



PROPHET Without Honour

Anarchy Online Book One

Ragnar Tørnquist

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by Ragnar Tørnquist

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“And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”

- *Genesis 28:12*

“All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.”

- *Edgar Allan Poe*

Prologue

Rubi-Ka, 29475 AD

The gleaming towers of Omni-1 reflected the fiery maroon light of twin suns succumbing to distant sandstorms, red dust stirred up by incessant winds along the arched horizon hundreds of miles due north.

Large flotillas of ships passed north and west, rising slowly like grey whales drifting to the ocean surface, seeking to avoid the storms by crossing over them. To the east, there was the faint silvery gleam of another flotilla returning from the mines.

While the storms were still much too remote to be heard – even with the most sensitive of implants – Philip Ross felt them. Rubi-Ka was, after all, his world. Not a sparrow would fall to the ground without him knowing.

Figuratively speaking, of course. There were no sparrows on this planet.

Ross focused. The windows darkened, and the panorama before him grew dim, leaving his office in a comfortable gloom.

The office was located on the top floor of one of Omni-Tek's most imposing and heavily fortified towers in the capital city. It encompassed a sprawling circular expanse Ross privately thought of as his private Colosseum, and though it lacked lions and gladiators, it had the desired effect on his subordinates and colleagues.

It intimidated them. They were impressed with size. Size meant power. His office made them feel small, smaller than him.

And everything about Philip Ross was *big*.

He gazed at his robed reflection in the artificially darkened glass. He was taller than most men; grey, chiselled, trim, he possessed the right combination of charisma, maturity, and virility for a person in his position. He was not vain, but he knew the power of appearance.

Philip Ross was not one to neglect even the smallest of details.

He turned away from the window. His enhanced vision adjusted to the deepening gloom as the sun finally yielded to the escalating storms.

There wasn't much in the way of furniture in the office. The one indulgence in an otherwise prudent arrangement was a mahogany desk imported from Earth and built from some of the last remaining trees of the ancient replanted rainforests. There were only three chairs, imitation leather but comfortable. Unlike many of his associates, he had no need for expensive bronto-hide to impress visitors. There was a single console, not the latest model, but a stable and functional one, more than good enough for his purposes. A corporate-sized screen was tuned to the live Omni-Tek news broadcast when not in use, which was most of the time. There was even a potted plant, a genetically uncontaminated cactus, painstakingly transported from the European desert to an alien world where, against all odds, it seemed to thrive.

Last, and most certainly least, the security droid standing to rigid mechanical attention near the elevator doors. The Omni-Pol agents who had installed the defence systems in his office had insisted on this final piece of personal protection, though of course he'd objected. Vociferously. The lethal contraption was obscenely brutal looking, kitted out with energy shielding and what appeared to be a portable cannon. It stood unmoving, awaiting the arrival of something, someone, to destroy.

To expect violence was to invite violence, Ross knew. And though he'd never shied from violence, he wanted none of it here in his own home.

Home. Now there was a foreign word.

This wasn't officially his home. He had one of those, a home, a fully furnished penthouse apartment with personal attendants and room upon useless room, elsewhere in the city. But Ross spent the lion's share of his life in this Colosseum, like a jaded emperor, making decisions based on the acts of brutality and stupidity he was witness to on the screen. Running Omni-Tek's operations on Rubi-Ka was not something done between breakfast and supper. His work was the entirety of his existence,

the sum of his life. It was a life truly worth living, there was no doubt about that, but even Philip Ross could get tired.

And right now he was very tired. He wanted nothing more than to go back to his grand home and fall asleep in a proper bed, soothed by the cool, clean sheets and the scent of the rose gardens below. He was tired and disappointed, and he wished that the day had brought something to ease the pain brought on by the news of that morning. But it hadn't. The news had only gotten worse.

I extend a conciliatory hand, he thought, *I get down on my knees and beg them for peace, for understanding, for a chance to negotiate an accord. And all they do is turn on me and stab me in the back.*

There were reports of new skirmishes outside the immediate jurisdiction of the city, between Omni-Tek's pacifying troops and clan-affiliated rebels. People had died, tensions were strained, and both sides were now tugging at their leashes for a chance to go to war again. And while these unfortunate incidents weren't entirely unexpected, it still angered and saddened him to think of the wastefulness of it all, for both sides involved.

Ross knew that he'd made an error in judgement early on. He'd completely underestimated how the disgruntled few could affect the complex machinery of progress. That lesson had been taught a million times over, most effectively a good seventeen millennia past, when, like a latter-day Moses, David Marlin had risen up and brought his people out of slavery, destroying the Omega in the process. The ensuing era had given birth to Omni-Tek, and Ross guessed he owed the man a silent prayer of thanks. But the example he had set...

To have imprinted on humanity the virtue of rising up against authority, against government, against corporate dominion, at any and all costs – and to have brazenly professed this to be a good thing, an honourable thing...

No, the man had done more to damage mankind than to heal it. David Marlin ought to have laid down his sword after destroying the last of the Omega. The freed slaves, the Solitus, the inheritors of Earth, should have been allowed to decide their own fate.

There was no room for gods in the kingdom of man.

Now grand but meaningless words were being flaunted as truth in the face of reason; words like “freedom”, “liberty”, and “justice for all”.

Justice for whom exactly? Freedom and liberty from what?

Perhaps those words appeared to resonate with truth when chanted by sign-bearing demonstrators – because in principle they were worthy and important words – but when the ideologies behind those words were applied to the real world, at least a world as precariously balanced as Rubi-Ka, they spelled only disaster: Disaster for him, disaster for Omni-Tek, and disaster for the millions who depended on the corporation to protect them and to provide for them.

The only thing the clans were accomplishing by their misguided resistance was to disrupt that balance and cause untold pain for the very people they sought to liberate.

Not that Omni-Tek would immediately crumble if they lost Rubi-Ka and their steady supply of *notum*. No, the company was too vast for that to happen, too entwined in every imaginable industry and trade. But there were other corporations encroaching on Omni-Tek's turf, and *notum* was the only thing that could possibly guarantee Omni-Tek's supremacy for the foreseeable future.

Without *notum*, Omni-Tek might be nothing more than another hyper-corporation.

The thought unsettled Ross, made him fidgety and nervous. He clenched and unclenched his fist and thought about the war he didn't want, the war that disturbed the balance of his world, and about the sparrows that fell to the ground on the screen in his Colosseum.

Now, with the gloom grown deeper, the suns absent, and his office darkened to a satin black – only the thousands of glittering lights in the city below provided any kind of illumination – Philip Ross suddenly felt desperately and achingly alone.

If they would only understand, he thought. *If they could see what I see, if they could only know the truth, that there is no future for this world without us, without me, perhaps then we would know true peace and prosperity.*

He stood gazing out at his city, his world, for a few more minutes in silent contemplation. From this height, life was abstracted into flickering lights and bursts of energy from moving vehicles. He couldn't see the people he knew were there, but they *were* there, somewhere, living, sleeping, dreaming.

Philip Ross turned away and headed for the comfort of a home rarely visited, a bed rarely slept in, and, he prayed, a long night's sleep without dreams, a dark and restful abyss.

Between the stars, 28911 AD

The dust-red globe, covered with a patchwork of real-time sensory data in all colours of the rainbow, was slowly beginning to solidify at the heart of the increasingly complex diagram of interstellar bodies that orbited David's field-of-view, updated continuously by his neural interface link.

It wasn't a particularly big planet, a bit smaller than Earth, but compared with its gas-giant siblings – dim, hulking monstrosities, mottled with fierce storms the size of continents, encircled by glittering belts of ice asteroids – it looked tiny, almost dainty, like a baby planet taking a walk with her older brothers. The system had twin suns: the smaller one red, the larger one yellow. The two suns orbited each other like graceful ballerinas engaged in an epic recital spanning light-years and aeons. Because of this, the trajectories of the system's planetary bodies were more complex than they would have been in a single-star system.

Of course, the mathematics of this astral performance weren't much of a challenge to the onboard systems, not with lifetimes to spare. Even David, given a few months and some assistance from his interface, ought to have been able to plot the course of the ship towards her destination.

David blinked, and plugged out.

The experience was akin to watching a bathtub being drained in fast-motion; the water – or in this case visual data containing information about his journey, past and present, and his current position and status in relation to the ever-changing gravitational forces surrounding him – swirling down an invisible hole, pulling him down with it.

The effect still made him feel queasy. He tried not to spend too much time linked up. There was something to be said for the quaint pleasures of seeing things with your own eyes, hearing them with your own ears: to read books and watch films, to study prints of art from Earth's long-lost past, to listen to the musical recordings contained in the ship's core – Bach, Mozart, Martinez, the Beatles – and to gaze at the stars.

The stars were always, always changing as his journey took him farther and farther away from home. Back on Earth, all those long years

ago, there'd been constellations to look up at and to recognise. He'd learned them all when he was a child, and he'd passed that knowledge on to Amy, his daughter.

Ghosts, he thought. Real or imagined, in my head or not, they're always here, always haunting me.

He blinked again. His thoughts had drifted. He'd almost fallen asleep. There were things to do – he couldn't afford to daydream, not today. He was too close to the end now. Well, relatively speaking. *Close* was an abstract term when time and distance meant little.

Besides, he was hungry. He needed to eat something.

David disengaged himself from the biofoam mattress. The material immediately reshaped itself into its original form, flexing and shifting like a living thing. That too was vaguely disconcerting to David, in an almost primal way. Any *thing* that seemed to have life aboard this solitary prison was like an affront to his humanity; without being in contact with anyone for so long, David feared that he might simply become a thing himself, like the biofoam, responding only to external stimuli without thought. Pre-programmed. Predictable. Numb.

His stomach growled. Life affirmed itself, and base emotions consigned futile philosophical musings to the back of his mind.

Funny, he thought, how even immortality comes with qualifications. I must eat, or I starve.

Food, in its natural form – vegetables, meat, cereals – was, of course, in scarce supply out here between the stars. There was vacuum, the deep cold of space, there was light – infinitely distant and faint like the ghosts of candles, wicks burned down to an ochre glow – and there was energy, the nourishment of the machines that bore him safely through the night. And that was all there was to work with, all the ingredients at his disposal.

Which, naturally, ought to rule out the possibility of a nice soufflé, or a juicy hamburger. Though, surprisingly, that was not the case.

If the Omega had given anything of value to humanity, there was one thing that would remain, in perpetuity, one of the greatest and most ingenious inventions since the wheel:

The builder.

With the builder, you could make anything out of nothing. Well, not *anything*, and not from *nothing*; the builder had its limits. It could

only create what it'd been programmed to create, and the complexity and authenticity of what it could create was dependant on how much energy it had at its disposal. The builder needed raw materials to work from – naturally occurring chemical elements, elementary particles...space dust? David wasn't entirely sure what the builder used; he'd never been much of a scientist, but the scoop that he had to extend on a weekly basis – a thin, porous sail that, when unrolled to its full length, was the size of something like a hundred football fields – apparently provided him with all the ingredients the builder needed to make a juicy hot dog, a tasty lasagne, or a frothy beer. It could also manufacture smaller replacement parts for the consoles and the ship itself, but no weapons. He'd tried. He'd gone through a phase some years ago when he'd been compelled by thoughts of suicide. Not that he'd actually wanted to do it – it was more a sense of being in a position where, if he'd decided to pull the trigger, he could have. It was about control, or more precisely the *lack* of control that his current situation had forced on him.

Those thoughts had passed, of course. Now there was only hunger.

David deliberated for a second or two and then decided on pork chops with mashed potatoes – lumpy, bits of skin in it, with garlic – fried onions and brown gravy. He hadn't had pork chops in months.

Determined, stomach growling, he straightened his back fully, raised his arms until they almost touched the ceiling, and groaned.

The biofoam may have been soft and comfortable, but staying linked for hours would usually play havoc on his back. There wasn't a lot of room on board to provide much variety when working out. He had a multi-purpose exercise machine in the aft chamber – which was connected to this, the navigational and control chamber, via a counter-rotating shaft about twelve meters in length – and every night before going to bed he would hook himself up to electrodes that stimulated his muscle-tissue, to battle atrophy. In fact, David knew, he was in much better shape now than he'd ever been back on Earth.

But his back could still be absolute *murder*.

He cast a glance out of the porthole to his left. Pinprick stars, planets and suns he'd left behind so long ago that he could no longer picture them in his head, rolled up and out of view. The rotation of the fore chamber was designed to perfectly mimic the gravitational pull of

Earth, a constant one G. Sometimes David was tempted to shut the mechanism down, to float in here like in the connecting shaft, to link up without being trapped in the biofoam. But he knew he wasn't supposed to – for his own sake, and for the sake of the sensitive equipment: everything in here was designed to stay on the floor, down, whichever way was down in a place that had no up or down; no north, no south; and no true here, nor a definite there.

The only direction David could be certain of anymore was back and forward...back to Earth, or forward to...his destination. And back was not a valid option. It never had been.

Sometimes he even wondered if Earth had ever been his home, if his time there had been anything but a brief, feverish dream.

He took a few steps forward, his cushioned soles brushing lightly against the soft, white floor. He supported himself on the consoles that lined the walls. From this chamber he could control every part of the ship. All systems were connected to both the virtual interface that the network provided him with and to backup systems that were accessible via a vast number of physical controls. He'd read mostly everything there was to read about how to control a ship like this, yet should anything ever happen to the automated systems, he doubted he'd be able to fly this vehicle.

He was approaching the builder when all of a sudden there was the faint whisper of voices.

David flinched and turned his head in the direction of the whispers.

Tiny diodes of light, spaced evenly across the curved and padded ceiling, made certain that there were never any real shadows in this chamber, only a perennial twilight, like the grey of dawn drawn out to infinity. Or perhaps it was dusk: the difference was between an approaching day and a growing night, between light and dark, life and death. Which one was waiting for him at the end of this long twilight?

Which one would he prefer, and which one would he embrace?

He shuddered, hugged himself. These were thoughts that he didn't want to think. And now his hunger was gone, leaving only a black pit in his stomach. Physical cravings were replaced with other emotions: fear, uncertainty...resentment.

The whispers came again, this time to his left. He didn't turn to

face them. While there were no shadows to jump at on board this ship, there were certainly ghosts. And although these ghosts were nothing but fragments of a disturbed mind – *his* disturbed mind – they were nonetheless as real as the metal bulkhead that surrounded him.

The ghosts were haunting him again, after an absence of days, perhaps even weeks. Whispering in his ear, they distracted him constantly. He'd long ago given up any attempt to shut them out. They were insistent, and ever-present, except when they decided to leave him be. Ignoring them made them stronger, louder. He couldn't even read a book anymore, and that wasn't just because he'd read them all a thousand times over: the ghosts were always there, except when he linked up. It was getting impossible to concentrate outside of the network.

David. Please, love. Return to us.

His wife's sweet voice, seductively accented, so familiar, but distant, as though it echoed across the vast number of years that lay between them. Her ghost was the one he feared the most. Hers, and Amy's. The others, he could stomach. Grey spectres of young men and women he'd sent to a certain death. Ghosts of soldiers who had followed his commands blindly, spirits of opponents he'd never met but whose blood was on his hands, and of compatriots he'd abandoned on battlefields. They haunted him, but they could never hurt him.

His wife, on the other hand...

The woman who had inspired him and encouraged him, who had guided him from being a general without an army to the reluctant president – some had called him the messiah, the saviour – of an entire planet. Now his wife mocked him, accused him, taunted and pleaded with him to turn back, to give up, to let prophecies lie and leave mankind to its own destiny.

Often, lately, her words were beginning to make sense.

Exhausted beyond comprehension, David turned to look at his wife.

She was standing not two meters away, bathed in the blue glow from a navigational console. Like the other ghosts, she was pale, faded, and she almost looked like an actor in an ancient black-and-white movie; her dark eyes and long, black hair stood in sharp contrast with her chalk-white skin. She was naked but unembarrassed – in almost every way the ghost was a true reflection of his long-departed wife – defiant in her stance

and her penetrating gaze.

She was confronting him, and though he knew for sure that this *thing* couldn't be who it pertained to be, that his wife was alive only in his head, he knew that he would relent to her, back down, give in. Eventually, he would. Because faced with such a horror – no, not horror, but misery incarnate – every man would fold.

You murdered me, David, whispered his beloved wife. Her mouth didn't move, and the voice came from all around him, as though it emanated from the air itself, but it was his wife's voice, exactly the way he remembered it. *You murdered me, and you murdered our daughter. How many more will die before you admit the truth?*

David shook his head, and closed his eyes. He could feel water welling up behind his eyelids. It wasn't so much what she said, but how she looked at him; that strong, accusing stare coupled with her frank nakedness made her seem so *real*. And of course her words spoke the truth; he *had* killed his wife, he had murdered his daughter. For so long he'd tried to justify it as being an inevitability of war: Innocents would die.

He'd racked it up to divine retribution and moved on with his life. He had sinned. God had decided to punish him.

That seemed doubly true now. Would this purgatory continue forever? Would it end only when he gave up his own life?

When David opened his eyes again, the ghost of his wife had disappeared. There were still whispering voices drifting through the air around him, but they were fading...for now.

He was quite certain they'd be back.

His appetite gone, David returned to the biofoam chair. Queasiness or not, if being linked up was the only way to escape the ghosts, then so be it. There was work to be done, he had to think, plan, consider the many paths that lay before him.

Even if his dead wife was right, even if he eventually would decide to abandon this foolish quest, until then he could not, would not, ignore his duty.

He lowered himself onto the soft, flexible fabric, sensing it more than actually feeling it as the chair enveloped him and swallowed him up, letting him sink into its tranquil embrace.

David closed his eyes and let the all-encompassing data blossom

around him; stellar bodies grew and expanded from the nothingness, instantly beginning their abstracted descriptions of complex ellipses simulating the motion of the universe. Immersion was easier than disruption; instead of a feeling of loss, he felt empowered.

David blinked. A thick, twisting red line – arching slightly to avoid the suns' gravitational forces and radioactive emissions – plotted a course towards the planet at the core of his vision: a timeline, ever shortened, slowly but continuously, informed him that his journey was almost at an end.

Soon he would reach orbit around that dust-red planet where humankind's fate would be decided for ever more, and where David Marlin's destiny would finally be met:

Rubi-Ka.

“It is not science that has destroyed the world, despite all the gloomy forebodings of the earlier prophets. It is man who has destroyed man.”

- Max Lerner

Chapter One

Moscow, 1949 AD

Roman Dragovich Zubov walked at a measured pace towards the front gate, endeavouring in every way to appear as casual as possible, as though this were only the end of another uneventful working day. Yet despite his efforts to the contrary, the doctor could not shake the all-pervasive feeling that penetrating eyes were tracking him every step of the way. He clutched the leather briefcase tight in his right hand, his knuckles white around the black handle, and prayed to the God in whom he had little faith that it was merely his imagination acting up.

The building's oppressive eloquence only added to his acute sense of paranoia. The only windows were a good three floors above his head, spaced equidistantly around the large domed ceiling; the six tiny spheres of thick, yellow-tinted glass offered precious little natural light and kept the grand hall in a perpetual gloom. Granite walls, curiously void of any dressings, encased the twin-levelled space; solid, unadorned pillars supported a large swept balcony with a wide staircase extending in a half-arch down to the immaculately polished marble floor.

The building was an impressive testament to the importance of Roman's department, but it was also a cold place, bereft of soul and personality. It was quite telling that the entrance hall's only furnishing was the massive security desk.

From the street, the building looked no different from a dozen other government structures in central Moscow. There was little of note on the surface to betray the secrets within. If only the Americans knew

what the Soviet Union's unequivocal tyrant, the secretary general Iosif Vissarionovich – “Uncle Joe” as the Yankee newspapers and glossies called him, blissfully unaware of the dictator's true power and astonishing capacity for evil – was brewing up behind these thick stonewalls, what visions he had for the future of himself and his most trusted friends...

Roman was very aware of the burden of secrecy on his shoulders, and the very real penalty he would pay for betraying the Motherland if he were ever caught. And he was equally aware of how much the medical and scientific breakthroughs made in the laboratories in this building were worth to the Americans, to all industrialised nations.

He had run through this scenario a thousand times in his mind, and he had come to the same conclusion on every single occasion: to hand over the results of more than twenty years of research to the political establishment would be a very, very foolish thing to do.

And now, finally, Roman had made his choice. The deed was done, and there would be no turning back. Ever. Yet he felt a strong urge to look around and face those phantom eyes, to see if he was indeed being watched or followed. But were he to look back now, even just to check, the guards might grow wary, believe that something *was* wrong, and apprehend him. If he were lucky, they would only delay him for several precious minutes with their questions. But what would he do if they decided to search through the briefcase? They would never understand the true significance of the material within, but they *would* know that it was important. He would be caught, and everything, all the work and all the preparations, would be in vain. But then if he did not look, if instead of looking back he just kept walking, he would never have time to flee if they *were* coming after him.

Roman felt his heart race and his throat dry up. It seemed an interminable distance to the revolving doors leading outside. Yet there was nothing he could do but act as natural as the circumstances warranted, keep a dignified pace, and hope that Lady Destiny was – as she had been in the past – on his side.

“Doctor?”

Roman froze.

That voice!

It was a familiar one, yet he could not immediately place it. There was something about the voice, however, something that made his heart skip a beat and his skin crawl.

Slowly, forcing some semblance of composure to his face, Roman began turning towards the source of the voice. He realised that, instinctively, he was using the briefcase as a shield. Considering what was inside, this was probably not the best thing to do.

Not that it would matter, if his intentions had been revealed: A bullet would not be his primary concern, not at first. The bullet – or a rope around his neck – would come later, after the “interviews”, the torture, and a short but agonizing existence as a *lagernik* at the Gulag in Kolyma.

The secretary general would certainly appreciate the irony of that: Prior to his anonymous death and burial in an unmarked grave, one of Stalin’s most prized subjects would be reduced to a shivering, malnourished convict rotting away in a labour camp.

“Roman Dragovich! It is good that I caught you before you had a chance to escape!”

For a split second, before he even had time to identify the speaker, Roman considered turning and fleeing the hall, because now there was no doubt in his mind: his betrayal had been discovered, his crimes exposed, and now it was only a matter of seconds before he was physically apprehended.

Almost instantly, however, he thought better of it. The guards had weapons, and they would doubtlessly use them on him if commanded to do so by this authoritative voice. No, it was better to live, and to attempt to explain himself, no matter how unlikely the story.

Roman looked up, steeling himself for whatever may come.

The man who had called out to him – the man who had just stepped off the staircase leading up to the gallery – was Sergey Nikolayich, the secretary general’s personal commissary to the advanced medical research office, and probably the last man – aside from Stalin himself – that Roman wanted to speak with at the moment. Yet it seemed that Nikolayich was alone, and he appeared to be in good humour, so Roman lowered the briefcase and forced a courteous smile to his lips; if there was still hope, it would do no good to arouse this man’s suspicions. Nikolayich had the ears of the highest office, and with Roman’s work being of prime importance to the state, any deviance from the norm would certainly be noted and passed on.

“Leaving early today, Comrade Zubov? Whatever would your superiors think?”

“There is a dinner tonight that—” Roman began, but Nikolayich interrupted him:

“I actually wanted your opinion on a matter of...well, let us call it a matter of supreme urgency,” Nikolayich said. He walked up to Roman and grabbed his arm in a not-unfriendly manner. The commissary was, as per usual, immaculately dressed, but he still appeared unkempt. He was a heavysset, short man with thick, rimmed glasses, thin hair that had been combed over from the left to the right, and pale, clammy skin that spoke of much vodka and very little sun. Ironically, considering the man’s preoccupation with personal grooming, and his advancing baldness, his eyebrows were full and bushy, and his sideburns thick and unkempt.

“Yes, Comrade?” To Roman’s own ears, his voice wavered slightly, but Nikolayich did not seem to notice. Or, at least, he wasn’t giving anything away if he did.

“In regards to our Teutonic friends...” The commissary tapped his nose, and winked. “I was wondering if you would be interested in travelling up to Khabarovsk, to the camp, to...sample the goods, as it were. They have been well fed, these lapdogs of Hitler.” The commissary spat, and frowned. “And though they have been there for a good while, they are in much better health than our own dissenters. Hum. But such is the way of things – to better serve the Purpose, *da?*”

Roman felt a rush of relief flood through his body. The commissary had no idea what Roman was planning. He felt like laughing and dancing, but of course he only nodded and said, “An excellent idea, Comrade.” Nikolayich looked at him quizzically, as if expecting more, and Roman continued; “I will submit a, uh, proposal...if you so wish?”

The commissary grinned. This was apparently exactly what he had expected of Roman. “Good, good!” Nikolayich pulled a watch out of his pocket, and glanced at it. His bushy eyebrows rose dramatically and he patted Roman’s arm apologetically. “Unfortunately, Comrade Zubov, I must bid you a good night. I have an important dinner to attend.” He tapped his nose again, and winked. “With our great and illustrious leader himself.” The commissary said this without even a hint of irony. “I will inform him of your answer.”

With that, Nikolayich left, and Roman did his best to contain a deep sigh of relief. While it had not exactly been a close call – after all,

the commissary had no idea about the contents of Roman's briefcase, nor was he in the least suspicious that the institute's most favoured son was engaged in treachery against the state – it certainly felt like he'd just gotten away with murder.

Less than a minute later, Roman emerged into the grey twilight of the late autumn day, and breathed what he silently thought of as the sweet scent of freedom. It was a short walk down to the pavement. He did not even cast a glance back at the imposing building he'd just left – massive stone walls that would never again confine him – but only headed towards his car, nodded at the driver as the man opened the door for him, and sat down inside.

“Home,” Roman told the chauffeur, and closed his eyes as the car picked up speed.

“I am stepping out for the evening, Anka!” Roman called. His housekeeper was in the kitchen – the scent of her cabbage, strong and mouth-watering, filled the spacious apartment.

Officially, the Soviet Union was a true socialist state where everyone, no matter how high or how low their position in the professional hierarchy, were given equal opportunities, equal benefits, and where no one enjoyed special privileges simply because of their position or title.

Officially.

No one was fooled, however, not least the people at the bottom of the hierarchy: If your value to the state was greater than your neighbour's – especially if your work was generating substantial income or prestige for the state, or when your work was of prime importance to those with real political power, like Roman's work – there were plenty of privileges.

Roman's apartment, for example, was a most welcome privilege. Located in what could only be described as one of the most fashionable parts of Moscow, nestled amongst buildings that still bore evidence of Russia's imperial golden age, it was a far cry from the rat-infested dump where he had spent his youth. He had lived with his mother, aunt and uncle, his seven siblings, and their maternal grandparents...and for all he knew, they were all still living there. He had not seen nor spoken with his relatives for more than twenty years, nor did he wish to ever see them again.

The truth of it was, power brought privilege here like anywhere else, although the state vigorously denied it. Mother Russia was not like America or any of its European allies. Certainly not. Because, whereas in those countries, power and wealth were openly flaunted, here they were covered up, explained away, denied. But if Roman ever felt a pang of guilt, it was brief. He had earned his privileges. Why should he suffer along with the unwashed masses? Had he been born in any other country, his personal research and groundbreaking discoveries would have made him rich, not to mention famous.

In fact, starting tonight, his work *would* make him a very rich man.

But while his apartment was opulent – at least in comparison with the domiciles of most other citizens, albeit lesser so than the men of power in the Party who not only had homes four or five times the size of his, but also more than one *dacha*, country-houses, outside the city – and while Roman lived comfortably in a good neighbourhood, he would not miss any of it.

No, that was not true: He would miss Anka's cooking. He drew a deep breath through his nose; the scent of cabbage was thick, and his stomach growled. Roman hoped there would be cabbage like this – good Russian cabbage – where he was going. Hamburgers and Coca-Cola could never compare with Anka's cooking.

There will probably be good Russian cooking wherever I go, he thought. After all, had not Russians emigrated for many years before the communists came to power? And had not many more escaped through the Iron Curtain in the years between then and now, despite the efforts of the state to curtail their movement? No, he would miss Anka's cooking, but food was the least of his problems.

As if on cue, his housekeeper entered the hallway carrying Roman's overcoat, hat and gloves, and glared at him.

"So, you are eating elsewhere." This was not a question. "Then it seems that tonight's dinner will have to be thrown out," muttered Anka. "Who will eat it? Not me, that is for certain. I have already eaten." In fact, Anka was not opposed to eating dinner twice, even thrice, something her stout and increasingly portly body, and large apple-red cheeks, bore ample evidence of.

Roman smiled. "I will eat it tomorrow, Anka. You will take the

next two days off. I will reheat your dinner myself.” He noticed that she was about to protest, and cut her off before she could begin. “No arguments, Anka! I will need to do some work from home tomorrow and the following day. I have much reading to do, and I do not wish to be disturbed. Please...consider it a holiday. You do not get enough of them. Place my dinner in the larder where I can find it.”

Anka frowned and threw her hands up in the air. “Very well, if the doctor insists, certainly, I will not impose. If the doctor insists...”

She waved for him to turn around and helped him slip into the warm overcoat. The gloves and hat came next. He had briefly considered packing a few things in a bag to bring with him, but had thought better of it. He might very well be under observation when he left the building, and what possible reason could he give for carrying a bag filled with undergarments and toiletries to a dinner party?

It was customary for the KGB to keep track of not only suspected dissidents but also, perhaps more importantly, trusted individuals in positions of power and influence. Especially those with vital and specialised talents – people the state just could not afford to lose. Paranoia was truly an art in the Soviet Union; no one was to be trusted...ever.

Perhaps rightly so, Roman thought. After all, I am about to commit treason myself. But why? Who is at fault? The citizen or the system that forces the citizen's hand?

The Soviet system – at least under Stalin – did not inspire loyalty, because even loyalty was often repaid with suspicion, torture, and death. He would not miss communism; he had read enough forbidden literature, overheard enough politicians speaking in private, to know that it was a flawed philosophy, doomed to eventual failure, and that even Mother Russia would one day have to embrace capitalism.

Hopefully – for the sake of his countrymen – this would happen within a generation. Certainly Stalin would have to go first, because there would be no political change before that man had vacated his office.

But Roman was no politician, nor did he ever aspire to be, and for the moment he would only think of himself and the journey that lay before him. Better to leave the greater issues behind with his old life. From this point on he would be reborn. Even his name would be cast off when he left Moscow – the papers that were waiting for him in Leningrad had a new name, a *Western* name.

“Right you are,” said Anka, and looked him up and down. “Packed in for your evening out.”

“Thank you. I will see you on Saturday, then?”

Anka only frowned, and sniffed loudly.

“Anka?”

“I have no need for time off, Doctor!” she protested. “There are things to be done in this house, I cannot simply ignore my duties!”

“That might be so,” said Roman patiently – he had known this would be coming – “but I need to be alone a couple of days while I do research, like I told you. I cannot have any distractions, and that includes you, even though I naturally appreciate your presence on most days.”

Anka sighed. She might put up a token protest, but she never disobeyed her good Doctor, and Roman knew that she did treasure the opportunity to spend more time with her family.

Well, come Saturday, she would have an ocean of time ahead of her to spend with her host of grandchildren. Hopefully, the KGB would not come down on her too hard. They would probably realise quite quickly that she had no idea where her beloved Doctor had disappeared to, and they would probably never notice the meagre, though regular, (and no doubt highly appreciated) flow of rubles that would begin to trickle into her coffers starting next week.

“Saturday it is, then,” she conceded. “Have a good evening, Doctor. I will be going home in a short while, after I put away your *dinner*.” Her innate ability to make him feel guilty actually worked for a moment, but then Roman knew that guilt was another particularly Russian characteristic he would soon be leaving behind for good.

He said a casual goodnight to Anka – no need to arouse her suspicions by being overtly sentimental – and left the apartment. As the solid oak door shut behind him and he was left standing alone in the grand entrance hall, he had a sensation of such finality that his heart started beating hard and fast: there was truly no turning back. Certainly that had been the case since this afternoon, in the laboratory – or even before that, with the extensive arrangements he had made for himself – but only now did it finally set in, this sense of closure...or of some doors closing and others opening up.

His car was waiting outside. It was, after all, important to keep up the appearances of a typical night out, which this would be...at least until two and a half hours past midnight, when Roman would make his way to the agreed-upon location, and from there to freedom.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of the restaurant, Fyodor, an expensive place on Lubyanski Proezd. One thing communism had not been able to change about the Russian people was their love of food and drink.

Roman leaned forward to speak with his driver. Unlike Anka, the chauffeur – a native Muscovite named Yevgeniy – did not object when Roman told him to go on home for the night – it would be a late evening, Roman informed the man, and he had already been offered a ride back with one of the other guests.

“Ah, and Zhenya,” Roman said as he was about to exit the car. “I am staying at home tomorrow and the day after, and I shall not require the use of the car. You may park it in the garage.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Yevgeniy replied.

Roman patted the man on the shoulder, and exited. As the car pulled away, Roman again experienced that disturbing sense of closure; Zhenya was yet another part of his life that he would never see again. Not that he would much miss his driver, not in the same way he would miss Anka, but still...

A life was a hard thing to give up, he realised. The only reason he was able to go through with this was in knowing there would be a *new* life waiting for him at the end of the road. A new and, most importantly, *better* life.

The evening passed interminably slow. There was good food and even better drink, though Roman did not consume much of the latter – only enough not to arouse suspicions; after all, who would refuse to empty a glass when there was still vodka in it? – and he could not force himself to swallow a great deal of the former. That ever-present sense of foreboding weighed heavily on him, now more than ever. One mistake, one misplaced word or suspicious gesture, and someone might think to call on a contact in the KGB. Paranoia was, in every possible way, a predominantly Russian trait.

His tablemates made many speeches as the night wore on, and the

empty bottles piled up, but Roman only listened with half an ear. He knew that he had to wait until the party ended before setting out on the first leg of his journey, but he was itching to get out. It felt like each and every moment only brought him closer to damnation, that any second one of the speakers would call him by name, label him a traitor, and then they would all crowd on him and hold him down until he was taken away in a black car.

But, of course, this did not happen.

It was well past one in the morning when Roman was again out in the frigidly cold evening.

Mist clung to the rain-swept streets like a funeral shroud, illuminated by the ghostly glow from streetlamps dulled by pinprick pearls of dew. It was the tail end of autumn, with winter at the door, and Moscow was at its most beautiful.

Roman took a deep breath. The sharp air filled his lungs, made him light-headed. He could feel his cheeks numb and his lips pull back from his teeth.

Another thing I will not miss, he thought. The bitter cold.

The last of his party, his friend Misha, came up beside him. Apparently unconcerned with the chill in the air, he had left his heavy fur coat unbuttoned. Misha patted him on the shoulder, and grinned. The tall and somewhat lanky man was red-faced from the vodka, but otherwise did not seem much affected by the evening's incessant consumption of strong spirits.

"I do not see your car, Comrade Dragovich. May I offer you a ride home in mine?"

Roman smiled, and shook his head. "I have called for my car, Comrade Andronovich. It will arrive soon." He made a show of pulling out his silver pocket watch and looking at it. "Ah, my man is late as usual. But he will be here."

Misha shrugged, and closed the last button of his coat against the night air. "If you wish to stand out here in the cold and freeze your balls off, then be my guest, Doctor!"

"What do I need my balls for, my friend? There is too much work to be done to be thinking of women and the pleasures they may offer. It is an unnecessary distraction, and one that would not be appreciated by our leaders."

"True," laughed Mihail Andronovich, "yet without a woman to

keep me company at night, I do not believe I would have the strength to go to work each morning!”

“You are a slave to your vices, Misha,” smiled Roman.

“And you are a slave to your misguided, albeit admirable, sense of duty, *Roma!*”

Roman laughed, and exchanged a parting hug with the man. Then Misha, too, left – whisked away by the last expensive automobile in a long line of such automobiles – and Roman was finally alone.

He waited only a few seconds for Misha’s car to make a turn and disappear from view before returning inside. The tables were being cleared, the lights turned down, and the last of the guests were leaving, but Roman signalled to a waiter that he was just going to the restroom. The waiter simply nodded and hurried on with his business.

Roman was relieved to find that the window in the back was unlocked, just as he had been told, and that it was an easy climb up and a short jump down to the dark, tree-lined passage between the restaurant and the neighbouring house. He would not be missed; the waiter who had spotted him would simply assume that Roman had left, unseen. And if he had been tracked and watched outside the restaurant, this manoeuvre would throw off any pursuers, at least momentarily, allowing him a precious lead.

Heading south, and keeping to the shadows, Roman began his last, fateful trip through a darkened, silent Moscow. Soon, in a few hours, he would leave the city and never return. When the sun rose, he would be on the road north and west, towards Leningrad, and soon after that he would say farewell to his homeland.

Roman was certain now that he would not miss it were he never to see it again.

Of course, eternity was a long time to predict anything. A secret smile spread on his lips even as he shivered against the cold. Eternity. It began now. Taking this secret from under Stalin’s nose... If he slipped for even one second, the ramifications would reverberate through history.

But he would not slip. Not now. Not *ever*. His destiny was as clear as the starlit sky above him. *They* had told him so. And if *they* were able to whisk him away from this communist prison, if they were able to speak to him of things that only he should rightfully know, then *they* had to be right.

They *had* to be.

Chapter Two

SAN FRANCISCO—(E/BUSINESS WIRE)—January 27, 2007—ApplikaTek Inc. and WPM Pharmaceuticals Ltd. announced today that their boards of directors have unanimously agreed to unite the two companies through a merger of equals. The resulting company will be named Farmatek Incorporated.

Farmatek will be headquartered on the site of ApplikaTek's current facilities in Silicon Valley, California, and its focus will primarily be on developments within biotechnology. The two former companies will still carry on research and development in their respective fields, however, with WPM Pharmaceutical's current Stanford, New Jersey facilities continuing its work with pharmaceutical research, and ApplikaTek's offices in India, Germany, and the United Kingdom focusing on embedded software and microprocessor developments.

Dr. Roland Drake, formerly CEO of WPM Pharmaceuticals, now newly appointed President and CEO of Farmatek, said in a statement, "Our parallel work in the medical and microchip technology industries will carry on for the foreseeable future. However, we envision that, within ten years, the advancement of biotechnology will allow the two fields to converge, and at that point, Farmatek will be ideally positioned to emerge as a natural industry leader."

Dr. Drake continued, "We believe that this merger is the best way for us to utilise and maximise the resources, talents and facilities of our two companies, and I'm positive the market will agree."

WPM Pharmaceuticals, a privately held company founded in 1922 by industrialist William Peter Morris in Stanford, New Jersey, has long been a leader in the pharmaceutical industry. In the past decade, their research into the effects of aging on cells has been crucial in the development of a new drug delaying, perhaps even preventing, the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

ApplikaTek was started by University of California, Berkeley graduate students Jerry Wong and Alexander Sturgis in 2004, and went public in 2005, raising more than five hundred and fifty million dollars in their IPO. The company's stellar rise on the NASDAQ stunned analysts, and prior to the merger, the company was valued at more than eight billion dollars. ApplikaTek's current research into artificial intelligence and biotechnology has garnered interest from the scientific community across the globe, and the company, headquartered in San Jose, California, has recently opened offices in India and the United Kingdom.

ApplikaTek's Mr Wong and Mr Sturgis will step down from their positions as, respectively, President and CEO, and CFO, leaving the joint Farmatek Inc. venture in the experienced hands of Dr. Roland Drake.

Contact Jules Lyman of WPM Pharmaceuticals at InP: 9717.317.2834 for more information.

*

San Jose, California, 2012 AD

"Computer, continue recording of personal journal, Eric Miller, normal file restrictions.

“Okay, so it’s Sunday night...and we’re finally getting somewhere! If I weren’t so emotionally repressed, I’d hoot, holler, and run around my living room in the buff!

“Last night Simon and I were able to contain a bot in a positively charged vacuum for a total of eleven minutes, twenty-five seconds – and, uh, for the anally retentive, sixty-nine milliseconds – before it went *poof*. Progress! At last! To celebrate, we shared a king-sized reefer out on the patio while gazing at the stars. Would you believe I haven’t seen the sky since the Saturday before last? It was *beautiful*, and the stars seemed closer than ever.

“Later, I went home for the first time in three weeks. Surprise, surprise; Jeannie was gone – she didn’t even leave a note – but who gives a crap? This could very well be the breakthrough we’ve all been waiting—no, working our *asses* off for...and if it is – well, hell, we’ll win the Nobel Prize, make a billion dollars each on our stock-options, and I’ll retire to a South Pacific island paradise with my own harem and live out the remainder of my happy, happy life. That’ll teach her.

“I think Simon said it best when he called this our Holy Grail. Granted, he was stoned, but he’s correct: The, uh, ‘nanobot’; a machine so small it can go anywhere, so versatile that it can build and repair anything. This baby will revolutionise every industry on the face of the Earth, and as for diseases...that’s going to be a thing of the past; we’ll be able to live *forever*. We’ll all walk around with a million tiny little surgeons inside us, fighting all bacterial and viral intrusions as well as halt cellular degradation, repair organs, and respond instantly to trauma. You can take a bullet to the gut and the buggers will just stitch you up in a second. This isn’t science fiction; it’s science *fact*. And when the curtains rise on the first nanobots, who’s going to get the credit? Eric Miller and Simon Rosen, that’s who! Five miserable years in the Farmatek dungeons without a single day’s vacation will finally pay off.

“I have to admit, though, until last night, I had my doubts that we’d be able to build a bot that could stay molecularly intact for more than a few seconds...but God-damn if we didn’t do it! Eleven-and-a-half minutes might not sound like a lot, but these things are self-replicating, and they even repair each other...and besides, we’ve only just got started. Now that we can do eleven minutes, we’ll eventually be able to do eleven hours, and then eleven days, and then...hello eternity! Not only will

Farmatek be the world's most important company, not only will I be the saviour of the human species, not only will I be rich beyond my wildest dreams, but Jeannie will be *begging* at my feet to take her back!

“But I got it all worked out...see, I have no intention of taking her back. I only want to leave her hanging and keep her suffering for as long as possible. Hey, life's a bitch. Time someone taught her *that* lesson.

“I'm going back to the lab in a few hours, and I don't expect to be home for quite a while. There'll be a million meetings in the morning – big brass flying in from all over, including Dr. Drake himself, apparently – and then...well, it's back to work for Eric Miller. I'm going to attempt to extend the bots' lifespan, and eventually – fingers crossed – remove them from vacuum containment altogether. Until that happens, their usefulness is only theoretical. Still, from this point on, things can only get better. We've already passed the most important milestone so far, and even if we don't make the next, the Revolution has begun.

“Okay, now my buzzer's going wild – Simon's getting impatient about something. He's probably got a wild new idea on how to stabilise the bots. Computer: end recording, save, and hibernate. Good night, and sweet—”

*

Oxford, England, 2016 AD

Sara Carroll had a dream.

She was flying. That in itself wasn't particularly strange, because she'd had dreams about flying before, but in those dreams she'd usually be on a plane having a drink and chatting up the good-looking bloke next to her when something would go terribly wrong – like a wing falling off, or an engine exploding, or a terrorist jumping to his feet brandishing a large stick of dynamite with a burning fuse, *Road Runner*-style, shouting something in a guttural foreign language – and the plane would tilt down and roll over, plunging towards the ground and certain death, and then she would wake up screaming and thrashing in bed before realising that she wasn't aboard a plane after all.

But this time – this time she was flying by herself, like an eagle, riding aloft on currents of warm air. She was looking down on a frozen

wasteland, a desert of ice, and there were people down there, little ant-like people far, far below, and she swooped down to take a closer look at those people.

They were dressed in filthy rags. They were hairy and dirty and they wore heavy packs on their backs and carried spears and clubs. They were almost like cavemen, except when the wind carried their voices up to where she floated she realised that they were speaking something that sounded a lot like English – American English, thick *rs* and all – so Sara swooped lower still to hear them better.

The cavemen didn't see Sara – of course they didn't see her, because she was dreaming, and they were not. They were awake. They were far away in time and space, and they couldn't see her. But she could see them, clearer than anything, clearer than waking.

Sara landed on her feet right behind the cavemen, landed as smoothly as a little sparrow – she didn't even sense the impact of the ground on the bare soles of her feet – and slowly snuck up to listen.

The cavemen were gathered around a small fire, and Sara saw now that they weren't cavemen at all – they were regular people like her, but they didn't have proper clothes, their hair was tangled, their skin rough, their teeth yellow. They had thick, calloused fingernails, and scars everywhere. They were a wild people, but not savages. They were, she sensed, what passed for civilised human beings in an uncivilised world.

There were three men and a woman. The woman had long, golden hair, and she was very beautiful. She reminded Sara of someone, although she couldn't quite say whom. After all, this was a dream, and dreams are always a bit fuzzy around the edges.

The woman said, "I am tired. I will go to bed now."

She rose, and put down a stick. There was something stuck on the far end of the stick. Sara leaned forward to look – for a moment she feared discovery, but the strangers obviously couldn't see her – and she realised that there was a bug stuck on the stick, a large, disgusting bug; roasted, half-eaten. Sara felt like retching, but then she realised that that was silly, because this was a dream.

The men looked up when the woman left. One man in particular – a young, rather handsome bloke – stared after the woman with what could only be lust and longing. Sara smiled; even in a world like this, a savage world, the blokes were still *so* predictable.

The golden-haired woman walked over to a pile of blankets, and wrapped herself in them to protect herself from the cold night. The men kept on eating – they were chewing on those big bugs like they were marshmallows – and the woman closed her eyes to go to sleep.

Sara left the warm fire and tiptoed over to her, crouching down next to the cot.

The woman's face was so familiar. Sara reached out to touch it, and found, to her surprise, that the skin was warm; she could actually *feel* her.

Suddenly, the woman opened her eyes and gazed at Sara – looked right at her, right into her heart and soul – and suddenly Sara realised why the woman looked so familiar:

Underneath the dirt, the tanned skin, and the sun-bleached hair...it was *her*.

Sara woke with a start. The bright sun was in her eyes. Her head ached. She felt sick. In fact, the world around her heaved and turned like she was on a raft in the middle of a stormy ocean.

It took a few moments before she realised that she *was* on an ocean of sorts, because the bed she was in wasn't her own; it was Trevor's waterbed. Her head flopped back down onto the pillow, and she groaned.

Trevor.

Bollocks.

She knew she'd been snogging *someone* last night, but dear God, did it have to be *him*? She'd been *so* over that wanker for *ages* now, and she'd made a solemn promise to herself (as well as all her mates) that she would never fall back into those treacherous, if ever so delish, arms.

She turned her head slightly to the left to check, and sure enough, there was that oh-so-familiar head of bushy, curly black hair.

