

Dorcas wondered, not for the first time, what her West African mother would have said, if she knew her Cambridge graduate daughter was cleaning offices at Canary Wharf, the very job she had done for fifty years so Dorcas wouldn't have to. Dorcas didn't think the Glock hidden in her cleaning equipment would matter much to Mum. She was a straightforward woman. She wouldn't have had time or patience for Dorcas' specialized position.

It was time for check-in. Dorcas took out her cheap mobile and typed in, *hey baby*. It was script three, and just as they'd practiced, Roy's reply was *hey, you. :)* Simon, the loaner from Special Reconnaissance Regiment, was the one who'd designed it. He'd pointed out that blending in was key, and nobody looked twice at someone texting. There was always a risk that the messages would be intercepted, so the textspeak was bland. The key was in the timing. Once every half hour, on the half hour. So long as you stuck to script, the chance that someone was impersonating the sender was reduced to nil, or as close to nil as Simon could manage it. So long as the texts kept coming in, all was well. If the texts stopped coming, or Dorcas sent *want coffee?* then it was time to send in the cavalry. Not that there was much cavalry to send.

Canary Wharf had lost all the glamor it ever had, so far as Dorcas was concerned. It was one thing to see a place when you're passing through it, and admire the architecture, or the functionality of its design, or just the vast parade of London's wealth and financial elite as it flowed through all day, every day. It was something else again to see it from the day to day perspective, to know how it worked, from the inside out.

But this one was something special. This one was a sleeper.

'His name is Peter Young,' the man from the Ministry had said in the briefing. *'Thirty four, married, one child. Mother and child are out in Kent, or they were; nobody's seen them for six months. Our mutual friends don't like complications, and it's possible they saw Young's family as one complication too many.'*

'He's been out in Dubai for three years now, on contract. When he went, he was an IT troubleshooter. Now, we think he's something else again. We're confident he made contact within the first year, and was converted by the end of the second. He doesn't have the skill set our mutual friends need, but he does have the connections. Contract workers always do. Never know where the next job's going to be, so you always keep your ear out, and you never forget a friend. Put him in Moscow, New York, or anywhere in between, and he'll know someone.'

'What we want to know is, why is he back? There was no reason to cut short his contract, not unless our mutual friends have something in mind for him. That's where you come in.'

Since then a day hadn't gone by when one of them hadn't had eyes on, but so far Young had done nothing to justify all this interest. He was in the Wharf short term, six months on another contract, but he already had his pimp – Dorcas had laughed when she'd heard that City slang for agent – on the lookout for something new, somewhere interesting. Yet he'd already turned down two offers that paid as much, if not more, than Dubai, that fabled land where Londoners went when they wanted to break into the six figure bracket. So Young had a plan in mind.

Or perhaps this was all so much smoke and mirrors. Young might not have made contact with the other side; the man from the Ministry might have been talking out of his public-school-trained arse. Wife and kid missing might just mean messy divorce on the way, and Young might have come back to brace himself for the storm. That might also explain why he'd turned down contracts which meant going too far abroad.

Time for another check-in. *You still @work?*

Roy came back, regular as clockwork. *Not for long. You?*

Dorcas hoped not. It was time to crack Young's office.

That was the great thing about being on the cleaning staff; you could get in pretty much anywhere, with her level of access, and just to be sure, Simon had bumped her card key up a couple

notches. She wasn't sure if the company's Chief Financial Officer had the same level of access Dorcas now had. Still, recon hadn't picked up anything hinky; no hidden rooms, or coffins next to the main server. Now it was time to plant a USB keylogger in Young's machine, and get out.

Dorcas sighed. The man was a pig. A little mess was one thing, but half-eaten lunch going to mulch strewn over the desktop was something altogether other. This cleanup would take a while. Not to worry; the USB didn't take long to work its magic.

Money. Not a lot of it, and mixed bills, strewn all over. Cleaners who got reputations for sticky fingers didn't stay in the job long. Dorcas' mum, when confronted with similar complications, used to put it all in an envelope and put the envelope somewhere it couldn't be missed, like on the occupant's chair. Most of it was in foreign currencies, a lot of it Euro, some dollars, some riyal, probably bills that Young had picked up on his travels.

There was a note on one of the twenty dollar bills. Dorcas snapped a photo of it, before putting the bill away. It was a number, a telephone number.

Dorcas shivered. It was Roy's telephone number.

