

**The Dark Numbers Chapter 5**

Gary raked open the sliding door and out they baled in shell suits and hejabs and puffa-jackets, shalwaar kameez.

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-

8-9-10-11-

“You. Quick!”

12.

The mini bus was already moving as Gary shut the door.

“When?” he shouted - but Breslin was away around the corner. Gary’s cellphone buzzed.

“Midnight. On the nose. Corner of George Square. Don’t be late. Don’t lose any.” Breslin hung up.

The gang shook themselves down and separated, the men to the left, the women to the right - then they separated some more.

They were all illegals. Ghurghust was Pashtun. The other men were Kurds. Gary’s two regular girls, Nazreen and Samar, were Marsh Arabs from Iraq. That night, Breslin had brought five new women. He said they were mostly Kosovo Albanians. Gary was from Aberdeen. His job was to interpret for Breslin and to keep an eye out for thieving. Gary barely spoke a word of any foreign language. Breslin just couldn’t be bothered struggling with fractured English.

From the edge of the pavement, Gary gazed up at the filmy golden windows of the bank opposite. In the halogen glare of the bank’s floodlights, the soft sandstone of the older buildings all around seemed to crumble. The gang cowered close, backs to the wall, like mice, Gary thought, watching for a cat. Gary shrugged. “Follow me, men,” he said and led them down the street. He pressed a buzzer on the wall.

“Yes?”

“Black Diamond Asset Management,” Gary said.

“Okay,” said the voice in the intercom. “How many are you?”

“Thirteen.”

The voice said, “I’ll buzz you in. Wait till I come down and check ID.”

They were buzzed into a kind of holding tank made of thick armoured glass. It was very brightly lit. Folk walking in the street peered in as they passed the window.

This was the first gig on the night's schedule - the branch office of a big US engineering firm located just off of Nelson Mandela Square. Second slot was at a big pub that used to be a bank on the corner of St. Vincent Street. Then they would head out of town - a two a.m. stint at the factory near Paisley.

The security guy appeared. He slipped round the door without really seeming to open it, just swivelling his hips and clicking it behind him. Then he was in the fish tank too.

"ID?" the guard said. Gary flashed him his card. The security guy grunted. "Now you lot."

The guys shuffled into a sort of line and pulled out their plastic cards with the Bad-Ass Management logo and their bug-eyed mugshot photographs. The security guy in the tasteful teal & grey uniform walked down the line, looked at each card and glared into each face, stooping down to check beneath Nasreen's hejab.

Bad-Ass/Mugshot

Bad-Ass/Mugshot

Bad-Ass/Mugshot – "You're a pretty one," he said.

This happened every night. The security guy (who could be anyone) checked their fake ID. Gary supposed the important thing was that their's was real fake ID. That was what Bad-Ass Management was for – to quality assure the fake ID.

"Seems OK. You their gaffer? Sign."

Gary signed (not in his real name obviously) and they were in.

Like Boxing Day bargain hunters they scattered through the building, pulling polishers from closets, mops and pails from cupboards. Gary counter-signed the COSHH assessment for Samar's bleach to certify that they had had a wee chat about the potential harmful effects of (for example) ingesting half a litre of Domestos in a fit of despair. On most nights, the building hummed with cleansing activity within minutes, leaving Gary to do just as he pleased. He trusted all of them. He figured none of them would jeopardise the tenuous protection and access to a paltry income Black Diamond Asset Management provided. Unlike the average Glasgow schemie-trash, Gary's little gang would count back each spilled paper clip and measure out precisely the required dose of Avatar floor polish. They executed their allotted tasks with the professionalism and precision one might expect of trained surgeons or analytical chemists.

At this point, therefore, Gary would normally be free to exceed his job description and pursue his personal interests in his employer's clientele, their role in the neocon project and in the sordid workings of *Empire*. He knew these interests to be at odds with both the letter and the spirit of Black Diamond's corporate mission statement. "Still, fair's fair," he reflected. "Caveat emptor." Gary, after all, had had no idea what *he* was getting into three months back when Breslin cornered him between the bar and the slot-machine in *The Howff*. Pig in a poke. It served Black Diamond right if they failed to undertake appropriate background checks on new recruits.

"You seem like a bright lad. Busy? Want a job?" Van work, Breslin had said.

Gary thought it would be shifting crates or boxes, courier-work maybe. He needed the money to fund the trip to France. But he soon discovered that the job had a range of benefits beyond easy tax-free cash.

He was working with oppressed people.

He was helping to circumvent the barriers which national governments created to restrict personal mobility.

He was subverting the structures which sustained the interests of global capital.

It was damn near a community project!

Of course, the whole thing was profit-generative in a fundamentally unacceptable way. Most of the cash paid by the corporations for services rendered ended up, surplus value, in the bank account of his apparently somewhat-shady employer. But, given the obvious informality of Black Diamond's corporate constitution, that too could be viewed as a form of resistance. Gary allowed that underworld was an anarchist enclave of sorts. It withheld consent and taxes, was self-sufficient, took direct action when necessary. There was no pretence at *imagining the world anew* however -so Gary decided he would have to open up his very own crack in history on his employer's dollar. Each evening, under cover of a pantomime of dusting and tidying, Gary dutifully ransacked the workstation of any employee who failed to comply with the company's "clear-desk" policy. He rummaged in recycle bins and checked for unlocked drawers. It was perhaps in the nature of things that Gary had yet to find anything of a compromising nature but he lived in hope.

