Secure Beneath the Watchful Eyes

by GroteskBurlesque

Summary

Three years after a coup by a faction within the Government, Britain is under the thumb of the brutal Regime. When a prominent advisor to the dictatorship defects with the location of a missing political prisoner, the Opposition—now the Resistance—finds itself in possession of a few unlikely allies and hurtling towards a war that could tear the country apart.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The girl sat, as she always did, in her favourite chair by the window, her back straight and her hands folded in her lap, atop her hospital gown. The afternoon light, diffuse and wan, was a line of white gold that travelled across stray strands of her hair to grace her still features.

Abby Nkeng, the day nurse, greeted her, but the girl continued to stare straight ahead, her milky eyes fixed on a point beyond Abby, beyond the far wall that demarcated the confines of her small, quiet existence.

"Shall I brush your hair?" Abby asked, though a response wouldn’t come, and besides, she'd already begun doing it. The girl's hair was long and full, as devoid of colour as her eyes were empty of life. "I hear you're expecting a visitor today." The man's real name was well above Abby's level of security clearance, but it was impossible not to recognize him from the television, though he looked much smaller in person, much older. Abby, who’d seen what was left of her family deported, was wise enough not to let on that she knew who he was.

She was good at playing the ignorant foreigner (she had been born and raised in Tower Hamlets) to the point where most believed she was as dull-witted as her sole remaining patient. Officially, the long-term care facility had closed two years ago; unofficially, the lone survivor of the chemical weapons attack that had killed the last democratically elected Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland marked out her remaining days in a small room on the top floor, her name and identity as vanished as her mind.

Abby knew some of the story. They called it the White Death, and normally, it was instantaneous
and deadly. The photographs of the bleached corpses had never been seen outside of the Regime's inner circle, though she always pictured them as marble statues, like the girl, frozen in their seats. There had been one first, failed attack, the canister cracking prematurely and killing the terrorist who'd carried it, and one on the PM during a press conference. The girl, fifteen at the time, ought to have been at school, but her father had wanted her to stand in the background with several other teenagers to lend support to the government's newest educational initiative. The ones who died that day were luckier than she was.

The war that followed, with its dirty bombs and its savage reprisals, was no longer spoken about.

The visitor came once a week, when his schedule allowed, and he would take up the plastic chair in the corner and sit across from the girl, and talk to her. Abby would excuse herself, politely, avoiding the man’s gaze, and leave them alone. She didn’t know what the man talked about. She knew only that the girl wouldn’t answer, not this afternoon, and not ever; she was a corpse, kept clean and fed and bearing the markers of the living by the work of Abby’s hands. In the language of the current climate, she was a mental defective, condemned to a second, actual death.

For all that, she was terribly beautiful.

Abby felt a kinship with the girl. She, too, was a carefully guarded exception to the rule. The visitor felt that the girl responded well to her, and so there was a special chip on her identification that she was to ask the soldiers to scan if they stopped her. She had not been herded, like cattle, onto a boat along with the rest of her surviving family. Legally, she was a non-person, but what else but a non-person could serve a ghost?

Just before the visitor was due to arrive, the girl went into a convulsion, tumbling from her chair and jerking on the floor, her bloodless lips foaming. Abby turned her onto her side, and that was when the man stepped through the door.

The girl twisted, vomited, and it caught the tip of the visitor’s loafer.

This is it, Abby thought. This is how I die. He’d never witnessed one of her spells before; he would have her fired from her job, disappeared, crammed onto a leaky boat destined for some African shithole, thrown out the door of an aeroplane gliding above the Atlantic. This glimpse of the horror that lived within the girl’s ivory chrysalis would condemn her to irrelevancy. Abby was a secret keeper, and the secret was writhing on the ground, spluttering and pissing herself, all in front of the man who had singlehandedly ushered in a new era of stability and order, the most powerful man in the entire country.

She didn’t expect him to kneel beside the girl, remove a handkerchief from the pocket of his suit jacket, and clean the frothing corners of her mouth.

She didn’t expect, when he at last looked up at Abby, to see tears in his eyes.

“Will she live?”

Abby nodded, then sensing further explanation was needed, said, “She does this often. It’s…her condition. I’ll get her cleaned up.”

His suit must have cost a year of Abby’s salary, but he nevertheless kept his hand on the girl’s shoulder until her seizure had passed, and helped Abby get her back into the chair afterwards.

“You tell no one,” he said. “You tell fucking no one, do you understand?”

Abby raised a finger to her lips. It seemed she and the girl had both been spared. He wiped moisture
from his cheek, and with it, any semblance of human emotion.

It was his cruelties that defined him, but his acts of mercy that would undo him every time.
London Calling To the Underworld

Chapter Summary

In which Emma tries to bring down the government with a Post-It, Sam heads to Scotland to see a priest, and Ross Lowell, Minister of Propaganda, visits his opposite number.

The woman, shrouded in a black overcoat with a black headscarf tied over her pale hair might have been a Hollywood starlet promenading down the French Riviera or a femme fatale in an old spy movie. With the nervous air of either of the above, she glanced at the security cameras that tracked her every step as she braced herself against the chill. She’d stopped just short of black sunglasses—combined with the scarf, and even in the dead of winter, they might be construed as a disguise, as nefarious intent. She kept her head down in the hopes that no one would see her, and her hand on her identification papers in case someone did.

She froze in the beam of a searchlight that seemed to pause as it passed over her. Shuddered. This wasn’t the London she knew, but it was the one she’d—albeit unwittingly—helped create.

Not many businesses were open an hour before the beginning of curfew, so the warm yellow beacon of a café that catered mainly to the Regime’s minor functionaries and cronies stood apart from rows of darkened and shuttered windows. Late-night meetings, at the very doorstep of the enemy, were a risk, but she was already a wanted woman. Despite the cold, the note that she held between two of her fingers was damp with her sweat.

The bells above the door announced her arrival. He was already waiting for her. She slipped into the booth across from him. There was a table of men in suits talking loudly near the back but a wide moat of space around the booth; she hoped they looked uninteresting, just two model citizens, blandly attractive cogs in the apparatus, meeting for a nightcap after a work day that had gone on hours too long.

“Internet porn,” he said as she adjusted her skirt before sitting.

“You said that last time,” she said, “and the time before. Shawarma.”

“That’s a good one.” Almost apologetically: “The Daily Show. Hullo, Emma.”

“Hi Ollie.” It was the game they played every time they met. She didn’t bother telling him that if he weren’t completely bollocks with computers, he might still be able to get internet porn, at least from overseas. Maybe even The Daily Show, if it was still on the air, though she suspected he didn’t miss that nearly as much.

For three years, she’d lived for these exchanges, and their secret language of lost luxuries that stood in for what she really missed. She remembered their constant break-ups and nearly romantic reunions, their passionate and embarrassingly public shouting matches as if in a book she’d read as a child. Hard as it was to imagine, there had been a time when the worst he had to fear was a bollocking from the director of communications, back when a leak could only cost them their careers.

Emma buried the thought alongside the names she dared not speak, names of men and women in all
likelihood buried in unmarked mass graves, and cleared her throat. No point in stalling. “I want to come in,” she said.

His response was a faint echo of the high-pitched giggle she’d once first found annoying, then endearing, then annoying again. “What makes you think I have anything to do with that?”

“Don’t be coy, Ollie. It doesn’t suit you.” She adjusted the scarf, twisted the fringed corner of the fabric between her fingertips. “I can pay.”

“They’re not after money.” For the sake of plausible deniability, he added, “I don’t think.”

“I didn’t mean money.” Her volume dropped abruptly as the server came around to collect their orders. She’d have to add decent coffee to her list; she settled for tea over the utter toxic instant shit that the Regime must have stockpiled before the embargo. Then, very deliberately not glancing at the table at the back, she reached into the pocket and retrieved the yellow Post-It note. There were two letters, and a string of numbers, written on it, the blue ink already beginning to bleed.

“Oh,” and that awful laugh again, “Oh, no, no. Just how fucking stupid do you think I am?” When her mouth opened, Ollie added, “No, don’t even answer that. How stupid do you think they are?”

“Would you,” she tried, “at least, for one time in your life, attempt to be something like a decent human being and pass that along to those people you have nothing to do with anymore so that maybe, just maybe, they can make up their own minds what they want to do about this?”

“It’s a trap,” he replied, and it was a measure of his seriousness in this regard that he didn’t even make the obvious Star Wars reference.

“It is.” She’d known that, naturally, from the moment it started, with Weber’s heavy mitt on her shoulder, Miss Messinger, I’d like you to come for a ride with me. “Of course it is. But it isn’t just a trap for your non-friends. They know I’ve been talking.”

“Why should I care?” He was suddenly agitated, though, and she frowned. Despite what she’d often said—and the considered opinion of the aforementioned communications director—Ollie wasn’t entirely stupid. But when he was backed into a corner, he got sloppy, and sloppiness was the last thing either of them needed now. If she was compromised, he could very well be compromised as well, with his cozy appointment at a corporation subcontracted to mine surveillance camera data, and his unofficial position as a purveyor of highly sensitive information to government and terrorists alike. He could, like her, find himself trapped between the Regime and a Resistance whose interests were almost certainly best served by a quick and simple bullet to the head.

“I’m not much use to anyone in a black cell, am I? Either way, it’s over. But you can perhaps not be a complete tosser about it.” She clasped her hands—bits of scarf still threaded through her fingers—so tightly together that they whitened. “I was there, by the way, if you care at all. They took me down to the cells and showed me.”

She could hear him trying, and mostly succeeding, in controlling his breathing. She had to admit that he was doing better than she was. Maybe he had grown up a little after all. “Why?”

“They knew I’d come running to you. And they wanted me to be convincing.” She sighed. “I’ve been honest. I always was. I can’t take it anymore. Your friends can make their own decisions.” She shoved the Post-It across the table, desperate to be rid of it. Her sticky pad, that she insisted on keeping even in the age of tablets and smartphones, had been in her blazer pocket. It had come with her, sat there against her heart while she watched, and after she’d GPS’d the coordinates and written them down on the top leaf, her hands shaking so badly that her pen had gone right through the paper
in places. “Ollie,” she tried again, “It was terrible. No one…no one deserves that.”

For the first time, an expression—carefully practiced, she knew better than to trust him even now—that resembled sympathy crossed his face. Despite her misgivings, it was enough to crack open the floodgates. Sympathy, these days, was a rarer commodity than good coffee or shawarma. She curled in on herself, buried her face in her arms, and sobbed.

“Emma? Oh fuck, Emma, don’t do this here. Not now. Come on.” She heard change clattering at the table and then he was at her side, lifting her to her feet, his body between her and their potential audience in the interest of not making a scene. He said, loudly enough for the men in the back and the staff of two to overhear, if they so desired, “Your da’s not dead yet, is he? It’s a wonder what people can come back from these days.”

She sniffled, wiped her eyes and nose on her sleeve, and chose to interpret his words as acquiescence.

“Can I come home with you?” she asked, the perfect picture of the perfect, grieving daughter. “I don’t want to be alone tonight.”

He rolled his eyes, but nodded. His arm around her, he led her out into the street. A searchlight spun across them, just as he lifted her chin so that her tearstained face was just below his, a mockery of a normal young couple, in a normal time. “I’ll never get used to those,” Ollie muttered, squinting against the burst of white, their shadows black against a massive electronic billboard sporting a portrait of the Chancellor posed before a fluttering Union Jack.

“Maybe you won’t need to.” When the sweep had passed, he started walking, still keeping her close to him. The night seemed somehow warmer than it had when she’d arrived.

“Can’t believe you’re crying over—your da. He’d laugh at you, you know. Or worse.”


“Fine time to grow a conscience, Emma.”

They kept walking, his own flat well in the opposite direction, and she told herself that gripping his arm had everything to do with appearances and was nothing at all like the way a drowning woman might cling to a life raft.

The city, cleaner and crueler than it had ever been, took no further notice of them.

Ollie said little as they walked—not that she would have expected him too, except that silence, coming from him, was unnerving as all hell—beyond asking her several times if she was sure. She was. Her feet were aching in her heels when they finally reached a condemned townhouse near one of Exclusion Zones. She followed him inside, and up the creaking stairs, into what had been a child’s bedroom. He tugged open the bottom drawer of a battered wooden dresser. There, neatly folded, were several hazmat suits. He retrieved one, handed it to her.

“White’s not really your colour,” he said, “but it’ll have to do.”

“You’re serious.”
“Last chance to back out.”

She thought about the cells, the way the screaming echoed through the narrow hallways. Better an elevated risk of cancer, better the merciful kiss of the White Death, than spending the rest of her life in one of those cells. She zipped the suit over her clothes, then fastened the gas mask he passed her over her face.

“Are you my mummy?” Ollie’s voice, muffled by his own mask. She couldn’t make herself so much as smile.

They stood at the rim of a crater, the ground jagged with twisted rebar and piles of rubble. No one guarded this Exclusion Zone; there were signs posted, and barbed wire, but enough gaps in the fence that slipping through was easy. Even the stupidest of London’s most downtrodden wasn’t thick enough to live here. Between the shambling house and the entrance to the Tube, well past the safe no-man’s land with its battered radiation symbols, they didn’t encounter a single human being. It occurred to Emma that the Regime already knew where the Resistance bases were, and was just waiting patiently for them to poison themselves.

Ollie pushed his mask above his face as they descended the stairs into the station; Emma didn’t feel nearly so confident that the air in the Underground was breathable. She balked, too, when he hopped onto the track, though she knew as well as he did that no trains had passed through this station in three years.

For the last long hour of their journey, he didn’t speak a single word.

Just when she was about ready to lie down on the track and die, he at last knocked on what looked like a maintenance room door, two short raps and a pause, then another quick three. She heard a lock unlatch, saw the sliver of a girl’s face before the door opened all the way.

“Suits off,” the girl said. “Dump them by the front. You can bring in the masks, though.”

Emma’s long hair was tangled up in the gas mask straps, and she was having trouble with the zipper, realizing belatedly that it wasn’t the zipper but her hands, shaking again, and Ollie grunted in frustration and did it for her, sparing her the joke at how it’d never been that hard for him to undress her in the past. She stepped out of the puddle of white and through the door, to a scene of half a dozen grim, grubby young men and women seated on old couches and chairs, jugs of bottled water stacked up to the ceiling behind them.

“Is it safe?” Emma asked.

“It stopped being safe the moment you opened your gob to Ollie,” the girl snapped. “You won’t die of radiation or the gas, if that’s what you’re wondering. The Regime wants you to think it’s worse out here than it is.”

“I’ve seen environmental reports.”

“Sure. Wait here. Ollie?”

He followed the girl through another door, and Emma stood in the centre of the room, hands folded in front of her, avoiding the stares of the assembled rebels, keenly aware of how clean and well-fed she was by comparison, how fucking posh. How far she’d fallen, to end up here. It was muffled, but it sounded like shouting was happening on the other side of the door. After long minutes, Ollie emerged, a look of dejection on his face that she hadn’t seen in—when had it been? Maybe the night of the coup.
“She’ll see you now,” he said to her, and then slumped on one of the couches.

And in Emma went. This room really was a maintenance cupboard; there would have been mops hanging off the walls except those had been cleared out in favour of a map of London and surroundings, showing the Exclusion Zones and Xs that she thought might refer to bombings. Incongruously, the room’s only other decoration was a photo of a young couple, the man tall and gaunt and grinning, the woman pretty and dark-haired, a softer, sweeter version of the Patty Hearst impersonation sitting behind the desk.

“Shut the door,” the woman—and Emma knew her, couldn’t place her, but she definitely reminded her of someone—said. Emma did. The woman had a quiet voice, but it was the voice of someone not to be fucked with. “You know your life’s over, don’t you?”

“Ollie said as much.”

“We can speak freely. Do you know who I am?”

Emma thought back to parties, conferences. Who was she? “The leader of the Resistance?” she tried. The woman laughed. “God, no. You think we’d let you anywhere near the leadership? You really don’t remember me, do you?”

“Sorry, no.”

“Call me Sam.”

“Okay, Sam. I’m—”

“I know who you are. Ollie showed me your little note.” Sam stood, her black jumper clinging to every sharp angle of her bony frame, and turned to the map. Pointed to a pushpin by the Exclusion Zone that oozed over Barking and Dagenham. “The old Ford plant is a black site, according to you.”

Emma nodded, and Sam motioned for her to sit down. Sam did as well, though it didn’t make her presence any less looming. (Which didn’t seem right; she wasn’t tall enough to loom. And yet there she was, somehow managing it.)

“Now that you’ve been down here,” Sam said, “You stay here, until we’re satisfied that you can be trusted and that you’re not entirely shite with a gun. If that day ever comes, you will not step above ground without a balaclava and the cover of night ensuring that your face isn’t seen on camera. If you ever see fucking daylight again, it’ll be because we’ve won. Am I making myself quite clear?”

Emma swallowed hard. “Ollie didn’t quite phrase it like that. But I thought it might be something along those lines.”

“Now.” And there was the note, amid stacks of paper on the desk’s surface. “I want you to look me in the eye and tell me exactly what you saw, in detail. If you’re lying, I’ll know. If you’re leaving anything out, I’ll know. If I think, even for a second, that you’re feeding me bullshit, I will flay your fucking face off and sew it into a new purse.”

Emma told her. She at least had the satisfaction of watching Sam’s face drain from the colour of a subterranean mole rat to that of a drowned corpse.

“And you’re sure,” Sam said when she’d finished.

“Trust me,” Emma said. “I’m sure.”
“I don’t trust you. There are two people in the world whom I trust. One is, according to you, languishing in a secret prison. If he’s dead, I’m going to honour his memory by brutally slaughtering a Tory cunt in a ritual blood sacrifice. I think he’d like that, don’t you?”

*Oh. That* Sam.

“He’s alive,” Emma whispered. “Last I saw.”

“You’d best hope he stays that way,” Sam replied. “We don’t get a lot of Tories down here to choose from.” Then she leaned forward, elbows on the desk, rubbing at her temples. She couldn’t have been any older than Emma, but she suddenly looked ancient, weary. “I’m done with you, for now. Go on outside. Ella will show you around. I’ll be gone for a few days.”

“So you’re—” She shouldn’t care, she didn’t, except that she *did.* “You’ll pass this along to the actual leader, then?”

Sam snorted. “Don’t be daft. The actual leader has enough problems.”

“You’re not going alone? There are guards. It’ll be suicide.”

“I’m not,” Sam confirmed, “going alone.” Then, more to herself than to Emma: “I suppose I’m going to church.”

Sam drove all night, stopping only for checkpoints, chewing caffeine tablets, her only company the Wilco cassette tape she’d tugged out of the glove compartment (she’d had to brush dust off the case and she was actually surprised, upon slipping it into the antediluvian player, that it worked at all. Her doubts extended to the car as well.). Sundeep had checked in long enough for an epic row, about the two new refugees in their meeting room, about the collateral damage in an otherwise successful assassination of the Regime’s propaganda minister, and oh, mostly about her immediate departure to a fishing village in Scotland, population 94, soon to be reduced to 93 if Sam had her way. It wasn’t so much the journey that he objected to—God knew she needed a holiday if it were possible for a lieutenant in a guerrilla army to take a holiday—but the mission, entirely unauthorized by their Glorious Leader, that she intended to undertake afterwards. Without him.

Locked in her maintenance cupboard-cum-office, with only her husband to see, and the soundproofing relatively impressive given its original purpose, Sam had indulged in a quick cry.

Sundeep had immediately shifted gears, pressing her head to the centre of his chest, his thin arms wrapped around her. She’d explained that she wanted him there, more than anything, not just with the black site but with Scotland, too, especially with that, but he couldn’t be, not when the risk of failure was so high.

In a rare moment of candidness, she’d confessed to him that being in the same place with the only two people in the world she cared about carried the risk of losing them both at once.

“What about me?” he’d pleaded. “D’you think I’d survive losing you?”

She stepped up on her toes to kiss him. “Yes,” she’d whispered. “You’d fucking well better.”

She pulled into the driveway behind the church just as the service was getting out. Pretty place, this,
especially dusted with snow, all mossy stone and peeling paint, fog drifting off the sea to meet the heavy grey clouds. You’d never suspect a place like this had changed much in the centuries its buildings had stood, never imagine it coming under the thumb of the Regime. As she climbed out of the car, she drew the attention of more than a few people coming out of the church, but they greeted her with smiles more open than any she’d seen in London, and it tore at her heart. She silently apologized to them for the hell she was about to rain down on their tranquil lives, for depriving them of their parish priest, for being a reminder that the world beyond their village was vicious and remorseless and closing in on them.

He didn’t come out, so she went in. She hadn’t set foot in a church, Catholic or otherwise, for years. She was surprised to find the priest—one Father Alastair Carmichael, at least officially—sitting in the front pew, facing the altar, his head bowed as if in prayer, which for all it defied belief might actually be the case.

“I saw your car pull up outside,” he said by way of explanation, and she was startled to discover that he had a volume setting below a dull roar. “Let’s no’ do this here. Walk and talk.”

He led her out to the seaside, a remote stretch past the docks, though contrary to his suggestion, he didn’t speak until she did. “You look good,” Sam offered, and it was startlingly true. She hoped he hadn’t found some sort of inner peace out here that she was about to shatter. She’d never thought the country life would have suited him as well as it did, but he lacked the pallor of everyone she knew in London, and despite a curling beard that lent him at least enough gravitas to pass for a priest, he looked much more relaxed and youthful than she might have expected.

And the cassock, well, she’d file that one away for later.

“Trouble down south, then?”

She handed him the note, now quite worn, nevertheless enough to make her heart leap into her throat every time she looked at it. And—she would have been tempted to think thank God, except—she was treated promptly to an outpouring of colourful obscenity, much of it uncomfortably blasphemous under the circumstances, characteristic not so much of Father Alastair Carmichael but of the Pitbull of Downing Street himself, Jamie Macdonald.

As she had, he asked if she was sure, only with more “fucks” thrown in.

Sam shook her head. “The girl’s scared, but I don’t think she was lying. It’s the most likely lead we’ve had.”

“You’ve told the Glorious Leader?”

“If I had,” Sam said, “do you think I’d be here? Just the two of us. I’m not going to risk another cock-up like three years ago, not on this bint’s word alone. I’d go myself but I thought you’d want to know.”

“Jesus,” the priest muttered. “Jesus fuckity Christ.”

“So you’re in.”

He looked out at the sea, the late morning light, diffused by fog, illuminating every windblown crevice in his face. His cassock flapped behind him. She realized that she’d been waiting for Jamie’s fury to bubble over, for him to shout or smash something to pieces, but he only stared ahead as though seeking an answer from the ice-crusted water. Sam, naturally, knew as well as anyone what had knocked the fight out of him, and no one could have blamed him for leaving when he did. If
fishing boats and the Virgin Mary gave him some comfort after everything he’d been through, she could hardly begrudge him that. But she wanted divine fucking wrath, and she hoped to hell that the hollow shell masquerading as a human being had it in him.

She’d never seen him stay still for so long.

“I like it here,” he said finally, “Can you believe that, Sam, because I cannae. Some days I catch myself goin’ on like none of it happened, like I really am—” He stopped, and the corners of his lips turned up in a crude mockery of a grin. “No surrender, aye?”

“Jamie.”

“Of course I’ll come with ye. It isnae though there’s a fuckin’ choice in the matter.” She felt him clasp her hand. It wasn’t a romantic gesture. She’d never so much as touched him before, not even at the memorial service, and she was startled at how rough his hands were, like he’d been out at sea too. Had they always been like that, back when he was ostensibly just a bureaucrat? “Come on, then. I’ve a present for ye.”

They walked back to the church. The wind had picked up, and she hunched her body against it, grateful when he pushed the heavy oak door shut behind her. He led her into the sacristy—“I’m Protestant, is this even allowed?”—and tugged aside an old rug to reveal a loose floorboard.

Now it was her turn to swear, copiously, and with a ferocity that would have made her mentor proud. Beneath the church floors was a small armoury, assault rifles, ammunition boxes, bomb components, even what she thought was a rocket launcher. “Where did it all come from?”

Jamie shrugged. “Sympathetic friends on the outside. Arms smuggled in, people smuggled out, and every so often one o’ the fuckin’ cunts gets topped. No’ as well as your lot do, but respectable, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she breathed. Her own cell would kill to have this kind of firepower casually at their disposal. “The local authorities?”

“Haven’t come for the Catholics yet.” He tugged the first gun loose and threw it in her direction, as though he had no doubt that she’d easily catch it. Which she did. Neither of them had adapted well to a retreat from public life, and she suspected him of spending as much time as she did drilling with illegally smuggled guns. He retrieved several duffel bags, and she realized he’d been planning something like this for a while. “Well, Meinhof,” he said. “Shall we pay a visit to the Regime?”

Meanwhile.

Ross Lowell, newly appointed Minister of Propaganda—his predecessor having recently met his demise courtesy of terrorists kind enough to ensure a constant stream of fresh ideas moving through the department—blinked nervously and hoped, rather in vain, that no one could see it. The cell was dark, but its occupant, currently sprawled over a filthy mattress shoved in the corner, his outline barely visible against the presumably-once-white rectangle, had been in the dark for a long time. If he could see at all, his eyes must have adjusted to the conditions. Lowell hadn’t gotten a good look at him when the cell door had opened, and he could see even less now. He had a mental image drawn from three-year-old tabloids but he suspected it wasn’t all that accurate anymore.
“You don’t want me in with you?” the guard had asked.

“He’s hardly dangerous now,” Lowell had answered, though he privately felt that if that were actually the case, they’d have executed the prisoner instead of tossing him into the first—but not the last—black site to be built on British soil. Now he found himself pressed against the door, the lock digging into his lower back, and nowhere to crouch or sit without ruining his trousers.

“Hello, Malcolm,” he said, in the faux-cheery voice he reserved for his occasional media appearances. He’d have to use it more, now that he’d become the official velvet glove for the Regime’s iron fist.

If Malcolm heard, he gave no indication. The mass of shadows in the corner didn’t so much as stir. Undeterred, Lowell gave his name, then, “Do you know who I am?”

That was apparently too much of a temptation, because a gray, terrible voice, growled: “I don’t fucking know you. You’re no one, ye don’t fuckin’ exist. Fuck off.”

“I thought we might be friends.”

Lowell could see a little better now, a gaunt spectre of a man, whittled into sharp angles by a privation that had begun long before the coup. He’d been foolish for even considering the guard’s offer. Malcolm didn’t look like he was able to stand, let alone attack him.

“We’re in the same line of work. Or, we were.”

Malcolm muttered something that might have been another “fuck off” and might have just been rambling to himself. There was no force behind the sentiment; he was slumped over the mattress, his arms wrapped around his knees and his breath wheezing with the effort of even this half-attempt at speech. Lowell, seizing the opportunity of an audience more captive than even the one he usually had, continued.

“You’re of no real use to the Regime. You lasted under interrogation, what was it? Eight minutes? After which you were willing to tell them everything you knew, none of which was in any way useful. Even before we took over, you had no power. Did you think it would have been different, if you’d been free at the time? You’re alive because you were already locked up and weren’t worth a bullet. No one even knows you’re here.”

He paused, trying to suss out whether he’d been understood.

“Let me make this clear,” he said. “We are winning. We will continue to win. I’ve been appointed to ensure that the state of affairs that has restored Britain to greatness continues unopposed and unabated. But in order to do so, I find myself in the difficult position of circumventing a certain deficit of creativity amongst our leadership. A position with which I understand you, in your day, were quite familiar.”

Lowell moved from the door to stand at the end of the mattress. He knelt to be at eye-level with the shaggy grey head.

“I thought I might ask your advice.”

The prisoner’s head sagged to his bony knees, and his thin shoulders trembled. Lowell was sure that the ragged, broken noises that wracked his body were sobbing until Malcolm looked up, his pale eyes blasted and vacant but entirely dry, and Lowell took a step backward and almost tripped on his arse.
Malcolm wasn’t crying. He was laughing.

Lowell called for the guards.
Some Tin-Pot Story

Chapter Summary

In which Sam and Jamie spring Malcolm from a secret prison, and Julius still somehow has biscuits.

Chapter Notes

Copious thanks to ThornWild and stackcats for Brit-picking and proofreading. I am awed by the kindness of strangers.

Jamie babbled non-stop as Sam drove, and to her relief, it was nearly all about plans. He was clutching a set of blueprints that she’d hastily retrieved from the archives just before her mad flight north, mapping out the entrances and exits to the auto plant-turned-secret-prison, babbling on about explosives and diversionary tactics with the rapid-fire diction of a general and the linguistic flair of a Glaswegian sewer rat.

She wondered if it wouldn’t have been better to go to the leadership rather than going off half-cocked with only Jamie as back-up. They could have launched a proper raid. With half of Jamie’s armoury stuffed in the hollowed-out compartment under the backseat, they’d all have stood a chance. She must have voiced at least some of these thoughts out loud—God, she was tired—because he immediately snapped at her to stop those fuckin’ thoughts, sweetheart, right now, y’hear? Remember Leyhill?

Sam did. Her disastrous first run at terrorism. The fate of prisoners, so-called-political or otherwise, had been one of the earliest signs of the Regime’s trajectory. All sentences were extended indefinitely, pending review; Category D prisons were to be closed and their prisoners transferred to an undisclosed location. Sam had duly consulted the leadership—haphazardly organised back then—and they’d deliberated, and by the time her squad had bashed open the doors, the facility was devoid of anyone beyond a small but well-equipped group of soldiers who’d stayed behind to ambush them.

The Regime had never publicly stated what it had done with the prisoners, and meanwhile, Sam had the blood of a dozen actual comrades on her hands, with nothing left but speculation as to why she’d been so eager to raid that prison in particular. Only an unbroken streak of successful operations, accompanied by the mitigating factor of painful personal history, redeemed her reputation in the eyes of the Resistance’s inner circle.

This time would have to be quiet. If they failed, the Resistance would lose one highly regarded lieutenant and one mildly unhinged arms smuggler. If they succeeded, she could make her apologies later.

“Checkpoint,” Jamie said, interrupting her thoughts. She slowed to give him enough time to stuff the blueprints under the seat. They were driving a ruined stretch of the A74, the earth pockmarked and trees smashed, the only sign of life a barricade of flashing lights and unmarked vans and a line of cars in front of them.
“My ID’s in the glove compartment.” She’d let her hair down for the drive; catching a glimpse of herself in the side mirror, she thought she almost looked the part of the coltish office worker, a complete non-entity. There were lines on her face that hadn’t been there three years ago, but everyone was thinner and harder these days, with the rationing.

The soldiers motioned the car in front of them off to the side of the road. Its occupant, a well-dressed middle-aged man, stood beside the front tyre as they searched the vehicle. He looked about ready to cry.

Sam forced a bright smile and handed over her card. Jamie did the same; with the priest’s collar above his fisherman’s sweater and those perpetually adolescent wide eyes of his, she suspected he was much more convincingly innocent than she was. Still, Sam didn’t breathe until the scanner’s LED blinked green and they waved her past.

“Only four hundred fuckin’ more to go,” he muttered, which was as far as he’d concede to being scared shitless. His knee bobbed under the glove compartment. It was clear enough that he wanted something to hit, and soon.

An hour from Dagenham, they took refuge for the remainder of the cold afternoon in the stopped car off the side of the road. Sam knew that she should at least attempt sleep, but her pulse was racing and Jamie was still worrying over maps and blueprints long after the point of usefulness.

“I can’t believe you’re a priest,” she said.

“I cannae believe yer fuckin’ married.”

Conscious of the minefield that surrounded that particular discussion, she replied, “You can believe I’m a terrorist, though.”

He said, “Aye,” with such cold precision that she was reminded that he’d been capable of bloody mayhem well before there’d been good cause to deal it out.

They were so close. After three years, he’d been in London all this time, and she pushed down the sick giddiness in her stomach. She hadn’t given up, that was the important thing. She hadn’t forgotten.

She must have drifted off eventually, because the next thing she knew Jamie was roughly shaking her awake. It was dark, silver moonlight spilling through the car windows the way the searchlights did, and her instinct to panic was stilled immediately by Jamie’s hand over her mouth. They knew their roles. They changed in the cramped seats without the slightest acknowledgment of embarrassment—years of living close-quarters with the Resistance had trained her to ignore bodies, even attractive ones—into black cargo pants and balaclavas, slung rifles over their shoulders and stuffed grenades into their pockets. She kept silent over the last expanse of road into bleak industrial decay.

The plant finally in sight, they parked and stood some distance away. Sam felt him take her hand again. She squeezed his in response, once, and met his eyes. He lit a cigarette, shoved through the mouth hole of his balaclava, a condemned man’s last puff before the firing squad.

“Let’s bury the fuckers,” she said.
The last time the soldiers came for Malcolm, it wasn’t an interrogation.

They didn’t ask questions, didn’t even try to persuade him, as Lowell had, to politely arselick his way to a slightly less rancid cell by offering his sage advice to the Regime’s apparatchiks. There was nothing they wanted from him beyond watching him thrash against the restraints, pointless, stupid reprisal for the Resistance’s latest attack, and his only consolation was that they were settling for torturing him because all of the actual killers had gotten away.

It wasn’t much of a consolation, though, not with the cold water filling his nostrils and mouth, the suffocating, clawing agony in his chest, and who’d have thought that drowning would feel so much like being set ablaze from the inside? The wet cloth over his eyes prevented him from so much as seeing his tormenters, and he choked and gagged and tried to scream but the noise that came out instead was a death rattle, the sound of his already-bollocked lungs deciding that was fucking it, they were done with him for good this time. When there was a pause for him to catch his breath, the breath didn’t come. Instead he sobbed, and tried to retch, and of course this was how he’d die, eyes bulging out of his skull, the air throttled out of him, every thought and word burned from his throat, stripped of authority and dignity and horribly, wretchedly alone.

His body had seldom been more than an inconvenience for him, a skinny sack of bones and not much meat that he dragged behind him like a millstone, but he nonetheless raged at its betrayal, its weakness. He was dying, and the distant shouting down the hall, the pop of gunfire, barely registered: the last fantasies of an oxygen-deprived brain, still dreaming of rescue when the rest of him had given up. Even the crash of a door being kicked open wasn’t happening, or if it was, it was happening somewhere far away from him.

After a lifetime in politics, he didn’t believe in miracles.

Someone shouted a stream of invective that contained his name. More gunshots, somewhere above the surface, a minor disturbance compared to the roaring current in his ears.

And then he was being released from his restraints, propped up into a sitting position with a puffer in his mouth. “Breathe!” And he was truly dead, or irreparably deranged, because it sounded exactly like Sam. He somehow found a last flicker of strength to inhale, and it hurt like hell but his respiratory passages opened enough to admit air, and the person who in no possible way could be Sam put her arms around him and murmured, “Oh, Malcolm.”

It was the first time in over four years that anyone had held him. He collapsed against her, into blessed darkness.

The guards had been prepared for them, the trap set for the Resistance as much as it was meant to confirm that Emma Messinger was leaking more dirt than a punctured colostomy bag, but they weren’t (Sam would note, in hindsight, with some degree of pride in her ability to plan on the fly) expecting anything like Jamie. The operations the Regime had weathered lately were scattered, cautious affairs—a homemade nail bomb here, a quick snatching there—nothing like a giant fuck-off blast from the RPG that tore a hole through one of the walls, or a flurry of grenades lobbed at the soldiers who immediately rushed to investigate. Between the two of them, they were too fast, too heavily armed, and too reckless with their own lives to keep out.

She went into something like a trance at times like these, firing at anything that moved, her trigger
finger moving of its own accord as though she’d been doing this all her life. She was, she had to admit, every bit as good at killing people as she’d been at fixing copiers and remembering who took what in their coffee.

There were no numbers on the cell doors, but Emma had described it, third door from the end of the corridor, with a long scrape below the lock. It was actually open. She’d thought to shoot it off, or torture one of the guards into giving up the code, but everything was actually easier than she’d gone in expecting until she kicked open the door and it suddenly got much, much harder.

She heard, as if from the other end of a tunnel, Jamie yelling for Malcolm, and then just shouting.

Sam had to force herself to look, because otherwise all of them were dead, first at the two soldiers, dressed in the grey uniform of the Regime, then down at the body cuffed to a table, head thrown back with a dripping cloth draped over the face, a whistle of breath emitting from it that sounded like air sucked through a crushed straw. Without thinking, she raised her gun and shot the man standing closest to her through the forehead, then backed away as Jamie shoved himself past her and through the door.

It was as if she, too, couldn’t breathe. Jamie glanced at Malcolm, who fucking hell wasn’t moving at all, and launched himself at the other soldier. The man, quite capable of torturing a restrained and emaciated man in his fifties, proved to be substantially less capable of handling an enraged, if diminutive, former rugby back, and while Sam fumbled at the corpse’s belt for the keys to the cuffs, she watched Jamie in a full-on rabid frenzy out of the corner of her eye.

Apparently, it was possible to bash someone’s skull against the side of a table until it exploded like an overripe watermelon. Good to know.

Sam lifted Malcolm up into a sitting position and forced the inhaler into his mouth, commanded him to breathe, to be alive, and was rewarded for her faith with a shuddering heave so violent she was afraid it would tear him apart. There was barely anything left of him under the ragged shroud of uniform. She looked over his shoulder to see Jamie still slamming the soldier’s head into the table.

“We need to go,” she said, “We need to get him out of here.”

Jamie swore again, but he dropped the soldier and staggered over to where Sam clutched Malcolm to her.

“Malc,” he whispered in a broken voice. “Can ye walk?”

“I don’t think he can hear you.”

Jamie, caveman that he was, slung the unconscious body over his shoulder, fireman style, pistol in hand, and it was a measure of his determination to get all of them out of there now that Sam had to struggle to keep up with him. More guards were flooding out from the cells, and she fired over and over again, willed herself to stay moving, stay shooting, until they were away and she could finally break down.

They reached the car. Jamie, almost tenderly for someone liberally splattered with another man’s blood and brains, lay Malcolm across the back seat and climbed in next to him, and didn’t have to tell Sam to drive like hell.
Berserker rage still boiling through him, Jamie shut his eyes tightly and tried desperately to calm the fuck down, just for a moment, before he punched a hole through the car door. Malcolm was out cold, a mercy that Jamie could almost envision as an act of a loving God who wasn’t out to fuck them all. His breath came in pained wheezes, but he was breathing, and Jamie craned his neck up at Sam and said, “Why d’ye have a puffer anyway?” Whereupon she tearfully confessed that she’d always carried a spare because Malcolm had a tendency to lose his, and she’d carefully transferred it to each new purse, long after he’d been arrested.

He turned his attention back to Malcolm, and what he saw almost made him suggest to Sam that they turn back so that he could ram several live grenades into the rectums of anything there possessed of both a grey uniform and a pulse. Malcolm was sheet-white, desiccated skin clinging to too-prominent bone, what little colour he’d had before completely sapped that he looked like he’d been run several times through a bad copier. Jamie was obsessing over the long hair and beard that made him look about twenty years older when he saw the hand dangling over the edge of the seat, fingers bent and crooked in a way that suggested they wouldn’t have closed properly if he’d tried to make a fist, and obviously intended to ensure that he never picked up a pen again. Heat flooded to Jamie’s eyes and he was sure he was going to be sick.

“He needs a hospital,” Jamie said, as if such things were possible in their utter clusterfuck of a world.

“We can’t,” Sam replied, “and you know we can’t.”

Jamie pushed back a wail of frustration and as softly as he could manage, placed his palm over Malcolm’s bumpy ribcage. Stroked there, trying both to soothe him and assess the extent of his injuries, but Malcolm groaned and Jamie pulled his hand back as if stung. He settled for rubbing his thumb over Malcolm’s temple, which was tolerated, barely; the man was a prickly auld cunt even while unconscious.

The agreed-upon plan, which had failed to take into account just how badly the fuckers had worked Malcolm over, was to switch cars outside of London and then take him to a safe house, which Sam now amended to, “No, Julius’s place,” and Jamie found himself nodding along, because as much as he detested the shiny poncy bawbag, Julius would let them in. Julius would have food that wasn’t tasteless rations, and running water, and a fuck-off gigantic feather bed, and Malcolm needed all of those things more than any of them needed safety. Jamie would personally rip out the throat of anyone who came near Malcolm anyway. Which he was quite capable of doing.

Malcolm stirred, and for a few minutes his red-rimmed, sea-foam eyes seemed to focus entirely on Jamie, and Jamie found himself for the first time in his life completely at a loss for words. He wanted nothing more than to pick the man up and cling to him, the absolute last thing he had in the entire world, and mumble all manner of sentimental jessie bollocks that he’d never actually admit, even to himself, except that it had been such a long fucking night and Malcolm looked for all the world like he was dying.

“You daft fucking twat,” he said instead. “You’re supposed tae be doin’ the waterboarding, no’ the other way ‘round.”

Malcolm just stared at him, his expression unreadable, and Jamie pressed their foreheads together and shut his eyes to keep the tears in.

“You daft fucking twat,” he whispered. He could feel Malcolm slump back down on the seat, but Jamie couldn’t make himself break contact, sure that if he pulled away Malcolm would evaporate into the ghost he’d been since the Regime’s bloody rise to power. Though folded into what could charitably be described as a stress position in the gap behind the front seat, Jamie didn’t move until they reached a car lot and Sam was opening the door and ordering him—the ex-PA, ordering him around—to
move Malcolm into the back of a van.

God, he weighed nothing. Jamie settled him in the seat with his head cradled in his lap and circled his hand around a wrist as thick as two of his fingers, and quietly promised to visit truly creative and sadistic violence upon the cuntswallops who had done this to him.

They reached Julius’ just before dawn, Sam driving along back roads to avoid checkpoints—one thing to skirt by patrols with a disarming smile and several duffle bags stuffed with weapons, and another entirely to smuggle an unconscious Enemy of the State past the Regime’s blood-brain barrier. He let her do the explaining and pushed past the stuttering ponce in his monogrammed dressing gown to carry Malcolm upstairs. He debated between the bathroom and the bedroom before Malcolm made the decision for him, scrabbling out of his arms to run for the toilet and curling over the rim in barely enough time for the bowl to catch a splatter of sick.

Jamie dropped beside him and rubbed between his shoulder blades, cringing at the knobby ridge of spine visible even beneath the rough fabric of his shirt. Malcolm allowed it for a few seconds before snarling at him, flushing the toilet, and slamming himself against the edge of the tub in an apparent effort to get as far from Jamie as possible. Jamie, stupidly, reached for him, only to have his hand slapped away.

“Piss off!”

His voice was so strained that Jamie’s immediate reaction was to lean in closer, except that this was the wrong thing to do because Malcolm flinched into the small crevice between the toilet and the bathtub, hugging his knees to his chest and glaring hatefully at Jamie.

“Malc…”


It occurred to him that they’d tortured Malcolm into insanity, that it was possible that he didn’t know where he was or who he was with, that he was probably completely terrified, and it also occurred to him that there’d be no way to tell the difference, really, and so he backed away, slowly, hopelessly fantasizing that Malcolm would just act like a normal person for once and let Jamie take care of him, cursing profusely when he didn’t. When he closed the door behind him, Sam was there, looking every bit as tired as Jamie felt, and Julius was watching them all from the stair.

From behind the closed bathroom door, the sound of water running and something that might have been a fist slamming into porcelain, again and again.

“I’m going back in there,” Jamie said, and Sam clutched his arms.

“Julius, can you, I don’t know, can you fuck off for a second? Make tea or something?” There was no venom in her words, just pure desolation. She wrapped her arms around Jamie and buried her face against his neck.

“He’s in pain,” Jamie whimpered. “You’d think he’d let me, at least—”

She reached for his hand and threaded her fingers through his. The sounds from the other side of the door were muffled, but not nearly muffled enough.

“Do you actually think he’d want either of us to see him like that?”

“I dinnae care,” Jamie said. “I just want—” Not that he could complete that sentence, not that he needed to with her, Sam being the only person who loved Malcolm as much as he did.
“There’s about a hundred bathrooms in this place,” Sam said. “Get yourself cleaned up. We both smell like shit. He’ll be fine.”

“He won’t be!” Jamie whined.

“No, I guess not,” she said. But he was listening to her nonetheless, moving stiff limbs in the direction of a second bathroom, aware of every ache and strain in his body. He was getting old, as much as his looks disguised it, and it had been years since he’d been in a proper fight. The shower’s water sluiced over him and dripped pink into the drain. He realised belatedly that he’d split his knuckles open at some point in the evening’s activities, and came up just short of deciding that listening to Sam hadn’t been an entirely shite idea.

When he emerged, a hundred years later, Julius and Sam were easing Malcolm—badly shaved and dressed in a silk nightshirt that might have made for excellent blackmail material a lifetime ago—into Julius’s ridiculous bed, shaking him awake enough to swallow Paracetamol that must have cost a small fortune on the black market and for which Jamie would have gladly sucked the baldy twat’s cock if it meant that Malcolm got a few hours of pain-free sleep. He looked more like himself, without the beard and with his hair damp and flattened against his skull. They’d have to cut the rest of the tangles off in the morning, Jamie decided, that hair made him look like the fucking Cryptkeeper, if any of them lived that long. Or maybe it was already the morning. He moaned.

“Why don’t you stay with him for a bit,” Sam suggested, with a clear implication of the adults are talking downstairs, Jamie, and it was a measure of just how pathetic Jamie was that he nodded eagerly, dragged the armchair over from the corner to sit close to the bed. If no one, Malcolm especially, was going to let Jamie climb in beside him and hold him (despite the fact that he hadn’t seen the man in four years and three of those had been spent in a dank pisshole being tortured) the least Jamie could do was guard him while he slept.

Experimentally, Jamie traced a finger over his maimed hand, so lightly that he was sure Malcolm wouldn’t have felt it even if he’d been conscious. The injury looked old, the bones shattered and never properly set, and Jamie’s eyes darted around the bedroom in search of something that he could smash in retaliation. Patience had never been his strong suit, and he was no one’s first choice for a caregiver, being more adept at dealing out pain than at mitigating it, and more than anything else he wanted Malcolm to wake up and be Malcolm again, derisive and arrogant and scowling and in possession of a cunning plan to drown every one of the Regime’s cut-rate jackbooted cat rapists in an ocean of horse piss. And to not be broken. Four years ago, before the inquiry and the trial and the war and the Regime, Jamie would have sworn that nothing in this world or the next could have broken Malcolm, but four years was a millennium in politics and the tangible evidence lay crumpled in front of him.

Malcolm, or whatever was left of him, curled on his side and wheezing shallow breaths into Julius’s pillow, didn’t do Jamie the favour of so much as stirring, and suddenly Jamie didn’t want to think about drowning anyone.

Fuck it—he just needed to talk to the bastard. Jamie didn’t have friends, neither of them did. They were too angry and driven and heartless. In the years before the coup, with Nicola blunderfucking the Party into irrelevance and Jamie in Siberian-gulag exile, their pint nights had devolved into vitriolic e-mails and too much careful distance. He’d come to the trial on the first day and Malcolm had shouted him out with a vehemence Jamie wished he’d reserved for his inquisitors.

After, though, it had been different. He’d needed Malcolm, and Malcolm was in prison, and then Malcolm was just gone, and Jamie was left with merely God to confide in. Which honestly wasn’t an adequate substitute. Going on twenty years, and no shortage of petty betrayals, vicious fights, losses
and disappointments between them, and he still couldn’t imagine a world in which Malcolm fucking Tucker was not the centre of his universe.

He knew, if he were honest with himself—and despite years of enforced religious contemplation, his bouts of genuine self-reflection were rare—he should have returned to the game years ago. He was no better than Julius, holed up in his palace and deluding himself that he was making a fucking *difference* while the country crumbled to shit around him.

Priesthood or no, Jamie never prayed. Hadn’t in years, not since that night, shortly after the coup, when Sam had appeared on his doorstep, whispering, “Jamie, Jamie, I’m so sorry,” and he’d understood at long last what God had in store for him. Even now, he didn’t so much pray as bargained. God owed him one. Four, but he’d take one, if Malcolm would just be okay, if Jamie could live long enough to fistfuck their enemies into submission. He would be the divine fucking sword of retribution, driven with righteous fury up the arses of the wicked until they choked on their own shit and blood, if only.

If only. Fuck. He leaned back in Julius’s stupid brocaded armchair, and waited.

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Julius had biscuits, and they were *contraband* biscuits, and if Sam weren’t a happily married woman and Julius no doubt a confirmed bachelor, she might have kissed him. She lifted the first one reverently, held it between two fingers and contemplated it with an intense focus born of fatigue as much as hunger, before taking the smallest bite possible and letting it dissolve to mush on her tongue.

Nothing she’d eaten in her entire life had ever tasted so good, and nothing would ever taste so good again.

Julius, ever polite even if he could never possibly understand starvation, sat quietly until she’d finished the first biscuit and was reaching, with somewhat less urgency, for a second, before gesturing for her to speak. “I’m sorry,” she managed. “I can’t even say I didn’t have anywhere else to go. And I might have been followed.”

Julius nodded, made a “hmm” noise, and sipped at his cup of tea. She did likewise, the liquid stinging her cracked lips.

“I might have fucked up,” Sam added.

“I am not entirely without defences, my dear,” Julius said, and he cast an eye at the suit of armour, no doubt belonging to one of his illustrious ancestors, mounted in the corner. She had a sudden vision of him donning it and riding forth to battle with the Regime’s thugs, and she quickly coughed and covered her mouth. He must have realised, because he said, “I didn’t mean—only that I’ve a *title*. Britain may have fallen to the fascists, but it is still Britain.”

Had she had any tears left to spend, she might have wept at the thought, but she was rung out like a sodden dishtowel. Britain was still Britain, and Julius was still Julius, with his gentle voice and his biscuits (where the fuck was he getting them? Was the Regime hoarding Jammy Dodgers in some Cold War-era bunker?) and in his opulent dining room with its oil portraits and tapestries, she could pretend that nothing outside had changed. She didn’t even *like* Julius, but the familiar was as priceless as what little good remained in the world.
“I am glad to see you, Samantha. Would you believe that I was worried?”

“You? I might actually, yeah.” She twisted a piece of her hair—greasy; she should have followed her own advice and taken a shower—around her finger.

“Much as it would be delightful to believe that you’ve come to reminisce over tea and biscuits about our lamented shared past, I imagine you have other pressing concerns.”

This was it, then. “Can you get someone to France, Julius?”

He was quiet for a time, sipping tea, with the selfsame expression she’d seen on his face just before he would stride into Malcolm’s office with a particularly asinine idea. “Someone?” he said, “I can, and have. It isn’t easy, as you know, but officials can be bribed. Malcolm Tucker, however? If his face hadn’t already been indelibly printed in the minds of every one of the Regime’s enforcers, it certainly will be once they’ve discovered that they’ve misplaced him.”

“Not to mention the bodies.” She sighed. “That’s what I thought.”

“And young James?”

“Well, I can hardly mention France to Jamie, not after——” Had Julius even heard about that? She imagined not, given that he wasn’t trying to drown Jamie in tea and misdirected sympathy. “Besides, you’d need a crowbar to pry him away from Malcolm.”

“Have you considered the radical notion of asking Malcolm what he wants?”

“He’s said about three words since we pulled him out of there. You can probably guess what they were. I don’t think he’s——” She couldn’t say it, not without the concern that speaking her fears aloud would somehow give them tangible shape. “That is to say, we didn’t rescue him because he’s useful to the cause.”

Julius reached out and patted her hand, and she wouldn’t cry, not in front of him, and certainly not with Malcolm upstairs. “My dear, dear girl,” and she wished his voice wasn’t so horribly kind. “I am well aware of that.”

