the CEO for 21 years, that makes it his in my book,' she said firmly.

Sebastian closed his eyes for a few seconds and counted to ten before continuing.

'Look, whatever, we'll just have to face the fact that the world of stale milk manufacturing does not hold any interest to me *at all*. In fact I find the intense study of dust mites and their mating habits infinitely more fascinating, so let's just leave it there shall we?'

'It just so happens that *cheese* manufacturing and consumption is an integral part of most people's lives and our heritage as well and I find it a very noble pursuit to supply people with our fine products.'

'Yes I'm sure your intentions are nothing but charitable and not in the least concerned with ever growing profit margins,' he interrupted.

She raised both hands in mock surrender and briefly closed her eyes.

'All right, say no more. I'll leave you alone to your dust studies. How very fortunate for you that your place of work also happens to be the preferred breeding ground for your subject matter,' she added with a small thin smile.

'Yes, very good mother,' he replied indulgently while taking her elbow and urging her to turn toward the door.

Before she could protest or Sebastian could manoeuvre her closer to the exit, the intercom crackled again and Gladys announced more visitors. 'Mr. Alice and his associate are here to see you sir,' she stated with trepidation in her voice. She was quite empathic for an artificial life form originally built to extinguish human life.

Mr. Alice apparently hadn't seen the need to wait for an invitation to enter and opened the door to Sebastian's office almost simultaneously with Gladys' announcement. He strolled into the room looking quite magnificent in a too small black pencil skirt and a pink frilly-laced cravatte, followed by his pet hard man Dweazil.

"Ello, 'ello, what have we got here Poe, another widow eager to part with her money?' Alice asked in his deep, booming voice.

'Yeah, yeah, hee hee, who's the old bag and the stiff eh?' Dweazil added in his own uniquely eloquent way.

Sebastian's mother didn't react, but Saunders raised one eyebrow.

'Uh oh,' Sebastian thought.

'Nothing for you guys to worry about,' Sebastian quickly explained. 'They were both just leaving, right?'

He looked at his mother pleadingly and after what seemed like an eternity but was probably just two or three seconds she finally took pity on him. 'Yes, yes we were indeed. Come now Saunders,' she said as she started towards the door.

She only managed to go one step before being stopped by Dweazil's arm which was suddenly thrust in front of her.

'Now, now, not so fast. Seriously Poe, who is the old bat?'

Saunders drew in his breath deeply and slowly while cracking his neck by moving it slightly down towards his shoulder. Sebastian looked at Dweazil and shook his head, trying his best to say: 'You do *not* want to go there.'

Dweazil though, being too thick to detect a subtle hint even if it landed on his face, hit him with a frying pan, married his sister and screamed 'I AM A SUBTLE HINT!!!' directly into his ear, persisted in his inadvisable venture.

'She must be loaded to employ the stiff 'ere. Is she maybe in the market for some young desperate flesh eh Poe? Is that the kind of *service* you supply now?'

Sebastian just continued shaking his head at him, knowing full well that it was too late. Saunders flicked some invisible speck of dust from his sleeve and said: 'I must insist that you stop addressing My Lady in such a crude and disrespectful manner sir.'

'Oh really, hee hee, and what are you going to do about it if I don't eh Jeeves? Make me a bad cuppa tea?' he chuckled, looking at Alice for encouragement. Alice though, didn't react but just kept observing the events unfold.

'I'm afraid tea isn't on the menu sir, but I *will* be obliged to forcefully render you headless and defecate into the resulting orifice,' he answered coolly.

You could almost see Dweazil's very limited brain struggling with all the big words as his eyes went blank, but in the end it just gave him the usual answer, which was a shrug and a bewildered expression²². So in spite of Sebastian's continued head-shaking he decided to press on. He drew himself up in front of Saunders, and looking him straight in the eyes he poked a finger at Sebastian's mother and emphasizing each word with his finger said: 'Wrinkly, old, senile... *snap*

That was as far as he got.

At Alice's request Sebastian had given Dweazil enough painkillers to knock him out as they'd all gotten tired of hearing him screaming his high-pitched scream. He was lying on the floor with his arms and legs in some extremely unnatural positions that could only be achieved through severe dislocations and a fair number of fractures.

Sebastian would have liked to be able to say that he'd never seen anything like it, but he'd be lying. It had been his questionable privilege to witness Saunders' handiwork on two other occasions and both had resulted in injuries you didn't walk away from in a hurry. At

22. Yes, brains don't have faces, and shoulders with which to shrug even less so, but if they did, bewildered is what this one would have looked all right? Just go with it.

least Dweazil's bones would heal eventually thanks to modern technology, but the mental scars were probably there for good, even if the mind real-estate available for scarring was infinitesimal.

The fact that Alice hadn't gotten involved was testament to his intelligence and good judgement. He picked up the comatose form of his henchman and gave Sebastian a meaningful look before leaving the office. The look said: 'All this doesn't matter, I'll be back for my money and you'd better have it.' Sebastian knew he was serious and Saunders wouldn't be here next time. Even if he were, Sebastian wasn't sure if he'd lift a finger in his defence.

Saunders was standing calmly next to his mistress, observing everything and nothing. He hadn't even broken a sweat.

Sebastian's mother looked terribly bored by the whole affair and started towards the door as soon as Alice's huge frilly-lace-covered frame had disappeared.

'Come Saunders, I think we've burdened my son with our company long enough. I'm sure Bassie has matters of crucial importance to get back to, haven't you dear?' she asked rhetorically.

'Already mother? We haven't even had a good heart to heart yet, but if you insist who am I to stop you.'

Before he'd finished the sentence he'd already jumped to the door and was holding it open for her with his good hand, the crippled one pointing guidingly through the opening.

'What on earth did you do to your hand Bassie,' she uttered with a look on her face that was more revulsion than concern.

'It was crushed by a malfunctioning bionic hand if you must know mother,' he replied matter of factly without altering his gesturing position by the door.

'Fine, don't tell me then,' she sniffed, trying to give the impression of hurt motherly feelings. But for that to happen, Sebastian knew she would have to have feelings to get hurt in the first place, and since that wasn't the case it was just another pathetic attempt at manipulation.

He shook his pointing hand and jerked his head towards to door for emphasis while looking at her with eyes open wide.

'Bye Bassie,' she said, still maintaining the air of having been wronged. They both left his office, walked past Gladys without acknowledging her existence and exited without a sound.

Sebastian closed his office door and sat down heavily in the recliner, exhaling deeply. Family. You can't live with them and you can't use a time machine to erase them from existence without seriously reducing your own chances of being.

The nightmare of having to deal with his mother aside, it was quite fortuitous that Dweazil's stupidity had given Sebastian some time to get the VD's together for Alice. He was a reasonable enough kind of guy, for an oversized, transvestite sociopath anyway, but business was business and he wouldn't flinch at inflicting pain in new and interesting ways to get his money. Sebastian would have to try and get an advance off Victoria tonight, and for that he needed to show some meaningful progress.

A subtle beep from his wrist reminded him that he'd have to get going if he wanted to make his appointment with Forsythe. Damnit, no time for lunch after all. Getting up from the quicksand-like chair with a grunt he put on his hat and coat and retrieved an ozone stick from his pocket, which he squeezed between his lips. Checking the mirror to make sure it was hanging from the corner of his mouth at exactly the right angle²³, he winked at the ruggedly handsome man of the world in the mirror and left after saying goodbye to Gladys.

The airspace above the towers was a strict no-fly zone if you didn't have the highest Tincorp clearance. Even employees had to park in the purpose built parking buildings outside the main complex. Sebastian was informed of this as he approached the massive

23. This would be the angle where the stick looked like it had been forgotten by its owner and was strongly considering giving in to gravity, but at the same time could just about hang on for dear life should the aforementioned owner decide to communicate verbally.

construct and obediently followed the assigned course to one of the parking levels. The building AI didn't get further than 'Welcome...' before he switched off the comm console completely. He just didn't have the energy. As a result he was almost running late when he'd finally found a place to park and gone through a dozen security checks to make sure he hadn't hidden a rocket launcher behind his retina. Like at the police station he was assigned an escort drone that also looked like it could keep soup warm for days. It led him from the main gate to tower one and into a lift which took them to the 67th floor. Here he was left in an opulently stylish reception room with Forsythe's PA lording²⁴ over the serfs from behind a massive desk that looked like an egg lying down with the upward facing side slightly flattened and the side facing the occupant hollowed out to accommodate users with legs. Needless to say it was transparent.

He gave her a polite smile and said: 'How lovely to see you again toots.'

'The name is Ms. Frost and if you'll please sit down over there, Mr. Forsythe will be ready for you shortly.' She nodded her head to indicate a small seating area across the room. She didn't show any emotion on her face but he could tell from her restrained voice that she was annoyed, which pleased him more than it probably should.

He winked at her and walked over to the assigned area. It consisted of a drinks dispenser in the shape of a white swan²⁵ and several pieces of furniture so avantgarde Sebastian couldn't figure out if they were tables, chairs or just pieces of art. Most of them were probably a mixture of the three but the social embarrassment associated with sitting down on a piece of art, putting his drink on a chair while admiring a table was considerable,

24. Ladying?

25. Designer drinks dispensers were very much the rage at the moment, ranging from delicate, aesthetically pleasing sculptures like this swan, to robotic tramps pissing in your cup. The problem was that you never knew how to use it as anything so crude as labeled buttons was frowned upon. As a result you never knew whether to sing opera to it or shove its wing up its own backside to get a drink, leaving them unused by most people.

especially if you'd just spent 15 minutes trying to violate a swan to get the drink, so he hesitated before making a decision and sitting down on a three-legged potential chair with a long, vertical protrusion that he hoped was for back-support. It was extremely uncomfortable and as the minutes passed he was increasingly convinced this item had never been designed to sit on. Just as he was about to get up under the pretence of getting a drink (opting for social embarrassment in lieu of spinal injury), the receptionist called out to him.

'Mr. Forsythe will see you now Mr. Poe,' came the emotionless voice. As she said this a huge opening appeared next to her desk where moments earlier had been only a wall. There was no sliding door and no sounds accompanying the event, the wall just seemed to dissolve. Very flash, Sebastian thought. He'd heard of these cloud doors but he'd never seen one in person. They were swarms of nanobots that could form into a flat surface on command, creating a seamless and undetectable door when activated. The swarm would merely stick to the surrounding wall as an extra layer when the door was open, giving the appearance of vanishing into thin air. That kind of technology was a nightmare come true for Sebastian, something controlled by technology, which could in effect seal you in a room with no openings. Considering that the walls of the CEO's office were probably impenetrable to anything up to and including a nuclear attack, being sealed in that office would mean being sealed indefinitely. Of course there were safeguards built into the system, that's what they always said, but in Sebastian's mind a person would either have to be very brave or very stupid to use this technology on the only opening to a bomb shelter; or maybe just being the CEO of the company that owned the patent and manufactured it was enough.

Sebastian got up slowly and entered the office on the other side of the opening. It wasn't as big as he had expected. These big business types tended to always go for the biggest of everything²⁶ and finding a room that couldn't host a large-scale wedding was a huge surprise. What wasn't a surprise was the extremely sterile decor of the place. Almost every single item and surface in the room was either (transparent) glass, shiny metal or white polymer. Were you able to survive the actual procedure, you could cut your chest open, remove your heart, roll it on the floor and re-insert it without any risk of infection. It was that

clean. Naturally Sebastian hated it. He preferred spaces that felt a bit more lived in. Arguably he took it a bit too far on the home front as his office was actually teeming with microbial life, but it was a damn sight better than living in a surgical facility.

The first thing you saw as you entered was the opposite wall consisting entirely of glass. No panes or seams were visible, giving the impression that there was nothing there at all in spite of the fact that the material was virtually impenetrable. The wall to the left was one big screen, divided into a vast amount of smaller video feeds containing news from around the world as well as the latest business information and stock market movements. How anybody could watch that without going insane was beyond his understanding, but somebody did and the man in question was sitting behind a modest desk²⁷ to the right of the doorway directly opposite the vid-wall. He got up from his chair when Sebastian spotted him and walked around the desk to meet him halfway with an outstretched hand.

'Mr. Poe, what a pleasure to meet a former member of our esteemed police force,' he grinned, and without breaking eye-contact with Sebastian he pulled back his hand with a feigned look of remembrance on his face.

'Oh, that's right, you can't shake my hand because of that terrible injury can you? How on earth did that happen? Did it get caught in the window of a wronged housewife?'

His grin turned into a smarmy smile as he walked all the way up to Sebastian, leaving only enough space between them to avoid homo-erotic suspicions by any outside observers. He was the same height as him but in considerably better shape and immaculately groomed.

26. In past centuries before it became the norm to have a wrist implant, men would often enter informal and unspoken pissing contests via the size of their wrist watch. The practice went out of fashion when a significant amount of men started getting chronic shoulder injuries caused by the weight of the exceedingly heavy and increasingly redundant timepieces.

27. Yes, if you wanted to you could wave hello to your feet through it as it was transparent.

Piercing blue-gray eyes, golden tan, perfect white teeth and closely cropped gray hair; in fact only his obviously male voice saved him from complete androgyny as he was wearing a pale blue patterned kimono and slippers.

'I'm sure your flunkies can find out if you really want to know,' Sebastian replied, not moving an inch even though he was extremely uncomfortable.

'I'm sure you're right,' he said cheerfully. 'Now, what can I do for you Mr. Poe?'

'What can you tell me about Franz Jaeger and the circumstances under which he died?' Sebastian immediately inquired.

'Not much really, a tragic incident to be sure but these things happen. As far as I know he was an exemplary employee, very dedicated to his job and quite brilliant, but I have no idea what he might have been involved in or why someone might have wanted to kill him.'

'So he didn't act differently in the days before he died? Show signs of being nervous or stressed maybe, that kind of thing?'

'I really don't know. As much as I'd like to bond on an emotional level with all my employees, I just can't seem to find the time.'

He was starting to get on Sebastian's nerves. There was sarcasm and there was sarcasm, and he *hated* sarcasm. He'd have to bite his lip for a while though until he'd asked all the questions he needed to ask.

'Were there any ongoing internal investigations suspecting him of selling trade secrets?' Sebastian continued flatly.

'No. Like I said, he was very much a company man, and let me add that *if* he'd been suspected of betraying the company drastic measures would have been taken already.'

'Like killing him and dumping him somewhere?'

'Probably not,' he grinned wolfishly.

'Right,' Sebastian said to himself. He pushed his hat back on his head and turned to face the excellent view. 'Any idea why his dead body was delivered to Queen Charlotte's Hospital and identified by his wife hours before he was "shot" in Fulham?'

He didn't answer immediately but moved next to Sebastian, also facing the large panoramic window.

'Now now Mr. Poe, who's been telling you this nonsense? I'm not sure I like what is being implied by that question. We might be a multinational company and ruthless in business matters, but we don't go around killing our employees and then cover it up. It doesn't even make sense, why if he was already dead would somebody move him?'

'I never said you killed him, and as to who told me, the answer is obviously his widow who id'd him there as you very well know.'

'Ah yes, the lovely Victoria, she never did seem to care much for the great work her husband achieved here, in fact she seemed to hold some deep resentment toward the company as a whole. God knows why.'

'Does he?' Sebastian exclaimed with a look of mock surprise on his face. Well it's too bad I can't ask him about it as he's a bloody imaginary being, isn't it?'²⁸

Sebastian's random emotional outburst seemed to throw Forsythe off balance for a few seconds but he quickly recovered.

'Yes, well, anyway, I think you'll find it a matter of record that her ludicrous tale never took place. Why don't you check with the hospital, I'm sure they'll be happy to tell you the facts.'

'According to them there is no record of Jaeger's body ever being in the hospital or Victoria entering the building,' Sebastian stated.

'Well there you have it then,' he concluded calmly.

'Yes, quite.'

Sebastian continued admiring the view for a few seconds.

28. A pet peeve of Sebastian's (among many) was people using stupid, anachronistic and nonsensical expressions out of habit. Every time people told him to go to hell, and this happened with disturbing frequency, he always made a point of asking them for directions. This was rarely received well.

'Still, it's a strange thing for her to make up don't you think? Why would she do such a thing?'

'Beats me, maybe she's hoping to stir up trouble, vent her grief at the big faceless corporation she always hated?'

'Yes, yes, very probable, very probable,' Sebastian nodded sagely and went silent again for a moment.

'What was Jaeger working on?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Then who can?'

Forsythe chuckled. 'You know perfectly well what I mean. Jaeger was one of our top guys and whatever he worked on was top secret.'

Come on, surely you can tell me the rough outline? I'm too stupid to understand it anyway, whaddya say?' Sebastian grinned while turning to face his adversary again.

Forsythe chuckled again. 'Tell you what Poe, I'll have Jaeger's assistant give you a small tour of the facilities as an act of good faith and because I like you, but she will not be able to talk about Jaeger's work, so don't even ask her, agreed?'

'Of course, scouts honour!' he replied, eyes opened wide with innocence as if the mere suggestion that he might do something sneaky was outrageous. At the same time he made a mental note to punish himself for using a stupid, anachronistic expression.

'Ferrar? Could you please ask Angela Jensen to come up here, I need about half an hour of her time,' Forsythe said while still looking out the window. Naturally he was integrated neurally with his wrist, allowing him to open a channel without actually performing any kind of mechanical motion.

Sebastian couldn't tell if he'd received a reply but since he didn't say anything else he assumed she was on her way. He spotted Halfie sniffing around behind the desk and even putting his paws on it. Luckily the owner didn't seem to notice.

'They waited in silence for about two minutes before the opening in the wall re-appeared and a young woman in a lab coat entered. She was of medium height and build, brunette with her hair in a ponytail, and unless Sebastian was mistaken, very very cute.

'You wanted to see me sir?' she asked after casting Sebastian a quick glance.

Forsythe turned to face her. 'Yes indeed. Would you be so kind as to give Mr. Poe a quick tour of the facilities?'

She hesitated a bit and her brow furrowed in mild annoyance. 'I'm actually quite busy trying to manage the lab after...', she paused and seemed to struggle to continue. '...after what happened. I don't have time to play hostess,' she finished firmly.

'Please Angela,' Forsythe said, his voice and hard stare making it obvious that he wasn't asking, 'I would be very grateful if you could do this. Now please.'

Sebastian had to admire her, she was actually trying to stare him down in return, but in the end she just shook her head dismissively and turned to leave. 'Fine, whatever.'

Oh, by the way,' Sebastian said, turning around just as he was about to follow Angela through the door, 'does TinyCorp still sell nano-cloaks?'

Forsythe hadn't had time to wipe off his bullshit smile and therefore found it easy to just look up from his desk and answer in a very reasonable if slightly patronizing tone of voice.

'You know as well as I do Mr. Poe that nano-cloaks are strictly prohibited and as such are illegal to sell. I can assure you that this company always follows the letter of the law.'

Sure you do, Sebastian thought but said: 'Oh yes that's right!' in such an exaggerated way you'd think he'd just invented parallel parking. 'I should probably inform you then that there are some rather unscrupulous characters running around using your product at this very moment, obviously flouting the very same letter of the law this fine institution is so dedicated to uphold.'

'Is that so,' Forsythe answered tersely. 'And might I inquire on what you base this invaluable piece of information?'

'Just some footage from Queen Charlotte's hospital I happened to see the other day. Apparently these aforementioned amoral law-breakers were there on the day that Jaeger died, can you imagine that? What a coincidence having two such completely disconnected events happen on the same day! They were big fellas as well so the little nano critters must have had their work cut out for them. Testament to the craftsmanship of the technology you produce here I have to say.'

All of this was delivered with complete innocence, to the point where you felt like kicking a kitten just to make sure there was balance in the world. Forsythe's smile stiffened a fraction and before he could reply, Sebastian tipped his hat, winked and left the room.

Angela was waiting for him outside and had obviously been privy to the whole exchange. She shot him a quizzical look.

'Not that it's any of my business, but what was all that about?'

'Just casting a line, seeing if something will bite,' he answered dismissively. 'Lead the way fair maiden and I will follow,' he half-shouted theatrically.

She maintained here evaluating stare for a few seconds longer before saying: 'Sure, follow me,' and leading Sebastian to the lift. On the way they passed the desk of Ms. Frost who appeared to have also followed the verbal action from afar as her aura of disapproval had been magnified by several degrees compared to his arrival. She looked like a nearsighted person trying to read small print without glasses immediately after ingesting a pint of lemon juice.

They got into the lift which was facing the reception desk and just as the doors were about to close Sebastian winked at her and pouted his mouth in an air kiss. The last thing he saw before the closing doors came together was her expression of indignant outrage. Excellent.

They only went down one floor on the lift before stopping. Angela had to go through a complicated set of procedures to get the lift doors to open as this was the heart of the operation, but the doors eventually opened and she led him into a long, white hallway which seemed to go on forever. Just outside the lift the uniform surface was broken by the outline of

a door. Another set of security procedures were executed with much practised efficiency and the door slid open. She motioned Sebastian to enter before her.

'What, no dissolving opening magically appearing? I'm almost disappointed,' he said, giving her a crooked smile.

'No. Good old sliding metal is good enough for us lowly scientists,' she replied. 'Besides, when the technology fails and a door jams, would you rather have a sliding piece of metal to work your way around or a solid wall?'

'Good point, but aren't you showing a disturbing lack of confidence in the product your company is making?'

'Well, you're a big boy and I'm sure you already know that all technology fails at some point, it's just a matter of time. All we can do is try to make the time before it happens last as long as possible, ideally past the date when the warranty expires,' she added with a wink.

He liked her already.

Walking through the door ahead of her he entered a massive open plan area jammed full of complicated looking machines and equipment. The room was so large that you couldn't see all of it due to the curvature of the building facade, and unlike the CEO's office there wasn't a single window. The air was humming with electricity and small drones of varying sizes zipping around purposefully from one piece of gleaming technological wonder to the next. Angela entered behind him and closed the door. There didn't appear to be anybody else in the room.

'Everybody else on vacation?' he offered.

She gave him a confused look before comprehension dawned on her face. 'Oh, no, no one else works here, it's always like this,' she explained.

'So it's just you here, doing all the research for Tinycorp?' Sebastian asked with incredulity.

'Since Franz died I've been the only one here yes, but we have lots of other research departments besides this one.'

'But this is the one where the truly ground-breaking stuff is done, am I right?'

'Well we rely on a lot of other people for support, but in essence yes,' she replied, not quite managing to hide her pride in this fact.

'How do you manage? It seems like there is equipment enough in here to keep an army of scientists busy for years?'

She gave a small chuckle, revealing a delightfully tinkly laugh. 'It's not that hard, really, it's all about organising work and giving instructions. The drones do all the actual work to the extent that I can't remember when I last had to handle equipment with my own hands.'

Having a typical male mind which couldn't help but try to wring a sexual euphemism out of pretty much anything, no matter how tenuous, Sebastian couldn't help but grin widely at her assertion. When he kept grinning at her she finally realised what she'd said and turned a charming pink while fiddling with her wrist.

'So...eh...anyway, I was supposed to give you a tour,' she quickly continued. 'Was there anything in particular you were interested in?'

'I'll be honest with you, I know next to nothing about nano technology, so a beginners introduction would be great and if you could then tell me more about what Franz was working on when he died, that would also be helpful. Please explain everything as you would to a child. A drunk child with learning difficulties,' he added self effacingly.

'That shouldn't be a problem, I'm used to giving presentations to management. Franz hated that stuff and always refused to do it so it was left to yours truly to explain what we do down here using crayons and cardboard cut-outs,' she answered dryly.

'So. Nano technology. Small machines is basically what it is. We construct very tiny machines which can be programmed to perform a wide variety of tasks. These tasks started out as very simple things, in fact in the beginning they weren't even machines at all but just materials with special properties due to the extreme precision with which they could be constructed. Currently however we're constructing fairly advanced little critters which can do anything from locating and eliminating certain cells in your body, like cancer, to cooperating with other nano machines to form shapes and surfaces as the entrance to the office of our

illustrious CEO so aptly demonstrates. At our current level of advancement the sky's pretty much the limit as to what we can do.'

'Ironically though, the sky turned out to not be the limit very early on, didn't it?' Sebastian asked slyly.

'I see what you mean, yes,' she replied with a small smile. 'The Highway to Heaven was actually the icon of nano-technology in the early days and is, as you know, still going strong. I thought you knew nothing about nano?'

'Well I would be hard pressed to not know anything about the space elevator, even with my level of general ignorance, wouldn't I. Especially as I see the bloody thing every day when I get in my car.'

'Fair enough,' she admitted. 'It *is* an amazing piece of construction isn't it though?' she said rhetorically, her eyes sparkling with the enthusiasm of a small child on Boxing Day. 'I mean, who would have thought that human kind would ever be capable of building an elevator into space? We take it for granted now, but I don't think people realise just how mind boggling it really is. It wasn't that long ago we had to burn tons of rocket fuel just to get a few hundred kilos into orbit, and now we take tons of people and equipment into orbit several times a day! All thanks to nano!'

