

The Night Before Christmas

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Chapter 1

The Night Before Christmas

A Primeval Short Story

1.1 PART 1

Jenny put down the phone. She stared blankly through the glass walls of her office and sighed tiredly. She rubbed her temples and looked up at the clock. Pretty much bang on the stroke of midnight.

“Happy Christmas,” she said to herself.

She opened her email and sent a quick note to Lester who was still around, waiting for the crisis to be resolved: `all sorted`. She logged out, conscientiously switching off the monitor and glanced at her watch once more. Coffee, she decided, if only to keep her awake until she got home. She gathered up her coat and bag and headed out of the office. She paused a moment on the upper walkway of the central area, christened “the drum”. Down below her the screens of Connor’s anomaly detector glowed in the dimmed lights. On the far side the garage doors, as usual, stood propped open. They spent too much time ferrying large equipment from the garage to the drum. She made a mental note to chase up what was happening about getting a remote control system for them. She headed down the long corridor to the common room.

The lights inside were on. An attempt had been made to decorate it with a plastic Christmas tree in one corner and a string of Christmas lights above it. A slightly sorry selection of Christmas cards were perched on top of the TV screen. She was surprised to find Abby seated on one of the sofas, playing Grand Theft Auto with a bored expression on her face.

“You’re here a bit late,” she observed.

“You too.” Abby glanced up.

“PR crisis. Breakfast TV got wind of that anklyosaurus incursion last week and were going to run something on it as a ‘ha! ha! good cheer on Christmas morning’ piece. Thank God I have contacts who got wind of it. I’ve spent all evening persuading them that, however amusing some west country peasant seeing an anklyosaurus sounds, what they actually saw is subject to a D-Notice and we’d appreciate it if nothing was made of the situation.” Jenny shook her head.

She walked into the small kitchen and switched on the coffee machine.

“Want a coffee?” she called, pulling two mugs down from the cupboard.

Through the door Jenny saw Abby glance at the screen. It looked like she’d just crashed. Abby made a disgusted noise and dumped the controller on the chair beside her. “Yes, please,” she said.

“So why are you still here?” Jenny asked.

“Connor needs a lift home.”

“And you waited until midnight?” Jenny was impressed despite herself.

“No. I went out for a drink with Kermit, Blade and a couple of the others and told Connor I’d be back at closing time for him. He’s writing some paper with Cutter, apparently it needs one more draft but they’ll definitely send it off then.”

“When did they tell you this?” Jenny looked at her watch again.

“About twenty minutes ago. I’m giving him another ten and then he’s getting the bus, or Cutter can take him.”

“What’s the rush on the paper anyway?”

“Cutter’s going to the States on Boxing Day. A big dig out in North Dakota or somewhere and it’s Connor’s family Christmas tomorrow. We both have a three line whip to attend. So this is their last chance to work on it together before the deadline.”

“You’re meeting Connor’s parents?”

“It’s not what you think.”

Jenny was about to reply when she heard the distinctive sound of a safety catch being removed. Twelve months ago she wouldn’t have recognised it but now it was instantly and unmistakably familiar. Through the door she saw Abby stiffen.

“Come out of there!” called a voice. It had a Russian accent.

Cautiously, Jenny walked out of the kitchen. There were two figures in the doorway, both dressed in black, both wearing balaclavas. They had guns pointed at Jenny and Abby. Jenny raised her hands. Abby did likewise. The smaller of the figures gestured with the gun.

“On the sofa. Keep your hands visible.”

Jenny moved carefully to sit next to Abby. The man who had spoken lowered his gun and began talking quietly into a headset. The other kept them covered.

“Who are you?” challenged Abby.

The short man glanced up but neither spoke. When he’d finished speaking to his unseen companions he glanced at his friend.

“We keep them here.”

Minutes later they were joined by two more figures herding Connor, Cutter and Lester into the common room. Lester had a look of weary resignation on his face. Jenny watched their captors, fascinated. Stripped of identifiable faces it was still easy to see that one of the newcomers was in charge. It was partly the way the others deferred to him but there was also something powerful and confident in his movements. She closed her eyes, briefly picturing Lyle and Stringer, the Special Forces Captains who worked on the project, trying to see if, in her memories and stripped of their familiar faces, they moved with the same sense of total command in the field. It was impossible to tell. She knew them too well to be sure. The other newcomer was a woman. A tall, thin woman, a head higher than the leader of the group.

“What’s going on?” Abby hissed at Lester.

“Espionage,” he said shortly. “Fortunately it appears they don’t want a mess so I suggest we all sit here quietly until they’ve finished whatever it is they’re doing.”

Jenny glanced up at the armed figures in the doorway then looked back at Lester.

“Who’s on duty?” she asked quietly.

“Lyle and Lacey,” he said shortly, “who are hopefully both tucked up in bed. They’re only supposed to be here so we can get a head start shipping equipment if an anomaly is detected. They shouldn’t be patrolling the corridors.”

The lead captor stepped forward.

“Do you civilians realise what time it is?” His accent was pure London.

Lester raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry if my staff’s dedication to their jobs has interfered with your plans.”

The soldier gave an exaggerated sigh. “One at a time, you are going to empty your pockets of any phones, PDAs and other electronic devices. Then you’ll be searched.” He gestured at Jenny. “You first.”

Carefully she pulled out her mobile phone and put it on the table. Then looked up at him.

“Stand up,” he said. “Computers, search her.”

The woman stepped forward. Jenny was quickly and efficiently patted down and her keys were removed and checked over before being dropped on the table

alongside her phone.

“She’s clear,” reported ‘Computers’ in an American accent.

One by one the process was repeated. The collected phones, PDAs, Connor’s ‘classic retro’ handheld, keys, iPods and blackberrys were dumped in a bin liner and then put in Computers’ backpack. The internal phone line and ethernet cable were severed and the keyboard removed from the computer that sat in the corner of the room. Once the leader was satisfied there was no way to contact the outside world from within the common room he turned back to Jenny.

“OK. You’re coming with me and Computers. The rest of you stay here.”

“Wait a minute!” Cutter was on his feet. Several guns jerked upwards.

“Cutter.” There was a note of warning in Lester’s voice. “Is it really necessary to take Miss Lewis with you?” he asked the leader.

“Fraid so,” said the man. “No one does anything stupid. No one comes to any harm. Let’s keep this as simple as possible.”

“I’ll be fine,” Jenny said, placing a hand on Cutter’s arm.

Slowly he sat down again.

“OK,” she said brightly. “Where to?”

“Out!” said the soldier. Carefully, holding her head high, she walked out the door of the common room, mindful of the armed man and woman behind her.

“Where *are* we going?” she asked once they were in the corridor.

“Server room,” said the American woman.

Two corridors lead away from the drum, one above the other. On the ground floor was the infirmary, followed by the server room, a small dormitory for the duty team and lastly the armoury. The upper corridor had the main laboratory, then the common room. In between, there were a number of empty spaces and store rooms. The ARC was built to allow for expansion. There was a stairwell halfway along the corridor which allowed access between the two floors without going all the way to the drum. Jenny headed for this.

The server room was horribly cluttered. Computers were stacked on racks with wires running to and from them. There were a couple of workstations and terminals. Connor had, early on, set up his domain in here where he could spread his stuff over the already cluttered desks and machines without anyone like Lester really noticing. His coat hung on the back of the door and his bag was on the floor under a table.

“OK,” said the man as they entered. “Sit on the floor next to that radiator. Get to it, Computers.”

The woman sniffed but opened her backpack, extracting a laptop and what looked like several external hard drives. She started plugging them together and into the system. She checked Connor’s machine.

“Ah!” she sounded pleased. “Someone hasn’t logged out.”

Jenny sat on the floor and the man crouched in front of her, holding a pair of handcuffs. He wrapped one end round her left wrist and attached the other to the pipes leading to the radiator.

“Sorry about this,” he said. “But it’ll stop you trying anything stupid.”

Behind him, Computers was typing away at the keyboard. He turned round to look at her.

“How long?” he asked.

“Given I’ve got access to the system? Not long. Looks like they’ve been relying on the lack of any connection to the outside world to act as their security for them. Now we’re in, we’re in.”

“Good,” said the man. He turned back to Jenny. “You’ll all be home in time for your presents.”

“Really?” Jenny allowed her scepticism to show. She couldn’t imagine this was going to end well.

“Really. We’ve no interest in harming civilians.”

Behind him, the Computers woman snorted.

“And that does include you,” he said over his shoulder.

“So why separate me from the others?” asked Jenny.

“Insurance, they’re less likely to try anything stupid if there’s a risk I’ll shoot you if they do... and vice versa of course.”

“And if they do do something stupid?” Jenny couldn’t help asking. “Would you shoot me?”

“Yes,” he said.

She shivered where she sat and believed him. Although she kept telling herself it was just the balaclava, this squat powerful looking man exuded a sense of danger.

“You shouldn’t talk to her, you know,” said the woman from where she sat. “It’ll complicate matters.”

“Who put you in charge?” he asked.

“You don’t have any authority over me, soldier boy.”

“Yeah but I’m sure your superiors don’t want me reporting that you were unhelpful. It is *supposed* to be a joint mission.”

