

MURDER IN PARLIAMENT STREET

by BARRY B. LONGYEAR

Illustration by John Allemand

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Wherein Jagers and Shad rise to new heights....

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“Cold and windy, dreary and damp,” muttered Detective Superintendent Marvin Matheson. “No wonder Guy Fawkes chose November in which to kill King James and blow up bloody Parliament.”

It was a day after that particular celebration, but superintendent was still celebrating apparently. No knock-knock jokes, which meant he was really down the pipe this time. Matheson was standing behind his desk, his hands clasped behind his back, head hung forward, eyes looking up through a frown and his office window at the gloom of the latest weather front. Superintendent’s early-model police replacement meat suit strongly resembled a historical American gangster named John Dillinger. I for one never wished to see John Dillinger depressed. Media ridicule of that model meat suit, in combination with his wife’s insistence he keep it, lost Matheson his position as Assistant Chief Constable of Greater Manchester. He was eventually deposited in Artificial Beings Crimes Division of Interpol as a lowly detective superintendent running ABCD’s Devon office in Exeter. Never quite let go of that.

“You wanted to see me, superintendent?” I said brightly.

He slowly turned his face toward me. “Jagers.”

“Yes sir.”

He turned and looked down at his desk. Twice he tapped on a few papers with the tip of a stylus. “It has been pointed out to me, Inspector Jagers, you and Shad deserve a day off, principally in recognition of your work on the Hound Tor and Hangingstone Rat inquiries. That recommendation, incidentally, came directly from Middlemoor.” He smiled sadly. “I heartily concur.”

That took me back a step. It was uncommon at best to have any mention at all of ABCD issue from the rarified climes of the chief constable's office. Well known to us all, ever since a particular award ceremony, Raymond Crowe, chief constable of the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, had been rather frosty on the subject of artificial beings, particularly on amdroids in law enforcement. Perhaps we were coming up in the world. "Good news, sir."

Matheson almost maintained his sad smile. "Nice spot of media buzz on both cases, Jagers. Shad and you have the rest of the day and this evening off. Pass on the word to Detective Sergeant Shad, if you would be so kind."

"Thank you, sir, I will. Doesn't that leave the office a bit shorthanded? Towson called in sick."

"Stay on call, but Parker should be able to handle anything that comes up." He gave himself a moment of silence thinking upon Detective Constable Ralph Parker, incontinent flea-infested gorilla. His sad gaze elevated until it rested upon me. "So, Jagers, how is Shad settling into his replacement duck suit?"

"Well enough, sir."

"A bit embarrassing him renting that Watson meat suit from Celebrity Look-alikes after his duck caught it at Hangingstone."

"That was a Nigel Bruce suit, sir, made up to look like Dr. Watson."

Matheson shook his head and looked again at the gloomy sky. "Damned silly. You looking like Basil Rathbone and Shad doing his Watson—damned silly. The chief constable put a bug in my shell-like when he heard about it, I can tell you."

"Remarkable amount of cooperation we received from the public, though, sir, as Holmes and Watson. C.C. Crowe, in addition, appears to have forgiven us with this suggestion of a day off."

Matheson looked confused for a moment then sloughed it off. "True. Mercurial man, the chief constable." He turned and faced me. "I find it hard to tell with a duck, Jagers, but at times Shad seems a bit depressed. Still recovering from the Hangingstone thing?"

"I don't believe it's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, sir. As you know

better than anyone else, no one ends in ABCD by choice. Being a star on the telly must have been very exciting for him.”

“He didn’t find getting blown to pieces exciting?”

“I hardly think he’d list that as a job perk.”

“I suppose not.” He shook his head. “Those adverts Shad was in: You suppose there’s anything to that insurance?” He waved a hand at me to fend off my uninformed answer to his idle question. “All rubbish now they’ve gone to that slimy little yob of a lizard for a mascot, isn’t it? In any event, a night off will do Shad and you both some good. AB Emancipation Week, you know. I may take the missus out tonight myself.” He sat down, opened a file, and said without looking up, “Try and enjoy yourself, Jaggars. Hate to waste a perfectly good gesture.”

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It was going to be a good night out. I called Val with the news and she suggested a double date with Shad and Nadine. Val was a golden Tonkinese bio and her orange tabby bio friend had been steady dating Shad. I put it to my partner and Shad decided to shake off his mood and agreed to go with us to a showing of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* at Exeter’s Picture House. Part of the film’s appeal to the AB culture was because a generic bio used to replace fallen police males in Britain some decades ago bore a striking resemblance to twentieth century actor Basil Rathbone. Besides Sherlock Holmes, Rathbone also played Sir Guy Gisbourne, Sheriff of Nottingham in the 1938 Robin Hood classic. What amused me about the film, aside from being a detective and wearing one of those Sheriff of Nottingham meat suits myself, was the strong resemblance of Dr. Hitchins, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, to the actor Eugene Pallette who played Friar Tuck. The archbishop was a very outspoken—dare I say rabid—opponent not only of AB rights but of AB existence, which is why Eugene Pallette always drew some good natured booing from the ABs in the audience every time he appeared on screen.

Shad and his date shared a seat. Val, of course, watched from my lap while I scratched her ears. I had disabled my wireless interface, the theater was darkening, and the new stadium seating was packed with just about every kind of artificial being in town, bio and mech, amdroid and android, as well as the occasional human natural. The flick had barely begun when Shad’s head went back, shook, and faced me, his bill dropping open. I sighed glumly, knowing either it was a call from Heavitree Tower or Shad was suffering a massive stroke. Either way the evening’s entertainment was

concluded.

“It’s Parker,” Shad quacked.

“Told you to disable your wireless.”

“Exeter cops have a dead bio, Jaggs. Parker says it’s on Parliament Street and he can’t fit. What’s he mean he can’t fit?”

“It means he’s too big to fit in the street,” I answered curtly as evil Prince John and the sheriff conversed up on the screen. “Call in the cruiser and run up the mechs.” I bent over and said to Val, “I’m terribly sorry, dear, but we have a call.”

“Harry,” Val purred, “Nadine and I can make it home on our own. You two go and take your call.”

“We’ll be fine,” Nadine mewed to Shad. “Take care.”

I stood and put Val down on the seat as Shad hopped off their seat and followed me out into the aisle at a brisk waddle.

Outside the sky was dark, the wind coming up from the Exe dank and chilly. Tarp fields protecting the unfinished new apartment construction across Bartholomew from the theater cast the street in a powder blue glow. I turned up my collar against the chill, but only a bit to conserve the charge.

“Cruiser’s on the way, Jaggs. Parker says he’s running his command post out of Broadgate.”

“Shad, do you still have that can of flea spray we picked up from the chemist’s last time we worked with Parker? I can’t afford to bring an infestation home with me again. Val is terribly sensitive.”

“That can’s gone,” said the duck with a smirk, which is not easily done with a bill. “I mixed the flea spray in the can with deodorant, had the mix put in a cut glass atomizer I got at Boots, gift wrapped it, and gave it to Parker during that fireworks show yesterday.”

I frowned. “Guy Fawkes Day.”

“Whatever. I told Parker it was cologne. Eau Le Monk, all the rage among the simian set, and Merry Fawkesmas. He was quite moved.”

“Guy Fawkes attempted to blow up Parliament, Shad. We don’t usually give presents on Guy Fawkes Day.”

“I imagine that depends on your opinion of Parliament. Parker is, however, using the spray.”

“You are a devious duck.”

“Thanks. Now, if we can only get Parker to make it to a loo before he takes a dump, there will be peace in our time.” He looked up in the direction of the Pennsylvania—St. Thomas Corridor, the traffic in the air vector sparse at this time of night. “Here’s our ride.”

The cruiser, an issue gray and electric-green Sky Rover Metropolitan, descended in front of us, its green strobe array flashing, its doors rotating up as the wheels touched down on Bartholomew. Shad flew into the driver side and I entered the passenger side, checking the mechs in back on my way in. They were mechanical vehicles of various sizes and configurations into which we could copy our engrams while our bodies were held in stasis. The mechs were able to go places and do things the duck and I couldn’t. Parker could’ve used a mech to work his crime scene, but he numbered copying among his many phobias and there was simply no point in arguing with him about it. Green readouts on the bed panels showed mechs operational, charged, internal laboratories stocked and ready, our engrams as of this morning copied into the Heavitree mainframe.

The doors closed and as the cruiser ascended toward the corridor, Shad said, “Do you Brits have a weird spelling for parliament?”

“Why?”

“I entered it twice, but this heap’s GPS doesn’t have a listing in Exeter for any Parliament Street.”

I looked at the GPS readout. “You spelled it correctly. Parliament isn’t on the cruiser response GPS. Put the cruiser down on High Street in front of the Guildhall.”

“A secret street and Parker can’t fit in it?”

“No secret, but neither Parker nor a cruiser can fit. You’ll see why.”

He waited a moment for a further explanation. When none came, he said, “Be mysterious.”

Grumpily, Shad guided the cruiser through the Cathedral Vector Roundabout. No sooner were we through it, than the cruiser dropped from the corridor and headed toward the illuminated columned gingerbread of the medieval Exeter Guildhall immediately below us, still the oldest working municipal building in Britain. High Street, though, was choked with bright lights, news vehicles, and a crowd. The media were in force.

"Is the king visiting?" asked Shad.

"Not to my knowledge." I looked around. "Change of plan," I said seeing a place nearby where we could put down unobserved. "Behind the Guildhall, Market Square in the shopping center. Put us down just beyond that small church." I reached forward and flicked off the switch for the light array. The entire block of buildings, of which the Guildhall was only one, was a warren of little streets, shops, and walks which had been turned entirely over to foot traffic and enterprise. The lot of it was called the Guildhall Shopping Centre. At this time of night, the shops were closed and the walkways mostly deserted.

Shad changed course slightly and nodded toward the square and the tiny, ancient church constructed from local red stone. "Isn't that church St. Pancreas?"

"St. *Pancras*, not pancreas." I saw the duck laughing silently. "As you well know," I added, dreading my partner's delight once he found out the block opposite the High Street end of Parliament Street had another old church called St. Petrocks.

After Shad settled the cruiser down next to the small Rougemont stone church, I had us both copy into micros. The micro is a matte black cylinder-shaped air mech roughly the size of a lipstick, one end of which bristles with a variety of forensic instruments. With them I hoped Shad and I could get to the scene without drawing attention.

Once copied, our usual meat suits in stasis, we flew from the vehicle and Shad put the cruiser up in hover park. At an altitude of approximately two meters, we flew around the west end of the tiny church into a shop-lined walkway that led to the north end of Trickhay Street walk. We streaked south between the furniture stores, gadget emporiums, wireless shops, restaurants, tea shops, and AB boutiques passing only a lone bipedal dustmech with attached dustbin. He was attempting to scrape what appeared to be a flattened wad of chewing gum from the pavement.

“Bloody AB Emancipation Week, me tin arse,” the dustmech muttered. “Doin’ the same bloody thing and payin’ bloody taxes for the privilege is all it is. Bloody wankers in bloody Parliament, tossers the lot—”

We turned right when we came to Waterbeer Street walk, leaving the unhappy mech and his soliloquy on unrequited expectation behind. After only a few meters we came to a police constable standing by himself in the dark, his hands clasped behind his back, his stocky form fairly filling the hundred centimeter-wide entrance of a long narrow walk between two buildings. Partly obscured by his shoulder on the right-hand wall of the walkway was a regulation size traffic sign that read: Parliament St.

“I can see why Parker can’t work the scene,” transmitted Shad out of the cop’s hearing. “He’d need a shoehorn to get in there.”

“It’s even narrower at the High Street end,” I responded. “Imagine Parker dropping a load as he tried to wriggle his way into the crime scene in front of all those cameras. That would’ve been a proper cock-up. Turn on your lights, Shad, go on external audio, and let’s log in with the constable.”

We were both hovering in the dark in front of the fellow’s face. When we turned on our lights I’m afraid we startled the poor chap. He jumped, bellowed, screamed, and swung his arms about.

“Detective Inspector Harrington Jaggars and Detective Sergeant Guy Shad, Devon ABCD,” I quickly introduced us.

The constable froze for an instant, let out a breath, then bent over to pick up his helmet, muttering about bloody pips, the noun modified by an additional Middle English adjective or two. Some words simply never go out of fashion.

“Police Constable Styles,” he introduced himself as he stood, a rather peeved expression on his face. Styles was a big ruddy-looking chap in his late twenties, sandy-haired and attempting rather fruitlessly to raise a moustache. After brushing off his helmet, he replaced it upon his head, smoothed his yellow anorak, adopted a stiff military posture, and said, “Now then. You’re the Interpolls.”

“Detectives Artificial Beings Crimes Division of Interpol, Devon Office, actually,” Shad said using his Laurence Olivier playing Marcus Licinius Crassus voice. Quite intimidating, even coming from an illuminated flying lipstick.

"No offense there, detective," said the officer stiffly. "But you two bits pop out the dark all sudden like a couple eyeballs from bleedin' Hell. Not half taken aback I was."

"Our apologies, Styles," I said. "We were trying to avoid the media tumult at the High Street end. Do we log in with you?"

"Sergeant Dunn, sir." He gestured with his head toward the walkway he was guarding. "Sergeant's at the other end. He sort of expected you to report there."

"Indeed. Are you chaps responsible for all the media attention? On High Street it looks like the resurrection and marriage of Princess Di and Elvis."

The corners of Styles's mouth turned down as he shook his head. "Don't understand it. Naught there but a dead bird."

"It was reported to us that the deceased is a bio," I said.

He shook his head and turned down the corners of his mouth. "Can't prove it by me, inspector. Looks like any other old sky rat to me." He grinned. "No shortage of pigeons in Exeter, is there," he said with an attempt at jocularly that faded rather rapidly as neither of the pips hovering before him reacted. The corners of his mouth resumed their downward turn.

"If the victim is a bio," said Shad, still as Marcus Licinius Crassus, "it probably carries a human imprint, Styles. It may be a murder victim."

The police constable shrugged his wide shoulders, his face devoid of expression. "Not paid to worry about bios," he said. "Your job, now, isn't it? No offense, detective, but the bloke couldn't of thought much of hisself getting copied into a pigeon suit. Might as well've copied into a toad or a flippin' dung beetle, right? Besides, amdroids all got bodies tucked away in stasis somewheres, don't they?"

"Some do," began Shad coolly.

"Thank you, Police Constable Styles." Outside of Styles's hearing, I transmitted to Shad, "Stop turning your crank and follow me."

"The bozo," Shad muttered as we swooped into the dark narrow passage, the walls on either side made of poured composite glass, smooth

but tinted to look like brick. The only illumination came from the lights on High Street.

