

# CASUALTY

*Brian Stableford*

Even though it seemed to take every last vestige of her strength to drag herself into the kitchen, Jenny found the impetus to cook breakfast. While she was waiting for the frying pan to do its work, she ate a bowl of bite-sized Shredded Wheat sprinkled with sultanas. Then she ate two fried eggs, two pork sausages, four rashers of bacon, three slices of fried bread and two fried tomatoes. She washed it all down with half a liter of orange and cranberry juice and three cups of coffee with sugar.

There had been a time when she was proudly eating for two, carrying the future of the human race in her abdomen; nowadays she was just ravenous. She had hoped that the food would restore her strength and sense of well-being, but it didn't. She didn't want to vomit, but she still felt utterly drained, hardly capable of movement. She had too much pride actually to crawl back to bed, especially as she had put so much effort into getting dressed, but she collapsed onto the settee like the proverbial ton of bricks.

She called Jackie first, but Jackie was at work and had her mobile switched off. The "Ride of the Valkyries" ran its course and then gave way to voicemail. Jenny cursed, not having realized that it was already after nine. She didn't leave a message. She called the Health Center, where she was due to pick up her Genetic Profile results—and, if necessary, to discuss their implications with Dr. Kitteredge. Her hand was trembling as she held the phone to her ear, although it weighed next to nothing.

"This is Jennifer Loomis," she said, as soon as the receptionist answered. "I have an appointment at eleven, but I can't make it. It's just not physically possible. I know you don't like giving out results over the phone, but could you just tell me whether the baby's Genetic Profile is clear? I think I'm going to have to ask the hospital if they can take me in today—I'm supposed to have three weeks plus to go, but I just can't go on. If I weren't living in a ground floor flat, the stairs would have done for me already."

She felt thoroughly ashamed of herself as she finished the rambling speech. She had always thought of herself as a strong person, capable of heroic effort when the need arose, and she had tried with all her might to believe what the veterans of the prenatal class told her about every first-time mother being taken by surprise by the awfulness of the experience, but she could no longer doubt that something was seriously amiss. It was one thing to be so lethargic that Jackie had to do the shopping for her, but quite another to find it impossible to move from room to room within the flat. She'd got into this mess because she'd heard the famous

metaphorical biological clock begin to tick too furiously, but now its tick had been replaced by the knell of doom.

The receptionist seemed to have taken forever to summon her notes to the screen. “It’s a good job you rang, Mrs. Loomis,” the receptionist said, scrupulously following the rule that required all maternity cases to be addressed as “Mrs.” Whether they were married or not. “Your appointment has had to be cancelled.”

“Well, thanks for letting me know,” Jenny said, unable to inject the requisite sarcasm into her tone. “He’s all clear genewise, then? Too bloody healthy by half, I dare say. It’s me that can’t take the strain.”

“I’m not able to confirm or deny that, Mrs. Loomis,” the receptionist said. “But there is a note here about contacting Dr. Gilfillan. It’s marked urgent. Will you call him or shall I?”

“I’m with Dr. Kitteredge,” Jenny told her.

“Yes, Mrs. Loomis, of course. Dr. Gilfillan is a consultant. It really would be better if you called him yourself. That way, you can describe your symptoms. His number—”

“Hang on!” Jenny complained. “What *kind* of consultant is he? What’s his specialism?”

“I really can’t tell you, Mrs. Loomis,” the receptionist said, frostily. “All I have here are his qualifications: PhD, RAMC.”

“PhD?” Jenny queried. “Isn’t it supposed to be MD, if not FRCS? And what the hell’s RAMC?”

“Royal Army Medical Corps,” the receptionist informed her, with a smugness that reminded Jenny of the general knowledge freak she’d got stuck with the last time Jackie had talked her into going down to the local pub on quiz night.

Awareness of what the voice at the other end of the phone had actually said burst in Jenny’s mind like a bomb just as the baby kicked her again, like a kangaroo taking a penalty. “A PhD in the Royal Army Medical Corps?” Jenny repeated, incredulously. “You mean he’s some biowarfare boffin from Porton Down? What the hell did that Genetic Profile throw up?”

“I really don’t know.” The receptionist’s disembodied voice suddenly seemed quite unhuman. “I dare say that he’ll explain everything when you call him. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. May I give you the number now?”

*You absolute cow!* Jenny thought—but all she said was: “Go ahead.” She

tapped it into the phone's memory as the receptionist read it off, and rang off as soon as she'd strangled a mumbled "thank you," without waiting to be told that she was welcome.

Jenny's hand was really shaking now. She cursed several times. She'd known, of course, that the Genetic Profile wasn't any mere formality—there were horror stories in the papers every day—but she'd had no reason to think that anything serious might be wrong. She had a better than average set of genes herself, and one of the pros of having selected an unwitting member of the armed forces as a potential father was supposed to be the screening that every recruit was put through nowadays. Except, of course, that she *had* had a reason to worry...

