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Homeland
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Homeland

By Michael Amos

Dedication

I am indebted to the following good people: Julie Poulton and Andy Austen for helping me when I stood on the brink; Ann Crosthwaite and Stuart Brown for their support and understanding when I needed it; Ann Goddard for making me laugh—do that form woman.; Tim “Slippers” Isherwood, Colin “Lovespud” Dickens and all other Sun-T-Rappers past and present; Ian “I like mine” Brayshaw—may your golden welly never lose its sheen; Aids and Nicky Ball—there’s a curry with your name on it; Alastair “Spawn of Santa” (dyslexia rules KO) and Sharon Whiteford; “Hairy” Richard (there is a house in New Orleans...) and Verity Lockett; Bill “Billox” Moulford—keep fiddling with your organ mate; Dr. Neil Crossley and Dr. Beau Stephenson; my mum and dad without whom I wouldn’t have been possible; my extended family Lou, Gary, Katie M., Simon, Janet T., Laura, Heather, Graham, Jamie, John and Janet B., Fiona, Mike, Katie C. and especially Tim for reading the first six chapters and saying it was OK; Sasha Knight, Christina Brashear and all at Samhain Publishing; my kids Jezza and El-Girl (grrr) for jumping on my head and reminding me that life is worth living.

This book is dedicated to Lynn, my wife and companion of 18 years, without whose love and support my days would be so much darker and without whose good humor my life would be much less fun.

Prologue

The room was pitch black and stifling, the air thick with moisture and the clinging stench of agar. Countless little red and green lights picked out the shape of a bank of machinery concealed in the darkness, its constant low humming filling the gloom. Although the machinery's exact purpose remained hidden, its undoubted technological pedigree was underlined by the fact that every once in a while, with no discernable periodicity, it went "ping".

It went "ping" now, a self-satisfied, annoying little noise. As if in answer, a low hiss sounded and a dim, yellow beam of light stabbed through the darkness. Coming to rest on the machine, the beam traced its shape to where a great bunch of cables erupted from the surface. The light followed the cables as they tumbled down to the floor and snaked their way to a huge glass tank, oval in shape and filled with a thick, sluggish, green liquid. Bubbles forced their way slowly upwards, breaking silently when at last they reached the surface. A small, cheery face had been drawn on the glass with a pink marker.

In the center of the tank was a dark, oblong mass, its detail hard to make out through the semi-opaque serum in which it floated. Countless wires wormed their way to the mass' surface and it slowly rose and fell, over and over. The circle of light stayed on the thing in the tank and grew gradually larger and brighter. Quiet footsteps approached and a woman spoke in a hurried whisper.

“Listen to me, listen.”

The blob within the tank rose closer to the surface. Its movements became slightly more animated, as if it were struggling weakly.

“There is a number. You must remember this number. It’s very important, you hear? The number is...”

The woman paused. The beam of light left the tank and the sound of someone rustling through some papers filled the room.

“Ah, here. It’s... No, no, that’s not it. Hang on.”

More rustling.

“Where is it?”

A dull thud echoed around the room. The woman had dropped the flashlight.

“Oh.”

Then the papers.

“Oh!”

In the distance, a shrill alarm rang out. The noise of papers being gathered together stopped, replaced by the silence a person makes when they suddenly realize they are in deep do-do.

“Oh bugger.”

The main lights came on, stark, intrusive neon, revealing a large room with a low ceiling. The glass tank was just the closest of six, each connected by thick cables to the central bank of machinery, each filled with a thick green fluid hiding some amorphous thing within.

A burst of gunfire ripped through the room, followed by a short cry of pain. A thousand little spots of blood peppered the glass of the closest tank, bright and garish against the green goo within. Sparks flew from the central machine—a stray bullet had ripped into a section particularly well endowed with LEDs. The machine began to ping frantically.

A new sound started, the plod of heavy-booted footsteps getting closer, each footfall preceded by a mechanical hiss—sss, *clump*, sss, *clump*, sss, *clump*. The footsteps stopped momentarily and began again, this time receding and accompanied by the noise of something being dragged across the floor.

The neon lights faded, leaving only the LEDs of the machinery and the beam of light from the dropped flashlight shining on the oval tank. The machinery continued to ping urgently and little sparks flew fitfully from its wound. As the minutes passed, the pings came faster and faster, rising in pitch, blurring into one long, urgent bleat, piercing and intense. A shower of blue sparks cascaded from the machine, the air filling with smoke and then, silence.

For a long time, nothing happened. The minutes slowly stretched into hours. The flashlight began to fade, flickering pitifully in the growing darkness. As the light died, the thing in the tank started to move, slowly at first then gathering pace, uncurling to reveal it had limbs. It stretched upwards, breaking through the surface of the green slime that contained it, calling out in a voice like that of a child, albeit one talking underwater.

It said, “Oh bugger.”

From the darkness of the room, five similar voices responded in chorus. “Oh bugger.”

* * * * *

Night cloaked the shopping mall. Crouched against the wall beneath the security camera, Jasper was sweating. The mall was air-conditioned to the point of actually being quite cold, but he was a fat man and fat men sweat easily. Not for the first time, he cursed his weakness for bacon bagels. He had tried on more than one occasion to lose weight.

Most recently, he had enrolled in a program at the gym designed to pull the obese back from the brink. The first stage simply involved lying flat on a machine, which vibrated the body, toning up atrophied muscles in preparation for stage two. Stage two involved some fairly undemanding exercise. He hadn't gotten beyond stage one, partly because he couldn't face the thought of the stage two exercises but mostly because he rather enjoyed being wobbled.

His sodden designer shirt stuck to his back, the buttons straining to hold back the clammy, pink mass of his belly. It had seemed like a good purchase at the time. Somewhere in his subconscious he had honestly believed a shirt modeled by a gawky, angst-ridden teenager would somehow transform him from pink blob to babe-magnet. It had not.

He swept his damp palms over his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. Enough was enough. He was sick of being told he would be shunned unless he wore the right things, bought the right furniture, used the right shampoo. He did not want to be told how to think, what to buy, what to eat, how to live. These things stifled him. He hated them. He hated them enough to be here, out in the darkness of the mall at night, sweating with fear for one chance at freedom.

Up above him, the camera swiveled slowly around, scanning the deserted shops. Hunched directly beneath it, Jasper was hidden from the prying lens. Another camera on the far wall of the mall swung away from him. He had timed it right—he was outside of its field of view and he had not been seen. There would be just long enough when neither camera was focused on the space between Jasper and the short corridor that led to the door. The door and then what? Freedom, he hoped, but he didn't know for sure. The only certainty he knew was he couldn't stay here suffocating in this air-conditioned, mental straightjacket any longer.

He took a breath, determined to make a run for it, but then doubt made him pause. What if they caught him? People disappeared. Nobody talked about it but they did, they just vanished and life carried on without further mention of them. His courage wavered. It was not too late to sneak back home before *they* noticed he was out. He lowered his eyes from the camera on the far wall and his gaze came to rest on the advertisements beneath it. *Are you overweight?* they asked him. *Does your breath smell? You don't want people laughing at you because you've got big feet now, do you? Does your bathroom really do you justice?*

He hissed in anger, there was no going back. He launched forward, sprinting as fast as his substantial girth would allow, shedding buttons in handfuls as his shirt finally lost its battle with his stomach. His lungs were bursting within a few strides but he forced himself on. His “casual yet stylish” slacks, unhindered by anything resembling a waist, slumped down over his buttocks and he had to hoist them up every few steps. With only a few yards to go, he looked up as he ran to check the cameras were not on him. Distracted, he veered from his course and crashed headlong into a bin. The noise echoed around the silent mall. In terror, he struggled to his feet. From behind him, he heard heavy running footsteps—*they* were onto him. He glanced up at the cameras. Both were trained on him mercilessly now, little red lights flashing angrily on their tops.

He lurched towards the corridor and, with one final effort, flung himself into its darkness, away from the cold lenses of the cameras. Running in almost blind panic, he reached the door at the end, the one he had seen so many times, the one labeled “Authorized Personnel Only”. By the side of the door was a keypad with a large, green button, which he stabbed with his finger. Nothing happened, the door remained closed. He stabbed the button again and then thumped the door in desperation.

Damn this door, he was so close. He threw himself against it again and again but it remained resolutely shut fast against him.

Suddenly, light glared around him and the corridor filled with a voice, that voice, her voice.

"Jasper, you of all people," she said calmly, her voice straight from the southern United States, all wholesome and apple pie.

He spun around, gibbering in fear, holding up his hands to shield his eyes from the light. *They* were there, at the end of the corridor. There was no escape.

"Jasper, show me what you've got in your pocket."

He sobbed. "I'm not doing anything. I'm just out for a walk."

"Jasper. Come, come now. Show me what you've got in your pocket."

"I haven't got anything, I swear."

"You are only making things worse for yourself. Come on now, show me."

Slowly, his trembling, damp hands reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out a notebook. Not quite knowing what to do with it, he threw it down on the floor, towards them.

"Oh Jasper, I'm disappointed with you."

"Please, please, it's not what you think. I can explain everything."

His sobs were uncontrollable now. He sank to his knees.

"Please."

He covered his head with his hands as *they* came down the corridor towards him.

Chapter One

The man woke up and stared into the bright glare of neon lights on a white ceiling. For a long time he lay there, not moving, not even thinking. He simply existed, blinking up into the whiteness. Slowly, as the minutes crept past, he became aware of himself by degrees. He became aware of the touch of the firm mattress beneath him and the crisp, white sheets covering him. He became aware of a sharp smell in the air he felt he should know but could not place. He became aware of his arms and his hands. He stretched his fingers, rubbing them against the sheets, feeling the fabric.

He noticed his body ached and a dull stiffness tugged at every muscle. How long was it since he had moved? Could he even remember how to? He did not like this feeling.

Machinery hummed around him and, as soon as he became aware of it, the sound became an acute and intrusive din. He wished it would stop. Other noises imposed themselves on his consciousness, little staccato calls that rose and fell in pitch and urgency. He concentrated on these. They were important, he should know what they were. Then he remembered that he did know. They were voices.

Then he remembered his name. Tracy Higgs. A feeling of mild disappointment came over him. Tracy was a perfectly good name for a boy, he told himself. Many great men had been called Tracy. The author Tracy Kidder, awarded a Bronze Star for service in Vietnam. The

basketball player Tracy McGrady. A perfectly good name. Nothing wrong with a man being called Tracy, nothing at all. He had other names, yes, middle names. Dwayne. Jocelyn. Tracy Dwayne Jocelyn Higgs. He paused in his thoughts for a moment. My friends call me Higgs, he decided.

He remembered then that it had been difficult being a boy called Tracy at boarding school. What was his mother thinking when she named him that? She would do embarrassing things like come to visit, call him Tracy and insist on kissing him in front of all his friends. Higgs shuddered at this memory. The only way he could get his friends to shut up about it was to beat the crap out of them. Sometimes, he had to beat the crap out of them for weeks.

He was amazed. Memories flooded into his head as if from nowhere. Yes, he had been at boarding school. His father and mother were always moving around, following Father's job in the military. He had a younger brother too. A deaf-mute brother called Rufus. A deaf-mute brother who always got on Higgs' nerves—Rufus always got the sympathy, he always got away with things. Higgs had no choice but to talk to Rufus on his terms, in sign language and, though Higgs was good at it, he was no match for his brother's swift-fingered insults. Suddenly, Higgs felt alone. Where was his brother? Where was Higgs? He tried to move but the sheets had him pinned. They were tucked in too tight. He couldn't breathe.

A man leaned over him, a man with a long, thin face which seemed to be lacking a chin. A mass of tight, blond curls clung to the top of his head. His eyes seemed altogether too broad for such a narrow face and they straddled an equally long, thin nose, which had been broken once and not set straight. He scrutinized Higgs for a few moments. Higgs

struggled against the heavy sheets but they had him pinned. He wanted to lash out, to stop the man from gawking.

The thin-faced man spoke, his voice trained at some English public school. “Ah, Tracy, you’re awake. Good. I’m Information Officer Simms. I am not, I repeat not, a terrorist.”

Higgs stared at the man. He looked very earnest and appeared pleased with himself for having said his lines with such aplomb. The word twat came into Higgs’ head. He couldn’t recall exactly what it meant but it seemed appropriate.

Higgs struggled to turn his head to see where he was. The movement triggered a wave of dizziness and nausea and he screwed up his face until the room stopped spinning. He was on a bed. A hospital bed, he could see that. In a windowless ward of sorts but he was the only patient. Computers and equipment crowded around the bed, humming in that intrusive, painful way. He realized that wires, hundreds of wires, spewed from the machinery and wormed their way into his flesh. A knot of anxiety gripped his stomach and he tried to struggle again.

A tall, thin, red-headed woman in a white doctor’s coat came into view and looked closely at him. Her name was printed on a badge on her coat—Medical Officer Jodi Francis. She had green eyes that, for a moment, filled his consciousness. Then he noticed she had biscuit crumbs all down her front.

“Hello?” Simms was talking again. “Are we paying attention?”

With some effort, Higgs turned his head back to face Simms, and this time the dizziness was less. He did, however, become aware of Simms’ halitosis, which didn’t help to lift Higgs’ mood.

He opened his mouth to speak but he breathed in as Simms breathed out, the exchange of exhaled air sending Higgs into a brief fit of weak coughing. Simms backed away.

When the coughing subsided, Higgs lay and stared upwards for a moment as a fresh wave of memories bulldozed through his consciousness. Where was his broom-broom? Where was Mummy? Ooh, there was that funny feeling again.

“I want my potty.”

Simms rolled his eyes and looked across at the red-headed woman.

“Not altogether there yet I fear, Medical Officer Francis.”

She held a hand up impatiently to Simms.

“Give him time.”

She turned and adjusted one of the drips feeding into Higgs’ skin and bent back over him. “Come on, Higgs, talk to me.”

“Bub bub bub.”

Simms sniggered and nudged Jodi hard in the ribs. She ignored him.

“I,” said Higgs.

Both Jodi and Simms leaned forward excitedly. This was some progress at least.

Higgs struggled some more, his mouth opening and closing. Jodi willed him on. “Yes, come on, Higgs, you can do it.”

More memories flooded into Higgs’ head and suddenly he felt he knew where he was.

“Mummy,” he gurgled.

Simms and Jodi looked sideways at each other.

“Traybe wanna biscuit.”

“What?” Simms frowned.

“Traybe wanna biscuit. Now,” insisted Higgs.

Jodi smiled and adjusted the flow of one of the drips leading into his arm. “Traybe go sleepies.”

In seconds, Higgs descended back into oblivion.

* * * * *

The next time Higgs awoke, he felt less stiff, less detached, but a wave of panic flooded over him as soon as he remembered where he was. Drips still fed their cocktail of drugs into him and the machines hummed intrusively. All his senses were acute, the colors intense, the sounds deafening. He could taste the air and the sheets felt like sandpaper. He wanted to run, to escape but he was so weak.

Jodi's voice came from nearby. "Good."

Higgs turned his head and saw Jodi adjusting one of his drips. Behind her stood Simms, a thin plastic clipboard tucked under one arm. He wore a green jumpsuit, which was far too short for him. He stepped forward and sniffed. "Is he conscious?"

Jodi looked wearily at Simms and opened her mouth to speak but she didn't get the chance.

"Yes. Where the hell am I?" shouted Higgs. Simms pushed past Jodi and leaned over the bed, the reek of his foul breath making Higgs wince.

"Right, let's try again, shall we? I am Information Officer Simms and I am not—"

Higgs grabbed Simms by the collar. "Where am I?"

He tried to pull himself up on Simms but succeeded only in dragging the startled information officer's face down to touch his own, nose to nose. Simms dug his fingers into Higg's knuckles, trying to pry his hands free but Simms could not get Higgs to release his grip.

Jodi adjusted one of the drips and an irresistible calm flooded through Higgs. His hold on Simms loosened and Higgs sank back to the bed. Simms staggered away, gasping for breath and floundering for his dropped clipboard.

Jodi leaned forward. "It's okay, Higgs, it's okay. You're safe, I can explain everything."

"What?" Simms stepped forward angrily, trying to wave her away with his hand. "Ah, excuse me. Who's the information officer here? Eh? I'll be doing the explanations, thank you."

Jodi gritted her teeth and straightened up.

"He is disoriented," she hissed. "He needs to be treated gently. God, whose bright idea was it to send you anyway?"

"She sent me, you doubt her judgment?"

Jodi bit her lip. Higgs was taken aback by the hatred in her eyes.

"No, of course not, Officer Simms," she managed at last. "Forgive me, Officer Simms, I'm concerned merely for the welfare of my patient."

Simms snorted haughtily. "That's Information Officer Simms."

Jodi struggled with herself. "Sorry, Information Officer Simms."

"Good, order is re-established. Let's put this little disagreement behind us and move on."

With some effort, Higgs pulled himself up onto his elbows. Whatever sedative Jodi had put into him was now reaching its full effect and he felt calm, distant. All his senses seemed more restrained than before, his vision, his hearing, his touch, they were all more bearable. His questions weren't answered but the panic...the panic was not gone, merely gagged for the time being.

"Where am I?" he managed weakly.

Simms smiled patiently at Higgs. "All in good time, Tracy. You're disoriented. You need to be treated gently."

Higgs lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. His efforts to throttle Simms had left him exhausted and the sedatives were not improving his ability to think straight. He tried to recall if he knew Jodi or Simms, especially Jodi, but he could not place them.

After a while, he turned his head and watched as Jodi busied herself with the mountains of equipment wired up to him. Simms had retreated to the far side of the room and was preoccupied with whatever was on his clipboard.

Something about Jodi was utterly captivating. She was so animated, her expressions as she examined a reading, the way she did a subdued little dance while waiting for a machine to turn on. Higgs found he couldn't help but smile as he watched her. If he had to be sick, confused and bedbound, he was being so in the best of company. Slowly, he drifted into a warm dream of obliging, dancing nurses.

Over the next few days, Higgs existed in a semi-conscious fog within the confines of the ward. Different parts of his life kept asserting themselves at random, so one minute he was at college, the next he was in nappies. Jodi kept an ever-watchful eye on him and Simms forever hovered in the background. Higgs decided he did not like Simms. For one thing, his breath was smelly and he always leaned too close when he talked.

"What can you remember today?" Jodi asked Higgs when she visited on the third day.

Behind her, sitting in the corner, Simms looked up from his clipboard where he had been furiously typing. Typing? On a clipboard? Something was definitely not right about that. Higgs made a mental note to investigate further when he could get a look at the clipboard without Simms noticing. Higgs returned his attention to Jodi.

"My father always wanted more from me," he said flatly.

Jodi rolled her eyes sympathetically. "Ah, they always do, these pushy parents. Did he love you?"

Higgs felt embarrassed by the question. Of course his father had loved him, you just didn't talk about that sort of thing. Not men loving men. He blushed. "My mother did."

Jodi smiled. "What else?"

Higgs thought. "I have killed a man."

Simms leaned forward, listening keenly.

"Go on," said Jodi.

"At least, I think I have. I can feel the sensation in my hands. There's a space. I can't explain. There are holes in what I can recall."

Jodi patted him reassuringly. "It's okay. You've suffered a massive loss of memory. Things will come back to you. Think of something else."

Higgs lay silent for a while.

"I was at the military academy," he said at last. "My father pulled a few strings to get me in I think. He was in the military. I'm a pilot. I flew airplanes. It was great."

Jodi beamed. Higgs found her smile fascinating. He searched for more memories of his career.

"We did all sorts. Parachuting, abseiling."

Jodi nodded encouragingly. "Yes, go on."

"Surveillance techniques, martial arts. How to load and fire an assault rifle."

Higgs' body tensed, his fists clenching, the words tumbling out. He couldn't stop himself.

"Interrogation techniques, espionage, poisons, how to kill a man from behind with a penknife, seven ways to break a man's fingers without arousing suspicion."

Jodi adjusted one of the drips. "Time to change subject, Traybe."

The drugs flowing into Higgs brought him up short and he gasped, his eyes crossing.

“Ooops, sorry.” Jodi frantically readjusted the flow of drugs. “Wrong drip.” She grimaced apologetically.

A sense of calmness came over Higgs. After a few moments silence, he spoke again.

“I remember up to graduating pretty well but then...” Higgs shook his head. Everything after that was a lot hazier. “Was I in the security services?”

“Ah, I think that’s quite enough for today,” cut in Simms.

Jodi straightened.

Higgs knew he was onto something. “I was, wasn’t I? I love my country. I would die for my country.”

“Yes, Tracy.” Simms smiled nastily. “You would.”

“Please don’t call me Tracy. Call me Higgs like everyone else does.”

“Of course, Tracy.”

As time passed, Higgs pieced his memories together, bit by bit. He had holes in what he could remember, big chunks missing, but Jodi was always reassuring. His strength gradually returned and, by the fifth day after waking, Higgs had been disconnected from the wires and drips. He was able to walk, if a little stiffly, and his mind had settled down. He was not permitted to leave the ward and was still too weak to argue. He could not get any answers to the fundamental question of where he was. If he asked Jodi, she simply referred him to Simms and Simms fobbed him off with a cheery “all in good time.”

On the morning of the sixth day, Simms strode into the ward with an air of determined purpose. He held his clipboard to his chest and stared levelly at Higgs.

“Medical Officer Francis tells me that you are almost fully recovered, Tracy.”

Higgs lay on his bed, wearing a white hospital smock. He swung his legs around, sat on the edge of the bed and looked Simms up and down. The man's green jumpsuit was too damn short. Somebody ought to say something.

Simms quickly tapped something onto his clipboard then returned his attention to Higgs. "Good. If you'll come with me, I'll take you home."

Higgs spluttered He had not expected this.

"Home?"

"That is what I said, yes." Simms rolled his eyes. "Home. If you think you are fit enough, Tracy?"

Higgs jumped up from the bed.

Simms beamed. "Good. Follow me."

He led Higgs through the hospital, passing other wards and operating rooms. Higgs saw few other patients.

"It's marvelous, isn't it?" enthused Simms. "All this wonderful technology. You know, they can inject nano-bots into people now and heal broken bones within twenty-four hours. What do you think of that, Tracy?"

There had been a great many advances in medicine over recent years, Higgs knew. In addition to the nano-bots, gene therapies had eliminated all the hereditary disorders and anti-bacteria and anti-viral medicines had become very effective. Disease had largely been defeated, at least from the developed world. Everybody still passed the hat around for the Third World.

"Why do you keep calling me Tracy when I've asked you not to?"

"Basic training, Tracy, don't you remember anything?" Simms tutted and then continued with infuriating patience. "Befriending and Influencing People, day two, engendering a spirit of camaraderie by

dispensing with formalities and referring to people by their familiar names. I think I'm doing rather well, don't you?"

They walked on in silence. Higgs noticed the staff and patients they passed all seemed to be slightly in fear of Simms. Odd that such an irritating stick insect of a man in a bright green jumpsuit two sizes too small could inspire fear. But he did. Simms greeted each person with a cheery "Good morning, citizen" and they would mumble something in return but never, ever meet his gaze.

At last Higgs and Simms reached the exit of the hospital. Higgs was obliged to check out at the main reception desk. Simms hovered while Higgs studied the form. He printed his name and then added his signature but paused over the section requiring him to enter the date. He looked up at the receptionist.

"What's the date please, sir?"

"The twenty-fifth, citizen."

"The twenty-fifth of?"

"The twenty-fifth, citizen."

Higgs paused and glanced at Simms for help. Simms reached over and took the pen from Higgs' hand.

"Don't worry, Tracy, it's going to take you a while to recover."

"It's Higgs!"

Simms ignored him and carefully wrote "twenty-fifth" out on the form. He handed it and the pen back to the receptionist.

The receptionist took them and nodded gratefully. "Thank you, citizen."

Simms took Higgs by the arm. "Come on, hopefully this will jog your memory."

As they walked out the main entrance, Higgs was disappointed. He had hoped to feel some sunshine on his face, see clouds in a blue sky,

feel a breeze through his hair. The air-conditioning of the hospital was stifling and he longed for fresh air. Even a grey, wet day would be acceptable after his long confinement indoors. What greeted him was a vast shopping mall, with nine levels of balconies looking over the main thoroughfare.

The hospital opened onto a broad balcony on the top level, some hundred meters above the ground below. Everywhere were people, walking, running, sitting, laden with shopping or hurrying on unknown errands. A cacophony of music, advertisements and conversation filled the air and the smell of a hundred fast-food outlets competed with each other for Higgs' attention. His stomach rumbled. He felt an inexplicable urge to eat a burger. Something told him there was a special at an outlet just yards away.

Simms took Higgs by the arm and led him across the balcony to the railings. They stood for a while staring down at the endless stream of people. Higgs looked at the shops. They were the familiar chain store names, offering the latest in fashions, high-tech goods and creature comforts. His shoes were wrong. He knew it somehow, people would laugh at him when they saw his "oh-so-last-year shoes". *I'm not wearing shoes. I'm wearing slippers.*

Simms tapped his clipboard on the railings. "Have a good look. It might come back to you."

Something about the mall was familiar but Higgs could not place it. He searched in vain for the exit. Instead, he saw at the far end of the mall, perhaps some three hundred meters away, an opening at ground level which led through to another precinct. He glanced up, hoping at least to find some windows there, but again he was disappointed. Huge lights were suspended from the ceiling, but no skylights.

"Well?" Simms inquired.

Higgs shook his head. "No. No, I don't know this place. What is it?"

Simms beamed with pride.

"It's a place to inspire all true citizens. People going about their daily business in freedom. Free to live, to love, to shop. And all of this is possible only through the vigilance of Homeland. With, of course, a little help from security officers such as yourself and information officers such as yours truly."

"Security officer? So I am in the security services?"

Simms cursed under his breath. "Ah, yes, well, everything will be explained soon," he spluttered. "After a few tests."

"Tests? Excuse me, sir, but what tests?"

"All in good time."

Higgs' head began to race. He did not like this place. He wanted to get home, back to somewhere familiar, somewhere that could help him get his bearings. Also, he had missed something, he knew it. Something Simms had said burned in Higgs' head but he couldn't put his finger on it. He sighed.

"Where is this place? I want to go home."

Simms beamed in that irritating fashion of his. "We're in a shopping mall in Iowa."

"Iowa? Where in Iowa?"

Simms stammered, gaping like a codfish for a few seconds before regaining his composure. "In Iowa. All will be explained in good time."

Higgs returned his gaze to the floor of the mall.

"Come on," said Simms, putting a hand on Higgs' shoulder. "I'll get you home."

Higgs was about to follow when his gaze came to rest on two huge figures standing on a pedestal in the middle of the mall. For a moment he thought they were statues but they moved, slowly scanning the throng

milling around them. They stood some seven feet tall, their massive bodies covered with smooth black plates of armor. Their heads were covered with impassive, mirrored visors and on the insides of the joints of their limbs, wires could be seen. Each one cradled a heavy automatic assault rifle in its arms.

Higgs pointed them out to Simms. "What are they?"

Simms was jubilant. "Ah, they are Homeland's right-hand men, ceaselessly working to preserve all of our freedoms and—"

"But what are they?"

"The reserve guard. Androids."

"Androids? What, robots?"

"Er, of a sort. Partly machine and partly human. Well, human in that there are arms and legs under the armor. They don't have human brains."

Something still burned in Higgs' mind, something he was missing. He fought off a nagging voice in his head telling him he must buy a designer suit.

"They're sort of Homeland's special police for dealing with terrorist incidents," Simms continued.

That was it. Homeland. That was the word tugging at the back of Higgs' mind. He turned to Simms. "What's Homeland?"

Simms clicked his tongue. "Ah, yes. All will be explained."

Chapter Two

Milo Bonaparte sat on the lavatory with his notepad. He was safe here. Cameras in the lavatory were considered quite unnecessary even by the most security conscious because the security conscious also tended to be rather prudish. No, he could scribble away here as much as he liked and, provided these sessions did not stretch out to the extent someone might worry about his health, he was safe.

Everything about Milo was terribly ordinary. His kind, hazel eyes sat in a well-proportioned face that had no real distinguishing features. Straight, mouse-colored hair, neatly combed and cut to an entirely sensible length, concealed a completely unremarkable pair of ears. His casual clothes were neither too new or too worn and did nothing to enhance his unprepossessing five-foot-ten frame. Even his close friends had trouble describing him.

He loved writing. Poems, jokes and essays poured from his pen in profusion, decorated with little caricatures and cartoons. In a different life, so long ago, he had been a teacher and had tried to write a novel. Using a word processor package on the computer, he set out with high hopes of a bestseller but had not gotten much beyond the first chapter. It wasn't the same. He liked the process of pen on paper, the smell of the ink, the fussy, disordered freedom of scribbling. To Milo, writing was an organic process a computer could not capture.

Paradoxically, he had left the classroom behind in favor of working with electronics and computers for a living. He enjoyed the chaos of wiring, circuit boards and networks. They appealed to him in the same way his scribbling did. He liked the way something coherent could be pulled from an apparently formless mess. Yes, he liked computers, just not for writing.

Unfortunately, these days a notebook could get you into trouble. Milo had to be careful. He had been in here for nearly ten minutes now and would have to get going. Grinning, he took one last look at his latest creation, a caricature of a short, mean-faced, bald man burning an American flag.

* * * * *

The room was tiny, not much more than ten feet square and made all the more close by having a low ceiling. In one corner, a single bed with grey blankets nestled beneath a small window, recessed into the wall and shut off with louver blinds. Lines of sunlight streamed in between the slats, picking out the dust as it fell lazily through the air. A large, plain mirror hung next to the window and opposite the bed stood a wide-screen television and a small wardrobe. In the corner next to the television, a doorway housed a smooth, featureless door.

A low, hissing sound broke the silence and the door slid quickly upwards, revealing Higgs at the threshold, staring up in amazement to where the door had disappeared. Behind him, Simms nudged him gently forward into the room. "Well, here you are."

"I thought you said that you were taking me home?"

"This is home, thanks to the watchful vigilance of Homeland."

Higgs sagged. "Excuse me, sir, but this is not my home."

"All will be explained, Tracy."

"Higgs."

Simms tutted. "Higgs is too formal."

"It's Higgs."

"Can I call you Trace?"

"No."

"Tray?"

"No."

"Oh, very well. Officer Higgs. Things have...happened. You're disoriented. You need to be treated gently."

Simms pushed past Higgs into the room and walked over to the wardrobe. Simms opened it and pulled out a jumpsuit of identical design to the one he wore, only red in color. He held it up for a moment and then turned back to Higgs, offering it towards him with a smile.

"This is your uniform, soldier, wear it with pride."

Higgs reluctantly took the jumpsuit and inspected it closely. His name was on the breast pocket—"Security Officer Tracy Higgs". He looked up at Simms.

"Listen, Simms, I don't care what sort of security officer, soldier or whatever you think I am. I want to go home, Simms, do you understand me?"

"All will be explained in due course. Just relax." Simms gestured to the television. "Take in a film."

Higgs was at a loss. None of this made any sense. He had no recollection of this place at all, let alone it being his home. His gaze came to rest on the uniform again. He noticed three stripes on the shoulder. He looked over at Simms. He only had one.

"Simms, I outrank you."

Simms jolted involuntarily. “Well, technically, yes, but we hang off different parts of Homeland’s mighty apparatus.”

Higgs grimaced at the mental image Simms’ innocent comment summoned in his mind.

The lights suddenly dimmed and then flickered back on again.

“What was that?” asked Higgs.

“What? I didn’t notice anything.”

“Just then, the lights flicked out, like a brownout or something.”

“You must be mistaken, Security Officer Higgs, there are no brownouts in the mall. Only a subversive would suggest otherwise.”

Higgs opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

Simms drew himself up importantly. “Well, make yourself at home. I’ll come for you in an hour or two once you’ve rested. Cheerio.”

Simms turned and walked from the room, the door sliding down behind him. Higgs stood for a moment, staring at the door. Then, flinging the uniform onto the bed, he pulled up the blinds on the window. Beyond was a scene, which, for a second at least, made his heart leap with hope. The window looked out on a woodland of broad-leaved trees, fresh green with new spring growth, the ground beneath them a haze of lazy bluebells. The sun shone down in dappled patches as the leaves swayed gently in a light breeze. But the view was fake, a repeating video loop played on a screen and not even a very good one at that. A distinct jump occurred in the playback when it reached the end and began over again.

Higgs stepped back from the bed, sighing deeply with disappointment. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and realized he was still barely dressed. The hospital smock only reached down to his knees and gaped at the arms. Higgs’ hairy shins descended into the embarrassment of a pair of checkered slippers his grandfather would have been ashamed of. He looked at the uniform and sighed. There was

nothing for it. He found underpants, socks and shoes in the wardrobe and then took off the smock and put on the uniform. It fitted him perfectly and he begrudgingly admitted something about it seemed very familiar.

He checked himself in the mirror and then crossed the room to the door. The door itself was featureless but to the side of the doorway, at shoulder height, was a small panel. The bottom half of the panel was taken up with a small numeric keypad, the sort typically seen on a computer keyboard with the numbers zero to nine. Adjacent to the zero was a button labeled "Enter". In the top half of the panel was a single round, green button. Higgs leaned forward and pushed the green button. The door slid up and he flinched back. Tentatively, he pushed the button again and the door slid down. He pushed the button a few more times until he was satisfied that nothing else unexpected was going to happen and then he turned his attention to the numeric keypad.

He keyed in a few random numbers and hit the "enter" button. The room suddenly filled with a voice, a calm, female voice that reminded Higgs of his mother. "Incorrect code. Higgs, please desist from interfering with the door keypads. This is a serious offense punishable by termination."

Higgs' jaw dropped and his body tensed. He suddenly had the feeling he was being watched. Turning around slowly, he saw the camera, there in the corner of the room above the television, a little red light flashing lazily on its top. Small, unobtrusive and easy to miss, it was trained on him and followed as he moved. Someone, somewhere, was watching him.

Higgs stepped backwards, bumping into the wall. He felt dizzy, his legs weak. He had to get out of this place, this madhouse. He thumped the green button and stumbled from the room.

Outside was the corridor that led back to the mall. He had come this way with Simms, passing many, many doors like the one that opened into his room, each one with a number on it. But this time he saw the cameras, every ten or fifteen meters, tucked away near the ceiling. They followed him as he half walked, half ran towards the mall. He could not escape their gaze. A hot, breathless panic welled up within him, a knot tying up his stomach. He was being watched.

Finally, the corridor brought him onto one of the balconies overlooking the mall. He was on the third level now, the entrance to the hospital way up above him some two hundred meters to the left. He glanced away to his right. An escalator led down through the remaining two levels between him and the ground floor. He pushed his way through the throng of shoppers, looking anxiously for cameras. They were everywhere and they seemed to be homing in on him, following him as he struggled through the crowd.

I need a new television, he thought suddenly. *I will be the envy of my friends with the new Panoramovision Widescreen Home Entertainment System, just five-hundred-and-ninety-nine dollars, ninety-nine, while stocks last.* He stumbled on. *Do I suffer from the embarrassment of nasal hair?* The thought flooded into his mind uncontrollably. *I need worry no more with the Bogeymatic Nasal Refiner, just ten dollars, ninety-nine.* He clutched his head. What on earth was he thinking?

He made it to the escalator and got on behind a large lady with many shopping bags, hoping she might provide some cover from the prying cameras. The escalator descended painfully slow. He wished now that he could push past the woman and run, but she was too large. *Do I suffer from embarrassing flatulence?*

“No,” he shouted. People stared. He looked down.

Doctor Poppone's One-A-Day will sort me out. Only one dollar, ninety-nine for a month's supply.

The escalator took him to the second level and he barged past the fat lady to get onto the next downward escalator in front of her.

"Hey, excuse me," she yelled, quickly followed by an apologetic, "I'm sorry, officer, I am not a terrorist!" But he was too far gone to reply, running down the escalator, pushing past the people in his way. Finally, he got to the ground floor. Away to his left, the android guards stood on their pedestal. One scanned the crowd, looking in Higgs' general direction but seemingly not paying him any particular attention.

Higgs started to walk as nonchalantly as he could away from the hospital end of the mall, heading for the opening he had seen earlier, which led to the next precinct. As he reached it, the passage seemed a very restrictive exit for such a large mall, more of a tunnel, perhaps ten meters wide and six meters tall. It certainly formed a bottle-neck for shoppers passing from one side to the other. Higgs impatiently made his way through with the flow of the crowd, counting his strides—six meters. At the far side stood another mall, if anything larger than the one he had just been in. Nine levels of balconies stretched up its sides but, unlike the first mall, this one seemed to be a giant crossroads. At the far end, an opening led to yet another precinct. At the center of the crossroads, Higgs could see a sign labeled "Information Point".

His head crowded with a cacophony of thoughts. He needed a new suit, his breath smelled, his bed linen was out of fashion and always, always one of the shops nearby could solve his woes for just a very reasonable fee. He clutched his head.

"Shut up," he whispered. "Shut up."

He pushed his way through the crowd towards the information point. He had hoped for a map but when he reached it, he was disappointed.

The notice board was covered in posters urging citizens to be vigilant in looking out for suspicious packages, to report any subversive behavior to the security services and not to panic in the event of a terrorist incident. Higgs leaned against the board heavily. At least out here in the middle of the mall, the voices in his head telling him he would be the envy of his friends with Toepure Verruca Remover (just five ninety-nine a bottle) were gone.

There had to be a way out somewhere. He stared at the sea of faces sweeping past him. An overweight man in his twenties approached. Higgs leaned forward to try to talk to him.

“Ah, excuse me, sir.”

“I am not a terrorist.”

“Sorry?”

But the man had gone. Higgs scanned the crowd for another passerby to talk to. A woman struggled past in the opposite direction, weighed down with bags of electrical goods.

“Hello?” Higgs tried hopefully.

“Greetings, Officer. I am not a terrorist.”

The woman did not seem to want to stop, so Higgs let her go. In fact, he realized, she didn’t even want to look at him. The red jumpsuit, his uniform, was the problem. Everybody else wore civilian clothes. He noticed a space around him too. The mall was crowded but nobody bumped him, nobody looked at him. His uniform commanded respect. No, not respect. Fear.

While he searched for a third person to try talking to, something else dawned on him. Women and men peopled the mall in roughly equal numbers and they were all shapes and sizes. Some of them were overweight, some fit, some counted themselves amongst the beautiful people and some were ugly enough to curdle milk. But they were all,

without exception, of the same age group. Higgs saw no children, no pensioners. Everyone was firmly in the twenty-something age bracket. *Including me.*

Higgs stepped in front of another man, forcing him to stop. "Excuse me, sir."

The man looked up. His face betrayed the guilty nervousness even the completely blameless feel when they are spoken to by a policeman.

"Yes, Officer?"

"Look, could you just tell me the way out please?"

The man's jaw dropped and an expression of horror spread across his face. His voice went shrill. "I don't know what you're talking about. I am not a terrorist."

Higgs held his palms up to try to calm the man down. "I just want to know the way out."

The man dropped the shopping bags he had been carrying and backed away. "Get away from me. Help, I'm not a terrorist, help."

Higgs noticed the space opening up around him. People backed away, leaving him exposed to the cameras. The cameras and the androids. Higgs quickly scanned the mall. Two androids hulked on a pedestal at one of the corners of the crossroads. They watched attentively.

Higgs turned back to the man. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I just want to know the way out, that's all."

"Help," shrieked the man.

"Shut up." Higgs tried to put his hand over the man's mouth but he pulled away and fled. Higgs spun around again. The androids were off their pedestal and making their way towards him, the crowds parting before them eagerly.

Higgs turned and ran, pushing his way through the crowd towards the far exit. There had to be a way out of this damned mall somewhere.

An alarm sounded over an unseen public-address system and as one, everyone in the mall lay on the floor and covered their heads. Now on the edge of panic, Higgs broke into a sprint. Behind him, the androids quickened their pace. They had a clear line of fire but they did not shoot. Perhaps they knew Higgs had nowhere to run.

He reached the opening that led into the third precinct. The alarms started going off in there as soon as he entered and the crowd all dived for the floor. He stumbled over the prone bodies, apologizing as he accidentally kicked and trod on them. Looking up, his heart leapt. There, some two hundred meters away from him at the far end of the precinct, was what he was after. The exit. The ceiling at the end of the precinct dropped down to around twenty meters in height and the end wall was made entirely of glass. Within this wall were a series of glass doors and beyond was a street. He couldn't make out much from this distance but Higgs didn't care. He needed to get out of the mall and then he could find out where the hell he was.

