

The insomnia is back. Lovely.

I'm pacing level two at three in the morning. Not helping. My bunk is a coffin, but this is scarcely better. Three weeks of pencil-pushing, surveillance reviews, writing reports into the damn void. Three flipping weeks and the Prefect still hasn't signed off on a walk topside. I need the sun or I will go mental.

Four seconds in, four hold, four out, four hold. The breathing thing they teach us, supposed to calm you down. Bollocks, but I'll try anyway. Four in, four—

Oh fuck!

My ears are ringing, screaming, just one long high-pitched whine that drowns out the world. I'm on the ground and I feel dust raining on me. For half a second I'm twelve again, watching the sky turn green during Event Gamma, watching—

Stop. Move. Don't think, just move. That was an explosion, and that's a fact. But the walls held, the roof isn't shaking. South Wimbledon isn't collapsing, not yet. Hell, I'd always thought they were inventing threats to keep us underground.

I rush to the stairs as the emergency lights finally come on. Fortunately, they keep the full-facepiece respirators here for quick access. A full hazmat suit, actually, but I can't linger. The respirator and the gloves, the world narrows down to my breathing and the glass frame, then I run. Run through the maintenance corridor, barely a metre wide, pipes and cables overhead, metal grating below. My footsteps echo loudly in here, and yet it can't drown out the high whine.

Don't think about it!

I reach level zero with my heart in my mouth. I can't possibly be equipped for whatever I'm about to encounter, but damn it, somebody's got to have a look at the damage.

The sunroom corridor opens up ahead, wider, brighter. Someone's staggering towards me. Atkinson, the night shift guard. Face bright red, tears streaming, clutching his throat.

'First aid's over there!' I shout. 'Go.'

He stumbles past, spitting and coughing and wheezing. I don't wait to see if he made it.

The sunroom door is wide open, and that is some smoke! Christ, so much smoke, billowing out in waves that I would've found hypnotically beautiful if they weren't blowing right at me.

I unholster the pistol and turn off the safety as I approach the sunroom entrance, the double doors bent open, grey-brown streaks flowing out of every gap. I squint through the respirator, trying to make sense of it.

Then I'm through, the double doors collapsing with loud thuds as I attempt to squeeze in. I flick my pistol's mini-torch on, but the smoke is already receding, and I can see glass shards on the floor, I can see—

Oh. No.

That is the sky. Those are stars. Those are actual stars.

The retractable roof is gone. The Glass Lotus, a million pieces on the floor. The debris crunch under my boots even as I move to check out the damage from closer. Christ, actual stars.

A strange plume from ahead, coloured differently. Thick, reddish-brown, coiling upward.

I take out my hankie, wrap it round my throat, then pull up the collar over it for good measure. Drag the left sleeve to cover the exposed wrists as best as I can. The rest of my skin is mostly covered; I always do my insomnia walks in full uniform.

Radio out. 'All units, we've got a major incident, sunroom collapse, I repeat, sunroom collapse. Chemical hazard, structural breach. We are exposed to the surface. DI Georgia Green on scene requesting backup and hazard crew.'

A long crackle of static. Then, 'Copy, DI Green. Units deploying. Please elaborate on nature of chemical hazard.'

'Looks like Nitrogen Dioxide. I'm mostly covered but I still feel it pricking my skin. Can't stay here much longer.'

'Copy. ETA six minutes.'

Six minutes. Brilliant. I'll just hold the fort then.

I move back, towards the collapsed double doors, closer than I'd like yet further than they'd want. The smoke's thinning now, pulled up to the surface by convection. The damage gets clearer with every second.

It's bloody surgical. A hole in the roof. Everything else mostly intact save for some shockwave damage, some debris pierced into walls. The projector screen on the other side is still usable. The LEDs further out didn't shatter at all.

The radio crackles again. 'DI Green, there's been a bit of delay. ETA is five more minutes.'

'Copy.'

I look at the watch. 3:02:52. C'mon lads, I'll give you eight seconds grace, but I expect backup before or at 3:08:00. I hate this sight, I hate this respirator, I hate stumbling first on scene. I just want to breathe clean air again.

The primary LEDs turn on, white swipes away red. I squint, turn off the pistol-light, let my eyes adjust. Instinctively, I scan through the room again, watching for the little details I may have missed. There's nothing particularly—

Something moved at the edge of the crater.

I freeze.