Jenny hit the speed dial, not to call the mysterious Dr. Gilfillan but to get to Jackie's voicemail. "Something's wrong with the bloody Profile, Jackie," she said, unceremoniously. "Pick up a soldier, you said. Guaranteed A-one physical condition, government screened, guaranteed never to show his pretty face again. The perfect combination of genetic quality and moral irresponsibility. I knew I should have gone for brains instead of brawn. All that stuff about the tactics of biological warfare wasn't bullshit, Jackie. He really did know what he was talking about, the bastard. Something is very, very wrong, and I think I've just become a casualty in Plague War One. Call me when you can."

Then she called the number that the receptionist had given her. She was expecting another receptionist, but the voice that answered on the third ring was male, deep and authoritative.

"Dr. Gilfillan?" she said, querulously.

"Speaking," was the reply.

"My name's Jennifer Loomis..."

"Miss Loomis! Thank god you called. I was beginning to think there'd been some kind of cock-up, or worse—"

Jenny cut him off, brutally. "There *was* some kind of cock-up," she told him, "*and* worse. I just got your message now, when I called the Health Center to tell them I wouldn't be in for my nonexistent appointment because I'm too bloody ill. Now, will you please tell me what's wrong with my kid before I call an ambulance to take me to the hospital?"

"That won't be necessary, Miss Loomis. An ambulance will be on its way within a matter of minutes, and I'll be on board. Keep talking—I'll bring the phone with me."

"No, no, no!" said Jenny, horrified by the fact that her face seemed to be

welded to the arm of the settee, so that she was unable to sit up. “You’re not shipping me off to bloody Porton Down! Apart from anything else, it must be sixty miles away!”

“I’m not at Porton, Miss Loomis. I’m at a private hospital in South Oxfordshire, no more than twenty miles away. If there are problems, you really would be better off here than your local maternity unit.”

“What do you mean, *if*?” Jenny complained. “You know damn well there are problems. What’s wrong with me, Dr. Gilfillan, PhD, RAMC? Exactly how did I become a casualty of this month’s bioterrorism scare? Because it seems to me that I’ve been hit by friendly fire, and if that’s the case ...”

“Please don’t get carried away, Miss Loomis.” The voice didn’t sound so authoritative now. Jenny had observed that male voices usually lost their edge when confronted with female hysteria—a serious weakness, she’d always thought. “We’ll be with you in less than half an hour. Now, can you tell me... ?”

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be telling me, you bastard!” Jenny screamed, figuring that if hysteria disturbed him she might as well let loose a broadside. “*What’s wrong with my baby?*”

She heard him out as far as “I’m not at liberty—” and then she cut him off. She called Jackie’s voicemail again.

“They’re sending an army ambulance for me,” she said, as calmly as she could. “Some hospital in South Oxfordshire—that’s as much as he’d say. If it were anything really nasty, like anthrax or Ebola, he’d have sent men in moon suits to storm the flat. Flagging my file with an urgent request to call him is pretty laid back by today’s standards, and whatever I’m carrying I’ve been carrying for the best part of nine months, so the feeling I have that it’ll explode any minute, or claw its way out, is probably a trifle exaggerated. That won’t stop them invoking the emergency regs, though, so it’ll be no phone calls, let alone visitors, once they’ve got their sticky fingers on me. Don’t let me vanish, Jackie. If I’m not in touch soon, start asking questions, and don’t stop.”

She rang off, and wondered who else she ought to call. The phone rang in her hand, causing her to start, but the hope that it might be Jackie died when she saw Dr. Gilfillan’s name in the display. She blocked the call and rang her brother Steve. She figured that there was no point trying anyone at the office, where she’d been out of sight and mind since she started working at home in advance of her official maternity leave, and she hadn’t spoken to her father since the funeral. Steve was the only one left who might conceivably give a damn.

Naturally, his phone was off too. “It’s Jenny, Steve,” she said to his answering machine. “Something’s wrong with the baby, and it’s nothing ordinary.”

The army are coming to pick me up. There must have been something wrong with the bloody soldier. I know you blanked it out when I told you about the eating, the kicking and the exhaustion, but it wasn't just feminine frailty. If I don't call you in the next two days, start making enquiries, will you? They say they're taking me to some private place in South Oxfordshire, but they might be lying. This is just a precaution. No need to panic yet."

It wasn't until she'd rung off that she began to think that maybe she was jumping the gun a bit herself, in the matter of panicking. If all this turned out to be a storm in a teacup....

Gilfillan was still trying to get through, so she accepted the call. "Sorry," she said, trying not to sound as if she meant it. "Had to bring a couple of people up to speed. Now, the way I figure it is that the soldier boy who got me pregnant was either a casualty himself or part of some kind of horrible experiment. Either way, I'm carrying some kind of giant mutant that's trying to claw its way out because it knows it won't be able to get out the usual way. Is that about the size of it?"

