

People upstairs imagine the dungeon is full of shadows, but we don't have any because of the risk. 'No hiding places' was a prime design directive.

I led Danute down to Floor Minus Seven, stopping under a cluster of spotlights at security. With her fancy shoes, skinny frame and knees that buckled together, she looked more ditzy photo-shoot model than high-security lab-tech. The grille began rolling back. A roar of rage sounded, but I wouldn't know where from. On the other side, an endless stretch of corridors linked a honeycomb of nameless suites I've never had clearance to enter.

Danute's eyes stood out as though she was on drugs.

'Don't worry. You'll get used to it.'

'What *was* that?'

I shrugged. 'Disagreement in one of the monitoring suites? Pissed off resident who wasn't given enough breakfast? It's irrelevant. You hear noises but you carry on.'

The grille stopped with a clunk.

'Do you refer to them all as residents?'

'Yes. Seems more appropriate than inmates. But the hybrids aren't my bag. I wanted to bring you this way so you can get a bigger picture of our work here. Shall we?'

We stepped through an archway into a hall roughly divided into living quarters. Beds, armchairs and entertainment consoles stood at intervals. In one corner, artists' materials lay at the foot of an easel that displayed a half-finished canvas of bright red poppies. Between us and the canvas, a slumped figure flicked at a games console, holograms chattering around his head. The face was obscured by a hood pulled down low. Two beds were occupied by prone bodies, invisible under wads of floral duvet. Another was in the process of being made up by a spindly androgynous figure with its back to us. Nobody registered our entry.

'Meet the residents,' I said.

Danute glanced around. 'Not what I expected at all. It's like a youth hostel.'

The owner of the poppy canvas appeared from behind a bedside chair. He folded himself past the easel, and slid into a sitting position.

'A usual first impression but don't be fooled. Everyone here knows we've arrived. They're watching and pretending not to. They've already clocked your age and sex, now they'll be working on your projected strengths and weaknesses. Some see us as the enemy, some as prey, but it amounts to much the same thing.'

Danute's eyes were wide. 'But they're living in a hall together like civilized... I don't mean to be rude, but I'd heard...'

I gave a vocal command and a haze of purple mist shot from floor to ceiling on both sides of the room, leaving us a narrow central corridor. The figure behind the easel vanished. A lump in one of the beds stirred, and the lad gaming the console dropped it and swore.

'Our residents don't mingle in the proper sense. Too risky. Senior staff experimented in the early days but it led to trouble. See the door at the far end? That's where we're headed.'

We began to walk.

'If you're interested in the gene splices, the home screens tell you what you're allowed to know,' I gestured to the units sitting on uprights in front of each section. 'But I'll warn you now, there are some things that Management Team don't even let *me* in on.'

Danute slowed right down to look as we passed. At the third pen, E238 slunk off his armchair and came closer, peering at us. Danute's eyelids fluttered and for a moment I expected her to step away, but she didn't. Her long, thin fingers tapped the home screen with those beautiful almond nails, and I thought: how do girls today have time to do all this? All that filing, polishing and epilating? Getting Brazilians or Hollywoods? This new breed of female were, to me, just as bizarre a species as anything behind the containment fields.

'Hello Martin,' I said to E238.

'His eyes,' Danute whispered. 'What's with his eyes?'

I stared at him over my glasses. 'He has beautiful eyes, don't you, Martin?'

The yellow pupils were split with black. They narrowed. Martin stepped back, opened his mouth, and hissed.

'A snake splice.' Danute squinted at the screen. 'What were Management Team trying to achieve here, exactly?'

I shrugged. Martin's body dropped to the floor in a fluid movement, elongating like a stretched-out concertina, then squeezing in on itself. He swung away and half-walked, half slid into a corner, his bare heels squeaking on the floor. A waft of lizardy odour percolated through the boundary-field. I made a mental note to mention it to housekeeping.

'And jellyfish polyp?'

'In order to self-renew at a cellular level,' I said. 'We'll see it on the high street as soon as the teething problems are ironed out. But nobody wants random ear lobes growing from their arm pit. '

A black 'no access' sign appeared as the screen stopped scrolling.

'I did mention that you weren't allowed to see everything,' I said.

We continued on, Danute lagging and nose-y, me feeling like a parent dragging a child through a toy shop. As we left Martin, he uncoiled himself, rearranging his elongated limbs in the chair. He picked up his book, but it was upside down. His split pupils watched us, unblinking.

In the next section, the bed had been hastily vacated, its covers dragged back. Danute stopped to search the interior.

'E385 is also known as Lucy. She's very shy. You'll rarely see her.'

'Where is she?'

I shrugged. 'Maybe she squeezed herself into the light fitting.'

The faintest trace of a smile lit Danute's face. She searched for Lucy's provenance and whistled softly through her teeth. She'd relaxed already, I could

feel it; the set of her shoulders had lowered, and the haunted look around her eyes was starting to soften.

'I told you it'd get under your skin,' I said, a little smugly.

'What?'

'This place. The work. You've either got it or you haven't.'

Danute flicked a cursory glance to the armoured door with its 'Strictly No Admittance, Authorised Personnel Only' sign, but she didn't ask. The truth was, I had no idea what went on behind it. In thirty years I'd never seen anybody enter or leave.

As we passed R299 he sprang to the back of his quarters, sending a console skidding across the floor. It hit the boundary-field in a sizzle of purple and white sparks. Danute jumped. Though the haze, R299 was visible standing on his head in the far corner.

'This is Amar.'

'Why the hood?'

'Amar feels self-conscious about his appearance,' I whispered, knowing full well that Amar's elevated aural capacity caught every word.

Danute flicked the screen and a black 'no access' icon appeared.

'It's best not to spend too long by Amar. He can get a little... grouchy.'

Amar slung himself from the far corner, twisting his body around mid-air. He slammed into the boundary-field, his arms and legs extended like a cartoon super-hero. The field screamed in alarm and showers of sparks rained into pools on the floor where they twitched and writhed. Amar's face closed in on Danute's. She froze and stared right into it: the enormous circular mouth with its rows of razor-sharp teeth arranged in concentric rings; the muscular sucker-lips; the googly fish-eyes that emerged from the top of his head when the force of the impact dragged his hood back. The smell was overpowering. Danute jumped back at the same time Amar was flung away by the boundary-field's safety protocols. She hit the floor with a slap and scrambled backwards. I leaned against the corner column

and clutched my chest, breathing hard. It was nothing I hadn't seen before - and nothing I wouldn't see again. One of Danute's shoes lay on its side on the floor. Her face was grey.

'Are you OK?'

She nodded, gasping. I offered her a hand up. She slipped her shoe back on without taking her eyes off Amar.

'He shouldn't do that again,' I said. 'The exertion will have taken it out of him.'

'What... *what*...'

'What is he?' I glanced over to where Amar had resumed his yoga posture, hood pulled up around his bizarre features. 'Human-Lamprey. The rest I can't say for sure.'

'What the hell were they trying to-'

'Develop? Nobody ever told me, so my opinion would be truly conjecture. But I believe they had plans for an army of them. They're suckers, you see. Amar and his kind will latch on to any nice soft living tissue they can find, lamprey-style. Imagine what a mess they'd make of a platoon of soldiers, or a band of political dissidents. And they can breathe in water, too. Fancy being able to swim an ocean and then take out an entire warship overnight. No bombs needed. No fallout, no after effects, and the vessel wouldn't be damaged. Whoever ran the Amar-army could fly in and commandeer the hardware for themselves. But that's just my opinion, mind.'