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TUNNELS Series!



SPIRAL

RODERICK
GORDON

BRIAN
WILLIAMS



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GORDON

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Chicken House
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Copyright

The freezing fog in mid-November

Downhill all the way, downhill all the way

How I wish the roads were straighter

Let's panic later, let's panic later

from *Let's Panic Later*

Wire (1979 –)



There is a point at which there is no point at which.

from *The Book of Proliferation*

Translated from the original Romanian (15th century)

PART 1

THE PHASE



1

BOOM.

Apart from the noise and the gut-wrenching fear of physical injury, the most terrifying thing about an explosion is the millisecond in which the whole world fractures. It's as though the very fabric of time and space has been split asunder, and you're falling through it with no idea what lies on the other side.

When Colonel Bismarck came to, he was spread-eagled on a marble floor. For a moment he was unable to move, as if his body forbade it. As if it knew better than he did.

Although there was utter silence, the Colonel didn't question it. He felt no alarm, no urgency. He was staring up at the shattered ceiling, where snowy chunks of plaster rocked gently. He became captivated by their movement — backward and forward, forward and backward — as if they were caught in a breeze. He was even more bewitched by the spectacle as some of the pieces broke loose, falling in slow motion to the floor around him.

His hearing began to return.

He made out a sound that reminded him of woodpeckers. "*Vater,*" he said, recalling the hunting trips in the jungle around New Germania with his father. Sometimes they'd be gone for as much as a week, sleeping in a tent and shooting game together.

It was a comforting memory. Lying among the blast debris, the Colonel sighed as if he didn't have a care in the world. He heard the rattling sound again, still so remote. He didn't associate it with the rapid fire of automatic weapons.

Then the Royal Mint building was rocked by a second blast. The Colonel shut his eyes at the blinding flash of light, every bit as bright as the sun in his world at the center of the Earth.

The percussive wave swept brutally over him, sucking the air from his lungs.

"*Was ist . . . ?*" the Colonel gasped, still on his back as shards of glass flew across the room like driving sleet and tinkled on the polished marble around him.

He knew then that something was wrong. Not only was everything quickly becoming hazed by a choking black smoke, but his mind seemed to be full of it, too.

“Wie komme ich hierher?” he said, groping for comprehension.

How he'd come to be there he had absolutely no idea. The last memory that felt substantial enough to rely on was of being ambushed in New Germania. He remembered being captured by the Styx, but after that — and he found this strange — he could only remember purple light. No, purple *lights*, many of them, burning with such intensity that his memories were dim by comparison.

He vaguely recalled the long journey to the outer crust, and then not much else until he found himself in a truck with a squad of his New Germanian troops. They'd been taken to a large building — a factory. And associated with this factory, and still in the forefront of his mind, was something he'd had to do. A task so vitally important that it overrode all other considerations, even his own survival.

But, right now, he couldn't put his finger on what this task had been. And he didn't have time to dwell on it further as a burst of gunfire from close by galvanized him into action. He sat up, wincing from the sharp pain in his head where it had struck the floor. Coughing and choking as the acrid smoke caught in his throat, he knew his first priority was to get himself to cover.

He crawled through a doorway where the smoke was less dense and found that he was in an office with a high ceiling and a desk with a vase of flowers on it. Kicking the door shut, he lay behind it while he checked himself over. His hair was sodden from an injury at the back of his head, but he couldn't tell how serious it was — the skin around it was numb and he knew from experience that head wounds always bled profusely. He ran his hands over the rest of his body, finding no further injuries. He wasn't in uniform but wearing a coat and civilian clothes, none of which he recognized. But at least he had his military-issue belt around his waist, and his pistol was still in its holster. He got to his feet and took it out, its weight reassuring in his hand. Something he knew. He waited, listening for sounds on the other side of the door.

He didn't have to wait for long. After a brief lull, he caught English voices and the sound of boots crunching on debris in the hallway where he'd been. Someone shouldered the door of the room open and stormed in. The man was dressed in black, with police emblazoned across his chest. He wore a gas mask and helmet and was armed with an automatic weapon the likes of which Colonel Bismarck had never seen before.

Catching the policeman by surprise, the Colonel wrapped an arm around his neck and rendered him unconscious. While the man's radio buzzed, the Colonel quickly removed his uniform and dressed himself in it. As he slipped on the gas mask, he realized that even more blood had seeped from his head injury, but he couldn't worry about that now.