“He’d have planned it out,” Sam said. “He’d have known what to do.” And worse, the Regime had a plan. They always did, and they weren’t swayed by emotion or nostalgia or compassion. “I’m afraid I’ve put you in terrible danger.”

“You have,” Julius agreed. “But I made my peace some time ago. There are far worse causes for which to die.”

“You’re not a revolutionary, Julius.”

“No more than you. And yet here we are, two dissidents sheltering a fugitive and waiting for the Regime to kick down the door. You may stay as long as you need, until then.”

“I can’t.” Sam drained the last of her tea, eyeing the teapot instead of meeting his gaze. “I’ll have to explain myself. There’s no sense in delaying it. I’d only hoped…” Even as the words left her mouth, she understood the hollowness of them. Knew that while the loyal, adoring girl she’d been might have wanted to protect Malcolm and get him as far away from London as possible, the pragmatic soldier she’d become had to believe he had some strategic value to them. She’d allowed for the possibility that he was too far gone to be of any use—Emma had said as much—but she’d always known, at some level, that broken or not he’d be coming back with her.
“You should get some sleep,” Julius said. “I have a feeling that it will be some time before you have the opportunity again. I’ll show you to the guest bedroom.”

“I’ve probably gotten you killed, and now I’ve put you on the couch, too?”

“Sacrifices must be made,” Julius said stoically, and patted her hand once more.

Julius’ guest bedroom was larger than the flat she’d lived in before the coup, and she collapsed gratefully onto the bed, the first she’d slept in for ages. She wasn’t even aware of drifting off, and might have slept more than a few hours if Jamie hadn’t screamed.
Lowell, unlike his counterparts in the Resistance, was not one for secret meetings in either cafés or irradiated tube stations. He sent a car directly to Ollie’s office and had him driven to his own residence in Notting Hill, where he received him warmly with a bottle of 2009 Chateau Lafite Rothschild that told Ollie everything he needed to know about exactly how fucked he was.

“Please,” Lowell said with an expansive sweep of his arm. “Have a seat.”

Ollie perched on the edge of an immaculate white sofa and swirled the wine in his glass. “Isn’t this illegal?”

“What thing worth having is not? To the spoils of power!” He reached across the space between them to clink Ollie's glass, and drank first, as if to assure Ollie that he wasn’t being poisoned.

Bribed, on the other hand. “What do you want, Ross?”

“Indulge me.” He retrieved his mobile, fiddling with the projector app until it shone a wide rectangle of light on the white blank wall. The light coalesced into what appeared to be security footage of the inside of a prison cell. The camera was obviously sophisticated; the video wasn’t the grainy and silent black-and-white of the police procedurals that Ollie remembered from his youth, but vivid, sharp colour and sound that left no ambiguity about what he was watching.

On the projection, two soldiers moved around a third figure, shrouded and cuffed to a table, and Ollie studied his wine. “I’d rather not,” he said.


The man on the table choked and spluttered, straining against his bonds. “Is this a snuff film? Because I’m not into—” Which was when the video shook with the roar of an explosion, followed by the door swinging open and two tiny balaclava-clad intruders wrecking merry havoc across the screen.

Lowell paused it, with a view of the caved-in head of one of the soldiers in the foreground. “Well?” he prompted.

“It is a snuff film.”
“I presume you recognise its subjects.”

He peered at the frozen image. “That’s Malcolm, isn’t it?”

Lowell nodded. He pointed at one of the terrorists with his mobile; the image flickered as it adjusted itself to the movement. “That, we know, is Samantha Cassidy. Charming, elusive, very deadly, and with an inexplicable grudge against my department.”

He was a good enough actor to feign surprise. “Sam? She brought the coffee, for fuck’s sake.”

“It’s safe to say she’s doing more than that now. Who’s the other one?”

Ollie squinted, deadpanned, “You mean the one in the mask?”

Lowell rewound. In reverse, the soldier’s head knit itself back together, his attacker released him from his grip.

“The dead man is Private Ian Winslow, age 24. I’m told he left a wife and two young boys. You can imagine, Oliver, how important it is to them that we bring his killer to justice.”

Unmoved, Ollie said, “What I’d like to know is how two terrorists managed to break into your secret prison. It isn’t a very good secret, is it?”

“They had help, of course.”

“From you.”

Lowell had a shark’s smile. “And others. But mostly from me.”

“Spoil the ending for me, then. Does the Resistance have Malcolm?”

“As planned. I believe he’s at the residence of one Lord Nicholson of Arnage presently, but they’ll no doubt have plans to move him closer to their base of operations.”

Closer to where the Resistance was hiding Emma, who’d known it was a trap but couldn’t stop herself from falling into it. Ollie, who’d always taken a measure of pride in his own detachment, felt the fine wine churn in his stomach. “Clever,” he admitted.

“I went to see him recently,” Lowell said. “Tucker, that is, not Nicholson. He’s a vegetable, but I suppose the Resistance can pretend that he has some sort of symbolic value.”

Ollie shook his head. This much, at least, was safe to give the Regime. “Sam’s in love with him. Always was. She’s married to some rebel bloke now but I don’t imagine it’s changed her feelings.”

Lowell chuckled. “Enough that she’d strike out on her own? When I set up this heroic tableau, I imagined a much larger assault force. More wine?”

Ollie’s glass was still mostly full, but Lowell, ever the consummate host, tipped the mouth of the bottle towards it so that he had the choice of accepting or letting it splash all over the white sofa. Ollie didn’t give a shit about the sofa but preferred not to have a lap full of wine, and so he drank for the sake of his trousers. “Rumour has it,” and it was a careful line, this, one that Lowell no doubt wanted to blur with inebriation, “that the terrorists’ leader doesn’t exactly care for Malcolm.”

“That,” Lowell replied, “hardly narrows down our list of suspects.” He played the clip again, rewound it again. Exploded skull, whole skull. “So who does? Who’s our mystery man? The rebel bloke, come to aid his wife in the rescue of her old flame?”
“He’s too short,” Ollie said, and immediately regretted it. The less he admitted to knowing about the individual members of the Resistance, the better off everyone was. “If Sam’s really acting without the leader’s permission, he—or she, you don’t know it’s not a she—might just be a hired gun.”

Lowell flicked back and forth between Winslow, alive and moving towards the door, and Winslow, head dashed to pieces against the side of the table.

“He,” Lowell said, “is not a professional. Professionals use guns. This.” The image on the screen jumped like a bad stop-motion, and Ollie could pretend that it wasn’t real, was just some footage from an Eli Roth film. He could. “This is personal.” Rewind. Malcolm, drowning in a secret prison cell. “Might I remind you that we did this to a highly valued and entirely compliant asset? What do you think we’ll do to you if you don’t cooperate?”

“His name is Jamie Macdonald,” Ollie blurted. He hadn’t been positive, not on the first viewing, but something in the snap from cool efficiency to uncontrolled rage conjured the memory of stale chips on his chair and a maniac barking in his ear. The build was right, and the anger. So much anger. Later, he’d tell himself that he could live with this particular treachery. He’d betrayed better men than Jamie, and endured worse on his conscience. Lowell’s face remained impassive; the name didn’t register with him. Ollie blinked at him, then shook his head, barked out something that might have resembled a laugh. “They haven’t briefed you yet, then? You really have no idea.”

“Précis it for me.”

“Senior press officer at Number 10, back in the day.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly frightening.”

“You weren’t there. He was mental, an utter psycho. Made Malcolm look reasonable by comparison. Malcolm kept him around as a kind of attack dog until they had a falling out. I heard he was actually raised by wolves. Not metaphorically, like they’d actually found him wandering the Scottish highlands killing sheep with his teeth and for some reason decided to dress him in a suit and put him to work for the government.”

“And then he joined the Resistance.”

“For about six months. He had a family, you see. Ex-wife, three little girls. He pulled strings to get them to France, but—” Lowell was leaning forward and the light curved around his face, the gruesome tableau painted across his skin. Ollie decided that Lowell could do his own damn research. “You are so completely fucked.”

“We,” Lowell corrected. “Don’t flatter yourself by pretending that you’re cleverly playing both sides. You belong to me.”

Ollie shook his head. “You stupid fucking wanker. You had a spitting viper chained up in that cell and you let him go, and now he’s going to end you. Malcolm Tucker is the fucking Devil, and Jamie’s worse.”

“Finish your wine,” Lowell said lightly, as if he hadn’t just been told that a raging tsunami of fuck was headed in his direction. “I’ll have my driver drop you back at your flat. You’ve done well tonight. I’ll have instructions for you in the morning.”
Sam jerked awake and nearly fell over as she stood, her ankle tangled in the bed sheets. Her first instinct was to reach for her pistol; it took her a few seconds to remember where she was, that the gun was actually on top of her neatly folded change of clothes that Julius must have washed while she was sleeping, and she tucked it into the waistband of her grimy black cargo pants before skidding down the hall to where Jamie’s cry had come from behind the bathroom door.

She saw the blood first, splattered over both of them and the tiled floor, pooled in the sink, clumping together tufts of long grey hair, the entire bathroom a B-movie horror as Jamie tried to wrestle a straight razor out of Malcolm’s hand.

“James? Samantha?” She could hear Julius’s footsteps approaching from the staircase; she tried to make sense of the scene before her to stop it right there before he reached them.

“Jamie, what the fuck?”

He made another swipe, but Malcolm was armed with a sharp thing, and taller and faster than Jamie was. She couldn’t tell whose blood it was. “He just went completely fuckin’ mental all of a sudden. Because that’s what we need, Malc? You bein’ fuckin’ batshit. Fuck!” He feinted to one side, then slammed into Malcolm with the full weight of his body, sending them both spilling across the bathtub and the razor clattering across the floor.

The immediate threat removed, Jamie, his chest heaving, pinned Malcolm against the wall of the shower. “You retarded fuckin’ auld twat, I’m gonnae finish what those jackbooted Nazi cunts started, what the fuck is wrong with ye—”

Sam turned to Julius, her face a silent plea. “James,” he said, as if that might be enough to interrupt him from the stream of barely comprehensible abuse he was howling in Malcolm’s face, as if it even registered. “James, stop it. Let him go.”

“Jamie, the neighbours will hear.”

“Fuck the fuckin’ neighbours!” Jamie spat, but glancing at the razor—Julius quickly scooped it up from the ground—he loosened his grip on Malcolm’s wrists. Without twelve stone of furious Scottish midget holding him in place, Malcolm dropped, and it was only their proximity that gave Jamie enough time to catch him before he hit the porcelain. “Ye dinnae get tae top yourself, y’cunt,” Jamie snarled at Malcolm, then pressed Malcolm’s head into his shoulder and held it there, streaked the inexpertly shorn back of his skull, more blood on his hand each time it came away, and wept.

Malcolm made a few weak attempts at struggling and then just hung, half-draped over Jamie, arms dangling at his side. Jamie dragged him over the side of the tub and slowly lowered him so that he was sitting, ragdoll limp, on the lid of the toilet. There was so much blood that Sam couldn’t see at first where it was coming from, but Jamie unspooled a fistful of toilet paper and wadded it against the back of Malcolm’s neck, revealing a deep gash before it welled up with more blood.

“Julius,” Sam said, feeling another stab of guilt for drawing him into this ugly little melodrama, but Julius was already digging out supplies from the medicine cabinet.

“He did that to himself?”

Jamie’s head shot up from where he knelt at Malcolm’s feet. “Of course he fuckin’ did, what did ye think I’d—” He rubbed at his forehead, leaving a thick streak of blood behind. “Thought he’d gone in tae piss, or cut off the rest of that fuckin’ ugly hair.” He’d at least done the latter, Sam noticed; what was left of his hair clung to his scalp in a clumsy approximation of his old hairstyle. He didn’t
seem to be hurt beyond the profusely bleeding cut, which Julius cleaned and staunched with gauze. Whatever madness had possessed him must have deserted him along with the last of his strength. She let herself exhale.

Sam stepped around the blood to stand over the sink. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror; haggard, face lined and eye sockets bruised purple, but it was better than looking at Malcolm, or at Jamie, hunched on the floor, his fingernails digging into his bloodstained jeans. She turned her attention to the sink and was about to run the tap to clear it when a gleam of metal caught her eye.

She picked up the tiny capsule and held it to the light. “Shit.” She squinted to see the tiny copper coil, the microchip under glass. It was a little bigger than a grain of rice. “Look at this.” Her voice sounded small in the wake of Jamie’s shouting.

Julius blinked. “That was in him? Do you think it’s transmitting?”

She searched for something heavy to smash the chip, reached for a cup that held more toothbrushes than a man living alone ought to need. Julius snatched it from her and replaced it on the sink’s counter.

“I’m afraid, my dear,” he said, “it’s much too late for that.”

“The fuck are you on about, Lady Arnage?” Jamie hadn’t moved from the floor, but he was at least half paying attention.

“They’ve already tracked us here,” Julius said. “Every second that atrocity is transmitting from my house is one more second you have to be as far away from it as possible.”

Sam nodded; her head was spinning, but it made so much sense it took a few moments for her to remember that Julius had said “you” and not “we.” She placed the chip back on the ledge of the sink. “You’re coming with us.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Julius replied. “I am staying precisely where I am. They shan’t drive me from my own home.”

“Julius, you fuckin’ pillock, grab your fuckin’ powder brush and pincushions and what have you and get out tae the fuckin’ car.”

The death glare Julius shot Jamie in retaliation wasn’t quite up to Malcolm’s calibre, but Sam was reasonably impressed under the circumstances. Jamie seemed unmoved; if anything, he looked happy. “I haven’t the slightest intention of fleeing, James, but I suggest you do unless you’d fancy the Regime committing four murders here instead of one.”

Jamie just grinned. “Go on, then, the both of ye. I’ll be right down.”

“Does the prospect of my imminent demise delight you that much?” Julius asked.

“I dinnae give two fucks, ye baldy scrote. Piss off, I need tae talk with Malcolm.”

Julius put a hand on her arm, and she wanted so badly to argue with him, but Jamie was dangerously close to having another shout and she told herself that she’d have a marginally better chance at convincing Julius once they were out of the blast radius. She let him guide her away, pausing only to tell Jamie, “Five minutes.”

Jamie kicked the door closed behind them.
Jamie waited until he heard the retreating footsteps before climbing—not without some effort, his knees protesting with a creak—to his feet and flinging his arms around Malcolm, who came to life for long enough to shove him off. “You utter cunt,” Jamie gasped, still beaming. “Yer a fuckin’ lunatic, and if you didnae look like seventeen different types of shite I’d rip yer fuckin’ throat out. I thought—”

Malcolm’s eyes drilled into him. His voice, when it emerged, was flat and rusted.

“You thought what, Jamie?”

Jamie felt his face freeze in a parody of the grin it had held a second ago. “I thought those limp-dicked mingers had arse-raped your brain into further fuckin’ senility,” he said, “but I see I was wrong.”

“Were you?” Malcolm replied in the same creepy-as-fuck monotone.

“Oi,” Jamie slapped the side of his head, gentler than he might have done if he wasn’t still half convinced that Malcolm was going to dissolve in front of him. “You are in there, yeah? Because—” he snatched the microchip from the sink and waved it like the talisman it was, “—because this says tae me that you wasnae tryin’ so much for decapitation as tae get free. Malc. Talk tae me. Tell me tae go fuck myself, I dinnae care, but tell me it’s still you!”

Malcolm shook his head and slumped again, and Jamie wanted so badly to touch him but he sat down on the side of the tub instead, his hand close enough that Malcolm could have clutched it if he’d inexplicably decided to act like a reasonable person.

“How long has it been?” Malcolm asked finally. “They—Lowell, the PR cuntface—said three years.”

“Three years of the Regime.” Jamie hated how fucking eager he sounded, clawing for any conversational scraps Malcolm threw his way. “You were eight months into your term when it started.”

“A fuckin’ geological epoch, then. The Ice Age has come and fucked off and the fuckin’ sentient cockroaches have crawled out of the floorboards tae take over.”

Jamie barked a singularly joyless laugh. “That’s what this is about? Your fuckin’ long-term absence from the political stage?”

The cadaverous face lifted again. “What else is there?” Malcolm whispered.

Jamie was sure there were a number of things, but the hollow-eyed madman before him was enough to make him forget the others.

“The world left me behind,” Malcolm said. “’S worse than anything else they could do tae me.”

“I know,” Jamie replied. He offered his hand. Hesitating for an unbearable second, Malcolm grabbed his wrist and let Jamie pull him to his feet. He broke contact immediately, but he didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands; hid, without much success, the mutilated right behind the left, and Jamie vowed to stick with the Resistance as long as it took to track down and skin whoever had done that
to him. “We’ll hang the lot of the fascist tits from lamp posts by their own bloody fuckin’ entrails, okay?”

Malcolm gave him the barest ghost of a smile. “Promises, promises.”

It was enough, Jamie decided, for now, and was about to retreat to the bedroom to retrieve the coat he’d dumped there when Malcolm grabbed his arm.

“Jamie?”

“Yeah.”

“That beard, it’s like a syphilitic prozzie’s twat. You look like you should be prancing around the countryside arse-raping sheep. It’s a fuckin’ disgrace.”

Jamie flashed him a dumb, goofy smile, the sort he hadn’t managed in years. “Sam likes it,” he said, and impulsively decided that he did as well.

“She’s too polite to say anything. She’s thinkin’ worse, though. Ask her.”

“I’ll be out in the car.”

“I had this recurring dream, when I went away to school,” Sam was saying. “About Chelsea, our dog. She died just before I left—old age, just kind of…gave up.”

Malcolm leaned his face against the inside of the door and closed his eyes. The van weaved an idiosyncratic path through the suburbs, to avoid checkpoints, Sam had said, and every time he sat up and looked through the tinted windshield, it was the fucking Blitz outside. There were more buildings bombed than standing, skeletal husks of high-rises, their windows gouged out, empty lots like broken teeth between them. The rain pissed down, slicking the road black and welling up in potholes, which, again according to Sam, was a good thing in terms of keeping the soldiers safe and warm inside. If the weather in London wasn’t constant shite, she’d claimed, the Resistance wouldn’t have lasted two weeks.

He’d been sure there was no part of him left that could be damaged, that he’d been consumed with pain and fear for so long that he was somehow inured to it, the way the constant throb of his badly set bones became so much white noise, the way the ache in his ravaged lungs became less surprising with every breath. Nonetheless, driving past the scooped-out shell of his city—strange, after all these years, to think of it as his city—was almost too much, and he considered Jamie’s suggestion of hiding with the duffel bags of weapons under the seat. At least then, he could delay seeing the scars that the war had left in its wake.

“In the dream, we’d sold the house, but Chelsea wasn’t actually dead. We’d left her behind—didn’t mean to, of course, we loved that dog—and she didn’t understand. She just waited for us, grieved for us even as she was starving to death, waiting for us to come home. Sometimes I’d come back, but it was too late to save her, and—”

Jamie was bollocks at women-type situations, and Malcolm was only slightly better at pretending to be human. “Julius could have come with us, darlin’,” he offered. “Didn’t sound much like he wanted to. The git wants to be a fuckin’ martyr, ye can’t stop him.”
“It’s not even his fight.” Was Sam crying again? Jesus fucktits, he was a fucking physical and emotional wreck, dressed in one of Julius’s suits that hung off him like he was a wean dressing up in his da’s clothes. Jamie, meanwhile, was in pure sociopath mode, petting the rifle on his lap as though he were ready to lay waste to some Eastern European fuckhole at the earliest provocation, and stuffing biscuits in his mouth like he’d never seen food before. So of course Sam was blubbering over fucking Julius. Malcolm might have mourned, but there was no point; he’d wait until someone delivered him the entire butcher’s bill, named everyone he’d ever threatened and blackmailed and otherwise persuaded, everyone he’d known in his former life, lined up against the wall and shot in a fate he’d only avoided through a felony conviction.

He’d gotten it together enough to ask after his family. Jamie’d avoided his eyes in the rearview mirror and said that his sister and niece were out, in America last anyone heard, and his mother had passed. Eighty-three, nothing to do with the Regime, but Malcolm felt a cold vacuum where his heart had probably been, once.

“So,” Jamie said, “this is the plan, yeah? We present ourselves before this Glorious Leader, having no doubt raised his fuckin’ ire, with the consolation prize that we’ve no doubt tripled our firepower and laid waste tae one of the Regime’s black sites, and all is forgiven.”

“Unless someone has a better one. She, by the way.” Sam pushed a stray twist of hair behind her ear. “The leader.”

Malcolm thought that he should ask; it was the kind of thing that should matter to him, and would have, if he didn’t expect to wake up any minute on the cold, damp floor of his cell. “Right. The big mystery. I’m picturing some pus-faced, basement-dwelling adolescent poof in a Guy Fawkes mask but I’m getting a strange sense it’s much worse than all that.”

“Really?” He could feel the burn of Jamie’s stare and slit his eyes open long enough to see him craning around the front seat. “For the longest time, I was sure it was you, Malc.”


“Fuck me,” Malcolm said, as if that explained absolutely everything that had gone wrong since they’d clapped cuffs on him and hauled him off to Leyhill. He supposed he should have been pleased; more than anything else, he wanted someone incompetent to shout at, and it appeared he’d be getting his wish after all. “Sorry, Sam, sweetheart, but are ye actually sure ye looked as hard as ye could tae find the most completely fuckin’ useless bint possible tae lead your wee revolution? Because there might be some day-old sacks of shite somewhere that ye could put in charge instead.”

Jamie snickered at this. Sam, her voice rising in pitch, said, “She’s changed a bit.”

“Did she learn to walk in a straight line?” He stared out at the city, gouged open and bleeding before them, crisscrossed with barbed wire, the soft purr of drones overhead, and Nicola fucking Murray its last defender of freedom and democracy. “I don’t suppose ye could turn around and put me back in that cell?”

“Don’t even,” Sam said, and Jamie gripped his rifle tighter, and they drove on through London’s corpse.
The first of the Regime’s men arrived when the sinking sun lit the low, heavy clouds. Julius wondered if they’d waited out of politeness until the dinner hour had passed. The man was State Security, not military, and while he was, of course, armed, did Julius the courtesy of knocking rather than kicking down the door. He was an officer. It might almost have been flattering.

“Lord Nicholson,” the man said, unperturbed by the sight of Julius in his dressing gown, one hand in his pocket and the other holding (with perfect pose; he’d been on the fencing team at Eton) a rapier in the intruder’s direction. “So sorry to have disturbed you.”

“What can I do for you?” His tone was even, solicitous; the blade didn’t waver.

“I won’t keep you long. I have reason to believe that you’re sheltering a fugitive.”

“Have you?” Julius stepped aside, the point still a jab away from opening the officer’s throat, offering a view of the inside of his house. “Present some form of documentation and you may search to your heart’s content.”

The man muttered something into his earpiece, waited for a response, then, “Lord Nicholson, I’m afraid I must insist.”

“And I’m afraid that I cannot allow you into my home unless you present me with verifiable evidence that you have a right to be there. For all I know, you might have stolen that uniform; you might be one of the rebels yourself.”

The man’s face reddened; his hand moved for his sidearm. “All right, enough of this. Drop the weapon. Last warning.”

Julius regarded him: one of the Regime’s many savage young things, stuffed into a tailored uniform and given rank, one musical interlude away from bursting into a chorus of “Tomorrow Belongs To Me.” From somewhere nearby, Julius could hear the distant rumbling of an army personnel carrier.

“It is a great tragedy of our age,” Julius said, “that it is no longer possible to live as a gentleman, and some small consolation that it is still possible to die as one.”

The officer scoffed. “You’re going to come at me with that sword?”

“You jumped-up frothing nitwit,” Julius said, “what kind of fool do you take me for?” His finger squeezed the trigger of the pistol concealed in the pocket of his dressing gown. Red blossomed on the starched grey breast of the man’s uniform, below his line of medals. He had enough time to look startled before he dropped.

Julius pushed the corpse outside and shut the door. He dressed quickly, but took the time to knot one of his school ties. It looked dreadful outside, wet thuds against the windowpane, and he slipped into an overcoat. He opened the chamber of the gun, checked the bullets, closed it again and slipped it into a pocket.

In the kitchen, he poured himself four fingers of the Macallan 1946 that he’d been saving for the right occasion, and let himself out into the garden.

Outside, snow became rain before rolling in fat drops over the withered delphiniums and foxglove, catching on the petrified thorns of his rose bush, and he wished it were spring. He watched the last streaks of gold bleed from the sky, swallowed by charcoal and indigo.

When the personnel carrier rolled up his driveway, Julius was sitting on the bench in his garden, the empty tumbler in his freezing hand, and even when they smashed through the back door, heavy
boots trampling the frost-blanketed ground cover, he did not so much as move.
The Shallow Drowned

Chapter Summary

In which, despite differences of politics and theology, a number of uneasy understandings are reached, and no one is very happy.

The walls were closing in on her.

Within the network’s hive of tunnels and secret rooms, only the War Room, built at the base of the cavernous ventilation shaft above Clapham North’s air raid shelter, didn’t trigger Nicola Murray’s claustrophobia. Usually. But it was dark, lit by a kerosene lantern and the blue glow of her tablet, and in the sleepless, sunless delirium that blurred together her days and nights, her inner sanctum was as good as a prison.

She’d grown a shell, buried alive as she was beneath concrete and steel and poisoned soil and these days, her anxiety barely showed to anyone who didn’t know her exceptionally well. She contained the trembling creature in a cage as rigid as the walls that surrounded her, and it was familiar and small and she observed it with a certain detachment: Yes, here we are again, trapped together with no way out.

Most days, she could cope. Today, the frantic animal was rattling at its bars, growling at her, and she could swear the room was tightening like a noose around her chair.

Sundeep, who’d been in the Underground since the first round of purges, months before Nicola’d had to go into hiding, was blithely poking at the tablet’s screen and humming to himself, apparently unaware that the War Room was shrinking. Were it not for a tremor in his leg, one could almost forget that he’d been concealing the whereabouts of his wife—Nicola’s second-in-command—for almost two days.

“I think this is it.” A flicker, and then an actual video stream, bounced through proxy servers in half a dozen countries to show Belfast in flames, the reporter narrowly ducking a Molotov, all of it watermarked with an Arabic squiggle in the bottom left of the screen.

She couldn’t tell whether his verging-on-manic excitement was because the Regime was (according to the Al Jazeera broadcast) teetering on the edge of declaring Northern Ireland ungovernable, or the fact that after months of hijacking nearly all of the generator’s power, he’d finally maneuvered his way around the Regime’s firewall.

“I’m a bloody genius,” he declared. The second one, then. Though the Belfast riots were cathartic to watch, and they tied up the Regime’s troops in a quagmire from which better governments had never quite managed to extricate themselves. It was, she thought, an opportunity. “You know there are maybe a hundred people in the entire country watching this?”

Dryly, though only half sarcastically, she said, “Where have you been all my career?”

Sundeep dragged one of the chairs around to her and sprawled over it, his arms draped over the back. “Trying to overthrow the government.”
“The Coalition, or our lot?”

He grinned, exposing crooked teeth slightly too large for his mouth. “Yes,” he said. He’d been at Oxford when the first of the White Death attacks happened, and the slight matter of a sealed juvenile criminal record for breaking the CMA, plus an inconvenient skin colour, had drawn enough unwanted attention that he’d quickly become one of the Resistance’s first recruits.

There had been an immediate trigger for her latest panic attack, and his wife—and by extension, he—had much to do with it. “Where’s Sam, Sundeep?”

He seemed about to answer when the door opened and the woman herself said, quietly, “Right here.”

Nicola looked up, past the point of Sundeep’s shoulder as he rose to meet her, and the walls drew back, just slightly. Even by the somewhat lapsed standards of the Resistance, Sam was filthy, grease and blood smeared up the side of her face, limp strands of hair escaping from a messy ponytail, but Sundeep immediately caught her up in his arms, and the visible uncoiling of the long line of his body confirmed what Nicola had suspected. Sam had been off doing something dangerous and likely incredibly stupid, and her husband hadn’t known where she’d been either.

The flutter of panic returned before she knew its cause, the sick dread in her stomach a tremor of thunder anticipating the lightning strike. A tall, thin shadow crept up behind Sam and leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest like he was already running the show.

“To be a revolutionary,” Malcolm’s caustic drawl apparently possessed some sort of time-travel capability, because it was enough to turn her into a fucking skittering schoolgirl, “is it not somewhat important to be able to tell yer left from yer fuckin’ right?”

This was obviously one of those dreams where she’d gone to work without wearing any clothes, and no one had said anything for whatever reason, and she was going to be relieved when she woke and there was only the Regime and the dingy horror of the Tube’s too-narrow tunnels. They were all staring at her now, Sundeep and Sam, the latter as self-satisfied as a cat presenting a half-dead mouse, and Malcolm, who in the sickly flickering of the lantern was every bit an apparition conjured from her omnipresent dread, a walking corpse in a badly fitted suit. The last one into the room was a man she’d never met before, a small, bearded guy with wide blue eyes who hovered close to Malcolm’s side.


“Leave her out of it,” Malcolm said. “Aren’t you going to say hello?”

Nicola steeled herself. She was the most wanted woman in the shambling and rotted remains of the United Kingdom, the top of State Security’s hit list, Public fucking Enemy Number One, and Malcolm was nothing, a memory that belonged to a Nicola Murray who’d never had to order anyone’s assassination. With ebbing desperation, she reached for the cliché. “I thought you were dead.”

“Just your luck.” There was something wrong with his voice; he was trying for bravado, certainly, but it was as if the words were squeezed through a sieve. “I’m a fucking vampire.”

He looked ill—not that he hadn’t always seemed one verbal explosion away from a massive coronary, but now he was downright frail—and another jolt of anxiety gripped her, because Malcolm was awful, it was true, and still irrationally terrifying, but whoever had done this to him was far, far worse.
“I had to,” Sam said before Nicola could figure out anything to say that was more dignified than a stream of jittery blather. “I had time-sensitive intel, and I made a decision, and it was the right call and you know it.”

A brief silence fell over the room, then Malcolm said, “You look good, Nic’la.” Which was a blatant lie, but accompanied by a paler copy of the charming half-smile that had probably saved him from a punch in the face or worse on more than one occasion. She wasn’t sure whether she wanted to throttle him or feed him soup. “The hair suits you.”

“Enough. I suppose you think you’ll be taking over now.”

He laughed, or tried to; it turned into a tubercular coughing fit that only stopped with a puff from an inhaler. So he was sick, then. It ought to have made him less frightening. “I haven’t come tae take over,” he wheezed. “I’ve come for fuckin’ asylum.”

“And show some fuckin’ respect,” the man beside him barked. “Malc, say the word and I’ll skin the saggy bint.”

Malcolm limped to the chair Sundeep had abandoned, too close to where she was sitting though there were twelve more he could have chosen from. The lamp’s flame lit the ridges age and starvation had gouged in his face, cast black shadows beneath his sharp cheekbones. “Nicola, this is Jamie. Jamie has some anger management issues, but he means well, yeah?” He looked around, at the shapes of the two guards posted outside the door, then down at the tablet that sat a few inches from his mangled right hand. “I see by the state of much of London that you’re doing a fine job with the revolution.”

She recognised that tone; it was the calm before the bollocking. “I am,” Nicola said, well aware of cliff’s edge on which she teetered. “Doing fine.”

Then the thunderclap: “No, you’re not ‘doing fine,’ ye daft hag. The country’s in the hands of a government demonstrably more noxious and fuckheaded than the sickest wank fantasies of JB’s inbred Etonian twat brigade. I was gone eight months—eight fucking months—before the fuckin’ BNP took over. That’s essentially the definition of ‘not at all fuckin’ fine.’”

“They’re not actually the B—” Nicola started.

“Shut up!”

She braced herself, anticipating the verbal equivalent of the Volhynian Massacre, but it never came. He slumped in the chair, rubbing at his temples. Her eyes kept going to the misshapen angles of his fingers, and she wondered whether she’d be better to avert her gaze altogether, if it was obvious that she was staring.

His attention had shifted to Sundeep, who still had his arms around Sam. “And who the fuck are you?”

Sam went red. “My husband, Sundeep Gowda. Sundeep, this is—”

“Husband?”

“Did I mention Jamie’s a priest now?”

“Get the fuck out,” he said. Sam went for the door; Sundeep didn’t know to do the same, so she
yanked him by the elbow. Jamie didn’t budge, and his eyes hadn’t left Malcolm for a second. “You too; we’ll have fuckin’ words later.” It was clear enough that the two men knew each other, that Jamie understood the threat that lay just beneath the surface of his words, but if he was intimidated at all, he didn’t show it. Only when Malcolm appeared to be summoning the strength to stand and push him out did Jamie relent, leaving Nicola and Malcolm alone in a room that was suddenly far too small to contain the two of them.

“I don’t like this,” Nicola said, well aware that all three of the others were pressed up against the door, witness to at least the audio of her inevitable humiliation. “You being here, it’s like nothing’s changed, like I’m trapped in an endless loop of utter shit.” When he didn’t immediately bite back, she added, “I’m building something. People are starting to fight.” She pushed the tablet across the table at him, Belfast’s fury somehow inconsequential before the cold rage facing her. Malcolm barely glanced at the screen. “I know it isn’t enough, don’t you think I don’t know that? But there’s no one else. You’ve—you’ve been gone a long time. Everything’s changed.”

He was silent for another long, tense spell. Finally, Malcolm said, “You’re not winning.”

“You’d do better?”

“You’d do better,” he replied, and maybe it was almost conciliatory, almost kind, “with me whisperin’ in your ear.”

“Jesus. Are you propositioning me, Malcolm?”

He shifted to eye the door; she was aware, then, of why he’d thrown the others out when Sam would have defended to the death any word out of his mouth and this Jamie character hadn’t wanted to let him out of his sight. They might not have recognised pure, animal fear, concealed as it was beneath all of his bluster, but Nicola? Nicola was well acquainted with terror, her own drawn to its mirror image like a magnet.

What the fuck had they done to him?

She knew—and he knew that she knew—that he wanted to run. He couldn’t; even the most cleverly forged identification couldn’t disguise a face that had been plastered across every newspaper and television set in Britain for decades, couldn’t hide the marks that prison had left on him, and besides, exile would have killed him faster than the Regime could.

“I’m not going to be your sock-puppet. I can’t function with your…your fist up my arse.”

“Attractive a prospect as that sounds,” he waved his damaged hand at her, “it’s not a possibility.”

“You actually do need to listen to me. I mean, we have a structure, a, uh, chain of command, you can’t just come here and—”

“I just did, though.” He looked pleased with himself, though it was, at best, a halfhearted imitation of his old self. “We’ll have the overbred wankstains out by the New Year, restore democracy to Great Britain, and then I’ll put someone marginally less batty in charge, yeah? Deal?”

She’d fantasised about him getting his comeuppance for years, felt vaguely disappointed to see him shuffled off to some posh prison with an organic garden, and quite nearly forgotten about vengeance in the wake of what had followed. Now, while she could strangle Sam (and maybe she would; there were usually purges after revolutions, weren’t there?) she was almost relieved that the only force in the universe more evil than the Regime was offering to join her side.

“I fucking hate you,” Nicola said, but reached out to shake his hand. He started to do the same, then
pulled back and gave her a crooked two-fingered salute.

And then he was storming out of the War Room, bellowing something about unholy matrimony, the fucking papacy, and the betrayal of everything he’d ever worked for, and she could at last breathe freely again.

Emma leaned across a stack of cement blocks, squinting through the rifle’s sight, and squeezed the trigger. The gun kicked against her shoulder, but the bullet had gone right through the Chancellor’s eye, and she flashed a triumphant smile at Sam.

“You are,” Sam admitted at last, “not complete shit.”

It was an understatement; Emma was a better shot than Sam, at least with a paper target, but she didn’t expect the other woman to say that much out loud. “My dad used to take me hunting.” Sam made a disgusted face at this. “Yes, yes, I’m a posh bitch, you’ve only said it about a hundred times.”

“The Regime’s soldiers will put up more of a fight than a fox would.”

Emma fired again, taking away what was left of the Chancellor’s head, and was gratified to see Sam actually flinch. When the echo had died down somewhat, she asked, “Why are you even here, Sam? Isn’t your time too important to waste on educating me in the art of guerrilla warfare?”

“Our Glorious Leader confined me to base.” It was accompanied by an eye-roll no doubt honed from years of experience at Number 10, but Sam was, as far as Emma could tell, in a good mood. It was indication enough, though Sam hadn’t said as much, that Malcolm was alive. Nice to know that she wouldn’t be brutally slaughtered after all. “Why are you here?”

Emma put the gun aside and sat down by Sam on a stack of overturned milk crates. Her ears were ringing despite the foam earplugs, the tunnel’s walls still reverberating with the echoes of gunfire. Every so often, Sam glanced at a telegraph machine on a fold-out table, a World War II relic that she’d referred to as their internal e-mail service. “You never saw what the White Death did to people, did you?”

Sam shrugged.

“I thought, at first—” Ridiculous, that she had to justify herself to a secretary, but there it was. “I don’t suppose you’d agree but it looked like the right thing, at first. We were under attack. And we stopped it, didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Sam said, the words acid on her tongue, “there are no more terrorists in Great Britain. Congratulations.”

“Of course it went too far. Turned on itself, and there were reasons, it was always justifiable.” She shook her head. “They killed Peter, you know. Not the terrorists, his own government.” Emma drew in a deep breath, held it, worried that the shake in her voice would give her away. If she ever mourned, for Peter or herself or anyone else, she’d certainly not do it in front of Sam.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said, and she almost sounded like she genuinely meant it. “He seemed all right.”

“He was an absolute git,” Emma replied. “He had the political instinct of a mentally retarded
Labrador retriever, and he was no threat to them at all, and they murdered him anyway.”

“It’s a brave new world,” Sam said, and Emma couldn’t help but envy her a little, this tough, efficient woman who had no doubt lost more than an incompetent boss and a handful of the colleagues she’d always vaguely resented, who’d been right about everything from the very beginning.

It was only starting to set in now, the knowledge that she’d walked away from her entire life. Even if she’d had no choice, even if her hand was forced by Weber and whoever had discovered her tiny, inconsequential acts of treason, she thought of her flat sitting empty of life, no doubt infiltrated by hovering drones transmitting a 24-hour feed to Ollie Reeder’s office. She’d fled with nothing but the clothes on her back and the coordinates of a secret prison, she was surrounded by people who despised her, and she had as little place in the Resistance as she’d had in the Regime’s machinery. It was enough to make her crave even the tiniest glimmer of empathy that Sam exhibited in her presence.

“The Glorious Leader wants to meet you,” Sam went on. “Apparently she thinks you might be useful, and I’m no longer trusted enough to question you on my own. Impress her, and we might be allowed on a girls’ night out to test that flawless aim of yours on some fascists. In a few decades, at any rate.”

“She’s that cross with you?”

“She’ll get over it.” Sam took the place where Emma had been crouching, and the abandoned rifle. “I never properly thanked you, by the way,” she said, punctuating the sentence with a shot that finally knocked the poster from its tenuous perch by the tunnel’s bend.

“Are we going to be friends, then?”

Sam turned, the expression on her thin, drawn face unreadable. “I could do with a friend,” she said. “I mean, I could also use anything you know about the Regime’s leadership and strategy and where they sleep at night and the Achilles Heel that will finally allow us to bring them down, but…” She ran a hand through her hair. “There comes a point when hate alone isn’t enough to sustain you. I’ve been fighting them for so long I barely remember how it was before.”

“There were press junkets,” Emma said. “And computer clusterfucks.”

“Rent-boy negatives.”

“Leaked policy documents.”

“The wrong tea order. Well, not by me.” She managed a wan smile. “This isn’t what I thought I’d be doing when I got into politics.”

“Fetching tea, or plotting the violent overthrow of the British government?”

“Both, really.” She stood up, retrieved the rifle, and replaced it in the locked cabinet that had once held tools for the maintenance workers. The fallen target remained where it was, soaking into a puddle of muck from a leak in the wall. “You get used to it,” Sam said. “Living like a fucking rat, while up there, they…” She didn’t need to say it; Emma knew better than she did. It was frightening now to remember how little had changed, how soon the drones and the checkpoints, the constant presence of armoured cars and the shrinking tide of human traffic in the streets became commonplace, how easy it had been to enact a simple policy change when one barely needed to worry about PR disasters.
The telegraph started making noise, and Sam bent over it to read the string of numbers it outputted on yellowed paper. As quickly as the mask had fallen, it was up again; Sam straightened her shoulders. “Time to go,” she said, motioning for Emma to follow.

“Sam?” Emma called after her.

“Yeah?”

“It will end. It can’t go on like this forever.”

Sam didn’t answer, and her own words, resounding off the tunnel’s walls, echoed back to mock her.

The deep-level shelter stretched for two miles and was meant to house thousands, but the ragged assortment of cots, mattresses, and bunks, dragged in from across the city, were strangely clustered together as though the rebels were afraid to be out of each other’s line of sight. Malcolm had found the darkest, most remote corner—which, of course, Jamie had promptly invaded—where the glow of the tablet didn’t draw aggravated mutters from people trying to sleep.

Sam had been convinced that he too should sleep, and he’d tried, only to wake up with his heart hammering and his lungs too constricted to issue a scream. Besides, he’d been asleep for four years, and in the meantime, the list of the dead, the documented atrocities and the accumulated intelligence collected on the device, none of it was getting any shorter. His eyes burned and his chest felt like a dog’s squeaky toy but he scrolled through report after report.

He popped yet another caffeine tablet, waved the empty blister pack where Jamie could see it. “I’ve figured out how tae take down the Regime,” Malcolm announced.

Jamie’s stupid hairy face appeared over the side of the bunk, then, unfortunately, the rest of him, dropping down to sit at the edge of Malcolm’s mattress. He’d had hours, practically a whole day, and so Malcolm could only assume that he was keeping the beard out of either a newfound allegiance to the Taliban, or pure spite. He gathered that he should feel grateful that Jamie wasn’t wearing a fucking collar.

“Yeah?” Jamie, bless his simple fucking heart—and Malcolm would never in a million years admit how good it was to just hear his voice again—actually sounded hopeful.

“We find out where they keep their store of these things and blow it up.”

“That’s the plan?”

“Aye. Don’t know how humanity even functioned without them. Greatest fuckin’ invention since autotune remixes.” Even if he couldn’t hear how weak he sounded, the look of pity—pity, fuck—on Jamie’s face would have told him everything he needed to know. “Don’t think I’m letting you off the hook about this priest bollocks either.”

“We’re no’ talkin’ about it.”

“We are.”
“I’m no’ a priest now, am I?”

“I’m no’ a priest now, am I?”

“Is it, what, a switch you turn on and off? One minute you’re diddlin’ choir boys and saying Hail fuckin’ Mary’s and the next you’re a serious fuckin’ person?”

The Jamie Macdonald he’d once known, priest or not, would have thrown a punch at his head for that. This one, though, was focused on a stain on the concrete by his feet. Malcolm liked that development even less than he’d liked finding out Jamie had returned to the bosom of the Holy Mother Church. “I needed tae hide.”

“When the fuck,” Malcolm said, “have you ever needed tae hide? Look, I need to know how serious this god-bothering business is. I’m knee-deep in mincing twats and stillbirths and have you gone kiddly-fiddler nutter on me or no?”

“Malc—” That was the warning, not that Malcolm had any intention of backing off. He didn’t entirely trust Jamie, even if the man had literally carried him out from the jaws of Hell, but he’d be more useful than—Sam aside—whatever collection of tits Nicola had managed to assemble.

“What?”

“It’s a simple fuckin’ question.”

“I dinnae see what—”

Malcolm placed the tablet aside and sat up. “Do you,” he said, “fuckin’ believe in some kind of benevolent fuckin’ Almighty ponce with a great white poofy beard—”

“—which is none of your fuckin’ business—”

“—because if ye do—” He didn’t want to dwell on why exactly it was so vital, such a matter of life and death, that Jamie believe in nothing but Al Jolson, New Labour, and the superiority of Celtic FC. “If all I did dragging you kicking and screaming from the seminary into fuckin’ actual reality was for naught, I have a list of names the length of Ron Jeremy’s cock, people we knew, bairns fuckin’ slaughtered in their cradles—”

Jamie stood up, narrowly avoiding bashing his skull on the steel underside of the top bunk. “I’m going out for a smoke.”

“Jamie!”

“Go fuck yourself, Malcolm.”

Malcolm moved to stop him and Jamie shoved him away and stormed off down the length of tunnel, and it was only by chance that Malcolm caught a glimpse of his face, unguarded and furious and what he saw there froze him in a grip of panic.

He tried for deep breaths, but his entire respiratory system was in open revolt. Scrabbled for the inhaler before he realised that it wasn’t another asthma attack, that it was something he didn’t dare name lest his suspicions become confirmed truth.

He hadn’t asked after Jamie’s girls, and Jamie hadn’t mentioned them. Not once. Fuck.

Malcolm gave it another minute and then stalked off to find Jamie.
The other man had only gotten as far as a cross passage, out of the way of most of the foot traffic. Maybe he’d wanted to be found. He was on a stool by a barricade of sandbags meant to slow the tide of piss and mud that flowed into the tunnels every time it rained, his cigarette down to the filter and the next perched, already waiting, on his thigh. Malcolm’s lungs gave a perfunctory clench of protest as he approached, the smoke a thick veil between them that—and he was almost relieved—prevented him from standing as close as he might otherwise be inclined.

“When were you going tae tell me?”

Jamie looked up, and Malcolm, crippled or not, would have personally gutted every one of the fascist cuntwipes if it would have taken the despair from his eyes.

“I was waiting for the right time,” Jamie said. “In between saving your withered arse and preventing your fuckin’ suicide attempts and waiting for ye tae stop fuckin’ shouting. You know. The perfect fuckin’ moment tae recount the entire tragic cunting saga in graphic detail because it was such a high priority.”

“How’d it happen?”

“Got them tae a refugee boat, one of the last leaving for France right before the embargo. The cunts bombed it just off the coast. They had no part in any of it, never did, Mary’d gone back tae her maiden name years ago, even…” He rubbed at the empty place where he hadn’t worn a wedding ring in most of the time Malcolm had known him. “She wanted me tae come with.”

“And you didn’t.”

“I wudnae be here if I had.”

“Jesus. Fuck, Jamie—”

“Don’t.” Jamie growled, “don’t you dare say yer fuckin’ sorry. I was a shite father tae those girls, and a worse husband, but I saw that they were provided for. I sent them as far as I could, away from me and this shitshow. I tried, fuck, I tried so fuckin’ hard.”

“I know.” Jamie visibly recoiled from the same pity with which he’d earlier assaulted Malcolm. He lit the end of the new cigarette with the old, tossing the fag-end into a brown pool, splintering the reflection of the lantern hanging on the opposite wall. His eyes shone, and Malcolm moved to block the view of anyone who might choose that particular moment to walk by.

He’d seen Jamie cry exactly once. It had involved divorce papers, a prodigious quantity of whisky, and a pub brawl that had nearly put Jamie in lock-up and another man in Casualty; at the end of it, Jamie was dripping spilled beer and sundry bodily fluids all over Malcolm’s Armani and they’d never spoken about it afterwards. By those maudlin standards, he was being restrained; only the hitch of his breathing and the almost undetectable shudder of his shoulders gave away that anything was wrong.

It would have been better if Jamie would just hit something. Malcolm knew what to do with violence.

“Does it hurt?” Jamie asked, when he’d recovered enough to speak.

“The hand?”

Jamie wiped tears and snot away with his sleeve; his eyes were red-ringed but at least no longer leaking. “Drowning,” he said.
Malcolm, never known for his compassion, said, “No.”

“Yer a fuckin’ liar.”

“It doesn’t hurt nearly as much as what I’ll do tae every one of those cunts at the earliest fuckin’ opportunity.”

It would have been fine under the circumstances, Malcolm thought, to just put his arms around the man, but his own wounds were much too raw, and he didn’t trust himself to be able to pull away after. Instead, he stood closer, braving the noxious fumes of Jamie’s cigarette, close enough that he could feel the heat radiating from his body. He wished, desperately, that Jamie would stop looking at him like he, personally, was the only man in the world capable of avenging Jamie’s family—Malcolm’s own wee goddaughters that he barely knew—Julius, all of them.

Even if it was probably true. Nicola knew it, even if neither Jamie nor Sam would be willing to admit it. He was, somehow, the person tasked with destroying the Regime, and that was the only reason he wasn’t dead.

He let Jamie finish his smoke in silence, his long inhales interrupted by the occasional hiccup. The lantern above them flickered, its flame failing.

“In answer tae your previous fuckin’ question,” Jamie said. “I do, actually, and it doesnae help any.”

Before Malcolm could respond—and what was he supposed to say, what could he say, and the psycho little shit wasn’t supposed to have tragedies, had never had the ability to reduce him to speechlessness before—Jamie stabbed out the cigarette’s embers and stalked back towards the shelter.
Terrance Price-Callaghan, Minister of Agriculture, adjusted his tie and looked directly into the camera.

Which, right away, was his first problem.

Lowell tapped on the glass separating the sound booth from the studio and pointed to his left; Price-Callaghan obligingly shuffled in absolutely the wrong direction, and Lowell struck his palm against the barrier and shouted an unheard, “No, look that way” at the man.

*We are the nation’s last bastion of defence against the forces of barbarism, the very face of civilisation, dignity, and honour, and this is what I have to work with.* Price-Callaghan gaped like a dying fish. Lowell understood, finally, why Malcolm Tucker had looked so fucking cross all the time.

His idiotic colleague finally in place, Lowell signalled for the address, which was to be broadcast live across every television and computer screen and e-billboard, to begin. Price-Callaghan stuttered through the introduction—the Regime, unlike its forebears, selected for competence, not media presence—and Lowell had almost tuned out the blandly reassuring buzz, when:

“—the food supplies remain absolutely safe, despite, er, rumours started *by the terrorists themselves* that there is contamination, and might I remind the public that it was terrorists, not this government, initially responsible for the release of the White Death and if there *was* any contamination, it was the work of—”

At which point Lowell was once again thumping on the glass, but the broadcast had to be live, that had been his idea because he’d foolishly assumed that Price-Callaghan would stick to the initial script and not sign his own death warrant and quite possibly that of many, many others.

Outside, beyond the glossy surfaces of the studio and the shining tower that encased it, the riots, and the crackdown, continued.

Three days earlier.
“What do ye mean I cannae smoke in the cunting War Room? It’s set aside for the express fuckin’ purpose of dealin’ out death, is it not?”

“Other people’s death, not ours.”

“It’s not as though I can go outside and have a fag and still be present to deal with whatever cock-up the Mouthy Bat Cunt’s committed now.”

“It wasn’t Nic—oh, I give up. Malcolm, sort this.”

“You could, and my sincerest fucking apologies if it inconveniences you in some way, not fucking smoke at all.”

“Can ye remind me again why I saved your fuckin’ life?”

Sam mouthed a silent, “Sorry” at Nicola and let the door close, doubting very much whether the men on the other side of it took any notice of the intrusion. According to Nicola, they’d all been difficult to the point where Sam’s excommunication from the inner circle had to be prematurely revoked just to keep the peace. Nor were they even the worst problem Nicola had to face that week: Apparently a bomb had gone off where a bomb was expressly not supposed to go off, caving in part of the Piccadilly Line, costing seven lives, and burying a cache of supplies well beyond retrieval, not to mention drawing undue attention from the drones. Now the survivors from that cell wanted refuge at Clapham North, which was already overflowing, and Nicola was convinced they were too hot to be allowed near her own headquarters and needed to go elsewhere, comrades or not. It seemed a mini-mutiny was brewing around Stockwell, and Nicola’s forces were stretched too thin to deal with it.

