

Primeval Season 2b

A series of short stories taking place between Primeval seasons 2 and 3.

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Chapter 1

Season 2b

A Primeval Short Story

Helen left the storage facility at a run, uncomfortably aware that the place would be crawling with the military before too long. It had all, she reflected, gone rather fubar. She was working hard not to think too closely about Stephen. Of course, bloody Nick had to stay to bloody watch, which was probably just as well, even if she couldn't see what purpose it served. There was an anomaly that should open in a couple of weeks which would take her to one of the nexus points. She was going to have to lie low somewhere until then.

The anomaly was inside a disused warehouse under a motorway arch. Helen itched to be gone. Piecing together the aftermath of Leek's little failed coup was a frustrating business. Either Lester or that Lewis woman had a stranglehold on the press which appeared to magically extend online. Leek and Stephen had officially died in a minor terrorist incident. Stephen got an official commendation. Leek didn't. There had been funerals. Helen hadn't gone. What, after all, was the point? Helen was ready and waiting when the anomaly opened and she headed straight through but, as she went, she recognised the sensation of being followed. There had been someone else in the warehouse. Whatever, let them take what chances they could.

1.1 The Whirligig of Time

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges

– Shakespeare, Twelfth Night

Helen stretched as she re-entered the twentieth century. It was an uncontrolled gesture. Humanity made her feel cramped and hemmed in. The way the houses crowded on either side of her where there should be the vistas of a wide plain. She was somewhere in Norfolk, not far from Norwich if her GPS told true. She hoisted her back pack and set off for the long walk.

In the event, it wasn't so long. She hit the A47 after an hour and managed to hitch a lift only about 10 minutes after that. He was a young delivery man, for some company she'd never heard of, with a van full of small mail order items. He was more chatty than she'd have liked, with a persistent belief that they had met somewhere before. After establishing that he'd never been anywhere near CMU, she blandly acquiesced to his assumption it must have been at Glastonbury. She had, in fact, once been to Glastonbury – a muddy and argumentative dirty weekend with Stephen. But that was too long ago for this child to have been there.

She persuaded him to drop her off at a garage on the edge of town. He was keen to take her further in, but instinct told her to keep it ambiguous whether she intended to stay in Norwich or hitch a ride somewhere else. She was about to enter the small shop and purchase a few basic items to tide her over when she was brought up short by a picture of her face in the shop window.

“WANTED,” it read. “Helen Cutter for suspected terrorism”.

The small print warned that she was dangerous and not to be approached, which was some consolation. However her plans were going to have to change.

The garage backed onto a housing estate. Helen lost herself in its tastefully curving roads all called PRIMROSE DRIVE or TULIP TERRACE. Then she picked a house with no vehicle out the front and no visible alarm and vaulted over the fence. The back door lock was depressingly easy to pick, even given her fairly amateur knowledge of the skill.

Once inside she headed upstairs and to the wardrobes. The lady of the house, it would appear, was slightly larger than she was. On the plus side, baggy clothes

were a lot less conspicuous than tight ones. Helen picked out a bland pair of tracksuit bottoms and a sweatshirt. There was no hair dye but plenty of make up, hats and sunglasses. Helen transferred her own clothes and the contents of her backpack into two brightly coloured squashy bags. She took the opportunity to clean up while she was about it. Satisfied she looked entirely unassuming and not at all like her WANTED poster, she left by the front door. She picked up the newspaper as she went, arrested by the headline “T. REX SIGHTING IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS”. The article was frustratingly vague. It was a local paper and Tunbridge Wells too far away to be of much interest. It was only the T. Rex, it would appear, that had prompted the paper to report it at all. She needed to get onto the Internet. She almost went back in and hunted for a computer but it was nearly 4pm and she wanted to be well clear before the owners got back from work.

She hoisted her squashy bags awkwardly over her shoulders, wishing she could have kept the rucksack. The picture on the WANTED poster had her rather obviously holding onto its straps. Wearing a rucksack was too likely to subliminally trip someone’s awareness of her identity so she would have to manage without. She set off down the road looking for a car that was old enough to hotwire.

Helen abandoned her stolen vehicle on the outskirts of Birmingham and caught a bus to the house she had once shared with Nick. Trying to contact him was more than a little risky, especially given the way things had ended. But she was reasonably confident she could get in and out before he had time to summon the goons and very confident that she could provoke him into revealing stuff. As she turned down the street though, she was arrested by the sight of a large “For Sale” sign outside the building. Undeterred, she fished out the set of keys she’d had cut last time she was there, and let herself in.

All Nick’s furniture was there. In fact most of it was *their* furniture but she doubted she’d be able to get it back now and wanted nothing to do with it even if she could. Slewage of the burden of possessions had been one of the first discovered and most surprising joys of her new lifestyle. At least it meant Nick still lived here. She moved through the house to Nick’s study and the computer. It had been emptied. The desk and shelves were still there but the computer and the books and papers had all gone. Helen pursed her lips. She ran her hand over the desk and watched the thin trail of dust it left behind. So he’d left the furniture but taken everything he needed to work.

Swiftly she moved to the kitchen and checked the fridge and cupboards. They were also empty. There was no food in the place. She frowned a moment and then went to the tall cupboard in the living room where Nick kept his whisky. It was still there. Whoever had removed the food from the kitchen either wasn't interested in taking the alcohol or hadn't known it was there. She placed it back. It seemed unlikely Nick would have left it.

Last time she'd been here, she'd found all her old clothes in a cupboard in the spare room. She checked it now. It was empty, though she hadn't really expected Nick to keep them any longer. His clothes were still in the main bedroom. Whoever it was who had cleared this place out, it hadn't been Nick, of that she was pretty sure. There were lots of reasons that might have happened. She refused to consider the obvious one. For good measure she switched her sweatshirt for an old jumper of his and moved her belongings into a wheeled suitcase.

She paused with her hand on the knob, wondering if the jumper was a good idea. She tended to forget how evocative smell could be of memories, and the jumper smelled, indefinably, of Nicholas Cutter. Then she gave a mental shrug and opened the door.

A rifle butt appeared from nowhere and everything went black.

The interrogation room hadn't changed much since she had last been in it. Helen rolled her head experimentally, feeling where the pain was from the blow she had received. She observed the same blank walls, the same table and the same chairs. She stared ahead of her at the darkened far wall. She was fairly sure it was an observation window of some description.

The door clicked open and a woman came in. She was wearing an expensively tailored suit in a warm brown colour, accented by a gold silk blouse. Short, but expensively cut, brown hair framed a squarish face. She looked elegant, rather than beautiful. Everything about her projected calm sophistication. Helen's instincts screamed predator.

"Good afternoon," said the woman, seating herself opposite Helen.

Helen remained silent and stared studiously over the woman's shoulder. She wondered who was in the adjacent room observing them.

The woman made a disapproving noise but carried on. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lucia Wright, Home Office, Minister in charge of this facility."

Helen took a long slow breath. It was a trick she'd learned and practised. It

helped keep your face impassive and conceal any show of surprise. Lucia Wright smiled at her.

“I imagine you were expecting James Lester.”

Determined to give nothing away, Helen forced herself to remain staring over the woman’s shoulder.

“Let me enlighten you,” continued the woman, as if Helen had been articulating the questions that buzzed around her head. “Lester and I have been working together for many months. I wanted to prioritise the Physics team. Lester very much concentrating on the more operational side of matters. Something of an error of judgement as it turned out.”

Lucia was working up to something. Helen made eye contact. It was a concession, but she wanted to hear Lucia out and didn’t want to get into a direct conflict just yet. Lucia smiled at her.

“I should thank you really,” she said. “By encouraging Mr Hart to go to the Press you rather undermined Lester’s position. When that was so closely followed by the little debacle involving Oliver Leek. Well,” Lucia shrugged, “it was clear that his judgement was fatally flawed. More direct ministerial oversight was needed. Lester was shown to have had too much autonomy.”

Helen’s mind was racing. Stephen had never made it as far as a journalist, of that she was sure. But information about anomalies had obviously become public knowledge in her absence and she could see how that would be a problem for Lester and his policy of secrecy. Lucia was watching her closely in the silence.

“What do you want?” asked Helen.

Lucia smiled. “I can see we are going to get along famously. None of this tedious beating about the bush nor any need for lengthy explanations.”

Helen cocked her head to one side. She wanted to convey ‘get on with it’.

“Now,” said Lucia, “I’m aware of your involvement with Oliver Leek but very few people have access to any hard information that links you to him. I hope you are aware, however, that your actions fall under the general heading of treason and that I will be going out on a considerable limb if I arrange for charges to be dropped.”

“Why would you do that?” asked Helen. She tried to keep her tone unconcerned but every instinct she had was straining to go into fight or flight mode. Her sense that this woman was a predator was proving accurate. But she was clearly a dangerous political predator and Helen had no illusions that she would come off well in such a fight. Her only defence was to keep as much as possible hidden in order to provide the woman with as little ammunition as she could.

“I need a replacement for your husband,” said Lucia bluntly. “Mr Hart does

his best but he doesn't have the authority to command the team and naturally they blame him for being away at a press conference while your husband tried to contain Mr Leek's excesses."

Helen balled her hands into fists where they were handcuffed behind her. She dug her fingernails into her palms and struggled to focus on the immediate pain. She took several deep breaths as inconspicuously as she could, uncomfortably aware of the cold measured gaze upon her from across them room. She silence dragged on.

As soon as she could trust herself to speak steadily she said, "They're hardly going to be more receptive of my involvement."

"Maybe not," agreed Lucia, "but you have unique experience which would make you invaluable to the project. You have the seniority and academic qualifications that Mr. Hart sadly lacks and, from my point of view, you have the advantage of lacking any strong ties to Lester."

Helen considered several responses to the proposition, using the immediacy of the problem to push other thoughts and feelings to the back of her mind. She would have liked to have said "go to hell" to the viperish woman before her. In fact, she would have liked to have screamed and shouted and thrown things. Watching Lucia bloody Wright go down to a right hook would have been, just at this moment, intensely satisfying. But, right now, she was badly lacking in information and without information she was powerless. Moreover, that part of her brain that was good at reading and manipulating people told her that Lucia wanted her to be glad of, or at least indifferent to, Nick's death. She didn't trust herself to talk again just yet so channelled her energies into maintaining the same bland expression. When it became clear she wasn't going to speak Lucia began again.

"As well as dropping the charges against you, we wouldn't object to you taking up an academic post and working for the ARC on a consultancy basis," Lucia smiled once more, friendly and conspiratorial. Helen's distrust deepened. "You left academia nine years ago under, it must be said, something of a cloud. Your theories were widely being described as crackpot. I believe your husband even went so far as to express some embarrassment about them."

Lucia was still watching her closely, but Helen as sure of herself here. She'd spent years training herself not to react to snide remarks about her research or Nick's opinions about it. Keeping her face neutral was a cinch, though that gave her small comfort.

"I imagine," said Lucia, "that now your theories have been proved so spectacularly correct, universities will be falling over themselves to appoint you. Emer-

gency funding for research into palaeontology was voted through parliament only last month. Almost every university is trying to bolster its research in the area and you have a decade's head start on all of them. Think about it Dr Cutter, you can pretty much demand your own terms. If you walk out of here, your name cleared, you'll be offered a chair at the university of your choice within the week. With your experience, the research councils won't be turning down any moderately well-written grant you put in. By the end of the year you can be leading the largest palaeontological research team in the country and the best bit will be that I won't have had to pull a single string on your behalf. It will all fall from the theoretical groundwork you laid down a decade ago and the rather unique fieldwork you've conducted since. Think about it."

Helen was thinking about it. It was a victory. A victory that tasted like ashes in her mouth, but a victory none the less.

"Do you accept?" asked Lucia.

"I accept," said Helen, keeping her voice clear and steady.

"Good!" said Lucia, "I'll set the paperwork in motion."

"There's one more condition," she added as she left the room.

"And that is?" asked Helen.

"Stick to the palaeontology. Leave the physics to the physicists and, more importantly, I don't want any experiments in changing history. I've read all the theories about Miss Lewis and Miss Brown and I don't like the implications. I don't want anyone messing about with time until the physicists have some sort of predictive theory. I hope I'm making myself clear."

"As crystal," said Helen and made a mental note. Someone had changed history since she was last in the twenty-first century. More to the point, someone had followed her through the anomaly in the warehouse. She watched the self-assured woman leave the room.

Helen let herself in to Lester's office without knocking. She didn't want to suggest any sort of subservience and, besides, he was perfectly aware she was there since he could see her through the glass walls. Jenny Lewis was with him. Helen decided to ignore her. She didn't have any practical place in the team anyway. Not now that the whole situation was public.

"Dr Cutter," said Lester wearily. "I imagine you would like to meet your new team."

"I've already met them," Helen pointed out.

Lester closed his eyes. "If you'd rather not be present when I break the news of your appointment to them then so be it. However I would like you to introduce yourself to them properly, as their new leader, *before* the team is needed in the field."

The temptation to needle him further was quite high, however Helen bit her tongue and smiled sweetly. "Let's go meet them then," she said.

Stephen, Connor and Abby were gathered together in the centre of the ARC's main area, next to the anomaly detector. Lester led the way down to them, Helen walking behind him. She noticed that Jenny Lewis did not opt to walk beside them but instead lagged behind, distancing herself from the decision. Helen would be on her own here.

"Mr Hart, Mr Temple, Miss Maitland," said Lester, "we have had a new scientific team leader imposed upon us."

"I don't believe it!" said Stephen, looking at her with undisguised disgust.

Lester feigned surprised. "You have a problem? I suggest you take it up with Miss Wright. I'm sure she'd love to hear your opinion."

"Or the newspapers," Helen heard Abby mutter. What a happy little team she would seem to have inherited.

"Right," said Helen moving forward.

"Bastard," she muttered quietly to Lester as she passed. 'Imposed upon us' indeed, talk about signalling clearly Helen's lack of support. Lester arched his eyebrows but said nothing, merely stepping back.

"None of us are happy with this situation." She looked hard at the three young people in front of her. "But we need to make the best of it. We have a job to do and, in the current circumstances, the four people with the most expertise in handling prehistoric creatures are standing right here. Lives are going to depend on us working together. No one is asking us to socialise."

"Why are you helping us now, all of a sudden?" asked Connor.

It was a good question. Why was she helping them? Because Lucia had threatened her? Because Lucia had bribed her? Because something was up and her best chance of finding out what lay here at the heart of the ARC? Because she was doing what she did best, surviving, observing and awaiting her opportunity?

She needed an answer that was honest, in so far as it went, and would satisfy them. They stared at her expectantly.

"I'm no happier that Nick is dead than any of you are," she said.

Abby gave a small nod. The explanation worked for her at least. Stephen looked away, unwilling to meet her eyes but didn't contradict her. Connor just

looked miserable. Helen itched to see Jenny's face but she was behind her somewhere and it would give too much away to turn around at this point.

Into the silence intruded the wail of the anomaly detector.

Helen let Stephen drive to the anomaly site. He sat in stoney silence in the front of the four by four, his eyes glued to the road, refusing to look at her. She decided to let him sulk for a bit, if only because he was pretty when he pouted. She switched on the radio, already tuned, it seemed, to the military wave lengths.

"Pigs by the look of it..." came a voice. It was vaguely familiar so it must have been one of the soldiers she'd already met.

"Wild boar more like," contradicted a second voice. Helen permitted herself a small smile. That was the one called Kermit. She remembered him.

There was the sound of gunfire. "Make that bad tempered wild boar," returned the first.

"Captain Lyle," broke in Lester's voice, "could we have a coherent report of the situation please?"

"It's a multi-storey car park, sir," returned Lyle's voice. "We seem to have a pack of some sort of wild boar here."

A hand sneaked over her shoulder from the back seat and picked up the hand-set.

"What do they look like?" asked Connor.

"Big, hairy, bad-tempered pigs with tusks," came Lyle's voice.

Connor rolled his eyes at her. "Anything else? Anything distinctive? How big?"

"About five foot maybe. The tusks grow out sideways, if that's any help."

"Metridiochoerus," guessed Helen.

Connor glanced at her, seemed to remember who she was, and retreated into the back seat in silence.

"If I'm right we'll need peanut butter," said Helen. No one responded. Stubborn bastards.

Captain Lyle and a special forces team were assembled at the entrance to the car park when they arrived. The place was in chaos, with panic stricken members of the public frantically trying to escape and the soldiers trying to scare off the creatures without hurting any civilians.

“Can you organise an evacuation?” Helen asked Jenny.

Jenny nodded and started work. Helen was impressed in spite of herself. Within minutes Jenny had corralled most of the public and cleared a space around the entrance. This allowed the soldiers to take up a position with decent sight lines. From somewhere Jenny produced a megaphone and began relaying information about exit routes to the upper floors.

Helen crouched near one of the soldiers and tried to get a clear view of what they were up against. There was what looked like a tightly knit pack of furry bodies inside the car park. She began to creep forwards but felt a heavy hand on her shoulder keeping her back.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

She looked up into the unfriendly face of Captain Lyle.

“I need a closer look for identification.”

She saw him hesitate. In some ways he was completely transparent and he was having a little internal battle between his desire to see her gored by a prehistoric pig and his orders to keep her safe. She batted her eyelashes at him and thrust her chest forward, more from habit than anything else.

“You’re staying right here,” he said. “We have some footage.”

The ‘footage’ was low resolution and poorly lit but there was enough for Helen to confirm her guess of *Metridiochoerus*.

“Connor! Abby!” she called.

They trailed over, Abby in the lead with a mutinous expression on her face. Connor pulled along in her wake, laptop in hand. Helen had left Stephen in the car. He still wasn’t talking to her.

“I need peanut butter,” Helen said. “Plenty of it. Find the nearest cash and carry and requisition a few catering jars of the stuff.”

“Why?” asked Abby.

Helen gave an exaggerated sigh. “Because they really love the stuff and will chase after the smell.” She looked at Abby’s suspicious face. “I did find some useful stuff out during the nine years I spent in pre-history,” she added, irritated.

Abby snorted but turned to go. “Come on, Connor!” she called.

Helen was surprised when Connor gave her a rueful smile before heading off after Abby. She watched him go in vague exasperation. He was obviously a clever lad, but apparently didn't have the staying power to hold a good grudge. It was probably just as well he had Abby to watch out for him.

Helen headed over to where Jenny was talking to a bunch of people who looked suspiciously like journalists. Helen watched as the cameras switched to focus on her, one by one, as she approached. She eyed them warily. They weren't exactly predators in the way Lucia was, but there was a distinct pack-like body language and it was a pack that hadn't quite decided which way to jump. Once again she revised her opinion of Jenny Lewis. She was going to need her to manage these people. "Can I have a word?" she asked Jenny.

Jenny smiled sweetly at the journalists. "Give me ten minutes and I'll have something for you," she told them.

"Really?" asked Helen as they walked away.

"I assume you know what those things are," said Jenny.

"Yes."

"No harm in telling them then and it'll keep them onside. Don't talk to any of them yourself though. I'm going to hold out an exclusive interview with you to a couple I particularly want to cultivate. It'll let us control the situation better."

Helen eyed her narrowly, but she'd never been one to ignore the advice of someone who clearly knew what they were doing, so she nodded. It was going to be hard to dismiss Jennifer Lewis, she was beginning to think.

"I need a cherry picker."

"What's the name of the creature?"

"Metridiochoerus."

Jenny produced a note book. "How's that spelled? What do they look like? Any salient points?"

"M E T R I D I O C H O E R U S. They look like wild boar with sideways pointing tusks. The soldiers have some footage though it's not very good. They like peanut butter, as do modern wild boar, as it happens."

