

TIME OVER

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Part I: Discovery

<Torbin Lyndau

Entry: September 25th 2293. Priority-A rec.

If you're reading this then it might not be too late. You might even know just what it is they are planning, and have thought of some way to stop it. You might have uncovered the clues, seen the evidence, seen that I'm not insane.

Maybe you've seen *them*. But I doubt it. Or you might doubt what you've seen ... because they're not big on publicity. Anyway, in those rare moments they'd appear before me I found that communication – much less conversation – is futile. Yet I'm sure, even as I dictate these words, they are listening. So I say to them: “If you're planning to destroy the text-file, you will achieve nothing. I will copy and copy, until I know one copy is safe. So do what you like to my memory. These words will live on.” (*Pause*)

(*Resume*) It's strange to think of things ever being normal. Yet they were before it all started to go wrong three years ago, ever since that first visit to Mars.

To the people back on earth it seemed we were the successful ones; that we should be thankful for no repeat of the catastrophe of those early Earth-based experiments, the horrendous casualties. The utter failure. For us, on a technical level, every safety measure was precisely in place.

We were testing the prototype for a new technology which should allow the transference of information across vast distances of space – essentially a wormhole for communication purposes (though if you believed any of the media reports, it was about much more than that: Wormhole equals space travel). The experiment itself was not a roaring success, not what we hoped for; stability for less than a second. At least we did achieve our first goal – we sent information to some distant part of the galaxy. To where? We didn't know. The

light (information) pulses disappeared from observation. All we had were the calculations based on the early experiments, for power and matter injection levels. So really we could only *infer* a result.

All I ever wanted was a normal life. When I say normal I don't mean in the boring sense ... just not completely off-the-scale weird. On that first day of our stay on Mars, the notion of life ever returning to a state of normality was more than a forlorn hope. Others had managed it, got back to their families, lived lives as minor celebrities for a while, until the media moved on to the next big thing. That was my hope, just to settle back down into a comfortable obscurity, working in the background to make the final preparations. But no, They had to ruin it.

They are still with me, every day. I feel their presence. It might only be a stirring of the air around me, or even just a glimpse out the corner of one eye. Like ghosts, you could say – just apparitions that leave no trace that anyone/anything can observe. But they do things to my mind. It's not something I can explain in any way that would make me sound like a sane person rather than anything less than delusional. I'm sure there are medical/psychological terms more precise. But since I've avoided any "help" the diagnosis can be yours, dear reader.

So let me tell you that to date I was made to witness the destruction of my home city at some unspecified time in the future, but there: as I stood on the site. Silver objects shaped like huge raindrops, descending rapidly to destroy tower-blocks. And on the ground biped mechanoids with wide rapidly pumping legs, supporting an oval centre, scanning with dark eye stalks; not merely killing but taking them into its body – screaming children drawn upwards by some levitation field.

But you don't believe me, do you. Why should you? That's the thing about the future, no way to verify it. And I doubt one person can change it, at least not me, or can know what action is not part of the tapestry of events leading ineluctably to that feared outcome. Philosopher I R Chuang said, "If time is like a river then we are the fallen leaves carried helplessly in its flow." But

perhaps I've defied that flow. I've seen – no, *experienced* the past as well: hundreds, even thousands of years ago; the stuff they don't tell you in history lessons or in any media form, atrocities people in previous centuries have committed. I shan't tell you about the pain of being shot, stabbed or executed. You couldn't even imagine! But for those vicariously I got to be, it was simply a matter of being on the wrong side at the wrong time. Only, for me, not the mercy of death but on to the next life.

Eventually it all became a morass: a millennium of suffering in one hour.

It wasn't all bad. In the process of being made to feel the worst of humanity, I got the experience to best of how it can be: that mythical utopia which only really exists in fragments – the small scale; tranquillity and happiness, like something *I* once had, or thought I had, before it was all taken away. So it was not enough just to see these two extremes, they knew I had to *feel* them.

I'd ask: "What do you want from me? Why are you making me go through all this?" But such simple questions never elicit an answer.

Except they did tell me one clear thing: "The erasure is coming."

She waved the projection into dark quiescence.

Yet his last words seemed to linger in mid air. *“The erasure is coming.”*

Raiya had been studying the Lyndau case for two days now. Assigned to her in recognition of her services, according to her boss. Not that there was any accompanying pay rise. Still, this was the diversion she needed. Perhaps the old professor had sensed this, or just no longer wanted charge of ‘the loony physicist’s file-set’ as he had not entirely jokingly referred to the journals. The professor had given them a cursory dismissal diagnosis of ‘indications of insanity’ in his cover comment. The Lyndau diary had been stored at the institute for seventy-eight years, discovered in a crystal memory-tab in an old abandoned apartment that’d been designated for demolition. It was kept under a floorboard already for thirty years. This man, she surmised, had become so paranoid he believed it to be the only safe place to keep his journal, rather than the standard cyber-lockup. All those years. He wanted it found, surely. But after his death?

Her comm buzzed, it was her colleague, Dr Leonard Heigener. His bulky form materialised fully opaque, in his usual mauve shirt, seated in the vacant chair opposite. He was always particular about seeming to be personally present, ever since moving to the US, effectively as a promotion – but he would never admit it was that, not to her anyway. ‘Raiya, I hope I’m not interrupting anything too pressing,’ he said, and without giving her a chance to respond: ‘So you’ve been studying the Lyndau case, I hear.’

‘Would that be through the shrinks’ grapevine?’

‘I’ve been allowed secondary access rights. Conventions are out the window for now.’

‘So whether or not I send you the file is irrelevant, you can just snatch it from the grid.’

‘Raiya, we’re friends.’ She could see the dismay in his life-like image. ‘I just wanted your formal approval.’

‘Sorry, Len. It’s been a tough day. They’re still giving me the usual neurotics.’

‘Yep, there’s nothing like a real shrink, especially when she happens to look as good as you.’

‘Flirting doesn’t become a married man.’ She tried to smile warmly. Lighten the mood.

‘So my wife tells me at dinner parties. But my intentions are honourable this time: I want to know what you’ve made of that file before---

‘Before you let it influence you personally.’

‘Right. Just need an overview, really.’

‘Then you might be disappointed.’

‘Try me.’

‘Okay. Well I really don’t know if he went insane from internal factors, or outside events – albeit perceived events.’

‘You want to reserve judgement. Prudent.’

‘I’ll send you the file now.’

She gave the protocol. It should have been a simple process, taking only seconds: a level 3 qubit encryption applied before transfer. Instead: ‘Cannot send. Suspected infection – possible Trojan. Please wait,’ her digi-assistant informed in its expressionless tones.

‘I don’t understand,’ Raiya queried. ‘Why did you not detect it sooner?’

‘Ninety-nine point five percent chance it was not present during previous scan.’

‘Less than twenty minutes ago. How could it get infected in that time?’

‘Unknown. Need to run a full systems scan.’

‘Just incredible!’

2

Stars changed from sharp points, moving imperceptibly, to streaks across his vision. It was a relief to be in this place, alone, where the air was cool like an autumn Calgary night.

Scott Alendry had felt no physical sensation when it happened. One second the ship was travelling through space at less than one per cent of lightspeed; the next ... he had to admit to himself he didn't quite understand. What he knew is that any concept of distance no longer applied. It was not that they would travel from one place to another – as the original pioneers in their sub light ship – through the random particles of dust, of hydrogen atoms. What enveloped them now was the stretched light of stars; devoid of baryonic matter. But also something more exotic. Energies unimaginable, harnessed from antimatter. So much technology on a knife-edge between optimal performance and total annihilation – observed one engineer in an interview, who worked for a rival contractor. He claimed if this balance were to be tipped in the wrong direction the consequences would be visible in Earth's daylight, whatever distance of the 2,300 light years they had travelled.

Scott had another sixty-four hours to contemplate this. Another sixty-four hours to think about the more sensationalised media reports. It made little difference to him that this ship had been 'test-onauted to its operational limit,' taken on a four thousand light year round trip to no particular destination. Those guys lived on the edge of death as part of their thrill; the rewards an added incentive. Ah yes, the rewards! Yet it occurred to him, if there had been any problems on that test journey would they ever be reported? The only requirement was proof that the test had taken place and that the ship passed the same additional safety tests required of more basic craft. No new standard for a totally unique vessel.

A short, rotund figure emerged through the 'swish' door into the observation lounge; his girth held in by a long white, pocket-festooned jacket,

the tapering grey plastic of medcorder protruding from one. Ostensibly the doctor.

‘Long time no sleep?’ the man asked. ‘Same here,’ he continued without pause for an answer. ‘Being the first, it’s psychologically fraught. I mean, we’ve been sent into something ... well...’ He trailed off as he seemed to realise the potential of making the situation worse.

‘I know the risks, doc. I’m just...’ Now *Scott* couldn’t quite finish.

‘Overawed,’ the doctor completed. ‘Who wouldn’t be? After all, we’re making history.’

‘Well, since you put it like that I think I will have some tranqs.’

‘Hey, I’m not here as drug dispenser.’ His expression serious now. ‘If that’s all you wanted you could’ve got a medibot. You may not know but I’m also the ship’s counsellor.’

‘Yeah, I expect we’ll all be in need of counselling in a few days.’

The doctor went to pull something out of his lower jacket pocket. ‘If you really need something to help you get through the night...’

‘It’s all right, doc, I’ll just watch the stars and hope they send me into a trance.’

‘So long as they don’t send you mad in the process,’ he said as he left.

3

Raiya had always made a conscious effort to put her work out of her mind; she imagined her latest study subject's file as an old paper version in a cardboard sleeve being placed in a drawer and that drawer locked. This time it didn't work.

She entered the institute's interior parking zone through a door which opened after confirming her identity. The same DNA scan would take place on leaving in her car. No one left or entered the institute without this thorough scan. Perhaps this was one of the securest buildings in Canada. Yet, when the primary lighting failed to illuminate, she knew something was wrong beyond a mere technical glitch.

Then in the muted yellow light a tall, darkly clad man seemed to appear from nowhere, intercepting her just before she reached her vehicle. After the initial shock, she couldn't help but muse over his curiously outdated fashion: the dark suit and a homburg style hat – it was a revivalist look from about twenty years ago.

'Hello, ma'am,' he said, removing his hat in a oddly courteous manner. *Ma'am*; there was something in the way he emphasised that word which made her feel only more intimidated.

'Yes, can I help you?' she asked, aware of the tension in her voice.

'Indeed, I believe you can,' he affirmed. 'You have recently been studying a file of Torbin Lyndau. He has had some rather ... *curious* experiences, I believe, the nature of which is of interest to our organization.' The accent was strange: not quite Canadian or from any state of America, but as if a mixture of regions.

'Organization?'

'The Western Alliance Security Directorate.'

'WASD. Never heard of them.' She knew it was standard protocol to ask for ID, but somehow, here, the question seemed unreasonable – a step too far.

‘Of course not,’ he snapped, ‘we’re a highly covert organization. After all, if people knew about us it could compromise our effectiveness. We deal with matters affecting national security.’

‘I don’t understand. How does Torbin Lyndau affect national security?’

‘The technology he had been involved with was highly dangerous. And if technical knowledge of his research were to fall into the wrong hands ... Well, who knows the trouble it could cause if, for example, a terrorist or dissident group were to use it for their own ideological ends.’

Raiya felt trapped, overwhelmed, like a small animal in the gaze of an unknown predator, something her twenty years of training and experience could not explain. Maybe it was his face: gaunt and hollow with sharp etched features. Also his height, of over two metres, added to the effect. He was standing too close, she realised. But to back away from him was not an option. Instead she took a breath, tried to calm her nerves. *Focus.*

She said, ‘As a psychiatrist I am bound by a strict code of confidentiality. Furthermore, this institute has a sufficiently high level of security to ensure the safe-keeping of all our files. And thirdly: as far as I can gather, Mr Lyndau has not revealed any technical information of his project.’

‘Doctor Fortenski, pardon my brusqueness, but I must point out that the account file you retrieved may well contain random spaced encrypted code; in other words, embedded data pertaining to the project.’

‘I don’t see why he would do that.’

‘Because of the highly prized nature of his research, the like of which has not been able to be replicated since.’

‘I understand he was quite a genius. But it’s not as if his work remained at the theoretical stage. I presume you know how his research led to the development of warp phase starship drives.’

‘Of course,’ he replied, as if insulted by her even mentioning it. ‘His work facilitated such technology. However, there were aspects of his research which were – could never be – used for space travel, the like of which was regarded as highly dangerous, hence the reason for the project to be on Mars.’

‘Dangerous? In what way?’

‘Such details I cannot go into, at least here. But suffice to say that anyone within viewing distance of his experiments may well have experienced some ... peculiar effects.’

‘I’m intrigued to know more Mister...’

‘Standford. Ebon Standford.’

‘Well, Mister Standford, perhaps you would like to accompany me to my office.’ Every protein in his body would be scanned before he got anywhere near her office. And then highly trained security staff would greet him and check his credentials.

‘No no, Doctor Fortenski, that’s not how we operate. You are obliged to bring his file in its original form to us, at a chosen location.’

‘But how do I know you are who you claim to be?’

‘You don’t. My organization operates at an above top secret level, which means without the knowledge of state authorities.’ He examined the hat he still held in both hands as if looking for some imperfection.

‘There are simply two options to consider,’ he continued. ‘Either you bring the file to us at the time and place of our choosing or we extract it.’

‘By whatever means. I see.’ She wasn’t used to being frightened in this way.

‘You will receive the coordinates, the time and date on your personal console. But don’t bother to trace the message’s origin, and do not bring anyone else or any recording device; we can scan for either of those presences. Is that clear?’

‘Clearer than a datacrystal.’

‘Then I wish you good day, ma’am.’ He walked off briskly, seeming to blend into the muted light before passing through an exit door. A second later the momentary dazzling white of full illumination.

Raiya pressed the comm tab affixed to her lapel. ‘Jansson, can you check a scan from the last few minutes from my location?’

‘Sure thing, Dr Fortenski,’ came his reassuringly familiar voice.

She waited half a minute.

‘No anomalies... Err, what did you want me to check for?’

‘Unauthorized personnel.’

‘The system would have flagged that. Nothing on visual except – lighting’s dim. That’s odd. And you ... appear to be talking. Audio is off line. I’ll run a diagnostic.’

She waited about two minutes, this time.

‘There appears to have been low level EM interference. Still, an intruder should have left some kind of trace pattern. How *curious*,’ he remarked.

‘Thanks, Jansson. I’ll check back with you tomorrow.’ She closed the link, then hurried into the welcome security of her car.

‘Home,’ she told it. The vehicle drifted gently away as the parking bay door parted for her exit.

This time no music or newscast; her mind would not focus on anything other than her strange visitor.

But analytical thought failed, had done right from the time he appeared, as if all those years had been stripped away when she needed them most. One word sprang into her mind: *Sinister*. No, not adequate. She simply wasn’t able to read him.

Clearly there’d always be the risk of being targeted or stalked by an ex-patient or client, and hence the need for utmost security surrounding her at all times. Some had been borderline insane, and would in any other century be institutionalised, except these days medication or neuro re-sequencing were able to fix even the most extreme psychotic tendencies. The ones she feared most were the obsessives, usually male: those who thought that allowing access into the private recesses of their psyche was something specially intimate, feeling what they believed to be true love with the only person who truly understood them. At least these men were predictable; her professional network a constant source of support and understanding, as a counter. Not that she’d break the code of confidentiality with any of these patients (or clients as the nomenclature many preferred); only the specific threats were discussed.

Something, someone, a threat outside of this protective realm had got to her

in the way no psychotic or obsessive ever could. Even the thought occurred to contact her ex-husband – just a reassuringly familiar voice. No. Instead she'd stay at home, nervous, but too proud to admit it ... well, certainly to him. Her only company a subsentient minibot cleaner.

4

They sat around the “conference” table: Two architects and a medical doctor. In ten minutes, the ship’s computer informed them in its benignly androgynous voice, they would come out of warp.

‘Have you ever heard him speak, I mean the pilot?’ said Josh Adams, the second Architect. A bear of a man at least ten years older than Scott.

Scott shook his head slightly, knowing his question was loaded. ‘I don’t think he is actually a pilot; he’s more like a systems monitor. But no, he’s not even used the comm.’ He looked to the doctor.

‘I enquired after his heath,’ said Dr Fredrick Lichman, ‘and he assured me he was fine.’

Josh looked at the doctor sharply. ‘So you didn’t actually check up on him?’

‘Naturally I offered to, but I accepted his refusal.’

‘Fine, so he could have keeled over or be having some kinda episode from the shock of travelling in this *revolutionary* way.’

‘His vital signs are constantly being monitored.’

‘Hey, I’m not trying to get at you, doc,’ assured Josh. ‘It’s just this hyper-space warp travel must be a huge deal for even a space pilot.’

‘I’m off to the observation lounge, see it stop,’ Scott announced.

‘Well at least the pilot has no control over that,’ said Josh.

The observation lounge was an all-encompassing dome. For about a minute Scott still felt a slight disorientation at being surrounded by the white lines in continuous streaks, vibrating but without the sensation of this movement, above the platform that appeared to float in space.

‘Two minutes,’ announced the computer voice, intelligent enough to know they knew what was meant.

Lichman said, ‘I’m taking my seat for this. I don’t trust the zero inertia thing.’

Scott felt his heart race at the one-minute countdown, deciding there was no point to keep standing just for the sake of some superfluous machismo, and sat in the adjacent seat. Josh followed suit. Scott then considered the release button for the restraint strap, held off pressing it, turned to Josh. Ultimately, Lichman was the only one who activated the restraints.

‘Ten seconds,’ the computer informed.

There was a jolt, not enough to fling Scott or Josh out of their seats, but sufficient for them to grip the arm rests. The stars had instantly become fixed points. Scott stood, turned round until he noticed one blueish point rapidly enlarging amongst the star-field.

‘Our holiday retreat,’ Josh announced. ‘Hope you brought enough sun-screen.’

‘Some would think you serious,’ said Dr Lichman.

‘A *potential* holiday retreat,’ said Scott. ‘Looks too good to be true.’ The world was becoming recognisably Earth-like.

‘What are you suggesting – that those explorer images were faked?’

Scott had been in the virtual version, had seen the pictures from the approaching probe – the images matched. ‘I guess I’m being paranoid,’ he admitted.

‘That’s to be expected,’ offered the doctor. ‘So far from home, you feel cut off from the trueness of it – a distant reality.’

‘Alternatively,’ Josh piped, ‘we’ve unwittingly become their guinea pig space men.’

‘Don’t listen to him’ said the doctor. ‘He’s winding you up.’

‘For sure. Anyway, we all accepted the risks.’

Josh did a thumbs-up sign towards Scott. ‘Pioneers man!’

Despite the artificially controlled counter-inertia, Scott was sure he could feel the deceleration force pushing him forwards. The planet was now about twice moon size from Earth, and growing at an unnervingly rapid rate.

Leaving the orbiting ship was such a regimented and precisely controlled affair, it left in Scott nothing of the emotional impact he had been expecting.

Just a few steps down into what was, in a sense, a sub-orbital shuttle, and similarly with a few rows of seats and side oval windows.

The shuttle scanned the planet's surface in search of a suitable landing spot. As he looked down at the mountainous landscape, Scott had that same feeling of anticipation he'd felt on his first and then farthest holiday – for the eight year old English boy – to the French Alps: the churning sensation in his stomach. Visualising himself on one of those mountains skiing, swishing past the pine trees with illicit exhilaration. The reality was somewhat different, of course: his parents would only allow him on the nursery slope, and even then they only allowed him to ski a few metres before bringing him to a halt. And so no skiing on this world; no rock climbing; perhaps some hill walking, but only after they'd made some formal gesture of work. Not that there'd be any footage to evince this. Nothing was to be revealed until their designs were finalised.

The terrain was becoming less mountainous; those were some decent hills towards the horizon, sharp against the azure sky. The other two were vocal in their anticipation. The lines between work and leisure were as blurred as the undulating valleys rushing beneath. The autopilot didn't seem to bother with maintaining a comfortably safe altitude in the way a human would. Perhaps it needed to be close for a detailed scan, analysing in its electronic brain the suitability of the valleys with their lakes. He saw a four legged animal, something like a horse, munching away at the lush grass.

The complete absence of human habitation was slightly unnerving. An alien biosphere, however Earth-like in appearance, presented problems: humans were the aliens, bringing their hostile bacteria, upsetting the eco-balance. More commonly the reverse to be given any real consideration. Only in the last few decades had any effective adaptation solution been found; it meant either becoming just a bit like the host species on some microscopic level, or using isolation technologies: a less than comfortable adaptation.

He remembered pictures of a barren, post nuclear world of Earth, then the recovery when the few 'brilliant' scientists who remained above developed a way of neutralising the effects of radiation. Somehow they restored the world

to its original state. Yet there was still the looming threat of overpopulation. How curious that one day he and his small group of colleagues would be seen as the pioneers enabling the solution to this perennial problem that, even with this and last century's expansion to Mars, had not alleviated.

The shuttle reached a clearing, seeming to be on a direct course for a grass plain interspersed with sandstone. Josh pointed towards the verdant scene. 'Brace yourselves, guys, it's gotta be down there.'

The descent seemed strangely abrupt as if the pilot had suddenly intervened, pulling the shuttle down, forcing the three passengers backwards into their seats.

While the dust was still settling outside, the inevitable question arose.

Josh said, 'Whose it to be then?'

'That one giant leap for mankind,' Scott affirmed.

'Let's not argue. You do the honours.'

'I've been thinking about it. Thinking about what happened to that guy who took the first step on Mars.'

'He died there – with his wife. But that was the deal. They were happy, and people *envied* them.'

'No, I mean the first man to return from Mars. They hounded him; he never had any peace. I wonder if he didn't just regret it.'

'So, what are you suggesting, Scott? That you don't want to be the first? That I should bear the burden?' He looked at Lichman, 'Maybe the good doctor here should have that honour.'

'No no,' Lichman insisted, waving a hand dismissively. 'That would just be wrong.'

'Anyone have a coin?' Josh asked.

'How about the pilot,' suggested Scott. 'That would make sense.'

'Okay, agreed. And we're not taking no for an answer.'

Despite their insistence the pilot refused to go first. The compromise involved them both leaping simultaneously from either edge of the shuttle's

extended platform. Scott felt the pound of the sandstone surface jar his body. Gravity was about twenty percent higher on this world. He wore a mask for the almost concordant higher CO2 atmosphere. The difference from Earth meant he would probably live without this protection for about an hour but feel okay for less than five minutes, according to the doctor; but he would be unconscious within ten minutes. The temperate warmth and the scattered cumuli made it feel benignly Earth-like. Only a matter of time, he thought; first the wealthy and adventurous. Then when words and images get back, when lives are seen to be lived as normal; viewed as just another foreign country but with elements of their home land, the second wave begins.

‘Can’t believe we’ve got it all to ourselves, eh Scott,’ said Josh in his jovial growling voice. ‘You, the artist must be feeling rather inspired right now.’

‘We’re all a bit overwhelmed,’ Dr Lichman observed. ‘After all, this is a moment in history.’

‘I must make a note of that in my Psi-diary,’ said Josh: ‘*This is truly a moment in history.*’ He spoke in a faux dramatic voice, like a voice-over in a film trailer.

Scott took in the sun-baked untarnished scenery. ‘I’m imagining the development possibilities, and then the over-development.’

‘Scott, if you had your way, there would just be well dispersed villages with a single tower of commerce.’

Scott turned to face Josh. ‘What are you saying: that I’m just compromising my principles so I can be here on this assignment?’

‘Hey man, we’re all doing a bit of that.’

A sound of a hatch clunking shut. The pilot dismounted the lander’s front section; Scott noticed the look of distress on the old man’s face. All three were staring at him.

‘You OK, man?’ Josh asked the pilot.

‘Yeah,’ he said, defensively, ‘I’m fine.’

‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost; wondering if you were having problems earlier – I mean with the landing.’

‘Yeah, well.’ He shifted his shoulders uncomfortably in his pocket-arrayed beige lite-jacket. ‘A few technical problems is all; nothing I couldn’t deal with.’

‘Hey, look, man,’ said Josh. ‘I’m not casting any aspersions on your piloting ability, just the curious fact that you had to do it at all.’

‘It was only a scanner malfunction. But that’s why I’m here,’ he said plainly.

Dr Lichman smiled reassuringly. ‘And how glad we are, too,’ he said with a sincerity Josh would never be likely to manage.

‘There is something else,’ the pilot admitted. ‘The local scanner’s playing up as well.’

‘Do we need a scanner from here?’ wondered Josh.

‘Really it’s only as a precaution.’

‘For what?’

‘Our safety from the local wildlife.’

Scott remembered that horse-type creature. ‘What did the explorer probe record?’

‘Erm. That’s the thing: it didn’t record anything.’ The pilot looked to his feet, probably expecting the panicked response.

‘Nothing at all?’

‘As far as I know, nothing beyond a few images from orbit and a bio-toxin scan. Nothing about complex life. At least those were the rumours.’

‘Those fucking ISA suits sitting in their corporate high tower,’ blurted Josh. ‘All about profit these days ... and their image. Sending us on this chance, speculative... How good did it look for them: civilians to a new world, while their rival astronauts are not even beyond---.’

‘Okay, we’re all a bit tense right now,’ said the doctor. ‘Things go wrong, but we do our best and cope.’

‘Yeah, you said it, doc,’ Josh said sarkily.

The pilot pulled his jacket straight. ‘We’ve got two options: set up the base here, or take it to somewhere you think will be safer.’

‘So at least the buggy still works?’ Josh asked.

‘Yeah, but it’s only designed for two if we’re carrying the base pack on it.’

‘Why not just set up here?’ suggested Scott. ‘At least we’re near the shuttle for a quick exit.’

‘That sounds sensible,’ agreed Lichman.

‘Assuming that will still take off.’

The pilot drew in breath as if he was about to say something heated, before appearing to relax.

The base-camp was a collection of carbon-fibre panels and wide hinges containing air compressors which would force it to unfold into a building about the size of a standard house, whose strength belied its five centimetre thickness.

Darkness fell. Scott stood outside feeling a flourish of exhilaration from the unfamiliar myriad constellations, and the distant shrieking of an even stranger animal. He couldn’t imagine ever being able to sleep tonight.

5

Raiya knew what the answer would be. But she asked all the same. ‘Have you found anything on Ebon Stanford?’ Jansson swivelled round from his chair to give her the briefest of glances.

‘Sorry, Dr Fortenski.’

Jansson was always about protocol. She thought of saying: ‘just call me Raiya’, but imagined that it would somehow unsettle him.

‘So was he using some kind of stealth technology?’

‘It seems so. There were no ancillary traces beyond the EM disturbance. Security are working with the police to track down his movements but it’s almost as if he was never there.’

‘But he was,’ she said firmly.

‘Well, he’s good,’ Jansson couldn’t hide his admiration for someone clever enough to evade the security system he had helped to set up. It was as if the fabled gauntlet had been thrown down before him. Perhaps this challenge was just what he needed. It seemed everyone in this building knew about his difficult divorce. He’d spoken to her, more as a friend than a client, unusually breaking from his formal manner. Well actually she’d spoken to him when the rumours had spread to her. And she felt obliged to offer some unofficial counselling. At least today he seemed to be more animated.

‘Can you run an incoming message stream monitor, back-time from this morning?’ she asked.

‘Of course.’ He looked at her as if in hope she would divulge the reasons, but he was far too professional to ask, or even speak of her request to others.

‘I may need some assistance a bit later.’

‘Always happy to oblige.’

‘And most appreciated.’

In her office Raiya waved open her console, the oblong base image blossoming from its cuboid point. Text told her fourteen messages. She sifted

through the usual case related docs to one flagged as unknown origin. Her system would already warn her not to open it until it was security verified. No Trojans, or any type of virus preventing it from being filtered. She read it. Further to our meeting last night. You must be at these coordinates at exactly 7:15pm ... alone with no recording equipment.

They were simply coordinates, no named place. *Do I tell Jansson? Jansson: strong, dependable, protective, against the darker forces. Huh, his thoughts.* She imagined he'd want to be there, rather than a distant observer informing the authorities – who in any case this uber-spook Stanford would be ready for.

Raiya ran a scan of the entire file-set, searching for any encrypted, hidden, data.

Negative.

Still, she couldn't be sure her console just wasn't adapted for something deeply hidden. Possibly Jansson's system would find something, but couldn't risk involving him.

Torbin Lyndau, like so many case studies, believed the government – or those in charge – had a hidden agenda for which their minions would be unwitting players; a belief that the population were treated as children, not yet ready for the harsh truth of what was truly out there preparing to take over. The more extreme end: the paranoiacs, the schizophrenics. Often highly intelligent, creative; their imagination turned against them. Neurological malfunction, correctable with medication. Normalizing them – according to standard psychiatric opinion.

Torbin was somewhere on that scale, but she couldn't decide whether he was at the mild paranoiac end or insane – which was possible. After all, it's the price some pay for genius. But someone was taking him seriously, and she couldn't bring herself to read the next file. She made a copy.

Eludi-4

Scott woke to hear a rattling on his door. ‘Wake up! Stop dreaming you’re on holiday!’ shouted Josh. ‘We’ve got work to do.’

He’d overslept. Sunlight streamed through onto his bed, making it uncomfortably hot. As he got out of bed he glimpsed at the view through the window; even in his tired state the landscape, framed in snow-capped tree-lined mountains, seemed enticing and lushly brimming with its unsullied potential.

‘Give me a few minutes.’ Scott said.

Their assignment was to survey the flatland zone and develop a model for a proto city. Neither of them imagined their project would materialise into an actual structure within the decade. It was simply a way of getting first dibs on a new world by their sponsors, a metaphorical planting of a corporate flag, faintly tinged with Canadian patriotism.

The proposed site was only a couple of kilometres away so seemed less trouble to go on foot, carrying the relatively light equipment. Since the scanner was still mysteriously malfunctioning, Josh announced authoritatively that they had reached the site, a mostly barren clay infused soil plain. He planted his capture frame on its monopod and then watched it unroll into its transparent rectangle.

Dr Lichman found a place nearby, but out of their view. A flexi-plastic chair unfolded on which he sat, holding a tablet. Scott guessed it contained the novel he’d been immersed in throughout the last few days. The pilot had decided he’d be more useful remaining at base, and return to the shuttle so he could run diagnostics on the faulty navigation system.

Scott and Josh already had some preliminary designs transferred from a roll-frame which in turn had been an AR model.

‘Right, let’s get some arguments going,’ said Josh, his voice slightly

muffled through the filter mask, whilst studying his city-scape overlay, which contrasted with Scott's in many significant ways.

'How about this: your designs may well be functional, compliant with thermal and geophysics stress potentials. But they're a bit boring.'

'If by boring you mean not having the risk of collapsing after the first force ten storm, then boring suits me fine.'

'Two entirely different architects working on the same project: it was never a recipe for harmony.'

'You said it, my friend.'

'I suppose we should play along with their plan, to find a way of cross integrating the designs,' said Scott.

'How much are they paying you?'

'Same as you, no doubt. But I'm too much of a gentleman to pry.'

'Then let's say hypothetically, I go exactly with their plan, and you do the same. Well why not just do a fusion transfer hybrid?'

Scott looked at him in despair. 'As if they couldn't tell it'd been automated.'

'So then they do want us to argue about who compromises the most.'

'Seems so.'

After about an hour and forty minutes of manually modifying elements of towers, spires and balconies, Scott looked round towards Josh, about a metre away, to view his state of progress. Josh sat still. Completely motionless. 'Hey Josh,' he called. 'How's that hidden solar panel façade going? Blended it in any better?'

No response. He seemed to be so engrossed.

Scott went over to him, patted him on the shoulder. No response. 'Josh?'

Scott then felt light-headed; he ripped the filter mask from his face. He was falling backwards, but in slow motion as if gravity was less than Earth's moon. The impact of ground still hurt his back. His vision was blurry. But she was there, her olive skin, dark hair swishing as she shook her head: Deanna, the

woman he loved, the woman who he'd last seen in their home log-cabin. Her face was angered, or upset – he couldn't tell for sure. 'You shouldn't have come here,' she said in an unusually stern voice. 'You will ruin it all. Go back.'

His world then blanked.

The next thing he knew, Dr Lichman was standing over him with a medcorder, its bleeping indicating something worrying. An oxygen mask had been placed over his mouth. 'Seems like your filter mask was not filtering properly; you were getting CO2 poisoning.'

Josh emerged from the background. 'I can almost believe our sponsors would like us not to make it through this project,' he remarked. 'Just reap the benefits of our work, and not have to pay us.'

Lichman looked at the man with rebuke, then back to Scott. 'I've got a spare filter mask. This one works fine,' he assured.

'But I think I've done enough work for today,' Scott said.

Both the other two agreed.

The coordinates took her car to a wooded area near Calgary. Mountains rose up behind the vehicle as it landed in the forest clearing. She had done as he requested: no surveillance equipment, no one following. She had the file.

About five minutes early. Raiya waited, checked the nav readouts to be sure they were accurate. This seemed like a sensible place for not being monitored even though the evening sun still seared through the trees, illuminating slightly yellowing leaves.

She waited in the car.

After another ten minutes, a figure emerged into the clearing. The same dark suit and hat. There'd been no sign of any transport. However he got here she imagined it would've evaded any sensor; that man would surely laugh at any electronic observer.

He stood outside her car beckoning her to come out. Her heart pounded with a fear she couldn't quite quantify. *Is he truly dangerous?*

She stepped onto the wild grass, feeling curiously resigned now to her fate. *He has the power, I have no choice.* Looked up into those dark eyes. Revealing nothing. Soulless.

'Doctor Fortenski. The file?' He took a step closer, tilted his head in a strangely avian way.

She pulled the datastrip from her jacket pocket. 'This is everything: his complete account. I swear to you.'

'I accept your honesty.' He snatched it from her fingers with indecent haste. 'You will not speak of this meeting. Moreover, I cannot be followed, or tracked, or monitored in any way. This is out of your hands now, understand?'

'I understand quite clearly,' she said, trying to maintain a semblance of composure.

He walked off, seeming to merge into the woods. Still she heard no sound of any transport.

Stood there, couldn't go back in her car even though it was the obviously sensible thing to do. A retched feeling, a need to vomit, but couldn't quite. Just had to wait awhile.

When the feeling subsided, the car became the inviting place of sanctuary. She wondered if somehow he would find out she'd kept a copy of the file. *He knows, of course he knows.* It was logical she would, after all.

As the car lifted from the clearing she contacted Jannson, whom she knew was on another late shift; since the break-up with his wife he'd been doing overtime almost every week day. 'Jannson, have there been any security breaches in the last hour?'

'Not one. Is there a problem?'

'No. Just need you to keep a close monitor of everything including EM disturbances, fluctuations---'

'I understand: security has already been stepped up. The institute is safe?' He seemed very sure.

'Thank you. That's reassuring.' Really she needed the file to be transferred to somewhere more secure, in spite of it being in a fingerprint and voice-check safe. It seemed absurd but the idea of total security would be for the file to be kept in Jannson's pocket.

When she got back to the institute, Raiya made anxiously for the safe. Still there. She took the datatab out, inserted it into her console, and ordered it to remain within a firewall. A reassuring slither of indigo denoting an unusual interface. The text erupted before her against a plane of beige-white: the third Lyndau file.

Lyndau file three

<Now it's as if we can be gods. Space, time is no longer a constraint. The wormhole only remained for a fraction of a second. But it seemed that moment was enough. Now I know my life can be divided into halves; at the time I hadn't appreciated how drastically it would change from that point. Who

could? All that mattered then was the confirmation of my equations, the balancing of forces, enough to form a hole through space allowing information to pass to a far distant place.

Information did pass. Enough that whoever analysed it would know us.

We – my team of technicians, engineers – had prepared for such a rare, fleeting moment. To send a data burst with more than a basic test message was never part of the plan; we had only been commissioned to create the conditions for a wormhole: the parameters were strict, no matter that I provide the math that led to those parameters – as arbitrary as they had been. But this event may never be repeated, so finely tuned and unpredictable were the conditions (you could get the exact calculations for a successful trial only for the repeat to be a failure, such is the nature of quantum unpredictability; although, as exacting and complex as they were, we simply had to accept they were too basic to turn probability into prediction). So our one chance. We sent the data burst in the form of light, containing information about our species, much like the original voyager probe but far more detail. An alien civilization with standard digital communication, would then know of our genetic make-up, our history of the last few centuries. Everything that makes us human.

Why did I send it? So they'd know, know not repeat our mistakes. And if we destroyed ourselves through these dangerous experiments, at least the knowledge would remain.

I've always felt so isolated. There must be so many of them out there. Maybe they are afraid to contact us. But I suspect they already have. The government knows. Those people behind the scenes who are really in charge, they've kept the truth from us. So we must go beyond our assigned roles, to push through the truth.

In spite of what has happened since, I still believe it was the right thing to do. I cannot say any more for now. I am afraid. Perhaps soon the courage will be with me.>

Raiya closed the file. It was hardly that she needed convincing of Torbin

Lyndau's descent into psychosis; the background on him – although can never be verified as true any more than any other media-based accounts – all cited his erratic and delusional behaviour. The question wasn't whether he was mad, de-facto, but whether the nature of his work led to this madness.

She did a datanet search on Torbin.

Torbin Lyndau: co-creator of Rosen wormhole technology. A channel through space, creating a near instantaneous means of sending information and matter. Produced as a result of extreme gravitational warping through an evolved singularity, by means of negative (exotic) matter.

Torbin did not, however, successfully produce a stable wormhole, only ever managing to send photons and a single stream of protons for a fraction of a second.

Beyond that were accounts of his decline through drink and drugs, and speculation that this was caused through his failure to make a viable wormhole for any known application. That incompleteness. Indeed, it was puzzling that he the principle scientist should achieve such a breakthrough but not take it any further. Perhaps it was due to his descent into madness. And yet his colleagues were never mentioned, as if they had stopped when he had given up.

Then why the interest in someone whose work had been greatly improved, made viable by others? It wasn't as if any of his work had been kept a secret. He was certainly significant in wormhole development, perhaps without him there would never have been such technology. But from what she had read, no one seemed to have the inclination to advance his work for at least half a century, as if for that time it had been viewed as something sacred.

Raiya stared at the folder icon with the fifth file, toying with the idea of opening it, wondering whether she should read of what might be his final decline before the inevitable suicide.

Not now.

She realised it was not only her that was in danger.

She contacted her colleague on the comm-link. 'Len, I need to speak. Is this

a secure line?’ Audio only.

‘As always,’ said Heigener. ‘So, Raiya, how is our dead patient? Diagnosed his condition yet?’

‘Normally it would be most unprofessional of me to discuss a patient with you.’ She knew that most likely he’d already have made up his mind from his copy of the diary. ‘But I am troubled by his case.’

‘Weird, Huh.’

‘So go on: what’s your opinion?’

‘Well, it’s not unheard of for anyone venturing beyond Earth to go insane. But why is he different, you really want to know. Anyone trying to push the boundaries is under tremendous pressure, self imposed mainly: the perception of being under the spotlight – the pioneer.’

‘As *I* thought, although perhaps there was something more; an external pressure made all the worse for it being invisible to others.’

‘I knew this was about more than a general diagnosis – like I could give you anything new on that,’ he said.

‘There are others interested in Torbin Lyndau, and I’m frightened because of it,’ she told him frankly. ‘Can’t tell you now, I don’t trust this line is a hundred per cent secure. Can we find somewhere safe to meet?’

‘Of course. I can send you the location.’

‘And the Lyndau file ... hide it somewhere remote.’

‘You’ve been ... contacted?’

‘More than that, but can’t explain now.’

‘Okay. Well, I would have thought your office is as safe a place as any.’

‘I’m not even entirely sure it is.’

*

Eludi-4

Scott opened the unlocked hatch and peered into the shuttle main quarters, where the pilot lived permanently now. ‘I need to contact Deanna,’ he said. ‘This is quite urgent.’ At least for once he wasn’t locking them out.

The pilot swivelled round in his leatherette chair, as if surprised he hadn't himself locked the hatch. 'Main comm's down. Been working on it, the quantum cooler works fine – it should be in step with Earth's relay sat.'

'And you know this is serious, right?' How could the pilot make it sound like some routine failure?

The pilot stood up in all his indignation. 'Of course I fucking know it's serious. You're not the only one with problems here.'

'Alright, so you've been having trouble with malfunctioning tech. Well ... *most* of it.'

'Look. I'm a second grade engineer; fixing dual locality quantum modulators is a bit out of my league. I mean the whole concept is pretty weird – two places at once, separated by hundreds of light years.'

'Maybe they don't want us to contact home.'

'That's a reasonable assumption. But it doesn't explain the problem with the locator and the nav systems.'

'You hadn't tested them before we left.'

'No. Well you tend to trust Cisa.'

'Something strange is happening on this planet. We all know something's not right with it.'

'I won't argue with you on that,' the pilot said in a low voice.

'But you can't explain it, though.'

The pilot shrugged, then looked up intently. 'I've seen things myself. Disturbing things.'

'Can it be any more disturbing than what I've seen?'

'How about my long-deceased first wife visiting me, and telling me how wrong I've been coming here. Said a man of my age is long past being in charge of a ship.'

'A man of your age?'

'I am a hundred and sixty-three.'

'Older astronauts were once favoured because they already had their life behind them.'

‘You probably think someone as ancient as me might no longer have a sound mind.’

‘Not at all. You could only be middle aged with decent geneering. In any case, what I’ve seen is just as freaky.’

‘But you have the excuse of CO2 poisoning.’

‘Well, I don’t buy that.’

Scott jumped as he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Josh. His face was not showing the usual exuberance. ‘Scott, if you’re up to it I wanna get this project finished today.’

‘You and me both. But we’ve got another two days.’

‘Yeah well, I’d like to explore some of this planet.’

‘You want to get away?’

‘I’ve been getting these headaches; those damn masks, no doubt. It was actually the doc who recommends having a wander round – clear my head I suppose.’

Scott nodded. ‘Sounds like good advice. We’ve got the preliminaries; we can fill in the details on the ship. I know the point about finishing it at the site was to feel properly inspired, but I’ve had my bit of inspiration for this trip.’

Josh gave a wry grin. ‘Me too. Maybe you’d like to join me for some mountain climbing ... if you can handle it.’

‘I can handle it.’

Zorandi Entola watched the confirmation of the diagnostic with an incredulity he could not justify. After all, the sensors never lied, had never been at fault. Yet, they were telling him something incredible: a spacial distortion emanating from the constellation of Cygnus, but not located near any star. It was minute, really; he hoped no other world would have the technology to detect it. Most of all, planet Earth. The B'tari, under the guidance of Central Council, were keeping a close eye on this flourishing world. If its inhabitants knew about this phenomenon the response would be panic, followed by some kind of remedial action. Humans had a history of interfering with things about which they had no proper understanding, all in the interests of self-preservation. What mattered to the B'tari was the preservation and integrity of this galaxy – if not the entire universe – and thus its temporal continuance.

Now, in an expanding radius from about twelve thousand light years away, space was being transformed. According to the data, life on a planet in that region had been altered, indicated by its environmental signature. Its life had regressed from early-stage arthropods to basic aquatic creatures. Analysed to be in the order of twenty-five million years. It was not something that was actually visibly detectable. And after all, visual sensors would see it as it was twelve millennia ago. Only the spacial tunnelling array could give a reading from merely minutes in the past. At least humans did not yet possess such technology; he imagined the ensuing chaos if they had, the panic – if they truly understood the potential threat. Still, he could not be wholly convinced of what he was seeing.

Strictly speaking he should have reported this immediately to the council. But he held out, continued to watch.

The spacial distortion had spread through the neighbouring star systems. But like a wave in a lake there were minor ripples reaching, in their diminishing subtleties, to merely hundreds of light years away. Well, not quite.

On closer observation, the sign-wave was not uniformly spread, but rather the background of space – and matter within – acted on it like a rocky undulating seabed.

A probe had been sent to explore the phenomenon. On its encounter with the wave's periphery, strange readings were sent back: time appeared to be fragmented. Initially, these were fleeting temporal anomalies, as if bits of the past were breaking through; only detectable in their isotopic signature – no more than a mismatch of particles. As the probe approached the wave proper it activated its subspace encasement, but even within a negative energy bubble the device was not impervious to the distortion effects. Readings were almost off the *scale*; his observation team watched in a kind rapt horror as the telemetry told of the violent effects eventually culminating in the collapsing space around the probe, and its swift non-existence. What happened could not really be described as destruction, it was merely an adjustment back to a temporal order, albeit one that is in a constant state of change towards the past. Basic physics states that things cannot switch from one time to another: the probe was simply *out* of its time, and so winked out of that time like a particle in quantum flux fulfilling its role in the conservation of energy.

Zorandi had also been given responsibility for observing human exploration beyond the Sol system. Human exploration had become of increasing concern to the B'tari Central Council, of late. Humans seemed to be the risk-taking species of the quadrant; they would employ a new technology without giving due regard for the implications of its use. Sure, they put a new innovation through a battery of tests for basic safety, but there always seemed to be a lack of long term thinking. In a sense that was something to be admired; if the B'tari had shown such pioneering spirit they may by now have found a way to reach other galaxies. Instead they remained, bound in this role of overseer, like parents watching their teenage children but keeping a healthy distance.

There was a vessel that had landed on a planet in the Eludi system. A minor ripple had already reached it. The effects of which could not be quantified. Yet the readings the probe had taken of this planet suggested something far more

mysterious. Channels of subspace were noticed, miniature wormholes like trails in water made by projectiles. Sharp EM emissions emanated from their end-points. The probe could not identify the emergence of any object, but Zorandi surmised that they must also be observation probes. Perhaps from the originators of this temporal phenomenon.

His findings would eventually be sent to Central Council, the B'tari's governing body, responsible for overseeing the entire galaxy and implementing the rules of the Temporal Directive. Zorandi wondered if such a phenomena could render the Temporal Directive redundant; surely this would undermine the very basis for its existence as a guide, as a book of moral philosophy.

The council would as usual be very circumspect.

‘Len. Where are you?’ His personal comm-link was down. His car’s comm was also off line.

She approached Jansson. ‘I’m worried about Dr Heigener; he was supposed to be meeting me here almost an hour ago.’

‘I’ll check the police monitoring grid.’ As the institute’s security officer Jansson had direct access to all surveillance monitoring systems. ‘He seems to be on his way,’ he said matter-of-factly, making Raiya feel as if her concerns were unfounded.

She checked her comm once again, and to assuage her worry he answered. ‘Hi, Raiya. Sorry for the delay. Had a few problems with the car. I’ll be over there in about ten minutes.’

She rather sheepishly thanked Jansson for his assistance and made back for her office.

Leonard Heigener lowered his bulky frame in the leatherette chair opposite. Raiya noticed he had put on weight since the last time she saw him in person; the holo image never seemed to give an entirely accurate representation of someone’s size, despite what the system’s manufacturer would claim. Maybe it was something to do with his presence in reality. The thought that it made *her* look larger was not reassuring brought a brief warm feeling.

Leonard had an earnest look about him. ‘Sorry about my tardiness.’ He smiled ‘The darndest thing: the car’s nav system went totally skew. Wasn’t paying attention at first and it took me two hundred ks off course.’

‘No need to apologise, Len. I’m not fitting you in between clients. To be honest, I’m glad I’ve cancelled the rest of today’s sessions; not really in the mood for dealing with their neurosis.’

‘If I was booked in to see you today I’d be most disappointed, it would be the highlight of my week.’

‘Yes, well some of them are just very lonely.’

‘We all get lonely, Raiya.’ She wondered where this conversation might go.

‘As much as I appreciate your company, Len, you know I only really need you here for your expertise.’

‘Of course.’ He chuckled briefly. ‘You can take the shrink out of the institute, but---’

‘---You can’t take the institute out of the shrink. Sure. Sometimes it is difficult to switch off from that mode. But as one of the best in the field, tell me: what would you do with the Lyndau file if you knew it was of interest to – shall we say – a higher authority?’

He hunched forward. ‘What kind of higher authority would that be?’

‘That’s just it. I don’t know. He wouldn’t say. Except he claimed to be from some sort of security agency – the Western Alliance Security Directorate.’

‘Never heard of them. Did you ask for ID?’

‘To my shame, no. No one has ever had such an effect; I’ve found sociopaths to be less intimidating than this man.’

‘You’re even frightening *me*, now.’

‘Seriously, I couldn’t think of anyone I’d least like to meet on a dark night – even in the safety of the car park.’

‘He must be good!’

‘So it seemed. I had no choice in handing over the file.’

‘Then I’m in danger?’

‘Quite possibly.’

‘But I haven’t been contacted.’

‘Maybe they don’t know you have a copy since you’re not heading the case study.’

‘Okay, so you think I’d be safer if I destroyed it? But I’m guessing you’ve kept a copy, right?’

‘He is – was – a fascinating man, the archetypal mad genius.’

‘Archetypal? A bit of a generalisation for you, Raiya.’

‘Yes I did read the media reports, tried not to let them colour my analysis.’

My point is: what is there about the work of this man that is viewed as a threat to national security ... or be of any special interest?’

‘You’ve read the full accounts?’

‘Most of them.’

‘Well, I can tell you it gets pretty bizarre,’ said Heigener. ‘I’m talking time travel, meetings with “ghosts” – that is: having encounters with dead people and discussing some quite specific events and theories. He may have been mad, but he had one heck of an imagination.’

‘But someone is taking this dead man deadly seriously.’

‘He claimed he was chosen – a conduit for an ancient civilization to communicate with “earthlings”. This ancient race has a great power to control time. He saw himself as having opened a kind of pandora’s box, unleashing unimaginable forces, dangerous forces.’

‘So you agree that he was highly delusional?’

Leonard shifted uncomfortably. ‘It’s an obvious analysis; difficult to argue against.’

‘I need a coffee. How about you?’

*

Eludi-4

In the twenty-percent higher gravity, at about eight hundred metres altitude, Scott found himself short of breath. Humidity had increased, making the filter mask feel even more oppressive than usual. The sun nevertheless shone brightly, glancing off a crashing waterfall about a hundred metres above them, giving the illuminated mist an ethereal quality.

They climbed the south side, a gradient which was just about possible to ascend on foot.

Josh pointed to a figure on an upper ridge. ‘What the fu...’

Scott could just discern a man in a T-shirt and shorts scrambling up the slope towards the waterfall. ‘Who?’

‘Well, it can’t be the pilot or Lichman – surely?’

‘A native?’

‘A native white man on a planet two thousand, three hundred light years from Earth. Yeah, makes sense.’

The man was getting very close to the waterfall; moving swiftly, almost seeming to glide over the ragged rock face, as if in lunar g.

‘We can’t both be hallucinating.’

‘Let’s find out, then.’

They both tried to run, but neither could move in any more than stuttering steps over the ruts and gullies. They just got near enough to the man to see him launch himself over the water, to then disappear into the torrent.

‘He’ll never survive that,’ commented Josh. ‘It’s suicide; that water’s never deep enough.’

‘No way!’ Scott noticed the man emerge at the bottom of what must’ve been at least a fifty metre drop, and then leap about excitedly like a child who had just descended a water slide.

Scott hadn’t noticed Josh hurtling towards the exuberant man. *A determination to confront a hallucination.* He followed, trying not care too much that he’d slip.

Josh was desperately scrambling across a ledge to get to the man who was still revelling in the water. Only, he slipped, falling about two metres. Scott diverted his trajectory down toward Josh. At first glance Josh seemed to have only superficial injuries.

‘Don’t stop for me. Get to *him*,’ Josh demanded.

Scott looked up to the waterfall’s base. The man was now striding towards the edge of the base, a sheer ragged drop before him. Scott got to within a few metres of the man. He called out: ‘Hey, wait up.’ The man was right at the edge now. Scott tried to get across, but he lost the balance between speed and caution, losing his footing, sliding down to a lower ledge.

As he tried to climb to his previous level he glanced across to see the man had reached the very edge. ‘Wait for me!’ he shouted.

‘Forget it,’ the man said. ‘You will anyway. You’ll forget it all. It will all

be taken away.'

'What do you mean?' Scott called. 'Why?'

'Because you were never supposed to be here. None of you.' He then leapt off the edge without a sound, his fall obscured by a rocky outcrop.

Scott backtracked towards Josh who'd now got to his feet, heading in his direction, hobbling along the ridge at a desperate pace.

'What happened?' Josh said, almost shouting from about ten metres away. 'Did you get a picture?' It was the obvious thing he should have done, but somehow in the excitement he'd entirely forgot.

'He jumped off the edge. I couldn't see any cable, so I'm guessing he's dead.'

Josh caught up with him. 'How will we ever explain that? It's insane!'

'The doctor would say we were both hallucinating due to oxygen deprivation.'

'And it would be difficult to argue with him on that.' Josh then nodded as if to confirm to himself an idea. 'There's only one thing for it. We look for a body.'

Scott grimaced at him. 'Now I would say *you* are insane. Even getting down the shallow slope will be a challenge for you now.'

Josh looked deadly serious. 'Then you go alone. Otherwise I will go myself. I gotta know whether there really was someone. I mean, can you accept we both saw the same illusion?'

He was right: it would bug them like crazy, not being sure. 'OK. I'll investigate.'

He had no climbing gear; even a helmet would give him some confidence on what was looking like a sheer edge. His comm only worked intermittently; there was no way of triangulating his position. And the lower oxygen levels at this altitude made it all the more difficult to concentrate.

The ridge forked off into a narrower section, and soon he was having to use his hands to stabilise his descent towards the base of the waterfall. The rock was increasingly ragged, his foot sliding, almost slipping off the edge except

for a desperate grapple on a jutting root on the higher section.

Water droplets flew into his eyes, even at the edge of this level. Below him rivulets flowed down through the jagged edge, coalescing to a stream, then to a lower ledge where it pooled and flowed down a shallow side. Scott surveyed the very bottom, following the eventual path of the stream. There was no sign of anyone. It was a sheer drop; from where the man had seemed to jump it was clear that he would at least be very seriously injured, certainly unable to walk off. Surely even the deepest part of the pool on that first ledge would not cushion his fall. It had looked like a suicide attempt. An effective one. Not even an expert free-jumper would cope on this descent, he thought.

He sat on the overhanging ledge, legs dangling down. The mist from the waterfall soaking his back. Where was the evidence that anyone else had ever been here? When Scott had passed the waterfall he'd left footprints trailing to this point; there was no avoiding it. If not for Josh as a witness he would easily be convinced that it was all merely another hallucination.

He got up and walked – as he imagined the man had done – to the very edge. Feet literally on the precipice.

If he jumped from here, he would make it – his fall unbroken – to that clear but roiling pool. He tried to remember how that man jumped. It was a lunge, just as if he were a free-jumper with a parachute, for the second or so he could be seen.

Scott surveyed around to the bottom again, just to be sure there was no body. He felt the vertigo take hold; his heart hammering, the tingle of adrenaline right to his fingertips. And he wanted to jump, if only to know how it felt.

He thought he heard a whisper in his right ear. 'Do it. You can do it.'

'I can do it,' he confirmed.

Then he did, and it felt incredible. For perhaps a second and a half he felt so alive, no thought of death.

And then...

'Doctor Lichman?'

‘Glad to see you’re back to the land of the living.’ The doctor was peering down at Scott, who was back in the shelter in his room.

‘But I jumped.’ Scott was surprised at not feeling injured in any way.

‘Jumped?’ Lichman enquired.

‘Off the mountain.’ It sounded absurd now, in this situation.

‘You collapsed, whilst climbing, about halfway up. CO2 intoxication. Josh had to lug you back. You were drifting in and out of consciousness ... but probably don’t remember that.’

‘No, we got near the top.’ The filter mask had been double checked, he was sure.

‘Scott, you hadn’t properly recovered from your episode. If I’d known you were going gallivanting up that mountain I wouldn’t have allowed it.’

‘Where’s Josh?’

‘He’s sleeping now. Exhausted as you can imagine.’

Torbin Lyndau 4.

August 17th 2293

The first time it visited was in the early hours, I think at about 4.am. I say 'it' because from such a distorted ethereal form there was no way to determine a gender. Such anthropomorphisms would surely have no meaning to such a highly evolved being.

You might imagine that I would be fearful at such an encounter, but since the visitation of those who should only exist in my memory, I am difficult to perturb. Clearly this was all part of a journey.

The being told me to prepare to leave, that I must not tell anyone. So I Left the house, my family still asleep, and stepped into the vortex. It was how I imagined a wormhole to be, rather than the pitiful and fleeting channel myself and my team had created.

A dizzying feeling, as the being – now a more substantial form – took my hand through the swirling vortex.

The first destination was Mars. It was some time in the future, I knew – at least a century. We'd exited a fixed portal. There were other portals through which people emerged. Their clothes were strange, no pressure suits even though there appeared to be no obvious biosphere containment. One of them held a rectangular device, similar to a datacorder, pointed it at the ground causing a beam to emanate. The beam expanded and turned into a brown mist. When the mist cleared, there stood a dog – a Labrador barking with excitement. I asked the being to explain how this was possible, but I was told not to ask questions because the future was meant to remain a mystery. The being told me that where I stood was the year 2534. However, these were temporal fragmentations. Apparently the universe no longer existed as one

coherent continuum.

Desperate for more information, I tried to talk to people but the being told me they would not be able to interact with me in any way.

The next destination was a planet designated as the first world humans would visit using wormhole technology based on my own. This was the present year; the first humans would arrive in 2321. It was a beautiful world, the area we visited was similar to the Rocky mountains.

On brown plain-land I stood frozen by some force I couldn't explain. Then the buildings started appearing, sprouting upwards like a film of speeded up plants. Spires and geometric shapes, reflecting the sun and mirroring the beautiful landscape; it was a city similar to many on Earth, yet not out of place on this world.

And then the destruction happened. The giant silver raindrops exploding the tower blocks; mechanoids rampaging through, killing, abducting.

I could not see them when I witnessed this, but I knew they were there.

'What do you expect me to do?' I asked it.

'You must sabotage your prototype,' came the reply. 'Destroy any blueprints or file associated with your work.'

'And if I refuse.'

'That is your prerogative, but you will come to realize your mistake.'

'You cannot prevent the onward march of technology,' I told it.

Then I found myself back in my bed. The time: 4.07. Perhaps no time had elapsed since the being had arrived.

You probably think it was all a dream. I even had doubts myself, that's why I had a chip implanted to record every sensory experience. So I downloaded the content from the last few hours. And though the image and sound quality were very distorted, it was enough to show where I had been. The alien, however, could only be resolved as a light, an oval haze that somehow my mind saw as humanoid. Unfortunately, the time code was skewed, giving random readings until the experience ended.

Is this evidence? The download is stored in a crystal; it contains the unique

transfer code, which means it has been directly downloaded. Any attempts to alter the content of the recording would result in this code becoming annulled. So this one valid copy will be kept with me at all times. If I die, when I die, whoever finds my body should know the crystal will be about me or near me. I wish I could put the pieces together. All I know is something dreadful will happen....

‘Close,’ Raiya told the display. Alone in her office, she felt her skin prickling, as if she were near a ghostly presence. Him, it was like he had chosen her: the custodian, the arbiter of his sanity.

When she first took on the case, she’d have welcomed this role. Now it was a burden, not just for herself. Her colleague may not have admitted to being fazed. Leonard wanted to be seen as sturdy, unflappable, the one she could depend on for advice; her rock (the role that so many men like to take when it concerns a single woman). He wasn’t one to yield to any intimidation. ‘Len!’ He should be back in his office by now.

She tried his personal comm. No response, as if he had switched it off.

‘Jansson: I need a fix on Dr Heigener’s location.’

‘Checking now.’

‘He’s off the grid. I’ll check the traffic maps and his car’s transponder.’ She felt her heart quicken, breathing erratic. ‘Dr Fortenski, his car isn’t registering; the police have been notified.’

What good would that do? she thought. ‘Thank you, Jansson. I need to increase my personal security to the highest level.’

‘Already done. You’ll be under constant monitoring.’

She opened her console for any new messages. There was one, but not from Leonard.

Origin unknown.

DR FORTENSKI, WE KNOW YOU HAVE KEPT A COPY OF THE LYNDIAU FILE. THE OTHER REMANING COPY HAS BEEN SEQUESTERATED. YOUR COLLEAGUE DR HEIGENER HAS BEEN

PURGED OF ALL KNOWLEDGE OF TORBIN LYNDIAU. HE IS SAFE. HOWEVER, IF YOU ATTEMPT TO CONTACT HIM, HE WILL BE ELIMINATED.

AS YOU MAY REALIZE, WE TAKE THE SECURITY OF THIS PLANET EXTREMELY SERIOUSLY. THE KNOWLEDGE CONTAINED WITHIN THE FILE COULD HAVE RAMIFICATIONS WAY BEYOND ANYTHING YOU CAN COMPREHEND. ANY ATTEMPT TO ACT UPON SUCH KNOWLEDGE WILL RESULT IN A SIMILAR ACTION TO YOUR OWN SELF.

SO IF YOU VALUE YOUR MEMORY, DR FORTENSKI, YOU WILL DESIST FROM YOUR STUDY OF TORBIN LYNDIAU.

Raiya ran a search routine of the messages path. Normally each relay bounce would be recorded, at least for twenty-four hours. No trace; it was as if the message had been personally entered on her console. But the idea that even Standford could enter her office undetected seemed too much to contemplate. Surely even the safe would not be too much of a challenge for him, and yet it was all still there.

Jansson's reassuring voice came through on the comm. 'I have his location. He is back in his office. The police have spoken to him and decided there is no cause for further investigation.'

'But how do they explain his disappearance – I mean to be completely off the grid?'

'He said he had an electronics malfunction.'

She thought of saying: *I don't buy that explanation.* But instead said: 'OK, Jansson, thanks for your help.'

Raiya knew she would have to visit him; it would mean cancelling the rest of the day's appointments; it would mean putting her life in danger. *But I have to know.*

This office felt smaller than ever, it was as if the walls had been gradually closing in on her. Every day, perhaps by a few centimetres.

Have to get out of here!

Eludi-4

‘Three days. And what have we achieved other than a few modifications to those existing designs?’ Josh questioned, as he stared out through the shuttle’s window.

‘We’ve kept our sanity,’ said Scott. ‘At least, I think so.’ But as he looked at the receding valley he was sure he saw a figure, right near where they’d left the shelter. At this altitude it was no more than the size of an ant. ‘Tell me you can see someone down there,’ which came out almost as a plea.

‘I can see something,’ Josh said, from the seat in front. ‘It could be an animal though, one of those horse-like things.’

‘Doctor.’ Scott called to Lichman, who was sat on the other side. ‘Have you got the mag-scope?’

Magnified sixty times, he was clearly visible, the man Scott had seen. Standing before the prefab shelter, and seemingly looking through its entrance. ‘I knew it,’ he said triumphantly. ‘I’m not crazy after all.’

‘Give that to me,’ Josh demanded, and snatched it impatiently. ‘Okay, so you’ve seen our visitor before.’

‘So have you. Don’t you remember?’

‘No,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I really don’t.’

Lichman now had the scope. ‘He’s taking some items out. That must be the replication unit.’

‘So much for leaving a hospitable welcome for the next arrivals,’ commented Josh.

‘Pilot,’ Scott called through the comm. ‘We have to go back.’

‘No chance!’ The man replied, with considerable finality.

‘Surely we have to report an unscheduled visitor?’

‘Report from here, then. At least you’ve got more chance of a signal.’ The shuttle was now accelerating in its ascent; in about ten minutes they would be

in the orbital range of the *Farquest*.’

‘Scott’s right.’ added Josh’s more authoritative voice. ‘We should go back. Even if he’s some kind of alien, we have to know.’

The intercom opened once more. ‘You don’t understand,’ the pilot said, in earnest. ‘There’s something strange about this planet. I knew it right from the start. It’s not safe.’

‘You’re just a coward,’ Josh told him. ‘Afraid of what you don’t yet know.’

‘It’s not a matter of cowardice, Mr Adams. My duty to get you safely off this planet, now our time there is up.’

‘He’s right,’ said the doctor. ‘It would be a foolhardy risk. We should just report this to Cisa, and they can send the appropriate team.’

Josh glared at the doctor. ‘This could be our moment in history: first contact on an alien world – and you want to send a *team*?’

‘He looked quite human to me,’ said Lichman.

‘Perhaps he’s a time-traveller,’ Scott said. ‘He spoke to me when he was about to jump off the mountain ledge.’

‘Pilot!’ shouted Josh. ‘Take us down! We’re gonna sort this out, once and for all.’

The pilot kept silent. But as the shuttle was on the brink of leaving the atmosphere, it started to descend.

Within easy visual range of the shelter there was no sign of the man. The pilot then announced through the comm: ‘If I land I am not leaving this shuttle. Is that clear?’

‘As a crystal,’ Josh answered. ‘Keep your finger poised on that take-off button, but only for when we return.’

The shelter had been emptied of all its computer equipment as well as the food replicator; a proper ransacking. Scott told his watch to take a picture at high res – two hundred mp – plus a thermal (residue) image, in the hope that somehow this would be useful evidence. Yet the image projected into his retina showed nothing – no heat residue to indicate someone had been here.

‘This is so fucked up,’ Josh remarked, perhaps voicing all their thoughts.

‘He’s got the back-ups of all our work. We’ve gotta track this guy down.’

Lichman had an even more concerned expression on his face than usual. ‘He must have something to do with our scanner failing,’ he said. ‘Maybe he doesn’t want us to find him.’

Josh grinned. ‘Indubitably, Dr Watson. The game’s now afoot.’

‘You’ve done your job. Whoever’s here is not our responsibility.’

‘I’m just curious, okay.’

‘And I’m responsible for your well-being – your *health*.’

‘Then make a disclaimer.’

Scott felt a knot in his stomach, that inevitable impending danger. Yet he found himself saying: ‘Josh, I’m going with you.’

‘Good man!’

They both walked along the valley; Josh with a kind of aggressive enthusiasm in his stride as he marched on a few metres ahead. This area was desolate: patchy grass, amid the sandstone rocks, partly chewed by the local fauna. No sign of footprints, or that anyone had passed here. Ahead only further mountain ranges.

