

Monday.

“look Dr. Blake, this is an audit. I work for the ministry, and obviously, the ministry wants you to be able to continue your work unhindered, and if the ministry wants to be happy, then I want to be happy. But for me to be happy, I have to see **everything**, and so I need that tour, and I really need to have that tour today.”

Dr. Blake, in his early 40s, wearing, in contrast to his title, a dark blue single breasted business suit, pressed the button on the intercom on his desk and brusquely instructed the dour matronly secretary in his outer office to “hold all my calls for the next two hours while I show Mr. Jeffries the installation.”

Blake stood, very carefully and ritualistically gripping both arms of the chair, sliding it back very precisely, and then, turning to the window, gently smoothing down and buttoning his suit.

“The Minister told me about you. You’re a very careful man. A very precise man. For your information, I knew Dr. McHaver very well. His loss in the ministry is a great one, and that was down to you. I understand the reasons for his dismissal, but that doesn’t mean I agree with them, and it certainly doesn’t mean I agree with your presence here, which I find insulting, unnecessary and extremely intrusive.”

He turned to face the auditor. “That said, I know you have your job to do, and I’m quite happy if it means I keep mine. If you’d like to follow me, we’ll start with the logistics section, and I’ll introduce you to my heads of staff as we go. I understand you have interviews to complete with each of them before the end of the week.”

Jeffries stood, and prepared to follow Blake out of the room. “If you don’t mind, I’ll leave my briefcase here, I only need my notebook.”

“I’ll ensure Margaret keeps the room unoccupied.”

He turned and briskly left the room, and Jeffries had to jog to catch up with him. The complex was in the rural midlands, with large grounds, and a good miles drive to the nearest road. An agricultural testing facility, the complex was the last on the ministry’s list of experimental botanical operations, and alas, was looking increasingly likely as the money pit which had sucked several tens of thousands of pounds of taxpayers money in unauthorised and badly documented spending over the last six months. Jeffries felt more uncomfortable with every visit, reducing the possibilities with every completed audit, until he arrived here, where he had the task of uncovering some kind of incompetent mismanagement, or outright fraud.

The only part of the Midsomer Downs Agricultural Station visible from the drive was the old Mansion building, leftover from a long line of local landowning gentry. Carefully landscaped woods and grounds hid several large greenhouses, and an extremely modern two story laboratory with polarised glass. Already, Jeffries had noted security measures that he hadn’t seen at previous centres, and which certainly had not been mentioned in his papers on the Station’s history and operating remit.

“The Garages over here are our procurement section. We have a couple of Land Rovers, and two Toyota Hilux pickups. We prefer not to stand out locally, so they’re all plain, and our boys generally try and keep a low profile. Any international exotic purchases are made by Doctors

Griffin and Marcase and shipped to us via UPS when possible and practical. Griffin is here at the moment, but Marcase is currently somewhere in South America. His last purchase is with Griffin now, but we won't interrupt them today."

They entered a large but unoccupied office at the end of the garage building. Several untidy desks, a large world map with tiny red pins affixed in outbound locations, and the stereotypical coffee maker, with stained collection of random mugs. "3 of our current working group are graduates, which I think has resulted in the general downturn in standards." Blake commented as they passed through the office and into the garages proper.

There were 4 bays, each with a closed steel shutter. There were two dirty, plain Land Rover vehicles, nudge bars and mud making them look disarmingly rural. In the 3rd was a Hilux, jacked up and missing an entire front axle, with a pair of oilstained overalls protruding from below the car instead. The 4th bay was empty, but Jeffries was again disturbed by a large steel door, with red warning symbols, and rather more mass to it than any door in a working garage should possess. There was also a yellow trefoil which Jeffries was sure was reminiscent of a biohazard warning. Not that biological hazards weren't common within agricultural laboratories, but the garage?

He frowned, and followed Blake out of the garage. Neither had enquired after the industrious unconfirmed human beneath the maintained truck, but Jeffries took it on the assumption that the individual concerned wasn't important enough to warrant Blake's interest or even his ire. "Next we'll see the nursery, by far the more important section. I'm sorry you couldn't meet Griffin, but it looks as though he might be with Research at the moment, we'll get there eventually."

The greenhouse appeared from the outside to be at least the length of 3 or 4 tennis courts, but the frosted, tinted glass prevented any interior estimates. Blake led Jeffries to a door which opened automatically as they approached. "**This** certainly wasn't in the budget." Jeffries thought to himself as they went into a small ante-room. "Blake is spoiling himself rotten, and his staff. What the damn hell does he think he's doing, GM crop research doesn't warrant this kind of overspend."

He looked up, to see Blake hanging his jacket up, pick up a white plastic bodysuit and proffer it to him. "What's this? I've got this facility down doing straightforward crop modifications, and testing."

"I know, but trust me, my people justified these kind of protocols to me, and I'm happy that we're not overdoing it. Put it on, and the overshoes, and we'll proceed. You'll have to leave your notebook behind of course."