Jenny nodded. "Good. I'll get you that cherry picker," and she turned back to the press.

"I have a name for you. I'm going to spell it out..." she started saying.

"What am I going to do?" Stephen was suddenly at her elbow. Helen glanced at her watch. It had taken precisely ten minutes for him to get bored of sulking in the car.

"You and I, Stephen, are going to go in there and find the anomaly so we know which floor to get the cherry picker to deliver the peanut butter to."

“We should take Lyle and a team.”

Helen looked across at the special forces. They didn't like her or trust her and the feeling was mutual. Stephen probably didn't like her much either but at least she knew him well enough to anticipate his actions. She shook her head.

“We're just scouting. They'll get in the way.”

She sauntered up to Captain Lyle who scowled back at her.

“Stephen and I are going in. We'll need comms and tranquilliser rifles.”

“No.”

“None of your men are hunters or trackers Captain. We're going to go in, keep out of the creatures' way, find the anomaly, and report back. You can send men in with us if you like but you'll only make us more conspicuous and I'm not guaranteeing their safety.”

“You're a heartless bitch aren't you?”

“I get things done, if that's what you mean.”

“I'll check with Lester,” he said. “You'll find what you want in the van. Stephen has clearance to sign it all out.”

Helen turned on her heel and headed for the van. “Come on, Stephen,” she called.

Lester must have given orders to let her have her own way because Lyle let her through without comment when she returned with guns and headsets. He bowed sardonically as she walked passed though.

She and Stephen hugged the walls as they moved round the edge of the space. Fortunately it was pretty open, apart from a few pillars and two central stairwells. This made it immediately obvious there was no anomaly on the ground floor. In total, the car park had six floors, with exits to the neighbouring shopping centre on the fourth. They'd evacuated most of the civilians out by those exits and there had been no sightings up there. Helen's best guess was that the anomaly was on the second or third floor.

Most of the Metridiochoeruses were milling around near the bottom of one of the ramps. They were keeping a wary distance away from the exit with its soldiers and guns. There was a pedestrian staircase close to where Helen and Stephen stood. Helen nodded at it.

“We go up there and then check the next floor.”

Stephen nodded. They made a dash for the staircase. Fortunately the boar paid them little attention. Helen breathed a little easier once the stairwell door shut behind them. It wouldn't hold out against a determined attack but it kept them hidden. The two of them made their way up to the second floor.

"I'll go first," said Stephen when they reached it.

Helen bit back an exasperated retort. After all, if he wanted to take all the risks who was she to stop him? One thing she didn't have, was a death wish. She followed him out of the door. The second floor had some sort of division down the middle. Cautiously, Helen and Stephen headed between the rows of cars so they could work their way round it.

Suddenly Helen caught a movement a her peripheral vision. She glanced sideways and saw a lone boar between the cars beside her. It lowered its head and began to charge.

Helen swore and leaped onto the car next to her. Stephen followed moments later. The boar head butted the car which shook underneath them. The alarm went off. Stephen took aim at it with his tranquilliser rifle but staggered as the creature hit the car again.

"This way," said Helen and leaped to the next car.

Stephen followed her and dropped to one knee sighting on the boar as it came round the car towards them. He let off a shot and then it collided with the car they were on. Helen over-balanced, but managed to convert her fall to yet another jump. Stephen followed her to the third car. They waited there a few seconds but, when the boar didn't appear, Helen cautiously jumped back the way they had come and peered over the edge of the car. The creature was sleeping peacefully on the ground.

"Any more?" asked Stephen.

Helen stood up and closed her eyes, stretching her hearing. She could hear the main pack on the floor below but couldn't detect anything moving up here. She shook her head.

"I don't think so."

They climbed off the cars and headed past the concrete bunker in the centre of the car park. Once around the corner the anomaly was directly ahead of them, bisecting a mini.

"We've found the anomaly." Helen reported into her radio.

Connor and Abby both rode up in the cherry picker. Abby had a large cardboard box containing four catering-sized jars of peanut butter. Connor had a digital camera.

“What’s that for?” asked Helen.

“The database. I haven’t got a good picture of these yet.”

Helen looked at Abby. “Stay here with him. Don’t let him wander off into the car park. Are you armed?”

Abby nodded and showed Helen a tranquilliser pistol.

“What if I need to get close to one?” asked Connor.

“You don’t,” returned Helen. “Stay here.”

She took the cardboard box from Abby and headed to the anomaly.

“What’s the plan?” asked Stephen.

She handed him two jars of peanut butter.

“Get yourself somewhere safe and then open these. I want the boars up here. I’ll go through the anomaly and open the others on the far side. Once the boars are up here, close these jars. They should then go through the anomaly.”

“What about you?” asked Stephen.

Helen shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

Before he could object she headed through the anomaly. She was in some kind of forest. Late Pliocene would have been her guess. She took a deep breath, mentally contrasting the smell of rotting plant matter with the stink of petrol from the car park. The late Pliocene wouldn’t have been her first choice of destination, but she knew there were other anomalies in the era and the things did tend to cluster. She should be able to find her way on and out. But first she needed to put a pack of *Metridiochoerus* between her and any pursuers. Carefully she put the box of peanut butter down and began unscrewing the jars.

She heard a cry from the other side of the anomaly. It sounded distinctly like Stephen. Helen hesitated a second and then plunged back through to the car park, rifle at the ready. Stephen was underneath a boar, beating at it ineffectually with his rifle butt. Helen aimed at it and shot. Then she strode, as confidently as she could, towards the herd and grabbed Stephen by the scruff of the neck, hauling him up from under the sleeping creature and onto the nearest car. She grabbed the jar of peanut butter he was holding and undid the top. She wafted it in the direction of the herd of creatures. Once she had their attention she tossed it through the anomaly. Several of the herd chased it and, seconds later, the rest followed. Helen looked down at Stephen in irritation.

“Thanks,” he said.

The anomaly pulsed once and closed. Helen swore quietly under her breath. She really shouldn't have come back for him. As far as she was concerned he was dead anyway and she'd just lost her opportunity to get out of this reality and start putting things back how they should be.

“Just looking after my team,” she said sweetly, jumping down from the car. She used the opportunity to flash a smile in the direction of Connor and Abby as well who, she noted, were already out of the cherry picker. She should really have left them to rescue Stephen. Sometimes, she reflected, she let her instincts get the better of her.

Abby ran up to them and gave Stephen a hug, shooting Helen a look of pure distrust as she did so.

“I thought you'd had it there,” she said.

“So did I.”

Connor hovered in the background, looking between them all, before letting Abby pull him into the hug with Stephen. The little minx, thought Helen as she walked away. But at least it meant the three of them might start working together again. There was nothing like a common enemy. Possibly that was why Lucia had put her in charge, which meant, of course, that Helen's position was even more precarious than she had at first thought.

“Can you confirm that the anomalies are being used by a terrorist group?”

“You navigated through the anomalies for nine years. Do you seriously expect us to believe you can not say when and where the next anomaly will open?”

“Can you tell us where you purchased your underwear?”

“Thank you, I think that's enough questions for this press conference.” Jenny moved in calmly before Helen had to answer the underwear question. “I've given you all packs with a full background on Professor Cutter. I've included her key publication on the anomalous evolution problem from 1998 and,” she shot the heavily made-up woman in the audience a hard glance, “a full breakdown of clothing outlets she uses. Thank you all for coming here today. As usual we'll let you know as soon as there are any further developments.”

Helen obediently stalked out of the room in front of Jenny.

“How did you know they would ask about clothes?” she asked once they were safely away from prying microphones. She'd had, and embarrassingly lost, a fight with Jenny over clothes which had resulted in a trip down the high street with

Helen nominating clothing items as ‘not completely impractical’ so Jenny could put them on a list for the Press.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Do me a favour and take a good look at yourself in the mirror sometime. You’ve been a hot topic in Cosmopolitan since your Wanted poster first appeared. Believe it or not, you are currently the epitome of Survivor Chic.”

“Survivor Chic?”

“Don’t blame me. I didn’t make up the term.”

1.2 Masters of their Fates

Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings

– Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

The anomaly detector was blaring again. Helen glanced at her watch. Tight on time. She hopped from the chair in her ever-so bland office and headed into the drum.

“Where is it?” she asked. There was a technician seated before the screens, a mousy girl from the Physics team. She’d been introduced to her at some point but couldn’t remember her name. She looked around. Connor, Abby, her *team*, were conspicuous by their absence. Helen tutted quietly.

“Church, I think.” The girl pointed to a pulsing signal not far from their location. She looked up at her. “I thought you were supposed to be starting that Oxford job today?”

That was what she loved about civilisation. All that time spent on trivial gossip and tittle-tattle. Helen shook her head. “Had to be delayed a week.”

“Anomaly!” called Stephen from the upper walkway. At least someone else was around. Helen glanced up. Jenny was also in her office.

“Let’s check it out before the soldier boys get there,” she called up to him. “Bring Jenny too.” She needed to talk to them both anyway and didn’t think either would prove much of a threat.

Stephen and Helen entered the church carefully. Both of them were armed. The anomaly glittered behind the altar. A minute later, when Stephen gave the all clear, Jenny walked abruptly down the aisle, heels clicking on the stone flags.

“Nothing here,” said Stephen.

“So I see,” remarked Jenny.

Stephen slumped in the front pew and glared at the anomaly sulkily. Helen was disappointed in him. She would have expected him to have at least taken a peak through it. She caught his gaze. He pulled a face and then stared up at the ceiling.

“Oh come on, Stephen!” Helen couldn’t help saying. “There are worse things than sitting in a church with me.”

“None spring to mind,” he said.

Helen looked across to Jenny and hoped her face said ‘help please!’. Helen had never been good at playing the ‘Women united against useless men’ card but it might just work here.

Jenny sat elegantly behind Stephen. “I’ll wait with you.” She smiled at Helen, all artificial sweetness.

“Really?” he looked surprised.

Jenny looked across at Helen and the artificial smile dropped from her face. “No hidden microphones here, right?”

Helen was surprised. That was extremely astute of Jenny. In fact the woman was full of surprises. Helen had a nasty suspicion she had been underestimating her. She sat on a pew, across the aisle from Jenny and Stephen, and put her feet up on the bench in front.

“Unlikely,” she agreed, nonchalantly.

“So,” said Jenny, “what was it you wanted to talk to us about?”

Helen considered her thoughtfully. How dangerous, exactly, was Jenny? “The Press Conference,” she started, “the one Stephen was at when Nick died. Who organised it?”

“Mick Harper, the Independent journalist,” said Stephen.

“So the story was already out?” asked Helen.

Stephen glanced at her in slight surprise but carried on, “Yes. He’d published an exclusive that morning and followed it up with a Press Conference in the afternoon.”

“Where did he get the evidence from?” asked Helen. “Did you steal files from the ARC?”

Stephen shook his head, "I gave him names and places where incidents had occurred and he got a lot of eye-witness accounts, but he also had leaked papers from government briefings and footage of some of the captured beasts."

"How did he get them?" asked Helen.

"I thought it was down to you," said Stephen. "You *said* you were talking to a journalist so when he phoned me up I assumed you had sent him."

"Where would Helen get information like that from?" asked Jenny.

Stephen shrugged. Jenny looked across at Helen and Helen felt a jolt of sympathy for her. Nick and Stephen were both horribly focused. If it didn't involve bones, fossils, animals or walking a long way in wet boots and socks then their attention just slipped over it. Stephen simply wasn't interested in who had stitched him up. He probably hadn't even realised yet that he *had* been stitched up.

"And why on Earth would Helen want the Press involved?" Jenny followed up.

"She said..." began Stephen but stopped when he encountered Jenny's hard gaze. Then he groaned and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "There was no journalist." He scowled at Helen.

Helen would have laughed had it not been for Jenny's impression of a schoolteacher faced with a particularly slow pupil. Just when she *really needed* his compliance, Stephen was being schooled away from her. Jenny turned to her, an ever-so-slight hint of triumph playing about her mouth and a glint in her eye that warned Helen to keep away from Stephen in future. She was marking her territory and warning Helen to keep out. 'You took Nick,' her attitude seemed to say. 'I'm not letting you have this one.'

"OK," said Helen, "this journalist organises a Press conference. Meanwhile Leek pulls his little coup attempt. Connor's software trashes his systems and the animals get out. What happened next?"

"You were there," said Stephen accusingly.

"No she wasn't," said Jenny. "We wouldn't be having this conversation if she remembered all of that. Something's changed."

Helen narrowed her eyes. She was getting accustomed to Jenny's sharpness. But it was the confidence with which she spoke, betraying no doubt that Helen might be bluffing, that disturbed her now.

"So what happened next?" Helen asked her directly.

Jenny shrugged. "We don't know exactly. We found Leek and Nick's bodies, or what was left of them, in the complex. No sign of you at all. We think Nick barricaded himself in the containment area. The external control panel was damaged and wouldn't work. It could only be operated from inside."

Helen wondered if she had stayed to watch, just as Nick had stayed to watch Stephen's death, or whether she had had the sense to run. She dismissed the thought. Brooding wasn't her style. Taking action, *that* was her style. The journalist was the key. Who had told him to contact Stephen?

"Then I get lynched as a whistleblower," said Stephen sulkily, breaking into her train of thought.

Jenny shook her head. "With your looks, general heroics and coupled with being positioned first and foremost at that Press conference, you should have been a national hero. You would have been if you'd hired a half-way decent publicist." Her tone was waspish and her mouth slammed shut in a thin line.

Helen watched fascinated. Lots of little signs in the past week showed that Connor and Abby had forgiven Stephen, but Jenny clearly hadn't, even though she was much better than they were at concealing her anger. Stephen had probably never worked out that she had held anything against him in the first place and Jenny was too focused on obstructing Helen to lash out at him. Helen always admired people with an appropriate sense of priorities, even when it was inconvenient for her plans.

"I didn't want a publicist."

"I know, but calling Max Clifford an ambulance-chasing stain on modern society, to his face, was not terribly bright."

Helen had read the Press stories covering Stephen's abortive attempts to run the team. It didn't surprise her that there was a personal element to the malicious spin on the reporting. Once she'd read them, she'd also realised how badly Lucia Wright had needed to contain that situation.

"Maybe, I should hire Max Clifford," she mused.

"Go through me," said Jenny.

Helen recognised an order when she heard one. She gazed thoughtfully at Jenny. Jenny clearly considered her more to blame than Stephen for Nick's death. Where Connor, Abby and Stephen restricted themselves to sulky and trivial obstructiveness, Jenny was all outward professionalism. Helen really, really hoped she wasn't planning anything.

She glanced down at her watch. It was almost time. If this went as planned, it didn't matter what Jenny was up to. Helen picked up her gun and rucksack and went to stand in front of the anomaly.

"What is it?" asked Stephen.

"Nothing, just stretching my legs."

She watched for the tell-tale signs that the anomaly was starting to close. The moment was near. She turned back to Jenny and Stephen.

“Thanks for the chat,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do to fix things.”

And then she jumped through the fractured light. There was the faintest of whooshing noises as the anomaly closed behind her.

She pursed her lips at the sight that met her eyes: the numerous anomalies she had expected, the three guns that were pointing at her, she had not. Beyond the soldiers she could see Abby and Connor. Abby smirked. Connor shrugged apologetically.

Captain Lyle sighed. “Trust you not to make your move until the last moment. Looks like we’ll be taking the long route back.”

Helen raised her eyebrows.

“We have to go through the Permian to the Forest of Dean,” said Abby, by way of explanation, tugging a rucksack onto her back. “Thanks to you,” she tacked onto the end.

“I wasn’t expecting a reception committee to be waiting or I’d have come sooner.”

“That would have saved us a load of trouble,” said Lyle.

Helen surveyed the three soldiers. Captain Lyle she now recalled from her previous run-ins with Lester’s security forces. She also recognised the woman, a Private Lacey, if memory served. The third man was a surprise. He had been one of Leek’s men, Lieutenant William Slater. She had thought him lost to the rather unpleasant sand scorpions in the Silurian, yet here he was, alive and well.

Lyle had fished a small handheld computer from his pocket and was consulting it.

“Through this one,” he gestured to a nearby anomaly.

“You have the anomalies mapped now?” Helen mentally kicked herself. There was too much surprise in her tone.

“Thanks to you,” he said.

Helen’s face must have betrayed her even further.

“It wasn’t that difficult to break the code in your notebooks,” said Connor apologetically, “not given what we already knew about the anomalies. It was mostly a case of identifying the ones we knew and then extrapolating from those.”

Oh, that had been foolish of her. She should have realised that Lucia and the ARC had held onto her possessions easily long enough to search through them and copy anything of interest. She struggled to maintain her composure. She had got out of much worse situations than this. She was wrong-footed, but not badly. It was just a matter of working out where the weak link was in this little bunch and then exploiting it.

“Lucia Wright sent us,” Connor continued. “We were waiting in the church for the anomaly to open hours ago and then we had to sit around here in case you came through.”

Which, of course, explained the mysterious absence of Connor and Abby when the anomaly alarm went off.

“Looks like Miss Wright has you pegged sure enough,” said Lyle. There was a grim note of satisfaction in his tone.

This particular area of the Permian was familiar to Helen. In her imagination her footsteps criss-crossed the sands heading backwards and forwards between the many anomalies that opened and shut onto the area. She half-expected to see herself on the horizon. It wouldn't be the first time. Once, she'd even waved.

Lyle set a fast pace. It was a leisurely two day stroll to the anomaly that opened into the Forest of Dean. They'd never make it before nightfall but presumably Lyle wanted time in hand the following day. Lacey took her backpack and they handcuffed her wrists in front of her, making the walk difficult. The soldiers walked in grim silence but Connor chatted away, overwhelmed, it seemed, by anything and everything. Abby asked questions and made observations every so often. Often enough to sustain the chatter. When she tried to join in, however, Abby closed down with a stony glance that shut Connor up in mid-sentence.

It was early afternoon when Helen realised they were being stalked. They were picking their way through a boulder field at the bottom of a river gorge. It was a path Helen knew well. The routes between several anomalies led through this area. But it was a twisting valley, with plenty of cover. She stopped still trying to pinpoint the source of her unease.

“Move it!” said Lyle, jabbing her in the back with his gun.

“There's something here.”

“Yeah! Right. I know all about your tricks.”

“Watch me if you like, but keep quiet.”

Lyle's eyes narrowed.

“Just listen,” said Abby suddenly.

Helen looked over her shoulder at the unexpected source of support. Abby scowled at her. Helen listened. There was something a little behind them and to the left. About the same time she realised this, she heard the sound of a safety-catch being disengaged. Private Lacey had her gun trained in the direction Helen believed the predator to be.

“You have sharp ears,” she said quietly.

Lacey’s eyes flickered in her direction but she made no other acknowledgment of Helen. “I think there’s something over there, sir,” she reported.

“Slater, Maitland, guard the prisoner,” said Lyle. “Come on, Lacey, let’s see what’s over there.”

Helen found herself dragged down behind a boulder by Slater.

“What about me?” bleated Connor.

“Just keep your head down,” grunted Slater.

Slater had taken up position behind the rock and was sighting in the direction of the predator. Abby, meanwhile, crouched down opposite her cradling a tranquilliser pistol. Helen eyed it nervously.

“What sort of dose have you got in there?”

“Large enough.”

“That’s not reassuring if you’re intending to shoot me with it.”

“You’d rather Slater shot you?”

Helen glanced up at Slater and his rifle then looked back at Abby.

“You don’t run, no one gets shot,” said Slater.

There was a loud roaring noise and the sound of gunfire.

“What’s happening?” asked Helen. It was frustrating not being able to see. Lyle and Lacey could be making all a complete mess of the situation.