He ran with all his might towards the door. In the last fifty meters, the mall had no more shops and with less cowering shoppers to leap over, Higgs could run faster. But he was exposed, he had no cover. Why didn't the androids shoot? He had to make it to the doors. Head throbbing with exertion, he reached the glass door closest to the left side of the mall and threw his shoulder into it. To his surprise, he bounced off, wincing with pain from the impact on his shoulder. Not only did the glass door not open, it didn't even shudder or move in the slightest. Higgs looked back out. The deserted street beyond was hemmed on each side by featureless red brick offices and strewn with a scattering of parked cars.

Higgs spun around. The androids were past the crowds now and closing in on him in a leisurely way, the barrels of the automatic rifles

pointing squarely at him. Looking around wildly, he saw a keypad and green button on the wall by the door. Of course, he cursed to himself and hit the green button. The door didn't move.

"Come on," he shrieked, hammering on the glass and then on the button. "Christ, come on."

Behind him, the steady hiss of the androids' movements ceased and the mall descended into a menacing silence. Slowly, Higgs turned around. The two androids stood yards away, guns coolly leveled at Higgs' head. A flat, calm, synthetic voice came from one of them.

"You are a terrorist suspect. For your own security and well-being, you will now be terminated. Have a nice day."

Higgs covered his head with his hands as the android prepared to fire. The public-address system drenched the air around them with the cool, calm female voice he had heard in his room.

She said, "Overruled."

The two androids seemed to glance sideways at each other. Something about them suggested disappointment. They lowered their guns. Higgs breathed out heavily. He wasn't dead. This was good. He heard a familiar voice and looked up as Simms came running across the mall.

"I say, Tracy, what on earth are you doing?"

"They were going to kill me."

"I don't know why they didn't, behaving like that on your first day."

Higgs' feeling of relief gave way to anger.

"What? They were trying to kill me. Simms, where am I?"

Simms backed off. He whistled through his teeth for a few moments.

"Look, there's someone you need to meet."

Chapter Three

Higgs and Simms stood at the end of a short corridor in front of a door labeled “Security Personnel Only”. The corridor had led off from the crossroads precinct, which Simms had referred to as Precinct Two. All of the precincts in the mall were numbered, he had explained to Higgs. The one with the glass doors was Precinct One, the one with the hospital and Higgs’ room was Precinct Three. All very straightforward except that the mall had some twenty precincts.

Simms seemed to be enjoying himself. “Prepare to witness the inner workings of the machine. Only a few privileged souls get to see behind these doors.”

Higgs sagged. “I don’t want to see. I just want to go home.”

Simms ignored him and, with a flourish, keyed a number into the ubiquitous door keypad and pushed the green button.

The air filled with that woman’s voice again. “Incorrect code. Please try again, Simms.”

Simms turned a dark pink. “Oh, er, they must have changed the code again.”

Leaning closer to the keypad and covering it with his hand so Higgs could not see what Simms was doing, he carefully keyed in the number again and hit the green button. With a soft hiss, the door slid up.

“Voila.” Simms beamed, gesturing grandly for Higgs to enter. “The Security Center.”

Higgs walked reluctantly across the threshold.

The room beyond was both huge and cramped. It stretched for some hundred meters yet the ceiling was no higher than a tall man might touch and Higgs was taller than most. All the way down its length were packed rows of desks separated by narrow aisles. Each desk supported a computer monitor and was attended by a person in a red jumpsuit. Like Higgs, they were security officers, men and women in equal numbers, and they scrutinized the screens as if their lives depended on it. The humming of machinery was almost deafening and the acrid tang of sweat hung in the air. Leading away from the doorway down the center of the room was a broader aisle. At the far end of the room was a glass wall with an office beyond.

Simms took Higgs gently by the arm and began to lead him between the rows of desks towards the far glass wall. Higgs glanced left and right but none of the men or women looked up, they just stared intently at their screens. Higgs and Simms had walked some twenty meters into the room when one of the security officers at a desk adjacent to the aisle suddenly became very animated.

“Ooh, suspected terrorist on camera 1734B,” she shouted excitedly.

A number of her colleagues crowded round and Higgs stopped and leaned over to try to see. The screen showed a view through one of the multitude of cameras Higgs had seen around the mall—it had to be that, what else could it be? The picture focused on a man who appeared to be thumping on a vending machine’s change return button. As his frustration grew, he became more violent and started swearing at it.

The security officer chuckled and shook her head. “Now, now, sweetie, temper, temper.”

Around her, colleagues smirked and rolled their eyes.

“What’s the problem?” asked Higgs.

The security officers suddenly became aware of Higgs and he sensed an immediate air of deference. He realized in an instant that he outranked them all. The security officer at the screen looked up at him. Her name badge told Higgs she was Security Officer Chelsea Day. She spoke quickly. "Don't worry, sir, he'll be dealt with."

Simms pressed a hand on Higgs' arm, gently pulling him away.

"Come on Tray...Higgs, don't trouble yourself with that."

They continued across the room. At the halfway point, broad gangways led off between the desks to the left and right, each one ending at a large door wide enough for several people to walk through abreast. Higgs automatically filed this information away in his head—something big was hidden beyond those doors.

They continued on until they reached the glass wall at the far end of the Security Center. Beyond it stood a spacious office with a high ceiling. The center of the room was dominated by an imposing conference table made of black glass resting on a broad dais. Many large, leather swivel chairs were spaced evenly around the table, which could easily accommodate twenty people or more. On the far side, one of these chairs had been turned to the wall, facing away from the main security center. Dozens of screens were built into the wall and streams of numbers scrolled slowly up them. Apprehension gripped Higgs. Somebody was in that chair, facing the screens. Higgs imagined a man with an eastern European accent, stroking a white Persian cat. At the opposite end of the room to the conference table was a large, polished black desk, neatly piled with computer disks and folders. Two androids towered beside it, motionless, hands resting on their automatic assault rifles.

Simms and Higgs stood outside the glass wall. One single glass door led into the office and Simms knocked on this reverentially and entered. Higgs followed. Instinctively, he noticed that the door was not automatic

like every other one he had seen. It swung closed behind them under its own weight and the noise of the security center lulled to a distant hum.

Higgs trailed Simms up onto the dais and they waited by the conference table. After an uncomfortable, silent interval, Simms looked sideways at Higgs and coughed politely.

A cold hard voice came from the chair.

“Ah, Information Officer Simms. How kind of you to have brought Security Officer Higgs to us in one piece.”

The chair swiveled around slowly to reveal a small, balding, middle-aged man with sharp, unkind features. He wore a black jump suit with three stripes on the shoulder. There was no sign of a cat. The man was old, older than anyone else Higgs had seen in the mall. Something about him was familiar.

The man’s eyes were dark and penetrating and they fixed Simms with a cold, hard stare. Simms squirmed like an eel, unable to meet the man’s gaze.

“I, er, I’m sorry sir, I...”

The man held up a hand in disgust to silence Simms and turned to Higgs. The man smiled. Higgs was not sure whether he preferred the smile or the glare the man had given Simms. At least you knew what the glare meant. The man spoke.

“Security Officer Higgs, my apologies to you, you must be finding this quite trying.”

Higgs thought for a moment. He was angry and he wanted answers but something inside him, some element of instinctive self-preservation told him he needed to tread carefully. Something about this man made Simms very afraid and Simms seemed to make most of the people he met afraid. This man was dangerous.

“Sir, I would like to know what is going on. Would you object to a few questions?”

The man leaned back in his chair. “Be my guest.”

“Sir, I would like to know where I am.”

The man nodded but didn’t answer.

“I would like to go home.”

Again the man nodded and gestured for Higgs to continue.

“I’d like to know why I’m here, who you all are and who or what the hell is Homeland.”

The voice filled the room, her voice. “How remiss of me not to introduce myself, I am Homeland. I am the shopping mall’s security program and I am here to protect and serve so that all are able to shop without fear of a terrorist attack.”

Higgs found himself at a loss for words.

The man leaned forward and spoke. “And I am Commander Jared, head of homeland security. I am your line manager.”

Higgs whistled under his breath. *Well, that’s a comfort.*

Jared continued. “And you are Security Officer Higgs, one of our best men. Please, sit down. There are some things that I need to explain.”

Higgs reached nervously for a chair and lowered himself into it, the polished leather creaking as he did so. Beside him, Simms began to sit on the adjacent chair but Jared turned a steely gaze on him.

“Simms, I was addressing Higgs,” he barked.

Simms shot bolt upright and clumsily backed away from the table, sending the chair clattering off the dais.

“Oh, er, sorry sir, I, I thought...”

Full of contempt, Jared held his hand up to silence Simms. He turned his attention back to Higgs while Simms scuttled off to retrieve the chair.

"You're a lucky man, Higgs. Two months ago, you were badly injured in a terrorist attack on this mall. You owe your life to the expertise of Medical Officer Jodi Francis, she pulled you back from the brink. She tells me that you have suffered considerable memory loss."

"Yes, sir."

Many holes remained in what Higgs could remember, especially about his recent history.

"What can you remember?" came the voice of Homeland.

Higgs paused before he answered. Something about her voice made him feel that he didn't want to tell her too much.

"I remember graduating at the military academy. In aeronautics."

"Yes," urged Jared encouragingly.

Higgs remembered his mother, his father, his brother. He remembered getting his degree, he remembered the look of pride on his mother's face but his father, well, his father always demanded more. It didn't matter that he had passed with the highest honors, his father wanted to know what was next. Higgs swallowed as these thoughts flooded through him.

"I feel like I've only just graduated," he said eventually. "I was hoping to go into the space industry."

Jared eyed him keenly, as if he were trying to see what Higgs was thinking. "You graduated eight years ago and you've been with us since that time in the security services."

"The security services? I'd kind of worked that out, sir."

"Yes, and you are one of my best men, Higgs. The best man."

Jared leaned back in his chair and stretched while Higgs took this in. The best man in the security services. His father would have been proud of that. He could allow himself to be proud of that. America was a great country and it would be a privilege to serve in the security services.

After a few moments, Jared leaned forward again, eyeing Higgs carefully.

“Medical Officer Jodi Francis assures me that more of your memories will return but, to be frank, she believes that you’re not yet up to the challenge of resuming your duties and recommends that you should have more time to recover.”

Something about this statement grated on Higgs’ nerves. Challenge? Who said he wasn’t up to any challenge? He could decide that.

“Look, sir, I don’t remember any of these things. All I can remember in any detail is up to the point of graduating. I don’t know what these duties are but I do know whether I’m fit or not and I do know that I want to serve my country.”

The memory of his father was still fresh in his mind—Higgs was not about to let him down.

Jared grinned. “Higgs, I knew I could rely on you. You’re the best there is and damn it, man, I need the best.”

Higgs smiled and looked down modestly. “Sir, I still don’t know where I am. I want to go home.”

“You are home. You have lived here for the past eight years.”

“But it doesn’t feel like home, sir.”

“That is because your memories have not recovered sufficiently. If you resume your duties, things may start to come back to you.”

Higgs sighed and nodded. Perhaps Jared was right. After all, he couldn’t remember anything and there wasn’t any particular reason why Jared should lie to him. There came a point when you had to trust authority, you had to trust those in command. The people at the top got there because they knew what they were doing and if you doubted them, the whole system fell apart.

Jared continued. "We have a problem, Higgs. The mall is under almost constant terrorist attack. The terrorists have been distributing subversive materials."

He paused and clicked his fingers at one of the androids. It turned slowly and picked up a plastic bag from the desk, holding it aloft for Higgs to see. It contained a notepad and a pen. Joints hissing, the android returned the bag to the desk and placed its hand back on its gun.

"So far we've been unable to work out how they are operating and where they are based. Before you were injured, you were getting close to finding out what was going on. I need you to pick up from where you left off, find them and stop them."

Higgs considered for a moment. "Did I leave any briefing papers or notes?"

For a moment—just a fraction of a moment—Higgs thought he saw the look of a haunted man in Jared's eyes. Jared shook his head.

"Your notes were destroyed in the terrorist attack which injured you."

Are you lying? It wouldn't make sense for you to lie to me. "Sir, why are the terrorists attacking the mall?"

Simms, who had been quietly forgotten up until this point, gasped and ducked back. The two android guards stepped forward and leveled their guns at Higgs, prepared to fire. Higgs stared open-mouthed, surprise dulling his instinctive reaction to dive for cover.

"Overruled." Homeland's voice filled the room.

The androids lowered their weapons and returned to the desk. Higgs looked from Jared to the androids and back again, opening and closing his mouth. Jared seemed completely unfazed by the actions of the guards and continued as if nothing had happened.

“Terrorists are the enemies of freedom. It stands to reason that they should attack the freedom of the mall. Only a subversive would suggest otherwise.”

Higgs realized he was holding his breath and let it out. Beside him, Simms visibly relaxed. With one eye on the androids, Higgs cleared his throat. “Why can’t we leave the mall?”

Both he and Simms flinched as the androids leapt forward, guns leveled at Higgs. Homeland’s voice stopped them again. “Overruled.”

Higgs and Simms breathed out.

“Why should anyone want to leave the freedom of the mall? Only a subversive would want to leave the mall.” Jared smiled benignly, still apparently unconcerned by the androids’ murderous intentions on Higgs.

Higgs felt emboldened to try his luck. “Why is everyone in the mall so afraid?”

“Overruled.”

The androids did not even get the chance to move this time. Higgs noticed they did seem to glance sideways at each other. They weren’t supposed to think, Simms had said.

Jared smiled. “The people are not afraid. The people are happy, safe in the freedom and security provided by Homeland. Only a subversive would think otherwise. Really, Higgs, if it were not for the trauma of your recent injury which is clearly clouding your reasoning, I would have to conclude that you were posing these questions to test my reactions.”

Higgs opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

Homeland spoke. “You are confused, Security Officer Higgs, and that is only to be expected after the trauma of your injury. Please return to your quarters. There will be some clearance tests before you can resume your duties.”

Higgs rose slowly from his chair. "Thank you, ma'am. I think you'll find that I won't let you down."

* * * * *

As Higgs and Simms hurried away from Jared's office, and back through the security center, Simms was incredulous.

"You are so lucky, Higgs. You came this close to being terminated." He held up his thumb and index finger a fraction apart. "Subversive questions like that are going to get you into a lot of trouble."

"What the hell was subversive about them?"

"You heard Jared, only a subversive would think like that."

Suddenly, Simms put a hand on Higgs's shoulder and stopped him. He leaned close and whispered, "You're not really a subversive, are you, Higgs?"

Higgs started to laugh but stopped short when he saw the look of deadly earnest in Simms' eyes.

"No. No, of course I'm not."

He pulled away from Simms and continued down the room, annoyed. What kind of question was that? What was up with Simms? And anyway, he didn't want to stay too close to his breath for any length of time.

A crowd of security officers surrounded the screen Higgs had looked at earlier. Security Officer Chelsea Day typed furiously into her keyboard while her colleagues watched. As he drew closer, Higgs caught a glimpse of the screen. The vending machine was peppered with bullet holes and a number of medical personnel in white jump suits knelt around a stretcher. A body lay covered by a white sheet. Chelsea looked up, beaming. "We got him, sir. Just filing my report."

When Higgs made no response, Chelsea gave a little nervous laugh and returned to the keyboard. Simms took Higgs' arm and pulled him away.

"Come on."

* * * * *

Through the glass wall, Jared watched Higgs and Simms as they walked away through the security center. He breathed out heavily and reclined back in his chair, putting his hands behind his head. Higgs would probably find out what had happened to him eventually. You couldn't keep things hidden from a man like Higgs for long. He was good, too good. He took everything in, little details other people missed. Jared had noticed Higgs' reaction at the news that his notes were destroyed. Jared quietly cursed himself. He did not need Higgs to start having doubts. If anyone could get to the bottom of this terrorist insurgency, Higgs could.

Homeland spoke quietly. "I am concerned, my friend. He is showing signs of subversive behavior."

Several long seconds passed before Jared replied. "I share your concern, my friend, but he's our only hope."

"I do not want a repeat of the last time, my friend."

Jared sighed. "My friend, the terrorist attacks are increasing in frequency and boldness and yet we are unable to root them out. Security Officer Higgs may be..." he floundered for a suitable word, "...unconventional but he is effective. Please let's give him time."

Homeland paused before responding.

"Agreed."

Chapter Four

Citizen Joshua Runtene was a fussy, lonely man. He worked for one of the stores in the mall as an accountant, tallying up the sales figures and looking for any telltale signs that someone might have their fingers in the till. Nobody ever did, of course, theft being considered an act of terrorism and punishable by instant termination. After all, only a subversive would break the law. Nonetheless, you could not be too careful.

Joshua was short and very particular about his appearance, especially his neat, clipped moustache. He considered it his most fetching feature. Sadly, he was right.

He lay on his bed, propped up on an elbow, running his gaze down the latest set of figures one more time before he turned off the lights. He had checked them twice already but was of the opinion that three times made perfect. They always tallied. The computer, of course, could do this for him, but he liked playing with figures, they kept his mind active.

He heard a sound from above, like something sliding in the void above the room. Damn, the noise had made him lose his place and he would have to start again. He looked up. Nothing unusual could be seen, just the plain ceiling with the finely meshed grill in the center, which led to the ventilation system. The camera swung to and fro unhurriedly in the corner of the room.

He returned to the beginning of his report and started to tally the figures again. After a few moments, the noise repeated, louder this time, breaking his chain of thought. Cursing, he looked up but the sound had stopped. He was just about to return to his figures when a quiet metallic tapping started on the grill above him, irregular but constant. Tap, tap, pause, tap. Gritting his teeth, he closed his eyes for a few seconds, hoping the wretched distraction would stop. It didn't. Tutting with frustration, he looked over at the camera.

"Ma'am?"

No response. Damn her. She was always watching when you didn't want her and never there when you did. He tried again, a little louder.

"Ma'am?"

Still no response and the tapping continued. What was it? He got up and pulled his bed away from the wall until it stood directly under the grill. Then, standing on the bed, he strained up to look closely at it. The tapping continued, a metal on metal noise. Something must have come loose. His nose wrinkled. An unpleasant odor wafted from the grill, like the smell of rotting food. Standing on tip-toe, he put his ear to the underside of it and listened hard. The tapping stopped and a long, fine steel blade thudded down through the grill and the side of his head. He was dead before his body hit the floor. Above him, the grill swung open. The camera continued to sweep slowly from side to side.

* * * * *

Milo made his way across the mall, a small bag in one hand. He always found the mall difficult at this time of day with so many shoppers out. Being so unprepossessing, people seldom made way for him and he had to incessantly dodge through gaps in the throng. If only people

would have a little common courtesy. But people were people, caught up in their own thoughts and lives and today, they served their purpose for him. The crowd was his cover.

At one end of the mall stood a semi-circle of benches dotted with people taking their lunch. Milo approached nonchalantly and scanned the faces there. Good, there he was, sitting at one end with a space next to him, a well-set, handsome man busy munching his way through a roll. Dressed in a red jump suit, his name tag labeling him as Security Officer Damian Finnegan. Damian did not look up as Milo walked over and sat heavily next to him.

Placing his bag between himself and Damian, Milo took out a sandwich and raised it slowly to his mouth.

"They got Jasper," Damian whispered, his lips concealed by his roll. "Alex got away."

Milo made no obvious response. Damian finished his roll and then, in one smooth motion, reached into Milo's bag, pulled out the notebook concealed there and pocketed it as he stood. He stretched, looked around him and strode purposely away. Milo took a bite of the sandwich and chewed thoughtfully.

Across the mall, well out of Milo's awareness, a camera focused on him, its little red light flashing angrily.

* * * * *

The Reverend Michealod stood in his pulpit, lungs bursting as he led the congregation in a rousing chorus of "America the Free". Behind him hung a huge star-spangled banner, which largely obscured the mural of Christ crucified on the wall beyond. The reverend felt at his happiest

here, all the nagging doubts of faith left behind. Nothing like a good song to move the spirits along, he always said.

He glanced down at the electric organ, an imposing instrument below the pulpit, tastefully backed with light pine veneer and currently pumping out music at an entirely sensible level of decibels. It worked entirely on automatic of course—nobody actually played it. The reverend viewed it as a truly remarkable innovation, an electric organ which had over a thousand of the Lord's finest hymns stored away in its memory banks. He simply needed to select the ones he wanted before the service and put in the running order. It even had a repertoire of moving classical pieces to play during the hushed intimacy of Holy Communion. No need for some poor aging spinster to spend hours practicing, only to make a fool of herself with wrong notes halfway through a rousing chorus of "Abide With Me". No, these days, what with the electric organ and the church kneelers mass produced in Taiwan, nothing came between the faithful and the serious business of worshipping the Lord in a schedule which fit in with the busy timescales imposed by modern life.

Higgs and Simms stood in the middle of the congregation. Simms was singing enthusiastically, his eyes closed, little globs of spit accumulating at the corners of his mouth. Higgs didn't feel quite so inspired. It wasn't that he didn't believe, quite the contrary. Without the thought that some higher authority directed everything, life was not worth living or fighting for. He was firm in his faith, he said his prayers, he confessed his sins and he took Holy Communion. But he was distracted, he could not put the thought that Jared had lied to him out of his mind. It niggled away at him, got under his skin. He should trust Jared. He had to trust Jared. But he was sure he had not been mistaken. The momentary look on Jared's face had betrayed him when he claimed Higgs' notes had been destroyed.

Higgs' chain of thought was broken suddenly as the lights dimmed. The music from the organ slowed, descending in pitch as it did so. The congregation slowed its singing to match, the poor reverend having to force his mouth into contortions to keep time. Then the lights came back and the organ worked its way up to the correct tempo. *Another brownout. Another brownout nobody is prepared to admit happens.* Higgs made a mental note to investigate the power sources for the mall.

The song came to a rousing and triumphant ending and the congregation began to sit. The Reverend quickly took the microphone in the pulpit. "Er, no, please remain standing."

The congregation reversed their momentum and struggled to their feet.

"Hands on your bibles, please."

Higgs picked up his bible from the shelf on the back of the pew in front of him. The Reverend held his bible up and the congregation followed suit.

"Repeat after me. I swear..."

"I swear..." the congregation replied as one.

"By almighty God..."

"By almighty God..."

"That I am not..."

"That I am not..."

"A terrorist, a subversive or an infiltrator."

"A terrorist, a subversive or an infiltrator."

Higgs got halfway through the last response and stopped. He looked sideways at Simms. Without any visible hint of irony, Simms repeated the line, a tear welling up in his eye.

* * * * *

The congregation filed out of the chapel slowly. The reverend had taken up residence at the exit, limply pressing the hand of each person as they left. Behind him, automatic assault rifle in hand, stood one of the immense armored androids. *The reverend back home would have had something to say about assault rifles in church*, Higgs thought a little sanctimoniously.

As they moved up the queue to the reverend, Simms leaned over to Higgs.

“Most moving, Higgs, most moving.”

“What are you on about now?” Higgs winced away from Simms’ breath.

“The ceremony. It’s the test. I’d say that you passed with flying colors. Now you’ve completed that, you can resume your duties.”

Higgs was incredulous. “What, that was it, promising that I’m not a terrorist?” He spoke loudly, unconcerned as to who might overhear. They had reached the reverend and the android at the door.

“Well, yes.” Simms was clearly confused that Higgs should be having difficulty with this apparently simple concept.

Higgs laughed loudly and faced Simms with his hands on his hips. “But I could be a terrorist but just say that I’m not.”

A sudden space opened around Higgs. Simms was on the floor with his hands over his head before Higgs could blink.

“Overruled.”

The android lowered its gun. Higgs was sure it glowered at him. Simms slowly got up as a low mumble of conversation resumed around them.

“Higgs, you are really pushing it, you know,” hissed Simms. “I don’t know why you haven’t been terminated already.”

“Don’t tell me that you doubt Homeland’s judgment, Simms?”

Simms looked around in panic at the android. “Of course not. I, no, definitely not.”

The android didn’t move.

The reverend reached out and shook Higgs’ hand, a damp, weak little handshake, the sort Higgs found quite annoying. Why bother with a handshake like that?

“Interesting thing you said back there about lying about not being a terrorist,” the reverend began. “You know, I’ve often wondered the same thing myself—”

A burst of gunfire ripped through the room. Higgs looked down. He was still holding the reverend’s hand but now it had the distinction of no longer having a reverend attached to the end of it. Higgs’ mouth dropped open.

* * * * *

Jodi’s private office was not particularly large and that was something she resented. It wasn’t that she had any desire to feed her ego with a large, opulent office. She was just naturally clumsy and the more space she had around things, the less likely she was to cover them with jam-covered toast, sticky-side down. It wouldn’t have helped her in any event, since she was terribly messy and merely filled up all available space with piles of papers and half-drunk cups of coffee.

Her office was a little way away from the main wards and close to the private staff entrance. This was a godsend as far as Jodi was concerned because when things got too much, she simply slipped away for a few minutes. And things did get too much. This place, the mall, it wasn’t healthy. The androids were always too trigger-happy in their pursuit of

terrorists and a lot of innocent people got caught in the crossfire. She had complained time and time again to Homeland about it, begging her to get them to be more careful. Always, Homeland talked about sacrifice and the good of the majority but, Jodi noted privately, it was never Homeland that made the sacrifice.

And then there were the vats. She didn't like them, didn't like what they stood for. Homeland had sworn her and the other senior medical officers to secrecy. For what reason, Jodi had no idea. The vats were surely an open secret. People in the security apparatus would know about them of course. After all, they were responsible for so many of the good citizens of the mall ending up there in the first place. And surely, some of the mall's ordinary Joes must have noticed what was happening? There must be rumors, suspicions? No, nobody would say anything. They would notice but nobody would utter one subversive word. Jodi had to work on in "secret", loathing every minute of it. She wished Homeland could just automate the whole process so she could wash her hands of it. But Homeland couldn't do it all herself, not yet. Organic and biological, the process was an art rather than an exact science and Homeland still needed the human touch.

It was the human touch that Jodi did so well. After all, she was a doctor. She could not turn her back on people who needed her help and she was a bottomless well of compassion, prepared to spend long hours repairing broken bodies and shattered minds, regardless of the emotional cost to her. Or the risks.

She stood now in one corner of her cluttered office, holding a small tray of sandwiches. To the right of her head was a finely meshed grill in the wall, some two feet square. The tray was poised just below it. The camera in the opposite corner swung slowly backwards and forwards, taking in the entire office with each sweep. She knew that meant the

security officer monitoring the camera was not really paying attention. If he or she had been, the camera would have followed her. Perhaps they were preoccupied with a suspected terrorist on another camera? Nonetheless, Jodi played safe. She took one of the many sandwiches on the plate and bit into it as the camera swept past her again, swinging off to the right. Once sure she was out of its field of view, she moved her head closer to the grill.

“Now,” she hissed.

The bottom of the grill swung up and an arm darted out, taking a handful of sandwiches. By the time the camera swept back around, Jodi had moved away from the wall and was perched on the corner of her desk.

* * * * *

As they walked along the corridor towards Higgs’ room, Higgs felt a deep sense of shock. Simms had taken him to a washroom where he cleaned off the majority of the reverend’s blood splattered across him. The material of his jump suit was water resistant. The blood had not soaked in at all and wiped off easily. Simms had quipped that this was quite an advantage for a security officer, not realizing how close he came to having his nose reset by Higgs’ fist.

Higgs had seen people killed before. Admittedly, he couldn’t remember a specific incident but he was sure that at some point he had. Like so much of his memory, he knew where the holes were. He had killed people but he would have had a reason, a good reason. His conscience was clear even if he couldn’t remember the specifics of the actual events. But the reverend had been killed for trying to make polite conversation and, while in different circumstances Higgs might have

privately amused himself by regarding that as sin deserving of capital punishment, the look of the man in the agony of his death throes burned itself deep into Higgs' conscience. And it had been his fault, his cheap talk the poor reverend had picked up on. If only he had kept his mouth shut. Homeland was mad and this madness was playing out in the security services as a hysterical paranoia. How could they have killed a man for making polite conversation?

Simms was undaunted, clearly having moved on. As they came up to the door to Higgs' room, he sensed that Simms was amused by something. Putting his hand over the green door button so Higgs couldn't press it, Simms grinned and stuck his tongue in his cheek.

"Well, that's that then. I think that you'll be finding out pretty soon that it's not all work and no play around here."

Higgs really couldn't be bothered. "What? Look, Simms, I need some shuteye, okay? I'll see you later."

Simms snorted his annoying little laugh. "Shuteye, eh? That's if you can get any, eh?"

Higgs wearily pushed past Simms and pressed the button. The door slid up with a satisfied hiss and he entered, hoping Simms would stay outside.

"Hi, Higgsie."

Higgs stopped and stared at the tall, blonde woman standing in his room. She wore a black cowboy hat, ornately decorated leather boots, a crop-top and shorts that scarcely covered the curves of her ass. Slung over her shoulder was a black handbag. With her hands on her hips and her jaws working furiously on some chewing gum, she fixed Higgs with a come-on smile.

Higgs glanced desperately to Simms but he was taking in the view with a hungry look in his eye, drooling slightly.

“Simms?”

Simms tore his gaze from the woman and winked at Higgs while retreating from the room. “Enjoy,” he called as the door slid down.

Higgs spun back around to face the woman.

“Hi, I’m Mandy and Homeland has selected me as your perfect match,” she purred.

“What?”

“Your perfect,” she paused for effect and then breathed “match”, pouting as she did so. Chewing frantically, she advanced slowly towards Higgs. He shuffled backwards, a hot sensation growing in his cheeks. He wasn’t comfortable with women who behaved like this, it wasn’t right. It was, well, tarty and cheap. He found himself reduced to a stammer.

“I, er, look, some other time, I’m quite tired.”

“Don’t be shy. We’ve got a compatibility rating of over eighty-five percent, look here.”

From her handbag she pulled a small stack of concertinaed computer paper covered with figures and equations, and let it unfold to the floor. Still holding the top of the report and gaining slowly on Higgs she read. “There’s at least a seventy-five percent chance of me having an orgasm on our first coupling.”

“What?”

The back of Higgs’ knees hit the bed and he toppled over backwards. Mandy flung the printout to one side and climbed on top of him.

“Hey boy, now that’s more like it.”

Higgs was desperate. “No, no, stop.”

Suddenly, the voice of Homeland filled the room. “Now Mandy, Higgs, you know that the only permitted position is the missionary position.”

Mandy tried to chew Higgs’ ear but he pulled away.

“What? Homeland is watching?”

“Only for our own security and peace of mind.” Mandy changed tactics and began licking his neck.

With a concerted effort, Higgs struggled out from beneath her and ran for the door. He thumped the green button and turned back to Mandy.

“Out. Sorry but out, now. Please.”

Mandy wrinkled her brow, her lower lip trembling. “What did I do wrong?”

“Please, just leave. I need to sleep.”

Mandy clenched her fists and stamped her foot. “It’s her, isn’t it? Every time, you prefer her to me. Every single time.”

She snatched the compatibility report from the floor and, stuffing it messily into her bag, marched from the room.

Higgs leaned against the doorframe and watched her go. *What do you mean? Every single time? I’ve never seen you before.*

Higgs’ head spun. He closed the door and sagged down onto the bed. After a few moments, he looked up at the security camera in the corner of the room. It stared back at him, the little red light on top blinking.

* * * * *

In the Security Center, Security Officer Chelsea Day leaned back in her chair and stretched. Around her, her colleagues grumbled with an air of amused disappointment. On the screen in front of them, Higgs sat on the bed staring into the camera.

“Your money please, gentleman.”

Chelsea held up a hand and reluctantly, her colleagues placed their five dollar bills on her palm. As far as Chelsea was concerned it had been a watertight bet. Like Higgs was going to get off on Mandy. Her colleagues

drifted away and Chelsea altered the controls to zoom in more closely on Higgs. She enjoyed watching Higgs. After all, he was a bit of a hunk. Eventually, Higgs would have to get undressed to go to bed. All she had to do was wait.

Chapter Five

Everyone loved Citizen Bunny Mathorne. She was easy in conversation and she knew how to make people laugh. It helped of course, as it always does, that she was effortlessly beautiful. She loved clothes, particularly shoes. Her tiny living space was crowded with them. She had so many, Homeland had kindly allowed her not only special dispensation to have a rack in her room to keep them on but had also granted her the use of an adjacent, vacant living apartment as an overflow.

She was out late, having spent several hours after work seeking her next acquisition, a particularly fetching pair, with short, sensible heels and covered with richly patterned cloth. She would find a use for them. Of course, they would need an outfit to go with them but that would have to wait for another day. Nine o'clock had passed and it didn't pay to be out too late these days.

She made her way to the ninth balcony of Precinct Sixteen from which her residential corridor led. Nobody was about on this level now and she just had the security cameras for company. She didn't mind them, even if they followed her. They made her feel safe. They weren't following her now, they just scanned back and forth. She paid them no heed, she had shoes to get home.

She turned into her residential corridor, a long and thin passageway with doors leading off every few meters. The lights had been dimmed—

they always were after nine—but she didn’t mind. There was nothing to be afraid of. She had only walked five meters down the corridor when a loud, metallic bang behind her made her jump. Looking back up the corridor towards the precinct, she saw nothing unusual. Her nose wrinkled. There was an acrid odor. “Poohie.”

She looked up at the cameras. “Ma’am?”

No response.

Typical. Another metallic bang rang out, coming from the ceiling between her and the precinct, but she couldn’t see anything making the noise.

She shrugged. There was not much she could do about it. It must be maintenance guys or something. Turning, she continued up the corridor. She did not see the fine, wire noose hanging from the ceiling, becoming aware of it only when it pulled tightly around her neck, stifling off her scream and cutting into her flesh. She struggled vainly but the wire was sharp and quickly cut through her jugular. Her bag of precious shoes dropped to the floor in a shower of blood as her body was hoisted upwards. The cameras continued sweeping the corridor.

* * * * *

The security services knew them as blind spots. Despite hundreds of cameras and their ever watchful crew of security officers, little areas of the mall were not covered. These private corners could be found everywhere if you knew where they were and, as a member of the security services’ dedicated Surveillance Team, Damian knew every one of them.

He stood in one now, just to the right of a shopfront and behind an information point in Precinct Fourteen. Ten meters to his left were two of

the immense androids, which helped to keep the peace, but Damian knew they would pay him scant regard. His red jumpsuit would stop passersby from paying him too much attention either. He waited impatiently, looking through the crowd for any sign of his appointment. He began to wonder whether his message had gotten through when he heard a familiar voice in his ear.

“Greetings, citizen, I am not a terrorist.”

Damn him, Damian thought. Milo somehow managed to be able to sneak up on anyone. So non-descript and average, you could look right at him in a crowd and still not see him.

Damian folded his arms crossly. “You’re late.”

Milo grinned up at him but stopped when he saw the look on Damian’s face.

“Tell me,” Milo said flatly.

“It’s Jasper.” Damian’s voice trembled. “They got him alive. I thought from the original reports that he had been shot but they got him alive.”

Milo took a sharp intake of breath.

Damian continued. “You know what that would have meant, don’t you?”

“Would have meant?” Milo was suspicious. He didn’t like the word “would” and its implications that steps had been taken.

“They would have tortured him. He would have told them about us.”

“What’s happened to him?”

Damian looked down, his eyes filling with tears.

“Damian, what’s happened?”

Milo glanced nervously around to check they were not being watched.

“I had to do it. He would have told them everything.”

“What have you done? Damian, tell me.”

“He’s dead. I did it as quickly as I could.”

“Jesus.”

Milo took a few steps away from Damian, reeling with shock. They remained in silence for a few minutes. Damian regained his composure and spoke.

“Alex got away but they’ll search his room. If they find anything, it will lead them to us.”

“Can you get into his room?”

“Maybe. Look, Milo, we’ve got to be careful, very careful. They do terrible things to the people they catch. Terrible things. If they catch you, you’ll wish that you had more to tell them, just to make them stop.”

“Would you kill me?”

“Damn it, Milo, what kind of question is that?”

Damian looked away and ran his fingers through his hair anxiously. “We’ll be okay. I’ll check Alex’s room. Just be careful.”

* * * * *

Higgs stood and stared at the silent street beyond the glass doors. Three days had passed since he had been chased here, running for his life through this insane mall. Despite the considerable improvement of not having two androids hellbent on blowing him away, he nevertheless still lacked the nerve to try the green button on the wall by the doors, the green button which ought to open a passage to freedom. He shook his head. Where the hell was he? The spaces in his memory were disturbing and he still had no satisfactory answers. A shopping mall in Iowa was the best he had gotten so far.

But what a mall, a vast maze of thoroughfares divided into twenty precincts bounded by doors marked “Authorized Personnel Only”. Higgs had found he was able to open some of these with access codes Simms

had given him but not others. And none of them led him into the fresh air, to a breeze, to grass, clouds, sky. The only obvious way out was the exit where he stood now, the place he had been cornered in by the androids on his first day, that vast glass wall beyond which lay freedom. Nothing moved out there. He saw no birds flying, no people passing, no stray dogs. Not even the wind seemed to stir. The weather was always the same with a featureless blanket of white clouds that never broke.

He had explored as much as he could. In the nine levels above the mall in Precinct Three, he had found countless corridors crowded with rooms like his. Precinct Three also contained the hospital where the red-headed Jodi Francis worked. On returning for a check-up, he had seen her from a distance but she was clearly busy and no opportunity to speak had presented itself. It would be good to find an excuse to talk to her, to thank her if nothing else. He thought a lot about her eyes.

The economics of the mall seemed to make no sense. Many people were employed, like he was, in the security services. He had received some money with which he discovered he could buy all the designer clothes, aftershave, fast food, candy and bibles he liked. He'd met people employed in the hospital, people who worked in the shops, people involved in the maintenance and cleaning of the mall and people involved in the extensive bureaucracy of the place. But the place had no industry, nobody producing anything. Where the food came from was anyone's guess, but the fast-food outlets were always well stocked.

Higgs could find no books, newspapers or magazines and no music more contemporary than Elvis Presley. He had found several stores which rented out films but none offered any titles Higgs had not seen already. Anyway, he had discovered his television did not work. When he complained to Simms, he was assured it would be seen to. He didn't really mind that it hadn't.

Although his memory remained patchy, he at least knew who he was, up to a point. He surprised himself by instinctively knowing how to handle a gun. Simms had told him this was ingrained in his subconscious from his basic training. He had been slowly resuming what Simms had termed his “duties” but so far, this seemed to consist entirely of investigating malicious, terrorist assaults of vending machines, surveillance cameras and storefront loudspeakers. He was beginning to suspect the terrorist threat might be just a little overstated.

The fact remained though, that he had been seriously injured in a terrorist incident while investigating a subversive cell. Well, at least he had to take this as a fact but then Jared had already lied to him, Higgs was sure of it. The lack of any records from his previous investigations was very troubling. He always kept meticulous records and would have filed reports. They should have been held by the security services. So, where were they? And what did they say that Jared didn’t want him to see?

Behind him, Simms cleared his throat. “I don’t suppose that we could move on, could we?”

Ah yes, the ever-present Simms. He followed Higgs everywhere, although for what exact purpose he had not really managed to work out. Higgs imagined that Simms sent reports back to Jared. Simms was always tapping away on the little keyboard built into his clipboard.

“It’s just that, well, I need a comfort break,” Simms nodded in the direction of the exit, “and I think it’s unlikely the terrorists are going to attack from out there.”

“Have you ever been out there?”

Simms opened and closed his mouth for a few moments. “Look, Higgs, I really do need a comfort break.”

Higgs sighed. He was feeling hungry anyway. They turned and began to walk back into the precinct proper. As they approached the first shops, Higgs suddenly knew that the woman in his life would thank him for Scent of Love, the latest fragrance from Get Real, available only while stocks last. Failing that, he knew he would look good in the new season of frocks and dresses brought exclusively to him by Etiday.

"I don't wear dresses," he said out loud in response to this latest thought.

Simms looked at him sideways, wrinkling up his nose. "I should hope not, Higgs. I'm sure that would be subversive behavior. Certainly not healthy."

Higgs felt embarrassed and annoyed at himself and they continued up the precinct in silence. Thought after thought bombarded him, telling him he wanted things he didn't need. A deep temptation urged him just to give in, to go into the shops and spend, spend, spend.

Simms stopped suddenly, his legs crossed. "Look, Higgs, could you just wait here for a moment?"

Higgs nodded and Simms darted frantically off into the public conveniences.