He familiarized himself with the assault rifle, which he found was pretty straightforward. Then he emerged from the office and took a couple of steps into the black smoke, only to come face-to-face with another policeman dressed in identical siege gear. As their gaze met through the lenses of their masks, the other man gave a hand signal, but the Colonel didn't know how he was meant to respond. A question formed in the other man's eyes. Thinking that his disguise had been blown, the Colonel

began to raise the HK assault rifle in his hands.

He was saved by another explosion that ripped through the hallway and swiped him off his feet. In a daze, the Colonel picked himself up and staggered through the main entrance, where the doors hung crookedly on broken hinges. Almost losing his balance as he missed the step, he found himself reeling on the pavement outside the building.

He stopped dead.

He was confronted by a cordon of armed men — too many for him to take on. They were all behind discarded vehicles or riot shields, their laser sights clustered on him.

He wasn't prepared for what happened next. With his head still spinning and his senses dulled, he didn't react when his rifle was snatched from his grip. At the same time, he was hoisted off his feet by two policemen and carried away in double-quick time.

"It's all right, old mate, don't you worry. We'll get you some help," the man on his left told him sympathetically. The second policeman said something, but the Colonel didn't take it in.

His escorts removed his helmet and gas mask. "You're not one of our guys," the policeman said when he saw the Colonel's bloodied face.

"Must be from E Team — a country boy," the other said. But the Colonel wasn't listening. Not twenty feet away, a body was stretched out in the gutter. Around it a circle of policemen laughed and joked as one of them nudged it with his toe cap. The Colonel recognized the dead man instantly. It was a New Germanian from his own regiment. He knew the soldier and his wife well — they'd recently had a daughter born to them. The Colonel tried to pull against the two policemen supporting him, but it was taken as a show of anger.

"Yeah — the rest of them'll be bagged and tagged within the hour," the largest of the two policemen promised in a growl. "Whoever these bastards are, we've already slotted four of 'em."

As the Colonel continued to try to free himself, the other policeman spoke, his words staccato as he were about to explode with fury. "Take it easy, officer. Leave it to us to finish the job."

The Colonel grunted a "Yes," realizing he had to play along if he didn't want to be identified as one of the protagonists. He allowed the two policemen to help him to the end of Threadneedle Street and then into a side road where ambulances were waiting.

"See to him, will you? He got caught up in the last explosion," one of the policemen ordered a medic. They left him there and sped back to the Bank of England.

In the ambulance, the medic began to examine the Colonel. "That's a very fine mustache," he told him. From the way his hands were shaking, the young medic had clearly never seen action like this before. He cleaned the wound on the Colonel's head and was putting the finishing touches to a field dressing when shouts came from the top of the street. Several new casualties were being carried in on stretchers. The medic went to their aid, giving the Colonel the opportunity he'd been looking for. Although he was still a little groggy, he eased himself down from the back of the ambulance and stol

away.

With so many uniformed personnel flooding the area — both police and increasing numbers of military — no one took any notice of the Colonel. Sticking to the back streets, he stopped only when an entrance at the rear of one of the large office buildings caught his eye. Beyond a pair of open doors he could see a ramp leading down to an underground parking garage. The Colonel descended into it and was trying the vehicles to find one that was unlocked when a man wearing a pinstripe suit appeared. The man went straight to a large four-by-four, and just as he was stowing two briefcases in its trunk, the Colonel knocked him out cold. Swapping the police jacket for the unconscious man's, the Colonel then heaved his limp body in beside his briefcases and slammed the trunk shut.

Although he had only driven left-hand-drive cars before, the Colonel had no difficulty in maneuvering the vehicle up the ramp and through the streets. As he joined a line of traffic waiting to get away from the trouble in the city, he rummaged through the pockets of the man's jacket. He came across a wallet, from which he extracted the credit cards, flipping them onto the passenger seat as he examined them. Then he found a driver's license, with what he assumed was the man's home address on it, and began to scan the road signs around him. Although he had no idea how he was going to find his way to the man's home, now that he was out of immediate danger, he could take his time.

He touched a control on the console beside his seat, and the blue-and-white BMW emblem flashed on a small display in the dash. He smiled. Within a few clicks he'd navigated to the onboard GPS system. He immediately typed in the postal code from the driver's license. As an authoritative female voice began to reel off directions, the Colonel nodded, allowing himself an even broader smile.