"Fine, but isn't this a little bit over the top? Spinney Hill, Jacobsen's lab in Dewsbury, neither of them had this level of secur—, I mean safety in place, and they have some strains of wheat which the do-gooder protestors have been up in arms over. What the hell have you got which warrants all this malarkey?"

Jeffries hoped that his slip hadn't been noticed by Blake. The security was what worried him more than this clean room rubbish, but he'd prefer to keep his focus to himself for now, even though it was a focus that had only just begun to occur to him.

"You'll see, Mr. Jeffries, you may be surprised."



Jeffries sat on the solitary chair in his hotel room. The village of Shodbury, lay 5 miles away from the Station, and was essentially a large pub, with a comfortable B&B attached. Jeffries

noticed he was sharing the building with a large group of corporate golfers, and a young newly married couple on a tour of the region. He span his mobile phone in his hand nervously. Trying to think of a good reason to ring the ministry, and go home at the earliest opportunity.

Closing his eyes, he opened them again with a start. Images of questing roots and searching vines ran through his mind in the black. He turned the television on, and sat for the rest of the evening, thinking, letting the flashing images drown out the darker thoughts he was desperately trying to suppress. Eventually, leaving the light, and the television on, he lay on the bed, and drifted into fitful sleep, praying that his dreams would go easy on him.



Tuesday.

“My dear boy, whatever is wrong?” asked Blake of the nervously fidgeting Jeffries. The younger man had slept for merely an hour before the sun rose again, foiling his efforts to rest. It hadn’t yet reached 10 in the morning, but he was already starting to sweat.

“I should be filing the paperwork to shut you down in my office right now. You bloody fool, what have you got me into for God’s sake?”

Blake chuckled, “Calm down and get a hold of yourself. Once you see the Alpha, you’ll understand so much more.”

“Understand?” Jeffries struggled to keep his voice level, “Understand? This is a testing station for new plant strains. You have no business building...” he stared at Blake. “Oh God. Building weapons.” He gasped the last word out, cradling his head in his hands.

Blake tut-tutted to himself. Shoving his hands hard into his pockets, he span on his heel, and began to pace slowly up and down the waiting room. “A weapon is only so, when applied as such. This is a species of it’s own, with it’s own biological imperatives. The unassuming *Leylandii* only gained a poor reputation once homeowners began using it as a blunt instrument to annoy their neighbours. You have no right calling our new strain a ‘Weapon’. No, no, that won’t do at all. At least give me the benefit of the doubt today. Let me show you what we’ve learnt so far, and then see what you want to do. I’m sure our betters wouldn’t like to see you so, so, negative.”

Jeffries stared with unconcealed rage at Blake’s far too positive expression.

“You bastard. The only thing I have to worry about is their reaction when I explain to them why I didn’t have your entire facility burnt to the ground as soon as you showed me that damn ‘new strain’.”

Blake laid a friendly hand on Jeffries’ shoulder. “Come on. I’ve had a small thought, and it might be an idea to show you our newest growth, which I was working with before you arrived. I’m sure you’ll be intrigued.”



Jeffries leant, rather than sat on the stool in the laboratory. Blake had changed into a lab coat, and had brought in one of the student interns to assist. The lab was relatively bare, and had been re-arranged to allow for the pedestal to be in the centre with a good two metres space around it. The intern, Sally, moved around the pedestal, at a slow walking pace, sometimes pausing, and sometimes turning around and walking the other way.

The pedestal stood four and a half feet. Perspex a centimetre thick formed a container covering the subject, which followed Sally's every move.

"This is what we're puzzled, and I have to say it, amazed by. There is no obvious visual organ, yet even through the Perspex it can follow movement. Sally, show Mr. Jeffries the limits we measured."

The intern manoeuvred a trolley with a larger, thicker Perspex block up to the pedestal. The new block was three inches thick, and from behind it, it was clear that she could move with impunity, the subject had failed to track her movements.

"You can see those tendrils moving from the bloom?" Blake asked. "it's actually the bloom's stamen, but we think it's now developed into a sensory apparatus of some kind. The lack of visual organ, coupled with the fact it can track a moving object through the glass, leaves us with only one logical conclusion, that it has some kind of extra-sensory ability. We still have a long way to go to test it's whole range of physical attributes. Of course, this subject pales in comparison to the Alpha."

"Oh, of course, pales." Jeffries mustered, with as much sarcasm as his nerves would allow.

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"Don't forget to prime the flamethrower this time. You don't want to lose another finger do you Tom?"

The intern fiddled with some valves on the rather crudely built backpack before putting it on, and priming a pilot light on the front of the nozzle connected to the business end. Wearing a patchwork of workman's overalls, heavy leather apron, gardening gloves, safety goggles and a visor for use with a common garden strimmer, Tom looked like the gardener from hell. Standing in the storage shed, there was a newly built interior section, with a concrete ramp descending into the floor.

"Of course, without the right kind of budget, we've had to improvise somewhat. At least here, we had the pit already dug, which has let us restrict its movements relatively simply. I am concerned however, over the eventual size of the Alpha, and whether we might need to terminate it soon."