Connor peaked over the rock. “Lyle’s gone right. Lacey’s gone left,” he reported. “It’s a Gorgonopsid,” he added and made a face. “Already seen lots of those.”

He sank back down beside Helen.

“You struck me as a bit more than just a stamp collector,” she said. “You’ve seen a Gorgonopsid before and now you’re no longer interested? What subspecies is it, for a start.”

Connor went red. “It’s not like that,” he said.

“Leave him alone,” said Abby, protectively.

Helen decided to ignore her. “Take another look, Connor. How big is it? What shape is its jaw? How is it behaving? Does it look frightened? Curious?”

Connor stood up and took a second look. “It’s several metres long, maybe four. It looks, ummm, kind of pissed.”

Abby stood up. “It’s cautious,” she said. “Hasn’t made up its mind whether we’re dangerous or not.”

Helen gave her a significant glance.

“Lyle!” shouted Abby. “You might be able to scare it off. Try firing over its head.”

Abby, it appeared, was quick enough on the uptake when it was necessary. There was the sound of more gunfire.

“Go on you big lump!” she heard Lyle call. “Get your ugly arse out of here. We’re not worth it.”

There was another roar.

“Keep shouting!” called Abby. “Act belligerent!”

“That’s easy for you to say,” returned Lyle. “Oi! Fuck off!” he added.

“Go on! Go on!” she heard Lacey’s voice. There was the sound of more gunfire.

“It’s working!” said Connor. “It’s turning round.”

“Shoo!” came Lacey’s voice again amid more shouting from Lyle. It sounded distinctly like the words to one of the more rowdy caving songs.

“There he goes,” said Abby.

“Seems I’ve missed all the excitement,” murmured Helen, drily.

Slater hauled her to her feet. “Plenty of ground to cover yet,” he said.

They set up camp by a rocky outcrop with a couple of stunted trees growing from it. Helen recognised it and wondered if the position had been chosen deliberately. Lyle had marched them hard and they had reached there late afternoon before night began to fall. None of the people with her had been in the Permian before but Nick would have made reports, as would Captain Ryan.

Helen sat grumpily on a rock, her hands still cuffed together. Slater built a fire and started cooking a meal, while Lacey and Lyle erected tents. Connor volunteered to help with both but was waved away. He then fished out his laptop and sat, with Abby at his elbow, typing away.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked.

“Adding details to the database,” he said. “Anything and everything really. Abby’s better at behaviour though.”

Abby smiled and dimples appeared on her cheeks. She nudged him with her shoulder. “You don’t do so badly.”

“You’ve never asked me any questions,” observed Helen.

Abby looked up at her. “Would you answer them?”

Helen schooled herself not to throw back a reply and watched. Abby was more guarded than Connor but it was clear that both were excited and interested in their surroundings, the fauna and the flora. Abby had gathered up a small collection of plants and leaves in little specimen packets and Helen was sure she’d done that

on her own initiative, not as a result of some ARC program. She'd even gathered seeds where she could, although it wasn't really the season for it. Now, while the laptop battery lasted they were entering information and discussing hypotheses. 'Would you answer them?' Helen pondered Abby's question. The way into the hearts of these two team members was probably by information, but it had to appear to be given freely, without an agenda.

"Grub's up," said Slater.

After they had eaten, Lyle organised them into watches, which didn't include Helen. He gave himself the first watch and Helen observed him moving to slightly higher ground, a little above the camp. She watched him standing on the rocks in the last rays of the setting sun. His head was bowed and she knew he stood at his friend's grave. She kept expecting to see him bend down to brush the earth from the bones, but he didn't. She was sorely tempted to go up there and talk to him but common sense, for once, told her it would only be counter-productive.

Mid morning saw them approaching the anomaly site. Helen was becoming frustrated. She'd been looking for an opportunity to slip away but, between them, Lyle, Lacey and Slater seemed to manage to continuously have at least two pairs of eyes watching her. Lyle was allowing them to take the walk at a fairly relaxed pace now. He obviously knew, as she did, that the anomaly would be open for another twenty-four hours. Connor and Abby took yet more samples of the soil and the flora. Connor even tried to catch a dragonfly, chasing after it with a butterfly net until Lyle shouted at him to keep close to the group.

"What's that?" asked Lacey.

Helen turned to look where she was pointing. Private Lacey must have sharp eyes as well as ears. Helen could see a hazy smudge on the horizon.

"Dust storm?" hazarded Slater.

Lyle looked around them. "We need to find shelter."

Helen could now feel a faint vibration through her feet. "Stampede," she said.

Lyle marched right up to her placing a gun at her head. "No tricks," he said.

"It's not a trick," said Abby. "She's right."

"How do you know?" asked Lyle.

"I spent a summer working in one of the big game parks in Africa. That's a stampede all right."

Helen couldn't help a smirk at Lyle's expression. That was twice now he'd disbelieved her; twice Abby had backed her up; and twice she'd been proved

right.

“Can we outrun them?” asked Connor.

“Not likely,” said Slater.

Helen shook her head, catching Abby’s eye, who nodded in agreement. Helen looked around them. Every few hundred yards there were sparse trees but none of them looked strong enough to bear much weight and she wouldn’t have liked to rely on one in a press of stampeding dinosaurs. In the distance was a rocky outcrop.

“Those rocks,” said Helen, “they’re the best place. The animals will go round, not over them and they won’t be able to knock them over.”

Lyle glanced at her and then looked past her to Abby who nodded.

“We need to move fast though,” Helen said.

Lyle started them off at a jog, heading up a gentle slope towards the outcrop. Helen cursed the handcuffs as she ran.

“Can we get these off?” she asked.

Lyle snorted. “We reap what we sow.”

‘No’ then.

In spite of herself Helen kept looking back. It was possible to see a brownish smudge on the horizon now. She looked ahead of them. They should be able to reach and climb the outcrop in time. Underfoot the ground had turned to an unpleasant scree that slipped and shifted as they moved. There was a sudden cry and Lyle fell to the ground. The whole party skidded to a halt around him - as if it was going to take five of them to help one man.

“Sir?” asked Lacey.

Lyle didn’t move. There was a faint trickle of blood on his forehead where it must have hit a rock.

“Shit!” said Connor. “What do we do now?”

“We’ll have to leave him,” said Slater.

“No!” said the other three in unison.

“See that tree,” said Helen, pointing, unsure exactly why she was doing this. Though there was a certain satisfaction to be had from saving Lyle’s life, just because his sense of honour would be affronted. “You and Lacey, take Lyle, get him up the tree, and yourselves. It looks stronger than some of the others and should just about hold the three of you. It’s not too far to drag him either.” She glanced over her shoulder once more at the stampede. It was probably not too far to drag him.

“What about us?” asked Connor.

“The outcrop. As before.”

“But?”

“The tree isn’t big enough for all of us. Go! Now!”

Connor and Abby both hesitated a moment looking at her and then they turned to run. Lacey already had an arm under Lyle’s shoulder. Slater was looking at Helen suspiciously.

“You too!” said Helen.

“I’m watching you,” he said. He grabbed Lyle’s other shoulder but walked backwards, gun trained on Helen.

She would dearly have loved to run but the fact remained that the only safe places were the tree and the outcrop. And, to be honest, she was pretty dubious about the tree. She turned and chased after Connor and Abby.

By the time she reached the outcrop, the thundering of feet was loud in her ears. She reached up her hands and cursed. Climbing, even such a small distance, with her hands cuffed was going to be next to impossible. She hooked the chain of the cuffs over a spike of rock and hauled herself up scrabbling for purchase with her feet on the surface below. Then she stopped short, effectively stuck. She was forced to move both hands at once and that would probably cause her to fall backwards. That was the worst of this damn stupid situation. They didn’t have the guts to simply kill her but they didn’t realise that in this environment handcuffs could so easily be a death sentence.

Selfish, self-centred, arrogant...

Arms reached down and grabbed her. She looked up surprised. Connor was holding one wrist and Abby the other. They both heaved together and Helen found herself lifted onto the top of narrow platform just as the rush of dust and animals swept by below. Connor was peering over the edge at the mass of bodies as soon as she was safe. Helen lay down next to him, fascinated, as always. After a moment she felt Abby on her other side, her shoulders rubbed by those of the two young people.

“Scutosaurus,” breathed Connor.

“Herd animals,” said Abby. “I’ve never seen a herd of reptiles before.”

Helen gazed at the bony heads and wide backs below her, resisting the temptation to reach down and touch them.

“They must have been attacked by a group of predators.”

Connor looked anxiously in the direction the animals had come from. “Something else to worry about,” he said.

“Probably not,” said Abby. “They’ll have picked off the stragglers by now and given up.”

“Abby’s right,” agreed Helen. “I don’t think we need to worry.”

“They run pretty fast,” mused Connor.

“They evolved from the Pareiasaurus,” said Helen. “Those had splayed out legs. These are much faster, on their way to the really fast beasts.”

When the animals had passed they climbed down from their platform, Helen once again having to rely on help from Connor and Abby. Lacey and Slater were approaching them from the tree. Lyle, conscious now, supported between them.

“Lacey tells me you saved all our hides,” he said, when they reached the trio.

Helen shrugged and resisted the temptation to smirk.

Lyle nodded at her. “Thanks.”

Helen looked at the faces around her. Slater excepted, there was a look of awkwardness and concern on display. Probably not enough, though, to risk making a run for it. She sighed. “Let’s get back to that anomaly shall we.”

Same interrogation room, Lucia opposite her once again shuffling a big stack of papers. Helen found she was rather more nervous than she had been last time. A reaction she filed away for later examination. Lucia left her waiting. Helen stared at the ceiling affecting nonchalance. Suddenly Lucia slammed her pile of papers onto the desk with a loud bang.

“I have here,” she said, “the thoughts of one of the government’s top profilers.” A neatly bound book was picked off the top of the file and dumped loudly on the table. “Personnel files from CMU,” a large and scruffy manila folder followed it, “bloody school reports!” a box file full of small stapled booklets “and a host of other crap!” the rest of the pile. “All of which tell me that Helen Cutter is not a team player.”

Helen found herself shrinking back in spite of herself. So she controlled the impulse, leaned forward to display plenty of cleavage and leered.

Lucia leaned back, sighed and closed her eyes. “I should have you locked up.”

Helen eyed her carefully. The press surrounding Stephen’s attempts to lead the anomaly team really had been magnificently disastrous. She now had an inkling why. Lucia didn’t need her to lead the anomaly team, she needed her to look good in front of reporters. Bloody survivor bloody chic was probably about to save her neck. It gave Helen an idea how to handle the situation, make this look like some form of capitulation to Lucia’s terms. Give her some reason why Helen had run and some reason to suppose she wouldn’t do so again.

“I’ll make you a deal.”

“I hardly think you’re in any position to make deals.”

"If it's my deal, you can trust me to stick to it."

Lucia opened her eyes. "OK, spit it out."

"We co-opt Clifford. Get Jenny to do it. He's had his pound of flesh at Stephen's expense but I really don't want to be watching my back for him. I'm prepared to deal with the Press, within reason, but there's only so many times I'm going to discuss where I shop with women's magazines. Let Jenny draw up a list and a schedule. If it's reasonable, I'll do it, but after that I get a low profile."

"Go on."

Helen was warming to her theme now. What else might she hypothetically have objected to?

"Keep the Special Forces out of things unless absolutely necessary. And the same for Lester. None of them like me or trust me which makes them a liability. My team, that's Hart, Temple, Maitland and, if necessary, Lewis, handle things our way. I imagine Nick stipulated the same terms."

"I'm beginning to think you are more like him than I had previously given you credit for."

"You know what they say about people being too alike."

"Especially when they are arrogant, stubborn and brilliant."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Keep the press, the military and Lester off my back and I'll handle your anomalies for you. I won't try to escape back in time again and I won't try any more time altering experiments so long as I get regularly briefed on current progress by the Physics team, say once a month."

Lucia looked at her thoughtfully and eyed the pile of papers. "They were all wrong about you, weren't they," she said, thoughtfully. "You've got nothing against teams. Your problem is with authority."

"So give me free rein."

Lucia's eyes narrowed. "This is your last chance. I get the merest inkling you're up to something and you'll be up on a charge of treason. And don't forget I have a copy of your notes."

She stalked from the room, leaving the door unlocked behind her. Helen left it a minute, in order not to appear too eager and then sauntered out. She was surprised to find a welcoming reception, her *team*, like it or not.

"You were trying to get Nick back weren't you," said Abby, standing forward.

Helen cast her eye over the little group. Abby in the front with Connor half a step behind her. Stephen leaning against the wall. Jenny hanging back.

"Something like that."

"Won't work," said Connor. "I've been through the equations with Dave, in Physics. Changing history is really complex."

Helen allowed an eyebrow to twitch.

“We appreciate it, though,” said Abby. Connor nodded vigorously and even Stephen gave a slight jerk of the head. Only Jenny made no move of recognition. Helen smiled at them and then turned, slipping one arm through Abby’s and the other through Connor’s.

“Let’s get on with things then,” she said, leading them down the corridor. Jenny she could deal with in time. Jenny worked with her head far more than her heart which meant Helen just had to find a sufficiently compelling argument why Jenny should trust her. The really hard work, convincing Abby to trust her, she seemed to have achieved by accident. She’d never have listed almost getting trampled by dinosaurs as a useful manipulative trick before. She wasn’t sure she was keen to try it again though.

Helen had taken the train from Oxford to Paddington just after the morning rush hour. She had no desire to spend the journey crammed into a carriage with hundreds of commuters. She picked idly at a discarded newspaper as she travelled. The Metro wasn’t really interested in politics, so Lucia Wright’s promotion to Home Secretary barely warranted a mention. The ARC had been in an uproar of gossip when she had last been there, earlier that week. The place was full of speculation about Lucia’s replacement. Personally Helen suspected that Lucia would continue to keep an extremely close eye on the project.

The press coverage in the broadsheets had been more interesting though, and had included a couple of potted biographies which were, indirectly, the reason behind her trip. She had arranged to meet contacts at the Natural History Museum but had left herself time to drop by the British Library and check the newspaper collection. She was particularly interested in references to Lucia’s father who had, apparently, disappeared thirty years ago in 1978. If she’d been Lyle, she would have said her thumbs were itching.

Three hours later she had two interesting facts at her disposal. Firstly, Lucia’s father had been a professor of Physics at Bristol University. Secondly, he was last seen near the Forest of Dean. She sent a text to a colleague, one Dr. Parry, at Bristol asking if the library held any of the good professor’s papers.

1.3 The Seeds of Time

"If you can look into the seeds of time,
and say which grain will grow and which will not,
speak then unto me."

– Shakespeare, Macbeth

Helen regarded the anomaly in front of her warily. It was inside a shed on an abandoned piece of wasteland behind a housing estate.

"Do we know where it goes?" she asked.

"Do you mean you don't?" countered Connor, though he grinned at her as he said it.

"You know I don't. You've seen my notes."

He nodded and tweaked the controls on his robot. It moved forwards and backwards noisily.

"All set," he said.

"Of you go then."

The robot trundled through the anomaly and Helen turned to look at the screens. Brilliant, bright blue sky and sand showed up on the monitor.

"Looks like the Silurian," said Abby. "That last anomaly to the Silurian was on the estate."

"Could be," agreed Connor. "The atmospheric composition is about right." He tapped at a couple of dials. Helen really needed to learn what they were all measuring.

Suddenly the anomaly pulsed and vanished. Connor cursed.

"Never mind," said Helen. "You can always build another robot."

She straightened up. "OK, team. That was all a bit of an anti-climax. Let's head on home."

They were halfway back to the ARC when Helen's phone rang. She frowned into it as an excited technician at the other end told her loudly that the anomaly had re-opened. Stephen was already signalling to pull off at the upcoming motorway exit.

"I take it we're going back," he said.

“So it would seem,” agreed Helen. She looked into the back where Connor and Abby were sat, hands almost, but not quite, touching.

“Cheer up Connor. Looks like we might get your robot back.”

The next morning Helen reached the anomaly site early. The previous day had been frustrating. By the time they’d got back to the estate, following entanglement in rush hour traffic, the anomaly had vanished again. It had been late though, and it had seemed unwise to return to the ARC. A phone call to Jenny had got them rooms in a nearby B&B and a hasty shift system had been arranged for watching the anomaly.

Connor was already there when she arrived at the tail end of his shift. She squatted next to him and peered over his arm at the laptop screen.

“What have you got for me?”

“It opens and closes on a three-hourly cycle. Two hours open. One hour shut.”

Helen stared back at it. “Any idea how long it’ll do that for?”

“I’m working on it.”

Helen stared at him.

“Really! I’ll work it out.”

Helen straightened up and went to stand before the glittering light, thoughtfully.

“I suppose I’d better call the military in. I’ve better things to do than stand here watching in case one of those sand scorpions gets out.”

“About that....”

“Yes?” Helen turned around with her best encouraging smile. Something in Connor’s tone told her he was on to something.

“The girl turned up about an hour ago.”

“What girl?”

“The girl from the housing estate.” Connor gestured behind them.

“Connor, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“When the anomaly opened on the housing estate last year a girl got lost through it, chasing her dog.”

“And she’s just turned up through this one.”

Connor gestured at the robot’s monitor screens and Helen walked over to look at them. She could just make out a small figure perched on some rocks in the distance. “Fascinating.”

“That means that Nick and Stephen will be through in a few hours’ time,” Connor’s voice faltered.

Helen squatted back beside Connor once more and pondered how much she actually trusted him. “You said changing history was really complex.”

Connor gave her a half-hearted smile. “Got to be worth a chance, though, hasn’t it.”

Helen looked at the monitor. “There’s a lot of sand between us and those rocks.”

“Walk like a fremen!”

“What?”

“You know, from Dune?” Connor gazed at her hopefully. “Classic novel? Sand worms and spice in the desert? Paul Atreides? Sting?”

Helen had gazed at him levelly throughout. “I’ve heard of Sting,” she finally conceded.

She was interested to note Connor’s eyes had glazed over slightly. He was grappling with how to explain a concept from the geek hive mind to one of the “not-we”. “So there are these sand worms, right, who track people by sound, rhythmic thumps on the desert sand.”

“Like the scorpions?”

“Right! Like the scorpions. So, the fremen have a special walk. It has no rhythm so the sand worms think it’s just random noise, not something moving.”

Helen nodded slowly. “Walk like a fremen.” It made a weird kind of sense but was she really going to trust her life to an idea Connor had read in a sci-fi novel? She eyed the anomaly speculatively and fished her phone from her pocket.

“Stephen? Can you come to the anomaly site? There’s something interesting here.”

“Why do you want Stephen?” Connor asked, a little sulkily, as she shut down the phone.

“Lucia has expressly forbidden any attempt to change history so I want this to be as quick and simple as possible. Stephen knows exactly what happened last time. I want to know that too.”

“Right,” said Helen, after Stephen had finished his tale. “You didn’t detect this anomaly after the other one closed, so it must have finished its cycle by then.”

She began thinking through the options. Connor sat by his laptop, his retrieved robot next to him. Stephen was lounging up against the wall of the shed. Abby

seemed to have tagged along with him and she was sat in a corner, perched on top of a workbench of some kind.

“I think our best bet is to be waiting as you and Nick come through the other anomaly.” Helen said to Stephen, “You talk to them and then we high-tail it back here as fast as possible. We need to time it right, though. I don’t want to get involved with Leek’s goons.”

“And yours,” said Abby, a touch of hardness in her voice.

Helen sighed, irritated by the harping over the past. She had always been more interested in fixing things than assigning blame. However, these days Abby was mostly playing nicely, with only the occasional snipe, so Helen decided to be graceful. “Yes, the goons employed by me *and* Leek, happy? We don’t want to run into them, so we should wait here, observing, and not head through until after we’ve seen them get attacked.”