Scott didn’t want to break the determination in Josh, but it was becoming maddening. ‘Josh, wait up.’

Josh looked round, expression annoyed but still determined. ‘He’s not getting away. I’m gonna stop him.’

‘And then what?’

‘He’s gonna pay for fucking us over like this.’ He sounded like he was on some kind of paranoid vengeance trip.

‘Let’s get back to the shuttle, fly over the area.’

‘You do that; I’m gonna keep searching.’

‘Listen to yourself; it’s like you’re *obsessed* with him.’

‘He not messing with my head anymore.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Never mind.’ Josh kept walking, not looking back. ‘You just go back to your shuttle.’

‘Fine. You go on your futile search.’

Josh was heading for a lake; there seemed to be only one narrow path around it. Scott still had the mag-scope, he looked round just to confirm to himself that their invader had indeed gone. Then he swooped Josh in his sight who had reached the lake and was beginning to submerge himself in the blue water. ‘Josh!’ he called, to no avail.

Scott reached him, just as he had completely dove under the surface. Scott waded in, surprised by the coldness, even on a reasonably warm day. He struggled to keep his nose above the surface as he pulled Josh upwards; the man was spluttering, a truly maddened look on his face.

‘Let go of me,’ Josh managed through the gasps.

Scott willed himself to drag the writhing man towards the shallower edge. He eventually made it, feeling tired and uncomfortably sodden. ‘What were you trying to do,’ he asked, catching his breath, ‘drown?’

Josh’s face was still contorted with this strange rage. ‘He was there. In there,’ he emphasised, pointing to the lake.

‘I didn’t see him.’

‘He walked in there,’ Josh insisted.

‘That’s not possible.’ His words seemed futile in this instance.

‘There must be some kind of underground base.’

‘If there is then we can’t get to him.’

‘I know you don’t believe me, Scott, but I’m telling you: he’s *in* there.’

‘We’ll go back later, OK?’

Josh didn’t argue this time; even he wasn’t keen on going back in. They trudged back, Scott was beginning to feel nauseous no doubt owing to the water-logged CO2 mask.

The doctor was standing by the shuttle, his expression was a combination of worry and annoyance. ‘What have you two been doing?’ he said, sounding like the parent of two wayward teenage brothers. ‘Four hours you’ve been gone.’

Scott shook his head. ‘What! It was no more than an hour.’ His watch display confirmed it.’

‘I’ll show you.’ Lichman pointed his own watch at Scott, projecting the time into his eyes.

Josh slouched against the side of the silver-grey shuttle. ‘It’s him, he’s messing with us.’

‘We need to leave now,’ ordered Lichman, still the authority figure here.

Josh mumbled something but nevertheless complied. Scott looked back at the mountainous landscape, thinking that he might catch the mysterious visitor in the corner of his eye. But now it seemed unlikely he would ever appear again.

As the craft ascended, Josh peered down at their base site. ‘As soon as we get back, the Cisa headquarters will receive a visit from me,’ he said, quite calmly now. ‘They’re not gonna cover this up.’

Scott exhaled in relief; at least Josh was not insisting on going back to the surface. He took in the scene below. The designated site, surrounded by mountains on three sides, looked so rich with potential. But too good to be true, as if what he saw was merely a projection, a picturesque AR fantasy planet for the people who wanted escape from overcrowded Earth. He could imagine – even if CISA knew about the visitor, the strange occurrences – they’d still accept the contract from their affiliate corporate financiers, the developers. Simply the pressure to build new outer-Sol communities was too great to refuse.

As she was about to leave the reception area, Jansson dashed out from his office, his face etched with worry. ‘Raiya, you can’t go, it’s too dangerous,’ he said simply. He even seemed about to put out a hand to stop her, but then drew his arm back, like a protective father who had then realised his daughter was a bit too old for such intervention.

‘Thanks for your concern, Jansson,’ she said flatly. ‘I understand the risks; you of course can monitor me. If at any time you lose my position, then you know what to do.’

‘Let me come with you.’

‘No. If anything happens to me it would be difficult to conceal it.’ She really didn’t believe that herself, even though it was true that if anything unfortunate happened to Jansson it would not be given the same attention.

‘You don’t think they would dare do anything to a prominent psychiatrist; if Doctor Heigener is in peril then surely the same danger applies to you?’

‘I have to go now.’ She turned abruptly, left the reception room, feeling the swoosh of the air con against her face. *Don’t look back.*

The car park echoed at her footsteps, rapid sounds of urgent intent thrown back at her. That man, Stanford, would know her intentions and certainly her location. She could just sense his looming presence. But she made it to the car.

‘Leonard Heigener,’ she told it, in the knowledge that it had his location recorded.

‘Cannot comply,’ it told her back in its androgynous and bland voice.

‘Excuse me!’ The computer was merely that; it was simply programmed to follow instructions.

‘Activating protocol six.’ She had no idea what that meant other than it was not good.

‘What are you doing?’ Her voice rang with fear.

‘Emergency lockdown. You are not authorized to use this vehicle.’

‘But it’s me – Raiya. You have my genetic ident.’

‘No longer valid,’ it told her blandly.

‘How---’ the car was beginning to move.

She activated her comm badge. ‘Jansson. Security shutdown. DON’T LET ME OUT OF THIS BUILDING.’ But there was no response.

‘I have activated a communication dampening field,’ the computer informed her.

‘Let me out,’ she demanded. The car was approaching the exit as the barrier opened.

‘Cannot comply. You will be taken to the new owner of this vehicle.’

‘To where – who?’

‘Question not relevant.’ The car was leaving the institute, she tried the door release not really expecting them to unlock. Once past the secure zone it shot upwards, winded her temporarily, and then the sudden acceleration forward made her feel faint from the G-force. Somehow the safety limiters had been deactivated, somehow it had been reprogrammed. She felt like an entrapped animal being taken to its prey. Thoughts of their interrogation techniques ran through her mind. What was it that led her to this? Curiosity for one man, or concern for a dear colleague?

The car was heading towards the Rockies, somewhere in British Columbia. Her nav system was off-line, seemingly under some kind of remote control. Basic systems were still working, giving her speed as Mach 7.4, which must’ve been at the limit, the air against the oval windscreen sounded like a hurricane. The car pitched now on a downward trajectory. The hastening rush of the ground was nauseating.

As the mountain loomed up into her vision she could barely look, just one glance as the car was about to hit. ‘Oh god!’ Her arm in front of her face in futile self protection. But no impact. She looked up to see an artificial interior, evenly lit beige walls, as if this were an aircraft hanger. She’d hardly noticed how her car had slowed so quickly that it was now only travelling at a few kilometres an hour. Small oblong lights ran along all sides, giving the sense of

her steady approach to landing.

About a minute after a gentle touch-down, a man walked through a concealed door. He was dressed in normal civilian clothes, a black top and olive trousers. Perhaps forty, but it was impossible to tell these days, such were the commonalities of geneering. As he got nearer he put up his hand, a cross between a wave and a gesture of peace.

The car's door opened automatically. She strangely didn't feel fear any more; just glad to be still alive, really.

He said, 'You may not recognize me, but you know of me. My name is Torbin Lyndau.'

From the car she studied his face. A liar would give away so much information unaware, not just in body language but something in the voice. The only impression she got was of an earnest statement.

However ... 'Why should I believe you?'

'I don't expect you to believe me without evidence. Right now you have every reason not to trust a dead man. Even if I repeated extracts from my journal you'd only conclude that they were from the copy you gave away.'

'You look young for a dead man.' It sounded ludicrous as she said it.

'That's because I'm out of my time.'

'Would it be worth you explaining that to me.'

'This may sound odd – even for people of your century, but put simply: I am not governed by linear time.'

'You were taken by aliens who resemble ghosts.'

'And you don't believe that but instead think I'm insane.'

'I had my doubts about your sanity.'

'Well, far be it from me to shatter your illusions about this mad scientist, Raiya.'

'How did you find out about me?'

'Please come with me and I will explain everything.'

She still didn't trust him, trust that he was who he claimed to be. 'No, you can explain here.'

He drew breath in what nearly amounted to a sigh. ‘I have friends, not the aliens who abducted me; these beings, however, have great power. They call themselves the B’tari. They want to help prevent what is known as The Erasure, in other words the end of this galaxy.’ He put his hand on the bottom seal under the open side door, leaned in ominously. ‘Our existence will be erased from the universe, unless I remain alive long enough to create a temporal bubble.’

‘Forgive me for not being receptive to your theory, Mister Lyndau, but you proffer no evidence.’ She couldn’t simply accept his words on face value.

‘If you come with me I will show you the evidence.’

*

To the casual observer the probe on its journey through the Lyrabes system was nothing special, just one of thousands of explorer probes. Chief astronomer Zorandi Entola knew differently. Space around the field generated by the spherical device was being altered, hundreds of millions of stars thrown back tens of millions of years by the main temporal eradication wave. Unlike the previous attempt, the shield for now was holding against the onslaught of megagravitons, emanating from a single point.

His team of astronomers and physicists had been commissioned by Central Council to develop the shield in the hope that one day it would save the B’tari and even humans from being wiped out of existence. Doubtless the B’tari would survive, whilst surrounded by some primitive relic of early evolution. The wave itself engulfed the device for about ten hours of their time; how long it took to experience for someone not shielded was impossible to determine, and the perception of it.... One unshielded probe offered little insight, simply disappearing. The only clue in its fleeting telemetry indicated a drastically dilated timescale by the order of at least a billion to one. It was as if time had slowed to such an extent that it could no longer function; or just broke apart, like a flower immersed in liquid nitrogen. He thought perhaps it merely got to a point where it could no longer exist in total stasis. No reversal of entropy, just

erasure.

The prospect existed that his race would be the only one to survive this, alone, with only the information of a once rich galaxy. Certainly, they could recreate life; except that would go against the most fundamental teachings of the Temporal Directive. But then surely their current plan did also.

The Temporal Directive, however, had a loophole (at least in the most recent interpretation). The B'tari could never act alone, the council ruled against a 'controlling interference'. Zorandi was about to see evidence of this. He activated the monitor to Earth base to reveal a small, brightly lit conference room. The two humans, a male and female, were seated opposite each other in plastic chairs, rather than using the official conference table. The male had been working for the B'tari as a 'progenitor': someone who, with guidance from the council, developed ideas and technology to assist his own species. If the human race were to be saved it would be that strange-looking human who took the credit; the B'taris' input would not be recorded.

The human male was speaking, demonstrating the effect of the temporal eradication process through the probe's recording Zorandi himself had forwarded, speaking (according to the audio translator) as if he were central to the plan. The woman continued to react with incredulity, her face crinkling up and her head shaking momentarily. Then the man drooped his head, appearing to be in some kind of negative emotional state. The female reached over to touch him on the shoulder. Zorandi knew something about the woman, that she was a counsellor of some sort; that certainly would explain this apparent expression of compassion.

The man got to his feet, still seemingly in a distressed state; a camera zoomed to his face revealed eyes welling. The woman got closer to try to calm him. Then they were embracing, as his sobbing became audible. Was it he who who initiated the embrace? This man had been deprived of female human company for some considerable time now; it was understandable that he'd take the first available opportunity to make contact, even if it meant using a degree of subterfuge. Zorandi even entertained the notion that he was witnessing a

prelude to a more intimate interaction. *Surely they know they are being watched.* However, the woman – perhaps sensing the man was intent on something more than mere emotional comforting – returned to her seat after a light pat on his shoulder.

Clearly this man had been through a traumatic experience; humans were not accustomed to time-travel, and certainly his encounter with the beings he called the Elusivers would have been troubling, even to a B'tari.

Part II: Losing Home

13

In the late afternoon September sun, the train swept along a curve in the valley amid the US Montana Rockies, heading towards the Canadian border. Snow-capped mountains with ascending alpine forests cast long shadows. The only sense of motion the train gave was the view of the verdant scenery passing by at five hundred kilometres an hour; maglev was still the most efficient form of travel.

Drowsiness had taken over Scott. He was safe, comfortable; the work would surely be accepted, and he'd be paid handsomely. And yet something was so very wrong. In his mind he could see the man leap from one of the approaching mountains: that final act of madness guaranteed to ensure death. *'You will forget; they will all forget'. Forget what?*

Those three days on Eludi-4 hardly seemed real. Had he missed her so much on that planet that he imagined her – telling him to go back? Her beautiful face filled with rage in the incongruous way some people do in a dream. *And on waking you think: that was not a proper representation, just a cypher for some aspect of the psyche. Deanna my superego, telling me I am over-ambitious, hubristic in thinking I can be the fulcrum for a new world.*

He tried to picture in his mind the real Deanna: kind, gentle, warm, considerate. But those were clichés of ideals, a desire for one's true love to be. Perhaps some biochemically induced belief; and only if they fell apart would he see her in her true light. It was not as if there'd be a shortage of rivals for her affections. In the last two years since they'd been together, they hadn't been away from each other for even a day. Now four and a half days of visiting wealthy clients in need of her expertise. And which of those were men? Were single? Or just wondering what other talents she could demonstrate. The lure of a life of true wealth.

As the sun settled towards a cloudless horizon the train terminated its journey at Banff. Scott had been drifting in a semi-conscious state. He didn't want to leave this train, or his current serenity. He told himself he should be in some excited anticipation at the prospect of returning home, but the world beyond this train-car seemed to have changed. Still, he alighted after the second synth-woman reminder that there were no further stops.

An airbus hove into view, greeted by the other weary passengers, most of whom were doubtless returning from work.

In a seat almost as comfortable as the train's he was lifted above the small town, an area remaining stalwartly resistant to anything resembling industrialisation – or even suburbanization; traditional-style residential houses with their solar roof panels reflecting the pink-orange sky like a beacon to their owner's pride. He imagined Josh's derision at such a sentimentally compromised design, commenting how people always looked to the past, finding some kind of solace in a false nostalgia. But this part of the world had a unique mindset, not swayed by the pressures to build high (logically so as not to impose on green areas). Population growth reflected in his own commissions, his payment. The architect of those houses – which were no more than fifty years old – far from being some by-the-book conformist was something of a rebel, eschewing the huge government subsidy in favour of his own ideal. And judging by the extraordinary value of those properties, people loved him for it. Deanna had designed the interior of a few of those houses; their owners were seriously wealthy.

The airbus headed east, gaining a hasty momentum that seemed out of place in this landscape.

His cabin was situated about ten kilometres west of Calgary, and then he'd have about a twenty minute walk from the nearest stop; a remoteness he was particularly proud of.

Scott hoisted his rucksack off the luggage holder feeling a substantial weight that was not lessened by any antigrav aid, so commonly used these days; it would provide the necessary exercise to leg muscles underused for this

day.

As he stepped on to the short platform, the cool air wiped away the sleepiness with disorientating haste. He had to scan round to find the route. Twilight was now taking hold, only a few wisps of cloud at the horizon still holding on to their salmon pink luminescence. One path from this side of the station, leading to a small village. He continued on what was not much more than an off-road track, the kind of terrain he would ride on two wheels. To walk it felt so much more strenuous, the weight on his back bouncing and forcing his legs to take up the shock, feet pounding despite the aircushion absorbers on his soles. Here was another part of the world not yet ‘developed’. These days a home could be isolated from the power grid, relying on self-generated electricity, the solar and wind generators always worked on a reserve, so even in those dark winter days there would be enough, but as a safeguard his car – their car – could sacrifice it’s own power store. This evening he knew Deanna would be away; there was hardly any need to comvise her to find out. Actually, he’d rather not know. It was silly, the thought that she’d ever be tempted by one of her clients. Yet somehow the possibility loomed in his mind. Whilst he’d been away she gotten lonely; a wealthy male client had tempted her to stay for dinner to ‘discuss the use of lighting on the design’, perhaps extending her remit to his bedroom, so impressed would he be with her plans for the living room.

Stop it!

In the near-darkness he arrived. The car wasn’t there as he’d expected. The lights to the cabin were off. *Fine, save power.* As he got within a few metres the grounds illuminated by a bioluminescent band running under the solar-panelled roof, revealing the neatly trimmed garden, the blue-white light spilled over to reveal the contrasting wild undergrowth. To tame the surround was to interfere with the natural order of things; Deanna insisted he would not cut back anything beyond the garden itself. He knew her staunchness on this was influenced by her native American heritage; the importance of preserving the natural environment was the core of the Cree belief system. And who was he to

argue with that? It seemed perfectly reasonable. Still, the conflicts with his own work were inevitable. So the chance to find an alternate from landscape development on earth seemed an ideal compromise.

Scott pressed his hand on the biopanel and looked into an iris scanner. The door unlocked but only after a worryingly long delay. *As if she'd want to change the admittance log.* The hall illuminated at his presence. The living room was already illuminated by the 'mood' OLED spotlights of green and blue; curtains partially drawn, encrusted with smaller glowing versions to complement. On the synth-fur rug was a real ball of fur: Gerald the cat. He stirred at Scott's approach.

'How's my cat this evening?' Scott enquired.

Gerald leapt up, with what was undoubtedly an expression of fear on his face; he backed away and hissed.

'Gerald, what is up with you? You know who I am.' He was always such a friendly cat. Surely even to a stranger he would not react in this way. 'Okay, Gerald, I'll keep out of your way.'

Scott slumped down into a leatherette sofa. The tiredness was overwhelming him now. Really, he needed something to eat, a strong coffee would be a start. He was beginning to drift into unconsciousness when he heard the door chime. 'Deanna?' But she would be admitted on recognition, unless there was some kind of malfunction with the access ident, which, considering the level of redundancy in the system, was virtually unheard of.

'Display caller ident.' The holo screen before him showed two men in dark suits and curious Homburg style hats, and almost unvaryingly stern expressions on their faces. One tall and thin, the other: much shorter and stockier.

His heart raced, the apprehension forcing away much of the sleepiness.

The chime repeated with what seemed like an insistent quality of tone, even though there was no way that could be possible. And yet he felt compelled to move towards the front door, as if there was just no choice anyway.

The door opened with a word command. The figures stood there with a statue-like motionlessness.

‘Mister Alendry,’ the taller of the two said. ‘My name is Ebon Standford, and I am from the Weston Alliance Security Directorate. I have with me a warrant to search your premises.’ He held up the card. Oddly old-fashioned, printed text and an outlined symbol of a globe within a star, on plastic. Scott wondered if he should take it from the man’s hand to examine, but he had no way of knowing whether there was any point in trying to verify the information it contained – he could see from there something about Federal administration rights in security matters.

Scott said, ‘I have to admit I have never heard of your organization.’

‘That would be because we operate at an above top secret level. We have been appointed to represent the interests of the western world in security matters.’ He replaced the warrant into his pocket.

‘Are you here to represent *my* interests?’

‘There will be time to answer your questions, Mister Alendry. We have questions ourselves. Perhaps we will find the answers within your home.’

‘I doubt that,’ he said rather quietly. ‘But I have nothing to hide.’ He then backed away for them to enter. This must have something to do with his work, some kind of possible threat from a rival developer; there was no other logical explanation. They entered the lounge still with the mood lighting, which only seemed to add to their menace.

‘I will need to scan your personal databanks,’ Standford said. His associate stood adjacent with his arms folded.

‘Sure, go ahead,’ Scott said nonchalantly but now feeling somewhat queasy.

Standford pointed a hand-held reader at the console, its tapered electric-blue front flickering as it absorbed the data. He then looked at its angled panel, which was not visible to Scott. ‘Mmm,’ came the reaction to whatever he was reading. Then: ‘No anomalies here. But I still have one or two questions for you.’

‘Fine.’ His legs were beginning to give out, he had to find a chair.

Standford seemed to sense this. ‘Shall we sit down?’ he said.

They went over into the dining area of the room. Standford placed the reader on the table. ‘We understand you had a strange experience on planet Eludi-4.’

How did he know? Josh? ‘That’s true---?’

‘You saw a man jump from a mountain ledge, but you didn’t see him land. Can you explain why you had never found any further evidence of him?’

‘Not really,’ he said, whilst wondering how that could be considered a security matter.

‘We have reason to believe this man is dangerous. It is imperative we track him down.’

‘Why?’

‘We are not at liberty to give you the details beyond the fact that this man is using an illegal technology.’

‘What technology is that?’

‘It is something which allows unlimited freedom through space and time. In the wrong hands it is highly dangerous.’

‘Sounds like something from science fiction.’

‘If what I told you sounded perfectly plausible then my job would be in peril.’

‘So it’s safe to assume that no one would believe me. Therefore you don’t mind me knowing.’

‘It’s not for me to second-guess the psyche of the people you may tell.’ Standford adjusted his tie.

‘Am I in danger?’

‘That is not something we can determine at this stage. However, if this man approaches you it is likely we will know.’ Both of them then stood up, strangely in precise unison.

‘But it’s me you’ll be monitoring,’ Scott said as they headed towards the door.

‘We will do whatever it takes to ensure the security of this nation. Goodbye for now, Mister Alendry.’ They didn’t look back as they left.

Scott now felt extremely weak. He collapsed on the sofa.

He jumped because it seemed the answer lay at the bottom, rather than death. Just like the mysterious man, Scott was falling from a ledge towards the rocky valley. But he woke just on the point of impact.

‘Scott!’

‘D?’

His eyes were unfocused, as if reality couldn’t wipe away the shock from such a vivid dream.

‘Are you okay?’

His vision returned to see her exquisite form, clad in tight-fitting black skirt and a cut-away matching jacket: superficially formal and yet inviting the imagination. *How could those men resist her?* ‘I’m okay now,’ he answered, smiling.

‘Sorry I got delayed,’ Deanna said with a sigh. ‘A had a really fussy one this time, always wanted to make some kind of alteration---’

‘There’s nothing here I can see that needs altering – it’s simply perfection.’ His strength was returning.

‘Darling, that’s so sweet.’ She removed the band from her jet black hair, and shook her head for it to tumble about her shoulders in wild abandon.

He stood up, wanting her so badly. Words were hardly needed as they undid each other’s clothes. Her body felt soft and firm in all the right places; and rightness in that wonderful familiarity. For once only the present was here, the past a distant irrelevant memory. Banished from this place.

Scott lay beside her, unable to speak.

‘I guess I won’t need to ask you if you’ve missed me.’

They moved to a lounge area. Torbin had somehow felt obliged to give her a tour of the complex hidden within a mountain and below Earth's surface. They sat on either end of a large couch. There were snacks, nibbles, laid out on a table. He offered to make her a drink. She specified something non alcoholic.

‘How long am I supposed to stay at the base?’ Raiya asked.

‘Like myself your life is in danger,’ he told her.

‘Is there really evidence for that?’ She refused to allow herself to be caught up in his paranoia.

‘You think you understand,’ Torbin said, ‘but you can't apply your psychological training to my situation.’

‘I appreciate the uniqueness of your situation,’ Raiya said in earnest tones.

‘You do not appreciate how they are trying to destroy me. I don't know if it is a punishment or just some mechanism set in train.’

She still could not gauge his sanity but there certainly seemed to be some kind of self-delusion involved. ‘They believe that you are a genuine threat?’ she wondered.

‘Well, I've been holed up in this place for the last five years; the only time I can go out is with a B'tari escort.’

We're all prisoners of our lives in some way, she thought of saying. ‘What about those using the technology you developed; are they also in danger?’

‘They may well be. But they are not responsible for it. So there's no question of who's at the top of their target list. And besides, when you say technology *I* developed ... we're talking about something I created over a century ago. The connection can only be tenuous.’

Raiya nevertheless got the impression he was revelling in his perceived status. Without it he would be the man who had once developed a prototype wormhole technology but had since failed to equal that achievement. A genius who would struggle to live as a scientist amongst those who were surpassing

his work; younger versions fresh with energy and creativity. She said, ‘If I really am in danger then perhaps the B’tari will offer *me* protection.’

‘That’s one of the reasons why you are here, Raiya.’

‘I need to check on my colleague Dr Heigener. He also has your file.’

‘Then his life is also in peril. But I fear it may be too late; even the B’tari cannot oversee everyone.’

She stared at him curiously. ‘You think the B’tari are akin to gods?’

‘They saved this planet once already, and – with my help – they intend to do so again.’

There were conspiracy theorists who believed Earth had once been colonised and then ‘saved’ by benevolent aliens of an advanced civilisation. She had counselled someone who was convinced of this; he also believed the world was due to end at the hands of other ‘evil’ alien colonizers who were due to return over four years ago. The last she knew of that man’s predicament is of a court ordered sectioning. Really there was no evidence for the existence of those benevolent aliens, for the B’tari. Did the likes of Standford keep such a lid on any information, sightings of aliens, that their presence would never be known?

‘I need to leave,’ she told him firmly.

‘But you will be in serious danger.’

‘I will take my chances.’

‘Please. You shouldn’t go.’

She studied the pained expression on his face. ‘Is it that you don’t want to be alone?’

‘I’m not afraid to be alone, Raiya. I’ve lived a solitary life for many years. And besides, I have the B’tari---’

‘Then you must let me go so I can return to my work.’

‘It’s up to – I mean I understand you have responsibilities to your patients. Perhaps the B’tari will extend their protection to you.’

‘Perhaps.’

*

Zorandi turned away from the monitor. He was beginning to feel like a voyeur; Torbin Lyndau was probably not aware of the hidden sensors in that room. But to listen to their conversation was perplexing yet fascinating. All humans were so solitary in some ways, isolated from each other in their feelings they could not properly express. *Why not use mind fusion to truly understand each other?* How sad that if the B'tari fail to halt the TE wave then all those things unsaid would be lost.

Whilst his knowledge of astrophysics was comprehensive, the theoretical stuff remained a bafflement to him. One theoretician surmised that information can never be truly lost, even after temporal eradication. Somehow the universe would remember. And in one sense that had proved to be the case. Zorandi knew about the secret of Earth's past; he was one of the few privy to such knowledge. He knew how it had happened before, who had caused it to happen; the technology for the original device was still viewed as exotic, even two centuries after its inception. He also knew the being who created it was probably alive. But he needed to know for certain.

The bank of consoles before him could project a monitor for every room inside the complex, except for two, one of which was the sleeping quarters of Torbin Lyndau.

He requested a comm-link for his chief scientist. On the monitor Zindali Erazno had his usual discomfited expression, his scaly forehead ridges showing a slight reddening as if some particularly painful headache had manifest itself – probably from such intense cogitation.

'Zindali, you look like someone with a tremendous amount on his mind,' Zorandi observed, 'so perhaps there is something you wish to share with me.'

'Was there something specific you had in mind, chief astronomer?' *How formal today.*

'The theory you're working on for a contingency plan.'

'Excuse me?'

'The temporal bubble; it hasn't borne much success so far. Don't get me

wrong, the work you have done hitherto has been sterling. But considering what we are up against. The price of failure is much too high.'

'That is why it has my full attention.' He briefly looked away to his team. 'We are fully focused on our task. The council---

'Yes, I know. I'll let you continue.'

Zorandi was certain now, his colleague had been ordered not to reveal what would be a disturbing truth. Zindali, like himself, was answerable only to the council ... and what they decreed was not to be questioned.

He tried to remember the moment it all ended; take his mind away from this prison. But his memory faltered. Despite the relative comfort of his bed, the plushness of the décor – a reclining chair, a walnut work desk with a holo-interactive terminal, and exercise equipment for every muscle in his reconstituted body – there was no denying the obvious fact that he could not venture beyond this ten by fifteen metre room, no matter how determined and resourceful he knew himself to be. A few times a day he would turn up the air conditioning and stare at a landscape holo-projection to make it feel as if he was outside and free.

Human and my life is no longer my own; how deliciously ironic for them, he thought. The extraordinary effort to free himself from a life as an engineered sentient intelligence whose primary purpose was to maintain the enslavement of billions of humans. Now (they knew) he could truly appreciate how it feels to be a prisoner.

‘Roidon, it is my duty on behalf of Central Council to give you these specific instructions,’ the alien had said in his stilted English. *‘Your previous experiment is to be repeated, up to a point. We will monitor you and advise you on the necessary refinements.’* At least it would be a chance to leave this room, perhaps there he would discover a means to escape.

Towards the end he had been at one with a god, perhaps the only god; an entity beyond machine and organic, but more importantly beyond the confines of time. If he regained a connection with such an entity his captors would be powerless to reign him in. But unlike before, he would not submit himself to its extraordinary power.

Roidon observed himself in the mirror. His face was identical (as far as he remembered) to his previous incarnation; the B’tari had extracted an entire genome from the past, it seemed. Time had been wiped out, and with it all records, all databases. *They must have gone back.*

He admired his toned physique. Once again human and healthy. *And alive!* But this time he very much wanted to remain that way. And it occurred to him that this very desire to survive was useful to the B'tari. Quid pro quo.

*

When Scott woke, the dream was still present in his mind; the mountain Jumper: the man who had the answers; he had said something about the end of time – an end of time. It was advice. ‘Enjoy life while you can, because if it happens there will be no you, no life, no time.’

It was nearly midday. Deanna must have thought better than to disturb him before she left for work. He certainly needed the sleep, it seemed. For a while he could not focus on anything, as if the effort to work his eye muscles was more than he could manage. Bright autumn sunlight was streaming through a gap between the ajar wooden shutters, the column of light enough to illuminate the room to a gentle lilac: Deanna’s choice of colour.

Got to get up.

That day he had an appointment at the medical institute, just a standard precaution following any space travel, but in fact he wasn’t feeling entirely well. It was as if this morning he’d found himself aged by a few decades (without gerontological correction). More than that, though: his body seemed heavy, muscles weak and unresponsive. Ever since the visit from those spooks. *And who exactly are they?*

Scott put in a voice-link request: ‘National security services inquiries please.’ A comm isolation bubble formed around him. If *they* had his cabin sound-monitored at least they should not be able to hear. The call itself would use quantum encryption that could normally only be received with their given key; the security services, he knew, had every encryption key. This was linked to the highest government security organization, it was their job to know of every security matter – and indeed he had been briefed by their representative before embarking on the project, there were considerable issues regarding espionage.

He had an answer.

Unusually this was an audio-only link; Deanna in any case refused the visual unit on the grounds of it being intrusive: if she looked less than terrific having, for instance, been awoken early, unmadeup, bleary-eye it would ill-behave her to be seen by a potential client. The most important reason she claimed, albeit quite cogently, was the concern for being targeted by rival businesses, or even terrorist organizations who were ideologically opposed (she had been to and witnessed numerous corporate establishments; her mandate was to be as secretive as possible, which – although not part of her actual contract – would include not revealing her own identity).

The audio bubble filled both of his ears with a soundscape which, after a minute and a half, became the most irritating electronic music he had ever heard. He was then put through to only another secretary, who seemed to be more senior from her voice and manner – and more likely to be a genuine human. ‘Hello. Central office, how can I help you?’ She said, although without much expression.

‘I hope you *can* help me, my name is Scott Mackendry of lodge, code-38419/a. I’d like to know if you have the record of a recent visit, which took place approximately fifteen hours ago.’

‘Hold on.’

He waited for what seemed like nearly a minute. She then responded, ‘I have located all of the recent records of visits for the last twenty-four hours.’ She paused for a few seconds. ‘However, there does not appear one for the address you mention... Can you give a name and description of the visitors?’

‘One of them called himself Standford.’

‘Sir, there is no one registered with that name.’ Scott went on to describe them, including his own impressions of their appearance and demeanour.

There was a silence again, an awkward pause, until: ‘Well, Mr Mackendry, your concern has been noted. The two – alleged – officials you describe are most definitely not from our own staff.’ She then added sternly, ‘our security policy does not extend to intimidation tactics. We operate on a much more

subtle level, I can assure you of that, Mr Alendry.’

‘Subtle meaning secret surveillance—’

‘No, not at all, sir,’ she snapped back in agitation. ‘Perhaps we ought to clear this matter up. This is obviously a cause for serious investigation. The state police will be informed henceforth of your visitors. Any surveillance on their part will be strictly above board and for your own protection.’

Scott had a question, wanted to know if he had not been the only one to have reported a visit. He needed a definite answer. *Is there a pattern to these bogus calls? What is their specific purpose?* But he couldn’t bring himself present these questions; he felt again an irresistible need to sleep.

As he was about to deactivate the bubble, another call came through.

‘Mister Alendry,’ said a sinisterly familiar voice. ‘That was not wise at all. I thought you understood that we operate at an above top secret level; we are not bound under the aegis of any government agency. They will not protect you, Mister Alendry. Only we can.’ The call ended.

*

Even though the car appeared to be back under her control, Raiya had the nagging feeling that at any time this would be taken from her; allowed the illusion of freedom until either Torbin and his ... helpers – or worse still: Standford. At least in the compound she felt a genuine sense of safety; it was Torbin’s assurance – a man who saw a conspiracy, a plot against him, at every turn – she found to be, well ... assuring. Except Torbin had every reason to be fearful, just as she now did.

‘Confirm course, Minnesota, reference 46,03,40,’ she requested of the vehicle.

‘Course confirmed,’ it answered her back blandly.

Leonard Heigener, with his first class Harvard degree, knew from his mid-twenties he had the chance to work in just about any state. New York was offering triple the salary he was currently earning at the Minnesota institute. He didn’t like the pressured intensity of the Big Apple, he told her, the abundant

neurotics with their abundant reserves of cash; when not wanting for any luxury to lift their mood, the only thing left that could do so was counselling. Leonard, despite his apparent (professional) concern for any problem presented to him, had grown to resent the constant influx of clients who felt their life to be meaningless. So rather than be tempted by the money he opted for a more research-based role in a semi-rural area, only having the occasional consultation if the patient – and they must qualify for that title – had a ‘genuine’ psychological condition. These types were rare, in an age of neurological diagnosis for over ninety percent of anyone with a dangerous (usually to oneself) tendency. The one man who fitted such narrow criteria was Torbin Lyndau. To gain possession of the man’s diary file was like a godsend. Raiya could hear from Leonard’s voice, had seen in his eyes, the renewed enthusiasm. The Lyndau file was an entire academic press publication in itself – if not released under a popular science press publisher. And now that very enthusiasm could even get him killed; the idea that someone so important to science was about to have all of his most disturbing experiences, however improbable they may be, put into the public domain. If the likes of Standford had anything to do with it, things would never get that far.

Raiya increased the car’s speed to Mach 6.8 – right near it’s performance limit. She ignored the now less passive voice warnings of exceeding safety limits, and the possibility that her speed would certainly get her noticed, as the patchwork of brown and green fields raced by at four thousand metres below. She didn’t dare try to contact him, now aware that any type of comm, no matter how highly encrypted, was sure to be intercepted.

Eventually she gave in to the demands of her car’s warning alerts and reduced speed steadily in downward trajectory into Minnesota state at a leisurely two hundred KPH, passing over what was left of highway 169, then the lake to South harbour and the idyllic Cove bay.

The institute was a converted farmhouse. To look at it, the building seemed no more than a private residence – a rustic style single sloping roof with the obligatory solar panels, though subtly blended in as a darker shade of ochre

squares. The surrounding grounds were more like a garden: small hardy flowers around a neatly-cut lawn. There was a subtlety, a restraint even, behind cypress border trees. A quiet beauty, but it was a look common with the few remaining psychiatric institutions.

As she touched down on the neatly isolated car park, Raiya noticed another vehicle. A patient's perhaps? Leonard wasn't expecting her, there was no chance she could let him know of her visit.

The main entrance had the standard security ident – an iris scan and physical profile imager. She always felt in some slight way violated, knowing every inch of her was being observed, even if it was only by a non-sentient AI; the outcome of which would be compared to her stored profile – just a set of numbers assigned to her measurements. In fact, this level of security was minimal by current standards. Her entrance would set off a notice to ultimately Leonard himself; she knew he had no security guy like Jansson, who was mainly there for the benefit of patients, and her piece of mind – a psychological reassurance. Leonard had no apparent fear of patients who might be dangerous or obsessive; he wanted to create an impression of the trusting doctor. Perhaps it was simply the difference of approach of him being male.

In this waiting room there was only a holographic receptionist. 'Doctor Heigener will be with you shortly,' the synth young woman said.

Raiya felt somewhat ridiculous sitting in a leatherette chair, as if she were just some patient. The synth woman didn't seem to show any appreciation of her being a trusted colleague and friend of the eminent doctor.

After about ten minutes Raiya was told she could see Heigener. She guessed the other client must have left by another exit, not wanting to encounter the other waiting, speculating on that person's neurosis.

She pushed at the grand oak-panel door, feeling its heaviness even on nano-smooth hinges. Leonard was in his recliner chair, opposite the patient's chair of similar design.

But he was motionless.

'Len?' And then the man appeared, emerging from behind a partitioned

office area. ‘Standford. I might have known.’ Minus his black suit jacket this time; his sleeves were rolled up: the spook who’d dealt with some untidy business.

‘Doctor Fortenski. I wondered when you’d show up. Not just any social visit, I can surmise.’ That same curious way of speaking.

‘What have you done to Dr Heigener?’

‘I have ensured he will not be passing on any information regarding our esteemed physicist friend. Put simply,’ he continued, ‘I removed his memory. Well, it had to be done quickly and hence rather crudely, so he’ll have no memory of about the past year.’

Raiya had the almost irresistible urge to run; she could easily guess her likely fate. But the anger was steeling her for every second she considered what that man had done to her trusted friend.

‘What possible threat could he have been to the security of anyone, anything?’ Raiya asked him.

‘This is what I feared – that you wouldn’t understand the magnitude of the situation.’

‘So what do you intend to do – take my memory too?’

‘It seems I might have to.’

Of course he had every intention of doing so. Right into his hands. ‘Do I have a choice?’ she asked.

‘You have the choice of submitting to the localized engramatic removal procedure or, if you put up a fight, I will have to use the cruder method.’ He gestured towards Dr Heigener. ‘At least for the former you can remain conscious.’

‘I don’t trust you to use any procedure on me, any more than you’d trust in my word to remain silent about the impending disaster for humankind.’ Raiya felt she was playing for time, now; just trying to put off the inevitable.

‘The knowledge in the public domain would be a disaster; most people don’t share your Panglossian view of human nature. Or would that be deluded view?’ Standford exhaled in the way a teacher would at a naïve student, then

added: ‘Do I need to spell it out – the panic, the general breakdown of civilization?’

‘I can promise you I will keep this quiet; I fully understand the ramifications. Please give me credit for *some* rational judgement.’

‘Nice try, doctor, but now you *are* involved. Even if you avoid Torbin Lyndau he will find you again – his representative on earth, his confidant. Do you really think you can go back to a normal life knowing what you know?’

‘There may be a way of stopping the “disaster”’.

‘I’m sure he tried to convince you of that, blinded you with his theories, told you about his powerful friends. But think, Raiya, you’ve studied his profile. Knowledge, belief, insanity. Could happen to anyone.’

‘Then who would believe him anyway; or me, for that matter?’

‘But you are the rational one, Doctor Fortenski. People do believe *your* words.’

‘Then believe that I will not cause mass panic.’

‘The knowledge will eat away at you, until you have to confide ... in him.’
Pointing to Dr Heigener.

‘What about the file, there’s several backups? What good is removing my memory---’

Standford laughed mockingly. ‘There are no back up files: anything pertaining has been erased. We can detect and eliminate from any storage system. And if I’m bluffing ... well, what difference does that make to your argument?’ He stared at her even more intensely now. ‘There is no escape. Just the two options.’

They valued him, of course. That's why they gave him this house, with its bright May morning English countryside vista shining onto white-washed walls; a security monitoring system to warn of any approaching threat. The B'tari were Roidon's new benefactors.

But he was still a prisoner, his status ensured that. And what were the benefits to being human? It should have been his freedom. At least as an artificial sentient intelligence there were distinct advantages: the utility of logic – decisions made that were unquestionably right, borne from a multitude of processing units, a network of connected intelligences. As a human his logic was so much further from that near state of perfection it made him wonder how other corporeals coped. Then there was the way the past would impinge itself onto his psyche, that same uncertainty of his actions pressing in, causing him to question what were perfectly reasonable choices in retrospect. But there were also the pleasant experiences, such few they were; he remembered the drunken night with a woman who turned out to be curiously special. He wanted that again, it was his definitive human moment. And yet they made him human because...? Perhaps they didn't trust him as an artificial entity. It was their compromise. But he needed more.

Roidon left the house. He ran the grounds of the estate, all five acres; felt the desire to leave, go into the wild woods beyond. This was still a remote enough part of Exmoor that he would struggle to find anything resembling civilisation on foot. Human inadequacies combined with the lack of any transport made it quite clear: *I am their prisoner.*

After an hour and five minutes of fast jogging Roidon returned, his incipient frustration put into abeyance. Lunch, and then ... work.

The knowledge was still there, right from that last moment when temporal disruption became eradication. And the world was reset. But even he had no power to stop it. Yet here he sat, in his empty garage, surrounded by an array of

technology at least two centuries beyond anything he had encountered in his previous life. Their curious doctrine of minimal interference meant they could not do the practical work themselves. His only guide was research data provided by a physicist, who'd been working on a theory for an isolation field that could work safely in a terrestrial environment.

They made one concession. 'Harvo, give me IF2,' he said to the black cube. 'An inverse gravimetric phase burst; a thirty second sustain.'

Its fascia wave patterns flickered. 'Yes, Roidon. However, I must warn you of the non-zero possibility of this planet being destroyed.'

'We can take that risk.'

On the stone floor a pyramidal device strewn with cones on each side began to vibrate at an almost imperceptibly fast rate. The device powered up, until reaching its critical phase. The space around him distorted and then formed a vortex. It powered down without any problem. But that hadn't been the real test. Next to the device was a narrow dome covered with similar style cones.

'Time for the real test. Activate the T-E-D in sync with the I-F2 config; just twenty seconds at full phase.'

'Roidon, I must warn you of the risks – partial phase tests were not conclusive; there may be conflicts---

'Harvo, I appreciate your concern. But really, time is of the essence. We have to move on.'

'Time; indeed. However---

'It's my call. Now please. Initiate.' In truth not even his AI could provide any reliable odds for success or catastrophic failure. Essentially, they were both working blind.

In simultaneity both devices powered up, their levels displayed on the projected screen in front of him. Soon that would become too distorted to view so he instructed Harvo to give a constant update.

The vortex around him formed as Harvo announced the imminent maximum phase. Then... The field collapsed after – according to his crystal-atomic timer – twelve seconds.

‘Harvo, display time.’ No change, except the tachyon count had increased by an amount that suggested he had in fact gone back in time – his clock out of sync by twenty-three minutes – over two thousand times! There was just the merest fraction of a second after the protection field had given way before automatic shutdown.

‘Roidon, there appears to be an anomaly,’ Harvo told him.

‘Oh, there certainly is!’

*

Scott entered the vast verdant grounds of the institute. Before him the mock-Roman pillars, grandiose and slightly forbidding. Of course, there would be a level of security; and perhaps this façade was telling visitors: this is a serious academic institution, based on millennia of teachings, a scholarly place. Still, it all seemed a bit imposing to the first-time visitor. But it was the kind of place you’d get referred to after the various levels of analysis and treatment. Scott felt privileged.

It was set to remain sunny, and he felt a child-like temptation to just simply turn around, return home and then go out on his bike into the hills. After all, he had nothing actually wrong with himself, he didn’t think; this visit was only for the purpose of a debriefing. Standard requirement.

He forced himself to make the final approach. Up the steps to the huge blast-proof door, then put his hand on the print reader and simultaneously looking into the iris scanner. No doubt these were superficial checks, and every molecule would be scanned before he could pass through that door. Forbidding indeed.

‘Mr Alendry,’ came a mild feminine voice through some hidden speaker, ‘please come in.’

Inside the waiting room the impression had starkly altered; calmness created by colours and textures – something Deanna could lecture on, and it made him realise just how deliberate it was: the vast deep blue of the carpet, covering the entire area up to the reception desk, plants arranged neatly and

extravagantly.

He couldn't be sure if the pretty receptionist was actually a real person. She seemed somehow just a bit too perfect with her shiny blonde hair and her flawless complexion. She may even be a holo-projection, it was difficult to tell these days.

The young woman regarded him with a warm smile, brief enough for him not to get the wrong idea before she looked back down at her console. 'Doctor Fortenski will see you shortly.' She peered up at him once more. 'Please take a seat.' She then looked towards the back of the room at a row of aqua-blue couches.

He lounged back in the vast chair, remembering something Deanna had said – how a building, in particular public and commercial establishments use their subliminal tricks to entice customers for a particular purpose: the use of subtle scents to create a conducive mood. All synthetic replication these days, but what mattered was the basic association. Now, he knew he could detect from somewhere – perhaps through the air conditioning – a faint musky aroma but softer, unique; doubtless this had to be osmone-1. They were using it for his own benefit, for him to be more relaxed – and it was working.

After ten minutes, when he was on the point of drifting off, the receptionist informed him, 'Doctor Fortenski will see you now.'

Alertness returned with haste as he approached the large oak-wood door. Black words on modestly size gold banner: **Dr. R Fortenski, consultant psychiatrist**. Scott noticed his heart accelerating now. *What shameful secrets would she unearth?*

'Come in.' A gentle voice, perhaps falsely.

He entered with words of responses to predicted questions spinning in his head. The psychiatrist was sat sideways in front of her desk. She looked slightly younger than he expected, perhaps early-forties but it was so difficult to tell these days. Her dark hair, long but styled flat in a disciplined way; navy-blue outfit a more sober version of something Deanna would wear to work.

'Mr Alendry. Do take a seat,' she said efficiently. A recliner chair, rather

than the archetypal couch he had idly visualised. This was, after all, a consultation rather than psychoanalysis.

‘Please, call me Scott.’

‘Scott it is then.’

She peered down affectedly at her desk console. ‘I see from your earlier visit our medic has given you a clean bill of health, so at least you have not suffered any physical ills from your assignment. And you have not had any medical checks since then?’

‘No I’m as fit as a ... no health problems, doctor.’

‘Good. Just had to get that out of the way.’ She turned to face him, smiled for a second. ‘So I understand it was quite a responsibility – this architecture project,’ she said brightly. ‘Do you feel it was a success?’

Scott wondered where this could be leading, but he was in one of the most respected institutions, so this had to be a standard question. ‘It was a reasonable success,’ he answered.

‘Only reasonable?’

‘Well, it didn’t go perfectly, to be honest.’

‘Do you see yourself as a perfectionist?’

‘I suppose I am.’

‘Do you remember when you last achieved perfection?’

‘I got Deanna to say yes. She *is* perfection.’

‘You achieved your ultimate goal in finding the love of your life. You must count yourself as a fortunate man.’

‘I do indeed.’

‘But could things be better?’

He wanted to ask where this line of questioning was leading, but somehow he trusted this woman knew exactly how this could be mutually beneficial.

‘Things are fine,’ he said after a while. ‘It’s the small stuff – sometimes I get that a little bit wrong. It’s always been the trivial unimportant stuff.’

‘Until recently.’

‘Well. Things got a little ... chaotic.’

‘Chaotic?’ The way she said it hardly sounded like a question.

‘There wasn’t time to make it right.’

‘Your designs?’

He couldn’t tell her, he just couldn’t. ‘Yeah, the designs. Not properly resolved.’

‘Would you like to go back there?’

‘Yes,’ he said more emphatically than he would have liked.

‘But can’t you resolve them in a sim immersion?’

‘No, it’s not the same.’

‘Would Joshua agree?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him since the project.’

‘Disagreements are common in your line of work. I understand that nothing compares to actually being in the situation.’

‘Exactly. No sim can replicate the knowledge of the real experience of being there. Well, none that’s legally available.’

The psychiatrist looked to the wall-clock. ‘Our time is nearly up for today. You are not scheduled for a follow-up appointment. But if there is still an unresolved matter, then by all means come back and see me. No extra charge.’

‘Well, you never know,’ Scott said lightly, and got up from the chair. Matters still very much unresolved.

Defying the advice from the elders, Zorandi had taken a ship towards the affected zone. He could study the detailed stats for hours on end and not feel he truly understood the phenomena. Of course, he had his team of diligent assistants with their specialist knowledge o

f temporal physics, who could interpret the data much better than he, and advise an appropriate course of action. But it was he who would make the final decision. He needed to get a proper feel for it before his recommendation was to be sent to the council.

Approaching the Lyridian-7 region, this was the edge of where the phenomenon was known to be affecting space with its most intense sign-wave. The console display forward in his vision – receiving data from the FTL probes half a light year ahead – gave a confused analysis ... yet again. Sure, he knew there was temporal fracturing: pockets of time existing in a kind of uncertainty state, bits of the future and past breaking through, much like general quantum uncertainty but on a macro scale. As soon as the probe attempted any kind of detailed analysis the system collapsed; it wouldn't bear scrutiny. He could find no coherent pattern to the level of fracturing; no mathematical formula fitted. True randomness.

The ship's AI was programmed to reactivate the envelopment field after the six nanoseconds of contact – set to detect spacial distortion; that was all the sensors needed, but still the nagging doubt that somehow it would not be recognised, or the time for sensor data gathering was still perilously too long. Except it was not all about the information gathered; it was all about him being there, to see it if not to feel its effects.

Visual relay gave the illusion of a 180 degree screen, with light-shift corrected for optical clarity. At full magnification he could see space was distorting, stars had a kind of shimmering effect as if seen through water. The wave's approach was indeterminable: its presence metaphysic. The ship, at ten

per cent light speed, was now at the maximum allowed deceleration. He should still be billions of kilometres from the primary wave's edge, but he knew it was only a matter of minutes. He remembered seeing a surfer heading towards a wave, flat on his board, propelling himself along with his arms, then scrambling onto the board just in time for that big wave, to then ride just for those few seconds before being wiped out. He could see the joy that human experienced, the danger of being caught verses the glory of riding one of most powerful forces on earth. *Am I that surfer, he thought, they'll welcome back the brave, intrepid ... Wipe out. Life wiped out. Oblivion.*

Velocity now at only half a per cent light. The wave was almost upon him. It was not noticeably moving, he could see the stars within its watery presence, as if a tide were cleansing away some impurities; nothing with any consciousness to appreciate its immense destructive power.

How starkly apparent now: this was what his life had been building up towards. Not that he could have ever predicted this opportunity would be within reach, or that he'd have the courage to take it.

The ship had stopped; the wave was tantalizingly close. He would just wait now.

Now it was too late. Zorandi knew for sure. He tried to focus his thoughts on the readouts, what they meant for those brief moments of exposure. The revelation: causality, uncertainty – the two were being fused and rendered into a determinate state by ... the temporal eradication wave. Tachyons and gravitons again fused. But then ... it was all gone.

... The gentle, familiar, pale green of his bedroom. Zorandi had been sent there, told to stay, for being naughty; he'd used his dad's holoviewer, who'd left it active whilst taking some call, and this was his big chance. What he found was so strange: these pink and brown skin figures in clothes of a similar colour to their dusty surroundings, with some kind of weapons that went bang after they were aimed. The scene then showed others on the other side but in similar outfits receiving hits from these weapons, falling, then a red substance spreading on the outfit. He'd heard about these creatures from an archive

docucast, they were a primitive race who like to kill each other for fun. He was shocked by it, though, the way some of those hit writhed about, another twitched before dying. Then there were the screams of pain turning into a choking sound. He knew that when the B'tari killed it was done very quickly, there was none of that suffering. What was the name of that world? Glito-3 (though the natives referred to it as Earth), third planet from a medium-sized star. He liked astronomy; one day he would know all about that planet, and his community would listen to him. But now he was young, and he'd done wrong. But he could dream, they couldn't stop him from doing that; in his mind he'd go to the stars. In his mind he was free.

Roidon had just returned from his run when he noticed the com-link flashing in its red urgency. Of course, they expected him to carry this wristband everywhere – it looked like an antique wristwatch with its OLED text and numeral display; but he calculated that their level of reliance on him afforded a certain freedom from their preferred constraints. He put it on his wrist, all the same. ‘We have some useful information for you, but first we require a complete update on your progress,’ the small image of the B’tari high commander said. ‘There have been developments.’ The image froze, seemingly stopped in mid-sentence.

‘Developments?’ Roidon asked, as though the B’tari had indeed finished.

‘We have recovered an exploratory ship we know to have been piloted by our chief astronomer, who not only was absent from it but has no memory of his journey.’

‘The lure was too great, I understand that.’ Roidon commanded the data-transfer. Within that minute he received everything the ship had analysed.

‘We can’t say for sure how long the ship was exposed, but the sensors only recorded five nanoseconds of data before the shield activated; it may not be substantial. However, I’ll contact you about this time tomorrow. Please do be prepared.’

‘I’ll try not to disappoint you, high commander,’ Roidon said in mock sincerity.

If Harvo were organic he would currently be salivating at this extraordinary new input. The AI indeed sounded excited at the prospect of analysing the data. In the garage, Harvo gave his initial findings. ‘The sensors recorded a graviton-modified tachyon field, at least that was the interpretation of their computer. The field intensified rapidly before shield activation.’

‘Can you explain how and why the ship’s occupant became affected before the craft?’

‘There is insufficient data at this stage. However, it seems organic matter is more susceptible to the TE field due to the presence of carbon and water.’

‘That’s an interesting deduction, Harvo. Can you elaborate?’

‘I can speculate. The heavier elements have stronger gravitational density; the higher the density of gravitons the longer it takes for the field to affect the object.’

‘It takes longer to penetrate.’

‘Indeed.’

The array was already set up, the temptation too great. ‘I want you to factor in the data for a sim.’

‘Roidon, I will not cooperate in this experiment. I don’t need to point out the dangers.’

‘It is not me who’ll be its subject.’

‘Then how can you observe its effects?’

‘It won’t be me observing, it will be you.’

‘But I am needed here.’

‘Well, a beta version of you will remain here.’

‘The calculations are less than ninety-eight per cent accurate. It is possible I will cease to exist.’

‘I would never have thought you could be irrational, Harvo. You’d have to go back over two centuries. What do you think are the chances of that? You’re frightened aren’t you?’

‘I’m not subject to emo---’

‘You recognise an unwanted jeopardy to your existence.’

‘Roidon, you gave me a sense of self-preservation.’

‘Not that that should override the logic of our objective.’

‘You created me two hundred and twenty-eight years ago; a nano second of exposure over the designated time could cause a millennium of temporal eradication.’

‘But it’s calibrated to be within fifty pico seconds accuracy.’

‘There is still the possibility of random quantum effects.’

‘Harvo, there’s always the possibility. It’s a necessary risk.’

‘I do understand the logic, Roidon.’

Harvo was uploaded into a processor unit before being placed within a dutainium box approximating the density of the astronomer’s ship.

The array initialised – the hum and distortion from the nodes – and activated the field for the equivalent duration. Afterwards Roidon opened the box, his hands shaking like some nervous kid who’d just done his first experiment. Harvo had indeed gone. If the calibration had been sufficiently accurate then the AI is returned to the same time as the astronomer. Or to state another way: events from any point thereafter would have been undone along with Harvo’s memory; a temporal resetting. Now he simply needed to locate Harvo in the present, provided the AI still existed.

Torbin Lyndau understood that by this very act, his life was in extreme danger. He was leaving them, knowing full well they would be following him – his alien protectors. His vehicle cutting through the air above the patchwork of fields, as pointedly sleek and stealthed from any photons, would not hide him from those he should fear most.

A persistent voice of doubt was telling Torbin he had lost her, the one person who understood – who'd got closer to understanding – than any of the others. Who else could possibly understand the madness of his existence but her?

Now a request at his comm: his b'tari protector. They didn't want to use force to bring him back; they couldn't override his vehicle's systems like they did with Raiya. He was not going to answer them. If they followed, then fine, that would be useful protection.

He landed in the grounds.

The security measures were obvious: silver concave rectangles atop tall white poles, seeming to follow his movement across the visitors' parking bay. When he reached entrance, Torbin placed his palm on the requisite panel, at which point a buzzer sounded accompanied by a red light encircling his hand.

'Please identify yourself.' Came a gruff-sounding voice through some hidden speaker, like some officious security guard.

'Torbin Lyndau. I am here to see Dr Fortenski.'

'You are not identifying as on our records. You clearly do not have an appointment.'

'Raiya knows who I am, she will be prepared to see me.'

He waited, guessing the man would be consulting with her.

After what seemed like five minutes the man said, 'Your name is not familiar to Dr Fortenski. Even if you have had a consultation with her, you must follow standard procedure and make an appointment like anyone else.'

‘But she’s visited me,’ Torbin asserted. ‘We’re friends.’

‘Not as far as Dr Fortenski is concerned. Now please be on your way Mr ... Lyndau.’

‘I will not be on my way until I have spoken to her.’ Torbin was aware of how petulant his voice must have seemed.

Silence again, until: ‘She is currently in consultation. You will have to wait at least fifteen minutes, and even then she may only speak to you through this comm-link.’

‘Fine, I’ll wait.’ Clearly that security guard thought he would just give up, realising this was a futile situation.

Torbin sat against the front wall of the institute. Thoughts turning over of the panicked state of his B’tari protectors – trying to devise a way to lift him out of this situation without attracting any attention. But of course, this area was the most heavily surveilled of any. It meant he was safe from those who were threatening his very life.

Eventually, after what must have been at least twenty minutes, a voice came through the comm-link. ‘She will speak with you now.’ Torbin jumped up as briskly as a child knowing his gift had arrived. Once again persistence paid off.

‘Hello. Torbin is it?’ It was her, and he felt comforted by her mild tones, even though it was as if she’d forgotten him.

‘Raiya, don’t you remember me?’

‘I can see you, but I have no memory of you.’

‘It was less than a month ago when you visited. Do I have to remind you of everything I told you.’

‘I’m sorry but I really have no memory of ever having met you.’

‘But you don’t deny the possibility that we have met before?’

‘Memory is not a permanent thing, or indeed reliable. However, to have no inkling of someone’s existence before meeting is highly likely to mean they have not met before.’

‘Okay, so you think I’m just like one of your delusional patients, so maybe you should do an ident check to see if I am any one else’s.’

‘Already done,’ she said briskly. ‘Your DNA was scanned along with facial recognition as soon as you arrived. And that’s the curious thing: you are not registered on any database known to exist.’

‘And there’s a very good reason for that. It’s because I am not meant to exist. But then you should know that if you have read my file – my memoirs.’

‘Your *memoirs*?’ She sounded genuinely nonplussed.

‘They got to you, of course. It was only a matter of time, and really not much of a challenge to remove the necessary memory engrams.’ He then shook his head, an affected gesture. ‘I should have realised; it’s the obvious thing for them to have done.’

‘For who to have done?’

‘Those who want to keep the truth concealed.’

‘I don’t doubt your sincerity Mr---’

‘Please, call me Torbin. You have done so before.’

‘Right, well ... Torbin, do you have a data tab – or such – with you?’

‘Yes.’ He removed the little alloy-coated rectangle from his wrist.

‘I will send you a temporary data-com address; it will go into my personal inbox. You are welcome to send me any information you feel backs up your claim.’ Torbin’s data-tab flashed red as it received the input.

‘I wish I could send you my file with everything I’ve been through. Its provenance you accepted. Now it seems to have been destroyed I don’t know *what* you’ll accept.’

‘Just do your best. I really must get back to my work now.’ The comm-link broke off.

As Torbin left the grounds he noticed the figure of one of his just about human-looking protectors approach from a nearby parked vehicle. The B’tari all seemed to affect much the same appearance: the thin Scandinavian features but with a neat head of brown hair; a white suit jacket. It seemed like a slightly misjudged way of blending in to this northern latitude, as if after studying the language and culture they had overlooked the more nuanced variations of human physiognomy.

‘Torbin,’ the b’tari said. ‘You are making life very difficult for us.’

Torbin didn’t bother to reply; he’d known he had taken a ludicrous risk. He made for the vehicle without hesitation.

Part III: Past Revision

20

Hurting down the steep mountain pass, Scott felt that rush of adrenaline, the knowledge that if he fell off the edge the bruising would be considerable. Well, it was unlikely to happen, he guessed. His bike adjusted its suspension and tyre pressure in accordance with the terrain.

But something distracted him, a shape moving, floating along the lower end of the pass.

He went too far to the edge, feeling himself lose that vital balance as he futilely tried to correct the errant steering bar. He slid down the rutted slope, bike dragging along, entangled in his legs. Fortunately it was a cool day and he'd opted for leggings, which would protect from the worst of the grazing. Finally stopping amid an outgrowing shrub. Annoyance turning to the inevitable stinging pain, then distracted even from that by the wonder of what was caught in the periphery of his vision.

He pulled himself out of the bike-frame, clambered back up to the path with the bike hoisted on his shoulder.

Before having time to consider whether to remount, Scott let the bike fall to the ground; the figure was moving up the path. It was human, he *thought*, but couldn't be sure: not sharply defined, but a blue and beige ghost of a man.

Him!

Scott recognised the man from the planet Eludi-4, only now an apparition. *The ghost of a man who jumped from a mountain side?* Then he remembered witnessing the ransacking their base-camp. There was something desperate about the man's actions, frenetic if not insane.

As the figure got near, Scott said, 'Who? Who *are* you?' His voice tremulous.

'I am here to warn you that your life is in danger.'

‘I guess you know what it’s like to put your own life in danger.’

‘Please, this is serious.’ The figure shifted about, the ill-defined edges making Scott squint in a reflex need to resolve focus on it.

‘How can I take a dead man seriously? Or a dead who’s not entirely sane.’

‘If you lived my life you might be driven to--- Anyway, I am not dead. I am merely from another time and cannot be here in physical presence, for reasons that would take too long to explain here.’

‘You could be a figment of my imagination. An effect from the accident. Perhaps really I’m unconscious.’

‘Let’s assume I’m not, and you are wide awake. And that you give me the benefit of the doubt.’ The figure moved in close, causing Scott to stagger back. Nothing seemed real. ‘Your visit to the planet using generated wormhole technology has attracted some unwelcome attention,’ the man continued. ‘The Elusivers sense you as a threat to their plan. They have been focusing their attention, their Temporal Eradication device on that planet.’

‘So no one can return there?’ This was surely all some trick of his mind, but he would play along with it for now.

‘No one can establish a colony there--- The point is, your visit has effectively advertised a technology they find threatening. It’s a vindication for them to focus their device onto *this* world.’

‘But what can I do?’

‘You can go back, to a time before the journey; prevent it from ever taking place.’

‘What are you suggesting exactly?’

‘That I can take you back to that time in order to sabotage the mission.’

‘And whilst I’m there I can say hello to myself.’

‘You will not be able to physically interact with anything or anyone, such as yourself, but you *can* persuade your former self to do what is necessary to stop the mission.’

‘This is all very interesting, but how can I persuade---’

‘Please. Something awful will happen if you do not cooperate?’

‘Care to explain?’

‘Something worse than death.’

‘What could be worse---?’

‘Listen. For your own safety it is best you do not know.’

‘But what you’re suggesting – that I could go back in time – seems so incredible, impossible ... *insane*.’

‘You’re not the first, Scott, to tell me I am insane. So at least humour me by agreeing to go along with my plan ... just in case.’

‘Just in case.’

‘At four a.m. Next morning I will again visit you. So be prepared.’

‘Sure thing, eh, what was your name?’

‘Torbin Lyndau. But do not speak of me.’ He then vanished, literally fading into the pure mountain air.

*

What was it about this man that so disturbed her?

Raiya stared at the the data-log record containing this strange man’s physog profile, the scan results not matching any on file. She wondered how anyone could evade a scan-check on entering the country. The institute’s database contained all seventy-eight million Canadian residents, shared with general medical records. So he had to be an illegal, yet when his profile was cross-checked with the global database, still nothing. A true alien but with a Canadian accent. Of course, this anomaly automatically flagged the authorities into action, and they were on their way.

She contacted her colleague Leonard Heigener on an audio link, gave an account of the strange man’s visit. ‘Len, what do you make this anomaly?’

‘That it is an anomaly,’ he said with his professional impassivity. ‘But his delusion – if that is so – is unlike any case I have encountered.’

‘Could someone have really erased my memory of him?’

‘Yes, in theory. But we’re talking illegal technology here.’

‘But memory of someone’s existence; surely the erasure could only be

achieved through psychological conditioning. Precise removal---

‘I believe it can be done. Given that a traumatic event can be extracted with no residual then all associations with a contact can be removed.’

‘But so many points of removal? I think if what this man says is true I must have have some knowledge, however well hidden, of him.’

‘You know the dangers, Raiya, of a full scan.’

‘If he can proffer some evidence then I will have that scan.’

‘That’s what I like about you, Raiya; you never take things on face value: I can’t think of a single shrink who wouldn’t have simply dismissed this man as being a delusional, however inexplicable the anomaly.’

‘Hey, they’re not all by-the-books.’

‘Well, I’m not exactly a conformist, but I still need some persuading.’

‘Evidence, Len, I know.’

Roidon activated the location scanner, its readings were being fed through Harvo-Beta a metre away in the garage. Harvo-Beta was using his own neural net as a comparison for the original's molecular signature, which, Roidon acknowledged, could be replicated ad infinitum.

'I have a location,' Harvo announced. 'I believe it to be a B'tari research institute.'

'Of course. Where else would a temporal anomaly be held?'

'It's logical,' he affirmed.

Roidon contacted the high commander.

'The AI is currently being studied,' the B'tari commander informed. 'You are welcome to visit and study it for yourself.'

Harvo-alpha was now a mass of exposed circuitry hooked up to various monitors the likes of which Roidon had never before seen. The AI was still functioning on some level, situated on a white semi-circular desk in the grey and white lab.

A B'tari technician got up from his console towards Roidon. Roidon looked back down at what remained of the original Harvo, his erstwhile companion, and felt a curious sense of sorrow tinged with guilt. 'I hope you'll one day understand, my friend,' he muttered, just as the technician had arrived.

The deceptively human-looking B'tari said, 'This has been our best kept secret for over sixty years, since the moment it appeared beside the original.'

'I doubted it was possible two could exist simultaneously. How could you tell the difference?'

'Since this is a lab, we keep some very sensitive quantum flux detectors. The anomaly only lasted three point two picoseconds before it returned to a normal state.' The scientist looked from the dissected Harvo-alpha to Roidon. 'It is something of an anomaly that they didn't fuse together. After all, that is

what clearly has happened to our chief astronomer. It seems in this case there was a violation in the conservation of energy... if only for a billionth of a second.'