As we reached midway in the walk, my light picked up a small still figure on the left near the northeast wall. We descended until we were next to it. The corpse was indeed a pigeon. The bird was lying on its right side on the cracked gray paving, his head toward High Street, his dark pink toes curled up, landing gear retracted in death. The bird's feathers were disheveled particularly on the side against the pavement. There were a few spatter marks near the corpse that could have been blood. "Shad."

"Yeah?"

"Be a good fellow and notify Sergeant Dunn of our presence. Ask him to make available whoever it was who reported finding this body over at DC Parker's command post. Also, explain we're shorthanded and ask Dunn to keep his men on duty until we clear the scene."

"You got it."

As Shad streaked toward High Street, I played my lights down the length of the bird, measured its dimensions and calculated its weight. It was a common Rock Dove model, bluish-gray wings, no wing bands but white coloring along the wings' leading edges. It had a partial white ring around its neck, open in the front, and its breast was a warmer hue than the rest. The bird's head coloring was darker, but not iridescent toward the neck as you see with so many pigeons. As the general run of pigeons go, this one was neither handsome nor unique. It was almost as though this model had been chosen for its dullness—its ability to blend into a background.

I checked my instruments and I picked up the fading marker beacon of a bio receiver. This was how one bio could always identify another as a bio, which meant the one who discovered the body was likely an android or human bio. I opened the mech's neural reader and checked the pigeon's imprint and recall bank. Both neutral. Unless the occupant had been on continuous sync with a neural net or a body in stasis, the memory information was lost to wherever such energies go after life can no longer sustain them.

"We're logged in, Jaggs," transmitted Shad as he returned. "I don't get it. That Dunn seemed really irritated we didn't come in from High Street. There're two mechs out there from the Forensic Medical Examiner. Dunn says he'll send them in to haul off the vic once we're done. There was a newshound out there who says you know him."

“Fidelis?” I asked.

“That’s the one. Sniffs out tips for BBC 228? I know him from Rougemont Gardens.”

“I’ve thrown him a bone on occasion. What does Fido have to say about the news frenzy out on High Street?”

“He was told to be there and to be heavy with camera. Worthwhile story alert.”

“Any idea what the story concerned?”

“I got the definite feeling everyone out there is expecting to catch someone official with his pants down.”

“Really.” I thought on that for a second then shrugged. “Shad, scan the vic, get a liver temp, DNA, and ID while I set up a prang and fly the grid. Analyze this spatter here, as well.”

While Shad got to work, I pulled away and up until I hovered approximately ten meters away from the corpse toward the shopping center end of the walk. Because of the narrowness of Parliament Street I couldn’t both get a good view and a solid fixed wall position upon which to mount the Vader prang—cop slang for the high definition image marker used for recording and analyzing the content of crime scenes. I attached one end of a high-tension poly web to one building wall about four meters up, stretched the web across the street, and attached it to the opposite wall. Mounting the prang in the center of the web, I remotely activated it. Once it settled down it began making a three-dimensional wideband record of the scene and I began a grid search of the entire space between the walls.

The walkway was unobstructed relatively clean concrete, it’s condition making it more than fifty years old. Save for the images of a couple of false doors imbedded in the glass below and images of a couple of false windows and exhaust ports four stories above, the building walls were simply two solid featureless slabs of poured glass: Modern, secure, low maintenance. When I got to the High Street end I looked out at the crowd. Although the curiosity seekers had thinned somewhat, the media reporters were just as thick as before and not moving. Nothing to see at that end; no one issuing statements. The tip they had gotten must have been made of solid gold—or that’s the way they were regarding it. I returned to the grid.

I noticed a small whitish feather stuck on the southwest wall approximately three meters up from the corpse. I closed on the site and hovered across from it. UV light showed a variety of organic materials—bird waste, skin cells, and a small amount of medium-velocity blood spatter—surrounding the feather in a vertically elongated impact pattern. In normal light there were a few microscopic red fibers scattered through the lower right portion of the pattern. I took images of the site, retrieved samples of the fiber evidence, took DNAs from the skin cells, feather, and blood, then measured the impact pattern to compare with the corpse's particulars to calculate impact angle, force, and trajectory.

"Jaggs," said Shad, "The spatter on the wall is medium-velocity blood matching the vic's. Pattern is the result of ground impact on already present surface blood. The vic's wound is on the side against the ground. Scan shows several broken bones on the bird's right side: Two in the right wing, five ribs on the right side of the breast. Wing and rib bones broke the skin. Dead about four hours."

"Around five this evening, then." I transmitted my data. "Does this match your DNA?"

A pause. "It's a match," answered Shad. "What do you have?"

"Blood, a feather, and some additional material. It appears that the deceased was propelled against the southwest wall from below—perhaps someone throwing the body up against the wall. It bounced, the trajectory arced up and the body landed next to the opposite wall. Evidence would indicate that the vic was already dead."

"Kids playing handball with a dead bird?"

"Only one wall impact. Do you have the area surveillance camera locations yet?"

"Working."

"ID?"

"No name yet, Jaggs, but Bio Registry says this is one of a super flock of eight thousand basically identical pigeons purchased from London Industrial Biotronics four years ago by a private security firm headquartered in Slough called Pureledge, Ltd."

I descended toward Shad and the corpse. "Are you telling me that

bird is a private dick?"

"Rent-a-cop. Pureledge hires out to keep real pigeons off of buildings, monuments, and out of the ground transit stations. Remember the old movie, *To Catch a Thief*?"

"Certainly. Hitchcock film. Cary Grant and Grace Kelly." I fought manfully for the date, but had to relent. "Released in the 1960s, yes?"

"Fifty-five," corrected Shad. We were both old film buffs, but Shad's knowledge of films was encyclopedic, as befits a dedicated thespian.

"Set a pigeon to catch a pigeon."

"I'm going through Pureledge's site right now. Pureledge has an office here in Exeter on Castle Street. It runs three wings of three hundred and twenty birds per wing—" Shad paused for a moment. "*Ledge marshals* is what they're called."

"Shad, did you get any fiber trace off the body?"

"Red fiber. Only one thread visible, the rest microscopic. All of the fibers are centered on the same impact point that broke all these bones. You have red fiber up there?"

"All microscopic. The impact pattern on the wall shows the bulk of the fiber trace considerably off center, though. Between that and the blood spatter, when the bird hit this wall his bones had already been broken and had already been bleeding. What's your guess on the fibers?"

"It was wrapped around whatever killed this bird."

"Shad, do these ledge marshals maintain continuous sync while on duty?"

"Their site doesn't say and no one right now is answering the phone. Jaggs, did you know this was how they were keeping pigeons from nesting on building ledges?"

"I noticed a dozen years ago or so in London when they took down the pigeon netting from several of the buildings there. I never thought to question why. Pigeons still seemed the same. Fewer of them, perhaps. Buildings and walks were remarkably cleaner. Get in touch with Pureledge Exeter and have them check vitals on their stasis beds. What's on the other

sides of these walls? A computer establishment on the northeast side, right?”

“Dell Bio & Mech. It’s an AB tech gift shop. In the building on the opposite side is Madame Fifi’s Feather, Scale, and Fur. She’s an android stylist.”

“The vic was killed elsewhere, Shad. Why dump the body on Parliament?”

“Say, Jaggs, how come this—it’s not wide enough to call an alley—how come this particular crack between two buildings is called a street?”

“I’ll have you know, Shad, Exeter’s Parliament Street holds the record as the narrowest street in the world. As it was explained to me on a tour when I first came to Exeter, it had to do with some act of Parliament in the nineteenth century. The burghers on the city council took exception to the act, but really couldn’t do anything in retaliation except deliver an insult to the body that passed it. Hence they named the narrowest thoroughfare in the city Parliament Street. Rather silly, really.”

“Not at all,” objected Shad. “I mean, here we are centuries later and Exeter *still* has a Parliament Street. That is vendetta-grade grudge.” Shad’s mech nodded. “This town is really beginning to grow on me,” he said as he streaked off toward High to release the scene to the FMEs. Despairing for Shad’s value system, I ascended to the roof, flew grids on each, but found no cameras, latents, trace, impressions, feathers, scales, nor fur.

I had just completed my examination when I was joined by Shad’s micro coming over the High Street edge. “Someone at Pureledge finally answered the phone,” he announced. “ID on the imprint is a six-month Pureledge rookie named Darcy Flanagan, eighty-seven, resides in a flat at Seventeen Hoopern Street. He began his shift at three this afternoon and he and his flight leader belong to 712 Squadron. The Seven-Twelve patrols the Cathedral Church of St. Peter.”

“Flight leader? Squadron?”

“That’s what they call them. The fellow on the phone said the scuttlebutt in the ready room at Castle Field is that Jerry got young Darcy.”

“Jerry? What is he talking about? Germans?”

“Hop in the old crate and tally ho! Chocks away!’ Jaggs, it was like talking to Fowler in *Chicken Run*.”

Fowler, the aged and absurdly militaristic dotty rooster in the old Nick Park animated feature—voice done by Benjamin Whitrow—seemed to think he was in the Royal Air Force rather than a chicken yard. Every AI, and particularly every android, knew the classic *Chicken Run* almost by rote. Decades ago the beheading-of-Edwina scene on the telly and bio blogs in combination with the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Grant v. Hudder* helped put the AI Rights Act in Britain over the top. “What did he mean, ‘young Darcy’? You said the fellow was eighty-seven.”

“Average age of ‘the lads’ is ninety-three,” countered Shad.

“I see.”

“Ledge marshals maintain continuous sync between bodies and bios, which would be good for us except they checked what they call their barracks. Darcy Flanagan the human natural is dead.”

“Poor fellow. Did they say how?”

“Sudden massive heart attack according to the stasis bed readout. Too severe for the bed to maintain him and he was past revival by the time their medical mech reached him. Pureledge has a lot of really old pensioners as ledge marshals. They make a little cash and for a few hours a day they get to fly, serve a useful purpose, and feel young and pain free, according to the fellow on the phone, a Mr. James Duggan. Duggan says six to eight of the old coves cack out in the barrack racks every year.”

“Hard done by Flanagan’s demise, was he?”

“The poor guy could hardly butter his crumpet. Jaggs, the stasis bed recorded Flanagan’s death at eight minutes to five this evening. The pigeon bio died eleven seconds later. Unless Flanagan managed to bust up his own pigeon suit like that, it’s murder. That means media.” The duck tossed his next question around in his head a bit before reluctantly asking it. “What do we do about Parker?”

I thought on that. “To be perfectly candid, Shad, I’m not terribly sanguine about having our end of the inquiry represented by an incontinent gorilla with self-esteem issues.”

His micro swung around and looked deeply into the shadows. “Man, I

can't believe I've come down to this. When I was the spokesperson for that insurance company, I used to have *staff*, bill polish, ermine feather extensions, my own dressing room. You should've seen my apartment in New York, Jaggs. I had a *fountain* in my living room! Ledge marshals. Gorilla poop."

"Those, Shad, are the challenging, exciting, ever-changing facets of a fulfilling career in ABCD law enforcement."

He dropped a heavy sigh and shook all over. "Sorry about the whining. About Parker, the division doesn't need any more bad air. Do we go to Matheson and take over the case?"

I pushed Shad's suggestion around in my mind for a moment. Neither Shad nor I were there to hurt other cops, especially those who, like us, had been flushed down into ABCD due to mishap, misunderstanding, or murder. I'd already put a smudge on Parker's record by refusing to work with him. The whole Parliament Street case was looking, however, like a giant slapstick aimed directly at ABCD Devon's collective posterior.

"Back to the cruiser, Shad. We copy into our own suits, and secure our evidence. Then we report to the command post and see where things go from there."

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In the cruiser, copied into our own skins, Shad gave the cruiser instructions to come up on Broadgate by a circuitous route. By swinging out over Queen Street, heading southeast, and doubling back over St. Peters Cathedral, we might lessen our chances of attracting notice.

Shad faced me. "What if Parker cut back on the bananas? Less in, less out."

"Been tried. The fellow is addicted. He has them squirreled away everywhere. A few months before you came to the Devon office, Shad, Parker and I were assigned to represent ABCD at an award ceremony at the Royal Diana Devon & Cornwall Force Museum theater."

"Handing out attaboys to the local blue?"

"Yes, although we call the medals *gongs*. A very solemn occasion officiated by Chief Constable Crowe. In attendance were two Members of Parliament, the Earl of Devon, and Her Royal Highness Princess Mehitabel.

Matheson and I took Parker's bananas away, dehydrated him, and tried to keep an eye on him. Nevertheless, he managed to tuck away a bunch or two before the ceremony."

"Naw. He didn't," said Shad.

"Oh, indeed he did, ducky. What's more, Parker didn't even notice he'd done it. Nothing quite like a fellow dropping his load before royalty right in the middle of bleeding 'God Save The King'."

"Make the news, did it?"

"Shad, Matheson's office was showered with media thank-you notes and fruit baskets.

"What'd the superintendent say when you all got back to the tower?"

"He called us into his office, pointed at his telly, and stared at Parker, his finger trembling. Matheson's face went bright red and he did a respectable impression of a beached cod. Then he waved us out of his office, came up behind us, and slammed the door."

"British reserve, wot, wot, Jagers old sock?" he said using his Fowler voice.

"Frightening, actually. The superintendent really does bear a striking resemblance to John Dillinger. I half expected to be perforated by a Tommy gun. He ordered Parker into therapy."

"To potty train him?" asked Shad.

"That's what it amounted to." I looked down through my window. The red air-vehicle warning lights above the crenellated spires crowning the Norman towers of St. Peters glowed softly on and off below. "He went faithfully twice each week and Matheson received in return a lot of cleaning bills and the therapist's conclusion that gorillas—gorilla bios, in any event—cannot be trained in that regard. There are no internal warning signs noticeable to the gorilla, so the gorilla simply delivers wherever it is whenever a shipment comes in."

"Like the old joke," observed Shad.

"Yes. Wherever he wants."

Shad glanced down through his side window. “Oh boy. Hey, Jaggs? We’re over Broadgate. I don’t see the ABCD van.” He placed the cruiser in stationary hover.

He banked the cruiser my way and I looked down. Opposite Dell and Madame Fifi’s side of High Street was St. Petrocks. Between the block upon which that church stood and the block opposite the Guildhall was Broadgate: a short, wide, shop-festooned thoroughfare connecting High Street and Cathedral Yard. Parked in Broadgate were three tellynet media vans, a blogosphere pool mobile, a Devon Forensic Medical Examiner’s van, and a constabulary electric, presumably Sergeant Dunn’s. There were no vehicles of any kind belonging to ABCD and no ABCD personnel I recognized, not even a furtive mountain gorilla in the shadows stealthily evacuating his bowels.

“Bugger,” I remarked.

Shad’s comment was earthier but equally apt.