“Oh very good!” the woman said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Let the hostage know there’s two organisations involved.”

Jenny watched with interest as the man in front of her tensed up but he didn’t do anything. Instead he adopted a casual pose, legs slightly apart, cradling his gun. She got the impression he wasn’t planning to go anywhere fast. She decided against further conversation. Her captors weren’t exactly relaxed. But the leader had been at pains to reassure her that everything would be all right so long as things went smoothly, and keeping quiet was probably the best way to ensure that. The minutes on the clock ticked passed. Tiredness overtook her once more and she leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. It began to get distinctly uncomfortable on the floor, especially with the radiator pipes digging into her back. She wriggled and tried changing position.

“Uncomfortable?” asked the man.

“A little,” she confessed.

He looked around the room. “I can’t offer you a cushion,” he apologised.

“I’ll survive.”

They waited a few more minutes.

“You done yet?” he asked the woman.

“Almost,” she said. She picked up her backpack and started rummaging through it, moving towards him. “Do something useful, why don’t you. Grab that printer off that shelf.” She pointed to where a broken printer had been unceremoniously dumped. He put down his gun, sadly out of Jenny’s reach, and picked it up.

“This?” he asked, “why?”

The woman was standing right behind him now and she deftly slipped one hand to his waist and removed the holstered pistol.

“So you’d put down the gun.” The woman dropped her rucksack and stepped back. She was holding what Jenny recognised as a tranquilliser pistol of the kind Abby favoured in one hand and his pistol in the other. She shot the tranquilliser right at him. He dropped the printer and reached for his gun, but the woman kicked the table it was on and it fell to the floor, out of his reach. He staggered towards her, swinging a fist but she ducked and edged round the room towards the door. He moved to follow but his knees buckled under him and he fell to the floor just in front of Jenny. The woman grunted in satisfaction.

“Got a vein,” she said. “Always nice when these things are simple.”

“What did you do?” Jenny asked.

“Shot him with a dose of Med and Ket,” said the woman. She put the man’s pistol on one of the tables and started tidying up the laptop and hard drives into

her bag. Then she began unpacking what looked suspiciously like explosives and fitting them round the room.

“If you’re going to blow us up why didn’t you just shoot him?” asked Jenny.

“Wouldn’t want anyone upstairs to hear now, would I?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Let’s say my superiors have a slightly different set of priorities than his and very explicit instructions about what to do if anyone sees us. But, to be honest, they had a far better idea of what was going on here from the start, much better than his lot did.”

“Oliver Leek?” asked Jenny.

The woman shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care. I’ve got your data. I have my orders and I’m out of here.” She placed a small clock-like device on the desk where Jenny could see it. Wires ran from it to the explosives taped around the room. It read 9:57 but was counting down. She hit the return key on Connor’s computer and turned the monitor round to face Jenny. Its counter started at 5:00.

“Goodbye,” she said and shut the door.

1.2 PART 2

Jenny sat still a moment, calming her breathing and making sure the woman had a chance to get out of earshot. Then she sprawled forwards towards the man on the floor. By stretching out both arms she could just reach her free hand to his waist and she began feeling in his pockets for the key to the handcuffs. They were empty but there were further pockets in his tac vest. After a bit of a struggle she managed to hook one leg round him and pulling at his arm with her hand she rolled him onto his back. She found the key and hurriedly released the handcuffs.

“Med and Ket,” the woman had said. It was the standard tranquilliser the ARC personnel used, and Ditzzy, their medic, had them all supplied with the antidote and trained to administer it. She groped for Connor’s bag under the table and glanced up at the countdowns. The computer read 0:30 and she hesitated. The countdown so clearly tied to the explosives read 5:27 but she had no idea what the computer countdown was for.

She looked at the comatose figure on the floor. She could leave him to die. No one would blame her. She looked at the computer clock again. It definitely wasn’t the explosives. She started to rummage through Connor’s bag for the antidote. She couldn’t help pausing, however, to watch the countdown roll over to 0. All around her alarms went off.

Nick sat and fidgeted in the common room. He'd have got up and paced around except that the not-so-nice men in balaclavas had made it clear that they disapproved of standing up. Lester sat calmly on the sofa, staring into the middle distance. Connor and Abby had talked together in low voices for a bit and then, to Nick's amazement, had both fallen asleep on each other's shoulders. He sat playing with his hands and wishing he knew how to make his knuckles crack in an irritating fashion, if only to see Lester wince as he did it.

Suddenly alarms sounded loudly throughout the building. Connor and Abby both woke up with a start. Lester's lips pursed into a thin line. His hands, which had been resting on his knees, moved down carefully so they were braced on the edge of the sofa. Nick caught his eye. Had Lyle done something stupid? He had to be around somewhere.

"That's the open cages alarm!" said Connor.

"The what?" asked Nick.

"Open cages. If the locks fail on any cages then an alarm sounds and the building is sealed."

"Sealed?"

"Steel shutters over all the exits, though the main one can be opened manually."

"That would be the main one past the garage and the underground corridor with all the cages?"

Connor nodded.

Nick glared at Lester. "Who designed this place!"

Lester pursed his lips, "In the event of the animals getting out the first priority is to contain them and protect the public."

"But the main entrance?"

"That may have been an oversight."

Nick looked across at their captors. One of them was radioing anxiously while the other had the gun pointed in their direction. Very slowly Lester stood up.

"Gentlemen, it appears we have a problem."

"Sit down!" said the one pointing the gun at them. Nick mentally dubbed him 'the Russian'.

Lester folded his arms. "It appears at least one of the cages is open, which means very soon there will be at least one dangerous animal on the loose. If you have any idea what this place is for, then you will have a good idea just how dangerous that animal is likely to be." Lester paused for effect. "I take it that

opening the cages was not a part of your plan and that you can't contact the other half of your team."

"I said sit down."

Lester didn't budge. "I have two combat trained staff members in the dormitory downstairs. I assume you disabled them before you found us."

The Russian brought the gun to bear directly on Lester but his companion placed a hand on his arm.

"We locked them in. Doesn't mean they didn't get out and start this." Nick realised it was the first time this man had spoken. His accent was Italian.

"Captain Lyle may be a little hot-headed but he isn't a fool," retorted Lester. "I can't think of anything he'd do which would cause the cages to open."

"Without the door codes, you'd need to hack through a lot of computer security to do that," put in Connor.

Lester spared him a quick glance before turning back to the two men. "Which would rather seem to point the finger at your American friend, assuming her code name had any meaning."

Nick was fascinated to see the two men exchange an uneasy glance.

"I take it you don't entirely trust her," said Lester. "So let's assume for a moment that you've been royally stitched up by, let me guess," he paused for effect, "ooh! seems like the sort of thing the CIA might get up to. How am I doing?"

The confident stance of their captors was deteriorating rapidly. Nick had never really watched Lester go to work like this. He wondered if, between them, Jenny and Lester couldn't have talked them all out of the situation an hour ago. Thinking of Jenny, the theoretical CIA double-cross, and the incommunicado second team made his blood run suddenly cold.

"What about Jenny?" he asked. "She's with the other two."

He stood up. This time no one pointed a gun at him.

"We'll just have to hope she can get to safety," said Lester quietly. He raised his voice, "I suspect we have very little time to get out of here."

"What do you suggest?" asked the Italian.

"The dormitory is right next to the armoury and Lyle will be able to let you in. Those guns you're currently carrying will only be of limited use against some of the animals which might be along shortly. I'd like to suggest we form two parties. One heads for the armoury, collects Captain Lyle and Private Lacey, and acquires suitable weaponry. The other heads for the nearest lab with a working computer. We automatically close any open cages preventing any animals, which have not

already done so, from escaping. We notify the relevant authorities and unseal the exits in this part of the building allowing both groups to escape.”

“Who did you have in mind for each party?” asked the Italian.

“We should have an expert with both groups, that’s Connor and his laptop if it’s around - ”

“In the lab next door,” said Connor.

Lester gave a slight nod, “ - and Professor Cutter. I have the main security access codes so I’ll close the cages and open the doors. I suggest we divide equally apart from that.”

“Most of the creatures will be in the tunnel,” said Nick, “and they’ll have to come through the drum to get to this area. I’ll come with you. Once you’re done we can head into the drum. If we shut the garage doors we can trap most of them in the tunnel. We may even be able to lure any that have got out into the garage.”

Lester nodded. “Miss Maitland goes with Mr. Temple then. And you?” he looked at their two captors with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll come with you,” said the Italian. “You with the others.”

The Russian nodded and gestured to Connor and Abby with his gun.

Captain Lyle was woken from a deep sleep by the sudden blaring of the alarm. He sprang up, swearing, and reached for the light switch. His thumbs itched. He blinked in the glare of the small dorm and reached for his clothes.

“That’s not the anomaly alarm,” said Lacey from the next cubicle.

He realised she was right. The last vestiges of sleep had prevented him registering the unfamiliarity of the noise.

“That’s the creature escape alarm,” he said.

“Fuck!” returned Lacey.

“Indeed.” He hurriedly pulled on the rest of his clothes.