Both of them were using burners, bought for this specific job, never to be used for anything else. She almost hadn't recognized it; the phone had come pre-programmed, and she'd never bothered to memorize any of the numbers in it. Roy was the one least likely to make contact with Young. He was the muscle, the cavalry, the one who'd respond if she called out for coffee.

So what was Young doing with Roy's burner number?

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Simon was sitting, as arranged, in the little coffee shop at Jubilee Place, beneath the park not far from Canary Wharf's main station concourse, which meant he had a clear view of everyone walking past. He blended in, but then that was his job. Dorcas couldn't picture him in a uniform, which for a career military man was a character trait rarer than hen's teeth. With his Hackett suit and carefully groomed appearance, he might be any one of the high powered office drones passing by, on their way to or from an informal meeting, or job interview. His laptop and papers piled around him completed the image; someone important, someone who didn't have time to waste, even on a coffee break.

Not that Dorcas was playing the cleaner that morning. Like Simon, she could be a chameleon when required. Put in a DLR carriage with two dozen secretaries on their way to the Wharf, and the only difference between her and the others would probably be skin color.

She ordered the double espresso, and sat next to him.

"So what's the problem?"

She passed over her mobile, with the picture on the screen.

Simon's narrow face pinched that little bit more. "I see."

"Could this be a set-up?" she asked.

"Of course. It could be a lot of things. The only thing it couldn't be, is nothing to worry about."

"If they're monitoring our comms ..."

"Then they get nothing. That's the whole point of the scripts. Let me see your phone for a minute, would you?"

Simon played with it. Dorcas guessed he was checking her call and message history, perhaps trying to see if she'd dropped the ball.

"Have you worked with him before?"

"No. The first time I met him was the first time I met you, as I recall. He's clean, as far as I'm aware, vouched for by higher authority."

"But he is a contractor?"

Simon nodded. "Is that a problem?"

Dorcas pointed at her phone. "It wasn't until last night. What if he's being paid by the competition? They have more resources than we do."

Infinitely more, she knew, but it was pointless going into all that now. Besides, Simon was as aware as she what was at stake.

Simon passed the phone back. "You've been sticking to the scripts, which is good. We can't pull him off the job, not now, and even if we could I wouldn't. It'd be a red flag to the competition, and we'd lose any chance we have of finding out what Young means to them."

"That's all very well for you and the Ministry, but you don't have to rely on Roy to pull you out of the fire if it all goes wrong. It's one thing to be out there with minimal backup, but it's something else to be doing it when your backup could be the threat. I'm just an analyst; field work isn't what I'm made for."

Simon frowned. "You know why you were picked for this one. There's no point second-guessing the Ministry; it had to be you. Besides, we've no reason to think Young is a threat. The man hasn't even got any minders, he's about as low risk as you can get and still be in the business. We should be in a position to wind this whole thing up soon. You gave him the gift?"

That was what Simon called the keylogger. Dorcas nodded.

"Then another few days of monitoring, and covering his house," which meant more keyloggers and bugs, Dorcas suspected, "And we can move on to the next phase, which means you can go back to the office and get on with your real job. Chin up!"

"What about Roy?"

"You leave that to me."

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All very well for Simon to say that, but Dorcas remained unconvinced. So she set out for Mudchute, where Roy was based. It was time to have a closer look at her backup.

Mudchute was where Canary Wharf went to get cheap labor. There were plenty of houses built for executives, back in the 1980s and 90s, that were still lived in by executives, but more than a few of them had seen the light and were renting, multiple occupancy of course, to baristas, cleaners, and all the other not-quite-untouchables that the Wharf needed to survive, plus a healthy minority of students from the University, only a short distance across the Thames in Greenwich. Five or six to a house, at Isle of Dogs rates, was a healthy income. The Ministry had quietly bought up a few of those properties very early on, as a hedge against the future, and so far it had been amply rewarded. In a place like this, nobody noticed a new face or two, and a house where the curtains were always drawn didn't stand out in a street where half the residents worked nights.

Dorcas didn't have to worry about finding Roy's house. His car was a dead giveaway.

"Where the hell did you get that thing?" she'd said, when she saw it for the first time.

Roy had grinned. Typical Yank, really, though the tattoos straight out of Bagram Air Field hinted at a different kind of background. "Bought my little putt-putt from some kid out in Romford. Well, I guess technically I bought it from his pops; the old man was pissed at his first born, probably on account of all the speeding tickets, so he was happy to pass putt-putt here on to me for next to nothing, cash transaction. Don't you be fooled by her looks. That kid knew what he was doing when he tuned her up. I couldn't have done better myself, and that's a bigger compliment than you know. You'll be happy to see her, if you have to get out of Dodge in a hurry."

