

The Capture of Jefferson Freeman

A short story about a man in trouble

By Dan Jones

Boilerplate Stuff

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“Jefferson, is everything alright?” whispered Ankie.

Jefferson looked up from the text message at Ankie, and then at the gaggle of journalists facing them in the Space Centre’s Media Auditorium.

Ankie put a papery hand upon his arm and creased her face with concern, showing all her wrinkles. “Are you ok?”

Good old Ankie. “Uh, yes, fine,” he lied. He cast his eye over the message again and clenched his jaw. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and recomposed himself, pressing his thumb and forefinger into the corners of his eyes. When he opened them the expectant hacks were still staring at him. “You’ll have to forgive me,” he said with a tired smile. “It’s been a long, sleepless few nights while we’ve been getting everything ready. I guess in space no-one can hear your alarm clock.” He smiled gamely at the journalists, some of whom raised a sporting chuckle. “Where was I?”

“You were briefing them on the current state of CLADISAT,” said Ankie.

Ah yes. CLADISAT. Sixteen tonnes of dead junk orbiting 500 miles above the Earth. The National Space Mission Centre had lost contact with it almost three years ago. Yes, he thought. Concentrate on the satellite. The satellite can’t hurt you. He looked down at his papers, containing the messages the comms team had prepared. Having the press in was always a chore. Capturing and deorbiting an uncooperative target the size of a basketball court tumbling through space at over 17,000 miles per hour was infinitely preferable to this.

“CLADISAT has been unresponsive for almost three years now,” he carried on. The thought of the text message needled at him.

You owe us.

“Theoretically we could leave it be. If left to its own devices it’d settle back to earth and deorbit naturally after about 180 years.”

You owe us.

“But orbit is so full of manmade junk these days it’s not feasible that CLADISAT will go those 180 years without having some sort of collision. And you’ve got to think, at that size and speed, it could trigger a chain reaction of other collisions resulting in a cloud of debris that could render further space exploration impossible.”

“The Kessler effect?” said one of the journalists, a cute little blonde with a Dutch accent.

“Very good,” Jefferson smiled. “Someone’s been doing their homework. Where are you from?”

“Dana Harbart, Science Today,” she smiled, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Well I’m impressed. Want to join my team?”

More murmurs of laughter through the room. He gave a sideways nod to Ankie, who seemed more at ease.

Tomorrow.

“My team is leading the ENSNAKE mission. The ENSNAKE spacecraft will attempt to grapple, embrace and bring CLADISAT from its orbital position into a safezone. From there it will be towed into a satellite graveyard, away from other operational assets. We’re on track for tomorrow’s launch in French Guiana, while the ground mission control team will remain here in Germany.”

“Are there any questions at this stage?” Ankie asked, using her kindly smile, the one that creased around the sides of her mouth.

Ankie and Jefferson fielded a number of questions, and when they exited the session Ankie took him aside in the coffee lounge and shut the door. “Is anything the matter?”

Ankie had been so lovely to him. Nurtured him almost his entire career, given him this once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity, but all he could think about was the burning in his face. He didn't want to see her right now, just in case this was the time she found out.

"Nervous?"

He managed a half-smile. "A tad."

"I've known you so long," she said, placing a soft hand upon his cheek. He hoped his stubble wouldn't scratch her. "You'll be fine. You'll be remembered, Jefferson. Do you know what the most wonderful thing about pushing the boundaries of science is?"

"Ah, the act of discovery?"

She pulled away with a smile and made two cups of coffee at the machine. "It's that even a failure can be glorious. Whatever happens, you can't lose."

His skin felt clammy inside his shirt.

Tomorrow. 7am. You owe us.

#

Vicky sipped her tea and blankly ran her eyes over the local paper, keeping half an eye on the café entrance. She wasn't a total stranger to the north-east - she'd had a couple of exotic weekends in Newcastle in her younger years - but she was hardly a local either. As the diners flowed in and out she appraised each one with a split-second glance, trying to spot which one was her client.

Bingo. A young woman entered pushing a pram, furtively glancing around. No makeup, unwashed blonde hair scraped back into a ponytail. Strap of her crossover bag caught on the shoulder of her high-street blouse. Stressed. Probably

got ready in a hurry and couldn't figure out what to wear for a meeting like this. It was a Saturday, and she was alone. Vicky knew already what this was about.

"Another 'Where's daddy?' case," she muttered under her breath. She waved at the lady, who came over wearing a meek smile, clumsily parking the pram by the table and extending a hand.

"You must be Victoria," the woman said, shaking it.

"And you're Tabatha," Vicky responded before calling over a waitress and ordering two hot drinks.

"Thanks," said Tabatha, sitting down and rocking the pram back and forth. She was clearly nervous.

"Who's in there?" Vicky nodded toward the pram with wide eyes. Getting a mum to talk about her baby was a sure fire way to get her to distract her from her own nervousness.

Right on cue, her eyes lit up and she gave Vicky a beautiful, warm smile. "His name's Ollie."

"May I look?"

"Oh yeah, of course!" She continued talking as Vicky got up and walked to the pram. "He's almost 6 months now. He cried a lot when he was little – I mean, really little – but he's pretty good now. It's been overwhelming, really; everyone tells you what it's going to be like, but no-one *really* tells you what it's like. But he's my world; my beautiful little soldier. I'd do anything for him."