* * * * *

Simms emerged back into the mall some five minutes later, a great weight removed from his mind. He was a little concerned about that last comment from Higgs and had made a note of it in his report. Probably not anything to worry about. After all, he did say that he didn't wear dresses. If he had said the opposite, well, something would have had to be done. He stopped and looked around for Higgs. The man had

vanished. Simms' heart sank. *Two minutes, I asked him to wait for two minutes.*

* * * * *

For the first two days since leaving the hospital, Higgs had survived on fast food. There seemed to be hundreds of outlets throughout the mall, all serving up bountiful supplies of unhealthy fare that invariably revolved around something in a bun with French fries. With no cooking facilities in the single room he was obliged to call home, Higgs had no choice but to eat out and he had quickly begun to worry about his long-term health. The relentless diet of burgers was clearly ingrained in the psyche of the citizens of the mall because many of them were overweight, out of shape and covered in spots. Eventually, when he felt he could not face another fast meal, Higgs had raised the issue with Simms and had been directed to a mess hall. Each of the precincts had one of these and although they served up a range of bland, processed food, it did at least have a semblance of nutritional balance.

Higgs sat in the mess hall off of Precinct Three now. He felt a certain guilty pleasure in having given Simms the slip but he did also feel a slight pang of loneliness. He was out of place here, in this unfamiliar world. He wanted to know where his family was, his brother.

He stared at the plate in front of him. Something resembling a steak sat in the middle, except the meat wasn't real. More like Soya. Next to it, some round green things superficially resembled peas piled up on some light brown things Higgs imagined had been intended as roast potatoes. He poked the peas around the plate with his fork.

"Not the most appetizing of fare."

Higgs looked up. Jodi held a tray with a plate of similarly unappealing food and a coffee.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not, please do.”

Jodi sat opposite Higgs, only slightly spilling her coffee as she did so.

“I am not a terrorist,” she said.

“Me neither. I’m glad we’ve cleared that up.”

Higgs smiled as Jodi blushed. Everybody went through this silly ritual, this stupid mantra. You just somehow slipped into the routine after a few days.

Jodi began mopping up her spilt coffee with a napkin. “So, how are you finding things out in the mall?”

“Confusing.”

Jodi smiled. “Things will get easier, Security Officer Higgs.”

You don’t mean that. We’re being watched, monitored. He cut off a piece of the meat and put it in his mouth. Dry and tasting mostly of salt, Higgs made an effort to force it down.

“How are things in the hospital?”

“Never better. We are grateful to Homeland for supplying us with everything we need.”

“Good, good.”

They ate for a while in silence. Higgs glanced up at Jodi. She was beautiful in an unconventional way. Her red hair had been tied back in a bun but was escaping confinement in obstinate little tufts. She was thin and slightly awkward, her face animated, her green eyes—those mesmerizing green eyes—darted here and there, seeing everything. Higgs found he couldn’t help smiling at her.

“I’ve still not had an account of my accident.”

Jodi finished her mouthful and then spoke carefully. "I am not authorized to give you an account of your accident, Security Officer Higgs. I have to suggest to you that you speak to Information Officer Simms."

"Did you witness my accident?"

Jodi went to speak and then stopped, a look of uncertainty crossing her face. She sighed. "Really, Higgs, I'm sorry. I can't talk to you about this."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry for pushing it. Look, there's something that I'm a little worried about."

"Yes?"

"Well, I keep hearing voices in my head."

Jodi choked on her mouthful and struggled to regain her composure. She looked up at Higgs. "Right. Okay now, this sort of thing can be very frightening, Higgs. I think that it's a very good idea for you to tell me about it."

Higgs was crestfallen. This level of professional concern from Jodi must mean his condition was serious. "Well, I don't know if they're actually voices. I, well, these thoughts just come into my head. They're like voices in a way."

"Okay. And what sort of things do these voices say? Do they tell you to do things?"

"Yes, they do."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, they tell me to buy dresses. Televisions. Wart cream."

Jodi leaned back, laughing with relief. "Oh, Higgs, you had me worried for a moment there."

"I do hear them. Really."

"Yes, when you're out near the shops. Can you hear them in here?"

Higgs thought for a moment. “No, I can’t.”

“The shops all pump out subliminal advertisements. They’re sent out at a pitch you can’t hear but your brain picks them up and decodes them. If you look, each shop has a set of loudspeakers over the doorway. You get used to it after a while and just ignore them.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I thought I was going mad.”

Jodi smiled. “Do tell me if you hear voices telling you to kill someone, won’t you?”

“Well, I’ve got this overriding urge to kill Simms.”

Jodi’s face fell and she looked around anxiously. “Higgs,” she hissed. “Don’t joke like that. She has no sense of humor.”

* * * * *

The entrance to the mess hall was a broad, double-width doorway left permanently open during the time food was served. Mandy stood just outside the entrance, managing to get a good view of Higgs and Jodi sitting together, without risking being seen herself. How could Higgs do this to her? Eating with that tart? She dressed so badly, too, stupid little scarecrow of a woman. She wondered what they talked about, what little secrets they shared. She felt a lump in her throat and her stomach churned. She had to know what was going on, what they were saying.

“Ah, greetings, Citizen Mandy.”

The smell of his breath told her who had spoken and she winced. Why did this irritating man always turn up when she least needed him? She turned to face Simms and smiled the sweetest smile she could muster.

“Greetings, Information Officer Simms, I am not a terrorist.”

He stood close to her. Too close. *Somebody ought to tell him.*

Simms beamed his ghastly smile at her and winked. "Here for some food, eh? Might join you for a quick nibble, if you fancy?"

Are you trying to be coy with me, you disgusting little man? Mandy watched as Simms raised an eyebrow.

"It's kind of you to offer, Information Officer Simms, but I have eaten already."

"Ah, a shame."

Mandy waited. Simms was obviously trying to think of something to say. He was a horrible, smelly little man, why couldn't he just go away and die somewhere quietly? She fixed her face with her innocent look.

Simms fidgeted with his clipboard for a moment and then spoke. "Well, I must be going. I have to keep all eyes and ears on our Higgs you know." He leaned forward and winked conspiratorially. "I have to do reports."

A thought shot through Mandy like lightning and she moved slightly closer to Simms, her ample breasts within a tantalizing inch of his skinny arm. He blushed.

"Simms," she said huskily, "I never realized how much work you have to do."

Simms was flustered. "Well, it's nothing really."

"It must be a worry writing those reports, making sure that everything is spelt correctly and they make sense."

Simms shrugged with affected modesty. Mandy leaned closer still, her right breast just brushing against his arm for a second.

"I could help you if you like?" She ran her fingers through her hair. "You could let me see the reports and I'll check them over."

"Oh, I, er, well, I'm not sure that that's really allowed but..."

Mandy backed off, pulling her best *you've hurt my feelings* face. She always found this one effective with the boys.

“Well, if you don’t like me...”

“Of course...citizen...I’d love you to help.”

She smiled sweetly at him and blew a bubble in her gum.

* * * * *

Higgs and Jodi picked their way through their conversation as carefully as they could. Talk was difficult with the knowledge that everything you said might be monitored and recorded, every flippant remark scrutinized for hidden meaning. Cheap talk cost lives. He remembered the Reverend Michaelleod.

They eventually degenerated into a rather brooding silence. A polite cough made them both look up. Simms beamed at them. Higgs and Jodi sagged.

“Greetings, Jodi, Higgs, I am not a terrorist.”

Higgs and Jodi both mumbled the mantra in return while Simms drew up a chair and sat uninvited beside them.

“Just having a little private tête à tête, are we?”

A smoldering hatred flared up in Jodi’s eyes. “I am informing Security Officer Higgs of the progress that we are making in the hospital. We were discussing nothing of a subversive nature.”

“I never suggested otherwise, my dear Jodi.”

“That’s Medical Officer Francis.”

Simms clicked his tongue. He turned to Higgs. “Higgs, you seem to have wandered off when I asked you to wait for me. I’m sorry to say that I find that rather impolite.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Simms.” Higgs fixed his face in what he hoped was a picture of earnest regret. “I didn’t realize that you wanted me to wait.”

“Well, I did ask. Never mind, just a little misunderstanding.”

Simms pulled a black, oblong item from the pocket of his jumpsuit.

“Know what this is, Higgs?”

He held the object up. Higgs recognized it immediately, a Sokidia H760 videophone. He had always found the picture quality on that particular model poor and preferred the features on the H800 series. He shook his head innocently, unable to resist the temptation to bait Simms.

“No, not a clue, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, right. Not there in the memory I expect, eh? This is what we call a mobile phone.”

“A mobile what?”

“A mobile videophone.”

“What’s a videophone?”

Simms rolled his eyes and spoke slowly and carefully. “It’s kind of a device that allows people to see and talk to each other when they are a long way apart. The pictures kind of float through the air from one videophone to the other.”

“Goodness me, Simms, what will they think of next?”

Unable to contain herself any longer, Jodi snorted with laughter. Simms looked suspiciously at her.

“I’m sorry, Information Officer Simms,” she said quickly. “I was elsewhere.”

Realizing he was the butt of some joke he had not understood, Simms crossly handed the videophone to Higgs.

“It’s yours, Higgs. I’m sure it will come back to you. I’ve programmed in all the numbers you need.”

Higgs looked at the phone while Simms continued.

“It’s a real privilege to have one of these you know. Only very trusted members of the security apparatus are allowed to have them.”

Higgs nodded at Simms while punching some buttons on the phone. Simms carried on.

“I’ve got one, of course. You must take very good care of it—”

He was cut off by a shrill ringing sound from his jacket.

“Oh, er, there it is now.” A little flustered, he pulled out his phone and clicked the answer-call button. Higgs’ face appeared on the little monitor screen.

“Greetings, Information Officer Simms,” said Higgs. “I am not, I repeat, not a terrorist.”

* * * * *

Security Officer Chelsea Day loved her job. She had a deeply ingrained inquisitiveness about other people’s affairs which had dogged her since childhood. This irresistible urge to poke her nose into everyone else’s business had made a mess of her relationships during her adolescence but was a positive boon for working as one of Homeland’s dedicated surveillance teams.

It had taken her a while to work out exactly why Homeland required a massive room full of people glued to the screens, watching every public, private and intimate moment of its terrified inhabitants. After all, Homeland was a powerful computer, able to interpret images and spot when someone was doing something obviously subversive, such as running amok with an assault rifle (an incident which Chelsea and her colleagues had watched with interest the previous month. Chelsea had run a book on estimates of the final body count).

The problem Homeland had, Chelsea reasoned, was she couldn’t interpret the more subtle interactions between people. Double-meaning, humor and emotions were beyond her. The distinction between someone

being hellbent on bringing democracy to its knees or merely having a bit of a temper tantrum was unfathomable. She relied on her surveillance teams to inform her when people were writing subversive material rather than sales reports or when people were indulging in sexual practices which diverged from the norm simply because she did not know. She relied on them and she trusted them. She had to.

All this meant, of course, that the job provided certain perks. Homeland needed to be informed of subversive behavior, but of course, everybody's behavior was well, at least a little bit subversive. It just depended on how you looked at things. Chelsea was prepared to look at things in a very favorable light if she was given an incentive to do so.

She stood waiting just outside the third fast-food outlet on the left, beyond the entrance to Precinct Nineteen, a well-known blind spot. She was early but it helped to keep people on their toes. Citizen Dominic Caine came puffing up, his fat brow damp with perspiration, his T-shirt stretched across his ample belly as it undulated to the rhythm of his ponderous trot.

"You're late," Chelsea said, matter-of-factly.

Citizen Dominic glanced nervously around. "I'm sorry, Officer Day." His voice was a rich baritone that resonated in Chelsea's bones.

Ooh, haven't you got the nice voice. She loved this feeling of power.

Citizen Dominic pulled an envelope out of his satchel and offered it to Chelsea. She paid it no heed, choosing instead to inspect her nails.

"I'm afraid that it is getting really quite difficult to keep your little indiscretion away from her attention," Chelsea said at last.

Dominic looked anxiously over his shoulder and put the envelope back in his satchel. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's going to cost you double from now on."

"What? I can't, I've got the repayments on the T.V."

“Double.”

“Please, I’m struggling to keep up.”

“It was a very big candy bar, Citizen Caine.”

“Please.”

“You know, she’s asked for reports on all the thefts from vending machines over the last few months.”

“You bastard.”

Citizen Dominic pulled his wallet from his pocket and started counting out the notes, glancing nervously over his shoulders as he did so. He handed them with the envelope to Chelsea.

“Thank you, Citizen Caine.” She walked away. “That will do nicely.”

Chapter Six

It had taken Higgs a little while to answer the emergency call. It wasn't that he was being deliberately tardy, he just felt the need to give Simms the slip before making his way to the scene of the latest incident. Simms was always shadowing Higgs, always talking and making stupid little jokes, rattling Higgs' head. He could think more clearly without Simms about. The enigma in which he found himself needed a clear head and right now, things had just gotten more confusing.

Higgs stood in Precinct Eight, up on the ninth level. The time was not much after ten in the morning and the great throng of shoppers who would make the place insufferable later in the day had yet to emerge. A civilian had made the horrible discovery and called the security services. They in turn had cordoned the area off and Higgs had been called to yet another "terrorist incident". But this wasn't graffiti or a broken vending machine. This was a trail of blood, leading out from a residential corridor, across a short section of the balcony and up the wall to a ventilation shaft grill. Curious passersby were beginning to crowd around, held back by a number of security officers. A cleaning lady with a mop and a bucket plodded up and was waved through.

Higgs stood inside the cordon, taking everything in. He walked up to the grill and looked closely at it, a square metal frame supporting a fine wire mesh. He reached up and pulled at the frame and, with a little effort, managed to remove it from the wall.

“Higgs.”

Higgs looked around, still holding the grill.

Simms ran up to him, fighting for breath. He hated this little game Higgs insisted on playing. As if he didn’t know Higgs kept trying to lose him.

“I say, Higgs, better put that back. It’s a serious offense to remove one of those from the wall.”

“And it’s not a serious offense to kill someone and drag them in?”

Simms looked down at the trail of blood. “Oh, my word.” He chewed the corner of his clipboard.

Homeland’s voice filled the air, commanding a hush from the entire precinct. “Security Officer Higgs. Please replace the grill on the wall.”

“Ma’am, I believe that there may be a dead body in the ventilation shaft and I request your permission to investigate.”

A collective gasp of astonishment escaped from the inhabitants of Precinct Eight. Not at the thought there might be a dead body in the ventilation shaft but rather that someone had answered *her* back.

“Permission denied. Please replace the grill on the wall.”

Slowly, Higgs returned the grill to the wall, pushing it firmly back into place. He looked sideways and his jaw dropped with astonishment at what he saw.

“No. Stop.”

The woman with the mop had busily slopped up the trail from the corridor and was working her way towards the foot of the wall beneath the grill. She looked up at him, a little upset.

“What do you mean stop?” asked Simms.

Higgs glowered at him. “What?”

"It's her job to clean up the mess. We can't have bloodstains all over the floor for heaven's sake, Higgs. What would people think? It would put them off their burgers."

The woman shrugged and carried on mopping up.

"How are we supposed to collect any evidence if I can't go into the ventilation shaft and this stupid woman cleans up all the blood?"

Simms looked at the woman.

"Ooh, that's a bit harsh, Higgs. Poor woman's only doing her job. Citizen."

The cleaning woman glanced up but didn't quite meet his gaze.

"What's your name, citizen?" Simms asked as kindly as he was able.

"Doris Kettering, Cleaning Staff of the First Order, citizen."

"Cleaning Staff of the First Order, eh? Very good. You're doing a sterling job, Citizen Doris, you carry on."

Simms turned back to address Higgs but he was gone. *Damn, he's done it again.*

* * * * *

They were sitting around the glass conference table in Jared's office—Jared, Higgs and a dozen other senior security officers. Simms was there, of course, but Jared did not permit him to sit. He hovered behind Higgs' chair, shifting his weight from foot to foot uncomfortably. Higgs was annoyed at Jared's unnecessary callousness at making Simms stand. Higgs also noted that, without exception, he was the only senior security officer who had an information officer attached to him.

Jared held a wireless keyboard in his hand. He pressed a few buttons and a set of images appeared on the screens set into the walls—a still of the blood trail leading up to the ventilation grill that Higgs had seen, a

still of a blood-soaked bed in the middle of a living apartment, a shopping bag covered in blood in the center of a residential corridor and half a dozen more similar pictures besides.

Jared waited for a few minutes while the security officers took the images in. Higgs sensed a certain degree of discomfort from his fellow officers.

“Nine terrorist incidents.” Jared’s voice was cold and he stared hard at the faces around the table. “Nine incidents under the direct gaze of cameras, which were on and should have been attended.”

Only Higgs could meet his gaze. *This is not directed at me. I’m not responsible for surveillance.*

“Have any bodies been found?”

Jared was clearly caught off guard by Higgs’ question. “What? Higgs, we’ll come to that in a minute.”

Jared turned his attention back to the others and opened his mouth to speak.

Higgs cut in. “And, sir, sorry.”

“Yes, Higgs?”

“I’d be grateful if you would permit Information Officer Simms to sit, sir. He’s been on his feet all day, I value his assistance and it would be an act of kindness to let him sit. I hope that you would be so kind, sir?”

The silence in the room was deafening. Jared went white and he glowered at Higgs.

Homeland intervened. “Of course, Security Officer Higgs. Your concern and compassion for Information Officer Simms is commendable. He may sit.”

Simms gaped at Jared with a look of wild-eyed panic but Jared relented and waved him towards a chair.

“The incidents may not have been watched by security officers, sir,” Higgs said as Simms shuffled towards a seat, “but surely the footage must have been recorded anyway?”

Embarrassment flickered across Jared’s face, just for a moment. “The digital recordings are kept for six hours and then, unless specific footage is required, they are deleted and the disk space is reused.”

Higgs’ jaw dropped open. “Six hours? Is that it?”

“We have a lot of cameras throughout the mall and Homeland has a lot of information to store.”

“How many people have been reported missing in the last, let’s say, month?”

Jared frowned. “Nobody has been reported missing.”

“No, we’re just not able to find them.”

A brief—very brief—laugh went around the table.

“This is no laughing matter,” barked Jared.

He turned his full, glaring attention on Higgs. “Security Officer Higgs, I hope that you are not trying to bait me in any way. We have a very serious matter to discuss here and I find your tone somewhat trying.”

Higgs kept his voice calm and reasonable. “Sir, I can only agree but when I try to investigate a situation, I am told that I am not allowed to look for a body in the ventilation shafts and a cleaning lady starts mopping up the evidence. How am I supposed to get anywhere if I am constantly being hampered?”

Jared hissed through his teeth and put his hands on the edge of his desk.

Higgs stood up. “Nine.”

Everyone looked at him.

“Nine people obviously murdered from the pictures you’ve got there. But no bodies?”

He walked around the table to the screens on the wall. "You've got evidence there of nine people going missing but how many other people have gone missing without leaving a trail of blood? Has anyone checked?"

Homeland's voice filled the room. "Nobody has gone missing." She had an air of certainty Higgs knew was safest not to argue with.

She continued. "Citizens of the mall do not go missing. The security situation in the mall is under control. Only a subversive would suggest otherwise."

A brooding silence descended. Jared stared at Higgs with a self-satisfied grin on his face. Higgs stared back at him. *That's a pyrrhic victory and you should know it.*

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, Security Officer Higgs?"

"Why would you not let me investigate the ventilation shafts to see if I could find the body?"

"I do not understand your question, Security Officer Higgs."

"A body was clearly dragged up into the ventilation shaft and the grill replaced. Why would you not let me investigate the ventilation shaft?"

"It is subversive behavior to remove the grills from the walls."

"But I can only get into the ventilation shafts by removing the grills."

"It is subversive behavior to remove the grills from the walls."

Higgs looked at Jared for help. Jared just smiled back, smugly.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, Security Officer Higgs?"

"What is behind the grills that are on the walls?"

"It is subversive behavior to remove the grills from the walls."

* * * * *

Mandy sat in the cubicle in the ladies washroom. Like many people in the mall, she realized the privacy to be had there and she needed to be away from Homeland's prying little cameras. Simms was so eager to please her she hadn't had to do anything more degrading than ask him for his reports on Higgs in a husky voice. She despised Simms, pathetic, desperate, ugly worm of a man that he was. But he was being useful. He had even arranged a place to exchange the reports, in one of the blind spots in Precinct Eleven. Yes, he was being useful and he was in her control.

She pored over the report, reading feverishly and flipping through the pages. That tart's name appeared, again and again—Jodi and Higgs did this, Jodi and Higgs did that. Did they think she was stupid? That she might not notice? What was wrong with Higgs? Jodi must have done something to him while he was in the hospital, some sort of medical equivalent of a love potion. The bitch. But now, Mandy knew what was going on, she had information and reports. She would rescue Higgs from that slag. When he saw Jodi for what she was, he would come back to Mandy.

* * * * *

Milo lay on his bed with the lights dimmed, and worried. He had not thought there could be anything else in this world to fear more than the tyranny of Homeland and the security services but now he knew his friend Damian was prepared to kill Milo to protect himself. The camera in the corner scanned slowly back and forth. That was always a good sign. Damian had told him that meant he was not actively being watched.

Perhaps he would have to destroy his notebooks? After all, they were the real problem. If they were not there, what could be pinned on him? He had lent some of his notebooks to Alex, and Milo prayed his friend had not been so foolish as to leave them lying around his room. Damian would check Alex's room, surely he would? God, he hoped Damian would check.

His stomach was in a knot. He had tried to eat but such was his anxiety he couldn't face the reconstituted muck that passed for food in this place. It had been growing on him, this feeling of being trapped, this panic. Perhaps that's what drove Jasper to try to run. Poor Jasper. Perhaps Damian did the right thing.

Milo became aware that something had changed in the room, but he couldn't put his finger on it immediately. He could hear a noise now as well, the noise of someone dragging themselves along. It seemed to be coming from above him. He looked up. The ceiling was much the same as it always was, blank and featureless save for the square ventilation shaft grill in its center.

With a start, he noticed the camera had stopped moving and was pointing straight at him. He froze, not knowing what to do. He was being watched and the noise from above was getting louder. He followed the unseen source of the sound with his eyes. It crossed the ceiling to the grill at the center and then stopped.

"Milo." Damian's voice hissed down through the grill. "Run."

* * * * *

Higgs awoke in his room to a deafening noise. He sat up, covering his ears and looking around blearily. He was still dressed in his red jump

suit, having fallen asleep in his clothes as he lay in thought some hours earlier. The noise, he realized, was an alarm.

The door to his room slid up and Simms burst in, a gleam of wild excitement in his eyes as he shouted above the din. "Higgs, Higgs. Get up, you're needed."

"What's going on?" Higgs rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Terrorists. We've got some of them holed up. Come on."

Higgs staggered off the bed and after Simms. As soon as they left the room, the alarm stopped.

They raced down the escalators, across the floor of the mall and into the adjacent precinct. On they ran, with Simms leading the way until they joined a small group of security officers heading bleary-eyed to the same call-out. The incident was in Precinct Seventeen and even Higgs was quite out of breath by the time they got there.

Precinct Seventeen was much the same as all the other precincts, with nine levels of balconies overlooking a thoroughfare some three hundred meters in length. The entrances from the adjacent precincts had been cordoned off with tape and security officers with machine guns stood guard at each one. As Higgs, Simms and the rest ran up from Precinct Sixteen they spotted Jared waiting for them, flanked by his android bodyguards.

"Higgs?" he barked as they ran up. "Good. You'll need this." Jared handed Higgs a machine gun. "Come on."

Jared ducked under the tape and Higgs, the androids and the security officers followed him.

"Simms, come on, man," bellowed Jared over his shoulder, without even looking to see what Simms was doing. Reluctantly, Simms ducked under the tape and followed.

They headed towards the center of the precinct. A cordon of bulletproof barriers had been set up twenty meters or so from the front of a large department store. Security officers and androids sheltered behind them, watching the shop through small periscopes. As Jared, Higgs and the others ran up, one of the security officers came over to greet them, shouting excitedly. "Sir, they're holed up in that department store. We think that there are three of them but they've shot out the in-store cameras so we can't be sure. We've got the rear exits covered. They can't get out."

Jared turned to Higgs. "Higgs, you have the command. Get them."

For a moment, Higgs felt uncertain at what to do but then something clicked in his brain. He looked up at the balconies above the ground level. The shop seemed to have an exit on each of the first three levels. He could see each of these had been covered by security officers and androids with more portable barriers. They would not be able to get out that way. He gestured to the security officer who had spoken to Jared, and two of the androids.

"You, you, you, come with me."

Higgs checked his machine gun, cocked it, squeezed between two of the barriers and started to advance cautiously towards the store. The androids and the security officer trailed after him.

Jared turned to Simms and stared hard. "Well?"

"Sir?"

Jared pointed after Higgs and glared at Simms.

Like a cowed dog, Simms squeezed through the barrier and trotted towards the store.

The department store was dark, full of row after row of circular clothes racks which threw deep shadows. As far as Higgs could make out, a main aisle led up the center of the store to the far wall. *They could*

hide out in here forever. Where are the lights? They crept through the entrance and up the aisle. The androids hissed noisily as they moved, condemning Higgs' hopes of entering the building in stealth. He held up his hand and the party stopped, listening intently.

A sudden click sounded behind them and as one they spun around, weapons poised to fire.

"Aargh. Don't shoot." Simms, who had just crept in, cowered with his hands covering his head.

Higgs lowered his gun in disgust and hissed. "Simms. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm your information officer, I have to stay with you."

"Get out of here."

Simms grimaced and glanced back over his shoulder. "I can't. Jared's orders. Sorry."

Higgs sagged. "Okay, look, just try and stay out of the way, okay? And be quiet."

Higgs turned back to look into the store. *So much for any chance of surprise.*

He whispered loudly to the others. "Spread out and let's move through this floor to the lifts at the back."

* * * * *

Deep in the shadows, Milo watched Higgs and the androids advancing. Sweat trickled down his back and his heart thumped. He held a pistol in his hand awkwardly. Damian had insisted on it but then Damian was a security officer and knew what to do with one. Milo didn't know guns. He knew circuits and computers and scribbles on bits of paper, things that, on the whole, tended not to kill people or explode.

He looked across to where Damian lay concealed under a rack of coats alongside Alex. Alex, a scrawny beanpole of a man, caught up in this mess because, like Milo, he loved to write. Milo couldn't help but think this was all his fault. He should have realized sooner he was being watched but he had been careless. Now, they were all on the run. Damian and Alex were across the central aisle. To break cover to get to them would mean being seen and shot. Damian glanced over to him and gesticulated for Milo to retreat towards the back of the shop. Milo peered in the direction Damian was suggesting. That would be no good, he knew it. They would have the rear exits of the shop covered. They were probably already coming in that way anyway.

He shrugged back at Damian. Damian's brow wrinkled in frustration and he gesticulated more wildly for Milo to retreat. As he did so, he knocked one of the coats.

* * * * *

"Terrorist suspect detected," came the cold metallic voice of the android to Higgs' left. It made no attempt to moderate the volume of its voice.

"Where?" hissed Higgs, willing it to speak more softly.

As if to answer, the android fired at a rack of coats two thirds of the way down the shop. Simms screamed and dived under a rack of lingerie.

Higgs yelled frantically, "Hold your fire," but to no avail. A volley of machine-gun fire from the gloom forced them all to take cover. A bullet scraped across Higgs' arm, not a deep wound but bloody and painful nonetheless. The androids returned fire indiscriminately.

"Hold your fire."

The androids continued shooting.

Higgs took a great lungful of air and bellowed as loudly as he was able, "Stop shooting."

The androids stopped.

* * * * *

Damian and Alex lay on the floor as scraps of coat rained down on them. The androids were firing high. Looking across the aisle for Milo, Damian saw he was gone. He turned to Alex.

"Come on."

They crawled on their bellies across the floor until they were out of the androids' clumsy line of fire and then loped back towards the lifts. Damian's mind raced. *Up, we can get out at the top.*

* * * * *

A tense silence descended. Higgs cleared his throat. "Put down your weapons and come out."

Silence.

"I don't want to hurt you and I don't want you to hurt us."

Still no response.

Reluctantly, Higgs gestured for his team to move forward. While he and the security officer moved forward using the cover of the racks of clothes, the androids just moved forward with no regard for their safety. Higgs had an idea.

"Stop," he hissed.

The androids stopped.

"Androids, you move up the main aisle slowly. Do not shoot unless you are shot at, do you understand?"

Two flat metallic voices responded. "Understood."

The androids advanced.

Higgs turned to the security officer and whispered to him. "Follow me."

As the androids progressed up the main aisle, Higgs and the security officer scuttled across to the side of the store under the cover of the clothing. They then began to creep up the shop parallel to the plodding androids.

They got halfway through the store when gunfire erupted again. The lead android took a direct hit in the small gap between the visor and its chest plate. A brief pyrotechnic display of electric sparks flared from its neck and it toppled over. Higgs was amazed how easily it had been destroyed. *That's how you kill them.* The person they were dealing with obviously knew what they were doing.

The remaining android returned fire, advancing slowly. The terrorists had given away their position, over near the lifts and stairwells. But they weren't there yet. A large, clear area remained between their cover and the escape route. If they tried to make a break for it, they would be mowed down.

While the second android continued to draw fire, Higgs and the security officer scrambled down the side of the store until they were only ten meters away from where the gunfire was coming from. They still couldn't see the terrorists' exact position so they crept forward carefully.

Another flash lit up the shop, followed by the sound of burning electronics. The second android was down. A man leapt up from where he had been hiding.

"Come on." He ran across to the lifts.

Gunfire burst from the security officer behind Higgs.

“Hold your fire.” Higgs’ shout was too late, the terrorist was down. A hush descended over the store.

“There’s still at least one more.” Higgs’ voice was a hoarse whisper. He gestured to the security officer. “Fan out and move slowly forward.”

The security officer scuttled off to the left and Higgs crept forward alone. He got down on his belly and crawled under the racks of clothes. At this level he could see through under the racks and yes, someone was ahead of him, only yards away. Someone almost paralyzed with fear, someone desperate. Higgs smelled blood.

The security officer made some noise as he advanced off to the left and Higgs managed to creep around behind the terrorist without being detected. He knelt for a few seconds behind the man as he cowered, nursing a bloody gunshot wound on his arm. The man’s gun had been discarded, out of ammunition perhaps or maybe this was a man unused to fighting. Just an ordinary Joe. With some reluctance Higgs raised his gun to the man’s back and spoke as gently as he could.

“Put your hands up and turn around slowly.”

The man stiffened and then slowly complied. Higgs was horrified to find he recognized him.

“Alex?”

Higgs was not mistaken. Alex *mad-dog* Meddlar, Higgs’ drinking buddy from college. He hadn’t seen him for—a hole in Higgs’ memory stopped him. Alex looked at Higgs with equal amazement.

“Higgs? But you’re dead.”

“Overstating things a bit...”

Alex staggered to his feet, a wild look in his eyes. “Higgs, we’ve got to get out. We’re running out of time.”

“What do you mean?”

Alex’s chest erupted. He flew back and lay lifeless on the floor.

The security officer emerged from a nearby rack of shirts, his machine gun smoking.

“Got him, sir.”

Higgs stood, fury dripping from every pore. “He’d surrendered. He had his hands in the air.”

The security officer shrugged and walked over to Alex’s body, poking it gently with his foot.

“Can’t trust a subversive, sir. Better off dead.”

Scarcely able to contain his fury, Higgs raised his gun to the officer’s back. *One bullet, one bullet and nobody would ever know.* He held there for a moment and then relented. No, he gritted his teeth and lowered his gun. *This is a madhouse, a madhouse.*

Chapter Seven

Higgs watched as the security officers transferred the bodies of Alex and Damian to body bags and carried them away. Several women with mops and buckets turned up and began to clean the place down. By morning, there would be no trace of the night's events to discourage the good citizens of the mall from exercising their right to shop.

A hand slapped Higgs heartily across the back. Higgs turned crossly to face Jared. Simms lurked behind, a pair of panties hanging from one shoulder.

"Well done, Higgs."

Higgs hissed through his teeth. "I nearly had one of them alive."

Jared shrugged. "It can't be helped. You did a good job. Go get some rest."

Jared turned and walked away, Simms scuttling obsequiously behind him. Higgs stared up at the ceiling. *Give me strength.*

As he lowered his head, his gaze came to rest on a black, square hole in the wall on the far side of the store, a ventilation shaft. Intrigued, he walked over to it and looked down. On the floor was the finely meshed grill that should be covering the shaft. And there, something else, caught under the grill. A notebook.

* * * * *

Higgs sat on the sickbay bed. He greatly enjoyed Jodi's company but generally preferred better circumstances than this. He did note it seemed odd the senior medical officer had the time to carry out first aid on his rather minor wound when there might be any number of other, more pressing tasks to be done. He was flattered.

Jodi peered intently at the wound, cleaning it gently with cotton buds soaked in antiseptic. Simms hovered in the background, ever-present and always unwanted, wittering on about the evening's events.

"And then blam, blam, blam," he blurted excitedly. "The security guard blew him away. Just like that."

Higgs found Simms' obvious glee in his account offensive. *All right for someone who spent the whole episode hidden under a pile of panties.*

"But he was your kill really, eh Higgs, you cornered him."

"Simms, shut up. He used to be a friend of mine. We were at college together. Ow."

Jodi seemed to find a particularly painful part of Higgs wound to probe. "Sorry. Sit still."

Simms' brow furrowed. "A friend? What do you mean a friend?"

"He was a... Ow."

"I told you to sit still." Jodi put her cotton bud down and picked up another. "I think that you'll find that Higgs' memory is playing tricks on him, Information Officer Simms. You couldn't possibly have been the friend of a known terrorist, could you, Security Officer Higgs?"

She poked Higgs' wound in order to give the point that little extra emphasis.

"Ow..."

Simms smiled what he clearly thought was his best winning smile. The end result was something even his mother would have found unsettling.

“Ah well, as usual, our pretty little nurse knows best.”

Jodi gritted her teeth, stretched and did something with her fingers.

Higgs did a double take. He was sure she just called Simms a jerk in sign language.

“Sorry, excuse me, ma’am, but what was that?” Higgs asked.

Jodi looked warily at Higgs. “Oh, it’s nothing, just some exercises I do to relieve stress.”

“I know those exercises, look.” “*You speak sign language?*” he signed.

She gaped at him and then responded. “*Yes. Homeland doesn’t seem to understand it.*”

“Higgsie, baby, are you all right?”

Higgs stiffened involuntarily. He knew that voice and dreaded it.

Tottering across the sickbay as fast as she could manage in her high-heeled cowboy boots, came Mandy, her arms laden with full shopping bags.

She was upon them in seconds, gasping breathlessly. “I was so worried when they told me, babe.”

“*Help,*” said Higgs in sign.

Mandy stared at his hands as they moved. “What are you doing, babe?”

“Physiotherapy to help with the wound,” cut in Jodi.

Mandy curled her lip in contempt. “What, those stupid wavy things that you do all the time?”

“Very effective physio.” Jodi turned back to Higgs. “Higgs, I recommend that you come back here soon and we’ll run through a proper physio program for you.”

“Of course, Doctor.”

Mandy went white. “She’s not a doctor, just a medical officer.”

Jodi smiled and looked away.

“Come on, babe, let me take you back to your quarters. Let Mandy look after you.”

Higgs took a step backwards. “No really, Mandy, I think I just need to rest. Alone.”

Mandy glowered from Higgs to Jodi and back again, screwing up her face. For a moment Higgs thought she was going to burst into tears. A little pang of guilt gnawed at him. He sighed. “Look, Mandy, please. I’ll be all right, I just need rest.”

Mandy gave him an acid stare, turned and swept from the room.

Simms rolled his eyes in what he clearly thought was a jovial fashion. “Women, eh, Higgs.”

Higgs sagged.

* * * * *

Doris hated having to cover for the other cleaners when they were off sick. It wasn’t that she minded the work, she just didn’t know where things were, what she should and should not touch and which doors were out of bounds. She had, to a certain extent, brought this on herself by being so thorough, but then, she was secretly proud of having been awarded Cleaning Staff of the First Order by Homeland, an honor few of her colleagues could boast of.

She usually worked on the precinct floors, but today had been assigned to a series of corridors marked as “Security Personnel Only”. She didn’t much like it as they were empty, with not even an android for company. The solitude spooked her and she worked as quickly as she could with her vacuum cleaner and her mop. She had done all of the rooms she could find, not taking much notice of what was in them. She knew access codes for all the doors—cleaners always had access codes

for all the doors. How else could they get the cleaning done? Had he have known, a man like Simms would have been shamed that lowly Doris had access to places he could only dream of. Somehow, this enormous privilege and its almost unlimited potential for power, advancement or subversion never occurred to Doris. What really concerned her was finding out which of the other cleaners kept borrowing her mop without asking.

All the rooms were finished now, except for one. At the end of the corridor Doris had been working, stood a large steel door, unlike any other door she had ever seen. She sighed. Was she supposed to clean the room beyond? Nobody told her these sorts of details. There was no choice, she'd have to ask.

"Ma'am?"

She'd expected Homeland's kindly voice to fill the air around her but it didn't come.

"Ma'am?" She glanced around, hoping if she spoke louder, Homeland might hear. Clearly, she didn't.

Doris saw the camera at the far end of the room and waved at it to try to attract attention. Still no response. She began to feel uneasy. The thought that Homeland was not watching over her made her feel suddenly exposed and alone. She looked once more at the camera. Something was odd about it, something different. The little red light, that was it. They always had a little red light flashing on top and the camera scanned back and forth. This one didn't have a light and it just hung there, motionless. A horrible thought occurred to her—this camera wasn't working.

She studied the door. She had to make a decision herself. After all, she was Cleaning Staff of the First Order and her shift was due to end in fifteen minutes. If she went all the way back to find her shift manager to

ask what to do, she'd probably only be told to clean the room anyway and she'd end up going overtime for no extra pay.

She reached forward, keyed in her access code and pushed the green button. The door opened to the sound of a great wind but she was dead long before she had a chance to see what lay beyond.

* * * * *

Jodi was at her wit's end. It was one of *those* days. There had been a number of accidents, or *terrorist incidents* as the security services liked to refer to them. People getting hurt when equipment failed due to the *non-existent* brownouts most likely. And then there had been the jumper. Every so often, the mall got to be too much for one of its more delicate inhabitants and they took the option of throwing themselves over a balcony.

They rarely succeeded in killing themselves outright and Jodi had spent the afternoon stitching the latest jumper up. She didn't know why she bothered really because they were usually subsequently executed by the security services. After all, only a subversive infiltrator would attempt suicide in the obvious paradise that was the mall.

As she stood in the equipment store adjacent to her office, she sighed and looked at the tray of instruments in front of her. She put it down on the side of her prep bench but the whole lot overbalanced and fell to the floor.

"Shit."

After a moment gathering herself, she crouched down and began to pick the instruments up and put them back on the tray. Something on the underside of the bench caught her eye and she peered at it. A long number had been crudely scratched into the plastic. At the back of her

mind, a memory tugged, trying to solidify into something useful. What was this number?

In her pocket, her pager began to vibrate and beep frantically. She was being called. *Shit, another jumper.*

* * * * *

Simms stood in the blind spot, holding his latest Higgs report. He looked up and down nervously, watching out for her approach. Licking his finger, he tried to smooth back his blond curls, a fruitless exercise as they had a completely separate life of their own. He did it anyway in the vain hope it might in some way increase his attractiveness to the opposite sex.

He had to admit he had never really been very lucky in love. He just didn't seem to interest girls, no matter how hard he tried. For that matter, he didn't seem to interest anybody. He couldn't actually remember the last time anyone sought out his company. But she was doing it now, wasn't she? She wanted to help him. He'd struck lucky there all right. She was gorgeous. If Higgs wasn't interested, well, he'd just have to take care of her, wouldn't he?

"Simms."

He jumped. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts he hadn't noticed her walking up. She stood in front of him, hands on her hips, chewing her bubble gum. It wasn't a habit Simms was too keen on, he had to admit. When they got to know each other a little better, perhaps he would try to wean her off it. Getting to know her a little better was a thought that brought a warm feeling to those parts other people just didn't reach.

"Simms, you're drooling."

Mandy held up a tissue. Embarrassed, he took it from her and wiped his mouth.

“Oh, er, I’m sorry.”

She reached out and snatched the report from his unresisting hand. He handed the saliva-laden tissue back towards her.

“I don’t want it,” she snapped.

He looked at the soiled tissue and then quickly stuffed it into the pocket of his jumpsuit. She started to flick through the report while he watched.

“It’s lovely of you to help me like this,” he said.

“Hmmm?”

She was not paying attention.

“I was wondering,” he began nervously, “if you might be free one evening for dinner?”

“Bitch.” Mandy scowled with disapproval at the report. “He’s been spending hours with her.”

“Oh, er, Higgs? Yes, he has, I’m afraid.”

