

7 Days In May

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Day 1

=10:29 hrs=

Frank Booker sighed as he read the report lying on his desk, his pudgy finger running down the pages picking out the relevant details. He fidgeted in his seat, not really believing his Director of Research would have had the audacity to turn in such a negative piece of work.

“God damned woman,” he muttered, flicking over another page, scanning it with his steel-blue eyes while wiping his forehead with a man-size tissue. Booker was running to fat and tended to sweat in the enclosed glass cage that was his office.

As he read, Booker tapped a pen on the desktop, his small, almost feminine mouth - framed by ruddy jowls - pursed in concentration. He cursed again, wondering how he had ever employed such an unsophisticated scientist in the first place. A doctor she might be but one with little imagination about posing a resolution. If Booker’s army career had taught him nothing else it had made him realise that fortitude made the man.

Booker’s favourite lament when drinking his evening port at the Duck and Drake was the way that the youth of today expected everything to be handed to them on a silver plate.

“Where is the effort, the drive,” he’d ask anyone willing to listen.

Booker slammed the report shut and removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a forefinger and thumb. Leaning back in his chair, he swung it around to face the huge picture window behind him, staring across the grounds of the facility he’d managed for the past six years.

The sun was high, glinting from the razor-wire atop a high electrified fence paralleling Military Road. The name always brought a smile to Booker’s lips, reminding him of better times. Military Road ran south-east along the Isle of Wight’s coast line, winding its way through scattered villages. It was a pleasant walk at this time of year but one Booker hadn’t been able to take for some months. The project was burying him under complexities that should have been resolved by his staff.

What the hell was he paying them for, he wondered.

Closing his eyes, he pictured his golden retirement fund disappearing because some stupid bitch couldn’t do her job properly. Breathing deeply he watched two gulls skimming low over the sea, trying to calm himself.

The facility he administered, designated Area 7 by the authorities, but known by the staff as ‘The Camp’, had been set up in the late 1990s to research pharmaceutical methods of improving warfare. Booker was offered the post of Director General after he’d retired from the forces. Sir Craig Holland, an old army comrade, had put forward his name, smoothing the way by reaching out to the numerous government contacts he’d built up over the years. It was the loyalty shown to him by Sir Craig that had carried Booker through his initial doubts about the latest project that they were researching.

The Aggression Stimulation Project, or AspByte as it was quickly christened, had raised some serious doubts in Booker’s mind, but Sir Craig had visited Area 7 personally, explaining how important the Government considered the project to be.

Sir Craig was Chairman of Biosphere Cojoin Ltd, a company supplying drugs to the armed forces. He had assured Booker that there was no conflict of interests in this latest undertaking and Booker had taken his word on the matter - after all the man was a retired General, a member of COBRA, and Military Advisor to the Prime Minister.

Sir Craig explained that the Aggression Stimulation Project was being set up by the army to explore the feasibility of producing a drug capable of raising aggression levels in their troops, going on to tell him that Human Rights issues were chipping away at their success rates in such places as Afghanistan - a theatre where the enemy had no such considerations to worry about. And Booker had to admit that after reading media reports of families lining up to sue the government for not supplying proper equipment to its soldiers, he could understand that point of view.

While Sir Craig continued his inspection of the facility, he expanded on the army’s aim of forming a small, select fighting unit within the Gurkha Regiment. These soldiers, treated with the new drug, would form a compact fighting force that would terrorise any enemy into submission. Despite Sir Craig’s gushing enthusiasm, Booker had a difficult time coming to terms with the doubts forming in his mind.

Bringing his thoughts to the matter at hand, Booker turned back to his desk, dropping the report into his top drawer. Walking to a filing cabinet across the office, he pulled a keyring from his pocket, sorting through it, trying a couple in the lock before finding the right one.

Returning to his desk he sat down, dropping the file he’d taken from the drawer in front of him with little enthusiasm. The AspByte file was thick and Booker spread it open on his desk, wiping his forehead as he searched for any clues as to what pressure he might bring to bear.

The file indicated that the early research had gone well, the subjects - initially rats but later cats - displaying an awesome aggression, attacking their handlers at every opportunity - but the project had stalled. The problem facing the team now was finding a method of controlling the aggression. Something they hadn’t yet accomplished.

Dr Sheena McKenzie, Booker’s flame-haired Director of Research had even tried advanced viral techniques but to no avail. Now she was convinced that it couldn’t be done, recommending that he close the project down.

Booker didn’t accept her analysis, feeling nothing but contempt for somebody who gave up so easily. If it couldn’t be done one way, they would find an alternative. They had to, a lot of money, and his own future was tied up in this project. She just needed the right motivation and it was up to him to find it. He continued reading her file, pouring over every little detail.

Some time later Booker closed the file and picked up the phone, punching out a number, tapping the file with his fingertips while he waited for it to connect. The problem needed dealing with quickly, he couldn't afford these doubts about the success of AspByte getting farther up the line.

Booker's thoughts were interrupted and he scowled at the desktop. "Oh yes. Is that you Dr Vasant? Yes, good, listen. I've got this report in front of me from Dr McKenzie recommending that the project be terminated. Can you explain what the hell's been going on over there for the past eighteen months? I was given to understand from your reports that it was on schedule."

Booker listened to the deep voice issuing from the handset, muttering a few, ah ha's and yes I see's while the Head of Research for the AspByte Project, Dr Mani Vasant, gave his excuses and recommendations.

Booker cut him short. "Well Dr Vasant, thank you very much. That's very interesting. I'll call you again later, after I've had a word with Dr McKenzie."

Booker replaced the telephone in its cradle, a thoughtful expression on his face. He hadn't said goodbye to Vasant, but then he never did engage in social niceties with his staff, not seeing the need to.

Gazing at the ceiling, he considered what he'd just been told, then buzzed through to his secretary, ordering a cup of tea before sitting back in his chair to mull things over.

If Dr Vasant was right, then the project could be pushed ahead with just a few months delay. Nodding, he wiped the back of his neck. He could deal with that. Sir Craig knew, as well as anybody, that such research never went smoothly or quickly. Digging in his desk drawer Booker got out his dicta-phone. He'd better get an alternative report drafted for McKenzie to sign straight away, time was of the essence.

Feeling pleased with himself, Booker clicked the machine on. "Report to Sir Craig Holland," he began to dictate. "Use the crested paper and head it 'COBRA Eyes Only'.

The office door opened and a well dressed woman walked in, placing a china teacup and saucer on his desk. Turning to leave, the secretary's eyebrows rose when she heard a muttered, "Thank you Sheila."

My, the old man must be in a good mood today, she thought. Wonder whose head is on the chopping block this time. Booker picked up the telephone again and punched out another number.

=14:15 hrs=

Sheena McKenzie gazed from her office window, blue eyes reflecting the bright sunlight. She hated the high chain-link fence surrounding her working world, The gate security and the identification cards they all had to wear made Area 7 seem more like a prison at times. It stifled her creativeness, chipped away at the confidence that had allowed her to realise her dream of becoming the Director of such a prestigious government facility in the first place.

That is if her latest report hadn't put paid to that particular little dream, she thought, staring through the window with a troubled frown creasing her forehead.

Sheena had grown up in a small village on the east coast of the Scottish Highlands, her early childhood spent roaming the fields surrounding her parent's smallholding. She would often come back from her wanderings clutching a glass jar containing some insect or small creature she'd found, and when she got home she would always run to her father to ask him what it might be.

He always gave her the same answer, "I don't know Sheena boy, but if you leave it in the shed, when I've finished work we'll find out together."

And they always had, delving into her father's many books - a large eclectic collection that he'd built up over the years.

Although he worked on a small-holding, hard physical work, her father always found time for Sheena, sometimes accompanying her on her searches for new creatures. He fancied himself as something of an amateur naturalist and his bubbling enthusiasm had rubbed off on her at an early age. She still remembered his crinkly, sunburnt face and the smell of stale smoke that always hung about him, with fond memories.