Sometimes Sam hated being indispensable.

“Okay,” she muttered, and flung the door open again. Jamie flashed her a lunatic grin from where he sat at the end of the wide table, feet propped up on its edge, a—thankfully unlit—cigarette in one hand. Malcolm scowled and paced behind a veritable fort of file folders, newspaper clippings, and empty caffeine tablet wrappers. He’d locked himself in the War Room two days ago, Jamie had pounded on the reinforced steel door until Malcolm had finally relented and let him in, and all of Nicola’s attempts to get back inside had been met with a staggering variety of anatomically improbable suggestions in ear-shattering stereo. Neither he nor Jamie looked like they’d slept since.

Sundeep had been allowed inside solely for his ability to virtually link Malcolm to the outside world. Now, he sat shell-shocked in front of his laptop, a lifelong anarchist whose paranoid suspicions about the inner workings of government had just been horribly confirmed. Sam gave him a little wave.

“The prodigal returns,” Malcolm said, and he looked glad enough to see her that she thought he might have forgiven her for getting married, not that he was entitled to an opinion. “And she’s brought the Central Committee with her.”

Sam decided it was relatively safe, and motioned the others in—Nicola, a still skittish Emma in tow, Barry, an SWP dinosaur who, like Sundeep, seemed slightly baffled at how he’d ended up in a movement led largely by the tattered remnants of New Labour, and Tim, a career soldier who’d publicly resigned following the coup. Ella Murray, eighteen years old, feral, and mean, remained just outside the door, rifle in hand, the future of British democracy.

“Right.” Nicola dumped a stack of files on the table, a gesture no doubt intended to be dramatic but robbed of its punch when most of the papers inside went spilling out of their folders across the faux-wood surface. Sam, PA instincts contained but never completely quelled, immediately went to sort them. “We have targets, people. Emma here—” Emma ducked her head. “—has been completely
cooperative in telling us everything she knows about them, so it’s a matter of strategy, really.”

“You’re killing people now,” Malcolm said.

“Yes, well, it is a revolution.”

“I do get that they need to die. But. You, personally, Nicola Murray, MP. I mean, no fuckin’ offense, but ye couldn’t cut a paragraph out of a draft policy statement. Let’s see, then.” He dragged the open files towards him. “Bradley Weber, Minister of Public Safety—you couldn’t get the psycho cuntair’s bodyguard—and, oh, Ross Lowell, I’ve met that one. And his predecessors. Why is it that the Regime’s propaganda ministers all have the average lifespan of a Spinal Tap drummer?”

“That was Sam,” Sundeep said, pride edging his voice. Heat rose to her cheeks, and she avoided both his eyes and Malcolm’s. “Because they had our propagandist.”

“Can we get on with it?” Nicola asked.

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but how exactly do you intend to go about this? None of these twats so much as walks to the fuckin’ kerb without an armed escort.” Malcolm gestured at his massive wall of files. “I’ve been reading.”

Tim cleared his throat. “It’s not exactly meant to be a return trip for our men.”

“Oh, oh, that’s just great,” Jamie said. “So, you’ve been losing several of ours for one of them that ye maybe sometimes manage tae kill, except that they seem tae have an unlimited supply of cunts, and we have—presumably, I mean, I didnae do the reading—a somewhat smaller supply of ready, willing, and fuckin’ retarded suicide bombers.”

Tim half-rose in his chair, glaring at Jamie. Sam sincerely hoped it wouldn’t come to blows, though she suspected that was exactly what Jamie was after. It wasn’t wise, keeping him pent up in the tunnels for days, not with his generalised hostility and Malcolm no doubt needling him beyond the limits of anyone normal’s endurance. She’d have to do something about him, and soon. “Where exactly did you find these people?”

She shrugged. “Prison. Church.”

“We need to draw them out into the open,” Sundeep said, his tone placating. “That’s what we’ve been talking about. Shouting about. Whatever.”

“This one—Terrance Price-Callaghan,” Malcolm said, sliding a file back towards the middle of the table. “Minister of Agriculture? He’d not have as much need to be paranoid as the rest.”

“He heads up ration distribution,” Emma confirmed. “It’s—well, not that dangerous, really. Not like security.”

“But it’s important,” Nicola said. “There’s a blockade, nothing’s getting in, and so the Regime controls who eats and who starves.”

“And if there were some disruption in that particular system…” Malcolm, tired as he was, looked more genuinely animated than he had since they’d hauled him out of the cell. “Nic’la, can you get a hold of a body or two?”

“What?”

“Corpses.”
“Literally?”

“Aye. Preferably in less than utterly fucked up shape.”

Nicola frowned, but said, “We have a food shortage, not a dead body shortage.”

“Right,” Malcolm said, “here’s what we do.”

Everyone—except Jamie, who’d probably suggested the idea, knowing him, and Sam, who’d never been easily fazed—listened to his explanation in stunned silence.

“People are going to die,” Nicola said, when he’d finished. “Ordinary, innocent people.”

“People have already died,” Jamie replied, his voice low and dangerous, and Sam wanted to warn the others, the ones who didn’t know about him, to tread carefully, except she couldn’t do it with Jamie in the room. “This will work. Not just Price-Callaghan, but others, and fewer of ours.”

“We need a line tae the outside,” Malcolm went on as if the idea had already been approved. “You there, Katharine Gun.” Sundeep startled at this. “Whatever anyone out there, civilians that is, whatever they’re reading and watching and tugging to, I need you to get us on it. Make it known that the Regime’s ration stores are contaminated with White Death residue. Don’t stay anywhere for long, make it look like the Regime’s burying it. The rest of you, light something on fire. Not fuckin’ metaphorically speaking here. Oh, and Sam? Find me Ollie.”

“What?” Nicola, rather than Sam, broke in.

“Ollie Reeder. I know he’s alive, the man’s a fuckin’ cockroach. Does he know you’re leading the Resistance?”

Nicola blinked. “No, I don’t think so. No.”

“Good. Find him. Bring him somewhere that’s not here. I need him to get to the other two.” He eyed the files disdainfully. “And I need more than this. Everything about these cunts—who they are, where they sleep, how frequently they take a shit…”

Nicola spluttered: “This isn’t—they control every website, every newspaper, every fucking TV station—Malcolm, you’re not going to take down the Regime with some…some revelation of the Chancellor’s secret scat fetish.”

“That said,” Malcolm replied. “You have no idea how many governments have been felled by IBS.”

Barry finally spoke. “Who the fuck are you, then, and who put you in charge?”

A beat, then, “I did,” Nicola replied quietly. “He’s the only person I know more ruthless than the lot of them. Worse, maybe, but if they can be fucked, if there is any way at all, he’ll find the way to fuck them.” She was watching Malcolm through those dark lashes, so fucking desperate, they all were, all of them just pretending that he was going to swoop in and save the day, like he wasn’t halfway insane and he hadn’t fallen apart long before the Regime had snatched up the reins of power.

He nodded in Nicola’s direction, the acknowledgment barely there, but Sam saw it.

“So it’s settled,” Jamie declared, rather loudly. “I’ll be having that fag now. Call me when the fuckin’ shooting starts.”
At the first sight of a bone white hand—and worse, white hair, spilling over the countertop of the Distribution Centre—the PHE set up a quarantine and banished the morning queue. Even with hazmat suits and gas masks, no one wanted to go near the body. It was only when a rat that had found its way out of the stores scampered, apparently unscathed, over the corpse’s arms that any of the consummate professionals gathered at the scene were able to goad each other into approaching.

No one actually said the words “White Death” aloud. No one needed to.

The cause of death would later be determined to be a gunshot wound to the back, the hair a wig, and the skin and eye discoloration due to a coating of ash and limestone, but by the time the autopsy was concluded, a second colourless body had been sighted—and photographed, though the photos were immediately taken down—at a different Centre. Within hours, the first brick went through the first window, and by the time authorities announced an official cause of death and ordered citizens to remain calm, the damage was done.

The corridors of power were as bland as the former offices of DoSAC, a laboratory maze of off-white walls and beige carpeting, even the odd placid pastel watercolour framed above cubicle-enclosed desks. It was one of those great glass buildings removed from time and space; transplant it nearly anywhere in the world and there’d be no difference beyond the language spoken. Only the constant presence of the floating drones, humming with data, downloading and uploading and scurrying from release valves into the city below, served as a reminder that they lived in the fucking pristine future. No flying cars or hoverboards, just cameras recording every whisper, every movement, and given sufficient advances in technology that were almost certainly around the corner, every thought.

One of said drones levelled with Ollie’s face, and its single red eye winked.

He rammed his fists into his own eyes, certain that he’d imagined it, but when the bright spots of green and purple cleared from his vision, the drone waited half a second, then quite deliberately did it again.

Something flashed on his monitor. He turned from the psychotic drone. A dialogue box had appeared on the screen.

>HEY DICKSTAIN

He spun in his chair, heart pounding, but there was nothing human in sight, just the drone, bobbing in the air behind him.

>NEVER MIND THAT. GET TO VAUXHALL STATION. NOW.

Ollie typed.

>WHO ARE YOU? HOW ARE YOU DOING THIS?

>WITCHCRAFT. XXX.

His hand hovered over the M key, then he thought better of it and instead let fly a litany of curses.
There were a number of things he wanted to type, exit routes out of the inevitable morass that awaited him if he agreed, but while he was exceptionally good at navigating disaster once it struck and coming out on top, he was less than perfectly skilled at avoiding it in the first place.

>OK

The dialogue disappeared. A second later, the drone buzzed its way out of his office. He looked around again, sure there was a trap waiting to close on him, some sort of fucked loyalty test, but it was after six and the office was nearly deserted.

He shut off the laptop, threw on a coat and scarf, and went outside to hail a cab.

It was the second straight night of food riots, and by the time Ollie asked the driver to pull over, fires were already dancing over the black surface of the Thames. The route he would have taken was fenced in with barbed wire on one side and a gathering mob on the other; a shiny car in the midst of a horde of yobbos was more of a target than he planned to be. He paid the man, tipping him extra to keep his gob shut, and walked the rest of the way.

Across the river from sporadic gunfire, he had to wonder if they’d planned it this way, then realised that he was attributing a level of organisation to the Resistance that was typical of the Regime. Still, there wasn’t a grey uniform to be seen south of the Thames, which couldn’t entirely be coincidence. Vaguely unsettled, he kept walking, casting the odd nervous glance through gaps in the red-brick buildings at the distant flames. He swept aside an overgrown swath of dying ivy to duck through one of the doors a few blocks from where the fencing began.

He didn’t flatter himself enough to think that the Resistance genuinely trusted him, but with most conventional information and supply channels closed to them, they couldn’t exactly avoid dealing with him. Accordingly, he’d been to a number of their outposts and knew their convoluted pathways into the Underground. This one was a labyrinthine route through never-finished blocks of flats and stalled waterfront development, at the end of which was a crude tunnel, dug out of wet earth and buttressed with unsteady lumber, guarded by a pair of boys who looked as though they should still be in school.

“Hope there’s not a password,” he said, forcing a smile. They continued to watch him in stone-faced silence. “If so, it’s probably ‘cunt’.”

“Go on in,” one of the boys said, so either they’d been expecting him, or he was right about the password.

Vauxhall Station had been hit by conventional weaponry during the war, and its shattered remains were less of a base than a convenient skulking ground. There wasn’t a single Tube station left that wasn’t eerie in its emptiness, but this one had been the scene of a massacre, and the twisted metal of the pulled-up tracks stood in stark memorial to the bomb that had ripped through the station at rush hour. One or two of the emergency lights still washed the dusty platform in sulfurous yellow.

Malcolm was already sitting on one of the benches, the Grim Reaper in a military surplus coat, and while Ollie had known he was alive and in the hands of the Resistance, it was still a shock to actually see him. He didn’t look well enough to have gotten into the station on his own steam, so Ollie assumed that the tunnel’s shadows contained numerous armed rebels.
He could have sworn he’d been practicing something clever to say on the way over, but what came out of his mouth as he sat on the bench was, “Are you here to kill me?”

Malcolm snorted. “What the fuck do you think this is, fuckin’ Le Carré? Nice to see you too.”

“It’s, sorry, it’s just a bit like the end of a slasher film when you think the killer’s dead and the last girl walks by him, and he reaches up like RARGH.”

“Rargh.” Jamie stepped out of the tunnel, every bit the terrorist Ollie had always suspected he was at heart, wild-eyed and bearded with a rifle slung over his shoulder, and seemingly more at ease in military cast-offs than he’d ever been in a suit and tie. If three years of the Regime’s rule had added centuries to Malcolm’s appearance, it had left Jamie entirely unscathed. “Did he just piss himself? I think that’s piss, don’t you?”

Malcolm didn’t seem amused, and Ollie bit back a rejoinder—he had, after all, recently watched a surveillance video of Jamie smashing a man’s head to pieces. His greatest hits collection of evisceration threats and rampant demolition of innocent pieces of office equipment seemed considerably more disturbing in hindsight. Jamie sneered over him, crowding in so that that he had the veritable Sophie’s Choice of breathing in fetid cigarette breath or sliding closer to the animated skeleton to the right of him.

Hemmed in by maniacs, he opted for bravery. “The Regime knows you’re back with the Resistance,” he said to Jamie. “At least, Ross Lowell does.”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “And how does he know that?”

Ollie ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the curls in annoyance. If he was going to be murdered, it wouldn’t be for giving them Jamie’s name. “Fuck, does it matter? He knows everything. He had Malcolm’s cell under surveillance—it was all part of his plan, his and fucking Weber’s. You didn’t escape; he let you go. They’re probably tracking you here right now.”

Malcolm turned slightly to reveal a piece of gauze, spattered with dried blood, on the back of his neck. He might have guessed that Malcolm had managed, thus far, to stay slightly ahead of Lowell. Lowell was no doubt the brightest in the lengthy line of Propaganda Ministers, but that was damning with faint praise. “Saves me the trouble of being nice to your ex.”

“Yes, well,” Ollie said. “They know you’re behind the food riots too, and there’re orders to shoot you on sight. Lowell was certain you were—” He made a motion around his ear. “—or he wouldn’t have used you as bait.”

“You’re mates then, you and Lowell?” Malcolm asked. “Go for pints together, play squash, how does it work?”

His voice, wafer-thin and bleating even to his own ears: “I’m trying to survive, Malcolm.”

“Far be it from me to judge. You’re really on our side?”

“Yes,” Ollie said. “I’m not a fucking monster.”

“Do ye tell the other twat the exact same thing?” Jamie asked.

“Be nice, Jamie. I’m sure when the little Oxbridge twat sits down tae filet fuckin’ mignon and champagne with his Nazi cuntstain friends while we starve on stolen rations and watered-down fuckin’ piss and get shot at, he tells himself that it’s all for the greater good.”
“Christ, Malcolm,” Ollie groaned. “Do you always have to be so fucking melodramatic? What is it that you even want?”

“Oh,” Malcolm said, almost cheerfully. “I want you to get to know the inflated fuckin’ pustule a little better. Make him trust you. Get on his good side if you’re capable of making anyone not want to smack you.”

Ollie told himself that one did not go around hitting people twice one’s age, especially the living dead, and also that he wouldn’t bet on himself in a fair fight with Malcolm, let alone Jamie. Not that Malcolm had ever been in a fair fight in his life.


“See if you can lift his mobile while you’re at it,” Jamie added.

Malcolm stood, albeit not without what seemed like considerable effort, and Jamie hovering close by. He grinned his apex-predator smile, exposing far too many teeth. “One more thing. Tell Lowell that once I’ve toppled the Regime, destroyed everything he’s worked for, taken away everything he fuckin’ loves, consigned him tae the fuckin’ dustbin of history, and fucked him so hard that his great-grandchildren are walking funny—tell him I’ll kill him slowly. Tell him that he dies fuckin’ last.”

He was halfway into the darkness of the tunnels before Ollie managed, “Is Emma…”

Malcolm turned, silhouetted in the orange light, and Ollie expected murder to be written in those eyes, but the expression on his face was distant, preoccupied. “Is Emma what?”

“Is she safe? I don’t expect she’s okay, but—”

“She’s fine,” Malcolm said, and Ollie told himself that the relief he felt was no more than a longing for the familiar. “Same time, three days. Talk to fuckin’ Lowell and come back with something interesting.”

Faintly, Ollie said, “It’s a date.”

He thought he heard Jamie mutter, “fuckin’ lovesick Poxbridge ponce,” as the two retreated into the tunnels.

“—If there was any contamination, it was the work of the very same terrorists who threaten this great nation and are willing to use illegal chemical weapons to undermine the very basis of our way of life…”

Lowell rang Weber. “It’s the PR equivalent of ‘whoever smelt it, dealt it.’ He has to go—”

“Not on the fucking phone, Ross. Meet me downstairs.”

He bashed through the office door, startling a drone hovering just outside, and practically threw himself down the staircase. Weber stood on the first floor, arms folded behind his back, a broad-shouldered military man in a grey uniform and mirror shades. “—because his explosive case of verbal diarrhea very strongly implies that the ration supply is less than secure and the terrorists have in fact managed to kill two people with the White Death.”
“So I gather.” The subtleties of verbal snafus were often lost on Weber; fortunately for the case Lowell was trying to make, Price-Callaghan’s cock-ups were hardly subtle. “You want to throw him to the wolves?”

Lowell glanced around at the drones; a few were in eavesdropping range, but he had a jamming field and Weber was standing close enough. “I don’t see how there’s a choice,” he admitted. “It’s hit international news, you know. We’ve blocked it but the attacks against the firewall keep coming. And the streets…”

“I’ve looked out the window,” Weber said.

“It is faked, isn’t it?” He’d had a gnawing of doubt, not having seen the bodies himself.

“Of course it’s faked,” Weber snapped. “It’s not even a good fake.”

“It didn’t need to be,” Lowell said. If only Malcolm Tucker’s ability to feign insanity had been as utter shit as his ability to mimic the effects of the White Death with a pair of shot-up, rotting rebel corpses—but he’d gotten what he’d wanted in both cases, hadn’t he?

Weber shared equal responsibility for this particular clusterfuck, and Lowell didn’t trust him not to throw him to the wolves if it came down to it, if the Chancellor ever found out. “He needs to be seen, live, at the location. Send a security detail, but—”

“Don’t say it.”

“Have the two Centres quarantined and sanitised. We’ll put him at an untainted one, stuffing his gob with a fucking ration bar and looking happy about it.”

“And the riots?”

“They stop tonight, preferably before Price-Callaghan has to go on camera. By whatever means necessary.”

Stretched out on a rooftop, Sam peered through the rifle’s scope at the scene unfolding at the Distribution Centre several blocks away. Her breath was frozen in the morning cold, puffing white in front of the lens, and even with the gloves, her fingers were chilled. She’d made more difficult shots before, but it was broad daylight and timing was key, and it was almost a pity that she couldn’t have brought Emma. She glanced at the kid keeping watch, at the cab, circling around the tanks blockading the Centre’s immediate vicinity. She checked her watch.

Price-Callaghan stepped in front of a microphone. A long line of grey uniforms flanked him and the press’s presence was limited to the Regime’s own publicity department and a handful of official media, but it was nevertheless the closest any Regime official had been to the citizenry since Sam had made it clear that the slightest attempt at public relations was an incitement to assassination.

He seemed nervous. He kept looking down at the ration bars in his hands. The hair on the back of his head was thinning, and he was underdressed for the weather.
Sam took pity on his audience and fired before he could speak.

The splash of red as much confirmation as she was likely to get, she motioned to the boy, then took the stairs down to the top floor. Ducking into an office, she shed the black clothes and the gloves and balaclava, straightened her hair, and walked into the elevator. The boy stayed behind, waiting until she was stepping into the cold, bright sunlight—how long had it been?—and into the cab, which circled one last time before picking him up at the corner.

They were stopped and searched at the checkpoint—“Ma’am, do you realize that the Minister has just been shot?”—but her ID, and the boy’s, sufficed. As they waved her past, she pressed her face against the window, closing her eyes to feel the sun on her lids for as long as she could, the daylight golden and perfect and everything she’d ever missed.

In the War Room, in the early hours of the morning, Nicola tallied the dead.

Reports were still flooding in, though at this point any count was mostly conjecture. Sundeep had planted the first seeds online that Weber had also been killed in the strike, and despite the Regime’s attempts to kill the story, it had snowballed quickly enough that Nicola was prone to doubt everything she heard, from any side. In addition to Price-Callaghan, three Regime soldiers had been killed trying to quell the riots, which were still popping up in ration-dependent parts of the city. The rioters themselves had lost between ten and fifty, depending on which continental news service one believed.

The greatest loss to the Resistance was the sniper rifle Sam had been grudgingly forced to abandon on the roof, lest the checkpoint guards conduct a search.

“One down,” Malcolm said.

“It worked,” Nicola said. “This time. I don’t think Weber will be so quick to step out into the open after this.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Malcolm replied. “He’s already dead. It was on CNN and everything.”

She put the tablet aside, walked over to a cupboard by the door, and retrieved a dark brown bottle and two chipped ceramic mugs. Sundeep brewed the stuff in the boiler room, and it didn’t taste like anything so much as windscreen wiper fluid and mud, but the assassination of a high-profile Regime minister called for a celebration. Even if she had nothing but moonshine and no one but Malcolm to drink it with, she’d take her victories where she could.

He stared down at the liquid while she sipped at hers, swilling it in a mug that read “World’s Best Grandpa,” then drained it, coughing and swearing as it burned its way down his throat. “What the fuck, Nic’la,” he growled, though he was already reaching for the bottle again. She’d always liked him better when they’d both been drinking, and she suspected the feeling was mutual.

She could feel its effects already kicking in, the inevitable despair following on the heels of her temporary elation, the weird time-lapse that came from a career in politics where fifteen minutes was an eternity and three years a lifetime.

After a long pause, and the world swimming before her, she said, “Malcolm? Are we going to win?”
“This fuckin’ guerrilla Womble act,” he said. “It isn’t for me. I’m a worse revolutionary than you are. So it’s win or join the Regime.” At her look, he added. “Fuckin’ joking, sweetheart. I’m going to cut out their livers with a spoon and you’ll get all the credit.”

Impulsively, she reached over to take his hand; he snatched it away before she could actually make contact. “Don’t get all misty-eyed at me, ye daft cunt,” he snapped. “Ye don’t want tae go down that road. One sappy fuckin’ twat around here is more than fucking enough.” He slid the emptied mug towards her and climbed to his feet, presumably in search of the sappy twat in question. “Hey,” he said over his shoulder. “I didn’t claw my way out of a fuckin’ Gorbals tenement and into power just to die in the fuckin’ Tube. I travel by cab. These cunts, they’re pretenders to the throne, it won’t last. It never does.”

She’d hated him for so long, and to no small degree she still did. That didn’t stop her from mumbling a nearly inaudible, “Thank you,” at the door as it whispered shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always to stackcats and Thorn Wilde for all of their awesomeness.
Chapter Summary

In which Jamie makes a new friend, Ollie reunites with an old one, and DoSAC gets rebranded, again.

The days, or what passed for them in the grim fortress of Clapham North, could almost have been bearable. Malcolm was a good liar, always had been, and while neither Jamie nor anyone else who’d known him before was thick enough to actually believe that he wasn’t coming apart like bits of wet toilet paper, he’d always been a master of shared illusion. He unleashed his once-legendary ferocity on Nicola’s beleaguered underlings, a veritable whirlwind of chaos and fuckery battering at the Regime’s door, and if his voice gave out mid-shout and he resigned himself to summoning Jamie to continue a bollocking, well, they could all pretend that he had better things to do.

Alone—though they rarely got to be alone—they bickered over strategy, and it was like the old days, Malcolm sharp-tongued and scheming and Jamie permitted to snipe back at him because in the end, they both knew he’d go to hell and back to do Malcolm’s bidding every fucking time. He did not allow himself to think that he’d been forgiven, neither for the Tom Davis farce (not that he was remotely sorry for that, even now) nor for his return to the priesthood (which they did not discuss, ever, lest Jamie be subjected to the full force of Malcolm’s Thoughts About Religion and Roman Catholicism In Particular), but a truce was definitely in order because whatever else you could say about Malcolm and his ability to hold a grudge, he did have a sense of priorities and besides, Jamie’d always been one of the few people who actually noticed when he was being funny.

If Malcolm hadn’t—as Whitehall rumour had once suggested—ever needed to sleep, Jamie might have been able to get by. Alas, again contrary to gossip, he was actually human, and would, every few days or so, inevitably drag himself back to his bunk at the very end of the shelter and collapse in the murk of some re-routed fucking foreign broadcast, which was typically when Jamie would feel his precarious self-control give way, and remember where the fuck he actually was.

Had Jamie possessed even a modicum of perspective, he might have convinced himself that Malcolm was not in any imminent danger of suddenly dropping dead, and that 220 feet underground and surrounded by armed rebels was about as safe as London got these days, and he might then have found something else to occupy his time besides lying on the top bunk and monitoring every catch in the wheezy cunt’s laboured breathing.

Instead, the situation was rapidly deteriorating into fucking intolerable. He found himself watching, through the gap between the mattress and the wall, Malcolm in the grip of some nightmare. Jamie wished he could invade Malcolm’s dreams and take a shit all over whatever was making him whimper like that. He wasn’t good at sharing sleeping space, as his ex-wife had never hesitated to inform him, but the bunk above Malcolm was infinitely worse than lying restive beside Mary. Not to mention that Malcolm would commit seppuku if he’d known that he was making pained little noises in his sleep and Jamie could hear it all.

In his other life, the one he could no longer think of as normal, he’d only seen Malcolm asleep once, and it had practically been the death of him. It had involved some party conference with an entire Special Olympics decathlon of various flavours of imbecility, and saw them holed up in Malcolm’s
hotel room, drinking furiously to ease the burden of being the cleverest people in a government full of tossers, wankers, and outright tits. After nearly seventy-two hours of Red Bull-and-gin-fueled psychosis, Malcolm had passed out on the bed, still in a fucking tux. Jamie’d paced for what seemed like hours deciding what to do about it, then tugged off his shoes and—carefully, as if disarming a nuclear warhead—loosened his bowtie and tossed a blanket over him. That was already going too far, and he knew it, but he’d been closer to Malcolm than he’d ever managed to get before, and he attributed to divine intervention the restraint that had somehow kept him from torching his career and marriage by pressing a kiss to those thin, sleep-slackened lips.

He’d thought then—and, later, blamed the toxic stew churning through his bloodstream for the flourish of sentimentality—that he’d have happily died for Malcolm. Or, at least, the man Malcolm had been in those days, incendiary and brilliant, before the Nutters got their claws into him and turned him into a ragged, empty caricature of himself, a tool to be used and discarded by the most toxic of opportunistic jizzrags.

Now, though, it was worse, now Jamie had no career, and no marriage, and nothing to live for besides Malcolm and revenge. The latter was a distant mirage, and what remained of the former was entirely too close and real and had no right to be so vulnerable, so embarrassingly human. Every crease and hollow outlined in the faint, pulsing light of the tablet’s power indicator, he had a face that more properly belonged to a Christian martyr than a ruthless political operative, and not for the first time Jamie wondered how other people managed to not just die from just looking at him.

Out of habit—it gave him something to fidget with when pacing or shouting wasn’t an option—he fumbled for his rosary, but it had disappeared from where he’d draped it over the bunk’s railing. Restlessness metastasising into irritation and a pressing need for a fag, he climbed down the ladder, pausing only momentarily to make sure that Malcolm hadn’t stirred. It wasn’t like he was getting to sleep any time soon. He made his way to the barricade and lit one of his diminishing supply of cigarettes and thought about Weber, and Lowell, and the fact that London’s hard water made the tea taste like shite, anything but fucking Malcolm.

Something moved in the darkness beyond the barricade, too noisy to be a rat, and he was instantly on high alert, hand on his rifle, stepping over the gap in the sandbags to press into the shadows that clung to the tunnel walls. Whoever it was splashed ahead of him, through an inch of black water, and he followed, quieter, tugging a balaclava over his face.

At the end of the passage was a connection to the station, and he followed the now-visible figure across the tracks until it vanished up one of the unused maintenance ladders; he waited, then climbed up after, saw a flash of black against the dull bulk of the staircase leading up to surface level.

There was a strain, then, a rubber band stretched slightly too far, at the thought of leaving—abandoning, as if he owed anything to Malcolm or the Resistance or anyone else—but his instincts for treason were too finely honed after committing no small number of acts himself to let some cunt steal past him, unannounced and unauthorized, into the outside world.

He followed for blocks, stopping involuntarily to clasp at the cold metal bars of a gate outside a mass of drab slate-grey buildings as he sucked in his first gasp of fresh air in weeks. Up ahead, he could hear some sort of commotion, the unmistakable sounds of shattered glass and the cacophony of gunfire, and his years of near-solitude and contemplation in the arms of the One True Church had not left him such a changed man that a part of him didn’t yearn desperately for a decent brawl.

A cold wind rushed past him, and he blinked to see a swarm of surveillance microdrones, followed by a heavier, armed craft that rose like an awkward seabird in their wake. He flattened his body against the lee of the closest tower—an animal reflex—intellectually, he knew that the drones sensed
body heat as well as visuals, but they were apparently less interested in him than whatever was happening where the road led out to a row of shops. He crept up along a concrete ramp overlooking the excitement, peered down in time to see the lithe figure in black run out to join the throng of rioters lobbing bricks at the line of plate-glass-shielded troops at the intersection.

Some of the rioters were still snatching anything they could from the handful of storefronts not already boarded up, but their numbers were thinning as Jamie slid along the ridge, half of them bleeding out into the slush-lined roads. Most wore hoods and masks in flagrant violation of any number of laws; none of the dead and dying, from what he could see, looked old enough to vote.

*We started this,* he thought, and allowed himself the unfamiliar stab of guilt because even that was better than reminding himself that Aileen might have been the age of those weans, if he’d not got her killed by trying to save her.

Moving along the barrier, he tested the door at the top. Open, a massive slab of hideous utilitarian architecture with countless floors to hide in. He could slip away, wait this out, slink back down into the Tube when the inevitable end came. He might have, had the identity of his runaway—now as cornered as the rest, shooting wildly—not occurred to him with a sudden, painful clarity.

It was stupid, horribly fucking stupid and possibly suicidal, but the promise of violence was intoxicating, and they were just so fucking young, Tiananmen Square and the Prague Spring and *Blake’s 7* all rolled up together in cunting Brixton. Besides, he shuddered to think what Nicola might do to him if he returned and Ella didn’t; worse, to think of the precise way in which she’d crumble, taking the nascent rebellion with her. In his mind, there was nothing beyond the cold Atlantic Ocean and survivors clinging to the bombed wreckage of a ship, screaming for help while the Regime’s dog-fucking bawbags looked on, unmoved.

It might be a short-lived revenge, but the world would hardly be lesser without him, and certainly much improved with the removal of a number of goose-stepping twats.

He turned back to face the fray, eyes just above the rim of cement, and every impulse he’d carefully contained for weeks roiling just beneath his skin. He didn’t think that it would outweigh the multitude of sins, real and imagined, that he’d committed in his disreputable and tumultuous career, but he took aim at the armed drone spilling death above the rampaging youths, and blasted it out of the sky.

The cloud of microdrones banked sharply and flew for him; he batted them away, surprised at how readily the tiny spheres cracked against the concrete, shooting into the ranks of grey uniforms as he ran down the ramp, flung himself over the barrier, and knocked Ella Murray to the muddy ground. Before she could struggle free, he dragged her, one arm crooked around her mouth, the other firing at the soldiers, through the tower door and into the decrepit lobby. She kicked and bit his arm and he nearly had to let go of her before he’d managed to manhandle her into a stairwell. The mad girl squirmed and hissed like a scalded cat, but he’d a considerable history of knocking down drunken Rangers fans who’d staggered into the wrong pub, and, unlike Malcolm, had absolutely no compunctions about hitting women.

“Let go of me, you piece of shit!” He could all but see the adolescent snarl beneath the black wool of her mask. He was sure now that it was her, having caught glimpses of her now and then when she was on guard duty. He’d heard, via unofficial channels he’d not admit to having before the coup, that the little hellion was the one responsible for turning the rest of Malcolm’s hair grey during Nicola’s ill-fated tenure at DoSAC, but she wasn’t permitted inside meetings and he’d not had much to do with her.

He shoved the girl in the direction of the stair. “Up. Now. They’ll be coming for both of us.”
Her dark eyes, Nicola’s eyes, narrowed. “I know you.”

“Keep moving. D’ye think this is some kind of game, ye retarded gash?”

With each flight, the noise of the gunshots retreated, and the girl seemed less determined to fight him. On the landing of the sixth floor, after scanning for the presence of cameras, he magnanimously allowed her to sit down.

“Fuck you,” Ella said weakly.

He sagged against the wall, tar-bunged lungs heaving with exertion, reviving only to snap at her when she went to peel off her sweat-drenched balaclava.

“They’re dying down there.”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “An’ naught ye can do about it, except tae not join them.”

“I can help,” Ella said. “I’ve done it before.”

“Right, yeah, you’re Mrs. fuckin’ Peel, I get it.” He rolled his head in her direction. “That tunnel ladder’s not guarded?”

“Hardly ever.”

He pushed back the germ of an incredibly ingenious idea—it could wait until he had her out of harm’s way—and checked his ammunition supplies. “Come here often?”

“When I can.”

“It stops tonight. You’ll do as yer told.”

“Or what?” she snit.

“Or I tie you tae the tracks by yer own fuckin’ entrails, ye demented demon twat.”

He watched her, hoping she’d reel, vaguely pleased when she didn’t. The bully, the one with the straightening iron and the comprehensive school, not the eldest who he’d heard was in hiding with the little ones; she was near tears for some reason, holding back the best she could, and losing, but she wasn’t frightened of him. It was an effort, not to resent Nicola for her still-living brood of brats. His jaw itched where the mask pressed the wiry hairs back into his skin. Malcolm was right; the beard had to go, at least if he planned on exercising his frustrations with the particular direction his life had taken by using the Regime’s shock troops for target practice.

“It’d destroy your mam.”

“She wouldn’t notice. Too busy with the revolution.”

“She would. Believe me.”

“You don’t know her.”

“She was never at home and every time she put her foot in it—which was every time she drew a fuckin’ breath from what I hear—the wee fucks at school pushed your head into the loo and flushed. And now she’s got you trapped underground and still doesnae have the time for ye.”

Ella curled her arms around her knees, leaned her head against her forearm. “So what?”
“She cares, ye daft bint,” he said, wondering which one of them was actually doing the confessing, and gripped with a frantic desire to bolt. He wasn’t meant for this, hiding in stairwells and laying his soul bare for some weepy posh teenage hellspawn. “She can’t help that she’s shite at it.” He looked outside the tiny window at the top of the landing, barred and streaked with an unidentifiable substance. He couldn’t hear gunshots anymore; he assumed that the troops had smeared the miniature uprising into red paste and moved on. “Listen,” he offered. “That shitshow down there? It’s on me, well, and Malcolm, but the Express will shut its gob about Diana before he fuckin’ apologizes for anything. Ye dinnae need tae fix this.”

“You, then?”

He nodded, gripping his rifle for emphasis. Already, a plan to slake his bloodlust and not inconsiderable boredom was forming. “But your mam, she fuckin’ needs ye. She cannae love ye, pet, not properly. You’re old enough tae understand that. But she needs the idea of you. She needs ye tae be fuckin’ alive.”

Ella stared, and for a terrifying moment he was convinced that she knew, it was bad enough with Malcolm and Sam shooting him concerned looks and thinking he didn’t notice, but at least they were actual adults even if neither of them had children. He carried his grief like a dry drunk carried his rage, obvious even to a spoiled little shit like her.

“We’ll go back tae base,” he said, not unkindly. “I’ll make a cuppa.”

“Fuck that,” Ella replied.

“That fuckin’ pish you people drink, then. Paint stripper and rat spadge.” This at least got a girlish giggle, which was un-fucking-acceptably civilised as far as he was concerned. “Get tae fuck, then,” he roared at her. “And put yer mask back on. You want tae be featured on the Regime’s Barely Legal Rebels page three wankbait? Fuck.”

Ella clung to his arm like her life depended on it, like his did, and together, they made their way back down to the silent, blood-seeped streets.

An hour or so later, after he’d installed Ella in her section of the shelter with a whispered promise to excruciatingly slowly remove the top layer of skin from her face and use it to replace his balaclava should she ever even consider stepping foot outside of the station without her mother’s express permission, and managed a quick shave that left his jaw raw and scabby, he found Malcolm lying awake, muttering an extensive inventory of verbal filth and tapping with obvious frustration at the tablet with his left hand. (He’d never quite gotten the hang of touch-screens and had all but required an exorcism when Sundeep had meekly informed him that Blackberry had gone under a year after the coup.)

He barely looked up as Jamie sat heavily beside him, but muttered, “If you weren’t homeless and living in the Tube, I’d scour your attic for ugly portraits. It’s not fuckin’ natural.” Which was as close to a kind word as anything he’d said to Jamie in half a decade, and Jamie’s traitorous jessie heart, which had never been anything approaching sensible where Malcolm was concerned, misfired like a backed-up engine.
He was still shaking. If the sight of children, even children shot down in the street, was enough to trigger panic or sorrow, he’d never have lasted as a priest, not even in a geriatric village where the average age rapidly approached that of AC Milan. It was just that, were it not for the infinitesimal weight of the photograph he carried with him, always, even into the killing fields of Brixton’s streets, he’d fear forgetting his daughters’ faces.

It was just that there was so little in his life that mattered anymore, and what did, mattered so fucking much.

“You left,” Malcolm said, far too flatly for it to be a proper accusation.

“Had places tae be,” Jamie replied. “Glummy Mummy’s bairn tae rescue.”

That, finally, was enough to make him more interesting than the Irish Times’s article on the various ingenious means by which refugees from the North bypassed the Partition Wall. Jamie’s boots were caked with drying mud and ASBO-gore, and he took it as a sign of Malcolm’s mental decrepitude that he hadn’t yet been filleted for tracking it all over the floor. “Really.”

“I like her. Great big fuckin’ bollocks for a wee yin. It’s sorted; she willnae get loose anymore.”

If he was waiting for approval—he knew better, of course, but it might have been nice after he’d been a genuine fucking hero—Malcolm wasn’t forthcoming. But nor did he flinch away, which was almost progress as far as Jamie was concerned, and Jamie was thus permitted to be close enough that, if Malcolm were a regular person and not some kind of Nosferatu with antifreeze for blood, he might have felt the warmth radiating from his skin.

“You should see the Wikipedia edit wars on Weber,” Malcolm said in lieu of actually having a civilised conversation. “He’s Schrödinger’s fuckin’ Dirty Den. They can’t decide if we killed him or not.” He tilted the tablet in Jamie’s direction, as if Jamie gave two solid steaming fucks about what obese American basement-dwellers had to say about the Regime. Though he supposed a clusterfuck of misdirection, even an ultimately harmless one well outside the borders of their green and buggered land, was making someone, somewhere, in the Regime unhappy. At least he hoped so. Still, if Malcolm was resorting to getting his kicks from reading Wikipedia, they really were fucked.

“Sundeep is not complete shite in the dirty tricks department.”

“The Poxbridge cunt’s got potential, then?”

“Aye, though he’s a fuckin’ blogger and he’s shagged my PA so he’s up against the wall once we’re through.”

“I’ll do the blindfolds,” Jamie said. “She could have married a journo. That’d be worse, yeah?”

Malcolm flashed him the pained grimace that passed for one of his smiles, and it was back to business. “It’s no’ enough,” he said. “They can’t be had by a PR flap, even Nicola would have done it by now. The only cunt terminally brain damaged enough tae pop his head out of his bunker has had it shot off.” He leaned up on an elbow and kicked at the blood-stiffened leg of Jamie’s jeans. “I’d kill for some polling figures. You’ve been outside. Is the public revolting yet?”

“Starving, anyway,” Jamie said. “What happened to ‘no civilians,’ Malc?”

He regretted the words the instant they left his mouth, and the glare Malcolm gave him in response was banned under the Geneva Convention. More important and powerful men than Jamie had withered and died under the heat of those fucking eyes.

“There are,” Malcolm said, “no more civilians.”
“They’re scared,” Jamie replied. “And they should be, fuck, look in a fuckin’ mirror some time. No offense, Malc, but you’ve been in a cell for four years. I’ve been out in the world, with them.”

“Yeah,” Malcolm said in a tone of voice that implied the exact opposite. “The terrorists brought the Regime to power, didn’t they, but the fuckin’ *civilians* kept them there. It wouldn’t take what I did to start them rioting otherwise.”

“So it’s fuck everyone else, then? Is that the new line?”

“When you were out there,” Malcolm spat, “in the fucking world, did ye happen to see the crowds lining the streets down to the docks, cheering on the deportations? When they raided the mosques and loaded everyone onto buses and liquidated the puir bastards? The good fuckin’ people of Great Britain, Good fuckin’ Germans…” His attention turned back to the tablet, downcast, as if the very act of arguing with Jamie was more exhausting than he could manage.

Jamie barely had the stomach for it either, even if he was right—which he was, and the worst bit of it was that Malcolm obviously knew he was right—and he wondered when, exactly, he’d lost the will to call out the old fucker when he was being an utter git. “You’d no’ have been so callous before,” he said.

Malcolm rubbed at the swollen joints of his hand. “You wouldn’t have let me be.”

He wasn’t, Jamie thought, just talking about the riots. Malcolm never spoke of the last years of his personal reign of terror, and no one, least of all Jamie, wanted to risk an orchiectomy-by-rusty-screwdriver by asking him about it. There were no graceful exits from politics, and if Malcolm’s final, inevitable implosion had been particularly spectacular, it was simply the nature of the game and the role he’d played in it. It was ridiculous to think that he’d never have spiralled out of control, never have fallen, if Jamie had still been there to rein him in.

“Aye,” Jamie said. “I’m your fuckin’ conscience, aren’t I?”

“You’d like tae think so, ye wee psycho.” The last bit of his sentence degenerated into a painful hacking fit. Jamie almost managed to stand, to get him water, he’d take water even if he’d not let Jamie touch him, before Malcolm seemed to recover enough to breathe again. “Fine. Right. What would you have me do, Jiminy fuckin’ Cricket?”

He’d actually thought about it for about thirty seconds. “Send out the Piccadilly cell to deal with the riots.” At Malcolm’s raised eyebrow, he added, “If the fecal fest at Stockwell goes on much longer, they’ll die anyway, or kill off Nicola’s people, and she’s right about no’ bringing them here. We arm them, put them out between the troops and the neets.”

“The Regime can replace troops,” Malcolm said. “I ran the numbers. I mean, I’m a fuckin’ press guy, not a military strategist, but Jamie, we can’t win a war. Not even a guerrilla war.”

“I dinnae mean for us to win,” Jamie replied. “I mean for us tae be seen controlling a situation that the Regime cannae handle.”

“Trot vanguardist bollocks.”

“No’ utter shite, though.”

“No,” Malcolm said. “Not utter shite.”

“I’ll go with them.”
“The fuck you will. I need you here.”

“You have Sam.”

Malcolm was quiet, then. Serious, which had yet to stop being so unnerving. “She’s a good girl. Loyal, and she’ll do exactly as I say. So—” He couldn’t be unaware of the effect he had on Jamie; it was as conscious and deliberate as any one of his television appearances, and still, it worked. “I need you.”

“We’ll talk it out later. After you’ve made Nicola say yes.”

Malcolm made a sound that was more acknowledgment than it was agreement, and reached under a nearly flat pillow to retrieve something that, in the shadows, took a few seconds for Jamie to identify as his rosary. “It fell,” Malcolm said, and allowed Jamie the very slightest instant of contact, a thumb’s brush against the dry skin of his hand, as he passed it over. Jamie slid the beads through his fingers, smooth and cold and certain. “Don’t go out there again. Not tonight.”

Jamie didn’t think that he could so much as make it back up to the top bunk, at least not until Malcolm kicked him off the bed. Not while, with a small army and what remained of the British political structure at his beck and call, he’d admitted, after all these years, to needing Jamie.

“I’m no’ going anywhere,” Jamie said firmly, and to his credit, completely meant it at the time.

Ollie arrived at the station early this time in the perverse hope of not being at a complete disadvantage, but Malcolm was, of course, already there, leaning against the crumbling tiles with his arms crossed over his skinny chest and one of the Resistance’s silent Che Guevara postulants in a balaclava beside him. Ollie sidled up to him, aware of how exposed their faces were despite knowing with complete certainty that the obsolete cameras above them had ceased transmitting years ago.

“It wasn’t easy getting away,” Ollie told him. “If Lowell knew I had a jamming field I’d be in a black cell by now.”

“Tell me you have something for me.”

“He doesn’t trust me. He wants to know why the Resistance is suddenly not getting soundly fucked on a regular basis.”

“He knows why.”

“He knows he won’t get to you, not right away. He wants the leader.”

“Of course he does. Tell him it’s fuckin’ Fatty.”

“Fatty’s been dead for two years, Malcolm.”

“Tell him it’s Jeremy Kyle’s pickled left bollock running the show for all I care. Make something up; didn’t that used to be your job? Look, I don’t know who the fuckin’ leader is, no one knows, it’s all rhizomes and fuckin’ disorganisation, and meanwhile you’ve no’ given me anything useful.”

“Okay,” Ollie said. “Okay, fuck, there’s this one thing. Lowell’s been poking around DoCR—that’s the Department of Citizenship and Resettlement—"
“DoSAC.”

“Yeah, DoSAC, basically. There’s something there he’s found interesting and he’s back and forth with a USB every few days.”

“So what’s at DoSA—DoCR, fuck me, that’s a bad acronym. Gulags and letters of transit?”

“If so,” Ollie replied, “They’re at least more efficient about it than DoSAC ever was. It’s the citizenship tracking, only I imagine that your lot can hack into the regular databases, so whatever’s on that USB is sensitive enough that they don’t want it on the network and important enough not to destroy.”

“Can you get it?” As Ollie’s mouth started to open, he snapped, “That wasn’t a fuckin’ question. Get it.”

“Jesus, Malcolm.” He smacked his head against the cracked glass of a “Terrorism: If You Suspect It, Report It” advertisement. “What do you think I am, exactly?”

“Ross Lowell’s bumboy?”

“You wish. Don’t you have people to go through his bins?” Ollie supposed that he’d been demoted to bin-forager; it wasn’t like Malcolm needed to actually say it. “I’d be burned. If I managed it. I’d have to go underground like you and the rest of Dumbledore’s Army.”

“Who says we’d have you? We’ve got fuckin’ standards.”

“I’m your one link to the Regime and I’m not a link, Malcolm, I’m a paper-chain garland. I’m nothing. I want to bring them down as much as you do—” Malcolm glowered at him. “Okay, but I do want to bring them down, but I’m not…I don’t want to end up like you.”

“There was a time when that was exactly what you wanted.” Malcolm pushed off from the wall and started walking. The masked woman beside him—Sam? No, she was curvier and less gawky than Sam—didn’t budge. “Bring me something real. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Is this some kind of bribery pity fuck? You pimp out your soldiers now?”

Malcolm started walking, then looked over his shoulder at the woman. “No’ exactly. You kids have fun, yeah? Betray me and you’ll wish the Regime was tenderly shoving electrodes up your urethra.”

Which was when the masked face finally turned towards Ollie, clear blue eyes and a whispered, “Yorkshire Tea,” and a strand of blond hair finding its way loose from the black wool. It was only then that he realised he’d convinced himself that he’d never see her again, and he didn’t even care that Malcolm was still there, that this was undoubtedly part of some complicated scheme; all he could think to do was wrap his arms around Emma and bury his face against the top of her head in relief.

“Malcolm?”

Already walking away, his ratty coat flapping behind him, Malcolm muttered, “Soppy fuckin’ cunts. At least wait until I’m gone.” Then, echoing off the curved walls, into the gathering shadows: “Someone should get what they want.”

“We don’t have much time,” Emma said, and he knew she didn’t mean this clandestine meeting, or all the ones that were to follow in the weeks to come. He wasn’t a political genius—not, after all,
Manchester’s top Malcolm Tucker tribute band—but it didn’t take one to spot the bloodbath looming on the horizon.

Later—and not much later—he’d have cause to wonder if, without the way her hands trembled as she lifted the edge of her mask, the way her lips parted before he’d even started speaking, it all might have ended differently. Whether this, despite what history would eventually record, was how the war had begun.

They’d played at coy long enough; outside, the wind howled, shaking the ceiling of the station. They weren’t as young as they’d been, and he was tired. “Your flat,” Ollie said. “Chinese takeaway in front of the telly and Phil and your brother complaining about all the sex noises.”

“I don’t,” Emma replied, “actually want to think about Phil right now.”

“Let’s not, then,” he said, and in the gloom of the deserted station, finally leaned in to kiss her.
In which the consequences of wars, both public and private, make themselves known.

Despite a frantic exchange of words—the vast majority of which Ofcom wouldn’t have allowed on-air before 9 PM, and all of them delivered at a volume well above the range normally produced by human vocal chords—there wasn’t much genuine discussion to be had. Jamie was leaving. All that remained to be decided was how violent the parting would be. So far, no one had thrown an actual punch, but then, it had only been a few hours since everyone’d met in the War Room, Malcolm had essentially dictated the new strategy, and Jamie had announced that he was, personally, leading the charge.

“Should we, I don’t know, do something?”

Sam stretched her arms behind her head and looked up at her husband. The single mattress ought to have been too small for them, but hunger had winnowed them both down to the barest of parts, just bone and sinew until they fit like tongue-and-groove siding in a space meant for one. There was no privacy in the shelter—at the moment, Malcolm and Jamie were carrying on a shout that had begun in the War Room until Nicola had summoned a pair of bollocks from somewhere and told them both to piss off, migrated to the men’s lavatory, and eventually wound up by the extractor fan, which did absolutely nothing to disguise the argument beyond making it even louder.

“Are you volunteering to get in the middle of that?” She had a headache, and it was all very draining to have to be more reasonable than everybody else. It wasn’t as if she didn’t also, on a regular basis, want to bury her considerable fear under a torrent of aggression, but revolution or not, a lifetime of conditioning to be publicly sweet and deferential, and privately fucking brilliant, wasn’t all that easy to overcome, especially with Malcolm looming in the background for contrast. She didn’t envy either him or Jamie, not with what they’d been through, but she wished, every so often, that she too could default to screaming at a problem until it went and fucked off.

“It’s just that they’re going to kill each other before the Regime gets either of them,” Sundeep said.

“This is nothing.” Sam, after all, had lived through the Great Tom Wobble of 2007, when they’d been genuinely angry at each other rather than terrified and trying—not very effectively—to hide it. “This is foreplay.” At his look, she added, “Metaphorically. Jesus, get your mind out of the gutter. Malcolm’s about two hundred years old and Jamie’s a priest.”

“Sounds like the premise of a supernatural romance to me,” Sundeep replied. “But for real, I think they’re about ready to whip them out and see whose is longer.”

She hit him with the pillow, and would have been tempted to snipe at him for suggesting anything untoward about her former boss, mentor, and the Last Decent Man in British Politics, and besides, the mental image alone, if she weren’t so fucking scared. “Nicola should let me go instead. Jamie’s not a soldier.”

“Neither are you, love. But you’ve both done well enough so far.”
The din of the All-Glaswegian Competitive Shouting Championship ground to an abrupt halt, and Sam sat up to peer, unnerved, down the long corridor of bunks.