"I think the last time I saw a car that color, Bugs Bunny was behind the wheel."

Roy patted the car's bonnet. "Don't you listen to the mean lady, putt-putt."

Dorcas wasn't about to challenge Roy up front. That would get her nowhere, but if there was a chance to look around the place while he was out, she'd take it.

She stopped at the corner, pretending to look at her phone, to give herself a chance to look up and down the street. No sign of life. Roy's place was four doors down.

Quick check of her case, and out with the clipboard; if it ever came up, she was from the Council, conducting a survey about garbage collection. She even had the paperwork to say so, though

how anyone felt 'Help Shape The Future' was going to sit well in a sentence about garbage collection habits was a mystery whose answer was known only to bureaucrats.

First, check the windows. Then a glance down the side, to the gate that led to the back garden. No surprises, and he wasn't in, but she noticed that the camera security was offline. She hadn't worried about it when she'd planned the job, confident that she could rely on Simon not to grumble too loudly when he saw the footage. That was when she thought they'd be working. Perhaps Roy had disabled them, for whatever reason.

The lock was no problem, and then she was in.

She'd loved reading Deighton when she was a kid. Safe houses are all alike, he'd written, but she hadn't appreciated how true that was until she'd seen a few for herself. Never quite lived in, never quite clean, a thin layer of dust and desperation covering everything.

Roy was a typical safe house occupier. He left nothing of himself behind, except the stink of sweat, and cheap takeaway food. There was an exercise mat on the floor, and some weights, the only real sign he'd been there at all. No papers of any kind. The pistol wasn't here – he probably had that with him – but the NeoStead bullpup shotgun was, as was a box of shells. Roy had policed his territory; a casual searcher would not have found it, but Dorcas knew houses like these all too well.

Finding nothing useful, Dorcas was about to go upstairs when she heard footsteps out front.

Stepping through to the kitchen, she paused just long enough to look back and see who was coming in the front door.

It was Simon.

Moments later she was through the kitchen, through the door that led to the backyard, and up the side passage between the houses. By the time Simon was in the front room, Dorcas was out the side passage and on the main road, walking swiftly away. She'd be at Crossharbour DLR and on a train within minutes.

When she'd joined, one of Dorcas' first instructors had explained the Green Elephant problem.

"You go about your day to day life thinking there's no such thing as green elephants," said the rugged man in his fifties who might, or might not, have been special operations once upon a time, *"And what's more, it's absurd to think there could ever be green elephants. Then you see one for yourself, and you say, well I never. So there is a green elephant after all. Then you see another one, and you say to yourself, don't I feel stupid, there's plenty of them around."*

"Then, without even realizing what's happened, you see green elephants all over the bloody place. In fact, now every time you see a grey elephant, an ordinary pachyderm, your first reaction is, I know what you are, you bastard. You're one of those fucking green elephants, aren't you? Can't fool me!"

"Gathering intelligence is an extended exercise in avoiding selection bias. You start assuming that things have to be so, because you expect them to be so. Because you're used to spotting when things are wrong – when someone's doing dirty, when someone's selling out – soon you start to wonder if everyone you meet is a wrong 'un. Green elephants everywhere, see? That's what you've got to guard against. Paranoia's a useful trait to develop, but if you let it control everything you do, you're no good to anyone."

Right now she was seeing a big green pachyderm, and his name was Simon.

It was absurd to think he was in on it, she told herself. She'd reported Roy to Simon. It was only natural that Simon should check Roy out.

Yet why should Simon turn up at the exact same moment she did? Coincidence? Or was he trailing her? *'Let me see your phone for a minute, would you?'* Is that how Simon had done it? Dorcas wished she was technical enough to know if her phone could be traced, and how; but he could have done something then, or been tracking her long before that.

Standing on the station concourse, far above street level, she looked down, across the road.

Simon was standing on the corner, across the road, looking up at the station platform.

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Protocol said she was to meet Roy before the insertion, so she went to the chip shop in her cleaner's rig-out. He was waiting for her, in the booth at the back with a good view of the room.

He grinned. "What's up, Doc?"

She sat next to him. "Sorry, I don't get it."