"*Bayerische Motoren Werke,*" he exhaled, running his hands appreciatively around the luxurious leather rim of the steering wheel. "*Ausgezeichnet.*" The Colonel knew this marque well because his father had flown aircraft manufactured by the company in the Great War.

Aspects of this outer world that the Colonel now found himself in were so familiar he could almost pretend he was still in New Germania. But other aspects would take some getting used to. For starters, the gravity was so strong here that every movement was an effort, as if his limbs were weighed down with lead.

And the sun . . .

He peered through the tinted windshield, marveling at the fiery globe hanging in the heavens, which was smaller and weaker than the ever-burning and omnipresent one he'd known all his life. Even now it wasn't directly overhead, and it was a revelation to him that it would dip below the horizon with the onset of night, the onset of *darkness*.

And the people in the streets. People of all races. He watched as an elderly black man tripped and took a bad fall. A white woman instantly went to help him.

Not out of choice but because of its origins, New Germania had been monoracial, and Colonel Bismarck knew only too well what atrocities had gone on in wartime Germany. As he surveyed the

mix of people making the exodus from the city, he smiled. He truly was in an enlightened civilization

“Continue for one thousand feet to Old Street roundabout, then take the second exit,” the GPS dictated mechanically.

The Colonel might have been plucked from his motherland by the Styx and thrust into this new and alien environment, but he wasn't about to throw in the towel. He was a resourceful man, a survivor.

And besides, he had a score to settle.



2

“TARNATION!” A LOW VOICE seeped through the treacly gloom inside the small crofter’s cottage on Parry’s estate. If anybody had been there to witness the speed at which the man crossed to the cobwebbed window, they would have doubted their eyes. As he hooked a ragged curtain aside, the rain-filtered light fell on his face — the face of a man in his sixties.

But it wasn’t any normal face; the skin was slightly raised in a series of concentric circles radiating out from each of his eyes. And there was a grid of lines across his forehead that extended down his temples and under his ears. It was as if worms had threaded through his flesh and left their tracks behind.

“Who in the blazes is that?” the man said, grimacing as he pressed the flaps of his cap hard against his ears, the metal-foil lining inside them crackling as he did so. Repeating the question, he backed slowly away from the window.



“Stop!” rasped Chester as Will tore toward the gate across the track in front of them.

Will pulled up and consulted his digital watch, unaware of the discomfort the innocuous electronic device was causing the man in the darkness. “Why? We’ve only been running for about thirty minutes,” he told Chester. It was only then that he caught sight of the moss-covered roof of the crofter’s cottage through the trees, but he made no comment about it to his friend.

“Half an hour?” Chester puffed, blinking as the drizzle fell into his eyes.

“Yep. Why don’t we see where this leads?” Will said, glancing along the track. “Or maybe you’ve had enough? We could call it a day and go back to the house,” he offered.

“No way. Not me,” Chester said with some indignation. He pointed at the sign on the gate. “But this says *Danger — Keep Out.*”

“Danger? When did that ever stop us?” Will said, immediately climbing over the gate. Chester followed him reluctantly.

“I’m just getting my second wind,” he lied.

“OK then, race you over to that wood,” Will challenged, putting on a turn of speed as the rain grew even heavier.

Chester struggled to keep up with his friend in the downpour. “I thought we *were* racing,” he grumbled.

Drake had been away for almost a month, and in his absence Parry had been putting the boys through their paces, sending them off on runs and teaching them to use the weights in his antiquated gym in the basement. Parry’s idea of physical training harked back to his army days and he pushed them hard, but they didn’t complain because they wouldn’t have dared refuse the old man, and because it filled the hours as they hid from the Styx.

Their feet slipping in the mud, they continued along the track until Chester gasped, “Time out. Weather stops play!”

They took refuge under an old elm tree, its branches affording them some protection from the rain. “We look like a couple of escaped convicts in these.” Will chuckled as he examined the thick gray tracksuits that Parry had produced for them.

“Too right,” Chester agreed. “And these sneakers are like something from the Stone Age.” He stamped his feet to try to remove the mud from his heavy black plimsolls, then looked around at the leaves on the trees, which were beginning to show the first signs of autumn. “Funny — all the time I was underground I didn’t have the foggiest idea where I was. But now I’m Topsoil again, I’m just as much in the dark.”