“I’ll send the robot back through,” said Connor. “I doubt it will be visible from the other anomaly and we’ll be able to watch.”

“Need any help?” said a voice suddenly.

The door to the shed was pulled open and Lieutenant William Slater walked in wearing full military gear. Helen cursed silently. They would have to get him away from the anomaly.

“Lieutenant,” she said, smiling winningly. “What an unexpected surprise.”

Slater brushed past her to the anomaly.

“You planning to go through there and interfere with history?” he asked.

Helen looked at Connor who shrugged helplessly at her.

“You popped up when I went through that anomaly on the housing estate,” Slater said. “Persuaded me to go back. Saved my life.”

“You weren’t there,” said Stephen.

“I wasn’t there when you were. I was before you arrived though, on Mr Leek’s orders.”

“You were working for Leek!” said Stephen and he lunged at Slater.

Slater blocked the blow and then punched back, knocking Stephen to the ground. “Don’t mess with me, son,” he warned. “I’m the regimental boxing champion.”

Abby and Connor helped Stephen to his feet. Helen couldn’t help a slight grin. Stephen quite fancied himself as the action man and seeing people’s pride get deflated always amused her. She eyed Slater thoughtfully. “Why should we trust you?”

The man drew his sidearm, pointing it at her. “No reason,” he said, “so I’m going to come with you. Make sure we do this properly.”

He grabbed her arm, pressing the muzzle of the gun to her head, and backed towards the anomaly facing Stephen, Abby and Connor. “I see anyone following us, I kill her. Everyone understand?”

They nodded.

Helen found herself standing on a sandy surface. The anomaly cast a pale light, letting her pick out rolling dunes. Slater was still gripping her arm with the gun pressed to her head. Surreptitiously Helen scraped at the sand with her foot and was relieved to feel rock just below the surface.

“So? What now, Lieutenant?” she asked.

She was pushed forwards. “Walk!”

Carefully, she started to walk along the rocky outcrop. It wasn’t long before her breathing became heavy in the oxygen-starved air. In the dark it was easy to see the second anomaly ahead of her. The night was clear. Helen was accustomed now to moving at night by the light of the moon. It wasn’t something she chose to do, but it was a useful skill that had saved her life on several occasions. It now made her confident as she walked. If there had been anything that approximated cover, she would have made a run for it. The rocky ground continued, but she kept her eyes open for disturbances in the sand. The scorpions could walk on rock after all.

They stopped in front of the second anomaly and Helen was grateful for the slight breeze that wafted through it bringing fresh air to them.

“You wait here to warn my younger self,” said Slater.

He looked around. Helen couldn’t help raising her eyebrows at him. She had already regretted the lack of places to hide; now she felt a twinge of vindictive pleasure. He was going to have to walk back to the other anomaly and trust she would remain here.

“We’ll wait together,” he said.

“That’s not what you said happened,” pointed out Helen.

“I’m changing what happened.”

Helen felt a small chill of fear run down her spine. This was getting out of hand. She pondered how to manipulate him. She’d never noticed him being particularly susceptible to her charms but it had to be worth a try, especially if she offered a little more than a tantalising glimpse of cleavage. She tugged downwards at the bottom of her jacket, aware this emphasised her assets. At that moment, however, the anomaly next to them pulsed and two men stepped through.

“What the fuck!” said Slater’s younger self.

“Look mate!” said Slater. “You want to go right back through that anomaly now. There’s serious trouble this side.”

“Go fuck yourself,” said the other. “I don’t know who you are but you ain’t fooling me.”

Helen closed her eyes, anger welling up inside her at the extent to which this situation was out of control. In doing so she became more aware of her other senses and, in particular, of the ground trembling beneath her feet.

“Too late,” she shouted and threw herself backwards as a large scorpion erupted from the sand.

There was the sound of automatic gunfire and a scream. The gunfire continued. Then there was a low whump, probably a small explosive of some sort. Helen felt the blast wash over her. She raised herself on her elbows. In the half-light she could see both William Slaters, but not the third man. The Slaters stood back to back, guns at the ready.

“Was that the trouble you were referring to?” asked the younger Slater.

“Possibly,” said the older one. “I did as I was told and headed back through the anomaly. Robinson didn’t, though, and he never came back.”

“Looks like he won’t be coming back this time either.”

“Is one of you two going to help me up?” asked Helen.

She watched them exchange a glance. “No,” said the older man.

Irritated, Helen clambered to her feet and brushed her hands.

“Well, now everyone’s happy, we should go.”

She deliberately turned her back on them and started off towards the other anomaly. Involuntarily she glanced in the direction of the rocky outcrop, where she knew Taylor Crane was waiting.

There was the sound of running feet behind her.

“You wait for me,” said Slater and grabbed her arm.

She looked around. Both Slater’s were next to her. “Shouldn’t you be back through the anomaly?” she asked the younger one.

“I want a good excuse for why I didn’t do as told, otherwise I’m buggered. What did you tell Leek?” he asked the older one.

“Not much and he wasn’t happy. But he’s the one who’s buggered. He’ll be dino-chow in a matter of weeks. You’ll do better to throw your lot in with Lester or, better still, Lucia Wright.”

“So I’m up shit creek if I go back. Let’s say I bypass the whole business and come back with you.”

“Well that will bugger things up right and proper.”

Helen sighed. “I’ll leave you two to argue. I’m going to go and talk to Taylor.”

Both guns were raised. “Why?” they asked in unison.

“Because I have a bit of tweaking I want to do too. I don’t see how it interferes with your plans and if you keep schtum about what I’m doing, I’ll keep schtum about what you did.”

Without asking further, she set off across the sand.

“Walk like a fremen,” Connor had said. Helen worked to control her breathing and, at the same time, to keep her footfalls random. It was a bright night, and there were two anomalies, but even so she could only just see the rocks ahead of her. She took a step, and then two in quick succession and then paused. Then she took another step. This was going to take a while.

“Taylor?” she said quietly as she came up to the rocks.

She saw the girl’s figure start up suddenly from where she had been sitting. “Who are you?” came a voice.

“I have a message I’d like you to deliver.”

“You what?”

“I have a message I want you to deliver.”

“And why should I do that?”

Stephen had said the girl was spiky. Helen liked a challenge but now was not the time. “Look, Taylor, two men will be along shortly to rescue you.”

“Why don’t you rescue me? Why should I deliver any sort of message for you?”

Helen tried to reign in her irritation. Kids! Who needed them? “It’s complicated. Just trust me, OK. Nick and Stephen will turn up tomorrow to get you out of here. You have to tell Stephen not to trust Helen. Have you got that? Tell them that Leek is the traitor.”

“Why should I trust you? Who are you? Why can’t I come with you?”

“You just can’t, all right. Nick and Stephen will rescue you. It will all be fine. Just deliver the message, OK!”

“Deliver it yourself. If you’re not going to help me I don’t see why I should help you.”

“Well it can’t hurt to tell them when they turn up, can it?” argued Helen in exasperation. “They can do what they like with the information. It’ll save their lives and they’ll have just saved yours. Fair’s fair.”

“Go away. I’m not talking to you.”

Helen resisted the temptation to slap the child. She wished she could see the girl’s face in the dark. Her figure was hunched up with her arms held tight around her knees. Helen scrambled down off the rocks and started back across the sands.

“I hope the monsters get you,” Taylor shouted after her but there was a wobble in the child’s voice that prevented it sounding like much of a threat.

Helen wasn't naturally the mothering type but she allowed herself a small feeling of guilt over leaving the child here. However, the girl would be fine, and hopefully she would pass on the message. Helen looked across the sand to where the Slaters were waiting. She tutted irritably and continued on her way, leaving Taylor where she was.

The two Slaters were both still there when she returned across the sandy stretch. Both guns were pointed at her.

"What did you do?" asked the elder one.

"None of your business," she snapped back. "Are we going to get on with this or not?" She glanced at the second man.

"Come on then," he said.

The anomaly glittered ahead of them. Helen strode towards it irritably. Hopefully they could show the younger Slater around. He'd be satisfied, and then go back to his own time.

She stepped through briskly. Stephen, Abby and Connor were all waiting anxiously on the other side.

"Did it work?" began Connor and then shut up suddenly as the Slaters emerged.

"Who's this?" asked Stephen, hackles visibly rising.

"They're both Slater," said Helen.

"Who?"

Helen's heart sank. She turned back to the two men and the anomaly behind them. The anomaly pulsed once and then vanished. Helen swore.

"This is going to be complicated," she sighed. "Someone had better contact Lester and Lucia."

This was the first time Helen had had a one-to-one interview with Lucia which had not involved her being locked up first. It was strangely disorientating to be sat together in the wood-panelled office Lucia maintained at the ARC. It was cosy and warm and reeked of political privilege and old money. It was such a contrast to the rest of the ARC that Helen wondered if it were some kind of protest, presumably against the ubiquitous steel and glass.

"What do think?" asked Lucia.

"Is he telling the truth? Yes, I think so," said Helen. "I know he was recruited by Leek. I'm pretty sure that, in one time line, I must have warned him to get the hell out of the Silurian, back through the anomaly and to dissociate himself from Leek. In the time line I remember he just forced me to go through at gunpoint

and then his younger self, being equally suspicious, insisted on coming back this way.”

“Why do you think he felt he needed to urge you through at gunpoint?”

“Neither of us has been exactly discreet about the fact you ordered me not to attempt any changes of history. I’m guessing he didn’t trust the new status quo.”

Lucia nodded absently, shuffling papers. She’d shuffled them every time she wanted to give the impression of consulting something. Helen had noticed that they were, in fact, a mixture of constituency letters and press clippings. She had a warm smug feeling at having detected Lucia in a ruse, however minor.

“I’ve checked up on Slater’s background,” said Lucia. “He went AWOL about six months ago. The day that anomaly on the housing estate opened up.”

“Now we know why,” agreed Helen.

Lucia sighed. “I’m not happy about this. Not happy at all. I want that recurring anomaly of yours watched. I’m going to keep the Slaters detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act until I’m sure they can’t go back through it and attempt to meddle again. No one goes through that anomaly. Nothing comes out of that anomaly. There’s to be absolutely no more meddling with that bit of history.”

Helen liked being able to look someone in the eye and tell them the honest truth. Not only because it happened so rarely but also because she knew her body language would subtly betray her confidence and that disoriented people. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” she said.

Helen left the room with a bounce in her step. She couldn’t help it, could she, if she allowed herself small amounts of pleasure than not everything was going Lucia’s way.

Helen’s good mood faltered, however, on encountering Connor in the corridor. The poor lamb continued to display pretty much every passing thought on his face.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“One of the sand scorpions got out.”

“How?”

He shrugged anxiously. “Lyle just radioed,” he said.

Helen cursed. “We’d better get back to the site.”

The Special Forces teams were there in large numbers by the time they got back.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded of Lyle as she got out of the four-by-four.

“The anomaly opened earlier than expected. Some of the lads got caught on the hop.”

His mouth snapped shut and his face was impassive. Helen could tell that she wasn't going to be getting any names out of him.

“Take Stephen to where you last sighted it,” she said. “See what he can do.”

Lyle nodded. Stephen had already unpacked his rifle. Helen watched the two men walk away.

“Connor! Abby!” She looked into the back of the truck. “Keep in touch by radio. If you get any bright ideas where it might have gone let us know.”

Connor was hunched over his laptop, looking up anything he could find on Silurian life.

“I'm feeling a bit useless here,” said Abby.

“You're the behaviour expert,” said Helen. “You're going to have to translate whatever Connor finds into something we can actually use.”

She looked up and was unsurprised to see Jenny walking toward her.

“Before you ask,” she said, holding up a hand, “I have no idea what it is, where it is or what it might do. I've Connor working the database. If you stay here you'll know everything as soon as I do.”

Jenny's mouth twitched into what might have almost been an appreciative smile. Without a word she climbed into the passenger seat.

“OK, Connor!” Helen heard her say, “what have you got for me?”

Helen watched Stephen and Lyle from afar. Stephen was looking all around him, mostly at the ground, intent and focused. Lyle hung back, letting him do his job. They walked over to the edge of the wasteground. Helen's curiosity got the better of her and she walked over to see.

The wasteground fell away into a railway siding, a disused one, judging by the weeds and undergrowth that infested the track. Stephen and Lyle were cautiously picking their way down the side of the slope. When they reached the bottom, Stephen looked both ways and then headed for the tunnel entrance.

“Lyle, Stephen,” she ordered from her vantage point. “Wait there, let’s find out where this tunnel goes.”

She headed back to the truck, Connor and his laptop.

“Connor, where does that disused railway tunnel lead?”

Connor looked up. His gaze followed the line of her pointing finger and then he glanced down and started typing. “Give me a minute or two,” he said.

“I’ll phone the council,” said Jenny briskly.

By the time Connor had pulled up several maps and a history of the Great Northeastern Railway, Jenny had navigated her way succinctly and, in some cases, aggressively through the successive hierarchies of the local council, spoken to the planning department and intimidated someone called Mr Jennings who, it seemed, had access to some plans of interest.

“The far end is blocked,” she reported. “But there are several access hatches from above.”

“Lucia wants the scorpion captured and returned, not killed unless it’s absolutely necessary,” reported Helen, recalling the extremely brief conversation she’d had with Lucia before she set out. The appearance of the two William Slaters had clearly rattled her. Helen would have been amused how solicitous it had suddenly made her for pre-historic life, were it not for the inconvenience it was going to cause.

“I need a large cage,” she said.

“I’m on it.” Jenny got out her mobile phone once more.

“What do you know about scorpions?” Helen asked Abby.

“Ummm....., they glow in ultraviolet light?”

“Cute, but not immediately helpful.”

“Nocturnal, not generally aggressive to humans.”

“That will be because humans are generally several hundred times their size,” said Connor. “That’s not really the case here, is it?”

“Nocturnal I can work with, though.” Helen flashed Abby a smile and raised her eyebrows at Connor. She didn’t want the girl to get surly and difficult, so a little bonding at the expense of the men-folk probably wouldn’t go amiss.

She picked up the radio from the front of the truck and tuned into the SF frequency.

“Lyle, I want a perimeter to contain the scorpion in the tunnel until the cage arrives. Meanwhile, I want a team to walk the length of the tunnel above ground and check for any place it might manage to get out.”

“Then what?” crackled Lyle’s voice.

“We wait for the cage.”

It was dusk by the time the cage arrived, but Helen suspected that would, in fact, serve her purposes better.

She and Stephen entered the tunnel system by the far entrance, an unpleasant climb down an ancient ladder with the constant risk it might come away from the wall or kill them in some other interesting fashion. They had night vision goggles and ultra-violet light sources. Stephen had put up token resistance when Lyle had silently handed them rifles and amour-piercing rounds, but Helen's irritated snap that he didn't have to get himself killed just to prove that Nick could sometimes be wrong had shut him up. The paranoia Nick had managed to communicate to the team about harming pre-historic life frequently irritated her and she was damned if she was going into the tunnel armed only with a tranquiliser rifle, whatever Lucia had said.

Helen landed lightly on the tunnel floor and flashed the torch both ways. She was reassured that she could see no scorpions. Stephen landed, cat-like, beside her.

"What now?" he asked, quietly.

"We get to the blocked end of the tunnel and then work our way back down to the entrance."

Helen walked quietly in the direction of the blockage, Stephen just behind her. She was glad Connor wasn't there to blunder around. Even Abby, who was careful and well-coordinated, could be heard coming if you were listening. She and Stephen had spent a long, hot summer in Madagascar, back in her old, old life. She had been impressed then at the natural silence of his movements and he had clearly got better at it since. As had she, for that matter. Quietly they paced down the tunnel.

She felt Stephen touch her arm, but it was unnecessary. She had also seen the flash of blue in the ultraviolet light. The scorpion was ahead of them. She stopped still and considered their options, feeling Stephen close behind her.

They had discussed this. It hunted by sound, so the conclusion was that it probably had poor eye-sight. Helen turned to face Stephen and pulled out a flare, so he could see it in her hand. She watched him take a step backwards, fading into the wall of the tunnel, then she slung the rifle over her back so her hands were free, Stephen handed her the aluminium pipe he was carrying. She walked forward a few paces, took a deep breath and then lit the flare.

"Oi!" she shouted, "Oi!" and she banged on the metal rails with the aluminium pipe.

“It’s moving,” Stephen’s voice whispered in her ear on her radio headset.

Helen turned on her heels and ran, dragging the pipe behind her so it clattered against the rails. It made a lot of noise, but if she hefted it up for a second or two, she could hear the sounds of scuttling feet. She glanced behind, but the flare she was carrying was causing night blindness. All she could see was darkness.

She ran into the small circle of light, praying there were no landslips or collapses she would have to scramble over. She trusted Stephen was behind the thing with his gun at the ready. She had to.

There was a shout up ahead of her. It sounded like Lyle, ordering the men. Not much further now. Some instinct made her duck and she heard a snap of chitin above her. There was a sound of gunfire. She swore quietly but, apparently, the creature paused. No claws snapped at her neck or feet. She ran on, up the ramp, into the cage and through the small door at the far end. There was a crash of shell meeting metal. She turned back. The creature was thrashing in the large cage. Already the metal door at the far end was closed. Stephen, now joined by several of the soldiers, was just locking it into place.

She jumped down from the platform to find herself face to face with a cheerily grinning Lyle.

“I suppose it was you ordered them to shoot,” she said, furiously.

Lyle shrugged. “Just trying to scare it a bit. I told them to aim high.” He eyed her with dislike. “Wouldn’t have wanted to hurt the scorpion after all. It’s entirely innocent, just obeying its nature.”

“Don’t be smart!” she sniped back but then mentally kicked herself. Alienating Lyle, however irritating his smug exterior, was not going to help her plans.

The anomaly opened one last time, at dawn, hours after it had last closed. They pushed the cage back through and opened it up, letting the creature out and into the sand. Helen, perched on the back of the cage, squinted across the wasteland towards the rock but, of course, Taylor, Nick and Stephen were no longer there.

“This woman turned up,” said Taylor as they walked towards the car Lester had provided to get them back home.

“What woman?” asked Nick.

Taylor shrugged. “Don’t know, some woman. She said not to trust Helen.”

Nick laughed mirthlessly. “Not much danger of that.”

Taylor nodded as she climbed into the car. “Fair enough, then. She also said not to trust Leek.”

“And you didn’t think about it again?” asked Helen, irritated.

Stephen glared at her over the steering wheel. “Course I thought about it again. I even tried to discuss it with Nick, but he said it was just you playing mind games and not to pay attention. If anything, I think he was more inclined to trust Leek afterwards than before.”

Oh Nick! Helen sighed inwardly.

“I did pay attention,” insisted Stephen. “I was cautious.”

Helen bit back the urge to say “not cautious enough.” It wasn’t going to help her now.

Stephen dropped her outside the house she had once shared with Nick. She considered inviting him in. She’d teach Jenny to try to warn her off, but she needed Jenny even more than she needed Stephen. She consoled herself with the thought that revenge was best served cold as she flounced up the steps, swinging her hips.

Inside the front door was a package. Ripping it open she was rewarded with photocopies of a dozen or so papers. Half an hour later her suspicions were confirmed. She might not have been a physicist but she knew enough to understand what the papers were telling her. Professor Wright had known all about the anomalies.

Helen was bored. Politics always sent her to sleep but sadly she needed to be keeping track of this. She stared idly at the hotel ceiling while Lester droned on. She was tempted to switch off the computer but Lester had warned her she might be called to give evidence and she wanted to know what had been said. Lucia had also warned her she might be called and had hoped Helen understood the importance of the committee. As a result, UK Parliament live on the web it was.