"I know," said Vicky, looking at Ollie, all tucked up in white and in peace, tiny hands up by his ears. She puffed out a sigh through her nose. Kids. She never liked taking the cases involving kids. "He's very beautiful. A very bonnie lad."

"Thank you."

The waitress brought over the two scalding hot teas before shuffling away. Tabatha smiled again and looked down at the cup. She had a habit of smiling with her mouth, but not her eyes, as if they weren't quite capable of it. It wasn't the first time Vicky had seen that look. "Can we talk about why you contacted me?"

"Yes, of course. Sorry. It's Ollie. Well, I mean his father, really. His name's Jeff."

"And where's Jeff?"

Tabatha shrugged, but her veneer of strength threatened to crumble.

"You want me to find him?"

She nodded, staring at the tea. "He just came into my life like this hurricane, and left just as quickly, with Ollie inside me. I've been trying to track him down ever since, but no joy."

"Tell me about how you met him." Vicky pulled out a laptop and began typing.

"It was a night out in Newcastle. I met him at a bar; he was charming, bought me a drink, asked me about myself. When I asked what he did and he told me he was a mission commander for the space agency. I think I laughed at him, but when he explained it – this sounds so embarrassing..."

"Not at all."

"I found him kind of dashing. It sounded glamorous, adventurous. He said he had to travel the world. We only saw each other for a few weeks before I woke up one morning and he wasn't there. He left just as I found out I was pregnant. He just vanished. He had a mobile number but didn't ever answer, and after a while the line must have been disconnected. I don't suppose I'd have cared otherwise, but..."

"Did he know you were pregnant?"

"I-" she cocked her head, thinking back. "No, I don't think so."

“Tabatha, I’ll need to take a few more details, anything that might help, but if what you’ve said already is true, I think I can find Jeff. But you have to ask yourself why you’re seeking him? Are you seeking him for revenge, so you can get back at him, or are you seeking him for Ollie’s sake?”

Tabatha’s face hardened. She obviously was still thinking about this with her heart, not her head, and when she peered over the rim of the pram her voice cracked just a tad. “He ought to play a role in his son’s life. He should take responsibility for what he did.”

“I understand,” said Vicky, offering a soft smile. “I only ask as this Jeff might not be the sort of man you want in your life again. If he left you once...” she let Tabatha complete the sentence in her own head. “What I offer is a service, but I have to be sure about your reasons for using such a service.”

“I’m sure. I need him to come back, to be brought back to me. You probably think it sounds naïve, but we had something. It wasn’t just a fling. We talked about going places, doing things together. Something might have happened to him.”

“Why do you say that?”

Tabatha looked down at her cup, as if the swirling tea contained the answer. “It just didn’t make any sense. I don’t feel as though I was being conned or anything.”

“Then why now?”

Tabatha stared into the pram. “I suppose up until now I thought I could do this on my own.”

Vicky nodded sincerely. It did sound naïve. But if she didn’t take the case, she’d probably only turn to someone else, someone less scrupulous. She brought out her tablet. “Let’s talk about the terms of the service.”

#

Jefferson eyed the hotel bar menu, his left leg bobbing up and down. All the drinks were so damned expensive here. Eight Euros for a bloody beer? He bit his thumbnail as he thought about it. He couldn't really afford it, but it would calm him down. And he could probably squeeze it through expenses. He thought about work, and his skin prickled with warning. He shrugged it off. He'd worked himself into a place where he was unexpendable. And if the mission was successful, he'd be in line for a promotion, and would jump a grade, maybe two. The extra money would sort it all out.

Tomorrow. 7am.

He looked at his watch - 7pm – and rubbed his stubble. He desperately needed some sleep. The beer would at least help that. He meekly held a finger in the air to attract the barman's attention.

“One of those local lagers, please.”

The barman delivered it with silent style, whipping a black napkin beneath the icy glass as Jefferson held out the banknote. The first swig was long, crisp, deep, and bountiful, and he took a deep breath after swallowing, blowing all the day's troubles away. When he looked up he saw the shape of a woman at the far end of the bar, and instinctively turned his head to see more. About his age, leggy, classy; expensive dress and shoes. She saw him, and looked over. He gave her a smile, and took another swig of beer to calm himself. He shouldn't. His brain felt overloaded, crammed full with all the things around him, all the things he shouldn't do, but couldn't help. The beer was going down extremely easily.

It was after he'd safely stashed the receipt for the second beer that he approached the woman and asked about her, but it was when she finally asked

about him that he leant in for the faux-conspiratorial whisper. "I'm a mission commander for the national space programme."

Right on cue, she couldn't help placing a demure hand over her mouth to try and stop a laugh from escaping, but it was too late. They always laughed. He remembered the first time he told a girl what he did, and how abashed he'd felt when the now-inevitable laugh came back. But he soon learned to use the laugh; what did it matter whether they believed him or not? It's not like he liked doing this; in fact it made him feel faintly nauseous. But time served as a decent analgesic, and he found himself able to push that nausea away and do the job at hand.