"You're being ridiculously melodramatic, Miss Loomis," the doctor informed her, reassuringly. "There is nothing wrong with your baby. If anything, he's a little too healthy. If only we'd known about this from the start, instead of having to find out when your Genetic Profile results tripped an alarm, there wouldn't be any problem at all—and the fact that you're as voluble as you are suggests that you're still perfectly able to cope with the stress until we get you into hospital. So please stop trying to make yourself worse by scaring yourself to death."

"So I'm not a casualty, then?" Jenny said, bluntly. "I have your word on that, as an officer and a gentleman?"

"Well," the officer and gentleman procrastinated, "that all depends on exactly what one might mean by *casualty*."

"Exactly what I thought," Jenny said. "Fucked by friendly fire. It's some kind of supersoldier, isn't it? I'm carrying some kind of fast-growing, android, cannon fodder."

"No, Miss Loomis. I promise that I'll explain just as soon as I can, but..."

"I should never have let Jackie talk me into it," Jenny put in, not wanting to listen to a long explanation of why the Frankenstein Corps weren't allowed to talk about their work to mere civilians. Let's sign on for an evening class at the university, I said. Imagine a kid with my head for figures and the instincts of a creative artist. Oh no, she said, your Junoesque body cries out for alliance with Hector or Lysander or the British bloody Grenadiers. Brains are for wimps. I can't believe that I went along with it. It's my baby, when all's said and done. Or is it crown property, given that it must have extra genes cooked up in some secret lab in

the wilds of South Oxfordshire? Do you need directions, by the way, or do you *know where I live?*” She tried to lower her voice as she pronounced the last few words, aiming for the customary implication of menace, but it came out all wrong; the hysteria was creeping back.

“We have your address, Miss Loomis,” Dr. Gilfillan assured her, trying to sound reassuring. “Our ETA’s eight or ten minutes. Please be patient.”

“Oh, stick your bedside manner up your jaxy,” Jenny said. “I’ve got to try to get to the loo before you get here, then back again. Wish me luck.” She rang off without waiting for a reply.

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She did manage to get to the loo, and back again, before the doorbell rang, but it was a close run thing. She even managed to get to the door without having to take a rest en route.

Dr. Gilfillan was very tall and distinguished, and exceedingly well dressed, considering that he might have turned up in a moon suit. In person, he oozed authority, almost to the extent that Jenny might have been inclined to trust him if she hadn’t known that he was a slimeball who had dedicated his career to the design and deployment of weapons more insidious than the human imagination had ever been able to dream up before. He had some uniformed chit in tow who didn’t look a day over nineteen. The ambulance parked outside her front gate was dark green. Jenny wondered whether it had a red cross on the roof, to warn off enemy aircraft, but she decided that it probably hadn’t; warfare had become so unsporting in the last twenty years that today’s guerillas used red crosses and red crescents for target practice.

Gilfillan introduced the chit as Sergeant Cray while he looked Jenny carefully up and down, as if trying to figure out how much trouble she might give him.

“Come in for a moment,” Jenny said, tiredly. “I think I need to sit down while you try to persuade me that I ought to go with you—because you will have to persuade me.”

“I can do that, Miss Loomis,” Gilfillan told her, his confidence seemingly renewed now that he had seen her, and the neat little garden fronting her neat little suburban maisonette. “I’m sorry you’ve been alarmed by your wild guesses. Would it be possible for Sergeant Cray to make us a cup of tea while I try to set your mind at rest, do you think?”

“Kitchens a mess,” Jenny retorted. “Worse state than me. Shall I show you where everything is?”

“I’ll work it out,” the sergeant assured her.

Gilfillan waited politely for her to sit down when they hit the living room, but Jenny hadn't the strength to make a contest out of it. She slumped down on the settee; he took the armchair. He reached into his jacket and produced a thick sheaf of papers. He peeled off the top half of the stack and held them out to her. "I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to sign these," he added.

Jenny didn't reach out to take them. "No consent forms," she said, soberly.

"It's not a consent form," he countered. "It's the Official Secrets Act."

"And if I won't?" she said, trying unsuccessfully to sound menacing.

Gilfillan shifted in the chair, arranging his limbs with more civilian fastidiousness than military precision. "Please don't be afraid, Miss Loomis," he said. "I doubt very much that you'll want to publicize your situation, but I can't tell you what your situation is if you don't sign the document, and that's not what either of us wants. Please sign." He offered her a pen.

Jenny understood well enough that if she signed the Official Secrets Act and then blabbed, even to Jackie, she could kiss goodbye to her so-called career—but she believed Gilfillan when he said that if she didn't sign he wouldn't talk.