“So in summary,” Lester finally concluded, “I see no reason to suppose the anomalies are anything other than an entirely natural phenomenon. The proposed extensions to the Prevention of Terrorism Act can not be justified with reference to the anomaly problem.”

Helen rolled her eyes and sighed. Who cared about the Prevention of Terrorism powers? The government was going to extend them anyway - the realities of the anomaly situation didn't make any difference to that.

Suddenly there was an excited babble of voices followed by a scream. Helen looked back at the screen and then sat upright in alarm. The bright shining shape of an anomaly was hanging in the centre of the committee room. As Helen watched, a troodon leaped through. The picture suddenly cut out.

Helen reached for the phone.

1.4 Cry Havoc

Cry Havoc and let slip the dogs of war.

– Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

Helen was standing outside the police cordon when the team pulled up in a four-by-four. A lot of army officers seemed to be present and there was an interesting little jurisdictional dispute going on between a Brigadier and a Chief Inspector. Helen was staying on the sidelines. She intended to bypass them anyway, but wanted her whole team behind her when she did.

She walked over as they started unloading the four-by-four. Two more trucks pulled up. Captain Lyle and his men piled out. Helen really shouldn't have been surprised. He was here to rescue Lester.

"There's more than one anomaly," Connor told her as she approached.

"How many?" she asked.

"I don't know, at least four, we stopped being able to differentiate them at that point. I think there are lots more though, opening and shutting rapidly."

Helen had a very bad feeling about this. She should know about an anomaly confluence that large.

"We working together on this?" Lyle was standing behind her, fully armed.

Helen nodded. "We'll have to get past the Brigadier and the police. Just look like you own the place."

She felt the teams forming up behind her and set off for the police line. At that moment she caught sight of an immaculately tailored suit heading her way. She paused to let Lucia catch her up.

"Stand your team down, Helen," said Lucia.

"What!" It was Lyle's voice.

Lucia's eyes never left Helen's face. "I said stand your team down. This is a matter for the military. It's too big for a small team to handle."

Helen looked across to where the Brigadier and Chief Constable had been arguing. The Chief Constable had a distinctly defeated air about him. There didn't seem to be a lot of soldiers around.

"What's he planning on doing?" asked Lyle, nodding towards the Brigadier.

"I understand that a regiment is on their way."

Lyle made an exasperated noise. "We need to go in now!"

"Two SWAT teams have already gone in and failed to come out again. We wait."

Helen eyed Lucia calmly. "Where's the Defence Secretary?"

"In there," Lucia nodded towards the Houses of Parliament.

"The Prime Minister?"

"Likewise."

"So you're the senior government minister present. You can overrule the military and send in a team."

Lucia smirked ever so slightly. "I'm afraid I agree with the military assessment. It's too dangerous for a small team. We have to wait."

"You just want Lester dead!" said Lyle angrily.

"Lyle," warned Helen.

"Honestly, Captain," snapped Lucia. "Lester is hardly my priority. Half the government is in that building."

She glanced at Helen. Cold shivers went down Helen's spine. A trap was about to be sprung.

"I can't over-rule the military assessment," said Lucia. "Everything we can reasonably do in a rapid response fashion has been tried. However, I have a number of colleagues in there and I'm aware that the people in front of me are those best equipped to deal with the situation. I will not prevent one further team entering the building, but I will not have anyone ordered inside. I hope I make myself clear. You can go in, but it is to be volunteers only."

"I'll go," said Lyle.

"Me too!" It was Stephen.

Helen cursed.

"And me!" from Connor.

"No!" said Helen sharply. "Connor, Abby, you're both staying here. This isn't a scientific situation."

"She said anyone could volunteer," protested Abby.

Helen took a gamble and looked at Lyle.

“She’s right,” said Lyle. “Sorry, you two, but I need people who are used to shooting.”

“Then why take Stephen?” argued Abby.

“He’s got more experience than either of you.”

“To be honest, I’d prefer it if Stephen didn’t go,” interrupted Helen. “But I won’t actually stop him.”

“Well,” Lucia smiled tightly, “sort it out between yourselves. But if I hear that any pressure was put on any one to go in there, there will be trouble.”

It looked like there was no question that all of Lyle’s team were going in. Helen watched them crowd round a schematic of the interior that Lyle had spread out in the back of the truck. Next to Lyle stood Lieutenant Niall Richards, known as Blade. He had a closely shaven head and a disconcertingly direct gaze. It hadn’t taken Helen long to figure out his nick name. She’d even watched one of the knife fights that definitely never took place out at the back of the ARC, from a discrete distance of course. He liked his knives and he was good.

Then there was Corporal Darren Cooper or Kermit. Helen was told he had a wife and kids, a fact she studiously didn’t think about too much. She’d once kidnapped him into the past and one thing had led to another. He was a nice kid, though, understandably wary of her, of course.

Next to him was Private Robert Finn, one of the youngest of the Special Forces, keen on guns, nice but dim. Helen had never had much time for him.

Second Lieutenant Dave Owen, aka Ditzzy, was the medic, known for his sarcasm and his cold hands. Helen had vaguely heard something about a girlfriend and got the impression she was the centre of the wives’ circle. Beyond that, she had heard he was good at his job and was grateful she’d never had cause to verify that fact.

Lastly, there was Private Tanya Lacey, the only woman on the special forces team. Helen had worked with her before and respected her sharp senses. Today her nut brown curls were scraped back into a pony tail. Her face was set into an expressionless mask but Helen knew it was often like that. Private Lacey didn’t open up easily, but Helen thought she was being even more careful than usual not to show her feelings. Lester or Lyle or the departed Captain Ryan or just a shared interest in caving, had forged a very closely knit group of soldiers. Possibly it was a bit of all three elements shaping the team, but there was no doubt that every one

of them was willing to die in order to get Lester out of there alive. It was just that some were more careful about hiding it than others.

A second ARC team, on the other hand, had opted out. They were comparative newcomers sharing no memory of Captain Ryan and no interest in caving. They were bunched up in discussion with the Brigadier. When the reinforcements arrived, they'd be working with them. Connor was with Lyle's group pointing out the locations of the confirmed anomalies.

"Lyle, a word please," Helen murmured.

"I'm busy."

"This is important and it won't take long."

Lyle stepped back slightly from the group. "Go on!"

"You realise that by insisting this op is volunteers only, Lucia is ensuring that only those most loyal to Lester go in there."

Helen watched Lyle process that information. "Not a lot I can do about that."

"Lyle! Lester is probably dead anyway. But if you take your team in there and get them all killed and by some miracle he survives, you've effectively cut him off from all military support within the Anomaly Research Centre."

"He's lost the political battle anyway, which is the important one," observed Lyle. "I'm just concerned with getting him, and any other survivors, out of there as quickly as possible."

Helen sighed. This was going to end badly. Lyle knew it too. She could see he was rubbing his thumbs.

"You can't even use the armour piercing bullets," she said, "because there may be survivors. You're walking into an anomaly confluence armed only with water pistols."

Lyle flashed her a rogueish grin. "We've survived worse."

"I doubt it," muttered Helen.

"There's another one!" came a shout.

Helen spun round. A large anomaly was opening in Old Palace Yard.

"Squad! Positions!" shouted Lyle, running forwards. He'd only crossed a couple of yards, the rest of the squad fanned out in a loose V shape behind him when a *Tyranosaurus rex* leaped through the anomaly. Lyle dropped to his knees sighting along his gun.

Helen turned and raced back towards the four-by-four. Connor and Abby were ahead of her, already unloading the rocket launcher. The sound of gunfire echoed behind them.

"Used one of these before?" she asked, as Connor fumbled to set it up.

"I've read the manual," he said.

“Mine I think.” Finn had run back to them. A pleased grin crossed his youthful features as he shouldered the gun. “You loaded this?”

“I think so,” stammered Connor.

“Stand back.”

Finn knelt down and fired the launcher. A grenade sped out and impacted with the T. rex, knocking it messily to the ground.

“One down!” shouted Lyle, triumphantly.

Helen didn’t feel like celebrating. The anomaly pulsed once and then closed as quickly as it had opened.

The team entered through St. Stephen’s entrance. Lyle took point with Finn and Lacey either side of him. Blade, Kermit and Stephen followed behind, with Ditzzy in the rear.

They each wore a radio headset with a small camera mounted on one side. This meant everything they saw was relayed back to the Brigadier, the Chief Constable, the remaining ARC members and fuck knew what other spectators.

Lyle’s plan, such as it was, was to check the Lobby, the Commons and the Lords for survivors and then proceed upstairs to the committee rooms. He’d seen a plan of the building. There was no way they could sweep the whole thing, but Connor’s best bet was that an anomaly had opened in each of the debating chambers and a third remained open in the central lobby. There was one, also still open, in Victoria Tower (which Lyle intended to ignore) and another had opened and shut on the upper floor. Connor had warned, though, that it was possible that dozens of other anomalies had opened and closed.

St. Stephen’s Hall was grandiose, with statuary down the sides and a tall gothic ceiling that rose upwards like the interior of a cathedral. Lyle could imagine tourists rubber-necking open-mouthed at the place. He was more concerned with the three large lizard-like creatures, each nearly two metres long, crawling across the floor.

“What are they?” asked Lacey nervously.

“Diadectes,” came Connor’s voice over the headsets. “Large herbivores,” he added, followed a moment later by, “probably.”

Lyle eyed the creatures doubtfully. They were ambling around, not looking obviously dangerous.

“You might be able to herd them,” came Abby’s voice. “I can look after them if you get them outside, some of the cages have arrived.”

Lyle debated inwardly. “Will do.” He decided. “This way we clear a route through for survivors to get out. But if they get twitchy or dangerous, I’m having them shot.”

Carefully the team edged round the lizards until they were on the far side of them. Lyle glanced at the soldiers and nodded to Stephen. “Let’s make some noise.”

They started shouting, fanned out across the width of the hallway. The beasts picked up pace and, thankfully, headed away from them, tails swishing. Lyle winced as one of the statues was knocked crashing to the floor.

“So much for Pitt the Younger,” came Helen’s acerbic voice over the comms.

Lyle watched as the three creatures rushed outside. He could see the other ARC team standing just beyond the entrance. Hopefully that was one problem sorted out.

“OK,” Lyle took a deep breath. “From here on it’ll probably get harder.”

He pushed open the door to the Central Lobby.

There was a flash of snapping teeth and fast movement. Instinctively, Lyle ducked as something bounded over his head. There was a sound of gunfire and a cry. Lyle whirled around to follow the movement. Where Blade had been standing Lyle could see a velociraptor. Without thinking he let off a burst of gunfire and watched it crumple.

“Blade!” Kermit shouted.

Together they pulled the velociraptor’s body to one side. Blade was underneath. Lyle could see there was a knife still gripped in one hand. Blade was preternaturally fast, but even so Lyle was amazed he’d managed to switch to the hand weapon for close-quarter work in time.

Hurriedly, Ditzzy started on the standard checks. “He’s bleeding badly,” he reported, “but he should live.”

“We need a medical team in here,” Lyle shouted. “Man down.”

“Negative!” came the Brigadier’s clipped voice.

“We’ve cleared the damn hallway, Sir, and we’ll keep the door to the lobby shut. We need a stretcher team at the least.”

He looked around. “Stay with him, Ditzzy, and help with the evac. We don’t have time to wait.”

The medic nodded.

Carefully, Lyle opened the lobby door once more and the team slipped through, closing it behind them.

The lobby was no less grandiose than the hallway behind them. Arched windows in four of the octagonal sides filled the place with sunlight that glanced off the tiled floor. Lyle felt the cold eyes of Margaret Thatcher upon him.

“Well, I’ll be,” muttered Kermit, gazing up at a glittering anomaly that hung in the centre of the octagonal ceiling. Swooping in and out of it and circling above their heads was a pterodactyl.

“Stephen,” muttered Lyle. The man was a good sharp shooter.

“Cutter wouldn’t want it killed,” muttered Stephen.

“If you’re going to be a liability you can get out of here now,” said Lyle. “There are at least two active anomalies in this building and several dozen MPs. We need to clear the creatures out fast and not faff around.”

There was a shot and the pterodactyl fell to the ground in the centre of the chamber.

“I didn’t say I would have agreed with him,” Stephen said.

“Which way now?” asked Lacey. “Lords or Commons?”

“Commons,” decided Lyle. “The PM is still missing and he was supposed to be at a debate.”

It was disconcerting to be standing inside a room seen so often on the television. It was empty of humans, standing ones at least. It did contain three large, lightly built, bear like creatures.

“What the fuck are they?” muttered Lacey.

“Hemicyon,” came Connor’s voice over the radio. “Half bear, half dog.”

Lyle sighted down his gun at one and squeezed the trigger. The creature leaped. Lyle cursed as the shot went wide. There was a shout from beside him. He glanced across to where Kermit should have been standing but saw only a blur of fur and gunfire. He couldn’t shoot for fear of hitting his man. The two other beasts were already down, caught in the crossfire from Stephen and Lacey.

Finn ran past him into the body of the chamber. “Oi!” he shouted, kneeling and sighting back in the melee. He let off a quick shot, high above the fight.

“Behind you!” Lyle shouted. A fourth Hemicyon appeared from behind one of the benches and powered down the chamber. Lyle let off a burst in its direction. Finn had half-turned when the creature piled into him. Lyle swore. He strode up to the pair and put a shot into the creature’s head. There was blood everywhere, but Lyle didn’t have to look hard to see that most of it had come from the jagged hole torn in Finn’s throat.

“Damn!” It was Lacey’s voice.

He looked up. Lacey was kicking the last Hemicyon aside. Underneath it was the remains of Kermit.

“Shit!” swore Lyle. He hurried over. Kermit was still alive, but again there was blood everywhere, spurting in great gushes from his legs. Lacey threw aside her gun and pressed her hands to the wounds, trying to staunch the flow.

“Cara!” groaned Kermit.

“You’re going to be fine, lad,” said Lyle desperately. He looked at Lacey’s stricken face as she fought with the wound.

“Ditzzy! We need you here now!” Lyle shouted into the radio. “Two down.”

Fuck! What a mess. Lyle swept the rest of the chamber quickly, pausing only to grimace at the PM’s sightless eyes as he stepped over the bodies in the front bench.

“It’s too late, Private,” he heard Ditzzy’s voice behind him. “He’s gone.”

Lyle scowled. “Helen, you listening?”

“I’m here,” Helen’s voice sounded tense.

“We’ve lost Finn and Kermit.”

“Damn! I told you not to go in.”

“Thanks. The PM’s gone too. You had better notify someone.” Not really necessary, they would have seen it on his head cam. No doubt some frantic politicking had just started.

He could hear the sound of banging from behind the speaker’s chair. Curious, he walked round. There was a door on either side. He tugged one open. Inside were a couple of dozen people in smart suits. He looked behind him to the carnage in the chamber.

“Good afternoon sirs, madams,” Lyle said in his most business like voice. “We’ll have you out of here in a jiffy. I’ve got survivors,” he relayed.

“They’ve sent a team in to secure St. Stephen’s entrance and carry Lieutenant Richards out,” reported Helen. “If you can get them back to the central lobby, someone will conduct them from there. I’d advise you to return with them.”

“If you care to step this way,” said Lyle stiffly. “Finn, Lacey check the route back to the central lobby. Ditzzy guard the rear.”

“Oh God!” said one of the men, confronted by the sight in the debating chamber.

“The immediate threat is eliminated, sir. But if you could all hurry.”

Lyle counted the heads as they shuffled passed him. Thirteen men and six women, all in varying degrees of shock, as far as he could tell, which at least made them moderately docile.

They conducted the shaken group back out of the gruesome chamber. Once away from the tangle of bodies they picked up their pace a little and seemed to gather their wits.

“Who gave the order for the army to enter the Palace of Westminster?” demanded a small pudgy man.

“Shut up, Henry. Let them do their job. We can argue about the constitution later.” It was a dark-haired woman in a vibrant red suit.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Lyle muttered quietly.

She shook her head and shuddered. “A small military team in the House will be the least of the changes we’ll see, I fear.”

There was a group of police in what looked like riot gear clustered in St. Stephen’s hallway. Lyle watched as the MPs allowed themselves to be conducted out. He turned back to Ditzzy, Stephen and Lacey.

“Right,” he said. “I’m checking the Lords and then heading up to the committee rooms. No one is expected to come with me.”

The two soldiers and scientist facing him exchanged glances. “We’re coming, sir,” said Ditzzy.

Lyle nodded and led the way to the Lords.

“Raptors!” breathed Lacey as they paused in the entrance.

“That last one had to have come from somewhere,” said Lyle. “Covering fire. Stay in the doorway. Mow them down.”

Stephen and Lacey dropped to their knees with Lyle and Ditzzy behind them. There were a dozen raptors. As soon as the small group opened fire the creatures turned towards the noise and then charged. The leaders fell, but not fast enough for Lyle. It was taking a lot of ammunition to hurt these buggers.

“Fuck!” muttered Lacey, reloading a clip.

The remaining six raptors hit them full on, two leaping right over the heads of Lacey and Stephen. Lyle and Ditzzy were forced back down the corridor. He couldn’t see either of the others under the swarm. They fell back towards the lobby.

“We can’t let these get out,” muttered Ditzzy. “Those plods will be mince meat.”

“Not many left,” said Lyle.

He fired another burst at a creature. There was answering fire from the corridor behind the raptors and the last one went down.

Lacey stood facing them.

“Stephen?” asked Lyle. She shook her head.

“How about you?” asked Ditzzy.

“A few scratches, nothing more. They ran right over me. I was lucky.”

“Check the chamber?” asked Ditzzy.

The Lords was grim. “They’ll have trouble identifying who is who,” said Lacey darkly.

Stephen lay in the doorway. Deep slashes raked across his chest. Lyle assumed one had hit an artery. Ditzzy closed his eyes. Lyle looked at his remaining two soldiers, wondering whether to ask them again if they were still with him.

“We find Lester then get the fuck out of here, right?” said Lacey. “No more faffing around.”

Lyle nodded. “No more faffing around. Let’s get upstairs to the committee rooms.”

They headed for the stairs as rapidly as they could, checking only that rooms with open doors were clear.

The stairs were in sight when Lyle heard a strange sucking sound behind him. He whirled to see Ditzzy’s legs dangling from the ceiling. His upper body enveloped in a shapeless mass.

Lyle and Lacey both fired upwards at once, riddling the shape with bullets, keeping clear of wherever Ditzzy was. His legs continued kicking which gave Lyle some hope. The gelatinous mass appeared to absorb the bullets.

“What the fuck is it?”

“No idea!” squeaked Connor’s voice. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. Not even remotely.”

“Make a guess at weak points.”

“Errr... near where it’s eating, I’m afraid.”

Lyle watched the shape. “Lacey! Grab Ditzzy’s legs. Let’s see if we can pull him out.”

They took a leg each and hauled on them. Lyle felt Ditzzy’s foot kick once but after that, nothing. Slowly the medic’s body appeared to be disappearing upwards and into the thing.

“Ditzzy!” shouted Lyle. “Give me a sign here!”

The legs remained motionless. Lyle looked across to Lacey. Dark, shocked eyes gazed back at him. How long for suffocation, wondered Lyle. How long should they leave before they gave up on the lieutenant. There was a jerk and the body inched upwards again into the strange maw above them.

“Stand back, Private,” said Lyle, with a heavy heart.

Lacey let go and stepped back smartly. Lyle aimed his gun, and sighted up Ditzzy’s body. Then he opened fire and hoped to God that if the lieutenant were still alive, none of his bullets would hit him.