After another drink, and confident the evening was going the way he intended, he pretended to head for the gents, but slipped away to the front desk and caught the attention of the effete gentleman manning it. "Excuse me, do you have any rooms for the night?"

#

It was 5:30 when he woke up, and still dark outside. Good. The contentment at the hour lasted a second, before he realized why he'd risen so early. The guilt spent a few minutes beavering at the front of his throat. Maybe he should lie here, and wait for it all to go away. Then the thought of what might happen otherwise hit him.

7am.

The woman – what was her name again? – was still on her side sleeping, all mussed hair and hastily, half-removed makeup. He crept around his hotel room to her clothes, neatly arranged on the dresser. Designer coat, designer dress. He quietly fished her purse from her pocket and looked inside. Cash: 1000 Euros. How much could he take? He took out a wedge and counted it quickly. 800? He looked

back in the wallet – 200 still looked like a fair amount. He shuffled the denominations around, leaving only the smallest ones in the wallet to pad it out. He stuffed the other 800 into a dirty sock and pushed it down the back of the wardrobe, got back into bed and stewed.

His face burned with the unfairness of it all. She could probably afford it. She'd miss it, yes, but she didn't need to eat. Not with those clothes.

It was 6am when he rose more intentionally noisily, waking her up in the process.

"Got an early start," he said by way of explanation as he bumped his way around the room, throwing on clothes. "Biggest day of my career."

"What is it again you said you did?"

He laughed to himself. They never remembered. They all thought he was either Captain Kirk or a lab geek. Once you mentioned "space" and "science" it went over the heads of 99% of them; except the time he'd approached an astrophysics postdoctoral student at a bar in Helsinki – he'd got the hell away from that hornet's nest as quickly as a scolded cat. "Just research."

"Have you got time for breakfast?" she asked.

"Not really. A coffee, maybe." He kept his words and manner terse, didn't look at her. Couldn't look at her.

He stayed sufficiently silent and unfriendly that she didn't even want to stay for coffee, and after she left he sat on the bed with his head in his hands, before biting at his fingers. Would she notice? Of course she'd fucking notice. But when? He glanced at his watch.

6:35. He'd have to check out quick and get back to his apartment, only a short trot away. He could make it. Or he could stay here, avoid them, perhaps? They wouldn't think of looking here.

He took out his laptop and scanned his itinerary for the day. He recalculated the algorithms and imagined ENSNAKE autonomously flying through space, fusing myriad pieces of data together to form a picture in its mind of CLADISAT and making a plan of how it would attack it; its snake-arms extending, twisting, grabbing. Despite all the variables, all the dangers, it was so beautifully clean, how the world ought to be everywhere. He flipped through to another spreadsheet, privately locked, which made him judder. Incomings, outgoings, more outgoings...

Three knocks came on the door, aggressive and impatient. He sat up, tension coursing through him, erecting his back, and put away his laptop. How could they have found him here? More knocks. Maybe it was the maid. If it was, she sounded awfully angry. He rushed over to the door, took a breath and opened it. It was pushed open and in stepped Chahian, forcibly but silently.

“Close the door.”

Jefferson did as he was asked. “Ah, ah, h-how’d you find me? I only booked this room last night.”

Chahian screwed up his bald, bristly face and scratched his chin, as if indignant at the question. He was dressed in the same perfectly respectable, dreary business suit as always, as if he never slept, ate or changed. Jefferson hated his thick German head. It looked as though you could take a baseball bat to it and he’d hardly feel it. All skull, all dull. He wished he had the chance to test his theory.

“You went in, and you never came out. It wasn’t hard, Jefferson.”

“You’ve been following me?”

“Yes. Not me, of course. We have low-level eyes for that sort of thing. Anyway, I’m starving. Don’t make me late for my breakfast. Have you got our money?”

“I’ve got a grand and a half.”

“A fucking grand and a half? You owe us three and a half.” A gigantic hand gripped Jefferson’s upper arm and squeezed, making him gasp. His fingers dug in, and Jefferson let out a wail. “Where’s the rest?”

“Give me... ah, please, please, give me a week. I can do it. I picked up almost a grand last night. I’ve got more money coming in. Please let me go.” His arm twitched and spasmed, as though Chahian might pull the flesh from the bone. His arm roared at him in warning, and he vainly tried to prise Chahian’s clubbed fingers off. At last the thug let go, and he creased up his face with agony, collapsing and holding his arm. He could barely move his fingers. Chahian walked away and opened the hotel minibar, taking an orange juice from it.

“Aw, come on, don’t do that, that’s like 4 Euros.”

He opened it, took a swig and left three quarters of it on the table. Bastard. They knew, they just knew, they could sense it, the desperation. Jefferson forced himself not to cry. Christ, his arm felt like it had been run over.

“Where’s this grand and a half, then?”

“Behind the wardrobe, in a sock.”

He walked over and retrieved the sock, pulling the roll of cash out and stuffing it in his pocket.

“You’re not going to count it?”

“I trust you. Not because you’re particularly trustworthy, Jefferson, but because we both know what’ll happen if you lied to me. Come here.”