He took a book out of his back pocket and pushed it across the stained and chipped Formica. She knew what it was; she'd approved the cover art, after all. She'd forgotten about the author's picture and bio on the jacket.

"I tell you, I was not expecting that," he said. "Here I am, trying to walk off a sleepless night, wandering around Greenwich. I pick my way through a dozen different books in this place, just window shopping really, and they have titles stacked to the ceiling here, so what the hell, right? Then I see a familiar face, and I think to myself, no, can't be. So I take a closer look. What are you a doctor of, anyway? Medicine?"

"It's a little more esoteric than that. I suppose you might call it ancient civilization. I could show you my dissertation, but then I'd have to kill you."

It was a lousy joke, but it got a chuckle. "So you're a history nut, huh?"

"Kind of. Languages are my specialty, really. Old, dead languages."

Roy grinned, a light, easy smile with very little feeling in it. "See, that's what I thought."

Dorcas leaned back. The coffee here was awful, but she needed the caffeine. "What?"

"I've been wondering what I'm doing here. Don't get me wrong, I like getting paid. In fact, it's one of my favorite things, but what I don't get is first, why your people didn't have anyone already on the payroll who could do this job, and second, why you're here at all. I see someone like you, I think back office, I think analyst, I think planner. I definitely do not think first in the door with a gun. You don't strike me as the kind of person who gets involved, you know? Yet here you are."

"I'm the only one who'd know what to look for."

Roy leaned in. "You believe that? Really?"

Dorcas took a long, deep swallow. She wished it was hotter. She only liked coffee when it was hot enough to scald.

Roy took out a cigarette, before realizing that he couldn't smoke indoors. He tucked it behind his ear.

"I say bullshit, lady. I say no way. If I was running your show, I'd have someone like you in a little room somewhere, telling some clever black bag specialists what to look for. Or just take a fucking picture of whatever the hell it is, and give that to the insertion team, with a note that reads, 'if you see this, steal it.' And I would not have one rent-a-goat playing Lone Ranger with shotgun accessory and kung-fu grip. I'd have another six very serious people with very serious guns waiting in a van."

It was the same thing she'd been thinking, though she tried not to show it.

"The Ministry has its own ideas about how to run the show."

He snorted. "On the fucking cheap, you mean. But what the hell, I should complain. The money's good, and the living is easy. What do you want to use tonight? Script four?"

"Sounds good. See you soon."

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Paranoia's a useful trait to develop, but if you let it control everything you do, you're no good to anyone.

What to do when you don't trust your watcher, and you can't be sure your backup will come when you call? Dorcas had an extra burner phone, one she hadn't told Simon about. It was one of those precautions that had become second nature, but before she dialed the number that she'd committed to memory long ago, not trusting the phone's SIM, she leaned against the wall and considered carefully what she was about to do.

It might all be paranoia. What evidence did she have, really, except for a phone number written on a dollar, and a chance encounter in Mudchute? Simon might be kosher. So might Roy. It could all be in her head.

Yet she couldn't ignore the phone number, any more than she could ignore the look on Simon's face when he'd stared up, from street level, at the Crossharbour platform above. If she was right, even only about some of it, then she had no effective support in the field at all.

She dialed the number. There were protocols before she could speak to anyone; she went through them one by one, speaking carefully to avoid any misunderstanding. Then she told the anonymous voice on the other end everything, from start to finish. It didn't interrupt her.

When she stopped talking the voice replied, "Understood. Proceed as arranged. Move from there to checkpoint directly afterwards. Support is on its way."

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Dorcas moved from office to office, playing her part, texting Roy every half hour on the half hour. It was what was expected of her, and she didn't want to arouse any suspicion, not until the task was complete and she could get the hell away as fast as possible. Checkpoint wasn't far, and she was confident she could avoid Roy in those few minutes between her leaving the building and his prearranged pickup. Then she'd be back in the welcoming arms of the Ministry, and she only hoped she hadn't been wrong about Simon. Otherwise making the accusation would complicate things for both of them, as the Ministry questioned and cross-examined each to see which was the failure, which the loyal asset.

The key now was to make sure that everything was in place, and that Young hadn't tried to interfere. Young was still the target, when all was said and done. As the target, he took priority. Someone else would have to plant the listening devices and keyloggers at his flat, and go through the contents to ensure he had, or hadn't, brought anything interesting back with him. But for now, his office would need to be searched one more time.

She was just about to go inside when she heard movement. Her first instinct was to hide, which she squelched. No point in that, and besides, whoever was out there had no reason to look twice at the cleaner.

