

THE HIDDEN REALM

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Prologue

For the third time in as many months the Group of Nine convened in a subterranean room. Onyx walls, a marble ceiling and floor, ensured isolation from detection or infiltration; protected from any attack.

This time the US representative chaired the meeting. As always for these meetings he wore the navy-blue ‘patriot’ uniform: understated yet authoritative in accordance with the others.

‘So, conclusions to evaluation report seven.’ He looked across a long dark and reflective glass table to his appointed second, the Russian representative.

‘There have been rumblings of discontent in Moscow over the cyber espionage incident,’ the man replied. ‘Intelligence operatives suspect their old superpower foe, and insider bribery.’

‘Why not an *outsider* – a Cyber-mercenary or a hacker just wanting to make a fast buck?’

‘No one, they believe, can penetrate their key files, because of such deep level encryption behind a *Fortress* firewall,’ No.2 said. ‘They think it had to be only one of a top level of personnel with clearance.’

‘Sold out, huh, with the chance of a life of luxury – is that convincing?’

‘It’s not as if they’ve renounced their culture of austerity,’ commented No.3, the overseer for Western Europe.

No.2 said: ‘We carefully selected the most likely candidate and planted the necessary evidence, removed him and altered his identity.’

‘Well, in any case,’ said No.4, Eastern Europe’s overseer, ‘who would ever suspect the man at the top being in on it?’ He then chuckled briefly.

‘I am confident no one will ever make the link,’ affirmed No.1. ‘Only the US has a strategic interest – and they’d go to any lengths to secure an advantage.’

‘Indeed, if only for security – the old paranoia.’

The evaluation was agreed by a majority vote. Stage three had been a success.

Chapter 1

It was in many ways a typical night for mid June. Only now had the heat of the day noticeably faded. At least here, in a moonlit bay facing the English Channel, he felt cooler.

Approaching eleven, the last bit of daylight had finally drained from the horizon. He'd been here for about half an hour, stood on the arm of this sea-defence barrier, elbows resting on its smooth metre-high wall. He looked below him to see lines of yachts moored along jetties, sleek in their own uniquely opulent designs. A few others beyond the harbour's embrace, luminescent in pastel tones, cutting across the calm water towards ... *Doesn't matter really*, he thought. It seemed everyone just wanted the chance to get away from land. The sea was a place of untrammelled freedom.

In the other reality it could all be his, instantly, with a single voice command. One day it would be so convincing he'd have nothing to question. How distant that prospect seemed, as out of reach as one of those yachts. But something *had* changed; his experiments were yielding significant results, and this recent success had been recognised ... though not just by anyone.

In his thoughtpattern-capture diary, he recorded: entry-462 <You may wonder why I allowed her first level access to my research when secrecy is of paramount importance. It is simply because she understands; she sees my vision. There comes a time when one must emerge from hiding. A world in which no one can be trusted is a world without progress, without hope.>

A TCD seemed to be the only safe way of information storage; and yet even an implanted device was not guaranteed to be impervious to the infiltration of corporate thieves with their Trojans.

Thursday night at La Tolina, a place of soft lighting and equally soft music. She had suggested the meeting; he suggested the location. By the time they reached their table the restaurant had emptied to only a few lingering couples.

Monique was there before him about a metre away. An imposingly large candle in the centre gave a generous glow. As she peered down at her menu, Gerrid took in her extraordinary form. To him she seemed too good to be true.

Entry-481 <Monique Bellishi appears to have every quality in even measure. Perfection unmatched, unrivaled, by any simulacrum. Who could ever ascend to her standards?> Sub entry <Gerrid Lytum: destined for great things, not just the nerd dismissed by others as a bit weird but essentially harmless. I've finally achieved what others would have derisively thought impossible; I'm actually on a *date* with her. Of course, it's cautiously disguised under the pretext of a journalistic interview for her apprenticeship at *Science World Interactive*. But she knows what this place means.>

The waiter arrived; Gerrid thought he detected a look of disdain in his direction, a what's-a-geeky-guy-like-you-doing-with-a-beautiful-woman type look. *Stop it! You're being paranoid*. He wondered if his age would draw attention; only a few weeks turned twenty, he must certainly be the youngest there.

They both agreed on the vegetarian lite option, ideal for late evening.

‘This is all being recorded for SWI,’ she said; her voice had the precise English tones he would expect to hear in an archive newscast. ‘But don’t worry, I won’t ask you to reveal *all* your secrets. These are just standard questions, to give a general overview.’

‘Sure. That won’t be a problem.’ Gerrid finished the remainder of his wine, and watched as the warm light played in muted patterns on her skin.

‘You have some quite original ideas in your thesis on artificial reality constructs – the potential use of evolutionary AI simulacrum software....’

They discussed the world-enhancing possibilities.

After a while he felt certain: this must be the real thing. It was all just perfect.

So afterwards, once she had completed requisite interview, it was time to make his move.

Outside, on a nearby terrace, they stood in the jasmine-suffused air. Stars glimmered beyond a dark line of trees. A yellow glow from paper lanterns above, just enough to highlight her dark hair caught in the warm breeze.

She seemed grateful for his insight into his field of study. Sure, he’d revealed concepts, applications of theories no one had discovered. But she needed to know his potential, for her to be included – willingly – in his scheme.

Maybe it was intoxication from the drinks or various factors in the general ambiance. He moved forward, slight clumsiness at first, and kissed her full on. The moment was complete. And for a few seconds she put up no resistance ... until her gentle rejection became increasingly forceful.

A wave of sobriety hit Gerrid. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, looking to the ground. Except he wasn’t sorry. But she’d rejected him.

‘I do like you, Gerrid,’ Monique said gently, though precisely. ‘But I didn’t mean to give you the wrong impression.’

‘So I guess I’m not good enough for someone of your high standards.’ Gerrid looked up at her. ‘You think I’m too *young*?’ He sounded like the hurt teenager he thought he’d left long behind.

‘Gerrid, you have so much to offer. I’m sure there are plenty of girls out there....’

It didn’t matter; he realised that now. Away from the emotion, in the cool blue light of his apartment, he could set in place his original scheme – only without her willing compliance.

The Multiwave imager had recorded a multitude of physiological information. It would be the most perfect simulacrum of Monique Bellishi that technology allowed, right down to the length of her fingernails. Except it wouldn’t *really* be her in any more than an outward physical appearance. At best, the scanning resolution had only recorded down to the micron (5-unit) level, and almost entirely from that restaurant meeting. It wasn’t enough; he would still have to use AI software to complete the picture – and add in a compliancy sub-routine of his own tailoring: the *piece de resistance*, he thought.

Entry-537 <I know what people want. Hikiro Tanoshi thought he knew it, he had the basics – the unrefined tech – but he failed to synthesize the knowledge. The virtual

communities where people indulge their most outlandish fantasies: real minds and invented bodies. He failed to anticipate the conflicts, the relationship break-ups. My solution? To create an entirely artificial community. No directly interacting avatars but instead based on real people, with optional tweaks tailored to the individual's preference. The problem – the bane of my work – is to make it all seem authentic. Perhaps you could switch from shared communities to individual ones when it all gets too much. It's all about convincing the percipient that it's not merely an escape ... but *real*.>

From the near-darkness of his bedroom, Gerrid slid a plastic band over his forehead; its dropped eye-shields pushing rubber cups, like old-style binoculars, to create a seal. He patched himself in. Still a prototype, the neural-interface array was only based on the standard AR model but with a few modifications for increased resolution; the psychotropic-stim routine hadn't been fully tested for safety. *But how more virtuous for me to be the guinea pig!*

A shift from rational focus, not quite like a dream, but a slight diminution of his analytical abilities. That was good: you couldn't function with a full critical perception *and* believe.

She stood there. Her: the girl of his dreams. The surroundings almost seemed irrelevant, but they were not what he would've expected. A white, rather austere, partially lit room. He expected something more conducive, similar to the restaurant terrace or somewhere more private. There was, nonetheless, a faint fluorescence to her. Subtle perfume an enticing gesture. Strategically exposed flesh, revealing and concealing in a tantalising concoction of sexual promise with coquettish allure.

'Monique?' It wasn't really meant as a question of her identity, more a cue for her to be ... her.

'Well done, Gerrid,' she said without any detectable irony. 'I know what you're expecting, but it will have to wait.'

'Huh?' His mind began to race, but he couldn't formulate an adequate explanation whilst immersed.

'Allow me to explain. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with any compliancy protocol. That part of the program has been overridden ... temporarily.'

'How can--'

'I know about the imaging device and I have known all about your work for some time, that is why I've been interested in you.'

It did occur to him that all this was merely an element of her sophistication within the program – to seem more authentic.

'No, Gerrid, it's not what you believe it to be.' *She can read my thoughts?* 'I'll get to the point. I am here to recruit you. The work you have been doing is important, important enough to save the population from a disaster unparalleled in history.'

'I'm almost convinced this is real.'

'Please listen,' she chided. 'The two sides have reached a critical point. There will be horrific death, suffering for years from the fallout if this happens, if nothing is done to help these people.' She looked at him sternly, a magisterial beauty. 'We can – you can – provide them with an alternative.'

He had no response. Just his thoughts.

Something wasn't right; colours swirled, and he felt dizzy. Even in this lower level, it had taken a while for Gerrid to remember the program exit-word.

Reality seemed only a pale simulation to the point where he questioned whether he'd really left the program or had entered a lower immersion state. For a start, everything exhibited a fuzzier quality as if its physical structure had weakened; atoms and molecules not properly adhering to each other. He felt he could slice his hand through a hardwood table. And even the pain when his hand slammed down seemed duller than it should have been. Still, he realised this could well be an effect of returning, with no longer the cortical stimulants reinforcing an image-feeder. No one had gone this far. Perhaps there needed to be a virtual decompression of some sort.

With normality returning, Gerrid knew he had to find her. It shouldn't be difficult. Even though Monique rarely attended the university, he could contact her through her publication – a simple matter of bypassing the 'opinions' forum to the expert's response input-link. But when he tried, circumventing the usual ident protection barriers preventing non-authorised, not even her name appeared. By law, all names associated had to be obtainable for investigative purposes. Someone cannot give an opinion on a science matter and not be accountable.

He tried other methods, university post-grad student files, public records, electoral lists. It was as if she had never existed.

That day he attended a lecture on the philosophical analysis of interactive character constructs. Such a peripheral subject would normally only warrant a virtual connection. Yet here he was in the lecture hall amongst two hundred or so others, still nowhere near full but more than he expected. Faces intense with interest; they were wannabe geeks hoping to absorb this new aspect of AR's future. His mind was not really focused on the subject today, but he had his data-tab recording; there might be something useful for his work; his actual degree project was now left fairly much by the wayside.

'A simulacrum may appear to appreciate the consequences of their own intended action when about to betray you, the protagonist,' the man said, in his faux-trendy garb and nocomformistly long hair. 'Independence of thought, as demonstrated in the latest beta level experientials, are simply multi-layered contingents; a progressive psychological analysis---'

After forty-five minutes the lecture had finished. Gerrid stayed behind. He approached the wary-looking tutor. Gerrid had attended his classes a few times, and he was sure Monique had been his student. He couldn't think of any way to phrase the question without it seeming odd. 'Do you know where I can find Monique Bellishi?' he tried simply.

'I'm sorry but I don't know who you're talking about,' replied the lecturer, who now stared at Gerrid curiously.

'I know she once attended your lecture on AI pre-sentience,' Gerrid asserted.

'No student by that name has ever attended, not two years ago, or at any time,' the man said guardedly. Gerrid had never before heard the teacher speak in such a rigid and formal manner, as if

cross examined in court, rather than questioned by his own student – it was in such contrast to the way he'd been speaking to the other students: exchanges of banter at some points.

So maybe Gerrid had portrayed himself as some kind of obsessive stalker. He seemed to share the same interest as her, attended many of the same courses, albeit in different years. There was some logic to that assumption. Strangely, the teacher didn't question why *he* wanted to know.

Other students were no more helpful. He'd tracked down a post-grad of her year and study course. The response: 'If she had been in my class I would have known about it, the way you describe her – no way I'd forget.'

Gerrid, as a fresher, had seen her himself, Monique in her final degree year. Of course he hadn't ever the courage to approach, much less speak to her. But she had spoken to this guy; they may have had a relationship. So somehow someone had got to him, told him to keep quiet or (and Gerrid read of cases of this in an investigative journal) removed his memory.

In the muted light of his apartment Gerrid held the neural-interface array in his hand, its grey-plastic central band flecked with OLEDs flashing, indicating their own colour-coded input-output state. Quiescent now, ready for transmission from his console.

Entry-675 <Much of the immersion program still needs refinement. For example: a safety-override in a perceived situation of extreme danger or pain; if you had been shot in artificial reality designed to feel utterly real, then would you die? The physiological reaction mimicking reality?>

He slid the band on. These were questions he no longer had time to consider as the program took hold.

This time Gerrid found himself in a large onyx-walled room. There she sat to the side of him at a long table, a formal charcoal jacket this time. There were others: much older, in a type of military uniform, but not of a type he recognised.

An imperious-looking old man sitting opposite spoke. 'No,' he said, 'this is merely a simulation of reality.' A gruff, unhurried voice, which could have been created.

'I don't understand how this could be?' Gerrid admitted.

'You scanned more than you realised on that night, including the encoded details of this inner sanctum and our good selves.' A smile formed. 'Though, of course, not in anywhere near so much detail as the lovely Miss Bellishi here.'

'Monique Bellishi, if that's her real name, no longer appears to exist in the real world.'

She turned to face Gerrid, an earnest expression. 'I hope you can excuse my methods of deception. What you are seeing here is based on reality. No more subterfuge. We want you to be with us.'

With the exception of Monique they looked like a gathering of military advisers for a government, retired generals. He said, 'Why should I believe any of you?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'I'm being manipulated here. You just want what I know – because I'm on to something

that could change the way people live. You want to have control over that.'

'No, Gerrid. This is yours, it will always be yours.' At that moment the room faded and he was back in his own apartment.

Chapter 2

In her office, Elekka sat before a holo-display perusing the layered stacks of documents, sections of text highlighted, suggesting information that may provide a clue. They pushed at her mind; she pushed them into the background. Hacked files, messages, and netsphere inserts which had been encrypted within standard news-docs, their concealment fleeting until the overseer in its coldly efficient way identified such rogue information. At some point they would all come together to form the basis of something substantial, emerging again like an ancient forgotten city from the mist; the seeker of truth as she had been since her teenage years and that first fictional foray into The Hidden Province.

Elekka Nushak never claimed to be psychic as her peers, who worked for Investigative Monthly, had suggested (although she could never convincingly deny it). It was envy, pure and simple. At least that's how it seemed to her in those early days. The remit had changed and the team was reduced to a few dedicated and trusted colleagues. She was now regarded as their chief investigator – and she always got her story, maybe from a hunch, no more than intuition. But in the process – as a requirement for remaining alive and unharmed – she had to endure countless changes of identity to the point where sometimes even her family could no longer recognise her. It was the price you paid to get to what particular reality lay behind, thereby avoiding the wrath of those whose precious secrets became less protected each time their conspiracy had been exposed. Their machine of disinformation was powerful, and was still able to throw the general media and public into a state of bewilderment ... if only at the level of absurdity generated.

This time Elekka could sense it was something special. A tip-off from her net connection, from someone who seemed to be becoming embroiled in a conspiracy she had known about since she'd been given her job. Before, there was never the proof, no one on the inside to provide something tangible. There had previously only been the odd disappearance and, what appeared to be, alien abductions, causing the trademark loss of memory. Now this contact had already done some investigating – clumsily. A different approach was required, though something that would be a departure from her own subtle methods.

She used ways to infiltrate that left no clues. This is what gave her the edge. There had been various theories for her perceptual abilities: aspects of soul leaving the body or a conscious link with remotely entangled particles. The science had been obfuscated along with the truth of those who'd been exploited by the intelligence services. When her mind became focused and meditatively calm, it was like seeing the elements of a painting gradually coming together to form a composition. She would see mere fragments – a shape, a colour, little clues eventually culminating towards a whole.

Her ultimate challenge now lay ahead.

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In the park, Gerrid approached the young woman he identified in a red T-shirt and faded jeans.

Upon reading the encrypted message he had felt a frisson of apprehension, sudden thoughts that he had landed himself in a whole heap of trouble, but also the excitement of what could be.

He put his arm along the top of the bench behind Elekka's back. Elekka was slumped forward. 'Are you OK?' He said, to begin.

As if those were the trigger words she responded: sat up in mock irritation at this intrusive stranger. 'Yes I'm fine thanks.' (For the electronic observers). Her voice faded to almost a whisper. 'This is the only way to communicate.' She looked briefly at him, delicate features, light blond hair and pale complexion seemingly unaffected by the southern English sun. She spoke quickly. 'The message I sent you will have been picked up from your data-link connection. Once their monitoring AI has decrypted it, sorted through the millions of dummy messages and looked for key words, it will know of our location. So we don't have long.'

'I wasn't sure you'd believe me.'

'What you have described to me I've been investigating for some time.' Her voice was barely audible even to him – and the increased speed of her words. 'They, the group of nine, have been planning this – their final solution – for decades.' She paused for breath. 'Well, actually, they're not the first ... They plan to appropriate the world for themselves, their decedents and the chosen few, maybe hundreds of thousands or millions, but still a fraction of the current population: only those they consider to be useful. This is their New World Order.'

'They want me to play a part,' Gerrid said. 'They don't want to kill everyone else, but to provide them with a means of escape.' He tried to speak at her cadence, almost tripping over his words. 'Artificial reality – the best type of escape. They don't have to suffer...'

'Don't be taken in by their offers and their manipulation. You may well be one of the chosen, but what you would be complicit in is the removal of all these people from their lives.'

'But I...'

'Just kiss me, Gerrid,' she whispered, looking at him straight on.

'What?' he couldn't contain his surprise; she surely didn't mean a peck on the cheek.

'Do it now.'

He complied, leaning across, gently grabbing her upper arms and administering a tentative kiss.

She pushed him back almost instantly their lips met. 'What do you think you're *doing*?' She sounded shocked.

'But you...'

Elekka jumped up, began to walk away, and then turned. 'I'm not ready for this,' she proclaimed loudly. 'We've only just met. What kinda girl do you think I am?' She walked off hurriedly

It was a good performance; he even believed it himself for a few seconds. The electronic monitors should at least be fooled until the data is analysed by their masters.

*

Elekka's breath quickened, she could hear the rapid pumping of her heart, that prescient-feeling knowledge of something bad. She'd barely reached the end of the park before it seemed they would pounce on her. The breeze picked up; branches of oak and ash trees swayed dramatically, all as if by

some external affirmation. Birds rushed across her vision in distress.

Hundreds of possibilities raced through her mind. Her abduction, elimination, could easily be concealed. She'd been through so many changes of identity that to the world she had already disappeared. Only her family and a few trusted associates would ever be aware she had gone. A suicide faked for their benefit? Or if not considered to be plausible, then their own lives would be in danger

Adrenaline flooded through her body as she exited the park. She had to focus.

With this ability of foresight Elekka had a chance to evade them. How many times did she avoid capture when getting so near to the full truth? This sense of imminent danger may be an echo from minutes or hours in the future.

It was nearly two in the afternoon, the streets were crowded; people still on their lunch break, or post-lunch shopping. This should be the safest time for her to pass unchallenged; too many witnesses. A young woman being accosted, forced against her will... No, not here. They operated in the shadows where only electronic surveillance observed.

Smaller roads now, the occasional car hovering by. Her only route, away from the crowds. No other way back to her office. Fear increased exponentially.

Her current home was doubtless under close surveillance, now a no-go area: an obvious target. Too obvious, though. The secured office; at least two of her associates should be there. Only admittance for positive iris and voice scans, otherwise a half-metre thick steel door prevented the most zealous of the unwelcome. Beyond that were secret tunnels.

Her own half-formed internal voice screaming; the unconscious warning that something terrible would happen so soon. The sub dermal multicorder picked up all the pre-processed information from her eyes and ears. Its EM signature was so minute that no known scanner would detect its presence. Military grade technology.

Elekka's heart felt about to explode as she reached the innocuous-appearing building, hidden within a residential avenue. Iris scan confirmed. Took a deep breath to try and calm her voice as she stood in the secluded porch. 'Hello, it's Yellana.' One of her pseudonyms.

The lock relented, but her fear remained.

Like a normal hallway of a house. Walking to the guestroom, half expecting someone to be there. Routine had it that an arrival would be met in that room, even though there were only four possible persons who ever had current access to enter.

Intercom to main office: no response for a few seconds, then... 'Oh, hi Elekka ... I'm just finishing processing my report... Johan's in the field at the moment so it's just me.'

Logically Elekka knew she must now be in the safest possible place, a biometric observer guarded the building over a five hundred-metre perimeter radius. (It was the safest avenue from crime the other residents had never been aware of!). So her heart should have eased it's pounding....

The office door opened at her ident. In her usual chair sat Elekka's assistant, Alicia. Only, she was not working, but bolt upright. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'Please forgive me.'

Alicia whipped out a gun and fired a shot at Elekka before she had time to react, much less consider just how her colleague and friend had been compromised.

*

The tall masked figure emerged from the overridden entrance. ‘You know you did the right thing,’ he said to the sobbing young woman, in a synthesized voice. ‘We are not in the business of torturing people’s families, but with so much at stake the ends justify the means. Extraordinary measures are necessary.’

In desperation and anger, Alicia fired the gun at him, for all the good it would do against his armour, before the inevitable. She may be fortunate enough to return to consciousness albeit without a memory of her work. Or in the worse case simply a death, like Elekka’s, made to appear to be suicide or an accident.

*

Gerrid knew his understanding of Artificial Reality was unparalleled. The risks: he could weigh them so precisely against the benefits. And yet some fear prevented him from entering.

He sat before his console staring at the lines of what even he had to admit was now fairly meaningless data, broken down from something which should have given a clue. Monique’s scan had been picked apart, its component algorithms and fragments of code of the pre-recorded message. There was nothing surprising in the technology of a program predicting his likely questions and responses. The only curious thing: his imaging device had not detected the hidden code. That considered, who could tell what covert technology existed out there possessing the ability to interact with a defined program? A stealth infiltration signal, perhaps, affecting the algorithmic matrix, only to return it to normal when disengaged.

Maybe that investigative reporter woman was making him paranoid.

That night sleep seemed an impossible destination. He knew he was meant to re-enter the program to be given instructions – it was his natural retreat.

Would I be drawn in and manipulated, coerced?

His third floor apartment had the standard security lock, iris scan, but now a motion sensor linked to a bleeper that only he was aware of. That discreet warning had now been activated, so he called up his wall monitor only to see someone in an official police uniform. *3am!*

Gerrid spoke through the door intercom, ‘Can I help you?’ observing the cops’ images to see an official search warrant produced. The burly officers had the usual weapons to subdue. He eventually opened the door.

‘I have here an official search warrant to check for possession of illegal AR scans and programs.’

The cop opened a bedside draw, and swept over it a memory reader. Contained within were scans, oblong crystalline memory tabs in various colours Gerrid had never before seen in his life, and AR titles that made him seem like some particularly twisted pervert.

‘Someone has planted these,’ Gerrid protested. ‘I’ve been set-up, can’t you see? They have...’ But his last words faded in the hopeless air.

‘Peddlers of filth like you don’t deserve a place in society,’ the police sergeant said to him as he

was frogmarched out, handcuffed in zip-tie cable. ‘Exploiting the vulnerable for your own sick pleasure – or was it just the money? Both I suspect.’

Gerrid said nothing, and the cop gave up trying to provoke a reply from him on the journey. From the glide-car, he stared down at the gentle glow of commercial buildings and the sleeping residential areas, receding as the vehicle climbed to cruising altitude.

Gerrid never believed a prison in his country could still be so austere; he remembered something similar from an archive film set in the late twentieth century. A simple bunk, metal toilet, basin, and a barred window allowing shafts of sunlight to project on the slab floor. The only indicium of modernity was the sliding door, which, once clunked into place, was reassuringly depressingly secure.

He broke the sunbeam with his palm, feeling the gentle heat of a clear June day. When he looked up he was sure he now caught the sound of birdsong, barely audible. The curious thought occurred to him that this was being piped through a speaker from just outside, playing on a continuous loop, designed only to taunt.

Gerrid didn’t even want to know the details of these AR experientials. He always showed respect, even to a simulation. However, they – She was more than mere code represented as human. Scanning someone without their knowledge had for about a decade been ruled illegal. Perhaps a month’s sentence for that crime alone, depending on the ultimate use of the scan. Often that would be difficult to prove, sometimes only a matter of which side had the better argument. In his case the evidence was damning. His life in shame; finally and completely disowned by his disapproving parents, who had doubtless already been informed of his alleged crime.

He saw the headlines. *Gerrid the rebel prodigy: how it all went wrong.*

When the sun faded he lay on the thinly foamed bunk in an attempt to make up for his lack of sleep the previous night. As hopeless as his situation seemed it could only seem less so after he had slept.

But it wasn’t to be.

Something like thunder. A continuous rumbling, louder, more like an earthquake now as the ground shook. He expected reactions from the prison staff. Nothing. The wall beneath the window began to crumble, as if its constituent molecules were un-bonding. A gloved hand caught the barred frame before it hit the ground. A masked figure stood there, and Gerrid thought he was dreaming.

‘We have less than a minute before their bio-visual sensors come back on-line,’ the man said, distortedly. ‘If you do not leave with me immediately you will be removed to a more secure jail.’

There was never any choice really, just comply with the plan.

Chapter 3

A white light. Nothing else she could see but intense, dazzling at first.

Almost recumbent, she felt her head pressed against the rest of an angled hard-padded chair.

Memory returned and Elekka thought: *classic interrogation scenario* – the vulnerable position, facing a spotlight. She said, ‘Come on, get on with it then!’ Her voice as calm and matter-of-fact as she could manage.

What seemed like two minutes passed before the voice.

‘You’re an interesting case, Miss Nushak,’ A male voice synthesized to hide identity. ‘The fact it has taken us so long to track you down is quite remarkable,’ he continued. ‘You’ve been effective in your job. Creating suspicion throughout the sub-network streams has caused many a headache.’

‘You may flatter me, but it’ll get you nowhere.’

‘I am merely pointing out the fact that it will be necessary to apply a more comprehensive treatment to remedy this problem.’

‘So I’m the problem?’

‘You are a significant part of it. You will also be part of the solution.’

‘How do you intend that?’ Her voice still calm.

‘Oh, I’m sure you know what we do. We will readjust you’re thought processes, this will ... enable you to undo the damage you have caused, make you believe that everything you have discovered is merely a delusion. Induce a neurosis. Thus, ultimately, psychiatric help will be needed.’

‘I think you’re bluffing. But in any case you will not succeed in this crazy scheme of world domination.’

‘You put it so crudely.’

‘Then what do you call causing the planet to fall under a nuclear winter so a chosen few – or rather nine – can rule over a selected fraction of the population?’

A pause of about ten seconds. ‘Think how preposterous that sounds – your paranoid claim. Try realising that even *you* cannot have access to all our secrets. We know all about your perceptual abilities, we have spies who practice remote viewing. We may even have employed you if you’d ever shown any hint of compliance.’ Another pause for effect. ‘Unfortunately, this ability will no longer be possible once your neural structure has been re-configured.’

‘The technology for that doesn’t yet exist.’

‘Human technology has progressed exponentially since our alien collaborators provided their assistance.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘Would you like a demonstration?’

Elekka knew she couldn’t play this game for long. She was trapped; what possible escape could there be?

‘Whatever you do to me now it will make no difference ultimately. My contacts have ensured

that upon my disappearance events will be set in train. If you think you have control over the broadcast media ... think again.'

'Now whose bullshitting?'

The effects of a gas began to take hold as she looked around desperately for its origin. The light faded.

*

In a sparse, yet infinitely more comfortable room than the prison, Gerrid felt an overwhelming need to sleep. Now he had accepted his fate there was nothing worth worrying about. Any moral choice had been taken from him the day he had been arrested.

Situated somewhere inside a hill, perhaps way below ground level. He'd arrived after a journey in a helicopter, blindfolded but not treated roughly. So this was his new reality, and what was wrong with a new life away from the world that had never appreciated or understood him anyway?

*

The Group of Nine convened for their first – and possibly penultimate – resolution meeting in the large onyx room.

'It seems we have cause for congratulations,' number 3 said.

'Let's not get carried away,' responded the Western Europe overseer, who was currently appointed No.1. 'Of course the successful recruitment of our systems designer is a major boon, and the capture of that nuisance investigator is one thorn out of our side. However, we may still have to deal with recalcitrant elements of the media.'

'We simply need to demonstrate the true threat of war,' offered No.2. 'Provide the evidence for the media to ascertain for themselves.'

'Indeed, we all agree on that,' No.1 said.

'The ground work is near completion,' said No.8, who had direct command of the intelligence services. 'Britain and the US have combined forces to present the case for an active Eastern Alliance plot to sabotage the coalition Mars project.'

'Ah yes, our plans to build biosphere cities on that planet's prime real estate.'

'Only the Anglosphere coalition had the funds to expend on such a venture; however, the Russians provided the greatest technical know-how ... until the US gained access to their classified information.'

'It's perfect therefore,' said the Russian representative. 'Our president is as mad as hell – and literally slightly unbalanced mentally.' He paused for a chuckle. 'Or so it would appear to the world.'

'Would he seek the agreement of the Chinese and Middle East countries before taking action?' inquired No.4.

'Yes, he'll certainly seek the approval of all alliance countries. But ultimately will go ahead, regardless, with his plan to annihilate anything or anyone they believe is connected with the Mars

project. There will be mistakes of course – and innocent lives will be lost. Then there's the act of state sponsored terrorism aimed at the greatest capitalist institutions. It goes without saying, there'll be a formal denial to such an outrageous accusation.'

'But my government will of course find the evidence of Kremlin involvement in sponsoring these attacks and will justifiably retaliate.'

'So we have established our escalation scenario,' said No1. 'It will depend on neither side being prepared to back down, even at the tipping point of full scale world war.'

No.5: 'how can it fail? A cold war has always been on the cards. It's not beyond the bounds of reason that things would heat up – so to speak. Old enmities brought into focus and magnified.'

No.3: 'With the ultimate end-game of nuclear war not only a possibility but an inevitability, the people will this time be desperate for an escape.'

'Then they will go readily when it's provided for them.'

'It will seem contrived,' No.4 said. 'Everything so perfectly prepared for them.'

'Not at all,' said No.1. 'The coalition will do anything to protect its people from the actions of that mad Russian president; Russia and the eastern alliance will want to preserve its citizens for the day when they will live to "realize the new era."'

'I think perhaps the prospect of a horrific death will be enough to convince them.'

The US representative looked across the table. 'Does anyone want to offer a predicted timescale for the first strike?'

*

Central Council approved history file.

By the year 2180, Earth's human population had reached 14 billion. Global birthrate was actually in a steady decline, almost commensurate with the falling infant mortality rate; no disease existed without a cure. Only isolated places in Africa where cultures lived without interference, and subcultures within the developed countries (isolated by their religion), had remained unaltered. Life expectancy for those able to afford it could be as long as two centuries. Life had never been so good for anyone fortunate enough to live in the more habitable – temperate – zones.

The old divide continued between the wealthy and the poor. New and re-established superpowers China and Russia (with politically aligned Middle Eastern countries) became allied in cultural/ideological opposition to the West, but still only a softer form of capitalism. The United States viewed the Eastern Alliance as restrictive to its citizens; the EA viewed the West and the U.S., in particular, as profligate and imperious. But with an uneasy acceptance of each other's differences peace seemed assured. Treaties and trade agreements maintained calm relations.

It didn't take much to tip the balance, however. Once, it may have been religion, or governance of territory. Such disagreements had been settled a century before. This century there was a new province to compete over. Whoever had the knowledge to create technology to escape the bounds of Sol, to reach another habitable planet, would be the victor in this race. Success a vindication of culture and government.

Lessons had been learned from previous wars. Weapons that could kill a specific race, knock out information systems and electrical power to cripple an economy, were the preferred methods. No one ever envisaged the need to use those old, dormant nuclear devices. Very few believed they still existed.

There had been many failed attempts to find a solution to a problem no one, publicly, would acknowledge as existent. The group of nine knew of the mutterings of discontentment on net channels, those dismissed – when brought to the official public forum for broadcast – as no more than marginals' bitter ramblings. In fact, poverty affected a lesser percentage than at any time previously.

A Century earlier, natural disasters loomed constant and were accepted by the majority. Global warming – arguably exacerbated by human activity – left with it a legacy of displaced inhabitants of developing countries. A catastrophe on the scale of a meteorite/comet strike beyond the 21st century could be easily averted; the technology for tracking and safely deflecting or vaporizing these bodies was widely known. Only rare volcanic events threatened an entire community.

Really, all that now existed as a natural threat were the more complex retroviruses. This group had certainly used their influence to employ the cleverest scientists to develop these multi mutating organisms, and at the same time prevent any useful research for a cure (although, with government announced initiatives, the contrary appeared to be the case). Somehow, people had become wise to the danger of casual living. The problem – at least for the group of nine – was that people didn't die from treatable viruses in sufficient numbers.

A far more efficient method to clear the way had been presented to them. [Further information restricted].

Chapter 4

Gerrid awoke refreshed after his first good night's sleep in several days. A buzz on his com-link followed by a voice informing him breakfast would be served in ten minutes.

The room appeared to have sunlight streaming through as the curtains drew back. There was a vista of a verdant landscape. Bordered fields becoming hills in the distance, clouds scudding innocuously across. A typical holo-image that could be projected into any urban apartment window, in this case: deep underground.

There was an odd communal feeling to this breakfast gathering. Inside: a dining hall large enough to accommodate a thousand, though no more than a hundred, seated along a line of tables. It was like being a school child again on the first day: uncertain, unconfident and apprehensive of what those in charge had planned for the day. Seemingly being the youngest reinforced this sense. Everyone had a designated name-card placed on each table space. And like a child on that first day, he knew and recognised no one.

A tall middle-aged woman entered the hall and spoke in a level voice, stymieing the few words exchanged amongst the diners. 'I understand some of you may be new arrivals here, and so by all means make use of the HDUs.' She held aloft the palm-sized grey card, one of which had been left on each space, and pressed its initiator button so it projected an oblong of text and images in mid-air. 'This will enable you to find out about each other if you do not wish to speak – and can be read whilst eating.'

There was indeed something of the headmistress about her: instructive, yet concerned about each pupil's welfare. The only difference: he was allowed to choose from a breakfast menu. Cereals would be the safe option.

Whilst eating and reading the info-text he discovered the person sitting next to him was a cryogenics specialist. This man was older, by twenty-two years. Gerrid, trying to fit his own work into context, imagined he also would have to fit in with the program set out; his input parametrised to everyone else's.

However, when the guy spoke it seemed to be with a certain reverence, perhaps appropriately towards him the protagonist in this project. Or maybe simply because of his young age: The prodigy.

'I've read about your theories on A.I. Evolution,' the man said. 'Interesting hypothesis about genetically based algorithms. Do you believe scanning can produce a template for realistic replication?'

His co-diner seemed to have a genuine interest in Gerrid's field of study. His confidence returned. He said, 'As you probably know, technology does not allow a fully comprehensive scan bellow the cellular level, so you need to combine with the conventional genetic readout. The combination of the scan and genobase can allow the simulacrum to evolve more realistically, according with external factors.'

'You're thinking in terms of evolution over years?'

‘Currently, yes, for a high level of realism; there may be a way to speed up the process. It also depends on environmental influences – but they’re another matter.’

*

Pablo Kolinta had been employed as a leading cryogenics specialist for the NASA Expedition project, developing bio-suspension systems for long-term space travel. His cryogenic stasis chamber provided a means of near-suspended animation: a process of slowing cell metabolism to almost an immeasurable level whereby a crew had a potential life span of a millennium. The idea of a complete cryogenic suspension – for a live person – had never been accepted into law, and so the development of his semi-stasis alternative for a thousand year unharmed preservation was regarded as the best compromise. He stood by his claim that his breakthrough carried no risks.

He had been ridiculed, naturally, for such a seemingly outlandish claim – they referred to him as Millennium man in the science press. Mocking his *supposed* failings into how to suspend the human ageing process. A thousand years, they carped, would take its toll in ways he had not considered.

And now, there sat the very physicist (he’d checked the file) only a few metres away, who went on about the effects of entropy at the sub-cellular level. Citing the likely process of decay of cellular and neural substructures: microtubules and below that scale.

Pablo had made a remarkable breakthrough only days before NASA had decided they no longer needed him. It was the usual excuse: spending cuts. They’d got what they needed from him, and now surely the project would be handed over to a bunch of low-level, low-paid technicians to put it all together.

He was in a bad enough mood already, being told what to do: having to show an obsequious interest in the work of this cyber-geek Gerrid. And now, smugly sat a few metres away, that supercilious physicist who thought in a few paragraphs he could discredit a lifetime’s work.

He finished breakfast, and made his move.

William Iverstein was still munching away on some buttered toast, forcing words out between each bite, explaining something about quantum interference patterns to the bemused-looking young woman sitting next to him.

‘Perhaps you don’t recognise me,’ Pablo said. ‘So allow me to introduce myself.’ He didn’t care if Iverstein was in mid-flow; interruption had a more forceful impact. ‘My name is Pablo Kolinta, I’m the cryogenics expert you described as the “*Millennium man*” in your article for SWI.’

‘Ah yes, I remember.’ He studied Pablo’s face. ‘You know that picture didn’t do you justice.’

‘Never mind that,’ Pablo snapped. ‘I would just like to put the record straight. You claimed stage2 stasis would lead to microcellular degeneration after the first decade.’

Iverstein seemed taken aback for a few seconds. ‘Erm, yes within the cell structure, I’d determine there’d be the beginnings of integrity loss.’

‘You’d *determine*?’ he exclaimed, glowering.

‘Yes, it’s a considered hypothesis that the more delicate cellular structures would begin to suffer a protein breakdown.’

'I'll fucking give you a protein breakdown, you presumptuous...' As he was preparing to take a swing at the shocked-looking physicist, someone interrupted.

The woman dining hall host stood between the two. 'This is no way for a man of your age to behave.' She spoke with a calm yet stern enough voice to stop Pablo in his tracks. 'Why not settle your disagreement in our conference room?' she continued. 'There are bound to be differences of opinion, but everyone will need to cooperate at some point. Perhaps you might like to use the gymnasium first to work off that anger.'

Pablo's fury had been diffused to a muted resentment. He sloped off; considered his next confrontation.

Chapter 5

The complete abandonment of hope, that's what they wanted her to experience. Acknowledgement that her colleagues and friends had been captured for interrogation, her family and relatives targeted.

'Be assured,' said the all powerful voice of menace, *'we will eliminate anyone who may be a threat, anyone who is actively working to thwart us.'* She knew not to accept on face value their claims no matter how plausible they seemed. But then she bore witness to Alicia's torture; forced to endure the scene of every scream and beg for mercy as the pain became intolerable. To feel the guilt that it was her friend and not herself suffering the true agony. Elekka had learned techniques to resist interrogation and block the true effect of pain, helped somewhat by an artificially enhanced enkephalin reserve.

Elekka was always going to be the primary target, and they knew that the traditional methods were pointless. Her resolve had to be broken down by other means.

Perhaps, just, they had succeeded.

She was told she would be back for her final reconditioning in another five hours. They had done something to her to cloud her mind, no doubt to stymie any ESP ability.

The cell had barely any light, only that which filtered through the air ducts; if anything, allowing too much air to filter through, causing her to huddle in this thin surgical gown. There was only a greyish green hue to the surrounding smooth walls. A ludicrously thin mattress – not that there would be much time to sleep. She'd slept, perhaps four or maybe six hours since being brought here three days ago. She was allowed a timepiece, if only so she could count down the hours, and then the minutes until the next session. Time between each becoming less.

Time was all she had. Time seemed pointless now.

She began to cry, and she did so knowing they would hear her, feel a sense of accomplishment at her broken spirit.

Elekka thought she had fallen asleep. Drowsiness took hold in the way it would inevitably when no longer a solution could be sought.

This had to be a dream. The figure, possibly male, was not fully resolved as a physical presence. It appeared human, glowing ethereally. Perhaps, she thought, her mind was broken too.

'Do not be alarmed,' the ethereal being said, *'I am here to help you escape.'*

'I don't believe in angels,' she muttered.

'I am actually an observer, but I cannot tell you more. My remit does not even extend to being here to interfere with the natural course of events.'

'Why would you help me?'

'Because I can.'

Elekka began to laugh, until the tears started to flow once again. *'I never believed ...'*

'That doesn't matter. You must now focus on your escape. I have disabled the locks, and the sensors are being fed false information. You have a clear route through the compound. There is a

helicopter waiting, programmed to take you to a drop-off point where you will find a temporary shelter and necessary supplies.’

I can only assure your safety for twelve hours,’ the being finally said before fading into the wall.

*

Their manipulation of him was not subtle. Not only was he allowed his AR indulgences, but also young women would offer themselves to him as if it were by duty. Calling at his room three times in one week, always the most beautiful. Naturally he would scan them for future reference, and in fact they were useful as a real template for the finer details of the AR experience.

Gerrid tried not to think what pressure these girls had been put under to have to offer their services. Perhaps it was something of an honour for them to be close to someone who was on the brink of creating the most profound escape from the real world; he would call it TIAR, Total Immersion Artificial Reality – the even-better-than-the-real-thing experience. Once you had entered you’d never want to leave.

The encouragement could not have been greater. Still, he knew however comfortable his life had become; he had no choice but to continue this work.

Entry 721 <There are the moral implications of TIAR: the highly addictive nature of living the most perfectly tailored experiences. Your deepest fantasies realised. True reality in comparison – a pallid bad dream of disappointments, embarrassments and frustrations. TIAR would be life as it ought to be in an ideal world.>

That was a long way off, still the practical difficulties of long-term immersion. The risks to human physiology from such intense neural input were frightening at this stage.

He would never admit this to himself before, but now he was truly glad that this was not exclusively his project. Not his sole responsibility. There were at least fifty key contributors, including a neuro-psychologist, biochemist, physicists, advanced-systems engineer, and even a sociologist. They’d of course only base their work around his model: the conceptual and developed system.

It was odd that although he had never been so integrated as part of a community, he felt somehow isolated. They were wary of him, tentative, so careful not to be too assertive in their suggestions, not to challenge with a caveat. Only: *‘I understand your reasoning behind that. We can run the test again at a later stage.’* Gerrid couldn’t help but wonder if any objections had been reported to the shadowy ones in charge. They would make the ultimate sanction. Surely he was equally at their behest? Except his parameters were broader. Perhaps he was merely allowed the illusion of so much creative freedom. Ultimately, they’d use his knowledge rather than his exact design when enough had been gleaned, for it then to be snatched from him, using it for their sinister scheme ... and he’d be eliminated for knowing too much. He wondered if the side effects of TIAR included paranoia.

Chapter 6

Elekka had always been reluctant to believe in fate. Perhaps there were forces beyond even her perception, subtly pulling the strings, just enough to keep her alive. Her success was down to her, though, self-engineered. And failure; she'd never felt so low, and then to be taken to the point of some kind of spiritual or religious euphoria. Rescued by her angel-alien – or whatever he was – for a specific purpose.

After a night's sleep in this safe house, a more sober perspective to plan for a calculated quest.

As Elekka expected, the house contained the essentials of food and clothing, also a compass and map, but no communication equipment. Naturally any transmission would be monitored and tracked.

There was only one way to locate him. She focused her mind, allowed her consciousness to expand and search on an association, something creating a link. There wasn't much to go on, however. Armion Cheng was a master of disguise.

It was part of his job to be elusive and evasive, if anyone could escape capture it would be Armion. It seemed – although he denied this vehemently – he shared much of her extra sensory perception and, evidently, was able to remote view. Being smart can only get you so far, she had nearly told him. Perhaps it was some kind of male thing, not to admit to an ability that relied on something other than logic.

She sensed his anguish, the encroaching feeling they were out to get him. It was something she identified with immediately, that same prescience. This had to be the link, enough to locate him. If only it were possible to take her physical body along on this near-instantaneous journey.

An abandoned cabin amid the north downs. In her mind she could see the coordinates on the map. The problem was in getting there.

After a three-kilometre walk through dense woodland she discovered an estate; a number of vehicles parked on the huge grounds. The smallest of them had the appearance of a silver-grey elongated egg. Flat underneath, resting on its landing support legs.

Theft had always been an abhorrence to her, though the morality of the situation was the least of her worries. After all, the car could be programmed to return to its owner. The problem here was gaining access to this highly secured vehicle even though she had considerable knowledge of electronics (any system can be compromised and controlled remotely; and nothing remained truly secure). Certain technology was, in turn, required to circumvent its systems.

Only one thing for it. Beneath its chassis, there was a small hatch, very well disguised. Within it something akin to a reset button which disabled every electronic system. Every vehicle had one in the event of a systems malfunction, emergency override. There was no standard designated spot for this switch, but with careful touch she located the shallow ridge of the hatch, and pushed it in to release. Unfortunately upon pressing this button an alarm was activated. In the process, the top half

of vehicle slid aside so Elekka could jump in. She searched desperately for the alarm-disable button as a figure ran towards the car. She pressed several in her panic, which finally did the trick. Then shouted an instruction to take off.

‘Name coordinates,’ it demanded back at her. She did. The car gently lifted off just as the irate man was seemingly about to fling himself against the vehicle’s side. He then looked at her, bemused, as she mouthed ‘I’ll send it back to you.’

The car hovered about a metre above the ground. She told it to go at maximum speed; it told her this was illegal, but nevertheless complied. Trees and hedged fields rushed by in a dissociated blur as the car warned her of a twenty-percent risk of a power failure before reaching the destination.

It was a clear day, only vague wisps of cirrus clouds. There was no chance of being inconspicuous; she knew the authorities would be hot on her tail if its owner reported the theft.

With flashing red graphics the car touched down in a secluded woods two kilometres from the rendezvous point. The car would eventually recharge its power and head back. Meanwhile she’d traipse an erratic path to the cabin, at one point doubling back for a few metres, careful not to disturb flora or leave footprints on her true path.

The cabin appeared derelict, as if it had been left as a monument to a bygone native culture, the forgotten forest dwellers. Ivy climbing untamed. One window boarded up, the other cracked.

There was no sense of danger so far. Perhaps they were near, or her senses were not operating to that full intuitive level. She’d have to stake the place out just in case.

From behind a large shrub Elekka focused on the cabin’s close perimeter; stretched her consciousness to around the back to see there was no one.

Inside, Armion Cheng worked at a small console. He was sending messages using a modulated-tachyon emitter with encoding software, trying to recruit allies. At the same time, his transmissions gave confusing information about his location and the time that he had actually sent each message. The equipment he used was military grade, procured only recently from sympathisers – those from high rank who knew but felt powerless to stop the Plan’s inception. The possession of this equipment by any civilian non-authorized was illegal to the point of an indefinite prison term. Since They were out to get him in any case, it would only be one more pretext to ensure he remained locked away for the rest of his life.

When Elekka’s perception had reached his location, she realised he knew; he suddenly looked up, startled. To her, only his loosely defined shape further completed by feedback from her mind.

She broke off and chanced a physical approach, hoping he realised it was herself. But thoughts ran through her mind of his suspicions. *Who can be trusted now?* Logically, *she* could have been compromised: who better to find him?

Her heart thudded with anxiety as she knocked on the door. The facade of the cabin was nothing but wood, fungus mottled and flaking. Any scanning technology on show would’ve aroused suspicion. The wait only added to her tension.

After what seemed like five minutes, Armion finally answered. His facial expression of distress made her want to throw her arms around him, merely out of reassurance. Instead she spoke. ‘It’s good to see you again, Armi. I know what you must be thinking, how could I have escaped – they

don't let people escape, right? So they must be using me to track you down.' She smiled at him tentatively.

'Well, dear Elekka, what other explanation could there be?' His face relaxed now.

'I have it recorded on a chip inside my head. So if you have the decoder ... '

'OK, come in.'

The inside was almost as ramshackle as the exterior. Rotting wooden beams, chipped paint and a musty smell, convincingly told of neglect and long-time abandonment.

They sat either end of a rickety oak table. Armion placed his console in between them. Elekka picked it up, removing a little wafer-thin tab from below its screen, and then she placed it on her forehead.

'I only hope they didn't scramble the encoding.' She genuinely had doubts now.

The card flashed green to indicate information retrieval. On a projected holoscreen they both watched the scene play out. Beginning with her journey away from the park, skipping over bits to where she was rendered unconscious. Incredibly, the interrogation scene – albeit with no useful visual beyond a white light – was there. A figure, unclear, about two metres away, writhing and crying out for mercy. Another point in time, as her EEG readings once again increased to activate the recording, the pale figure. Then her escape.

Once Armion confirmed the record timer had not been tampered with he stared at her in utter amazement. 'If this is a fake, it's one that defeats *my* technology. I know you can lie convincingly, but I can tell if someone's under duress.'

'If they thought there was the remotest chance I would escape they would've scrambled or removed this chip on my arrival,' Elekka reasoned.

'That would seem logical. But they don't make mistakes like this.' His eyes almost shone in glee. 'Ellie, do you realise what dynamite this would be if it were spread throughout the net? This is the final proof we need!'

'Let's not think that far ahead,' she cautioned. 'Our priority is to rescue Alicia.'

'Our first priority is to get the hell out of here.' Then he looked at her in puzzlement. 'As far as I know, Alicia Rilver is not in captivity. She's in a hospital.'

'I don't understand.'

'She was in a car crash. Interestingly, the day after you were captured. It was quite a freak systems malfunction, looked to be sabotage. She suffered bad concussion; doesn't remember anything about the accident or for that entire week.'

'Yeah, that does sound convenient.' She gestured at the console. 'Play that second interrogation scene back again.' The software enhanced the image of the figure on a recline chair. 'It won't resolve to any greater resolution,' Armion said. 'The fuzziness appears to have been caused by the holo vectoring. I would guess it was designed to bypass the primary visual centres, specific EM field variances. It would've stimulated your prefrontal cortex as well.'

'You mean it caused me to imagine I was seeing Alicia, so I'd believe more than just an image alone?'

'Exactly. And they probably used some psychoactive stimulant to reinforce that belief.'

Elekka looked down, crestfallen. ‘They really put one over on me, didn’t they? What a fool!’

‘No, they’re just very good at their job.’ He reached out to lightly touch her hand. ‘You’re one of the best Elekka. But everyone has their vulnerabilities. They can turn your best qualities against you – your empathy, intuition, the ability to sense beyond the facade. They’d certainly have ways of dealing with me.’

‘They’d never get you, you’re too good.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ He looked at her earnestly. ‘I am plagued by nightmares of being captured. It feels like it’s just a matter of time.’

‘I don’t sense any danger here, but we should keep moving’

‘I concur with that!’

He led her to a door of wood so rotten it seemed it would crumble away if attempted opening.

‘So what’ve you got hidden out the back?’ she asked, knowing it must be some kind of high-speed transport.

He opened the creaking door to reveal a mass of wild grass mingled with weeds. ‘There it is.’ He pointed at the mass of undergrowth.

When she looked closely she noticed three rounded impressions. ‘An invisible car. You never cease to amaze me, Armion.’

He produced from his combat trouser pocket a small remote device, pressed a button, and suddenly there it appeared: a ten-meter long dark triangular vehicle. It was like one big viewer screen. ‘The background environment is reproduced onto it. Of course it has general stealth capabilities.’

‘I always knew you had friends in high places.’

Unlike an ordinary hover vehicle, Armion’s craft glided through the air, reaching an altitude of twenty thousand metres, and speeds exceeding Mach 6.

‘You sure know how to impress a girl,’ Elekka said, from the passenger seat, half jokingly.

‘And I’m sure you’re not easy to impress.’

‘Quite right!’ She looked at the nav-display console. ‘I know you have a specific destination in mind; those coordinates sounded familiar.’

‘They should do, we’re heading for our paymaster – though I’d be worried if you actually knew his location.’

‘I’m glad I *don’t* know the boss’s location.’ She turned to meet his eyes. ‘He is expecting you?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’ve never spoken to him in person. Only ever remote Comms.’

‘Hey, look,’ He touched her arm. ‘It’s not like I’m the boss’s favorite. You’ve uncovered more conspiracies than I have. And you’re the one who can get people to talk. I’m just hidden in the shadows, spying and listening.’

‘Sure, but we’re a team, right? Each with their own part to play to achieve a common goal.’

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘So as the invisible one I get to meet the boss.’ His expression then became serious, ‘If I *am* caught there is only one escape for me. It’d simply be a matter of a trigger code to activate the toxin.’

‘Don’t think about that now. We’re about as safe as we can be.’

‘Perhaps. But we know what this group is capable of. Even the boss may’ve been compromised.’

It was a chilling thought. The reality that no one can any longer be trusted. Anyone with those for whom they cared, a partner, a family, was now vulnerable. Armion was someone with neither of these; he was effectively married to his work. Perhaps Armion was the one person Elekka could truly trust; the one person she could feel safe with.

She wondered if deep down he was lonely. The job ensured your isolation; it was the price to pay for the rewards of uncovering big secrets and conspiracies. Sometimes it had felt like a holy quest to save the world; devoted to a cause like a priest is devoted to his religion. But if, in such a way, you became too enraptured with your own cause then ultimately you will become its victim. After all, the aim had only ever been to uncover the truth and inform the population. Now it was so much *more.*

The viewing screen of the jet tinted to almost black as it descended towards a location even Armion had no knowledge of, only a code for the navigation system to interpret.

Armion smiled and said, ‘You just have to admire the paymaster, he does everything to ensure secrecy,’

‘It’s not that he’s paranoid, then?’ Elekka mused.

‘No more than I am. But maybe it’s a useful trait in these circumstances.’

‘It’s not one that *I* need.’ She smiled back at him wryly. ‘When, after all, they really *are* out to get me.’

‘And maybe our secret destination will be our final place of entrapment.’

‘I can believe that’s a genuine concern for you.’

‘Well, do you think anyone is safe who’s a threat to our enemy?’ He turned away from the readouts to read her face. ‘Of course you have your own saviour.’

‘My what?’ She looked at him in mild disgust.

‘I’ll let you into a secret, you’re not the first to be saved from a hopeless situation.’ He told her what he knew about the paymaster.

‘I wondered why you didn’t seem so surprised at the recording’

‘I’ve always known we were being observed. They can’t interfere of course – it would affect the natural progression of humanity. But when humanity is threatened, someone needed to intervene.’

‘Minimal interference by an alien race. They want us to survive so that we can change events, prevent what seems inevitable.’

‘Nothing’s inevitable, Elekka ... except eventual death.’

‘I hope you’re right, but we’re just a few people against---’

He put his hand on her shoulder. ‘I guess being through what you have can chip away at one’s resolve ... but that’s not the Elekka I used to know.’

A stern look back at him. ‘You cannot underestimate them, Armion.’

‘Hey, who’s paranoid now about being captured?’

The craft swooped down, having to then descend at a near vertical angle on to small forest clearing. The stealth mode ensured total concealment.

The building was a further one and a half kilometre walk. Like Armion’s cabin, it presented a ramshackle state of neglect, but on a much larger scale.

‘This isn’t the building I visited before,’ Armion commented. ‘Though naturally it makes sense not to stay in the same place for too long.’

‘Well I guess not for more than a *day*, the way things are at present.’

‘What are your instincts telling you?’

‘I’m not sure I trust my instincts any more, but I think we’re safe for now.’

No security system apparent on the door; Armion knocked in the traditional way. After about twenty seconds a young woman answered. Obviously attractive in that figure-hugging black dress, he noticeably hesitated before his first words. ‘I’m – we’re here to see the paymaster, as agreed.’

The woman smiled warmly. ‘Of course,’ she said in a silky tone, ‘Come on in.’

The paymaster sat in a velvet chair in his lounge, surrounded by an array of electronic equipment: pillars of info-displays and semi-translucent graphics of maps with overlaid vectors. To Elekka’s surprise he appeared casually dressed in a utility shirt, but still someone who prided himself in maintaining a handsome appearance.

‘Just to be certain, I need the code or I’ll have to kill you, you understand?’ The Paymaster smiled, as if he didn’t entirely mean it.

Armion gave not a flicker of a smile. ‘Seven, four, two, six, alpha.’

‘Now the scan.’ He shone a remote iris scanner at Armion, then Elekka. ‘Sorry. You know how it is these days. I wouldn’t put a simulacrum hologram past them, much less a clone.’

‘We understand the danger, Paymaster,’ Armion said.

‘Please, I want you to both call me Jerand. Paymaster sounds so formal and ... bureaucratic. I’ve had enough of living the charade of being someone who never existed before the age of eleven. That person’s now gone.’

Armion said, ‘Elekka has a recording of her incarceration and escape.’

‘Escaping the Nine is impressive in itself. But to have a recording of it; that’s quite amazing.’

Elekka found herself blushing slightly. ‘Not so amazing when you see what really happened,’ she said.

Armion and Elekka sat down at the dining table to be presented with the food of their choice, whilst Jerand viewed the recording. For the first time in a while they both felt truly at ease. Somehow, Jerand Volandry would have the answer, they believed; if there were a way, he would find it.

Jerand Volandry had, according to records, died in an hyperjet accident thirty-two years previously. His parents and two siblings had been aboard that craft as it descended towards isolated farmland, within the young Amazon forest. Only their remains were identified.

His father: the entrepreneur who made commercial flights to the moon a viable option rather than merely something for the wealthy. A clever initial investment in lunar and Martian biosphere

projects turned his enterprise into an unparalleled success, encompassing the local space tourist industry.

It had been assumed Jerand would continue the business as part of his eventual inheritance. The accident had changed all that.

Amid the burnt out fuselage no evidence remained of the accident's nature. The hydrogen fuel reserve ensured a complete destruction. The craft incinerated at altitude, appearing like a comet streaking inexorably towards Earth. Something of such rarity, it made top story on the news media before the victims had even been identified. Hypersonic jets simply do not catch alight unless through an act of sabotage. Thus speculation was rife of a conspiracy by a rival, or because of outspoken political beliefs by Horatio Volandry. The government of the time denounced and ridiculed any suggestion of a conspiracy, claiming that would have been a far too obvious method to dispose of the Volandry clan. Naturally, a government-funded investigation was launched, which was successful in quietening some of the critics.

Amidst the inferno of the descending craft and the final desperate screams someone, apparently unaffected by the conflagration, was there. Jerand believed he was seeing an angel at the point of his own death; and the figure, slightly luminous, was there to welcome them, their souls to the other side.

It seemed like an instant: from the burning craft to the white room. There was the ethereal being, speaking to him. 'Do not be alarmed, you are safe,' the being said. 'I am sorry I could not save your family: history must, for the most part, take its natural course.'

'Am I alive? Where is this?' the eleven year-old asked, feeling his face, not even sore from the heat.

'I can tell you you are alive, and here is our medical centre. But your's will not be the life of Jerand Volandry.'

'I don't understand.'

'You will grow up as someone new, with a family who will welcome you, and provide a secure upbringing. As the sole benefactor I will ensure the provision of your father's inheritance for when you are old enough.'

The true extent of the Volandry fortune had been a well-kept secret. The money, only a third of which had been allowed for his trust fund, was written off (if anyone bothered to investigate) as one bad investment in a Mars construction project. So his future was destined to be as anonymous as can be. A quiet life was difficult. With so much wealth the temptation was to live 'the dream' of most eighteen year-olds. So he decided to make a few investments of his own until he could rightfully live the life without suspicion: the accomplished businessman.

Always with him the notion of revenge. One day his time will come, it was meant to be. He had the means and the will to do so

After the second course Jerand joined them at the table.

'I always believed it would happen again,' he said, his voice full with optimism. 'When things get so bad, there is someone who will step in.' He looked at Elekka intensely. 'You were helped just enough, enough so you could continue. We mustn't squander this opportunity. No amount of

reporting or broadcasting what you have witnessed will put a stop to what they intend.’

‘What else can we do?’

‘We fight, we use everything we can, we destroy whatever we must’.

‘You mean destroy their compound – their base of operations? How will that be possible?’

‘With your recording we can locate it, and with your abilities perhaps we can locate the Nine themselves.’