Greasy *black hair*, she reminded herself. *Nothing charming or attractive about it whatsoever.*

She sniffed, and grimaced. There was an unmistakable stench of booze and vomit in the air, and she hoped to God it wasn't her.

She cupped a hand to her mouth, and exhaled.

Buggerit.

It was all she could do not to start retching; whatever she'd been drinking last night, at some point during the night parts of it had come

out again. Exactly where...well, as long as she wasn't sleeping in it, she didn't care. It wasn't her flat. Thank God.

Trevor groaned something unintelligible, and rolled over on his back. His chiselled face came into profile. His mouth was open, and he was drooling. Had she ever fancied him? Looking the way he did now, it didn't seem possible; he was such a...a *lad*. All six feet of him.

All drooling six feet of him, she corrected herself. Trevor was good-looking in an infuriatingly cocky way. And he wasn't her type any more. Not her type at *all*.

She squeezed her lips together, and held her breath. It'd do no good for him to wake up now – she'd have to come up with a bloody good excuse for why she'd fallen for his salacious advances again, something along the lines of “being piss-drunk and making a definite error of judgement, sorry Trev”. No; better she slipped off unnoticed, without a word of goodbye, and then refuse to answer his inevitable (and no doubt incessant) calls, mails and personal visits when they came.

At least she and Trevor attended different colleges, and it wasn't as though they hung out with the same crowd...normally. Last night she'd been down to Head of the River, by Folly Bridge on Abingdon – she didn't usually go there, but Shelley was supposed to meet up with some lads from Magdalene – and there had been lots of beer, and then...she wasn't entirely clear on the exact sequence of events. Trevor had showed up, yes, and there'd been a bit of teasing from her mates, and he'd been so bloody charming, and even though she hated his guts, there'd been some snogging and dancing, and then...

Why the hell hadn't Shelley rescued her? She must've been busy on her own. Lucky her. Whomever she'd picked up, he was sure to be a damn sight better than *Trevor*.

Trev the *Lad*.

She would just have to escape this bed, one way or the other, without waking him up. She propped herself up on one elbow and studied the man next to her. He was out cold, no question, and he'd probably be sleeping until noon. What time was it anyway?

She lifted herself slightly and looked over Trevor to the alarm clock by his side of the bed.

Noon.

Oh, for Christ's sake...

She pulled the cover away, slowly, and slipped her right leg out of bed.

Trevor groaned.

She stopped, held her breath. He fell silent again, his right eyelid fluttering. Hopefully, he'd had more to drink than her. Lots more. She slid over and planted a foot on the floor. Now, if she could only—

The floorboard creaked.

“Whatsamatta?”

Oh, sodding hell.

She clenched her teeth together, and turned to look at Trevor. He was squinting at her with bloodshot eyes. Saliva was running down his chin, and he looked simply *awful*. None of that dubious *laddish* charm left in him now; he'd been reduced to a large, fleshy, uncomfortably *male* obstruction to be handled cautiously lest she regret it for the rest of the week.

“Gotta run, Trev darling. Study time.” She rummaged through her head for something more. “Just go back to sleep, all right? I'll find my own way out.”

“Youleavin?” He yawned, and reached out his hand to grab hold of her. She jumped away, and staggered to her feet by the bed.

It was only then she realised she was stark buttocks naked.

He smiled a lustful grin, and looked her up and down. She quickly pulled the cover away from him to hide her nakedness, accomplishing only to reveal his pride and glory in its entire statuesque...*wood-ness*.

His grin grew wider and even more licentious.

“Trevor, for God's sake, cover yourself up!” she shrieked, before realising that he couldn't. It was either him or her.

Better her than him, then. She turned away from the rather grotesque sight, and began picking up her discarded clothing, starting with the disturbingly skimpy knickers.

“Wanker,” she muttered, and then immediately prayed he wouldn't take that suggestion literally.

The most infuriating moment came when he saw her off at the door – against her repeated insistences that he stay in bed until she was well out – and he told her that last evening had been a big mistake, he'd

been pissed out of his mind, and he hoped she'd understand.

The nerve! She couldn't believe he was making it sound like this was something *she* had wanted, and that he was letting her down gently.

She was about to tell him off in a serious way when she realised there was no point; this was Trevor in a nutshell. He never got it. He was so full of himself. So she said nothing, but instead gave him a look she hoped spoke volumes of the utter contempt she felt for him before slamming the door in his face.

It was only after she was out on the street that she realised she'd played right into his hands. She'd acted like the jilted lover instead of playing it cool; he was probably basking in the infuriating glow of utter smugness right now. For a moment, she considered going back to set things straight, but then that would just make it worse.

Things always had a way of going from bad to worse between her and Trevor, and she *always* ended up doing something she'd regret a minute later.

This time she would *not* make the same mistake; instead, she would simply put him out of her mind and get on with her day.

She turned right, and headed down Adelaide towards Woodstock Road.

The tree-lined street was mercifully empty; the world was hushed and refreshingly dull in a Sunday kind of way. There wouldn't be any taxis about, certainly not on an early Sunday afternoon – not that Oxford ever had much in the way of taxis, not like London; it was one of the few things she missed about *that* hellhole – so she'd have to take the bus down to the city centre, and then switch for the service to her flat.

Luckily, it was a sunny day, and although she had a splitting headache, the clean spring air was doing her wonders. After only a few minutes, she had a genuine spring in her step, Trevor was momentarily forgotten, and she was looking forward to getting back home. With luck, Shelley would be there, and Sara would be able to give the girl a right smacking for not stopping the Trevor-thing from happening.

That was, if Shelley hadn't brought someone home with her.

Now, Sara herself had the good grace to go home with the *man* (not that it happened all that often) instead of bringing him round hers and Shelley's place, unless it was at least the third or fourth date, and then be sure to warn her best friend and flatmate of four years *beforehand*.

Shelley, on the other hand – bless her heart – never seemed to get the idea; she pulled often, and she usually brought the lads back to their flat.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, Shelley was also a screamer. Sometimes it got to the point where Sara actually had to knock on Shelley's bedroom door and ask them both to tone it down a bit, because she simply couldn't sleep. Now, *that* was *always* embarrassing. Somehow, though, Shelley seemed to enjoy those interruptions...like it gave her a kick. Shelley was *weird*. But she was also Sara's best mate in the whole world, so she left it at that.

Some questions were better left unanswered, Sara always reckoned.

By the time her bus into the city arrived, she was feeling positively rejuvenated. Whether it was the lovely spring air, the warm sunlight, the smell of green grass, fresh leaves, and blossoming flowers, or simply that she'd realised Trevor meant a whole hell of a lot less to her than she'd feared, it didn't really matter. She felt great, headache aside.

In fact, her headache was fading, and now she just felt a raging hunger. Once she got home she'd fry up some eggs, mushrooms, and bacon, toast some bread, and brew herself a nice cuppa.

Her stomach growled. Funny thing, that: only an hour earlier she could've sworn she was about to be sick. And now – save for a much-needed shower – all she wanted was a hardy English breakfast, the kind of breakfast her Mum used to make, the kind she'd sworn off completely (just like she'd sworn off Trevor). Nowadays, all she usually allowed herself was a non-buttered croissant and a decaf, low-fat latte, or even just a cup of herbal tea, before heading to the lab in the morning.

The lab. That stirred something in her mind, but she couldn't quite figure out why. Was there something she was supposed to do today? Something she'd forgotten about? Whatever it was, she couldn't remember.

All right, so she'd probably had a *little* too much to drink last night, and she probably needed the day to recuperate. After all, she wasn't supposed to go in on a Sunday, was she?

Was she?

After getting off the bus on George Street, Sara decided to walk the rest of the way. It was only about twenty minutes, if that, to her flat. And, honestly, it was simply too lovely out to waste the opportunity – she

would've had to wait for her bus anyway, and, most importantly, she felt *great*. She was experiencing a strange sense of accomplishment despite the...misadventures of last evening, as though something grand and wonderful lay in wait for her today.

Curiously enough, she thought, it was as if this day was destined to be the first day of a brand new life...that by tonight, everything would have changed beyond recognition. Which was simply ridiculous, because tomorrow morning, like every Monday morning, she'd be back in the genetics lab with the others, nursing a delayed weekend hangover, and the week would pass much like every other week: work, study, sleep, until the weekend awakened the monster in her, and that eternal cycle of university life would start anew.

Still... There was that unmistakable *tingle* in her head.

Her Mum always called it "women's intuition", her Granny – rather colourfully, as was Nan's wont – had claimed it was psychic powers. Sara herself had always thought of it as simple *intelligence*; the ability of the subconscious mind to interpret the signs before her consciousness caught up, to see specific patterns and to extrapolate the likely possibilities, arriving at the most likely outcome. Then again, she was the natural scientist, wasn't she?

Yet it was an undeniable fact that this ability, whatever it was – mathematics or magic – had run in her family on the women's side for generations. Nothing ever came as a true surprise – aside from insipid incidents like the whole Trevor-affair, but that was libidinal and hence outside the realm of precognition – like, for example, the day she got her scholarship to Oxford University, to work in the laboratory with Dr. Andrews. She'd *known* that would happen more than a month in advance. There'd been no doubt in her mind. And when the call finally came, it was an anti-climax; something she'd been expecting.

And now the *tingle* was back, but this time she wasn't sure what it signified. It was connected with the laboratory somehow, but not directly so. She wasn't supposed to go there, she knew. She was supposed to go *home*.

Suddenly she felt like rushing, but that would defeat the whole purpose of walking. It was a beautiful day, and she wouldn't let the *tingle* ruin her appreciation of the weather, the wonderful city architecture that she would never get tired of, the sense of a spring arrived and a summer

leaping ever closer by the day. But the pull was strong, the temptation to walk faster and faster, and she constantly had to *force* herself to slow down; if she let her mind wander for even a second, her feet automatically picked up the pace until she was half running.

What in God's name is going on?

Sara prayed it wasn't something bad, but then she'd know if it was, wouldn't she? When Nan had passed, it had struck her full force in the middle of a lecture. Like a blow to the head, she'd almost passed out, and then she'd stumbled out of the hall and called her Mum immediately, and her Mum had known, too – had *known*, like it'd been advertised in big glowing letters in the sky – that Nan was dead.

It was scary at times...this *tingle*, this intuition, this psychic precognition. Even Sara had to admit that there was no logical explanation for knowing about Nan's death. She'd been sick for a while, yes, but for two people to guess the exact moment of another person's death...

Right, so she *would* start hurrying. Just a bit, mind. She was halfway home anyway, and she was getting more than a little peckish. Better use *that* as an excuse for walking faster, instead of calling it precognition.

If nothing else, it made her feel more in control.

She locked herself into the flat and shut the door quietly behind her. Shelley wouldn't be up – it was only half one on Sunday afternoon; the girl was a skilled sleeper-inner...if there was such a word: there really should be, it was a bloody art form, being able to stay conked out in bed until dinnertime – and Sara felt like spending some time alone, thinking.

She poked her head into the kitchen. Empty. *Thank God.*

She got the kettle from the shelf above the sink, and started filling it with water.

"Where the bloody hell *you* been all night, then?"

Startled, Sara dropped the kettle into the sink, where it clattered loudly and splattered her shirt with cold water, before settling with the spout poking up in a way that reminded her of Trevor.

Irritated, she turned to find Shelley in her bathrobe...accompanied by a tall, quite sexy-looking bloke – dressed only in revealing boxers and little else – peering bemusedly over Shelley's bare shoulder.

"God's sake, Shelley!" Sara turned off the water, and crossed her

arms. “Would you mind not startling me like that? I thought you were in bed...” She looked accusingly at Shelley’s new stud. “...*sleeping*. What are you doing up before sundown, anyway? Don’t you know you could turn to dust?”

Shelley smirked, and tousled the hair of her playmate. “Go get dressed, love,” she told him in her most infuriating baby-voice, and turned back to Sara. “We’ve got girl-business to discuss.” The boy toy gave a bored shrug and left them alone.

Shelley entered the kitchen, and picked the kettle out of the sink. “Didn’t have the chance to sleep in, did I. Had a visitor drop by at nine sharp. I tried ringing you, but you had your mobile switched off...as usual.”

Sara cursed and rummaged through her purse until she found the Motorola. It was indeed switched off, something she’d probably done in an alcohol-induced daze late last night, before...before...

She tapped the flat screen unnecessarily hard and was immediately greeted with the colourful animation of a bouncing rabbit with a letter in his hand, and the short, cartoon-jolly fanfare announcing messages.

“Turned out it was a courier,” her friend continued as Sara quickly browsed through her inbox – there were two messages from Shelley, one from (God help her) Trevor, and one anonymous one; probably another pathetic attempt by Trevor to get her to listen to him – “with a delivery for you.”

Sara looked up. Shelley was coyly holding both of her hands behind her back. “Guess which hand, then.”

“Stop playing around, Shell. I’m not in the mood.”

“Not until you come clean, darling. Were you ever planning on telling me?”

“Telling you what?” Sara was getting frustrated with her roommate, and the fact that the headache had returned and she was bloody starving didn’t help any.

“That you were going away.” Shelley looked genuinely put out.

“What?” Sara exclaimed, puzzled. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“That so?” Shelley extended her left hand and handed Sara a plastic card, about the size of a regular credit card.

She took it, and, noticing the nice, shiny, animated *Farmatek* logo on one side (her heart skipped a beat and Sara felt her mind struggling to

catch up with something monumental and unfathomable) she flipped the card over.

There was only a silver square, about the size of a stamp, in the middle of the blank grey plastic: there were no other identifying marks, no print of any kind. The silver square bore the Farmatek holographic trademark and Sara knew immediately what it was: a thumbprint-locked credit chip.

From *Farmatek*.

She looked back up at Shelley. “When did this arrive? Wasn’t there a letter or something?”

Shelley shook her head, pouted her lips, and was about to say something when Sara’s mobile shrilled.

“Wait, there’s a new message...” She noticed again the anonymous message she’d thought was Trevor’s; it was flashing an *urgent* icon, now – that’s why the Motorola was getting testy: someone was in a right hurry to get a hold of her.

Sara clipped the wireless receiver to her ear and tapped the message’s tiny icon with her finger.

“Good morning, Ms. Carroll,” intoned a soothingly professional female voice. “My name is Anna Rivera. I’m with Human Resources at *Farmatek*.”

There was a trained pause; Sara could hardly breathe, now, her heart was beating like a drum.

“I’d like to invite you to our biotech laboratories in San Jose, to meet with Dr. Eric Miller, as soon as possible – I’ve taken the liberty to courier you a credit chip which you can use to claim your open-departure first-class ticket from Heathrow to San Jose, as well as to pay any and all expenses incurred in connection with your trip. You should be receiving this chip shortly.

“I do hope to see you here first thing Monday morning, Ms. Carroll, but please let us know if you need to reschedule, or if you have any questions whatsoever.

“Thank you.”

The message ended. The Motorola beeped, softly, to let her know there was no more. She removed the receiver, and snapped her mobile shut.

Looking back up at her best friend, Sara realised that Shelley was

waiting for her to say something, anything at all. The girl looked positively stricken.

“They want to interview me...I think,” said Sara. Come to think of it, she wasn’t entirely sure *what* they wanted with her. She’d never spoken with any recruiters from Farmatek, though she knew they hovered about the university like hungry vultures with the rest of the multinational corporations, flocking to the most talented students as though they were carrion to be torn apart, eaten, and digested.

But of course her work had been published, and she knew a few graduates who’d moved on to Farmatek after school – she might have been recommended by any number of them.

“Who?” Shelley sounded very tense. “Farmatek? In *California*? That’s where the package’s from, isn’t it? Do they want you to start working for them? Are you leaving me?”

The girl looked like she was about to start blubbering, and suddenly Sara was angry with her: it was so like Shelley to be both completely neurotic and totally self-absorbed. As though this wasn’t the best thing to ever happen to Sara, to be noticed by Farmatek, by Eric *Miller*! She’d read all of the man’s papers, reproduced his experiments, virtually worshipped at the altar of Farmatek...like any biophysicist, their accomplishments were an inspiration to her. And now they wanted to *interview* her?

And all Shelley was worried about was being left alone. But she was a friend, and Sara sort of understood how she felt; they’d been together for ages. She just didn’t have the heart to be angry with Shelley for long.

“I’m not planning on staying away, Shell,” she said softly. “But I do want to go there, to see what they want with me. If nothing else, I might secure a job with their facilities in Cambridge after I’ve graduated.” She knew that wasn’t true; if she were offered a job, it’d be in San Jose, but no need to worry the girl. Besides, she still had a year and a half to go before graduation. Nothing was certain yet.

“So when are you leaving?”

Sara frowned. Could she leave today? Then what about the lab work in the morning? She could skip that, and with luck she’d be back before Tuesday. It was, after all, only a four-hour flight.

“Well...now,” she said. “Right now!”

Saying it out loud made her body surge with energy, like she

couldn't wait to get out of here, out of this life and take a peek into the next one.

"Now?" said Shelley as Sara raced towards her bedroom, already taking inventory in her head of what clothes she'd need to bring. "But what about Sunday dinner? Sara? Sara!"

She boarded the slip-rail to Heathrow only an hour and a half later.

The trains ran every twenty minutes from the Oxford station, and, as the trip took a further fifteen minutes – the slipstream trains could travel in excess of three hundred kilometres an hour – she'd have more than enough time to make the six o'clock flight to San Francisco that she'd booked thirty minutes earlier. First class, even. Not that she'd specifically requested it; her ticket had already been registered. Open departure, open return.

Shelley had come with her, looking increasingly miserable, which, for Shelley, was a real departure. The girl was always chirpy, no matter the circumstances, and Sara couldn't help but feel a bit guilty, even though this might prove to be her big break, and she was planning on returning immediately anyway.

I shouldn't be hard on her, though, Sara thought as they were hugging goodbye, and Shelley actually began sobbing. *If the situation was reversed I'm sure I'd be blubbing too. But at least I'd be happy for her.*

"Give us a ring, all right?" Shelley wiped her eyes with the sleeve of the coat she'd grabbed as they'd hurried out of the apartment less than twenty minutes earlier.

"I'll be back on Tuesday, Shell." The slip-rail was about to depart, and Sara was eager to board, to begin her journey. "You won't even notice I'm gone."

"Perhaps not now," insisted Shelley, "but what if they offer you a fantastic job with a huge salary? Would you be able to promise me that you'd say no?"

"You know I can't promise you that, Shell. It all depends on...on what happens."

"Right. On what happens. Not on *me*, what *I* want."

"Oh, Shelley, for God's sake!" Sara shook her head and glanced at the clock above them. The train was about to depart. "That's not fair,

and you know it. You're being totally selfish!"

"Me?" Shelley's voice was turning shrill, and she was flushing. "You've always said you're my best mate, but still you'd abandon me in a sec when fame and fortune comes calling?"

"You know that's not true, Shell. I—"

Sara was interrupted by a series of loud beeps. The doors were about to close. She started towards the train, reluctantly, as Shelley glared at her. "I have to go."

"Sure."

"Shelley..."

But her friend wasn't listening anymore. She'd started to turn away, and now the doors were really closing. Sara had no choice but to board.

As the door slid quietly shut behind her, and the train picked up speed, she couldn't help but ponder the possibility that something momentous had just happened; that Sara, torn between friendship and career, had chosen the latter.

The thought hurt. And of course it wasn't true. It couldn't be. She was just going to an interview. If nothing else, it was a chance to see California, to go on an exotic daytrip, to perhaps meet a man she'd admired for years, and to feel good about herself and her future. If Shelley felt that, by taking this opportunity, Sara had abandoned her, then so be it.

By the time she returned, her best mate would probably have forgotten all about the whole argument anyway. Shelley wouldn't even realise that Sara had been away.

Sara put her luggage – a small bag with a single change of clothes, makeup, and toiletries – away, and found an empty seat opposite a polite old couple.

The woman was reading a book on her outdated mobile when Sara sat down; she looked up and smiled, and Sara smiled back. The man – balding, in his late seventies, wearing tweed, still quite striking in a stiff-upper-lip kind of way – pulled his knobbly knees back, and muttered a silent apology, though for what, exactly, he was apologising, she wasn't sure.

The train was still accelerating. The Oxfordshire countryside was slipping silently by; green fields replaced by small towns followed by more

green fields. Grazing sheep and cows – their numbers severely reduced by yet another recurrence of some awful disease or other – contentedly chewing their afternoon meals, didn't look up as the slip-train bulleted past them. Once she spotted, briefly, a group of bicyclist navigating a narrow, winding country road, before they too slipped past and vanished.

Much like the world outside the window, Sara realised, her life was moving bizarrely fast now. Faster than she'd ever thought possible. In a way, Shelley had been right; changes were approaching, changes that were far beyond Sara's ability to comprehend. She was only a few hours past waking up with a hangover next to a bloke she didn't want anything to do with, and at that time, it'd been all she was capable of worrying about. And now she was on her way to America, to San Jose, to *Farmatek*...

What could possibly have happened in those five hours between then and now? What kind of spell had been cast on her? And what would happen in the hours and days ahead?

By the time the train began decelerating for the approach to Heathrow, Sara had fallen asleep, and her fluttering dreams brought her staccato pictures of a distraught Shelley and a pathetically sheepish Trevor, both hanging on to her legs like iron weights as she struggled towards a distant door in a blank, colourless wall.

Behind that door, she knew, was salvation – whatever salvation would mean, in whatever form it would come – but when she looked back at her tormentors, their faces, ghost-like and shimmering, began to resemble the woman from her earlier dream – the woman who looked exactly like her, only older, dirtier, stronger; like a reflection of a dark future in a pool littered with dirt and the leaves of a long, cold autumn.

*

San Jose, California, 2014 AD

“Computer, continue recording of personal journal, Eric Miller. Restricted access, my voiceprint only. Password protected.

“God, I'm tired. Tired...but ecstatic. If there were any way to eliminate the necessity of sleep, I'd jump at it. Come to think of it, it

won't be long before we've probably developed a drug to do just that. The world is at our feet. At Farmatek's feet.

"Today we became gods.

"Too dramatic? Nah, I don't think so. The first stage is complete and immortality is within our grasp. We tested one of the initial batches today, on a lab assistant diagnosed with cancer. She was informed, naturally, and only happy to help out, though I suspect her motives weren't particularly altruistic. Who could willingly and wilfully refuse a possible miracle cure?

"It took fifty-three minutes for the little buggers to devour the cancer completely.

"There was no residue of cancerous tissue, and she's already making a full and total recovery. Next step; we rebuild lost tissue, repair organs, replace and reconstruct the entire body. Heck, why stop there? Why not go evolution one better, and make us *perfect*?

"Well, apparently that's been the plan all along. But that's just part of it; Drake finally told us about the Ark Project that we've heard rumours about for ages now. Trust the old codger to be so dramatic, so...I guess the word is *biblical*. Still, there's something to be said for affectation, especially with something of this magnitude. Oh, the project is insane, no doubt about that: completely and utterly insane. And I think Drake knows that quite well. He may be getting on, but he's not stupid. With the power we now have at our disposal...with the power we'll have three or four years from now...it would be insane *not* to take control of our own destinies. We can't afford anything else. This world's going to hell in the proverbial hand-basket anyway, so why not try to preserve something of actual value?

"Why not get ahead of the game, do ourselves a favour, and manufacture our own Armageddon while we still call all the shots?

"It's all a good ways off, though. Sure, the preparations have already begun in subterfuge – the construction work and political manoeuvring – but as far as us lab-rats are concerned, we're holding off. We'll staff up, grab the most promising recruits – with the announcements we're making in the days and weeks to come, we can pick and choose from the top candidates – and start implementing Drake's strategy the minute it arrives.

"Until then, though, we'll keep working the same way we've been

working since this all began, back in twenty-oh-seven. I have a million plans myself. There's no stopping me now. The difference is that now I know what I'm working towards...and it's good.

“Frustrating thing, though, is that this is top level information exclusively...the only guy in R&D I get to share this with is Simon, and we haven't been on the best of terms lately, not since I went straight to Drake with the news of the first airborne bot. The only reason they tell us anything is because they need us on their side, when the doors shut and all hell breaks loose. No one else, though; not outside the board and the core personnel. Not yet.

“Sure, when everything is ready to go, they'll pick out their favourites amongst the employees and bring them in on the project. Until then...basically there's no one to jabber with about any of this.

“So I talk to a machine.

“I'm sure Farmatek would go ballistic if they knew I recorded and stored this, but hey, I've got to look out for myself too. Chances are, no one will ever hear this except me...but I like to play it safe.

“Any reservations when it comes to Drake's five year plan? Not really. I'm not on particularly friendly terms with mankind at the moment. People suck. They deserve to die, every last one of them.

“Computer, store and—

“On second thought...what the hell am I doing? I'm not going to gamble with immortality.

“Computer – delete this entire record right n—”

Chapter Three

Russia, 1949 AD

Surprisingly enough, it was a lot easier than he had ever thought – or at least made to believe – to escape through the Iron Curtain that kept the Soviet Union and its satellite states from the West.

In fact, the hardest part of the journey – not physically, because that was still to come, but the most suspenseful and nerve-racking part – had been the long drive from Moscow to Leningrad.

Even with valid papers, stamped and signed, there was a real chance that his name and personal details had gone out over the ether and that the KGB were looking for him in force, despite the fact that he was not expected back into the office for two whole days. If that was the case, if he was currently a wanted man, even his travelling papers – excellent forges notwithstanding; Roman was travelling to the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute for a seminar – would not help him escape detention, incarceration, torture...and death.

But the drive had been surprisingly uneventful, if time-consuming and arduous. He had spent that first night behind the wheel expecting to hear sirens every time he passed another automobile on the road, but by morning, as the roads filled up with buses and delivery trucks, he began to feel reasonably sure that he had at least made it out of Moscow undetected.

Still, it had been a long way to Leningrad, and though he had stopped only when absolutely necessary – to fill up on gasoline, to eat, and to visit the restroom – it had taken the better part of two days and

two nights before he had completed that first leg of his journey.

He had not slept; he had been too nervous to relax, and he had a tight schedule to keep. And when, by the end of the second day, he had arrived in Leningrad, he had given silent thanks to the sky above him.

As planned, Roman had left the automobile in an inconspicuous parking lot. It was, of course, not his personal vehicle, but rather an anonymous grey-green 1947 GAZ *Pobeda* that he had picked up in the agreed-upon location in Moscow on that chilly night.

There was nothing that tied him to the automobile, and, with luck, no one would ever connect the dots. The police – should they even decide to investigate – would simply assume that the car had been stolen and then abandoned. Which, in a way, it had been, except that this was one theft that would never be reported: its last owner was dead and buried.

Nothing had been left to chance.

After he had abandoned the automobile, everything had gone surprisingly smoothly. Even now, looking back, safely out from under the shadow of the Kremlin, Roman knew that the experience ought to have been a lot more difficult than it was: that carrying such sensitive research, fleeing a country which suspected even its most trustworthy citizens of dissidence, putting his life in the hands of complete strangers, he should at least have been left with a more thrilling story than the one he now had to tell.

But Roman knew he ought to be grateful for small favours. And there were aspects to his flight that still puzzled him...

It was only a few minutes prior to the arranged rendezvous time when Roman finally arrived at the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.

He entered the grand building and made his way up to the second floor, home to many of the picture galleries – even in these philistine times an example to the world that Russia was more than a match for the Western countries when it came to the arts.

The museum was not particularly crowded – quite the opposite, in fact – and Roman silently cursed his luck; more patrons would have meant an easier time slipping away, if he were being followed. Then again, this way it was harder for anyone to track him undetected. Any

strange face – and here all faces belonged to strangers – would be suspect.

Mounting the stairs, turning left – Roman had been to the museum before, several years ago, and he knew exactly where the rendezvous point was: after all, he had picked it – he entered the Room of Kandinsky.

He stopped in the middle of the room and, feigning confusion, cautiously inspected his surroundings.

He was alone. His contact had not yet showed.

Turning left – finding himself face to face with Kandinsky's 'Winter Landscape' – Roman yet again wondered if this was the end of the road, if at any moment strong arms would grab hold of him, toss him into a black car, and drive him back to Moscow where he would be *interviewed* by stone-faced interrogators who would make him scream for days on end until he told them everything.

Roman shivered, and tried to focus on the framed canvas.

Though he was no great lover of Vasily Kandinsky – being more of a traditionalist, Roman favoured, perhaps rather unpatriotically, the fourteenth and fifteenth century renaissance artists of southern Europe – the artist's work was, admittedly, significantly better in every way to most of the modern, state-sanctioned works that filled official buildings throughout Moscow and Leningrad: dreadfully uniform, grey and angular state propaganda, disguised as artful, inspirational, patriotic décor.

Here was yet another failing of communism; to assume that artists could be asked to conform to the ideals proclaimed by the state and to commission them to create works that Stalin himself, the biggest philistine of them all, could approve of; to think that these great artists of Russia would be able to muster inspiration on demand, and make great art in service to communism.

No, Comrade Kandinsky's paintings may have been *good*, at least in comparison to most of the soulless muck defacing governmental buildings, but they were too garish for Roman. This one included.

Still...there was no denying the artist's genius. Roman dabbled a bit in oils himself, but his work – landscapes, mostly, and sometimes a still life or a nude portrait of a lover to preserve some vague memory of passion – were dull, perhaps technically competent, but lacking in any spirit or imagination. Kandinsky, meanwhile, lacked neither in technique nor in artistry.

Roman leaned closer, as if smelling the very paint on the canvas; there was something wonderful about the texture of a canvas; the peaks and valleys of brushstrokes on stretched cloth. With years of practise, perhaps, Roman may have accomplished something akin to this...but, no, his talents lay elsewhere.

Footsteps echoed through the hall.

Someone was approaching.

Acutely aware of his posture and mannerisms, Roman turned casually around to look, as though only mildly curious of the approaching stranger.

The man – for it was a man this time, and not the woman he had met with on all previous occasions – was dressed like any other museum patron: he was in his late forties, wore a non-descript suit and sported dark, cropped curly hair, and darkly tanned skin. He also carried a walking stick with a head shaped like an eagle's.

Roman found himself wondering again, as he had done so many times in the past few months, just *who* his mysterious benefactors truly were. Americans? The British? Certainly not Germans, he would not have accepted that. Whoever they were, they had great power and influence, to the point of being able to infiltrate channels of communication inside the Iron Curtain, to bribe officials who lived in daily fear of Stalin's persecution, and to – supposedly – traffic him from Leningrad to Vaalimaa in Finland, and from there on to the relative safety of Sweden.

The notion that his contacts might in actuality be the Committee of State Security – the KGB – attempting to entrap him had occurred to him briefly during those first few encounters. But he had gambled, and his gamble seemed to have paid off. After all, would the *Komitet* have taken it this far, having all but confirmed in writing, with his signature in blood, that he was ready and willing to desert his nation and to commit treason? They had the evidence; he had carried that with him since he left the laboratory two days ago.

No, they were genuine; they had to be. But who *were* they?

His contact had avoided the question when she had first approached him, just a few months previous.

“You do not need to know this, Roman Dragovich,” she had told him. “Any answer we would choose to give you would change nothing: You need to leave the Soviet Union with your research, and soon. We will

not profit directly from your actions, but the consequences of your escape will be far-reaching and very important to the future of the free world. Do you understand?”

He had answered yes, even though that was a lie. He did not understand then, and he did not understand now, yet he had committed himself...for what reason? Greed? Fear? A misguided sense of duty?

Perhaps, thought Roman, all three.

The approaching stranger stopped to look at the Kandinsky. He kept a respectful distance between himself and Roman, as though he did not wish to intrude. A long minute passed in silence. Then, finally:

“The use of colour is quite extraordinary, is it not? Especially in a painting of a winter landscape.” The stranger’s voice was lightly accented, as though hailing from one of the provinces to the southeast. Roman had no frame of reference; his life, even during the war, had been down in the laboratories, amongst vials and books.

“*Da,*” answered Roman – he was following the agreed-upon manuscript to the letter – “the warm colours stand in stark contrast with the cold season.” He turned to the stranger. The man was looking at him with the hint of a smile on his lips. “Like with all things, nature is filled with contrasts,” Roman added, deviating from the code.

The stranger nodded, seemingly pondering Roman’s personal observation.

“It is an enigmatic painting, this winter’s landscape of Kandinsky. Some say it is not even his, that someone else painted it. I believe it does not matter either way – art exists regardless of the artist.” His eyes danced down to the briefcase in Roman’s left hand. “So, Dr. Zubov, you are ready?”

Roman took a deep breath. This was it. If his mysterious benefactors were the KGB, this would be the moment when the game was up for good.

Not that anything would matter at this point if they were; he’d brought his work here, to Leningrad, to meet with a stranger who was supposed to traffic him out of the country. There was nothing he could say to explain this, to defend himself, if worst came to worst. Events had snowballed beyond his control days ago.

And so Roman simply inclined his head slightly and said, “I am, yes.”

The following twelve hours were, in retrospect, a complete haze. He had walked with the stranger – the man had identified himself simply as Vanya, the familiar diminutive of Ivan; an obvious alias – out of the museum and to a parked Lada with two faceless men seated in the front.

Again, the fear that this was simply an elaborate ruse by the KGB had surfaced, but when he had climbed into the back seat of the rusty grey automobile, followed by Vanya, and they had begun driving west, out of the city, his fears had subsided. If they had been with the *Komitet*, he would have been taken to their Leningrad headquarters.

But as the sun had sunk below the horizon, bathing the countryside in a bewitching wintry light – the sort of light that brought forth a sense of magic in the trees and rocks and hills – they had followed a near-deserted country road north, and west, along the coast.

Towards freedom, and not captivity.

In the early morning hours, not long before sunrise, Roman woke. He was surprised to find that he had fallen asleep, and even more surprised to find that they were still driving.

The two men in the front had not said a word since he got into the automobile, not even to introduce themselves, and Vanya had only briefly answered the few questions he had bothered to ask. Roman presumed he had fallen asleep at some point after midnight, and now he had no idea where they were, though from what he had been told, they must be closing in on the border with Finland.

Less than thirty minutes after he woke – sleep was still clouding his thoughts, and his body felt heavy and awkward as though nursing a hangover – the car pulled off the road and rolled onto a cartwheel track leading off into the thick pine woods. The snow was piled high on both sides, and the track did not seem to be much in use, at least not by motorised vehicles.

Another few kilometres into the forest, the automobile stopped, and Vanya signalled for Roman to exit.

Climbing out in the cold, dark night, the powdery snow reaching well up his ankles, Vanya went around to the trunk and opened it. Roman followed, hugging himself and shivering; out here, winter had arrived in full, and it was no place to be dressed for an evening out on the town.

Vanya pulled a large sailcloth bag out of the trunk.

“Supplies and warm clothes,” he explained. “We will be walking from here, you and I.”

He slammed the trunk shut and knocked on the hood with his knuckles. Immediately, the Lada pulled away, tail part slipping as it gained speed and disappeared into the forest. Soon, even the taillights had vanished, and the two of them were left alone in the misty grey of early dawn.

“You will accompany me across the border?” Roman was puzzled. He had thought he would be alone.

Vanya shook his head, and smiled a grim smile. “No. That is a journey you will have to make on your own.” He opened the bag, and pulled out two large fur coats, tossing one over to Roman and donning the other himself. “But I will go with you for a distance. To ensure that our...investment is kept safe.”

He winked at Roman – a surprisingly jaunty gesture considering the man’s previous gravity – and pulled two pairs of snowshoes out of the bag, together with gloves, hats, and thick scarves. That done, he walked to the foot of a large pine, dug a hole in the snow, and buried the empty bag.

No trace of our passing, thought Roman. Not until late spring, and even then, who would ever think to look for me here?

It was a chilling thought. From this point on, he would disappear completely. Unless his accomplices talked – and he doubted that this would ever happen, even under extreme duress: Vanya seemed like the kind of man who would endure torture and accept death to protect his secrets – no one would ever know what had happened to Dr. Roman Dragovich Zubov. They might *guess*, certainly, but they would never *know*.

A few minutes later, as night began its slow transformation into day, they set out into the woods, trudging across the fresh snow with the snowshoes securely fastened to their feet.

Vanya carried with him a weapon, an army issue automatic rifle – for the wolves, he had explained, though Roman was sure that the man would not hesitate to fire upon humans if it ever became necessary; Vanya had the calm aloofness and firm posture of a trained soldier – while Roman himself carried his ever-present briefcase within which his entire fortune and future resided.

One aspect of this whole affair that had bothered him ever since the beginning were the constant insistences from his new friends that they wanted no direct compensation for their work, even after he had been safely transported to the west.

They knew what the briefcase contained – that had been clear from the very first moment – but nevertheless they had simply suggested to Roman that he should share some of his other research with the university that was going to be his sponsor in Sweden, and that he should keep the bulk of it – specifically, the parts that Stalin had salivated over for many, many years; the parts that would make the dictator curse his own mother and sentence Roman's entire department to death come next week – to himself until he was both safe and able to profit directly from it without fear of reprisal.

"Then what do you want?" he had asked his first contact, the stunningly beautiful – and frustratingly nameless – woman, three months ago, when she had approached him in the park where he had been feeding the pigeons during a midday break.

"Only to see you out of this country," she had answered – her diction was perfect, her accent light – "and to have the fruits of your labour away from the secretary general and his associates. It should be obvious to you that we have no wish for communist Russia to become the most powerful nation in the world."

This was when he had assumed that his contacts were Americans, but, as time passed, he began to question that assumption. After all, would not the Americans wish for him to travel to their own country, and then take his research away from him and hand it over to their state department? He would not have agreed to these conditions, of course, and had they been suggested to him, he might have experienced a change of heart early on and reported the woman's – the agent's – advances. As much as he feared what Stalin would do with the research, he did not trust the Americans either.

But instead *they* had arranged for him to go to Sweden, and once there, to disappear – under a new name and a new, manufactured identity, naturally – into the fitting cover of academia. Where, hopefully, Roman would be able to continue his work unchained by political ideologies.

More than ever, though, he wondered who *they* were, these people

who risked their lives to help him, despite the fact that they would never benefit financially or politically from his escape...

The long day's trek through knee-deep snow was frightening, but also highly invigorating.

Strangely enough, for Roman was in no way the rugged outdoorsy type so favoured by the Motherland's propaganda; he much preferred a cosy evening with a good book – Dostoyevsky, or perhaps even Hemingway; he had an illegal copy of the latter that had been given to him by an Englishman – before a roaring fire, with American negro jazz music on the gramophone, and a bottle of French liqueur to warm his insides. This was certainly preferable to subterfuge in the midst of the Russian forest in the dead of winter – Russian winter, the worst there was – with the very real possibility of being discovered and fired upon by the border guards.

But no, he actually enjoyed the walk...to a certain degree. After all, he was dressed in a wolf-skin coat, every inch of him wrapped and covered, and he was wearing snowshoes that let him walk comfortably in the powdery snow.

If not for the icy wind and the uncomfortable silence of his companion, it would have been an enjoyable constitutional.

It was not until the end of that long day when Vanya finally stopped and said, "This is as far as I go."

Although the man had not offered much in the way of company, Roman felt his heart sink. He did not relish the thought of being left alone in these woods, with night – and quite possibly wolves – on the way, and with no sense of direction nor a map or even a compass to guide him safely to his destination...wherever that was.

"I am not certain that I can do this, Vanya," Roman answered. He wiped his nose with his wool glove, and placed the briefcase in the snow so that he could stretch his arms and massage some of the stiffness out of his fingers. "It was my understanding that I would be escorted safely to my destination. This—" Roman gestured at the trees around them, weighed down with snow. "—I venture, is not it."

"Not to worry," said the other man. He pointed down a slope in what Roman guessed was a northerly direction from where they were standing. "At the bottom of this hill there is a house. Inside the house,

there is a man. This man answers to the name of Ivan.”

Roman laughed. “Another one?”

“Ah, but this one is the real deal, Dr. Zubov.” He smiled. “His name is genuine. He does not know who you are, but he does provide a service that is...quite invaluable. He will take you to the border and see you across.” A pause: the man that was not Vanya anymore gazed up at the sky. “Tomorrow. Tonight, you will stay in his barn.”

“And you are certain that he is there, and that he will help me?” Roman did not feel entirely confident. After all, if this other Vanya was not there, or was unwilling to help, it was quite likely that he would freeze to death.

“Absolutely certain. If worst comes to worst, know that we will keep an eye on you until you have settled down into your new life. We will not let you die or be captured, Dr. Zubov. Now—“ He pulled two envelopes out of his coat; one sealed, the other not. “—this envelope contains your travelling and identification papers.” He pointed to the unsealed envelope. “This other one, however,” he said, and tapped the sealed one, “is to be handed to the man that I spoke of. It is his compensation. And instructions. It is vital that you do not break the seal before handing it to him. Understood?”

“Why?”

His companion sighed. “You have trusted us until now. We have fulfilled all our promises. What purpose does questioning our motives or *modus operandi* serve?”

Surprisingly, Roman felt a pang of shame. It was true; they had given him so much without asking anything in return. The least he could do now was trust them until this ordeal was over and done with.

He accepted the envelopes, tucked them safely into his belt, and took the other man’s hand when it was offered to him.

“Good luck to you, Roman Dragovich,” Vanya said with a sombre smile. “In your hands rests the future of mankind, as I am sure you already know.”

It struck Roman now that this man, this Vanya, this stranger who had accompanied him throughout the night, possessed an air of something other than simply an exotic foreigner. It was as though he were bigger than life, a person harbouring great mysteries...like an angel, perhaps, or a demon.

The religious implications surprised Roman; he had never even considered the existence of either, and though he still did not subscribe to myths and fairytales, his companion was nevertheless in some inexplicable way *more* than human... Of this, Roman was certain.

“Thank you,” he stammered, suddenly ashamed of his earlier doubts, wishing to thank the man for all his help, but Vanya had already left, quickly slipping between the trunks and sagging branches back towards where they had started their journey, almost a day ago.

The other Ivan – a rugged, silent man, skin like leather, a man who had spent his entire life out here in the forest, unaffected by changes in the political landscape and similarly untouched by a barber’s knife – had not been overly surprised by Roman’s appearance. This Vanya had accepted the sealed letter from Roman, read it several times, slowly and deliberately, and then Vanya – the man had insisted on the familiar diminutive, but had not offered a patronymic nor a surname – had opened the barn to him and told him to stay there until morning, when they would be on their way.

Before dawn, Roman had been awoken. There had been a horse and a sleigh made ready, and by noon they had already been on their way for more than six hours.

The going was slow, but Roman was grateful that he did not have to walk, because here the snow was even deeper than it had been on the first leg of the journey.

At some point Roman had fallen asleep again. He woke to the sound of wolves howling at the full moon. It was the middle of the night, and they had stopped on a crest where tall pines, burdened with heavy snow, leaned awkwardly down towards a shallow vale where tiny pinprick lights flickered in the dark.

They had made it across the border, and ironically enough Roman had been asleep. After all those weeks wondering if he would be able to pass through the Iron Curtain, the actual passage had happened while he was busy dreaming of warm fires and hot food.

The Real Vanya – as Roman had silently named him – had handed him the private letter back – sealed anew, Roman guessed, while he had been resting in the barn – and told him which house to go to. This was Finland, and he would have to avoid as much contact as possible with

the locals. Down there, in the vale, the Real Vanya had told him, was another man who would help him onwards, towards Sweden. Roman was to give that man the very same letter.

Whatever the letter said, it would have to be something special, Roman reflected; why else would strangers risk their lives to help him?

The rest of the journey had been largely uneventful. His third companion, a young man named Pekki – whether that was his first name or his last, Roman did not venture to guess, nor did he ask – had brought him immediately on in another sled, by way of an actual road, to the harbour city of Kotka. Once there, Pekki instructed him to board a cargo ship. Again, Roman was given the letter in return, and again he handed it away as instructed, this time to the ship's captain. The chain of collaborators was almost disconcerting; the power of a simple document even more so.

A few hours later he was at sea, with the chill breeze in his hair, seagulls overhead, and the vast, black sea beneath him. It was a brief, albeit rocky, trip, and less than three days after leaving the first Vanya in the woods just east of the border between the free world and the communist prison he had spent his life, Roman was in Sweden, in Stockholm...safe from persecution, free to pursue a new future.

*

Roman gazed out the window of his small, cluttered office towards the green lawns that framed the university buildings.

It was late summer. Soon now, the students would be returning from holiday to resume their studies, and the lawns would once again be teeming with vigorous life, young men and women eager to learn.

To his own surprise and pleasure, Roman relished the thought of commencing lectures, working with these young minds in the classrooms whilst continuing his own research in his spare time. There was something liberating about academia, about not having to fear failure, to be able to experiment and explore without having to constantly achieve and accomplish the impossible.

Also, the knowledge that failure would not bring certain death, and that his superiors weren't insanely paranoid, helped his disposition greatly.

There was a knock on the door.

Roman cleared his voice and answered, "Yes?"

The door creaked open, and a round face peered through the crack. "Dr. Molander?"

"Yes?"

The round face broke into a grin, and an equally round body followed through into the office. The unexpected visitor was in his late twenties or early thirties – a graduate student, perhaps, or some professor's assistant – and he approached Roman with a substantial amount of trepidation.

"My name is Gustav," said the visitor, "Gustav Lund."

"Ah." The assistant. Roman stood and offered the man his hand. "I was told you would not arrive until next week."

"Ahem...well, yes, Dr. Molander..."

"Augustus, please." Roman's Swedish was more than passable – he had discovered a knack for languages when, from the moment he arrived, he had been forced to take on a new identity. "After all, we shall be working together closely."

The other man's grin grew even wider, and he seemed so excited that Roman, for a second, was afraid the portly fellow would simply pop like a balloon.

"Thank you, doctor. I came early because of my travel arrangements, but if it is inconvenient for you, I can—"

"No, no, not at all." Roman raised his hands, and shook his head. "The sooner we start working, the better. Please sit."

They both seated themselves, and Roman leaned forward towards his visitor.

"Now, I have been told that your graduate work in biology here at the university has been...groundbreaking." Gustav Lund reddened at the compliment, but Roman pushed on: "It is imperative, then, that you are able to think even further than you have in the past. What we will be doing..." He waved his left hand in the air impatiently, as if seeking the right word to describe his feelings. "It is without compare! But it will also be...what is the word? Hush-hush. Classified. Within the parameters of the university's curriculum, certainly, but far in advance of what has been done here in the past."

Portly *Herr* Lund was shaking, his face blushed and flustered, but

when he answered, his voice was filled with enthusiasm and excitement:

“I will do my very best to live up to your expectations, Dr. Molander...Augustus.” He paused, and Roman knew what was coming; he had been waiting for this ever since he had recruited the boy through academic contacts. “Although I am aware of the general direction of your work...what exactly is it that we are working with? What are we trying to accomplish?”