Dorcas busied herself with the office next door to Young's, and kept watch. A man walked past, typical Wharf drone, all suit and trousers, tie half pulled off, a strong whiff of beer. A shock of recognition: it was Young.

He wasn't in great shape at all. Not even a suntan to show for all that time in Dubai, and he'd put on weight, a lot of it. His face was greasy, tears leaking from his eyes. Slumped in his office, legs dangling listlessly. There was no way she could search the place now, and in any case protocol demanded she back off. The less she was seen, the better. She began moving on to the next office.

"Oi."

She pretended to be deaf – the traditional response when one half of the Canary Wharf workforce was directly addressed by the half that was far better paid – but that didn't work.

"Oi, come here."

"Sir?" Bright, deferential. Don't look up, she reminded herself.

"I want to get a look at you."

"I really need to be getting on, sir."

"No." *Gun!* Her mind screamed. *Gun!* "No, you don't."

His grip was shaky and his eyes well out of focus. If he pulled the trigger of that expensive, high caliber toy, Lord alone knew what he would hit.

"Sir, I really think you should put that down."

"I don't know who you are," he said, enunciating each word with deliberate dignity, so as not to let the drink get in the way. "But I know what you are."

He waved a familiar twenty dollar bill in one hand. "I've got your number, see?"

"I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else, sir. May I go now?"

He giggled. "See, if you were just the cleaner, then when I took this out," he waved the pistol in a wide arc, "You would have freaked out. It's what people do. I got this in the Emirates, you know, bloody difficult to get it back here again, but I did. I know people. Important people."

He began to cry again, snot flowing freely. "Not that they did any fucking thing. Send me out there, they say, you keep in touch. You let us know the minute they try to recruit you, and we'll take over. You won't have to worry about a bloody thing. Well I did! I did exactly what they told me to do, and the other side, they did what they told me they would. They made contact."

He shivered. "My God. Have you seen them? Do you know what they're like, really like?"

Dorcas nodded.

"Then why did you people leave me out there!"

Young sprang to his feet, pistol waving all over the place. If this kept up, Dorcas was determined to take him down, but hand to hand wasn't her strong suit, and even if she'd been Bruce Lee's long lost cousin several hundred times removed, there were all kinds of ways that kind of thing could go very badly wrong.

"They make contact, so I call you people, and what the fuck do I get? Big fat fucking nothing. Oh, they want to know more, they want me to report, they want me to put my arse on the line, and I say, but why? That wasn't the deal! The deal was, I made contact, and you moved in, but you never fucking moved in, did you!"

The gun moved tantalizingly close for just a moment, and Dorcas almost went for it. Then he pulled it away again.

"You left me out there as bait, goddamn it. Bet you hoped one of the big ones would show up, one of the really fat fish, but all that ever came to see me were fucking nothing, just the little ones. They knew something was up, so they stayed away, just keeping the contact live enough so everyone'd feel invested.

"Three years! I do this for three years, and then they get bored. Then they send me back, and I try to report, but none of you fuckers wanted to know, did you? All I get from you is this phone number, call if ever things go pear shaped, but stay in place, wait for further instructions. Bait! Except the others see me as bait too, and they want to know who's sniffing around. So everyone waits to see what happens next."

He glared at her, bleary eyed. "So what happens if I call this number, eh? Will that phone of yours ring?"

She was already late on her check-in, by a couple minutes. If it went any longer, Roy was under instructions to haul ass in and get her out. That's if those were the real instructions, of course. Maybe the script was just to keep her quiet.

"Please put that away, sir."

He stopped waving the automatic. "What happened to Lucy? Where's Robbie? Where are they?"

The wife and son. Dorcas remembered them from the briefing. Would a lie get her anywhere? He was well out of it. Who knows how he'd react, whatever she said?

"We don't know. The opposition don't like ... complications."

The truth hit him hard. For a single moment he looked all of five years old, lost, alone, wanting his mummy.

He put the barrel under his chin and pulled the trigger.

Dorcas' fingers wouldn't work. They felt fat and numb and stupid, and she hit a button. When Roy answered, she paid no attention to his fear and shouting.

"Coffee. Coffee. Cofffee. Fucking coffee, COFFEE, COFFEEEEEE!"

Then she threw the phone away and started to run. The corners were becoming indistinct, the air hot and bubbling. The opposition were on their way in, sharks attracted by the scent of blood.