"And I suppose the others are my conscription papers?" she said, hoping that she might be joking.

"I don't have the authority to conscript you," the RAMC man told her. "You have to volunteer." He put all the papers together and placed them on the coffee table.

Jenny picked them up. She skipped the Official Secrets Act, and found that the other set really was an application form to join the RAMC in the capacity of "civilian aide." Curiosity was burning up calories Jenny couldn't spare, and she really did need to know what was what, for the baby's sake. She signed the top set of papers and gave them back, but left the others where they were.

"I need to confirm the name of the father," Gilfillan told her, now sounding confident that he not only had the upper hand but the full cooperation of his victim.

"He called himself Lieutenant Graham Lunsford," Jenny told him, putting on her best brave face even though she knew that it couldn't be very convincing. "Very tall, not very dark, and extremely handsome. Have I just got him into deep trouble or won him a medal?"

"That's not for me to say. Was it just the fact that he was a soldier that triggered your anxieties, or was there something more?"

“Apart from your attachment to the RAMC and the fact that we haven’t had a good bioterrorism scare hereabouts since Wednesday last?” Jenny countered. “Actually, we did have a conversation—Jackie, me, the lieutenant and the lieutenant’s friend. Jackie’s my friend. She screwed the lieutenant’s friend, but she took precautions.”

Gilfillan had apparently been doing his homework too. “That would be Mrs. Jacqueline Stephenson,” he said. “Lives at number thirty-two. Divorced five years ago, shortly after your mother died.” His tone was remarkably even, but what he was telling her was that he had access to all the information he could desire about Jackie—and about her. He probably knew about Jackie’s teenage chlamydia and present sterility, let alone the whole sorry saga of her own mother’s cancer. He had probably guessed about the biological clock, and the reasons why she’d gone fishing for unattached sperm rather than wait for the kind of miracle that might equip her with a committed partner and full-time father.

“You had a conversation, Miss Loomis?” the biologist prompted, still scrupulously polite.

“A conversation took place,” she said, remembering how little she’d contributed to it. “Jackie has theories. She spent a couple of hours telling them both that soldiers like them would be redundant soon, and would be already if our military strategists had any sense at all. She’s a great believer in biological warfare. Never mind shooting and bombing the poor buggers, she says—hit them where it *really* hurts. If you want to be slightly subtle, sow the entire Middle East with a virus that sterilizes women. If you want to be very subtle, use one that does what the female hormones in the local water supply are supposed to be doing to our menfolk by accident: feminize them. See how the apprentice martyrs of Global Jihad cope with *that*”

Gilfillan nodded his head, as if he agreed with every word. “And what did Lieutenant Lunsford and his friend have to say in their turn?”

“They said it wasn’t that easy, and that she was looking at the problem from the wrong angles—that the biggest problem with biological warfare was delivery, and after that self-defense. They said it’s hard to produce designer diseases that are more velvet glove than iron fist. For the time being, they said, the trick is to make the most of the genes that we already have. Expressionism is the way to go, your lieutenant said. His mate added that Abstract Expressionism is best of all—which was obviously some kind of joke. I didn’t get it at the time, but I think I do now. The soldier boy meant genetic expression, and it was a joke because the army was abstracting his sperm for in vitro experimentation.” Jenny winced as the baby kicked, expressing himself the only way that was currently available to him.

“Actually,” Gilfillan told her, “the joke was a bit more convoluted than that.



It's an obscure item of rhyming slang." He paused as Sergeant Cray brought in a tray bearing a pot of tea, two cups, a milk jug, a sugar bowl and two spoons.

Jenny usually stuck a bag in a mug and poured the milk from the carton, so this seemed to her to be uncommonly civilized. "Aren't you having any, Sergeant?" she said.

"Sergeant Cray will pack you a bag while I explain" Gilfillan told her.

The sergeant was standing behind the doctor at that point, and Jenny met her eye. The chit favored her with what was presumably supposed to be an expression of sisterly support. It wasn't convincing. Jenny didn't say that she'd far rather do her own packing, because the simple fact was that it would take every last vestige of her strength just to walk up the garden path to the ambulance. Gilfillan took a genteel sip from his unsugared cup, and pretended not to notice the second heaped teaspoon that Jenny had shovelled into hers.

"Okay," Jenny said. "I'm gagged. Tell me exactly how I've been fucked over."

"All your test results are fine, Miss Loomis. We'll probably have to think in terms of a precautionary Caesarean section, given the size of the fetus, but we don't expect any further problems. If you want to bring the baby home after we've completed our preliminary observations, you can. We'll stay in the background, if you wish—but if you'd like to move into army accommodation, to be with other mothers in the same situation as you, that would probably suit you as well as us. If you want to arrange mainstream schooling for him, that will be okay too—again, we'll be discreet—but again, it might suit everyone better, especially your son, if we were able to keep him in a protected environment."