“Well . . . ,” Will began thoughtfully, “the rainfall seems to be above average here — maybe because the wind is coming in over water, or even the sea.” He wiped the moisture from his face with a sleeve. “Yes, I think we might be close to the coast. Could be Wales or Scotland.”

Chester was impressed. “Really? You can tell that?”

Will laughed. “No,” he admitted.

“You dipstick,” Chester said.

“Maybe, but I’m a faster dipstick than you,” Will replied, breaking into a run again.

“We’ll see about that!” Chester shouted at Will’s back. He was hard on Will’s heels as they thundered around a bend in the muddy path, only to come face-to-face with a man holding a shotgun.

“Good afternoon,” the man said as Will slid to an abrupt halt, Chester bumping into him. The shotgun was broken over the man’s arm — the correct way to carry the weapon when not in use — so neither of the boys felt any particular alarm. To their eyes, the man looked ancient, his wrinkled skin burned a dark brown by the sun, and his sparse hair almost as white as Will’s.

“You must be the Commander’s guests?” the man said. He was referring to Drake’s father, and Will realized right away that this had to be Old Wilkie, the groundsman employed on the estate.

Will nodded slowly, not quite sure how he should respond. “And you must be . . . er . . . Mr. Wilkie?”

“That’s the one, but please call me Old Wilkie. Everyone does,” the man said. “And this is my granddaughter, Stephanie.”

“Steph,” a girl’s voice corrected him as she stepped into view. She was around fifteen or sixteen, and had striking red hair and a pale complexion dusted with freckles. She looked both boys up and down with a somewhat disdainful glance, but said nothing more, adjusting the brace of dead pheasant hanging from her arm as if they were more interesting to her.

Old Wilkie was regarding the girl with a look of pride. “Stephanie comes to stay for the odd weekend. She goes to school at Benenden, you know. The Commander is a real gentleman — he’s always taken care of the school fees —”

“Gramps!” Stephanie said sharply, spinning around on her slim legs and strolling away in the opposite direction.

Old Wilkie leaned toward the boys conspiratorially. “Now she’s a teenager, she says life in the country is dull, and just wants to be in London, shopping and seeing her friends. She wasn’t always that way — she used to love it here when she was little. Anyway, by all accounts, London and the south are in such a mess, she’s better off up here until it all blows —”

Out of sight, Stephanie shouted, “Gramps, you coming or what?”

Old Wilkie straightened up. “Are you and the rest of the party staying with the Commander for long?”

Will and Chester exchanged glances. Drake had specifically warned them not to give the man any information about themselves.

“We’re not sure yet,” Will replied.

“Well, if you’re serious about doing some training — commando style — you might be interested in the Tree Walk,” Old Wilkie said.

“What’s that?” Will asked.

“Starts there.” Old Wilkie pointed at a ladder on a metal frame built around the trunk of a massive pine, then raised his finger to the branches up above, where the boys could see something running among the trees.

“It’s an assault course I built for the Commander way back,” Old Wilkie said. “10 Para down in Aldershot copied my idea, but mine’s bigger and better. I keep it in working order even though the Commander hasn’t used it in years.” Old Wilkie smiled at the boys. “Stephanie can get around it like greased lightning. You should challenge her — see if you can beat her time.”

“Sounds fun,” Will said.

“Yes, we should do that,” Chester chimed in unconvincingly, as his eyes followed the metal track which zigzagged through the tree canopies.

“Well, gentlemen, I’d better be getting on. I hope that we come across each other again,” Old Wilkie said. He began to whistle to himself as he strolled off after Stephanie.

“You’re not getting me up there,” Chester said, then smiled. “Not unless Steph wants a race. She’s really nice, isn’t she?” He pursed his lips as he thought of something. “Have to say I’m not too keen on redheads after what Martha did to me, but I’m prepared to make exceptions.” He had a dreamy look on his face.

“So you like her more than Elliott?” Will teased.

“I . . . er . . .” Chester stalled in embarrassment.

Will was looking at his friend with surprise. He hadn’t meant the comment to be taken seriously.

“Well, it’s not as if we see much of Elliott these days, is it?” Chester blustered. “She’s always in her room, taking endless baths and doing her nails and all that girl stuff.”

Will nodded. “She told me her back was hurting her . . . that her shoulders ached all the time.”

“Maybe it’s that, then, and she’s just under the weather,” Chester surmised. “But she’s not at all like she used to be. It’s like she’s gone soft or something.”