Sebastian almost thought she'd start clapping her hands and jumping up and down like an overexcited Manga character, but she thankfully limited herself to very expressive hand gestures. They were very exuberant though and the kinetic energy alone from her Italian-style gesticulation could probably power the lab for a few hours.

'So just to get this straight, you like nano technology do you?' Sebastian asked with mock sincerity.

'What's not to like? It's wondrous!' she replied with unabated enthusiasm.

Sebastian found it hard to maintain his usual sarcastic demeanor faced with this level of joy and optimism, but pressed on. 'And what of the other uses nano technology has been put to over the years, like biological weapons, espionage and infringements on civil rights?'

With the practiced ease of someone who'd defended a viewpoint many times over she didn't miss a beat though. 'Any great leap in technology is going to be exploited by unscrupulous people to varying degrees, especially in its infancy when everybody is trying to get a handle on the possibilities, but that's unavoidable. All we can do is work hard to punish the people who do these abominable things and create countermeasures just in case.'

'And if the culprits turn out to be the people you work for?' he continued, making sure not to break eye contact.

She paused for a second, and in that brief time he saw a number of feelings wash over her face, fear, doubt, guilt, before settling into a defiant challenge. 'Nothing of that kind has ever been proven in connection with Tinycorp. I can guarantee you that nothing has ever come out of this lab which abuses the power of nano and I've had assurances from management that the same goes for all other labs belonging to the company.'

Her smile had disappeared now and in spite of her grandstanding Sebastian could tell that she was also trying to convince herself. Normally he would have kept prodding at this newly exposed vulnerability but two things prevented him from doing so. Firstly, he needed her on his side if he was going to get all the information he needed, and secondly and more worryingly for his self-respect, he found that he would be willing to compromise on his usual no holds barred people skills as long as he could get her smiling again. So to his own surprise he heard himself saying: 'Well if that's your view then that's good enough for me.' Even more surprising was the fact that he said this without any trace of sarcasm in his voice. He wasn't even aware that he could turn it off.

She apparently had formed the same opinion of him and her initial response was a wary look until she appeared to be satisfied that there was no mocking involved, and gave a curt nod as if to say that that was settled then. Her smile didn't return yet though.

'So, what does this machine do?' he asked, indicating a nearby metal box with a small window in it and a lot of differently-coloured wires coming out of it.

His strategy appeared to work instantly as her face lit up. 'That is an amazing bit of engineering actually. It's where we test the resilience of our bots. If you notice this thin tube

leading into the box on the left, that comes from the larger box over there, emitting the bluish light, and that's where the bots are physically created based on the blueprints we create. We call it the maternity ward,' she added with a geeky half-smile. 'They get fed from there through the tube into the resilience testing container, or purgatory as it's also known, where we can then subject them to all manners of physical abuse. We can generate temperatures from zero Kelvin to the corona temperature of the sun in there while still being able to measure and collect data on how the bots react. In addition to that we can also simulate pretty much any type of radiation known to man.'

Sebastian had no idea who Kelvin was or why he was being used as a measure of temperature, but decided to keep his ignorance to himself and just nod his head while raising his eyebrows to indicate how astounding he thought it was.

'Impressive,' he added.

'I know!' she agreed, once again beaming happily.

'And what about the two tubes from the maternity ward going into the wall over there?

Sebastian pointed at a red and a green tube running between the box in question and two sockets in the wall.

'Oh, well the green tube supplies the raw material used to build the bots and the red one leads to the test room where the abilities of the bots are tested.'

She started walking away, going past the two tubes in question and around the bend of the room. 'Come on, I'll show you,' she said, motioning him to follow, which he happily did.

Passing the wall into which the tubes disappeared quickly revealed it to be the end-wall of a fairly large room, about ten meters wide, four meters deep and three meters high. The long wall facing the room was made of a glass-like material (yes, another way of saying transparent), and the room appeared to be completely empty.

'So what do you call this room? The Void? Harsh Reality?' Sebastian suggested wittily.

'No, we call it the test room of course,' she answered matter-of-factly.

'Oh,' Sebastian said, slightly disappointed. 'How come it's so big when the subject matter is so small?' he asked in an attempt to wow her with his deductive powers.

'We're not just dealing with single nano bots if you recall, but most often with whole swarms of them, working together to perform complex tasks. We need enough room to perform large surface tasks, like forming structures or enclosing objects of varying sizes,' came the, let's be fair, quite obvious reply, once again leaving Sebastian feeling a bit dense.

'Oh,' he repeated. 'And I assume there are a lot of safety measures in place to ensure that these tiny critters don't get out until they're ready?'

'You better believe it. Things don't always go according to plan in the first designs and you can end up with some pretty weird behaviour in those cases. You wouldn't want something like that getting into the world. One time we were working on a swarm which was supposed to be used by law enforcement to detain people by encasing their arms and legs, and it seemed to work until the swarm got clever and decided that it would be more efficient to just assume a bullet shape and pierce the head of the subject. Once it had demolished the test dummy it also decided that anything human-like in the vicinity should be dealt with in the same manner and it started slamming into the screen here to get at us. Was a bit of a shock I have to admit, but of course the screen held.'

'And then what did you do? How do you get rid of something like that?' Sebastian asked, horrified at the prospect of a swarm of tiny homicidal robots killing people left, right and center.

Angela smiled, 'I'll show you.'

She pressed a few buttons on a panel in front of the screen and the test room was suddenly inhabited by what looked like a small rain cloud. It hovered there without moving. She tapped away at the keyboard for a few seconds and all of a sudden the small cloud started changing shape. Slowly it elongated vertically and after about ten seconds it was starting to look human. Another five seconds and it was a very good resemblance of Forsythe standing there, giving Sebastian a thumbs up and winking at him.

'Now, press this large red button here,' she said, indicating an irresistibly large and glowing button next to the control panel.

He pushed it and immediately had to shield his eyes from the blinding conflagration inside the room. Seemingly from out of nowhere the room had filled up with red-hot fire which kept burning for about five seconds before a voice declared: 'All matter has been successfully incinerated,' after which the flames disappeared, leaving a once again pristine and barren room.

'Neat, huh?' Angela said with a grin.

'Very,' Sebastian had to admit. 'And not without a certain amount of satisfaction I have to say. Is this how you deal with management issues?'

'I have been known to indulge on occasion, yes,' she replied with mock seriousness, transforming into a bright smile.

It was extremely infectious and Sebastian found himself grinning like a fool before he realised and tried to resume a slightly more professional façade. Trying to quickly find something new to get her talking he spotted what looked like a small cupboard with a glass door. Inside he could just make out another small container and on the glass door was a big skull and crossbones as well as a radioactivity symbol.

'And what sort of horror is kept in there?' he inquired.

'My lunch actually. It was a joke of Franz's because I love strong cheeses and he absolutely hated the smell of cheese, so he had this special fridge made based on a cabinet for hazardous biological material. It will restrain any matter, except the smell of Stilton he used to say.'

She said this with a wistful smile that quickly turned into a look of intense sorrow as her eyes started welling up.

'You were quite close weren't you?' Sebastian said.

She seemed to pull herself together with tremendous effort and quickly wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her lab coat. 'How couldn't we be? Spending most of our waking lives with each other, I think I knew him better than his wife did.'

At this Sebastian raised his eyebrows questioningly.

'Not in that way, I assure you. He was completely devoted to his wife and I wasn't attracted to him in that way.'

'Do you know his wife well?'

'I only met her once or twice to be honest, not really long enough to form a strong opinion of her, but...', she paused.

'Yes?' Sebastian urged her on.

'Well, I...I probably shouldn't be saying this, but between you and me she didn't seem like the most loving of people. He worshipped the ground she walked on, but I never saw her show him the least bit of affection. Like I said, I only saw them together a few times, so I probably caught her on a bad day and got it completely wrong.'

'Or she might have been jealous of the gorgeous, intelligent woman her husband spent more time with than her?' Sebastian suggested, trying to resist winking at the same time but failing.

Angela turned a lovely shade of pink and seemed a bit flustered.

'Hardly,' she managed to reply while looking away.

Ok, so she clearly wasn't up for the flirty approach, probably better to move it along, Sebastian thought.

'What can you tell me about what he was working on when he died?'

'Nothing,' she replied with a shrug.

'Come on, I know your boss doesn't want you to let go of any industry secrets, but you must be able to tell me a little bit? I'm too stupid to make sense of it anyway.'

'No, you misunderstand, it's not that I don't want to tell you, although even if I did know I couldn't tell you much, but the fact is that I have no idea what he was working on. We've always worked together on most projects but he would also have his own private research that I wasn't privy to at all, and at the time of his death that was all he was working on. In fact, I'd never seen him this obsessed about anything before.'

'But what about now that he's no longer here, surely you've looked at his files and research material?'

'I can't, everything is in his private lab and we haven't been able to get access yet.'

'Are you telling me that after he has died, the company which employed him and owns the facilities where he worked can't get into his lab? That seems very unbelievable.'

'I know how it sounds, but it's not that simple. This lab is very well protected from any kind of intrusion and his private lab doubly so. Nothing short of a nuclear attack could harm these walls. Add to this that Franz modified the access control system to be completely decoupled from the rest of the building, in fact, there is no hard link between his lab and the rest of the building, so we can't even attempt to hack his computers to obtain his research.'

'So what, his lab will just be isolated in all perpetuity? That's ridiculous!' Sebastian exclaimed, once again outraged at the power of computers.

'No, of course not, nothing is 100% secure, and the company is working very hard to get past the access controls, but it could be days, weeks or even months before they succeed. Franz was a very clever man,' she said, not quite being able to hide her pride in the fact that even after his death he was still outsmarting the rest of the world.

'I see,' Sebastian said, equally failing in hiding his disappointment at having hit another dead end. 'If and when you do get access, could you let me know and maybe divulge whatever you can? Might be very helpful to the case,' he said with sincerity, wisely deciding that this was not the right situation for him to use his puppy-eyes approach.

'Sure, whatever I can do to help, I'd be happy to,' she replied, matching his sincerity.

'Appreciate it, here are my contact details.'

He tapped a few keys on his wrist using his thumb and Angela did the same after a few moments. The clumsy maneuver exposed the sorry state of Sebastian's right hand and when Angela spotted this she let out a surprised gasp.

'Oh my Dawkins, what happened to your hand?' she exclaimed, putting her hand to her mouth.

'Nothing serious, just an unfortunate rendezvous with a malfunctioning bionic arm. Nothing a healthy dose of nano bots can't fix you'll be happy to hear!' he grinned.

'Yes, quite, but that must have hurt like a bitch when it happened,' she said, staring at the hand with fascination.

My, my, what colourful language our little professor is capable of, Sebastian thought approvingly.

'Nah, not that bad really. I've conditioned myself to ignore pain, goes with the territory you see,' he said casually. And before she could call his bluff he continued: 'But while we're on the subject, why, when you can create a human nano cloud in seconds or shape them into bullets does it take days to fix a simple hand? This is very inconvenient you know!'

'Well it's one thing to form shapes or even to destroy matter but quite another to heal and repair tissue. The human body is quite complicated and even though the nano bots are very sophisticated they're still too... clumsy if you will, to repair and manipulate living cells quickly. All they're actually doing is assisting the body's natural healing process. Speeding it up and improving on it slightly,' she explained.

'I see, strange to think of these tiny things as being clumsy I have to admit, but I'll just have to take your word for it.'

He smiled at her again and then looked down briefly before meeting her eyes again.

'I'm really sorry to have to do this, but I need to ask you a bit more about Franz even though I know it's hard for you to talk about. Will that be alright?'

She only hesitated for a second before nodding, her face once again clouding over.

'Were you working here the day he died?'

'I was, but only until lunch-time. I...I had the afternoon off.'

'And how was he the last time you saw him? Happy? Sad? Nervous?'

'Well now that you mention it, he was actually kind of excited all morning. He's usually very serious and focused with only the occasional dry humour, but on that day he was almost giddy,' she replied furrowing her brow. 'I hadn't thought about it before now though.'

'Any idea why he might have been particularly happy that day?' Sebastian continued.

She stared blankly ahead for a few seconds before replying: 'No, none at all. The only thing that would usually make him happy like this would be when we'd just had a

breakthrough of some sort, but all the stuff we're working on is months away from anything like that at the moment.'

'And what about what goes on in his personal lab, could he have reached a breakthrough there?'

'It's possible,' she shrugged. 'But he's usually not that secretive and I think he'd have told me if that had happened. He wouldn't be able to contain his need to show off if that was the case I think,' she said with a small wry smile.

'So you left after lunch, and then what happened?'

'Well I went to see my mum and dad and went home after that. I didn't get in again until morning and that was when I found out that he...he...he'd been...sho..., ' her voice cracked at the final word as tears started slow paths down her cheeks. 'I just don't *understand* it, who would want to hurt him, he's never hurt anyone!' she almost yelled in frustration.

He hated seeing her unhappy and instinctively wanted to give her a hug and a very literal shoulder to cry on, but he checked himself at the last moment. Wouldn't do to get too involved and besides, getting a hug from a near stranger might not help the situation. Instead he opted for continuing down the path of professionalism.

'Well opinions are divided there,' he sighed. 'The police thinks that he might have been involved in selling trade secrets and just ended up doing a bad deal, your boss claims to have no idea and his widow thinks Tinycorp killed him.'

'Tinycorp, what? That's ridiculous, why on earth would they kill their top researcher? That doesn't make any sense!'

'The traditional motive for bumping off employees is usually that said employee uncovers some secret or illegal activity within the company and decides to go public, but I don't see why Franz would have gone looking for anything like that, being a, pardon the phrase, a bit of a geek,' he smiled apologetically.

'You're right, he *is...was* a geek, which is why that theory is bollocks, just as him selling his own research is bollocks as well. He was never interested in money, only his research, and for that he couldn't get better conditions than he had here,' she stated firmly.

'The fact remains that he *is* dead though, so someone must have had it in for him. If not the company or black market buyers, than who?' Sebastian asked.

'You're the bloody detective, isn't that your job to find out?' she retorted a bit aggressively.

Sebastian was a bit taken aback by the outburst and found himself unable to come up with a quick reply. Before he could regroup, Angela broke her angry stare, closed her eyes while sighing and sagged her shoulders.

'I'm sorry Mr. P...*Sebastian*,' she said quietly. That was out of order and very rude of me, it's just...I'm just a bit stressed at the moment. Please accept my apology.'

He wanted to make a big show of telling her how no apology was needed just to show how magnanimous he was, but it stuck in his throat in the face of her earnestness and instead he replied: 'Apology accepted.'

She gave a weak smile and he returned a grin.

'But you're right, and I *am* the bloody detective, so I think I'll leave you alone now and get back to some serious detecting,' he said with a wink.

She smiled in spite of herself and said: 'I didn't mean to scare you off, but I'm not sure I can offer any more help, not that I feel like I've offered much so far.'

'Oh you'd have to be a lot more vicious to scare me off, and at the very least get some weaponry involved,' he grinned. 'And you've been very helpful indeed, not to mention an excellent teacher on the wonders of nano. But all good things must come to an end, so I'll be off now. Please contact me if you think of anything anything else which might be relevant alright?'

She nodded and smiled. 'Will do.'

'So, how do I get out of this fortress?' he inquired.

'Let me call you a drone, that's probably the easiest,' she replied and tapped a few keys on her wrist. 'It'll be here in a few seconds.'

Certain enough, they barely had time to exchange a few awkward glances before he heard a hiss from the other side of the room as the door opened and a drone floated in. It

came to a halt in front of him and said: 'Please follow me Mr. Poe and I will see you and your artificial canine to your car.'

With a smile and a two-finger salute he said goodbye to Angela and walked to the door with Halfie and the small shiny custodian. It took him to the same lift as before and all the way back down to the ground floor where it continued to lead him through the various security-gates back to the parking building. With a 'Have a nice day,' it then left him there and went back towards the main buildings.

Getting into his car he was pondering what she'd told him. If anyone knew Franz well it would be Angela, and she certainly struck him as very honest person. That meant that he could effectively rule out the industrial espionage theory, which only left Tinycorp as a suspect, although with no known motive. They'd have to have had a pretty good reason for dispatching him as he was worth a fortune to them, and he wasn't the sort of person to go looking for trouble so it didn't seem like a very likely scenario. Unless it had something to do with the work he was doing on his own. It was interesting to note that he was in an especially good mood on the day he died, but again, anything that would have made him happy should also make the company happy, so maybe the two were completely unrelated. Sebastian's head was aching now from a morning full of family, violence, industrial intrigue and plain old thinking. Deciding to let his subconscious take over the thinking for now and focusing on the more pressing need of a late lunch at Hong's, he started the car, took off without being bothered by the building AI for once and headed home.

As usual, driving on manual was a challenge but one that he'd grown accustomed to to such an extent that he could still dream about and plan the lunch ahead without any noteworthy exacerbation of risk to his continued survival in the afternoon traffic. It was in the middle of an especially saliva-inducing fantasy involving a kebab, massive chips and enough ketchup to constitute tomatocide that he noticed the car behind him. A black Taurus, Falos model, with blacked out windows was flying very close to his rear bumper. Too close for comfort in fact as it indicated that the driver was on manual and not automatic as 99.999% of all people with fully functioning cars were.

No sooner had he finished the thought than the massive car accelerated violently and rammed him from behind. A car hitting another car in the old days when everybody was driving on the road always looked thrilling and dangerous when you saw it in the old classic movies, and while it was a challenge to control the car under attack, it always seemed to be survivable as long as you had a bit of driving skill. The difference in this situation though was that there was no road on which to get grip, and with the computer disengaged nothing to compensate for this. As a result Sebastian immediately lost control of his car as it plummeted down and into the opposite lane. Luckily for him everybody else had a computer controlling their vehicles and the collision avoidance software in these was advanced to such a degree that the sea of traffic flowed around him without ever coming close, much like a crowd of people would behave around a hairy, sweaty, fat man with his top off screaming abuse at trees for being "lazy". Sebastian quickly realised this and managed to persuade his heart to go below 200 beats per minute. As long as I don't hit a building I'll be ok, he thought and checked the rear-view mirror two seconds before the black Falos rammed him again at an angle, sending him flying towards the nearest high-rise.

Shitfuck.

Pulling and turning the steering wheel as hard as he could he narrowly managed to avoid crashing headfirst into the building and instead hit it with the left side of the car, tearing a gash in the building as he continued flying forward and making a noise like the world was ending. After what seemed like forever but in reality was probably only about two or three seconds he separated from the brick surface and immediately headed for the safety of solid ground. He could see no sign of his attacker, but he wasn't taking any chances. There was only so much punishment the car could take, and with no computer to help him he was a dead man in any car duel.

It didn't take long to reach level zero and set down shakily in the crowded street next to a kiosk, with people throwing themselves out of the way to avoid being flattened. Sebastian leapt out of the car and checked the sky looking for any trace of the black behemoth, but all he could see was the normal traffic droning back and forth above him. He gave it a few

seconds trying to get his breathing under control. Still nothing. They must have given up. He would like to have thought that this was the result of his superior flying skills, but even his naturally inflated male perception of his own abilities knew this to not be the case. He wouldn't have stood a chance if they'd decided to hit him again.

'Oi! What the hell do you think you're doing landing in the middle of the street?' an agitated man with a ridiculous cap who could only be the kiosk vendor shouted at him angrily. 'You could have killed somebody, or worse you muppet!'

Other people getting up and dusting themselves off after having just taken a dive to safety were murmuring their assent and a few of them were inching closer. A wise man would have seen this as a bad situation and gotten out of there, but wisdom wasn't one of Sebastian's defining attributes and he couldn't help himself.

'What do you mean "or worse"?' he inquired of the irritated instigator of insurgency.

'What do *you* mean, what do I mean "or worse"?' the vendor retorted with a slightly puzzled look.

'Well you said I could have killed someone, "or worse", which would imply a fate worse than death. Personally I find it hard to see how my car can inflict such a thing, so I was just curious for you to clarify what scenario you had in mind when you made that claim,' Sebastian answered in all seriousness.

Cap-man looked momentarily confused but quickly made his comeback.

'It's just a bloody turn of phrase innit mate, not meant to be taken literal-like see? It's like when you say you're dead tired, but you're not actually dead are you? It's meant to enhance the general sentiment you're trying to get across see?' he explained.

This really pissed off Sebastian. *He* was supposed to be the one on the intellectual high-ground in these types of discussions, not the damn vendor. How dare he make a reasonable and intelligent argument when he was supposed to just stand there and be humbled in the presence of Sebastian's wit and powers of reason. The bloody cheek of the man. Nothing for it but to do the mature thing though.

'Whatever,' Sebastian said dismissively and got back into the car, taking off before the miffed crowd had time to find their pitchforks. He was halfway home before he suddenly remembered the attack, so busy had he been seething over the vendor incident. It had happened in broad daylight right after his visit to Tinycorp and the perps were well funded to fly a car like that. Coincidence? Sebastian didn't believe in coincidences²⁹ and this had the smell of a corporate warning all over it. Well, he wasn't a man to be easily intimidated and besides, he was too well compensated to be. He'd just have to keep his wits about him in the future, especially as he continued digging around.

Arriving home without further incident he bypassed the office and went straight to Hong's for his much-deserved evening meal. It was a bit early and the late afternoon shoppers were still milling around the shop. There was no line at the coffee counter, so either Will had given up on his high concept latte or word had spread that getting a coffee here today would involve a line and a wait too much for even the most hardened bus passenger to handle. Due to his earliness the food counter was also mostly vacated and he was able to get his favourite seat right at the end, with Halfie curling up at his feet.

As he sat down he saw Will coming out of the kitchen. Thankfully it wasn't Nyala. Sebastian wasn't sure she appreciated the way he exited last time without paying, and she was the wrong woman to cross. She was nowhere in sight though, so Sebastian kick-started his enzymes and was preparing mentally to place his order when he saw Will's face. He looked like someone had killed his favourite puppy, made it into a hat, shat into it and mailed it to him in a urine-soaked box. In other words, not happy.

'Hey Will, what's up my main man, why the long face? Or is that just your horse impression?' he said glibly, hoping to get at least a weak smile.

Will's facial muscles didn't move a micrometer though as he sat down behind the counter, opposite Sebastian. He just gave a big sigh and assumed a posture that would make any banana suffer from curvature-envy.

29. He did actually, but he didn't believe he did.

'Come on buddy, tell you old pal what's wrong,' Sebastian prompted him without any food-related self-interest in mind whatsoever.

'It's granddad. He shut me down,' Will said flatly.

'Shut you down? You mean the karma coffee thing?'

'TAI CHI LATTE! Not bloody karma coffee!' he shouted, making a man approaching the counter with an intended purchase in hand suddenly reconsider, make a 90 degree turn and proceed to intensively study what appeared to be a shelf of dehydrated meat.

'Alright, alright, tai chi latte, easy now,' Sebastian said calmly, holding up his hands in a defensive posture.

Will sighed again and blinked slowly. 'I'm...I'm sorry Seb, it's just that I work in this bloody place all the time, I don't have any prospects and then when I try to *do* something or *create* something I just get ridiculed and then ultimately shut down. It kills me, you know?'

He looked genuinely upset and was exhibiting way more vulnerability than Sebastian's exaggerated sense of masculinity was comfortable with. Keen to get past this, in his view, awkward moment he attempted to steer the conversation in the direction of a quick resolution that would ultimately lead to him having his dinner sooner rather than later.

'I'm sure it's not all that bad Will. There are lots of things you're good at, for example, I happen to know that you're the best cook in the family. I'd take your Spotted Dick over anyone else's any day, and you know that. In fact, I'll take your Spotted Dick right now,' he offered gallantly.

It was only when he got an odd look from Will that he realised his choice of dish might have been badly chosen in the context of this conversation.

'I mean...I didn't...you know it wasn't...ehh,' Sebastian floundered until he was interrupted by Will's laughter. I went on for a bit and was infectious enough for Sebastian to start chuckling a bit as well.

'Thanks Seb, I needed that. And you're right, I've got lots of talents damnit, and I'll show them some day. I'll make something of myself and make granddad proud, I promise you that. But for now I'm happy to cook you the best meal you've have all week, what'll it be?'

Still on shaky ground from the sudden turn of events Sebastian had forgotten all his earlier food plans and could only offer an eloquent: 'Ehhh...'

'That's fine, I'll conjure up something special for you,' he winked, turned around and went back to the kitchen.

Hmmm, Sebastian thought, went into uncharted waters there for a moment but all in all he got the speedy resolution he wanted and was much closer to satisfying his need for unwholesome sustenance.