“Which one d’you think’s snuffed it?”

Before she could hazard a guess, Malcolm was storming down the cross tunnel, cold fury carved into his face. He would have gone right past the shelter, but she leapt up and caught the sleeve of his coat. He whirled, death in his pale eyes, and for an (albeit fleeting) instant she was half-afraid he was going to hit her.

“You talked him out of it?” Because that was the only way a disagreement with Malcolm ended, with the other poor fucker conceding, given that he could no longer have anyone sacked.

He shook his hand free and braced himself against the wall; a quick, furtive look to determine that it was only Sam in the cross tunnel, then the fight went out of him with a harsh exhale like air whistling out of a punctured balloon.

“He’s going?”

“Tonight.” Sam was sure that, in a hundred lifetimes she wouldn’t get used to the omnipresent rasp in Malcolm’s voice, or the despair. She didn’t want to get used to it. “Taking a handful of Nicola’s most expendable redshirts to meet with the sorry self-annihilating cunts at Stockwell. We’ve reached critical levels of fuck if drunken sodomy with a pool cue counts as fuckin’ military experience now.”

“What’d he say to convince you?”

“Oh,” Malcolm said. “Nothing. He just looks at me with those great big fuckin’ baby blue eyes and I can’t refuse him anything.” Her embryonic smirk died stillborn under Malcolm’s glare. Despite what she’d said to Sundeep, she suspected he wasn’t entirely wrong about the dynamics at play. “Where’s Free Gary? I need him to hack into DoSA—DoCR—for me.”

“Here.” Sundeep, and his laptop, were behind her. Had he overheard everything? She supposed it didn’t matter; there were no proper secrets in the tunnels, at least not for long. “But Malcolm, I’ve looked at that stuff. There’s not really—” He shifted his fingers over the computer’s casing, leaving streaks of moisture despite the cold. “Right, then. Shall we?”

Two hours later, having commandeered the War Room yet again, Malcolm looked back up from the screen, bleary-eyed and, if it were possible, even more irritable than he had been before. It wasn’t in Sam’s job description anymore to bring him tea, and he’d be as likely as not to pitch a fit on her if she tried, but the temptation was strong enough that she clasped her hands tightly and sat down in one of the chairs beside him to stop herself.

“I think I’m getting a vibe.”

“A vibe?” Sundeep asked, because he’d only met Malcolm a few weeks ago and didn’t know any better.

“A supernatural fuckin’ spidey-sense, kind of a tingling, a boring sort of déjà-fucking-vu, like the entire world has changed and yet here I remain, looking at another catastrophic DoSAC fuck-up.” He poked at the keyboard as if it were a still-twitching bit of roadkill. “Does this make any sense to you, Sam? Does this—” He moved away, enough for her to see a spreadsheet of names, broken by stretches in dates that easily spanned months. “—look to you like the work of a government that makes the trains run on time?”

“They deleted something,” Sundeep said.
“Yes they fuckin’ deleted something! Fuck! What is it that Sam sees in you? These are the puir fuckers they had murdered, and they kept records of those, so who exactly did they fuckin’ delete?”

“I don’t know!”

“Get it back.”

“I can’t, Malcolm. I’m not a fucking wizard; this isn’t magic, it’s IT. It’s—probably it’s what’s on that USB that Reeder told you about, and the reason it’s on a USB is to keep it out of the hands of people like us.”

“You hacked a drone.”

“Once, and then they changed the firmware. If I’m lucky enough, and it’s on a computer that I’m watching at one particular moment, maybe, I can see it if they put it on screen, but realistically—” He didn’t need to go on; ancient as he was, Malcolm mostly understood how networks functioned.

“We need to physically go and get it,” Sam said. “Break into DoCR.”

“You wee delinquent. No, I’m no’ having you die in that fuckin’ fishbowl for what’s probably just weapons-grade incompetence. We’ll find another way.” He frowned, stood up. Paced. For the first time since he’d marched into Nicola’s War Room and taken up the helm of the Resistance, she was aware of just how old he looked, how weary and small, and it occurred to her that he might very well have no more idea of how to wage a war, let alone win one, than she did.

“Malcolm,” Sam tried, and though she wasn’t frightened of him—she was the one person in all the world who’d never been frightened of him—she had an instinct for self-preservation common to all meat-based creatures, and said instinct most assuredly did not want her to finish the sentence. “You should go and be with Jamie. I’m worried about him, and—and you.”

“Darlin’.” His voice was gentle—well, as close as he got to gentle, which would be considered a venomous snarl for most people. “And I mean this in the nicest possible way—Jamie can get tae fuck. He wants to play tin soldiers with the BNP and get himself killed for the chavs and hoodies, I won’t do him the courtesy of a tearful fuckin’ farewell.” He swept himself out of the room in a flap of moth-eaten wool and malice.

“That went well,” Sundeep said.

Sam shook her head. “He’d better fucking not get himself killed,” she muttered, and wondered when it was, exactly, that she’d started to give a fuck about what happened to Jamie, of all people.

“I know how he feels.”

“I don’t think Jamie has feelings, exactly.”

“Malcolm, I mean.” She stared at him. “When you go. Like I can’t even look at you, in case.” He squeezed her forearm, and she leaned her head against his bony shoulder. They stayed like that for a long time.

A giant map of the city, the Exclusion Zones shaded in biro scribbles, lay over the table, the areas
held by the Regime demarcated by outdated ration tickets, Jamie’s army of Brixton detritus a scattering of sliced-up playing cards, the Resistance’s own guerrilla cells represented by poker chips along the Underground lines. Malcolm tried to focus on whatever Barry was droning on about, but despite him being no more boring than any number of self-important cunts Malcolm had put in their place over the years, he kept drifting off, the sharp aches in his joints made all the worse by a pressure front building across a London sky he hadn’t seen in over a month.

If Jamie were here, Malcolm might have passed him a note detailing exactly in which bit of the old Trot’s anatomy he’d have liked to ram an ice-axe, but Jamie had been off for a week and was, by all accounts, proving to be as much of a festering-axe wen on the Regime’s arse as he’d been on Malcolm’s. He might have even managed to make sense of the scrawls Malcolm—after painstaking, swear-ridden practice—could almost vaguely write with his left hand, a cipher which even Sam, flawless creature that she was, couldn’t decode.

It was all so fucking slow. Back in the day, with Jamie on bin-and-long-lens duty, it’d have taken Malcolm no more than a few hours to determine from where any given member of the government was obtaining his nose-candy, who and what he was fucking, and how he could be disposed of with the minimal amount of fuss and collateral damage, at least where it concerned the handful of people about whom Malcolm gave a fuck. What was worse was that the Regime was thuggish, their state apparatus even more lethargic than the bloated bureaucratic machinery that they’d abolished in their crawl from the primordial muck of the *Daily Mail* to the halls of Number 10, and in an even (if not fair, never fair) battle of politics, they’d never have stood a chance against him. They had no right, no legitimacy. Had they not been torturers and murderers, they’d still have no place at all in a game like his. And yet there they were, the nation beaten into cowed submission beneath them, and the vast might of their military-fucking-industrial complex aimed straight at Jamie.

One of the tablets, propped up by a pair of ancient and dusty dictionaries, showed, silently, a repeat of the Chancellor’s latest address. Pre-recorded, of course, they couldn’t have risked a repeat of Price-Callaghan. Malcolm noticed a definite blurring around his eyes and mouth that ironed out the creases, evened his skin tone, and filled out—almost imperceptibly to someone who hadn’t spent a lifetime in public relations—his jaw. While tangible victories had been few and far between, he’d include among them this obvious bit of desperate high-tech interference. He ought to have been pleased, not just with the level to which Jamie was managing to keep London in flames, but with the resulting chaos which afforded Tim’s more disciplined troops to launch rapid, tactical strikes that had, at last count, destroyed one of the Regime’s weapons depots and damaged an army base. It was now apparent, at least, that the great pony-fucking Oswald Mosley clone was sleeping badly.

He should have been focused on the next move, but instead, he was thinking of the rosary left in the filthy chasm beneath his bunk, wondering, his chest tight for reasons unrelated to the scar tissue choking his upper respiratory system, where Jamie was hiding out between flashes of spasmodic nocturnal violence.

The night, the very fucking instant, he thought, that some flaccid Regime prick managed the lucky shot that took out the Resistance’s answer to Wayne Rooney, they wouldn’t be able to resist gloating. They’d drag his corpse (and Malcolm tried to avoid imagining Jamie dead, Jamie still for more than thirty seconds) down the middle of Oxford Street for all the surveillance drones to capture in lurid detail, splash it across every digital billboard in Piccadilly Circus, and moreover Malcolm would know, the loss would be tangible in every parched, malnourished cell in his shattered body, and that was the only reason he ever slept at night at all.

Which was how he nearly missed Tim telling him that Jamie’d actually gotten a message through on one of the ancient telegraphs, that he was due back in a few days to restock the ammo supplies for his ragtag army of yobbos, and that Malcolm needed to convince him, while he was here, to pull
back and regroup.

“What?” Nicola frowned at his obvious distraction, and Tim looked decidedly unhappy with both of them. There was an unease between the two of them that hadn’t been there until Nicola had waffled over the Stockwell situation, and had intensified in the week of Jamie’s Yob Blitzkrieg.

“I said to shorten Jamie’s leash,” Tim said. “He’s out of control. The attacks are too localised, too predictable; he’s doing well, but it’s short-term at best. He’s nipping at the Regime’s ankles and they’re better equipped. They’ll just send in more tanks, or flatten every tower block in the area.”

Malcolm pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead. “What the fuck,” he said, slowly, because the man clearly was a moron if he thought Jamie was out of control now, “makes you think that Jamie’ll listen to anything I say?”

“He’s doing all this under your orders, isn’t he?” Tim leaned forward in his chair, and Malcolm wasn’t imagining his body language; he was deliberately cutting off Nicola’s sightlines, talking past her, making it evident that she was no longer calling the shots. It might have been true, but any coup d’état would be Malcolm’s decision, not fucking Tim’s. “I mean, if Nicola—”

“If Nicola what?” She might have been a yawning black hole that sucked in political savvy and regurgitated a condensed torrent of feel-good cradle-to-grave pabulum, but even she couldn’t fail to detect the mutiny bubbling around the table.

“I’m just saying that perhaps Malcolm’s better equipped to deal with, ah, issues of particular sensitivity when it comes to military logistics.”

“Nicola, what do you actually think about all this?” Sam asked, and Nicola was flustered, spluttered out some gibberish that wouldn’t have passed muster at a press conference, and Malcolm inwardly groaned. He let the rest of them natter on—deadly bores, all of them, all except Sam—until they’d run out of traction, let them clear the room before pulling Nicola aside for a word in the ladies loo. Two underfed punkish girls exiting the stalls gave him sidelong stares, and he snapped at them to respect his identity and lifestyle choices, then hissed to Nicola, “The army wanker.”

“What about him?”

“Watch your back, darlin’, because he’s got a great fuckin’ Tomahawk missile aimed at it.”

She dragged her hand through strands of hair. She’d gone grey at the roots. Miracle she’d been able to keep up the dye job in the first place, when there was so little of everything else. But it looked good, he thought; artifice didn’t become her, and she at least wore her age better than he did.

“Don’t you think I haven’t noticed?” Elbows on the sink, she evaluated her reflection—critically, if he were to guess. He tried his best to avoid his own. “It might be for the best.”

“It would fucking not be.”

She turned to him, tilted her face up. “No one’s ever taken me seriously, not in my whole career. Whenever they started to, you made sure—”

“I didn’t need tae do anything. Look, pet, you’re a fuckin’ joke, you always have been, but he’s a dripping arseplug in khakis and I won’t oust one junta just to set up another one. So fuckin’ take control.”

“You do know how to give a pep talk, Malcolm,” Nicola said with a wan smile. “But Tim’s right—you do need to do something about Jamie. It’s not just his own life at stake anymore.”
He might have once relished her misery, but he must have been turning sentimental in his dotage because he couldn’t manage to point out that she’d rubber-stamped Jamie’s scheme, not him, and it was hardly his fault if their feral pitbull had turned out to have rabies in addition to his myriad personality disorders.

And if the thought of Jamie blown to pieces, or worse, imprisoned in the same pitch-black, piss-stank oubliette where they’d stashed him for the last three years wasn’t a coiling tentacle of fear snaking beneath his ribcage, he’d have argued that a dead revolutionary hero might do wonders for their public image. He’d throw someone else ahead of that particular oncoming train, though, Nicola herself if he had to, before he’d contemplate anything happening to Jamie.

“He’s due Tuesday?” Malcolm said, and he wouldn’t be relieved at that, because nothing was going to happen to Jamie anyway. Jamie was immortal, he was Keith fucking Richards and Marmite and that jellyfish that could re-spawn itself for all eternity. “I’ll ready the gaffer tape and the cattle prod. He’ll see reason.”

Later, lying in bed listening to the low buzz of CNN—Stephen Fry, poster boy for the new English Diaspora, interviewed by Anderson Cooper, the two of them prattling on in concerned tones about international sanctions and human rights abuses, Gordon Deitrich resurrected to bemoan the sorry state of Beyond Bugged Britain—he let his hand drop a few centimeters from the floor, close enough to feel the dust gathered there, where he had deliberately not moved Jamie’s rosary from its latest resting place. The springs bursting through the thin mattress dug into his spine, and he tossed on his side, trying to ignore the various protestations of his body enough to just pass out. He longed to return to his too-large, too-empty house, painted decorator-white by his ex-wife and full of books he’d never had the time to read. It was in a neighbourhood that was an Exclusion Zone now, Sam had said. Even if the Regime fell tomorrow, it’d remain contaminated for years, decades perhaps, behind barbed wire and radiation signs, a silent shrine to the horrors of chemical weapons and to the abandoned shell of the London-that-was.

Tuesday would come before that. He told himself he could wait that long.

Ollie woke in fits and starts, the absence of daylight and an alarm conspiring to keep him unconscious for as long as possible, the dead weight of another sleeping body on his arm, and how long had it been since that had happened? His hip and ribs ached where they met the coat spread out between them and the cold surface of the platform, and he tightened his other arm around Emma’s slim waist, for a moment, reveling in the very physicality of her, the two brown moles on her shoulder blade, her long length of smooth neck. She stirred, rolled onto her back, wincing from stiff muscles, yawning.

“Morning,” he said, hoping that was at least still accurate, and she scrambled up, reaching for her black jumper.

“Morning, oh—” Emma checked her watch, then frantically started pulling on layers of clothing and brushing dust from her knees. “Fuck, fuck!”

He thought that, of the two of them, he had the right to be more nervous, given which one of them was working at a subcontract for the Ministry of Love, but she was clearly in a state.

“Malcolm’s going to kill me,” Emma said, and before Ollie could entirely bite back the reflex to be
spiteful, he replied, “Yes, scamper on back to Daddy. Did you miss curfew again?” She gave him the martyred eye roll honed to perfection by generations of harried sit-com housewives. “Sorry, fuck, that wasn’t—look, I just don’t completely appreciate that our relationship is actually a threesome with a sweary, anorexic psychopath.”

There was a long, and by no means comfortable, pause before she said, “It’s a relationship now?”

“I, uh, I have to get going too, actually. There’s the Stasi to run and all that.”

“Ollie.”

“…is it? I mean, do you…?”

She bent down, one hand braced on his coat, the other snaking through hair that no doubt looked like something out of Eraserhead, and brought her lips close to his ear. “You first.”

He barely stopped to consider it. He liked to think that he had an impressive track record with women—certainly in comparison to everyone he’d ever worked with, and even most of his friends from university. He’d not have thought to elevate what they’d had beyond cross-aisle espionage and, let’s face it, some incredibly passionate and inventive shagging, but the war made some things so much more urgent, lent weight where, perhaps, it should never have fallen, and wouldn’t have otherwise. “Emma. Fuck. You’re going to ask that now?”

Emma snorted. “We’re carrying on in the bloody Underground with a murderous totalitarian government and Guy Fucks both breathing down our necks. Can you think of a better time?”

All he could think was that she was fucking beautiful. No makeup—and not the kind of no makeup that well-bred girls worked at to make their boyfriends think they weren’t trying, either—sleep caking her eyelashes and soot from the tunnels smudged on her cheek, dressed in some bloke’s cast-offs that sagged over her shoulders, and he wondered if this woman, resilient and brave and a little earthy, who’d have ever guessed that, had been hiding under that Tory power suit all along.

“Hey,” Ollie said, and caught her chin to lift her face. “Hey, when all this is over, we’ll do the whole bit properly, yeah? Five-star hotel and candles and we’ll order in, because rice is—anyway.”

“Because Malcolm wants it?” she asked, a note of posh-girl sulk lingering in her voice.

“Because I do,” Ollie said. “Jesus, Emma, anyone would.” He stood up, reached out an arm that she didn’t need to climb to her feet. His coat looked trampled on; he’d have to find a way to shed it before he reached the office. “But I have to go now, I’m sorry, they will actually—”

“I know.” She pulled him close, her kiss this time sharp and more than a little desperate. “Be safe, Ollie.”

“I always end up on top, don’t I?”

“You book us that room,” she said, grinning, “and we’ll find out, won’t we?”

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He made it into the lobby, barely, and then the grey swarm was upon him, polite and formal as befitted one of their own, the little fake stammering, “oh, so awfully sorry, Mr. Reeder” for barking
his elbow as they shoved him into the back of a car.

Twenty-four hours ago they’d answered to him. Now, he supposed he should be grateful that they kept up appearances and didn’t go as far as yanking a canvas sack over his head.

Anyway, it wasn’t as if it mattered where they were going, or whether he’d be able to find the way back. He had every sense that it wasn’t that sort of trip.

“Lowell’s orders?” Ollie asked, but neither of the men in the front seat replied. He evaluated the position of the locks on the doors relative to the great slabs of Aryan übermensch on either side of him, calculated that he didn’t have time to scramble over them and throw himself out of the moving car before one of the bastards went for a gun.

It’d be a quiet delivery, then. He supposed they wanted to question him first (and fuck’s sake, he wasn’t Malcolm, no one would rescue him) or he’d be dead already. It was the strangest sort of hope, even knowing what lay ahead, that he’d draw breath for a little while longer.

He checked his watch. If they hadn’t followed him from Vauxhall Station, Emma would have probably had time to get away. She had to have.

They pulled up in front of Lowell’s house, and he was flooded with palpable relief; whatever they planned to do with him couldn’t wreck the propaganda minister’s slip-covered furniture and his white carpets. Still, the men kept to either side of him, effectively ensuring that he couldn’t make a break for it.

Lowell was sitting, hands folded on his lap, watching a projection from his mobile. A small cluster of kids, distinguished only by their clothes from the line of rebels providing covering fire behind them, tipped over a police carrier while others dragged burning boards from where they were nailed to shop windows into the streets.


“I forget how young you are,” Lowell replied. “I watched this the first time round, on the telly, back in the 80s.”

“I did warn you.” Though Lowell wasn’t smiling, wasn’t offering him illegal wine or forced jocularity, Ollie felt slightly more confident about his prospects for surviving the day. “You’ve literally got an entire generation with nothing to do but play Grand Theft Auto, get into pub fights, and fantasise about how they’d survive a zombie apocalypse, and now you’ve given them a dictatorship to fight and Jamie Macdonald to lead them.”

“On the contrary,” Lowell said. “He’s done us all a favour.” He switched the display to a map of the Tube, the riots a red flare below the Thames. “We’ve known about the Underground, of course, where else could they hide for any extended period of time? The attacks were scattered before, but these riots are concentrated. We know the stations now, and the closest deep-level shelters where most of the terrorists are housed. All we need to worry about now is the timing of the air strikes.”

“Air strikes.” His fingertips pushed in to the arms of the chair, a shade less pale than the fabric. He took long, slow breaths, determined to stay calm, to not give himself away if such a thing was even possible anymore. “You’ll kill hundreds. Thousands.”

Lowell continued to calmly stare ahead at the projection. “A rebellion is a cancer,” he said, his tone even, mollifying, while Ollie’s heart pounded so hard he was certain the other man could hear. “You’d cut off a gangrenous limb, to spare the rest of a body.”
Emma, he thought, oh fucking hell, Emma, and the blood rushing past his ears beat out a rapid snare, burying beneath it any thoughts of self-preservation. It didn’t matter, he thought, if he lived one more day or a handful more; Lowell knew, and he wasn’t going to be allowed past the doors of his office, wasn’t going to be allowed to live his double life. Something base in him, something animal, urged him to run. “You can’t do this. It’s not—you want order, Ross, peace, you can’t just—”

“Weber’s already done it,” Lowell said, “I’ve saved you a front-row seat.”

His hand moved to tap the mobile, and that was when Ollie lurched forward, spilling a bowl of nuts on the side table and more by luck than dexterity, snatched the ‘phone from its resting place. He barely even had time to think before he was running, and Lowell didn’t so much as dignify his too-little, too-late attempt at defiance by giving chase, merely calling behind him, “You’re making a huge mistake.”

Stumbling, half-crawling as gunshots shattered the gilded antique mirror in the foyer, clutching the mobile, he somehow made it through the front door and into the sludge-drenched road with Lowell’s security firing after him. He had just enough time to see them gaining on him, to think that he was going to die, shot in a ditch, not yet thirty-five years old and having done exactly one decent thing in his entire life, which wouldn’t even matter and about which no one would ever know, when a car careened around the bend in the road, tyres squealing. He was yanked into the back as the man in the passenger side leaned out the window and fired in a wide arc at the oncoming guards.

Ollie crashed hard against the backseat as the car swerved, blinking up into the balaclava-covered face of one of his rescuers. From the shattered rear window, he could see one of the guards, his face bloodied, still standing in the middle of the road, but the man at the wheel drove like a maniac while the one beside him shot at a flurry of drones taking up the pursuit that human security had failed.

The one in the passenger seat with the AK-47 and, the second he craned around to face Ollie, unmistakably large eyes, said, “If you’ve still got a signal jammer, now’d be a good time tae turn it on.”

“Jamie.”

White teeth filled the little gap in his mask. Below its rim, the rectangle of his priest’s collar was just barely visible. “Right. Who’s the nice Scot now, then?”

“How did you even—” he started, then, “Emma.”

“Slipped a tracking device in yer coat pocket on yer first date.” He made a disappointed noise. “You work in surveillance, you gigantic ponce. You shoulda seen it coming. That way,” he added, the last bit to the driver. “We’ll have tae ditch the car and split up.”

Granted a stay of execution, Ollie managed to gasp out, “Jamie. We—we need to keep driving. They’re going to bomb the station. Wherever it is you’re hiding, Lowell knows. He’s already—we have to warn them.”

From the front seat, he could practically see the waves of fury radiating from every pore in Jamie’s body, Silver Age comic-style, too much pure, visceral violence to be contained within the mere cage of his skin. “Get me tae somewhere with one of those fuckin’ telegraph things. Fastest route; if they come after us, we shoot our way out. Now!” He grabbed Ollie’s shoulders, the front seatback the only thing shielding him from being throttled by a rage-drunk madman. “Listen tae me. Are ye fuckin’ listening?” Ollie nodded. He couldn’t speak; if Lowell had been frightening as he calmly proposed flattening an entire neighbourhood, Jamie—who’d been wasted behind a desk, who’d been granted a sort of perverse, unchecked freedom by the Regime, and who, Ollie strongly suspected,
had spent his entire life with the hazy understanding that a situation would someday arise in which he might be called upon to murder and maim with impunity—was much, much worse. “It wasnae my decision tae rescue ye. I dinnae like you, but Malcolm thought your life might be worth something. You live and die by his whim, understand? And if anything’s happened—”

“I get it,” Ollie said.

“Then,” Jamie told him, “welcome tae the fuckin’ Underground.”

The car screeched to a halt, and Jamie, rifle in one hand, shouting at his companions to fuck off or cause a distraction or blow something up, grabbed Ollie by the collar and dragged him through twisted metal gates strewn across the entrance to the station like the ribcage of an ancient behemoth. Ollie had the advantage of a longer stride, but he was panting for breath by the time Jamie kicked in the door of a maintenance cupboard and sat heavily in front of a WWII telegraph machine. Ollie hung back and watched him hammer at the keys, then, apparently satisfied, lean back in his chair, peel off his balaclava, and swipe his forearm across sweaty tangles of hair. He shed several layers of military surplus, adjusted the white rectangle at his throat, and attempted to arrange himself into something that resembled a human being.

Ollie thought to mention it, then. “I have his mobile.”

Jamie’s crazed eyes looked past him for a moment, focussed; he blinked at the small device in Ollie’s hand that had somehow managed to escape being lost or crushed in their escape. He uncoiled from his seat, picked up the mobile, and laughed for several long and incredibly disturbing seconds.

“What now?”

“Now we jack another car and get tae Clapham North.”

“Is that where—”

Jamie nodded. “I warned them, they’ll know, they’ll manage tae get out,” and he sounded so frantic that Ollie momentarily forgot to be afraid of him. “Come on.”

He shouldn’t have been at all surprised at Jamie’s facility with hotwiring cars—the man was the closest Ollie’d ever met to a born criminal—but something about the priest get-up made it inherently jarring. “What’s with—”

Jamie gestured up at a mural splayed across the burned-out shell of a nearby car park. Ollie had seen several like it in the weeks since the riots had begun—a Bansky-style stencil of a masked man facing down a tank. The Regime did its best to paint over them as soon as they appeared, but they proliferated across the city nonetheless, an attempt by someone, somewhere, to turn the mindless violence into a genuine uprising.

“They’re looking for that cunt,” he said. “No’ a respectable man of the cloth.” The car spluttered to life, and they were moving again, almost slow enough to be below suspicion, but it must have worked; the drones he could see took no special interest in their stolen vehicle, in the Resistance’s firebrand and his entirely unconvincing piety.

Somewhere above the thick cover of cloud, Ollie could hear the rumble of jets.

“…Jamie.”

“I know. Shut it, ye poofter, I’m trying tae think.”
“—poofter, right, one of us has shagged a woman in the past three years—”

“Aye, a Tory, anyway. That’s almost like a woman.” He shook his head. “Och,” he said, “fuck it,” and gunned the engine as hard as he could. Ollie was flung once again against the seat, clawing himself back to upright to gape at the maniac behind the wheel. Rain lashed against the windscreen, building to hail, and the car hydroplaned, veering in and out of the lane. There was no one to be seen as they made their approach, and Ollie tried to convince himself that maybe everyone had left, that the blocks of low-rises and houses and shops were each one deserted.

He saw the jet as it dove low, just above the rooftops, spilling its black cargo against the slate-grey sky.

Jamie slammed on the brake, nearly broke the handle of the door before he realised it was locked, before he was standing in the drowned street, the wind’s howl swallowing the whistle as, one by one, the bombs reached the surface. Ollie wrestled him back behind the car, choking on ash and heat, as the pavement buckled under them, every brick and window shuddering and heaving and straining to break free of its moorings. Jamie squirmed wildly, screamed and thrashed in his arms, promised to tear Ollie limb from limb if he didn’t let go, then at last, as the flames and smoke erupted from the grim concrete silo of the station, clung boneless to the crumpled side of the car while the rain, cold and impervious, fell all around them.
In which everyone doesn’t so much have issues as the whole subscription, and Jamie’s vows are more like guidelines, really.

For a long time everything was darkness and he raised his hands to his eyes certain they’d blinded him

Finding his face relatively intact beyond a bloody scrape just below his hairline he staggered to his feet crashed almost immediately into cold concrete oozing liquid from a crack that ran the length of the wall fumbled along the confines of the cell tried though he knew full well it was futile the heavy lock on the door knocked over the bucket they’d thoughtfully provided not that it mattered not that he didn’t already reek of piss and vomit and blood

Not that he wasn’t dying dead buried somewhere no one would ever find him

Ran a finger over the crevice in the wall pried loose a crumbling piece of rubble and wrapped his fist around it and forced himself to breathe past the nausea in his guts and the pain in his lungs

He took the little piece of concrete and dragged it savagely across the wall felt the mark it made told himself he had this if he could still affect the world he wasn’t dead to it and fell to his knees and sobbed and scratched into the pockmarked walls of his prison I was here I was here I was fucking here

The light as the door opened burned splinters into his eyes before he was slammed again into darkness and a hand closed around his wrist what the fuck are you doing and the bit of rubble the last thing he had dropped from his fingers and what do you think you are you little piece of shit you terrorist do you think you’re allowed to write

With the last of his strength he folded forward and smashed his elbow into the guard’s bollocks

Even still he didn’t expect the blow until it came the crunch as the butt of the rifle pulverized bone over and over pain bright and sharp and something shrieked high and inhuman and it was him—

“Malcolm. Wake up, Malcolm, you have to wake up.”

He groaned, opened his eyes. It was still dark; there was grit in his mouth, coating his skin, and he rolled to one side and coughed up dust and spittle into the cracked floor. Nicola’s voice called to him from the present, shaking him into consciousness despite his every fervent desire to just lie there and expire with quiet dignity.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw her in front of him, white-faced and shaking, knees hugged to her chest, framed in bent rebar. The tunnel’d either been redesigned by Frank Gehry or the Provos, crumpled and collapsing, the path behind him cut off by a pile of rubble, another group of survivors huddled around a cigarette lighter some metres ahead. Her head just barely cleared the bowed ceiling; Malcolm had to stoop to even sit up.

He went for his inhaler, but it’d been cracked in three and the mechanism jammed; he threw it with
as much force as his scrawny arm could muster and heard it clank somewhere in the shadows above the sound of his own laboured breathing.

“Malcolm,” Nicola said again, and clutched at his wrist—the bad one, a shock of pain arced up his arm, but it did the trick of jolting him back into alertness.

“I’m here.” The mental twat was having one of her panic attacks. Fan-fucking-tastic. The Resistance, living in the cunting Tube, couldn’t have chosen a leader who didn’t suffer from claustrophobia, of course not, nor could she have refused the honour in favour of someone with a brain less bovinely spongey, because that would’ve made his life just too fucking simple.

The blast, the telegram that had preceded it by minutes, the last-second scramble not to evacuate—they hadn’t had time enough for that—but to go as deep in the tunnels as possible in the faint hope that a shelter built to withstand the Luftwaffe would hold up under the smart bombs of a more technologically impressive band of Nazis; it all came back to him in flashes, along with the realisation that Jamie, presumptuous, god-bothering little cunt that he was, had now saved his life twice. “Where’s Sam?”

Nicola’s head wobbled on her neck in the direction of the big pile of rubble. “Other side of that. They’ve all gone to find something to dig us out with. She said.” The tremor in her words told Malcolm that she wasn’t convinced.

“How bad is it?” Malcolm asked, which was when Nicola started blubbering uncontrollably. “Christ, haud yer whisht, woman, ye can fall tae pieces later.” He shook his wrist free from her grip, his hand sending another whine of protest up the length of his arm. He was almost grateful for the pain, the anger; without those, he’d have to be afraid.

Tears streaked her cheeks, collecting in the lines that he’d watched encroach themselves deeper into her face over the years. “You don’t need to be such a fucking prick about it. You know how I am with—” She stopped. Stared at him as though she could flay skin from bone and leave him exposed, bleeding out his secrets onto the grubby concrete floor, and he suspected that if he injected just enough terror into his own voice, he’d convince her that she had.

“Yes,” he ground out. “That makes two of us, and one with a reason tae be.” It was a desperate ploy, and under ordinary circumstances, even Nicola would have seen right through it. It was the most demented sort of luck that she was too preoccupied with her own psychological minefield of shite to doubt him.

Nicola wiped at her face with her sleeve, took a few shuddering breaths. “Sorry.” She edged ever so slightly towards him.

“If you try to hug me,” he warned, “I’ll bite you.”

That, of all things, brought a shaky smile to her lips. “Oh, Malcolm.” She sniffled. “I—most people got down below, I think, but Sam said there were ca-casualties. And above ground, all those tower flats, the people in them…” That almost set her off again, and this time he was the one to reach out to steady her.

“You didn’t do this, Nic’la. You didn’t kill anyone.”

“Didn’t I?”

“Not unless you’re not telling me somethin’, darlin’.”

“I’m shit at this.” It was hard to make out her speech, squeezed out as it was between sobbing
hiccup and—she had a cunt-hair of sense, despite everything—the volume dampened for the sake of the people trapped up ahead. “You were right—I’m…I am a fucking waste of skin, I’m—”

He could strangle her, he thought, and then she would *have* to shut up, and even with a crippled hand and the lung capacity of a geriatric chain smoker, he could probably manage it. Instead, a hiss that had once turned ministers’ bowels to liquid: “You are the fucking leader of the revolution. Act like it.”

“Tim would have been a better choice.”

“If Tim is even alive,” Malcolm said, “he’s not complete shite, but he’s military, and this isnae a military uprising. He can command the troops for you if you ever manage to get any, but Nic’la, you’re the one who’ll bring back the NHS and the cuntin’ Children In Need specials and ban BPA in little kiddies’ toys, all right? ‘S what makes this country great, right? What’s worth fighting the wankers for in the first place.”

After a long string of ragged inhales and exhales, she said, “And here I had you pegged as an incorrigible cynic.” Her voice was faint but the tremble in it was muted now; his distraction was working.

“Why’d you think I ever did any of it? It wasn’t to be loved.” Grimacing against the pain, he turned to face down the tunnel. “Those people up there,” he told her. “*Your* people, they’re as fucking scared as you are. You need to go over there and tell them to start digging.”

She looked from them to the rubble behind them. “With what?”

“Their hands, if there’s nothing else.”

“It won’t—”

“Of course it fuckin’ won’t. But they’ll feel as if they’re doing something. Go on.” She hesitated, and he geared up for a shout before she crawled, on hands and knees, towards where the other survivors were clustered.

He leaned back against the warped concrete and listened to her, her voice steadier as she rallied her diminished forces to work. He slunk back into the shadows and watched, easily rendered invisible in the ruins of a structure as damaged as he was.

Without his obvious presence to unsettle her, she was fucking glorious, commanding the stronger ones to dig, even dandling a crying child (and where had she managed to find one of *those*?) in her lap in between shifts of digging. Somehow she’d become a consummate politician. It might have been seven years and two governments too late, but he was—and he was nonplussed by the realisation—actually a little proud of her.

The long, Sisyphusian struggle to shift one pile of debris until it formed a new blockage in a different part of the tunnel went on for what seemed like hours until, at last from somewhere above them, amid the clang of steel on cement, the first shards of light broke through.

“Give me a hand with this or fuck off somewhere I dinnae need tae see ye. Yer not fit to be sicked up.”
Ollie didn’t move from where he was crouched behind the sole remaining half-floor of what had been a three-storey building, his coat over his head, though it was of little use as a shield against the rain and even less use if the jets circled back for another go. Jamie was soaked through, the reek of cold, sodden wool against his face nowhere near strong enough to overcome the stench of charred buildings and heat-melted asphalt, the oh-fuck-is-that-what-that-is smell of roasted human flesh.

He’d thought, as the roar of jet engines subsided, that he’d been deafened by the blast, so rapidly had the blighted landscape descended into a silence without sirens or the electrical hum of the drones. Then Ollie’d said something unforgivably retarded and he’d managed to stand, somehow, shivering, clawing past the car and into the shattered teeth of Hell itself.

Now, he managed to push away the heavy segment of concrete on his own, but what he’d thought was a child’s foot was actually just a child’s shoe, and there was no life hiding beneath, no trace that it had encased a living foot beyond a rust-brown stain at the mouth. He slid against the broken masonry and waited until his breathing steadied, then took a few more staggering steps towards the still-smoking concrete pillbox, scanning the ruins for any sign of movement.

No one was even crying out. Fuck, they couldn’t all be dead, could they? The block radius that had been ground zero for one of the bombs—the only one, to Jamie’s mind, that counted right now—was flattened, but beyond it, the buildings were mostly standing, and someone had to have survived it.

Malcolm had to have survived it. Jamie knew, because under no circumstances would he allow Malcolm to die some anonymous, meaningless death surrounded by hundreds of boring ordinary cunts, with the last words between them having been about how Jamie was a hypocritical, superstitious nonce with all the strategic sensibilities of an escaped lab monkey on a PCP bender, minus the fucking foresight. No. This was not fucking on.

He nearly tripped over an arm—the skin blackened and bubbling and he had no idea if it was attached to the rest of a body—and it took Ollie catching him before the bit of his brain that was still functioning under normal parameters understood that the stupid fucker had decided to follow him after all.

The ground turned steep and muddy at the wound gouged by the bomb’s impact; at the other side, the face of a council flat was singed and the windows knocked out, the first floor of the station torn and scattered across the road. He picked his way through the wreckage, paused at every dead face, stared into every set of open eyes.

“Jamie,” Ollie said.

“What?”

“You won’t find him here.”

“Them, ye ambulatory puddle of anal leakage, there are hundreds of people in that tunnel.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure you care deeply for all of them. You’re about as subtle as blackface, and before you hit me, no, that wasn’t a dig at Jolson.” Ollie, curls plastered to his face in the rain, eyed the bleak, empty sky, and it was a measure of Jamie’s rather impressive growth as a human being—yes, really—that he didn’t immediately turn the chinless tit into pink mist now that he had the firepower to do it. “We need to get away. The bombers will come back.”

He grunted. “Do what you want.” He’d nearly made it to the south entrance of the tunnel when something tugged at his ankle. A man—old, though Jamie couldn’t tell for certain with the amount of blood caked on the poor bastard’s head—lay, buried beneath an avalanche of brick and fencing, his
own free arm pawing weakly at the ground by Jamie’s foot.

His elation at finding someone alive ebbed rapidly into disappointment at finding someone who wasn’t Malcolm, but he bent by the man’s side and began to pray him free. The man moaned, and that was when he saw the pool of blood leaking into the stream of rain. He pressed two fingers to the man’s throat, felt a thready, fading pulse, and decided that if Ollie said one more fucking word about them having to keep going, he was fully entitled to the overeducated little ponce’s head on a spike and neither man nor God could judge him for it.

It was the stranger who spoke, though, whispered, “Father…?” and Jamie said, “Ah, fuck,” and tried to convince himself that the man had in fact asked for water despite the obvious fact that all he’d need to do in that case was open his mouth; there were fucking torrents of it.

He next tried to convince himself that he wasn’t a proper priest and he’d perhaps not entirely legitimately finished at Scotus and was as shite at celibacy as he was preternaturally adept at fathering bairns, and had, for almost twenty years, been repeatedly—graphically—driven into temptation at the thought of burying his cock in the arse of his very much male and for at least half of that time married boss. (Not to mention a good many other men and a not insignificant number of women, but if he was destined for eternal damnation, it’d be because of Malcolm and not anyone he’d actually shagged. Jamie’s God was a capricious fucker in that regard.)

That line of reasoning didn’t work either.

“We’ll get you out,” he said. “Ollie, come here.”

The man coughed blood as Ollie appeared beside him. “Legs crushed,” he said. “Father, please.”

That time it was unambiguous, and Jamie snarled, “Ollie, fuck off, this is a very fucking private moment,” then whispered, “okay, fuck, okay,” and let the rain drip over his fingers, it’d have to do, and made the sign of the cross over the dying man’s forehead. By the time he’d got to “pardon thee whatever sins” the man’s mouth was slack, the blood already thickening.

He bowed his head, the rain cascading in rivulets down his face, soaking into his collar, mud seeping over the tops of his boots.

“I thought it was an act,” Ollie, who hadn’t managed to fuck off, said. “The priest thing.”

Jamie blinked rain, just rain, out of his eyes. “It wasnae tae him,” he muttered. “Come on.”

He shoved the rusted door to the shelter, blasted loose from its hinges, open past a barrier of crumbled brick and slipped into the inferno that lay beyond.

Jamie slid down what was left of the wrought-iron spiral staircase, the already narrow passage bent into funhouse mirror shards by the explosion. A larger man might not have been able to do it at all, and he heard Ollie cursing behind him as they descended into the tunnel. The bottom few stairs had been crushed into the floor, and he dangled from the metal rail before dropping onto the concrete.

Ella Murray barreled into him full force as he hit the ground, her arms a vice around his back and her head pressed into his chest.
“We got the telegram,” she breathed. “Jamie, we have to go back up there, we have to fucking kill every one of those bastards, you tell mum that I have to—”

“You’re no’ going anywhere,” he said. Her grasp around him limpet-strong, he forced himself to ask first, “Your mam?”

“Trapped in the cross-tunnel with Malcolm,” Ella said. “Which is almost like being fine.”

He leaned the side of his face into her hair and screwed his eyes shut against the heat that wanted to spill forth. Suddenly dizzy, he clutched her to steady himself. “He’s—”

“Sam thinks they can get to him in the next hour. She thinks he’s okay. They were all trying to get everyone else as far below as possible when the bomb hit.”

“Ella, pet, I need tae find him—them. We’ll talk about the rest later.”

She pulled back, and her fierce eyes searched her face, and though the girl was nothing like his daughter, he was reminded so abruptly of Aileen that the grief was incapacitating.

“Hey,” she said, tweaking his collar. “I like the new look.” Ollie made a disgusted noise. Jamie wrenched himself away from her and stumbled down the tunnel, though thick smoke and dust. The walls throbbed heat, and his boots crunched shattered glass that littered the floor from the fallen kerosene lanterns. Beyond where Ella kept guard, the only light came from an oil drum that someone had brought close to where a small crew of rescuers hacked shovels at a landslide of rubble.

There weren’t more than fifty people left in the shelter out of the hundred or so who’d been there when he’d left. Some—the very old, the very young, and the injured—cowered in the cots and bunks away from the collapsed segment. Others were salvaging weapons and supplies from the wreckage, dragging limp, twisted bodies and straightening them out beneath bloody sheets.

He heard, but barely registered, Ollie and Emma finding each other before she dragged him off to do one of the less grim tasks, reached Sam just as she and the rest of the inner circle broke through the junction of the cross-tunnel.

One by one, people he didn’t know and couldn’t summon a fuck to give about emerged from behind the obstruction; he made out Nicola’s ashen face behind the flames and then, after an eternity, Malcolm crawled free, cradling his disfigured hand against his chest and coughing like a 19th-century consumptive, grown somehow more sallow and spectral in the weeks since Jamie had last seen him, but alive.

Jamie, contrary to popular impression, had always known his place—which was wherever Malcolm said it was—and had more willpower than anyone had ever given him credit for, because he didn’t immediately run to Malcolm’s side and refuse to let go of him, ever, despite having more justification than anyone in the course of human history for doing so. He told himself that it was enough that Malcolm met his eyes across the destruction, that he heard, clearly if quietly, Malcolm whisper, “Not now, Jamie” in a way that his vastly overtaxed and underslept brain interpreted as meaning an unambiguous “Later.”

He took the two duffel bags of guns that someone handed to him, and joined the long procession of the walking dead down the tracks, putting them down only briefly to give Sam the hug he’d wanted to give Malcolm.
The exodus to Clapham South took most of the day, and Malcolm, useless in the evacuation efforts, flipped between a dozen or so browser tabs on Sundeep’s battered laptop as various news services played the world’s most macabre game of Broken Telephone. The Regime’s state channel listed the death count as sixty, mostly its own soldiers and enemy combatants, and accused the Resistance of using the civilian population as human shields. Al Jazeera had the toll in the hundreds and a woman in a hijab and bright red lipstick talking about the carnage in the concerned, measured tones he was accustomed to hearing used to report on other countries. He briefly contemplated asking Sundeep if he could somehow arrange a call to Doha to give Sheik Al Thani the long-distance bollocking of a lifetime, before he remembered that Sundeep had gone back to salvage what he could of their tech from the other shelter.

CNN was calling the destruction in London and the handful of skirmishes in other cities a civil war, which, he thought, was an overly generous term for a massacre.

If the Regime suspected anyone had survived, they’d know where to hit next, and he now knew exactly how well the ancient walls and ceiling would hold up against missiles, and still, when Nicola’s circle met in the bare twin of the War Room, the first words out of his mouth were, “We have tae get back above ground.”

“They’ll hit a second time as soon as the drones spot rescuers,” Barry replied. His fingers, gripped around a mug of tea, were shaking. “That’s what they do.”

“It’s optics,” Malcolm said, weary of the argument before it had begun. “We need to be seen as fuckin’ benevolent. The Regime’ll spin it their way, and I can’t stop them.” Reluctantly, he turned to Tim. “Is there any chance at all that the army will turn on them after this?”

“They’re mostly ex-Serco and G4S, at least at the top levels. They don’t even need many troops, not with the drones, not—not if they’re willing to do something like this.”

Malcolm decided that they were well and truly fucked if even the big gruff soldier was losing his composure. What no one was saying, what everyone knew, was that any chance of toppling the Regime by force of arms had been blown to fuck along with half of Brixton.

“Bugger all this,” Jamie said. “I’m going back out there.”

“Jamie,” Nicola said. Jamie, who’d not so much as bothered to change his soggy clothes since stumbling into the shelter, ignored her, grabbed his rifle from where it rested against the wall, and stormed out.

She looked next to Malcolm. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “Onto it.”

He caught up to Jamie by the stair and hauled him, with a strength no one would have ever suspected someone in his condition of possessing, through the door of what had been the warden’s office and slammed it shut.

“So?” Jamie asked, placing the rifle with surprising delicacy against the wall.

“Yer a fuckin’ psycho and you’ll get more people killed.”


Malcolm grabbed him by his stupid priest’s collar and pushed him into the wall, their faces close enough that he could smell the nicotine on Jamie’s breath. “You’re out of control tae the point where
Nicola—Nicola, who needs directions tae find her own arse when she goes for a shit—has noticed, and the Regime is gunning for you, and you are the very last fuckin’ twat who should be anywhere near the surface. The riot thing wasn’t the worst idea but it stops now. You are staying right fuckin’ here. Understood?”

Jamie—his expression, if someone had a gun to Malcolm’s head and demanded that he put a name to it, hungry—said nothing for a long time. “Are ye done?”

“No’ even warmed up.”

“Good.” Jamie knocked his hand out of the way and spun sideways, flipping their positions. Malcolm yelped—there were pushpins in the wall—and tried to shove him off, but Jamie had the advantage of two good hands and mud-slicked clothes. “Neither am I. You ready tae admit what this is all actually about?”

“It’s about how you’re fucking mental, son.”

Or, well, that was what he would have said, if Jamie hadn’t taken the fact that he’d opened his mouth to speak as an invitation to perform a tonsillectomy on him with his tongue. His mouth was sour, his breath hot and rapid and his fingernails bit half-moon circles into Malcolm’s wrists, and he seemed determined to asphyxiate both of them; it took Malcolm twisting and nearly sending them crashing into the table before he’d break contact.

“What,” Malcolm spluttered, pushing at him, “the fuck is wrong with you?”

Jamie released Malcolm’s wrists, brought his own hands—which were intolerably grubby, black lines under each of his chipped nails—to Malcolm’s chest, pressed against his wildly hammering heart. “I missed you, ye auld scrote. I thought they’d fucking killed you.”

“You might have said that,” Malcolm replied, “instead of trying tae gnaw my face off. Where’d you even learn to kiss, the Franklin expedition?”

“Malc…” Jamie said, and went for him again. Malcolm whipped his head to one side so that Jamie’s lips caught his cheek instead; undeterred, Jamie trailed a wet path down his jaw and neck. Malcolm shivered, pulled at fistfuls of his slimy jumper, and even with his cock offering its own considered opinion on the proper course of action, his mind ran through the strategic possibilities presented here, chief among them being that Nicola had told him to rein Jamie in and—well. This probably wasn’t what she’d had in mind, but it’d do.

“You’re very presumptuous,” he said. “What makes you think I even fancy you?”

Jamie looked up from where he was licking at Malcolm’s carotid artery. Fucking disgusting, even if every nerve ending in Malcolm’s body rejoiced. “Don’t play daft. You’ve wanted me for twenty years.” He slid a hand over Malcolm’s bony hip. He’d lost so much weight that Jamie didn’t even need to unbutton his fly to shove his hand down his trousers.

“This is a bad idea,” Malcolm muttered.

“It’s a brilliant idea,” Jamie replied. “You’ll end up claiming that it was your fuckin’ idea.”

“Yeah, right, I’m a diabolical genius tae think of shaggin’ a wee papist bawbag in a broom cupboard in the middle of a fuckin’ civil war. You’re not even my type.”

Jamie palmed the evidence to the contrary, and Malcolm stifled a moan, half afraid that he’d come in his trousers before they could even get to anything interesting. Truth was, beyond a drunken fumble
with an otherwise inconsolable staffer after they’d lost the election, he’d gone long enough without pulling that even if he hadn’t wanted Jamie for twenty years (it had actually been sixteen years and three months since they’d met, but one couldn’t expect anything as feral as Jamie to keep track of dates) that he wouldn’t have been able to resist.

And, well, it was Jamie, mad and deadly and so fucking beautiful, fuck, the only thing left in the desecrated vestiges of civilisation that was. “I’m exactly your type. I interrogated all your ex-lovers. Even went through their bins. I did fuckin’ research.”

“If that’s true—” He had little doubt that it was; at least there hadn’t been gaffer tape involved. Probably. “—then you know none of them are anything like you.” Which was the mother of all understatements, all those well-bred, well-spoken women, those discreet gentlemen with much more to lose than Malcolm had, nothing like the twitching livewire in his arms, the barely civilised cataclysm that was rutting up against his touch-starved body like a cat in heat and overriding even Malcolm’s revulsion at being smeared with muck and tobacco-laced spittle.

“You couldnae have anyone like me,” Jamie said. “Well, you could, any time, but it’d have caused a massive gay scandal. Now, though? The only way the Glorious Leader would care that you were shagging some bloke is if you let her watch.” He pulled back to look up at Malcolm with eyes out of a Margaret Keane painting. Malcolm, feeling as though every joint in his body had suddenly rusted stiff, removed his hand from Jamie’s back and lifted his scruffy chin.

“Stupid cunt,” he said, not without affection. “Your timing’s shit.”

“Yeah. Are ye goin’ tae act like some uptight fucking English poofter and stutter at me all day or should I bend you over that desk, pin you down, and fuck you into next week?”

Malcolm flinched, and fuck, with Jamie squished up against him, one hand curled around his bollocks and the other running up and down his flank, and possessing the uncanny instinct of a sniffer dog when it came to other people’s damage, there was no fucking way he didn’t notice it.

“Malc?” Jamie froze, sounding dangerously like someone who’d gotten the wrong fucking impression. Like Nicola had, earlier, when she’d thought the tight coffin of the collapsed tunnel had triggered him. He’d march straight into the Chancellor’s bunker in fishnets and heels singing the Internationale in fucking Arabic before he’d let Jamie—who’d suffered much worse than torture, worse even than losing a hand—pity him.

“Pin me down,” Malcolm growled, “and I’ll rip out your eyeballs and use the empty sockets for a fuckin’ Fleshlight.” He paused, his thumb drawing out rough spirals over the underside of Jamie’s jaw. Bent to kiss him—properly, one of them hadn’t been raised by wolves—caught his bottom lip in his teeth and sucked at it, and Jamie whimpered into his mouth. “The rest of it, though.”

Jamie seemed incapable of movement or indeed of coherent thought—Malcolm wondered if he actually turned Jamie on that much or whether it was just the promise of three years of celibacy coming to an end, then decided that he didn’t give a fuck—so Malcolm maneuvered them both over to the desk, got as far as helping Jamie slide his jumper over his head and tossing it against the door with a wet slap before he, without thinking, reached to unbutton Jamie’s belt with his useless hand. Pain sizzled across his bones and he switched to his left, fumbling like a virginal public school boy behind a bike shed, and he remembered with a sudden, sick start that in the interests of civic order and Jamie not going on another suicidal rampage, he could under no fucking circumstances allow the other man to see him naked.