"So he *is* a supersoldier with artificially boosted genes? Have you got a battalion full of pregnant squaddies, or are you mixing up the fetuses in petri dishes and outsourcing them all to *civilian aides*<sup>7</sup>. Is it a long-range program, or are the little Action Men programmed to continue growing twice as fast as normal once they're out in the open?"

"It *is* a long-range program," Gilfillan said, remaining perfectly calm in the face of the attempted onslaught. "It compares reasonably well with the time it takes to get a new warplane or missile from the drawing board to the battlefield, but that's not the point. The nature of warfare is changing, though not quite in the direction your melodramatic friend imagines—and so is the range of political thinking."

"I know," she told him, intent on making it clear that her brain was still working even though her body had turned traitor. "The Age of Reckless Haste ended the day oil production peaked and the price of energy began its inexorable upward march. Everybody thinks in terms of generations now. I read the

papers—and I fiddle company accounts for a living, or did before I decided that it was time to fulfil my destiny as a woman. You’d better get to the bottom line, Dr. Gilfillan, if you expect me to get into that ambulance when Sergeant Cray has packed my nightie and toothbrush.”

“Fair enough,” Gilfillan said, seemingly quite pleased by the way she was handling herself. “Your lieutenant was right about the difficulties of biological warfare. We don’t know exactly how many biological attacks have been mounted in this country during the last twenty years, but the casualty figures have been tiny, even when the agents were supposedly deadly. Even if the flu epidemics were assisted, they’ve done far less damage than self-inflicted injuries like junk food and cigarettes. The days when biowar enthusiasts thought that it would just be a matter of opening a test tube on a plane or filling a cluster bomb’s warheads with contaminated powder are long gone. Biological agents are delicate, and even the most contagious ones don’t spread far if the targets have the sense to move back and wash their hands. The cutting edge of research isn’t a matter of designing deadlier or cleverer diseases—it’s a matter of designing better carriers. Do you know what a perfect carrier is?”

“A Typhoid Mary, in tabloid-speak,” Jenny said. “Someone who can infect a lot of other people with a disease without suffering any ill effect himself.”

“Actually, it’s a Typhoid Mary with the ability to discriminate: to switch his infectiousness on and off, so that he—or she—can target the contagion.”

“And that’s what I’m carrying—in a slightly different sense of the word.”

“I hope so. You asked whether we have a battalion of pregnant squaddies—well, if things had gone the way we hoped, we might have. At present, we’ve hardly got a platoon. Your country needs you, Miss Loomis. And when you’ve had a chance to think it over, I’m sure you’ll understand that you might very well need us. If this were to leak out to the media—and I’m certainly not trying to threaten you, because we’ll move heaven and earth to stop that happening, whether you come aboard or not—you and your baby would be subject to weeks of intense scrutiny and a lifetime of haphazard prying.”

If she had had the strength, Jenny would have laughed— not because what he was saying was absurd, but because it was so obviously true. For her child’s sake, and her own, she ought to be begging the army to let her in, not to leave her out in the open, where the eagle eyes and sharp beaks of the media might only be one of the threats facing her. The world was, alas, full of people who might find a use for the kind of weapon she was allegedly carrying in her womb—and might not want to wait until he was in long pants before setting him loose.

“Well,” she said, softly, “it wasn’t rape, and it wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t even loneliness or desperation. All those years looking after mum while she went

through the chemo three times over, and all the transfusions and transplants, took a big bite out of my life, but I was nowhere near the end of my tether. It was a choice. Go for a soldier, Jackie said. Guaranteed A-one condition, and no complications. And I get the joke now, by the way: abstract expressionism, a load of Jackson Pollocks. Would you like another cup of tea while I make a couple of phone calls?"

Gilfillan's hesitation was only momentary. "No thanks," he said. "Feel free." He didn't utter any objection when she hauled herself to her feet and staggered to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

Jackie's phone was still switched off. "Now I've joined the bloody army, thanks to you," she said. "I'm in the bloody secret service, and I can't ever pour my heart out to you again, even if I want to. I hope you're pleased with yourself. Call me when you can—it looks as if things aren't quite as bad as I feared."

Then she called Steve. "I won't say its panic over," she told his answerphone, "but it looks as if I'll probably be able to call and let you know I'm okay. They'll have to whip the baby out a bit prematurely, it seems, but that'll probably make me feel a lot more comfortable. Hold tight—I'll get back to you when I can."

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She insisted on having lunch before they left, although she had to be content with a couple of microwaved pizzas, a microwaved chocolate sponge pudding, two bananas, an apple, half a bottle of Lucozade and three cups of coffee.