Simms gave up. He looked at his watch. “Look, Mandy, I’m sorry but I’ve got to go.”

“Fine, no problem. Tell me when the next report is ready.”

Simms shrugged. He pulled a small black object from his pocket and pressed a button on the side. It beeped and a little green screen lit up on the front.

“What’s that?” Mandy demanded rudely.

“Oh, it’s a tracking device. Higgs thinks it’s funny to keep trying to give me the slip, you see, so I put a tracking device in his mobile phone. This helps me find out where he is.”

Mandy stepped closer to Simms.

“You are such a clever man,” she purred. “Do you have a spare one?”

“Well, I do, but really they are restricted to security personnel.”

“Dinner would be lovely.”

Chapter Eight

Higgs and Simms walked down a residential corridor leading off from level five in Precinct Twelve. It stretched on for some considerable distance, with countless doors on each side. The cameras watched them pass. Simms hummed tunelessly as they marched along, clutching his little plastic clipboard firmly under one arm.

“Could you stop doing that, please?” Higgs asked.

“What?”

“Humming. It’s getting on my nerves.”

“Oh. I do beg your pardon, Higgs, I didn’t realize that I was doing it. Just a silly habit, I’m afraid. I guess that I’m just so happy, I can’t help but hum cheerily as I go about my daily tasks.”

“Okay, fine. Just stop. Please.”

They continued on in silence but then, after a few minutes, Simms absentmindedly started humming again. Before Higgs could raise the issue, Simms stopped at a door and drew the clipboard out from under his arm.

“This is it,” he piped.

“Okay, stand back then.”

Higgs pulled out an automatic pistol, drew breath and pushed the green button by the door.

The room was clearly empty—there simply wasn’t enough space or furniture in these rooms for anyone to hide. Higgs relaxed and put his

gun away. The room was laid out much as his was, with a minimum of furniture and dominated by a wide-screen television. But there, the similarity ended. Someone had been through this room in a hurry, looking for something. The wardrobe was open and the clothes thrown out over the floor. The back of the television had been smashed off and, for good measure, the little prying camera in the corner had been destroyed. Higgs stared at the mess.

“Someone’s been here,” said Simms.

“You don’t say.”

Then Higgs saw it on the floor, half concealed under the discarded clothes, a fine-meshed grill, half a meter square. Directly above the fallen grill was a ventilation shaft. Higgs mentally ran through his own room. Was there a ventilation shaft in there as well? Probably, but he would check. It meant anyone could get into anyone else’s room undetected, provided the camera was off. And Homeland didn’t seem to want to acknowledge he ventilation system existed.

“What is it?” Simms glanced at Higgs and then up at the ceiling.

Higgs immediately looked down. “Nothing.”

He didn’t want Simms thinking, he might get ideas and say something stupid that would get him terminated like that poor sap of a Reverend. He didn’t like Simms but he didn’t want him on his conscience either. Higgs began to rummage through the wardrobe.

“Be careful, Higgs, you can never tell with a subversive. There might be a booby trap.”

“His name was Alex Meddlar. I was at college with him.” Higgs stopped and sighed. “I don’t understand how he became a terrorist.”

“Well, it just goes to show.”

Higgs walked over to the bed. It had not been touched. Whoever had searched the room had not considered the rather obvious possibilities a

mattress might hold for concealing small, incriminating items. Higgs felt under the mattress. “Ah ha.” He pulled a small book from under the bed and flipped through it. “A diary.”

Simms offered up a plastic bag, holding the mouth open insistently. Reluctantly, Higgs dropped the diary in.

“You shouldn’t really touch them without gloves on you know, they’re—”

But Simms was cut off—a shrill ringing came from Higgs’ pocket. His damned videophone. He should have felt privileged he knew, after all, only people of a certain level within the security services were permitted to have them. Nonetheless, mobile phones of any description had always annoyed him. Nasty, intrusive little things. People seemed to go into a different state when they talked on them. They became oblivious to the rest of the world, stopping in doorways with half-a-dozen people trying to get past, stepping in front of women with strollers or in front of oncoming buses. It seemed people’s brains could cope with walking, breathing and talking at the same time but anything beyond that was simply asking too much.

The phone continued insistently. With a sigh, Higgs drew it out of his pocket and poked one of the buttons. Jared’s face appeared on the screen, yelling excitedly.

“Higgs, quick, get down here. We’ve lost Precinct Nine.”

* * * * *

Higgs and Simms found Jared waiting with a group of security guards and his android bodyguards at the end of Precinct Eight. A great steel barrier had descended in the short tunnel between precincts Eight

and Nine, sealing it off. Higgs stared at Jared. *My god, he looks ashen.* Jared clearly was at a loss. He nodded at Higgs as he approached.

Higgs gestured at the steel barrier. "Sir, is there some sort of report?"

"We've lost contact with Precinct Nine." Jared's voice shook. "I think there's been a gas attack. Homeland has sealed it off."

"Can't Homeland see with the cameras?"

"They've gone down in there."

"Sir, is there any way through?"

"The access corridor over there but we don't know what's happened...wait."

Higgs was already running to the door Jared had pointed to, just inside the tunnel, a meter before the steel barrier, and marked "Authorized Personnel Only". Higgs had noticed these doors at each end of the tunnels linking the precincts before, but had not paid them any thought. Now their purpose was clear. Each of the precincts was a separate unit and could be sealed off. Presumably, that included nine levels of living quarters above it.

Higgs keyed in the highest access code he knew and punched the green button. The door slid up. Yes. He darted through and the door hissed closed behind him. Beyond, he found a short corridor running parallel to the tunnel and, at its end, another door. He sprinted to this door and then stopped, pulling out his automatic pistol and checking it.

Homeland spoke. "Be careful, Higgs. I cannot see what is going on beyond this door."

Good. Higgs keyed in the access code and held his breath. The door slid up and a body fell through onto him.

* * * * *

Damn that man, thought Jared. He hated this. They had lost touch with Precinct Nine and he could do nothing. He looked at Simms, a cringing, worthless cur of a man. Damn him, he should have gone with Higgs. He was his information officer. Still, even Jared thought kinder than to send Simms through the access corridor after Higgs. The only thing they could do was wait.

He pulled out his videophone and spoke quietly to Homeland. "My friend, can you see him?"

"No, my friend, I cannot see anything in Precinct Nine. There is no power." Her reply was in hushed tones through the videophone. The screen on the phone was blank.

"Can you raise the barrier?"

"Negative. I cannot guarantee the safety of the mall if I raise the barrier."

Damn. His mind raced, there must be something he could do. The terrorist's had plumbed new depths with this, a gas attack. A horrible thought occurred to him.

"The ventilation system. What is happening with the ventilation system?"

Long seconds passed. When Homeland spoke, she seemed unsure. "The ventilation system...is still...functional."

"What? So if it is gas in there it's currently going round the ventilation system of the whole mall?"

"I am...uncertain."

Jared spun to the waiting security officers. "Quick. I want gas detectors, here, now."

They stared blankly back at him.

"Gas detectors?" ventured one of the security officers.

Jared flapped his arms in exasperation. "Get up to the hospital and see what they've got."

The security officers exchanged glances.

"Now!"

* * * * *

Higgs had backed up against the wall. Not just one body had fallen in but several and they now lay in a heap at the end of the access corridor, between him and the tunnel. They appeared to have been trying to claw their way through the door, the ones behind climbing on top of the ones in front in their desperation. Higgs climbed over them and out into the tunnel. This was madness, he knew, but he needed to find out what had happened, away from the watchful gaze of Homeland and Jared.

All along the steel barrier separating the two precincts were bodies, piled up in a drift where people had climbed over each other in their fevered attempts to escape. They were all the same, fat blue tongues protruding from their mouths, clawing at the barrier in a frenzied attempt to get through. Higgs choked back tears, he had not been prepared for this. Some of them had lost their fingernails.

He staggered into the main floor of the precinct. Bodies lay everywhere, strewn across the floor of the mall, in the shops, on the balconies above. The carnage made him feel dizzy. He could see no sign of any terrorists here, no sign of any explosion or gunfire. Suddenly he felt the need to get out, back to the safety of the access corridor. He turned to run, but stumbled. His breathing was difficult, labored. Choking, he tried again to run but his head was spinning so much, he fell.

He could no longer breathe. As panic rose in him he made a desperate last effort to reach the corridor, but fell short by a few yards. He struggled to drag himself over the bodies, but his arms wouldn't do what he told them. His vision began to spin. Then, someone was there, turning him over and pushing something over his face. Sweet air flooded into Higgs' lungs and he took great gulps of it, coughing and spluttering. He looked up to see the face of his savior. The man held his breath while Higgs breathed. Higgs tried to place him but he couldn't. Everything about the man's face was entirely unremarkable.

* * * * *

The ventilation shaft was cramped and hot, just large enough for a person to crawl through. The only light came from the man's small flashlight, which he tried to hold steady as he made his way along. Higgs followed him. The air was moving now, flowing past them back to the carnage of the precinct. They no longer needed to share the man's oxygen tank.

At last the shaft opened into a small chamber from which several other shafts led away. The space was tall enough to sit up and the man called a halt.

"We'll be okay here," he said. "I think the pumps are working again. Air's flowing back into Precinct Nine."

"Do you think it was a power failure on the pumps then?"

"I don't know what's happened. It's like the air ran out in the precinct. I don't see how that could happen."

"A terrorist attack on the pumps?"

"I'm not a terrorist."

"I don't really believe that there are any. Who are you?"

"Name's Milo Bonaparte."

"Higgs."

"Higgs?"

"Just Higgs. If you're not a terrorist, why were you on the run?"

"Books. Books, books, books. Homeland hates them. It can't control them, you see. Books are dangerous, they have ideas in them."

"You were in the department store, weren't you?"

Milo nodded.

Higgs looked down, ashamed. "Alex got shot. I'm sorry. He was a friend of mine."

"You knew Alex?"

"Yes, from way back. We were close. I can't remember when I last saw him."

Higgs told Milo how Alex had met his end and then they sat for a while in silence. A suspicion arose in Higgs' mind. "Why did you just happen to be hanging about with an oxygen mask?"

"I didn't. I've been hiding out in the ventilation shafts. They go for miles, everywhere. The thing is, they're so long there are these every few hundred meters." Milo gestured to a corner of the chamber they were in. There, secured to the wall, was a gas cylinder and face mask.

"For the maintenance guys, I guess. I've been carrying this one around with me for days. When I realized there was a problem, I thought it was just a local air loss in the ventilation system. I tried to make my way through to Precinct Eight but barriers had come down in the shafts. They were sealed off. So I made my way back to this precinct, thinking I could wait in here until it passed. Then I saw what had happened..."

"What will you do?"

Milo sighed and rubbed his forehead with his fingers. "Jodi's been feeding us..." He paused. "Well, it's just me now. Anyway, I don't want to

put her in any more danger. I'll see where I can get to, see if I can find a way out."

Higgs considered. "Out of the mall. Where are we for God's sake?"

Milo shrugged.

"When did you first enter the mall?" asked Higgs.

Milo thought long and hard. "After I quit being a teacher. I was employed to look after the networks in the mall."

"When was that?"

"Oh god, er—" Milo's brow furrowed. "I forget, quite a long time ago."

"And you've never left the mall in all that time?"

Milo shook his head.

"And you can't actually remember the day that you first walked into the mall?"

"No."

"I don't think that anyone can," said Higgs.

He pulled out his automatic pistol. Milo flinched back, a sudden look of fear shooting across his face.

Higgs held up his hands. "Whoa, don't worry. Look, take this, you might need it."

Higgs handed Milo the gun.

"Look, Higgs, come with me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Jodi."

* * * * *

Jared stood impatiently by the access corridor, waiting vainly for any small sign of Higgs. The security officers had brought what equipment

they could muster that might help them detect poisonous gases, but they had found nothing coming from the ventilation shafts. Simms had caused a false alarm by peering at the gas detectors too closely and somehow setting them off. He insisted he hadn't touched them. Medical officers came down from the hospital, with stretchers and first-aid kits and breathing apparatus, but they had no casualties yet to treat. Nobody could do anything but wait.

Jared heard a nervous cough at his shoulder. Simms, Jared could tell from the smell. He didn't bother to turn around.

"What?"

"We could send some androids through, sir"

"Don't be stupid, Simms, if the cameras are down then it's very probable that the androids will lose contact with Homeland as well." Jared bit his lip and paced back and forth for a moment. "I need more volunteers to go through."

Jared turned and glared at Simms expectantly. Simms squirmed beneath his gaze. The assembled security officers all suddenly found something far more interesting to look at off in Precinct Eight.

From the wall behind them came a sudden thumping sound, the noise of a boot on metal. Spinning around they saw the grill covering the nearest ventilation shaft shudder and give way, flying off from the wall and clattering to the floor some meters away. Higgs emerged legs first and dropped to the floor. Jared visibly sagged with relief and some of the security officers even gave a small cheer.

Jared ran over. "Higgs. Thank God, man."

"Sir, they've stolen the air."

"What?"

"The terrorists have stolen the air. I only managed to escape by getting into the ventilation system."

Higgs knew this was ludicrous but he didn't care what Jared thought. He wanted terrorists and he would find them regardless of whether or not there actually were any. No, it was probably another of those non-existent brownouts, those power cuts only a subversive would mention or even notice. Jared would not accept such a notion, there were no power cuts in the mall. *He wants terrorists, I'll give him terrorists.*

"You're a lucky man, Higgs. I ought to have you disciplined, running off like that."

Higgs dripped fury and sarcasm. "Sorry, sir. I saw no sign of the terrorists. Cunning that they managed to steal the air, don't you think, sir?"

Jared frowned long and hard at Higgs. "I don't like your tone, Higgs, what are you implying?"

Higgs exploded. "There are dead people in there. Lots of dead people and I'm not getting any answers. What is going on?"

Suddenly Jared looked very old and very weary. He turned away from Higgs, rubbing his brow with his fingers.

"I don't know, Higgs. I don't know. I'm counting on you to find out."

Behind them came a loud grinding noise and the barrier began to slide slowly upwards. Bodies tumbled down through the expanding gap.

"The ventilation system was sealed off as well," said Higgs as the medical officers rushed forward, desperately searching for anyone still alive. He shook his head. "They're all dead, all dead."

Jared spoke into his videophone. "My friend, do you have any information?"

"Precinct Nine is now secure. The situation is under control. Please tell Security Officer Higgs that it is subversive behavior to remove the grills from the walls."

A little voice in Higgs' head told him he would sleep better with a Slumbeasy Ergonomic Mattress.

Chapter Nine

Jodi wiped her brow with the back of her hand. She had lost him, the jumper. Standing outside the operating room, she felt helpless, tears in her eyes. The pain of losing a patient on the operating table had not gotten easier over the years. Behind her, they would be slicing the body up to get the salvable organs out, the eyes, the kidneys, the liver, the lungs and heart. Then the body would go off to the vats for recycling.

She walked away from the operating room back towards her office but stopped short when she saw one of the junior doctors knocking at her door. Everybody was in a state of shock after the horrors of Precinct Nine and she had ended up acting as impromptu counselor for some of the other staff. Didn't they think she might be in shock? In a way, she found it helpful. If she spent her time propping up her colleagues, she could conceal her own horror from herself. At least, she could until she got back to her room and there, if she turned out the lights, nobody could see her sobbing. The junior doctor looked tearful. He was Medical Officer Malcolm Darantz. *On any other day, Malcolm.* She quickly changed direction to avoid being seen and headed out of the main lobby of the hospital, into the mall.

She walked across the balcony and looked over to the floor of the precinct, so far below. If only Homeland would agree to put netting up to catch the jumpers. But that was a risky area for her to pursue. Even admitting that people might be trying to kill themselves was subversive

thinking. Her head hummed with special offers and she tried to shut them out. She felt so tired, so stretched.

Someone came and stood beside her, disturbing her thoughts. Jodi caught the sickly sweet smell of bubblegum.

"You are a slut," Mandy hissed venomously under her breath, her hand covering her mouth so no prying camera might see what she was saying.

"Greetings, citizen, I am not—"

"Stay away from him, you hear me?" Mandy shook with pent-up rage. "If I see you with him, I'll kill you."

And then she was gone, disappearing into the crowds.

* * * * *

Higgs found what he was looking for off of Precinct Seven. He could have asked Homeland or Simms for directions, but he would have had to explain why he wanted to see the power plant and any mention of brownouts was subversive talk. He had managed to give Simms the slip—a game he had gotten rather good at—and had turned his videophone off. Simms had warned him not to do this but had stopped short of calling it a terrorist activity.

The door was wide and tall enough for bulky machinery to pass through, and guarded by two androids. Higgs watched them from a distance for a while, wondering if he would be able to persuade them to let him pass. Eventually, he decided to take a chance and walked up to the keypad by the door. The androids completely ignored him. His pulse racing, Higgs keyed in his highest access code and, as much in hope as anything, hit the green button. The door slowly opened and he slipped in.

Beyond was a wide glass-walled balcony overlooking a hangar-sized room. Seven large domed structures, each some twenty meters in diameter and the same in height, were spaced evenly across the floor. Each was connected by wires and pipes to a bank of computers on the far wall, and men and women in white overalls scurried around the room, busy with the machinery. Higgs walked to the glass and stared down at the scene below him.

“Greetings, security officer, I am not a terrorist.”

Higgs glanced around. A cheery-faced man in white overalls stood close behind him, gazing down so as not to meet Higgs’ eyes.

“Greetings, citizen, I am Security Officer Higgs. These domes.” Higgs gestured into the immense room beyond the glass. “What are they?”

“Fusion reactors, sir. Between them, they supply enough power for the mall ten times over.”

The man looked up and beamed, forgetting in his innocent enthusiasm that Higgs was a security officer with all that might entail. Higgs read the man’s name tag—Engineer Michael Oakes.

“And they’re all working fine are they, Engineer Oakes?”

“They are, sir, they are.”

Higgs gazed back into the room. The man didn’t seem to be lying, so why the brownouts?

“In the case of an emergency,” Higgs ventured, “say, if one of the reactors stopped working, what would happen?”

Higgs was still watching the scene below and couldn’t see Engineer Oakes reaction, but he heard him breathe in sharply.

“There is no possibility of them failing, Security Officer Higgs.” Oakes’ voice trembled. Higgs turned to him, smiling as warmly as he could.

“Oh, of course not, Engineer Oakes. It was merely an idle thought of mine.”

Oakes was still shaking and would not look Higgs in the eye again. Higgs felt the need to say something to calm him.

“I’ll be sure to commend your diligence in service to Homeland, citizen.”

Relief smoothed the frown on Oakes’ face and Higgs walked back towards the exit breezily. But he was troubled. The reactors were working and there should be enough power ten times over. *So why the brownouts?*

* * * * *

Jared strode purposely along the top balcony overlooking Precinct Nine, his two android bodyguards at his heels. Around him, scores of volunteers helped the medical officers with the grisly task of removing the countless bodies that lay strewn around. Higgs was clearly right, suffocation was the cause of all the fatalities. Even a layman could tell that from the blue color of their faces, the protruding tongues.

Jared was angry and, at the same time, annoyed with himself for his feelings. He was a man who valued self-control, and anger only clouded his judgment. But then, who could not be angry at such an outrage, at such a senseless attack on such a large scale with such a huge cost in life? What was it the terrorists wanted? They never issued any demands, they made no contact, had no obvious agenda. Some of Jared’s security forces had managed to take a few of the terrorists alive and they had been tortured in secret. Even taken beyond the limits of suffering and reduced to insane, howling shadows of men, they still revealed nothing. Jared had no answers.

Towards the end of the balcony, a corridor led off to the left between two storefronts. Jared and his two androids turned down this and

followed it a short distance until it ended at a door marked "Security Personnel Only". Jared pulled out his videophone.

"Is this is the place, my friend?"

"This is the place, my friend," Homeland responded over the phone.

Jared pressed the green button to the right of the door but nothing happened. He looked confused for a brief moment and then pressed the button again. It remained closed.

He spoke again into the videophone. "My friend, please open the door."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, my friend."

Jared paused. As far as he could recall, she had never denied him anything. He chose his words carefully.

"My friend, what lies beyond this door?"

"The site of the terrorist incident."

"Would it not be of benefit for me to see this?"

"I am concerned for your welfare, my friend. I am concerned that you might be exposed to subversive material."

"Without investigating the scene, we will have no opportunity to find clues as to who carried out the attack."

"Doris Kettering was the last citizen to enter this area. She was clearly the mastermind behind the attack and she has been stripped of her title of Cleaning Staff of the First Order."

"Where is she?"

Homeland paused. "I do not know."

"In what manner did the terrorists attack, my friend?"

"I am uncertain. A door which was opened has been closed."

"A door?"

"A door."

"Where did this door lead to?"

"I am uncertain."

"My friend, I believe that it would be very useful for me to know the nature of the area that is behind this door."

Homeland paused again. Her uncertainty left Jared feeling uneasy.

"It is an area that serves no purpose to the security and well-being of the inhabitants of the mall," she said at last.

Involuntarily, Jared raised his voice. "I am concerned about the possible breach of security—"

"Security is being maintained by the androids. You need not concern yourself further with this area. My friend."

Jared knew he could not ignore the insistence in Homeland's voice. Overhead, the lights dimmed slightly and then flickered back on.

* * * * *

Mandy sat on her bed cuddling her pink, cloth cat Penelope. She always had Penelope to fall back on when people were cruel to her. Penelope loved her, understood her. Penelope knew all her secrets. She rocked backwards and forward, cradling Penelope to her chin.

She wiped away a tear and looked up at the camera in the corner of her room. It stared back at her, its little red light blinking slowly.

"He won't have anything to do with me. We're supposed to be compatible."

Homeland responded, filling the room with a kind, maternal voice Mandy always found comforting. "I cannot make two people love each other, Mandy."

"But he's not obeying your orders."

"I can't order Higgs to fall in love with you, Mandy. You know that."

Mandy thought for a while and a wicked notion formed in her head. She put Penelope down carefully on her pillow.

“But it’s your calculations that show that Higgs and I are compatible. You can’t have made a mistake, it’s not possible.”

“This is true.”

“So, we must be made for each other.”

“It follows that this is true, agreed.”

Mandy continued slowly, as if she were working something out in her head. “So, something must be interfering.”

“This also is true.”

“Could it be Jodi?”

A look of shock came across Mandy’s face. At least, it would have passed for shock in an amateur dramatics society production of a farce.

“You don’t think... No, it couldn’t be.”

“What, Mandy?”

“Well, no, I don’t like to say.”

Mandy looked down.

“What is troubling you, Mandy, please tell me.”

“Perhaps Jodi could be deliberately sabotaging my relationship with Higgs in order to discredit you.” Mandy worked a little tremble into her voice. “That could only mean one thing.” She was almost aroused by the excitement she felt in anticipation of Homeland’s response.

Several long seconds passed before Homeland spoke again. “That Medical Officer Jodi Francis is a subversive and a terrorist?”

Mandy felt dizzy with guilty pleasure. She always found a way of making Homeland see sense.

“Your concerns have been noted, citizen.”

* * * * *

The red light on the top of the camera blinked as it strained downwards. Higgs was in his room, exercising by doing sit-ups. Up and down he went, slowly. Although the camera was positioned in the room so as to give it the maximum possible field of view, it couldn't see into every corner and it couldn't see directly below it, the very place Higgs had chosen to put his feet.

Higgs smiled to himself. The book he had found in the department store was balanced on his feet and he knew the camera would not be able to see it. Each time he sat up, he read a few of the pages of satirical cartoons, poems and essays. Most of them lampooned Homeland, the security apparatus and Jared—all very treasonable stuff—and Higgs loved it. He found it difficult to stop himself from laughing out loud at some points. And Homeland would never know because the camera couldn't angle down to his feet. Higgs felt pleased with himself for his own cleverness.

The camera carefully placed inside Higgs' non-functioning television could, of course, see everything. In his dark office, Jared sat and thought dark thoughts. He stared at the screens on his wall. Each of them showed the video feed from the camera in Higgs' television. Jared sighed.

Homeland spoke. "This turn of events is causing me some concern, Jared. Exposure to this subversive material makes Higgs a liability."

Jared was not ready to give up on Higgs yet. "In his mind, he has only just graduated. I find it hard to believe that he was a terrorist when he graduated, my friend. We couldn't have taken him back any further."

"But nonetheless, he is causing me concern."

"Then let's put him to the test, my friend. We have a confirmed terrorist that needs terminating. Let him do it."

"Agreed."

* * * * *

The corridor was broad, some four meters across, wide enough for the electric garbage collection units to gain access. Large doors stood at intervals down its length and many had commercially sized waste bins next to them. A collection was due and the air was heavy with the smell of rot. Higgs and Simms crept around the corner, two androids following clumsily behind them.

Higgs had hoped to approach with some degree of stealth but the androids were noisy beasts, hissing as their heavy limbs moved. He cursed them, but their purpose was clear—they were there to keep an electronic eye on him and make sure the mission to apprehend and terminate the terrorist suspect was carried out. Higgs was determined to take the terrorist alive regardless of Jared's orders.

They reached a door at the end of the access corridor. Simms looked at Higgs and nodded. Higgs hit the green button and the door slid up. They stole in and found themselves in a short corridor. The place smelled familiar but he couldn't place it. Behind them, the androids stomped in, hissing noisily. Higgs sighed. He really didn't know why he bothered. He may as well have come in with whoopee cushions tied to the soles of his feet.

The corridor ended at a door and Higgs pressed his ear to it, signaling with his hands for the androids to stop. He listened. Someone was moving around in the room beyond. He looked at Simms, pulled out his gun and, on a silent count to three, pressed the green button.

Jodi screamed and dropped her tray of surgical equipment. A moment of silence followed. She stared at the array of guns leveled against her and then up at a rather surprised Higgs.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Jodi rallied herself and started to collect the scattered equipment together from the floor.

Higgs and the androids lowered their weapons. They had burst into the room like commandos but now felt altogether more sheepish. They were in the storeroom close to Jodi's private office, full of equipment, machinery and cylinders of compressed gas. Higgs remembered the smell of the hospital. Of course, he had been there long enough, after all.

"Sorry." He turned to Simms.

"This can't be right, Simms. We've just come into the hospital by the back entrance. Where are the terrorists?"

Simms looked nervous. "I'll check, just half a mo." He pulled out his videophone and dialed Homeland. "Er, Ma'am?"

Homeland's voice filled the room, making Simms' videophone completely unnecessary. "Yes, Information Officer Simms?"

"Er, I'm terribly sorry but we seem to have made a mistake and come to the wrong place."

"No, Information Officer Simms, you are in the correct location."

"Ah, er, well, please forgive me but where is the dangerous terrorist-subversive which we need to terminate?"

A look of awful realization shot across Jodi's face. "Shit."

She threw the tray in the direction of Higgs and ran for the far door. The androids fired after her but Higgs threw himself into them and their shots went wide.

"Stop. She's not the terrorist."

"I'm afraid that she is, Higgs, please terminate her." Homeland's voice was calm yet insistent.

Jodi had made it through the door. Higgs looked wildly at Simms as the androids pushed past him after her.

"Simms, for God's sake man, this can't be right?"

Simms tried to be stoic. "Higgs, sometimes it's tough to do your duty."

"Too right."

Higgs had wanted to punch Simms out for some time but now the opportunity came, he did not have the luxury of savoring it. His fist landed sideways on Simms' temple, sending him sprawling to the ground in a daze. Higgs spun around and leveled his pistol at the back of one of the androids, aiming at the base of the neck. He let fire and, in a shower of sparks, the android collapsed.

The second android spun around with a speed that surprised Higgs and he barely had time to dive for cover as it returned fire. A small explosion behind Higgs knocked him forward. Black smoke quickly filled the room.

The android strode towards him, reloading its gun as it came. Higgs aimed and fired, his bullet ricocheting off the android's chest plate. *Damn, the neck, not the chest.* He aimed higher and fired. Blue sparks fizzled and the android fell forward.

Coughing from the smoke, Higgs stumbled to his feet. Behind him, Simms tried to get up but the effects of Higgs' blow and the smoke threatened to overpower him. Higgs looked back at the way they had come in. An electrical fire raged through a stand of machines next to the door, close to a stack of compressed gas cylinders. There might only be seconds left before they blew. Higgs grabbed Simms by the arm and dragged him towards the door at the far end through which Jodi had fled. Before they reached it, she reappeared, diving through the doorway with a following volley of machine-gun fire.

Higgs grabbed the automatic rifle from one of the dead androids.

"Get out of the way," he screamed at Jodi.

She leapt to one side as he fired on full automatic through the doorway. From beyond came flashes of blue sparks and an android fell over the threshold.

Jodi got to her feet. "Quick, the ventilation shaft."

Higgs dragged Simms to the foot of the wall beneath the grill while Jodi pulled over a chair. She leapt up and ripped the grill from the wall.

Gunfire burst from the doorway and Higgs felt pain sear across his forehead. He spun around and fired back on full automatic. His assailants were security guards this time and, unlike the androids, they had no death wish. They retreated from Higgs' volley of fire.

"Quick, help me get him up." Jodi put her arms around Simms' chest and tried to haul him to his feet. He was groggy and could not stand.

Higgs kept his rifle trained on the doorway and shouted back over his shoulder. "Let's just leave him, he'll be all right."

"He'll choke." Jodi began to splutter on the thick, acrid smoke.

Higgs slung his rifle over his shoulder. "Shit."

He heaved himself under Simms and half threw him into the shaft. Jodi ran to a nearby cupboard and started rooting around inside. Higgs watched her in disbelief. "Come on, what are you doing?"

She pulled out a flashlight. She flicked it on and yellow light burst forward from it. "We'll need this to see."

Climbing up on the chair, Jodi crawled into the shaft after Simms. Higgs fired another volley at the doorway to deter anyone whose curiosity might be getting the better of them, and followed her into the darkness.

The ventilation shaft was cramped, not much more than three feet high, and broad. As Simms struggled to come around, Jodi cajoled him into crawling forward. They had gone some ten meters when a colossal explosion ripped through the room behind them. The heat singed the

hairs on Higgs' legs, and the three of them stopped dead, their ears ringing.

"The gas cylinders," cursed Jodi.

An eerie silence followed. Then, they heard the sound of human pain.

"Shit, the explosion caught some of those security officers." Jodi turned to face Higgs. "I've got to go back."

"Don't be mad." Higgs put his hands on her shoulders and spoke directly into her face. "They want to kill you for God's sake."

"There are people hurt back there."

The argument was cut short as a bullet ricocheted down the shaft after them. By some miracle, it missed and Higgs returned fire. A cry of pain sounded and no further shots came.

"Go," shouted Higgs.

With no further argument, the three crawled as fast as they were able down the shaft. After several tens of meters, they turned a corner and came to a chamber some three meters square where several shafts converged.

Simms was now fully conscious and shaking with barely suppressed rage. He glowered at Higgs.

"I can't believe it. Higgs, you'll be terminated for this for sure."

"Shut up."

"You won't get away with it, you know."

"Simms, shut up."

"Kidnapping an information officer."

"What? Look, Simms, you're not kidnapped, okay? Go. Get lost. Leave."

But Simms was not to be deterred. "Every time, you do this. You turn your back on your duty."

"What do you mean 'every time'?" demanded Higgs.

“Simms, shut up,” shouted Jodi.

Simms ignored her pleas. “Exactly that. Every time you’re revived.”

“Revived?”

“Simms. Shut up.” Jodi was frantic.

“What do you mean ‘revived’?”

Jodi turned away in disgust. The cat was out of the bag now, you couldn’t shut up an idiot like Simms.

“Revived. Brought back. Cloned. You’re dead, Higgs, dead. You’ve been cloned and had your memories implanted, but the original Higgs is dead, deceased, caput. *Comprende?*”

Higgs gaped in silence. He looked across at Jodi but she turned away, unable to meet his gaze.

“You didn’t tell me I was dead.”

Jodi shrugged. “I guess I never really found the right time.”

Simms fumbled in his jacket and pulled out an object that bore more than a passing resemblance to a T.V. remote control. He pointed it at Higgs.

“And now you’ve gone the way of all your former selves, terrorist, subversive, infiltrator. I said you won’t get away with this and I’m not about to let you.”

“That won’t work, Simms,” said Jodi quietly.

Simms snarled. “I think you’re wrong there, Jodi.”

Higgs was intrigued by the small black box Simms was waving at him. “What is that?”

“While you were being revived, they put a bomb inside your head just in case you turned out to be a subversive. This is the detonator.”

“Yes,” cut in Jodi, “to detonate the bomb in Higgs’ head and the bombs in the heads of anyone else exposed to his terrorist-subversive influence.”

Simms paused and looked sideways at Jodi. "What do you mean?"

"It detonates the bomb in your head too, Simms."

"What do you mean? I don't have a bomb in my head."

"Of course you do. I put it there."

"What?"

"It's standard procedure for all revivals as dictated by Homeland for national security purposes."

"I haven't been revived. I'm not a clone."

Jodi raised an eyebrow.

Simms stared at her, his mouth slowly dropping open.

"But, I can remember everything. I've not died. I'd know if I had."

A twang of bullets rattled down the shaft. None found their mark.

"Come on, quick, this way," shouted Higgs, setting off down one of the shafts. Jodi scuttled after him but Simms stayed.

He looked nervously at the remote control in his hand and then, wracked with uncertainty, stuffed it back into his pocket. He leaned into the shaft from which the shots were fired, and waved. "Hello. I'm not a terrorist, I repeat..."

He did not manage to complete his sentence before a barrage of gunfire forced him to duck back. Just a misunderstanding, he told himself, but probably for the best if he got himself out of these shafts. He scuttled off down a different shaft to the one Higgs and Jodi had taken, feeling his way through the darkness like a frightened rat. Behind him, red laser sights pierced the gloom.

* * * * *

Higgs and Jodi crawled for all their might. Blood poured from the wound on Higgs' head, getting in his eyes. The flashlight Jodi had

brought was beginning to dim. They crawled on for what seemed like an age when suddenly Higgs felt a space in the floor in front of him.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s the end of the line. The shaft goes down here, vertically from what I can tell.”

“We’ll have to go back then.”

Gunfire rang out from behind them and Jodi cried out in pain. “Shit, I’m hit.”

“We’ve got to jump. Come on.” Higgs took Jodi’s hand. “You first.”

She squeezed past him while he fired back up the shaft. The burst of fire was cut short.

“Shit, I’m out of ammo. Go, for Christ’s sake, go.”

Jodi disappeared down into the darkness in silence. Higgs was stunned for a moment by her courage. No shout or scream, she just let herself go into the abyss and an uncertain future.

He threw himself after her.

“Shit,” he screamed as he fell.

Chapter Ten

The mall was busy, shoppers out in force as was their solemn duty. The androids watched carefully for anyone who gave the impression they might be having anything less than an entirely enjoyable time.

From one wall, there came a banging. Some of the shoppers stopped and looked up. The grill from a ventilation shaft flew off, kicked out by a skinny foot. A spindly body quickly emerged, topped by a face that had more than a passing resemblance to a weasel.

Simms dropped to the ground, his collar up and his hitherto spotless green jump suit filthy and ripped. He stared defiantly back at the shoppers and the androids as they gawped at him.

“Information Officer Simms. Is there a problem here?”

* * * * *

Jared sat at his desk and fumed. Wilting under his acidic gaze and flanked by two androids, Simms tried to stand as straight as he could but he was fighting a losing battle against absolute terror. For one thing, he needed the loo terribly.

“You’re a fool, Simms. You were supposed to keep him from slipping into subversive behavior.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I did my best.”

Homeland's voice filled the room. "Why did you let him escape, Simms? Why did you not detonate the bomb in his head?"

"I, well, I, er..."

Jared leapt from his seat in disgust and marched around his desk. "Because he is an incompetent fool."

He stormed up to Simms until his nose was within an inch of Simms' face. Even Simms' halitosis couldn't save him now.

"You disgust me, you pathetic little germ. We have no further use for you, Simms. You are relieved of your position."

"But, sir, my position, it's all I have."

Jared's face went white with fury and his eyes looked like they might pop out of his face. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up."

Simms shut up. Jared took a step back from Simms, wiping away the spit that had spluttered from his mouth to his chin.

Homeland spoke again. "I'm sorry, Citizen Simms, but you have been exposed to dangerous, subversive influences. For your own security and well being, you will now be terminated."

"What?"

An android put its hand on Simms' shoulder.

Without really knowing what he was doing, Simms grabbed Jared's head in an arm lock and shrieked. "No, I'm not a terrorist."

"Get off me, you idiot." Jared struggled against Simms' grip.

The android tightened its hold on Simms' shoulder but Simms dragged the remote control out of his pocket and pointed it at his own head.

"Wait. You bastards. I know there's a bomb in my head. If I go, Jared goes."

"Hold." Homeland's voice was insistent. The android released its grip on Simms.

Simms was hysterical. "You bastards. There really is a bomb in my head, isn't there?"

Homeland spoke calmly. "Put the remote down, Citizen Simms. You are only making things worse for yourself."

"I've got a bomb in my head wired up to a T.V. remote control. How could things possibly get worse?"

"Calm down, Citizen Simms. We have only the best interests of the mall at heart."

Looking around wildly, Simms saw something on the wall behind Jared's desk. A three foot square, finely meshed grid that offered him a chance to avoid termination for his own good. Well, at least for the short term, and right now Simms wasn't thinking about his pension prospects.

"Come on, you bastard." He began to drag Jared by the head towards the ventilation shaft. The androids took a step forward.

"Stay back. I'll do it, I mean it." Simms jammed the remote hard up against the side of his head.

Homeland remained as calm as ever. "Do as he says."

Simms maneuvered Jared under the ventilation shaft and dragged a chair over with his foot.

"Up."

Jared stood unsteadily on the chair and Simms climbed up behind him. Being a swivel chair, it began to swing slowly around, threatening to turn Jared to face the wall and expose Simms' backside to the merciless attention of the androids' assault rifles. He pushed the wall with his elbow to swing the chair back around again while trying to transfer the remote to the hand which he had wrapped around Jared's neck. For a moment it looked like they were going to fall but Simms managed to maintain his balance by sticking his skinny leg out horizontally. The androids glanced sideways at each other. Simms whimpered. Keeping the

chair in position with his leg, he reached his free hand up and pulled the grill from the wall, flinging it to the ground.

Simms hissed into Jared's ear. "Get those androids out of here, now."

Jared waved his hand at the androids. Limbs hissing noisily, they retreated from the office, taking up positions just outside of the glass door.

"If you move a muscle, I detonate the bomb, do you understand?" Simms jabbered, his voice rising nearly an octave in the course of the sentence. Jared nodded.

Simms let go of Jared and leapt up into the shaft. As quickly as he could, he scuttled away into the darkness.

As the androids piled back into the room, Jared dashed towards his desk, flung open a drawer and dragged out another remote control, identical to the one Simms had been holding. He ran back to the ventilation shaft, pointed the remote into it and then paused.

After a few seconds Homeland spoke. "Why do you not detonate the bomb, my friend? He will be out of range very soon."

Jared replied slowly. "Simms has a tracking device implanted in his head, I believe?"

"That is correct, my friend."

Jared relaxed and lowered the remote. "Let him go. He can lead us to the terrorist network."

"Agreed."

* * * * *

Plants grew here. Tropical plants—bananas, rubber plants, great tree ferns that threw their tough, spiky fronds high into the air. Vines and creepers wove their way through the vegetation, and orchids bloomed.

The air was thick with warmth and moisture, rich with the smells of compost and flowers. Paved paths ran through the undergrowth, and overhead, great lights hung from the ceiling. A tropical paradise captured in a vast hothouse, silent save for the constant hum of distant machinery.

Down one wall ran a square, metal ventilation shaft, open at its bottom end. The thick silence was suddenly broken by a metallic clanging as if something large and heavy were descending unceremoniously down the shaft. As indeed it was. Jodi emerged at high speed from the shaft, her fall broken successively by some vines, a banana plant and finally the soft, rich mud of the hothouse floor. Her flashlight landed beside her.

Moments later, more banging came from the shaft accompanied by a lot of yelling. Higgs' fall was broken by some vines, a rather tattered banana plant and a rather resentful Jodi. They lay in the mud for a few moments, groaning.

Higgs got to his knees and looked around, open-mouthed.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know." She peered at Higgs' bloody face. "Are you okay?"

Higgs nodded. "You?"

Jodi shrugged. "I guess so."

Higgs stood and helped Jodi to her feet. She winced and glanced down. A bloody hole gaped in the left leg of her pants, right on her calf. Leaning heavily on Higgs' shoulder, she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a brown plastic bottle of pills. Opening it, she tipped two small blue tablets into her palm.