Sod it, the day was pretty much over and anything Will could dish up was guaranteed to leech out the remaining energy he had for the day, forcing his body to concentrate on breaking down obscene amounts of protein and starch. He might as well write up his report for Victoria and try to get the advance out of her while he waited. It didn't do his self-esteem any good to come begging like this but he could only string Alice along for so long, and the incapacitation of his, albeit witless, henchman would have done nothing to improve his patience. Sebastian quickly dictated his progress report into his wrist, cursing the fact that he couldn't type it like he preferred due to his mangled hand, and subtly put the request for an advance in as a footnote. Some people actually had terminals on both their wrists, but for Sebastian that was definitely out of the question.

He'd barely sent off the message before Will returned with a steaming plate of cardiac arrest and placed it in front of him with a big smile on his face.

'Dinner's served big guy, and if you can finish that I'll even throw in the stretcher we'll need to get you out of here,' he grinned.

Calling it a plate was a bit like calling The Stairway a stepladder as it more resembled something that could easily have doubled as a manhole³⁰ cover, and the content of it could easily be called family-sized, if the family in question was extensive.

30. Manhole? I can't decide whether it's a sexist name or whether nothing good can ever come from a word that ends in "hole". One thing is for certain though, "womanhole" wouldn't be doing anybody any favours.

'I detect a challenge Sir,' Sebastian said with a posh accent and proceeded to stuff a paper napkin down the front of his shirt before digging into the food. Like a witness to a traffic-accident Will was horrified to observe the event and at the same time he couldn't prevent himself from staring in disgusted fascination at what could only be labelled carbocide and consumption with intent to digest.

About ten minutes later Sebastian's cutlery clattered noisily unto the empty plate, followed by the soiled napkin and a three-second belch. He leaned back contently, rubbing his belly and gave Will a triumphant look.

'It's alright sonny, you're still young, you'll learn,' he smirked. 'Now, I'd love to have stayed for dessert but duty calls and I'm working on a very important case, so I'd better get back up to the office.'

Putting on his hat he slid off the stool, gave the still stunned young Hong a casual air-salute and waddled out of the shop with Halfie on his heels. As soon as he'd cleared the windows of the place he immediately leaned against the wall, bent over slightly, closed his eyes and took slow, controlled breaths.

Ok, he thought, bad move, why the hell did he do that? To impress Will? His stomach made a loud gurgling sound like a flatulent elephant in shallow water, and followed this with a dull ache in his lower intestine. Shit, feels like I sprained my gut, Sebastian thought and squeezed his eyes even more shut, trying to will the pain away. About a minute passed before it started to fade and he felt capable of walking again. Right, up to the office and on to the couch for the rest of the evening, that was the plan. Keeping hold of the wall for moral support he staggered the short distance to the building entrance and up the stairs to the office. Answering Gladys' welcome with an incoherent grunt he went straight to his couch and threw himself down on it head-first. Bliss.

'Mr. Poe? Do you need my help to prevent an instance of suffocation by hat or are you entirely comfortable in that position?' Gladys inquired from the door, having just stuck her head around the corner.

'Mhooa owaoao,' came the muffled reply.

'Very well, I shall be back later to check for a pulse,' she said and closed the door.

Chapter 11: GLUM

Waking up in sweat from a dream about sinking into a lake of potato mash while huge cumberland sausages were jumping on his head trying to force him down, Sebastian fought himself into a seated position on the couch. It took him a moment to shake the disturbing, yet strangely appetizing dream. Checking his wrist to see the time, he saw that only about two hours had passed since he fell asleep. He also saw the most probable reason for him waking up, aside from food nightmares and indigestion, namely a message from Victoria informing him that she was happy with the progress so far and confirming a transfer of five thousand kilos to his account.

That was more than enough to cover his outstanding with Alice and keep him going for a few weeks. Bless the woman. So focused had he been on the money that he almost missed the last paragraph of her message where she asked him to attend Franz' wake the next day at noon at her house. A wake? How exceedingly dull. You stand around with a bunch of strangers, or even worse, relatives and either share at best vaguely humorous anecdotes about the deceased or comment on how well the widow/widower is coping. And apparently it's frowned upon to make jokes at the expense of the deceased, or describe in detail various sordid chapters of his or her life as Sebastian had found out on numerous occasions. Wake. What a weird thing to call it too since the very definition of the word means to cease sleeping. Maybe the name should be seen as a stern reminder not to doze off during the proceedings. At least it would give him a chance to question some of the people who knew Franz, even if he'd have to be more subtle than his usual self. No knock-knock jokes then³¹.

He'd better get some more sleep then if he was expected to stay awake through that, Sebastian thought and got up to remove his coat so he could resume slumbering in a

31. Knock-knock. Who's there? Beau. Beau who? Aw don't cry, you'll find someone else.

marginally more dignified manner. Having arranged the coat in a haphazard pile on the armchair he dove back into the warm, soft, and let's be honest, pungent embrace of the couch with a sigh of contentment. His stomach was still giving the occasional indignant twinge but it was nothing compared to before and everything should be back to normal in time for breakfast. Mmmmm, breakfast.

He heard the outer door open, followed by some muffled conversation. Please, no. Please, please, please...

'Sir?' the intercom crackled.

'Excuse me Sir?' Gladys persisted.

For crying out loud, not a moments peace. Sebastian got up, started towards the desk, hit his shin on the small coffee table, cursingly drew said coffee table's lineage into question, hobbled all the way to the desk and pressed the intercom.

'YES?' he shouted, not entirely managing to mask his irritation.

'I'm sorry to interrupt Sir, but there are some men here to see you.'

'Men? What men? Can you be more specific please, I'm a busy man,' he needlessly stated.

'They won't say Sir, they just insist upon seeing you, claiming that they have important information concerning Franz Jaeger. Do you want me to send them away?'

Sebastian cursed, he'd have to see them now. Wouldn't do to send away people who could help the case. On the other hand, they could be muscle from Tinycorp, sent over to intimidate him, or worse. He'd better take his precautions and give Gladys the secret code.

'Send them in Gladys. Oh and please, send in some coffee...*extra strong*,' he added with a subtlety worthy of sumo wrestler at a buffet.

'Will do Sir, *wink wink*,' she replied, actually saying the words "wink wink".

Letting out a small sigh Sebastian reminded himself to have yet another refresher conversation with Gladys concerning subterfuge.

He turned around and sat down on his desk, facing the door as it opened. Through it came three or four men. That might seem like an odd observation as one should be able to

perform a more accurate count when the number was in the single digits, but the fact of the matter was that looking at them you were sure that there were more than three and yet four seemed like too high a number. Sebastian decided to focus on each person in turn to work his way through an exact count.

The first one through the door was impossible to describe. He had no distinguishing features whatsoever. He was a police artists worst nightmare, as the answer to any question about his appearance would be: Ordinary. In fact, he was the reason the tiny group was hard to count as he was clearly there, but was so plain and boring that you could easily miss him if you didn't know he was there.

The next person was exactly the opposite. He had to stoop slightly to get through the door and Sebastian got the impression that if he hadn't twisted his upper body slightly as he entered, he would have ripped the sides of the door off. In a word, he was massive. You could alter you physiology quite substantially in this day and age, but his size you had to be born with. As for his face, it matched the rest of him, with a large square jaw, a brow like a granite outcropping and crew-cut hair making look like a larger-than-life-sized action figure.

After these two extremes it was almost a comfort to see two fairly normal-looking people enter. The first one with shoulder-length, black, lank hair and brown mocking eyes and the last one with a blonde ponytail, nervous eyes darting back and forth and for some reason wearing thin, black gloves.

Apart from the gloved one they all wore fairly standard clothes, especially the first one.

A few moments had passed in silence as Sebastian had been appraising them, and they were the first ones to break the silence³².

'We're GLUM,' the plain one said.

Sebastian thought that to be an odd conversation opener, but decided that the best course of action when faced with something confusing was to go on the offensive.

32. No, not with words like violence.

'Well I can see you're not the bloody Chuckle Brothers, but who are you?' he threw back.

It was now the visitor's turn to be confused and he didn't manage to hide it.

'Ehh..what? I just...I just told you? We're GLUM!' he restated.

The big guy sighed and half-whispered to the speaker: 'I told you it was a stupid acronym...'

He turned back towards Sebastian and said out loud: 'It's an acronym, GLUM, Gentleman's League of Unusual Mutants,' he half sighed.

'Ooooooaaaaay,' Sebastian said slowly. 'So you're muties³³? What's so unusual about you?' he asked against his better judgement.

Before anyone else could answer, the guy with the ponytail took a half-step forward, struck a dramatic pose with his right hand and index finger semi-erect.

'Wherever there is injustice, you will find us. Wherever there is suffering, we'll be there. Wherever liberty is threatened, you will find...GLUM!' he recited enthusiastically.

His three companions looked extremely uncomfortable and exasperated at this outburst but refrained from turning on their compatriot.

'I think you'll find the three, or in this case four, amigos there my friend,' Sebastian chided him, secretly impressed that someone else had seen that classic movie. 'But let me *try* and get this straight. You're some kind of...of super hero outfit?'

They all continued to look a bit uncomfortable except for the one in the pose who started nodding vigorously while grinning like an idiot.

33. Due to the systematic abuse of the planets' ecosystem and the destruction of the natural barriers protecting humanity from harmful radiation, the last few hundred years had seen more and more occurrences of random mutations in humans. These mutations, unlike what comic books would lead you to believe, were almost never beneficial.

'I'm sorry but, no offence, none of you, maybe except for Gargantua here,' he pointed at the big guy, 'look particularly super to me. Exactly what powers are we talking about?' he inquired, curiosity actually getting the better of him.

Mr. Anonymous, who appeared to be the leader grabbed this opportunity to reassert his status and said: 'I'm The Unseen Man, and I have the power to avoid being seen by people. Apart from that I also have excellent organisational skills and I'm the leader of the group,' he added hastily.

'What, like The Invisible Man?' Sebastian asked.

'Ehh...no, not really. I can't turn invisible per se, but when I concentrate I can make people not see me.'

Sebastian was confused.

'I think a demonstration would help me understand this better,' he said.

'It doesn't work like that. It won't work if you're actively looking for me.'

'So, you can't go invisible, but if people aren't looking for you they won't see you. Is that a correct summation of your powers?'

'Right.'

'Right,' Sebastian echoed.

'And what about you big guy, are you only big and muscular in the early evening or what?' he turned his gaze on action man.

Big guy grinned and replied: 'Nope, all me all the time. I'm called Mr. Big by the way.'

'Not high on originality but it cuts through the bullshit I guess,' Sebastian nodded. 'Any interesting downsides or weaknesses?' he said shooting a quick glance in the direction of Captain Transparency.

Mr. Big immediately looked nervous. 'Ehh, no. Why do you ask?'

'No reason,' Sebastian quickly replied with a smug smile. 'And what's *your* stage name?' he asked the dark haired young man with the playful eyes.

'I'm The Confounder,' he answered softly. 'I confound people with logical traps, circular arguments, idiosyncratic statements and superior powers of reasoning.'

'That's hardly a mutational power though is it,' Sebastian challenged him. 'Anybody with a decent upbringing, education and brains could do that.'

'Not the way I do it.'

'And how is the way you do it special if I may ask?'

'It just is.'

'Come on, give me an example or a demonstration or something.'

'Ok, I will.'

A few moments passed.

'Well?' Sebastian urged.

'Well what?'

'Were you going to give me a demonstration or not?'

'Yes.'

'Then do it.'

'I am.'

'I beg to differ, but you're doing fuck all at the moment.'

'Am not.'

'Am too.'

'Look, this is just stupid,' Sebastian said dismissively.

'Look, this is just stupid,' the youth repeated in exactly the same tone of voice, an annoying little smile around the corners of his mouth.

'Oh you're repeating what I say now, real mature.'

'Oh you're repeating what I say now, real mature.'

'Is this what you call superior powers of reasoning?'

'Is this what you call superior powers of reasoning?'

The inflection was an exact copy.

'Right, I'm not playing this retarded game any more.'

The Confounder made a crybaby face and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and said sulkily: 'I'm not playing this retarded game any more. Boo hoo, boo hoo.'

He was starting to get on Sebastian's nerves.

'Stop it.'

'Stoop eieieiit, boo hoo,' he replied, still pulling a face.

'I'm warning you!' Sebastian shouted, his vision starting to assume a red tinge.

'Ohhh, I'm soooooo scared, boo hoo,' was the mocking reply.

Sebastian leapt at him, hands stretched out, aiming for his neck, but was intercepted at the last moment by Mr. Big who held him in a vice-like grip without any apparent effort.

'Lemme go! I'm going to wring his stupid fucking neck, the little bastard,' Sebastian spat while fighting uselessly to get free.

'Relax please Mr. Poe,' Mr. Big said, 'he was just giving you a demonstration, don't you see?'

Sebastian fought on for a few more seconds before the words sunk in and the red haze started receding. At that moment Gladys opened the door and stuck her head in.

'Everything all right Sir?' she asked.

'Yes...yes, fine Gladys,' he replied, indicating to his captor that he was ok now and could be trusted to not attack anyone if he was let go. And so he was. Gladys retreated again.

His shirt had come undone in the scuffle and he spent a few moments sorting himself out before returning to his initial position on the desk.

'Very good, very good,' he said with a forced smile. 'I get it. Not sure where that particular ability would come in handy, but a very efficient demonstration none the less.

'That leaves us with you then,' he nodded in the direction of the last GLUM member with the ponytail and gloves. 'What do *you* do?'

'Give me something from your desk please, something that you don't mind losing,' was the reply.

Sebastian looked behind him and immediately found an empty pizza box which he handed over. The gloved man put it under his left arm and made a big show of slowly removing the glove on his right hand. Sebastian had half-expected to see something horrible or glowing, but all he saw was an ordinary hand. With his left hand he now grabbed the pizza

box and gently touched it with the index finger of his right. Again, Sebastian had, maybe naively, expected something more than nothing to happen, but as far as he could see nothing had indeed happened.

'Is that it? What did you do?'

'Smell it,' the man said and held it out toward Sebastian, who obliged and cautiously sniffed it. It smelled like bacon and he said so.

'Exactly!' the now partially gloved man exclaimed.

Complete silence for about five seconds before Sebastian spoke.

'It's a fucking pizza box, of course it smells like bacon! What are you, mental?' he almost screamed.

'Ok, ok, bad example,' he replied apologetically. 'Give me something else then.'

Sebastian's head was starting to hurt, this was just surreal. He decided to see it through though and handed over a used ozone stick from his desk.

The gloved avenger went through the same ritual again and handed it back with the words: 'Smell it.'

He did. Bacon again. Unbelievable.

'Are you telling me that your power is to make things smell like bacon?' Sebastian asked in exasperation.

'Yes!' he beamed proudly. And my name is...'

'Bacon Boy!' they both said in unison, although with markedly different levels of enthusiasm.

'That's it, get out, all of you,' Sebastian said brusquely. 'I've had enough for one day.'

He started waving his arms as if to herd them out the door like a flock of chickens.

'Wait, wait, you have to listen to us, we can help you!' the nigh-invisible man insisted with urgency.

'If I ever find myself in a situation where I need to annoy some vegetarians you'll be my first port of call, I promise you that,' Sebastian said while continuing to wave his arms about.

'No but, but we can help you with the Jaeger murder, we saw it happen!'

Sebastian froze in place. Shit, that's right, with all the stupid bloody mutie nonsense he'd completely forgotten the reason he'd let them in in the first place; their claim to be able to help him on the case. He didn't want to appear too eager though, better to maintain a superior position with nutters. He leaned back unto the desk again and crossed his legs and arms.

'Fine, and what is it you think you saw?' he asked indulgently.

Professor Bland told him where they all worked and took him through an explanatory conversation very similar to the one which had happened amongst themselves in the company canteen earlier, including furtive glances over his shoulders and hushed tones. When he'd finished they all looked at him expectantly.'

'That's a very interesting story I must say,' Sebastian said calmly. 'Why have you come to me with this? Aren't you afraid of what Tinycorp would do if they found out you were blabbing to the enemy?'

At this Bacon Boy took a half-step forward again, assumed The Pose and started reciting: 'Wherever there is injustice, you will...,'

'Yes, yes, yes, you're noble heroes in shining armour, I get it,' Sebastian interrupted before nausea set in. 'Do you actually have any proof of this? Security recordings? Anything?'

They all looked at The Confounder who shuffled his feet slightly and said: 'No. I tried looking through the security logs, but I don't have access to those labs at all. I did manage to access the hallway in front of it though, and there is nothing on there. Not even footage of John, sorry, The Unseen Man being in the hallway. They must have wiped it after the fact to cover their tracks.'

At this The Unseen Man's faced turned deathly pale. 'They...they wiped it?' he stammered. 'But...but that means th...that they've seen me on the recording! I'm fucked!'

'Relax, they didn't see you then so they probably didn't see you on the recording either as they weren't looking for you,' The Confounder tried to calm him.

'But what if they did? What if they did?!' he insisted in a panic-ridden voice.

'Well,' interjected Sebastian, 'if they did you'd probably be dead already, but returning to more important matters, if you don't have any evidence and you can't get access to where the evidence is, then what good are you to me? Hmm? Because unless Mr. Big has two twin brothers with a penchant for murder I don't really see how you can help me.'

They all looked at him in confusion.

'Twin brothers...?' Mr. Big mouthed softly and looked pensive. 'Do you mean Nut & Bolt?'

The focus of confused looks, now including Sebastian's, shifted towards Mr. Big.

'Nut & Bolt?' Sebastian repeated.

'Yeah. They're these top executive security guys at Tinycorp who come and go at all different times of the day and have full access to everything. They only answer to the CEO. Only the security staff knows about them and even we know very little as they're not on file. The other guys usually take the mick and call them my brothers whenever they come around, which is why I thought you might be talking about them. Identical twins, about seven feet tall, blonde, always wearing sunglasses? We call them Nut & Bolt as a Frankenstein reference because they look like they had a ton of work done.'

Sebastian's pulse rose.

'And would you happen to know their names and addresses?' he asked hopefully, already knowing the answer.

'Are you kidding? These guys are top-level corporate black-ops, they probably don't even have an ID-tag,' Mr. Big replied.

'Figures,' Sebastian muttered.

'I do have an idea where you might find out more though?' Mr. Big offered.

Sebastian raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

'Although they both had a lot of work done, you don't get to do what they do unless you have an incredible amount of mental discipline and body control, so chances are that they were BC members at some point. I can't be sure though.'

Body Cult, Sebastian thought. Basically body-builders who'd taken their addiction and turned it into a quasi-religion. Members lived and breathed optimization and perfection of muscle and would spend most of their lives in the gym. They didn't use anything artificial to assist their growth and had nothing but scorn for genetic treatments and implants. This meant that the twins were sure to not be members any more, but the lead was better than nothing.

'All right, I guess it could be worth checking out,' Sebastian agreed. 'Any other ideas?'

They collectively shuffled their feet and looked around at each other.

'I can keep trying to get access to the lab records and maybe have a snoop around to see what else I can find on the systems. I just have to be really careful,' The Confounder said.

'I'll look into physical access to the lab,' Mr. Big suggested. 'I don't know if we'll need it or if it's even possible, but it would be nice to have as a last resort. Also, I'll keep an eye out for the twins and see what they get up to.'

'And I'll...eh...coordinate,' The Unseen Man said weakly, doing his best to look like he was in control.

Bacon Boy didn't say anything but was still grinning. As hard as he thought about it Sebastian couldn't find anything useful to which the weirdo could apply his dubious skills, so he let it lie.

'Well if that's it, I suggest you all clear out now so I can get on with my work,' he concluded and once again stood up and started waving his arms in an attempt to herd them out the door. This time they didn't resist and slowly ambled out of his office, with Sebastian closing the door behind them.

What a bunch of freaks, he thought, leaning against the closed door. Bacon Boy? He really couldn't afford to be seen in public with these guys, but at least he now had some people on the inside and it was nice to get some backup for Victoria's story. He'd have to pay Body Cult a visit tomorrow morning. Now though, he deserved some rest, so he threw himself back down on the sofa and got on with his work.

A maximum of two minutes had passed when he heard the main door open again followed by muffled conversation. The conversation stopped and the door to Sebastian's office opened.

'Right! That's it! What part of no more visitors didn't you understand Gladys?' he all but screamed while fighting to extricate himself from the pillowy death-trap. Finally getting up he aimed an angry stare at the door only to find a tall hairy man wearing a red dress, black hardwood-destroying stilettos and a matching black purse. It went very well with his beard.

'Oh, Alice, didn't see you there, please come in,' Sebastian one-eightied in a split-second. 'Can I offer you something? Coffee? Rent?'

'Rent would be nice Poe, are you telling me you have it this time?' he asked in his slow, deliberate way.

'Of course I do! I promised didn't I?'

'That you did, that you did..., ' he agreed.

'Let me transfer it to you straight away. Three mil is it³⁴?' he raised his wrist and right hand to tap the transfer out, was confronted with the state of his right hand and sighed. Before he had time to give the verbal order, Alice interrupted him.

'Plus hospital bills. Comes to four mil now.'

'But the hospital is free,' Sebastian protested, 'why should I pay for that?'

'Like I said, *plus hospital bills*, comes to four mil now..., ' he emphasized giving Sebastian a hard stare.

'Right, right, hospital bills, of course,' Sebastian agreed, knowing full well that he was in fact getting off easy considering how it was partly his fault that The Weasel had had his bone-structure radically re-ordered. 'How is the little tyke by the way? Not in any pain I hope?'

34. 3000 kilos = 3 Mil, kilo also meaning thousand.

A more disingenuous question of concern hadn't been uttered since Hitler had phoned the Polish President in September 1939 asking him: 'You don't mind me and a few friends popping over later, do you?'

Alice didn't bite though and merely stated: 'He'll be fine.'

'Oh good, so glad to hear it, Sebastian replied, narrowly topping his previous statement in dis-ingenuity. 'Four mil it is then,' he confirmed and gave the verbal command to initiate the transfer. A few seconds later Alice's wrist emitted a beep, and upon inspection of it he started nodding slowly.

'Very nice Poe, I must say I am a bit surprised, but it's good to see you're being a bit more responsible with your financial matters.'

Sebastian didn't know whether to be offended that he was being patronized or to be proud of himself, but in his defence a ruthless six-foot transvestite did tend to throw your equilibrium out of balance a bit. In the end he went with an inane smile.

'I hope I won't have to come back next month Poe, you do realise that you can transfer the money to me without me being in the same room right?'

'Hahaha,' he laughed unnaturally, 'of course I do, and next month I'll do the transfer well ahead of time *just* to be sure.'

Alice gave him a long stare.

'Right then, I'll be off,' he stated and ambled out of the office with all the femininity of drunk welder.

Sebastian slumped back down into the sofa. Four bloody mil. That didn't leave much of the advance he'd received but he'd have to make do. Five minutes later he was fast asleep.

Lying in a hospital-bed with most of his body in a cast, Dweazil was not a happy man.

Fucking tweed-wearing psycho, he'd surprised him that was all. Who would have thought that a fucking servant could get the drop on him like that. It wouldn't happen again, that was for damn sure. And Poe...he would pay, oh yes sirree he would pay. This was all *his* fault, the smart-mouthed, window-peeping, widow-chasing cunt. As soon as he got out of

here he would pay him an unexpected visit, and then we'd see how many smart remarks he could make with no teeth and his bollocks in his mouth. Alice wouldn't like it but there was no reason for him to know. He'd just have to...

'Evening Mr. Diminutive!' came a cheery female voice. 'Time for your bath!' The nurse had entered the room without him noticing and was approaching him with a small bucket of water and a very abrasive-looking sponge.

'It's Diminotov, DIMINOTOV ya silly bint!' he spat. 'And you're not coming near me with that thing!'

'Now now Mr. Diminutive, quiet down and watch your language, you have to be cleaned when you can't do it yourself, it's regulations,' she chided him with a stern face.

'I don't fucking care, do I?! Just stay the fuck away from me!'

She put down the bucket and sponge and stuck her hands in her sides while staring at him.

'Now you listen here you little twerp. I only have one sponge and I need to wash all of you. I can either start at the top or at the bottom, it's up to you. Will you play nice?'

Dweazil gave his answer a thorough half-second of deliberation before answering.

'Stick it up ya arse ya cow!' he hissed.

'Fine, have it your way, bottoms up!' she said cheerfully as she loomed over him, sponge in hand.

Outside the room in the corridor his screaming and cursing could clearly be heard: 'I'll get you for this Poe, I swear it, I'll mmmmmphhhhhmuuurphllll...'

Chapter 12: Some Bodies

She broke through the surface like a magnificent figurehead adorning the prow of a submerged ship, which had suddenly decided to resurface if for no other reason than to show

off. Rivulets of water streamed down her bronzed skin, caressing every curve like something wet caressing something curvy.

Sebastian once again found himself fully clothed in an armchair on a paradise-perfect beach, watching spellbound as the aquatic vision stepped unto the sandy shore and slowly walked towards him. She looked exactly the same as before, the dream girl with the perfect face, hair and body.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she came to a full stop in front of him and knelt down, putting a hand on each of his knees. Looking him deeply in the eyes she pushed his knees apart, slowly moving her head toward his crotch...