The shape convulsed. Lyle backed away smartly. Then the thing collapsed inwards and fell off the ceiling. Lieutenant Dave Owen’s head rolled free, coming to rest at Lyle’s feet.

Without a word, Lyle turned away, loaded in a new clip and headed to the stairs. He was aware of Lacey at his back.

Lyle knew which room Lester had been in. Third on the right. He didn't even pause to check the others.

"Predator," called Lacey and there was the sound of gunfire.

Lyle whirled.

The creature was already upon Lacey as he emptied his clip into it. It paused giving that eerie impression of looking at him, even though he knew it had no eyes. Lyle reloaded and fired again. Put enough bullets in the things and even they went down eventually. It moved, too fast to see, but Lyle was prepared. He dropped to the floor and fired upwards catching a brief blur of movement as the thing sailed over his head. There was a thud. Lyle rolled to his feet. The body of the predator lay slumped against one wall. Private Tanya Lacey lay still, where she had fallen. Lyle set off at a run for the committee room.

The door handle turned but he couldn't gain entrance.

"Lester!" he shouted and shoulder-charged the door, he felt it move slightly.

"Lyle?" came a familiar voice from the other side. "Give me a moment, we'll move the table." Lyle sighted both ways down the corridor but couldn't see anything.

"It's clear," Lyle backed into the room. Lester and another man stood there. There were three dead bodies on the floor. Lyle shut the door and placed his back against it. "What was it?"

"Some kind of small raptor," said Lester. "In the supply cupboard." He nodded to a battered metal cupboard against one wall.

"Right," said Lyle, "let's leave it there."

Any way he evaluated their alternatives they did best to barricade themselves back in the committee room and wait the thing out. He'd lost five men fighting his way in here, he was likely to lose two civilians on the way out.

"Desk back where it was," he said.

He stepped away from the door and heard a horrible splintering sound behind him. He was unsurprised to see a second predator when he turned. He was already firing. As the claws ripped into his chest he saw the sparkle of an anomaly open behind the creature and a vaguely familiar figure stepped through, also firing a gun. Then everything became a haze of blood and pain.

Helen counted the body bags as they came out. The morbid fascination irritated her but she couldn't help it. She gave up at three hundred. The building had been packed with people. There were survivors too. Small groups who had had the presence of mind to lock themselves into offices and remain quiet and inconspicuous, but they were outnumbered by the dead.

She knew when Lyle's body came. Lester was walking behind it. His suit was covered in dried blood. Helen guessed he had held Lyle to the last. Behind him walked some MP Helen vaguely recalled from the committee she had been watching when this all started.

At the end of the small procession walked an armed man. It was another William Slater, only this one had greying hair and the look of middle age about him.

Their third William Slater was escorted from the room by his guards.

"What do you think?" asked Lucia tersely. There was a lot going on, her demeanour said. She didn't have time for this.

Helen shrugged and glanced across at Lester. His face was an impassive mask but, even in so short a space of time, he appeared to have lost weight. "His story sounds plausible enough," she ventured. "You ordered him through an anomaly because you knew he was destined to turn up in the Houses of Parliament at this time. I can see why you might have ordered him to go, just to maintain the established course of history."

"If he is telling the truth," said Lester. "All we have to do is keep him under lock and key with the other two for a couple of months and then send him back. No harm done."

"He says he worked with the team," said Lucia, "and he would certainly appear to have the relevant experience. Do you trust him?"

Helen shook her head. "No," she said emphatically. The man was all wrong. Nothing added up.

Lucia eyed her levelly. "I'm appointing him to Lyle's former position," she said firmly. "There's no one else suitable and I don't want to interfere with any established time lines."

“Clearly she doesn’t trust you at all,” muttered Lester, after Lucia had left the room. “Did you know she’d ignore your advice?”

Helen opted for a smirk. She was surprised too but she’d rather Lester thought she was planning something. She heard him sigh and he started loading papers into his briefcase. She felt a sudden and inexplicable sympathy for the man.

“In the light of the simultaneous attacks upon the Palace of Westminster and the Anomaly Research Centre we feel there is no other conclusion to draw than that the anomalies are in the control of forces hostile to the United Kingdom and her people. In such desperate times, desperate measures are required. We, the surviving members of parliament, have resolved to form a government of national unity under the aegis of Lucia Wright, the former Home Secretary. Elections will be held at the earliest opportunity to refill representation but, for the foreseeable future, the parties have resolved to work together until the threat is removed. In the light of this the following extraordinary powers have been granted...”

Helen switched off the television in disgust. The ARC wasn’t quite as much of a mess as Westminster but a lot of lives had been lost. The special forces teams had been spread thinly, caught rushing towards Westminster just as the first anomaly had opened within the ARC. The scientific teams, left behind, had been decimated. She took small comfort from the fact that Abby and Connor had been with her but the Physics research had probably been set back by months, if not years. In fact Helen rather doubted the ARC, as an organisation, would continue to exist. With the anomaly threat now public enemy number one, she expected the whole project would be parcelled off into different institutions controlled by the Ministry of Defence.

It was raining when Lyle and his team went into the ground. Helen lurked awkwardly. She wasn’t family and she wasn’t, technically, any part of the Special Forces chain of command. Somehow, obscurely, she felt she had been responsible for the five men and one woman who had died. It made her cranky and difficult.

Kermit’s wife whose name, it transpired, was Cara, struck Helen as a pale and insipid little thing. Helen pretty much despised her on sight. For some reason the

families of the dead had nominated her to make a eulogy.

“My husband always believed absolutely in his duty to serve his country. How could that be better demonstrated than in saving the lives of the nineteen members of parliament who were found in the Aye chamber. With his friends and colleagues he gave his life for his country, a symbol to us all, of loyalty and bravery in support of our British values of democracy and freedom.”

“That old lie,” thought Helen, “*dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori.*” The deaths had been pointless and unnecessary. Freedom and democracy lay in tatters.

“Touching eulogy,” she said, as she shook the pale girl’s hand.

Lester, of course, was not among the official mourners. He stood, alone, on the sidelines. The politicians present ignored him, afraid of his political isolation. Moved by something approaching sympathy, Helen found herself drawn into his orbit.

“I’m sorry about Lyle,” she said.

“You hated him. Don’t insult me with false sympathy.”

“I didn’t say I liked him. I said I was sorry,” returned Helen, relieved that here, at least, she could be honest.

Lester looked at her in surprise. “I shall need a lot more than your sympathy in the days to come.”

Helen met his gaze. “What’s in it for me?”

“Quite frankly, I don’t know. But I don’t think you like Miss Wright any more than I do. Speaking of whom,” Lester plastered his falsest smile across his face.

“Lester! Such a relief to us all that you survived!” Lucia was immaculate in her tailored black suit.

“Indeed, Prime Minister,” said Lester. “I am very grateful to the men and women who died to ensure my safety.”

“Ah yes! Captain Lyle and his team,” Lucia’s smile was like a knife. “At least they weren’t family, eh.”

She smiled once more and was gone.

“Was that a threat?” asked Helen.

“Oh yes!” said Lester.

Helen walked next to him to the graves and stood at his side as the last post rang out across the green and pleasant fields.

“It’s going to be massive,” insisted Abby. “The organisers think at least ten thousand people are going to be marching through London. We have to be there.”

“We’ll just be three more people, Abby,” said Connor. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t go, but it’s illegal and an anomaly might open.”

“But don’t you see Connor? We’re not just three people. We’re the anomaly team. If we’re there it will show that we don’t believe the anomalies have anything to do with Al-Qaeda or terrorists. That’s important.”

Helen shook her head. “It’s a trap.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What do you mean, a trap?”

“Lucia isn’t fighting the plans enough. She’s expecting something to happen. I don’t think anyone should go.”

“We can’t not go!” Abby’s face was a picture of disappointment. “This is important.”

Helen turned on her heel to leave the room. “I’m not ordering anyone, one way or another. I’m just saying it’s going to end badly.”

1.5 Present Fears

Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings

– Shakespeare, Macbeth

“What’s the problem?”

Helen looked up, surprised to see Jenny standing in her lab. “No problem.”

“Yes there is. You’ve been popping up and checking the anomaly detector for two weeks.”

Helen shrugged. “It’s been quiet. That’s all.”

Jenny sat down elegantly and leaned on the lab bench. “No it’s not.”

“What’s your interest anyway?”

It was Jenny’s turn to shrug. “I like to know what you’re up to.”

Helen eyed her thoughtfully, wondering how far she could trust her. But then Jenny wanted Nick back, right? So that gave her leverage. “There are missing anomalies.”

“Missing anomalies?”

“Anomalies that should have opened, but didn’t.”

Jenny frowned. “I’m supposed to be keeping you away from the physicists.”

“A task at which you have excelled.” Helen could hear the waspishness in her voice.

Jenny smirked ever so slightly. “Of course, nothing stops me talking to them. Any idea what I should ask?”

Helen was surprised, but she kept forgetting Jenny could focus and prioritise. For now, it seemed, they were on the same side. “I’ll think about it and let you know.”

The siren sound of the anomaly detector echoed through the building. “Where to now, I wonder?” asked Jenny.

“The Fens, if everything is as it should be.”

The anomaly was hanging over a shallow mere. The location appeared deceptively remote but Helen knew from the map that the village of Little Bucknall was only half a mile away. A combination of fog and a mild drizzle made it impossible to see.

“Slater, get some teams searching the area. See if there are any traces of something getting out,” Helen ordered. “Connor, any chance of a robot working over this terrain?”

“Not a hope,” said Connor dismally. He was standing in front of the anomaly with his hands thrust into his pockets. Helen noticed that his trainers were already covered in mud. Abby, standing next to him, was more practically dressed in a waterproof jacket and wellingtons. Jenny had refused to even get out of the car.

Helen tramped off to where Slater - the oldest Slater - had sent his two younger counterparts off in separate directions leading small teams. Blade was still on sick leave. Helen hardly knew the man, but he had been a member of Lyle’s team. That meant Lyle trusted him, which meant Lester trusted him, which in some strange way meant Helen trusted him a lot more than Slater.

Helen watched the soldiers vanishing into the mist. “Staying here to keep an eye on us, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“Actually I was wanting a word with you,” said Slater.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I want to get rid of Lucia and I’m fairly sure you do too.”

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

“My son was on a school trip four weeks ago. To the House of Commons.”

“I didn’t know.” Helen kept her voice neutral. She didn’t do sympathy and, anyway, this could easily be a trap.

“He doesn’t yet either.” Slater nodded after his younger self’s retreating back. “My bitch of an ex-wife had a restraining order out. Managed not to let me know for six months.”

“And what has this got to do with me?” Helen still wasn’t sure she believed him.

“You came from a time line where Lucia wasn’t in charge of the anomaly project. One where Nick Cutter didn’t die. You’re trying to put it back.”

“I am, am I?”

Slater shrugged. “That’s what your confession said, before you were executed.”

“Really?” Helen felt a small knot of excitement. She sensed now the kind of weapon she was being handed.

“If you go back and stop Lucia, then the House of Commons anomaly confluence won’t open. ’Cos she made that happen.”

“Do you know how?”

“Some machine in the physics section. That’s the rumour. Handy for her that all the physicists got killed.”

“I’m still not sure I believe you.” Helen smiled, challenging him to prove his point.

“Get your friend Connor to poke around the casualty lists and restraining order databases. I imagine he can verify that I had a son easily enough.”

Helen nodded. “I’ll do that.”

“Might be worth getting him to wipe some records while he’s about it. I don’t want Lucia making the connection.”

Helen nodded again. The man had clearly been thinking about this a long time. But then, she thought as she turned and headed back to Connor and Abby, people did plot revenge slowly and carefully.

“So,” said Abby glancing around gloomily in the drizzle. “We wait.”

“Yeah,” said Connor.

Abby shivered, suddenly feeling Stephen’s absence keenly. “What do we do if something comes out of the anomaly?”

Connor looked over at Helen and Slater. "There's them," he said.

Abby looked at the two figures, deep in conversation and didn't feel reassured.

"And you!" said Connor, unexpectedly.

"What?" she asked vaguely.

"You. You have a gun. You know about tranquilisers. We'll be fine." Connor smiled reassuringly at her. In the gloom it felt like a ray of sunshine.

"Yeah, we will." She mustered a smile.

Connor turned back to the anomaly. "Of course, if it's large, one tranquiliser dart won't be enough." His tone sounded light.

"No," agreed Abby.

Connor grinned. "Lots of running, I expect."

Abby smiled and then, in a spontaneous moment of daring slipped one hand into his. Connor glanced at her with a surprised look and then grinned again.

Abby leaned close and looked out over the muddy pool with the anomaly hanging over it. It was then she became aware of a pair of raised eyes just above the water about a thirty centimetres or so apart. They were less than a metre away from herself and Connor, and heading straight for them.

Instinctively she took a step backwards, pulling Connor with her and drew the tranquiliser gun. A huge triangular head rose out of the water and a large jaw gaped. Abby shot. The jaw snapped shut, two tusk-like teeth at the front poking up through what looked like nostrils.

"Oh boy! Mastodonsaurus!" said Connor.

"How big?" asked Abby, squinting into the water behind the jaws.

"Not sure, couple of metres maybe."

"With a head that large?"

Connor shrugged. "They're mostly head. Amphibians, though, so it can probably get out of the water."

"Probably?"

Abby backed away further, dragging Connor with her. The brief glimpse suggested it had short stubby legs, splayed out on either side. It probably wasn't a fast runner. She began loading a second dart into her gun. If the Mastodonsaurus was only a couple of metres long she thought, running a rough calculation in her head... At that moment the head slumped down on the edge of the pond.

"I got the tranquiliser about right, at least" she said.

Getting the Mastodonsaurus back through the anomaly proved to be a difficult and exceedingly damp exercise. Eventually it took three soldiers, up to their chests in the water. Helen was with them struggling with the beast when she saw a man in a flat cap and Barbour striding up the soggy track. Even as she watched, Jenny emerged from the four-by-four and intercepted him. Her thin heels sank into the muddy track. Helen turned her attention back to the soldiers and the Mastodonsaurus. Jenny would handle the public better than she would.

When she waded out of the pond Jenny was waiting for her on the bank.

“Trouble?” asked Helen.

“Fraid so. He’s some local bigwig. I think chins have been wagging and he volunteered himself to come and check us out.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Anomaly, government response team, all under control. He asked if there are more creatures.”

“Wouldn’t we all like to know.”

Jenny nodded. “Turns out there have been a couple of sightings and some excitable talk of crocodiles. There’s a waterway flows into this lake. Sounds like we need to check it out. Luckily for us Mr. Browne quite fancies himself as the local upholder of the peace. He’s going to arrange to keep people away.”

Jenny turned her back, clearly intent on heading back to the car.

“I know what I want you to ask the physics people,” Helen said.

Jenny turned to look her in the eye, eyebrows raised. “Oh yes?”

“Yes. There’s a machine. I want to know what it is.”

William Slater led his team cautiously along a raised causeway next to the mere. He was generally called Junior by the squad since he was the ‘youngest’ of the three Slaters. It wasn’t a name he liked much, though he had more sense than to protest about it.

“Sir!” Lieutenant Greeves pointed ahead of them. Two eyes were just visible above the water.

“Looks like one of them things,” said Slater quietly. “Where’s the tranquiliser gun?”

“Here, sir!” Private Rushcliffe ran eagerly up to him.

“See if you can get a good shot at that creature.”

The private knelt down and sighted along his rifle. Just as he shot, there was a sudden massive disturbance in the water.

“Holy...” began Slater.

Two of the creatures seemed to be fighting each other, letting out harsh cries of challenge.

“Sir?” asked the private.

“Shoot them both, private.”

Private Rushcliffe knelt once more, loading a second dart. Slater aimed his gun at the fighting beasts, braced in case one came up the bank towards them.

Rushcliffe grunted as the dart landed. Then he pulled a third from his pouch. Suddenly Slater heard a noise behind him. He turned rapidly to see a third creature powering up the bank. He threw himself to one side, in time to see it barrel into Rushcliffe.

There was a cry and thrashing.

“Jones! Greeves!” Slater was on his feet aiming into the fray, but it was impossible to be sure where Rushcliffe was and where the creatures were. He made a guess and fired a burst into the water.

There were more cries and then silence. A moment later a large wave disturbed the surface of the mere as one of the Mastodonsauruses swam away.

At the waters’ edge lay two of the creatures, either asleep or dead, and the battered body of Private Rushcliffe.

“Connor!” Connor looked up from his laptop to see Helen striding across the muddy ground towards him. She had got out of the waders, but she was still wearing wellingtons, loose canvas trousers and a practical jacket. Her short hair whipped in the breeze. She looked very at home.

“What is it?” he asked as she drew close.

“Jenny needs to work up some kind of briefing sheet to hand around local bigwigs. Can you get back to the ARC with her and help?”

“Sure.” Connor frowned. Jenny was an old hand at that kind of thing. There were copies of his database on the ARC computers. He couldn’t think what Helen wanted him to go for.

She sat down next to him. “While you’re about it, have a dig and see if Slater had a son and if the boy died in the attack on parliament. If so, I want any records

connecting Slater to the boy quietly erased. Can you do that?"

"Slater had a son in the House of Commons?"

"So he says. Check it out. If it's true erase the records and let me know."

Connor gulped. "That's pretty illegal."

Helen regarded him levelly. "You believe the attack on was Al-Qaeda?"

"No!"

"Well then, sometimes you have to act. It's a matter of choosing your moment." She wasn't looking at him, just staring out across the landscape.

"Is that what you always do? Choose when to act?" Connor couldn't help asking.

"Something like that."

"OK then. Can I tell Abby?"

Helen looked at him coolly. "If you must, but no one else. This stays small."

Helen and Abby were scouting around the edge of what could loosely be called the lake the anomaly hung over. It was more a series of ponds and puddles with muddy areas in between. The oldest Slater lurked behind them, gun at the ready.

"Don't go on that march," Helen found herself saying suddenly.

"Do you care?"

"The team needs you. If you and Connor are arrested I'll be the only person left with experience handling these creatures."

Abby looked up at her, her eyes standing out, rimmed with dark mascara. "What if only I go?"

"Connor will be frantic."

Abby nodded curtly, then she shrugged and turned away. "Sometimes you have to take a stand."

Helen made a face to her retreating back. "Not like this."

Suddenly Abby held out one arm and gestured for caution. Helen walked slowly up to her, to see what she was looking at. A Mastodonsaurus was crouched in a pile of rushes and leaves on the edge of a pond.

"She's laying eggs," whispered Abby.

"Oh no!" Helen's maternal instincts were non-existent. She wasn't particularly sentimental about animals either, but she just knew Mastodonsaurus larvae in the Fens would mean paperwork. "We'll need to gather them up somehow."

“Here, girl,” Abby had picked up a large stick and was approaching the Mastodonsaurus carefully.

“What are you doing?”

“Using tranquilisers is always a bit dangerous. She seems pretty docile.”

“The last one wasn’t.”

“That was a male.” Abby turned back to the creature and began walking around it. “You’re not going to harm me, girl, are you?”

“Abby!” hissed Helen in exasperation.

“Just getting a look at the spawn.”

Abby was on the far side now, crouching down in the mud, clearly fascinated. “It’s like frog-spawn. Looks like the eggs stick together.”

“Well that’s something. I hope there aren’t any more spawning around here though,” muttered Helen. “We need to tranquilise her and then gather up the eggs.”

“I think we can move her without resorting to tranquilisation and she might be useful awake for handling that remaining male.”