* * * *

There was nothing to do but head to Heavitree Consolidated Police Administration Tower in which the constabulary’s Exeter Station, Devon ABCD Interpol, and the Devon Magistrate’s Court were headquartered. As the cruiser came down from the St. James—Heavitree Air Vector Corridor, Shad brought us in over St. Luke’s College and Heavitree Hospital as we circled down to the sky dock on top of the tower. As we approached we could see that the media had already gathered far below at street level entrance. Up on the roof by himself someone very large, dark, hairy, and dejected was skulking next to the landing target. It was DC Parker. After coming in and docking in our assigned slot, we got out of the cruiser and walked across the target to the fellow.

As we approached Parker, Shad said to him in his Fowler voice, “I say, old hairball, the ruddy bloomin’ corpus is in the middle of flippin’ Parliament Street. Don’t Heavitree Tower strike you as rather inconvenient for a local command post, wot, wot?”

Upon witnessing Shad’s passive-aggressive performance, Parker’s massive shoulders sagged even farther as his incredibly ugly head hung down, his knuckles dragging against the rooftop.

“Terribly sorry, Inspector Jaggers,” he said, his voice rumbling eloquently in posh Oxford-educated tones. The urgency of his current

predicament appeared to have frightened off his usual ape-of-the-people Estuary affectation. "I had the van on Broadgate, sir, but the tellies, boggies, and shutter rats were everywhere waiting for me! Peering in the windows, underfoot, poking in their heads, all of them on geek hunts, and, good lord, the *questions*. Cameras ... all aimed at the van. It was like they were waiting for me to ... you know."

"Yes," I responded. "I know."

"I didn't want to let down the side again, inspector. I couldn't've fit in that narrow passage in any event. Wouldn't the tellies love seeing me try, though? That's why I asked for someone else to work the scene. I'm so grateful to you and DS Shad."

"You did the right thing, Parker," I said.

"You see why I had to get out of there, don't you?" The gorilla was motionless for a split second, then grew a bit wild-eyed. He suddenly grunted loudly, smacked his fist against the edge of the concrete landing target, cracking it. Suddenly DC Parker began turning about in a tiny circle, waving his heavily muscled arms above his head.

"Steady," I cautioned as I backed away, almost stumbling over Shad who had managed to get behind me.

Parker stopped, lowered his arms, and slumped. "Sorry, but will no one in this bloody city ever forget that damned awards ceremony?" He thumped his chest angrily with his fists. Seeing that he startled me again and caused Shad to take wing, he said "Sorry. Terribly sorry, sir. Sorry sergeant." He was even more crestfallen.

Shad settled further away from the gorilla. "Keep cool, Ralph. Okay?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"What seems to be the trouble, Parker?" I prompted.

He sadly shook his head, his gaze somewhere around my feet. "It all began at Royal Diane. Before that ceremony I was just another cop bio trying to make a place for himself in ABCD. After that ceremony I was a worldwide joke. There were tourists here last summer from Kazakhstan, inspector. *From Kazakhstan!* Their children had these bloody little animated stuffed gorilla toys! They sing 'God Save The King' and then poop little licorice sweeties! I simply can't bear it!"

"I never got my own action figure," muttered the duck sullenly.

Parker held out his massive hands. "Princess Mehitabel has forgiven me. I wrote her soon after..."

"After the goods were delivered," completed still sullen Shad.

"Her Highness's secretary wrote me a few weeks ago. He wrote—well, his letter said that Princess Mehitabel understands completely, stuff happens and not to worry myself over it. Water under the bridge." He let out his breath with what appeared to be his remaining resolve and looked up at me. "Inspector, should I tell the superintendent I can't handle the Parliament Street inquiry? If I lead this case, the media'll make a laughingstock of all of us."

Shad and I glanced at each other for a beat; the duck shut his eyes, shrugged, and nodded once at me. I faced the gorilla. "Detective Constable Parker, you have an inquiry to run and I suggest you run it. Shad and I have worked the scene and we're prepared to brief you on the evidence and the progress of the investigation. We will also back you up however we can. Leading this case will give you much needed experience. I expect you to make the most of it."

There was a touch of panic in Parker's expression. "It's not just a dead pigeon, is it, sir?"

"It's murder," said Shad. "Murder most foul," he added with a straight face.

"Shall we get on with the briefing?" I suggested.

"Yes, inspector." Parker looked up at me with sad yellowish eyes. "What ever shall I do about the media?"

"Later we'll need to prepare something. Right now we need to know how you wish us to proceed."

Parker stared at me for two seconds, then frowned, reared back until he was at his full height, puffed out his chest, and bellowed, "Very well!" He thumped his chest with both fists several times, and bellowed, "Very well, then! We'll grasp the nettle, shall we? On to Room 914!" On his knuckles and feet he scooted toward the access door, nearly ripped it off its hinges, and all thirty-five stone of him disappeared down into the stairwell, his

parting cry of “Jam tomorrow!” echoing from below.

Something of stunned silence descended upon the roof. I glanced at my partner. “What happened to his accent?” asked Shad.

I shook my head. “For some reason he’s returned to Received Pronunciation. I believe he only adopted Estuary to fit in, which he never did.”

“I hate it when that happens.”

“Oxford graduate, you know.”

“I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.”

I hoisted an eyebrow in Shad’s direction. “Murder most foul?”

The mallard nodded. “*Murder Most Foul*, directed by George Pollock, starring Margaret Rutherford, 1964.” Looking sideways at me, he said, “Foul, fowl, dead pigeon—get it? Huh? Huh?”

“Yes, yes. I quite get it,” I acknowledged painfully. “Thank you.”

“Any time. Give any thought to how we’re going to work this case with Parker running it? I mean, he gave you the perfect out. Why didn’t you take it?”

“As I recall, Shad, you nodded at me.”

“That’s because I’m a big marshmallow. You’re a tough old ex-London Metro murder cop and our leader. We depend upon you to keep us out of silly predicaments.”

I frowned deeply. “Shad, surely you see if Parker quits this case because he’s frightened of the media—”

“—among other things,” interrupted Shad.

“For any reason. Parker’s not stupid. He’s just—”

“Six cashews crazier than a Nutter Bar.”

“Shad, if he doesn’t lead this case and win doing it, he’ll be useless in the future both to ABCD and himself. We cannot stand by and watch that

happen.”

“I suppose not.” Shad examined my face for a moment cocking his head to one side. “There’s something else, though, isn’t there?”

My gaze rested momentarily on the distant ground vehicle lights circling the St. Sidwell Roundabout west of the tower. “This insane degree of media attention over what appears to be a less-than-interesting case. Add to that the timing.”

Shad nodded. “You and I suddenly get the evening off, Towson’s out sick, Parker’s holding the fort all by his lonesome.”

I nodded. “The one detective who because of his copy phobia and size couldn’t possibly fit into the scene of the crime, the one detective who with each public bowel movement brings into question the seriousness of amdroids being in law enforcement at all, he’s the one who catches the case.”

“I checked the tower call log, Jaggs. Your newshound buddy Fido got the call to come to Parliament Street a good fifteen minutes before the Exeter cops notified ABCD.”

“Record on the call?”

“Throwaway mobile. Do you think that’s what the killer wants: ABCD to fall on its pratt and to look ridiculous in doing so?”

“Or someone using the occasion created by the killer. One question that remains to be answered is at whom this exercise has been aimed: Parker or ABCD.”

Shad cackled out a wak-wak-wak laugh. “If it’s Parker, that makes Nigel Towson our prime suspect.”

Despite an involuntary smile, I shook my head. “DS Towson may be dogging it, but he’s the grandfather of by-the-book cops. Former Royal Canadian Mounted Police, you know.”

“Yeah.” Shad shuddered. “I heard about that grizzly attack in the Yukon. Lucky his head was found by that RCMP tracking unit and they could copy his engrams into one of their bloodhound bios.”

“Yes. And as soon as he finished copying, he continued tracking

down the killer he'd been after. Got his man, too. A lesser cop would've gone after the bear."

"The media should hear some of these stories—how the cops in ABCD got here—rather than focusing on Parker's poop and all this silliness."

"Wouldn't that be a treat? The media have programmed this city to expect ABCD to fall on its face and have a big laugh every time we do. Our success with the Hound Tor case, though, and getting blown up out on the moor stepped on their laugh lines rather severely. They seem grimly determined to get back to the giggles. That is why we must succeed in this inquiry, Shad. We must succeed, look magnificently competent in doing so, *and* with Parker in charge."

The duck leveled a gaze at me. "And we are going to bring this to pass how?"

I looked down my Basil Rathbone nose at him and arched an eyebrow. "I have brushed in the broad outlines of the concept, dear boy. Fill in the details." I pointed at the open door to downstairs. "Shall we brief our lead on his murder case?"

"Oh, let's do." Shad waddled toward the door muttering gloomily about computer-generated lizards, penthouses, Waterford Crystal birdbaths, action figures, and outrageous fortune.

* * * *

Room 914 looked like every other interrogation room in every police station in every country in the world: featureless pale beige walls, white light panel above a plain white plastic table flanked by two sets of composite wood stools on opposite sides, audio-visual recording controls in a black enameled wall panel next to the desk. The only way 914 differed from other interrogation rooms was that it was en suite, or as Shad would have it, the room had an attached crapper. I sat on a stool at the table, Shad squatted upon the table, and Parker sat in the loo with the room's door open—undignified, perhaps, but with olfactory compensations.

Through the open door Shad briefed Parker on the scene of the crime, the position and condition of Darcy Flanagan's bio, and the impact and trace evidence. "Flanagan was killed elsewhere and dumped at the scene," said Parker.

“Shad and I concur.”

“Security cameras in the area?”

I looked at Shad. He shook his head. “Nothing yet,” he said to the toilet door. “I’ve downloaded the area traffic surveillance records for this evening into the Heavitree mainframe as well as the private security recordings. The tech mechs are just getting started on them.”

The toilet flushed, but Parker failed to emerge. Nothing but silence for a long uncomfortable stretch.

“Parker?” I called at last.

“Sorry, sir. I was just thinking. What if Flanagan’s body was carefully inserted into Parliament Street for a purpose?”

“What purpose?”

“A political statement.”

Shad and I exchanged glances. “Dead bird in an alley—vote for Arthur Q. Schnebble?” cracked Shad.

“Hear me out, sergeant,” said Parker. “The deceased is a bio, isn’t he? We’re right in the middle of AB Emancipation Week, right? E-Week marks the Parliamentary Reform Act of 2132, which maintains suffrage for the human engram imprint, even onto mechanical or non-human bios, and it extends suffrage to artificially created intelligences otherwise qualifying as independent intelligent beings. See?”

Shad and I exchanged additional confused glances.

“It’s symbolic, sir,” continued Parker. “See, if Flanagan was purposefully dumped on Parliament Street, it may well hearken back to the original reform act that led to that little passage being named after Parliament. A possibility?”

Mallards don’t have eyebrows, but I swear Shad’s went up. “Parker, I bet you could tell me what the original act of Parliament was that lead to the naming of Parliament Street.”

“Yes, sergeant. It was the Reform Act of 1832. The act changed a number of laws in Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales regarding

representation in Parliament, but the main thing it did was to increase the number of males who could vote by approximately thirty percent.”

“Fair to say it extended suffrage to the less worthy?” Shad inquired.

“That was certainly how the Exeter city fathers regarded it at the time. As we are all aware, that’s how the archbishop and the rest of the anti-AB crowd today currently regard the Act of 2132.”

I pondered that in silence for a moment. I glanced at Shad. He was looking at the tabletop. Once he had concluded shaking out his feathers from his head to his tail, he looked at me and said, “Well, gang, this nothing case fairly reeks with significant coincidence.”

“If DC Parker is correct in his facts,” I cautioned.

“He is. Checked it all out on *Ferdie’s Freepaedia*,” Shad explained. “Parker—” he began but stopped short. “Autopsy report coming in,” he said, his eyes focused at an invisible point between the toilet door and myself. “Flanagan’s human meat suit likely died as a result of a heart attack induced by the violent death of his pigeon bio. Death in the pigeon bio was caused by a broken rib through the heart as the result of blunt force trauma, the weapon being circular, approximately seven centimeters in diameter, convex in shape, fabric enclosed, flexible—”

“Shad,” I interrupted, “doesn’t that sound like one of those old beanbag loads for a what-do-you-call-it?”

A brief pause as Shad consulted *Ferdie’s*, then he said, “Gas gun. They were miscreant-safe weapons for use in riot control. The thirty-seven millimeter gas gun fired a 7.5 centimeter fabric-covered flexible baton filled with a 150 grams of lead shot.”

“Sounds like one of those could do a dandy job of mangling a pigeon,” said Parker.

Shad faced the toilet. “They’re antiques, Parker. We’ve got greasefoot, flashnet, and stunspray now. Gas guns haven’t been used anywhere for anything in over a century.”

Before I could suggest Parker put in a search for gas guns in Devon, he mentioned it himself. “Research will keep me out of public view,” he offered contritely as a wistful note came into his voice. “That’s what I used to do, you know. Research.”

Shad looked at me and held out his wings questioningly as the voice from the loo fell silent.

“Parker was once a police historian,” I explained. “Oxford, wasn’t it, Parker?”

“Yes,” he replied gloomily. “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!”

I glanced at Shad.

“Wordsworth,” Shad muttered back at me. Facing the door to the toilet he began to ask a question—probably concerning just how a police historian in Oxford wound up as a gorilla bio—when another call came in on Shad’s interface. “Tox screen on Flanagan.” He stood and faced me, nonexistent eyebrows arched. “Alcohol. In Flanagan’s blood. Enough to pickle a pigeon.”

We all thought on that for a moment. It was a case wrinkle with which none of us knew what to do just then. Shad’s tail resumed twitching, signifying another incoming call.

“The person who reported finding the body, Parker,” I said, “did he or she ever show?”

“Yes. Sharissa Thule. She’s a thirty-one year old woman—human natural—from Dawlish. She was in the city shopping and visiting relatives and was on her way from the Guildhall Shopping Centre to have tea at the Milkmaid on Catherine. She found the body on Parliament and reported it to a constable.”

“Why would a nat report a dead bird to the police unless she knew it was a bio?” I asked.

“She could tell it was a bio. I gather Ms. Thule carries a marker detector.”

“Really. Why?”

“The way she put it, sir, ‘I want to know whether to pet a cute little doggie on the head or send the bloody pervert packing.’ A bit anti-amdroid. Said something about a wolfhound in Lympstone two summers ago. The creature rubbed against her leg rather passionately. Turned out to be an

amdroid.”

Shad’s tail stopped twitching; he spread his wings and faced me, his bill hanging open. He froze that way for almost a minute, and then said, “They want me back!”

“Sorry?”

“They want me back!” He lowered his wings and began pacing rapidly in a circle. “That was my New York agent. Barton Stanky? The duck stockholders somehow regained control of the insurance conglomerate over the lizard people—I don’t know the details, but Barton baby says the corporation stock has been diving for the bottom ever since their advertising firm dumped the duck! The clients have been demanding the return of the duck! Aa-flak!” he cried “Aa-flak! They want me back!”