Sebastian closed his eyes and thought: 'Yes, yes, thank you, thank you!'

She then opened her mouth and clamped her teeth down on his inner thigh, making him scream instantly.

When he opened his eyes the beach was gone and instead he was confronted with Gladys holding an empty tray slightly askew, and looking down he immediately saw the reason for his rather sudden awakening: An empty cup and a steaming wet patch on the front of his trousers. The visual confirmation did nothing to alleviate his pain, quite the contrary as a matter of fact, and so he continued screaming.

'Aaaaaaarrrrghh! What the hell! Ow ow ow ow ow ow!!!'

Sebastian jumped out of the sofa and tried his best to pull the hot, wet fabric away from his skin on both legs simultaneously, using only his one good hand. This resulted in him looking like a man who had made a wager that he could pluck two chickens at the same time with one arm tied behind his back.

'I'm so, so sorry Sir, oh my gosh, are you alright?' Gladys squeaked with genuine concern.

'Am I alright?! Am I alright?! Does it look like I'm alright?!' Sebastian screamed hysterically.

'No Sir, it doesn't, but my programming tells me that this particular nonsensical platitude is appropriate in the situation. Is it not so?'

In the meantime the trousers had cooled sufficiently to not cause agonizing pain and were now merely insufferably hot. Sebastian didn't have a clever reply so he just settled for glowering at her, which seemed like a weirdly unsatisfactory thing to do when your subject didn't have a face, but he persisted nonetheless.

'Well don't just stand there, get me some dry trousers,' he snapped.

'You mean "the other pair" Sir?'

'Whatever, as long as they're dry.'

'You are aware that they have a rather large stain on them aren't you?'

'They do?'

'Yes, ever since your... accident involving a certain bodily function.'

Sebastian looked puzzled for a moment before remembering. 'Oh yes, that. Well just get me another pair then.'

'You only have two pairs Sir, when I last spoke to you about it you deemed more than two pairs a needless extravagance. Even persuading you to have more than one was an uphill struggle to be honest. I believe your exact words were: "I've only got one set of legs, what would I want with more than one pair?" Sir.

'Ok, fine, but why didn't you have the other pair cleaned then?'

'I did, but they couldn't get the stain out. Apparently the... matter, had bonded violently with the material in a way the dry-cleaner had never seen before, making it impossible to remove without destroying the fabric.'

'Why didn't tell me this and get a new pair then?'

'At this point I'd like to refer to my earlier recitation of our conversation on the topic Sir...'

Sebastian sighed.

'Very well. What do I do now though? I can't go out like this!'

'You should be fine in the other pair as long as you don't remove your trench coat. If you do, you might want to have an explanation handy involving chocolate and sitting on it for an extensive period,' she said without a trace of sarcasm.

Two minutes later Sebastian and Halfie entered Hong's, Sebastian failing miserably to keep the front of his trousers from clinging to his crotch. Ok, yes, so it looked like he'd pissed himself, but there are worse things it could look like, and the extremely unpleasant sensation it was to have your genitals soaked in coffee would pass in time.

As usual the food bar wasn't busy even though it was actual breakfast time for normal people. Sebastian checked his wrist again, not believing that he was actually up at this ungodly hour. Only workaholics and weirdos were up at 8am, surely. He surveyed the other customers, mostly consisting of stressed-looking suits queuing up for their java fix with an optional side of pastry indulgence. Amateurs. They probably started the day with an instameal or something equally unappetizing like yoghurt or muesli, or both! How could you live on that? Sure, you might not feel "bloated" or have "digestive problems", but at what cost? Living out life only tasting bland food that was good for you? Never enjoying the succulence of a greasy banger, the charcoal splendour of bacon burned to a crisp and the sweet and salty explosion of taste that was baked beans? No thanks, not this guy. Re-affirmed in his culinary life-choice Sebastian tried to get the attention of Will who was busy serving (regular pace) coffees. Will spotted him straight away and gave him a friendly nod. Then he did a half-turn towards the kitchen and shouted: 'Nyala, food order!'

Bugger. She wouldn't be too happy with him after last time when he skipped out on his bill yet again. She came out of the kitchen and spotted him immediately. He gave her a small wave and what he hoped was a charming smile. She didn't appear to be appeased by the gesture though and was looking very serious as she stamped over to the counter.

"Ello luv, moight ay saay 'ow luvlay you're lookin' this mornin'?" he attempted in what could only be described as the most complete butchering of the cockney accent since Dick van Dyke starred in Mary Poppins. Apparently Nyala didn't find it charming either.

'You've got a lot of nerve coming back in here after last time!' she said angrily.

'Oh come on, your food's not *that* bad, and besides, I like to live dangerously,' he replied with a wink, opting for ill-advised smart-arsedness.

She reached over the counter and grabbed him by the lapels of his coat, pulling him halfway over the counter; a move which belied her short and willowy stature.

'Listen buddy, nobody, and I mean *nobody* makes a fool of me, and until you've paid your bill in full you will not be getting so much as one sip of coffee or one baked bean! You understand?!' she hissed, her face now mere inches away from his.

With a small poof, two tiny figures appeared on Sebastian's shoulders, one on each. Now traditionally one of these would be wearing angelic garb and be carrying a harp and the other be equipped with horns and a pitchfork, but as Sebastian's world view didn't revolve around moral decisions, his shoulder people consisted of witty macho man on one side and a socially competent human being on the other. Macho man said: 'Go on, kiss her! She'll love it, the dirty cow,' while Normal man just turned pale and shook his head wide-eyed with shock. Sebastian was about to pucker up when some deep instinct of self-preservation kicked in and he found himself saying these words instead: 'Loud and clear Nyala, loud and clear. I'm sorry.'

Macho man gave him a look of contempt, made a rude gesture and vanished. Normal man wiped his brow with relief and also disappeared.

Nyala didn't let go straight away but continued to give him the full brunt of her withering stare for a few seconds before suddenly letting go. She put her fists at her waist, giving her the appearance of a small angry teapot.

'Right, let's have it then. Now!' she yelled.

'Easy, easy, take it easy Nyala, I said yes didn't I?'

Sebastian made a big show of tapping out the transfer on his wrist with the crippled hand, even adding such gentle touches as wincing occasionally to give the impression that he was only managing by suppressing large amounts of pain. With a final awkward press he announced: 'There. Done.'

Nyala immediately checked her wrist and only had to wait a second before the transfer appeared. She looked back up at Sebastian.

'All of it. Not just this month, I want all of it.'

'All of it?! Are you mad? That's a bloody fortune!'

'Yeah, tell me about it. All...of...it. Now.'

Sebastian gave her a pleading look, but nothing could assuage that cold, hard stare.

'Fine. You're taking me for everything I've got here, but if you can live with that, then sure, I'll give it to you,' he said raising his wrist again but pausing his hand over the display, hoping against hope that she'd stop him at the last second. No change of mind was forthcoming though and with a deep sigh he went through the motions again. Even though it was a lost battle he still put in the occasional wince and air sucked in through clenched teeth before completing the task.

Nyala checked her wrist again and gave a slight nod, apparently satisfied that everything had now been paid. She then looked up and gave Sebastian a big, bright smile.

'Right then, what can I get you? Let me guess, a full english and a large coffee strong enough keep you awake for the remainder of the year?'

She didn't wait for a reply but just continued smiling and said: 'Coming right up!' before turning around and going into the kitchen.

'That woman has issues,' Sebastian thought to himself.

He hadn't been telling the exact truth but the bill had made a rather huge dent in his rapidly decreasing cash holdings and he wouldn't be able to stretch what was left for very long. Actually, it would be best if he could wrap up the case in a few days and then get paid the total sum Victoria had promised him. Then he'd take a much deserved vacation, maybe a sandy beach somewhere. Just him, a sun lounger and an endless streams of cocktails. Oh yeah.

He was pulled out of his reverie by Nyala slamming a heavily laden tray-sized plate in front of him.

'Bon appetit!' she grinned eerily, at least in Sebastian's opinion. It did nothing to lessen his appetite though and he immediately dug in, only coming up for air occasionally.

Five minutes later as his stomach and lower intestines were embroiled in intense negotiations concerning working conditions and evacuation procedures, Sebastian was

contentedly sipping the last half of his industrial strength coffee, mulling over the agenda for today. The wake was just after midday and he'd have to go to that. It might even be interesting to see who showed up and it would give him a chance to check out Franz' home computers, which he needed to do anyway. Until then, the only real lead he had was the one on the peroxide twins and the possible link to the Body Cult. It was a bit of a long shot, but all he had at this point.

Draining the cup and wiping his face and hands he got up, and with a quick glance to check that the dragoness wasn't around, he quick-stepped out of the shop, closely followed by Halfie. She might have made him pay all he owed, but he'd be damned if he'd leave there without owing *something*.

The Body Cult were very serious about their beliefs and they also believed strongly in symbolism. As a result they didn't have any branches or offices, but just one massive building situated in East London. That building housed what few administrative functions they needed and the rest was filled with exercise machines and free weights; over 40 floors of them. Members needed to go here if they wanted to be taken seriously. After all, what good was it being extremely fit and muscular if you couldn't show it off to as many people as possible.

As with most other buildings the top few floors were a parking garage and Sebastian had no trouble finding a vacant spot, although the landing was still a bit difficult with just the one hand. Walking into the reception he was yelled at by a huge guy in an ill-fitting uniform: 'Hold it, hold it, hold it!'

Sebastian did so.

'No animals allowed in here buddy,' he said nodding his head at Halfie who was sitting next to him.

'He's not an animal, he's artificial, check out his shiny metal posterior, that's the main clue.'

He gave Halfie another look.

'No synthetics or implants allowed either.'

'What? Why?'

'We believe only in flesh and the perfection thereof. The taint of artifice must be avoided at all cost,' he recited in a manner which indicated that words like "thereof", "taint" and "artifice" were not part of his active vocabulary.

'But he's a dog, surely those rules just apply to members or at least humans?'

'Them's the rules, I don't make 'em. He can't come in,' he stated with finality.

Normally Sebastian would lay into him with cleverly disguised sarcasm and intellectual arguments, but first of all it would probably be wasted on him, and secondly it might not be a good idea to anger someone who looked like he could fold you many times over.

'Fine. Halfie, go wait in the car.'

Halfie cocked his head to one side as if to ask if he was sure. When no contradictory order was forthcoming he seemed to decide that Sebastian was serious and he got up and padded out of the reception towards the parking garage.

'Reception's over there,' the hulk pointed a hand like a baseball glove towards what was unmistakably the reception.

Sebastian gave him a dry smile and went in the indicated direction. Behind the counter stood a perfectly tanned and toned perky-looking young woman in a tight-fitting track-suit; her obligatory³⁵ ponytail sticking out the back of a baseball cap emblazoned with the Body Cult logo³⁶. She seemed so full of energy that standing still appeared to be a chore, and she was actually bouncing up and down slightly as Sebastian approached her.

'Hi there! What can I do you for?' she bubbled in an American accent. Sebastian noticed that she didn't have a wrist. They took the whole implant business quite serious in this place.

'I need some information on a member of yours, it's for an investigation.'

35. All tanned and toned perky young female gym instructors have ponytails. It's a well known fact.

36. A stylised curled biceps on top of a brain, paying tribute to the idiom: "Matter Over Mind".

'Oh! Are you from the police? Coz you don't look like police? They're like, a lot more, you know, uniformy? You know?'

'No, no I'm not from the police, I'm a private investigator and I'm working on a murder case, so it's very, very important that I speak to someone who can access member information for me.'

'No way! A murder case? That's like, so awesome? Is it someone famous? Like someone on the screens? How did he die? Is it even a guy? Coz you know, it could also be like, a girl?'

Sebastian's head was starting to hurt from the barrage of unintended rhetorical questions.

'No one famous I'm afraid, just a boring old scientist.'

'Oh,'

She looked very disappointed.

'Well I can't give you any information on members anyway? Coz it's like, classified or something? You know?'

'I know, so can you direct me to someone who might be able to help me, like your manager for instance, or even better, the head guy around here whoever he may be?'

'Oh you can't see the head, you have to make an appointment for that, but I'll see if maybe the neck has time or one of the pecs?'

Sebastian gave her a long cold stare.

'Are you trying to be funny little miss?' he inquired acidly.

'Huh? Like, what do you mean?'

The vacant stare and open-mouthed non-stop chewing of her gum convinced him that she was in fact not trying to be funny, which could only mean one thing.

'Are you telling me that the management in this place has an organisational structure where the individual positions in the hierarchy are named after pieces of anatomy?'

'Huh?'

Sebastian sighed.

'Are your bosses named after body parts?'

Her face lighted up. 'Yeah! Cool huh?'

'Yes, very clever indeed. Now I don't really care if I talk to a tendon, a femur, an artery or even a complete rectum, I just need to talk to *someone* who can authorise access to information about two members of yours. Can..you..help...me?'

She looked momentarily stunned by the heavy processing involved in deciphering the first part of his sentence, but the two halves of her brain appeared to just look at each other, shrug and skip it to better focus on the latter half.

'Lemme check, hold please?'

She tapped away on her terminal for a while before looking up again and declaring: 'Latissimus Dorsi is working out on the 14th floor by the freeweights, he's agreed to speak with you for five minutes while he gets his electrolytes? You can change on the floor below here?'

'Change?'

'Yeah, you're not allowed on the workout floors in normal clothes? It's like, against our rules or something?'

'You're shitting me. I'm not here to work out, I just need to talk to this guy for five minutes, that's it.'

'I'm *really* sorry, nothing I can do, they told me like, no exceptions?' she said, looking about as grief-stricken as someone who'd just put his pants on the wrong way and now had to go through *all* the trouble of taking them off and on again.

'And what am I supposed to wear? It's not like I brought gym clothes with me!'

'Oh that's fine, there's stuff down there you can borrow? Just ask around, people are really friendly!' she exclaimed with a big smile.

Sebastian hesitated for a moment, weighing up the personal indignity of wearing gym clothes against the information he might get out of it. It was a tough call, but desperate times and all that, he had nothing else to go on. He needed this. Making his decision he said: 'Fine!' and strode angrily towards the lift, passing under a big shiny archway on the way. The

archway had a round light right at the apex which turned green as he came out from under it. Taking the lift down one floor, he stepped straight into a giant changing room full of muscle-bound people wandering around in various stages of undress. The whole level seemed to be organised into colour-coded islands, each consisting of a large amount of lockers encircling a central shower area.

Unsure where to go, he decided to follow the advice of the receptionist and ask somebody, picking a passer by who was mostly dressed and didn't look too intimidating.

'Excuse me, could you tell me where I can borrow some gym clothes?'

The man stopped and gave Sebastian a puzzled look.

'You didn't bring your own?'

'Apparently not.'

'Oh. Well you can get some down there in the yellow zone, there's a dispenser.'

He indicated in the direction behind Sebastian.

'Might find it hard to get something in your size though,' he offered with an evaluating elevator look, making Sebastian feeling a bit uncomfortable.

'It's a dispenser isn't it? It's on demand so it should be able to give me any size.'

'Yeah I guess, but even technology has its limits doesn't it?' he grinned.

Sebastian didn't know whether to be offended or agree with him wholeheartedly, so he settled for a non-committal grunt and a nod and wandered off.

He had to go to the furthest corner before he found the elusive dispenser, and it was obvious by its placement in the corner of shame, that no self-respecting member would stoop so low as to use it. Sebastian walked up to it and pressed the large glowing button on the front panel, which was the only interactive element adorning the front of the black cube measuring about 2 meters on all sides.

'Welcome to the Clothes Dispensermatic 27B/6, brought to you by Tinycorp,' droned a disembodied voice. 'How may I help you?'

Them again.

'Gym clothes,' Sebastian said.

'And what fit and colour would you like you swim clothes in?'

'What? No, *gym* clothes, not swim clothes.'

'Come again?'

'Gym clothes.'

'Come again?'

'Gym clothes!'

'Come again?'

'Gym!!! Clothes!!!'

'Come again?'

'Now you listen to me you malfunctioning piece of crap, give me some SODDING GYM CLOTHES!!!'

'And what fit would you like for you hot pink swim clothes?'

'Aaarrgh! FUCK!'

'Thank you, one pair of snug, hot pink swimming trunks coming up.'

After a few seconds of whirring noises a small aperture opened next to the large button and a tiny piece of fluorescent material shot out of it, hitting Sebastian in the face, where it proceeded to dangle from the brim of his hat. It was indeed a very small pair of stretchy, hot pink swimming trunks. Tanga model.

'You know what? Fuck it, it's not like I care what these morons think of me anyway,' Sebastian thought, grabbing the offensive garment and walking back where he came from to find a free locker.

Leaving the changing floor and taking the lift down to the 14th, he was getting a lot of odd looks. This only got more pronounced as he strode into the massive free-weights area, navigating around sweaty, grunting men of all sizes. He'd grabbed a complimentary towel on the way in the hope that people might think he was indeed on the way to the pool but had just gotten momentarily lost, but nothing could distract from the fact that the only article of clothing he was wearing was a pair of very tight and very pink swimming trunks. An Italian

super-model would have had second thoughts about trying to pull off this look, and Sebastian, with his many years of neglecting physical exercise, proper nutrition and natural sunlight did not make a formidable figure. Whereas most of the people here were built like brick shit-houses, he was built more like a shit shed, and as he wasn't so inclined he couldn't hide behind gay pride, resulting in a case of straight embarrassment. Luckily anyone unfortunate enough to bear witness to this ocular atrocity were so dumbstruck they didn't have time to jeer or make comments.

On the way down in the lift he'd requested a path to the Latissimus Dorsi from the building AI and he was now following a trail of glowing footprints on the floor, hopefully leading him to his destination. With his luck it would probably lead him to a podium in a fashion show, or maybe mercifully to a sheer drop.

The footprints stopped right in front of a man who was a head shorter than Sebastian, but at least twice as wide. If you'd been a rush to get past him you'd be hard pressed to make a decision to go around him or over him. Like most people here he was tanned and very muscular, wearing tight-fitting (not as tight as the swimming trunks, as that would be defying the laws of physics) knee-length shorts and a tank top. The tank top was so small and stringy that it could best be described as an inverse bra, i.e. it covered everything except the breasts. Sorry, *pecs*. He was drinking from a green canister and observing him closely as he approached, incredulity written on his sweat-dripping face. Sebastian decided to pretend everything was normal. Hell, that strategy had gotten him through most of his childhood so it was tried and true.

'Mr. Dorsi I presume?' he smiled and stuck out his hand, before instantly remembering the condition of it and thrusting out his left instead.

The man in question looked down at the hand and then back up at Sebastian's smiling face, before putting his own left hand forward and saying: 'Call me Lat,' as if in a trance.

'Very, very pleased to meet you,' Sebastian enthused while struggling to save his left hand from suffering a similar fate to its sibling, disappearing as it had into a vice-like ham of

a hand. Thankfully it was also slick with sweat and he managed to retract it without any embarrassment.

'That's uh, that's an interesting choice of outfit you've got on there.'

'Isn't it just?'

Refusing to be fazed he didn't miss a beat.

'I was told by your lovely receptionist that you were the guy to talk to about members?'

'I'm sorry, but she wasn't very clear on what this was about, just something about a murder?'

'Yes, I'm investigating a murder and one of my leads has lead me here. It's imperative that I speak to two of your former members as soon as possible, and I was hoping that you could help me with their contact details.'

'So you're police?'

'Not exactly no, I'm a private investigator, working on behalf of the widow.' It never hurt to throw that word in there for sympathy. It didn't appear to have the desired effect though as Lat put down his drink and went over to the long row of dumbbells, picking up one which looked to weigh at least 40 kilos. When he next spoke it was with his back turned.

'I'm afraid I can't help you Mr. Poe, all our member details are confidential, and if you're not from the police there is no way I can give you that kind of information. I'm sure you understand.'

He lumbered over to a nearby bench with an upright back and sat down.

'Pass me the other one?' he gestured at another dumbbell similar to the one he just picked up. Sebastian eyed up the massive lump of metal.

'I'm sorry, but I make it a point never to lift anything that's intentionally heavy.'

Lat gave him an odd look before putting down the dumbbell he was holding and waddling over to the rack to retrieve it himself.

'Are you sure there's no way I can persuade you?' Sebastian said, raising his wrist suggestively.

Lat chuckled.

'Your money won't do you any good here. You forget who you're talking to. We're very serious about our calling and even more serious when it comes to looking out for our own, so don't insult me with money mate, I think it's time for you to leave.'

'Fair enough, fair enough, I apologise. I guess I should have known better than to try to get this information from you.'

'Damn straight,' Lat answered with a serious nod of the head.

'I'm just surprised that you'd feel so protective about two guys who've had more work done than the London Underground, as I thought that might have gone against everything you hold dear, but I was clearly wrong. I'll trouble you no more.'

Sebastian turned around and started walking away.

'Wait!' Lat yelled.

'Gotcha,' Sebastian thought and turned around slowly.

'What did you just say?'

'Oh I just said that I didn't expect you to defend two people who so clearly have flaunted your core principles. But hey, to each his own.'

'Are you saying the guys you're looking for are...are...impure?' he said with such vehemence that he almost looked like he was choking.

'If that's your term for someone who, when they die, should not be cremated but rather re-smelted, than yes.'

Lat threw down the dumbbells with a huge crash and strode over to a nearby terminal.

'What are their names?' he barked.

'I don't know.'

'You don't know their names? Do you have pictures?'

'No, afraid not.'

'No names and no pictures. Do you realise how many members we have and have had? Even if I narrow it down to people who've been thrown out for impurity that's still thousands!'

'Oh I don't know, I guess I had the hope that you hadn't thrown out a lot of seven foot tall, blonde twins...'

Lat froze and a dark cloud went over his face.

'Them...', he growled.

'Oh you know them? Splendid!'

'I know them alright. Let me tell you about them. Those two motherfuckers came here for years and they were always two of the best performers around. Seven feet of muscle and willpower. Lots of the young kids idolised them. Then seemingly overnight they started outstripping everyone else, I mean it was scary what these guys could do. I bench almost 500 kilos, and they started doing 600, 650, 700, all over the duration of a few months.'

'Why didn't you check them for implants if you thought they were cheating?'

'We did! Didn't you see the big archway scanner in the reception? No artificial implant gets past that thing, and you don't get into the building without passing through there. Not a beep though, they were clean. Or so we thought. One day Denny, one of the older guys here, makes some snide remark about cheating, and Riggs flies into a rage, I mean he goes completely berserk. Tears the other guy apart. During the fight though his left arm gets a massive cut from a broken sheet of glass through which he'd just thrown Denny, and right there for everyone to see is shiny artificial cabling.'

Sebastian raised an eyebrow.

'I know, unbelievable eh? Needless to say there were so many witnesses that it was no use for them to try and cover it up, so they just left without a word and we never heard from those arseholes again.'

'And you never found out how they managed to cheat the system?'

'No,' Lat sighed looking concerned. 'We like to think that BC members are people of ideals and integrity and that the scanning we do is more symbolic than anything else, but the fact of the matter is that we had these...these *betrayers* in our midst for a long time without having any idea what they were doing, and if *they* could do it, other people could and probably will.'

'Actually, I wouldn't worry too much about that. Those guys are not your run-of-the-mill average gym-goers, trust me.'

Lat winced slightly at the term "gym-goer" which to him was probably the equivalent of describing a master sculptor as someone who likes to play with clay.

'What do you mean?'

'I can't tell you any details, but let's just say that if anyone would be capable of getting their hands on the most state of the art technology money can buy and a lot of stuff you *can't* buy, they would. They're extremely well connected in that department.'

'I see. I'll just have to take your word on that I guess,' Lat replied. From the way his eyes looked up and down Sebastian and the tiny crease appearing between his eyes, you could tell that he might be harbouring secret doubts concerning the validity of anything a pale, slightly flabby man in too-tight, pink trunks and a fedora had to say.

'Look, I know I look ridiculous but believe me, this wasn't my choice of clothing. It's a complicated and boring story, but if you give me that address I promise you that they'll get what's coming to them. I'll make sure of that,' Sebastian finished sincerely.

Lat looked him in the eyes for a few moments, turned around and went back to the nearby terminal where he started tapping away.

'You didn't get this information from me, understand?' he said with his back turned.

'Of course, mums the word.'

'I'm serious,' he said forcefully, turning around to face Sebastian again, with cold steel, or at least a similar sturdy non-precious metal, in his eyes. 'I hate those bastards, by Dick I do, but I can't have word getting around that we passed out information on members, even if it involved those pricks. Understand?'

'One hundred percent,' Sebastian affirmed with as much macho attitude as he could muster while wearing glowing pants.

'Good, as long as we're clear on that.' He half-turned back to the terminal and tapped it once, resulting in a beep from Sebastian's wrist one second later.

Checking it and seeing the much desired address, which was in North London, Holborn to be exact, Sebastian gave a satisfied nod and turned his attention back to Lat who'd already gone back to his bench to resume his arse-kicking of gravity.