Although poor, Sheena's family had unlimited pride and enthusiasm in their daughter's abilities, supporting her throughout her studies at university; her mother even taking on an extra job to help supplement the meagre grant. Sheena had studied hard, gaining a doctorate in virology - a subject that had fascinated her since secondary school - only to join the ranks of the great unemployed who swelled the Job Centres after the bank meltdowns of 2010. Sheena spent the next two years helping out on the family small-holding, convinced that her education had been an utter waste of time.

It had been an accidental meeting with her old university supervisor during a family trip to Edinburgh that had led to her applying for the Directorship of Area 7 - a name that always brought dark thoughts of conspiracy theories to her mind. No-one had been more surprised than her when a letter dropped through the front door late one afternoon offering her the position, and would she start straight away. Her mother and father had been ecstatic, even taking her to the small local hotel where they had a celebration dinner, telling anyone who would listen how intelligent their daughter was.

Sheena was standing in front of her office window, hands on hips, studying her reflection, a soft smile spread on her face at the memories. At five-seven and nine stones, Sheena was what she liked to think of as curvaceous. Waves of red hair framed a pale, round face, highlighting wide blue eyes, a stub nose and full lips. She didn't consider herself beautiful, but knew a lot of guys - especially Gary Knowles, the laboratory technician working in the animal house - found her bright hair and soft Scottish burr attractive. The thought brought a slight flush to her face and her smile grew wider. Gary had asked her out for a drink on more than one occasion and they'd had one date but so far nothing serious had come of it.

Jumping when the telephone cut across her thoughts, Sheena turned from the window and crossed to her desk. Her office was fairly large, with sparse furnishings; a modern glass desk on which sat a telephone and a large flat-screened

monitor, a low coffee table set between two comfortable three-seater settees for visitors, and three grey coloured filing cabinets which sat against the door wall. No pictures, no certificates, nothing to give a hint of who used the office. Her desk was clear of paperwork. Sheena had always been a clear-desk person, hating the papers and personal stuff some people cluttered their workspace with.

Picking up the telephone, Sheena's forehead creased when she heard Booker's voice. She'd never got on with Frank Booker, disliking his attitude to the staff at Area 7, women in particular. She sometimes wondered why he'd employed her in the first place. Listening to him speaking she could almost smell the faint odour of sweat that always hung about him.

"Dr Mckenzie, I want to see you in my office at three-thirty. We need to discuss your report."

Before she could reply with a, "Yes sir! Thank you sir!" or an, "Up yours sir!" Booker had rung off.

Sheena couldn't remember having met such an arrogant man before joining Area 7. Running her hands through her hair, she checked her watch. Two-fifteen. Settling down at her desk, she opened a drawer and pulled out a copy of her report. Knowing her superior as she did, it would pay dividends to memorise every comma and dot in it. He had a mind like a steel trap and he used it to great effect.

Seventy-five minutes later Sheena was standing outside Frank Booker's office, waiting for him to acknowledge her knock. Unlike herself, he always had his door firmly closed and appeared to take great delight in keeping his visitors waiting. Finally she heard a gruff voice from behind the thick wooden panel, and assuming that he'd invited her in, pushed it open.

"You wanted to see me," Sheena said.

"Ah yes, come in. Sit down."

Sheena crossed to a low seat in front of the desk and sat. Booker stared down at her with hooded eyes, bringing a picture of a large toad eyeing up some unfortunate insect to her mind. Pushing the image aside she waited, her face devoid of expression.

Holding up a folder Booker shook it, a tight smile on his face. "I've read your report and talked to Dr Vasant." Sheena started to reply but he cut across her. "I think you need to explore your options a little further Dr Mckenzie. Both Dr Vasant and I agree that there are other options here that should be considered."

Sheena felt her temper rising, struggling to stop the red flush that she knew must be growing on her face.

"Oh? Such as?" she managed in a neutral tone.

Booker leant forward, his voice patronising. "Well, Dr Vasant thinks that a change in the type of subject, something nearer to the physicality of humans for instance, is an avenue that should be explored, and is one that you have not looked at in any depth."

He sat back, hands folded across his stomach, a self-satisfied expression spread across his face that implied he'd won some sort of unspoken argument.

For a few moments Sheena was at a loss but then shrugged, emphasising her words carefully.

"Dr Vasant is not the Director here Mr Booker. Neither is he a virologist."

Booker held up a placatory hand and smiled across at her.

"I'm well aware of Dr Vasant's position and qualifications Dr Mckenzie," he said. "But he is in charge of research on this particular project."

Sheena heard her voice slip into a deeper Scottish accent, something that only happened when she got defensive.

"He may well be Mr Booker, but the fact remains that I am the Director and in my opinion this project should be closed down. If you read Section 14 of my report you'll see that these animals have shown an extremely dangerous amount of uncontrollable aggression. In fact it has grown exponentially since the third trial began in January. We've tried every approach to control the response, with no success. And we still haven't overcome the problem regarding the subjects showing mental instability after four weeks of treatment."

Sheena took a breath, trying to control the tremble that had entered her voice. This man always ended up infuriating her. He was so pig-headed. She laced her fingers, wishing that the Director General was a person that one could engage in debate, instead of somebody who refused to see reason.

"I know Mani . . . Dr Vasant," Sheena corrected herself, remembering how much of a stickler for titles Booker was, "thinks that using our TRC inoculation on pigs might help us to overcome the difficulties we're experiencing." She waited a beat, watching Booker nod his head in agreement. "But I must strongly disa . . ."

"Have you tried it?" Booker interrupted, leaning forward.

"Of course not. I've explained in my report why it would make no difference. Besides which, porcine subjects displaying that amount of aggression would be impossible to handle."

Booker looked down at the report, opening it with an impatient flick, turning pages quickly. With a grunt he stopped, running the nail of his forefinger down the page until he reached the section he was seeking. "It states here that, in your opinion," he glanced up at her with a dismissive twitch of his lips, then continued, "changing the experimental subject to a pig will make no significant difference to the outcome of the results gained. Is that correct?"

Sheena nodded silently, not trusting herself to speak.

"The use of the word significant interests me Dr Mckenzie."

Sheena faltered under his stare. "Well . . . it's . . ." Licking her lips, she tried again. "Look, we all know that one can't be one hundred percent certain about anything regarding experiments such as these. It's new territory, especially the use of a joint dual-yCRO DNA and testosterone approach. But this I am certain of . . ." Sheena placed both her hands on his

desk and stood up, leaning forward so that she was standing over him. "What we're undertaking here is far too dangerous Mr Booker and now is the time to call a halt."

Sheena was angry, breathing hard, and suddenly realised that Booker was staring at her chest. The bastard was enjoying this, she realised.

Stepping back from his desk, she gathered herself and managed to smile back down at him. "Will there be anything else Mr Booker?"

"Yes Dr McKenzie, there will. You will restart the experiment using pigs as the main test subjects. I'll have the maintenance department make up some special restraints for handling the animals. If you wish you may put your reservations in writing to me and I'll send them on to the appropriate person. Dr Vasant is waiting for you in the lab to discuss the various options open to us in using this new approach, so I would appreciate it if you would see him immediately you leave here. In the meantime I'll write a holding report explaining your concerns and the actions we are taking." Booker nodded his dismissal, the corners of his lips turned upwards in a tight smile. "That will be all thank you doctor."

Sheena hurried from the Director General's office, denied even the satisfaction of banging the door behind her because it was fitted with a soft-closer. She rushed down the corridor to her own office, her heels sounding angry clacks on the tiled floor.

A short while later the loud crash of a slammed door echoed back down the corridor.

=17:04 hrs=

Gary Knowles laid out twelve Phenobarbital filled syringes, trying to ignore the heavy gloominess that had settled over the lab since Dr Vasant had instructed him to put down all the cats being sent over from the AspByte project. This was the part of the job that Gary really hated - still it had to be done and done humanely.

Gary searched through his clothes, locating his identity card in the back pocket of his jeans. It was bent, the plastic covering curled away from one corner. Like all things Gary owned, the identity card was well past its sell-by date. A girlfriend he'd once taken back to his flat had walked out in disgust at the state it was in; unwashed dishes in the sink, clothes piled everywhere, a big dirty ring around the bathtub. Gary couldn't understand why she'd been so fussy, he'd only cleaned the flat a couple of months earlier and the bed sheets the week before that.