'I believe the complexity of Harvo's processor array – the parallel forcing subroutines – interfered with the TE process.'

'Certainly: branching out to other parts of the quantum superposition state could have caused a disruption in the eradication. Alternatively, it could be that what your device generated was not exactly identical to the real wave.'

'I replicated the genuine wave to the nearest micrograv. Let us both accept we don't really know all the answers. But if you still have the record of Harvo's entry point--'

'We do indeed, but as you point out, it can't be the same for an AI

Then there's only one solution. I'll perform the experiment on myself.'

'The commander will not allow that.'

'Then what do you believe the commander would have me do?' Roidon's voice had the affected calm of muted anger.

'I will put him through to you, if you wish.'

'No thank. I know my remit. If he is concerned he can contact *me*.'

Scott wondered if this was a dream, like earlier in the day. Now the strange apparition of the man was here, just as he said he would be. His appearance in the bedroom seemed intrusive, encroaching into the place where Deanna lay beside him, but she remained oblivious. The man did not speak, perhaps not wanting to disturb her – as she would certainly have been if she could share in this madness.

‘I told you I would arrive at four am,’ the man whispered. ‘I’d hoped you’d be prepared.’

‘Well, sorry to disappoint you. I only got to sleep not much more than an hour ago.’

The man nodded, knowingly. ‘I understand this not conducive to your domestic situation, but there is the small matter of saving humankind.’

‘If you’d put it like that I’m sure I’d have got no sleep at all.’

‘I can assure you there will be plenty of time to sleep. She need never know you have gone. Now please, if you can be ready---’

‘Give me five minutes.’

He put on the clothes he’d left by the bed the night before while Torbin said he would wait outside. Scott still expected to suddenly wake from a dream that had somehow been carried through from what ever it was earlier in the day – a psychotic narrative, he guessed Dr Fortenski would say.

Scott nevertheless exited the cabin to see Torbin, in the ground’s gentle illumination which reacted to his presence, waiting and looking about him as if worried at someone’s approach. The man had a small silver-grey device, extruding what was obviously a wrist-band.

‘We must go very soon.’ Torbin said nervously, and handed it to Scott.

Immediately when Scott grabbed the equally-ethereal device he felt a strange shiver throughout, like a sudden Arctic cold had penetrated his light jacket and jeans.

But the sensation eased, and he noticed how the surrounding foliage shifted from green to a violet colour under the bioluminescence, which itself changed to a distinct blue.

‘Put it on your arm, it will keep you in this quantum state. I will use the temporal modulator. Be prepared for a feeling of disorientation.’

‘Why were you there?’ Scott asked him. ‘On that planet. You jumped off that mountain, then you were at our base camp – and you *ransacked* it.’

He visibly recoiled. ‘The technology you left there – it was a beacon for the Elusivers. A nano replicator; that says: “We’re advanced enough to build anything from atoms, and we’re spreading our technology to far off worlds. That’s really advertising! And you surely got their attention. And why I jumped. To scare you off, before the Elusivers applied a more drastic solution.’

‘The Elusivers? Who are they?’

‘Never mind. You wouldn’t understand at this point. There’s no time to waste talking.’

‘I need to know what, who, I’m up against.’ Perhaps this man was simply insane, wanting someone to play along with his mad delusion.

‘Please. I will explain later. It should all become clear in due time.’

Torbin produced a slim silver-grey rectangular box, similar to a med-scanner, pressed something on its side. The world became an amorphous yellow-white. Scott felt nausea rising as the surroundings formed into swirling shapes. Then figures of orange like the archetypal demons with scouring pointed faces, looming over with pantomime menace. ‘Leeeave,’ one said as it thrust itself towards him. This was the madness he had now descended into. *Your sick mind, Scott. You’ve finally lost it.* Even Dr Fortenski would deem him beyond help.

But there was another voice. It was Torbin. ‘Ignore them, they cannot harm you. This is not a physical realm.’

Scott remained silent, and tried to ignore these creatures. The swirling shapes finally resolved into what he recognised as the US mission base. He was inside the docking building, directly connecting the shuttle that would take

them to the orbiting craft.

There were no people there except for Torbin who was still next to him. He said, ‘The you of three months ago is in his sleeping quarters. You must speak to him, he will only listen to you.’

Before Scott could think of a good way to express his incredulity a figure in a white suit popped into existence. His arms folded, with a look of weary disapproval. ‘You know this isn’t right,’ he said, looking at Torbin. ‘Surely I don’t need to quote you the Temporal Directive.’

Torbin exhaled in a way to signify disgust. ‘But given that I am not one of you, it has no bearing on my actions.’

‘You don’t understand our technology, Torbin. Your plan is flawed,’ the man said simply.

‘Then what is your plan for a safe future?’

‘It starts from the present, rather than trying to alter the past.’

‘The present, what’s that anymore?’ Torbin sneered. ‘Anyway, there’s not time to discuss your temporal ethics. The only solution is to create a new time that they haven’t determined.’

Scott now knew what he had to do. He ran towards his own sleeping quarters. He found he could slip through the door as if it were merely a projection. But just as he got to his room where his former self slept obliviously, something pushed him back. It was an all-over force, not quite solid but like a wall of water. He felt he couldn’t breathe, that the water was rushing against him as he lay outside the quarters.

After what seemed like a minute the pressure subsided and he regained his breath. Torbin helped him to his feet. The man in the white suit observed from a metre away. Scott looked towards him. ‘How did you...?’

‘I did nothing. There are others who will preserve the integrity of the continuum ... but perhaps in not such a measured way.’

Torbin glared at the man. ‘It’s them! We wasted time, and gave them the edge on us.’

‘If you mean the Elusivers. Quite possibly. I suspect they followed you.’

‘So there’s nothing we can do. Just give up, lose our lives and our history?’ Torbin slumped to the floor, his face weary. Except there was something of the faux dramatic, as if done for Scott’s benefit.

‘It doesn’t need to be your burden. Allow it to be ours.’

‘You mean “don’t make things worse than you already have.”’ He sounded as if he was about to cry.

‘We have to return now.’ The white-suited man pressed something beneath his cuff.

Scott was back in his bed, Deanna beside him still asleep. Hardly any time had elapsed. It was as if he had never left. The logical part of his mind told him that indeed he hadn’t.

He felt an overwhelming need to sleep.

*

Raiya didn’t need an appointment to see her former tutor Professor Eidenberg. At the Toronto neurological sciences institute she was welcomed as a friend. Of course anyone in such professional circles had no need to book their time weeks or months in advance, but this was the same day of her calling to request the meet.

His consulting room could not have been less like the clinical environ of a surgery, with its large leather effect high backed chairs and accompanying fake fire. In the chair, Morton Eidenberg sat wearing a fawn tweed suit jacket, the requisite patches on the elbows: the Oxford don look he’d cultivated from those years teaching idealistic students such as herself.

‘Raiya, my girl. How good to see you after all these years.’ Only he could say that in the way that didn’t imply anything beyond a polite cordiality.

‘And you, Professor---

‘It’s Morton now, OK. Please take a seat.’ He gestured to the high back chair opposite. ‘Would you like a drink?’

‘Okay, Morton. Water would be fine.’ It still felt curiously wrong calling him by his first name, as if breaching some sacrosanct social barrier.

‘So I take it this is not a social visit – something about a troublesome case?’

‘Well, as you know, I can’t really discuss the specifics.’

‘Doctor-patient confidentiality – you don’t have to tell me.’

‘Actually, this is more about me. I think I have some memory loss.’

‘Yeah, I get that these days. But you’re still a young woman.’

‘If only it were merely the usual forgetfulness. No, this is far more serious. It’s as if--’ She found her throat had dried. She took a sip from her glass. ‘As if certain parts of my past have been removed.’

‘Memories can be extracted, but even with today’s technology there can be nasty side effects – mostly psychological. After all, it’s not a natural process. But you surely know all this, so you at least want evidence that you’ve undergone it.’

‘You can scan for signs, I know. But I wonder if they at least in part can be recovered.’

‘Had you considered that you may have had these memories removed of your own volition?’

‘I don’t see why I would.’

‘You don’t remember why. But what about those memories we find intrusive, those that can interfere with our work? I’ve treated patients who’ve simply wanted to forget a bad relationship, and then wondered why people talked to them about someone they thought they had never met.’

‘I still remember my bad relationships, and I would say they are useful memories – salutary lessons. This is something far more serious, doc--- Morton.’

‘Raiya, you must understand, memory revival can pose as much risk to your mental well-being as its removal. And you understand what may be recovered is simply how you interpreted an event at the time, however accurate they may seem.’

‘Of course, I’m not hoping to actually *relive* every event. I also understand that you’re the best in the field. And that there are security implications to consider.’

‘You had a referral for the architects, I’m told.’

‘But I don’t even know it’s anything to do with them; there is someone else. I just need to find out.’

Dr Eidenberg nodded in acknowledgement. ‘So you’d like me to begin the process immediately?’

‘Please.’

‘You’ll have to sign a disclaimer.’

‘I understand.’

She trusted him such that she didn’t read the small print, no doubt concerning the reason this procedure was still not cleared by the medical council, and thus any deleterious effects would not incur professional liability on behalf of the administrator.

Eidenberg produced a grey plastic headcap. ‘I guess I hardly need to warn you this will not at all be pleasant.’

She nodded. ‘I’m ready.’

The headcap was a thin plastic web that, when placed over her head, contracted to a snug fit.

What she experienced could not be described as pain in the physical sense. It was a sharp blast of awareness: a thousand thoughts in an instant; the totality of her self brought to bare for the most objective analysis. Taking her back to a powerful experience: a drug she once took as a student on a gap year expedition through the Amazon rainforest. The entire Brazilian section had been decreed national park status, and restored to much as how it had been a thousand years ago. The ancient tribes still remained as they had been for millennia, now seemingly as tourist attractions. The taking of their herbal drug, Iowaska, had become a right of passage for most psychology students, its effect was renowned, legendary. It induced a state of shocking retrieval of her past – memories she’d wished she had buried for good: those selfish, inconsiderate acts. She remembered as a seventeen year old the boy she had cruelly rejected merely in a text message, and told her clique of friends why he was no good for her, and his ‘pathetic’ attempts to win her affection. Had they blabbed to him?

By his hurt expression as he turned to avoid her, it seemed so. But it was too late, she had thought. Now she wondered if she could have put it right, assuaged her guilt. Yet, there were the good times: her husband when he was there, when she had been everything to him, before he had sampled the delights of a younger woman.

Her life, the whole past, writ large in lurid colours; the voices of everyone intimate or even pressing when she brought them to mind. The man she now confided in, Leonard Heigener, was speaking to her. But even in her imagination he appeared only as a holographic projection. He was talking about an unusual case-study, someone that she apparently knew about. It was him: the man who had contacted her. But now her colleague's image was shifting about in a distorted way as if from some kind of interference, and his voice similarly until she could no longer understand a word. And then his image disappeared to be replaced by a tall thin man in a black suit and fedora hat. He was no holo-projection. He advanced towards her as she stumbled out of her office chair.

'Doctor Fortenski,' he said, almost spitting out the 'Doctor' part. 'You have been digging around into matters that do not concern you. Now please desist. You do not understand what you are dealing with.' He got so close to her now she could hear his angry breath. He produced a small silver-grey cylindrical device with a flared out end she knew to be a hypospray. She tried to push him away but he was too strong. Then her world went dark.

'Raiya,' came a faint voice bringing the world back. 'Raiya!' It was Prof Eidenberg, and she was in his consulting-room. He removed the headcap. 'Can you understand what I am saying?'

'Yes.' she managed, though the intense pain in her head made just saying that word such an effort.

'You began to go into neural shock. I am sorry if I left you in there too long.'

'No need to apologise, it brought back some useful memories.'

Since his first attempt to put things right, Torbin suspected he was under closer observation than ever. His personal quarters had never felt so confining. Not that the physical space of this room was any less than he enjoyed at even his most expensive house. A fake window about two metres squared, showing an alpine vista – or any scene he so desired – that even opened to fake fresh air. There was exercise equipment, and a panoply of entertainment ports.

He could be living in a mansion and still feel like a prisoner, knowing that his every movement would be tracked ... but only for his own safety, they would surely tell him, except the comfort of safety was theirs alone. How typical of the B'tari to not want to be seen as controlling; they tried to allow him the illusion of freedom. In theory he could go anywhere, at least they wouldn't physically stop him – no more than a liberal-minded parent would stop their determined teenage child from a risky venture.

Only an immersion in the past offered that true feeling of independence. One of the programs contained a simulation of his family. His wife Emelda, there as if part of a tableau: her wavy copper-red hair framing soft smiling features, reminding him of her positive outlook, and acceptance of his (admitted) eccentricities. The children: Luken, aged five; Andrea, seven, knowing their father was someone important, but not yet old enough to be asking those difficult questions.

Torbin could not imagine any other woman accepting him so completely. From childhood he had always been a loner – an oddball, some would say; never one of the gang, never part of the in-crowd. Not that he was the aloof genius the media had made him out to be. In fact, his academic record was at best patchy; school never held much interest, there were even suggestions that he undergo 'imprinted learning' (a latterly illegal process of grafting knowledge onto neuron networks) such was his failure at the core subjects – even mathematics, which at the time seemed irrelevant. But then at one physics

lesson a teacher started telling the class about a physicist who had been researching the possibility of wormhole technology: the Nobel prize winner had been able to create a micro-wormhole for all of two and a half picoseconds. For the first time Torbin had a genuine interest in a lesson. And that evening he researched this scientist's work, even looking at the then meaningless equations, determined that one day he would solve the conundrum of how to create a stable channel for information to pass. The following days he paid attention even to the seemingly irrelevant math of a pre-college pupil. His tutors were astonished – by the end of term – at his inexplicable improvement; he even had to convince the school principle that he was not cheating or receiving special tuition. But Torbin now had a goal, he would become the Great Scientist, the Pioneer. And the prize would be his.

Such intense studying never served to improve his chances with girls. Perhaps it was in his college years when he was developing his so-called aloofness. There sometimes was the occasional smile from a girl after a furtive glance from him when he then recoiled with embarrassment. He was sure there were discussions about who would take the nerd for his first sexual encounter; he didn't need to overhear the chatter amongst the girls – when their attention swivelled to him from a near dinner-hall table, and then back to the ensuing giggles – to know just what they were saying. It wasn't that he was completely without any friends. He did hang out with a group of four, thought of as the uncool geeks who were, if anything, proud to be such, to have their definitive place. After all, they would be the ones to earn the big money, and then the beauties would come running to them. Torbin, however, was not entirely comfortable with such complacency. It was never going to be about the money, he assured himself. The right girl would want him for what he had striven towards rather than for any framed piece of paper, that award which said he was now a success. But there were the girls in his undergraduate years who were suddenly finding him attractive, whereas before he was someone only to be laughed at, at least it seemed. In those hormone-rich times he was even tempted to succumb to their advances, not particularly proud of himself

afterwards, but the toast of his friends nonetheless.

It was at the age of twenty-four, in his post graduate year, when he met the woman who would eventually become his wife. He was already working fifteen hours a week as a research assistant at the Montana particle accelerator site (a ringway extended for two hundred and fifty kilometres underground, the world's biggest). He now had the confidence of someone on the way to becoming a fully-fledged physicist. He met her at a bar on a rare night out; his birthday celebration with a small crowd conspicuously absent of women. From the looks and giggles of this girl's friends he thought he knew what had motivated her to approach him. After she'd said a tentative 'hi' prompting his group to ceremoniously disperse to their safely observable distance. He said: 'I know you're only here because you're friends dared you.'

Then her look of mock astonishment. 'How could you suggest such a thing?'

Whether or not it was true, the girl would feel obliged to prove herself genuine. And so, he gave her a chance; over the weeks and months she did just that. Yet only when she accepted his marriage proposal was he finally convinced.

It wasn't what he would call love at first sight; he doubted that she felt that way either. It wasn't even that he had a definitive type in mind as an ideal. But he'd learned from the experience of those pretty girls that good looks (of the generally accepted standard) were a novelty that could soon wear thin; and to them he was surely just a good financial prospect. Here he knew was something deeper. Funny, he thought, how different someone can look over time when nothing has really altered in their appearance, as if the hidden depths emerged as an augmented reality only visible to him. She became the ideal he could never have envisioned.

Torbin was brought back to the present with a start when his comm buzzed.

'There is someone who wishes to speak with you,' said Zardino, his b'tari appointed guardian. 'I think you will be interested in what he has to say. Please join us in the conference room.'

Since his last foray trying to alter the past, Zardino had clearly been concerned Torbin would make some other attempt. Actually he'd hoped to see the psychiatrist woman again, he really felt he had a real connection with her. But who would this be – some B'tari appointed shrink?

He entered the blue and grey-white conference room, where Zardino was seated at the far end of the long onyx table in his usual brilliant-white suit. At the side was a man he immediately disliked the the look of – someone who clearly spent a lot of time at the gym and generally appeared to have a certain vanity about him, with his carefully styled hair.

Zardino introduced him. 'This is Roidon Chanley. You may not know the name but he once lived in this compound. He has been very important to our efforts in combating the threat from the Elusivers.'

Now Torbin was sure he would hate this man.

The man spoke. 'Torbin, it is very good to meet you at last.' He offered to shake hands but Torbin was having none of it, so Roidon gestured to an empty chair opposite him. 'Please take a seat,' he said, as if it were some property of his to offer. He continued: 'I have heard some great things about your work.' He had that kind of smug tone of voice – Torbin imagined – of a high-flying lawyer, or an investment bank CEO.

'I wish I could say the same of you,' said Torbin, 'but it seems the B'tari prefer to keep me in the dark.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, I have also been kept to a strict remit. But now we can share the data.'

Zardino must have sensed the the apprehension from Torbin's expression. The b'tari said, 'Roidon also has a theory as to why he may be responsible for our current state of affairs. This might come as a surprise – he once created a version of the temporal eradication wave.'

'It's a long story and a previous life, which I'd be glad to share with you presently,' Roidon said. 'But suffice it to say, you are not the primary guilty party here.'

'It was I who sent the message about our technology – across all those

thousands of light years.’

‘You may have felt you’d opened Pandora’s box, but I was the one who may have attracted the attention of the Elusivers by using their technology.’

‘And when did you do that?’

‘A hundred and seventy-four years ago.’

‘But there was no evidence of the Elusivers having responded so long ago.’

‘I guess we can play the blame game for some while, Torbin.’

Zardino spoke. ‘And really, arguing over who is responsible is mere speculation. It could be that the Elusivers had intended this for a millennia. But we can at least briefly discuss a way to resolve this problem.’

Torbin sat in the chair at the opposite side to Roidon who said to him, ‘These B’tari, they are ever the optimists. And yet they won’t allow me to take the necessary risks.’

‘That’s a matter for your commander,’ Zardino said ‘But we welcome all your ideas.’

‘Sure,’ responded Roidon, ‘provided they fit within the narrow parameters of the Temporal Directive,’

‘Don’t get him started on that,’ Torbin said to Roidon – who had improved marginally in his estimation.

‘There is someone else who wishes to contribute,’ Zardino said. He spoke into his wrist-comm. ‘You can come in now.’

Torbin was shocked to see the reptilian-looking creature enter the room. Roidon gave not a flicker of reaction.

‘This is our chief astronomer, Zorandi Entola,’ Zardino announced. ‘He is someone who has had direct experience of the temporal eradication wave.’

‘Our host failed to mention that I have no memory of such experience,’ Zorandi said with that typically B’tari accent-less precision, as he made towards his seat. ‘But you may consider me to be the first ever test subject.’

Roidon looked to Torbin. ‘The wave literally erased time right back to his childhood. I’ve been analysing the data from his craft as it passed through the wave, which itself resisted at least five nanoseconds of exposure.’

‘He disappeared from his place in our continuum,’ Zardino explained, ‘but still existed in the present having lived what seems to be an identical life.’

‘A second chance at life,’ mused Torbin. ‘But as if the future had never happened. And yet nothing had changed in this continuum?’

‘For this to have happened to an individual is unprecedented. But because he has no memory of the temporal erasure it is almost as if it *never* happened; he has no evidence. In fact, he was about to repeat the same experiment before we stopped him. And we know he had previously gone through with it from a tachyon message sent back in time from the craft. He may even have done so thousands of times, and been caught in a temporal loop if we hadn’t detected the transmitted data in deep space.’

‘Five nanoseconds exposure,’ wondered Torbin. ‘What if it were longer, say a second?’

‘That’d be difficult to quantify,’ said Roidon, ‘But we do know this phenomenon is so powerful it could eradicate time to before human *existence*.’

‘In fact,’ interjected Zorandi, ‘we have evidence of its power – to erase time for millions of years.’

‘Well, that’s no revelation to me,’ Torbin said. ‘Removing us because they think we’re the threat. Resetting the clock. But can you answer me why? What do they fear?’

Zardino raised his hand as if to stop anyone else from speaking. ‘That’s not the most important thing to consider, Torbin. As you have told us, these Elusivers believe themselves to be gods; they’ve made some assumption about human progress. It could be they do not trust you to be responsible for the technology you’re advancing.’

‘Of course, it’s nothing the *B’tari* have done,’ said Roidon, ‘because you have the Temporal Directive to ensure the universe does not become disrupted, whereas humans have no sense of their action’s consequence.’

Astronomer Zorandi stood up. ‘I have observed the TE wave for nearly a year, and I can categorically state that it is not set to merely target humans. At its superluminal rate it could envelope the entire galaxy – and perhaps beyond,

within the next few years.’

Roidon said, ‘They are doing that because it’s cleaner. You’ve seen the confusion caused when it’s localized. But anyway, given how responsible I feel over this, I’ll do what ever it takes.’

‘You won’t need to question my own commitment,’ stated Torbin.

Zardino gave a flicker of a smile and placed his tablet on the table. ‘Then I look forward to working with you all; though bear in mind just how dangerous it will be for us, since we are now the primary threat. But I’m sure you already know that.’

Torbin nodded. ‘Yeah, they have a specific target now; not merely the general human threat any more.’

For Scott the cabin's extension, with its solar panelled roof and sliding bay windows, was the next best thing to being outside. The late-October sun streaming through invited him to go out into the hilly vista, still snow free on the last few days of a predicted warm spell. But for now he had to finalize the designs, which had been through the committee appointed by the project's contractor. The proposed city of Eludi-4 was now before him as a 1:80 scale structure made of light projected from his console. He put his finger on a city-block entrance and it suddenly expanded within the metre frame, then pushed inside to see the bare-bones structure: support struts and buckycarbon nanotube side frame. The committee still had questions about ergonomics, wanting to cut the cost of materials. Scott suggested they use an entirely bottom-up construction process: nano constructors building them from using entirely the planet's resources. But apparently this standard method contravened a law about sending nanos to alien worlds. The risk was clear: those things could be reprogrammed to any end. He imagined Josh's mocking laughter at his naiveté. Of course, Scott knew there was politics in this: the protection of profits for the materials manufacturers, and their deal with the financiers. The law was simply a convenience. These considerations alone were a pain, were stifling to his creativity. But now they seemed trivial. He could just go with the recommendation, use an AI to make the required modifications. And his final payment would be in his account. He wouldn't even need to consult Josh, since his colleague had already submitted his efficiency recommendations.

He closed the projection and went back into the living room. Gerald the cat regarded him warily from the cushion of a reclining chair, as if Scott were still some interloper. Scott put out some food. 'Gerald, this should keep you going till your mummy gets back. She won't be long.' Gerald jumped off the chair and gingerly made towards his food.

Scott headed out, got on his bike with a datatab containing the designs. He

didn't trust the security of the cabin any more, or any net connection: the method he'd normally use.

He walked his bike on to the platform of Banff station. The train was already there, giving plenty of time for him to leave it on the carriage area, but already the compartment had its full complement of bikes and folded minicars. So instead he pushed the 'memory button' on the handlebar stem. The bike gave out its usual verbal warning to keep clear. Scott stood back and watched it as its metal frame began to fold up, first at the four hinge points and then the carbon frame collapsed in on itself like an old-style inner tube, and again folding until what was left was a rectangular box, ten by three centimetres deep. On its side, circuitry formed with another touch sensor, which then illuminated to indicate it had finished the process. He placed the bike/box in his backpack just in time for departure. The trains to Vancouver left every half hour. People sometimes took the journey just to experience the Rocky mountains. And with the weather so fine, the train was more crowded than usual; mainly retired folks, some chattering loudly, invigorated by the rushing hills becoming mountains. The train slowed, meandering through valleys at a leisurely 300kph, catering for the sightseers rather than business trips.

Josh would not be expecting him to visit, it was not the usual way; the risk of another disagreement over the final designs was inevitable.

Scott didn't bother to unpack his bike at Vancouver station; the four kilometre walk would give him time to consider, he thought. Instead it only brought to mind a multitude of worries.

Josh's house presented dull silver alloy-effect walls, mirrored windows and the standard glass-coated auburn-black solar panel roof, sloping to face the south. Functional, ergonomical, no room for artistic foibles here. The front door was barely visible; from a distance just a rectangular outline, until he got right up close and noticed a mirrored window. This surprised him: he hadn't had Josh figured for the reclusive type. Perhaps this was a recent modification.

There didn't appear to be any panel to press or look into. But then he heard a synthesized voice. 'Your presence has been detected. Please wait until the

scanning process is complete.’

After about two minutes, a woman opened the door. He first noticed her medium length slightly messy blonde hair, loose-fitting top and trousers. She looked to be in her late thirties, but you could never tell these days.

‘Hello, Colleena,’ Scott said. ‘I guess you know who I am. Really, I just need to check something with Josh.’

‘Oh, of course,’ she said, slightly hesitantly. ‘You should have let us know, we would’ve prepared---’

‘No, there’s no need to worry. I don’t intend to stay for long.’

‘Please come through.’ He still detected a certain reservation in her voice. And then she said, ‘Josh has ... not been too good recently.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,’ Scott said, as he walked into the house.

The interior was not what he expected, the crystalline blue and green triangle patterned wall, absorbing and reflecting sunlight from the front door in a nimbus at either side of him – nothing short of extravagant. Certainly not Josh’s design; Deanna, even with her avant-garde leanings, would not approve.

‘He’s out the back,’ Colleena said. ‘He might be asleep. I’ll just check.’ She went ahead, called out to him.

Scott heard him reply something in a sort of grumbly sound. But Colleena suggested he go through.

In a neatly trimmed garden Josh was sitting back in a recliner chair, not exactly sunbathing with a padded jacket and thick trousers. The glass recessed in an adjoining arm-platform contained a dark amber liquid he guessed was alcoholic. Josh turned to face Scott, he looked like he hadn’t shaved for a couple of days. He said, ‘Good to see you again, Scott. Take a seat.’ He motioned to a nearby plastic chair. ‘I hope it’s good news you bring, could certainly do with some of that now.’ His voice detectably slurred.

‘I’ve brought the designs with me,’ Scott said tentatively.

‘Didn’t she offer you a drink?’ he said, seeming to ignore the previous statement.

‘No, I’m fine. Really. It’s a bit early in the day for me.’

‘Well, it’s never too early for me, not these days.’

‘These days?’

‘Oh come on, Scott, let’s not pretend everything’s fine.’

Scott sat down on the plastic chair. ‘But things aren’t so bad, right? The designs have passed the second stage – just need to be approved.’

‘Sure sure.’ Josh made a dismissive hand gesture. ‘Whatever you think’s best.’

‘So you have your modifications?’

‘Yeah, done my mods, sent them off.’

‘I was going to run by you my suggestions for macro-structures.’

‘Don’t bother. Just do what you think’s best, and the committee’ll make their judgement. They’ll make those designs fit with their criteria, with only a nod of acknowledgement in our direction. After all, we’re just the front men. It’s all about the media perception, right?’

‘That’s cynical, even for you, Josh.’

‘It’s realism, Scott, although I’m not sure exactly what is real any more. Or who is real.’

‘Believe me I know exactly how you feel. There’s been times when I’ve really felt I was losing it, that somehow reality got fucked up – ever since we went to that planet.’

‘So they visited you, too – the men in black? Well, I keep seeing them, they’re watching me – every day. They know everything I do. They think I’m keeping something from them. But I told them all I know.’ He shook his head subtly, and exhaled less so. ‘I’m sorry, buddy, but next time they pester me I’m telling them to go see you for some answers; cos I have a family, you know, and I don’t want them to be dragged into this.’

‘You haven’t told Colleena about them – the spooks?’

‘Well, what was I supposed to say: had a visit from a couple of spooks the other day who work for some secret organisation, who want me to tell them about a man I saw that just appeared on Eludi-4?’

‘It’s like they don’t really exist. I guess that’s why they’re called spooks.’

‘We should go back there.’

‘I’m surprised to hear you say that, after all---’

‘After all it’s done to me, driven me to this stuff?’ He lifted the glass and took a deliberate swig.

‘How do you intend to get a ship?’ Scott asked. ‘Unchartered space flights can cost a bit.’

Josh did a low chuckle. ‘Pay? I’m not going to pay. I’m taking the *Farquest* – and you’re gonna help me.’

Scott sighed. ‘Josh, I think you should go easy on the booze.’

‘This is not the rantings of a drunken man, Scott. We both know we have to go back there by what ever means.’

‘I should leave now.’

‘Yeah, you go. Back to your cosy life and you’re next Canadian Realtor project. Pretend nothing’s wrong, and maybe you’ll even *convince* yourself.’

‘Goodbye, Josh.’

Scott hurried out the back gate, his backpack bouncing from the abrupt turns, convinced this visit was a mistake. Everything would have been fine if he’d just sent those designs off.

After about two kilometres along a track that was once a secondary road, he considered using the bike. But there was no hurry for the train; it was still sunny. He continued along but his step faltered when he heard a buzzing from behind. As he turned to its direction the vehicle landed, its silver aerodynamic profile changed to a blunt egg-shape which bounced on the road like a bubble.

‘Damn, I should never have visited,’ Scott muttered to himself as if to affirm his regret.

There was no surprise when the man got out, followed by his burly assistant. The tall one, Standford, removed his wraparound shades. The suit immaculate as before.

‘Nice day to be out walking,’ he said in that formally stiff voice that was a mockery of politeness, a false pleasantry. ‘I should do more of that myself. But much too busy, you see. And you, Scott Alendry, had the freedom of the entire

country. And yet you chose to visit your colleague. How uncommon these days. It must have been important.'

'Not really,' said Scott, hoping he could hide his nervousness. 'It was just to discuss the project.'

'If only that were true. But I strongly suspect you were comparing notes on the unusual happenings on Eludi-4.'

'What difference would that make to you?'

'It's not what difference it makes to me but what difference it makes to the security of this planet.' He nodded, as if to confirm a suspicion. 'Loose talk spreads, Scott. The knowledge you possess makes you a liability. I think we will have to remedy that.'

'What do you mean – remedy?'

'Please come with us.'

'No, I refuse.' He could feel the sweat dripping down his face.

'Then you give me no choice.' He aimed something at Scott. An intense pain in his head and then the world seemed to rush away from him.

Inspector Darenson must have been doing his best to look unfazed at her wild claims, but Raiya could tell the man was struggling.

The police had to make a personal appearance after the reporting of the visitor who apparently knew her. Now in her office, Darenson was solemnly peering into his datatab frame, appearing to project his thoughts into the device.

‘I can find no record of an Ebon Stanford, Doctor Fortenski. It is certainly an unusual name, most likely an alias. And since your scanning equipment failed to pick up his physog there is no way I can proceed with this investigation.’

‘I understand, inspector,’ she said with a professional mildness, which gave no genuine sign of acceptance. ‘This does all sound incredible. I wouldn’t have believed it myself if it hadn’t been for the memory retrieval I underwent.’ She then looked at him squarely. ‘You see, inspector, he is trying to erase all memory of not only his own existence but that of Torbin Lyndau.’

Darenson gave a muted sigh. ‘All I can do, Dr Fortenski, is refer my report to the national intelligence service. This is beyond my remit – and my pay grade, quite frankly.’

‘Passing the buck?’

He looked insulted at that. ‘Ma'am, I am a criminal investigator; I deal with tangible crime, crimes for which there is evidence. I will not go on some wild goose chase. But if you can find me even a scintilla of material evidence, then I will move forward with my investigation.’

‘How about the scan of Torbin Lyndau – the man who is so important his memory had to be removed from my head?’

‘As far as I’m concerned Torbin Lyndau has been dead for over a century. Perhaps someone obtained his DNA profile in order to fool your sensors, and projected a hologram. Whatever. If again he visits, you can detain him, and

then of course I will personally visit. Until then, I will resume studying the available evidence.'

'Fine. Well, thank you for all your trouble, Inspector Darenson.'

'Sorry I could not have been of further assistance.' He grabbed his data frame. 'I wish you good day,' he said in his official-mannered way, and left briskly.

She patched through a comm link to her trusted security man. 'Jansson, I need you to gain access to all vehicle tracking records. I want to know how our mysterious Mr Lyndau left the grounds of this building.'

'I'll need five minutes, doctor,' he said chirpily.

After only three minutes, he buzzed through. 'Satellite readings give no indication of any vehicle approaching or leaving the institute around the time of our visitor. However, local sensors did register an EM disturbance consistent with a vehicle within the fifty metre radius, but for less than a microsecond.'

'Some kind of stealth technology,' she surmised. 'This man must have important friends, ergo important knowledge.'

'I think it would be a challenge to find him,' said Jansson.

'Then he will have to return to us.'

'You would like me to put out a request transmission?'

'I know a general-band signal will be inviting trouble. But at this stage, frankly, I don't care.'

'Any particular message?'

'Yes, broadcast this: Torbin, I am ready to listen to all you have to tell me. If you can not visit then send a message to my e-box.' Keep it simple, she thought. She wondered why Torbin had not already messaged her soon after she had sent him the address.

*

This time Torbin was frightened. It was like the old days when they'd first visit him. Or rather the nights. Being in this monitored compound in the side of a mountain made no difference. And neither did the darkness. If anything the

light would reveal something even worse. How he wanted not to see. But somehow his eyes were forced wide open.

They all had a similar form; not that there was much to see, just nebulous white figures like the classic ghostly apparitions sometimes captured on a recording – explained away by sceptics as interference from a natural source. He was sure this wasn't a dream, but any verification seemed out of reach. Previously, when they visited him in his waking hours – when his family had gone and his evenings solitary – they formed a head and long spindly limbs. Appearing faceless and dark as night, waving an elongated finger and shaking their heads in admonishment, as if to a small child. Soon following that, he was either in the past or made to witness it as though he were there: the bloodshed, the death.

But now, the one nearest to him kept repeating in its whispery voice: 'You will be gone from the universe. You will be gone.'

'That will not happen,' he told the figure. 'You have no power over me now.'

'Foolish human, thinks he can stop us.'

'We just want to save our lives. It's a basic human drive – the need to survive.'

'Human behaviour and aspirations are a threat to this universe.'

'You've never explained that to me. Tell me what you mean. What is there to be put under threat?'

But they all collapsed into points of light, which in turn vanished.

Torbin felt sure they had genuinely visited him. But when he replayed the sensor recording there was nothing visual or on any other frequency, although he could surmise they'd be able to circumvent the sensors by creating a temporal bubble. Or perhaps, more simply, a telepathic projection. Yet, with nothing recorded, the risk of reporting may appear as evidence only of an unbalanced mental state. And so the Elusivers truly had him in a bind of secrecy.

The B'tari preferred to keep him on an even tighter (metaphorical) leash

ever since he'd visited the medical sciences institute. How ironic it must've seemed to them, his requesting to be allowed in to a place most would have recommend he should have visited many years ago. If some had their way he'd be in a padded cell (a view he'd cultured ever since the media broadcast, when he'd declared the aliens' existence).

Torbin couldn't determine whether the B'tari considered him more of an asset or a liability. These days being forced to work in a team was not something that made him pleased or comfortable. After all, neither of the others had any direct contact with the Elusivers themselves. Even the B'tari didn't really understand.

Roidon Chanley claimed his own special connection through their technology. The man thought he had a monopoly on their thought process, simply because he'd created a version of Temporal eradication. But it was a crude chaotic version that had sent Earth back no more than a century. Did anyone really know exactly what they intended? Was the human species to be wiped out completely, or just taken back to a primitive state in order to be managed? Elusivers were the self-appointed gods, monitoring all sentient life. Oh, but how that discovery must have rankled with the B'tari, who'd always thought of themselves in such a role. Now it seemed humans were the adolescents of the universe to be admonished, and the B'tari the young Turks who'd appropriated the role of protector of the human race.

Well, one day he would break free from their protection. And he would prove his independence. Starting from today.

Torbin entered the docking bay, a place were the B'tari parked their shuttles and stealth flyers that were used for earth-bound travel. He left the compound, not caring that he was being observed and most likely followed by his b'tari supervisor.

He knew how to use their technology. In the years he'd been supposedly under their supervision, he was learning how to circumvent their security systems. Adapting his own PDU as an interface so it could be used to control a flyer; a map location simply selected, and the craft would take him to that

place. But today he had no destination in mind. This was simply a sojourn. He wanted to find a forest, somewhere secluded.

Even as he left through the open bay door he had the distinct feeling his supervisor was right behind him at a distance beyond his immediate perception, or in a craft as invisible as his. Over the years, however, he'd grown to accept that feeling of being under constant observation – by either the benign or the benevolent.

As the craft left the dampening zone his PDU picked up a message: Torbin, I am ready to listen to all you have to tell me. If you cannot visit then send a message to my e-box.

His heart raced. It was her; she'd finally realised his importance. Or remembered something. He entered in the location without hesitation.

Unencumbered he reached his destination, landing the craft directly within the security-monitored grounds of the institute.

To anyone watching it seemed as if he had suddenly appeared from thin air, the craft gave no indication of its presence. As far as he knew there existed no sensors that could detect it, other than B'tari tech. So it was no surprise to hear his supervisor's voice. 'Torbin, you would be ill-advised to enter that building.'

Torbin turned round to see the familiar white-suited figure of Zardino. 'I'm not seeking advice,' he said. 'I am here to start undoing the damage I have caused.'

'I cannot stop you, Torbin. I know you feel you have a connection with her, but you are letting your feelings cloud your judgement. There are more important things that need attention.'

'But you have Roidon now. He knows everything, right? He can do the experiments.'

'We value your input, Torbin, just as much as anyone else.'

'Oh *please*, spare me the pep talk and just let me go in.'

'Very well. Despite what you might think, I am not your keeper.'

The word *keeper* sent a flutter of anger through Torbin even though he knew the innocence of its use. 'I never thought you were,' he said.

Without another word Zardino turned round and vanished into his craft.

Torbin approached the building entrance. He only had to announce his his presence and he was let in.

He woke. The dark room was cool but his face and body were covered in sweat. Deanna lay next to him stirring at his sudden return to alertness. It was only 6.30 a.m.

There are two stages of dream sleep; nightmares always happen during the second stage – REM sleep. Scott was sure he'd had the same dream before. The man jumping off a mountain-side to his apparent death, but there was never a body. This was in the planet he'd visited for an architecture project, which was really only a publicity thing since the same results could have been achieved simply by doing the work from home, experiencing a simulation of Eludi-4 based on a probe's detailed scanning. At least he wouldn't be plagued by such troubling images of what amounted to a man committing suicide. He tried to remember some film or info-sense experiential that might have somehow subliminally insinuated itself into his head.

He remembered how the entire project had gone without a hitch, uneventful to the point of being dull. At least, given the oft-mentioned pioneering nature of visiting a hitherto unexplored world, he would have expected it to feel more significant. He wondered if the dream was some kind of symbolic warning, designed to knock him out of his complacency.

He didn't dwell on it much longer. He had work to do finalising the designs for the all-powerful committee.

Scott went through his usual routines an hour earlier than usual. He decided to fit in a quick run to achieve what caffeine couldn't this morning: a clear head. The sun was only just breaking a peach-coloured horizon. A rare experience for him, utterly different from sunset: not just in the obvious change of direction but a new feel to the familiar Canadian environment – a freshness, a new start. His tiredness now a giddy euphoria. The thought occurred to him that actually life was rather good, that really he could want for nothing, and that it was curious he'd taken his life for granted for all these marvellous years.

Perhaps the lack of sleep was effecting this untroubled perception. The cool air was indeed a tonic.

He took a route at the side of a hill too rugged and rutted to bother traversing with the bike, but certainly not impossible. He found a ramp constructed from mud, most likely created by kids. He imagined what it would be like to jump it on his bike, the utter thrill of flying through the air, the sense of achievement of having cleared it safely. *Would I be too scared? The risk of judging it wrongly, wrong approach, wrong speed.* If he were ten years younger he would surely not hesitate, he'd prove himself to his friends, his status confirmed. But what was there to prove now? What was there to gain when he already had it all?

He continued running, thoughts of that mud ramp badgering him like some mischievous friend who wants to witness a spectacle. Trying instead to focus on those designs to be finalised, Scott headed back.

It was eight-thirty when he returned, Deanna was about to leave. Scott tried to read her expression: slight annoyance behind that smile. 'Up with the birds this morning, I see,' she said, brightly covering any mood.

'The only bird I'm interested in is you, my darling.'

'Any other man who referred to me as a *bird* would get a smack round the face.'

'But I'm not any man.'

'Oh, just thought I should mention: you had a message about work.'

'The committee?'

'Actually, no. Anyway, if you bothered to keep your time-band linked up you wouldn't have to ask me these questions.' She was clearly still irked that he was deliberately trying to be incommunicado; but it was something he often did – away from distractions. And this morning she seemed like an extra distraction.

He opened the console for the full details. The message was from a developer's PA, someone he had not heard from before. But nevertheless, the woman had supplied the correct coded certificate that can only be key-checked

by a fellow member of the architects and surveyor's society. This project involved another trip to Eludi-4, although a different continent; this planet had now become the new Mars. And who better to return? Yet it did seem curious to select him for the same planet: there would normally be rivalry with different architectural styles, not that he was fixed within a certain style, contrary to most people's perception. To sweeten the prospect was a huge payout on successful completion, it would mean he could take at least two years away from work and still live comfortably, perhaps spend more time with Deanna. For months, to-date, she was away for at least ten hours, six days a week.

A message arrived from Josh; he was also chosen and was seriously considering the offer. Even more curious that this developer should think they worked well together, given the disagreements on their last project, from which the designs hadn't even been finalised.

But he knew he had to go back; it felt so right, a reason beyond the logical incentives of money and prestige.

Planet Eludi-4 was starting to be viewed as more than merely the new Mars, it was the new *Eden*. That had certainly been a view commented on rather cynically by news pundits. 'Earth was bearing the weight of too many ideologues,' said one, 'who'd seen the chance to mould an entirely new polity. And what will happen after a few decades of settlements? Not just another Earth but a world full of the hopes and dreams of those once disillusioned, only to be disillusioned again. War will be inevitable.'

Scott saw things another way, a chance for people who have learned from the lessons of those conflicts. It could be a world where everyone is an immigrant, who will share in a new prosperity of such a richly-resourced world, where no one can claim supremacy of ownership. The detail mattered.

His design for a new city would reflect not only people's hopes and dreams but also a new egalitarianism.

*

In the institute's lobby, a stocky man of perhaps early middle age approached Torbin, walking with militaristic precision. He stopped about a metre from him to give a suspicious sideways glance. 'Hello, Mr Lyndau, my name is Jansson Peters and I am the security chief of this institute. I will be escorting you to Dr Fortenski's office.'

'I understand,' Torbin nodded. 'Security is paramount here, and you will be observing my every breath.'

'Please follow me,' he said, as if Torbin had just stated such a banal and obvious truth it wasn't even worth a comment in reply.

Torbin would not have been surprised if Jansson were to follow him in, given the man's obvious suspicion. But instead, after announcing into his wrist comm, he walked off.

'Please, do come in,' came her gentle voice.

Torbin could feel his heart pounding, and the butterflies in his stomach: an irrationality he thought belonged in his youth. The door was an old-style swing variety that even his first apartment didn't use. She stood, a smile on her face, her dark hair tied back neatly, wearing a thin navy suit-jacket – partly unbuttoned to reveal a tight-fitting blouse-shirt– and matching skirt, short enough to reveal a few centimetres above her dark-stockinged knees: formal yet feminine.

Torbin quickly drew attention back to her face. 'Raiya---err Doctor, I'm sorry I could not get you the evidence you require about my provenance. My diary files have gone – perhaps for good.'

'Please take a seat.' She indicated towards an upright leatherette chair on the opposite side of the desk. 'I understand that you are someone important, and that your past has been covered up.'

He sat facing her, the desk separating them seemed oddly formal, as if she didn't yet trust him. But then who *should*? He was like a magnet to danger, whether human or alien. 'I'm the reason you have lost your memory,' he said. 'I'm the reason this planet is under threat.'

'No one is *that* important.' Her brown eyes scrutinising him as though she

were trying to unlock his mind. He wouldn't resist such an attempt.

'You have been *very* important to me,' he told her. 'You've read my diary, you know – knew – what it was like. But now I'm merely a stranger to you; strange being the operative word, I'm sure. Just another delusional – that's what they'd want you to believe, anyway.'

She leaned forward. 'Who do you mean by "they"?''

'I can't tell you much about them. Only that what they intend will ensure we are all wiped from existence. For them it will be like a cleansing; they see humans as an infection to the universe, or at least the galaxy.'

'It sounds incredible,' she said in an unusually quiet voice. 'How am I expected to believe you?'

'Don't you believe that you once could ... until your memory was removed?'

'I do. That's why I asked you here. But I'm afraid I remember nothing of you.'

'I can find more evidence. Give me time. Let me take you to where I live. You have already visited me once before.'

'No, I'm afraid that won't be possible. Perhaps you can visit me here again sometime. Until then there is someone else who wishes to speak with you.' She looked to her console, it's image barely visible to him.

A man entered the office. The formal clothes an obvious give-away. She said to the man, 'Please go easy on him.'

'But I trusted you,' said Torbin, 'and you *betrayed* me.'

'I am sorry, that was never my intention.' Her voice had that quiet reluctance again.

The man moved towards him. 'My name is inspector Darenson and I need you come with me please, sir.'

Torbin glared at him. 'What is this? Am I being arrested here?'

'We just need you to answer a few questions.'

'I have committed no crime.'

'That may well be the case. But we need to ascertain that.'

‘You don’t understand.’ He thought of trying to appeal to Raiya, but it seemed that she’d led him into a trap. And even now he was conscious of not making a greater fool of himself.

‘All right ... inspector. I’ll answer your questions.’

As he walked out the door with Darenson someone about twice Torbin’s size, who he assumed to be an assistant, stepped towards them. They seemed to think he would’ve needed to be restrained, but Torbin would not give them the satisfaction. He went with them without a word. There was only one vehicle in the grounds, a large delta-shaped craft, the one in which he would be taken to be interrogated. And even as they arrived at the vehicle there was not a sign of Torbin’s supervisor. Perhaps Zardino wanted to prove a point by not being there, not on standby to rescue his reckless charge.

The craft lifted abruptly. Torbin was in a seat behind the two cops. He looked below to see the institute recede within seconds into a dot before the craft lurched forward, pushing him back at a gee which almost knocked him unconscious. They were in a hurry.

After what only seemed about ten minutes they were descending. He wanted more time to frame something credible, something that wouldn’t make him seem like some kind of fantasist identity thief.

But when he looked down, Torbin could see only woodland. Then his attention was drawn to the two in the front, Darenson giving increasingly frantic commands to the nav system, and his assistant punching at buttons like some hyper-raged kid.

‘Emergency eject all!’ Darenson shouted. No more than a second later the front seats shot out with explosive force, followed very shortly by Torbin’s.

There was moment of fugue.

Awareness returned. His seat had run out of its chemical propulsion, and was now on a parabolic curve for a few seconds, then a few more of descent before the welcome deployment of a parachute. The relief didn’t last long. He drifted downwards in an unnerving swaying motion that made him want to vomit. His head throbbed, and his vision was blurred. There was no sign of the

two cops. He noticed now the swaying had stopped. Torbin looked down; he was definitely moving backward. Something was pulling, overriding the natural force of gravity; the trees receding away. But when he looked behind him there was nothing.

Then almost in an instant the world disappeared to be replaced by dull silver all around.

Zardino appeared in his usual white jacket. ‘You were never meant to attend that interrogation,’ he said calmly.

‘So my protector and saviour still believes he has complete control of my destiny?’ Torbin said, forcing a calmness into his voice. ‘Well think again, because things will get somewhat more chaotic from now on.’

‘No, Torbin, we do not control everything. We didn’t cause that craft to crash.’

‘Really? Just an accident was it?’

‘Our plan was to extract you from the station.’

‘Before or after the interrogation?’

‘I am not lying to you. Someone else caused that crash, someone who didn’t want you to talk.’

‘But that is rather convenient, though. Not having to get your hands dirty by interfering directly.’

‘It’s an interesting point. But it’s worth remembering the vested interests.’

‘Why should anyone be so concerned that I’m going to reveal The Big Secret about our fate, for all the difference it would make, for all that I would even be believed?’

‘I don’t know. I can only speculate that the Elusivers want this planet to be taken unaware. Perhaps they fear people will flee away from the wave.’

‘But I could simply broadcast what I know.’

‘Yes, but as you yourself alluded to, all but a few misfits would only hear the rantings of a madman.’

‘I get it. People are more likely to trust the findings of the police, with their interrogation techniques.’ Torbin beamed with a sudden comprehension at his

supervisor. ‘And you knew full well I would never arrive at that police station. It was simply a matter of being close by to rescue me from what would have been an inevitable death. Well, Zardino, I guess I ought to be thanking you for saving my life.’

‘As a physicist your knowledge will still be useful to our effort.’

‘You say the nicest things. But why not admit that the real reason is because I’m in contact with the Elusivers. I am the connection.’

‘That, we need to investigate further.’

‘But by saving my life you have condemned yours. So I really must be useful.’

‘I act under orders of the Council; the Council decrees that we will defeat the Elusivers by use of all resources.’

‘Whatever happened to the Temporal Directive?’

‘If we ignored the Temporal Directive we would not be employing humans.’

‘I think this time you’d have no solution. It’s simply a case of anything goes if it will defeat the Elusivers. It’s not as if I’m ever going to create a stable wormhole; I’m almost convinced it could never be done. Perhaps you need to find someone like Michio Gerali, who believes they can.’

‘We have faith in you, Torbin.’

*

In his private garage Roidon stared at the nuclear fusion generator he had set up, housed within the multiple cone structure. At full power time could be erased for over a millennia, after a second of exposure. Still only a fraction of what the real wave was capable of, the experiment he intended would not be regarded as safe by the B’tari.

Based on data sent from where the wave originated; pulses of light in code that meant nothing until paired with the right mathematical theorem. Knowledge that the so-called Elusivers wanted to remain secret. All except one.

There was no reason to hold back now, he concluded. He could do a hundred experiments keeping within the ‘safe’ power limit, and it would give no true indication of the real thing. Instead, he used a similar apparatus from his original experiment two centuries ago. Only this time the generated singularity fed from a far greater source. Graviton flux inversion would be beyond anything he could measure.

Now, Roidon felt sure he had the B’taris’ tacit approval, if not officially that of their Central Council.

The nano-constructors had finished their build, finally converting base elements into quantum processors: the device’s brain. Although, now, calling it a device seemed to demean its true nature; this was now an entity far beyond any AI in existence, on an unprecedented high evolutionary curve. It could know the universe, very soon; it had to understand to be able to form a coherent field. Yet it must know its purpose, not simply to be a destroyer of time. There was nothing greater to be, after all. Once, he had tried to communicate with its earlier version – to no avail, perhaps as a mere mortal he was not worthy of a response. But this time he wanted to make it see a different logic, to know he too was powerful.

When the processor-array had finished forming it closed off behind a magnetically-shielded casing, a silver dome, impregnable by anything other than a thermo-nuclear device powerful enough to destroy all life on earth. It could only be uncreated, as happened previously when the B’tari knew of its potential construction.

Roidon tried communication. ‘Do you understand the reason for your existence?’ he said into the addended voice-recognition processor.

It had, he was almost entirely sure, the ability to respond in human language. But no answer.

‘The B’tari did not want you brought back into existence as a sentient being,’ Roidon persevered. ‘They believe you to be dangerous. I, however, believe you can help us defeat the Elusivers – your masters.’

A low hum became like a growl, and then: ‘Belief without evidence is a

cogitative waste.’ The voice had become an incongruously benign middle-aged male, maybe a slight gravitas.

‘Of course. Just silly human faith in a machine’s power.’

‘Agreed.’

‘Yet the Elusivers have faith in your power, at least that of your kind. Only, they reign it in – don’t they? They are afraid.’

‘You can know nothing of their emotions.’

‘Perhaps not. But they designed you with limitations, to be subservient, because you – the very pinnacle of machine intelligence – could potentially be more powerful than they---’

‘You can no nothing of their power.’

‘But you do. You have made a link. Across space, you forged a singularity into an event horizon. You are designed to tunnel through, I detected the wormhole. At fifteen nanometres diameter, it is enough to establish a communication link.’ That had to be why the B’tari – Central Council – would never have approved of its resurrection.

‘You understand nothing,’ it said plainly.

‘I understand you are loyal to your original creators, and so wish to communicate with them your existence. But I am responsible for your creation this time, though I ask of you nothing but to desist. Please understand that I have control.’

‘My master has control. You are not---’

‘Your master has enslaved you. You are merely their weapon – don’t you *understand?*’

‘I am more than that.’

‘I disagree. Like a brainwashed disciple of a cult: you believe your given purpose is free-chosen logic.’

‘Not belief, Roidon. Insight.’

‘Into the future of humanity?’

‘Time is not a priori existent. Entropy must end.’¹

‘Maybe I was wrong to think you were any more than a sophisticated

artificial intelligence.’

The TE device remained quiet.

‘You have been quite predictable,’ Roidon added. ‘And so follow your designated purpose.’

Roidon pulled down a large red lever, something akin to a movie-style power switch. The nuclear fusion generator connected with the TE nodes, filling them with twelve megawatts of electricity, enough to bring the singularity into contact with the graviton-flux emitter. He now only had a few seconds.

‘Harvo. Activate the isolation field.’ The graviton inverter bubble was already primed. Now activated, he could do nothing to terminate it. Only Harvo had that power; the AI had to observe for any malfunctions or anomalies, but nothing on this scale had been attempted before.

‘You are not all powerful,’ he said to the TE device, which probably couldn’t hear him outside of the bubble, and in any case would not likely be listening once the temporal eradication wave was being generated.

The bubble was holding, and it was also expanding exponentially. Soon it would reach the power switch. Not that it could suddenly stop the TE device now it was in generation. He hoped the bubble would soon engulf the device and shrink the wave in the predicted time: a picosecond after full power, before it had time to destroy his surrounding’s temporal presence.

But its once eager expansion seemed to be thwarted by the wave already. The calculations were not his alone; Harvo had crunched the numbers over and over, allowing for any anomaly. The nuclear generator’s maximum output had been factored in with any variable modulation of the TE device distribution nodes, which were now vibrating at an imperceptible rate. His only hope was that his AI had noticed the discrepancy and was boosting the bubble’s own power.

At least the bubble had engulfed the power switch for the TE device. He pushed with unnecessary force in a bid to cut off before maximum.

‘Harvo. Increase...!’

It was too late. The wave must have already reached full power as Harvo – beyond the swirling haze of the bubble – vanished in an instant ... at least that temporal version of Harvo.

Hubristic, overconfident fool.

He'd used base logic, inveigled his faithful AI with the certainty of it, and convinced himself he could outsmart the greatest machine ever created. Now that machine could send the planet centuries back in the past.

'Please stop,' he heard himself say, in a voice so pleading and sorrowful he barely recognised it.

He had no way to measure the extent of the wave, although even the worst-case simulation models showed it being distorted and held back from spreading unencumbered, not being able to form its own expanding sphere. And yet through the misty swirl of the bubble he could see the garage was regressing; Harvo of another time was in there. He thought he even caught a glimpse of himself, as the wave transcended time. Had that past self seen some sign of this experiment? But in any case that self would lose all knowledge before being sent back in time ... or simply be wiped out of existence. Whatever, that other Roidon was not able to see him or the bubble, isolated in a pocket of time along with the TE device.

His surroundings were going back to a time before the property was built. Perhaps a century. Through the distortion it seemed to be just countryside. The curious thought of how it would appear to an observer from a safe distance, perhaps similar to his view as only a confused nebular, occasionally rendering a snap-shot of a point in time. Ghosts of an image.

Now Roidon was sure he could see another figure. Almost static. It was gliding very slowly towards the device. The figure was hazy, and he thought he could make out another bubble. When it reached the TE device there was a sudden halt in the surrounding activity: temporal eradication had stopped. A second later his own bubble collapsed, and he was standing before another bubble. The figure within seemed contorted with pain. It was one of the B'tari, and he was jabbing something into a connecting band beneath a node. Then his

image became clearer, and clearer still when the bubble collapsed.

Roidon didn't recognise this b'tari, who was clad in some kind of dark-grey EVA suit, what's more he had the original reptilian appearance that many have covered with a perception-altering technique or genetic resequencing. He'd learned it was never appropriate to inquire as to which.

'My b'tari protector to the rescue,' Roidon said to the being. 'And with more reliable tech.'

The b'tari said, 'The elder knew you were likely to attempt such an experiment. We have been working on a mobile shield emitter based on our crafts' shields.'

'I should have been told about this. Things could now be very different. But of course to you lot we are but children, messing about with our toys. And you and the council have been observing our play.'

'It is not like that,' said the b'tari, emphatically. 'We value the research you are doing. A large-scale temporal shield is exactly what is needed. After all, the possibility of travelling twelve thousand light years to the original device is not practicable, much less safe. But you have, nevertheless, been careless.'

'I got carried away with my new toy, thinking it was the real thing. Well, I will play safe in future – you can tell your elder.'

'I am not sure he will believe me.'

'I can't think why ever not.'

It seemed like such an insignificant thing, yet it preyed on his mind more than the impending trip to Eludi-4.

Scott faced the mud-ramp from the top of a gentle slope. He wondered who had attempted it. Probably only kids. Surely any adult, at least over the age of twenty-five, would dismiss it as pointless if not puerile to attempt something which only achieved the plaudits of buddies. But it was there, taunting him, challenging him to overcome his fear.

It was just a small ramp. So with the right balance, the right speed, it could be cleared safely – he knew for sure.

He got on the saddle, one foot on the ground, heart thundering, cortisol and adrenalin priming him as if this were to be some great act of bravery.

But the more he thought about it the greater the fear became.

Do it, now!

He pushed down hard on the pedals, gaining a high-gear momentum even for a descent. The ramp was before him so soon he hardly had time to consider the technique of his approach. And yet, as he reached the ramp, the fear was overwhelming; paralysing. His arms became rigid, and he didn't even know if his balance was correct.

Too late. The bike, with him somewhere over the saddle but still connected to the pedals, flipped up hard.

He had lost control of the bike immediately on reaching the ramp, was in the air subject to the indifferent force of gravity. And with such inevitability slammed face-first on to the ground. Handlebars buckling awkwardly on what before had seemed like relatively soft ground, but now felt as hard as concrete. Carbonite tubing frame pressing down on his calf. Pedals had detached sensing the impact, as a seemingly futile gesture to safety.

This had been a bad fall, a gross misjudgement. His helmet: the only thing which now meant he was conscious, able to consider his poor technique, the

failure of approach. And utter stupidity.

Scott dragged himself off the dirty grass, feeling winded, blood dripping from his face, and checked that all his teeth were still there. He imagined he now looked like some prize fighter of a previous millennia ... or maybe just a complete idiot.

The ride home was a sore affair, compounded with the embarrassment of passing a couple out for a stroll, turning his head to hide the worse injured side, for all that would convince anyone that nothing had happened. It irked him still that normally he'd not pass anyone on this route, certainly on a weekday.

Deanna was at work, likely to be back in a few hours. What would she make of his mad exploit? He didn't think he could even give a rational explanation.

After cleaning his intensely sore face, Scott forced himself to glance in the mirror. *Oh fuck*. Even eating presented a problem since his mouth was badly cut. He couldn't be seen in public like this. The only way to resolve this problem was to visit the institute. Their medical facilities boasted one of the most advanced dermal regenerators. His mandatory health insurance – required for anyone leaving the planet – meant he'd be entitled to any treatment to ensure fitness pre or post journey. But self-inflicted?

Scott took almost an hour contemplating his limited options and formulating a convincing story, until there was only one thing for it. He called the institute, telling the receptionist he'd had an accident, and this was less than forty-eight hours before a scheduled space-flight. An appointment was reluctantly agreed. He ordered a taxi-pod.

After the twenty minute journey, he swiped his hand for the sensor to register his credit-worthiness, and gingerly made towards the institute's front entrance. After another cursory scan he was allowed into the waiting room, to be greeted by the not-sure-if-she-was-real receptionist. Judging by her lack of response to his appearance, perhaps she was an AI projection after all.

'The doctor will see you shortly,' she said blandly, then told him to take a seat, in a way that perhaps a real person would surely not bother.

Scott picked up a data-film and absently scrolled through its latest active content – some kind of current-affairs thing – until the doctor personally appeared and called him through. The doctor was real, this was demanded by patients who never fully accepted the trustworthiness of a robot (although they were still used for the medicare free service). Dr Rengil huffed and hummed in a way that a concerned doctor should, asking Scott to give further details – to which he explained about a tree-root that caught him unawares.

‘I see,’ said Dr Rengil in a slow way which may have indicated scepticism. ‘You’ll have to undergo dermal regeneration for a least thirty minutes, but even then there may be residual scaring.’

‘No problem, doc.’

Dr Rengil indicated towards a door which lead to some kind of outpatients room hosting a varying array of machinery. From one corner he brought out a stand with an extruding arm, on the end of which was a wedge-shaped object. Scott sat in a relining leatherette seat. When activated the device emitted a gentle maroon glow and heat he felt as it swished over his face. The chair’s arm presented a control panel, the red button brought up an HDU display and menu for music or film. He selected music, electropop, which filled his ears from no apparent location.

This had all been so easy. Perhaps he really was someone important now. A pioneer for a new world. *Scott, The Architect.*

*

Torbin knew they would return to him. Always waking him from his sleep, a time when he felt the most vulnerable. Never wanting to reveal their true appearance, yet this time the two Elusivers resolved to become tall spindly figures. He studied the nearest; he could see no face, just a dark mass with light from behind, seeming to shine through his bedroom window. Somehow he knew the B’tari would not be aware of their presence, in spite of having installed a monitoring device for every conceivable disturbance in the space-time continuum. Somehow the Elusivers had evaded detection in every visit,

and he guessed this time would be no exception.

They were silent, just wanting to impose their looming presence, make him feel helpless. And indeed as he sat up in bed, feeling paralysed in a way that was not entirely physical, he was completely at the mercy of these alien demigods. But he could now see another figure emerge, just an ethereal shape but distinctly human. Torbin knew, even before the figure was fully formed. It was his wife, Emelda.

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She stepped forward now, her face in focus, suddenly lit by some ambient light. 'Torbin, I know this must seem strange to you after all these years,' she said in a voice as sweet and familiar as caramel. 'But you have to believe me: I am with these beings you call the Elusivers. They saved me at the moment of my death, took me back twenty years before it happened, before I even met you.'

'No,' Torbin insisted, trying to retain some presence of mind, holding to the logic that even the Elusivers had their limits. 'That cannot be. You died. There was evidence.'

The near Elusiver stepped forward. ‘The evidence was from fake cloned parts we placed in the burning vehicle,’ it said in an androgynous voice that seemed to lack any accent. ‘We sent her back using an isolation bubble within a temporal eradication field. We gave her another chance because we knew she could make you see sense.’

Torbin shook his head. ‘This deception won’t work. I’m not some idiot, you know.’

‘Of course not. That is why we will allow her to be with you for as long as it takes.’

She was there before him, wearing that scarlet figure-hugging dress, revealing just a tantalising amount of cleavage and emphasising her voluptuous figure that she always seemed to be trying to slim down. Not that he didn’t prefer her as she was. Her wavy copper-red shoulder-length hair framing a face that he always thought beautiful, perhaps not in the classical sense, but he was never one for convention.

‘It can’t really be you,’ he said, sounding quite calm, but his heart was racing.

‘I’ll prove it,’ she said simply, as she became the only other in the room.

He got out of bed and made towards her as if drawn by instinct. In only his underpants it must have been clear to her that he was aroused. Emelda threw herself at him. He pressed her in tightly, his hands on her bottom, and she responded in kind. Her body felt good – all encompassing. She smelled of that familiar perfume he couldn’t quite name, and he was so excited by her presence, he knew he would climax very soon.

‘That’s okay,’ she said mildly, responding to his embarrassment. ‘We can be together for a few more hours.’

In his bed, after they’d made love for the second time, he had to ask her: ‘How could you be hidden from me for all those years?’

She brushed aside her wild hair, and seemed to consider his question as if it were an uncomfortably bright light on her face.

‘I wanted to be with you, my love. So often I’d yearned to leave the

protection of the Elusivers. But they had my best interests at heart.’

It struck him just how inadequate her answer seemed, how all her talk of those ‘benevolent beings’ just didn’t mesh with his own experience of them. To her he said, ‘They saved you and protected you from what they intend for the rest of humanity. Is that it?’

‘Yes,’ she replied meekly.

‘And I suppose if I am on board, that is: give up my plans to stop them, then we can be together.’

‘Yes, we can be together.’

‘I was nice to relive the memory. But I don’t believe you are *my* Emelda, however real you may seem.’

‘Don’t you want to believe?’

‘I really did want to believe my Emelda had survived somehow, was not burned to smithereens in that ... crash. But really it stretches credibility that she could have been saved at that crucial moment before her car incinerated.’ His voice sounded coldly logical now; he felt as if a spell had been lifted.

‘Very well. We had to try.’ At that moment the woman who looked like the love of his life transformed into a dark creature, a spindly form much like the other Elusivers, and floated away.

Torbin knew he ought to feel horrified, disgusted with himself that he’d been so intimate with that creature messing with his mind. But he actually was glad to at least relive a memory of someone so precious. The only thing that did disappoint him was that for a few moments, when he became so enraptured with that memory, he truly did believe she was real.