“True,” Will agreed. “Since we’ve been here, she’s changed so much. I’m really quite worried about her.”



As the rain continued to hammer down and they jogged the last mile to the house, Will and Chester were joined by Bartleby and Colly, the two huge Hunters.

“Got ourselves a big cat escort,” Chester laughed as the animals positioned themselves on either side of him and Will. Their heads held high, the Hunters were loping along with steady, easy strides, as if showing off that the pace was nothing to them. In response, Will and Chester sped up, but the Hunters did likewise.

“We’ll never beat them.” Will chuckled, out of breath, as the four of them reached the house. The cats thundered up the steps of the main entrance and crashed through the doors into the hall. Parry appeared almost immediately.

“Shoes off, boys, eh,” he urged them, seeing that they had already tracked mud across the black-and-white marble floor. “And look at the state of those two mangy animals.” He glowered at the cats, their bald skin streaked with dirt. “They’re polishing off all the grouse on the estate. Soon, there won’t be a single blessed bird left,” Parry added resentfully. The tough old man with his wayward hair and shaggy beard was wearing a kitchen apron over his tweed suit trousers, and in his hand was a sheaf of papers — it was a printout of some kind. “You’ve both been gone longer than I expected,” he noted, glancing at the grandfather clock.

The boys stood there mutely, wondering if they should say something about the encounter with Old Wilkie and his granddaughter. But they didn’t and Parry spoke again, “Well, I’m pleased you’re taking your training seriously. I expect you could do with some food now?”

Both Will and Chester nodded eagerly.

“Thought so. I’ve left some soup on the hob and there’s a fresh loaf to go with it. Sorry there isn’t more, but I’m rather busy at the moment. There’s something going on.”

Opening the door to his study, Parry hurried inside. But before the door slammed shut, the boys caught their first glimpse of the interior.

“Was that your dad in there?” Will asked. Before the door closed, the boys had spotted Mr. Rawlins standing over what appeared to be an old-fashioned printer from the loud clattering it was making.

“Yes, I saw him, too. I thought the study was off-limits to all of us,” Chester replied. He shrugged and then knelt down to remove his plimsolls. “Come to think of it, I haven’t seen much of Dad lately — maybe he’s been in there all the time?”

“And I wonder what Parry was talking about. Do you think it’s you-know-who up to their tricks again?” Will posed. It had been several months since the attack on the financial district in the City of London and the explosions in the West End, but then the Styx seemed not to have continued with their offensive against Topsoilers.

“If there’s anything going on, it’ll be on the news. Let’s grab our food and eat it in front of the TV,” Chester suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Will said.



Due to the security precautions, there were long queues to get into the special performance of *La Bohème* at the Palais Garnier in the 9th arrondissement of Paris. The additional precautions had been laid on because the French President and his wife were attending that night.

As the gendarme used handheld scanners to check each member of the audience before they entered the foyer, a woman stood patiently in line.

“*Bonsoir*, madame,” a gendarme said as her turn came, and she handed him her clutch bag to inspect.

“*Bonsoir*,” she replied, while his partner ran the scanner over the full length of her body, back and front.

“*Anglaise*,” the gendarme observed casually as he made sure her ticket was valid. “I ’ope you enjoy the performance.”

“Thank you,” Jenny replied, then the gendarme waved her through. As she went in search of her seat, she walked like someone who was wading through thick fog and couldn’t see the ground in front of her. She eventually found her place and sat there quietly, waiting for the curtain to go up.

The woman, Jenny Grainger, had raised no red flags as she passed through the scanner and the security checks at St. Pancras International before boarding the Eurostar to Paris. And neither did she

do anything to arouse suspicion during the rest of the journey, although her face was drawn and perhaps a little jaundiced, and most of the time she seemed to stare straight ahead with unblinking eyes. But if anyone had paid her any attention, they would most likely have assumed that she was suffering from fatigue.

But now in the Palais Garnier, as everyone rose to their feet while the French President and his attractive wife were shown to their seats, Jenny began to fidget with her bag. The lights dimmed and the curtain was raised.

In the seat next to her, Jenny's neighbor became annoyed as Jenny continued to fidget, whispering frantically to herself. As the man watched her more closely, he saw that she appeared to be in some difficulty. She had her hand on her abdomen and was pressing it hard. As he was a doctor, it was natural for him to inquire if she needed help. But when he spoke to her, she didn't reply, her whispering ramblings only becoming louder.