“Armoury first,” he decided. “Then we check the cages.”

Private Lacey appeared. She was wearing light combat fatigues, her wavy nut-brown hair pulled up into a pony tail. Lyle put his hand on the handle of the dormitory door and pulled only to realise it was locked.

“What the fuck!” he said. He pulled it again.

“It’s locked?” asked Lacey. “Seriously?”

Lyle shrugged and fished his key out of his pocket, slipping it into the lock only to realise it wouldn’t go. He bent down and peered at it.

“Someone’s jammed something in the lock,” he said. “Looks like we’re dealing with foul play.”

He stood back and aimed a kick at the lock and then another.

“Door opens inwards,” observed Lacey.

“Fuck!” Lyle swore again. “Pass me my rucksack,” as an idea dawned, “it’s got my caving gear in.”

“Planning a dirty weekend soon as we get off duty?” asked Lacey as she handed it over.

“Too right, Private.”

He rummaged through the pack and extracted a hammer and chisel. He started above the door handle and whacked the chisel as hard as he could. It bit deep into the wood. He moved along and repeated the process.

“Be out of here in five minutes,” he said.

Jenny found the antidote pack at the bottom of Connor’s bag. She still had three minutes. There wasn’t much time but she needed to see this man’s face. Quickly, she pulled the balaclava off his head and then paused. He was completely bald. His face was squarish, not unhandsome, and a pale brown colour. Jenny thought of Al Qaeda and hesitated over the antidote. Then with a slightly sick feeling, realising she wouldn’t have stopped had he been white, she plunged the needle into his arm and prayed that he wasn’t a dangerous and psychotic terrorist. Almost at once he blinked and sat up. She’d forgotten about the pistol but as she reached for it he moved, swiftly and suddenly, so she found herself looking down its barrel.

“Don’t move,” he said.

“I hate to break it to you,” she returned, “but your colleague has rigged this room with explosives. If you can defuse them then I suggest you do so quickly.”

She saw his eyes flicker round the room. The digital clock read 0:26. Almost immediately he was on his feet, dragging Jenny after him. Before she had time to register properly what was happening he had caught up his rifle from the floor and was bundling her through the server room door. She could hear him counting under his breath. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the corridor a few yards towards the drum before suddenly pulling her into his arms and dropping them both to the floor with her beneath him.

“Two, one, zero,” he murmured into her ear.

There was a loud explosion behind them. The alarms silenced and the lights went off.

1.3 PART 3

Nick watched as Lester switched on the lab computer.

“What’s the plan?”

“I override the lockdown on the side door by the armoury. I relock the cages, if possible. I email the bloody army and get them here poste-haste.”

“What about phoning?”

“I imagine they’ve thought of that.”

Nick picked up a phone on a nearby desk. Silence. He put the receiver back down and glared at the Italian with the gun. The man shrugged helplessly.

The computer made the familiar chiming sound as Windows started up. Lester drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk as icons gradually populated the screen. Once it was up and running he pulled up a program Nick didn’t recognise and typed in some sort of IP address, his username and a password.

“What are you doing?” asked Nick.

“Logging into the server that controls all the building systems.”

There was another wait. Nick watched impatiently as the little egg timer on the screen rotated cheerfully at them.

“Ah ha!” said Lester as some sort of GUI popped up.

At that moment there was a rumbling sound underneath them. The lights went out. Lester’s monitor went blank. He swore.

Lyle had just finished knocking out the lock when there was the sound of an explosion nearby and they were plunged into darkness and silence.

“What now?” asked Lacey.

“Wait for the emergency lights,” he said. “At least the alarms have stopped.”

Slowly a dim red light filled the room. Lacey hadn’t really even registered the emergency lights before, but now she saw one in each corner of the dorm. Lyle pulled open the door and they stepped out.

Lacey drew in a sharp breath. Facing them were several dog-like creatures, about three foot long with short snouts and long bodies. The one closest wagged its tail but not, she thought, in a terribly friendly fashion.

Jenny felt the man sit up and cautiously she raised her head. He was speaking into the radio headset. Looking back down the corridor in the red glow of the emergency lighting, she could see the door of the server room, propped up against the far wall. It had obviously been blown clean off its hinges.

“Sazanov! Castellini! Come in please.” He glanced at her. “What happened?” he asked. “Make it quick.”

Jenny shrugged. “Your friend shot you with a tranquilliser dart, then rigged up the explosives.” She hesitated, “Before that she set up the computer to do something. I think she’s let the creatures out.”

The man gave her a hard look while listening to a voice in his ear. “I’m fine. What’s your situation? It’s all FUBAR here. Anderson’s hung us out to dry.”

He listened for a moment or two, apparently getting reports from his subordinates.

“Better put this Lester chap on, Castellini. Sounds like I should talk to him.”

Then he winced and pulled the receiver from his ear. Jenny could hear Nick’s voice, tiny and tinny, emanating from it.

“Is Jenny all right? Let us speak to her!”

Her captor held the earpiece and microphone between them. It meant Jenny had to lean in close to speak or listen. He smelled of the same aftershave Lyle used.

“I’m fine.” She spoke into the mic. “A little bruised and dusty but otherwise fine.”

“If you could calm down now, Professor,” came Lester’s acid voice.

“Who am I talking to?” asked Lester.

“Captain Sayed. I understand you have a proposal for co-operation.”

“I do, Captain. Judging by the international flavour of your little team I’d say you’re a UNIT detachment. I also gather your American colleague has deserted you. CIA, I presume.”

“No comment.”

“Well, let me make a couple more guesses. You had a different computing officer lined up and they were injured at the last moment. The CIA generously offered a replacement in return for the intelligence which C19 has been so obstructively refusing to let us share with UNIT for the past year. How am I doing?”

Sayed curled his hand round the mouthpiece.

“He’s good, your boss,” he commented.

“He’s right?”

“I didn’t say that, but he makes intelligent guesses.”

Jenny pondered this. She knew about UNIT, an international force for handling the wierd and unexplained. They’d been pestering Lester for information for months. However, the ARC fell under the aegis of C19, part of the British Intelligence service and C19 had been very clear that nothing was to be shared. She’d heard Lester mutter several times that there would be trouble. It looked like he’d been right.

Sayed opened his hand. “Is this getting us anywhere?”

“Your erstwhile colleague has opened some, if not all, of the cages. If you didn’t know already, you will shortly discover that these contained a number of extremely dangerous creatures. If we all want to get out of here alive we need to work together.”

“Agreed.”

“I was going to open the back door but our server seems to have gone down. Also your friend’s handiwork, I presume. This means we have to get out the front entrance and, as Professor Cutter has pointed out at length, due to a design flaw this is located at the opposite end of the menagerie from ourselves.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Professor Cutter, your man Castellini, and I will attempt to secure a route to the garage on the far side of the drum. You should be just down the corridor from the other group. Link up with them, collect weapons and then make your way here. We’ll grab a truck and drive through the tunnel to the entrance.”

“Agreed.”

Sayed put the headset back on and looked at her.

“Miss Lewis?” he asked. Jenny nodded. “Thank you for saving my life. Many wouldn’t have.”

“Lucky it was me, then.”

He nodded and held out his hand. “Captain Hamza Sayed.”

She looked pointedly at it and didn’t respond. “OK,” he said, “fair enough. Shall we head for these friends of yours?”

“Good doggies,” said Lyle. There was a growling sound. “According to Cutter,” he murmured, “these dog things like to ambush their prey.”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

“Pop back into the dorm and look in the fridge. I left some bacon in there for breakfast tomorrow. I’m going to stay here, staring down our friends.”

Lacey ducked back into the dormitory to the small kitchen at the far end. There was, indeed, bacon in the fridge. She fished it out and tore the pack open with her teeth as she returned to Lyle. He took it from her.

“You know the store room down there.” He nodded down the corridor.

“Yes,” said Lacey.

“Open the door, will you?”

Lacey moved across the corridor. Lyle picked a rasher of bacon out of the pack and waved it at the dogs. Carefully he backed towards her. The pack followed. Suddenly the lead dog leaped at the bacon.

“Jesus!” swore Lyle, letting go of it quickly. He backed up hurriedly next to Lacey. The dog tossed the bacon up slightly and then gobbled it down. Lyle fished out a second rasher, waved it around and then hurriedly tossed it into the store room. The lead dog moved cautiously to the door, but paused on the threshold.

“Good dog!” murmured Lyle and tossed another rasher over its head into the room. The dog moved inside. The others moved to follow. Lyle tossed yet another rasher over their heads and further into the store room. There was a bit of a scrabble as they surged forward. Quickly he shut the door.

“Armoury,” he said.

“Lyle! Lacey!”

Lacey looked up the corridor to see Temple and Maitland running towards them. There was someone behind them she couldn’t make out in the emergency lights.

“What’s going on?” demanded Lyle.

Temple shrugged. “Men in masks, alarms, boom! Lights go out.”

Maitland shot him an irritated look and stepped aside to reveal an armed man in a balaclava behind her. “Lester says it’s espionage,” she explained, “and not to do anything stupid. Lester’s trying to organise a way out. We’re supposed to be getting more weapons, and we’re *supposed*,” she shot the man behind her a hard look, “to all be working together.”