Government databases weren’t really Connor’s thing. At least, they weren’t his thing when it came to illegal hacking. They definitely weren’t his thing when it came to illegal hacking while emergency powers were in effect. And yet, somehow, here he was. He decided to leave poor James Slater’s birth certificate untouched and focused on William Slater’s personnel file. Lots of that, of course, was an official secret, given there were three of him, but the basic information was accessible to Connor’s clearance level and it was simple to change “next of kin” from James Slater to none. Connor hoped that would suffice.

“Ah Connor!” He looked up in alarm to see Lester smiling genially down at him. Jenny was standing a foot or so behind him.

“What? I haven’t done anything!” Connor’s mind scrambled.

Lester pinched his nose and looked back at Jenny. “Are you sure this is a good idea.”

“Do we have any choice?” she asked.

“What choice?” asked Connor.

Lester dropped a data stick on the table in front of him. “You have no idea how many strings I’ve pulled to get hold of that.”

Jenny smiled from behind Connor. “The physics section have some kind of top-secret machine. We don’t know much, only that all the people involved in the

development were killed when the ARC was attacked. Schematics were lodged with the MoD when it was developed.”

“Those are they,” said Lester. “I managed to get someone concerned about the emergency powers to pull them for me. Try not to look too guilty when someone surprises you in future.”

“What am I supposed to do with them?” asked Connor.

“Find out what it does and let me know, or Helen if you must,” Lester sighed.

“How come you don’t know already? I mean it must have been developed when you were still in charge of the whole place, right?”

Lester almost looked a little contrite. “Lucia played me. She let me think she had some bee in her bonnet, a leftover from her days as a physicist. I let her divert some of the ARC resources into a ‘personal project’ since she was junior minister with responsibility for this place. She managed to keep me completely in the dark. If Helen hadn’t somehow rustled up the fact there was some kind of top-secret machine being kept under wraps, I wouldn’t even know the research had ever got anywhere.”

Connor looked at Jenny who smiled sympathetically. “Just do your best Connor. It may be nothing, but something’s going on in physics that Lucia wants to keep a lid on and we’d all like to know what.”

Connor eyed them dubiously. It looked like things had just got a lot more dangerous and a lot more complicated than hacking a couple of personnel files.

Helen was up to her chest in muddy water again, this time with a net, scooping up Mastodonsaurus eggs and loading them into buckets. Thankfully they did seem to stick together so she had some hopes they would get them all. As she was doing so her mind ran over options for sealing and draining this area of wetland. She suspected the best they would be able to do was keep an eye on it and pray.

Meanwhile Abby seemed to have performed some kind of small miracle with the creature. She squatted near its head, crooning gently to it. It appeared pretty docile, though Helen noted that Abby still maintained a safe distance and had a stick close to hand.

They’d managed to co-opt a large truck with a cage on the back to drive the thing back to the anomaly and hopefully once there they could shove it, and its eggs back through.

“There they are!”

Helen glanced up to see about half a dozen men approaching. She also saw a couple of shotguns, a pitchfork and a baseball bat. Hurriedly she waded out of the water.

“Can I help you gentlemen?”

She stood square in the pathway between the bunch of men and Abby and the Mastodonsaurus. She smiled sweetly, she hoped, though Nick had once said her smile looked like a panther when it was about to strike. They stopped, which was good. Anything to destroy their momentum.

“Get out of our way!” snarled the leader. Helen realised suddenly that it was Jenny’s ‘local bigwig’.

“Mr Browne, isn’t it? I thought you were going to help coordinate the search.”

“We deal with things our way out here.”

“We’re the experts. We’re dealing with it.”

“Like you dealt with them dinosaurs in Parliament,” shouted a voice from the back somewhere.

“There’s only one creature here. We have a reptile expert with it. We know there’s at least one other out there and that it’s probably male and dangerous. What we’d like to know is if there are any others, particularly if there are any others closer to your village.”

The men visibly wavered. Helen decided to hit home while she could. She stepped up close to Mr Browne, invading his personal space.

“Lucia Wright is personally concerned about the consequences of killing these creatures out of time. I have personal orders from her to minimise deaths. Now, Mr Browne, if you want to explain to the Prime Minister why, exactly, you contravened one of her personal orders, I’ll be happy to let you past.”

He was the leader, but he valued his status and reputation. Helen prayed she’d played the right card there. If he got stripped of whatever small-time local position gave him his perception of power, he would lose far more than the little respect backing down would cause.

“Her personal order?” he asked.

“Indeed. There is some evidence that harming these creatures can have dangerous temporal effects. The PM thinks it imperative to keep that risk at a minimum. Feel free to continue if you think you know better, but, she does have the physics background.”

Helen allowed herself another smile and a secretive look and then she stepped off the path.

“Well, if the PM thinks it’s right...” muttered Mr Browne.

“Only person with a good grasp on the situation, if you ask me,” said someone else.

“Yeah! She knew what to do when them Muslims attacked Parliament.”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

“What are you doing exactly?” asked Mr Browne. It was clearly a tactic to reassert some authority.

“We’re waiting for a caged truck which will allow us to move the creature back to the anomaly.”

He nodded. “That sounds sensible.”

“But we really need the area well-searched for any more of them. I understand you are coordinating that.”

He nodded again. “All right, lads! Let’s get on with our job.”

Helen watched them go.

“Thank you,” said Abby as she turned back.

“I’m getting sentimental in my old age. I should have let them past,” Helen grumbled. But she felt a glow of pleasure at Abby’s smile.

They parked up a few hundred metres from the anomaly, which was as close as they dared without risking the truck getting stuck in the mud.

“Now what?” asked the oldest Slater.

Helen looked at Abby. “You’re the reptile expert.”

Abby nodded and clambered up onto the truck, next to the cage. She was still carrying her stick. “Does someone have the meat?”

One of the Slaters wordlessly handed her a Tesco’s bag. He’d been sent away to purchase steak while Abby was coaxing the creature into the cage.

Abby rapped on the side of the cage with her stick. The Mastodonsaurus’ head flipped towards her. “Here you are girl.” Abby ripped open a packet and tossed the steak at the creature. Its head tipped sideways and it gobbled up the meat. “Good girl.”

Abby held out the next bit, but kept it out of reach. She rapped on the side of the cage again with the stick. “Let’s hear you ask for it.” Then she hit the side of the cage again. The Mastodonsaurus opened its mouth and let out a roar.

Behind her Helen heard one of the Slaters whistle in surprised appreciation.

“Good girl!” Abby tossed the meat at the creature.

“Better start keeping a look-out!” she said.

Connor was driving Abby's mini back to Little Bucknall. Jenny had refused him one of the four by fours on the grounds he wasn't needed. But he wanted to get back to Abby and to Helen to tell them what he'd found out.

As he drove up the track to the edge of the mere, he could see a couple of the four by fours and a large cage on a flat-bed truck. It looked like everyone was around. He stepped out of the car to be greeted by a loud roaring sound. None of the soldiers looked particularly panicked though, so he ambled towards them.

He could see Abby standing on the side of the truck, next to the cage. Inside it was a large Mastodonsaurus. The soldiers were spread along the causeway, guns at the ready.

"Hello!" He waved at them all.

"Connor!" shouted Abby.

"What?"

Helen began running towards him. She was carrying a tranquiliser pistol and paused by one of the soldiers to grab another.

"What?"

"Connor, down!"

"What?"

"Down!" Helen raised the pistol.

Connor gulped and dropped face first into the mud. Helen shot twice. She had already reached him and grabbed his arms, hauling him to his feet.

"Now run!"

As she dragged him back towards the soldiers he risked a glance behind him and then ran faster. Two Mastodonsauruses were powering down the track, each with a small dart visible in its hide.

He could hear safeties clicking off as Helen dragged him through the line of soldiers.

"Wait for it," shouted Abby. "The tranquiliser should take effect any minute."

"Right behind us!" shouted Connor.

"Actually they don't move that fast, luckily for us," muttered Helen.

Connor turned and looked back again. The two Mastodonsauruses were waddling towards them and visibly slowing. Gradually they sank down onto the track.

"I thought you said there was only one male out there," muttered a William Slater in an accusatory tone.

Helen shrugged. "Talk to your younger self. He reported one got away. Talk to your men. None of them reported another sighting. I work on the information

I get given.”

They stared at each other a moment and then Slater blinked and turned away. Connor looked across to Abby who grinned at him from the flat bed.

Helen was sitting in the four by four drinking coffee when the anomaly closed. Abby and Connor were sitting in the back, Connor tapping away on his laptop.

“That’s that, then,” said Abby.

Helen nodded. “No sign of any more of those things. We can leave Jenny and the Slaters to tie up any loose ends.”

“You came all the way back here for nothing.” Abby nudged Connor.

“Not quite,” muttered Connor. “I think I know what that machine does.”

Helen twisted around in her seat. “You’ve analysed the schematics?”

“Yeah, some. But we can all guess. Those anomalies didn’t open in the House of Commons by chance. I can’t say I’m entirely on top of the theory, but everything I’ve seen confirms the obvious.”

“It redirects anomalies. Makes them open where Lucia wants them to, probably in some specific distance and time frame from where they were supposed to open,” said Helen.

“Got it in one!”

“But that’s great!” said Abby excitedly. “We go public with this, we can expose her completely.”

“I doubt it,” said Helen, thoughtfully. “I’ll run it past Lester and Jenny, but I doubt we’ve got enough. We don’t have the machine for a start, just some top-secret blueprints.”

“But we must do something!” Abby looked at Connor for confirmation.

“Oh yes!” Helen grinned. “We’re going to do something. But we’re not going to rush in. We’re up against an expert here and she has both the press and the government in her pocket right now. We need to be very, very careful.”

“Come on Connor! We’ll be late!” Abby shouted up the stairs from her position by the door.

“On my way.” Connor thumped down the stairs, still pulling on a coat and trailing bits of clothing and electronic devices.

Abby grinned at him nervously. “All set?”

“Yeah! What’s the worst that can happen, eh? Bit of tear gas, right?”

“Right.”

She opened the door and gasped in surprise. Helen stood on the other side.

“We’re going to the protest,” said Abby stubbornly.

“I need Connor.”

“What?”

“I need Connor. I don’t want to manage without you, but I can, but I can’t do this without Connor and if he gets arrested then I’m stuck.”

Abby narrowed her eyes at Helen. “It’s just a march.”

“It’s a trap. I don’t know what kind of trap but Lucia’s a predator and I know predators. Connor’s too valuable right now. I need him to stay here.”

“I’m going with Abby.” Abby felt a rush of pleasure as Connor stepped beside her, a look of determination on his face. At the same time her heart sank.

“No, Connor! You’d better stay. If Helen needs you... Well, she’s right, there is a risk of arrest.”

“Abby!” The look of rejection on his face was heart-breaking.

“Push off, Helen. You’ve made your point.” Abby shut the door in Helen’s face and turned back to Connor.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Helen’s probably right. She’s our best bet for doing something about Lucia.”

“But the protest, you said...”

“I know what I said and one of us should be there, but it doesn’t need to be both of us. If Helen needs your help.”

“Abby...”

Abby stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. “It’ll be fine, Connor. I’ll be back by this evening. You’ll see.”

Lester had invited Helen into his office to watch the course of the protest on television. She wasn’t sure why. She wasn’t sure he knew why either. A desire to be with someone sympathetic when the thing played out, perhaps.

She perched on the edge of his desk, unwilling to sit down, to suggest they in anyway understood each other, that he in anyway understood her.

They watched in silence as the tear gas was followed by riot shields and batons and then the windowless trucks, appearing one after another and driving away, each loaded with protesters. The battle raged through the streets as the protesters fought back, suddenly unwilling and scared to risk getting into those dark and sinister vans. The commentators continued to talk of insurrectionists and a process that had been hijacked. After a while Lester turned the sound down.

“I should never have agreed to keep the anomalies secret,” he said.

Helen shrugged. Democracy and transparency were over-rated in her opinion. “It would have happened anyway. Even if the public had believed the anomalies to be a natural phenomenon, the attack on Westminster would have convinced them otherwise.”

Lester pursed his lips and shook his head. He was unwilling to say more, even here, even in his office.

Helen looked back at the television, unwilling to admit she was searching for a flash of white-blond hair. Lester followed her gaze.

“I had better get on the phone,” he said. “Don’t worry. If I can find Miss Maitland, I will. She’ll be back here in no time.”

Helen was sitting in Lester’s office, drinking tea with him. It was a routine they had somehow fallen into. She wasn’t quite sure when it had happened but it was one of the few moments of the day when she didn’t feel the need to be constantly on her guard. The faint aroma of tea, never a drink she’d been particularly attracted to with its overtones of propriety and gentility, was strangely relaxing. Lester rarely pushed for anything. They drank tea, sometimes they barely exchanged a word, sometimes they talked trivialities, and sometimes the trivialities masked something more important.

If anything, Lester was more cautious than she was, but he was determined to do something. She had learned to read him, the way he said some things and didn’t say others. He fascinated her. They were so totally different and yet cold hard steel ran through Lester and she admired that. Since the game was all politics right now, and he was a political predator, she let him get on with it. She followed his subtle directions and waited patiently for her own moment to arise.

“I’ve found Abigail.” He surprised her by offering the information. She’d asked him to look, more from habit than anything else, and had assumed he was making inquiries, but she hadn’t expected him to tell her the outcome. She hadn’t expected there to be an outcome.

“Where is she?”

“Paisley, there’s a big internment camp up there.”

“Anti-terrorism?” asked Helen.

“You have to ask?”

“So what now?” she asked. She’d heard bad things about the camps but if Abby was there at least she wasn’t dead, or in some MI5 interrogation room somewhere.

Lester’s mouth straightened out into a thin line. “I’m working on it.”

He looked tired. Helen deduced he was running out of options. She nodded to show that she understood and placed her empty tea cup down on his desk.

“I’ll tell Connor where she is,” she said. “It’ll be something to know she’s alive, even if she is in one of the camps.”

1.6 Time is out of Joint

*Time is out of joint, oh cursed spite
That ever I was born to put it right.*

– Shakespeare, Hamlet

“Are you all right?” Helen hated herself for asking. It wasn’t as if she particularly cared about Connor, but she needed him focused and effective. He was sitting beside her in the 4x4, completely silent.

He waggled his head. It was half a neck stretch and half a nod. “I’ll manage. At least she’s still alive, eh?” He offered up the ghost of a smile.

Helen nodded curtly. “Lester will do what he can. We’ll have her back with the team before you know it.”

She felt Connor’s eyes on her as she drove along. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Helen glanced back in his direction, debated several answers and then turned and looked at the road. She’s always prided herself on being brutal with the truth when it was necessary. She couldn’t really see the need at the moment, but she didn’t want to risk Connor catching her in a lie.

“That’s what I thought,” he said quietly.

“Where are we heading? Any idea?” Helen decided to change the topic of conversation.

“Grange Road Park. It’s a green space. Couple of roads along on the right.”

It wasn't a very large park: a playing field, a few trees and a tiny car park. It was dominated by a large playground that seemed much too big for the space. The anomaly glinted clear and bright above the playing field. Helen parked in one of the few spaces. The second 4x4 with the soldiers in it, pulled up next to her.

Helen looked across at the eldest Slater as he got down from the truck. "Someone needs to check the trees."

He nodded, "Slater Two and Three, take Jackson and Hobbes. Check out the treeline. Mitcham, you're with me. Professor Cutter and Mr. Temple here need to check out the anomaly."

Helen eyed up Lieutenant Mitcham. She'd not really met him before; he'd been transferred to the ARC in the past couple of weeks, part of a tranche of new faces bolstering the depleted ranks of the soldiery. He was a small, compact man with jet black hair and blue-grey eyes. She didn't think Slater knew him and wondered why Slater had him with the anomaly party, instead of one of the other Slaters. Bringing him with them was a problem, it prevented her talking to Slater and, just as she had become used to taking tea with Lester, she had become used to small moments of understanding with Slater in the field.

And then, like a screen sliding away in her mind she realised that Lucia must have placed Mitcham with the squad. Any attempt to prevent him watching her was bound to make Lucia suspicious, therefore Slater wasn't making any attempt.

That thought wasn't going to stop her from trying something though.

As they approached the anomaly Helen spotted the trackway. A two-footed animal with an enlarged claw was heading out towards the trees.

"What are you looking at?" asked Slater.

"Something came out of the anomaly."

"What kind of something?" Connor looked down at the tracks.

"Two feet, you can tell by the locomotor pattern and see this indentation here?" Helen realised she was succumbing to the desire to lecture.

"Yes?" Connor was crouched beside her, his laptop already open.

"It's deeper than the others, that suggests a longer claw of some kind."

"Raptors! Raptors have come out of the anomaly!" There was a tone of excitement in Connor's voice. Abby's plight was temporarily forgotten.

Helen straightened up and surveyed the field. In some ways she admired his ability to focus, she'd lost it long ago. If you get too wrapped up in one thing you lose your sense of where the threats may be coming from. She scanned the surroundings more from habit than anything else. She was looking directly at the treeline when the raptor broke cover and headed towards them. It was small, probably about a foot in height, and covered with vivid green, froned feathers.

Mitcham raised his gun.

“Don’t shoot unless absolutely necessary!” ordered Slater. He was already raising the tranquiliser rifle but the creature was moving too fast. Helen grabbed Connor by the arm and headed for the playground at a run.

It was an adventure style playground with large wooden huts suspended up ladders and ropes. Thankfully it was a cold, overcast day and there didn’t appear to be anyone around. Helen picked the platform that seemed least accessible to raptors and ran towards it, pausing at the foot of the rope ladder.

“Connor, get up here!” she shouted. “Slater, go with him. Mitcham you’re with me.”

Then she ran towards the anomaly. It was too far to reach, but hopefully Mitcham wouldn’t realise that.

Her feet pounded over bark chippings and then out onto muddy grass.

“We’re not going to make it!” shouted Mitcham behind her.

“Have you got a tranquiliser gun?” she returned. She knew he hadn’t.

“No! Should I shoot it?”

“No! Only as a last resort. Lucia’s orders. OK! Split!” she shouted. “You head for that zip wire. Get out of reach. Attract its attention. I’ll double-back to Slater.”

Mitcham obediently ran towards the zip wire, shouting and flapping his arms as he went. Helen was impressed. The man was obviously a natural decoy.

She jogged back towards the tree house containing Connor and Slater. Once she was close enough to make it safely at a run. She began shouting in turn.

“Oi! Over here!”

Mitcham was already perched precariously on top of the zip wire frame. He immediately shut up and Helen jumped and shouted again, attracting the raptor’s attention. Once it was running towards her she grabbed hold of the rope ladder and began to climb.

She scrambled up onto the platform, alone with Slater and Connor. She was rather pleased with herself.

“So what is it?” asked the Slater, pointing at the raptor.

“Bambiraptor, one of the smaller raptors and it’s on its own,” said Helen.

“Bambiraptor? You’re not serious! It’s called a *Bambiraptor*?”

“It’s true!” said Connor. “Named after the Disney character.”

Slater snorted. It sounded dismissive. Helen wasn’t too keen on cute names herself.

“Tranquillise the raptor,” said Helen. “Then we’ll wait for it to go to sleep. To be honest, it’s small enough that you could probably rugby tackle it, but I don’t

want to risk those claws.”

Slater grunted and peered down through the slats of the climbing frame as the creature ran around the base. It was obviously a tricky shot. She watched him take his time as the thing rushed about. When he finally took the shot, Slater hit the bambiraptor in the muscled part of the haunch.

Then he sat back and stared thoughtfully at Helen. “So, do you have a plan yet?”

Helen was disconcerted by the direct question. She narrowed her eyes at Slater, but she didn’t have a lot of choice. She was going to need him.