* * * *

“I swear, Val, I have the karma of Tantalus,” I said later at home as I poked at the shepherd’s pie Val had Walter prepare for me. Walter, the mech who did our cooking and housework, had even made spotted dick for dessert, but I could only pick at it.

“I finally get a partner I can work with—that I like—and bleeding Madison Avenue wants to make Shad a flipping billionaire clowning around and falling on his pratt to sell insurance.”

“How nice for Guy. He was so unhappy to be let go,” she said, her aqua eyes focused on mine. She sat across from me on the table, her tail wrapped around her legs. “Aren’t you happy for him?”

“Oh,” I let out my breath and turned my scowl toward my dinner. “Of course I am, dear. I am being quite selfish.”

“A tad.”

I took a breath, let it out, and tried a bit of pie. “This is rather good, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Walter said he was trying a new recipe.”

“Excellent.” I leaned back in my chair, took a sip of tea, replaced the cup on the table, and smiled at her. “I suppose if I got a call from Metro to go back to London the sonic boom of my run back to the Yard would uproot

half the trees in southern England. Thanks for being patient with me, dear.”

“Cats are nothing if not patient, Harry.”

“I’ll miss Shad, though. He saved my life in that stable out at Hound Tor Hunts. We’ve talked old films for hours, and he tells the most outlandish stories. His rather disrespectful comments of certain political and police personalities from time to time have kept me in stitches, not to mention his terrible puns. Did I tell you—”

“Murder most fowl,” she interrupted.

“Yes. Sorry. I forget at times.” Val walked the length of the table and seated herself next to my left shoulder. “Looks as though this might be my last case with Shad,” I said to her.

“If that’s so, Harry, make it a good one.”

“Of course. We’ll make it a good one—if we can. Parker’s career—ABCD’s existence—may well depend upon it.”

“What’s on for tomorrow?”

“Parker will be tracking down antique beanbag guns while Shad and I question Flanagan’s coworkers. We’ll see if we can piece together Darcy Flanagan’s movements prior to his demise.”

“Do you know yet what to do about Ralph Parker leading the case? I’ll never forget the horror of that ceremony at the Royal Diane Museum when I saw it on the telly.”

“Many of us have been having rather fearsome flashbacks this evening on that account. After we briefed Parker, I prepared and read a brief statement to the reporters and took no questions. They didn’t like that at all. Hardly any of the questions they tried to ask were about the murder.”

“About Ralph?” she asked.

I nodded. “Sooner or later, Parker is going to have to face the media if he’s going to lead this case.”

“Ralph must be so worried.”

“A concern shared by a small but anxious legion at ABCD, my dear.”

* * * *

The next morning constables from the Exeter Station brought in only a single coworker of Darcy Flanagan's, a pigeon bio named Tommy Shay. He was a deep-gray bird with gleaming white wing bands, a blued-gunmetal colored hood that came down to his shoulders, white beak, and deep pink feet—a much more handsome model than that flown by the deceased. Shay was a flight lieutenant and the commander of Puss-in-Boots Flight, the late Darcy Flanagan's unit. The remaining two members of Puss-in-Boots, flying officers Jock Munro and Art Krauthammer, were in hospice at Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital where Pureledge kept Munro and Krauthammer's stasis beds. Both were in their late nineties and bedridden, hence unavailable until they came on duty at three in the afternoon, should they live so long.

Flight Lieutenant Shay was brought in wearing his pigeon suit, which for him was a permanent arrangement. It seems that the year before, ninety-seven-year-old Tommy Shay cacked out on his barracks stasis bed at Castle Street while his engrams were still on patrol at St. Peters. "When that happens," Shay said from his perch on a stool at the interrogation table, "Pureledge lets their old time employees live out their lives wearing wings, if they like. Those who take to it permanent even get a new bio once the old pigeon goes toes up."

"Generous of the company," I said.

The pigeon shrugged. "Pigeon bios is cheap when you get 'em by the thousand. Builds good will with the lads, though."

"And for you?" I asked.

"A pigeon on this side o' the dirt's better'n worms on t' other, the way I looks at it," he answered philosophically.

Shad squatted on the end of the table as I leaned my elbows on it. "What can you tell us about Darcy Flanagan?" Shad asked the pigeon.

"Not much, sergeant. See, the RPAF is kind like the old French Foreign Legion. You get a job, training, equipment, burial expenses, and no questions."

"RPAF?" asked Shad.

"Royal Pigeon Air Force," answered Shay.

"Is that actually connected to the British military?"

Shay shook his head at the duck. "No, guv. Haw! The RPAF is just somethin' the original lads dreamed up to make the job a bit more fun. Long as we keep Jerry off the ledges, company don't mind."

"Tell us what you can about Darcy," I said.

"Darcy joined the 712 middle of June. He was issued one of them old-line model pigeon suits. We calls 'em 'Hurricanes.'"

"I noticed," I said, "that your bio is much better looking than Flanagan's."

"Better performin' too. This here is a Spitfire," said Shay, opening and closing his wings, turning about, giving Shad and me a good look. "We calls 'em Spits. Great improvement over the Hurricane, detective. Better speed, climb, and dive rates, higher ceiling, more maneuverable, can take a whale more punishment, too. I rammed me a couple o' pushy ravens settin' up house on a turret on the cathedral south tower in this suit back in March. Tangled toes with the buggers, I did, 'til they got discouraged and headed for the countryside. Never mussed a feather of me own." He looked at Shad. "Raven's bigger'n a pigeon," he explained.

"Do tell," Shad responded. "About Flanagan?" he urged.

"Oh. Well, Castle Field was short o' Spits when young Darcy joined 712. Still is." He faced me. "I do believe Artie Krauthammer got the last Spit."

"Darcy?" I reminded him.

"Right. So when Darcy shows at flight school, I looks at that old Hurricane bag o' feathers and says I to Squadron Leader Haverill, 'Les,' I says to him, 'you can't send the kid up in a crate like that!'"

I glanced at Shad. He appeared to be gnawing on the edge of his own wing.

"Squadron leader says Flanagan flies the Hurricane 'til the new Spits come in. 'Make do,' says he."

"Well, Tommy," I said as I faced Shay, "How did he do?"

"Oh, he took to flying well enough. Loved it so, he did. Inspector, you take dim eyes, sore knees, bad back, weak heart, a scarred liver, and no wind, leave that all behind and put on wings—even one o' them Hurricanes—and all you wants is to get up in the sky—" Shay interrupted himself, looked down lost in thought for a moment, then he faced me. "On patrol though, sometimes he'd lag behind. Hurricanes just can't keep up with Spits. We'd get to diving on Jerry, chasing him 'round the towers ... well, sometimes Darcy wouldn't quite be on time. Tried to keep down the speed, but in the heat of the chase—"

"Tally ho," said Shad.

"Exactly. See, Puss-in-Boots Flight patrols the south side of St. Peters. I ain't unfair in sayin' we're hard done by with just the one flight. Wolf Flight has the north cathedral patrol which is just that side o' the church. Red Riding Hood Flight only has Mol's, St. Martins, and them other old shops on Cathedral Close. Cinderella Flight's only got east end o' Cathedral Yard, the Royal Clarence and a couple shops. On the cathedral's south side, though, Puss-in-Boots's got half the cathedral plus the Cloisters, plus the Diocesan House, and plus the Bishop's bleedin' Palace."

"And Flanagan couldn't keep up," I urged.

"What I thought I done was make a problem into a virtue, inspector. After a few days I put him on lone patrol flying the Diocesan House and the Bishop's Palace. Just surveillance, mind. While me, Jock, and Art buzzed Jerry off the rest, Darcy would patrol his part and send up the balloon if he saw Jerry heading his way. We'd come running and the four of us would roust the Hun and chase 'em off."

"So for most of the shift—ah, patrol—you wouldn't see Flanagan at all," said Shad.

The pigeon nodded. "True enough, but he'd radio in every so often when he'd see Jerry or to check in. It was just until Darcy got his Spit." The bird thought for a moment. "It worked good for a few weeks. Darcy would put in a call and the rest o' the lads'd come a-runnin'. Kept the ledges pristine, we did." Shay fell silent, shook his head. "Then Darcy stopped calling in for help. He could do it on his own. When I'd check, the ledges were clean, so I left well enough alone."

"And yesterday?" I asked.

"Patrol started at three, our flight was posted and Darcy peeled off for the palace. We got two calls from Darcy that first hour. Both times he said he'd taken care of Jerry on his own. We got no more calls. It were busy on the south side. Besides Jerrys, there was dole bums and pige freaks—other pigeon bios. They had us fagged, so it wasn't 'til a bit before five I radioed Darcy, see how he was makin' out. I got no answer and ordered the flight onto Darcy's patrol area. He wasn't there. We split up and searched all over for him, but couldn't find a feather. Can't see how he wound up on Parliament Street. That's way out of our patrol area."

"Did Flanagan drink?" asked Shad.

"Darcy's Irish so he has to put away his jar, right?" Shay said scornfully. He glanced at me, then faced Shad as he adopted a completely phony uncaring demeanor, standing slouched upon his stool. "Wouldn't know about Darcy drinkin', sergeant. Surely wouldn't. Don't socialize with the lads off duty. Wouldn't be none o' my concern anyway, would it?"

"On duty," I said. "Did he drink on duty?"

"Do I look like a stool pigeon to you?" he demanded.

Shad was back to chewing on his wing. I found a sudden need to rub my eyes. "Flanagan's autopsy," gasped Shad, "it showed that he'd been drinking quite a bit before he was killed."

"A wee touch o' the dew, eh?"

"He was pissed," I insisted.

Tommy Shay raised his right wing. "God's honest truth, detective, I never seen young Darcy take a drink on or off duty."

"So, the last time you saw him was at the beginning of the patrol, three PM, and the last time you heard from him was before four."

"Yes."

"What kind of transmission range you birds have?" asked Shad.

"About twenty-five kilometers before there's a noticeable drop in signal strength."

“That narrows it down,” he said sarcastically.

Shay looked from Shad to me. “What’s he mean?”

“Hell, man.” I held out my hands. “Flanagan could’ve been in bloody Exmouth for those two transmissions for all you knew.”

Although Tommy Shay felt bad about young Darcy, we got nothing more useful out of him. We detained him, however, until we had a chance to brief Parker.

After we delivered our report through the open toilet door in Room 914, our aromatic leader said, “There are nine gas guns registered in England. The Manchester Worker’s Museum has one, the Imperial War Museum in London has one, the British Museum has two, all four inoperable according to museum curators. The police force museum in Bristol has two, one of them possibly operable. The Royal Diane Museum here in Exeter has one, functional according to the curator. Of the remaining two, Morton Geller, an antique weapons dealer in Leeds, has one. Mr. Geller believes that with the investment of just a few hundred quid the gas gun he has in inventory might be made operable, although he hasn’t a clue where to obtain ammunition for it. The remaining gas gun belongs to the Office of the Bishop of Exeter.”

“Whoa!” said Shad, looking at me. I faced the door to the WC.

“Parker, what about that last?”

“The lord bishop, Dr. Reginald Koch. His secretary will get back to us about the gun. Apparently they cannot locate it. No one recalls seeing it ever and the last record of its existence is a century old.” Parker punctuated his finding by flushing the toilet.

Shad looked at me. “That might even be a clue.”

While Parker continued his investigations and sorting through the surveillance videos, Shad and I arranged with Flight Leader Tommy Shay, 712 Squadron Leader Patricia Kwela—a.k.a. “Mother Goose”—and Pureledge Exeter Manager Lucinda Martini for Shad and me to go undercover that evening as ledge marshals, Puss in Boots Flight, 712 Squadron, Royal Pigeon Air Force.

* * * *

Since we were new to the service, Shad and I had to arrive at Pureledge two hours early for flight training. Shad put the cruiser down on High Street at Castle, we climbed out, then he sent it back to Heavitree Tower. Castle Street there is a wide park-like thoroughfare given over to foot traffic, mercilessly hard stainless steel benches from another age, the occasional tree, and the obligatory busker or three. That afternoon, despite the chill, entertainment was provided by a kangaroo bio singing “Charlie Is My Darling” with a Scottish accent to the accompaniment of a banjo played by a joey bio located in the ‘roo’s pouch. Shad actually coded a fiver into the creditron in the open banjo case at the ‘roo’s feet.

“Tough business,” he explained as he waddled up past Musgrave Row toward the rounded white south-facing side of the Pureledge building. Castle went up the left side of Pureledge, a narrower street named Little Castle went up the right. The pigeon chasing company’s building was the southernmost of the buildings bounded by the two Castle streets and on the south by the doglegged joining of Musgrave Row and Bailey. The building itself was a five-story Neo-Georgian structure with multi-paned double-hung windows above and larger display windows at street level the panes of which displayed graphics mostly of Exeter’s various buildings and monuments, pristine and pigeon free. A lone “before” graphic showed a beer stone statue of some king, lord, or martyr from the west facade at St. Peters Cathedral, a furtive-looking pigeon behind the statue’s right shoulder guarding a huge black nest that extended behind the statue’s head and to its left shoulder. Pigeon waste coated the statue’s shoulders and folded arms. At the bottom of the poster was printed, “Don’t let this happen to you.”

The top floor of the building was set back, the windows forming part of a metal roof. Those windows were open and a group of about forty pigeons exited one of the windows on the left and took a westerly heading. There was something strange about how they were flying. “Shad?”

“I see it. Don’t know what it is.” He glanced back at me. “It’s like they’re doing a continuous stadium wave in different directions with their wings but I can’t follow it with my eyes. Weird.” He waddled the semicircle to the Castle Street entrance and entered.

The receptionist was a rather attractive human nat in her early thirties named Naomi Foon, according to her illuminated plastic desking accessory. She appeared quite normal in lavender pantaloons and vest business attire, spiked black hair with lavender tips, and matching lavender communications array plugged into her right ear. In fact everything about

the sales floor of Pureledge was traditional: liquid crystal walnut paneling, virtual gaslight, plush red algae carpeting, hand-painted ties on the sales agents, and the reek of preserved Albion, which is what they were selling, after all.

Receptionist Foon took our names and looked over her desk down at Shad. “I don’t believe we’ve ever before had a ducky as one of our flyers.” She batted her feather extended eyelashes and flashed Shad a smile.

“I’m already in a low paying job and I thought I’d explore some of the other options available in poverty,” he said.

She nodded vacantly. “We once had a wildebeest bio.”

“Why would a wildebeest want to be a pigeon?” I asked.

“He was a very old wildebeest,” she explained. Her lavender streaked eyebrows went up. “Not that I’m implying either of you gentlemen are very old.” She looked at me. “I would say, Mr. Jagers, that you look very young to be one of our flyers. How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The bio was grown forty-five; I’ve had it twelve years. The engrams are...” I had to think for a moment. “The engrams are ninety-three.”