“Under protest,” said the man with a thick Russian accent, “and I’m in charge.”

Lyle’s mouth twitched dangerously. “Really?” he said.

Nick paused at the upper entrance to the drum and peered cautiously out. There wasn’t anything on the upper levels but he could see their rhamphorhynchus circling up near the ceiling.

“See that?” he asked.

Castellini nodded and trained his gun on it.

“Leave it,” whispered Nick. “Hopefully it won’t be interested in us.”

Behind him he heard Lester snort. Nick crawled forward and peered through the glass walkway. Below him was a scene of chaos. A large ankylosaurus was thrashing about in some kind of panic. Circling it, at a cautious distance, were several velociraptors. He could hear the sound of the Mammoth bellowing, but couldn’t actually see it. Hopefully it was still in its cage. Connor’s anomaly detector was in pieces in the centre of the floor.

“Any suggestions?” asked Lester.

“You’d better tell the others to take the upper route to the drum,” Nick said to Castellini. “Some of that lot will end up in the lower corridor before too long.”

Castellini nodded and relayed the instructions over the radio link. When he’d finished he shook his head. Nick heard him muttering the word “Dinosauro” in a disbelieving tone.

Suddenly there was a loud cawing sound. Nick looked up anxiously to see the rhamphorhynchus circling again and eyeing them up. The soldier swung up his rifle and let off a burst of fire.

“No!” shouted Nick angrily. The rhamphorhynchus was about three foot long but most of that was a long tail. It had a comparatively small body. Its jaws, though full of sharp teeth, were not really that large. It was a specialised fish eater. Nick didn’t think it would do a human a lot of harm. At least, not if people weren’t shooting at it. The rhamphorhynchus let out a second cry and turned to dive at the soldier who, ignoring Nick’s shout, fired off another round. The flying reptile shook in the air and then crashed into the soldier and crumpled on the walkway.

1.4 PART 4

“Jesus,” muttered Lester, surveying the blood. In its final crash landing, the rhamphorhynchus had pinned the soldier to the wall of the drum with its long spear-like jaws. Nick pulled off the man’s balaclava, revealing a long pointed face and a shock of curly black hair. He felt at the neck for a pulse but couldn’t find anything, not that he was necessarily sure he was feeling in the right place. He held his hand in front of the man’s mouth and nose, hoping to feel some breath, but there was nothing. He looked up at Lester and shook his head.

Lester nodded, looking grim and a little sick. “Can you get the guns?” he asked, “and his radio. We need to keep in touch with the others.”

With distaste, Nick plucked the rifle from the man's lifeless hands. There was also a pistol in a thigh holster. Nick carefully detached it and the headset and then picked his way past the now lifeless rhamphorhynchus to Lester.

Lester took the pistol and headset from him.

"My office," he said.

Once inside, Lester shut the door and locked it behind them. Nick looked out through the plate glass walls.

"I don't feel all that safe in here," he remarked.

"You think I'd let the government build me an office above the world's first pre-historic zoo without insisting on the strongest, most reinforced glass around?"

"What is that?" whispered Captain Sayed as they approached the stairwell. Blundering around at its base, nudging at the fire doors with its head, was a large squat looking beast with a short tail and an armoured head. It walked on four splayed out legs and filled up almost the entire corridor.

"Pareiasaurus," whispered back Jenny. "It's a herbivore."

"You're kidding me!"

"Weren't you keen on dinosaurs as a kid? Lots of big herbivores."

"Yes, I was," he hissed back. He shook his head. "This just wasn't quite what I was anticipating when your boss said dangerous animals." He whistled quietly through his teeth. "I guess that narrows this place down to cloning or time travel."

"No comment," said Jenny.

He laughed quietly. "I wasn't really expecting one."

He studied the Pareiasaurus impassively. "It won't be easy to get past. How thick is that armour plating?"

"Thick enough, I think. The Special Forces weren't happy about tracking it down when it got loose in the New Forest."

"Tracking it down?"

Jenny bit her lip. That probably pretty much narrowed them down to time travel.

"It's pretty docile," said Jenny, "or so Abby tells me anyway." She thought about the problem. "Poor night vision too, I think."

They watched it for a bit. "I wouldn't want to just walk past it," said Sayed. "Even if it's docile, I don't want it stepping on me." He looked around thoughtfully. "It's pretty dark here."

"You have an idea?"

“Make a noise behind it. Get it to back up a bit.”

“That won’t help us get past it.”

“We could get into the stairwell and head upstairs. Link up with the second team when they get there. Hopefully they’ll have armour piercing bullets.”

“Abby and Connor won’t want it harmed.”

She saw the look of incredulity on Sayed’s face.

“Scientists,” she said and shrugged.

Sayed flicked a switch on his ear-piece. “Sazanov? It’s Sayed. Our way to you is blocked by a...” he looked at Jenny

“Pareiasaurus,” she said.

“Pareiasaurus. We’re going to head straight upstairs. We’ll meet up in the common room.” He paused, listening. “You heard right. It’s a dinosaur. Let’s just hope they’ve not got any T. Rexes squirrelled away down here.”

“No T. Rexes,” said Jenny.

He flashed her a grin. “Pity.”

He fished through the pockets on his tac vest and produced a fair amount of small change.

“I thought you all had terribly useful combat ready stuff in those pockets,” whispered Jenny.

“Small change *is* terribly useful,” he whispered back, “as I shall, hopefully, demonstrate.”

He tossed a coin high over the Pareiasaurus and it clattered to the floor on the far side of the creature. It turned its head, alert. Sayed tossed a couple more coins and the creature, not without difficulty, turned around and shuffled cautiously down the corridor.

“Stairs!” said Sayed.

They ran for the doors.

Lyle led the way to the armoury. Lacey walked at his elbow, aware of Temple and Maitland behind them, and Sazanov in the rear. In the emergency lighting it was difficult to see very far but she could tell there was something backed into the end of the corridor where the entrance to the armoury was. Lyle stopped walking and Lacey followed suit. Temple and Maitland blundered into their backs.

“What is it?” Lacey asked, squinting in the half light. She could make out a large shape, deer-like perhaps, and horns.

“I think it’s the synthetoceras,” said Maitland.

“Does it matter?” asked Sazanov and sighted along his rifle.

“Hey!” objected Maitland.

The soldier let off a shot but Maitland was already pulling up his arm and it went wide. Lacey seized the opportunity to relieve him of the rifle. Lyle, with his usual supernatural anticipation, was already close enough to remove the man’s holstered pistol at the same time. There came a braying sound from the end of the corridor. Lacey realised the creature had lowered its head and was charging at them. They scattered to each side as it came past. It turned for another run but Maitland stepped forward, making soft cooing noises and holding out her hand.

“There’s a good boy,” she whispered gently. Maitland always carried bits and pieces of food in her pockets. She must have got some out now.

The creature paused. “Come on,” said Maitland. “It’s me, Abby. You know me.”

The creature stepped forward and nuzzled into her hand while she stroked its head.

“There’s a good boy,” she murmured. “There’s a good boy.”

“Right,” said Lyle gesturing with the pistol. “Now I’m in charge and we can stop blundering around taking pot shots at anything that moves. Let’s get kitted up and head back to the drum.”

Jenny watched as Captain Sayed cautiously peered out of the entrance to the stairwell.

“All clear!” he said with obvious relief and stepped into the corridor.

Jenny followed him. The red emergency lights made it remarkably difficult to see very far. She squinted in the direction of the entrance to the drum. It was all dark. Without thinking, she placed a hand on Sayed’s arm to prevent him walking forwards. Then her conscious mind caught up with her intuition.

“There’s something in the doorway,” she hissed.

He stopped dead and sighted along his rifle. Now that she knew what she was looking at Jenny could make out the rough shape. A large dome and something moving above, or perhaps behind it. Her blood ran cold.

“That’s the anklyosaurus,” she said.

“You make that sound like a bad thing. It’s another herbivore, right?”

“Armoured and bad tempered,” said Jenny.

“OK, back down the stairs and let’s take our chance with the Pareio what’s-it.”

“Too late!”

The anklyosaurus had started a charge. Jenny turned and ran. There was a burst of gunfire behind her. She pushed through the common room door, Sayed hot on her heels. She wheeled round and slammed it shut. There was a loud bang as the anklyosaurus thudded into it and then the centre of the door splintered as it swung the heavy ball on the end of its tail against the obstacle.

They both backed away from the door.

“That’s not going to hold for long,” said Sayed.

He stepped forward and emptied a clip through the hole. He grimaced.

“Bounced off?” asked Jenny.

“Pretty much.”

The door shook again and more of it splintered. Jenny looked around her frantically.

“Kitchen,” she said. “Shut the door and hope it doesn’t work out where we are.”

The door shook again.

“Kitchen,” Sayed agreed.

They both ran for it.

Nick and Lester watched the carnage below from their vantage point. The anklyosaurus had taken out a couple of the velociraptors and then started up the ramp and headed down the upper corridor.

“We should warn the others,” said Nick. “We told them to take that route.”

Lester nodded and fiddled with Castellini’s headset which he was now wearing.