Jefferson stood his ground, still clutching his injured arm, but when Chahian stood bolt upright he shuffled over. Chahian grabbed his bad arm, spun him round and yanked it up his back. Pain stabbed its way up to his shoulder like a barbed snake, where it felt like it might explode.

“You’ve got three more nights. Don’t make me have to come to a hotel again. Next time, be at your fucking flat. Why are you staying in a hotel anyway? You trying to hide?”

“No, I-“

“What then, are you a fucking rent boy?”

Rent boy? For half a second his mind filled with possibility, but the thought of it – the sheer probability of such a solution - made him retch. He forbade himself from sinking that low. “Just some space to think,” he said meekly. That, and it enabled him to swindle middle-aged divorcees out of their maintenance payments. On expenses. That was pretty low. The depths he was plumbing made his gut tighten into a ball, hardening itself into armour in case the thug Chahian tried to slug him there, but Chahian simply walked towards the door, before turning at the last to face him and jab a fat finger in his direction.

“Two grand. Saturday morning. Or it’s broken bones time.”

#

Once upon a time it might have seemed odd to Vicky that such a quaint little German market town should be home to a state-of-the-art space centre, but nothing surprised her any longer. It was a rewarding job, mainly, when she was able to track down the beneficiaries of wills, missing persons, and even the odd juicy commercial case; but she soon realized that it came with an unexpected price – she hadn’t been surprised at anything for years. She was unnaturally cynical about the world.

It hadn’t been hard to identify the agency Jefferson Freeman worked for – it seemed he’d been telling at least half the truth when he’d been with Tabatha, and that told Vicky he wasn’t a con man, or at least a professional one – just another guy

to track down. Still, exactly which one of the agency's dozens of global offices he worked in had been harder to determine. No social media profiles, and what little trace of him she found on the internet was confined to old academic papers published in his university days. She'd asked an associate, a hacker who was au fait with the Deep Web, to pull up his credit files. He'd managed it with just his old phone number and address. It made her shudder every time she had to use that service, but needs must. His credit files were illuminating. He'd gotten himself into a terrible mess. Not good with money, then. He wouldn't be the first, and he wouldn't be the last. But the credit file was out of date by a couple of years – he was in a mess even before he'd met Tabatha. Illuminating, then, but not helpful. She'd spent a day cold-calling different agency locations; it seemed he'd moved around a lot over the past couple of years, until she was told by a haughty Spanish gentleman at a scientific test facility in Fuerteventura that he'd been assigned as the lead for something called the ENSNAKE project. A quick Google search had yielded a few research proposal papers from a few years back, and a couple of news bulletins from the last couple of days, one of which showed a video of a press conference filmed at Space Centre mission control in Germany. She smiled as she watched it. Perfect. She'd booked the first flight out here, and now she stood inside the reception office. Just outside the town, it was a sprawling, walled complex that was strictly prohibited without an appointment, which she didn't have. But that shouldn't be too much of a problem.

“Guten tag,” she said to the rotund gentleman behind reception. He was expressionless, generously moustachioued and probably a size too big for his suit.

“You have a reservation?” he asked flatly.

“I'm here to see Jefferson Freeman,” she said with a smile.

He tapped a few things into his computer, and analysed her over his counter.

“Your name?”

“Dana Harbart, from Science Today magazine.”

Tap tap tap. “I see no meeting or appointment.”

“Oh, no, I don’t have a meeting. I was here a few days ago and wondered if I might be able to see him.”

He shrugged and shook his head. “I’m sorry, it’s not possible.”

“Oh,” said Vicky, feigning disappointment. “In that case, could I borrow your phone to make a call? Mine’s out of battery.”

“No.”

“Ok.” Not a problem. “In that case would you mind leaving him a message? Would you please tell him I stopped by, and I have some further questions I’d like to ask him about the mission. For the magazine.” She took out a business card she’d taken from her hotel and wrote her mobile number on it. “That’s the hotel I’m staying at, and my number. If he could call I’d be very grateful.”

The man breathed out in frustration, but picked up the phone and made the call. As he did, Vicky smiled, thanked him and left the queue.

It was about 4pm when Jefferson called. Vicky had to affect a mild Dutch accent, but he didn’t question a thing. He arranged to see her on Friday evening. He’d wanted to see her sooner, but apparently today was the big launch; if she was interested in watching it, she could watch it on internet TV later.

She agreed to do so, and at 8pm, from her hotel room she watched the live feed from French Guiana. There was something wonderful about this enormous thing, unknowable and inscrutable, being sent into something even more unknowable and inscrutable; it was glamorous, and dangerous, noble even, and in that moment she experienced the briefest hit of the frisson Tabatha must have felt

when she met Jefferson. The moment passed when the internet feed of the rocket broke off to show an animated simulation of how the ENSNAKE platform would go about its task: a first arm would grab the errant satellite, secure it, before the second and third arms would grasp it, locking it into a fatal embrace before carrying it gently to what they were calling a satellite graveyard. She found herself damning the timing of it all; could she really upset the running of the mission for her client? It seemed pretty important. Maybe she could just leave it be for a few days?

She looked at her list of things to do. Email Tabatha. She tutted and brought herself back to the present. Nope. She was there to do a job.

#

“It’s done *what?*” said Jefferson, placing a hand over his mouth.