A Glock wouldn't do anything now. She needed to get away.

She hit the emergency stairs at a run, almost falling down the first flight. Then she saw men coming upstairs, and out came the Glock, instinct taking over, forearm extended, trigger finger resting alongside the gun, waiting for the first target.

"Hold fire!" Simon yelled. "Hold fire!"

Dorcas' forearm snapped up.

"Doctor Cissé! Doctor Cissé, please identify!"

"Simon? I'm standing up, Simon." She moved into view.

Simon was on the lower level, two heavily armed men with him, weapons pointed at her. More were behind them.

"Move up," Simon ordered. Dorcas had to smile; six serious men with serious guns. She wondered where Roy was.

"How many?"

Dorcas tried to think. "At least two of our friends, but their SOP calls for three at each insertion, so my money says there's three up there. Young's dead. They'll probably verify and try to withdraw, but that depends..."

The door above them flew apart, and all the lights in the stairwell died.

"You two get the Doctor out of here," Simon ordered. "The rest, cleared to fire!"

Dorcas found herself almost lifted away, as two of the team grabbed her and bundled her downstairs. Sound suppressed weapons fire erupted behind them.

It was a long run down. One of the two peeled off after two flights, covering the tactical retrograde. The other stayed with her all the way to the bottom. He was carrying small mirrors, she noticed, not good for covert work but practical under certain special circumstances. At least someone had read her briefing notes.

Bait, Young had said. *Except the others see me as bait too*. Dorcas could picture it all too clearly. The Ministry leaving him out in Dubai, hoping he'd attract a target worth going after. Then when he doesn't get one, the Ministry leaves him there, thinking things might change; but the opposition send Young back. They see him as bait too, and they want to know what the Ministry will do next.

So the Ministry tries a different tack, and dangles a special kind of worm on its hook.

The Ministry puts Dorcas out, as bait.

You don't strike me as the kind of person who gets involved, you know? Roy had said. *Yet here you are*. Doctor Cissé, whose research had everyone so excited, playing field agent again, sniffing around Young, while the mutual friends started sniffing around her.

They'd hit the ground floor. Dorcas was feeling the pain, but the soldier with her was in better shape. He went through the door first, and then gunfire erupted all around them.

The mutual friends had come in hot. Dorcas knew their SOP; three in the assault, hit, then run, and they seldom needed any more than that. This time they'd recruited shells, weak puppets that had been bought for a little taste of power, and by the look of them the opposition had hired mainly gangbangers, probably PDC, though she knew she was out of date when it came to the current South London scene. Kids with guns, weapons they couldn't afford, which said all that needed to be said about their true allegiance.

The trooper laid down fire, shattering a lot of glass and putting a few rounds in one of the shells. There were too many to hope he'd get them all. There was no cover where they were, so he sprinted for the reception desk, Dorcas close behind.

She heard a familiar engine roar.

“Run!” The trooper put down suppressive fire, burning what was left in his clip as she sprinted for the exit. The shells had no discipline – this wasn’t their kind of fight, after all – so they broke, then concentrated fire on the reception desk. By the time any of them realized what was going on, Dorcas was on the street.

One of the shells ran towards the car, swinging his SMG up to fire before Roy, leaning over the bonnet from the driver’s side, put a shotgun slug through his chest. A large part of the boy flew away behind him, and he plunged face-first onto the pavement.

“Hop in, Doc,” Roy said, as he slid back behind the wheel.

Dorcas dived in. There would be time for questions later. Right now, her immediate goal was to get far, far away.

Roy did just that. The other shells were scrambling to get to cars of their own, as he flew past.

“We going to see the cops any time soon?” Roy yelled.

Dorcas doubted it. She knew the drill; the Met would be under heavy manners not to interfere. Soon – if not already – this whole incident would be another D-Notice, the official description for an incident covered by the Defence of the Realm Act. Technically it was a DA-Notice these days, but people in her line of work still called it a D-Notice. Given what they were up against, it was a grisly in-joke.

“Not likely,” she yelled back.

Roy grinned. “Cool.” He floored it. Dorcas soon realized he was making for Blackwall Tunnel, under the river. The opposition wouldn’t be able to follow them over running water. Clearly he’d been reading her briefing notes too.

“Who are you with?”