Placing his identity card on the work bench, he rummaged around in a drawer, taking out a small tube of superglue. The tip of his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth in concentration, Gary carefully glued the errant plastic back in place. Then moving across to a steel cabinet, he slid the card through a reader on the door, hearing the soft click of the lock disengaging.

Reaching into the cabinet, Gary lifted out a black plastic box, laying it on the workbench, flicking up the two catches that secured the lid. Inside the box was an anaesthetising dart gun. Checking the weight chart stuck to the inside of the lid, he plucked out twelve coloured darts from the soft foam lining. Supplies were getting low, he needed to order some more. Scribbling himself a reminder on a yellow Stick-it note, he attached it to the side of his computer monitor, where it was instantly lost among the twenty or so others already there.

Placing the dart gun and darts beside the syringes, Gary added the log book that he was required to complete after he'd euthanised the animals. He checked everything once again and nodded.

Yes it was all ready. Now, he told himself, he could take a break before the animals arrived.

Picking up a pair of tongs, Gary removed a beaker of boiling water from a nearby Bunsen burner, pouring the contents into a mug containing the makings of a coffee. Then settling himself on his high stool he picked up The Sun newspaper and turned his attention to the sports page. But no sooner had he taken a sip of his coffee than the two rubber doors leading into the lab slammed open as a powerful looking black man pushed a large trolley through them. The doors swung back and forth behind him with a decreasing clack-clack until they came to a rest. Gary sighed, putting down his mug, folding his newspaper, knowing that this was the end of his short-lived coffee break.

The newcomer gave Gary a big smile, picked up the mug and took a gulp of coffee. "Thanks mate, that's just what I needed after fighting these little bastards." Digging out a thick leather glove from his lab coat, he tossed it to Gary, "Take a gander at that my friend and let your eyes widen in awe."

Holding up the glove, Gary saw that it had been ripped across the palm and was stained with blood.

"Little fucker got me through the top of the cage when I was loading them on the trolley, nearly took my bloody hand off."

Gary glanced at the untidy bandage wrapped around Rudy's hand, shaking his head. "Should take a bit more care with these animals Rudy. You had it looked at yet?"

"Yeah mate. Went to the First Aider. You know, that little blond what works in the canteen? Anyway she had a gander and reckoned I should see the doc, especially as I didn't know what the cats was being used for. Doc Vasant gave me some injection or other, just in case."

Gary walked over to the trolley and pulled free the thick sheeting covering the cages. The animals hissed at him, ears flatten back against their heads, yellow slit-eyes following his every movement.

As Gary walked around the trolley the cats stalked him, slinking low, claws extended, lips pulled back over sharp teeth, mirroring his movements.

Gary frowned at Rudy across the top of the cages, his voice indignant. "What the hell have they been doing over there? I know Doc Vasant said they'd need knocking out before de-caging but this is bloody ridiculous." Gary stepped back as a paw reached out of a cage, snagging his lab coat.

Rudy shrugged. "Don't know mate but whatever it is, remind me not to get caught in a cage with one of them horrors anytime too soon."

Finishing Gary's coffee in a noisy slurp, Rudy made for the doors, taking the mug with him.

"Oy!" Gary shouted, just managing to catch the mug as it came flying back through the air at him.

Chuckling to himself as Rudy's deep laughter faded away down the corridor, Gary shook his head. Putting the mug next to the other four dirty ones already on the worktop, he promised himself a break as soon as he'd taken care of the first few cats.

Pulling on a pair of thick gloves which had small metal inserts sewn into the palms and back and protective tubes in the fingers, Gary picked up the first cage, putting it on the worktop, careful to keep his body out of reach of the sharp claws dabbing the wire bars at him.

Fetching the dart-gun, he loaded it, inserting a small compressed air canister into the end of the butt. Then turning to the cage, he studied the cat inside. It stared back at him with such malice that he recoiled. Feeling a dampness break out on the palms of his hands, Gary shuddered at the thought of what might happen should the animals get loose.

Gary turned the cage around, trying to find the best position to shoot the cat, but it moved with the cage to stay facing him, glaring at him with intelligent eyes. If he hadn't known any better, Gary would have sworn that the animal knew what was about to happen to it. The cat mewed softly, then gave a long hiss.

Taking careful aim, Gary stayed facing the animal, holding the gun around the side of the cage so that he could shoot it in the meaty part of the hind leg. It stood quite still, fur raised along its spine, eyes fixed on him, as though it were trying to memorise every detail of his face. They stood that way for perhaps a minute, then the cat's eyes lost focus and it collapsed.

At once the lab was filled with a loud wailing as the other cats began attacking the sides of their cages. For one terrible moment Gary thought that they might bite their way free. Alarmed, he picked up another dart, quickly thrusting it into the gun but as suddenly as they had started the cats fell silent again.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his lab coat, Gary took a shuddering breath. He'd never experienced anything like this before and it deeply disturbed him. With trembling fingers he placed the dart gun on the worktop and cracked open the cage door.

Reaching inside he poked the prone cat. It stirred, causing a shot of adrenaline to flood through Gary's body. He gasped, wrenching his hand from the cage, his elbow striking the coffee mugs, dashing them to the floor with the crash of smashing china.

Swearing under his breath Gary slammed the cage door shut and went off in search of a dustpan and brush. Having cleaned up the mess, he reopened the cage and reached in, pulling the anaesthetised cat out onto the bench, praying that he hadn't left it too long.

Quickly shaving a patch of fur from the cat's foreleg he inserted the syringe into a vein, pushing the plunger home, watching the clear fluid disappear. Pulling the syringe clear, he dropped it into a Sticks Box and sighed, glad that the first cat had been successfully euthanised.

As he turned back to the bench the cat's eyes flicked open and it began scrabbling at the worktop, trying to stand. Gary hurriedly backed off, eyes wide with surprise, heart thumping in his chest. Then the cat's head began to droop and it finally collapsed back onto its side, giving one last drawn-out mewl before laying still. Using a stethoscope Gary tentatively checked the cat's heart, relieved to find that it was dead. Taking a moment to let his own heart rate slow, Gary licked dry lips.

"One down, eleven to go," he muttered.

Working efficiently and quickly, Gary repeated the process on the remaining animals. They had quietened down now, as though accepting their fate, which Gary knew was ridiculous. No animals apart from humans had any sense of their own impending death.

Gary had reached the penultimate cage when he felt his mobile vibrating against his thigh. Pulling it from his jeans, he flipped it open, holding it to his ear.

"That damned man is going to drive me crazy!"

Gary checked the caller ID with a frown. He'd never heard Sheena swear before and wasn't sure that it was actually her calling.

"What's up Sheena? You okay?"

"Not really Gary. Right now I could spit feathers."

Gary glanced at his watch with the feeling that this was going to be a long, cathartic call. He needed to get this job finished, he was already way past the time when he should have left.

He should cut the call short of course, but if he listened sympathetically perhaps he could persuade Sheena to come out for a drink with him. Catching his mobile between cheek and shoulder, Gary made placatory noises as he continued working.

Sheena carried on a tirade about the things she would like to do to Frank Booker in one ear, while the cats wailed and hissed at him in the other, and he began to wonder what he'd done to deserve such venom being thrown at him from all

directions at once.

“Shit!”

The phone slipped from his shoulder and Gary made a grab for it, dropping the cage he'd just picked up. The cage crashed to the floor on one corner, bursting the door open. The large male was out in a flash, jumping up onto the worktop, upending vials and glass containers as it ran from one end of the long bench to the other.

Gary's mobile dropped to the floor and he could hear Sheena's voice calling, asking him what was going on.

The cat turned, its attention on the tinny voice, almost as though it recognised who was speaking. Running back along the worktop it launched itself at the mobile, knocking over a Bunsen burner as it leaped to the floor.

The Bunsen burner landed on Gary's discarded newspaper which caught fire, igniting some spilt ethanol. The top of the workbench broke into a sheet of flames. Backing away, Gary looked around for the fire extinguisher. Hearing a low growl from behind, he glanced back at the cat, eyes widening in disbelief. The cat had somehow managed to mangle its way through his mobile, which now lay in pieces at its feet.