She knew that the ambulance wouldn't have gone unobserved, and that her uncomfortable journey to its interior would probably end up on a couple of DIY DVDs. The neighbours had got out of the habit of talking to one another, except in emergencies, but they filmed everything out of the ordinary just in case. Someone would be sure to show it to Jackie, in the hope of getting an explanation. The exact nature of her relationship with Jackie had probably been a topic of speculation for some time, even though the dull reality was that they were just friends who'd found one another to lean on when Jackie's divorce had matured in parallel with the final phase of Jenny's mothers losing battle against the Evil Empire of Lymphoma.

"Would you like a sedative, Miss Loomis?" Gilfillan inquired. "It shouldn't be a bumpy ride, but if you suffer from travel sickness..."

"No way," Jenny retorted. "I'm keeping my wits about me as long as I can. I need to think about this situation—the upside, not the downside."

Gilfillan looked at her quizzically. Jenny felt a perverse need to prove to him that she really was capable of understanding anything he might care to tell her, in spite of being a mere accountant.

“The way I’m trying to see it,” she said, “is that the military application was just a way of getting the funding. With any luck, Junior’s utility as a strike force will be obsolete by the time he’s in secondary school. Selective contagion is no bloody use at all if everyone has defenses—the city walls will hold off the cannon every time; it’s the long sieges that do the damage. The spinoff from better disease carriers will be better immune systems. By the time my boy starts sowing his own seed, we’ll be looking forward to a generation fully-armored against all disease, accidental or deliberate.”

The doctor hesitated before rising to the bait, but he rose. “I wish it were that easy,” he said. “If I were in charge of the biowar to end all biowars I’d be a happy man. The peace dividend isn’t to be sneezed at—the probes we’re using as targeting aids will be a key phase in the pharmacogenomic revolution, but the trouble with biological engineering—even when it’s only tinkering with expression—is that you can never do just one thing. There’s always spinoff.”

Jenny knew that he was testing her, to find out how much she understood, and hoped that she was equal to the task. Genetic probes were what the NHS doctors used to do the routine Genetic Profile tests to which her baby had recently been subject. Searching out weaknesses with a view to treatment was only a short step away from searching out weaknesses with a view to convenient murder, which was presumably what he meant by “targeting.” As long as there were variations in the individual DNA of human beings—and how could the human race be reckoned healthy if there weren’t?—then sufficiently clever probes would always be able to identify ways of attacking some people while leaving others untouched, if not with hostile viruses then with tailored cancers and other innate catastrophes. Her boy, she supposed, was destined to carry an armory of probes as well as the strike forces that would pick out the targets whose vulnerabilities the probes had identified: individual targets, in some instances, but more often families, and whole related populations.

All wars, Jenny knew, were matters of economics—and ever since the oil supply had peaked, moving history into an era of permanently dwindling resources, economics had become an anything-but-dismal science. She understood that, because she was a tax accountant. She knew, too, that since her son had no choice but to be born into such a world, he would be better off as a weapon than he would as a mere target. The world was still a thoroughly civilized place, in spite of all the seemingly random biological attacks that always spread far more anxiety than the actual casualty figures warranted; the price of maintaining as much of that civilization as possible for as long as possible was a price worth paying, even if it included the child she’d set out to procure in a race against the biological clock. She had no problem with that.

But Gilfillan had mentioned spinoff...

“Where did it go wrong?” Jenny asked, as the ambulance sped towards its

unknown destination. “Why do you only have a platoon and not a battalion? It’s because the fetuses are so big, isn’t it? There’s a nasty side effect you hadn’t thought of.”

Again he hesitated, but eventually he nodded.

“We couldn’t do it by transplanting genes,” he said. “Transforming sperm isn’t that hard, but the new genes have to pair up within the zygote if they’re to stand a reasonable chance of expression, and transforming ova is a very different matter. We had to work with the genes that were already in place, working on the expression process itself. Natural carriers aren’t so very rare, and they’re not exotic mutants. It’s just that their genes work differently—I would say better, but there are costs. Any tinkering with the expression process reduces the probability that a sperm will implant, so we expected the *in vitro* program to fail, and that a lot of the embryos conceived in the ordinary way would fail within the first trimester, but we hadn’t expected the kind of problems that developed thereafter. Your chances of carrying Graham Lunsford’s child to this point in the pregnancy were probably more remote than winning the jackpot on the National Lottery.”

Jenny was ashamed that first thought was regret that she hadn’t miscarried and saved herself the bother. She tried to concentrate on the intellectual labor and the search for the fugitive upside, but she needed help. “Why?” she asked, trying to sound forceful. “Why do they grow so big? Why are they so bloody *demanding*?”

“It’s a matter of imprinting,” he said, having set aside his hesitations. “Do you know what that is?”

She had to shake her head.