“CLADISAT,” said Luca, one of the project engineers. “It’s changed trajectory. Just slightly, but it could be enough to collide with another asset.”

“Scheiße,” he muttered to himself. That was all he needed. ENSNAKE was making good progress, but if the collision occurred they’d have to course correct before they’d even got started. As CLADISAT was completely dead they couldn’t ask it to manoeuvre; they just had to let things run their natural course. “Which asset?”

“VenZAT.”

VenZAT; Venezuela’s main state-owned telecomms satellite. Jefferson rubbed his temples. They’d financed that with loans from the Russians and Chinese. He hoped to God they’d not tried to botch the space insurance premiums.

He watched as other engineers made overseas calls to the private owners of the Venezuelan satellite, informing them that evasive manoeuvres might be required.

At this late stage, with the lags in comms relays back to mission control, even that was pretty desperate. VenZAT was the size of a small car, but CLADISAT was the size of a basketball court. It'd be obliterated. He wondered how the trajectory of CLADISAT had changed. A faint smile crept over his face, and he covered his mouth to hide it. Maybe the old bird wasn't as dead as everyone thought.

He walked away from the screens and over to Pedro, one of the navigation engineers charting ENSNAKE's progress.

"Are you monitoring the VenZAT situation?" he asked.

"Ah, hey Jeff. Yeah I'm staying on top of it. Shit's gonna go down."

"Good. I don't want ENSNAKE to switch to full autonomy just yet. Wait until we've re-engaged. Maintain low-level sense-plan-react intel. Stay in the loop. We're losing time either way."

"Ok bro."

Now it was just a matter of waiting, which meant his mind started to wander. He bit his thumbnail, and his left arm started to throb, in turn making his face burn with shame. It was midnight already; maybe he could just stay here indefinitely, work overtime, be one of those guys that gets married to his work. He could let Chahian and his loan shark mates trash his apartment, take his things. Even Chahian's fat head wouldn't be able to get past security in here. Perhaps that's what it would take to make them go away... no. They wouldn't let it go, they'd never let it go until it was all done, all paid off, and he couldn't stay here forever. He shook his head, then scolded himself for showing it, and rubbed his face.

"Everything ok, Jeff?" asked Pedro.

"Yes, just, uh, a bit stressed."

"It's ok; it's not us who's going to get hit by CLADISAT," he said with a smile.

"Sorry, I shouldn't joke."

“No,” he said, almost a whisper. “It’s no joke.” He looked around the control room. “Where’s Ankie? I thought she’d be here?”

“Yeah bro, apparently she’s been called into some extraordinary finance meeting. People are saying some of the old SNAKETECH tech demo funds have gone missing.”

Jefferson made a face. “The old projects that came before ENSNAKE? Do they know where it went?”

Pedro shook his head, his eyes glued to his monitors. “Above my pay grade, bro.”

Jeff walked calmly – he hoped to God it looked calm – out of the control room, though it felt like he was floating, and dragging a ball and chain all at once. When he was outside he rushed to the toilets, fell into a cubicle and retched. He’d been careful, so careful. It was only a couple of thousand, and that was three years ago, just to pay off a bank loan, a stupid bank loan. How could those idiots at the auditors miss this for three years? Three bloody years! When his stomach stopped throttling itself into a yawn he sat by the bowl, breathing hard, and thought. They wouldn’t sack him, they couldn’t. Not now. They might not even know it was him. He’d been so careful. What would he say? Deny it. Buy time. He was owed a pay rise at some point, they could take it out of his salary... fuck the payrise! How the hell would he get a payrise if he was fired? He swore at himself again, told himself to think straight. No; this mission *had* to work. If he wasn’t absolutely inexplicable, he was, well, expendable. And if he stayed he could pay it back, in installments. They might do so to stop the bad publicity, and there would be bad publicity – public funds, incompetent auditors... then it struck him.

Dana.

She'd asked to see him. Publicity. He stood up, shook away the trembles in his face and gut. As he washed his face, he went over it. She'd wanted to see him. She was interested in the project; no, *at least* the project. He could give her magazine access to it, exclusive and unprecedented access. The magazine would love it; it'd be great for the education angle. Plus she'd love it, it'd great exposure for her – and the cherry on top is that they'd pay for the privilege. He could set it all up. It wouldn't take long. It was Wednesday morning now; he could set something up for the end of the week.

Before returning to the control room he hung back in the corridor and listened to the message that the receptionist Üter had left him earlier that day. He dialed Dana's number back into the keypad. It rang out to voicemail, so he left a short but polite message, hoping she'd get back to him promptly.

Back in the control room he learned that CLADISAT had collided with VenZAT. The Venezuelans and the Europeans were already working together to assess the damage, but it was difficult to say. A rush of sympathy for the blameless Venezuelans washed over him, but then he turned his mine to the practicalities of the situation. Perhaps a couple of crashes wouldn't actually be the worst thing. Stretch out the need for him to be there.

#

Vicky dressed smartly for the evening – just striking enough to be noticed – and took a seat a short way from the bar. She ordered a single G&T with a lot of ice, and drank it slowly, allowing the ice to melt and dilute it. Jefferson had arrived and perched at the bar about half an hour ago, his left leg going up and down like a

pogo. After he'd stewed for a while, waiting for Dana, she went up there under the pretense of buying another drink.