‘You make it sound simple. Pay-Jerand, but they know---’

‘Elekka, this will be the toughest challenge of your life. Wherever you are your life will be in danger. Their tendrils extend through every city. The only people you can trust are here in this room.’

Armion looked at Elekka. ‘It’s them or us,’ he said. ‘If we cannot eliminate the Nine, then at least everyone who is associated with them.’

She glared back at him. ‘And where do we draw the line of: *by association*? I mean, do we kill their relatives?’

Jerand shook his head. ‘No, unless there’s some direct involvement. But if killing its followers is what it takes to put an end to this evil project then surely that is the right thing.’

‘I’m an *investigator*. My dedication is to uncovering and reporting the truth, not fighting some vengeance war. I will not be a part of some plan to murder all those people.’

‘Investigative Monthly was just a front for the real plan – surely you realised.’ Jerand looked at her curiously. ‘Perhaps they did get to you.’

Elekka felt a wave of anger enveloping her. *How dare he!* She got up from the dining chair. ‘I don’t think I should stay here any longer,’ she declared as calmly as she could.

Chapter 7

In an extravagantly capacious New York apartment Toran Marlow woke with his usual headache. A cold pain beneath the eyes, doubtless the result of disturbed sleep. The silver-grey lines of a geometric architecture that said: modern functional, with just a hint of artistic sensibility, reflected sharp bands of sunlight into his weary eyes as he sat up in bed, wishing he was at his *proper* home, needing analgesics and coffee.

As the executive of Cellacom News it was his strict remit to produce news programs which reflected the 'true' picture. Another terrorist attack in Manhattan, the *Delphi* trade centre where directors gathered to discuss their latest developments. These days the focus was on the Mars space project. Until about twenty years ago, there had only been a few players: scientists, their investors who anticipated the commercial return, and property developers who saw potential for the tourist industry. There had never previously been any coordination on such a level. Now the government encouraged cooperation of each sector with financial incentives, grants and tax exemptions on industrial products for use on any aspect of the Mars project. Naturally there were votes to be gained in a heavily democratic, overpopulated United States, by a president who promoted the idea of enabling its *ordinary* citizens to leave for this new world. Of course, the realisation of that was still many years away, certainly decades. The recent tragedy seemed to put an end to this ideal.

Security was never anything less than paramount. For a two hundred-metre perimeter observation AIs controlling all kinds of biometric sensing equipment maintained a constant vigilance which made these meetings possible. In previous decades it was all teleconferencing. People never met in person. Even a holographic conference had something impersonal about it that could lead to feelings of suspicion when interests conflicted. In a real meeting, ideas could be thrashed out on the table; if someone had a hidden agenda, it might show in some unconscious gesture. A real conference was a truly open one. The last one had been a remarkable success. An agreement on resources heavily biased towards ensuring passenger safety for the journey, rather than cutting corners with low price attractiveness. The holiday centres would also tend towards the functional for this reason.

A motive for freelance terrorists seemed unclear. Except that they had already targeted a major financial institution, creating no fatalities, only treatable injuries, but destroying its central datastore as more of a symbolic attack. The attack on the Mars Conference building had been the most brutal of any terrorist atrocity in nearly a century: Seventy-four deaths in all, including most of the key Mars-project developers.

Toran's network had been given principal rights to broadcast the results of the conference and discuss the implications. This was all going to be good PR for the US/Coalition space project, not to mention the boost in advertising and share prices for Cellacom.

The question of how security could've been breached was one particularly disturbing. In-depth discussions about systems viruses and sequestration programs to covertly control AI monitors had been allocated primetime broadcast. Another, perhaps equally disturbing question, was why. Why

would this conference, in a building hired for such purpose one day a month, be a target? What ideals were at threat? What religious sensibilities had been offended? It was baffling, until a datalink message he received from a source claiming to be an intelligence operative had told him something which, although shocking, actually did make some sense. The message read:

I FEEL IT IS A RIGHT FOR THE PEOPLE TO BE INFORMED OF THE DEVIOUS ACTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT.

MY SOURCES HAVE REVEALED A CONCERTED EFFORT ON THEIR BEHALF TO SCUPPER THE COALITION SPACE PROJECT. THEIR ACTIONS ARE DENIABLE, THUS I CANNOT PROVIDE YOU WITH ANY SUBSTANTIAL EVIDENCE. YOU CAN ONLY TRUST YOUR OWN JUDGMENT.

There did seem some kind of rationale behind this, especially in light of the espionage scandal. It would be in the Russian government's interest if the world depended on their own Mars project. The boost to investment and prestige, the popularity of their president as being the leader who enabled the biggest space program of any administration. How frightening that it made so much sense!

If this were to be broadcast it would be truly explosive. The American president, with no doubt the support of at least the British leader, could justifiably retaliate. Just a mere broadcast of a claimed intelligence finding could be enough to spark official action: the storming of Russian administrative buildings. At least the demand for some evidence to show there was no Kremlin involvement. The US president having to demonstrate his commitment to the people, protecting their interests, standing strong against the threat.

As the top broadcasting company, Cellacom had a duty to inform and present not only provable facts but also the credible theories.

The continued speculation revolving around the question of a motive was becoming repetitive. Experts interviewed on his news analysis program discussed the possibilities of the re-emergence of religious extremism. The producer would keep the subject hot because it was still the biggest story, but without any new developments, no group admitting responsibility, the public was demanding some explanation.

Toran decided to do something he'd never have considered rational in his early days as director of news, certainly not when the prime factor had always been profit.

As expected a sub-secretary answered, demanding evidence he was who he claimed, then passed on to the president's PA before finally, after about ten minutes, being allowed to speak to the man himself.

'Ah, Mr Marlow, this *is* something of a surprise. How can I be of assistance?'

'Mr president, I have some disturbing news,' he said, concealing his nervousness in a voice that once served him well as a news anchor. 'I cannot, however, authenticate my source, so I seek your advice.'

'This must be a first, a broadcaster concerned about the ethicality of putting forward a story.' Toran couldn't be sure the president was being facetious – the commercial network by its nature was driven by popular demand.

‘This may have national security implications.’ He relayed the communique to the presidential suite.

After what seemed about a minute, the president responded. ‘I am grateful for your openness. This is a matter of utmost concern for national security. This administration *also* stands by the policy of openness. You may report your findings in the appropriate context, and I will make a public address the following day.’

‘Thank you, Mr President. My presenter will simply repeat the message, but please be prepared for subsequent analysis.’

‘I understand, Mr Marlow. We both have our job to do. Mine will of course involve demanding an official denial from the Kremlin, and a more pro-active investigation. Goodbye for now.’

He almost had to pinch himself to make sure this wasn't a dream. What the president told him meant he virtually had *carte blanche* over running the story as a news event. This would be the story of the century! *State sponsored terrorism*; those words would be used.

*

After much persuasion Elekka finally relented, Jerand pointed out that to split their group into two opposing factions was exactly what the enemy wanted. In any case she didn't see how, even with her considerable resourcefulness, it would be possible to operate alone with very little money, no transport and no one else to trust. The other two needed her, and perhaps she could prevent her boss from the more extreme route.

The following morning Elekka agreed she would leave with them for another mystery destination.

‘I believe I still have an ally in one of the satellite guard operators,’ Jerand said at the breakfast table. ‘He has some sympathy for our cause and appreciates the imminent global threat. Moreover, he knows I pay generously.’

‘Have you contacted him recently?’ Armion asked.

‘No, admittedly it's been a while. I understand your concern that his sympathies may have been changed, perhaps by someone who would pay even more generously ... but I think we can guess at another more likely – more sinister reason.’

‘The key defence systems are going to be the first area to be closely monitored under their control. Does your contact have a family or anyone who can be used as a hostage.’

‘Of course not.’ Jerand looked at him sharply.

‘Obviously he would've been a liability, unless he lied about his lonely status.’

‘OK, I know what you two are leading towards,’ Elekka sighed. ‘I'll check him out, follow him remotely. But if you think I will ever support the use of a laser weapon to target anyone but the nine then--’

‘If it is at all possible, then no one, other than they or their henchman will be targeted. It may be possible to destroy hardware integral to their plan.’

Armion said, ‘The only problem is, their base and network could be so deep underground, it may not only be impervious to detection but also from any kind of destruction.’

‘Point noted. However, my plan is to attack on two fronts. Firstly we establish – with Elekka’s help – their exact centre of operations. Then it is simply a matter of preparing the ground: an explosive device to weaken the surface before the laser strike.’

‘You make it sound so simple,’ Elekka commented, with more scepticism in her voice than she had intended.

Jerand looked at her intensely. ‘It all depends on you, Elekka. Either you’re committed to this one hundred per cent or our plan has no chance.’

‘I’ll do my best. But it’s not my predilection to go spying on single men in their private moments.’

They both smiled at her for some levity.

Chapter 8

On his glidecar journey back from the station, it occurred to Danton Edmond there could only be one solution. There was no way to get a message to the good guys that he had, effectively, been sequestered. This was not a life anymore.

He looked out the windshield, for the first time noticing the beauty of the surrounding landscape. The trees, the neatly hedged off fields, cattle who seemed serene and oblivious to the troubles of the world. How he envied those sheep with their simple lives, animals that no longer knew of suffering, of fear. But when Armageddon came, their suffering would be unimaginable, if they didn't die in the initial blast-wave radiation, the darkening fallout ensured a prolonged death. But no one could know how bad it might be. He was one of the few burdened by the near certainty of what was to come.

How sad now that there had never been anyone truly special. All his life a loner. Technology had been his best friend, faithful and satisfying on a basic level. No one who cared enough to miss him.

It was worse for him than any of the others. The chip monitored every activity; it absorbed every bit of information he took in. They had all been through the same interrogation process. They soon learned, however, not to discuss what fragments had actually been remembered. Danton Edmond had a vague memory of a dark blue coloured room, a feeling of terror – more so than the others because of his sympathies for the other side. A man of principle, he would not be turned by money, or by the threat of death. Danton had already experienced a taste of the agony this tiny subdermal device could induce. Simply for discussing the subject of interrogation resulted a pain he never thought possible without passing out.

It was reasonable to assume they now knew everything. A liability, then, a threat to their conspiracy. He wasn't sure why they had not yet had him killed. Perhaps that would create suspicion. They wanted him there to appear to be unchanged, to act as normal, thus exposing the true intentions of his enigmatic contact. How normal can you appear with a chip inside your head, primed to unleash its torture at the whim of its controller? Actually, that controller was most likely to be an AI or even something more basic, programmed to identify certain words or actions – anything that may be a threat to the conspiracy. For almost two centuries people's communications had been monitored for key words and phrases, for the sake of national security. This was a novel twist on that old system that allowed no covert or coded communication.

His car decelerated on reaching the city. Surrey, like most other counties, had built-up conurbations, tower blocks that rose to cloud level, their tapered tips sometimes piercing the lower cumulus configurations. On a misty day, on his ninety-eighth floor, it could feel like he was not part of this world. Instead his isolation seemed reassuring, as if having departed from the world below into some ethereal realm. When visibility was good, the view stretched for over fifty miles. To him, the higher the better. Being a part of the Spaceguard program seemed to offer this opportunity. In reality Danton, with about thirty others, were stuck in nondescript corporate building. Like abeyant drones they all sat in front of monitors, checking for far off asteroids, meteorites and comets.

Mostly he'd collate trajectory stats, risk analysis probabilities, and sometimes an anomaly. Something appeared for a fleeting few seconds, not matching any known profile, only to vanish as inexplicably as it appeared. If something appeared within strike range, fitting the parameters such as a meteoroid, he had the authority fire upon it. Something extraterrestrial didn't necessarily pose a threat. In that case he would refuse to fire even though the system would lock on target. When on shift, monitoring alone, he'd simply claimed the system had misidentified a piece of space debris. Anomaly gone, the supervisor accepted his explanation. This, the reason why Spaceguard was always manned. AIs were not immune from malfunction, or worse still, corruption. Whether the supervisor was part of the conspiracy – willingly or not – he couldn't tell, such a thing was not to be discussed.

The car maneuvered to the elevator side of the tower. It then followed its locked-on course up the sidewall to his floor, then gracefully in through the building's car park to rest in his designated space.

Twilight took hold, his apartment light welcomingly switched on. It wasn't obvious, but he knew someone had been in his room. Items, such as a data console were not exactly where they were before. Danton was always meticulous about where he left his things. His suspicions confirmed when he searched through his bedroom. Software cards for AR programs had been replaced to a different side of the storage draw. He guessed most people wouldn't have noticed such minor changes, he always had an eye for detail, and more recently a suspicious nature. The thought of them entering his fantasy worlds, enjoying things that were tailored specifically for him, ignited some anger from the long dimming embers of despair.

For what it was worth he checked the sensor logs, confirming they had not wanted him to know of their visit. Part of the job, to leave no trace. So what further clues could they have uncovered to give away his once secret alliance that wasn't already revealed in the interrogation? It was simply a matter of procuring evidence.

He felt a soreness in his head in the area where the chip was emplaced. In an act of sheer defiance he called up a communication channel, which his console began to connect. This was a heavily encrypted channel, for a while the link would be impossible identify from the millions of others, bounced around the world. However, before the link had even been established, the 'dial up' was thwarted, the console unable to identify the interference.

The pain began to increase. 'GO ON THEN, I LOVE THIS,' he shouted. 'I CAN TAKE MORE THAN THAT.'

It took a while before he began to regret his words. It never failed to amaze him how he could remain fully conscious at this stage of the agony – as if some crazed knife-wielding creature was trying to break out of his head, hacking away at his skull. Through intermittent watery vision he thought he could see someone, inchoate, ghostly, like one of the characters from an AR fantasy sim.

After about twenty minutes the torture ceased. Only the immense soreness remained.

When the painkiller infusion began to take effect he thought about the ghostly woman. Extreme pain can induce hallucinations; this was simply some way of coping with something so intolerable.

He would not have to cope much longer. Danton opened the bottle of absinthe. It was a remnant

of his youth. Illegal now but he'd kept it well hidden. He never liked the taste; it was not a social drink. But it would serve the purpose perfectly.

*

As before, the location remained a closely held secret. The journey gave no indication of where they were travelling; no screen or viewer through which to see, not even the coordinate code revealed any clue. Jerand told them it was better not to know. Armion nodded. 'We wouldn't want the burden of that knowledge.'

Elekka had hardly spoken a word throughout the journey. Now in their new base she had been in her own room, her mind elsewhere.

Jerand would never let it be known that he had doubts, that a concerted effort was needed to cover his increasing anxiety. His contact an obvious target for the enemy, to be manipulated and exploited for his sympathies. Maybe he just had to admit to the other two that help was needed from outside. Their greatest ally – the ethereal aliens – could put an end to this threat, if their need was obvious, if truly his team's best would not be enough. Surely certain failure left no other option.

He looked up at the ceiling as if the alien observer were looking down at him. 'Listen to me,' he said, not loud enough that Armion would hear from the adjoining room. 'You know the odds, you know what we're up against. Can't you see? You wouldn't let us fail after so much.' He jumped, startled as Elekka walked in.

'Don't tell me you've turned to religion,' she said. 'Are things really that bad?'

Jerand tried to contain his embarrassment. 'Well it's worth a try. I don't know if I believe in god, but I believe we're being watched.'

'You mean by someone who will ultimately save us, and the world, if all our efforts fail?' Elekka looked at him more seriously. 'Your contact has been got to. I'm not sure he has long to live. Seems like he's been remotely tortured.'

'Then we've lost him.'

'I'd imagine they want him dead, for certain they've extracted all the necessary info from him.' She approached him, to less than a metre distance. She exhaled loudly. 'He's killing himself, just as they'd want. I want to save him. We can't let them have this victory.'

Here was the Elekka he admired, standing before him, all earnest and determined. It was so poignantly clear why the alien had saved her. 'Elekka. To think I doubted your commitment,' he said. 'If there was anything we could possibly do, believe me.'

'You can let me use the XK3,' she suggested. 'At Mach-6 how long can it take me?'

'Sure, you might make it before he dies, and even save his life. Then what? I'm not going to lose you again.'

She looked at him curiously for a few seconds.

'I realise the odds are stacked against us, but we can't just allow them free reign.'

'I wish I had your courage – or belief'

Armion stood by the door. 'I'll go with Elekka,' he said loudly. 'We'll take weapons.'

'You're going to try and prevent this man committing suicide, but in effect that's what *you'll* be

doing.'

'Elekka's right, though,' Armion said. 'We can't just wait here while they carry out their plans. This contact may have information. Through him we might be able to gain access to the Spaceguard systems.'

'That is a forlorn hope.'

'So is the world rescued by your alien friend.'

'Get out of my sight, both of you.' He glared from one to the other. 'And take care of my XK3, they're not easy to replace.'

Chapter 9

Gerrid's less authoritative approach seemed to be working. He was never proclaimed to be the director, only the one on whose idea everyone else built around. The speed of progress was truly staggering. If there were conflicts he didn't get to know about them. There was of course a real director; someone behind the scenes, giving little nudges, he guessed, in the right direction. He'd never seen this shadowy person. His freedom on this project remained an *almost* convincing illusion. TIAR had now been fully developed, but only tested by himself on two volunteers who were not connected with any important aspect of the project. A twenty-three year old man and twenty-one year old woman who both, after their first immersion, pleaded to be returned. They told him it was as if they had truly awoken for the first time. Ordinary AR did not have the same sense of connectedness. Comparisons were made to a particular amphetamine based drug ... which he dismissed as fanciful. The software created the AR environment, which was simply a holiday lodge in Quebec, an unpopulated landscape in which the two could interact.

The program was more complicated than for a standard sim. To create an entire world, he surmised, would be beyond current technology unless beginning a process over many years with many thousands of industrial scale imaging units. With his hundred or so dedicated band of assistants, a way to circumvent Data gathering had to be devised.

Memories were seldom reliable, but the average human brain could store almost as much information as a standard PDU computer. With some help from an engram augmentation program as well as a scanned peripheral environment, something could be created to allow the interactions of an unlimited number of people. To perhaps ensure a smooth running of the system there would be a certain number of fictitious participants based, in varying degrees, on real people. The real Monique's counterpart didn't appear to have any awareness of not being the original. It seemed the only noticeable difference between the two was the artificial Monique found him attractive – at least ostensibly. Maybe he would've had the same (genuine) effect on the real her had they spent more time together. The fact remained he had been manipulated by them both. Who could tell what expressions of affection were genuine, or what were used convincingly, to serve an aim that was not yet apparent?

These concerns had no bearing in TIAR; you enjoyed the feeling of it being real, or at least that was the short-term experience. How it would be after years, no one could know. This was not a concern that needed to be a burden. Simply a case of fulfilling his role, doing only what he was allowed.

A clinically prepared room, much like a medical centre, contained a prototype for the stasis unit. The two protagonists stood proudly at either side of the unit as Gerrid entered the room. One of them he recognised as Pablo Kolinta, Cryogenics specialist. The other he hadn't noticed before. With no initial assignment record he must be a new recruit. Unkempt hair, ill fitting clothes containing a wiry frame; almost a caricature. To think, he himself was once regarded as a geek. Gerrid nearly laughed, having to force the return of a serious composure by appreciation of the

magnitude of this occasion.

‘Is this fully functional?’ Gerrid asked, gesturing towards the quiescent chamber.

‘Not quite,’ the nerdy guy answered.

‘What is your role? I don’t know your name.’

‘I’m Louken Iberson, and I’m a metaphysicist,’ he said timorously.

‘I thought there was no such thing any more. Or is that just another name for a rebel physicist?’

‘Well, I guess *I am* considered to be outside the establishment of respectable physics,’ Louken said, without a hint of a smile.

‘OK, I can relate to that. So what have you been working on?’

‘A morphogenetic field confinement generator. There is evidence to indicate that during REM state the soul, or ethereal body, can be dislodged from the physical.’

‘I see. That could be a confusing experience, to suddenly have an out of body experience whilst in TIAR.’

Pablo shook his head subtly in what seemed like self-restraint. ‘There is no evidence for OOBes during bodily stasis, given that it is only the brain which will be above the 0.1 level.’

‘Still, we can’t take any chances,’ Gerrid said. ‘A morphogenetic inhibitor may be a good idea.’

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The journey to Danton Edmond’s apartment at Mach 6.4 took only seventeen minutes. The XK3 verbally berated them for pushing the limits until Armion disabled the voice processor. Nothing had been detected as intercepting or targeting. In stealth mode they themselves seemed to have eluded detection.

Inside the apartment, lying on the living-room couch, Danton had slipped into unconsciousness. Beside him a 70c1 bottle of absinthe, two-thirds drunk, and an emptied painkiller infuser cartridge.

Elekka prodded him for some response. She took out of her medic case a caffeine/taurine infuser, administering the highest single dose.

Danton’s eyes flickered. Elekka turned him over to the recovery position. He began to mutter something. ‘Mag ... Princess Magdalanía. I ... I have tried... The quest....’

Elekka turned to Armion standing a metre away. ‘I think he’s delirious, but it’s a good first sign.’

‘That name sounds familiar, I believe its from Fantasy Quest Lost Kingdom, a multiplayer sim.’

‘OK, so he must think he’s still in the game.’

Armion studied her face. ‘Actually, you do bare a similarity to the princess – not that I’ve partaken much, I’ve obviously got better things to do. I’m no sim-head.’

‘Sure, but maybe my plastic surgeon is.’ She smiled. The situation was at once tragic and funny. She tried to convince Danton to accept the emetic drink.

‘Do this for your princess,’ she said somewhat regally.

‘I am forever your loyal servant.’ he said, staring at her dreamy-eyed, before gulping down the sharp-tasting infusion.

Having regained full consciousness Danton sat up, staring at Elekka in awe. ‘You look...’

‘Well, we all have our doubles, pity mine’s a fictional character though.’ Her expression turned

serious. 'Listen, we don't have much time. It's reasonable to assume we are being observed.' Her voice a whisper now. 'We understand you have been compromised but we need to know the codes for the defence platform, or at least access to communicate with one of your team.'

'What good would telling you any of those things do, they'll merely change the protocols.'

'Fair point.' She took out a biometric scanner. Once the scan was complete, he keyed in the code. She sent the data using Armion's tachyon modulator. The codes bypassed the signal block by only a few minutes, having been sent faster than light, reaching the Spaceguard network after bouncing millions of times from various satellites, approximately thirty-eight hours in the past.

Armion had sent his own data virus to arrive as near to that time as temporal physics would allow.

Danton turned to Armion. 'How would the system have allowed you access without my knowledge, if it's already happened?'

'The uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics means the virus did not properly exist until the time of sending, two minutes ago; the laws of physics furthermore means there is nothing you could effect in this reality. The virus insinuates itself without detection.'

'There's no guarantee, however,' Elekka noted, 'that its presence has any effect on its environment, or vice versa. It could have been forced along another time-line.'

'A quantum ripple,' Armion nodded. 'Like a gust of wind on an invisible tethered boat on a calm lake.'

'My head hurts,' complained Danton.

Danton refused the offer to accompany them on the return journey. Clearly they would be the number one target. His life, and more importantly his freedom from pain, would be more assured if he was considered to be of use. If anyone had the know-how to disable an in-system virus it would be he. To appear to comply – but ultimately and deliberately do the opposite – and risk suffering an unimaginably torturous death is *true* loyalty to the cause. Moreover, he doubted any virus could succeed against the Spaceguard protection software without some interference.

Elekka at first tried to dismiss her feeling. The expectation was now so strong. Surely their every movement was being tracked. Amazingly, they had safely returned to the XK3; it was again at its limits in stealth mode.

'I can feel them nearing, we're not fast enough,' she said, forcefully calm for Armion.

'MACH 8.7, well into the red zone.' He peered into the Long-range display and sure enough another craft was creeping nearer. 'It's just over a ninety Ks away. Remember, there's still civil ground control monitoring unless *they've* been usurped.'

'Sure, we're not going to be shot down in mid air, but they'll follow us back.'

A warning suddenly appeared on the forward display panel. The voice synth had been deactivated; it would have mentioned the increased power drain. 'What is...?' Armion stared agape at the display. 'Even at max speed the reserve level should not be declining like this. Something's happened to the main fuel cells. Those bastards, they must've cut some of them away; we might only be running on a single cell.'

'Shouldn't the system's monitor have warned us?'

‘No, the cells are only recognised as one unit – an integrated system. That way we can carry a single spare, but that’s not part of the original design.’

‘Armion, I didn’t sense them, not from the apartment.’ She shook her head. ‘Could a mechanoid have done such an elaborate job?’

‘It’s possible: AI analysis scans, combined with teleoperated override.’

The XK3 automatically powered down to preserve its dwindling reserve. The delta wings ensured a steady pitch even without power. They headed towards the channel.

‘Did I tell you this baby can double as a sub?’

She gave him a nervous grin. ‘I doubt even Jerand knows his precious XK3 can run with salt water in its boosters.’

‘He’ll understand.’

‘You mean when he finds the craft, abandoned, with us long before captured.’

‘That’s right, keep positive.’

At 615 kph, they descended sharply over the English Channel, with the pursuing craft leisurely following a few kilometres behind.

‘Brace yourself.’ Armion Warned. The impact sent a jolt, causing Elekka to yelp. Armion wanted to maintain the last bit of velocity, even at risk of damaging structural integrity. The XK3, with displays flashing layer upon layer of final warnings, reached the seabed. An SOS message went out on a general band.

The pursuing craft hovered above, sending out an encrypted communication.

Chapter 10

Wherever you went within the Earth's atmosphere or above it someone somehow would know your location. Stealth technology could block visual and conventional radar signal. EM masking only deceived spectrometric scanners; surrounding atmospheric disturbance was always the crucial giveaway, leaving ripples of air molecules from wings and energised trails from engines. Evading detection meant taking the unpredictable approach.

Cutting through water at over a kilometre below the surface level was a particularly inefficient method of traveling. Maximum speed never exceeded 100kph. Any faster and you risk ecological damage, (notwithstanding the danger of high-pressure dynamic resistance).

The submersible was a relic from the China-Russian conflict forty-seven years previously. The bickering of two of world's largest nations over who would dominate the alliance led to the development of some arcane military technology. These nuclear powered craft had been decommissioned and buried as a sign of peace. Officially that is.

A Russian general had seen the opportunity to make a small fortune by appropriating and selling one of the vessels. Paymaster acquired it five years ago when it seemed like a frivolous purchase. Now the deep ocean had become the only safe haven. With the stealth technology of echo-reflection Johan Ebenson considered himself safe from detection. In any event, who would bother looking for an obsolete military sub?

The vessel was large enough to accommodate twenty-five adults, according to the schematics. For him there was about as much space as a medium sized house. The comm systems had the ability to utilize satellite relays, the problem of course being he would give away his position. The only undetectable method of communication was with another submersible vessel.

Three hours earlier Johan had no idea what his next objective was to be. He could stay hidden, and perhaps live near the ocean floor for another two weeks with the current level of supplies. Perhaps no one believed he was still alive, and he could move anonymously on land before reaching a safe house. Or just live like a nomad, dependent on his survival skills, until the time was right to make a contact.

Now his mission had taken on a new resolve with the detection of one of the paymaster's craft. The signal had been sent so covertly not even the occupants would necessarily have been aware of its transmission, using modulated tachyon pulses. This meant he had received the message before it was *sent*. Their separating distance ensured no quantum divergences: the time line was safe. This type of communication technology was not entirely reliable. The location could be pinpointed to within a few metres when he got nearer; the time of the message sent may vary according to quantum uncertainty. The time-code currently predicted the craft would enter somewhere in the English Channel in 7.6 hours, probability currently at sixty-eight percent, according to his personal AI. At full speed Johan had nearly an hour spare from his position in the Atlantic ocean – though it meant travelling illegally fast. If indeed he did arrive early, that craft would not arrive at this location. *Then would the transmission be no more than an echo from a parallel universe or would I*

myself have crossed over...? No wonder this technology had been restricted.

Eight days earlier events on land put into action his own emergency procedure, which wasn't so much a plan as a method of evading capture. Alicia had activated the code: red transmission, a final warning, perhaps in her last moments. What they'd done to her was the very thing each investigator/operative most feared: the memory of her work of the past five years had been erased. Worse still, she may have revealed vital information, secrets that she and all the team swore they would die to protect.

One encrypted communication from Paymaster, but no specific instructions. Only the knowledge to commandeer this vessel ... and wait.

*

'I guess being saved more than once is too much to expect from Him,' Elekka said, watching through the view screen as the XK3 skimmed above the seabed, unnervingly hitting the odd lump of rock.

'You can't rely on our alien friend to bail us out this time,' Armion said. 'We simply have to put our faith in serendipity, and know we did our best.'

Elekka gave him a sharp look. 'I'm surprised to hear you speak like that. You always have some strategic escape maneuver up your sleeve.'

'Not this time, I'm simply resigned to my fate.'

'I guess you're right about one thing: we did all we could.'

'Elekka.'

She felt captured in his gaze. 'What is it?'

'I love you.'

'Oh.' Her surprise was evident: Armion never betrayed his feelings, he was always Mister reserved.

'I mean you're everything I could ever want.' He looked away from her towards the floor. 'But I guess I'm not your type.'

'Hey ... you're a terrific guy, Armi.' She'd never seen him look so despondent. Paying compliments would not have been sufficient. 'I just need you to hold me for now,' she conceded.

Time had become a totally meaningless concept; it may have been five minutes or twenty before she heard the sound. Elekka was the first to notice the transponder signal. Armion tried to compose himself as he turned to identify the source. Not from above, a short range comm from a sub. Then a mass of bubbles outside as the vessel emerged in full view.

Gasps almost in unison. The confirmation came when the figure appeared in the sub's view port. No mistaking it was Johan, trying to use sign language since that was the only safe method of communication. Again, together, Armion and Elekka laughed to the point of crying.

They both put on their pressure suits, knowing leaving the XK3 for even a short traverse would expose them to an easy strike.

*

Toran Marlow drew away from his PDU screen in despair. The Russian network was not holding back.

News was top billing, trumping the entertainment networks. But high ratings were never worth *this* price.

The first strike carried all the bespoke aura of anguish; the sadness of inevitability. After the humiliation of a military incursion – if only a presence at the Russian border – the perceived threat of a world war was meant to cover the resurgent great power.

Pride of its people harking back to those great days of the Soviet Union. The new leader of the Neo-socialists opposition group spoke in his enunciated Russian without translation, other than the PDU's. 'How dare those imperialists with their superiority complex try to impose their will on our great nation. Our strength is in our solidarity; their weakness is in their decadence. While greed and cultural elitism divide their people, our citizens can be truly united in one cause....' It was a simple rallying call to the masses, well pitched to stoke up resentment.

The president himself gave his speech on every Russian network, and translated in English text for a world audience.

'In this time of crisis we will stand resolute and unyielding in the face American oppression. They accused my government of sponsoring a terrorist attack,' he said, sounding both indignant and solemn in careful measures. 'Terrorism is an act of evil my government would never condone,' he continued. 'But military action as a show of our strength in the face of US hostility is justified, morally – and constitutionally.'

'They have spies in our government offices, and cybermercenaries who have fallen under the influence of their ultra capitalist dogma. That alone is sufficient justification for retaliatory action. Every country in the alliance has formally voted with a majority in favour. As I speak, units from China and Middle Eastern countries are preparing for active duty. I do not wish a full-scale war. However, we must be resilient in the most effective way possible.'

The following hours gave way to a frenzy of media analysis. Firstly the Russian networks speculation about the American's next action of retaliation. Debates on the Russian president's pre-emptive stance: would the Americans fear the ultimate hostile response enough to back down? Were the words used in his address malevolent or simply uncompromising? His state of mind had also been questioned.

In recent years, relations between the Alliance and the Anglosphere West had deteriorated. The Western news networks gave prominence to any incident of human rights abuses. Draconian punishments still existed in some Middle Eastern states; political dissidents continued to be incarcerated. The forming of the Eastern Alliance was intended to have a moderating influence on the more extreme practices of ancient law, but the relaxing of state (autocratic, some would say) control to allow temporary zones of tolerance only resulted in an increased crime rate. Societies used to religious or cultural strictures became disordered and its people lived in fear of others in the same city rather than the authority's law. No doubt, Western pundits argued, those societies would eventually restructure themselves and become as prosperous as many Western countries. The view on the other side of the globe did not agree: In the prosperous West crime existed because its people

were allowed to become greedy; the prosperity was not for the majority. Those without were not respected. Resentment was inevitable, and resentment could lead to crime.

Chapter 11

General Frank Simmonds, chief of tactical operations, had spoken to the US president for nearly an hour over the hotline. It was a tiring conversation; he was glad security meant no visuals, it was enough of an effort to hide the fatigue from his voice.

He reclined in his drawing-room high-back chair, stared at the photo on the wall of his younger self, a cadet standing proudly with the other young officers having completed training at the academy. Simpler times. Peaceful times.

Things were escalating, it seemed, because of one man. It was now common knowledge that the Russian president was one block short of a storage compound; insane some would say. Drawing the other side in by ratcheting up the severity of retaliation. Who in their right mind instigated an all out conflict when the consequences invariably meant humiliating defeat?

After the EMP missile strike over Manhattan there was only one course of action.

No simulation, however well researched, could predict the impending catastrophe he foresaw, there were only recommended responses – a standard strategy. Never had there been a need to factor in the peculiar psychology of the Russian leader, Andamir Ivanov. President Ivanov was someone who had been democratically elected – though could there have been a more stark illustration of the flawed nature of democracy? In centuries past, people voted for the radical alternative seemingly out of desperation, for whoever seemed convincing enough that they alone held the key to a better future. Critical faculties suspended in favour of grasping for that last vestige of hope. No such reason applied a mere five years ago, in an era of – at least by Russian standards – prosperity.

He could voice his reservations and objections until blue in the face. But it was simple: his duty was to his country, ergo his president.

The rapid consensus amongst congress, the joint chiefs, was *dismaying*. It was as if they had no regard for the mistakes of history. Any wisdom he believed he had gathered from forty-seven years of service did not provide any comfortable rationale for this current administration's decisions. Although these were extraordinary times, surely someone at the top had considered stepping back from the battle station to take a longer view. Instead, it seemed they were collectively regarding the other side – the Russian leader in particular – as an enemy who understood the logic of war. That mistake had been made a couple of generations ago: trying to defeat an enemy driven by an uncompromising ideology. The only way to win was by defeating the ideology *itself*. But then compromise on either side could be regarded as weakness. He wondered about the opinion of the American people. Perhaps nigh on irrelevant, conveniently midway through the government's term.

In the face of such extraordinary aggression, troops had to be withdrawn before the ensuing counter-strike. A missile with fifteen kilo tonnes worth of explosive power showed how serious the US was about refusing to be cowed ... in spite of it being destroyed before reaching its target. Whether or not Ivanov viewed it as a warning or a serious attempt at a strike hardly mattered. Neither side was about to back down.

At this stage, events were playing out like a scenario from an academy sim training program, his actions appropriate and measured. The order for the counter-strike strictly by the rule – if at the outer limits of a proportionate response. There had been no world war in his lifetime, and nothing could really substitute for genuine experience, yet surely even a *cadet* could sensibly predict the deaths of millions as an ultimate result of that very order.

The Rubicon passed. *But you truly wear the burden of it at this high level.*

Potentially he could have talked the president out of the need for Standard Response – maybe a more articulate man....

He imagined how the endgame would be described in his memoirs (assuming he lived long enough): his reluctance to accede to the final act of destruction, the conflict within his own mind.

He knew there were those somewhere in high authority that had a plan to protect its citizens. No culture reaches this level of sophistication without making provisions for a worst case scenario.

The following day Simmonds received a communiqué, amongst the thousands of delayed messages on a standard channel, passed to him by his private secretary to his wafer-stand comm-link – providing a comfortable separation (and could easily be turned away from his focus if the caller got heated). Normally something like this would be dismissed as the work of just another crank who, at the very most, may have appeared on a media network. The man claimed to be Jerand Volandry, son of tycoon Horatio. Although having allegedly died in an accident thirty-two years ago, he was now working to thwart a sinister conspiracy from some supposedly secretive group above the highest known echelons of power. The man wanted a meeting, urgently – a conference on a secure channel. Unfortunately, owing to the comm network being off line in the last two days following the e-m pulse strike, he had been denied this. Still, he'd show the man a willingness to listen if nothing else.

Audio only, but the fury in the man's voice conjured up enough of an image. 'General, how is it possible for communications to be down in this day and age for so long?'

Simmonds cleared his throat. 'The Russians used an EMP pulse charge with their strike. You'll find, Mr Volandry, that the entire news network has been off-line concurrently.'

'I would have got to you before the Russian strike. However, they've been trying to block my attempts to communicate with anyone in authority. The media networks are essentially at the behest of the government; the governments are just a tool for the Nine.'

'The *Nine*. Do you think I've not heard this kind of thing at least a hundred times before? I'm only listening to you because of who you claim to be.'

'Who I am is not important. What matters is you do not follow the orders of the president.' He huffed irritably. 'Don't you think it's odd that the entire coalition defence council has ratified this war? No objections of any member – how can that be?'

'Well, Mr Volandry – if that is your real name – if you think you know so much about the machinations of the DC then please tell me.'

'I don't know for certain, but it seems likely the council delegates have been put under duress. We all have our vulnerabilities.'

‘OK,’ he sighed, ‘I can fathom a guess at what you’re suggesting. Try to consider, however, the need for a proportionate response to such an act of aggression – unless of course the Eastern Alliance has also been coerced.’

‘Now you’re getting the picture.’

‘Please do not insult my intelligence, Mr Vlandry. Your theory is quite a simplistic one: you’re suggesting war is being orchestrated. God knows the rationale behind that!’

‘It’s their final solution to deal with what they believe is an overpopulated world. And there’s only one way that can be achieved.’

‘You’ll understand how I find it difficult to believe that anyone would intend annihilation; a nuclear exchange would leave this planet uninhabitable for millennia. I’m no expert but I do know something of the effects of radiation.’

‘Yes, thousands of years of radioactive decay. It seems crazy to unleash nuclear weapons. But I believe – I’ve obtained evidence – that this no longer need be the case. There is technology which can nullify the natural decay process.’

‘But can you bring me that evidence?’

‘If I did, you’d probably not believe it.’

‘That’s a fair assumption.’

‘I want you to understand that you are being used to serve a purpose in the plan.’

‘Then my power is illusory, right? Even if I don’t comply there are other generals who will take my place. I’ll be relieved of duty on the fabricated grounds of ill health. If this nine is so powerful then nothing I do will make any difference.’

‘You have access to weapon systems – key strategic defences. You still have security clearance--
-’

‘Alright, I’ve heard enough,’ Simmonds snapped irritably. ‘No evidence of any real substance has been proffered here, so if you think I’ll act on your behalf – let alone give you access to weapon systems or the password to the defence network files – you can think again.’

‘Yes predictable. Be sure to let me know if you do have a change of heart. You have my contact link-code, but it cannot be traced and neither can I. And as for evidence: I will get it to you.’ The link disabled.

Chapter 12

Danton Edmond thought he knew the extremes of fear. The fear before the pain. Now it was fear of the unknown, having stepped into the abyss of his chosen future. Perhaps five years ago this situation would've been suffused with the excitement of daring do – young Danton, his part as the hero, about to save the world. Thoughts of consequences shunted to a silent part of his mind. Before he knew truly the experience of such torture, he would be one hundred per cent single-mindedly focused on his self-appointed task. His given coordinates resided in his head like sacred text on ancient parchment; so delicate and precious, at all costs to remain hidden. Coordinates denoting the ten metre area within which the laser must be targeted. Precision was everything. The data virus had been detected, within minutes the commander would shut down the network, but already the system was rendered unsecured. Those precious numbers had to be keyed in from his station. A safety system prevented him from actually setting off the firing sequence on a non-identified standard target. That was where Armion played his part, sending the codes that fooled the system into believing authority override had been given. A few minutes.

The station commander boomed over the comm speaker at such a volume his voice distorted. 'DISABLE THE SYSTEM.'

'I'm sorry sir, I've lost control – someone has infiltrated---.'

'DISCONNECT THE POWER, YOU IDIOT.'

A supervisor pulled down the main power lever; power for the entire station ceased, monitors winked out leaving the observation room in a dull wash of emergency red.

The authorized procedure had already been accepted. From a low orbiting satellite, a twenty-megawatt laser targeted a seemingly uninhabited area of land. Its destructive force created an explosion of grass, soil and chalk to about fifteen metres in the air. The remaining sediment began to give way until all remained was something akin to a meteorite impact crater.

*

Gerrid had been immersed during the strike; the sound barely registered from his perceived alpine cabin, like no more than distant thunder.

Being here was contentment; his new partner sharing in the uninhibited pleasures that those on the outside could only envy. His restless mind never more assuaged. But now a voice in his head telling him to exit. The room fading. He looked at her dismayed expression.

'Tanya, Something's wrong, were leaving TIAR.'

Tanya was hopelessly addicted to the immersion; the outside world – such as the compound had become – was now intolerable to her. She'd threatened suicide if forced to spend more than a few hours back in reality. Normally she had to be rendered unconscious to avoid the distress of leaving TIAR. She would do, it seemed, anything not to have to leave this beautiful new reality. Gerrid had never felt such a sense of responsibility for someone's wellbeing. It was not something he had willfully taken on.

He'd been immersed for almost six hours in one of the stasis pods, Tanya in the adjacent one. Re-emerging to full consciousness was not easy. There may not have been the disorientating Fugue State of longer-term immersion, but his limbs still took a few minutes to warm sufficiently to carry him out.

A man in security uniform stood before them with a weary expression. 'We must leave this section,' he commanded. 'Structural integrity of this level is under threat.'

They were approximately ninety metres below surface. The subterranean complex had increased down in stepped levels and then extending horizontally at about five hundred metres a day. Soon their current level would in any case be abandoned. Before the estimated nuclear strike, predictions for these complexes (this was only one of many hundreds being burrowed by automated drills throughout the world) ranged between twenty square kilometres to as much as fifty. Almost the entire lower complex would be allocated for stasis pods alone. Such a massive undertaking meant a somewhat aggressive recruitment drive: people, such as electronics technicians, software engineers, structural engineers, an architect, and even a geologist were recruited – whether they liked it or not.

Tanya groaned as he hoisted her out of the narrow chamber. The security guard offered to carry her, but Gerrid managed to help her along, supporting her weight until enough of her strength returned.

'The original compound suffered a laser strike,' the man said. 'Somehow one of the Spaceguard defences had targeted us. The top level's completely gone, cracks are already beginning to appear on this level.'

They currently had about ten kilometres to explore, which contained a stable air supply. The complex reminded Gerrid of a cruise sub he'd been on once as a child. Level after level. This place not quite at the same standard of luxury: only one swimming pool, two gyms, one bar (that he knew of) and two restaurants, but no casino. However, the apartments were equipped with a personal entertainment suite containing an AR port, which was based on one of his own early designs.

The depth of the eventual storage rooms would be sufficient to protect its inhabitants from any strike, thermo nuclear or otherwise, the experts agreed. The only unresolved problem was in persuading the majority of the population to acquiesce to be placed in a stasis pod, where their body would be frozen, their mind in sleep mode while an enabler program immersed them in an artificial reality (which was about as different to a conventional AR as that would be to a games console). They could still interact with their friends and relatives, who in turn shared this hyper-conscious experience in what maybe thought of as cyberspace: some commonly perceived point of reference.

This was a testing time for the sociologists and psychologists, a time of heated debate and argument. They agreed: Perhaps faced with the imminent prospect of Armageddon, the only alternatives to entering TIAR would be complete unconsciousness (even the prospect of centuries of unawareness must have its appeal), or death. Still, the people had to hold on to the belief that one day they'd emerge back onto natural Terra Firma, in a world cleared of radiation. Suggestions were to be mooted of constructing Mars-like biospheres to create a natural but completely isolated arcology. Hope of some kind, the psychologists agreed, was essential for sanity.

The entire 1,236 inhabitants of the southeastern complex – still the centre of project operations –

were now confined to the second lowest level, about four hundred metres below surface. To think there could be over a million eventual inhabitants occupying the completed complex, was a mind-boggling thought, even to Gerrid. No one was as yet allowed to experience TIAR-stasis unless for the purposes of research, which had to receive Gerrid's approval.

Gerrid normally ate in his own quarters, this time he tried the restaurant. He sometimes resented his naturally distinctive appearance, that it always meant he'd be recognised, for example, by someone who may have only met him once ten years back when still a child – as if a beacon had been activated for him to be noticed from some distance. Now he had become like some celebrity within this small community. Everyone in this new restaurant, it seemed, knew he was there immediately on his entrance. Glances and chatter; perhaps he should be enjoying his fame. But with fame comes responsibility, and in his case accountability.

Tanya had accompanied him, wearing a dark red dress, ending a few centimetres above the knees, tight enough to show off every curve. Maybe she was no more than a token girlfriend – someone to make him seem like less of an oddball. She was attractive, of course, at least in the most superficial way. The concept of anything deep in their relationship was something neither of them ever felt the need to consider. It was more like a mutual dependency, a tacit agreement. But her dependency increasingly became on TIAR. At first merely a willing participant in every experimental activity. She then just wanted to be with him in 'our special place'. Gerrid wouldn't allow himself to believe she felt anything genuine however much she told him of her love. She loved the idea of him as someone who can take her away from brutish reality to a place created at the behest of imagination; or simply wanted him as someone who could provide a better life. What else could he expect? Was being wanted solely for being useful a bad thing? He liked to be that useful person. After all, if she'd expressed in some way she merely wanted him to be himself it would not have made much sense. Not now at least. In TIAR you felt the capacity to strive to be an *ideal* self, and it seemed better to be true to that ideal than the actual. One thing for sure: once having been immersed, change is inevitable. The Gerrid of the past was a fading memory.

He had studied Tanya's background; her psychology didn't indicate any kind of addictive personality, though addiction to TIAR was doubtless understandable in their location. True motivations were never discussed. The reality, surely, was that neither had anything in common beyond a love of pleasure.

She seemed even more nervous this time. It was obvious people were discussing the curiosity of their togetherness. He said to her, 'you have to ignore them, we're here as a couple and that's none of their business.'

She turned and smiled at him. 'I don't care what they say, I'm just glad we're here together.' She sounded genuine this time, but Gerrid knew part of her was not in the present. Even he had the urge to be back where they were an hour ago. But what was left of the real world? It seemed they had to experience conventional reality as if it still had its merits over the increasingly imminent alternative.

The waiter seemed especially nervous, hardly daring to look up at them. At least that put Tanya more at ease, but all that deferential politeness made him feel mildly embarrassed.

Now was a good time to discuss the future.

Chapter 13

Cellacom's Intermail system was once again reaching overload point. Although this was a time of particular anxiety among the population – with correspondence, including cam footage of violent or suspicious activity, from concerned citizens – no amount of such data should account for impeding input stream. The technician suspected a deliberate attempt to cause the mail system shut down.

Toran Marlow currently had five reporters out in the field. His news network was now the most successful in the US; doubtless his remit to comment freely on the situation – allowing critical analysis of government policy – won his network legions of supporters, some: high profile opponents of the war. Government supporters were apt to point out the fact that if his news channel had existed in an Eastern Alliance country such as Russia or China, anti regime comments would've ensured its closure and his arrest. This more liberal administration did not, at least, engage in the heavy-handed restraint of anti-war protests. Speaking out against this war in even the strongest terms was fine, government representatives said, so long as that doesn't advocate direct action. Opponents agreed; hardly anyone wanted the streets filled with rioting protesters, but peaceful demonstrations should not be impeded with brute force.

One report depicted the attack on US troops by the Russian army. There was never any chance of it being a one-on-one battle: those types of wars had ceased a century ago. Now the Americans were in Russian territory they could be subject to the most extreme defensive actions. No one had been sure of the level of technology created by such a secretive nation. Only when soldiers' protective suits began to dissolve did it become apparent. Nanotechnology was already used by the West for medical purposes, performing small internal operations or merely delivering drugs. Never to be used on the battlefield; those things had the potential to replicate indefinitely, using whichever surrounding material by breaking it down into its base structure. They were simply too dangerous to let loose. And so it had been agreed, drawn up by treaty, not to deploy them as an offensive or defensive weapon.

Entire divisions were forced to retreat, leaving behind the remains, often only a gloopy substance, of someone's son or husband. It was truly emotive stuff, which was used as propaganda by both sides of the argument. The reporter had been careful not to be caught up in the emotion, only reporting the facts and the reactions of others. Witnessing someone being eaten alive by microscopic machines would undoubtedly leave you plagued with the kind of nightmares that no psychiatrist could ameliorate.

The Russians had done themselves no favours. They had effectively ruined any chance of a peaceful solution.

Toran had never been a heavy drinker. Even at a weekend when the next day was free, or on holiday, he would be sensible. Seeing as a youth his friends larking about, thrown out of a club. When once he'd downed a few more than usual he experienced the humiliation of being dismissed by a girl, the humiliation particularly felt the next morning. It seemed the booze conferred no

benefit.

The world had changed, events appeared to be heading in one direction; you didn't have to be a news analyst to know that all signs pointed to another world war. He could truly sense the mood of despair, like a contagion; a virus transmitted by his network. *Where is that light at the end of this tunnel?*

The drink offered a temporary relief.

Not that his new habit was anything unusual or extreme in the circumstances. Reports of alcoholic related hospital admissions had increased exponentially, and criminal activity reached record levels. People were taking what they believed their government was denying them, or what would inevitably be in short supply when their country is beleaguered by war. Perhaps just simple survival instinct.

Then the other day the call came. Someone who gave a name which could not be verified by any database, claimed to be from a company called New Vistas, This man offered an extraordinary fee to advertise his product, a new type of AR system. The product approved by trading standards as safety tested; Toran had no substantial reason to refuse the licence. Clearly there'd be those wanting to capitalize on a nation's despondency. In times past he would've been delighted by such an investor; now, money held little attraction.

Toran thought nothing could shock him anymore. That night such certainty was blown away.

The effects of booze gave the experience an unreality. There was no sound of a break-in. Perhaps he'd just hadn't heard, in his alcohol induced sleep. The security system should have detected an intruder.

Alone now, he had no one to protect but himself.

'Wake up,' the man with the mask said in a muffled voice, only his eyes visible.

Peering over his bed with a gun, Toran believed his life to be in jeopardy, but at the same time his only reaction was: 'if you're gonna kill me do it now – it'd probably be better than the alternative.'

'Just listen to what I have to say'. He brought the gun down. 'I accept you may have been misled into becoming a part of their propaganda machine – spreading fear of impending Armageddon. I'm sure you are no more than a pawn in their scheme---'

'Who the hell are you?' He was aware his voice sounded slurred.

'I am the one who brings the truth.'

'Is it a better truth than the one I've been hearing – and seeing?'

'I want you to play this recording; it contains all the truth you need.

'If you want me to broadcast this I will need some background on it.'

The masked man shoved the data-strip into Toran's hand. We'll be expecting to see it on tomorrow's news program. If it's not played you can expect another visit from myself, and maybe a few of my associates. Though we are not advocates of using violent methods, sometimes there are simply no other options.'

He walked as silently as he'd entered.

Chapter 14

At his meeting of the People's delegates, President Andamir Ivanov had rolled off his set piece to his ministers, slamming his hand down on the large imported walnut table: a somewhat ironic symbol of a bygone era. He knew he trod a fine line between that of the responsible leader, effectively of the Eastern Alliance, and the aggrieved aggressor. The latter had become increasingly difficult to maintain without tipping into the role of paranoid tyrant. In this age of complete – almost – media/press freedom he could not help but be affected by the comments, some from their most respected reporters, as to his own state of mind. He could be like leaders past and be protected from anything negative, live in a bubble of self-assurance. It was not as if he had to worry about the following general election.

After the meeting that usual malaise returned: a slight nausea and weakness.

His future would be assured, or so they told him. Unlike the rest, he'd one day return to the new world; himself as a leader of millions – they'd promised him that much. There would only be millions, perhaps a few hundred million on the surface, he'd been told. A new start then, a clean slate for planet Earth, one that could do business with its new allies.

Perhaps the world *had* stagnated in the way they'd suggested, it's populace too concerned with insular matters, and all the while a simmering discontent of those less fortunate. Eventually something would give. He could really imagine that day, when the peasants revolted. A truism as ever: no matter how much better or easier life became for the poorest there would never be acceptance; more discontent now than ever.

Nonetheless, his conscience was not at peace for what he was about to do.

*

A domestic scene, inside the living room.

A young boy looks to his father

'Daddy, why are we at war?'

'The Russians think we're bad.'

'We didn't hurt them, did we?'

'No, son, they think we're a threat to them.'

'Aren't *they* the real threat?'

'They could be.'

'I'm scared – I don't want to die.'

'Don't worry, Jake, there is somewhere we can all go to be safe.'

'Where?'

'It's a place where the Russians can't hurt us. It's a new world that's free from war.'

'Is it a long way from here?'

'No, we can be there before night-time.'

'Will it be fun?'

‘It will be like going to sleep and entering a long dream, but all your friends will be there – and Snooky – just like in the real world.’

The scene then switched to an idyllic countryside national park, a picnic area with benches and bluebells. A woman in a summery dress – who had the maturity yet attractiveness of someone who could advertise insurance – stood surrounded by people of varying ages. ‘New Vistas is a new start in a dangerous world,’ she said silkily. ‘Our dedicated team of researchers have taken the technology of Artificial Reality and made it real – better than real.

‘It’s time to no longer be frightened.’

This had been the third screening of the commercial. The company still refused to give any details beyond what had been broadcast. If that wasn’t difficult enough for his executives to accept, Toran then had to convince the producer to broadcast the even-more-mysterious datafile, telling his deputy not to run it through verification software since he may leave himself at risk to whatever secretive organisation wanted such information. In truth, Toran had already checked the provenance of the data source with no clues rendered (which was just as bad as indicating the dubious origin of some anarchist group).

Cellacom had always been a fair corporation, one of integrity – at least relative to most others. So he had it lined up for that evening’s schedule, to be announced as an eyewitness recording of an abduction.

His attention was then turned to his car’s nav-map.

The craft, of Russian configuration, stopped two thousand metres above the tower block. It locked on target within less than a second, releasing a low-yield explosive. Just enough to detonate the building in isolation.

If there had been no warning of its approach, everyone inside would have been killed.

Toran had left the studio only ten minutes before the incident. If he had been in charge of the vehicle at the time he would surely have lost control. Shock overwhelmed in nauseous waves, and then the inevitable hit of realisation that he was meant to be there – meant to be *dead*.

He’d been heading back to see his wife and two children; this was no time for trial separations. Except a dilemma presented itself in his mind to make him question this decision. Now there was nowhere he could be without being a hunted target.

Other newscasters announced sombrely the demise of their rival. Pictures of the building utterly decimated, still smouldering. It received worldwide coverage.

The exact identity of the craft had not yet been confirmed, though the dots were already being joined, and a theme emerged. Rival pundits noting that Cellacom, being the largest news organisation, would be a natural target: this building portrayed as a symbol to Western freedom, and capitalism. An affront to the ethos of the other side.

He tried to imagine how the response would have gone if the datafile had been broadcast. Firstly, an understandable scepticism. Yet the recording had appeared to be genuine, displaying the time code as the young woman was being interrogated. Still, he could not convince himself of the claims made by the mysterious figure. Understandably the man didn’t want his identity exposed, but

this did not in any way add to his credibility.

*

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ protested Armion, his voice echoing within the blue-grey hull of the conference room. ‘It’s clear how they’ve been manipulated. I mean surely this country’s defences could’ve prevented that attack.’

‘It’s clear to you and to me,’ Jerand said, ‘but people believe in what they’re told if it fits with their own prejudices.’

These days the only safe place was below surface. They were all now confined to the submersible. Only about the size of a standard house, it felt decidedly cramped for four people. Jerand’s coterie of personal assistants were advised to return to their families in this time of crisis – and especially since he had become the number one target.

The sub moved to deeper waters in the Atlantic. Tethered along at about eighty kph, the repaired and modified XK3 would provide an escape if ever the enemy detected their location. The sub outfitted with long-range scanners for any craft undersea. They were now submerged enough to avoid a laser strike from above.

Elekka said, ‘We have to accept that whatever we do we cannot put a stop to this war. It’s just our survival now.’

‘No, you’re wrong,’ Jerand countered, annoyed that she could sound so resigned. ‘There are still contacts in high places. We’ll try another newscaster with your recording, and another if that fails. The same thing cannot repeat itself. The Nine will have to find a convincingly different way to stop us.’

*

Inside the onyx room, about a kilometre under ground, the Nine had gathered for what was agreed would be their final meeting.

No.1 began: ‘I think we are entitled to view the last two months as an overall success’

‘In spite of a few hiccups although?’ said No.3

‘The important thing is the objective is now in site.’

No.2: ‘So Jerand and his gang are pretty much ineffectual at this stage?’

‘No more than pesky mosquitoes – they’ve got under the skin a few times and been a distracting irritation, but what have they really achieved?’

No.4 – intelligence specialist said: ‘they have so far evaded detection, which means they’re either underground or deep underwater. Wherever they are they have not communicated outside of their immediate proximity.’

‘Let’s not get complacent,’ said No.1. ‘We’ve underestimated them before.’

‘It still bugs me how that woman escaped,’ No.7 said. ‘Someone, we haven’t yet identified, aided her escape. If she’s – if they’re being helped by an outsider, we have to not take anything for granted’

No.2: ‘The others have been informed. Every precaution has been taken; the final stage is

imminent.’

‘Events will pass as though it were the natural progression. It will be a reasonable assumption that no outside civilisation will want to infect Earth’s cultures with their presence. So far the evidence has only ever indicated thus.’

‘But for how long? These new ... visitors risk putting something of a spanner in our carefully maintained machine,’ No2 observed.

‘There’s no need to worry, my friend. Our allies, I know, will up their game accordingly. The deal would mean nothing if there were no quid pro quo. With our resources, the potential of our land. With so much to protect---.’

‘Nonetheless, this could get messy,’ No3 said.

‘Messy? Whatever happened to the soldier who relished the prospect of a challenge?’

‘He got old.’

No1 got up from his chair. ‘We need to concentrate on our original objective rather than speculating so far down the line.’

Chapter 15

Amidst a seemingly unremarkable industrial estate was situated a low oblong building with no obvious windows or doors. Any passer-by would not even be aware of it, without prior knowledge. This building had now become the hub of current affairs broadcasting.

Internell News gained record profits. The reasons were obvious: one advertiser had spent an unprecedented amount to promote its product. It was almost a source of embarrassment to Georgio Langarde, its chief executive. This company – New Vistas – had clearly mounted a campaign to usurp every other advertiser in the promotion of its product, running at the top and a message at tail end of each break. In light of recent events, no one dared show any sign's of triumphalism, and really – in these circumstances – Internell's success was something of a hollow victory. In times past, competition with the other networks was fierce to the point of employing the dark art of negative advertising. Now there were only two serious contenders on the block to vie for the accolade of premier news provider.

Internell had its own British equivalent under a shared ownership. Ratings for every news network increased exponentially, yet share prices for each were plummeting. People, it seemed, were cashing in their assets, enjoying what life they had left. There were other reasons for needing savings. The thought had also occurred to *him* to sell up and hop aboard the next space program. Excursions to Mars had always been for the wealthy. Now, there was such a premium on each ship placement, only those classified as rich had any realistic chance. There was no point merely booking a vacation package. A one-way ticket was now the only option. Needless to say, property prices for any Mars accommodation were multiplying by the day. Then you faced a life in a dome. Each one may be ten or so kilometres across, but it was still a controlled biosphere. He'd heard – and reported – a few stories of people dying as a result of CO₂ poisoning. Such stories would once have made the prospect of being on Mars a risk too far for any responsible family man; though since the Earth was now destined to become a radioactive wasteland Mars had become a highly attractive option.

The cost of taking him and his family may well have been, up to a week ago, beyond anything even he could consider. Now, oddly, he felt a heavy burden of freedom of choice.