'Great, well I think I'll be going then. I'm sure that if I get these trunks off within the next five minutes I'll be able restore enough circulation to save at least one leg.'

It was a wasted effort though as his reluctant host was already deep in concentration and didn't seem able or willing to acknowledge the world around him.

'How rude,' Sebastian thought, 'I'll be glad to see the back of this place. Actually, come to think of it I just have, at least the upper part of it.' He let out a small guffaw at his own wit, gathering a few (more) odd looks from the other people in the vicinity. Becoming increasingly self-conscious about his appearance and realising that his small joke about circulation wasn't actually that far from the truth, he decided to make haste to the changing room to slip into something infinitely more comfortable. Selecting the destination from the environment menu on his wrist, the glowing trail of footprints appeared on the floor in front of him once again, making it easy to find his locker in the labyrinthine changing room.

Ten minutes later he was back at the car with Halfie who was waiting patiently next to the car with what looked like a small corner of a licence plate sticking out of the side of his mouth. As if realising that Sebastian was staring at his mouth, Halfie flicked out his tongue and scooped the small piece of metal into his mouth. With a few crunchy chews it was gone and Halfie went back to looking expectantly at Sebastian.

'You're an odd dog, you know that don't you?'

Halfie cocked his head to the side as if he was mulling over the assertion of his master, barked once and started panting happily.

'But I love you, yes I dooo, I luvvy wuvvy youuuuu,' Sebastian said in baby-speak while scratching the curious canine vigorously behind the ears, much to the enjoyment of said canine. Hearing steps in the vicinity Sebastian immediately stopped his embarrassing behaviour and straightened up, looking around to survey the potential damage to his street cred. Luckily someone was just coming around the corner a second later, so no damage done.

They both got into the car and after taking off Sebastian put his right hand on Halfie and said: 'Well buddy, I hope Vicky throws a good party with lots of grub, because we'll have

to go straight there if we don't want to be late, and it won't do to bite the hand that feeds us eh? But you know all about that, don't you? Don't you? Yes you dooooo, yees you dooooo...'

Realising that he'd once again sauntered into the land of inane voices he cut himself short immediately and decided to concentrate on flying.

Chapter 13: Quite a Wake

Victoria's house was located a fair distance north of London, in a small village called Buntingford according to his wrist. Sebastian was rarely this far out from London, and flying on manual he would have been lost without the navigation program; a fact he didn't like to think too much about even if he'd long ago accepted the need to integrate at least some bits of technology into his life. Most people would look out the windows of their car and admire the rolling hills and green fields, contrasting it against the horrible urban jungle from whence they came. Not Sebastian. What could be more boring than living in the middle of this pollen-infested, no-man's land, waking up every day to random animal noises only to have the experience completed by the smell of bovine digestive gases the moment you stuck your head out the window. No thanks, give me the vibrant city life with all its possibilities, ups, downs, heartbreaks and exhilarating experiences any day. Yes it could be dirty and dangerous, but at least you were never more than two minutes away from a great coffee made by someone else.

A subtle beep informed him that he was getting close to his destination and he started looking around for the house indicated on his wrist. All he could see was a giant mansion and no other buildings in the vicinity, and it took him a few moments to realise that the mansion was in fact where he was going. He whistled appreciatively while starting to look around for a good place to land.

'Good daaay to you Siiir,' came an incredibly posh voice from his car speakers.

'Welcome to Jaeger House Mr. Pooooe, you've been expected. I can see that you prefer to handle your vehicle yourself, so please park anywhere you like within the marked parking zone.'

Sebastian was impressed, this was the first time he'd experienced a building AI exhibit actual intelligence.

'Hang on, how do you know who I am when I'm on manual?' he asked after coming to the realisation.

'You license plate Siiir,' came the dry reply.

Oh, right. Low tech was still used once in a while then.

The parking zone was clearly visible from the air and consisted of a semi-circle in front of the house, with the front entrance as the center. More than twenty hover cars were neatly parked in a single curved row, and in spite of this there was still plenty of room even if you were on manual with a crippled hand. Setting the car down without too much trouble, Sebastian and Halfie got out and made their way to the grand entrance. On the way there he noticed that you couldn't see the parking zone lights from the ground. They must be recessed into the ground. Nice touch.

Arriving at the door he was about to knock when the door swung inwards and an immaculately dressed butler android appeared.

'Mr. Poe,' it's head tilted slightly downwards, 'and companion. Do come in.'

The door opened fully and they both stepped past the servo servant and into the hallway, which was several times bigger than Sebastian's office and tastefully decorated with objects of art both new and old as far as he could tell. On both sides of the doors, stairs curved up and met at a smaller door a few meters up. Large open double-doors opposite the entrance led into an adjoining room full of people standing around chatting in subdued voices while occasionally sipping from a glass or helping themselves to a snack from one of the many trays being unobtrusively carted around by small domestic robots. Excellent, he hadn't arrived too late for the food. He was about to start towards the nearest tray when the butler made a throat-clearing sound.

'Sir's coat and hat?' he said encouragingly.

Sebastian didn't like parting with the most iconic parts of his clothing but it might be a bit inappropriate to refuse at a wake hosted by the person paying your bills, so he handed the items over with only a token amount of seething resentment. Feeling naked he walked across the hallway, through the double-doors and joined the crowd with Halfie running off to sniff things. As soon as he entered Victoria appeared in front of him.

'Sebastian, so glad you could make it,' she said with a small smile. 'Please help yourself to some refreshments.'

She moved close and put her head next to his as if she was going to kiss his cheek and whispered: 'You might want to look around upstairs...'

She drew back again, gave him another careful smile and turned to talk to heavy-set bearded man with a weirdly staring eye who'd been glaring at Sebastian with suspicion.

Upstairs must be Franz' office, he'd have to go there later and check it out, but for now he was going to cruise the room and surreptitiously get an obscene amount of snacks in him while inspecting the crowd. Plotting a course optimised for maximum variety of food trays he set off, starting with what looked like a giant prawn stuffed into a ball of something pink and puréed. Mmm, buffalo mozzarella and tomato. This bode well for the ensuing snacking. He was halfway through it and heading towards a tray with an assortment of glazed mini-vegetables when he was suddenly obstructed by a woman in a very tight-fitting dress. The current fashion was to show some midriff, but in this instance it had been taken to the extreme and showed everything from a good deal south of the navel up to the last possible moment you'd have to start the fabric again if you didn't want an upside-down cleavage on your hands. Now most men would love to have any kind of cleavage on their hands, but even Sebastian had to admit that this was pushing it considering the circumstances. The rest of the outfit didn't help as it was equally frugal with the amount of fabric and the space between it and the wearer. In her defence, she had the body for it, and as Sebastian realised when he managed to raise his head sufficiently, a face to go with it. Sultry was the first word that came to mind. Another thing most men had in common was the inclination to divide women into

one of three groups: Not potential partner, sexual or otherwise; potential partner, she's lovely, I'd take her to meet my mum and might marry her; and lastly phwoar, I'd like some of that, oh yeah! You and me, hotel room, plastic sheets and 3 gallons of almond oil! She was definitely the latter, and would in fact probably give most mothers a heart attack.

'Well hello handsome, enjoying the...food?' she said with a husky voice that completed the package.

Sebastian coughed and straightened up trying to regain his composure. Swallowing the remaining shrimp he managed a suave: 'Eh yes, it's delicious,' and a weak smile. Stuck opposite a stunning woman, holding a decapitated crustacean buried in, by now crumbling, cheese, Sebastian felt a strong surge of social awkwardness, his brain shouting at him to say something, anything.

'It's shrimp. In cheese,' he said meekly, displaying the object in question.

'May I?' she inquired with raised eyebrows.

'Eeeerghi?' Sebastian replied in the affirmative.

She gently took hold of his wrist and wrapped her substantial lips around the snack and his fingers, slowly pulling her head back until contact was broken with a wet suction noise.

'You're right. Delicious,' she said after a few moments, licking a bit of cheese off her top lip.

Sebastian cleared his throat to break the spell and managed to activate enough brain cells to formulate a coherent sentence.

'Eh, hi, I'm Sebastian. And you are?'

'I'm Susan, the sister-in-law of poor, poor Franz.'

The latter was delivered in a way which made it clear that she wasn't exactly up all night crying about the loss.

'You're Vickie's sister?' Sebastian said with incredulity.

'Oh, *Vickie* is it? And how do you fit in, in all this? Judging by your clothes you're not one of *Vickie's* usual high-class friends. No offence.'

'Non taken,' he replied, meaning it 100%. 'I'm a private eye investigating the death of the deceased as it happens.'

'Are you now? And does a big, strong private *dick* like you carry a weapon?' she said, moving a bit closer until they were almost touching.

'Eh no, I hate guns actually.'

'Who's talking about guns?' she replied and firmly grabbed the part of his anatomy most sensitive to grabbing.

Sebastian almost squealed in surprise and seemed incapable of coming up with a reaction to this very unexpected turn of events.

'Are you alright?' a voice to the right of him inquired.

Turning his head he saw Angela standing there with a worried expression on her face.

'You look awfully pale Sebastian, are you feeling unwell?'

Susan had also turned to look at the interloper and was giving her the female elevator-look of competition appraisal. Mercifully she also let go of his parts most private in the process, thereby handing Sebastian a modicum of his faculties back.

'Angela! Hi! I...I think I just had a dodgy bit of shrimp there or something else that disagreed with me, but I'm already starting to feel better,' he smiled wanly.

'Oh ok, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt...,' she said apologetically.

Susan, having apparently finished her appraisal and deemed it either too much effort or not worth the effort, quickly cut her off.

'Don't worry your pretty little head professor, I was just going to powder my nose anyway, he's all yours.'

Turning to Sebastian, she leaned in and gave him a bit wet kiss on the cheek and whispered: 'I hope to see more of you later...'

Then with a wink she moved away, using her substantial curves to full effect in the process.

It was only when Angela cleared her throat that Sebastian noticed he'd been staring at her... well exit as it were. He quickly turned his attention back to Angela with what he hoped was a casual smile³⁷ 'Can you believe she's Victoria's sister?' he exacerbated his predicament.

'Yeah I know, like two peas in very dissimilar pods aren't they,' she replied, apparently too nice to let him squirm. 'According to Franz she's quite the man-eater apparently, although I find it difficult to believe that men actually fall for something that obvious.'

'Yeah, ridiculous isn't it,' Sebastian chimed in, throwing in a few tut's and a scoff for good measure. 'But enough about her, how are you holding up?'

'I'm ok thanks. The funeral was a bit tough though. I don't think I had fully accepted that Franz was dead until I saw the urn, but he's really gone isn't he?'

'Afraid so,' Sebastian answered the rhetorical question. 'All you can do now is try to remember all the good times and hope that the people responsible are caught and brought to justice.'

'How is that going by the way?'

'It's...progressing I'd say. No breakthrough yet but I still have a few leads. I can't really tell you anything specific, but I think you need to watch yourself at that company.'

'What, at Tinycorp? You think Victoria is right and they're behind all this? I still find that hard to believe. What proof do you have?'

'Like I said, I can't tell you any specifics yet, just give you some friendly advice.'

She furrowed her brow and looked at him with obvious scepticism. After a few moments the expression was replaced by a look of extreme tiredness as she looked away.

Sebastian put a hand on her shoulder, quickly shaking off a small piece of shrimp en route, and gave it a comforting squeeze.

37. When men are caught in the act of staring at other women they will always attempt to appear nonchalant about it and therefore smile the casual smile. Unbeknownst to most men though, it is physically impossible to pull this off with any convincing effect, and the smile will *always*, without exception, just look goofy.

'Look, why don't you go home and relax, maybe take a few days off work just to be safe. I promise you I'll keep you informed if...*when* I find anything solid. Agreed?'

She sighed, but when she looked back up at him the tiredness was replaced by a disciplined resolve. Sebastian didn't know this, but it was the kind of resolve you needed to cultivate to survive the years of studying for exams at universities³⁸.

'I will not just go home and wallow in self pity, that won't do anyone any good, and besides, Franz would have wanted me to get right back to work.' She moved a bit closer and added in a hushed tone: 'I'll also keep my eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary. You need someone on the inside to prove or disprove your suspicions.'

'Angela, no!' Sebastian said firmly. 'Do *not* go poking around at Tinycorp, these people are not to be trifled with. Leave it to me, I'm the professional!'

'You just try and stop me Dick Tracy!' she shouted and whispered at the same time, eyes flashing, and poked Sebastian in the chest with her index finger. Then she walked off.

For fucks sake, not only was he trying to stay alive while solving this high profile, and let's face it, fairly complicated case, now he also had to worry about her! He'd probably end up having to save her in the nick of time at some future point, right before some big explosion. Yeah...

Realising he was staring off into space with a stupid grin on his face daydreaming again, he pulled himself out of it and looked around quickly to see if anyone had noticed. His eye quickly caught that of the strange man talking to Victoria earlier. He looked like a real hard-case, and his weird eyes were once again fixed on Sebastian, who grabbed a glass from a nearby tray and saluted him. He didn't flinch, but just kept staring. Freak. Maybe it was time for him to take a look around upstairs as Vickie had suggested.

38. Unless of course you were studying arts or social sciences, in which case you mostly needed to cultivate a strong liver and a tolerance for tediousness. Just kidding. But no, really.

'Come on boy,' he said and patted his leg. When he didn't hear any response he looked around, but could see no sign of Halfie. Where had that damn mechanical mutt gone off to now? Probably eating cutlery in the kitchen or something like that. He'd find him later.

Grabbing another exotic-looking piece of food from a tray for the road he moved through the crowd towards the hallway. More people had arrived by now, all of them looking more like socialites than scientists, making them more likely to be Vickie's friends than friends of the deceased. Arriving at the entrance hall he ascended the large curving staircase to the first floor and opened the door at the top. It led to a long wide corridor lined with doors on both sides. The first one on the left was easily identified as it had the word "WC" written on it in calligraphic letters, but the rest of them didn't bear any distinguishing marks which was not surprising as this was a home and the inhabitants probably knew their way around. The door opposite was a supplies closet and the next two doors looked like bedrooms; he gave them all a miss. It was an office he was after.

The third door on the left was slightly ajar, and as he pushed it open he heard a faint metallic *snick* from inside the room, as of a big lock engaging. Having opened the door fully he found himself in what looked like what he'd been after, a small office with a terminal and various high-tech knick-knacks scattered throughout the room. In the far, right corner was what seemed to be a glass door and in front of it, tongue lolling to one side, stood Halfie.

'There you are! What on earth are you doing in here boy?'

Halfie just cocked his head to one side and then proceeded to scratch himself behind the ears.

'Were you in that other room?' he continued his pointless questioning while walking over to join Halfie by the glass door. It had a massive locking mechanism on it, and an equally impressive security panel requiring multiple authentication inputs to grant access. The sound he'd heard could have been this door closing, but that was ridiculous, Halfie was clever, but there was no way he'd be able to get in there. Remembering to check for the obvious he gave the door handle a good shake, but it was like pulling a handle mounted on the surface of a building. Putting his face close to the glass and squinting, he could see a

small dark room, partly lit by a large amount of electronics, from which he could hear a low hum even out here. That was probably the server room and where he really wanted to go, but chances were that it was just as secure as his lab at Tinycorp. Hopefully Vickie could help him get access.

Deciding to find out what he could from the room he actually had access to, he scanned the room a bit more thoroughly. The sight really made him long for the good old days when an office would be littered with stacks of paper and filing cabinets with files and pictures where you needed to sift through it all to find that crucial clue attached to an old newspaper clipping. Or ideally, taped underneath a drawer, now that was the dream! As it were there wasn't a single piece of paper in the room, just a lot of electronics and a terminal. Sebastian had no idea what any of the gadgetry was for and therefore sat down in front of the terminal with a resigned sigh, preparing himself for failing to extract anything useful.

Hitting the keyboard the screen came to life and presented him with a login window, where the user name was pre-populated with the letters "fj". Right Franzie-boy, what kind of password would you have? Probably something ultra secure with twenty characters, all a mixture of upper-case, lower-case, numbers, symbols and hieroglyphs. Or maybe not? Maybe this was his home computer where he felt safe and where he didn't see the need to use a complicated security, and in that case the password would be something ridiculously simple. How about, "nerd", Sebastian thought and immediately keyed in, most of all to vent his own frustration with his predicament.

To his own amazement the login screen disappeared and he was shown a desktop with multiple icons on it. Hovering his index finger in front of the screen, using it as a pointing device, he started going through the various applications, folder and files. Most of the applications scared him with their complexity the moment they opened up and he quickly closed them down again. The files on here were mostly private and had nothing to do with work, but it was good to know he *had* had a life outside work. Saving the best for last he selected the e-mail application and started going through his messages, starting with the most recent ones. Most of them seemed to be relating to other nerdy hobbies and communications

with like-minded people, mixed with promotion emails from companies wanting to sell him more gadgets. One e-mail stood out all of a sudden, from someone called gov_ntt@whizmail.com. Whizmail was an anonymous e-mail service, so this could be anyone, but the content was very interesting.

"Have received your details on TC transgressions. Ready to move soon, but need more time. Extreme caution advised. We will contact you soon.
Thatcher"

Sounds like Vickie was right, Franz had uncovered the shady dealings of Tinycorp and was working with some government body to expose them. The message was more than a week old which could only mean that the premature death of the good professor had probably halted the whole thing, since nothing had happened. Sebastian leaned back in the chair putting his hands behind his head, trying to work out where this left him. He knew the twins worked for Tinycorp and he knew they were the ones who shot Franz outside that bar in Fulham. He also knew now that Franz seemed to have been looking into what was probably illegal activities inside Tinycorp, but that those plans never came to fruition. The problem was that he didn't have any proof of any of this. The e-mail was worthless as proof and the old duffer who saw the murder wasn't the most reliable witness, plus he'd promised not to mention him to anyone and he should really keep that promise. He still had the address of the twins to look into, but odds were that it was a dead-end.

'Finding anything interesting?' a female voice came from behind him. Giving Halfie, the worst guard-dog in existence, a reproachful look Sebastian spun around on the chair to come face to face with Vickie who was leaning casually and elegantly against the door-frame with a sly smile on her luscious lips.

'As a matter of fact I am,' Sebastian glibly answered, in his own view matching her casualness³⁹.

Victoria's eyes looked over Sebastian's shoulder and saw the terminal window.

'You got into his terminal! How on earth did you do that?' she exclaimed with shock and surprise.

'I'm not completely inept in the world of high-tech gadgetry you know. I have my methods, and by applying my skills, delicately mind you, I managed to circumvent your late husband's Cerberus-like security measures.'

'You guessed his password?'

'Yes. Yes I did.'

'Well? What did you find?'

Sebastian told her what he'd found and his own masterful deductions based on the information at hand.

'I knew it! Didn't I tell you? Didn't I? Those *monsters* had my darling killed because he knew too much and was going to expose them!' she half-shouted in anger.

'Well yes, it would seem so, not that I ever doubted you Vickie. The only problem is that we have no proof, none at all. Unless you can get me into his server room over there?' he said, indicating the glass door in the corner with his thumb.

Victoria sighed and closed her eyes briefly.

'No, he put extraordinary security on that door and the walls. I'm sure I'll get in there eventually at great cost, but I just haven't had the strength to organise it.'

'I understand completely, and I might not be able to find anything even if I do get access, but there's bound to be more information on what he'd uncovered somewhere. Also, he uploaded a lot of information just before he died, and I assume that would have been to a server in there?.'

'Yes, certainly nothing out here, he was very paranoid about his data. The police pestered me about that as well,' she said looking annoyed. 'So what are you going to do now?'

39. Yes, this is a word. Not sure if it should be though.

'I've got another lead on the killers and hopefully that'll pay off. I've also gotten some inside help, albeit dubious. Weird help is better than no help at all is what I always say though, wouldn't you agree?'

'I...I guess. Who is this inside help? You mean at Tinycorp?'

'Yes, but it's probably better that you don't know any details. Plausible deniability and all that.'

'I see. You're probably right,' she replied slowly looking a bit uncertain.

There was a lull in the conversation which immediately made Sebastian feel uncomfortable, so he jumped out of the chair, wanting to appear energetic, but only managed to startle Victoria who'd been unprepared for the sudden, spasm-like movement.

'I better be off then. Thank you very much for your hospitality, and expect to hear from me very soon.'

'I am, in fact I'm expecting another report tonight,' she quickly replied, raising her eyebrows.

'Of course you are,' Sebastian smiled ingratiatingly and proceeded to exit the room. This was made slightly awkward by the fact that Victoria was still standing in the door opening and didn't seem inclined to move out of the way. There was enough room for him to squeeze by, but not without brushing against her and becoming intensely aware of her smell, which was intoxicating. Becoming aware that he was almost hovering in the opening, he gave himself a mental slap and went fully into the corridor.

Getting his coat and hat from the bionic butler Sebastian and Halfie left the mansion and went back to his car. By now even more people had arrived, no doubt drawn by the free food and drink and the opportunity to hobnob more so than for their affection for the deceased whose social life had just been confirmed to be extremely limited after reading his e-mails.

By now it was late afternoon and the few snacks he'd managed to scoff, before being interrupted by the sexual force of nature that was Vickie's sister, had done nothing to fill him up. A quick pit-stop at Hong's was required before moving on to the twins' flat in Holborn.

He was a bit wary of going as there was a small chance they'd still be there. Sebastian was no coward, but he hated guns and never carried one, so he'd be screwed if he ran into them. Come to think of it, even unarmed they'd be able to twist him into the shape of a pretzel, so maybe the weapons weren't the biggest problem. He'd be alright, he had Halfie, the killer terrier to defend him.

Chapter 14: Eye of the Beholder

Nyala had the evening off so Sebastian managed to get his meal without any hassle about payment, as Will didn't really care. The result was a detective with fully recharged starch-batteries, ready to take on the world, or in this case a flat in Holborn which might or might not contain two homicidal and heavily armed freaks. He was feeling positive though and by going after dark, the time when most bad guys did their dastardly deeds, odds were that they wouldn't be at home. The building had its own parking, but it was never a good idea to park in the building where you were about to break into a flat, so he chose a nearby public parking tower and walked the rest of the way. If the twins were making a lot of money working for Tinycorp, it certainly didn't show in their choice of accommodation as the building was extremely dilapidated, and didn't even have a porter at the door. This was a bonus as Sebastian wouldn't have to blag or bribe someone to gain entry. The address said apartment 1214, so taking the stairs was definitely out as anything past three floors would probably give him cardiac arrest⁴⁰. Only one lift was in service, which was testament to what a shit-hole this place was. Sebastian got in and pressed 12. As the lift ascended, a grating female voice was announcing the floors as they went by: 'First, Second, Third, Fourth, Sixth, Eighth...'

'Hang on,' Sebastian said out loud. 'That's not right.'

40. Is as cardiac arrest also what the police makes when someone has committed a crime of passion?

'Tenth, Twelfth...You have arrived,' it announced sounding very indifferent about the matter.

The door opened and he could immediately see that it had indeed miscounted and they were in fact on the eighth floor. Slightly annoyed he pressed the 12 button again, only to be informed that: 'You are already on the twelfth floor.'

'Like hell I am!' Sebastian shouted. Right, calm down, it was just skipping some numbers, so if he pressed 20 it should give him four more floors. He pressed 20 and the lift went up.

'Fourteenth, Sixteenth, Eighteenth, Twentieth...You have arrived,' it droned on and stopped with a soft *ping*.

The door opened and Sebastian was faced with a big sign reading 24.

For. Fuck's. Sake.

Twenty minutes later Sebastian's pulse was equivalent to that of a 100m sprinter after a race, his face was flushed, he was screaming incoherently at the panel of buttons and yet the closest he had gotten to the 12th floor was the initial 8th. He was not one for giving up a fight with a computer, but he had a job to do and this was going nowhere. Accepting defeat he got out on the eighth floor (morosely announced as the 16th floor this time) and started the Olympian task of walking up four flights of stairs.

The effort did nothing to reduce his pulse or indeed the redness of his face, but as an added bonus he was now sweating profusely as well and didn't have enough breath in his lungs to swear. He had finally arrived on the 12th floor and was now stumbling along the corridor, using the walls for support. It was just one long row of doors on both sides and apartment 1214 followed 1212 predictably. There was still a chance that they were home and they probably knew who he was, so he'd have to be careful. He put his ear against the door and listened for a minute, didn't hear anything and decided it was probably fine. Any thoughts of what would happen to him if he were to break in and find them at home were quickly put to one side as he activated the special wrist program Calvin had made for him. It would unlock any door only secured by the standard wrist proximity sensor, and in this crap flat he'd

be very surprised if they had more security than that. Furthermore, the hunter rarely expects to be hunted. After about ten seconds of his wrist flashing numbers on the screen an audible click was heard from the door, and slowly Sebastian pushed it open.