“Hello, Sayed, Come in please. There’s an anklyosaurus heading your way.”

Lester paused and winced.

“He knows,” he said to Nick.

“Is Jenny all right?”

“They’re hiding in the kitchen. They’re safe for now.” Then he sighed. “Captain, I’m afraid I also have some bad news.”

Nick turned his attention back to the velociraptors while Lester broke the news of Castellini’s death. They were prowling round the floor of the drum and looking distinctly territorial. A compsognathus ventured through the doorway from the garage and was quickly pounced on.

“The good news,” he mused to Lester, “is that the velociraptors are preventing anything else getting through into the main part of the building.”

Lester gave him a withering look.

Lyle put on a radio headset and checked it was working. Sazanov was glowering at him from across the room, near as he could tell anyway. The man was still wearing a balaclava. “What frequency are you on?” he asked the Russian. “Let’s all talk to each other.”

By this point Lyle and Lacey and, somewhat against Lyle’s better judgement, Sazanov, were fully armed. After some discussion, they’d settled on rifles with underslung grenade launchers, a backup pistol, and several clips of both regular and armour piercing bullets. The armour piercing bullets were to be used only in direst emergency since, while they would probably go through almost any dinosaur hide, they would definitely go straight through the walls of the ARC and probably the buildings on either side as well. Lyle didn’t want to be responsible for any civilian deaths. Maitland had a tranquilliser pistol. Temple had his laptop.

“How come Sazanov gets a gun and I don’t?” Temple hissed to Lacey.

She just rolled her eyes at him then hit him on the back of his head.

Lyle had also equipped everyone with radio headsets and head-mounted torches. The emergency lighting was too low for his liking. Maitland and Temple also both had light backpacks with emergency first aid kits in them.

They’d not gone far down the corridor when they met the Pareiasaurus Sayed had warned them of.

“Any ideas for getting past this?” Lyle asked Abby.

“It’s pretty docile,” said Abby doubtfully.

“And also large enough to tread on you without noticing,” returned Lyle.

“We’re probably all right if we don’t frighten it.”

Lyle gave her a look. Abby just shrugged back.

“OK,” said Lyle. “I’m going to move past it, slowly. Sazanov, you come next, then Connor, Abby and Lacey last.”

“Its night sight’s not great,” added Abby. “If we move slowly and don’t make any loud noises, it probably won’t even notice we’re here.”

Lyle edged forward towards the creature. His thumbs were itching again. He kept his movements slow and smooth. The Pareiasaurus remained where it was standing, head down, apparently sniffing at the floor. Once past, Lyle gestured to Sazanov to follow. The man was bulky and not naturally as quiet as Lyle - but a good deal quieter than Temple was likely to be. He was also extremely nervous about the Pareiasaurus. That thought brought Lyle up short slightly, realising

how his own attitudes to these creatures had changed. He knew that some were mean but some were much like large cows and you didn't waste too much time being nervous of a large cow - you just kept far enough away not to get stepped or sat on. Sazanov skittered about nervously as he approached the creature and the movement obviously attracted its attention. Lyle watched as its head turned to follow Sazanov, making the man even more nervous. Slowly the great beast turned around so that, by the time Sazanov reached Lyle's side, it was facing the two of them. It made a low guttural snorting sound.

"It's going to charge!" said Sazanov nervously, lifting his gun.

"Easy, easy," murmured Lyle, although his thumbs were pricking really badly.

The creature's head rocked from side to side and it moved a step forward. Sazanov tensed. Lyle had a half second realisation of what Sazanov was about to do. Then the man launched a grenade.

"Down!" shouted Lyle and pulled Sazanov to the floor, despite the fact that the latter was an idiot who should know better than to let a grenade off in an enclosed space.

There was a loud bang and then an ominous sound of moving metal. Lyle glanced up to see the ceiling buckling. Realising what was about to happen, he rolled towards the wall and then the whole lot came down.

1.5 PART 5

"Lyle! Lyle! Captain Lyle, report damn you!" Nick watched Lester talking into the radio.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I don't know. One of the UNIT soldiers did something stupid. I don't know what."

"That sounded like an explosion."

Lester sighed. "It was an explosion." He turned his attention back to the headset. "Lyle! Are you there?"

There was a pause.

"Lacey! I'm receiving you. Report please."

Jenny watched as Sayed talked into his headset. Beyond the door of the kitchen she could hear the anklyosaurus smashing up the common room. Tired, she sat on

the floor. Sayed crouched down opposite her, his mouth in a thin line.

“Two more men down,” he reported.

“Who?” she asked.

“Sazanov,” he said, “and a Captain Lyle.”

Jenny bit her lip. “Lyle was a good man.”

“So was Sazanov.”

They sat in silence for a bit, listening to the sounds of banging from outside.

“It’s not getting bored, is it?” commented Sayed.

Jenny shook her head. “They’re not very bright, or so I’m told. High boredom threshold.”

“Budge up,” said Sayed. “I want to take a look.”

“Careful!” She warned.

She moved aside and he crawled forward to peer through the keyhole. He sat back, facing her across the narrow width of the galley kitchen. Suddenly a tinny rendering of *We Wish you a Merry Christmas* started playing.

“That bloody Christmas card,” swore Jenny. “It drives me up the wall.”

“I don’t think the anklyosaurus likes it much either.”

They sat in silence while the chirpy melody cycled round.

“So what now?” asked Temple after Lacey had finished reporting to the others.

“The stairs are somewhere behind that.” Lacey nodded at the pile of debris in front of them. “As is Lyle,” she added.

Temple cautiously prodded a bit of plasterboard with his foot. It bowed under the pressure. “Doesn’t seem very stable.”

Even the emergency lights were out now. Lacey played her head torch over the pile. The beam showed a lot of plasterboard and some pieces of metal that presumably had been floor joists. There was a big hole in the ceiling and wires dangled down.

The damage was much worse on one side of the corridor.

“That’s where the server room was,” commented Temple.

Lacey nodded. “Two explosions in more or less the same place. Won’t have done anything very much good.”

Where the server room had been there was now a really huge pile of stuff. The wall had given way.

“Stairwell was opposite the server room,” observed Maitland.

Lacey shone the torch on the far wall. It was possible to make out the doors. “Rubble’s not too bad there. We might make it into the stairwell, especially if we stay close to the wall.”

“What about Lyle?” asked Temple.

Lacey considered the huge mound of rubble in front of them. Her training told her she needed to get the civilians out. She needed to keep with the plan. Instinct said they should dig for Lyle.

“What about the anklyosaurus?” asked Maitland.

Lacey made a decision. “We can’t climb over this pile. It’s not safe. If Lyle’s anywhere he’s on the far side. We’re going to get to the stairwell. According to Captain Sayed, the anklyosaurus is in the common room so we head out towards the drum, link up with Professor Cutter and Lester, then come back and look for Lyle. Agreed?” She looked at Temple and Maitland, who both nodded.

Lacey slung her rifle across her back and cautiously placed a foot on the pile, one arm braced against the wall. Carefully, she transferred her weight then put her other foot down. There was a sound of movement and she paused, waiting for it to subside, before taking another step forward.

“One at a time, I think,” she said. She advanced forward a few more steps until she was standing by the doors.

Suddenly there was a low growling sound and a flash of brown.

“What’s that?” asked Temple.

Lacey shone the torch around. Perched higher up the mound of debris were several of the dog-like creatures she and Lyle had run into earlier. Instinctively she turned her head back down the corridor towards the store room they’d locked them into. It was right next to the server room, she realised, mentally mapping where the door in each room was. It looked like the explosion in the server room and then the one in the corridor had created an exit route for the creatures.

“Osteoborus,” said Temple. “They’re scavengers.”

“We’re a bit large for them to attack,” said Maitland cautiously, beginning to clamber up after Lacey. “They shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“They are pack hunters,” shouted Temple from below. “They might well attack larger animals, especially if they think we’re vulnerable.”

Lacey leaned her back against the wall and eyed the creatures. She’d grown up in the country and knew working dogs. These animals were wild and not as cautious as they should be. Too long in ARC cages getting used to humans, she thought. She unslung the rifle.

“You going to shoot them?” asked Maitland, coming up beside her.

“You got any better ideas?” Maitland was usually sensible, but all the scientific team got a bit erratic when the animals were threatened.

“Short of chucking bits of wall at them? No.”

“I’m all undefended back here!” squeaked Temple.

Lacey turned her head towards him. Temple was backed against the wall. Three Osteoborus hemmed him in.

“Throw wall at those three,” she said to Maitland. “I’d rather not shoot in Temple’s direction.”

Maitland grinned. “Don’t tell me you aren’t tempted though.”

Lacey snorted. She let off the safety and sent a couple of short bursts in the direction of the dogs above them. A couple fell and the others backed off.

“Oi! You!” Maitland shouted and started lobbing debris at the creatures in front of Temple. “Connor, get up here,” she added.

“Move that way a bit,” said Lacey. “I’m going to try and get this door open. The debris’s quite likely to shift.”

Maitland moved back towards Temple, still chucking stuff at the Osteoborus, which backed up. Temple himself put a foot on the rubble and started to climb up out of their way.