A head appears against the stars. Then shoulders. Elderly bloke, thin as a rail, holding something shiny. He scans around like a scavenger, and his eyes fall on me. He holds his stare, and I glare back. Then his eyes move, and settle on the floor just below the crater.

He looks back at me. At the floor below. Back at me.

‘Sir, you’re trespassing on—’

He kicks something. A mattress falls on the floor. A fucking mattress?

A landing cushion!

‘Don’t!’

He laughs and lets go, plunging through the air.

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He lands hard on his arse, clutches his back, screams. A dagger bounces away from him.

Then he gets up slowly, stumbling, hurting. I raise my pistol and his hands shoot up in reflex. ‘Ow! Please, I just want food. Bread... You’ve got bread.’

‘Stay where you are, keep those hands up.’

‘You bunker folk are rich, everybody says so. You... you probably have clean meat.’

I ignore him, scan through the crater once again. If any more Terries come plopping down, we’re doomed. I have to assume the surface defence units are already compromised.

‘C’mon missy, I ain’t even asking for meat, just bread... some beer to wash it down.’ He moves.

‘Freeze! I will—’

Another face at the crater. He’s got a revolver.

I saw the muzzle flash before I jumped. I was too late.

Concrete chips spray off ten feet away. Dreadful shot. I run and don’t stop until I’m behind the broken door.

The older one has picked up a shard, but there’s another loud *thud* before I can do anything. The second man – wild and hirsute – lands, grunts in pain, gets up and shoots haphazardly. The older man, positioned somewhere between us, jumps in panic, trips, and the second man is yelling in frustration, ‘Out of the way you o—’

I got him in the lungs. I did. And again, and again. *Ping-ping-ping* goes my pistol, and I can’t even register it as violence. A game. I was challenged and I answered.

I saw the old man too late. My pistol left my grip as he lunged low and hit me like a freight train, feeling like a bag of bones but bringing me down with sheer momentum. My head bounces on the floor and for a second it’s all a high-pitched ring and a blur of grey, and now there’s a shard jammed in my thigh and I feel it burn and he just goes on raining blows from above and I’m kicking madly.

Move.

Muscle memory returns. Forearms up in defence, up-kicks to his chin, nose, throat, eyes, sternum, what little BJJ I can summon. He lets go with a faint *ugh*, tumbles down, recovers at about the same moment I do, and we both spot the pistol.

I lunge for it. He falls on it. My palms closed on the polymer grip just as his weight crashed into my ribs. He didn't reach for the gun, no, he just got one hand vaguely above my pistol grip and then sank his teeth into my throat, teeth stabbing through my hankie.

Pain flares through me. I scream, I squirm, my hand spasms around the gun. He thrashes his head like a dog tearing at a bone, pulling my arm twisting upward. He lets go of my throat, and spits on my respirator, a big glob, then a smaller one, then drool, and I can't see half of him anymore.

Ping. A pained grunt. Blood on my respirator, dipping from his mouth, and I can't see a thing. I squeeze the trigger two more times. Feel my belly warm with his blood. He's dead weight on me.

I scramble backward, kicking my legs out from under him, chest heaving, lungs burning. But he's gone. Desperate, ferocious energy, gone in three squeezes, leaving behind nothing but a frail, broken man bleeding out on the concrete.

I kneel there in the quiet, my pistol shaking, my body throbbing in so many places I can't count anymore. The dust we'd kicked up is settling. I had it under control, I absolutely did. Until that second face.

Crap, who's to say there won't be a third. I don't even move for a better position, just wipe the respirator with my sleeve and take aim from this awkward angle.

'Freeze!'

I nearly shot at them. The backup. I drop my pistol, get my hands up, count myself lucky these ones have discipline. 'DI Green here.'

'Hold fire,' cries a voice. They move, heavy boots on concrete, torches cutting through the dust and the lingering smoke. Hands on my shoulders. Someone pulling me back. These men are proper military. Body armour, assault rifles, the works. Albion Republic badge on their shoulders.

'Ma'am, are you injured?' One of them is in front of me, torch in my eyes. 'Any wounds? Exposure?'

I try to answer but my mouth won't obey. The corridor's starting to tilt. Floor becoming wall becoming ceiling, and the respirator feels like a noose. I reach up to pull it off but my hands are useless, just trembling things at the end of my arms.

They're shouting for a medic. One of them is taking me round the corner, but I can't focus on his face, can't focus on anything but the plumes, the red-brown. And the stars. I'd forgotten there were stars.

I wake up drowning.