Roman leaned back in his chair, put his hands behind his head, and smiled.

“Immortality, *Herr* Lund. You and I will discover the secret to life immortal.”

Chapter Four

San Jose, California, 2016 AD

The sprawling Farmatek campus, though bordered by high-voltage fences, patrolled by heavily armed private security, and watched over by fortified watchtowers, still resembled an Ivy League college more than it did a world-leading corporation.

The vast grounds sported fertile green grass – thick and rich, trimmed to a perfect four centimetres – row upon row of oak and pine and willow trees, abundant flowerbeds fostering an eclectic collection of fauna, from pink roses and purple tulips to orchids and water lilies. Winding, raked gravel paths snaked around lovingly clipped hedges; ponds and waterfalls – seamlessly and naturally integrated into the environment – accommodated wild ducks and geese, as well as hundreds of varieties of genetically engineered goldfish in all sizes and colours of the rainbow.

Everywhere, in scattered groups or by themselves, casually dressed employees ate their lunches, read books, listened to music, or simply enjoyed the warm November sun.

A large percentage of Farmatek, San Jose's more than ten thousand employees lived on-campus. New dormitories popped up every month like square white mushrooms from fertile soil, ceaselessly expanding the corporate city.

Still, the picturesque grounds encircling the buildings never seemed overcrowded. The construction had been planned well, and there had been enough foresight to make room for the constant expansion. In fact, as far as most employees were concerned, there was no reason to ever

leave the campus. Stores contained every conceivable necessity, and there were movie theatres, a concert hall, a stadium seating ten thousand spectators, two separate roofed arenas, elementary, junior high, and high schools for employees' children, a college, and a dedicated slip-rail service running to and from San Francisco and the San Jose international airport.

Farmatek was a thriving metropolis unto itself – one free of crime, poverty and other harmful, and ultimately unproductive, distractions.

At first, Sara had thought of it as sort of an adult theme park, the kind of place a truly sane person would never want to leave, a place where every day brought a new ride and every night new pleasures and surprises.

After a little while, however, she'd realised that it was much, much more than that.

The Farmatek campus was a scientist's Mecca, her trip there a pilgrimage to a holy place.

On campus, some of the brightest minds in the world challenged each other in friendly but fierce competition while cooperating and striving for perfection, for new discoveries, for a breakthrough that would not simply revolutionise biotechnology, but enrich the lives of everyone on the planet. In this creative atmosphere, anything was possible: here, the impossible was just another challenge.

And Sara *loved* it.

During her first visit – she'd stayed a lot longer than she'd planned, but it was simply impossible to tear herself away – Sara had decided that this was her destiny, that she belonged here, not in some stuffy, under-funded laboratory at the university.

The difference between the two was fundamental. It was the difference between academic theory and implementation, between *thinking* and *doing*. Theories and hypothesis were just a step on the way to true innovation, invention, and production.

'From the mind to the shelf', so to speak, and Sara got a kick out of that mantra, she was inspired by it, she respected it: to *do* instead of to just *think*, to work under pressure, and to be expected to perform and to produce and to sell. There was power in that, power in knowing that she was judged only by her worth to the company, because Sara knew she'd be worth a *lot*. They truly wanted her – they'd followed her work closely for a long time now, and they'd felt the time was finally right to bring her on

board, regardless of whether or not she had her degree. This was an important phase for Farmatek, with several key products, long in development, now close to completion, and they were willing to offer her almost anything to join the team...and to keep her as far away from the competition as possible, of course.

She'd said yes almost instantly, without hesitation.

There were times in the months that followed when she felt guilty for having been so quick to make a decision. It'd been very, very hard to leave her home, her friends – Shelley in particular, who'd given her the cold shoulder when she realised Sara had made up her mind – to be so far away from her family, and to abandon her studies when she was as close to the end as she was.

But the benefits far outweighed the fleeting disadvantages: soon, only days after making her permanent move, she'd been so engrossed in her new work that thoughts of her old life were banished to the back of her mind. Only late at night did they resurface, and sometimes when that happened she'd pick up her mobile and ask for Shelley. Not that Shelley ever answered her calls or replied to any of the dozens of messages Sara left her, and after a while Sara gave up trying to contact her best mate.

If Shelley were adamant on cutting her off, then so be it. Guilt or no guilt, it wasn't Sara's style to beat a dead horse.

The move from England to California had been quick and final. And now, for the first time since leaving her parents' house for university, Sara felt like she had a proper home. Corporate dormitory or not, her apartment was stunning: There were three bedrooms – God knew what she needed three bedrooms for, but, nonetheless, there they were – two bathrooms, a split-level living area, a fully equipped home office, a beautiful large kitchen that she never had time to use, and lots of expensive-looking furniture.

Combined with the other benefits at her disposal – free food, company-sponsored, top-of-the-line mobile – and the fact that she basically had no life outside of work, there was little to spend her enormous salary on. Sara figured that, by the time she'd turned thirty, she'd be a multi-millionaire with stock options to boot. Aside from the fact that she couldn't ever see herself retiring from this industry, the future was looking rosy indeed.

But the best part of the job weren't the material gains; rather, it

was the people. Specifically, one person:

Eric Miller.

Together with Simon Rosen – another Farmatek pioneer, now head of the New Jersey medical laboratories – Miller was the father of modern nanotechnology. With the might of Farmatek behind them, Miller and Rosen had not only created the first true microscopically-sized robot – nanobot – capable of receiving programming, of self-replication, and of performing automated tasks in cooperation with other bots, but they had managed to develop that initial concept into a commercially viable product.

They had created a burgeoning industry, one that was still in its infancy, but which promised amazing things for the future. And Sara had met Eric Miller on her first day in San Jose.

Sara was shaking from the moment the limousine brought her through the large steel gates (the guard had checked her ID thoroughly, but once her identity had been confirmed, he'd been incredibly courteous and welcoming) and up the long, oak-lined road towards the squat, perfectly cubic administration buildings at the very heart of the campus.

She'd been blabbering incessantly since they left the Holiday Inn she'd stayed at that first night (unlimited credit notwithstanding, she'd not wanted to book into anything more extravagant), but the driver, poor chap, had managed to say nary a word in response; even if he'd wanted to, Sara didn't leave many holes in her monologue. She had a habit of doing this when she was anxious, as though the sound of her own voice made her feel more at ease. But now, rolling slowly through the gently landscaped splendour of the Farmatek (*Farmatek!*) campus, she found that she'd lost her voice, and instead she felt a combination of rising dread and growing excitement.

Stopping in front of the second of four identical buildings – each one covered in reflective black glass, and sporting the ever-present rotating Farmatek logo – her driver opened her door for her and pointed her towards the entrance.

“Anna Rivera is waiting for you in her office, Ms. Carroll. Just go in there and show them your ID.”

“Ta very much,” she stammered, and started towards the steps leading up to the wide door.

“Your baggage—”, began the driver, and she turned, abruptly, her face reddening.

“God, I almost forgot! Right, then, I guess I’ll take my luggage and...” And what? Was she supposed to carry the bag around with her all day?

“Not at all, Ms. Carroll,” the driver said, answering her question before she had time to voice it. “I’ll be taking this to the visitor centre.” Seeing the quizzical look on her face, he continued: “You have a room booked there, indefinitely. There are shuttles every few minutes. I’m sure Ms. Rivera will point you in the right direction.” He flashed a friendly and reassuring smile, and Sara knew that this wasn’t the first time he’d transported a fresh, naïve young recruit from the airport and to this door.

“Thanks so much.” She meant it. “I...guess I’m going in, then?”

“Good luck.” The driver tipped his hat, and got back into the car. Sara felt a brief pang of regret that she’d never bothered to learn his name, but then the gravity of the situation came crashing down on her:

She was a few minutes away from being interviewed for the job of a lifetime at *Farmatek*. Why was she fretting the small stuff?

Taking a deep breath and lifting her chin in what she hoped was a confident and assured manner, Sara resumed her ascent up towards the front door – on both sides of the crescent set of granite steps there were thick bushes, and beds of colourful flowers; Sara couldn’t for the life of her name a single one of them – and into the chilly, air-conditioned lobby of the *Farmatek* administration building.

Surprisingly enough, the reception area, though stylish and professional looking, was quite ordinary, with none of the frills so common with upstart biotech corporations that often tried too hard to impress visitors with grossly expensive art and uncomfortably antiques (or similarly ultramodern) furniture. Here, the lighting was subdued, the floors slick and immaculately clean, the ceilings high, and the scattered seating black leather. There was really nothing that bespoke the fact that this was the inner sanctum of the world’s most powerful company.

Corridors ran left and right to two banks of elevators, and there was a round reception desk in the centre of the room. It was empty.

Sara frowned. She’d have thought a place like this would always have *someone* on duty.

“May I help you, ma’am?”

Momentarily startled, Sara turned to find herself face to face with a tall, smiling woman in her mid-twenties.

She was wearing an earpiece and a clip-on mike, held a wafer-thin mobile with a large screen in her right hand, and she wore a professional – but calculatedly chic – two-piece suit with an ID-card pinned to the left breast pocket. Her hair, straight and black, tied back in a red knot, looked Asian, though the woman's face had Caucasian features.

She briefly registered the woman's name to be Joanna Nokumi before answering.

“Yes, hi...uh, hello.” She felt her face turn red again. She hated being caught off-guard like this. It always made her flustered and awkward. “I'm...my name is Sara Carroll. I'm here to see...I have an appointment with Anna Rivera in human resources?” That last part was supposed to have been a firm statement – instead, it had come out as a question.

Sara had a brief vision of the woman finding no trace of her appointment, and calling security to have her kicked off the premises, but the receptionist only smiled, and said:

“Certainly! Follow me, please.”

They headed left and halted briefly in front of one of three elevators. The woman – Joanna – spoke softly into her mike, and the mobile beeped. Moments later, the elevator door slid open and both of them stepped inside.

Neither of them said a word during the brief ride: Joanna didn't look as if she was about to start a conversation and Sara was too nervous to speak, and so the rapid ascent to the fifth floor took place in near-silence, accompanied only by softly omnipresent classical music.

When the elevator stopped and the doors slid open, Sara was met by another woman, this one short and somewhat stocky, with long, brown curly hair, and a discreetly grey suit. Her sense of fashion obviously leaned towards frugality – unlike Joanna who, incidentally, had already vanished – but what she lacked in style she made up for in presence and professionalism.

Even before the second woman introduced herself as Anna Rivera, Sara knew it had to be her.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Carroll. May I call you Sara?” Sara only nodded as she was led down a long corridor towards the back of

the building. “I’m glad you could make it on such short notice. We are extremely grateful – we know how busy you are. Did you have any problems with your trip?”

“No, not at all.” Sara cast inquisitive glances at the offices lining the corridor, but curiously enough there was nothing that set them apart from the dozens of other offices she’d been to, in companies that were a thousand times, a million times, smaller than Farmatek. “I’ve never flown first class before,” she added, unnecessarily. “It was nice.”

Nice? Good God. She was turning into a first-grader! What a way to impress her potential employer.

But Rivera only smiled and said; “If you start working with us, Sara, you’ll soon get used to such conveniences. We believe in keeping our employees rested and comfortable. Though, as you can well see—”. She gestured towards one of the offices they were passing by; it was small and simple, and though the view was spectacular it seemed like a fairly typical office. Its occupant sat hunched over the very latest in console technology, however, his hands hovering centimetres above a high-resolution thermal panel. “—we do not believe in unnecessary luxuries or expenditures either. We’re frugal, but only when it doesn’t negatively affect the work we do.”

“Oh. Well, I guess you have to be frugal.”

“That doesn’t mean we won’t offer you a competitive salary,” Rivera continued. “As I’m sure you’ll find. In fact, we’re up there with the very best. We just believe that salary isn’t the be-all and end-all of what we can offer you.” She stopped in front of an open door at the end of the corridor. “Here we are; my home away from home.”

Sara stepped through the door into a quite ordinary corner office overlooking the central area between the administration buildings. Crisscrossed by paved paths, and featuring a beautiful fountain, the spot was completely deserted aside from a few orange-beaked blackbirds bathing in the water.

The very existence of such an island of solitude in the middle of what was, for all intents and purposes, a corporate metropolis, amazed Sara. Where else would she be able to find a company offering such an abundance of what could only be described as sheer and simple *beauty*?

As though she’d read Sara’s mind, Anna Rivera said, “It’s an adorable view, isn’t it?” Sara nodded, but kept looking out the window,

transfixed. “When I first started working for Farmatek, and they put me in this office, I couldn’t believe my luck. It may sound trite...but I don’t think I’d ever want to work anywhere else. Why don’t you take a seat?”

Sara sat down in a soft chair facing Ms. Rivera, and the other woman seated herself behind the desk and spoke briefly to her console, which immediately lit up.

“Now, let’s see,” she started. “You’re eighteen months away from graduating from Oxford. Correct?”

There was little point in wondering how they’d come by their information. “Correct.”

“And you’ve worked with Professor Eli Bernstein for the past two years?”

“Yes.”

“He thinks highly of you.”

“You’ve spoken with him?”

“No.” Rivera looked up. “Do you enjoy your work there?”

What to say? The truth? “Sometimes. It’s not all that challenging, but I’m learning a lot.”

“Yes.” A smile. “Do you see yourself staying on until you’re done?”

“That was the plan.” Uh-oh – did she just blow it?

“What if we helped make an arrangement with your college...to allow you to join us now, and for your work here to count towards your degree in exchange for certain...concessions, favouring the university?”

“Like what?”

Ms. Rivera shrugged. “Recruitment of graduates. Sponsored seminars. Sharing part of your research here with Professor Bernstein and his students. That sort of thing.”

“You can do that?”

Anna Rivera leaned forward across her desk, and looked straight at Sara. “I won’t beat around the bush, Ms. Carroll. Sara. We want you to come and work with us immediately. We need you. And, I think, you will benefit greatly from the environment here. You’re not the first brilliant student we’ve recruited before graduation, and though we’re acutely aware that it’s important for a young woman to complete her studies, I do think you’d be far happier here than you would ever be back in England. Am I right?”

Sara didn't even have to think about her answer.

"Yes."

"Ideally, we'd like to have you on full time. I know that's asking a lot, but we're certainly going to make it worth your while. If not... Like I said, yes, we're in a position to make arrangements with the university. We'll make any deal with you that we have to."

"I'm...flattered. I just don't know what to...to think."

"We're not asking you to give us a final answer now, Sara. In fact, there's someone I'd like you to meet first."

"Who?"

They'd used one of those small, quiet compacts to travel across the campus to the biotech labs. Anna (she had insisted on Sara using her first name; it seemed to be corporate policy to be as casual as possible in every way) had driven, and along the way she'd pointed out the sights: from the shopping mall to the artificial lagoon, by way of the tennis courts and the digital production facilities.

Sara was quite dumbstruck and overwhelmed by the time they reached their destination; even though she'd seen promotional material from the campus before, nothing could compare to the spectacular reality of it.

The laboratories themselves were, like the administration offices, utilitarian rather than luxurious. They were far better equipped than what she was used to from Oxford, but still nothing like the extravagant images she'd had in her mind.

Scientists being scientists – and scientists were the same everywhere you went, no matter the size of the budget – everyone had customised their desks and cubicles with personal items. There were glossy holographic posters, animated pictorials of family and friends, and, of course, *everyone* had at least one robotic toy: from eager, stumbling puppy dogs that barked excitedly and wagged their plastic tails as Sara and Anna passed by, to growling alien monstrosities clinging with sharp claws to the walls, flicking fire-red tongues and blinking each of their three, huge eyes in complex patterns. All were products of biotech and nanotechnology, courtesy of Farmatek.

Playing around with self-built toys, Anna explained, was part of the campus 'curriculum', so to speak. In fact, every Friday afternoon there

was a showcase in the upstairs common room where everyone tried to impress each other with new, fantastic inventions – a game that, in some companies, would be considered a waste of time, but which was encouraged here at Farmatek.

Sara couldn't help feeling a bit intimidated, and she hoped that, at least to begin with, she'd be able to stay in the shadows and simply observe...if she were going to take the job, of course. Although, by this point, she'd basically made up her mind to come and work here full-time. How could she say no?

"And this is the heart of the facility...you'll need to be scanned and wear a full suit to pass through, of course." Anna smiled. "Here I am, telling you the details of your job...naturally, you know the drill quite well."

They'd stopped in front of a heavy door at the bottom of a long staircase. Corridors led left and right, curving slowly out of sight as though encasing an oval structure.

There were two guards in front of the door; both were armed, and both wore full biohazard suits. In the dim lighting, they looked menacing, like something out of a sci-fi film. A sign above the door carried a biohazard warning.

Sara turned to Anna, noticing the other woman's obvious discomfort. "You're not going inside?"

"Me?" Anna smiled. "This is not my territory, Sara. You'll feel at home in there. And there's someone waiting for you."

"Who?"

Anna's smile faded for a brief moment, and something a bit mocking crept into her expression; perhaps a hint of superiority, though Sara couldn't understand quite why the other woman would feel that way.

"You'll find out. Good luck. I'll be waiting for you upstairs, in the lobby. Come right up when you're done, and then we'll finish up our talk, all right?"

Without waiting for a reply, Anna turned and walked up the stairs. Sara frowned and looked at the guard closest to her.

"Do you need to see some ID or something?" She pointed towards the departing human resources representative. "Because she didn't tell me anything about...about procedure."

The guard shook his head. "Step right through, Ms. Carroll," he

said. “Your profile was confirmed the second you entered the room. You’ve got executive-level authorisation for this visit. Otherwise you’d be in handcuffs by now.” Even though Sara couldn’t see the man’s face, she was certain that he was grinning.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, and took a few steps towards the large door. Just as she was close enough to touch it, the door slid open, revealing a short corridor with another, similar door at the other end. Sara stepped through, and the first door slid shut again, leaving her trapped in a tubular prison.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then: a hissing sound. She looked up: a light vapour was escaping from four nozzles, one in each corner of the corridor, and a thin mist was filling the room.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt you. It’s standard decontamination procedure, Sara.”

The voice, although distorted by the hidden speakers and the acoustics of the room, sounded very familiar.

“One more thing, though: you’ll, uh, need to get undressed. I promise I won’t look.”

A panel slid open to her left, revealing a compartment with several biohazard suits.

Casting a furtive glance towards the camera on the far wall, Sara began taking her clothes off and putting them back into the compartment. It wasn’t the first time she’d had to go through this procedure; whenever they’d been working with toxic material – any kind of embryonic biotech – at the university, she’d had to wear a suit similar to this one.

They hadn’t insisted on her stripping down to the skin, however.

Wearing nothing but her bra and knickers, she addressed the camera:

“Everything?”

“You’ll...uh, yeah, we’ll need to have you naked inside that suit, Sara. Sorry.”

“Thought you weren’t looking.” She grinned. If there was one thing that didn’t bother her, it was nakedness. She’d been stark buttocks nude in front of enough people, and she was confident enough with her own appearance, not to be bothered by that.

But she loved the way it bothered some people. Like this one. Whoever he was, he was shy. Typical scientist bloke, then. Typical *bloke*,

full stop. Despite their constant and fervent craving for the female body, it still scared the living crap out of them.

“Ah...I’m not, uh, looking...”

“Don’t worry, I’m taking it all off.”

She stripped down and began wriggling into the reassuringly tight-fitting suit. It was a custom-made Farmatek model, of course – the omnipresent logo a genuine stamp of quality – with auto-adjusting joints for maximum mobility, vacuum-sealed safety seams, and ultra-thin reinforced latex gloves. The compact oxygen container on the right hip had a standardised interface, which meant they’d have a flexible and long-lasting breathing solution inside the lab to facilitate for extended sessions with full mobility. The helmet’s faceplate had a full-colour HUD with a confusing array of readings, some of which were helpful – like the oxygen meter, and the various warning-icons – and some of which she couldn’t make heads nor tails of.

Suited up, she shut the wardrobe panel tight, wobbled inelegantly towards the entrance – the suit would take some getting used to; she felt like she was wrapped in cellophane – and waved to the camera.

Almost immediately, the second door opened, revealing another, smaller chamber beyond, with a third door – also closed – at the far end.

The moment she’d moved inside, the door shut behind her, again leaving her imprisoned.

“We’ll need to run a full decontamination and a scan,” intoned the familiar voice again. “It’ll just take a few seconds.”

Almost immediately, the lighting dimmed, and the room filled with a fine mist. Sara slowly became aware of a low, bone-rattling hum, growing in volume. She started feeling a bit queasy, and put her hand out to the wall, but pulled it back right away. The wall was warm, and it was vibrating.

“What’s going on?” she asked, fully aware that she sounded a bit shrill.

“Molecular scan. New procedure.” The voice appeared excited. “We can determine the presence of all foreign particles you carry on you, both organic and synthetic. The suit you’re wearing helps the process along. It’s populated with bots.”

“Really?” The queasiness vanished in a second. “How does it work?”

“Come on through, and I’ll tell you.”

The moment the voice stopped, the mist cleared, the lights came up, the humming stopped, and the far door opened up into a huge, cavernous room, like the pearly gates to heaven.

And in the doorway, framed by the stark white light from beyond, stood a man that might as well have been St. Peter himself, as far as Sara was concerned. Though his faceplate was tinted and his environment suit bulky and shapeless, she recognised the wearer immediately:

Eric Miller. Pre-eminent Farmatek scientist. Biotech god. And the father of modern nanotechnology.

It was *his* voice she’d heard over the com-system. *He* had spoken to her, guided her through the decontamination and scan procedures, he’d been watching her when...when...

Sara felt like a giddy schoolgirl who’d just come face to face with a rock-and-roll idol or a movie star. But far from some pin-up Hollywood model, this was a *real* star, a man whose brilliance had changed the world, a scientist and thinker comparable to Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawkins. Here was the man who’d invented the nanobot in its current form...and he was smiling at her!

“Welcome to Farmatek, Sara!” said Eric Miller, and Sara felt like she could just *die*.

“Now the bots...” Eric paused – like everyone else she’d met here, he’d insisted that she call him Eric, though she had a hard time not calling him Dr. Miller – and his eyes narrowed, focusing on a spot to the left and above Sara’s eager face. “...when they’re activated, inside the suit, they – I’m sure you’re already familiar with this stuff – feed on the bio-electrical energy emanating from the body... Sweat, heat, moisture... It’s a veritable feeding-ground for my babies.”

She smiled. He called the bots his babies. He was a sweetly sentimental man, incredibly charismatic and charming, and Sara knew that she’d end up in bed with him some day soon. If she decided to stay, that was...but there was really no question in her mind at this point.

She would stay. She had to.

“Still,” he went on, “the application of bots to the thermal layer of the environment suits is something we only recently came up with...although it should have been pretty obvious from the...”

He trailed off again. She could literally see the thought-processes going on behind his surprisingly youthful face – from what she remembered reading, Miller was in his late forties, divorced and overworked; he ought to have looked a lot older than he did – and the way his mind worked was intriguing, if a little intimidating.

He went on, apparently oblivious to his previous unfinished sentence:

“If we can only fashion a way to incorporate – cheaply, of course – bots into your common textiles, for example... Imagine a dress that repairs itself, cleans itself, changes colour...” He focused on Sara again. “That’s not really what we’re concentrating our efforts on, though...naturally.” He grinned. “Cancer, heart-disease, your common cold... Lymphocytes enhanced tenfold, a thousand fold, by bots, defeating viral and bacterial intrusions in a matter of seconds. An entire personal army upgraded in a matter of days, even hours!”

Dr. Eric Miller threw his hands up, dramatically, drawing smiles from the other patrons in the cafeteria who all seemed quite familiar with his quirks.

“Can you imagine, Sara? Can you just *imagine* the things we can do, the miracles we can perform?”

His hands dropped down, his voice reduced to a dramatic whisper. He leaned across the small round table towards her. “I mean...this is all textbook stuff, of course, and nothing you haven’t already thought about yourself, I’m sure, but...do you have any idea how close we are to a world where disease is non-existent? Where a human’s lifespan will be counted in centuries instead of decades? Ten years ago, this was all just theory. We had an idea that it might be possible, but nothing more. Five years ago, we started believing we were on to something real... And now? Now there’s...”

He stopped himself, gazed around the room as if only now realising where they were, and Sara prayed he wouldn’t stop, that he would go on, inspire her and amaze her with his insight and enthusiasm.

Only a short while ago, after a brief tour of the lab, they’d returned through the tunnel – and another round of disinfections – to have lunch in the building’s cafeteria. The eating facilities were utilitarian but stylish and comfy, and there was seating for several hundred people. Lunch consisted of a large selection of cold cuts, a variety of hot

dishes, salads, and, of course, fast food.

After all, this *was* America.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were always free, Dr. Miller had told her – another company perk. Still, watchful of her weight, she'd opted for the fat-free tuna salad and a glass of white wine, while he'd stacked his tray tall with three slices of pepperoni- and pineapple-pizza, a huge cup of chocolate milkshake, two hamburgers, a plate of chips, and a big wedge of apple pie with whipped cream.

Yet he'd barely touched his food once they were seated; he'd waved around a chip or two quite enthusiastically, like a conductor to an orchestra, and he'd picked one burger apart to remove the tomatoes, but the man seemed more interested in talking than eating.

Which was fine with her, although she was starving; she had a hard time pacing herself with the salad so that she'd not have her mouth full when the doctor asked her a question...which, admittedly, wasn't too often.

But then she did have a lot more to learn from him than he had from her.

And now they were sharing the apple pie. It was quite delicious, but again her attention was focused on the doctor. He was eminently fascinating, if a tad self-absorbed.

Genius, in Sara's opinion, often was.

He'd been about to say something important, but he'd stopped himself. He picked at the whipped cream with his index finger and then licked it off.

The man seemed distracted. He'd fallen strangely quiet.

"Now there's *what?*" prompted Sara.

Dr. Miller looked up, staring at her as though surprised at what he saw. His age was showing a bit, now; there were crow's feet around his eyes, and he seemed tired. Tired, but still passionate.

Several seconds passed. Then the doctor smiled and spooned up a big chunk of apple pie.

"Now? Oh, Sara, if you could only see!" His eyes lit up. "The things we are doing...forget the banalities of your studies. You've learned the basics, but that's about all you're going to get out there." He waved his hand at some distant representation of the outside world. "What we're doing in here is the impossible. We're stepping back billions of years to

the very dawn of creation, and we're correcting God's mistakes."

Sara coughed, and quickly picked up a napkin to wipe the whipped cream from her chin. She looked up at the doctor, but he seemed quite serious.

"God's mistakes?" she said. "Like what?"

For a fleeting moment, the enthused twinkle in the doctor's eyes seemed like madness. He leaned forward, and whispered:

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She'd signed the contract the next morning. The previous night, hanging out with Farmatek employees at one of several on-campus bars, had only served to confirm what she already knew.

To hell with university, she thought. *This is the reason I went to school in the first place.*

So she'd signed the contract, securing a salary that would be more than sufficient for her needs in addition to receiving a healthy wallop of stock-options that would no doubt make her rich beyond her wildest dreams at some point down the road.

It wasn't about the money, though. Never that. No, it was what Dr. Miller had said to her in the lunchroom over an apple pie that had made it all so crystal clear.

Wouldn't you like to know?

Oh, she did. More than anything, she wanted to *know*.

But there were dreams. There were still dreams, and now her dreams were strong, stronger than ever.

Sara had considered seeing one of the campus therapists, but she had eventually decided against it. The therapists probably reported directly to her superiors – she had a feeling Farmatek didn't worry overly about patient-doctor confidentiality – and she didn't want to appear weak or distracted, not with the projects that were starting up, projects she desperately wanted to be part of.

The dreams, though...the dreams did bother her.

In one recurring dream, it was winter. There was snow everywhere, which was strange, because it never snowed here. But the campus was covered in a pristine white sheet of snow, and it was desolate, most of the buildings in ruins, and Sara was all by herself.

In this dream, she watched herself from the outside, a Sara that was both her and not her, some phantom future her, some possible her, one possibility amongst many. She was lost in a dead world, a world she'd helped make dead.

A world of snow and wind and an everlasting chill; a world on the verge of winter.

In her dream, she saw a baby boy, a young man, a grown man – all three the same, fluctuating constantly, as though time itself was going round and round.

In every dream like this one, the baby, the man, spoke to her. It said:

“To every end there is a beginning, Sara. What you destroy, you destroy to create. Let it happen.”

And she would answer:

“Who are you?”

And the baby, the boy, the man would say:

“I am the last of your blood, the blood of Sara Carroll, of Alyssa. I am David the prophet.”

And every time this man, this David, told her this, he would reach out to touch her, but his hand would pass right through her as though she were a ghost. And he would look pained, and then he would turn away, and the dream would be over.

What could it mean? This dream, this dream...what could it mean?

*

Cambridge, England, 1962 AD

The warm August shower washed the dusty stain of the summer's drought from the cobblestone streets and slate roofs.

The city woke with the arrival of rain: the yellowed grass regained its green lustre; the streets gleamed golden as the afternoon sun, peeking furtively through the heavy, bruised clouds, was mirrored in puddles and streams, and everywhere people emerged from their homes and workplaces to welcome and embrace the change in the weather.

For once, Alexander Moss reflected, the Englishmen didn't com-

plain about the climate. What on Earth would everyone talk about down the pub every evening?

Alexander had enjoyed the dry spell, but then again he did not have fields to water or a crop to harvest. He had taken great pleasure in the warm weather, waking every morning to the pleasantly balmy touch of a sun peering through the white curtains into his modest bedroom.

The knowledge that he could no longer stay here, that this life had to end soon, was exceedingly painful. He had *enjoyed* this place. The university had challenged him intellectually, and provided him with a near-perfect environment for his research. To leave now, though a necessary course of action, would set him back several years, not to mention cause him more grief than any previous relocation. The personal ties he had made...

He knew he ought not to have risked intimacy. Relationships were a luxury he had long abandoned. Yet, after he had met Yvette, his work had improved dramatically, and for a while he had even fooled himself into thinking that his future need not be uncertain anymore. Perhaps he could simply settle down and live this life like a normal man, to grow old with someone, to see his children and grandchildren grow up, perhaps even to die.

Yvette had not only given him a reason to live his life to its fullest: when he was with her, for the first time in his life, he did not fear death.

Then one day Alexander received a visitor.

He had not recognised the man, but there was still something disturbingly familiar about him, as though he were an old acquaintance, long forgotten, or a half-remembered dream. The man had spoken to Alexander only briefly, yet when he had left, Alexander knew that his lofty thoughts of a normal life were futile; that too much had happened to him, too much was at stake, for that to ever be a possibility.

He had a responsibility, a *destiny*, so to speak – never mind the fact that he knew little of what that destiny might entail.

The man had spoken to him, and now, two months later, Alexander was wrapping up the loose ends of this identity, preparing to disappear yet again.

Ten years of peace and comfort was not nearly enough. Ten years was a mere drop in the ocean. With the time available to him, a decade was a single breath. And yet in that time he had grown so attached to the

people and the places around him that he dreaded the loss of all that was familiar and dear to him.

He would never make that same mistake again. He would never attach himself. He would never *love*.

Alexander could not bear to face her, and so he would not. Instead, it would appear as though the much beloved professor Alexander Moss had perished in a fire, and most of his priceless research with him. He would make sure that the university kept the bits and pieces of his work that was of a more generic nature.

As for his life's labour, he had taken giant steps in his time at Cambridge. Where, previously, the treatments had been complex and dangerous to perform, and their effects short-lived – Alexander himself was the only one for whom any of the treatments had even worked – he could now operate on a genetic level, albeit in a highly rudimentary fashion, to battle and reverse the course of nature.

And yet there were decades of work to do before the procedures were stable and predictable, and the effects permanent, and science would need to catch up with his theories in a number of fields before he could accomplish even half of what he hoped and wished to accomplish. In fifty years, perhaps he would reach his goal...but not before then.

Fifty years, he thought. *Fifty years is still just a drop in the ocean, the blink of an eye, and yet I cannot even bear the thought of another year like this.*

It was not as though he had a choice, however. Never a choice, not anymore.

He rubbed his eyes and turned away from the window where raindrops had left silvery streaks in the dust. Books and papers were scattered everywhere, but he would not be able to bring most of them with him. That would arouse suspicions. As for his body...Alexander's body...

Murder was the least of his problems. Still, though, it was a dangerous nuisance.

He sighed. The weight was heavy on him right now, but that would pass. In time, everything passed.

Outside, the rain kept pouring down, washing away all that was old and making way for the new.

Chapter Five

Stanford, New Jersey, 1971 AD

“Dr. Drake – thanks for coming in on such short notice.”

The stocky man in the wrinkled brown shirt and suit, and wide chequered tie – also brown, Roland noticed with disdain – closed the door to the office and sat down behind the desk, where he put on a show of opening and closing some folders before settling himself back and folding his podgy hands over his crotch.

The entire man was brown, except for his face, which was pasty white and speckled with greasy red spots and the glistening residue of old sweat.

Roland sensed his dislike for the man grow with every moment in his proximity. The minute Roland had achieved his goal, the second he had assumed control over the company, this man would be the first to be sacrificed. He would accept no rotten apples amongst his managers, and this man was rotten to the core: a washed-out, middle-aged middle manager, someone who'd spent his entire professional life in the company attempting to cover his ass whenever something went wrong, someone for whom a perfect day meant a day without conflict, without personal interaction, without challenges. He probably showed up at ten past eight, went home at ten to four, ate his predictable dinner, and fell asleep in front of the television set with a can of beer in his hand.

America was filled with these creatures. And Roland did not want any of them in *his* company.

Of course, it wasn't his company quite yet. But it would be. Very,

very soon.

The man – his name was Smith, of course; Roland couldn't recall his first name; it was probably Chuck or Frank or Joe, or something equally banal – motioned for Roland to sit down.

Finally.

Apparently Chuck-Frank-Joe Smith liked to feel superior when he conducted interviews, and Roland had no intention of antagonising the fellow just yet. After all, only a stupid man puts a bullet in his riding horse, no matter how slow or old or mean-spirited, when he's in the middle of the desert.

Sometimes it was hard to make all of these sacrifices, demeaning himself, submitting himself to the petty whims of lesser men, simply in order to reach a goal that was still decades away. He had to constantly remind himself why he even bothered, when he was quite capable of carving his own destiny – a better one at that, at least in the short term – and achieve more, faster.

Of course, he owed *them* a debt, one that would never truly be repaid.

After Russia, they'd left him alone for a while, allowed him to settle into something approaching a normal existence – albeit one that had to be interrupted regularly so as not to invite questions regarding his...*condition* – but then, suddenly and without warning, *they* had re-appeared, handed him the instructions, the passport, the papers, the new identity and the new name...

Roland Drake. Closer to his real name than the last few he'd carried, but still not him, not really. It was still an alias, a character, a role in a grand play where the final act was a mystery.

They'd wrested control away from him just when he'd convinced himself he was the master of his own fate. Suddenly, he was just a marionette.

By the end of the millennia, they'd informed him, he was expected to be in charge of this firm and to have brought it to a point where it would be ready for a metamorphosis...into what, exactly, he didn't yet know. But he was sure that they'd tell him, sooner or later.

Probably later. Probably at the very last moment.

William Peter Morris Pharmaceuticals was not the sort of company that Roland, under ordinary circumstances, would have agreed

to work for. It was conservative, reactionary, old-school, and highly unlikely to be a daring inventor in the ever-growing pharmaceutical market. Its product line included painkillers, antacids, sleeping pills – dull drugs for a dull market – and it hadn't made an impact on the market since before the war.

The Second World War, that was.

Yet *they* wanted him here, and they wanted him here *now*, because apparently this was the perfect moment for WPM Pharmaceuticals to grow, to capture a large portion of the market, to earn big money, and finally to be in a position to do whatever it was *they* needed done, some thirty odd years from now.

Roland sighed and sized up the ratty man behind the desk.

“So,” he began, “you have had the opportunity to review my credentials?”

Smith nodded sagely, an affectation that irritated Roland no end, before answering.

“Yes indeed, Dr. Drake.” Smith flipped the folder open in front of him, and drew a breath through his nose, prompting a thin whistle. Roland sensed the onset of a serious headache. “Very impressive. Very impressive indeed.” He looked up. “What do you feel you could offer our company, Dr. Drake? In, hmmm, *practical* terms?”

Roland almost laughed out loud. What could he *offer*?

If this awful man only knew how old Roland was. He may have appeared to be in his mid-thirties, but in actuality Roland was approaching seventy. And with luck, if all his research paid off like he'd predicted it would, he'd never truly age – in fifty years from now, he could simply turn back the clock, change his identity, and be young again.

So what could he offer this company? How about riches beyond compare? The fountain of youth, the secret to eternal life?

But instead Roland simply said: “My considerable expertise and knowledge in related pharmaceutical fields, aided both by my doctorate in medical science and five years of work experience with one of your largest competitors.” He smiled and added, “Mr. Smith.”

Smith simply nodded again, as though he was processing information and wouldn't deign to reply...not until he'd made a decision. As though it were a decision *he* could make. As though his opinion *mattered*.

“Very well,” said Smith, “your references are impeccable, and we

would very much like to have you join our team. However,” and Smith made this sound like a caveat of great import, “we have a very focused and streamlined record here at Morris, and though you seem to have been involved in groundbreaking work in the development of new drugs, it’s important that you keep your ambitions in check.” Smith rose. “A cautious team is a good team.”

Roland felt a strange urge to punch the man in the face, but that would accomplish nothing. People like Smith wouldn’t take a hint if it broke their nose. So Roland simply shook the man’s hand and forced a placid smile to his face.

Now. He was inside. Just like *they* had told him he needed to be. What would come next?

*

San Jose, California, March 5th 2017 AD

Sara shook her head.

“No. I really don’t get it. Why is this even an issue? Why are we talking about this? I thought we’d decided that the risks were too great, that we wouldn’t play with fire this way.”

“Sara, for God’s sake...”

Eric Miller shut his eyes and flopped back on the sofa. The wide doors were open, and a slight breeze – rich with the scent of blossoming flowers from the garden outside – stirred the curtains.

Eric’s study, opening up to the back of the house, was usually an idyllic and peaceful place, but they’d been arguing for more than an hour and Sara was getting exasperated with her colleague and lover. He was brilliant, a genius, but he could be a real arse, and he was being one right now.

“Don’t ‘God’s sake’ me, Eric!” she said. “We shouldn’t be having this discussion.”

“It’s not like it’s up to us, Sara.”

“Please don’t give me that. It’s always up to us. Your words count for a lot, you know that. They listen to you. Even *Drake* listens to you.”

“Don’t make assumptions.” There was venom in his voice. He glared at her. “Especially when it comes to Dr. Drake.”

Sara flew to her feet and started pacing back and forth. She was fuming. This conversation was heading in the same direction as all the other conversations they'd had on the subject. Eric knew something she didn't, he had inside information, and he was involved with Farmatek strategy on the highest levels. And that was fine. She expected no less. After all, she'd been with the company for little more than a year, and though her work had yielded concrete results, Eric's work was the foundation for Farmatek's entire wealth and market position. That he was still working in the laboratories was a miracle, and a testament to his dedication and passion.

But he could still be infuriatingly smug, just like all the men in her life. Just like Trevor, in fact. What a horrendously depressing notion, Sara thought, to have come this far and yet be stuck with something she'd tried so hard to leave behind her. Unlike Trev the Lad, however, Eric usually had a reason to be smug.

In this particular case, though, he was dead wrong.

Disease still wreaked havoc on the planet, and though Farmatek held the key to prevent and cure most known diseases, their work had only begun. One problem was money: manufacturing bots was hugely expensive, and the solution was to work on a basic genetic level in the labs, using bots as tools, and subsequently releasing new medication in a more traditional fashion.

Now, however, they were talking about going directly to the source of certain diseases: more specifically, mosquitoes. Certain mosquitoes could carry a whole range of dangerous and infectious diseases. Release one genetically modified mosquito into the ecosystem, however, and it could destroy all the others, quickly, cleanly, and efficiently.

Except when it came to nature, nothing ever went exactly according to plan. She knew that. Eric knew that. He was just being stubborn because this dictum had been handed down from the top, from the eminent and distinguished Dr. Roland Drake himself.

"You're willing to take the chance, Eric? To risk creating a Frankenstein's monster, a super-mosquito?"

He laughed.

That just pissed her off even more.

"A *super*-mosquito, Sara? From the planet Krypton?"

"You know what I mean." It was all she could do not to scream

at him, or throw something at him.

“We don’t deal in chances, Sara. You know that. We do the legwork first.”

“But things like these...they’re unpredictable. We don’t know how the ecosystem will respond!”

“You never like it when we do God’s work, do you? Traditional English values?” He took a sip from the drink in front of him. “Or are you just afraid we’ll prove there never was a God in the first place?”

“It’s not about God. It’s about mankind’s hubris. We’re starting to build a modern-day Tower of Babel, Eric, but this time we won’t just destroy languages...we might destroy the entire ecosphere.”

“More New Age religious absurdity...”

“It’s an analogy, Eric. We have to be careful. We have a responsibility.”

“We’re not building a tower to the Goddamn heaven, Sara!” Eric flipped his legs over to sit up straight, and knocked over his drink. He didn’t even notice. “We’re eliminating one of the deadliest carriers of disease in the world! This can only be a good thing. There are no drawbacks.”

“And you know that for sure?” Sara approached him. She had to appeal to his sense of reason. “You’re willing to gamble our lives on that?”

Eric sighed. Ordinarily not a patient man, he abhorred arguments. In Eric’s eyes, he was always right even when proven wrong.

“It’s not a gamble, Sara. It’s a sure thing.”

Sara sat down next to him and took his hand. He didn’t resist, but he didn’t warm to her advances either. He was turning colder by the day, withdrawing himself from her. She was losing him, and it hurt – not just because she loved him (she wasn’t even sure she really did, or if she simply admired him), but also because she knew she was risking her entire career on this argument.

“How sure can it be? We don’t have all the data.”

“We’ve run simulations.”

“Simulations—”

“—based on successful experiments, Sara!”

He pulled his hand away, stood up, and walked over to the garden doors. The breeze ruffled his hair. He looked tired, drawn. The work was taking its toll on him – this argument, too. But she had to bring it

up. Her conscience was eating at her.

“It’s not as though we’re working blindfolded,” he said.

“So you believe this is the way to eliminate disease? To kill the bearer rather than the cause?” She followed him, but she didn’t touch him again. “Eric...the work we’re doing with vaccines, genetics...it takes time, but it’s still—”

“Time?” He turned on her, his eyes ablaze. “Time? It’ll be decades, centuries even, before we’ve achieved what we want with medicine. We need to be more aggressive. We need to approach this problem from all angles. Don’t you see that?”

She did. Of course she did. She wasn’t stupid. But she knew that this was not the right way – to meddle with nature, to create something so unpredictable that even their simulations sometimes went awry. And to do so without consulting or even informing the world about it...

She knew she’d have to submit to Farmatek’s decisions, and she knew she wouldn’t go public and sabotage the experiments, because she wanted to keep her job, God help her, and she wanted to be a part of whatever Farmatek did, if only to influence the course of the future in whatever fashion she could.

But she couldn’t sit still and keep her mouth shut: she had to speak up.

“Let’s say it works,” she said. “Let’s say the experiments are successful, and we make the mosquitoes incapable of carrying diseases... We replace God’s creation – or the universe’s, whichever you prefer – with our own creation... What next? Which animal do we decide to work on next? Or, wait, should we start working on embryos and babies yet? I know you’re itching to do that, Eric. Is that the plan?”

He shook his head and smiled. For a moment, she thought he was about to relent, and then she saw his eyes. They were as cold as the breeze that now made her shiver and hug herself.

“Are you so naïve, Sara, that you don’t think we’ve already taken that step?”

“What?” She didn’t understand what he was talking about.

“Long before you ever got involved. We’ve taken that step already. We’ve created genetically enhanced children. We’ve even modified the genetic makeup of grown humans. This...” He opened his hands as though he’d been cupping something, but they were empty.

“Modifying mosquitoes, it’s just another tiny step in our long time plans. It’s safe and predictable. We’ll dramatically limit the spread of malaria, dengue fever, encephalitis...in areas that cannot afford more expensive medications.” He tossed his hands up and turned away from her. “We *are* gods, Sara. You will just have to get used to that fact.”

She was stunned. She’d been taught that certain things were sacred, something she’d believed even Farmatek, despite its accelerated research into unexplored areas, respected. And while she knew that the limits of ethics were often tested – and sometimes broken, all in the name of progress, of course – here on campus, she hadn’t considered the possibility that the most sacred of them all, experimentation on humans...on defenceless humans, no less...that this had been going on right in front of her.

And yet, should she really be shocked? After all, wasn’t this a natural extension of their work? If they couldn’t test hypotheses then how could they be expected to perform miracles?

And this world needed a miracle; that was certain. Every day brought new tragedies, thousands more succumbing to new threats, be it viral, bacterial, ecological, war, poverty, or natural disasters caused by environmental imbalances.

What was one human life in return for the salvation of millions?

These were dangerous thoughts, she knew. It was easy to find arguments in favour of such steps – and hard to defend the ethical point-of-view, that the end could never justify the means – but she had to be true to her convictions, no matter how much she wanted to just accept facts and proceed.

Still, what would it serve to leave now? If she stayed on, she could at least make sure that her voice was heard. Whether they decided to listen to her or not, while important, was not the only thing that mattered. If she could be the voice of reason that whispered in Eric’s ear, wasn’t that enough?

Or if not enough, then at least it would be *something*. Better than nothing.

She sighed. “Please, let’s not fight anymore. It’s our day off.”

Eric simply grunted. He stood staring out at the garden, the sky beyond, infinity. Whatever his thoughts, there was nothing Sara could do.

She walked back inside. She felt queasy, but she knew a drink or

two would solve that.

In time she'd make him see, she was sure of it. In time.

*

New York, March 30th 2017 AD

The room was expensively cold and efficiently impersonal. It had the air and atmosphere of a room rarely used, and when used, used by wealthy and important people only.

There was an abundance of pricey black leather – all the chairs, the two sofas in the corner – a polished hardwood floor, a huge teak table, panorama windows facing the downtown skyline, and a big flat-screen monitor. There was art on three of the four walls, but even these paintings were expensive-looking and impersonal; commissioned works by well-known artists, now reduced to icons of wealth, symbols of the prosperity and contemporary tastes of the room's owners.