"Waiting for someone?" she said to him demurely, allowing him to appraise her. His face was gaunt and ashen. Grey bags huddled beneath bloodshot eyes, and his gaze darted back and forth, as if he thought the world was out to get him. He almost flinched when she spoke to him. He certainly didn't seem the dashing international commander; he looked like he needed a hug.

"I, uh..." he looked around, looking for Dana, but eventually sighing and placing his face in his hands in resignation. He knew he'd been stood up. She almost felt sorry for him. She'd seen a lot of broken, lost people in this line of work; all the colours and shades of human misery as people ambled from one disaster to the next, trying to make sense of their unravelling lives. If she could get close enough, she could bring him back to Tabatha, try and encourage him to stay with her and their son; that was why she did this job: to recapture human lives that had escaped just ever-so-slightly out of control. She gently gestured to place a hand upon his arm, and when he didn't flinch, she did so. "Are you ok?"

"I'm just waiting for... waiting for..." and he broke into a weep.

"Hey, come on now. Whoever it was, don't worry about them. Maybe I could keep you company for a while? What do you do?"

He looked up from his arms at her and wiped his face with a slovenly, unwashed sleeve. "Oh, Jesus." He let out a weak, defeated laugh. "What the hell must I look like? Sorry..."

"...Vicky."

"Jeez. Sorry Vicky. I'm having a tough time of it, a really tough time. So much shit, and I thought tonight might just sort it out."

"It still might."

He looked at her with curious, screwed up eyes, as if she were an alien, or an angel. She patted his hand and smiled warmly. "If you want, you can tell me all about it. Would you like a drink? I'm buying."

It was a couple of drinks in when they moved to one of the comfortable leather sofas dotted around the edge of the bar. He'd calmed down a bit, stretched back and face staring at the aggressively modern angular architecture of the ceiling. He'd started to loosen up, which was good. She didn't want him a nervous wreck, but nor did she want him to become too boozy and lugubrious.

"You want to know how this all started?" he said. In truth he hadn't actually mentioned what "this" was. Instead he'd talked vaguely about the problems and injustices of modern life. She didn't answer, simply allowing him to speak freely. "I was in love. The first time, properly in love, lucky in love, you know? And I bought an engagement ring for her to ask her to marry me. You know what she said? She said no, as simply as that, as though that was the obvious answer. It was like being stabbed. She said no, but she... she kept the ring anyway. She said it was a gift, and it was therefore hers to keep by rights. And I was so sick with upset I was no state to challenge her over it. I don't know, maybe she was right; maybe I thought if I agreed then she'd change her mind. She didn't, though. And I never saw her again. I decided to pay the ring off in installments – I can't remember how much it cost – a few grand – but I was so depressed I missed two or three payments. And that's ok, you think, that's ok, I can manage it, just rein things in, take a bit of care. Get that payrise you were promised, but suddenly things weren't like that. You go out for a few drinks with colleagues so you don't lose face, and then another month's gone. I wasn't prepared for..." he stopped talking and looked at me. "Do you know much about maths?"

"A little."

“Variables, variables,” he said vaguely, waving a hand in the air in front of him while wiping his face with the other one. “You think there’s a magic formula for life. And it has a way of finding you out. And suddenly everything was just *chaos*. This,” he said, grasping the front of his sweaty, creased shirt. “This isn’t me. How the hell is this me? And why am I telling this to a stranger? Why didn’t I say this to someone who... someone who mattered, when it mattered. No offence.”

“None taken. Jefferson...”

“Wait.” He raised a hand and sat up, a glint of clarity lighting up his face, and she knew: discovery. That’s what this man was built for. That’s what lights him up. “I never told you my name.”

“As we’re in the mood for confessing a few truths, I must come clean as well.” She smiled again, a kind smile, to tell him there was no threat here.

“Could we go somewhere more private? Don’t worry, I mean you no harm. In fact, quite the opposite.”

He seemed remarkably ok taking her to his apartment – but then a desperate man would cling to just about anything if it was laced with the whiff of hope.

“Jefferson, do you remember a lady named Tabatha, from Newcastle?” she said when they were both sitting at his table. His apartment was uncluttered and immaculately kept: a small, contained attempt at order. And now she was here. She had to smile; life really does throw out the most unexpected variables.

“Yes, I remember.” He smiled at the recollection and stared down at his coffee. “She was really lovely. But that was eighteen months ago. Are you a friend of hers? I never told her where I was going.” He looked up, his suspicions slightly dulled by the late hour but still alive enough to curl his brow into a furrow. “How do you know her?”

“Jefferson,” she took his hand. “My name’s Vicky Anderson. I’m a private detective. Tabatha hired me to find you. She was worried about you. She has a son, named Ollie, and she says you’re the father.”

He looked at her with a mixture of dread and confusion, his face slowly melting. Whether it was in defeat or hope, she couldn’t be sure. But he wasn’t running. That had to be a good sign.