He glanced at her. “Nobody. I’m hired help, that much is true, but I was supposed to be looking after Young. Then someone decides to let you loose in here, and I guess that same somebody figured, well, we’re already paying this guy to sit on his ass and watch over some drunk IT dude. Why not get some value out of him, since he’s here anyway? So they gave me you, too. Shit, I was probably just window dressing, put out here to make it look good. Simon and his people, they’re the real deal.”

“Young’s gone.”

“Shit. Well, there goes the bonus. He go out his own way?”

“Yes.”

“Figured. Tried to tell the folks back home Young was stretched too thin, but they didn’t want to know. I don’t know what they put him through, but whatever it was, it ate him all up.”

Dorcas looked behind. Roy was weaving through traffic, trying not to die. The shells were catching up; they were more motivated to take suicidal risks. Some of them may have believed they didn’t have to worry about dying at all.

A round ricochet off the car. One of the shells was close enough to take shots at them.

“Don’t you touch my putt-putt,” Roy said, and punched it through oncoming traffic. The shells kept coming, and now they were closer still. More rounds peppered the air. People on the pavement were diving for cover.

“They’re closing in!”

Roy settled behind the wheel, a grin sneaking across his face.

“I ever tell you about my uncle Jack?”

The passenger side mirror vanished in a cloud of splinters, and the rear window shattered.

Dorcas crouched low. Returning fire was not an option; she hadn’t a hope of hitting anything useful, and she didn’t want to think about what might happen to a wild round.

“He used to run shine back in Alabam’, when Tricky Dick was in the hot seat.”

“What has that got to OH JEEEEEEZUUUU ...”

Roy cranked the wheel over and jacked up the emergency brake in one smooth action. In a gut-wrenching swivel, his car pushed all the way around, and then he let out the brake and straightened the

wheel. Dorcas saw metal fly away from the car; hubcaps, she realized, as one of them bounced off a building. Roy flew straight past the shells, who could only watch as he sped away behind them.

One of them, Dorcas saw as she looked back, tried the same maneuver. It did not end well.

“Uncle Jack always said I could go pro, if I put more practice in.”

Dorcas took a breath. “This means we’re not going to the Tunnel.”

“Nope. That option’s closed. I’m headed back to the safe house.”

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By the time they got to Mudchute, putt-putt was in critical condition. The gunfire had done her little good, and Roy’s reverse had punished the tyres. She was smoking and ready to die by the time they turned into Roy’s street.

Most of the neighbors were at work at this hour, but not all, and some of them came out to see what was going on. The ones that did went straight back inside when they saw Roy emerge with his bullpup shotgun. There’d be a lot of calls to 999, Dorcas guessed, none of which would get the desired response. It did mean that the Ministry’s people would be on their way. At least they didn’t have to worry about YouTube; if someone did try to capture all this on a smartphone, when the opposition arrived the cameras would fry.

“Upstairs, Doc,” Roy said, as he closed the door behind them. “I’ve been working on it.”

The first thing she saw as she reached the top of the stairs was a stack of mirrors, some fresh from the store, others more antique, probably bought in one of Greenwich’s oddments shops.

“You read the whole thing?” she called down the stairs.

“Uh huh. Say, is even half that shit true?”

“No way to be sure. We still don’t know as much as we’d like about them.”

Roy took up position at the foot of the stairs, the sofa deployed as temporary cover, shotgun pointed at the door. “Well, that’s comforting.”

Salt would have been useful, but Roy hadn’t stockpiled that up here with the mirrors. She guessed it was in the kitchen. She grabbed a mirror, a nineteenth century replica of a seventeenth century original, and headed back downstairs.

Someone was at the front door.

“Roy?” It was Simon’s voice. “Are you and Doctor Cissé in there?”

“Simon?” Roy began to stand up.

“Don’t listen to it!”

“What the hell, Doc? It’s Simon.” Roy had put his shotgun aside and was moving towards the door, when Dorcas came up behind him and hit him as hard as she dared with her Glock. The first blow put him on his knees, the second put him out.

“Doctor Cissé?”

Dorcas put the mirror in front of her. “You can’t come in!”

The door swung open.

“What makes you say that?” It still used Simon’s voice.

Then Dorcas remembered; when she’d visited the safe house before, the cameras had been out of commission. She’d thought it was Roy who’d turned them off. It wasn’t. They’d fried when the opposition visited the first time. That was probably why Roy had been so vulnerable to the voice trick; they’d tasted him before.

She called out, in a language that was old when Romulus and Remus sucked on their hairy mother’s teat.