“Lucia changed everything when she got Stephen to go public with the anomalies. That was about six months ago. I want to change history; take Lucia out of the picture. That means going back at least six months, preferably a little longer and then finding a way to interfere.”

“You’ve got an anomaly map,” said Connor. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find your way there, especially if Slater leads the team to bring you back.”

“He has a point,” said Slater.

“No anomalies are going to open for a while that link up in the right way. We’re going to have to sit it out for a few more months.”

“I’m not sure we have months,” said Connor. “Lucia doesn’t trust you. As soon as she thinks she’s got a more reliable team trained up, you’ll get removed.”

“We’ll be fine if we don’t get over-excited. We just have to keep calm and sit it out.”

“Lucia must have a second map,” said Connor. “She must know when to activate that attractor of hers. We should get hold of it.”

“I agree with him,” said Slater suddenly. “You can’t afford to wait. I’ve lived through this once already. She’ll be moving against you by the end of the year if it plays out the same way.”

Helen took a deep breath and looked at her unlikely co-conspirators. “OK, so how do we get hold of this map of hers?”

Connor grinned and wiggled his fingers at her.

“How did you know about this place?” whispered Connor. They were in the echoing chambers of a new build office building. Small open plan offices with five or six desks each opened off a long corridor. The office workers weren’t due in until

the next day, but the computer system was all linked up and there were several generic test accounts on the system.

They'd picked an office at random, one of the ones on the top floor to minimize the risk of their torches being seen from the street.

"Don't ask because I'm not telling you. You sure you can hack into that ARC lab? I thought it was all off Internet."

"Don't ask because I'm not telling you either. Well not any names. I got someone to plug in one of those mobile phone dongles. Chances are it'll get found in the morning. This is our one shot."

Helen nodded curtly. She'd got the security pass, the username and password to one of the test accounts through a university friend who now worked for the company. It hadn't been too difficult. He'd been a little blinded by the celebrity and her suggestions of an old infatuation. Of course, she hadn't told him what it would be for, and things would probably go badly for him once it was all uncovered. She hoped he would be scared enough not to let on that he had given out the information. By then, with luck, it would be too late to stop her changing things.

Without thinking she placed a hand on Connor's shoulder, just as he was about to sit down.

"What?" he asked.

"Have you thought this through?" She hated herself for asking. Why should she care whether Connor understood what he was doing or not. But she had to admit she was curious. She knew how paranoid Nick had been about changing history and how much Connor had hero-worshipped him. Something in her just had to know.

"What? You mean hacking into a highly secret government database? Bit late to ask, don't you think? Yeah, I realise the consequences."

"It won't rescue Abby, not as such, even if I succeed. You realise that?"

Connor looked up at her. It was too dark to read his expression clearly but she thought it was one of slight surprise.

"Yeah, I understand how this works. Well I understand how it doesn't. I'm not sure what will happen to this time line if you go back. But it seems clear to me that Lucia deliberately tampered with things. Putting that back, well, I think it's what... I think it's the right thing."

He'd been going to say it was what Nick would have done. Helen found herself irritated. "Will you come with me?" she asked. It was mostly out of curiosity. It wasn't really a bid to steal his loyalty.

"Nah! I'll stay here. If whatever you do doesn't actually fix this, well, there's no one else to fight Abby's corner."

“What if I ordered you to come with me?”

He looked at her again and then turned back to the screen. “Well, we’d have a problem, but you’re not going to.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Do you have a good reason to make me leave Abby behind?”

“No.”

“Well then, you’re not going to order to do it, are you?”

Helen stared at the back of Connor’s head in surprise. His confidence unnerved her. It was like seeing herself reflected in a distorting mirror. She didn’t recognise the leader Connor thought he saw. She dismissed the thought.

“Let’s make this quick,” she whispered.

Connor snorted. He was already logging into the systems. “I can’t type properly in these latex gloves,” he complained.

“Yes you can, now get on with it.”

Helen didn’t really think a lack of fingerprints would protect Connor. They’d trace the security pass back to her friend eventually. Sooner or later he would admit to handing it out and not long after that he would mention her name. Lucia would then know who did the hacking. However, Helen saw no reason to give Lucia the clues before she had worked for them.

“I’m in,” said Connor.

“That was fast.”

“The machines aren’t supposed to be on the Internet, so the security is more focused on making sure the people who can access them physically have the right clearance.”

“Well they obviously slipped up there. I’m not going to ask how you suborned one of them.”

In the light from the computer screen Connor flushed a startling shade of red which make Helen rapidly re-evaluate the methods available to him, and quite how ruthless he might be prepared to be in order to protect Abby.

Instinctively she reached out and squeezed his arm. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“I hope so. She was nice. I don’t like to think of her getting into trouble.”

Helen turned to look back at the screen. Connor appeared to be searching folders for keywords.

“Got it!” he announced. “Anomaly projection data. I’m downloading it now.”

At that moment the office was suddenly flooded with light.

“Attention! Attention! Lay down your weapons!” A loud voice chimed through the speakers. It sounded like Slater.

Connor quickly glanced at the screen and then pulled out the data stick he'd plugged into the computer and handed it to Helen. Then he swapped in another and started copying the file across again.

"Go!" he whispered. "I'll stay here and pretend it was just me."

Helen took the data stick and ran. As she emerged into the corridor strong hands grabbed her and she found herself shoved into some form of cupboard. It was Slater.

"Stay here," he hissed.

"What?"

"Stay here. I'll cover for you. Your bloody contact tipped Lucia the wink."

The door slammed and she heard footsteps in the corridor. "Looks like they're still in the office," she heard Slater say. "Altogether, guys!"

She heard shouting and then the sound of shots.

When Slater came for her two hours later, Helen very carefully didn't ask what had happened to Connor.

He looked her in the eye. "Can't have anyone who knows I'm talking to you falling into Lucia's hands."

Helen shrugged. It wasn't as if she had cared anyway. Connor had served his purpose. She had the data she needed.

"I'm going to disappear," she said. "How do I contact you?"

Wordlessly he handed over a mobile phone. Then he glanced at his watch. "I'm going to talk to the guard out the back for five minutes. Use your time well."

Then he was gone.

Helen took a deep breath. She could see the logic of his reasoning. She schooled her thoughts back to the old detachment. She was starting to show the kind of weakness Nick had so easily succumbed to. She had the data, she repeated to herself. She didn't need Connor any more.

She checked her watch and then took the emergency stairs back to the ground floor. The whole place felt empty and quiet. Much more so than it had been when she entered. Of course then she had had Connor babbling away in her ear in a whisper. Now she was alone, which was good. Connor attracted too much attention.

She had a small crowbar in her backpack and used it to lever up the bottom of the window. They'd been fitted on the cheap and it popped out of the frame with

ease. Helen slipped out and into one of the generic shrubs that were newly planted in the grounds. She froze as footsteps approached. Two special forces soldiers, invisible in their black uniforms, but fortunately not making the effort to be quiet.

“Was that window levered open before?” she heard one ask.

Helen dropped her face into the ground, unwilling to risk the paleness of her skin or the light reflecting from her eyes. She willed her breathing and heart rate to be long and slow.

“Not sure. I’ll radio the boss.”

Helen listened to a burst of static. “You there, Boss?”

“What is it?” It was Slater’s voice.

“We’ve got an open window here. Someone’s levered it out of the frame.”

“That’ll explain how Helen got out. Go back the way you came and try not to disturb anything. I’ll see if any of the trackers can make something of it.”

“Got you, Boss.”

Helen listened as the soldiers withdrew and then she slithered on through the bushes and down into the small piece of national forestry that sat at the back of the office building.

Helen spent three weeks in a bedsit in Burton-on-Trent. It did not improve her temper. She didn’t dare use credit cards so was reduced to one of the small supplies of cash she still compulsively hid around the country and the tiny netbook that she’d had in her pack on the raid. Its processing power was zero and it didn’t have any of the fancy mapping software the ARC used. She had to figure out a route the old-fashioned way, by hand.

The mental discipline was comforting. Long practice let her work from her notes, and the data on the small stick Connor had thrust into her hands. She worked as she always had, hard and rigorous and careful, enforcing long hours on herself. After three weeks of plotting, watching for patterns to emerge from the tangle of data points, it paid off. A thin skein of opportunity that would take her through the Permian and to the anomaly junction and from there a short hop across the Cretaceous and back five years. It was a dangerous journey and the timing would be tight, but it was all she had.

She opened up the phone Slater had given her and dialled the one number programmed into its memory.

“I’m here.” Slater’s tone was gruff. It warned her to be quick and anonymous.

“I need to get into the basement of an office block, in the Docklands. 10pm, two weeks tomorrow.”

“I’ll arrange it. Text me the address. I’ll meet you there 9.55pm.”

Then he hung up. Helen scowled at the phone and texted the address.

Slater was altogether too confident and was acting way too much like he was in charge. Thoughtfully Helen dialled a second number, one that she had apparently memorised, almost by accident, in six months of summoning a PR guru to handle the public.

Helen watched the office block from a rooftop across the street. It had been done discreetly, but the place had been locked tight all day. The tiny sound of light footsteps her caused her to turn round, reaching for a nonexistent weapon. It was all three Slaters, anonymous in black combat fatigues. They were grim-faced and armed. They looked like an army, ugly and ruthless.

“Thinking I’d betrayed you?” asked the eldest.

“The thought had crossed my mind? What’s going on down there?”

“I’m guessing you’re not the only person who can plot a map with that anomaly data. Lucia has had the place locked up tight.”

Helen considered her options. She had no more information than Lucia did. Any route she could find, Lucia could find as well. “There won’t be any better opportunities. Is Lester still in charge of the armed response to anomalies?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t count on the loyalty of the soldiers down there.”

“But he can send in a team, once the anomaly opens. A team consisting of the three of you and someone from the science team.”

“I don’t trust Lester.”

“I do.” Helen turned to look down at the building, pleased to have the upper hand in this conversation, “Besides, it is already done.”

“You didn’t have to come in person.” Helen complained when she met up with Lester.

His mouth was drawn in a small tight line. “Sometimes you have to throw all your resources into one last ditch attempt.”

Wordlessly Jenny held out a bag. “Disguise,” she said shortly. “Wig, glasses and some mouth pads. They’ve got facial recognition. You need to distort your features.”

“Keep in the middle of the group,” advised Slater.

“Anomaly’s been open half an hour,” said Helen. “Shall we go?”

They moved as a unit towards the entrance to the office block. Lester and Jenny walked in front, Helen was in the middle, the three Slaters surrounded her. Jenny was on the phone. Helen realised she was going through the motions of organising an anomaly response.

They marched up to the doorway. “Anomaly response team!” Jenny flashed a dangerous smile. “You’re to let us in to check the anomaly. I’ve got the Home Secretary on the phone.” She handed the mobile over to the guard on the door.

Moments later they were in. “We don’t have long,” said Jenny quietly. “Lucia will find out sooner or later that I’ve been by-passing her. Probably sooner.”

“Sooner,” said Slater. “The search and destroy has just come over the military channel.”

“Careless of them to broadcast the fact,” muttered Lester.

“We’re not going anywhere.”

Helen shrugged. “Let’s get to the basement. Once we’re through the anomaly things change.”

“Only if Lucia hasn’t got a reception party waiting for you,” observed Lester.

“Unlikely, I’m working from the same map she is. No real way for her to get people there, unless she had this planned from six months back.”

“I wish I had your faith.”

Helen had no answer to that. She had always maintained that faith was a psychological prop for the weak-willed. She wondered, briefly, if Lester knew that, but couldn’t tell from the back of his head.

The narrow staircase they were descending opened out into a cramped corridor.

“Where from here?” asked Slater.

Helen switched on her anomaly detector. “No signal,” she reported anxiously.

“It’s a trap!” said Slater.

Helen took a deep breath. “Unlikely, Lucia would have had to have been psychic to plant that particular information at just the right time. Chances are the information from her father is inaccurate. We give it a little longer.”

“No wonder they put out the search and destroy so quickly,” muttered Jenny. “I just bluffed our way into a nonexistent anomaly.”

“Lucia was flushing out her enemies,” said Lester drily. “How resourceful of her.”

“So she did have this planned,” said Slater. “We should fight our way out.”

“No, Helen’s right. She’s good, but not that good.” Lester’s tone of authority was absolute. “She’s just capitalising on the miss-step. We can still do this. We need to delay the soldiers. I want a plan. Slater?”

“Two staircases,” said Slater. “If we’re sure we’re not going anywhere except through the anomaly, I can bring them down.”

Lester’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re carrying explosives?”

“I like to be prepared.”

Helen nodded. “Do it! Let’s buy ourselves as much time as we can.”

The Slaters proved to be remarkably well prepared. In less than five minutes both staircases were piles of so much rubble, one of which conveniently blocked the entrance to the corridor. Even once the special forces abseiled down that hole they wouldn’t be able to get in.

“What happens now?” asked Jenny.

“Standard protocol would be to sit tight upstairs and wait for us to try to negotiate our way out,” observed Lester.

“Lucia doesn’t have time to wait on standard protocol,” said Helen.

“I’m aware of that, yes. I anticipate it will be messy. Captain Slater, I would appreciate it if I could borrow some of your extensive armoury. I notice you are carrying *two* M4s which seems a little excessive.”

Slater frowned and then handed over the gun. “Do you know how to use this thing?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I’ve had some training too,” said Jenny suddenly. “Clay pigeon shooting and I’ve been practicing small arms.”

This time Slater just nodded and produced a small Glock from his belt. Jenny checked it over with an alarming degree of professionalism. Helen admired her calm and efficiency. She really should have made more use of Jenny.

Slater looked upwards. Helen followed his gaze and then realised he was listening. The sounds of booted feet up above them and shouted orders had changed. Slater glanced at one of his younger selves and nodded. The man nipped into the

remaining stairwell. There was a burst of automatic weapons' fire and then he returned.

"They're going to abseil down. I can't get a clear shot."

Helen looked at her detector, the dials were beginning to swing. "An anomaly is opening. I think Lucia's father was an hour out."

"Where is it?" asked Lester.

Helen swung the detector in an arc around her and watched as the dials juddered and jerked. "In there, I think." She gestured to a small room.

"The anomaly's not open yet though?" asked Jenny.

"No, there's obviously some additional activity before one opens that these detectors can pick up."

"Connor would have been fascinated," observed Lester.

Helen glanced at him sharply. Lester was staring hard at the eldest Slater who just shrugged and said, "I couldn't afford to have him shooting his mouth off."

Looking at the expression on Jenny's face, Helen concluded she was going to have a tough time preventing her team from killing each other on their way back through history.

"Right," said Slater. "Everyone into the room. We'll barricade ourselves in. That'll buy us more time."

"Not enough," said Lester. "I think I'll stay out here."

"What?" Helen was brought up short.

"Two layer defence. First they have to get down the corridor and then into the room." Lester kicked over one of the filing cabinets propped against the walls. "I'll use this for cover."

"The anomaly will open any minute. There's no point in needless heroics." Helen had thought better of Lester than this.

"The anomaly is no good to you if Lucia's forces come through it seconds after you do. Unless you think you can order Slater here to stay behind, you're out of options, Helen."

Helen looked at the eldest Slater.

"You've got a volunteer," he said. "You don't need me. But he's right. Someone needs to lay covering fire down the corridor. Preferably two someones."

There was a sharp silence. Helen realised that the Slaters were looking at Jenny. The battle of wills was palpable. She had two prehistoric periods to walk through, at high speed. Jenny was in heels and the Slaters were armed soldiers.

"Jenny, can you stay too?"

Jenny turned and glared at her.

“Please,” Helen found herself saying and realised, with a shock, that the request was genuine.

“You’d better take this,” Slater handed Jenny a second M4.

Jenny took it and she stalked right up to Helen, staring her hard in the eye. “Don’t fail,” was all she said.

“I promise.”

“Anomaly’s open!” shouted the youngest Slater.

“Time to go!” the eldest grabbed Helen’s arm and began to steer her into the room. She shrugged off the touch. She was in control of this situation. It was all going according to plan. She didn’t need Jenny, or Lester.

The anomaly hung glittering before them. Helen didn’t look back as she went through, the three Slaters on her heels.

“Why are you staying?” Jenny couldn’t help asking as she crouched uncomfortably beside Lester.

“Running away never suited me. Some of this mess is my responsibility.”

Jenny considered that. “How much good are we really going to do here?”

“We buy time. That’s really all we can do. Do you mind if I ask why you’re helping? It surprises me that you’re assisting in an attempt to change history, given your background.”

“What if Helen changes history and brings Claudia back? Someone how I doubt she’ll try that.”

Lester’s chuckle was dry. “She isn’t as sure of what she’s doing as she let’s on.”

There was a sound of shouting and booted feet coming from the stairwell. Jenny aimed the M4 at the entrance and sighted along it.

“If Helen finds either a Claudia Brown or a Jenny Lewis back there then I hope whichever of them she meets will give her a run for her money.”

Lester smiled thinly. “I have no doubt they will.”

Then there was a crash and the door at the end of the corridor fell off its hinges, in a cloud of smoke and dust.

“Let’s buy some time then,” said Jenny. As the first dim shape emerged through the haze, she placed a finger on the trigger and opened fire.

2006

The sniper rifle was a sleek and dangerous looking piece of equipment. Helen had been practicing with it for weeks and it still sent strange shivers through her. It was something about the distance and the impersonality of it. She was used to fighting up close and personal, ruthless but direct, where you could see the pain and the blood. She'd examined her reactions to the gun with anthropological interest and had now them filed away for later consideration. They wouldn't be allowed to affect her actions.

"Here she is, right on time," said Slater. He stood at her elbow, disapproving rather obviously of her decision to take the shot herself.

Helen sighted down the gun at Lucia Wright as she crossed the road from the tube station. She was on her way to be briefed by Sir James Lester, Home Office, on the ramifications of events in the Forest of Dean. This was where it had all started.

Lucia paused outside a newsagents', waiting in a line. Maybe she was buying a paper or perhaps she had a secret smoking vice. It was the perfect shot. Helen lined up carefully. She placed her finger on the trigger. If she took this shot everything would turn out right... probably. Nick would survive. Stephen wouldn't have to take over the team. They would never become her team. Abby would never show those small moments of gratitude and understanding. Connor would never look at her with those irritating puppy dog eyes, wanting direction. Jenny would never treat her with that calm respect that masked steadfast enmity. She'd never won Jenny over, now she wouldn't get the chance. There would be no mornings in James Lester's office drinking tea in unspoken understanding of their position.

"You going to take the shot or not?" asked Slater.

Helen pulled the trigger. She hadn't wanted a team anyway. It wasn't as if she had *liked* them. She watched Lucia fall and the crowd begin to panic, but she was already moving rapidly away. They had an anomaly to reach before the police caught up with them.

2010

When Lucia Wright, following angrily and swiftly behind her men stepped over the bodies and into the small storage space, it was just in time to see the anomaly stutter and wink out of existence.

Then time twisted and folded.

Feet came running.

"Aww! It's gone. I almost had the signal."

"Not to worry, lad. It's almost bound to have been down in the lower levels somewhere. Lieutenant Lyle, I'm going to check down there. I imagine you'll

insist on coming with me.”

The voices echoed down the stair wells. Sightless eyes stared up at the ceiling, deaths already ravelling away into nothing.

“You bet, Professor.”

“And remember...”

“You don’t have to remind me. Don’t harm anything, unless I have too. Ditzzy, take the second team and check the other staircase.”

The sounds bounced off the walls. There were no signs of a struggle or a fight. No footprints in the dust. The filing cabinet was back in its place against the wall.

“Abby, Connor, go with them and be careful.”

When the two teams swept through the basement there was nothing of interest to be seen.