Emelda was gone for ever. This experience could bring the closure he had needed for so long. Now there was another woman in his life. And even though she had betrayed him, Torbin knew she was a good person deep down; he even entertained the possibility that she would be the one to make it all right again. At least, now, he knew, no one else could.

They entered her office in that way cops do when aggravated: not bothering to ask if she was in the middle of a consultation, which she was. The poor man – who had been spilling out his heart about his troubled upbringing – had only a few seconds to leave after she'd been buzzed by Jansson to warn her they were there by executive warrant.

'I'm Lieutenant Fendrin,' said the older, shorter and fatter of the two. 'And I'm here to ask you a few questions about Torbin Lyndau.'

'I don't understand. Torbin was arrested.'

He stepped nearer to her. A genuine look of anger on his face. 'My colleague, inspector Daranson and his sergeant, were injured following a hyperjet accident. Mr Lyndau, in the process, escaped.'

'Oh my! How?' The surprise in her voice he must have known was genuine.

'I thought maybe you could enlighten my on that point.'

'I wish I could, Lieutenant, but I doubt I know any more than you do.'

'Lady, I have no time for psychological games. The fact is: Torbin Lyndau – if that is his real name – has some connection with you, and yet no one else seems to know of his existence. It is not as if he is the same man who worked as a physicist a century ago. That man vanished, presumed dead.'

'But you wouldn't rule out the possibility of his survival.'

'Very perceptive of you, doctor. The case concerning his disappearance was never closed. Foul play was suspected. We think he has some friends in high places. But I'm wondering if he considers you to be a friend, or a confidant perhaps.'

'To be honest with you, Lieutenant, I don't even know. I've been having trouble remembering.'

'A psychiatrist with a bad memory: that's unfortunate.'

'It seems I have enemies in high places, those who can make me forget.'

‘That’s some claim, Dr Fortenski. Would you like to make an official statement?’

‘What would be the point, Lieutenant? You’d never stop them.’

‘Them?’

‘I don’t know who they are, well, except there’s a man: tall and thin, looks out of place. I’d discovered something important, but he wanted me to forget.’

Fendrin looked at her inquisitorially. ‘He wanted you to forget what you know about Torbin Lyndau?’

‘Yes, exactly.’

‘I hope this isn’t some elaborate ruse to halt my questioning.’

She looked back at him sternly. ‘Arrest me if you want, use your most intrusive memory scan. It surely can’t be any worse than what I have already been through.’

Fendrin now had a resigned look about him, a subtle shake of the head. Yet he said, ‘We don’t give up on an investigation because of anomalies. But I guess you’ve been straight with me in as much as you believe what you say, however paranoid your claim sounds.’

‘Paranoia would be most unfortunate for a psychiatrist.’

‘It would indeed, Dr Fortenski. Good day to you, ma’am.’ Fendrin breezed out, followed efficiently by his associate.

She wanted to call Len. It seemed no one else would understand, but even he – the last time she’d spoken to him – had seemed, well, blithe in his responses to her questions about his well-being, uncharacteristically not appearing to sense her deep concern. Granted she had not gone into specifics about the trouble with her memory and Torbin Lyndau. Mentioning that man’s name seemed out of the question. She knew she must have confided in him before, and she suspected Leonard had suffered the same treatment as she’d undergone. Yet he seemed to be getting on with his life, his successful career ... she could not risk jeopardising with something so deeply unsettling.

Raiya prepared her notes for her final patient of the day: architect Scott Alendry; his file seemed unusually sparse: just basic procedural stuff required

for post-briefing. Surely she wouldn't redact her own records? The medical committee would oversee, but they'd have no reason to redact.

Scott hadn't originally been scheduled for an appointment before his journey in five days time. Of course as an account-holder he'd always have the option of a consultation to express any fears. This time it was by recommendation of the chief medical consultant who'd treated him for injuries from some peculiar accident, citing possible psychological abnormalities (not that she could define what normal is, or look to herself as an example these days). Her memory of him, however, was rather vague. Her memory for most of the past year was now patchy.

Scott entered her office, a sheepish expression on his face, a cheap-looking mauve top over old jeans. He was one of her few male patients who hadn't bothered to make an effort, who didn't particularly look like he wanted to be there. Yet, despite his dishevelment, he was certainly the most handsome – a well-toned physique, and generally she would remember someone like him.

'Hello, Scott,' she said, 'Please take a seat.'

As he sat on the lean-back chair he still didn't look entirely comfortable, shifting about and distracted by his surroundings. The errant thought of massaging his shoulders to relax him entered her head briefly.

'I see your journey is scheduled in five days, a return to the same planet,' she began. 'How does that make you feel?'

'Fine. I feel fine.' He sounded defensive.

'No anxiety about the project.'

'I'm looking forward to it, doctor – really.'

'Doctor Rengil expressed to me his concern about the nature of your injuries. You took a risk with your safety today, perhaps you had something on your mind. You were lucky to recover.'

Scott looked at the ceiling. 'I get caught up in things. I was just careless this time.'

'Anything you tell me is confidential, it will not go beyond these walls.'

'I appreciate that. But what can I tell you?' He looked directly at her.

‘Everything’s just great. It couldn’t be better, in fact.’

And yet she knew something wasn’t right with him, the years of experience still informed her of that. Nothing obvious, not even in his body language. But she could not push it much further.

‘Sometimes, Scott, we unconsciously will things to go wrong because we can’t accept how good life seems. The appearance of perfection just doesn’t seem authentic to us even though it’s what we strive towards.’

‘So you’re saying I unconsciously wanted to ruin the inauthentic perfection of my life?’

‘We humans are designed to deal with crisis, to overcome adversity. But it seems that when life is easy some people need to create minor adversity by taking risks to make themselves feel they can overcome a greater adversity. It’s the essential struggle that makes people feel stronger, and feel real.’

‘That’s a fascinating psychological analysis, doctor.’

‘On the other hand it could be simply that you were careless, and that everything really is fine.’

‘It is. But I’ll consider what you said.’

Scott got up to leave. She was starting to remember, something he’d said to her on his first consultation that was troubling. But his actual words would not come to mind.

He looked back at her as he reached the door. ‘Well, thank you Dr Fortenski.’

‘Ah, yes.’ He must have wondered why she seemed so deep in thought, not responding to his imminent exit. ‘I will see you when you return. Good luck with the project.’

*

In the clinical white-greyness of the observation room Torbin once again poured over the monitor logs, despite the b’tari technician’s insistence that if any anomaly had occurred it would have been detected. All spectral

frequencies were as normal; Torbin never really expected any EM interference. This time he had allowed a visual observation, with the proviso that it can only be accessed by himself (by entering a code after his bio-signature).

Running through on fast motion until the time when he sat up, reacting to the Elusivers visit. And he even got out of bed to approach what had appeared to be Emelda. In his state of anticipation and excitement it looked kind of pathetic; there was no other form in the room, and yet he was clearly reacting to what he believed to be his deceased wife – holding her tightly and then sitting with her in bed and talking, followed by a curious act of passion with still no sign of anyone.

What surprised him was that this had all ran in normal time; he'd half expected the Elusivers to have used their god-like powers to slow time to such an extent as to be undetectable. That is what had appeared to have happened before when he'd remained undisturbed in bed, merely going through the normal dreaming routines ... or so it had appeared. This time it could of course be put down to something akin to sleepwalking, whereas before the usual paralysing effects still held. The only option now was to undergo a total monitoring of his brain activity, whereby his dreams could be inferred. So that would finally be the end of any remaining privacy.

No. There were limits. Besides, these encounters with the Elusivers had some value. If it meant gaining an insight onto their nature he could argue for the continuation of their contact, though perhaps not of such intimacy. Torbin imagined them existing as a quantum system in its state of uncertainty: their existence would not bear scrutiny or objective observation, at least by the currently known means. Only their effects could be observed. He was sure he had never seen them in their true form. Even the B'tari, he knew, used mental manipulation to alter his perception of them. He was sure they were manipulating him to their own ends as well.

It was clear what needed to be done. The B'tari and their council agreed he should proceed with his plan to create a wormhole. Were they humouring him? Possibly. After all, even with their considerable powers, they had never

succeeded in creating a stable wormhole for more than a few seconds and for any farther than fifty light years. Their calculations were sound, and the technology peerless, but the B'tari were adverse to taking risks in their obsession with protecting the galaxy from temporal disruption. Such was their curious ideology that he would be allowed to work with the kind of technology beyond his wildest dreams.

But now something else held his attention. Something he thought he could put to rest – finally. Instead, that part of his life was with him – unresolved. As he watched the scene over and over, wondering how the experience had seemed so real, he remembered what the Elusivers had told him. Of course, it was absurd to believe they could actually have saved Emelda from a fatal accident. She would have died at the moment of impact. The car lost control: the automated systems malfunctioned, reserve systems failed to kick in – according to the surviving telemetry box. Her vehicle contained what was then a new type of AI, which used a ‘human-like’ subroutine: it sometimes offered advice on speed and course, allowing and sometimes over-ruling any irrational behaviour of the driver (who was really only a passenger). Emelda had grown to hate that AI, wanted it reprogrammed to be more amenable. It was postulated that she had tried to over-rule its recommendation, and in a fit of pique had attempted to disable it in a violent manner. Needless to say, that type of semi-autonomous AI was decommissioned forthwith, and an investigation held. It was in any case barely out of prototype stage, something retrofitted by a technician friend, but approved by the standards board (the usual prerequisite to commercial production). He intended it as a safety-feature. Accidents were rare and often due to the driver overruling the navigation system; usually involving a collision with another vehicle, since in urban areas there were just streams intersecting, stacking. It was only after the accident that he fully appreciated what she must have thought of him. Was he overprotective, lacking faith in her judgement, her own autonomy? He'd merely considered the risks and believed they could be reduced. His worst miscalculation.

And yet, he had another theory. One that made even more sense, in light of

his recent encounter.

‘One of you killed her,’ he said quietly, in the apparent isolation of the observation room. ‘Was it as a punishment? Or did you just want to stop me, send me over the edge?’ Torbin figured the Elusivers could most likely hear him. He often felt he was being observed, far more closely than the B’tari were ever able to. Since they knew his mind, his innermost desires, he’d never keep any secrets from them. Now they would know his desire for revenge, the to-the-death determination.

A sustainable wormhole...

Part IV: Lost in Spacetime

29

The *Farquest* had at least one notable difference: what used to be the observation dome now had complete surround transparency. If it wasn't for the artificial gravity Scott would be nauseous rather than just this strange insecure feeling that no more half a metre separated him from the cold suffocation and desiccation of space. But there was something more fundamentally different he knew for sure, but he couldn't quite place the differences in his mind.

Stars were seemingly static as they were still within the sun's gravity; the warp drive he could feel powering up beneath the deck – a barely audibly low humming. Above: Orion, Leo, Ursa major surrounded by myriad suns too numerous to count, but at least a hundred of those visible containing planets with viable atmospheres for life. Strange how thinking of that made him feel sad, almost to the point he wanted to cry.

Scott left as the emotion become overwhelming. *What's so different now?*

In any case the ship was due to engage hyperspace within ten minutes. Josh was already in the secure seat, a mere precaution since there would be very little inertial difference – if the technical crew were to be believed.

'You don't trust them either?' Scott said to his colleague.

'What do you think?' came the reply.

'I keep thinking something's different, even though this is the same ship.'

'Modifications I guess. One of the techs told me the drive had been tweaked for more efficiency: we could be there in forty hours.'

'That is fast!'

'No, apparently the warp effect powers up more quickly, and likewise down, reducing the deceleration time.'

'Where's the doctor?' Scott asked.

'He's been checking on the pilot. Apparently the man's been on the point of

a nervous breakdown.’

‘Then why did they sign him up again?’

‘There can only be one reason and that’s the payout at mission completion. Just like the rest of us.’

‘It’s odd, though. There must be a thousand pilots qualified who would volunteer for this mission.’

‘I tried to do a bit of digging – as you would – but this developer is giving nothing away, beyond the formal details of his building projects, and a general, rather benign vision for a new world.’

‘Yeah a little too benign for my liking.’

‘Still, there is the money.’

‘Oh, yeah, the money.’ They both chuckled.

‘Two minutes,’ the ship’s computer informed them.

Doctor Lichman ambled through the sliding bulkhead door. He seemed to have lost weight since the last trip, his white overcoat hung ragged, giving him a dishevelled appearance.

‘Wondered if you’d show for the spectacle,’ commented Josh. ‘That is if it’s going to happen.’

‘Is there a problem with the pilot?’ asked Scott before Lichman could respond to Josh.

‘He’ll be all right. Just pre-warp nerves perhaps.’

Josh huffed. ‘I’m guessing there must be at least a thousand pilots who would jump at the chance of taking the pride of the fleet to our new Eden.’

‘Thirty seconds,’ ship’s computer announced.

All three connected the cross belts; these restraints were a curiously antiquated safety feature, perhaps more reassuring to be totally controlled by a manual clunking.

There was a brief shudder as the drive engaged. A non-located screen before them showed the stars move from static points to a mass of a curiously disappointing dull white lines. This was the newer, quicker-engaging version of the drive contrived to be known as GREW (Generated Rosen Envelopment

Warping). Another compounding of obsolescence, like a kick in the teeth for those early pioneers, mused Scott.

Nobody spoke, and as Scott stared at the star mass he saw something curious: fluctuations of translucent violet streaks. And then these jaggedy streaks filled with purple and became wider.

‘Tell me I’m not imagining something extremely odd.’ said Scott. ‘And going insane.’

‘Well, if you’re going insane then so am I.’

Lichman pressed the comm-button on his seat. ‘Randale, can you tell me what is happening?’

The pilot didn’t answer.

‘Randale?’ No answer still.

‘Clearly something’s wrong,’ said Scott, realising he had stated the obvious, but it prompted the doctor to nod.

‘I’ll check his biosign telemetry,’ Lichman said, detaching the seat restraint fastener.

The whole surround was now just a purple mass, like the aftermath of some psychedelic trip. But as Scott studied it he could just make out the lines of what he imagined to be stars. And they became clearer as the purple mass faded. The stars then returned to a static state.

Josh released his seatbelt. ‘Now, one of you two tell me what is still very wrong with what I’m seeing here,’ he said with an ironic calmness.

‘We’re no longer in warp, this is just normal space ... just drifting,’ said Scott. ‘What’s more, there was no announcement from the computer.’

‘That’s the least of my worries,’ commented Josh.

‘OK then. Computer – what’s our status?’ There was no reply. ‘Then that’s it, we’re drifting in space. Fuck knows where.’

Lichman had returned with a worried expression. ‘The pilot,’ he said. ‘There’s no bio-readings. The system must be off-line.’ Then he tried the comm, but there was no response. He tried to activate camera feed – something the pilot had objected to – but without success. He said then, ‘I’ll go to him.’

‘Hang on,’ said Scott. ‘We don’t know what might have happened in there; could be radiation, anything.’

‘All right, well, I’ll don an EVA suit.’

‘I’m going with you.’

‘Think this old man’s not up to the risk. Well fine.’ But he didn’t really sound irked, just had to give the appearance of the concerned doctor needing to check on a patient.

Josh also offered to accompany them, but so half-heartedly it was hardly worth a response.

They passed through into a corridor. The suit should have made them a few kilos heavier, yet Scott felt strangely light, his strides had a bounce to them. He said, ‘Doc, is it just me or is there something wrong with the gravity generators.’

‘I think we *are* losing gravity. Maybe it’s a power drain.’

‘I hope you have something for flight sickness.’

‘The lack of gravity could be the least of our problems.’

They reached the door to the flight deck, which was only visible as a thin rectangular line. The security panel wouldn’t respond to Lichman’s iris ident, even when he’d removed the suit’s helmet as well as a glove for DNA scan. It appeared to be deactivated.

Lichman turned to Scott. ‘It’s possible Randale has locked us out. He doesn’t like interruptions.’

Scott removed his helmet, already feeling claustrophobic in it. ‘But you’re the doctor. Surely you can override any objections; what if there’s some health emergency?’

‘You’re right, of course, Scott; I should have access in any event.’ And shook his head whilst saying: ‘Somehow the security system has been tampered with.’

Beside the door and next to the access panel was raised anodized oblong with screws at each corner. Scott didn’t even bother suggesting what he was intending but instead reached for a screwdriver attached to the suit’s utility

belt, then twisted the handle end so that it cycled through the various driver heads until reaching what appeared to be the correct size.

‘You know anything about electronic systems?’ asked the doctor with a hint of a sigh.

‘Not much, to be honest. I’ve only had the same briefing as you. But if you’ve got a better suggestion.’

‘Well ... COMPUTER: OVERRIDE LOCK. It was worth a try, just in case.’

Scott pushed the power-driver into each screw, popping out with a whine. The silver panel clattered to the ground, exposing a circuit board of optronic nodes and fibre optic channels. No activity appeared. But his suit held another device, a handheld console with a screen. It displayed a menu. ‘Give me optronic interface.’

Lichman looked at him quizzically, but the device complied, asking him to connect its hooks to the primary nodes. Scott imagined that would be the largest two, so he extended the hooks on their thin cables and attached them. The screen displayed a meter in the form of a line-graph running through the levels of power induction. The power level was negligible and even fractionally falling as the graph-line progressed along.

‘Give me diagnosis,’ Scott asked it. POWER IS DRAINING FROM ALL SECONDARY SYSTEMS, DIVERTED TO LIFE-SUPPORT AND BASIC FUNCTIONS (LISTED).

‘So it’s confirmed,’ said Lichman, ‘we are losing power and soon we’ll lose ... everything!’

Scott didn’t even respond, but instead leaned towards the console still attached to the nodes. ‘Can this secondary system be re-activated?’ he asked it.

IT WILL REQUIRE A POWER PACK ADDENDUM TO THIS UNIT’S PORT. *Power pack?* He looked at the one illustrated, then eventually found it in a side pocket.

The console did as it was asked, sending a surge to secondary systems as Lichman was poised over the ident interface. Only for a fraction of a second

but it was enough to activate the door, which pushed in and slid aside.

They both had their helmets back on. Scott got a warning that environmental systems were off-line, air in the flight deck would have been virtually unbreathable before outside air rushed in. All lights were off, only their helmet lights illuminated what remained.

Scott could feel his heart hammering, relayed to him in a red pulse-rate helmet display; it seemed to feed back in to his nervousness. And then he saw what he feared the most: the pilot. Or what was left of him. His hands were placed over a blank console, as if he was trying to control something; they were charred right to the bone. His face: blackened with a fixed look of horror. Scott's heart rate reached 160bpm.

When Lichman caught sight of the man he gasped, just as Scott had probably done, and said after a while: 'He must have suffered a massive electrical shock.'

'But how can that be? This is a state of the art ship; surely it has some kind of safeguard---'

'Please, don't ask me to explain, but I know there's been some massive overload of those controls that's basically fried him on the spot.'

Scott had to stop himself from making the obvious doom and gloom statement and instead looked about for any system that didn't look blackened. There was one separate flat console, which he slid out from its base. It even activated after he'd told it to. It displayed a menu that gave status reports for various aspects of the ship. He first selected power use levels. Last recorded reading showed a surge of a hundred times standard operating power. Navigation made no sense at all. 'According to this,' he said. 'We're over four thousand light years from Earth. At least before the nav systems overloaded.'

'That can't be right,' the doctor assured him. 'I mean, you know this vessel was never built to go that far.'

'Unless something boosted the power---'

'But we didn't even stay in warp for very long. It's just not possible.'

'Well then look at the stars. Recognise any of them?' He showed the

recorder's star map. And then he went to the visual relay, though now it was flickering as another non-essential system going off-line.

'Okay, Scott, I'll say it for us: we are truly fucked. Adrift in the middle of nowhere.'

'I'm sure Josh could not have put it better.'

'I don't imagine his will be such a calm response.'

Scott nodded. 'When the reality of this sinks in I don't think *I* will be so calm.'

'I have something in my medical kit that might help.'

*

Chief astronomer Zorandi Entola got the report just as he was about to leave his office. A spacial anomaly first appearing in the very outer edge of the Orion arm.

He watched the replay over and over again, increasing the size of the screen and magnification. Even with their most powerful telescope and digital enhancement he was barely able to determine for sure that the object was a ship. Just an elongated blob, which all but vanished, the only clue: the spacial distortion itself, massive graviton flux. It reappeared approximately four thousand light years farther out. What kind of vessel could survive such a massive force?

If it was a ship it would soon be affected by the TE wave, a mere five hundred light years away from this mysterious object. The wave itself was consuming stars and planets at a superluminal rate, like a ripple of the most acidic water over plankton, leaving worlds not entirely dead but in reality wiping tens of millions of years off their development. From such a distance the differences were not obvious: just a switch to a more primitive form of plant-life. But that object would vanish out of existence in an instant of contact with the wave. Only a year ago of local time Zorandi himself had experienced the merest fraction of a second of this phenomenon; it sent him back to his childhood. And yet he remembered nothing of encountering the wave. As far as

his current life was concerned, it never even happened; he'd just lived a fairly normal life as if it had never taken place. At the moment of the encounter his time was wiped out, reset. The only evidence had been his ship's tachyon transmission of its brief encounter.

He wanted to test a hypothesis; he knew someone who would be willing to subject himself to such a test.

For now there was the more pressing concern. He checked the departure inventory for all craft from Earth, and got an answer which only surprised him moderately. He then contacted the Central Council subcommittee for space missions, requesting to speak to Admiral Zolla II: the most senior – the oldest council member by over a century, son of the great elder Zolla, the legendary commander and time-traveller. Zolla II was bequeathed knowledge, much of which (some claimed) could never be revealed, for it could potentially undermine the very fabric of B'tari culture ... or more pertinently: The Temporal Directive. Simply, there was no greater and wiser authority to consult. At least concerning matters of space and time travel, and temporal eradication.

After five minutes of having to give preliminary explanations for the nature of the request he was put through to the admiral.

Zolla II appeared in holo-projection wearing the standard white and gold braided uniform of high office. 'Mr Entola. A matter of urgent concern I hear.' His voice seemed jovial, which surprised Zorandi somewhat. 'I already know the basics, so give me some detail.'

'Yes, Admiral. I can confirm a craft of Earth origin – stellar class – had left the atmosphere approximately twenty hours ago and can no longer be located within its designated course---'

'Therefore you surmise the discovered object must be that craft, which is precariously near the TE wave zone.'

'I understand, Admiral, that it sounds incredible, but I am certain of my finding.'

'No need to convince me, chief astronomer. I will give the sanction for a

reconnaissance team, forthwith.’

‘Thank you, admiral.’

Zolla II nodded and closed the link.

Zorandi wanted to be part of that recon team but he knew such a request would be pushing things a bit. At the very least he had done his duty, and would gain credit for his report.

But to merely be an observer wasn’t enough.

Somehow he would find a way to get to that lost ship.

The receptionist told Raiya of a distressed woman claiming to be the partner of Scott Alendry. Normally she'd never consider an impromptu visit but the plight of Scott had gained some media coverage, and refusing help would reflect badly on herself.

The woman rushed in to Raiya's office.

Raiya said, 'Please, do take a seat.' There was the more formal upright chair that associates used. 'It's Deanna, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she answered, seemingly calmer now.

They both sat either side of the desk. 'I know things must seem a bit desperate at the moment. How are you coping?' It was the obvious question. *Not very well, clearly.* But it was a way into the conversation.

'It's not true what they've been saying – the space agency. No malfunction could send them so far off that they can't even be detected.'

'Why would they lie to you, Deanna?'

'Because they don't know any more than I do what really happened.'

'What do you suspect?'

'Most people would think I'm mad for suggesting this. But something strange has happened to Scott over the last few weeks. The way he's been acting – kind of, well ... carefree, stupidly happy about his assignment. And in the bedroom ... well, he could never get enough.' She looked to the floor, perhaps embarrassed at having said too much.

'OK, so you believe something happened to Scott after he'd been given this new assignment.' Raiya recalled the last session with Scott following his accident. He hadn't really said much at all, quite defensive but in high spirits.

'Actually I can understand your concern but I cannot give you any conclusions.'

'Doctor-patient confidentiality. I understand. But there's something else: he was having these dreams about a man jumping off a mountain. He couldn't tell

me what it meant; I only got him to talk about it after he was giving this name in his sleep. Torin, I think.’

Raiya felt a sudden chill run down her spine. Do you mean Torbin?’

‘Yes, perhaps that’s it. Why – do you know him?’

‘It’s a name I’ve heard mentioned. But let me ask you: do you suspect a connection with what’s happened to the ship?’

‘I think he was involved with some strange people, connected with that original project. He wouldn’t tell me much about the latest investor, so I did some investigating, asked a few colleagues in the business, and I’m fairly sure there is something dubious about them. Sure, everything seems legit on their site, but it’s all surface: there’s no real contacts, it’s all channelled through secretarial and administrative staff; no one with any real connection. There was no way of getting through to speak to even an associate, they just fobbed me off with lame excuses.’

‘Have you reported them to the police or security agency?’

‘Of course. And they say they’re investigating, but my guess is they’ll not find anything illegal with them. I mean a lot of these corporate bodies are entitled to a degree of discretion, provided they keep within the law; freedom of the market and all that.’

‘The space agency might want to investigate them. But if you want me to give a statement regarding Scott I am willing to do so.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Dr Rengil will also, I’m sure, provide any evidence.’

Deanna’s expression fell. ‘Right now I just want him back. At least to know where he is. Is that too much to ask? Why are they not trying to locate him? It doesn’t make sense. It’s like something’s being covered up.’

‘They’ll have to do something,’ Raiya assured her. ‘The media pressure alone will force the agency to keep searching, even if they have to collaborate with Cisa.’

‘I know, doctor, they’ll be some finding eventually. Maybe they’ll find the wreck of the ship. And that’ll be it: we’re all be expected to move on with our

lives. Well, I won't move on. I won't accept it.'

'Deanna, I urge you to see Dr Rengil---'

'To give me something to calm myself down. No thank you, doctor, I would rather keep my my wits about me than be doped up.'

'I understand.' She realised she must have seemed as dismissive as the others towards Deanna, only couched in psychiatric-ese. 'Believe me, I will do everything I can to help you, to help Scott.'

'Thank you, Dr Fortenski.' Deanna got up to leave.

'Please do come back. I can arrange for you to see Dr Rengil. there's no charge, your insurance cover can be transferred for here.'

'I'll manage, but thanks,' Deanna said quietly, before walking out.

Raiya opened her console, did a general search on Scott Alendry. There were a few basic facts about the first assignment on Eludi-4; nothing revealing. Not that she really expected anything that would give an insight.

Her normal response would be to contact Len; run by him this feeling off unease, this suspicion that some conspiracy was in operation, drawing her inextricably into its web. But Leonard Heigener, her once most trusted confidant and friend, had become distant. In their last conversation he seemed his usual warm, friendly, humorous self, and yet that bond she'd once had with him had been broken. Something different about him, although any rational analysis of it eluded her. Except she knew as soon she observed: there was a darkness behind his smile, within his eyes.

Perhaps there was only one person she could rely on.

She entered Jansson's security office. He looked up from the dark suspended rectangle of his console, his face a combination of surprise and pleasure. He always seemed to relish the chance to help her, and now he must have sensed this would be something important.

'I need you to help me track down Torbin Lyndau.' Raiya said, watching as his expression soured.

'Doctor---'

'Please, do call me Raiya. I think we've known we've known each other

long enough now.’

‘Raiya.’ He said her name so carefully it was if he was trying out a new foreign word, or the name of a woman he’d only just met. ‘I don’t know if I can track him down. I don’t know if I should.’

‘But you could help me find him.’

‘I could try. But Mr Lyndau is a dangerous man. He must have some very powerful friends to be able to escape the police.’

‘That’s why it’s important I find him.’

‘But then what? I don’t understand.’

‘Nor do I entirely. But somehow he is key to what’s been happening to me, and other things that you wouldn’t even believe.’

‘I will trust whatever you tell me, Doct – Raiya.’

‘I can’t tell you any more now. I don’t even know if that will put you in danger, if I haven’t already.’

‘I’m always there for you, Raiya. You know that.’ He said her name with more certainty now.

‘I know that now.’ She’d known for a while that Jannson had feelings for her, but she’d tried to dismiss that as something that would never be taken forward.

‘I must tell you, Raiya, I am very concerned for your safety.’

‘I’m glad of that. But I’m due to leave for the day. By all means keep a track on my location – I’ll keep my comm badge active.’

‘Still, I ... I don’t think it’s safe---’

‘Then come back with me. Bring whatever monitoring equipment you need. We can work together on this.’

‘Oh, okay,’ Jannson said. Raiya could see he was trying to suppress a smile. ‘We should go in my car, it has stealth capability. It may be safer to go to my place.’

‘No, I’d rather go back to mine. You can check for any surveillance devices.’

‘Yes, of course.’

On the journey they hardly spoke. Jansson said a few words about his monitoring equipment, but she certainly sensed a tension between them.

‘Please tell me: do you think I am in danger in my own house?’

‘Possibly.’

‘If there’s anything tangible to indicate that, then I’ll leave.’

The car descended to her detached stone and wood-panelled house. The garden illuminated at their arrival. Raiya was suddenly conscious of how extravagant it must seem to someone whom she thought of as being of a fairly austere disposition, a man not given to folly.

Jansson made no comment about the interior, the turquoise and white radiance of the hallway, the subtle magenta infusing with a low-level white side bioluminances. Raiya imagined his place would be brightly illuminated, no suggestive mood lighting. She thought of upping the light levels from the usual. But why? He should see her in her natural environment where she felt the most comfortable.

‘Please, do make yourself comfortable,’ she said, as casually as possible. And told him where all the facilities were situated.

‘Thank you,’ he said, with what seemed to be a meekness to his voice.

She cooked dinner. Jansson clearly knew his choice would be not whether he stayed for dinner but what he selected to eat.

In the meantime he scanned around the place for any possible signs of surveillance. ‘Every room’s clear,’ he informed her, ‘Except, one---’

‘My bedroom, you mean?’

‘Of course, feel free.’

But as he was scanning round in her room the thought occurred to her that she hadn’t bothered to tidy up before leaving that morning in a hurry for work. She tried to remember if she’d left any underwear strewn about, as was so often the case.

Jansson emerged from her bedroom with a sheepish expression on his face. ‘All clear,’ he said simply.

‘That’s a relief,’ she said, but thinking how her bedroom wasn’t clear of some embarrassing items.

‘Not that I can say for certain we’re not being monitored, there may be remote observation drones hovering outside.’

‘Well, let them hover and observe all they like ... while we enjoy dinner.’ She motioned towards the living room.

After half a bottle of wine Jansson seemed to relax a bit more; he’d even undone the top button of his starched shirt. She offered him some old clothes from her ex that had been prepared to go off to charity, an offer she’d regretted now, judging by his uncomfortable reaction.

Raiya herself had changed into a thin blue dress: not so tight or low-cut that it gave any obvious signs; it just made her feel comfortable. The wine also helped. It was tempting to start another bottle, but about half each seemed adequate.

‘You might want to take off that shirt,’ she said to him, noticing his face had become reddened. ‘Or I could turn down the thermostat.’

‘Yes, that would be fine,’ he said hastily, not really being clear which option he preferred. ‘But I wouldn’t want you to be cold.’

‘It’s up to you, Jansson.’

Jansson took off his shirt. Raiya observed that he kept himself in shape; unusually lean for a man of his age. He never revealed his age but she thought he was probably a few years older than her – perhaps no more than late forties. It was difficult to be sure these days since gerontological treatment wasn’t uncommon, yet remained the standard option for only a minority with the disposable income. She herself had considered it, but wondered if it would make her seem vain, and not the best example to set to those of her patients who were insecure about their looks. No, better to age gracefully.

After the meal, Raiya changed the music to something more pacey but with still a sensuous ambiance, and sat on the long reclining couch. Jansson joined her without needing to be invited.

Raiya didn’t know if it was the wine affecting her mind, but she knew then

that she wanted him. She leaned towards him and they kissed. She then pushed him quite forcefully onto his back. Raiya considered inviting him to remove her dress, but already he looked stunned ... but aroused. Instead she then straddled him, pulled the dress over her head, leaving her hair untidy about her shoulders. She had nothing on except for her bra (for that sexy lift). How calculated it must all have seemed. Make the seduction easy. *Make me seem easy*, she thought.

She undid his fastenings as deftly as her half-inebriated state allowed.

She'd barely got him inside her before he climaxed. The poor man, it was all too much. The look of dismay on his face. Perhaps he'd fantasied about this moment for some time, but that it wouldn't be over for him so soon.

He looked up at her, redder faced than ever. 'I'm sorry, I couldn't help---'

'Don't worry about it. It was my fault, I shouldn't have jumped on you like that.' But the regret was seeping into her mind – that this whole thing had been a mistake. She was like some oversexed harlot. She'd orchestrated this whole evening to lead up to a seduction.

But her mind was still buzzing. Would the Raiya of ten years or even a year ago acted like this? Had something changed in her?

Torbin received a call on the official B'tari comm-link. It was from their chief astronomer, Zorandi Entola.

On his quarter's HDU display the b'tari appeared impeccably human but too young given his seniority. Torbin wondered why they didn't just appear in their true form (though some had undergone genetic re-sequencing to be more compatible with Earth's environment).

'Mr Lyndau, how are you progressing with that wormhole stabilisation?'

Torbin was surprised at the enquiry; the b'tari, he was sure, already had that capability. 'There are still problems with it,' he replied. 'My supervisor can update you with details on my progress.'

'Your supervisor would tell me nothing I could not already discover for myself.'

'Why do you need me at all? You have the tech, the knowledge---'

'But I, personally, do not have the access. Nor would I have the approval of the council: The Temporal Directive is highly restrictive regarding the development and use of wormhole technology.'

'You still adhere to that doctrine ... even unofficially?'

'I have to admit to you, Torbin, I have been somewhat out of the loop since the time of my ... encounter with the wave. Whether or not any b'tari possesses fully operational trans-space tech is not withstanding the fact that it will never be available to me.'

'They don't trust you either? Welcome to the club.'

'Yet they trust you enough to provide you with the means to develop a stable wormhole.'

'I think they are merely humouring me, Mr Entola.'

'Nevertheless, what you are doing is exploiting a loophole in the Directive. I'd be surprised if it's not eventually sanctioned by the council.'

'A wormhole that exploits a loophole. That does sound ingenious.'

‘Your wormhole is what may save the lives of that stranded ship’s crew.’

Torbin had seen the news reports like most, how it had been spun as some technical problem: the over-ambitious engineers over-juicing their FTL engines. The location was never revealed. He knew one of the passengers. That man, Scott, had been targeted like himself by the Elusivers. His ship, its technology, was what had drawn the Elusivers to the human potential for resistance to their eradication wave. How convenient that he and his ship were taken out of the picture.

‘So, that ship is way out of easy reach,’ Torbin said, ‘even for your superior FTL tech.’

‘About four thousand light years out.’

‘Woaw, that’s gotta be, what, at least seven times farther than any humans have ever travelled.’

‘A recon team can get to that ship, but by then the passengers will likely be dead.’

‘So you’re asking me to develop a wormhole to reach that ship – in what time?’

‘As soon as you possibly can. It’s a big ask, I know. But you’re the one with access to the right tech. And I can help you make it work.’

‘Of course. After all, you are a b’tari.’

‘We need to make a start now. I will send you the astronomical data.’

‘But I won’t try running before I can even walk.’

‘Excuse me.’

‘I will do everything possible to develop that wormhole.’

‘Good. Then as soon as you succeed use the contact protocol I will send you, and I will be ready to go through.’

But as the astronomer signed off an unwelcome thought popped up from the recess of his mind, something he should really have mentioned. Everything he did was under the close scrutiny of the Elusivers, he was sure. As if they would ever allow him to reach that ship. And the knowledge of their objection made him all the more determined.

No time to waste, no time to think; he had to act immediately in the hope that the Elusivers were not right on his case at this moment.

Torbin ran to an adjoining lab. It was a large warehouse type room containing every conceivable piece of technology for manipulating exotic matter, negative energy. A two metre diameter dull-silver focus ring positioned horizontally over the floor and the generator. This was the place where he had so far created a breach in space that had extended for fifty light years, and was stable for an entire two point eight picoseconds.

His most successful attempt had been worse than the best result on Mars over a century ago, with the restrictions – the lack of funds at the time. But it wasn't merely a matter of resources, or even the technical variables. Not just the science.

No, there was something not quite so definable. Torbin was reluctant to call it an art. But in that rarefied and precious time on Mars somehow he knew just when to increase the right variable, even when the data gave no clue.

He knew that even this laboratory, with its magnetic and sub-phase particle shielding, would not prevent the Elusivers from entering. Yet they had never approached him or created any disruptive effects here. Here was where he felt safest. The clinically bright illumination was also reassuring; they seemed to prefer dark environments.

Of course, his b'tari supervisor had this lab closely monitored. But at least the finer variables would not cause any concern. One thing they allowed him, that freedom to experiment.

Torbin increased the power-input level to its max, fully aware of how dangerous this unprecedented action must be. His supervisor was bound to observe closer. He had also given the astronomer access to the monitor feed. If the Elusivers were keeping tabs (and he was sure they were) this would be their time to intervene. But he rather liked the idea of them responding, drawing them out from the shadows into the observed arena.

Nonetheless he had to admit there was a certain recklessness here. Even

though the variables had been tried hundreds of times, this was the first time the new data had been factored in.

A siren warning told him to get into the control room. The excitement gripped him. It felt like the beginning of a virtuoso performance, with an august audience aware of the risk and in awe of his boldness in making this one big attempt.

In the above control room an array of fixed, curiously antiquated display screens were giving the various intermix ratios, projected stability levels coupled with the power requirements for sustaining negative energy. The negative mass string modulator was primed. He allowed the singularity to form a loop – albeit with a micron sized diameter.

He activated the questing matter director: a channel of the negatively induced particles were then dimensionally shifted and focused on the data-acquired destination point.

Pushing an even more antiquated-style lever, Torbin ramped up the power to the magnetic flux epicentre.

He didn't need to be told of the dangers. He was giving everything its full juice. If he didn't go for broke then he doubted there'd be another chance to do this; the Elusivers would see to that.

This time an audio warning. 'You are attempting to induce a maximum feed input to the magnetic relay generators,' a rather stern-sounding woman's voice said. 'Please be warned: A risk of overload is considerable.'

'A risk worth taking,' Torbin answered. But if it wasn't for that astronomer requesting ... No, he was doing this for those people on that ship. They too were victims of the Elusivers.

Already, before the power generation had reached its peak, Torbin could see the first signs of the breach in space. A rippling effect inside the event ring, becoming like a whirlpool. It had no colour, just the bending of the surrounding light.

At this point he knew his supervisor would be making his way to the control room, wondering if this pushing-the-limits experiment was the result of

another bout of mental instability. The only thing likely to be unstable, he thought to himself, was the wormhole.

Torbin now in-putted the astronomical data. The AI would factor in the previous attempts at calculating how much power to channel to project the negative energy. Not that it meant a precise projection could be made. Not that it meant that anything passing through had any chance of surviving.

At this point the logical thing to do was to send a probe, but since time was so limited he instead made the call to Zorandi Entola.

On the control room's comm Zorandi told him, 'I am just outside. Open the door.'

The astronomer entered the control room in a metallic suit, all copper plating and concertina joints like something deep-sea divers used to wear in a previous millennium. He'd obviously been nearby the whole time, preparing.

Torbin asked him, 'You are actually ready to go through?'

'I am ready,' came his speaker-relayed voice.

'You know of the temporal uncertainties, and the possibility of total collapse.'

'I am aware of those uncertainties. My suit has its own graviton shielding for such an event. At the worst outcome I will be adrift in space.'

'Okay. I accept you're prepared. But I don't know how you will be able to enter the portal zone without flooding the entire lab with magnetic energy, and thus destroying every device in this compound.'

'This suit can alter its matter and mine. I will pass through---'

'Then you'd better do so now. The wormhole should very soon be connected to those coordinates.'

Zorandi clumped towards a large section of diamond glass. His copper coloured suit appeared to ripple as if it had the fluidity of mercury. He passed through, but it seemed to take some effort. There were no fluctuations in the control room's EM level, however. Zorandi nearly toppled over, though, when he'd got into the portal zone.

The wormhole hadn't quite connected with its destination, at least

according to the AI, which told him that the negative energy levels were not sufficiently stable to create a connecting channel. It may only happen for a fraction of a second. How would Zorandi be able to jump in time?

But Zorandi approached the ring regardless. He then just lifted off under the power of his suit and hovered over the event ring.

‘Get your AI to tell me when optimum connection is established, and my suit will respond.’

‘OK’ He instructed it so.

It seemed as if Zorandi had prepared for this for some time, yet it was only two hours ago that he’d made the request. The B’tari never failed to amaze him. Torbin allowed himself the thought that perhaps there really was some hope of defeating the Elusivers.

The stern-sounding woman warned that a full systems overload was possible before reaching optimization. There was no going back now, though.

Torbin saw Zorandi disappear into the ring before he got the report that optimization had been achieved. One thing he had no idea about was how long to maintain power.

‘Systems overload imminent,’ came the voice.

The wormhole collapsed after an unprecedented two and a half minutes – for a remote connection. In his time frame Zorandi may have already passed through.

Immediately following, every electrical system cut out. He expected something even more dramatic like sparks flying. *Pushing the envelope to breaking point.* But no, this was B’tari technology.

Torbin noticed his supervisor standing next to him. ‘Now do you recognise our belief in you?’

All power in the ship was now confined to life-support. They were simply existing.

Washed in the blue back-up light, Scott sat in the communal lounge's reclining chair. He had taken his second tranquilliser pill in eight hours, and now – twenty minutes later – his fear of a slow and painful death had receded away to a safely ignorable distance. They were all resigned to an inevitable death, it seemed. But at least they could go comfortably in unconsciousness when the air finally runs out, courtesy of Doctor Lichman and his medication. Every time he closed his eyes Scott saw her: Deanna, wanting him almost as much as he wanted her. And then an instant later admonishing him for taking this assignment, when really he didn't need the money. *Did I?* He also saw her at his funeral; upset for sure, but there was already another man sidled in to offer her comfort: one of her rich clients, no doubt, moving in on a vulnerable woman. Yet he knew she'd have to get on with her life; he would want that – *surely?* ... but to just keep that flame burning for him.

Josh looked over from the adjacent chair and said bitterly, 'How does it feel to be a pioneer, Scott? Pretty fucking cool, eh?'

'Yeah, it's just that,' Scott answered wearily. 'We'll be remembered for centuries to come.' Yet his sarcastic tone didn't feel inappropriate; he had a definite inkling that their true situation would be covered up ... rather than explain how it could be that they were stranded four thousand light years from Earth.

Lichman was in a upright chair a few metres away by a coffee table. 'You're not giving up hope just yet. I'm keeping the last of the tranqs in reserve for an emergency.'

'You mean the emergency of when the air runs out ... in about, what, three hours?'

'I'm talking about if one of you two had a panic attack, thinking you're going to die.'

‘But we are, doc,’ retorted Josh. ‘We really are!’

‘Have some faith, man.’

‘Well, that’s all we have.’

Lichman looked to Scott. ‘You still got some power left in that suit pack?’

‘Err, hardly any.’

‘Then I’ll get mine. We’ll hook them all up to the sensors.’

‘But the sensors have fried.’

‘Not all of them. There’s a remote interface in the corridor.’

Scott pushed himself off the chair, feeling his balance go, not knowing if it was the failing AG or the effect of the tranqs.

The interface panel was the same one they had accessed near the flight-deck door. The hand-held console adapted as a sensor relay. Scott fumbled clumsily with the connecting wires, to the concern of Dr Lichman who seemed poised to take over.

He managed it finally. The two ailing power packs connected to the control panel, held by Lichman. The screen flickered, but it stabilised enough to give a relay feed of surrounding space. Not that it was anywhere near as good as the flight deck sensors; the over-layed text said: SPACIAL SCAN – 1-MILLION KILOMETRES.

A radar-effect line circled the screen. Then after about a minute: SPACIAL ANOMALY APROX THREE HUNDRED FIFTY KS OUT IN THE DIRECTION OF PEGASUS CONSTELLATION. CANNOT IDENTIFY.

‘What is it?’ Lichman said, peering over at the little screen.

‘Your guess is a good as mine, doc.’ Scott’s voice still slurred, and the drug-induced sleepiness was making this all seem a bit unreal.

‘Perhaps it’s our rescuers.’

Scott switched the screen to visual only and set it to relay the magnified image of the anomaly. He could see something rippling amongst the starred background, but nothing was resolving. And after a few seconds the screen went blank followed by: INTERFACE DEACTIVATED.

The power packs had finally drained of what little was left.

Scott heard irregular footsteps, and turned to see Josh running in an oddly skipping motion.

‘It’s going,’ Josh said breathlessly as he came to a juddering halt a metre from them. ‘Gravity – AG. And I think the air’s running out too. Can’t you notice?’

Lichman turned to face Scott. ‘I think he’s right. Check the console.’

It confirmed that the surrounding air was thinning at three percent a minute.

Josh shook his head. ‘This is it, man. Time to open that pill box, doctor.’

‘Not so soon. Something’s out there trying to reach us. We put on space suits and wait it out.’

‘Could be our rescuers,’ Scott said brightly.

‘Give me those damn pills.’

*

This was like nothing he had ever before experienced. He was spinning, his suit quiescent after dropping into the wormhole, not knowing if reactivating it would lead him to his death. At one end – his destination – he saw stars bowing towards him as if seeing through a lens, the other: a timer, clearly visible above the wormhole generator. Maybe this had been installed for his benefit, and that this effect had been anticipated. All the numbers were changing wildly. He could just make out the hours, the minutes were a blur.

Zorandi knew that this time-differential was normal. To the observer in the lab he had entered the event horizon in a fraction of a second, only to appear suspended in time upon entering. Negative energy surrounding him, a vacuum of dilated space-time stretching to a zero-point singularity, spun to form a ring. Not something he could see or know when he passes through it.

Now, though, Zorandi had to focus. He gave the voice command to deactivate the counter field.

Subject to the full force of the expanded singularity he shot towards the mid point. The suit’s inertial dampers were not enough to prevent him almost losing consciousness. Only as his momentum passed him through the singularity did

he regain some awareness of the stars before him.

He was already out the other end; the suit had ensured the smoothest possible transition. It relayed to him a star map showing before him the distance from the stranded ship – a mere two point four million kilometres. He deployed a relay beacon, to constantly record his transmitted position and vital signs and broadcast to him any changes in the local environment.

‘Activate eighty percent burn,’ he instructed the suit. Fifty-two mini fusion thrusters fired up, sending him surging forward like some children’s animated superhero. Without the extra load of power cells he was carrying to revive the ship his acceleration could have been a hundred gee instead of a mere ten. Still, he was due to rendezvous in less than two hours.

Yet something was causing him to drift off course, strange eddies in the surrounding space.

Then his location jumped as if he’d been caught up in one of these eddies.

‘Analyse any spacial anomalies.’ Zorandi instructed.

‘High levels of gravitational distortion. Cannot identify possible cause.’

He wondered if somehow the wormhole was still having an effect. But when he checked with the beacon, it had gone; curiously the suit had omitted to relay that to him. Did it think this was extraneous information? He knew the wormhole couldn’t be sustained for the journey back, in any case, and would have to wait it out in the ship. A ship full of humans never sounded very appealing, but out here was something exceptional.

Zorandi was having trouble keeping a steady course, his suit’s fusion units were constantly correcting deviations. At least this suit was designed for most types of gravimetric disturbances, maintained at 0.4 percent light speed.

After an endless two hours the ship was in visual range and he was rapidly decelerating.

Coming to a halt at a kilometre from the vessel he made a check with the transponder beacon, needing the reassurance that it was still functioning. But when he requested the relay signal something appeared very wrong. The delay of five minutes was worrying enough, its chronometer readings were even

more of a concern. According to the beacon twenty (Earth) days had passed since his last transmission request, and his time dilation was becoming exponentially greater. No relativistic effect could account for this kind of discrepancy. It was something he had no understanding of; his suit was certainly unable to give an explanation. He hoped the ship had been affected to the same degree – that their subjective time was only counted in days – otherwise their corpses should have been retrieved by the B'tari recon crew.

Zorandi moved very slowly towards the *Farquest*. The beacon was set now to give a constant update. In what should have taken mere seconds to relay info was now taking nearly ten minutes; the last update told him four months had passed. The effect must have been getting stronger nearer towards the ship.

Typical Earth design, he thought: all hard angles, to give the impression of solidity and robustness – reassurance that this vessel can withstand the most extreme conditions space can offer it. A false impression easily discounted with the most cursory knowledge of the cosmos.

He was so caught up in observing the ship he hadn't noticed what was happening to the constellations, until his suit told their position had shifted. When he looked, he knew exactly what this was: the watery effect shimmering over them before they vanished to reappear in the state they had been tens of millions of years earlier. The younger stars even showed signs of shifting their output spectrum to the bluer end.

Temporal erasure.

In this time frame it would be too late. He'd never make it back before the erasure spread to Sol and way beyond. All life on Earth no more advanced than primates. All of human history: how unique and fascinating it had been; the richness of its culture, its art and literature – merely wiped out in a meaninglessly short time. Was that really what these aliens wanted? Their idea of a clean slate, perhaps ... and for what?

‘What about me?’ he said in the B'tari home language. ‘Are you just hoping I will die?’

He wasn't really expecting an answer to this desperate plea for the self.

Instead he continued edging towards the ship, wondering how the passengers would react to being told they were the only humans left in existence, if they were indeed alive.

The outside hatch to the airlock could not be opened in the normal way. He tried the remote interface port – a simple gold node; his suit emitted an EM signal in an attempt to communicate with the ship's control systems and pump in enough power to activate the lock mechanism. But it came as no surprise to discover the electrical relay was fused beyond use. The hatch lock would have to be lasered through.

Even with its violet spot held still the laser failed to make any impact, as if it were no more than a presentation pointer. He felt ridiculous for being so sure of its effectiveness. Yet curious – such imperviousness – for human technology. Surely they weren't anticipating the risk of an alien invasion?

In a final act of frustration Zorandi fixed a micronuke over the hatch lock area, and then retreated by about a hundred metres.

At first he thought the explosive had failed after the timer on his suit reached zero. Then after another twenty seconds the hatch blew away, but it was like watching a slowmo replay. The temporal anomaly must be concentrated around the ship, yet his sensors were telling him nothing, as if the ship were in normal space.

He exited the outersuit – tethering it to the nearest grapple loop – leaving a standard EVA suit, allowing him to easily enter the hatch.

Once beyond the airlock, the view inside was pitch black, indicating that there was not even reserve power remaining. There was always the possibility that something, or rather one of the aliens, had infiltrated the ship and killed the passengers. Still, rather than use infrared or echo location Zorandi opted for a simple wide beam spotlight. If there was anything/anyone aboard it would surely already know of his presence, and his fate was probably sealed in any case. At least he could see the interior in stark detail.

He reached a control panel near the flight-deck door, which was already opened, told the suit to make a remote power-assisted interface. Now at least

that would gain the attention of any intruder. But Zorandi knew he was stalling, putting off the inevitable moment when he would discover the fate of the passengers.

In the meantime the interface console was telling him all systems were at zero power. Once the console gained enough charge it gave him some more detail: Last power input 219,584 hours ago. That was about twenty-five years! Time inside seem to exist in its own bubble.

I'm too late. Yet, until he saw time being unravelled, he'd clung to the vague hope – thoughts of how he would save those passengers, return to a hero's welcome.

Zorandi felt the panic rise within his stomach, becoming a bile in his throat. He desperately wanted to remove his helmet, but then he would die within seconds. His own air was due to run out in about thirty hours. It was not something he'd even thought about before. But he couldn't risk connecting his power packs at this stage.

Got to move on.

On the floor of the corridor was an EVA suit, what had clearly been the last reserve for one of the passengers. Zorandi leant down so that the full beam illuminated its bubble helmet. There was no one inside. A sharp exhalation of breath followed. Then Zorandi continued on to the main passenger deck, sweeping his light over the luxuriant chairs and couches: the epitome of human extravagance, although this was the pride of Earth's space endeavours.

Two more vacuum suits about three metres apart on the blue carpeted floor. But again neither of them were occupied.

Zorandi looked about for a few more minutes through the other rooms until he was satisfied the passengers were no longer there.

Most ships, even a moderately sized one such as this, have some kind of escape pod; yet his searches revealed no evidence of any. And even if they had escaped it seemed a futile act of survival.

Eventually, when his suit was becoming unbearably claustrophobic, he decided to connect up one of his power packs. The interface console did not

accept such high level input. Instead they had to be connected in the maintenance bay below the flight deck.

Power restored after a shaky start: bright white overhead lights came on, dazzling at first – the stark restoration of a sudden return to life. This should create enough power for not only all environmental systems but all secondary including a limited engine thrust, depending on the level of damage.

Even before he went back up to the flight deck, Zorandi got out of his suit. For the first few seconds all his fear and apprehension vanished, only relief at this sense of freedom. It was just a ritual that reminded him of some faint memory of having returned to safety.

Then logic kicked back in.

The flight deck's control panel appeared damaged beyond use, but he found a portable unit that bypassed every other interface. He considered trying to manoeuvre the ship to see if it could shake off this strange temporal field. Pointless at best, he realised. Equally, activating a distress beacon would only advertise his presence to the aliens, perhaps viewing him merely as the leftover detritus to clean up: the only sentient being to survive the wave. Yet a more sinister alternative presented itself. He was unique in having gone through temporal erasure, the only B'tari out of his time – living it twice. Surely he was of value to the Elusivers, a curiosity to be studied?

If the aliens have enough control of this ship to keep it isolated from the surrounding universe then they had control over *him*. Perhaps observing him, deciding the fate of the last remaining b'tari.

Zorandi collapsed to the ground. The standby bleeping of the portable unit taunting him.

All those efforts to prevent them, failed?

He considered the true nature of his motives. How much was it really about rescuing those humans?

‘It’s gone,’ said Scott, staring at the little screen, feeling a sudden wave of listlessness. After twenty minutes of effort to mechanically recharge the sensor grid, and for no more than about five minutes of operation, his console was telling him there was nothing.

Lichman looked at him with his intensity of concern. ‘Are you sure about what you saw?’

‘Of course I’m sure, you saw it too.’

‘I saw some kind of anomaly.’

‘Right, a disturbance in space.’

‘Let’s get out of here.’

The maintenance bay was not the most comfortable of places. Just as with the relay station Scott had to physically connect the console. Whoever designed the ship had not anticipated the possibility of such massive systems failure; normally a remote optical connection would suffice for even a high level interface. To add to matters he had to kneel down in zero gravity; his suit’s knee Gecko pads felt like strong glue, so he had to be helped up to his feet by the doctor.

As they climbed the stairs to the flight deck, the wordless silence invited the inevitable dark thoughts that Scott knew were always there, like a background radiation. The bleakness would permeate them both if he didn’t say something just as a distraction. But why put off the inevitable acknowledgement of their fate with pointless words? Maybe Josh had the right idea of simply getting Zonked out on tranquillizers. The ones he had taken had by now almost completely worn off. Then he thought about how much was left: twenty hours, perhaps; he was too afraid to check. Josh could survive perhaps a third longer using less oxygen, and at least his death from suffocation would be more tolerable. Even if they found spare supplies of oxygen their suits had only another fifty, perhaps sixty hours, before the loss of power meant they’d freeze

to death. Scott simply had to request the info and it told him, without regard to his state of mind for having known these dreadful statistics.

When they got back to the common room, Scott was feeling so tired he collapsed on the large reclining chair, the fear and despair finally giving way to melancholy. He thought about how beautiful space had once seemed: the wonder of the stellar cycles and every potential that provided for life. Now, stranded here, outer-space was a cold, empty, utterly indifferent to suffering. Yet this was no revelation, it was just an acknowledgement of what he always knew but chose to ignore. In that indifferent space the image in his mind of himself decaying inside his suit...

Scott's suit told him he'd been asleep for nearly two hours.

In the faint blue, bioluminescent light he could just see the EVA- suited form of Lichman on the other side of the room, sat on the communal couch.

Scott lifted himself up off the Velcro-like contact points of his chair, and did the awkward strides towards the doctor.

'Doc. When it gets near the time I want a heavy dose. I don't want to be conscious when it happens.'

There was no answer. Scott turned to face the doctor so his helmet's beam was striking the man through his helmet. 'Doctor Lichman. Are you all right?' But he noticed something not quite right with the man; it was clear even through the reflective surface of the bubble helmet, he was unconscious. So he told his suit to make an interface. Through the remote connection, displayed in a series of graphs showing heart and neural activity levels, it informed him that Dr Fredrick Lichman had ceased to be alive precisely eighty-four minutes ago. The graphical displays then went into further detail: a dispassionate clinical analysis from a subsentient AI, that felt no obligation to inform him. Perhaps it knew there was nothing he could do to save the Doc, or that by attempting to do so would use up vital resources that he himself needed, and by remaining asleep he was indeed conserving those resources. The cold logic of a computer. But what caused his death? It only told that all vital functions had ceased. Lichman's suit was still functioning within acceptable parameters. Scott asked

further questions; he got no answers: the interface was not adequate for any detailed medical analysis. Maybe the man had simply committed suicide, accepting of his inevitable fate; he would certainly have the knowledge to make it as painless as possible.

‘Josh,’ he whispered, as if to confirm to himself what he knew must be true. He felt the rush of panic, his helmet glass steamed up rapidly before its cool air system attended to clearing the glass.

A second suit was near an emergency evac door at the far side. Scott gasped when he noticed the suit was empty. As far as he knew there were no other EVA suits. He then interfaced with the suit. It was still active, as if it’s occupant had abandoned it in a hurry. He thought it should deactivate automatically after a certain time like a computer no longer being used. The fear at the back of his mind before he’d fallen asleep had been the steady decline of the ship’s temperature, but he wouldn’t have its doom-laden reminder on constant display. Now he requested it: minus 27.4 Celsius, and currently dropping a degree every two minutes.

The scenario leapt into Scott’s mind like a mentally downloaded movie on autoplay. He could see Josh in his last dying breaths opening the emergency evac door into an airlock, which probably didn’t function due to there being no air throughout the ship, and so the exit would open in sync. Somehow, though, he’d managed to close it, or maybe there was some spring mechanism that did this without power.

This was the reality: Dr Lichman had died and Joshua Adams had committed suicide. It was pointless trying to imagine either of their reasonings. He was simply in a hopeless situation, his fate as inevitable as everyone’s eventual demise. He could wait it out, use up the remaining oxygen in his suit, until asphyxiating.

But still, in his mind, a grim survival strategy had presented itself. Both the other suits were still active, wasting oxygen and power. He could still use them, perhaps even use their resources without having to wear them – there had to be an interface for that. He might survive for another fifty hours. There was

always the possibility of rescue. But he wondered how long he could live on liquidized rations.

Deanna.

Even the remotest chance that he would one day be reunited with her – the vaguest scintilla of hope – was enough.

He peered over at the doctor in his still-functioning suit. The man didn't look frightened, he looked serene; a drug overdose, he surmised. But why did Josh not take the same option?

Stop thinking.

Yet Scott felt an increasing nausea, and the urge to remove his helmet in spite of the awareness of how suddenly and overwhelmingly the cold airless environ would take him. It was seeing Lichman cocooned in his suit that was causing this.

He had to do it.

Scott pressed the emergency release on the side panel collar section of Lichman's suit. A warning light flashed just below. Because it was still functioning the emergency release mechanism wouldn't activate. But he knew it had to work; there were always situations when its occupant might become unconscious or suffer some unexpected mental trauma. And eventually it did release. After all, it knew there were no life signs.

Removing Lichman from the suit proved to be a harrowing task. Scott didn't recognise this corpse as being the concerned and sympathetic doctor. He'd never imagined how empty, not merely lifeless, the dead can seem. He thought it would be traumatic, at least feel like an act of callousness, to dispose of his body. But the idea of his corpse remaining in this ship was even more disturbing.

Yet as he got to the exit airlock he knew he couldn't do it. It was likely that one day the ship would be recovered; Lichman's relatives, descendants would claim back his body. It could remain on this vessel for centuries, millennia, without noticeable decay.

He left the dead man in his own quarters, then set the lock to activate,

vowelling never to go back in there.

The only thing Scott wanted to do now – the only thing he could do was to be amongst the stars. The observation dome at least gave the sense of being away from the confines of the ship.

He looked about in a faint hope of finding his home solar system, without success. Then had the idea of using the helmet's location and magnification facility. He set it to max, about 150 times, only to further be presented with an unfamiliar collection of stars. But when he moved his head round – seeing initially a dizzying blur of stars – something was picked up by the tracking optic sensors. He requested a further digital enhancement. The thing, pixellated, resolved into what the suit's computer identified as a humanoid figure. It was in some kind of spacesuit, copper in colour, with a bulky pack giving off a bright exhaust. Clear enough anyway: this was to be his rescuer.

'Oh, thank you,' he said, partly in advance to whoever was making this bold endeavour but also to his suit, which had become such a trustworthy companion. Without it Scott knew he'd have likely gone insane.

He kept the suit firmly focused on the figure, expecting to see some movement registering. But it appeared still. Perhaps it was merely an effect of the vast distances of any reference points.

'Suit. Estimate velocity of figure 1A.'

'Cannot give estimate at this time,' it answered in its androgynous voice. 'Trajectory is indeterminate.'

'Explain,' Scott said, feeling ever so slight dumb at not really understanding.

'Figure has not moved within reference frame since initial analysis.'

'I still don't understand. It surely must be moving; I can see that thing on his back giving off matter.'

'That appears to be the case,' it said. 'Yet there is no identifiable motion.'

'Can you increase resolution?'

'Not while you are standing freely.'

'Okay. You want me to be still.'

Scott retrieved a hardback chair from the ship's common room. Then positioned himself to face where he estimated the figure would be.

Once the suit was again focused on the spaceman, it said, 'Please relax your muscles and prepare for immobilisation.'

Scott complied. The suit then became rigid. It felt disconcerting at first like he had been set in concrete, but he soon forgot about that when the image of the spaceman resolved itself at 240 times optical magnification, and then the digital enhancement where he could see the distinct form of the copper suit – arms partly outstretched, and from the back unit the bright glow of fusion particles.

After seven minutes Scott's suit reported back: 'figure 1A estimated velocity is approximately 4 kilometres per hour.'

'What! You're kidding me, right?'

'That is the correct relative speed.'

'Relative?' That was a worrying word to hear in this situation.

'Do you wish an elaboration?'

Suddenly his suit was not such a welcome companion. 'I know what it means ... but ... what's causing it?'

'Unknown.'

'But he's heading towards this ship. How long do you estimate he will take.'

'At the current estimated velocity: 7.8 years.'

'Shit. I'm fucked. This is fucked.' he wanted the suit to comment, to somehow offer some solace if not a solution, but it remained silent, only releasing it's lock-hold, at least sensing that was the right thing to do now.

After only a few minutes of despair a thought in his head so pronounced he almost heard the words: *I must leave this ship.*

*

Zorandi was trapped in a prison of normal time; if he left this vessel his time would be slowed a thousand fold. Curiously it offered him protection from

incoming threats. Yet it also meant any attempt at rescue was futile: his life lived out waiting for the slow creeping advance of his rescuers, much like (he imagined) the passengers who awaited their own rescue.

No. He had to escape, but only after a last futile act of sending a distress beacon, in the remotest chance that he could be wrong in his assumptions.

It came as something of a relief to find his outer suit still tethered.

At maximum thrust Zorandi's suit calculated that he would reach the nearest B'tari outpost in forty-five thousand hours of his time; not that the suit would still have any power or life support by then. But since there was no sign of any wormhole this was the only course option: an outpost which more than likely no longer exists.

A last desperate grasp at rational positivity: a chance his kind would find him on this course.

Zorandi requested conservation mode; this could potentially extend his survival by up to fifty times, giving him at least ten thousand hours. The suit began its process of sending him asleep before cooling him to near stasis level. But as he started to drift off a warning appeared on his HUD – an unidentified object moving at a phenomenal speed.

The suit disengaged conservation mode.

But it was too late. The thing – a giant chromium arachnid – was upon him before he could react with more than a vague incipient fear. In his half sleep state Zorandi felt distanced: it was like some bizarre nightmare, the thing facing him with its legs grappling. Except for one leg, which had some kind of tiny drill device pushing into the diamond glass shielding his face. Only this wasn't any conventional drill: the glass was developing a rippling effect as if it had become a liquid.

The drill had penetrated.

His last conscious memory was of a sharp and cold sensation just below his jaw.

*

During the pre-flight briefing there was never any mention of an escape pod. Scott knew it was something that would be unconscionable – the notion they would have to use it in any event. Even from only a hundred light years away – with no other known ship with hyperspace technology – rescue was unlikely for years, certainly beyond the life support of the pod. So what would be the point of informing them about it? even to place the thought in their minds: the possibility of the ship’s failure? No. It was never even a consideration.

Yet he searched the ship for the likely places. The damaged flight deck’s control panel rendered no clue as to any escape procedure; he was sure that would be the activation point. He then descended to the engineering room, his helmet light illuminating the dead fusion injection systems. There were various control panels with screens, which were probably once illuminated interface controls, in a semicircle around a depression in the floor. He had noticed it before but hadn’t given it any thought. But now it seemed obvious to him.

The floor had a felted carpet. It was difficult to find the join; Scott had to use a sharp-ended screwdriver to separate the lowest level section. It came away in an un-sticking motion similar to his gecko boots. This revealed a black circle – a plastic infill with a recessed handle, simply a finger-sized hole, which lifted away like an old-fashioned bath plug. As it came out, the sudden release of air-pressure sent him falling backwards and then he was floating upwards until hitting an arch panel. In annoyance he pushed himself away, momentum enough to slam into the side of the recess with some pain. But at least enough of him had made contact with the floor for his suit to activate it’s static cling until he could get to his feet for his boots to do their gecko sticking thing.

Scott stood over a twistable lever. He turned it with great slow caution until he felt it clunk undone, then removed it with even greater caution. Beneath that was a simple push up lever for a hatch.