Farmatek didn't own the entire building. That would have been wasteful – there was only need for a nominal workforce in New York City – and if there was one thing the board didn't like, it was wastefulness. Frugality and good old-fashioned business-sense had made Farmatek what it was today – at least the part of Farmatek that had once been William Peter Morris Pharmaceuticals. Showing off was for the younger companies that had yet to garner the respect of the industry. Everyone wanted what Farmatek had, but there were very few people who knew how to achieve that. And most of those people were now gathered in this room.

Roland Drake sat at the head of the table, his back to the city. As usual, his hands were folded neatly on top of an equally neatly stacked pile of documents. Roland swore by paper; he'd yet to see the benefits of a digital workspace. Perhaps his age had something to do with it – although he looked an unusually fit and healthy sixty, he was more than a hundred years old – but Roland thought there were practical reasons for his old-fashioned work ethics.

Paper was simply more *efficient*.

To his immediate left sat Heinrich Welte, the man in charge of Farmatek's German operations, as well as a highly knowledgeable bio-

geneticist. He was a tall and lanky man, balding and grey-skinned, with an unmistakably aristocratic air. Roland had great respect for Welte, but the man sometimes reminded him too much of his *Partiya* comrades back in the home country.

To his left again was Annette Cruz, the covert coordinator for Asia – she also headed the worldwide security network for Farmatek, from campus defence to online anti-terrorism. Cruz was a coldly attractive woman in her mid-thirties, with black, shoulder-length hair – naturally curly – and olive skin. She was tough and confrontational, and Roland often wished that he didn't need her competence. But she was valuable, especially at this time. Perhaps later he could get rid of her, but for the time being he had to be the diplomat.

He just wished she didn't keep smoking those cigarettes; the odour irritated him no end.

Finally, to Roland's right, sat George McKinney. George ran the logistical aspects of the project, and while Roland was reluctant to admit to it, he was also the closest thing to a friend he'd had these past seventy years. A Scotsman, quiet and reflective, and – amazingly enough – a devout Lutheran, George was also the sharpest one of them all, though few ever realised it. He was unpretentious and uncomplicated, and he spoke his mind, and Roland knew to listen when he did. George's genius lay in making others feel comfortable enough to open up completely, something George knew to take advantage of – though not in a cruel manner. He was anything but cruel. And he also believed in the cause with all his heart and soul. He considered the cause to be both morally just and God's will.

Right now, George was gazing intently at Welte, who was presenting his report.

"The intelligence is just coming in, sir," said Welte, addressing Roland. "I have only had the opportunity to scan the reports briefly, but first impressions are promising."

Welte was always formal, something Roland appreciated, although the man's perfectionism could grate in the long term. He had only the hint of an accent.

"I don't know if *promising* is a suitable word, Herr Welte," Roland said, "but do go on."

Welte cleared his voice. That was about as far as the man was

willing to go when expressing his dissatisfaction, Roland knew. He'd make a note of it. "We should be seeing the signs of widespread outbreak in a matter of days. I expect—"

"Why the hell has it taken this long, *Herr Welte*? I mean, Christ, it's been over two weeks!"

All heads turned to look at Annette Cruz. Welte appeared a bit shaken, but, to his credit, still composed.

Cruz simply ignored them all. She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another one, closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and blew the smoke towards Welte. His lips curled into a slight smile, one of the few times Roland had seen the man smile: it was not a pretty sight.

Welte looked at Roland. Roland simply shrugged. What could he say? It was her prerogative to question. If only she could apply a modicum of diplomacy.

"Well?" Cruz was glaring at Welte, the cigarette pinched between her index finger and thumb. She looked a great deal older than she had only a week ago, Roland observed. He glanced over at George, but George was leaning back in his chair, eyes half shut and apparently focused on the ceiling.

Welte sighed.

"It's not quite been two weeks yet, Ms. Cruz," he said. "Remember that the implementation was delayed by—"

"Oh for God's sake, Heinrich. Don't be absurd. You know very well what I mean. Why's it taken this long? We should've been having this meeting several days ago. I've been waiting around this God-awful city now for too long, and I have too much to do to waste my time shopping for accessories on Fifth Avenue." She stumped out her half-smoked cigarette and immediately lit another.

"Annette," said George. His voice was soft and soothing, and though he was still gazing up at the ceiling, Roland knew that everyone felt George was giving them his full and undivided attention. "There's no reason to interrupt Heinrich when he's simply submitting his report. There'll be time for discussion afterwards, I'm sure." He lowered his gaze to look at Roland, and Roland nodded his assent. "We'll be done much quicker if we all save our comments until the end."

Cruz blew smoke out of her nostrils, but kept silent. Roland gestured for Welte to continue.

“As I was saying,” he began, “we are just now getting reports of what is being labelled a type-X causative virus manifesting itself in central Hong Kong, a mere five kilometres from ground zero. There may have been earlier outbreaks—” He gave Cruz a pointed look. “—but we have decided to be cautious, and use only officially *confirmed* reports as a basis for our strategies.”

“But it has begun?” Roland felt a strange quivering in his chest, something akin to excitement, but tempered with a fair dose of trepidation.

What had they done?

“Yes,” said Welte with no small amount of satisfaction. “It has begun.”

Roland exhaled, and noticed that the others did the same.

“Right, then: the Ark Project has been initiated according to schedule.” He looked at Cruz, and she shook her head. “Almost on schedule,” he corrected himself, “but well within the safety margins. George?”

“Yes, Roland?” George was the only one who used his first name, though Roland had never forbidden it.

“Care to give us an update?”

“Ah,” said George, “of course.” He leaned over, picked up a black leather briefcase, and put it on the table. “The information you’re about to receive is eyes only, my friends. Meaning no one, bar no one, sees this or hears about this aside from you.”

He put his thumb to the print-lock, and the briefcase snapped open. “If this fell into the wrong hands...our Ark may capsize before it ever leaves harbour, I’m afraid. So keep that in mind.” He pulled out four folders, and handed them out.

“What’s this?” Cruz stumped out her third cigarette in five minutes and grabbed the folder. Each one had a name on the front; they were all personalised. The folders themselves were sealed in plastic.

“Your personal instructions for evacuation,” said George. He put his folder down on the table, but didn’t open it. “Starting tomorrow morning.”

“What, the evacuation?”

“Only the first phase, Annette,” George said. “We won’t be seeing each other for a good while, now, but we will meet again just prior to phase two, and of course after completion of phase three. After that, we’ll be

seeing quite a lot of each other.” He smiled, and winked at Cruz. She just rolled her eyes, and puffed on her freshly lit fourth cigarette. “This is just to ensure our safety while phase one rolls out...to keep us all away from the epicentre, away from danger. The actual evacuation – the relocation of Farmatek personnel – will still happen according to our previously agreed-upon schedule.” He tapped the folder. “It’s all in here, my friends, so read it thoroughly, familiarise yourself with it...and get rid of it.”

“How is work proceeding with the new facilities?” Welte asked.

“More or less according to schedule. I could give you all a detailed report, but only if you think it’s necessary.” George looked at them all in turn. “We haven’t encountered any problems, and our cover is sound.”

“I think that’s all right, George,” Roland said. “In fact, things appear to have surpassed our expectations, not least the work done in San Jose.”

Cruz looked intently at Roland. “The biogenetic modifications? Are we any closer to actual implementation of the research?”

“Even better,” Roland said. “We have already begun treatment on five test subjects. Our eminent and reliable Dr. Miller and his hand-picked team have worked closely with New Jersey to facilitate for real-time alteration of chromosomes, using the new series of nanobots working on a molecular scale.” He paused. “And we seem to be making excellent progress. The combination of Miller’s miraculous little machines and my research into the aging process and the human genome has paid off. We can alter nature, my friends, and we can do so with confidence in the expected results.” He spread his hands and smiled. “In a short few years, you will all find yourself decidedly...reinvigorated.”

Cruz shut her eyes and slumped back into her chair, obviously relieved. Welte simply nodded, while George grinned broadly.

“Bloody excellent,” he said. “I have to admit that I had my doubts...no offence, Roland.”

“None taken,” said Roland.

“It just seemed like such a bloody impossible prospect, to be able to manipulate and move around tiny bits and pieces like that. To change God’s work for the better! I have to tell you I’m bloody impressed.”

“Likewise,” added Welte. “Now, all we need to know is how Cruz’s Chinese operation is advancing.” He glanced over at Annette Cruz,

and frowned. “She has been disturbingly quiet on the subject thus far. And I need not remind you how key an element to the entire operation this is,” he added. “We have built the gun, but we are missing the bullet.”

Roland looked at Cruz and lifted an eyebrow. Of course, he’d read her entire report, but he wanted her to present it to the others, to ease the tensions between them. There were enough external variables to worry about without having to deal with internal ones as well. That was a waste of time, energy, and resources.

She smiled. “Smoothly.”

There was a long pause.

“That is all?” asked Welte. He sounded more than a little irritated.

Again, Cruz just smiled – it was almost sweet, but her eyes were cold. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I would like to make up my own mind about that,” Welte said. “I just want the facts, Ms. Cruz. I do not want your sarcasm.”

Roland cleared his throat. “I implore you all to let us work together, not against each other.” George nodded his consent, ever the diplomat. “Annette – if you could ease Heinrich’s misgivings, we might all be able to leave and get back to our busy schedules sooner rather than later.”

“Fine,” she said. She leaned forward and put her elbows on the table, studiously ignoring Welte. “Unlike the rest of you, I don’t put a lot of trust in *any* of our employees. Even your lab rats,” she looked at Roland, “are capable of making mistakes. It wouldn’t be the first time. With all due respect, of course.”

Roland smiled. He knew she was trying to fire him up, but he wouldn’t take her bait. “Of course,” he said.

“I’m not trying to be defeatist. I just feel like we need some perspective. Things could still go *SNAFU*. Still,” she said, “I have every confidence in my woman on the inside. The operation will run smoothly. As you predicted, sir.” She nodded at Roland. There was genuine respect in her eyes.

“Yes.” He had predicted nothing. Again, that divination had come from upon high: The name of the radical Chinese cult, the strategy for infiltrating them, calculations on their potential and the impact of their actions if helped along in just the right way at just the right time...it

was all part of someone else's grand plan. All he was doing was carrying out *their* work. "As I predicted."

"The date of launch has not changed?" Welte still appeared sceptical, as well he should be. Anything could go wrong. Predictions were just that: estimates, educated guesses. Nothing was set in stone. The future wasn't yet in their hands...though it soon would be.

"Next summer," promised Cruz, "the world will be ablaze." She turned to Welte. "Is that soon enough for you? Because I can tell you now, Heinrich, that when the day finally comes, you will not be so eager to see the end of it all."

Silence fell on the four powerful people seated around the grand table, high above a city teeming with life – lives that were in the balance, lives that would be sacrificed on the altar of progress.

Lives – deaths – they would all be accountable for.

It was George McKinney who finally broke the silence.

"Man may never understand what we have done. But God will."

Cruz and Welte both looked at George, incredulously, and then Cruz began to laugh and Welte closed his eyes and dropped his head.

But Roland nodded. He alone understood what George truly meant.

"Perhaps we should have named our project the Exodus, instead of the Ark," he said.

"As Moses led the Israelites from Egypt, we too lead humanity out of slavery." George exhaled. "Yes. Yes, that's what we are doing. Moses or Noah, our purpose is divine, our intentions pure, and our methods just."

Roland rose. The others stood with him. Cruz was no longer laughing, though she was staring at George as though he were insane – or perhaps she saw something in him now that reflected herself, her own thoughts and emotions.

"My friends," he said, "we face a brave new future together. Our course is set, and now we will perform our..." – the word came without thought and seemed fitting – "*sacred* duties to the best of our abilities. In due time, we will meet again. I expect to see you all at the end of the long road. Good day."

They all shook hands, and then, one by one, they all left, until the room was empty yet again.

As Roland closed the door, he looked back one final time and caught a glimpse of the afternoon sun descending behind the southern skyline, and he knew with certainty that he would miss none of it – the people, the cities, the buildings, the wars and politics and poverty and diseases – and he knew now that he would be the architect of a better world.

He smiled. The future was truly in *their* hands.

Chapter Six

Hong Kong, June 11th 2017 AD

Chi-Won squatted on the curb and let his head hang down. He was exhausted. Around him, the sirens blared on unceasingly. They had been sounding through the night, and even if he'd tried, Chi-Won would not have been able to sleep.

But Chi-Won had not tried to sleep. Sung-Yin, his wife of fifteen years, had begun coughing late last night, and her throat had been sore – the early signs of the influenza – and by first light, she was dead.

The virus acted quickly. The authorities had warned them all repeatedly that it would. The human immune system was quite literally ravaged in a matter of days, and after that, any disease, like pneumonia, and any virus, any bacterial infection, was potentially lethal.

Now both his children were in the hospital, quarantined behind locked doors and guarded by dozens of heavily armed Chinese soldiers, and he himself was infected with the virus, doomed like most others in this city to a horrible, painful death.

Hong Kong. All his life, this city had been his home. Once, not long ago, it'd been a free port, open to all, a popular and important destination for millions of tourists and businessmen. Now it was a city under siege. Few entered, sans doctors and soldiers, and absolutely no one left. This was where it all started, and although the virus had already manifested itself in other cities across the world, this is where they hoped it would end.

The plague.

He looked at his hands, turned them over. There was still no sign of the sore red spots that would signify the onset of latter-stage influenza.

Chi-Won took a deep breath. He still felt fine. Relatively so, considering what he'd been through these past few days.

Down the street, soldiers fired on a speeding bus. It crashed through a store window and started burning. The soldiers, wearing gas masks and protective clothing, rushed the bus. Shots were fired. Then...silence.

Chi-Won rose. He'd seen scenes like this for a week now, desperate civilians attempting to flee to the countryside where there was still food, no burning piles of corpses, and no soldiers. And, repeatedly, they were all cut down in their flight, massacred...but apparently this was a *necessary* measure, the government protecting its citizens from certain death, preventing the virus from spreading.

At least, that's what the authorities said, on the radio, on television, on the Internet, in the newspapers: communicating their instructions from hundreds of kilometres away. Safely hidden away in their contaminant-free fortresses, they policed the lives of millions...billions. It wasn't just Hong Kong: The Earth was under siege.

Like the preachers and priests on countless satellite channels howled over and over again: Armageddon had come. The End of Days was near.

Chi-Won was not a religious man, but he believed in covering all the bases. He'd been to the temples, the monasteries, and the churches; he'd lit candles and made offerings. But the plague had still invaded his home, taken his wife and his children, and now, soon, it would take him. If there was still time, it was short, and he had a lot to do.

He would endure the pain the disease would bring him, but he would not let the terror befall those he loved.

He walked on, away from the toppled bus where the soldiers were busy pulling out bodies and torching them with flamethrowers. He had a mission, and he could not risk detention. Detention meant death.

Less than half an hour later, he found what he was looking for in an alley off Nathan Road, near the Temple Street Market: A soldier, having succumbed to the flu that he'd probably been hiding from his commander, lay curled up behind a container. He was still clutching his

automatic rifle.

Chi-Won wouldn't have spotted him if it hadn't been for the dogs. They were pulling at the soldier's clothes, eager to get to the meat inside. He clapped his hands and shouted at them to drive them away. They growled, menacingly, but retreated. They still had respect for humans, but it wouldn't last.

Animals, like men, became feral in a hostile environment.

He tried to lift the soldier's rifle away, but the dead man wouldn't let go. Even in death he was holding onto his weapon like it was a life-line. Perhaps the soldier believed he'd need it in the afterlife, wherever that may be.

Chi-Won yanked the gun, and finally those cold, white fingers gave, and he was armed. He checked the chamber. There was ammunition. How much, he couldn't tell, but hopefully it'd be enough.

It took Chi-Won another two hours to get to the Queen Mary Hospital on foot. He constantly had to duck out of sight and stay concealed when soldiers and civilians passed by. Twice, he was spotted, but he knew the city better than his pursuers, and he'd been lucky. Perhaps the gods were with him. Or perhaps they consciously turned a blind eye and enjoyed the irony of his luck; that in this final deed, he would face no obstacles.

His death was certain, and maybe that was all the gods cared about, to receive his soul into whatever heaven or hell they'd chosen for him.

The second encounter had been the most frightening. The two patrolling soldiers had spotted his gun, and without warning they'd begun shooting. But they were young, and probably recently recruited, because their shots all went wide, and they couldn't run as fast as him with their masks and their heavy boots, and he'd escaped without a scratch.

But now came the difficult part: how to get into the hospital itself. It was getting late, and dark, and the lights around the buildings would soon be turned on, making it even harder to get past the barricades. Even though there was a twenty-four hour curfew in place, the guards kept an eye out towards the street, although their primary concern, of course, was to keep the 'patients' inside. So Chi-Won would have to act quickly, while the shadows of early twilight obscured his passage.

He waited until one of the armoured cars used as makeshift

ambulances passed by on Pokfulam Road, heading towards the main entrance where the latest victims of the deadly virus would be brought into the care ward. Then he sprinted across the once-busy thoroughfare, ducked below the hedges by the front of the building, and, keeping the car between himself and the guards, made his way towards Block L.

From what he'd learned, most of the exits had been sealed, but the Block L entrance had been kept open for the doctors to pass through. And since that entrance was on the west side of the main building, he'd have to handle two, at the most three guards on the outside. On the inside...well, he'd figure that out once he *was* on the inside.

Again, Chi-Won was in luck. There were only two guards stationed outside Block L – they weren't counting on anyone breaking *in*, and there obviously was no great risk of anyone breaking out that way, separated as it was from the main care ward.

The guards were both wearing masks, and so their vision would be impaired. They wouldn't be able to spot him if he snuck up on them from out here...unless, of course, they happened to glance in his direction. Which meant he'd have to be ready to fire his weapon. That would give him away, though, and then he'd be left with no choice but to go in, guns blazing, and while he was prepared to do that – it couldn't possibly be *murder* when they were all doomed to die anyway – it would complicate matters, perhaps even prevent him from accomplishing his mission of mercy.

He waited a few minutes to observe the soldiers, but they barely moved. They were disciplined and professional. Fresh recruits they were not, unless they were sleeping standing up – but no, he noticed their heads turning back and forth...only marginally, but enough to cover the entire area around the entrance.

So he wouldn't be able to sneak up on them, and judging by the way they held their guns, neither would he be able to take out both of them before he himself was taken out.

He would just have to keep waiting, bide his time and hope that chance, yet again, turned in his favour.

Twenty minutes later, the lights went on. The area between himself and the soldiers was brightly illuminated. Subterfuge no longer appeared to be an option.

At eight fifteen, a doctor passed through the checkpoint. He showed his identification card to the soldiers, who scrutinised it and questioned him briefly before he was let through. The doctor headed around the building towards the parking garage.

Chi-Won followed, keeping to the shadows, and when the doctor got to his car, Chi-Won was right behind him.

The poor man never knew what hit him. The butt of the rifle connected with the base of his skull, and there was a sickening crunch. Chi-Won caught the doctor before he hit the ground; he didn't want blood on the doctor's clothes. Glancing around, making sure he wasn't being observed, he pulled the white coat off the lifeless body, located the doctor's car keys, opened the trunk, and lifted the doctor into it before slamming the trunk shut and locking it again.

He looked around.

The garage – or at least this particular floor of the garage – was completely empty. He tore off his jacket and put on the doctor's coat. The identification card was in the right pocket. Chi-Won took it out and looked at the picture. He'd only be able to pass a cursory inspection – the doctor was at least twenty years his senior – but how thorough were the guards with people going *into* the hospital?

There was only one way to find out. But first he'd need to find a way to conceal his weapon.

There was a large duffel bag in the back seat of the car; the doctor had brought with him several changes of clothing. Chi-Won emptied the bag, and placed the automatic weapon at the bottom.

It *just* fit.

Refilling the bag with the clothes, he zipped it up and shut the car's door again.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. He was still blessed with good luck. The gods smiled on his mission but the most difficult parts still lay ahead of him. Getting into the hospital was one thing. His final deed would be a test of strength and courage, and even now, he wasn't sure that he'd be able to go through with it.

But he would try. He had to try.

Chi-Won left the garage and headed towards the entrance to Block L.

He was spotted the moment he rounded the corner, but by then

he wasn't trying to stay concealed. He couldn't appear furtive. The guards had to believe he'd been through the checkpoint dozens of times before, that this was routine.

The guard on the left kept his eyes on him through his whole approach, and when Chi-Won was less than ten meters away, the guard lifted a radio to his mouth and spoke into it. He couldn't hear what was being said, but he guessed it was customary to alert the guards on the inside.

"Good evening," said Chi-Won and nodded, civilly, as he stepped up to the door. He held his identification card up for the guards to see, but at an angle away from the light, hoping they wouldn't notice the dissimilarities.

They didn't. Instead, they seemed more interested in what he was carrying.

"What's in the bag?" asked the guard on the left.

Chi-Won felt his heart miss a beat. "Clothes. I have a long shift ahead of me."

"Open it."

He unzipped the bag, and held it open for the guard to see. The guard nodded, and held the door open for Chi-Won. "Go right in. Have a good evening."

Chi-Won blinked, then smiled, and went inside.

He didn't dare breathe until the door had shut behind him.

He was in a long, well-lit corridor. At the far end, a few nurses passed back and forth with supplies, and halfway down the corridor, by the reception area, two armed guards were keeping watch. Aside from that, the area was empty and eerily quiet for a hospital that was so severely overcrowded.

There were several doors along the corridor, equally spaced out, all shut. Most of them probably led to various offices and supply rooms – this was mainly an administrative block – and from what he knew of the hospital, and from the reports he'd managed to find on the net, he'd need to pass by the guards and take a right at the end of the corridor. This would bring him to the Main Block where they kept most of the patients in quarantine.

The two guards didn't bother him – in fact, they barely glanced at him, preoccupied with keeping an eye out for potential runaways heading

in the opposite direction – and less than a minute later he found himself in front of a closed and locked door marked “Quarantine Area – Authorised Personnel Only”.

There was an electronic card-reader next to the door.

Chi-Won tried the doctor’s card. The doors stayed locked. The card didn’t work.

He cursed under his breath, and ran his hands through his hair. His face, his chest, even his arms were dripping with perspiration. He glanced at his hands; still no red spots, but he didn’t feel well. In fact, he felt quite sick. He was coming down with a fever. He wanted to lie down, but he knew that if he did, he’d never be able to get up again.

It was now or never.

Someone has to come through, sooner or later, he thought. All he could do was wait and hope he wouldn’t be questioned.

Chi-Won didn’t have to wait long. He’d barely finished the thought when the doors swung open, and a doctor and a nurse passed through. He grabbed the open door and gave the two a courteous nod. They returned the greeting and continued down the corridor.

He was inside.

He stepped through into the intermediate containment chamber – it had apparently been constructed recently to accommodate for the quarantine – letting the door swing shut behind him.

There were several decontaminated facemasks kept in airtight cabinets along the wall, and Chi-Won put one on. He wasn’t concerned about his own protection – after all, he was already infected, and he wouldn’t live long anyway – but the mask provided him with a good disguise. He’d be able to move around freely inside the quarantined zone.

With the mask secured, he squeezed the release button for the door leading into the Main Block, and walked through.

It was a madhouse. Faceless nurses were scrambling back and forth between the different wards, and the corridors were filled with the sick and the dying. There were five armed guards on this side of the decontamination chamber, and they seemed prepared to fire their weapons at the slightest provocation. One of them asked him something, but the masks prevented him from hearing what was said, and when he stopped, the guard just pushed him on and pointed down the hall.

At first, Chi-Won walked as if he was in a particularly vivid nightmare. It was a lot worse here, on the inside, than it was outside. All around him, bodies were carted off towards the elevators to be incinerated down in the basement where the furnaces were roaring twenty-four hours a day. People were screaming, crying, howling, begging for a relief from pain, for freedom, for their children or their mothers and fathers. Doctors and nurses were passing from bed to bed like merciful angels, dispensing a moment's respite from the pain, bringing fleeting hope of relief, of redemption. And then they moved on, and their patients were left with nothing. Because there would be no cure, there was no hope, and death was a certainty.

Chi-Won grabbed the arm of a passing nurse, turning her around to face him.

"The children," he said. "Where have you put the children?"

Her face was concealed by her mask, and Chi-Won couldn't read her expression – was she suspicious, angry, or confused? But she just answered, "Third floor," and moved on.

The elevators had been shut down – for security reasons, no doubt – so he took the stairs up to the third floor.

It was eerily quiet after the chaos of the first floor, but from behind some of the doors leading to the various wards he could hear children crying. He opened the first door on his left, and went through.

The room was large, and it was filled with dozens and dozens of beds. In each and every one, there was a child, sometimes two, ranging in age from infants to teenagers. Some were sleeping. Others were crying for their mothers, hugging their stuffed animals, curled up into foetal positions. Others again were reading, or drawing, or talking and singing to themselves; to escape from their grim surroundings they turned inwards, oblivious to the fact that in a few days – perhaps mere hours – they'd be dead. Or perhaps they knew, but chose to ignore it.

Death, to a child, was an abstract notion. But pain was real. And there was no apparent pain in this room. Those children who were starting to feel the effects of their disease had to have been moved elsewhere.

He scanned the room but didn't see what he was looking for. He went back out into the hallway and tried the next ward.

Chi-Won found his daughter, Ming Tak, behind the third door.

She was asleep, but her hands and face were covered with painful

spots and sores, and her breath was laboured. The room was quiet: with these patients, the influenza had clearly manifested itself, but there was still little pain...or else the children had been injected with morphine, to keep the pain at bay. There were two nurses in the room, but they were busy with patients.

Quietly, he picked up his daughter and walked out.

Man Po, his son, was in the next ward. He was in pain, and crying, and at first the child was oblivious to his father's presence. His eyes were squeezed shut, his face deathly white. Chi-Won felt a pang in his chest, an unspeakable sense of loss manifesting itself as physical pain, and he put Ming Tak down into Man Po's bed.

She hugged her brother, and looked up at her father with wide, fearful eyes.

He put the doctor's bag on the floor and opened it.

The pain would soon be at an end.

"Excuse me, doctor? What are you doing?"

Chi-Won froze and looked up.

There was a nurse by his children's bed, and behind her, a guard. He was carrying a gun.

Chi-Won dug his hands deeper into the bag until he felt the cold metal between his fingers. He tensed his body. He would only get the one chance.

"I'm caring for these children," he said.

"What is your name? Are you on duty up here? I haven't seen you before, doctor—"

"Cheung. Dr. Stephen Cheung."

"Please stand up, Dr. Cheung," said the guard. "I'll need to see some identification."

The nurse leaned over the bed. "This girl isn't supposed to be here. Why did you move her?"

Clutching the automatic rifle, Chi-Won stood up. He levelled the muzzle at the nurse. "Don't touch her!"

Everything happened really slowly, like in one of those old action-movies Chi-Won liked to watch on television, the ones with Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, or Danny Lee.

The guard raised his weapon. He was carrying a small semi-automatic gun, army issue, not nearly as powerful as Chi-Won's rifle, but a

much quicker draw. The guard's face looked pinched as though the man had abdominal pain...perhaps he was sick, too?

He did not look well: Chi-Won felt a pang of guilt, having caused a stranger so much pain. These thoughts and images, and a million others, flooded through his head like colourful butterflies, silent as the night, as Chi-Won turned towards the guard with the weapon in his hand.

And then there was a flash of light and a sound like rain hitting a tin roof, except amplified a million times over, and then all colour seemed to fade from the world, turning the ward, the nurse, the guard, and his children into black-and-white still pictures.

His gun dropped to the floor. It clattered and bounced, and finally laid still.

He couldn't quite understand why the gun had dropped, because he'd been trying his very best to hold onto it. In fact, he'd tried to fire it, but his fingers had not obeyed his commands.

Strange.

He suddenly felt very, very tired, and realised that he had to sit down, even though he really shouldn't. He still had something important to do. Something extremely important, although he couldn't remember what that was, specifically. It had something to do with his children, but again, that was strange; they were at home, with Sung-Yin, getting ready for bed.

That thought made him smile, and then sitting down wasn't such a bad idea after all, because now he had his children to think about – their distant faces echoed back to him like ghosts.

Why did they cry? What was Sung-Yin doing to them? He would have to have a talk with her; it was no good putting them to sleep if they were *crying*.

It didn't help to sit, Chi-Won soon realised. He was still tired, so he lay down instead and closed his eyes.

There were lots of strange noises around him, people crying and screaming, running about. It was irritating. All he wanted was to sleep. Didn't people understand that? Why were they so rude? He tried to tell them, but when he opened his mouth, it was filled with a thick, warm liquid that ran down his cheek into his ear. He coughed, and the liquid sprayed all over.

Now that would ruin his shirt. Sung-Yin would be angry. She'd

berate him. But later...after the children were asleep and they were in bed together...she'd lean over, and she'd kiss him, and she'd tell him that she loved him...

Chi-Won smiled. The shirt didn't matter.
He took a deep breath and fell silent.

*

San Jose, August 3rd 2017 AD

The dreams had stopped, all of them. No more dreams and no more nightmares.

Sara ought to have been happy, relieved that she was haunted no more, but instead she felt distraught and nervous, filled with doubt, regret, and guilt.

She knew that this *meant* something, though she wasn't sure what. It couldn't be divine retribution for her sins, because she'd prayed for the nightmares – the visions – to end. Yet it still felt like a punishment rather than an answer to her pleas, especially to be denied the sight of him, of David.

Sara glanced at the clock on the wall. It was past three in the morning, yet she didn't feel sleepy. She was tired, dead tired, but she knew that if she went home, she'd end up lying in bed staring at the ceiling until it was time to come back to the lab. Sleep was a rare luxury these days. Besides, she wasn't alone; in addition to her assistant Karen, there were five or six people from the core team, and of course Eric was in his office. These past few months he'd rarely left the building, and he looked increasingly sickly.

The outbreak had taken its toll on all of them. Not least of all him – though he refused to accept any kind of responsibility for what had happened, arguing that it was a chance accident, a freak twist of fate, and that there'd been no way to predict this outcome.

She hadn't confronted him after they'd learned about the outbreak. What would be the point? To tell him "I told you so"? This wasn't a joke. Millions had died, and millions more would die unless they could produce a drug capable of eradicating the type-X causative virus.

Besides, they could never know for sure if their genetically modi-

fied mosquitoes *had* been the cause and carrier of the influenza.

Sara knew that this was wishful thinking – chances were they had created a Frankenstein’s monster, and untold deaths lay on their collective conscience – but still she welcomed the thought, wishing against all hope that this was a natural outbreak and that their attempts at creating a working drug were driven by thoughts of compassion rather than guilt.

She rested her head in her hands, and sighed.

At least there was some hope. Without nanotechnology the development of an active drug would have taken years, but with the help of bots they were making rapid progress.

Sometimes it amazed her how quickly they had been able to analyse and understand the virus, and in her darkest hours she wondered if there was a reason for that – but she honestly did not want to know if there was, because the implications were terrifying.

“Sara?” Karen was standing right next to her workspace, looking concerned.

“What is it?” Sara asked, fully aware of how exhausted and irritable she sounded.

“It’s Dr. Miller. He wants to talk with you.” Karen was fidgeting, and that was never a good thing. “It sounded urgent.”

“When isn’t it urgent?”

Sara sighed. Ever since their relationship had imploded, Eric had been testy around her, and Sara sometimes feared for her job...not that she hadn’t also sometimes secretly wished for the company to fire her, to absolve her of all guilt, and allow her to just run away, far away, where she could hide until this nightmare was at an end.

But that too was wishful thinking. No matter where she went and what she did, she would always be haunted, and at least now she was able to make small amends for her negligence, both morally and medically.

“Thanks, Karen.” Sara gave her a weary smile, and Karen visibly relaxed. No point getting the girl vexed when there was still so much work to be done.

She walked down the short corridor to Eric’s section of the lab, and turned right into his large, soundproofed office.

Unlike some of the other offices in the building, he hadn’t done a lot to personalise it, and aside from a large poster of some half-naked woman and a choice of unwashed coffee-mugs, it was bare.

Eric himself was sitting at his desk, feet up, his hands folded over his chest, and his eyes closed. He wasn't sleeping, though; she knew him well enough to see that he was only meditating, or pretending to.

She sat down in one of the visitor chairs, and waited.

"You're up late," he said after a couple of minutes of silence.

"So are you. What do you want?" While she wasn't trying to be rude, she couldn't help sounding short. She was tired, she was irritated, and she didn't want an argument. Not now.

He swung his chair around and planted his feet on the floor. His eyes were bloodshot, but he was smiling. "You're angry, aren't you." It wasn't a question.

"No." She shook her head. "Not angry. Frustrated, exhausted, fed up...but not angry."

"Oh, you're angry. I can sense it." He stood up, began pacing the room. "You blame me for all this..." He waved his hand in the general direction of the labs. "...this thing we're fighting."

"I don't blame just you, Eric," she said. "I blame myself, too. I played my part. We all did. But I knew we were playing with fire. I should've stopped it."

He laughed. "Stopped? *Stopped?* You think you could have stopped it? Dear Sara, beautiful Sara, science must progress or we stagnate. And Farmatek mustn't stagnate, no, no; never that. If we stop, we fester and die."

"Because of us, millions have died, Eric. Millions! Is the future of any company worth such a cost?"

He turned on her, eyes blazing. "We've done nothing wrong! Nothing! We don't even know if we're to blame, and still we're allocating our time and resources to fighting this. We're doing the world a service, Sara, and I shouldn't have to feel guilty because of that!"

"But you are feeling guilty, aren't you?" She understood now why he'd asked for her. "You feel guilty, because you know the truth, and you just want me to agree with you and absolve you of all responsibilities." She rose. "Not a chance, Eric. You live with your guilt, as I do with mine. You live with it, and you channel it into your work. Perhaps then we can be forgiven, in time." She paused. "Though I doubt there will be any absolution for us."

Eric spun around and punched his console.

It toppled and crashed to the floor. Blood from his slashed knuckles sprayed onto the large poster, freckling the model's perfect breasts crimson red, but Eric didn't seem to notice. He was staring at the wrecked console as though he was surprised to see it on the floor, muttering under his breath, and for the first time Sara feared his sanity. He'd been working too hard, and whatever he may say, Eric did feel guilt. He wasn't a bad man, she knew, just too ambitious for his own good, extremely driven...and zealously devoted to Farmatek.

She rose quietly, and backed towards the door.

He was examining his hand now, perhaps wondering how he'd cut himself. When he suddenly spoke, Sara wasn't even sure he was speaking to her.

"We did what we had to do," he mumbled. "We did what was required." He slumped down in his chair yet again, his eyes distant. "That's all. Nothing more." He looked at her. "Sara? Please...there's so much to do...go back to work."

Sara nodded, and turned away from him. As she left, she thought she might have heard a sob, but she never looked back.

That morning, as she stared with glazed eyes at yet another visual simulation of the virus, she had an epiphany.

Maybe her dreams had stopped for the very reason they had begun? Maybe now, finally, the course was set and the images that had played back in her mind time after time would come to pass...not as dreams, but as actual events.

If that was so then their work here was of no consequence whatsoever, because most of humanity would die a terrible, lonely death, and the world would be a cold and desolate place, ravaged by an endless winter. Though from her firstborn there would emerge a bloodline that would eventually bring forth a saviour, a new Messiah...

David.

The face in her dreams.

The ghost from her nightmares.

She smiled, put her head on the desk, closed her eyes, and eventually she slipped into a semblance of sleep, untouched by dreams – or nightmares.

Chapter Seven

TO: KATHRYNS@NEWSDESK-INT.CNN.COM
FROM: JLLOYD@ROAMING.CNN.COM
SUBJECT: The big one!

Kathy,

We need this story live ASAP! We have exactly one hour lead-time on this, but I can't for the life of me get access to a voice-line or broadband sat connection and I'll just have to hope and pray that this cell link doesn't go AWOL on me before the mail has been sent. Twenty-four minutes until the hourly update from Atlanta, and if you stamp this EXPRESS I ought to be watching Donna reading this at 8PM here in Beijing. My sources are ONE HUNDRED PERCENT reliable, and I'm counting on you, Kathy, so don't screw this up!! Okay, here we go:

It's been twelve months since the first outbreak of the flu here in China, and in all that time the world's been holding its breath for the announcement that will put to rest the fear and the paranoia that's haunted us: A drug; a cure.

Now that announcement is forthcoming. CNN has come across highly reliable information suggesting that at some point in the next few hours Farmatek, a Silicon Valley based biotechnology corporation, will reveal to the world a drug created using patented nanotechnology

Prophet Without Honour

(Kathy: get some visual cues here, create a video link to some kind of generic archival footage of Farmatek's nanobots); a drug that will prevent infection of the type-X virus and halt the outbreak of the deadly influenza.

Experts had feared that hundreds of millions of people would be infected by this virus in the next few years, and that Hong Kong, Beijing, and Bombay would have to remain under strict martial quarantine. Now there may be hope for an end to the deaths and for the eventual reopening of these cities to the world.

There has yet to be an official statement from Farmatek or anyone else, but sources have confirmed to CNN that several batches of the drug have already been shipped out to high-risk areas where the disease has infected over 50% of the population.

The development of the drug has been on an unprecedented fast-track, and the FDA has apparently granted the product approval after only a minimal trial period, but the use of nanotechnology does, according to experts (Kathy: get some experts in to say JUST THAT!), result in fewer potential problems and side-effects than with traditional drug research and development.

We will follow this story very closely over the next few days, and we will provide updates as soon as we hear of any new developments. As we mentioned earlier, an official statement is expected before the end of the day, and it is believed that not only will Farmatek issue a statement to the media, but representatives for the governments of the United States, the European Union, China, and India will also hold press conferences. Stay tuned to CNN throughout the day...blah blah blah.

Kathy: again, you know how big this is, so DON'T SCREW IT UP! I'll keep trying to secure a broadband line and do a live report, but failing that, I'll expect this on the air in FIFTEEN minutes!

-jake

Hong Kong, March 21st 2018 AD

In his thirty-seven years on the job, it was the closest thing to a miracle Dr. Nicholas Lee had ever seen.

Within hours of injecting the drug, the patients were showing signs of improvement. After only a few days, the symptoms were in regress, and within the week most patients made a full recovery, suffering little to no after-effects of the deadly influenza.

While most of the hospital's patients were still kept under careful quarantine, almost all of the Chinese army's soldiers had been dismissed from the hospital, with only a few troops remaining on the streets of the city to keep the peace. The curfew had been lifted. Things were calming down. People were hopeful. Peace had finally come to Hong Kong.

Dr. Lee was well aware that what looked like a miracle to some was usually the result of someone else's hard work, and in this case, the miracle in question had not been carried out by the hand of God, but by Farmatek. Yet it might as well have been a true divine miracle for the effect it had on his city. For the past year, there had been a dark shadow hanging over Hong Kong, and there were times when even Dr. Lee had given up all hope of salvation.

Despite his prayers, despite his innumerable attempts at helping his patients, death had appeared inevitable.

One incident in particular would remain with him until the day he died. Almost a year ago, at the very beginning of the epidemic, when panic was spreading like a wildfire across the city, a mentally disturbed man – suffering from flu-related dementia caused by dehydration and exhaustion – managed to pass through security with a loaded weapon with the sole intent of murdering his own dying children.

Death drove people mad, and Hong Kong had been a city on the verge of insanity. Soldiers had fired indiscriminately at citizens on the streets. Corpses had been thrown on pyres that kept burning, day and night, for weeks and months. Black clouds had been hanging over those tall skyscrapers for a whole year. And now, in what seemed almost the blink of an eye, it would all end.

“Anything the matter, doctor?”

The voice brought him out of his reverie, back into the present.

He looked up. The nurse seemed concerned. Dr. Lee shook his head, and smiled. “Nothing is the matter. I was just thinking how lucky we’ve been.”

She smiled back. She was very young, and very pretty. She stood so close to him. He felt his heart skip a beat, and an old fire was kindled in his loins.

Old leech, thought Dr. Lee. *You’re forty years her senior.*

He cleared his throat. “I have...patients.”

She nodded. “You’re doing an amazing job, doctor.”

“We all are.”

She smiled again, and walked on.

He couldn’t help but watch her as she rounded the corner towards admittance. It felt good to be able to lust again. There hadn’t been a lot of that in the past eleven months. Not even at home. Death put a real damper on your sex-life. And there’d been a lot of death in his life...even his personal life hadn’t been free from tragedy, although his closest had been spared, thank God. As for his professional duties...

He couldn’t even begin to guess how many morphine injections he’d made to end the endless suffering, how many bodies he’d seen rolled out of his ward. Hundreds. Thousands.

Too many.

Now. He was drifting off again.

He shook his head, glanced at his watch, yawned. It was getting late – it was past eleven – and he still had his rounds to do, his charts to fill in. There were still some patients for whom the drug had arrived too late; they were already at death’s door, and their suffering, or the absence of it, was his prime concern.

And then there were those who’d yet to be vaccinated – there wasn’t exactly a shortage of the drug, but it took a while to get the syringes distributed to the nurses and doctors, and there were hundreds still waiting. But they wouldn’t die. Their salvation was certain.

He said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever angels Farmatek employed – angels who’d brought a true miracle to Hong Kong and the world – and then he moved on.

The phone-call came in the middle of the night as he lay wrapped in his wife's arms, pleasant dreams embracing his sleeping mind.

He turned groggily to the nightstand and flipped open his mobile, the hospital's icon flashing an angry red. He sighed, picturing in his mind a confused nurse calling to find out when a particularly anxious patient was due for treatment, and activated his earpiece.

"Dr. Lee here. Who is this?"

There was a brief silence on the other side, and Nicholas thought for a moment that the call had been disconnected, and then a breathy and stammering voice started speaking:

"This is Nurse Lien, Dr. Lee, and...we need you to...to come in right away, doctor...right away!"

Dr. Nicholas Lee felt his heart jump, but he wasn't about to sacrifice a rare night's sleep for one agitated nurse. So he simply asked, "Is this not something a doctor on duty can take care of, nurse?"

Again there was that pause, and this time he could hear noise in the background...what sounded like yelling, or screaming. He frowned.

"We're calling in all...all of the doctors," she stammered. "The situation is...grave, doctor. We need everyone."

"What's going on?" He was rapidly waking up, now. Next to him, his wife stirred and put a warm hand on his arm. He must have sounded apprehensive.

Nicholas felt a shiver running down his spine.

What was going on?

"The patients, doctor...the patients are dying!"

"What patients?" He felt as though he was the lead actor in a play where he didn't know any of the lines. Nothing made sense.

"The patients that have been treated! The flu-patients that were treated with the drug...they're all dying!"

Nicholas tried to focus on the nurse's words, but his thoughts were spinning. "The influenza was in regress...our initial patients have already left the hospital. Has the flu re-emerged?"

"Not the flu, doctor. You...you have to come in...we are flooded with patients."

"If not the flu, then—"

"The victims are suffering from massive haemorrhaging, boils, blindness...massive organ failure...they're dying in front of us...it's all

happening so fast, doctor, you must come in! What?” The nurse’s phone clattered to the floor, and Nicholas heard running feet, agitated yells from orderlies.

White-faced and frightening, his mind a jumble, Nicholas turned to his wife. She was looking at him, wide-eyed with concern.

“I must go,” he mumbled. “They need me.”

“What has happened?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said, and shook his head. “I honestly don’t know.”

Whatever it was, whatever the cause of this relapse, it couldn’t be good. And whatever miracles Farmatek had bestowed on them, he’d never thought they’d be conditional.

Nicholas rose and began preparing himself for what he feared would be the most trying day of his professional career.

*

San Jose, March 23rd 2018 AD

When Sara woke from her weeklong sleep to a world thrown into utter disarray, it didn’t take long before the truth dawned on her.

The drug that had been manufactured to fight and defeat the influenza, a drug she herself had laboured on for an entire year, was an assassin in disguise, a Trojan horse designed to lull its victims into a state of complacency before exploding and shattering the host body.

This new plague was nothing like the first one – it washed across the Earth at an alarming rate, decimating entire population centres before moving on, ever on, unhindered by quarantines or medical countermeasures.

It’d only been two weeks, and yet more than a hundred million people had perished, with the numbers rising by the day, by the hour. And as the reports kept pouring in – panicked yet professional voices informing rapt and disbelieving viewers and listeners of yet another city or country that had fallen victim to the plague – she knew it couldn’t be long before the voices all fell silent. When that finally happened...

The end was near, she knew, and somehow she wasn’t all that surprised.

They had miscalculated everything again, trusted in technology and in their apparent control over the bots. But the carrier outsmarted the creator, adapting rapidly to its host. The living drug devoured the human body from the inside out, and once activated it killed in a matter of hours. It was painful and ugly, and no one would be spared, because this thing was fast, and adaptive, and created to be resilient and smart.

Sure, it did what it was supposed to: it destroyed the virus that caused the deadly flu. But it didn't stop there. It was hungry, and now it had an entire body to feed on. It wasn't about to leave or go dormant. It wanted, needed, to replicate. But to do that, it also needed fuel. The irony was clear: in defeating one threat, they had created another one, far worse than the first.

Not surprisingly, Sara didn't feel like laughing.

The day the drug had shipped she had crashed on her bed and slipped into a black and senseless void. And she'd woken from that dark night realising that she'd finally dreamed again, for the first time since the outbreak of the flu.

It wasn't the same dream as before, although they were both bleak nightmares of a warped, post-apocalyptic world. In *this* dream she saw a boy – he was young, much younger than her, and she didn't recognise his face – in a house. He was cold, and he was dying, barely surviving on scraps of food and polluted water. The world around him was grey with soiled snow, the houses in ruins, and corpses were strewn about like discarded rag dolls in gardens and driveways and playgrounds.

She saw herself go to him and comfort him, and then she saw herself walking away, going north and east, ever north and ever east. And though she was on her own, she wasn't alone anymore.

She was with child.

The dream came again and again, every night after that long sleep, every night after the beginning of the plague.

And every time, it was the same.

She became pregnant and then she began to walk, and every time, she walked into a hazy nothingness, an uncertain future without hope for her or any of the other survivors of the apocalypse. The only hope left was reserved for her child, for the bloodline she would mother.

The bloodline that she knew would one day give birth to David.

Now Sara was trapped behind the walls of the Farmatek campus with thousands of other employees – strict quarantines were enforced from coast to coast, none more effectively than here where even before the crisis security was strict and virtually foolproof – and every day was spent anxiously awaiting news of recent outbreaks as they inched ever closer to home. While the networks and CNN kept broadcasting night and day, reports from distant locales became less and less regular until they finally stopped altogether.

The last to succumb to the plague before the blackout were the observers and reporters with their digital cameras, satellite dishes, and headphones, but in the end they too had to pay with their lives.

The plague, unlike countless wars of the last generation, made no concessions to the media.