“I’m sorry I lied to you. But this can be a good thing for you. The thing that sets you right. You’re not the first person I’ve seen with financial problems, and I promise you won’t be the last. I can point you in the right direction.” She placed her hand on his again. That was the third time. The repetition would be comforting. He’d trust her. Tears were welling in his red eyes once more. He was done running, surely.

“I’m a daddy?” he whimpered. “With *Tabatha*?” He wiped his eyes with his sleeves and sniffed loudly before groaning and, inexplicably, laughing. “You’d think I’d have learned to embrace the chaos, after all these years.”

“Maybe it’s time you did, yes?” She stood up and knelt by his side as he slumped over his cold coffee. “If you came with me, I can help. Would you like that?”

He nodded, not looking at her, and she slid her arms around his neck, inviting him to place his head on her shoulder and let it all out. *There, there*, she thought, patting him on the head.

She slept on the sofa, but woke with a start when it was still dark, and saw the shadowy outline of Jefferson shuffling a few feet away.

“Jefferson?” She sat up and wiped her eyes, and switched on the lamp on the sidetable. He was shirtless, pale, and hunched over his fists. His eyes shot to

her, encrusted with a white, sleepless fear. She noticed him trying to hide something in his hand.

“What’s that?”

His eyes darted this way and that – looking for an exit? – before he breathed out and hung his head, defeated. He opened his hand, showing her purse. She might have gasped in any other situation, but she actually pitied the man.

“Give it back, Jefferson.”

He handed it back silently, and she placed it on the sidetable. “I want to see it here when I wake up.”

When she woke up again, it was still there. When he summoned the courage to face her again she had already dressed and prepared a meager breakfast of coffee, juice and toast harvested from his cupboards. He drank and ate tentatively, as if he wasn’t built for solid food.

“I know you need to finish your work,” she said as he ate. “Once you’re able to hand over your work, you should come back to the UK with me.”

He shook his head. “I can’t just leave. Have you got any idea the complexity of what I’m attempting at the moment?”

“You’re in crisis. It seems scary, but I think you’ll find employers can be quite understanding about these things.”

He cocked his head to one side and made a skeptical face, and there was a knock on the door. He froze at the sound, and dropped his toast.

“Oh, shit.” He stood up, and backed away from the table, like it was the source of his misery. “Oh shit, I forgot. You shouldn’t be here, not now.”

“Who is it?” She stood up.

“Bad people. The loan shark.” Dread smeared itself across his face and he backed himself into the kitchen window, before turning round and looking out. Her

chest tightened as she wondered what he might be contemplating, and she went to move towards him when the knock came again, louder, more aggressive, relentless.

“Open up, Jefferson,” came a rough German voice. “You’d better be in there!”

“Do you want me to answer it?” she asked him, but he could barely respond. He was clutching his left arm and shivering. With no shirt on, he looked vulnerable, a small creature trapped by a hunter. “I’m answering it. You sit down and stay calm.”

Vicky answered the door, and it was pushed open. When the thick-headed, bald man came through, she stretched out an arm, barring his progress. He had a squashy looking face, with two dull eyes stuffed into its centre. Loan sharks always plied their trade on aggression, on implanting fear in the vulnerable. But she wasn’t trapped quarry.

On seeing the arm across him, he raised a tree-trunk arm of his own to push it away, but when he saw her, he let out a little laugh.

“My my, Jefferson,” he said, eyeing her up and down with a cracked grin. “I see you’ve still managed to find time for the finer things in life.” He moved his gaze across to the kitchen, where Jefferson had pinned himself against the wall. “I do hope you haven’t been paying for it.”

“You’re not to touch him,” she said firmly, looking him in the eye.

“A whore with a heart,” he said. “Nice find. Where’s your patch?”

“Shut up. You leave him alone. He’s with me now. You don’t scare me.”

He laughed again. “Does he owe you money, too?”

“No.”

“Then step back and listen, lady. This doesn’t concern you. I never enjoying hurting women, but I have a job to do.”

“I’ve got a job to do, too,” said Vicky, holding her ground. “You think I’ve never seen people like you before in my line of work? And no – it’s not *that* line of work. I know some fearful people too, so maybe it’s you who should back off.”

He hesitated, his fat face looking at her with a smidgen of doubt – probably more doubt than he usually encountered when pursuing his prey – before raising his arm to her to swat her away.

Just as she expected.

She grabbed his wrist with iron fingers of her own, and rotated it forwards in one flashing sweep, forcing the joint into supination, and forcing the big man to his knees, howling in surprised agony, to prevent the break.

“Jefferson, call the police,” she said, keeping her hands locked onto the thug’s wrist. But Jefferson didn’t move. “Move!” He flinched at the sharpness in her voice.

The moment of distraction cost her, as she let her grip waver just a fraction, and the brute slipped his sweaty palm out. He rolled on his side and brought a huge paw down on the side of her face. Her cheek buzzed with the rawness of the blow. It was more of a cuff than a punch, but with hands that size she felt it plenty. She fell to the ground, away from the door, rolling with him, trying to grasp his huge hands and use his bulk against him. He hit her again, this time in the face, swearing, and her nose lit up, a beacon of pain as something in it gave a little. But he’d sacrificed his defence for a clean punch; she wound her arm around his, rolled herself away and on top of him, lifted a leg across his chest, leant back and *pushed*, securing the armlock, forcing the guy’s arm back over her chest, turning the elbow in ways nature never intended. He roared at her, swearing, even managing to swing a few impotent punches over with his free arm, but she wouldn’t relent. Christ, he was strong! She increased the force, imagining the tendons and ligaments screaming for mercy

inside him, but still the guy wouldn't submit, until she heard a slight *crack*, and the guy shrieked with pain.