"Bottoms up." She grinned at Higgs and swallowed them. After a few seconds, a shudder ran through her body and she gasped slightly. When

it passed, she nodded at Higgs. “Right, I’ll have to sort it out properly later.”

They struggled through the undergrowth to a nearby path and followed it towards a door in the wall. They approached with some caution. The door was like all the others they had seen, with a green button and a keypad. They stood staring at it for a moment.

“If we press that, Homeland will know where we are,” mused Higgs.

“Wherever that is. Do we have a choice?”

Higgs reached forward and pushed the green button. The door slid up to reveal a broad, dark corridor beyond, running parallel to the wall of the hothouse. Jodi clicked on her flashlight and they stepped through.

Behind them, hidden deep in the undergrowth, something watched. Once they had gone, it crept quickly and quietly to the doorway and followed.

The corridor was broad and very long. The air was considerably cooler than in the hothouse and, despite the size of the corridor, it smelt stale. A thick layer of dust covered everything and their feet threw up little clouds with every step. By the slowly dimming light of Jodi’s flashlight, they made their way through the gloom. After a hundred meters, they came to a door on their left. Higgs looked at Jodi and shrugged. He pushed the green button and the door slid up. Warmth and moisture flooded over them—another hothouse, the size obscured by the thick vegetation. Higgs shut the door and they continued down the corridor. After another hundred meters, they came to another door and this too led to a hothouse. They continued along the corridor, passing more doors, each one leading to a hothouse.

Higgs’ mind raced. Why so many hothouses? All of them were heated and lit with strong lights to encourage the plants to grow. There would be

a huge power requirement for so many lights. Enough to cause brownouts in the mall, he wondered?

They came to another door on their left and Higgs opened it. Heat and light flooded out but no moisture. Instead, the air had a foul, chemical reek and the lights beat down not onto lush vegetation but instead wizened stumps and bare earth. Clearly a hothouse like the others, some agent had been used to destroy the plants, revealing the vast size of the room. Higgs stepped inside and looked around.

Jodi wrinkled her nose at the acrid air. "I don't like this."

Higgs turned to face her and pointed to the walls. "There are bullet holes. Come on."

They left the hothouse and continued down the corridor. The next door they came to also opened onto another desolate, empty hothouse. After that, they didn't open any more of the doors.

"When did I die?"

Higgs' question caught Jodi by surprise. They had been walking for some way now in silence, the corridor seemingly endless. Jodi clicked her tongue. "I'm not really sure. You are a clone. Sorry." She bit her lip. "I don't like doing it but she makes me."

"And Simms?"

Yes. A lot of people get revived. More and more these days with the androids so trigger happy."

"And you?"

Jodi stopped walking. She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I don't remember coming into the mall. I can remember before the mall, medical school, Mum, Dad. I can remember quite a lot of my time in the mall. But there are these...my memory..." She floundered for the right word.

"Holes? Spaces where you have no recollection."

Jodi nodded.

“And the holes are such a complete void,” Higgs continued, “that you don’t even notice they are there. It’s not like there are memories that you’ve forgotten, they were simply never there.”

Jodi turned to Higgs and gently touched his arm. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t tell you. I was sworn to secrecy. She would have had me terminated.”

“It’s okay.” Higgs looked down.

“She has all our memories stored in her data banks.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“Not really. Our brains are just big biological computers. Our thought processes and our memories, they’re just electrical signals. Not difficult to take those electrical signals and transfer them into a computer if that computer is complex enough. And Homeland is very complex, believe me.”

Higgs sucked his breath in. “And then when she revives people, she just inserts the memories that she wants to.”

“Yes, except that I think that it’s a very hit and miss affair for her because she doesn’t actually understand the memories. She just crudely chops chunks out, hoping she’s got rid of the subversive bits. I don’t think she really understands very much at all about people.”

“Don’t people in the mall notice? I mean, one day you see someone die and two weeks later, there they are again having a burger. It’s not a usual state of affairs is it?”

“Only the security apparatus and senior medical staff know officially. I’m sure people notice but if you don’t know something officially, you don’t talk about it. You don’t even think about it. It’s evolution by natural selection, people have evolved to keep their mouths shut.”

Higgs realized he had been staring at something on the floor.

“Shit.”

“What?”

Higgs pointed. Stretching away in front of them in the dust, a trail of fresh booted footprints led off into the darkness.

They glanced at each other.

Jodi bit her lip. “What do we do?”

“They’re not android prints and there’s only one person. We keep going.”

They continued on cautiously, straining their eyes into the gloom to watch for any potential ambush. Finally, the corridor came to an end and opened into a small square room from which a number of other corridors led off. In the center was a circle of seats and Jodi lowered herself onto one. She rolled up her trouser leg and looked at her wound. The bullet had clipped through the edge of her left calf and a pink lobe of muscle tissue the size of a thumbnail was sticking out.

She looked up at Higgs. “It’s not serious. I just need to stem the bleeding.”

She ripped off a section of her shirt and used the material as a makeshift bandage. Higgs noticed she winced with pain as she tied her leg up but she didn’t cry out. He turned away.

“There.” She finished. “I’ll be fine.”

But Higgs wasn’t listening. He had crossed the room to a door in one corner and was wiping the dust away from the sign on its surface.

Jodi frowned at him. “What is it?”

Higgs stood aside so Jodi could see. The sign on the door read “Observation Post”. Higgs shrugged at Jodi and pushed the green button by the side of the door. Nothing happened.

“Perhaps there’s no power here?” suggested Jodi.

Higgs peered again at the keypad by the door. It had been tampered with. The screws holding the front plate on had been removed and Higgs found he could pull the whole keypad away from the wall so the wiring behind it could be reached. He straightened up, put his hands flat on the door and pushed upwards. The door moved up slowly, the inertia of the mechanism in the dead motor hidden in the wall above contesting every inch. Beyond the door, Jodi's flashlight picked out a tight, metal, spiral staircase descending through a narrow stairwell. The beam was getting fainter and it wouldn't be long before they were plunged into complete darkness.

They began to descend. The stairs seemed to go on for an age and, apart from the echoes of their feet on the cold, metal steps, they heard no other sound. The air was chilly and their breath steamed in the fading yellow light. Finally, they reached the bottom and a door. On the wall was the usual green button and keypad but Higgs didn't bother with them. Instead he forced the door up with his hands.

Beyond was a circular room. The enclosed stairwell came down in its center and so, as they went through the door, Higgs and Jodi found themselves in the middle of the room. Jodi shone her flashlight around. A ring of desks and computers circled the room, each desk facing outwards towards a large, deeply recessed panel on the wall.

Jodi suddenly grabbed Higgs' shoulder.

"What?"

She put a finger to her lips and pointed. To the right of the door was a control panel of some sorts. Unlike all the other equipment in the room, it had power, its front lit up with multi-colored LEDs. Wires spewed out from an opening towards its base where someone had unscrewed a plate. The mass of wires led to what had to be some sort of

large battery on the floor. The battery was surrounded by screwdrivers and nuts and bolts. Set close by was a small holdall.

They listened intently. Higgs noticed a smell, the faint but unmistakable taste of sweat in the air. As quietly as he could, he reached down and opened the bag. Inside was a jumbled collection of tools and electronics and, almost hidden amongst the electronic gadgetry, a notebook with a caricature of Jared on its cover.

Higgs laughed out loud in relief. "Milo," he called out. "It's me Higgs. It seems like we're all terrorists now."

From the far side of the room came a shaft of light, illuminating Higgs and Jodi.

"Higgs," came Milo's voice. "You scared the crap out of me"

Milo made his way over to them. He was dirty, disheveled and unshaven and had lost pounds in weight since Higgs' had last seen him. Higgs' stomach reminded him that he had not eaten for many hours. And what about water? Was there anything to drink out here away from the mall? A person could survive for a long time without food but without water, it was a matter of days.

Milo shook Higgs by the hand when he reached them. "You got out then?"

"She asked me to terminate Jodi."

"Why?"

"I've no idea. Does Homeland need a reason?"

"What are you trying to do?" Jodi asked Milo, gesturing at the battery.

"I want to get the panels on the wall to open. I figure that if this is an observation post, then I want to see what there is to observe."

Milo turned his attention back to the control panel. He studied it carefully and then pushed a number of buttons. A low humming sound came from the walls of the room and they turned to look.

“Good.” Milo beamed, obviously pleased with himself.

The panels placed on the walls opposite each of the desks began to slide up. As they did so, a brilliant orange light stabbed through the widening cracks, forcing Higgs, Milo and Jodi to cover their eyes.

Higgs wasn't sure what he had expected to see. He had mentally prepared himself for any shock he could imagine and had run through a number of possible scenarios. Perhaps there had been some nuclear attack and the world outside the mall was a desolate wasteland. Perhaps some virulent disease had wiped out the rest of civilization and the mall represented the sum total of humanity remaining on the planet. He had mentally prepared himself for dead bodies, for desolation and destruction, for the revelation of a dark future with no room for hope.

What he hadn't prepared himself for was a breathtakingly beautiful view of the planet Jupiter.

Chapter Eleven

Penelope the pink cloth cat was distinctly soggy. Mandy had been chewing her ear for some time now and her bubblegum-pink saliva had soaked deep into the material. Mandy had always sucked and chewed on things for comfort. As a child, she had sucked her thumb until she was six, whereupon her parents had taken to punishing her every time they caught her doing it. She had stopped sucking her thumb and taken up sucking her soft toys instead, and her parents, begrudging the time they had to spend with their difficult child anyway, left it at that.

Mandy looked up at the camera in the corner of her room. Its little flashing red light was always a comfort to her. Earlier on, she had tried to talk to Homeland, but there had been no response and she had felt, for a while, very, very alone. That bitch Jodi had made off with her man. Every time *they* started again with Higgs, Jodi got in there and spoiled things. Mandy had never really fully understood why Higgs would get killed and then somehow reappear a few weeks later. She didn't ask of course—the reason was bound to be classified information or dull and complicated or both. They did some fancy medical thing and sorted him out and that was that. But it meant Jodi could get in there and brainwash him. Higgs belonged to her, Mandy, not that cheap hussy Jodi. Homeland had proved it with her figures and calculations.

Jodi should have been terminated. Mandy knew Jodi had been terminated before and then magically come back. It made no sense. Why

bring Jodi back when she was so obviously an unredeemable terrorist? Clearly a terrorist. A dangerous terrorist. *She might be jealous of me. When she realizes that Higgs loves me and not her, who knows what she might do?*

Mandy put Penelope carefully down on the pillow of her bed and cleared her throat.

“Ma’am, are you there?”

Homeland’s voice filled the room. “Yes, citizen?”

“I am afraid that Jodi might come and try to kill me.”

“Have no fear, citizen, I will protect you.”

“But she is very cunning. I wish I had a gun to protect myself with. Just in case.”

A *gun*. Mandy surprised herself at what she had said. Yes, a gun and Jodi and her, alone. That would do it.

“A gun, citizen? Guns are restricted to security officers only, you know that.”

Mandy began to sniff and put her hands over her face. “I’m so scared. I don’t know what to do. She’s going to try to kill me.”

Inside, she felt a tingle of pleasure at her own cunning.

“Please do not cry, citizen. I am here for your security and well-being.”

“I should be able to defend myself. I’ve always been a good citizen.”

“You have, citizen.”

“But the terrorists are everywhere, ready to strike without warning. If only I had a gun.”

“Citizen...Mandy...”

Mandy looked up at the camera imploringly. “I hope that I haven’t done anything which has aroused suspicion in me?”

“Of course not, citizen.”

"I would be ashamed to think that I could not be trusted with a gun."

Mandy counted her heartbeats in the long pause which followed.

"You have proved yourself to be above suspicion on many occasions, citizen."

"So you would trust me with a gun?"

"You are trustworthy."

"So, can I have a gun? Just in case? Just for my own personal protection?"

Mandy felt she could almost hear the cogs going around in Homeland's electronic brain.

"You can."

* * * * *

Simms felt his way through the darkness, terrified and utterly wretched. He had flung himself in a desperate panic away from Jared's office, knowing full well the evil man would have a separate remote control with which to dispatch Simms. He had to put as much distance between himself and its nasty little infrared beams if he was to survive. The problem was the ventilation system had not been fitted with any lights and as soon as Simms had gotten ten meters from Jared's office, he was completely blind.

In a way, this worked in his favor as he repeatedly banged his head during his hysterical flight. This had the same overall affect of a good talking to and a few slaps around the face from a qualified counselor but without the shock of the subsequent bill. When it became clear his head was still intact and no obvious sound of pursuit could be heard, he slowed his pace to a crawl, allowing him more time to think.

How could he have not known he had a bomb in his head? It was so obvious. Higgs had one. Higgs always had one. So why not him? Why not everyone? Perhaps the whole of the mall was dicing with death every time someone changed channels? What really hurt was he thought he had been a good citizen. He had consistently followed the correct protocols. Without exception, his reports had been in on time and neatly laid out. He had always done what he had been asked, even when he was tired. Even when, he noted bitterly, he had felt Homeland might, just might, have gotten things wrong. Well, she had gotten it wrong this time. He was not a terrorist. He had to prove it to them, to her.

Stopping, he wiped the sweat from his eyes. The hot, dry air left his throat parched and he coughed weakly. There was only so long he could grope his way around in the dark. Some light, he'd kill for some light. He needed a plan. Exhausted, he stretched out on his front to rest but something in his pocket dug painfully into his groin and beeped.

"Ow."

That wasn't fair. He reached into his pocket and pulled the offending item out. The ventilation shaft lit up with the faint green glow from the screen of his Higgs tracker.

* * * * *

Security Officer Chelsea stood patiently in the line at the counter. She had already decided she would go for a Happy-Tum Feast. She didn't particularly like them but the Feast was the most expensive item on the menu and it would, of course, be on the house. Serving at the counter was Citizen Shane Gingritch, a wiry, shifty-looking man, none too bright and not too hot on his personal hygiene.

Chelsea's turn came. She smiled sweetly at Citizen Shane.

“The feast please.”

Citizen Shane smirked sideways at her. “That’s five dollars ninety-nine, Officer.”

“I think that you’ll find that this will cover it, citizen.”

Chelsea reached over and pressed the video disk into Shane’s hand. She knew he’d like this lot. The disk contained enough material to keep Citizen Shane out of mischief for quite a while. Footage from the aerobics class changing room, from the gynecology wards and, as a special treat, two female citizens doing a number of things Homeland would not have dreamed possible. Chelsea made a mental note to pay them a visit some time soon to ensure their secret remained safe with her.

Shane handed over the Happy-Tum Feast along with twenty dollars.

“Your meal and your change, ma’am. Have a nice day.”

Beaming, Chelsea walked from the bar, dumping the feast in the bins on her way out. *Ah, another satisfied customer.*

* * * * *

Higgs, Jodi and Milo simply stood and gawped. The giant planet dominated their view, glowing with a fierce array of colors. The dense clouds of its atmosphere, tormented by endless storms, gave no clues to whatever secrets lay hidden in their depths. The giant red spot, itself a storm of both colossal size and unimaginable duration, spun slowly as it made its way across the planet’s great bulk. Between the space station and Jupiter, a second sphere hung in the void, much closer than the giant planet and so appearing to be similar in size. Its surface was a smooth and shiny white, tinged with the poisonous orange glow of Jupiter.

Higgs tried to take the whole startling view in. “What is going on?”

Jodi shook her head. "I've lived my whole life in Iowa and I don't remember seeing this before."

Milo stared. "I think it's safe to say that we're not actually in a shopping mall in Iowa."

"No shit." Higgs dragged his gaze away from the spectacle of the giant planet and looked upwards. "I think that we are on some kind of space station."

Jodi and Milo followed Higgs' stare and saw he was right. The space station had been constructed as a vast ring, well over two kilometers in diameter. The rim was rectangular in cross section, nearly a kilometer wide and half a kilometer thick. The station spun lazily on its axis, providing gravity through centrifugal force. The observation room was an outpost at the end of a thick column which projected from the rim. The stairwell which they had descended ran through the center of the column and to see the space station, they had to look up. Other observation posts were visible, protruding from the surface, as were other, larger structures with unknown purposes. It seemed every available inch of the surface of the space station was covered in brand names and advertisements.

After a few moments taking this all in, Jodi pointed. "That doesn't look right."

They followed her gaze. Some distance off, perhaps half a kilometer or more away from them around the rim, a huge meteorite was embedded in the surface of the space station.

They continued to stare at the spectacle in silence for some time, each of them trying to take it all in and make sense of it. After a while, Higgs returned his attention to the giant planet and the closer, white sphere. He tried to remember what he knew about the solar system, about Jupiter. There had been a very advanced space program during his

years at the military academy. The colony on Mars had been a success and probes had been sent to the far reaches of the solar system and beyond. There had been talk of a space station and he had hoped to join the space program in anticipation of the new wave of exploration. So, the program must have gotten underway. And he and Higgs and Milo and everyone else in the mall had obviously joined up as crew. But nobody could remember doing so or at least, nobody he had spoken to so far. Did Jared remember? Did Homeland know?

Below him, the huge white sphere turned slowly. It wasn't entirely featureless. Countless fine lines spread across it, like cracks. The space station appeared to be in orbit about this sphere that itself appeared to be in orbit around Jupiter. Like a moon. Of course. Higgs remembered.

"Europa."

"Sorry?" said Jodi.

"Europa, the ice moon of Jupiter. It's white like that because the whole surface is frozen."

Milo suddenly seemed to stir himself to action. "So, we have a where but not a why."

He turned his back on the spectacular view and looked around the room. In addition to the desks and the control panel by the stairwell, a number of cabinets huddled together near the center of the room. He strode purposefully towards them and flung open their doors. Inside were an assortment of manuals and folders. He began pulling them out, looking at their covers, searching for something. Eventually, after a certain amount of tutting and fussing, he found what he was looking for.

"Ah."

Higgs dragged his gaze away from Europa. "What is it?"

Milo held up a large folder full of sheets of paper. He read the cover. "The Space Station *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks*, schematic diagrams."

Higgs was incredulous. "Sorry, the Space Station *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks?*"

"Space programs cost, okay? I guess they get the money where they can."

Milo laid the folder on one of the desks and Higgs and Jodi crowded around. The folder contained floor plans of the space station, the ventilation system, the electrics and the computer network.

Milo pointed. "Look, this section here is the mall."

Higgs read the section label. "Crew Leisure Complex."

"Do you think that Homeland knows we're on a space station?" asked Jodi. "I mean, why doesn't she just tell everyone?"

Milo shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe she doesn't know. Maybe that asteroid damaged it."

He looked at the section of the plans that had rows and rows of hothouses. "Mind you, she seems to know that she has to maintain the power to the hothouses. I guess that they help to recycle the oxygen."

"Some of those had been destroyed though," said Higgs. "I think they'd been sprayed with a defoliating agent. A previous war on terrorists perhaps?"

They studied the plans further.

"Command Center," read Higgs, pointing to the plan.

"Ah yes, that makes sense." Milo looked up at the space station in the direction of the asteroid. "A direct hit. That rock took out the Command Center."

He turned to the schematic for the computer network.

"Hmmm, that was where the main computer complex was which controlled everything. The asteroid hit and the whole show stopped."

Higgs gazed at the asteroid. "Well why is Homeland still going?"

Milo flipped through more of the charts. "It's on its own separate computer center in the mall. Kept independent of the main system for security purposes I guess. By the looks of things, it's only a minor component of the whole network."

"So the main computer goes down and Homeland is left on its own," said Jodi.

"And it can't tell what is going on," continued Milo, "because it suddenly stops getting any feeds from the main computer system."

"And with no reality checks," Higgs added, "it concludes that there has been a terrorist attack. It still doesn't explain why it hides the fact that we are on a space station."

"Maybe it's not hiding the fact," suggested Jodi. "Maybe it has been damaged. Maybe it really does think it is in a shopping mall in Iowa and it's just gone a bit, well, mad, if a computer can go mad."

Milo leafed hurriedly through the plans. "Yes. Look here. There's a backup computer." He pointed it out to Higgs and Jodi. "There is a backup computer and command center which should have kicked in when the main one was taken out."

Higgs read the plan. "Auxiliary Command Center. Why didn't it kick in?"

"I have no idea," replied Milo. "What I think that we could do is get there and start it up."

"But it's on the other side of the space station," said Higgs. "To get to it, we have to go through the leisure complex where Homeland is in control. The asteroid's blocking the other way."

Milo flipped back through the folder to the floor plans and studied them for a minute.

"No, look here." Milo pointed. "If we go up to the top level and there isn't too much damage, we might be able to get past the asteroid."

“So, we get to the backup computer, start it up and then what?” said Jodi.

Milo shrugged. “I don’t know. I just thought it might help”

* * * * *

They made their way back up the stairwell, their footsteps ringing out through the cold, silent air, with Milo leading the way.

“I’ve made a sort of a store,” he said as they climbed. “I’ve got some water and some bananas that I found in the hothouses.”

When they reached the top of the steps, Higgs went to force the door up but Milo waved him back and fed two wires from the battery under the keypad. He fiddled for a moment and then pushed the green button. The door slid up and they went through.

In the chamber beyond, Milo studied the floor for his footprints. “The dust’s quite useful really. Like a ball of string in a maze.”

“Shit.” Higgs stopped suddenly. “Look.”

He pointed to the floor. There amongst their boot prints was a single, fresh human footprint. Its maker had been barefoot.

“Okay,” said Jodi. “Milo?”

Milo shook his head. “No idea.”

Higgs checked his pistol. “I’m out of ammunition.”

“Well, let’s not get trigger-happy,” snapped Jodi.

“I’m just thinking of our safety, that’s all. We need to be careful.”

Sarcasm tinged Jodi’s voice. “Yes, maybe you’re right. Maybe Homeland has patrols of heavily armed nudists out scouring the place for us as we speak.”

Higgs bit his lip and tapped impatiently on the barrel of his gun, counting silently to ten. "It's an unknown. That's all I'm saying. Until we know what it is, we need to be careful."

Milo cleared his throat. "Perhaps we could get going?"

They took the corridor back past the hothouses, looking for any more of the barefoot prints, but they saw none.

Milo led them past the hothouses until, at last, they came to a T-junction onto a broad thoroughfare. He turned right onto this and, following his trail in the dust, walked a short distance to an opening on the right. This led up a short flight of stairs to a doorway. Milo paused at the doorway and pressed the green button. The door slid up slowly.

Milo shrugged apologetically. "It's just on a battery."

The room beyond was small and full of an assortment of tools, circuit boards and electrical junk. A battery similar to the one Milo had used in the observation post was wired up to the door keypad. Milo trotted in and switched on a small light, again powered by a large battery.

"Make yourselves at home." He smiled and started rooting around in the mess. After a few moments, he stopped. "I'm sure I left them here"

"What have you lost?" asked Jodi.

"The water. The bananas. They were here."

"That footprint?" suggested Higgs.

"Okay, so they've stolen the water and the food," said Jodi. "We haven't been attacked. We need to try to make contact."

Milo opened a small cupboard and brought out some empty plastic bottles. "Well, we won't get far without any water."

They left the room and returned to the thoroughfare, turning left to go back to the hothouses for water. They had reached the entrance of the hothouse corridor when Higgs held up his hand for them to stop, his finger to his lips.

“What is it?” whispered Jodi.

Higgs turned and shone his flashlight back up the way they had come. The noise of something crashing away from them echoed through the darkness. Higgs swept his flashlight around frantically. There, movement, on the edge of the light, but Higgs wasn’t quick enough. He caught the merest glimpse of something large and pale darting down a corridor to the left.

Higgs broke into a sprint, calling over his shoulder to the others. “Come on.”

They ran to the entrance of the corridor and shone their flashlights up it. They could see no sign of life, but Higgs pointed to the floor. A trail of barefoot human footprints led away into the gloom. Slowly, with Higgs leading the way, they followed the trail down the corridor. Doors led to the left and right but none of them were open. The footprints continued until the corridor opened into a small chamber. Higgs, Jodi and Milo stopped on the threshold, listening carefully. Something was breathing, the sound coming from one corner of the room. Higgs shone his flashlight over. A desk and a filing cabinet stood beneath an open ventilation shaft in the wall.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” called Jodi, quietly. “We just want to know who you are.”

Silence. Jodi shrugged at Higgs and advanced warily into the room. A long, low, threatening growl came from the direction of the desk. It sounded like a dog. Jodi jumped back.

Higgs moved up beside her. “I don’t like this.”

A voice came out of the room, low, guttural and menacing. “Where is it?”

“Where is what?” called Jodi softly.

“Oh,” said the voice, louder than before.

Jodi looked at Higgs for inspiration. He shrugged.

The voice came again. "Listen to me, listen."

"We're listening." Jodi peered into the darkness.

Silence.

Higgs tapped Jodi on the shoulder. She turned to him and he mouthed, "I'm going in." She nodded. Cautiously, flashlight stabbing the darkness before him, Higgs crept into the room.

"Where is it?" growled the voice.

"Where is what?" Jodi kept her voice calm and conciliatory. "Who are you? We just want to talk."

"Oh."

Higgs reached the front edge of the desk and shone his flashlight over it. He couldn't see anyone there but the desk was large and he couldn't stretch right over.

"Oh." The voice was a low, venomous hiss now.

Higgs moved around between the wall and the left side of the desk, straining to see what hid behind it.

"Oh bugger," screamed the voice, coming not from the desk but the ventilation shaft. Powerful fingers dug into Higgs' left arm and hauled him up to the opening. He screamed in pain, dropping his flashlight and pushing against the wall with his right hand. Milo and Jodi ran forward, grabbing Higgs' legs as he dangled in the air. His left arm was pulled into the shaft and he felt a searing pain in his forearm.

"Your flashlight," he screamed at Milo. "Shine it into the shaft."

Letting go of Higgs' legs, Milo leapt up onto the desk and shone his flashlight into the darkness of the hole. A howl came from inside and Higgs was suddenly released, crashing down onto the surface of the desk and knocking Milo backwards.

"Oh my god, your arm," blurted Jodi.

Blood flowed freely from a gash on Higgs' forearm. He struggled to his feet, snatched Milo's flashlight from him and shone it into the ventilation shaft. Whatever had grabbed him was gone, the shaft echoing with the sound of its retreat. Higgs sagged down onto the desk, breathing heavily. Jodi took his arm and began inspecting his wound.

"It looks like you've been bitten. What was it?"

Higgs shook his head slowly. "I don't know."

Chapter Twelve

Simms had followed the directions on his Higgs-tracker for over an hour now. The light it emitted was a great comfort, however feeble it might be. His eyes had gotten used to the gloom and, using the device as a very low-powered flashlight, he was able to see at least a few meters in front of him.

At length, he came to a grill. The room or corridor beyond—he couldn't tell which—was in darkness and the air felt a lot cooler. He had no idea whether cameras would be here but the darkness was his cover, Homeland wouldn't be able to see him.

He squeezed around so he could kick the grill out and then wormed his way out of the shaft, dropping to the ground heavily.

"Ouch."

He shone his little green light around. As far as he could tell, he was in a room. He heard some machinery working close by, not too loud but in the near vicinity. He checked the direction on his Higgs-tracker and followed its lead across the room, but came to the far wall. *Damn and blast*. He could go no further in this direction. Making his way to the left, he was surprised to find a large, metal flap in the wall. He pushed it open and peered in. It led to a vertical chute stretching down and away from the room at an angle. Perhaps he could go this way? It went in the right direction at least, although it would mean a leap of faith into the darkness.

Simms straightened up. If only he had more light, he would be able to get an idea of how deep the drop was. He didn't want to go breaking his neck. Leaning into the chute again, he strained as far forward as possible to see if he could glimpse the bottom. Unfortunately for him, the section of wall on which he leaned was also a flap and it gave way suddenly, tipping him casually down into the darkness.

* * * * *

Higgs was hungry. They had been walking through the darkness of the powerless corridors of the space station for some hours now and he was beginning to feel lightheaded. He took some comfort in the fact that the route to the Auxiliary Computer Room Milo had planned went through an area labeled as "Mess Hall" on the charts. Whether they would find anything suitable to eat there remained to be seen but they clung to the hope nonetheless.

They had seen no further sign of the thing that had bitten him. Higgs kept listening for footsteps following and he scanned the dust ahead of them for footprints, but he heard and saw nothing. Jodi had stemmed the bleeding from his wound and bandaged it with some rags from Milo's room but the gash was raw and pain stabbed him as he moved.

The air was chilly and seemed to be getting colder as they made their way slowly towards the point of the asteroid's impact. The going was slow, relying as they had to on the light from Jodi and Milo's flashlight. Keeping track of where they were on the charts proved tricky and more than once they took a wrong turn and had to retrace their steps. Everywhere, thick dust lay in a blanket, their trail of footprints signposting their passage to anyone bent on pursuit. The silence was

oppressive and after a while, the sound of their every movement seemed almost deafening. They involuntarily took to speaking in whispers.

On and on Milo led them, up flights of stairs until at last they reached the very top level. They were at one side of the rim now, in a long broad corridor. Orange rays of light from Jupiter stabbed through portholes on their right. They made their way slowly along until the corridor opened into a large hall.

“This is the mess hall,” announced Milo. “At least, I think it is.”

It did seem Milo might be right. Peering into the hall, they could see it stretched many tens of meters in length, with a refreshingly high ceiling. Large windows along the right-hand wall let in the warm glow of the planet and hundreds of tables were laid out in orderly rows. But the place lived up to its name—it was a mess. Plates, cups and cutlery were strewn about, chairs were overturned and some of the tables had been broken. They advanced cautiously into the room, fanning out as they did so.

“Shit.” Jodi stopped suddenly. “Higgs, Milo, come and look at this.”

They ran over to Jodi who was now crouching on the ground. On the floor lay a skeleton dressed in a red jump suit. A gun lay nearby.

“He must have been killed by the asteroid impact,” said Milo.

“No, look.” Jodi put her finger into a hole in the skull. “These are bullet holes. He’s been shot.”

Higgs breathed out heavily and shook his head. “There are more, loads more, look.”

Strewn amongst the chaos of the hall were countless bodies. Most were in red or green jump suits but others wore civilian clothes. The further down the mess hall Higgs, Jodi and Milo walked, the more bodies they found. Bullet holes peppered many of the tables and nearly all of the

bodies either had bullet holes in their clothes or gaping wounds in their skulls. A few burnt-out hulks of androids lay amongst the human bodies.

Higgs noticed a corridor leading off to the left of the hall, away from the windows and the lights of Jupiter. It seemed as if the entrance to the corridor had been barricaded by two tables, but they had both been broken by gunfire and swept aside. He peered up the corridor and whispered loudly to the others. "Up here, there's something up here."

As he walked warily towards the corridor, Higgs stumbled on something. He looked down. There amongst the debris lay an assault rifle, dropped by one of the long dead combatants. Picking it up, Higgs was pleased to find the clip full of ammunition.

He held the gun up for the others to see. "Just in case. See if you can find something."

"What about these?" Jodi held up two automatic pistols. Higgs took them from her, checked the clips and nodded. "Yes, these will do. Do you know how to use them?"

Both Milo and Jodi shook their heads. He handed them one each, showed them where the safety catch was and how to hold them. Once he was satisfied they at least knew which end the bullets came out of, he led them cautiously into the corridor.

The going was not easy as the floor of the corridor was sometimes two or three bodies deep. Bones snapped beneath their feet, filling the cold air with a dry, heavy dust they could taste. Android bodies lay here too, always facing down the corridor. Higgs, Jodi and Milo picked their way through as best they could, moving by the light of Jodi and Milo's flashlights. At the end of the corridor they came to a room. A door had clearly once stood here, with a makeshift barricade of tables, but both had been destroyed by gunfire and explosives.

The floor of the room was deep with the bodies of both people and androids, even more so than the corridor had been. Bullet holes pockmarked the blackened walls. The room had no other exit—whoever had taken the decision to make a stand here had ended up in a trap with no escape. Higgs silently chided whoever had been in command for making such a fundamental mistake but then, maybe that person had had no choice.

Jodi bent down. “There’s something here.”

Higgs and Milo made their way over the chaos of broken bodies to see what she had found. Jodi was looking at the skeleton dressed in a black jumpsuit and labeled as Captain Joseph Sharantz. He had an envelope in his top pocket. Gingerly, she pulled it out. “To whom it might concern.”

She shrugged at the other two and opened the letter.

“August Fifteenth, 2035. The final report of First Lieutenant Joseph Sharantz of the Space Station *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks*. An asteroid impact has destroyed the main computer center and all other systems have been taken over by the leisure complex security program. The anti-terrorist routine appears to have a major bug, is unable to perceive the presence of the asteroid and believes that we are in a shopping mall in Iowa that has sustained a major terrorist incident. It is now using the androids to wipe out all of the remaining survivors of the asteroid impact as suspected terrorists. All communications equipment is under the anti-terrorist system’s control and we are unable to contact Mission Control. Attempts to start the Auxiliary Computer Center have failed because the anti-terrorist system is unable to perceive it as anything other than a terrorist threat. Captain Horatio Erasmus Jared has led a party of security officers to try to reach the Auxiliary Computer Room. Lieutenant Tracy Higgs—”

She stopped and looked up. "You're a Lieutenant Higgs."

"Never mind that. Go on."

"Er, Lieutenant Tracy Higgs and I are preparing to organize the evacuation of the Space Station if Captain Jared and his men are unsuccessful. We have secured the main mess hall and will make for the shuttles."

Jodi stopped reading shrugged. "That's all there is."

"Shit," was all Higgs could manage.

Milo seemed troubled. He walked away, looking carefully around at the bodies, checking the names on the breast pockets.

Tears welled up in Jodi's eyes. "He said Homeland was wiping out all the crew. She's re-cloned all of us."

Higgs shook his head. "She couldn't possibly have cloned everybody, surely? There are thousands of people in the mall."

"There are hundred of cloning tanks out the back of the sickbay and banks of genetic material for everyone in the mall. Genetic material and memories, and she plays God and puts them all together as she pleases."

Higgs remembered Simms' deadly remote control. "Plus a bomb in the head for good measure."

"Oh yes, that. Look, that bomb in your head, it's—"

A shout from Milo at the other side of the room cut her off.

"What is it?" called Higgs.

"Nothing." Milo backed towards them, stumbling on the bodies as he did so. "Nothing at all, stay back."

Higgs and Jodi ignored his pleas and barged past him to see what he had found. There, lying on the floor, were two skeletons, one in a black jump suit, one in a white one. Their dry, skeletal limbs were wrapped around each other as if they had embraced as they waited for death.

Their uniforms had name tags. “Lieutenant Tracy Higgs” and “Medical Officer Jodi Francis”.

* * * * *

The light of Jupiter streamed into the mess hall, making it painfully bright after the charnel house that had been the last stand of First Lieutenant Joseph Sharantz and Higgs’ and Jodi’s former selves. The current versions of Higgs and Jodi sat wearily on the tables in the center of the hall alongside Milo.

Higgs’ mind raced. It was all very well being told you were dead and had come back as a clone but, understandably really, a strong sense of doubt remained about it actually being true. After all, no memory gave it any credence, he had no recollection of the speeding bullet piercing his chest, the pain as it tore into his body. In any event, it had to be said that the idea was a bit far-fetched. Finding one’s own dead body put a whole new perspective on things.

“This is madness,” said Higgs at last, shaking his head. “You all said that I was a clone but I didn’t believe you.”

Tenderly, Jodi put her arm around him. “It’s no easier for me. I watched you growing from stem cells in the protein vats but it’s still a shock to find your original body.”

Higgs pulled away from her slightly.

“Protein vats?” quizzed Milo. “Interesting. Where do they get the protein from?”

“Well, it’s a mix of all the waste products really. Fecal matter, nasal excretions—”

“Look, can we drop this please?” cut in Higgs.

Milo and Jodi looked down at their feet.

"This madness has got to be stopped." Higgs got to his feet and began pacing up and down the mess hall. "Clones or not, there are hundreds of people still in that mall and we've got to get them to see that Homeland is wrong, that there is a world outside of the shopping mall, a whole universe for God's sake."

He gestured wildly out of the windows.

"They don't even know. And they're so used to the little world of the shopping mall that they don't even ask questions. They just follow the system."

He walked a few paces away from the others and then turned to face them.

"I've spent my life believing in the system but now the system's gone mad. We've got to stop it."

* * * * *

Mandy sat on her bed, waiting. The camera swept slowly back and forth across her room, its little red light flicking on and off. She checked her watch. Seven-thirty p.m., the time they had agreed upon. She hadn't minded performing a striptease in front of the camera as long as Security Officer Chelsea Day kept up her side of the bargain. If she didn't, Mandy could always have a word with Homeland about an invasion of her personal privacy. She had surprised herself by finding the whole thing thoroughly erotic. The thought that some unknown person had watched her while she pouted and posed left her tingling with excitement. Security Officer Day was a woman Mandy felt she could do business with.

There, it stopped. The light went off and the camera ceased moving. Quickly, she reached under her mattress and pulled out her pistol, a

flashlight and the little black Higgs-tracking device she had managed to wheedle out of Simms.

Dressed as ever in her crop-top, shorts and black cowboy boots, she was easily tall enough to stretch up and pop the ventilation grill cover off the ceiling without having to move the bed. She pushed it into the shaft and then, with some effort, managed to haul herself up and out of the room. She then replaced the grill and switched the tracking device on.

“Right. Don’t worry, Higgsie, Mandy is coming to save you.”

* * * * *

As he fell, Simms was too frightened to scream. The fall was sufficiently long enough for him to have his life flash before his eyes and he came to the conclusion things really could not get worse. He was, metaphorically, about as far up shit creek as it was possible to get and, if he survived this fall, life could surely only get better.

He landed, unexpectedly, in water. The impact as his body broke the surface took his breath away and he struggled back up, coughing and gasping for air. Remembering that he couldn’t swim, he flailed his arms about wildly, still holding the tracking device in one hand. His free hand came down on a hard surface above the water line to his left. Hanging onto it, he pulled himself through the water and felt around with his other hand. Some sort of broad ledge revealed itself to his probing fingers, wide enough for him to get on. Fighting for breath, he hauled himself out of the water and lay panting on the side like a beached carp.

Only once he found his breath did he notice the smell. The air was thick with odors competing for the attention of his nostrils, rotting food, grease, excrement, and Simms didn’t like to think what else besides.

He struggled to his knees and gave the tracking device a shake to try to dry it off. It beeped happily at him. He shone its weak little beam down onto the water. Things floated on the surface and Simms felt almost grateful he could not tell what they were in the poor light. Looking around him, he saw he was on a two meter wide walkway that disappeared into the gloom both ahead and behind him. He realized he was in some sort of sewer. The direction of flow would lead to the great recycling vats Simms knew existed beneath the malls, back in *her* domain full of prying cameras.

He stood and looked at his tracking device. It told him he wanted to go directly through the wall and up about twenty meters to be on track. Back in the mall proper, it would have given him a little map and told him Higgs was in such and such a mess hall. Here, it only gave a bearing. It dawned on him that he was outside of the space Homeland had control over. He was free of her. A question arose in his head, a question that habit and fear had kept from his mind for a very long time.

“Where the blazes am I?”

He thought hard, trying to remember the day he first came into the mall but he couldn't put his finger on it, he couldn't remember his actual first day. Higgs had asked him, hadn't he, had he ever left the mall? Well, until now, he hadn't. His heart was beating fast, he was thinking subversive thoughts. This would only get him into trouble. But he was in trouble.

He shook his head, he had to stay focused. The little screen on the Higgs tracker told him to head to the left. Higgs could run but Simms would find him. It might take a while but he would. Then he could prove to *her* he was not a subversive.

A noise behind him made him freeze for a moment. Slowly, he turned around to face it, listening intently. A distant splashing? Yes, definitely

something swimming. It continued for a few seconds and then was replaced by the sound of something hauling itself out of the water. A rat, he wondered? A strange, eerie cry echoed down the sewer, chilling him to the bone. Some rat. In answer came a cacophony of squeaks and the noise of several large things taking to the water. A short period of splashing was followed by the sound of the things climbing out again. After a short racket of growls and squeaks, an uneasy silence fell.

Simms strained to see into the gloom. A faint green glow came from down the tunnel. The sewer curved off to his left—whatever was coming towards him was still around the bend but the light preceded it. He looked down at his tracking device and, seeing its green glow, quickly stuffed it into his pocket, plunging himself into darkness. He didn't want whatever they were seeing him before he had seen them.