Though she knew it was pointless, she couldn't tear herself away from the grotesque sights. Like a murderer returning to the scene of her crime, she herself returned to the monitor day after day to witness the devastation she'd helped cause. She became numb to the sight of bodies wrapped in black plastic or burning on giant pyres, numb to the chaos caused by the plague. She became numb, and she turned in on herself, staying longer and longer in bed every morning, rarely leaving her apartment as the days went by, and refusing to even answer her mobile or her mail.

After learning of her mother's death, the deaths of everyone in her close family, of Shelley, of her old mates...there was really no good reason to communicate with anyone. Sara had never looked back, not in all the time she'd spent out here. She'd made a choice, she'd taken the leap, and her home and family had become less and less important. Now she'd paid for her negligence, but worse still, her family had *suffered* for her negligence.

The third week after the outbreak, someone came to visit.

Eric was with them, his face pale but composed. He looked more rested and rational than he had in more than a year. That in itself was frightening enough, but she knew there was more. There had to be more, and she could guess what it was.

"Good morning, Sara," he said as he stepped uninvited through the door. She lifted her head, but stayed curled up on the couch, the video feed blaring on in the background. "I brought some friends with me."

Two figures stepped forward; one was Anna Rivera – she appeared concerned, but she didn't approach Sara – and the other guest Sara didn't recognise. He was short, stocky, with red curly hair, and a winning smile. His eyes were a deep blue, and when he spoke Sara recognised a mild Glaswegian accent:

“Hello, Sara,” he said. “I'm George McKinney. We've come to talk with you about something.”

She reached over for a tissue paper and blew her nose. She didn't want to talk to these people. To Eric, perhaps, but not the others. Behind her three guests, right outside the door, she spotted two or three security people. What, did they expect her to freak out or something? Or had they come to take her away by force?

“What do you want?” she said, looking at Eric. “Just leave me alone.” She knew she didn't sound very forceful.

Eric shook his head, and sat down in a chair facing her. The other two, Anna and McKinney, stayed close to the door. Perhaps they didn't feel like intruding, or perhaps they were scared. Whichever it was, she appreciated the gesture. “I'm not leaving until I've told you what I have to tell you,” he said. “And I think you need to hear this.”

“No,” she said, but she did. She really did want to hear what he had to say.

“Hear me out, and the choice is yours.” He looked back at Anna and McKinney, and Anna nodded. “Stay or leave, it's up to you. We'll give you a pass and you can walk out of here. Of course,” he added, “you can never come back again. Once those gates close behind you, your choice is final. You'll be on your own.”

“You're lying,” she said.

“I swear to you I'm not.”

“Then why?”

“Everything happens for a reason, Sara.” He moved from the chair to the couch. She didn't protest. “Everything.”

“The plague,” she sighed. “It's ours.” Strangely enough, the words hurt far less spoken out loud.

“Partly,” he answered, and of course she wasn't surprised. She'd guessed from the very beginning. “We set things in motion. Nature did the rest. The flu-virus, the plague...it's all part of Farmatek's long-term strategy.” He made it sound as though they were discussing market shares

or an advertising campaign, and not the deaths of billions of human beings. “All part of the Ark Project.”

“The what?” she said, and looked up. “The Ark Project? You have got to be kidding me. Who came up with that name?”

“Drake,” said McKinney, and she could’ve sworn he was smiling. “He’s the architect of our future.”

“*Our* future,” repeated Anna, with an emphasis on the first word. “You, too, can be a part of this. You’ve been selected, Sara. You’ve been selected as one of the lucky few.”

“You mean ‘lucky’ compared with all the people you’ve killed?” She paused. “All the people *we* have killed?”

“It would’ve happened sooner or later,” said Eric. “The Earth isn’t capable of sustaining any more life, and humankind hasn’t made much progress the past hundred years. We were stuck in a rut, Sara; we’ve been taking one step forward and two steps back. Technical, medical, scientific innovations have crawled to a stop these past two decades, save for the work done here at Farmatek. And we’re still the violent, egotistical barbarians we were a thousand years ago. We fight wars, we kill each other, we let billions starve or die of diseases that we cured fifty years ago...” He stood, walked over to the window. “We’re animals, Sara. Nothing but animals.”

“So you decided to kill indiscriminately?” It didn’t make sense. “That makes you more than an animal?”

“No,” he said, looking at her. His face was mild, even loving. She’d rarely seen him like this. He was at peace. “No, we’re still animals. We’ve murdered humanity, but it was mercy killing. It was the only way to ensure our survival.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said. “That’s your excuse?”

“No excuses.” He shook his head. “We agreed on that early on. Never any excuses, because there aren’t any. But there are explanations. And we’d like to tell you. George?” He turned to McKinney. “Would you?”

“Certainly, Dr. Miller. Sara,” said George McKinney, and immediately she felt herself seduced by his confidence and empathy and charisma. Whatever this man said, it was worth listening to. “You see, we’re soon going to disappear from this world for a very, very long time, while it cures itself. Myself, Dr. Miller, Ms. Rivera, several thousand individu-

ally selected employees and civilians...we're taking our leave and going into hibernation." He shrugged. "So to speak. We'll be awake and alive, but we'll also slow down."

"We won't age!" Anna inserted excitedly. "That's what they've been working on now for decades, Sara, what they created the bots for in the first place. We'll be immortal!"

McKinney nodded. "Almost. We'll certainly live a very, very long time. Long enough for this world to change beyond recognition. For the better, of course. Without our interference."

Sara didn't find any of this surprising. Right now, anything was possible. "So you're leaving Earth?" she asked.

"Not...exactly," said Eric. "We're going *into* the Earth, down below in deep, specially constructed caves. A subterranean world where we'll have everything we need. Even artificial sunlight. After all, we're planning on staying there for a very, very long time."

"How long?"

"A thousand years, at least," McKinney answered. "Until the time is right."

"And all this time...you won't age?"

"Not if our research is correct and our bots operate according to plan."

"You're all insane," she said. "You can't be immortal. You're human! It's not right."

"Who is to say what's right and wrong?" She knew Eric would argue that point. "We decide what's right for us. For humanity."

"So now you're gods?"

"No," said McKinney firmly. "We are not God. But I believe that this is God's will."

"Then you're the craziest of all," she whispered, and she knew she was right. If there was a God – and sometimes she doubted that very much – this was not his will.

Eric sat down next to her and grabbed her arms, turning her towards him. "You too can be immortal, Sara. Just come with us. We need someone like you, and...and I miss you." His eyes were almost sincere. "I need you to join us. Either that, or you have to leave."

"What, you'd trust me not to tell anyone?" She laughed. "You must be really stupid, or you're lying."

“What’s there to tell?” McKinney spread his hands. “Who would believe you? That we’re the cause of the plague? That we intend to destroy the world? Only a crazy person would ever claim such a thing.”

She knew he was right, but at the same time she couldn’t simply *accept* it. And never, ever would she go with them – not just because of her dreams, but because they were murderers and psychopaths and she couldn’t even begin to picture an eternity in their company.

If there was a true hell, that would be it. A hell filled with liars and sinners. Liars who professed their love for her to gain her forgiveness, forgiveness for unforgivable crimes. Because she knew that was the reason Eric wanted her with him; to make him feel less guilty for what he’d done. She was his conscience, but she’d never give him absolution.

Never.

“Then I leave,” she said, “and I hope and pray that you’ll be punished for what you’ve done. I pray that eternal life will turn into eternal death, that you’ll eat each other like rabid dogs in your stone prisons, and that you’ll never, ever be allowed to inherit the Earth you’ve destroyed.”

She didn’t even understand where her words had come from, but they gave her the power she needed to stand up. She grabbed a coat and her wallet and pushed her way past McKinney and Anna to the door where the men in dark suits looked uncertainly at McKinney.

She glared at him, McKinney nodded, and they stepped aside.

“Sara,” began Eric, but she cut him off.

“Don’t. There’s no point. I’ll do everything I have to do to stop you, but I know I’ll fail...you’ll make sure of that, I know. Whatever made you think you could convince me to come with you, Eric? You’re a sadist. You’re a monster. I never loved you. I loved your strength, but now you’ve lost even that, and now you’re nothing. You’ve lost your power, because you *used* it, and you *abused* it. There’s nothing left of your soul. You’re dead.” She looked at each one of them in turn. “You’re all dead.”

With that, she turned and walked out, and she never glanced back. At the gate, they didn’t stop her, but the gates clanged shut the second she was outside.

A cool breeze blew her hair back, and she realised that she hadn’t stepped outside the Farmatek campus for a year...no, for more than a year.

There was a whole world out here. And she knew the plague

wouldn't touch her, because she'd dreamed that, she'd dreamed everything that was to come.

She looked north. First, she had to find a car. And then...

There was so much to do, so much to see, and so many dreams left to dream.

*

Beijing, China, July 30th 2019 AD

In most places, any attempt to impose an effective quarantine failed completely. Airlines and railways halted their services, and international borders were hastily closed.

But it was too late; almost every country and every major city on the planet had already been infected. The plague struck both industrialised and developing nations with equal force, yet it was the nations of the Western Hemisphere that suffered the most rapid spread. Their efficient transportation and communication networks were, ironically, their greatest failing.

As panic spread, people in densely populated areas attempted to flee the plague, and in doing so they contributed to the spreading of the disease to rural areas. No place was safe, and the plague killed indiscriminately.

For the first few weeks, while the infrastructure was still in place, doctors and scientists worked day and night to find why some were spared the effects of the virus, but they could find no apparent link between survivors. It seemed almost arbitrary who was killed and who was spared.

By the middle of the summer, seventy-five percent of the Earth's population had perished. The remaining twenty-five percent strove to keep some semblance of law and order and basic services operating. But it was futile.

There was widespread panic, and hundreds of thousands more were killed in riots, robberies, or in tragic accidents. The survivors were paranoid. A lot were armed, and most isolated themselves and what remained of their families in homes, bunkers, cars – whatever shelters they would come across – scavenging for canned food and water, and trying to establish a safe distance between themselves and the decomposing bodies

that littered all populated areas.

For those who stopped to consider their plight, it truly seemed to be the end of the world as we know it.

But if man is good at one thing it's adapting to harsh and inhospitable conditions. Slowly but surely some semblance of order returned to scattered communities across the world. Power generators were put back in service, providing blacked-out areas with electricity once again. Shops reopened, with basic necessities sold for sky-high prices or as barter for fuel and water. Lines of communication were reopened, and provisional governments were established.

For a while, it seemed that mankind would make it through the crisis. The world's population had been decimated, but still most people believed that in time the damage could be repaired and humanity could rebuild itself.

However, scattered across the globe in isolated locations were extremist groups and religious cults grown bloated and vast by paranoia and promises of redemption. In their eyes, the plague was a sign from God or Satan or alien invaders from distant stars that man's domination of the Earth was at an end, or that governments or multinational corporations had instigated the plague to wipe them all out. They did not want to rebuild society: they wanted to destroy what remained of it.

And while most of these cults and sects and extremist political organisations had neither the dedication nor, most importantly, the resources to follow through on their rhetoric, one did...

The tall, charismatic man leaned forward on the podium. He appeared to gaze intently at each and every person in the room. His eyes were piercing; blindingly white circles in a deeply tanned face.

They seemed to penetrate to the core of your being, she noted, your true heart revealed to him. And you rejoiced. If anyone could ever claim the title, he was truly a prophet. And he certainly had his disciples.

"Friends! Compatriots!" His words echoed across the gigantic auditorium where thousands had gathered in hushed reverence. For some, this was their very first glimpse of the man in whom they had placed their trust, their lives, and their entire future.

The Reverend paused for effect.

The silence was truly eerie, considering the size of the crowd, and

he seemed to appreciate the awe bestowed upon him, because a smile played across his lips. A small, almost imperceptible smile – imperceptible to most but her. She knew him. She could see right through him.

“We have waited for this moment to come,” he finally said, his low voice rolling across the rows of seats like an earthquake.

Did someone increase the volume? She turned towards the back of the auditorium where the technicians were ensconced in their studio.

He’d probably given them a signal. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed. His voice was a booming baritone, like the voice of God – electronically enhanced, but still cleverly done.

Farmatek had financed a lot of the expensive audio-visual equipment. Good thing the Reverend knew how to put it to its best use.

“In reverent anticipation of our destiny,” he continued, and she had to fight the instinct to clap her hands to her ears, “we have arrived here, at the cusp of time, for the endgame to commence.”

Again, he paused.

The man was good; she had to give him that. Of course, he’d be nothing without her and the resources she’d given him access to, but she’d let him believe otherwise, let them all believe in his divinity. They were playing right into her hands, the company’s hands – eating out of them, even – and it was a satisfying feeling. But the Reverend himself was still something of a wild card, even after all this time. He had his own agenda, and influencing this agenda was a continuing challenge.

She was pretty confident that everything would work out, but still...there was a knot in her stomach. What if he suddenly threw a curveball at the last minute? Would she still have time to correct matters before it was too late?

“I can sense the passion in all of you. I can sense your collective love.”

Would the crowd really fall for cheap gimmicks like that? She looked around, surreptitiously, and decided that yes, yes they would. They already were. They were eating it up like dumb sheep.

But he was really good. She *had* to give him that.

“I sense excitement, and fear, fear of an uncertain future. But fear not!”

Fear not? What was this, a Renaissance festival? His diction was perfect – the man was, after all, educated at Oxford – but...*fear not?*

Maybe that was his trick, however. Maybe corny theatrics was everything.

“We will remain together through all of eternity, my most beloved friends. We have already been judged and we have been found worthy! We walked unscathed through the plague while those around us were struck down by the righteous judgement of the Mother, and now we ourselves have been chosen to pass judgement. We will judge those who have incessantly raped Her, and the sentence is total annihilation!”

God in heaven above! This was too much. The man couldn't be serious. This was drama-school theatrics. And yet the rapt audience were swallowing it hook, line and sinker! They were screaming and shouting and applauding and jumping up and down in joy.

“I look around me and I see family,” he went on. “I feel love; there is untold joy in the companionship we share. To know that you will all lay down your mortal lives with mine brings tears to my eyes...tears of joy.”

The Reverend Xiao placed his hands on the shoulders of his two youngest sons who both stood erect and proud, one to his left, the other to his right, beaming their practised smiles at the audience. He knew the positive effect this would have on the crowd and on the cameras: to show that even his own children would, in these final moments, be sacrificed.

Oh, this was good. He was so, *so* good. She even felt a lump in her own throat. Her, of all people! The one person who had every reason to not fall for the manipulations of the Reverend, the person who was basically behind this entire freak-show, yet she was starting to buy into it?

Unbelievable. It couldn't be what he was saying, because the copy was *awful*. He'd obviously not used the speechwriters she'd provided him with this time around.

Not that it seemed to matter in the least.

“The Great Mother has been raped, my friends, for years and years, and when She passed judgement on us all, it was swift and deadly. But it has not been enough. No, not nearly enough, because those most unworthy have been spared and we must finish Her work.”

He suddenly turned to look at her, and she experienced a violent jolt of fear as his eyes glowed with an otherworldly light.

What was happening?

“Some think they can use us for their wicked, immoral purposes.”

He looked away again, but she still had a very strong desire to flee the auditorium.

If she did, however, everyone would notice, and she needed to stay anonymous.

I need to contact Cruz, she thought, *now, as soon as possible*. If something had changed... She knew that she was the last link in the chain, the final piece of the puzzle. The project would fail without the successful completion of this operation.

“The corporations are the greatest sinners,” the Reverend continued. “They enslave humanity, exploit Gaia, and strive for dominance regardless of the spiritual and environmental damage they cause.”

He extended his arm and as she realised that he was pointing at her, she felt for a brief moment as though a great void had opened beneath her and was about to swallow her whole. All the blood left her face and she got sick to her stomach.

He was pointing at *her!*

She couldn't stay. She had to leave. She had to leave *now*.

She stood up but strong hands grasped her and pushed her back down. The two men, one on either side of her, had obviously been seated there just to keep her from escaping.

“Your unholy gods have failed you,” he said, and now she knew he was speaking directly to her. “All of you! Well, tomorrow the executioner's axe will fall on your evil empires, reduce them to nothing but dust and rubble, and though Gaia our Mother will be decimated, she will be free of her plague – free of humanity! In time paradise will emerge again, and our souls will be reincarnated and we will enjoy an eternity in Her warm embrace!”

The crowd cheered, and she felt herself go cold. If she was unable to escape...if the Ark closed without her...

Pumped up on adrenaline, with an inhuman effort, terrified to the core of her soul, she tore herself free, surprising her captors, and began running towards the doors.

If she could only contact Cruz, they would get her out. The Reverend had confirmed his plans, it all began today, and her job here was done. He'd do what he was supposed to do; even in his victory he was playing right into their hands. And now, if she could only get out, she would be safe, if she could only—

The floor tilted unexpectedly up to meet her face and she felt her jaw shatter with the impact.

It felt as though someone had toppled a wall on her; she couldn't see, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't even feel anything. Her body had been buried under a wriggling mass of limbs and joints, of angry, screaming fanatics thirsting for her blood. A loud buzzing sound grew in her head as the air was pushed out of her lungs and red sparks flashed before her blinded eyes.

Her left hand was momentarily freed and she grasped for the mobile secured to her belt. She wasn't sure if the device had been damaged in the fall, nor was she able to speak a single word – her mouth felt as though she'd been chewing rocks, and she was swallowing a lot of blood – but as panic clamped its clammy fingers around her heart, she pushed the activation button and the quick-dial key for Annette Cruz's personal mobile.

The line crackled to life in her ear.

The plug was still active, the mobile still worked.

Her heart raced, but she sensed that life was slipping away rapidly. The crush of bodies around her had not abated; she was trapped like an animal in a trap, and she was dying.

“Yeah?” It was Cruz's voice.

She tried to speak but there was no air left in her lungs and all she managed was a strangled, wet croak.

Something clattered to the floor, and she knew that it was some of her teeth.

She didn't care.

Night was falling, and she didn't care.

“Noriko? Noriko, what's happening?” Cruz's voice was fading. “Is everything okay?”

Yes. Everything was perfectly all right.

Noriko closed her eyes.

*

Tekom, Mexico, July 29th 2019

Annette Cruz snapped the mobile shut and slipped it back in her pocket.

She'd tried calling for half an hour without getting an answer, and there were no replies to her messages. It wasn't like Noriko to go mute. Annette was worried, though not about Noriko. Agents in the field took their chances. No, she was worried about the ultimate stage of their project. Everything had to go smoothly in these final hours or else years – decades – of preparations would go to waste.

And it was *her* neck on the line. The board might decide to initiate the final phase of the Ark Project regardless of what happened in China, but if Noriko's work didn't pay off, Annette would find herself shut out and left behind to die with the rest of humanity.

The Ark would, to use a suitable metaphor, set off to sea without her. That, more than anything, frightened Annette to death.

She took in her Spartan home one last time, walking slowly from room to room, trailing her hand along the walls and brushing the dust off of furniture and picture frames she hadn't seen, much less touched, in months.

She'd elected to leave everything as it was and not bring anything with her. What was the point? It wasn't like she'd ever be able to move back in. If she...no, *when* she returned, there wouldn't be anything left of this place but dust.

The picture windows in the dining room looked down a lush slope to the valley below where a golden river snaked its way into the haze of the late summer's afternoon.

She'd grown up on the Yucatán Peninsula, and it was the place she always returned to when she felt disillusioned, depressed, or simply hungry for solitude.

Now, of course, she'd returned to say goodbye.

The windows faced southwest and as the large orange sun descended leisurely towards the green horizon, she breathed deeply of the world, taking in every smell and sensation associated with this place she loved.

Then she turned her back on it all and walked towards the rear porch where Farmatek's mini-chopper was waiting for her.

She had a long night ahead of her, and tomorrow might be even longer. They would all know soon if the project had succeeded, and if it had...there wasn't much time.

Not much time at all.

*

London, England, July 31st 2019

The gaunt man boarded the tube and seated himself next to the door.

The briefcase was on his lap. He was dripping with sweat, his white sleeveless shirt soaked through. The air was dead down here, heavy with the rank stench of humanity. The authorities had been able to reactivate the Central and Circle Lines after the plague abated, but the ventilation systems still went on the fritz daily.

London was not a pleasant place to live. He missed the salty breezes and cool rains of the Pacific Northwest. But he had a mission. And soon the heat and the sweat and the noise and the rude people wouldn't matter anymore. Nothing would matter.

The train began moving. Even now the car was crowded and he wondered what it'd been like before the plague.

The past few months, people had moved back into the city in droves – rats seeking the company of rats – and central London was rapidly becoming repopulated. The tube didn't run often, once an hour at the most, and, ironically enough, though the Earth's population had been cut down to less than a quarter of its former numbers, there was still mostly standing room only on the London Tube.

He shifted on his seat and frowned at the large woman who'd squeezed herself between him and the young black boy to his left. If possible, she looked even more uncomfortable than him. She was waving her hand at her face as though it could possibly do anything to relieve her of the discomfort.

He clutched his briefcase tighter and shut his eyes.

A drop of sweat ran down the right side of his face from his bushy eyebrow to the corner of his mouth. He licked it away. The salty taste made him long for a bottle of cool water, or even better, an ice-cream cone: Chocolate coating, sprinkles, strawberry and vanilla flavour...

His mobile chirped.

The network had been the first thing to be repaired, wherever repair was needed, and most nodes were now active again, even down here below the city.

He lifted it to his ear – it was an ancient model without detachable components – and said, “Terry.”

“Launch.”

It was just one single word but he still felt as though his head was about to explode.

“Right,” he said. “Thanks.” He disconnected.

He was about to put the mobile back in his pocket when he suddenly reconsidered and gave it to the woman next to him. Flummoxed, she accepted it.

“Do you have anyone important in your life?” he asked her.

“What?” she said. She appeared confused, staring at the device in her hand as though she’d never seen anything like it before in her life.

“Someone who’s important to you...a husband, a child. A parent?”

“Why?” Her eyes were wide now. The gravity in his voice must have had an effect on her.

He didn’t answer right away. The train was decelerating now as it approached the next station. He stood. As the train slowed to a complete stop and the doors slid open, he said to the woman, “Because there isn’t much time left.”

Her mouth opened part way as though she was about to say something, but then she just nodded, looked down at the mobile, and began dialling a number.

He left and ascended the stairs towards the street, carried along by the impatient crowd.

Launch.

He’d waited so long to hear that word, and now that it had been spoken he didn’t feel much of anything. Not even relief. Not even that.

He emerged into the blistering heat and humidity and looked around for a suitable location. There were a few benches right beneath a tall statue – he wasn’t sure who the statue was supposed to represent; he’d never cared much for the history of this country – and the benches were all empty.

He found himself a seat in the shade and sat down with the briefcase next to him.

Would they all follow orders? The others had probably received word concurrently with him. He wasn't sure how many of them there were in total, but he'd met five fellow brothers at the mission briefing, and they'd all been posted in European cities.

He wondered whether or not he'd have time to see the explosion. Would the sky light up in all the colours of the rainbow? He wouldn't get to see that, but he wished he knew how far away the glory of his work would be visible. Would they see it or feel it on the other side of the planet? Doubtful. Then again, they would hopefully have their own lights in the sky, their own brilliant, divine fireworks.

He opened the briefcase and looked at the shrine for the hundredth time.

It looked perfectly plain, nothing like he'd ever imagined. The only thing visible was a cover of brushed steel with a single keyhole – for some reason he'd always thought there would be two keyholes – and a small timer which would probably light up and start counting down when he put the key in.

A flock of pigeons landed a few meters away from him.

The birds gave him expectant, hungry looks. For a brief moment he regretted that he'd not brought any bread with him, but then he realised the absurdity of that thought and began laughing.

Passers-by gave him crooked stares. They looked at his briefcase, too. He clamped his mouth shut. He didn't need anyone to get too curious right now.

He pulled the key out from under his shirt. It was connected to a thin chain that he'd been wearing night and day for several weeks.

The key fitted perfectly into the hole in the brushed steel. He twisted it, and the shrine came to life. The display lit up and numbers appeared in a warm orange:

Five minutes and ticking.

Suddenly, the southeastern sky lit up as though someone had put a match to it. It was beautiful!

He gaped at the awesome display, the shrine momentarily forgotten.

So he wasn't the only one who'd followed the holy word from

above, blessed be the Reverend! The others were just as committed as him. They too were ready to die.

The starkly beautiful light washed overhead like a tidal wave, and on the streets people stopped and stared, pointing up, yelling and shouting. Some began running. Others cowered, while most simply gazed in wonder at the divine sight.

They were the lucky ones. They got to see it.

Three minutes.

If he had one regret it was that he'd never met the Reverend in person. But China was a long way away, and he didn't need to meet his saviour to know the truth of the holy one's words.

Two minutes.

He wondered briefly if America too was on fire now. Had his dogs been properly taken care of? Would they suffer?

One minute.

A little girl sat down next to him on the bench. The girl smiled. Her face was angelic and expectant. He smiled back at the girl. She pointed to the shrine, and asked, "Will it be pretty?"

He laughed softly, and reached out to stroke the girl's hair. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it will be."

Zero.

Chapter Eight

Los Angeles, California, August 1st, 2019 AD

It started getting cold just a few hours after the intense heat and winds had abated. It was the middle of the day and yet it was already growing darker. Not the comfortable dark of night, however. No, this was a grey dark, a dead dark. And accompanying the dark was a flurry of poisoned snow.

So this is how it ends, he thought. Not in fire and smoke but under a funeral shroud of snow. Funny, I never pictured it'd be anything like this. At least not in California.

He huddled in the corner where the wallpaper was still intact and pulled the soiled blankets around him.

Nothing to do now but wait for death, whichever guise it'd decide to appear in. If he were unlucky, he'd survive until the radiation sickness set in. His hair would drop out, he'd start vomiting, and his skin would flake and burn. Not a pleasant death by any measure of things.

Then again, maybe the cold would kill him first, or a rabid dog, or paranoid survivors, or...

There were so many ways in which death might arrive that survival was no longer an option. As for suicide, he'd ruled that out hours ago. He didn't have the guts. And if there happened to be a heaven and a hell, he wasn't about to risk eternal damnation. Better be on the safe side, now that he was so close. He'd pray, atone for his sins. Worst came to worst, if death was truly final, it was simply a way for him to occupy his mind before...before...

Better not to think about it, really. Although, strangely enough, the thought of death didn't really frighten him the way it would have only days earlier. Maybe it had something to do with being one of the few people left alive on Earth. Everyone he'd ever known was dead. Death wasn't really an end anymore, because the end had already been and gone without him. He was just loitering on an empty stage after the conclusion of the final act. The audience had left and the lights had been switched off. There was simply nothing left to do now but die.

The wind had picked up in the last few minutes, perhaps from some unseen explosion thousands of miles away, perhaps simply because it was getting windy. It was hard to tell where nature ended and man begun. With forces like these at play...

Atomic bombs! he mused. *Fire from the sky! Duck...and cover!*

He chuckled, and then the chuckle turned into a cough. He cupped his mouth as the coughing racked his body. When it stopped, he looked into his hand.

No blood. Was that a good thing or not? He wasn't sure.

With such a show of force, they'd really challenged nature, and in all probability humanity had won the battle. There'd be no future for anything or anyone on this planet.

Heck, even the cockroaches would have a hard time adjusting. What were they going to eat a decade from now, or a hundred years, or a thousand?

Eventually, inevitably, the Earth would be a barren rock. Like Mars. Maybe some day a spaceship from another planet would land on Earth, collect soil samples, shoot some video footage, and then depart without realising that a mighty civilisation had once called this their home.

Or maybe they'd find his skeleton, photograph it, perhaps even bring it back to their alien planet and build a true-to-life reproduction of how humans might have looked.

That'd be kind of cool; being the model for an entire alien species' perception of humanity, with a physique that could only charitably be described as average.

He barked a laugh but quickly put his hand to his mouth to stifle any further outbursts. He should really avoid making any noise...just in case.

But he had to admit it was pretty damn funny that he, the guy who always got picked last for softball, would represent the human race in some alien museum. If only he could tell his classmates, see their faces...

Their dead, scarred faces...

It was getting darker, or maybe it was just his eyes failing. He didn't know much about the effects of radiation aside from what he'd seen on TV, but blindness might very well be one of the first signs of radiation sickness. Going blind would be a real downer. After all, there wasn't much else to occupy his time. Not that there was much to see, but what little there was, he did not want to miss.

After all, what if, in death, you only had your memories to accompany you through all of eternity? If that was the case, he wanted as many memories as possible, and though grey snow in a dark wasteland wasn't much of a visual memory to keep and treasure, it was *something*.

Something was better than nothing at all.

He sighed. He wanted so much to hear another human voice it was almost scary. For as long as he could remember, he'd wanted to be left alone, and then all of a sudden, when he was finally totally and utterly alone, he desperately wanted company.

Isn't it ironic, he thought.

Who'd sung that song again? Some old band, he was sure, nostalgic crap his sister had listened to: Oasis, maybe, or another long-forgotten fad from last century currently experiencing an inexplicable resurgence in popularity.

Still; it *was* ironic.

He'd handled the plague pretty well, even when his Mom and Dad and sister had died within hours of each other. For some strange, inexplicable reason, he'd been spared. He hadn't even had a cold for over two years. And then all of a sudden he was completely alone. But he was resourceful, and he'd been able to hole up in the house with the dog for company for almost an entire year.

There'd been people around, of course, people he knew or at least recognised, but he didn't want to deal with anyone after his family was burned on the pyres. When things calmed down and the neighbourhood didn't so much resemble a war zone as a perennial construction site, he'd ventured outside and talked to some people. But they were all busy

getting their own lives back in order, and he'd turned down the few people who'd offered to take him in – older couples, usually, or parents who'd lost their children.

Now look at him. Even the dog was dead; ironically (there was that word again) it got run over only four weeks ago. Would the dog have been alive today if that hadn't happened? Or would it have died in the explosion? Luckily, he'd been down in the basement trying to listen to the radio. There hadn't been any warning whatsoever. Just a big, bright light – which he hadn't looked at – and then a horrible shockwave, a terrifying rumbling sound, and finally the heat...the searing, terrible heat.

He'd survived both the plague and the war. But what was the point? Now he was just waiting to die anyway, and he was completely alone.

At least his parents had had him around when they were dying, caring for them the best he could through that long painful night. His sister too, although it'd taken her longer to die, and in the end he'd simply given her a glass of water with fifty sleeping pills dissolved in it. Whether that had killed her or not, he wasn't entirely sure. But it'd made her go to sleep and, hopefully, alleviated some of her pain.

He sighed. Again.

This was just...boring. Why was he sitting here anyway? So what if someone saw him and tried to kill him? That'd be a quick and easy way to go.

Then again, did he really want to go wandering through the rubble and the smouldering wreckage? What if he broke his leg or something and was forced to die an ignominious death out there, in the open, with dirty snow falling on his stiffening body. No, right here was better. Right here was *home*. He'd always lived here, and by God he'd die here.

If he only had something to read or something...

He perked up. There was a thought.

He crawled out from underneath the blankets and limped towards what used to be his bedroom. He wasn't bleeding anymore, but his leg was numb, and he couldn't put too much weight on it before it started aching.

There wasn't much left of his stuff. He felt a moment's loss when he thought back on the boxes filled with rare and wonderful comic books, and then he realised how little it really mattered in the grand scheme of

things, and searched on.

He finally found what he was looking for in the corner right behind an old Star Trek lunchbox that was covered with ash. Almost intact, thank God. Of all the books in his room this had been his most treasured, and he remembered he'd left it on the floor the last time he'd read it.

He made his way back to his makeshift shelter and settled in. It wasn't all that uncomfortable, to be honest. In a way, it was almost cosy.

Now. Chapter one.

"A Long-Expected Party," he read out loud. He smiled to himself, and then he continued reading.

She came to him late the next evening, when the first of the winter storms began in earnest.

It was freezing cold, and he had lost all feeling in his fingers and toes. The book had dropped to the ground and he didn't have the energy to pick it up again.

He heard her before he could see her; his eyelids were frozen shut, and he had to massage them with his unfeeling fingers before he could see anything but a vague blur.

She knelt down in front of him.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Sara."

"I'm Alex," he tried to say, but his mouth and tongue were both numb, and his throat was dry, and all that came out was a croak.

Typical, he thought. Pretty girl comes to visit, and I embarrass myself.

She smiled at him – she really *was* beautiful. She had a heart-shaped face, long blonde hair, full lips, and lovely blue eyes.

She reminded Alex of his mother.

The girl, Sara, opened a knapsack he hadn't noticed until now. She lifted out a tall aluminium thermos, unscrewed the top – steam rose from the liquid inside – and filled it with what smelled like piping hot herbal tea.

Where'd she get that from? he wondered, but not for long, because she put the cup to his lips and he began to drink the sweetly bitter liquid, and after a few sips he started feeling a lot better.

"Thanks," he said, and then he suddenly had to cough, and he

coughed for a long while. There was blood, but not too much. Afterwards, he drank some more tea, and Sara gave him some freshly baked banana bread. She brought some clothes out of her knapsack and wrapped him in a thick winter coat and a woolly cover.

While he ate, she talked about trivial things, never a word about what'd happened to the world. She talked about where she was from, how old she was, her mother, her best friend back in England...and Alex listened intently, not wanting to miss a single thing. Here was the thing he'd prayed for the most, human company, and he didn't know when she'd up and leave again. Better make the most of it.

When he'd finished the bread and the tea, she gave him some pills that he swallowed without question. What was the worst that could happen?

"They'll help you feel better," she said, and he believed her. Why would she lie? "You've been alone a while, haven't you?"

He nodded. "Since the plague came to California. My family died. I stayed in the house, with Strider."

"Strider?"

"The dog. My dog."

"Oh." She paused. "Strider, as in Aragorn?"

He jerked upright. "You've read the book? Or did you just see the movies?"

She smiled. "Both. Many times. It's my favourite book, Alex."

"Mine too!" This was simply awesome. Pretty *and* cool. "Strider's my favourite character, by far. Who is yours?"

She considered this for a long time. "Sam," she finally said, and nodded. "He's the biggest hero of them all."

"Why?"

"Because he was willing to die for the person he loved the most. He's humble and loyal."

"Yeah." He was in love. "That's what I thought too."

"You want to scoot over?" She didn't wait for an answer, and slipped under the cover with him.

He stiffened, because he'd never been this close to a girl before, but when she wrapped her arm around him and put his head on her chest and began stroking his hair, he relaxed.

"I've been alone too, for a long time," she told him. "I'm glad I

finally found you. I would've come earlier, but I didn't know until last night."

"Know what?" he whispered.

"Where you were, silly," she said, and kissed his ear. Her lips were soft and warm, and a strange emotion washed through him; it wasn't lust, but it was close, and stronger. Much, much stronger.

He figured it had to be love.

She stayed with him through the night, and at some point before the new day dawned – there wasn't much to separate night from day anymore – she let him kiss her and touch her and make love to her. She moaned, once, but Alex knew that, for her, it wasn't about pleasure.

They made love twice more that day before she left.

She kissed him goodbye, and she was crying, but he told her that it was okay, that he couldn't go with her even if he'd wanted to. His leg was swelling and the pain was growing fiercer. When he coughed, there was blood, thick and black.

She gave him some more pills, and then she walked away without looking back.

Alone again, but this time it wasn't so bad. Perhaps because of what she'd said after that first time, when she held him close, her breath as sweet as cherry blossoms.

"There is hope," she'd told him in a confident voice. "Humanity will survive. I'll make sure of it."

He sighed, and closed his eyes.

It'd been getting steadily colder since the first snow fell, and he doubted that he'd survive the night. He hoped Sara would be okay, wherever she was heading.

No. *Hoped* was the wrong word. He *knew* she'd be okay. It was a certainty. There'd been something about her, something almost angelic...

"A goddess," he whispered, smiling. He pulled the cover tight around him and ate a piece of the chocolate she'd given him.

Now all he could do was wait.

And so the long winter began.

“If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.”

- *Anne Bradstreet*

Chapter Nine

Rubi-Ka, 29475 AD

“Omni bastards!” she spat, and scrambled back down into the trenches, descending the sandy incline until she was well below the security line and safe from immediate danger.

A few of her comrades had already started hauling their equipment towards the new bunker. Their position had been compromised. Again.

This was becoming a disturbingly commonplace occurrence.

The blast had sliced through the air only a few centimetres above her head, charging the molecules in the air, making her dusty, unwashed hair stand on end and causing her entire body to buzz with adrenaline. The smell of ozone was invigorating, but it was also the smell of death, and Jennifer Brody was all too familiar with death to enjoy the sensation. She'd seen her family murdered before her eyes by Omni-Pol fascists when she was ten years old.

The associations weren't pretty.

Besides, being fired on by mechanised units out to destroy you and everything you represented usually left a sour taste in your mouth.

Her unit was holed up just south of an old miner's town, now deserted – the Omni-Tek troops had massacred the villagers back in the last round of riots under the pretext of securing the realm from terrorism, but the town was a good strategic base – and they were in the process of excavating a new bunker that would hopefully hold up under the latest attacks from an increasingly arrogant enemy.

With the clans pulling back and gearing down – those clans who'd seen their entire forces decimated to the point of genocide were eager to sign ceasefire agreements – the Omnis were getting cocky. Eerily, and decidedly out of character, they appeared to honour the ceasefires, but Jen knew in her heart that it wouldn't, couldn't, last. When the last of the clans withdrew and agreed to cease all hostilities, Omni-Tek would descend upon them like carrion-birds upon the dead.

The clans would be defenceless and at the mercy of a mechanised army primed for slaughter.

She wasn't about to let that happen.

“Hey, Jen, you alright?”

Jennifer turned her head to make eye contact with her friend Adam. As always, he was grinning: nothing seemed to faze Adam in the least. It was almost as though he enjoyed being shot at.

Which, she quietly reflected, was a definite boon out here on the frontlines.

“A-okay, hotshot. You?”

Adam clapped a hand to his reinforced breastplate and burped, loudly. Jen grimaced. The odour was thick and putrid.

“What do you think, babe? Just loaded up on a bottle of beer and deep-fried leet meat five minutes ago. Particle beams are my favourite dessert.”

Jen just shook her head, and turned her attention back to the gun. It'd malfunctioned...again. Third time this week, and if they didn't give her a new one soon, she'd raise hell. She knew the brass appreciated her track record, but she wished they'd take better care of their grunts without being pestered about it...like actually issuing new guns before the old ones blew up. It wasn't as though they were hard to get. You could buy a decent weapon almost anywhere these days.

They'd actually lost a kid to a malfunctioning assault rifle recently. He'd carried a fifteen-year old Omni-Tek issue, polished to look reasonably new and loaded up with heavy-duty ammo. He'd pulled the trigger, and boom! The entire thing went ballistic, taking half the kid's head with it and scattering sharp metal bits everywhere.

Not a pretty sight, but even worse, they'd lost a good soldier...or at the very least a *potentially* good one.

Having kids go out that way was a sorry waste, especially when

those kids had just signed up for the good cause. It put a depressing spin on the whole situation: having to tell the kid's parents that, on the first day out of training their son was pointlessly killed by defective technology...that just plain sucked.

"Gun still acting loco?" Adam leaned in, squinting.

"Yup." She held down the charge-button and cursed when the gun reported empty. She'd just charged it a half hour ago, and she'd barely fired off a single shot. What the hell was wrong with this thing?

"Take it down to Bester. He'll get it going."

"I don't know if I want this thing 'going', Adam. I want a new one. One that won't kill me."

"Can't escape death, Jen. Not even you."

"Duh." She grimaced at Adam. "I don't need a lesson from you, kiddo. I'd just as soon prefer I didn't have to commit suicide. And I'd like to take some Omnis with me when I go...not some innocent unlucky bastard who happens to stand close when my gun blows." She winked at him, and he rolled his eyes.

The 'kiddo' part was a private joke between them. From the day they'd met at the boot camp and Jen found out she was Adam's senior by less than four days, it'd been her pet name for him. And like with all good pet names, it'd stuck, though she was careful not to use it when anyone else was around. Adam feigned annoyance, but secretly she knew he liked being called kiddo. Anyone else used the name, he was furious. With her it was okay.

In some ways, the two of them were like brother and sister.

At boot camp, in Sparta, during those arduous first few weeks, everyone – the two of them included – assumed that they were destined to become lovers. There'd been a very visible spark between them, a mutual sexual attraction, and there were even a few furtive kisses and awkward gropes in dark closets before they'd both realised they were better off as friends: romance had a way of complicating matters, especially on the battlefield...especially when they had to rely on each other in extreme and deadly situations.

He was a handsome guy, though, and what he lacked in smarts he made up for in loyalty and a wicked sense of humour. If this war ever ended in their favour, Jen figured, she might just try wooing him again...for old time's sake, just to see if there was something there.

Eventually – hopefully – she'd have a real reason to think about settling down, build a house somewhere green and humid, far away from the desert, get a cat or a dog, and squeeze out a couple of babies.

Last she heard, you needed a *man* to do that.

Well, no, of course she didn't; there were several other options. But why not do it the old-fashioned way? It was more fun than cloning and in-vitro fertilisation.

“Hey, you hear the latest?”

Jen shook herself out of her reverie. It was no good daydreaming like a civilian teenager when they were still on the battlefield. She strapped her rifle back on and raised herself into a crouch. The situation had quieted down, and it was a good time to move to a safer position before the tanks arrived.

“No. What's up?”

Adam spat out a thick, blue-black wad; chewed madra-leaves, aromatic but nasty-tasting...and incredibly addictive. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

So charming, she thought. *Be still my beating heart.*

“Well, the Omnis have started this new thing. They're offering full amnesty to all soldiers, all northerners, regardless of previous affiliations and convictions.”

“You serious? Damn.” Another well planned strike against the clans. Perfect timing, too, with the morale already on the decline. “Smart move,” she grudgingly offered.

“Yeah.” Adam nodded solemnly. “Boss Ross himself made the announcement this morning across the entire band.” He stretched his arms wide as though he were embracing the entire magnitude of Omni-Tek's media coverage. Even if his arms could stretch around the entire planet, he wouldn't get close. “He used swanky words like ‘family’ and ‘back to the fold’ and ‘forgiveness’...reactionary Fascist crap. Man's good, though. He almost got me thinking seriously about it...before I smashed the viewer to pieces.” He grinned a wicked grin.

Jen didn't see any reason to smile.

“He's circumventing the ceasefires,” she said. “Those agreements will be totally worthless now, with people going legit and returning to the cities. Some clans will be completely decimated and defenceless.” Jen shook her head. “This is no good. What's the Council planning to do

about it?"

Adam shrugged. "Nothing, at least not yet. They haven't even issued an official response. You know how it is. The Council's always slow in coming up with any kind of response to crap like this. They're useless in a crisis. And the Omnis are always ready to counter their political manoeuvring within hours."

"That's because they're a dictatorship, Adam," Jen said patiently. "We've got a democracy. And democracy can be slow. But in the long term—"

"In the long term we're dead," growled Adam. "What use is democracy if we're all buried six feet under?"

"What do you think we're fighting for?" She knew she was getting worked up needlessly, but they'd had this argument before, and she was getting tired of it.

Why couldn't he just understand? He wasn't the only one, though. A lot of soldiers felt the clans ought to adopt some of Omni-Tek's methods and strategies, and ignore the edicts issued by the Council urging caution and mercy. What would that accomplish?

"Do you want the clans to become just like the Omnis?" she said. "What's the point of being out here, putting our lives on the line, if that's the case?"

"I dunno..." He sniffed the air, an old soldier's habit; the tanks had a distinctive odour they'd all gotten to know all too well. "Maybe there's no point to it." Adam was becoming restless. She knew him well, and she knew his moods. "We should get going."

"Affirmative, kiddo. This position's hot. Estimate tanks in, uh, ten minutes? Thereabouts?"

Adam crawled up the incline and peeked over the edge. "Big wrong, girl. They're about six minutes away, seven tops."

"Dammit!" Still crouching, Jen hopped down to the reinforced surface of the trench and started moving after the main contingent of their group. Except for the two of them, the trench was empty. "You coming, kid?"

"If I could just get one good shot off at that thing..." Adam started pulling his rifle off his back.

She shook her head in disbelief.

Men!

“Adam! Let’s go. That’s an order! You trying to get killed?”

“Every day, baby!” He grinned, and climbed back down after her. “Every single day.”

The bunker was crowded. Off-duty clan soldiers – men and women, some sleeping, some eating, the remainder reading, linking up, listening to music, watching dirty flicks – occupied every square centimetre of the triple-tiered concrete structure.

The air was thick with the scent of sweat, blood and urine, and there was a steady hum of conversation, some of it professional, most of it personal. Brothers and sisters in arms sharing stories of the past few days in the field, seeking to keep the darkness and the nightmares at bay by making light of whatever traumatic experiences they’d witnessed this time round.

At some point in the past, this had been an administrative structure connected to a notum mining operation, but for the past few years, after the notum ran out, it’d been a clan stronghold, and a good one at that: as far as Jen knew, it’d never been compromised.

There wasn’t a whole lot left of the original décor; all the walls, doors, and windows had been reinforced, and all the furniture had been tossed out save for a few plastic desks used by the top brass. Instead, they’d brought in bunks and weaponry, and now the building – two thirds of it below ground, the last third well camouflaged and guarded around the clock – was a stronghold close to the border between the northern, clan-run territories, and the Omni-Tek controlled regions of the south.

Jen and Adam stepped gingerly around the present occupants, making their way to the back of the building and downstairs to the command centre.

There were reports to be made, assignments to receive, and one rushed pullback didn’t entitle them to any downtime, not now...especially not now. The war was more important than ever, and those clans still fighting couldn’t just take a vacation and expect others to fill in. They needed soldiers, and few soldiers were as qualified as the two of them.

“Good to see you guys get out of that mess.” The guard greeting them at the door to the command room was familiar to both. Before his injury, Mahavir Panja had fought his share of battles, often elbow to elbow with Jen and Adam.

“Hey Panja,” barked Adam, and clasped a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “How are things down here on the chicken farm?” In grunt-speak, the chicken farm was anywhere not on the frontlines.

“Dull.” The Indian-ethnic soldier, a young man in his late twenties wearing army fatigues and strapping a pulse-rifle, cocked his head at the closed door. “Commander’s in a foul mood...other than that, just another uneventful day on the farm.”

“What’s up?” Jen didn’t feel like facing the commander without a heads up on the situation. “What’s eating him today?”

“Boss Ross. The offer he made...you hear about it?”

“Unfortunately,” said Jen.