Lacey slung her rifle behind her again and aimed a kick at the stair-well doors. They shuddered but remained still. She kicked again and was pleased to see one budge slightly so there was a slight crack. She leaned against the door and slid her foot into the opening, forcing it wider while gripping hold of the other door with her hand. Suddenly the door swung open. Lacey hung on as a small landslide of debris poured into the stairwell beyond.

“Lacey!” she heard Maitland calling.

She hauled herself back up into the corridor. “I’m fine.”

Temple shouted. Lacey swung her torch back towards them.

“It’s biting me!” he shouted.

One of the dog creatures was hanging onto Temple’s leg and he was kicking at it ineffectually.

“Out of my way.” She pushed passed Maitland and back into the corridor. She pulled out her pistol.

“Hold still, Temple.”

“They’re bone crushers!” he said, alarmed.

“I said, *hold still*.”

The animal hung on. Lacey crouched down with the pistol next to the creature’s head but made sure it was aimed well away from any part of Temple. Then she shot it. She felt the blood spatter on her face and hands. Temple’s leg was

covered in blood and gore, some of it his own. She stood up and placed a shot into the heads of the two dogs in the corridor. There were sounds of whining and barking from above them.

“First aid when we’re upstairs,” she said and pushed Temple up the pile. “Maitland! Get into the stairwell!” she shouted. She paused to wipe the back of her sleeve over her face. Switching the pistol for the rifle, Lacey aimed a burst at the creatures above her. They backed off and vanished down the far side of the pile into the server room. Then she scrambled up and through the doors.

Maitland was examining Temple’s leg in the emergency lighting of the stairwell.

“Upstairs!” said Lacey, “through the doors at the top. We can shut those.”

1.6 PART 6

For we all like Figgy Pudding trilled the card.

“What *are* we going to do when it does get bored?” asked Jenny. “The only place it’s got to go is back to the drum and we want to go there too.”

“We wait here for the cavalry to arrive.”

Sayed checked the door once more.

“What’s it doing now?”

“Sofas.”

Good tidings we bring to you and your kin.

He sat back. “You’re remarkably calm about all this. What is it you do again?”

“PR.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That often involve dinosaurs?”

“It does these days.”

He grinned, looking rather like a small boy. “It must be a lot of fun.”

“It has its moments. This isn’t one of them.”

“Come on! It’s not so bad. There’s a real life anklyosaurus out there.”

“It’s Christmas Eve. Correction, it’s Christmas Day. I’ve been hand-cuffed to a radiator, blown up and now I’m trapped in a kitchen with an unknown enemy soldier who’s having a geek moment about two tonnes worth of anklyosaurus that might just randomly break the door down any minute. An anklyosaurus which, might I say, despite its vast destructive power, can not shut up one crappy Christmas Card which is about to start on its tenth assertion that it won’t go until it’s got some.”

So bring some out here

“Have dinner with me.”

“What?”

“Will you have dinner with me.”

“You handcuffed me to a radiator!”

“Think of it as an apology. You saved my life. Many wouldn’t have.”

Jenny boggled at him. “I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t believe you saved my life? Because I’m quite certain about that, or don’t believe I’m apologising, because I’m perfectly serious about that too.”

Jenny gestured helplessly round the room.

“I don’t believe you’re asking me out to dinner. Here! Now!”

“It’s a perfectly simple question. Will you have dinner with me? Or do you have a boyfriend?” He looked a bit crestfallen at that thought.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she found herself saying without thinking. “Or, at least,” she corrected herself, mentally moving Cutter forward for back up purposes, “it’s complicated.”

He sighed. “How can it be complicated? Either you have a boyfriend or you don’t. Anyway it’s only dinner. If you’ve got a sort of boyfriend, dinner with me might help him make up his mind.”

“You handcuffed me to a radiator.”

“I can see the whole radiator handcuffs thing is going to be an issue in our relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship,” Jenny hissed.

“You haven’t actually turned me down yet.”

Jenny opened her mouth.

And a happy new year!

Suddenly, he held up his hand. “Sounds like your friends have a plan.”

Lacey pushed through the doors at the top of the stairwell. Temple was seated on the floor with Maitland binding his leg. The sounds of the anklyosaurus in the common room were clear. She thought she could also hear singing.

“Let’s move away from the common room,” said Lacey nervously. She mentally made a note of where the kitchen, Miss Lewis and the third soldier were in relation to her and then slipped in a clip of armour piercing bullets. She’d need them if the anklyosaurus came their way, but she didn’t want to shoot anyone.

They backed up the corridor but almost immediately came to the hole in the floor. A single metal joist ran across its middle.

“OK. Maitland, you cross first. Take Temple’s laptop. I don’t want him trying to balance with an injured leg and carry something. Then Temple. I’ll come last.”

Maitland took a careful look at the floor and then walked across swiftly and decisively. Lacey had always thought she looked nimble. Clearly she was right. Temple, on the other hand, paused at the edge, looked at the joist and visibly gulped.

“What if it doesn’t hold my weight?”

“These things are supposed to be over-engineered. It’ll hold. Just don’t jump up and down.”

He cautiously put one foot on it and looked at Maitland. “Abby?” he said, half whining.

“You’ll be fine,” she reassured.

“I don’t like heights.”

“Then don’t look down, idiot.”

Temple shuffled onto the joist. It creaked. “Abby!” he said again.

Maitland held out her hand. “Here, it’s not far. Take my hand. Look at me.”

Temple reached out and grabbed Maitland’s hand. Shuffling some more, he made it across. Lacey shouldered the rifle and stepped onto the joist. She felt it move slightly under her feet. Throwing caution to the winds she ran across to the far side.

“I’m not sure it’s that over-engineered,” observed Temple. Then his face entirely changed, a speculative look settling on his countenance. “It certainly wouldn’t hold an anklyosaurus.”

Lacey looked at the hole in the floor. “If we covered it with something, would the anklyosaurus notice?”

“Probably,” said Maitland, “but it wouldn’t connect it to a hole in the floor.”

Lacey looked at Temple for confirmation. He shrugged. “Abby’s better with live animals. If she says it won’t notice, it won’t.”

Lacey nodded. “We can cover the hole with one of these doors.” She walked to the nearest room and fished a screwdriver out of her tac vest. “Can one of you hold this for me while I take it off its hinges?”

Maitland came to help while Temple sat on the floor and fiddled with his laptop. Together, Lacey and Maitland lifted the door and rested it on the joist, concealing the gap on the far side. Lacey stood back and admired their efforts.

“Well, it’s the first time I’ve set a pit trap in an office block, but I reckon it’ll serve.”

Temple looked up. “I’ve got a recording of a female anklyosaurus. I can play the sound on the laptop speakers.”

Lacey looked at him in surprise. “You have what?”

“I have a recording of a female anklyosaurus. I took it just before this one got trapped here, while we were herding the others back through the anomaly. I keep recordings of as many cries as possible in the database.”

Lacey stared at him. “Why?”

Temple stared back, his mouth working wordlessly. “Because,” he said at last. “Whatever,” she said. “OK, on my signal.”

She made Temple and Maitland retreat up the corridor a bit. Then she knelt and sighted at the common room door at an angle which would send any bullets away from the kitchen. She patched into the radio.

“Captain Sayed, we have a plan.”

“I’m listening”

“We’re going to lure the anklyosaurus down the corridor over a hole in the floor. It should drop through to the floor below.”

“Should?”

“I’m all sighted up and ready. You and Miss Lewis stay in the kitchen until I give the all clear.”

“Understood.”

“OK, Temple, it’s all yours.”

Temple hit a key on the laptop and a loud groaning sound filled the corridor. They all waited. The sounds of destruction from the common room faded. All was silent except for a tinkling voice demanding Figgy pudding. Connor hit the keyboard again and the sound reverberated once more. There was a shuffling sound. Lacey saw the anklyosaurus emerge from the common room and start moving towards her.

“Once more,” she said.

Temple sounded the cry again. Lacey forced her breathing to slow down. She knew where the hole in the floor was. She wouldn’t be wasting any bullets unless it got over the door. Somewhere behind her, in the drum, came the sound of automated weapons’ fire and a cry of pain.

“What was that?” asked Maitland.

Lacey continued to watch the anklyosaurus, refusing to be distracted. It moved cautiously down the corridor towards them.

The anklyosaurus moved to a shambling run. Lacey forced herself to keep the rifle steady, uncomfortably aware that if anything went wrong she wouldn’t have much time. It crossed on to the door. There was a shriek of metal and the door tilted sideways. The anklyosaurus let out a huge bellow. Lacey kept it in her

sights. There was a bang and the door slid through the floor and onto the pile of debris below, taking the ankylosaurus with it. Lacey stood up.

“All clear,” she said into the mic.

“*On our way.*”

“Lester?”

Lester motioned Nick to silence with an irritated gesture. He had one hand pressed to his ear where he listened to the others’ reports and was looking terribly professional in a pinched kind of way. Nick looked out of the office window. In the red of the emergency lighting the velociraptors were gathering together. They’d explored the drum and were about to move on.

“Lester!”

Lester looked up with an irritated expression.

“What?”