“You look just like Sherlock Holmes—you know, in the old telly flicks? That actor, Basir Redbone?”

“Hadn’t noticed it myself.”

She looked at Shad. “I would say you are a young-looking duck.”

“Ducks never show their age until they find themselves plucked, glazed, and surrounded by chopsticks,” responded Shad curtly. “Where do we go?”

“Second floor,” she answered. “Good hunting, fellows.”

As we went to the elevator, I asked Shad, “Are you looking for a fight or has that fellow from the Chinese restaurant been lurking around Rougemont again?”

“Sorry there, Holmes. Things on my mind.”

“Things theatrical?”

We entered the elevator, the doors formed and hardened, and Shad barked “Two” at the control panel. He looked up at me as the car elevated. “I guess I’m a little torn between work here and going back to doing commercials.”

“Ever since that lizard bumped you out of your advert slot and you wound up in ABCD you’ve been unhappy, Shad. Now they want you back. I’d think you’d be quite pleased.”

The car stopped and the doors softened and faded. Shad didn’t move. “I know. But I’ve had a ball working with you, Jaggs. I kind of like Exeter. There’s Nadine, of course. Hell, Jaggs, you saved my life out at Hangingstone.”

“I’ll not be happy to see you go, Shad, although I will enjoy seeing you on the telly again. You’re the only television star I’ve ever known. Val is very happy for you. So am I.”

“Well, it’s been a sincere privilege to work with someone who looks so much like Basir Redbone, wak, wak, w—”

Shad was staring straight ahead, his countenance frozen. I turned to look at what had captured his attention. We stepped out into the room. The second floor looked like a military officer’s club from the midtwentieth century, leather-covered overstuffed chairs, dim lights, a piano mech that played itself, and dozens of posters on the walls and ceiling of fighter aircraft of World War II, with several of the Hurricane but mostly of the Spitfire: Spits diving, climbing, turning, shooting, on floats, and on wheels. The piano mech was playing “The White Cliffs of Dover” and accompanying itself with a familiar sounding female voice. I glanced at Shad and he said, “Vera Lynn,” in answer to my unasked question.

“How do you know it’s Vera Lynn?”

“I recognize her from the end of *Dr. Strangelove* when she sang ‘We’ll Meet Again.’”

“Ah, yes. With the nuclear mushroom clouds going up. Nineteen sixty-six?”

“Sixty-four,” he corrected. “Get a load of this room, Jaggs. I feel like Errol Flynn in *Dawn Patrol*.” He nodded his head toward a strange-looking mech who was approaching us silently on soft rubber wheels. She was

wearing a starched white dress, white cap, and a short midnight blue cape. The mech's right eye looked human. The left eye glowed green, resembling a night scope with a variety of interchangeable lenses and filters. Instead of fingers her hands bristled with sensors, various tools such as a rubber hammer, tongue depressor, and things that poked, stuck, cut, sewed, cleansed, taped, and perhaps knitted for all I could tell. The most formidable of these instruments was a sensor that resembled a huge rubber finger.

"I'm Nurse Florence," she announced in a raspy voice. As she came to a halt, her big rubber finger thrust up toward a poster of a ME 109 going down in flames.

"I'm just a little duck," Shad whimpered to the nurse in a tiny voice.

The big rubber finger retracted and was replaced by a smaller, but still fearsome, digit. "Follow me," she commanded.

"Chocks away, lad," I said to Shad. As we followed Nurse Florence to the examination rooms, the piano mech struck up the Glenn Miller version of "Little Brown Jug."

* * * *

After our stasis bed physicals, about which the less said the better, we were escorted to a third floor room which housed approximately eighty triple bunk stasis beds, about half of which were filled with old men, old women, old bios, and at least one very rusty mech. "Two-sixty-four Squadron," whispered our escort, a tech mech named Watkins. "Them's the blokes you chaps'll relieve once you get in the air." In the 712 area, along with a woman in her seventies named Mathilda, Shad and I copied into our Hurricane pigeon suits. Watkins ran the three of us and eight other "chicks" directly to the roof where we met Hell's pigeon.

"You lot will never make it."

Flight Sergeant Ponsonby marched up and down our file of eleven ledge marshal trainees, his gray, black, and white Spit feathers glossed back, his pink toes gleaming with some sort of gloss, and something resembling a chopstick thrust beneath his left wing. He alternated his growling and barking with the following: "You lot come creepin' up on me roof from hospital, from the flippin' dole queue, from bloomin' Bide-A-Wee Nursin' Home, or hidin' out from old bill or the missus happy as you please, all fired up to singe Jerry's tail feathers for Pureledge's tenner, and not a

bleedin' clue how to get in the bleedin' air. Just look at you feather bags. I might as well be talkin' to a stack of flippin' flapjacks—"

And so on. Once flight sergeant was finished with his set piece, he bellowed, "Staff!" and two pigeons emerged marching from in back of us. Through a series of shouts, bellows, shoves, and curses they herded us over to a skylight. Standing upon the edge of the raised casement looking down upon us was a one-legged, one-eyed pigeon Spit with one droopy wing. The missing undercarriage limb had been replaced by a red plastic peg leg. The missing eye was covered by a black patch held in place by a thin black elastic band.

"I am Squadron Leader Leslie Haverill, ground commander of Castle Field," he said in a calm voice. "I, Flight Sergeant Ponsonby, and the staff personnel at Castle Field welcome you to RPAF, Exeter. I know you'll do well here, become part of our rich tradition, and be credits to the Royal Pigeon Air Force."

Squadron Leader Haverill then read us *Kings Regulations* pertaining to private investigators, guards, watch officers, and ledge marshals. Curiously enough, besides chasing pigeons and other fowl off ledges, unlike detectives from the Artificial Beings Crimes Division, ledge marshals were actually allowed to detain suspects and make arrests. In cases of pigeon and other fowl bios carrying human imprints, those trespassing on private, company, corporate, or government property protected by Pureledge were subject to arrest using whatever force necessary to subdue said arrestee. Miscreants thus detained were then to be turned over to the Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, Exeter Police Station. There was, in addition, a robust course in beak-to-toe combat during which Staff Foster—a Spit pigeon wearing a tiny set of prescription goggles—mentioned that all those staffing ground and flight schools had been killed in action. That is, their suits reclining in stasis had cacked out. Like Tommy Shay, they had opted to remain in wings.

"What happened to the squadron leader's Spit?" asked Shad when we were on break.

"Terrible thing, lad," answered Sgt. Foster shaking his head, his voice lowered. "A year ago squadron leader used to command 331 of the First, covering Rougemont Castle down to High and southwest to Iron Bridge. Out on the rooftops, towers, and ledges, lads: That's where Jerry is; that's where we expect the attack." He shook his head sadly. "Danger's all around, lads, everywhere. See, back then we had a brand new pilot officer assigned to 712, lad by name of Kumar. He took to that Spit like he was

born to it. Once off the tower and he was airborne. A natural flyer. Only with us a few days, though. Disappeared, he did. They only found a feather or two over by the Royal Clarence. Must've took on a falcon or hawk. Snapped him up quick as Bob's your uncle his parts parceled out 'mongst Henry and the other hawk chicks in the nest I imagine. Heart of an eagle, young Kumar, but he had the body of a pigeon and the judgment of a scone. You find a hawk or falcon squattin' in your patrol area, flyer, you call it in. Special Unit goes after the big ones."

"Haverill?" prompted Shad.

"Don't be impatient, lad." He regarded Shad down the length of his beak. "Let's see, then. Squadron Leader Haverill in his pigeon suit was cuttin' through 712's stasis beds when Kumar went down. Kumar, he slams awake all stressed from bein' turned into hawk vittles. Wildebeest bio, he was. Sprung right off that bed he did, hit the ceiling, and landed on Haverill all four hoofs a-runnin' at the same time. Tore up squadron leader proper." Foster faced me. "Took poor Kumar in his wildebeest suit that night and run him straight off to the wigpicker works, bleedin Happy Valley, they did. Still there, poor lad." He returned his goggled gaze to Shad. "Pieced squadron leader together but his flyin' days was done for. Took him out of the air and made him ground commander."

"Why the prescription goggles, Staff?" asked Shad, nodding toward flight's set. "Aren't all Spit bios genetically coded for good eyesight?"

"Well, lad, that were a cock-up of me own. I joined back when each squadron did it's own flight training. About eight years ago it was. They sent me straight into the 994 patrol area south o' the Guildhall. Only an hour or so in the air, lad, then we was on break. I put down on a windowsill by the Catacombs. Nice little stairclimb o' houses called Napier Terrace. I was recitin' the flap changes—" He lowered his voice as though passing on official secrets. "The changes was brand new back then. Your flight leader'll fill you in. I was number five in the flight and it were one, two, three, four, five, six—a flap on me own number, see—then two, one, four, three, six, five—up flap—then two, four, one ... or was that two, one, five—bugger it. Been so long I forget. Anyway, I was recitin' the changes out loud when next thing I know Jerry hits me with poison gas."

"Sorry?" I said.

"Poison gas, lad—bug spray according' to the tox screen they did on me in hospital. Blinds me and knocked me colder'n January lager, as we say in the RPAF. Next I know I'm in hospital. Findin' out what happened to

me upset my nat in stasis so, Billy Foster the natural man cacked out.” He held out his wings. “Company’s gift.” He lowered his wings. “Had to get specs, though, ‘cause the poison fried me corneas. Can’t see much with ‘em, but can’t see a bleedin’ thing without.”

When Staff Foster marched off to abrade some trainee’s ego, I turned to Shad. “We need to know if the scenes of crime officers ever found Kumar’s pigeon bio, exactly where the SOCOs found those feathers, and what they did with them. We also need a detailed map of the squadron patrol areas in Exeter. I’m very curious who was living in Napier Terrace eight years ago when Staff Foster caught it.”

Shad’s pigeon suit looked at me for a beat then nodded. “Fitness reports and other pigeon injuries and deaths?”

“Absolutely. Get details, location, and date of each incident. We need police reports and lists of every employee, guest, and residence in each area as well as traffic and private surveillance video archives. Stasis bed consequences, too.”

“You think our boy has been busy before?”

“Seems likely.”

“Awright, you lot! Don’t be late for parade!” bellowed Staff Foster. “To the tower, lads. Let’s see if those new feathers bounce or fly!”

* * * *

Part of the package in all ledge marshal bios is a flight program that does most of the work involved in knowing how to fly. On the roof the eleven of us were run up little ramps to the top of a tower and kicked off into the air until, instead of landing crumpled up at the foot of the tower, we flew down under our own power. I did it in three tries but it took Shad five.

“Ducks don’t fly the same as pigeons,” he explained. “I finally had to disable my duck program before I could work these pigeon wings.”

We flew circuits around the building, higher and higher, almost to the level of the air vectors, then circled back down. It was the most wonderful sensation I have ever experienced. Even in one of their old Hurricanes, the strength, the freedom, the thrill, combined with the incredible degree of control, was such I was certain DI Harrington Jagers below was grinning in his stasis bed.

One final ground parade and caution from Squadron Leader Haverill prohibiting flight formations and synchronous wing flapping: "Lads, our function is to keep the ledges of our clients clean and to do so in a natural-appearing manner. No one objects to pigeons. They are natural; they are beautiful. What our clients object to is filth. However, if we eliminate the filth but fly fighter and bomber formations, we no longer look natural. Instead, we look threatening. Flapping wings in unison, I would add, does not look natural. Report to your commands."

Flight Sergeant Ponsonby and his two staffs barked us down to the ready room on the fifth floor where Shad, Mathilda, and I joined Puss in Boots Flight as the 712 Squadron of the Third Wing prepared to relieve 214 of the Second. We had a few minutes and Tommy Shay, Jock Munro, and Artie Krauthammer explained to the three of us what they called "the changes."

"Years ago we used to flap in unison. Took great pride in it, we did," said Shay. "The legs downstairs,"—*legs* appeared to be a term of derision—"The *legs* says they got complaints, so no more synchronous flappin'. Well, we still takes pride in our flyin', so we flies changes. Got it from the bell ringers what do change ringing. Now we up to full strength, we got six birds in the flight. We can do it proper." And then Tommy explained the mysteries of the 'Blue Line,' otherwise known as 'Plain Bob Minor.' Tommy was Puss in Boots One, Jock was Two, Artie was Three, I was Four, Shad was Five, and Mathilda was Six. After going from One to Six in order, the variations began, 214365, then 241635, 426153, and so on. "I'll call 'em out 'til you get the hang of it. You flap down on your first number, raise on your next, then down on the next. I'll time my call to start once I see where Wolf Flight is in the pattern. You'll pick it up soon enough. Any questions?"

"It doesn't look natural," said Shad.

"No, it don't," said Flight Lieutenant Shay. "But the legs don't know *why* it don't."

A buzzer buzzed and a red light began flashing. Shay led the way out of the ready room into an area ringed with open windows. There were hundreds of the Third Wing milling about. The forty or so "old wings" of the 712 introduced themselves to the five new "chicks" assigned to the squadron, stating first name then flight, as in "Percival, Wicked Stepmother," and "Jenkins, Tom Thumb." They all made Shad, Mathilda, and me feel quite welcome. On the sill of the southernmost facing window,

a handsome Spit pigeon stood and called the 712 to attention. Other Spits on other windowsills addressed their squadrons. As we fell silent, a second Spit pigeon took the first one's place.

"Mother Goose," Shay whispered to us in the flight.

"I am Squadron Leader Patricia Kwela, commanding officer of 712," the pigeon said with a slight accent I couldn't place. "I am notified 712 has five spankin' new pilot officers this mission. I welcome you. Your flight leaders will give you your orders. Do your most best to follow orders. You do that, we look good, keep ledges free of Jerry, go home safe, and all be most dandy. Now we going to have moment of silence for recently departed brother Flying Officer Darcy Flanagan of Puss in Boots Flight. I ask you all call down your juju and beg your wing brother Darcy get nothin' but clear skies, soft breezes, cozy dovecotes, and the whole Peanut Mountain."

Someone cooed a whistle and the entire wing fell silent as the piano mech far below softly played "Chariots of Fire." Once that was concluded, the whistle cooed again followed by the buzzer and a green light.

"Chocks away!" bellowed the wing adjutant, the squadrons lined up at their respective windows, and one after another flights flew from the windows. I managed to get Shad to stop laughing long enough not to miss our flight.