“It’s got a lot of people thinking. There are already reports coming in of loyalists putting down arms, surrendering to the Omnis. Grapevine says it’s the real deal; they confiscate the weapons, take down your name and personal details...and that’s it. In return, you get full amnesty, a new job, corporate housing if you need it—”

“In exchange for betraying your friends and neighbours,” Adam interrupted. “Sounds like a pretty stiff price to pay.”

“To you and me, sure, but others...” Mahavir shook his head. “For a lot of people it probably sounds a lot more attractive than continuing to risk their lives in the face of overwhelming opposition.”

“How about you? Do you think it sounds like an attractive proposition?” Jen knew that their friend was simply speaking the truth, but it still sounded like treason to someone like her, someone who went out onto the battlefield every single day to fight for the freedom of those who stayed behind.

“Of course not,” said Mahavir. “Why do you think I’m down here, Jen? The pay? The food? It ain’t all fun and laughs on the chicken farm.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean... It’s just that it’s easy to be deceived by the smell of honey, but people often forget that a bee stings.”

“Huh?” Mahavir looked confused. “What’s a ‘bee’?”

Adam laughed. “Jen’s all poetic, she reads too much.” He hit her upside her helmet, prompting a frown and a kick to his shin. “Can we go in?”

“Certainly. They’re waiting for you.” Mahavir punched a button to his left, and the door to the command room slid silently open. “Good

luck.” He gave them both a lopsided grin and resumed his sentry.

The room beyond the door was large and perfectly square. A metal walkway extended all the way around the room – a gallery of sorts – and two steep stairwells descended to the floor five meters below. A large display mounted on the far wall showed the populated areas of Rubi-Ka, with stark colours representing clan and Omni-Tek positions – blue and red. White symbolized neutral.

There were between twelve and fifteen people in the room, most of them junior-level brass engaged in briefing-sessions with their seniors.

There was a constant buzz in the control centre. This was the operational heart of their campaign.

Jen and Adam climbed down the front stairwell and approached a heavy-set man, tall and bald, in his early sixties. He awaited their arrival with cool poise, barking out brief answers to the constant questions put to him, and he simply nodded when they came close. They weren’t much for ceremony, any of them. They left that to the Omnis.

“Damn shame about the pullback,” he said. His voice was gruff, but not unkind. This was business. “We could’ve done without another setback like this one, especially now. I’m guessing you heard about the latest OT disinformation campaign?”

“Yeah,” said Adam. “We heard.”

“Philip Ross is a smart one.” The man folded his arms, and sighed. “He’s coming across as reasonable and reconciliatory. Makes us look bad for fighting back. For once, I think, OT’s got the PR advantage. Public opinion is turning. Northerners not involved in the day-to-day fighting are gravitating towards the Omnis. As for those who like to stay neutral...”

“There’s no such thing, commander,” said Jen. “You’re either with us or against us.”

The commander laughed, and clapped a hand to Jen’s arm. “You’re right. I keep forgetting.”

Commander Gerard didn’t wear a uniform. He didn’t have to. He was the kind of man who exuded rank and charisma in his boxer shorts. He never wore a uniform, but if you asked anyone who’d ever received an order from Gerard, they’d swear to you that he *had* been wearing one, and that he was ten feet tall and wide as an ox. You didn’t say *no* to Gerard. You answered every question and you obeyed every

command. Not because you were afraid of the punishment, but simply because the man had such presence and strength of will that the very thought of disobedience seemed nothing but pure folly.

Gerard gestured for the two of them to sit down at the conference table in the centre of the room. He joined them, and folded his hands in front of him. Jen and Adam shared a quick look: something big was going down.

“I need you two for a very special mission,” the commander said.

“Sir?” In situations like these, Jen was the one who spoke. Adam kept his mouth shut and his ears open.

“I want Ross taken down.”

“Philip Ross?” Adam broke protocol, but Jen could understand why. This *was* big, and entirely unexpected. The resistance never focused on single human targets, not even high-ranking officers. *Especially* not civilians, no matter what their positions were in the corporate pyramid. “You want Philip Ross assassinated?”

“I want him taken down with extreme prejudice, soldier. I want that man eliminated, and I don’t care a hoot about what this does to our approval ratings. We’ll take a major dive in the short run, but in the long run...if Ross gets any smarter, the game’s up. We’re dead. He’s now our number one target, bar none. And you two are the best soldiers I’ve got.”

Jen was stunned. A part of her was pleased that the commander had chosen *them* for a mission like this. Another part of her cringed, realising what was at stake.

If they succeeded...

The effects would reverberate through history. And the war might very well be over, because Omni-Tek couldn’t simply ship in another Philip Ross, or promote some suit from corporate. Ross had real power, the kind you had to earn, the kind that didn’t come by way of an official-sounding title.

In many people’s eyes Ross *was* Omni-Tek. Without him...

This was a whole new ballgame.

“What’s the plan?”

Adam was already fired up, she could tell. This was the kind of thing he lived for. He didn’t even think about the consequences; if it sounded important, if it offered a challenge, if it got his heart pumping, he was on it like a cat on a mouse. He was the perfect grunt. They made

a good team, they really did.

“Very little so far,” Gerard said. “We want you two to take an active part in the preparations. Covert ops have been looking at scenarios for a while, way before this latest move, everything from remote droids and clones to blowing up Omni-1. But I think we need to think more traditionally. We can’t afford to risk civilian lives. If that happens, it won’t matter if we take out Ross or not. We’ll lose for sure. No, we need two people to go in there, get close, and take him down cleanly and quietly. Nothing fancy. Nothing messy.”

Adam bristled with pride. “We can do that, sir. No problem.”

“With all due respect, sir,” she shot in, “the situation does present a problem. Several problems.” She glared at Adam, but he just shrugged. “Adam’s rearing to go, I know, but I’ve got my reservations. Like how do we get into Omni-1 in the first place? We’re not exactly welcome down there, and we’re not blanks. Someone will recognise us.” The commander was about to say something, but she held up a hand. She wasn’t finished. “There’s a bunch of good solutions, I’m sure. I just want the record to show that I’ve got my doubts we’ll ever pull this off.” She paused. “Doesn’t mean I’m about to say no, sir. There’s no way I’m letting this opportunity pass me by.”

Gerard nodded slowly. “I wouldn’t have let you say no, Brody, but I appreciate your candour.” He stood, and Jen and Adam did the same. “We’ll sit down after dinner. You two get yourself a proper meal and some downtime. Expect to ship out in a few days.” He glanced at the wall display; the red sections were starting to eat into the blue ones. “Say goodbye to your friends, soldiers. This will be a high-risk mission – you both know that. We’ll be keeping you isolated from tonight on. Not that we don’t trust you, but we can’t risk you two talking in your sleep.” Gerard smiled warmly. “I appreciate your bravery, soldiers. After this one, you’re taking some well-deserved time off whether you want to or not. Dismissed.”

With that, the commander returned to his work, and Jen and Adam climbed back up to the living quarters. They were both hungry, and dinner had been served.

They didn’t talk while they wolfed down the bland reet stew, but once in a while they gave each other a look that spoke volumes.

They were going into the lion’s den, and their actions would

decide the future of the entire planet.

This was *exactly* why they'd signed up with the resistance in the first place.

*

Between the stars, 28911 AD

The ghosts had become unusually pervasive.

Everywhere he turned their blank, white faces stared back at him, mouths agape in silent screams. Wild, desperate eyes accused him of bloody murder and pleaded with him for release.

Turning away accomplished nothing; the ghosts would materialize wherever he looked. Shutting his eyes only opened his ears to their whispered, disembodied voices. He could wring his hands and curse God however much he wished – the ghosts would not leave.

But despite the psychological torment, the sleepless nights and restless days, David could simply not endure linking up, even though he knew it was the only sure way to escape the ghosts. He'd spent much of the past week in the biofoam chair, planning the remainder of the journey, preparing for the stasis, considering the future, and he was sick to his stomach.

Yet, those dead eyes, those unrelenting voices...

"Stop staring at me!"

He wasn't shouting at anyone or anything in particular, and David knew that, to an outside observer, he'd appear totally and utterly insane: the ghosts were for his eyes only, and when they whispered, the words were in his head.

Not that there would or could be prying eyes out here – not living ones at any rate; at least not *human* ones – but he wouldn't have cared even if there were. Had there been people around, he would still have yelled at the ghosts.

As far as he was concerned, having lived as long as he had, a man no longer cared much about what others thought of him. David had held the undivided attention of an entire planet for so many years that, in the long run, it didn't matter what people said about him or wrote about him. In the end, he hoped, he would be remembered for his leadership, for his

unique heritage, and for his hand in aiding the Solitus escape from slavery under the Omega and win their freedom.

That was all that mattered. Everything else was inconsequential.

He'd been called crazy before. He could live with being called crazy. What he could *not* live with were those dead, black eyes staring at him. He was able to turn away from the soldiers and the civilians who had died in the wars. They were bothersome and intrusive, and they made it very hard to do anything except wait for the next ghost to appear. But when those eyes and voices belonged to the only two people he'd ever truly loved...

That was intolerable.

The way he remembered them – his memories were still vivid, even after so many years – they were both startlingly beautiful: His wife Nika with her long hair, black as a raven's, her soft and delicate features and heart-shaped face, her full lips, petite breasts, her elfin body. And his daughter, Amy; in his memories still the trusting and adoring eight-year old she'd been before they'd started to drift apart.

In fact, David could barely remember the grown-up Amy. They hadn't had much contact. She'd turned remote and embittered after her mother's death, and David knew Amy always blamed him for what had happened. She was a true daughter of war, and in the end it was war that claimed her life.

The last surviving warlords knew that their reign was at an end, and that the world was uniting behind David, but that didn't stop them from one last act of desperate vengeance. They took his daughter and made an impossible demand: that the world government relinquish control over annexed territories and pull back their peacekeeping forces, or Amy would die. Such an action would have doomed millions to die in another war and David had no choice. He pleaded with them, threatened them, but in the end he could not negotiate with terrorists...not when he was supposed to be the leader of humanity.

They sent him her head before his elite squads got to them. He wept for her and cursed the souls of her captors, but the truth was that he was just as responsible for her death as they were.

Like with her mother, David hadn't been there for Amy when she most needed it.

Now all that was left of them, of both Amy and Nika, were ide-

alised images harking back to some moment of perfect synchronicity when all seemed right with the world. And though he knew his wife and daughter were ghosts of his own making, there were times when he felt he could simply reach out and touch them both with his bare hands.

But he never tried, because he feared what might happen if he did. Perhaps he'd go insane, lose that last, tenuous connection with reality and emerge, stumbling, into a greater darkness on the other side. He couldn't afford that.

Strike that: *mankind* couldn't afford it.

As far as he was concerned, madness would provide welcome relief. The only thing that anchored him to sanity was the debt to his people.

And besides, what would be accomplished by reaching out to a ghost? It wasn't even a real ghost – if there were such things – just shattered fragments of his fevered imagination. What would such an action accomplish?

In order to face the future, he would have to surrender his past. Though it was understandable that being cooped up inside this...this coffin for so many years, the things he'd left behind would eventually return to haunt him.

If only they weren't so intrusive, so persistent. If only they'd confined themselves to his sleeping dreams. If only.

During the past week, he'd edged ever closer to his destination, and now, with the planet having grown large enough to be seen through the onboard telescope as a distant pinprick, only slightly less black than the emptiness around it, he knew that his journey – at least the spatial part of it – was approaching the end.

But there was still the temporal part of the journey to consider. He'd arrived early for the party, so to speak, and now he'd need to be patient and wait for events to catch up with him. Humanity had just begun colonising Rubi-Ka – he'd picked that name up on regular radio frequencies not long after his navigational arrays had located the correct solar system. It was the first communication he'd intercepted in aeons – though the transmissions were already decades old by the time they reached him, of course – and he'd known instantly and instinctively which planet they'd been speaking of.

The time was right, the stars spoke true, and it was directly ahead

of him.

After all, this very planet, this *Rubi-Ka*, had been his ultimate destination long before mankind began their colonisation of the galaxy.

He'd continued to monitor the frequencies regularly, but transmissions were relatively scarce. He knew that most of their communication would occur through more contemporary means. They'd had faster-than-light travel for so long now, while he was still restrained by the archaic technology on board his ship, by millennia-old scientific theories.

David sighed. There'd been a lot of sighing lately. It'd become a regular substitute for any kind of real emotional release.

Restraint and control, he reminded himself. *Always restraint and always control*.

There was so much to worry about, so many things to do and so little time to do it in, he really couldn't afford to get emotional.

Well, alright, there was still time, though time in itself was becoming a highly abstracted concept. He wasn't even sure what year this was, because he'd left the required references behind when he left Earth. Time inside this ship was different from time outside it, which, again, was different from time back on Earth and time on *Rubi-Ka*. Time was relative. And relative to time, David existed in a sport of temporal void from which he'd eventually – hopefully – emerge.

In fact, his ship was a time machine just like Einstein had predicted long ago. His ship was a time machine – a time capsule – and he himself a relic from the past on his way to briefly touch humanity in the present, and then he would travel onwards again into...what exactly? The future?

Would he pass the present by and go on, untethered by time and space?

He wasn't entirely certain what he'd been told, what it all meant. Aside from his strange bond with the planet *Rubi-Ka* and his mission on that world, everything else was vague and far beyond what he was capable of comprehending at this point in his existence. Even the concept of corporeality, of life and death, would soon be twisted and transformed by science. He would die, and yet he would live.

Eventually, he might live forever, but never again would he be truly alive.

Truth be told, that was exactly how he felt now.

He lifted his head. He'd been sitting on the soft, padded floor in the corner. There was a porthole above and in front of him. Pale stars rolled slowly by. Several hours had passed while he'd been mulling over his situation.

What a complete waste of time.

He shook himself, and looked around. He was alone. The ghosts were gone for now. But they'd no doubt return.

David rose and stretched his stiff limbs. Sometimes he could feel the weight of the ages on his shoulders, and sometimes, like right now, he just felt like a man who'd waited in line for way too long: waited in line for the doors to open, for the show to start so that he could play his part and go home at the end of the performance.

It was hard to comprehend exactly how and why he, of all people, had ended up here, how *humanity* had ended up on the other side of the galaxy. Everything and everyone appeared to congregate on a single point in space, a planet that still remained a mystery to him and to all of humanity, though obviously not to the diverging forces that stood above and beyond them all.

They had known about Rubi-Ka – or at least the planet that humanity had chosen to name Rubi-Ka – for a very, very long time. *They* knew about its secrets and its incredible gifts. And *they* knew that Rubi-Ka would be the playing field for the most crucial war in human evolution; it would end here or it would begin anew here. And he would play a part in deciding which of the two would come to pass. He knew that others would be there to fight against him; humans out of time, ancient and cruel, weathered by the ages, grown tough and smart and infinitely crafty.

Another sigh escaped his lips before he was able to stop it.

Would that he could only regain some of his spirit and enthusiasm, some of the willingness to fight, to endure, and to triumph that he'd possessed so long ago, when the Solitus were still enslaved and an entire people looked to him as their reluctant messiah and prophet. His optimism had saved him before; he needed it now more than ever. But it had to come naturally.

Right at this moment, he just wanted to sleep.

He crawled through the interconnecting shafts to the living quarters – the seconds spent unconstrained by gravity were a welcome distraction – and flopped down on his bed. He wasn't tired as much as he was

exhausted, and he needed a diversion, something to keep his mind from wheeling so that he could finally find the rest that he craved.

David touched the panel above him and the vertical holographic screen flickered to vivid life in front of his eyes. Hundreds of thousands of choices were available, entertainment and information and art spanning millennia: stories and histories, legends, myths, some modern, some ancient. Most of the material was from the era between the end of the long winter to the onset of the emancipation wars. The age of warlords hadn't yielded a whole lot of art or entertainment, and the years between the end of the war and his departure from Earth had been spent rebuilding society.

But some stories had been told even then; to fill holes left by the dominance of the Omega and their control over all media, storytellers had gone back through history to the dawn of the Solitus, to where records were spotty but oral traditions had made certain the tales were told and retold over and over again, from generation to generation.

David knew the stories well. While his own mother hadn't exactly been one to tell bedtime stories – and Emilie Marlin would never have chosen these tales to tell her son anyway – he'd picked them up from his wife when she'd told them to Amy, as Nika's mother had done to her. Some of the stories were probably true (at least in parts), some were not, and though there was no way of knowing which was which, did it really matter?

The era known by the Solitus as the long winter had been the darkest hour of mankind, and yet from that age had sprung the seeds for the post-Omega Earth that had endured and prospered to this day. The seeds to stories that were sown back then, stories that had grown strong and significant over time, were beyond truth; history or not, they spoke of the fire in the hearts of humans, of their ability to struggle on despite the odds, of the will to survive and to succeed.

He selected a fictionalised account of life during those wintry years, one that he recalled vividly from cosy evenings before the roaring fire with Nika and Amy, and the pictures swam to life in front of him, white, cold, and desolate.

The story began playing out, surrounding him in its imagery and sounds, but it didn't take long before David's eyes fluttered and closed, his mind drifted off, and the dreams began...

“History tells how it was. A story, how it might have been.”

- *Alfred Andersch*

“There are two tellings to every story.”

- *Irish Proverb*

Chapter Ten

Adrienne, the First Story

Earth, 2798 AD

she had golden hair, long, tanned legs, and a face like an angel. Her name was Adrienne. She lived in the village across the Silver Lake, and the first time I saw her she tried to murder me.

My name is Vincent. Together with my brother Marcus, I gather cockroaches for my family. We travel far by foot, across the Sandy Plains to the deserted cities by the coast, to trap and kill the roaches. When we travel, we are gone for a long time – sometimes months – and if we do not find any roaches, our family starves. On a good day, in the wreckage of the past, we may find as many as a hundred roaches. On a bad day, we find none. Lately, there have been more bad days than good.

Marcus is my younger brother by three years. I have twenty-seven brothers, and fifteen sisters, but Marcus is the only one related to me by blood. I had a younger blood sister, Elisa, but she died from the yellow fever a year ago this month. She wasted away over time, and one day when I came back from a long trip west there was a new grave on the hill above the village. Every time a girl dies, we fear ever more for the future. There are tribes off east that grow in numbers while we dwindle every year. The elders say we may have to move, but we do not wish to do so, because we have been here a long time. Since before my memory, this has been our home.

Adrienne was a water-gatherer. She would work with the ones who dig into the soil to find water that has not been contaminated. She was slim and light and the men would lower her into the deep well holes to test the soil for water. She was very good at finding fresh springs, and her tribe believed her to be charmed. They thrived; of the

tribes we traded with, hers was the only one that would grow larger each full moon. Despite her seventeen years, Adrienne had not yet born a child, and for as long as she could work, she would not, because in giving birth, she might perish, and her water-talent with her. As a worker, she was of more value than she would ever be as a woman.

On the day we met, I had strayed too far south returning from the west, and I had landed on the far shores of the Silver Lake where my tribesmen were unwelcome except to trade and to meet in counsel. Marcus was a day's journey ahead of me, and my current predicament had come about when I had attempted to catch up with him by taking a different path across the mountains. When I realised where I was, it was too late to go back; I would have to travel almost a week longer, and my water was running short. By staying on the path, I could circle the lake and be back with my family only a day later than planned. So I went on, but travelled cautiously so as not to be noticed, and I walked more by night than I did by day.

I came on her by accident one morning. She was alone, searching for good spots to dig wells, and I saw her before she saw me. It was a clear morning, and the sky was a bright, clean turquoise. For the past week, it had been snowing heavily, and the going was tough, and so her presence did not register with me until she was only twenty or thirty meters away. She was wearing a thick animal fur, and at first I considered stalking and killing her to retrieve her coat, because it would be worth a lot to my family. Then she turned and I looked into her eyes. They were green, like the grass in the photographs Marcus keeps in his chest, and they flashed with quick anger. I tensed myself to run, because I expected her to call out for help, and I could not be sure that her tribesmen were not close. But she did not call for help, but only looked at me with her angry eyes. Cautiously, I raised my hand in greeting, for I was no longer considering murder; she was beautiful, but different from our women who are dark-haired and short, and brown-eyed, and in my mind there were already thoughts of her carrying my children.

Then, all of a sudden, she pulled a slingshot from inside her coat and aimed it at me. I carried a weapon too, but I would not have time to draw it before she could shoot, and I could tell that she had a steady arm and she could probably murder me with one rock. Inexplicably, this made me desire her even more, although she was seconds away from ending my life. I tried to speak:

"Stop! My name is Vincent, and I come from across the Silver Lake where my tribesmen keep their tents."

She did not lower her slingshot, but neither did she fire. Her eyes were questioning, but she kept her silence.

"I came across the mountains." I cautiously pointed back west, towards the

blue ridges on the horizon. "In the winter storms I took a wrong pass and ended up on the far shores of the lake. I mean you and your tribesmen no harm. My name is Vincent," I repeated. "What is yours?"

She fired off a rock.

In the days that followed, I came to realise that she missed murdering me for a purpose, although at the time, I thought I had been lucky, and that she meant to see me dead. The small rock struck my left temple, and I hit the ground. Everything went black. For a while, there was a loud buzzing noise, but then that too faded away and I cannot remember anything that happened until I woke up in a dark tent some hours later.

"He is waking." It was a female voice, but by the sound of it, not the girl I had encountered earlier. I turned my head.

"What were you doing on our land?" I was looking at a tall man that I vaguely recognised as Tom Finn, a tribesman elder who had visited our tents on several occasions. Behind him was an older woman. She cast a quick, worried glance at me, and left.

"I took the wrong pass," I explained, "and ended up on this side of the lake. I apologise, but I did not want to turn around and spend another week on the road. I thought I could pass through your lands unnoticed."

"You thought wrong," said Tom Finn. "We do not appreciate unwanted intruders on our land. You might have been killed. Count your lucky stars that you were not." He paused. "You may still regret your journey here, however. We have yet to discuss what shall be done with you."

I said, "Tom Finn, our tribes are not at war, so why not let me go? I will leave your lands within the day, if you let me."

Tom Finn shook his head, and his face grew dark. "Eighteen days ago," he began, "my tribesmen met with your tribesmen where the cold river runs into the lake, to trade food and tools. I was not there, because my wife is with child, and she could deliver at any moment." He stopped, rummaged in his pockets for his pipe, and lit it, all while watching me intently. When he continued, his voice was grave, and I felt a shiver run down my spine: "My people never returned. We do not know what happened to them, but there are many rumours. Most suspect your family. . . that they grew greedy, decided not to honour the trade, and turned to murder."

I bolted upright and hissed, "My tribesmen are honourable!"

My visitor blew smoke out of his mouth and shrugged. "That may yet be so, but

until we know for certain what has happened, you may not leave, and you will be our prisoner. Stay here. Do not leave this tent, or the guard will slay you on sight." He rose, but before leaving he offered me one last admonishment: "If we find that your family has committed grave insult on mine, you will be garrotted before a full gathering of the tribe, as is custom with prisoners of war."

I spent the next two days alone, receiving visitors only when I was fed, and even then none would speak to me. I did not hear anything of what was occurring outside, and I feared for myself and for my family.

Then, on the third day, as I woke early in the morning, there were voices outside my tent:

"Is this where he is kept?" The voice was familiar, but in my current state, I could not place it.

"You may not enter." This was the voice of the guard who was posted outside.

"Your tribesman Tom Finn gave us leave to do so. Stand aside!"

Someone passed through into the twilit tent; I squinted against the bright light silhouetting the familiar shape.

"Vincent? Vincent, are you all right?"

It was Marcus! A second person entered behind him, and now that my eyes were accustomed to the light, I could see that it was another one of my tribesmen, John Pook.

"Marcus!" I called out. "John Pook! It warms my heart to see you both!"

I embraced my blood brother, and clasped arms with my friend, before sitting back down and gesturing for them to do the same.

"What news?" I asked. "I have heard little since I was imprisoned here, but they told me that our tribes may be at war. Judging from your presence, I gather that this is no longer true?"

"We thought likewise," answered John Pook. "Our traders disappeared after a rendezvous by the river, and we feared they had been murdered." He paused. "Turns out that they had been, but not by whom we first suspected."

Marcus cut in: "When I arrived home, there was great worry amongst our tents. Five men and three women had left more than a week ago and had yet to return. There was fear of war. Spears and slingshots were prepared, and when you did not return, we thought that you had fallen."

"We knew that we would stand no chance against our enemies," continued John Pook. "They are greater in numbers, and they are better fed. But we would not stand

down either, not in the face of aggression. And so we came south, across the lake—“

“Across the lake?” I exclaimed. “No one crosses the lake!”

Marcus glanced at John Pook proudly, and then said, “We did. On three separate occasions, we were almost swallowed by the roaming ice. But we persevered. We came to the far shore last night, and we snuck up on the tents to spy on them. It was there that we heard Tom Finn speak of his worries, and we came to understand that they had lost their traders too, and that they were not waging war on our family.”

“We made ourselves noticed,” said John Pook, “and we spoke with Tom Finn. We have agreed to travel west, a party of our tribesmen and theirs, to survey the trading outpost and to find out what happened to the traders.”

“And he also told us that they had captured you!” said Marcus. “What were you doing this far south, Vincent?”

“I got lost,” I said, but I spoke softly.

“Say what?” teased John Pook. “The great tracker Vincent, lost?” He laughed. “Well, tribesman, rise! Let us see if you still have the spirit to join us on our quest east, to the river.”

Outside were gathered a great number of people, as well as three dressed for travel: Tom Finn, another man, a brute by the looks of him, and the girl who had struck me down three days before; Adrienne. They would accompany us to the trading outpost, and we were to leave that day, before noon.

Tom Finn spoke to his tribesmen, and said, “My heart is warmed by the knowledge that we are not at war with our friends from the north! But I worry that there may be a new threat at large in our lands, one that murders indiscriminately, and so we must east, to find and identify this threat, and, if possible, to eliminate it. May your prayers be with us.”

And so we left.

That first day I attempted repeatedly to speak with the girl Adrienne – I had learned her name from Tom Finn – but she stayed away and often strayed from the party to explore. I learned much about her from her friend Wigand, the third tribesman, and discovered the reasons why she had joined us: First, she was believed to be charmed, and would thus bring us luck on our quest. Second, her blood mother and blood brother were both traders, and they were amongst the vanished tribesmen. And third, when she had heard that I would be going, she had insisted on joining the party, although I could not get Wigand to tell me why. Maybe he did not know; but I had a feeling there was something he had not told me.

The second day I rose early to urinate, and I found Adrienne holding the last watch of the night. She was alert, but her eyes looked tired. I offered to take over and let her go to sleep for a little while, but she refused. I sat down next to her and waited for her to speak. It took a while, and the sun was about to rise above the horizon – the good weather was holding, to our luck – when she at last turned to me and said:

“You were going to murder me.”

I kept my quiet for a few moments, before answering her. “Until I saw who you were; maybe.”

“You do not know who I am!”

“When I saw your face and eyes, all thoughts of murder were swept away.”

“Why?”

“You have green eyes and golden hair. You are lovely.”

“Bah! That is all you think of. To make me yours?”

“I wish to know you.”

She fell silent. The sun, huge and red as blood, rose quickly, as if spurred on by an army.

“Adrienne.”

She looked at me.

“Why did you not kill me?”

She turned away. Again, she did not speak for a long while. Then: “Because I knew who you were.”

“You had seen me before?” I was confused. Until our meeting four days previous, I had never laid eyes on her.

“In my dreams,” she answered. “I dream truthdreams.”

Shocked, I rose, and backed away. To dream truthdreams is a mutation; both a curse and a blessing. I had never met a truthdreamer before, but I heard the tales from distant tribes, told around fires in hushed voices. Truthdreamers were powerful, and dangerous, because they knew your heart; they could decipher your thoughts, and take from you your every hope and wish.

“Sit,” she commanded. Stunned, I did as she said, and she continued: “I only dream of things that affect me, and of water. I have not told anyone else this and you must swear to keep it a secret!” I did, and this seemed to calm her. “It is not often that I have such dreams, but I remember you clearly, as if we had met in bright daylight. I knew you would come that day, and so I was not surprised. But I did not know if you would kill me or not...” Her voice trailed off. She looked towards the huddled shapes of our party. “And I knew that if you did not kill me, we would become lovers. I do not

know which I feared the most; death. . . or being your wife."

I was speechless, and then the others rose, and we ate, and Adrienne and I did not speak any more that day.

The following day, early in the afternoon, we crested a hill just west of the trading outpost. Wigand and I snuck close to the ridge to scout the terrain. We saw nothing in the valley below, aside from the shack where the traders would meet. The only sound was that of the river water churning the ice floats like cogwheels in ancient machinery. It was a grey day, but visibility was good, and yet we saw no sign of our tribesmen, living or otherwise. If the traders had met at the outpost, they were no longer there.

We signalled for the others, and started down the hillside towards the outpost. We had to be cautious, because we were not following the path and the ground could be treacherous. At one point, Marcus almost fell into a hidden chasm, but he threw himself down and caught the edge, and Tom Finn helped him up. We had no further incidents on our descent. I tried to stay close to Adrienne, hoping that she would speak to me of her dreams, but she looked distracted and kept her distance. I had thought much on what she had told me the previous morning; that she would either be my lover or that I would kill her. I did not understand it, but I knew better than to doubt a truth-dreamer.

We were only a few hundred meters away from the outpost when John Finn raised his hand in a warning gesture, signalling for us to stop. We did so, and waited while he sniffed the air. Then he turned to us, and said:

"Blood."

I stood and drew the chilly breath through my nose, and then I smelled it too. The wind had turned and was now coming from the east, from the shack. The unmistakable copper smell of blood was in the air. Somewhere close, there might be evidence of a bloody battle.

Tom Finn, John Pook, and I approached the shack while the others stayed concealed in the snow. The stench grew more rancid the closer we came, but as of yet we could see no sign of a struggle. I also noticed that the shack seemed burned in circular patches scattered about the exterior walls, and I pointed this out to my two companions. Unlike a fire that would be indiscriminate in its destruction, these patches seemed deliberate, as if by a weapon. But we knew of no such weapons, nor of anyone who might possess such a destructive force.

When we arrived at the shack, we could no longer see our tribesmen, nor could we hear or see anything else of note. Yet the stench was there, the metallic, sickening smell of blood. Whatever the source, it was inside the shack. There was no use in hesi-

tating, so we entered.

There was blood everywhere. The floor was soaked in it, the walls splattered with it. I took one glance at the inside of the shack, and then I felt my stomach turn and I lurched outside and retched. John Pook followed close behind, tossing up his breakfast in the pure, white snow: Only Tom Finn stayed inside, and even his breathing sounded ragged and sickly.

Although it was probably only a short while later, it felt like ages before Tom Finn emerged from the shack. He looked worried, and distracted, and pale. He signalled for the others to join us, and then spoke gravely of what he had deduced from the bloody scene.

"The traders were attacked," he began, "that much is quite obvious, although I can not as of yet tell you who attacked them." He pointed at the circular black patches on the exterior walls. "There are marks like these inside the shack as well, with traces of blood around them. I think they are from a powerful weapon, the kind of which I have never seen nor heard of. This is not the work of any tribes in our lands; if tribesmen did this, they must be far away. But I do not think they were tribesmen." He gestured to the ground around the shack. "It has snowed a lot here in the past few days, and all tracks are gone, but if they were not tribesmen, we should be able to track them. Men with weapons as powerful as these are bound to be careless about concealing their retreat."

"What about the bodies?" asked Adrienne coldly. "Who is in there?"

Tom Finn shook his head. "No one. If all were murdered, or some spared, I do not know. But there are no bodies, and no sign of anyone being buried. I would venture the strangers took the bodies. . . although for what reason, I cannot understand."

"Then we must go now!" shouted Adrienne. "We do not have a moment to spare!"

"You mean we should track them?" asked John Pook. "Is this wise? If they are half as powerful as you insinuate, Tom Finn, then I would be loath to face them with only spears and slingshots."

"Who said anything about fighting them?" replied Tom Finn. "I meant only to track them, and to find who they are. If our tribesmen are prisoners, then maybe we can agree on a plan to free them. But I do not mean to battle the strangers, John Pook. I may be a stubborn man, but I am not stupid."

"I did not think you were, Tom Finn," said John Pook, "but we would still be in great danger following their trail. With weapons like these. . ."

Adrienne approached the shack and gazed through the door. If the stench

and the sight of blood bothered her, she did not let it show. When she turned, her face had hardened and her knuckles were white around her spear.

"Whoever murdered our tribesmen," she said, "it is now our duty to find them and to avenge our families. John Pook, would you be able to live with yourself knowing you had the chance to bring justice to the criminals? Or knowing your tribesmen might be held captive as slaves?"

John Pook looked down, and Adrienne nodded.

"Very well. Tom Finn, you are our guide; let us search for the tracks before it grows dark, and be on our way!"

"Only if all are in agreement." Tom Finn was a wise man, and he did not wish to split us down the middle, or bring shame to any in our party.

With his honour intact, John Pook gave his consent, as did Marcus, Wigand, and I. Immediately, we began searching for signs of the strangers and their bloody load. Tom Finn was right; it did not take long before we uncovered tracks leading southeast. While new snow had fallen recently, the old snow contained many footprints, blood trails, and strange, parallel tracks, like of wide skis mounted on a wagon.

Tom Finn examined the tracks. "I have not seen such tracks before," he said, "but I have seen ancient photographs of mechanical vehicles that travel on top of the snow and that might make tracks like these." He stood and gazed eastwards. "If these strangers have weapons that cast fire, then they might also have such vehicles. If that is the case, they are probably able to travel fast and far. Our chances of catching up with them are slim at best." When Adrienne made as if to protest, he continued: "We will try to follow. If luck be with us, they did not travel far – that might explain why they attacked the traders, to protect their territory or to hide a secret."

Again, we all agreed. I do not often feel fear, but I did now; these strangers were different from any I had encountered before, and their technology vastly superior to our own. Still, I would not let my fear stop me or hinder me from accompanying Adrienne. Already, this was more important to me than my own life, to be with Adrienne, and to prevent her from harm.

We left immediately and although the skies stayed grey for the remainder of the day, there was no snow, and the tracks, although partly covered, were easy to follow. They stayed level, and away from the hills, following the long river-valley east and then south, towards the old refinery that I knew lay a day's journey away.

That evening we camped by the riverbank. We lit a fire and roasted a couple of the roaches I had brought with me from the west. I had first watch, and soon all were asleep. A while later, after the moon had risen behind the thin veil of clouds, Adrienne

joined me. She sat next to me for a while without speaking, and then she touched my arm.

"I want you to tell me about yourself," she said. "Although I try not to, I keep thinking of you. I want to make myself hate you, but I cannot."

And so I told her of myself, of my travels both with Marcus and alone, and of my blood-sister and my mothers and fathers back at our tents. She listened without speaking, sometimes casting a quick glance at me – at my mouth rather than my eyes, like she was reading my lips – but mostly looking down, and keeping her hands folded. After I was done, she kept her silence, but looked now at the sky rather than the ground. Suddenly, she gasped, and grasped my arm.

"Look!" she exclaimed.

I looked up, and right above us a large patch of sky had cleared up, and thousands of stars were visible. And across the heavens, from one end to the other, was a ghostly red sheen, like a transparent sheet thrown to the wind. It was beautiful, and unlike anything I had ever seen. At that moment I knew that everything would be all right, that we would prevail, and rebuild and make the Earth as it once had been; tame and clean and beautiful, a safe home for all tribesmen. It might not be in my lifetime, but it would happen, eventually. I took Adrienne's hand, and I told her my vision, and she smiled and kissed me.

When Marcus came to take over the watch, I went with Adrienne to her cot, and we made love, and then she told me that she would be with child. This she had dreamt, and so it would be.

We found the strangers the next day. It was late in the afternoon, and we had come to the large metal pipes that once fed contaminated water into the river from the refinery. The pipes were broken now, but they were large enough for a man to walk upright inside them, and this gave us an opportunity to approach the refinery unseen.

The vehicle we had tracked sat unguarded outside the large, dark building; it was longer than I had imagined, the back part connected to the front via a thick, black cable. The front part looked like a house, with a solid casing and windows, while the back part was open to the wind, but hollow. The floor of the back part was covered with a large, shiny fabric, and there was something underneath. My gut churned. This was most likely how they had transported the bodies of our families for all those miles.

We waited inside the tubes until sunset, but saw no sign of the strangers. When it got dark, Tom Finn, Adrienne, and I approached the vehicle, while John Pook, Marcus, and Wigand kept watch. The vehicle was a dirty yellow colour, icy cold to the

touch. The surface was a blank and shiny metal, untouched by rust and stronger than anything I had seen before. The house of the vehicle had a door, but it was locked. I climbed up to look through the window; and I saw buttons and levers, and a wheel. There were tiny red, green, and yellow lights under the front window; and in the ceiling. The windows had partly frosted, but felt warm to the touch; there had to be heat generated from the inside, but how, I could not tell.

Suddenly, there was a noise over by the refinery. I ducked down, and Tom Finn and Adrienne ducked down as well, just in time to avoid a large cone of yellow light that swept across the vehicle. There were two male voices, and it sounded as if they were arguing:

"Ain't nuffin there, Mikey. You must be seein stuff. I mean, who in their right mind woulda come out here in this weather? It's Goddamn freezin!"

Their speech was broken and incoherent, like that of the tribes of the north-east, but coarser, and filled with strange words.

"I coulda sworn. . . hey, let's check it out anyways. You never know with these frikkin Groundcrawlers, they're likely to do the strangest things, and we can't afford witnesses. We don't want another Dallas on our hands, right?"

"Hell, don't remind me of that! We burned so many bodies that day, it ain't even funny. They just kept comin at us. Damn Groundcrawlers – radiation's done a real job on those freaks." The man laughed, a hoarse, bellowing laughter, and I suddenly felt very afraid. These men were strangers indeed, and even though I was able to understand most of what they said, their words were still foreign to me. What was 'Dallas'? Who were the 'Groundcrawlers'?

"Get the blaster and let's go. Hey, and call up Donny and tell him we're checkin out the terrain. He'll be mad as all hell if he comes to check in on us and we're gone."

"Awright, awright, hold on a sec wouldya?"

There was the sound of footsteps on metal as the two men descended a staircase. I raised my head to look, and saw two dark shapes with sticks of light in their hands emerging from the shadows around the refinery. They stopped, and then one of them spoke into a small box in his hand:

"Hey, Donny! It's Al. Listen, we thought we mighta seen sumfin. . . no, no, don't bother with that, it's probably nuffin. Yeah, yeah, we got the blaster so if there are any Groundcrawlers. . . okay, see ya in a bit."

The two men resumed walking and once again the cone of light swiped over the vehicle. I ducked down and whispered to Tom Finn and Adrienne who were lying next to me:

"We must move! They are coming this way!"

"Quick," whispered Tom Finn, "this way."

He crawled on his stomach away from the refinery, towards a ditch a few dozen meters away. Adrienne followed, and I headed up the rear, covering our tracks in the process. Luckily, the two men were slow, and they seemed to spend a lot of time making jokes and casting their cones of light about without thought. Apparently, they were not used to subterfuge, and had never spent much time in the wild.

We reached the ditch safely, and covered ourselves with snow. From this vantage point we could see the vehicle clearly, and hear the strangers, but were unlikely to be discovered.

The strangers reached their vehicle and examined it briefly. They did not even think of looking at the ground where they walked, and even if we had left tracks, they would not have noticed them. I could not see how these people were dangerous even though they possessed weaponry and technology that surpassed ours. They were stupid, and careless, and loud. But I still felt fear, because I did not understand where they came from or why we had never encountered them, or even heard tell of them, before. And the name Dallas stuck in my head, if something had happened there, and they wished for it not to happen again, what could it be? It was not a good thought.

"Looks okay to me," said the first man. Up close, I could see that he was fat, and his skin was very pale, and he did not look particularly healthy.

"Let's check out the load," said the other. He was taller and thinner, and looked athletic. His skin was tanned and he carried himself with more grace than the first, but I guessed that neither would be much of a match for me. They did not look like experienced fighters.

They made their way to the back part of the vehicle, lifted the shiny cover, and shone their lights on what was underneath. I heard Adrienne gasp next to me; there were bodies there, as I had guessed, but the bodies were blackened, and mutilated, and there was much blood. All the bodies looked fused together, and frozen, and it was all I could do to not turn my gaze away, or retch. I glanced at Adrienne, and I saw that her eyes were on fire and that her mouth was working silently, and then I remembered that she had a blood mother and brother amongst the dead, and I put my hand to her shoulder, and squeezed her. She turned to face me, and I shook my head.

"God, that's gross!" said the first man. "I don't know why we couldn't just leave em where we killed em."

Adrienne shook in anger, and I squeezed her shoulder again. I feared that she might let her temper flare and reveal our position.

"Nah, think bout it, Mikey," said the other. "We don't want the Groundcrawlers to start askin questions of each other, or to unite, or to try any crap like that. Keep it clean. It was an accident that we bumped into em, and we didn't really have a choice. Better to dispose of the evidence, if you know what I mean."

"We takin them back down with us?"

"Yeah, and burnin the bodies. Come on, everything's good here. Let's go."

Adrienne let out a growl, and the second man turned on the spot and shone his cone of light in our direction. We all ducked, but the strangers had heard us:

"What the hell was that?"

"Yeah, I heard sumfin too. You see sumfin?"

"Wait here."

The second man headed in our direction. It would only be a few seconds before he was on top of us. I coiled myself like a spring, hoping that it would not come to a confrontation. It was my mistake that I did not remember Adrienne.

The moment the second man reached the ditch, Adrienne leapt and grabbed his throat. She cut him open with her knife before I had time to utter a single word, and then Tom Finn was up and running towards the second man by the vehicle. The stranger yelled out, lifted a long tube that had been fastened by his waist, and pointed it at Tom Finn.

The night lit up like it was on fire.

Tom Finn did not even scream. He fell down, his head blackened like charcoal, and steam rose from his smouldering body. I do not remember what happened next, but before I could think I was up and running and the darkness erupted in geysers of fire around me. I raced towards the first man, and as he pointed his weapon at me I tackled him. There were more shadows moving in the night, but I paid no heed to them, hoping they were my tribesmen, and not more strangers. The body of my enemy slammed into the metal vehicle, and he let out a single grunt. Again, his weapon fired, but this time the flame hit nothing but the ground, and although the heat seared my left leg, I was not seriously hurt. I grabbed a hold of my opponent's head, and twisted, hard. There was a loud crack, and then he was dead.

There was utter silence. The others reached the vehicle, and Marcus spoke:

"What is that?"

I leaned down and took the tube from the dead man's hand. It was shaped like an L, with a small catch in the joint; I recognised it as a gun, from pictures, but this thing did not shoot projectiles: It shot fire, fire that could burn a man in an instant – as it had with Tom Finn. I looked towards our dead leader, and saw that Adrienne was

crouched next to him, weeping. He had been dead before his head touched the ground, never knowing what had happened.

There was a thin voice that came out of nowhere. We all jumped, then realised that the voice came from a small black box on the ground next to the first man's body:

"Al, what's goin on out there? We heard blaster-fire! You guys okay, copy? Hello?"

"We must away, now!" said Marcus. "There are more of them, and they probably have weapons too. We are not safe here – we cannot fight them."

"Agreed," said Wigand. "And we must take the body of Tom Finn with us. We cannot leave him here, lest they find him and come to wreak vengeance on our families."

"What about the others?" hissed Adrienne. "We cannot just leave them here."

"We must," answered John Pook. "We do not have time to give them a proper burial, nor can we bring them with us."

"What about the vehicle? What if we use that?"

"How?" snorted Wigand. "Adrienne, even if we knew how to operate it, even if we could get inside the housing, how do you presume we would hide our tracks? These strangers are sure to have more vehicles somewhere, and they would follow us. No, we must away quietly, and quickly, before we are discovered!"

"Come," I said, "Marcus, help me carry Tom Finn. John Pook, you and Adrienne drag the bodies into the ditch and cover them with snow. Wigand, cover up our tracks. Let us get back into the pipe and towards the river, now! We probably do not have much time."

All followed my directions without question, although Adrienne kept glancing at the bodies, and muttering under her breath. We had only just made it inside the pipe when there were noises over by the refinery, and many men came down the stairs towards the vehicle. We hurried through the pipe and out onto the riverbank where we stepped back through our previous tracks while covering them behind us.

For a while, we heard voices shouting the names of the two strangers, while cones of lights swept across the sky, lighting the clouds above us. Then there was silence, and I knew that we had escaped.

We walked all night, switching between us who would carry the body of Tom Finn, and by morning we had made it back to our last camp. Safe for the moment, we ate, and slept for a short while before beginning our journey again when the sun was straight above us. The weather was getting worse, and the sun was a dull coin behind the thick clouds, and I guessed that it would begin to snow by sunset.

We spoke little, and when we did it was about the strangers; who they were, where they had come from, what they wanted, and whether they would pose a threat to our families. We did not speak of Tom Finn or of the dead traders, for we knew that when we again reached our tents we would have to answer these questions many times over.

Late the second day, we arrived back at the outpost, and there we would have to split up. Marcus, John Pook, and I had to return north, to our tents, while Adrienne and Wigand carried the body of their tribesman Tom Finn back to their tents. I offered to come along, but Adrienne refused; to honour their leader, and according to tradition, they would make the last part of their journey alone, and then bury Tom Finn in their home ground.

I spent those last few moments with Adrienne thinking I would see her again soon, but that never came to be. I would soon have to travel westward again, to gather more roaches, and when I returned I would find that Adrienne had died giving birth to our child, a daughter.

She became my lover, and I killed her – both of her truthdreams came to pass. She had interpreted them wrong. But in dying she gave the world Alyssa, who would grow to become a leader of many tribesmen – as well as a truthdreamer like her mother – and who would unite the families of the Silver Lake and the Sandy Plains, and build a great city on a mountain. But that was a long time into the future, close to my last days, and for now we said our farewells and kissed while new snow fell lightly on us all, covering the world in a pure white sheet.

I never saw Adrienne again, nor the strangers who had murdered Tom Finn. What happened in the place they called Dallas would forever remain a mystery to me. But there would always be fear in my heart now; fear of the strangers and their weapons, and what they would do to us if they ever found us. And I would always have nightmares in which Adrienne and I were burned to ashes by cones of fire erupting from dark shadows in the night.

After we parted with Adrienne and Wigand, I cast a last glance back at them. They were carrying Tom Finn between them, wrapped in his coat, working their way up the hill south of the lake. Soon, they were swallowed in the heavy snow; but I will never forget how she looked there, with her hair the colour of the sun, walking proud and tall though grief threatened to swallow her heart and soul. She was always strong, Adrienne, and that strength carried on to our daughter and, I am sure, one day to our daughter's children, and their children again.