No, not drowning, just drooling. Coughing. My face is pressed on a pillow, a proper puddle of drool tracing a line from my mouth to the fabric's edges. Body feels like it's been dragged through a ventilation shaft.

The clock on the wall behind me says 20:19.

I lean up a little too fast and my head spins a little, the shoulder hurts, the thigh burns. But seriously, did I just sleep for seventeen hours?

Okay, I remember. The attack, of course, and the medic room. Nurse asking me questions, sticking syringes into my arms, smothering me with antiseptic-soaked cotton. Then, what? I just conked out?

There's noise beyond the curtains. An armed bloke, positioned right outside it. He turns, checks on me through a gap, and waves at someone.

'Georgia?' Someone comes in. She can't be much older than me. 'I'm Dr. Irene Gladstone. How's your head feel?'

'Like somebody played football with it.'

'Well, your bloodwork suggests minimal exposure, but you've got injuries on the shoulder, neck, and left thigh. I can send you home after a check-up. They'll want to talk to you before that.'

'If "they" refers to my father, sure. Everyone else, including my mum, can piss right off.'

'Your father is here with Prefect Murphy.'

'Huh? What does he want? Ugh, never mind. It was a huge cock-up, wasn't it?'

'Disaster...' The curtain opens, and in walks the man himself, in his usual 21st-century-CEO suit, his deep Youth Pastor voice declaring, 'is what it would've been, had you not intervened, Detective.'

'Only my job, sir.'

The doctor quietly steps out, and he takes it as an invitation to grab a chair. 'Feel alright?'

I'd feel better not having to smell the booze on your breath. 'Yes.'

'How much have they told you about the incident?'

'I literally just woke up, Prefect, but I was first on scene, I can extrapolate a little.'

'The Albion Army is here. The assault was repelled with no losses on our side. Some injuries, material destruction, and of course, the trauma. But no deaths.'

'Must be packing up to leave any minute now.'

The Prefect chortles. Narrows his eyes like he's reevaluating his opinion of me. 'DI Green, always delighting to meet a true, red-blooded Englishwoman in this tomb full of insipid husks. Certainly have that pessimistic humour, eh? Can I also count on you to have the grit, the poise, the wisdom of a... uh, Margaret Thatcher?'

Uff. This twat probably scored an A+ in Modern History, interpreting everything like they wanted him to. 'What can I do, sir?'

The Prefect takes out his phone. Taps on something. *God Save the Queen* starts playing. The Fu— Oh. Anti-bugging! Crap, I judged him too quickly.

'DI Green, I don't suspect Terries were behind this, even if some of them did attempt to capitalise, which naturally means they shall be blamed for it. Our citizens are already terrified, and so is Colliers Wood. Put simply, the conditions are rather convenient for some parties.'

'I don't understand.'

'Of course. You're in shock. You remember a boom, maybe a chaotic mess of a gunfight.'

'I saw a red-brown plume, said as much on the radio.'

'I'm trying to help you, DI Green. Help you from being the sole witness to the Reichstag Fire without openly betraying your people. Tightrope, dear girl.'

The audio stops. One minute and four seconds, enough to make his case. He's up now, smiles his Youth Pastor smile, places a George Cross nomination certificate on the table, leaves as abruptly as he arrived.

The curtain rustles again. Dad's here. He's grown thinner, his dark circles bigger. Nobody sleeps in this family, huh?

'How's my sweetheart?' he begins in that tone I never knew I so missed. 'C'mon, I've lobbied the doctor to examine you now. And no police bunks! We're going home.'

'Ah, you found a secret tunnel.'

'Very droll. You're coming to level seven where Mum and Dad will watch over you for the duration of your recovery and that is not up for debate!'

It's 11:15, way past dimming hour, when the elevator door opens on level seven and I have to squint my eyes. The corridor is blocked with dozens of bodies, most carrying torches, some armed with cricket bats, kitchen knives, anything they could pick up. They don't register me at first, and I catch snippets of conversations – all variations of fight, kill, hide, run – before someone spots me and they all quieten, clique by clique.

'Georgia!' Bobby makes his way through the crowd. Another voice I'm glad to hear. 'You're awake.'

'I'm alive, guys. Got two of them, passed out. Afraid that's it.'

'That's it?' cries Kevin Abbott, the arsehole from two doors over. 'We've been waiting all day for an update!'

‘She’s given you all she has.’ Dad puts his hand out and starts wading through the mass. ‘Step aside, please. Kevin, go hound the Albion Army if you want your damn updates. Excuse you, let us through!’