“The velociraptors are moving. We need to stop them.”

Lester came to stand by him at the window.

“If they stick to the lower floors it will to our advantage. We get a clear run to the garage.”

“Lyle and that other soldier might still be alive, just unconscious. They’re in the lower corridor, if they are anywhere. Come on, Lester! Have a little optimism.”

Lester looked at him steadily for a moment, then nodded.

“Very well. How?”

Nick looked around, thinking as he spoke. “There’s a holding cage down there with a manual door lock. If we can somehow lure them in.” He trailed away, thinking of the dead rhamphorhynchus outside and Castellini’s knife, still at the dead man’s belt.

“We need a bucket,” he said.

“Of course! I always keep a supply of buckets in my office,” sniped Lester. “You’d better use the waste paper bin.”

He emptied out a small pile of paper onto his desk and handed Nick the metal container. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Cut up the rhamphorhynchus and put the meat in the holding cage.”

“And what if the velociraptors get interested too early?”

Nick looked around the office and then picked up Castellini’s discarded rifle.

“You’re not serious.”

Nick shrugged, “I should be able to scare them off with the noise. I don’t need to hit anything.”

Lester sighed. “What will I be doing all this time?”

Nick looked at him, concerned by the flatness of his tone. “Staying in here,” he gestured helplessly, “co-ordinating.”

Lester gave him a cold look, then nodded.

Cautiously Nick exited the office. He leaned over the balcony and let of a burst of gunfire into the velociraptors below, just to scare them back from the exit. The heavy weapon kicked in his hands and he found himself sitting on his bum. He glanced behind him. Lester stood at the window to his office and shook his head. Gingerly Nick got back to his feet and peered over the parapet once more. The velociraptors had backed up and were now clustered near the garage.

Nick worked his way around the upper level to the entangled forms of Castellini and the rhamphorhynchus. He reached over to Castellini’s belt and extracted the knife. Then he began to butcher the creature. He made faster work of it than he would have, had it been an autopsy, but it didn’t need to be pretty, he just needed to get as much meat as possible into the holding cage. He became uncomfortably aware that his hands, at least, were getting covered in blood that would also attract the velociraptors. When he’d filled the bin he stood up and glanced into the drum. The raptors were clustered just below him on the walkway, probably attracted by the movement and the smell. He quickly moved down the slope towards the floor.

He was almost there when, with a sudden screeching sound, a velociraptor appeared directly in front of him and leaped. Instinctively Nick threw himself forwards and rolled beneath it as it jumped. He lifted his head and realised he’d dropped the gun and bin which now lay further up the ramp, beyond the raptor. Nick rapidly crawled backwards, away from the creature, which turned to face him and crouched down for another spring.

1.7 PART 7

The raptor’s head exploded. Behind it stood Lester, holding Castellini’s pistol, a grim expression on his face. He picked up the rifle and handed it back to Nick.

“Try not to drop it again,” he said.

“Thanks,” said Nick.

Lester barely acknowledged him but stalked back up the walkway once more. Nick picked up the bin and reloaded the meat. When he set foot on the floor of the drum, the entire pack of velociraptors turned to face him. Awkwardly, he

raised the rifle and let off a blast of gunfire into the air over their heads. The recoil pressed him against the wall but he managed to keep hold of the gun. The velociraptors didn't appear that impressed, but then they'd spent several months in a strange environment and Abby had kept telling him how well they were adapting. They did back up a little though.

Hastily, Nick edged round the wall to the holding pen. The door was open and the cage empty. He backed inside to the far wall and emptied out his wastepaper bin on the ground. Then he hurried forwards. The raptors were now uncomfortably close to the entrance, attracted by the prospect of food. He let off another burst of gunfire and seized the opportunity it gave to leave the cage for the drum. The raptors' heads moved to track his movements. Then, almost as one, they moved to attack. Nick aimed the gun right at them and let off another blast, but he couldn't hold it steady and his bullets didn't seem to be hitting anything, although it was difficult to tell, reptiles were good at ignoring minor injuries.

There came a shout from up above and a lot of swearing. Nick revised his opinion. He wasn't hitting any velociraptors.

"Lester!" he called, but at that moment the first raptor was upon him. He whacked at it with the butt of his rifle, knocking it to once side.

Then there was further gunfire. The kind of controlled, targeted, professional gunfire that Nick wasn't supplying. Two of the raptors dropped. Nick rapidly backed out of the way around the side of the drum.

Lyle, looking a bit battered, dark hair ruffled and his tac vest hanging from his torso, emerged from the corridor. Several of the velociraptors were already inside the cage, pulled by the smell of meat and pushed by the noise. Nick waved at Lyle, urging caution. There were a lot of the beasts. He wasn't convinced even Lyle could dispose of them all and he wanted to save the raptors if he could. If they could persuade them that there was easier food available, then the creatures would leave them alone. Nick willed the velociraptors into the cage. At first there was hardly any movement and then, one by one, they entered.

Lyle walked up to Nick and snatched the rifle from his hands with a look that spoke volumes of trouble later on. "Lester!" he called, unable to disguise the concern in his voice.

"Professor Cutter," came a voice from the balcony. "You are the most fucking incompetent, insubordinate bastard I have ever had the misfortune to manage."

Lyle grinned. "He'll live."

Lester emerged above the parapet. His suit was ruined and he was pressing a blood-stained handkerchief against his shoulder. Lyle waggled his hips and blew Lester a kiss.

“Miss me, darling?”

Lester closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand.

Nick hurried towards the holding cage and began to lower the door.

Abby listened with relief as Lester informed them that Lyle was fine. Captain Sayed and Jenny were approaching them up the corridor. He wasn't bad looking, Abby thought, now that she could see him without the balaclava. If you went for squat and chunky, at any rate. She wondered what he made of them. Lacey looked worst, with blood from the dogs smeared across her face. But Connor was limping and they were all dusty and grimy.

Jenny and the Captain stopped short on the other side of the hole in the floor.

“You'll have to take those shoes off,” the Captain said to Jenny. “I'll go first then you take a run and a jump. Don't worry about the landing. We'll catch you.”

Jenny nodded mutely. Captain Sayed backed away slightly and then took a run up and a leap over the gaping hole. Abby watched Jenny eyeing the hole and then she moved to one side, which made sense. It was a lot narrower at that point. Jenny took off her high heels and started to run. She leaped well before the edge but had plenty of speed to carry her across. The Captain contrived to catch her anyway. As Jenny put her shoes back on, Abby saw her raise her eyebrows at him.

Abby hadn't much taken to Sazanov. Quite apart from that, UNIT, or whoever Lester said these people were, were clearly responsible for their current plight and so were not her favourite people. She watched this newcomer suspiciously.

“Right,” said Captain Sayed, looking at them all. “You'll be Private Lacey?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Which makes you two Miss Maitland and Mr Temple.”

Connor, standing at her shoulder, nodded. Reluctantly, Abby nodded too.

“OK. I'll take point, the civilians take up the middle, Lacey, you bring up the rear.”

“Wait a minute,” Abby squared up to him. “Who put you in charge?”

“I did,” said Lester in her ear, making her jump. “Now all of you get here right now and Lyle can take charge.”

Sayed smirked and took the lead. Connor took her hand as they fell in behind with Lacey at the rear.

It was less than a minute before they emerged on the upper walkway of the drum. Lyle, Nick and Lester were already there. Lester was sitting on the floor

and appeared to be bleeding from one arm. Lyle, squatted in front of him, looked remarkably unharmed, apart from a few cuts and bruises.

Nick's face broke into a broad smile when he saw them all.

"Jenny! You're safe!" he said. Abby watched as he hugged a distinctly surprised looking Jenny. Nick then went bright red. "Abby!" he added and gave her a hug too. Abby winked at Jenny over Nick's shoulder. "Connor!" he said gruffly and shook his hand awkwardly.

"All the merry band here I see," Lester said acidly.

"He just wants to make sure you don't worry about him," said Lyle. He glanced up at them and then his eyes widened in surprise.

"Hamza Sayed!"

"Jon Lyle!"

Lyle stood up and the two men clasped hands.

"I take it, you two know each other," said Lester from the floor.

"We were in the same unit, in Afghanistan and elsewhere. A few years back now, mind," said Lyle. "I should have known that only an idiot like Sayed would get involved in trying to raid the ARC."

"And I should have known that such lax security could only have been your responsibility," returned Sayed, good-naturedly.

"Oh good!" said Lester witheringly. "I'm in Lyle's episode of *This is Your Life*."

With an air of indifference, Sayed peered down to the floor of the drum. "All clear below. What's the plan?"

"There's a small truck in the garage," said Lyle. "We get down to the floor. Maitland, you're driving." Abby nodded. "Temple, you and Lester are getting into the back of it and staying put. Use the first aid kits."

"He clipped my bloody arm," retorted Lester. "I'm hardly walking wounded."

"You can do as you're told for a change," muttered Lyle.