“Some genes,” he told her, “are only expressed in a developing fetus if they come from the father’s sperm, whereas others are expressed only if they’re already present in the egg. Every pregnant woman is engaged in a struggle for resources with her own offspring. Every pregnancy is a battlefield, in which the best interests of the child are served by ruthless parasitism, and those of the mother by the preservation of reserves to serve the potential needs of future children. So, paternally imprinted genes work to assist the fetus in seizing more resources, while maternally-imprinted ones work to make the fetus’s demands more discreet. Over the course of our evolution, natural selection has produced a balanced situation, but we had to unbalance it to get the result we needed. Producing the perfect carrier necessitated favoring certain paternally imprinted genes—but we couldn’t just favor the ones we wanted. We had to tip the whole balance...with the results you’ve been experiencing. Fortunately, medical science has given us the means to deliver the baby successfully, so we can get a result that natural selection could never have favored.”

Jenny had to be quiet then, not only because she needed time to mull over

what she'd been told, but also because she was too exhausted to talk—and because the soldier boy in her belly was already practicing his drill.

\* \* \* \*

When the orderlies brought her out of the ambulance on a stretcher Jenny craned her neck to see where she was, and was glad to observe that it seem to be a perfectly ordinary hospital, not a barbed-wire-surrounded camp. The conditions inside were far from Spartan; there was a TV in her tastefully furnished room. When she asked, Gilfillan told her where she was. He advised her against visitors, but assured her that it was perfectly okay for her to use her phone in spite of the equipment.

For once, Jackie answered before the “Ride of the Valkyries” had progressed through half a dozen bars. When Jenny told her where she was, Jackie seemed impressed. “I nearly went there to have my face lifted,” she said. “You could get yours done while you’re in. Two birds one stone, and all that rot.”

“I’m probably in a special wing,” Jenny said. “Only under observation, for now. They’ll leave it as long as possible to do the Caesarean, but I’m guessing tomorrow, if not tonight. I’ve told them you’re my official birthing partner, and they said that was okay, but you’ll probably have to sign the Official Secrets Act. If I start babbling uncontrollably, you might have to join up yourself.”

Jackie thought she was joking, and managed to fake a polite laugh. “I can be there in thirty minutes if it’s the middle of the night,” she said. “Forty-five if it’s rush hour. You want me there now?”

“Not yet,” Jenny said. “Got to go—it’s just coming up to dinner time.”

Dinner was roast lamb and mint sauce with new potatoes, green beans and broccoli, followed by lemon sorbet, but the nurse had obviously dealt with cases like hers before, because she was also permitted to order a packet of Garibaldi biscuits, a five-hundred-gram bar of Cadbury’s fruit and nut and three bananas, all presumably paid for by the army. She only had mineral water to drink, because the bathroom was down the hall and she didn’t want to subject herself to the indignity of calling for bottles at regular intervals.

She refused the sleeping pills she was offered, but began to regret it when she realized that she couldn’t find a comfortable position in which to lie for more than three minutes at a time, let alone go to sleep. She tried to tell herself that it didn’t matter, because she still had to come to terms with her new situation, and its prospects.

She was still thinking about it three hours later, when the door of her room quietly swung open. There was a nightlight beside the bed, so it wasn’t dark, but the glow was too dim to show her anything but the blurred silhouette of the man who

came in. For a moment, Jenny couldn't suppress the fear that this was someone come to steal her baby, even though her baby hadn't been born yet and there was no reason in the world why the army would want to steal him, given that it would work out so much cheaper and so much less trouble to let her bring him up. The absurd panic died when she took note of the fact that the man was exceptionally tall, and realized who it must be.

"Hi," said Lieutenant Graham Lunsford, uncomfortably. It was obvious that he hadn't volunteered for *this* mission.

"You utter bastard," she said. "You knew you were shooting killer sperm, and you just went right ahead. Considering that you must have been trying to get soldier girls pregnant week in and week out, I'm surprised you even wanted to."

"You told me you were on the pill," he pointed out, as he came to stand beside the bed. Standing so close wasn't as heroic as it seemed; he knew perfectly well that she had about as much mobility as a beached whale. "And sex isn't as much fun when you're doing it under orders. You have no idea how much I needed one just *for me*"

"So I lied," she said. "It was Jackie's idea. No, it wasn't—it was mine. Jenny Loomis, walking cliché. Alarm on the biological clock about to go off, no reason to saddle oneself with a bloody husband, no reason why a bloody accountant can't work from home, etcetera. Turned out not to be *just for you* after all, didn't it? It's the medal rather than the court martial, I suppose?"

"What the treatment was supposed to do," he told her— and perhaps his naivety was genuine—"was to make sure that any kids I fathered would be better equipped to live in the future we're heading for. Isn't that what you want too?"

"Sure I do," she said. "You and your mate must have had a fine time listening to Jackie ramble on about the tactics of biological warfare. Abstract expressionism—a load of Jackson Pollocks. If you're here because they've ordered you to be a good father, I'd rather you didn't bother. I'd rather stick to plan A, warts and all."