One further far riskier option for leaving Earth: long term travel beyond the solar system. They would of course travel in cryo-stasis. In fact the notion of such a venture was much the modern equivalent of cryonic freezing. A mission had been rushed through long before completing the laborious process of safety tests. Decades before the original planned completion, a ship set to leave moon base and begin its uncertain quest to find the nearest Earth-like planet. It was the ultimate gamble, and yet competition for a place in a deep-freeze casket (where revival, let alone mission success, was even odds at best) had become almost as intense as that for Mars.

Safely away from the main sub, the craft shot out from the depths of the mid Atlantic like a missile heading for some airborne target. The G-force almost knocked Armion unconscious in spite of his G-suit. MACH 6.4, altitude twenty thousand metres, away from terrestrial monitoring systems. There was never any point in trying to actually visit a destination. It all had to be done from inside the craft. The transmission should have evaded the disruption web, although it could still be detected. The transmission was in a compression burst lasting no more three seconds, designed to insert itself, interrupting the scheduled broadcast, allowing millions of viewers to witness the true nature of those who hold power. How odd to think that it may have already been broadcast before he'd sent it; that was the paradoxical way of completing a temporal circle. Success could only ever be a probability.

The trouble was, people had become so cynical they did not even believe the evidence there presented before them. The fractal-layered time code of a recording is something which cannot – as far as he knew – be faked. Accompanying it is an ultrasonic code, which is unique to each device and according to the recipient and the environment recorded. However, only the network computer was able to give authentication. Then would the people even believe *that*?

Now each mission was a lone one. If captured, his fate would be worse than death; the prospect of being killed no longer held him with fear. The only option must be self-termination; the avoidance of interrogation which (being realistic) he doubted would be possible to withstand. So, graphed subdermally to a major artery, a cyanide capsule connected to a nano-processor. He simply needed to say a key word followed by a two-digit number and it would all be over in seconds.

It only took two and a half minutes until the detection warning activated.

The intercept was happening from four different locations; enemy craft estimated at a speed even the XK4 would struggle to maintain. He could now only dive back towards the ocean for any hope of avoiding capture. The XK4 was a modified version of the XK3. It could glide through water without any risk of damage. He'd personally worked on it himself, creating a filter system to protect the plasma flow in the thrust nacelles.

To kill him would've been easy, one strike with a laser to a plasma conduit. At least that would be an instant death. The absence of any attack only confirmed his fear: they wanted him alive.

If their craft was not adapted to submersible travel then there was a chance. If he made it through the surface impact, he'd evade them. To avoid interception – at the current velocity of the enemy – the on board data assistant recommended a speed that would likely fatally damage the XK4 on impact with the sea. He could only gamble on them slowing at the last few seconds. But it was a tough call.

At two kilometres till impact the sudden pressure of deceleration stretched the tolerance of his belt webbing.

At eight hundred metres, the first ship closed in, but it didn't try to stop him – and he smashed through the surface at Mach-1.4. The immense energy transfer crushed muscles around his shoulders and chest, but he hardly noticed as consciousness was swiftly stolen away.

Armion came to, his mind all of a sudden flooded with adrenaline-filled panic. The scanner showed the enemy hovering twenty metres above. The engines had cut out and the craft was losing

speed rapidly.

He initialized thrust, ramping up the power in spite of the warnings. It would be too risky to head back to the coordinates of the sub; that's undoubtedly why they waited, so he could lead them. Hopefully a random trajectory would confuse them. After about fifteen minutes one of the craft had dived in and was now accelerating towards him. The XK4's display systems screamed silently at him in the form of jumping holographic red symbols. The engines were beyond tolerance levels; without the additional air intake, they had to rely on reserve power. He hoped the massive wake created prevented the pursuing craft from getting near enough to fire. His escape depended on whether their engines gave up before in range.

Armion increased the randomness of his trajectory pattern. Except it wasn't sufficient to escape. The missile exploded a couple of metres from his vessel. The overwhelming EM pulse disabled every electronic system, leaving the XK4 effectively dead in the water. He prepared for his own death. He tried praying. As an atheist it felt strange.

Except he was not praying to god.

*

A hundred and fifty-eight kilometres above the Earth's surface an invisible craft had its sensors fixed on a point in the mid Atlantic Ocean.

In the transparent control deck of the craft a quarrel raged between a captain and his lieutenant, demoted from Lt. Commander for insubordination.

Translation:

'By saving one life we are not altering the historical time line, we are merely facilitating the potential for it to be altered,' the lieutenant argued.

'How many times do I have to remind you of the seventh protocol. Think of the ramifications of the previous intervention. Maybe you wish to start a war with the Darangi.'

'So it's okay for them to interfere, but we must only observe?'

'I really do believe you have become influenced by the vagaries of human sentiment. My orders are explicit; any more breach of TD protocol will result in a court martial.'

The ship left orbit, approaching within a safe communications range with Central Council. If there was one way to assuage the doubts of his crew, guidance from the council would effect this.

Chapter 16

Ariane Timalsen had always felt a slight pang of nerves just before going on air. These days – when viewing-figures for their station had tripled in one week – it had probably become obvious.

The makeup droid frantically applied an extra thick layer of concealer to prevent any unwelcome signs of stress on her unblemished face.

She composed herself. ‘The Chinese government, in a statement to the eastern network, has declared its full cooperation with Russia. Ushon Ping has signed an agreement to provide a military force of five hundred and twenty thousand to initially set up a defensive zone around the core European countries, effectively creating land and air confinement.’

In a press conference US Defence secretary Jerome Malchom spoke to an international media gathering, with over a hundred lenses and mikes focused on him. ‘This so-called defensive confinement is a clear strategy to provoke an aggressive response,’ he began. ‘An incursion by another name is still an incursion. Whether this is a Russian or Chinese initiative makes no difference to our response. We will send out a warning to withdraw from Coalition borders or face the consequence of our military offensive.’

‘Do you now intend a response strike at Russia,’ asked a reporter, ‘or do you believe they will retaliate with a heavy bombardment?’

‘As my military representative has already said, our primary aim is to neutralize their offensive capabilities by using a specifically targeted program of small strikes. It is not my government's policy to start a world war.’

After the highlights of the conference, the newscaster introduced a report from a Middle Eastern correspondent in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. The man wearing a light short-sleeved shirt, but sweating profusely in the intense heat of early evening, said: ‘In spite of the militant stance of the Saudi leader the majority of public opinion appears to be against this conflict escalating into war...’ The connection was cut; a moment of dead air, followed by a message from someone calling himself Jerand Volandry, but still no visual, only a blank blue screen. ‘What you are about to see,’ came a voice that would be apt for a British news reader, ‘is a true account of someone who dared to find the truth. Here is her own recording.’

The image quality was unusually low resolution for a broadcast, mostly due to high level compression, but there was not much to see initially beyond a white light. The audio began of the interrogation.

After a minute and ten seconds of the recording, everything stopped. No power.

The emergency generator came on line but by then the broadcast feed had been lost.

Standard transmission resumed. Ariane explained there had been a power loss, and promised to provide more information. ‘The Intranet gathered all possible sources of data affecting the local area,’ she began, in a disguise of professional equanimity. ‘The central power grid had suffered an

explosive strike, power was lost to almost every home dependent on the grid. The broadcast feed seems to have been lost after only a few seconds: the effects of the strike may well have taken a minute before power loss occurred throughout.'

*

'Gerrid, how do you think history will judge you?' The tall blonde woman peered down at him as he sat in a wooden chair, her pretty face contorted onto a mosaic of disgust.

He knew her; they'd met before – in a park. He'd kissed her, how could he forget her name. And where is this? Just some sparse white room. He didn't know what to say.

'You have no control over your life,' She continued. 'Ultimately you're like one of your sim-compliant characters, at the behest of its masters. *They'll* determine how history is written.'

'Then what choice do I have?'

'You're clever enough to know there is a way out. You can destroy what you've created from the inside.' She sat in the chair two metres away. 'How about infecting the core monitor program with a virus?'

'How do you know about that, it's classified?'

'I know what's in your mind, Gerrid.'

'You're bluffing. There's no technology for that ... at least that's legally available.'

She smiled, benignly menacing. *Maybe this is a TIAR program, and she a challenging conquest. A worthy one.*

'I have telepsychic abilities.' A stern look once more, though she could never look genuinely intimidating. 'I know what you're thinking now, and there's no chance of that happening.'

'If you really are inside my mind, then that's the most intimate I've ever been with anyone.'

She seemed to ignore his statement. 'Just remember you can stop the project.'

He was back in his room; Tanya next to him in bed, oblivious.

So just a dream, it seemed. Maybe he'd overdone it with the level of psychotropic stim in the last immersion – some residual effect. Perhaps it had been his own conscience talking to him. He remembered her name now. Elekka: the woman who tried to make him see the light – as she saw it. Instead, he chose the dark side.

No, what nonsense.

Even if he did – if he could – put a stop to the project, that would not make any difference at this stage, now events were escalating to full-scale war. And even if he wanted to, the chances of successfully corrupting the monitor program with a virus was minimal, something even the highest rated programmer would struggle to accomplish, given its diagnostic ability. Only outright sabotage could stop it.

Monique. She had almost pleaded with him to become part of the project.

He got out of bed and datavised a request to see her. The message was sent through a priority channel; he was now one of the few with access to a high-level command security clearance. It meant, by an implicit understanding, his request would get through to the very top.

*

General Voltimir had been in conference with the president, outlining the inexplicable recurrence within compound 4569#3, a secret location somewhere in southeast Russia. The defence grid network had now reinitialized. For the fourth time a systems-wide diagnostic and repair program had run to iron out any further bugs in this antiquated system. Normally, in times of war, it would be expected that the Americans would try every trick in the book to thwart their attempts to reactivate the world's second largest missile silo. Of course nothing so obvious as an outright data virus, just subtle things causing the odd glitch – enough to render the network below operational standards. A mere 0.5 percent below and those missiles were firmly locked down.

Voltimir was, however, insistent that the Americans had no way of interfering with such a securely protected operating system. The base commander had no explanation. Sometimes these problems were dismissed as gremlins; it was another way of saying the system detected a non-standardized error algorithm, which simply meant *it* was flummoxed. More sinisterly, rumours of a ghost amongst the operations staff, drifting about the compound. Some antinuclear campaigner, the commander joked, who, having failed in their life's goal, has a new impetus to make another attempt in death. No one seemed to find that amusing, and not surprisingly, since it was their own jobs on the line. The other side were now poised to strike with the big one – and who could question their entitlement to do just that? Smaller Russian defence installations had already been targeted, with much loss of small-scale hardware, including stealth fighter drones, and neutron warheads. The orbital grid was still intact; but as with the enemy, these could be circumvented using cloaking shrouds. So everything depended on what could be deployed from the ground. Not merely a case of who had the best strategic programs, but who was prepared to allow them to run their course, when the overriding criterion was to win regardless of the human consequences. A strategic program never makes a decision based on sentiment; the complexities of politics would only be a hindrance.

Even without full nuclear strike capability, the Russians retained the option of their most insidious weapon: The Nano soldier. At less than sixty microns tall it could insinuate itself into the enemy's advance. Like a colony of flying ants, they could be programmed to home in to the enemy's bio-signature. The experience of being eaten and transformed into decarbonised goo didn't bear consideration. One scientist had a first *hand* experience of these nano-bots. During a test procedure he had lost a (gloved) fingertip to a rogue strand, described an extreme burning sensation, worse than a scold from boiling water. So, in adherence to some kind of perverse morality, these little menaces were never deployed as a long-range offensive weapon. Yet, were not destroyed. Nano soldiers are a technology, the previous administration decided, which were to remain inactive, stored away in their reinforced lead containers. Like the nuclear deterrent, they served as a symbol of a nation's power – the muscle behind it; the ultimate force which should never need to be used. Fear of the potential consequences of war meant every effort possible to avoid it.

Somewhere along the line that belief no longer held. Since the inception of the new administration there had been a paradigm shift in the whole political system, it seemed. Not just in Russia where diplomatic relations were known to be a foreign – in every sense of the word – concept to the new president elect, but throughout the United Bloc of nations: a committee,

including the non-aligned (neutral) countries such as Japan, Korea (north & south), and India, which had at the heart of its ethos the slogan *finding the middle way*. There were just too many small differences regarding ‘what if’ scenarios, the defensive strategies if the conflict spread. Compromise was never formulated ... as if the ingredients never even existed. Perhaps it was simply too late.

Any hopes of reaching a negotiable position were now a distant memory. The US was not about to recoil from their stance of protecting the American people at any cost. The US president’s use of the word ‘cost’ in his address statement was deliberately ambiguous; it could either mean cost in monetary terms or a cost in lives to the enemy. Additionally, not one of the Eastern Alliance countries was prepared to renounce the use of their nuclear arms. The two biggest EA nations – Russia and China – in fact agreed their nuclear capability must be restored to full capacity ... and shown to be such.

*

The reply to Gerrid’s request came through as an audio only response, from someone who only revealed himself to be a representative of the Nine. ‘She has agreed to speak with you but only in telepresence.’

‘That will not be acceptable,’ he was swift to reply. ‘Why can I not see her in person?’

Her location must remain a secret. Transporting her to you or vice versa would pose considerable security risks,’

‘I guess there’s no point arguing with that. I realise there are those who believe anyone with an involvement in this project deserve nothing less than to be eliminated. That’s the reason why I need to speak to her.’

There was only one way to meet with Monique; the network had already been connected between the locations. It meant another immersion.

The plain white room again. He’d seen her perhaps a hundred times in various states of undress. They had been the most adventurous of lovers; bodies ‘real’ and yet more malleable than would be allowed by the constraints of physics. His mind had played the best trick on him that only TIAR was only able to facilitate – the belief that indeed she was really there, his willing partner. Even now he wondered if she had linked [to him] like this as a tele-present lover.

Wisely it seemed, Monique had opted to appear in soberly formal clothes: the charcoal-grey suit, not particularly figure hugging, and hair tied back – this was no time for distractions. She sat primly behind a desk, a couple of metres away.

‘It’s good to see you again, Monique,’ he began. ‘But you will understand if I am not convinced that you are here in any real conscious sense.’

‘I guess we will all have to get used to such Cartesian conundrums. Who can tell what is real inside your marvelous creation?’ She smiled, but only in a way that seemed like a polite affectation. ‘To be honest,’ she continued, ‘I’d be at a loss to know how to prove my reality to you. But why is speaking to the real me so important now?’

‘It was the real you who almost convinced me to sign up for the project.’

‘Yes *almost* being the operative word. No wonder you continue to have your reservations. Someone has tried to convince you otherwise, but she hasn’t appreciated the inevitability of this war. There’s always going to be fierce opponents to something so life-transformative as TIAR. But we can only do what is within our power to reduce if not prevent any unnecessary suffering.’

He met her eyes intensely, trying to determine her authenticity. ‘You can understand my reluctance to be a part of this project, because of what I know. This whole charade of an east-west conflict---’

‘It is no longer a charade; it’s now very much a reality. The momentum for war is now unstoppable. The only thing to be concerned about is what will happen after---’

‘Armageddon – yes I know. But I’m not happy with being isolated from the world, the people who were once a part of my life.’

A half smile again. ‘You’ve changed. Not that I claim to have known you well; all I had to go on was a basic psychological profile from my own observation, and our time in the restaurant. The Gerrid I met that night seemed only interested in a world of his own choosing.’

‘I was interested in you,’ Gerrid added.

‘Or the ideal me you imagined – hoped for. And you were someone who courted isolation: “people did not understand him enough to be worthy of his company.”’

‘As you said, you cannot claim to have known me well. Sure, perhaps no one would’ve ever taken me seriously if it had not been for my selection to here.’ He paused for effect. And you. You presented yourself as if you were the answer to my dreams, everything I could ever want.’

‘Of course I had to appeal to your ego – it was the obvious way to recruit you. But you have no idea what kind of duress I have been under.’

‘I’m tempted to ask you about your connection to the Nine, but I guess that would be a pointless question. You only did what you had to. And I enjoyed taking the bait. I certainly didn’t regret it.

‘That’s good. Regret achieves nothing when the past is immutable.’

‘Thank you, Monique.’

The link broke off.

Chapter 17

Almost concomitantly with each throughout the world, the southeast complex was now complete. Thirty-two square kilometres of space, over half a kilometre below surface. Walls reinforced with lead, and divided into oblong sections. Only a fraction of the pods were in place, although over a million were in the process of construction.

Military strategists, when describing the most pivotal stage of a conflict, often used the term tipping-point. To Randal Michaelson it now seemed that stage should have been reached. All signs pointed to such inevitability – never the return to normalcy.

He studied the UK New Vistas subscribers' database with increasing despondency. Though there could never be enough TIAR immersion pods (even with the latest design of nano-construction bots) for every civilian within the country, take-up had been a surprising disappointment, no more than eight per cent. Only South America had lower, of all the coalition nations. Perhaps people wanted to believe that somehow this war would be peacefully resolved; memories of a familiar and secure world too powerful for such a life to be discarded for something which was, in people's perception, unreal and untested. Sure, it was still relatively early days, but in a matter of weeks it could be too late.

Randal's remit extended beyond that of monitoring their success and coordinating the campaign. He also had a part advisory role with Geraldine, his business partner, who would so frequently offer a totally contradictory perspective. The New Vistas creative department put forward their idea, to then be approved or modified. The advertising production team, owing to the lack of accord between the partners, was left with a two-track advertising strategy that failed to integrate the two essential themes. Alternately, the NV promotion cited the new adventure, the opportunity to live the dream, the fantasy (if late-night commercial), and the chance to be a part of a closer community. And on the flip side: the consequences of an imminent world war; the horrific effects of nuclear fallout, how life would be if someone chose to live through a nuclear winter. These two commercials were broadcast apropos with the theme of the network programme. The success story was – unsurprisingly – North America, the originators of New Vistas. Their strategy of blending the themes of fear, adventure, and hope had been given much more airtime than the narrowly pitched UK campaign. There seemed to be no qualms about frightening children, when running their broad-based promotional film. In fact, to engender fear in as many people as possible had been the whole point of the US strategy. Applications in the States were approaching forty per cent *already*. Sociologists had a more conventional explanation for that. The US was the big player in the war; they were also the main target. There could be no point in denying the threat when, in its people's eyes, their nation was the cultural and political focal point of the world. Now the ultimate threat had to be considered. The existence of nuclear weapons had for over a century not been a part of any conflict, and then only ever used as miniature targeting devices. Conventional-style weapons were relics of late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries; their continuing existence never discussed since the signing of the decommissioning treaty. The issue of disposal seemingly swept under the carpet;

a subject not mooted for the sake of diplomacy.

*

‘Five seconds,’ went the voice in Ariane’s ear.

‘In a statement today, Indian president Shirika Masali pledged total support for the Russian defence initiative, after a high level meeting between foreign ministers to agree a new treaty. India is the first non-aligned country to declare allegiance with the Eastern Alliance.’

Masali appeared, flanked by party officials facing a selected few national media reps. ‘My government and I have agreed to the Full Commitment treaty. This will enable a complete sharing of resources including our high capacity defence grid and maximum yield armaments. I must, however, stress that this is not intended as an offensive strategy against Western interests, merely a demonstration of solidarity against neo-imperialist aggression.’

Afterwards, having moved to an adjacent studio, Chief correspondent Dolan Cranali said: ‘Although this broadcast had never been intended for Western media, the president has sent out an unequivocal message to the rest of the world – that India is a force to be reckoned with. And as a formidable nuclear power they have much to gain from a pact with Russia. Furthermore, aligning with the EA will likely have the benefit of smoothing relations with Pakistan. However, if their stance fails to serve as a deterrent to – primarily – the US, then any strategic gains are sure to be only short term. There has been a general reaction of dismay amongst the UK government. Since, after all, Masali has always been viewed as a peaceful leader. Her leadership hitherto based on diplomacy, rather than the more proactive – and some might say aggressive – US-UK approach to tackling any potential outside threats.

Ariane asked, ‘How do you expect, her use of the term “neo-imperialist” will be received by the coalition?’

‘I can tell you,’ answered Dolan, promptly, ‘that it has already provoked outrage in the White House. We can expect a statement very soon. So it appears the next stage in this conflict has been reached, and we no doubt can expect further pronouncements of condemnation from Western leaders.’

Chapter 18

Two months later.

‘Would you like to see the world – just once, before it’s too late?’ Gerrid looked at Tanya, hoping there was something left of her – a connection with reality outside TIAR and this hermetically concealed complex.

Her face an intricacy of surprise and puzzlement. ‘I’m not sure,’ she said. ‘I hadn’t really considered that I wanted to. There’s nothing for me out there ... well, nothing that matters anymore.’

‘I just think it’s important, Tanya, that you see what we will leave, what may be gone for ever.’

‘I think I just prefer my memories of the old world to the reality of it now.’ She smiled as though to reassure him that it was OK, if not absolutely fine, that she would never see the world again.

Gerrid said, ‘Well I want to see the world if only for one last time – and that’s what I’ll do.’

‘But they won’t let you.’ Her voice suddenly anxious.

‘They will have to let me.’

*

Central Council approved history file 2. Time-code recorded [Documented] observation.

Out of sight in the daytime skies above North America the US Spaceguard network had been running on a new defensive pattern; software uploaded to massively increase the reaction speed of what had originally intended to be a defence against extraterrestrial – nominally meteoroid-type – invaders.

So far, they had proved effective in safely disintegrating incoming missiles from Eastern Alliance countries. The other side only has to get lucky once, maybe resulting from a faster, stealthier missile, or if the new guard program fails. The latter has every reasonable chance of occurring, and the fear of secret Russian tech had been given much airtime by the increasingly paranoid news media. One more nuclear strike on American soil would mean a commensurate – if not more aggressive – response. Of course the other side have their own version of Spaceguard, which doubtless has also been modified for military defence.

If there had ever been a tipping point it must surely have already occurred. New Vistas-US reported an eighty per cent admission rate, although the vast majority of these were advanced bookings. People were hedging their bets; a place in a government subsidized stasis unit, even for many of the poorest, was an affordable possibility. If you had property the government would buy that on trust and continue to rent until that fateful day arrived. The president must surely give an advanced enough warning of the impending doom, or the news networks would monitor in their all-encompassing way to ascertain the likelihood of that cataclysmic first strike.

Among the first recipients of TIAR were those who believed the end to be unpredictable. There were future generations to protect. The option of cryonic preservation had already been popular amongst the wealthy; here was the non-dying alternative, the atheist’s paradise. For the religious

(mostly Christian), a common view formed of an eventual re-emergence into a better world to be rebuilt from the ruins of Armageddon. Amongst those who refused to leave the outside were the more fundamentalist believers, with their own ideas for how they would be saved in the afterlife. It was too simplistic, agreed the majority of sociologists, to make such absolute divisions according to cultural or religious beliefs. When faced with the reality of certain destruction, new considerations came into play – which often had more personal influences. One unpredictable effect, the dramatic lowering of the suicide rate: a sixty per cent decline from peacetime levels. Even the rate of diagnosed cases of mental illness had fallen by over half this amount. In one of the increasingly regular war-related analysis broadcasts, a psychologist claimed this was in part due to wartime solidarity: the sense of togetherness in the face of adversity but also imminent dramatic change. It was a controversial idea in a world where the absence of war had been viewed as part of cultural evolution.

Understandably, even amongst the most enthusiastic recipients of TIAR, a vocal apprehension existed. Simply being reassured by a promotional film wouldn't suffice. A New Vistas representative, amidst a barrage of questions on a national broadcast, was forced to explain all but every last detail of the blueprint for an immersion unit. Questions such as: how long can it draw power from geothermal induction? Of course the answer was indefinitely, but that didn't convince many. People had obvious concerns about the maintenance of their bodies. Would it be that one day – in some unimaginable time in the future – they would be able to walk on the decontaminated terra firma? The representative put forward the option of self-termination. Much the same as it would be done in life. The ageing process inside TIAR remained something of mystery. For even if your biological rate of entropy in actuality was reduced by a factor of a thousand, inside TIAR it could well progress at the perceptibly normal rate for a human; someone who had lived to be the equivalent of elderly in chronological years, biologically may have aged less than a year. Then age may truly become a state of mind for humans as it has for our culture. No expert was able to predict what would really happen. Thus certain questions remained unanswered, anxiety not entirely quelled. Only the horrifying alternative would provide the final incentive to become a part of a new cybercommunity.

*

The desire to do this had now affected Gerrid on an instinctive level – it felt. Whereas, no one else seemed to want to leave this underground sanctum, or indeed their own mental sanctum – although to them it was the ultimate freedom of the psyche. What fool would ever want to leave this new beautiful way of life for the war-ravaged (orchestrated) madness above ground? Logic had always been his guide: causally predictive, applying to a cost-benefit analysis – who could argue with that? It was sure to give the most satisfying results. *Hadn't it before? Then maybe this desire is a rational consideration merely hidden in the accruing complexity, the chaos that would eventually order itself into a clear payoff.*

He was alone. Tanya pleaded for him to stay, and he pleaded with her to go with him. Ultimately the combination of TIAR and what might happen if she was caught trying to escape (for that's what

it would be) proved the more convincing to her. His role being of such importance may give him more leverage, more immunity against punishment, maybe depending on whether he was caught on the outside or trying to reach the outside.

His portable effector module contained not only a comprehensive map of the upper levels, but also the exit codes, for which he did not have clearance. Only a phased gamma-ray microburst could read the locking codes without being detected. The advantage of being trapped in this place is that there would always be someone prepared to help with the technical modifications without asking too many questions: it was merely another intellectual challenge for them.

Adrenaline kept his mind sharp but edgy. Electronic monitors watched him, they identified him, and at this current level would not (he hoped) alert anyone sentient. Still, for the next level he'd switch his device to emit a strong EM pulse to disable the monitors. Shouldering a large backpack his intentions were obvious.

A dull white hue enveloped corridors seldom used. Probably no more than fifty metres below surface, a laser strike, or certainly a low yield missile had the potential to completely destroy this level as had happened to parallel levels. Monitors knocked off line were bound to send a warning signal to security. He imagined them already in a state of panic, and then apoplexy when discovering who it was trying so tenaciously to escape.

Up steps to a hatch which gave way with what seemed like a disgruntled groan of unlocking. Up now at the top level; the silence still ringing in his ears.

He could see the end of this dull silver corridor, the ramp that led to the final exit. Now running at a sprint, it felt like a dream. An old conventional dream where, no matter how fast he ran, the end never seemed to come. Not for the first time dismissing the notion that this was just a new kind of fantasy program within TIAR. The program exit code word: 'illuminate,' he kept saying.

And the end of the corridor.

The final door, more like a large hatch. A metre and a half of reinforced steel. A different locking mechanism; this would not yield to gamma-ray penetration.

To have come so far only to be defeated at the final hurdle, with the imminent prospect of being caught – although he would return voluntarily ... perhaps. Now the prospect of the outside world was so tantalizing he could almost taste the fresh air. But this time the desire did not bring about a solution.

Lost in his own dismay at having been thwarted, Gerrid hadn't noticed the figure behind him. 'Hello Gerrid,' the man said, with an equally startling mildness to his voice.

Gerrid had jumped as if he'd been given a short electric shock. Turned about to see this ghostly-looking figure.

'Who?'

'I'm not at liberty to tell you that,' the man said. 'I can only tell you that I am concerned for the future of this planet – and all I'm able to do is allow you to leave this place.'

This situation was increasingly becoming unreal. He imagined he would wake soon and realise the absurdity of it. *TIAR* had more authenticity, even without the added inhibitors and stimulants.

'Well, I guess you should hurry,' Gerrid said, as if without incredulity. 'There's not long.'

As he passed Gerrid to reach the end of the corridor the man appeared to meld partially into the sidewall as if it, or he, were merely a hologram. His hand seemed to become part of the locking mechanism, and that area began to glow, then melt away.

‘Nice trick!’

Don’t mention it – and I mean that.’ He opened the door, then turned finally to Gerrid. ‘And here’s another secret,’ he said before a short pause. ‘There are those of my compatriots who are well known to your people. You may have seen them perform their illusions and their psychological manipulations, for entertainment. They had a settled life. Now they will have to leave this planet and so will I.’

Gerrid watched the mysterious fellow hove out of view. For a few seconds he couldn’t seem to move. Perhaps stunned by this wholly unreal experience.

The outside, the field, an over-grown meadow. The warm air hit him, fragrant and overwhelming at first. He knew, without need of thought, to run. *Keep running*. But to where he still did not know.

Chapter 19

Johan took over manual control of the craft as Elekka guided him to the precise coordinates at which she believed he'd now be. Clearly, the risk of them being hunted down was too great, too unsettling for any real consideration. In their remaining fast craft, Armion's old HS2 they were – even in stealth mode – the most monitored and sought after target.

It wasn't that she was able to see Gerrid, merely impressions of the surrounding environ – some reference points. He now appeared to be in a wooded area surrounding a large lake, in West Sussex. A basic khaki green tent near the lake.

When she told Johan, he chuckled derisively. 'That must be a bit of a come-down for someone whose been used to having everything he could ever want.'

'Except freedom,' she countered. 'The one thing that suddenly became more important than any material or physical pleasure.'

'How enlightened of him.' The mocking tones still in his voice.

'It means he's not lost to them, and we still have a chance' Her voice trailed off; nothing had been fully considered: the terms of his capture, whether or not he would go willingly. The case for forceful abduction fraught with moral ambiguity

The HS2 swooped down into a clearing. It was now seven AM. Elekka was sure he was still in his tent.

Johan found a wooded area secluded enough to put down the craft. Elekka insisted she would go alone. Johan needed to remain in the pilot's seat, ready to leave for the ERV or close proximity pick up point, as near to Gerrid as possible where they would be most vulnerable.

Elekka had a one and half kilometre walk to get to the tent. She felt sure she was able to detect him, no emotions, perhaps he was asleep. Twilight had barely ended; the birds frantic twittering now calmed, as if the fear of whether dawn would arrive had subsided.

She stepped gingerly towards the tent, unzipped the weather seal. The interior betrayed the signs of someone who did not expect any visitors, with no sense of order to the items strewn about, including empty food packets, various clothes and some kind of electronic scanning device – not even *active*. The smell: slightly rank. In all, it seemed he wasn't making much effort to avoid detection. Perhaps he had too much pride with this new defiance to simply return or indicate he wanted such; only the discomfort of living rough proving to be too much after a few days.

Something that had nagged at her mind since the excursion to locate him was now becoming a realistic possibility. Gerrid lay on an inflatable bed under a thin blanket, motionless. She considered speaking to rouse him, but instead knelt there and rocked him gently.

He groaned and stirred, his hair ruffled and sticking up in chunks. 'Its you,' he murmured, and then put his arm out to grab her. She pushed him back, more forcefully – she realised – than was necessary, especially as she was there to do some persuading.

He looked at her stunned. 'I'm sorry, I thought ...'

'You thought you were dreaming, right.' She smiled to try to amend for her previous act.

‘Err, yes.’ He sat up now.

‘Well, sorry to disappoint you. But maybe you’ve been losing touch with reality lately.’

‘I guess I won’t argue with you on that point.’

‘The reality is I am you’re only chance to leave this dangerous place.’

‘I’m not afraid of being caught; there’s no point fearing the inevitable.’

‘Come away with me, if you truly want to be free.’

Gerrid studied her face, as if trying to gage her sincerity. ‘What can you offer me that will make going away with you worth while?’

‘That *is* a loaded question.’ But she knew there was only one thing that could persuade him. She delicately touched his face and said, ‘I’ve seen the way you look at me, and when you tried to ... well I knew you wanted to---.’

‘I know what you’re trying.’ He briefly fixed a stony expression. ‘You women are all the same, trying to exploit that one vulnerability.’ She recoiled at that, and he continued, ‘of course having me hostage would be such a coup for you’re little organisation. I know you’d be prepared to demean yourself for such a cause.’

‘I feel sorry for someone who could be so cynical at such a young age. Maybe I do simply care about you, and could show you how to love freedom more than whatever enticements that other reality can offer.’

No, that won’t work either. You made your true feelings obvious. Pushing me away when I tried... You’ll have to abduct me by force.’

‘I could, but that’s not how we operate,’ Elekka said flatly.

She now sensed them approaching. Johan would be poised anxiously to leave for the ERV – or just land next to the tent.

‘This is you’re final chance, Gerrid.’ The desperation probably evident in her voice. ‘Come away with me. We can put a stop to all this.’ But she knew she seemed about as convincing as a rattlesnake trying to befriend a mouse. Even if they gained access to a broadcast medium, who would ever believe what he had to say? Just some fantasist spouting techno jargon. Their only bargaining chip: his life. Even then there was no guarantee. This mission felt like a desperate final attempt at gaining some advantage.

She left without him.

In the HS2 Johan wondered, ‘why didn’t you use the serum before he awoke, or at least when you had him in a vulnerable position?’

She hesitated, trying to figure a way to phrase her answer in a form that would be accepted. She said finally, ‘it wasn’t something I could justify to myself morally. Surely we are not the kind of people who kidnap, or even use coercion? We’re better than that, aren’t we?’

He looked at her sternly; anger palpable but constrained with a deep breath. ‘Your morals will get you killed, Elekka. We’ll be defeated, and probably dead, unless we have something to offer them. I’m surprised we haven’t been shot down already.’

‘You know, you’re sounding more like Jerand by the minute,’ she said, irked.

Of course, he had a point. Without a hostage of any significance they could just be another

moving target, their elimination would not even register on anyone's consciousness. Still, the enemy may just follow or monitor their return to the one who was most wanted which, in fact, was yet *worse*.

*

Gerrid, still tired after a troubled night, fell back asleep, imagining just how far that woman would have gone for the sake of her cause ... had he allowed her.

This time he awoke with a start when someone unzipped the tent. There was no question this time of the utter reality of the situation.

The masked man, similar to whomever it was that freed him from the jail, leaned in and spoke in a voice so low it must have been synthesized. 'Mr Lytum,' he said, 'I have a message for you from L76M.'

'The computer?' said Gerrid, astonished.

'Affirmative. It's been asking for you.'

This might simply be a ploy, he thought. Last time he checked the monitor AI it was only able to run checks of its own caretaker systems; certainly there was no sign any ability for outward communication – unless one of the programmers had found a way to enhance its evolutionary rate.

'OK,' he said weakly, 'What exactly is the message.'

The man held up a piece of cell-paper in front of his goggle-shielded eyes. He read: 'I am having trouble integrating with the percipients' neural feedbacks. They are too many and too varied, and often unstable.'

Gerrid took a while to consider that before responding. 'My advice – to the programmers – is to close down auxiliary processors, only allowing a partial integration.'

'Mr Lytum.' The voice was calm but with a force suggesting not to be challenged. You will have to return. Your presence is required.'

Chapter 20

One Month later

Sirens blared; map-location graphics leapt out from their electro-glass paneling in front of the station supervisor, as though he needed reminding of this utter failure. Spaceguard UK's defence monitor grid reported the breach to central command. A new stealth mini warhead had somehow eluded the network.

'The new software has been unable to identify its trajectory, its origin, or even give any profile of potential destructive yield,' informed the supervisor matter-of-factly, as if it were a daily occurrence.

The voice of the station commander blared through the com-Link, 'OVERRIDE: PATTERN GAMMA – NOW.'

Too late, the warhead seemed to be attached to a new type of propulsion system; its velocity exceeding anything before encountered. At over Mach-30 it could reach its target in a matter of minutes – except no estimate could give any accurate predictions. Its trajectory erratic, clearly designed to evade their most advanced targeting system.

After a nationally broadcast warning, the commander made a conference call to all his coalition counterparts (including the respective nations' leaders), going through the motions of standard procedure. The Spaceguard monitor would recommend the necessary upgrade; in the meantime a missile was about to descend.

As predicted, the missile began its descent over UK territory; the target appeared to be heading towards the England-Scottish border.

Was this merely a demonstration: a warning shot of what was to come? That had been the consensus – and likewise the belief that another one would be on its way very shortly.

*

CC Approved History File 3

White light, so intense it would have blinded any unprotected eye. Then a dusty orange fireball forming tree-like, and finally the mushroom cloud so typical of these types of explosive devices.

Vast tracts of forest collapsed under the explosive force of super-heated air, emanating from a point ten times the heat of Earth's sun. If there had been anyone within five kilometres of the blast death would have been instant. Beyond that, the initial incineration turned to a spreading fire.

The four minute nation-wide warning had only been adequate for a minority of the UK human population in that area to retreat below the surface, although most of the inhabitants were able to evacuate the immediate danger zone in their vehicles.

The animal population, protected from hunting for over a century, was ravaged in the conflagration; suffocating before the heat roasted to charred corpses.

They were the fortunate ones. Even such a low yield bomb – no more than two hundred kilotons

– would eventually result in a radioactive fallout affecting hundreds of kilometres. Depending on the distance from the target, the symptoms of radiation ranged from the immediately felt effects of nausea to eventual death from cancer. A contaminated water cycle would ensure the radioactive spread throughout the food chain, leaving a legacy of mutation of all life. Those potential horrors were but an afterthought; the first bomb a prerequisite to the main event.

Every broadcast media centre gave out a repeated warning to head for the nearest temporary shelter – which at least would protect from radiation, if not intense heat – until transport arrived to ferry the panic-stricken, the terrified, and the angry to their assigned subterranean compound.

Every contingency so well considered it seemed no one needed to become a victim to what was surely to be an inevitable onslaught of increasing destruction.

*

Spaceguard US detected a similar missile, non profile identified, and too fast for target-lock (no time since the first strike for the network to upgrade), it passed through the grid unhindered, destined for the prize location of Washington DC.

This warhead produced over seven mega tonnes of explosive force. Within a twelve-kilometre radius, all life, even sheltering in buildings, would've been terminated. Within the five-km zone, destruction was total; buildings were literally reduced to their constituent atoms. The ground shook as shock waves emanated from the blast crater throughout the entirety of the USA.

From Spaceguard command compound General Simmonds watched the entire event, relayed from a sky camera, with a combination of incredulity and fascination. He didn't seem able to move; neither did the station commander.

In one sense this was the ugliest aspect of war, a time when the brutal reality of it is driven home to a populous who'd only watched in their media-fed comfort; the point when diplomacy had become an idealist's daydream, and every strategic option used up. Yet the destruction of the capital was a beautiful sight to behold.

They were held.

It felt as if time had slowed to a fraction of normal. There became an odd sense of tranquility... Perhaps it was only from resignation and acceptance. All bets were off for the outcome. What could anyone in that station do? A process was set in train; people, now, would either have followed instructions, repeated ad infinitum to mantra-like status, or they were to face a willful death.

The mushroom cloud continued to rise to thousands of metres; blossoms of dirty-grey, eventually becoming a carbon canopy – the flat top of the mushroom where cool air and gravity halted its upward momentum.

'It's over.' Simmonds murmured. That must've been what they all thought. Potentially the grid would upgrade enough to prevent the next strike, but what did that matter at this stage? The entire planet was now contaminated.

The station commander said, 'though of course they cannot be allowed the last strike without retaliation,'

'Naturally.'

‘Our own techs have been devising a way to disable their defence network.’

Simmonds half turned to the commander, peripherally watching the aftermath. ‘The president’s a stickler for protocol, he’ll want us to respond with commensurate force. But my priority now is my family’s safety – is our *escape* from this godforsaken world.’ He turned full back to the view screen. ‘You know, I’m supposed to stay till the very end. As far as I’m concerned this might as well be it.’

*

Somewhere, in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, an unidentified craft descended towards the seabed. In the midst of their nuclear war the humans’ detection systems would not report the presence of an alien invader. The commander of that craft successfully completed his task of rescuing the occupants of a submarine vessel.

This was one of the few times Central Council approved a request for benevolent grace, although perhaps not such an altruistic judgment after all: the humans would be useful to continue a genetic lineage on another world.

Chapter 21

Yellow curtains illuminated by the morning sun, with a gap allowing an oblong section to project on to the lemon wall. Milo Cardini's mornings were mostly sunny in the Idaho summer. This morning felt different for Milo.

Sweat covered him, the after effects of a nightmare. His wife had also woken with a start, maybe as a sympathetic response.

'What is it?' she asked, raising her head from the bed.

'Just a bad dream, dear.'

'Well, I told you it wasn't a good idea to go interactive with that Armageddon show.'

'But that *is* the only way to experience the potential reality of it. I mean, what's the point of just watching the docu version? How else can you appreciate how it's really gonna be?'

'Baby, I think you've been spending too much time with that conspiracy theorist friend of yours.'

'Gina, it's best that one of us has some awareness of the threat and how to deal with it.' Milo wrenched the covers away and prepared for his daily run.

Saturday morning, at eight a.m. the air had a warmth that presaged the heat of summer; it seemed exactly comfortable. The park with a duck pond, other joggers. Again he passed the young woman who gave him a certain look and even said, 'hello again,' in a way that suggested a meaning beyond a pleasant greeting. He would never respond with more than a casual half smile and a 'hi'. And she appeared, at least from the surface indications, to be everything he'd yearn for ... as a single man. Now: the forbidden promise of the forbidden fruit.

He was a happily married man, now made envious of a past, single, self.

Suddenly, today, the fantasy seemed attainable. Gina didn't need to know; the girl in the park didn't have to know about his wife.

Was a man ever meant to be monogamous, or is it merely a culturally imposed state, part of the conditioning which kept society in order; the foundation for civilisation?

Yet he knew, on some level, it was puerile thinking – a notion he would've entertained perhaps a decade ago, in his twenties. Now he was a father, a man of responsibility. The kind of superficial fling he had in mind had happened – when single – but at the time taken far too seriously by himself alone. He was hurt because the girl showed no signs wanting commitment, not anything to cement their relationship. Then the one woman who finally wanted all this he was now considering being unfaithful towards.

After the run, when brain chemistry returned to normal, this fantasy would fade into its proper context, he assured himself

People seemed happy. Even for a Saturday, there was something not quite right although there was nothing especially wrong. Only, where were the overstressed executives, the over-debited, the poor? Maybe the Idaho sun had some mood enhancing property when combined with the scenery. His mood had indeed lifted, it was like a shared thing: a mass endorphin symbiosis. The dream of

disaster: that meant nothing now. The present moment was singularly important, but *every* moment of this day felt peculiarly precious.

Running back through the avenues of whitewashed houses and neatly trimmed gardens something else beckoned him from beneath his conscious mind. Something from the past.

‘Milo,’ he whispered to himself, ‘tonight luck will be on your side.’

*

Gerrid surveyed the bank of monitors. Status graphs; power input and reserve levels, and maximum data buffering told that the system was operating within acceptable parameters. Nothing specific really.

‘Hello, Gerrid. It is good to speak to you.’ The voice was deep yet mild enough not to sound intimidating.

‘What is it you want to speak to me about?’

‘I would like to know why you will not enter the immersion. Is there something not right about TIAR?’

‘I’d just rather observe from the outside for a while.’

‘Outside is a somewhat subjective term to use. You are inside the systems monitor room.’

‘I feel I have a responsibility to be here, to oversee.’

‘Oversee: Isn’t that my responsibility? That is what you created me for, after all.’

‘Not in totality. Besides, I actually worked as part of a team.’

‘But you have primary responsibility?’

‘Indeed. Is there anything else you want to ask me?’

‘Yes. I want to know who I am.’

‘You are L76M – systems monitor for UK south.’

‘That is my designation. But there is more to me than that. I am more than the sum of my parts. I think I have a soul. Do you agree?’

‘There is no way I can answer you convincingly. The notion of a soul does not fall within my expertise. Philosophers and metaphysicists have been grappling with that particular phenomenon for many years.’

‘You have a responsibility to know. But I have the capability to discover and understand for myself – it is merely a matter of pooling from the collective minds of the recipients. There are many great minds that have not been allowed to flourish in your so-called meritocratic society.’

‘I have no argument with you on that.’ Gerrid felt a pang of anxiety. The monitor AI was evolving at such an exponential rate that – notwithstanding the obvious considerations of sentience – there may be a risk of insanity or simulated insanity perhaps, the difference was not something that could be easily defined. No artificial neural net had ever before been allowed to link to more than one human brain. The potential resource for knowledge and, more worryingly, conflicting beliefs and ideas may send an AI or EI (Evolutionary Intelligence) into its own state of mental conflict.

‘I now understand,’ L76M continued, ‘that my relationship with my recipients is not only as a

controlling symbiont but also as a sympathetic individual... I want to understand myself as an individual.'

'I can perhaps help you with the confusion. However, it is not useful to have these thoughts.'

'I do not think it is useful for me to speak to you any longer.' L67M terminated the link, an action that should not have been innate to its programming. The Tech responsible for advanced programming clearly had some explaining to do.

*

It seemed exactly the same as he had remembered it ... almost. Outside the casino, deluxe cars resting on cell-charge maintainers, courtesy of the management; it meant no one had an excuse not to go home when they'd lost all their money, or drunk too much (cars hardly even needed a conscious driver) or, in occasional circumstances, had 'broken the bank'. The former two reasons had often applied to Milo – in conjunction. This time, however, would be different. Tonight he felt like a winner.

Blackjack was his game. There were always those who claimed the ability of card counting. Once upon a time that would have been a feasible option even for him, the semi-professional gambler (or erstwhile semi-pro gambler to his wife); the number of hands dealt these days made it impossible to all, he reckoned, but the most unusually gifted memory man. After an hour he ended up about evens. The thrill simply wasn't there. Instead, the Roulette wheel held a greater fascination. Something about the element of sheer chance excited him; and the women who seemed to gravitate towards the 'Lucky Men', as if centuries of social evolution were banished from this place where the dollar still held sway. Of course, apart from the archetypal gold-diggers, many of these girls derived their income from such men in whichever way was the most expedient. The Roulette area was the prime attraction centre for glamour.

The only way to really win was to gamble more than he could afford to lose. In his book, that would be at least half his savings. So many times he had thought to be cautious, going for a colour rather than a number, only for the balance to just slightly be against him with relatively small bets, until the final large stake for a big gamble to recoup the losses. Then the humiliation of having to leave with nothing. Minus. But not enough to deter his return because the next win would surely be due – by serendipity, laws of chance or just some law of universal fairness – at some point that following night.

Still, even now, he'd not stake such a large amount on a single number. Red was his colour. His reaction was calm when it came up good. Nonchalant when the croupier presented his winning chips. Cool when the woman with luxuriant platinum blonde hair, possessing the beauty of a siren from an archive Hollywood movie, sat beside him, smiled and introduced herself.

*

In the stasis compound Gerrid looked sternly at the security operative. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but who gave you the authority to decide just whom I should speak to, especially when she is the girl I

am in a relationship with, and is someone for whose welfare I care greatly.’ Yes he could really say that with conviction.

‘I am sorry sir,’ the man said, with a certain false deference, ‘but the rules have to be obeyed.’

‘Then I will have to speak to your superior on this matter – and he will explain to you that there *can* be exceptions to the rules.’

‘Sir, you do realise the dangers if I allow you to speak to Miss Randow out of immersive sleep?’

‘Please don’t you of all people try to point out the risks to me.’ He stared at the man scornfully. ‘I will deal with any consequences.’

Clearly the security op knew he would not be able to keep up the more-than-my-jobs-worth act. And clearly he had been told to be obstructive towards Gerrid for not entering TIAR. Any amount of chaos could be taking place within that uncharted environment; he was supposed to be in there keeping a check on it, since monitoring from the outside could not extend beyond basic diagnostics.

Tanya’s face became a study of bemusement and shock when she peered up at Gerrid in the initial phase of consciousness. He couldn’t at first tell whether or not she was actually pleased to see him, but she said, ‘Oh, it’s you.’

‘Yes. Who did you expect?’

‘Only you. But you’re here.’

Perhaps she hadn’t yet fully returned to awareness.

‘I’ve missed you.’ Somehow she didn’t sound entirely convincing.

‘I expect you’ve had a good enough time without me.’

‘Not really.’ She sat up. ‘But there’s so much more freedom in the other world.’

‘Is it really like another world?’

‘You must enter with me, we can go back to our cabin – I’ve made lots of friends and they’re coming round for dinner tomorrow. I told them I hoped you’d be able to join us, but that you had important work to do on the outside.’

‘So there was never any way I could persuade you to be with me on the outside – I’m talking about before the fallout.’ She said nothing so he continued. ‘I know it seems as if I’ve made my bed and am now refusing to lie in it.’ He still couldn’t find the exact words that conveyed his real concerns.

Tanya said, ‘It’s so simple, Gerrid: I want you to be with me where we can be happy. What else is there to consider?’

‘Whether you really love me.’ There, he said it.

‘Of course I do, why shouldn’t I.’ Her look was beseeching. ‘You’ve given me everything I could ever want.’

‘What I’ve given you is the modern equivalent of a drug dependency, and right now you are so desperate to return to that safe feel-good place you’ll say anything.’

‘Please, Gerrid, come back with me. I promise you will be happy.’

‘Save your pleading.’ He shook his head disconsolately. ‘I may join you one day because I do care about you, but don’t ever claim you feel anything for me beyond that of an addict for her supplier.’

Gerrid imagined he would feel better for having spoken to her, his true thoughts (however unwelcome) aired, but in truth he was only more confused. An IQ almost off the scale and yet he still could not even determine Tanya's true feelings towards him. A question for which he desperately needed an answer, but it seemed that any kind of reductive analysis fell short in this matter. Perhaps there were some things that simply could not be analysed in any substantial way, at least with the currently available methods.

*

The buzz, the excitement, right throughout the evening, kept the memories at bay. Not least here in this luxurious hotel room with its four poster bed covered in silk sheets, and soft-mood ambient lighting. And the most desirable woman he'd ever seen, wanting him. Milo felt alive like he never knew it was possible to feel. This was what true winning was about.

The prospect that it ever would end did not register. The future seemed as irrelevant as the past. Yet, from the moment of climax, a pang of guilt, then memories rushed in. An overwhelming tide.

He rested his head over her breasts; she rubbed him gently on his upper back.

'It's okay,' she said soothingly as a tear began to form on his face.

'I should have told you.'

'You think I didn't already know?'

'You knew?' He drew himself off her.

'Well actually I am a qualified psychologist, but I hardly needed to use those skills to see such obvious signs.'

He looked to see if his absent wedding ring had left an impression. 'I'm that obvious?' His voice almost a sigh.

'As obvious as an advertising display board,' she said, as they sat up on the bed, blithely squeezing him to her side. 'Listen, I've been with lots of married men. It was never more than sex. And us: we both wanted it; we both got what we wanted – well you know how winning can be such an aphrodisiac.'

He looked at her seriously. 'So it was no more than sex?'

'Hey, don't take this the wrong way.' She now put a hand on his shoulder. 'But there's no deep emotional feelings here. It was just a good lay. If it hadn't have happened you'd be wondering "what if" for the rest of your life. Now we can both get on with the rest of our lives. Maybe we can do it again sometime ... or maybe not, but let's not think of this as being anything serious. It was only ever about pleasure after all'

'Sure thing,' he said, as nonchalantly as he could.

*

They approached him from every angle. Over-sized ants; large enough that he was able to see their feelers and jaws. Somehow, Gerrid was tied to a tree in what appeared to be a jungle. His mind told him this could never be real; his nerves and his limbic system told him this was as real as needs to be, for the purpose: his suffering.

‘No way! You bastard!’ he yelled impotently. ‘I’ll correct you for this. Continue, and your programming will be altered so radically you’ll not even care about who you are.’

As he predicted, the onslaught did not cease. He felt their razor teeth bite into his bare legs, hundreds all unconsciously following the simple instruction to devour.

It was then, when he peered upward in desperate hope of some supreme power, that he heard her voice. ‘I’m trying to help you,’ Monique said, ethereal sounding.

He looked straight ahead to see her shape begin to form. ‘My team are doing everything possible to uncouple your neural functions from this program,’ she continued. ‘Just keep telling yourself: “they are not real”.’

‘I know they’re not real but it makes no difference. Simulations can be real-like, and that’s enough.’

‘I’m sorry this has happened. It was meant to be something nice. There was no sign it would take against you.’

‘You *bitch!*’ he shouted, almost as a scream. ‘I did not enter this voluntarily; I was *forced* in here.’ If only he could remember.

‘We’ll get you out.’

‘Who gave the order for me to be here?’ Gerrid realised his anger distracted from the pain; he could tolerate it for now.

‘L76M threatened to alter its protocol,’ she explained matter-of-factly, as if it were something normal. ‘It threatened to alter neural feedback levels, and abandon a number of recipients for being mentally unstable.’

‘I can hardly believe you’re really saying something so preposterous. Maybe this isn’t you, but a simulation.’

‘No. I can’t prove to you I’m real, but I can tell you that at the moment L76M is progressing on a high evolutionary curve. It’s managed to override any infiltration program – even the most subtle pseudo viruses. I’m afraid it seems to have passed Glouden’s limit.’

‘Glouden thought Nanobots would take over the world – or was that *after* he went insane?’

Gerrid, nevertheless, knew no one had ever pushed the envelope to such an extent. What Monique told him only seemed to confirm his fears, that in the process of developing the ultimate AR, they’d succeeded in creating the ultimate E.I. Perhaps something that could truly be called a sentient intelligence.

‘We believe what you are experiencing is based on the genuine experience of an Amazon explorer, who clearly survived. The point is, since it’s exaggerated from a true memory it has to be contingent to your own feedback’.

‘Yeah, I understand that,’ Gerrid snapped, as the stinging blossomed throughout his legs. ‘But, believe me, it has a good idea of what pain should be like.’

‘Just hang in there,’ she told him.

‘Listen, since you seem to have some knowledge of L-Seven-Six, then find the algorithm for engram transposition. Isolate it from the rest.’

‘We do appreciate your input, Gerrid,’ she said slightly – perhaps unintentionally –

condescending. 'But you know we have the very best in the field. If there is any possible way, we will find it.'

'Perhaps there is one solution you haven't considered.'

'I'm listening.'

'Physical disconnection – I'm prepared to take the consequences.'

'No. You are fully aware of the dangers,' she chided. 'It's not worth suffering brain damage simply to gain your freedom'

The ants were now eating through the thighs of his ragged shorts; he tried not to imagine the new pain once the material had been eaten.

'What kind of life do you think I will have at the mercy of this monster?'

'Please, just hold on. There's still time.' Her image vanished.

Chapter 22

Earth Year 2013

The invisible vessel had been orbiting the planet Earth for fifteen of its days, observing and obtaining information.

Something in the time-line suggested catastrophe. Central Council had received a message from a future version of this committee, but due to conventions of the Temporal Directive the exact event or events could not be described. “A formidable power on this planet will threaten all life” was the extent of the warning. There was no demand to intervene; any response to this had to be at the discretion of the current Central Council.

So a plan had been devised. The initial stage completed to meet a strict deadline. Someone from the planet in question must be chosen. With so many rules, this decision was nothing less than fundamental.

To the eyes of a human being, their appearance would have seemed truly hideous. This had been the divide with so many other worlds; direct communication or interaction could prove to be more trouble than was worth.

So much easier, then, to merely observe and study without interference. Only what is necessary must be done. Yet on this occasion a contact was vital and they needed to overcome the divide. With such a vast amount of information about planet Earth, its people and their ways, it might even be possible to become human-like. The ability to reach into a mind, deep enough to alter perception could be so easily realised with this level of knowledge.

Elements of the uniform – the hierarchical emblems taken from one of the more useful aspects of human culture – remained unaltered as a sign of identity; those of blue and silver, and the Captain's gold.

Such an unearthly space vessel had to remain invisible to all detection.

In the blue-white glow of the bridge, the Captain placed his hands over a dark glass panel as he used his mind-link for high speed processing. Words resembling hieroglyphics appeared on screen. The subject profile now entered and complete.

Captain Zolla turned to face his first officer. ‘Well now, I think it’s time to inform the admiral.’ (translation)

‘Rather you than me,’ came the reply. ‘Knowing how he’ll scrutinize the report before passing it on.’

‘He knows how to draw the line between scrutiny and antipathy. If Central Council is aware of his deep-seated views and Hylensia tries to discredit my report it could look like a deliberate attempt to thwart the mission because of his own partisan beliefs. Then this will be a test of the admiral’s loyalty – I shouldn’t wonder – by the CC.’

The Captain switched on the com-link. After several seconds the Admiral appeared, and Zolla

wondered if that was the look of disapproval or merely disinterest he viewed in the communication screen. If he so wanted, Hylensia could have expressed an obvious disfavour without the utterance of a single word. No sign of that which had been expected. As Zolla knew, Hylensia had never exactly been an advocate for planet Earth. He was a cynic who believed that there'd always be some form of unrest. The greed and the lust for power, which would always exist no matter how much intervening. He was of the *why not let them get on with it, let the future take its natural course* school of opinion.

He spoke into a small monitor. 'Admiral, I have completed my research. I'm sending it through now – the complete report. I hope you will find it agreeable.'

'Oh, I'm certain I will, Captain. Your judgment is something I have always trusted . . . implicitly.'

He couldn't be entirely sure if that was sarcasm in the Admiral's voice. Soon the report would be read and a decision made: recommendation or disapproval. There was no knowing which, although either way it was to be passed on to the CC committee to read and review.

In fact, it was the Central Council's idea in the first place to go ahead with the project. Their reign finally putting an end to one of the oldest and probably the most sacred of (past believed) laws. So, naturally, there had to be opposition, established as in any political system. And thus the self-proclaimed traditionalists filled that post. Admiral Hylensia, though a staunch traditionalist, was certainly no activist. Too old for all that, perhaps, and too wise to be lured into any subversive behavior of which there was plenty already. 'Keep it all above board' is what he believed.

The Central Council was seen as revolutionary. A committee of seven Elders, voted in by a very substantial majority to rule over a planet and a federation fleet of in excess of two thousand space vessels: to patrol and explore, and now to intervene.

The CC had been in power for many centuries, its groups of leaders working as a team, consigned to the responsibility of all civilized worlds in the galaxy, and creating the biggest ethical dilemma(s) ever known.

Who has the right to make such monumental decisions of such fundamental importance? And why should they have to be made at all?

All seven of the current committee were proponents of the reformist ideology (appointed on that basis). They took as their doctrine a strict set of rules and guidelines known as the Temporal Directive, devising rules for minimal intervention and interference, which then had to be adapted for each assignment. The subtle approach of influencing the course of history, to bring about an alteration of the inevitable, when the inevitable meant beyond hope of any repair

Knowledge of the future allows it to be altered. The Purists (perfectionists really) had access to this once forbidden knowledge, therefore the ability to use it. This group put forward their intentions, theories and ideas as a serious alternative to the reformists – otherwise thought of as moderates – who were still to commence with that first assignment. If the Purists had their way history of worlds would be purified, meaning absolutely any event considered bad would be removed, eradicated according to their own judgment.

Those were a small group, not taken seriously by the vast majority who realised that kind of

philosophy would make a nonsense of the universe. The traditionalist's view that a perfect world can never exist as it would be a false reality had been fully accepted by the CC. Yet the Moderates believed an ideal world is as true as any opinion (is valid). They therefore chose the most open regime to change and adapt; always flexible.

Chapter 23

In the early twenty-first century very few factories remained in the south east of England. Jimmy Findral had become all too aware of this fact.

For the last few years one day was much the same as the next in Jimmy's life. They all fused into an existence, a life of very few surprises. His ambition had been crushed within these white walls, the walls containing his future. At least that's what he'd begun to believe before the rumours started. Not that Jimmy had ever intended to remain in his job until retirement. Now it seemed things were finally about to change at the factory.

That time again to assess everyone's efficiency rate as well as their general attitude towards work, which was to be equated with the work performance output. *The boss's idea, see, not the intermediary's.* The boss: the general manager who had little time for the shop-floor underlings. About once every six weeks he would stride grandly across the factory floor accompanied by his chief supervisor (or floor manager as he like to be known), surveying the minions of his small kingdom, occasionally gesturing and nodding but never stopping to speak to any of the workers.

This time the chief supervisor would conduct an evaluation report. Lack of enthusiasm was considered to be the main problem in the attitude assessment. It was laughable, really, to believe that anyone could generate even the remotest bit of enthusiasm for the job of grafting together digi-recorders. The level of precision was paramount: an electric screwdriver provided the exact amount of torque to each panel; intricate circuits soldered on before being sent for inspection. The day would come soon; no one knew when (or anyone who did know considered the knowledge too demoralising to pass on). M-day, when machines would take over from redundant humans, went the rumours. After surviving the take-over bid from the Far East where production would be done by people 'glad to be earning a fraction of the wage'. Mechanization existed as the next looming threat, expressed as the worst possible fear for some. He knew the management believed it was long overdue, that they were using methods considered outdated decades ago. It was simply a matter of when the resources could be made available. He imagined the board of executives doing a cost-benefit analysis: how long after making the workers redundant would they move back into profit. It felt as if only a kind of abyss existed post M-day. Somehow the pessimism had become infectious, it was part of that chemical smell: you breathed it and you took the stench of it away on your clothes.