Immediately he was hit on the head with...no, just kidding, the place was empty. Completely empty in fact. He went straight into a small livingroom, which had an open door to a tiny bathroom first thing to the right. Like most cheap living spaces in the city there was no kitchen as people mostly had insta-meals or ate out. It also seemed like there there was no bedroom or any other room for that matter. The twins were many things, but you couldn't say they were picky when it came to their living space, and more pressingly they were also not living here any more, if in fact they ever had, come to think if it. This could just have been a false address. Not very likely though as the address possibly predated their work at Tinycorp.

The disappointment was almost too much. He had so been looking forward to rifling through stuff looking for clues, and now this. Nada. Zip. Zilch. He wanted to cry but was too manly to. Well, he was here now, so he might as well take a look around. Should take all of two minutes.

He walked around the edge of the carpeted room, looking for markings on the wall or stuff on the floor, but found nothing out of the ordinary. That left the minuscule bathroom, in fact he was surprised the twins could get their massive frames in here. Not at the same time that was for sure. It consisted of a small sink with a mirrored cabinet above it, a toilet and a shower-head. All of these were in such close proximity to each other that you could actually shit, shower and shave at the same time. Convenient. The cabinet was empty, no surprise there. Running his fingers along the top and sides of it revealed nothing, but when he did the same on the underside his fingers came across what felt like a small piece of sellotape stuck to it. Bending down to inspect it, it did indeed look like a piece of tape and using the nail on his left thumb it also felt like it as he slowly ripped it off. Strange, once off it wasn't sticky any more and it seemed a bit thicker than tape; more like a small piece of plastic. The place where it had been stuck wasn't sticky either. On a hunch he took the small piece and held it close to the side of the cabinet where it proceeded to stick itself to it. Well I'll be damned,

magnetic plastic. That can't be normal. Knowing nothing about science and next to nothing about technology he'd have to get some expert input though, which meant paying a visit to Calvin. It was a long-shot but as there was fuck-all else to go on he'd have to take it. At least leaving the place as he'd found it was not hard, so he just left the flat after quickly checking that the corridor was empty, and walked casually back to the lift, praying that it at least could figure out how to get to the ground level. Mercifully it did and he made it all the way back to the car without incident.

Calvin's shop was located on the third floor of a building in a decent part of Tottenham Court Road, along with 90% of the city's other electronic wares dealers. Shop was probably too grand a name for what it was, namely a large flat which looked like the place circuit-boards went to die. Sebastian assumed that Calvin slept like most people, but whenever he showed up at his place he was there working on something, buried hip-deep in wires, cables and computers, be it in the middle of the night or any other time. This was also the case this time, and Sebastian only had to wait two seconds after telling Calvin's name to the building AI before a well known voice sounded from a speaker by the door.

'Poe old buddy, come right up!'

The door to the building slid open and Sebastian entered. Moments later he was sitting opposite Calvin at a messy desk, Calvin wearing an implausibly big magnifying glass on his forehead, intensely scrutinizing the small piece of plastic he'd been given.

'Fascinating, if this is what I think it is, I've never seen one before but I've heard of them,' he said utterly engrossed in the task at hand.

'And what is it then?'

'Well it's basically a calling card for spy's to put it crudely. It's magnetic to allow it to be easily hidden in hard to see places, and it contains nano-agents which will enter your body when you touch it, interface with whatever communication device you have in you and place a call to whoever made the strip. That call will most likely be to an unlisted and untraceable

number,' he finished and took off the magnifying glass, probably to avoid the risk of serious neck injuries.

'But I touched it and so have you just and no call was placed,' Sebastian protested.

'True, that is because at the same time, it is programmed with a certain genetic code and will only interface with that exact code. In your case there is also the added obstacle that you insist on that external wrist, leaving the nano's with nothing to interface with.'

'So now I've got small machines in me perpetually roaming my body in search of something to talk to?' Sebastian asked indignantly.

'Afraid so, but they'll die very quickly and then leave your body through normal channels. No worries.'

'Who's worried? I *love* technology, you know that, and what could be better than the knowledge of tiny robot corpses floating around inside me?' he said tersely.

'Still the good old paranoid Poe,' Calvin chuckled. 'I missed you!'

'I'm not paranoid, they *are* out to get me,' he grinned in response.

'So now what, we're stuck? I guess we can't find out what that number is?'

This time it was Calvin's turn to put on a big grin. 'As I'm sure you know, or at least suspect, *anything* can be hacked, and you're with the master. Give me a moment.'

He took the strip and went over to what looked like a microscope on steroids with wires attached to it in a multitude of places, placing the strip in the centre of it. Next to it was a terminal on which he started tapping away at a frantic pace. It hadn't been more than a minute or two before he exclaimed: 'Yeah, thought as much. Piece o' piss. Want to place the call?'

'You got it already? What crappy kind of security is that?'

'Poe, I'm hurt. This is state of the art stuff, it's just that I'm exceptionally talented! It was simply a case of reverse-engineering the DNA receptors of the...'

'Never mind,' Sebastian interrupted him. 'I prostrate myself in the presence of your superior skills, but please don't try and explain it to me. Let's make the call, but can you be sure it won't be traced back to you? I don't want you to get in trouble and these are some very serious individuals we're dealing with.'

'You're talking to a pro here Poe, if anybody tries to trace this they'll only come up with an address somewhere in Cambodia, don't you worry. Ready?'

'Sure, hit it.'

Calvin tapped a key and waited. Nothing happened immediately, but after about ten seconds a digitally distorted voice said: 'Yes?'

'I've forgotten my last orders, could you repeat them please?' Sebastian said hopefully.

The connection was cut immediately.

'Shit,' Sebastian said. 'My clever ploy didn't work. I'm pretty sure I know where the recipient is located, but you can trace it for me can't you?'

'Well yes, but it'll take ages, it's not called "untraceable" for nothing you now.'

'How long?'

'Two days. Maybe less.'

'Fuck, that long? Ok, I guess I'll have to wait, it's only my last and only lead in this bastard of a case,' he sighed while pushing his hat up with his injured hand.

'What happened to your hand?' Calvin asked, furrowing his brow at the sight of the polymer-encased hand.

'Oh that? Nothing much, just had it crushed to bits by an army-issue bionic hand.'

'You're kidding? What did you do to wind up in that situation?'

Sebastian didn't really want to relive this, frankly embarrassing, episode in his investigation, but since he was stuck anyway he might as well regale the whole sordid tale.

Calvin looked deep in thought for a few moments after Sebastian finished.

'So this guy saw the whole thing happen?'

'Yeah.'

'And you say he had a bionic arm as well as one eye, is that right?'

'Yes?'

'Army issue?'

'Yes, Calvin, where are you going with this?'

'Well if he saw the whole thing and he has a military issue bionic eye, you could just play back what the eye recorded and you'd have your proof wouldn't you?'

'The eye...records?'

'Of course it does, it's military. I think it has something like a month's worth of buffer space and it's continually recording. Very handy for mission debriefings.'

Sebastian stared at him in disbelief for a few moments before shouting "FUUUUCK!" and running out the door.

This was it, the big break. With that footage of the two goons he could link the murder to Tinycorp and bish-bash-bosh the case was pretty much solved. Why the hell hadn't the old coot told him he was recording? He probably didn't even know the poor fool, it's not like the military had a record of divulging excessive amounts of information.

He stormed back to his car and went straight for The Cock⁴¹. Archie wasn't there, but after a few threats of grievous bodily harm and a good deal of kilos he managed to get the address from the amorphous blob of a bartender. It was just a hundred meters up North End Road and Sebastian ran there as fast as he could, ignoring the yells and lewd propositions of the human refuse littering the area.

Detective Sam Lowry was surveying the room, and it was a mess. Someone had gone through every single drawer and wardrobe in the room with a vengeance, emptying everything onto the floor. They'd received a call 30 minutes ago from a concerned neighbor who said that she'd heard screaming and loud noises from next door. Normally that wouldn't mean much in London, but as this whole building was populated with ex-government employees who were now retired, it was deemed worth a look. And sure enough, someone had indeed had it in for the old guy lying on the floor in the middle of the room. He had to wait for forensics to know for sure but from what he could see, his windpipe had been crushed, which was a nasty way to go. From the way the place had been ransacked one could

41. *titter*

easily jump to the conclusion that this was a burglary with a nasty ending, but then one would have been ignoring the one thing in the room that was very obviously missing: The right eye of the victim. Sick.

'Francis, where the hell is the forensics team? I requested them ages ago!' he shouted at a young queasy-looking constable standing by the door.

'I'm sorry Sir, I don't know Sir, I'll just check Sir,' he rambled nervously and tapped his wrist repeatedly, probably grateful for the distraction.

Out in the corridor Sam could all of a sudden hear running feet approaching, accompanied by what sounded like a chant of "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...". The volume of both increased steadily until all of a sudden the familiar face of Sebastian Poe appeared in the doorway.

'No! Fuck me, no!' he shouted at the sight of Archie lying dead and maimed on the floor, a look of both outrage and frustration on his face.

'Well hello Mr. Poe, might I ask what you're doing at my crime scene?' Sam asked.

Sebastian looked up at him with a blank stare, apparently not recognizing him. After a while he blinked and seemed to regain senses he had momentarily lost.

'Sam. Hi. I... He had some information I desperately needed,' he replied wearily with a nod towards the recently deceased.

'So you knew him?'

'Yes, barely, I spoke to him once before. He saw Franz Jaeger being shot while sitting in the pub opposite the terminal where it all happened.'

Sam raised his eyebrows.

'You found an actual witness? Why didn't you inform me?'

'Look, Sam, he was just an old, scared duffer who wanted to live the rest of his life quietly, and if it wasn't for the fact that he owed me after crushing my hand I probably never would have found out that he saw the whole thing.'

'Crushing your hand...? Actually never mind, you still should have told me. We could have protected him damnit!' he said angrily.

'Protected him? The police? Well I've got three things to say to that: Firstly, the last place I'd place someone who might be wanted dead by a major corporation is with the police, no offense, secondly, I didn't think he'd be in danger as I didn't tell anyone about him and the only ones who saw us talking were drunks, and lastly and most importantly, I gave him my word I wouldn't tell anyone,' he finished with a hard stare that brokered no argument.

Sam returned the stare for a few moments before looking down while pinching the bridge of his nose.

'Ok, alright... fine. You may have a point there, but I would still have liked to have talked to him. What information did he have then that you didn't get the first time around?'

'What's the one thing very obviously missing in this room?'

Sam's gaze flicked to Archie's dead body and back to Sebastian. 'What, the eye? What information could you possibly get from his bloody eye?'

'Look again,' Sebastian urged him.

Sam did, studying the body in more detail. The right arm had been further damaged in the struggle and whole patches of skin had fallen off, revealing the nature of it. His attention shifted to the scarred right side of the face and then it clicked.

'The eye was artificial wasn't it?'

'Yup.'

'And it recorded the murder didn't it?'

'Probably.'

'Damnit Sebastian, why the hell didn't you get him to give you the footage the first time around?' he shouted in frustration.

'I didn't know the sodding thing was recording did I?'

'What do you mean you didn't know, every child knows that bionic eyes record, especially military ones! Hell, there's even a programme on the network called *Journals of a Bionic Eye*!' he half-shouted.

'Well *excuuuuuse* me for not being a complete technophile or spending my life watching the coma aquarium! I didn't know ok?' Sebastian matched the half-shout and raised him a quarter-shout.

They both seethed in quiet frustration for half a minute before Sam broke the silence.

'Can't be helped now anyway, that's for sure. I just hope this wasn't your only lead.'

He looked up at Sebastian and could see the answer written clearly on his face.

'That bad eh?'

'Afraid so,' he replied dejectedly. I know it was Tinycorp who did it, I just can't prove it.

'Welcome to my world Mr. Private Eye...'

They shared another moment of silence, although this time there was no seething involving, just good old fashioned depression.

'Look, the forensic team will be here soon and if I can avoid it I'd rather not have to explain your presence here, so please get out of here now. I'll let you know if we find anything of interest, but I wouldn't hold my breath,' Sam said quietly.

Sebastian didn't say anything, but after a moment he turned around and walked out the door, followed by Halfie who seemed to detect the mood of his master and padded silently and softly in his wake. The walk back to the car was very slow and Sebastian didn't even hear the jeers and offers from the addicts and purveyors of dubious goods and services he passed along the way. He flew straight home, went to Hong's and bought two bottles of Smirnon vodka, which he proceeded to drink in solitude, sitting at his desk. A bottle and a half later he was sound asleep, face down on the sofa.

Chapter 15: Uncomfortably Numb

The small room was extremely cramped. It was designed to house one person, just, and with three more people in there any notion of personal space was gone. The fact the one of the added people should count for two if you went by volume, didn't help matters. The two

chairs were taken by John and Jerry, leaving Bruno and Lars to stand up in the narrow space between the table and the wall. This had the unfortunate result of bringing John and Jerry's faces at the same level as the crotches of their compadres, which was awkward at best. Making the situation worse was Bruno's choice to wear skin-tight trousers on this occasion, bringing to everyone's attention, and especially the seated individuals, the apparently proportional size of his member. It was either that or he was keeping an extra pair of socks down there. Trying his best to avoid the uncomfortably close proximity to Bruno's meat and veg, John cleared his throat and initiated the meeting.

'Right, ahhhhrrrrrm, thank you all for coming at such short notice. I thought it was time to have a status update and in the light of the seriousness of the situation I thought it best not to have any more meetings at work. I hope you all agree?'

There was nodding and murmured agreement.

'So I guess I might as well start with myself. I've tried to get access to the lab, but it's been impossible. There's only one door in there and my clearance isn't high enough. What I *have* seen though is a ton of people going back and forth to the lab with various bits of machines, so I can only assume they're hard at work to get into Dr. Jaeger's lab. No clue how they're doing. Anyone else found out anything?' he asked, looking around questioningly.

'Well I've seen the twins a lot lately,' Bruno offered. ' They used to come around once maybe twice a week but these past two days I've seen them a few times. Impossible to tell what's going on though, what with them always wearing sunglasses and never displaying anything resembling human emotion. I've also tried getting more information on them, but there's nothing in the system and nobody seems to know anything.'

'And you Jerry? You're probably the one with the most access. Have you found out what Dr. Jaeger was working on, if he'd found some dirty secrets or how far along they are with the lab door?' John urged.

Jerry made a circle with his right thumb and index finger.

'That's what I've found. Niente, nichts, nada. Whatever they're doing it's not recorded anywhere in the internal systems. The same goes for progress on the lab. I've found the work

orders and personnel assignments, but in the progress report it just refers to our CEO and we're not planning on asking him are we?'

'Of course not, that would be stupid,' John answered the rhetorical question.

'Would it?' Jerry retorted.

'Yes, extremely so!'

'Extremely so?'

'Yes!'

'Really?'

'Yes!'

'Really really?' Jerry continued, now starting to have a little annoying smirk at the corners of his mouth.

Bruno smacked the back of his head gently. 'Not now Jerry, save it for the baddies.'

Jerry grinned at John who'd only just realised what was happening. 'Sorry mate, it just comes naturally you know?'

'Yes, well, try to reign it in ok? We're trying to find killers here,' John said reproachfully. 'By the way, did you do that thing we talked about, just in case we need to move fast?'

'Yeah, done and dusted, no sweat. I don't even think they'll notice the difference.'

'Very good. That still leaves us with pretty much nothing to offer Sebastian as help. Unless you've found something Lars?' he said without much hope in his voice as he looked at the person in question. With him working in the kitchen, being of limited intelligence and having the most rubbish powers in everybody's opinion (unspoken of course), the expectations were set extremely low.

'Unfortunately not guys. I was hoping and trying to be assigned to the team that brings food to the lab guys working on Jaeger's door, but no go unfortunately. My boss thinks I make the food too salty so he doesn't like me.'

'Oh ok, too bad,' John said matter-of-factly, not having expected anything in the first place.

'And it wouldn't have helped much anyway since we don't have to deliver food any more after tomorrow, so I wouldn't have had a lot of time to find out anything,' Lars added.

'Why not?' John asked looking puzzled.

'Oh, they told us they'd be gone, that's all I know,' Lars said with a beats-me expression on his face.

Everyone else in room looked at each other in disbelief.

'What?' Lars asked, looking confused.

'What do you mean "what"? It's pretty damn obvious isn't it?' John said, not even trying to hide the frustration in his voice. 'If the people working on the door are leaving tomorrow it must mean that they intend to *finish* tomorrow, see?!'

Lars looked at him for a few moments before his face lighted up in revelation. 'Ooooooh! I see now, very clever!' he grinned while tapping the right side of his nose with his right index finger.

'No, not really, not if you're above the age of five!' John almost screamed.

This did nothing to wipe away Lars' grin as he was obviously in a world of his own.

Sometimes John wished they could be a bit more selective in their membership criteria, but unfortunately mutants didn't grow on trees so they'd have to make do with what they were given, even if that meant having a dim-witted member whose only ability was to make things smell like a fry-up. He let out a deep breath before continuing.

'Right, this is big, we have to go tell Sebastian.'

'Can't you just send him a message?' Bruno inquired.

'No, I don't want to risk sending anything on the net, who knows who might be listening in. We'll have to go to his office. Come on, if we leave now it shouldn't be more than a few hours by train.'

'By train? Aww come on John,' Jerry whined, 'if we take a cab it'll only be 20 minutes.'

'What am I? Made of money? I need all the income I can get and I can't waste what little I have on needless extravagances like cabs.'

'Tell you what then, I'll pay alright? I really can't be arsed with spending hours on a train.'

'Ok. Sure. If that's what you want to do then fine,' John snapped in a tone of voice usually only heard from annoyed wives after they've given in to another of their husbands' stupid fancies. He then stood up and obviously wanted to stomp out of the room in a huff, but quickly found himself trapped by the table and the mere physical presence of his compatriots. Not wanting to resort to asking people to move as that always somewhat tarts a good huff, he instead proceeded to squeeze between Bruno and the table, opting for arse against groin rather than groin against groin action. Within seconds he became intensely aware that being at eye-height with Bruno's privates was nowhere near as awkward and uncomfortable as rubbing you posterior against them, and as it felt as if he'd gotten stuck halfway he panicked and started flailing wildly to get past. Bruno watched this with interest for a moment or two before giving him a small shove, sending him flying into the door where he crumbled to the floor. Immediately he stood up and glowered at them all, daring them to laugh. Apparently satisfied he finished his huff by leaving the room and attempting to slam the door which unfortunately resulted in the door opening again as thin polymer doors didn't really lend themselves to slamming. One unwise decision later he was repeatedly slamming the door trying to make it stay shut, until he finally gave up and closed it quietly.

The room was silent while Jerry, Bruno and Lars just exchanged glances. After a few seconds they couldn't hold it in any longer and all cracked up.

As Jerry had predicted it was a relatively short trip by cab and less than half an hour had passed when they entered Sebastian's office. Gladys was sitting at her desk as they entered.

'Eh, hello again,' John said. 'We realise it's a bit late but is Sebastian in his office?'

'Yes he is, but I'm afraid he's indisposed at the moment,' she replied.

'Oh, he's with a client?'

'No.'

'A woman?' Jerry interjected with a lewd smile.

'No, he's alone in there, but not in any state to talk to anyone I'm afraid. I've tried and failed.'

'What's wrong with him then, is he injured?' John persisted.

'No, just very, very, *very* drunk.'

'Drunk? Why?'

'I haven't the faintest idea, he won't talk to me.'

John felt a bit lost and looked around at the others for support. They all gave him a nod.

'Well it's very important that we talk to him, a matter of life and death in fact,' he said as authoritatively as he could manage. 'So you'll have to let us in.'

'Ok, but don't expect any sensible response, I certainly didn't get any...'

John was so surprised that his new-found assertiveness had paid off, that he was already formulating his follow-up argument when he realised she had agreed.

'Oh...right. We'll just... go in then?'

Gladys held out one arm toward the door to Sebastian's office.

'Right,' John concluded and led the group to the door.

There was nobody at the desk, but as they entered fully they could see the lifeless form of something resembling a tumble-dried human on the sofa lying face down with his right hand wrapped around an almost empty bottle of clear liquid. A few feet away on the floor was another similar looking bottle, this one empty.

John cleared his throat. No reaction. He cleared it again, a lot louder. Still no reaction. He continued clearing his throat, making it sound like someone was trying to manually start an old chainsaw with limited success. After about ten seconds of this Bruno gave him a small slap on the arm as he moved past and knelt down next to the sofa.

'Enough already with the throat clearing, he's obviously not hearing it!'

Gently at first he put a hand on Sebastian's shoulder and shook him, calling his name, but when no answer was forthcoming he started increasing the intensity until the whole sofa was shaking. Suddenly Sebastian's upper body jerked upwards, taking his right arm holding

the bottle with it. The bottle hit Bruno on the chin, snapping his heads backwards and making him pass out cold on the floor. Sebastian was now sitting up, looking extremely dazed and confused. After blinking slowly a few times, he spotted Bruno on the floor, looked up at the three other visitors and then back down at Bruno.

'Wasse doin onne floor?' he slurred.

'You hit him with your bottle when you woke up,' John replied.

Sebastian seemed to mull this over for a few moments, continually shifting his gaze from Bruno to the others and back again.

'I only hitem onne chin. De boddle din even break. Wussup wit dat?'

John looked uncomfortable and shot a glance at Jerry, who just shrugged.

'Well, I really shouldn't tell you this but I guess you need to know... He's ehh, he's got a glass jaw,' he explained nervously.

'A wut?'

'A glass jaw. It means that even though he's big and very, very strong, the slightest tap on the head will knock him out. It's his secret weakness, and you must *never* tell anyone!'

Sebastian had been looking at John while he explained and now he looked back down at Bruno with an expressionless face and back up at John.

'Bwaaaahahahahahaaaaaa!' Sebastian started screaming in laughter which didn't show any signs of lessening even after about 30 seconds.

'I don't really see the funny side...,' John tried to interject, at which point Sebastian paused, looked up at John and promptly resumed laughing uncontrollably while pointing at the prone form of Bruno. After another 30 seconds the worst of it was over and he was now able to utter the odd intelligible word in between guffaws.

'And here ... I belivd ... dat onayou ... assualy had powus ... and now ... turns oud ... HIS USELES TOO!!! BWAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!' he resumed his mad cackle. Tears were streaming down his face while Bruno's team were at a loss at what to do next. Lars seemed to find the laughing infectious and started chuckling himself until silenced by a very stern look from John. In the end they just waited it out and eventually Sebastian

quieted down, collapsing on the sofa from sheer physical exhaustion. After a few moments he looked up as if he was only just now noticing them.

'Whaddya wan?'

John gave a visible sigh of relief at the prospect of finally being able to communicate with the detective. 'We have some *very* important information and we didn't want to transmit it, so we came here as fast as we could.'

Sebastian looked indifferent. 'Well, wussisit?'

'It appears that Tinycorp is having success with Jaeger's door and they'll get into his lab tomorrow at some point.'

'So?'

'So we'll have to move quickly if we want to prevent them from destroying any evidence, right?'

'Who cares, dusn madder anyway,' Sebastian said waving his injured hand dismissively. 'I haf no proof, no clus, anne one widness I had? Ded! Cossame! You unnerstan?! Cossame! I dun wan any more ded peeble on my conssch... consshhh... *head* alright? Go home, issafer.' He picked up the Smirnon bottle, took a long swig and leaned back in the sofa closing his eyes.

'But, but...', John sputtered, 'we have to do something now, or the baddies will get away with it! We have a responsibility to Jaeger, his widow and...and...and the *community*!'

'Pffft,' Sebastian retorted. 'Baddies aalways geddaway widdid, it's no use, get widdeprogram. Have a drink!'

He generously offered up the almost empty bottle, which contained probably 50% fake-o-hol and 50% dribble.

John threw up his hands in exasperation, looking around at his companions with an expression which said: "Well *I'm* out of ideas." This was followed by a few moments of uncomfortable silence and shuffling of feet, during which Sebastian's eyes were slowly closing again and his head lolling forward.

Bruno looked like he was about to say something when they all heard the front door open, followed by a female voice shouting: 'I have to see him straight away!'

Gladys either didn't have time to react or she decided to let the visitor pass because two seconds later the door to the office flew up, hitting Lars on the shoulder as he was standing right next to it.

'Sorry, sorry!' a petite brunette apologised as she entered the room and saw Bacon Boy massaging his shoulder. He just grinned inanely without saying anything. 'I'm uh, here to see Sebastian, is he in?'

Nobody said anything, but Jerry and John both moved a step out of the way, revealing to the newcomer the unwelcome sight of a semi-conscious detective in the sofa and an unconscious giant on the floor next to him.

'What's going on here? Who are you people and what have you done to him?' she said worriedly as she rushed to Sebastian's side and put a hand on his forehead. It took about a second from she sat down until the full aroma of his breath manifested itself in her nasal passages, instantly disinfecting them and killing off a few hairs in the process. As quickly as she'd sat down, she jumped back up.