She kicked her way out from beneath him, sweating, panting, muscles quivering with effort and adrenaline, before scrabbling away. "Shit," she gasped, looking at his arm. It was bent ever so slightly backwards, his suit sleeves taut in areas it shouldn't be. He writhed in agony, rolling over onto his side, his face pink raw with shock.

"You fucking bitch, I'll kill you, I'll kill you!" he kept saying, sweat pouring down his red face.

She scrabbled to her feet, keeping her eye on him. When her heavy breathing subsided, the pain started to throb through her face. "Jefferson. Jefferson? Did you call the police?"

No answer. Her mind flashed with danger – a greater danger than the thug had posed – and she turned to the kitchen. No Jefferson. She rushed over, looking over the apartment. Relief flushed through her when she saw the kitchen window closed, but a withering feeling in her gut grew as she realized the front door was still open, and her purse was no longer on the sidetable.

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He ran.

He'd grabbed a T-shirt and the shoes from the night before by the front door and ran. He couldn't help it. That woman might have helped him. But how could he be sure? He ran along the road, not looking back. No-one stopped him, no-one called him by his name. He reached the taxi rank by the train station and jumped in.

"Morgen," said the driver.

“Morning,” he said, gasping. “Can you take me to the space centre, please?”

“No problem.”

As the driver drove off, he opened up Vicky’s wallet. Around 600 Euros, and about 400 in sterling. He stared at the cash. He opened up his own wallet, still in his chinos from the night before. Empty, apart from a maxed out credit card and a few loyalty cards. He still had his organisation’s credit card, though. That could be a lifeline.

Who could really say whether this Vicky woman was going to help him? That she was telling the truth? That he really had a son? He shook his head, the thought too unreal to be contained. It was unimaginable, unbelievable. It was a ruse. It had to be. He’d ripped off enough people that there had to be others hunting him down, and he knew not all thugs were as ugly and thick-headed as Chahian. He was incredulous he’d almost believed her, just like that. He couldn’t be so damn stupid again. Mind you, it was great to see Chahian get a taste of his own medicine, the bastard.

He pulled out his phone and checked his voicemail. Three messages from work.

“Jeff, it’s Pedro. It’s Friday night, about 9pm. If you get this, you gotta come back to the office, bro. Shit’s going down. Ankie needs to see you about that finance shit. Bro, she seems vexed. And as for CLADISAT, I don’t know where you are, but it’s all happening. The VenZAT? Ah, after VenZAT got hit, we managed to rearrange the ENSNAKE path-planning to follow CLADISAT. Call back, bro.”

Next message.

“Bro, it’s me again. Call back. It’s midnight. We got a few problems with ENSNAKE’s data fusion, but she’s on track now. Snake arms have been deployed and extended, we’re going in for the master grab. Bro, call me. I want to know your

thoughts about some stuff I'm getting from the autonomy framework. CLADISAT's tumbling badly, and ENSNAKE is asking me for verification of suggested sequences, but I need your eyes. Call me."

Message 3.

"Jesus, bro. We had it, we had it, and it got away! First arm managed to clamp hold of CLADISAT's chassis, and the second and third were deployed. They caught hold – they had it – but the extra mass from VenZAT or something must have thrown everything off course. CLADISAT hit another satellite, some Chinese one, and then, oh jeez, it knocked ENSNAKE's clamps off. The manipulators got damaged, too damaged to complete the operation, and, well..." Jefferson felt his body melt as he understood Pedro's pause. "They couldn't hold on. CLADISAT's gone, bro. Still tumbling through space. I hope everything's alright, bro. I guess I'll see you tomorrow. You'd better be here. People are mad pissed. Anyhow, night. I need some sleep."

He put his phone back in his pocket, his face burning with shame and adrenaline and guilt and trepidation at worse to come. He closed his eyes, waited for the blackness behind his eyelids to become complete, and played out the whole scenario in his head. Space. It calmed him. The closing in, the initial successful grab, the embrace, and the failure. He couldn't help but smile at the imperfect perfection of the mission; the acceleration of ENSNAKE, its identification of CLADISAT, ENSNAKE planning its path, approaching its quarry at 17,000mph before going in for the critical manoeuvre, clasp at the mantle, before, at the last, failing, because of... *because of life*, he thought. He managed a slim smile. Even up there, where it couldn't exist, life got in the way.

He thought of what they'd say to him when he went back to the office to face the music. That promotion and pay rise was probably off the cards now. Ankie's

words came rushing back to him, lodging in his mind like one of ENSNAKE's snake-arm manipulators. *A glorious failure.* He liked the idea of that. He looked again in his and Vicky's wallets, and thought long and hard.

Glorious. He snorted a laugh out. "Driver," he said.

"Yes?"

"I've changed my mind. Take me to the airport."

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