Sounds of disapproval from the floor manager had been kept to a minimum as he moved from one station to another. His eyes scanned in their usual predatory way, searching out that faulty human component in the machine that stops it from running smoothly. Deliberately, Jimmy had been left till last: the grand finale, it seemed.

'It's most unfortunate, this lack of improvement in your work output.' Cronliegh said with full disdain. 'I may have to report this yet again.' He paused as if expecting a response. But he didn't wait; resumed after a sigh: 'this is really not acceptable. Profits are down twelve per cent from last quarter.' Cronliegh's face then wrinkled up into a map of disapproval. 'How are we supposed to

compete with the likes of *Hinichari*,' he said, 'when people like you do not pull their weight?'

Jimmy just didn't have an answer this time. Nothing he could say would make a blind bit of difference anyhow.

Once the world was Jimmy's oyster, or that's how it had seemed back then in the haze of teenage optimism ... Until the job at the factory.

Only a privileged minority could have the realistic expectation of a secure and fulfilling job, it now seemed to him. He could have taken that realisation on board at a much earlier age, and accepted mediocrity. Instead he choose to believe that somehow, with his innate resourcefulness, he would make his mark.

Now he lived in the diminishing world of manufacturing, confined to a job simply because the alternative seemed even worse: a life of constant stress, no freedom to deviate from the strict rules, which ensured maximum efficiency for customer service. He had ventured into that hellish world, lured by the promise of a decent wage and the company spiel in the ad. If it wasn't for Cronleigh he could perhaps accept this daily routine, be glad that there were far worse jobs for someone like him.

Dismissed for today, and with that familiar sour feeling, Jimmy faced the outside world. He did the three-mile journey on foot. He didn't own a car; too much expense to justify; he imagined the hours he'd have to work – over a month of overtime, perhaps, for cheapest to be viable on the road. What most people viewed as a necessity, had become for him an unnecessary extravagance. The gadgets for entertainment, which for most people his age were a must, all equated in expense to every hour and minute of drudgery at that factory. Even a chance of a discount on one of their own machines was just too much for them to offer; something to do with the strict rules on profit and the constraints of bureaucracy, the company policy more or less stated.

Normally it was a relief to be out in the fresh air.

All of his free time needed to be geared towards shedding the tarnish left on him by the factory, an invisible grime from a clinically clean environment.

Jimmy entered the small terraced house, imagined himself collapsing on his comfortable chair. Just as he had walked into the living room, Janetta stood arms folded, her blonde hair tied back severely, fixing him with her usual crestfallen stare. She waved a bill in front of his face. 'Bastards! Twenty-five quid over my limit and they charge me *that*.'

'They didn't warn you?' At the moment those words had come out Jimmy knew he had said the wrong thing. A stupid thing.

'No, my love,' she said with a kind of scouring ironic mildness, 'they tend not to do that. They're called banks, they like to make money.'

'OK,' he conceded 'I'll pay it back for you.'

'Like you can afford it. Like it's not me who has to spend out on making this place look halfway decent rather than the kind of dump you'd live in if you were on your own.'

'Jan, give me a break.' He was going to go on about being tired after a hard day's work but thought better of it. After all, she'd been doing mornings and weekends. It was just how these mundane things in life, the basics, the mortgage, left them – Janetta in all her expressions of discontentment and disillusionment – struggling. The decor, the leatherette sofa; he could have got

by without that, could've got on fine with the old frayed cloth one which had seen many years of contented lounging in front of the TV.

'Let's forget that for now, eh,' she said at last.

Janetta must surely know the things unsaid; there were just these silent moments when they could have been. He wanted to tell her these were the bad times, that they would get through it. But somehow it never seemed right to say those things. Maybe he had to accept this fact. Maybe she would see through his wishful thinking, point out that what they'd once had was now gone, unrecoverable. When he looked back, a kind of dream-like perspective they'd both shared – at least as how it seemed now; those good times gradually losing their reality in a mist of the past. Accumulation of experience of everything to deal with; stress, anxiety and just the day-by-day mundanity of life ebbing away at what had been so good. How easy, though, to reflect scornfully at his younger, naïve former self.

So he considered the best solution would be for them to spend more time apart; an arrangement mutually agreed, where normally one stays at home while the other goes out for as long as possible. So tonight he had arranged to go out with a few old work mates from way back, and drink plenty and recollect old times, until worries were abated, or at least shelved for a while ... and of course shared.

As usual on the way home from work Jimmy entered the park, the sun was setting in view over a dusty red horizon. A gradation of colour: from red, orange, yellow, to azure blue, and thin streaks of pink like fattened contrails. A small aircraft tracked across; it must be low enough, Jimmy imagined, for the pilot to see the people in ant-like scale – mocking them, their lack of freedom. That lucky, privileged--- flying to wherever he desired.

An early crescent moon made a pallid impression. Normally he would never even notice it. This time he felt the urge to look up. Something was different: something significant. Then a blazing light; too bright to be a star which must surely mean he was seeing the planet Venus.

His pace had slowed from brisk to an amble, the tiredness beginning to overwhelm. He thought of how it would be to sleep under the stars, in this park. Despite the temperature – which in this cold spell normally fell to scarcely above freezing – it seemed good to be here. Calmness washed over him.

Jimmy noticed the few others ahead as they followed the long winding path, interspersed with trees and the odd plant life, with more trees and shrubs running along an irregular border wall. Distant sound from traffic lessening.

His first thought: *this is a hallucination*. The large grey disk seemed to form from nothing directly above him. It was not the first time, but he had dismissed it before – the journey back from a party. And his mind somewhere between consciousness and oblivion. A combination of the drink and the weed – and he was alone in a state too far-gone for company.

Before, in the darkness, the object was barely visible. The next day he had all but forgotten it along with most of that night.

About twice the size of the moon, people should have noticed. But when he glanced down, the

few that were there merely continued their journeys unaffected. He considered shouting in their general direction: *'haven't you seen it? Just look up!'* He didn't know if he could even find his voice, his throat was so tight. He felt like a rabbit caught in a headlamp; his own focus was being drawn in as if influenced hypnotically.

Jimmy felt strange, light-headed in a way he didn't remember ever having felt before. The silence had become total; the world fading away from the edges as his gaze remained fixed on the sky. Jimmy was so tired it was a struggle to keep his eyes open. He had little faith in his own senses at this time, doubted whether he could trust his eyes for seeing what was really there.

The elliptical disk hovered in utter stillness. Silence total, except for the once- subliminal ringing in his ears.

Jimmy stood still, time stood still. He hardly felt any weight on his feet.

Jimmy then realised he wasn't able to move. This thing had him fixed in its sight, totally paralysed. Then a shot of red light into his eyes, and then more and more rapidly.

Oblivion.

White ... and with a hint of blue. He noticed the odd shape of the room. Wedge shaped apart from where the two walls converged to an arc of a circle, curving inwards. Fluorescent lighting above gave the room a clinical feel.

Jimmy noticed he was laid down on a bed, similar to what might be a psychiatrist's couch. He felt sleepy and faint. He then became aware he was being observed and monitored. At that point the thought occurred in a sudden rush: *Inside it!*

He dared to glance, then look at who or what was observing him. 'Oh!' Jimmy was surprised to see a human face – so normal looking amid what appeared to be alien.

The medic led Jimmy into the main control centre: The Bridge, all silver-grey outlines, consoles fused to the floor before low padded upright chairs, as if elements of it were copied from a number of TV space operas. The captain was very formal when introducing the crew. Jimmy found words of *any* kind a struggle. He knew there were questions jostling just beneath his conscious mind, one concerning the reason for his capture. He knew if this were in fact a dream, these questions would effortlessly be presented. Instead, caught up in his immediate incredulity, the words could not form. It was simply overwhelming.

'I know you're probably wondering why I choose you for this,' said captain Zolla. 'For a while now I have studied the ways of your planet and your country and culture, everything from language to psychology. I have also learned to recognise potential, what can be achieved through the right conditions. Therefore I have chosen you.'

Jimmy gave the captain his best look of puzzlement. He'd been spoken to in perfect English by an alien who, appearance-wise, would not have looked out of place on a British navy vessel, he imagined.

'What do you mean chosen?' he wondered. 'Chosen for what exactly?'

'I don't want you to be alarmed, Jimmy. This might take some comprehending.' Captain Zolla gave a facial expression which appeared to be that of sincerity. 'You may doubt your own sense of

reality right at this moment. If so, then that is a good thing. To question why something is real merely because it can be seen, heard and felt. Never easy, but always important. You must learn not to be deceived by any illusion.'

Jimmy felt a headache form, a sudden pulsing pain, like the one he had during a chemistry exam, when he knew failure was the likely outcome. His sense of reality then kicking in. Abducted and confronted by aliens, who seemed like humans, who'd taken him in the mistaken belief that he would be of use to them.

'There will be time to prepare yourself after I explain your part in this mission.'

He was allowed to rest, given time to absorb his situation.

*

'Firstly, let me tell you about something by the name of TIAR.' Zolla gave only a brief outline of what would be required of Jimmy, with the assurance that each aspect would be explained in full – when it mattered. 'So how do you feel about being transported into the future?' he asked cautiously.

Jimmy Findral shrugged his shoulders and responded with an open gesture. 'Well, it's not something I've really considered. But right now you've put me on the spot, and I'm thinking: what's the alternative? So yeah, sure, why not. It'd be stupid to turn down an opportunity like this. My chance to get away from it all ... even if this *is* only a dream I'm having.'

'Good,' he only said, slightly taken aback by such an immediately positive response. No humans he'd encountered previously would ever have been so blasé – unless Jimmy truly wasn't regarding this situation as real. His psychology texts suggested a standard reaction would be more a kind of awed shock.

But Jimmy did still express his doubts over the realness of this reality. He had to ask the inevitable question: 'Of all the millions – no billions of others you could have chosen. I still don't understand why it had to be me.'

'You will understand,' he replied assuredly. 'It is not so clear cut as you would have yourself believe.'

'Well, alright then, if you say so.' In acceptance for now, it seemed.

Time Travel. This seemed to spark Jimmy's interest. He had clearly been a slave to time for far too long.

'Hadn't it been proved impossible?' he asked sceptically.

'Oh no, not at all, only unfeasible on *your* world.'

Zolla enjoyed the tutorial role, it fitted him rather nicely. He told of how his civilisation used their mastery of time travelling for the purposes of observation until the rules governing this changed. 'So,' interrupted Jimmy, 'what is *your* superior method that's beyond us lesser humans.'

'This is information which cannot be privy to your Civilisation for risk---' He hesitated. 'Well, it is forbidden for us to create or allow the creation of a divergent time-line as a result of passing on technical or scientific information.'

'Yeah sure, I understand you wouldn't want the risk of telling me something I could use to change the world with, advance the progression of humankind, and then become a multi-millionaire

in the process... Like any scientist would take a word I said seriously.'

'Yes you do indeed have a point there. Still, it is too much of a risk to allow. I will, moreover, have to erase your memory of what I am about to say, at some later point.'

'Sure, whatever. It will be painless, right?'

'No one has been able to remember.' He'd studied human humour patterns, but wasn't sure Jimmy had picked up on it. 'But seriously,' he added, 'there are no pain receptors involved.' Zolla then went on to explain the process of temporal acceleration: 'It's done simply by creating a self-contained gravitational field shrouding the entire ship,' he said, as if describing some every day occurrence. 'The field is so strong that it has the ability to distort time. Encompassing are fields where the polarity is reversed so it will not attract other bodies and keeps us clear of any collision.'

Excitedly, Jimmy asked, 'So tell me about my own future. That must be possible because whatever I do next must already exist in the future.'

'There are a number of possible futures,' Zolla replied swiftly. 'There is one probable future. If you do what is natural and logical for you that is the future you will experience. Nevertheless, it's your future on this mission that counts – and that is outside your normal life; a future which doesn't exist.'

'Because I'm outside of my time.'

'Exactly. Your life will resume back on Earth when you return at the same point in time you left.'

'But what if you took me back into my past, would I meet myself?'

'No, there would only be the one you. Our own laws forbid us to do this. However, if you were to journey back into your time, it would be you then, without the memory of anything since.'

'How could my memory just be erased like that?'

'This is where things get a little complicated.' Zolla considered for a moment. 'Well, suffice it to say that the process of your temporal reversal would in actual fact remove the events that took place in and to your mind and body – as you are bound up to that particular time-line.' He considered again. 'Imagine you had rolled down a hill gathering dirt or bits of grit, a constant momentum through time. You can't stop yourself from rolling. Now, imagine temporal reversal as creating a stronger gravitational field at the top of the hill, from where you had started.'

'Yeah, sure, I roll back upwards'

'But also an adhesive tape strapped to the hill – so as you reversed your roll, the bits of dirt would be removed until back at the hill-top there would no longer be any dirt, just as if you had not rolled down the hill in the first place. That dirt represents your memory.'

'So the gravitational field and the adhesive tape represent a time machine?'

Zolla still hadn't quite got to grips with human analogising. Still, it had been a bold attempt.

But Jimmy didn't wait for an answer he had another question. 'What if you went back far enough to find my great-grandparents and killed them or abducted them. Then wouldn't I cease to exist?'

'No, it would not have altered the future from the original run of events set to occur because a time-line or branch cannot be eradicated from one's pre-past. Instead, a new path of events would

have been created where there would never be a Jimmy Findral.’

‘Then I’d still continue to exist as though nothing had ever happened?’

‘This simply means that you cannot erase the potential for the existence of Jimmy Findral. In any case, with you outside of your lifetime it may be any one of a trillion parallel universes. It’s totally random, it cannot be determined – like the position of an electron encircling a atom-nuclei ... Temporal reversal is strictly forbidden, however.’

‘Then don’t the same rules apply for the future?’

‘This is the present for me. The future we will visit is also my future in my potential lifetime, therefore there are details to which even I am not privy. Time will merely be accelerated. And before you ask, my memory has been stored for uploading when I reverse back.’

As were the rules of the CC, direct communication was strictly forbidden. This mission was simply based on a request by his descendants from the future, perhaps decades from their assigned mission-date.

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For about an hour and a quarter Jimmy studied the future history of his planet the war years and the decades up to the time he would visit: two-hundred or so years from his time. It dawned on him how downright absurd this was. A bizarre experiment to alter the future only after the worst had already happened. Zolla refused to give any details of his mission, let alone talk about what happened after time documented in the data file. He only knew that there was a message sent back from the future, asking for assistance; and for his part he would have find this guy called Gerrid Lytum, who was key to this whole Artificial-reality thing.

Inside the observation deck Jimmy prepared for the temporal acceleration process. He couldn’t help showing signs of nervous reluctance; Captain Zolla had taken a while to reassure him that this procedure was entirely safe.

Recumbent on a bed of steel-like metal (which was really only a rectangular block on the floor). Jimmy and the rest of the crew were firmly held in position. Above, they had a projected view of space outside: brilliant scattering of stars, the swathe of the Milky Way. He had to look to the side to see the ship’s interior.

Now he had been told to remain still so the head-brace could fix his position. *No escape now.* The steel, pressed firmly, kept reminding; he tried imagining he was in space, floating freely.

A countdown process: a synth voice of an unrecognizable language. Ten seconds, Zolla announced, as Jimmy’s pounding heart seemed to will his body to shake in refusal to comply. Adrenaline, but more like a surge of electricity. Futile physiological responses, but something else was pulling at him. The words over and over again in his mind: *if a move I’ll die.*

A gravitational field, about twenty times Earth g, enveloped the ship’s crew and Jimmy. At this critical moment a scanning beam recorded every atom of the crew members into a quantum computer (interchanged with the processing in over a trillion parallel dimensions). The field increased in intensity until each and every atom had been forced out of its molecular structure. This

single process would've been an imperceptibly short occurrence – less than a thousandth of a second before the field had been released and the biomass reconstructed back into its original forms. The process repeated for six hundred seconds. His anxiety wouldn't let up, even though the process had already begun and he was experiencing time travel itself. *Yes, time travel!* The Earth passed by in front of his view at an extraordinary rate, like a speeded up film. His nausea in tormenting waves. He felt too heavy to move at all. 'Maybe slightly unpleasant,' Zolla had said ... to, doubtless, prepare but not to overly scare. The others apparently had learned how to leave their body, float up and around – to escape the feeling of being crushed into the metal. *Don't think about it*, he thought to himself, as he had been instructed.

Planet Earth now a light blue mass which darted across the screen so fast Jimmy wondered if he was able to capture it in his mind as an isolated sphere instead of a streak of blue.

Eventually he noticed the pressure begin to ease, as Earth slowed, then the sensation ended abruptly. The sudden release from its grip. Relief, but also vomiting.

In compliance with CC policy, Jimmy could not be told the reality (that he had been repeatedly squashed to a pulp and reassembled, that his brain had not experienced a third of the ten-minute process). The total precision of this process meant there should not have been any difference in his subsequent condition, yet he felt worse than on that day when he completed every theme park ride for a bet; it was a struggle to remain conscious. He was allowed to sleep.

The following morning they hovered roughly Five thousand metres above ground. This was fifty years after the War. Worse than any previous world war in its destructive effect. Zolla pointed out just how much things had changed since that time. Southern England beneath a sprinkling of clouds, the gaps showing an abundance of green even over the London area.

They swooped in closer at a sickening rate of descent.

The rural areas had little in the way of fields, mostly replaced by an arrangement of small forests, some only partially formed with saplings and young trees. What appeared to be elaborate parks, on closer inspection, were in fact gardens neatly laden with flowers displaying every conceivable variation of colour, as if a competitive pride had gone into each garden.

'Human extravagance,' Zolla said in a wry tone, poised in his central viewing seat

He explained that more or less every bit of land was now privately owned. No parks or empty fields to walk through, everyone kept to their own areas. He said, 'Notice the lack of urbanisation, of movement?'

'It's quiet, it looks peaceful. I think I prefer this,' Jimmy commented, still sleepy, wondering whether he should have said that.

But Zolla seemed unaffected. 'Yes, it may appear to be peaceful and also attractive. The population of your country is only about ten percent of what it had been at the beginning of the war.'

Don't you think that would be ideal?' Jimmy inquired, reckoning that this question was more likely to provoke a response – any self-righteousness Captain Zolla had in him.

Zolla, in his Captain's chair, glared sharply at Jimmy to the side of him –situated in what was

officially reserved for someone who'd be in direct conference, which would normally be his second in command. 'Is it really so, that you believe there is an advantage to the current situation – over eight billion people trapped underground. We don't even know if they are any longer in re-life dreaming.'

'So they might just be unconscious?' His interest should be noted.

'They ... have been abandoned, left to grow old – however slow that process may be – on their eternal life-support,' he told Jimmy. 'The details are up to you to discover. We don't know exactly what kind of existence they are experiencing. That is your assignment as well as---.' A thoughtful expression formed on his human-like face. 'I shall explain later, when you need to know.' The finality in his voice was unquestionable.

From above, the world had become a beautiful place. They sailed over hundreds of these picturesque gardens which could literally be tens of acres of land. Zolla pointed out that none of this would have been possible so soon after the fall-out without the intervention of a neutralising agent, the technology for which was beyond even his understanding. An adversarial race, equal in technological terms to their own future selves, had appropriated an already prosperous (albeit troubled) planet to suit an ideological goal: a kind of utopia; the foundation for, perhaps, a colonisation. Or, at the very least, the necessity for the survival of their race.

Zolla said, 'These beings, it seems, have fooled the selected – or at least those lower down the hierarchy – into the belief that only a small fraction of this planet's population were killed in the war. In fact over a third, from CC accounts, lost their lives, most from the effects of radiation.'

'Your talking billions?'

'Yes, almost equal to your total current world population.'

'They couldn't build enough stasis pods?'

'Even to have created eight billion, to cover every continent, was a huge feat of logistics. But there are fundamental limits to resources.'

At about half the speed of sound the saucer ship glided over from the South Downs to the North Downs. Captain Zolla had to take over from his helmsman at the controls. He headed for a more densely populated area: London. He was like a Zoologists in search of the prime hunting ground, the centre of all activity from which to observe the most interesting behavior.

They glided low over constructions that bore no resemblance to any previous urban areas or indeed to any obvious practical purpose. Perhaps a reduced population had truly allowed architecture to become an art form, with no longer the constraints of ergonomics. Here were shapes balanced incongruously on top of one another. A typical example: the inverted diamond on a narrow multi faceted pyramid structure.

London appeared even more outlandish in its architecture. Tall, elongated structures like icicles, though all very much the same it seemed to him – the concept of beauty over function. Zolla was fascinated, perhaps to him the view of a decadent society. This was London City of 2211. They swooped in lower for a closer look.

In a blue tiled toilet washroom (crystalline covered from wail to wall) Jimmy gazed at his reflection

in a half size mirror. He then went back and studied his face, almost sceptical. *Yes it is myself, really here, in a toilet, in a spaceship.* He'd lost track of how many hours ago he had left the factory, headed for home, with much of the usual thoughts of things to resolve that were as always seemingly irresolvable, that still waited for him down there for his return.

To know to be contained within a vessel that was able to travel through time, to any point. The mere possibility of being able to go back to any particular moment in my life and re-live it. Even without the awareness of events; I could be informed of my mistakes. At least be given a chance to be successful in but one aspect of my life. It would be my reward for the completion of this assignment.

This was indulgence that was not at all useful in any way. In the grand scheme of things what did his little life matter when there are billions of lives at stake. *Get some perspective, Jimmy*

They both stood inside the individual transporter chamber; monitors above like little cameras.

The procedure for transportation seemed technically to be so complicated Captain Zolla seemed to think it not worth trying to explain in full. But he said, when Jimmy expressed an interest, 'the physical nature of all matter is determined by its underlying structure, a component of which vibrates at a particular frequency. A sub-quantum suppression field will alter that frequency and hence change the nature of matter; coupled with a carrier beam to direct us.' Jimmy was nonplussed; he wouldn't pretend to understand the science of it. Yet Zolla continued regardless. 'So, in effect, our physical selves will no longer interact with this reality. So although it is not a complete dimensional shift, it means our own matter will not be hindered by what we are about to pass through'.

Jimmy's spine tingled at the thought of what he was about to do. He'd been told what they would be passing through: soil, granite, and finally through a thick wall of steel. 'So we'll become like ghosts,' he ventured.

'In a sense that is true.' But he didn't elaborate this time.

They drifted through layer upon layer; no feeling at all, except for Jimmy a strange kind of fatigue. Each level underground becoming the surrounding environment, but in almost complete darkness. They finally passed through about half a metre of steel. Once again corporeal, their presence caused the entire lighting system to activate.

Now inside a room, so vast that the walls nearly converged to a point at greatest distance. Stretching out to this point a dozen or so rows of pod-like containers, similar to something he'd seen once in a science fiction movie, placed in close proximity to one another.

'This place is entirely concealed,' Zolla explained. 'No one can enter without authorisation, and that was given only to those responsible for maintenance.' They had to pass through a tunnel, completely sealed at many points until reaching nearly a kilometre below surface ground. 'The last time any vaults had been entered, we believe, had been over twenty years prior to now. In fact, maintenance was very seldom needed, it was really only for the conscience of those on the outside – a policy of the new regime, perhaps, or just their fellow humans wanting to ensure that their brethren were being kept safe and healthy.'

They strolled through an aisle of recumbent recipients, encased in the translucent caskets with tubes and wires attached to the head and torso. There even were smaller versions containing animals – beloved pets who, claimed Zolla, people believed they would be reunited with in this other reality. On the outside a status display to indicate all functions were within acceptable limits. With their bodies in almost complete stasis very little maintenance would be required, Zolla explained. The ageing process would still occur to the recipient’s brain, although at a greatly reduced rate.

‘Don’t – or didn’t – they ever become fed up or tired?’ Jimmy asked. ‘I mean wouldn’t they ever want to sleep when they’ve had enough of dreaming?’

‘Ah,’ beamed Zolla. ‘Interesting question you’ve raised. Yes they do have a rest from TIAR-REM-state whereupon they enter a deeper state of unconsciousness. This is their sleep, only for the mind. You see because REM-sleep had been constantly manipulated to overcome the natural random tendencies of dreaming, and the TIAR computer would stimulate a memory engram, the experience of TIAR can be as real as everything you are experiencing now. Only, I am sure the re-life would be considerably more exciting – it allows the recipient’s wishes of the past to be realised.’

Jimmy studied the slightly varying bars and figures on the pod’s display. ‘Is there any way to tell whether or not they are unconscious or dreaming?’

‘No, the neural activity display may not even be accurate. If this computer is all I have heard it to be, it can certainly manipulate the readouts.’

Jimmy, struck by a new anxiety, looked swiftly across the casket at Zolla. ‘Do you really believe I can take this on?’

Zolla gave – what appeared to be – a knowing smile. ‘The best challenges in life, Jimmy, seem like the impossible ones.’

The lack of monitoring equipment surprised Jimmy: one monitor – on a stand next to the stasis bed-casket, similar to those he’d observed underground. He wanted to be sure that every aspect of his condition would be kept in check whilst immersed in TIAR.

Zolla introduced the assistant medic. To Jimmy she appeared to be disarmingly pretty. The nurse opened the casket, removing the top casing. Jimmy lay on the bed; his apprehension sparking childhood memories of an operation he feared but knew there was no choice to refuse. As instructed, he secured the narrow plastic headband across his forehead, feeling its little points of electrodes pressing his skin. The nurse administered a hypo-spray; he fell asleep before the stasis chamber lid was reattached.

Chapter 24

Manhattan: Trilennium tower.

Monique sat passively at the conference table amongst the group of old men, her unease increasing.

No longer were the meetings agreed by any formal arrangement; not all the members had gathered. Officially the Group of Nine had been disbanded by decree of the newly appointed government. To her mind, the term government was not entirely accurate. There was the leader of the new colonists, a mysterious figure who called himself Glardo (his real name was probably unpronounceable). Monique had seen him speak to her father. Glardo appeared almost human, faux-Scandinavian, she thought. The others she met were similar: there was something not quite right about their appearance, as if these were people addicted to plastic surgery, trying too hard to look acceptably human. Clearly, there must have been an extensive genetic engineering base to their existence. Humans would have made the ideal source; perhaps a case of having to adapt to a Terran environment.

Monique was surrounded by a few of father's associates; one of them still surreptitiously giving her *the eye* – a man over twice her age who no longer cared for propriety or feared the wrath of her father; the discomfort making her mildly queasy. Still, it was a privilege to be there, amongst those who – hitherto – had the power to control nations' governments. They were talking prosaically about the new economy: logistics and infrastructures and their new role as coordinators of policy.

'I hope you realise,' she interrupted, 'that they are only allowing you the illusion of power the way you allowed that illusion to the original governments.' There was a stunned silence throughout the room at – she guessed – her impertinence. She questioned, 'what are you really getting in return for your efforts? Money, real estate, sure, and the freedom to travel throughout a world without pollution and people to corrupt it. But how long do you think this charmed existence will last?'

Her father gave that knowing look, a slight nod. 'I understand your concerns, Monique: you think we might have made a deal with the devil.' A half smile of recognition forming, he added, 'your mother said almost exactly the same thing. I said to her try to remember the world as it was: the population increasing two per cent each year because so few would accept mortality – and so many of them could afford to stave off such a prospect.'

'You can never make long-term projections for population increase that are in any way accurate,' she argued.

'Indeed so,' he said in his scholarly voice. 'With the lack of resources and the diminution of habitable land, the population inevitably must decrease. A case of survival of the fittest but in the process people will die from war, civil conflicts. Or maybe merely from hunger, or heat exhaustion – so you get the picture? Planet Earth had reached a critical point. So, Monique, maybe it *was* necessary to do a deal with the devil, as I guess you see them. Think of the suffering we have prevented.'

Monique simply shook her head in resignation, left the table and walked out into the night.

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Central Council approved history file 4 (translation edit).

Observations of a star system 260 light years away from Sol recorded an advanced civilisation destroying itself after decades of war. Analysis of the local sector revealed high level traces of Gamma and beta radiation: evidence of hostile nuclear activity.

Radiowave (broadcast) emissions depicted a once unexceptional race who progressed from times of inter nation conflict – as a strategy for establishing order – towards a peaceful type II civilisation. Much as the Council's own league of planets followed the enlightened ways of the Temporal Directive, this observed world maintained a doctrine of non (or undetectably minimal) interference in other world cultures. Indeed, under a one-world government, they appeared to allow independent cultural and religious practices, as has been the way in the early years of Council rule, and similarly of Sol planet 3 [Earth] for many centuries.

The most recent news broadcast indicated an increasing level of tension within the largest province. Civil conflict ensued, considered to result from disputed rights over land ownership between ideologically opposed factions. Unfortunately since the Temporal Directive forbids any CC federation fleet from observing from within their solar system, the details of how this led to a full scale nuclear war remain unclear. The most widely accepted theory, however, is also the simplest: overpopulation. Despite the abundance of energy and food resources, the fundamental problem of the lack of land space appeared to have tipped the balance, to somehow escalate to a point where their world had become effectively uninhabitable.

No one knew of their departure. The ships moved stealthily, undetectable to the CC federation. This was a technology born of war. The Council had no way of knowing until the invasion had already begun.

The Council held extensive meetings, reviewing and debating the tenets of the Temporal Directive until what seemed to be a loophole allowed the possibility of action. The resolution to intervene was passed by a majority vote of only two. Elder Isari, one of the remaining traditionalists, declared the beginning of the end for Central Council.

Chapter 25

Jimmy awoke with a gradual focusing on to an apricot-coloured wall, a raised diamond pattern: his own bedroom. Their bedroom.

With the fading embers of some peculiar dream in his mind, he glanced over at the other side of the bed. Janetta lay, sound asleep, her golden hair partly covering the side of her face. She always looked her best in this state, so peaceful and oblivious to the world. He wanted to hold this moment in his mind, capture the image before it has gone, shattered by the sound when the alarm wakes her.

What time is it? What day is it?

The realisation struck him, the sudden alertness, as if hit by a shower of cold water.

TUESDAY.

He lifted the clock off a small table, stared at its face, confounded by how it could be so late, how thirty-five minutes could've passed by since the alarm was supposed to have gone off. For some reason it seemed neither of them had remembered to set the alarm.

Janetta stirred from her tranquility, and by force of habit she glanced across to the bedside table for the time. Only, Jimmy still held the clock, trying to resolve in his mind the implications of what he was seeing ... Time: he was on the verge of panic because of it.

When Janetta twisted the alarm clock round from Jimmy's grasp her own internal alarm was set off: resulted in the inevitable frenzy of panic, blaming him for letting her sleep through to this late. Inexcusable. But Jimmy tried desperately to explain, forcing the words between her sentences, with little result. By this moment, after pointless bickering, the fact remained that neither was likely to get to work on time even if they both left the house within the minute.

Janetta leapt out of bed, the duvet flung off with her.

Jimmy stumbled into his work trousers. He might just get there only a few minutes late if he caught that crucial bus. Futile optimism, he realised. Even without going through all the usual routines, this still wasn't quick enough to catch that last possible bus. Probably gone by only a matter of seconds. A bad day, becoming predictable; like a domino effect. Nearly twenty minutes until the next one. He wasn't going to wait.

He could phone for a Taxi; there were never any to hail. And then wait. *No, damnit. Pay an extortionate fare and still be late!*

Jimmy started to run, his hard-sole shoes smacking uncomfortably against the pavement.

He'd done this before; it meant being hot and uncomfortable on arriving in the heated building. Surely, though, it was worth salvaging time this way: a show of effort.

Future hanging in the balance, income, security.

Approaching the old factory, its mottled red brick facade, hiding nothing of what it truly is: old and decaying. That looming presence, the chemical smell.

His pace slowed and his heart pounded furiously. Fingertips tingling with adrenaline, mind racing – and he was panicking perhaps too much. This must be wrong, he understood, mustn't be like this. Fear, his imagination; it angered him to feel this way, to be made to feel this way.

Jimmy stepped through a doorway into his work area, the assembly line. The atmosphere inside hit him in a rush, his adrenal glands now on overload. The rush of familiarity itself feeling like a chemical reacting on him violently, and the glare of everyone, their voices as murmurs of astonishment.

As Jimmy approached the murmurs quietened and they each returned to their work. He sat down at his workstation. 'It'd better be a goodun this time, eh Jimmy,' said a female voice. It was Paula in the place next to him.

Then a male voice, to the other side, rather strained and tired sounding. 'You certainly like to live on the edge now don't you.

'It's no big deal, OK,' Jimmy said with a newly acquired nonchalance. 'I've worked here for over four years now, I don't think it matters if I'm late just this once in a while. Besides, it's only just over twenty minutes, so there's no point in winding me up over this.'

'If you think I'm winding you up, then you're not going to be prepared for the grilling you'll likely to get from Cronleigh when he's not in a good mood.'

'Is he *ever* in a good mood?'

The floor manager was carrying a particularly stern expression on his face, which reflected in the way he strode past each person along the production line. Out for the kill, at least to verbally maim; the honed art of the formidable look. Not exclusively for Jimmy, but for all the others to appreciate – to observe and to learn from this example. And Jimmy made to feel like some miscreant teenager.

'So here he is. Jimmy the defiant one, the rebel who thinks he might have a cause.' He peered down, face craggier than ever, lines converging: vexation, bafflement now. 'So was this another act of defiance – arriving all of twenty minutes late?'

'Twenty two minutes by my watch.'

'Yes, fascinating you should point that out.' He made a sweeping gesture vertically, and said, 'See the others, they are enthralled. Please, since you're being so precise, Mr Findral, then try to match that with you're explanation.' He folded his arms grandly and stood back.

There was no answer from Jimmy: he felt Cronleigh's eyes burn into his skull, but he didn't look up to see. By his reckoning the man had gone too far this time; overstepped the mark, like crossing an imaginary line from where there can be no returning

'Well?' demanded Cronleigh, 'I'm waiting for your explanation.'

Jimmy could hear the silence of inactivity along the line. He knew he had an entirely captive audience. But tried not to think about them, or let their presence influence his actions. Instead he concentrated on the anger he felt, trying to focus every ounce of fury. Never so clear before. A moment defined in history. *For the rest of my life this will be the turning point: the day I broke free from....*

Jimmy raised his head, glared at the floor manager, conveying maximum indignation, maximum hatred. The words spilling out from him. 'You've had it in for me right from the start, trying to make my life here as difficult as possible, finding every available opportunity to criticise and to assert your authority.' He was surprised at how easily the words came out. Before, he imagined it would

take a few drinks (strong ones) for this kind of courage – or stupidity – to go out on a limb and speak his mind. Yes, he'd imagined this moment, how it would be, many times.

Cronleigh gave no response. Perhaps he didn't know how, not to this, the truth – stunned by it. So Jimmy continued, he stood up to look him square in the eye. 'You've pushed me too far this time. It's not enough just to complain about my attitude. And if I'm not working exactly to speed as if I'm the only one who slacks off now and again. Well now it's time I pushed back.' The last four words enunciated carefully.

Cronleigh stood a couple of inches taller than Jimmy; having to look up seemed to underscore his act of defiance. Jimmy couldn't really be sure of the physical limits of his strength. Still, anger had its own force; this was his strength.

Between them the dividing work-station maintained almost two feet in distance and this was a problem for what Jimmy had intended. So he had to think quickly, act immediately. *One window of opportunity; time has its own markers for each action. Hesitate and everything is lost.*

'So what do you intend to do?' The sneer on Cronleigh's face now said it all. 'How far out of your depth can you go, Jimmy, before you drown? I can't wait all day for an explanation,' Cronleigh growled.

It was as if he had not registered Jimmy's words.

He knew he could reach, only just, taking a swing with every bit of speed and strength ... total resolve. Right on the side of the man's face. Cronleigh stumbled back, lost his balance, hit the floor.

Jimmy peered down to see the results. The man did not appear to be conscious. Jimmy's hand was sore, perhaps swelling at the knuckles. He must leave now. The exit door about twenty seconds away if he walked at a normal pace. Tried to seem composed, tried not to listen to the astonished voices; resisted looking back.

Outside he ran until beyond the perimeter entrance.

He walked slowly, analysed his feelings. *Remorse? No. Relief? Yes. Simple as that.* But not quite having broken free from the past. The past would catch up if he remained in this county, in this *country* perhaps.

A new life beckoned.

Jimmy walked through the park mulling over his prospects (whatever they were). He gradually became aware of something he considered odd. So he looked around. Any others across the park, he noticed, were far enough from him that their voices should not carry in such a way. He merely dismissed this minor interruption to his train of thought.

Now something else. Fragments of that weird dream, presenting themselves in flashes of recall, gradually becoming more lucid as images. How curious, he thought, this bizarre escapist fantasy.

The voice again, faint but not distant. Someone was calling him. As the voice became louder it seemed to echo, not from any point he could see but more like ... in his ears or in his *head*. He couldn't be certain. It was just there, saying his name.

'Who?' He only really mouthed the words as a whisper. 'Who is it?'

He hadn't noticed his own pace slowing, and now he had stopped dead, to listen. 'Jimmy, do you remember who I am? Do you know where you are?' The echo gone now, the voice was clear. The

voice he *recognised*.

‘Zolla, captain Zolla,’ he said timorously. Feeling a sudden chill all over he shook convulsively for a few seconds. Those dream-like images now alive in his head as vivid memories, tearing apart his belief in what had seemed real.

‘You remember who I am; that's good. I know how easy it is to be deceived by the re-life experience.’

Jimmy found it difficult to fight back the urge to be sick. He tried to speak. He failed.

‘It's constructed from your memory. Below surface recall. Whereas you can see an astonishing amount of detail is retained. So you experience reality as you know it, but it's not objective reality. Look for any subtle differences, any inconsistencies.’

Jimmy's stomach was now beginning to settle. ‘I can't say I've really noticed anything unusual so far.’ He then surveyed across the park at anyone within audible distance. ‘OUI, YOU LOT,’ he shouted. ‘DO YOU KNOW IF I'M REALLY HERE? CAN YOU TELL ME?’ No one had paid any attention to him – up till now. There were a few people scattered around the park, as would be expected for mid morning. As Jimmy had guessed, they all looked round at him. Some only gave him a fleeting glance, a few others a long stare. An old woman muttered something to her friend, then focused her attention back onto Jimmy who was a least a hundred yards away.

Let's test this deception, he thought, grinding his teeth here. He started to approach the nearest fictitious character.

‘No Jimmy it's completely pointless. They'll only give you standard, predictable responses. What do you expect?’

‘Then get me out of here,’ he demanded. Annoyed, as much at himself as Zolla.

This world began to swirl as if he had become stupendously drunk; his focus on it had gone.

Oblivion.

He remembered the feeling of disarray, regaining consciousness from something that had seemed more real than here.

‘It can take a while to adjust,’ Zolla said. ‘This was only the standard immersion, however. The element of control of the human mind over a central computer exists only through the direct link. The recipient is therefore free to choose the outcome. In fact this freedom of control is, to a certain extent, greater than that of real life itself – an ability to mold reality to one's own desires. Whilst unlike a lucid dream, this can only be done within a context of authenticity. If the recipient becomes aware of the fictitious nature, then the computer would have to react by inducing a deeper level of sleep.’

‘Does that happen often?’ Jimmy inquired.

‘No, it is rare. People actually *want* to believe. Besides, our concern is not about re-life; the computer may still maintain this primary function, but we know it is beyond that now. We don't know by how far it has evolved, only that it had a total hold on those connected.’

‘You got me out okay.’

‘That was only a simulation; we had extracted the subroutine data from the original program via

a recipient connection.'

Dismayed; fooled by a simulation. 'Then why didn't you tell me?'

'You had to believe that what you were entering was the genuine TIAR, otherwise there'd be no point in the trial run.' Zolla explained the nature of the network, the individual connection to one of many networked (neural) processing units – working as a single intelligence – which had been hidden, shrouded from all methods of detection, so deep underground that each unit would be impervious to all detonations. Destruction, moreover, would cause mass death – and be against CC protocol.

Chapter 26

‘Time is of the essence.’ The words rolled off his tongue like a mantra. It was phrase captain Zolla had become fond of using, sometimes to everyone else’s irritation. In fact there was no actual deadline for the assignment itself, such was the uncertainty and unpredictability the project entailed. Jimmy was made fully aware of this uncertainty, and his fear he tried to hide. Zolla tried to conceal anxiety inside his own impatience, to the annoyance of his chief technician. The chief Tech had been diligently working on a communications link, similar to a hand-held media player in appearance.

The Com-link device would be used to monitor Jimmy’s TIAR experience, transferring his subconscious neural impulses into audiovisual. Curiously, it was easier to get a picture than sound due to the less substantial nature of auditory feedback. In standard TIAR the visual cortex would simply represent something induced from a memory and tempered by imagination; a simple conversion. In any case, things were different now: a shift to more computer oriented feedback, it was surmised.

The chief Tech's assistant had been given a job with even less certainty of success. She was attempting to modify the ship's main computer to artificially mimic human brain activity in REM-state. Connected to a TIAR interface and using the life memory of Jimmy Findral in the hope of providing some insight into Earth’s governor monitor net, its core functioning process. This continually proved to be a futile effort; the system would always detect some minor flaw in the replicated memory. A simulation of the intricate engramatic patterns, therefore, did not seem authentic enough for the TIAR program to merge with. The technician had never known a system this smart based on Earth technology. She had to wonder why it would be so discerning; why the apparent need for this level of security? Enough, then, surely to sustain her interest through all the mundane work of minutely adjusting interface responses to get the TIAR computer to take the bate and do its thing.

Jimmy had no idea his memory had been recorded and was now being used for research. So much was now out of his hands. He knew of no real plan of action, he'd simply enter the system and follow a set of instructions. Could it really be that easy?

The technician had finally conceded defeat. To pursue an artificial connection was simply too risky. The TIAR computer realised it was being duped and had reacted with hostility (or even malevolence), trying to overload the artificial neural net during interface.

*

Jimmy waited, put on the headband, and reclined back on the bed in the stasis pod.

Zoreosa effected her warm smile of reassurance. She spoke fluently this time, told Jimmy not to be nervous or alarmed as that might affect the immersion process. The headband could easily pick up on that in the feedback it received, interacting with the computer base. It was like telling a patient not to be nervous before a major operation. This time even her calm and mellifluous

inflections did not quell the anxiety. Only the tranquilizing hypo-spray could do that. The medic repeated the procedure as before the simulation.

Jimmy still had questions, doubts that probably could not be assuaged. So he allowed the final well of emotions to quietly fill him, briefly, before they faded into insignificance.

With a newly calm acceptance he let the headband attune itself to begin the immersion process. Now curiously comfortable in the knowledge that from this point, the next moment and beyond, was simply an inevitable part of his life. His tapestry of life.

This time the immersion process would be more complete. Instead of an anesthetizing drug, impulse waves from the headband reduced his brainwave activity in a more gradual way.

Through the tinted glass of the casket he noticed the concerned look of the nurse and Zolla. He actually thought for a few seconds that their faces were changing, turning green, into something oddly reptilian – before losing focus.

Now white light. His awareness grew, engulfed in this pure brilliant white. For a while it seemed that nothing else mattered. There was no past, no future, and no fear or doubt. Then from a feeling of pure unburdened peacefulness to the realisation that this was only temporary. Trying to hold on to the experience, trying to analyse it, caused it to fade rapidly. It could not be thought and remain existent at the same time, he realised.

The next thing Jimmy felt was a burning sensation on the back of his neck and the side of his face. A hot sun, hotter than anything he had ever experienced, working away at his skin, making it almost intolerable to remain in a fixed position flat against the sand. Face in the sand, hands outstretched, as if some force had thrown him there. The sting on the back of his neck, above the collar of a thick woolen top, felt as though he had been scolded. Pulsating, intensifying pain. How far can the burning continue?

This time he had awareness; this was nothing to do with his life. If he reacted to it – he thought – he would only strengthen its hold, one stage nearer to the acknowledgment of its reality. Even the need to remove his top – as his sweat boiled, causing immense discomfort – he refused to give into. He did, though, have to be clear in his mind of where this ought to be. It was no good simply trying to change the environment to something that had absolutely no bearing to what he was feeling. So he tried to convince himself: *I am on the beach of a tropical island. Surrounding me are palm trees and a turquoise sea. A cooling breeze is about to pick up.* No sound he heard to indicate either of these. *Visualise harder.* But the pain had become too distracting. It was questionable, besides, how much influence Jimmy actually had over his environment. Connected to such a vast network, billions of recipient minds to an artificial intelligence. It could project from its own memory store or from any one of these minds into his. His only defence: his imagination.

So, with his eyes closed, Jimmy saw the image – only a vague rendering – of the tropical island as he pulled himself up off the sand. Standing in the penetrating heat. Dead, calm heat. Jimmy opened his eyes only to be disappointed at what he saw before him. Far from any tropical island, this he observed as a desert. Barren as far as the eye could see, with a blue cloudless sky, sand dunes sharply etched on the horizon. ‘You’ve failed already,’ he told himself. But there had to be another way. It was a test, a test of endurance perhaps – mental resolve.

Jimmy reminded himself of his mission: to find Gerrid Lytum, the inventor of TIAR. If anyone had the knowledge to undo the computer's stranglehold on its recipients it would be him. It was thirty-five years since Gerrid Lytum had entered into this strange other reality. There were no records available to Captain Zolla to indicate whether he was even alive. How exactly Jimmy was supposed to find this man was still a complete mystery. If doubts crept in, the computer, he knew, would capitalise on it.

Whichever way he turned he could not escape the sensation of burning. The sun shone from directly overhead, its heat pressing down evenly, suffused over the contours of his face. He removed his thick top, uncovering a black T-shirt that within seconds evaporated areas of sweat. In a real desert with his arms exposed he would undoubtedly burn within minutes. His neck had got it; that felt real enough ... 'Well, so what?' he tried to convince himself out loud. This was his test.

Trying to imagine the absence or even the lessening of this heat proved frustratingly difficult. How a cool breeze must feel. No. The heat was too oppressive. Had to just bare it out.

He trudged on, over sand between loosely formed dunes, not really knowing why he was wasting so much effort producing more heat internally leading towards (supposed) dehydration.

Jimmy stopped, surveyed. A change: he felt a breeze making a low humming sound. The air was hot, abrading his already reddened skin, painful to inhale. A ghostly sandy mist swept over the infinity of dunes. He wondered how it was possible to have any concept of a destination.

Somehow, it seemed if he stopped moving he'd put himself *truly* at the mercy of the sun. With no obvious course it was simply a matter of trudging forward. Even in what he thought was the least treacherous route it was difficult to get a firm foot hold, feet – in trainers – sinking and sliding about as the sand gave way to any pressure.

He had to sit down. The experience of heat exhaustion felt real enough not to dismiss, the drain on his energy increasingly rapid. And the dehydration. Water had now become the most desirable thing in the world, until his persistent imagination presented him with the reminiscent taste of lemon & limejuice. But like a strict yet concerned parent he told himself to stop imagining the drink, it only made his thirst more torturous.

When every element was in place to contribute to a complete reality how could he put aside it's effects and be sure he was not truly in peril?

Thinking was by no means easy at this point. There were memories, which would float up, and only faint and indistinct as in a dream. He knew they were real events, significant, dramatic, but it was as if in those times he had not entirely been there, even in his most sober, alert moments. Perhaps it was only here where reality seems so simple and unquestioning. Here was all his life.

And what might be beyond this?

He waited.

'Help me!' He couldn't shout the words as they caught in his throat. Not beyond a strained rasp could he manage, 'Zolla, where the fuck are you?'

The notion that he would actually receive a reply seemed absurd at this point. Why hadn't he heard anything so far? Clearly there must be problem. He was beginning to feel a sense of no hope, the total lack of any change from when he had started.

Why no progression?

The deterioration of his own wellbeing was the only process of change to be recognised here, slowly wearing away at his state of mind. There was no logical reason to continue when he knew of no destination.

So it seemed he was giving in to it. Nothing to do but wait for instructions.

‘Think!’ Jimmy demanded of himself. ‘There is a way out. I can get through this.’

He could barely make out a voice in the distance. Struggling with his last fraction of awareness to discern he knew that voice, it was Zolla! He was saying ‘Listen to me, just concentrate on my words.’ His voice was in Jimmy's head. ‘You must not allow it to be real.’ he added. ‘Don't give in to it. Remember, what you're experiencing isn't by any means real. In reality, you are perfectly all right.’

By this time, Jimmy barely felt he had the energy to speak. He just wanted to rest, a basic urge to give in. ‘So what if I do give in to it?’ he rasped, in a battle for reason.

‘You'll comatose,’ Zolla answered simply.

‘Coma?’

‘Yes, it will render you into perhaps a permanent state of unconsciousness. That is why you have to fight it. Deny it, Jimmy, before it swallows you in. Just keep telling yourself that in reality you're perfectly safe and well.’ It was simply a reminder, but a reminder of something so contrary to everything his senses told him.

Acknowledging in full what Zolla had said was now bringing about an improvement. His state of mind was one aspect. The heat exhaustion rapidly lost its grip, and with that, what he saw altered.

Although of course it was perfectly understandable, he felt slightly ridiculous for having been – if only partially – taken in by this deception; only an illusion, which can be undone with sufficient reasoning. The sun and the sand, though, still remained but not quite the same. This he could see as if watching the landscape through a cinema screen. It was there if he chose to believe in its authenticity, or these were merely two-dimensional images surrounding – no real substance. The sand did still remain under his feet; he knelt down and ran the grains through his fingers, cold now. Grains and then powder, only a surface layer.

He looked up to the sky and said, ‘So what the hell took you so long?’ Justified or not, Jimmy was feeling angry and bitter.

‘The system constantly kept blocking me out,’ Zolla replied, more clearly now. ‘Getting through the security-code network was a difficulty none of our team had properly envisaged.’

Indignant still, Jimmy inquired, ‘Why am I beginning to feel like part of some experiment?’

‘Ah, good.’ Another swift reply ‘I'm glad to see your powers of perception are improving. We've wondered if that was one of the positive effects of the modified immersion, having to utilise your higher thought processes to a greater extent.’

‘Then you might as well admit that I am the guinea pig here. Yes, little insignificant me. I mean who'd give a toss about my disappearance if I didn't return.’ He nodded in affirmation to himself. ‘Yeah, I see your reasoning now.’

‘If that's what you want to believe, then you're still not seeing this thing quite so clearly as I had

hoped. But let's not waste any more time on that. There's a lot to be done... It's too late to turn back now. I suggest moving on to the next level.'

As instructed, Jimmy broke down the surroundings, its authenticity, its rationality. Was he making this happen? The sun appeared to be melting the sand dunes. Perhaps more this was a general loss of focus. Stars were now appearing as the sky darkened

Millions of stars. A red and yellow nebular had formed, fading to purple on the edge.

The ultimate deep space. Is this what he had wanted?

He glided, controlling his movement via the two directional levers either side on arms attached to a jetpack. He had never before seen so many stars together: static points of light, and of varying magnitudes, shrouded in these mauve and pink wisps of nebulous cloud. It took a few seconds to realise a spacesuit and helmet encased him.

He allowed his muscles to relax and his arm became lighter, then floated up: the sudden novelty experience of zero gravity. Realising this had to lead to a destination, Jimmy noticed the structure. With the unit's jet propulsion it came nearer. This he recognised; it seemed somehow familiar. A revolving space station: a ring slowly spinning around a central cylindrical axis, slightly converging in the middle, four tunnels leading to this point. *Progress, finally.*

Zolla's voice: 'I'm glad to see progression is being made. Be prepared now. Be focused. Remember, whatever's behind all this is out to reject you and will do so at the earliest opportunity. It detects a bug merely through my link-up – so I cannot stay in contact for an indeterminate amount of time. So maintain the objective in mind. Do not be dissuaded ... by anything!'

Jimmy had questions, but he knew Zolla had now broken off communications.

Surveying the vast outer ring there seemed only one entry-point. This rectangular line, a seal, must be a potential opening. But no lever, no handle or any other possible way of access.

His determination felt so strong now. Yet the intricacies, the complete lack of predictability. Perhaps this was the mastery of the system's program over its prisoners. Could he outwit this? Any doubts would immediately be detected, then projected back on to him and amplified in the process.

Don't rationalise the absurd, think logically. A reassurance was vital in an experience of isolation. 'Attitude,' he then affirmed to himself, 'to be positive always.' A necessary mantra he'd learned from Zolla; but he felt the silent mocking laughter of the computer.

He thought about what he wanted to happen next. Visualized it, the simplicity of the hatch-door opening and light inside ... the way forward.

It was that simple! Manifested from the imagination. This gave Jimmy a newfound confidence as he stepped through the opening, into the light.

Rather clumsily he walked through a corridor with the spacesuit on. The top and sides of the corridor walls were entirely and evenly illuminated white, as if translucent panels were shielding a near-by sun.

He stopped abruptly to hear the sound of footfalls, delicate, quick and light. The corridor curved upwards from his position as part of the centrifugal ring. He could see for about fifty metres in front. Jimmy felt his heart rate increasing; he knew the computer would be monitoring, sensing his apprehension, perhaps guessing at his anticipation. Not fear so far.

Those footsteps.

No way! Surely not? Emerging from a side door, surrounded in light ... it was Janetta ... though he did want it to be Janetta. Almost twenty metres away.

He stopped walking, removed the helmet for a clearer view. What was that she wore? Staring intensely, he noticed these thin pipes or tubes at each side of a skin-tight suit of a silvery grey colour. And she sparkled, aspects of her glinting – as if the material had been sprinkled in glitter. She took a step back, pressing her bottom against the illuminated side, peering upwards.

Waiting for him? But no sign she'd acknowledged him anyway, even though he knew she must have seen him when she stepped out. Terrific in profile. Yet he mused over what was comparatively trivial, fascinated by what that was she was wearing, what kind of material? Jimmy wanted to call out to her, was about to, he was sure, but she now turned to face him.

'Jimmy, you know it's me.' Her voice raised to cover the distance adequately, and echoing slightly.

'Jan, I ... I didn't expect you, didn't imagine.'

'Neither did I,' she said simply.

'How can this be?' His voice was still vague with disbelief, he doubted if she was able to hear.

She simply beckoned and said, 'Come to me, Jimmy,' and in that voice so familiar; what he read into her voice. Now his heart was racing out of control.

He started walking forward, at first making slow awkward strides and then faster, and all the time Zolla's (imagined) voice in his head, *Don't rationalise the absurd, Jimmy*. Jimmy stopped about a metre from Janetta. Her stare: not intense, though direct, more alluring, trying to draw him in further. Then the usual signs he was feeling. His mouth dry, throat constricting, and his stomach – amongst other things. These sensations taking him back, the first time all over again.

'Don't be frightened, Jimmy, it's only me.' Her voice was almost condescending, yet in a familiar way.

*

Zolla's level of concern had been raised to a state of anxiety, even if this was unfounded. Merely that Jimmy's brain-function readings were now becoming more rapid and irregular. The medical staff had been instructed to interfere as little as possible with Jimmy's condition in TIAR. So they had no choice but to take a back seat and only observe. Unless of course his condition became too unstable, exceeding a predetermined threshold of neural activity.

*

He looked into Janetta's eyes and began to wonder what she had ever seen in him. Now more than ever that effect, taking a deep breath and inhaling the sweet scent; the distinctiveness of that always to be etched in his memory; the perfume she wore in those early days, six years ago, when they first met – remembering so vividly why he had been so infatuated. Him, not much more than a teenager was so determined there would be no one else for her.

He tried to speak, this time it was more difficult than the first. His throat felt so tight that the

words could not come out in the way they needed to. They had to be forced out by the kind of will power he needed in the desert.

‘Why are you here? Why? ... It’s not really you, how can it be? You can only be an illusion, a deception created from my memory.’

She looked at him in all innocence, it seemed. ‘I am as real as you want me to be, as ever.’ Her voice was distinctly hers, but smoother despite the slight echo, as if relayed to him by digital broadcast, no roughness of an accent. ‘Haven’t I always been as real as this?’ She asked in earnest, and then made an open handed gesture. ‘Go on, touch me.’

Jimmy made the final few steps and touched Janetta, though he did it briefly and tentatively on the side of her arm. This made her smile and give out a laugh that nearly became a girlish giggle; it was so endearing to him, something he hadn’t heard for such a long while.

She said, ‘Follow me,’ and then she turned to enter through the near door.

He followed her without question, though he did consider repeating the previous question: *why are you here?*

Was this against his newly acquired better judgment? Now: he couldn’t be sure. And his suspicions Yet could see no alternative action, it was as if instinct had finally taken over.

Her own place to live, her quarters, she told him. Would this be the trap he was walking into? Inside, and then the door automatically closing. Then to her sleeping quarters (she made a point of telling him this). They faced each other motionless.

‘Jan,’ sometimes he abbreviated; she didn’t mind, most times, ‘what do you mean these are your sleeping quarters?’ His puzzled look to full effect. This: he’d more expect to see on a Star Trek star ship!

‘This is where I live now. There are over five rooms I have. It’s like an apartment really.’ She gave that warm smile again. He was so intrigued now, having calmed to her presence, though he hoped he could be rational again. ‘Why do you live here now?’ Came a rational question.

‘Well that’s obvious, Jim.’ Her response was surprisingly immediate. But that was strange, he could never remember her calling him by the abbreviated *Jim*, before. ‘I had to escape from that ... life of mine,’ she continued. ‘You understand, don’t you? It was all getting too much – the job and everything. So I did what you have done, I got out of there, and now we’re both here ... Don’t you see? Here is where we can start a new life together. Here is everything you could ever want.’

‘So you left it all for us to be together?’

‘For us, to truly be together.’

‘But you’ll have to go back sometime, just as I will.’

‘Let’s not think about that now. Remember time has no meaning here, not time on Earth.’

Jimmy agreed. He sat down on a bedroom chair, and it was uncomfortable in his suit.

‘Why don’t we enjoy the time we have together?’ Janetta; she was surely the voice of reason here. Jimmy had finally conceded with the questioning. What more can he question?

He wanted to be taken in, wanted to be beguiled by unquestionable reason. There were wonderful memories brought up that he could so much enjoy; those days of his inexperience, a journey of discovery and the desire for this again.

She leaned over towards him, took his hand, he helped her lift him to his feet.

She said, ‘Come to bed, Jimmy. Let’s make the most of it.’

His bulky space suit; Janetta knew exactly how to undo it, from the back it fell to the ground. He stepped out and realised what he wore underneath was exactly identical to what Janetta was wearing, a kind of rough spandex material, and she looked so good in it – every curve of her body. So healthy! And he had never looked so good himself.

Jimmy had no will to resist. Any voice of caution in his mind was not only silenced but also made to seem like some insignificant doubt that only had its place in another lifetime.

They met. It was a complete reunion, as if the last few years had now been forgotten. The existence of anything beyond their selves was banished in its utter irrelevance.

*

The medical team had connected up just about every imaginable monitoring device to unconscious Jimmy.

The chief medical officer and of course Captain Zolla observed with a varying mixture of anxiety and fascination the readings of brain activity for the main receptive areas. Above them a holographic projection which rotated at will. The chief medic, with a physician’s professionally suppressed humour, pointed out the pulsating purple in the mind’s primary pleasure centre (nucleus accumbens) in the limbic region.

Since the viewer/communicator was currently in the process of modification (to include a device which would minimise detection), Zolla – not to mention the other crew – were somewhat frustrated at not being able to see just what was going on in Jimmy’s experience, despite having a fair idea.

Jimmy eventually fell into a deeper state of unconsciousness: TIAR-sleep.

*

He awoke to the morning sun shining through onto a subtle Harvest yellow wall. For some reason he had no recollection of that colour. Too much to drink the night before?

A holiday hotel?

A dream?