Blake walked over to a large thick wooden panel, with heavy black metal hinges and locks, and with some difficulty, lifted it up to reveal a window into the interior compartment. Jeffries stood against the far wall. Almost against his will, he slowly walked towards the window, every muscle straining to turn around and walk away despite his curiosity, his eyes wide, he reached the window, and stifled a whimper with his hand as he saw the Alpha.

Standing almost seven foot tall, moving slowly by its roots, or limbs, or whatever they may be, the bloom twisted around until it was looking directly at him. He started back as the tendril from the centre of the bloom twitched in his direction. Unable to hold himself together, he bolted from the shed and vomited over the wall.

A few minutes later, Blake closed the door behind him and leant on the wall next to him as Jeffries sat on the floor. "You'd be surprised how easy it was, in the end." He put his hands in his pockets, and closed his eyes, reminiscing. "We'd got the genetic characteristics from several plants which showed the necessary extremes. Some work by the Soviets back in '66, which we got our hands on about ten years ago, gave us the basics, and then it was just a 'fill in the gaps' exercise. We have to feed that one quite a bit though, but it only needs to feed once a week thankfully. We have a pigsty at the end of the compound which provides us with enough live prey to herd into the pit."

"Pigs?"

“Oh yes, it does indeed appear it prefers live targets. It will consume dead flesh, but it seems ill at ease, or in as much as an animate plant can appear ill at ease, with dead meat. We think it has something to do with the venom that the sting carries.”

“Sting? That, that, thing..... it waved at me?” He looked up at Blake, with bleak dismay.

“Oh yes. Fortunately, no-one’s died from it, but we did have one or two close calls.”

Jeffries stood up, leaning heavily on the compound wall. “Look. I’m not sure I can go on with this. This is horrific, this is meant to be a peaceful little agricultural station, and now I’ve got a monster on my hands. There’s no way I can keep this from the Ministry.”

Blake smiled, but there was absolutely no trace of humour behind it.

“I suggest you think quite hard about that, I really do. I’d hate for there to be any ill feeling between us when you’ve finished your audit.”

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“The venom is the most interesting chemical I have ever encountered. I think it may prove to be a wonder drug in many ways. After necropsies on some of the pigs we retrieved before the Alpha began to consume them, it shuts organs down in the most ingenious way, and in a very specific order indeed. Of course, none of the results can be released until we are very much further along.”

Jeffries leafed his way through a large stack of technical printouts Blake had put together, and they were impressive, annoyingly.

“And you say that no-one’s been stung by this thing so far?”

for the first time, Blake looked uncomfortable, but only for a fleeting moment.

“no, but there have been close calls. I certainly wouldn’t want anyone to receive a full dosage sting until we’ve isolated the chemical’s actions in the body, and created some sort of anti-venin, or antidote.” He carefully avoided Jeffries’ gaze. “Now, if you want to finish with those notes, I’ll be back later.”

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Wednesday.

The reception desk was unmanned, and of the usual dozen cars in the car park, only two remained. Jeffries walked through the deserted building.

The labs were empty, where the day before, he had seen a busy group of graduates, noone.

Walking back to reception, giving in to curiosity, and a growing fear, searching behind the desk, in a drawer, he found a red badged, but otherwise unmarked entry card. He made his way to the other end of the building, where Blake had shown him the seedling, which had unneringly watched the intern, clearly now he had witnessed the alpha, thinking more of the intern’s value as a food item, than of her movement.

The containment unit had been destroyed, smashed violently against a wall, the heavy plinth upon which it had sat leant drunkenly against the sill of a toughened glass window. The door opposite where Jeffries had entered, had crumbs of earth scattered on the floor, and marks as if something had been dragged out, or he couldn’t be certain, in.

He carefully leant out of the fire exit, onto the metal gantry, and seeing nothing around, quickly climbed down to the yard behind the main building. The double utility door to the outbuilding was askew on its hinges. On leaning in, he was unsurprised to find the younger technician, Tom, lying on his back, eyes open. Holding him away from the floor was the flamethrower pack, the nozzle still clutched in his left hand. On his neck was a vivid bruise, raised puncture wounds within it. His skin was a strange shade of blue.

Quickly, with his eyes constantly returning to the door, he lit the pilot light on the pack, burning himself once or twice in the process. Kneeling on the floor, reluctant to touch the body any more than he had to, he prised the technicians cold grip on the hose, pointed it towards the corner of the pit, where some of the building's wooden frame was still visible, and pulled the trigger. He flinched at the sudden bloom of heat, which he felt singing his face, but held on, directing the flow over the inside of the building until he was sure it was well alight. Then he released the nozzle, walked out of the building, and hurried back to his car.

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The call came on his mobile phone shortly after lunchtime.

“No sir, I completed the audit yesterday, I merely stayed overnight to finish the writeup, which should be on your desk next week. Totally satisfactory, no issues to report. I'm on my way to Braehead now, which should take only a day or so, they're a small unit.”

“No sir, I think Blake is a perfectly competent man, I'm sure we can expect results soon.”