As we took up our heading toward the cathedral, Shad, Mathilda, and I learned to flap changes, and to take a bit of pride in doing so. Learning "the rows," as they were called. "Plain Bob Minor" began:

123456

214365

241635

426153

462513

645231

654321

563412

536142

351624

through sixty-two variations, then was repeated from the beginning. As a “four,” I could watch the fours ripple though the entire squadron while other numbers rippled in nonparallel directions. Very neat. Once the 712 was at the cathedral, Puss in Boots and Wolf flights peeled away. Wolf banked left for the north side and Puss in Boots banked right for the south where we fell in with the lads we were to relieve—Jimmy Dorsey Flight of 264 Squadron—and did a circuit of the South Cathedral, Cloisters, Diocesan House, and Bishop’s Palace. Jimmy One said to Tommy the area had been fairly quiet: only thirteen pigeons and one lone pigeon bio to discourage, and when his flight peeled off to join 264, he called, “Good hunting, chaps. Jimmy One out.” Then he called to “Big Band” and Jimmy Dorsey Flight ascended to join Tommy Dorsey Flight and 264 Squadron as it headed back to Castle Field.

* * * *

I suggested to Tommy that Shad and I take up Flanagan’s old patrol area. Since Mathilda was in a Hurricane and couldn’t keep up with the Spits, she came with us. The only experienced flyer among the three of us was Shad and Tommy made him our flight leader. We chased a few pigeons off the Bishop’s Palace and had a brief encounter with a pigeon bio named McGee on the Diocesan House. McGee was probably the same bio Jimmy Dorsey Flight had run off during their patrol. We chased him off but an hour later had to chase him off again. This time the three of us escorted McGee down to the Quay and showed him the cliffs above the river where the “really in” pigeons lived. Shad issued some formidable audio taken I believe from the second *King Kong* remake: giant gorilla grunts, snorts, thumps, and bellows followed by Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator saying, “Don’t come back,” which took care of the problem nicely.

We took breaks around the Puss in Boots patrol area feeder installed by Pureledge on the roof above the cathedral tearoom. On the first break, Munro couldn’t resist a tired working-for-peanuts reference. After feeding, it was off to the loo. Our patrol area’s designated bombing area was in the Bishop’s Garden, and it took several tries before Shad and I, on the wing, scored bulls eyes on the garden’s compost heap. Then it was back to patrol.

On the second break, Artie Krauthammer shared a useful reminiscence or two about Darcy Flanagan. It seemed that, prior to Pureledge, Darcy and Artie had spent much of their lives together in pubs. That continued until they found themselves in failing health, dire legal circumstances, and turning over more than half their pensions for rat poison blends from the offies. I had to explain to Shad that offies were shops, off-license package stores that sold alcohol.

“It was a rum life,” said Artie. “Darcy’s the one who discovered Pureledge. See, Darcy’s old liver couldn’t take much more and mine was even worse. ‘Another Old Coot Whiskey,’ the doc says to me, ‘and you’ll be looking for a bunk down in the catacombs, me lad.’ Darcy and me both swore off, but it weren’t never an easy oath to keep.”

“Why the RPAF?” Shad asked.

“‘Pigeons,’ Darcy says to me, ‘young they are, livers is just fine, and no questions. How much single malt you think it takes to warm up a pigeon?’ he asks me. Couple of drops? It’s a body weight and metabolism thing, right?”

Shad and I exchanged glances. “Right,” we both said facing him.

“Instead of more booze, we went for less body mass. Seemed like an answer to all our prayers. A single bottle could last a couple o’ pigeons a month or more. The day we was to show, though, Darcy didn’t. He’d spent the night and morning seein’ how much scrumpy he could put down and they had him in hospital. By the time he got out, I was in my Spit flappin’ changes and kind of enjoying having health and a clear head. Wanted to keep it that way. Darcy still had his plan, though. Day he left hospital he was at Castle Street fitted out for wings. All they had left then was Hurricanes. Anyway, Darcy was in the 712. I coaxed him to stay off the stuff, and he did for a few weeks. Then I could smell it on him.”

“He was drinking on duty?” asked Shad.

“I never saw him. Don’t know where he kept his jug,” answered Artie. “I wanted to stay sober meself, see. Got into a program: Birds of a Feather. Well, Darcy and I drifted apart. Didn’t exchange a word with him except to say hi for weeks. Then yesterday he goes missin’ and winds up dead.” Artie Krauthammer sadly shook his head. “Poor Darcy.”

After the second break, Mathilda was missing. Shad and I checked

the Bishop's Garden and began running a search grid on the cathedral grounds when we both looked around and noticed she was right behind us. "Sorry, boys. Had to go powder my beak," and then she cackled insanely and began sobbing and singing "Chariots of Fire." I dropped back, took a sniff, and Pilot Officer Mathilda was flying a bit too close to the wind.

"Darcy Flanagan was a good man," she declared as Shad fell back, Mathilda flying between us. "Such a dear—urp—poor dearie, dearie poo. Can't believe he's *gone!*" More sobbing. Between us, Shad and I guided her to the central peak of a roof, the palace spread out below us. From her babbling monolog, apparently Mathilda knew Darcy from his pub days. Sober old Artie Krauthammer wasn't the only one with whom Darcy had shared his reduced body mass alcohol conservation proposal. She wept, she reminisced, she sang a tune or two, gave a sloppy eulogy for the departed, and sobbed some more. Shad and I were both trying to decide how to get Mathilda to reveal the location of Flanagan's jug when she quieted, thought a moment, then took off. We watched as she glided down toward the palace, landed on the crenellated top of a small octagonal tower, then disappeared between the crenellations. When we joined her we noted a trap door set into the roof of the tower and next to it a ceramic jug painted the same dark color as the roof. Set into the base of the jug was a push-button spigot that emptied into the upturned lid of a jar. Mathilda pushed the button with her beak, a dollop of single malt landed in the lid, and she guzzled more than a wee drop or two. I looked at Shad and he was looking along the roof of the Diocesan House to where it joined the Bishop's Palace. I knew he was thinking the same as I: The bishop's gas gun was still unaccounted for.

At eleven that night, the 712 Squadron was relieved by the 132 "Big Toon" Squadron. We flew Yosemite Sam Flight around the south cathedral patrol area, then climbed to join Mother Goose and the 712 back to Castle Field, all of us cooing the old Vera Lynn song, "We'll Meet Again," as we flapped changes back home, Mathilda's changes flapping to a different ringer.

* * * *

"I am getting considerable pressure from the Chief Constable's office to resolve this dead pigeon matter," declared Detective Superintendent Matheson the next morning. Shad and I were in his office standing in front of his antique mahogany veneer desk. The rest of his office was unadorned save for the image of a gilt-framed painting of the Biograph Theater in Chicago centered in the liquid crystal wall facing the desk. The superintendent's hands were clasped behind his back and DC Parker was

behind the image of the Biograph in the superintendent's WC. Between flushes and shouting through the door, Parker did an adequate summary of the progress thus far on the Darcy Flanagan case.

Complete results on pigeon bio deaths and injuries weren't yet in, but what results there were appeared discouraging. Constabulary SOCOs had been called in regarding the Kumar matter, and had collected the feathers, but apparently the evidence collected at the scene had been misplaced. The report itself had been scrubbed in the Heavitree Tower computer meltdown that year, the file apparently never having been copied to the archive backup nor forwarded to ABCD. The detectives and SOCOs who worked on the Kumar case were scattered to the winds. They were being tracked down, but with little hope of success.

I could see Matheson was struggling with reconsidering his decision to place Parker in charge of the case. At one point his eyes pleaded as his brows arched, wrinkling his forehead, probably hoping against hope I would insist on taking over. The image of John Dillinger begging Sherlock Holmes for a favor quite gave me pause. Nevertheless, as Shad would have put it, we continued with the starting line-up. Either we'd pull this lump out of the fire or we'd all be singing the Oscar Meyer wiener anthem.

After concluding the briefing, Matheson turned to his WC and said, "Parker, I rang up DS Towson to hound him about his failure to show at work. Had quite a talk with him." A long uncomfortable pause ensued. "I'm afraid Towson's put in for retirement. Sorry." The superintendent hung his head for a moment, then turned and looked out of his window at the giant mirror-finished icicle advertising the Sport Centre Ski Slope on Gladstone.

"There's something I need to say to all of you." He glanced back at Shad and me, then glanced at his toilet door. "I have no one but myself to blame for all this. I went at this job by bits and bobs, always hoping to be called back to Greater Manchester, putting this—what I considered this silliness of AB Crimes—behind me. So many issues I let slide—pay, working conditions, the entire range of our special problems." He glanced at the toilet door. "At the end of the day, I fear I've failed. I just hope I haven't ruined this office and the entire national and world ABCD offices neck and crop."

He nodded to himself. "AB Crimes is important work because murder is still murder whatever suit carries the imprint. I hope you will all carry on, but I'll understand if anyone wants to bow out." He stood there silently, the gloom in the office so heavy it ought to have posted health warnings. I felt the duck kick my ankle. I looked down at Shad, his nonexistent brows were

furrowed, his beak was open, and his wings held out to his sides as he glared at me.

I faced the superintendent. "Well, sir, thank you kindly for the offer, but these are early days. Despite being terribly understaffed and underpaid, and despite the media's current cant on AB Crimes, I've rather gone off the idea of packing it in just yet."

He turned his head and looked at me. "Oh?"

"Parker is doing an admirable job conducting this investigation, sir, we have good leads, excellent detectives to follow up the leads, and it's frankly only a matter of time until we have a suspect. I am confident that the three of us under your leadership will be more than equal to the task. If that's all, sir?"

Matheson nodded, smiled, and nodded again. "Thank you, Jagers." He studied me for a moment and turned back to his window. "Thank you, gentlemen."

Outside the superintendent's office, the door closed behind the three of us, Shad looked up at me. "You do know you're going to Hell."

I glanced up at Parker and the gorilla nodded sadly. "If lying gets one Hell, inspector, you're in for it. I can smell the brimstone."

"Well. Perhaps I'll be offered a position."

* * * *

While Parker chased down video archives, researched injured and killed pigeon inquiries, and attempted to reconstruct the casework on the Kumar matter, he followed up on the gas guns. I helped him until late afternoon when I was to meet with Dr. Reginald Koch, Bishop of Exeter. Since the lord bishop was something of an anti-amdroid fellow, Shad's presence would likely cripple the interview's focus. Hence, Parker had Shad continue service in the RPAF to try to find out more about Flanagan's last patrol.

As I entered the ornate vine-leafed gothic entrance to the palace, I could hear a strange ghostly choir singing high above me. I backed out of the entrance, looked up, and in line high upon the crenellated edge of a decorative battlement above the entrance were the lads—all of Puss in Boots Flight, including Shad and Mathilda. They were singing Vera Lynn's

“When The Lights Go On Again.”

I made a rude gesture and pulled the chain. No one answered. Trying the latch, the door opened and inside the palace was a state of barely organized chaos. Carpenters, plasterers, plumbers, glaziers, decorators, architects, contractors, and bishop’s minions appeared to be engaged in a shouting and dust generating competition accompanied by power tools of several kinds joined by chipberries playing at top volume several types of music and things that might be music. The choking haze of dust seemed to be settling out on acres of dropcloths while mechs carried stuff from here to there and from there to here.

There was a fellow in dusty livery and I went over to him and waited for a break in the bellowing. He was of medium height, a slender human nat of about forty with black hair, dark gray eyes, and a mouth that looked as though he had been suckled by a lemon. When he noticed me, he smiled, cocked his head to one side, and said, “Yes?”

“I’m Detective Inspector Jaggars here to see Dr. Koch,” I yelled and held out my identification. “I have an appointment.”

His puckered upper lip curled slightly at the sight of my ABCD card. “Artificial Beings,” he said as though he had just discovered a decomposed badger in his pudding. “Come this way, inspector. Dr. Koch is expecting you.”

I followed him around jack mechs, ladders, scaffolding, and stacks of building materials into a long hall, the walls draped to protect them from construction dust and debris. As I followed my guide, I watched as he brushed off his green and black coat. “Forgive me for not answering the door, inspector, and for not introducing myself. Inexcusable, but you see how things are. My name is Fedders.”

“Not at all, Fedders. Making a few changes?”

“It seems endless, inspector. Parts of the palace date back to the thirteenth century and I’m afraid the subsequent centuries haven’t been kind.” He reached a blue glowing tarp field at the end of the hall. Reaching to his vest pocket, Fedders turned off the field, opened the almost black varnish-caked oaken door thus revealed, and leaned his upper body into the room beyond. “Detective Inspector Jaggars, milord.”

I couldn’t make out a response from within if there was one. The butler stood aside and held the door for me.

"Thank you, Fedders," I said. I entered a study that was all that I imagined a bishop's study should be: book-lined walls, green shaded lights, ornately carved wooden beams, luxuriously stuffed chocolate brown and green leather chairs, and a ceiling mural of one bewhiskered fellow I assumed to be God bestowing upon another bewhiskered fellow who resembled Burt Reynolds a pair of tablets numbered from one to ten. None of this was computer generated or liquid crystal; all quite real. In the midst of this actual and studious piety was the rear-on view of a remarkably overweight fellow in green plaid shorts, purple satin short-sleeved shirt, red and green argyle socks, and spiked red and yellow golf shoes. As he teetered upon his artery-lined legs, he was apparently attempting to knock golf balls with a putter across his solid green carpet into a container that resembled a highball glass.

"A moment, inspector," said the man. His head came up and he was wearing a strange garment upon it that appeared to be a white leather tam with a purple visor and a large purple pom-pom on top. "I finished up an appearance at that three day golf thing at Oak Meadow in Starcross this morning. Abominable weather."

He swung, he hit the ball, the ball rolled straight and true across the carpet just where physics sent it: wide of the glass and directly beneath a green leather chair studded with polished brass tacks. The Lord Bishop of Exeter raised a trembling hand gripping his putter above his head, made several gasping and choking noises that to my ear approximated certain Middle English nouns, verbs, and adjectives fighting for expression, then the hand came down. He put the putter handle-first into a large purple bag leaning against a built-in bookcase where the gleaming instrument joined his other implements of improbable relaxation.

"Not as young as I used to be," said the bishop.

"It's going around, milord."

He wiped his fleshy red face with a purple towel. Lowering the towel, he regarded me for a moment, then tossed the towel in the general direction of his golf bag and seated himself in a brown leather chair next to a table that had a drink of some sort requiring a tiny pink umbrella up top and a polished silver tray beneath. He nodded toward another chair and I seated myself in it. He lifted his glass and asked, "Care for something to drink, inspector?"

"No. Thank you."

“Well, you are, aren’t you?”

“Sorry, milord?”

“Young as you used to be. At least at some point. Artificial Beings Crimes Division, wot? Everyone in ABCD is a bio or mech, am I right? Never heard of anyone copying into anything older than his natural.”

“ABCD is staffed by ABs—artificials. When I used the word *I*, milord, the reference was to my imprint rather than my suit.”

“Suit? *Suit?*” His thick white eyebrows arched. “A suit is a jacket, man. Trousers, a waistcoat perhaps. God’s truth, man, what you call a suit is a created *body*—what God in his arrogance once thought was *his* domain.” The bishop’s eyebrows came together into a frown.