'Dawkins, he stinks! Why is he drunk, what is that guy doing on the floor, and once again: Who the hell *are* you people?' she shouted, looking around accusingly.

John opened his mouth as a preface to trying to explain the situation, but the shouting had stirred the slumbering PI who sat up straight, looked at her and said: 'Angela?'

Angela spun around again. 'Sebastian!'

'Whadya doin here?' he asked bleary-eyed and slightly self-conscious as he made a futile attempt at flattening his hair with his good hand.

'I had to come, I received a message an hour ago, from F...', she stopped mid-sentence and cast a glance at John, Jerry and Lars. 'Could we continue this talk in private please, without your... friends here?'

'Oh is fine, donworry, you can trussem,' Sebastian waved a dismissive hand.

For some strange reason this assertion did nothing to put Angela at ease. 'Ok, but this is kind of private and I'd prefer it if we didn't involve strangers in this. It's about *you know who*,' she emphasized while trying to make meaningful facial contortions.

'Then now aaaall about you know who already, they... they...' he started giggling. 'They're my superhero team! Waaahahahahaaaaa!' he broken into raucous laughter.

Angela looked puzzled and made eye contact with John who just smiled nervously and shrugged. Sebastian kept laughing and was oblivious to the anger starting to brew in Angela's face. A situation that was quickly rectified when she slapped him hard in the face.

'Heeeeeeeey,' he objected as he stopped laughing and put a hand to his cheek. Halfie also raised his head from his bed under the desk to emit a low growl. A growl which seemed to say: 'Yes I know he's a bit if a twat, but easy on the physical abuse.'

'Hey your bloody self! I come here with critical information about Franz in the hope that you can help, only to find you pissed out of your mind with a room full of strange people, no offence,' she added while giving John a brief look.

Once again he just smiled inanely and shrugged.

'You're supposed to be a detective, you're supposed to find the people who killed Franz, and you haven't and now you're drunk? You know what, you're not who I thought you were, you're useless, I'll take care of it myself,' she barked and turned around to leave.

Sebastian jumped up and put a hand on her shoulder. 'Angela, wait.' He took a deep breath and closed his eyes to steady himself. 'I'm sorry, I'm just in a schl... slump and I'm getting nowhere with the invesch... invesss... *case*,' he explained, making a big effort to enunciate.

'Please tell me whas up,' he added.

She didn't turn around but she also didn't try to break free from his grasp. After a few tense moments she finally turned around, apparently having come to a decision. 'I don't know what possible use you can be in your current state, but I'll tell you. I just received a message from Franz.'

Sebastian raised his eyebrows in response.

'Yes I know he's dead, but the message appears to have been written shortly before his death and timed to be delivered now. It was heavily encrypted as well, you'll see why when you read it.' She offered her wrist to Sebastian who, after spending a few seconds focusing his blurry vision on the text, started reading.

Angie,

I did it. I finally cracked it. After working on it for the last two years I've managed to take our profession a quantum leap forward. You remember all those discussions we had about pico technology and how it wasn't feasible as a concept? Oh boy were we wrong, and now I can prove it. The thing is, I've actually gone ahead and constructed a new picobot that was only meant as a quick proof of concept, but all my simulations have exceeded my wildest expectations and now I find myself in a quandary. We work for Tinycorp, and everything of commercial viability we produce, they sell and make a profit. It's all about profit, and I've never had a problem with that. But what if you all of a sudden had a game changer on your hands? Something that could drastically alter people's lives across the globe, and all for the better? Do we still focus on the profit or do we owe it to ourselves and indeed the world, to share it freely with everyone. I'm just not sure any more.

So why am I writing you in this fashion? I want to test my bots on a human and I can't do it without alerting our employers to what I've created, so I'm going to test it on myself. I've triple-checked my simulations and it should be fine, but just in case something happens I want you to go into my lab, get all the data on my work with picobots and make it publicly available. I know I'll be fine, but if I'm not, not bad for a legacy eh?

I've attached a synopsis of my work, and to gain access to the lab you just need to remember my love of the bard :)

You'll probably never read this anyway, so see you on the other side!

Franz

He looked back up at Angie. 'So, wassisit, I mean, what...is...it,' he struggled.

'It's amazing, that's what it is! Remember when you hurt your hand and you asked me why it took so long to heal? The reason is that our nanobots can only assist the body in healing, so the healing will be perfect but not quick. Not so with picobots, they're smaller and faster, and what he's done is create a bot that can do two things: Firstly, it'll repair tissue damage much faster than before, and get this, if for some reason the heart stops, they'll rush to the brain and feed it oxygen until the damage is repaired, the heart kick-started and the blood supply is restored! It's incredible!' she said with her face lit up like a child's at Christmas.

Sebastian stared at her blankly.

'Don't you see? This means that people don't have to die from accidents or violence any more as long as they have these picobots in them,' she explained.

'Oh...right. That's cool. But if he took them himself why did he die? Twice!'

Angela furrowed her brow. 'I'm not sure, but I have a theory. From what we know, he probably took the bots outside his private lab where he was found dead, and it could be that the introduction of them was too big a shock for his body. He never told anybody, but he actually had a weak heart and physically he wasn't the strongest of people. Added to this, from what I can see in his notes, he took too large a dose, which is a stupid rookie mistake but he was probably too excited about his breakthrough.'

'Ok, and then se...the bots kept his brain alive until they fixed his heart?' Sebastian suggested.

'Yes, exactly, and he probably woke up in the morgue at the hospital very confused. I still don't get how he ended up shot, in Fulham of all places.'

'Then alloooow me to explain, I think I've got sis one sorted,' Sebastian replied confidently. 'Franz wakes up, se good Doctor Gupta is in schock and contacts Tinycorp who in turn realise sat something fishy is going on so they send their two enforcers to bring him in, he panics and flees on foot enning up in Fulham, tries to call for help on a terminal, is seen by the goons who probly think he's transmitting sensstive data or in some other way is compromising Tinycorp since he fled, and they subsequently gun him down. End of Franz,' he concluded with a smile.

'I...I guess that makes sense,' Angela agreed looking concerned. 'I know Tinycorp has a reputation for ruthlessness I just never thought they'd go that far.'

'Trust me, they would,' Sebastian stated with the confidence only a drunk man or a salesperson could muster.

Angela hesitated a bit, processing the fact that her employers might be the bad guys in this scenario and that she was now confronting a life changing decision. It was not a hard decision to make.

'Right, we have to get his research data from his lab and fulfil his final wish,' she said with a firmness that didn't broker any discussion. 'Who's with me?'

'I am!' Lars shouted enthusiastically raising his arms, then realised that he was the only one and quickly took them down again.

'Not that I don't wannahelpyou Angela, but why do you need help? Jusgo inno his lab an gettadata, right?' Sebastian broke the awkward silence.

'I tried, but even though I know his reference to "the bard" means Shakespeare, as he was a huge fan, I can't figure out the exact phrase he used. I tried all the big ones without any luck, so I could use some help. Furthermore, I'm not sure how much my employer knows about this, but it might not be entirely safe for me to try and get the data out of the building. You've got a gun right?'

'Absolutely not, I hate guns. An even though I'd *love* to sneak into Tinycorp and help you, Immafraid the securty's too good, right guys?' he looked at the three standing GLUM members with a face that exuded regret but with eyes full of hope. Angela did the same but with sincerity in the former and the exact opposite motivation in the latter.

'Well actually, we do have something prepared for this eventuality and we're fairly certain we could sneak you in undetected, right Jerry?' He turned around for confirmation and upon receiving it smiled and nodded happily back at Sebastian. He was somewhat surprised to find that the information didn't overwhelm the recipient with enthusiasm and gratitude, he actually looked more like he wanted to throw something sharp or heavy or preferably both⁴² at him. That all changed when Angela turned back to look at him again, at which point his face lighted up in a strained smile.

'Great! That's just...great!' he confirmed. He really didn't want to have to do *anything* in his current state apart from sleeping and feeling sorry for himself, and even in an ideal scenario it didn't sound like any part of this would bring him any closer to having evidence against Tinycorp. For some reason though he was unable to disappoint Angela, there was just something about her that made him want to win her approval at any cost.

'Lesgo!' he shouted as enthusiastically as he could, raising his injured hand in the air.

Angela gave him an uncertain look. 'Are you sure you're in any condition to see this through Sebastian? You seem awfully drunk to be honest.'

Sebastian tried to look surprised and offended. 'Whaaat? Ibefine, promish!' he reassured her while trying to not fall over.

Angela looked pensive for a few moments before coming to a decision. ' Alright, I guess we don't have any other options. This has to happen tonight. At least let me get you a strong cup of coffee.'

'Thasfine, I'll get Gladys...'

42. Like a sharpened anvil.

'No, I'll get it, you just wait here,' she interrupted and quickly left the room to go to the reception. Nobody said anything while she was gone but Bruno started stirring on the floor, and just as he opened his eyes, Angela came back into the room with a mug between her hands. 'Here, drink this, all of it,' she commanded, thrusting the coffee into his left hand. He did as ordered, barely registering the awfulness of it in his current state. Placing the empty container on his desk he received a satisfied nod from Angela who turned around to speak to GLUM who were helping their largest member get up from the floor.

'You say you can get Sebastian into Tinycorp undetected?'

John nodded.

'How sure are you that it'll work?'

John looked at Jerry who gave a small nod in reply. 'Pretty sure, assuming he is able to move quickly and follow orders,' he indicated Sebastian with a nod of his head.

'Ok, let's just hope it works. You all have cars I assume?'

'Eh, not really, we took a cab here,' John answered regretfully.

'And the great PI is in not condition to drive. Great. We'll just have to pile into my car,' she sighed. 'Come on, let's go.'

They'd only made it into the lobby when Sebastian's wrist started beeping. It was Victoria. He acknowledged the call and gathered all his willpower to speak clearly. The others were then witnesses to one half of a conversation where he was obviously not in control.

'Victoria! Hi!'

'...'

'Yes, yes I know it's been a while since my last update, but I've been quite busy with new developments.'

'...'

'Now? Sure, why not. I eh... I've got a new lead and I'm actually just about to look into it now.'

'...'

'I don't think I should tell you, it's one of those cases where it's probably best you didn't know.'

'...'

'Well because it might be slightly, how can I put this, legally questionable?'

'...'

'No, I don't think that would be a good idea.'

'...'

'Yes I know you pay my bills.'

'...'

Yes, I'm aware of that, but...'

'...'

'I know, b...'

'.....'

'Ok! Alright! I'm breaking into Tinycorp ok? Happy?'

'...'

'What? No! Absolutely not! Out of the question!'

'...'

'Victoria... Victoria... Victoria? Fuck!' he shouted. This was one of those situations where he really wished the world was still using old fashioned phones. There was just no way you could convincingly hang up on a call dramatically these days, leaving Sebastian to just tap his wrist aggressively with his injured hand, resulting in a sharp jolt of pain from it.
'Aaaargghh, fuck-a-doodle!'

The others were all watching the spectacle, waiting for him to calm down a bit.

'Why did you tell her what we were doing?' Angela asked incredulously.

'I had no choice alright? She just kept pushing and pushing, plus she's paying me, so there,' he finished sullenly.

'And what was the last thing she said where you said: "absolutely not"?''

Sebastian looked away. 'She eh... she said that she was coming. She'll meet us a Tinycorp.'

'What?! Are you insane? We can't risk bringing along some spoiled rich girl just because she throws a hissy-fit,' Jerry objected.

'Did it sound like I gave her my blessing? Did it?' Sebastian retorted angrily. 'I *know* it's not a great idea, but we just have to face facts now, and the facts are that she's the kind of woman who doesn't take no for an answer, and we'll risk blowing the whole thing if we start a fight with her outside Tinycorp headquarters!'

'I still think it's stupid,' Jerry grumbled.

'And I agree,' Sebastian said, 'but let's just focus on getting this done. The most important question is: Can you get her in as well?'

'I guess, but we'd have to move very quickly, there'd be no room for mistakes at all,' Jerry confirmed.

'Good, we'll just have to be flawless in our execution,' Sebastian asserted. As he said so he actually found that he was feeling surprisingly well. He wasn't as dizzy any more and his enunciation was back to normal. Dawkins bless that coffee, it really was a miracle-worker.

When no more objections were forthcoming Sebastian opened the front door for Angela. 'Let's get to that car of yours,' he said with a determined smile and a wink.

Chapter 16: Small Machinations

Bruno was assigned the front passenger seat for obvious reasons, but even so space was extremely limited on the back seat. Sebastian was crammed in with the other three members of GLUM, resulting it way more body contact with other males than he'd ever want and a faint smell of bacon.

'So,' Sebastian started while trying to get more comfortable and failing miserably. 'I forgot to ask, how *do* you intend to get us into Tinycorp? I thought that place was more secure than the World Bank?'

'We're making use of an existing hack to the system that I had to make years ago because of John,' Jerry explained. 'The security system in place makes use of 3D facial recognition as well as an iris scan and voice recognition, and it's a flawless system. Well almost flawless, apparently they couldn't account for John. His face throws the 3D scanner every time, it simply cannot get a lock, it's as if his face is so plain and generic that there are no distinguishing features to pick up on. In any case, to circumvent the problem we had to make a manual hack to the system, which means that whoever is manning security can override the security system and let a person in regardless of the system. Everything is logged and recorded of course and only the door facing the Tinycorp compound will open. However, since I made the hack I was able to sneak in a few modifications: When the override functionality is activated, *both* doors will open and the security camera will black out for about five seconds. It should be long enough for one or even two people to run through after John and brief enough for them to think it was just a small glitch.'

'Ok, sounds good, but what about security once we're inside? Won't there be cameras?'

'Yes there will, but they won't be actively monitored. They're so confident about the security at the entrance that all internal cameras are only recording for archiving in case they need to check something after the fact.'

'I still plan on being alive a fair amount of years after this, and I'm sure that if we get out of this alive, there will still be an investigation and they'll find footage of all of us!' Sebastian objected.

'And that's why we have these,' Jerry replied, digging out a handful of what looked like oversized tie-pins.

When Sebastian gave him a decidedly unimpressed look, he elaborated: 'They're nano cloud cloaks,' he said excitedly, 'they generate this field around you which...'

'Yes I know what they do,' Sebastian interrupted him. 'I thought they were extremely illegal though?'

'And that's your main concern at the moment? The legality of the equipment we're using while breaking into a major corporation to steal from them?' Jerry asked drily.

'Fair point,' Sebastian conceded. 'Well great, sounds like you've thought of everything.'

'Everything except one small detail,' Bruno said. 'We can't get into the lab without Angela's ID, so it doesn't matter if she's cloaked or not, they'll know it was her who let us in.'

The whole car fell silent.

'I knew this was a one-way street for me career-wise when I made the decision,' Angela interrupted the silence after a few seconds without looking at anyone.

'Never mind your career, this could be a one-way street for you *life*-wise Angela,' Sebastian argued.

'I know. I guess you'll just have to keep me safe, won't you Mr. Poe?' she said with a wry smile and a quick glance in the rear-view mirror.

No-one said anything after that, and the rest of the trip was spent in silence. They all knew it couldn't be any other way and that it was her decision to make. That didn't make it any more pleasant though.

Arriving in Chiswick Angela set down her car in a nearby parking building, not wanting to risk parking on company grounds. Victoria had also parked there and as they exited the car, they could see her walking towards them.

'Well at least she didn't bring an entourage,' Jerry murmured as she was in fact alone and comparatively sensibly dressed as well, i.e. no high heels and nothing too flashy.

Sebastian decided to make a last ditch attempt to dissuade her from coming with them, and as she came up to them he stepped forward.

'Victoria, I really think this is a bad idea. What we're about to do is illegal and very risky. There is a chance that if we get caught we might not get out alive.'

At these words Lars, who usually wore an oblivious grin on his face, visibly blanched, apparently not realising until this moment that it was serious.

Sebastian took another step forward so that he was very close to her. 'Please, please reconsider, I can't guarantee your safety if you come,' he implored her.

'I don't need you to guarantee anything Sebastian, I'm a grown woman and I can take care of myself. I'm not stupid, I do realise the risk, but I cannot in good conscience let you do this alone. I have to do this for Franz. I appreciate your concern though, it's very sweet,' she gave him a small smile and a brief hug.

Once again he found himself intoxicated by her smell, not to mention the parts of her body briefly pressed against his, and all resistance sapped out of him. Turning around to the others he gave a shrug in resignation, communicating in a gesture that he'd done everything in his power. They didn't look particularly impressed by his efforts and Angela looked decidedly annoyed.

'I didn't realise you'd brought an army Sebastian,' Victoria said, giving everybody present an evaluating once-over. 'Is this really necessary?'

'Trust me, it is. Angela you know, and she's the only one who can get us access to the lab. The others are... friends of mine who also happen to be working for Tinycorp, and they're the only ones who can get us access to the compound.'

'But surely we don't need all four of them to get us in?' she challenged him.

'Strictly speaking no, but they eh... work as a team I'm afraid, nothing to be done there.'

'Very well, if it's necessary. I'm just loathe to risk others in this endeavour, like you said, it could be very dangerous and I'm sure Franz wouldn't have wanted more innocents hurt. I must thank you all; it is testament to Franz' decent nature and indeed yours that you're willing to take this risk to make sure that his killers won't go unpunished.'

'Well actually..., ' Angela started before being interrupted by Sebastian who gave her a meaningful look and a brief shake of the head.

'Actually it's the least they can do,' he finished for her. 'That's how good a bunch of people we're dealing with here, they feel it's their duty and they can do nothing less.' There

was no reason to tell Victoria what the primary purpose of the visit was as she might object, knowing exactly how slim the chances were they'd find anything incriminating on Tinycorp. The real objective was too important though, at least to Angela and therefore to Sebastian, and they'd have to see it through even if it meant keeping his client in the dark, or at least in ill-lit conditions.

Victoria looked a bit confused by the exchange but smiled and concluded: 'In any case, I thank you all.'

At this point Jerry had had enough of all the talking and decided to move things along. Extracting the portable nano cloak clouds from his pocket he distributed them among the people present and instructed them in its use. 'You just flip the switch the moment we're through the main gate, but not before. If it's active as you go through it will be picked up by security. Understood?'

He received affirmative nods from everyone present.

'Right, let's get a move on then.'

As they left the building and walked towards the main gate of the Tinycorp compound John instructed them all in how they'd get John and Victoria inside. 'Angela, Bruno, Jerry and Lars will enter first, followed by me. I'll try to authenticate, fail and then be put in contact with security who'll activate the override. At that moment both the outside and the inside doors of the booth will open, giving you a few seconds to run through. Got it?'

Sebastian and Victoria both nodded. Luckily it was in the middle of the night which meant that as long as they were careful, nobody would see them perform their little stunt.

They all approached the long row of booths, moving towards the left-most one which was next to the trees lining the plaza and therefore less exposed than the rest. Angela and John's team went through the adjacent booths leaving just the three of them on the outside. John was about to go in, and was checking the area to make sure nobody was watching, when he thought he saw movement further back by the trees. He informed the others and they all spent a minute staring in the direction indicated by John, but didn't see anything.

'You're just being paranoid,' Sebastian said dismissively, 'who'd be stalking us?'

'Even the paranoid are right sometimes,' John bit back.

Sebastian sighed and checked his wrist. After a few moments John was apparently satisfied that they were alone and went into the security booth. They only had to wait about ten seconds before the door opened again and they could see that both doors were indeed open. Quickly they ran through and were immediately met by John who pulled them behind a small maintenance building. This was done with such expediency that nobody noticed the small shadowy figure exiting the same booth from which they'd just emerged, bare milliseconds before it shut again. A second later it was gone.

John was clearly wired from the excitement of it all and slammed them both against the wall a bit too forcefully. 'Easy there buddy, we're on the same team,' Sebastian reminded him.

'Right, sorry, I'm...I'm just a bit nervous is all. It seemed to work though. Now, turn on your cloaks and we'll get to the service entrance as quickly as we can.' They did as they were told, and following his lead they all tried to walk inconspicuously towards the rear side of Tower 1.

As they arrived at the small door at the back of the building there was no one else around. 'Where are the others?' Sebastian asked.

'They've entered through the main entrance as they would do on any normal day,' John explained. 'It would look strange if we all just piled in through this door. Once they're in they'll go to somewhere that's not under surveillance, like a toilet, and engage the cloaks. We'll meet them at the lab. Now step aside so they won't see you on the camera and we'll repeat the procedure from before. Only one door this time, so it'll be easy.'

Sebastian and Victoria immediately moved up against the wall, and when John was sure they were out of sight he activated the security mechanism. As usual he was met by an annoying honking sound indicating that authentication failed, followed by the small screen above the console coming to life, showing the very bored face of a middle-aged man.

'You again, should have known....,' the face droned irritably and immediately activated the override causing the screen to go black. The door clicked open and the three of them rushed inside, where John immediately activated his own nano cloak.

'Right, let's get to the service elevator, it'll take us straight up to the 64th floor where the lab is,' John said quickly and stormed off down the hallway, his nerves obviously getting the better of him. Both Sebastian and Victoria had to half-run to catch up, but they didn't have to go far before arriving at the lift where John was pushing the call button frantically while looking from side to side and muttering: 'Come on, come *on*...'

It soon arrived with a soft *ping* and John rushed in before the doors were fully open. No sooner had they all entered before John was once again engaged in fevered button pushing and urgent muttering.

'Relax John,' Sebastian said calmly. 'It's gone smoothly so far, you don't have to be so nervous.'

'Don't I? Don't I?' he shouted quietly⁴³ in response. 'Do you realise what they'll do to us and especially me if they catch us? It will not be pretty, I can assure you of that.' He left that statement hanging while giving both of them a wild-eyed stare.

'They won't catch us, you're with a professional,' Sebastian grinned and winked. John stared at him for about two seconds before resuming his panicky button-mashing and insistent muttering.

Sebastian looked at Victoria and shrugged.

The lift did eventually get going and it wasn't long before they were able to step out of it and into the long curved corridor on the 64th floor after John sticking his head out to check that there was no one there. The service lift was on the opposite side of the building from the main lift and the entrance to the lab, so by the time they'd made the walk there the others had already arrived.

Angela looked visibly relieved when she saw them. 'Glad to see the plan actually worked,' she said with a small smile. 'Not that I didn't have faith in the plan to begin with mind you,' she quickly added after seeing John and Jerry starting to frown. Her reassurance

43. Yes it's possible to shout quietly.

not doing much to alleviate the awkward mood which had suddenly descended, she decided to move things along. 'The lab is this way, follow me.'

She only had to walk a few meters to get to the door where she inserted her security card causing it to slide open immediately. They all followed her through the opening and found themselves in the most expansive, expensive and machinery-filled laboratory of the worlds largest nano technology company.

'A bit boring isn't it it,' Lars commented.

Everybody else being in complete awe of the scale of the laboratory, not to mention the advanced machinery and assistive drones and robots buzzing around, they turned as one to look at him with incredulity.

'Boring?!' Angela was the first one to exclaim.

'Yeah, I mean, I was expecting a bit more whiz-bang and colours and stuff, you know,' he elaborated, unperturbed by the reaction of everyone else currently staring at him.

'This is the most advanced laboratory of its kind in the world! Each machine in here costs more than you probably make in a lifetime and most scientists would sell their grandmother to work here!' Angela explained forcefully.

Lars was starting to look a bit uncomfortable under the combined scrutiny of everyone present. 'Alright, alright, fair enough. Just saying...'

John cleared his throat loudly. 'Eh, not to break up this... whatever this is, but could we focus a bit on the task at hand before we're all caught and put to death?'

'Yes, yes of course, sorry,' Angela said shaking her head in an effort to get rid of the air of ignorance which seemed to ooze off Bacon Boy. 'His lab is down here at the end.'

They had to walk a considerable distance before coming to Franz' private lab, the door to it only coming into view shortly before they arrived at it, due to the curvature of the room as well as all the equipment in the vicinity.

Sebastian went to check out the security console next to the door immediately, expecting to find an installation similar to what they'd encountered entering the compound.

'There's only a keyboard here,' he said giving Angela a surprised look.

'Yeah, Franz hated all the extra security, insisting that a single password was still the best way to go, assuming you chose the correct one. That's actually our luck because if the door had required the usual authentication there's no way we'd ever get in. At least this way we only have to guess his password.'

'But you already tried with no luck didn't you?'

'I did, I tried all the famous quotes I know, starting with the ones he used often, but with no luck.'

'Ok, let's try that again just to be sure you didn't miss anything obvious,' Sebastian suggested, receiving nods in response from everyone present.

'To be, or not to be, that is the question,' John offered.

Sebastian typed it in, getting a low buzzing sound for his efforts. 'Nope, next?'

'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,' Bruno suggested.

Another buzz.

This went on for some time, with the same outcome until Sebastian took his hand off the keyboard. 'Ok, wait, wait, this is getting us nowhere, we could be here all night at this rate. Franz must have expected you to be able to get it relatively easy or he wouldn't have relied on such a small hint. Isn't there some phrase that he used often and which he'd know you'd remember?'