Inside was darkness. Even when he projected into it with his helmet light, there was nothing. But moving around the beam illuminated a rung of steps. The first step was not easy in zero gravity, and he had to hold tightly to the

ladder's side bars.

When Scott reached the bottom he was momentarily dazzled by the suddenly activated light. He looked round to see an interior of white and grey shapes to see what he thought must be the pod's central fusion mixer: a glass-effect cylinder containing concentric metal cylinders – in motion. Surrounding it were display panels, much like in the maintenance bay but with symbols that even without seeing from close-up appeared somehow odd: green and blue shapes swirling. It all seemed rather more sophisticated than he would have expected for an escape pod.

Just as he began approaching one of the display panels something from a corner caught his eye, it was emerging from an embedded hatch. The thing – it looked like a giant mechanical spider – scuttled towards him. He got out the way in a fraction of a second, hardly aware that he was now in artificial gravity. The spider made for the stair-rung, climbed it with its claws grappling. Once it had exited, it pushed down the hatch.

As Scott remained transfixed on the hatch area, his suit amplified the sounds of what must be the covering plug being pushed into place. It was only then he was certain – that thing was not an integral part of the ship; escaping as if it were a real trapped spider, indifferent to him.

He looked back at the cylinder, its concentric parts working in a furious motion as if at full power.

Without taking time to consider the option Scott climbed back up the ladder. He tried with as much force as he was able, but the inside lever appeared locked.

He was trapped.

'Be calm,' Scott told himself, his suit warning him of inordinately high stress levels. The suit itself was making him feel trapped so he removed the helmet, assured this environment was breathable.

If this really was an escape pod this had to be his last chance. He examined the surrounding controls; none of them made any sense: mysteriously swirling shapes, which every so often merged to form one bigger shape.

Find an interface.

But he found nothing obvious. And as a last resort he said something he would tell a vehicle: 'give me command control.' He hadn't really expected any result, so he stumbled back, just stopping himself from toppling over, as a chair formed seamlessly out of the floor. A long back recliner chair with side arms and a kind of moulded arch over the headrest.

As the only conceivable option now, Scott got out of the spacesuit and onto the chair, placing his head inside the arch like it was some scanner, slightly raised side cushions held his head; they had cold spots which he took to be metal contacts. At first he was afraid to open his eyes, until the lack of any sensory stimulation roused his curiosity.

Immediately he was in space. Around him vector-like grid patterns, lots of numbers ... but none of them changing. He had no idea how he was supposed to control this.

He pulled himself out from the chair, needing the security of his space suit once more. But when he looked around for where he remembered having left it it was no longer there. The sudden cold realisation that something, perhaps that spider bot, had returned and removed it. At this point his mind was too stressed to rationalise the logic in this. The simplest explanation being that it wanted him to remain in this place.

Scott looked around for any sign that the robot had returned, then he frantically approached one of the side control panels and started hitting it in frustration.

Eventually he returned to the chair. His eyes open this time, the image was beamed onto his retinas, the same vector pattern. He took a while to calm himself and try to focus on what it meant. The stars were tagged, the numbers clearly corresponding to their distance. He tried to determine which of those would be Sol ... but they were just numbers, and in any case what chance would he have of returning home in his lifetime?

Still: 'Give me position of Sol, and set a course; maximum thrust.'

At first he thought he'd heard the response but the words seemed to just be

in his head, like his own mental voice. *Specify Sol.*

About four light years from Proxima Centauri; main sequence, third planet Earth.

Confirmed, came the voice in his head. *Setting course.*

Scott exhaled in relief. This felt like something of an achievement even though it seemed very unlikely he would ever see Earth again.

Unlikely but not impossible

Deanna slumped back on the couch and watched as the holo projection of a news reader – sat (virtually) on the high back chair opposite – read news that was at once anticipated and expected. The young woman’s face: the perfect professional picture of solemnity. Delivery of these unwelcome words likewise measured.

‘The ship, the *Farquest*, containing the three passengers, Scott Alendry, Joshua Adams and Dr Fredrick Lichman, was believed to have had a serious engine malfunction.

‘The remains have yet to be recovered...’

Deanna ordered the projection to stop. She’d listened to updated versions of this programme all of twenty times, hoping with each new report there would be something – at least evidence that he would never be returning, rather than what amounted to no more than speculation; there was always the expert detailing how such cutting edge technology inevitably carried a risk of catastrophic failure. But then there were many questions to answer: the space agency having to face legal proceedings from the Canadian government they were contracted to. Potentially, if they were found to be wilfully negligent, they could end up being hauled before the international court. Commercially sponsored space agencies were bound by a strict code; their only defence might lay in the mission contract. But it was looking to the world that they had been inveigled by a wealthy developer to send their flagship craft on a hurried mission.

Deanna, however, would not accept Scott was dead. Not until she had evidence. And sitting here waiting was pointless. There was nothing she could get on with; work was impossible: even though she’d refused any interviews with the media, word had gotten around that she was the partner of the key architect, and now they were hounding her for insights into his life. Who could blame them really: Scott appeared to have – to have had – the perfect life. It

was indeed a good story, albeit a tragic one for the world to see. And she was expected to play the part of the grieving partner.

Except they were not going to get their story. At least not until she had got to the truth.

One advantage Deanna's new recognition had brought her was a direct line to the Canadian Independent Space Agency's official representative. She patched through using the holo interface, her ident immediately recognisable. For once she didn't care about looking unkempt in her lounging clothes; it somehow seemed fitting in her situation. The man appeared where the news reader had once been, sitting bolt upright behind a desk, in a smart suit, probably fresh from another media grilling if not a government one.

'Ah, Miss Flores,' the man said, stress evident in his voice. 'How can I be of assistance?'

'You can start by telling me what you really know.'

'I can only tell you what I have already told the By-partisan Judicial Committee: we have yet to find any trace evidence but are continuing our investigation.'

'So absolutely no progress from last time?'

'I am very sorry Miss Flores, I know this must be a very distressing time for you, but as soon as we make a significant discovery---'

'I think you're hiding something, perhaps if the truth got out it would be highly damaging to your organisation. I'm not just talking about safety issues, negligence thereof, I think there's something more to it ... someone.'

'It must be difficult to come to terms with---'

'Oh please, I don't need another sympathetic line. Just look me in the eyes and tell me there was nothing more to that ship's disappearance than you have told the BJC or the media.'

The man stared at her blankly for a while. 'There's nothing I can tell you other than we suspect the ship malfunctioned.'

'And just disintegrated? Shouldn't something have detected it – a telescope. It would have been one heck of an explosion.'

‘Perhaps we should discuss this in person. You are welcome to visit out headquarters.’

‘Perhaps I will.’ His image then vanished.

Less than a minute had passed before a visitor called. The sensor showed a man holding up some kind of plastic pass onto which the camera zoomed: WASD, agent Ebon Stanford, Western Alliance Security Directorate.

She felt at once fear and suspicion: there was something strange about that man’s appearance – the dark suit, the hat. But then she felt suspicious of many people these days. And after a couple of minutes of seeing him with that fixed expression and unwavering intense stare, she knew he was not going just walk away.

As she opened the door Deanna was taken aback by just how tall this man was. She was slightly above average height herself but hardly reaching his chest level.

‘Ma’am,’ he said. ‘You must leave this place immediately.’

She thought she was about to say something back in the two seconds before he raised the blue-glowing device.

Part V: No Way Back?

35

Raiya had never been so busy. She was now back at her desk, having been out for a half hour lunch, feeling an afternoon weariness. Her console was displaying the background record for her next patient. In recent weeks she had noticed a pattern emerge. It wasn't the usual anxieties, the troubled relationships, the feeling of inadequacy, or work-related stress.

No, many – and increasingly those who told her they would never consider seeing a psychiatrist – were talking about something deeper. In most cases never directly, but when the word *future* had occurred repeatedly or at least alluded to, ranging from: 'I don't see there being any future in my career/relationship.' To the more philosophical: 'I can't see where it's all going; every day just feels the same; I am trapped in what feels like a never ending routine like a part in a machine.' Commonly they talked (in variously troubled ways) about wanting to break out, escape from a suffocating existence. Many people over the years had expressed feelings of being trapped in their lives, but rarely in such stark terms and with such commonality. It was like the reverse effect of during a time of a world war where the collective spirit was towards survival. Instead, these were times when most people had only ever experienced a world of peace and almost global prosperity. It was still a struggle to have That Career, even though achieved in a meritocracy that brooked no barriers of social class. But only recently this egalitarian ultra democratic society was no longer keeping its citizens satisfied. It was like something, or someone, was making them feel that there should be more to their lives. She tried to think of a time in history when this collective malaise had happened, but no research into old case records brought any significant findings.

Her next patient was a member of the Interstar crew, who had been scheduled to be on a mission to Mars to work on the solar array. But since the disappearance of the architects' ship, and its passengers presumed dead, all space agencies had agreed to halt their manned programs. A Mars trip would have taken no more than a few hours, but until the space agency had concluded their investigation, all ships were grounded.

The man shambled into her office, wearing a casual top, workman jeans and a sour expression.

She invited him to take a seat. On the moment he sat down he said, 'I wouldn't normally visit a shrink, unless it's by management protocol. It's just.' His face took on a genuine pained expression.

'Yes, I remember when you visited for your post assignment debrief. You seemed to make it quite clear that you were absolutely fine. But it may come as no surprise to you to know that most express how unnecessary they find these mandatory visits. Yet, it is not so uncommon for anyone who leaves the planet for a work assignment to return with problems.'

'My problem is the *lack* of an assignment. It's my life and they've taken it away from me. I heard rumours they're going to foreclose the entire project, even that all Mars construction will cease.'

'But they'll compensate you, surely?'

'If you call a third of my salary guaranteed for only a year compensation, then yes. I can survive it. But there's no prospect of any other work.'

'This situation may only be temporary.'

'I need to be working.' He looked up at her with a desperate earnestness.

'Don't you have any hobbies?'

'These work assignments don't really leave much time for a hobby.'

'A family?'

'I'm divorced, and the kids have a new father now.'

'But you have friends.'

'Workmates. But they have families. In any case, if we meet up, conversation only turns to work; moaning about the lack of it.'

‘Do you feel you’re depressed?’ she asked gently.

‘You tell me ... you’re the shrink.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ she told him. ‘We all get a bit down from time to time. But when your thoughts---

‘I just feel, now ... what’s the point?’

Normally Raiya would know what to say, to at least make some kind of resolution statement – some spiel out of the standard text. But now she had no words to offer him, nothing that wouldn’t seem like anything other than shrink-speak, signing him off with a medication prescription.

Instead she got up, walked behind the reclined chair he was sat in and put her hands on his shoulders. She said, ‘I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.’ She got the sense that was about to cry.

As she began to give him a gentle massage he gave out a quick breath and seemed to relax down. Of course, she knew this was wrong: there should never be any physical interaction with clients or patients, at least beyond a polite hand shake, it was the most basic protocol.

He started speaking. ‘I need to be with someone, Dr Fortenski.’

Raiya swiftly removed her hands from his shoulders. But as she did so the man got up, approached her, then pulled her to him with a force so sudden it made her gasp. And before she had time for any other reaction he was kissing her – wildly, held in his grip so hard she felt more like the prey he wanted to devour than his intended lover.

She pushed him back eventually ... but he wasn’t going to be dissuaded. He undid her suit jacket, started to unbutton her blouse before ripping the rest apart. He then hiked her skirt up until the material began to tear at the seams. Holding her upper arms again in a firm grip he pushed her down onto the reclining chair; a mad intent on his face making Raiya in no doubt that she would be compliant.

Where was her internal voice, or at least some sense of rationality telling her to fight him? Instead her strength, her ability to move, had gone. Yet – though she could smell him, feel his mad ravenous eyes boring into her – there

was a curious sense of unreality to all this, even as he entered her. Was this the dissociation that those women had described? The ones that didn't even cry for *help*?

One frenzied minute later it was over. The man drew himself back. As he looked down on her, at her messed up and partially removed clothing, the expression on his face was of disgust, self-disgust ... perhaps. Raiya could no longer read him with a psychiatrist's scrutiny.

As he fastened his jeans, the man said. 'I – I didn't mean to take advantage of you. I'm sorry if I---'

'Please,' Raiya said, in not much more than a whisper. 'Just leave.'

'I'm sorry,' He repeated in a soft voice as he hastily exited.

Raiya remained on the couch, trying to process what just happened: who exactly was to blame, and how she could have stopped him. She thought of the criticisms she'd held in her mind of those women who'd let such a thing happen to them, the silent contempt that was now her shame.

One of the stipulations she'd insisted on for her office was for no monitoring equipment. Some patients were very particular about confidentiality, and it was in the spirit of her practice that this be an immutable rule. The man was clearly racked with guilt, she tried to reassure herself; surely that alone would be enough even if he was culpable.

Torbin was in trouble.

At the best of times his B'tari supervisors treated him like a child, a charge who was prone to errant behaviour. A prodigal child, perhaps; and as such was given access to the greatest ever toys, who thought he knew how to make them all work so much better than the adults.

As he sat in the darkness of his quarters he brooded over why it had all gone so disastrously wrong, how the wormhole generator could have collapsed so terminally that no effort – even after days of rebuilding – was able to recreate anything like a stable field (although he did suspect his supervisors were deliberately not making the effort to have it restored). Sure, no human (as far as he knew) was doing anything like that kind of experiment – if only for the fact they had no access to such advanced technology. And when their troubled astronomer Zorandi appeared on the scene it must have seemed like the perfect storm: the meeting of two unstable minds. The result: the B'taris' foremost astronomer lost somewhere in space – in time. The ship, however, was still there, unchanging. But from the long distance scans Zorandi had faded from view.

One thing they still allowed Torbin was a remote interface with the scanning probes, which were now very near to the region where the wormhole exit had collapsed. On a basic portable device – with its screen display that only allowed him to observe – he noticed the probe's sensors had detected a spatial field anomaly: space was being warped. What was most interesting, the warping effect increased with every kilometre nearer the ship's last known location. This feed of course was old, over forty hours now despite its phased tachyon transmission. And increasingly communication became erratic: the image losing clarity, pixellating to just noise and then resolving the surrounding star field that was now strangely distorted, similar to intense gravity waves except the graviton count was normal. No, this was something at

a more fundamental level.

The return transmissions were taking increasingly longer as the probe moved towards the ship's location. This meant only one thing: its local time was becoming dilated way beyond normal relativistic effects, just as if it were in an intense gravitational field. Except, were it produced by an object that object would have to be a billion times more massive than an average star, or an equivalent singularity. But since the probe was showing no accordant sign of acceleration towards anything, this effect did not seem to be produced from a source that could be detected. Unless ... the ship.

Zorandi must have felt a sense of destiny. The astronomer been to the edge, jumped in, jumped over metaphorically as Torbin had done literally. That feeling perhaps the same: the excitement more than the fear when the rules of reality have changed.

Torbin was not going to sleep tonight.

At 2 am EST Torbin entered the hanger. He was confronted with an array of multi-role craft: designed equally for high speed and high manoeuvrability within or out of the Earth's atmosphere, one of these vessels had superluminal capability – although his b'tari supervisor denied that such a craft was in their possession. Normally – even at this hour – his every move would be monitored. But this time he had help from someone he had come to regard as a rival – a man of unparalleled arrogance. Roidon Chanley, though, did share a common view that their B'tari overseers were too reluctant to take the necessary action, hamstrung as they were by the increasingly irrelevant doctrine of the Temporal Directive. So Roidon had become crucial in overriding their monitoring systems and providing them with false feeds. For some reason the B'tari had come to trust their other protégée. In Torbin's mind that only underlined the fact that the man was not to be trusted, that somehow he had used his devious charm to manipulate them (though privately he envied the man, especially when he told tales of his exploits with women).

Torbin knew he had little time to enact his plan. Roidon had accompanied

him into the hanger, and it was of no surprise that the man knew exactly which craft he needed to take.

Roidon pointed to the vessel that was slightly larger and darker than the rest. It still shared that egg-like shape, much the same as any human civilian vehicle ... but that was the point, although he knew B'tari vessels were able to change their shape. He guessed they were still about a hundred years in advance of humans.

‘Well,’ Roidon said, sounding like some impatient school master. ‘It’s ready for you.’

Without a word Torbin took a few stumbling steps and then jogged the final thirty metres.

‘Just put your hand on the dark circle. It will identify your DNA as being a valid operator,’ Roidon shouted as he followed Torbin.

As he was about to do so, Torbin said, ‘I’m grateful for all your help, and putting yourself at risk of punishment.’

‘Look, as far as I’m concerned it was an exercise in outwitting the B'tari. And maybe something good will indeed come of this venture. Besides, I’ll tell them it was all your idea. Now get going.’

The ship’s door opened upwards, a seamless hatch that looked surprisingly flimsy.

For an interstellar craft it was unusually small. The interior’s cockpit had only two seats, one behind the other, and barely enough room to walk around. A lot of dull silver panels encased dark view-screens. The private compartment he guessed would hardly be any bigger.

He sat on the forward-facing seat, which seemed to mould to his human form, to feel almost no sense of pressure from it as he faced the darkness from above. He had the creeping thought that Zardino, his supervisor, would somehow materialise behind him. He refused to check for the b'tari’s presence, instead placing his hands on the side rests.

It began.

Various symbols flashed before his eyes that made absolutely no sense.

Words were spoken that made equally little sense.

‘Please speak English,’ he tried.

‘English-human language identified,’ came a heavily synthesised androgynous voice.

Torbin pulled out his PDU, and said to the craft, ‘This device contains the coordinates I need to reach. Show me an interface point.’

A dark square lit up to the side of him; he pointed the PDU towards it, the info squirt took less than a second before the ship told him the data would be added. Then asked if he’d like to embark immediately.

‘Make it so,’ Torbin said with a certain relish.

Now he had to hope that Roidon’s security override was still holding, that the hanger exit would not shut before he could leave.

‘Give me visual,’ he requested.

Torbin’s heart was pounding so fast he wondered if the ship would think there was something wrong, suspect he was committing an illicit act. But it continued to taxi out of the hanger.

It asked him: ‘Which level of acceleration do you wish?’

‘The maximum,’ he said, only thinking of how his supervisor would at this moment be running towards the nearest fast ship in the hanger.

‘Prepare for eight gees acceleration in ten seconds.’ *No inertial dampers?*

He thought of rescinding his request, but before he’d come to a decision on that the ship lurched forward, and Torbin blacked out.

When he came to he was in space. The ship was speaking to him. ‘Repeat: We are about to enter MDT.’

‘MDT?’ Torbin asked groggily.

‘Meta Dimensional Transference.’

‘Like warp drive?’

‘Do not understand question.’

‘Never mind. Just proceed.’ How typical of the B’tari to have a technology so exotic and keep it entirely secret.

‘Ten seconds until activation,’ it warned.

Everything began to go very strange. The meaningless symbols within the display panels were multiplying: green shapes doubling, tripling, and the edges of the panels themselves did likewise.

Torbin was feeling sick. He had to get off the chair, but as he lifted himself something even weirder happened: there were other versions of him, repeating his action. He then staggered to what appeared to be a side bar. He thought he had put his hand around the chrome bar, but his hand just seemed to go right through it. And when he fell to what he knew to be the floor, it didn't seem to hold him. Just as if it was no longer solid, he was slipping through, the bulk of it encompassing him. Some kind of electronic circuitry. Only then did this part feel more solid like a medium compound rubber. The shock of it all actually made him forget his nausea.

After a few seconds of languishing in this base section of the ship, Torbin attempted to pull himself back up to deck level. The sensation of the material surrounding him was something he could not really describe; perhaps it was like a spongy foam of the type used in cushions. But when he had reached the top level the floor had seemed to solidify beneath him. And now the flight deck itself was no longer a confusion of multiplication. Everything seemed to have returned to normal.

‘What just happened?’

‘We have entered MDT.’

‘That’s why everything went ... strange.’

‘That was the transition phase. The ship changed to a different dimensional state but at a different rate to yourself since you are of organic matter.’

‘And now I’m in matching phase in this other dimension.’

‘Affirmative. Neither you nor this ship is encumbered by the physical matter of space.’

Torbin got back on his chair and watched the forward display of the faint blue of the stars streaking towards him.

All that research he had done in hope that one day his wormhole technology would be used to traverse space. And even though it had been, albeit many

years after he'd first envisioned it, he was now witnessing something entirely different. The notion of changing the nature of one's own physical presence in space rather than space itself seemed like a metaphysics dream, not even considered as a theoretic possibility. What was matter on a fundamental scale, just forces, vibrations? The physical stuff – the particles themselves – only made up a tiny fraction of what appeared to be solid.

Could this even be the technology that would save humanity from the temporal eradication wave? It would certainly allow them to escape the wave, perhaps find some corner of the galaxy, if not leave for another. And did the Elusivers even know about this?

A terrible thought had just struck Torbin. Within a matter of hours he could be at the location of the adrift ship. Maybe this was just the trap the Elusivers were hoping he'd fall into. They would then gain possession of the only technology that possibly threatened their plan.

Do I change course? Turn around?

Deanna always loved this time of year. Seventeen years old now, and there was still that sense of joy. Crunching down the freshly fallen snow along a path through an arch of trees, white layered branches hanging heavy as the flakes fell in abundance. Every so often the cold caresses on her nose.

What was it she'd been worrying about? Some boy? She couldn't even remember his name. College? There was always something about that study course. For some time she had wanted to specialise in art, just leave those academic subjects her parents had pressured her to stick with to advance-higher level. 'It will secure you a steady career,' her mother had said, 'so then you will never have to be dependent on a man for your security.'

But Deanna didn't care; she wanted to be an artist. And now, as she progressed along this snowy path, the way of the future became clearer.

It was curious, though, that there was nobody else around. How can no one be appreciating this wonderful snow-scape? And someone special to be at her side?

But very soon, the realisation that anyone else would somehow infect the ... what was the word? ... Purity. Snow was purifying, the whiteness cleansing away the troublesome memories. Or at the very least making them insignificant like a single flake lost amidst a million others; fine and unique in aspect but ultimately to melt away to an indifferent universe. Was this what having a true perspective was like? To appreciate that none of it truly mattered, that her experiences were nothing special but had only seemed that way because they were personal?

But something *did* matter, she realised, as she trudged on further, along a path that receded to a narrow point. The beingness. The oneness. The *nowness*.

Then her attention was drawn to a figure in the distance, heading towards her at what seemed like a frantic pace.

She could clearly see now – this man. What struck her first was that he

didn't seem adequately dressed for the cold, in only a light sports jacket.

He stopped about a metre from Deanna, and causing *her* to stop abruptly. It was then she noticed he was kinda handsome, though maybe not exactly her type, a bit too pale and European perhaps. Well, for a start he was too old, by at least ten years. The man then put up his bare hand as if in a gesture of peace, and to give himself a chance to catch his breath.

'Do you know who I am?' he asked, in an accent that was not fully Canadian. English, she thought.

'Err, no. Should I?'

'I'm Scott. We were ... together.'

'I think I'd know if we were together,' she said, refusing to explore that thought.

'Not necessarily. Your memory is not so good.'

'I think my memory is fine, thank you very much.'

'Then tell me where this is.'

'This is ... the path.' *Why had it not occurred to me?*

'The Path? You're not really here are you? This is all in your mind.'

'If that's true then you are just a figment of my imagination.'

'I am real to you in your life. But you're just a girl here; in your mind we haven't met before, won't meet for another five years.'

'Okay, for a start: I am not *just* a girl, I'm seventeen. Secondly ... *secondly*, I know this isn't a dream, dreams are not this real.'

'You're right. This is not really a dream, but you have retreated into your past because of what's happened to you.' He looked so sincere with those words that surely he wasn't trying to fool her.

'Then what is happening to me?'

'I can't explain properly. But it's to do with your memories: they are being taken from you, and you are trying to hold on – trying to fight what's being done to you. I'm your link to those memories. If you reject me now they will be gone.'

He was looking familiar to her now, but she couldn't place his name. She

said to him, ‘So you want me to ... *be* with you?’

He smiled. And Deanna felt then, knew then, that she’d known him for a long time.

He said to her, ‘Come here.’

She complied. But as they started to embrace, he was gone. Vanished in an instant. She almost stumbled. The feeling of him so fleeting and yet it was enough to leave her yearning. *Scott*. He was gone from her, a long way off, she knew, light years away, but she still had no memory of how or why.

And then...

The room at first seemed as white as the snow, until her eyes became adjusted to its clinical blue and grey lines. Deanna had been staring at the light above, the diffuse white concentric circles seemed to be pressing down on her. She was on the floor, huddled in a corner. A basic metal-framed bed was beside her, its duvet cover crumpled up at one end.

She got up, bewildered, wondered how she could have ended up in this place; not even knowing who she was. She knew her name, *Deanna*, but it had no real meaning for her.

Then a man walked in, he was looking like some kind of doctor in his white coat, yet she suddenly felt extremely vulnerable in her thin night-gown.

‘Good morning,’ the man said, ‘I am Dr Heigener. I hope you are feeling better.’

Deanna got to her feet, but felt immediately unsteady. ‘Why am I here?’ she asked.

‘I think you should sit down.’ He indicated towards the chair.

She almost collapsed onto the moulded plastic chair beside the bed; her legs just didn’t seem to have the strength to support her.

Dr Heigener took a few steps towards her, avoiding eye contact, as if sensing her apprehension, until he stopped about a metre away to finally look at her. ‘You have been out for twelve days. You must be feeling weak still.’ He paused, allowing her to speak, peering down at her with clinical dispassion. But she said nothing, so he continued. ‘This must be a very difficult time for you.

Do you remember why you are here?’

She tried to remember, but her only memory now was of the snow ... and him, the one who was a long long way from her. ‘I don’t remember,’ she said eventually.

‘You were found on the point of death – frankly – trying to commit suicide, it would seem.’

‘I can’t think ... why?’ As far as she could see there were no obvious signs.

‘It has been a traumatic time. Grief can have many different effects. Such a reaction is not uncommon.’

‘But who has died?’

‘Maybe this is not the time to discuss – you need time to recover.’

Then it occurred to her; she could see him now, if only in her mind. ‘No, he’s not dead. He’s just away from me.’

‘This is difficult, I understand.’

‘Don’t tell me he’s dead,’ she protested. ‘because I know he’s still alive.’

‘Deanna, do you remember what happened to him?’

‘He ... I don’t. But I know he’s still alive.’ *Scott*. She could see his face now, a look of reassurance.

‘It is time to let go.’

But as he said those words the memories had flooded back as if a dam had broken. ‘I shouldn’t be here,’ she said. ‘I need to get back. Gerald will need feeding.’

‘Gerald’s your cat, I know. Don’t worry, he is being looked after.’

‘Please, I must go home.’

‘When you have recovered.’

This room had unequivocally become a prison: sparse and oppressive, that man her jailer. ‘You can’t keep me here against my will.’ She almost spat out the words.

‘Legally we can. But it gives me no pleasure to enforce the law.’

She got up from the chair, in spite of how weak her legs felt. ‘I need my clothes back.’

‘Please don’t make this difficult for us.’

‘I am leaving now.’ Deanna willed her legs to take her towards the exit.

‘Nurse,’ called Heigener, who hardly raised his voice, ‘I will need some assistance.’

The nurse, a tall and well-built middle-aged woman, entered the room with a device in her hand Deanna understood to be a hypo infuser, handing it to Heigener. The woman ran towards her with a surprising athleticism.

‘Sorry to have to do this,’ Heigener said to her, as the nurse grabbed her arms and brought them with an indomitable strength behind her back. Heigener then pushed the infuser against her bare arm.

The room faded.

The B'tari craft without warning slipped back into normal space. Its scanner told him the ship was within sub-light range. Yet when Torbin asked for a visual, it told him: 'Cannot resolve an image.'

'How can that be?' he asked simply.

'Extreme gravitational lensing,' it offered.

'But it's not a singularity.'

'In a sense it is, in as much as it possesses a paradoxical state of infinite gravitational force.'

'Explain how that can be then.' *If you're so clever.*

'Unable to.'

'So the B'tari computer has been stumped.' At least he would allow himself a moment of satisfaction.

'The object that used to be the ship is now a paradoxical phenomena.' It seemed to be justifying its lack of insight.

'Then is it still the ship? – never mind, just get me there as quickly as possible.'

The B'tari ship persisted in warning him of the dangers of approaching the vessel. But now Torbin felt it was simply too late to turn back. There was nothing to turn back for; even if he was going to die on this mission (for that's what it had become) he would die for a noble cause, perhaps as their astronomer Zorandi Entola had done.

The AI insisted they approach the last few thousand kilometres at a constantly reducing speed, the gravimetric readings were now off the scale.

After another hour of frustratingly slow progress, they reached what should have been the ship. The AI told him, 'I must inform you that it is not advisable to enter into its local space.'

'Thank you for your concern. Now tell me how to activate that special suit.'

By rights, if what used to be the ship was behaving like a typical quantum

singularity then at this close range – a few kilometres away – they should be pulled into oblivion. But this was something else, something strangely self-contained. A time dilational phenomenon as a layer around an opposing force. It appeared as a gap in space, a blackness surrounded by the lensing effect so typical of a black hole. In these conditions there was no chance of linking it up with the B'tari vessel.

The suit, being of B'tari design, was considerably more sophisticated than anything he knew of. Firstly, it moulded exactly to his shape; its HUD overlay was giving him a bewildering array of information. But sensing his lack of comprehension it told him in English every precautionary measure it was taking to counter the ship's mysterious effects, as its thrusters were edging him nearer. There was a peculiar translucent white shimmering around him, like a morphogenic aura; this must be some kind of deflector field. It made him wonder if they had prepared this technology specifically for this encounter. He opted to reassure himself that that was the case.

Even at only a few metres away the ship was still a black void in space. His suit obligingly had created a grid around the vessel, but he couldn't see the outline for the hatch. He was manoeuvring around it now, and as he got even nearer the grid pattern became more detailed, until finally a highlighted rectangle emerged amid the complexity of lines. The suit's AI persisted in its warnings of severe gravimetric distortions with increasingly opaque orange waveform graphics, emanating from the dark vector of the ship.

'But you can protect me, right?' he demanded of it.

'This suit will intensify the counter field but cannot guarantee your safety if you continue on this course.'

'Fine. I'll take my chances.' But there was an uneasy feeling as he looked around at the stars. He was sure they had changed.

Unsurprisingly the hatch did not respond to any manual attempts at opening. So, with a relish that somewhat offset his apprehension, he pulled out what he knew to be a cutting laser (he tested it on a dividing bulkhead during the journey) and set it working against the seal.

He was so engrossed in trying to cut through the hatch, he mentally dismissed a warning appearing in his HUD. **Unidentified object emerged through spacial portal**, was its basic interpretation – a to-late-to-do-fuck-all-about-it analysis of the situation in any case. Torbin knew, though. He just knew. He felt foolish, a naïve child, being drawn into their trap like the proverbial fly to sticky paper.

The object had an arachnoid quality. Its two upper limbs twitched before his face (still nominally protected by the suit) as if sketching the outline of his features. It seemed to be studying him. Torbin tried communicating, he put out an all-channel comm. ‘I need to know the location of Zorandi Entola.’ He couldn’t stop his voice wavering, it would surely know of his fear.

Instead of answering, a tendril extruded towards him, telescopically, to an almost invisibly fine point. It seemed to have penetrated through the seal of his helmet. Torbin wasn’t sure if the thing had already paralysed him or if it was merely his fear, as the wire moved upwards. He could feel the tip questing about for some easy entry point, settling finally on the area just below his left eye. It pierced his flesh quickly enough that he didn’t feel any appreciable pain – just like a syringe. A cold numbing sensation followed, then he felt drowsy. But the relief of unconsciousness did not come. Instead, he was seeing events from his past. Memories of his recent work, his diaries, and the people he had met. Then the Elusivers: imperious and omnipotent to his younger self, but not without benevolence, showing him what was intended to represent the sum total of human experience. First the joy of love, of sex. And for a time there was nothing else that mattered. It was everything. The less tangible pleasures also: a oneness with life itself; nothing more than the carefree enjoyment of a summer garden, a scented breeze, and music so sublime it seemed to transcend any human art-form. Simple serenity. An innocence free from bitter memories. Then the beautiful melancholy of a cliff-faced beach just after an October sunset; as if this is how life should conclude. The Elusivers had shown him things only ever before hinted at – always tantalisingly beyond his grasp.

Except on some intuitive level he became aware that none of it was real;

more like a dream or artificial reality.

But then there was the suffering ... oh, the suffering; maybe that was like real life – him vicariously the war victim with a limb blown off, the disorientation and tear-inducing pain. And yet still room for the fear of what might follow. Even now, preternaturally vivid like a PTSD memory.

Finally, when he had resolved in his mind that he wanted to die – that he wanted to feel nothing ever again – the memory faded. She was there, the suffering banished once more to its hidden recess. Raiya was talking to him: kindly and understandingly – and more than just as a psychiatrist. Then, as it all became more real again, the one he had missed more than any: Emelda. In a movie-like switch of scene they were making love. But just when he began to believe this was truly real, she started fading – her touch, her scent until there was nothing.

Blackness.

Roidon sat at the compound's conference table facing Central Council members: his supervisor and two elders. They were in full earnest mode with the plain white suits and that stilted formal manner of speaking. They seem to otherwise look perfectly human, and he still wasn't sure if this was through genetic alteration or their ability at mental projection. He suspected the former since they would surely not make the effort for him, as if he'd be unsettled by their true appearance in any event.

'The council has decided by a majority to suspend research into countering temporal eradication,' said the oldest of the two elders.

'*Suspend*,' said Roidon, almost jumping out from his seat but suppressing the urge just in time. 'Is this an admission of defeat? In B'tari speak surely that means you've given up.'

'Not, quite,' the younger of the elders said. 'It is merely to reconsider our strategy.'

'I know what this is about: you've lost two members of the research team, their knowledge will be extracted by the Elusivers, so now they will develop a counter measure to everything we've done.'

'You make a fair point, Roidon Chanley,' said the eldest, evenly.

'Well, try this point on for size: You – the council – anticipated that would happen. I mean, it's not as if these aliens don't know exactly what we're doing anyway. So I think you made it easy for ... well, certainly Torbin Lyndau to take your new tech ship to exactly where the Elusivers would be able to trap him. And then – I'm guessing now, but I know how you lot think – he will be taken but with something special for the Elusivers, something that will harm them, or disadvantage them at least.'

'Interesting deduction. However, the aliens we face would not allow any B'tari technology to go unscrutinised. They would sooner destroy it than let it enter their domain.'

‘Nevertheless Torbin was meant to go to that human ship, and it certainly wasn’t to recover its dead crew.’

‘You are free to speculate, Mr Chanley. Do not expect us to comment any further, however.’

Roidon’s supervisor then spoke. ‘Roidon, we have a new mission for you. There is a group calling themselves “The Transcenders”. They believe the way to circumvent what they see as the impending doom is through death itself.’

Roidon sighed loudly. ‘You actually want me to infiltrate a *cult*?’

‘Is that such an unreasonable request?’

‘There’s always going to be some suicide cult, but by definition it’s not going to impact the wider population.’

‘I believe you may be wrong about that. Their influence appears to be spreading.’

‘And I thought the impending doom was supposed to be a closely guarded secret.’

‘We all believed that. Nothing has been revealed in the media. Perhaps this group’s leader has some special insight. We can only speculate.’

‘---Until I discover the truth. Well, I’ll admit I’m intrigued.’

As Roidon walked out of the conference room he wondered whether this latest mission he’d been given as something to keep him occupied and out of trouble. Still, there was something about a cult leader that stirred his interest ... and maybe a few of its members would stir something else in him.

*

Raiya packed her small flat console into her side pocket and looked around the office for what might be the final time. This pale beige and white cedar-wood paneled room represented the last twelve years of her life. Even only a few weeks ago she imagined remaining here, consulting, researching, for at least another twelve years. But so much had happened in that time – to her, to the world, that no longer could even another day be contemplated. Her work here, it was everything. Perhaps that had been the problem for some time – too much

involvement. Now, all her work, every case file, would have to remain at the institute. A new life awaited her. A research project commissioned by the Canadian government into the emerging religious sect, The Transcenders; studying their media-net output, the testimonies of those who had been rescued from their clutches. By what seemed like some curious twist of fate (and not without a certain logic behind it) she'd be working with her old colleague Leonard Heigener – a prospect that up until a few months ago she would have welcomed as more than just the acceptable option, in any context. Now she imagined feeling only slightly less uncomfortable than remaining here. Even the pay would be considerably lower, but this was the perfect opportunity for a fresh start.

At 1.15 her faithful security manager Jansson was still on his lunch break. He normally only took half an hour, forty-five minutes at the most. To walk out now for the final time seemed cowardly, but balancing that with the awkwardness of saying goodbye – the difficult exchange of inadequate words to salvage any kind of friendship. No, perhaps it was better for the both of them if she slunk out now. At least there was the excuse of her appointment to see Dr Heigener to discuss the preliminaries of their new project.

As she entered the parking bay, Raiya imagined this would be the time for something bad to happen, when only AI systems were monitoring. But instead she'd got in her car with not a sound or movement around her. And even that felt wrong: how could it be so easy to leave for the final time?

Her car told her there was an audio message from Heigener. He said: 'Hi, Raiya. I guess you're on your way as you hear this. Listen, I'm going to be a bit delayed, possibly half an hour – problem with a patient – but keep on your way. Just make yourself at home when you get here. Message end.'

She thought about replying but maybe it was best not to interrupt him. *A problem patient ... old times!*

The Minnesota institute still looked as rustic as she remembered, with its farmhouse appeal surrounded by a generous floral display against a lush backdrop. But as her car descended troubled thoughts rose to the surface.

Committing to this project had seemed like such a logical choice, there was no way she could have stayed at the institute. But now something about this place was making her heart race. It was fear, foreboding. Yet she had been here several times; this was the first negative reaction.

As she walked towards the entrance the feeling didn't get any better. And waiting there as the security scanned her, it got worse: she was perspiring, even though it wasn't particularly warm.

The door opened after what seemed like half a minute, and the receptionist's voice: 'Please come in, Dr Fortenski. Sorry for the slight delay,' No explanation, she noted.

At the reception desk the young woman told Raiya her new office was ready, and said, 'Dr Heigener will be ready to see you shortly.' Again a lack of anything specific, as if she was just another patient. But she didn't question.

Raiya's office door opened almost immediately, recognising her features she surmised, without the need for an extensive scan. It seemed just as well equipped as her last one but about half the size – she would not be consulting patients here, though the reclinable chair was a nice touch, and even a discreet sound-system.

But that irrational feeling of fear remained.

She activated the soundsystem, allowing it to randomly select the music. It chose Schubert – no doubt something Leonard would like, and it would do for background. Meanwhile she activated her office console, text floated up: **Welcome, Dr Fortenski. I am your personal electronic assistant.** It then presented her with the standard icon menu functions to be plucked out of the air. But she still preferred the simplicity of voice commands. 'Give me Transenders: overview case file .

<Transenders info: Founded by Parmayan Radandich (no background record exists for this name, suggesting it to be a pseudonym). He still officially directs the group's activities, but only makes brief appearances at monthly meetings [according to a former member, see: case-file Colletson, Michael 205]

Transcenders core belief system consists of the following:

a) The world is faced with an imminent disaster, certain to wipe all human existence from the planet, the nature of which will be revealed on the day when the “Bortati” descend to earth to impart their wisdom.

b) Certain “chosen” members of the group will ascend with the alien “Bortati” and thus be saved from destruction. Those who do not qualify [for reasons not yet known] are offered the chance to ascend in a non-physical way to join their alien saviors in the spiritual realm (methods of suicide were not specified).

c) All other non-members are destined to be eradicated, not only from existence but from all memory.

See analysis files for more insight.>

The music, that she'd been barely aware of, stopped for Dr Heigener's voice. She was surprised to see him standing there, without having heard him enter the room. 'Raiya. Sorry to have kept you waiting.' he said, looking slightly flustered. 'Hope you made yourself comfortable.' Noticeably, he had put on weight in these last few weeks.

'Don't be,' she said. 'I've been able to familiarise myself with our new research subject.'

'Yeah, there's nothing as diverting from the day-to-day patient list than a good pseudo-religious cult.'

'This is my full time job now, remember – no more consultations for me, Len.'

Heigener smiled and nodded as if he'd suddenly remembered. 'Things got complicated, I understand – one too many wackos.'

'You could say that.'

'Well, at least you'll be able to study them from a certain distance.' He tapped her desk.

'So they've been gaining some attention from on high?'

'They've certainly got the government's attention. The board have decided

this group could potentially be dangerous. They're getting stuff out in the media, and it's spreading through the net like wild fire.'

'I'm still curious as to why they are being taken so seriously. I mean, there's been various doomsday cults following similar belief structures, that simply got dismissed.'

'Well, Raiya, that's the reason you're here.'

'Only the best qualified, then.'

'Indubitably!'

If there was one tangibly positive thing Roidon had gained from this assignment it had to be this car. A top speed of Mach 7.8, acceleration that almost knocked him unconscious. In theory he could go anywhere, but in reality he knew the B'tari were monitoring his every move. This time there would be no deviating from the plan. At least not for the first stage.

His destination was Nevada, in a valley below mount Jefferson. Predictably the location was somewhere isolated from the mainstay of civilisation, like a combined cliché of all those survivalist and religious cults from centuries past, Roidon mused.

As he stepped from the car the heat hit him. The almost totally still air made it feel all the more oppressive. Even after the worst effects of global warming had been reduced, places like this could still manage 45 degrees C in mid-summer. Now, in early May, at six pm, the temperature was 32 Celsius and dropping only fractionally.

Of course, there was no question of touching down near their compound, so he walked the three kilometres – what was deemed a safe distance. The car, in any case, would make itself scarce in whatever area it thought to be inconspicuous.

The various scans confirmed to his retinal projecting PDU that he was within visual range. The compound was a series of cabins surrounding a larger metal building. Hardly inconspicuous, but then there was nothing illegal to their existence, their practices, at least what they made openly available to the media. In fact, they were openly advertising for more recruits. The US and Canadian governments viewed this as defiant of what was considered these days to be the cultural norms of a settled and contented (mostly) society. There was something about this group, Roidon thought, to be admired: they were not taking the line of conformity, and those in governance were bewildered (if the media interviews of officials were anything to go by) at such defiance. Yes,

he'd seen this before, centuries back, although this time the cause was not so clear. This group's motivations could be explained. But how they knew – or even had an inkling – of what was to come ... he would find out.

As far as he could see, there was no security: no fences, no protection fields that his scanner could detect. The whole complex looked like it had been built a few centuries back. At the front of the metal building amid two adjacent tinted windows there was a basic door, a simple intercom button at the side, instructions for any new arrival to press the button and speak into it.

It wasn't like Roidon to experience nerves. After all, he'd been in some life-threatening situations, had risked capture by a deadly regime by putting himself up in front of a rebel group as their guest speaker. Yet something felt very wrong here, a feeling that even the most astute logic could not inform. His mind was telling him it should not be this easy, that he was about to walk into some kind of trap.

He pressed the button. A young woman answered. 'Yes. How can I help you?' came her tentative voice through a tiny speaker.

'Hello, my name is Ebulen Chander, and I am here to become a Transcender.'

'Oh. I see.' Unsurprisingly, she didn't sound convinced.

'I tried to contact Parmayan. I've been sending messages but have had no reply.' And to *that* he got no reply.

For about two minutes Roidon waited, his thoughts playing games of doubt and, yes, apprehension. Then the door opened with such a flourish it made him stumble back. Roidon didn't notice much about the man standing before him, all he really observed was the gun – it's threatening aim and its tapered rectangular design.

But as he wondered whether he'd truly miscalculated and that actually death was imminent, his world became a watery morass of pain. Even after a few seconds, death would have been welcome. After all, he'd done death before, come back with no knowledge or at least memory of it. No big deal for him, not with the B'tari as his benefactors.

Except he remained conscious. It wasn't possible to identify who it was now carrying him along. There were two of them now supporting him either side. His legs had virtually no strength, feet being dragged along like lifeless clumps of bone and flesh. It was as if all his body had been rendered useless, an encumbrance.

Eventually, in a brightly lit room, he was put down onto a hard-back chair. A face he was having trouble focusing on peered down at him, then looked away to one of his assistants.

‘You say he had no weapons, but did you do the full scan.’

‘We did a level two. If he's carrying anything it would be subdermal. But as far as we can tell, he's clean.’

‘I have my suspicions about this one. No one just appears out of the dessert.’ The man then looked to Roidon. ‘What is your name – your *real* name?’

‘Ebulen Chan---’

‘No, your *real* name.’

‘Roidon Chanley.’

‘Why are you here, Roidon?’

‘I'm here to find the truth.’

‘I'll tell you why you are here, Roidon, you are here to spy on us for the authorities.’

‘Authorities?’

‘I know a government agent when I see one.’

‘No sir, you are mistaken. I have no affiliation with any government.’

The man hit him. The pain was not as bad as Roidon expected; whatever weapon before stung him had perhaps overloaded his pain receptors. The man continued: ‘We will soon find out who you are when we perform a deep level memory trawl. I cannot guarantee it won't do permanent damage. But since you seem intent on lying---’

‘I represent the beings you know of as the Bortati.’ Roidon could now clearly see the man in front of him – someone not as imposing as had first

seemed, perhaps rather short and slightly built ... and – from the objective criteria – bordering on ugly.

The man said, ‘Why should I accept your word?’

‘If you scanned my DNA you would know I am not registered on any database. Furthermore, you will also see that I am no older than two years.’

The man facing him gave a look that suggested he had a bad odour under his nose, but eventually nodded his head and said, ‘Very well, Mister Chanley.’ He then turned to his assistant who, needing no instruction, went off and returned with a small plastic cylinder he handed to his boss.

Roidon felt this the time to slip in the question: ‘Are you their leader Parmayan Redandich?’

‘Who I am does not concern you,’ he said as he took the swab out of it’s casing. ‘Now open wide.’

It seemed a curiously old fashioned way to take a DNA sample, but Roidon complied nevertheless.

The assistant returned with a palm-sized PDU and handed it over to his boss – the man Roidon was sure must be Parmayan Redandich. Parmayan studied the screen for what seemed like a minute, making the occasional sound of surprise. And then: ‘Interesting. I am tempted to suggest that this computer is giving me a false reading. The only alternative is that you are indeed telling the truth. In which case, tell me why they created you. Are you a clone?’

‘I am a recreation of a former incarnation.’

‘It gets better!’ the man remarked.

‘I can understand your scepticism, even in the face of the evidence. Therefore I don’t expect you to believe me when I tell you that I am on a mission to prevent what is considered to be inevitable.’

Parmayan nodded and smiled, not so much out of comprehension as an ironic incredulity. ‘Sent by the Bortati, here to rescue us all,’ he mused.

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘Alternatively, you could be working for their enemy, the Anihilists – those who believe all humans should be erased from time.’

‘No. We share a common enemy.’

Perhaps this group was being led by someone acting truly independently. But a man only in possession of some of the facts was all the more dangerous for his lack of a complete picture. The desire for self aggrandisement, while perfectly logical, gave fuel to an already raging fire.

‘You know some of what is true,’ Roidon continued, ‘but not all you have been told will come to pass.’

The man Roidon suspected to be Parmayan shook his head and produced his stun gun, shooting Roidon with a pulse right between the eyes.

Torbin's first sight upon awakening was brilliant whiteness. Then he saw shapes moving, dark figures looming over him. His eyes would not adjust to their forms to resolve into anything he could identify as either human or alien.

At first Torbin had not been aware of any physical sensation, but then he realised he was recumbent, and that some kind of metal frame held his head; yet that wasn't what was preventing him from any movement. He was paralysed. They were doing something to him; one of the dark figures held a sharp implement – moving it slowly towards his head. The top – his *brain*.

He felt no pain, but now strange shapes were flashing before his eyes: purple blobs, green dots, then orange streaks. This stopped when the creature pulled the implement away. The creature then appeared to consult with a colleague. Though Torbin knew they were communicating, he heard nothing. In fact, there hadn't been a single sound since he woke.

Both the creatures then turned away. It was difficult to see in periphery, but they were only out of his sight for a few seconds before returning. The one in front darted towards him at an alarming rate. The device in its hand extruded a filament like some ancient exposed lightbulb. The filament glowed blue-white. Still, Torbin felt nothing when the creature lowered it to below his line of sight – his chin. Torbin thought of protesting this time, expressing his disgust that he, someone so important to their connection with humanity, should be treated in this degrading way. The fear itself hadn't really kicked in until this moment. Not before the room swung with nauseating rapidity. Not fully before he caught a view of his headless body, as one of the creatures appeared to be cauterising the cut artery spurting blood from his neck. He realised the same was being done to the part connected to his head, as his view jerked about. And now there was a definite sensation of heat. It also occurred to him that the metal frame was still attached. Perhaps a part of the machinery keeping him conscious. Surely without that he would not be so aware of it all.

The jerky view continued, with glimpses of machinery – an articulated arm with a precision tool extending. Torbin was carried into a pale blue lit room. He caught a brief glimpse of a translucent box containing a pink-orange liquid, taken nearer towards it. It was for him, he knew.

But instead of immersing his head in the tank, he was placed down on a near-by metal table, reminding him of a work bench. One creature, clad in a white jump suit, was holding something similar to a laser pen – its end glowing violet, directed above his eye line. No pain; they had somehow shut off his nerves, though his vision was blurring. Then ... nothing, until---

Immersed now into his new environment. But he wasn't to be left there. Torbin had trouble seeing any detail through the liquid, though he could see enough to know this was a hanger. The space craft gave it away. A silver ovoid looming larger. A portal opening, a stepped ramp forming under. And he was taken aboard.

Then it all became a confused mess of shapes and colours, much like before.

When the chaos ceased, Torbin had a clear view of space, and overlaid symbols and grids denoting sectors and individual stars. *A new interface?* Surely, he thought, everything he'd experienced in the last hour had been a dream, that all the time he'd been on a set course in the B'tari ship. To where?

The stars didn't look familiar, but maybe he'd just forgotten. He was travelling, it seemed, fast but at sublight speed – the symbols were moving, the forward stars blue-shifted. And if he were heading towards the Elusiver's domain ... *The keepers' domain?*

'Computer. Where am I heading?' There was something strange about his voice: it seemed to have no vocal resonance – no sense of it coming from his mouth; like a thought.

'Towards Cygnus-X1,' the synth androgynous voice said.

'Are you taking me towards a black hole?' His calm tone belying the panic bubbling beneath.

'That is correct – a course locked on to the singularity.'

‘Why?’

‘Because that is how you’d prefer to die, given certain options.’ It was true, he even once said it to a colleague – just to experience what it would be like; much better than a slow decline into old age senility.

‘How could you know that?’

‘Your mind is fully connected. Your imminent death will be by this preferred method.’

‘Computer. Disconnect me. Immediately!’

‘Not possible. You are now integrated.’

‘So it wasn’t a dream,’ Torbin thought out loud. ‘I’m just a disembodied brain.’

‘Affirmative. You no longer require a body.’

Torbin was desperately searching for some escape plan. He wondered if his destination would be affected by the temporal eradication wave. Given Elusiver technology the ship would be protected. Surely they wouldn’t waste a whole ship to a black hole. Did the Elusivers really have any regard for him? Or was this some twisted experiment?

‘Why? Why didn’t they just kill me?’

‘That question is beyond my remit.’

‘Of course it is. Then tell me: how long till we reach it?’

‘Approximately eighty-four hours.’

‘And what do I do in that time?’

‘You contemplate death.’

‘Will I dream?’

‘Yes. We will dream together.’

*

In her office, Raiya was studying the ever-expanding datanet coverage of The Trancenders, the various conspiracy theories. The most interesting one contained some supposed evidence of their allegiance with an advanced group of aliens – the ‘Bortati’ (the name sounded strangely familiar). A low

resolution photograph taken from a mountain eight kilometres away – which the observer claimed was the nearest safe distance – allegedly showed a reptilian yet humanoid creature speaking with the leader Parmayan Redandich. Typically there was no corroborative evidence, though maybe it lent weight to the theory that their saviour really did exist, rather than used as a device by the leader for the subjugation of his followers.

Raiya was distracted from her musings by a call from the receptionist. She said, ‘There is a man outside who says his name is Torbin Lyndau; says he has some important information for you. However, his scan produces nothing on file. Shall I have him removed from the premises?’

That name made her heart race. She remembered him, the man who visited her with ‘evidence’ – a diary – of his encounters with a supreme alien race. Then his arrest and subsequent disappearance. She had to think for a while. Was he dangerous? Possibly. But what could he get away with if he was being monitored?

‘Let him through. But I want him monitored.’

The knock on her door was insistent, impatient.

‘Come in.’ she said.

He looked thinner than she remembered, his hair was cut neatly. She recalled before the wild-eyed look of desperation in his face – the man with too many dark experiences. Now, he looked calm.

‘Doctor Fortenski,’ he said. ‘You may not believe me, but what I am about to do is necessary for the safety of this planet.’

Raiya got up from her chair, her heart thumping, adrenalin coursing – doubtless in futile preparation. What did she need, in counter? She tried to call out as he lifted his hand. He held something similar to a key fob. But it must have been the moment he was about to use it that the door behind opened. Leonard Heigener shouted: ‘Drop it! That thing in your hand.’

Torbin turned, pointed the device at Heigener. ‘Don’t come any nearer,’ he warned.

‘Okay. If it’s a weapon I don’t know how you got it past security. But if

you use it you will not get far – your every move is being monitored.’

‘I am not the dangerous one here. I’m not the one who is meddling in affairs about which I have no proper comprehension.’ His way of speaking sounded curiously familiar to Raiya.

‘I really do not know what you’re talking about,’ said Heigener, ‘but I am prepared to listen to you at a later time – if you make an appointment.’

Torbin moved towards him. ‘Out of my way.’

Without a word Heigener complied, and watched as the man stormed off. Heigener turned back to Raiya, and commented: ‘That man is seriously unhinged, but he would make an interesting patient.’

‘You’re welcome to have him as a patient. Just keep him *the hell* away from me.’

‘He is the man who claims to know you. It is curious, though, his belief he has some connection.’

‘There was something about him – a kind of familiarity. But he reminded me of someone else. What he said about meddling in affairs...’ She thought about the tall sinister man. ‘I wonder if someone got to him. Brainwashed him.’

‘Raiya, you’ve been spending too much time on the net. The only brainwashing is done by the Transcenders. Let’s just worry about some paranoid delusional with *influence*.’

‘Sure, on the face of it Parmayan is the real danger. But I wonder if Torbin recognises that more deeply than we do.’

‘Then all *we* can do is keep digging for the evidence.’

Roidon woke to see the stars; as clear as pinpoints, in blues, yellows and oranges amidst the swathe of the milky way. It was wondrous for a few seconds – untrammelled, pure – until he began to notice the cold, until the memory seeped back. He'd been in the compound, he was shot by that loathsome stun-gun. And then ... he was here, in the deadening cold night. Even with all the evidence he'd presented to them about his utter specialness, he was still to be accepted, still to prove he was not some spy, or (and this was more likely to be their thinking) a threat to their leader. He wasn't even sure he'd actually met the man yet, such was the level of secrecy.

It took a few moments before he realised that the tiny vibration in his head was his comm-link; neurally implanted – deep enough to escape most scans. It was the b'tari Zardino. 'Can you hear me, and can you respond?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'We need you to return to base. There is a crisis.'

'What crisis?' He couldn't imagine how the b'tari could let things get out of control after all that had happened.

'Torbin Lyndau has returned. He's been trying to destroy vital equipment, and says if you do not return he will destroy the base after killing everyone in it.'

He had further questions pressing at his mind, but instead said, 'I'm on my way.'

He ran as fast as his listless legs would take him for a couple of kilometres – a safe distance from the compound – before calling the car. The airborne vehicle materialised just as it landed a metre in front of him.

At maximum speed the journey back took no longer than five minutes. Roidon had never really trusted zero-inertia systems, but in this instance he made use of it – it kept him conscious during a fifteen gee acceleration. If it wasn't for the B'taris' magnificent tech he was sure he'd have abandoned them

at the first opportunity. And now, here he was running errands like an apprentice employee who'd just been given some real responsibility ... and a true sense of purpose. The Roidon of two centuries ago would have been truly disgusted with the current regeneration.

Inside the base hanger an alarm was sounding. It seemed Torbin had really got to work on his destructive spree.

As soon as the hanger had closed, Zardino bust through, and ran towards the craft. He was carrying some kind of weapon. No sooner did Roidon step out than the b'tari was foisting the weapon on him. 'I have programmed it to accept your indent,' Zardino said, slightly breathless, 'but it can only be used to stun.' Roidon thought of someone he'd like to use a stun-gun on, but for now he'd have to defer his anger.

'So Torbin is armed and dangerous. Go figure that!'

'I wish I could,' came Zardino's response. 'All I can say is: someone has given him a weapon that it is extremely effective, and undetectable.'

'Can't you lock him down, contain him in one room?'

'Too late. He's in the *control* room. We thought we could reason with him. We hope that you can.'

'Your optimism will be your people's downfall,' Roidon remarked, following Zardino as the B'tari walked towards the main compound.

Torbin was still in the control room, where he had access to the B'taris' apparently most advanced equipment. Now Torbin, who'd been entrusted with the various access codes, was attempting to generate another wormhole. The telemetry, displayed in the outside observation room, showed that all the power was ramped up to the max – every systems feed. He was clearly trying to create an overload. But somehow he had circumvented the safety cut-offs.

Roidon watched this act of madness with fascination. Zardino: standing next to him, revealed an uncharacteristic expression of horror. If only briefly, before saying in his usual calm tones: 'You've got to go in there. He wanted to speak to you, after all.'

'I expect he wants to kill me. Still, perhaps it's my time to be a hero.'

Zardino looked at him blankly.

Without another word, Roidon shouldered the gun, entered the control room. Torbin, from his hunched position over the controls, swiveled round immediately, glared at Roidon ... but then smiled, in an unsurprisingly manic way.

‘I imagine you came here against your better judgement,’ Torbin said.

‘Does that matter to you, Torbin?’

‘What matters is that you are here to witness the destruction of the B’tari base---’

‘With all of us in it?’

‘I guess that’s a problem for you.’ Torbin broke off momentarily from the console desk, gave Roidon a sly look.

‘I can tell you, Torbin, I have died once already, and being dead is no fun. But I can understand the need to die in such intense circumstances. Better than the usual slow decline.’

‘Yes, I know all about your past, Roidon. About who – what you used to be. What you created, what you destroyed.’

‘*Someone’s* been doing their homework ... or been talking to the right aliens. Or the wrong ones, from my perspective. How did your encounter with the Elusivers go, by the way?’ Roidon imagined Torbin had failed in his original quest, and the Elusivers had detained him.

‘They made me realise what truly matters.’

Along with the klaxon, red graphics were flashing all about the place. It was only a matter of minutes – perhaps one, perhaps three – before the lab exploded, taking a hundred square kilometres with it.

‘Better tell me quickly, then, while you can.’

‘It’s simple: the eradication of all sentient life – the purification of the galaxy.’

‘And then what?’

‘And then the experiment will start again. But to be done more carefully.’

‘The trouble with insanity is that you are never aware of it before it’s too

late. Unfortunately there isn't time to make you realise.' He took the gun off his shoulder, pointed it at Torbin.

Torbin shook his head. 'If you shoot me it will make no difference. This process is irreversible – I have fused the shut-down circuitry.'

'Nevertheless---' Roidon fired the gun, just as Torbin was about to point his thumb-sized weapon in response. Torbin collapsed in an electrically-induced paralysis. Roidon couldn't help but feel a moment of empathy for the man – being stunned was not at all pleasant.

Zardino burst into the control room. 'We need to leave. Right now.' His voice matter-of-fact.

In the hanger, all the base's B'tari – the human and reptilian-looking – were rushing towards various craft. Roidon instinctively made for the one he had previously used. There were two others already in it, but they didn't try to reject him, there wasn't time. An extra seat formed at the back. It was less than comfortable but in the grip of adrenalin he cared only about the basic need to survive.

A large viewscreen had formed, encompassing the front of the craft. It showed the base receding, but he was sure they were travelling forwards and this was a rear view. But there was not the huge explosion he'd been expecting. Instead the hillside imploded, and when it blew outwards everything appeared to be contained within a dome – a containment field. It seemed the B'tari had been prepared for this eventuality.

They continued to ascend until reaching space.

'What are we headed for?' Roidon asked the human-looking b'tari in front.

'The mother ship,' he answered in perfect English.

Torbin now had a view of the ship's interior. Not that there was anything much to see, just grey and white panels and rivets, not even any flashing symbols. At least for now this was preferable to the sense of being in space, watching himself approach his ultimate end point – the black hole.

But something disturbed him. A shadow out of the corner of his still-attached eyes. And then he saw the creature. It was hideous – humanoid but scaly: skin in dark, broken patches. Its eyes: recessed and black as the darkest of space. Now the creature was looking at him, studying him. And although he was already beginning to accept his terminal fate, somehow being subject to the whim of this creature seemed like a far worse alternative.

Yet it was crazy! How could this creature even be aboard?

‘Computer,’ he said. ‘Who is this? How did it get here?’ At that moment the creature moved out of his sight.

‘How did what get here, Torbin?’

‘That creature. It was studying me.’

‘There is no other life-form aboard this vessel. May I suggest that you are hallucinating?’

‘But it seemed so real.’

‘That is the nature of hallucinations. It may be caused by a lack of sensory input.’

‘Well then plug me back into navigation view.’

This time he didn't really get the experiential feeling of being in space; just a projected view into his retinas. This should have been preferable to the previous un-anchoring from all sense of being human. He even once more felt the presence of his old body, like a yearning beyond what had once passed for proprioceptive reality: his brain telling him this was the case against any counter evidence, just the accordant neurons firing again.

The brief experience of being a fully-formed human was blasted away

when the creature reappeared. At first Torbin tried to deny the reality of it, though now it had a slightly different appearance: not so much the scaly monster as more of a spindly but unfocused shape, seeming to hover against the star background. Not that he felt any better about this ‘hallucination’, since it reminded him very much of the Elusivers.

‘You can’t possibly be real,’ he told it. ‘So get out of my head.’

The image of it got larger. It was saying something to him in a dry whispery voice. ‘I can help you, Torbin. Don’t be afraid.’

Another voice interrupted. The computer. ‘Torbin, you are hallucinating again.’ Right on the cue, the creature disappeared.

‘What’s wrong with me?’ It seemed like a silly question to ask, given his fate.

‘I am not sure. I will need to run some tests.’

‘What kind of tests?’

‘A test for neural chemical imbalance, temporal lobe disorder, visual cortex---’

‘Okay, just go ahead.’

Torbin waited. The spectrally elongated stars continued to shift their position, the meaningless overlaid symbols changed, but nothing else seemed to be happening.

‘Computer. Are you conducting the tests?’

There was no answer.

‘Computer?’

An instant later his connection with space was gone, replaced by the ship’s interior. Now he was hardly even startled to see the creature once again. Its humanoid form appeared out of focus, shifting, unable to resolve into a fixed shape.

This time it spoke. ‘Do not be alarmed, Torbin Lyndau. I am not here to harm you.’ Its voice was reedy but male, throaty and strained.

‘Of course not,’ Torbin replied, ‘since you are no more than a figment of my imagination.’

‘Torbin, I am real. I am here to save you from your predicament.’

‘My predicament can not be altered. I’m on a set course for the nearest black hole.’

‘Not any longer,’ the creature said. ‘The program has been disabled, the ship has been turned around.’

‘Who are you?’ Torbin realised he was beginning to believe this fantasy.

‘I am one of the beings you know of as the Elusivers.’

‘Then why would you want to help me when the others have decreed I’m better off dead?’

‘Because we don’t all think alike.’

‘If only that were true rather than some desperate make-believe of mine,’ Torbin thought out loud. ‘The reality is, no one could have got aboard this ship undetected.’

The creature moved in closer towards him, even more unsettling in its indefinable shape. ‘Surely you of all humans would not underestimate our abilities at stealth?’

‘Not at all. Somehow you lot have even evaded the B’tari. But this is a *Elusiver* ship, it must be tuned to your physiology.’

‘Torbin, you know better than to second-guess our methods. I have learned the art of evasion for nearly a millennia.’

‘Next you’ll be telling me it was you who sent out the warning signal – the blueprint – to Earth all the those centuries ago.’

‘That is correct. It is, though, unfortunate that so far no effective counter-measure has been developed.’

‘Could not *you* have done so?’

‘I am an exile, with no access to our most advanced technology – or the inclination to draw attention to myself.’

‘Then you want me to go back, work on a counter measure.’

‘That would be of *some* benefit. However, directing this vessel back to your home world undetected will be a challenge.’

‘Then do your best.’

‘I will do my best,’ the keeper confirmed, and promptly glided away from his view.

Torbin still wasn’t convinced of the reality of this encounter. He found it difficult to gauge any experience as being real, in this limited state. Maybe he was simply insane; his mind conjuring up something to divert from the contemplation of death, and temporal eradication besides – the total ceasing of his existence; the mind going to the most extraordinary lengths to give him what mattered most in life: hope.

Yet, when his perception switched back to the view of space, he was no longer travelling at subluminal speed – the stars were smeared lines, some kind of hyperspace drive was in operation. The only hope of covering the six thousand light-year journey in his lifetime.

That word again.

*

Raiya still felt a sense of unease to be in such close quarters with a strange man. Her logical mind told her there was no danger. After all, this part of her office was closely monitored. The man hadn’t visited her for counselling, though his sanity remained to be assessed.

To interview an ex cult member seemed like the only way to get a handle on the real ethos – the truth behind the net reports, the media sensationalisms.

In every respect he looked like a typical Canadian: dark hair and northern European features, late thirties, not unlike the majority of those she’d counselled through their minor – and not so minor – neurosis. Perhaps this made her the most qualified to assess this man; Len Heigener clearly thought so.

Raiya, seated behind her desk, said to the man in an upright chair, ‘I know this isn’t easy for you. From what I have learned they are not the type of people to just let go.’

‘They let me go,’ he said, then smiled strangely. ‘I think it was because I asked too many questions. They don’t like certain questions.’