Well. That was a problem, if not an insurmountable one. “You don’t have a condom.”
“Malc, there’s a cunting war on and I think the Regime’s banned contraception.”

“You’re a walking STI, I’m no’ letting you—”

“I was a priest, for fuck’s sake!”

“For all I know, your altar boys all had the clap. Condom.”

“Fuck.” Jamie went through the motions of scrambling through his pockets, and, coming up empty, tried a final, practically plaintive, “Neither of us is going to survive this.”

“Both of us,” Malcolm snarled, “are going to live to see our guys back in power.” He thought about it for a millisecond. “Suck my dick, then.”

He had the pleasure of seeing Jamie look truly gobsmacked before—Christ, he was actually going to do this wearing the fucking collar, which was guaranteed to give Malcolm spank material until the Regime put them both out of their misery—the lunatic shoved Malcolm into the chair, dropped to his knees on the filthy concrete floor, and yanked his trousers down around his thighs.

“You’re a shite priest,” Malcolm started, before Jamie’s mouth slid over his cock and he wanted to keep talking, thought Jamie probably expected it, even, but then Jamie did something with a flick of his tongue and Malcolm forgot altogether how to form words. He braced himself against the chair and, testing the boundaries of what was and wasn’t jessie enough to be fucking risible, carded a hand through Jamie’s hair.

“Jesus,” he gasped, and he felt the low rumble of Jamie’s laugh as the demon cunt attempted to suck out his brain through his dick, tugged at the curls caught between his fingers and was rewarded for his piety by Jamie taking him in deeper, encasing him in unbearable heat and pressure, bringing him to the edge, then drawing back, nipping at the junction of his thighs with sharp little teeth, again and again until Malcolm heard himself begging incoherently and unabashedly for release.

As he spilled into Jamie’s mouth, Jamie reached for his hand, and he barely had the presence of mind to snatch it away. His vision was swimming; he wondered if he was concussed from the blast. Jamie wiped his lips clean with the back of his hand. Fucking _repulsive_, so why did he find it so attractive?

“Does this not,” Malcolm asked, “violate every one of your vows?”

“I’ve killed three people,” Jamie replied. “Not in my life, I mean _today_.” He bent his head against Malcolm’s knee, a penitent in confession. “I liked it. Nothing changes what happened, it can never, but—” A dark chuckle, then; Malcolm shivered at the whisper of breath against his skin. “I think God frowns on that somewhat more, don’t you?” He pushed himself up, leaned against the edge of the desk. Grinned, though there was little mirth in it. “You going to return the favour, then?”

There was a part of Malcolm’s beleaguered brain that ached to do anything Jamie wanted, and he mentally threatened that part with violent extraction if it gave in now.

“Yeah…no,” he said, buttoning up his trousers (no simple task one-handed, but the first thing he’d forced himself to learn) and standing. “I don’t think so. Not today.”

“You fuckin’ faff-arse mimsy twat!” Jamie scrambled after him. “I’ll rip your cock off!”

“There wasn’t say never, did I?” He grabbed Jamie, tilted his head up, and kissed him fiercely on the mouth. “Guess you’ll have to stick around for a bit, now.” He let go, and had the small pleasure of seeing Jamie look genuinely distressed. “Nicola’ll be wondering where we’ve got to.”
“Malc—”

“We have a dictatorship to overthrow.”

Jamie’s anguished howl followed him all the way down the corridor.
“Right, I know what we said, because I wrote it for him to say. I want actual numbers. Well, fuck, dig up the fucking bodies and count them. Then tell me about the ones that matter.”

Lowell slammed the mobile—a cheap replacement on which he couldn’t perform basic bodily functions, let alone run a government—closed, and followed Weber’s gaze towards the whiteboard that occupied most of the wall. A spider’s web of marker connected haphazardly pasted-up photographs, his own neat handwriting beneath each one.

“Brixton’s been quiet,” Weber said, raising a threatening red marker to the two extant photos of Macdonald, James A.—one, cut out from a family portrait with him smiling stiffly into the camera as if he were unsure whether to pose for it or bite it, half a girl’s face visible on either side; the other, a still lifted from a drone surveillance video, in which he was calmly putting a bullet through the head of a fallen soldier.

“Not yet,” Lowell cautioned. “Not until there’s a body.”

He looked to the rest—Samantha Cassidy’s old LinkedIn profile, the renegade soldier and the communist, the newer additions, Messinger and Reeder, the silhouette stand-in for the nameless, faceless terrorist leader (someone had tacked a picture of bin Laden on there for a while; Lowell had made them take it down) and at the centre of the web, Malcolm Tucker. Not the shattered, starving wretch he’d visited in the cell, but a Daily Mail cutting of him sneering at a scrum of reporters, the power behind the throne.

On the flat-screen, the Chancellor spoke of rebuilding, moving forward. It was Lowell’s speech, and it had sounded better when he’d written it.

“Plans for the holidays?” Weber asked.

“Hmm? Oh.” He toyed with the framed photo on his desk. The broadcast cut to a carefully edited shot of a handful of soldiers rolling barbed wire across a flattened lot in Brixton. Reconstruction efforts. It’d been a risky bit to include, but he thought it showed the men in a flattering light, and in the wake of the terrorists’ latest round of propaganda efforts, image meant nearly as much as superior firepower. “Quiet dinner with the wife. The last one with just the two of us.” He smiled at that, turned slightly away from the screen.

“It’s the usual big to-do with Tina’s family for me. I don’t suppose we could manufacture some sort of emergency here. So—” Weber dropped a meaty elbow on the corner of Lowell’s desk, not even bothering with a segue. “—that thing you were asking after at DoCR…”

Lowell’s heart raced, but he kept his expression neutral. “What thing?”

“You’ve paid multiple visits, and yet there’s been nothing in your diary accounting for those hours,
and the drones have come up empty. Something personal, perhaps?”

He forced himself to laugh. “Just a minor kerfuffle, not even worth mentioning, really. It’s been dealt with.” He could tell that Weber wasn’t having any of it, and he was reeling through excuses and explanations when the television screen crackled.

The scene of Brixton, as silent and empty as the ruins of an ancient city, zigzagged and split into static, replaced by a living nightmare of fire and death, black-masked rebels dredging the rubble for severed body parts, a mother wailing over a small body draped in a bloody blanket, then lines of soldiers marching, striking batons at the mourners. Lowell heard Weber draw in a tight breath and the screen flashed again. When the static cleared, one of the terrorists in a balaclava sat in front of a tattered Union Jack, staring directly into the screen.

“This is the face of the Regime.” He’d expected the voice to be disguised as well, but it was only striking in how ordinary it was, how very calm and soft-spoken. A woman’s voice—Cassidy aside, he didn’t often think of the terrorists as women. “This is London.”

In the days to come, he’d see that face again, stenciled on the walls of dozens of buildings or crudely scrawled in spray paint, a black blotch of mask over a crudely drawn Union Jack. It would come to take the place of the man facing down the tank, as Malcolm Tucker’s innumerable acts of sabotage took up from where the riots, now spread well beyond Jamie Macdonald’s control, had left off.

“—footage intercepted from drone surveillance of an air attack on a civilian population—”

Both Lowell and Weber reached for their mobiles; Lowell’s was already ringing.

“—we address the international community, we, the people of Great Britain, are pleading for your help against an illegitimate, tyrannical government that has lied and murdered its way into power—”

“Find out where it’s coming from,” Lowell hissed at Weber. “Shut it down.”

“—and we address the officials of the Regime, wherever you’re hiding.” The voice turned sharp. Lowell felt like a scolded schoolboy. “You can kill us, you can bomb our homes, you can deport us, imprison us, torture us, but you cannot possibly kill all of us. We are still here. And we are coming for you.”

Static, then the Chancellor’s face, distorted into monstrous form, black Xs over his eyes, dissolving back into the original footage as he addressed the state news service. Not exactly We Shall Fight Them On the Beaches, but in fairness, the broadcast it had interrupted was hardly the St. Crispin’s Day speech either.


“Maybe. Or any one of Tucker’s meat puppets,” Lowell replied. “It hardly matters who claims to be running the show.” He picked up the remote and turned the television off. “You wanted an emergency.”

“I could have sworn—”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just… that voice. I’m sure I’ve heard it before.”

“Reminds me of my mother,” Lowell said, an attempt at levity that fell flat before the words were out of his mouth.
“Was your mother Jiang Qing, by any chance?” The other minister made grumbling noises and climbed to his feet. “I’ll get my staff on it. And Ross?”

“Yeah?”

“Merry fucking Christmas.”

Sam stepped over the splayed corpse of a dead guard and shoveled the warehouse door open. Sheltered from the wind and freezing rain, it was slightly less cold inside. Her footsteps echoed over the dusty floors, down the aisles of wooden pallets and stacked cardboard boxes.

She swayed against one of the rusted support beams. The cavernous space was packed to the ceiling with the Regime’s hoarded treasure, enough, more than enough, to fix fucking everything. Holding in a breath, she fell upon the closest box and tore open the cardboard with her jagged nails. In the grey light from the second-storey windows, the wrappers of the ration bars gleamed gold.

Sam, however terrifyingly competent she might have been, was as human as anyone else, and before she managed a, “here, set it up here,” at Sundeep, her mouth was already stuffed with one of the dry, crumbling bars.

He worked quickly to place the transmitter—which would, apparently, intercept the state news service’s broadcast for much of London with their own latest recorded message—between two long rows of crates while Sam shoveled as many of the bars into the duffel bags as she could. Between the two of them and Emma (positioned outside with a sniper rifle, should any passing drones pick up on the dead guards), they couldn’t carry a fraction of what was in the warehouse, and Sundeep had told her that they had only minutes once the transmitter came online and the drones tracked it down.

When the bags were full, she crammed more, crushing the bars in their casings, into the pockets of her cargo pants, determined to salvage what she could. There was enough food in the warehouse to stave off the starvation surging towards the remaining pockets of the Resistance and the swelling ranks of refugees who’d descended into the tunnels, with nothing but empty bellies and PTSD, from the ruins of the tower blocks.

In less than three minutes, she would watch their salvation burn.

“There are other ways,” Sundeep said for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time since Tim had suggested it, Sam countered that the Resistance—at least Nicola’s central command and the huddled masses it had grudgingly accepted—might have been starving, but so were the people above ground, the ones who faithfully lined up in the cold for rations every morning, and they ought to know who was responsible for that. Not to mention that of the countless ways in which their people were likely going to die, the prospect that they would survive long enough to run out of food seemed overly optimistic.

“We’ll go hungry,” Sam said. “They’ll lose London.”

“Ready?” he asked.

Sam nodded. A bag slung over each shoulder, holding the third between them, they ran.
The drone, barely audible against the onslaught of hail, rose heavily over the roof of the warehouse just as Emma grabbed her by the wrist and helped her climb over a half-frozen, muddy outcrop. Engorged with its cargo, its improbable, meandering flight trajectory reminded her of a fat bumblebee. Sundeep held up a tablet set to record. The second transmitter, the one set up in the middle of an Exclusion Zone, was set to broadcast the footage in real-time to anyone in a 60 km radius.

Emma leaned on her rifle, eye narrowing through the sights. A cylinder descended from the drone’s base, rotated, then shot out a blast of cluster bomblets into the warehouse roof.

Sam shielded her face from the explosion as it tore through the warehouse, strewing rubble and bars over the snow-blanketed wasteland. Minutes later, the first scavengers, bundled in winter coats and scarves and carrying backpacks and shopping bags, emerged from the closest tower blocks. The drone continued to float above the burning skeleton of the building. Several surveillance drones joined it, no doubt confirming that the signal had been cut, but Ollie’s jammer rendered the three of them below the machines’ notice.

She put a gloved hand on Emma’s arm. “Wait for it.”

_We do what we must_, she thought, even as the low susurrus of the drone as it charged its targeting system built above the heads of the gathering crowd. Sundeep zoomed in as far as the tablet allowed, on winter-chapped lips and reddened skin and the odd glance upward, at the menacing craft, the instantaneous oblivion of an air strike preferable to the slow torture of starvation.

“Now,” she said, and she and Emma climbed to their feet and let themselves be seen by the camera and the crowd alike, two masked freedom fighters facing down the Regime’s might. The wind blew a torn wrapper past her feet, flapped the bottom of her long coat against her legs.

Emma took aim at the drone. Fired. It came apart in white-hot shrapnel, smoking where the fragments landed. She let the rifle down at her side and raised her fist in the air; Sam echoed the gesture, saw, one by one, the scavengers do the same.

Then, without a word, she turned and led the trek back to their latest stolen car.

For everyone’s sake, Sam put on a bright smile as she made her way into the narrow passage that served as a canteen. Sundeep slapped down his duffel bag on one of the tables and declared, to a ragged chorus of cheers, that Hindu Santa had arrived with Christmas dinner and news of another mission that had gone more successfully than not. Emma, standing a few feet from her, was immediately swept up in Ollie’s arms; Sam sidestepped the reunion and found herself wanting to just disappear for a few hours—not that, with inventory to be taken and next moves to be planned, it was even a remote possibility.

“You need to see this,” Ollie was telling Emma. “Caledonian Mafia, in the kitchen, trying to cook.”

Sam followed them to the doorway that led to what was more a storeroom with a five-alarm-fire’s worth of hotplates and oil drums to see—and _fine_, it _was_ a bit funny—Malcolm and Jamie attempting some sort of culinary necromancy with packets of ketchup, pot noodles, crumbled ration bars, and tins of various questionable substances. She stood back, letting the warmth and the smells of MSG and Spam emanating from the simmering pot waft over her, and, with the notable exception of her
husband, was hard pressed to think of anyone at this particular moment that she loved more fervently than the two of them.

"You can come in, Sam," Malcolm called, and had it just been her imagination, the feeling that she was intruding on something private? Her nose watered, and she couldn’t resist the temptation to warm her frozen fingers by one of the oil drums.

"Did you lose a bet?" she asked. She noticed an opened bottle of Sundeep’s homebrew on the counter, which was at least a partial explanation as to what two men who largely lived off takeaway were doing playing at post-apocalyptic Jamie Oliver.

"It’s fuckin’ Christmas, isn’t it?" Malcolm replied, with an eye roll that told her that he gave about as much of a shit about Christmas as he did about any other day that wasn’t an election. It was obvious enough, though, that it mattered to Jamie a great deal.

All of them were gathered together—even Nicola had managed to collect her far-flung offspring for the occasion, Katie towing the younger two kids down from wherever she’d been hiding them up north—for what would probably be the last time. Sam had pushed their Malthusian deadline a little farther forward with the latest raid, but the Regime’s remaining food stores were increasingly well-guarded, the patrols and checkpoints on the surface more frequent. She liked to think that it was because their attacks had been the spark for a full-fledged revolt above, but even a proper, old-fashioned people’s uprising wouldn’t have stood a chance against the Regime’s machinery. They were running out of time.

She pushed aside thoughts of impending famine and began the excruciating task of doling out bowls and mugs of stew—she didn’t want to think about what had gone into it, but her stomach growled at the smell—to the shivering refugees huddled around the canteen tables, until Malcolm threatened to do something unmentionable to her with a feeding tube and a wooden spoon if she didn’t sit down and fucking eat something.

Sundeep was at the table, arguing about the Kronstadt Rebellion with Barry, his laptop running a script on Ross Lowell’s locked mobile while he picked apart a captured microdrone, and she slid in beside him, her leg against his. She looked out over the long, narrow room, the gaunt, hopeful faces singing Christmas carols, and told herself that this was her life now, for however long it lasted, doomed and subterranean but life nonetheless, defiant to the end.

Ollie rifled through the stack of CDs in the office desk drawer.

"It’s true what they say," he mused.

Emma was perched in the doorway, yellow sparks from the kerosene lamps in the canteen dancing across her hair. "What do they say?"

"They’re all Queen’s Greatest Hits," he said. "Every one. They might have started out as something else, but—"

She laughed and swayed over to him, slipped her arm around his waist and leaned in against his side. "But someone left them in the drawer for more than a fortnight and now they’ve changed?"

"Marry me," he blurted.
Emma said nothing for long enough that he might have backed into hasty revisionism—*not now, I meant after, when things are normal again, I’ve been drinking too much of that wiper fluid*—but all of it, the hunger, the bombs, the grinding fucking misery, it was all-consuming, it left no space for respite beyond her, beyond them. “Fuck it, let’s do it here, in the Tube. Jamie can officiate.”

Emma, in her best—which was to say, not very good—Scottish accent, pronounced, “Do ye, massive poofter that ye are, take this woman tae be yer lawful fuckin’ wife despite bein’ as bent as a bumrape at Eton?”

“Well?” Ollie prompted.

“We’re all going to die down here.”

“Then,” he said, “Emma Messinger, do you want to die an outlaw, a terrorist, and an honest woman?”

She rolled forward on her toes and tugged her fingers through his hair, her mouth soft and pliant on his. “Yes,” she whispered, “yes, I think I do.”

Ollie and Emma had started it, with the scavenged stereo, plugged into a generator, crackling banned music through the canteen. He’d emerged from one of the offices with his hand outstretched and an attempt at a formal bow. “Care to dance, m’lady?”

Emma, for her part, turned crimson, but went along with him as various people laughed and pushed aside the tables to join them. Even Sam managed to prod Sundeep into abandoning his work for a song or two, and from within her small knot of children—not that either Katie or Ella was a child anymore, and little Josh had somehow shot up about a foot in her absence—Nicola watched them sway together with all the grace and rhythm of awkward first formers at a school disco. Sam, she thought, looked happier and more at ease than she had in ages; Nicola didn’t notice the smile on her own face until Malcolm’s gravelly voice banished it.

“Dance with me, Nic’la.” He’d managed to creep up behind her, which shouldn’t have been possible in a space without corners, with their ranks so decimated and threadbare. The kerosene light threw his long shadow up the curving wall.

“What?”

“Up ye get, love.”

Nicola glanced frantically at each of her children in turn, but none offered a ready excuse, and so she followed Malcolm to the periphery of the makeshift dance floor. She wasn’t sure she’d had enough to drink for this, but she looped an arm around his waist and gingerly threaded her fingers through his, closing around the back of his hand while his own fingers remained stiffly splayed and crooked.

He wasn’t drunk—he never got *that* drunk—and she briefly considered the disturbing prospect that he actually did just want to dance with someone who could keep up with him. He whirled her across the cement floor to “Don’t Stop Me Now,” and for all that he looked too frail to stand, he really *was* a great dancer, and they’d always been more in sync on a dance floor than they’d ever been in politics.
Still, it was never a good sign when he was nice. “What’s this about, Malcolm?”

He dipped her, then spun her out and brought her close. “A show of strength,” he said. “You know. Keeping up morale.”

“Seriously?”

“When am I not serious? Look around you, darlin’. Even if everyone here picks up a gun, we still lose. But they need tae think otherwise. Understand?”

She swallowed hard. “I—I think so.”

“Right. Now. Over by the wall, don’t stare.”

He turned them both, not even missing a beat, and she followed his gaze to a woman, one of the refugees, holding a shivering child swaddled in a mess of blankets. “What about them?”

“The bubonic fuckin’ plague, Nic’la.” At her expression of confusion, he added, “Probably the flu.”

That made enough sense; it was the season for it, and then she realised that whatever medical supplies they had were buried beneath 220 feet of rubble, that the plumbing in this shelter was questionable, that for the first time since the Resistance had formed they had more civilians than fighters. “Fuck,” she hissed. “What do I—”

“Nothing, not tonight. Circulate. Don’t shake anyone’s hand. Find out who’s sick, and, very fucking quietly, isolate them.”

“Shit.”

“An entire monsoon of spraying liquid shite, and we’re living in a tin shack on the coast. That’s no’ a fuckin’ metaphor, by the way, that’s literally what’s gonnae happen. Do what you can, buy me more time.”

“To do what, exact—”

“Shut it, Jamie’s coming.” If he had a plan—and he had to, she told herself, he always had a plan—he wasn’t about to say. He managed to spin her in an extravagant flourish so that Jamie, clearly into his cups and with a posture that suggested that he was bracing to glass someone, didn’t actually collide with her as he swaggered up to them.

“Nicola,” Jamie said. “Would ye fuck off for a moment?”

Malcolm gave a low growl of warning; Nicola, her eyes wide, released his hand and backed away. She watched the two men circle each other like a pair of stray dogs, teeth bared.

“Not here,” Malcolm said.

“Just shut the fuck up,” Jamie snapped, and moved in to take Nicola’s place as the next track came on. “You fuckin’ owe me.” He folded his arms around Malcolm, who, to Nicola’s eternal shock, didn’t push him away or try to punch him, just pressed his face against the side of Jamie’s head.

She found herself standing by Ollie and Emma, who, less drunk than most of the people still on the floor, were also gaping. There was still enough of a crowd, and an inebriated crowd at that, that the clumsy spectacle wasn’t quite as obvious or mortifying as it might have otherwise been, though she still found herself wincing in secondhand embarrassment.
“Now that,” Ollie said, “that is fucking hilarious.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Emma replied. “I mean, honestly, who else would have either of them?”

“Just imagine the pillow talk.”

Jamie moved like someone who’d heard about dancing before but had never actually seen it done; Nicola wasn’t sure if Malcolm was trying to lead or just keep him in one place before he broke something. She might almost have thought that he was just humouring a drunken and sad, but purely platonic, friend until she saw—and hoped no one else did—Malcolm’s hand over the small of Jamie’s back, squeezing a fistful of fabric and then just resting there several minutes longer than it needed to be. He looked close to collapse, as if Jamie, himself unsteady, was the only thing keeping him upright.

Fuck, she thought, none of us knows anything about him. She’d resented Malcolm’s attempts to manage and dominate her personal life, and yet he’d clearly buried his own so deep for the sake of his career that even evisceration at the hands of a vengeful press hadn’t managed to unearth this, or they would have never left it alone.

God. All that time, she thought he’d been trying to control her—he had been, of course—but mostly he’d been trying to protect her. She tried, and failed, to suppress an ache of empathy, told herself that he didn’t deserve that much.

Then he patted Jamie’s shoulder and announced, loudly, that the Chancellor’s holiday address was set to begin, and everyone settled in around the collection of laptops and tablets to watch.

It was, apparently, an annual tradition among the Resistance. The inner circle monitored state news as a matter of course, but on Christmas, every web-capable device was tuned to the Chancellor’s speech and everyone hurled abuse at the screen.

Malcolm wrapped cold fingers around a mug of watery tea—he’d given up drinking after a half-cup of homebrew, his head already throbbing before he’d finished—and, watching Jamie with nearly as much trepidation as the Chancellor (who’d become, he decided, almost as much CGI as actual man), sprawled out in one of the plastic chairs. The party was still in full swing, the Chancellor’s words lost beneath the acid buzz of commentary around him.

“—and we renew, once again, our commitment to protect the security and prosperity of Great Britain’s families, to pledge ourselves to the future of this great country and its most valuable asset, our children—”

Beside him, Jamie muttered, “I’m gonnae find what that steaming spadgebasket loves the most in the world and then I’m gonnae fistfuck it tae death,” then stood up (almost falling down again, which was likely the only reason he’d managed not to start a fight) and staggered off. Malcolm leaned to his other side and nudged Sam.

“Um,” she whispered. “Good luck?”

Jamie was waiting just outside the canteen, leaning against the wall with his shirt untucked and his hair disheveled and looking every bit the disreputable Motherwell punk that made Malcolm willing to abandon whatever notions of discretion he’d managed to retain. Everyone else, he decided, was
busy with the party.

He followed Jamie down the tunnel to the plant room, where the exhaust fans beat stale air throughout the shelter. There was an inch of dust on the floor and a dirty mattress and he had enough time to wonder what exactly the other man had in mind before Jamie was pressing him into rusty machinery, stubble and moonshine and the oral hygiene of Shane McGowan.

“What was that about?” Malcolm asked between assaults. “Earlier.”

“Don’t fuck Nicola,” Jamie demanded.

“I’m no’ going tae fuck Nic’la, ye wee radge. It was strategy. Jesus, are you fuckin’ jealous?”

Jamie glared at him. “No!”

“You are. Little lovesick cunt. One fuckin’ halfhearted blowjob—”

“—it wasnae half—”

“—and a few gropes in the loo and yer ready tae become the second Mrs. Tucker.”

Jamie slammed him into the fan and started pulling at the buttons of his shirt. Malcolm grabbed one of his wrists and drew it away, cognizant that they were still dancing around each other, that with Jamie furious and brooding, he was only putting up a pretense of a fight to get the other man as distracted and horny as possible.

“I brought condoms, are you happy?” Jamie patted one of the pockets of his cargo pants.

“Did you get those from Sundeep?”

“Fuck no, Sam terrifies me. I nicked them from Ollie.”

Malcolm snorted. Jamie kissed as badly as he danced—which didn’t bode well for the rest of it—and he sent up more red flags than an SWP convention, but there was something to be said for initiative. Malcolm had, apparently, been outmaneuvered by a feral psychopath. He was losing his grip. “I can feel my libido ebbing away at the thought.”

“Oh, fuck off, Malc. You’re not 12.”

“Yeah, you’d like it if I was.”

Jamie tugged the bottom of his shirt free from his trousers, then went at the buttons again, and this time, when Malcolm slapped him away, he looked up with those big, stupid eyes of his, and Malcolm thought that he couldn’t do this, he could handle being a convenient shag, he could take both their minds off their own impending deaths, but what Jamie wanted (what you want, whispered the treacherous voice that didn’t get a fucking say in the matter) was just too much.

Not that they weren’t absolutely going to do this anyway. He had a sacred fucking mission to ensure that Jamie didn’t spend Christmas wallowing in grief. And besides, he only had so much self-control, and most of it, these days, was being squandered on not falling to pieces, and it wasn’t as though his dick came with an off-switch.

He let Jamie strip him, more efficiently than he’d have done himself, grateful for the relative darkness that rendered both of them dim smudges in the shadows. Still, he felt horribly exposed, Auschwitz-thin and bone pale, waiting for Jamie to exhale. Or explode. One of the two.
“Christ, Malc.” Jamie’s arms wound around him, and it’d have been better if he’d just gotten angry, it’d have been easier to take than the calloused fingertips tracing over bumps and ridges of scar tissue, the dent of a broken rib that hadn’t healed right, cataloguing every truncheon blow and electrical burn, the knobs and valleys of his too-prominent spine. He tried to elbow Jamie away and ended up sending them both teetering off balance and onto the fetid nightmare of a mattress, where Jamie tugged his own shirt over his head and kicked off his cargo pants.

“I know, I’m the fuckin’ Elephant Man, stop pawin’ at me and get on with it.”

It was a trivial, petty thing to hate the Regime for, this newfound lack of confidence, this desire to have been with Jamie when he’d still been whole, when he was powerful and important and could have had anyone he wanted simply by unleashing a fraction of his charm on whatever poor unsuspecting twat caught his fancy. When a dark room was an invitation to all manner of perversity and not a reminder of the years he’d spent as the Regime’s favourite chewtoy. _Fuck it_, he thought, seizing Jamie and throwing him into the mattress, biting at his collarbone, dragging his mouth over his chest to tease at a nipple with his tongue, _they’ve taken everything else but the fuckers don’t get this._

From there, it was a frenzied competition, neither of them willing to cede the upper hand, Jamie coming up for air only long enough to gasp out, “fuck, you fuckin’ beautiful bastard” before putting his mouth to more productive uses, Malcolm determined to give the mad cunt some incentive to survive a little longer, snarling a litany of abuse even as he shivered under Jamie’s touch. It was just, he was sure, that he’d been in pain for so long, that he’d practically forgotten that his body could be anything beyond a burden and a cage, it wasn’t as though this was something more than a momentary distraction—

Jamie reached between his legs and inched a slicked finger inside of him, somehow managed to curl it in just the right way to make Malcolm involuntarily _whimper_ (he found the presence of mind to vow violent retribution at the soonest possible opportunity) and murmured, “D’you want me to?” like a fucking kilt-wearing long-hair poofter on the cover of a Mills & Boon paperback, and Malcolm hissed, “Oh, you’d fuckin’ better, y’cunt.”

Jamie beamed, like he’d only been waiting for permission before he pushed his way into Malcolm’s arse and obliterated any vestiges of rational thought that had the audacity to suggest that the whole thing was a _bad fucking idea_. Malcolm managed to roll them both over and angle himself so that each one of Jamie’s spastic thrusts sent a shock up his spine, before, partially in fear that he’d have a coronary if they kept on that way, settling them both in a rhythm that left Jamie writhing and babbling under him.

He collapsed as Jamie’s orgasm shuddered through him, let himself be manhandled into Jamie’s arms as blunt, deft fingers finished him off, his own limbs turned to heavy gelatinous sludge, bright splotches of light bursting across his eyes.

Which was why he couldn’t stop Jamie from picking up his limp, useless hand, rubbing the sore joints in an act somehow more intimate than everything that had preceded it. He tried to say, “Don’t,” but all that came out was a low moan of relief, so Jamie just kept doing it, hushing him and kissing the back of his neck above the still-raised scar. “You really are mental, y’know.”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “Obviously. I’ve put up with you this long.” He nuzzled against Malcolm’s back. “Don’t run off, yeah?”

Malcolm was convinced he wouldn’t be able to, positive, in fact, that whatever toxic swamp had spawned the likes of Jamie had also imbued him with some sort of superpowered fucking ability to render the brains and bodies of otherwise incredibly clever people into jelly, and besides, he was
tired, and, tucked against Jamie with his coat draped over both of them, warm and content for the first time in years. He lay for some time, listening to the thump of the exhaust fan over the drone of Jamie’s snoring, before following him into sleep.

He dreamed of the ocean with the bombers roaring overhead and the gunboats circling, the cold waves crashing into his mouth, salt-sting in his eyes, dreamed of drowning in fire and ice beneath the wounded, sinking wreckage of the ship. With every desperate, choking breath, he screamed out that he wasn’t there, hadn’t been there; each time his head broke the surface, he floundered wildly, searching for his girls. Machine-gun fire strafed the swells and he fought, even knowing that the ocean was too vast, too unforgiving, to yield up three small bodies in its hunger.

A body floated past him, torn to shreds by the gunfire, and he let himself fall below, the sea determined to throttle the air from his lungs, plunged into its depths only to be dragged up again, coughing and spluttering, to the deck of one of the gunboats.

He looked up from where he lay sprawled on his belly, dripping seawater and blood, at Malcolm, his skin mottled and blue and peeling, a shroud of seaweed clinging to his scrawny body, and still as the dead.

Cried out, did you fucking rescue me, what the fuck would you save me for—

—and woke, staring into Malcolm’s open eyes, his skull pounding and the scream dead in his throat. Malcolm silently pressed a finger to Jamie’s lips.

“You were dreaming,” he said, as though he was entirely unaccustomed to the idea, as if he didn’t also have nightmares every fucking night, as if it even made sense for him to still be here asking Jamie about his fucking dreams.

“I dinnae want tae talk about it.” He placed a hand—tentative, unsure if he could do this, oh yes, apparently he did get to do this—over Malcolm’s chest. Malcolm was obviously some sort of lizard-person with no blood circulation (in retrospect, Jamie wondered why he hadn’t figured this out before) but he did have a heartbeat beneath his ice-cold skin, frantic and strong against Jamie’s palm. “Sam’s stupid creepy dog, if ye must know.”

“Yeah.” Malcolm sounded distracted. “Look, Jamie—” he started, and looked acutely relieved at the knock on the door, even as Jamie scrambled to cover them both with the coat and sundry scattered items of clothing. “Oi! Fuck off!”

Sundeep was standing in the doorway even before he’d finished. “I’ve a Christmas present for you.” His gaze was pointedly fixed somewhere above their heads; Jamie sniggered.

“Is it a robotic hand?” Malcolm asked. “Because I’ve asked for one.”

“It’s Lowell’s mobile.”

“Fuck.” Jamie rummaged for his shirt and pants. Malcolm just pulled himself upright against the wall, his coat loosely arranged over his lap, having apparently decided that if they were well beyond the point of keeping secrets, the least he could do was mentally scar his ex-PA’s husband. “Find anything good?”
“You think I’d barge in on—whatever the two of you were doing—if I hadn’t? The mobile numbers of every major figure in the Regime.” He cautiously made eye contact again. Weren’t young people supposed to be all about twerking and hook-ups these days? Though he supposed computer geeks were still computer geeks. “Given time I might be able to do something with that. But also, I found something strange.”

“Spill.”

“Okay, so while you were, uh, asleep, I had Emma look over Lowell’s directory of contacts. She recognised most of them, but there was this one name that stood out, okay? I did a background search. She was a public health nurse before the war, born in London, family’s from Cameroon. Two uncles shot in the purges and her parents and children deported.”

“But not her,” Malcolm said.

“But not her. So what’s a black NHS worker doing walking free in London, let alone with her number saved in the mobile of the Regime’s propaganda minister?”

Malcolm extended his hand, long fingers uncurling greedily, and grinned his vulpine smile as Sundeep tossed the mobile at him. He scrolled down the screen.

“Shall we find out?”

The girl sat in her favourite chair by the window, and her clouded eyes tracked neither the drift of snowflakes against the darkening sky, nor Abby Nkeng’s attempt to arrange the few objects in her barren hospital room before the visitor arrived. He was late, and though her shift had finished an hour ago and she longed to go home, it was Christmas, and the thought of leaving the girl alone—perhaps alone all night, he’d failed to show before—was one heartbreak too many when her own children, if they still lived, were so very far away. Even if the girl didn’t know the difference, Abby thought, it would be wrong to abandon her.

The visitor arrived just before midnight. She’d seen him on television hours earlier—the other him, the leader, Chancellor and Lord Protector of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, not the haggard, despairing father of a dead-alive child.

He had a present for her, which Abby dutifully opened. A gold necklace, which she placed around the girl’s slender neck, knowing she’d only have to take it off again so that it didn’t choke her in her sleep.

“Merry Christmas, Miriam,” the Chancellor said softly.

“Merry Christmas, sir,” Abby echoed.

He looked up at her sharply. “Shouldn’t you be on your way?”

Abby blurted a stuttering apology as she gathered her coat and hat, nearly falling into the door in her rush to leave. Outside, the searchlights swooped, catching specks of snow in their path, and though, intellectually, she knew she didn’t need to, she did her best to move only in their wake.

A tank rolled past her, and she reached for her identification, but it kept moving. She glanced behind
her, at the square of yellow light in the top floor of the hospital, at the graffiti scrawled across the wall, the flag and the balaclava and beneath it.

We are still here.

Which was around the time her mobile began to ring.
In the Silence of God, In the Fullness of Time

Chapter Summary

In which a number of goodbyes are said, some more permanent than others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On one of a diminishing number of mornings, spooned around Emma on a sunken, lumpy mattress and listening to a chorus of uneven breathing in the quiet of the shelter, Ollie found himself gripped by a wave of painful homesickness and the realisation that, having saved himself, he’d almost certainly killed his parents. State Security would have gone to his company, taken the lift to his old office, retrieved, without even a question, his file from whatever hapless tit they’d replaced him with. They would have methodically tracked down his family in Lincolnshire, had his parents and his brother and sister questioned about his whereabouts—tortured; it had been much easier to ignore the Regime’s brutality when he didn’t have to watch Malcolm coughing up a lung on a daily basis—then executed once it became apparent that they had no useful information. He waited for it to sink in, and when it didn’t, tried picturing each one of their faces. It was no use; it was as if his other life still existed somewhere else, contained in a hermetically sealed bubble, waiting to be reclaimed once they’d sent the Regime scuttling back under the floorboards.

Rationally, he knew the end was coming. Above, the skirmishes blazed across cities until they’d reached a holding pattern, and what remained of Britain after the war wouldn’t survive the death throes of the two forces warring over it. From what he’d heard, it was a wonder there was anyone still living within London’s city limits, and nothing was much better anywhere else. He thought of watching the game over a pint at the Varsity back home, that the pub had probably burned down by now, and that, for whatever reason, was what caught his breath in his throat. Emma burrowed into him, yanking the thin pillow from under his head to under hers.

He could start a new life with her, and he had a sudden, unbidden image of a big flat and a gaggle of blond, bespectacled children in tiny scarves as hazy and distant as the memory of his parents. Imagined growing old with her, in the unfamiliar London that would emerge from the ruins, though it had never even occurred to him that he would ever be as old as he was now. He tried to picture the surface, the burned-out buildings growing whole again, and the mirage vanished as quickly as it had come.

“S’cold,” Emma mumbled. He caught her hands, blew breath over them that steamed and curled towards the tunnel’s ceiling. They only ran the generators a few hours at a time now, conserving what little power remained and maintaining, to the Regime’s surveillance, the illusion that the tunnels were all but abandoned. Down the row of bunks, someone coughed, moaned.

He had yet to get used to the smell. Once the flu outbreak had hit, and despite Nicola’s efforts to contain the epidemic, the shelter’s antiquated plumbing had lasted all of six hours. Now, the tunnels were choked in a thick soup of shit and vomit, unbearable enough that some had left the relative safety of the shelter and retreated farther down the line. Fleeing wasn’t a bad strategy, all things considered.

The disgust must have shown in his face, because she reached across him to the edge of the bunk
and passed him a vinegar-soaked rag, helped him fix it over his mouth and nose. “It helps. Really.”

“The glamour of revolution,” he said, the rag cold and acrid, but admittedly better than the reek from the loo. “Born in defiance, strangled to death in shit.” He pushed his glasses, streaked in white, up the bridge of his nose. “We could just leave.”

It was the first time either of them had said it out loud, and it would have been easy, a year ago. He could have greased the right palms and had them on a boat to Ireland. Now, the farthest they could get was Wandsworth and it was still better than dying here, but the inertia (if he were being cynical; in truth, he worried it was something more than inertia) that had kept him in London after the coup now kept him in the tunnels, determined to see this sorry mess through to the end.

She pushed herself up on one elbow, her fingers still laced through his, until she was leaning against him, the blanket wrapped around both their shoulders. “I kept thinking things would go back to normal,” she said. “God, I was so fucking stupid.”

“You don’t want to—”

“No. You?” He was surprised to be relieved, the remnants of familiarity lingering in the tunnel preferable to what lay beyond, even if the latter offered a few more precious days, weeks maybe, of survival.

Ollie could hear, from somewhere at the other end of the tunnel, one of Nicola’s pre-recorded addresses, something about the disenfranchised youth who had put their lives on the line fighting the Regime, how there wasn’t a place for them in the old order and the task before us is to make one, and he snorted. “I think that madwoman actually believes her own nonsense.”

Emma’s eyes shone strangely in the kerosene gloom. “There can’t just be nothing, though, right? The Regime’s in tatters, we’re—everyone’ll die down here, I know that, but. Something has to come back. Even if it’s ten years, a hundred years…” She squeezed his fingers and uttered the ultimate jinx: “It can’t get any worse.”

“You’ve never actually watched a movie that didn’t have subtitles, have you?” She shoved him, and he said, miserably, “There’s nothing left out there.”

“There’s us.” He laughed at that, and she glared. “I mean it. You know, I like working with you, even if it’s literally shovelling shit out of the latrines. It’s better than…than our fucking spy games, and the lying and the manipulation.”

“Emma Messinger, are you coming over to the Dark Side?”

“You lot can’t be trusted to run Britain on your own, can they?” She stood up, reached out her hand. After a hesitation, he took it. “Whatever’s standing at the end, we’ll make something better out of it. You and me, we’re proof.”

“Emma?”

“Yeah.”

“I hated Solaris. Both of them.”

“I know.” She smiled, and it was like the sun coming out. “That’s why I let you ask me on a third date. Come and be useful for once, okay?”

“Right,” he said, and trailed after her down the tunnel.
Nicola’s new haunt, the place she hid when she resolutely did not want to be found, was at the sealed entrance to the second shelter tunnel, the one where she’d reluctantly quarantined anyone with so much as a sniffle. There’d been two deaths behind the door so far—an elderly woman and the small boy from the towers who Malcolm had first pointed out. She’d grudgingly admit that it could have been much worse, that if Malcolm hadn’t based his long, faintly improbable career on an uncanny ability to predict the exact way in which everyone else’s plans would invariably go arse over tit, what remained of her depleted, malnourished forces would have been incapacitated or dead.

Still, she seethed, at the pointless waste of life—to have come this far only to be finished off by fucking flu season—at the darkness and the cold and the sound of fists pounding against the reinforced steel door, begging for more water, at each torturous hour of state television that she forced herself to watch. Most of all, at the confinement, the slow squeeze of the tunnel walls as they prepared to bury her alive.

She looked up at the approach of footsteps, startled as Ella slid against the door beside her. She’d planned to send all of her children away after Christmas, but Katie, who had, despite Nicola’s certainty that she’d end up on heroin or the dole or worse, somehow become a practical, sensible young woman, had pointed out that if Clapham South fell, it wasn’t as though they’d be safe anywhere else. As a politician, Nicola had barely had the time for her kids; as the leader of a guerrilla army, she actively kept a distance, as if it might somehow protect them from the weight of her decisions. Ella, for her part, had apparently imprinted on Jamie Macdonald like a lost duckling, more interested in following him around than in seizing what little time remained to reconcile the family.

So it was something of a surprise that she’d have found Nicola here (not that it was much of a hiding place, even with the shelter’s declining population), that she’d have bothered to seek her out at all.

“They want you down in the War Room. Strategy huddle.”

Nicola groaned and rubbed at her temples, not entirely convinced that she wouldn’t vomit if she tried to stand up. For a desperate, panicked moment, she wondered if she was sick too, but no, it was nausea born from mere terror, only the steadfast determination of the earth to swallow her whole.

“Can’t I just die instead?”

“C’mon.” Ella tugged at her arm, and she flushed, ashamed to have her own daughter see her like this.

“Go on,” the ghost of her voice said. “Tell them—”

“Mum.”

Of all her children, Nicola thought, Ella looked most like her and least like James, even transformed as she was into something lean and hardened and older than she should have been, A-levels and first dates and all the teenaged joys and anguish stolen from her, just another grim soldier in the Resistance. Another one of her myriad failures, another person who’d counted on her only to be met with disappointment.

“Sorry.” Nicola took several long breaths, wishing she had a bottle of Rescue Remedy, or a fucking Dignitas clinic, or anything. “I’m just so tired, sweetheart.”
“No one could have beaten them,” Ella said. That was the latest refrain among the Grumbling In Resignation Bat-People, their sole consolation at the end of their doomed, truncated rebellion. No one was suicidal enough to say it to Malcolm’s face—if the concept of failure had ever even occurred to him, it wasn’t something he’d be willing to admit out loud—but they felt perfectly comfortable saying it to her. “At least you tried.”

“I couldn’t save the Party,” she replied. “Why should I ever have thought I could save the fucking country?”

“Because no one else could?”

“I just wanted to help people,” Nicola whined. “Raise them up, bring them together…” She trailed off as the sobs threatened to choke off her words. Ella—sullen, spiteful Ella who’d come into the world shrieking and bawling and never quite stopped—pulled Nicola into an awkward hug and held her until her shudders subsided. “Shitting Christ, what’ve I started?”

Ella whispered, “Mum? I’m proud of you. I am.”

Drained, limp as a wrung-out flannel, Nicola finally lifted her head.

She had one last completely boneheaded idea, and Malcolm was going to hate it.

Lowell’s mobile sat in the centre of the table. It had been ringing, on and off, for the last half-hour, a shrill drill bit driven through the side of Malcolm’s aching skull. Seven pairs of eyes watched it; no one so much as reached for it until Sundeep, monitoring the call from his laptop, gave the signal.

Malcolm didn’t need to look at Jamie for the other man to know to pick it up and tap in the code—fuck, but he hated touch-screens—then hand it over.

He pulled aside the rag covering his face to speak. “I told you never to call me on this line.”

“Hello, Malcolm. That is who I’m talking to, isn’t it?”

He mouthed, Lowell at the others, leaned back in his chair. Not that they’d thought it was anyone else. The only surprise was how long after Ollie’s escape, after the escalation into pure chaos on the scarred remains of the city’s surface, it had taken him to ring.

“Are you alone?”

“What, you want tae have phone sex with me? I’m flattered darlin’, but you’re not really—”

Lowell made an exasperated noise on the other end. “For once in your fucking life, shut up and listen. I have a proposition for you.”

Sundeep wrote on a paper, “KEEP HIM TALKING.” Malcolm jerked two bony fingers in his direction.

“From the Chancellor?”

“From me. The Chancellor needs sat nav to find his own prick when he goes for a wank. You know how it is.” That would be the feigned empathy, the appeal to a common understanding. Far down in
Malcolm’s own toolbox—he found shouting and death threats, if not more productive, were infinitely more cathartic—but not without its uses. It was bollocks anyway; digitally-airbrushed, chinless tin-pot dictator or not, the Chancellor was at least more competent than any PM Malcolm had ever had to deal with, not that he’d been left with a very high standard. “You’ve made quite a mess up here.”

“Yeah?” There was a red circle on the map displayed on the laptop, shrinking with each second. He’d honestly never thought that signal triangulation worked that way outside of Hollywood. If every joint in his body didn’t feel like it had been smashed with a ball-peen hammer, he’d have relished the time it afforded him to listen to Lowell squirm. Somehow, as the Resistance waited for the inevitable, its imaginary war—his imaginary war—had become something real, and uncontrollable. “I wouldn’t know.”

“It’s gone on long enough, wouldn’t you say? The killing, the mindless destruction. You’ve unleashed anarchy. There’ll be nothing left standing in London, and I know, Malcolm, I know you don’t want that. We’re reasonable men, you and I. Pragmatists.” A pause, then: “Call off the riots.”

He almost laughed, but halfway out of his mouth it became a cough. He held the mobile away from his ear and muffled the sound in his sleeve before rasping out, “Sorry, no, fuck off.”

“You’ve been doing this longer than I have,” Lowell said. “You’ve toppled Prime Ministers. Started wars. You must have some idea—there’s no possible scenario in which you and your band of Merry Men come out of this alive.”

“Two months ago,” Malcolm replied, “you told me I wasn’t going to see the outside of a fuckin’ black cell.”

“You can’t win. And for us, all of this is untenable. I’m offering amnesty, for you, for whomever’s left alive down there…” As Malcolm was gearing up to tell him, in explicit detail, exactly what he could do with his amnesty, Lowell said quickly, “You don’t care about your own life, that much is obvious, but you’re not alone, are you? There’s lovely Samantha, and wee Jamie.” Both were in the room with him, which Lowell had no doubt guessed, and yet it was though they were each encased in glass, just beyond his reach. “They were willing to die for you, were they not? Isn’t it time you returned the favour?”

Lowell kept talking, rattling out conditions (expansion of the press, democratic elections at the local level, posthumous rehabilitation for some of the prominent dissidents, oh yes, and the Chancellor won’t live forever, and when that day, tragic as it will be, inevitably arrives, perhaps then a glacial glasnost) while the room swum and he fought the temptation to hurl the mobile across the room, grab Jamie, and run. The blood pounding in his ears was so loud that it took Lowell clearing his throat before he noticed a gap in the endless deluge of blag.

The red circle narrowed to a single point. He glanced at Sundeep, who frowned and shook his head. They’d all been hoping for somewhere more isolated, somewhere Lowell might have been vulnerable, but he was calling from Whitehall.

“Listen to me,” Malcolm growled. His constricted windpipe had decided to make every word a battle, but he pressed on. “First, I’d burn London to the fucking ground before I’d let it be taken up the shitter by the likes of your six-toed, horse-fucking master race. Second, you’re a married man, yeah? I mean, I don’t actually give a fuck but they’ll need someone, when I’m finished with you, ye unmitigated pig-fuck of a man, to identify what’s left of your body.” He hacked into his sleeve again, the lack of steady oxygen to his brain making the world spin even as his vitriol narrowed on the voice on the other end, the living, breathing embodiment of everything he hated. It made no sense that with all the technological advances made in his lifetime, there wasn’t a way for him to just reach
through the tiny, polished screen and tear out Lowell’s kidneys.

Jamie folded a hand over his forearm, ran a thumb over the sharp protrusion of his skinny wrist while glaring around the table, silently daring anyone to say anything about it. Far from calming him down, it had the duel effect of reminding him to breathe between curses and intensifying his hatred to a diamond-sharp point—the arse-licking fuckstick had threatened Jamie, which was beyond the pale and something that only Malcolm was allowed to do.

“It’s a pity,” Lowell purred like a half-rate Bond villain. “I quite like you.”

“Yeah, it shows.”

“You don’t sound well, Malcolm.”

“I’ll outlive the Regime,” he said, found himself wishing for the days when he’d say things and they’d somehow become true, regardless of the actual facts. “You’re no’ much of a student of history, are ye? D’you know what happens tae cunts like you? You’ll be lucky if we waste a firing squad on you, ye piss-gargling fascist maggot.”

“Are you quite done?”

Malcolm hissed, “Not even close.”

He was up and barking commands before Jamie’d managed to hang up. “Right, they’re as fucked as we are and it’s cuntin’ Somalia up there, here’s what we do—” ordering Tim and his skeleton crew of an army around before Nicola squeaked, “Malcolm?” and he roared, “What?”

“…there’s something I want to try,” she said, and before he could stop her, she was prattling on about some sort of Fourth Sector sandal-wearing bollocks. He ran his hand through his bristly grey hair, now quite out-of-control after days without running water, and gave her the side-eye.

“Fine, great, take Sundeep with you and go do that,” he said, barely pausing for a breath before muttering, “mental twat. Jamie!”

Jamie materialised by his side; it was entirely possible that he’d never left. Malcolm could feel the burn of everyone’s attention on them. He’d been careful, since the depressing Christmas wankfest, not to get too close to Jamie unless they were alone, but that was the wrong thing, wasn’t it? He’d never—not even during a period of drunken recklessness right before the divorce, when his steel-trap control threatened to give way—hesitated to touch Jamie in public. It was more suspicious not to. Fuck it, he thought, ran a hand over Jamie’s where it still clutched the mobile, and murmured, “Find Abigail Nkeng before Lowell does.”

“On it,” Jamie said, though the sentimental little cunt didn’t move from where he stood.

“Sam, we need a distraction. I want the Regime’s attention on anything but Jamie, so—”

She was looking at him strangely, as though she could see right through him—maybe she could at the rate at which he was wasting away to nothing—and said, “It’s okay, Malcolm, I have a plan.” Then she raised herself on her toes to kiss his cheek. If he’d been thinking clearly, he might have seen something ominous in that, but he was riding what he assumed to be a last flicker of manic energy and so he let her leave without even asking—Sam was a great girl, she always knew what to do—moving on to his next hapless victim.

“And Barry, go play with yourself in a corner, you’re fuckin’ useless here.”
“Malc,” Jamie said, and just like that, the others, the frantic whirlwind of activity around him that reminded him so excruciatingly of how his life had once been, might not have even existed for all that he wanted to tell the entire world to piss off, sink into Jamie’s arms, and sleep forever. “I’m going now, yeah?”

“This isn’t the end of *Return of the King,* y’cunt. Move!” Jamie, for all his years in politics, had never entirely perfected his poker face, so Malcolm dragged him over to the wall to make himself crystal-fucking-clear. “If you get yourself killed,” he snarled, “I will find whatever mass grave they’ve buried you in, and I will visit it every year with a bottle of Laphroaig, and I will drink the entire thing and piss it out over your fucking corpse.”

Jamie’s huge, perpetually startled eyes blinked, and he grinned. “I love you too,” he blurted, and fled before Malcolm could respond.