As the flames shot higher, licking the ceiling tiles, the cat looked at him with a murderous expression. Gary ignored the animal, intent on finding the fire extinguisher. He finally spotted it hanging beside the steel cupboard and ran over, pulling it from the bracket, releasing the split-pin locking the handle closed. Before Gary could get back to the fire he felt a weight land on his shoulders and claws rake down the back of his head, ripping his scalp open. Crying out in pain, he dropped the extinguisher, and fell to his knees.

Rolling onto his back Gary managed to dislodge the cat and sit up, skating backwards on his buttocks, dimly aware that somewhere in the distance a fire alarm had begun ringing. The cat stalked around him and he turned with it, eyes tearing from the acrid smoke.

Searching desperately for the dart-gun, Gary spotted it on the worktop, surrounded by flames. He had to get to it now. Scrambling to his feet, Gary launched himself towards the bench, grabbing for the gun.

Yes, yes, he had it.

Turning, coughing, nose filled with fumes, he brought the gun up, a triumphant glow spreading through him.

The cat landed on his face, hissing loudly, back feet scrabbling at his flesh, tearing away the skin, popping out one of his eyes. Dropping the gun, Gary grappled with the cat, twisting back and forth, trying to pull it from his face. His screams rose and fell in time with the wailing of the fire alarm, like the accompaniment of a drunken banshee.

Gary finally managed to tear the cat free and throw it across the lab, groping his way about, his remaining eye blinded by the thick smoke. The cat leapt at him again, knocking him backwards onto the bench where his lab coat soaked up the remains of the spilt ethanol.

Flailing about for a hold, Gary's sleeve burst into flames. Struggling upright, he beat at the flames but just spread them further until they enveloped him. Disorientated, he stumbled towards the lab door, his body now a flaming torch, his screams of agony unheard as the flames burnt away his ears.

Gary had never suffered such agony before. He could smell his own flesh burning, hear the fat in his skin spluttering, feel his delicate tongue blistering. Crashing into the lab doors, he fell backwards to the floor, his last thought, that this must be what hell was really like.

Rudy charged into the lab, ripping off his white coat, smothering the flames on Gary's still burning body, holding his breath at the stench of burning flesh, trying not to throw up at the sight of the blackened skin curling away from his friend's face.

As Rudy battled to put out the flames, the big cat slipped unnoticed between the closing doors, as silent as the man it had just killed.

=19:34 hrs=

“Yes Sir Craig, I appreciate that.”

Booker sat at his desk, twirling his glasses in one hand as he talked on the telephone, a habit he'd picked up years ago. He'd been discussing the fire at Area 7 with Sir Craig Holland for the past ten minutes.

Booker listened to the gruff voice issuing from the earpiece and nodded.

“Yes Sir Craig, the fire totally destroyed one of the smaller laboratories but fortunately our on-site fire-fighters managed to keep it contained to the one area. Regrettably, a young lab technician was killed. We think he accidentally started the fire somehow. Our people are carrying out an investigation as we speak. A member of staff has reported that he used to make coffee using the Bunsen burner.” Booker harrumphed before continuing. “Why these people can't stick to the safety regulations is beyond me. Anyway, our HR department is drafting a press release and our legal people will contact the family of . . .” Booker checked the file, “Gary Knowles, as soon as possible. There will have to be an inquest of course, but there's no doubt about the outcome. Accidental Death.”

Booker listened for some moments, then folded his glasses with one hand, slipping them into an inside pocket.

“Yes Sir Craig, that's correct. We'll start the next round of experiments using the new subjects as soon as I can get them shipped in. It will take about a week. Yes . . . yes. That's the soonest . . . I appreciate you have a lot invested in this. So have I. Good, okay. Yes, I'll keep you updated. Yes I'll send her report as soon as she submits it. Goodbye . . . yes goodbye.”

Replacing the receiver, Booker swung his chair around to face the window, staring out into the night. He wiped his face, tossing the tissue into the waste-paper basket beside his desk, his breathing heavy. He owed Sir Craig his position

here at Area 7, but that didn't mean the man could insult him whenever he felt like it. He could be insufferable when things weren't going the way he wanted.

Booker calmed down and stood up, walking to the window. The sky was clear, the stars bright. An evening when he should be taking his usual quiet stroll down to the local and a nice port, instead of having to explain himself to somebody who had no idea how difficult it was keeping so many egos working together towards one end.

He sighed, promising himself some time in London when he'd sorted this out and things were back to normal. He hadn't been to the flat in ages. Booker's gaze softened as he recalled his last visit - the subdued lighting, the meal, the shared bed. Feeling a little better he turned from the window, a smile puckering his red lips.

Locking his paperwork into a safe, Booker glanced out of the window again, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Putting it down to the stress of the fire, he checked he hadn't left anything lying about that the cleaners might read and headed for the door.

The acrid smell of burnt wood and plastics permeated the corridor, making Booker cough as he gingerly stepped over the fat hose still snaking its way passed his office door. Nodding at a couple of workmen clearing up after the fire, he headed towards the damaged lab to check on progress.

When he got there he could see that the body of the lab technician and the remains of the cats had been removed. The large workbench running the length of the room had been destroyed, as was most of the suspended ceiling. A mangled pile of wire cages lay in a heap against the rear wall and a large black square had been burnt in the floor tiles. The heat generated by the fire must have been incredible.

Leaning over Booker picked up an object from the floor. It was the remains of an identity card, the edges burnt and curled. Turning it over, he saw the face of a young man staring back up at him.

Booker let the card drop back to the floor, wiping his fingers on his trousers as he turned towards the exit. At least the cats had been destroyed, one less thing to worry about.

Sliding his card through the reader, Booker waited for the lift, his mind already busy on the details of the reports he'd have to write tomorrow. The lift arrived with a muted ping and the door slid open. He stepped inside, hitting the button for the roof, leaning back against the cold steel.

As the lift rose up the shaft a sudden thought rose in Booker's mind and he felt all the stress returning. His daughter was expecting him to pick her up from her school on the mainland tomorrow and in all the excitement of the fire he'd forgotten to submit his flight plan and organise his engineer to give the helicopter a once over.

Pulling out his mobile, Booker hurriedly tapped in a number. His secretary should have arrived home by now and it was about time the woman did something to earn the outrageous salary he paid her. Having given his list of orders, Booker rang off, looking at his watch. If he was lucky he could get a quick drink in before dinner with his wife.

The lift stopped with a slight bounce and Booker stepped out into the still night air. Taking a deep breath, he looked up, marvelling at the sight of so many stars. He headed for the helipad and the R22 helicopter waiting there for him.

Settling himself in the cockpit, Booker did a quick start-up check, ran up the engine, took hold of the yoke and eased the machine into the air. He'd be glad to get home, he hated these late nights.

Orientating himself by the lights from a nearby farm-house, he headed towards his mansion, unaware that far below him the noise of his passing had startled a large cat.

=20:08 hrs=

When the helicopter rattled its way overhead, the cat sat back on its haunches, a wild look flashing in its eyes, a paw raised in the air as though it hoped to swipe the noisy machine from the sky. Once the helicopter disappeared into the distance and a silence had returned to the compound, the cat went back to its single-minded search, exploring the high fence that was blocking its escape.

When the cat had tried climbing the fence earlier, it had received an electric shock that threw it to the ground. It had lain on its stomach, licking its scorched paws, its delicate nose inhaling the pungent smell of burnt fur. It lay there for some time, staring at the fence with intelligent yellow eyes, head moving back and forth as though trying to work out what had happened to it.

The cat jerked to its feet, hissing, its heart rate climbing as the ever-present rage grew in intensity. Its brain flooded with chemicals, building the rage until it was an overwhelming unstoppable force, driving it back to the fence and its single-minded search.

Having already received one powerful shock, the cat acted more cautiously, slowly inching its way along the base of the fence, whiskers twitching at the current flowing through the mesh. Ahead it could see bright lights and paused, looking back over its shoulder, seeking out the comforting darkness. It mewed softly, turning back the way it had come.

But the force that had driven its original escape gave the cat no peace, constantly surging from deep within its brain, blinding it to the dangers, evoking one overpowering thought that was repeated with each heartbeat.