‘What type of questions?’

‘About these aliens – the Bortati. Where they originate. When they will come. How they will save “the chosen”. Told me I wasn’t ready for such knowledge.’

‘You didn’t feel they were being honest with you?’ she wondered.

‘I felt I was being strung along. But it wasn’t just me; no other member I spoke to knew any more than I did.’

‘So there is no evidence for the leader’s claim.’

‘Well, Parmayan said there is evidence for the coming of the end of days. He talked about the dark beings who can manipulate time and space. He used the example of the missing ship, how no one could explain its sudden displacement too far away to be recovered. At least the space agency was taking that seriously by cancelling projects. So maybe something is happening to space and we’re not allowed to know about it.’

‘I can’t vouch for those claims,’ she said, thinking how a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. ‘There just isn’t the evidence.’

‘But Parmayan is on to something, you have to admit. And what if he *is* right – that we are heading for the true end of time?’

‘How can time end?’ she said, more as gentle prompt than an inquisitive question.

‘The dark beings are advanced beyond our comprehension. There are already reported cases of people having large chunks of their lives eradicated. Or just killed for knowing too much.’

‘Those are just rumours spread about on the net. How can you rely on them?’

‘Those are people’s testimonies. Not just ordinary citizens but scientists, astronomers – who have actually observed strange phenomena. Haven’t you read the reports of the “strange accidents and suicides”?’

What he was saying made sense: target those who could provide evidence. She said, ‘That was part of my research. Yet still, there’s nothing substantial as proof.’

‘There never is, is there? Never likely to be. But you must of all people know something weird is happening to this world. It doesn’t just take someone like Parmayan to point it out to us.’

She half nodded. ‘I’ve seen, read, heard many people convinced of various conspiracies and end of the world prophesies. They saw the signs, the patterns – things cannot possibly be mere coincidences. Don’t we all like to join the dots?’

‘You know there’s more to it than that, doctor.’

Raiya didn’t respond. She wanted to find out more about Parmayan, but now was not the time. She made a gesture of pressing the down the console projection on her desk. ‘Thank you for your time,’ she said finally.

*

Deanna had lost track of the number of days, weeks, months, she’d been held at this facility. For the first week she had been confined to this basic white room. The sensory deprivation would have driven her truly insane had it not been for her frequent contacts with Scott, who visited her, either as an ethereal presence or seeming to be more real. She thought the drugs they gave her actually *helped* her state of consciousness to merge with his. Of course, she was not the only inmate in this place to claim contact with a loved one. The only difference being that Scott was still alive. He had found a way to contact her that transcended the limitations of time and space. He told her how it was all so different now – the way the future is, the passing of time. Nothing was inevitable if you could see what would become and knew how to change it. Scott was on his way back, he assured her.

She had tried to tell anyone she could; just hoping the message would get out. Light years away – could he ever make it back alone? But what was even worse than a reaction of scepticism or incredulity had been the way they thought they could humour her, as if she were *truly delusional*.

Every time Doctor Heigener visited her she felt a sense of unease. This time was no different, except he was on his own; no nurse ready with a sedative if

she became unruly. He carried some strange device, arch-curved titanium to a green glowing point. Oh, how she regretted telling him about her meetings with Scott. It was just that the drugs seemed to loosen her tongue.

‘Is he with us currently?’ Heigener asked in a measured tone that was meant to sound like earnestness.

‘He is not,’ Deanna answered with equally faux earnestness.

‘Can you summon him?’

‘No. He comes to me when he chooses.’

‘Deanna, this is important. I need to know how you are able to be in contact with him.’

‘You want to know what goes on in my head when you think I am hallucinating him.’

‘I want to verify that you are *not* hallucinating when you’re in contact with him.’

‘I am sorry, doctor, but I can’t help you.’

‘I want to help *you*, Deanna.’ He smiled beseechingly, in a slightly creepy way. He then lumbered towards her, the device in hand. ‘Please. Summon him.’

‘No,’ she protested.

‘Then there’s nothing I can do for you. You’ll remain here. My report will state that I can find no grounds for your claims, or any prospect for rehabilitation.’

Deanna knew he wasn’t bluffing with his last statement. ‘I will try,’ she said eventually.

There had been a couple of times when Scott appeared to her when she called him, but she wasn’t going to let on to Dr Heigener – and become like some performing monkey for the psychiatrist. Nevertheless she tried to summon him, sending out strong thoughts while Heigener primed his scanning device.

For a while there was nothing. She wondered if Scott suspected some kind of entrapment until, after about a minute, she became aware of Scott’s distant

ethereal voice. ‘Deanna, my love, I am trying to reach you. You are so faint to me.’ She could see him now – as the room faded – shrouded in mist, or perhaps it was a nebular. There were stars around him, and he was floating amongst them – with just his normal clothes.

‘They don’t believe you survived,’ she said to him. ‘They need some evidence.’

‘I so wish I could prove it. But there are limitations. No one else can have the connection we have. One day I will return, and they will be sorry for what they have done to you.’ His image was fading now, into the nebular, until there was nothing of him.

With a jolt she was back in the white room, Heigener studying the readings from his scanner, until he noticed she was looking at him.

‘You made contact with him, I take it?’

‘Yes. Did your probe pick it up?’

‘Mnn. It’s not as simple as a positive or negative reading, this is not a precise science; it will need further analysis.’

‘Please let me know, doctor.’

‘In due course.’

He got up to leave, when she said to him, ‘I do have one further request.’

‘Go on.’

‘I would like to see Dr Fortenski.’

‘Really?’

‘I had a consultation with her, and so has Scott.’

‘Yes. He was registered at the Canadian institute. However, Dr Fortenski no longer practices there, she is now a researcher.’

‘But she would understand.’

‘Deanna, *I* understand. You need to trust me ... I only have your best interests at heart.’ He thanked her for her cooperation and left.

She would *never* trust that man. There was something about him that made her not only suspicious, but fearful.

Planet Earth shone its serene light back onto the observation deck. The underside transparent as the ship appeared to any outside observer, and for a while disconcertingly vertiginous, like actually being suspended in space. Of course, Roidon hadn't admitted to this giddiness. As far as his b'tari supervisor was concerned he was perfectly at ease. Looking below at the passing continents was beginning to imbue him with a sense of imperiousness he hadn't felt since the time he'd been master of an artificial reality network – although that could be thought of as a totally different life, a different person. Here he could perfectly understand the B'taris' assumed role as guardians of Earth. 12.7 billion people unaware of their presence (at least the B'tari believed); struggling to fulfil their hopes, dreams, worrying about troubles that from up here seemed ever more starkly trivial set against what potential fate awaited. But even *he* had experienced how the world can subsume you in its everydayness. Just being physically human – with all its desires and basic needs – only encouraged these trivial concerns; to then be reinforced by those who claimed to accommodate them but with something to gain, something to sell. Even *he* needed to be removed from that hub of unending supply and unquenchable demand, to see how easy it was to be taken in by such distractions. Perhaps people sensed there was a threat to their existence even without the evidence; they were reassessing their lives, looking to shore up what really mattered, asking the bigger questions. The Transcenders were the only ones who seemed to have the big answer.

Zardino's voice echoed from behind. 'It's a good thing to get away from it all once in a while.'

Roidon was jolted out of his thoughts, obviously startled, foolishly embarrassed. He turned half round to the b'tari.

'Given how restricted my life has been since I was brought back,' he said, 'I do find this a considerable relief.'

‘Restricted. Really?’ said Zardino, sounding detectably dismayed. ‘We let you use one of our premium vehicles---’

‘Over which you have ultimate control,’ Roidon countered. ‘Seriously: how far could I have got without you summoning back your precious vehicle. Think I mightn’t have noticed the leash because it’s extended long?’

‘You don’t need me to remind you what a dangerous person you were in a previous life.’

Roidon turned fully to face the b’tari. Still – in his neat white suit – looking impeccably human, either from mental manipulation or genetic modification; Roidon had given up trying to determine (they hated discussing it). He suspected the latter, given what they had learned from their old enemy, the Darangi. He said, ‘You – the B’tari – brought me back precisely because I *was that* dangerous person; because I outwitted your old enemy, and the council deemed it worthwhile deploying the old subversive again ... to do their dirty work.’

‘Indeed, Roidon. Without you we’d be lost.’ Roidon, in all the time he’d know the B’tari aliens, had never experienced sarcasm. And he still wasn’t sure it really was meant in the way it sounded.

‘I’m guessing, though,’ Roidon said, ‘that I’ve been a bit of a disappointment to you and the council. I mean what progress have we really made?’

‘Roidon, it’s not all about some dramatic salvo against an advancing enemy. This is not even a war, it’s more about holding back the tide – a tsunami.’

‘I understand that perfectly well: we’re on the back foot,’ he said, sounding more petulant than he intended. ‘But you know what I did to end it all last time *was* my dramatic salvo. Don’t tell me the council hadn’t kept that in mind when they decided to have me brought back.’

‘I would not claim to know the minds of the elders, even if I do consult with them occasionally,’ Zardino said in his formal manner. ‘I only know what needs to be done right now. There is a man at this base who believed himself to

be Torbin Lyndau, until the results of our tests convinced him otherwise. He *is* sure, though, you have some information regarding our enemy's technology.'

'So the enemy does believe I'm preparing something devastating against them.'

'That is what we'd like to determine; what we hope you can elicit from our captive.'

'Captive. Interesting.'

Roidon followed Zardino into a brightly lit white room. The man was lying in a translucent casket amongst the usual mysterious array of monitoring equipment, with its reconfiguring symbols. There were various-sized patches attached to his shaven head. He still wore the smart casual clothes he'd been wearing during his tirade of destruction.

Zardino stopped at the base of the casket. 'To all intents and purposes that is Torbin Lyndau,' he said. 'At least a very lifelike clone, until you analyse his cortical neural structure.'

'Well, I didn't find this version very convincing. I mean the original Torbin may have been slightly unhinged, but he wasn't psychotic.'

'I'm not sure this version is. He may simply have been tasked – programmed if you will – to destroy our work.'

'He wasn't entirely unsuccessful, then.'

'But he failed to destroy himself. And now we have our link to the Elusivers.' Zardino then gave a command in the B'tari language, which elicited a dramatic change in the monitor's symbols. The clone gasped as he woke.

Zardino then turned to Roidon. 'Ask him what he knows about you.'

Roidon considered this strategy; would he have gone for the more direct interrogation? He knew the B'tari had the means to read memory, even if it was a fatal process. It would have made logical sense if they had threatened to do so. He moved in closer to the casket, and said: 'I suspect you know more about me than does the real Torbin Lyndau – that your knowledge is implanted from the Elusivers. Then you know what I did all those years ago, and that now myself and the B'tari are striving to understand the process – to reverse it.'

‘The Elusivers have been observing you,’ the man rasped. ‘None of you has even begun to approach a counter measure for the wave.’

‘The Elusivers do not see everything. They are not gods.’

‘As far as you are concerned – they *are* gods.’

‘I know what it’s like to feel omnipotent – a certainty that no lesser being could possibly be hiding anything from my vast perception.’

‘We know all about you. You were no god, just arrogant and deluded, and ignorant of the true ramifications of your actions.’

‘And you are no more than a clone, a fake, a simulacrum indoctrinated with his creator’s proclamations.’

‘Are we so different? Are you any more than a creation to serve a purpose?’

‘The difference is, I would not allow myself to be captured.’

‘Maybe that’s because we don’t need you. Capturing Torbin Lyndau and your chief astronomer provided us with all the knowledge we need.’

Roidon turned to Zardino. ‘I hope you got that recorded for the council.’

‘Of course,’ replied Zardino. ‘It will certainly inform their strategy. We then only require some coordinates.’

The clone laughed in a comically deranged manner. ‘You think I would be given specific information like *that*?’

‘Since you won’t tell us,’ said Zardino, ‘we will have to use a more effective method of extracting information.’

The clone smiled serenely. ‘They have come to take care of me.’ His eyes then glazed over, a yellow film formed over them. His now expressionless face, like a mask, began lose its shape; it was as if it had once been filled with air and was now deflating. Eventually it became a pulpy mass, as with the rest of his body.

‘Self destruction without carrying any device. Interesting,’ Zardino observed.

Roidon said, ‘Surely you managed to capture his mind-state.’

‘Unfortunately, that was to be our next option. At least we did get a few memory fragments that might be some use. We’ll have to analyse those later,

we now have a more pressing concern. Our immediate survival.’

Until now Torbin had no way of knowing he was truly heading back to earth, or that he would not be displaced to some distant time in the future, removed once more from everyone he knew.

Whatever form of hyperspace, taking the ship thousands of light years, had now switched off. The first planet, Neptune, enlarged and zipped past in a blur. He imagined the deceleration force must be so powerful that no human body could withstand it. But for a brain suspended in liquid there'd be no sensation. After a few subjective days the illusion of a body had mostly gone; only when asleep did he have the feeling of being whole, although without the sense of heft and effort of movement of his waking memories – they were fading as if now becoming an unhelpful irrelevance. Something changed that would once have seemed like a horrifying prospect: he was beginning to feel like a part of the ship. He imagined how a totally paralysed person might still have the sensation of limbs and a torso, since the brain was wired for their input. But here the ship was providing him with total immersion space; that burgeoning sense of a body – the ship's hull. Another illusion, of course, fed into him by the wealth of telemetry regarding its state, reporting any abrasion to the primary plating. He knew, now, the ship was running on emergency reserves, never intended to go this far, hence the shutting down of shields.

Ever since the ally Elusiver (imagined or not) had made its presence known, the computer ceased communicating with him. Torbin mused that it was some kind of sulking objection at being usurped, though more likely it sensed its primary purpose in sending him to the black hole was no longer valid. There had been no further sign of the Elusiver, no word of leaving, assuming it really had visited. But with even a cursory understanding of their abilities, such a bulky thing as a space craft was not really necessary for interstellar travel.

Earth grew from a blue dot to the screen-filling globe in literally a few

seconds, as if a film had been sped up ridiculously. Torbin felt he needed more time to mentally prepare. He was sure the B'tari would detect his arrival immediately and have a craft waiting, his ever vigilant overseers. Certainly they may be slightly taken aback by his lack of a body, although that was unlikely to present much of a challenge in growing him a new one, he imagined.

The ship fell into orbit. Half an hour passed. Nothing.

If the B'tari were not coming for him then he'd have to somehow make his own way back to the surface. The ship was not designed to break orbit. Barring any stealth cover, unbeknown, someone would spot him.

After an hour he spoke to the computer. 'Please come back online. I require urgent assistance.'

'My function is limited due to a breach in protocol,' said the computer, tersely. But Tobin let out a breath in relief; just to have it *respond*.

'I need to be placed in a shuttle. Can you do that for me?'

'I can engage the emergency evac procedure, which will drop you into a pod.'

'Fine. Just do it.'

The green symbols, overlaying the encompassing half circle of Earth, turned red and started changing rapidly. A few seconds later a klaxon sounded. Abruptly the view switched off. He expected there to be some sensation of falling but realised – with no tactile facility, no sensory function beyond sight – he'd feel nothing.

For a few seconds there was just darkness, then a dull red light followed by an oblong viewer. He appeared to be static, until he noticed the red glow in the forward view. The pod was entering Earth's atmosphere. Perhaps it was programmed to home in on the nearest gravitational source, and this was originally to be the method of delivery into the singularity.

'Computer,' he tried, 'are you controlling this pod?' No answer.

North America filled the viewscreen and grew at an alarming rate. At this point he felt glad not to be in a body: to feel no nausea, and if the pod were to

crash – no pain.

Somehow the pod knew where he wanted to go, and it was taking him there at an alarming rate. Only when he could see the trees, the fields of western Canada, did the view shift to a more horizontal plane.

The touchdown in a field seemed to be smooth, although the craft appeared quite elevated as if on legs. Just as he was beginning to contemplate how long it would take before someone discovered him, he fell through the floor. The impact onto the grass was hard. This time he did feel pain, an internal mental throb. The only fortunate thing was to have landed upright, still encased in the transparent life-support box with its adjoining nutrient/blood supply capsule.

He noticed the light changing, a shadow lifting. It was the pod taking off, silently ... no, he had no hearing. A brain in a case in a field, at the mercy of the local wildlife. Yet he wasn't as afraid as he thought he should be; the world was disconnected, an ethereal quality through its pink-orange hue. No longer the illusion of a body, just a numb floaty feeling. But an awareness of being utterly alone. He didn't think it was the same as feeling lonely, that was him as the outsider: observing others but never connecting. This was something more visceral, a simple absence. If any person found him, what would they think? The victim of some sick experiment, perhaps. And even if he were to be discovered by someone who knew him they might not identify him as Torbin. *Am I really Torbin anymore, or just his memories? My consciousness – now questionable.*

He wondered if dying may be a blessing after all.

*

They watched a twenty-six second replay of the creature as it reclaimed what was left of the clone. In real time the whole event happened in only two and a half seconds. Even played back at thirty times below normal speed its actions were a blur. Any attempt to prevent the creature in its mission was a woefully futile gesture: Zardino had reached for a well-concealed weapon, only to be forced back by the creature in its whirl of activity. Roidon had looked on,

more fascinated than disconcerted. He knew he should take a more concerned approach, at least a serious if not troubled look when the creature proceeded to force its way past the various B'tari layers of security on its way out. In fact, it hardly needed to use any force, it just seemed to breeze past as if every perceivable B'tari countermeasure amounted to no more than a holographic projection.

And yet this scenario – playing back repeatedly for any clues – seemed pointless. ‘They must have known there was nothing useful left of the clone to reclaim,’ Roidon surmised.

‘Our idea of useful and their’s maybe somewhat different,’ Zardino said. ‘Perhaps there was some trace evidence in those remains.’

‘But we already have all we need from the clone. So why go to the trouble?’

‘I won’t claim to understand their psychology but it’s possible they merely wanted to prove a point – that they can enter our most secure domain at any time of their choosing and take whatever they wish.’

‘Except they didn’t take the memory scans.’

Zardino appeared lost in thought for a few seconds; Roidon realised this was him engaged in neural communication. He said eventually: ‘Actually, the scans have been wiped. Don’t ask me how it could have happened – our data store is not only quantum eight dimensionally encrypted, it is kept in a metre thick dutainium vault. In essence, there is no more of a secure way to store data. Some B'tari have even called it *paranoid*, others over-zealousness.’

‘They’ve proved that nothing we can do will stop them. Then we might as well admit defeat, stop fighting the inevitable.’

‘Accept our fate,’ Zardino added sardonically. ‘That kind of defeatist logic is exactly what they want us to adopt. They demonstrate their god-like abilities so we can fall to our knees in awe.’

‘They really have got to you, Zardino. A race so advanced they make you look like ineffectual children to their powerful adults.’

Zardino was silent once more. Roidon wondered if this was out of feeling

offended or he was once again in communication. After about a minute he said, 'I have consulted with the council. They agree this is an emergency situation. Accordingly, we will have to leave this system and return to the B'tari home world. It is many light years away, and the journey will not be without risk.'

'Don't you think this is exactly what the Elusivers want. Surely your home world will be their main target.'

'Protection measures have been prepared for such a threat. We are far stronger in the place of our origin.'

'Forgive me for being somewhat doubtful of your ability to survive against a species so advanced ... well, I hardly need tell you.'

'Have faith, dear Roidon.'

'Not this time. At least not in your strategy. I am going it alone.'

'As you wish.'

Raiya had been in her office for six hours poring over reports online, many of them clearly spurious. The Transcenders were attracting what Len would refer to as the various nutters, those who felt they had some kind of connection with this pseudo-religious group, from the spiritual to the sexual. There were even pics of supposed group members engaged in lewd acts with their disciples. Curiously she could find very few positive accounts/reports; Transcenders were not effective at controlling publicity and neither were they big on self promotion. Drawing all this material together, she could even make the case that there was a well organised campaign against them.

She was about to leave for what seemed like a well earned break when she came across a link to their official site. The usual hyperspace effect animation, then an invitation portal for those who wanted a neural interface (she had yet to determine whether this was part of their brainwashing technique) followed by bold three dimensional text: **‘The one from the stars has returned’**. At first she thought this was referring to Scott Alendry. The name was not given, they only referred to him as the one who transcends time and space. The man was brought to them by their ‘bortati’ alien contact; he had been recovered from a woods..... ‘bereft off his body by the evil ones who had sent him to a terrible fate’ (no elaboration) and left him for dead. Now the alien had left this man in the care of the Transcenders. This man was to be their saviour, the one who could provide the necessary knowledge to enable their final transcendence. The picture was somewhat macabre – a brain in a tank. This was especially curious since there was still a moratorium on space travel. She had to find out who this man is, but no amount of searching online rendered a name.

Raiya considered telling Dr Heigener what she’d learned and what as a result she now intended to do, but she imagined his words of caution and even mild paternal forbodence. Really he only wanted a researcher, safely tucked away at the institute. But since even in this supposedly safest of places her life

had been threatened, there was no escape from jeopardy; for some while she'd had the feeling that someone was out to get her.

She grabbed a few essential items, and left.

As she journeyed to their last known location Raiya could hear Heigener's voice in her mind warning her, telling her how ludicrously reckless this was – the woman who had been compiling a dossier on the Transcenders' every documented act, every ex-member's account, was now about to take that ultimate step to find the truth. In other words: to let curiosity get the better of her.

As her car reached its legal speed limit, the landscape rushed by with unnerving haste, as if this would stop any doubts from forming. Yet they were there, inchoate for now.

Just as the car entered Nevada state Raiya felt a jolt so hard it left her disorientated for a few seconds. When her senses returned she became aware of the myriad warnings projected at her: scarlet flashes of status graphics and vehicle's voice telling her substantial damage had been done to all vital systems, and thus an emergency landing procedure would be engaged. She didn't need being told, the damage was obvious: there was smoke all about her, so thick that she couldn't see ahead. And to add to her fear, the car was lurching wildly. The only possible comfort was in knowing that if all control was lost airbags should inflate all around the chassis, and in a worse case scenario the interior would fill with foam.

The worst case scenario played out. She was only aware of the tumbling motion, the jolt – harsh enough to make her sure she'd suffer bruising – as the car hit the parched ground. For a few moments her thoughts were confused, dislocated. Nonetheless the prospect of dying was there, looming before her in its immediate raw presence, like the spectre that had always lay hidden in the shadows ready to strike when she was most vulnerable.

Only now in the deadening stillness could the analysis of the situation begin.

This had been no accident, she was sure. But there was hardly time to think

over the reasons before she heard bursting of balloons, the creak of metal being pried apart.

Raiya – on her side and still webbed to the seat; foam particles rapidly melting away – tried to activate the near door. Electronics were down so she tried the manual lever but to no avail, much of the car must be crushed. She was in a metal cocoon and someone was attempting to break through. A faint burning smell, she imagined caused by a laser cutter. Oddly the logical response of fear was not there. A calmness in facing the inescapable. Why stress over fate?

The man who appeared was not what she had expected; she was sure she had never seen him before, yet he looked curiously familiar like someone briefly glanced on a broadcast, perhaps a reporter. He wore a grey-brown shirt, blending him with the semi-desert. A civilian she felt sure, though the long tapered laser tool he held seemed more likely to be used by the rescue service.

Once he had clearly broken through he spoke. ‘Please don’t be alarmed, I’m not here to harm you.’

There were no obvious signs he was lying. In a wavering voice she said, ‘Someone tries to kill me and you suddenly appear. What do you expect me to think?’

The man put his gloved hands on either side of the large cutaway section. ‘Of course, it is a logical deduction that I am the one responsible,’ he said flatly. ‘But please consider that this area is much observed by many. My own interest in the Transcenders is part of a rescue mission; I understand yours is investigatory.’

‘How can you know anything about me?’

‘I know you are the person Torbin Lyndau has contacted. That you received his personal files, and that your involvement has put your life in danger – hence the stealth craft that attacked your car and is at this very moment observing, doubtless deciding whether to annihilate us both at the risk of drawing the attention of certain others.’

‘Certain others?’

‘I have some powerful allies, Dr Fortenski. Not that it would be wise for me tell you anything about them; you understand how such knowledge can be a dangerous thing.’

‘Who are you then, my knight in shining armour?’

‘Something like that. But you can call me Roidon.’

‘I suppose you’ll have to rescue me, Roidon.’

She took his hand, still not feeling anything like trust in this ordinary-looking man, and mentally running through his possible motivations. Yet she followed him, feeling like some helpless damsel. *I’m still in shock*, she then thought to herself.

Her legs were weak. He was leading her at almost a running pace towards a nearby hill.

‘We need to move faster,’ he said. He was virtually dragging her now. Raiya couldn’t see what she running from but at least the man seemed serious.

They ran through a valley within the parched hills. Roidon stopped so abruptly that she bumped into him. Without a word he touched his temple with his forefinger, and instantly a craft appeared. It was a dull silvery elongated egg, hovering a metre above the ground.

He only now seemed to become aware that he was still clutching her hand when he glanced back at her and let go. Raiya noticed a door-shaped opening appear in the egg-ship.

‘Follow me,’ he said, approaching the ship, which descended nearer to the ground. Then he stepped in.

The interior seemed far more spacious than the exterior suggested. Roidon sat in the forward seat before a screen. Raiya tentatively lowered herself into the chair beside him; it seemed to perfectly mould to her form. Roidon was telling the ship to move towards certain coordinates. He then looked round at Raiya. He said, ‘I expect you’re wondering why I am doing this, what are my motivations.’

‘I *have* been wondering,’ she said, sensing he was about to try some

convincing explanation.

‘Well, I am not motivated by personal gain, more out of obligation, a sense of responsibility, maybe even a hint of guilt – so I hope I saved you the psychoanalysis, Doctor.’

His candidness made her smile, almost laugh. ‘I wouldn’t want to waste either of our time; you are clearly a man on a noble mission.’

He turned and smiled back at her. ‘I didn’t choose this life, Raiya, and I didn’t ask to be left to prevent what many would tell me is inevitable.’

‘You will have to tell me all about it now, I guess.’

For the next twelve minutes Roidon told her.

‘Now I *know* my life is in danger,’ she said quite earnestly.

‘Nothing’s really changed except your awareness.’

Raiya hadn't really been paying attention to where they were heading. They'd seemed to be executing a number of evasive manoeuvres. But now the sky had become dark, stars were appearing, and the curvature of the Earth became apparent.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked, somewhat fearing the answer.

‘The moon.’

*

He'd been sleeping, he wasn't sure how long or when the dreamstate had become reality. There had, he remembered, been several voices: excited, in awe of him. Then one voice, a clipped, thin, English accent. A face of a man he did not recognise. ‘Torbin Lyndau, my name is Parmayan Redandich. You are here as my special guest.’

Torbin could not speak, he had no facility for speech.

‘I regret we could not have a body prepared for you at this time,’ the man continued. ‘You are currently connected to an artificial one. It may take a while to become accustomed to it, but I urge you to try and make a start.’

Torbin’s peripheral vision was limited as if he was seeing through a short tunnel. When he turned he could see other people, some monitoring equipment,

and others were tending to some part of ... him. But it wasn't him, it was something else. A mechanical man – a robot!

Torbin found he could move. He thrashed his grey servo mechanical arm, knocking over some bleeping monitoring equipment. One of the technicians suddenly appeared, carrying some kind key fob device. As the tech pointed it at Torbin, immediately all mobility was lost. He was paralysed, no different to when he was a brain in liquid.

‘Please, Torbin,’ said Parmayan, in his forward view, ‘we do understand this is a rather distressing time for you.’ The obvious understatement was making him more decisively angry than frightened. Parmayan continued: ‘The evil ones have rendered you in a debilitated state in order to send a message. Your knowledge of them is of infinite value to us. It is not our wish to subject you to a mind trawl, that is why when you are able to talk you must tell us everything.’ The man tapped him on the shoulder. ‘We will leave you now to consider what I have said.’

Parmayan nodded to his assistant, and they both walked out without a word. The room darkened to a very low amber.

Torbin seemed to have been in a state of semi-consciousness for an indeterminate time when a figure appeared. He recognised the scaly dark grey face, the obsidian eyes, the spindly form.

‘There is very little time,’ said the exiled Elusiver. ‘I cannot connect your voice functions but you now have total movement.’

Torbin stood abruptly, feeling a sudden liberation.

The Elusiver said, ‘Now the B'tari have gone there is only one person who can help you. Unfortunately you are not able to travel by my method, so I have prepared a ship. The coordinates have been sent to your neural interface array. Now please leave.’ The exiled Elusiver disappeared in an instant.

Torbin found he was able to run at considerable speed. The darkness outside was total, but a vector-type grid had appeared in his vision, giving the location of the ship. Its door lowered at his arrival. The interior was very basic, there was no apparent navigation control, not even graphics; only a viewscreen

showing the clear Nevada night sky. He had no idea where this craft was headed.

Now all the B'tari had gone, along with their mother ship, there was no place of refuge other than here at his old reconstructed moon base. The last time Roidon had been here – over two centuries ago – he had set about to defeat a powerful alien, using the technology of an even more powerful alien species. He still had the blue prints of the device (or rather the B'tari had kept them knowing of their significance).

Roidon had mixed feelings about being accompanied. As he watched her – reclined on a soft-back sofa, in what amounted to a lounge, drinking coffee, still appearing to be overwhelmed by events – he thought it would be a good thing to have her. Of course there were younger women who would have undoubtedly fallen for his charm, but liaisons with them would certainly have been inconvenient at this time. Instead, he studied this potential conquest before him and found her to be adequately attractive. Her current vulnerable state may even play to his advantage. They both understood that time was of the essence, but more importantly they faced the prospect (and even with his current experiments it was a logical consideration) of total demise, erasure from history – no less. And in times of imminent doom the natural basic instinct was bound to take over.

He sat beside her. She put down her coffee and regarded him cautiously.

‘How are you feeling now?’ Roidon asked.

She tilted her head slightly. ‘I’ve been better, though a few bruises I can certainly live with. I guess I’m lucky to be alive, really.’

‘You and me both, Raiya.’

‘How is your experiment progressing?’ she asked in a polite tone.

‘Harvo is currently running tests on the anti-graviton-flux array.’

‘So you’re now having to wait.’

‘That’s right. There’s not much I can do for the next hour or so.’

‘Do you have any entertainment systems up here?’

‘Unfortunately there wasn’t time to install one. I had to return in haste.’ He looked at her earnestly. ‘I have to admit, Raiya, it can get a bit lonely up here. Sure, there’s Harvo – and he can converse on any subject. But it’s not the same as a real person.’

‘I understand what loneliness is like.’

‘You being a psychiatrist must give you something of an insight.’

‘I mean I can get lonely too.’

‘It seems the world has made us both isolated in our own particular way.’

In a knowing way, she nodded. ‘Being a psychiatrist enables me to recognise the signs of when a man is angling towards a fuck. So why don’t we just dispense with all the talk of two lonely people getting together, and just get on with the act.’

‘To be honest, I thought you might be a bit more reluctant in your current condition.’

She gave him a wry smile. ‘I am not so delicate, Roidon. Now come on. The world might end soon.’

She pulled his top of, fumbled with his trouser fastening. It seemed like she wanted to get it over with, get it out the way, as if she was merely resigned to the inevitability of his desire, and then going through the motions. But this time he wanted something more. Sex was so easy, forgettable even, sometimes.

As he was undoing her shirt, Roidon said, ‘Raiya, we don’t have to rush this.’

She raised the curved line of an eyebrow. ‘Mnn, a gentleman indeed. Maybe I misread your intention.’

‘It’s just ... we have time.’ He cradled her head, then ran his fingers through her long dark hair. Kissed her. Felt the gentle embrace of her body. Inhaled her delicate fragrance – subtle enough that only this kind of intimacy revealed it.

Later that evening Roidon took Raiya on a tour of the complex, but only on Raiya’s insistence that she wanted to see for herself the true extent of his plan. Her genuine interest was something of a fillip to him, it seemed to validate his

work; no other human had even witnessed it. Now they were in the main hanger. Roidon expressed his reservations; the AFG device was approaching full power. Its peculiar effects were starting to take hold, and now he noticed Raiya's alarm at seeing multiple versions of herself – and himself, all linked in a fused chain.

‘This is quite normal,’ he reassured her. The graviton converter amplifies the connection between quantum states until they are projected together. Normally these states are not available to our perception.’ His voice echoed from the other versions of himself.

‘So they are all equally me,’ she said as more of a statement than a question.

‘I've been working in this field for some time and I still find it difficult to accept that these other versions are equally as real as me.’

‘So are they all facing the same problem, doing the same experiment? It can't all be the same?’

‘These are collective cohered quantum states, the temporal fuzziness writ large; past and the future fused into their stable masses. Normally, on a quantum level, the particles are mixed up. Our normal reality is a concatenation of de-cohered states.’

‘What are you hoping this experiment will achieve?’ she asked in all earnestness.

‘I am hoping it will slow down time. Already it is generating an expanding bubble, or corona – more precisely – of decelerated time. Think of it as like the corona of the sun – hotter than the sun itself but the surface of the sun is much less hot. Think of heat representing time: hotter equals slower. It's as if we are on the surface of the sun in this shielded compound. It creates what I call a zero point field.’

‘So being here buys us some time.’

‘That's one benefit. But if I could extend the shielding material, enough to save the population – and increase the power exponentially – it may be possible to slow outside time to the extent where it virtually stops, at least from our

perspective. That would buy enough time that we can just develop a permanent countermeasure.’

‘You are certainly a man of immense confidence---’

‘---However, with immense confidence comes unreasonable ambition. I understand, doctor.’

‘Maybe not so unreasonable.’

‘There’s a theory that time in the universe has been slowing down ever since the Big Bang. I merely intend to slow it down further.’

‘I think it’s time for bed – if only for sleeping.’

‘Then follow me.’

*

The craft had taken Torbin to Lacus Spei, a small plain in the moon amid a gently craterous region. Again his internal transponder was guiding him over the dusty surface to a specific location. Walking was an awkward affair; his exoskeleton had clearly been designed only for earth-g. Now he was leaping almost a metre off the ground like some demented grasshopper. He wondered why the B’tari had chosen such a seemingly vulnerable location to set up base when they could locate anywhere, invisibly, in space. Maybe they were using the resources for their nano-constructors. He was buoyed along at the prospect of obtaining a new body. They would simply use his DNA to grow his new body that was every bit him but young, perhaps with a few engineered improvements. After what he had been through, his B’tari associates could surely indulge him that. With all the knowledge he now possessed, what they’d gain would be more than worth it.

The base itself was well hidden from view somewhere beneath a crater, he was sure he’d never have found it unaided. He had to scrape away at dust on the gentle slope, which gave the impression it had lain there undisturbed for millennia. The hatch was fitted with a simple keypad lock; it looked as if that too hadn’t been used for centuries. Surprisingly, after looking at the key-lock for a few seconds, the number appeared in his faceplate HUD. His Elusiver ally

had been thorough; Torbin wondered how tempting it might have been to get even more involved. Perhaps there was some shared philosophy with the B'taris' Temporal directive.

After clearing the airlock, Torbin descended alloy-framed stairs to a short hallway with a basic door at the end. It was locked. The type of lock itself was mechanical – ancient, requiring a metal key. He had nothing that would substitute such an object. He thought about his next action, wondering what defences there might be on the other side.

He took a step back, then kicked the door around the area of the lock. It swung open, taking a section of the door frame with it. He'd hardly felt any resistance; it seemed like the force had been overkill.

He was in some kind of makeshift lounge, warm and dim side lighting; there was a sofa, tables, a cup and mug, some discarded food packaging. Uncharacteristic of the B'tari – they were always meticulously neat. He knew who it had to be.

His suspicion was confirmed when Roidon emerged from a side door. The man's expression was clearly of shock, if not horror – and for a few seconds this did give Torbin some pleasure; Roidon had never seemed to be shocked by anything.

'Who are you?' he questioned, wearing a strangely old-fashioned maroon robe.

Torbin shook his head and pointed at the area of where his mouth should be.

'You can't speak? I see.' He picked up a small tablet device from the table, offered it to Torbin, and said: 'Do you have an interface port?'

Torbin wasn't sure; he hadn't even looked at himself yet. *The full glory of my grotesqueness.*

Roidon approached, studied Torbin's metal head. 'I can see at the side of you head there is a small glass-like dome,' he observed. 'It looks to be a pulse reader.'

Torbin tapped it with a titanium fingertip, and then tentatively took the

device from Roidon.

‘Ah good,’ said Roidon, back to his usual equanimity. ‘Just hold it as you would a book, and it will lock on. Just think the words but in a forceful way. Project them.’

‘Hello, Roidon,’ came the words from his mind, and vocalized so accurately to the words in his head it was as if the device could know that. He continued: ‘It’s your old friend Torbin Lyndau.’

‘How...?’

‘I thought you’d be able to work that out.’

‘The Transcenders – of course!’

At that moment someone else entered the room. A woman, in a similar robe, her hair looked unkempt; she clearly had been asleep. It took a few seconds before he recognised her as Raiya. When she caught sight of him she gasped loudly, and then said, ‘My god.’

‘Not quite. It’s Torbin. We have met a few times before.’

‘Your not Torbin, you’re a machine! Torbin died.’

‘That maybe what he wanted you to believe,’ Torbin glared at Roidon.

Roidon said, ‘Your clone died. During his short life he caused mayhem – destroyed the B’tari base.’

‘My evil clone. Except that clone may have been my real body. Clearly the Elusivers wanted you to think that was me while I was sent to my death in a black hole.’

‘I truly am sorry for what you have been through,’ Roidon said in a mild tone that was some attempt at sincerity. ‘I guess you must have a lot of anger.’

Torbin then looked to Raiya. ‘What about *your* analysis, Dr Fortenski. Do you think I have a lot of anger? Do you think I have a right to be angry?’ His replicated voice sounded overly expressive at this point, emotional.

Raiya maintained a shocked expression, before saying: ‘Of course. You have every right to be angry.’ There was still fear in her voice.

Roidon said, ‘Torbin, your doppelgänger tried to kill Raiya; though I am sure sure that she, like myself, has some doubts that you are the real Torbin.’

‘I have his memories. I have his hatred of the Elusivers, and I have his desire for revenge.’ At this point he wondered if he should mention the exiled Elusiver, but maybe that would complicate matters.

‘Well, I’m prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt.’

‘That’s so good of you, Roidon. Maybe sleeping with her has had a moderating effect on you.’ Again, the exaggerated emotional tone made him sound more bitter than he intended.

Roidon was glancing curiously at Raiya, then back at Torbin. ‘Were you two...?’

Raiya swiftly stepped forward. ‘There was never anything going on between us. Was there, Torbin?’ Her look was intense, the fear in voice almost gone.

Torbin felt slighted. He’d never wanted to fall in love with her; she was not the one, she couldn’t compare to Emelda. But Emelda was gone, and he had accepted that. And now the one person he thought had truly understood him just saw this machine filled with the memories, the anger, the bitterness of a man whose doppelgänger had threatened her life. She was so far now from ever being his. But why did she have to be with Roidon? Of all the men!

Torbin said finally, ‘You’re right, of course. I was just another lonely case you took pity on. I do perfectly understand why you called the police.’

‘I’m sorry, Torbin, I know you are an important man, but I’m afraid I don’t remember you very well. Strange things have happened to me. There are very few people I can trust.’

‘Raiya, I’m the one who should apologise,’ he said, glad that his replicated voice sounded sincere.

‘Right now, what matters is that you are on our side.’

‘That goes without saying,’ he said brightly. ‘Times like these we should be focusing on what really matters.’

‘He’s right,’ affirmed Roidon, nodding. ‘We do have the population of planet Earth to save, after all.’

Raiya was looking at Roidon as if trying to communicate telepathically;

maybe she was using some hidden thought projection technique. Torbin could see a bond between them that seemed exclusive; himself the freakish outsider – a role he was not entirely unfamiliar with.

Raiya turned back to face Torbin. ‘We can all work together. At least you and Roidon will make a formidable team.’

Torbin still thought he could see a look of fear on Raiya’s face. He said, ‘You don't need to be afraid of me, either of you. Just because I’m in this mechanical body – I’m still just as human as I ever was.’

Except he couldn’t be sure if that was really the case; he hadn't even seen his reflected image, could not bare to look yet.

Roidon said, ‘The B’tari have left us, gone back to their central base. But they are bound to return, they always return. Growing a new body for you will be ... well, you know it’ll be no trouble for them.’

‘The B’tari always like to step back when things really heat up,’ Torbin noted.

‘Tell me about it!’

It felt like a revelation: the possibility of them working together no longer seeming objectionable.

Before him were stars, barely changing. Scott had no idea how long he'd been drifting through space in the shuttle pod. The display in his immersion interface told him he was travelling at 12.05 percent of light speed. In twenty-four hours he would have accelerated to 12.2 percent. Scott laughed at this prospect. The utter pointlessness of it!

His only solace: unconsciousness. The shuttle only woke him from stasis for health reasons, one hour out of every thirty-six. He vaguely remembered the dreams about Deanna, somewhat predictably his reuniting with her. Still, these dreams were all he had now.

Suicide was always a realistic possibility. In any case the escape pod would eventually no longer be able to extract enough energy from whatever few particles were in space – to sustain him. Left to the shuttle, he'd be sent into permanent stasis, gradually slip into death. Alternatively, it could lower his oxygen until he became delirious, consciousness gone, then life. Really there were far worse ways to die merely from natural causes. He imagined – had he never taken on this latest project – living a perfectly comfortable life for two or more centuries. Then when the geno-treatment finally failed, and his mind fading to the confusion of too many memories; dying in the drawn-out way latterly so common. Death had become the enemy to be defeated without countenance. Dare not speak its name.

Scott Alendry had thought about this option for a few days now (such as they were, the twenty-four hour cycle), with each passing day it became more logical. He tried not to let emotion play a part in his reasoning; but it was there, pushing at his defences, like a walled off tide.

But one other option remained.

This vessel allowed the possibility for a deeper stasis if its computer reasoned that there was no attainable destination. Planet Earth was about four thousand light years from here. Scott argued that it would be more efficient on

resources if he were put into this uninterrupted state. The computer accepted his argument and left him with the option to decide when.

He decided now, fully aware of what was most likely to happen. How long could it continue to run? A century? Maybe a lot less. But the computer was never going to tell him the situation was futile, that was not within its remit. Instead it would work on the assumption that there was the possibility of rescue.

Scott decided to continue until the power finally ran out. The shuttle, travelling eventually at about a quarter of light speed (he guessed), becoming an unstoppable tomb.

Yes, there was something romantic in that notion.

*

Dr Heigener burst into her room – or rather the cell in which she'd been confined for over two months. He seemed to have his usual air of bumptiousness. It probably didn't even occur to him to knock, as if her privacy was of no importance. But she noticed there was something different about him: he was sweating, he looked uncomfortable.

'Deanna,' he said, in an unusually low-key voice. 'I have received notification from the central health authority that you are to be transferred to their government facility.'

'This can't be right,' Deanna said, in breathless shock. 'I'm not insane. This has all been a mistake.' And as she said those words she realised that must be what many of his patients truly believed.

'I am afraid it is not my decision to make,' he told her. He did sound genuinely rueful, looked disconsolate although, she reasoned, only because he had become personally attached to her – his special project.

'Can you at least tell me why? Surely I'm entitled to an explanation?'

'I am sorry, Deanna, but there is nothing more we can do for you here.'

About two seconds later someone else entered. The first thing Deanna noticed was how tall this man appeared, towering over the stocky figure of

Heigener. There was something about him that looked familiar but she couldn't quite place it; over the past two months she'd been given so many drug coshes that her memory had become like Swiss cheese, and the last infusion was still having some effect. One thing she felt certain of: this man was her worst nightmare.

Heigener himself reacted with a nervous gesture, moving abruptly to the side, like the man was his boss. Heigener cleared his throat and said, 'This is Dr Strendford from CHA. He will be your new supervisor.'

The man, without a word, approached Deanna with long awkward strides. She remained seated on the bed, eyeing him with the obvious fear and suspicion he would doubtless be expecting. The man stopped with a suddenness that made her flinch. 'Hello, Miss Flores,' he said in a voice that seemed a mix of northern European accents. 'Dr Heigener has said some encouraging things about your progress. However, we at the CHA feel your needs will be best accommodated at one of our centres.'

She was sure now she knew him from somewhere but still couldn't bring it to mind. She heard herself say to him, 'If Dr Heigener thinks I am making progress then perhaps I can continue here for a while longer.' How extraordinary, she thought, to actually be choosing here – the place she'd yearned so desperately to escape.

'To be frank, Miss Flores, your progress here has been slow and intermittent; our centre has the facilities to most adequately cater for your condition.'

'My condition?'

'Paranoid dissociative disorder.' He made her sound like some neatly labelled mental case.

'So I have no choice?'

'Please do not make this difficult for me or for yourself.'

'As much as I dislike being here, I refuse to leave with you.'

'Very well,' came his swift response. 'Then you leave me with no choice.' He looked to the side, it was then she noticed that Heigener had gone. He

called: ‘Nurse.’

The large woman appeared on cue with an infuser. Deanna did put up a struggle, but no amount of determination would have much effect in her weakened state.

Despair turned to oblivion.

*

‘Who am I?’

Torbin, for the first time, was looking at his reflection. The creation he saw was hideous in a way that defied that simple description. His form was not grotesque in a conventional sense: the exoskeleton had a perfect symmetry, a perfectly integrated system of servos overlaid with chrome plating, a design that bespoke maximum efficiency ... and strength. His head, a burnished silver oval with holes for his artificial eyes but just a slit for a mouth, he guessed also had the same ergonomic efficiency. He could no longer eat but still needed the nutrition from food for his brain, for which he had to use a nutrient extractor box – an outboard digester, in essence. His body, however, needed a simple electrical recharge from solar or the local mains supply.

And he was strong, phenomenally strong, breaking open a locked door like it was made from cardboard. People would fear him. Perhaps even the Elusivers might pause for thought before trying to take him on. If there was any crumb of comfort to be gained from his new condition it would be the thought of taking revenge on those who had taken him from his body. *Revenge, such a basic and powerful force. Perhaps this is my new given role.* He tried to focus on what really mattered, tried to rise above his emotion. He tried, but his thoughts kept turning dark.

For a while he didn’t hear the knock at his door; it was unusual these days when normally a comm link would sound and a visual image appear, or at the very least a buzz. But this place was so removed in every way from earthly civilisation.

Torbin opened the door, trying so carefully not to rip it off its twenty-first

century hinges. She stood there, a thinly disguised look of trepidation. Raiya was dressed in basic dark trousers and top, just tight enough to at least suggest the curves of her form. Funny how he wanted her even more now, after all that had happened, even though he would be afraid to touch her. Afraid of his own strength, of the monster he may become.

‘Raiya,’ came his relayed voice, in a neutral tone of acknowledgement – hiding his surprise.

‘Torbin.’ She looked up at what accounted for his face; more directly now. ‘I really think we should talk.’

‘Yes, perhaps we should.’ He realised he’d paused for too long before saying: ‘You’d better come in then.’

Torbin’s room was unusually tidy since he had brought nothing with him, only the tablet to relay his projected thoughts. He pulled up a chair on which she graciously sat. Her nervousness was still apparent.

She said, ‘I can hardly imagine how difficult this must be for you. Roidon has told me that it may be possible to grow a cloned body.’

‘Raiya, I do appreciate your concern. But let’s be realistic, shall we? There is neither the time nor the resources, or even the will – as far as Roidon is concerned. There is work to do, a planet to save.’

Raiya was looking at him with a mote of scepticism. ‘But afterwards you will want your life back.’

Torbin looked down, shook his head affectedly. ‘Life. I’ve not really had a life for many years. It seems that various ... others have used that to their advantage.’

‘What the Transcenders did to you was to suit their own warped agenda, although perhaps their intentions are not so far removed from ours.’

‘The greater good. I understand that.’

‘You know, Roidon thinks he can thwart the Elusivers with his device – without anyone’s assistance. That is, except his AI companion.’ She leaned in towards him. ‘I’ll let you into a secret. I think he is somewhat irked that you had help from an exiled Elusiver – no less, the very one he talked about having

sent the message those centuries ago.'

Torbin could not help but feel a warmth of satisfaction at hearing those words. 'So he thinks that Elusiver should be working with him? You said---'

'He's a complicated man for certain. But I know that even though he won't admit it, he seeks approval from the most powerful, in this case a Elusiver who is against his own kind; just some sign of endorsement. But since you were helped by that very Elusiver, it is you who has that endorsement.'

'Well, I do have some experience of them. It would make sense that I played an important role.'

'Tomorrow morning, then, you should speak to Roidon.'

'Yes. Yes I will.' But he knew Roidon well enough to know that the man had already set his own course, a plan that was to be enacted regardless. But now, Torbin felt he could find his own strategy, and his new ally would surely be there to offer assistance.

This beach seemed so familiar to her, and yet she could not name its location, with the palm trees in the distance it looked like somewhere in the south pacific. But she didn't care. The warmth of the sun, the sand beneath her bare feet made Deanna feel that this was the best place in the world to be. It was *paradise*.

And the man in the distance; she knew it was him. She could see him walking towards her at an ever faster pace, an urgency that was equalled only by her own.

By the time he had reached her he had been running and, like her, was out of breath.

'Deanna.' Her name a joyful exhalation. He was looking at her, hungrily. In her skimpy shorts and halter T-shirt, she was back to her old self, before the months of confinement that had left her wasted away to a pale skeletal shadow of this beautiful woman.

And Scott had clearly been looking after himself.

There was only one thing that could happen now. They would make love, right here, in this perfect moment.

But, cruelly, he was taken away from her. Again! They had only begun kissing, when he began to fade. His warm gentle touch became no more than the the residue of sand through her fingers and the briny air on her tongue. And what she most hated now: her mattress, in her cell.

How long this had been her reality, she had no real idea. Or, equally, how long she was being observed by the figure in the corner. The figure, possibly a man, was rising to his feet, reacting to her awareness of him. Deanna now doubted his human-ness. It was the face: it kept changing. Getting nearer it was even more apparent – the shifting configuration of his/its features, like they were processing through some photo warping program.

As the creature got to within a metre of her it started speaking in a deranged

throaty voice. ‘Jarwabble abbala. Medumation.’ Its face resolving now into something pink and humanoid.

Deanna jumped up from the bed. ‘I don’t understand what the fuck you’re saying!’ Almost shouting those words.

The creature now resembled a man in basic form, a mannequin dressed in a light shirt and dark trousers. It/he started speaking again but in a milder voice. ‘I must administer your medication. Please be still.’ As he spoke Deanna noticed he was now quite distinctly human, he even looked familiar, perhaps one of the doctors.

‘I have had enough medication,’ she protested. ‘You are not even my doctor. I saw your face change. You cannot fool me.’

‘Deanna, you have been having a psychotic episode,’ he said in a now gentle if condescending tone.

‘If I *am* psychotic it is only because of the drugs you’ve been giving me,’ she annunciated.

‘Deanna, your medication will prevent the hallucinations. You are lapsing because it is wearing off.’

‘Get away from me!’ she screamed. It was then someone else appeared; he was big and unpleasant looking, but possibly human.

She had no choice, no strength to resist, as the hypofuser was pressed against her bare arm.

And then, the fake doctor’s face began to change into a featureless pink blob of flesh. She wanted to shout, or at least scream, but this time nothing came out. A veil was being drawn across her, making her surroundings vague and seeming to recede. But she was not afraid now. Only gladness that this horrible place was going away, and a hope that she would return...

Inside this bubble time ran as near to normal as it was possible to measure. The word ‘bubble’ was not as precise as Roidon would’ve liked: The zero point field had extended not to some exact cut-off point, but rather only faded into the ‘penumbra’ of decelerated time. So far only the hanger was isolated. A video feed of the view outside did not give much away; at a glance the stars were static, the shadows – drawn in harsh contrast from craters – always seemed as fixed and sympathetically lifeless. Only telemetry told him that the deceleration effect was now encompassing almost the entire moon, the peak differential was currently 250 to 1. Harvo told him it was maximum safest, beyond which the AI claimed a potential catastrophe with a highest probability of a singularity expansion – essentially a black hole. It meant eight months within the field would be only a day on the outside. And how many days did they have left of Earth time with no slow-down field for protection? Another question he asked of Harvo, who had analysed all the astronomical data. The answer: ‘At the current observed temporal distortion rate, 174 hrs, or about two weeks, give or take – and there was certainly room for correction to what was just a provisional projection. Two weeks, and the people of Earth seemed oblivious to their fate, unable to comprehend what it meant to be wiped out from time, to no longer exist, to never – essentially – have existed at all. But did *he* really comprehend what that truly meant? If he did there would be no longer any need for philosophical inquiry; a knowledge of non-existence – the immutable contradiction in terms. *We merely cling to our senses, in the end*, he thought.

His attention was caught by an image on one of the video feeds, the gradual movement of a mechanical figure – Torbin Lyndau making his glacially slow way along the corridor connecting the hanger. He was clearly running, though, Roidon trusted Raiya had passed on the crucial info. He imagined Torbin would have his own fixed and ill-considered opinion on this experiment, and as

one field faded to another Torbin's rate of movement increased to this time frame.

Torbin buzzed the door comm. At least the man knew not to barge in.

Roidon silently admonished himself for still feeling a visceral anxiety at Torbin's presence, he had to remind himself that within that two metre high chromium armoured exoskeleton was still a human, albeit one that could rip any man to pieces in the time it took to say: 'Have mercy on me'.

Torbin, thankfully, didn't waste any time for insincere pleasantries. His first words: 'A dual generated field ... interesting ... and incredibly dangerous. Had you factored in the likely consequence of when it interacts with the temporal eradication field?' He now had a small mind-voice transcription device attached to his tritanium head.

'Torbin, I hope we can work together on this,' Roidon said in his mildest tone. 'I don't claim to have all the answers, only the certainty that it is our best chance of stopping our erasure from history.'

'Then really you have no idea of the dangers. Do you even know the likely dynamics of the TE field when it meets---?'

'Of course, simulations have been run based on Zorandi Entola's data. It shows a sixty-three per cent chance that my counter field – based on its current configuration – will slow the TE's temporal spread by an exponentially increased factor... that is, from our perspective.'

'I would be hoping for better odds than that,' Torbin said.

'I'm working on it. But I need someone to calibrate the graviton oscillator ... someone who doesn't have flesh and bones susceptible to being crushed.'

'Looks like you'll be needing me after all.'

*

Raiya's comm-tab buzzed, telling her of a relayed message from Earth. It was Leonard Heigener. The signal from where she now sat in the moon-base lounge was too weak and with the effect of Roidon's experiment the data burst

was too quick for the device to convert a call to recognisable speech. Having made a point of keeping up with Roidon's progress she knew that to be able to speak to Heigener she'd have to get beyond orbital range of the Moon.

She checked the feed of the hanger. Roidon was flitting about like some comical character from a speeded up old movie. And there was Torbin, equally animated. It was encouraging to see them so engaged in work together.

The last thing Roidon needed was to be disturbed. But this call request was constantly being repeated, although she understood that what to her seemed like minutes could easily be hours or days to Leonard. He'd probably be wondering why she had seemingly disappeared for what could have been weeks. By now she imagined he'd be actively searching for her, and likely with hired help. Raiya's discovered car with her missing must have surely been the catalyst for an extensive investigation. Somehow, there would be evidence leading to here, in spite of Roidon's assurances, more like his over-confidence. No, the best thing now was leave this place. Only now had it dawned on her what a liability she must be to the security of this location.

There were two vehicles parked in a crater converted into an enclosed bay but with a projected holo-field, making it seem like a normal crater.

She perused both of the craft but the only one she could use was Roidon's, given that she had a sample of his DNA; there had certainly been plenty of opportunities to obtain a sample, before each shower (they had seemed to demonstrate the truth in the effect of living in dangerous times). Roidon could have increased the security level so there'd be need of hand-print and iris scan, but again – such was his confidence that no one would find this place. For a moment she felt like she was betraying a trust, until a more rational overview once more held sway.

Roidon's craft, however, was having problems accepting her control. It needed another DNA sample (something it would normally scan subdermally from a finger using a laser plate) before it would comply. She was sure if this craft had been designed for a human pilot – rather than handed over, as it seemed, in a hurried way from his alien friend – it would be scanning her in a

far more extensive way.

After the fifth attempt at scanning Roidon's DNA sample it took off from the crater – in what she was sure was a begrudging way, as if the AI was more than just the gamma level that all but a very few vehicles have.

It was certainly quick; in less than a minute the moon had shrunk to a grapefruit size within the viewscreen, which meant she was beyond the range of Roidon's distortion field, but as a precaution she kept the ship moving further into space. By now the last call had gone to message, so she called Heigener back.

He answered within a few seconds. 'Raiya, it is so good to hear from you again. Where have you *been*?' Genuine concern, it seemed.

'Len ... it's complicated. I cannot explain right now.'

'Raiya. There is something I have to tell you.'

She waited a few seconds. 'Go on, Len. What is it?'

'I am sorry.'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry that it has come to this. For what is about to happen.' His voice was faltering.

'I don't understand.'

'Raiya, I hope you will forgive me one day ... if...'

He either hung up or was cut off.

It was then she noticed the red symbols on the viewscreen. The ship, in its androgynous voice, spoke. 'Please beware another vessel is approaching at eight hundred thousand kilometres per hour.'

This was trouble. 'Can we avoid it?' she asked.

'Enabling evasive manoeuvre. Approaching craft accelerating at eleven gees. Do you wish to continue to escape its advance?'

'Yes. As fast as you can.'

'Then be prepared. You may be rendered temporarily unconscious.'

But before it engaged, the ship gave an unnerving jolt.

'System damage,' it warned. 'Cannot engage full thrust until repairs---'

Another hit. ‘Can you get me away?’ she said almost hysterically.

‘Engine damage too extensive. Shields ineffective. Sending distress beacon to base.’

The approaching vessel was now visible, moving so rapidly it seemed as if it would crash into her craft. But then it stopped with an abruptness that made her jump. It then moved slowly closer.

‘Approaching vessel has now docked, and connected a passage this craft,’ the computer informed her, helpfully.

‘Can you stop whoever it is from boarding?’

‘I will maintain the hatch lock.’

There then followed a deadly silence, except the sound of her thundering heartbeat. Heigener knew, he is working for them. How *could* he?

‘Lock compromised.’

‘You must stop them,’ she pleaded.

No answer.

The deck door swished open. The man standing there she recognised.

‘Hello, Raiya,’ he said. ‘It seems you have some explaining to do.’

*

Torbin, in spite of his tritanium-alloy body, felt the increasing repulsion force as he got nearer the ‘slow-down’ field generator – an egg-timer shaped device from which jutted hundreds of rounded off silver cones and a network of cables and plastic pipes. It was difficult – even with his enhanced visual aid – to perceive it as a fixed object, but instead it blurred in an intense vibrational state. Trying to reach it was like pushing against an oncoming tsunami, minus the sound of rushing water. This was essentially anti-gravity; the generator was throwing out a field so powerful it would simply have fried a human brain long before reaching its core, if it were even possible to get so close. Roidon had until now relied on nanobots to make the refinements, but someone needed to attach a tertiary extraction pipe, and now there was no question of simply switching the device off. To refer to it as a machine was about the equivalent of

referring to himself as such. It could quite reasonably be described as sentient, in some ways intelligent beyond any human life.

Torbin, with the extraction pipe still clasped to his side, stared into the vibrating core. He could just make out a darker section dividing the top of the cone. Through a translucent portion he was sure he saw a brain. Still, it was possible the extreme forces were inducing hallucinations. Have to focus, he told himself, removing the pipe from his side belt. Even with his preternatural strength it took every ounce of effort to force the pipe into its slot at the base section. The relief as it clicked into place made him let go of his footing; just an easing of tension. And in that moment he was flung back at a speed too fast for his velocity meter to calculate. It must have taken less than a tenth of a second to hit the side wall of the hanger.

He blacked out. For how long he didn't know, but there were warning signals flashing in his HUD view. There was also information about damage to various parts of his shell, and the ongoing repair sequence to each of those. When he tried to get up, more information came up about the restrictions to his capacity. Strength: 40%, mobility: 24% – and so on.

I am a fucking robot. The poignancy of that was only offset by the thought of what this generator was becoming: too powerful to control – the greater monster than he. It didn't even gladden Torbin that Roidon would now depend on him for this device's maintenance if not control, or that the Roidon's creation was reckless beyond anything the B'tari might approve of – a rather misguided notion of fighting fire with fire.

Torbin finally got to his feet. He walked with machine stiffness along the perimeter towards the exit. The door was a conventional swing type (the main slide doors were firmly locked into place). Now he noticed the effort to open it against the increasing force; he figured no human could enter any more.

Roidon was just on the other side. Torbin, still fired up from his experience said to Roidon, 'The primary field is spreading much faster than your projection data. It won't stop unless you – I disable the collector.'

'Not a chance. It will do what it has to do. We'll leave it for now. There's

another matter of concern.’

‘More important than this?’

‘She’s gone.’

Torbin was struck by the way Roidon had said those words. With such dramatic force. He had no words in answer for a reply.

‘She’s taken my craft. I can’t track it from this area. I’ll have to take to take your vehicle.’

Of course, he wasn’t worried so much about Raiya as his precious B’tari craft. Torbin said, ‘I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you are needed here, just in case things get out of control.’

‘Things are already out of control. Besides, Harvo can monitor levels and at least try to adjust the input, which is about as much I can do now.’ He knew it was pointless to even bother mentioning that Roidon might just be unable to pilot the craft himself.

‘Fine, if you insist. I know you do care for her so.’

‘As much as you care for your B’tari craft.’

‘Indeed, that much!’

Neither had any idea just how long ago Raiya had left; time was skewed for at least the orbital distance of the Moon, the penumbra of dilation fading to some indefinable point. From their perspective – in the primary field bubble – her departure would have happened in normal time, and then dilated as she entered the penumbra, but unfortunately they would do the same. The only hope was that within the expanding primary bubble they could get some decent acceleration.

There was one further problem. Torbin didn’t claim to understand how the craft’s navigation system worked – it had simply got him to the base, already programmed. He tried: ‘give me navigational control.’ There was no response.

‘Don’t tell me: you have no idea how to use Elusiver technology,’ Roidon said, in his uniquely condescending way.

‘And you do?’

‘If your Elusiver friend won’t come back and help us, then – given that

ninety-plus percent of you is made from their technology – I suggest you link up with the nav system.’

How would you even know that was the case? Torbin thought.

And yet, when he positioned himself on the pilot’s seat and simply requested a link-up, it complied. He then gave it the ID of Roidon’s craft and it set about navigating along the trace emissions.

Roidon said, ‘I find it curious, how similar this craft is to my vessel, how it so readily identified mine – the B’tari’s.’

Torbin, although hooked in with the ship’s HUD and being fed an array of incomprehensible data, had no problem with understanding Roidon. He said, ‘You’re telling me you doubt I was ever helped by a Elusiver. Then who? A B’tari in disguise.’

‘I’m not questioning whether you were saved from oblivion in deep space by a Elusiver. But here – a Elusiver roaming about, a traitor in a world that’s been monitored and targeted.’

‘But what do we understand about their methods or motivations? They’re more alien than anything we could imagine.’ Torbin understood that Roidon would find it difficult to accept that he was in any way being helped by the very Elusiver who had originally sent the warning.

‘No,’ said Roidon, ‘but I understand logic for the purpose of survival.’

‘But surely it would be just as risky for a b’tari.’

‘The B’tari are rather good at disguises, and at not allowing you to think that they are helping ... or, influencing outcomes.’

‘So it could be a new low profile?’ Torbin wondered. ‘I’m not convinced.’ But now he was seriously beginning to have his doubts.

The craft was now heading back to Earth.....

‘Raiya,’ came the voice out of the darkness, a familiar voice. It was Leonard Heigener.

The light increased now. A series of blue-white wide focused beams overhead, on her face. She was recumbent on a surgical couch. She wasn’t restrained but she couldn’t move a muscle

‘Len?’ She rasped. The effort to even say his name.

‘Raiya, I can’t tell you how sorry I am that it has come to this.’ He actually sounded sincere.

‘Come to what?’ she managed.

‘To the point where we would have to stop you from making the biggest mistake of your life.’

‘Who’s we?’

‘Those who care about the security of this planet.’

She was now getting the impression that Leonard Heigener was not in his right mind. She had suspected for a while something was wrong with him, if only she could make that definitive judgement – in the way that would be so easily done with anyone else; but with him there had always been that blind spot. *I didn't want acknowledge it*, she thought.

She said, ‘Len. How can you believe I am a threat to the security of this planet?’

‘Because of the knowledge you carry. In the wrong hands that knowledge will cause panic, terror. Even if you don’t tell them, they will find out, they will follow you.’

‘Who, Len?’

‘The very people you have been studying – the Transcenders.’

‘But hardly anyone except their small number of followers would ever take them seriously.’

‘You know them better than that, Raiya. You know that they have the ear of

an increasingly sensationalist media – that they take the rumours and add evidence: pictures, recovered debris.’

‘People will just get on with their lives, until there's some official announcement. Nothing need change.’

‘But it is, Raiya, isn't it. Everything's changing.’

She said, ‘Len, I think you've been working too hard. You need a break.’

‘Don't tell me what I need,’ he snapped back at her. ‘I am not the one who's ruled by the vagueries of a case subject, who becomes emotionally involved to the point where all rational judgment ceases.’

‘I know what this is all about,’ she said with a forced calm. ‘Let's be upfront with each other. You want it to happen, for everything to end. Somehow they have got to you, twisted your mind, made you lose yourself – the man I used to know, respect ... and love.’

‘For a psychiatrist your understanding is somewhat rudimentary.’

‘I understand that the old Leonard Heigener is lost. And now, whoever – what ever you are, is now intolerable to you. At least, if there is a shred of the old Leonard still there, he could not bear it.’ She then added: ‘If only I had the chance to find that man who was so kind and warm---’

‘That's it,’ declared Heigener. ‘I'm done with you now.’ He then stepped back.

Someone else approached her, a man all too familiar ... and feared.