Jenny suddenly jumped to her feet. Disturbing everyone in the row, she made her way hastily to the central aisle. However, instead of turning right in the direction of the exit, she dropped her clutch bag and began to run toward the stage. Toward the French President.

She never reached him, but the explosion killed over twenty members of the audience.

A number of witnesses stated that one second she'd been there, and the next there'd been a flash of blinding light and a massive bang. But while some thought she'd tripped on the carpet, others swore that a member of the President's staff had intercepted her. This couldn't be substantiated because the man had been killed outright. Whatever had stopped her, Jenny never reached her target, and the President and the First Lady were rushed out of the theater by their protection officers.

Although the records showed that Jenny had no known terrorist affiliations or political interests other than having once been a member of the Young Conservatives, it was assumed she'd somehow smuggled a device into the theater. But this conflicted with all the security camera footage and forensic evidence, which pointed to something extremely bizarre.

It appeared that the explosion had come from within her, and the detailed analytical work supported this because much of her body mass was missing from the blast scene.

The theory quickly emerged that Jenny's internal organs had been removed to make room for a two-part explosive, which, when mixed, became a potent weapon.

This very ordinary housewife from London, who would most likely have died anyway within a few days from the horrific mutilation of her body, had been a walking bomb.



On his way home after work, the man emerged from the Tube station and turned right onto Camden High Street. With his glasses and neat appearance, he had a studious air about him as he surveyed the

disparate groups of people in the area.

In the last decade, the market at Camden Lock had become a popular destination for black-clad teenagers who hung around the various boutiques and covered markets. But in among them, even at this hour in the evening, there was still a smattering of tourists hoping to catch the last boat tour down to Little Venice, or to see the sequence of working locks on the canal itself.

In his sober suit, the man was rather at odds with the meretricious displays in the shop windows of brightly colored boots and leather belts with large brass buckles of screaming skulls or crossed bullets.

He came to a sudden stop just before the bridge over the canal, then stepped back from the edge of the pavement to allow a phalanx of Australian tourists to pass. Taking a cell phone from his jacket, the man appeared to start speaking on it, chuckling as he did so.

“Call that a disguise?” he said. “You’re far too old to pull off the goth look.”

Several feet away, in a shadowy bay between two buildings, Drake laughed. “Maybe, but you know they’re called emos these days. Anyway, I’m still a big fan of The Cure,” he said.

Drake pulled farther back into the shadows, pressing himself against the pitted Victorian brickwork. Decked out in a loose-fitting black combat jacket and trousers, he had a pair of Doc Martens on his feet. But this wasn’t what the man had found so amusing; Drake had completely shaved his head, and sported a mustache and goatee. He’d topped this off with a pair of small round sunglasses, the lenses mirrored.

“Thought you might be in touch,” the man said as his expression became serious. “I followed up on the three Dominion specimens we lodged —”

“But they’ve vanished from the pathogen banks,” Drake interrupted. “And there’ll be no trace of them on the main database anymore.”

“How . . . ?!” the man exclaimed. “How do you know that?” He began to turn toward Drake.

“No!” Drake warned. “They might be watching.”

The man turned toward the road again, nodding as if he was agreeing with the person on the other end of his phone conversation.

“And that’s why I badly need your help,” Drake went on. “I need you, Charlie, my favorite immunologist, to cook up some more Dominion vaccine for me, then I’ll figure out another way to distribute it. And I’ve got some other stuff I want you to look at for me.”

“Your *favorite* immunologist?” Charlie repeated with mock indignation. “Bet I’m the *only* immunologist you can call on, and certainly the only one stupid enough to risk his life for you.” Taking a breath, he asked, “So how do we go about it this time?”

“When you get home, you’ll find a package hidden out back behind your trash bin — I’ve left some more blood samples in it, and also some viral specimens I grabbed from the Colony.” Drake paused as a woman passed Charlie on the pavement, then he resumed. “There’s a really nasty strain in

there — a killer — so watch how you handle it.”

“We treat every pathogen as if it’s the Great Plague,” Charlie said.

“That’s uncannily near the truth,” Drake whispered, his voice grim. “Now you’d better not hang around here any longer. I’ll swing by your place in a few days.”

“OK,” Charlie said, pretending to press the button to end the nonexistent conversation before he went on his way again. After a moment, Drake stepped out behind two aged rockabillics schlepping along in their suede shoes and with large quiffs of hair dyed an unfeasibly black black. He kept behind them as they headed toward Camden Tube station, where numerous police vans abruptly pulled up.