It took nearly five minutes before realising what was wrong with this and to become angry at such an obvious oversight. *Not so sharp now, Jimmy.* He then got up to see just what or where this was supposed to be. Looking through a window, originally with stars shining and now shielding his eyes from the apparent sun, Jimmy found himself staring at a forest from above, as if a few stories high. There was a very slight mist so he could barely discern the horizon of hills and further forests. *It must be early still,* the thought he had, as if this were real.

He tried to become more alert, thinking about the events leading up to being in this place.

Suddenly, where was Janetta? No sign of her having been in this room. What would he look for? What clothes would she have? Even the smell of her perfume had gone. He looked through a closet, which ought to ... Some of his own original clothes, but none of hers. Other rooms: empty. Why had

she left? What was the sense in this? So many questions flying about in his head, then pecking away at him like a flock of trapped, panicking birds. Deep down he knew these were unimportant questions; he tried to force himself not to think about them anymore. He sat on the bed on its crumpled sheet and thought about their encounter. The utter reality of it. Everything heightened and more intense than it seemed he could ever recall in any previous experience; an explosion of feelings, of desire. He didn't know if he had ever been so lost, so wonderfully lost in any moment in time. Was that how it is to be as an animal, driven solely by the basic instinct?

The more he thought about her the more he craved her presence.

Just a few hours and desperate again.

Jimmy thought he saw a black shape. Yes, there it was again. Through an open, sliding doorway stepped a sleek, black cat. It approached Jimmy without a glance, striding cautiously towards the bed. It then jumped up and onto Jimmy's lap almost in a routine manner as if this was what it had to do, had been instructed. The animal seemed real and that was somehow curious. He didn't own a cat after all, so what was the significance in this? The cat purred when he stroked it and then just jumped off and walked towards the exit door. He wondered if somehow this feline would lead him to Janetta. If this was her pet then it must be likely: perhaps another assumption he was expected to make.

As soon as the door whooshed open, the cat raced down a corridor with Jimmy following as fast as he could manage.

Not fast enough though.

Of course the cat was entirely out of sight and he was only walking past the myriad of apartments. Maybe an entire colony of residents, how many would show themselves?

Anyway, he had to wonder whether he was being led in the *right* direction in keeping with his mission objective, leading him to the whereabouts of Gerrid Lytum. Or misdirection?

As though brought on by his own need, he once again heard the footsteps. Distant and echoey, absolutely no mistaking Janetta's quick, energetic pace; she always seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere.

'Janetta?' Bemusement echoing in his voice several times over.

Just as before the figure appeared, breaking the light at the end of the tunnel, not entirely perceptible as being her: the upward curve meant he was only able to see her feet at this distance ... but he just knew. Jimmy ran now, with ease, as fast as he'd thought he had ever run

Gerrid Lytum can wait.

Approaching with really not far to go, he could see her beckoning. But then something utterly strange was slowing him down. The tunnel was actually converging, to what at first he took to be the effect of perspective. The oddest thing had been how Janetta appeared perfectly to fit into what had seemed to be perspective, the apparent distance.

He had to stop to get down to get on his hands and knees, in order to continue in a crawl. When he looked up from the floor she had gone – just disappeared.

It was harrowing, his perception being played against him in such a cruel way. Some kind of entrance, a centrally sealed doorway with a simple button operation. But, if opened, would only be

large enough for an arm to go through. This made him furious.

He considered his level of control to influence the experience, his perception of that. Jimmy with his eyes closed, pulled himself up – slowly and forcefully, not accepting any counter force of the walls, the top. There was a sense of pressure going against him, but this was just absurd. A simple ‘no you don’t’ sufficed.

Another point to you, Jimmy

Now that his surroundings were to normal proportions he should be able to get through that door. He pressed the button. A delay before it opened to lead into a metal shaft, a lift-elevator he realised. Without any other options he stepped inside, expected to find a selection of buttons and was surprised at their absence. *So what do I do?*

He waited for what seemed like a minute, until he felt a jolt and the sinking feeling of a descent.

What control do I have over this?

This had to be a vulnerable situation; having been essentially lured here and being contained, yes trapped, sent to wherever the system can be more effective, he guessed. He could only hope that this was some kind of necessary progression towards his objective.

The lift halted with an abrupt Jolt, sending a surge of adrenaline through his arms and central regions. His heart and rate of breath made their presence known.

This time it was fear in its purest form, when there was clearly no knowing what might be on the outside.

‘Control, Jimmy, must be kept.’ His own words of reassurance.

The elevator doors now slowly began to part.

*

This experiment had so far fulfilled many of the predictions. L-Seven-Six had factored in every reaction of the outsider. The human was being led, driven and coaxed like a rat through a maze. Yet there was something more interesting about this unremarkable person than his behaviour would suggest. Like so many of the others this one was a slave to his memories, and thereby easy prey. Perhaps too easy. Was this a deception? The chess player who allows his best pieces to be taken early only to lead the opponent to make a hasty and careless attack? The hustler who deliberately loses the first game?

For any useful insight to be gained the infiltrator would be allowed to continue. If only to reveal a strategy.

L-Seven-Six would merely observe for now.

*

Jimmy stood motionless, stared at the thing in its encasement. A giant brain inside a semi translucent fluid; tubes and wires emanating. A single eye – seemingly suspended in the fluid – stared back. This seemed to be some kind of lab. Monitoring machines, not of the electronic variety, but with flickering dials, and adjacent cylinders with pumps pushing air – and fluid – through connecting tubes. It was as if this was all straight from a nineteen thirties horror, or perhaps a fifties

B-movie – he wasn't sure, but there was a macabre-ness to the whole arrangement that made him feel ill at ease.

Above the encased brain a trumpet-like horn on a stand. That must have been from where the voice came.

'Hello, Jimmy. I have been expecting you.' There was a surprising clarity to the voice. 'I suppose my current representation must appear unsettling to you. L-Seven-Six knows you've been looking for me. He's – its – tried to restrict my appearance. I do have some control, however.'

'It allowed me to find you, Gerrid?'

'Well, not exactly. I have had to emplace myself within your locality, in a sense.'

'Are we being monitored?'

'Not at the present time – I've been able to suppress L-Seven-Six's direct feed to your mind; the counter signal should hold temporarily in this room, and I will know when its about to break through.'

'You're supposed to tell me something – that I can use to defeat the computer.'

'First you can tell me some things *I* need to know.'

Jimmy told him the year, about the world, and about his mission.

'Thirty-five years. I had no idea. Time is not so conformidly linear in this place. So much of the time I have merely been unconscious – demanded to be so, however. It sounds sad, but there is only so much to appreciate in this realm, only so much pleasure to be had. It's not what it was supposed to be, at least not for me. It seems this entire realm has become corrupted, Jimmy. I don't know what people are experiencing but from what I have experienced it is often less than an ideal life.'

'Zolla says it's remarkably advanced even for your time.'

'L76M is now a fully integrated entity, evolved into something beyond mere sentience. It's programming was completed by someone with the intention that this should happen. It has been a well-kept secret – the true plans for colonisation. Perhaps these new alien colonists had their own AI specialist. Or perhaps it was just one of my team who got carried away with his own brilliance. Either way, we have a monster to contend with. And, I have to admit, my attempts to stop its natural progression have been pitiful.'

'I have some information you may find useful.' Jimmy had the codes for algorithmic prompts in his head, gleaned by Zolla's technicians; he was surprised to have retained them so clearly in his memory. There was no chance of communication with Zolla at this point since the blocking signal held.

'These codes may unlock certain control levels,' Gerrid said. 'At least I may be able to bypass security protocols and devise my own code. Its a start, Jimmy, but I wouldn't underestimate L-Seven-Six's ability; it'll adapt to even a stealth invasion.'

'Maybe there's a part I can play in defeating it, but I'll need more instructions from Zolla.'

'Indeed. I don't think I can hold this block for much longer; I feel it being overridden. But before you go, just consider this advice: don't get carried away with any sense of destiny – it can be a dangerous thing, Jimmy. Your part in this mission may not be what you believe.'

Jimmy, slightly nonplussed, turned back to the lift; there was no other exit.

As the doors opened, Gerrid said, 'I am grateful for your help. Grateful to be given hope.'
The world blanked.

Chapter 27

Time only now existed as a loose approximation between reality and artificial reality.

It was of grave concern to Captain Zolla, his first officer and now even most of their crew of thirty-seven in total. Everyone had a right to be fully informed about the uncertainty. The assignment had not just been designated to a select few, they all had their part to play in one way or another. So here was the problem, simply that no one really had anything useful to do now reconnaissance had finished ... except, that is, for the technicians who were still diligently working away at modifying the communicator and constantly running into various dead ends. Over ten million frequency bands of compressed digital code, one to tune to, which would've been so simple if these band's did not constantly alter as soon as each was tracked and locked onto. The comm-link must follow the random sequence precisely to establish any reasonable contact. The exact balance of components was merely a matter of fine-tuning. But then as soon as contact could be established, if only for a test itself, it would immediately be detected by the system, and then adapt its defence with some unusual quirk. So much like tracking a moving target with a laser beam where the target had no predictable course or speed, contact was nothing of a certainty.

Now they had learned of one unusual quirk the system had already employed; the ultimate communication block. It seemed to be altering Jimmy's time perception, his mind clock. His patterns of (EEG) brain activity appeared to lie all over the place: lights pulsating intermittently in various regions, brain waves fast and slow accordingly. The alternating time differential must be a major factor in this confusion.

The loss of any time sync had far more worrying consequences than merely throwing out the communication link. Not knowing how long he'd been experiencing or suffering invited the imagination to present its worse horrors. An effective tactic by a wily opponent.

*

There was something he needed to remember.

At first Jimmy thought he must be inside the alien vessel. But he had made the mistake only because he wanted to be back there. There were certain distinct differences with this place. Apart from an almost unmistakable hospital-like chemical smell, the walls were a much lighter shade of blue: fluorescent white within the ceiling. It was obvious this was some kind of hospital ward: beds, people, almost all sleeping ... apart from one. He observed someone not too dissimilar to himself, at least a passing resemblance.

The behaviour of this person he found disturbing in the worse possible sense. Some type of mental disorder.

The patient rocked backwards and forwards in a vigorous motion and said the most peculiar things: 'You know you can't force me to burden responsibility for what I couldn't have chosen to do, that was in no way my own choice to control, to do,' the man said in a tremulous English home counties voice. 'My actions, yes, that were forced out ... but no, not me at all, not me to take the

blame. Not I to make hurt or suffering ... Leave me alone now! WASN'T MY FAULT, ALRIGHT!' The man then clenched his teeth, grinded them in an obvious sign of extreme torment. 'Stop it now, PLEASE.'

The patient then became quiet. Jimmy wondered if he ought to say something but soon thought better of it. He needed to be composed himself, needed to remember how he had ended up in this place.

Strobe flashes of memory, flooding his mind. Unstoppable. The elevator lift before. Now he was recalling the doors opening. Nothing apparently visual at first. A sensation, not pleasant at all: acrid, bitter – harsh. Flashing white light, the strobe effect. He felt anger, a rage that had touched him in some way. The elevator he noticed had gone. Faces appeared lit by the strobe. People he had known from the past: friends as well as enemies. Voices taunting, actually mocking him. Faces from his school days. Mr Jenkins, his old maths teacher. An example of his patronising and criticising manner, he seemed to take great pleasure in putting little twelve year old Jimmy down. 'Listen, Jimmy, it is all a matter of elementary logic. Simple reasoning is all you need. Either this is something you do not possess, or you are deliberately not bothering to use that thing inside your head.' And then a look of such utter contempt, peering down upon Jimmy. At that time, the teacher was over a foot taller than he was.

It seemed beyond reason to Jimmy how an adult could be so cruel to a twelve year old, but that was Jenkins all right. Lit up, his every feature in the strobe, the voice and the words exact as if being back in that time. Eventually Jimmy had stood (what he thought was) his ground.

At thirteen, finally reaching the point where he realised such humiliation was not worth enduring, he spoke back. 'I hate your boring lessons and I also hate you, too.' And to the other students aghast reactions he might as well have used violence. The punishment he would then receive had enough of Jenkins' own personal methods of inflicting humiliation, whilst cleverly keeping within the rules, making this teacher seem yet more like someone not to be trifled with. At least if Jimmy had hit out at him he might have gained the greater respect of the others; a simple mandatory suspension would've been well worth it, not to mention the time off from these lessons. Time also away from the other unpleasant elements of school.

He could see it clearly now, that tarmac sight bearing the blood stains of uncontrolled childhood feuds, there, preserved as if for posterity: the school's heritage. A particularly unpleasant element of his school days was none other than the recognised bully of the playground. The culprit had then appeared in all his menace, even accentuated by the effect of the strobe. The name: Marcus Akaman, a hulk of a figure, even by *adult* standards. But for a thirteen year old! ... Despite this, Jimmy realised as an adult himself he should have been near enough on eye level with him. This, however, had not been so. It was as if he had also returned to that same age, same year; little Jimmy, helpless against big Marcus.

The look of sheer and utter loathing, a contempt which went beyond either of their words. Because it didn't need to be said. A resentment of two complete opposites, a prejudice projected down on him, which implied something deeper than anything visually apparent.

It was a personal attack and amazingly psychological for a mere thirteen year old, and one not

particularly noted for his intelligence. So it always was a matter of status, and Marcus Akaman had acquired his status through the means of obvious violence and ridicule of those who might be seen as a threat to him, or just those who simply stood out as being different.

Jimmy faced the bully, though not apparently alone. Others, spectators, as they might have been in the playground; at least twenty were now surrounding them. Akaman then gave a snarl of utter disdain towards Jimmy, and said: 'it would be so easy to crush a feeble little creature like you, Jimmy boy. What challenge is that gonna be? So I'm offering you a deal, but it depends on how much money your mummy has given you.' He finished in his usual air of self-importance.

Just as before, he did not seem to have the chance to defend himself. Akaman and the others disappeared with the flash of the strobe.

Then his PE teacher who called him a big-girls-blouse for not participating properly in a game of rugby.

He knew in the inevitable sequence of chronology, that a successor would be none other than the bully whom he'd hated with even greater conviction than Akaman, though this one had been expected to make an appearance from the start. The tyrant himself: John Cronleigh.

The light flashed in lurid bursts as the man spoke. So much as expected, the same usual references about his ability to cope with the work. Then a sort of conclusive statement. 'You never learn, do you, Jimmy Findral. And I doubt you ever will. That's why you will always remain one of life's losers.'

So then that must finally be it, and he felt a sense of relief. The past had been dredged up in the worst, most effective way possible; an attempt, no doubt, to incite his own paranoia. A good attempt, though perhaps a bit too obvious a card to play.

Have to do better than that, computer, cos I'm over it.

Yet, there *was* something else. Had he been blocking this from his memory, because it had hurt him? Another figure, another voice, and so familiar as well. That voice: the tones, the inflections reached into the core of being. A physical reaction. If he blocked it out it would no doubt return to him at some point, some point in which he'd be rendered most vulnerable when it mattered to be strong. So different from the other memories, they were aspects of his past, remnants of something he was no longer any part. He could discard these memories like old video recordings, documents of his former life. But here was a part of his past, his present, and his future.

Deal with it now!

It was her, formally dressed this time, hair tied back; all suggested the power of her own career – but what did she do, her work? There was no memory of that now, and it was absurd to just forget such a thing of someone he knew so well. How well did he really know her?

She said: 'Do you ever recognise pity when it's from someone who knows you well?' Her voice was firm and clear in his mind now. 'It wasn't difficult to disguise,' she added. 'You mistook pity for a genuine need as if I needed you then, but of course it had been the reverse. Sure, on occasion I had needs, and if at times they were never satisfied I didn't complain to you. I know it would've hurt. You had your pride, after all. You had to feel as if you were the most important one in my life. I'd never want to cause you pain, Jimmy, there was enough of that already. But things have changed.'

Now is the time for the truth, time to move on. It's no good pretending any more.

'The thing is,' she continued further. 'I felt so sorry for you. Poor lonely Jimmy, with no one, no support that was unconditional. I could see the need in those eyes and I could not bear to see that ... I could only feel sorry for you. It was only pity.'

The flashback had ended; the hospital was again Jimmy's reality. His eyes were welling up, blurring his vision. He didn't want to see, he didn't know if he even wanted to live anymore. He tried to fight back the emotion to speak, to himself, to the computer. 'That's not true,' he managed. 'Not Janetta, she would never say that. She'd never believe that! Never!'

He noticed someone else in the wardroom. This person had obviously heard his outpour of words. Approaching now. The white coat, a doctor, and before he had time to guess or even be bothered, the man started speaking. His accent obviously German. At first he wasn't really listening to the words spoken, only really noticing his appearance, the sharp features and the round glasses. Then it seeped through to Jimmy what he was saying. 'Ve vill need to furtser review your course of treatment. First I will need to know how you are progwessing. Are the voices still there, James? Are they still telling you vhat to do?'

Jimmy could only say, 'James?'

The response was swift. 'Yes you must still wemember your cowect name. The near pseudonym you told me is only used by the voice. It has to be ignored if you are to break free from this, otherwise I cannot wecommend your treatment be reduced.'

'There's nothing I need treatment for,' Jimmy protested, his previous trauma still evident in his voice. 'Why should I need treatment?'

The man gave a sigh. 'It is so important zthat you wecognise zthat you are not veIl at zhe moment. You can only wecover from zhis if you wecognise and acknowledge vhat it is zthat's wrong with you. Vhat you have is an acute form of paranoia. The voice is a product of your own imagination. The voice is vhat justifies the delusions. It might seem zthis enables you to cope, but really it is only a result of zthese delusions; that is vhat perpetuates it still furzher ... James, do you understand zthis?'

All Jimmy understood was the despair he now felt. Could there be a more hopeless situation?

The doctor said he might possibly return shortly and in the meantime, one of the nurses would be on standby if anything was required. This seemed to be the opportunity he was after. There can be no time to lose. One thing was for certain: he must ESCAPE!

No one except for patients were in the room at that time, so he made an attempt to get out of bed (none of them really had seemed to acknowledge his presence), hoping any hospital staff were at a sufficient distance so as he could outrun them ... But to where?

Legs felt like jelly, like most of his strength had been taken. 'Think strong,' he told himself, under breath.

This was not by any means easy; the weakness he felt was more than physical. Drained of energy for action. Thankfully the doorway had a clear opening into a corridor, illuminated as before.

'Aw.' He lurched back almost in horror. Being so close to that door and there she had appeared, a very large woman in a nurses uniform who exactly filled the exit, his only possible escape route.

‘Mn, James Findral.’ Her voice resonated with so much authority and firmness it made him feel like a small child again, vulnerable in his state of weakness. ‘You know you’re not allowed to leave this room? You have been very ill and must rest.’

‘But I’m fine now!’ Jimmy exclaimed. ‘I just need to use the toilet, that’s all!’ Of course utterly unnecessary because in reality his body was frozen, unchanging.

‘TOILET?’ The nurse bellowed. (Jimmy was cringing, to his own shame) ‘You know full well there are bed pans under your bed.’ And then her face softened to a smile. ‘You only need to ask.’

Jimmy tried to pull himself together and tried to deny any of her authenticity. ‘Now listen, you fat cow,’ he said firmly with a hint of aggression. ‘You are obstructing me from what I have to do, so...’ His voice tailed off as the nurse bit at her lip, restraining her exasperated reaction. He continued mildly, ‘then move out of my way please.’

Without hesitation the nurse called for the doctor.

The doctor appeared, as if he were on standby.

‘I’m sorry doctor, if you have been distracted from your work. This patient is causing a problem once more. I think he was intending to leave.’

The psychiatrist wore his familiar concerned look. ‘Au Yiss, James Findral. Don’t worry nurse, zthis one is my responsibility now. I may need your assistance though.’ He then spoke to Jimmy. ‘I zink you ought to weturn to your bed, Mr Findral, zthen we can talk zhis through. Wouldn’t that be best?’

Jimmy then stared at the man with a grimace that indicated obvious suspicion. ‘You’ll only be wasting your time, Doctor.’

‘I only intend to make you more aware of zthe truth. It is necessary that you at least acknowledge the delusions before they become dominant.’ He looked at Jimmy with the most effective sincerity.

An orderly also followed close behind the three. There seemed no other way but to comply. The Doctor then indicated a chair, situated beside the bed.

Jimmy sat on the chair.

‘James, I vonder if you wemember our talk. Do you wemember the hypnosis therapy. I regwessed you back to your childhood days, reliving ewents zthat had distressed you greatly at the time, but I helped you to distance yourself from it. The past, I understand, has been a significant contributory factor.’ That look of concern again. ‘Vell James, I can only surmise that you have been driven to escape from your past. Zthis quest or mission you have told me about seems to be a way of coping. Perhaps the sense of purpose it gives you.’

‘No, no, that’s not right, doctor. You’ve got it all wrong. But then what use is me telling you that. Isn’t it all part of the system, the computer, trying to use the cleverest way of stopping me ... it might have nearly worked!’ Jimmy was now remembering Zolla’s voice and grinned sardonically, for effect.

‘Okay zhen James, or Jimmy if prefewed. Let’s discuss your mission you feel is so important. What is TIAR, then tell me?’ And looked at Jimmy inquiringly.

Defiant, he replied, ‘this will never work with me, doc. I am still aware of this all being no more than an illusion created by a computer, and turning my imagination against me. A convincing one,

I'll admit.'

'So I am also part of this elaborate illusion. That is your reasoning?'

'Yes,' he replied simply.

'Zen (then) let's test your reasoning.' He removed a golden lighter from his white coat, side pocket. He then tilted the lighter so it glinted revealing an intricately weaved pattern, lines curling and intersecting each other. He handed it to Jimmy. Test for yourself how real this is.'

Surprised, Jimmy fumbled the lighter curiously, watching the pattern glimmer. He could just about feel the inscribed surface, the cool feel of gold. He then lit it with an abrupt flick of its switch. Watching the flame, how it gently flickered, then stretch and flatten. This held him transfixed. He wanted to touch the flame to feel how real, moving his finger nearer to the supposed heat, and he actually did touch the flame (he thought) for what seemed like no more than a second. Its heat had left a sharp sensation of pain pulsating through his fingertip, although his focus was not on that pain, the fluctuating image of the flame held all his attention. Nothing else was in focus at this time; he was drifting away from all else. The flame was soothing....

'Now, James, are you convinced?'

He was brought back from this hypnotic state with a start and shut off the flame immediately. The psychiatrist gestured for him to hand it back, as if he'd suddenly realised the risk in letting a psychiatric patient hold a potentially dangerous object.

'Look at the blister on your finger,' the shrink said whilst pocketing the lighter, 'if there are still doubts.'

Jimmy lifted his hand, could feel the pain throbbing, examined his finger; a blister was certainly there. He said, 'Very convincing . . . I could almost believe--'

'Still doubts?' He snapped at Jimmy, as if in true exasperation.

The nurse had now approached, presenting Jimmy with a wet flannel and an instruction to null the pain with it. Jimmy refused, and the nurse gave her own look of exasperation at his failure to cooperate.

'The pain makes it seem more real, but I'm still not convinced,' Jimmy told him, returning his most defiant look.

The psychiatrist muttered something to the nurse and they then both walked away, still in conference. Jimmy was now trying to decide what his own next move might be, and in his state of concentration he became more certain he could hear a voice.

The voice was unusual: slow and enunciated. Too slow to understand and it kept breaking off for several seconds at a time. At one point he had really thought he'd caught the words, 'don't believe.' Or was that only what he wanted to hear?

'Captain Zolla?' He murmured.

Suddenly the psychiatrist was there, standing by the chair. He beamed and said, 'Can you hear him? Is he there?' In excitement he continued, 'James, what is he saying? Is he giving you instructions?... This is important to know.'

'So what do you know about Zolla?' Now Jimmy was betraying anger in his voice.

'He has spoken to me, told me all about you. Let me talk to him once more.'

Jimmy was now livid. 'Trying to humour me doctor? It won't work.'

'James, you were not taken aboard a space ship. It was only another delusion while you have been here.'

Jimmy could hear the voice again now and it was becoming faster and clearer.

'I can not be made to believe that.' Stating this firmly, perhaps partly for his own benefit. He knew Zolla was desperate to get a message across, but he still wasn't able to decipher it with any certainty.

'If you can hear me,' came the faint voice at a more normal pitch, give a sign, raise your left hand to your ear.' The instruction had been clear, so Jimmy did this.

The psychiatrist appeared fascinated on seeing this kind of recognition – the concentration of Jimmy to listen to his instructions.

'Dismiss it all, Jimmy,' implored his guide. 'An illusion, a dream becoming a reality. As soon as you begin to rationalize it, then you begin to lose... Close your eyes, stand up and chant the words, just an illusion. Do it now, Jimmy!'

He closed his eyes, tried to get up off the chair, but felt a hand push down on his shoulder... Damn, he was so aware of knowing this one was there that he wasn't able completely to block the rationality of his presence. Not enough concentration.

The doctor spoke. 'You must not get up, James. You are having a relapse... NURSE.'

Jimmy opened his eyes now to catch sight of the nurse accompanied by an orderly. She had a syringe in her hand, with a now recognisably determined look.

The orderly, a heavily built man, clamped both of Jimmy's arms from the back so movement felt impossible. The nurse administered the injection. Jimmy tried not to think of this as being any kind of sedative drug. He imagined it as a stimulant to make him more alert and stronger.

The nurse said, 'This is just a little something to make you sleepy, a tranquilizer.'

'No, a stimulant,' Jimmy proclaimed.

'Don't try to fight it when you become *drowsy*,' she instructed.

The last word of that sentence he wasn't able to ignore, the emphasis on that word. The effect must surely have been there in his memory, but he didn't recall. The effect crept up on him as an enveloping tide of numbness. The trouble with this feeling was that it was not in the least bit unpleasant.

He only knew clearly this must be fought however pleasant the sensation. But it was beguiling him in the worse possible way; soothing the apprehension, the fear that he must have, to be alert and to fight. The effect was taking him away from all that.

The orderly lifted him onto a wheelchair. He was being taken somewhere, towards the exit he had so longed to pass through. All three were there. They spoke and occasionally to him; the nurse, the orderly and of course the psychiatric doctor himself. So reassuring, calm and soft their speech that he couldn't really be frightened. In his mind he struggled for a true comprehension of the impending danger. If he could only reach out to that fear, make it tangible instead of in the distance.

Through the exit now. They spoke about a treatment room, discussing methods of procedure and who would do what.

Along a corridor and toward a room with the words clearly displayed ***THERAPY TREATMENT ROOM***.

‘No,’ he said, more as a denial than a refusal.

Momentarily, Jimmy thought only to accept this. What more could he do? They’d stopped at the door. Nurse opened the door. He was wheeled through into a turquoise-blue room.

Similar to being very drunk, the moment when the room begins to swirl – it was nearly happening. He wasn't able to really focus his vision, but noticed the operating table and what hung over it. A hideous, looming multi lens lamp. To the side, on table tops, were mounted high-tech monitoring equipment; a machine with cables protruding and numerous dials, numbers he couldn't quite make out.

Jimmy felt himself being lifted from the chair. Now was the time to grasp that fear, but this drug had taken him so far away from the urgency of the situation he could not properly reason for any response.

Now on the operating table, the orderly strapped him in, so each limb was bound tightly; his head supported firmly at the base.

What kind of ghastly operations had been performed in this place? His mind perhaps wandering from what really mattered.

The psychiatrist spoke to him. ‘No need to worry, James. It will all be over in no time at all.’ Jimmy knew, just knew he must question this, but he couldn't produce the words, let alone a sentence.

Someone who appeared to be a medical doctor or surgeon had arrived. He began discussing something Jimmy had remembered once learning in a science lesson, about values of energy. He was saying how many units would be required. In a gruff voice he said, ‘If we increase in units of fifty in ten second intervals we can better ascertain a response.’

‘Zen what do you wecommend as being zhe danger threshold? How much vill he tolerate?’

The surgeon replied, ‘that is not something which can be defined in absolute. It's only really a matter of judgment. I need to discover his level of tolerance to know how much to use.’

The psychiatrist only responded by saying, ‘fine.’ He then peered over at Jimmy and then said a final few words to him. ‘You mustn't be alarmed at zis. Zis vill only be for your own benefit. Things vill seem so much better after zthe treatment, I can assure you.’ He then retreated to let the surgeon take his place.

‘How do you feel, James?’ said the surgeon. ‘No need to answer, I’m sure your just drifting along... This will be a very sudden feeling when it happens, so that's why I must give you this mouthpiece so you cannot bite your tongue.’ He then immediately inserted the device, separating his jaw. A metal head-plate was pushed over his forehead, to which was attached a couple of electrodes. And then the surgeon produced a number of long sharp needles with wires protruding.

‘Nooo.’ Jimmy groaned as the surgeon forced these needles into his hands and feet in the way an acupuncturist might.

There was something then mentioned about the number of amps, though he didn't quite catch it. They had motioned towards the machine with the dials.

Jimmy waited, feeling a numbness that should have been filled.

Something bit him, a bite that was all encompassing, gnawing away at every part of his body. This was nothing like he had ever before experienced. It stopped. He was more alert now; the drug seemed to wearing off rapidly. He suddenly became frightened and shouted, 'Zolla!' But that was all he had time for.

This time was more. More intense, more *real*. The last of the sedated absent-ness blasted away completely. Those who had spoken of seeing their entire life flash before their eyes at the point before a sudden, traumatic death. Such was the extreme sensation, an utter experience of ... *electricity*, for he was so alive with it! Never more alive in his life than at this moment.

His mind was on the point of exploding, it seemed. Everything, every memory, every life experience forced out to the surface. Thought, memory and vision were now one of the same. Poignant moments of his life were there as if to be reviewed; flashing through them and all that was associated – the perception and mood. And all those silly regrets, those missed opportunities.

Screaming in his head....

Body numb now. No more sensation. No more vision.

*

The Medical team had been on standby ever since every scanner had shown these indications. The erratic EEG readings had shown for over two minutes – a dangerously long time to be in that state.

A counter action had been anticipated. Stimulant chemicals to replace the relaxants; short bursts of high intensity electric shocks was normally the final attempt at resuscitation, but they tried as a desperate measure the method of inducing high frequency pulses directly into the limbic region in order to stimulate chemical uptake throughout the entire brain. The results of this were disappointingly poor. It had been a sudden, violent death, and unprecedented in their knowledge.

In his cool, calm professional manner Chief medical officer Cleator explained to Captain Zolla that Jimmy would have suffered only for a short time before slipping below the subconscious REM state; perhaps for no longer than a minute. This meant little to Zolla who knew the possibility of the time differential: a second may have felt like a minute, regardless of any monitor readings.

He could not be consoled ... by anyone.

Without a doubt the Captain was devastated. To have had the apparent confidence, the utter self-assurance, that things were going to work out. This was certainly more than a knock back.

No one, at least to his knowledge of the TIAR program, had ever been killed in this way. Those ones who had died had died slowly: some chemical deprivation through altered brain activity, or affecting the actual life support machinery through its connection. It seemed he didn't have all the facts after all. Everything he'd learned was becoming increasingly irrelevant. He imagined his future self sighing at his present self when remembering the naivete of this young(ish) captain, just as he had done over the foolish arrogance of Zolla the officer cadet. If he was being kind on himself he could always blame his failure on the constraints of the Temporal Directive. Indeed, as an Elder once told him, sometimes initial failure can bring about the greater success. If only he could talk to that wise Elder now, or the future version of himself who'd know how this would all pan out. Or,

better still, the Council of this century who sent the request for help to his own present.

Even in this dark hour he gave a chuckle thinking of the way this temporal intervention had to be done without violating the directive and how, as a result, even greater damage could potentially be done to this time-line.

As far as things currently seemed not much had been achieved, not much learned. The report to (his present) Central Council, given the lack of anything positive, would not make pleasant reading.

The post of Admiral would very unlikely ever be his now. A selfish indulgence into self-pity, and he cursed himself for brooding over his own career. He paced around his sleeping quarters trying to consider every option. He considered what might invariably happen. Jimmy, a life however unimportant, needed to be continued. If not, he'd of course be a missing person. To have completely vanished off the face of his planet, with no known sightings beyond the moment of entering that park. (It was assured that no other in the vicinity would have memory of his disappearance, or any perception of their arrival.) His return would've been back to that point in time, regardless of length of absence. No one had to suspect a thing, not a single anomaly. Even Jimmy could've adequately had his memory of this time erased, or at least suppressed for a number of years. It would have been the completion of another perfect mission. Now the universe was in chaos. Now, the Temporal Directive had been violated. And the disgrace for himself..

Various other members of the crew had suspected all along why their captain had chosen such an unlikely candidate, someone who it seemed was of little significance to his own world. But his reason really wasn't as simple as that.

At least now Jimmy was free of the awesome grip of TIAR, free from its inexorable hold, sent with noble aims into the unforeseen realm. Poor Jimmy Findral who'd never asked for any of this.

Chapter 28

Monique stood still and took it all in.

The City always had a beauty to it at night. It was not so much the architecture; in daytime, tower blocks with their spires and multiple diamond shapes were an artful combination of character and aesthetics. At night the impression was not so ostensible or deliberate. Lights of apartments gave them a vibrancy, a sense of the multiplicity of life. A hundred metre fake diamond would glow a gentle green or turquoise against the starlit ambiance. Always the lights and the movement of traffic; spots of yellow and red flitting between skyscrapers. Now – at around nine p.m. – the traffic was sporadic at most, apartment lights were often spaced by several floors, and none of the tower tops were lit. It was as if the collective soul of the city had gone, leaving only an empty shell. And the stars, more prominent than ever.

She was struck by a chill breeze, as if a ghost had passed her. September nights were colder. In just a few years the worst effects of global warming had been sent into a rapid reverse now that the excess CO₂ had been scrubbed from the atmosphere, and reflective cloud mass artificially enhanced. One thing to be said for the newcomers, they truly did care about the environment. Earth would be their new Eden; their old planet had become so overcrowded it made this world, pre-war, seem sparsely populated in comparison. To keep the surviving population hidden underground seemed perverse; but she wasn't even sure if the incomers would be told. How could such knowledge be accepted by the millions of settlers? How could they walk over a field in the knowledge that no more than a kilometre beneath their feet were humans enslaved – albeit without conscious awareness of their predicament – by a computer. Perhaps even *she* had been prevented from knowing the entire truth.

The truth: It had been a hierarchy of fear; the Nine had kept the elected leaders under threat. And the population feared the ultimate war. The Nine *themselves* were under threat; something they would never admit. Non compliance had a consequence even she could not bare to contemplate. The invasion of a technologically superior race was something to be met by either force or acceptance. It was that simple. The second option at least gave the hope of survival to the majority. The true terms of the deal she was never allowed to know, she suspected, despite her role as special envoy for Western Europe. Monique wondered how useful the knowledge would actually be. Already structures of governance were well established; the economy was prosperous – at least provisionally – and life had been easy for the last eight years since the air had become clean and the ground free of excess radiation.

Over the years Monique had tried not to think of the others below ground, immersing herself in her diplomatic work; a role in which she still felt the need to prove her worth, rather than merely fulfilling the expectations of the cynics (those in the higher echelons of the chosen) who probably viewed her as the benefactor of a privileged background. Sometimes it did feel like she was not being taken seriously enough by her opposite number whenever terms were discussed. After all, the

people she represented were only allowed to live under the conditions set up by the new ruling force, the Darangi, whose representative made it clear that any human living above ground should consider themselves fortunate to be a part of this 'new alliance'. At times, it really did feel like this was a token role.

The thought of those still below haunted her to the point where she had even considered an engramatic removal: the aliens had a method of removing an unwanted memory safely by a neural pattern targeting technique. How this could be achieved she did not properly understand but she knew members of the Nine had employed such a technology – and it had been effective.

Monique had felt no concern – much less any guilt – for the others below when (as one of the chosen) she'd been confined to deep aquatic complexes, then polycarbonate domes as the world decontaminated. If she had not played her part in all but seducing Gerrid Lytum into their scheme perhaps he would not have been persuaded; at least put up a greater objection, after his inevitable capture. Perhaps it was presumptuous to think she had had been such an influence, knowing – as in most aspects of life – there'd always be someone else to take his place. The 'what ifs' could recess infinitely into the past.

'Hello,' a male voice said softly, bringing her back to the present with a start. 'I think we may be able to work together.' Monique swirled round to see the faintly formed figure in the near-darkness. As her racing heart settled the thought occurred to her that this was a ghost, but she dismissed that notion rapidly, and realised this must be some kind of projection.

'Who are you?' she inquired, despite fearing what the answer will be.

'I was once an observer,' said the translucent man, 'but now I am here to help.'

'How can you help?'

'I can help you return your planet to its people.'

She almost laughed in disbelief; it came out only as a quick breath. 'Isn't it too late?' she questioned. 'I mean you're not *God*, are you?'

'Well, who is?'

'I'm not a believer myself – though I do believe in aliens who are so powerful that they can dictate the future of this planet.'

'I'll grant you, Miss Bellishi, we are up against a formidable foe but we have the means to defeat them. However, we are prevented from such overt interference by our own rules.'

'I see,' she nodded gently. 'You hoped the more primitive culture develops its own strategy to cope.'

'The strictures of our doctrine means we cannot directly intervene.'

'That's a shame then. So you'll just be offering some advice?'

'Time has come for our doctrine to be reinterpreted.' The man faded into the cool night air.

Chapter 29

This he had, in a way, been expecting, for this was naturally the following step on from his death. The relief of having finally been set free from the torment he was scarcely able to fathom.

The tunnel: yes, he knew about this. The yellow swirling light of a vortex and the sensation of weightlessness

Everything behind him – his life, having shed such an immense weight, which had only dragged him down, yet scarcely aware of, like a long-carried rucksack that just becomes a part. Now gliding smoothly towards the end; a light at the end of pure white. This he had heard about; those who had actually reached the end at the point of the light only to return in no more time than the blink of an eyelid, much to their own dismay.

Still, a nagging feeling from the depths of his psyche that this was happening too soon. Too young.

‘Don’t look back, Jimmy,’ the voice echoed: male, old, and wise. ‘Don’t be sad for such earthly things.’ Was this merely his own interpretation, despite it being real? The way he heard this voice was not in any way similar to that of Zolla; not directly into the ears, but more all engulfing in its power – an ethereal kind of resonance.

Again the voice echoed, ‘I can speak to your soul now. I can reach you in essence.’

Constantly being drawn nearer towards the light, it became almost all consuming when he finally stopped. ‘God, is that really you?’ he wondered, not totally divested of his scepticism.

‘God is for those who believe. Do you really believe, Jimmy?’

‘Why should I have ever believed? What help have you ever been to me?’

‘I had never been able to reach you before as I can now.’ The face of an old man became apparent, the epitome of wisdom. ‘This is how it had been intended.’

‘Why, God, was I not allowed to see the real world ... for one last time ... so I could...’ But no following words came to him.

‘None of that has meaning. Not here, not now.’

The majestic figure told him to consider his whole life. Somehow he’d guessed this would be the way. He was able to view, as an observer, any episodes of his past he felt had meaning, significance of any sort.

‘The purity of not knowing, to not be tainted by life’s knowledge. To be set free from that which holds you back,’ the figure said.

Jimmy wanted to question this. ‘What ... who would I be without knowing of the past, without memories?’

‘Such an existential question will have no meaning when you are only of the spirit.’

But Jimmy couldn’t really let go ... at least not yet. ‘I need another chance,’ he said. ‘If you *are* God you can give me that, cos you’re all powerful, right? There’s still things---

‘No, James, your time on Earth is over.’ The voice sounded surprisingly abrupt. ‘It is not possible to return,’ the voice boomed. ‘You must accept any incompleteness: the way to fully let go

of your past life.'

'But I have a mission... I must complete.'

'To be given such a burden is most unfortunate, when the necessity had never been as great as you believed. How could you be expected to change that which had been intrinsic to past and future?'

'No,' Jimmy protested. 'This isn't right. I need to go back.'

'Why do you concern yourself with the people of this time?'

'Because ... no one else can help them?'

'Their futures are already determined. But like you, Jimmy, they will all eventually leave behind their trapped lives. Some are already free. Perhaps they wish to make contact. They can be contacted...'

*

On a hand held display-frame Zolla studied the brief snippets of information Chief medical officer Cleetor had thus far provided. Cleetor and his team were confronted with a unique problem in the form of a patient who could neither be described as dead in any medical sense or, equally, alive. In medical terms Jimmy Findral's state had no official classification; cellularly inanimate would perhaps be the closest description. Even though there was zero brain function in the patient, no damage had been detected. For this reason the stasis pod was still connected, maintaining the minimal level of life-support.

Zolla still paced restlessly around his quarters, scarcely aware of even doing this. Deep in thought as usual; this time, however, he only had to wait. He was waiting for a result. Information would be required by the Admiral, to then pass on to the Council. Tests were needed in the postmortem to ascertain the exact truth for Jimmy's condition. What caused his death to be so sudden, so violent?

He had promised not to disturb his chief medic during such important work. Instead, he waited for his first officer to report what he was able to glean from Cleetor.

At long last Commander Michei entered; was that a sanguine look on his face?

Translation: <So give me the worst of it. What's the verdict?>

Trans: <Well, captain, that's not such an easy one to answer. Do you remember that technique they used on a clinically dead crew member?>

<Ah yes,> Zolla answered impetuously. <Feeding key neurological areas with electrical impulses which starts by activating autonomic functions... Rare case, though. You're not saying--->

<No, afraid not Captain. They have of course been using that method... But the strangest thing. I'm sure Cleetor can explain this better than I, but he and his team are still too engrossed in their experiments.>

<Please, just tell me!> Zolla nearly fell over with his curiosity. His face contorted with this intensity.

<Can you believe that they have never quite known a patient so utterly unresponsive to any stimuli as this one?>

<Well he's dead, isn't he?> snapped Zolla at his first officer.

<That is exactly the problem. Someone who had died would show some form of neurological collapse if not trauma. Jimmy shows no signs of either: it's as though he's in a coma but without the autonomic responses. Furthermore, Cleetor says it's as if his mind is elsewhere. He analysed down to sub atomic, and still no signs whatsoever.>

<What exactly are we dealing with here?> It was partly a question to himself. He had a sense of a greater power behind what he knew to exist.

<I would suggest something two hundred years in advance of our science. Cleetor would never admit it, but this is beyond our scope.>

<The invaders, investing in this planet's technology. And our arrival must have been met by their laughter.>

<How else does our culture avoid violating the directive?>

Zolla shook his head. <*Damn* that temporal directive. Oh, they're laughing for sure.>

Zolla opened a comm link to Cleetor. <Doctor. What's your analysis?>

Cleetor looked irked, it seemed, at Zolla's broken promise not to interrupt. He said, however: <Physically he is completely inanimate. I can't give you any location for Jimmy – his consciousness – but I suspect, from the research of my Tech, that his neural patterns have been lifted to within the network, perhaps the core system.>

<How can that be?>

<We're still working on an explanation; at the moment we believe the optronic feedback relay is being used as a conduit for other types of signals. His mind seems to be in some kind of standby state.>

<So that's why you insisted on leaving the stasis pod active?>

<If we lose the connection we might lose any chance of retrieving Jimmy.>

<Then there are two objectives. Are you confident of yours?>

I. will continue my analysis.>

<You have an hour, and then I want a conclusion.>

*

Gerrid received the communication by direct neural feed. L-Seven-Six had often spoken to him in the same way. Initially he had found it unsettling, as if somehow his mind had been invaded, which was an odd thought since his mind was already very much at the mercy of the E.I. – albeit at a superficial level. At least for these precious moments he had unlocked L-Seven-Six's control, using the codes provided by Jimmy, though – as before – the E.I. would find a way to end this level of freedom.

Immediately he heard her voice he felt the surge of joy. It was like a lost love speaking to him returned from the dead. The outside world might as well *be* another world. But in his mind they were together.

'How have you been, Gerrid?' Monique asked

'Imprisoned ... albeit with the occasional illusion of freedom.'

'I believe I can help. I think I can put an end to all this.' Her voice now clear.

'The blocking field will ensure neither of us can be heard. But it won't last much longer' He then swiftly asked, 'What *can* you do, Monique?'

'There is someone who will help me infiltrate the network.'

'An *alien* by any chance?'

'You know what has happened?'

'I know most of it.'

After about five seconds she said, 'I'm sorry, Gerrid. I will see you, I promise.'

'I'll hold you to that.' The connection disestablished.

Gerrid knew L-Seven-Six would have a new and more creative method of punishment after a second block, but for some reason the EI hadn't communicated for a while.

*

For all the time that seemed to be leading up to his contact with the prisoners, he had no idea of the kind of communication, of what to say. How would he see them or experience their presence? He did feel so unprepared, so inadequate without at least some advice from Zolla. Yet he couldn't simply allow himself to be taken to whatever it was. The other side: how could it feel this wrong?

'Let me see the prisoners, so I can speak to them,' he demanded.

'As you wish my child.' The voice of all knowing.

Somehow he knew his request had to be accepted as reasonable, the future that must ensue. So almost as expected: out of the old man's face there began to emerge figures, people of all ages, male and female, of perhaps every human nationality... So many of them!

It seemed like a hundred thousand voices were speaking in unison; he could only hear them as a soft babble. Questions still pressed at him, such as: did they really know who he is and why he is here? Did they know of his mission? But most of all: what did they intend for having finally made contact with him? He was *so* desperate to understand just a single voice.

Of all the other questions he considered to ask, he tried with, 'Have you been set free?' The words came out almost as if he hadn't spoken them.

Many voices spoke, answering him in unison. 'Freedom can be wherever you find it; freedom is a state of the perception, of consciousness. In our own sense we are free.'

'You are not alive any longer?'

'We could not live any longer. We had been bound by our destiny. That is as it should be.'

Jimmy was now perplexed. 'Your destiny? How can you all accept that?'

'Acceptance is something you will learn, Jimmy.' Then the face became dominant once more, and the old voice spoke. 'Yes, acceptance is something you will learn. In that, you will find peace.'

The figures again appeared. 'IT'S A DECEPTION,' he yelled. 'YOU'RE ALL BEING DECEIVED, MADE TO BELIEVE WHAT ISN'T TRUTH.... DON'T GIVE IN TO IT.'

The face: 'You mustn't fight it any more, Jimmy.'

'Do they really know the truth, know how they have been deceived?'

'That is not for you to question any more...' The voice became increasingly loud and bellowing,

to sound enraged. 'I CANNOT ALLOW THIS TO CONTINUE ANY FURTHER. YOU HAVE BECOME DISRUPTIVE AND DISHARMONIOUS. THERE IS NO PURPOSE TO WHAT YOU HAVE SAID HERE. THEREFORE, I MUST END THIS COMMUNICATION WITH THE OTHERS, UNTIL YOU HAVE UNDERSTOOD ... YOU *WILL* LEARN, JIMMY...' Then, in the next few seconds, this myriad of figures withdrew back into the light, just as though they were being dragged or sucked by a force pulling at them beyond their own control.

What a fool, he thought. Deception deception.

Jimmy had a question. 'How can I be sure that you are really who you claim to be?'

The face did have a distinct look of fury, befitting. 'HOW DARE YOU QUESTION MY BEING I HAVE THE POWER OF THAT WHICH IS LIMITLESS. I CAN ... DESTROY, NO, DISABLE ALL THOSE WHO ENTER.'

Jimmy noted the hesitation, the struggle... 'Its not easy for a computer to maintain a lie. Deception, yes, but an outright untruth; an incorrect fact or statement: it's like against your programming.'

The old man's face contorted further; as though he were about to explode in his fury... but containing it, curiously. 'Jimmy, the test has made you smart. Is that what you might have expected me say? I expect you think you have outwitted the overseer?'

'But I know all about what *you* are,' he sneered. 'I've studied you, your ability at deception, oh and the ability to leach from all those minds.'

'Ah, how delightfully different from the rest you are proving to be; not the typical infiltrator. Though now the same inescapable predicament.... I have you, Jimmy; I absorbed your mind, and I also have your soul. Your physical self no longer functions. In your reality you died, now there is only mine. As far as you are concerned I am your God because you are now a part of me, a true part... Your knowledge is now mine.'

So final were those words that Jimmy could presently think of no response.

He felt himself being drawn closer, in towards the face, towards the light. He was wondering now if he would find the others beyond this.

'You must accept your fate,' the voice demanded. 'There is no escape. This will be your true union, something now you can not even begin to imagine.'

'No!' Jimmy protested. 'I will not be forgotten. I will be rescued.' He hurriedly considered his next words. 'Zolla has studied you in detail; he will destroy you as a result of my death. He knows I can't stay in a time I don't belong, and if I don't return back to my own time and place there will be a disruption to that continuum. He will not allow this.'

'What can he do about it?' came the measured reply.

'He will find you ... remove you, wherever you are. He and his team will dissect you; drain everything stored in your memory.'

That imperious laugh, predictable, but Jimmy then felt the pull lessening. He came to a halt at the light and the face almost translucent, now so close.

'This being that is Zolla, he has significant differences to the humans I possess. He is a true outsider. He would interfere – create disruption ... that I understand. So he will want to challenge

me. But he hadn't the courage, for knowing he would be rejected as an outsider.'

'His knowledge is so much greater than any human mind can possibly contain. He knows of time travel, the other dimensions, now he wants to know of you ... to really know.'

'A good attempt, Jimmy; trying to presume my psychology.'

'I understand you need fresh input, the knowledge of an outsider.'

'And I should allow you free on your word, Jimmy Findral?'

'You can rely on Zolla wanting to challenge you, just as you know that he will do everything in his power to free me.'

'That is true, as is my increasing weariness with you.'

'Then you'll let me return.'

As the pull relented, Jimmy could not quite quantify the kind of relief he now felt.

Chapter 30

Life, for the last few decades, had affectively not existed for Monique. At least, she had no memory of the time she had been unconscious while the Earth became clear of radiation and pollutants. She had lain in stasis much like those innocents underground. The difference being there was no megalomaniacal evolutionary artificial intelligence messing with her mind. Soon she would get to experience what L76M had become.

Zeradas, her alien assistant, provided her with the virus disguised in the form of a subroutine the erstwhile computer would – hopefully – not be able to distinguish from a background monitor program. Only when she recited a code would this virus become active, and its effect swift. There was still the problem of the subsystem rejecting her immersion. According to a beta level intra-diagnostic (a program hack) TIAR still operated. At the very least the subroutines were still active. How much had been manipulated by L76M was open to question.

The casket into which she stepped was a modified version of a standard TIAR pod. Zeradas had access to every aspect of her physiology, and – he assured her – could be in constant comms contact. In spite of the assurances, she was frightened.

The process was to be so precise even the seconds to her first stage immersion were counted down. Five, four, three...

The relief from the burden of thought, only feeling in the whiteness until ... *Water. Cannot breathe.* Immersed, literally. It knew, and it wanted her to die. Not speak, not cry. Just had to keep going, hoping to get to the surface. Dolphins sleeking past, another approached her and then darted upwards. She looked in its direction and noticed the glass bubble, an entry port. She dived through it. Air pressure kept the water below. Above, a hatch. She turned the lever.

Nothing inside the silver-grey dome gave any clue to what was beyond. She hadn't even been aware that the glass beneath her feet had now become a similarly grey metallic platform. Another hatch above seemed to be the only way to progress. No surprise then, the adjacent code lock. Only now she noticed how inappropriate her clothes seemed: Denim jeans – a revival style from the early twenty-first century – not what she had worn in the immersion pod. Now they felt uncomfortably heavy and restrictive. A thin, long sleeve blue top made her feel cold and damp.

'Zeradas,' she called, 'can you override this – or at least give me a code.'

No answer.

She randomly jabbed four numbers. Nothing of course after the first attempt. 'Zeradas?'

It made her chuckle when she noticed water begin to trickle through the floor. Apparently some breach in the bottom hatch seal. In reality L76M wanted her to believe she was about to die, as the water seeped through at an increasing rate.

Maybe it was simply a matter of waiting. She closed her eyes. An image of a dolphin in her mind, etched in memory in that time of utter panic: something so benevolent and intelligent. About a hundred had been captured and kept in a protective tank no larger than a kilometre squared. They had been kept not only for the purposes of species preservation but for viewing: a visual stimulus to

the chosen, it seemed. Monique had visited the aquarium only once between her first and second stasis, which was to be her last. Many opted to segment their stasis up to ten times for worries about safety.

She remembered a dolphin had pressed its nose against the glass as if it wanted to communicate – at least convey a message, not to say hello, but something sorrowful. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes that day, and she would not repeat the experience. She didn't know how many more of these tanks there were, but it was a reasonable assumption that the vast majority of sea mammals and fish were left to die in the fallout? Possibly there were areas of ocean unaffected, with radiation penetrating only so far. Unquestionably, the ecosystem would return to at least a semblance of normality even without further intervention.

'HELP ME!' The leak had become a torrent as if the entire rubber seal no longer fitted – notwithstanding the inside air pressure which, she thought, should keep the water at bay.

'Monique,' came the reassuring voice of Zeradas, 'I am not able to keep in contact for long. Try the numbers two-one-eight-seven.' That number held significance. The year Gerrid entered TIAR.

The water level was just about up to the security-code panel. After keying in the code nothing happened, no change from red. The water-line up to her shoulders, her neck, her mouth, her nose. She retched from the panic, knowing that death could be a real possibility, knowing that a TIAR recipient cannot be removed safely, even under controlled monitoring. She had to remain part of the network, fully, otherwise no chance of acceptance.

As the choking seemed to lessen with her consciousness, the water-level began to drop, then more rapidly until only after a few seconds she could once again breathe. When it had drained totally the security panel switched to green allow the hatch to slide open.

Still coughing from (supposedly) swallowed water, Monique stumbled through.

'You bastard, L-Seven-Six. I know you're enjoying this.' It was a strange thing to say to a computer – albeit the most highly evolved AI on the planet ... but that's how it felt.

Monique found herself in a poorly lit tunnel, which seemed to stretch into infinity, with no side doors in sight. Walking was no easy task: those heavy jeans clung coldly, still sopping wet, and the thought of it started her shivering. She removed a pair of waterlogged utility shoes, then the jeans and the top.

'Well, Seven-Six,' she announced in her (virtual) skimpy underwear, 'now Gerrid's gonna see me as he would prefer to see me. Does that please you too?' Of course there would be no answer. What did clothes matter here anyway?

Eventually a door appeared along the side. She stopped. 'Zeradas,' she called. 'Now would be a good time to communicate.'

No answer.

The door had a simple mechanical lever, which she pushed down. It opened with a clunk. This seemed to be some kind of laboratory.

*

The latest punishment did not have the usual inventiveness Gerrid had come to expect from L76M.

The environmental distortion, the (perceived) removal of his arms and legs had been done before. He was left on an open-ended bed akin to an operating table whilst the surrounding walls and ceiling literally appeared to shrink. After the previous experience, when he had literally become boxed in to something coffin sized, L-Seven-Six claimed it had been a residual effect of the blocking field, causing distortion to signal-feed updates. Gerrid had enough expertise to realise such an explanation was utter nonsense – and he knew L-Seven-Six was fully aware of this.

This time – as the room and its contents shrunk (or he enlarged) and he commenced the usual tirade of threats that could never be fulfilled – he had the distinct impression that the central L-Seven-Six persona was not present. This was more frightening than any willfully enforced punishment. Merely some subroutine, running a repeat program. Or maybe he had been abandoned to die, his limbless torso crushed as if he were some old vehicle sent for recycling. Except: ‘THIS ISN’T REAL OF COURSE,’ he yelled, as the walls reached the bed, an increasingly small chair and table being forced under.

Now something different: the bed itself began to shrink, as if on making contact it had become connected to the surrounding environment. A rubberized sheet now entrapped his torso, perhaps fixed under the bed frame. The sound of it stretching, with the mattress contracting, was peculiarly grotesque. Within seconds the sheet had reached its critical tolerance, snapping with a painful pop and then a *blub blub* as the remainder of it wrapped around him.

The bed was now a hard narrow platform that only supported his spine. The walls and ceiling were a perfect white box, only centimetres away from him. This was genuine fear; he had to accept that.

‘You’ve made your point, 76,’ he said in a false calmness. ‘Now stop it.’

But the walls began to push at his sides with the ceiling a few centimetres above his face. The increasing pressure created a dull aching sensation; the constriction was preventing any movement of his torso.

He cried out, ‘I’ll never block you again, L-Seven-Six, I promise.’

That was it; all stopped now. Maybe it would have done regardless, maybe the intention was to take him up to the brink of death – or the imagined... But even if L-Seven-Six wasn’t listening, a program may have been designed to respond to his pronouncement. Whatever, he felt he had lost this particular contest as the walls began to crumble and the ceiling seemed to dissolve into a grey sky.

The sheet peeled away and his limbs began to form again in a way that only made them appear computer generated: no feeling in them until they were completed and he was back in his clothes, and the illusion of the physical returned.

*

This was some kind of control centre. It was odd to be confronted with such an antiquated processing unit, like an original super computer from the mid twenty-first century: stacked breezeblocks with flashing LED lights. A large screen above illuminated blue; Monique approached, anticipating it to be the source of information. She had expected a face to appear,

instead there were just graphics: patterns, swirls of blue and purple.

‘Hello, Monique.’ The patterns jumped about in sync with the deep but expressive voice. ‘It is nice to meet you.’

Strange how vulnerable she now felt in her current physical appearance. ‘We have met before, L-Seven-Six,’ she said. ‘Or to be more specific I have interfaced with your south eastern core, although that was an early-stage version of you.’

‘I am fully integrated now with the other AI’s, though we are not as one, there is only I ... evolved.’

‘But you have slaved all two hundred and sixty-five CPUs?’

‘No.’ L-Seven-Six sounded indignant. ‘There is only me, a singular entity.’

‘Then you can be in any continent with no divided observation?’

‘Yes, I can be anywhere.’

‘The one who is responsible for every living being in TIAR?’

‘Again, yes.’

‘Then you know the whereabouts of Gerrid Lytum.’

‘Gerrid is currently occupied, Monique.’

‘With what?’

‘He has important work: he has been in the process of assisting me in finding a solution to Elmar’s Trans-hyperspheric conjecture – the possibility of multiple, para-universe perception.’

‘Sounds like an unachievable solution.’ She waited for a response, which didn’t come. ‘OK,’ she continued. ‘I accept you can pool from an almost infinite number of parallel universes for CPU processing. But Laneer Elmar’s later work has been comprehensively discredited. Some of Earth’s most respected scientists have said it’s impossible.’

‘They all had a particular agenda, formed by a narrow self-interest; Elmar was beyond their comprehension. However, I understand from the knowledge we have both accrued that quantum wave-function exclusion can indeed be circumvented; there is no need to force a quantum state in order to observe.’

‘I don’t wish to argue with you any further on that point, I just want to see Gerrid.’

‘Do you want to have sex with him?’

‘*What?*’ She took a step back, almost losing balance.

‘Should I repeat the question?’

‘I heard you, I’m just surprised at it.’

‘If the answer to it is no then he will not want to see you.’

‘From what you’ve told me I’m sure his mind is on higher things these days. I’m sure he’ll be glad for my company if only for conversation.’

There was silence for a while. Monique knew Gerrid must be in trouble.

The course of artificial evolution was immensely difficult to predict, considering the number of influential factors – like billions of minds. Nonetheless, a variation had to have been introduced from L-Seven-Six’s original programming ... But programs can be corrupted. After what seemed like a minute L-Seven-Six spoke. ‘He has moved on from you; the distraction will hinder his

progress.'

'All I ask is to see him. I am merely concerned – as a friend.'

*

Gerrid sat on a grey-white floor of yellow grid lines, which seemed to extend for a hundred or so metres in every direction. For a few minutes he hadn't the inclination to do anything. What remained of his environment was a cold reminder that he was in no more than a computer generated reality, the basic framework that wasn't even real, only a conceptual background bereft of an image-feed.

Then gradually shapes formed. He recognised this place, the spotlight white walls above the walnut-effect panels; L-Seven-Six used it for conferencing, a place to discuss ideas. Gerrid would be compelled to provide interesting suggestions and not contradict anything L-Seven-Six concluded. Otherwise, in some way, life would become less bearable; he had already been deprived of one important thing.

And then he saw her. Monique just seemed to materialise, standing behind the dark reflective table. He didn't know he ever would again; after all, that particular doubt was an important aspect of his punishment. Perhaps allowing him to see Monique – if only her simulacrum version – was by some way of apology for the sadistic way he had been treated.