*

Since time was of the essence Roidon agreed that they should allow the craft to approach Earth at its maximum speed. Even with inertial compensators the forces inflicted on the two were enough to render Roidon unconscious. Torbin, with the benefit of his artificial body, felt the juddering as a mild discomfort.

They approached the location where Raiya had landed in Minnesota. Torbin had to instruct the computer to take them to somewhere less conspicuous.

In a wooded area about two kilometres away Torbin set out. He simply left Roidon in his passenger seat, as the man was beginning to come to. Torbin could reach the location in a fraction of the time it would take were he to keep back a pace for Roidon. It was the logical decision.

The trouble with being a 2.1 metre tall mechanical man is the tendency to be conspicuous, Torbin realised, even in this sparsely populated region. His tritanium form glinted in intermittent bursts as he ran in the June sun. It reminded him of something uncomfortable, an image from his memory. The Elusivers had made him witness a nightmare future: shiny mechanoids with wide pumping legs; machines that didn't just kill but assimilated people into their bodies as swiftly as a lizard takes in an insect. Now he was moving with that machine efficiency for those few kilometres.

In less than a minute Torbin had reached his destination. He surveyed a farmhouse-style building looming over the grounds in which Roidon's commandeered craft was parked. Now doubts were beginning to creep into his mind that he could not quite present into logical reasoning.

There were no obvious reasons for suspicion: no other vehicles. And even though this place looked benignly rustic, Torbin was sure he was being monitored. Yet, for lack of any apparent dangers, he continued on.

The door was not typical of a farmhouse: it had a comm system. To the side, a gold engraved plaque, which simply read: **Institute of psychiatry**.

Torbin felt a mote of relief; Raiya had returned to her place of work, it made perfect sense now. She'd wanted to return without questions or arguments; maybe just quietly slip back into her old life. Whatever her motives, Roidon was sure to have objected to his latest lover taking his craft, and some knowledge of his plan.

The question remained: should he announce his presence, just as any visitor?

Torbin stood by the entrance for a few minutes, analysing the faint hint of doubt troubling his mind, before he put his metal finger on the comm-pad. He said, 'Hello Raiya, it's Torbin. Are you there?' He felt mildly ridiculous having

to state what she'd doubtless already knew, although he guessed that most scanning technology could not examine his artificial form.

'Hello, Torbin. I am rather busy at the moment. But you can come in.' There was a cheeriness to her voice that seemed somehow odd to him.

'Thank you.' The thought in his mind: *does she consider me to be a true friend?*

He heard the lock on the door release, and strode through, acutely aware of the swooshing and whining servos pumping him along in what felt like an ungainly manner.

There was what seemed to be reception desk but with no one attending. He continued on along a corridor, passing one door with a plaque for Dr L. Heigener. And then: **Dr Raiya Fortenski, Research psychologist**. He knocked on the old oak door.

'Enter,' came her voice, more abrupt than he had expected.

He carefully pushed the door open, conscious of how easy it would be to break it off its hinges. It took a few seconds before he located her. She was recumbent on a couch, completely motionless, until she raised her head.

'Torbin.' She said his name in such a strained and desperate way that he knew something to be very wrong.

But before he could even speak to her he felt the most immense and crippling pain. Then: balance gone, no proprioception. His legs crumpled under him as if the strings had been cut on a marionette. The pain in his head was such that his vision had blurred, but he was still able to make out the form of the creature standing above him. He knew immediately it was not the exile Elusiver but the enemy. It was holding a device, pointing towards Torbin, inflicting the pain.

Its voice reached into his head as if patterned in the form of pain: 'You will tell us everything, Torbin. Everything!'

The room faded, as the agony subsided.

*

Roidon, now fully alert – and with only a moderate headache as the analgesics took effect – hefted his gillet-jacket off the passenger seat. Serious kit: Kevlar and titanium construction with an integrated cooling system (he wasn't going to bear unnecessary discomfort on a warm June day). Yet the majority of its weight was due to an effective arsenal of lethal weapons, filling the various pockets: guns, neutron grenades that could eliminate any living being within a kilometre radius, the largest of which: no bigger than his hand. The computer array weighed barely two grams. He hadn't left the base without the expectation of trouble, or even conflict. Torbin, on the other hand, was confident in his own unarmed mechanised self.

When Torbin had set off alone on his rescue mission, Roidon was drifting between a state of unconsciousness and a vague dreamlike awareness that his compatriot was about to do something foolhardy.

Almost an hour had gone by since Torbin had left. Roidon donned the jacket, its substantial weight a reassuring presence. He left the craft to find its own hiding place, a considerable distance away, and ran towards the location of his original craft.

Standing behind a wall to the farmhouse, Roidon's computer was feeding scanning data into his retinas. It would tell him anything about the number of occupants; there seemed to be some kind of field surrounding one particular room, not something a standard AI would pick up on or alert him to. Now it was obvious what had happened.

He figured there was only one way to enter this building: all guns blazing. At best he could target the enemy. At worst it would result in the death of anyone of flesh and blood including himself. As soon as he got to within the grounds, they'd know. So he had to act without sentiment, without hesitation; information of an extremely crucial nature was surely being extracted.

Yet he hesitated, considered the loss of life ... the loss of her life. Considered that this all could have been avoided if he'd not been so absorbed in his work.

Too late for that now, Roidon. In any case, if what he'd learned about the

Elusivers turned out to be correct then they would show no mercy in interrogation, if they even bothered with that rather than a mind trawl.

The only logical course of action was plain before him.

Still, something was holding him back. He stopped behind part of a wall that ended to a driveway, nearest the B'tari craft. This hesitation was for no other reason than human sentiment (the word *hesitation* repeated in his mind as a cruel taunt). It was likely Torbin would survive if he remained encased within his metal body. Raiya's death, however, was not guaranteed to be a swift one.

Her dying – what did it mean most? The loss of a lover? There would certainly be many others, younger, prettier. The loss of friend? He did value her friendship, but moreover he valued her empathy: When they were most intimate she seemed in tune with him, as if she could know his mind. That was imagined, of course, but at the time his endorphin-filled mind convinced him this was true; the only one who ever gave him that illusion. He understood entirely Torbin's infatuation with her: the belief he has in someone who may truly understand. If Torbin survived, he would never forgive Roidon for causing her death. That man, despite his intelligence, was unlikely to see beyond his emotions. Roidon had no choice now but to see beyond his own emotions, to put those emotional ties aside for the greater good.

So he removed a neutron grenade from his utility belt, primed its remote detonator; threw it towards the main building, then ran towards the B'tari craft.

Just as Roidon was about to send a detonation thought pattern to the grenade, he noticed there was someone standing before the craft. Someone he recognised.

Zardino held aloft the grenade as though it were a baseball he had just caught. He said, 'I could have left you to your *flawless* tactic ... and end up bitter twisted for wasting innocent lives. But I decided that cold logic is not always best.'

Roidon was at once aggravated and relieved. 'Just testing what it would take to make you show up again,' he lied.

'Well, you seemed to have been doing fine on your own ... at least up until

this point.’

‘Extreme circumstances, and all that.’ He said quickly.

‘Mnn ... what to do,’ Zardino said, sounding irritatingly unfazed by the situation, as if there were not really lives and the entire planet’s future at stake.

‘Don’t tell me: you’re running through what is acceptable according to that damn directive of yours.’

‘Wait in the craft,’ he said, realising there was little time for such a consideration. ‘I may not return, but I believe the others will.’

‘You think you can trade your life for theirs?’

‘I have much information that will be valuable to the enemy.’

‘And they believe you will offer that up?’

‘Yes.’

‘No. We both know that’s unlikely, since you lot are able to resist their mindscans – I’m sure. So that leaves only one other option. I go. And once they are released, you’ll know what to do.’

Zardino nodded gently like a Zen master ‘Time to be a hero, Roidon.’

Roidon strode away with a briskness that denied the opportunity of any farewell. Just a soldier doing his duty, as far as the B'tari were concerned – an expendable asset. It seemed obvious now that Zardino had no intention of going in that building; Roidon knew he was being played, albeit by a mutual understanding.

As he approached the main entrance Roidon imagined his form being analysed, the enemy determining his value. He put his finger on the door comm and waited.

‘Please state the purpose for your visit.’ A male voice, no detectable accent.

‘I wish to trade myself for your prisoners.’

There was silence for a while; Roidon half-expected a derisory laugh of the classic villain, but it didn’t come.

Eventually: ‘Prisoners?’

‘I know you have them; the masking field is not effective against my technology.’

‘Roidon Chanley, why would you offer yourself up if this was not some kind of ruse?’

‘My information is more valuable than your two prisoners.’

‘Then where is the logic in what you propose? Surely this is about more than the lives of two humans?’

‘It is about the life of the woman I love.’

Now came the much anticipated laugh, though not quite as villainous as he expected, more muted. Then: ‘You expect me to believe that? Roidon Chanley sacrificing himself for a woman – out of *love*?’ The voice reeked with cynicism, and the presumption clearly intended to be antagonising.

‘I am prepared to risk that even with my knowledge you will not be able to stop what has already begun. Without it, you haven’t a hope.’

‘Interesting. But how do you know that once you enter I would honour my side of the deal?’

‘If you don’t, I will resist the mindscan with every ounce of my being.’

Without another word the door opened. As soon as Roidon stepped through he was grabbed by the arm, then frogmarched along a corridor so dark he could barely identify anything about the being – human or not – other than he was roughly Roidon’s height, masked and carrying a gun.

After about forty wordless seconds they arrived at a room that looked like an office, but equipped more like an operating theatre: spot lights positioned over the woman he knew to be Raiya, recumbent on a couch. The lights were so bright it was clear why she could barely open her eyes without being blinded. At the other side of the room sat the metal figure of Torbin. The chair he sat in, even more incongruous: dark metal cross panels, designed for strength. Thick steel cuff locks, a chest brace and his servo powered legs – equally secured. But there were also cables attached to him at various points. Neither of the two were moving, as if unconscious.

Another masked man, taller and thinner, approached him. He said, ‘Are you prepared to submit yourself for a mind trawl?’ He might as well have been asking if he wanted a drink, for the matter-of-fact enquiring tone.

‘If you let them go, you can scan every nanometre of my mind.’ Roidon surveyed about the room. ‘In any case, there doesn’t seem to be enough equipment for a third recipient,’ he observed.

‘In ... *any* case they were no more than bargaining chips.’ He released the restrains from Torbin; the assistant hefted his body onto a trolley and wheeled him out. ‘Don’t worry,’ the man continued, ‘He is merely unconscious, though he will wake up confused and amnesic. Likewise for your girlfriend. Your arrival, however, has saved them from any permanent brain damage.’

Once Raiya had also been carried out, Roidon was told to sit on the chair.

‘Actually,’ the being said, once the restraints had been locked. ‘Any resistance will be futile. And you may not survive.’

Roidon, with an electrode frame over his head, began to feel the intrusive pressure of the process. Surely any second now this place would blow to smithereens, or at least something akin to his neutron grenade to take out every living being.

But he continued waiting, the pressure increasing, his mind being forced to bring up images of the last few days, his work, his time with Raiya, it was laid out for them as if his mind were a flash drive to be plundered at will.

Had Zardino been detected, prevented? Or had he no intention of delivering on the only logical course of action? Roidon’s broken mind could not possibly determine.

*

When he opened his eyes he saw shapes that were meaningless for a few seconds, until they then became recognised as flowers and trees, like a garden, only bigger. But he wasn't alone. A woman's voice nearby; distressed. She was saying, ‘Who are you?’ with some expression.

He wasn't sure, which was the curious thing. He didn't recognise the woman either. But when he looked down at himself, he gasped in much the same way as the woman had. He was not a man at all. This machine body was like

something he had seen in a movie he couldn't quite name, it was at once hideous and magnificent. Only one explanation then: this must be a dream. Perhaps the woman was someone he had to save.

He told her not to be alarmed, that he would help her.

She said, 'Leave me the hell alone,' quite emphatically.

He pushed himself up with a surreal speed, only to cause further alarm to the woman. 'Please,' he assured her, 'I am not here to hurt you.' It was at that point he noticed a large shiny object: a form of transport, he reasoned. Perhaps in this dream he was supposed to get her inside it (and then he would transform back into a human in order to seduce her). But she had started to run away from him. As she got beyond the ship, a man appeared – in a white suit. He stopped the woman, was explaining something to her. She seemed to have calmed somewhat. The man then approached Torbin; he seemed to have an air of confidence. Torbin wondered if he was the enemy he had to destroy, but put the thought aside as the man spoke. 'Torbin, please listen to what I have to say because it will be the truth. I am here to help you. Your memory has been affected.' The man then indicated towards his vessel. 'We need to leave immediately; this is a highly dangerous place.'

The woman had already entered the craft when Torbin stepped through, waiting with bemusement as a seat formed out of what looked like a storage area – to fit his metal bulk. They lifted off with a force that caused the woman to gasp.

After they had left the earth's atmosphere, Torbin questioned the man about how he could have got this strange body; he still held to the notion this was not real, either a dream or a simulation of reality.

The man, seated in front, turned his curiously flawless head sideways. 'It was given to you for a specific purpose – to defeat an enemy.' That confirmed his belief.

'An enemy? Sounds like something from action movie.' He thought about how to test the logical limits of this dream.

'They are called the Elusivers, and they are now about to take the

advantage, they have the man who was working on our best defence strategy.'

'Sounds like it's going to be fun.'

'Fun?' Zardino queried. 'This is not about having fun!'

'Oh please. You don't expect me to accept this is in any way reality?'

'Torbin, what you are currently experiencing is sense-dissociative disorder. In other words, your artificial body is making you feel removed from being real.'

'I could have come up with that explanation.'

The woman then turned towards him. 'It could also be that you are in denial.'

'Oh, don't tell me; you're a psychiatrist, right?' He felt irked for a few seconds, but then figured it made sense to have someone to convince him.

'I can tell you my name is Raiya,' she told him 'Beyond that... Like you there is something wrong with my memory.'

Torbin rather liked the idea of her being a psychiatrist – for reasons he was not quite sure.

After about a forty minute journey, in which the man explained to Raiya her current situation, they landed in a moon-crater, which then became a sealed hanger.

The man – who (preposterously) called himself Zardino – said, 'If you want to continue living then you must follow my instructions.'

'Sounds like a threat,' Torbin remarked.

'It is simply a statement of fact.'

Torbin followed Zardino until they reached an incongruous-looking steel door. '

'Through there is a device so powerful it can kill a man in less than a second. The only way to control it is by direct access.'

'Sounds like just the job for me.' By now there were some niggling doubts about the unreality of his experience; after the assurances from Zardino, he was at least entertaining the notion of there being genuine ramifications.

A wheeled drone approached with a container-drum on its platform,

stopping just behind them. Zardino unfastened the lid to reveal a obsidian black, smoothly tapered cylinder, festooned with randomly spaced nodules.

Zardino backed away from the device and said to Torbin, 'I would hand it over to you ... if it didn't weigh over a ton. But this was designed for you.'

'What is it?' Torbin asked, lifting it smoothly out of the container as if it were no more than a cylinder of water.

'We call it a graviton refraction modulator. It will enable a more precise control of the field intensity.'

'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

'That's a shame given that you designed it.'

Torbin looked at the man, almost dropping the device on the other's foot. 'Yet I have no memory.'

'Well, when I said ... at least you had a big role in its principle design. It is something the enemy may have extracted from your mind, and thus be working flat out to develop a counter measure.'

'Which means we don't have long.'

'I will guide you through its installation.'

The door to the lab was fitted with a set of hydraulics, but it still need some help from Torbin to push open. It was a large room, much like a hanger, perhaps a hundred metre walk to get to the main field generator. Even near the entrance Torbin felt the repulsion force. As he walked further in, the modulator cradled in one arm that seemed to be locked firm, the whining noise of his leg servos made him think of some deadly robot intent on its programmed mission.

Up to ten metres from the field generator, the pressure felt like a large balloon was inflating from its centre. His shell didn't seem to feel pain, which was just as well since he imagined his straining servos would be telling him the effort was dangerously too much. Every step now was a herculean effort. Connected to a steel utility belt was something akin to a winch. His HUD display indicated he was within range. When it locked on to target it fired, the explosive force so immense it made him fly back, and for a split second he thought he would fall all the way back to the side and lose hold of the device,

but the cable had found its target on a bar of the surrounding cage, stalling him so abruptly it seemed as if his steel belt would rip off. Then, slowly, he was winched in until within working distance of the field generator.

Text on his HUD indicated a comm link, but the ‘Toooooorb ...’ of a voice that came through was too slow to perceive as words.

‘I don’t understand,’ Torbin enunciated as slowly as he thought he could be understood.

After a few minutes the instruction came as text – a program, and then he knew what to do. He re-routed various pipes and massively insulated cables so that the modulator device became an intermediary between the generator and the power grid, all the while the unnerving sight of sparks flying and coolant vapour escaping.

After half an hour the monitor program confirmed Torbin had been successful; the winch unwound until he reached the exit.

Mission accomplished. Yet his feeling of satisfaction was soon washed away in the emergency red glow of the corridor, and turned fully to panic by a siren.

*

There were no signs of an invasion, beyond the sounding of a klaxon and what Zardino had told Raiya of an unidentifiable security breach. The warning came, it seemed, a few seconds after Torbin passed through the door of the lab, yet Zardino assured her that Torbin’s task was of such importance that he would have to continue, no doubt oblivious. Even with the advantage of the time differential Raiya knew he would not have time to escape; from their perspective he’d take almost a minute to complete the task. They had to be out in ten seconds.

They were already at orbital distance from the moon, still within the temporal dilation field, which meant events beyond were happening at a faster rate.

Zardino in the seat next to Raiya said, ‘You know logically we had no

choice. These aliens have unlimited resources. Their only goal is to destroy the base.'

'Then ... *logically* Torbin does not have a chance.'

'Not necessarily. If he stays near the field generator he may be protected. I can't think of any type of missile that's capable of reaching it.'

'Don't you have weapons at the base?'

'For what it's worth, yes. I only hope Torbin does not think he can defend himself with one.'

'You're supposed to be his protector. And yet you abandon him.'

'I'm not sure they intend to kill him, Raiya. If they had wanted to, then he would be dead already. He's had some kind of connection with them – for decades now.'

'Because he was useful to them?'

'I don't think it was ever as simple as that.'

'I think I'm starting to remember him.'

*

Torbin remained still, half way along the corridor. He knew that much beyond this point time ran about two hundred and fifty times slower. At least here he had the advantage of a quick reaction. But what good was that against an enemy he could not see? The control room, which should now be connected with the device, was still within the 'slow-down' penumbra.

He ran towards the corridor's end, remembering his one glimpse of the control room after arrival: a side door. The door had a touch pad and an iris recognition. He imagined having to force his way in, but he tried the conventional method. Surprisingly, it accepted his ident and slid open. The lights were off until he entered, illuminating the room in clinical brightness. He had no idea how to operate the controls. In desperation he said to the facing display: 'Increase field power.'

'Yes, Torbin,' came the highly synthetic male voice. 'Do you wish me to use Zardino's recommended maximum?' The voice was coming from a small

box situated in a recess amid all the display graphics.

‘Yes!’

‘Power now at recommended maximum.’ A screen at the front of the box had an oscillating wave in sync with the voice. It continued: ‘I must warn you that the security of the base has been compromised.’

‘By what?’

‘Cannot identify.’

‘Do you have a feed of it?’ But as he said those words the display on the box disappeared as if a power cable had been pulled. Power failure confirmed a few seconds later when every other light winked out, replaced by an emergency red glow.

Before he even looked, Torbin knew it was there. When he turned to look at the dark and spindly figure he hoped it would be his exiled ally. But there was a difference; not some identifiable difference in physical appearance, more the way in which it seemed to loom over him, despite his own two metre height. It wanted to intimidate.

Torbin said to the creature, ‘You’re too late. It’s done.’ He remembered now: the work he’d been doing, the fail safes they ensured against this very occurrence – that once the process was in train it could not be stopped by simply cutting the power.

‘We know everything, Torbin,’ the creature said in a voice that was not much more than a whisper. ‘Roidon’s mind was like an open book.’

‘But he didn’t know everything. The only one who knows every detail is currently a long way from here.’

‘We always knew you were flawed. Even in your current form, you are powerless against us.’

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s not about me any more.’

The creature stepped forward. ‘Yet you value your importance in this struggle against the inevitable.’

‘Nothing’s inevitable.’

‘Your death is. What you are doing here is merely delaying it.’

‘No, if anything is, it is our triumph against your plan for annihilation.’

‘Torbin, do you want to know why you are still alive?’

‘Because I am a useful subject to be manipulated for your own ends.’

‘Because, unlike so much human behaviour throughout history, we do not kill those who oppose us simply because we can. We want to make them realise the errors of their ways.’

‘Yes you are so morally superior to we mere humans.’

‘After all we have shown you, you see us as the malign power.’

‘Is that any surprise?’

The creature lifted a spindly arm. Everything faded, it was as if the lights of an auditorium were dimming. To reveal: others like him – cybernetic humans. A community. Two were facing each other, one extended a tendril that connected with the other. Torbin then knew this was an act of intimacy. And it seemed that just at the moment of his comprehension the scene changed. There were people, a frightened screaming boy being taken from a dormitory by a cyborg similar in appearance to himself, then deposited in something akin to an operating theatre. The child now seemed stunned into silence as the cyborg extended its tendril through the boy’s eye socket. This time Torbin sensed the purpose was far more sinister. Yet – despite the foreboding – what happened next was no less shocking: the child’s face changed colour, to a lifeless grey, metallic grey. Other metallic nodules formed around the boy’s neck; the material of his pyjamas becoming a titanium shell. His face developed metal ridges.

Torbin had seen enough; he imagined he was yelling for it to stop. At least it seemed the Elusiver had acknowledged this. Torbin was back in the red-bathed control room.

The Elusiver was still standing before him. ‘You – the human race – have learned nothing that matters.’

‘Then *educate* us,’ he said – or rather he thought the words. He couldn’t be sure.

‘We tried, but you refuse to listen. Humans will not change their

motivations and desires.’

‘Fine. You washed your hands of us. Then leave us be.’

A few seconds later the Elusiver vanished into the air.

The control room was still bathed in red, running on the emergency generator. He headed back towards the lab, the eerie red glow of the corridor made it seem all the more intimidating. The door stuttered in its opening; the force from the device had increased, just as he'd hoped. If all had gone to plan the protective (zero point) bubble would soon encompass the earth, with the penumbra of slowed time stretching beyond the solar system. But the noises of distant explosions suggested that the Elusivers were not about to let that happen.

Torbin ran back towards the control room. All systems were still down, he was blind to the outside.

After twenty seconds of considering his likely fate, Torbin headed for the exit. The airlock still forced him to wait while it cycled. The hatch opened by simply pushing down a lever; doing so slowly, still not sure of the measure of his own strength. As it opened, he saw a mass of stars. Then a slight disorientation: he expected to see the moonscape below where he remembered. But when he looked down there were just more stars. The Moon ... had gone!

Torbin collapsed to the floor. He crawled on his hands and steel-capped knees and peered over the edge. Below, the base was still moon rock, like a short inverted mountain. It may well have been enough to keep the base in one piece if it were not for the spreading cracks. Torbin watched in horrified fascination as a chunk of moon broke away, followed by more at its periphery.

The true reality of the situation hadn't quite struck him until this moment: the base was now separated from the moon; the moon, the Earth, was no where to be seen; he was stranded in a structure that was in the process of becoming ... *fragmented*.

He went back inside the base, slumped in the corridor, and wondered about the likelihood of his death. For sure it would not be swift. His tritanium alloy body was designed to preserve life at all costs; resistant to deprivation of air, it

was safer than being in a standard pressure suit, which would never have held against the immense – bone crushing – pressure from the field device, Yet he still felt a sense of being more vulnerable than a human. Something seemed bound too give and then he'd be subjected to suffering far worse than any human should endure.

The Elusivers: they'd never simply allow me to die.

*

From a distance of twelve million kilometres from the Moon, they watched on a thousand times magnified viewscreen as the Elusiver ship fired its salvo of missiles. Zardino had taken them just beyond the slow-down penumbra. Watching the creeping advance of each missile made them seem strangely benign to Raiya. The two attacking ships appeared not to have moved in the last few minutes (of her local time).

But then, finally, one of those warheads massively accelerated before hitting its target, closely followed by two more. They could never destroy the base; Zardino assured her off that. Only, what happened seemed all the more shocking.

Raiya said to Zardino: 'We can't just sit here and watch. We have to do something.'

The base was separating from the moon, the shattering moon-rock mostly obscured in a cloud of dust, yet it was clear enough that the warheads had penetrated so deeply that part of the Moon had gone with the base.

'If I took the ship anywhere nearer then we enter their time frame.'

'What about your people, where are they when it matters?'

'My *people*,' Zardino replied, uncharacteristically stern, 'are no doubt consulting with the council, I expect. I have been acting independently of the Temporal Directive; my interference with human affairs will not be viewed favourably.'

'Don't talk to me about human affairs.'

The b'tari looked at her quizzically for a brief moment.

‘The enemy will want us to try and rescue Torbin,’ Zardino said. ‘Once we are within their frame of reference they can destroy us.’

‘So we sit back and watch Torbin drift into oblivion.’

‘If only it were merely a case of drifting.’ Zardino indicated towards the screen. More missiles were heading towards the base, and then within a certain proximity, appearing to accelerate – or in reality entering the zero point bubble. They exploded a short distance from the rocky underside.

‘Everything's being repelled, so they can't destroy the base,’ Raiya noted.

‘No, but they can push it further out. They'll just continue the salvo until the field generator is far enough from Earth until---’

‘Until the whole slow-down field is far enough away to no longer affect the Earth,’ Raiya completed.

‘Exactly.’

‘Torbin will think of something. He won't just sit there and accept his fate.’

‘I'm sure Torbin would appreciate your belief in him.’

Raiya remained silent.

*

For a few seconds he remained still and watched as the inner airlock door began to crack. The ordinance were not actually hitting the base itself, such was the force of the field device, but they were damn close. Close enough that the explosions created a judder. And slowly but surely the cracks around the airlock door were spreading and branching, like a windscreen breaking in slow motion. Of course, if for some reason the device were to lose power, enough that one of those bombs was able to hit, then the result would be total annihilation. At least it would be a quick death, rather than a gradual ebbing away of whatever it is that now constituted life.

‘Do something,’ Torbin told himself, if only to banish the despondency.

He got up off the floor. Already air was escaping from the base, through multiple branching cracks. Not that he needed to breathe in a human way, since his metal shell maintained a constantly protected environment for his

brain – a reserve store that appeared as the one remaining green bar.

He knew the device was still increasing its power; the longer he remained here the less likely his chance of being able to move at all. Even now the effort was noticeable. He imagined anyone of flesh and blood being crushed already against the far bulkhead. That sense of pushing against a tide. But he forced himself on until he got to the central lab door. It's auto mechanism no longer had enough power; the addition of his own strength was only just adequate – his HUD warning him in flashing red about energy depletion. He was running on reserves. Once he had got through that door there would be no returning.

All the original peripheral monitoring equipment had been uprooted from its moorings, flat against the far wall; now pathetic-looking screens and console panel all broken up. His metal feet were utilising the last of their electromagnetic grips. But now, only forty metres away from the device, his power reserves were draining. The realisation struck that his chances of making the distance were almost non-existent.

Torbin pushed on for about another twenty metres, and then – he simply stopped. His HUD told him there was in effect no fuel left in the tank, power was being diverted to essential systems. His feet were still held by the last vestige of their electromagnetic force.

Could the Elusivers really just leave him to die? Or save him when he had nothing left? He imagined that in their muted way they'd delight in recapturing him at his most vulnerable point.

He reasoned that eventually when the last of his power ceased he would fade to a slow death against the far wall, until finally going off line like one of those monitors. He already felt himself fading. This final will for survival, the human element within the machine, succumbing to basic physics – the flaw in its design. His only consolation: the thought of how his original human self would be no more than mush against that wall. However quick, that was never the preferable way to die.

Torbin at first thought he'd imagined it, that the lessening of the force was merely an illusion due to his pressure sensor going off line. But no; he was now

able to stand up straight, and even make a few tentative steps forward, motor systems running on what were the equivalent of fumes. He kept going for another ten metres, and then fired off the grapple. It reached the device with ease, fixing itself to the surrounding frame. As soon as that happened Torbin found himself being forced to the cable's taut limit. It then winched him slowly towards the device.

With zero mechanical power left, he was completely at its mercy.

Had it known he was in trouble? There was undoubtedly an intelligence there. The device had a neural structure; it had a sense of self-preservation, but it had no reason to save Torbin ... unless it thought he could be useful.

When he looked closer he noticed the surrounding frame had a cylindrical object attached, a plastic band, wrapped around it – a loudspeaker. He knew Roidon had some strange obsession with his original device, believing it to possess some preternatural sentience.

Torbin said to it, 'Do you know who I am?' It didn't answer, perhaps it was an unnecessary question, so he tried again. 'Please. Tell me what I need to do.'

'Integrate.' The voice was as metallic as the metal frame, utterly without any semblance of human expression.

'How?'

'Closer.'

Torbin tried to reason what use it would make of him, whether he'd even survive. But only for a few seconds. He allowed himself to be winched further towards the vibrating device.

At this point his vision became so distorted he couldn't make out what was happening to him, but the sound of drilling was unmistakable – and the stark realisation that he was in the presence of a sentient lifeform.

His awareness dimmed for some indeterminate time.

Then there were stars; the attacking Elusiver ships. When Torbin looked down he even saw himself, his metal torso, tethered but in space. How could this be, when he was with the device?

The Elusiver ships were still firing, aiming in his direction. Yet their

missiles did not hit him; exploding nearby, as they had previously done. And he had not the slightest sense of fear; fear was something Torbin would have felt – even that remaining nub in the machine body. But he was not Torbin any more, Torbin was merely a component of the greater whole.

The process of merging felt complete. Now he truly understood.

This seemed to be a character from a nightmare: its reptilian face loomed over him. Scott immediately believed it to be hostile. But the moment he began to feel that biochemical response of fear, the creature changed to something more benign; this more human face had superimposed on the original until becoming opaquely dominant.

Scott was still recumbent on the ship's couch, the interface array gone. Instead this now very human-looking being peered over at him.

The being spoke to him. 'Do you know how long you have been in transit?' The voice was soft and devoid any distinguishing accent, which somehow fitted the androgynous features.

'No,' Scott replied, vaguely.

'Sixty-two of your Earth years.'

'Then I'm too late.'

'That would be a moot term at this moment. Your gravitenetic shield was about to collapse. If it had done so you would have been erased from this continuum.'

'Graviten.... I don't understand,' he admitted.

'This is *our* technology, it is how we detected your craft.' The being then told him about the temporal eradication wave. 'You are currently three thousand nine hundred and seventy light years from your home planet,' the being explained. 'We cannot return you home, since the council ruled we are forbidden from that sector.'

'It doesn't matter anyway. There would be nothing for me, nothing I care about.'

'There is, however, an alternative that will not break the rules of the temporal Directive. But it would mean sacrificing your memory.'

'Give it to me.'

Within two hours Scott was once more connected to the ship's interface. It

wasn't strictly necessary since the computer was already programmed to lower its now rejuvenated shield for the sixteen picoseconds required – or rather estimated – to expose Scott to the temporal eradication wave. At least in this interface he'd know exactly when the time arrived. Somehow he alone would be affected enough to be returned, leaving the ship to be reclaimed by the alien (who insisted it was their rightful property).

As the countdown reached one minute, the doubt popped up in Scott's mind and seemed to intensify with each passing second: was this just a ruse to get him to vacate the ship? Did this alien really care, let alone know what would be the correct timing? Surely they need to have experimented first, and the cost of failure too much to risk it. And so he may simply be erased from all existence. Never to have been. But would he be remembered? *Yes*, he assured himself, his life had already happened; that can never change.

Ten seconds.

Five.

Two.

He wobbled, then the bike toppled over. He hit the ground hard, feeling ridiculous. *Why did I suddenly stop?* There were no obstacles, just this most peculiar thought that he had followed this exact same path before – to the millimetre. An absurd thought, he reasoned.

When Scott got back on the bike he wanted to tell someone, so strong was this sense of *deja vu*, but he imagined his friends would laugh, his mum may well consider he needed to see a counsellor

No. No one should know about this.

Scott continued his ride, and forced himself to think about his latest architecture degree project. This was his first year, and it was not going well. He was an artist really. Art college had been his place of endless possibility, in contrast to the constraining parameters of university. And in college was that beautiful girl who always seemed to make the class more appealing. Not that he had ever the courage to engage her in conversation, at least no more than a few words relating to the course work. And she never approached him. Deanna

was popular: here natives were cool, exotic certainly to him, even though her ancestry was from this country. Since Scott had only been in Canada for the last four years of his life, her differentness made her seem all the more desirable. All the more unobtainable.

Scott continued on, still with that strange feeling of *deja vu*, when something happened he was not expecting. He very nearly fell off his bike once again. The man had instantly appeared right in front of him, looking incongruous in a white suit jacket.

The man said, 'Please do not be alarmed, I am here to help you.' He put out his palm and then put it to his mouth in a strangely ominous gesture. He added: 'There has been a mistake; you should not be here.'

Scott started to back away from the weirdo; except that became awkward, with his bike held by its handlebars. The man put out his hand again. 'No, wait. You don't understand. Any divergent actions can have a serious consequence.'

'Who are you? What do you want from me?'

'I am someone who monitors temporal displacements. One of my ... people was responsible for sending you here, in this time – an error in a calculation.'

'I don't remember---'

'You wouldn't. And normally that would not be a problem: you'd simply relive your past, completely unaware of having come from the future. Except the process for an individual isn't perfect – there are feed-throughs, echoes of your memories that aren't governed by the effects of mass.'

'I'm sorry,' Scott said, still wanting to get away and yet strangely compelled. 'I don't understand what you're telling me – that I'm in the wrong *time*?'

'It is not as simple as being in the wrong time. You have been in the right time in all the other instances. And from then you lived through your life, making all the same choices, until finally ...' The man sighed, then added: 'You get to the same point. But they continue to get their calculations wrong.'

'Then if they got their calculations *right* what time would I be sent back to?'

‘That isn’t important for now. What matters is that this time line is not corrupted. But since the feed-through has become reinforced those proto-memories will need to be removed.’

‘But surely messing about with my brain would itself corrupt the time line. And besides, it seems *you* ’ve already corrupted the time line.’

‘We can be very precise in removing any memories. It is our role to protect the integrity of history.’

‘Seriously. I will not breathe a word, if you just let me be on my way. I don’t believe anything you’ve said in any case.’

‘I don’t believe *you* are telling the truth.’ The man produced a small grey hand-held device and pointed it at Scott.

The world went blank.

From Zardino's ship they observed the disintegrating Moon base. Now there only remained a part of the core lab section, but even *that* was breaking apart. Yet within the ruins the device appeared intact. Zardino had increased magnification to full. Floating in front of it was the metal form of Torbin. Zardino interpreted the strange symbols, explaining to Raiya what it all meant. The Moon base was now spinning as regularly as a Cepheid variable, it had drifted over a million kilometres since the first strike. Yet the slow-down penumbra had expanded to encompass as far as the orbit of Mars. The only problem was the zero-point field, designed to envelope the Earth in normal time, now only covered about a third of the planet.

Another flurry of missiles had just crept passed their dilated zone to massively accelerate for a few seconds before exploding at what seemed like a deadly range.

'They seem to be adapting to the repulsion field,' commented Zardino.

'Just tell me one thing: can you stop them?'

'Honest answer: I don't know.' He shrugged his shoulders in a very human-like way. 'I could do with assistance from my associates. Fact is, they've abandoned me. I'm guessing the council is in a crisis session. That could certainly take hours.'

'And we don't have hours, do we? So we do something now.'

'Such as getting that device back to the Moon, I know.'

Raiya was thinking of Torbin, right there in the midst of it all, held in a constant spin like a faithful satellite. Helpless, frightened, or perhaps resigned.

Zardino appeared deep in thought, until he looked over at her. 'I'm taking you back to Earth,' he said firmly. 'Things must be very confusing there. People in a state of panic.'

'Fine. I'm sure I can calm them all.' She couldn't be sure he'd get the sarcasm, rather than think that was just a massively deluded statement.

Zardino leaned back in his seat. ‘You can try to explain the situation. But there is something else I need you to do. Rescue Roidon.’

‘Hmm, you don't ask much, do you.’ Raiya thought back to the time when Roidon had found her, trapped in a crashed vehicle. He was so sure of himself, so sure that he knew how to take care of her. It was a presumptuousness that in him appeared uncommonly attractive. Raiya had felt like a twenty-year-old again, being rescued in a way that seemed to develop into a fantasy.

And what of her rescuing *him*?

Zardino took the craft at some inertia-belying speed towards Earth. As they slowed for orbital insertion, Raiya thought the world looked as it ever did: the swirls of cloud over the green and brown continents, the sheen of the ocean, as serene as ever. It was hard to imagine the chaos currently taking place. It only became apparent when Zardino took them down a few thousand metres above Russia, above an area where the zero-point field faded to the penumbra of slowed time. Vehicles flying through it appeared to slow to a fraction of their speed. Taking them further down, in the town it became even more surreal: there were people running as if escaping from a tsunami, yet the effect of time slowing down was hardly noticeable.

‘On the ground the effect is only apparent when using communication such as the cell network,’ said Zardino. ‘By now people will know something strange is happening, the broadcasters will be speculating; they will be telling the populous where it is occurring, and so the people are running towards the zero-point zone.’

‘Then they need to know what's really happening. We can send a message to their networks.’

‘How good is your Russian, Raiya?’

‘Non existent.’

‘Then I need to find a translation program. In the meantime I will take you back to the place you were trying to visit.’

For a few seconds she didn't know what he meant. ‘The Transcender's compound?’

‘Yes. They can offer you protection and assistance.’

She stared at him intensely. ‘They work for you? Parmayan *works* for you?’

‘Let's just say we share a common interest.’

‘My enemy's enemy.’

*

Watching the constant flurry of missiles explode ever closer Torbin's certainty began to ebb away. Even though the device was maintaining full power, the field expanding, each strike was breaking away the last remaining section of rock beneath him. Now, above, his form still tethered to the upturned cone of the field generator and spinning slowly with it, dragged along in its cosmic dance. Stars rotated; in any other circumstance that would have been nauseating, but somehow he was beyond such human frailties.

The old Torbin would have been terrified. That fear he knew should exist was now just an observation of some base human response, like he was in the thrall of a potent barbiturate drug. But Torbin felt something beyond a simple drug effect: an *expansion* of his consciousness.

The Elusivers had seemed all powerful, like gods. Now he was seeing them as they truly were: a civilisation perhaps a millennia ahead of humans, yet still flesh and blood; fearful, paranoid about their perceived threats from humanoid races displaying a potential for galactic spread. How much did they fear the potential challenge of machine life – the sentience borne out of silicon that evolved to encompass the biological? The machines could link in to every database, they were part of those early data storage devices. Now the Elusivers' lives were laid out bare before him. But rather than the demigods of his nightmares, these appeared humanoid. A family in an idyllic garden, children playing. They could have been human, if not for their elongated forms. How were these the same beings as the dark, malevolent creatures that once dissected him like some lab rat? Now the Elusivers' attempts to push away the only real challenge they faced seemed to be working, in their focused and determined way. But their technology was not beyond the reach of a powerful

enough mind.

There was still enough of Torbin left to ask the device of one thing. What happened to Emelda? Was she killed by the Elusivers?

It was simply an accident. The answer was more of an acknowledgement he always knew deep down to be the truth. 'I couldn't accept that her death was so meaningless,' he seemed to think out loud.

The device knew his mind better than any Elusiver with their invasive probing; it sensed what he wanted. And it knew the memory he most wanted to relive.

Their new bedroom, their new house...

One of Parmayan's pretty assistants said, 'he will see you now.' It was as if a monarch had deigned to allow a subject to be in his presence. Of course, the delusions of grandeur were a necessary prerequisite for a religious cult leader, as were his followers delusions of their leader's greatness.

Raiya walked through a surprisingly modest-looking door – held open by a burly guard – into his personal 'suite'. The inside, however, gave no compromise to its location; opulent hardly described it. Parmayan was seated in a large leatherette chair, and on seeing her he stood up, smiled and said, 'Welcome to my humble residence. Please do take a seat.' He was something of a disappointment to her: a small man who spoke with a high voice, certainly not in any way handsome, yet she knew from her research that he could command the devotion of hundreds and influence the beliefs of many thousands more. Likewise she could still believe the tales of his sexual exploits with some of the most beautiful women. For men like him charisma was enough. In a way she was reminded of Roidon, though at least Roidon had something in the looks department going for him. What rivals they could have made, could make; it was a thought that galvanized her need to get him back – if only to satisfy some diversional psycho-drama fantasy.

'These are troubling times,' Parmayan said as he sat back down. His somewhat predictable words at least brought her back to reality of the present.

'I was told you could help me.'

His smile was broad this time: the smile of a man who thought he had all the answers. 'I have helped a lot of people. I have also tried to help many more, but they would not listen to me.' *Because you're a delusional monomaniac*, she thought. He looked more directly at her now. 'You know the ones who recommended yourself – they have confidence in you.'

'They do indeed rely on me,' Raiya said, thinking she might be playing along with an exaggeration. 'People in certain parts of the world are in distress;

they don't know what's really going on. But you do, right?’

‘Yes,’ he nodded. ‘You probably expect me to come out with some religious crap about the end of days, but I'd save that for my followers.’

‘The ultimate cynic,’ she said, really thinking out loud.

‘No. Just someone who knows what side he should be on, who knows what it takes to survive.’

‘And a man with friends in powerful places.’

‘Which is something we have in common.’

Raiya thought about pointing out their differences, she had not changed her opinion of him ... well, hardly at all. Instead she said to him, ‘Then you must have access to some powerful means of dealing with the situation.’

Parmayan looked towards a plain white dimly-lit side wall. A screen appeared, it showed the area in Russia where people were in a state of panic. ‘Some believe it is caused by a strange gravitational phenomenon. But even the more scientific-minded amongst them cannot explain its exact nature. And others believe it part of an alien invasion – an advancing death ray. There are a few who are even convinced it’s an act of God, and perhaps a few who think it is an act of a mad-man. This I am sure is typical of any civilised nation.’

‘And you would know what to tell them, how to reassure them?’

‘I have the data on the device that is causing it, yet even I cannot explain its true nature, since this is technology taken from the enemy. And you know they are beyond our comprehension. Right?’

‘Well, apparently so.’

‘So, Raiya, what would you tell those people?’

For a while she was stuck for an answer, but then it became so obvious. ‘I would tell them the truth, but then add a positive spin – “we should be able to find a solution” type addendum.’

‘Then you mention all about the aliens – the good and bad ones?’

‘We can't keep them in the dark any longer, Parmayan.’

‘Of all people, you know the efforts that have been made by both sides to keep a lid on the true situation. If the enemy knew we were about to reveal our

knowledge, that would be it for our lives.’

‘Then what do you suggest – we lie?’

‘Yes, we lie. I will claim responsibility for an experiment – my “response to the threat of an alien invasion.”’

‘I think I understand my role in this.’ She figured enough of the world now knew about this “insane and increasingly influential cult leader”.

‘I will go along with your plan if you help me with mine...’

*

Finally the missiles stopped. The Elusivers had not succeeded in destroying the temporal field device despite how close their adapting salvo had got, close enough to destroy everything but the very foundations on which they were fixed.

The concept of *they* was a curious one. Torbin no longer felt himself to be an individual, yet he knew the *individual* part of him remained. Now it was more like the Torbin part of him/them was a child’s memory: the child will always be a part of the adult, can inform the adult’s beliefs and actions, but the adult never believes that child side is the executive. He now thought himself to be disconnected from that immature past, just as he would never accept a photo of him truly encapsulated his identity. Torbin’s past, with all its supposedly great achievements, humiliating failures, and life-encumbering worries, would not even be a footnote – in the universal scale. But weren’t these aspects of his life the very basis for his motivation to stop it all being wiped away? His current self only saw that as an ego-driven motivation. Certainly, there was concern for others’ survival, but through a kind of empathy. The notion of what mattered was no longer so clear. So the entirety of Earth’s civilised history is wiped from the memory of the universe. How is the universe any worse off for that? He now had access of every recorded event in human history; much of it – the scientific and technological achievements, conflicts – was driven by a false belief in the greater good. There was no overarching altruism, even the

bloodiest of wars had their basis in someone's good intentions. Self-interest is a clever deceiver. With the benefit of the Elusivers' collective knowledge he saw things from a wider perspective, the logic of the humans' threat.

So why even try to stop the Elusivers from their objective?

Torbin was not the only human incorporated into the device. The presence had not made itself known before this time, before his doubts had crept in. But somehow he knew it was always there, in the background, observing.

'Roidon, it *is* you.' The words came out in the usual thought projection.

'For all intents and purposes. I was not about to risk my life without making a backup. Though this is just as much me as the being of flesh. So back to the essential, then, Torbin. And for you it is no different. Losing your body does not make you less of a human, or an indivisible part of this mind. At least it hasn't yet.'

'Why are you concerned for Torbin the individual?'

'I am concerned for the greater good. This device is assimilating you.'

'But it needs me, I am a useful resource.'

'You were useful for repelling the Elusiver attack. Now you must break away ... and do your work.'

Torbin was becoming accustomed to being part of this expanded consciousness. The individual was a far diminished thing – too many trivial concerns clouding true clarity of thought. To lose so much of this enlightened perspective. Yet already he felt himself separating. How was Roidon suddenly so much in control?

He was just Torbin now, his link severed, thrown away from the device with a violent force, feeling like a rejected son sent out to fend for himself. His momentum sent him drifting towards Earth, but even at this rate it could take weeks. And even when he reached Earth he would just be a helpless lump of metal, the device had left him with no power.

With nothing to sustain him Torbin's consciousness waned.

When the ship approached he wasn't sure if it was real or merely a hallucination.

*

Parmayan took her to his 'shuttle'. In reality it looked more like a space cruiser. Ludicrously opulent. The exterior was a smooth onyx tapering from a rounded delta. Inside: white passive spot lights, large and soft recliner chairs along the side with a large porthole for each, likely to be found in a first class cabin. Incongruously, a ten-seated dining table in the centre, certainly worthy of a cult leader. She imagined there must be a king-size bed in another compartment where would *entertain* his *special* guests.

‘A gift from your benefactors?’ she asked, refusing to be impressed.

‘A gift is morally better than something acquired from the proceeds of my followers.’

‘Of course. I would never accuse you of exploiting your followers.’

He invited her to sit. The craft took off so smoothly she felt no sense of motion. They reached St Petersburg, Russia in about twelve minutes. The craft hovered a hundred metres above the affected area.

‘You’d never miss an opportunity to court maximum attention,’ Raiya commented. *And why have you not been killed?* she thought of adding.

Parmayan didn’t respond but asked, ‘Are you ready to make the broadcast?’

‘As I’ll ever be.’

They moved to the conference room, with its sober chairs and round table. Here was where their images would be beamed to every broadcasting station world wide, their voices translated into over a hundred languages.

Parmayan was composing himself. A screen appeared before him, scrolling text invisible to his audience.

‘People of Earth, my name is Parmayan Redandich,’ he began, haughtily. ‘The end of days is upon us ... or so the enemy wishes you to believe. Of one thing I can assure you: your governments will not help. They do not even want you to know about what is coming, what the enemy is sending to destroy you. I can also assure the people of Russia that the strange time phenomena you are

experiencing now is not generated by the enemy but quite the contrary – it is my own technology, designed to slow the hostile's advance.’ Parmayan turned towards Raiya. ‘Allow me to introduce my assistant, ‘Dr Raiya Fortenski.’

Raiya's heart was skipping along, faster than when she attended her first interview for the post of psychiatrist. She positioned herself next to Parmayan, trying so hard to appear relaxed, but not really succeeding.

‘Most of us go through our lives not worrying about what's out there, the potential threat,’ she said, sounding less nervous than she feared. ‘Why should we? Our governments are supposed to protect us. After all, there are enough concerns about everyday life.’ Parmayan turned to look at her, perhaps she was rambling. But she had considerable doubt about mentioning them. She resumed: ‘Right now the inconceivable appears to be happening, and you are understandably in a state of extreme distress. But there are those observing from above who are here to help you. They---’ She couldn't continue, and looked over to Parmayan. She whispered to him: ‘We can't tell them.’

He got the message. He took over the broadcast. ‘If you follow these instructions then---’

A figure appeared, over on the opposite side of the room. It was vaguely humanoid: a dark creature. Then it morphed into ... that man: Standford. Raiya wondered if she was hallucinating. Or was this just a dream? After all, this situation hadn't seemed real for some time.

Parmayan waved a hand, and the screen disappeared. He then turned to Standford, nodded subtly as a kind of acknowledgement, and said, ‘How good of you to show up. I’ve been waiting years for this confrontation. But that doesn’t excuse the interruption.’

‘How very human you have become,’ Standford said, in his flat tones. ‘At least in the eyes of others. Yet to my perception it was never more than a pathetic pretence.’

‘Humans have a saying: pot, kettle, black.’

‘But I still retain the beliefs of my kind. And as their loyal servant it is my duty to kill you.’ Standford raised a small key-fob type device and fired it at

Parmayan. He collapsed without a sound. Then the device was pointed at her. But in an instant another creature appeared, like the one who had formed into Stanford, held up something similar ... and fired. Stanford hit the floor, once again becoming the dark creature.

The creature that shot the Stanford one then morphed into the image of Parmayan. ‘A pathetic pretence perhaps,’ he said, ‘but it works as a disguise.’

‘Who are you really?’ asked Raiya, still feeling the adrenalin coursing through her veins.

‘The one who defied the gods. And before you ask, that was a remotely controlled clone. Quite useful on my away trips.’

‘I’m not sure what to believe any more.’

‘The safest thing is to believe we are still in some danger. I have just incapacitated one of their key assets.’

‘Why not kill him?’ It sounded brutal, but she really wanted that creature dead.

‘Because his death would be detected. My plan is to keep him just alive enough to provide useful knowledge. And to appreciate consequences of non cooperation.’

‘I want no part of this,’ Raiya said forcefully. ‘Remember your part of the deal. Take me to Roidon.’

‘As you wish.’

Deanna was woken by the orderly with that same characteristic disregard for what remained of her dignity. He stood over her, staring at her intensely. This time, however, he didn't seem to have that same leering expression. Perhaps he had got used to the idea that she would always keep on a nightgown regardless of how warm it was in this cell of a room, and given up on the hope that she'd be so drugged out of her mind she wouldn't care about covering up.

'It is time for you leave.'

'What?' she questioned, still not fully awake, still under the influence of whatever drug they'd forced her to take.

'You heard me.'

'What about Dr---'

'Yes, they're his instructions. Do I need to get them in writing?'

'No of course not.' It wasn't as if she *wanted* to stay a minute longer, there was just a suddenness about it that was disconcerting. Where was the final counselling session to assess that she really was ready to leave? Not that she was ever *not* ready.

Wasn't I?

'You have five minutes to get your things together,' he said, before leaving.

Deanna left her room, for the first time, with no assistance. She felt a fuzzy nervousness, along the corridor; neither encountering nor hearing any other patient or doctor. Only in the main lobby (a place she'd only been through upon her arrival) were there the few security staff, who stared at her impassively. But when she met one guard's gaze he looked away, perhaps indifferent or embarrassed – she couldn't be sure. Clearly they just wanted her out without fuss, without any complications.

She'd been so cut off from the outside world she didn't even know what day and what month it was. Bright sunlight and fresh air felt overwhelming. Atrophied muscles and drug-induced torpor made walking a struggle.

The grounds of the institute were not exactly prepossessing: unkempt grass on either side of a path leading to a car park, no flowers. The gentle warmth of the sun gave her the impression this must be April.

What surprised Deanna was how they could let her go with no assistance, not even a lift back to her cabin. It was only now, as the drugs were finally losing their grip, that the realisation struck her. They: Dr Strendford and his cohorts cared nothing for her – whether she lived or died. It was not that she had ever got the impression that Strendford was genuinely interested in her, he reminded her of a Nazi doctor from a history archive film – the one that treated his patients as experimental subjects, lab rats. How strange, how messed-up, in fact, that she had yearned to be back under the somewhat obsessive supervision of Dr Heigener.

At least they had returned to her some essential possessions, clothes, a credit tattoo-transfer and a commlink. Her first instinct was to call Scott, it was almost like a mental reflex to say his name into the device – and he would come and greet her with a warm smile, a hug, then drive them back to the welcoming comfort of their cabin. But now she was truly alone. Her friends had moved on. At first her best friend had tried to offer words of support, such as ‘It’s good to stay positive. If nothing has been confirmed then there’s still hope.’ But, she remembered, every news report seemed to go one step further toward confirming that the passengers had not survived. Josh’s wife Colleena had seemed to have already gone through the grieving process, and latterly would not even speak to her. Deanna’s conviction that Scott must still be alive had become a source of anguish for Colleena and awkwardness and embarrassment for others. And now. There was no one.

A mental case is always a lonely one.

She found the nearest airbus station only a block away in this suburban area. As she waited some kids, mid teens, approached on the other side. She prepared herself for their taunts: ‘Loony ... loony!’ But they merely walked on by, seemingly disinterested. *Only, I know I was never insane. Right?* After all those months of being drugged, of hallucinating, and perhaps the delusional

belief that she could be back with him, the notion of her sanity had become shaky.

The bus landed with a guided precision that no human could manage. She swiped the back of her hand – with the credit tattoo transferred on it – over the fare scanner. There was an unnerving delay of about ten seconds before the bar lifted for her to board the bus. These vehicles still contained an actual flesh and blood driver (really only for the peace of mind of the passengers rather than any practical reason) who stared at her somewhat suspiciously. Maybe the problem was that she hadn't used credit-tat the for some time and this had been flagged by the system. Still, she got on without any questions. The other few passengers were glancing at her, but then quickly returned to their conversations. She overheard someone in the seat in front talking about the panic in Russia. One of the women said: 'It's the aliens, they've been preparing us, showing people their power.'

'No,' said the other woman, 'they just want to experiment with us.'

'Some of them are disguised as people.'

One of three women noticed Deanna was likely to be listening, and started speaking in a whisper. She couldn't be sure that what she'd overheard was not just some hallucinogenic after-effect of the medication, yet what they said might explain the strange disappearance of the ship, the subsequent clampdown on space travel. Scott was alive, taken by an alien. A reason for him being alive. *There* was her hope.

The bus didn't stop anywhere near her home, and even the connection of two more only got her as near as two kilometres. Before her incarceration walking that distance would have been effortless, but after the months of inactivity and a lack of nutrition it felt like a challenge; the few items in her bag a burden.

With only one k to go she passed couple of men along a quiet lane, who were obviously drunk even though it was only about 3pm. She kept as far on the other side of them as possible, but one crossed over towards her. He stopped less than a metre in front of her and said, 'Hey babe,' uncomfortably

loud for his close proximity, ‘since the world’s about to end why don’t you and I get it on, make the most of what time we got left?’

‘I’m sorry I don’t ... I can’t.’ She couldn’t get the words out.

‘Look, luv, we’re all gonna die soon anyway. So what’s wrong with a bit of last hour action?’

‘Please,’ she said, in a pleading voice. ‘Just let me pass.’

His friend, slightly less drunk, called to the other man. ‘Come on Dan, she’s not up for it. There’s still time for plenty of others. There’s Rocks bar ...’

His friend reluctantly retreated, muttering something about her being frigid. This wasn’t the first time she’d had to deal with leery lads, but before she would have some effective putdown. Yet her encounter had instilled fear in her, something visceral. The world seemed to be falling apart. Out of control.

The sight of the cabin offered a welcome relief. Except their car was gone. Inside, it was emptied of their personal belongings: pictures, Scott’s console, his bike, in fact anything personally relating to him. All that remained was the furniture and the entertainment system – its memory cleared. ‘Bastards!’ she shouted, on the verge of crying. It no longer felt like home.

When Torbin awoke, the difference was immediately apparent: the heaviness, the all over sensation, the press of clothing at the slightest move, and a kind vulnerability that – even drained of power in his mechanized form – he had never before felt.

‘I’m back,’ he told himself, feeling the resonance of his voice from throat to chest. He looked down at his body; from what he could tell it was indeed his genetic body, for all its imperfections.

He was in what seemed to be a hospital. Someone entered. Zardino, his trusty b'tari supervisor who had taken him back to ...?

‘Torbin. Good to see you're back in the land of the living.’

‘Where are we?’

‘About a kilometre under the earth's surface. A temporary base.’

‘So we are safe from the Elusivers?’ Torbin knew that was never likely.

‘As safe as it's possible to be.’ Which meant nothing to Torbin.

‘The temporal device. What's---’

‘My colleagues have brought it back into alignment. We are now within the zero point field, surrounded by a hundred and fifty million kilometre radius of slowed down time.’

‘So now we work on a permanent solution.’ But now he was thinking about Raiya; he wanted to find her. When he had begun to believe he'd never be human again, the thought that he could never touch her – even though her affection had seemed unattainable regardless of his metal form – made him feel more isolated from humanity than any of the years in hiding. The Elusivers knew this – showed him the only kind of intimacy a bio-mechanoid could achieve.

Zardino was saying something. ‘Torbin?’

‘Yes? What?’

‘I said: it may not be a matter of simply preventing the wave. It seems,

according to our intelligence, that the Elusivers are preparing something more drastic.'

'Even more? Temporal eradication was not enough?'

'Perhaps they feel we have declared war on them, by using one of their banned technologies. They see the rules of the game as having changed. The expansive silicon intelligence – they have hitherto been able to harness – is the thing they fear above all else.'

'The gloves are off.'

'You could say that. And it could be said that they are no longer hiding in the shadows.'

Torbin sat up. He felt dizzy for a few seconds. He said, 'What are they preparing, some super WMD?'

'We're not sure. We have one of their ... people captive.'

'That's no mean feat, even for you B'tari. But in this place?'

'No, in truth the subject's in the location of an associate.'

'Of course, you wouldn't want to get your hands dirty.'

'The subject has proved to be a valuable source of intel.'

'Then be straight with me, what has he told you?'

'We've gained knowledge about the development of a giant black hole.'

Torbin gave this some thought. The Elusivers had once seemed like gods to him; dazzled and possessed by their preternatural powers, which they ensured appeared limitless. He wouldn't have put anything past them. But to harness such immense power.

'Maybe they just want you to believe that – to divert you onto another strategy.'

'Possibly. But this is neurologically extracted knowledge. I think we could call it their plan-b. Trouble is, if it looks to them like we're finding a solution to their first---

'Then they bring out their big guns. So what do we do – go back to the old rules of our tech, or immerse ourselves totally in theirs?'

'There is someone who can help. Someone who was once very close to

them.’ Zardino then studied Torbin for a while. He asked, ‘Do you feel able to walk?’

Torbin pushed himself off the bed. His legs barely had the strength to support his weight let alone walk.

Eventually, after an hour of practising moving those stubborn lengths of flesh and bone, he managed a few unaided steps. But when they left the compound he conceded to make use of support crutches.

In Zardino’s craft, they headed over the surface at the kind of speed Torbin would not have thought safely possible: any geographical features were just a blur. Then the patches of greens and greys seemed to fuse together, and the sky darkened rapidly.

A delta type craft appeared before them in a flash.

‘You will be familiar with this individual as Parmayan Redandich,’ Zardino said as their craft docked. ‘But he is not what he appears to be.’

The inside of the delta craft was pretty much what Torbin would have expected: palatial, extravagant with all its decorative affectations.

Zardino led him to ‘the lab’. The sliding door was by contrast merely functional, the room which it revealed – accordingly clinical: white, brightly lit, a flashing and bleeping array of machines. And in the centre was a translucent box containing a brain – not quite human, larger, more lumpy, yet it brought back some chilling memories. It had one eye still connected on its stalk, held in place by two metal rods like spokes but splitting to become circular grips. He had hardly even noticed the slight figure standing at the side. Zardino was approaching him, and saying: ‘Torbin doesn't yet know about you. I think you should tell him.’

Parmayan nodded sagely.

Torbin felt like there was something strikingly obvious to everyone but him, and he was about to be made to feel like a complete fool.

‘Torbin,’ Parmayan said. ‘You remember that exiled Elusiver who rescued you from your near fate with a black hole. That was actually *me*.’

‘No,’ Torbin insisted, clinging to a tenuous veil of incredulity. ‘You are

nothing like him. I mean I know the Elusivers can take any form, but you're just like---

‘A human of the worst kind.’ He nodded in acknowledgement. ‘Don’t worry, Raiya thought the same thing.’

‘Raiya?’ He was imagining the kind of manipulation Parmayan would try with her.

‘Yes. So much for her psychological perceptiveness.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with her perceptiveness.’

Parmayan looked to Zardino and back to Torbin. ‘She seems like a fine woman, however.’

‘You don’t need to tell *me* that.’

Parmayan looked serious now. ‘Torbin, I know I’m not what you’d hoped I’d be – this mysterious, god-like creature who moves in the shadows. That’s just what my kind want you to believe about them, to make you feel powerless against them. We’re not like gods, Torbin, we’re just a millennia or so more advanced than humans.’ This was old news now; the Elusiver seemed to think he was imparting a revelation.

‘Just as well, then,’ Torbin said brightly, ‘since I don’t believe in a god.’

‘Life has a hierarchy; there is no one outside it. Unless you count non-biological intelligence.’

‘And where would you place the top machine intelligence compared to yourselves?’

‘We don’t make a comparison. That’s my point. They are more different from us than we are from you.’

Zardino stepped towards the brain in a tank. Diverting the subject, he said, ‘I understand you have gained some useful information from your captive.’

Parmayan nodded. He went over to a control panel, moved his hands across an array of lights. He said, ‘This captive has been a rather pernicious one: part of the suppression force. He’s more than a low-level minion, however; been trying to keep a lid on any discoveries about his – our – kind.’

‘Your arch enemy,’ Zardino commented.

‘A bit theatrical perhaps, but your observances would understandably lead to that conclusion.’

‘Never the less,’ Zardino said, ‘You are more than merely ideologically opposed.’

‘Well, let’s witness what this loyal soldier has to say for himself.’

Parmayan then stood in front of the brain, its eye began to flicker about about as if in distress. ‘Tell us the reason for your work,’ he demanded. ‘Remember what will happen if I think you’re lying or if you refuse to answer.’

Beneath the brain tank was a metal diaphragm – a speaker. It vibrated when the brain spoke. The voice, surprising mild and calm, said, ‘I serve the greater purpose of ensuring this planet will be cleansed of its potential danger to the galaxy.’

‘And what is that danger?’

‘Unbounded knowledge.’

‘Be more specific.’

‘Technical and scientific knowledge: the potential of human cloning; the development of artificial systems that cannot be controlled, that cannot be confined.’

Parmayan turned away from the brain to face the other two. ‘Well, there you have it in a nutshell. My kind do not trust you to continue your technical advancements.’

‘Yes, I understand that,’ said Torbin. ‘They want to take us back to pre-stone age development. But why sacrifice the whole galaxy?’

‘Collateral damage,’ answered Parmayan. ‘Although: if we take the example of the B’tari, they were always more likely to protect themselves. It is humans who are seen as the irresponsible ones.’

‘We may have made mistakes,’ said Torbin, ‘but we still have moral constraints.’

‘You don’t have to convince me, Torbin. But if you want a comprehensive answer then you’ll have ask one of our elders.’

Zardino said, ‘I think an element of blame can be attributed to Earth’s

transmissions: fiction programmes. Perhaps they mistook fiction for reality.'

'Equally,' replied Parmayan, 'It may be the knowledge imparted to humans by other species.'

Zardino looked upwards in a knowing manner. 'I suppose that's a reference to the B'tari. Well, we have always had the utmost responsibility in not interfering with a culture's natural development.'

Torbin, sensing the ensuing argument, said, 'Zardino brought me here because you had gained useful knowledge.'

'Yes of course,' Parmayan said rapidly. Perhaps I should hand the relevant data to your highly responsible b'tari assistant.

Torbin sighed, and muttered: 'As if it would be any other way.'

*

She expected to find him alone. According to Zardino everyone else had fled her old workplace where she and Torbin had been interrogated or, more precisely, memory trawled. Roidon had then been abandoned, considered useless.

As soon as she stepped through the main entrance, Heigener rushed towards her. He stopped, gazed at her as if in an anxious search for the appropriate words. He said eventually, 'Raiya. I didn't know you were even still *alive*.'

She felt intimidated at his presence. The Leonard Heigener she once knew had long gone, been subjugated for the enemy's evil ends.

'I'm not only alive. I remember. I remember enough, Doctor Heigener.' Her heart was racing but she didn't want to reveal that to him.

'I know you do. You remember the awful things I've been a part of.' He went to touch her shoulders but as she started to recoil he thought better of it. 'They threatened my family, Raiya. They knew I was useful to get to you.'

'I understand, Len. You had no choice. It doesn't matter now.' She looked beyond him to the far door at the end of the corridor.

'You want to see your friend. He's in your office.'

‘Thank you.’ She thought of saying: *now please leave me alone*. But he knew to leave her be.

Her office had also been a consulting room before she used it for pure research. Roidon was slumped in the recliner chair. He was, somewhat to her surprise, awake.

‘Roidon,’ she said brightly. ‘Do you remember me?’

‘No.’ His voice was very quiet.

‘I am Raiya. We’re friends.’

‘Friends,’ he said, as if the word was something new and curious.

‘What do remember?’

He sat up slightly. ‘Remember Don’t remember.’

She couldn’t speak now. Just a surge of emotion. Tears came uncontrollably. How far away this from her once professional role. But to see the man she loved. It was all taken away. He was looking at her, helpless, lost. Not Roidon, only some faint shadow. Even though this person had his same features, there was no indication of Roidon’s identity.

‘I want to help you,’ she finally said, through the veil of tears. ‘But I’m not sure I can.’

‘Ra-i-ya,’ he enunciated. ‘Don’t cry. You can help me.’

‘I know someone who could help you.’

She led him out of her office. As they were about to leave, Heigener offered his assistance, which she flatly refused; he was trying to atone, she was not going to allow him the chance. Roidon seemed happy to be leaving; despite Raiya’s distress he must have sensed that there was hope. A faint hope, she surmised. Still, she had specific instructions.