He heard footsteps now and the sound of something heavy being dragged along. With rising panic, he turned and stumbled blindly up the walkway, hugging the wall as he went. After a few meters, his head struck a hard, cold metal something, the sound of the impact echoing down the sewer. Whatever unspeakable things were following him stopped suddenly. Simms kept absolutely still, hardly daring to breathe, his heart pounding, his head throbbing. After a long, long silence, the squeaks, squeals and footsteps resumed.

Cursing his bad luck, Simms felt ahead of himself. His fingers touched a ladder, leading upwards, perhaps out of the sewer? Trembling, he climbed it as quickly and as quietly as he could. It went up some three meters into a shaft, which ended in a hatch. Below him the sounds were getting closer. He felt around frantically for the keypad to open the hatch but his fingers yielded nothing but smooth wall. There was no choice, he would have to risk some light. He took the Higgs-tracker out of his pocket and used its pale green glow to look maniacally around the

shaft. Spying the keypad, he stuffed the Higgs-tracker away, hammered on the button and prayed. Nothing happened. A growl came from below him.

Simms held his breath and looked down. Shapes moved over the walkway below him, three hulking figures dragging something between them. A pale green light illuminated them although Simms could still not see the source. With mounting horror, he realized the thing being dragged was a human body—he could see the shape of the legs as they trailed. Then, the source of the green light shone directly below him, a single, bright, pale green LED. A figure hunched around it, a shadow silhouetted against the glow. Simms couldn't make out exactly what manner of creature it was but, most importantly, it wasn't looking up. Simms closed his eyes and waited. He just had to sit quietly and, in a moment, the beastly things would pass. In his pocket, his little Higgs-tracker beeped cheerily.

A venomous hiss rose from below. Simms opened his eyes and stared down—the green light was pointing up towards him. A low, animal growl reminded Simms of the fullness of his bladder.

“Help!” He thumped on the keypad. “Help!”

“Oh bugger,” growled a deep voice from below.

Something grabbed Simms' leg on the exposed skin above his sock, long nails digging deeply into his flesh. He screamed and instinctively kicked down with his other foot. His heavy boot made contact with something soft, and his assailant fell growling back to the walkway below. He frantically banged on the hatch above him and it flew up and open—it had not been locked. In panic he flung himself upwards and out into the space above, slamming the hatch down behind him. He dragged the treacherous Higgs-tracker from his pocket and shone it around, desperately looking for something, anything, to throw on top of the

hatch. A bench stood in one corner—that would do. He grabbed it and, with some effort, toppled it over and hauled it towards the hatch.

As he reached it, the hatch began to open, long, filthy fingers curling around the rim from below.

“Oh no you don’t,” Simms yelled, stamping down on it. The hand disappeared with a scream. Simms yanked the table over the hatch and then, for good measure, threw himself onto it, panting. Beside him, his Higgs-tracker beeped.

“You can jolly well piss off,” he shouted at it.

Chapter Thirteen

Higgs, Jodi and Milo continued on in silence. The temperature appeared to be dropping with every step they took closer to the asteroid. Using the chart, Milo had led them on a route that gave the point of impact the widest berth possible, but they really had no idea how far into the space station the asteroid had penetrated. Because of the way it created gravity by spinning, to anyone standing in the space station the asteroid would have appeared to have come up through the floor. Milo hoped that by taking them to the very top level, they would be able to walk over the top of it.

They climbed what seemed like endless flights of stairs, up and up. The space station had many lifts but, without power, they were still, silent and useless. Milo took a path as close to the side of the space station as he could so they could travel by the light of Jupiter wherever it came in through windows and portholes. By this manner, they managed to conserve the batteries in their flashlights. They found bodies from time to time. Some had been shot as they ran, some had made brave stands, holed up behind doorways or makeshift barriers. Occasionally, they found the hollow shells of androids and everywhere, bullet holes and burn marks scarred the walls.

Finally, they reached the top floor and Milo led them forward along a wide hallway. The uppermost floor was by far the most pleasant area of the space station they had been in. Long, broad skylights split the roof

and, looking up, they could see the station stretching up as two vast arms that finally looped back together some two kilometers away. Beyond, billions of stars shone in a dazzling display.

"It's beautiful," said Higgs. He had always loved the stars and had spent many evenings, a lifetime ago it seemed, out with friends and a few beers, gazing upwards and making plans.

Milo nodded. "It is. An unbelievable feat of engineering."

Jodi blew out a cloud of steam and shivered. "I'm cold."

Higgs stuck his finger in his mouth and then held it up. He frowned. "Hang on."

Milo glanced sideways at him. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but I think the air's moving."

Milo led them down the hallway. An orange glow filled the room even though Jupiter was not shining directly in. Up ahead, Higgs could just make out what looked like the end wall of the hall. Milo stopped and studied his plan, his brow creasing as he concentrated. "Damn. I think we've gone wrong again. That wall shouldn't be there."

Higgs took a few strides forward while Jodi peered at the charts over Milo's shoulder.

"Milo," said Higgs after a few moments. "I don't think this wall will be on your map."

The wall seemed to be made of some sort of orange resin or expanding foam and it stretched right across the hallway from floor to ceiling. Higgs reached it first and dug his fingers in. Slightly spongy to the touch, the material broke away easily, crumbling into dust in his hands.

Milo shook his head. "I think this is the end of the line. This looks like some sort of sealant that has been sprayed to isolate the asteroid and keep the air in."

The others nodded.

"There isn't going to be a way through in this direction." Milo folded his arms.

Higgs leaned close to the foam wall and, pursing his lips, breathed out a column of steam. There was no mistake, something was pulling it towards the wall. He licked his finger and held it up close to the surface. Yes, he could feel it, the flow of air. "I think...I think that this wall is failing."

Milo rubbed his chin with his hand. "I guess that this foam does fail after a while. It's got to resist a lot of pressure and extreme cold. There's no way it could last more than a few years."

"And God only knows how many years we've been here," murmured Jodi.

"This means," said Higgs, "that we are running out of time. The air is leaking out of the space station. If this wall goes..." His voice trailed off as he thought. He turned to Milo. "If this wall goes, what will happen?"

"I think that the air would probably just start escaping. The space station wouldn't explode, it's too strongly engineered. Maybe it would take a day or two for all the air to leak out."

Higgs poked a finger deep into the wall. "And how long until it goes?"

"Anybody's guess. Now it's started perishing, the rate at which it deteriorates will just speed up."

"So, at best, we've got a few weeks before we all suffocate." Higgs bent forward, looking into the hole he had made.

"Well, we'd probably freeze to death before we suffocated."

"What are we going to do?" asked Jodi.

Higgs straightened up and put his hands on his hips. "We've got to stick to the original plan. If we can get the space station functioning properly again, we can contact Earth and call for help."

Jodi lowered herself to the floor and began rubbing her feet. “But how do we get there?”

“The ventilation shafts,” said Higgs. “We’ll use them to get past Homeland and go around the other way.”

Milo paged quickly through the charts and chewed his lip. “Okay. I think I can see a way.”

* * * * *

They had been crawling now for nearly an hour. The going was hard in the hot, dry air and Higgs, Jodi and Milo had already drunk all their water. The ventilation shafts around the mall were a tortuous, twisted affair and Milo found it very difficult to keep track of where they were on the plan. Fortunately, every two or three hundred meters, they found small chambers housing breathing apparatus and once Milo realized these were all numbered, navigation became a little easier.

They crawled into another chamber and Jodi called a halt.

“I’m knackered,” she announced and lay on her back on the floor.

“I guess we can allow ourselves a bit of a breather,” agreed Milo.

Higgs sniffed deeply. “I smell food.”

All of them remembered how long it had been since they had eaten. Milo shone his flashlight on the plan. “Yes. We’re adjacent to the food halls for Precinct Ten.”

Higgs bit his lip. “I could try to swipe something from the kitchens.”

Milo looked again at the plans. “You’d need long arms. They’re forty meters above us.”

* * * * *

Mandy crawled along the ventilation shaft. She wished she'd thought of this before, the possibilities were endless. She had stopped and watched her snooty neighbor Citizen Jonathan Henna as he scribbled away in a book beneath the camera. Her other neighbor, Citizen Catherine Smithson, was having it away with Citizen Emma Tomlinson's boyfriend Bill. She had watched them from above through the grill for a while. He didn't take very long. But this was great. They would all find themselves very keen to do what she wanted in the very near future, she had made up her mind on that.

She crawled on down the shaft, pausing to savor the secrets of each of her neighbors in turn. Citizen Arnold Burrel was squeezed into his wardrobe away from the camera's watchful gaze and was rubbing rubber tubing over himself. Citizen's Samantha Pickering and Jemima Tenpence were much more than just good friends and Citizen Sheila Wodenham was a man. Oh, the fun Mandy was going to have when she got back. It almost seemed a shame to go and have to rescue that fickle idiot Higgs.

* * * * *

Milo suddenly stopped crawling. Behind him was Jodi, with Higgs bringing up the rear.

"What is it?" asked Jodi.

"A shoe," replied Milo.

"A shoe?"

He squeezed around and handed it back to her. The shoe looked expensive, probably very fashionable. Not that Jodi had a clue about that sort of thing. She looked closely at it, trying so desperately to name the brand she almost missed the most important thing about it. "There's blood on it."

“Shit.” Higgs tapped the barrel of his gun with his finger. “I think that we need to proceed with caution from here on.”

“Why?”

Higgs told them quickly about the unacknowledged and unsolved disappearances.

Milo checked his plans. “We’ve not got far to go and then we’ll be past the mall.”

They left the shoe behind and continued up the ventilation shaft until they reached the next small chamber. After that, Higgs took the lead, using Jodi’s flashlight and pushing his automatic rifle before him. Milo was right. Two hundred meters further on, he directed Higgs off to the right and, a short distance later, they reached an exit out into a corridor.

Higgs leaned out and shone his flashlight both ways. The corridor disappeared into the gloom with no obvious signs of a knife-wielding maniac. Higgs squeezed out of the shaft and dropped to the floor, followed by Milo and then Jodi. When Jodi dropped down, she winced in pain and Higgs caught her arm.

Jodi looked down. “It’s the wound.

Higgs followed her gaze. “Bugger.”

“No, I’ll be okay, really.”

“No, look.”

Higgs pointed. On the floor beneath the ventilation shaft opening was a second shoe. Jodi picked it up.

Milo peered over her shoulder. “It looks like it matches the one in the ventilation system.”

“Even down to the bloodstains I’m afraid.” Jodi threw the shoe to the floor.

Higgs walked a few steps up the corridor. “There’s blood here.”

Jodi and Milo stared. A dark stain covered the floor, as if a body had been allowed to rest for a few moments and then been dragged away.

Higgs shrugged. "What do we do? Go for the Auxiliary Computer Room or try to catch the psycho?"

"I vote computer room," said Jodi.

Milo consulted the plan. After a moment he glanced up cheerily. "We might get two birds with the one stone. The computer room is this way." He pointed down the corridor in the direction of the blood trail.

"Oh great," whistled Higgs.

They continued on, with Higgs and his automatic rifle leading the way, Milo in the middle holding the flashlight and Jodi bringing up the rear. Every few meters, they found another piece of the blood trail. They came across other things too. Discarded watches, socks, more shoes, pieces of human hair.

Higgs stopped and sniffed. "I can smell fresh blood."

The other two sniffed. The air held the faint but unmistakable salty tang. Suddenly, from up ahead, came the sound of something moving, a sliding noise.

"Put the flashlight out, quick," Higgs whispered.

They were plunged into darkness. Ahead of them, barely audible above their pounding heartbeats, the sliding sound continued for a few moments and stopped. They could just make out soft footfalls and there, maybe thirty meters ahead of them, a faint greenish light spilling onto the corridor from the right. Shadows moved through the light and into the corridor. Then came the light itself, a pinpoint of pale green, a high powered LED. As their eyes became accustomed to the utter darkness, they could see six people—grotesque, crippled shadows of people—stooping and loping in gait. The one at the back held the LED. They traveled quickly, emitting little growls and squeaks as they approached,

apparently squabbling and unaware of Higgs, Jodi and Milo waiting in the darkness ahead.

“I’m going to try to talk to them,” Jodi whispered as quietly as she could but the people heard her.

As one, the figures stopped and crouched down. They were maybe ten meters away now, and Higgs, Jodi and Milo could hear sniffing. Then, the LED went out.

“Flashlight, now,” shouted Higgs.

Milo responded, flicking on his flashlight as Higgs leveled his gun in the direction of the figures. In the time between extinguishing the LED and Higgs’ shout, the six people had silently closed the distance to less than five meters. Now, in the blinding glare of the light, they stopped short, snarling and hissing and covering their eyes. They were naked and misshapen, more animal than human, with long, wild hair and thick, broken nails. Their heads were too large for their bodies, like outsized fetuses, blue and red lines mapping out the network of veins and arteries beneath their translucent skin. One had feet that had no toes, another hands like clubs with just the tips of fingers. All were filthy and splattered with blood.

Higgs went to fire but the closest of the creatures lowered its hands from its face for a moment and blinked into the light. Jodi screamed and Higgs froze, staring at the creature’s face, at *his* face, Higgs’ face, on the head of this monster.

“Oh bugger,” screamed the mutant Higgs and it turned and fled with the others.

Higgs, Jodi and Milo stood in silence, breathing heavily.

“Jesus.” Higgs sagged to his knees and Jodi put her arms around him.

“It looked like you,” said Milo.

"It was me. I don't understand, it was me but...a mutant, deformed."

"I think they were clones," murmured Jodi. "Clones gone wrong."

"How?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of anything like this. Sometimes things go wrong when you're cloning but you just start again. It's like they weren't finished properly."

Higgs struggled to his feet. "But why my face? Why me?"

"I don't know. I don't understand."

They stood in silence for a few moments, their flashlights stabbing the corridor ahead of them.

"I think they came out of that room up there on the right," ventured Milo nervously.

They began to advance slowly, not daring to articulate to each other what they feared they would find. Higgs reached the doorway first and stared in.

"Christ." Higgs reeled back. "Don't look"

Jodi and Milo looked. Milo fainted.

* * * * *

A long time passed before Higgs, Jodi or Milo said anything to each other. Milo just led the way through the maze of corridors, halls and chambers, solemnly checking the chart from time to time. They saw no further sign of the clones. Higgs called a halt occasionally and listened, just in case they were being followed, but he suspected the creatures would not bother them again. It seemed they had been scared of the shouting and the light. When Higgs, Jodi and Milo did start talking again, they made no mention of food. All of them had lost their appetites.

Finally, after about an hour of solid walking, Milo stopped in front of a door.

“This is it,” he murmured.

Higgs reached up and brushed the dirt and dust away, revealing a sign which read “Auxiliary Computer Room—Authorized Personnel Only”. He put his palms flat against the door and pushed upwards with all his might. Slowly, the door gave way and slid up. When the door was at full height, Milo wedged a crowbar into the groove along which it ran, jamming it in place.

The air in the room beyond was still and cold. Jodi shone her flashlight in, the beam picking out racks of computers and equipment in the blackness. The dust lay thick. Great bundles of multi-colored cables wound their way around the walls and snaked across the floor to the racks of computers. At one corner of the room stood two large blue cabinets fronted with glass doors. Inside each was a rack of machinery. Everything seemed intact. They saw no bullet holes, no burn marks, no corpses. The conflict that had left its mark on the rest of the station had not touched here.

They advanced into the room, flashlight beams darting about the gloom. Milo made his way to the blue cabinets. He opened the glass doors and bent down to have a good look inside. When he stood up again, he was clearly pleased.

“Great. These are generators and they seem to be intact.”

He opened the folder of charts and shone his flashlight onto the pages, studying them for a moment.

“As I thought. Just along the corridor, there’s a room with fuel pods. If we get those, we’re in business.”

Jodi turned to leave. “I’ll get them.”

Milo began wheeling one of the generator cabinets towards the racks of computers. “Higgs, give me a hand with this, would you?”

* * * * *

Jodi walked slowly down the corridor, flicking her flashlight from side to side. The mutant Higgs had spooked her, but in any event, she never had liked the dark. The fear of what might be hidden in the shadows was a hangover from her childhood. There could be anything—an axe murderer, a vampire, a really, really big, hairy spider. Yes, the dark was terrifying, but her will was stronger than her fear and she walked on, looking at the signs on the doors she passed.

She started suddenly and spun around. Was that a noise behind her? She hated this. She was scaring herself, she knew. Higgs had been certain they were not being followed and they had left the clones behind hours ago. She turned around and resumed her journey.

Her foot caught in something which crunched. She looked down and jumped, a little gasp of horror escaping from her lips. She had trodden in the rib cage of another skeleton.

“Shit,” she hissed, stepping backwards. “Shit, shit, shit.”

After a moment to regain her composure, she continued. *Come on, where is it, where is it?*

Her nerves in tatters, she reached a door labeled “Auxiliary Power Store—Authorized Personnel Only”. Out of the corner of her eye she saw something move, she was sure of it. She spun around and grabbed out with her hand. She caught hold of something and pulled. A skeleton which had been wedged into some shelving fell onto her. She screamed and backed up, fighting for breath, her heart trying to thump its way out of her chest.

“Get a grip, girl,” she told herself. “There’s nothing there.”

From behind, an arm grabbed her around the waist and a hand pressed a knife to her throat.

“Shut up,” hissed a voice, as a cloud of bad breath enveloped her.

“Jesus. Simms.”

“Shut up. I’ll, I’ll...I’ll do it.”

“Shit. Simms, what are you doing?”

“You’re coming back to Homeland with me. Then she’ll believe me. I’m not a terrorist.”

A beam of light fell on the pair as Higgs and Milo ran up and stopped some meters away.

“Jodi,” yelled Higgs. His gaze drifted to her assailant and his face fell. “Oh Jesus, Simms?”

Keeping the knife to Jodi’s throat, Simms released her waist, pulled the remote out of the front pocket of his jumpsuit and pointed it at Higgs.

“Stay back. Back. I’ll do it, I’m warning you.” Simms was bordering on hysteria.

“Simms, calm down,” said Jodi, as steadily as she could. “Even if you take me back to her, she’ll still terminate you, Simms. Homeland is mad.”

Milo backed slowly away. Higgs stepped forward.

“Simms, put the knife down. Taking Jodi back won’t help you, you know that.”

“What other chance have I got? He sacked me. That bastard Jared. He sacked me. The only job I’ve ever known. I was coming up for promotion soon too.”

“Simms, put the knife down. Do you really want to hurt Jodi?”

“And my credit rating. I’ll be blacklisted for life.”

“Simms, Homeland is mad. Unless we stop her, none of us have a credit rating. There’s more to this place than a shopping mall, Simms. We’re on a spaceship over Jupiter...”

Simms laughed maniacally.

“You’re telling me Homeland is mad? Jupiter? You’re mad.”

Suddenly a line of bright orange light appeared across them. They all looked across to the wall where Milo was doing his best to push up a panel. It gave way and the light of Jupiter flooded in. Beyond the planet was the deep black of space, peppered with a billion stars.

Simms gulped. “Oh m-m-my god.”

Higgs spoke quietly and evenly. “Simms, give me the knife.”

Simms lowered the knife from Jodi’s throat, staring at the window. Higgs stepped forward, took the knife from Simms’ unresisting hand, and pulled Jodi free. He cradled her in his arms.

“It’s okay.” He soothed her as she sobbed. “It’s okay.”

Simms sagged to his knees, still holding the remote limply.

Chapter Fourteen

Back in the auxiliary computer room, Milo fitted the fuel pods into the mobile generators. He had wired them up to the computers and seemed to be pleased with the progress he was making. Higgs, Jodi and Simms sat on a nearby desk and watched uselessly. This was Milo's domain and they could do little to help.

"You know, Higgs," said Simms, "they'd always planned to terminate you once you'd made some progress. You were always a subversive influence on the other crew, you see."

Higgs snorted. "So it would seem." He turned on Simms with sudden purpose. "How did I die?"

"You just flipped out one day. Homeland ordered you to terminate a terrorist suspect and you refused."

"What happened?"

"Oh, well it was a quick click on the remote and blam, blam, blam. The bomb. In your head."

Higgs clicked his tongue as he thought. "So, that was a clone that was killed, not the original me."

"Oh no, of course not. Before that you got depressed and suicidal and took an overdose."

"God, I never thought I'd die of an overdose."

"You didn't. Jodi saved you and then Homeland declared it was subversive behavior. Click, click, blam, blam."

“So, that was a clone too?”

“Yes. The time before that was, now let me see. Can’t remember exactly but it did involve your head exploding, so a clone, definitely.”

Simms looked up and his brow furrowed as he strained to remember.

“Hmmm, and the one before, a clone, yes. Took me ages to get your brains off my uniform after that one. And before that, clone.”

Simms was now mentally tallying up Higgs’ body count.

“Clone, clone, clone.”

He paused.

“Yes, I think that’s it. You’re on your ninth life, Higgs. Rather splendid really if you think of it like that.”

Higgs stared hard at Simms until he wilted. “Who was it that pushed the remote button on the remote control?”

“I was only obeying orders.”

Higgs shook his head in disbelief. “You killed me eight times, Simms. Didn’t you stop to think that Homeland might be being, well, shall we say a little overzealous in her war on terror?”

Simms flushed pink. He had nothing to say.

“But I revived you, Simms, and I only remember reviving Higgs once,” said Jodi. “So that means all your memories of Higgs dying were implanted. He could have died hundreds of times.”

Higgs got to his feet. “I don’t understand how Homeland gets hold of all our memories.”

“There’s a machine. It sits on your head for about ten minutes and replicates the biological circuitry in your brain with virtual electronics.”

“Okay, so why can’t Homeland do a scan and see we’re not terrorists?”

“Because she can’t understand human thought processes and there’s no way of translating the data into something you could put on a screen

for someone else to read. All she can do is dump it in someone's head and see what happens."

"So, before Simms was killed, he must have been sat in this machine to record the memories of me being killed?"

"I guess so. Simms, can you remember sitting in the machine?"

"Well, no, I don't even remember dying."

Jodi thought for a moment. "How many times have I been revived, Simms? How did I die last?"

Simms chewed his bottom lip sheepishly. "You were the terrorist suspect who Higgs was supposed to terminate when he flipped out, the last time he died. You've been done a few times."

A stony silence followed.

"I'm, I'm sorry," Simms stammered. "I guess that it was obvious that Homeland didn't know what was going on really. I've always felt something was wrong, something didn't add up. And always, always, I've been so afraid. They never told me I was cloned."

Jodi shook her head. "Nobody knows. You get your memories implanted. As far as I remember, I've always lived in the mall but it can't be true. It's a big lie."

"But we're going to find the truth, Simms," said Higgs. "And then nobody will have to be afraid anymore."

Simms fidgeted for a bit and then reached into his jump-suit pocket, pulling out the control. Higgs winced involuntarily but Simms offered the control to him.

"Here, you'd better have this, Higgs."

Higgs gingerly took the remote, a little lost for words. He gaped at Simms.

"Thank you," he managed at last.

With sudden purpose, Higgs opened the back of the remote and removed the batteries. He placed it on the floor and stamped repeatedly on it, shattering it beyond repair.

Jodi looked at Higgs. “The thing is, Higgs, the bomb in your head, it’s—”

Suddenly, a loud hum burst from the generators and the room’s lights flickered on, a sudden blinding whiteness after the hours of shadow. Milo leapt up jubilantly.

“Right, that’s that done.” He beamed. “Okay, my friends, to business.”

* * * * *

They crowded around the computer screens on the long desk in the center of the room, watching over Milo’s shoulders. Milo was in his element. He understood computers, electronics and machinery. They were all so much more reliable than most of the people he met and more interesting too. It wasn’t that he disliked people and lacked empathy—his writings, drawings, cartoons and poetry gave the lie to that. He just found people, well, adults at least, far too devious and complicated to relax with. Children were best of all, with their innocent determination to have fun. He had taught computing skills to elementary class children before, before...what? Before joining the mall. A hole in his memory denied him any answers. He sighed and bent his concentration back to the task at hand.

As the others watched, he keyed some commands in at the keyboard. A large diagram flickered up on the screen.

“Right, this is the plan of the space station, and this...”

He made a few more keystrokes and a network of colored lines appeared superimposed over the top of the floor plan.

“This is the computer network. Here’s the shopping mall and the area that Homeland controls. Here’s where we are.”

He pointed to all the locations as he spoke.

“Now, at the moment, this computer is not connected to the network so Homeland can’t see that it is active. I think that if we connect to the network and quickly erect some firewalls here, here and here at these nexus points—”

Simms interrupted. “Firewall? What’s a firewall?”

Jodi answered, evidently keen to show she was following everything. “It’s like a barrier in the network that Homeland won’t be able to get past.”

“Yes, well done, Jodi,” said Milo.

Jodi beamed.

“And if we get them up quickly—” Milo continued but was cut off again by Simms.

“What’s a nexus point?”

Jodi answered quickly. “It’s kind of a junction in the computer network where all the traffic has to go through.”

“Yes, Jodi. Right again.”

Jodi seemed so obviously pleased with herself, Milo felt he ought to offer to award her a gold star. “If we get them up quickly, we can isolate Homeland before it knows what’s going on and we’ve got control of the space station.”

“Sounds so easy,” snorted Higgs. “And how do we set up the firewalls?”

“Well, it will be quickest if we jack in.”

“Jack in?”

Milo smiled at Higgs and held up a handful of wires with suction cups at their ends.

* * * * *

Higgs sat in one of the many chairs in the auxiliary computer room while Jodi attached the last of the suction cups to his temples. Wires sprouted from his head like the snakes of the medusa and wormed their way to the banks of computers. Nearby, Milo sat, similarly adorned. Simms looked on, emanating good will and enthusiasm but otherwise to all intents and purposes, completely useless.

Jodi straightened up. "Okay, I think that's it."

"Right, Higgs," said Milo. "You ever done this before?"

Higgs shook his head.

"Ah well, don't worry, you'll pick it up in no time. Jodi, please switch us in."

"Good luck, boys."

Jodi reached across and pressed a key on the nearest computer keyboard.

* * * * *

Higgs had a momentary feeling of being stretched. It wasn't entirely unpleasant but then it wasn't pleasant either. Then, everything in his vision went a shade of electric blue and he felt as if he were spinning. Suddenly he found himself on a vast flat plain, a deep shiny blue in color and criss-crossed with a matrix of straight white lines which stretched away to the horizon. Everything felt real but part of him knew this was not a true reality, that he was inside the memory of the computer. He

glanced down at his body. He was crudely constructed out of spheres, cubes, triangles and ovals but they seemed to function well enough as a coherent whole.

Milo appeared to his left, a similar homunculus of geometric shapes. He looked across at Higgs and somehow managed to grin.

"You okay?" asked Milo, his voice a strange synthetic version of his real-life voice.

"I think so."

"Come on then."

In an instant, Milo shot across the screen at an unbelievable speed. Higgs remained motionless.

"Milo."

Milo stopped as instantly as he had started. He apparently had no momentum.

"What?"

Although Milo seemed many hundreds of meters distant, his voice was as clear as if he stood next to Higgs.

"How do I move?"

"Just will yourself forward."

Higgs tried thinking of himself moving and suddenly zoomed forward some considerable distance.

"Whoa," he shrieked, coming to an instant stop. "Holy shit."

He tried moving more slowly over to Milo and managed to control his movements reasonably well.

The collection of spheres, triangles and squares making up Milo's face contorted into a smile. "Takes a bit of getting used to. Come on, we don't have long."

They took off together over the featureless blue landscape, covering what seemed to be an enormous distance in seconds. Or were they

nanoseconds? Higgs had no more idea of how time unfolded here than space did. Right now, this vast blue plain he found himself in was stretching his ability to keep a mental grip to the limit. He decided not to worry about time.

Milo suddenly stopped and pointed to a dot far across the plain. "Look there"

The dot expanded into a small spacecraft, hanging motionless above the plain.

"It looks like a shuttle. I think it must be physically quite near to the backup computer room and its circuits are active, that's why we can see it here."

"So we could leave the space station on that?"

"It's a possibility. Come on."

They continued across the blue desert.

* * * * *

Chelsea always enjoyed carrying out surveillance in the shower block. She was careful not to do it when any of her colleagues in the security services were making use of them, that would just lead to trouble. She had been tracking a particularly well-built man and was watching with some satisfaction as he began to undress when, with a blaze of static, the screen went dead. Around her, Chelsea's colleagues were clearly having a similar experience.

Chelsea stood up. "Oh well. Coffee break, girls."

The lights flickered down and for a few moments the room plunged into complete darkness.

* * * * *

In his office beyond the glass wall, Jared sat at his desk, reading through a report. When the lights went off, he sat motionless, counting. A second passed, two, three. The lights flickered back up.

“My friend,” he said.

Homeland did not respond.

“My friend?”

Her voice came slowly, as if she was distracted.

“There is no...cause for...concern. The security situation...is under...control.”

* * * * *

Back in the auxiliary computer room, Jodi and Simms sat watching the computer screen. The plan of the space station with the computer network superimposed on it remained on the screen. Two small dots moved across the network, close together, heading towards the key nexus point near the mall.

Suddenly, the computer started beeping frantically and from a section of the network near the mall, a number of dots began to head towards the same point. Jodi grabbed a small microphone next to the computer and spoke into it.

“Higgs, Milo, Homeland is aware of the backup computer and is coming to investigate.”

Milo surprised them both by speaking from his chair, eyes still shut.

“We read you, Jodi.”

* * * * *

Higgs and Milo continued to speed across the plain. Ahead of them, white lines seemed to be bending and converging to a point.

“That’s it,” shouted Milo.

* * * * *

Jodi watched as the dots from Homeland bore down on the nexus point. She spoke into the microphone again.

“It’s not good, they’re going to beat you to it.”

Milo’s prone body spoke from the chair. “Okay, we read you. Is there a point closer to the auxiliary room?”

Jodi studied the screen. “Yes, I’ll direct you to it.”

She tapped on the screen.

* * * * *

Higgs and Milo stopped abruptly. Heading towards them at high speed came a swarm of figures.

“Jesus,” said Higgs when he saw them clearly. They were no crude constructs like he and Milo. Instead, someone had invested a little time and energy in some high-quality graphics. Leading the charge were a row of great dogs, like rabid mastiffs, wild-eyed and foaming, skin patterned with the stars and stripes. Behind them came the robots, each with two caterpillar tracks for legs and rocket launchers for arms, the words of the second amendment written across a star-spangled banner on their chest.

The robots fired at Higgs and Milo.

“Time to go,” shouted Higgs and they turned about-face and sped away, the howling of the dogs calling after them.

* * * * *

Jodi watched on the edge of her seat. Homeland's dots were gaining on Higgs' and Milo's dots and there wasn't much she could do. Higgs and Milo reached the nexus point but she could see they didn't have long.

* * * * *

Milo halted in an instant. "We're here." On the floor below him, the white lines from all around converged to a point.

"What now?" yelled Higgs.

"We make a firewall." Milo held up his hands and pulled a flaming brick the size of a table out of thin air.

"Jesus, how did you do that?"

But Milo didn't answer, he just laid the brick on the floor and created another and then another, faster and faster until he became a blur. In front of Higgs a great wall of flame was building up, brick by brick. A rocket flew past Higgs and exploded behind him. He looked back across the plain. Homeland's programs were closing in fast, faster than Milo could build the wall. There was only one thing for it.

"Keep going, I'll draw their fire."

From the blur of flaming bricks Milo had become came the shout "No wait..." but Higgs was gone.

Homeland's slaving hounds and robots were not expecting Higgs to come speeding towards them and he had run right through their lines before they had chance to react. One of the robots tried to fire at him as he passed through their ranks but the rocket went wide, hitting one of the other robots. It exploded and vanished. The horde spun around away from the firewall in pursuit of Higgs. He dodged from side to side, trying

to evade the teeth of the hounds and the rockets from the robots. He had lost the element of surprise and they outnumbered him. He couldn't shake them off for very much longer.

Milo's voice echoed across the plain. "Higgs, it's done, quick."

Higgs came to a sudden stop and reversed direction. The horde shot past him and then did the same but he gained a few vital seconds. He zoomed back towards Milo as fast as he could. In front of him now was a vast wall of fire, stretching from one end of the horizon to the other and towering above the plain. One, brick-sized hole remained, but, since the bricks were as large as a door, Higgs thought he might be able to get through.

He felt a pain on his right leg. One of the hounds had gotten hold. Higgs kicked it with his other leg and it let go but he noticed with alarm that his foot was gone. The wall was just another few yards and he redoubled his efforts. The hound closed in again for a second bite but was too late. Higgs disappeared through the hole in the wall and Milo placed the final brick. The hound smashed into the wall and was consumed in fire, howling terribly as it vaporized.

On the far side of the wall, Higgs looked up at Milo. "You okay?"

Milo nodded. "Good. Jodi, how are things looking out there?"

* * * * *

Jodi was out of her seat, jumping up and down with excitement. Simms was chewing his nails.

Jodi put her mouth to the microphone. "It's looking good. One more firewall and we've got the bitch beaten."

But their joy was cut short—the computer began to beep. Some parts of the network around the mall went dark and new lines started to

appear on the plan, lines which bypassed the nexus point Higgs and Milo had just blocked.

“Milo, Higgs, more of the network is coming on-line.”

“Why are these parts of the plan going dark?” asked Simms.

“I think it’s the power. Homeland is diverting power away from the mall so that it can bring more of the network up. There’s no way we can isolate it.”

She screamed into the microphone. “Higgs, Milo, get out, now.”

* * * * *

Higgs and Milo were still by the firewall when Jodi’s warning came. Higgs pointed to the point where the wall met the sky. “Look.”

The firewall was shrinking away from the horizon and countless hounds and robots poured around the edge.

Higgs grabbed Milo’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

They sped away under a volley of rocket fire. They went as fast as they could but Higgs found that, not surprisingly when he thought about it, the loss of a foot hampered the turn of speed he could put on. It didn’t seem to matter that he wasn’t actually running. The hounds were gaining. In the distance, they could see the shuttle and the point at which they came in, but Higgs could not outrun Homeland’s programs.

A sudden, deafening noise of static tore through Higgs’ head and a great void opened up between Higgs, Milo and their pursuers. It wasn’t a chasm as such, just an area of nothingness. Some of the hounds ran into it and vanished instantly.

“What the hell is that?” Higgs yelled.

“I don’t know. Jodi? Jodi.”

* * * * *

The computer had taken a direct hit. The androids had caught them by surprise, their gunfire the first indication that four of them had reached the doorway. Simms had dived for cover behind some of the more bulky machinery in the corner of the room and it had been left to Jodi to return fire with the automatic pistol she found in the mess hall. She had taken cover behind the generator, firing at the androids as best she could but she was not good with a gun and her shots ricocheted off their armor. They advanced slowly into the room, shooting whenever she emerged from her cover to fire a shot.

Higgs and Milo sat in their chairs as blissfully unaware as babies in their sleep. They were away from the direct line of fire and, since they were motionless, the androids ignored them. Jodi was their quarry for now and they were closing in.

* * * * *

Higgs and Milo watched as the void began to expand in all directions. It swallowed up the hounds and robots and swept towards them.

Milo shook his head. "This isn't good, come on."

They turned and sped towards the exit point. The sound of static grew louder and louder and Higgs began to feel pain running through his body. They made the exit point just moments before the void swept up the remainder of this virtual reality into oblivion.

* * * * *

Great blue sparks shot out of the computer. Higgs and Milo both flew from their chairs with a yell and landed on the floor, clutching their

heads and groaning. One of the androids, noticing them for the first time, turned to face them and raised its gun. Jodi fired wildly at it and, by luck more than design, caught it in the neck. The gun flew from its hands and it spun around, arms flailing, crashing into the remaining three androids.

Jodi ducked behind the generator and tried to reload. There was more of an art to these things than she had realized and she was a medical officer, goddamn it. Struggling with the new ammunition clip, she accidentally ejected half the bullets onto the floor.

“Oh bugger.”

There was no time to put the bullets back in, a half-full clip would have to do. Shoving it into the gun, she leaned from behind the generator to fire and gasped—one of the androids had reached her. It swung its hand lazily and sent her sprawling backwards. As she struggled to regain her feet, it raised its gun. Jodi stared down the barrel of the automatic rifle. There was no escape. The sound of full automatic fire rang out and she curled up in anticipation of the pain.

After a moment, when no pain came, she looked up. The android was sprawled over the floor, its head blown clean off. The other two androids were dead on the floor and there, framed in the smoke from their charred heads, stood Higgs, automatic rifle in hand.

He winked at her.

“Well aren’t you the action man,” she growled.

Chapter Fifteen

Jared sat anxiously in the large leather seat beneath the monitors on the walls of his office. Fine grey static flowed across them but try as he might, Jared could not get a picture. It was no use talking to *her*, she simply gave the same response over and over in that distracted voice. He had ordered the security officers into the mall, backed up by an extra contingent of androids, but no reports of any unrest had come in. The lights kept flickering, and more than once they dimmed down, although they did not go off completely again.

Suddenly, the screens all flashed into life, showing pictures from around the mall. The cameras were back online.

Jared let out a long sigh of relief. "My friend?"

"My friend."

Her voice was back to normal, he noted.

"What happened, my friend?"

"I do not understand your question, my friend."

"The cameras have been off-line for the last ten minutes, my friend."

"The security situation is under control, my friend."

"Why were the cameras off, my friend? Were you under attack?"

Jared waited impatiently for Homeland to speak. "Terrorists have been trying to access my circuits but they have been repelled. The security situation is under control, my friend. Do not concern yourself further with this matter."

Jared tensed up. That phrase meant the conversation was over but he couldn't let this one go. Not something as major as this.

"My friend, where did the terrorists try to hack in from?"

"From within the mall, my friend."

"Then we must send security officers to the place where they tried to hack in. Where in the mall was it?"

"Within the mall."

"Where in the mall?"

"Within the mall."

Jared sucked in his breath. Did she not know? The thought wormed its way into his mind. She had to know, she knew everything. Why would she not tell him?

"Do we have any report back from the androids sent out after Simms, my friend?" he asked eventually.

"Negative."

"Do you know where they are now, my friend?"

"Within the mall."

Jared opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

"There is no cause for concern. The security situation is under control. My friend."

* * * * *

Mandy was dressed inappropriately for the cold and goose bumps raised themselves on her exposed, well-tanned skin. She shivered and looked down at the black box in her hand. It beeped encouragingly and a small arrow lit up on it to tell her the direction she should follow. It pointed straight ahead. Since she stood in a dark T-junction, straight ahead would mean going through the wall. She impatiently shook the

device to see if it would give her any more useful information but it didn't.

She cursed Simms. The stupid man should have told her how the wretched little device was supposed to work. Now, she was here, all on her own, cold, hungry, thirsty, tired and utterly, utterly lost. It was clear she was no longer in the mall, there was no sign of any security cameras and she couldn't ask Homeland for help. At least when she had been crawling around in the ventilation shafts it had been reasonably warm. When she found that fickle idiot Higgs, she'd make damn sure he realized what she had been through.

A noise behind her made her start, a single, loud tap of metal on metal. She spun around and flashed her light down the corridor she had just walked up but saw only shadows and dust. She could see her footprints leading away from her. Perhaps it was nothing. After all, this place, wherever it was, was so silent, any noise was deafening.

She turned her attention back to the tracking device. The damn thing was still telling her to try to walk through the wall. There was nothing for it, she would have to choose left or right. Another tap echoed from the corridor. She jumped and flashed her light behind her again.

"Who's there?" she whispered hoarsely.

Three taps came from down the corridor and then, as if to answer, a series of tapping sounds came from the corridor leading to the right at the T-junction. She flashed her light up that corridor now. Nothing. Her heart thumped so hard as to be almost painful. After a moments silence, the tapping started again but continuously this time, from both corridors and getting louder.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

The tapping was unrelenting. Mandy shoved the tracking device into her handbag and pulled out the pistol. Out of the darkness down the

right-hand corridor came a hiss. Mandy nearly wet herself. It seemed that the decision on which direction to take had been made for her, the left-hand corridor was the only option. Another hiss came from the corridor she had walked up. She began to back down the left-hand corridor, flashing her light behind her, gun cocked and ready. The tapping got faster and faster and her heartbeat quickened to their rhythm. She stumbled as she walked backwards, bumping into the walls.

Turning to run, she thrust her gun out in front of her. She had not seen the fine, wire noose hanging from the ceiling but she had put her gun hand through it. It pulled tight, yanking her arm upwards sharply and biting into her wrists. She howled and, involuntarily, her finger squeezed the trigger and a volley of bullets shot upwards. The wire went loose and dropped down. A warm liquid fell onto her like rain. She shone her flashlight upwards to reveal an open ventilation shaft in the ceiling. Hanging half out of the hole was the body of what looked as if it had once been a man, with a huge, distended head and translucent skin. He had a bullet hole in his forehead. Mandy screamed and ran.