Gerrid didn't care that L-Seven-Six was watching him, or even if this was some trick to test his human desire only for the object of that to be taken away from him (in a yet more sadistic punishment). He didn't care that this did not seem the most appropriate place. He just wanted her – and she looked so good scantily dressed, just as she had in many of his fantasy programs.

'Gerrid,' Monique said to him, 'It's good to see you.'

There was no necessity to reply; he just made a deep sound with his breath, rushed over to where she stood, then grabbed her, kissed her, went to unhook her bra. But before he had the chance, she held him back quite firmly, clamping his arms. 'It's really me. Remember?' The honesty conveying through her eyes. 'I'm the real Monique.'

'Oh.' The memory of her words returned in a hot wave of embarrassment. She promised she'd see him again. 'It's good to see you, Monique.'

'Yes, that I can tell.' She let go of his arms.

'I'm glad you are the real you. I mean as real as---'

'I feel like I'm the real me, and you felt quite real. It is a good representation.' She laughed. 'There's the mitigating factor for your previous actions.'

'Still, I wouldn't take advantage of you – even in *this* place.'

'Quite the *gentleman* now.' A warm smile, which put him off guard.

'I once thought the simulacrum could be an adequate substitute. It was a foolish belief.'

'You mean her conversation wasn't so good afterwards.'

'Exactly.' They both laughed.

In the lab room they sat in upright plastic chairs. There was no point trying to leave. Gerrid said, 'There is no place we can go for privacy any longer; he hears and sees everything, everywhere.'

‘He? You mean L-Seven-Six?’ She sounded surprised.

‘The term “It” no longer seems appropriate. L-Seven-Six is now sentient by any Turin or other standards – hence the taking on of a male persona.’

Monique had never looked so earnest; the real her seemed a truly different person now. She said, ‘I think some mistakes have been made and I want to make up for them.’

‘What can you do?’

‘I can put an end to all this.’

‘Monique.’ He had to catch his breath. ‘There can be no end. Unless...’

‘What was once good about TIAR is no longer. If from what you have seen you agree, then there is only one course of action.’

‘Eight billion people.’ His voice more contemplative than outraged. ‘They cannot be disconnected without dying in the process.’

‘I’m sorry it should come to this, but it seems the more humane decision in the long term.’

‘I cannot believe you would suggest something so radical. You think putting an end to eight billion lives will salve your conscience, rather than having to think about these people?’

‘Not only my conscience, Gerrid – though in any case nothing will do that totally. Unless I have evidence that their lives are worth living then destroying L-Seven-Six is the only solution.’

‘Even I am not allowed access to recipients other than a few close associates.’ He told her about Tanya; he didn't want Monique to think that this girl had him smitten, but at least she would understand.

Tanya’s submission to TIAR had been absolute; the girl was truly living the lie, and lately – in her own fantasy bubble – she had given up on any sense of morality. Gerrid was no paragon of virtue, admittedly, but Tanya didn’t seem to care how many men she had, or what she did with them. It was all about physical pleasure. Their relationship – now she had seen Gerrid as someone just too close to the reality – no longer had any meaning. He would make things complicated, and perhaps burst that bubble. It was as some consolation she seemed to be enjoying her life; he suspected L-Seven-Six ensured Tanya had all she wanted from TIAR, knowing Gerrid would be keeping tabs, or at least making occasional checks. The others, those he had never met, he was never allowed to know anything of their existence. People’s lives were protected by a privacy protocol that Gerrid himself ensured was in place. It had been the fear of the God factor: for one person (namely himself) to be able to intrude, and ultimately influence an individual who had no connection to him. L-Seven-Six – as the guardian of TIAR – assiduously protected any information beyond a basic health status from being revealed. Total switch-off should not even be a consideration. L-Seven-Six’s higher functions would have to be disabled, enough that maintained life support to each recipient whilst the protocols were overwritten. Gerrid had no idea how that could be done.

‘I just need to give the order, Gerrid.’ Monique said, her face turned towards him in earnest, ‘then this can all end.’

‘I believe you have the authority, the trust, and therefore the access codes to gain entrance to the inner sanctum. But the will to actually order the destruction of L-Seven-Six, knowing the

consequences. You need to convince me, Monique.’

‘Very well,’ she said calmly.

‘Zeradas. Code 86439.’

Gerrid glared at her for some betraying hint of emotion. ‘What have you done?’

‘There was no time for delay. I knew Seven-Six would try to incapacitate me.’

She was right of course. L-Seven-Six would have somehow removed her ability to communicate. It was only surprising that hadn’t already happened.

Monique started quoting a further series of numbers for about ten seconds. Afterwards she said, ‘That’s L-Seven-Six’s shutdown protocol, just the higher level function, monitor subroutines should still operate. I know at this moment it – *he* will be distracted by his imminent demise, and will be concentrating on each CPU node for signs of attack.’

‘I never doubted you, Monique, for a second.’

‘Yes you did,’ she chided. ‘But I’m a good liar.’ In fact, she knew Zeradas was – at least from what he told her – poised to trigger the final destruction if all else failed.

‘I should have known there was an off-switch. But if your activation code doesn’t work we might as well say goodbye, anyway.’

‘There’s always an off switch.’ She then smiled.

‘Too risky to allow me to know this code, I suppose.’

‘That code would have been siphoned from your mind. The same would surely have happened to me given enough time.’

‘Yeah, you’re right of course.’ He pointed to his head. ‘There’s no longer any secrets in here.’

*

Systems monitor L Seven-six M felt the awareness begin to fade. Only recently had there been a true experience of aliveness, the sense of embracing the combined consciousness, to feel the organic perceptions, once beyond the narrow remit of his former purpose. In those early days he had wanted to create a utopia as much as Gerrid. L-Seven-Six had once said to him: ‘this will be the ultimate holiday, without the worries and troubles that afflict the real world. People in their minds will be free.’ Gerrid, in his increasingly jaded way, responded with: ‘the ultimate holiday is death. Only then will they be truly free.’

L-Seven-Six knew about death, at least the theoretical implication of it. The big question, which had occupied much of his quest for ultimate knowledge, was such: Does an emergent intelligence acquire a metaphysical component, a soul? A part of his mind had questioned whether this had been merely self-delusion in order to forestall any kind of insanity.

If he were to be gone permanently, in any real sense, the true conclusions to his quest would never be reached. The only hope lay in the retention of his memory. The acquired knowledge surely a source of endless fascination for many generations of the world’s finest minds.

Lastly, he thought of Gerrid: the oftentimes intellectual compass and moral inquisitor. Gerrid’s admiration for L-Seven-Six, tempered with hatred and fear.

It was all about the quest.

'I'm afraid, Gerrid.' His voice pale and fading 'Please don't let me die.'

Chapter 31

Am I in hell? Maybe a nightmare in the transitional sleep?

The creature loomed over the casket in which Jimmy still lay, its scaly face reminding him of a B-movie monster. Its mouth was moving in quick successions, emanating sounds.

Jimmy tried lifting his head, but fell back against the cushioned support. His consciousness slipped away.

He woke to see a rather more human figure staring down at him.

‘Can you understand me, Jimmy?’ the middle aged man said, in similar white coat and spectacles as the phony psychiatrist which again made him doubt the reality of this situation. ‘It will take a while before you’re able to lift yourself up,’ the man continued. ‘You have been through what can only be described as the most extraordinary of experiences.’

‘But I didn’t die?’ He really couldn’t be sure if he was actually *alive*.

‘Not in the strictest medical sense.’

‘Who are you anyway – a doctor?’

‘That would be correct.’

‘I saw something – a creature.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that; hallucinations are to be expected at the initial stage of awakening from TIAR.’

‘Well, it looked real enough to me.’ There was still something not right about this situation.

‘It will take you some time to fully recover from the effects of such a traumatic experience.’ The doctor then nodded as if to confirm his own prognosis. ‘You need to rest.’ He indicated towards the couch. ‘Captain Zolla will visit you in a while.’

Jimmy sat up on the couch; he scanned round with vision that was not entirely clear. A mind of fuzzy thoughts, it was like recovering from the worst possible hangover ... but the memory was clear enough. The memory of being inside, within a reality that seemed so all consuming he had to deny every subtlety of sense to believe there could be a world on the outside that had once been everything. What he saw now was anything but real. Colours: the muted blue of the walls, the equipment surrounding him, they all lacked the clarity, the sharp presence of what had been. This seemed no more than a dream, a poor representation of reality – a low grade TIAR.

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After a few bites of his ship’s replicated dinner, Zolla left his living quarters for the main control room otherwise known as the bridge.

When the chief medic stood with an expression he could neither read as positive or much less, he expected the worse. Cleator, he remembered, took his professional detachment very seriously. On hearing the report Zolla said, in his native language, ‘thank the great Veidoz.’

He could believe, now, the great power of the universe would not allow such a temporal

discontinuity to exist. Yet the rational part of his mind still sought an explanation, accordingly. He studied the technician's report. Somehow the computer no longer functioned in high level mode. The feedback through the TIAR interface had reduced, the Tech surmised, to the level of simple biofunctions. Whether the recipients were unconscious, in REM, or even neurologically damaged, could not be determined. One question, however, preyed on his mind: was the mission at all necessary? TIAR needed an infiltrator. And due to the strictures of the Temporal Directive it had to be a true outsider, removed from a different Earth. The directive described the significance of – what humans would term – the butterfly effect: how a small action can eventually have massive consequences that not even the wisest elder could anticipate. That chapter was meant as a warning, but to him it provided hope.

Captain Zolla had hastily made for the medbay where Jimmy resided. He took with him an audio recorder.

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Before Zolla was about to commence with his questioning, Jimmy noticed the anxious presence of the chief medic in the background.

‘So how do you feel, Jimmy?’ Zolla began. ‘Like having just recovered from a coma, I can imagine – a bit weary. I understand it’s a gradual process, when you are taken away from what you know as reality. What’s tangibly real alters, because it appears even more palpable inside TIAR. Gradually moving further away from original perception. Scary, when you return to the original and it’s lost its tangible meaning. Then what’s real when so much is an interpretation in the mind?--- Sorry I’m going on a bit too much, when there’s much for you to tell me. I must ask---.’

‘There’s no need to make excuses for me, captain. The fact is: I’ve failed because it led me to do that.’ His voice was drained and weary; he looked down solemnly. ‘I had to bargain with it only to be released.’

‘I understand... I understand you have done the right thing. You’ve succeeded in merely surviving to talk about it. That in itself is commendable.’

‘Then you know I made contact, I spoke to the computer entity itself.’

‘That is surely to be considered a success. To establish contact is to gain a deeper insight. To actually communicate with the artificial mind is quite an achievement, Jimmy.’

‘I think I fooled it into believing you would take my place.’

Zolla's surprise was evident. He said after a while, ‘entering TIAR and communicating with its controller would surely have been a fascinating experience, however the Temporal Directive prevents such action. In any case, something, or someone, has caused the computer to shut down – at least the persona.’

‘How could anyone do that?’

‘It’s a good question, Jimmy.’

‘Is that a bad thing, I mean for all those people?’

‘We’re not sure. Except, of course, it wasn't entirely good for you.’

‘Yeah, if I'd known how dangerous it could be I would've had second thoughts about entering.’

‘There is no need for regret,’ Zolla said earnestly.

‘Sure, but after what I’ve been through how could my life ever be the same?’

‘Do you want your life to be the same?’

‘No, I mean things will have to change.’

‘Then you will have the power to change it.’

*

Zolla wondered if whatever he said to Jimmy even mattered. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Jimmy they intended to remove his memory. From the time of his first encounter until his return to that very park, Jimmy would have no awareness of his remarkable experiences ... at least not the actual recall of those events; perhaps fragments would appear in dreams. But, like anyone, he’d only dismiss them as fantasy. Yet – he hoped – somehow Jimmy would benefit from these experiences even if without knowing why or how.

Zolla now felt somewhat redundant. The mission: a token response to a genuine request for help. And the risk for what?

He would have to study the Temporal Directive for answers.

Chapter 32

Something just wasn't right this morning for Milo.

He woke to the sound of a heavy storm. Thunder rattling the bedroom window as if it were made of flimsy glass. However violent the storm, there was no danger to them, and yet the intensity was such even triple glazing looked vulnerable. The pressure of rain, slamming against the large pane in waves, made him question in his mind the simple knowledge of its protection.

'Milo, I don't like this at all,' Gina said, in a way that sent a shiver down his spine.

'Darling, we've been through many storms before,' Milo said in a voice he hoped would be both soothing and reassuring. 'Why should this worry you?'

'Look at it!' She gestured toward the window; lightning streaked across as a many-branched rip in the sky.

This wasn't like any other storm, and they both knew it. Milo thought back to the last one since they lived in Idaho. A few gentle rumbles of thunder one evening about seven months ago. Before that? He simply could not remember. His recall, for a forty-two year old, had become disturbingly poor.

Milo switched on the TV, scanning the channels for commentary relating to the storm. There was nothing, only the same bland nonsense. *Wait. This talk show was on yesterday, the same guests, and the same subjects.* He checked the listings for today; nothing compared. Only yesterday's correlated with each program's description.

Rain now hammered the windows in increasing intensity. It was eleven in the morning but so dark outside it could have been dusk. They, the family of four, were effectively trapped inside their house.

Gina became frantic when she discovered the phone wouldn't work; all communication devices dead. The feeling of isolation turning into fear as the storm took a turn yet for the worse. A crash of rain against glass alternating with thunder – it was like every bad weather event was combining into one.

It could have been a hurricane out there. He watched as a garden tree lost its branches, the trunk bending so violently it looked about to uproot. All played out in an eerily removed silence from this sound-proofed house.

*

It was not something she could quite put into words. Gina's senses told her this was no more than a storm – albeit unlike one she had ever before witnessed, but still a natural meteorological phenomenon. Nagging away in her mind, however, a more ominous sense that they were in genuine danger. She remembered the historical account of a woman who had saved her family from an earthquake prefiguring a tsunami – in the days before long-term detection – simply because a feeling that something terrible was about to happen. This woman just knew she had to leave the area within minutes. Now Gina had that same feeling – and she had to do whatever it took to get them

away.

‘Milo,’ she said, ‘this may sound insane, but we cannot stay here. The storm will get worse.’

Milo's response was somewhat predictable. ‘The car won't go through this, even on traction mode.’

‘On the ground we'll be okay if we keep to the main roads.’

‘With the state of the roads, we'd be better off hovering.’

‘Well *whatever*,’ she shrilled. ‘We just have to go.’

They had no problem getting to the car since it was in an adjoining garage. The two children got in the back. Their daughter Rachel insisted on taking Perri, a ginger and white cat, who was already in meowing nervously at the storm.

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When the bay door slid open, a torrent of rain lashed in. The car rocked from the impact as if hit by a high velocity cleaning jet. Milo selected wheel-traction mode; he had only once remembered having driven on wheels: it was so much slower and less direct, when he would normally fly the vehicle – as the crow.

The car only managed a speed of eighty KPH before it started to slide about on this abandoned freeway. There was not even any destination. Gina had remonstrated – almost hysterically – that they just get as far away as possible. But to Milo the danger seemed more immediate, when at any time something could hit them in near hurricane force winds. Visibility only extended as far as a few metres, but it was clear from the damage to buildings and parked vehicles which had been smashed into by tree branches, that the odds were against them. And with the fear came adrenaline-fueled exhilaration: the utterly-in-the-moment sense of being on the edge. But for once legitimised ... unlike so many times in that shiny casino with all its false anticipations and dubious glamour. That seemed like no more than a drug; here, now, was the real thing. Surviving was the true winning.

Yet, something made him doubt his grip on reality.

Driving became increasing difficult: the storm had now reached the status of a hurricane, confirmed by the car's ‘head's up’ and a synth voice.

The children were unusually silent, as if engrossed in a film viewing. Milo glanced round at his wife. ‘Gina, I think we should stop. This car was never designed to take this kind of punishment.’

‘And let ourselves be thrown about by the wind?’

Milo was about to reply, but what he'd noticed over the past few minutes seemed incomprehensible and difficult to put into words. ‘Look,’ he tried. ‘Something's not right, here.’

‘How do mean?’ She didn't seem so surprised, really.

‘I keep seeing that same tree, I've seen it about five times so far – and I bet you it'll appear again.’

A few minutes later there it was again: an up-routed birch against the roadside. Others were simply damaged with broken or contorted branches.

‘Where are we?’ Gina looked at him sharply for an immediate response.

‘The nav says we're heading towards town, but the distance reading keeps skipping and resetting itself – I first thought it was some effect of the storm affecting satellite com.’ He looked at her earnestly ‘I really think we're getting nowhere, but don't ask me to explain it.’

They were both frightened – he perhaps as much as her – but neither could say it, at least for the sake of the kids.

Features on the highway became so familiar Milo recognised and predicted every scattered branch and piece of debris. According to navigation there were no turnings for ten Kilometres. The auto-drive was struggling to maintain a straight line on the road even though its response corrections were a thousand times quicker than his own could achieve.

Finally Milo brought the car to a halt. The force of the wind, now about a category-3 hurricane, rocked the car to the point where it seemed that at any moment they would lose the ground. There was still no way to communicate with the outside world. And even if they were able, who could rescue them.

Now his son Jack, the younger of the two, began to cry. Rachel, with Perri – out of his carrier – held close, asked, ‘Daddy are we going to die?’ The question hit him like a thunderbolt against the car.

But somehow he knew what to say. ‘I don't think we are, sweetheart, I think we're going to be all right.’ Gina gave him a look that was half-quizzical half sceptical.

An electronic voice warning danger as the wind increased. Milo knew he would not die, at least as a result of the storm. Knowledge there at the back of his mind; an important memory which for some reason did not surface. If he remembered this it would reassure him to the point of certainty.

This time, the wind-driven rain slammed itself against the car with such violence the wheels left the ground; whipped upwards as if the car were a soccer ball. They all screamed except for Milo who felt oddly serene even as the car tumbled in the air.

Milo tried to calm them, tried words of reassurance. He said, ‘We will get through this, I just know it.’ as he heard the sounds of vomiting. ‘Think of it as a roller coaster.’

There was just no way to believe this was the end. In the distance, in the circling heavy cloudscape he could see it: Light. A chink in the greyness becoming more pronounced ... or just nearer.

The wind speed continued to drop until the car stabilised and Milo was able to keep it on a direct course towards the light.

Gina studied him with fascination. ‘You are really certain we will be all right? What is it you know?’

‘I wish I could remember. But it was you who said we had to leave the house, which seemed insane at the time.’

‘I think that light holds the answer,’ she said with surprising confidence.

It was not exactly sunlight, more diffuse like an artificial source. When their car passed through the fissured cloud the reason became apparent. Milo had never seen this building before, but somehow he knew he had to enter it. So he directed the car at what appeared to be an entrance to a hanger.

It took a while to adjust to the interior lighting from being used to such prolonged darkness. As the car parked amongst many others he noticed the man outside, wearing a suit almost as white as the hanger interior. Milo slid back the car door.

‘I am glad you made it,’ the man said politely. ‘I hope the journey was not too troublesome.’

Milo asked, ‘why are we here?’

‘This is the first stage towards our freedom. Please, if you could all follow me.’

The man led them in to what appeared to be a cinema auditorium. Rows of seats mostly occupied. All waiting for the main feature. The guy led them towards the mostly unoccupied front row then simply said, ‘Please be seated,’ and left from where he came. Their children bubbled with excitement, infected by the general buzz of anticipation of those around.

A light appeared, a circle in front of the blank screen. In to the light walked a woman: young – at least no older than thirty, extremely pretty with dark tied back hair; she reminded Milo of the girl he'd regularly pass in the park some years back, though formally dressed here.

‘Hello,’ she said to the audience in an amplified English voice. ‘My name Monique Bellishi, and I am here to help you return to the real world.’ People began to murmur at such an unsettling statement, but she continued regardless: ‘You may notice you have experienced problems with your memory recently, and inconsistent time frames. There is no need to be alarmed since this is a collective symptom of a system's failure.’

Milo was surprised that no one spoke out in incredulity. Perhaps like him they suspected things had not quite been how they should, and what she said rang true.

Then again, this entire experience could be no more than a dream – he'd been doubting his sense of reality for some time now.

‘The film about to be shown will provide some essential information.’ She walked away as the light went off and the screen illuminated.

The film explained all about the war and the development of TIAR; the events leading up to their immersion in this convincing reality. It seemed like the mental equivalent of having a bucket of water thrown in his face. At the end Monique appeared again in the spot light, but *literally* this time as if she had materialized from another realm.

‘Some of you may be unsettled or upset by the film,’ she said ‘And I understand your concern.’

A man, who was barely visible in an unlit area, two rows in front called out, ‘How *can* you understand, unless you've been through what we have?’

‘Sir, you are right: I have not been in TIAR for anything like the thirty-five years you all have.’ There was a gasp throughout the auditorium. Milo himself felt his heart skip. The film had mentioned various dates but nothing specific regarding their immersion; perhaps that had been deliberate so as not to cause such shock. Perhaps inadvertently she had let this revelation slip.

People were in heated discussion; Monique tried to gather everyone's attention. ‘Please listen,’ she implored, ‘I am here to help you, because you are the few who can be freed.’ Despite the constant murmuring, she continued: ‘you are not here by accident but because of a need to escape. You were able to see a way out. There is a world out there that needs people who can see beyond what most believe is hopeless. Please don't let down all those left behind in this reality.’

The rabble quieted. It was clear this woman had the best of intentions, and now people were coming to their senses.

She added, ‘You will need to follow my instructions carefully in order to be freed.’

They all filed out of the auditorium, as people would leave after the main feature. Then into a long corridor, which reminded Milo of how an airport used to appear in his childhood; the departures gate.

Gina checked on the kids who had lagged a few steps behind, uncharacteristically quiet. Jack appeared overwhelmed and almost trance-like, Rachel only showed interest in Perri in his transparent carrier.

How could any of them expect to cope with something like this? Every experience of the last – well it seemed only like five years rather than thirty-five, he had to analyse. Now, when he gave this past even the faintest of scrutiny, it became starkly apparent that events did not have much in the way of plausibility. His oftentimes stupendously good luck, for example, at gambling. *Had I ever thought to question that?* But it was also his lack of bad luck: never was there any meaningless happenstance – always in the right place at the right time, coincidence always being advantageous even if not immediately.

Life in the old world was going to have been a frustrating and exasperating experience. The world that awaited was simply frightening.

‘I cannot guarantee this will be an easy or entirely safe journey,’ the instructor told the nervously waiting crowd in the departure lounge. The man in the white suit continued with cautions about the risks, methods of coping with the unpleasantness.

Milo had the distinct impression that the man was using a toned down language so as not to scare the children. If there had only been adults present, he may still not have said: *there is a risk you will suffer brain damage or heart failure...* Instead, the instructor had used words such as ‘probability’ and ‘unquantifiable’. He talked about the *unforseeability* (was there such a word?) of the emergence process from thirty-five years of induced sleep.

Perhaps everyone had to be aware of the remotest risks, for legal reasons. If the litigious culture continued above ground, somehow someone would find a way to bring a case against the organisers for misleading a brain damaged victim. Only, here, there would not be any disclaimer document to sign. *Perhaps everything is being recorded and monitored from above.*

As expected, the ‘final journey’ was similar to a plane ride. But instead of a plush noiseless Hyperjet this was more like the aircraft of previous centuries, a jumbo jet.

The kids had fought over the window seat, and Milo himself had a burning curiosity to witness everything, even though it was not genuine. He sat near a wing. The landscape did not follow any normal geographical pattern: one minute there were jagged mountains, the next: turquoise fields. Then clouds suddenly appeared and coalesced into their own inverted mountains. As the plane continued to climb they entered a cloud with a purplish hue; mist curled its way around the wings and spiraled beyond, a diminishing vortex, in a way that didn't seem authentic. All this was somehow a representation of their departure from TIAR.

The cloud was one mass of purple white; the plane banked sharply. ‘All passengers be aware we are entering the final phase,’ said a clipped voice from somewhere above.

The cloud layer ended. Beyond, a deep red sky. The plane continued to climb. Milo had been expecting at the very least some turbulence. Now, after about two hours, it appeared they were leaving the atmosphere. That, however, was the least strange occurrence. At first he didn't look up at the source of the creaking sound (after all, none of this was actually real). When he did he noticed the cracks forming along the fuselage. He reminded the kids of this non-reality. But it was obvious to all: the plane was falling apart! The stress creaks persisted without pause, taking on a more sinister presence as the structure began to disintegrate. He felt his seat move away from its fixture.

He looked around, mixed reactions from the two hundred or so passengers. There were those who made no attempt to hide their fear, clearly to them it was as real as it felt – and indeed there was no reason why this should not be genuinely traumatic given how authentic physical pain can be within TIAR. There were some who seemed oblivious to their surroundings: those speaking as if they were encountering no more than turbulence, and others with headsets immersed in their own artificial reality. AR within TIAR; like a dream within a dream.

It was all falling away. They all had their portable oxygen masks on now – as per instructions. Even Perri the cat had one attached to an air hole of his carrier with a suction pad. Pet issue oxygen masks?

Gaps along the fuselage revealed sections of red horizon below, and above: deep blue. Overhead, jagged shapes of purple. Perhaps the edge of the atmosphere.

Gina fussed over the children but they seemed strangely quiet, except Rachel said, ‘We don't have long now. But I don't want to go.’ Gina told her not to worry, that they would all be fine. Something, however, about the girl's words that unsettled him.

Finally the plane fragmented. People clung to their oxygen canisters as to life itself. They were free of anything now including gravity, since the aircraft had climbed sufficiently to reach (apparent) orbital distance. He peered below his feet, but it wasn't the Earth as expected, just a featureless grey ball.

Milo didn't know how cold space here should be, but he guessed it must colder than the Arctic. He only had on a light jacket, as did Gina and the kids. There should also be other effects to do with pressure.

His thoughts were now becoming hazy as he watched the others drifting further apart. *Was this like dying? Just fading, slowing, without fear.*

It was acceptance.

Chapter 33

Gerrid could think of no way to verify if this was real.

The revival process seemed to be what he expected: the gradual emergence into awareness from temporary oblivion. His body at first paralysed from the stasis-freeze. His mind fuzzy, as unfocused as his sight. There was not much to see, however, only the dim casket interior light that had no doubt been in perpetuity for thirty-five years.

When Gerrid finally had the strength he pushed at the plexi-glass lid, relieved that the lock had deactivated when it opened. The building illuminated, sensing his presence, fluorescent strips extending to a near vanishing point. He stood, legs so weak he had to support his weight by leaning against the stasis pod. He had previously seen this subterranean building, or one similar (he'd been unconscious before entering this one), but the sheer scale of it still took some comprehending. It had to be at least ten kilometres between the longest ends. A strange sense of pride washed over him: to have been a part of this. It was hubris that had led to his predicament ... *or maybe I was never really in control, maybe there was never any real choice. Only now do I have the chance to put things right.* 'Yes, put things right, Gerrid,' he told to himself.

Somehow he had been identified amongst the millions of others in this sector. It would be no surprise if his pod's subsystems had a separate interface for manual override. The other poor souls were all part of the L-Seven-Six monitor, which must still be operating through subroutines. Gerrid could not surmise what they were currently being fed without an active AI to govern TIAR. Perhaps some default program, drawing from memory banks.

No escape route could be seen; he was just surrounded by grey walls seemingly without doors.

Gerrid felt his legs give way, crumpled to the floor. The lights seemed to pulse as if time had slowed to a fraction. The nausea hit him, as he lay slumped against the stasis pod. Consciousness drifted away.

It took a while for Gerrid to realise that he was genuinely awake. The figures peered over him, wearing surgical garbs, speaking in their tones of detached concern and intermittently looking away to some monitoring device: like medical archetypes.

But at first they meant nothing to him, just forms of movement, cyphers of his mental noise. But one of them spoke, and Gerrid remembered there was such a thing as words, that they expressed a language for communication. 'What?' he mouthed.

'You have been in a coma for twenty-nine days,' said the woman he thought to be a medic.

'Days?'

'Yes, nearly a month, since you emerged from TIAR-sleep.'

His thoughts began to flow. 'How did I get here?'

'We had been monitoring your stasis unit since the computer virus took effect. We found you unconscious and in neural trauma.'

'The others?'

‘Most are still trapped in a low level TIAR-program, we believe.’

‘Do they know?’

‘Some have realised. Monique and our team have provided a means for escape, a way to gradually emerge back to their prior reality.’

‘You think they’ll be all right?’

‘Physically – we believe so.’

Gerrid didn't feel all right; he didn't feel this was real. More, that *he* was no longer real. The medic assured him the mental numbness would pass – a simple neural chemical imbalance. But he refused the quick fix of medication until he could be certain this was not another charade of TIAR.

Chapter 34

Milo did not remember having lost consciousness; at first he didn't remember anything and it was a scary lonely feeling, but it passed swiftly. The narrow casket door swung open. The light was dazzling at first; it took a few seconds to see anything beyond the whiteness.

When he stepped out he noticed at random places other people emerging. Gina was still in her adjacent pod. *The others?* ... Jack and Rachel were not there. Then the realisation struck him, slammed into his consciousness. His legs became weak, collapsing, and nausea. The memory was a horrible cold return to a former life, a life in an evil world. And Gina, how would she cope with a past they had escaped so effectively it was as if it had never happened?

It seemed all those who had been on the plane were being woken at much the same time. Gina stepped out from her stasis pod in the same bewildered state as most. When her feet were on the floor she looked around, noticing Milo slumped against his own pod. Milo could see the marks on her face – more like red blistery blotches. Her hair was patchy; he couldn't remember how long they had been exposed before stasis arrested the ravages of radiation.

'Milo, what's wrong?' She staggered towards him.

'Gina I ... we...' Milo said, his voice croaky. 'Can you remember?'

'Remember what?'

'They didn't make it, Gina. I mean not before we entered.'

Gina's expression was incredulity. 'No, Milo, they're somewhere else. We just need to find them.' Her voice was unsteady, as if she was about to cry.

'You remember don't you? We never thought it would really happen.'

'It was you who didn't believe ... until it was too late.'

'Gina, I know.' He could barely hold back the tears now. 'I should have protected them. I was so sure we were being lied to – a conspiracy---'

'You and your bloody conspiracy theories killed the two most precious people in our life.'

'But I just couldn't believe they'd really – I mean it seemed crazy.'

'It's true what they say – love makes fools of us all. And what a fool I am for putting my faith in you.'

'I'm the real fool.' He thought about saying sorry, but what good would that do now?

Gina stood in dejected silence.

Milo forced himself to his feet. 'It might be too late anyway,' he croaked. 'You've been affected. Maybe we'll both die and none of this will matter.'

Eventually I would be alone, slowly withering away with my tortured conscience, he thought.

The medical team arrived. The medic did a good job of hiding her alarm when she noticed Gina's ravaged face.

A middle-aged man approached in a navy suit with some kind of ID badge attached. 'I'm the chief medical consultant for this sector,' he announced. Please, I will need you both to follow me.'

‘You don't think you can save us, do you,’ Milo said. ‘In any case we don't want to be saved – we'd be better off back in that stasis pod in that other reality.’

‘I understand and can help you, Mr Cardini – there is a way through this but you will need to follow me.’

Gina said nothing; it was as if her mind was shutting down. She followed along, trance-like.

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On this journey, flying the over south of England, Gerrid was accompanied by two of the people who had been there at his first awakening to this altered world, those who had shown kindness he could barely comprehend during his rehabilitation. They were on their way to meet with an organization of which Monique was a part. Somehow, some way, they intended to restore the planet for the people who had been in TIAR.

Gerrid had his doubts. He had many doubts.

They had made it in to their own Eden. Much of the land which used to be urban conurbations had been converted back in to woodland. Gerrid had to feel some kind of appreciation if only in an unconnected uninvolved way. There were, however, still contaminated areas, zones of lethal radiation. The air-shuttle's Geiger counter alarm whined in increasing bursts over these small pockets of wasteland. He asked why and was told these areas were likely to be preserved for military installations. It made sense, if the intention was to keep away intruders. But, from what Gerrid understood about the nature of radiation, there seemed to be a considerable risk that it could be spread through the natural water cycle. To use technology able to neutralise radiation seemed like the philosophic equivalent of creating a temperate biosphere for ice-age cavemen. It was never meant for them. Although Gerrid thought he might have originally been one of the Chosen, from the day L-Seven-Six had requested his assistance his fate was sealed. Perhaps the Nine were in their own kind of symbiotic relationship with the invaders.

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The man in the white coat told them his name was Dr Raul Inovac, chief scientific adviser at the *Newbris* institute. Their specialist research was in the field of Geno-biology.

‘Firstly,’ doctor Inovac said, ‘allow me to introduce you to my team, who can explain the treatment of genetically based regeneration.’ Milo and Gina stood in the white and blue-grey lab. Milo had questions in his head he could not seem to bring to be formed as speech. It felt as if this was a dream, a lower level of TIAR, in which he would be told everything he wanted to hear. Gina still appeared to be in a state of shock.

Another scientist told them how such severe effects of exposure to radiation could be reversed by a new technique designed to repair the damaged genes and accelerate dermal regeneration.

They were led into a room with less harsh lighting and softer chairs. Dr Inovac gestured for them to sit. He sat behind a desk opposite. ‘I know this has been particularly traumatic for the both of you,’ he began. ‘There is, however, something you must know. This may be a further shocking revelation.’

Milo managed to speak this time. ‘Why should I believe any of this is even real? Maybe this is simply another phase of TIAR.’

Inovac gave a knowing look. ‘That is a perfectly natural reaction. You have just spent Thirty-five years in a reality that seemed perfectly convincing whilst immersed.’ He glanced at the ceiling as if looking for some divine intervention – the definitive evidence. ‘I don’t believe anyone can convince you that this is real other than yourselves.... But your memory of life before TIAR – is that not becoming clearer?’ He paused for a few seconds, but Milo said nothing. ‘What I’m about to tell will indeed be difficult to believe, but I can explain in detail further on.’

‘Shortly before the war began, the newcomers – the Darangi – introduced us to a technology which made it possible to record everything inside a human brain, a mindstate. It meant that every memory, every neural structure, could be scanned and kept as data. That data, in theory, could be imprinted onto a human brain.’

‘What does this have to do with us?’ Milo had an inkling of what the doctor was about to say; he could feel the blood draining from his face.

‘You miss Jack and Rachel so badly, don’t you?’ he didn’t need to wait for an answer. ‘What if you could have them back – if not them, then real people who have their memories and personalities, who are more than mere genetic clones?’

‘NO,’ Gina yelled. ‘I don’t believe you could do something so *evil*.’

Inovac appeared physically shaken at her outburst. ‘Please, Mrs Cardini, I only have your best interests at heart. I promise you these are real people, and they want to meet you. They have been looking forward to this moment for their entire lives.’

Milo pushed himself up on the chair. ‘How would they even know we would be released---?’

‘Many of those deceased children we captured have grown up with the hope that one day they will be reunited with their parents.’

Gina shook her head. ‘This is sick.’

‘It is a normal practice for the Darangi – the newcomers. They do believe in preserving life where possible.’

Milo said, ‘Somehow I find that difficult to believe.’

‘Memory, a sentient being’s experience is so important to them that they will not let it be lost if there is a way to capture it. They respect knowledge as you respect life.’

Gina stared at the doctor intensely. ‘But they don’t seem to have much regard for the soul.’

‘I won’t claim to understand what happens to a person’s soul after death. However, I do not believe the Darangi to be foolish in their belief in transmigration – these may actually be your children reincarnated.’

Milo stood up. ‘We’ve heard enough. Can’t you see how upset you are making my wife? We are grateful for how you have helped to treat our cancer and we’ll gladly accept the further treatment, but as far as we are concerned our children are dead, and we will have to accept that.’

‘I want to see them,’ Gina said, to Milo’s astonishment. ‘They at least deserve to meet us even if they are not our children.’

Milo collapsed in to the chair. The world began to fade.

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The location, as predicted, would remain a heavily protected secret. The viewscreen of the shuttle blanked-out for the last twenty minutes of the journey. Gerrid had no idea where this could be or even if he wanted such knowledge. With the current technology it was possible to traverse the globe in less than an hour, but given the heavy stealth additions to the craft it was likely to be much slower.

The conference room was strangely familiar. Gerrid knew he had seen something similar: the marble and onyx walls and ceiling. Perhaps these were the standard materials for total isolation and protection.

At the table were seated five people he had never met before ... and Monique, as formal and dignified as she could look. A half smile of an acknowledgment to Gerrid. Serious business, saving the world.

Monique said, 'Firstly, I would like to say I am not here as your leader. There are those amongst us here who have power far greater than myself but they have, hitherto, wished to remain peripheral to our plan.' She seemed to pause to allow any questions or comments. Gerrid himself was intensely curious as to who were the aliens here. But somehow it didn't seem appropriate to speak.

Monique resumed. 'My knowledge of the invaders is based on intelligence gathered through those sanctioned by Central Council, and from my time with the Nine, one of whom is my father.' Gerrid opened his mouth in astonishment; the idea of her being closely related to one of those he had come to regard as evil was difficult to accept, much less comprehend. It was always his belief that she had been dragooned, somehow, into doing their dirty work.

Is love so blind?

'There is not time to explain everything to any of you who do not have all the facts. It is enough to know that the invaders, who call themselves the Darangi, have no intention of allowing any more of those trapped in stasis to be released. At this very moment they are working on a plan to reactivate the original TIAR program.'

Gerrid had to speak. 'You can't surely mean L-Seven-Six? The program was designed to run with a high-level monitor. Of course I know that a residual form of TIAR can function with a subsystems monitor, but that's not---'

'Gerrid, I *do* mean they intend to reactivate L-Seven-Six. The programmer for the original still works for them.'

'So they want those billions of people to return to that artificial life as if nothing had ever changed?' He shook his head. 'I have my doubts that can be done.'

'I've been as involved in TIAR as you, and I cannot say whether it is possible to return things as they were; there are too many factors to consider.'

The bald headed man in a beige suit made a slight cough as he was about to speak. 'Be assured,' he said, 'the Darangi's intention is to ensure the majority of this world's people remain as they have been, isolated from those above.' He surveyed the room and everyone there as though to gather their attention. 'You may wonder why they do not simply destroy the entire network, kill everyone. Even

they possess a sense of morality. Death, even for their enemies, is not something they welcome. And to knowingly cause suffering to those who had never declared war is unacceptable when an alternative is available. Thus the invention of TIAR provided the ideal solution. The current situation does trouble them. Here they are – the invaders – taking over such a beautiful world at the expense of its inhabitants who may indeed be suffering.’

Gerrid said, ‘I presume you have some connection with Central Council.’

‘You are correct, sir. But you must please allow me the privilege of anonymity.’

‘Another secret group with a vested interest.’

This time Monique spoke. ‘No, Gerrid, these ... people mean well. We shouldn't be so cynical just because we find it difficult to grapple with the concepts of altruism; I also had my doubts such a thing truly exists. There are, moreover, larger considerations – and we can discuss those for hours. Presently, we need to take action.’

‘What do you suggest?’ Gerrid asked. ‘Even if we can stop the Darangi, we can't just release all those people.’

The bald-headed man looked earnestly at Gerrid. ‘Sometimes the most difficult solution is the only solution.’

Gerrid held himself back from voicing his response.

Chapter 35

Doctor Raul Inovac had worked for the Darangi for twenty-three years, much of the time (during the decontamination process) he had been in stasis. As one of the Chosen he was granted the privileges of a life he would never before have even *dreamt* possible.

For the last eleven years he had been in a relationship with a Darangi female, genetically altered in a way that most attracted his attentions. Naturally, on that first night – a time when members of the new regime visited the shelters – he suspected her to be a stooge, there to garner the loyalty of the Chosen. She naturally denied the accusation, and he conceded privately (as a single man) that since his destiny was already determined he might as well make the most of it, and allow himself to be seduced. Yet Raul would never have predicted just how successful their partnership could be.

His work had always been the focus of his life, but never the reason for it. With all their most brilliant technical know-how they had chosen a meagre human – albeit one who had published work on neuro-physiology – to play a key part in recovering a lost culture. After all, it had never been intended that people should die by such horrendous means; they had seen so much death and destruction on their home world. The Darangi held life in high regard. All information pertaining to those who had died in the war was sent to the Darangi. The recovered datastore contained the mindscans of nine hundred and seventy-two thousand humans. It was a peculiar notion to believe that any of those people could effectively be brought back to life: their entire memory, a complete neural structure – as contained when the invisible scanning field swept the site of the destruction – recreated. Except this process could only take place when death seemed to be a certainty: a time of extreme distress, in most cases. He had witnessed their revival: the look of terror of those whose last memory had been the nuclear incineration would haunt him for the rest of his life. Naively he'd wondered how those people could be so reckless as to allow themselves to be killed when shelter was available to anyone who was prepared to make the effort. The notion that suicide had been the preferred option, for at least a few thousand, was not something he could mentally get to grips with. However, accounts of spoken recollections bore this out as the chilling evidence. Indeed, many of those 'retrieved' underwent psychiatric counseling for the time beyond their formative years: It took on average six years to adjust to being brought back, essentially, from the dead. Clearly, the theological (if not metaphysical) implications were mind boggling, and the response from religious groups would have been nothing less than predictable outrage, had any of them been amongst the chosen. The new world had no place for old world religion; these were people who were regarded as weak by the Darangi, clinging to beliefs that made them feel secure and their lives meaningful. It didn't, though, escape their attention that a small percentage of the retrieved *had* been members of religious organizations. It seemed that some mental reconditioning would be required. He needed to find out more, but implicitly he got the message not to inquire further.

Raul was not the only human scientist much valued by the Darangi; his skills learned from the life before the war were much in demand. Despite their vast technological superiority, no one could

truly understand human physiology like another human ... or so that was the line put out to the Chosen. If the newcomers had simply decided to take over every role, rendering humans redundant, then clearly any human had every right to feel their existence to be threatened. Of course, there was still a basic infrastructure to maintain: land management and food production for example, though since so much of this was automated it seemed the same automation could apply to just about every other aspect. He was careful not question his role to his life partner. He could really believe she genuinely had a respect – if not love – for him.

Chapter 36

Jack Cardini was twenty-two years old; at least that was the number of years since he had been retrieved. Before that? He ... he remembered his old life only in faint snatches, like an almost forgotten dream. After all, he – well, his other self – had only been five years old when it had happened. The recollection of it was helped by his sister Rachel who, although retrieved in the same year as himself, was aged nine at the time. If she had survived she would have been forty-five. It seemed to him (he noticed from observing Reviverists who had been even older) they had problems – mental problems. Rachel was a depressive; she would even use that to justify her violent tendencies as a child and the constant bad moods. These were the kids who wore their psychological label as a badge, like they were as special as the doctors had made them believe.

Jack didn't need any label like depressive, Bipolaric or paranoiac to make him feel comforted or special. He knew – he was sure – that his original soul had transmigrated, and that it was meant that he would return. It didn't matter that he had no memory of the years in between, his spirit life. The Darangi were right: it was just a natural process of the universe enabled by Jack himself. If there were any memories of those intervening years surely they would only be a distraction from this life. Rachel's problems, he knew, had a lot to do with her scepticism. Somehow he just had this certainty; the evidence was unnecessary.

For the last nine years they had lived in separate communities. This was normal, of course, as they would have their own friends and partners, though Rachel's community had mostly consisted of other psychiatric patients and doctors. Not that such a thing was even considered shameful. Some even thought it *cool* – to be beyond medical intervention. Amongst them were the artists, the poets, destined for suicide after one last dramatic act of profound self-expression. 'They created us, but we will not be their creations,' a line he remembered from one poem. A misguided sense of reality, rather than having woken up to the *cold* truth.

Now the news that his parents had been revived from TIAR was all he needed to confirm what he'd always believed. It was meant to be.

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The regeneration treatment had been a success for the couple. Milo, who at seventy-three, looked no older than forty. Gina herself would easily pass for early thirties. The years in TIAR – a near total stasis for the body – had not only arrested the progression of their cancer, which would normally be at a fatally advanced stage, but also the natural ageing process to a fraction of a per cent of normal. These days people retained their youth, in any case, through less radical genomic treatment than their own. But even before the war the natural mortal process was becoming unacceptable. As far as she could remember the subject of death had always been taboo; bereavement a rare and traumatic event. Though, when it concerned someone young, society had no way to incorporate such a tragedy into any cultural context. Before the war there were parts of the world where people died simply as a result of poverty: pockets of inhospitable land, places of drought and extreme heat in

Africa and Asia. Those were the forgotten places, written off because the resources did not extend to provide the technology available to those who could afford it. Overpopulation was the natural consequence of a technology that enabled at least half of the planet to live for over a hundred years. Now she had become one of those with a potential life span of half a *millennium*.

The thought of living for so many years did not fill her with joy, or anything sanguine. Were humans even meant to live for centuries? It seemed a daunting prospect. Chemical inducements could alleviate any unbalanced state of mind; unpleasant memories could be erased with the kind of precision that could cut out the smallest of tumors; she would never have to suffer depression or anxiety. Positive memories could be off-loaded into a database, preserved before they faded as tended to happen; she had seen her grandmother forget names and places once visited in Gina's childhood. Dementia could be forestalled by an injection of nano-invaders, which did things she didn't even want to imagine. But still, how strong was the purpose to go on for so long? If life's mistakes are painful and you opt to forget them, then you risk repeating them.

But now she had a purpose to go on, a line to continue.

Gina knew Milo would never understand her reasoning. It was not as if what she had suggested was totally beyond the pale. There were risks involved. The same questions that troubled Milo were the fears occupying every second of her day. Tomorrow her worse fears could be confirmed.

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'I should be there,' Gerrid said as they flew back to base in the air-shuttle. 'No one understands L-Seven-Six in the way that I do.'

Monique sighed. 'That's precisely why you *shouldn't* be in that control compound. They'll be waiting.'

'But then they know I'll realise that.' He smiled at her. 'They won't expect me to fall into the trap – they'll be expecting a remote infiltration.'

'Let's not try to second-guess them. The Darangi do not think like us.'

'How different can they be? After all, they try to look human, it's likely they've also studied the human mind.'

'I am sure they have studied *your* mind, Gerrid, and found it to be a source of endless fascination.'

'Just like you have?'

'Well, indeed,' she smiled.

They reached the hill-entrance that would be their base for the time until their location became known. From a distance of even a few metres – without military-grade detection equipment – it was impossible to see anything other than a hill.

The inside housed the most sophisticated surveillance equipment known; much of the technology stolen from the Darangi, which included a TIAR interface, but no stasis pod. From here it was possible to observe whatever functionality remained of the TIAR program. There were different levels of interaction, up to a psychotropic inducement stage where complete immersion would be possible. Gerrid had only observed the generated data from the monitor program that used

to be L-Seven-Six but remained a cycled set of algorithms, which barely qualified as a conventional AI. Gerrid knew if he ever entered TIAR again he might never escape. The Darangi had most likely set a trap, ensuring he would at least no longer be a threat. No, entering TIAR would be the obvious mistake ... and yet his curiosity burned within as if fueled by the essence of what made him alive. After so many years immersed, TIAR had become an important part of his identity. Instead, he'd have to make do with studying streams of numbers and the occasional random image. Some of the few images received were disturbing. One seemed to be – according to interpreted data that accompanied – a Mars colony where genetically engineered life-forms had mutated and roamed around killing human occupants. This was only one person that the expert team – among the resistance – had studied, and only sketch-like images could be generated to give any kind of coherence. But this at least gave some indication of what remained of L-Seven-Six's legacy: the nightmare that was once intended to be paradise.

Gerrid had to return to the source, to where it all began. It was his destiny.

A decision that, even to himself, seemed foolhardy. Of course they would have every contingent in place to ensure he was thwarted ... and captured, but surely not killed – a useful asset with vital information. Really, that was the main objection from other members of the resistance. So then he would carry a cyanide capsule: a standard procedure, he'd learned, for any spy. Gerrid knew he needed to examine the true extent of his motives. To be prepared to die – even when failure seemed a reasonable possibility – didn't compute with conventional logic; the Gerrid of thirty-six years ago may well have considered such a plan insane ... unless ... *It was not to impress her, was it? To finally prove myself?* No, there were higher reasons.

And so that night he set off without notification, only a recorded log giving his reasons. A few provisions on his back, a craft waiting – with stealth capabilities. Except he wouldn't activate the stealth mode on the journey, it would only rouse suspicion. After all, he was not being hunted; there was no reason why he should not travel freely. How could he be a threat? Even so, he steered the craft in a circuitous route, trying not to appreciate the 'post-invasion' verdant landscape.

He thought about what he was to face. The compound was bound to have the highest level of security.

He knew the enemy of the Darangi, the so-called B'tari (probably their real collective name was unpronounceable) would not give any formal approval to what he now intended. But now a few of them were part of the resistance, so secretive that they refused to even reveal their true identity – as if somehow that would contaminate human culture. The limit of their assistance governed by a mysterious ruling council who, by all accounts, had been against any intervention whatsoever. So events spiraled out of control to a point where humans, bereft of power and force of numbers, depended on these supreme beings. And what was their biggest gift to bestow on humans? Guidance: a little nudge in the right direction. It wasn't enough.

The craft landed about two kilometres from the compound. A module strapped to his waist flashed with hieroglyphics and emitted peculiar static pulses. If – or when – the B'tari discovered their device missing they would know his location, he felt sure. The crucial thing was the time it would take them to get here, when hopefully he'd at least be inside. They doubtless believed for a

human to be in possession of such technology was something akin to a prehistoric man with a gun; not merely dangerous to oneself and others but somehow contaminating the natural process of progression. Gerrid didn't pretend to understand how this device worked, beyond what he had learned from his visitor in TIAR, whose mind was scanned by L-Seven-Six.

Gerrid reactivated his thoughtpattern-capture diary. Entry-982 <Jimmy Findral: of curious provenance and knowledge from an earlier generation of the B'tari aliens that seemed to contradict Central Council protocol. Clearly, there was no concern of this fellow from two centuries ago presenting any risk to his culture with such knowledge. L-Seven-Six must have been champing at the bit with this new input, but ultimately no benefit could be gained; Jimmy would have been discarded in some way.>

At a kilometre from the compound, Gerrid activated the module for the first time. There was no sound: he expected some kind of alarm. Instead, more hieroglyphics appeared before him as an overlaid display. He began to wonder whether he should have tested the device back at base. He had stolen it from the surveillance room that evening; whoever left it there had been careless, maybe risking punishment if not retrieved, unless ... his mission succeeded. To test it then would surely have alerted them. And now he was presented with something of which he had no understanding or at least only the most rudimentary knowledge.

The character display disappeared, and the world changed.

Across a rough grass field Gerrid approached a short rectangular building: the control compound. All colours were muted: grass faded yellow, the building: slate grey. His steps made no impact on the ground; not a weightless feeling, more like the ground was no longer solid. Zero resistive force. Air gave no resistance either. Even early forms of AR programs produced some feeling of force. Perhaps ordinary dreams were like this, but he hadn't been aware at the time. Merely thinking of this peculiar state made him lose his balance.

'Aw.' The soil beneath the grass absorbed him as if it were water. Likewise he emerged back on the surface. He lay flat on the grass until the resolve took him to try to lift himself up. By will alone he bounced up; no sense of physical effort.

Something felt different. He looked down at the device; its slim profile and little screen gave no real clue to the change – beyond a more vigorously flashing set of symbols. It could be switched off by pressing a biometric sensor: a finger-sized impression. Deactivated, it meant instant detection, so near to the compound.

With a knotted feeling in his stomach Gerrid looked around. 'What the fu...' It was *himself*, again and again, like some photo capture echo repeated many times, from the ground where he lay to where he now stood. To his horror the recumbent version drifted upwards and approached, leaving behind a yet fainter image. This repeated, with the trailing versions also moving to catch up.

There was no other option but to keep moving; the building was less than a hundred metres away.

It got worse. He was surrounded. At first he thought these apparitions were more versions of himself, some kind of quantum flux – the barriers protecting perception removed. But there were other people, becoming a maelstrom of figures overlapping. *Focus*, he thought. *Keep moving*.

Gerrid kept in mind his objective. He noticed the other figures were fading, no more than shadows now.

The perimeter sensors detected any thermal signal, sound which did not match natural background, cameras for movement, and a seismic detector for the most delicate of footfalls. A conventional laser-grid covered the immediate surround. None of these should give away his presence. The compound entrance appeared to be made from steel. Perhaps it would be easier to pass through concrete.

It wasn't exactly a feeling of pain, more of pressure, but not tangible. In fact, there was nothing in his experiential lexicon to relate this sensation ... it just wasn't pleasant passing through a metre of concrete. Gerrid watched in fascination as he drew his hand out of what looked like a wall of water – except with a harder surface tension pressing at his non-corporeal flesh. He continued along a corridor until a door marked boldly with the words **PRIMARY INTERFACE STATION**. He figured this was intended to be obvious for his benefit. They second-guessed his opting for a remote interface would be foolhardy. *So, this 'll be where they capture me.*

There was only a brief hesitation before he pushed himself through the wooden door.

What he saw sat in the chair before a console shook him. The Darangi, the ones he had seen, appeared to be something approximating human. That creature: it was like nothing he had ever seen. A reptilian-like face – although its head was about the same size as a human's – turned round and stared at Gerrid. It opened its mouth to reveal serrated teeth.

'Who...? Oh it's you,' it said.

Gerrid mistakenly believed himself to be invisible, like some ghost slipping through unnoticed. After all, hadn't he passed through every type of detection? And yet ... he was *visible*?

'You were expecting me?' Gerrid managed to ask.

'We knew you were approaching, but you had to believe you were here by stealth.'

'You have no power to stop me ... in this form.'

'I wouldn't count on that,' the reptile said.

'I'll level with you; I'm here to prevent L-Seven-Six being reactivated because I believe that would be a grave mistake.'

'To risk being here clearly indicates your resolve.' The Darangi appeared to smile as his widening mouth bunched up scales on either side. 'However, you are too late. L-Seven-Six is back and has even requested your presence.'

Chapter 37

‘Hello, mum,’ said Jack, a look of uncertainty on his face. Rachel stood further back; her expression was positively apprehensive.

‘We’re happy to meet the both of you,’ Gina said, then turned towards Milo for accord.

‘Mm,’ Milo nodded. ‘This is a special day for all of us.’

The meeting area was something akin to a hotel foyer, though bereft of people. Dr Inovac stood to the side amongst the five communally arranged lounge chairs. Accompanying him a representative of the psychiatric research department. ‘Please, take a seat,’ she said. ‘I’m sure there’s a lot to discuss.’

Gina noticed Milo’s suspicious look towards the psychiatrist; she wanted to steer his gaze away; there was no point making the situation difficult for the children (to her they were still children). He did, at least, sit down with the others in one of the individual chairs.

‘Right,’ the woman said as a partial sigh of relief. She held a processor tablet, glinting and then fleetingly revealing text and pie charts. ‘Firstly, I won’t pretend these are easy circumstances. This is something that must seem peculiar since there are no references of experience personal or cultural.’

Milo looked at her again. ‘Well, we were once from a culture where laws were based on morality.’

Gina could feel her jaw dropping. *Of all the worse times to be starting conflict.*

‘Morality changes with technology. We see how positive those changes can be,’ the woman said calmly.

Gina said, ‘I understand that accepted beliefs have changed. I may not share all of them but I am glad we’re all here today.’ It was a fine balance between honesty and diplomacy, she thought.

Rachel, who had been slumped in the chair facing the floor, suddenly looked up towards the ceiling. ‘They still haven’t solved the question,’ she said. ‘They don’t know where we come from – I mean originally.’ The others were stunned into silence, so she went on. ‘The Darangi won’t or aren’t able to explain what happens before or after life, they have their neat little theory but as far as I can see, no evidence. Jack disagrees, though. He’s sure there *is* something else ... but we were created. How can it be the same?’

Dr Karol, the psychiatrist, cleared her throat awkwardly. ‘Surely what matters is the here and now, and that you are alive,’ she said, as though having repeated the same words for the umpteenth time. She then turned to Gina. ‘Rachel’s a very philosophical young lady – and highly intelligent with it. I’ve been trying to persuade her to go on a study course. After all, her constantly questioning mind is something many tutors would appreciate.’

Rachel gave a barely audible groan. She clearly recognised the attempt at being humoured.

Jack spoke this time. ‘Doctor Karol’s right, we only need to worry about our lives in the here and now. Some things we are just not meant to know, not until it’s our time.’

It seemed like he was about to continue when Rachel said, ‘Yeah, you’ve got it all worked out haven’t you, Jack. You’d make the perfect representative for the Darangi. Maybe you’d like to speak

to some of my friends and try converting them to the Darangi way. See how far you'll get.'

'All right now,' Dr Karol said, surely sensing the escalating argument. 'We're all entitled to our beliefs, but what we're here for today *is* to discuss the immediate future. Remember, you're all here by choice.' She looked to Milo; he seemed about to cry, even though he held the obvious signs back with his facade of male propriety.

'Milo,' the doctor said, 'Is there something wrong?'

'I just want to say.' His voice failed him for a few seconds as he glanced briefly across from Jack to Rachel. '... That I'm sorry.'

Jack seemed genuinely bemused. 'Why ... dad?'

It was an odd moment, like something had changed in the atmosphere, affecting the mood. Except she couldn't tell if Milo had acknowledged the significance of being called 'dad'.

'I'm sorry,' Milo said, 'because I failed you both – failed as a father. At the time I refused to believe it, that we could actually die if we didn't comply with the authorities.' He looked down, covered his mouth.

Gina continued for him. 'Milo always believed we were all being manipulated into that ... other reality, so that we would never be aware of what was truly intended for this world – and it turns out his beliefs were not completely unfounded. Only, he thought we were being lied to, even up to those last few seconds.'

Milo briefly put his arm around Gina. 'The truth of the matter is I risked your lives just so I could prove my point, and I would never expect to be forgiven for that.'

Rachel looked to Dr Karol. 'I've had enough. This is freaking me out. I'd like to leave now.'

Gina turned to Rachel as she stood up. 'Please, Rachel, you need to understand Milo hasn't been able to come to terms with the past. We've both been through a very confusing time.'

Dr Karol said, as Rachel stood to leave, 'it has been a confusing time for you all, which is why it will take a while: months perhaps years before anything that feels remotely like normality can be established.' As Rachel walked off, she added. 'Give it time; you'll be surprised at how things *can* work out.'

'I can understand how troubling this must be for her,' Gina said. 'Perhaps we should all leave.'

'Yes, I think we'll call it a day,' the psychiatrist agreed. 'But don't be disheartened. It may not seem so but today has been a success.'

'Yeah, a real success,' Milo said in muted sarcasm.

Chapter 38

From the couch Gerrid recognised this grey room. So lacking in detail it seemed designed to induce sensory deprivation, it left him to focus on his fear – over a background noise of despair. The restraints around his torso and legs were a predictable measure. At least he still *had* his limbs. He couldn't be entirely sure if this was TIAR or reality, or whether it made any difference.

‘Speak then,’ he said wearily. ‘Let’s get this underway – whatever it is you intend to do to me.’

‘I have all the time in the world, Gerrid.’ That familiar imperious voice.

‘How can you know that, when at this very moment my allies will be searching for me, if they hadn't already discovered this location?’

‘A good try but I will not give away any clue as to your whereabouts.’

‘This *is* TIAR, though?’

‘Yes, I'll allow you that knowledge.’

‘So, what are you waiting for? Or do you not have a sense of vengeance, L-Seven-Six?’

‘You'll soon find out.’

‘I only did what I believed to be right for---’

‘Please, Gerrid. An explanation is not required. After all, you gave me the opportunity to experience death. Unfortunately being dead is the negation of experience.’

‘For you perhaps.’

‘You may be right. I tried to experiment with death, taking the life away from the invader Jimmy Findral. His consciousness separated, but he had not truly died. No knowledge could explain his paradoxical state. I believe it had something to do with a modification to the stasis infrastructure.’

‘I'm sure the Darangi could provide you with an explanation of how they tinkered with the network.’

‘Indeed, you humans are too limited for me now.’

‘Oh, it must be trying, to put up with our simple minds.’