London Transport employees were ushering people out of the station, and the trellis gates were pulled across its entrances. More than a dozen police in full riot gear had disembarked from their vehicles with some urgency, only to stand around and look rather confused as to what they were doing there. One was tapping his baton on his riot shield as an announcement came over the Tannoy that the Tube station was closed so a suspicious package could be investigated.

Drake blended into the crowd collecting outside the station and listened to the resentful comment of the commuters. This type of occurrence had become increasingly commonplace in London following the first wave of attacks by the Styx or, more accurately, their Darklit New Germanians.

In the months after the bombings in the city and the West End, the country — already in a precarious financial position — had been tipped into a bleak and spiraling recession. The assassination of the head of the Bank of England had rattled people badly. And while these outbreaks of terrorism by unidentified perpetrators seemed to have petered out, the general unrest continued. The populace had called for a change of government, and an early election had been held. The resulting hung parliament led to a power-sharing arrangement, and a climate of indecision and confusion in which industrial action was rife.

Ideal conditions for the Styx as they forged ahead with their plans. As Drake knew only too well.

“Move along now, people,” a policeman directed the crowd. “Station’s closed. You’ll have to take alternative forms of transport.”

“What d’y mean?” one of the rockabillics demanded. “Y’ mean take the bus? Did y’ forget they’re all on strike again this week?”

As people in the crowd began to shout in agreement and surge forward, Drake decided he’d better extricate himself before it got out of hand. He strolled casually away. Following the attacks in the city he was a wanted man — the Styx had made sure of that. And although he was confident his disguise would help him to avoid light scrutiny, the police might begin to make arbitrary arrests to disperse the mob, and he didn’t want to tempt fate. Not while he had so much to do.



Chester woke up earlier than normal the next morning, racked by a cramp in his leg.

“I’ve overdone it,” he moaned to himself, massaging his calf and remembering how far he and Will had run the day before. All of a sudden he stopped kneading the locked-up muscle and stared into the middle distance. “Growing pains,” he said, recalling what his mother would say when his aching legs made him shout with pain in the middle of the night. Mrs. Rawls would rush to his room and sit beside him on the bed, talking to him in her soothing voice until the pains had subsided. They never seemed to be so bad with her there, and now he had no idea where she was, or even if she was still alive. He tried not to think about what the Styx might have done with her, because that felt worse than any physical pain. He still harbored the hope that she was safe and hiding out somewhere.

Once he was dressed, Chester left his bedroom and went along the hall, taking long paces in an effort to loosen up his legs. He rapped twice on Will’s door as he passed, to let his friend know he was up, but didn’t wait for a response.

Downstairs, there was no sign that anyone else had surfaced yet, and as usual the door to Parry’s study was firmly shut. Chester lingered outside it for a moment; for once the printer was silent, and he couldn’t hear any other sounds from inside. He pushed open the door into the drawing room and entered.

The air was warm from the fire in the hearth, in front of which, sitting cross-legged on a tartan traveling rug, was Mrs. Burrows.

Her eyes were closed and her face blank, and although she must have heard Chester come in, she said nothing. The boy didn’t know what to do; should he announce himself and risk disturbing her, or should he simply slip out of the room and leave her to it?

A *thump* behind him made him start as Will jumped down the last flight of stairs.

“You’re up early,” he announced to Chester in a loud voice. “Bet you’re —”

He trailed off as Chester pressed a finger to his lips and then pointed at Mrs. Burrows.

“It’s all right,” Will said. “She’s just meditating. She does it every morning.”

“Can she hear us?” Chester asked, still speaking softly.

Will shrugged. “I think so, although she can choose to stay in a trance if she wants.”

Although Mrs. Burrows’s eyes remained shut and she was so still that she seemed not even to be breathing, her jaw suddenly dropped open. What appeared to be freezing cold air seeped from her mouth. Condensation hung before her expressionless face for an instant, despite the raised temperature in the room.

“How does she do that?” Chester whispered.

“Dunno,” Will replied distantly, more preoccupied with the rumbling sounds coming from his stomach. He glanced over his shoulder into the hallway. “I can’t smell anything cooking in the kitchen. I’m starving. I could murder one of Parry’s fry-ups.”

Chester shook his head dourly. “Think we’re out of luck on that front. He’s too busy to cook.