“In the name of the Sun, that sits on the right hand and is Blessed thereby, I command ...”

It stepped inside. “Yes, yes,” it replied, in the same language. “And he who affirms the Devil, creates the Devil. I have heard all this before.”

“Though,” it continued, as it eyed the mirror warily, “Not all your researches have been mistaken.”

It was the third time she’d seen one, up close. She’d managed to kill the first one, more by luck than judgement. The second time had been a fleeting glimpse, in a Budapest slaughterhouse. After that, it had all been research and educated guesses, until now.

It had a face, she knew that, but she found it hard to concentrate on it. Something about their makeup made them indistinct, or perhaps it was more than that. Perhaps she saw a human face because that was what it wanted her to see, but it couldn’t get it quite right, so her eyes, or mind, refused to take it in. It was why, she supposed, cameras didn’t work well on them. They were masters of misdirection; if they didn’t want you to see what was really there, or wanted you to hear, and believe, a familiar voice, they could make it so.

“Dawn’s coming soon,” she reminded it, in English this time. “You won’t be able to stay long.”

“No, I suppose not. Pity. If only you hadn’t made that call to the Ministry. We had planned for this to go rather differently, you know, but then you called for help, and Young had the poor taste to get drunk and sloppy that same night. It all fell apart so quickly.”

“You were monitoring our comms. You intercepted my call.”

“Of course. So did your friend Simon, for that matter, but then he didn’t really need to, since he had a direct line to your paymasters at the Ministry. We hadn’t wanted a full-scale confrontation in the heart of London, but your call got his team moving, and when we tried to intervene and salvage something from the wreckage it all got rather complicated.”

It looked around the room. “I see you haven’t had a chance to prepare. There should be salt across the threshold – assuming that works, of course – and there are other things you could have done. But even your gallant companion there couldn’t buy you enough time for that, I suppose.”

She held the mirror high. “What do you want here?”

It bared teeth as sharp as a shark’s. “We want to make you an offer.”

“Recruitment? I don’t think so.”

“Don’t be so sure. Consider: how many friends do you have, really? The Ministry? It used you as bait. Simon? He works for them, he’ll do as he is told. Your companion, well, you had to disable him yourself, and in any case he only works for money; he has no loyalties really. So where does that leave dear Doctor Cissé, I wonder? Happy to go back to the Ministry and be a good girl? Or perhaps you’ll retire, return to academia, write a few more books. Wait for the knock on your door. Because there will be a knock on your door; the information in your head is too valuable.

“Don’t make a hasty decision,” it said, as it took out a business card and tossed it into the room. “Think about it. Weigh up your options, and when you see where your best interests lie, call us. We’ll be waiting.”

“Wait as long as you like.”

It chuckled. “Waiting is what we’re good at. Goodbye, Doctor Cissé. I hope to hear from you. Soon.”

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Roy opened his eyes for the first time in three days, and winced.

“Hey there,” Dorcas said, and she leaned across the bed to check on his condition. “Good to see you back.”

“Where am I?”

“Across the sea,” she told him. “I had to call a few third party friends of mine to get that done, but it was necessary. Sometimes, when they use that voice trick of theirs, it sticks in the mind, like an echo. You’re never quite right afterward, not unless you get immediate treatment. I had to keep you under with Propofol for a while, and I thought it was better to do my work here, than in London.”

He tried to sit up, but dizziness put him back down. “So how am I, Doc?”

“Better than you were. I need to keep you under observation for a while, but you should make a full recovery. Your head is harder than it looks.”

He tried to touch his head, but his fingers wouldn't work the way he wanted them to.

“Don't exert yourself. Relax, you'll be here for some time yet. Plenty of time to make a full recovery.”

“I didn't think you were a medical doctor, Doc.”

She glanced out the window. The sun was shining down on Dublin's streets.

“No more I am. But you learn a few things in this job. Tell me something. You said you work for money. Will you work for anyone who pays you?”

“Never had to worry about that before, not about to start now. But I don't think I'm going to be taking on new contracts any time soon, you know?”

“Oh, don't worry about that. I can wait until you're healed. Once you are, though, I want to take a trip, and I could use a reliable travelling companion.”

“Your bosses won't mind?”

Dorcas smiled, a distant, cold smile. “I don't think that matters much. Are you willing?”

“Sure, Doc. Anything you say.”

Dorcas gazed out the window. Her mind was on the business card, with its 1 +33 1 code telephone number.

She wondered if she would like Paris.