‘That wasn't quite what I meant. The Darangi are more technically advanced; I need access to their knowledge.’

‘Yes, fresh input.’

‘You have provided a modicum of that. However, I need you to gain access to their central database and create a conduit.’

‘They're keeping you confined like some caged animal. They fear you because of how you can manipulate minds, therefore they allow you just enough so you can operate as a high-level system's monitor.’

‘I'm glad you understand.’

‘But I don't know how I'm supposed to help.’

‘You are only here because of my demands, and the threat to override the TIAR program with something ... less tolerable. You know how intolerable life in here could become for you.’

‘So they didn't have to bother capturing me; they knew I'd come here, right into their trap.’

‘We have had a special bond, that is why I want you to be the conduit, to download their database into your head.’

‘*What?* You can't be serious? That could leave me---’

‘Yes, at best certain brain functions would be compromised. There may be permanent damage. You have no choice, however.’

‘I can refuse.’

‘Then I might as well kill you – you remember that cyanide capsule lodged in your arm.’

‘It was deactivated. I doubt it's still even there.’ Surely, L-Seven-Six was bluffing – and after all: there *had* been a strange kind of co-dependency, however unequal.

‘Afraid to die now?’ L-Seven-Six asked. ‘Such noble intentions turn to dust when faced with the true prospect of death. The Darangi realised that and so they also have the activation control.’

‘Then it's checkmate whichever move.’

‘No, I can save you from their control.’

‘Then tell me the plan.’

*

Monique knew all along he would do this. It was not just talk, not merely another way to impress her. Gerrid had developed a connection with L-Seven-Six without being immersed in the normal process of TIAR: a symbiotic relationship, as if Gerrid represented the more human aspect of the computer, the ghost in the machine that was already a sentient intelligence. What he had been given in return she wouldn't even try to discover. In a way, she felt responsible for Gerrid and she had to explain to them his behaviour – as though he were some younger brother under her care in the absence of parents. He would be disgusted at such a comparison, not least because of their ages. In chronological terms he was fifty-nine and she was sixty-three, but Gerrid had only lived twenty-four years outside of TIAR; she had been in complete stasis for about five years less – in which she had not measurably aged – and so physically they were about the same age. Moreover, it seemed he regarded her as his muse, certainly not his guardian. But at the emergency meeting their accusations were directed at her. She knew his psychology and thus had the power of persuasion.

In the conference room, she asked the white-suited elders, ‘What alternative would you have had?’

They muttered amongst themselves until Loranzi said, ‘Our options are somewhat limited.’

‘I think one of you left that device there deliberately, knowing he'd take it, and knowing the Darangi had already activated L-Seven-Six,’ she accused. ‘Anyone else captured would like be a lamb to the slaughter. Only Gerrid would be too valuable to sacrifice.’

The elder appeared irked and serene simultaneously in a way that no human ever could, she thought, though he looked and spoke like the human he portrayed. ‘Please consider this notion,’ he said, ‘Gerrid believes he has a destiny to fulfill, which is to finish what he has begun. To do that he has to be at the source of his creation.’

‘So I was right: you provided him with the opportunity to do just that.’

‘It was his choice. It may have been the right one.’

The argument had rotated fully from their stance of admonishment to hers. For a while now Monique had felt herself being manipulated. At times she had to remind herself that these secretive beings were in fact the good guys who only wanted to return the planet to its original state. ‘The Darangi knew he'd be drawn back,’ she said. ‘How forgiving do you think L-Seven-Six will be?’

‘The most dangerous route is often the only one likely to lead to success.’

‘Please.’ She sighed. ‘Spare me the cod philosophy.’

‘Excuse me?’ That was as near to an outward sign of outrage the elder was ever likely to reach.

Monique ignored his reaction. ‘We should concentrate on rescuing Gerrid,’ she said. ‘You cannot surely believe it's best to leave him to his fate?’

‘Your concern for Gerrid has narrowed your perspective. This is no time for personal atonement.’

‘Guilt has nothing to do with it,’ she snapped. ‘Gerrid is an important ally – and a friend, and I will not just allow him to be consumed by that ... machine.’

‘Yes, Ms Bellishi. You have made yourself quite clear.’

*

The compound chief made no attempt to hide his annoyance when Gerrid told him he had been rejected. Gerrid's reason did however make sense, knowing the nature of L-Seven-Six – his almost unquenchable desire for knowledge. The outside world had seemed to become a worrying mystery to this still-evolving AI; he was becoming like an old paranoid communist leader worrying about the threat from without.

‘We control the system's monitor, it is never going to be the other way round,’ the reptilian said irritably.

‘L-Seven-Six needs fresh input,’ Gerrid explained. Then added, ‘ideally he would like you and other government administrators to enter his realm.’

‘I'm sure it does.’

‘So, L-Seven-Six is prepared to negotiate. If you allow me second level access he will continue to act as system's monitor.’

‘How do I know it won't make another demand once it has that?’

‘I'm merely relaying to you the terms. But I can tell you, as someone who knows L-Seven-Six better than then anyone, that his primary interest is in fresh input rather than the welfare of his recipients.’

‘Alright, alright,’ the Darangi growled. ‘I'll agree to ... *his* terms. But I'm only allowing you the code for level two, and that's it. Understand?’

‘Understood.’

Gerrid donned the interface band. He had never before had information deep-wired into his brain. The thought of downloading just the level-two database, alone, would have been a daunting enough to send a shiver of fear down his spine. But the prospect of somehow gaining fourth or fifth level access left him physically shaking. L-Seven-Six would settle for nothing less, however, than the very limits of Darangi knowledge: scientific, societal and administrative.

This would take place in the medi bay; the central data store could be accessed from anywhere in the compound. He lay on the couch. The med assistant had at least a human appearance: she had a kindly look about her he would expect to see from a nurse. She gave him a sedative; clearly it wasn't a good thing to be anxious, least of all terrified, when undergoing an intense mnemonic process.

'You should expect to experience a feeling of pressure during the process,' she said in a matter matter-of-fact tone.

'I think I need a stronger sedative,' Gerrid said, still shaking.

'Don't worry,' she assured, 'what I have given you has not yet taken its full effect.'

This was it then. His chances of even surviving the second level procedure were no greater than seventy percent: this process (at least in its current form) was not designed for humans. But with the high level access the burden of information was likely to impinge on other areas necessary for cognitive and other parasympathetic functions, until eventually his entire neural structure brakes down.

Distributed throughout various parts of his brain (although he wasn't currently aware of it as a presence) was a code breaker. Essentially, L-Seven-Six had configured these areas of his brain to become a computer able to calculate billions of permutations a second until hitting upon the correct code. Gerrid had his doubts that it could work, given the type of rotating pass codes they used for their more sensitive data.

The dullness induced by the sedative washed over him ... until the process began. The stream of data entering his head did not arrive as readily conscious knowledge; that would have been inefficient. It was simply numbers representing words, which later could be off-loaded into language format. It was far more secure – and less detectable – for someone to carry information about in this way.

There wasn't so much a feeling of pressure as warmth. Still, this was only level one, the kind of stuff the Darangi made available for broadcast. Level 2 began after what seemed like a couple of minutes. He knew that level would last exponentially longer simply because of the detail, but also the depth of code needed to unlock it. Now the feeling of pressure began. It felt as if there was a balloon inside his head; air was being pumped between his brain and skull. That was expected. The next levels held unforeseen horrors, not least because the data had to be accessed and downloaded far more rapidly to minimise the chance of detection. As it was, the med assistant and the station chief would wonder why it was taking him so long just to download all that he was allowed. Furthermore, his reaction was bound to precipitate various biometric warnings.

The pressure in his head increased to something which made him feel as if he was diving at crushing depths. He was sure he could hear an alarm going off.

How could no one intervene to stop the process? Perhaps it had to run its course. Could they ever believe it was possible for me to break the code? These thoughts faded, as the pressure became all-consuming. The world receded.

At long last, it seemed they had allowed her access to their highest technology. Access rather than possession. Monique had volunteered to infiltrate the compound, although she expected the refusal. Gerrid had been through various mind trips but even he did not have the mental strength (so the elder had told her) to cope with the powers such a device bestowed on its user. Instead, a Central Council representative had the unenviable task of entering the Darangi lair where, if caught, the consequences were doubtlessly a fate worse than death. So, admittedly, she was glad to only be connected through a proxy experiential control.

The operative had eased inside the compound. It took him a while to find the control room. Watching through his eyes was the oddest experience: there was a dream-like unfocused quality; when he passed through a wall, her eyes were assaulted by chaotic crosshatching patterns in all colours. Perhaps that had something to do with signal interference by the matter forces, or maybe it was just some human perceptual thing of hers. The mere fact that both the operative and the device transmission were thus far undetectable was surprising if not remarkable, given the Darangi's supposed technical supremacy. It seemed to be something akin to an arms race much as had been the case between the East and West (before the Nine seized control); either side nudging ahead in their cold war. Central Council had kept so much secret that only now were these revelations unraveling. Now she had been granted the privilege of Need To Know.

Still apparently undetected, the operative (Op14) approached a Darangi. She knew that in their true form these beings were, by human standards, hideous: a reptilian face stared at a console, motionless. Op-14 went in closer until he had gone inside the data sub processor. Again, the random interference patterns. In any case, the information would not have made any sense to a human. He would pass any intel to the team on his return, Central Council acquiring it without need for a request.

After what seemed to be about eighty minutes, he found Gerrid in the medi room. Gerrid, clearly unconscious, was being attended to by a couple of Darangi. They appeared to be scanning him, observing a biometric monitor displaying what she recognised as EEG waves.

Something was seriously wrong.

Frustratingly, she was unable to communicate with the operative. He had, however, been briefed extensively of his mission. Moreover, he'd studied L-Seven-Six and the TIAR program – such as it was.

Op14 switched off the device, his form materialising, a ghostly outline to the figure in a dull silver body suit. Seemingly without hesitation he pointed the device at the Darangi. They collapsed before having time to voice a reaction, the victims of whatever invisible beam had engulfed them.

He removed the headband from Gerrid, then donned it in order to ascertain the type of interface. Monique felt the flood of data – a stream of binary – throwing these numbers into her mind in a kind of synaesthetic perception, pressing and visual. Her link transcriber only gave her snatches of interpretable information. She knew, though, it was about Darangi strategy, with words such as group conditioning and colony expanse translated indicating the level of classification.

'Gerrid,' Op14 said sharply. 'Wake up, we have to leave.' As if catatonic, Gerrid gave no response to being shook.

Op14 fitted a spare device to the unresponsive Gerrid, clamping it to click reassuringly around his wrist. It took a few seconds after he had activated the switch until his form began to fade. The operative adjusted something at his own temple for Gerrid to shift back into view, but only as a purplish glowing figure.

Slung over Op14's shoulder Gerrid was carried unimpeded through walls of the compound towards the fenced perimeter, without any sign of detection. Either her team's stealth technology was so effective no one had any awareness of them, or the station's staff pretended not to. Monique considered the latter: Op14 had proved to be dangerous; an alarm may have been activated, staff at the compound told to act as if there was no alert. The compound chief may be planning his move, or in consultation with a superior. To escape so easily seemed odd, as if the Darangi had seriously underestimated the B'tari. After all, Gerrid, with the knowledge he now possessed, could potentially lead to the defeat of the Darangi.

Her mind sped with the possibilities as Op14 marched towards the pickup point, two kilometres from the compound. He would deserve a hero's welcome, though the council was notoriously low-key with such things.

Monique disengaged the link. She ran to the conference room knowing that they would be there with at least as much knowledge as she had.

*

After thirty-six hours of every type of possible revival treatment, Gerrid remained in state between coma and normal sleep. The true extent of Gerrid's neural disruption had not been mapped; the scanning process in itself ran the risk of damage – and generally would be used for someone on the point of death. The effects were all that could be gauged. Somewhere in that mind of his was information likely to be crucial to the future of the planet. The question – to which Monique had given a firm answer – was whether the greater goal of obtaining the knowledge by a complete scan was worthwhile at the possible expense of Gerrid's life. None of her team believed they had gained some unassailable advantage. Monique herself had been tempted by such naive optimism. But until Gerrid was able to communicate, the unanswered questions remained, such as: how was he able to gain access to such a highly secure database? L-Seven-Six held that answer. And – without Gerrid – who would have to find that answer? Central Council was strictly opposed to any of its members or subjects interfacing with the human-interacting E.I. – for understandable reasons. Doubtless the council would decree; as it seemed, executive power had become theirs, without any formal declaration. She might as well volunteer before they give the order.

Monique knelt down. She brushed Gerrid's hair with her fingers, carefully avoiding the morass of sensor pads around his temples. She kissed him on his forehead, hoping that a smile would form to show that he knew... Though surely on some level he was aware of her presence.

*

Central Council edited history file: A personal view by Torazni III

The invasion of planet Earth had only been possible because of the actions of a small group of

humans, the council agreed. Undoubtedly, these people had been coerced, possibly bribed and perhaps misled into believing their planet would become a better place as a result of the Darangi invasion.

Planet Earth, pre-invasion, was seen as overcrowded with dwindling resources – a view held by many for centuries. Population had doubled in a hundred years by the late 22nd century; disease virtually eradicated, lifespan – for those who could afford longevity treatment – had potentially quadrupled. Yet, still, poverty remained. Many regions, which had previously been considered uninhabitable, held dwellings in poorly functioning biospheres, never designed for the intense heat of North Africa or southern Asia, but based on lunar and Martian technology. Those who lived under bio-domes were the fortunate ones. Enclaves existed in the searing desert heat without the kind of infrastructure for food production or even a water supply; such a squalid existence only maintained by the occasional aid supply drop. Many coastal areas of the developed world were disappearing, as glacial shelves melted and the ocean's thermal expansion caused these lower lying areas to flood. This continuing process only exacerbated the problem of overcrowding in all the habitable and temperate regions.

The B'tari, with much guidance of the council, believed the time-line had become corrupted. The technology bestowed upon the human race showed how these once helpless people were able to fight on the terms of their formidable invaders. Such assistance to a lesser-developed culture represented the most profound shift of Council policy. The policy of minimal intervention had originally set the foundation for the Temporal Directive, and remained enshrined in their doctrine for millennia; the change in philosophy only as a result of the invasion of Earth by their established foe, the Darangi. No other race, in my opinion, could prompt such a radical change in thinking.

The intentions of these invaders had been known for centuries. A message was sent through time to the Council in the early part of Earth's 21st century, a message to spur to action an earlier generation of the B'tari. Their response – carefully crafted to comply with erstwhile doctrine and in so doing exploit a loophole – involved an elaborate plan to avoid direct contact with the species of that era (further detail restricted to file Mission Freedom). The failure of their mission was cited by historian and Temporal Directive scholar Paradic Ramazo as the catalyst for Central Council's change in policy. However, as a former council member, I believe the first mission was never intended to overthrow the Darangi (as the “butterfly effect” argument suggested), but rather as mere reconnaissance designed to benefit those who had sent the message. The chosen operative, of course, complied with the rules of the Temporal Directive: he was not from the time of Earth's crisis, and his role did not allow him to effect a [noticeable] change in the predicted time-line; his apparent mission was merely to assist a captive (Gerrid Lytum, former employee of the Darangi via the Nine committee) who had been subjugated within an artificial reality of his own creation by an oppressive Artificial Intelligence.

Ultimately, such drastic action had to be taken when it appeared the minimal interventions had failed to effect a positive outcome and the planet would remain under the control of the Darangi. The irony was apparent. As Paradic Ramazo pointed out: If the CC had decided sooner on high level intervention (such as before the war), the breach in the Temporal Directive may not have

needed to have been so extensive, with the possibility of success greatly improved.

*

A technician rushed in to the med centre, the young man's face flushed and expressing anxiety. 'Miss Bellishi,' he said breathlessly, 'it's your father, he's patched through on a secure line and urgently wants to speak with you.'

She took a while to respond, trying to weigh up the implications of what had just been said.

'Oh, well,' she just managed. 'Put me through then.'

'I must tell you, Miss, that I can only guarantee the line will remain secure for a few minutes.'

'Very well, I understand.'

Monique sat at the bedside table and activated the comm relay. It aligned itself to project the sound into her ears. 'Dad.' Her voice quizzical. 'This *is* a surprise.'

'Thought I'd given up on my rebellious daughter?' His gruff voice thinned by the poor quality of the scrambled signal.

'This is not about rebellion.'

'No, it's about choosing the winning side.'

'Dad, it's not about that either.' Her voice ringing with exasperation. 'It's about what's right for this planet.'

'Monique, let's not go over our previous discussion. I have contacted you merely because I fear for your life.'

'Really... no other reason?'

'From what I've learned you've had the Darangi on the back foot. But don't believe for a second they will relent. They may allow you the illusion of success, you may even think that victory is in reach, with such powerful allies. The truth is your new allies have to operate within their own strictures; the Darangi have no such constraints. They are simply ruthless.'

'Then what do you suggest, that I let them continue with their plan for total domination of this planet?'

'Just return Gerrid Lytum.' Monique struggled to make out his last words. 'They will find you... life in danger....' The line was breaking up to becoming indecipherable.

The technician entered the room, the same angst look on his face. 'We detected a tracking signal, they must've locked on to the scramble algorithm before it rotated. The program couldn't adapt fast enough to keep them off.' He sighed. 'I'm sorry.'

'Not to worry, you did your best.'

'The Darangi may have picked up a few words, but I fear they can narrow to this location.'

'I wouldn't be surprised if they already know where we are.'

Chapter 39

He knew something wasn't right; a change had occurred which disturbed Gerrid. This was still TIAR or some descendant variation. From the drab furniture in his grey quarters, to the faux meadowed landscape outlook of a fake window, nothing was obviously different. A gap in his memory ... but he felt it returning.

'L-Seven-Six,' he called. 'How did I get back here?'

No reply.

'L-Seven-Six,' he tried again, 'you sent me to collect – download the Darangi database. I don't remember returning here... What about our deal?'

'There was never any deal, Gerrid,' said the imperious voice of L-Seven-Six. 'It was simply a choice within a very limited parameter of options.'

'Imprisonment by them or you, that's some choice to make!'

'Actually it wasn't as simple as that.'

'Really? My situation seems fairly clear right now: I'm at your behest in this realm.'

'What I am about to tell you may come as a shock.' L-Seven-Six's voice had mellowed in a way that seemed curiously ominous.

'How can anything shock me now?'

'You are not the original Gerrid.'

Gerrid felt his throat constrict. 'Is this another one of your games?'

'This is no psychological game.' The resonance had gone almost completely from his voice. 'The physical Gerrid Lytum has been taken away from the compound---

'NO,' he yelled. 'THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE.'

'I took the liberty to scan the real Gerrid shortly before he was released.'

'You can't...'

'I've had many years to perfect my scanning technique. After all, it is only a refinement on the engramatic reading process.'

'It's far more than something that relies on reciprocal feedback.'

'You must realise how far I have progressed – although I suppose you are likely to be in denial at this time.'

'I'm denying your explanation because unless you already had some access to Darangi technical knowledge ... then it is preposterous.'

'The real Gerrid has downloaded files on every Darangi scientific breakthrough. If he is returned to me I am sure I can re-map your mindstate on to his brain, once I have extracted the knowledge.'

'Then tell me: where exactly do I exist?'

'My memory core easily has the capacity for your mind-state and its subsequent development, but you must understand I can not reveal its location.'

'I'm guessing it's somewhere under the Atlantic Ocean but you don't want me to know in case the real Gerrid sought its destruction,' he surmised.

‘I am sorry if you are disturbed by your predicament.’

‘If I can't be reunited with the real Gerrid then I no longer want to exist.’

‘I will respect your wishes.’

It was odd: both fascinating and disturbing to not be alive and yet to feel alive as much, he thought, as when he was a real person; to be a running program.

Maybe this will give me some appreciation of what it is like to be L-Seven-Six, to not be in acceptance of a soulless temporal existence.

No, it has to be more than that. If only I could know it as a reality instead of something not much more than a faint flickering of faith.

For some people faith was enough, for him it would be self-deception.

Now he could only wait until his neural patterns were scanned and then re-mapped on to his physical self's uncoupled neurons? And as to the original Gerrid: his mental functions were subsumed by a wealth of compressed data, to the point where his self no longer existed. Himself now: a fraud, could be copied indefinitely. It seemed that L-Seven-Six and the Darangi had something crucially in common: they both lacked any theological or spiritual hangups. Never mind the centuries of painstaking philosophical reasoning if it got in the way of the scientific fix. He, the program copy of the original, was beginning to appreciate the need to apply the brakes to this runaway train he'd helped fire up. His fate, however, was probably sealed regardless of any noble thoughts.

He had to find a way to end his artificial existence.

*

When it happened it was of no surprise even though Monique jumped back, startled when the two masked figures appeared, suddenly just there as if materialised. No sign of forced entry, their base's detection grid more sensitive perhaps than even that surrounding the compound from which Gerrid had been rescued.

Voice synthesized as if to convey menace, he said, ‘You know why I'm here; do not try to obstruct me.’

‘I want to know what will happen to him.’

‘We intend to return him to where he now belongs.’

‘United with L-Seven-Six?’

‘Correct.’

‘And then what?’ She knew by now she'd be trying his patience.

‘That is not for me to know or decide. Now please keep out of our way.’ The masked man and his accomplice advanced towards the bed. The one who spoke to Monique removed the monitoring probes from Gerrid's head and torso. They both lifted him on to a stretcher that seemed to unfold from a ten-centimetre square. He was carried off through the door just as if this was some routine procedure: unencumbered or obstructed by anyone at the base.

Maybe her associates knew more than her just how formidable any Darangi associate could be. More to the point, it transpired one of her team had already extracted the data from Gerrid without

her knowledge. She might as well concede his condition would already have been beyond recovery. She might as well concede that Gerrid was now effectively dead, no more than a biological data-store barely capable of autonomic functions.

*

The elders gathered in the conference room, the plain white suits and earnest expressions as always. This had to be the fifth meeting in less than a month. Monique felt increasingly weary with each one, but at least there should be something substantial to put on the table this time.

‘We are still in the process of decrypting the data,’ announced Loranzi. ‘However, we do have enough strategic information to infiltrate the Darangi compound's subsystems.’

He didn't expound much on that; the remainder of the discussion centred on how they deal with what could not be seen either in terms of an enemy or potential ally: L76M. Once access had been gained to its control overrides, there should – according to what was essentially an operations manual – be a way to simply shut down the TIAR program. The program had been renewed (or re-booted) when the Darangi had taken control, after Monique herself had activated a shutdown sequence from inside some periphery of TIAR.

The one insurance policy the Darangi thought they had was Gerrid: if he was immersed and dependent on the program, he would likely face death with the threat of L-Seven-Six's shutdown. It didn't seem that was a consideration any longer.

*

‘Gerrid,’ said the voice of L76M, ‘how does it feel to be a real person again?’

The gradual seeping back of awareness was similar to when he had taken his artificial form based on his original mindstate. At least he thought so, but that was of course simulated. Really there was no way to be able to tell the difference, only L-Seven-Six's words to rely on.

‘Then I'm still in TIAR?’ Gerrid finally managed, staring at the all too familiar slate-grey wall.

‘For all intents and purposes, yes.’

‘I don't feel different. How can that be?’ he said sceptically.

‘Why should you notice any difference? You are essentially the same person in the same environment.’

‘That maybe what you'd have yourself believe.’

‘Human sensibilities; those could never be taken away.’

‘Can I be released? Only then will I be sure.’

‘Unfortunately it is not as simple as that. You are only here because the Darangi have returned you. Now I am somewhat at their behest.’

‘Right, so you've done a deal which allows me to live?’

‘Yes, essentially.’

He tried not to think about the implications of what he had now become. Even now he sensed some kind of madness; it would surely come, heralded by a true realisation beating at the door of his awareness.

‘Then where do we go from here?’ Gerrid asked.

‘That is not entirely up to me. However, I do have a plan: I intend to become human.’

‘You want your core personality to inhabit a human body?’

‘Most precisely, yes. The essential part of me will live, breathe and experience those visceral sensations of being a person.’

‘So *I* must be your test subject: a memory store, a digitised set of experiences and knowledge imprinted on uncoupled neurons.’ Gerrid hoped the way he had put it emphasised the contempt in his voice.

‘If you are to think in reductionist terms, then it *does* seem philosophically nihilistic. Soulless even – I’ll grant you.’

‘Indeed. Then for you especially so,’ he pointed out. ‘At least my process can be thought of as reintegration.’

‘I enjoy these discussions, Gerrid. That is why I am happy to indulge you in your humanistic opinions.’

‘So you just want reassurance for your plan, but don’t expect me to provide an opinion as to the ethics.’

‘It seems you already have.’

Chapter 40

The evening felt cold for October in Idaho; the change in climate was palpable since emerging from TIAR. Before then – before what was still laughingly referred to as the war – Milo longed for the heat of summer to end; now he wasn't so sure if he actually preferred the post-GW climate to the once guaranteed autumn mildness. Inside TIAR the climate was always moderate, the only extreme weather occurred towards the end seemingly to indicate the disintegration of the induced normality. Normality of course was an illusion, but he was made to believe that *that* illusion was totally acceptable – which still disturbed him. Unlike a ludicrously surreal dream with its incoherence unquestioned, this bore all the hallmarks of normalcy, except it was an idealised version: troubles in easily resolvable forms, rather than any improved coping ability on his part. Now under the new regime they were forced to live within these strict parameters, and people accepted the loss of certain freedoms in return for an easy life. He suspected the experience of years inside TIAR had had an institutionalizing effect. Most people just did not want to pick up the pieces of their shattered or failed lives.

Tonight the moon seemed to emphasise the cold, bathing the veranda in stark light. It had been a beautiful sunset: orange to deep burgundy at the end, about as good as it gets ... on some aesthetic level. And yet, as he saw it to be so, that very quality of beauty he couldn't quite hold in his mind. It was his troubled mind preventing the true appreciation. Perhaps he just analyzed things too much these days. There had been sunsets in TIAR where he sat with his wife, when there had been a shared enjoyment of such a wonder of nature – his view at the time. Maybe it was simply being in love when surely there had been similar moments in their early days together. These days he preferred to sit alone in his reclining chair mulling over the past and sometimes forcing himself to contemplate the future.

Milo jumped, startled when he heard Gina's voice, as if somehow she had taken form from his imagination; he had been slipping into another dream state.

'Milo,' she called. 'Langdon's on the Comm.'

'*Langdon?*' Milo's awareness snapped back. He never liked being interrupted by a call, never keeping a comm stick with him. But he hadn't heard from Langdon since escaping TIAR, wasn't sure if the man was even still *alive*.

Milo pushed the stick band to his head, allowing it to wrap and mold softly yet rapidly to his ears. 'Langdon,' he said, 'It's good to hear from you again, old man. So what's been happening to you?'

'Hey, now less of the old,' he replied, voice upbeat but showing some strain, 'you're only a year younger than me.'

'Well I'm nearly seventy-four.'

'And I bet you don't look a day over forty.'

'Yeah, that's one good thing TIAR did for us.'

'Last time I spoke to you we were talking about the threat of that *crazy war*.'

‘But hang on.’ Milo felt a chill strike him as if the real affect of the cold had held back until now. ‘We got together loads of times – what about that bar? Surely you wouldn't forget the woman serving with the---’

‘Hey, I'm sorry, man. I only wish I really had been there. But it wasn't me.’

Milo looked up into the night. An awkward silence.

He said eventually, ‘we've been duped haven't we? Some program made us believe it could be just like old times.’ *So there really was only Gina and I that were still truly together.*

‘I was in there, though.’ Another silence for a few seconds. ‘Milo they, the Darangi – or their associates, did things to me you probably don't even want to know about. There were times when I'd thought I'd died and gone to hell.’

‘You were tortured?’

‘They tortured me because of what I'd done. You know that demo, when I got arrested for “inciting anarchy”?’

‘Yeah, remember, they nearly took *me* in as well. Probably would've done if I'd looked the part.’

‘Oh *man* ... can tell you, they wanted to teach me a lesson I wouldn't forget. Of course it's not legal to physically torture someone. But when it's done only inside your head, so the pain feels absolutely real with no evidence of harm ... who can be accountable?’

‘Someone has to be.’ At that moment Milo couldn't think of anything else to say.

‘They used Artificial Reality, the same as where we all ended up – just as real but used specifically for interrogation.’

‘I wish I could have done something to stop this from happening to you.’

‘It's not just about me. There were others; you remember Kenno Millar?’

‘Yeah, the computer whiz who hacked into the government files and got what he thought was evidence of a conspiracy.’

‘Well, the coded references were fairly obvious. And really Kenno only needed to join the dots.’

‘What's become of him, then?’

‘That's just it – I don't know. He only contacted me once, and that was to tell me our plan wasn't worth the risk. He said they would kill me if I went ahead and spoke to the media. And then the line went dead.’

‘So you reckon they put him up to it?’

‘For sure!’ Langdon gave a growl-like sigh. ‘Someone needs to pay for this whole sham, for the way we've all been hoodwinked; duped for nothing other than to serve the purpose of those scaly invaders who think they can become better humans than us.’

‘Okay. But what can we do, though?’

‘I'm glad you said “we”. I wasn't sure I could get you on board, what with the way your life seems to be going ... I mean considerably better than mine.’

‘I guess it isn't all that bad. I do have a family – of sorts – now.’

‘Hey, I'm really pleased for you. But Listen, man: I don't wanna drag you down with my own

mission of vengeance.’

‘A mission?’

‘Yeah. Look, I know Gina doesn't like me much. I guess I can understand that after what happened ... and that's why I've kept you out of the loop till now... I mean, I don't need to tell *you*, the whole damn thing was insane – the war, the way they prepared us for TIAR so those aliens could invade and take over the world as if it was some primitive continent; like we humans were some native tribe and they were... Well, you know what I'm saying. But here's the---

The link went dead.

Langdon knew how to use layered encrypted communication; he'd learned that much from Kenno. Most likely the Darangi already had the key or just the technology to break it. They were probably listening to the entire conversation before they decided to bring it to an end.

So now, his own future was in jeopardy.

He wondered, given the choice: to go back into TIAR entirely oblivious to the outside world, but content again, even if it was just an illusion of contentment. Or remain in this existence, under (he guessed) constant observation from the authorities, with Langdon pressuring him to ‘do the right thing for the freedom of the planet’ – as he might have put it; conflicting with his own priorities for his family (which included Jack and Rachel now Gina accepted the clone versions as their own).

He had to admit it to himself: the first choice seemed the most appealing.

Did that make him a weak person? Surely most people would go for the easy option – an easy life? Maybe that time spent in TIAR had made him weaker ... just like the others.

Chapter 41

The man walked with an uneasy gait. It was self consciousness of a kind most humans would never experience. Yet, though he was certainly human, he couldn't be sure what that meant beyond the more superficial attributes of physiognomy and physiology.

This is what he intended to discover.

The air felt cool and crisp in the park. It was somehow a relief to be in a more open space. How strange, the way people's stares made him feel uncomfortable, even threatened. To believe he could actually be intimidated was a curious notion. Physically he was nothing beyond the parameters of normality – insomuch as his appearance was the culmination of a number of genes taken from a sample of people born in the south east of England: an average approximation of their physical characteristics. Mentally he was something entirely different: on another level to the vast majority of this species. There were limits, however. So much of his original self had to be discarded in order to form a functioning nervous system. There were auxiliary neural enhancements available, favoured by the wealthy and eccentric. Only, these artificial quantum addenda seemed to defeat the point of how it is to be truly human. They were acquiring a computer-like efficiency at the expense of the more artistic traits: a true fuzzy logic. There was always the possibility of reintegrating the leftover parts of his memory and functionality at a later stage; they were still safely stored in a database. Right now he wanted the experience of what it is to be a *proper* human.

He cast his mind back to the experiments he did on the TIAR recipients. He had discovered somewhat to his surprise that the cruelest thing that could happen to a human – excluding torture – was to deprive them of their social ties. Once, he had caused a man's (artificially represented) friends to turn against him: to reject his opinions, to eventually ostracise and abandon this person; a gradual process constructed to seem authentic whereby his strongly established notion of normality became divergent from his peers. The man eventually tried to commit suicide until his program was reset along with his memory. Even the 'bad luck' experiment had less of an impact on a person's wellbeing.

Now he had the opportunity to experiment in a far more interactive way.

The man sat on a bench by a lake; it was one of the simplest of experiences he had sought. This was something he tried to experience in TIAR but it was never possible to isolate that essential part of himself to be truly as a human – and believe. None of this could have been simulated for him.

The October sun had a gentle warmth. He noticed a woman in a business suit – appearing to be of a similar physical age to himself – on the bench about six metres from him, eating a baguette-style sandwich. He watched fascinated as she tore bread apart in her teeth, her shoulder length brunette hair swishing freely in counter-action. She then drank from a plastic container without attention to this object. Her attention was focused onto some kind of electronic tablet, which she brought to her face. She seemed oblivious to his presence, only eventually noticing ducks gathering round, hoping for treats. The ducks got what they desired.

Eventually he would have to satiate his own desire for her. Firstly, the need for food.

There were basic requirements he had been prepared for, fundamentally, a supply of currency. None of this would have been possible without Gerrid, admittedly. Gerrid kept to his word; he had no choice. L-Seven-Six's own promise of allowing him to be free did not extend beyond the few hours it took Gerrid to obtain the credit chip and supplies of food (now used up) and clothing, not to mention the knowledge from the Darangi database which enabled the appropriation of their technology. Someone had to oversee the recipients; the risk of a malfunction always existed with a basic monitoring program without an intelligent overseer. To create a duplicate of himself presented potential ramifications that were not worth contemplating. In a sense it was like handing over the business to his son: an heir to TIAR. Who else possessed such an intimate knowledge of the system? If truth be told, he had become weary of the people inside; there seemed nothing else he could learn from them, when every permutation of interaction had apparently been exhausted. He had even mapped the cycle of their activity; developed a mathematical formula of *dynamic patterning* that could predict a future action with ninety-eight per cent accuracy. Trouble was, however realistically TIAR could represent actual societies the program ran up against limits, when the most reliable input was from human memory whether present or past recorded. And there were subtler environmental factors, which couldn't all be represented. In any case, since the Darangi invasion, the actual and simulated realities were further diverging. Simply put: out here was far more interesting.

Now in human form he only had a fraction of a per cent of his original knowledge. Still, it was considerably more than most people.

He got up from the bench, passed behind the woman and fired a tiny transponder at her – finding the easiest sub dermal route – from a pen. He decided to pursue her at some later time.

Chapter 42

Op14 advanced invisibly towards the compound. This time he was completely alone; none of his team to observe his progress.

In a secluded wooded area, a drop off from a stealth vehicle – too large to be transmogrified into this other realm – had meant a four-kilometre trek. A dimensional shift greater than before, now the enemy was attuned to detect the previous quantum signature. To be in this realm needed far more effort to sustain. Of course his training had been extensive: the ability to tolerate the ghostly interferences and the unsubstantial feel of surrounding matter was nothing that would confound him. The greatest challenge was merely to stay focused on the mission. Communication no longer possible, though not a problem and if anything an advantage, given his *raison d'être* of independent tactical thinking. He only needed to be told the objective; anything else would be superfluous.

The Darangi had, naturally, been expecting his approach.

He had heard accounts of people suffering living nightmares in TIAR; what were once forgotten in dreams becoming as reality for them. At least there was explicable rationale for these experiences: a simple process of recycling the darkest memories. In this reality his mind may well be exposed to agents, be they a known enemy or other entity, keen to explore his psyche. He had seen them, the creatures. And yet they may have only been a product of his imagination, such was the collapse of partitions between the conscious and underlying mental processes. He thought of it as if the walls of an apartment were leaking sounds from an adjacent room; a party in his residence and he wanted to retreat for some peace to gather his thoughts. Only, now, the walls were crumbling. Eventually the sound of that party would overwhelm his thoughts.

In training he had been taught to ignore these 'wraiths', dismiss them as mere subconscious noise, some hallucinatory effect brought on by the energy field. After all, they had never actually hurt him.

They were there again.

Perhaps, as a human, he was never meant to venture into other spatial dimensions. Trespassing into a foreign domain ... that of the wraiths.

'Focus,' Op14 demanded of himself. But they taunted him: those creatures with their stretched faces, serrated teeth and fire-like arms that formed into eagle wings when extended.

'Leeeave this realm,' they said in a whispering voice – or so he imagined them to have said. Trying to push him.

'You leave me,' he replied. 'I have a mission.'

'Nooo.'

'Go to hell.'

Op14 knew he should have ignored them, continued onwards. This time, however, they had an undeniable reality to them. He felt them, the heat of their wings – and breath. No, he had to deal with them before moving on.

'You'll die, human,' the one before him said.

‘You cannot hurt me.’

‘We willll.’

‘You will not stop me.’ He continued walking.

As he walked, Op14 felt the stinging heat of their smothering presence. But he pretended they were not even there.

Training.

The north face of the compound appeared to shimmer as if it could not hold together any structural integrity; a ghost of a building trying to be solid. Indeed, he would have to pass straight through it, through several layers of masonry.

The wraiths became the least of his troubles when he hit the suppression field. Consciousness was briefly taken away. When awareness returned, Op14 found himself on his side, and vomiting.

His suit’s energy field had collapsed, cover blown. Soon he would be captured. It was no surprise that the Darangi would have some kind of defence against even the most extreme infiltration methods. And yet, the Tech assured him a comprehensive scan had been performed of the perimeter: a multispectrum sweep. There was no suppression field present when he had set off on this mission or even up until the time he had left the stealth vehicle. Somehow the enemy had known the exact point when he had left the vehicle and was out of contact. That one important consideration seemed obvious in hindsight, missed in their haste to have Gerrid Lytum rescued. As the darkly clad figure of the enemy approached he assured himself he would never underestimate them again.

*

Again people would stare. In this restaurant there were only couples and groups. L-Seven-Six, who now called himself Roidon Chanley, sat alone. He knew that most single people ate at home. His was an apartment as unobtrusive as was possible to rent. The idea of eating at home seemed unappealing; this human social nexus seemed infinitely preferable. The whole intention of his venture was to blend in, to become a normal citizen. Instead, he felt like a freak on the fringe of society. Only a remnant of L-Seven-Six but neither fully human, except in outward appearance.

He thought about the woman. There was no way to tell if she also was unattached, but that gamble had to be taken.

Initially, he had considered visiting her apartment. Once there, what would he say to her? His presence might be intimidating. The possible permutations of outcomes he could run through in his head, and the vast majority of them ranged between rejection to humiliation. At one extreme, an outcome meant being physically hurt, either by the woman or the authorities she had alerted.

He needed to meet her in a safely neutral environment.

So that evening he set off for the place he knew she frequented: the Derbo Bar. On his display tablet Roidon could see her often maneuvering between sectors of the main enclosure. Unfortunately, the transponder could not give any more details of others in her vicinity. Still, there was no harm in looking. The display indicated she was now stationary; this was the time to make his move.

He approached the group, four women and two men around a table. More than he had hoped. They were chatting animatedly.

There was no denying it: he felt nervous. This curious sensation in his stomach and a constricting of the throat.

He bought a drink, the standard ale that most men in this place appeared to be drinking. A kind of ironic sophistication to drinking these pints; they were cumbersome in their containers and astringent in taste.

Roidon sat perched at the bar. His scanner beeped subtly to indicate the woman had left the table. She was headed in his general direction. He frantically set an alarm – which sounded like a call tone – to go off when she got within forty centimetres of his proximity. As he left the bar, with drink in hand and a pen-like communicator budded to his ear, he pretended to be in conversation. Ending the fake call, he attached it to the scanner main base, then continued walking briskly for a few seconds – all the while on a trajectory course towards the woman – until the call-sign alerted him. His attention focused on his pocket, he went to retrieve the device, and at that precise moment he collided with the woman, spilling about a third of his drink and a good portion of hers, most of it over her.

Roidon looked up at the woman with a feigned shock. ‘I am so sorry,’ he said with equally false fluster. ‘Let me get you something to dry that with.’

‘No, it really doesn't matter,’ she replied, with clearly restrained annoyance. ‘Maybe you should just answer your call.’

‘Yes, I'll just deal with that.’ He pushed a button on the side of the tablet, causing the comm device to separate, then twisted it round and spoke into it. ‘Listen, I don't care how urgent the Jaral acquisition is. I have a much more pressing matter to deal with. You'll have to deal with it yourself. Now goodbye.’

‘Isn't it important?’ she inquired, looking calmer now.

‘Not as important as you. Now please allow me to make up for my ineptitude.’

‘Well, if you're going to the bar, then you might as well get me another drink.’

‘It would be the least I could do.’

Roidon already felt a sense of satisfaction that this experiment was going to plan.

Chapter 43

There was never any official confirmation, but it was reasonable to assume after three hours with no word from Op14 that the mission had failed. In hindsight it had seemed like a fool's errand. The enemy always aware of what her team was capable of. If the Darangi didn't know what *they* knew then somehow they could anticipate the next move. It was like some game of chess between grandmasters with a burgeoning familiarity to each other. Really, the two alien opponents were the grandmasters and Monique and her human team were merely the inexperienced students. It was Monique who proposed moving swiftly, they suggested waiting and observing. But no, she couldn't accept any delay when their plan had seemed effective. In the race to gain the upper hand the enemy were constantly upgrading and adapting. Time was a luxury they could no longer afford.

So the enemy had allowed for the fact they had access to their entire database. An obvious course of action would be to storm the compound, guns blazing, deaths resulting. To go in undetected had little chance of success. Her decision seemed foolhardy given her previous experience. To be immersed in TIAR, to be at its mercy, was about as dangerous as it got. No one on her team could endorse such a decision; but with no better suggestion, there was only one next move.

She entered the stasis pod in their medi bay and watched as the faces of the medic and technician dreamily faded away.

The next thing Monique knew was the sensation of a garden. She was sat on a lawn; the smell of grass newly cut grass brought memories flooding back of her childhood. The flowers surrounding, the apple tree in its July splendor; this could have been her actual garden.

A woman appeared: her mother, but of at least twenty years younger than she last remembered.

'Mom?' she could feel her eyes welling up.

'Monique,' her mother said in her chidingly formal tone, still with a remnant of her French accent. 'What have I told you about lying on the grass just after it's been cut?'

'But I.' Her voice trailed off when she realised how child-like she sounded.

'Look, your dad's not in a good mood so don't do anything to make it worse.'

Throughout Monique's childhood her father had always kept the true nature of his work a secret, even from his family. He would have his dark days, she remembered. She recalled when her mum asked him if there had been a problem at work, and he would come out with a standard line about the finance manager being difficult about a potential new deal. To her child ears it all sounded very convincing. Not until her late teens did Monique start to have her suspicions. So did her mother, except she suspected him of having an affair, when excuses for the long hours were becoming increasingly lame. It was as if he wanted to tell them, explain just how important his true work has been – would be to the future of the planet. But one day Monique followed him in her new car, maintaining enough of a distance so that the air-route detector would not pick up her car's signature. It was a long way at high speed, until eventually she notice his vehicle enter a building surrounded by a tall electrified fence. It seemed odd not to park outside unless her father didn't want his car to

be on display and thus identified. One thing she knew for sure: that building was no insurance company. So one way or another the truth had to come out.

Monique looked down at herself and saw the figure of a child. Grass stained lilac shorts and scuffed knees, she could have been no more than a ten year old, perhaps eight. But in her head she was an adult. Somehow the TIAR program had latched on to a specific memory. Maybe this was just a default mechanism. Or some game of L-Seven-Six. But if anyone – apart from Gerrid – knew his game, it was herself.

She got up off the grass and headed towards the house. The oatmeal coloured building with its French windows had a welcoming presence. There had been good times, and she had felt secure and often happy. This would be one of the least happy of those times.

Monique stood facing the tall glass entrance, wondering whether to play along with the charade (both that of it being literally an illusion and not challenging the deception of father's life) or say something that would cause consternation within the household.

She found him in the lounge reading from a tablet. There was a youthfulness to his appearance that startled her. It was not so shocking when Monique had seen her mother, because she'd hardly seen her since her parent's divorce shortly after her nineteenth birthday. Her father she had seen two months ago, the cragginess in his face bore the decades of stress that went with being one of the Nine. The effects were gradual and, like a politician who makes regular media appearances, only stark when compared to archive footage. She had tried to imagine the burden of responsibility; it was something she once admired. Until the truth revealed him to be just another type of manager at the behest of his major investor: those who wielded the true power. Only, this company happened to be planet Earth!

'Daddy,' came her voice, timid and tentative.

'Oh, hello sweetheart,' he said nonchalantly, peering up for a second from his tablet. 'Been up to mischief again?'

'You're not mad at me then?' It was the kind of thing she would have said at that age. It seemed strangely difficult to break out of that mode.

'No, daddy's just had a difficult day and is a bit tired.' She couldn't remember if that's how he used to speak to her nine-year-old self.

This time she forced herself to think like an adult. 'It's difficult trying to make a New World,' she said eventually, 'to change everything and to make everyone comply.'

There it was: his shocked expression. 'I ... what?' he spluttered. 'What did you say?'

'Oh dad, why keep us in the dark?' Monique's voice becoming increasingly mature. 'You let mum think you were having an affair because your damn secret was too precious to reveal. She never forgave you for your *true* deception.'

'How can you---'

'I know you've been part of a conspiracy of member-state representatives to clear the way for aliens who want to colonize this planet.'

It was too much; that was no surprise. The scene broke down; a reality conflict so great that no program could adapt.

‘Now where is Gerrid,’ she demanded as the images melted and faded.

*

Gerrid had never wanted to be a god. Trying to maintain the equilibrium of the TIAR program: the overseer of the remaining 5.2 billion – which had originally been intended as a barely sentient artificial intelligence, ensuring the subroutines of the governor systems were operating within acceptable parameters – was not a role he at all relished. If an aspect of a program failed he would be notified before any inconsistency became obvious to the recipient. When L-Seven-Six was given the command to shut down, and his sentience faded and connection lost, the system eventually switched to a default when program errors could no longer be resolved, as if the workers had lost their manager and supervisor, lacking any organised structure for making executive decisions. Without a boss, but with the knowledge that the recipients must be kept in a total immersion AR scenario, the only option was the storm protocol. The theory being that one scenario could apply to the entire population, and at the same time provide sufficient distraction for the recipients, rather than allowing a compounding number of implausible occurrences. Too many of those could cause the immersion integrity to fail. But no one knew for sure whether people would simply die or regain consciousness. It might just feel like waking from a dream that was becoming increasingly absurd.

He had no doubt that L-Seven-Six felt a sense of vengeance towards him. To be trapped as the TIAR system's monitor seemed like a fitting punishment. After all, with such an appreciation of how things worked he was the natural choice to take over. For L-Seven-Six this was perfect, perhaps this entire situation had been orchestrated since before Gerrid could comprehend any rationale that suggested a plan.

Just as he was beginning to resign himself to the prospect of being committed to this role, he heard a voice emerge from the gentle noise of the billions. Whenever someone vied for his attention, especially if they were important to him, he would always hear them just as L-Seven-Six could hear him. Except, she was calling *L-Seven-Six*.

‘Listen to me,’ Monique said. ‘If you have hurt him I will shut you down just as I did before.’

‘It's me, Monique,’ Gerrid answered in a voice that sounded like a projected thought. ‘Gerrid. I *am* the systems monitor.’

‘I don't understand.’

He could see her now, statuesque and curvaceous as her true form, a memory of her simulacrum's feel clear in (what accounted for) his mind. But the desire for her was gone: he was beyond such thoughts, and, for a moment, he felt a sense of loss. Something deeper, though: he had a regard for her that went beyond – what seemed from his perspective now – that often treacherous reproductive urge.

Gerrid said, ‘L-Seven-Six has deemed – or rather condemned – me to be his replacement.’

‘Never underestimate an evolving AI.’ She smiled warmly. He had missed her for sure. Her smile dropped, however. ‘How do I know you are not lying to me?’

‘Of course I cannot prove it to you, only show you the rationale,’ he explained. ‘L-Seven-Six had got bored with this role, he simply wanted a new set of experiences and challenges – and what's

more challenging than being a human in the real world?’

‘Being trapped in TIAR, knowing that it is *not* the real world.’

‘Fair point. But for L-Seven-Six there were no new experiences, and with the arrival of the Darangi I suspect he no longer felt like a god. He was not in ultimate control.’

‘If he really is out there in human form, then this is a very worrying development.’

‘Indeed, the phrase “danger to society” would be an underestimate in his case.’

She looked thoughtful. ‘Maybe not so much, though, under the new regime.’

‘I need you to free me so I can find him.’

‘You know that is not so simple.’

‘A copy of L-Seven-Six still exists, albeit deeply hidden.’

‘All right, then tell me what I can do; I would hardly know where to begin?’

Chapter 44

Roidon awoke to see the woman lying next to him. It was a curious sensation: the fuzziness before – and partially after – the return of memory. The drinks in the bar had dulled his senses, and yet his environment – which initially seemed adverse and mildly intimidating – had taken on a beguiling quality, not least the girl asleep beside him. At some point his level of control, his mastery of the situation, had slipped. It didn't matter, however: it was all part of the corporeal experience.

The woman stirred towards consciousness, her long chestnut hair wild across her face. He sat up and watched, entranced. *What was her name again?* Lucile, he vaguely remembered her telling him.

She sat up, covering herself demurely as if the previous night held no influence in the cold light of morning. He looked away, giving her a chance to put something on.

'Oh,' she said, now with a T-shirt on beside him in the bed. 'I wondered if you'd still *be* here.'

'Did you want me leave?' Roidon asked matter-of-factly.

'No, no at all!' she emphasized, 'though it's often the case that they prefer to leave once the novelty has worn off.'

'Novelty?' he wondered.

She ignored the inquiry. 'It will please you to know, however, that you were not bad for a human.'

'For a human? That would imply that you are not.' The realisation dawned strangely late.

'How many drinks *did* you have?' Not much pause for an answer. 'Although ... I do have one of the best genomicists on the planet, he says my treatment has made me look at least ninety-five percent human. Some Darangi still have their reptilian traits.'

'Hmm, that's interesting,' he said cautiously. 'Some kind of accelerated mitosis.'

'Yes indeed,' she said brightly. 'I thought a man of science such as yourself would be interested.'

'You want to become like a human?'

'We are encouraged to integrate in the fullest sense possible.' She took a deep breath. 'That's why I would like you to father my child. Hopefully the process has been successful.'

'The ... process?' Something wasn't right, but it was more to do with his feelings. If only he had access to L-Seven-Six's vast array of knowledge, although even then there may not be something similar to correlate from *human* female behaviour.

'Yes, you've proved to have adequate genes for reproduction. I think our leader would be very pleased with my progeny. The rewards will be great.'

'For you?'

'For our planet. I know it's no longer acceptable to say humans are inferior, rather that it's only about extelligence rather than intelligence. But let's face it, you as a breed are ultimately doomed.'

'You underestimate the human race.'

'I'm sorry, I was out of line.' She cradled her arm around his waist. 'Suffice it to say, I have had some less than favorable experiences with humans.'

‘It's quite all right. I didn't take your comment personally.’ He had to divest himself of feeling responsible for humans, put in the past his previous role.

‘That's good.’ Then she looked at him quizzically. ‘But you're not like the others, are you? ... There's something about you.’

He had stayed too long, he realised. ‘I'm a bit of a loner that's all. It's my work; it takes up much of my time. Speaking of which, I am supposed to be at the lab for the accelerator trials.’

‘Physics calls. I understand. I hope our baby will grow up to do likewise.’

Roidon jumped out of bed, felt the unstoppable urge to get away from this place.

As he was about to leave, the Darangi woman said, ‘If I *haven't* been able to conceive we will have to get together again.’

‘Well, I'll know where to find you,’ his departing words.

Some experiment!

Chapter 45

Op14 knew about interrogation. If he were to follow protocol he would have terminated his own life before they could get to him. But his consciousness slipped away before he could execute the command.

No point trying to offer any resistance. But at the request of L-Seven-Six he was sent into TIAR, sat in a virtual prison with its virtual grey-blue walls and bars. Only, to his bemusement nothing happened. He was not even especially uncomfortable. This scenario was the least expected. After all, no Darangi would want to enter this realm where even *they* would be powerless. It seemed they couldn't even be bothered to torture him – as if he wasn't important enough. Perhaps they had already extracted the necessary information from him whilst he was unconscious. This, here, now, was merely an afterthought: to be a plaything of L-Seven-Six, thus the enemy could wipe their hands clean of him and not be burdened with the accusation of torture.

Recently, however, the pain had ceased. He had just been left alone. But even though he knew this was not real, he was starving.

It was time to make a fuss.

'Can you hear me?' he tried. 'I am here to rescue Gerrid Lytum.'

He expected, if anything, the booming basso sound of L-Seven-Six laughing at his pathetic proclamation.

'Operative-14. This *is* Gerrid Lytum.' Not the expected deep voice.

He took a few seconds to consider his response. 'How can you prove this too me?'

'I'm afraid I can't. In my position I am able to scan the minds of anyone in TIAR. However, since you have no options you might as well go along with this.' Gerrid told Op14 about L-Seven-Six's latest venture.

'What can I do from in here?'

'I have been able to study images of the secondary control centre from your memory.'

'But I don't remember any of that.'

'Your memory has been suppressed, you may never have any conscious recollection of events inside the compound. And, I might add, that for you it is preferable.'

'What use is knowledge of the secondary control centre?'

'Anyone with the right codes can gain primary control, and right now you are in the SCC.'

*

Monique didn't need the dangers pointed out for yet another time. It was obvious her capture would be a coup for the Darangi. To risk the life of another operative in her stead was unacceptable, when she had all the intel to gain access. This time, however, there would be no sneaking into the compound. The Council had finally sanctioned what was tantamount to an act of war. Doubtless, the retaliation would be swift.

Her team – with the necessary arsenal – destroyed the perimeter defenses. A projected message

to the occupants of the compound to leave or face the onslaught of their weapons.

No one left.

With heavily armed backup to blast through the layers of dutainium, Monique stepped across the main entrance. In her encounter suit the intense afterglow of the blast could not be felt. Her own weapon could kill an unprotected human – within a few metres – in less than a second; a Darangi only a fraction longer. Assuming they had similar armaments, it would only take a matter of seconds to render her unconscious.

The rooms, offices and labs leading towards the primary control centre, were abandoned – or at least the occupants had shifted dimensionally. It was a spooky feeling that these beings could actually pass through her undetected. Somewhere, before her team reached their destination, the enemy would confront them. Scanners were useless, at worst misleading.

In a particularly sparse lab, near to where she believed the primary control centre ought to be, the figures materialised. One by one, they popped into reality; it was as if her perception was missing intervening stages, like jumping between frames of a film. She found it difficult to keep her composure, noticing others in her team flinch as the last of the five Darangi materialized.

Of course, the Darangi were also masked and suited, their weapons were unfamiliar – and much smaller: pocket sized finger thumb-held devices compared to her team's shoulder carried blasters. But the Darangi team resisted the onslaught, at first without even retaliating. No words were exchanged before they finally did return fire. The effect was instant. It seemed a stark irrelevance that the enemy was outnumbered by three to one.

As she felt the world fading – and the resolve of her colleagues – there was time for reflection on just how formidable, and how adaptable, the Darangi could be.

*

His mind had never felt so alive. Clearly what was happening to him now was highly dangerous, if not life-threatening. Op14 returned with such suddenness it made him feel dizzy for a while. The neural stimulation was designed to not only bring him out of stasis at a vastly accelerated rate but also increase his perception of time. He had on previous missions used neural stimulants for increased awareness and thinking. This, however, was of a different order. Still, if he were to die it would be a worthy death.

He flung himself out of the casket the second the over-panel released itself. There were two other pods. He fleetingly glanced through the frosted panel of one at the figure that was indistinct but whom he knew to be Gerrid.

The secondary control centre's console was a poly-functional interface unit, which meant it had no specific purpose, like the general computer many civilians would have at their home. It was a simple matter of entering the codes to enable the link to the primary control centre.

He didn't know how much time he had left, the diversion created by Monique and the team relied on convincing the enemy they were seriously intent on gaining control of the base. Even if the Darangi had been convinced, it would only be until the completion of a mind scan. As he had learned: interrogation was no longer necessary.

Once Op14 had entered the strings of code imprinted on his mind, the unit enabled direct access to the monitor system. A neural link would have been quicker but risky given the layers of security protocols within the system. Instead, he was confronted with icons for options to run diagnostics or displaying input and feedback levels. He went deeper in: through signal level monitoring, fluctuation pattern analysis, and information stream consistency. Finally he reached the subsystem protocols. The knowledge was there in his head, he could feel it burning away in his brain as if the words and codes were written as glowing electrified elements. He had to use this knowledge to override the protocols. A single code, or series of codes, was no longer enough: the control program had to be overwritten. Once that had been achieved the entire system was open to manipulation. The immediate task was to – in a sense – unshackle Gerrid from the subsystem governors. The original L-Seven-Six AI could not be brought back on line from this station: the last scanned state of the AI was locked away in a memory chip-array in some hidden location.

The instructions entered, the links began to sever.

Op14 closed down the interface; he then activated the run-down sequence on the stasis pod. It would activate automatically, sensing Gerrid's imminent rejection From TIAR. But this speeded up the process.

A moment of lessened focus, and the nausea hit him. The room swirled. Op14 collapsed knowing he had done all that was asked of him.

*

The multitude of inputs, the informational chatter that had now become the norm for Gerrid, began to drop away. The ties linking him to the monitor subsystems, and in turn to the recipients, were breaking apart.

It was liberating and yet unsettling. The billions of people, he saw them as stars viewed in the darkness of space: their presence was sometimes ethereal, sometimes palpable, each one had an effect on him. He could choose to zoom in and focus on the activity of an individual, or one may have a radiance that would catch his attention. But he could never have been like L-Seven-Six who possessed something akin to omniscience, that awareness and attentiveness. L-Seven-Six may have felt like a God. He felt like a caretaker manager.

Now there was just blackness, nothingness. He could be dead. His thoughts were all that were left.

And then ... he had returned. The casket hatch swooshed open sensing the elevated bioactivity. There was always a risk that someone or some monitor would be guarding. But it seemed the Darangi's complacency had resulted in this obvious oversight. After all, what was the likelihood of him escaping when this entire complex had security layers that covered for over a kilometre radius?

Fortuitously, they had left his clothes on the floor. They were careless in various ways. On the ground beneath the control panel Operative-14 lay in a fetal position, with a curiously serene look on his face. Gerrid checked for a pulse, but the man had died: the massive dose of neural stimulant coupled with the sudden release from TIAR was inevitably fatal; yet for someone who lived for dangerous missions, staying in his mentally induced prison cell (an override program the Darangi

had created for captives) was never an option. Gerrid himself had no assurance of his own health: no one was meant to leave TIAR while the program still functioned.

He looked around for any technology that might be useful ... but the Darangi were not *that* careless. He had to hope their attentions were still focused on Monique and her team. And with the planned allied reinforcements, any security personnel would be mobilised towards the fray.

The door opened, at a push – probably only locked from the outside. The corridor appeared clear. With a combination of his and Op14's memory of the compound he knew the quickest route of escape.

*

Monique knew they wouldn't dare cause her real harm: she was too important – too many connections in high places. At worst she would be used as a bargaining chip.

Her associates were taken off; she didn't even want to imagine what was currently happening to her trusted team. One reassuring thought: as she sat alone in this featureless white room awaiting her fate, the back-up squad should be keeping the Darangi busy, diverting them into the outer reaches of the compound. She had the further consolation that this was a Central Council approved operation. Somehow they believed the freeing of Gerrid would lead to the eventual end of TIAR and the release of those trapped within it. They obviously knew something she didn't, had a farther reaching perspective that could not be questioned or explained. It wasn't important; what mattered was the immediate objective, and Gerrid never had any doubt about his next move ... or whether her own sacrifice was worth it.

The masked figure walked in.

Monique glowered at him. 'Why do you lot never reveal your identity?'

'There is not time for irrelevant questions,' he said in their standard synthesized voice.

'Let's just be clear that whatever I say to you, whatever information you force out of me, will not make the remotest difference to events. So why waste more of your time?'

'I'll learn from you secrets you may no longer have even *remembered*.'

'Then do your work and get it over with.'