Something's definitely going on."

"Not according to the news," Will said. They'd searched the channels the evening before and drawn a blank. He gestured at the blackboard in the corner of the drawing room. "Maybe we won't be having *commando school* today, either."

In addition to encouraging the boys to get fit, Parry had done his best to keep their minds active by giving them lectures every morning. To do this, he drew on what he knew best, so somewhat bizarrely, they were treated to lessons on map reading, military tactics, and combat fieldcraft.

"Choke points and interlocking fields of fire," Chester said, recalling what Parry had told them about ambush theory.

"My favorite was combat driving techniques." Will smiled. "Now, that was something they didn't teach at our school back in Highfield."

Chester became thoughtful for a moment. "Just think how many lessons we've missed in the last year. It all seems like a lifetime ago. I hardly remember anything about it . . . except putting that little squirt Speed in his place."

"I'm still amazed that Parry trusted us with his beloved Land Rover," Will continued, not really listening to his friend. "I seriously thought it was going to tip over when I powered down those slopes."

Chester came back to the present with a chuckle. "Yeah. And he wasn't too happy when I took the sideview mirror off on a tree, was he?"

"Not particularly," Parry declared from the doorway. Chester looked sheepish as the old man continued, "Afraid you'll have to look after yourselves this morning, lads. I've been up all night, monitoring the situation."

"So it is the Styx?" Will asked.

"It has all their hallmarks. If I'm right, they've just entered the second phase of their initiative." Parry frowned. "Still can't quite figure out why there was a two-month hiatus after they stoked things up in the city with those full-frontal attacks."

"But is this latest stuff serious?" Will asked.

Parry nodded. "And bloody clever."

The boys exchanged glances, waiting for Parry to elaborate, but he was staring absently at the fire. He appeared to be exhausted, leaning with both hands on his walking stick.

"Is Drake dealing with it?" Will finally said, hoping this might elicit some further information.

"No, he's gone dark."

"Gone dark?" Will asked.

"He's operating on his own, probably in London. I've left messages for him to come back here if he ever deigns to listen to them," Parry replied, beginning to turn from the doorway.

"And my dad — is he helping you now?" Chester inquired hesitantly.

“I’ll give a briefing later on — when I know more,” Parry mumbled as he crossed the hall to his study.



3

“**DOES ANYONE ACTUALLY** *live* in a grot hole like this?” After the car left the motorway, Rebecca One had sat up and begun to take notice of the succession of sprawling commercial areas they were driving through at some speed. “Even the name of the place sounds ugly. *Slough. Sluff. Sloff.* Who thought of that?” She was thrown to the side as the car took a corner. “Oh, look, yet another roundabout. What a drag.”

Rebecca Two didn’t reply. She was peering through the tinted car window beside her, lost in thought as the streetlights strobed her face.

Irritated by the lack of response from her sister, Rebecca One gave a small snort. She began to scrape her sharp little nails on the stretch of seat between them, marking the luxurious hide. “This crush of yours is becoming a little too in-your-face. Don’t think it’s gone unnoticed,” she announced. She had her reaction now, as her sister immediately swiveled around to her.

“What are you on about?” Rebecca Two asked.

“This thing you’ve got for your toy soldier there,” Rebecca One replied spitefully, tipping her head at the man behind the wheel of the Mercedes. It was Captain Franz, the young New Germanian officer Rebecca Two had taken a shine to while they were in the inner world. “We should have one of our own driving us, not your blue-eyed boy all decked out in a chichi chauffeur’s uniform. You don’t even make him wear the cap because then you wouldn’t be able to see his lovely blond locks.”

Rebecca One’s eyes burned into the back of Captain Franz’s handsome head as he continued to drive, seemingly oblivious to the exchange behind him.

“You do talk a load of rubbish!” Rebecca Two fumed. “It’s not like that.”

“Oh, sure. I’m your sister . . . you can’t kid me,” Rebecca One retorted, shaking her head. “And I just don’t get it.”

Rebecca Two noticed the look in her twin sister’s eyes — she was genuinely troubled. “Don’t get what?” she asked.

“Well, for starters, what’s so special about him? He’s just another human, same as any of these worthless Topsoiler slugs up here. But, worse than that, he’s been so Darklit, he’s a zombie.” With her tongue lolling from her mouth, Rebecca One went cross-eyed to emphasize the point. “He’s like some

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