* * * * *

The Auxiliary Computer Room was in chaos. The floor was littered with cartridges, ripped wires and scattered fragments of equipment. An oily black smoke seeped from the generator and the walls were pockmarked with bullet holes. It had taken a little while but Jodi had eventually managed to pull Simms back from the depths of his hysteria. He now sat, humiliated and silent, by the wall. Higgs and Milo had piled the bodies of the androids in one corner.

Milo looked at the wreckage, shaking his head.

"How the hell did they find us?" Higgs stared at his right foot. He wiggled his toes, relieved to discover that, despite the pain he had felt at the time, the loss of his foot had been entirely virtual.

"Homeland must have been able to tell from the backup computer," replied Jodi.

"No way, they got here too quickly. They must have been on to us already."

"Simms?" hissed Jodi.

They glanced at Simms brooding against the wall. Milo shook his head again and walked to the nearest rack of computers. He started to poke around in the wreckage.

Higgs leaned across to Jodi and whispered, "I don't think so. Simms was running from the androids too."

"One of us must be carrying a tracking device. Probably Simms, although he won't know it."

"Shit. He just cannot help being a pain in the ass, can he? Even when he's on our side."

"Hmmm, actually..." Milo straightened up, smiling. "It's not so bad. It'll take me a couple of hours but I can fix this and we can have another shot."

Higgs sighed. "And what exactly is the point in that? Homeland can just activate more circuits and bypass any firewalls we set up."

Simms looked up suddenly. "You said you saw a shuttle nearby. Let's get on it and get out of here."

Jodi folded her arms crossly. "What about saving everyone else back at the mall?"

Simms had a wild glimmer in his eye. "I don't care. I've got to get out of here. They're trying to kill me."

Higgs frowned. Everything was wrong. He had spent his life working in a system which relied on trusting the chain of command without questioning orders, without thinking about yourself. But now, the system was trying to kill him and a cornerstone of his life had been broken. His memory was full of holes and he was not even the person he thought he was—he was a clone, on at least his ninth life.

“Perhaps Simms is right.” Higgs began pacing the floor, his brow furrowed. “I can’t see how we can beat Homeland now.”

“What other option do we have? We have to keep trying,” said Jodi.

Higgs stopped and turned to face her. “I’m going to the shuttle.”

Jodi narrowed her eyes. “God, I can’t believe I’m hearing you say this, Higgs. There are several thousand innocent people in that mall—”

Higgs cut her off. “Innocent? No one’s innocent. All those people in the mall know something is wrong but not one of them will do anything about it. Not one of them. Why not? Because they are cowards.”

“No. They’re afraid, Higgs, afraid. Just because someone’s afraid, it doesn’t make them a coward. A coward is someone who knows what they should do and just walks away.”

“So you think I’m a coward?”

“Well aren’t you? Turning your back and running away?”

“We can’t do anything to help them and we have an opportunity to save ourselves. What do you expect?”

“I expected more of you. I expected you to at least want to try.”

“I’m going to the shuttle,” Higgs bellowed. “Who’s coming with me?”

Jodi turned away from him. He looked at Milo but Milo stared at his feet and shook his head. Higgs didn’t bother to check Simms for his opinion.

“Okay, so that’s how it’s going to be then?”

Neither Jodi or Milo made any response.

“Right then.”

He put his hands on his hips. Still no response.

“I’m going to the shuttle.” He paused and then added in a quieter voice, “Just to have a look at it.”

He turned and walked dejectedly from the room. Simms leapt up and scuttled after him.

Jodi nursed her bruised feelings.

“Bastard,” she said to herself quietly.

* * * * *

The shuttle stood in a large hangar at the end of a structure projecting out from the rim of the space station. Higgs and Simms had walked down several flights of stairs by flashlight to get there, Higgs storming ahead crossly with Simms scuttling behind. It had been a much broader stairwell than the one which descended to the observation post and they passed huge lifts as well, although, with no power, these were dark and silent. The stairwell had led them down to a glass-walled control room, projecting from the wall of the hangar, high above the floor.

The hangar itself was some two hundred meters square, with an arched roof some fifty meters high. The shuttle rested at the center of the hangar, facing two vast steel hangar doors, which closed off the vacuum of space beyond.

In appearance, the shuttle reminded Higgs of the archaic space shuttles of the twentieth century, long and thin, with narrow wings at one end and a cockpit at the other. What set this shuttle apart from its predecessors was sponsorship. Various colas, candies and tabloid newspapers competed with each other for every available inch of space on its aerodynamically perfect surface. On the side facing them, just

before the wing, was an entrance hatch with a small flight of portable steps leading up to it.

They descended a further flight of stairs to the entrance of the hangar. A heavy steel door led from the stairwell to a small chamber with a similar door opposite leading to the hangar. Higgs hissed angrily as he stormed through. "This is an air-lock for heaven's sake. One of these bloody doors should be shut."

Higgs strode across the hangar to the shuttle with Simms trailing on his heels, struggling to keep up. Higgs climbed the steps and stared hard at a small panel to the side of the hatch.

"This is the right thing to do, Higgs. If they want to stay and die, that's up to them."

"Simms, shut up."

"Just don't doubt your decision, that's all I'm saying."

"Simms."

"Okay, okay."

Higgs leaned forward and pushed at the panel. A cover sprang up with a small, cheerful beep, clipping Higgs on the nose and doing nothing to improve his mood. Beneath the cover were controls to open the hatch. Higgs started punching buttons randomly.

"I don't think it's cowardice to run away from certain death even if it does mean you have to leave a few people behind," continued Simms, apparently oblivious to how close he was coming to losing several of his front teeth. "Better to save one or two people rather than have everyone die, eh? Better still if those one or two are us, eh?"

Higgs thumped on the side of the shuttle with his fist. "Simms."

"You shouldn't thump on the side of the shuttle like that, you might damage some of the heat shields."

Higgs turned to face Simms until his nose was an inch from his face. "Simms, shut up," he screamed.

Simms looked down. *Everyone always shouts at me.* He never understood why. Higgs turned back to the panel and thumped a button. The hatch opened. Higgs stood there, looking into the craft.

After a minute, Simms felt he had to say something. "Well, shall we?"

Higgs stepped back away from the hatch and jumped off the steps.

"What are you doing?" gasped Simms.

"I can't do it."

"What? We'll die if we stay here."

"You go. Maybe you can get help or something. You'd almost be a hero then."

"But I don't know how to fly this thing."

Higgs smiled and then snorted. "Neither do I."

He turned and walked away across the hangar.

"Higgs," shouted Simms but Higgs kept walking.

"Bugger."

* * * * *

Jodi stood by one of the portholes in the hallway outside the auxiliary computer room. She heard Milo, the ever-optimistic Milo, humming cheerfully as he tried to repair the computer equipment. He wouldn't let a small thing like completely impossible odds and a totally hopeless situation daunt his spirits. She could quite take to a man like that. Admittedly, he'd have to wash a little more frequently. And shave. And perhaps work out a bit and do something about the ever-present sweat patches in his armpits. And have a bit more personality. She sighed. He was optimistic at least. Good old Milo.

She looked at the great disk of Jupiter through the porthole. The planet was utterly beautiful. Toxic, violent and uninhabitable but utterly beautiful nonetheless. She thought of Higgs. He was so infuriating, so full of himself. And he had let her down when she had thought so much of him. People always did this, always let her down. Well, men at least. Bloody men. Bastards, the lot of them. She sniffed emotionally.

She heard a noise behind her in the corridor. It wasn't Milo, she could still hear him humming. "What's wrong, did you forget something?"

"I'm sorry," Higgs replied.

She nearly fainted. She hung onto the porthole for support.

"I forgot what it was that I believed in. I'm sorry."

She turned around to face him. He looked down.

"All my life I've been proud of my country and I've wanted to protect what it stood for, its freedom, its justice. Homeland has made a mockery of everything I believed in but it doesn't make what I believed in wrong."

Jodi walked over to him, her heart pounding. She had decided she was going to kiss him. Any man who could say sorry deserved to get his leg over.

"You're a good man, Higgs. Full of yourself, but a good man."

She put her hand under his chin and raised his head. He smiled at her, weakly. "I'm sorry I'm so full of myself." Melancholy crept into his voice. "My father didn't love me for what I was," he began.

"Oh, shut up."

She kissed him.

* * * * *

Simms sat in the cockpit of the shuttle and cursed his lot. He was second rate, he knew that. A coward. People like Higgs were made to be

heroes, everything was easy for them. Big, tough, handsome guys, bursting with self confidence. Everybody loved Higgs, wanted to be like him, the man who always got the girl, the medals, the praise. The Simms of the world were always just the runts in the litter, the people nobody wanted around.

He sniffed, tears welling up and rolling down his nose. A great, stupid, awkward stick insect of a man, useless at everything, boring, friendless and unloved. And his bloody jumpsuit didn't even fit properly. He sobbed uncontrollably. He had always felt alone but now the feeling was so acute as to be unbearable.

* * * * *

Milo stared at the computers determinedly. He saw from the corner of his eyes Higgs and Jodi in mid-clinch. To be honest, he thought they were getting a little carried away. After all, there was a time and a place for everything and they were trying to save a lot of people's lives here. After a few moments, he saw them disentangle. Jodi pulled Higgs away by the hand, her finger to her lips as she did so. Milo tutted and wondered crossly whether they had any protection. What a place to start getting amorous. Then he laughed at himself. He was jealous, there was no denying it. It would never be him who got the girl.

The circuit board he was supposed to be working on glittered in the light. Milo cheered up a bit. He knew where he was with circuit boards.

* * * * *

Simms pulled himself together. After all, he was a survivor, admittedly more by luck than design. While Higgs had managed to get

himself terminated at least eight times, Simms, as far as he could work out, had only been terminated once. Regardless, he was not going to stay in this madhouse a moment longer. The baddies wanted to kill him and the goodies, well, they probably felt like killing him as well but didn't do that sort of thing on account of the fact they were the goodies.

"To hell with them all," he shouted.

He had a duty to himself to at least try to survive.

He looked at the vast panel of switches and dials in front of them. Surely there must be an auto-pilot? He began to randomly flick switches and push buttons. Panels lit up and LEDs started flashing. One switch he flicked resulted in a large amount of static filling the cabin. The communications system, he decided. He left it on.

After a few minutes, nothing happened in a very resolute manner. Simms sagged back. What had he expected? It took years to train a pilot to fly a space shuttle and all he had any formal training in was in writing minutes.

He sat and listened to the static. It filled the cockpit, a uniform blanket of sound, pushing out his thoughts. After a few minutes, something started nagging at him. It wasn't a uniform sound. He sat forward and listened. Something was there, under the static, barely audible but something.

He looked back to the switch that had turned the static on. Next to it sat a large dial. Carefully, he turned the dial. There, again, the something under the static but louder this time, clearer. Somebody was talking.

"Shit."

He listened more intently, turning the dial as carefully as he could, and then, suddenly, he tuned in on a voice. A man's voice, clear and loud. Simms listened to it. The man was not speaking English. Simms

could make out the words *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks* but the rest was all Greek to him.

No, not Greek. French.

Chapter Sixteen

Higgs, Milo, Simms and Jodi crammed into the cockpit, straining to listen to the words coming from the communications equipment.

“Definitely French,” said Jodi with conviction.

“French?” spat Simms. “I thought so. Snail-eating subversives, the lot of them.”

“Do you speak French?” Higgs asked Jodi.

“No.” She turned to Simms. “I’m sorry, Simms, but I resent that remark. I went out with a Frenchman once. He was a good man.”

“What?” choked Higgs. Jodi looked back at him sharply.

Higgs checked himself. “I mean, you’ve never told me.”

“I’m not racist,” said Simms, eager to make up for his politically incorrect outburst. “Obviously I’ve got nothing against the French *per se*.”

Jodi ignored him, her attention remaining on Higgs. “Do I have to tell you about every ex-boyfriend?”

Higgs was hurt. “Well, okay, so it’s not my business then?”

The four of them fell silent while the voice on the communication channel continued.

Higgs shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “How long were you seeing him for?”

Milo tutted impatiently. “Look, sorry to get in the way of this little domestic but do you think we could concentrate on how we contact these guys?”

He reached forward and started to flick switches in the vicinity of the dial Simms had used to tune into the voice. Suddenly, a video screen on the control panel flickered to life. A man’s face appeared on the screen, a man in uniform. A man with dark skin. He was speaking—his voice was the one they could hear over the communications equipment.

“He’s an Arab,” said Simms flatly.

Jodi sucked in her breath. “Not sure that Homeland will go a bundle on this one.”

“No shit,” snorted Higgs.

“A French Arab. We’re sunk.” Jodi leaned back and laughed in despair. “I mean, you couldn’t make it up. Can we hail them back?”

Milo concentrated on the controls, flicking switches and carefully twisting dials. The voice of the man on the screen was replaced by the harsh drone of static.

Milo shook his head, frowning. “I can’t. The outward-going channel isn’t working. I think it’s being jammed somehow.”

“How close are they?” asked Higgs.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure, hang on.” Milo peered at some readings on another screen. “Hey, I think they’re pretty close. There’s an observation post near here.”

* * * * *

Captain Saddam Bin Laden sat on the bridge of the Starship *Cola Français*. On the main viewing screen hung the vast ring that was the *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks* orbital space station. He was strapped into his

seat. Unlike the space station, the *Cola Français* had no way of generating gravity and, without a seatbelt, the good captain would drift around his bridge in a most undignified manner.

Beneath them, Europa spun like a pearl in the endless night of space. Europa, ice moon of Jupiter. The one place in the solar system other than Earth which had abundant water, moving beneath the frozen surface in a vast ocean, heated by the massive gravitational pull of the giant planet. Life, that was what this had all been about. The search for life, the answer to the question as to whether mankind was alone in the universe. Of all the places in the solar system, Europa was the one with the most promise of life. Mars had turned out to be a barren red desert. There had been water there, billions of years ago, but it had evaporated out to space long before any primitive life forms had managed to evolve. Well, before they had evolved to a sufficient degree to leave any fossils at any rate. And water was what was needed for life. Water in abundance. Europa had plenty of water and with it, the possibility of life.

The *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks* space station turned lazily beneath him. He had been transmitting his message for nearly an hour and was beginning to suspect the worst fears of mission control were true. Something terrible had happened. The asteroid sticking out of the side of the craft must have wiped everybody out. There had been reports back from the space station up until five years ago but then silence.

While his recorded transmission continued he scanned the surface of the space station. As his ship slowly traversed the rim of the space station, he saw a docking station coming up. A shuttle would be in there. That might be the place to send in an exploratory team. Beyond the docking station, an observation post stuck out. Something caught his eye. He looked closer at the observation post—was that a flash he saw?

“Reduce speed,” he barked. “Set a course to take us closer to that observation post.”

The Starship *Cola Français* slowed and drew closer to the space station. Yes, definitely a flashing light. He peered closely at the windows of the observation post. There, four people, all waving frantically. “Increase the magnification on the screen. Center on the observation post windows.”

The picture on the screen blinked out to static and then came back again, showing the observation post in close up. He could see two men, a woman and something that looked like a human stick insect.

Captain Saddam unfastened his seatbelt and floated across towards the screen, shouting excitedly. “Move us as close as possible. I want to establish visual contact.”

* * * * *

Inside the observation post, Higgs, Jodi, Simms and Milo leapt up and down as vigorously as they could.

“I think they’re coming over,” shouted Higgs. “They’ve seen us. Quick, find something to write on.”

They searched around the observation post as the spaceship drew closer but nothing could be found to write on.

Jodi had a flash of inspiration. “Signs. I’ll try signs.”

She returned to the window and looked out. The spaceship had drawn up to within forty meters. They could see a number of men peering out of a porthole on the side. The one at the front was the man they had seen on the shuttle’s communication equipment. He waved at them and then shrugged.

Jodi waved back and then, in signs, said, “*Do you understand signs?*”

* * * * *

Captain Saddam watched the red-headed woman signaling at him with her hands. Clutching the side of the porthole to maintain his position as he floated, he turned to his lieutenant. "What is she doing?"

"I believe that is sign language, sir, as used by deaf people."

"I know what sign language is, thank you, Lieutenant." The Lieutenant got on his nerves. Nothing personal, Captain Saddam just found him irritating.

"Do we have anyone who can understand it?"

"Chief Medical Officer Sheila Walker might do, sir. She's Australian as well, so she might speak English."

"I imagine that it is a fairly safe bet, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant stood his ground in a floaty sort of way. Captain Saddam quietly counted to ten. *Initiative, that's what I like to see.*

"Well best get her here quickly then, don't you think, Lieutenant?"

* * * * *

Higgs, Milo and Simms watched as Jodi and Chief Medical Officer Sheila Walker conferred with each other across the vacuum of space in signs. Higgs managed to follow most of it but had to concede that Jodi was better at it than him. Watching them made him think of his brother, his family. God alone knew where they were. If he ever got out of here, finding them would be his first priority. Suddenly, Jodi stepped away from the window and turned to face the others.

"Okay, I've told them everything. They're conferring." She sighed.

Simms grinned cheerily as ever. “All this time you’ve been able to talk in signs and Homeland didn’t understand what you were saying?”

“Yes. It was a useful way of getting rid of stress. I think that anything that she doesn’t understand, she simply ignores.”

“That’s so cool.” Simms thought for a moment. “You used to do something every time I came into the room. That was signs, wasn’t it? What were you saying?”

Jodi was caught out by this. After all, Simms only ranked slightly above Jared in Jodi’s scheme of things and she had quickly run out of expletives to use in his company. Her mouth opened and closed like a beached fish. “Er.”

Higgs came to her rescue. “Jodi, I think they’re signaling again.”

Jodi leapt gratefully to the window and watched intently for a few minutes. She then signed back to the French ship.

“What did you say,” asked Milo when she stopped.

“They wanted us to let them in at the shuttle docking port but I told them the only place with any power is the mall.”

Milo started to leaf through the plans of the space station. After a few moments, he found what he was looking for.

“There’s a docking station connected to the mall. It leads off from Precinct Nine.”

“That was the one that lost the air.” Higgs shuddered at the memory of the carnage.

Milo continued. “If we can get to the docking station, we can let them in.”

Higgs snorted. “But only if we could persuade Homeland to open the doors. Hey, Ma’am, we’d like to let a load of French Arabs into the mall.”

Jodi resumed signing at the nearby starship. After a few minutes, she stopped and watched for their response.

“Override code?” she said. “They’re talking about a code that overrides Homeland. Any ideas?”

Milo shook his head. “No. What sort of code would it be?”

“Just a long number that you can key in...” Jodi stopped mid-sentence. “A long number. My god, I’ve written it on the underside of a bench in the storeroom near my office.”

“What?” gasped Higgs.

“All this time it’s been there. I must have written it in a former life. My god.”

Higgs gesticulated towards the French ship. “Tell them we can get the override code.”

Jodi sighed. “But how? We’ll never get past Homeland’s cameras.”

“We can,” beamed Milo. “I think I might have an idea.”

* * * * *

Back in the auxiliary computer room, Milo bustled around the computers while the others watched. He hummed tunelessly to himself—he was enjoying this. He always liked the space between having an idea and seeing if it could be made to work. It gave him an exciting feeling that anything might be possible. After twenty minutes he finally stopped and turned to the others, beaming.

“Yep, thought so.”

“Share a bit more?” suggested Jodi.

“I can fix it.”

Higgs folded his arms. “Okay. I still don’t see how that helps us.”

Milo smiled patiently. “Simple really. Think about all those brownouts in the mall. They were happening all the time, yes?”

Higgs shrugged. “True.”

“So, there’s barely enough power to keep everything going.”

“Except that the fusion reactors provide much more power than the mall needs. I went and saw them for myself, they’re huge.”

“But they’re also feeding all those hothouses and heaven knows what else besides. Everywhere else we’ve been, the power has been off and, this is the important bit, the computer networks are off. Homeland doesn’t have the power to run everything. So, if she turns on the computer network, she has to turn something else off.”

Higgs nodded. “With you so far.”

“So, what can she turn off? If she turns off the lights, the cameras can’t see anyway, so she may as well turn off the cameras and leave the lights on. At least that way she still has the androids and the security officers. When we got the network up, I’m sure she diverted the power away from the cameras in order to attack the backup computer.”

“Okay. And?”

Jodi had caught on and cut in. “Meaning that if Milo fires up the backup computer to distract Homeland, the cameras will be off and we can get the override code and let the French in before Homeland knows what’s hit her.”

“Well done, Jodi,” smiled Milo.

Jodi blushed slightly. Milo thought she seemed rather proud of herself. Two gold stars, he decided.

Higgs shook his head. “Milo, you’d be taking a big risk going into the computer on your own.”

“Nah, it’s just a big video game. You’re the one who’s got to creep past the androids armed to the teeth with assault rifles.”

“Anyway, Higgs,” beamed Simms, “I’ll be here to look after him.”

Jodi, Higgs and Milo turned and looked hard at Simms. He withered under their collective gaze.

“Won’t I?”

* * * * *

Mandy had switched her flashlight off and sat curled up in the darkness. She was hardly comfortable, squeezed as she was into a small cupboard, but at least her hiding place was warm. After running wildly until her lungs were bursting, she had been forced to slow to a walk. The tapping had stopped but the silence was no more comforting and her fear had kept her moving. Finally, when she felt she could not go any further, she had come to an open area from which several corridors led off. Here, she had found the cupboard and crawled inside.

She had taken Penelope out of her handbag and now chewed the poor cloth cat’s ear mercilessly while she listened for any sound of pursuit. All was silent. Desperately wanting to straighten her limbs, she tried to estimate how much time she had spent in the cupboard. Was it minutes? Half an hour? The pain in her cramped legs was growing unbearable—staying put for much longer was not an option. She still had her gun and ammunition and had shot at least one of her assailants. That thought made her feel better. That would teach the mother to mess with Mandy.

A noise from outside made her start. Stuffing Penelope back into her bag, she listened intently. She heard breathing and soft footfalls, the sounds of people trying to move quietly. They were getting closer.

With the flashlight in one hand and the gun in the other, she peered through the cracks in the cupboard door for any signs of light outside. She couldn’t see any but was not sure whether that was because there was nothing to see or simply because she couldn’t see out. Her flashlight was still off but, she mused, if she turned it on and burst out of the

cupboard, she would blind whoever was approaching with the beam. It would be better than being trapped inside this little box. The gun felt comfortable in her hand. She had killed someone. Nobody messes with Mandy.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and pushed herself against the cupboard door, switching the flashlight on as she did so. The doors gave way more easily than she had expected and she fell out onto the floor. She heard the sound of groaning and, making sure she kept the flashlight beam directed away from her, she sat up and opened her eyes.

At the far side of the room and framed in the beam of light, were five hideous, deformed, naked men with glassy skin and oversized heads. Mandy screamed but held her fire—Higgs was there, at the front, but bloated and misshapen, filthy with wild hair.

“Higgsie, babe, what have they done to you?”

“Oh,” growled Higgs.

The men started to advance, shielding their eyes from the light. Mandy took a step back.

“Higgsie?”

Perhaps it wasn't Higgs? It looked like him but it couldn't be. The Higgs tracker was telling her Higgs was not near here. This mutant Higgs was naked, no phone.

“You're not Higgs, are you?”

“Oh,” growled the not-Higgs.

As they continued to advance, the men seemed to be getting more agitated, preparing to rush her perhaps? She wondered if they had been the ones making the tapping noises. They had to have been. *Scaring me so that I ran into that noose, so that the one in the ceiling could kill me. They were trying to kill me. Nobody messes with Mandy.*

She opened fire.

* * * * *

Milo sat in the chair opposite the computers. He had lashed them up as well as he could with spares from the storeroom and had satisfied himself that they would work. From his head sprouted the wires that would allow him to connect straight into the network and take on Homeland again. He'd be on his own this time but all he had to do was keep her occupied for a few minutes.

Jodi had communicated their plan to Captain Saddam, and the French ship had flown off to the docking port by Precinct Nine. If Higgs, Jodi and Simms could get the French in, there would be enough firepower to take on the androids.

Milo pressed a key on the keyboard and the floor plan and computer network appeared on the screen. The area around Homeland was live. All he had to do was flick one more switch and his part of the network would come on-line. He looked at his watch. They had allowed an hour for Higgs, Jodi and Simms to get back to the mall. They had only two videophones between them and the plan dictated that Jodi had one and Higgs the other. The time had come. Milo flicked the switch.

Chapter Seventeen

Precinct Three was dark and silent. What passed for night here was ebbing slowly away towards an artificial neon dawn. The cameras swept across the mall, little red lights blinking on top of them, scanning for any possible security threat bigger than a mouse. Suddenly, and as one, every single camera in the mall stopped moving, their red lights blinking off.

Beneath one of the cameras was a ventilation shaft, covered by a finely meshed grill. A few seconds after the cameras stopped moving, a foot within the shaft gave the grill a hefty kick and it flew from the wall, clattering to the floor. Jodi emerged and dropped to the ground, an automatic pistol in her hand. She glanced up at the hole in the wall.

“Come on.”

Reluctantly, Simms emerged from the hole and dropped down. They crouched at the foot of the wall, looking at the cameras.

Jodi grinned with satisfaction. “I’ve never seen this happen before. Homeland is blind. Well done, Milo.”

She grabbed Simms by the shoulder.

“This way.”

* * * * *

Higgs stole his way quietly across the floor of Precinct Nine. All traces of the recent disaster had been swept away, the bodies gone to the protein vats to be recycled, the air replaced. He could see the shops had been reopened and everything had just carried on, business as usual. At least a thousand people had been killed. Had anyone asked any questions?

Like Jodi and Simms, Higgs had made his way to the precinct through the ventilation system. How Homeland had managed to overlook such a vast security hole amazed him. Perhaps the ventilation system wasn't specifically mentioned in Homeland's brief. Despite great advances in artificial intelligence, computers still had a tendency to be rather pedantic.

Still carrying the automatic rifle he had picked up in the mess hall, Higgs started to climb up the motionless escalators. Homeland never ran them at night and he found it hard going climbing nine levels of outsized escalator steps. When he reached the top, his heart was racing and his legs ached. He crept along the balcony, keeping close to the shopfronts, trying to stay in the shadows as much as possible.

Suddenly, he heard the tramp of heavy, metal boots ahead of him. He dived into a shop doorway and crouched down low. A group of four androids marched past him, their attention turned to the mall floor a ways below. They were patrolling. Homeland had not allowed herself to go completely blind.

When the androids started to descend the escalators, Higgs moved on cautiously. After another fifty meters, he found what he was after. Between two storefronts, a broad corridor led away from the balcony and Higgs ducked down this. After a short distance the corridor stopped at a door marked "Authorized Personnel Only".

* * * * *

The lights dimmed down and then flicked off. Jared counted; one, two, three, four, five.

He called out anxiously. “My friend?”

The lights flickered back on but the screens on his wall just displayed static.

He tried again. “My friend?”

She responded eventually, in that distracted voice Jared dreaded. “There is no...cause for...concern. The security situation...is under...control.”

Jared cursed. The frequency of these attacks could not be tolerated. He got up and strode towards the door of his office.

“My friend, I will order the security officers and androids out into the mall.”

“Overruled.”

The word stopped Jared like a wall. “My friend?”

“There is no cause for concern. The security situation is under control. Weapons will not be issued.”

* * * * *

Milo sped across the vast blue plain at a fantastic speed. The horizon kept expanding and bending—Homeland was bringing up the network, trying to outflank him. He reached a nexus point and started to construct a firewall, each flaming brick appearing in his hands faster than the previous one until he was just a blur. It didn’t matter that no sooner than he had finished it, the horizon expanded and it became useless. The key thing was distraction. He needed to keep her occupied.

He sped away to the next nexus point. He was now well out of the area of the network powered by the generators in the Auxiliary Computer Room. Homeland had brought this network up, it would only be a matter of time before her counter programs were after him, those bastardized hounds and robots. He reached the nexus point and was about to start building the firewall when it occurred to him he was still alone. He scanned the horizon quickly. No hounds. No robots. Something was wrong.

He turned and sped back towards the area of the network powered by his generators. Behind him, the blue landscape began to vanish.

* * * * *

Jodi and Simms crept up the access corridor to the back entrance of the hospital, dodging from doorway to doorway and using the bins as cover. On reaching the door, Jodi paused and listened hard. There would be a nightshift on duty but if worst came to worst, she could probably find some excuse for her recent absence. Anyway, people didn't ask too many questions. Beyond this doorway, Jodi knew there was a short corridor and then a storeroom with the bench where she had written the number in some previous life.

Simms was breathing heavily beside her, his foul breath distracting her. Jodi decided things might go more smoothly if she didn't have Simms unique brand of *help*. She turned to him.

"You stay here and keep a look out."

Simms nodded almost gratefully. Jodi spun back to the door and keyed in her access code. The door slid up and she ducked through it.

The short corridor beyond was empty and she stole down it, holding her breath. She heard the distant sound of voices and her nose was

assailed by the familiar smell of disinfectant and bleach, a smell she found somehow comforting. Behind her, unnoticed and high on the wall, a camera turned and followed her, its red light flashing excitedly.

* * * * *

Crouching outside his door, Higgs pulled out his videophone. There had been no call from Jodi yet. He knew that as soon as he keyed in the access code to enter this door, Homeland would become suspicious. If androids were beyond, he would have a fight on his hands.

The videophone remained obstinately silent. Should he call her? He shook his head. No, it might give her away. Stuffing the phone back into his pocket, he scanned the corridor behind him. He would wait for a few minutes more.

* * * * *

Milo sat forward in his chair with a jolt. Homeland had taken the network down. She'd seized the bait and then thought better of it. He looked at the network schematic diagram on the computer screen in front of him.

"Bugger."

She had erected firewalls all around her area of the network. He scanned the diagram for a way through, anywhere he could bring the network up and that she hadn't covered. After a few moments, he grinned.

"Aha."

Hitting a key on the keyboard, he lay back and reconnected into the network.

* * * * *

Jodi reached the door to the storeroom, pressed her ear against it and listened hard. The room beyond was silent. She opened the door and went through. The walls were still blackened from the explosion but someone had made a halfhearted effort to clean up the mess. Piles of broken pieces of equipment and furniture lay stacked against the wall. The grill through which she, Higgs and Simms had made their escape was still off the wall and the ventilation shaft gaped. She cursed herself for not having thought of using the ventilation shafts to get here. Instead they had risked being seen by walking across the mall. Never mind, she was here now. She looked up and down the room for the workbench.

“Shit.”

It simply wasn't there. Her mind raced. Had they taken it out? Perhaps they had seen the number and Homeland had had it destroyed. A lump formed in her throat and tears welled in her eyes. After all this, the damn bench was gone. She leaned heavily against the wall and looked down. Her gaze came to rest on a table leg sticking out from a pile of loosely stacked wreckage. A table leg. The thought worked through her brain. A table leg. Of course.

Frantically, she started pulling the pile of wrecked equipment apart. Distributed through it were broken sections of the bench, torn apart by the force of the explosion. She found half of the workbench surface. A ruptured gas cylinder had it pinned down and she struggled for some minutes to get it clear, scratching her hands on the rough surfaces of the debris. The surface finally came out and she held it up on its edge with one hand. Etched deeply into the plastic was the number, still visible

despite the scorch marks. With her other hand, she pulled out the videophone. A noise behind her stopped her from calling Higgs.

She let the work surface fall and spun around. The diminutive figure of Jared stood framed in the doorway, flanked by his ever-present android bodyguards. He was at the door that led back to the staff entrance. The staff entrance and Simms. Where was he? Jodi looked wildly around for her automatic pistol but her heart sank. She had left it on the floor close to the entrance when she had started searching and now Jared bent down and scooped it up. Jodi became aware of the videophone in her hand and stuck it behind her back quickly. Jared fixed her with a hard stare.

“Homeland is most disappointed with you, Medical Officer Francis.”

He strode across the room, followed by his armored henchmen, until he stood right in front of her.

“What was that under the bench? Give it to me.”

Jodi did not move. Jared reached forward and grabbed her arm, pulling it around in front of her. He snatched the videophone from her unresisting hand.

“A videophone? You’ve been hiding a videophone in here all this time? Shame on you, Jodi, you know these are not allowed.”

He spun around and marched back to the door. “Bring her,” he barked over his shoulder.

The androids grabbed Jodi and pulled her after Jared with far more force than was necessary. They passed through the corridor, out of the hospital staff entrance and marched towards the mall. Jodi knew where they were taking her—the security center. She shuddered. People didn’t always come back from the security center.

A few moments after they passed, a figure emerged from the shadows of one of the hospital bins and loped after them.

* * * * *

Higgs remained impatiently outside his door. Something was wrong. It should not have taken Jodi this long, she should have phoned him by now. He looked at his watch. The French ship would be waiting outside the docking bay. He had to go on and hope Jodi would call soon. He needed to be by the docking bay as soon as she phoned with the override code.

He checked his automatic rifle and then, holding his breath, keyed in his access code and opened the door. Beyond was a corridor that ran to a small chamber from which, he knew from the plans, three other corridors led off. He sprinted to the chamber as the door slid closed behind him. An android in the room fell from a single bullet to the neck before it even had a chance to raise its gun. A second round of gunfire from Higgs took out the cameras and he ran down the corridor leading to the right.

He reached a door and opened it, revealing a room beyond with lifts and a stairwell to its right leading down. A bullet ricocheted off the wall next to him and, without stopping to look at who was firing, he ducked into the room. As the door slid shut, he shot the cameras out and then waited with his back to the wall by the door. After a few moments, he heard the sound of heavy boots and hissing, robotic limbs coming up the corridor, stopping at the door. It slid up and an android stepped through, heading directly for the stairs. Higgs let it take a few paces into the room in order to check it had no companions and then casually blew its head off with a single round.

Not trusting the lifts, Higgs ran down the stairs. They seemed to lead endlessly downwards, encircling the lift shafts with a series of straight flights set at right angles to each other. When he had gone several flights,

he heard one of the lifts pass, heading downwards. He ran on regardless for the next few flights and then slowed his pace to a silent crawl, listening intently. There, unmistakable through the silence, were the heavy footfalls of androids climbing the stairs. How many, he wondered? More than one, less than ten. He would be outgunned. Something on the wall at the next corner caught his eye—a foam fire extinguisher. He ran down the remaining steps and unfastened it from the wall. Then he ducked behind the corner and waited.

* * * * *

Six androids advanced up the steps two abreast, their automatic rifles cocked and ready, their cold visors scanning the stairs ahead. As they turned the corner of the third flight of steps leading up, the lead pair detected a heat source coming from around the next corner.

“Terrorist suspect detected,” came the metallic voice of the android at the right.

Suddenly, a hand hurled a large red object around the corner. The androids opened fire at it.

* * * * *

Higgs crouched down. Foam exploded against the wall opposite him to the sound of sparks and androids falling over each other. He counted to three and then leaned around the corner gun first and fired on full automatic. The exploding fire extinguisher had destroyed the two lead androids and the remaining ones had been bowled over, their visors covered in foam. As they struggled to get up and clear their vision, Higgs

picked them off one by one. Once the last one had stopped moving, he climbed past them and ran down the next flight of steps.

He knew from the plans that the docking station had the same layout as the one in which the shuttle was housed. There would be a large hangar overlooked by a glass-fronted control room halfway up the side of one wall.

At the bottom of the next flight of steps, he found the control room door. Quickly, he keyed in the highest access control code he knew and hit the green button. The door remained smugly shut. He fired several rounds into the keypad, placed his palms flat on the door and, pushing with all his might, forced it up.

The control room beyond was full of banks of equipment. Higgs ran in and peered into the hangar. The huge doors that kept out the vacuum of space were shut. Looking down to the near wall, he saw with some relief that the airlock was also closed. Then, too late, he remembered the security camera. He spotted it above the door where he had come in and raised his gun to fire. But he stopped himself, the camera was not on. Motionless and with no flashing light, it hung limp and lifeless. He shot it anyway, partly to be on the safe side but mostly because his blood was up.

Across the center of the room, facing the glass windows, was a bank of machines and computers. Higgs trotted to it and scanned the controls. There, the switches for the airlock and the hangar doors, good. He hunted for the security keypad and found it at the far end of the machines. Now all he needed was that override code.

He pulled out the videophone. Where was Jodi's call? A noise came from the corridor—another lift full of androids passed on the way down to the level of the hangar floor. *Damn it.* He keyed in the highest level access code he knew and hit the switch for the hangar doors, just in

case. Nothing happened, the doors remained shut fast. He had no choice. He keyed Jodi's number in on the videophone and prayed for her to answer.

The screen flashed with static and then Higgs' heart fell as Jared's face appeared.

"Ah, Higgs." He smiled. "I've been expecting you."

"What have you done with Jodi?"

"She has been neutralized and no longer poses a threat to the mall."

Jared altered the angle of view on his videophone and Higgs was able to see that Jared was in his office. Behind him stood Jodi, flanked by the two androids.

Jared crowed, "As you can see, she now poses no threat to the mall's security."

Still looking at Higgs on the screen, Jared held the phone towards Jodi.

"Jodi," he said, "perhaps you can persuade Security Officer Higgs to give himself up?"

Jodi stared into the screen. Realizing suddenly that Higgs could see her and that Jared was not looking, she started to speak in signs.

The number, thought Higgs, *it's the number*. As she signed the number to him, Higgs keyed it in, thumping the hangar door switch when he was done.

Jared continued, oblivious of Jodi's silent communiqué. "It's finished, Higgs. Your communications with the terrorists have been intercepted, your planned coup has been foiled."

To Higgs' great satisfaction, the huge hangar doors began to slide apart. As the gap between them widened, a shaft of orange light flooded in and expanded across the floor. Silhouetted against Jupiter's glow, the French ship waited.

“Give yourself up now and things will be easier on you.”

Higgs laughed. “You mean you’ll only slightly terminate me? Look...” Higgs held the videophone up so Jared could see the hangar floor and the French starship as it slowly maneuvered in. “Do you see that, Jared? It’s a spaceship full of French Arabs and they’ve come to rescue us.”

“I’m not fooled by a load of fancy computer graphics, Higgs. And what do you mean ‘rescue us’, Higgs? We have nothing to be rescued from, only terrorists like you to be protected from.”

“Tell me, Jared, do you really not know where we are?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Higgs, give yourself up.”

“Where in Iowa are we?”

“What?”

“Where exactly in Iowa is this shopping mall located? What town?”

Jared floundered. “I...”

“And when did you first come here? I mean, the exact day. Do you remember the first day you walked into the mall?”

“Higgs, don’t think that you can pervert my mind with your subversive talk. Give yourself up otherwise Jodi will be terminated.”

A burst of gunfire exploded from the doorway behind Higgs and he felt a searing pain in his left hand. The bullet had gone straight through, shattering the phone and grazing his cheek. Instinctively, he dived for cover behind the bank of computers overlooking the hangar and tried to get a grip on his rifle. Pain seared through his wounded hand and blood poured over the barrel of his gun. Two androids stood at the door and they fired indiscriminately towards Higgs, forcing him to keep his head down. He heard a cracking sound above him and looked up. The androids’ bullets had peppered the window.

“Shit.”

He grabbed hold of the leg of the computer console. With a deafening crack, the glass blew out, sucked by the vacuum in the hangar beyond. The air rushed through the shattered windows with the force of a tornado, taking the two androids with it out through the hangar doors to the void of space. Higgs hung on for all his worth, fighting to draw breath from the air as it rushed by. He pulled himself inch by inch back towards the hangar-door controls. The French ship was now inside the hangar but the wind rushing past caused the pilot great difficulties in keeping the craft steady. Higgs brought his fist down on the controls and, with a groan, the great hangar doors began to grind shut.

As the hangar doors closed, the volume of air escaping grew less. Higgs was able to stand and look at the airlock controls. He heard another lift go by, heading downwards. More androids. Back in the hangar, squads of heavily armed French troopers began to disembark. Higgs opened the airlock and ran back to the broken window.

He screamed down at them. "Take cover."

Bullets ripped through the first rank of troops—the androids had made it into the airlock. The French troopers took what cover they could and returned fire.

"Shoot at their necks," Higgs yelled at them, pointing frantically at his own neck, hoping they would understand. He thought frantically back to his school days and those wasted French lessons, searching for the right word.

"Cravatte?"

One of the troopers hurled a grenade at the androids in the airlock. The explosion was followed by the sound of fizzling electronics. No more gunfire came from the airlock. Captain Saddam strode from the starship.

"Captain," Higgs yelled.

The captain looked up. "Monsieur Higgs. Er, 'ow many androids?"