Get out. Get out.

The cat turned back, continuing its hunt for a break in the fence.

A little while later it stopped, its head raised, ears swivelling towards the sound of an approaching car. The vehicle stopped at the main gate and a man in a dark uniform walked over, checking with the occupants before opening the big gate and waving them through. The cat watched the man return to the building, studying the gap between the gate and the post as it quickly diminished.

Even though it was tempted by the opening, the bright lights had frightened the animal and it turned away, still too uneasy to leave the shelter of darkness. Instead it bounded across the dark car-park towards the opposite fence, its sleek, muscular body driving it across the tarmac in long leaps, its noiseless footfalls quick and certain.

Reaching the fence the cat stood quietly, sensing the same electrical tension in the mesh that had hurt it before.

The cat felt no disappointment at this discovery, just a deep rage driving it ever onwards - an internal command that swamped its every thought, filled its brain so no other thought remained.

Get out. Get out.

Day 2

=04:31 hrs=

The darkness was lifting when the big cat finally made its way into the village. It was hungry, but with a hunger that threatened no fulfilment.

Its coat was full of sticky seeds, knotted here and there where the fur clumped around them. It wanted to stop and clean itself, nibble and lick the clumps until they were smooth again, but something darker drove it onwards.

The cat slipped down the quiet lanes, searching for food. It had tried killing a mouse earlier but the little creature had escaped, adding to its hunger and rage.

The animal had spent most of the night searching for a way out of the compound, finally discovering an old rabbit run under the fence. It was wary at first, never having been out in the open countryside before. Having been born and raised in a cage, it was now surrounded by strange scents and frightening sounds, but little by little, with the help of its deep seated rage, it overcame the fear.

The cat's nostrils flared when it caught a scent on the night air, recognising the odour from its time in the cage. Setting off at a fast lope, cutting through the back gardens of some nearby cottages, it jumped the low fences with ease, its hunger growing.

Finding the dish that had been left out for the hedgehogs, it quickly gulped down the moist contents, then crossing to a small garden pond, took a drink and spent some time flicking out the small goldfish onto the bank, eagerly adding them to its meal.

Hearing a low hiss the cat turned its head, back raised in an arch.

Three female cats stood side by side on a garden bench, watching with hooded eyes, heads bowed in submission. The big cat smelt the odour and knew one of them was ready to mate. It turned to face them and one by one they jumped to the ground, waiting for the big male to come to them.

The mating was quick and savage, the male's sharp teeth biting into the female's neck as it mounted, saliva mixing with blood. Afterwards the male bit the other two females on the neck as well, ensuring its teeth sank deeply.

Then the cat's split up, the females returning to their own haunts - the houses where the occupants rose to a new morning, a few wondering why their pet had not yet returned home.

The big cat set a steady pace, working its way across a field, something deep inside it, pumping out its message of rage.

As the first rays of daylight lightened the sky, the cat felt a calmness descend and for the first time since it could remember, it felt sated, able to concentrate on something other than the rage it had always known.

It found a sheltered bush, curling up under its branches, the tip of its tail covering its sensitive nose.

Dropping into a deep sleep, the cat dreamed of running free across the fields, but always close behind was the snapping jaw of the dark cage trying to recapture it.

=09:07 hrs=

Frank Booker closed the carved wooden doors of his mansion behind him and smiled in pleasure. One of his gardeners was busy raking the driveway smooth, while another clipped the low hedges bordering it. He had bought the place seven years ago when he'd gained his position as Director General of Area 7. He and his wife, Helen, had spent months looking over all the houses for sale on the Isle of Wight and in the end Booker had got so fed up that he'd threatened to leave the new job and go back to London if she didn't find somewhere quickly.

Two weeks later Helen had driven him to Bathingbourne. As they topped a low rise, Booker saw a large house - more a mansion really - set in the most beautiful grounds. The smile on his wife's face grew wider as she guided the car up the driveway, stones crunching under its tyres. The sun flickering through the hedges across the windscreen made them screw up their eyes, so they missed the best views that first day.

Stepping from the car, Booker breathed in the scented air and joined in Helen's smile. He remained silent as he trailed his wife around the house but was suitably impressed. It was a magnificent place.

Booker had wanted it and had got it. Two months later he and his family moved in, and after much pleading, his daughter Carolyn, got her cat.

Helen, unable to conceive, had insisted that they adopt a daughter. That had been twelve years ago and now, after thirty years of a cold marriage, Booker and his wife had grown so distant that Carolyn was the only thing they had left in common.

Booker went his way, Helen went hers - she spending most of her time at committees, fêtes, and such like - Booker at his desk, except for the odd trip to London now and then to visit his lover.

Bracing his shoulders Booker smiled.

Not a bad life really, not bad at all.

Taking a deep breath Booker gazed at the sky. The sun was shining through scattered, broken clouds. He would have no trouble with his flight this morning. His secretary had submitted his flight plan to London City Airport, so he was ready to be on his way. With luck it should take him about forty minutes and after his meeting with Sir Craig Holland he'd stop off at the flat before picking up his daughter and her friend from their school. He should be back in time for his afternoon weekly meeting with Dr Vasant with time to spare.

The front door opened and Booker's wife stepped out under the portico.

"My, what a beautiful day," she said, bending over to fuss the cat that had twisted itself around her legs. "Go on, you bad boy. Go and do your business."

Finished with the cat, she straightened up, walking out into the sunshine beside Booker.

He turned and smiled at her. "You haven't called me a bad boy for years Helen. Are you feeling quite well?"

Helen Booker turned and watched the gardeners at work for a moment. "I meant the cat," she said after a pause, her voice neutral.

"I know," answered Booker with a wry smile.

Helen shot a look at him, distaste clear in her eyes. Unlike herself, who had kept her slim figure with constant exercise, he'd piled on the weight and she wondered for the thousandth time why she'd married him all those years ago.

She held out a white plastic box. "I made you some sandwiches for the flight," she said.

"Why thank you Helen. That's very kind of you."

"When will you be back?"

"Probably about five with a bit of luck. I've got a meeting at half past two with Vasant at Area 7."

Helen sighed loudly, turning back to the house. "Stupid name," she muttered.

"I didn't name it Helen. I just work there."

The front door closed behind him and Booker walked down the long flight of stone stairs to the drive.

"Morning, Mr Booker," the gardener tending the drive greeted him, nodding his head. "Nice 'un."

Booker nodded back before disappearing around the side of the house.

"Stuck up bastard," the man muttered. "No wonder his old lady is always out on the razzle."

Booker crunched his way across the yellow stones towards the helipad located behind the house. As he passed a green wheelie bin, he opened it and dumped the box of sandwiches inside. He'd get himself a couple of nice bacon rolls at the airport before he drove in for his meeting with Sir Craig - he hated the salad muck that Helen favoured.

Rounding the house Booker saw their cat loping down towards the stream running along the bottom of the garden. A cruel look entered his eyes as he hoped the damned thing drowned itself. It was always covering him with hairs and pulling the threads in his suits. Maybe he should take it to the project for Dr Vasant to work on.

With that cheery thought buoying him up, Booker struck out with a jaunty step.

Having been told that Booker was going to use his helicopter today, the flight-engineer had checked it earlier in the morning. Booker stopped for a moment, studying the machine. The sun glinted from the clear perspex canopy and its blue paintwork shone like a treat. He still couldn't believe that he was the owner of such an aircraft. It had been a dream of his since childhood to own one and now his position as Director General of Area 7 had given him the means to indulge his fantasy.

As Booker settled himself into the helicopter's padded seat, he pulled his iPhone from his suit pocket and hit one of the quick-dial buttons. After a moment a youthful voice answered. Booker's heart did a flip in his chest and his forehead broke out in a light sheen.

"I'm coming into London for a meeting," he said into the mobile. "Yes, yes, I'll be finished my meeting by noon. I have an hour to spare, so I thought perhaps, lunch at the flat?"

Booker listened for a moment, his penis swelling in his trousers. They'd agreed to use the euphemism 'lunch' because it was so easy to hack a mobile. A man in Booker's position needed to be very careful.