Sam pushed aside the captive drone that greeted her like an overexcited puppy at the door of the maintenance cupboard. Her husband looked up at her from where he was crouched over his laptop, editing the footage of Nicola’s last address.

A list of means to sabotage cameras and drones with various household objects crawled across the lower third of the screen, while Nicola—at her most statesmanlike and dignified, despite looking like a member of Pussy Riot—urged the remaining citizens of London to cut up their identification cards, pick up every weapon at their disposal, and destroy the Regime’s surveillance apparatus. It was something between a call to arms and a suicide note.

“She’s quite good when her heart’s in it,” Sundeep admitted.

“She always liked a bit of people-power nonsense.” Sam sat in the little wooden chair beside him, the drone chirping above her shoulder. She batted at it, but it was determined to perch there, humming in her ear. “What’s it do?” she asked, slightly worried that her husband had reprogrammed it to fancy her.

“Same as theirs,” he replied. “Plus it transmits a moving signal, so next time they try to nuke one of the Glorious Leader’s recordings, they’ll have a WWI dogfight on their hands.”

“We must be each other’s eyes and ears,” Nicola was saying through the laptop’s tinny speakers. “They’ve left us no weapon but the strength and solidarity of our own communities.”

Too little, too late, but Sam smiled—it felt like it’d been ages, like any happiness in her had atrophied and was only just beginning to thaw—toasted back her long ponytail. “Okay,” she said. “I’m away to take down the government.”

“Sam,” he said. “You’re not…” He swallowed hard. “Whatever’s at DoCR, it won’t be something neat and easy, some map to the black sites or a smoking gun that proves that the Regime was behind the White Death all along. It’s not going to be anything like that.”

“It might not be anything at all. I still—I need to try.” She pressed her palm to the centre of his spine, warmth reverberating through the thin cotton of his shirt. He didn’t turn to look at her—she knew why, and she told herself that she wouldn’t let it matter.

“The Resistance can’t be killed, not so long as there is a single spark that refuses to submit. We, the
underground, pass the torch to you. Hold fast to each other, and keep fighting the good fight.”

“Take some grenades,” he said, instead of wishing her luck.

Sam nodded. Their time was up.

“Be back soon,” she said.

Jamie shifted from one foot to another, frozen hands jammed into the pockets of his coat, the scarf pushing the edge of his collar into his throat. Around him, the air stiffened and crackled—first a puff of cold wind, then the low heat and the harsh taste of ash. Across the park, a row of shops was in flames; the smoke rose grey against a sunless sky, the wailing and lamenting from the riots punctuated by short bursts of silencing gunfire.

Abigail Nkeng, bunched under a thick anorak and a knit cap, swung on the kiddie play set, dark eyes darting nervously from the broken CCTV cameras above the snow-crusted path, to the spray-painted eyeballs scrawled over the basketball court and the abandoned nursery school, to his approach, like a shambling giant through the bombed-out miniature Tudor houses and overturned train cars. Ice crunched beneath his boots, louder, in his own ears, than the pitched battle taking place streets away.

He squeezed into the swing beside her, kicked at the snow with his heels, waiting for her to speak first. When she didn’t, he said, “It’s a dead zone here. No cameras, no drones, okay?” He waved an arm at the smashed camera for emphasis. The fighting had blown through here, and moved on, the rioters having taken or destroyed anything of value. Good on them.

“They’re watching me. Anything I do, anything at all, they will kill me.”

“Eh, well.” He grinned and hoped it struck the right balance between charm and menace. “If it’s safety yer after, love, I cannae promise ye that, but I thought ye might like to stick one up the Regime’s arsehole after what they did tae yer family.” She twitched as if she’d been tasered. “Yeah, we know all about that.”

Her fingers, bare and thin and grey, circled the cold chains of the swing. “You are not the man I spoke to before.”

“He’s indisposed.” Not that he was certain Malcolm would be any better at this. He’d always delegated the prying to Jamie when he could. Malcolm tended to find dodgy expense reports when he went digging into other people’s lives; Jamie got autoerotic asphyxiation and key parties. He just had that kind of luck. “How do you know Lowell? Who are you? Why’d they let ye live?”

A stray explosive canister whistled between the trees at the far end of the park, the shockwave as it detonated shuddering through the swing’s metal frame. She sprang to her feet, wrenched sideways before Jamie could stop her, and took off in the least dignified sprint since Paula Radcliffe at the 2005 Marathon World Championship. He stumbled after her, through the park and into the street. Fast little bint, despite her stocky build and the layers of winter gear weighing her down.

Piles of burning rubbish in the middle of the road and the glare of searchlights lit the neighbourhood as bright as day, played light and shadow over the shell-gouged concrete, the corpses littered like dead leaves across gutters and pavements. He’d seen nothing like it, not even in the early days of the fighting. An armoured personnel carrier, gutted and smoking on its side, blocked the far end of the
street, a few masked holdouts crouched in its skeleton. Past them, almost nothing was left standing.

Jamie ducked past the burning ruins of a building supply shop. His heart, overtaxed with the pursuit, with the understanding of how *important* this was—fuck, Malcolm wouldn’t have let him out of the tunnels otherwise, and he wouldn’t, couldn’t have left anyway—kept up a relentless hammering. He saw her turn, run down a narrow alleyway between two abandoned buildings, then slam futilely into a chain link fence. She spun, clawing at the fence behind her, her eyes wide and helpless. Clouds of white smoke huffed from her open lips. She lashed out at him with a fury born of terror, tried to dodge past him only to stumble, over-padded and clumsy and too exhausted to struggle.

He could, he thought, knock her over the head and drag her off. It was an option. But it entailed carrying her through a war zone, and there was a part of him that was still principled enough to insist that she go with him willingly.

“I’m no’ here tae hurt ye, lass. I wannae help.”

She slumped, still hanging onto the fence, her head falling to her chest. “You can’t;” she whispered. “You can’t.”

Jamie scanned the alley—one camera, broken, no drones, and if he could get her to move behind the rubbish bin, no clear shot from anywhere nearby—then dropped to his knees beside her. “Hey,” he said, and his voice was gentler. He loosened his scarf, hoping she’d see the collar and the crucifix, that she’d accordingly deem him trustworthy. Lifted her chin with a gloved hand. There were black circles under her eyes, like she’d done more crying than sleeping.

“Please. Just—go away. I don’t want trouble.”

He reached into his coat for his cigarettes. The nicotine hit didn’t quite take the edge off, but it gave him something to do with his hands. He wanted to throttle her, and it was all the worse that he couldn’t blame her, that she’d been braver than she needed to be just to meet with him. “Half a million people dead and as many deported, but you’re still here. Why? Are ye shagging Lowell?”

“I don’t know anyone named Lowell.”

“Why *you*?” She was hissing through her teeth for him to quiet down, as if by some acoustic alchemy his shouts could be heard over the din of the fighting.

“I *don’t know.*” He almost believed her. It occurred to him that he was sitting in the middle of sodding Beirut with an entirely ordinary twat who counted for nothing, who couldn’t matter when bombs were raining down on them, and maybe he wasn’t exactly on some noble mission that would royally fuck the Regime in every conceivable orifice and restore Labour to power for the next political century and guarantee that Malcolm would just be fucking *okay.* Malcolm had looked so grey and shattered when he’d left; Jamie was consumed with the terrifying suspicion that he’d been sent on a hopeless fuckaround so that the old fucker could, in his absence, find somewhere hidden to curl up and die.

He slumped against the bin, adding more smoke to the spluttering embers of a dying city.

“You had kids,” he said. “Before.”

“Two boys.” She fumbled with her mobile.

“I dinnae want tae fuckin’ see pictures—” Not the right tack; she was recoiling from him again. He tried to keep his voice a shade less explosive than Chernobyl. “I was a father once. I mean, literally.”
She looked him up and down. “How does that work?”

“It’s a long fuckin’ story, okay, and it’s no’ fuckin’ about me anyway, is it? This is about the future of the fuckin’ country, except maybe, maybe, if you tell us everything ye know, it’s a future where ye get tae see yer kids again.” He held her gaze, watched her parse through his rambling until he was sure she understood. Heat itched at the corners of his eyes, but he didn’t fight it. Malcolm wasn’t the only person capable of being a manipulative bastard. “Ye cannae possibly have that much tae lose.”

“There’s one thing,” she whispered. “I can’t…leave her alone.”

He sensed it in her then, the hesitation and pull. His vocations director back at the seminary had claimed that every soul wanted to be unburdened, to be broken down and reconstituted, told him, in a moment of raw honesty, that Jamie’s own gift in that regard was the only reason he’d even been considered for the priesthood. It had served him just as well in politics; there wasn’t a secret that, in his presence, didn’t long to be brought to light.

“Miriam,” she said. “Poor, sweet Miriam, she’s counting on me. I’m all she has.”

“Your daughter?” he tried.

“No.” Abigail looked confused again. “No, not mine.” She drew in a deep breath. “The rest of the government doesn’t know. It’s not them protecting me.” A beat, then: “It’s the Chancellor.”

And then she told him.

His response, had it been recorded for posterity, may well have ensured the end of any career in either the priesthood or politics. Fuck gentle and sympathetic; he yanked her up by the wrist, drew his gun, and hauled her back out into the street, firing at a pair of approaching soldiers. She choked back a gasp, like she’d never seen anyone gunned down in the street before. He kept moving, certain no force on earth could stop him now that he had it, one tiny, inconsequential bit of information that he could use to fuck the Regime so hard they’d be shitting swastikas through their teeth.

“What are you a priest of, exactly?”

“Never mind,” Jamie said. “You’re comin’ with me, okay, and you’re gonnae tell the entire fuckin’ country—and Malcolm—what you just told me, and we all get tae fuckin’ live.”

“I mean, did you know he was gay?”

Suspended from climbing ropes lashed across the underside of the Hungerford Bridge, Sam already regretted bringing Ollie along.

Emma’s voice was almost lost amid the sound of the waves lapping against the piers below. “Ollie, no one cares.” Searchlights dappled silver over the dark waters. Sam wished they’d both shut up; though they were all but invisible and inaudible to the Regime, she felt exposed above ground. They had risked the surface twice on the journey so far, once where the tunnels were too damaged to continue below ground, then, approaching Waterloo, where the Regime, in their first year of rule, had installed heavy portcullises and checkpoints at the entrances to the tunnels to prevent the terrorists from doing exactly the thing that Sam had in mind.
“Seriously, you’re completely obsessed with every detail of his life, was it down on his diary? 7:00, phone call with the PM, 8:30, interdepartmental bollocking, 9:45, deep-throating Jamie Macdonald in the supply cupboard?”

“Even if it was,” Sam said primly, “you’d be the last to know about it.”

“Oh God,” Ollie said. “You had no idea either.”

“No one’s as obsessed with Malcolm’s sex life as you are,” Emma said.

Ollie was silent for thirty blessedly peaceful seconds as Sam flung the grappling hook ahead of them, straining beneath the weight of her rucksack, then said, “With Jamie, though?”

“He’s cute enough,” Emma opined. “He’d be fine if you muzzled him.”

“And Malcolm’s dashing if you’re into heroin chic and Tourette’s, but does no one but me feel like we’ve crossed into a parallel dimension where everyone’s a fucking lunatic?”

Sam reached the last pier, hauled herself over the edge, then reached an arm down to help Emma up. They stood on the long expanse of paving, looking out at the lights in the distance. The rest of London, maybe even the rest of the country, was in open revolt, but Westminster, hemmed in by security details and a perimeter of barbed-wire fencing that stretched across the shores of the Thames from Trafalgar Square to Lambeth Bridge, was barren and silent. There were checkpoints along the fence, but ten minutes with a pair of bolt-cutters outside of an alley off Horse Guards Avenue, and they were inside.

“Where is everyone?” Ollie wondered aloud.

“Overreliance on technology and a commitment to austerity measures?” Sam frowned; it did seem easy enough—two security guards milling by the doors, quickly dispatched with a silenced revolver—that she wondered if it might just be another trap.

After the claustrophobia of the tunnels, the building’s lobby, with its utilitarian sofas and light and airy, transparent-government layout, felt horribly exposed. Sam glanced up at the staircase with its suicide lookouts and pointless acoustic panels, then slid around the corner past the front desk to bash open the lock on the door to the stairwell. The rows of glass-fronted offices looked abandoned, but there was always a chance that some bright young thing had taken the initiative to pull an all-nighter.

The Department of Citizenship and Resettlement was frustratingly unchanged from when it had a different name and a less nefarious purpose; she almost expected the ghost of Glen Cullen to slink out from behind the bookshelves. Same cloying pastel walls and industrial blue carpets (even, as Emma pointed out, the same hope—that’s just a wine stain from Peter Mannion’s disastrous 2013 New Year’s office party), the residue from taped-up newspaper clinging to the office windows, and, as if attempting to illustrate the very concept of the banality of evil, the desks swamped in an endless deluge of folders and print-outs. Sam drifted past them, paused at a lengthy report from an informant, graphs of transfers and arrests, an inexplicably cheerful family photo propped above a policy paper on “voluntary resettlement.” She shivered.

Ollie was on his knees by a filing cabinet, a torch between his teeth, rummaging through the drawers, while Emma kept guard by the door and Sam, moving as if in a dream, planted explosive charges beneath each workstation.

The light spluttered; Ollie said, “Found it.”

The USB’s dark metal casing looked like it was meant to withstand a nuclear blast. Sam rummaged
through her rucksack until she found one of the tablets (cracked screen, the hard drive wiped in case) and plugged it in. There was only one file, a spreadsheet—bloody hell, were the Regime still using Excel?—and, to Sam’s surprise, not even password-protected.

“Are you sure this was what Lowell was after?”

“I saw him hide it,” Ollie replied.

The screen filled with text, names along the left column, two columns of dates to the right, national identification codes, and a string of digits that Sam didn’t recognise. It looked not unlike the spreadsheet that Sundeep had retrieved from the DoCR mainframe listing the Regime’s victims. Emma and Ollie closed in behind her while she scrolled.

“I don’t get it,” Sam confessed. “Name, date of birth, date of execution—”

Emma said, “Oh—fuck, stop, Sam, hold it there.”

Ollie shifted impatiently beside her. “What?”

Emma’s breath by Sam’s ear was quick, excited. “Check the DOBs. These are children.”

Sam felt like her brain was packed with thick cotton wool. “So?”

“Well, they didn’t kill children. Not white, British children, anyway.”

“They murdered Jamie’s daughters.”

The other woman flashed her a curiously wide-eyed stare, but her attention was captivated by the names on the screen. “They executed thousands of dissidents, it’s true, but they took every precaution to save the kids. Jesus, Sam, do you think anyone would have gone along with them if they’d killed babies? They adopted them out to families loyal to the Regime. These aren’t executions—they’re transfers.”

“I still don’t get why Lowell was after it,” Ollie said. “It’s fucking sick, but it’s not a PR thing.”

Emma huffed, then pointed at a single name. “Ollie, I love you, I really do, but you’re incredibly thick sometimes. Would you just look?”

Above her chipped fingernail, Sam finally saw it: Atherton, Miriam. She’d be nineteen now, and her transfer date was listed as a few months before her sixteenth birthday. “I know that name,” she said.

“Him?” Ollie replied. “Miriam Atherton was at the press conference during the White Death attack. She was one of the students who died with the PM.”

“And…” Emma prompted.

“And she was the daughter of the highest ranking member of JB’s government to survive that day,” Ollie said. He shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense. The transfer date’s in June; she died six months before that, and besides, her father’s not a dissident. He’s the fucking Chancellor.”

Sam jumped at a sound from somewhere below them, told herself that it was air rattling around the filtration system “We need to go,” she said. “We can figure it out later.” She hit the timer on the detonator, packed the tablet back into her bag, and stuffed the USB in her pocket.

It wasn’t the air filtration system. At the top of the stair, she could see the grey uniforms flooding into the lobby. The elevator chimed; she ran into the back stairwell, Ollie close behind her and Emma at
his side, gun drawn. She hung over the edge of the railing and as the first soldiers stomped up the stairs, she and Emma blasted down at them.

They spilled out onto Richmond Terrace just as the first explosion tore through the upper floors of the building. Sam stopped in her tracks to watch. Emma gave a startled laugh, and whispered, “To DoSAC.”

Ollie whooped, clapped his hands and raised an imaginary glass. “To DoSAC! May it rest in fucking pieces.”

Sam grinned despite herself. “I almost hope the drones are recording this,” she said. “Malcolm will fucking love it.” Her moment of triumph—they’d hit at the very heart of the Regime, as if to tangibly demonstrate how much the government’s control was slipping, good luck covering that up, you bastards—was cut short by a burst of machine gun fire down the street.

She forced herself to move quietly rather than quickly, to stick to CCTV blind spots. This was still London, she thought, still their London, stubbornly resilient, a city of secrets and shadows that even the Regime could never quite tame.

The sleeping streets woke, sluggishly; the blast, the shouts of the soldiers combing the streets for them echoed by a chorus of light from the windows of flats, blinds opening and faces peering out at the disturbance. A searchlight blazed across their path; Sam held the others back, then made her way down a rubbish-strewn passageway, away from the light and noise. Through the mouth of the alley, she could see the bridge, and safety.

She felt the impact before the sound of the gunshot registered. She stumbled into Ollie, and had enough presence of mind to clamber up against the brick wall for support, to turn—one of her legs wouldn’t cooperate—and squeeze off a shot in the direction of the patrol. She saw a man fall; the others raised their guns before Emma’s rifle, deafening in the cramped space, cut them down.

Sam slid to the ground. It was wet, bitingly cold, enough to smack her brain into alertness. With sickened fascination, she probed at the hole on the thigh of her fatigues, the little gush of blood that leaked out between her fingers.

Emma tried to pull her back up, and something wrenched and splintered in her. Sam screamed and slumped against the other woman. Emma, frantic, took off her mask and balled it against the wound.

“We need to go,” Emma insisted.

Sam craned her head up, then—her shattered leg protesting at the movement—somehow wriggled out at her rucksack. “It’s fine,” she said, her voice small, pensive. “It’ll be fine, just…go. Run. I’ll hold them off.” It took more to dig into the pocket of her trousers and retrieve the USB.

“What? Sam, no, fuck, no, you need to get up now. Sam!”

“Don’t be daft.” She lifted Emma’s hand from her leg, pressed the USB into her palm. “Get this to Malcolm. Tell him—tell him I got away, that I’m laying low and I’ll be back when I can. He’s been through enough, I don’t want…he can’t be distracted. Not when we’re so close.”

Ollie, flattened against the wall, whispered, “They’re coming.”

Emma was crying. “And Sundeep?”

“She’s said the things we needed to say to each other a long time ago.” She squeezed Emma’s hand. “Go.”
Tears streaking her face, Emma climbed to her feet, swinging the rucksack onto one shoulder, and took Ollie’s arm. “What about—” he asked stupidly, before she pushed him on, towards the glittering water.

Sam clawed at an eaves trough, pulled herself up and dug her fingernails into the bricks. Her injured leg dragged behind her, shockwaves of agony each time her foot met the ground. A century later, she reached the other side of the alley, then collapsed again onto the pile of dead soldiers.

Sam had never been prone to melodrama, but she was still startled at how calm she felt. Maybe it was just the blood loss.

One by one, figures emerged from the darkness. She braced her rifle against her shoulder, stretched out behind the barricade of corpses, and waited.

The Embankment’s walkway lay in ruins, its paving stones torn up for missiles, the lanterns broken, their familiar glow replaced by the harsh glare of the searchlights, and Ollie felt an unexpected stab of grief for his mutilated adopted city. The London Eye loomed huge and twisted on the other side of the Thames, its great wheel slipped loose from its moorings and slouching towards the water.

He slumped against a staircase, panting for breath, fumbling with frozen fingers through the rucksack for the climbing gear while Emma kept lookout over the railing. His eyes itched at the corners, but every time he closed them, he saw Sam, broken and bleeding in the alleyway.

Just as his hand closed around the rope, Emma hissed, “Grenades.”

“Shit.” He rummaged through the bag, hands shaking—was it possible to pull a pin accidentally, had he already done it?—before he seized on one, curiously cold and heavy in his hand. Down the walkway, he could see the soldiers approaching from either side, the low hum of an armed drone as it rose above Whitehall Gardens. He looked, in desperation, to the stretch of bridge behind them, the rush of the waters below.

This time, he thought, Jamie wasn’t coming. There’d be no last-minute rescue, no reprieve. The second they ran, the soldiers had a clear shot.

“Ollie,” Emma whispered, “I think—well, I think you ought to run.”

“What?”

“Down the footbridge; you’re in black, they might not see…” She swallowed. “If I—”

“No.” The world had slowed to a crawl, everything but the hammering against his ribs. He half-expected to wake up—in the tunnels, in his old flat—from a dream of falling and falling forever. “Look, Emma, I’ve been a shit, to you, with my whole life, really, and if I can’t…” He smiled weakly. “I said I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, didn’t I?”

“Fine time to grow a conscience, Ollie.”

She held the grenade between them. They could hear the heavy rhythm of boots above.

“Now?” he asked.
If he lived to a proper old age, she’d still be the most gorgeous thing he would have ever seen. “Now,” she said.

Together, they walked up the steps and stood in the walkway below a broken streetlamp as the soldiers closed in.

“Drop your weapons!” someone shouted.

He slipped the ring of the grenade around her finger, and she laughed darkly, then tugged the pin free. He tossed the rest at the soldiers. It flew a few feet and bounced once. Rolled.

Emma said, “Anyone ever tell you that you throw like a girl?”

The world went white.

Chapter End Notes

...I'm so sorry please don't hate me.
Chapter Summary

In which Malcolm finds a way to destroy the Regime at a cost Jamie's reluctant to pay.

Dee sidestepped the bent streetlamp, uprooted from the pavement, pausing—the way the lady on the pirate broadcasts said—to hit the CCTV’s lens with a spray of black paint. The estates where she and Mellie had holed up for the last few days were already tagged with the eye symbol that meant no cameras and a neighbourhood on the alert for drones and troops, but this far into the heart of the Regime, the cameras never stayed sabotaged for long.

Westminster wasn’t safe by a long shot, but Brixton and the warehouse bombings were reminders that nowhere, and no one, was safe anymore. The Resistance lady might talk too much, but she was right: there was nothing to lose anymore that couldn’t just as easily be lost sitting in one’s own flat minding one’s own business, and much to be gained rummaging through the smoking aftermath of a skirmish.

Mellie, up ahead, hissed, “There’re bodies.”

Dee almost caught up with her. “Weapons?”

“Shitloads.”

Dee reached the corner. The Resistance had won this round, she thought, going by the ratio of grey-clad corpses to black ones, and good on them. She had no faith that the Resistance, given the slightest whiff of power, would be less bloody-minded than the Regime, but they weren’t the ones razing entire tower flats now, were they? So she was rooting for them in the offhand way one might place a small wager on Madron FC against Man U. You didn’t actually expect them to win.

She’d held a job, once, until the economy went down the shitter and even unpaid work experience was hard to come by. The woman she’d been then might have flinched at the sight of a body ripped open by semiautomatic fire, clothing and skin flayed from muscle and organ, bits of skull and brain dissolving into the torrents of cold rain that raced along the concrete into the gutter. These days, she didn’t blink, and there was more money in scavenging than benefits had ever provided.

The two women went about the work of divesting the dead soldiers of their rifles (valuable) and identification cards (fucking priceless, if you knew the right people, and Dee did) before a moan from the alley caught her off guard.


Dee crouched above the fallen rebel, peeled back her mask. The woman was young. Pretty. Unconscious, but breathing; there was blood smeared over her face from where she’d bitten her lip.

Mellie had a point. The roving gangs of yobs would pay far more for their salvage than the Resistance would, and smuggling a terrorist anywhere naturally carried the risk of being mistaken for one. If she’d had a conscience, three years of bare survival under the boot of the Regime had squished the life out of it.
So what she did next, she’d chalk up to a momentary lapse of reason, as afflicted everyone, now and then.

Sam dreamt, fragments of memory blurred at the edges like old film—the alley, her fingers sticky with her own blood, the faces in the windows, the women, swaddled in bulky anoraks, standing over her as her vision grayed—and woke with a searing agony in her leg and Miriam Atherton’s name on her lips.

She was lying on a bunk behind a tattered curtain of sheets that cordoned off the end of the row of beds. Light from the oil drums bled through the rotted fabric in ochre and red; silhouetted in front of it, Malcolm, gaunt and bleary-eyed, might have been deposited at her bedside directly from Hell itself.

“You look a mess,” Sam muttered through cracked lips.

He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “You look like a Heather Mills charity campaign,” he replied, then reached down to part her hair back from her face. “Fuckin’ madwoman. I said I needed a distraction, no’ cunting V for Vendetta. What the fuck were you thinking?”

Sam tried to sit up—catching a glimpse of Sundeep at the foot of her bed, draped across a chair and snoring—before a shock raced up her nerves and she stifled a scream. She fought to think past the pain, to remember; there was something she had to tell him, some message crucial enough to deny her a martyr’s death.

“The USB,” she said. “Emma, did she—”

Malcolm stared at the wall above her head. “She didn’t,” Sam said, sparing him the indignity of having his voice crack. “Ollie?” He shook his head, still refusing to meet her eyes. “Oh Jesus. I’m—I’m sorry, Malcolm.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart. I should have stopped you.”

She took several long breaths, pushing down the burning in her eyes and the dryness in her mouth, telling herself that she’d mourn for Emma—for Ollie too, even if he’d been a self-serving little prat—at some later date, when she had the luxury of grief. She caught his hand where it smoothed her hair—felt the minute tremor there, God, she didn’t want to think about what could make Malcolm tremble now—and clutched it against her cheek.

“There was a name on the file.” In the flood of remembering, she tried to move again and her leg wrenched. She balled a fist into her mouth, bit down on her knuckles until she could breathe properly. “Miriam Atherton, the Chancellor’s daughter.”

“We know.” Jamie’s head pushed through the curtain, deranged and brimming with the vitality that seemed to have abandoned Malcolm. “Hey, I heard ye fucked up DoSAC worse than Hugh Abbot did.”

“Piss off,” Malcolm said. “The puir girl needs rest.”

“She needs a hospital.” That was another new voice. A woman, middle-aged and a head shorter than Jamie, squished in beside him. “But I’d settle for peace and quiet, which she won’t get with the two
of you having a carry-on.”

“This is Abby,” Malcolm said. “She saved your life. And possibly everyone else’s, though she took her sweet fucking time about it.”

“Abigail Nkeng.”

“Young Miriam Atherton’s private nurse.”

Sam coughed, squeezed Malcolm’s hand as tightly as she could. “You need to tell me what’s going on.”

It was hard, through the splintering, all-consuming pain, the tears that threatened to overcome her at any moment, the sheer exhausting sorrow of it all, to draw the story out from the three of them, but somehow it came, in pieces: how the White Death attack three years ago had spared Miriam’s life but taken everything else, how her desperate father, the most powerful man in Great Britain and the architect of the Regime, was determined to keep her alive at any cost. How he’d kept her hidden away, even from his own cabinet, with only a skeleton staff—Abby among them—to attend to her needs. How he’d created the nation’s new order, its ruthlessness and near-total control, from his own anguish, a vast apparatus of borders and checkpoints and prisons, all because he hadn’t been able to protect her when it had mattered.

How very different, Abby said, he was from the man on the screen when he came to see her, with his kindness, his tears. Miriam, she claimed, was the secret Lowell had been after at DoCR, the secret that Ollie and Emma had died uncovering. The Chancellor’s greatest love, his only weakness, and the carefully guarded exception to every one of the Regime’s rules.

“They would kill her, the others would,” Abby said. “Or experiment on her, to see why she survived. Kept alive like this—” She made a disgusted face. “—she’s a drain on the system. A non-person.”

“Right,” Malcolm said. “All of you, out.” Sam didn’t miss, as Jamie turned to leave, the look that passed between the two men. The instant he was gone, Malcolm seemed more restless. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek; it was burning, as though beneath his skin was some raging inferno that his emaciated body couldn’t contain. He looked miserable, so absolutely lost and distraught that had he been anyone else—had she not been in so much pain herself—she’d have been compelled to hug him. “I don’t do touching bedside vigils,” he grumbled. “There’s fuckin’ work to be done.”

“I know,” Sam whispered. “Do what you have to, I’m not going anywhere.”

For a moment the mischievous glimmer that had once so charmed her, that still made her determined to follow him no matter what, flickered in his eyes, and he gave her a small half-smile. He leaned in close enough to murmur, “Whatever made you think I could do without you? That this revolution, this omnishambles clusterfuck, could survive with you gone?”

It was an effort to push words through her parched throat. “It’ll have to,” she said. “Malcolm, I don’t remember anything. How’d you find me?”

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “It was Glummy Mummy and her fuckin’ Fourth Sector Pathfinder bollocks. Find a wallet on the train, take the time to turn it into the police. Find a dying revolutionary near a bombing site—”

“Track down an underground network of terrorists to bring her home.”

“Something like that. Yeah.”
“Her latest address…”

“We are each other’s eyes and ears,” Malcolm quoted in a not-unconvincing English accent, unable to disguise a note of sarcasm. “Sentimental blag wins the day, but not, alas, the war.” He patted her hand and stood, walked over to the foot of the bed where Sundeep had somehow managed to sleep through the commotion. Shaking the younger man awake, he added, “And because of your act of heroism, it’s now down to me and Jamie to save the fuckin’ country from the fascists. Thanks for that.”

Sundeep was at her side immediately, the thin growth of stubble along his jaw and the purple bags beneath his eyes enough to tell her that the sleep he’d gotten in the chair had been his first in some time. “Hey. Make sure she doesn’t go running off again,” Malcolm told him.

For the longest time she watched the curtain, and his departing silhouette, and told herself that whatever it was he was off to do, it had to be for the best.

Malcolm got as far as the opposite end of the tunnel before turning at a stairwell, slamming the door, and falling into a fit of coughing that Jamie had the un-fucking-comfortable task of pretending not to hear.

“Worse?” Impromptu, underequipped surgery on Sam’s gunshot wound hadn’t been enough, apparently, to satisfy Abby’s professional instincts. He ought to have been grateful, he was, of course, exceedingly fucking grateful, but she seemed insistent on shining a clinical light in dark corners that he’d just as soon keep hidden.

“It’s nothing, the flu, it’s been going around.” That was more than he’d admitted to anyone out loud, and probably more than Malcolm had admitted to himself. Jamie definitely hadn’t heard Tim suggest that Malcolm sequester himself in the quarantine tunnel (though he’d enjoyed the lengthy bollocking that followed), and just because he’d seen blood on the rag that Malcolm wore over his face didn’t mean that it was actually there. “The waterboarding fucked up his throat. He always sounds like that.” Jamie squeezed his eyes shut, wondered, briefly and suicidally, whether he should go after him.

Definitely worse.

Abby’s hand floated by his arm, like she wanted to touch him but was, not unjustifiably, afraid that he might bite her. “There isn’t anything wrong with him that a course of antibiotics wouldn’t fix.”

“Yeah. Well. We dinnae fuckin’ have those, do we?” He silently willed Malcolm to resurface before the conversation went in a smashy direction, preferably with a brilliant plan to put a swift end to the war so they could all fuck off home.

Behind the door, Malcolm had gone silent. Jamie tensed, but he could hear the Darth Vader wheeze of Malcolm’s breath so it wasn’t time to barge in, yet. He’d expected—needed—Malcolm to take out his ever-present wrath on someone’s, anyone’s inevitable fuck-up, but beyond the frenetic hours between Sam’s reappearance and Abby’s assurance that she’d probably live, he’d barely said a word. He’d absorbed the confirmation of Ollie and Emma’s deaths, courtesy of a bombastic pre-recorded broadcast by Weber, whereupon he’d instantly aged about a thousand years, muttered a stream of terrifyingly-subdued-by-his-standards vitriol, and gone off to sit wordlessly at Sam’s
bedside until she woke.

It wasn’t that Jamie was *worried*, exactly. Before he worried, he’d have to first accept that the miserable auld mingetunnel was mortal, and he’d fellate Piers Morgan before making that concession.

The remnants of Nicola’s inner circle were already waiting for them when Malcolm re-emerged, limping, his watery eyes fixed in a red-rimmed glare. Nicola looked nearly as tired; she’d been blubbering for the man who’d effectively ended her political career, and Jamie envied her ability to retain some semblance of normal human reaction in the wake of the latest hard-right turn into utter shitastrophe.

Still, he thought, they ought to have been at least a little hopeful. They’d a chance to strike a painful, if not crippling, blow to the Regime, effective immediately, and, decades from now, no poncey Poxbridge scholar could claim that the Resistance had passed easily, without a proper fuckin’ fight, from the stage of history.

“So it’s to be blackmail, then?” Nicola said. “Resign or we’ll expose the existence of your severely disabled daughter? You’ve murdered half a million people but what’s worse, you’re a hypocrite?” She pressed fingertips to temples. “We can call it Gassing-Victim-Gate.”

“I’d prefer a good rent-boy scandal,” Malcolm replied. “But it’ll do. You’ll go up to the surface with Tim, whatever bits of the Angry Brigade we’ve got left, and Sundeepe’s wee pet drone, and demand the botoxed cunt’s immediate and unconditional surrender. Take over a news station if you can manage it. Let them know you mean business.”

“He won’t do it, you know,” Tim said. “Atherton’s got secrets. So what? It’s not enough to bring down the Regime. He resigns, and Lowell’s right there with some other vicious bastard in the wings, ready to take over.” He glanced around the table. “You do see it, don’t you? We’re playing right into their hands.”

Barry added, and it must have cost him some of his pride to do so, “Tim’s right. Nicola, it won’t work.”

Jamie’d been quiet throughout the whole discussion, his knee bobbing under the table, waiting, just waiting for Malcolm to say something, but what was left of him, the patchwork scraps of rag and bone held together by malevolent, stubborn force of will, didn’t need to tell him when it was time for him to speak.

“He didnae say ‘resign,’ did he?” Jamie said.

“Unconditional surrender,” Malcolm echoed. “While it’s still in his power to do so.” He rose and made a dramatic show of punching in digits on the much-abused mobile. “Yeah,” Jamie heard him say, unsteadily making his way for the door. “Ross, mate. We have the fuckin’ girl. We know everything. Still wannae deal?”

Jamie gave himself a few moments of feigned, blessed ignorance, enough time to bark, “Well, get to it,” at the others, before he fled to the plant room, where he knew Malcolm would be waiting.

“We’re no’ exposing her existence tae an outraged public,” Jamie said, his voice carrying over the
drumbeat of the ventilation fan. “Are we?”

Malcolm looked over at him, gave a slow, reptilian blink. The kerosene lamps, arranged in a circle around what had, in the past few days, substituted for a private office, did nothing to render his appearance less Mephistophelian. “No.”

“Does Nicola know?” He regretted the words immediately. “Of course she doesnae. Sam?”

“Don’t be a fuckin’ twat. Sam’s all that’s pure and good in the world, not tae mention that she’s my Ten Year Plan. She can hardly have blood on her hands if she’s to be the future PM, can she?” He took several steps in Jamie’s direction, and fuck, he looked ready to keel over; for all that they were gearing towards a friendship-and-whatever-else-they-had-ending row—the scale of which would likely eclipse the landmass of several continents and Malcolm’s own inflated ego—Jamie’s every instinct was to reach for him. “Just you.”

“Malc…”

“I’d do it myself, you understand, but—” He held up his bent, twisted hand, the crooked silhouette of a barren tree in winter. “Not to mention I’ve not actually held a gun before. They can’t be shamed, Jamie. And I can’t see another way out.”

“She’s nineteen,” Jamie said. “She’s no’ her father; she’s done nothing wrong.”

“She’s a fuckin’ vegetable. It’s a mercy killing. She won’t even know the difference.” He repeated the last, softly, to himself, as if he were still unconvinced. “But he will.”

“And if I say no?”

Malcolm circled, bloodshot eyes never leaving Jamie’s face, close enough that he’d probably have cowed anyone else into submission with the sheer electric force of his presence. “This isn’t the time tae second guess me, son. I don’t need a conscience. I need a soldier. You are a soldier, aren’t you?”

“Fuck’s sake, Malc, no. I willnae terrorise and fuckin’ murder a girl on the off fuckin’ chance that it’ll destablise the Regime.”

He felt both of Malcolm’s hands on his shoulders, backing him into the wall; he could have easily knocked the other man away but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Malcolm’s breath, ragged and quick, whistled by his cheek and he wanted nothing more than to throw him on the mattress and kiss him senseless, as though the entire context of their lives, politics and God and power and everything they’d longed for and never acted upon, mattered less than Jamie’s hopelessly jessie need to just touch him.

“You’ve killed before.”

“Not someone innocent.”

“A million Iraqis, Jamie, or have you forgotten? You think some of them weren’t bairns the age of your puir wee girls? That we didnae leave grieving parents then?” Slowly, deliberately, he dragged a broken finger along Jamie’s face. “Neither of us has a right tae be squeamish, darlin’. We sold that off a long time ago.”

He broke away to curl into a hacking fit, and Jamie took the second of reprieve to pretend that Malcolm might suddenly grow a moral compass and change his mind.

The second passed.
“There won’t be guards at the hospital; he can’t risk that.” Malcolm went on as though it was already a fait accompli—which it was, Jamie knew even now that there was only one course of action left, spread out before him like a cokehead prozzie on a hotel duvet. He thought briefly of running to Sam, rousing her from her sickbed in the hopes that she’d manage to look disappointed enough in Malcolm to make him reconsider, but she didn’t deserve that, she’d suffered enough, and he wasn’t entirely sure that Sam wouldn’t side with Malcolm anyway. “Wait a few hours. Nicola will make the demand, and then you call him. Convince him that he surrenders or you kill the girl.”

Ten years ago, five years ago, before the Nutters, before the Regime, when he’d been Malcolm’s faithful attack dog, he’d have done it without hesitation, and if he’d changed since then, he wasn’t certain it was for the best. “Your brilliant plan hinges on the Chancellor deciding that his brain-damaged wean is more important than rights for whites and keeping out of the EU.”

Malcolm shrugged. “It’s a great fuckin’ sympathy ploy if he lets her die. But he might not. I’m counting on not.”

“You think the bastard who had my family murdered is gonnae show mercy?”

Impassive, Malcolm replied, “I think he’s a better man, by a cunt-hair, than I’d be in his position.”

Jamie shook his head. Paced. Pulled at his own hair, fighting the restless urge to scream and knock over the lanterns and pound at the wall until Malcolm relented and saw reason. “Send someone else, then. Someone who isnae going tae look in her face and see—”

“Oh, grow a pair, ye mimsy shiteheel, that’s why it has tae be you. Someone else, someone who hasnae had his life ground to paste by these fuckers, might actually fuckin’ hesitate, and he has tae know you mean it, that he slaughtered Aileen and Kayleigh and Tara—” Jamie might have killed him for daring to speak their names and dragging their perfect, blessed memory into his ugly realpolitik. “—that you’re out for revenge. Someone else might be weak.”

He shoved Malcolm away, and Malcolm lashed out to catch him up in his spindly arms, somehow managed to keep hold of him despite Jamie’s struggles. He murmured, low and dangerous, “Want to know what it’s like to drown?”

Jamie swung out, catching the edge of Malcolm’s jaw. It wouldn’t have knocked an actual opponent off balance but Malcolm didn’t see it coming; bounced off the side of the fan hard enough to dent the casing. He lunged at Jamie, battering at him with the wrong fist, but there was no force behind it; he wanted Jamie still, wanted him broken and his heart burst and bloody on the stained concrete floor, but not hurt. Jamie grabbed him by the wrists and hurled him—for the safety and security of the country, not to mention his own fuckin’ protection—into the mattress on the floor, where, crumpled in a heap, he glared up with crazed eyes and bared his teeth in a feral snarl, ready to strike one last, fatal blow.

“Not the fuckin’ fairy tale I told ye before,” Malcolm spat. “They wouldnae died right away. They’d have fought for each breath, Jamie, like I did, and when they saw the gunboats approaching they probably thought they were being rescued.”

His voice died with the last few words, consumed by choking coughs. Jamie dropped to his knees beside him, wanted to claw him to shreds and instead pressed his forehead to Malcolm’s and cradled the back of his head in his palm. Both of them were still breathing heavily—Malcolm with considerably more effort, his skinny chest heaving with exertion and sweat beading over his skin—but the maelstrom had lifted, left them both battered in its wake. Finger-sized bruises were beginning to bloom on Jamie’s arms; Malcolm would probably look worse in an hour or two, but it wasn’t, in the end, about any physical wounds they could inflict on the other. He stroked the damp tangles of
Malcolm’s hair over a token grunt of protest until the other man could speak again.

“In the entire world,” Malcolm whispered hoarsely, “ye tragic, barely housebroken cunt, you’re the only one who’s ever understood what needed tae be done.”

Jamie drew back just enough to meet his eyes, suddenly, strangely calm. Malcolm was right about that much. He’d never seen much point in agonising about the correct course of action.

“If I do this, and live through it, and we win like you say.” Jamie spoke as a judge pronouncing a hanging. “I’m done. Away. Back to the priesthood, properly this time.”

Malcolm snorted. “You’ll last a fuckin’ week.”

“I went three years before your shrivelled arse dragged me back here.”

“You like cock too much to much to be a priest. Wait, no, that wouldnae actually be—”

“Malcolm.” Malcolm’s mouth twisted, first into a smirk, then into a puzzled frown, finally settling into a contemptuous sneer, while his in all other contexts quicksilver brain worked out what Jamie was telling him. “There couldn’t be anyone else, you know. Not after.” Which had been the case since his twenties, through a tempestuous marriage, a string of affairs, and an overstuffed Rolodex of coke-addled civil servants, opportunistic journalists, and passionately idealistic young staffers with clever tongues; having existed, however impermanently, in the shadow of Malcolm’s bright sun, he’d not be able to move on, then or now.

It wasn’t as though Malcolm didn’t care. To the extent that he was able to care about anything beyond a Party that had ceased to exist, Jamie was quite certain that Malcolm cared about him, might even have loved him if he were capable of it. But none of that mattered, not when the price of saving the country had plummeted to just the life of one girl and the soul of one man.

The truth was, while he—like every other human being on the planet—was expendable to Malcolm, the reverse didn’t exactly apply.

Malcolm said, “Well, I’ve no’ driven anyone tae celibacy before.”

“Stop acting a massive tit for five seconds,” Jamie snapped. “I’m leaving.”

“Right, Father Dougal. Go. Fuck off to the seminary if they’ll have yer sad, poncey arse back, but I need you tae end the fuckin’ war for me first.”


Malcolm’s instinct was, as always, to draw away before reciprocating, to turn it into a battle for dominance, but Jamie laced his fingers around the back of his neck and kept him in place, tongue exploring the terrain of teeth and broken lips, tracing fingertips over the bones of his skull, the back of his neck and the sharp outlines of his shoulder blades, and Malcolm, sensing an opportunity, stopped fighting him and tugged off his jumper, would probably have torn Jamie’s shirt off with his clumsy left hand if Jamie didn’t manage to shrug out of it first and hastily get to work on the buttons of Malcolm’s.

The singsong Teletubby voice in the back of his head issued a mantra of bad idea, bad idea. Malcolm’s skin felt clammy under his touch, perspiration-slick with just the effort it took to shimmy out of his clothes, and in the unforgiving exposure of the kerosene light, he looked far worse than he’d let on during their brief, frantic shagging sessions, a ruined landscape of scar tissue and
starvation. It was enough to almost kill Jamie’s raging arousal, left him just wanting to fold Malcolm up in his arms and make him drink tea, but Malcolm did nothing by half-measures and, dying or not, seemed intent on bending Jamie to his will by fucking him into oblivion.

For the longest time, Jamie could do nothing but stare. Wasted away to almost nothing, skin stretched spare over jagged bone, he still possessed a striking, austere grace, and Jamie was determined to burn into his memory each stark angle, every harsh protrusion and imperfection to carry with him, whether he lived or died, into a post-Malcolm existence.

“What the fuck are you gawping at?”

Futile as the demand might be, Jamie muttered, “For once in your life, Malc, shut the fuck up,” and covered his mouth with his own to push away the nagging worry that if Malcolm so much as said a word now, if, naked and vulnerable and half delirious with fever, he lost his mind and begged Jamie to stay with him, he’d not be able to refuse. “If ye have tae fuckin’ talk, scream my name.”

Malcolm shoved him on the mattress, clambered over him, and, to his credit, stayed silent, his tongue tracing whorls and spirals over Jamie’s body, mapping the outline of ribs, teeth dragging across gooseflesh-prickled skin. His nose bumped Jamie’s hip; Jamie squirmed and Malcolm’s hands closed around his legs to hold them still while he licked at the crease at the top of his thigh, the skin behind his balls, the inside of a kneecap, everywhere but where Jamie needed him to be. He wanted to snarl at Malcolm to stop being such a fucking cocktease, but every second the unhinged bastard wasn’t pushing Jamie to the edge was a second closer to the time when he’d be out of Jamie’s life, forever.

“You’d have to want this now,” Jamie muttered, and yanked Malcolm’s curls until he finally slid his lips around Jamie’s cock, and of course he’d fucking withhold his considerable oral skills until the worst possible time, despite their existence being obvious to anyone who’d ever spent an unhealthy amount of time watching his mouth. (Which, Jamie’d long known, was everyone who’d ever met him.) It was only another coughing fit—which, fuck—that gave him the opportunity to haul Malcolm off of him and exact some sort of revenge.

Malcolm might have been a deranged, impossible cataclysm of a human being, but he was hardly a mystery in this respect. In his real life, beyond this shared madness, it’d take him two hours to drink a pint, so determined was he to avoid relinquishing even the smallest amount of control. Here, with one of Jamie’s arms circled around him, holding but not restraining, his long legs spread to let Jamie stroke him to unbearable hardness before pushing a finger up his arse, he was a writhing, shuddering disaster. Jamie barely had the presence of mind to be overwhelmed by how exactly much trust Malcolm had in him, let alone to reconcile it with how quickly Malcolm’d steamrollered over his conscience when they’d had clothes on.

He ignored the surge of Catholic guilt; it felt like sticking his cock into a furnace and he was convinced he was hastening Malcolm’s premature demise, but Malcolm clung to him, bit his throat and moaned his name like something forbidden and profane, like an invocation, and Jamie didn’t have the testicular fortitude to let go until they’d taken each other apart.

He timed it by his own heartbeat; minutes, and Malcolm was up, hastily pulling his clothes back on and kicking Jamie’s trousers at him. “Are we gonnae talk?” Jamie asked.

“What’s to talk about? Nic’la will be on soon; you’ve got to go.”

Jamie slipped off the filled condom and flung it at the overflowing bin. Malcolm looked nauseated. “It’s nothing,” he said. “Just…I thought ye might have gae a fuck there, for a second.”

“It wouldn’t make a difference if I did,” Malcolm replied wearily, and didn’t so much as indulge
“Right.” Jamie dressed quickly, putting as much deliberate aggression into every movement as possible, well aware that he was being childish and melodramatic. He found his rosary in one pocket and tossed it at Malcolm, who rolled his eyes. “There’s enough of these where I’m going,” he said. “You can throw it in the cuntin’ rubbish for all I care, but I’d rather ye didnae.”

“Jamie,” he said, so quietly that at first Jamie thought he’d imagined it.

“There’s got to be a better way to save the world.”

He turned, determined that his last sight of Malcolm not be of him sagged against the wall in a rumpled shirt with the buttons done up wrong, pale to translucency. The strap of the rifle was twisted, digging into his shoulder, but he didn’t bother fixing it—or hesitating, or looking back—as he marched out the door and slammed it behind him.

Outside, the world had ended.

In the dwindling hours before night, the sun anemic in a sky as colourless as Cliff Lawton’s political career, the shops were shuttered, the offices dark, and the law-abiding cowered in their flats. The rest—a vocal minority, at the very least, on the day that the Regime fell—bided their time until darkness afforded them a modicum of safety. He thought of faded news footage from the 70s, decayed streets and blurred rifles and dust scratches floating on a camera lens, his childhood belief that the violence of a crumbling world was containable inside the little box in the living room. The temperature had crashed and icicles, blanketed in ash, dripped from the skeletal remains of double-decker buses and crushed cars.

He was being followed. Ollie’s signal jammer had died in a grenade blast along with Ollie, Emma, and half a dozen Regime expendables (Jamie wouldn’t envy him for living a twat and dying a fucking hero by the side of someone he loved, or, well, he’d not admit to doing so aloud), and so he was resigned to the more conventional forms of sneakiness, to shadows and black clothes and an idiosyncratic, maddeningly slow course through the city with the lizard hindbrain of routine insisting the whole time that he might just call a ministerial cab and be at the care home inside of an hour. He didn’t look behind him—the Regime would have put a bullet through his head by now—just leaned against the wall and waited for Ella to catch up.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone,” she said, before he could tell her the same.

He shrugged. “Stealth mission.”

“You’re shit at it.”

Which was true enough, but here they stood nonetheless, small and insignificant in the empty street, and she reached across the space between them to clasp his hand with a woolen mitt. “Can I come with you?”

He shook his head even though his treacherous shit of a tongue was already saying yes. She wouldn’t have been his first choice for backup, but the need to have someone, anyone, at his side, outweighed any qualms he might have had. The girl at least knew how to be silent, a shadow padding heel-to-toe over deserted streets, and as long as she intended to play sidekick, he’d not be
the last ghost moving through the devastated city.

So long, he thought, as he didn’t look at her face. She wore a balaclava, but it didn’t conceal the unwarranted admiration in her eyes; he wouldn’t accept it or admit that he gave a steaming shit about what Glummy Mummy’s crotch fruit thought of him. When she looked at him like that, he prayed that the soldiers would gun him down before he’d a chance to prove that after all, he was nothing more than Malcolm’s semi-tame psychopath, a mindless weapon to be used and discarded, while he remained, to her, the ridiculous hero who’d saved her in a riot. Before he had to put a bullet through the skull of some other wee yin who’d had the misfortune to be saddled with a murderous prick for a father.

Somewhere close by, a tank rumbled, treads tinkling over ice and the blown-out glass littering the street, and had he not been gripped then by a sudden, animalistic urge to live, to see this through, he’d have thought wryly on God’s choice, from the paltry selection of his prayers, of which one to answer.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Abby said.

Malcolm gave her a sidelong glance above the rim of the cloth wrapped around his face before returning his attention to Sam. She was sleeping, dark hair fanned out over the pillow, the lines that pain had etched in her face softened by unconsciousness and a not inconsiderable quantity of moonshine. Sundeep had propped one of the tablets, tuned to the drone’s broadcast, on a table by the bunk so that he and Malcolm—and Sam, if she woke—could watch it without leaving her side. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m a fuckin’ miracle, or so I’ve been told.”

“No,” she insisted, “I mean you shouldn’t expose her. She’s stablised, for now, but she’s hardly out of the woods.”

“I’m fine,” Malcolm said. “She’ll be fine. Or there’ll be seven thousand kinds of hell to pay.”

“She’s right, Malcolm.” Sundeep, for the hundredth time, adjusted the thin sheet covering Sam’s shoulders. “When was the last time you even slept?” At Malcolm’s glare, he added, “And where did Jamie go?”