"Cutter and Lewis, you get in the back but sit by the doors. You're going to be opening the main door when we get there so you need to be able to get out quickly. I'm assuming there are more creatures in the tunnel to the entrance so, Lacey, you're in the passenger seat at the front. Keep the way ahead as clear as possible. You, Captain," he grinned at the UNIT soldier, "and I are on the tailgate. Maitland, you drive us to the main entrance and stop. Cutter and Lewis, get out and open the doors then get outside. Sayed and I will get off the truck and cover you. Soon as the truck is through, start closing it from the other side. Everyone understand?"

They all nodded.

“OK. Sayed, you’re on point to the truck. I’m rearguard. Lacey, with me. Let’s go.”

They headed down the sloping ramp. Once at the bottom, Lyle turned to cover the entrance back towards the armoury. The emergency lighting showed nothing beyond the large garage doors.

The truck was right by the doorway. Captain Sayed walked all around it once as the others approached. Abby climbed into the driving seat and Lacey got in beside her. She heard someone bang on the back doors.

“Let’s move!” shouted Lyle’s voice.

Abby started the truck and they set off. For good measure she switched on the headlights, allowing them to see what was ahead properly. The tunnel led from the drum through the main row of cages and then out.

There was a pack of small compsognathus in the tunnel. Abby mentally classed them with velociraptors and the like although Connor tended to be dogmatic on the point that they weren’t raptors at all. They were small, two-legged and carnivorous. They were also incredibly cute, in Abby’s opinion at any rate. She hoped too many wouldn’t get hurt. The truck was too large for the small dinosaurs to consider a prey animal and they cowered back as it drove past.

The *Coelophysis*, another non-raptor theropod, also a pack hunting animal, was a different matter. They were about the same height as the truck and clearly considered it fair game. One jumped on the bonnet. Lacey leaned out the window and shot it. There was the sound of more gunfire from the back. Glancing in the wing mirrors, Abby could see that both packs were following them. Lyle and Sayed were picking animals off but the packs seemed undeterred. The half of her mind that wasn’t running on adrenaline was fascinated by the apparent cooperation between the two species.

All too quickly they were at the main doors. Abby halted the truck. She kept the engine running.

“I’m getting out,” said Lacey. “They’re going to need as much firepower as possible back there.” And she was gone.

Abby heard the back doors opening and more gunfire. She glanced in the mirrors. Cutter and Jenny were running up the side of the truck. Lyle, Captain Sayed and Lacey had spread out in a shallow triangular formation and were laying down a steady cover of bullets. Abby wasn’t a military expert but it looked to her like the UNIT man and Lacey were just keeping the animals cautious and at bay while Lyle picked them off one by one. A lot of the *Coelophysis* seemed to be dead or injured.

Cutter and Jenny were hanging off a large wheeled handle, turning it slowly.

In front of her the entrance gate started to rise. When it was almost high enough to get through she sounded the horn and leaned out of the window to look at the soldiers. She could only really see Captain Sayed and he waved her on. She frowned at him.

“Move it, Maitland!” Lyle’s voice came over her headset.

She pulled her head back in and drove through the doors. Jenny and Cutter were already on the other side, turning a second manual handle. She turned the truck around once she was out so she could see what was happening and so the headlights would illuminate the scene for the soldiers. The three of them were holding their formation and backing up slowly. Sayed and Lacey had to duck their heads to get under the door. As soon as they were through they both dropped to their knees and carried on firing. Lyle, in the centre, slightly further in, continued to back up. She saw him change clips, an operation that took seconds, but something took advantage of that moment. It looked like a compsoognathus, though it was difficult to see clearly. Lyle was knocked onto his back. Lacey scrambled to her feet, but Captain Sayed was up first.

“Hold your position, Private,” he ordered over the radio.

Abby watched Lacey drop again while the captain dashed forwards to Lyle. He grabbed the compsoognathus by its neck and hauled it up. Abby couldn’t quite see what happened next but guessed he’d put a bullet through its brain at short range. She did see him throw the body away into the pack. Cutter and Jenny, meanwhile, had stopped turning the handle.

“Should we raise the door?” she heard Jenny call.

“No! Carrying on closing!” came Lyle’s voice.

Captain Sayed had hauled Lyle to his feet. It looked like the UNIT soldier was still firing the rifle. His gun arm was jammed awkwardly against his side. Lyle turned and staggered towards the entrance. His chest appeared to be covered in blood. He ducked under it and turned. Both he and Lacey were lying on their fronts now, continuing to fire. Abby watched the door lowering, willing Sayed to emerge. Almost at the last minute he did, rolling under the closing door. Two compsoognathus tried to follow. One made it out. It was at the far side, right by Cutter and Jenny. Cutter spotted it and dived forwards with a rugby tackle. He clamped one hand round its jaws and the other pinned its hind legs. He stood up, looking triumphant, the struggling creature in his arms.

Jenny stood by Lester, next to an ambulance in which paramedics were seeing to a vocal and irritated Lyle. About two dozen ARC soldiers were massed around the entrance. They'd be heading in to start clearing up the mess fairly soon. Cutter and Abby were talking to them, Connor trailing along behind. She didn't need to hear the discussion to know what it was about it.

"They'll not kill more than they have to," Lester said, obviously thinking the same thoughts she was.

She couldn't help smiling. "It's funny how the soldiers respect Cutter, even when he's being an idiot."

"They always respect someone with the knowledge to save their lives," said Lester. "The good ones anyway, and I try only to select good ones. Speaking of which..."

He nodded towards Sayed, who was walking towards them. A small clutch of UNIT troops had appeared on the scene and Sayed had been deep in discussion with them ever since.

"Am I getting an official apology?" asked Lester when Sayed was in earshot.

Sayed shrugged. "The General's working himself up to it, I think."

Lester sighed, "I suppose you'd like me to go over and commend your professionalism."

"I'm up shit creek and no mistake," said Sayed. "To be honest, sir, I don't know if a good word from you will help or hinder."

"Right now I have the moral high ground," said Lester. "I think I should capitalise on the fact."

"Sir?"

"Budgets, young man. I'm thinking budgets."

Lester struggled to his feet and set off towards the UNIT contingent.

"James! You're injured," called Jenny.

"I am aware of the fact. I'm hoping it'll make me look pale and interesting."

Jenny rolled her eyes at Lester's retreating back. She looked back at Sayed and then swiftly at her feet.

"So that Professor?" asked Sayed. "He your complication?"

Jenny looked over at Nick, deep in animated conversation with Abby and Connor. "He used to know a woman called Claudia who looked exactly like me. Well apart from the fact she wore less make-up, had lighter hair and was better at being fluffy and accommodating."

"What happened to her?"

Jenny hesitated.

“Hey! I’ve signed the Official Secrets Act... and seen your collection of dinosaurs.”

“Far as I can tell she vanished in some kind of time paradox and I popped up in her place.”

“OK,” he said, “that’s complicated.” He paused again. “You like him?”

Jenny smiled. “He’s the most pig-headed, stubborn, wilfully blind,” she paused searching for an adjective, “*Scottish* idiot.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Jenny smiled ruefully at him and he smiled back.

“Well,” he said, “if you do change your mind about dinner...” and he fished a pen and notepad out of his tac vest and started scribbling. “That’s my number.”

She took it from him. “I’ll bear it in mind.”

He sketched her a salute, turned, and was gone.

Jenny was still staring at the scrap of paper when Lester got back.

“I’d hang onto that if I were you.”

“Why?”

“An informal contact in UNIT could be useful.”

Jenny glanced over at the General and his platoon, who were loading themselves back into their cars.

“Your meeting with the General not go well?”

“It went very well. There’ll be a full meeting and post mortem next week. By the end of the month, if I play this right, UNIT will be subsidising us and we’ll have some autonomy from C19.”

“So what do you want Captain Sayed’s number for then?”

“C19 won’t go down without a fight. I’d like to keep the unofficial lines of communication open.”

A medic appeared out the back of the ambulance and looked at Lester. “Time to go, sir.”

Lester nodded, “Connor!” he called, “time for our hospital trip.”

Jenny watched Abby squeeze Connor’s hand quickly before he limped over towards them. Once the ambulance drove off, Jenny walked over to where Nick and Abby stood in the entrance to the ARC.

“Time to go home?” she asked.

“I’m going to stay and supervise this,” said Nick. “You two can go.”

Jenny nodded at Abby. “Go home. I imagine Connor will be back in a few hours. When do you have to be at his parents?”

Abby looked at her watch. “In a few hours. I’ll wait until morning and then warn them we might be late. I don’t suppose they’ll be surprised.”

She walked off and Jenny was left alone with Nick.

“You don’t need to be here,” she said.

“Yes I do.” He ran his hands through his hair. “They need someone who knows the creatures to help round them up. Don’t worry,” he added, spreading out his hands. “I’m not going to get in the way. Just give advice over the radio.”

Jenny glanced into the gaping mouth of the ARC and wondered if she should stay as well. She was desperately tired and was supposed to be at her own parents’ by midday. She glanced up and caught sight of a lone, forlorn decoration above them.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” she said. “One thing though.”

“What?”

She pointed upwards to the small scrap of green.

“Mistletoe.”

His kiss was firm but chaste.

“Merry Christmas, Jennifer Lewis.” There was a smile lurking around his mouth as he drew away.

“Merry Christmas, Nicholas Cutter.”