Blowing a kiss into the iPhone, Booker slid it back into his pocket and strapped himself in. Five minutes later he was hovering over his mansion, marvelling at the view spread out below - his well kept gardens surrounded by fields, and over to the south, the waves sweeping their way across the sea before crashing onto the shore.

=09:45 hrs=

Booker looked down at the airport, talking into his headset. Air Control directed him to the end of the runway - a stand beside a large shed, where he settled his helicopter. Struggling his way out of the cabin, he thought yet again that he needed to lose some weight - at this rate he wouldn't pass his next medical. The last one had been a pretty close call and he was convinced that it had only been his invite for the doctor to attend lunch at the Savoy that had got him through it.

Booker poked his head around the door of the shed, his nose crinkling at the smell of oil and diesel fuel. Spotting a man in a pair of greasy overalls, he called out, "Is my car ready?"

"I don't know mate. You'll have to ask in the office. Know where it is?"

"Of course I know where it is!"

"Then why are you bothering me? Can't you see I'm busy?"

Booker held his temper, knowing from bitter experience that it was useless expecting any respect from such uncouth individuals. Striding over to the office, he pushed his way through the glass doors and stalked over to the young receptionist.

He gave her a frosty smile. "I ordered a car," he said.

"One moment please."

The girl checked something on her computer screen, took a key from a drawer under the desk, placed it in front of him and held out a ball-point pen. Pointing to a box on the blue form with a long lacquered nail, she smiled at him.

"Would you sign here please sir."

Ignoring the proffered ball-point, Booker pulled out his own Schaeffer fountain pen, signed the form with a flourish and pushed it back at her.

He was walking away from the desk when the girl called out to him, "Oh sir, don't you want us to check the vehicle with you? For scratches and such like?"

"Not necessary, young lady," Booker called back over his shoulder. "The car belongs to me and if anyone has scratched it then you can start looking for a new job."

The silver Peugeot Coupe was parked at the side of the building, its fat tyres still gleaming from the valeting it had received that morning. If there was one thing Booker hated, it was a dirty car.

Easing himself into the seat, he drove out of the airport, flashing his pass at the security guard before turning right on Hartmann Road, narrowly missing a cyclist who gave him a one-fingered salute. Booker pretended he hadn't noticed, his face flushing at the insult.

Should be in the army, that sort, he thought. That would teach the bastard some sort of respect. Probably an out of work scrounger on his way to collect his benefits. Booker felt his indignation rising and gripped the wheel tighter. They deserved putting in boot-camp, the lot of them.

Feeling somewhat better after his mental outburst, Booker negotiated his way over Connaught Bridge and on to the A112.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, if slow, and he grunted his satisfaction when he finally pulled into the underground car park of Biosphere Cojoin Ltd, the pharmaceutical company owned by Sir Craig Holland.

Finding an empty visitor's bay, Booker turned off the engine and sat thinking, the soft ticking of the cooling engine marking the passage of time. Finally he had worked out his strategy for the upcoming meeting and looked at his watch, seeing that he still had twenty minutes until his appointment. Good, he'd forgotten to pick up a sandwich at the airport, but had time to get one now.

=10:37 hrs=

Settling himself at the red-rimmed, white plastic table, Booker pursed his lips at the greasy surface. Wiping it with a tissue from the chrome dispenser, he looked around at the scruffily dressed patrons. He smiled to himself, already luxuriating under the admiring glances he imagined they were giving him when they thought he wasn't looking. Plucking an almost invisible speck of dust from his lapel, he dropped it to the floor with a twist of his thumb and forefinger, then picked up the steaming mug of tea he'd fetched from the counter.

While he waited for his bacon rolls, Booker studied the revised report Dr McKenzie had written up yesterday. They had discussed it at length, trying to find ways of presenting the results in a better light, but no matter how hard they had tried, everything pointed to the same conclusion, the serum was a total failure. He'd just have to persuade Sir Craig that using pigs would bring better results. He knew the man wasn't going to like this, banking as he was, on Biosphere Cojoin Ltd being the lead supplier of the new drug to the forces.

Booker sat back with a grunt when his rolls arrived. Picking one up he took a big bite, chewing hungrily, his mind still pondering the best approach to take with Sir Craig.

There had to be an answer, he told himself half-heartedly.

Halfway through his second roll, Booker's iPhone rang and he answered it, a flutter settling in his stomach as he recognised the voice. Even though he was in a place where nobody would know him, Booker turned his body away from those around him, cupping his hands around the mobile so nobody could overhear what he was saying.

"Yes, I'm just having a quick roll," Booker said, chuckling at the reply he got. "No, shouldn't be too long. Just got a meeting with someone rather boring first."

Booker continued the conversation for a further five minutes then ended the call, careful to remove the number from his mobile before returning it to his pocket. He sat at the table, staring into space, his half-finished roll forgotten, his mind back at the flat and the joys waiting for him there.

Perhaps he should take a present with him, he hadn't done that for a few weeks. A watch perhaps, or a ring. Checking his watch he saw that he didn't have time and got up, brushing some loose crumbs from the front of his jacket.

The walk back to Biosphere Cojoin Ltd only took a few minutes and Booker soon found himself standing in a fast lift, the floor indicator marking his passage as he ascended the vast building.

The lift door opened and Booker stepped out into a large space fronted by windows overlooking the River Thames. Smiling at the receptionist, he introduced himself.

"Of course Mr Booker. If you'll just take a seat over there, Sir Craig will be with you directly."

Booker sat down, lost in dreams of one day having an office in a building such as this.

=11:59 hrs=

Frank Booker walked into Sir Craig Holland's office and sat in one of the guest armchairs, sinking into the plush leather.

"Tea, coffee?" Holland ask him, taking the chair opposite.

"Tea please Sir Craig."

"Lap sang? Assam? Indonesian? Or perhaps a green?"

"Assam please Sir Craig."

Holland looked over at his PA, who was still waiting politely just inside the door. "Two Assam please Gordon."

His PA gave a curt nod and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

"Cigar?" Holland asked his guest, studying him carefully.

Sir Craig Holland had fought his way up the political ladder by being a good judge of character, and he judged the man sitting in front of him now to be weak and greedy.

Booker shook his head and leant over the arm of his chair, retrieving a file from the slim briefcase he'd set on the floor when he'd first sat down.

"My dear man," Holland said as Booker set the file on his knees. "Let's at least wait for our tea shall we? So tell me, how is that delightful daughter of yours getting on in that boarding school I recommended?"

"Oh she's doing fine. She seems to be enjoying it." Booker took a tissue from his pocket, wiping his forehead.

"How old is she now? Fourteen, fifteen?"

Booker moved in his seat, embarrassed at being asked such personal questions. Holland didn't miss the fidget.

"She's fourteen." Booker was saved any further discomfort by a quick double knock on the office door.

"Come," Holland called out.

His PA entered again with a large tray and proceeded to lay out the cups, saucers and teapot on the glass table between them. Adding a milk jug and a pot of sugar, he looked at Holland. "Will that be all sir or do you want me to pour?"

"No thank you Gordon. We'll let it draw awhile."

His PA walked across the deep piled carpet as though he was floating a few millimetres above it, bringing the tray to his side as he exited the office.

Holland smiled, his eyebrows arched. "Walks like a woman, don't you think Frank?"

Booker looked startled and pulled his attention back from the door, realising that he'd been staring at the man. "Can't say I noticed Sir Craig," he said, wiping his forehead again.

Holland leant over and poured them both a cup of tea, putting a splash of milk in the cups first. Then the office echoed with the chinking of china as both men stirred their tea. Sitting back with the saucer balanced on the palm of one hand and the tea-cup held in the other, Holland took a sip and nodded.

"A good choice Frank." Clinking the cup back on the saucer, he sat and smiled at Booker. "So, what brings you to my office? It must be urgent to get you scurrying all the way over here at such an early hour."

Booker put his cup and saucer on the table and sat back in the comfy chair. Holland noticed a grease stain on the man's waistcoat. It looked to be new.

"Well Sir Craig," Booker began, tapping the file on his knees nervously. "For obvious reasons I didn't want to chance discussing this over the telephone."

Holland smiled again and took another sip of his tea, nodding for Booker to continue.