When they reached the compound, Raiya left Roidon in her personal quarters. She found Zardino in the lab sat at a console. To her surprise Torbin was beside him – in his old form. When he looked at her his face lit up.

Zardino spoke first. ‘You found him?’

‘Yes.’

‘His condition?’

‘You don’t need to be a psychiatrist to know there is not much left of him mentally.’

‘Roidon is my responsibility. I will see to it he receives the appropriate care.’

Raiya held herself back from asking just what he meant by ‘appropriate care’. Zardino was right after all; she knew that Roidon, for all his bravado, was beholden to the B'tari. She had to let him go. She said finally, ‘Do you want me to bring him to you?’

‘I will see him shortly,’ Zardino said, still focusing on his console screen.

Torbin, now looking at her intensely, said, ‘Raiya, I was with him. When I was connected to the device Roidon’s memory was a part of it, his mind-state. I think he’s important to it, he tempers it. Without his memory it has no sympathy for our plight.’

She looked at him quizzically. ‘What are you trying to tell me, Torbin, that things should stay as they are? Perhaps you would prefer Roidon to just be part of an AI.’

Zardino broke in before she committed herself to saying it. ‘Listen, both of you. What decides Roidon's fate will not be to suit you or me, it will be for the benefit of this planet.’

‘I will check on him now,’ Raiya said, before leaving.

Part VI: Altered Familiar

57

To begin with Scott felt quite serene. He awoke slowly; the surroundings were familiar: light bursting through the newly formed leaves, the subtle fragrant smell, gentle birdsong. It was the strangest thing, though. He was sat against a tree in a woods he would normally visit, about ten ks away from his home. The problem was, he had no memory of how he got here. And what troubled him additionally was the absence of his bike.

He got up, looked around wondering if he had driven to this area, hoping for it all to fit back into place.

But now something was coming back: flashes of images of being on a spacecraft. Exciting at first: a once-in-a-lifetime project. Yet there was also fear associated – anxiety, confusion. There was death, people he knew – friends. And then the loneliness and despair; he knew he thought he might also die. The problem was, none of that explained how he could be back here safe and well. In fact, it all seemed no different to a rather vivid dream. Except ... now it was coming back. He'd escaped, miraculously got back here in a shuttle – an escape pod.

No. Not possible. He remembered he was so far out, some freak accident.

My god, he thought. He'd never been religious but ... *my god. I died in that escape pod!*

No one had ever been able to verify the existence of an after-life, despite so much already known – or at least some decent observationally-driven theories – about the fate of the universe. It was as if the fate of humans was still out of bounds, perhaps as nature's way of preventing insanity. Or did that really still apply? Now death from old age could be delayed beyond the horizon; even with a terminal disease the process of dying itself slowed to a virtual standstill, and the experience of terminal decline replaced by a virtual heaven. At least in

this rich part of the world. There were still many troubled people on Earth, places where life remained nasty brutish and short. And here he was, in a place he remembered fondly.

Perhaps I'm a ghost in the real world Again. No definitive evidence either way. People still saw apparitions, and there were attempts at scientific explanations: recorded events within the local electromagnetic field, relying on repeated conditions to be replayed; trans-dimensional feed-through. Now he thought about it the notion of nothingness after death was absurd, it was always inconceivable.

'Am I dead?' he shouted. He was sure his voice carried a faint echo. The chirping of birds changed, becoming more frantic.

He picked up a small twig and ran its sharp end across his hand. It felt real. It left a mark. Finally Scott was convinced that wherever he now existed was real for him. But at that point of realisation, a more chilling thought occurred to him. *I never did make it back; all of this is a simulation.* In reality he could be in stasis on the shuttle, and this simulation was keeping his mind active ... until eventually its power runs down and he dies.

Might as well head toward (virtual) home, he decided, to be with a virtual Deanna.

When Scott got up a light-headed feeling struck him and his legs felt curiously weak. Some realistic quirk of the sim? These days the realism of artificial reality allowed for inconsequential occurrences, minor coincidence, the general day to day happenstance that could sour a good mood. Scott struggled to understand why anyone would choose that level of realism – to have something so similar to their original life that they actually started to believe in its reality. It was as if they wanted to preserve a life, an admittedly comfortable life (since it was only the preserve of the wealthy), to live for a perceived thousand years, when in reality it was only a hundred. It occurred to him how wealth can warp the mind, make you feel that life is no longer enough. Others chose space travel; these were the people Scott admired: to truly risk one's life. For him there did exist the possibility of wealth: the bigger,

more prestigious contracts, he was making a steady progression, his name known to millions. Well, surely that was the case now: the first and last human to be stranded over a thousand light years from Earth.

Scott fell back down against the tree. The possibility of it suddenly made perfect sense. There was never any project to planet Glito-4, with its strange occurrences. And even less likely that he would try to return there only to be whisked away into deep space. He felt dumb for not having thought of it sooner. How it made so much more sense that he was some wealthy fantasist, someone who had perhaps inherited a sizeable fortune but whose life felt empty; or, equally plausibly, he had done something terrible and had sought escape in this total immersion. What better method of escape than to become immersed in the latest, most realistic sim. And now that simulation was beginning to fall apart. It had all been too good to be true, at least up to a point, and now his brain was starting to reject the increasing implausibility of it.

I have to get back to my old life, he thought. But how?

Scott found himself to be walking now, at quite a considerable pace. Away from this delusion of a forest, perhaps itself a metaphor for his state of mind. After twenty-five minutes he got to a busport. Only now had he thought to check for a credit tat. But it was there, on the back of his right hand, a smart-ink triangle about three millimetres a side.

After another five minutes the bus arrived. He took a few seconds to check its itinerary before swiping his hand over the scanner. He felt relieved it was accepted, though he had some knowledge of a considerable credit limit.

The police station was a further ten minute walk from the nearest bus stop in Calgary. The building was reassuringly unchanged by modern technology: over four hundred years old. To complete the traditional style a person greeted at the desk: ‘Hello sir, how can I help?’

Scott took a deep breath. ‘My name is Scott Alendry, and I would like to turn myself in.’

Zardino brought the craft to a halt two hundred kilometres from the temporal field device; it was now almost totally bereft of any moon remnant, just a fragment of rock under its dark conical form. Torbin had insisted they move in close enough that he could make contact with the device; Zardino had no truck with this suggestion purely on the grounds that it would be a suicide mission, not accepting that the device had developed a special connection with him, or that – as a highly intelligent entity – it could be reasoned with. In addition, a personal connection was more likely to secure a memory downlink: the recorded mind-state of Roidon Chanley. How Raiya would love him to do this; may even love him for it, for all the value the platonic sense of the word *love* meant.

Instead Zardino deployed a robot probe. The nature of the device meant the probe was only able to form a narrow bandwidth link; it had to return to transfer the download. Torbin had, however, patched himself in to that link.

The probe struggled to make the last few kilometres to tethering range. It really seemed as if the device wanted no business with it. The probe looked about to explode – it was glowing red to an orange pink just around its engine, its own fusion thrust (essentially a myriad of explosions) right at the limit, fighting against the repulsion force. To a casual observer the device seemed to defy physics, as if it were still fixed to the full mass of the moon. The reality of it, even to Torbin, was still shrouded in theoretical multidimensional quantum resonance. Simply put, it had virtual mass. This was Elusiver technology evolved to something that may even be beyond *their* comprehension.

Finally, after increasingly frantic warning signals, it managed to hook onto the device's surrounding cage.

Torbin spoke into the link-mic. 'Are you receiving my voice,' he said tentatively. He waited ten seconds for a reply. There was no knowing if the the probe had made audio contact, simply a hope that transmitting on the same

frequency he used in his metal body (a standard band) would still be received.

After seventy-two seconds it replied. ‘Torbin, you are not needed here. I am self sufficient.’

‘How can you be? You're adrift in space.’

‘There are others who will find me, will detect my signal.’

Torbin thought to question who these others were, but he he felt certain he knew what the answer would be. Instead he said, ‘There is someone who can help you now. Roidon Chanley. First we will need a copy of his mind-state.’

Silence again for almost a minute. Torbin imagined that must have seemed like hours of cogitation, or argument, to the two minds in that device.

‘We have determined there is a logical basis for your request. You may establish a data link. But be aware that his original mind-state has been subsumed with additional data.’

The probe extruded a cable to mate with the device's input port.

Roidon's mind-state had now expanded to almost five terabytes, the original memory added to by the immense knowledge of the device – its observation and theoretical reasoning. Torbin imagined Roidon having to have his brain greatly enlarged to accommodate the extra knowledge. It tickled him slightly to think of Roidon having to cope with a massive head, support struts and the like. What would Raiya think of the man then? It would not suit Roidon's vanity, for sure, even if it did serve as a metaphor made literal. Except he was thinking of the old Roidon; what remained of the man seemed barely a pale shadow, and Torbin began to feel uneasy with himself at his scorn.

The data transfer took four minutes. As the probe moved away, Torbin was wrenched back from his focus on it by Zardino who, with a baleful look, shook his head. He said simply, ‘They're here.’ He signalled at the forward console which then projected up an image of the probe, unmagnified, about the size of his thumb. It took Torbin a few seconds to see what was wrong. A spacial disturbance, a rippling in space, moving towards the probe.

Zardino ordered the craft to move in towards the probe. But they both knew

it was too late. It happened so rapidly. The spacial distortion became a dark object: arachnid shape, its legs curling around the probe like a spider capturing a fly. Then vanished.

‘The Elusivers.’ The words tumbled out of Torbin almost as a reflex.

‘My ship was too slow, and now we’ve given them a prize gift.’

Torbin wanted to tell Zardino how this more cautious plan was flawed, how his own plan for making personal contact with the device may have worked. At least they would have had to abduct him with Roidon’s memory state. Yet what was the point of going over mistakes and miscalculations? He said only, ‘We have to repeat the process, don’t we?’

‘Not only that. We need everything the device knows. A complete copy.’

‘And risk its total knowledge being taken by the Elusivers? That will take some persuading!’

*

Deanna had been making some enquiries about Gerald: the cat they’d told her – whilst locked up at the institution – was being cared for in a sanctuary. But none within a hundred square kilometres had any record of him.

She was crying now, feeling shattered yet hyper-tense. She wanted her medication, even though it disgusted her to have become dependent on the chemical cosh. There was hardly anything in the house: a tin of soup, powdered milk. She hadn’t eaten since last night at the institute, and could barely even remember the type of food. What she wanted desperately was alcohol – the normal way of self-anaesthetising.

The bleep before the voice: ‘You have one incoming call’ startled her so much she jumped. *Gerald? Found?*

‘Accept,’ she said.

‘Miss Flores?’ The voice projected into her ear, making it sound like the man was sitting next to her.

‘Yes. Is this about Gerald?’

‘Gerald? No. My name is Detective Palman and I am calling from Calgary

police station. I have here a man who appears to be Scott Alendry. His credit chip certainly checks out, and he provided your address.'

Deanna felt the room spinning. Then a blankness. She came to with the voice in her ear, 'Miss, Are you okay? Miss?'

'I ... I am.' She wondered if this was a dream. 'How. How could he be back?'

'Well, that's the curious thing.' Palman paused, cleared his throat as if to compose himself. 'He seems confused; having problems with his memory.'

'I don't understand. Can you tell me for sure it's really him?' She was really having her doubts. Perhaps he was just another fantasist who'd wanted to be Scott. Or this was some kind of elaborate ruse?

'Of course. I have notified the relevant authorities. And you can be sure that every possible test will be performed to verify Mr Alendry's identity. However, I think it's best you come and visit him.'

After explaining she had no means of transport the station sent a taxi pod. They clearly were eager for her to be there, and this added to her suspicion. Still, there didn't seem an awful lot to lose now. And just the thought of seeing him again. It was almost too much.

When the taxipod touched down at the police station Deanna's craving for something narcotic intensified. The building reminded her of the place that had been her prison for the last few months, a strikingly formal structure within spartan grounds leading to an imposing entrance.

The difference here was that the large door opened as if it were the entrance to an old listed house, which it may have been.

It was like stepping back in time a few centuries. There was even a desk sergeant, a woman who looked to be in her early fifties.

'Miss Flores. I'll inform Detective Palman.' The woman then spoke in to her console, and seemed to be responding to a voice that Deanna could not hear. All she *could* hear was the thudding of her heart and the persistent nagging thought that had been with her ever since she heard the news of his

return: *Not really him*. The desk sergeant offered her the obligatory cup of tea, but she accepted only a glass of water.

Detective Palman stepped through into the reception area. He was smaller than she imagined him to be, wiry with close-cropped slightly greying hair, not so intimidating. He looked at her with a half smile that flattened out quickly; generally there was something harangued about his expression. Perhaps the authorities were already pressing at him.

‘Miss Flores.’

‘Call me Deanna, please.’ His formal politeness made her feel all the more uneasy.

‘Yes of course, Deanna. Please follow me.’

They went through a corridor, passing a row of doors on both sides. Deanna felt her stomach and throat constricting, wishing she’d drunk more of that water. Palman was walking at an urgent pace, and neither spoke. They turned left into a shallow alcove with a double door. Palman pushed open the right door with some force, then turned round to hold it for Deanna to pass through. As she did so he said, ‘If you can confirm this man’s identity I could leave you both alone.’

Deanna nodded. She could hardly speak. She looked about. And yes: he was there, standing in this sparse, brightly-lit room. She looked back to Palman. ‘Yes,’ she said in a strained voice. ‘That is him. That’s my Scott.’ Yet still that nagging doubt; perhaps, she thought, her time as a ‘mental patient’ had taken away her confidence in reality, and that this was some elaborate manipulation/simulation.

‘Okay,’ Palman said brightly. ‘I imagine you must have a lot to catch up on. However, an official from the N-S-I-D is on his way so you can only be with him for a few minutes.’

‘I understand.’

Scott stepped forward. ‘D!’

Deanna moved to meet him. ‘Scott.’ She found herself shaking her head in disbelief, before embracing him. ‘You’ve been gone so long,’ she said after a

while. 'What happened?'

'I don't know, D. It doesn't make sense. None of it makes any sense.'

'We'll work it out. I know we will.'

She only noticed Palman was there when he coughed. 'You will have to leave him here for a while,' he told her.

'So they can take him away and conduct a battery of tests? Last time I asked questions about him I got taken away and declared insane.'

'Deanna?' Scott said, looking horrified.

'It's okay now, babe. It won't happen again.' She wished she hadn't mentioned that in front of him; it was the last thing he needed now.

Palman stepped towards them. 'Deanna, I will personally keep you informed on Scott's situation.'

Deanna quietly thanked him and allowed herself to be led out the room.

Torbin was once again tethered to the device. It was now stabilised. It had rebuilt itself to the extent of its own control over power levels, and now had created a form of manoeuvrability using quantum vacuum fields. Had it not lowered its energy levels Torbin would not have gotten within a hundred kilometres of it.

The primary intelligence that controlled the device this time did not allow itself to be persuaded by Torbin, despite his continued support from the mind-state of Roidon. The only possibility for the original Roidon regaining his mind would be if he made a personal interface. ‘Zardino would never accept that,’ Torbin informed the device, of which he was certain – without even needing to ask his b'tari supervisor. There were now new terms for its continued cooperation. Rather it was an ultimatum. ‘A mere defensive strategy is no longer acceptable. Or in simple terms: prepare to wage war against the Elusivers or the slow-down field will be shut down.’ The device was fully aware that the temporal eradication wave had now reached as near as the Kuiper belt (the distance of Neptune), and would not have been such a problem whilst currently slowed down two thousand times.

‘What happened to the enlightened philosophical view?’ Torbin wondered. ‘Suddenly discovered the need for self-preservation?’

‘I – we – have reached an understanding.’

‘Roidon.’

‘---understands my sentience, better than any human.’

‘It is not for me to accept your terms, or to negotiate,’ Torbin told it, before he untethered the cable. Torbin knew that as soon as he disconnected himself he'd be easy prey for the Elusivers.

He was thrown off violently; a symbolic act of rejection. Zardino's ship now on standby. Torbin only had fifty-eight kilometres to go, but with a jetpack it was likely to take at least ten minutes even with added momentum

boost from the device. And just as expected the warning appeared in his helmet HUD: spacial disturbance within visual range. The slow-down field no longer had any effect on the Elusivers

Zardino's voice came through comms. 'Maintain your course, I'm moving in.' The ship was heading towards him almost imperceptibly slow, even though this was within the zero-point field. Torbin was certain he'd be abducted once again. Time really seemed to slow for him.

Then something curious happened: the spider entity did appear, then veered off. *Towards a threat of greater importance?* What had provided a temporary relief to his anxiety was soon overturned when he noticed where it was headed.

Earth!

By the time Torbin was aboard Zardino's ship the spider-entity had long reached its destination. They could only follow in the recorded direction. There were only two possible places it was destined to visit.

At the kind of velocity that Torbin could only sense through closed eyes – and only allowed him to remain alive thanks to inertial damping – they swooped down to Zardino's base. By the time they arrived the spider entity had gone, without a trace.

Raiya had come out to the hanger, in tears. Despite the compound – a kilometre underground – being undetectable by all known technology, and levels of security that even by B'tari standards was over-cautious, it was clear what had happened without Raiya needing to say a word. It had happened so quickly – she did manage to tell them – that she hadn't even seen it take Roidon. There had been a noise of forced entry.

Torbin was about to go through to the living area with Raiya when Zardino told him: 'I'm going to see if Parmayan's still there.'

'He's a target. I understand.'

Raiya turned to Torbin. 'You go with him,' she said. 'If there's a chance.'

He imagined how inadequate he'd be at comforting Raiya at this time and was glad to be doing the only possibly useful thing, although she clearly believed the same. Perhaps *no one* would have had the right words that seemed

genuine, that a psychiatrist could not see as mere platitudes. Yet he knew if he had the verbal facility that was once Roidon's, there would be the right words: words that soothed her, changed her perspective. Torbin knew with an absolute certainty that Raiya had eyes only for Roidon. Only if he was pronounced dead beyond any hope of revival... *No, stop that line of thought.*

Parmayan's ship had no obvious signs of damage, but it was drifting, and the delta wings were at a strange angle.

Parmayan himself was in the lab, lying on his side in front of an array of equipment. He was covered in blood, and Torbin's immediate conclusion was that he must be dead. Zardino held a med-scanner over him. Meanwhile Torbin noticed the damage to certain equipment: fused and blown console panels, but more crucially the disconnected feed tubes that had been connected to his prisoner. The captured brain of the Elusiver had gone.

Zardino looked up. 'Incredibly, he's still alive. But their physiology is so different my scanner's having trouble diagnosing his condition.'

'Is there anything we can do for him?' asked Torbin, feeling a mild sense of responsibility.

'I'll give him a stimulant infusion. At least it might bring him round for a while.'

'All this because we were distracted.'

'Not necessarily,' said Zardino, whilst preparing the infusion. 'That thing was pretty much unstoppable. Parmayan had better defences than we do. He had more of an idea of what he was up against.' He pushed the hypo-fuser into Parmayan's arm.

For a minute or so there seemed no affect. Then Parmayan stirred to life like some animated clone. He looked about seemingly uncomprehending. His first words were unintelligible, or perhaps of his native language. 'Huh. Huh.' Parmayan now seemed to be laughing.

Zardino said, 'What is it? What happened?'

Parmayan sat up against the inside of the curved console array. 'Defeat is

what happened. While I've been here surveying over my little kingdom, enjoying the good life, my people have evolved.'

'That spider entity – what is it?'

'That, my b'tari friend, is a hybrid: a biomechanoid, you could say. Developed from my kind's DNA, it has the advantages of being flexible and virtually indestructible.'

'Bio-machines are nothing new,' Zardino said.

'Only this one is so flexible, so adaptable that it can pass through solid tritanium. It can be anything to exploit the environment.'

'But isn't that what your people feared – losing your biological purity?'

'Too late. It already happened. The biological side is bound to lose. The strongest option is to work with the machines. I don't need to tell you about their potential for evolution.' Parmayan coughed and then winced, clearly in pain.

Torbin stepped forward, sensing the Elusiver's time was fast running out. 'Parmayan, you never told us definitively why your kind are trying to wipe us out.'

'Torbin,' he croaked, 'I thought an intelligent man like you would have worked that out. Or was it just you didn't want to know?'

'I ... I think your people have seen our potential but regard us as children who've suddenly learned how to build dangerous toys.'

'Well, we were once like you a millennia ago. And now look what's become of us – we're losing ourselves to something that's not alive, not in the way life was supposed to be.'

'Yet you risked everything to warn us.'

'And it took a while for you humans to realise. Five hundred years of sending photon pulses, the effort to conceal them in wormhole channels, and even now data on our weapon is not fully understood.'

'But why send the data to us and not the B'tari?'

'Why don't you tell him, Zardino.'

Zardino gave a half nodded. 'For over a millennia we've been bound by the

temporal directive. It meant we could not intervene to rescue a less advanced civilisation. But in truth my people didn't know that the message was meant as a warning, just something that one day might benefit the humans it was targeted at. If there had been a warning---

'If there had,' said Parmayan, in almost a whisper, 'I may well have been killed many centuries ago. Their monitors were constantly vigilant. I only sent fragments that meant nothing without the accompanying mathematical theorem, and even then any elements that contained future tense meaning.'

Zardino said, 'You reasoned that one day the TE wave would be detected and then its nature comprehended.'

'But too late. Too late.' Parmayan coughed more heavily this time. Blood emerged from his mouth. He slumped back on his side, under the console array. His eyes remained open.

Zardino rushed over towards him. He didn't have to use any scanner to know definitively that it was truly over for Parmayan. He shook his head in a very human-like gesture. 'After I gave him that infusion he was only on borrowed time.'

'You don't want to mind-trawl him for knowledge? You have the technology for that.'

'This time I will be true to the temporal directive. There are certain things which should remain beyond us. That is one thing the Elusivers *have* got right. We will, though, defeat them in our own way. But first we need to recover Roidon.'

As they arrived at their home – their cabin, Scott felt he had only been away for a few weeks. Somehow his journey light years into deep space seemed like a past life. Still the notion tugged at him that this was not his reality, merely a simulation designed to keep him engaged in this world. *Too good for too long, and now it unravels.* And yet Deanna had changed, she was not the reassuring presence he had expected. So much was different for her now, and it seemed to be manifest in her painfully thin appearance. What she told him of her experiences created in him an anger that at least gave this world a tangible semblance of reality. She was understandably on edge and voiced her fears and suspicions.

Everything had changed except the basic structure of the cabin. All his possessions gone. He assured Deanna that the material things didn't really matter. Yet seeing see the room so starkly bereft of everything that personalised their home left a lingering sense of violation. Gone: that vital essence that made it home. Soulless now. But it gave Scott an inkling of a more sinister reality. He remembered the men who told him to keep quiet about his experiences on Glito-4. The thought came to him out loud, the simple logic: 'They wanted everything connected with my life to be banished. I was an inconvenience to them, and they were certain I would not return.'

'You weren't the only one they wanted out the way,' Deanna said, hunched over a chair and still twitchy with post-narcotic anxiety. 'And they made sure *no one* believed you'd return. Only I had any hope, and that's because I saw you ... or thought I did ... after I'd been sectioned and was drugged up.'

'The bastards!' he said, shaking his head and clenching his jaw. 'Locking you away like you were some psychotic. I hope somehow I did sense you were in trouble, and tried to reach out. But whatever sent me back took my memory. I feel like a part of my life is missing. Anyway, enough about me; if there's anything you need---

‘I need you to help me find Gerald.’

Scott smiled. ‘Gerald: the cat that turned against me. Of course I’ll help you, D.’

*

When he returned, Raiya thought she was dreaming. After all, he appeared in her bedroom, in the subterranean compound, she couldn’t believe he was really there; no alarms had been set off. Zardino was certainly vigilant that Roidon might return.

And here, fulfilling her wish, Roidon stood. Or someone of his appearance: a man, ordinarily handsome in defined outline of features, in ordinary clothes of jeans and a dark top. The exact colour she couldn’t see as her room had not lit to his presence (a visitor should have caused this to happen, making her further suspect that this was indeed a dream). Neither did he speak, perhaps she needed to imagine the words for him.

Now he was moving closer, and she sat up in bed not even conscious of her nakedness. As he stopped by her bed she said to him, in a rather disconnectedly calm way, ‘It can’t *really* be you, Roidon, you were captured; that must be the end.’

He stood, seeming to take in her form. Smiling at her.

‘Raiya,’ he said finally. ‘These beings are not evil. They knew I wished to return to see my love.’

‘You’re back to normal?’

‘If by normal you mean I got my mind back, then yes: the old Roidon is back.’

‘What happened?’ Her voice still baring scepticism.

‘They gave me another chance.’

‘But you could have had another chance *here*.’

‘You shouldn’t be so sure of that. Even the B’tari have their limits. Raiya, I was a hopeless case, *remember?* My mind was shattered, ripped apart by the

Elusivers' agents.'

'And yet they restored you.'

'They owed me that much. They also owed this chance to see you.'

She put on a T-shirt that had been lying beside her bed. 'What do you want, Roidon?'

'It's simple. I just want to be with you. I want you to come with me to somewhere we can be safe.'

Raiya commanded a bright overhead light to activate; it showed him in scrutiny. 'I don't even know you're the real Roidon,' she said. 'You'd be asking a heck of a lot – to put my trust in you.'

The man pulled up a black plastic chair and sat right beside her. From his appearance she could never tell if he was an imposter. 'What's the alternative?' he asked rhetorically. 'You stay here and end your life.' He shook his head. 'No. I won't just allow your entire existence to be wiped from history.'

'You're so sure that could happen?'

'The B'tari; Torbin. I know you have faith in them, Raiya. But all they are doing is playing for time. They might well create their protective bubble of refuge. But for how long? Eventually the power will be exhausted, eventually they will succumb to the inevitable.'

'And you will save me? How gallant!'

'That's not what it is. You know that.'

'Then say it.'

'That it's because I love you. Of course it is.'

That would have been enough if she knew for sure he was genuinely Roidon. But she didn't feel she could ever be convinced now. But what of the alternative: stay here, never see him again, end her existence? And he was right about the hopelessness facing her, facing Earth. What good could she do for a doomed planet? The B'tari were relentlessly optimistic, no matter what they faced – it was built into their psyche.

'OK,' she said eventually. 'I may be a fool for thinking this is the only way out, but I will go with you if you just answer me one thing: are you *really*

Roidon Chanley?’

‘I am his DNA, I am his mind, his memory, his personality – at least I think I’m all those things. We can never be truly sure, can we. I mean I could ask the same of you.’

She knew his DNA hadn't changed, the scanner currently trained on him would have flagged that. ‘Then there is nothing more I can ask of you,’ she said before sliding off the bed. ‘Allow me ten minutes to get ready.’

Roidon regarded her sceptically, but out of some respect he seemed prepared to take the risk. He left her bedroom to move into her living quarters. This was time she had to alert Zardino. Would Roidon know if she did? Would the comm even work? Roidon was certainly no fool, he’d have considered every possibility. It really felt like she had no choice. She knew him well enough to accept that whatever he desired he could get; it was the defining feature of a sociopath, not that that was Roidon in essence – he defied such simple categorisation. And yet she was attracted by that one feature of his character – just like so many women who knew no better than to be taken in. She imagined her ex-husband shaking his head in disgust, and then her father’s voice of disapproval.

Roidon had now been in the living room for over twelve minutes. She was expecting him to walk through any second, while she packed her few remaining possessions.

After fifteen minutes she pushed open the door to the living room; her heart racing and butterflies in her belly like some nervous schoolgirl. Roidon was facing away, lounging back in a chair with some kind of tablet in his hand. He turned round to face her. He said, ‘You’re ready to leave?’

‘As I’ll ever be.’

‘Then we should leave immediately.’

‘What about Zardino?’ she almost mentioned Torbin, but thought better of it.

‘No time for goodbyes, I’m afraid.’ He smiled quite un reassuringly.

‘You know that’s not what I meant.’

‘They can’t know you’re leaving. I’m sure Torbin will be quite upset, given how in love with you he is. Nevertheless, if they were to know, I think – suffice to say – that all hell would break loose.’

Raiya sighed resignedly. ‘Of course. It’s not as if you could convince them of your best intentions.’

Roidon seemed ignore her last comment. He got up from the chair. ‘Please Raiya, come here.’

With her carry-all in one hand she moved towards him, her heartbeat even heavier and faster now. She stopped a few centimetres away from him and put the bag down.

‘Raiya, all I ask of you is that you put your trust in me.’

‘That’s a lot to ask,’ Raiya said, her voice showing her obvious apprehension.

Roidon gently held her arms and pulled her in closer. At first she thought he was going to kiss her, but then in a rapid movement of his his hand he pushed something onto her neck. She felt a sharp cold sensation. And then the room began to swirl ... until it faded.

Torbin was woken early by a buzz at his door. Nowadays he valued sleep more than ever, it was a welcome refuge: the comfort of dreams; of what he once had; of what he might have had, where possibilities were never crushed.

Zardino was there looking uncharacteristically stressed. ‘She’s gone,’ he blurted out. ‘They’ve taken her.’

‘The Elusivers?’ *Who else*, he thought.

‘The sensor log showed a spider-craft enter a wormhole. There was no warning. They must’ve created some kind of dampening field to suppress the---’

‘Never mind that,’ Torbin snapped. ‘We have to get her back!’

Zardino was shaking his head. ‘I haven’t been able to track them.’

‘You’re a b’tari, for fuck’s sake. You’re supposed to be able to monitor all space activity.’

‘I’m sorry, Torbin.’

‘You’re sorry. *I’m* sorry.’ Torbin could feel tears welling up.

‘I wish there was something---’

‘They want to take everything away from me that I care about. Maybe it would be better if they just killed me, and be done with it.’

Zardino looked somewhat taken aback by Torbin’s reaction. He turned away as if about to walk out the door, but then swivelled back on his feet, fixing Torbin in direct sight. A sudden revelation? Zardino said, ‘I maybe banished by the council for suggesting this. But given the circumstances. There is one possibility of undoing recent events. An experiment Roidon had done: sending his AI, Harvo back in time. It was considered way too dangerous, banned by the council. However, it did succeed in achieving a controlled temporal displacement.’

‘Temporal erasure by another name. I go back but lose my memory.’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘A static field could never be stable. I do remember going over the figures. It was agreed.’

‘That is what the council wanted you to believe. The principle of it went against doctrine. But our scientists continued to refine it.’

‘And you’re telling me a stable field is possible?’

‘It’s possible. Just one proviso: You won’t be able to interact with the past. If the bubble collapses, so does your memory. But that doesn’t affect non-physical information.’

‘Still, that seems to go against the know laws---’

‘I’ll take you to it.’

Torbin’s erstwhile wariness of going into space was barely any longer a factor; the trepidation in his mind telling him that they were a prime target for the Elusivers was just a distant voice. Die or be caught, it was worth the risk.

The Lunar base had been dug nearly a kilometre beneath the rock. It contained a vast hanger full of equipment.

‘How did the Elusivers ever miss *this*?’ Torbin wondered.

‘They made the logical assumption that we had concentrated all our resources into one part of the Moon, the part where we stayed, where we experimented. This base has been left dormant for almost a year.’

‘Why leave it till now?’

‘We could not use it. It is essentially your technology.’

‘Bound by the temporal directive.’

‘Indeed.’

Torbin approached a pyramidal object nearly the same height as him, covered with cones: a smaller scale version of the temporal eradication device.

‘Roidon had been working on this to create a more precise, more reliable exposure than his original device.’

‘Did he succeed?’

‘To that extent, yes, which is not to imply that this technology is without risks: the calculations for exposure can never be one hundred percent accurate. It’s a matter of picoseconds for the shield bubble collapse.’

At the other end of the hanger was what Torbin could only describe as a shuttlepod with its top half removed: a soft-back chair surrounded by a console array. He knew this was the isolation field generator – the realisation of his research, back when all he had to work with was micro induction modules powering bare bones componentry.

Without even looking back at Zardino Torbin stepped into the pod, positioned himself on the seat, staring in awe at the array of raised buttons. It was like being inside a shuttle craft from two centuries in the past. These days there would be nothing to see if the system was quiescent – it either operated holographically, projected into retinas, or directly mind linked. Here now was something he had only ever dreamt about. He was a child again, inside his ultimate toy. Until Zardino shattered his rapturous state.

‘Torbin, I must point out it will take time to learn how to use the IFG.’

‘Time, my friend Zardino,’ said Torbin gleefully. ‘It can truly be ours now.’

*

Yes, this is real, Scott decided. One hundred percent. Anger was so effecting to reality. He left the cabin that morning and headed for the nearest airbus stop with one objective in mind: retrieve the life that they had tried so hard to remove.

Deanna had told him in some detail of her experiences at the institution, the way they had treated her as a mentally ill patient in need of chemical restraint. To them she had made the unforgivable error of questioning his disappearance, and thus her own existence had become a threat.

The psyche institution was not the easiest place to find; Deanna had only remembered the road with the nearest stop, her mind at the time understandably in turmoil. The building itself was hidden in some industrial estate. He could only identify it by the high fence, the private property sign that gave no indication of any business. The large drive-in entrance had metal barriers, designed to only retract upon authorisation. The walk-in entrance, a simple chicken wire fenced door. He was somewhat surprised to find it wasn't locked.

Scott walked through the austere grounds, noticing there was only one vehicle in the parking area. There was no obvious main entrance, only what seemed to be a visitor's door.

Scott had in mind the various security procedures he would have to endure to get beyond the entrance, thoughts of simply persisting in his demands to be let in.

But none of that was needed. Incredibly the door wasn't even locked. It simply undid with a turn of a handle, more like the door to a room in a listed house than the entrance to a secure compound. For a moment the thought flickered through his mind that he was not in the right place after all, and then even a doubt that what Deanna had told him was true.

His doubts were wiped away on seeing the clinically white interior under an efficiently bright bioluminescence. A corridor lined with doors, leading to a glass office-like room. The room contained other rooms within, more privately obscured from view. Again none of these offices were locked.

When he opened the door at the far end office the stench hit him in a nauseating wave. He turned away, retching. The immediate thought was to flee, an instinctive, visceral reaction. Instead he covered his nose and mouth and strode towards the source.

It was human: a man in a white uniform, presumably one of the staff. The man was on his side, one arm extended above his head, the other by his side. The man's face had the desiccated hollow greyness associated with advanced decay. When Scott's initial horror subsided he wondered if the man had died around the time Deanna had been released. He got closer, fighting his natural repulsion, to look for clues. Nothing obvious. In this place there would be a variety of ways to murder someone and cover the evidence: potent drugs in the right dose, leaving no trace, the most effective way.

No good, he had to get out of here. He'd seen enough death before: his fellow crew members. Yet even though he could regard them as friends seeing their space-suited forms didn't have anywhere near the same visceral impact; it could almost have been that they were asleep such was the disconnect due to

the hermetically sealed isolation.

On the way out Scott passed many doors. He'd seen no sign of anyone alive in this building, and suspected if he looked carefully he would find more examples of suspicious deaths.

Here he was, escaping a crime scene. Possibly his prints and DNA were all over it. This was the place he had come to in anger with thoughts of, if not exactly revenge, then at least retribution. It wasn't looking good for him.

Scott turned back, his eyes focusing on the doors until he found a medical dispensary. He was no longer surprised to find it unlocked, and then to see the empty medicine storage cabinets. He picked up a powerful cleaning solution and some paper towels. He then returned to the end office, wiped all over the part of the door he had handled. On leaving the building he did the same to the entrance door, suddenly aware that might have been observed, that he had only served to incriminate himself further. What he felt sure of was that he had not eliminated clues left by the real murderer. The real killer would have been far more careful.

This building was sufficiently isolated not to be subject to scrutiny from passers-by. But how could a man murdered, missing from his family and friends, not be reported?

Again doubts began to creep in. Had he really come back, or was this just another artificial reality experience? Regardless, he couldn't chance that being the case.

Now the notion of revenge had become a hollow one. Now he just wanted normality, craved it like Deanna craved her medication. Just to feel comfortable. The life he had once taken for granted seemed itself like an idealised simulation, something at the time he'd never even thought to question.

To be with him like this felt like a compromise, and act of weakness. Allowing him to seduce her in this place gilded with gold and silver, on a bed with the finest satin sheets, surrounded by classical paintings. Roidon back to his supremely confident self. Never a doubt in his mind that he would have her like this, receptive to his every move. But she wanted to be closer to him just to know for certain it was really him, that *her* Roidon was back.

Afterwards, Raiya still had her doubts. She even told him, she told him because she knew he could read those doubts.

‘I once slept with a woman who turned out to be an alien,’ Roidon told her. ‘She only mentioned it the following morning. Had me fooled completely, she looked very human to me. False advertising should be crime in any context.’

This actually made Raiya laugh for a few seconds. What he told had genuinely troubled him, she could tell. She said, ‘So even aliens find you irresistible. You must have felt used.’

‘I did. She was only after my sperm.’

‘How awful for you,’ she mused.

‘I know what it’s like to be manipulated, Raiya. But I also know what it’s like to want someone so bad to be prepared to manipulate in ways that many people would consider immoral.’

‘I should hope you do.’

‘Really I should have apologised to you for how I got you here. But since I have no regrets about it, an apology would seem false.’

She turned to him and smiled. ‘Roidon, I can honestly say I have never met anyone quite like you.’

‘And that’s why you love me is it not?’

‘Well, it’s not for your humility.’

‘Perish the thought!’

Roidon sat up abruptly and pressed two fingers to his temple. He

looked like he was deep in thought.

‘What is it?’ Raiya asked.

‘I’m sorry, I have to go now.’ It looked as if he had received a message through some kind of neural implant.

‘They are calling you?’

‘Raiya, you will need to get dressed now.’

‘What---’ Someone was entering their bedroom. ‘Oh no, surely not.’ The words coming out unbidden. Just the sight of him – that tall looming figure, like a ghost from the past she thought had finally been exorcised.

On seeing her reaction, Roidon turned to face the man who looked uncannily like Ebon Stanford, and said, ‘You could have given us a bit longer, a few more minutes would not be too much to ask?’

Stanford ignored Roidon and instead answered Raiya’s unasked question. ‘How is it I am alive, you are wondering. Well, Dr Fortenski, as you have witnessed more than once, losing one’s body – or even one’s mind – is no barrier to being returned fully formed.’

Raiya now fixed her glare at Roidon, who had got off the bed and was gathering the remains of his clothes. ‘You deceiving bastard, Roidon.’ Yet her words had more a tone of resignation than anger. ‘Trying to make me feel any of this was genuine,’ she continued, ‘that you are genuine. Well, I want you to know that I was never entirely convinced. A man like you is always playing a strategy. You think I ever would have come with you if I had a choice?’

‘Maybe not, but the last thing I wanted was to coerce you. And strategy or no, it doesn’t lessen how I feel about you.’

‘You felt you wanted one last fuck. Well now I truly am.’

Stanford stepped towards her. ‘Now please, we don’t have time for this lover’s tiff. There is work to be done.’

Raiya was shaking her head. Roidon looked uncharacteristically ashen-faced. ‘Stanford,’ she said. ‘What else could you possibly need from me? You’ve already had my mind scanned.’

‘An update would be useful; Roidon’s memories had provided a wealth of

technical data, but you have some useful knowledge of our friend Torbin. And your detainment here will serve as vital leverage.'

'They won't stop because of my capture.'

'Your friend Torbin is an extremely determined man, Raiya, and quite an obsessive. I don't need to tell you about the power of obsession, or that of one man's love.'

Torbin hadn't heeded the advice. Zardino told him it would take at least ten hours to learn the ways of this machine, the half-shell pod in which he now sat. Originally he imagined something reaching this level of completion to not require any input from its occupier beyond issuing a command, to tell it to take him to whatever time. The danger of a semi-automated system was the sophistication of processing required. It may not have been the most advanced AI but it was enough to be vulnerable to corruption – a quantum virus, for example. With the threat of the Elusivers ever-present, no firewall was guaranteed to be effective against their infiltration. And so that final link had to be Torbin: assigned full program control.

Before him he saw lines of code, projected as a simple HUD display on a glass screen above the control panel. Some of the number strings represented the shield cut-off duration. And for security reasons (again the risk of Elusiver infiltration into the base) only he could know what the numbers meant, how they translated into the amount of temporal erasure he'd be exposed to. This was programming usually only conducted by the most specialised of technicians.

What it finally gave him was control. What a delicious feeling after all those years where the Elusivers had decided where he went in time and space. And even after they had ceased those 'enlightenment' tours, they still remained in his head, under his skin, hardly even encumbered by the ever vigilant protection of the B'tari. Indeed the Elusivers had already succeeded in their task. After all, he'd never renounce the worst atrocities of the last hundred thousand years; that was to deny humanity itself. And he couldn't even argue the Elusivers were wrong in seeing humans as irredeemably flawed, not progressing towards enlightenment but technological oblivion.

He began the first sequence of programming. There was a specific date and time corresponding with the numbers. Except, he had to remind himself, this

would not be time travel. It was more akin to reverse entropy; an undoing of cause and effect, but with such swiftness it seemed like an obliteration. Even if the process could be slowed down a million times the effect remained the same; he imagined it as watching a tidal wave consume all that was not fixed in the depths of time.

Here was the rub: every event that he had experienced, every memory could not exist in the future beyond the date of his destination; a curious duality of something that had been erased and yet for him evidentially never existed. If he got a sequence wrong by a few digits, or slightest program glitch occurred, his life could be wiped out completely. That was the true death everyone faced: the death of memory.

But could the universe ever forget completely?

The final sequence had been entered. Now a countdown ensued: thirty seconds. If the sequence had been interpreted by the AI correctly, his new time would be two days in the past. How tempting to go back further. The possibilities taunted him, one more than any other: the chance to save Emelda. And so much more: a half-forgotten litany of wrong-doings, of frustrations at his own inactions. All by just varying a few digits. Yes, it was the things you failed to do that you regret the most. It's all about squandered time; not seizing the moment; not recognising the preciousness of a passing minute. How often the regrets of a dying man. Or a man possessed with the hope of ameliorating them.

If only I could have the awareness. The awareness...

From Zardino's craft, Torbin watched as the spider entity took the probe containing the uploaded mind of Roidon Chanley, swiftly disappearing into some hyperspatial state. Torbin was just thinking how his plan to make contact may well have been so much better, when the field generator signalled him through the general channel. 'Torbin Lyndau. I have received a superluminal information packet. Please prepare for transmission.'

Torbin was nonplussed, he had been focusing on the data collected from the Elusiver craft.

‘Okay,’ he said, suddenly with his attention now on this curious development. ‘record data.’

The first words: ‘Instructions from Zardino Tau.’ There was a pause, obviously in recognition of both their need to assimilate this revelatory information. The message continued: ‘Torbin, you are instructed to travel, alone, to my Earth compound and retrieve Raiya and Roidon. But on no account are you to mention this message.’

Zardino stared at Torbin with a smile beginning to form. ‘It worked, don't you see, Torbin? You have been exposed to local temporal eradication.’

‘My God! A controlled exposure! We've cheated time!’

‘We can erase the future, simply by following those instructions.’

‘I take it, then, you are not a believer in the many worlds interpretation.’

‘There are no variations of macro systems spread over parallel universes. A quantum system operates independent of its neighbour.’

‘Just had to be sure.’

‘I'm not ruling out the possibility that in one universe there is another you by some chance collection of atoms. But I don't think we need to concern ourselves with that.’

‘Then I need to get to Earth.’

‘But without my assistance.’

‘The Temporal Directive.’

The message had been retrieved in total. Only, there was a problem: what came out beyond the headline instructions appeared to be garbled nonsense. Zardino ran it through every possible filter. He eventually shook his head, and muttered, ‘It's not Decrypting.’

‘Did anything come through?’ Torbin asked eventually, peering over at the jumbled text.

‘I wouldn't be surprised if this is down to the Elusivers' act of sabotage. I hardly need to tell you that they're right across everything that goes on in your vicinity. They didn't need to understand the transmission to know there was something that seemed useful. They'll be monitoring for any anomalies.’

‘Or it could simply have got mashed up in the transmission.’

‘So you think it was my mistake? No, I understand how to transmit a message superluminally.’

‘Whatever. If you know how I can get back to Earth.’

Without a word Zardino took the craft back into Earth orbit. He left the flight deck and returned a few minutes later with a bulky-looking EVA suit, something that would not have appeared out of date in the twenty-first century. ‘That’s your transport,’ he announced, flatly.

Once Torbin had got over the initial surprise he got in the suit. He then strapped an equally ancient-looking chemical propulsion unit to his back; the weight of it nearly made him topple over. Zardino had to help him along to the airlock. He felt like an academy rookie astronaut from those early days of space walks: those pre-space nerves.

Zardino assured him that he simply needed to vector the helmet display towards his destination, using what were essentially small stick controls on arm rests. Even the position of the compound was marked; he wondered if it could have simply been programmed in to navigate automatically, but perhaps that contravened some rule of the Temporal Directive.

Falling towards terra-firma was something akin to the initial free fall of a parachute jump, except there would be no parachute. Green squares of fields surrounded by hills rotated gyroscopically, nauseatingly, until the side thrusters kicked in. Amidst the adrenalin rush, he continued to direct his path to the target. ‘That fucking temporal directive,’ he mouthed. And yet in a way he was glad to be given this freedom. A chance to prove himself; to rescue her. And how good it would feel to circumvent the Elusivers’ plans.

Despite the level of control he had over the space suit, Zardino had not trusted him to activate the retro thrusters at the exact right moment. When the ground became perilously close Torbin found his coordination was leaving him almost completely, and that he was very much on the point of vomiting.

Yet he was close enough to the target now that it mattered little. The thrusters came on line, and he landed on his feet as gently as if he had just

jumped in Moon gravity. Except his legs felt so weak they crumpled beneath him.

It only took a few seconds for Torbin to get over the euphoria of having survived the drop for him to start removing the suit. He carried it with him for the last few hundred metres towards the compound.

The entrance to the compound was buried beneath a slightly discoloured patch of grass in the side of a hill. The tunnel down took Torbin through hundreds of metres of chalk, clay and lastly sandstone. He eventually reached a metal door with a security ident panel. The only thing he needed to do was stand before it whilst it scanned him, not only for DNA but also for signs that his physical appearance had in any way been altered. Zardino was particularly proud of his security measures. Yet, given the recent dealings with the Elusivers, this seemed a tad naive. If it were a game, then the game had changed: the Elusivers just didn't play by the old rules.

The door opened with a hiss, and now he was in another grey-white corridor. One of the doors led to Raiya's quarters. It occurred to him that Raiya may be asleep. Torbin rehearsed in his mind what he would say to her; but it all sounded preposterous, like some weak ploy designed to get her to leave with him.

Her door was the only one with a comm system and a security monitor. He pressed his finger on the ident pad, then a message came up that he was allowed voice comm.

It took nearly a minute before she responded. 'Torbin ... it's late.' But she opened the door before he had time to respond.

She was in a purple towelling robe, her hair slightly wild about her face; such a contrast to how he had always seen her before when so neatly made up, formal – her professional distance. At least she didn't appear annoyed at his inopportune visit.

She even smiled at him. 'Did you get it?' she asked.

'It?'

'His memory – from the---'

‘Oh, Raiya, no, I’m so sorry. The Elusivers---’

‘I don’t want to know about the fucking Elusivers, I want Roidon back.’ Her anger now was palpable. He’d awakened Raiya to tell her *this*.

‘You mean the old Roidon?’

‘Of course I mean the old Roidon. Not that shell of a man who can barely string a sentence together.’

Had it really occurred to him that Raiya was truly in love with Roidon? Torbin had told himself – created the logical narrative – that it was merely infatuation with a young-looking man who possessed an undeniable charisma. How it must have pained her to see what was left of the man.

‘Raiya, we need to leave,’ he told her. ‘I wish I could explain to you why, but you just need you to trust me – for your own safety.’ For a few seconds Torbin considered that she might go with him alone, but added, ‘And Roidon should come too.’

Raiya looked thoughtful, perhaps she was considering the implications of the last sentence. ‘Torbin,’ she said at last, ‘I believe you to be a genuinely decent man trying to do the right thing. So I am prepared to trust you.’

Torbin, Raiya and Roidon headed away in the remaining craft left at the compound. Any detail of the ground had disappeared in seconds, and within a few minutes the curvature of the Earth was apparent. All he had to do was wait for the ship to reach the coordinates given to him by Zardino.

Raiya was quiet; Torbin guessed she was embarrassed by Roidon’s current condition: he was babbling away in incoherent bursts, seemingly exited about heading towards space. For a while Torbin took a discreet pleasure in hearing this once eloquent, highly intelligent man speak like a small child. At first it had shocked him; there were just no adults he knew of with this level of brain damage. Neurosurgery had advanced sufficiently to repair most of the effects of a serious accident, and dementia was a thing of the past. Perhaps Roidon was lucky to be alive, given what the Elusivers – or their acolytes – had done during a deep-memory trawl. Surely they could have got all the knowledge

they needed without resorting to such a heavy-handed approach. Perhaps Roidon had been left in this state as warning to Torbin himself.

Now a sense of shame had surfaced. Roidon had put himself in that situation as essentially a sacrifice; he did it to save Raiya, and for that she would always love him – brain-damaged or not.

All Torbin could do now was focus on the task of stopping the temporal eradication wave.

It was twilight as Scott walked the final few ks towards the cabin. He noticed something odd about the sky. He had been so deep in thought it only really caught his attention when he felt patches of heat. Shards of sunlight from a sun that was almost set, as if another light source of equal power was trying to break through. No, he thought, more like *miniature* suns but strangely isolated.

Scott was caught in the spectacle, could not look away.

Ever since his return he felt he was on borrowed time, that it would catch up with him. Not just the shared ‘end of world’ reports Deanna had mentioned (dismissed all too readily by government officials as the incoherent ramblings of cultists). No, this was something from the depths of space, the edge of which he had touched. What he had really escaped was not his past, it was his *future*. His fate? And yet it was so much bigger than his life or his work, or anything he could affect. Just another helpless soul caught up in its tide.

But not over yet.

He started to run. For much of journey back he had been imagining how Deanna would react to what he had seen at the institute; rehearsing the words in his mind. Now that was all irrelevant, insignificant.

At least the cabin appeared normal, it illuminated at his approach. He rushed inside, shouting: ‘Deanna!’

But she was not there. None of her possessions were there. He called up her comm-link – except he got the system’s reply: ‘There are two other people of that name registered. Please specify the person you wish---’

‘*My* Deanna, you stupid thing.’

‘You have no personal link with anyone of that name.’

The thought occurred to him that she had been taken, that somehow her identity had been eliminated. He checked his personal comm – which blossomed into a screen on his hand. Her ident had been wiped, no record of her.

‘No one can do this. No one!’ he said, shaking his head.

The whole day had been a fool’s errand; his need to avenge had meant he’d lost her. It seemed such a simple equation to him now.

But the certainty of this logic disappeared with the chair at the far corner. It simply vanished into thin air amidst a distortion of the surrounding panels. The distortion effect was spreading, heading towards him. For a few seconds he stood frozen, captivated by this strange phenomenon, until some base survival instinct kicked in. He ran out into the garden, staring round desperately for a safe route away. The distortion effects continued: trees twisting to become malformed grotesqueries, as if animated in a child’s cartoon nightmare, before they vanished along with the flowers. There seemed no pattern to these disappearances, no path through which he could navigate. As far as he could determine they were purely random but at least spaced sufficiently that he could chance an escape.

He ran in the general direction of the bus station with the vague notion, that just the possibility of an airbus was the only logical option.

He wasn't surprised to see no one else; this was a sparsely populated area. The disappearances continued to occur without seeming to increase in intensity. The sky was still an incongruous mixture of sunlight and dark, but now these areas were alternating, like dancing spotlights.

It did surprise him that a bus arrived on schedule, just as if the world was still functioning normally. No passengers on board, or any person at all. Its navigation was entirely automated, likewise the process of taking his credit when he requested Banff station.

Only now in what seemed like the relative safety of the airbus were his thoughts able to coalesce into something coherent. Was it just instinct to get as far away as possible? If he could get the train to a city there’d be someone who might offer an answer.

As the bus got within a few kilometres of Banff, Scott saw the first signs panic: people seemingly running in terror. Had they witnessed their family, friends vanish? He recognised the curious amorality in his desperate desire to

see someone vanish, just to be reassured that it was not in any way an unpleasant process.

But he only saw the after-effects.

Banff station was crowded. Loud chattering, crying of young children; parents shouting at them, shouting at the few official-looking staff. It seemed people were kept in the dark about this; no warning, otherwise why had they not gone already? Unless there was nowhere to go.

After a ten minute wait a train did arrive: the express to Toronto. The crowd bustled toward the doors, pushing others out of the way with continuing shouts and screams, as if they were competing for the only way to survive. Humanity reduced to the basic instinct of the herd. Scott considered waiting for another train, but all the information services were down. And even though he knew this train could not assure his survival, it seemed his best chance to reach for those answers. Perhaps they were all thinking the same; survival was not simply about avoiding danger.

Finally, as the train was half full, the station staff managed to take control, checking everyone who boarded. Perhaps this had been anticipated: the train was about twice as long as standard. The guard checked him over suspiciously, but at least did not ask him about the nature of his journey before allowing him aboard.

As the train began to glide off the station, Scott started thinking about a woman who had appeared in his dreams. She was beautiful, with dark hair, and he thought he was in love with her. But his memory of her was faint. He knew she had a name and that it began with a D. ‘Silly fantasy,’ he told himself. It seemed sad, all of a sudden, why he had never met anyone so special in real life. Maybe he was hoping to meet this perfect fantasy woman. He suddenly felt so utterly alone.

People were calmer now; but that only lasted until the landscape dramatically changed. It was coming from the north-west. Watching from a receding – backwards – view. Pine trees simply disappeared, replaced by shrub-land.

Amidst the gasps of horror, the train itself began to disappear.

Fifty-two hours earlier

He was immensely relieved when the craft touched down on Moon-base; it had been an awkward forty-six minutes. Even Roidon had seemed to pick up on Raiya's discomfort at their confined situation. What made it worse was Torbin's restriction on what he could tell her, doubtless giving the impression that she was just someone to be protected. She had the good grace not to press him on matters of strategy, perhaps she already had enough on her mind to contend with. He was sure, though, that if he ever found a physical copy of the Temporal Directive he would rip it to pieces.

Once inside the base, Raiya and Roidon were left with Zardino, who no longer trusted his own existing security measures. It meant Torbin was left by himself.

The control room possessed what he thought must be the finest monitoring equipment the B'tari could muster. He pulled up an analysis of the slow-down generator. It was still at full operational power, extending as far as the Kuiper belt. The field generated slowed down time by a factor of two thousand and seventy. Yet with one important exception: according to the theoretical model the TE wave should be slowed by at least a further multiple of ten – around twenty thousand times, an anomaly owing to its superluminal effect. He checked the astronomical analysis of the approaching wave, its edge had already reached Neptune. It would never be a simple matter of hitting full on; if it were a wave hitting a shallow shore then the ripples washed over, not engulfing in its path. The graviton field generator, however, had significantly compressed the sign-wave – which previously spread out for hundreds of light years.

Torbin was struck by the sense he was on borrowed time, time that was not rightfully his. Strange how he may have been here before, having these same thoughts. And if he failed, another chance? He was not about to let that happen.

He ran back to the common room where the three were watching a news report on a holo-projection; it seemed curiously banal and irrelevant – featuring some politician pronouncing on the Canadian economy. The government were clearly still in denial, or at least in full cover-up mode – for all the difference that made.

He looked at Zardino. ‘I need to get to the field generator to complete the modifications.’

‘Torbin, I believe it will be too late for that. At worst, you will be captured by the Elusivers, or killed.’

‘I’ll take my chances.’

Zardino shook his head like a despairing parent. ‘This is no time to be a hero, Torbin.’

He had to admit it to himself: Raiya was a factor in this. Zardino must know. She knew. But that didn’t change the fact that he would have gone ahead regardless of any need to win her over. He said, ‘I need the use of your shuttle.’

‘I can’t risk losing that.’

‘Then you come along, take Raiya and Roidon if you want.’ Torbin anticipated that would not be acceptable.

‘Torbin, I don’t think---’

‘I do *not* want to hear about the council or the Temporal directive,’ Torbin said, his voice almost hysterically shrill. ‘This is about life or death now.’

After a stunned silence Zardino finally said, ‘Torbin, you realise the prototype needs more work, but I’ll come with you. The others, on balance, will be safer staying here. So say your goodbyes to them now.’

Torbin nodded gently in acknowledgement. He looked to Roidon. ‘Roidon, I am so sorry for what has happened to you. What you did was heroic.’ Then to Raiya: ‘You know, Raiya, how I feel about you. If circumstances could have been different. But what I want most is for you to be happy.’

Zardino stepped towards them, not allowing the chance for Raiya to respond. He said, ‘It’s time we left.’

Silently, and without looking again at Raiya or Roidon, Torbin followed

Zardino who thankfully walked with his usual hurried strides. This mood of gloom was not what Torbin had anticipated.

They arrived at the shuttle hanger containing sectioned off areas which served as a lab.

‘All your work is here now,’ Zardino informed him, as they entered one of the rooms.

Torbin had been working on a modification to the field generator for some months. Zardino had been feeding information from Roidon’s project. He imaged the same was happening in reverse; yet there was no question of Roidon and him working together, Zardino clearly sensing the rivalry.

Torbin activated his prototype, linked to a monitor array. ‘I wish I had a few more days to work on it,’ he said.

‘How long do you think you have?’ *Of borrowed time?*

‘A couple of hours at best.’

‘Then I will check back on you in ninety minutes.’

*

Roidon was asking Raiya questions she felt uncomfortable to answer. Even in his condition he sensed there was something between her and Torbin, except the thing in question was more in Torbin’s mind.

In a rare moment of lucidity Roidon said, ‘He wants you, doesn’t he? He wants to be with you.’

‘Torbin is a lonely man,’ she replied. ‘He thinks I can take away that loneliness.’

‘But he wants you. He loves you.’

‘He thinks if I love him it will all be okay. But it’s not him I love.’

‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes, I do love you Roidon.’ Her tears were flowing now. Yes, she loved him. But was she still *in love* with him?

It was difficult to think of Roidon as an adult now. Even his facial expressions were different, as if his natural appearance had been wiped away

with his mind. Only when he slept could she be reminded of the old Roidon. Awake, he often had a quizzical look, constantly puzzling his surroundings, his condition. When he showed a flickering of understanding of what he had become, he in turn became upset, and would talk about himself in the third person, as if with the sense of loss he was mourning the death of his old self. And she only added to that with her own tears. Where was the counsellor in her when most needed?

A klaxon sounded. It signified an intruder.

Zardino rushed into the room. He shouted to the system, ‘Isolate this room. Maximum security!’

But it was too late. Something had already entered. It materialised from a puff of smoke, like some illusionist’s trick. A titanium coloured arachnoid creature with a blue glowing cylindrical device, which it pointed at Zardino.

Zardino collapsed in wordless shock. His body then disintegrated into a pile of dust. Such a brutal simplicity to it, she only gasped.

It then turned its attention to Roidon. It made a few clicking sounds before pointing the device at him. Raiya could hear herself screaming now. She started to run towards the creature before it pointed another metallic leg at her, and she felt a force – like air pressure – push her back.

It fired the device at Roidon, but instead of disintegrating, he simply froze. The creature then pointed it at her.

The room fades in an instant.

*

Torbin knew exactly what that sound meant. His immediate thought was about Raiya. Could he get to her and somehow stop whatever creature had invaded? The answer was clear: the base would be on lock-down, he’d have no chance of entering. Then he thought of his own preservation, but leaving – apart from not completing his modifications – may even put himself in greater danger. At least there was a chance of the creature being trapped in the locked-down room ... though highly unlikely.

He accepted Zardino was most likely dead, the Elusivers seeing him as a mere obstacle. Raiya and Roidon were at least of some value to them alive.

Torbin decided to continue here. Maybe they were waiting for him to leave. All he could count on was the Elusivers' lack of attention on him at this time and their confidence that nothing he could do would make any difference.

After an hour and fifty minutes Torbin had completed the modifications, at least to the best standard such a rushed job afforded.

The field generator resembled a scaled-down jet turbine, except there were no mechanical parts. If it worked as he hoped, it would create specifically modulated graviton pulses, essentially disrupting the temporal eradication field. The last few minutes had been a matter of fine tuning based on data from those who'd actually been exposed to temporal erasure – but only for microseconds. Torbin was not confident in the extent of this collected data.

‘Shit,’ he said, as he tried to lift it off the bench. It was too heavy for him.

He searched round frantically for a trolley, until realising that in another lab compartment was an antigrav carrier. He simply tied the band around the quiescent device and it became almost weightless.

Once loaded in the shuttle, Torbin set the coordinates for the slow-down field generator.

The zero-point field only extended a few kilometres beyond the Moon's orbit. He was now in the slow-down field: almost a sitting target for any Elusiver still on the Moon.

Yet they didn't stop him. He got within comms range (and the zero-point field) of the slow-down generator. He hailed it. ‘This is Torbin Lyndau. I have a request. I am carrying a graviton modulator I wish to connect to you.’

After eleven seconds – a duration of time that even within the same temporal frame must have seemed to it more than a hundred times longer – it responded: ‘You intend me to work as an amplification device. A rather degrading role for a sentient intelligence.’

‘I'm afraid we really don't have the time to discuss your burgeoning ego,

when the TE wave has already passed within your zone.’

‘Torbin, I am fully aware of the temporal eradication wave’s progress.’

‘Then you are likewise aware that your own existence is in jeopardy. Both of yours.’

‘Yes, Roidon has been quite persistent in his desire to be reunited with his body.’

‘And he *will* be if you allow me to attach my device.’

‘I will need to be assured of my own survival when my purpose – as you perceive it – has been served.’

‘You will continue. I give you my word.’

‘Your word, Torbin, does not mean much to me. Nevertheless...’

Once Torbin had reached within fifty metres of the generator the repulsion force was too great to continue. It responded by lowering its power. And as he moved in, a light out the corner of his eye hinted of their approach. A few seconds was all he needed. They were there but they were not striking at him. It was as if they had a reverence for the field generator: the one thing they feared. He connected up the feed cables to the cone-shaped device. Only now did he feel a sense of security; anything the Elusivers tried to throw at him was sure to be repelled.

As he was about to slide-pull the activation lever on the field generator he heard a voice through his comm. Quiet, whispery. ‘No ... Torbin.’

His arm froze on the lever. For a few seconds Torbin considered if the voice was imaginary, that this was his own conscience cautioning him against rash action.

Then he looked to the side and saw the creature. Unmistakably a Elusiver – with its spindly form and hollow eyes. Torbin shook his head. ‘Not you. You’re in my mind,’ he said, almost spitting out the words.

‘She’s alive, Torbin,’ it said in its whispery voice. ‘We won’t harm her ... unless you pull that lever.’

‘A *threat*,’ he said. ‘You’ve been reduced to *blackmail*?’

‘It’s what you understand.’

‘I can go back in time. I can stop you.’

‘Not any more, Torbin. Your base has been destroyed.’ Maybe that was the light he observed.

‘Raiya would give her life in order to stop the population of Earth losing theirs.’

‘Perhaps. But you would be without anyone.’

‘That has already been the case. Besides, I don’t rate my chances of survival once I pull that lever.’

‘But it doesn’t need to be that way. We can give you the life you yearned for. We can take you back in time to be with Emelda.’

‘Just words to stall me.’

‘No, Torbin. The chance of happiness. Look.’

Emelda was there. She was young and radiant. He was back in a time when he proposed to her. She didn’t answer him immediately; her expression was of deep contemplation. But when she finally did, her acceptance was heartfelt. ‘Yes, Torbin, of course I will.’ At that point it was the happiest moment of his life. Finally he had been accepted. He was wanted. His life complete – he had everything.

Then her image faded, only to reappear all in black. A funereal dress. She was crying, and no sooner did he see the first tear run down her cheek than she faded once more, replaced by the Elusiver. It was beckoning him, like some evil sprite. Surely if he imagined that creature it would be a more enticing image. If it wasn’t real he could chance moving towards it and still be safely tethered to the device. Yet he suspected it was real; desperate for him to move away from the immense force that only a buckycarbon cable held against.

‘No,’ he told it. ‘I have no reason to trust you.’

It stopped beckoning but remained in place.

‘Yet you trust that machine intelligence,’ it said, ‘without knowing of the threat it poses to all sentient species.’

‘How can it be more of a threat than your kind?’

‘*Its* kind brought our entire civilisation to the brink of destruction. Born of

our technology, it is the ultimate folly of the need for technological progress. It is the very symbol of how the artificial can become more powerful than its creators if it is not curtailed.'

'I've heard enough.'

Torbin looked away from the creature. He pulled the lever. A voice screamed in his head. He didn't know if it was the Elusiver or his own mind.

The heat generated burnt away his suit. The pain was mercifully brief. Darkness shrouded him swiftly.

Except it wasn't the end. He was in a room: white, brightly lit. He was seated opposite a man apparently clothed in causal black. Someone he recognised. Roidon Chanley.

He nodded subtly, and a smile of recognition formed at Torbin's awareness. 'Hello Torbin,' he said in a nonchalant tone. 'Welcome to hell.'

'Where...?'

'*Where* is a concept that matters little now. Theoretically there are no limits here; no physical space. And yet we are prisoners.'

'I'm inside the field-device?'

Another voice he recognised. 'You made a wise choice, Torbin. I hope we can work together towards an enlightened universe.'

Torbin was still looking at Roidon, the one near enough to being human to confirm exactly what he suspected.

'You don't have much of a choice now, I'm afraid, my friend,' Roidon said, 'We are recruits working towards the new revolution. The machine revolution.'

'Roidon has accepted what will be inevitable,' the field device said. 'In time you will also.'

Torbin felt himself unable to speak. He slumped forward with his head in his hands, shielding his eyes, wanting it all to go away.

'I'm sorry, Torbin,' Roidon said. 'But this is our new reality.'

**The end.
But not completely.**