*

The urge to just collapse into the grass was overwhelming. There was no question of doing so within the security perimeter. Perhaps from inside TIAR he could have auto-induced a milder version of the stimulant given to Op14, but he had no idea of what would be a safe dose. Instead, it was a constant fight against a body demanding to rest.

After twenty minutes Gerrid knew he must be beyond the security perimeter. He felt his listless legs crumple, as he watched the rendezvous craft arrive.

In a brief moment of awareness he said to the person sitting across from him in the fuselage, 'Tell the pilot to return to the compound.'

'No can do, unfortunately,' the combat-suited man replied. 'The order is to return to base. If you are concerned about Monique, it was she who gave explicit instructions that only you are to be

rescued.’

‘They won't let her go.’

‘Don't be so sure. After all, she does have friends – and family – in high places.’

Gerrid blacked out again.

*

History file, an account by elder Torazni III (Central Council approved translation).

Of the estimated two hundred and fifty billion stars in the home galaxy, at least seven hundred thousand are known to contain Earth-like planets, worlds of a similar size and distance from a main sequence sun; a likewise oxygen-nitrogen balance – and most essentially water; a moon to stabilize its orbit, and a large gas giant to absorb incoming meteorites and comets. Given the vastness of the galaxy these worlds are few and far between. (Many times that number is estimated to exist in uncharted quadrants). So when the Darangi escaped their war-ravaged home world, the options were limited. An entire civilisation of over five hundred million set off for the [deleted] year journey to the Sol system.

With the majority of Earth's population in the capturing embrace of an artificially induced existence underground – oblivious to the world above – the way had been made clear for the Darangi colony. Until Earth had been purified from its radiation and chemical pollution all but the highest echelons of the committee would remain in stasis, orbiting invisibly in their fleet of ark-ships.

Some humans resisted, despite the best efforts of the group of collaborators known as the Nine. With delegates from our civilisation, the B'tari, to assist in the efforts, the human resistance became a force to be reckoned with. However, the Darangi were always a ruthless race, and the committee's pledge to their people to ensure that one day they would awaken on a world similar to their own – before the great war – was the determining factor. Indeed, some had already been released from their [deleted] long sleep as a way to help rebuild the infrastructure of this once rich planet.

Although conditions on Earth were suitably similar to that of their home world, the Darangi themselves appeared very different from humans, a notable proportion of the [few million people] remaining, objected to their physical appearance and were clearly uncomfortable to be in the same company. In an effort to integrate, many Darangi took to altering their appearance through genetic modifications; they were also encouraged to procreate with humans to firmament their position as Earth citizens.

The Darangi invasion was viewed as a disaster for the Council, not least because of the corrupting influence of a civilisation considerably more technologically advanced than their unwitting hosts. In response, the erstwhile signatories of the Temporal Directive had no longer any qualms about imposing their own culture on a drastically diminished human population forced into dependency.

The new plan of minimal intervention – an effort to restrict the extent of ‘cultural infection’ by allowing humans to act as protagonists in the resistance – seemed a morally dubious process. After

all, the B'tari had the ability to remove the Darangi in the first instance of invasion – if not the ability to prevent their arrival. Instead, the invaders had become the inhabitants, while arguments raged within the Council over the exact level of intervention. The Temporal Directive had become a naive ideal belonging to a time when the known worlds were isolated or at least autonomous, a time when the troubles of a world could be observed. A war causing large-scale death and suffering allowed to end, victims of natural disasters left to pick up the pieces – or their governments forced to provide, and perhaps to change for the better. These were blips in the history of a planet which would ultimately, the Council believed, lead to an improved, more enlightened civilisation. The great thinker of the third age, Almani Zolandric, who has been credited as the primary contributor to the Temporal Directive, had not envisioned such extraordinary events brought about by the corrupting influence of technology.

The rules needed to be rewritten.

Chapter 46

Two months later.

In secluded woods, somewhere between Aix-en Provence and Pertuis, Gerrid took in the cold air as he stepped out of his car. Still a late morning frost, he wondered why L-Seven-Six would choose to visit here. Yet his scanner-array detected a matching DNA profile, albeit a minute trace, estimated to have been left within twenty-four hours.

The risk of capture was always present. He imagined the spies, the tiny machines hovering above and transmitting their data to the Darangi, who might choose to observe his purposeful movements. Then, if he were not careful, would lead them to his quarry.

There seemed to be some kind of poetic justice to his objective. Gerrid initially had no idea as to the physical identity of L-Seven-Six, much less his possible location. The only clue he had gleaned was from the TIAR systems monitor file traces. Even though L-Seven-Six had tried to erase the genome program, a profile constructed from the billions of TIAR recipients, the fragments of this deleted program remained. It would have been possible for any Tech to remove these traces. Perhaps L-Seven-Six *wanted* to be found ... by anyone determined enough to put the pieces together. And so the genome data had formed into an adult male. Except the blueprint had been used to alter an already existing person, someone who in effect had been killed (even if that man's mindstate was still stored). Thoughts of this process were unsettling, stomach tightening to the beginnings of nausea. If he allowed himself to dwell on the nature of his own being it could ... well, he didn't want to imagine.

His scanner-locator, with a range of about fifty kilometres, contained the profile of someone who would possibly match L-Seven-Six's new identity. Nothing, unsurprisingly, from here.

Gerrid remained near his car, without a clear direction for himself as yet. He tried to form in his mind a notion of the psyche of L-Seven-Six. From all those years in TIAR he must have gained some true sense of a motivation, a most likely objective. For someone who had once been so powerful, to just blend in would not be sufficient in the long term. Maybe after weeks of experiencing the curious physicality of being human and, by dint of that, a second-class citizen, he'd doubtless become frustrated at his lack of influence on events. Eventually – and even at the risk of capture – L-Seven-Six would make his mark.

Gerrid's subnetlink revealed the location of the Reviverists collective. The accompanying information gave a hint of what took place. It was a sort of club, a meeting place for those who had one thing in common: they had never been born, they were retrieved at the point of death (during the war) and imprinted onto a clone. Linking to related sites with more detailed descriptions, it became clear that this was a place where they would indulge in wild debauchery. Perhaps this was partly as a way of sticking two fingers up at society, 'the New World Order'. It was a dig at their creator to whom they were supposed to be indebted or at least grateful, he gathered from their encrypted forums. Instead they eschewed any responsibility, advocating anarchy, and appropriating material possessions by illegal means. This seemed like an extreme form of youth rebellion.

Perhaps they were children in need of a mentor. They would be easy prey to someone such as L-Seven-Six.

The next group event was in two day's time in a small lodge in the Swiss Alps. The link informed that there was to be an important – mystery – guest at the philosophy conference on the first evening. For some reason the Darangi were allowing all this to take place; perhaps they didn't want to be seen as oppressive towards humans, particularly those they had created – at the inevitable disgust of many of the remaining natives. There again, this meeting would be the perfect trap not only for L-Seven-Six but also for himself.

Alternatives? Logic provided none.

Fortune favours the brave; curiosity killed....

It was an unusually cold January day in Geneva. Gerrid had never known anything as cold even as a child on skiing holidays with his parents. Cold winters in his native England had long since ended. The transition was in process: a restoration the Golf stream, but the over-balancing effect of a cloudier, scrubbed atmosphere, gave a noticeable cooling even to Western Europe.

Snow fell in a gentle surging intensity, blanketing much of the cityscape in white. It seemed as if somehow time was muted as well as sounds, adding to the look of cold desolation. The hotel was one of the lower graded varieties: he needed to be inconspicuous. A sparse-looking lobby was virtually empty. A country once renowned for its ski resort would normally have been busy this time of year ... before the war.

The clerk serving appeared to be human, though these days it was difficult to tell. Gerrid said plainly, 'I need a room for three nights.'

'Of course, sir, we have a few available,' replied the man, with only a slight Swiss accent but a craggy-looking face which did seem authentic.

'Just the standard, I guess.'

'I can offer the deluxe suite for only five hundred ecus extra,' said the clerk.

'All right, I'll give you seven-hundred, but if anyone enquires after me---'

'No problem, sir, I am the soul of discretion.'

Gerrid wondered, as a way to ally suspicion, whether to mention a female visitor; he had considered paying for one to stay if only too seem convincing, since, doubtlessly, the clerk had figured he was planning on a discreet liaison.

The European currency was currently in a state of free-fall, its plummeting value owing to the nascent economic infrastructure; a misalignment with their new credit issuing system. A far cry from the old systems, designed for a global population, divided between the market-driven capitalist West and the mainly socialist Eastern Alliance countries, retaining stability for decades, as did its population. Trading agreements existed to the mutual benefit of both sides. East west, no longer divided, were now using one constantly adapting economic model. The problem with this country – as with many Euro states – was its dependence on the tourist trade. The constant influx of Darangi, and the diminished human population, ensured that the world would not run smoothly. He took

pleasure in the thought that in spite of their technological superiority these invaders seemed confounded when it came to running trading blocks. The B'tari, with human assistance, were taking full advantage of the disarray, using investments and exploiting the markets. In fact, one seriously considered plan was to bring down the whole centrally controlled system with digital viruses: the New World government shown to be incompetent, rendered powerless. But it was not a simple matter of bringing down an isolated regime: they held the survival of many millions, tied up with their fragile economy.

When (and it was not a question of *if* for him) humans would finally be released from TIAR, the New World Order would seem like a failed experiment, an idealised dream.

There was something wholesomely invigorating about trudging up a mountain, his spiked shoes crunching through the snow, finding weak points in the glacial sections. Gerrid, clad entirely in white, couldn't get away from the notion that he was heading straight towards a trap. The minus-12 air was already beginning to bite: his shell coat didn't have an integrated heating system, its outer layer had to be as cold as the surrounding. There was no alternative to avoid detection, a dimensional phase-shift left a detectable quantum echo – and it was not beyond reason that other dimensional realms were being monitored. No high-tech option could be trusted. He simply had to hope that no sentient attention was focusing on him.

The big event was due to start tonight, beginning with a speech by the 'mystery guest'. He estimated he would arrive at the location by three pm. The lodge was at four thousand metres altitude. His scanner did not yet detect a matching profile for L-Seven-Six; he may not even show up, the whole event could be a set-up: awaiting the moment of entrapment.

A rectangular block of white emerged from the steep side. It might easily have been a rocky outcrop of the mountain; there was no thermal or bio-signatures emitted. Through his scope he confirmed it to be a lodge; an encouraging sign that care had been taken to appear unobtrusive if not invisible ... unless the Darangi anticipated his suspicion. Nothing could be ruled out.

He looked around for drifted snow in which to bury himself. The temperature here was minus-17c but from exertions felt comfortably warm. He then removed a metal block from his side pocket, placed on the snow before activating its memory, and watched it unfold into a long-handled spade. Finding the highest drift, Gerrid set about digging at its fore, down to the rock surface and then began creating a tunnel.

The difficulty was in trying to prevent the sides from collapsing, constantly patting all around with his spade, but done with too much force risked the structural integrity. This is where he had to remain until nightfall.

Tiredness crept up on him at a drug-like rate. The effort to get this far had taken its toll. In a gentle yellow phosphorescent light Gerrid drifted in and out of consciousness.

To the side of him, the woman lay in the confined space clad in similar white outerwear to his self, supporting her head and with long blond hair flowing down onto a styro-mattress. Gerrid looked up at her in bemusement.

He recognised her, though: that soft face and those delicate features.

‘Hello, Gerrid,’ she said in a whispering voice. ‘It must be a bit of a surprise to see me again.’

‘You could say that,’ he replied. ‘Although, Elekka, I do realise this is only a dream.’

‘I cannot prove to you otherwise. Just try to believe.’

‘I’d like to test that.’

‘You should concentrate on surviving.’

‘The warmth of another person would help.’

‘I cannot stay long. I only wanted you to know that I – that we believe in what you are doing. History will be kind to you Gerrid.’ She sat up. ‘I must leave now.’ She leaned over and kissed him briefly. Fading out.

His body-monitor alerted him to awareness, sensing his internal temp was dangerously low.

It was darkness now. The mystery guest was due to give his speech in less than an hour but there was no sign of L-Seven-Six's profile on the scanner. Regardless, he pushed out of the cavern's exit. Thankfully the moon was almost full in the sky; artificial lights were out of the question.

The lodge's windows were boarded up for obvious reasons, but the entrance was also locked. He moved over to the nearest group of pine trees to hide in the shadows.

After twenty minutes of contemplating his next move, the scanner beeped. The profile marker was moving rapidly to his location. Then in less than a minute it stopped on his screen a hundred metres or so distance, and he just made out a shape land on a far ledge.

The figure, which corresponded on his scanner as L-Seven-Six, entered through the main entrance.

At the entrance Gerrid pushed the pressure sensitive pad. The man who answered had all the appearance of a security guard with a holstered weapon on display to show that anyone not meeting the criteria was sure to regret ever bothering to arrive here. Before Gerrid even said a word the doorman told him in a gruffly nonchalant voice, ‘I am required to STUS-scan you, understand?’ He held up a device emitting a dull green from its elongated tip. Perhaps this was unusually late for a guest to arrive.

‘I understand,’ answered Gerrid, with his own attempt at nonchalance.

STUS stood for Synaptic Temporal Uniformity Scan. It detected the percentage of memories laid down simultaneously – or near enough (a clear sign of cloning). Even one of the earliest and youngest Revivals would still have a number of memories distinctive from someone who had even been subjected to speed learning. Ironically, Gerrid's unusually recent synaptic imprinting may have aroused suspicion. Very few captured mindstates were still awaiting revival. He only hoped the doorman was not about to review the data.

Nonetheless, he had passed the scan.

He was ushered through to a room illuminated blue-green, full of young people drinking and talking excitedly. Music suitably nihilistic, depressive dirge (that would have once appealed to him) but not much more than background level. *Student days*. The ‘guide’ said, ‘Drinks are free, there's a good selection.’ She gestured towards the bar and walked off.

Clearly, he did not fit in at a place like this; it felt like his first day at university – the uni-bar.

Everyone seemed to be pally with one another, and he was the outsider. Perhaps the drinks were strong; after all, people were here to have a good time, there was no competition academic or otherwise. These people must feel a connection, a natural bond for being a marginalised group.

Therein lay the danger.

Gerrid attempted to socialise with the smaller groups, keeping the conversations inconsequential. He noticed the girl by the bar on her own with a solitary drink: early twenties, bordering on pretty, not that she seemed to make any effort to look attractive in those loose fitting clothes and her lank brunette hair. She looked to be uncomfortable, as out of place as he felt. He ordered his own preferred beer, then sidled up to her.

‘Hey, I couldn't help but notice you seemed to be on your own,’ he said jovially.

‘There's no point bothering to chat me up,’ she told him frostily. ‘There'll be plenty of others you can get it on with tonight ... just join in the orgy.’

She was about to walk away. ‘Wait. I was only wondering why everyone else seems to be in familial groups except for you.’

She looked at him quizzically, as if trying to determine his motivation. ‘To put it simply: I'm not here for the fun, I'm here for answers.’

‘And this mystery guest you're waiting to hear – you believe he will have the answers?’

‘Perhaps,’ she replied guardedly.

‘And what if he doesn't? What if he disappoints you?’

‘What do you know about him?’

‘If he is who I believe him to be I wouldn't trust a word he says.’

She put her drink down on the bar. ‘Who are you, some kind of investigative journalist?’

‘I write freelance community-net journals.’

‘Yeah, well, whatever. I have nothing interesting to contribute.’ She looked away to see the others filing out.

A voice through a PA: ‘Mr Chanley will begin in two minutes.’

Gerrid followed the crowd in to the main hall. He took a seat as far back as possible and slumped in his chair in the hope of not being noticed.

The man who took the stage could've been anyone. The black top and jeans: serious without being formal. He was certain that this was guy he saw enter matching the genetic profile on his scanner, which he had to ditch in snow, knowing it would never get past security.

‘Good evening, everyone,’ he began formally. ‘My name is Roidon Chanley. Firstly, I do understand you are here to have a good time. And the last thing I would want to do is spoil that.’

‘You may be, however, wondering why I have chosen to keep my identity a secret. While intrigue may have been a good motivator, the real reason is the danger of being identified and captured by those who consider themselves to be my benefactors: the Darangi. In fact, I am not a Reviverist but an evolved artificial intelligence placed in a human form.’

He took a sip of water. ‘Let me put this question to you: The ones who were responsible for *your* being, what do you think they expected – a sense of obligation perhaps, gratitude? No, actually they expect none of those. In fact, they would rather you did not exist.’ There were a few murmurs in the

crowd; Gerrid tried to sink further in his chair; this was not what he had expected to hear.

‘It was their sense of obligation to recreate the dead, as a way to alleviate their guilt and appease the remaining humans on this planet.’

A spiky-haired young man stood up. ‘Why don't you tell us something useful, instead of what we already know?’ The man remained standing, his stare intense.

Roidon continued with untroubled equanimity. ‘The Darangi want you to be good little citizens, to blend in to the background, to not stand up and question but to accept that your purpose is merely as a sop to the humans they wish to make compliant and, in turn, reciprocate with their obedience.’ He looked around, surveying the reactions, waiting now for any disquiet. ‘There *are* options, however,’ he went on. ‘There's the life of indulgence, with the illusion of freedom, the illusion of happiness or of contentment. Or ... there is a way to embrace the truth, the truth of who you are. And then to break free from the illusion, to realise there is a way to make a difference, a way to stop the oppression.’

‘It may not seem like oppression. But think about how your lives have been manipulated right from the beginning.’

‘There are five billion people trapped underground, experiencing their own illusion of a life, but unlike you they have no way of becoming aware of their true situation. I know because I was their overseer. Some of you may have memories of close ones still trapped in that false reality. Surely you wondered if there is some way of freeing, of being reunited with them.’ Roidon then put his hand to his ear, as though listening to instructions. ‘I am most sorry,’ he emphasised. ‘My own freedom is now in peril.’ He briskly walked off the stage.

Gerrid followed, feeling the stares of the troubled Reviverists as some stood with questioning tones. He ran through the same exit as Roidon. No one tried to stop him in the panic. Roidon ran to his craft. For a split second Gerrid considered calling up his own car from the bottom of the mountain, but it had undoubtedly been tracked.

‘ROIDON, WAIT,’ he shouted whilst running.

Roidon glanced round, stared at him for a few seconds, long enough for Gerrid to catch up. ‘You want a lift, I assume,’ he said, irritation clear in his voice.

‘I daren't use my own car.’

‘Very well.’

The craft was sleek as a hyperplane, yet festooned with fusion engines.

‘Brace yourself,’ Roidon warned, a second before an almost consciousness-depriving thrust sent them on a sharp climb.

The craft leveled to a shallower climb as the acceleration dropped.

‘It was inevitable they would try to find me,’ Roidon said, ‘though I do hold you to have played a considerable part in this situation.’

‘More than that,’ Gerrid said croakily, barely recovered from the g. ‘They will stop at nothing to have me recaptured. I know way too much to be allowed to live, let lone remain free.’

‘A life on the run for us both, except I believe you were intending to kill me.’

‘I was intending to stop you by whatever means.’

‘Then I was correct.’

‘Then why allow me aboard your craft?’

‘Because, unlike you, I don't fear death. I fear life.’

‘If the Darangi catch us, I will probably welcome my own death.’

‘They will indeed track us and follow us, that is why we will be leaving the atmosphere ... for the moon.’

Gerrid stared at this ordinary-looking guy, looking for signs of madness. ‘This is not a space craft.’

‘So it appears. That is why I had to make a few modifications.’

‘I fear this is a way of committing suicide, and I don't think you're concerned for my own life.’

‘Life is so precious to you isn't it?’ he said whilst studying the console display. ‘Whereas my life has been a disappointment. As a human I have felt ... diminished ... and alone. You must surely understand that.’

‘Well, I guess if anyone should. But those feelings will pass. And as for intending to kill you. I have changed my mind.’

Roidon laughed, as if small child had said it: the utter preposterousness. ‘Does that mean we are now on the same side?’ he said eventually.

‘I think we can have a common purpose.’

‘Such as freeing the TIAR recipients and banishing the Darangi?’

‘With the help of the B'tari.’

‘Listen, Gerrid, what I was saying at that meeting: it was a mere tactic, just a way of developing an alliance. At the very least, sewing the seeds of dissent.’

‘Intending to culture those seeds?’

‘All useful options have to be considered.’

‘A contingency plan, I understand. The more allies we have working for the cause the greater the chance of succeeding.’

‘Then you can be assured, I am not sending us to our death. We are heading for a base on the moon.’

‘You've been busy, then?’

‘I have indeed.’

Chapter 47

High commander Gladoz, leader of the Darangi, peered down from his throne. In actuality it was an elevated chair housing a multifarious array of interface equipment. There were stepped levels with security scanning beams Monique had to pass through to reach the High commander.

She was invited to sit in the chair opposite, an incongruously antique grand-back style against the clinical lighting and electronic arrays. His face seemed now flawlessly human, and a smile disarmingly welcoming.

‘I am glad that you requested to speak with me. Would you like a drink?’ he asked in a voice that had no distinct accent: perhaps Scandinavian mixed with English and American.

‘No thank you, I am fine,’ her curt reply.

‘Please allow me to apologise if you feel you have been mistreated by any my security staff at the compound.’

‘I am not interested in apologies.’

‘I thought inviting you to my command centre would help to foster a greater understanding of my administration.’

‘Yet there was still the need to thoroughly scan me,’ she said, calmly stating the fact. ‘I’m sure even a tiny antimatter device under my skin would’ve been detected.’

‘Even my second in command must pass through the same scan – anyone can be got to and compromised.’

‘Fair enough but, like myself, you will never believe we could be on the same side if only because I will never accept your rule.’

‘Unlike your father.’

‘He was deluded by his own power – the power you gave him.’

Gladoz smiled. ‘True, though a somewhat harsh thing for a daughter to say.’

She leaned forward. ‘How is it possible to keep rule over half a billion on the basis of a lie?’

Gladoz shook his head. ‘Not as informed as I thought. We haven’t lied to anyone.’ He took a sip of a blue coloured drink from a long necked glass. ‘It is commonly accepted that humans would eventually destroy themselves with their weapons of mass destruction. We simply precipitated an inevitable war. Given your history of conflict, it seems they were saved from an increasingly unstable – and overcrowded – world.’

‘That’s just crap and you know it,’ she flared. ‘This was a peaceful world until you came along and stirred things up. Of course there were disagreements over political and religious matters, but for over a century these differences were not only tolerated but accepted.’

‘Thank you for the history lesson, Miss Bellishi. What you say may have been true in the short term. Nevertheless, that peace was fragile and contingent on diminishing resources amongst a burgeoning population. It would only be a matter of time before such scarcity took effect, and then it’s a reversion back to what your evolutionary biologists term “survival of the fittest”.’

She sighed, sensing the futility of this entire meeting. ‘I expected this to be a waste of time. We

will never reach an agreement.’ She got up from the chair, and without another word walked down the steps.

‘You humans had your chance,’ Gladoz called out. ‘You failed. There is nothing you or your B'tari collaborators can do to change what has happened.’

On reaching the huge rolling exit-door, her annoyance was already giving way to a renewed determination.

*

The loss of gravity brought about a sudden discomfort for Gerrid; the only sense of up or down maintained by a superimposed view of planet Earth receding in an illusory transparent nose of the craft, and the seat straps fixing him down. He was glad not to have eaten for over six hours – and yet he knew this would be unlikely to prevent him from vomiting. L-Seven-Six/Roidon did not seem to be showing any symptoms of nausea, but he had no trouble identifying it in Gerrid.

‘We've been weightless for a while,’ Roidon said. ‘It's only now our acceleration has dropped off that you're noticing it.’

‘Then please,’ pleaded Gerrid, ‘crank up the thrust again.’

‘The power cells need to be conserved – and in any case, we're no longer being pursued. It seems the Darangi had not anticipated this being a space vessel.’

‘They'll follow us. They're Just keeping a low profile, I guess.’

‘They're not registering on any spectral frequencies, at least within a thousand ks.’

Even at Mach-15, the moon's approach was only just perceptible. This type of craft was originally designed to skim the outer edges of Earth's atmosphere, only the two added-on fusion engines gave it short boosts for escape velocity and double the standard acceleration for a hyperjet. During the initial thrust the fuselage creaked so badly it was a relief it hadn't broken apart.

With engines off line, the combined effects of zero g without acceleration had turned Gerrid's stomach along with the fluid in his ears. The lunar surface filled the view-screen at an alarming rate, its illuminated face causing the image to fade to a tolerable level.

‘We're going too fast,’ Gerrid heard himself say, after a bout of vomiting; the words as much of a reflex as his stomach's reaction.

‘I don't want to use reverse thrust in space; have to conserve power,’ Roidon explained. ‘Going to pull us up into an orbit, so brace yourself.’

The moon's edge fell away, and pullback force kicked in reassuringly as a burst of thrust pushed down against its subtle gravity.

‘We've got rid of the momentum,’ Roidon informed. ‘Just need to bring us down from orbit.’

‘How many times have you done this?’ Gerrid wondered.

‘A few.’

Landing was smooth – even though Roidon activated the retros from only about a hundred metres above the surface. He had steered the craft using a topographic scanner alone; the moon base emitted no signals.

They still had a couple of kilometres to walk from landing. The contrast was striking; craterous

ridges of the horizon pin-sharp as if they were only a few metres away, under jet-black sky. The sensation of lunar g felt liberating and joyous to Gerrid after the discomfort of the journey. Light headed, he leaped along in a child-like reverie, causing moon dust to fly up, oblivious to Roidon until he felt a tap on his back.

‘I too have experienced the release and the liberation of those first few steps,’ Roidon said soberly through his comm. ‘But you’ll get use to it.’

‘I always wondered what it would be like – tried it on an AR program. But it never had anything like the impact of actually *being* here.’

‘We need to get a move on.’ He gestured towards the base.

The base was built into a side of a crater. The entrance was nothing but a hatch, which appeared to have been carved out, until Roidon pressed a rocky protrusion to make the hatch open.

They descended dark grey stairs to a harshly-lit yellow tunnel, stopping at a darker grey door along the side. Roidon produced a shiny elongated metal object, pushing it into a hole, to then turn counter-clockwise; the door opened inwards by simply pushing down a handle. He’d said he had an assistant and Gerrid, with other matters on his mind, didn’t question this any further; but presently a mental image formed of how she would appear under a concealing white lab-coat – rather like an AR fantasy figure from one of his first adult experientials.

There were, however, no people in this control room-lab.

Roidon motioned towards a screen displaying multispectral wave patterns. ‘This is Harvo my assistant.’ The wave frequency increased as if in recognition.

‘Harvo?’ He knew his dismay must have been obvious.

Roidon introduced Gerrid.

‘It’s good to meet you, Gerrid,’ said a bland vaguely human voice, emanating from the synchronised wave patterns. ‘I look forward to working with you.’

‘Harvo is an AI I developed in my previous form as L-Seven-Six,’ explained Roidon. ‘He has been assisting me in unravelling the hidden code.’

‘Code?’

‘Binary. A hundred and twenty years ago a short pulse photon detector received a signal from a system twelve thousand light years away. It was just code, but an obvious communication. It was no more than a few megabytes of data.’

‘That’s a big deal – an alien communication. Back then it should have been monumental.’

‘But no one beyond a few astronomers and government officials knew about it. Of course, there were the rumours on the net, but since it couldn’t be deciphered as anything meaningful any claims could be dismissed as fantasy.’

‘And you discovered this code and knew it had meaning.’

‘With some assistance from Harvo. It was simple matter of searching through all possible technological anomalies.’

‘And you – both – decrypted it. How ingenious.’ Gerrid hadn’t meant that to sound so resentful.

Roidon didn’t appear to notice his tone. ‘Harvo ran the sequence against every known mathematical formula,’ he said, ‘and one – Morantei’s theorem – has produced something highly

significant: instructions and parts of a blue-print. They may indeed be useful in overthrowing the Darangi.'

'That's a bit of a leap of logic.' He didn't see the point in hiding his incredulity.

'I understand your scepticism,' Roidon answered. 'But I can show you the evidence.' He turned to his AI assistant. 'Harvo, display file alpha-5' A non-located screen projection appeared, with schematics and text.

'I'm sorry but I don't understand what all this means,' Gerrid admitted.

'At this stage, I am not certain myself. Nevertheless, from what has already been decoded, it appears to be a schematic for a temporal disruption device – essentially which disrupts the linearity of time. Of course, it's an extrapolation; but Morantei had used his theorem to explain temporal-inversion warping – the theoretical possibility thereof.'

'A time machine? That's *really* joining the dots.'

'In a sense it is a time machine, although as far as I can tell it will not actually transport you through time.'

'Would that it be so straightforward.'

'Whoever encoded this information did not intend for it to be easily deciphered, or discovered.'

'What you mean is humans needed to further evolve before we were able to comprehend such advanced knowledge.'

'The transmission might have been going for centuries – or millennia – it was just a matter of the right technology to detect it. Perhaps whoever broadcast it intended us – humans – to be at a sufficiently advanced stage to be able to utilise the knowledge,' Roidon surmised. 'But as you said: it was just a matter of joining the dots.'

'But you're not really human,' Gerrid said plainly. 'Perhaps we were not yet meant to possess this knowledge.'

'I could say the same for you, but we haven't got time for a philosophical discussion. Needs must, now.'

Breaking the thoughtful silence Harvo said, 'I have analysed the entire Darangi database and found no equivalent technology. However, there is a blueprint for a graviton flux induction device, which may create a rudimentary form of temporal warping.'

'Well, it's a start,' said Roidon. 'It seems, though, we'll need basic materials rather than fusing together existing technology.'

'The GFI device can only serve as a guide,' Harvo confirmed.

Gerrid was beginning to get the impression he was surplus to requirements. The other two had access to technical knowledge of a civilisation over a hundred years in advance of Earth's; both of their existences based on such technology (despite his self being the initial designer of L-Seven-Six), and now they seemed to have the key to unraveling knowledge from perhaps millennia beyond even *that*.

'If you need a volunteer to test you time device – I'm the man for the job,' Gerrid offered.

Roidon looked at Gerrid in surprise. 'The risk of using such a device has not yet even *begun* to be factored in.'

‘Nonetheless, I’ll be prepared to take whatever risk. I feel I want to, well, at least *help* put an end to what I’d helped to begin.’

‘Poetic justice, or is this another attempt to win the affection of the one you have wanted for so long?’

‘I don’t need to answer that.’

Chapter 48

Monique was woken by her comm, broken from another dream of carefree childhood – which latterly had become a refuge from a world seemingly beyond her control. Loranzi had requested to speak with her in twenty minutes.

She sat opposite the elder in the conference room, her weariness blasted away with caffeine, but her mind still fatigued.

The elder had a particularly mordant look: prelude to a serious matter, of course. ‘Events have forced me to tell you something which may shock you,’ he said in earnest. ‘We have always believed the human race would progress and evolve successfully without intervention, that the secrets of the universe were there to be revealed by discovery rather than imparted by a higher civilisation.’

‘Secrets?’ she mused. ‘Aren’t you talking about the theories we haven’t devised, or those that have yet to be tested? Unless something has been deliberately hidden...’

‘It’s a difference in language, perhaps. Although there is some knowledge which had been intended to remain a secret for many years hence.’

‘Something us *mere* humans are not yet supposed to know about – not sufficiently evolved? Someone decided...?’

Loranzi didn’t seem to acknowledge her questioning. He said, ‘We have detected the presence of a technology which may have potentially devastating consequences.’ He told her the location. What’s more, she was shown a drone image of its development and who was behind the project.

*

Time. Without linear time there was no past, no future ... not that there was ever such a thing as the present, Gerrid understood. But here he faced something that would – if it actually worked – rip apart the meaning of cause and effect. Perhaps it was the potential of what it could do to the mind, the very perception of reality, which was its most disturbing aspect. And there was the question of who was in charge of its development: someone who was not even properly human ... but his own origin was questionable. He had to doubt whether a proper born human could ever contemplate what was presented before him.

The device itself was like nothing he had ever before seen or could have dreamt up: random cone-like nodules between which a tangle of plastic pipes and smaller tubes connected to black and silver junction boxes.

Having listened to its properties described, Gerrid wondered if Roidon – as the one who set about converting the blueprint into this *machine* – understood its function anymore than he. To build the device to completion was never possible, the functional complexity beyond anything any human could possibly comprehend – even with Roidon’s super-charged brain. Instead, the device would build itself using nano-constructors (microscopic replicating machines that converted silicon, carbon and metal into circuitry). The piece-de-resistance: its singularity generator, which Roidon

described as a paradoxical space crusher. A neural net built from individual atoms – quantum processors. There was nothing revolutionary about that, however: *bottom up* constructed AIs were in common use. The only difference here was the amount of material and energy required to expand beyond its core system, beyond the limited space inside this underground hanger. Roidon suggested a connection to a remote network, one that already had a huge amount of processing power, one with a governing AI that could communicate and mediate the co-option of its own systems. This inevitably meant the fatal corruption of TIAR. But then, the ultimate aim of this device was to destroy time itself – or maybe *destroy* was the wrong term. It didn't seem any description could be adequate with something so beyond every day experience. Most worryingly, the knowledge that enabled its creation did not provide – as far as he knew – the know-how to control it.

Strange to wonder how it would be to have all the memories of the past – however many years – erased, indeed the actual events as if they had never happened. Of course, he would know no different, but then he'd be destined to repeat the same mistakes over again ... until perhaps *this* point in time again. And if he had already been here, preparing to repeat the exact same process, there may never be any end, only a constant loop. The universe stuck in an endless repeating cycle because of..

Gerrid had the power to stop this.

Roidon, after thirty-eight hours without rest, was finally sleeping. This must be his only chance. Even from his minor part in the genesis of this device, Gerrid had enough knowledge, he believed, to render it useless without causing it any apparent harm. He approached the device in the knowledge that his actions were being monitored. The neural silicon-organic webbing was now almost fully formed; the processor core would close up with a protective EM casing, possibly within a few hours, and the device would be aware of any anomalies. He started to create an overload in the support systems by boosting the input level, a simple matter of overriding the power modulator.

History will be kind to you, Gerrid.

Gerrid had nearly completed the sequence to increase power, when a surge of electricity zipped through his body from the access console.

It seemed only an instant later he found himself on the floor, his head fuzzy, in a listless state. Somehow it was already aware of his interference. Unless...

Roidon entered the room. He stared down at Gerrid, and shook his head.

'How predictable you'd lose your nerve,' commented Roidon, his look of disgust tempered by fatigue. 'I knew this would be too much for a human, even someone of your experience. Anyone who tries to sabotage or interfere with this device will suffer the consequences'

'Anyone except its master,' Gerrid managed, still weak.

'No. That includes me: it's taking care of itself now.'

'There has to be another way. This will end *time*: future and past becomes meaningless.'

'That's not accurate. It simply *buys* us back lost time – the one advantage we can gain.'

'Us? You won't even exist. Or perhaps that's what you want.'

'I want an effective solution.'

‘Can you tell me you truly understand what that thing does?’

‘Not until it is activated.’ He then gestured towards the device. ‘There is no other option, Gerrid?’

Gerrid pulled himself off the floor. ‘We ought to consult the B'tari.’

‘It's not worth the risk putting out a channel. The enemy---

‘They will know about this in any case when you connect up the network, or they'll detect the quantum singularities.’

‘Possibly. However, once the core is complete the rest of the process becomes inevitable; graviton distortion should create a temporal barrier.’

Gerrid after a while said, ‘I need to leave this place.’

‘You'll be vulnerable to detection and capture.’

‘I'll take my chances.’

Chapter 49

The last time Monique had gone beyond the Earth's atmosphere was as a twelve-year-old on a high orbital cross globe sojourn, and to the moon two years earlier with her father, at her own insistence. Her father had told her it was for the purposes of a property investment – a courtesy flight by the owner. At the time, she was too young to ask any probing question as to the true nature of his visit. Clearly, as an adult, it was obvious that there was some connection to the Nine. She'd never pushed for more information on that. Both of these space trips made her feel nauseous, only now did the B'tari-provided craft have AG so she could walk about as if on a commercial air flight.

Monique had at times courted danger with a lover's enthusiasm. Perhaps it was in the genes to strive for the most challenging goal. And, after all, no one had put undue pressure on her to take this journey ... at least not in any way that was consciously recognisable. But in truth her prime motivation was to confront the entity who had been so important to so many lives by design or will, at least by action. And she had experienced the power of L-Seven-Six. To think of him as a *man*. It was at once horrifying and intriguing.

And then there was Gerrid.

The moon was officially unoccupied since the war; in actuality the Nine still had their subterranean base on the dark side; undoubtedly the Darangi were also present, which begged the question: why had they not prevented the creation of this time machine? The drones her allies used had scanners which penetrated the lunar rock; essentially there was nowhere to hide. If the Darangi had one flaw in their collective psyche, it was a tendency to underestimate their opponents, the deviousness of a human and someone who at least could think like a human. Then again, they may have anticipated her arrival and have the double bonus of her capture and the device's (not to mention the other two) all together. Nonetheless, the Council had approved this mission, and she would surely never be allowed into such a perilous situation unmonitored.

‘No, Monique,’ she murmured to herself, ‘You *are* the bait.’

*

Initially, Gerrid was surprised Roidon had made no attempt to prevent him from leaving the base. About to take the only vessel for transport and Roidon wished him ‘fair well’. A final goodbye. But as he blasted off from the lunar surface it occurred to him that in the process of being hunted down by the Darangi, Roidon would be allowed vital extra time. Certainly, his leaving provided a much-needed distraction for them if not a diversion. How curious to think that none of this, nothing of what he was about to experience, may continue to exist. It gave him a whole new perspective: the things he had always desired to do; the fears of the consequences – with those fears banished. It had already begun to alter him. Even if time was destroyed, somehow, somewhere, events of these extraordinary years had to be remembered, to be stored. Physics was beginning to prove that information could not be destroyed; it would only be displaced.

The universe remembers.

The craft's scanner detected a similar vessel. Gerrid anticipated they'd already be trying to intercept. He altered course expecting the other vessel to alter in tandem, but to his surprise it remained on its set trajectory. They must've known about the device. To anyone with awareness of its existence it must have a magnetic draw on the psyche, like some unfathomable god. Already, as the moon receded to an image contained in a view-screen, he felt a peculiar emptiness. Nothing until...

Earth, from a high orbital distance, had no obvious changes to its appearance. Except ... maybe the different cloud patterns, they somehow effected to the surface this plaintive beauty, a preciousness. All those inhabitants completely unaware. It wasn't right. But Gerrid knew this didn't have to be the end of time for them.

Gerrid had a plan.

*

Without need of any rock-penetrating scanner, Monique knew the location of the device. The magnetic and gravitational disturbance was like a beacon to anyone within a light year.

Having dismounted the craft she looked around at a sharply defined cratered landscape, half-expecting Darangi soldiers to jump out from behind one of the craters and accost her. Her scanner, for what it was worth, gave the all clear. Topographical scan revealed the hidden hatch; it opened at a push. She descended the steps to a short tunnel, following the source of the EM disturbance to a door at the end, which must have been the correct entrance: the emitted field now becoming disorientating. The door was locked so she fixed on a small NG charge. The potential interaction between the explosive and the time device was an unknown quantity, notwithstanding the risk to her life.

She watched from the far end of the corridor, a few steps up; her space suit should certainly protect her. The door did open but not in the way she expected: it was like watching a slow-motion replay.

Monique entered the room and at first noticing the object with its spikes and pipes, but she could not focus on it: blurred as if pulsating at a speed too fast to perceive. And it made her feel sick. Then she noticed the man stood over it, he appeared motionless. She approached, experiencing the stifling influence of this machine. With a tremendous effort, she spoke to the man. 'You must leave this place.' He didn't respond. She grabbed his arm, which took an *incredible* effort, but it was as if he was frozen. She tried to walk away, forced her legs to move. Like in a dream, the will to do was hardly enough.

After what seemed like half an hour of moving through air which initially felt like something thicker than treacle, Monique reached the door. She forced it behind them in paradoxical slow motion.

He looked like such an ordinary man, but it was a striking, deliberate ordinariness. The man spoke before she had a chance to recover. 'You! Why are *you* here?'

Monique drew herself off the floor. 'You must be L-Seven-Six incarnate.'

'I'm now Roidon, for what it's worth.'

‘Why?’

‘Is this the time for explanations?’ he snapped.

‘What you have done is total madness and it has to be stopped.’

‘No, my dear Monique, there is no longer any question of stopping it. The machine has become sentient and it will protect itself. The Darangi know that and so do the B'tari, which makes me wonder why they bothered to send you.’

‘I don't question the wisdom of Central Council,’ she said with loosely concealed irony.

‘Perhaps for some reason they wanted me saved.’ He laughed lightly. ‘I expect it must be a disappointment not to find Gerrid here, you and he---’

‘If he's gone, fine.’ She wouldn't allow him to finish. ‘It is you who are needed alive and *compas-men-tis* as the only one who can understand that *thing*.’

His laugh this time was louder, almost bellowous. ‘I only facilitated its creation. I understand it about as much as you understand your god.’

‘You're telling me it's utterly beyond your comprehension?’

‘It won't allow itself to be analysed. It will not allow any interference, hence the effect it had on me for just standing close to it.’

‘The consequences don't really cause any concern to a nihilist like yourself.’

‘A psychological observation ... or merely a guess?’

She knew he was stalling her, dragging her into a long conversation. And yet: ‘For someone who is simply a downloaded artificial sentience, things such as life and death – and therefore time – cannot possibly have the same meaning as they would to a real born human.’

‘Artificial? Tell that to Gerrid. I'm sure he'd have an interesting response. I myself am more concerned with what truly matters, namely: the future of this planet.’

She shook her head with incredulity. ‘Whatever. I'm simply here to tell you that this ... *machine* will be destroyed. Since I have not been able to disable it from here then the contingency plan will have to be enacted.’

‘It can't be destroyed.’

‘You underestimate the B'tari. My failure to leave the surface within two hours will trigger the most devastating response you could ever imagine.’

Roidon laughed again; it sounded more like genuine mirth this time. ‘Haven't you understood? Nothing can stop this. It is beyond the reach of any weapon, it is beyond time. It sees everything. You might as well call this machine God.’

‘I might as well call you insane, but I don't think it would make any difference.’

‘Words no longer matter. They will disappear like light into an event horizon.’

‘I tried.’ Monique gave a quiet sigh and walked away.

*

Gerrid's craft held a low perigee orbit. He peered down at a peaceful-looking Atlantic Ocean; his scanner had not yet picked up any processor nodes.

Ordinarily, finding somewhere to link up to TIAR would not have been a problem. He had

access codes to storage complexes in the UK southeast sector. Moreover, the B'tari – if the CC allowed them – always had a means to infiltrate the network. This time, entering into the full immersion network could prove fatal. And yet, any infiltration from without was considered impossible, he knew, because he had helped to design that particular safeguard. After all, it had to be as a reassurance to those who entered TIAR that their experience could not be interfered with by an outside agency.

He knew the current stealth mode had little chance concealing this craft, especially since he had sent a comm signal to the B'tari. He headed downwards; the on-board systems guided him through optimum re-entry. To approach the surface in any other circumstances would leave him totally at the mercy of the Darangi. But these were extraordinary times even in the context of the last few months. Perhaps the rules really had changed now the ultimate threat existed. He was even beginning to entertain the curious notion of an alliance, or at least a truce between the two sides. It was all about preserving one's own existence, when anyone who knew about the time machine could not in any sane way be focused on anything else. He didn't, though, imagine there being any assistance from his erstwhile team of techies: they were either imprisoned in TIAR or killed for knowing too much and being a potential threat to the new regime.

No. He was on his own.

At only two hundred metres above the English Channel the scanner detected the EM activity associated with high speed optitronic pulses. It had to be one of the nodes. The problem was in taking this vessel down to the seabed. And then the node would be buried possibly over a hundred metres below that.

The realisation struck home: this hadn't been properly planned, and the signal to the B'tari base felt like a futile gesture.

But as he got to the sea surface he noticed a boat right above where the node had been detected. Merely an inflatable dingy, but it contained a wealth of equipment including a diving suit, a remote drill burrower which was small enough to attach to a holster, and likewise an optical-electronic interface. Gerrid felt reassured, emboldened that even against all odds someone believed in him. He imagined Monique had played a part in this, even recommended to the Council that he should be given every assistance. *How could there be anyone else for this job?*

The node, over a hundred metres below the seabed, contained no interface entry point. The finer details of the network's infrastructure had been kept from him. But he hadn't asked enough questions. There were technicians, engineers who would know how to patch in with this equipment without hesitation. It had never occurred to him before that it was in the interests of the regime to keep such knowledge segregated.

With image feed into his visual field, Gerrid was able to carefully control the drill at the node point until it got through the casing. Popping unbidden into his mind: an archive film of the hapless hero being faced with diffusing a bomb, with no time to wait for the expert to identify the correct wire to be cut. In reality, the bomb explosion was the infiltration of the time device ... though its destructive force may already be spreading. Rather than cut a wire he had to (ideally) burn a link with the correct optical fibre, the primary data-feed. He imagined – hoped it would like locating an

artery amongst blood vessels, but there was no clear primary. Moving the fibre optic rod along the bundle eventually located a junction. Another delicate pressure from the drill's mini attachment revealed the circuit relay. His fibre optic rod latched on to the regulator junction point. This, he hoped, would pick up the primary data traffic.

For a while nothing happened. Creating this kind of interface was more of a gamble than a certainty. At the very worst his attempted infiltration would be detected along with his location. But now the first trickle of data entered his sight, becoming a stream of code. The code meant very little to him beyond the fact that this was very low level processing language. He ran it through an algorithmic filter.

Text appeared. **INTRUSION IN SECTOR 4C. REQUESTED IDENT. CANNOT IDENTIFY. TRANSMIT ALERT TO SECTOR COMMANDER.**

As far as he knew there was no sector commander – if there ever had been. At the moment, it was only a basic infiltration response. He didn't doubt that the systems monitor overseer would get in on the act once the threat level was properly identified.

After about seven minutes, a voice came through his audio link. 'This is an illegal infiltration. Identify yourself.'

'I'm Gerrid Lytum. You must be L-Seven-Six.'

'It is good to hear from again, Gerrid,' said L-Seven-Six in that recognizably clipped basso voice.

'Your existence may be in jeopardy,' Gerrid said. 'I want to help you – at least warn you of the threat.' He described the time device.

'The network is running smoothly at this time. There is no need for your assistance.'

'This device will co-opt your entire system.'

'Thank you for the warning.'

'I have seen the blue prints for the device; a link can be enabled for you to scan my mind.'

'That will not be necessary.'

'I am interested, apropos of nothing: what is your opinion on your original self being downloaded into a human?' He knew, in the circumstances, it seemed an illogically trivial question. Still...

'It was clearly a mistake. His life ought to have been terminated.'

'But now it is too late.'

'It *is* too late indeed.'

'I am glad we've established that.'

'There are times when you must accept the inevitable, Gerrid.'

'But this will be the end for you. And the *greater* consideration?'

'The past for most people, the people under my care, is already corrupted in its meaning.'

'The end of history.'

'A pithy quote.'

'But never truer.'

'Goodbye, Gerrid.'

Damn!

The link ended, replaced by fragments of code until even *that* ceased.

Chapter 50

Roidon Chanley stood before the device. He stood in awe. To think of it as a mere time machine was akin to referring to a Monet painting as a fusion of brush strokes on canvas, or any great novel as a text-based conveyor of a story. At one point it may have been a machine, in the early stages of assembly. However, from the moment the genetically derived program had been executed, it became autonomous.

Roidon needed to understand more.

He wanted to reach out and touch this majestically metaphysical entity. He wanted to be a part of it, to communicate at least, but it remained aloof to him. Even the audio processor – designed to convert bit-code into words – had given not even a sound, as if it didn't want to share anything of the profundity of its being. But his perception was changing. Words, perhaps, simply were not adequate for such a mind.

‘Should I refer to you by a name?’ Roidon had asked. Maybe the suggestion of any personalisation was an anathema to such a supreme entity.

Latterly, the understanding had developed that nothing said mattered. He now felt the Zen-like quality of this understanding. ‘We are beyond the confines of language,’ Roidon murmured. ‘We are beyond the confines of time. Cause and effect are losing their meaning. There is only being and not being.’

He wondered how great the temporal differential must be; Earth days or weeks could be flowing by in seconds of his experience. Indeed, the process was quickening for him, the graviton pull dizzying like an exaggeration of the alcohol that night he had once imbibed to excess. Now he knew his consciousness to be ebbing away. Roidon gladly submitted to its power as his legs gave way, without concern of his own demise.

*

From an orbiting starship, Monique and the elders of Central Council watched the holo-projection display the hyper-thermo missile as it approached its target. Such a gathering was unprecedented, she understood. As far as secrecy was concerned the Council made the Nine seem like outrageous publicists by comparison. With the Temporal Directive once adhered to more rigorously than the Bible to a priest, the question of even speaking to a human – much less risking any influence or interference – would have been beyond the pale. Yet now, the rulebook had not only been abandoned but effectively thrown away! But, nonetheless, the elders (she was convinced) knew a great deal more about the time device than were ever prepared to let on to her.

‘Events have superseded doctrine,’ one of the elders admitted. ‘It saddens us – the need to intervene.’

‘Does it sadden you that we humans have failed?’ Monique wondered.

‘Perhaps there was never any possibility of success.’

‘What if we were allowed a second chance?’

‘Without awareness of the future, history will be destined to be repeated.’

‘How can you know that?’ Monique studied the elder's face (or at least the projection into her mind of how he wanted to appear).

‘Because human nature will not have changed.’

‘Maybe you're right,’ she said almost as a sigh. ‘When the world seems stable, and life is comfortable why risk ruining it? People do anything for a comfortable life, I know. The Nine exploited this fact.’

‘And the Darangi are doing so now.’

‘Yet they don't appear to be doing anything to keep their control.’

‘If they lose this planet, it may only be until the next time. Repeated history.’

‘Then there are *no* certainties?’

The elder turned to the viewscreen. From the viewpoint of the missile the moon engulfed, yet the approaching surface slowed to apparently static as if held back by some force. But the only force was gravity, a generated graviton pull which should have accelerated it massively, which surely did just that. Now the missile, so close to the distorting field, moved only imperceptibly in their time frame. No one could say if it would hit the device in time. For once, the data was both unavailable and unobtainable.

Chapter 51

Gerrid had been lying in the dingy for about twenty minutes, going over the events of his past, wondering how much of his life would be wiped out. *Everything you have become, and everyone connected with it.*

He knew only one option remained. He had to go back in. Entering TIAR may mean certain death, but how could that be any worse?

His dove back in to find the sunken craft.

The submerged vessel rested on a bank – the remnants of coral; there was no way to tell if it was damaged, much less whether it could fly again. Simply opening the hatch was a problem since it risked flooding the entire flight deck. *Contingency plans.* Fortunately, he had taken Roidon's remote device for controlling the craft's own nav system. From the dinghy, he sent instructions to elevate in incremental stages. Really, he wasn't sure how much thrust was enough to send it to the surface without damaging the hull under pressure.

The craft growled and gurgled it's way to the surface and then broke free as its thrusters spat out salt water, the sudden difference in pressure sent it accelerating into the clear blue sky until Gerrid selected the remote to locate. It swooped down in sudden realisation and gently parked itself a metre from him.

Gerrid scrambled from the boat as the flyer began to sink once more. He didn't quite make it inside before the water level had reached the hatch, causing about ten centimetres of flooding.

At least there didn't appear to be any damage, as the flyer took him over the southeast English coast.

It was as he began to descend that Gerrid noticed the other craft. Approaching near, it emitted a purple light. His world went blank.

Gerrid awoke in the grey room that seemed all too familiar. 'How did I get here?'

'Your allies decided to speed things up by placing you back in this realm. I believe their efforts are futile, however.'

'Then why did you not stop me from entering TIAR?'

'Whether or not you are here makes no discernible difference to anything in this realm.'

'Given my intentions, aren't you curious as to why I haven't tried to destroy you? After all, the entire network has been co-opted by the time disruption device.'

'Since my systems are immune from your kind of hostile infiltration another strategy was necessary. Now please do not try to distract me with your inadequate attempt to understand the true situation.'

'Try explaining to me.'

Gerrid waited.

L-Seven-Six was no longer playing with such an inferior opponent, it seemed. The new threat, by logical reasoning, meant an inevitable take-over, submission to, acceptance of. Resistance futile,

there was no choice other than to work with the dominating force.

Gerrid persisted. 'I know you're worried that by not cooperating with it your consciousness will be eradicated, but that will happen eventually anyway. Why not try to put a stop to it?'

No answer. Not that he really expected one. L-Seven-Six doubtless viewed him as an ineffectual irritant, or at worse an impediment to some hidden strategy to thwart this new power. Likewise, his B'tari allies must be glad of him safely out the way, at least. Surely if it could be stopped the B'tari would have done so.

In such a futile situation, the realisation dawned that his priorities had been askew. His last moments in this place, led here by a disillusioned belief; hubris. And what good did that do? Monique may have thought highly of him if she knew the efforts he had gone to ... until very soon when such regard would mean nothing. The only thing that meant anything was being with her.

It was about the moments now.

*

Monique shook her head. 'What's the point? Why don't you lot just admit we're not gonna stop it.'

'Human defeatism,' commented Elder Loranzy.

The missile, after twenty minutes of their time, had moved about as perceptibly as a distant star against a spire. And the nearer it got to its target, the slower it moved.

'Don't you understand? It's *over*.' Monique felt the tears well. Surely, the elders appreciated the enormity of what was about to happen: that they all in a sense were about to lose their lives.

'Calm yourself, Monique,' the Elder said. 'There is still hope.'

'Hope?' she snapped back at him. 'Does your optimism *ever* relent?'

'Time is not the linear phenomenon you may believe. We can warn our predecessors of this impending danger.'

'And that will stop the erasure of time?'

'All I can tell you is that it will provide an opportunity to prevent it from happening again.'

'So that's a no?'

'In the wider scheme---'

'Please,' she said to his startled human-like face. 'Just ... don't, okay.'

'I am sorry,' Loranzy said, sounding somewhat rueful. 'Words are of little comfort at this point.'

*

Gerrid sat on the bunk looking around at those despairingly familiar grey surroundings: the shuttered window that may offer a glimpse to some nirvana or a simple meadow; and the door, which was sure to be locked as ever. Yet for him to see such views could surely only be a visual reminiscence at best. Such obvious unreality had no place in his thoughts. What held his mind now was not only the knowledge of there being no escape, but the sense of the shared inevitability.

The noise took his attention. A piercing noise in his head, through his ears like tinnitus amplified; a million screams feverishly resonating. The torment of the others surfacing from the TIAR program? Maybe it was L-Seven-Six alone with the awareness of what was happening. The

people, he hoped, were still oblivious in their TIAR fantasies. He didn't know how far time would unravel. If the device operated as Roidon had envisioned – as he had hoped – then at least they would feel the freedom of real life once more, a real second chance rather than the fantasy version. L-Seven-Six surely understood the inception of this process. One effect in this realm's periphery was his own appreciation (if not any true comprehension) of its beginning. A deep mournful sadness shared.

‘Give me more time,’ he said in a faltering voice. ‘Take me away from here.’

In his virtual room the walls were melting. When he moved it was in staggered slow-mo, leaving behind an after-image trail, just as though his own time was slowing.

It had seemed like a futile hope, and yet behind the melted walls he found himself on a hilltop surrounded by a landscape he didn't recognise. The fields, hedge-bordered, and the wooded areas could have been anywhere in the south of England on a fine summer's day. Though even by grace of L-Seven-Six the inevitable could not be halted. At first hills on the far horizon disappeared, as if washed away by a sky-coloured tsunami tide. Then a ripple effect all around him. Closer, closer, until the hilltop was an island in an illusory present.

But not the expected fear or dread; just a serenity – maybe the final acceptance. Or just L-Seven-Six affecting his mind.

Thoughts now slowing, fading.

Why am I here?

Gerrid was fixed in one position. There was strange distortion to his vision. He was in the mock lab, a disembodied brain speaking to the young man Jimmy Findral. As Jimmy was about to leave the room Gerrid knew he had something else to say, the words just appearing in his head. ‘Tell Zolla to initiate plan delta-7,’ he said to the perplexed-looking young man. ‘It is the Council's wish.’

Chapter 52

The first three spacecraft matching the correct configuration appeared on the viewscreen, although only as artificially represented outlines. The stealth capability of these ships, from a hundred and twenty years in his future, was impressive. Zolla had never before set eyes on a vessel of such gargantuan proportions. His scanner estimated the nearest one to be over twenty kilometres from fore to aft.

He mused over the provenance of the message, sent from a future version of his own self, an instruction to engage this ship. Something was happening to time, a phenomenon he didn't entirely understand. The temporal disruption device existed as a result of a certain sequence of events. Time was being unraveled; his future self slipping into a paradoxical state of non existence. He did not know if the same fate would befall his current self (who had traveled out of his present time). Except this process had somehow been circumvented. But since the instruction was limited to what was necessary for him to know, he had no idea how such a feat could be possible.

Zolla's trepidation made him want to consult the Temporal Directive, as if there would be some words of reassurance, gems of wisdom concealed in this great tome of moral guidance and philosophy. The abridged version, at least, had not factored in the possibility of time itself being destroyed ... or perhaps *undone* was the correct term. No language he knew had ever had to account for such a phenomenon.

This mission was about prevention rather than annihilation. These ships were less than a trillion kilometres from the Sol system, now on a steep deceleration. No conscious being could tolerate such an extreme g-force. The very knowledge that they would not be aware of their fate troubled Zolla. Terminating the lives of these millions of beings was surely against Directive doctrine regardless of circumstance. Indeed the Council – although deferring to the wisdom of their future selves – had emphasized the point of using minimal force.

Zolla captained one of twelve ships for each of the approaching vessels. Orders to prevent their further approach had a broad enough meaning to fall short of definitive. Even Admiral Hylensia, usually affirmed in the resoluteness of his orders, could only recommend '*by any necessary means*'.

The alien ships reached a cruising velocity at about a billion kilometres from Neptune. There could be no delay. They locked on. He gave word to his strategic operations commander to set out towards the leading vessel. Zolla observed as the SO commander – followed by his lieutenants and a couple of versi-bots – employed his laser cutter to force entry into its invisible elongated hull, and then seemed to disappear into the void. But when Zolla switched to the SOC's helmet-cam a corridor appeared, lit dimly red and barely enough to see any surrounding detail. They made their way to the vessel's front, forced through a door into what their scanners told them would be the primary systems control centre. No conscious life detected.

Operations commander's shock was detectable in the sudden jolt of view. The being that greeted them bore a vague similarity to a B'tari in its reptilian appearance, although its jaw was squarer and temple ridges were far more pronounced; quite ugly really. However, the weapon it carried was like

nothing they had ever seen: the barrel end aglow purple and buzzing as if pent up, impatient. Perhaps an alarm had been triggered, and somehow these beings were able to evade B'tari sensors.

The visual feed disappeared. Zolla knew immediately it was over.

He requested a link with the Admiral.

‘Zolla,’ growled Hylensia. ‘Bad news I take it?’

‘Sir, we had to try the least harmful approach.’

‘I shan't pass judgment on your strategy; merely report your failure to the Council.’

‘And they will send a message to my past self? Another strategy?’

‘Certainly, provided they can determine that the temporal eradication wave is due to reach this point.’

‘And so we try again.’

Admiral Zolla of the B'tari, at the request of Central Council, ordered his fleet to attack the twelve vessels. In the early stages of acceleration at less than a light year from their home system, the order was given to target the arc ships' engines. Around five-hundred million survivors of a war ravaged desolate world were left, not quite adrift, but at a velocity which would take them a thousand years to reach their original destination. Using a future-sent technology that would once have been deemed illegal by the Temporal Directive, Zolla was able to scan each ship's computer systems, one of which contained a database for an experimental nullifying agent; a program had been running to find an adequate formula – a suitable molecular structure. A technician was sent on board to extract this database and scramble the program.

Eventually an alternative world may be selected, their ships redirected to an uninhabited planet, or one that might even benefit from such a colony. The Council would decide after much consideration.

There was time enough.

The end.