Little profit in bandying souls, minds, mortal remains, and afterlives with someone who was an obvious bigot. He was also a bishop and presumably could quote me under the table regarding my bandying candidates. Putting temptation aside, I said, “I’m inquiring about an antique gas gun registered to your office well over a century ago. We’ve talked with your secretary and he seems unable to locate it.”

“Gas gun? Gas gun? What rot. I own guns. Fowling pieces, wot? Never owned a ... gas gun, you say?”

“Yes sir.”

“What’s it for?”

“They were originally used by law enforcement in non-lethal riot control. You might say the one we’re looking for now, though, was used as a fowling piece.”

“Fowling piece, you say?” His eyebrows went up again as he pointed a finger at me. “Ah hah! You’re talking about that dead pigeon bio on the telly. Ledge marshal chap.”

“Yes, milord. He was killed by a gas gun shooting a flexible baton.”

“Flex—a what?”

“A beanbag.”

“Beanbag. Damned silliness if you ask me. Pigeons. Beanbags. If that chap’d stayed in his own skin, he’d still be alive, wot?” The bishop took another drink, placed the glass upon the tray, and faced me. “Jaggers, have you any idea how much it costs churches in this country to keep pigeon filth off sills and ledges? Have any idea at all how it’s done?”

“Actually—”

“Cloned pigeon bios, can you believe? All over the sky: Bloody scientific freaks strutting about chasing off real pigeons. Call themselves the bloody Royal Air Force! Ruddy cheek of it. Takes a king’s ransom just to keep filth off buildings. Billions we pay across the entire kingdom. You want to see your money grow, sir, sink a few thousand into that Pureledge.”

“About—”

“You ever see ‘em fly, sir? The pigeon Air Force? See what they do with their wings when they’re up in the sky? I pulled a bell rope or two in my time, sir. I know what they’re up to.”

“About the gas gun, milord.”

“Gas gun? Oh.” He settled back in his chair, pursed his lips, and raised an eyebrow at me. “Murder weapon, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Understand, inspector, my personal possessions are different than things belonging to the bishop’s see. I don’t own this furniture,” he raised a hand, “or any of these books. They all belong to the office.” He frowned again, looked at his knees, and looked again at me. “How old was this contraption?”

“It was manufactured in the twenty-first century. Your secretary said the last mention in your records is one hundred and forty years old.”

“Rubbish. Don’t own any guns that old. Wouldn’t use them if I did. Unreliable. Something that old belongs in a museum, wot?” He placed his hands upon his knees, leaned forward, and stood. Turning, he went to the writing desk and pushed a button disguised in its surface. His face and hair achieved a bluish-white hue and I realized he was looking at the illuminated side of a virtual video screen. “There’s that mention.” He studied the screen, his lips silently moving, then moved his fingers about on the desk’s

surface. "Let's see. There, inspector. Well. What do you make of that? The office owned a Defense Technology 37mm Multi-launcher with folding stock and revolver type motor driven magazine. Here's an image..." His eyebrows went up. "Formidable looking device. Fired beanbags, you say."

"Yes, milord."

"Six rounds in three seconds it says. Bloody hell. You could have a Glorious Twelfth shooting party with one of those things—open the shooting season proper." He nodded once. "Let's see. Cathedral groundskeeper then purchased the weapon for pigeon control. Gun was never used." He glanced at me. "Illegal to shoot pigeons then, I suppose."

"As it is now, milord."

"Silly regulation." He looked back at his screen, muttered some numbers, and fingered his desktop. "Ah. There. I was right. A weapon of that make, model, description, and serial number is among the acquisitions of the Royal Diane Devon & Cornwall Force Museum. You know it? Fore Street next to St. Mary Arches?"

"I know it." I got up to look at his screen and verify the bishop's statements. Indeed, the weapon in question resided at the Royal Diane Police Museum. I asked Dr. Koch if I could use his link.

"Feel free, inspector." He nodded and returned to his chair and beverage.

Clerical error. The serial number of the gun belonging to the bishop's office had been entered incorrectly when the gun was donated to the law enforcement museum back when its location had been at Middlemoor at the Police College. Because of Parker's inquiries, the curator at the museum had rechecked the serial number and had made the necessary correction on their site. While I was there, I checked on the bishop's alibi. At the time when Darcy Flanagan was killed, the Bishop of Exeter was indeed in Starcross being entertained by approximately eighty witnesses at the venerable Oak Meadow Golf Club. The soiree had taken place after a blustery day of attempting unsuccessfully to put little white balls into little round holes for the benefit of notorious anti-AB life organization, Natural Pride. The person writing the article was Alicia Pelletier of Starcross, secretary of the local NP chapter.

"Lord Koch, are you a member of Natural Pride?"

"Natural Pride? Heavens, no," he said from his chair. "Don't get me wrong, sir. It's a sound organization doing vital work." He turned in his chair and looked at me. "A view unlikely to be shared by artificial beings I suppose." He turned back, removed the peculiar hat, and placed it on the table next to his drink. "Too controversial, NP. Never do to join in my position. Eight percent of church members in the see are ABs. I have a responsibility." He shook his head. "Human imprints on animals, sir. God never intended kangaroos to play the banjo, sir, nor apes to sing before the royal family."

The Parker reference peaked my interest. The bishop shook his head ruefully, noted his glass was empty, and was about to ring for his butler when the door opened and Fedders appeared with a fresh highball. "Bloody gorillas," he muttered raising the fresh drink to his lips. He glanced back at me. "Conducting your current inquiry I understand."

"Yes, milord."

He turned back, muttering to himself. "How long until the future sees a bloody chipmunk as priest?"

I decided to risk a question. "Milord, how would you feel about killing an amdroid?"

"Hah! Me, sir? Kill one, sir? I'm a man of God, sir. How do you think I'd feel about murder?"

"You consider it murder?"

He looked around again. "My objection to amdroids, inspector, is that in copying into an animal suit, as you put it, I believe the soul is copied in as well. Moving the soul in and out of a body is man's ability, sir, but it is *God's* work. If the only imprint of an individual is in an amdroid, bio, or mech, killing that imprint moves that soul out of the body. Again, sir, I say that is God's work. When men move souls I call it murder. Dread the future, sir. I do." He shook his head and looked down at the tiny pink umbrella in his fresh drink. "I do," he repeated.

* * * *

That night at home eating dinner—Walter had prepared an excellent pasty—I mentioned to Val my visit with the bishop. "Dr. Koch seemed quite adamant that every time we save an imprint off a dying soul or copy into a mech we're somehow violating God's plan. I'm glad I never had to bother

with all of that nonsense.”

“You mean religion?”

“Yes. My father thought I should choose for myself. I looked around, experimented some, but in the end decided to leave it all be.”

Val lowered the paw she had been licking as she sat on the table and beheld me with those dazzling aqua eyes. “Yet last Christmas Eve,” she said, “we went to Saint Peters to listen to Christmas carols.”

I thought on that, remembering the young male soloist who had brought me to tears with his haunting interpretation of “I Wonder As I Wander.” Val had been on my lap.

“There wasn’t a thought in my head that night,” I said to her. “I was filled with beautiful sounds. Tremendous choir there.”

“I remember,” she purred as she walked over and sat by my shoulder, leaning against it.

“When that boy sang—you remember the one—when he sang that carol I didn’t even hear or understand the words. For a moment I flashed on that terrible night those yobs came at me in London as I crossed Trafalgar Square. The knives, all that blood.”

I glanced at Val and her eyes were closed. “When they found me and harvested my engrams I was all the way to Charing Cross Station. I don’t remember getting there, but I do remember praying. It wasn’t to some bearded gent in a long white nightshirt or even using a name. I asked whatever was out there to get me home to you. When I heard that boy sing, his beautiful voice reverberating from the walls of that ancient cathedral, I was filled with gratitude to still be alive, whatever suit I inhabited. How could that be wrong?”

“Harry,” she said, “it doesn’t appear to have bothered the entity to whom you prayed.” She rubbed her head against my sleeve. “Nor the one to whom I prayed.”

We sat like that for the twenty seconds it took for the telephone to ring. I got up, walked into the living room, and said “answer” to the tiny screen on the end table next to the couch. Val liked the screen phone because it was easy for her to ring up and talk with her friends. I didn’t like it because any nit with wit enough to punch in our number got a free peek at

me. That's why I usually used the old fashioned one in the kitchen. The screen came up and it was Shad. "Hello, old duck."

"Hey, Jaggs. Parker and I have been at the tower all this time trying to crack Lord Bishop Fauntleroy's alibi."

"Find a fissure?"

"Polished titanium. He was definitely at the golf club when Darcy Flanagan was murdered. Something else, though. Do you remember that site write-up on the banquet by one Alicia Pelletier?"

"I remember."

"Parker read the whole thing including the mention of those valued Devon Natural Pride members who, most regrettably, could not attend that day's festivities at Oak Meadow. Ready for two of those names?"

"Stun me, ducky."

"Sharissa Thule of Dawlish and Raymond Crowe of Exeter."

I stood there, stunned. Half of that duo shouldn't have been a surprise. Two out of three times, the person who finds the body is complicit in the killing. It was the second name, though, that was going to be a problem: Raymond Crowe, Chief Constable of Devon & Cornwall Constabulary. His name answered so many questions it almost outweighed the overwhelming problems.

"Jaggs? I thought that making Crowe our prime suspect would at least be worth a bugger or two. You should've heard what Matheson said." He held a wingtip in front of his bill. *"I quite blushed."*

"Send me a cruiser, Shad. I'll be right down."

"He said that, too. Oh, a minor hitch in the murder weapon. The FME is amending his report. It seems that the cause of death wasn't the beanbag."

"Oh?"

"That caused the broken bones and precipitated his nat in stasis to peg it, but doesn't explain how that one rib changed direction eighty

degrees from the direction of impact and made it into Flanagan's heart."

"Shad, is it possible that Flanagan was conscious? That he knew his body in stasis was dead?"

"He was on continuous sync with his nat. It's possible."

I rang off and went to the hall to get my coat and hat. "Val," I called. "I have to go out. There's been a possible break in the Flanagan case."

"What is it?" she asked as she came up to me. I reached for the knob.

"I haven't sorted it all out in my mind yet, but our killer might very well be Chief Constable Crowe himself."

"Oh, dear."

I nodded. "Yes. Oh dear, indeed."

The cruiser was waiting for me as I left the house. I climbed in, and the vehicle ascended into a clear night sky and turned east, sirens blaring, right-of-way signals interrupting nearby vehicles' GPS controls, my own set of Christmas lights flashing green as the cruiser cut across Pennsylvania—St. Thomas to St. James—Heavitree Corridor. As the cruiser streaked toward the tower the pieces began falling into place: Parliament Street, the evening off for Shad and me, Parker catching the call, the pressure of the chief constable's office to resolve the case, the media there and waiting for Parker to drop it, the missing case file on the Romila Kumar bio disappearance. It wasn't enough to bring charges, though. Finding the rest of our case was going to be the night's likely assignment.

* * * *

Eight the next morning in the superintendent's office, dark circles and baggy eyes all around, including Detective Constable Fatima al-Fasi and Police Constable Duke Milburn both of Exeter CID. They had been the two on call for ABCD requests and had brought in Sharissa Thule just before midnight. Detective Superintendent Matheson asked them to remain pending an additional arrest. Now the sun was up and hurtfully bright.

"I don't quite understand why we still need to be here, superintendent," DC al-Fasi said to Matheson. She was wearing an olive

pantsuit with black turtleneck. The first impression she gave was of being young and petit—too much of both for police work. She had bobbed black hair, soft dark eyes, and no obvious makeup. It took awhile to notice the scars and calluses on her hands. She was one of those who worked out by smashing bricks and oak boards. “You have our full cooperation in making arrests,” she said. “Simply tell us who you want nicked, hand us the warrant, and we’ll bring him in.” Milburn nodded, yawned, and nodded again. Middle twenties, brown eyes, buzzed brown hair, square-jawed, and muscular. He was in the usual Exeter blue except instead of a helmet, his headgear consisted of a blue watch cap.

Matheson was seated behind his desk. He looked up at his liquid crystal ceiling. Images of little white clouds moved soundlessly across a deep blue sky. Shad and I were in chairs before the superintendent’s desk, al-Fasi and Milburn seated to our left. Parker occupied his usual seat in the WC. Matheson brought his gaze down until he was looking at DC al-Fasi. “It has taken us a while to collect enough evidence to obtain an arrest warrant, detective.” Milburn was steadily sliding down in his chair, his legs crossed at the ankles, the back of his head in search of rest.

“I apologize, sir,” said DC al-Fasi reaching out a hand to awaken her constable.

“Never mind, detective. He’ll awaken soon enough.” He looked at her. “We have one last task before sending you all out to make this arrest. It will be necessary for you understand the case we’ve prepared against this individual.”

“Why, sir?”

“Unless you understand the evidence, you may be reluctant to carry out the arrest.”

She looked a bit impatient. “Reluctant or not, superintendent, we’ll do our job,” she replied off-handedly as she reached out and jabbed Milburn, barely getting his eyelids to crack open. “Who is the bloke?” she asked in the midst of a barely stifled yawn of her own.

“Chief Constable Crowe.”

Milburn almost slid out of his chair. Like a jack-in-the-box he jumped back to an upright seated position. “Blimey,” he said. He looked at DC al-Fasi who was looking back with very wide eyes, upraised dark brows, and an open mouth.

She faced Matheson, her eyes still wide, all thoughts of sleep banished. “We’d best see that evidence, then.”

Matheson pointed at the wall he was facing. “If you’ll turn your chairs about.” Except for Shad, we turned our chairs around. Shad simply jumped up on the back of his chair and faced the image of the Biograph Theater. The superintendent said to the toilet door, “Very well, Parker.”

The image of the Biograph faded and was replaced by Alicia Pelletier’s article on the Oak Meadow Golf Club banquet.

“Chief Constable Crowe was scheduled to be at the special golf tourney in Starcross on the day Flanagan died,” said Parker. “Instead he was registered under a false name at the Royal Clarence Hotel. Did you know the Clarence was England’s first hotel?”

“The witnesses, Parker,” Matheson urged.

The image switched to a security video of two fellows behind a counter facing a bewhiskered fellow in civilian clothes, a large suitcase at his feet.

“Desk clerk and office manager at the Clarence, sir. Chief Crowe and Ms. Thule have been meeting there once or twice a week since last July. The hotel staff pretend they don’t recognize him behind that phony beard, but they all know who it is.”

“The customer’s always right,” said Shad.

“Go on, Parker,” I urged.

“Yes. Well, they check in, go up to their room, have a wee drop, get naked, put on some erotica, and then—”

“Yes,” Matheson said with a pained expression on his face. “As tantalizing as this is—thank you for that mental image, Parker—that is not illegal.” He waved a hand toward the image. “Besides, where’s the mistress in this shot?”