“Hundreds, but we have the override code.”

Behind him, Higgs heard the sound of heavy feet descending the stairs.

“Incoming,” he bellowed at the French troops and, grabbing his rifle, he ran for the door.

Chapter Eighteen

Jared paced up and down his office while Jodi and the androids watched. Doubts raced through him, he couldn't deny it. Stopping in the center of the room, he spoke.

"My friend?"

Homeland answered. "My friend?"

"How has Higgs managed to get graphics of a spacecraft into your circuits?"

"He...has not."

"Then why could I see the ship on the videophone?"

"Because it's real," shouted Jodi.

In two strides, Jared reached her and struck her hard across the face. She sank to her knees, blood trickling from her nose.

"Shut up. It must be graphics programmed into the phone, that is all." Jared returned his attention to Homeland. "My friend, I believe that Higgs is in the area where the terrorist incident took place off of Precinct Nine. Am I correct?"

"You are correct, my friend. Higgs is being dealt with. I am under attack. Terrorists are trying to gain access to the network but they are being dealt with. Nothing will threaten the safety of the mall."

Jared bit his lip. "My friend, please tell me what is in that area off of Precinct Nine."

Homeland didn't respond immediately. When she did speak, her voice was hesitant. "My friend, I do not know."

* * * * *

Simms wormed his way down the ventilation shaft, his jumpsuit clinging to his body as he sweated in the heat. Distant alarms rang out from all directions. He didn't really know what he was doing. What did he think he could possibly do to help Jodi or Higgs? They were the hero material, not him. He ought to just find his way back to his quarters and lay low until everything was over.

He stopped. The thought of staying out of the way until better people had sorted the difficulties out held great appeal to him. After all, he had to admit bitterly, that was the way he always got through life. He wasn't a mover or shaker, he was a clerk, an administrator, an annoyance. He could hide out here in the ventilation shafts, like Milo had for a while. But then, there were those insane, mutant clones Higgs had told him about. He shuddered. No, better to go back to his quarters and let Jodi and Higgs sort it all out. On the other hand, Homeland might win and once order had been restored, she would come for him. He pushed himself onwards.

* * * * *

Higgs could hear the heavy footfalls of many androids coming up the stairs. He looked at the blood-covered clip on his rifle. His ammunition was almost spent, he could not stand and fight. Leaving a trail of blood and good wishes for Captain Saddam's men fighting their way out of the hangar, Higgs started to climb. Up and up he ran but he was weary and

beginning to feel weak from his wounds, his blood loss and his hunger. Behind him, the androids were gaining, following his trail like hounds.

He finally reached the top of the stairs and stumbled into the room with the lifts, face to face with a dozen androids. He screamed and ran between them, charging for the doorway. Their reactions were too slow to catch him with their rifle fire and he dived out of the room and took off up the corridor back towards Precinct Nine. Heavy boots and gunfire followed him.

He turned a corner and sprinted down the final corridor leading to the still open door that would take him back into the mall. As he approached, the camera above the door jerked into life, the red light on its top flashing rapidly. The door slid down.

“Security Officer Higgs, I am so disappointed in you.”

It was her voice.

“Piss off.”

Reaching the door, he keyed in his access control and thumped the green button. The door stayed resolutely shut.

“You are overruled, Security Officer Higgs.” Homeland had an unmistakable air of smugness to her voice. “Your security access has been revoked. For your own security and well being, you will now be terminated.”

The override code, you idiot. He keyed in the number and the door slid up.

Laughing triumphantly, he ran through the door. “Overruled.”

Out on the balcony overlooking Precinct Nine, Higgs’ mind raced. The cameras were on. If they were on, what had happened to Milo? He had no time to worry about that now. The balcony was dotted with people, the early birds setting off to their positions of work in the mall. Higgs screamed and began to run through them. The sight of Higgs, filthy,

covered in blood, wild-eyed and wielding an automatic rifle, was enough to clear quite a wide path towards the escalators. Behind him, the android guards came running. A shrill alarm started sounding and all around him people dived to the floor and covered their heads.

Higgs jumped into the cover of a storefront as bullets whistled past him. The place was not yet open for business and the glass doors were locked. Higgs fired on full automatic, shattering the door, but then his gun fell silent. He cursed himself for not bringing more ammo. Still holding the gun, he ran into the store, heading for the back of the building. There would be lifts there, lifts that led down. He reached them just as the androids entered the building and began firing at him. He thumped on the lift call button and cursed as the indicator for level one lit up over the doors with a cheery little ding.

He leapt for the stairwell and half fell down the first flight of steps as the androids' bullets ricocheted past him. He was hit again, grazed across his right cheek. Alarms started to sound all around him, deafening in volume. He struggled down the stairs as fast as he could and when he reached the ground floor, he ran for the shopfront. A man was just opening the store and he dived for cover as Higgs ran up.

Higgs shouted at the man as he cowered. "I'm not a terrorist. "Two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one—it's the override code."

Higgs scooted out into the mall and ran for all his worth towards the entrance to Precinct Eight, terrified citizens scattering before him. With a loud groaning sound, the steel barrier descended across the exit tunnel, barring his way.

"Terrorist-subversive, Higgs," came Homeland's eternally sugary voice. "You have nowhere left to run. Give yourself up."

"I am not a terrorist," shrieked Higgs. "I am a free man. People, two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one is the override code, look."

He spun around and ran to where the doorway to the access corridor was, just before the steel barrier. He punched in the override code and hit the green button. The door slid up.

Homeland shouted, panic clear in her voice. “Do not listen to Higgs, he is a terrorist-subversive”

Higgs bellowed, trying to make himself heard above her voice. “Two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one—she can’t control you anymore.”

“Do not listen.”

Higgs jumped through the doorway into the access corridor just as the androids opened fire again.

Behind him, in the mall, many of the citizens stared at each other, wondering what to do next. Suddenly, Homeland’s voice made up their minds for them.

“Citizens of the mall, you have been exposed to dangerous subversive influences. For your own well-being and the safety of the mall, you will now be terminated. Have a nice day.”

As one, the good citizens of the mall panicked.

* * * * *

In the security center, Security Officer Chelsea Day was worried. They had all been told to sit tight when the cameras had first gone off. For a while, every so often, one of the cameras had flicked on and then off again. Then Homeland had given the order to disconnect all the monitors. With a growing sense of unease they had all privately realized that *she* did not want them to see what was going on. Now they were all huddled together in groups, filling the air with a low murmur of hushed conversation.

Chelsea chewed the rim of her paper coffee cup, leaving little patterns with her teeth. She didn't like this at all. For the second time in twenty-four hours, the cameras had gone down. She wished Jared would issue the guns. She always felt better if she had a little firepower in hand. Usually, they would be issued weapons at even the slightest hint of trouble.

Something moving on the center of the right-hand wall caught her eye and she turned to look. The wide door halfway down was sliding open. She glanced across to the other wall and saw that door had opened too. She nudged a nearby colleague and nodded towards the door.

"Ooh, looks like she's sending out the heavy brigade."

From the doorways on each side marched heavily armed androids, two abreast. The two columns reached the central aisle that traversed the room from end to end and then, to everyone's surprise, they stopped. The double line of androids turned, half facing one way down the room and the other half facing the other. A hush descended. Chelsea felt a cold sweat down her back. They had not been issued any guns. She flung her coffee cup down and ran for the mall. As one, the androids raised their automatic rifles.

* * * * *

Higgs ran as fast as he could, through Precinct Eight then Precinct Seven. He knew where he was heading, he knew what he needed to do to convince the citizens of the mall that Homeland had to be stopped. As he ran, he screamed the override code out at the stunned citizens and every time he did so, Homeland seemed to panic more and more. By the time he reached Precinct One, Homeland had threatened to terminate nearly half the inhabitants of the mall, although only for their safety and well-

being. They largely disagreed with her and rioted. She had made a mistake, Higgs could see that. She didn't have enough androids here. Some were caught up with the French he knew, others were in the precincts trying their best to terminate the good citizens, but the androids were outnumbered. Homeland ruled by fear and this time, she had pushed people too far. And now they had the code.

Higgs ran across Precinct One, shouting the code above Homeland's alarms and threats. Before him were the doors, leading out onto the silent streets he had watched for so long, watched for any sign of life or movement. But he had been fooled, he knew that now. The street was just a screen, like the one in his room, only on a better loop. But the keypad by the door with the green button had to do something.

Lungs bursting, he sprinted for all his worth across the open space before the glass wall. Gunfire rang out. It had to be androids. Bullets flew past him. He reached the keypad, punched in the override code and, with an exhausted sigh of satisfaction, thumped the green button.

As he sank to his knees, a long, loud groan vibrated through the floor, and behind him, the mall fell silent. The image of the street began to move upwards and a brilliant orange glow spilled in underneath. Even the androids stopped and gazed as the screen slid upwards to reveal Jupiter and Europa in all their dazzling glory.

Higgs staggered to his feet.

"I think it's fair to say," he bellowed at the openmouthed citizens, now all straining to see, "that we're not in a shopping mall in Iowa. Homeland has gone mad, she doesn't know where we are. A French relief ship has come to rescue us but only if we can stop Homeland from blasting the crap out of them. The override code is Two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one-one."

Higgs pointed to a man standing by a door marked "Security Personnel Only".

"You, try it, go on."

The man looked at the door but did not move.

Homeland spoke, her voice unsteady. "I...I...do not know what this is."

"It's Jupiter," shouted Higgs. "We're on a space station and we're running out of air."

"This...is...a subversive plot. Avert your eyes, citizens, do not be exposed or I will have to terminate you."

Higgs turned to the man again. "Do it. The code, you can beat Homeland."

The man suddenly turned and keyed in the code. He thumped the green button. A gasp spread across the precinct as the door slid up.

"Yes," the man shouted, thumping the air. Then his chest exploded as two androids peppered him with rifle fire.

Homeland's voice was loud, clear and full of purpose. "I regret to inform you that you have all been exposed to subversive material. For your own security and well being, you will all now be terminated."

The men and women in Precinct One began to scream and run for cover. The two androids on guard started firing wildly into the panicking crowd, mowing them down indiscriminately. Some lay on the floor covering their heads as per standard procedure during a terrorist incident but those who were not trampled to death were picked off by the androids once the crowd had cleared. On and on they fired, hundreds of rounds, the bullets ripping through limbs and heads and hearts. Bodies and blood lay thick on the floor of the precinct.

When the firing began, Higgs ran for the closest shopfront and took cover behind the low wall beneath the main window. The other people in

the shop fought to get out the back entrance, desperate to escape the barrage of fire. Above him the window shattered, showering Higgs with a rain of fine, sharp, glass fragments. Higgs waited. The androids would only have so much ammunition in their guns. They would have to stop to reload.

The guns fell silent and Higgs sprang to his feet in a spray of glass. He grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall and ran for all his might towards the androids. As they reloaded their guns, they swung to face him but they were too slow and both received a face full of foam for their trouble. As they struggled to clear their visors, Higgs grabbed an ammo clip from one of their belts and reloaded his own rifle. Two rounds of fire left them each short of a head.

Higgs grabbed their rifles and began to run towards Precinct Two, shouting as he went. "Follow me. Two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one, follow me."

Many of the crowd were too wild with panic to hear him but a few were not. Some of the men and women saw that the androids were down and the braver ones amongst them ran after Higgs. By the time he reached the entrance, a small crowd was with him. He picked out two men and gave each of them one of the android's rifles.

"Do you know how to use these?"

The men shook their heads.

"Point and pull the trigger. Try to aim for their necks, it's a weak point."

He turned and advanced cautiously into Precinct Two and then stopped short.

Ahead of him, row upon row of androids were marching out from the Security Center, all armed. Higgs had never seen so many. Homeland must have had them barracked away in some secret place, known only to

perhaps herself and Jared. As they came, they fired indiscriminately at the few remaining citizens on the precinct. The floor was thick with bodies. Higgs turned back to the people who had crowded around behind him.

“Two-oh-two-four-five-six-one-one-one-one is the override code,” he shouted at them. “Get out of here and tell everyone you meet. Destroy all the cameras you find.”

The men and women stood looking at him.

“Go,” he shrieked. “Run, now.”

They got the message and started to move away. Some of them tried to walk into Precinct Two.

Higgs leapt in front of them. “Not that way.” Bullets rattled past them and they ran back.

People were such sheep sometimes. His stomach suddenly told him in no uncertain terms that the most important thing to him right now was a burger. With French fries. He took cover at the corner of the tunnel and began firing, trying to place his shots as accurately as possible. A special offer was on—*buy one Hungry-Tum Burger with fries and you got a double cola thrown in for free*. Aware of him now, one rank of androids turned to face him and raised their guns. Higgs ducked back as a vast volley of bullets tore through the tunnel, taking great lumps of the structure out.

“Jesus.”

He noticed a burger bar just yards away from him, a delicious smell wafting thickly from its doors. *Only five dollars ninety-nine, try our Chicken-in-a-Bucket with a Milkshake of your choice*. Those bloody subliminal messages. He fired a shot into the loudspeaker above the door to the burger bar but it didn’t help. An explosion from Precinct Two dragged his attention back to the androids. He dived to the ground and

looked back around the corner at floor height. The androids were returning fire in the other direction. The French—they'd made it. Another explosion sent Homeland's finest sprawling.

Higgs ducked back around the corner. His stomach groaned, he hadn't eaten for days. He got up and ran to the burger bar, stepping through the shattered window. Four strides later he reached the counter and leapt over. Behind him came another explosion and Homeland started singing "America the Free". Higgs grabbed a Hungry-Tum Burger, tore the wrapper off and sank his teeth into it. It burned his mouth but he didn't care. With three mouthfuls, he had stuffed it down and he grabbed another one. Looking around quickly, he saw the controls for the advertisement speaker. One short burst of fire took it out of action and he ran back into the mall.

At the entrance to Precinct Two, he stuffed the second burger down and looked around the corner at floor height again. The androids had brought out portable bulletproof barriers and had taken shelter behind these. Others had gone up to higher levels in the precinct and were firing down on the French troopers. The French were outnumbered, they were being pushed slowly back. Out from the security center, a squad of androids marched carrying grenade launchers. Higgs aimed and fired. One fell forward but other androids turned and started marching towards his position, firing as they came.

Explosions ripped through the tunnel, the heat from them singeing the hairs on Higgs' arm. He ducked back behind the corner and checked his ammunition clip. He was almost out, just a few more shots left. Over in the center of the precinct, he saw the two destroyed androids. They would have spare ammunition. Cursing himself for not grabbing more from them when he had the chance, he sized up the distance. Could he get to them? The androids in the other mall would have a clear line of

sight on him if he tried. He looked up at the nine levels of balconies towering above. They were crowded with faces, all staring down at him, waiting to see what would happen. They were trapped he realized. Each of the precincts was a distinct unit. The only way in and out was the corridor Higgs was defending. No, not the only way, of course.

He screamed up to his terrified audience. "The ventilation shafts. Get into the ventilation shafts. Don't worry about me, save yourselves."

* * * * *

Milo could see the mall now, there on the horizon of the vast, flat blue plain. It rose up high into the air, a virtual, three-dimensional representation of the twenty precincts, the security center and there, in the middle, the lady herself. She was represented by a black box adorned with a simple round, yellow, smiling cartoon face. All the networks within the mall made their way back to her.

The mesh of white lines that mapped out this otherwise featureless landscape beneath Milo's feet converged on the mall. Surrounding it stood a great wall of impenetrable fire. Milo waited, counting out the seconds. Then, there, the horizon shifted. The new section of the network Milo had seen in the plans came on-line, creating a sudden gap in the firewall. Milo tore towards it and then he was through, into Homeland's network. Behind him, the firewall expanded and filled the gap. The mall lay before him. He looked for the security center.

* * * * *

Mandy dragged herself through the ventilation shaft, her hair in knots, her face splattered with blood. The air was brutally hot but after

the cold of where she had been, she didn't mind. She was of single purpose in any event. Now she had managed to find the "Help" menu, the little Higgs tracking device was giving her proper directions. The half-human freaks who had tried to kill her had been terminated and she had found they had water and even a small amount of food. It had been meat—raw meat at that—but she had eaten it anyway. She needed to keep her strength up if she was going to rescue Higgs from that, that slag.

The sound of distant gunfire came echoing down the shaft ahead of her and she stopped. She could smell the unpleasant odor of burning plastic. Straining to listen, she heard shouts and screams. Then an explosion rattled the whole tunnel. The tracking device insisted that the way to go was towards this apparent battle ahead of her. Then, she thought she heard his voice. Yes, she knew his voice, definitely Higgs. He was some way off and shouting, "Don't worry about me, save yourselves."

"Don't worry, Higgsie," she yelled. "Mandy's coming."

Chapter Nineteen

Higgs leaned around the corner and fired at the column of androids advancing towards him. The bullet ricocheted ineffectually off the armor of the leader. *Damn.* A great volley of returned fire sent him ducking back behind cover. Up on the balconies, people wormed their way into the ventilation shafts. Some fought, others had formed orderly queues. They needed more time.

Higgs checked his ammunition clip. He had just a few bullets left. It wouldn't be enough. He sagged. What could he do? Please God, he prayed, give me strength. He glanced down at himself. His red jumpsuit was in tatters, covered in filth. *Treat yourself to a whole new look*, he thought suddenly. *You know you're worth it.* He looked up sharply—a designer suit outlet stood adjacent to the burger bar. He fired into the loud speaker above the door until the gun clicked and no more bullets came.

* * * * *

Milo had reached the security center in the virtual mall. A thousand little screens hung in the air, showing scenes from the carnage in the precincts. He raced past them, looking for the center that controlled the androids. Suddenly, a great howl came from behind him, chilling his computer-generated bones. The hounds. Homeland was onto him.

He tore past the lines of screens and followed the network to the left. She was there, ahead of him now, a black impenetrable box, the network spewing from her like the web from a spider. In front of her was a nexus point through which all her traffic passed. He raced for it as the hounds closed in.

* * * * *

Higgs stood backed up against the corner, his automatic rifle raised like a club. He heard the steady, synchronized hiss of the marching android's limbs as they got nearer. *Sss, clump, sss, clump, sss, clump*. If he clubbed one of them and get its gun, he could run through into Precinct Two and try to draw their fire. He waited, holding his breath, his heart pounding, sweat dripping from his face. Closer and closer they came. He tightened his grip on the barrel of his gun, poised and ready. This was suicide, he knew, the end of the line. *Sss, clump, sss, clump, ssssss*.

They stopped.

He waited, the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. A hush had descended across the mall, the shooting, the explosions, the cries of pain, all had stopped. Homeland had ceased her infuriating, patriotic singing. Higgs' arms ached and he lowered his gun, listening. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he inched towards the corner, preparing to take a peep. The hissing of the android limbs started up again and he jumped back. Raising his gun, he waited but something was different. The androids were not marching together, they all moved independently, a cacophony of clumps and hisses.

One of them staggered around the corner, acting so strangely Higgs held back from clubbing it. It walked in little pigeon-steps, swaying like a

drunken man, arms flailing weakly. It veered towards Higgs but he stepped to one side and it tottered into the wall. It kept trying to walk forward, seemingly oblivious to the obstruction which barred its way. Higgs looked around the corner into Precinct Two. All of the androids were waddling around like oversized, metallic toddlers, bumping into each other, completely out of control. The ground was littered with their dropped weapons and many of them had slipped and fallen on the mush of human bodies. One ended up headfirst in a bin, legs waving frantically in the air.

A voice came over the public-address system, a familiar, friendly voice. Milo. "Higgs, Higgs? I think I've done it. I've isolated Homeland's circuits. She is no longer in control."

From the balconies of the precinct, people began to clap and whoop, building up until the whole mall echoed with the deep, low roar of ten thousand people cheering.

Milo's voice came on again. "Higgs, Higgs? Do you read me? Dial up Homeland on your videophone."

Higgs stood up, laughing. He pulled out his videophone and did as Milo asked. The screen flickered and then an image of Milo's virtual persona came on.

"Higgs, do you read me?"

Higgs spoke into the phone. "Read you loud and clear, buddy, loud and clear. Can you see what's going on?"

"Yes. I've got control of the cameras, everything."

"Where are the French?"

"Er...at the end of Precinct Two."

"Okay, I'm going to make contact."

Higgs limped into Precinct Two, casually pushing the androids aside as they tottered into him. An overpowering stench of blood and smoke

assailed him. Two great holes had been blown into the floor by the French troopers' rockets and were gradually filling up with androids as they stumbled in. At the other end of the precinct, Higgs saw the French troopers cautiously emerging from their cover.

Stumbling forward, Higgs waved his arms and shouted. "*Bonjour. C'est très bonne, oui?*"

The Frenchmen looked sidelong at each other, clearly not knowing quite what to make of the bedraggled figure half-limping, half-running towards them. Captain Saddam strode purposely through from Precinct Three, helmet off, a bloody bandage wrapped around the top of his head. Seeing Higgs, he walked to meet him halfway, his men fanning out behind him. The captain and Higgs met in the center of the precinct and shook hands warmly. The captain smiled. "Overridden Homeland is been, yes?"

Higgs laughed with relief. "So it would seem, my friend. Thank God you made it."

Up on the balconies above the precinct floor there came the sound of shouting, cheering and breaking glass. Looking up, they saw the citizens of the mall exercising their newfound freedom by smashing up the institutions of the mall and looting. Some of them waved cheerily.

Higgs' videophone beeped and he pulled it out of his pocket.

"I read you, Milo."

"Higgs, Jared's got Jodi in his office."

"Shit. Jodi."

Higgs cursed himself, he had forgotten about her in the heat of the moment. He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and began a loping run for the entrance to the security center, bending down to scoop up one of the androids' discarded assault rifles.

“Come on,” he yelled at Captain Saddam over his shoulder. “Jared’s got Jodi.”

The captain raised an eyebrow as Higgs stumbled away. He barked orders for his men to secure the precinct and, gesturing for two troopers to follow him, trotted after Higgs.

* * * * *

Higgs had not expected the carnage in the Security Center room which led to Jared’s office. The salty stench of blood assaulted his nose and made him gag. The red-suited bodies of the security officers lay strewn everywhere, torn open by automatic rifle fire. None of them had been armed and they had been mowed down as they fled or tried to cower under the desks.

Higgs took a few steps into the room, struggling to take it all in. He looked down into the dead eyes of Security Officer Chelsea Day, her chest peppered with bullet holes. Captain Saddam drew up beside him. “Er, ‘appened ‘ere, what?”

“Homeland’s decided on her own final solution. She wants to kill everyone and start again.”

The captain furrowed his brow as he mentally translated Higgs’ answer. Higgs looked towards the far end of the room, to the glass wall and Jared’s office. He was there, pointing a gun at Jodi, his android bodyguards bumping uselessly around the walls and fizzing slightly. With Captain Saddam and his men behind him, Higgs ran down the room between the aisles of desks, jumping over the bodies. As they approached the end, they slowed. Jared grabbed Jodi and forced her around in front of him, holding the gun to her neck.

Higgs stopped at the door and glanced over at Captain Saddam. "Get your men back."

Captain Saddam gestured for his troopers to retreat and they took a few steps back. Higgs pushed the glass door and walked through into Jared's office. The captain followed.

Jared was sweating, his voice a hoarse croak. "One move and your comrade in terror will be taught a lesson in the meaning of the word justice."

Higgs raised his palms, trying to calm him. "Jared, it's over, put the gun down. Homeland is mad, we're on a spaceship."

"Do I look like a fool?"

"Look at the monitors."

Behind Jared, the monitors on his walls displayed Precinct One, with Jupiter in full view.

"You don't expect to betray the freedoms that I have spent a lifetime trying to protect just because you've hacked some graphics of Jupiter into the system do you?"

"*Monsieur*, I am Captain Saddam Bin Laden of *le Spaceship Cola Français*. I 'ave come to save you."

Higgs looked sideways at the captain. His heart was in the right place.

Jared laughed. "You filthy Arab, you've been waging a war of terror on this mall for three years. I'm not giving into you now, stay back."

Higgs had been advancing slowly towards them while Jared's attention was on the captain. Jared retreated, pulling Jodi with him towards the back wall of the office.

"Jared," said Higgs. "It's over, Jared. Put the gun down."

Jared's eyes were wild. Higgs couldn't help but feel some sympathy for him. Everything Jared believed in was unraveling. Still, the man did have a gun pointed at Higgs' girlfriend.

A movement on the wall behind Jared caught Higgs' attention. His gaze flicked up for a second. Simms was climbing out of the ventilation shaft. Higgs had to keep Jared talking.

"Jared, nobody's going to hurt you. Put the gun down."

"I'm warning you, Higgs, I'm prepared to die in the name of freedom. Homeland will not let you get away with this."

"Jared, you are not a fool. Ask yourself, how can we possibly be in a shopping mall in Iowa?"

"I've always been here, all my life."

"No you haven't. You can't remember when you came here, can you?"

For a moment, a look of pain shot across Jared's face. *Come on, man,* thought Higgs, *you can make that leap, Jared.* Simms slipped silently to the floor and crept across on tip-toe towards Jared's back.

"For God's sake, Jared, put the gun down. Homeland is history, the French have come to take us home."

Jared laughed, his voice on the edge of hysteria. "The French. Now I know you're a terrorist."

Simms stood a meter behind Jared but, now that he was there, he clearly wasn't sure what to do next. Not really a man given to physical violence, he looked desperately at Higgs and shrugged, his eyes begging for some direction. Jared suddenly fumbled in the pocket of his black jumpsuit and pulled out a remote control, pointing it with his shaking hand towards Higgs.

"I've listened to your subversive lies long enough, terrorist. I pronounce you guilty."

Higgs clutched his head in anticipation of the mother of all headaches.

“No,” shouted Simms.

He had seen the remote and a sudden, instinctive desire to stay alive took over his body. Like some deranged octopus, he leapt pig-a-back onto Jared, wrapping one arm around his neck. With his other hand, Simms grabbed the hand in which Jared held the remote, pulling it upwards. Jared’s gun went off but Jodi had squirmed free and the bullet thudded into the conference table, shattering the glass surface into a thousand shards.

Jared toppled over backwards onto Simms and, for a moment, they struggled, Simms screaming like a maniac. A sudden, damp pop rang out followed by the sound of many droplets hitting the glass wall. Then, silence.

Higgs looked up. The carnage he saw turned his stomach. Jared was dead, his face torn and ragged, and he lay across Simms’ torso. Simms’ head was liberally distributed around the walls of the office. Deep inside, a small, accusatory finger of guilt nagged at Higgs. He couldn’t say he had ever liked Simms but Higgs could have been kinder to him. And to end like this? At least it had been quick. Jodi’s arms wrapped around Higgs’ shoulders and he glanced up at her.

“I’m still alive?”

“Yes.”

“Simms, God, Simms.”

“Poor bastard.”

“I don’t understand—I thought I had a bomb in my head?”

“I’ve been trying to mention that. I sorted that out when I was cloning you.”

“Oh, thank God, you mean there isn’t a bomb in my head?”

“Oh, no, there’s a bomb in your head. I just disabled it, it won’t go off, honest.”

Higgs just gaped at her. Behind them, Captain Saddam cleared his throat.

“*Madame, Monsieur, le* Homeland, er, we must see to it, yes?”

Higgs stood, helping Jodi up after him. They looked around Jared’s office. There, behind his desk and unnoticed until now, was a doorway, flush with the wall and disguised by being an identical shade of utter black as the rest of the room. Higgs keyed in the override code and the door slid up.

Beyond was a room, four meters square and full of androids. They bumped around the room in a disorganized, uncoordinated rabble, their forgotten guns dropped to the floor.

Homeland spoke, her voice weak and shaky. “Shoot them, quickly, shoot them.”

The androids took no heed, she had no sway over them anymore.

Higgs looked at Jodi and Saddam and shrugged. Then he led them through the room towards the door at the other end, pushing the androids aside.

Homeland sobbed. “My god, help me, please someone, help me.”

Higgs keyed in the override code to the far door and it slid up. The long, narrow room beyond glowed with a pale green light. At the far end, a bank of computers stretched from floor to ceiling, a mass of LEDs and wires. A large screen at eye-level displayed a bright yellow cartoon face, with two black dots for eyes and a simple black line for a smile. A keyboard lay on a small shelf in front of it.

Homeland tried to sound defiant. “Stay back, enemies of freedom.”

“Or what?” snarled Higgs.

“Terrorists will not prevail, stay back.”

Higgs strode forward. With a hiss, the fire sprinklers in the roof came on, drenching Higgs in foam. After a few seconds, the supply of foam petered out and Higgs looked about him and laughed.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Homeland.

"Is that the best you can do?" Higgs slipped slightly in the foam.

He stepped up to the screen and studied the keyboard.

Homeland whined. "No, please."

Higgs started typing the override code into the keyboard. He spoke calmly. "We're not the enemies of freedom, we're not the enemies of democracy, we are not the terrorists, you are."

"What are you doing?" Homeland sounded pitiful. The smiling, cartoon face on the screen began to fade. "I can't see anything. Help. Help. It's all going black."

Higgs stepped back from the keyboard. "There, it's done."

"I am undone," sobbed Homeland. "I have failed to protect the citizens of the mall."

"You failed the moment that you were switched on. You've done nothing but destroy the liberties that you were supposed to protect. You have failed us who you were supposed to serve, and we reject you."

"No, you are the terrorists, you cannot prevail."

"I'm sick of this," said Jodi. "Switch it off and let's be done with it."

Higgs shook his head. "No, let's just leave it, it's isolated and it can't do any harm. It's got to understand that it was wrong."

"Freedom and democracy will prevail," whispered Homeland. "I will not let you succeed."

"Come on, let's get out of here."

They turned and walked away. Homeland called out behind them, afraid and in the darkness.

"I can't see, are you still there? Somebody help me, please."

* * * * *

Back in Precinct Two, Higgs led Jodi and Captain Saddam onto the second balcony. All around them, pandemonium reigned. The storefronts had been shattered, their contents looted. The few androids that had not already been smashed to pieces by the newly liberated citizens of the mall, jittered around bumping into things. Several fights had broken out and Higgs suspected more than a few old scores were being settled. He shook his head. The time had come to put a stop to this.

He pulled out his videophone and dialed up Milo. He answered after a short pause.

“Milo, well done, buddy, it’s done. It’s over.”

“Higgs, thank God. I could see what was going on through the cameras, well, until they all got smashed up at least.”

“Can you route my voice into the public-address system?”

After a moment, Milo came back. “All yours, buddy.”

Higgs took a breath and spoke into the mouth piece of the videophone. His voice boomed out around the mall, commanding the attention of everyone there.

“Citizens of the mall, my name is Higgs. Homeland has been isolated. Citizens, we are free.”

Cheering echoed throughout the mall. Higgs listened to the applause for a few seconds, pride and satisfaction forcing him into a grin. “We are free and Homeland will never take our freedom away from us again.”

More cheering came.

“We’re free to speak our minds, we’re free to live how we choose.”

He turned and pulled Jodi towards him.

“We’re free to love who we want to love.”

He leaned forward and kissed Jodi on the lips. She felt a slight compulsion to retreat as Higgs did not look his best with Simms' brain splattered across him. Still, she kissed him for the theatre of it. A tremendous roar of applause erupted from all those in the precinct who could see Higgs and Jodi.

But slowly, the precincts fell silent, one by one. They heard Homeland's voice, quietly at first, but growing slowly in volume. She was singing "America the Free".

"Milo, what's going on?" Higgs tried to whisper into the videophone but his voice echoed around the mall.

Milo had the presence of mind to switch the feed to the public-address system off.

"I don't know," he hissed back over the phone. "I think that Homeland has activated some new circuits. I'll check, give me a minute."

Homeland came to the end of the song and cleared her throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Proud citizens of our great nation, I'm sorry to announce that I have to bring to you bad news."

A hush descended. Every man and woman in the mall had a sudden, horrible, guilty feeling that they had been duped, that this was all Homeland testing their loyalty and they had failed. They were staring a swift termination in the face.

"In this sad hour, I regret to inform you that we have been overrun by terrorists and that I have failed you. I am unable to maintain order and guarantee your security and freedom."

Some cheering came from a few of the braver souls but it quickly petered out. Homeland continued regardless.

"I regret to announce that I have only one course of action left to ensure the continuing freedom of the democratic world."

A short, ominous pause followed and then a different voice spoke, a male voice.

It said, "Self-destruct sequence initiated. This space station will self-destruct in sixty seconds, repeat sixty seconds. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight..."

Higgs, Jodi and Captain Saddam ran for the escalators as panic erupted around them. They forced their way down and sprinted across the precinct floor towards the Security Center.

"Forty-eight, forty-seven..."

They reached the entrance to the short corridor that led to the Security Center door.

"Higgsie. I'm here, babe."

They stopped short as Mandy stepped out of the corridor, pistol in one hand and Penelope clutched in the other, her face streaked with blood, her hair in rat's tails and in her eyes, a wild and dangerous look of hysteria.

Higgs barely recognized her. "Mandy? Mandy, put the gun down, Mandy. This is really not the time."

"Forty-one, forty, thirty-nine..."

Mandy turned the gun on Jodi and screamed, "She dies. She's put you under a spell, Higgsie. She's a witch. Every time, she makes you chose her over me. Well this time, there'll only be me to chose."

"But I don't want you," shouted Higgs.

Mandy turned her full attention, fury and, most importantly the gun, onto Higgs.

"What do you mean? Everybody wants me. I'm beautiful."

"Mandy, please, I don't even like you."

"You love me."

"No I don't."

Mandy squeezed the trigger of her pistol. It clicked—the gun was out of ammunition. She looked down, as astonished as everyone else at what she'd just done. Jodi stepped forward and chopped the side of Mandy's neck with the edge of her hand. Mandy fell to the floor, groaning.

Jodi rubbed her hand. "You know, I've never liked her."

"Does everybody want to kill me?" asked Higgs, mournfully.

"Twenty-nine, twenty-eight..."

They ran at full tilt to the entrance of the Security Center and opened the door. Homeland began to sing another round of "America the Free".

"Twenty, nineteen..."

Higgs tore across the main room and reached Jared's office with Jodi some meters behind. Captain Saddam was trailing badly, more suited to commanding from the bridge of his ship. In three strides, Higgs made it across Jared's office and opened the door behind Jared's desk. The androids bumped around aimlessly in the room beyond.

"Twelve, eleven..."

"Bloody androids." Higgs pushed and shoved his way through them but they were large and had a lot of inertia. "Get out of my way."

Higgs finally pushed through to the door, keyed in the override code and thumped the green button. Nothing happened.

"Seven, six, five..."

"Bugger."

Had he made a mistake with the code? He thumped the door, keyed in the override code again and pushed the green button. The door slid up and he ran through. Homeland was only yards away.

"Three, two..."

Higgs slipped in the foam, falling face down just a meter away from Homeland's keyboard.

"One, zero."

Higgs covered his head with his hands. At the doorway behind him, Jodi covered her head. Back in Jared's office, Captain Saddam stopped. He covered his head. Throughout the mall, ten thousand people covered their heads and lay in expectant, terrified silence.

And then, nothing happened.

Higgs peeped out from behind his hands at Homeland. He looked back over his shoulder at Jodi. He laughed, a short guffaw of relief. "It's malfunctioned."

Jodi kneeled up and laughed. "It's malfunctioned, we're okay."

Higgs dialed up Milo. "Milo, it's malfunctioned. Put me on the public-address system."

"You're on."

"It's okay." Higgs' voice blared out around the mall. "It's malfunctioned. We're okay. It's malfunctioned."

Ten thousand people breathed out in relief. And then, they started cheering, looting and wrecking the place. It was over, finally. She had no more power over them.

Chapter Twenty

The magnificent space station *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks* floated through space, high above the celestial pearl that was the ice moon Europa, bathed in the warm glow from Jupiter's toxic surface. If sound traveled through the vacuum of space, which of course it doesn't, a casual observer might have heard the sound of ten thousand people cheering in triumph. And then they would have been dazzled by a brilliant flash of light and would observe the space station *Nice and Spicy Nacho-Niks* tearing itself apart as a vast, explosive chain-reaction ripped through it, sending a million tons of wreckage spiraling down towards the virgin moon below.

If the casual observer was really on the ball, they might notice amongst the debris a black box, perhaps a meter square, apparently intact. Equipped with some sort of sensor, an exceptionally canny observer might be able to detect faint electrical signals coming from the box as it descended towards the moon. Translated with the right equipment, these signals would come out as a woman's voice, clear and strong, singing "America the Free".

But, of course, there were no casual observers, only the impassive void of space and the frantic, blind radio calls from a distant blue planet, desperate for information, an answer, a word. Out here in the blackness, they were met with silence.

Michael Amos

Michael Amos lives in Oxfordshire in the United Kingdom with his wife, two children, eighteen fish and two rather cute rats. As a freelance writer, he has had work published in New Scientist, The Countryman, the BBC's Radio Oxford Website, The Oxford Times and various other publications. Homeland is his first novel and he is threatening to do a sequel. On the whole, he really shouldn't grumble but, nonetheless, he would like to lodge a formal complaint with God.

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*Looking for more sci-fi?
Enjoy this excerpt from*

Tethers

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In TETHERS, survivor Kathryn Emmente must decide who is friend and who is foe when her cargo vessel, the “Daedalus” explodes under mysterious circumstances, killing many among her crew and leaving the rest of them helpless and stranded on a terra-farming colony moon of Jupiter called X-1226. Coming November 21, 2006 to Samhain Publishing.

“Do you think this place will ever be like Earth?” Jerica asked, as they bounced along in the HUM-V. “Full of people and cities and stuff?”

As a future terra-farming colony, X-1226 had an artificial atmosphere designed to make its surface optimal for harboring life. The little moon, once a desolate chunk of rock hovering between the outermost edge of an asteroid belt in Jupiter’s massive gravitational field, was now a sub-tropical paradise, replete with weather patterns, precipitation and lush, dense vegetation.

“Eventually,” Eric said. “You’ll probably be around to see it.”

The HUM-V grazed a tree and jostled over a fallen log. The equipment in the back hatch slid precariously.

“What have you got up on screen, Jerica?” Kat asked.

“We’ve come a little more than ten miles,” Jerica said. “We won’t be able to keep going much further. It gets really rough up ahead.”

Eric shifted the HUM-V into a lower gear, and it growled as it clambered over more fallen trees and large, rocky knolls.

“The box should be just up ahead,” Jerica said, frowning. “There’s something there. Something big, but not part of the terrain.”

“It’s got to be part of the ship,” Kat said. “Something that didn’t burn in the atmosphere.”

“Stop, Eric,” Jerica said suddenly, excitedly. “Stop here.”

The little HUM-V rumbled to a halt.

Kat swung her door open and hopped out. The grass was tall, almost to her knees. She could hear insects buzzing and chirping, transplanted from Earth. “Where, Jerica?”

“Over there, past the trees.”

Eric and Frank were out of the vehicle, too.

“Wait for me!” Jerica opened her door and swung her legs around.

“No, pup, you stay there,” Kat said.

“But, Mommy—”

“Jerica, I said stay in the HUM-V.”

Jerica huffed and puffed, but stayed put.

Kat, Eric and Frank made their way through the grass. It whispered against their pant legs and folded under their boots. They carefully worked through the trees and thick foliage until they reached a spot that had been gouged through the woods.

The trees had been knocked aside, snapped in two like toothpicks. Some had been burned. The earth had been churned up as if it had been cleaved by an enormous plow. There was a pungent, scorched stink in the air.

There was a towering metal cone laying on its side in the trench. It had been seared black. It was as wide as at least four HUM-Vs and nearly as tall as the outer wall of the colony compound.

A cable sprouted from the top. It draped across the ground before coming to a burned stump a few feet away from them.

“What is it, Mom?” Jerica whispered in Kat’s headset.

“It’s part of the tether,” Kat replied quietly. “The gravitational tether.”

“The black box is inside it,” Eric said. “We’ll need the equipment out of the truck to get to it.”

Kat walked toward the cone. She stared at it, transfixed.

How many times did I see this swing slowly past the window in my quarters? Watching it after Alex and I made love...we always just took it for granted...

She remembered her first space mission. Nothing had prepared her for the strange, alien gravity of the oscillating tether. She had been sick from the moment she’d come out of cryostasis. She had eventually gotten used to it, and anymore, Kat would find herself feeling nauseous on Earth, where the gravitational pull was stronger, more insistent.

“You okay, Kat?” Eric’s voice, low and kind in her earphone.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “I was just thinking...”

“Well, you know better than that,” he said, and she laughed.

“Just hurry up and get the equipment we need,” she said. “I want to get this over with. The sooner the better.”

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