'Yes there is,' Angela replied equally frustrated, 'but that was the first thing I tried and it didn't work!'

'Well what is it?'

Angela sighed. 'The way we worked he would usually come up with the initial idea and then I'd try and pick holes in his theories, often to the point where he'd get tired of all my objections and say: "Methinks the lady doth protest too much".'

Sebastian type it in, receiving only another low buzz.

'Actually,' Lars said suddenly after having been quiet since his unfortunate comments upon entering the room, 'that's a misquote.'

'It's what?' Sebastian urged him.

'A misquote. Most people quote it like that, but the actual quote is: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks".'

They all looked at him in astonishment, sharing the same sentiment that this was like one day watching your toddler do quantum mechanics with his crayons.

Sebastian was the first one to snap out of it, and turning around he keyed in the phrase, this time being rewarded with an audible click from the door as the lock disengaged.

'Yes!' Sebastian shouted, making a double-sided fist pump while everyone else sighed in relief and rushed to pat Lars on the back.

Their celebration was suddenly interrupted by slow, loud clapping. 'Bravo, bravo, very impressive.'

They'd all been so preoccupied by the door that they hadn't noticed the three people walking up behind them. At the clapping they all spun around, only to be confronted with Tincorp CEO Frederick Forsythe flanked by the blonde twin towers, both pointing their heavily modified energy weapons at them.

'Thank you so much for saving me the trouble of getting rid of you in some complicated manner by simply walking in here where I can do what I want with you,' he said with a smile which belied the coldness in the stare he was giving both Sebastian and Victoria.

'Well if it isn't Mr. Big Cheese himself.' Sebastian started. 'So you finally decided to slither out of hiding to get your oily hands dirty did you? What are you going to do, kill Franz' widow just like you killed her husband?'

'Don't be ridiculous, why would I kill my top researcher? Do you have any idea how much money he made the company?'

'Who's being ridiculous now? There's footage of your two goons killing him and you know very well the lengths you went to, to get that footage secured you prick!'

Forsythe looked genuinely puzzled for a fraction of a second, before shaking his head and giving the twin on his left a look and a nod towards Sebastian, at which point the colossus fired his weapon, hitting Sebastian in the chest. He looked at his chest in disbelief and crumbled to the floor.

'Ah, that felt so good! He was starting to get on my nerves,' Forsythe said with mock relief.

'Sebastian!' Angela screamed and leapt to his side. As per usual with energy weapons there was no blood, but there didn't need to be. A check to his carotid artery on the neck confirmed the inevitable. He was gone.

'No, no, no!' Angela started crying. After a few moments she looked up at Forsythe through welled-up eyes. 'You bastard!'

'Oh yes, does that surprise you?' he replied drily. 'As for all of you *employees*, it seems you have violated several clauses of your contracts, which we'll have to discuss in detail, but let's keep it an internal matter shall we?' he said with a wolfish grin.

He then turned toward Victoria. 'That just leaves our poor, poor widow. You've been a thorn in my side ever since Franz died with your incessant questions and refusal to give us access to your husband's lab at home. It would all be a lot easier if you ceased to be. Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you?'

Victoria just stared at him stoically without replying.

'Thought not,' he stated flatly, giving the twin on his right a look and a nod towards Victoria.

An instant later the large energy weapon was discharged again, causing everyone to blink at the sudden sound and light. When they opened their eyes they were met by the sight of the illustrious CEO of the largest company in the world falling to his knees with a surprised look on his face and a smoking hole where his right kidney used to be. He slowly turned his head to look at his henchman turned traitor while silently mouthing the word "what" before falling face-down on the floor. Nobody spoke or moved a muscle. The silence was broken by the sound of Victoria's heels on the hard floor as she walked over to stand between the two turncoat bodyguards.

'Right. With that unfortunate business out of the way, what do you say we go get what we came for?' she said with an exaggerated smile that never reached her eyes.

'But...but...what?' John stammered in confusion. 'I don't get it? They work for you now? But didn't they kill your husband? Isn't that the reason you're here, to find evidence against Tinycorp?'

'Oh, poor little lost lamb, is this all proving too big a strain on your limited resources,' she replied sarcastically with a pout. 'I don't need to explain myself to you, but since I'm in a good mood now, having just gotten rid of *this* bastard,' she kicked the dead body of Forsythe, 'and because I'd just hate for you to die in greater ignorance than absolutely necessary, although given your normal state the difference will be negligible I'm sure, I'll oblige. Anyway, it's the done thing isn't it in situations like this? There'll be no last minute reversal of fortunes here though, I assure you.'

At this she paused and gave them all a hard stare.

'I married my husband for one reason and one reason only: Money. Unfortunately it turned out that all his perceived wealth was tied up in a trust fund to which I couldn't get access, even if I bumped him off, so what was a girl to do? I realised that the best way to profit from this "marriage"⁴⁴ was to get my hands on some of the technology he was working on as there is a great market for industry secrets. People will pay very handsomely indeed for the latest cutting edge technology from Tinycorp.'

She shifted her position and casually put her left foot on the head of the recently deceased CEO before continuing.

'So I devised a little plan which consisted of biding my time, waiting for him to have a breakthrough on some interesting technology and meanwhile make sure that when the time was right I'd have the necessary...tools at my disposal for making sure my husband would have a tragic accident when the time came, and what better place to recruit than right here where he worked?' She indicated her two helpers with a look.

'But why would they help you against Tinycorp?' Angela asked.

44. Yes, she actually made the bunny-ears gesture with her hands.

'You *are* an innocent aren't you dear,' Victoria replied mockingly. 'There are no sides in this game, just personal gain, and in this case the promise of enough money to set them up for life. An offer they of course couldn't refuse being men of low morals. And I say that with the greatest admiration mind you.' She patted the shoulders of each of the giants. 'Nothing so sickening as a person who can't be bought.'

'So I waited, and waited and waited some more until finally he announced what I'd been waiting for: A major breakthrough that would change the world. I couldn't believe my luck when I heard what it was! I would be the richest woman on the planet if I managed to sell that to the right party. So I enthusiastically celebrated with him, although for a slightly different reason than he thought, while planning to sneak into his private lab at home the next day to get the data, erasing all proof of the work and then getting my friends to dispose of the one person who knew about it. Perfect plan right?'

A cloud went over her face. 'Wrong.'

'Turns out the data wasn't in his home lab as I found out the following day. No problem I thought, It'll be at work and I'll find some other way of getting at it. Then what happens? Genius boy has a heart attack. At least I won't have to kill him then, I just have to get into his private lab at work before Tinycorp does. Tricky, very tricky. But then I get a call from my associates that he's come alive again! I realise that if Tinycorp finds out they'll also find out that he tested his own invention on himself and more crucially *what* he tested, so I tell my friends here to not inform Tinycorp but stop Franz instead. Somehow he manages to escape when they arrive at the hospital and after a chase they find him at a terminal. This is when they make a, shall we say less than optimal, decision?'

She pauses to shoot them both a reproachful look to which they don't react.

'I prefer to keep the facts to myself and only inform the people who work for me on a need to know basis, so granted, they couldn't know how important it was to keep him alive, and they took my instructions to stop him a bit too literally. Now I was screwed. I knew Tinycorp would be suspicious of his death so they'd be interested in getting into his lab as quickly as possible. On top of this I had no way of getting in there myself. Franz used to have

a connection between his home lab and the private lab at work that no one knew about, well at least no one but me, but for some reason that connection was now down. Maybe he shut it down before he died, I don't know. In any case, I needed to get to the data fast and as a last ditch attempt I decided to find some stooge who'd buy my grieving widow versus evil corporation story and then get him to get me in there.'

She paused and rolled her eyes. 'Yes, I know, desperate, but hey, look how it worked out in the end,' she grinned. 'I did have to prod him a few times to support the illusion and get him to come to the conclusion that he needed to get to the lab, but he got there in the end, and here we are. Now I just need to extract the data and I'll be on my way, so doc, if you'd please?'

Angela didn't move.

'NOW!' Victoria screamed with an insane look on her face, revealing a psychotic side that was terrifying.

Angela jumped up and started moving towards the door to the lab.

'And don't get any funny ideas about deleting the data or stalling. I'll kill one of your little friends here for every two minutes that go by until you're back with the data.'

'Two minutes? It'll take me longer than that to get everything!' she protested.

'You'll just have to hurry then if you want to maximise the number of people who'll be alive when you finish, won't you?' came the cold reply.

Angela was about to open the door when all of a sudden a small figure jumped out from behind some machinery with a gun in hand and exclaimed loudly: 'Ahaa! Got you now Poe you bastard!'. He was wearing a number of bandages and casts, including a neck support, making you wonder how he'd been able to get here on his own.

It took Dweazil about one second to spot Sebastian's prone form on the floor, assume a very surprised facial expression and say: 'What the...' during which both Victoria and the twins spun around to face him. Upon seeing the sunglassed behemoths and their massive weapons he managed to squeeze out an 'oh fuck' before all hell broke loose.

All three guns were discharged simultaneously and at this distance it was very hard to miss. Dweazil caught two beams in the chest, but not before hitting one of the twins in his gun arm, sending the weapon flying back towards GLUM and causing Victoria and her friends to spin around again in search of the lost firearm. It had landed next to Sebastian's dead body and both Angela and all the GLUM members had been too slow to pick it up until it was too late.

'Don't even think about it!' Victoria shouted, while the armed twin trained his gun on them. Satisfied that they weren't doing anything foolish she quickly checked that the tiny mummy had been dealt with and turned her attention back to the others. 'I have no idea what the hell *that* was, and I really don't care. Proceed,' she nodded at Angela.

At that moment Sebastian grabbed the weapon next to him and fired a single shot from his position on the floor, hitting the the armed twin right between the eyes. The highly trained reflexes of the killer allowed him to get a shot off of his own before having his life terminated, and he would have hit his target if not for the fact that the massive recoil from the modified rifle lifted Sebastian from the ground, slamming both him and the weapon into the wall next to the door.

This time it was Victoria's and her injured companion's turn to be stunned, giving Bruno the opening he needed to take two quick steps forward and dealing a bone-crunching blow to the jaw of the biggest leftover threat who went down immediately. 'I guess you forgot to upgrade your jaw,' Bruno said drily. He then turned his gaze to Victoria who gave him a weak smile. 'You. Over there in the corner where we can keep an eye on you,' he growled. She did as instructed while everyone else gathered around Sebastian who was nursing his arm and shoulder. His forearm was bent in a weird angle that didn't look at all natural, and judging from his facial expression it was associated with considerable amounts of pain.

'Sebastian, thank Dick you're alive!' Angela almost shouted and tried to hug him.

'Oww, oww, ooooooww,' he shouted in return as she squeezed his broken arm. She let go immediately.

'Oh, sorry, sorry, I'm just so relieved it worked!'

'What worked?' Sebastian asked through clenched teeth.

Angela looked a bit sheepish. 'Well... you know that cup of coffee you had at the office? I slipped in a dose of Franz' prototype as I was worried about you and the state you were in.'

'You gave me a dose of the stuff that *killed* Franz? What the hell were you thinking? You could have killed me!'

'Not likely, he had a weak heart plus he injected it and you ingested it, allowing your body to assimilate it much more slowly. Granted, it was a risk, but a calculated one. And remember, even though it gave Franz a heart attack, he still survived it.'

Sebastian just continued staring at her in disbelief with an open mouth.

'How's your arm?' she inquired when he didn't say anything else.

'It's bloody broken is what it is, look at it!' he displayed his wonky left arm for all to see. 'Now I'm not able to use my right hand *or* my left arm. At this rate I'll be a paraplegic by the end of the week! And furthermore... hang on,' he paused and looked at his injured arm. While they were all looking at it, it slowly started to straighten itself until it looked completely normal again. Sebastian flexed his hand a few times and twisted his arm. 'Ok, that's actually pretty cool,' he grinned. 'Wait, how come Franz died when he was shot when he had the pico bots in him?'

'They're hard-wired to only live a few hours. It's a fail-safe we put in the design of all prototypes, just in case something goes wrong,' Angela explained.

'Not to be pushy or anything, but we've got quite a few dead bodies here including the CEO of the company, do you think we could speed things up and get out of here?' Jerry interjected.

'Yes, yes of course,' Angela agreed and sprang to her feet. 'I'll go get the data now.' She pushed the door but it didn't budge. She pushed it once more harder with the same result. 'Uh oh.'

'Uh oh what?' Jerry asked.

'Uh oh this,' she replied indicating the security display next to the door which was smashed to pieces. 'Sebastian must have hit it with the butt of the rifle when he was thrown back against the wall, causing it to lock again. Now there's no way for us get in there.' She hung her head in defeat and what had seconds earlier been an atmosphere of triumph quickly turned into one of disappointment.

Victoria let out a high-pitched 'Ha!' earning her annoyed stares from everyone present.

At this point Halfie emerged from where he'd been hiding under a table, padded across the room to the door and stuck what looked like his tongue into a small opening underneath the security console. Moments later they all heard an audible click from the door, whereupon Halfie removed his tongue, pawed the door open and disappeared through the opening.

It took them all a few seconds to process what just happened and Sebastian was the first one to react. He looked at the others and shrugged. 'I guess it's open now,' he stated redundantly. 'Bruno, you stay here and watch her, the rest of us will go in and see what's going on.' Bruno affirmed with a quick nod and a scowl at Victoria and the rest of them went into the elusive lab.

It wasn't very large, probably around 300 square feet⁴⁵, but packed with computers and other hardware. Halfie had jumped up onto the chair in front of the main bank of screens and had once again inserted his tongue into a small opening in the console. They were now able to get a better look at him and could see that it wasn't actually his tongue, but some kind of plastic and metal tubing previously hidden *under* his tongue.

45. Forgetting for a moment how ridiculous it is to use the human foot to measure distance, why exacerbate the problem by talking about "square feet"? Who has square feet? Maybe it would be better to talk about squared feet with a "d" at the end? On second thought, that might create the impression that someone had taken a normal foot and then managed to get it into a square form by either cutting bits off or forcefully inserting it into a square baking form, this creating a "squared foot". Actually, never mind.

They'd barely all made it into the room when the screens started to flicker, quickly settling on the face of a thin man in his thirties with a receding hairline.

'Franz!' Angela said in surprise.

'The face on the screen smiled. 'Hello Angela, good to see you again.'

'What's going on, where are you? I thought you were dead?'

'I was, I am, or at least my body is. I managed to upload most of my mind to my lab at home before getting shot, so you might say I'm virtually alive,' he gave a snorting guffaw.

'Excuse me,' Sebastian interrupted, '*most* of your mind?'

'Yes, I made sure to secure all my cognitive processes first and then went on to my memories in reverse chronological order. I was killed somewhere around my 8th birthday. No big loss, or at least I think so. Can't know for sure can I?' he snorted again.

In the meantime Angela seemed to have regained her wits and was actually starting to look a bit angry. 'But where the hell have you been then? Why didn't you tell my you were alive... sort of?'

I wanted to, trust me I really did,' he replied regretfully, 'but first of all I needed to figure out what was going on and second of all, being virtual isn't all it's cracked up to be. I always thought that once I was living inside a computer then I'd be able to control everything so much faster, but it doesn't work like that at all. It's a bit like wanting to drive a car but finding yourself trapped under the hood: You're right in the centre of where all the important stuff happens but you have next to no control over anything; it's hard to explain.'

'So what *have* you been doing all this time?' she pressed him.

'Trying to find out what was going on mostly. The first thing I did was to cut the connection from my home lab to this one. I didn't want my research exposed, that was the most important thing. Then I tried breaking into Tinycorp, but that went badly wrong. Part of me ended up in a maintenance robot that went insane because it couldn't cope with the amount of data.'

John's face lit up. 'So that was you!'

'What?' Sebastian asked, turning to face him.

'A few days ago I was called to fix a garbage drone that was acting strangely. Never saw anything like it and I had to terminate it in the end.'

'Yeah, sorry about that,' Franz said.

'But then what? How did you get in here and what's the dog got to do with it?' Angela persisted.

'Well I found out that Vicky had hired Mr. Poe here, so I wanted to contact him, but failed miserably. My attempt was picked up by this little guy here though and for some reason I was able to communicate with him easily. I'm not sure you understand just how remarkable a creature he is Mr. Poe.'

'Please, call me Sebastian, and no, sounds more and more like my furry friend has hidden depths.'

'Ok, Sebastian it is then,' he smiled. 'So anyway, Halfie agreed to do some scouting and data collection for me to add to my own feeble attempts, and when I found out that Victoria had constructed a false email for you to find on my computer at home I knew who was behind it all,' he finished, his face exhibiting the obvious emotional pain this betrayal had inflicted.

'What, she faked that email?' Sebastian asked, 'but how could she know I'd be able to hack the terminal?'

'Hack? Please Sebastian, how likely is it that I would have "nerd" as a password? I realise what I am but one thing a nerd is not, and that is stupid. She rigged it to accept any password you tried.'

Sebastian was experiencing a mixture of emotions, most notable among these disappointment that he wasn't finally getting the hang of computers.

'By this time I'd realised that I wouldn't be proficient enough in moving around the net in time to do anything about this, so Halfie graciously offered to host me. I opened the door to my home lab for him while you were at the wake and downloaded into his storage banks. We both agreed that it was better if I didn't let myself be known at this point, and when Victoria turned up it was too late to tell you. In the end it all turned out quite well though I

must say, as the drone interface in the security console was the only way to gain entrance to the lab after you broke the main display.'

'I guess it did, but I *did* get shot and would have died if it weren't for Angela,' Sebastian argued.

'True, and I'm sorry about that, I didn't realise quite how ruthless my dear wife was. A good thing our brilliant Angela had the foresight to check the refrigerator for the leftovers of the prototype I injected.' At this he smiled at Angela, who returned it shyly.

Nobody said anything for a moment or two before Sebastian broke the silence. 'So what now?'

'Now we get what we came for,' Franz replied. 'I still intend to share my invention with the world and for that to happen we have to get out of here.'

'And how long will it take to get the data?'

Franz closed his eyes briefly, stating upon reopening them: 'Done.'

'Oh. Right. Let's go then,' Sebastian suggested, surprised that something finally went as planned.

As they all exited the room they saw Bruno still standing next to Victoria scowling while she looked as cool as ever.

'What do we do with her?' Angela asked.

'We take her with us,' came Franz' voice from Sebastian's wrist. Checking it he saw the virtual visage of the not quite late scientist winking at him.

'Oh now you're on my wrist?' he said, not thrilled at the prospect.

'Halfie was kind enough to set up a link, makes communicating a bit easier don't you think?'

'Undeniably, but that doesn't mean I have to like it does it,' he retorted, but decided to move things along instead of debating. 'What do we do with her if we take her with us?'

'We hand her over to the police. I've got plenty of electronic evidence of her various transgressions, including conspiring to kill her husband. She'll go away for a long time, believe me.'

'I see, fair enough. All that's left is getting out of here I guess.'

'Not a problem,' Bruno said from behind them. 'What most people don't know is that there are certain passcards which are "all-access" and don't require other forms of authentication. They can only be issued by the CEO, but I'll bet you anything that humpty and dumpty over there have them. They sure as shit don't figure in any of our security databases.'

'Let's check it out,' Sebastian agreed.

'Look out!' Lars screamed as he spotted the twin Bruno had knocked unconscious grabbing his brother's rifle and preparing to fire. None of them had any weapons and there was no cover to be had in time. The killer smiled a cold smile, said: 'Bye bye...' and promptly fell flat on his face completely lifeless as a loud gunshot rang through the lab.

'Fuckin' cunt,' came the rasping voice of Dweazil who was now sitting up with a gun in one hand while he was massaging his chest with the other. 'The fucker shot me right in the family jewels he did, look at this! Some of these chains have been in my family for generations!' He was now inspecting the melted, tangled mess of necklaces on his chest which had absorbed the impact from the energy weapon earlier.

Sebastian laughed. 'I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad you're not dead Dweazil.'

Everybody else also started chuckling in relief, except Dweazil who now pointed the gun at Sebastian. 'I don't know what you're laughing about mate, I'm the one with the gun and I came here to fuck you up.'

Everybody fell silent again, watching Dweazil as he stared hard at Sebastian, squinting his eyes menacingly.

'Ahh, fuck it all to hell!' he shouted and threw the gun in his lap. 'This is not how it was supposed to go! I was supposed to get the jump on you, stick the gun in your face and watch you kack yourself, but now the moment's completely gone!' He looked extremely dejected and started staring at the floor.

'Sooo, you're not going to kill me right at this moment?' Sebastian hesitantly inquired.

'Nah, I'll get ya some other day ya bastard,' Dweazil replied sullenly. 'Just help me out of here before I change me mind.'

'Right you are,' Sebastian agreed, following up with a line he'd wanted to say for a long time but never had the opportunity: 'Let's blow this popsicle stand.'

This earned him a lot of strange looks, compelling him to explain the expression, which he hated. 'You know, popsicle as in ice-cream and stand as in... stand? And by blowing I mean... you know what, just forget it, let's go.' Now it was his turn to be miffed after his great exit line had been ruined, leaving Bruno to secure the passcards, which the twins turned out to have, and Lars to help up the struggling Dweazil who was having trouble with his casts and bandages.

They all exited the lab and managed to squeeze into the service elevator. As they passed the twin Sebastian had shot between the eyes Angela gave Sebastian a mock distrustful look. 'I thought you said you hated guns?'

'I do, I detest them, but I never said I wasn't any good with them,' he grinned back.

They had the passcards to allow them to exit undetected, but it was better to play it safe and avoid the main entrance. Ten minutes later they were all standing next to Angela's car, except Dweazil who'd scurried off the moment they were outside the Tincorp compound. Sebastian was looking wistfully at the towers through the open sides of the parking building.

'Are you alright Sebastian?' Angela said.

'Mmm? Oh. Yes, I'm fine,' he replied with a small smile. 'It's just that...well...I always dreamt of being in a situation where I managed to save the day and then exit the building in the nick of time just before it blew up. Optionally followed by a long passionate kiss with... whoever was there really. Female I hasten to add!'

'You mean something like this?' Franz' voice squawked from his wrist. A second later a massive explosion rocked the top of Tower 1 as the entire laboratory was incinerated.

'That'll have to do,' Sebastian smiled. 'That'll have to do.'

'No it won't,' Angela added, grabbing Sebastian by the lapels of his trench-coat and kissing him passionately while behind them the fire raged, sending plumes of smoke across Chiswick.

Epilogue

The first thing Sebastian became aware of as he regained consciousness was the sound of waves lapping against the shore, closely followed by the smell of sand, sun-lotion and pineapple. Slowly he opened his eyes, squinting against a bright sun shining from a clear blue sky. He was on a beach. The kind of beach you only saw in brochures and which was always populated by models. There were no models in sight though as the beach was completely empty. As he looked around, suddenly a female form broke the surface of the water and started wading towards the shore. She was dark-haired, petite and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and not just because she was wearing a bikini, although that certainly didn't detract from the experience.

She made it to the beach and continued in a straight line for where Sebastian was sitting, making his heart race as she got closer and closer. After what seemed like an eternity she was right in front of him, where she stopped and sat down astride his lap. From this position she put her hands behind his head, looked him deep in the eyes and leaned in for a long, moist kiss. She tasted like strawberries.

Sebastian half-expected her to disappear the moment their lips touched, but 10 seconds and a considerable amount of fluid exchange later she was still there, smiling at him. He was sitting in a beach chair, wearing Bermuda shorts with not a Fedora or a trench-coat in sight.

'Hello my angel,' he said with a big smile.

'Hello to you too Mr. Poe,' she replied, mirroring his smile.

She was about to kiss him again when he pulled back slightly.

'You know, it was really great the way Franz was able to hack Tinycorp with Halfie's help and erase all records of us being there, wasn't it? I mean, why didn't we think about how easy it would be for them to look at the footage of the surveillance cameras and backtrack to find out who had entered the building?' He made a "duh" expression.

'Yes, quite,' Angela agreed and tried to kiss him, but once more he pulled back.

'And it was also extremely nice of him to set us both up with several tons of cash from his estate, allowing us to take a long and, let's be honest, well deserved holiday on a private beach.'

Angela nodded and attempted another kiss that was also thwarted.

'It's just...'

'What?' she asked in mock annoyance.

'Well... couldn't we have gone just by ourselves?'

He turned and looked to his left where a small table was standing, Halfie sitting next to it, tongue lolling. On the table was a terminal with cables running all the way back to the beach hut and on the screen was the smiling image of Franz winking at him.

'Hello!' he said happily.

Angela smiled and shook her head, ordered Halfie to turn around by way of the universal index finger stirring motion and resolutely flipped the terminal over so the screen faced downwards, earning a muffled shout of disappointed protest from Franz.

'Now,' she murmured, running her fingers through Sebastian's hair. 'Where were we?'

The End