“On the day Flanagan died, Chief Crowe checked into the Clarence alone. The hotel clerk says the chief appeared to have been drinking rather heavily.”

I glanced at DC al-Fasi. We had her attention as well as her constable's. A new image appeared on the wall, that of the Clarence's north side. "This is from surveillance taken from Saint Martin's across from Dingles Berry Farm store on Catherine," continued Parker. "This was an in-house camera not visible from the street or the hotel. This window is Chief Crowe's room that day." The image centered on a third floor window of the hotel and zoomed in. Despite the blustery cold winds that day, the window to that room was open at the bottom. The curtains weren't completely drawn; a shadowy figure was noticeable between them. Then came Pilot Officer Darcy Flanagan swooping in and thumping into the side of the casement, somehow landing upright on the ledge followed by some severe staggering. Flanagan appeared to be laughing uproariously.

"That bird's pissed," declared Milburn.

"Is there audio on this?" asked al-Fasi.

The sound increased along with a great deal of wind and background noise. When Parker suppressed the background, we could hear Flanagan laughing. He was looking in the window, pointing with his wing. "*Wot's this then!*" we heard him holler, another raucous laugh, then there was a *poomf* sound, and the pigeon was gone. The window quickly closed.

"The surveillance video doesn't cover Martins Lane below where Flanagan landed," said Parker. "The camera that covered Martins Lane had been tampered with." He ran the Dingles Berry Farm video again from when Flanagan pointed with his wing and laughed at the person on the other side of the window. In slow motion we saw a small puff of escaped gas, and Flanagan falling straight back from the window for only a couple of frames, a smeared red object against his right side.

"Sharissa Thule was below the window to collect the corpse and the flexible baton load," said Parker. "We have no video, but we do have Sharissa Thule."

The image changed suddenly to the interior of Room 914. On one side of the table were Matheson and I. Shad squatted on the table's end. Seated on the other side was Sharissa Thule.

"*Ray was obsessed with bird bios,*" said Sharissa. "*He was convinced the birds were seeking him out, ridiculing him, trying to do him harm. 'They're out to get me, Shariss,' he'd tell me. This one pigeon bio somehow found out about the trysts Ray and I were having at the*

Clarence. No matter what room we were in, that bird would be outside the window, marching around, laughing, and calling in to us. It was embarrassing."

"Go on," prompted my image.

"Ray tried to grab that bird a number of times, but he was just too fast. Smelled of whisky, too. Horrible thing. I said to Ray, why don't we stay someplace else? That'd make sense, wouldn't it? But, no. No bloody amdroid was going to make Ray Crowe give up everything to the damned bios. Ray was once on the Honors List, you know. Then that awards ceremony happened—that gorilla thing?"

"Yes," said Matheson. *"DI Jagers and I were there. And ... uh ... DC Parker."*

She frowned at me, then Shad, then cocked her head toward the loo. Shad and I nodded and she shrugged. *"Well, anyway, you know just what I mean. Getting embarrassed like that knocked Ray off center."* She pointed at her right temple. *"In the head Ray went a bit dotty. Then, after what that bird said..."*

"What was that?" Shad's image prodded.

"That bloody rude pigeon said he heard all about us down in the pubs. Ray and me! The whole hotel staff was talking all over the bleeding city!" Sharissa Thule was looking a bit dotty herself. *"All those pigeons, hotel staff, pub crawlers, who knew who else was talking? Bloody damned amdroids! I teach third form! What about my reputation?"* She looked down and her hands were wringing the life out of a pink tissue. She took a deep breath and released it in a ragged sob. *"He wasn't dead, you know."*

"Who wasn't dead?" Shad's image asked.

"Flanagan. The pigeon bio. When I picked the bird up to put him in the tote he says, 'What's all this then?' and he laughed. Sort of choking, but he laughed. I wanted to rush him to hospital, call the medimechs—something. But Ray, he was right beside me in a minute. I held the bag out to him and said, 'He's still alive.' Ray looks in the tote and the bird looks Ray right in the eye and says, 'Darcy Flanagan is dead.' Just like that. Darcy Flanagan is dead."

She took another tissue, blew her nose, and slumped forward on her elbows. *“Ray, he looks around, makes sure no one’s about, reaches into the tote, wraps his big hands around the bird, and squeezes. Not long. Only a little squeeze and the bird was gone.”*

The image froze and Parker said, “We talked to the FME and that little squeeze addresses the FME’s concern about that rib bone’s change in direction; the one that went through Flanagan’s heart.”

“When Chief Constable Crowe was detective chief superintendent,” said Shad, “he and his former spouse Lurella lived in a modest place on Napier Terrace near the catacombs. That was where Pilot Officer Trainee William Foster of Pureledge, Ltd. was hit with insecticide. He still carries the scars of that assault and his natural body expired in stasis as a result of the attack.”

“We have the sworn affidavit of Lurella Roberts, eyewitness to the assault against Foster. Years later,” continued Parker, “when another pilot officer trainee named Romila Kumar was on break at the Clarence and disappeared, Crowe and a different mistress, one Kati Prien, were upstairs in the hotel having a tryst.”

I looked across at Milburn. “We’ve located the former police records collator, Danielle Mintz, whom Chief Crowe ordered to dispose of the Kumar case materials and cook the Heavitree mainframe to eliminate any mention of the case. It was she who dropped Kumar’s dead bio into the Exe. Judging by her description of the weapon, Kumar’s bio was killed with the same gas gun that took down Flanagan. She cleaned the weapon and Chief Crowe returned it to the Royal Diane Museum where the curator has the chief on record as a weapons restorer. He has access to whatever he wants whenever he wants it. To get a reduced charge,” I concluded, “Ms. Mintz has agreed to testify against the chief.”

From deep within the superintendent’s WC boomed Parker’s dulcet tones, “On foot Sharissa Thule went to Parliament Street and tossed the body up against the southeast wall. She believed it might look like a flying accident. Whoever drove her there either drove between the camera surveillance photons or drove stealth.”

Matheson looked at al-Fasi. “And the only vehicles authorized to use image neutralizing software in the county?”

She glanced at Milburn and nodded as she returned Matheson’s

gaze. "The only vehicles so authorized in the constabulary are the Major Incident Support Team stealth units under Chief Constable Crow's direct command."

The superintendent looked at me. "Getting away with it wasn't enough. He wanted to make a point. It's Artificial Being Emancipation Week and Chief Constable Crowe, valued member of Natural Life, wanted to make a point. He was the one who suggested giving Jagers and Shad the evening off leaving Parker to catch the Flanagan case. Crowe notified the press to watch out for a really funny story at the High Street end of Parliament, waited fifteen minutes, then had the Exeter Station notify ABCD. The calls were made with a toss phone, but we have the phone records, and soon the phone thanks to Ms. Thule."

DC al-Fasi nodded to herself and looked at Matheson. "Did this Kumar's body die in stasis, as well, superintendent?"

"No. The fellow snapped mentally, crippled another bio, and had to be put in an institution. Poor chap's still there."

"The chief has a lot to answer for," she observed.

"He's a cop. A *chief*," said PC Milburn to DC al-Fasi. "The stink on us'll never go away."

"It might," said Shad as he jumped off the back of his chair and began pacing on the floor at a crisp waddle. "Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, Exeter CID, and ABCD together, brothers and sisters in blue: we go to the chief constable's office in the name of the law and take this crooked cop and murderer down in front of the nationwide media."

Milburn frowned, thoughts playing across his face. "How you going to get the media in there with us?"

Detective Superintendent Matheson arched his brows innocently and said, "It's just possible, constable, that someone without the permission of either Exeter Station or my office might possibly provide a live feed to the event in HD widescreen." He looked at Shad.

"Complete with EnviroSound and narrated by a celebrity of some note," Shad added.

DC al-Fasi leaned forward and nodded at Shad. "Quite a package you've got there, sergeant. I hear you were the duck in all those telly

advertises a couple years ago.”

“He will be again, soon,” I butted in. “The insurance corporation that was honored to have the duck mascot is bringing him back.”

“Never did like that bloomin’ lizard,” she said. “Always talking like a yob.” She looked at me and said, “Heard about you too, Inspector Jagers. Took down some bad ones in London when you were with Metro.” She looked at Matheson. “Superintendent, I hear you practically have to get killed to get in this unit. Everybody here—their natural bodies—killed in the line of duty, right?”

“That’s correct,” he answered.

DC Fatima al-Fasi reached into her pocket and suddenly we could all detect her bio marker beacon. “I had to leave Weymouth, go clean out of Dorset, and do a little truth elongation to get into Exeter CID as a nat. Marker shield cost a bloody fortune at Bio Shack. Been in Exeter CID three years. Heard all the bio jokes, seen too many ABs getting what for and hard done by. I love police work and hate my job. If you’d take me, I’d be honored to serve alongside the likes of you chaps.” She smiled really wide. “You blokes go after some really big game.”

PC Duke Milburn drummed his fingertips on the arm of his chair. He let out a breath he had apparently been holding. “Well, I guess that just leaves the stink on me. I got no career in the cops after taking town a chief, superintendent, even if I get the bleeding Victoria Cross for it. Do you have to be an AB to be in ABCD?”

Matheson’s brows arched. “No. It’s not a rule.”

“It’s either join the ABCD or hit the road sellin’ bleedin’ toilet brushes.”

“I’ll call London and see.” Matheson shook his head. “We need to focus, people. Although I hate to discourage such an unexpected upturn in recruitment—I’d be pleased to have both of you—there’s just one small matter you two need to get out of the way before climbing down to our rung of law enforcement: The arrest of Chief Constable Raymond Crowe. We aren’t allowed to make arrests in ABCD.”

Al-Fasi and Milburn stood. “Well, we’d best get cracking then,” she said.

“Parker,” I called. “We’re ready to go.”

The toilet flushed, the sink water ran, and Parker emerged drying his hands on about ten paper towels. Both al-Fasi and Milburn froze.

“Hi,” said the gorilla.

They muttered something unintelligible in response somehow acknowledging Parker as lead on the inquiry.

“Shad,” called Matheson, his face suddenly serious.

The duck turned, “Yes sir?”

“During the arrest, with the feed, try to...” He cocked his head gently toward Parker. “You know.”

“No sweat, superintendent. It’s all been taken care of.” He looked at the gorilla. “Right, Parker?”

“All taken care of, sir.”

“Really? I mean, *really* taken care of, Shad?”

“Water off a duck’s back, boss.”

“Indeed. And to think that only hours ago I was contemplating fleeing to the Himalayas disguised as a yak.” Matheson reached forward to pick up his phone link. “Well then. I think I’ll just ring up a few media fellows and give them each an anonymous tip about a great big arrest about to go down.” He held up a pale green slip of paper. “Shad, this is the feed frequency?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Good work, Parker,” he said. “All of you,” he said to Shad and me. To al-Fasi and Milburn he said, “Good hunting at Middlemoor.”

* * * *

The arrest went nearly as planned. Considering the disturbed lethal violence CC Crowe had exhibited on more than one occasion, attempting to resist arrest should have been expected at least by Shad and myself. We were the most experienced detectives there. Arguably Parker was not prepared either, which didn’t matter a whit. Parker *looked* prepared.

When our tiny band reached the second floor of Force Headquarters out at the Police College and entered the chief's outer office, DC al-Fasi simply led us past the chief's secretary and a couple of higher-ups patiently waiting in the outer office for their audiences. Milburn followed al-Fasi, Parker followed Milburn, and Shad followed Parker, his internal camera providing real time action to stations across the planet. I brought up the rear in time to see the chief constable rise from his desk to his full two hundred uniformed centimeters, an old fashioned telephone receiver in his hand, mouthing the word "What," his attention on Fatima al-Fasi. She was cautioning him as his face began growing a most unhealthful shade of bluish-red.

"Raymond Crowe," said DC al-Fasi in a clear voice, "you are under arrest. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defense if you do not mention when questioned something you may later rely on in court—"

"*You!*" Crowe growled as he saw Parker standing to al-Fasi's right. "*You! Bloody you!*" With one massive hand he pulled his entire telephone free from its old-fashioned cord and threw it at Parker, who caught it in his right hand and just as quickly flung it back, bouncing it off the chief's head. Chief Crowe teetered on his heels for a split second, then dropped behind his desk.

"What did you see, DS Shad?" I asked immediately.

"I saw DC Parker physically assaulted by the suspect and forced to defend himself, inspector," Shad came back as he flew up onto the desk to get a down shot of the chief out colder than January lager, as the lads used to say back in old Puss in Boots Flight, wot, wot?

PC Milburn put in a call for paramedics, Shad put in a call for Matheson, and I put in a call for Val.

* * * *

Three final notes on the Parliament Street inquiry. First, once Raymond Crowe was convicted of premeditated murder, DC Fatima al-Fasi and PC Duke Milburn applied for ABCD Interpol, Exeter. London sent it up to Baghdad and Baghdad sent it down to London who sent it down to Exeter. The two of them would, in the opinion of Baghdad, be most valuable in ABCD Exeter and were assigned to that office.

Second, Shad decided to stay on. Agent Stanky worked a deal in which Shad would take a few weeks off from crime busting and spend that time training his replacement while a clone of his famous duck suit matured. When the first of the new adverts was on the telly all the reviewers said they couldn't tell the difference. Val and I could. There never could be another Guy Shad.

Finally, there was another award ceremony, and among the Devon & Cornwall law enforcement recipients was recently promoted Detective Sergeant Ralph Parker, ABCD Interpol, Exeter. HRH Princess Mehitabel insisted on presenting the awards herself, which had all of us in Matheson's office sweating beanbags—all of us but Shad and Parker. Shad said, "I said it's been taken care of. During the arrest of CC Crowe, did Parker disgrace himself and the office in front of the camera?"

We had to admit that he had not. Save for a bit of blood dribbled on the chief's carpet by the chief's own head, the carpet was as clean when we accompanied the chief on his stretcher out the tower entrance as when we entered his office. We had thousands of subsequent media camera shots as evidence, many of them showing DC Parker in rather conservative heroic poses.

Neither Shad nor Parker told Matheson what had changed. At the award ceremony in the Royal Diane Museum auditorium the next spring, as Princess Mehitabel pinned the gong—King's Police Medal for Distinguished Service—to Parker's green sash, I looked down at my green-sashed duck partner and whispered to him, "Give. What did you do to Parker?"

"Madame Fifi's," he whispered back. "The amdroid stylist place on Parliament Street?"

"Yes?"

"Fake fur covered gorilla diapers, Jaggs. The fake fur blends right in with his coat. On special. Check it out. You should see the really cool stuff they have in there for cats, too. Fawkesmas Day comes but once a year."

Gorilla nappies.

I'm afraid the road to the future will be more trying for the lord bishop of Exeter than even he imagines.

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