Myself, I kept travelling west to find roaches, and I met many people in my days, and I saw many sights, but none would ever compare to the ones I had seen with Adrienne.

Chapter Eleven

Eden, the Second Story

Earth, 2999 AD

There weren't many who realised or cared that the world was yet again hovering on the brink of another millennium.

The last time this had happened – very soon that day would be exactly one thousand years past – all nations had celebrated by lighting the sky on fire, and there had been both hope and optimism for the future of the Earth.

Now there was neither. Only the instinct for survival kept the scattered tribes alive. For almost a thousand years, there had been no future. Scavenging for food kept humans preoccupied, with nary a moment to consider their situation or to reflect on how their species had reverted to such a primal state.

Still, evolution – in its most basic form – was establishing a foothold, as it had so many years ago: slowly but surely. The long winter would perhaps last forever, but now, finally, tribes were coming together in larger cities, trade was starting up, and food was getting more plentiful and more varied. There were vegetables, domesticated animals, clean water – or at least as clean as water would ever get on this ravaged planet – wheat and milk.

Things were of course different, and more difficult, elsewhere, but in this city, this great city, this Eden, civilisation was returning. It was an agonisingly slow process, though, and Amena was often tired.

Yet such was the eternal burden of a Lady of Eden.

Being born into the clan of Alyssa, the first Lady of Eden, required much of a young woman. And Amena had not had an enviable childhood. Every waking moment was spent learning about the past, about Eden, about politics, economics, geography, geology, etiquette, and diplomacy. She'd rarely seen her mother, Aurea, and her father was only a vague memory. He'd died when she was two years old, assassinated by tribesmen from the east. The moment that had happened, even though he died more than a hundred kilometres away, Amena had begun weeping, and she couldn't be consoled for days. Like all of Alyssa's clan, she was an Empath – what they once called a Truthdreamer – and although the talent changed with each generation, the ability to feel the hearts and minds of those closest to you never did.

The day she became the sixth Lady of Eden, her mother left her, and that had hurt even more than her father's death. Aurea wished to embark on a pilgrimage, and since Amena had just turned eighteen years of age, Aurea relinquished her seat in favour of her daughter. That night, after the ceremony, they had said their farewells. Amena's heart had been aching, but she stayed composed, as befitted a Lady of Eden, and kissed her mother's cheeks before seeing her out the door and into the hay-covered cart.

She felt for a long time in her mind how her mother drew further and further abroad, until, one day, Aurea was no longer there. Whether she was dead or not, Amena didn't know. Her ability wasn't omnipotent. But as the years passed by, she no longer believed that her mother had survived the journey, and she realised she'd most likely never get to see her again.

By that time, however, she had a family of her own, and the pain was less of a burden to carry. Two daughters and a son she'd given birth to – Amaya, Anicia, and Airen; according to tradition, all born into the clan of Alyssa would receive names that begun with the same letter, the first letter of the alphabet to signify how their clan was the beginning of a new era of mankind – and when she was not handling the affairs of the city, she was busy teaching them what she herself had been taught. But she'd made a point of spending more time with her children than her mother had with her, although her position demanded much of her. Unlike her mother, she was able to rely more on her counsellors and min-

isters, and thus she was able to concentrate mostly on the matters that required her personal attention.

Yet progress was slow. It would sometimes frustrate Amena to read about the Earth's past, how machines aided progress, how there had been inexhaustible amounts of food, energy and natural resources, and how people were able to spend great parts of their days in leisurely activities, like reading, or sleeping, or listening to music. It seemed they'd never get to that point again, and maybe that was a good thing, but when things were going badly, Amena cursed their condition. It didn't seem fair for countless generations to be punished for mistakes made in the past.

Now they would soon enter a new millennium, and yet nothing would change, at least not as long as she was the Lady of Eden, nor her daughter, nor her daughter's daughter. If there was ever a future for her people, it lay another thousand years ahead of them.

She sighed. There was no use wishing for something that might never be, nor to complain about the world that they *did* have. After all, they were better off now than they had been only a few hundred years ago. One of her forefathers had gathered cockroaches, which were cooked and eaten. Amena shuddered. The thought sickened her. So there was some progress, albeit slow, and before she stepped down to let Amaya take her place, she'd instigate and encourage even more progress.

Amena was forty-five this year. Her mother had been thirty-seven when she'd left on her pilgrimage. Yet Amena was not about to transfer the responsibility of Eden to Amaya, her daughter. Like many Ladies before her, she'd carry on until she was too old, too weary, too sick to be able to continue. Then she would step down. Perhaps Amaya would be her own age when that happened, but so be it; for the moment, her daughters – and her son – were able to enjoy the pleasures of youth without the burden or responsibility that came with governing a city-state.

She turned away from the window that looked over the white valleys below. Her bedroom had recently been redecorated with great treasures that had been carried with traders from the far west, amongst them a gold figurine of a man inscribed with a legend – now partly rubbed off, though she could still recognise the word 'Awards' – and a name. That was a thing of the past, in truth. Awards. If you were to hand out awards in these times, it'd be to the best hunter, the best trader,

the best warrior, or perhaps even the best leader. And even then, the things they did would be so much more valuable than any award could ever be.

Amena wasn't too sure she'd ever be fit to claim such an award. Her ancestors had set a standard she'd always strived to live up to, but it was hard to live up to legend. Alyssa herself had founded this city. How could anyone ever surpass that? Not that that was her purpose in life: She'd been raised to be a good and just Lady of Eden, and so she would be. But it'd be nice to leave something behind, a heritage, a symbol of her reign.

Perhaps she should build a new senate building; the old one had stood since the days of Alyssa, and it required constant repairs. But then history was important, and there was history in that building, decrepit or not. No, it would have to be something else...something of considerably more value.

She was still considering this thought a few minutes later, when there was a knock on her door.

"Come." Amena turned to see her son enter, leaving the door open behind him. "Airen? Anything the matter?"

"You'd better come downstairs, mother," said Airen. He looked, and sounded, strange.

"What is it?"

"Please, mother. Just come downstairs."

She shook her head and smiled. Like his older sister, Airen liked to keep his mother guessing. They took after their grandmother in so many ways. "Very well," she said, "lead the way."

They went down the wide hallway of the three-storey house, and descended the staircase into the main hall. The Lady's house was grander than all other houses in the City, but it was by no means extravagant, and as she was often required to receive emissaries from far-flung regions, its size and stateliness was a necessity. Once her visitors witnessed how far Eden had come in less than two hundred years, they were often more willing to negotiate fair trade agreements and non-aggression pacts. They wanted a "piece of the cake" – another one of those ancient expressions she had a hard time understanding – and they considered Eden a model to strive towards in their own development.

So whatever luxuries her house offered, they were accepted by her

people and never resented. Still, she was always impressed with the main hall, where the ceiling stood three storeys high, and where the floor was covered with finely cut terracotta tiles, each embroidered with the seal of the City of Eden.

Today, however, her gaze was not on the tiled floor, nor the great, grey stonewalls, nor the lamps, nor the many paintings and weaves that adorned the walls. For in the middle of the hall, surrounded by her family and stunned guards and servants, stood Aurea, her mother, the fifth Lady of Eden.

“Mother...” she whispered, before her voice broke.

Aurea looked up, and seeing her daughter, she smiled. She was older, her face wrinkled and brown, but she looked in every other way much the same as she had that day, twenty-seven years past, when she’d left. “Hello, Amena,” she said. “I am returned.”

Amena couldn’t take her eyes off of her mother. For years, she’d hoped to see her returned, but it was a long time now since she last gave up hope to ever meet her again. Aurea was believed dead, and her companions with her, when news of her journey had stopped coming, and when the sense of her being had left Amena’s heart. Yet here she was, older in a way, but still full of spirit, a glint in her eye, still able to walk on her own two feet without support. It was a miracle. Truly, that’s what it was. A miracle.

“Why did you leave, mother?”

Amena instantly regretted her question. Here was her mother, returned from almost thirty years in the wilderness, and all she could do was interrogate her? Still, the question had haunted her for decades, and she needed to know. It hadn’t been easy to become the Lady when she was only eighteen, without a mother or a father to stand by her and to advise her.

In a way she guessed she resented her mother for leaving...there had to be some reason why she’d had to go, so quickly, without explanation. If there weren’t...

Aurea turned the teacup in her hands, round and round, as she – seemingly – pondered her daughter’s question. They were seated in Amena’s office, the room that had once housed her mother when she was Lady, as it had her mother before her, back all the way to Alyssa.

It was a spacious room, and well lit by the two large windows in the south wall, but sparsely furnished – aside from the Lady’s desk and chair, there were two chairs for visitors, a water basin for washing her face and hands, a hearth, twin iron candelabra – currently the candles were unlit, because the afternoon was still bright – and heavy wool curtains for the windows.

As if reading her very thoughts and avoiding her daughter’s question, Aurea said, “Did you know that Alyssa would have been two hundred years old had she still lived today?”

Amena frowned. Of course she knew. Her family’s history had been imprinted in her from a very early stage. All descendants of Alyssa knew of her, of her parents and her children. What a peculiar question. She was about to say so when her mother continued:

“Do you dream still, my daughter?”

Aurea’s bright blue eyes pierced hers as only a mother’s eyes could. Those eyes had been able to see straight through to her heart when she was a little girl, as they were still able to do so many years later. Amena felt as though her mother was judging her, and her gaze fell to the desk before her.

There were papers piled high, documents that had to be read and signed, laws to be passed, trade agreements to be considered, judicial matters to be arbitrated...so much responsibility, yet her mother’s look could still reduce her to a fretful little girl.

“Not so often, mother,” she said, noticing how her voice grew sullen, as though she were twelve years old again and had been called before her mother to answer for some wrongdoing. “I do not sleep well these days. There is...so much...”

Aurea put her hand on her daughter’s cheek. “It is not an accusation, Amena.” They clasped hands, and Aurea offered a warm smile. “There’s much we have to talk about, so many things I’ve learned. And time is getting short.”

“Why?”

Aurea sighed, and rose from her chair. She walked over to the tall windows, and looked out on the city that was once hers to command.

The sun was westering and the sky was a deep burgundy red. Below her, on the streets, people were going about their business; there were even more people now than there had been in her days, and if there

was one constant in Eden – aside from the Lady – it was the certainty of growth. Eden was destined for much, Aurea knew. Or, at least, Alyssa had known. There had never been another like her. They might be Empaths, all of Alyssa’s clan, but their dreams were shallow and foretold little except for the immediate future.

But Alyssa...she had dreamed their entire future, and almost two centuries ago she’d come here, established the city of Eden in this exact spot – just like her dreams had told her she would – so that whatever the future held for them all, they would meet it face on, prepared, ready to fulfil their collective destinies.

Aurea closed her eyes. It was so hard, this part. She’d travelled for twenty-seven years, to distant lands, harsh and brutal, and rarely had she eaten a meal in peace or had a good night’s sleep, and yet returning home was proving to be the hardest thing of all. Returning to a daughter she loved so dearly, a daughter she’d neglected when they’d been together – she’d always been too busy for her – a daughter she’d left on her eighteenth birthday to rule a city on her own, and a daughter she’d now be leaving again, so soon after returning.

But this sacrifice was inevitable. It had been dreamed. Like all such things, all sacrifices – her own mother’s death in battle shortly after she herself had been born, her sudden departure, forcing Amena to take on the Ladyship when she was still too young – it had to be so for the good of all that was to come.

“I’m not staying,” she said, and she didn’t want to look at her daughter because she was afraid of the disappointment and resentment that she feared would be written on her face...or worse, to turn and see nothing, to realise that her daughter no longer cared. “I only came to talk with you, and to see you again, one final time.”

Amena said nothing, and Aurea went on:

“This is probably not what you wanted to hear from me, Amena, but there is a reason for everything.” She paused, opened her eyes again, and looked out the window. The sun was now touching the horizon, and in a few minutes, darkness would fall on her city. She still thought of Eden that way – as *her* city. “There are difficult times ahead for you, for our entire family. Dark times. I’ve had many dreams on my travels, and they’ve told me many things. It is imperative that Alyssa’s clan perseveres and survives, yet there is a chance that it will not. And if we should

perish...” She sighed. This was the hard part, to make Amena believe what she was about to tell her. “In a very, very great number of years, the last descendant of Alyssa will give birth to a boy, a boy who will grow into a man, a man who will lead our people out of darkness and into the light. I had this dream, Amena, and in my dream I saw a distant planet, and I saw this boy, this man, travelling to this planet, and his presence there will decide the entire future of mankind. His life will affect billions, and he is needed, for there is great evil ahead of us.”

She had to see. She turned around. Amena was sitting with her head bowed, and Aurea couldn't see her eyes, could not tell if her daughter believed the prophecies or not.

“His name will be David,” she continued, and then Amena raised her head and Aurea saw that there were tears in her eyes, but she also saw that Amena believed her...that she believed her mother despite all the things Aurea had and hadn't done for her, and that although it gave her daughter pain to know that they'd be parted once again, Amena understood the burden that lay on their clan.

“You saw him?” asked Amena.

“I spoke with him, in my dreams,” answered Aurea. “He looks just like your boy, Airen.”

“Your grandson, mother.”

“Yes.” She sat down again. “I wish I had time to get to know him, get to know all your children, but there really is no time, Amena. In the morning, I must leave again.”

“Why?”

“Don't ask me that, because I cannot tell you.”

“That's exactly what you said the last time, thirty years ago.”

“It was as true then as it is now. If you could only see what I see...”

“You don't have to defend yourself, mother. I just wish you could have stayed. I wish you could stay now.”

“I don't have long,” Aurea said. “I'm dying.” She continued before Amena had time to say anything; “I may only have a few weeks to live and there's still one important thing I haven't done, one place I have to go to. I wish with all my heart, Amena, every morning and every evening, that I could spend these last days with you. But I have to go.”

A true Lady of Eden, Amena kept her composure, but Aurea

could see that her daughter's heart had been broken.

"I could provide you with an escort, to make your journey lighter," Amena suggested.

"No. Where I go now, I go alone."

Amena smiled a sad smile. "I would insist, mother, but I know how stubborn you are. And I know you always have good reason to be."

Aurea smiled back, and said, "You know me well. But now let us spend this evening together, you and me and your family as well, so that I can at least learn to know them a little before I leave. And then, before we sleep, I must have council with you alone. Like I said, there are things to discuss, and you must prepare for the dark times ahead."

And so Aurea and her daughter exited the private rooms to eat dinner with Amena's husband and children. It was late when the children finally went to bed, and later still when the two returned to the Ladyship's chambers where they talked through the night until the grey hours. Then Amena retired to her bedroom to sleep, while Aurea stayed up and watched the sunrise one last time from the balcony on the east side of the house.

When Amena woke, her mother was gone. Neither the guards nor any of the servants had seen her leave, but the watch at the city gates had let an old woman out just after sunrise, and according to him she'd wandered off north, along the old road that wound through the hills towards the lake. He'd been hesitant to let her journey on her own, but when she insisted, he gave her leave. After all, there was no law against a lawful person leaving Eden. He hadn't recognised the woman, and when he was told who she was, he was amazed; thirty years ago, he'd been a young man, and he remembered well the day her Ladyship had left and Amena had become the Lady of Eden. Now she'd left again, on his watch, and he hadn't even realised it was her.

Days went by, and though Amena was crushed, every morning brought some new business to distract her, and as the days turned into weeks, and months, slowly the pain went away and it was as if her mother had never returned in the first place. In fact, often were the times Amena woke up and thought the whole thing a dream, but then her children inquired about their grandmother, and the memories came flooding back.

But there were no more tears. Wherever Aurea was, she'd gone there for a greater purpose and she was happy. Amena was glad that her

mother had been able to meet her grandchildren, and that her children had met the old Lady of whom they'd heard so much.

It was more than a year later when Amena finally received some word of her mother.

A trader from one of the smaller mountain towns up north had one morning, about a month after Aurea left Eden, met an old and crooked woman wandering by herself in the fields just east of the town. When asked where she was going, she said she knew the way and she required no directions. The trader had debated whether to follow her and see if she needed assistance, but the old woman had seemed clear-headed enough and too wilful for him to dissuade her from going any further. It appeared that the path she was taking would eventually lead her into a desolate land where neither man nor animal lived.

The trader hadn't thought any more of her until he'd come to Eden recently and had heard talk of the Lady Aurea who'd come back and left again, walking north on her own.

And so it seemed that Aurea would pass out of the world of the living and into history. Although it pained Amena to learn of the possible fate of her mother, it pleased her to know that she'd come as far as she had – because it was now likely that wherever Aurea had been heading, she'd completed her journey. And if she was dead, she was finally at peace.

As for Amena, she had matters to attend to, a future to assure. Like her mother had told her, dark times were ahead, and if her clan was to survive, it would need her constant attention. Evil forces were abroad, and men conspired to bring an end to Eden, and an end to the legacy of Alyssa. Truthdreamers, Empaths, would no longer be revered. Fear would steal the hearts of her people, and she didn't have much time to guard herself or her family against their growing resentment. Amena was fearful of the future, but there was hope as well, and if all went as Aurea had wanted, then in eight thousand years their bloodline would culminate in the one person born to bring mankind forth from darkness into a new, and brighter, existence.

If nothing else, that thought gave Amena the courage to continue.

Aurea stepped into the dark tent. It took a few seconds for her

eyes to adjust. She was tired, and her eyes weakening. She was close to death's door, she knew, but now, finally, her journey had come to an end. She could rest now, until her heart grew still.

A voice spoke out of the darkness: "Come closer." It was a woman's voice, ancient, but strong, like worn leather shoes made tough by old age.

Aurea moved closer, and then she saw the woman seated on the cots by the far wall, wrapped in a thick wool cover.

She was older than the hills, her skin grey as ash and wrinkled, and her fingers thin as sticks. But her eyes were alive. They were a bright green and young still, and there was a light in them that Aurea had never seen before.

She fell to her knees, and stretched her arms out. Her heart sang. Tears sprung from her deadening eyes to the dry sand beneath her. She felt like rejoicing. Her dreams had spoken the truth. There was hope. Much hope.

"Alyssa," she said, "great mother, you have called on me, and I have arrived."

Chapter Twelve

Exodus, the Third Story

Earth, 3332 AD

Juanita often explored the caves by herself.

She was only twelve years old, but she didn't feel like playing with the other children in town. Their games were always so competitive, and they were all brutal and careless, even the girls.

Besides, she was always the last one to get picked for kickball, and she simply hated that. So instead, every afternoon after school was out, she snuck out between the pillars just when the guard shifts were changing and prying eyes were away from the walls, and then she made her way across the bridge, through the Petrified Forest, and into the hills beyond.

If her parents had known about her illicit escapades, they'd have been furious, but she was always careful to brush dust and dirt off of her clothes afterwards, and to tell them about how she played for hours in the barns with the other children. And since her parents were trusting, they never thought to question her or her friends. If they had, they'd have realised that Juanita had a very dangerous secret.

The caves were exciting beyond belief. Burrowing for miles into the earth, the sandstone was always cool to the touch even when the weather outside was warm. The deeper she went, the colder it got, and the darker the tunnels. She always brought a torch, of course, and she always made sure to return long before the torch was half burned. She didn't want to risk being trapped by the darkness, even though she wasn't

the least bit afraid of the dark. She knew very well that a tunnel was no different in the dark than it was when lit, but when it was dark she might stumble and fall and break her leg, or get lost in the labyrinthine network of interconnecting passages and starve to death.

She knew the inherent dangers of her forbidden explorations, and though the sense of danger fed her excitement, Juanita was far from stupid; she didn't want to die. Not down there, alone and cold and afraid. So she was wary and careful, and she always kept track of the twists and turns she took in her head.

Even then, her treks into the unknown were dangerous, and for that reason alone she told no one.

The town had grown much since she was little, and every day brought new citizens from faraway places. Like Eden – which she'd heard so much about in school – her town, Esperanza (“hope” in the tongue of the traders from up north), was built to be a hub of trade and traffic in the region, which meant there were always new people to look at or speak to.

Esperanza had been built in a valley just southeast of the ruins of another even greater city, one that had been reduced to rubble over one thousand years ago when the fire fell from the sky.

Juanita always loved hearing about the cataclysm that had struck Earth, how the Goddess had showered the lands with flames and smoke and lava, and how she'd poisoned the rivers and the air and the ground so that everybody got sick, and nothing could grow anymore. Now, through prayers and the work of cities like Esperanza and Eden, the Goddess was once again smiling on her people, and the clouds were lifting and things were starting to grow again. Slowly, every day a struggle for all the grown-ups (or so her mother said each morning as she brushed Juanita's hair before school), life was improving for everyone.

Juanita thought things were just fine the way they were.

Esperanza was a safe and clean place to live, she had a nice bed to sleep in, a big house, she had school where Madre Maria taught her about the world and about animals and how to make the water clean. She even had a dog – not a lot of people in town did. Madre Maria had told her that it was because most dogs couldn't have puppies; they were “sterile”, whatever that meant.

Her dog was named Ñoña, and she was a pretty little dog with a

brown coat and brown eyes, and a bushy brown tail. When she'd asked her father what type of dog Ñoña was, he'd told her that she was a "mongrel", and that it wasn't a particularly special dog. But Juanita didn't much care. Ñoña was very special to her, and that was all that mattered. She never brought Ñoña with her to the caves, however, because she might run away and her father had traded some of his handmade tools for Ñoña so that the dog could keep a watch over the house when everyone was away, and bark if someone tried to get in.

So she was alone today, as always, when she finally came to the cave entrance and walked into the cool, dry shade beneath the rock.

It was a hot and humid day, and the change was always pleasant and always surprising. She shivered a little, but that was part of the ritual; it was supposed to be a bit chilly, and a bit scary, and very, very dark. Today was no different. She hadn't taken many steps into the cave before she couldn't see a foot in front of her – the sun was quickly obscured by the large boulders that were lodged in front of the cave entrance (the reason grown-ups had never found this cave, because they couldn't squeeze through) – and so she pulled the finely wrapped torch out of her sack (she took them from her father's workshop, he always had dozens of dozens stacked in a box next to the furnace) and lit it with her flintlock.

It was a much bigger torch than usual; she'd made sure to pick the largest one her father kept, for a very special reason: The last time she'd been down in the caves, two days previous, she'd spotted a new passage that she'd always ignored before. It looked like a narrow niche leading nowhere, but on her previous visit she'd squeezed through and discovered that the niche widened out into an exciting new passage leading far down into the mountain. It was bigger than most of the other cave corridors, and steeper, and it might lead to an underground lake (like the one she'd found a year ago, where there had been tiny little fishes, brilliantly white and almost transparent), or even to one of the wonderful crystal caves where weird rocky shapes extended from the ceiling to the floor, and where her torch was reflected in a million, million tiny mirrors.

She'd even brought a big lunch and a large water bottle this time around. She estimated the torch would last long enough for a long trip down the new corridor, and she didn't want to get hungry or thirsty and have to go back because of that. And today was a good day for staying away a long time – her father and mother were attending a town meeting

at sunset, and that meant they wouldn't be back until late.

It wasn't long before she had reached the niche, and she squeezed through to the other side.

Tiny pebbles broke free from the solid rock around the entrance as she entered. They rolled down into the darkness. It was a bit scary; she'd been in a lot of different passages in the four years she'd been exploring the caves, but this one was...different. It sounded different, it smelled different – there was a slight metallic tang to the air – and there was even a light breeze coming from somewhere deep below.

She guessed it was from an underground river. She'd found one of those before, a little one, and she'd noticed how it brought cool air from somewhere else, from somewhere far away.

Most importantly, this passage *felt* different. She'd spent so much time in the caves, she knew what they were like, how they felt below her feet, how they embraced her and made her feel safe and comfortable, or alone and scared, or cold, and this one...this one was new. She couldn't describe it, but strange emotions coursed through her heart; fear, excitement, curiosity.

There was something down there, something she'd never seen or heard or felt before in her life, and this temptation was too much for Juanita to resist. She had to find out, even if it took all night, even if she had to make her way back in the dark; hungry and thirsty and cold.

She started walking, and soon the slope of the floor became even steeper, and she had to be careful so that she wouldn't slip and fall. She held the torch far in front of her, realising that at any point the floor might drop away into a deep chasm (that had actually happened quite a few times, and once she'd almost fallen in: that had been a really terrifying experience, and it'd made her very cautious when traversing new ground).

The corridor stayed mostly the same width and height the whole time. Once in a while, a wall had caved in a bit, or the ceiling had collapsed, and she had to snake around or crawl over a mound of rocks. But mostly the passage went down at an even pace, with an even floor and an even distance between the walls and the floor and the ceiling. She was pretty sure that this was a manmade corridor from back when these caves were excavated – they'd been looking for gold, or perhaps silver, or even diamonds (what would she do if she found diamonds? She couldn't just

leave them, but what would she tell her parents? She didn't like lying to them) – and she was pretty sure the corridor led somewhere in specific, and not just to a dead end like so many of the other passages she'd explored.

The torch had burned a third of the way when she began hearing the sounds.

They were distant, and she wasn't quite sure of the direction they were coming from (although it had to be somewhere in front of her, because she hadn't heard them until now). The sounds were indistinct but obviously not natural – it sounded like her father's workshop when he was working with metal...mixed with what could be...

She stopped.

Voices?

She strained to hear, and sure enough, after a few seconds, she was positive she heard someone shouting something, far ahead of her. The words were indistinct, but it could be nothing else.

There were people down here.

Juanita debated turning around and going back before she was discovered. It couldn't be people from Esperanza (she was certain she was the only one there who knew about the caves), but it might be unfriendly people, from tribes or clans or towns that didn't trade with Esperanza, people who didn't want little girls prying around and spying on them. But her curiosity got the better of her: She couldn't resist taking a peek at what lay below and she was good at staying quiet – she had, after all, played in these caves for years – and so she walked forward, holding her torch low and tilted so that it wouldn't light up the cave very far ahead.

It didn't take long before she noticed that the darkness before her had turned a deep red, and she could see much further.

Quickly, she extinguished her own torch, and she realised that, even if it was still quite dark, she could now move solely by way of this new light. Whoever these people were, they had lots of torches – there had to be a whole village down here. What were they doing? Were they mining for diamonds, perhaps? Or was it something else, something she didn't know about?

She had to find out, that was for sure. She couldn't stop now.

After another three hundred and twelve steps (she counted), she came to a point where the corridor branched. To the right and to the left,

there was only darkness, but in front of her and below – the corridor now dipped down into a large cavern, but there were steps in the rock so she wouldn't slide – there was lots of light. She got down on her knees and crept forward, until she was at the edge of the staircase, looking down.

What she saw made her jaw drop and her eyes go as wide as saucers.

The cavern was large and smooth, obviously (even to Juanita) manmade, and on the floor below – she guessed it was more than a hundred meters down – wide corridors branched off in a number of directions, all lit from within. Strung on thick string, like pearls on a necklace, were bright, white balls of fire that burned evenly, without a flicker. These lights went around the whole circular cavern. But that wasn't what amazed Juanita the most.

In the middle of the cavern, surrounded by large, green metallic crates and barrels, there was a big silver bird. Well, not a bird, exactly, but it kind of looked like one, because it had wings, and a beak, but it was as large as a house, and it had wheels instead of claws, and a glass head with a chair inside. Juanita was only twelve, and she'd never seen anything like it, but she quickly guessed that it was some kind of vehicle...something out of the past, from the stories of the pre-cataclysm, when mankind had been able to travel to the moon and cross continents in a matter of minutes.

This had to be a flying machine, an (she strained to find the word) "aeroplane". A true wonder! But who kept an aeroplane after so many centuries? Who were these people with white ball torches and underground villages? She was certain of one thing; none of her people had ever seen anything like this, and she was pretty certain that no one else had either, because in that case Madre Maria would have told them about it.

Juanita tried to find signs of life, but there were none. The cavern was empty. But she could hear voices now, quite clearly, coming from the tunnels that branched off from the main floor. She knew she should go back; it was getting late, and besides, it might be dangerous to stay. If these people were hiding an aeroplane, only the Goddess knew what other secrets they harboured, and they probably didn't want little girls sneaking around spying on them.

Still, it would be a shame if she left without finding out more

about these people. The least she could do was listen in on one of their conversations. Maybe they would say something important.

She stayed by the top of the stairs for a little while longer, and then, when she was sure there was no one around, she rose and started to make her way down the steps as quietly as possible, yet as fast as possible so she wouldn't be caught on the descent. She stayed in the shadows wherever possible, but most of the way down she was exposed to anyone entering the cavern from the branching corridors. She kept her ears open, but heard nothing or no one approaching, and when she finally made it to the cavern floor (it only took her a few minutes; she was fast and lithe and exploring the caves had given her a nimbleness when it came to rocks that few could match) she ducked behind a metal crate and stayed there for a little while so her heart could stop beating so fast and hard.

She had to admit that she was quite scared, but there was a sense of purpose to this adventure. It wasn't like the pointless exploring she'd been doing on previous visits. She was here to find out who these people were, to learn as much as she could, and then get out before anyone noticed her. She was a...an agent? Was that the word?

Yes, agent. A spy.

Juanita grinned. It was frightening, true, but also enormously exhilarating. It sure beat playing in the barns with the other kids!

She waited a few minutes, and then, crouching, snuck towards the closest of the passages that exited the chamber. There were voices coming through from that direction, and it was also less well lit by the strange torches than the other corridors. She would probably be able to walk a bit into the passage without being noticed, and hear better what was being said.

The first words she heard clearly were: "...that town down in the valley? Hope?" It was a male voice, dark and rusty, and it spoke her language, although the accent was weird, and some of the words she couldn't quite understand. But she could guess quite well what was being said, and she felt an icy tingle running down her back.

They were talking about her town!

"*Esperanza*, yeah," said a second voice. That, too, was male, sharing the accent and diction of the first voice, but younger and quicker.

She'd never heard anyone speak this way outside, so these people really were strangers. She walked a little further into the passage so as to

be able to hear better what was being said. The bare, white torches hung over her, spaced out on a thick, dark string, winding down into the corridor ahead of her. The corridor turned, and she wasn't able to see anything, but that was good, because that way she wouldn't be spotted herself.

She put her back to the cool wall, bent her knees a bit, and listened.

"I guess they'll want us to use that town as a base during the first wave," continued the first voice. "If we're going to be able to get to all the Groundcrawlers—" Juanita didn't recognise that word, but it didn't sound nice. "—as quickly as possible, we'll need to use their hubs."

"Esperanza is a busy town," said the second man. "Lots of people going through. Kind of like Eden, up north, except smaller."

"I heard Eden's going to be important, that some of the top brass are heading there directly. Seems like it's got a hell of a lot of influence with a great number of people, so it's imperative that we get there as fast as possible, to establish a foothold. Or so I hear."

"I'm telling you, though." This from the second man again. "It's going to be so good to get out of here, to go up there. I've only seen sunlight, like, five times in my life. They picked the perfect time for us to go back."

"There isn't much 'there' yet," laughed the first man. "It'll take a while before we put everything right. The machines are ready, but they haven't been tested. It won't be much to brag about for another, oh, five or six hundred years. That's my guess."

"They say no more than two hundred and fifty."

"Yeah, well, they're not doing any of the work, are they? Twice that, at least. Like I said, that's my guess."

"At least we'll have a big workforce at our disposal." The voices were moving closer, but Juanita was transfixed. She wasn't sure what they were talking about, but she knew it was big. Really big. "The latest estimate exceeds ten million, on this continent alone."

"Breeding like rabbits!" They both laughed, and Juanita cringed. They were talking about her people! "It might turn out to be a problem, though. I know they're considering strict restrictions on Groundcrawlers breeding, to keep the numbers manageable. After all, technology and weapons will only get us so far...hey, who's there?"

Juanita jumped. She'd been listening so intently she hadn't

noticed how far the two men had come, and now they'd rounded the corner and spotted her! The three of them stood staring at each other for what seemed an infinity, and then Juanita turned on a dime and ran back down the corridor towards the big chamber. For a few moments, the two men didn't follow, and she was almost sure they wouldn't, when she heard the sounds of pursuit.

She sprang faster, up the now seemingly endless staircase where she'd come down, but it wasn't fast enough.

She was halfway up when she felt the coarse hand grab her neck and pull her back. She screamed, but another hand came across her mouth, and then two more hands grabbed her kicking feet and they carried her down to the floor again.

"It's a Groundcrawler," hissed the taller of the men, the older one, the one she'd heard first when she'd started listening in on their conversation. "What's she doing down here? How did she get here? This is a bad time for security to go lax. I'm telling you, somebody will get in a whole hell of a lot of trouble because of this."

"It's just one girl," said the other. They put her down on the ground, and the first man let go of her mouth. She didn't make a sound. There was no point screaming. No one would hear her anyway, no one who could help her, at least. "She was probably just running around the caves, found some kind of secret entrance. I don't think we have to worry about an invasion or anything like that."

"What about her family, though? Don't you think they'll come looking? No, I'm telling you, this is no good. And the timing is just awful."

"Yeah, well, we're launching in less than two weeks anyway. You really think this is going to make much of a difference?"

"I guess...no." The taller man straightened up. Juanita was able to get a good look at him. He was dressed in a strange, red material that covered his entire body, and his skin was very pale, and his hair silver grey. His face was hard, but his skin was soft like a baby's, although his hands were quite coarse, like those belonging to a manual worker. Like her father.

She felt tears threatening to well up, but she held them back. She didn't want to cry in front of these men, like a little baby. She didn't want them to see that she was afraid.

“What do we do with this one, though?”

The younger man was dressed in the same material as the older man, but with a different mark on the left side of his chest. He was pale, too, but his hair was red – she hadn’t seen hair like that before – and the skin on his hands was as smooth as his face. He looked very unhealthy, and Juanita guessed (from their appearance as well as their conversation) that they lived underground and rarely, if ever, went outside.

The older, taller man looked at her intently. She looked back. His eyes were dark, and there was no compassion there. She suddenly felt very afraid, and she wished she’d never ventured into that passage, or even discovered the caves in the first place. Oh, how she wished she was playing with the other children in the barns right now! Although, this late, they’d probably be at home eating their dinner. Her parents might be returning soon, and they would wonder where she’d disappeared to. They’d look all around the village for her, but no one knew where she’d gone, and they’d never, ever find her. They wouldn’t even be able to get through the crevice and into these tunnels.

She felt so stupid for being so reckless. And now what would happen to her?

“Get rid of her,” the old man said.

Juanita gasped. She wasn’t sure what that meant, but it didn’t sound like a good thing.

“Wait!” she cried. The two men looked at her. “I won’t tell anyone anything,” she stuttered, hoping they’d understand her accent.

The two men looked at each other, and then back at her.

“Where did you come from?” asked the younger man. “How did you get here?”

She pointed back up the stairs. “From a passage, up there. I snuck through. Only a little person can get through, like me. No one else knows about the caves. Only me. I go there all the time. But I’ve never been down here. I didn’t know it was secret. I didn’t mean to spy. Please, let me go!”

The older man shook his head. “We can’t do that. You could tell someone.”

Juanita started crying. “I won’t, I swear! By the Goddess, I swear! I won’t tell anyone.”

The younger man laughed. “By the Goddess? My, my, you’re a

persuasive little lady, aren't you? But we know how hard it is to keep quiet when you know something nobody else does. Never trust a child to keep her mouth shut."

"But I've kept my caves secret for four years!" Juanita pleaded. "I never told anyone! Please, let me go. I want to go home. Please." She started weeping hard, wishing for her mother's warm embrace, for her father's stern and commanding voice. She'd let herself be spanked and still thank the Goddess afterward, if only they would let her go.

The taller man sighed and crouched down. He didn't seem quite so scary now, but Juanita was still fearful.

"What's your name, little girl?" he asked.

"Juanita," said Juanita.

"Juanita." He repeated her name. "It's a pretty one. Where do you live?"

"Esperanza," she sniffed.

"Ah." He rose again, looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling, then at his younger friend. He shook his head imperceptibly and walked away.

The younger man frowned, seemingly uncertain about what to do, but finally he leaned down and whispered to Juanita:

"You're a lucky girl, little one." He straightened up and started walking away, but turned before he reached the corridor where they'd first bumped into each other. "Not one word!" he cautioned, pointing a finger at her. "Or else..." He didn't finish the sentence, but turned and followed his friend into the passage, disappearing from view.

Relieved as she was, Juanita felt that his last comment had been a bit redundant, even though she was only twelve. Nothing in the world would ever make her say a word to anyone about this!

Her heart was pounding as she struggled to her feet (her legs and arms were hurting from the rough treatment she'd received), and she limped to the stairs leading up from the chamber.

She took one last look back when she'd reached the top of the stairs.

The silver bird was sitting there, dormant, and she wondered if she'd see that bird fly some time soon. From what the two men had been saying, it seemed she would, and that was both frightening and immensely exciting.

One thing was for certain: her world was about to change, and

she would be there to witness it. In fact, she was the first to know, and though she couldn't tell anyone, it was her secret to carry with her for as long as she lived.

Juanita turned towards the darkness in front of her, and lit the torch.

It was a long way back, and she was hungry.

Eleven days later, Juanita woke to the sounds of thunder above the town.

She jumped out of bed and ran into the street dressed only in her underwear, and there, above them all, was a huge silver bird with fire shooting out of its tummy. It floated in the sky like a cloud, and all around her people were staring and pointing and shouting and crying, but Juanita? She just smiled, because she'd seen the bird before (on the ground, but *still*), and she knew who was coming, and she knew it wouldn't be all that bad.

The men were scary, but they weren't *evil*. They'd let her go, and now they brought immense changes.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

Chapter Thirteen

Between the stars, 28911 AD

David woke disoriented, panicked, gasping for air. Perspiration had soaked his shirt through; it stuck to his chest in tepid patches. He'd been falling, falling into a deep black void, a void filled with voices, voices echoing words from his dreams.

Adrienne. Eden. Groundcrawlers. Truthdreams.

He felt hollowed out, but the fear was fading quickly.

Dreams. Just dreams.

The screen in front of him was playing out some post-Omega melodrama set during the long winter. Digital puppets wore frayed animal fur and rummaged through towering ruins for fat cockroaches and radioactive water.

He waved his hand at the images and they faded away, leaving only charged air that made the hairs on the back of his hand stand up straight.

That thing had been on all night. No wonder he'd dreamed such vivid dreams.

His mouth creaked open in a giant yawn. He swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and sat up straight. The light hurt his eyes. He felt jagged, worn, and very, very old.

Just a dream. It was just a dream.

And then he thought, *isn't that a paradox? Does the word 'just' ever apply to dreams?*

Truth in dreams or dreams as truth...

The fact was that he kept circling back to this place, this place he travelled to when he closed his eyes and faded quietly from the world and dreamt, just dreamt, simply and absolutely.

We fortunate cursed, we who see more than a reflection of our own selves when we dream...why have we been given this gift of sight? Who opened our eyes and minds wide? Who damned us so, with divine faculties?

He'd had the sight of empaths – the *seysense* – his whole life. The *seysense* had given him an advantage over his enemies...and over the people who were supposed to be his friends. He'd been able to feel what they were feeling, see what they were seeing; he'd always known when to negotiate and when to strike – and where, and how. Yet these were *feelings*, not dreams, not visions: intuition rather than fortune-telling.

But there had been dreams too, of course, and when he dreamed his true dreams...

Truthdreams, he thought. *Where did that word come from?*

And then it struck him, as sudden and unexpectedly as lightning from a clear sky, and everything made sense: He'd been granted a vision. The dreams he'd dreamed – they were more than *just* dreams, much more. In his sleep he'd been handed something valuable and precious and breakable to bring with him on the last part of his long journey.

He'd been shown the *truth*, and though the details of his dreams were already fading, the passion and life within them would never fade, not for as long as he lived.

He'd dreamed *true* dreams, yet that in itself wasn't so unusual. He'd had dreams of the future before, and they were never wrong. Yet these dreams were not of the future – they were of the past, and they were true in a way only the past could be true. They were of places and people long past turned to dust, but that didn't mean that the dreams weren't valuable. If there was nothing of the future in the past, or reversely, nothing of the past in the future, then actions had no consequences and every incident was just a random event in a long chain of random events. And, of course, that wasn't the case. Everything was connected...the past, the present, the future.

The past and the future in particular. The present was simply a conduit between the two.

For the first time in his life, David had all the pieces to the puzzle.

The experiences he'd shared with the ghosts in his dreams – they

had been ghosts, but quite unlike the ones that haunted him aboard this ship; these ghosts had been more alive than he himself could ever be – they instilled him with new purpose as he stood, reenergized and ready to face anything the universe would decide to throw at him.

Well, almost anything. A meteor-storm, for example, might upset his plans a tiny bit.

Some things were still left to fate and chance.

He climbed out of the living-quarters and floated through the intermediary passage to the control module. The biofoam chair was waiting for him. Just seeing the damn thing made his head hurt.

Dreams mattered, David knew; even dreams of a distant past. The future was shaped by the past, and the past had always strived for a certain future. It all converged on the present, on this particular moment in time.

Right here. Right now.

While he couldn't define exactly what, his dreams had taught him something valuable. His intuition told him as much. Something that he ought to be able to use in this particular moment in time to shape the future that he sought. Or perhaps something he needed at the end of his journey to complete the circle, to join the present with the past—

A bolt of pain shot through his skull. He clamped his hands to his ears and bent over, teeth clenched. It was all he could do not to topple over or scream in agony. For a terrifying few moments, he thought the pain would never subside. The world was awash in a grey-white shroud, speckled with stars, and then finally, after an eternity of seconds, the sharp sting subsided to a throbbing; still painful, but bearable. Just. He'd had headaches lately, but never something of this magnitude.

It *hurt*.

A painful gasp escaped his throat, a drop of spittle ran down his chin, and then the whispers began and he knew he wasn't alone anymore.

When he lifted his head again the room was filled with ghosts – a few he knew, most he didn't, but he suspected they were soldiers who'd paraded before him at some point in the past, or faces he'd scanned quickly in the countless records of the dead and mortally wounded that'd been put on his desk every morning.

And now they were here. All of them.

Individually, their whispers were too faint and distant to discern,

but together they were a thunderous choir of white noise threatening to drown out his very thoughts.

Hands still clamped to his ears, he stumbled towards the biofoam chair. He tried to avoid passing through the ghosts, but they were standing ten deep in the cramped space and every time a part of him passed through one of their pallid shapes, David felt his skin crawl and a deep chill settle at the base of his spine and run up, tingling, to his neck.

He heard himself scream, and the ghosts answered with their own ungodly shrieks, but his mind was pulling back, away from the pain and the noise and the awful sights to some deep and buried place far, far inside his mind.

By the time he reached the biofoam chair and the login procedure had initiated, David had left the building.

“The beliefs that mould great organisations frequently grow out of the character, the experience, and the convictions of a single person.”
- *Thomas Watson Jr.*

Chapter Fourteen

Rubi-Ka, 29475 AD

He didn't usually dream.

When he slept (which admittedly wasn't often enough), implants kept his subconscious mind preoccupied with analysing the previous day's events, keeping up with organisational and political changes, and studying facts and figures. There simply wasn't room in his psyche for dreams. And if, from time to time he *did* dream, his dreams were practical, constructive, controlled. Not like these dreams. Never like these dreams.

Philip Ross saw the world – a world he'd always thought of as *his* world – through another person's eyes. It was magnificent but terrible, like a wild animal. It promised beauty and delivered pain.

Directly or indirectly, he was the cause of much of that pain.

That morning, like every morning, Ross ate a light breakfast at his desk and watched the latest feed from a local service up in Tir. Although it was always heavily skewed in favour of the clans with its editorialised content, the thought of shutting the service down had never even crossed his mind. He'd always encouraged his employees to get more than one opinion on current events – objective though the company's own broadcasts were – in order to gain a broader perspective of Rubi-Ka and a better understanding of her people.

And, of course, Ross practised what he preached.

Besides, the clan broadcasts were a lot more entertaining than the slick but dry Omni shows. Without the flashy visuals or attractive anchors, they had to focus on content in order to keep their audience

interested. And somehow, these pirate stations were able to dig up a lot more interesting content than Omni-Tek's star reporters who were paid ungodly amounts of money.

He really ought to have a talk with the head of programming one of these days. Perhaps they could even attempt to recruit some of those clan stations into their fold? Probably not, but it was worth a try.

Still, despite these diversions, despite the morning's routines and the mounting workload, his mind kept returning to the dreams. Despite the events up north, despite his responsibility to constantly analyse and to comprehend his enemy, he couldn't focus on the news or on his breakfast. His thoughts always ended up back in the same place, back to what he'd seen and heard and felt.

Ross had never obsessed about something as trivial as dreams before. It seemed an awful waste of time and energy. This time was different, however, because he felt as though he'd been granted a vision...which was ridiculous. He didn't believe in visions, and he most certainly didn't believe his dreams were anything but dreams. But the dreams had come from somewhere, and perhaps there was a part of him that had mulled over certain ideas for a while, ideas that he simply hadn't allowed to take root until now.

After all, he'd always cared a great deal for his people. But he'd never put himself in their place, and perhaps that was where his greatest weakness lay.

He pushed the ceramic bowl away and wiped his mouth with a napkin. The cup of imported coffee stood untouched, steam rising from the rich, black liquid. There were benefits to his position, though he was careful not to exploit many of them. Food was one of the few indulgences he allowed himself, but he ate little, and not particularly often.

"Off," he said, and the feed shut down, leaving him in complete silence.

He swivelled his chair around. Traffic was slow and heavy in the city today – albeit not in the immediate vicinity of this building; for security reasons, a heavily controlled no-fly zone – and the rain was pelting down, limiting visibility. There would probably be accidents. Fully automated traffic systems or not, there were always gung-ho pilots going manual and overestimating their own abilities.

Ross kept mostly to the ground when he travelled. He didn't

much like the tight turns and sudden drops of the Omni-1 air-traffic flight patterns. In fact, at heart, Ross wasn't a city man at all: he preferred the wide open spaces and clean air of the countryside. There was plenty of that on Rubi-Ka, although, unfortunately, he'd never had a chance to enjoy much of it. His life was uniformly urban; steel, glass, plastic.

Out past those dark buildings, out past that dreary cityscape and those towering peaks, there was an entire world that was still alien to him. People lived and died out there. It wasn't just his planet; it was theirs, too, and he'd failed to comprehend the importance of that, failed to comprehend the extent of their passion and love for this planet.

Terrorists or not, the clans were unwavering in their faith: they were patriots. Right, they believed, was squarely on their side.

Faith was a very, very important thing. Sometimes, he knew, Omni-Tek lacked faith.