"Well it seems . . . that is, Dr McKenzie and Dr Vasant, seem to think that what we are trying to do with AspByte is impossible. The serum causes brain damage to the subjects within four weeks. Every test so far confirms this."

Holland didn't show any emotion, hiding his contempt for the man sitting opposite him. It interested him that Booker used the acronym instead of the full title of the project, something he would normally avoid. He must be nervous.

When he'd put Booker in charge of Area 7, he'd expected better from him. For the past two years he'd sunk millions of pounds into the project, risking everything; his reputation and yes, even his freedom if things went wrong at this stage. He'd side-stepped the regulatory bodies to develop this drug, knowing that they would have vetoed its use. Maybe the UK was too left-wing to use such a serum, but he knew other countries that would welcome it with open arms. He smiled to himself at the thought.

"And what do you think Frank?" he asked.

Booker flipped open the file, searching through the pages until he found what he was looking for, holding it so that Holland could see, pointing at a graph. Holland raised an eyebrow.

"Well you see. Look at the graph, the model is telling us that it can't be done."

Booker sounded pathetic and Holland thought back to why he'd worked so hard to place him at Area 7 seven years ago. The man's only saving grace was that he had a secret and men with secrets were easily manipulated. Tenting his fingers, Holland tapped them on his chin, his eyes hardening.

"You told me you were making good progress, Frank."

"And we are. We were. It's just . . ."

Holland leant forward, slapping the palm of his hand on the arm of his chair, watching Booker jump in his seat. The file fell to the floor, papers spreading out across the carpet.

"I don't want to hear negatives Frank. Do you understand that?" Holland's heart thumped as contempt surged through him. Standing up, he leant over Booker. "I've invested good money in you Frank, and I want results, or else."

"But . . . but . . ."

Holland calmed himself with a few deep breaths and sat down again, trying to look earnest. "Frank, let me lay it out for you. This deal, the Aggression Drug Project, is worth a lot of money to me. I've kept it from the mainstream research establishments and the M.H.P.R.A. for reasons which I don't intend discussing with you. What I am saying is that this drug will be developed. I don't give a damn if the soldiers receiving it are idiots in four weeks or not. In four weeks a war can be won. Do I make myself clear?"

Booker found himself trembling at Sir Craig's obvious anger. He nodded, still finding it hard to believe that Sir Craig had confessed to bypassing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. It was unheard of.

"You want me to press ahead with development, even though the drug will adversely affect those using it?" Booker checked in a tight voice.

"Isn't that what I've just told you Frank?"

Holland watched as Booker shook his head and stood up, a determined look on his face. He knew exactly what Booker was about to say. Now the bloody man had decided to take a moral stance. Typical.

“No Sir Craig. No, I can’t do that.”

“Sit down Frank.” When Booker didn’t move Holland raised his voice. “SIT DOWN!”

Booker sat and Holland smiled at him, reaching under his chair, pulling out a large brown envelope. Leaning over, he dropped it in Booker’s lap.

“Here. A present for you,” he said.

Booker looked at the envelope with a puzzled expression.

“Take a good look Frank. It’s photographs of you and your lover. My man took them last month. Really Frank, I didn’t know you could be quite so athletic.”

Booker felt the blood draining from his face and sank down in his chair like a beaten child. His ears popped when he moistened his dry lips. The whole room seemed disconnected for a moment and he realised that he was hyperventilating.

“Come on Frank, have a look. After all I paid good money for them.” Holland snatched the envelope from Booker’s hand, tearing it open and tossing the contents in his face.

Booker felt the pictures hit him and flutter to the floor. There were at least twenty of them, full colour, A4 size, showing him making love to a young black man. Another pale, white teenager sat on the edge of the bed watching them.

“Get out Frank,” Holland ordered, disgust thickening his voice. “Go back to your wife and daughter, and see what they think when they receive these.” He waited a beat before continuing. “Or go back to Area 7 and do your job. It’s your choice.”

Holland waited until the defeated man had left his office, then picked up the phone.

When it was answered he said, “It’s going ahead. Get the plant ready.”

Well satisfied with how the meeting had gone, Sir Craig Holland walked out of his office. His PA was busy typing something on his computer.

“Ah there you are, Gordon. I’m going out for a while. You’ll find some photographs scattered about the office. Lock them in the safe for me. There’s a good man.”

=13:12 hrs=

On the lawns outside Givendale House in St Mary’s School, Dorset, two girls lay on their stomachs talking. Dawn was excited because Carolyn’s father was picking them up by helicopter for a holiday on the Isle of Wight. Her friend had complained that it wouldn’t be a holiday for her, just going back home for the half-term school break, and as welcome as that was, well . . .

Dawn rolled over on her back and laughed. “Really Carolyn, you can be such an arse at times.”

Dawn closed her eyes, feeling the sun caressing her round face. Brushing her long, light brown hair behind her ears, she thought how nice it would be to live in a house like Carolyn’s. She’d give anything to live on the Isle of Wight in a big mansion instead of the small, two-up, two-down that she and her father lived in.

Somehow Christchurch on the south coast of England wasn’t as appealing as living on an island. Some people didn’t know how lucky they were, which was exactly what she kept telling her friend.

Dawn rolled over on her side and looked at Carolyn. She was rubbing Vaseline over her lips with the tip of a finger.

“Too many kisses at the dance last night?” Dawn asked.

“I wished,” Carolyn replied with a giggle.

The end of term dance had been a bit of a flop this year. Or maybe, Dawn considered, it was because at fourteen they had grown a bit too sophisticated for the boys from the local school.

“So tell me about your dad,” Dawn said. “If he flies his own helicopter, he must be important.”

Carolyn gave Dawn a serious look, mimicking Mrs Fingal, their small, rotund geography teacher, “I’ll have you know young lady, that my father is the Director General of Area 7.”

Both girls fell about laughing and Dawn slapped Carolyn on her arm.

“Be serious for a minute will you. What’s he really like?”

Carolyn considered the question for a moment, biting her lips. “He’s a bit overweight, a bit old and a bit grumpy,” she finally said with a smile.

Dawn slapped Carolyn again. “Be serious.”

“Will you cut it out. If you do that again, I’ll tell him to lock you up with the monkeys in Area 7.”

Dawn giggled. “It’s not really called Area 7, is it?”

Carolyn nodded. “Unbelievable isn’t it? All very hush, hush. You’d think they had the Terminator hidden away in there or something.”

“So what do they do?”

Carolyn shrugged. “Some sort of experiments I think. I don’t really know. Anyway, enough about my father, how about yours? What’s he like?”

Dawn frowned. “My dad? Oh he’s okay I suppose. You know, he’s a dad.”

“Your mother died, right?”

Dawn nodded, a frown settling on her face.

“What happened? You’ve never told me.”

Dawn looked off into the distance, her blue eyes half-closed. "We were on an island, I don't remember where. Anyway dad was out on the reef doing some research . . ."

"He's a marine biologist?" Carolyn sounded impressed.

Dawn nodded.

"Cool. So what happened?"

"Well, mum was busy getting stuff ready, she used to help dad a lot, she was some sort of scientist too I think. I'm not sure really, I was only six at the time and dad won't talk about it. I'd gone down to the shore and was playing around in the sand. Anyway this boy floated passed on one of those blow-up bed things. He splashed me and I splashed him back, you know, just messing about. In the end we started playing together, jumping off the bed into the sea, that sort of kid's stuff."

"Anyway, we didn't notice how far out we'd floated and when we did the boy went mental, screaming and crying for his mum. He was really, really frightened. I don't think he was a very good swimmer. Next thing I know, mum's alongside us, trying to hush him down. She'd swum out from the shore and it was a really long way. She began pushing us back, which was hard because the tide was against her. She kept coughing up sea water and I started to get panicky too. We'd almost reached the beach when it happened . . ." Dawn stopped, tears filling her eyes.

Carolyn reached out, rubbing her arm. "Sorry, I didn't realise."