“I don’t keep him on a leash,” Malcolm muttered, which was the wrong thing to say. It reminded him of Ollie, who hadn’t been his friend, wasn’t competent enough to be his enemy, hadn’t even properly been his protégée since they’d both known from the beginning that all the little twat wanted was to take over—and yet he still felt like a father who’d buried his son. He curled over in his chair, fighting off another spell of vertigo, aware that he was coming unmoored, the only ones capable of holding him back now far beyond his reach. He had nowhere to run, no move left but to sit, watching the screen, and wait. He longed to pace, to expel some of the restless energy thrumming through him, but he was convinced that if he moved now, he’d vomit. He wanted to tear himself from the morbid deathwatch around Sam’s bed and the flickering screen, to scream and hammer at the world until it reshaped itself before his rage, reach into its bloody, dripping miasma and just fucking sort it; felt himself on the verge of bursting free from the battered shell of his failing body to wreak havoc on the butchers who had brought them all to this.

The bunks swam in and out of focus. Needle-bright pain danced a staccato rhythm over his skull, and he fought to stay awake. He knew, without anyone having said it, that he was dying and it ought
to have scared him even a little, but he’d shriek defiance with his last breath, determined, if he was to die, to take the Regime down with him, to be there watching when it fell.

The amorphous phantoms on the screen resolved themselves, at last, to a mask, Nicola’s eyes. The shot was too close for him to identify the location. Someone had pinned the Union Jack behind her as a backdrop.

“Am I live?” she was asking. She seemed nervous. Even now his instinct was to reach for a mobile and get someone, preferably Jamie, to bollock some sense into her, but no, this was good, wasn’t it? Made her seem approachable, human, made the Regime seem all the more fragile if it could be fuckered by the least competent figure in the history of British politics, and besides, Jamie was gone, Jamie was out there, somewhere, doing his dirty work, burying the bodies like always, and then he was shaking again. *Fuck, Jamie, hurry up and put an end to this, I don’t know how much longer—*

“I’m on,” Nicola said, cleared her throat, and pulled off her mask. Hair askew from static electricity, no makeup—good choice that, he’d forgotten to tell her—she’d summoned fire from some secret source and she looked ready to fight, ready to win in a way he’d not seen in years. “Right. I’m on. This is happening.” She looked down, off-screen, then straight ahead. “My name is Nicola Murray, MP, elected representative of the people, and leader of Britain’s Resistance.” A pause; a sliver of triumph crossed her face. “And I have a message for the Chancellor.”

“Run,” Jamie hissed, shoving Ella ahead of him, but the daft girl just reached for her own rifle and stood back-to-back with him, braced against the first wave of soldiers spilling out from behind the tank.

“Not a fucking chance.”

He edged out of the alley and opened fire into a wall of plexiglass, aiming for the narrow window between shields and helmets. The turret roared in response, and the ground in front of him erupted in a cloud of broken pavement and dust. He caught a breath, wiped grit and blood from his face, and one hand on the rifle, the other flailing for Ella, ran back down the alley.

There were soldiers everywhere now, a lock-step tide accompanied by the mosquito buzz of the drones. He hoisted himself up on the lid of a bin to get a better look. He entertained, briefly, the prospect of climbing up on the rooftops before he remembered that he was an underfed chain smoker in his forties and not cunting Daniel Craig. He’d never really stood a chance.

A voice in the back of his head—one that sounded irritatingly like Malcolm’s—whispered that if he really believed in God, his heart wouldn’t race like this, he would carry his faith wrapped around him like a shield as he walked, unflinching, into whatever awaited him.

Okay, he thought, you win, you bastard, you’re fuckin’ right after all. Hope you’re happy.

A bright flash nearly blinded him; it took him a second to process what he was seeing. It was followed by another, and a clanging, arrhythmic cacophony that vied for dominance with the marching beat.

People, throngs of people, standing at windows and doorways, flashing makeshift reflectors made out of tinfoil, pounding on pots and pans and bins until the chorus drowned out all other sound. At the cross-street, a trickle of cars, all that was left of rush hour traffic, slowed to a halt before the tanks,
honking horns and clogging the lanes to a standstill.

Night was falling and they’d emerged, yobs and rioters and regular Wombles too tired to fear anymore, louder than the guns, more numerous than the soldiers, a sea of joyous desperation that would swallow them both. He swayed against the wall, slid to the ground and slung an arm around Ella. She grinned up at him, and the crowd folded around them, absorbed them into its midst. He wondered, if they’d all known what he had planned, whether they’d still agree to hide him.

By the time the bullets started flying, they were safely away and standing amid overgrown shrubs, before a frozen stone fountain, in the care home’s courtyard.

“This is where I go on without you,” he told Ella.

She crossed her arms over her chest, the rifle dangling at her side. “Why? What’s here?”

“Something ye dinnae need tae see, lass.” Though he supposed she’d find out, eventually. Still.

“You know how to jack a car?” She nodded. Good girl. “You know how to drive one? Okay, I need you tae go do that, now, and wait for me outside. If I’m not back inside the hour, or if there’s any sign of the soldiers, any at all, you fuckin’ go, right? You run.”

She hesitated, and he thought he’d have to club her over the head with his rifle or some action film heroic wanker bollocks, but then she threw her arms around him. He felt her lips press against his cheek through the balaclava, loathed himself all the more for her admiration.

No one stopped him as he pushed through the glass doors, crossed the lobby and ran up the steps to the third floor. Abby was down in the tunnels; the night nurse hadn’t started her shift. Miriam Atherton, left alone, a puddle of piss collected beneath her chair and a delicate gold necklace around her throat, was as still as the dead by the window in an otherwise empty room.

He stood before her, his own breath and her echo of it the only sounds. Were it not for the rise and fall of her chest, he’d have thought he was too late.

She gave a shuddering heave and flopped on the floor, her body twitching, face down, and he rushed to lift her, felt her spasm in his arms, vomit running from the corners of her mouth. She was choking, drowning in it, dying like his weans had died, like Malcolm almost had, and he’d come to kill her but instead he pushed her back up onto the chair, bent her head forward so that the sick spewed over her hospital gown and his coat.

He murmured, “Sorry sweetheart, fuck, I’m so fuckin’ sorry,” held her against him, her blind eyes imploring him, condemning him, signifying, he told himself, exactly fucking nothing.

Slowly, as if moving through brackish water, he knelt beside her, his gun to her ear, and opened the mobile. Snapped a picture, his face, unmistakably familiar to the Regime’s surveillance apparatus, by hers, blank, uncomprehending, bone white. He found Atherton’s number among the contacts.

Held his breath and hit send.

History—much later—will commit the following images to the collective memory of that day:

Nicola Murray, in what had been the London Studios, speaking directly into the camera. Picadilly
Circus, where the crowds are gathering despite a heavy troop presence, every head turned to the projection across the LED screens. The atmosphere is tense, anticipatory. There are still some windows left un-smashed; by the following morning, there won’t be any.

The Chancellor’s arrival in a limo, flanked by guards and a canopy of microdrones, speaking into his mobile. The still that would be on the cover of every newspaper around the world (outside of the American press, which was largely focused on Bieber’s latest drug-fueled breakdown), where he stood across from Murray, in the moments before his surrender on a live feed. He looks resigned, ancient; she, as he accepts her terms without argument, looks shell-shocked.

The street celebrations, of course, and the riots, and the liminal spaces where one can’t be differentiated from the other. The obligatory images of the Chancellor, torn from walls and set ablaze. Effigies burned in the streets—there aren’t many, but it makes for a great cover photo.

Owing to the efforts of Sam Cassidy, acting Press Officer for the provisional government, footage from within the Resistance’s shelter itself, if it existed at all, is never made available to the media.

“Did he just say that? Did he just fucking say that?”

Malcolm raised his head. He’d drifted off again. There was shouting from somewhere down the corridor, and his first thought was that the Regime was invading. Every breath stabbed knives into his lungs; if they came, he decided, he’d be grateful for the sweet release of a bullet in the head.

Sam was awake, looking better than he felt. She grabbed his wrist, her fingers ice, as Sundeep rewound the feed on the screen.

He squinted at the Chancellor, still muttering into his mobile, at Nicola, the semi-circle around each of them with guns trained in a détente, the whole studio ready to explode into an HBO splatterfest at the slightest provocation.

Heard the words as they were spoken, but his fevered brain wouldn’t accept them as truth.

“Shit,” Sam whispered. “I think we just won.”


And crumpled to the floor.

When he opened his eyes again, it was Sam’s turn to sit a concerned, sleepless vigil by his bed. There was a crutch propped up against her chair, faintly outlined in the dim light. He noticed it, for some reason, before he noticed that he was soaking wet, and cold, his jaw itching with a growth of stubble, and lying in a proper bed instead of the thin, lumpy mattresses in the shelter.

He tried to speak, but his throat was parched and there was an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, She responded immediately to his distress, shushing him and stroking his shoulder, which,
anyone other than her or Jamie, but he grudgingly conceded that she’d earned the dubious right.

“You’re okay, you’re fine, the fever’s broken.” She hit a button on the arm of the bed, which was when he realised that he was in an actual hospital, and the pea soup fog in his head was some kind of chemical cocktail and not the dementia of the near-dead. “Christ, Malcolm.”

His eyes followed the line of an IV. His hand was in a cast; the crushed bones hurt, in a dull, abstract way, as though the pain belonged to someone else, and his chest still felt like Fat Pat was sitting on it, but his breath, while shallow, came easier now. It was a relief of sorts, the matter of his own life or death now in the hands of some detached professional.

Sam, great PA that she was, brought him up to speed. “You’re in a field hospital. It’s all a mess out there, but they’ve let the Red Cross through the blockade. The UN’s sending a peacekeeping taskforce. Half of the Regime officials are on the run, they strung up Weber from Tower Bridge—yeah, I thought you’d appreciate that—and the Chancellor’s under house arrest.” The girl, he thought, he should ask about the girl, but no, he’d ask Jamie about her when he got back. “There’s still fighting; it’s not over, but—” Her voice faltered. When she’d collected herself, she rattled off a laundry list of the various afflictions, malnutrition and pneumonia and plain exhaustion, that done their best to kill him, but he was already drifting, his attention on the faint draft from the window, like a cool hand against his face.

It was dark outside. He was accustomed to darkness, after four years without daylight, but something had changed. It was London come alive again, released from its prison, petrol exhaust and rain on tarmac that seeped past even the antiseptic stench of the ward and the sharp note of oxygen; the sky, through the streaked glass, empty of searchlights.

Right before he slid back into unconsciousness, it occurred to him to wonder where Jamie was.
As If We Live By Different Laws

Chapter Summary

In which Malcolm and Jamie attempt to move on with their lives with dignity and maturity, and Ross Lowell still has one more card to play.

Jamie’s fist connected with the cheekbone of the larger of the two thoroughly pissed behemoths with a crack that startled him as nearly as much as it seemed to surprise the other man, now splayed over a table in a sea of overturned pint glasses and soggy napkins. The second was easily sent flying with a foot hooked around his ankle and an assist from the catastrophic waste of beer—acceptably drinkable by post-Regime standards, if not by traditional Glaswegian ones—that was pooled on the floor.

Though no one would ever believe him, he’d actually gone in to break up the fight, but insofar as the establishment of civic order was concerned, he’d merely created a temporary truce between the two warring factions for the purpose of kicking his arse. Which, he reflected as the first giant bounced back from the table and flung him into the dartboard, was slightly better than the UN peacekeepers had managed so far.

Wincing—he wasn’t that drunk—he kneed the big fucker between the legs, flailed about for the first weapon he could find (the bumptious cunt’d be glad, when he was getting sewn up in A&E, that it was a pint glass and not a dart through the eye, not a fuck-off RPG given what Jamie’d had access to months ago except no, he wouldn’t be, because no one here knew about that, thank fuck) and smashed. Blood and several teeth gushing from his mouth, it was still taking him longer than was ideal to fall, so Jamie gave him a hand.

Metaphorically speaking. In actuality, Jamie gave him the metal leg of a stool, and this time, the twat stayed down, not that it stopped Jamie from swinging the stool again and again until four other men managed to relieve him of his weapon and haul him, kicking and biting, through the front door, into the miserable pissing night.

“Post-war reintegration and adjustment” was the preferred jargon of the rubbernecking vultures of the foreign press for what happens when a nation of emotionally repressed, faintly embarrassed wankers finds itself embroiled in revolution and civil war and then tries to go back to normal as if nothing happened. It was the prickle at the back of your neck, like you were being watched, like the cunt side-eying you at the bar might be an ex-Regime thug who’d shed his uniform and dashed—you couldn’t know, and the flight or flight instinct that had kept you alive through those years didn’t just fuck off on its own because a handful of blue-helmeted twats had waltzed in when the fighting died down and declared it over. Done. Finished.

Jamie supposed the term applied to him too. For all that he’d always been seen as a human IED, he could hardly be expected, now, to return to civilian life unscathed. It had everything to do with serious wartime trauma, then, and nothing to do with the cathode ray tube TV mounted above the bar that fired occasional bursts of static and news and nostalgia; and anyway, he was 336 miles from London, a footnote, not even that, safely severed from anything that mattered.

He lay squelching in the mud, tunelessly belting out “Give My Regards To Broadway” to the tracts of identical houses and wide, empty streets, until the wail of sirens rose amid the steady drum of rain to silence him.
Nicola leaned into the handrail, its insipid pastel peeling from the metal below, the wall cold against her forehead. The door to the ward was open, and she could hear signs of life within, rustling of bed sheets and the steady beep of heart monitors, a quiet conversation close to the entrance and a substantially louder one beyond. She sucked in a breath and stood in the doorway.

Malcolm was sitting up in bed, his good hand wrapped around a mobile. She’d braced herself to see the ghost they’d carried out of the shelter, grey and shrunken, the fire that had burned well past the point of human endurance extinguished to cooling embers. He was still painfully thin, with a cannula in his nose and an IV bag pumping fluids into his arm, his hand splinted together in a complicated contraption following the first of what would be several surgeries to reconstruct the shattered bones into something slightly usable—but no more like a dying man than he’d been the night they’d lost the election. She’d have to factor him in, then.

He met her eyes over the rows of beds—she’d have sprung for private if anyone’d bothered to ask her; she hoped he was in the ward out of socialist principle or a lack of space and not because his bank account was frozen—but kept talking to whoever was on the line, his brogue a shade more impenetrable than usual.

“—oh, she’s utterly fuckin’ useless. If she were any stupider, she’d need to be watered.” He grinned wolfishly up at Nicola, and she flushed, told herself that she wouldn’t let him do this to her, not now. “But what else do we have?” A pause then, “No yer no’ fuckin’ coming here. Because it isn’t safe. I’ll come there, right? I don’t know, soon. When they’ve got flights out.” He held the mobile a few inches from his ear; Nicola could hear the tinny rattle of the other voice through the speaker. “Sure, put her on. Hi sweetheart. Your ma’s being a twa—very silly. I’m fine.”

Right, his sister and niece in America, and the slightest smile touched her lips as she pulled up a chair. It was strange to think that there were people in the world who cared about him; stranger still that after all they’d been through, after all they’d put each other through, she counted herself among their number.

He made her wait while he spoke to the child, then her mother. “Prime Minister,” he said, stiffly formal, when he finally ended the call.


“You’ll have to learn to lie better if you’re going tae run the country.”

“When do you get out?”

“They’ve threatened to keep me here until I’ve got a BMI up there with Kate Moss.” He shrugged. “Sooner than you’d like.” He waved the latest issue of Time at her. She was on the cover—the Woman Who Saved British Democracy. It was a good photo, a combination of expert makeup and Photoshop, all gravitas in a charcoal grey suit. Ella and Katie kept buying copies and leaving them around the house, wedged in behind the toilet tank or fallen under the sofa, but she’d only read the article the one time.

She’d thought, after the Year of the Pork Chop, that nothing the media could do could surprise her, but then they’d gone and venerated Malcolm, of all people, as some great revolutionary almost-saint—not just in the Time article, but in the flurry of news reports that followed the thawing of the press
corps. Everyone loved a redemption story. Of course, there were no recent pictures of him, so she kept seeing the same candid photo from her early days as opposition leader, before their relationship had completely soured, from some party conference; her, before a scrum of reporters with him snarling into a Blackberry behind her. They’d painted him as the brilliant mastermind behind the Resistance, the unacknowledged saviour of the country, but if there were ever a time for him to step from the shadows, it’d be now, while he was loved as much as feared.

There was talk of a knighthood, and also speculation that he’d already told the reluctant-to-intervene-in-matters-of-the-state worthless twats where they could stick the poncey sword in question, and she desperately wanted to know if indeed it was true that Malcolm had actually taken a flamethrower to his own career and told King Chuck to go fuck himself.

“Do I need to be worried?”

He blinked. “There’ll have to be an election, sooner rather than later. You’re the People’s Hero for the fuckin’ moment, Nic’la, but it won’t last. It never does.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Do you want it?” She thought she’d wilt under the heat of his stare, but she wouldn’t—she’d overthrown a dictatorship, for fuck’s sake, she’d saved the country, and she wouldn’t be intimidated by Malcolm Tucker in a hospital gown. “You could, if you wanted.”

He smiled again, though there was less warmth in it. “Me?” he said. “I’m just a backroom boy.”

Which, naturally, didn’t settle anything. He looked a bloody wreck, but she couldn’t exactly imagine him retiring to trim his hedges or write books or whatever Masters of the Dark Arts did when the political terrain shifted dramatically under their feet. And there was the other thing, the unspoken absence that no one, as far as she could tell, had dared mention around him.

Don’t think for a moment, Sam had told her in a rare burst of solidarity, that he’s actually okay.

“What do you want, Malcolm?”

His gaze was off somewhere else, but he didn’t so much as hesitate. “To keep you in office.”

“What happened to putting someone less batty in charge?”

Worn, obviously tired, drugged to the gills and stripped of his customary defenses, he reverted to charm. “I’m looking at her, love.”

She couldn’t say it was without effect. “I need you,” she admitted. “But I need to know I can trust you.” He snorted hard enough to dislodge the cannula. “Well, you’re not exactly a tame lion.”

“I’m a reconstruction zone. I’m painting the fuckin’ Forth Bridge. I made it,” and he gestured to the door she’d come through, “all the way over there, yesterday, before my lungs forgot how breathing worked. I’m in no fuckin’ state to plot against ye. Listen, darlin’. There’s a long list of people I’d rather have as PM but they’re all dead, yeah?” He shifted back against the pillow; she was unnerved, vaguely, by the rush of guilt, talking politics and treason when he’d almost died. She’d gone in prepared to give him anything he’d asked for, to stand back and let him take over if he’d said the word, or to let him slink back into obscurity if that was what he needed, and the absurdity that he’d been dragged through hell and was asking for nothing more than his job back was slightly more than her brain, overtired by the 15-hour negotiation session she’d just left, could process without crying.
She’d never trust him, would never be that naïve again, but in the viper’s nest of Westminster with fascists and collaborators and outright twats lurking behind every corner, he was the one person—even reduced to a fragile husk, a scared, sick man lonely enough to humour her attempts at political machinations—she desperately needed on her side.

“Okay,” she said, and wanted to hug him, except that she also wanted to live. “Malcolm? Do you want to talk about—”

Malcolm summoned up a flicker of his customary ire. “Think,” he said, “extremely fuckin’ hard before ye finish that sentence.”

“Sorry. You should, um, you should get some rest.” She wondered if that was condescending, and if so, whether she’d pay for it when he was back on his feet again.

He was quiet for so long, his eyes sliding shut, that she thought he’d fallen asleep when he mumbled, “Put Sam somewhere important. Not Foreign Secretary, I can’t have her gone off all the time, she’s all I…”

“She’s been great,” Nicola said. “She’s outside, holding off the feeding frenzy.”

He pulled himself up to look out the window. It’d been the same for the last few days: the press, of course, a huddle of supporters with insipidly inspirational placards, and one lonely BNP loon who’d camped out there for a week denouncing the provisional government as Islamofascist-loving Maoists, Nicola as a shrill feminazi harpy, and Malcolm, to his apparent glee according to Sam, as the Antichrist.

“Fuck it,” Malcolm said. “Let them in. I want them to see.”

She gave in and patted his hand, then stood. “Call if you need anything.”

He rolled his sunken eyes, and she made her way outside, into the blinding flash of cameras and shouting. The car waited for her, as did Sam, dressed in a sharp suit and leaning, almost imperceptibly, on her cane.

“I think he wants to give a press conference. You might want to head up there.”

Sam laughed. “Got it.”

“You’re doing well.” Which was an understatement; she’d had cameras in her face all morning and had yet to break a sweat, and Nicola envied her ability to crawl out of one grimy skin into cool, unruffled competence.

“The press is much easier to handle when they find out you’ve assassinated four propaganda ministers. See you at the talks?”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Nicola said dryly. “And Sam? How’d you like to be Home Secretary?”

“Let’s win the election first,” she said, flipped back her ponytail, and walked out, into the sea of lenses.
Jamie watched, more than listened to, Father Kelly’s mouth move in prayer through the mahogany lattice, and wished he could feel anything at all like contrition. This fervent desire, it seemed, wasn’t enough for the Holy fucking Spirit, wasn’t enough for Father Kelly, who’d, just this morning, taken in Jamie’s stubble, the black eye, the array of tiny cuts over his knuckles, and said, not without a measure of sadness, “And ye wonder why the answer’s nae.”

The words should still have been a comfort, the ritual closest to his heart, the thing he’d been really rather great at—if he had to be honest, the only part of the whole charade he’d missed. He couldn’t believe in God in any way that counted, just longed for the enfolding darkness of the confessional, the chance to perform a post-mortem on his sins. But his skull had, apparently at some point the night before, developed intimate relations with the business end of a pneumatic drill and his stomach turned in slow, sour cartwheels. It felt like the box was closing in on him, a cage, not a haven.

He didn’t notice when the prayer ended and the interrogation resumed. “The girl?” Father Kelly asked.

Jamie’s head snapped back, as though he could, through the pain of the impact, force the conversation to be real. “What about the girl?” he groaned.

“What about the girl?”

“Where is she now?”

“With Abby, the nurse, at least—until everything’s settled and they’ve a home for her. Or until someone decides she’s better as a test subject. It’s still murder in every way but one.”

“An important one,” the priest pointed out.

He refuse to believe that Father Kelly was that completely dense, recognised it as a ploy to make Jamie understand mercy or whatever weepy, poncey bollocks the man was pushing, to save God the trouble of punishing him by making Jamie do it himself.

The darkness, the pounding hangover, made him defiant—whatever the priest thought, God wouldn’t have him back any more than the Church would.

“He was so smart, you know?” Jamie whispered. “Always so fuckin’ clever. But he couldn’t come up with a different way.” He fought the sob that wanted to rise in his throat. “There should have been another way.”

Father Kelly sighed. “An Our Father and two Hail Mary’s.”

“I’d have killed her,” Jamie said, as he’d said every Sunday, as he had, in variation, cycled through his multitude of crimes. “I’d have done anything he asked. I loved him, fuck, sorry Father, sorry, but I still do.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I murdered a lot of people.”

“And He forgives you.”

“Fuck. Don’t you understand?” Jamie took slow, deliberate breaths. It was supposed to help, stop him punching through the grille or overturning the 125-year-old confessional booth or adding to his already substantial body count. “Don’t you get it?”
He made the sign of the cross, thought it should burn, consume him until there was only ashes and repentance. Instead, as always, he felt nothing.

“That makes it so much worse.”

After, the recessional hymn still ringing in his ears, he walked down Park Street, past battered brick and trees, their budding leaves laden and glistening with last night’s rain, the streets as deserted as London’s had been between violent eruptions. Past an empty factory, he thought of how huge the sky looked, dotted with only the odd tower, the distant scaffold of never-finished construction. It didn’t feel like home, no more than the confessional did, and he thrust his fists into a coat that he ought to have burned, hunched against the wind, his face bare and strangely exposed, as if it had been flayed to muscle and bone when he took off his mask for the last time.

Silence, Father Kelly assured him, was good for the soul, and the fucker’d actually suggested that he spend some time in contemplation at a monastery—he was serious, which made it all the funnier—and just as he’d once assured the teenage delinquent Jamie’d been before he had any time to rack up real mortal sins, told him that he didn’t need to decide right away. God was patient, loving; God would never give up on him no matter how long it took to choose.

As if he could make decisions at all, when everything in him said to keep moving, that if he put enough distance behind him there would come a time when he could watch the evening news and not drink himself into a homicidal stupor, not stare at the screen and worry about whether Malcolm was getting enough to eat.

He’d come back here to think, slipped quietly into his childhood home with the windows smashed in and blood on the floor but nothing worth looting, and no one batted an eye at Wee Jamie’s return; if they said anything, it was to mutter, oh, aye, always knew London would chew that one up and spit him back out. He’d fled, like a fucking coward, but not quite far enough, not to Glasgow where he might have made a life for himself or at least been useful in the efforts to rebuild—he’d run, and hid in the last place he knew to hide.

His mobile buzzed with another text from Ella Murray. He deleted it without reading, managed to nevertheless be impressed that she’d tracked him down despite him having called only Sam to say he was alive. She’d do well at Whitehall one day, he thought. Maybe sooner rather than later, with so much of the political class either, depending on their affiliation, awaiting war crimes tribunals or molding at the bottom of mass, unmarked graves.

*I’ve no’ heard God’s voice,* he’d told Father Kelly, *have ye, ever?* and the priest had said, what about the crowd, that night, that had come from nowhere to hide you from the troops, what about the Chancellor’s last-minute surrender as you steeled yourself to pull the trigger and didn’t have to, that was good enough for Abraham and his son so why not you, and maybe God was speaking, had been speaking all the time and it was Jamie who’d forgotten how to listen. And Jamie’d replied, in the security of the confessional, *God’s a right twat, then, and fuck Abraham, he’d only had tae kill a fuckin’ sheep, he couldnae fuckin’ understood what I had tae leave bleeding on the altar.*

In the cold, wan light of day, though, he thought that the old bastard had a point. Maybe he’d been in London too long to understand what the grimly Old Testament God of Motherwell had to say to him. But given that the irredeemable cockthistle had let the Regime murder his kids, given that there was nothing left for him beyond the barren landscape of a dying town, his youth and potential glory now
rooted firmly in the past with nothing ahead but a slow decline, he wasn’t sure there was any point in listening anymore.

For the next few months, Nicola was engaged in talks to set the terms for the transfer of power. The UN forces tried, and sometimes succeeded, to quell the outbreaks of retaliatory violence between the remnants of the Regime and the pockets of the Resistance loathe to allow officials of the previous government to go un-murdered. Malcolm, meanwhile, was left to run the country with the sort of remorseless efficiency that led to grave and concerned analyses of whether a return to democracy was what the provisional government had in mind at all.

To which he responded (the rumours of what he’d endured in the Regime’s secret prison beginning, by now, to surface) that while the previous government had obliterated the welfare state, habeas corpus, and, apparently, all manner of human decency within a nanosecond of taking power, the hard work of rebuilding a functional nation required actual political will, and those not helping were most useful staying out of the fucking warpath of those who were.

It was, Sam thought, his finest hour.

Nor did it fool her, or anyone who knew him. Jamie’s name was anathema, its mention an invitation to a stream of vicious invective such that no one made that particular mistake more than once. It was worse, she thought, than their long-ago row after the PM’s resignation, when Malcolm had fumed and sulked and been nastier than usual to everyone, even her, but had eventually settled down once the e-mails resumed. This was different, and though she’d been in and out of consciousness on the night the Regime fell, she’d pieced together enough of what must have happened to know that Jamie wasn’t coming back.

She knew better than to urge Malcolm to confide in her, let alone in a qualified therapist. She kept her distance, let him stay in the guest room of the house she and Sundeep had bought—London, so brutally depopulated, was finally affordable again—and used her now-considerably fierce reputation as a shield between him and people whose fucking business it wasn’t. Kept him out of the game of “Dead, Exiled, or Went To Work For the Regime; Can We Shoot The Fucker?” that had become the chief pastime around Whitehall.

And so he was a ghost when he had to be outside of 10 Downing Street, staring at a carton of onion bhaji for what seemed like hours while everyone else celebrated the return of Indian takeaway before stalking off. He buried himself in policy drafts, in endless testimony before an insatiable tabloid press, and she didn’t get close, or ask sympathetic questions, and if he grieved at all—for Jamie, or for Julius and Emma and Ollie—it was out of the sight of anyone who might have cared.

This febrile state of affairs continued until his fifty-seventh birthday, an occasion that everyone knew about and everyone with the slightest trace of self-preservation, Sam included, naturally dreaded. She hung on the door frame to his office, waiting for him to admit that he’d noticed her there.

Finally, he snapped, “Busy.”

“I have something for you,” she said.

“It had better not be another fucking cake, Sam.”
It’s merely a hypothetical exercise, a philosophical problem.

You have your worst enemy—or something near enough that the distinction’s irrelevant, a man responsible for your torture, symbolic of a government that nearly killed you and killed a number of people close to you, a fleshy casing for the unadulterated twattery that had oozed into the place in the world you’d fought tooth and nail to claim, that had *thrived* there—imprisoned. Tied to a chair, at your mercy. You can’t kill all of the fuckers, half the reason the peacekeepers are here is to prevent that, after all, but this one’s been missing since the night the Chancellor surrendered, and with mass graves still being exhumed throughout the country, with the canals dredged and the black sites cracked open, what’s one more corpse?

You stand above this man, and he cowers, so much smaller than he seemed when you were the prisoner and he, the tormentor.

You could have him killed. You could kill him yourself. You would, in all certainty, face no repercussions whatsoever.

It’s entirely abstract; that sort of thing never happens in real life.

“Hello, Ross,” Malcolm said.

It was in no way a proper prison. The provisional government, still in the process of sorting out innocent victims from hardened criminals, hadn’t quite managed those yet (leaving the *Daily Mail* to squeak about murderers with sufficiently left-wing credentials walking free in the wake of the Regime’s downfall) and Sam assured him that no one had recorded the former propaganda minister’s arrest. They’d brought him to Aldwych Station, to a maintenance room lit by a single bare bulb, and Malcolm allowed himself a moment of *schadenfreude* and had the good taste not to mention that at least Lowell was allowed more light in his windowless prison than he’d gotten. Sam’s people—and fuck if it wasn’t strange that Sam had *people*—had roughed him up, probably more than showed. The Resistance were heroes, not saints.

The light glinted off the edge of his cracked wire-rimmed glasses. He bared his teeth—several of which were missing—in a rictus grin. He was older than Malcolm remembered, though he supposed defeat did that to people.

“You’re not dead,” Lowell said, and Malcolm thought, with vindictive satisfaction, that while the fuckers had, inarguably, broken him, he had destroyed *them*.

“I did,” Malcolm said, “promise to kill you last.” The guards that flanked Sam by the door, still dressed in the cast-off fatigues favoured by much of the Resistance, were armed, would be happy to put a bullet through Lowell’s head if Malcolm spontaneously decided to forgo the pleasure of inflicting a lingering, poetically just death. He stood over the bound man, tested, tentatively, the pressure he could exert on his throat. He felt Lowell swallow under his fingertips, but the man’s face
remained expressionless. “It takes five kilos of force to strangle someone. Don’t know if that’s with one hand or both; I imagine, though, it’s going to take a very long fucking time for you to die.”

Lowell stared up at him, unblinking, and then gave a short, barking laugh. “Come off it, Malcolm, you’re not actually going to kill me.”

“No?”

“I asked for this meeting. Tell him, Samantha.”

She shrugged. “If you want him dead, I’ll make sure they’ll never find the body.”

“Good girl.”

Lowell made an irritated noise, reclaiming his attention. “You’re not,” he repeated, “going to kill me. You’re going to offer me amnesty. More than that, you’re going to rehabilitate my reputation, because that’s the one thing you’re brilliant at. You’re going to convince the world that I was a spy for the Resistance the entire time, risking my life for democracy and freedom of the press and adorable little puppies, whereupon I will retire somewhere peaceful and quiet and live off a state pension and the legend that you’ve built for me. This, Malcolm, is what happens next.”

Malcolm exchanged a look with Sam, folded his arms over his chest. “You haven’t the slightest fuckin’ clue who you’re dealin’ with, do you?”

“Of course I do. You’re a jumped-up, foul-mouthed slum brat who squandered his one chance at power and turned the country into a debt-ridden, immigrant-infested sewer, a Class War reject who’ll transform Britain into some dreary worker’s paradise run by parasites on benefits now that he’s been handed a carte blanche by his fellow terrorists and traitors. A convicted felon; I remember that, even if no one else seems to. The Regime’s the best thing that could have happened to you.”

He rubbed absentmindedly at his ache in his wrist above where the splint started. “How do you figure?”

“What do you think would have happened after you got out of prison, anyway? Talk-show appearances and the odd consultancy gig? It’s no life, not for you. You should be thanking us. We’ve done what no amount of tell-all memoirs and pathetic, half-arsed comebacks could do.” He shifted, looking physically uncomfortable but confident. Like he knew something that they didn’t, which, in Malcolm’s considerable experience, was typically an indication that a cunt was about to unleash a full-barrelled barrage of cuntishness. “We’ve made you politically relevant again.”

“Yeah,” Malcolm said. “I’ll remember to thank you for that next time I have to type something.”

“We restored pride to this country,” Lowell said. “Hope and glory. Remember that, when you and Comrade Sourpuss are busy running it back into the ground.”

“Well this is all very fuckin’ interesting, Ross, but the kulaks aren’t going tae liquidate themselves.”

Lowell huffed. “Right front pocket. Go on. Let’s get this over with.”

“This is the worst birthday present, Sam,” Malcolm said, but he reached into the pocket of the once-fine, now tattered, suit jacket. His fingers closed around something small, metal—the USB from DoCR, its casing dented but intact.

“We know all about that,” Sam said. “Relocated children, Miriam Atherton; how else do you think we got the Chancellor to surrender?”
Malcolm turned it over in his palm. He could feel Lowell’s stare on him. Knew it then, what was coming, in the shiver of anticipation, of stupid, painful hope that ghosted over his skin, was convinced as he had been for months that he’d wake up any second, still buried in his cell beneath the Ford plant, the surface of the water above him visible but forever beyond his reach.

“Miriam was vital, naturally,” Lowell said. “If Atherton was to remain Chancellor, she had to go. A man in his position can’t afford vulnerabilities; it’s a miracle that his dirty little secret lasted as long as it did. But there are other names on that file. Other…points of leverage.”

As if from a distance, he heard Sam say, “Other hidden children.”

“War orphans, for the most part, who could hardly be held accountable for the sins of their parents. We placed them in upstanding, prominent households, but of course there was always a chance that a friend or relative might try to track them down. Might cause trouble. Safer to list the lot as deceased and keep the actual data eyes-only, but, well, you know how good that department was at keeping secrets.” He lifted his gaze from Malcolm to Sam. “The document’s in alphabetical order by surname. I know you didn’t read it to the end, Samantha, because it’s you that’s here, in this dank little cell, loyally promising to help Malcolm murder me. You, and not Jamie Macdonald.”

Malcolm moved for the door, only to have Lowell call out after him. “I had it encrypted after I took it from what was left of Emma Messinger. I’m sure your Mr. Gowda could decrypt it, given enough time, and you could probably even decipher the transfer numbers, but time’s what you don’t have, not once there are protocols and red tape in place and the UN interfering, and you and I both know how important it is to seize the advantage when you can. Shall we talk terms?”

Malcolm whirled, his fist closed tight around the drive, and, much later, Sam would tell him that she’d never believed so completely that he possessed the ability to eviscerate someone using only the sheer dynamism of his fury.

“What,” he asked, his voice deadly, “is in that file?”

Lowell flashed his shark’s smile.

He said four words.

And—had he asked—Malcolm would have handed the country right back over to him.
Who's Killer, Who's Captive, Who's Free

Chapter Summary

In which Malcolm finds himself an uninvited guest at the Macdonald family reunion.

Decades later, in her memoirs, Aileen Macdonald would claim the day as her start in politics. Kayleigh’d been perched by the window, rapping her fingertips against the sill, Tara on the floor, playing video games on her tablet. Aileen, exiled to her bedroom so that the Bartletts could consult with their lawyer in the privacy of their dining room, was lying on her bed, bored out of her skull. (The twins, deemed too young to really understand the proceedings, had joined her exile out of stubborn solidarity.) Hours had passed, and she was sure she’d heard the lawyer leave, but since the army of volunteers administering her school hadn’t sorted out basic things like truancy and the Bartletts were otherwise preoccupied with not getting hauled off to the Hague, she jealously clung to her rare afternoon of privacy and quiet. She’d remember with clarity, after so much else had faded, the rectangle above her bed where the paint was darker than the rest of the wall, where until very recently, the portrait of the Chancellor had hung, would recall how she’d wondered what would hang there next.


“Eh?” Aileen rolled off the bed and went to look out the window. It was a black car, shiny, with tinted windows. Any distraction from the fraught purgatory that the Bartletts’ house had become would have been welcome, but her heart caught in her chest as the car beetled up the long driveway to the front gate and stopped there, idling.

Kayleigh, even runtier than Aileen had been at her age, had to push herself over the tall sill to see properly; Aileen boosted her in time to see that two of the men emerging from the car had guns. She opened her mouth, ready to tell the younger girls to hide under the bed because it had all started again, when she caught sight of the last man, tall and whip-thin, dressed in a long black coat that flapped around him like a cape, and then the guns didn’t matter.

She didn’t realize she was shaking until Kayleigh tugged her arm and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I know him,” Aileen said, which was more than she should have said this far behind enemy lines. The portrait was gone, but for all she knew, the bugs were still there.

“No, I mean I—” She stopped. Reconsidered. Lies and feigned ignorance had gotten Aileen and her sisters through the last three years, and just because the internet said that the new government was going to respect human rights and call elections didn’t mean that the girls were safe. Aileen was pretty sure that Mr. Bartlett, as the Regime’s regional commander for Leeds, had killed people during the war. That he and his wife insisted that they were family meant nothing; even family couldn’t be trusted. (Especially family. There’d been rewards for information at school, posters and ads everywhere; more than once, the head had pulled her into his office to ask her what her parents—Regime loyalists right until the sorry, humiliating end—talked about at the dinner table.)
“Hey, I have to piss,” she said, and grabbed Tara and Kayleigh by their wrists. “Come with me.”

“Aileen?”

“Feumaidh sinn bruidhinn,” Aileen murmured, breathless, the taste of brine at the back of her throat. Her lungs contracted in panic. It was only slightly less blatantly retarded to speak Gaelic in the enemy’s house than to say something in Urdu or Arabic, but it was code to invoke their shared secret, to signal that they were to get away from hostile ears immediately and talk about the things that were, otherwise, off-limits to even mention. Louder, she said, “You’re right, must have seen him on telly.”

“Why’re you acting like such a freak?” Tara hissed.

She ushered them both into the loo, locked the door behind them. Turned on the taps, the rush of water at once drowning her voice and taking her back to the ocean, the bone-deep chill and the copper spray of blood across her face, and she wanted so much to throw up the wall between before and after, the barrier of denial that had kept her silent but sane. “I do know him,” she whispered, praying that her voice couldn’t be heard above the taps. “So do you, and not from the telly, either. You two were probably too little to remember, but he used to come ‘round the flat when we stayed in London. He was da’s friend.”

Tara made a face. “That makes no sense,” she said. “Dad’s with the old government, and that’s the new government. Why would they—”

The surface, there and then gone, flashed before her, memories forbidden and buried behind a façade of perfect obedience. It wasn’t safe to speak; she knew that, but she was convinced she’d burst apart if she’d come this close to salvation but was too frightened to say anything. “I mean our real da.”

“You said not to say…” The end of Kayleigh’s sentence was muffled as Aileen hugged the girls close to her, shaking, curled around them as if to shield them from the crash of the wave, to keep them afloat when she herself was starving for oxygen. “D’you think he’s here for us?”

She made herself breathe. “No, twatface, he’s only the guy who runs the entire country. Don’t you pay attention to anything?”

“Oh my God,” Tara said. “He’s here to arrest the Bartletts.”

Aileen said, “He must be,” and Tara wriggled out of her arms to break for the door. “Wait—don’t. We should be careful.” Maggie at school kept saying that the new government was murdering people who’d been part of the old government. Aileen didn’t think she meant kids, but she wasn’t about to risk her sisters’ lives on it. “But I think… I think we should go talk to him. I think we can trust him.”

Kayleigh’s eyes narrowed. “You’re sure?”

Aileen shrugged. “We have to trust someone,” she said, though it wasn’t really true; it had been just the three of them for so long, playing spy games and reciting half-remembered Gaelic phrases that the Bartletts didn’t understand, and they’d been fine. They’d lived through it all, which was more than most could say. “Eventually, right? He might get us out of here.” She pushed herself up against the door, held a hand out to each of the younger girls.

“Is he even gonna remember us?”

“Probably not,” Aileen replied. “But he’ll remember da. They worked together.” She opened the door the way she’d practiced, with her palm clasped around the knob as she pushed it so that it didn’t make a sound, crept, her stocking feet silent on the polished wood floor. She’d forgotten to turn off
the taps, but the voices from the dining room were already louder, and even her less-stealthy sisters were able to move unheard.

Through the railing, she could just see into the dining room; Mrs. Bartlett, seated at the table with her head in her hands, Mr. Bartlett, the light from the chandelier glinting off his bald spot, braced behind her. Circling them both, arms windmilling like he was preparing for takeoff, was Malcolm Tucker.

Three years was a long time. Long enough that she called Mr. Bartlett her father in public, and the twins referred to him as such in what passed for private as well. Aileen, who’d been too weak to save her family when the Regime had taken power, had grown up to be tough, just like her ma, in her dying breath, had told her to be. She could watch the suppression of a riot on the news and when Mr. Bartlett came home at night with blood on his boots, she could still smile sweetly at him over his wife’s pot roast when he asked her to pass the salt.

Now, he was red-faced and blustering, and the two soldiers were watching him closely, fingers twitching at the triggers of their rifles, while Malcolm shouted and Mr. Bartlett spluttered helplessly in response.

She’d never seen her foster father afraid of anyone before, and that was enough to ensure that for the rest of her life, Malcolm Tucker would be cemented in her mind as Gandalf, Dumbledore, and the Doctor rolled into one, saving her from the monsters and whisking her off to someplace better.

“This is bloody bollocks and you know it. There’s a dozen men up the pecking order who haven’t been charged. I have rights.”

Malcolm laughed, which was far more terrifying than his earlier shouting. “Do you now?”

“Is dad gonna punch him?” Tara whispered, and Aileen slammed a hand over her mouth, held it there until she was confident that neither of the twins was going to make their presence known.

“Look, ye half-rate zombie pig-fucker, this isn’t a discussion, you’re going tae move aside and let my men search the place before the kneecapping starts. D’ye think these two bricks with guns are here to protect me? They’re here to make sure I don’t rip your bollocks out through your fuckin’—”

Aileen had slid all the way down the stairs and made her way down the dimly lit foyer and around the corner to stand at the entrance to the dining room. She was going to stride up to him—the PM’s right-hand man and currently the most powerful person in Britain—and introduce herself and her sisters, the ghost of her old accent bleeding through her practiced RP, and say that they were the daughters of Jamie and Mary Macdonald who maybe he remembered from before the coup, and she was sorry to bother him but their parents were dead and they needed his help. And then, she hoped, he’d contact the right people and they’d be sent far away from the Bartletts to live with some distant remnant of the Macdonald clan who’d made it through the war and Maggie at school could claim to the others that they’d been murdered all she liked but it wouldn’t matter because they’d have a real home again and be safe.

That was what was supposed to happen.

What actually happened was she stood in the square of light from the chandelier, and the indomitable Malcolm Tucker—who’d survived three years of imprisonment at the hands of the Regime, who’d been tortured and nearly killed but survived to overthrow the government and save the country, who’d lost everything and still come out on top—stopped shouting and froze where he stood. The fury fled him all at once and his face crumbled in on itself like a controlled demolition.

“Fuck me.” His voice cracked in a way that it never did on the telly. “You’ve got his eyes.”
Jamie stabbed the glowing red coal of his cigarette into the corner of the wall, his fingers already twitching for a second fag as his mobile buzzed for the hundredth time that night. Spears of rain slid down the overhang in a shimmering veil, prison bars that fenced him off from the deserted streets. He stood listening to the gunfire rapport of droplets slamming into the pavement and the dull throb of the music inside, contemplated another walk to fucking nowhere in the rain like a soppy heartsick twat through the dim skeleton of a dying town, and then surrendered to the lure of dryness and warmth, yanking the door open and slinking back inside.

The woman at the bar who’d been watching him play darts—flawlessly, another unforeseen consequence of all the killing—was still at it, and it was an option, if not an ideal one, to get blisteringly drunk and find out if she was enough to get the taste of Malcolm off his tongue. It’d been so long since he’d exchanged more than a few words with another person that he thought he might as well take Father Kelly up on the monastery offer otherwise.

He swung onto the stool beside her, bared his teeth in a threatening parody of a smile, decided, then, that he couldn’t overcome his revulsion at her presence, at his own, ordered another beer. He tried, and failed, to ignore it when the Sevilla-Basel match broke for the News at Ten. As the presenter came on, stumbling over the teleprompter, Jamie felt the first grim glimmer of optimism he’d had in months—with practically every legitimate journalist in the country dead or in exile, he could walk into any newspaper office, any broadcasting studio, and be hired on the spot. Take that, Paxman.

And then Malcolm appeared on the screen, and it was useless to pretend that the fucker hadn’t—as Jamie’d heard him threaten to do to others so many times—reached down into his throat with his spidery fingers and pulled out his still-beating heart and the rest of his guts and sinew and arteries along with it, hadn’t left him, as always, to clean up the splattered mess left in his wake.

For a man who hated the spotlight as much as Malcolm claimed to, the cameras loved him, loved his sly smiles and charcoal Paul Smith suit and the pale blue tie that brought out the hints of colour in his eyes. He flitted between courting sympathy and commanding admiration; he was toying with the interviewer, and it might have been fun to watch if the LIVE graphic in the corner wasn’t distracting Jamie to no end.

“Tha’s as fuckin’ live as cuntin’ Lady Di,” he muttered. The woman next to him arched a plucked eyebrow, and he realised he’d said it out loud. “The cast thing,” Jamie said. “He had it off days ago. This is pre-taped, ‘s probably no’ even in London.” Which meant that Malcolm was up to something, some clandestine negotiations or whatever dirty work he did for Nicola these days, and didn’t want anyone to know where he was.

“Why do ye care?” she asked, her tone bored enough to indicate that she didn’t, either. Sometimes he forgot that their Byzantine games of backstabbing and assassination, literal and metaphorical, were completely irrelevant to normal people—at least until the tanks came out and the Molotovs started flying, and even then, how easy it was for the country to pick up and muddle on.

“I don’t,” Jamie said, and put his head on the bar. He was long past the point where he’d have denied that seeing him was like wanking with a fistful of Tabasco. The man on the screen, controlled and composed, his rage and passion ever-present but unleashed only in precise, tactical strikes, with his expensive suits and cropped hair, might have been the man Jamie’d fallen in love with all those years ago, but he couldn’t help wondering what had happened to the wild-eyed, ragged revolutionary, the patron saint of lost causes who’d lurked beneath London’s stifled streets. The one
he’d actually gotten to touch, who had, however briefly, been his.

“What do you say to the criticism that the Repatriation Act is a shameless ploy to win votes for Labour?”

“‘S a fuckin’ shameless ploy tae win votes fer Labour,” Jamie slurred into the sticky wood, not that the woman beside him caught his words, not that it wasn’t a shameless ploy that he’d quite agree with if he were a) being honest with himself, and b) sober, one of those rare instances where good strategic thinking also happened to be the right thing to do.

“—presumptuous to suggest that at this point there’s anything like a functional party structure, and listen, right, we are talking about British citizens here, people whose most fundamental civil rights were stomped on by the previous government, who were unlawfully deported and have as much a stake in this country’s future as you or me. We can’t seriously talk about holding elections, restoring democracy, not before they’re home.”

“The fuck are ye playin’ at, y’cunt?” His eyes rolled up towards the screen, in time to cut from the reporter’s inevitable question on Scottish independence, an issue Malcolm had been tactfully dodging for months, to a close-up of Malcolm staring squarely into the camera.

“Look, I know the country’s gone in the shitter—sorry, am I allowed to say “shitter” on telly now? I did win a war for freedom, yeah?—anyway I’d ask of the people of Scotland the same thing I’m asking of everyone currently in exile and facing the decision of whether or not to return home. It’s not easy to trust, or forgive, not after what’s happened. But I’m asking—” He smiled, bright and mercurial, and Jamie thought, oh sweet fucking hell, he’s not in London, he’s fucking here, now, and slapped a tenner on the bar as Malcolm purred, victorious, “—give us another chance.”

The woman at the bar reached for his untouched beer as the door slammed shut behind him.

By the time he reached home, his buzz had subsided into an incipit migraine, the rain had turned to a stubborn demonstration of Reaganomics. Dampness settled in cold constriction around his bones, and Jamie had worked out enough permutations of “f*ck off back tae London, you massive f*ckin’ bawbag” to almost drown out the persistent and irritating fantasy of finding Malcolm on his doorstep and falling, like some dozy bint in a Hugh Grant movie, into his arms.

Malcolm, of course, wasn’t on his doorstep. The door was locked—he had an alcoholic’s lapse of fuck, where are my f*cking keys—but the kitchen light was on. Fuel shortages being what they were, he was positive it hadn’t been on when he’d left.

It occurred to him that the murmur above the rapid-fire pulse in his ears was the sound of voices from inside and it should have set off every defensive mechanism born out of life under a totalitarian state, but he shoved the thought into some cobwebby corner; all that mattered now was storming through his front door, grabbing Malcolm by the throat, and tossing him out into the rain. Which he had, muttering to himself all the way home, convinced himself he was capable of doing.

He could see the tall, unmistakable silhouette backlit in the glow of the kitchen’s single bulb, and he boomed out, “I told ye I was f*ckin’ done, and did ye break into my f*ckin’—”

Which was when it finally registered that Malcolm wasn’t alone, even as she stood up from the kitchen table, her round, blue eyes widening, rattled a precariously perched teacup as her hip bumped
the edge and launched herself across the hallway at him, sobbing.

Jamie raised a shaking hand and let it hover above Aileen’s hair, afraid that, if he touched her, she’d crumble to dust. He’d had this nightmare before, spaced between dreams of the ocean, had her returned to him a hundred times only to wake with her and her sisters still drowned.

She wailed, “I thought you were dead, they told us you were dead,” her accent muted, practically unrecognisable, and that, of all things, was what convinced him, because he might have still been a bit drunk and mid-psychotic breakdown but he’d not have hallucinated his daughter suddenly becoming English, and his head bent into hers and he wept.

“Tara and Kayleigh are upstairs,” Malcolm said, and Jamie couldn’t process the thought that his weans had been dead, all three of them, and now they weren’t, as if Malcolm had raised their corpses from the depths of the Atlantic and breathed life into them again by sheer force of will just so that he could have the last fucking word. As if he’d every right to tear Jamie to pieces and then sweep in like the conquering hero he claimed to be on telly and resurrect what was left. “They wanted to stay up and wait for you, but it was a long train ride.”

“You were dead,” he murmured into his daughter’s hair. “I’d never have stopped looking otherwise. Not in a million years, y’hear?”

He felt Malcolm brush past him and, seconds later, the door opening and closing softly, leaving him alone in the house with his family.

The twins were curled back-to-back on what had been his mother’s bed, Kayleigh completely buried in the folds of a quilt sewn by Jamie’s Nan, Tara, having kicked the pile of covers off her feet, shuddering and twitching in a tangle of sheets.

The ghost of a prayer brushed across his lips. He couldn’t decide if God or Malcolm had returned his daughters to him, or worse, if the two bastards were finally working in concert.