She watched his face carefully, but couldn't judge the exact extent of his relief. The fact that he changed the subject was a bit of a giveaway, though.

"How much did Gilfillan tell you?" he asked, warily.

"Just enough," she replied, confidently. "He told me about imprinting. I'd never heard of that, but it's a neat idea. The womb as an eternal battleground, where every mother and her child are locked into a struggle for resources. Makes all that old kin selection stuff seem quaintly sentimental, doesn't it? At the end of the day, it's all warfare—even motherhood. We all get caught by friendly fire if our defenses

get leaky. There's a certain irony in the fact that a perfect carrier is so hard to carry to term...but I can see the upside now. You're absolutely right about my kid being better equipped than most to live in the future we're designing. And I can see the next step in the argument, too—the side effects side effect. I can see the *real* weapons potential.”

Lieutenant Lunsford hesitated a lot longer than Dr. Gilfillan had, and when he did speak, all he said was: “Ah.”

“Jackie was right, wasn't she?” Jenny said. “Okay, maybe it's not that easy to design, manufacture or spread viruses that will sterilize women or feminize men—but that's not the name of the game, is it? Expressionism is the way to go. You don't have to invent bioweapons when they're already built in, when all you have to do is upset the balance of power. You don't have to sterilize women if you have a means of doing to them what you've done to me ... or the opposite. It really doesn't matter, weaponwise, whether it's the mother or the fetus that gets the upper hand in the eternal struggle—just so long as natural selection's carefully negotiated balance is upset. Either the kids become too difficult to carry, or they're starved of resources before birth. A lose-lose situation—unless, of course, you're the enemy. Which we will be. After all, we're the ones with the fancy hospitals and the hi-tech medicine. As usual, it'll be the rich that get the pleasure, and the poor that pay the price.”

“You're a tax accountant,” the lieutenant said, brutally. “Would you want it any other way?”

“Speaking as an early casualty in this particular war,” Jenny said, “no. But I still think you're an utter bastard, whether I lied about the pill or not. You can't excuse the casualties of friendly fire by saying that you thought they were wearing flak jackets.”

“You're right,” he said, although his heart wasn't in it. “But if you need me, I'm around. All you have to do is ask. Your son is my only child, so far, and the way things are going, he might have to wait quite a while for a little brother or sister—so I'm not sorry about what happened, all things considered.”

Jenny opened her to mouth to say “I am,” but she couldn't shape the words. She was exhausted, she was being kicked black and blue from inside, she was paranoid, and she was probably even a little delirious, but she couldn't quite manage to be sorry. She was a victim of friendly fire, and she was carrying the spawn of Satan, and she was a complete idiot, and she was *extremely* hungry, but she couldn't quite manage to be sorry. After all, her perfect, healthy, glorious baby boy might still grow up to be an actor, or a lawyer, or a brain surgeon, even if he did have to do his national service as a secret weapon... and if progress moved on, he had twenty years to become redundant in that capacity.

“You can go now,” she said to him, eventually. “I think I might be able to go



to sleep now.

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For breakfast Jenny had a big bowl of cornflakes sprinkled with sultanas, followed by three croissants with butter and strawberry jam, a bowl of mixed fruits, including slices of melon, pineapple, oranges and kiwifruit, washed down with half a liter of apple and mango juice and a single cup of black coffee without sugar. Then she had a couple of rounds of toast with butter and lime marmalade. She'd never felt so virtuous in all her life, but she would have killed for half a dozen rashers of crispy bacon.

When she'd finished, she called Jackie. Jackie was already at work, but this time she had her mobile switched on. "I'm ready," she said. "Just say the word, and I'll be there before the contractions have got into gear."

"It's not time yet," Jenny assured her. "Any day now, any way now, I *shall* be released—but I'm hoping not before lunchtime."

"You sound a lot saner than you did yesterday," Jackie observed.

"I was always sane," Jenny assured her. "It's the world that's mad. I saw Lieutenant Lunsford again, but he didn't seem to enjoy it. He's glad he's a dad, I think, but that doesn't mean he wants to complete the mission. Isn't it always the way?"

"Great to hear you so cheerful," Jackie said. "Must go now. Get them to call me the minute the dam bursts."

"I will," Jenny assured her. Then she called Steve. Miraculously, he answered too.

"It's okay," she told him. "The kid's healthy, and I'm in safe hands. Expect to be an uncle some time in the next twenty-four hours."

"What the hell was all that stuff about the army picking you up?" Steve wanted to know.

"I've joined up. I can't explain why—it's a need-to-know sort of thing. I'm okay, though. As well as can be expected, and maybe better. I'll call when I can. Bye."

She put the phone under her pillow, wondering how long it would be before they served lunch, and whether they'd let her have elevenses between. She was, after all, eating for two—and there was a war on.