Dawn smiled through her tears, touching the back of her friend's hand with cold fingertips. "No, it's okay. It's good to talk about it. I never have." Composing herself, she sat up and cradled her legs, her chin resting on her knees. "So, without knowing it, mum had pushed us through a shoal of box jellyfish. She'd been stung so many times that her body had started to blacken where their venom had begun destroying her skin, but she kept right on swimming . . . right . . . on . . ."

Dawn burst into tears and Carolyn pulled her into a cuddle, rubbing her back, not knowing how to comfort her, guilty that she'd asked about Dawn's mother in the first place.

Dawn rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, continuing her account between sobs. "She saved us Carolyn . . . she gave her life . . . for . . . I'm alive because she died."

The girls sat together, Carolyn's arm draped over Dawn's shoulders as the distraught girl cried herself out, until she finally shuddered and looked around at Carolyn, her eyes rid-rimmed, her cheeks wet with tears.

She kissed her friend on the cheek and took a deep breath. "Thank you Carolyn. Thank you so much."

Not knowing how to reply, Carolyn sat silently while Dawn wiped away the last of her tears.

"Wow," Dawn said, "That was kinda awesome." Then a short time later, "You know, I've never been in the sea from that day to this. I hate it."

Both girls stood, walking towards their school-house. They had some packing to do. The headmistress had given them the day off to get ready because the official holiday didn't start until tomorrow. As they walked down the long corridors to their dormitory they could hear the muted murmurs of lessons behind closed doors.

Dawn pushed Carolyn and ran off shouting, "If I get there first, I'm going to wear your Paul Smith jeans."

Carolyn squealed and ran after Dawn, her feet thudding along the corridor.

"Girls! Girls! No running in the house please," a voice shouted after them.

They both ignored it, bursting into their dormitory in a fit of giggles.

=13:32 hrs=

The schoolgirls pointed at the sky, their excited voices calling back and forth, "Look, look, there it is."

Dawn and Carolyn stood off to one side of the crowd gathered along the edge of the hockey field, hands shading their eyes as they searched for the helicopter.

Dawn saw a tiny black dot heading towards them. It got bigger and bigger until she could make out the rhythmic whop-whop-whop of its blades.

Growing in size, the helicopter zoomed over the buildings of the school, bringing an excited cheer from the girls. As it began to descend the teachers lined up in front of the pupils, making sure that no over-excited girl ran out on to the field.

After landing, the helicopter door swung open and a man clambered out. He seemed to have some difficulty doing so and Dawn could see that he was quite plump. Was this Carolyn's dad? In her mind's eye she had built up a picture of someone resembling Chris Evans.

The pilot walked over to the teachers and they gathered in a small huddle for a moment before calling Dawn and Carolyn over.

"Come on girls, don't keep Mr Booker waiting now. I'm sure he's got a lot of important things to take care of."

Grabbing their backpacks, the two girls ran to the helicopter and climbed in, Carolyn hanging out again to wave at her friends who waved back, the younger ones jumping up and down in their excitement. Carolyn laughed, stowing their backpacks behind the seats before sitting down and showing Dawn how to strap herself in.

Tossing a quick, "Hello Carolyn, sorry I'm a bit late," at his daughter, Booker grunted his way behind the controls and took the helicopter into the air, hovering over the field so that the people gathered below had a good view.

Dawn looked down at the school where she'd spent so many years. She hadn't realised quite how big and spread out it was.

"Look," Carolyn said, pointing through the Perspex canopy over her shoulder, "There's the gym and over there, the science lab."

The helicopter continued to rise, until it was among the scattered clouds where it levelled off. Dawn could hear Frank Booker talking to someone on his headset.

"He's asking the way, he always gets lost," Carolyn shouted over the noise of the engine.

"I seriously hope you're joking," Dawn shouted back, seeing the twinkle in her friend's eyes.

"Might be," Carolyn quipped.

Dawn watched the landscape slip below them - cars like toys, people like tiny ants scurrying along a grey ribbon. Dawn looked round when Carolyn poked her in the ribs. Her friend was holding out a pair of headphones that had a microphone attached. Dawn pulled them over her ears.

"Is that better?" Carolyn asked, pointing to the earphones then her father to show that he would be able to hear what they said.

"Much," Dawn said, nodding at Carolyn to let her know that she understood. "So, this guy you were making out with at the dance last night," she continued. Dawn heard a splutter in the headphones as Mr Booker half-turned, his face red. Feeling Carolyn's slap, she relented. "It's okay Mr Booker, I'm only kidding. Honest."

"Yeah - the great joker," Carolyn cut in, pushing her face into Dawn's, her eyes wide, warning her to shut up.

"Oops," Dawn mouthed at her friend, leaning back into her comfortable seat, a big smile plastered across her face.

Carolyn flashed her eyebrows in exasperation and looked out of the window.

"You don't have a lot of luggage Dawn," Booker said over the headset.

"No Mr Booker, Carolyn said that I could borrow some of her stuff while I'm there. I hope that's alright?"

"Course it is," Carolyn cut in. "I've got loads of clothes, haven't I father?"

Booker just gave a low grunt that could have meant anything, concentrating on his flying. In truth he could have done without having to fly the girls to the house right now. The meeting with Vincent had not gone well, the young man taking it hard when Booker told him he would have to leave. It had taken a lot of money to lever him out of the flat and it had been a tight rush trying to get the locks changed before he had to fly to the school to pick them up.

"How long will it take to get there Mr Booker?" Dawn asked.

"About twenty minutes I should think. I'm having to take a big loop out over the sea for some reason. If these air-controllers had to fly themselves home every day they'd make the flight-paths shorter."

Settling back to enjoy the rest of the flight, Dawn's thoughts turned to her mother. She'd been shaken by the deep feelings of guilt that had surfaced after talking to Carolyn about the accident.

Was that why her father would never talk about it, she wondered. Did he blame himself for her death too? Whatever his reason, it was a conundrum she didn't want to tackle right now.

Pushing it from her mind, Dawn leant forward to speak to Frank Booker, even though she knew wearing the headset meant she didn't have to. Habits were hard to break, she realised.

"Mr Booker?"

"Yes Dawn," came the reply.

"What is it that you do exactly. At Area 7, I mean?"

Booker was silent for a moment, then tapped a dial on the console with his finger. "Well," he said eventually, "Most of it is confidential I'm afraid, but basically we carry out experiments for drug companies and various government departments."

"You don't experiment on animals, do you?" The repugnance in Dawn's voice was unmistakable and she heard Booker's soft sigh.

Booker had been down this road before. Many times. When would people realise that without animal experimentation, no matter how distasteful it was, there would be little advancement in the drug industry?

Correcting the flight path, Booker considered his reply. "Well Dawn," he said, "I know most people think that we maltreat animals at places like Area 7 but I can assure you we do not. Our animals are looked after better than some people's pets are. I'll tell you what, I have a meeting to attend to there before I fly you to the house, so why don't you two take a look at the animal house while you wait for me. I'll get Dr Mckenzie to show you around and you can judge for yourselves, okay?"

Carolyn leant forward. "Wow, that's a first. I've never seen so much as his office."

"Carolyn!" Booker's tone conveyed far more than the single word he'd uttered.

"Sorry father," she said, sitting back in her seat, a chastened look on her face.

Dawn was seeing a side to Carolyn that surprised her. Her friend had always seemed so carefree and outspoken, but in front of her father she appeared . . . subdued was the only word that came to mind.

The cabin was filled with a sharp buzzing and Dawn jumped. Carolyn laughed, putting a reassuring hand on her arm. "It's okay. It's only the satellite phone. We're not crashing yet."

Dawn breathed a sigh of relief, then her eyes lit up. "You've got a satellite phone on the helicopter?"

Carolyn nodded. "Sure and one at home too. Father has them as a backup in case the network on the island ever goes down."

Booker completed his call, which the girls couldn't hear as it wasn't being relayed over his headset.

"Er, do you think your dad might let me ring home on it?" Dawn asked Carolyn.

"I can hear you Dawn," Booker said. "And yes, you can. Carolyn will show you how."

Dawn took the phone as Booker handed it back to her and saw that it was like a standard mobile, if a little thicker.

"Just dial like you do on your mobile, then press the green call button," Carolyn told her. "Neat, isn't it."

Dawn punched in her dad's mobile number.

"Hello?"

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