Kayleigh and Tara wouldn’t know him, not really. He’d fucked off when they were eight months old, exactly as his own da had done, too young and ambitious and damaged to be a proper parent, and Mary’d dragged herself home to her family in Glasgow with her tail between her legs. Aileen was just old enough to miss him—to hate him, judging by his own childhood experience—but the twins had only grudging court-mandated trips to London to go on, hazy memories of being parked in front of the telly while he stomped around the press office shouting at blundering MPs. They were strangers to each other, the girls a curious collision of his features and Mary’s, so beautiful it hurt to look at them, and all too grown-up in the three-year gap when they’d been dead to him. If he’d seen them in the street, he might not have known who they were.

And now he was the only family they had, suddenly a father after years of being that other, unnatural thing for which no word existed in any language, the parent bereft of children and deserving of sympathy no matter how rubbish he’d actually been at raising them. Mary had bled out, Aileen had told him, with Tara clasped in her arms, using the last of her strength to keep the child’s head above water. What could Jamie ever be to them, next to that?

“I fucked up,” Jamie told Aileen. Had he mentioned that already?

She was quiet, neither condemning nor absolving him, then asked, “Are you gonna cry again?”
Jamie rubbed at his burning eyes and apologised for the hundredth time, swore he’d dry out, atone, somehow make up to them the last three years, okay, their entire wretched, neglected childhoods, etc.; he hadn’t managed a coherent sentence since he’d walked through the door. Aileen smirked, and it was like the sun had come out; she reached over and squeezed his arm. He thought she probably understood, was in the same weird position of having to reassure herself that he was real and not going to vanish, that the war—or at least their part in it—was finally over.

“It’s okay,” she said, “he cried too. And it’s not like he even knows us.” His brain chugged and stalled before he realised that she was talking about Malcolm, then blue-screened and fizzled out entirely at the thought of Malcolm crying. “Did he leave already? I don’t think we thanked him.”

Better not to have to explain to his brave, tough, miraculously back-from-the-dead fifteen-year-old daughter that she and her sisters were being used as pawns in one of Malcolm’s innumerable demonstrations of overly elaborate bastardry. “I’m sure he hasn’t gone far.”

Long seconds of silence fell between them where she didn’t move and he couldn’t, and then Aileen mimed an exaggerated yawn. “It’s four in the morning,” she said, and he was probably imagining the undercurrent of so deal with your poncey shite already so I can get to bed; we didn’t all sleep until noon in a drunken stupor. Probably.

“Will you, uh—” Not that there was any non-psycho way to ask if she was going to stop existing the moment he turned his back, and for fuck’s sake, he was a grown man who’d brought a fascist dictatorship to its knees and he ought to have been able to manage object permanence. “—be okay?”

Aileen hugged him tightly. “I’ll still be here,” she said. “Promise.”

Malcolm had made it to the bus stop across the street, a lonely shelter that was apparently inadequate for both the purposes of containing his caged-panther pacing and keeping him dry. Water trickled through the gaps between the Plexiglass panels, laced glittering beads over the black wool of his coat. If he had actually been crying—crocodile tears, Jamie reminded himself, and the redness around his eyes had been there for centuries—the rain hid it in an overall onslaught of dampness. Malcolm stopped violently assaulting his mobile for long enough to raise his bedraggled head as Jamie ducked against the rain and darted to meet him.

“This doesnae change anything.” Jamie had to shout to be heard above the storm that battered the shelter’s roof and walls. “And by the way, fuck you very much for using my fuckin’ bairns just tae spin me. That’s a new low even for you.”

Malcolm looked to be vacillating between amusement and annoyance. “Check your mobile.”

“What?” But time had not, as he might have hoped, dulled his reflex for following Malcolm’s orders, and he unearthed it to see, scrolling down the already-wet screen, a lengthy stream of unanswered texts and voicemails from Sam, any one of which if opened would no doubt inform him that his daughters were alive and Malcolm was on his way to bring them to him.

“D’ye think I’d let you go a second thinking they were dead when I knew otherwise? That I’d not throw my not-inconsiderable power and influence at anything standing in the way of getting them back to you?”

Having adjusted his opinion on the level of Malcolm’s cuntishness from apocalyptic to merely
catastrophic, Jamie shrugged. He looked haggard; Jamie could easily imagine that he’d not slept in
days, that he’d moved hell and earth to track down the girls, and if his ulterior motives weren’t
exactly a state secret, Jamie could admit to himself that he wouldn’t have done much differently in
Malcolm’s place.

“Aileen wanted tae thank you, presumably for kidnapping them. Is this gonnae be a problem?”

“I kidnapped them back from a pair of Nazi cuntwipes who’ve just jumped the queue for war crimes
prosecution. She’s a sweet lass, by the way. She must have gotten it from her ma.” Jamie wasn’t
fooled that this wasn’t all part of the whole Kinder, Gentler, Having Re-Evaluated His Priorities In
the Wake of Such-and-Such act that Malcolm pulled a lot these days, but he still had to stop himself
from closing the last few inches between them. “I go to see Miriam Atherton every week,” he said.
“As her father can’t. It’s not exactly like she knows the difference. Abby says she appreciates it,
though how she could—”

Jamie shifted from one foot to the other, the splash of rain bouncing from the pavement soaking into
his trainers. “It doesnae change anything,” he repeated, then shook his head, dragged a hand over the
side of his face. They were both sopping wet and overtired and he was so shattered he didn’t know if
he was still even cross with Malcolm or for what. “What’re you even doing out here, Malc? You’ll
catch pneumonia. Again.”

“You could invite me inside.”

Jamie pretended to mull over the prospect, and Malcolm, to drive home the point, shivered in his
long overcoat, his hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched.

“You’re on the couch,” Jamie said finally. “I’ll no’ have my daughters exposed tae any of yer
debauchery. When do you have to be back in London, anyway?”

“Monday,” Malcolm said, and the expression on his gaunt face, so hopeful, verging on happy,
was completely incongruous and disarming. “Not until Monday.”

Jamie sighed and turned towards his house, not bothering to check behind him to see if Malcolm was
following.

Jamie’s resolve lasted all of twenty-four hours, almost to the second.

It didn’t take a political mastermind to decode Malcolm’s strategy. He stayed out of their way,
inventing excuses to pick up takeaway at the corner or ring Sam or remote-bollock Nicola and her
cadre for an hour each, all the time insisting that he had no intention of obstructing Jamie’s wee
tearful family reunion. It would have been entirely convincing if Jamie had never met Malcolm
before. He stood back and watched wistfully as Jamie floundered and blathered his way through talk
of schools and housing arrangements and probably years of therapy and other things he knew
precisely fuck-all about, and should he even be thinking about these things now or just sit back and
bask in the nervous giddiness of having everyone he cared about huddled under one (leaky, in as
much a state of disrepair as everything else in his life) roof?

The drone, muted but insistent, of the television from downstairs woke him from fitful sleep, and he
edged down the staircase to see Malcolm, folded in the armchair next to the couch where he was
supposed to be sleeping but where, instead, Tara was stretched out under a tartan blanket. Jamie
hung over the railing and, as he had so many times throughout the day, measured her breathing
against his own, convinced himself that she was alive and real, and only then looked to Malcolm.

He was bathed in the blue light of the late-night news, the volume on the telly lowered to almost
nothing, wearing a pair of Jamie’s old track pants and faded Ultravox t-shirt (the 80s had been an
awkward and unfortunate time for Jamie, all confused aesthetic sensibilities and tragic experiments
with eyeliner). The clothes were too loose and too short on him, bunching across his shoulders and
baring bony ankles. Jamie bristled. It was as contrived as every other aspect of Malcolm’s Get Jamie
Back On Side campaign; he might have left London in a hurry, but claims to bouts of memory loss
aside, Jamie didn’t quite buy that he was senile enough to have packed two suits but nothing to sleep
in. He could have worn a clown suit and Jamie’d still want to fuck him, but the sight of him curled in
Jamie’s chair, guarding Jamie’s daughter, and dressed in Jamie’s clothes that didn’t fit him properly,
aroused strange, unwelcome feelings of affection and possessiveness.

“I don’t forgive you,” Jamie said.

“Good,” Malcolm said without turning his face from the screen. “Because I’m not actually fucking
sorry for anything.”

“Where’s it leave us, then?”

Malcolm lit up at “us,” for whatever fucked reason, and Jamie wanted to smack him. “Keep your
voice down. I’ve only just gotten her to sleep.”

Tara’s breath whistled softly in her sleep. It hadn’t taken her long to graft on to Malcolm, in the way
that all children were fascinated by monsters, and while it shouldn’t have surprised him that her night
terrors had her running to him—the man who’d rescued her and not the absent father she’d mostly
only heard about—it didn’t help drive away the overwhelming sense that Malcolm belonged here,
and did approximately jack and shit to quell Jamie’s kamikaze lust for him.

“It was bad, you know,” Malcolm said, watching the girl just as closely as Jamie was, and almost
certainly as restless as he felt. “For them. It’s not my story to tell, and they didn’t say much about it
anyway. But it won’t be easy.”

He ignored whatever Malcolm was trying to imply. “What is it, exactly, that you want?”

Malcolm didn’t miss a beat. “Come back to London with me.”

“Malc.”

Malcolm uncoiled from the chair and invaded his space, cornering him against the dusty 1970s
drapes, suddenly manic, the energy crackling off his skin. “This is it, Jamie. We’ve a chance to run
the country properly now. No more fuckin’ soft-headed, boot-licking appeasement bollocks. No
compromises. This is our moment.” The tip of his tongue flicked out over his lips, and just like that
was 1999 again, the Iraq War and 7/7 lurking only in some distant, unforeseeable future, and
Malcolm was urging him to leave the job he’d only just taken at the Herald and come work for him.
He’d just enough time to push down an impulsive, unthinking agreement before Malcolm said, “and
I want you there” and Jamie remembered to hate him and London both.

“I dinnae give a shit about any of that anymore,” Jamie ventured.

“I highly doubt that. Look, I’m so fucking bored without you.” At Jamie’s incredulous snort, he said,
“I am, you fuck like you’ve invented it and you’re all that’s ever kept me sane, but if it’s between
you and the Party I’d choose the Party every time. Nothing personal. So. Don’t make me have to
"You’re turning into a proper ponce in your dotage,” Jamie said, though it was Malcolm’s much-buried and publicly disavowed idealism, his obvious glee at the prospect of turning the world upside-down, that had made Jamie love him so fiercely in the first place. He let the words hang between them, the weight pressing down on both of them, and then finally, excruciatingly, brought his hands to rest on Malcolm’s skinny shoulders. “It’s no’ actually that simple.”

“It could be.”

“It isn’t,” Jamie insisted, but moved closer to him anyway. He was fairly certain if, in the next few minutes, he didn’t have his lips wrapped around Malcolm’s cock, he was going to wither and die. “I’ve responsibilities now.”

“You could have responsibilities in London just as easily,” Malcolm said, the glint shining in his eyes that indicated that he knew he was about to annihilate someone in an argument. “Plus some additional, nastier responsibilities and vast minefield of solid fuck and a premature coronary, and quite a bit of fun.” He traced a finger over the two days’ worth of stubble that had colonised Jamie’s jaw. “It was fun, though, wasn’t it? Before everything went to shit?”

“Yeah,” he gritted. “It was fun.” A pause, then, “You could stay here with me and the girls.”

“King and country call. Have you seen what happens when I’m no’ around?”

Jamie shook his head, hoping it would somehow recalibrate so that he could make sense of the world, not that there was any chance of that happening with Malcolm apparently thirty seconds away from pouncing on him. Malcolm’s hand slid around to cradle the back of his skull and leaned in, his breath hot and rapid; Jamie barely had the wherewithal to push him off. “The fuck are ye doing? My daughter is right here.”

“She’s asleep.” But he rolled his eyes in the direction of the stair.

And so, for the first time in three decades, Jamie was tugging someone into his adolescent bedroom, a faded tribute to fast cars and Depeche Mode, a crucifix above the narrow bed that he flung both of them on in a messy sprawl of limbs and dirty sheets. He declared, his voiced hushed for the sake of his daughters, an intention to commit a number of acts that, until Nicola’s interim government got around to repealing the Moral And Spiritual Purity Act, could—at least on paper—result in both of them being shot.

Malcolm grinned, and he wanted to add that it wasn’t any sort of promise, or concession, or surrender, but the other man was already preoccupied with peeling Jamie’s clothes off both of them.

Most of their fucking had heretofore been a rushed, furtive affair, squeezed between strategising and sabotage, hidden in dank, dusty corners. Now that Jamie had a whole twin bed to work with (his old bedspread, lint-speckled and faded to a non-colour somewhere between grey and brown, beneath them), he’d planned to lick every part of Malcolm’s body until he squirmed and begged in a masterfully conducted epic inspired by some of the more exotic titles in his DVD collection. He had, naturally, underestimated exactly how loud Malcolm could be once discovery merely meant an awkward-as-fuck family discussion and not, say, a bullet in the head. (If pressed to choose, Jamie would actually have preferred the latter.) The near-pornographic noises from the back of his throat as Jamie licked a stripe up the underside of his cock would have made the priests down at the church reconsider their life choices and could very likely be heard by them as well. Jamie risked Malcolm’s famously sharp tongue to stuff several fingers in his mouth. Malcolm sucked at them, then gave a hint of teeth enough that Jamie tugged them free, just in case.
“The girls will hear,” he hissed, coming up for air.

“They already know.” Malcolm replied, and Jamie would have had a heart attack but he added, “Or, Aileen suspects, and I dissembled. She’s very much your daughter. We’re no’ going tae discuss your kids right now, okay?”

“Right,” Jamie said, as if ensorcelled, and bent his head down again, hoping the walls weren’t as thin as he remembered them being.

He told himself that it’d be the last time, that this was a man who thought nothing of murdering kids —of destroying Jamie’s soul—if it meant winning, that it was only because the last time they’d been together, Malcolm had been near death and he couldn’t just leave it like that, with the fever and starvation and sickness indelibly inscribed on his memory. Back in the tunnels, he’d promised them both it was over, and it was.

That said, it wasn’t even the last time that night.

Jamie slept through the morning and woke to the sheets rumpled and abandoned beside him.

_The girls are alive_, he told himself. _The Regime’s been defeated. Malcolm—_

Right. Malcolm. He swung his legs off the side of the bed, wiped the sleep-crusted drool from the side of his mouth, threw on another relic from his unfortunate boyhood closet, and padded downstairs to find Malcolm in his kitchen, directing his daughters in chopping and stirring with all of the efficiency, if none of the vitriol, that he used to unleash on the Press Office. Thick, spicy-scented steam rose from a bubbling pot on the stove and the pile of dosas that flopped over one of Jamie’s ma’s chipped serving dishes, and Jamie rubbed at his eyes, uncertain at first as to what he was actually witnessing.

“I love the smell of penitence in the morning.”

Malcolm shot him a sidelong glance. “I told you I wasn’t sorry.”

“Those,” Jamie declared, “are apology dosas.”

“They fucking well are not.”

Jamie sniffed the air. “Yeah. They positively reek of contrition.”

“Aileen paused from folding crepes to clear her throat and remind him that this was probably not a discussion to be had in front of his children and besides, it was the sort of comment Malcolm would almost certainly take as a compliment.

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“That’s the garam masala in the curry, ye philistine. You’ve the guilty Catholic conscience, not me.”

Jamie was about to spit back that Malcolm didn’t have anything resembling a conscience at all, but Aileen paused from folding crepes to clear her throat and remind him that this was probably not a discussion to be had in front of his children and besides, it was the sort of comment Malcolm would almost certainly take as a compliment.

“Sit down,” Malcolm said. “I’m catching the train back to London tonight.” And went back to rhapsodising about ghee to Kayleigh as if Jamie wasn’t even present, and Jamie, for lack of anything else to do with his hands, grabbed one of the dosas from the plate, used it to scoop up a gobbet of lentil mush fit to be deployed as crowd control, and considered for a very brief moment lobbing it at
Malcolm’s head.

“Are we moving to London too, then?” Tara asked.

Jamie put down the dosa mid-bite. “Did you—”

“Didn’t say anything,” Malcolm said.

“But that’s it, right? That’s what you guys have been fighting about all weekend.”

“Tara, Kayleigh.” Aileen sounded, to Jamie’s ears, much older than fifteen and entirely too much like his ex-wife. “Why don’t you take a plate of this and go somewhere that’s not here?”

“We don’t even get a say?” Kayleigh asked, and Malcolm said, “I’ll go, you four talk it out.”

Jamie was close enough to grab his wrist and pin it to the counter. “Don’t you fucking dare. Look —” An awkward glance in Aileen’s direction, then back at Malcolm. “I didnae actually think we’d make it through all that.”

“That,” Malcolm said, “is perfectly obvious.”

“It’s no’ just me I need tae worry about,” Jamie said, which was obvious too, and Malcolm, whose marriage had lasted nanoseconds, who’d never expressed any desire for children, whose lifestyle was polonium-210 to meaningful human connections, had clearly realised it as well. “I mean.” He swallowed, took in the sight of him surrounded by his kids, weirdly natural with them as though there was some part of him that actually contemplated an ordinary life. “—are we on the same page here? With…”

“Aye,” Malcolm said. “Finish your fuckin’ dosa. My train’s at eight, and if I see you running after it, I’ll forward the pictures I took of your bedroom wall to the Daily Mail.”

“Your blackmail needs work, Malc.”

“Exactly,” Malcolm said, and wouldn’t have been so forward to actually take his hand in front of the girls, though Jamie felt him twitch beside him. “—why I need you back in London.”

Smoke filled his mouth, exhaled into the cooling night air. It had finally stopped raining, which Jamie tried not to take as overly symbolic.

He’d have to quit smoking, for the sake of the girls. He could rationalise a few bad habits when Mary’d been alive, but they’d lost too much for him to be irresponsible now. Accordingly, he savoured his last few puffs, calculating how long he could stretch the pack before he’d have to not buy a new one.

Malcolm kicked idly at his overnight bag that sat on the small rectangle of dry earth below the overhang. Crossed and uncrossed his arms. Every so often, he seemed about to speak, then apparently thought better of it.

“As what?” Jamie asked, finally. He hadn’t wanted to ask, not with the girls around. There were one or two things he could still protect them from.
“What?”

“London. As what?”

Malcolm exhaled sharply. “Oh for fuck’s sake, Jamie, you know by now how this works.” Though he didn’t, neither of them did, and that was the terrifying bit, wasn’t it? While he couldn’t exactly imagine them arm-in-arm at Buckingham Palace in fucking matching kilts, he was broadminded enough to entertain the possibility that the rules might have changed somewhat.

Still, he bit back. “Not that, I dinnae care, fuck, if you want to meet in back alleys and talk in smoke signals I dinnae give two shits as long as when you’re done performing for the press pack, it’s me that gets tae shag ye senseless.” His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “And by the way you’re a complete drama queen; this isnae the fuckin’ 80s.”

“Your décor says otherwise.”

“I wouldnae marry ye anyway; you’re not even Catholic.” Jamie rocked on his heels, suppressing the urge to pace. There was nowhere to pace to. London had some advantages, at least in that respect. “I meant work, ye twat. Burying your bodies and rooting through bins. I was sick tae death of it when I left the last time, and that was before I’d actually killed anyone for you. If I go, I’ll not be your fuckin’ bagboy anymore, right?”


“I want tae do more than pull the trigger. You owe me that much.” He saw it sink in; after months apart, he had a little leverage. The Party came first, but Malcolm’s obsessions weren’t mutually exclusive. “So. London. As what?”

Malcolm gave an exaggerated sigh and dragged his fingers through his hair, and Jamie was convinced he’d retaliate with something as flippant as it was caustic. Instead, he just looked incredulous, like he had in the footage of the Goolding Inquiry, faced with the prospect that he might not win this time.

“Oh, Jamie, Jamie.” And bent around him, drew him closer with one arm while finding the cigarette and smashing it against the wall with his other hand. “As the wee box in the mountain fortress where I’ve hidden my heart from my enemies. That all right with you, you petulant cunt?”

Jamie cast a glance inside, at the light and movement within, and told himself that London would be better for the girls, anyway.

“As if I’d leave running the country to you, ye daft auld cunt,” Jamie said, and grinned in the flash as the cab pulled up at the kerb.
Raise the Scarlet Standard High

Chapter Summary

In which Sam goes on her honeymoon, Nicola goes to the polls, and Malcolm and Jamie go home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He watched the tide roll in, lapping at the pebbled sand. The cries from the beach house had ebbed; his wife, having managed to get their infant son settled for his afternoon nap, had likely stretched out on the sunlit bed by the crèche to catch a few moments of peace. He could see, in the distance, tiny figures running across the shore, hear the whoops and screams of laughter of tourists splashing each other in the waves. Below the shadow of his Panama hat, the sun, just beginning its retreat, was warm on his face.

Were it not for the gun aimed between his eyes, the afternoon would have been quite perfect.

Ross Lowell leaned his elbow on the arm of the chair, pushing himself up to stare her in the face. “Really,” he said, “I don’t see the need for that.”

Sam Cassidy shrugged. The wind from the ocean batted the folds of her floral sundress around her legs; when it caught, he could just see the lump of scar tissue above her knee. Another woman might have chosen a longer hemline to conceal it, but, then again, another woman would either have not brought a gun to a stroll on the beach with her husband, or at least wouldn’t have worn flip-flops to an assassination.

Politics, though, was a different game these days.

“It makes me feel safer,” Sam replied.

“It’s hardly befitting a representative of His Majesty’s government. Last I heard, the war was over.” Mockingly, he held up both his hands. “I surrender.”

“We’re well past that,” Sam said. “I’m here on my honeymoon, believe it or not.”

He looked from her to her husband. Lowell had never actually met Sundeep Gowda in the flesh, and he’d stayed largely out of the headlines even as Sam had become somewhat of a national icon, remaining a curious piece of trivia for the tabloids and gossip blogs attached to the intriguing young upstart who was set to win West Ham in a landslide. How, Lowell thought, times had changed.

“Seriously.”

“We never had a proper one. Unless you count the jaunt to Elephant & Castle that one time. Barely any rats. That was almost like a holiday.”

Lowell still faithfully read British dailies, despite his wife’s constant reminders that short of a miracle, he’d never return to his homeland, that they lived in Majorca now, that there was really no need. The sun, the ocean, the endless stretch of sand, none of it was enough to cure him of his addiction or his
morbid fascination. This close to the election, he was mildly surprised that Sam was allowed off the campaign trail, even for a weekend.

“Does Malcolm know you’re here?”

Semi-reformed terrorist or not, she was a beautiful girl, tanned and backlit in the golden hour when the sun peaked low in the sky. It would have been easy to underestimate how dangerous she could be, how many lives she’d ended.

“Present company excluded,” she said with a significant glance towards her husband. “Malcolm’s the most brilliant person I’ve ever met. But every man has his blind spots, and it’s been my job for some time to ensure that his don’t fuck up the country.” She stepped closer, her shadow cool where it fell over him. He was close enough to grab the gun, though he suspected it wouldn’t have gone well for him if he’d tried. “Malcolm promised you your life and reputation, and all of this.” She waved a slim hand towards the things he’d worked so hard to build, the sprawling white beach house, his beloved family inside, innocently sleeping while this madwoman and her pet anarchist threatened all their lives. “I won’t break that promise. Darling, if you would?”

Sundeep did something on the tablet he was holding and turned it so that Lowell could see. There were his various bank accounts—including the ones he’d been quite sure, up until now, that no iteration of the British government knew about—a GPS feed of his property, NHS health records, his entire life in little windows displayed for anyone to see, all of it in real time.

“We’ve been working hard to dismantle the surveillance state you’ve put in place,” Sundeep said, and had it not been for Sam’s revolver, Lowell might have pointed out that it was their lot that put it there in the first place. Though maybe they were both too young to remember that. “The interim government is very much committed to the privacy and freedom of the individual. It’s the first point in Murray’s election platform. I think that’s very nice, don’t you? Idealistic, considering.”

Sam nodded in agreement, showing too many white teeth.

“Thing is,” Sundeep said. “I don’t work for the government.”

“He doesn’t even vote.”

“Never voted. It just encourages bastards like Malcolm Tucker.”

“And Sundeep here will be on you like a creepy Sting song,” Sam chimed in. “Every e-mail, every page hit, every financial transaction, every movement. Should you ever step out of line, the deal’s off. Your assets are seized and nationalised, your name goes on the no-fly list, and Ross Lowell as we know him becomes a non-entity. Your entire life is now in the hands of an anarchist hacker whose family was murdered by your government. Everywhere you go, whatever you do, when you feel that prickle on the back of your neck, like someone’s watching, like someone has their finger on the button?” She stooped, brought her face close to his as if leaning in for a kiss. “That’ll be us, you fucker. You get to live when better men and women rot in their graves. You even get to be rich. And history will remember you as a hero, not as the coward and butcher we both know you are.” She took a deep breath, searched his face to ensure she had his attention. “But none of you bastards ever gets to be free.”

Sam straightened, and the breeze caught the dark curtain of her hair. She slipped the hand that wasn’t holding a gun into her husband’s palm. Smiled, brightly.

Fractured sparks of sunlight danced over the ocean, and the tide, ever higher, rose to fill in her footprints as she walked away.
Only Jamie could make being manhandled off the crowded sidewalk in front of the pub and stuffed unceremoniously into the back of a ministerial car feel less like a violent kidnapping and more like a rescue. The psychotic press-officer-turned-priest-turned-insurgent had been demoted to babysitting duty while Nicola watched the ballot count, deflecting the hack pack and various hangers-on at the polling station with the cool efficiency of a bobby directing traffic until she’d managed to blurt out the last lines of a prepared speech.

“The lady’s said her bit,” he snapped. “We’re away to Westminster now, so you can all fuck right off.” The last three words, Nicola noted, were softened by the small, pointed grimace that was as close to Jamie got—at least in situations that didn’t involve Malcolm or the kids—to a normal person’s smile. Don’t mind me, I’m as soft and cuddly as I look, I’ve no intention to light anyone on fire. Today.

“Thanks,” she breathed out, working at her seatbelt as the cameras flashed a bright glare off the rear window, her heart still threatening to leap from her mouth and make a break for it. Despite the empty seat between them and his less-than-imposing stature, Jamie had already managed to take up much of the back of the car, a messy spread of papers and devices scattered across his lap and over the leather interior. She squished into the door, steeling herself against the inevitable motion sickness when the car shuddered into motion.

“Yeah, well.” Jamie slid from window to window on the tablet, tracking exit poll numbers that wouldn’t be official for hours, flicking past BBC footage of the armoured convoys that carried crates of ballot boxes along roads still pockmarked with the scars of shells and IEDs. “I had 50 quid on ye no’ completely fuckin’ up the lines, so I’ve a vested interest in your gob opening as infrequently as possible. Congratulations, by the way.”

“You too. I mean, on not having to pay Malcolm’s tab at the pub.”

He stared at her, gigantic blue eyes blinking, then barked out a laugh and produced a flask from a jacket too immaculately tailored for him to have picked it out himself. The whisky, a world away from the now legendary Tube arse-wash, burned a path down her parched throat to settle warmth around her lungs. She took several slow breaths and was about to raise the flask to her lips again when Jamie batted her hand away. “One of us gets tae not upchuck on King Chuckles tomorrow morning,” he said, which of course sent a new flutter of panic through her—panic, and a feeling so utterly foreign that it took Nicola long seconds to identify it as hope.

Their mobiles buzzed simultaneously; above Josh shouting excited congratulations through the noise of what sounded like a party, she could hear bits of Jamie’s call. “—fucktarded thundercunt said what on ITV? I’m on it, soon as—well, I’ll send Ella over with a cattle gun to put the flailing dong-gobbler out of his misery, then, if ye cannae live without me for the night, they must have one up there in Outer Shitsville.” She squeezed one ear shut to drown out a near-incomprehensible barrage of obscenity that seemed to happen every time his improbable love life and equally unlikely career intersected, and which ended only as the car slowed for a checkpoint. Despite the fact that it was her own government that had requested the additional security, despite the blue berets and the khaki and the friendly chatter with the driver, she flinched. Jamie stiffened and reached, impulsively, for the rifle he didn’t carry anymore, and she was faintly relieved that she wasn’t the only one who hadn’t adjusted yet.
“Be there soon.” His hands clenched and relaxed, finally, and his volume dropped to nearly gentle. Paused. “…you too. Sentimental twat.” Nicola turned her face to the glass, to the snaggletooth skyline of cranes and wreckage, flushing like she’d walked in on her parents in the act.

And then they were moving again, past the rows of sandbags and the tired soldiers, into the battered heart of London.

It was the strangest election night that Nicola could remember. Hacks aside—and she recognised precisely none of them, God, even from her position she hadn’t managed to get her head around just how many pens the Regime had silenced—a sizable minority of those crowding One Brewer’s Green weren’t members of the Party, probably hadn’t even been political before the war. They’d crawled, apparently, out from under the wreckage to volunteer out of loyalty to or curiosity about her, or Malcolm, or—as was more likely the case—the unpredictable, semi-autonomous movement that they’d inadvertently spawned and that hadn’t conveniently shrivelled and died the instant they’d declared a return to politics as usual. Even with victory almost certain, the mood was restrained, as if the very air had grown thick with the presence of the dead.

Jamie stuck close by her, and for the first half-hour or so, she was granted a tiny island of serenity in the flurry of staffers and ringing phones. Josh and Suzi were weaving their way though the crowd, and she managed brief eye contact with Katie before her eldest was whisked away in a flurry of excited ex-Resistance members.

Despite the throngs, she felt strangely removed from the action. From where she stood (smiling for the cameras, shaking hands, but never saying anything that could be recorded, strangely safe and in control), she watched Sam trading stories with Affers Messinger, a drunken Barry teaching a cluster of slightly less drunk young acolytes the lyrics to “The People’s Flag Is Palest Pink,” and—not at the centre of the web, where he had every right to be, but by a blockade of cardboard boxes jutting out from the wall—the grey scarecrow that no one would have recognised as the man who’d freed Britain.

Malcolm was ensconced in a huddle of staffers, snarling out vitriol into his mobile. From what she could piece together, the subject of his current rampage wasn’t that newly elected rural candidate who’d, in a moment of excitement and confusion, stuttered out something that might—according to Jamie—be construed as a wee bit racist, but about reports of violence at the polls in Eastleigh and Boston. When Jamie walked through the door, Malcolm lifted his head and stared past the wall of eager young things desperate for his attention, across the crowded room for several long minutes before disappearing behind the boxes. It was all the acknowledgment, Nicola thought, that Jamie would get for hours, but at least for the moment he was content.

“He seems happy,” Nicola offered, and immediately felt foolish. By any objective measure, that would never be true, though she thought Jamie understood what she meant.

“Eh? I suppose he is. He’s got what he wants.”

“I wouldn’t think—” Jamie looked at her sharply, as if daring her to continue, and she reminded herself of which of the two had actually killed someone. “—only that I can’t see him as a family man. Settling down. You know.”

“Oh, aye, he’s got the heart of a child. Several, actually. We had tae have a shelf installed to keep all
the jars.” Nicola must have looked aghast, because Jamie snorted. “I meant the election, ye batty mare, ye think anything else matters compared to that? Relax, yeah? You’ve fuckin’ won, or as good as, and we can’t have ye lookin’ this sour once the paps decide tae swarm.” He squeezed her upper arm, the pinch of broken nails into her skin a reminder that he’d still been busting skulls only a few months ago, the pattern of calluses not yet faded from where his fingers had gripped a trigger. “For what it’s worth—and don’t you ever, ever, tell him I said this—but we could do worse than you. Now go shake some fuckin’ babies and try not tae trip over yourself. It’s gonnae be a long night.”

She drifted, dazed, through the crowd, her own face (tired, makeup smudged and fading) mirrored on half a dozen small televisions. She made a few attempts to watch the coverage. It was subdued, lacking in Dimblebies, the swingometer stuttering over false calls as a patchwork landscape unfurled across the vast field of formerly-grey, the electoral map irrevocably altered by Exclusion Zones, by entire constituencies depopulated, by borders redrawn. She had no idea how they’d managed even this much. She was transfixed until a retrospective of the prominent dead appeared on the screens and she had to turn away and force herself to stare at the wall of boxes, to wonder where they’d come from and who had brought them and what was in them, lest she be confronted, not for the first time that evening, with the same pixellated photo of Ollie and Emma in Venice.

She didn’t notice that the quality of the shouting had shifted until someone asked her how it felt and she replied, detached, “how does what feel?”

“Mum!” It was Ella, Katie behind her with Josh and Suzi in tow, wild-eyed and grinning, babbling that the Opposition—or what passed for it, clinging to dusty corners of the country—had conceded. Ella, who’d always given her the most trouble, who’d been her headache and her soldier and her comrade and now, tenuously, her daughter again, was the one breaking through her cocoon, pulling her back to the world of the living.

Guilt stabbed through her mental fog. Once again, they’d been an afterthought, even with the hell she’d dragged them through. She’d have even less time with them, and they’d already grown so big. Perhaps they’d been irrevocably lost to her.

“It’s over,” Ella said, “Go on, you’ll need to say something.”

She couldn’t speak. She’d won a long, grueling game where the prize was everyone hating her. Her heart spluttered, each beat speeding to overtake the next, her entire body suffused with a floaty, indistinct sense of weightlessness. Only inertia and the crowds kept her from falling.

A bony hand gripped her shoulder. Years of practice allowed her to stifle a shriek. He hadn’t lost his ability to materialise from thin air, and she shouldn’t have assumed that just because he looked as close to happy as a sleep-deprived Thestral could manage, he was ever going to be any less of a nightmare to deal with.

Malcolm hissed: “If you want your time in office to last longer than Ben Swain in a cave full of Weeping Angels, you’ll give the cameras a smile, say something fuckin’ dignified and statesmanlike, and do whatever I tell you for the next five years. Or you’ll wish you’d never crawled out of that tunnel.”

Nicola froze. She didn’t remember the script—had there been one? It seemed a thing that Malcolm would have insisted on, except that now the heat of the room was pressing down on her and if anything had been written, it’d escaped from her hours ago. She wasn’t even convinced that she remembered how to speak. For her paralysis, for every time that she’d stumbled and fucked up and disappointed, for her stupid, stubborn ambition that hadn’t let her keep her head down and trudge through life like a regular person, she was about to be eviscerated on a live video feed broadcast to the entire world.
And so she did the only thing she could think to do, which was to spin on her heels, wrap Malcolm in a fierce hug, and pray that it played brilliantly for the cameras.

She felt him slacken almost imperceptibly against her, his face pressed against the top of her head. “You will pay for this in blood,” he murmured, but his long arms closed around her, turned them both slightly aside so that the photo that would run on the front page of every daily in the country showed his crippled hand, the tears that she’d not noticed at the time smearing mascara into the creases around her eyes, and her children lined up behind them. From somewhere in the room, she could hear Jamie making loud kissing noises. She told herself that if the two of them, violent lunatics that they were, managed to somehow balance running the country with having their children not hate them, her own life wasn’t entirely a lost cause.

For a time, she thought, they’d be loved for that image, Britain’s careworn saviours in their tired moment of triumph, their myriad sins forgiven. And afterwards, well. All of history was made of bits of afterward, and they’d do the small amount of good that they could manage.

It was still yet another hour before Nicola could be shuffled off home and various underlings—fuck, the average age of the new Press Office recruits looked to be about 12 these days; had they always been toddlers?—could be dispatched to mopping-up duties, and Jamie’s mobile stopped vibrating for long enough that he was convinced the poor device had glimpsed its unrelentingly bleak future of constant abuse and committed suicide. He was free.

There was no real need for plausible deniability anymore and Malcolm didn’t insist on it, but Jamie still kept more of a distance from him than he might have otherwise liked. It wouldn’t dissuade the wank rags from spewing salacious details of Westminster’s worst-kept secret, except that they’d look utter cunts if they’d tried. Besides, the rumours that Malcolm—who’d been scary enough before he’d had half of London blown to shit—might possibly still have access to actual weaponry and the inclination to use it was enough to give even the Mail pause before it went prying into dark places.

“That’s it then,” Jamie said as the car pulled up. “Our lives, in loyal service to the glorious cause of keeping these tedious spunktrumpets in power, from now until the receding hairlines and the haemorrhoids and massive strokes behind our desks.”

“Fuck you, I’m planning tae live forever.” Malcolm ducked into the back seat, tugging Jamie after him, and flashed a grin very much like the one he used to have, pre-Tom, when he’d been unstoppable and hungry. Jamie was caught off guard—as he’d always be, years, decades from now—by just how savagely beautiful he was. “And my hair is magnificent, ye wee dickstain.”

Well, Jamie thought, can hardly argue with that. Once inside, the cab a hermetically sealed bubble from the press and the Party and the endless parade of shit that comprised the entire outside world, Malcolm slid against the seat and half-closed his eyes, gone suddenly stiller than Jamie’d seen him in weeks. Jamie bent forward, critically evaluating the back of the driver’s head, then carefully moved the corner of Malcolm’s coat aside and ran a fingernail up the inside of his leg. That got him an irritated growl, even if Malcolm was too tired to open his eyes beyond slits, but Malcolm didn’t shove him off.

Experimentally, still watching the driver, he slipped a hand down the front of Malcolm’s trousers. For the endless, excruciating centuries of the election, that hand had been Jamie’s primary sexual partner; on the rare nights that Malcolm had actually managed to make it as far as the bed, he’d been
too exhausted to do anything beyond curling against Jamie’s back and catching one or two hours of
sleep before dragging himself back to work while it was still dark outside. Now, after three days or
so of mainlining Red Bull and presumably sleeping on the floor of Nicola’s office—at least, Jamie
thought, it had better be her floor; he didn’t fancy ordering an airstrike for the next cabinet meeting—
he was, it seemed, more awake than he was letting on.

“Fuck, Malc. I wish I could believe this was for me—” Squeezing, ever so slightly, and Malcolm
moaned and melted into his touch. Jamie’s own cock twitched at how responsive Malcolm was,
snapped immediately back to alertness, at just how little it took to get him going. “—and not for the
Party’s big, firm mandate.”

Malcolm smirked, signaling his obvious disapproval by hooking a foot around Jamie’s ankle and
dragging him closer. “If us in power,” he said, and his voice, hoarser than it had once been but more
than enough to turn him on every fucking time, “doesn’t get you harder than post-structuralism,
you’ve either picked the wrong calling or I’ve picked the wrong fuck.”

“No’ bloody likely, given your otherwise fuckin’ abysmal taste,” Jamie said. Malcolm grabbed a
fistful of his tie and pulled him, his limbs flailing in multiple directions and his head buzzing with
sleeplessness and nicotine patches, into his lap and caught his mouth in a kiss that was more teeth
than lips. Jamie managed to right himself—barely, their driver having decided to preserve his own
sanity by careening like a maniac to get them home as quickly as possible—and straddle Malcolm’s
legs. He was dimly aware that he was only marginally on the good side of 50 and dry-humping a
man who was, technically speaking, his boss again. And in the back of a car like a mouthbreathing
ned on a smash-and-grab, no less.

The car hadn’t quite rolled to a complete stop before they were tumbling out of the door. Malcolm
flung out an arm to stop Jamie from drunkenly careening into his precious fucking hedges, then
pushed him up against the front door of their house (their house, fucking hell, he’d not get used to
that in a thousand lifetimes) and kissed him again, all ungainly angles and blatant disregard for
whatever paps might have been long-lensing them. Jamie might have barrelled through the door and
thrown Malcolm on the living room rug then and there had he not been halted in his tracks by
Aileen, in her pajamas, sprawled out on the hardwood floor, awake long past her bedtime and eating
Hula Hoops in front of the telly.

“Um,” Jamie said.

“Uh,” Aileen replied. It was a small mercy that Kayleigh and Tara had apparently gone to sleep
already.

“We won.” The words were thick in his throat, not yet truly substantial.

“Gathered that.” Aileen was eye-rolling at Malcolm and his uncharacteristically rumpled suit and his
hair sticking up in all directions, and worse, they both looked practically conspiratorial, as though
the two of them found Jamie’s myriad deficiencies as a parent completely hilarious, and it occurred to
him that this really was going to be his life from now on.

He couldn’t shed the grief he’d carried for three years any more easily than Malcolm could have
suddenly picked up a pen, couldn’t make himself believe that Aileen was real even when she pulled
the odd bout of teenage brattiness. There were times, even now, when her impossible existence left
him fumbling for words, like a weight he hadn’t known was there had suddenly lifted from his chest.
But it was easier lately to remind himself that she was a person and not just the embodiment of all his
losses.

Malcolm picked up the television remote and tossed it at her. “Keep the volume turned up, yeah?”
“Just so you know,” she said, wrinkling her face and flicking a get the fuck out of here before I’m scarred for life gesture in their direction. “You two are paying my therapy bills until I’m 40.”

“Sure,” Jamie said, then added, “love you.” Malcolm, backing up towards the stair, gave the funny little half-shrug he usually reserved as a punchline for Jamie’s more specific and graphic threats.

They barely had any furniture yet (Malcolm insisted that the remnants of the Macdonald family home were fit only for burning or ramming up the arses of insufficiently obedient MPs); the bedroom was still mostly a repository for filing boxes, bed sheets tacked up over the windows because neither of them’d had the time or inclination to look for curtains. It reminded Jamie of that dodgy shared flat in Glasgow where he’d lived in the weird period after the seminary, of his confused attempt to find his place in the world before Malcolm had turned up and decided it for him. It was a construction site, like the rest of London, like Malcolm himself, who stood in front of the closed door, his eyes, hard and glittering, fixed on Jamie. The first pale rays of dawn had already seeped into the room.

“How long’ve we got?”

“Ages. Two hours. One hour, at least. I’ll have you begging me to let you come in half that.”

Jamie snorted. Stepped forward and got to work on Malcolm’s tie. “Should’ve just gone down tae Number 10. I could’ve shagged ye over Nicola’s desk.”

“You’d fuckin’ like that, wouldn’t ye?”

“Shit would.”

Malcolm shrugged out of his suit jacket and flopped on the bed. The house didn’t have anything approaching decoration, but Jamie’s rosary had appeared mysteriously, weeks ago, wound around one of the bedposts. It rattled against the wood as Jamie hit the mattress and Malcolm climbed on top of him, and he was aware, uncomfortably, of Malcolm watching him notice it.

“For a fuckin’ dyed-in-the-wool atheist, Malc, you have some strange fetishes.”

“Yeah, and for a good Catholic lad, you suck—precisely the amount of cock I’d suspect, actually. Speakin’ of which…”

Jamie reached up and cupped his face. Ran a thumb over his cheekbone and held his gaze for long minutes before Malcolm’s head dipped to nip at his throat, before there were frantic, clumsy fingers ripping his tie loose and sending buttons clattering onto the floor. Malcolm hissed, “—all I could think about, all fuckin’ night, fuckin’ distracting insatiable little cunt,” and fumbled at a pile of condoms scattered on the stack of boxes by the bed.

There’d be time, some day when their lives weren’t an ever-expanding series of catastrophucks, for slow, patient teasing, to explore the alien geographies of each other’s bodies, but until then, he’d hardly object to Malcolm in exhilarated Blitzkrieg mode, grinding him into the bed. Rocking into him, his tongue flicking at Jamie’s earlobe, swirling across the underside of his jaw, and when release finally shuddered through him, whispered something against Jamie’s cheek that they’d both agree, later, couldn’t possibly have ever been uttered by Malcolm Tucker, former revolutionary, terror of Downing Street, and avatar of psychotic fury.

Jamie slumped, spent, into the soft barricade of pillows that, after months sleeping on a lumpy mattress in the tunnels, still felt wrong. Malcolm had gone back to watching him again, his eyes hooded and inscrutable.

“You came back for me,” he said, finally, and Jamie didn’t know if he meant the prison beneath the
Ford factory, or London, or whether all of it was as blurred together in Malcolm’s deranged feral cat colony of a brain as it was in his own.

“Aye,” Jamie replied. “So did you.” He didn’t ask, couldn’t ever, why Malcolm would entertain the completely fucking *mental* thought that he wouldn’t burn the entire world down, twice over, to be the one who stood between Malcolm and whatever boring twatweasel got it in his head to fuck with him. He curled against Malcolm’s chest and picked up his hand. After multiple surgeries and several centuries of PT, it looked slightly less like a shrunken flesh-toned rubber glove stuffed with broken ceramic and strapped haphazardly to his wrist, and each new, slight bend of its fingers had been won in painful increments. He lifted it to his lips and kissed the swollen knuckles, one by one. Felt Malcolm tilt his head towards the window—too much light already bleeding through, there’d never be enough time, wouldn’t ever be as much as they needed—then bent against the top of Jamie’s head, his breathing at last deepening into sleep.

No one who’d ever been on the receiving end of one of Jamie’s tirades would have thought him patient enough, capable of this. Not the sex—there’d been more than one presumptuous cockwomble who assumed they’d been shagging since the late 90s—not even the relationship, such that it was. They’d both been married before, after all, and to people far saner and more stable than each other. But the rest of it, the times that they never managed to properly talk about, when Jamie dreamed of the ocean, when Malcolm descended into a brittle quiet more terrifying than his rages had ever been. His bad days were less frequent than they’d been at the beginning, but there were mornings when he’d wake up, bursts of breath trying to escape from his lungs, and for a split second forget where he was, when Jamie had to open the window and let the reek of London inside until the tripwire tension fled him. Those were the times when Jamie believed, when he knew that he acted, however imperfectly, according to God’s infallible will.

Jamie closed his eyes and the city, in its shouts and shattering glass and traffic jams, continued the slow work of knitting itself back together, of becoming itself again.

“Yeah, well, if you could remove your head from the cavernous valley of your own arse crack—I can send an extraction team, it’ll be Mary Bell spelunking in there with a pick-axe—you’d see the fuckin’ problem here, which is that I did no’ in fact liberate our great nation from the totalitarian clutches of Big Bugger just to have it taken up the chutney by the Hayek fanboys at the IM-fuckin’-F. The answer’s no. We find another way.” A pause; Malcolm moved the mobile farther and farther from his ear, until the voice on the other end threatened to become a comforting blur of white noise. From somewhere beyond the ancient door, a distant rumble signified that someone, possibly several someones, were at this precise moment trying to be anywhere other than in the path of Jamie Macdonald on a bollocking spree. “The PM? Yeah, she’s in agreement. Well, she doesn’t *know* she’s in agreement, does she, but look, she is fuckin’ committed on this, right? Toodle-loo, fuck off.”

He hung up and ignored the immediate ring that followed. Back to normal, then, if the definition of normal could be expanded as wide as Nigel Evans’ arsehole to embrace a looking glass world where Nicola Murray had been permitted to choose her own clothes in the morning, let alone be trusted with the codes to the nukes. He rolled back in his chair and craned his neck up at the square of unfaded paint left—one of so many squares like it all over the country—from where they’d removed a portrait of Atherton. It was overlaid across the larger shadow of the landscape that had once hung above the fireplace. The picture had been disposed of well before he’d been in any condition to reoccupy his old office, which hadn’t stopped Jamie from riddling that particular wall with dart holes
on sheer principle.

He shouldn’t have felt so peculiarly defensive about his office—just an office, people had fucking died—but it had once been his, zealously defended from the Tory hordes and Julius Nicholson’s re-org schemes, and a conga line of Regime cunts had violated its sanctity; they’d in all likelihood committed war crimes from behind his desk. He balled up an already crumpled memo and whipped it at the empty space.

“Redecorating, Malc?” Jamie said, and just because the wee bastard’s appearance immediately lifted his mood several degrees above pantshittingly psychotic didn’t mean that Malcolm didn’t get to resent him for it. He spun back to face the door, and fuck, he’d have to train Jamie to stop doing that cocky rentboy tongue-flicking, leaning-in-the-doorway thing. At least in public, and definitely when the girls were around. And while he was at it, get him to a barber who didn’t suffer from epileptic fits.

Or, he thought, he could just not.

“Already have it planned out,” Malcolm said. “Big fuck-off red flag above the mantle, the Chancellor’s head on a spike as a paperweight, and his bollocks for one of those perpetual motion desk toys.” He wasn’t about to specify which chancellor, either; it had been the new one, of the much more ordinary and fiscally constipated variety, that he’d just been threatening with a particularly violent enema. “As if I’ve the fucking time. I have a revolution to defend, you know.”

Jamie bumped the door closed. “How bad is it?”

“Oh,” Malcolm said. “It’s fuckin’ massive. Billions in debt, billions more if we’re ever going tae sort things properly. The vultures were already circling before the body was cold, and now they’re lining up to fuck the corpse.” He was mixing some of his metaphors, but Jamie nodded. Neither of them had forgotten about this bit, where you ran the country but didn’t really. Even Mandela’d had to turn his back on socialism in the end, and Malcolm was no Mandela.

“We won’t let them,” Jamie replied with enough conviction that Malcolm would at least believe it until the phone started ringing again. He rubbed at his burning eyes. Noticed, as if for the first time, the fine lines in Jamie’s face, the beginnings of grey at his temples. Loved him (and he could, after all these years, call it love, had to; no one but the Party itself had been there for longer, no one else had clawed their way into his heart and grown there like a stubborn fucking abscess that couldn’t be removed for fear of damaging the rest of the organ)—all the more for it. Neither of them was young or unbroken, and there’d been so much pointlessness, so much wasted time, but time, and that endless hunger, the longing to remake the world, remained to them nonetheless.

They could still rebuild. They could still win.

“Of course we fuckin’ won’t.”

Jamie pulled out the chair and dropped into it, propped his feet up on Malcolm’s desk and picked up the closest stack of papers, as if he’d a fucking clue about EU economic policies and infrastructure renewal. He beamed the bright, mad grin of a serial killer.

“Right,” he said. “Where do we start?”

END
One sweltering night in August, after many, many, many pints, I found myself in discussions with several other local activist types about British political comedies and creeping fascism in our own country. Two things came out of that evening that would occupy ridiculous amounts of my time over the following months, one of which was the Plot Bunny That Wouldn’t Die. (The other being an election campaign that I’m, er, doing communications for.)

Among my notes for this story is a long list of links that freak me out every time I look at them, like the British government texting random foreigners and telling them to leave the country or G4S forging documents to deport asylum seekers or Theresa May or the cops showing up at someone’s house to take down an anti-UKIP tweet. And of course, the European elections. What started as an allegory for some racist policies and government fuckery in Canada became a situation where suddenly, very little of what I was writing about near-future dystopian Britain seemed all that far-fetched.

Here’s where the title comes from, by the way.

Which. Heavy, for fanfic of a show that’s ostensibly a comedy. But important, and it’s not enough to just be depressed about it. One thing I’ve found about this fandom, above any other, is that people in it give a shit about the state of the world. Which is something inspiring, even in the face of UKIP getting a single vote, WTF?

Anyway! Thanks are due—epic, copious, embarrassingly weepy thanks—to the magnificent stackcats and ThornWilde, without whom this story would have been riddled with errors and Canadianisms, and without whose support I’d likely have given up halfway through. Seriously, you guys did not know what you were getting into on this and gah, you are just incredible, really.

Amazing fanart—of which neither I nor this story are worthy—by 1stqueenofmars can be seen here and here.

ETA: More amazing art! AlexKrenin did this wicked illustration; go check it out.

I am incapable of writing even the shortest thing, let alone a behemoth like this, without making a soundtrack. For this thing, I’ve made two. Side A is the chapter titles, Side B is miscellaneous songs that I was listening to while writing this thing.
Lest the notes become as long and unwieldy as the story itself, thanks to everyone who read, left kudos, and commented. Hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

End Notes

Russian translation by the amazing Ewige available here!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!