Tonight, however, Gary had novices to break-in first.

Having set his trusties about their allotted tasks, Gary herded the five new girls towards a closet for a peremptory induction.

“Now,” Gary said.

The women nodded to the sound of his voice.

“I’m Gary,” he explained.

“Gary,” they intoned.

“So who are you?”

They formed a bunch, diverse and shabby. The tall blonde in the beanie hat lurked to the back of the group whilst at the front a fierce dark haired woman stood her ground. Between these two, the others shuffled, unsure where to place themselves. Gary picked on the dark haired woman first. She wore a black hoodie like his own over faded jeans. He guessed she was five or six years older than he was, mid to late twenties, sexy in that oppressed/defiant way some of the illegals had. He pointed to her.

“You?”

“Marije,” she said. “I speak good English.”

“Good,” Gary said, wanting to get on. “And you at the back?”

The tall girl looked confused.

“Spashaliska?”

“Kak vas zavoot?” Marije cast over her shoulder.

“Ya zavoot Svetlana, spaseba.”

“Russian,” Marije explain. “Moldovian.”

Gary nodded. “You speak Russian too?”

“A little,” Marije said.

“And you?”

Marije interrogated each of the other women in turn in a language Gary assumed must be Albanian. The women’s names were Besa, Adelina and Klodiana. Marije re-iterated each name in turn. The other girls watched her anxiously.

“Can you speak English?” Gary asked, directing his attention to the three other Albanian girls. They shrugged.

“No,” Marije said. “I’ll speak for them.”

“Will you?”

She nodded. None of the others seemed very pleased at Marije’s initiative. Gary tried to catch their attention, smiled encouragingly.

“OK,” he said, relenting. “You can translate, Marije. What we do here is YOU clean. We clean this place. Night shift. Understand? All night.” He mimed the swish of a mop back and forth across the floor of the closet for the benefit of the other girls. Marije did not translate. Instead she asked, “Are you a relative of Mr. Breslin?”

“No.”

“How did you get this job?”

“Why do you ask?” Gary said, cutting short his pantomime.

“I’m curious,” she said.

In three months in the business, Gary had never come across a curious illegal. Illegals did not do curious in English. They checked things out with fellow countrymen. He caught them sometimes reading notice boards or scanning the instructions on machines or chemical canisters. But they never asked. And they never questioned. And that was restful - for even Gary knew that curious was apt to be unhealthy and anyway he liked having the monopoly on curiosity thereabouts.

“Curious is not good, Marije,” he said.

“Oh?” she said. She smiled. She caught his gaze drifting again in the direction of Svetlana. “So what do we do?” she asked.

“Toilets. Lavatories. Restrooms. Here. Mops. Buckets. Nasreen and Samar will explain. The two Iraqi girls? In hejabs?”

Marije spoke to the other girls in Albanian. The translation did not seem to contain any of Gary’s words or the names of the Iraqi girls. The Albanian girls looked scared. Marije then addressed Svetlana in Russian. Gary noticed Svetlana seemed to relax. She smiled and nodded. She was very tall and pretty.

“I will go with Besa to Nasreen,” Marije said. “These two will go with the other Arab. I have told Svetlana to go with you.”

“Have you?”

“Yes” she said.

“I don’t speak Russian,” Gary said.

“Sign language,” Marije said. “On ne gavareet rooski. Izvenee.” Svetlana nodded. Marije winked at Gary then nudged the other women into motion. Gary directed the Albanians to Samar and Nasreen and led Svetlana upstairs to the management suite.

The management suite was open plan. Its eight workstations were organised around a meeting space blocked off by pale blue whisper-boards. As one might expect in a collegiate business culture, the executive workstations here were ergonomically identical to those of the dataproles downstairs. The superior star-trekiness of the chairs, however, was probably intended to motivate *colleagues*, hinting that there *was* something worth striving for beyond greater customer satisfaction in the value proposition.

“Svetlana,” Gary said. “Svetlana?”

“Da.”

“English? Eenglishski?”

“Niet.”

“Watch.” Gary stabbed his fingers towards his eyes then pointed them towards the door. “Watch. Door. OK? If security comes you tell me – YOU tell me. Yes?” He prodded her breast-bone, mouthed silent words then thumped his chest. “Tell me. OK?”

“OK,” she nodded. “Choroso.”

“Dust. Here. Dust.”

Svetlana set about flapping the desktop veneers with a dry shammy.

Unlike most other areas of the building, the management suite had limited CCTV coverage. A single camera scanned the room from a site above the double doors. This location afforded security with a somewhat restricted view of the space. In fact, Gary calculated, the camera missed a number of the workstations completely. He set about, systematically, testing the drawers of the cabinets.