Bobby joins us, helps us squeeze into the house. The gossiping and yelling come to a halt with a slam of the door.

‘Thank you, Mr. Olatunji,’ Dad says.

‘No probs. Could I get some crumbs though?’

‘Bobby, it’s better you don’t,’ I say. ‘Maybe tomorrow at your pub, once I have a handle on what I can and can’t say.’

‘Oh, it’s like that, huh? Having adventures without me, a card-carrying member of the Sunshine Five!’

I can’t help but smile. Bobby always has the right thing to say. But he won’t overstay his welcome now. Waves and leaves, deftly closing the door behind him. I scan around the room now, and it actually is impressive how hard Dad has tried to make it look exactly like our Sunshine house. He’s painted the concrete to match the tile pattern we had; got the sofa exactly like it used to be, the radio on a narrow table, the cream cabinets in the kitchen, the kettle, the toaster... Dear God it hurts.

‘Skip the pub, dear,’ Dad says, ‘they’ll peck at you all day—’

The bedroom door bursts open, and I find myself starting embarrassingly. It’s Mum, holding a small bowl of water in one hand. Holy water. My face is wet before I can put my hands up.

‘Thank the Lord you’re safe!’ she says. ‘Where are you hurt?’

‘I killed two people, Mother.’

She crosses herself. ‘The ones who broke in?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did they touch you?’

‘I shot them, mother. They’re dead.’

‘Did they touch you?’

I don’t answer; I’m not getting into this shit.

Her fingers tighten around the bowl. ‘You’ve been through something terrible. Come here.’

She reaches for me. I step back.

‘Violation, Georgia! They have trespassed what God gave me to keep safe.’

‘And I shot them for it!’

Frowning, she turns and reaches behind the sofa. Lovely, it’s still here. Four foot by three, a picture of blond Jesus against an American flag backdrop.

‘Do pray for all of us, love,’ Dad says, then catches my arm and pulls me inside the bedroom, locking the door softly behind us. ‘Eh. Your Mum loves you in her own way.’

‘I know.’

‘You don’t have to tell her anything.’

‘Do I not?’

‘Well, not tonight.’

‘Alright, enough about Mum. Look at the rest of the level, everybody’s still on edge.’

‘Why shouldn’t we? Every crisis, they’re rushing down with loudspeakers to “dispel rumours.” Not a peep today.’

‘Couldn’t spare anyone, I guess.’

‘Except the Prefect himself, who apparently had an hour to spare in the waiting room, speaking nothing of his aides running about the ER. Christ, you’d think the medals could wait a day or two.’

‘He spoke to me. I think it’s best left private.’

‘There it is. Grown up now, so Dad couldn’t possibly have anything to offer, could he?’

‘Go on then, tap on your vast knowledge of policework.’

The faintest of flinches. I regret my sarcasm immediately, but he manages a smile. ‘The coppers think Terries had help, don’t they? And amidst all this, Murphy’s busy saving his own arse. I don’t blame him at all. You know why the Greens survived Event Gamma when so many of our lovely, brave Sunshiners didn’t?’

‘You were always so careful, prepared...’

‘And the others, they didn’t care for their children? We all did. But some of them looked back when they should’ve run for the hills. Tried to pack things. Pack! Tried to help each other. I helped nobody but us. Ran, jumped, lunged. That’s the job description, isn’t it? Surviving isn’t heroic but we’ve got to!’

‘The bunker would be crawling with hostiles if I hadn’t—’

‘Then bless Lady Luck! But don’t you think she’s your forever mate now. You don’t ever hear from the ones she stood up on. They get a sermon and six feet of Earth if they’re lucky.’

‘I know what survivor bias is, Dad. Anyway, point taken. Shan’t do anything stupid.’

We managed half a minute of silence before Mum is knocking on the door.

‘Open it.’

‘She’s asleep now, love,’ Dad answers.

‘I only want to see my daughter.’

‘Your daughter is healthy and asleep.’

‘Let me in. Now. T... There may be something on her.’

‘Doctor cleared her.’

‘Let me in. You don’t lock me from my bedroom, my girl!’ The knocking loudens into banging.

Furious, Dad gets up and opens the door. ‘Love thumping the Bible, do you? Mind reading Ephesians 5:22 for me?’

‘Oh... You! You think you’re being clever? You flirt with apostasy and you dare...’

There it is. The shouting begins. So glad I’ve already slept today.