A small sentinel ship passed slowly by his window; sleekly black, the rain seemed to fall around it, never on it. It was almost invisible against the monotonous backdrop. Chameleon technology, designed to remain covert until it was close enough to administer its deadly firepower. He ought to be thankful that the blasted things were around, but he wasn't. They reminded him again of the war he wanted no part of, but was forced to wage, every single day.

And it was *hard*. Harder than anyone could ever know. He'd killed children. His direct orders had torn families apart, made honest working folk homeless, caused chaos and destruction and death...and for what? To what end? Every time a tentative peace was made with the clans, hostility would unfailingly rear its ugly head again. Someone fired a weapon or made a derogatory comment, tempers flared, ceasefires were broken, and suddenly they were back where they'd begun.

War.

It was so...unproductive. And, Ross had to admit, he usually blamed the clans. Hot-headed and reactionary, they appeared unwilling to make any compromises. They wanted to rid themselves of Omni-Tek, and they failed to see that this was impossible. He was prepared to speak with them, but their claims were unreasonable. They didn't want diplomacy. They wanted victory, total and complete.

For the first time in his life, he understood why. The dreams...

He stood. It was raining harder than ever, and visibility was down

to less than fifty meters. He wondered briefly when the company would allocate the resources to build proper environmental control systems, and then he realised that he actually enjoyed the unpredictability of the weather. It made life more interesting. It reminded Philip Ross of Earth, his home.

His *home*.

Now there was a peculiar thought. That word kept popping up at the strangest times: Home. Why was that? Why did his mind return to a concept that he'd basically discarded when he took on this job?

His dreams had been about home, but not *his* home. The dreams had been about Rubi-Ka, but not *his* Rubi-Ka. And they'd been about people who were family, but not *his* family. He didn't have a family. Not anymore. The company didn't count. The company wasn't family like the family he'd dreamed of. In the company, there was no love, only duty. There was no compassion, just fear. And there was no such thing as sacrifice, unless you counted backstabbing and avarice.

In the company, no one were willing to put down their own life in service of others, unless they'd been directly ordered to do so, and then only because they knew the consequences of disobedience were worse than death.

But in his dreams...in his dreams...

The sentinel ship sped away, perhaps reacting to some remote command, or maybe it'd simply ascertained that the area was safe and that it was time to move on.

Ross paced the length of the office, past the tight cluster of furniture, towards his own security droid. Its dead eyes scanned the room incessantly; it wasn't hampered by the rain outside either. It probably saw as far today as it would on a clear and sunny day.

"Don't you ever feel like taking a walk in the countryside?" he asked it. "A picnic, perhaps, with some good friends or family. Maybe go swimming in a lake up north, or watch the sunset, explore the caves, go hunting..." The droid didn't even allow its sensors to linger on Ross.

What was faith? Did faith make right? Was it his faith that was misplaced, or that of the clans? Who was at fault? Who was responsible for all the destruction, all the deaths?

He glared at the security droid. It did nothing for him except to constantly remind him of a war that never seemed to end. Even now, with

full-scale confrontations few and far between, the war simmered on low heat, ready to boil over the moment someone turned up the temperature.

“You’re dismissed,” he told it. “Get out of here.”

The droid didn’t respond. It couldn’t, he knew; it’d been programmed to never leave his side. But that didn’t help allay his anger.

“Get out!” he yelled, and pushed it. The droid balanced expertly and simply kept scanning the room for threats. It was ignoring him.

The elevator doors slid open and two soldiers, two *human* soldiers, burst through into the room. They were fully armoured, their guns held high, their eyes bright – ready for action, craving action.

He could not tell the one from the other.

“Are you all right, sir?” soldier number one said as he spotted Ross. He kept panning the muzzle of his gun across the room. The other soldier did the same. They were as bad as the automatons. Worse, actually. They didn’t have an excuse.

“I’m fine,” he told them. “You can leave.”

They seemed in doubt, as though he were under duress and couldn’t be trusted to tell the truth.

“Are you absolutely certain, sir?” said soldier number one. “We detected an attack on your defence unit, and we heard some yelling.” He stepped past Ross towards the furniture. “Sir, are you alone in here?”

Soldier number two approached him before he had time to answer, and said, “We’d appreciate it if you could walk away from the door, sir.”

“Why?” asked Ross. He was getting tired of this.

“Your office may have been compromised, sir.”

Icily, he said to them, “My office hasn’t been compromised. My ‘defence unit’ is not under attack, nor am I. I was the one doing the yelling. I was the one who pushed the droid. Now...would you both please leave, immediately?”

The two soldiers shared a look and then turned their heads towards him. They appeared deeply disappointed.

“Why did you attack your defence unit, sir?” said soldier number one.

“Why did you shout?” said soldier number two.

Ross shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Please. Leave me be.”

Grudgingly, obviously aching to fire their guns at *something* (he

would have offered the droid as a target had he believed for a second that they'd take him up on the offer), the two soldiers left. As the elevator doors closed again – it was the only way to gain access to his office, and he'd always wondered whether or not standard safety regulations counted for anything in this building – he felt trapped, caged, contained in a high-tech prison.

He had no freedom.

On any normal day, he wouldn't have cared. But he had dreamed such vivid dreams, dreams of such power, such brilliance, that they couldn't be banished from his mind.

He had dreamed of freedom and of freedom stolen.

The man stands on a precipice above a white city framed with green and gold. Verdant foliage speckles the desert; a lush oasis has sprung from the barren sand. The sibling suns are high above him – they always travel together, he observes, locked in a permanent gravitational embrace like Siamese twins – and the sky is a brilliant blue, an alien blue.

He holds his hands in front of his face and notices that there's something strange about them, as though they're not a part of him, not really. It's as though he's seeing this place through the eyes of an avatar, but then he can feel the warm desert wind on his face, he can smell the aroma of this green oasis, he can caress the rough fabric of his costume with his fingers...no simulation was ever this real.

Only *reality* is as real as this. And slowly, inevitably, the dream becomes reality.

He *is* this avatar: thoughts, ambitions...hopes and dreams...all that this person is he becomes now.

"God damn those Omni monsters to hell," he says, and he means it. "Look what they are doing to our world."

And now he sees what he's been looking at, now he really sees it.

There is smoke on the horizon; a ragged chimney rises from behind the rolling hills, black, woolly, thick. He knows what it is, he knows what it means.

"They've attacked the outpost," she says.

He turns to look at his wife. She's angry and afraid. He offers her his hand and she takes it. She gives him a grateful look, and together they turn back to their midday vigil.

Somewhere behind those hills, their hopes are slowly dwindling. They've been left alone, in peace, for so long now that they've almost allowed themselves to believe they're finally free. Free to live their lives, free to raise their children and to work and to secure a permanent future for themselves and their neighbours.

They're not part of the war, they never have been. They're only farmers. They sympathise with the rebel cause, but they don't condone the means. Still, they know that, if push comes to shove, they will not back down. They will protect what they've built with their hands; they will protect their community, their fields, and their property, just like their son is doing now, behind those hills.

They are not warriors, but when forced to make a stand they will fight and bleed and die with the clans. They hate Omni-Tek, not because they are fundamentally opposed to its corporate politics or because they are hungry for power, for control, and not even because they necessarily want to be heard, to have a voice or a vote. No, they hate Omni-Tek because they want to be left *alone*, and Omni-Tek has brought the war to them.

Omni-Tek is taking their freedom away.

"Isam," she says, and that is him, that's his name. "Isam, what can we do? What if they come here next? Do you think Killian is safe? Do you think they've retreated?"

Never, he thinks. His son would never back down.

"I don't know," he answers, and it is mostly the truth.

"Why aren't they stopping?" she says, and her voice breaks, but when he looks at his wife she's not shedding a tear. Her face is hard, and her hand is tightening around his.

"Because they are monsters," he says, and it's strange...it's strange because a part of him is still Philip Ross, looking through the eyes of a stranger who is him, Isam, his avatar in this place. "They will not stop until they've broken us all. They're not happy with peace; they need dominance. They need for us to admit complete defeat and come crawling back to them. They need for us to be slaves. But we are slaves no more."

"What choice do we have? We can't fight them, Isam."

"We *are* fighting them, Elyn. Our sons are fighting them. We can't win this battle, but we will win the war. We won't give in, never that."

“You may be willing to die, but would you let Killian die? Would you sacrifice all that we’ve built, all that we have, to win a war? Isam, my heart, are you willing to sacrifice *me*?”

Isam looks at his wife Elyn (Ross looks through a stranger’s eyes into the sun-browned face of another stranger; the middle-aged, dark-haired woman is desperately tired, and worry has carved deep lines around her eyes, but she’s still remarkably beautiful) and he touches her cheek tenderly.

“I would not ask you to die,” he says.

“But you would ask me to watch my husband and my son die,” she says. “You would ask me to watch as the Omnis burn down our houses and our fields. You would ask me to be defiant instead of yielding. Isam – husband – we can’t win! There is no victory in death! They are not asking the impossible. They will leave us be if we submit.”

“Submit to what, Elyn?” He feels himself grow frustrated, especially because he knows there’s reason in what she says. “To slavery? To relocation? To give up our land and our work, for Omni-Tek to lay claim to our destinies?” He shakes his head. “No, wife, I can’t do that.”

She’s about to answer him, and he can tell that she will not yield to him, not this time, when suddenly a cone of brilliant light shoots up from beyond the hills. Translucent, distorting the sky behind it, it grows rapidly in circumference, washing across the green-speckled gold.

At first there is silence, and then, as the dazzling, lucent cone rolls closer, there is a sound like thunder. It persists, constantly rising in volume.

Isam instinctively crouches, pulling his wife closer.

The sound is almost deafening.

The wall of light is almost upon them when it dissipates, like morning mist to the wind, and disappears. The sound fades.

They crouch for a little while longer. It takes a minute for him to notice that his wife is crying.

“Everyone,” she says bitterly, “is dead.”

“Killian might—”

“Killian is dead,” she says to him. “They obliterated everything.”

“He might have left,” he finishes, but he knows that this isn’t true. Isam knows and Ross knows too, he understands his son (not his, not his son; Isam’s son) well enough to know that Killian would rather die than

surrender to the Omnis.

“Everything,” she repeats. “Now you have your sacrifice.”

He stands up. It’s obscenely peaceful; the utter destruction they’ve just witnessed seems to have left no mark on the world. Not here. Beyond those rolling hills, however, where the town’s outpost is...was...located – where the young men trained with illegal guns, where clan members from the north came to teach and instruct, and where politics were discussed and ideologies impressed on impressionable youths...

Beyond those hills, the mark of war would scar the land for all time to come.

He bellows, then, and his desperate roar echoes between the hills and the walls to his city and rouses similar cries, cries from free men and women who are about to become embroiled in a war they never wanted but were powerless to avoid.

At his feet, his wife is weeping.

They are neutral no more.

A voice echoes...echoed...in his head.

Philip Ross looked up, momentarily confused, and found himself face to face with himself. The glass had darkened to reduce the glare of the suns now peeking through deep fissures in the black blanket above Omni-1, and his weary reflection hovered in front of the expansive cityscape.

He’d been lost in reverie...no, more like a re-enactment of that awful dream. Why was it so persistent?

The calm voice sounded again, and this time he heard what it said: “Mr. Ross, Eva Pourais to see you.”

He shook himself and answered the call. He’d almost forgotten about the meeting with the department head. Eva wouldn’t be very happy if he’d missed their weekly get-together. And this meeting was particularly important.

“What’s wrong,” she asked him the minute she sat down in one of the two visitor’s chairs – she always chose the same chair, he noticed; she was a creature of very exacting habits. “Looks like you’ve had a rough night. Nightmares?”

Mentally, he ground his teeth. He respected the head of Omni-

Reform (after all, he'd appointed her himself), but on some instinctive level he also feared and despised her. She was the antithesis of him; fiercely arrogant, persistently cocky, addicted to the public spotlight...but in some ways they were very much alike; tremendously empathic, intelligent, charismatic. Diametric opposites, they were also flip sides of the same coin. Ross guessed that this was why their partnership was so successful.

If only she wasn't so damn perceptive and disturbingly blunt. It was an uncomfortable combination.

"I couldn't sleep," he answered her. "I've had a lot to think about."

"Yes," she said and studied him. He felt ill at ease, but refused to drop his eyes. He knew every trick in the book.

After a few seconds, she smiled and nodded. "Right, then, do you want the short version or the long version?"

"Do you even have to ask, Eva?"

She laughed, and proceeded to give him the long version. He listened intently, storing pertinent information in his databanks and processing the rest on the fly.

She told him about the latest public relations campaign they'd initiated only a few days earlier, offering amnesty to anyone and everyone (excluding wanted criminals, of course; despite what the flyers and bulletins and transmitted messages might say, individuals identified as terrorists were incarcerated the moment they revealed themselves. After all, Omni-Tek couldn't very well let murderers walk the streets of their cities) who put down their weapons and registered themselves with the nearest Omni-Tek office. No repercussions (in most cases, at least), no more violence. That was the plan.

Of course, not everything went as smoothly as all that.

"We've had some extreme reactions to the programme," Eva said. "We've tailored it perfectly to each market segment—" (Eva always made socio-political reforms sound like advertising campaigns) "—and we've distributed information-bombs locally, in whatever form is most palatable to the yokels, but I believe we have a major trust-issue to deal with, as well as..." She trailed off, looked at him.

"What?" he said.

"Obviously," she continued, "all the clans aren't immediately going to bite and take our bait."

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t call it ‘bait’, Eva. If we don’t trust our own initiative, who will? We’re trying to cool things down, not heat them up.”

“As well as hook some big-fish criminals,” she said. “Let’s face it, Ross; this isn’t charity. Sure, it’d make things a lot easier if all the itty-bitty rebels lined up to hand in their precious sub-machine guns and grenades and we’d give them a full pardon and everyone would be happy forever after. But the truth is, we’re hoping for a face-to-face with some of the most notorious anarchists out there...for a chance to get to know them *real* well... Everything else is just gravy. However,” she continued, and this appeared to be her point, “for that to happen, for the most paranoid to even think about taking us up on the offer, taking the proverbial bait, we have to resolve this trust-issue. And the, uh, other problem.”

“What other problem would this be?” he asked. He knew that he was playing straight into her hands, but he didn’t care. He was tired of games.

“It appears that there’s a certain level of...scepticism that has instigated a transgression of traditional conduct.”

“Eva...please.”

“Some of the clans are pissed off, Ross. In a big way. There’s talk of a plan to have you assassinated.”

Ross laughed. Not because it was particularly funny, but because it was so absurd to be warned by the head of Omni-Reform that there were people out there who wanted him dead. Of course they wanted him dead! Millions of people had wanted him dead from the day he took this job and assumed responsibility for leading Omni-Tek’s Rubi-Ka operations. He would have been surprised if there *weren’t* any plots to assassinate him.

She shook his head when he told her this.

“You misunderstand me,” she said. “This isn’t about wishful thinking. There’s a big difference between saying they want you dead and actually doing something about it.”

“And you’re saying someone’s doing something about it?” He didn’t really see the difference. He’d always thought there’d be plots to have him killed; you take the job, you accept the risk.

“Yes,” she said. “This particular someone is a separatist New Dawn offshoot, a very active combat outfit, maybe two hundred strong,

holed up somewhere a good bit southwest of Athen. Pretty inhospitable area, lots of old mining outposts, deserted towns...perfect for a clan burrow. We've been trying to flush them out for a while, but they're pretty good. Trained soldiers, guerrilla tactics; they often strike south, across the river – quickly in, quickly out.”

“Sounds like any of a dozen rebel groups,” he said. “What’s so special about this one?”

She leaned forward, conspiratorially. “They’re organised and effective, and they have solid intelligence on a lot of the OT operations in the area. I don’t know who’s supplying them with this information, but we’re going to find out.” She paused. “We have a mole on the inside.”

Ross raised his eyebrows, impressed. It wasn’t easy to infiltrate any of the extremist clans. Their security was usually tight and they didn’t trust strangers. Ever.

“This mole,” she continued, “doesn’t report back to us on a regular basis. That’s way too dangerous. His...or her; I don’t have any idea who our agent is...this person’s job is to locate the source of the leaks inside OT, not to sabotage the rebel outfit. We need the rebels to plug the leak in our own organisation. Once that’s accomplished...” She smiled. “...we’ll push the button, and boom! The mole,” she told him before he had time to ask, “is Reform’s agent. That’s why I’m involved. We believe the leak is in our department. And that makes it my responsibility. Whoever it is, this clan collaborator is high up on the corporate ladder. Too high.”

“See to it that the hole is plugged,” Ross told her. “But I fail to see what relevance this has to an assassination plot.”

“Yesterday, we received an encrypted message from our agent. We don’t get a lot of those; it’s too risky. But apparently this was worth the risk.”

“Ah,” he said, and nodded.

“The message didn’t contain a lot of details – I’m guessing the assignment was being kept under wraps even within the outfit. But you have been targeted, and the operation is underway. I’d expect the strike team to be small and low-profile...probably travelling by foot or public transportation so as not to be scanned and identified in any way.”

“You think they’re in our database?”

“Almost certainly. At the very least I expect them to be registered

as probable insurgents, which means they'd be easy to pick out for questioning if and when they got close to Omni-1. Unless, that is, they're travelling by more traditional means, and under disguise, in which case they'll probably be able to enter the city undetected. But it'll take them a good while to get as far as this, and Rubi-Ka isn't the friendliest of places. Still...they're bound to be excellent soldiers, and I expect to see them here within the week."

Ross got up and paced the room while he thought about the problem. As far as he was concerned, there was little to worry about. He was well protected, and the city was absolutely crammed with troops and guards. Whoever these rebels were, whatever equipment they were able to bring with them, whatever disguise they'd donned, they still wouldn't be able to get into this building. And even then, they'd have to deal with his private security force...as well as, he mused, the bloody security droid. For once, perhaps, it'd prove itself useful.

No, he concluded, there was absolutely nothing to worry about.

"I know what you're thinking," she said as he sat back down, "and I partly agree. Barring a complete carpet bombing of the city – and that's never going to happen – the chances of this plot succeeding are slim at best. But it's not impossible, Ross, and Reform needs you alive and breathing. We've seen a definite upswing in public approval since we started actively working on your image, and I think people are responding to your authority in a positive way. To lose all that now..." She shook her head. "It'd set us back *years*."

Ross was bemused. She only thought of his survival in terms of approval ratings. To him, he was a marketing tool, not a person.

Eva Pourais was, in fact, the perfect person to head up Omni-Reform. Compared with her, Ross was a soft-hearted liberal.

"Meaning?" he prompted her, hoping against hope that this wouldn't affect his daily routines.

"Meaning we'll need to beef up your security come tomorrow. And we'll have to restrict your movement patterns. We don't want you leaving the building. But," she admitted, "this isn't my area of expertise. Security will have to handle the specifics. But, speaking for Reform, we need you safe yet available for public statements if and when it's necessary. We don't want people to think you're afraid of—"

Philip Ross banged his fist on the mahogany desk.

The security droid's head swerved instantly in his direction, though the sentient machine didn't move any closer. Eva, to her credit, hardly flinched, but her eyes flickered briefly towards the door as though estimating the distance and direction for a potential escape.

Good. He was still capable of surprising her...although, to be honest, his reaction had surprised even him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this way; rage and dejection mingled with frustration and regret.

"I'm not afraid," he hissed.

The very idea was an affront to his person, to his ethics. What did he have to fear? Why should he have to fear? Fear was its own worst enemy...fear bred uncertainty, uncertainty bred violence, and violence bred war.

"Time and time again, I've given the clans the leeway and opportunity to stand down and resolve this conflict in a peaceful manner. I shouldn't have to be forced to take extreme measures in order to protect my own life. These...these..." He searched for the right word. "These *thugs* are only making the problem worse!"

"Of course," said Eva. She sounded remarkably composed considering his sudden outburst. "You're right, sir, but—"

"I'm going out," he said calmly, and this sudden decision to ignore every one of Eva's suggestions, to ignore even his own better judgement, managed to surprise him all over again. Apparently he was full of surprises today.

Did that have anything to do with his dreams? Anything at all?

He put the thought aside and continued: "I refuse to let myself be imprisoned by suppositions and threats. I refuse to separate myself from people because they frighten me. I refuse to let that thing—" (he pointed to the droid) "—be my sole companion, I refuse to let it define me. I've stayed aloof for too long. I'm protected, but only from physical threats. My own paranoia will kill me if I don't go out there." He waved his hand at the windows, at the city, at Omni-1's towering dark skyscrapers and airborne traffic.

Eva had gone quite pale. "Sir, that's not a good idea," she tried. "If you want to make a public appearance, my office is going to have to work together with—"

Again, he interrupted her: "I'm not going to make an appearance,

Eva. I'm going to go out there like any normal person, walk the streets of this city, breathe the air and see the sights. I'm tired of being confined to this office. It's killing me...it's turning me into the monster the clans claim I am. It's turning me into *that*." Again, he indicated the lifeless bodyguard. "I'm turning into a pre-programmed automaton."

Eva sighed. She was quite aware that when Philip Ross had made up his mind, he would not be swayed.

"At least take the guards and the security unit, sir," she said, "and let me mobilise a recording crew. If you're serious about going out, we might as well use this opportunity to run an uplifting report; you know, something for the OT channels, about your desire to get back in touch with the regular Joes and Janes. Hell, we might even be able to syndicate something like this, capture more eyeballs." She visibly perked up. The concept of synergistic image management was obviously too tempting an opportunity to pass up. "We'll get some insurgent pirate station to run it – we've got a few connections – and we'll just let the clan editors slap together whatever commentary they want. It's hard to spin a negative twist on such good, straightforward PR without looking like a party-pooper." She shrugged. "We could spin it, easy, but the clans aren't exactly known for their subtlety or media savvy. However they want to run this, it'll be good for us. And right now, good is very good. *We need good.*"

His frown had increased through her soliloquy, but now he realised that she'd just found a way to work around his stubbornness: she made it sound as though it'd all been her idea from the get-go, another brilliant Reform campaign engineered by Eva Pourais. Let's make our leader one of the people! Stuff the assassination plot: we're going to increase OT's approval ratings!

"No," he said. "No reporters, no camera, no guards, no spin." He nodded distastefully at the still-vigilant droid. "I'll take that thing, but that's it. It's not as though I can ever get rid of it. It follows me everywhere."

The excitement bled from her face in an instant. He could tell she was about to argue with him, so he cut her off.

No, he explained to her, patiently but firmly, he didn't care. They were in the midst of a huge Reform campaign – if the early numbers were an indication, they'd reduce rebel headcount by thirteen percent through

the amnesty program alone – and she shouldn't divert attention away from that. He would go out, incognito (as much as that was possible, being trailed by an eight foot tall metal monster), and if all went well, the world wouldn't be any wiser to the fact that Philip Ross, the most wanted man on Rubi-Ka, had just walked the same streets as millions of other citizens.

A few long minutes later, he managed to usher her out of the office, and then he began to prepare himself.

In some strange way, he was very excited. All he'd seen of the city for the past few years had been through the window of a transport, on the increasingly infrequent trips between his apartment and the office. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt rain on his face. Despite the cracks in the clouds where brilliant bolts of sunlight stretched all the way from the heavens above to the earth below, it was still drizzling.

Good.

*

They began walking that first morning, following a straight line south and east from the bunker, using the terrain as cover wherever possible, staying away from trafficked roads and sentient life.

The smouldering heat had abated somewhat by noon, aided in part by a light cover of clouds and a cool northerly breeze, unhurriedly growing in strength as they passed through the desert and neared the river delta.

They'd dressed casually, Jen in a light nomad's cape, hood over her head, dark goggles protecting her eyes from the sand and the sun, Adam wearing a dark grey tunic and knee-height leather boots, but concealed beneath their rough civilian attire they wore military grade armour – covert or not, sooner or later they'd be grateful for the protection.

The going was hard, and they had to take the least travelled route, especially while they were still in the vicinity of the bunker. They couldn't risk using any form of transportation, not for as long as they were heading south. There were prying eyes and inquisitive sensors everywhere, and though people regularly travelled between the north and the south, few did so without some tendrils of Omni-Tek's intelligence web being aware of their passage; tracking, logging, analysing. Corporate

paranoia had grown fat and bloated on this planet; the *notum* was precious beyond compare, and the company would leave nothing to chance, not with a hundred different clan factions vying for control, not with rival corporations standing by to pound on Omni-Tek the second it faltered.

Rubi-Ka was a paranoid place. Friends sold out friends, and politics and credits often went hand in hand.

Thus Jen and Adam had to stay out of sight for as long as possible. Their cover might work perfectly, but the longer they were under scrutiny the greater the chance the disguise would be blown before their mission was accomplished. And if they should fail, it would be doubly hard for anyone else to pick up where they'd left off. Most likely, they only had this one chance. Right now, the Omnis were cocky, enjoying the recent surge in public approval. They wouldn't expect such an extreme reaction, not from the seemingly beaten and subdued clans.

The first day saw them out of the desert, past the confluence of heavy tracks that marked the exodus of Omni-Tek mining equipment from the more remote mines in the north-western quadrant. There was still plenty of *notum* to be found out here, but conditions had grown more and more precarious with time, and now that the miners demanded protection and coverage (if the clans had accomplished anything, it was to better the working conditions on Rubi-Ka) it was too expensive and too risky to operate out here.

The surge in mutant wildlife didn't help any; ironically enough, most of the lethal critters were Omni-Tek creations run loose. Not that they'd ever admit to it; the Omni-Med bioengineering laboratories were a badly kept secret, but a secret nonetheless.

For the clans – especially the smaller insurrectionary clan factions that needed more room for training and less visibility – the corporate migration south and south-east meant there were a large number of abandoned mines, mining towns, outposts, and bunkers ready for the taking. True, there was little but desolate desert out here, but Omni-Tek troops rarely ventured this far north, and when they did, they did so timidly and without conviction.

It was the perfect playground for the clans.

Still, the two travellers were careful to avoid as many of the known clan-occupied areas as possible, and not just because there was discord between the various extremist factions; Omni-Tek wasn't stupid,

and though they'd abandoned military occupation of the land, they were certainly keeping watch with satellites, airborne sentinels, and sentient spies. Anyone passing through might be tracked.

Despite the necessity for stealth, by nightfall that first day they had finally left the sand and the rocks behind and passed under the shadows of the first bora trees where the scent of putrid madra-leaves was thick and pernicious, lingering like a vile perfume on their clothing. Even Adam was gagging, and he was addicted to the narcotic.

Soon, however, the wild patches of the valuable red plant gave way to tall, yellow grass and flowers, and the craggy rocks and steep ascents were smoothed down by wind and water to rolling knolls and rounded dells. The bora trees – tall, invitingly verdant, thick dark-green leaves the size of a man's head and nuts with a sweet, tangy taste – were still abundant, but now they were joined by manna ash and rowan trees, only marginally modified Earth-variants that thrived in the temperate climate this close to the water.

Before first light, they reached the river. They were walking slower, now, and it was a dark night, and so they smelled and heard the water long before they reached it.

They ate a quiet meal on the banks as the suns rose in the east; red and yellow light reflected on the slow water, sparkling like stars – a deep and fluid universe.

It was a wide river, almost half a kilometre across, though it wasn't particularly deep and there weren't any strong currents. Swimming was out of the question, though: Omni-Tek had used this part of the river as a dumping ground for organic toxins back before the war started, and the rich aquatic life introduced during the terraforming had suffered...and changed. Further downriver, bots had cleaned out the toxins, and the fauna thrived. This far inland, however, there were still things down in the water, that would give the bravest of soldiers nightmares...if they were lucky.

They wouldn't have to swim, however. They'd come prepared.

Adam knelt down and took off his pack. Opening it, he pulled out a small square box the size of his fist, and placed it on the ground.

"Step back," he said, and uploaded a program to his NCU.

Invisible nanobots flowed from his fingertips into the plastic parcel, and almost immediately it seemed to expand, unwrapping itself

like a flower, petal flowing from petal until it'd grown ten times its original size. Adam moved back as a small canoe evolved from the bioplastic, its hull transparently thin but strong as steel, flexible, almost indestructible.

In less than five seconds, aided by a million sentient machines, they had a seaworthy vessel. Adam stood, and then he wavered and would have toppled over if Jen hadn't stepped up to support him.

"You all right?" she asked. "Do you need to sit down?"

"Yes. No." His skin was clammy, his pupils dilated. Shaping bioplastic wasn't easy; it demanded intense mental and physical focus, and the complex handling of a host of bots.

"I've got to..." He swallowed and looked at her.

She nodded, and helped him back towards the canoe. He leaned over and placed his hand on the finely shaped material. She was only aware of a slight shimmering in the organic material near his hand, and a light tremble in his body, as the bots returned to their host.

Adam was an amazing nanotechnologist, and while she was barely able to activate the simplest heat-resistance program, he had a genuine talent. Unfortunately, as with most of Adam's talents, he rarely applied it in any meaningful fashion. The exception was bio-sculpting. Aided by bots, the man could create almost anything from plastic. And while this particular skill didn't come in handy very often, Jen was happy he'd had the chance to do something useful with it now.

"I'm good," he said, and he did look marginally better, but Jen ordered him to sit in the back of the canoe anyway and let her paddle – he hadn't forgotten to shape two paddles; they were amazingly light and thin, but broad-bladed and rigid – and get his strength back.

"We can't have you exhausted when we get to the other side," she told him. "Remember, you'll have to repackage the bioplastic, and it's better we spend a little longer crossing than be forced to set up camp during the day."

Grudgingly, more for show than anything else, he complied, and as the suns climbed over the morning mist downriver, to the east, they pushed the canoe out into the water and began the journey across.

Adam fell asleep in the rear almost immediately, snoring loudly, and Jen appreciated the opportunity for some solitude. She alternated the paddle left and right, keeping the canoe on a straight course south across

the river. After a few minutes, she even began to hum; a traditional folk-song her mother had taught her when she was little.

Her mother.

Jen hadn't thought about her mother for a while now, hadn't thought about any of them. Most days, she was too busy to think of anything except the training and whatever mission she was on, too busy killing...which, in a way, meant that she was *always* thinking about her family, because they were the reason she was out here. Before the...before she became an orphan, she'd been the quintessential girly girl, dolls and all. She hadn't exactly envisioned herself with combat fatigues and guns, and her parents hadn't been hardcore clan supporters.

No, Omni-Tek had *created* her, this warrior bent on revenge, on retribution, when they'd brought the war to her home. And if she didn't normally think much about her family, they were the driving force behind everything she did. One day, when this was all over, when the Omnis had finally admitted defeat and left Rubi-Ka to the free people, she'd be able to move on, to forgive and forget.

The reason she didn't think about her mother much, Jen realised, was because she was angry at her, angry at all of them. She was angry that they'd had to die, angry that they'd been murdered by Omni soldiers, angry that they'd left her alone, completely alone, with nothing but a burning void inside, a void that had to be filled and refilled. She'd filled her void with anger and violence, and now the anger and the violence had consumed her, and she wasn't Jennifer Brody anymore – she was an automaton bent on vengeance, but now it'd become a cold vengeance: Her anger was real, but the memories...the memories that had set her on this course, they were no longer real; they were like dreams, fleeting and ghostly.

Five years ago, everything had changed. Five years ago, she had died.

She switched the paddle over and dipped deep into the calm water, propelling the canoe rapidly forward and slightly to the left. As she lifted the paddle again to switch sides, something suddenly tugged at it, rocking the canoe.

She frowned, and looked over the side.

She couldn't see anything, but the paddle was still stuck. Had she hit a shallow patch of water? Glancing over at Adam – he was still sleep-

ing – she leaned over the side of the canoe and tugged at the short, flat-bladed oar; it gave, and she grinned, and then the dark monstrous thing rose from the water and grabbed at her.

Jen didn't even have time to scream as she was pulled underwater. The canoe toppled, and the last thing she saw was Adam as he struck his head on the edge of the hard plastic. His blood clouded the water, and then the cold water rushed down her throat and she felt the world go black, as black as night, and the terrible thing, the dark thing, pulled her down, down, down into the murky depths.

Chapter Fifteen

Florence, Italy, 9999 AD

Dr. Jonas Stenberg was mortally tired.

He had been weary for millennia, but it wasn't until recently – the past few decades, perhaps; he hadn't kept track – that the crushing weight of his age had begun to truly torment his frayed and stretched soul.

Slowly, inevitably, he was turning to stone; cold and hard and lifeless. Death would not afflict his body, but his spirit was already buried, withered to so much dust.

When had this happened? Had it been a gradual decay, or had he simply woken up one day, numb and broken, his spirit fled like a dream?

He knew this ought to mean something, that he couldn't even pinpoint the moment of his spiritual death...but it didn't. He couldn't even muster up nostalgia at its passing. Nothing had meaning. Instinct had replaced emotion, and routine had become a poor substitute for passion.

It seemed a lifetime ago when he (or anyone else around him) had last been able to feel something, anything at all. Probably more than a lifetime, because that measure of a man didn't count for much with the Omega. Living this way, living this endless existence, time took on a new dimension; anything less than a century seemed a triviality, a normal human life of little more relevance than an insect's.

Perhaps the soul wasn't meant to be immortal, he thought bitterly. Perhaps that was the one thing they'd failed to understand, the one thing that couldn't be kept at bay with machines and drugs: death wasn't

merely physical, it was emotional, and now they had all become zombies, the living dead.

The greatest irony of all was that, in his immortality, he'd become unable to pass his legacy on, to procreate. He was barren.

He had taken numerous lovers both among the immortal Omega – the originators and descendants of the Ark Project – and the slaves, first for pleasure, then later, as pleasure became dulled by repetition, for reproduction. But to no avail. His seed wouldn't take. There was nothing wrong with it; it was healthy and active, revitalized by the same process that kept his skin smooth, his organs working, and his brain in optimal condition. It just wouldn't...work.

He had, of course, attempted every in vitro insemination and fertilisation procedure there was – and Farmatek had plenty of experience in the field – but nothing, *nothing*, worked.

His failures went in the face of science; there were no logical explanations.

When even cloning failed and the only offspring they were able to produce were dead, twisted, misshapen monsters with no semblance of humanity, he'd finally understood his curse.

It was the same with the others of his kind, the ones who had survived the long winter in their subterranean prisons. At first, during their self-imposed exile, and in the subsequent centuries and millennia, there had been children. Not a lot, but then procreation had been subject to board approval: their own ranks had to be kept in check.

But then the birth-rate had slowed, and soon it had dwindled to zero. It was now a thousand years since an Omega child had been born. When, exactly, no one was sure...not anymore. In the ages that had passed since their re-emergence into the sunlit world, records had been updated less and less frequently. His own kind had grown lazy and contemptuous of the past.

And now, with each passing day, the Omega dominance dwindled as the slaves gave birth to healthy, and remarkably resilient, children. These new humans, these short-lived but inventive, vulnerable, aggressive, ambitious, and resourceful beings, they posed a constant threat to their almost seven millennia long regime.

Like tiny, hairy monkeys replacing the mighty dinosaur, the Omega were slowly falling victim to these *new* humans, the *Homo Solitus*.

They were little more than gifted apes, mere mortals, but in the greatest irony to befall the empire of the Omega, the Solitus represented the next true step on the evolutionary ladder. Few would admit this openly. To do was tantamount to treason. Nonetheless, it was the truth.

The Solitus, evolved from the battered survivors of the long winter, were the true inheritors of Earth...while the Omega, immortal relics from a long-forgotten past, were nothing but impostors.

And yet, and yet, they couldn't live without them. Not now. The Omega were too dependent on their slaves to initiate a new genocide.

Jonas reclined in his seat. He was tired of numbers, tired of facts, tired of his life and his work. He drank the cool caffeine drink, but even this tasted bitter now, serving only as a reminder of the slaves who had harvested the beans and the berries, carried the water from the lakes and milked the cows, the slaves who had boiled the water and steamed the milk, ground the beans, the slaves who had delivered it to him that very morning...

Without the slaves, they would be helpless. They'd become too dependent on their hairless monkeys.

And now the monkeys were becoming rebellious. Not visibly so, not yet, but in the shadows they congregated and plotted against their rulers. In the light of day, they were as submissive as ever, even though the spark of independence in their eyes grew brighter and more treacherous for each day that passed. The Solitus knew only too well how much the world depended on their labour, that the Omega could not exist without them, but they bided their time.

They were smart. They could wait. They had waited for thousands of years. But their day would soon come; there was no doubt about it.

The door to Jonas' laboratory creaked open.

He turned. His wife Emilie stood in the doorway. Her arms were crossed below her pert breasts. She looked barely twenty-five, but her true age was closer to a thousand.

Their eyes met for a second, and then she looked away. Fatigue was written all over her perfect, wrinkle-free, heart-shaped face. They rarely spoke; for the past four hundred years, there'd been nothing to say. Once, he recalled, he might have been in love with her. Such emotions were alien to him now. He couldn't feel *anything*. He would never feel

anything again.

He was as old as the mountains, and like those ancient hills he would remain forever like he was now, untouched by the changing times.

There was only self-pity left. Well, at least there was that.

“There is someone to see you,” she said. “A slave.” Pause. “A *female* slave.”

He stood. Visitors were rare these days. The Omega kept mostly to themselves. They were tired of each other, tired of the same discussions, the same arguments, the same dull conversations.

As for Emilie’s reaction just now, the intimation of jealousy, a hinted accusation...

Her jealousy was instinctual, not emotional. Like a machine trained to react to data, her observations were purely clinical. Like him, she felt nothing. The fact that he’d had a thousand lovers since they married barely fazed her. She was no different herself; in the years before her own spiritual death, sex had been an escape. Now it was nothing more than a physical reflex. Like everything else in this hateful world, it had become deadly dull.

He walked to the front door to see his visitor. His wife trailed behind him. Why not? Anything to break the monotony of the pointless, endless days. He owed her that, at least.

The slave was a young female, eighteen or nineteen, podgy but pretty. He thought he recognised her, a possession of his from some months back. Her name might be Tina, he thought, or perhaps Lisa. Catherine?

Could it possibly matter what her name was? She was a nobody. She was a slave.

The girl had been escorted to his door by a nameless blank from his private security forces (Jonas guessed Emilie had authorised the visit; there was no other explanation for the intrusion). She was wearing a long, grey sash; her hands were folded over her stomach, and her eyes were red-rimmed. She’d been crying.

What was that like, he wondered. He couldn’t recall. Had he ever shed tears for anything or anyone? It seemed very unlikely.

“Yes,” he said.

“She asked to see you, Dr. Stenberg,” answered the blank. “Said she had something she wanted to talk about. Said you’d know her?”

“Yes, yes.” Impatiently. “Come inside.” To the blank: “You can leave now.”

The girl stepped inside and looked around with wide eyes.

Their mansion was opulent, excessively so, but his wife took some joy in making each successive domicile grander than the last. Joy was probably too strong a word: perhaps the only reason she bothered was because he hated these lavish palaces.

To a girl raised in a commune, however, rooming with dozens of others her age, it must have seemed like heaven itself.

“Do you want some water?” His vague attempt at hospitality sounded insincere even to him.

The girl shook her head.

“Right. What do you want?”

She looked down, and then she moved her hands away from her stomach. There was an unmistakable lump below her abdomen. At first, Jonas wasn't quite sure what he was looking at...something biologically foreign, a tumour.

And then Jonas Stenberg suddenly realised what he was looking at.

“You're pregnant,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Why come here? There are hospitals that...”

He trailed off because the answer was too obvious and yet too impossible for words.

“You're pregnant,” he said, “with...”

The word wouldn't quite come out.

“Yes,” she said and looked up at him, and then quickly back down at the floor. She was afraid, and for a moment, but only the briefest of moments, he was ashamed of himself.

Then there was a gasp behind him as his wife finally made sense of the exchange, and Jonas turned to look at her. Emilie's mouth was hanging open, her eyes glittered. If she was at all jealous, it was well concealed by excitement...or was that a glimmer of hope? Jonas couldn't tell.

“When did you have sex with her, Jonas?” The question was blunt, but without malice.

“I can't remember.”

“I became pregnant five months ago, ma'am.” The girl still kept

her eyes diverted, like a good slave. “I haven’t been with anyone else, if that’s what you’re wondering. I was a virgin.”

“We’ll have to do tests.” Emilie ignored the girl, lost in her own thoughts. “If you’re fertile, Jonas, then...then there might be some hope.”

Ah. Hope. Yes. Jonas recognised the emotion now. Countless centuries might have passed, but the mind could still arouse forgotten feelings when it was required to.

Hope. What could it mean?

At first, the girl was reluctant to stay – which prompted the question why she’d come to the house in the first place – but after she’d been promised food and money and assistance with her child, she’d let herself be brought into Jonas’ study where Emilie could examine her.

He could have done the job himself, but it seemed the girl was more at ease with Emilie, despite the fact that they’d both shared a bed with him. Or maybe that was the reason for the women’s good rapport. Even after having lived as long as he had, after so many sexual experiences, he still didn’t know the first thing about women.

His wife was not a medical doctor, at least not on paper. But advanced age had its advantages, not the least of which was time. In Emilie’s case, that time had been spent studying a wide variety of subjects, everything from fine art to medicine. The implants helped a great deal as well, of course, granting her the sure hand of a specialist surgeon and the comprehensive knowledge of a general practitioner, as well as the ability to look up and cross-reference every single disease and ailment known to the databanks.

“She is pregnant,” Emilie confirmed within minutes. They had withdrawn to her office, leaving the girl alone in the study. “And the child seems healthy. But we’ll need to visit a hospital before we can know for sure.”

“Any tests you can do here?” asked Jonas.

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure. I want to...” He thought about it, and came to a decision. “We should keep this to ourselves, Emilie. For the time being, until we know for sure what’s happened, until we’re certain the child is mine.”

“She is adamant that you’re the only man she’s ever had sex with.”

Jonas waved his hand dismissively. “They’re slaves, Emilie, for God’s sake. Do you expect them to be honest?”

“Actually, yes. Far more so than you or me.”

“And we’d both lie about it, if we could profit from it. You know that. Maybe she thinks I’ll marry her or something, make her one of us.”

Emilie laughed. “Don’t be so sure of yourself, sweet, dear Jonas. You’re not all that desirable. My guess is she just wants money, to provide for the security of her child...food and shelter...that kind of thing. They’re simple, the slaves, they don’t ask for much.”

“If she turns out to be the key to curing our current predicament,” he said, “she can have the world for all I care. If the Omega can reproduce again...she won’t even know it, but she’ll destroy the only chance her species ever had. She will be our saviour and their destroyer.”

“How ironic,” she said.

“Yes.” He tasted the word. It was fresh, and exciting, and it brought forth a host of fresh possibilities. “Ironic.”

Katerina closed her eyes, stretched her limbs, breathed the expensive air, and listened to the silence.

She wasn’t used to such perfect stillness. In the commune, there was too much sound: People talked, argued, cried; shifts changed; slaves were born, slaves died. The sounds of lives being lived were unceasing; there was never a moment’s silence. You got used to it, but it was always there, a constant buzzing in the back of your head.

But here...complete silence. She could hear her own heartbeat. She could hear herself think. It was wondrous! If her child could grow up in a place like this...what paradise! She didn’t care much about her own fate as long as her child could have a bright and prosperous future.

Never mind that the child’s father was who he was: a soulless monster, a degenerate Omega. *Anything* was better than being born a slave, born into a life of constant hardship. Her child would be better than any of them, because her child was a child of Alyssa’s clan. He or she was destined to bring about a sea change, a new reign, the destruction of the Omega and the freedom of the slaves.

This she had dreamed, this she knew, this would come to be.

If the child was allowed to live, that was.

She had feared the doctor’s reaction, and his wife’s, but now it

appeared they were pleased beyond comprehension. Katerina had heard rumours that the Omega could not have babies, that they were infertile, but it had never really occurred to her how important this child might be to them. If she had, she might have thought twice about coming here.

But it was too late now. She was at the mercy of the doctor and his wife. Besides, it *was* the right choice. It was the right choice for her child. Her friends and family would just have to say whatever they pleased – they didn't know what it was like. They *couldn't* know.

Katerina knew she was supposed to bring the child here, to the home of an Omega, to Dr. Stenberg and his wife. It was part of the plan. She had dreamed it.

From behind the closed door, Katerina now heard murmured voices. The doctor and his wife – Emilie was her name – they were discussing, or arguing, about her destiny...no, her *child's* destiny.

She opened her eyes again. The room seemed a little...excessive. Who really needed a real wooden ceiling? Plastic was so much better and so much stronger. Wood decayed, plastic didn't.

In her part of town, the durable dormitory cubes lined the narrow streets five stories high, all exactly the same. That was all she'd ever known. Her job didn't take her to homes like this one, not even close. From the very beginning, after extensive testing and a few months of schooling, she'd been assigned to the factories, working eight-hour shifts on the assembly lines, doing work that could just as well be done by machines. But slave-labour was cheaper and easier. And the slaves were reliable, because they knew the consequences of making mistakes.

The Omega had, since the day they emerged from deep within the earth to reclaim the surface world, constructed an entire civilisation on the basis of forced labour. Which made them vulnerable, she knew (or she'd been told; Katerina was quite aware that she wasn't particularly bright – if she had been, she wouldn't be stuck in the factories), but there was little she or anyone else could do about it. She was just a slave.

Now, however, for the first time in her life, she had an advantage no one else had. She was pregnant with the child of an Omega. She'd never heard of such a thing happening before. No matter what came next, it would be an improvement for her and the child. It *had* to be.

Katerina had almost fallen asleep by the time Dr. Stenberg and his wife came back. She started to sit up, but Emilie put a hand to her chest

and gently urged her to lie back down, to not exert herself. The woman smiled; it was a genuine smile, Katerina thought, one of hope and excitement.

They were both happy, she thought, the doctor and his wife, happy that she was pregnant, that the doctor was not sterile. Happy that the Omega could still procreate.

Katerina relaxed and listened to them tell her how they needed to do more tests, to see if the baby was healthy, if it belonged to the doctor, how long it would be until she gave birth. There was nothing to worry about. She knew there was nothing wrong with her child, and she'd never been with anyone except the doctor.

Given a choice, she wouldn't have let him have sex with her, but you didn't say no to an Omega, not someone who owned you. It'd been painful and humiliating, and afterwards he'd been angry with her for no reason whatsoever.

But now...that was part of a past that could easily be forgotten. Now the doctor and his wife would do their tests, and they'd be satisfied, and then they'd ask her to stay with them, to live in their house, to raise the baby. The future was so clear to her, so bright and beautiful and filled with promise, she couldn't help but smile.

Emilie glanced at her husband and made a grimace. Why did the girl smile that idiot smile all of a sudden?

For God's sake, she thought, *I hope she's not a retard. I hope the baby's not a retard.* That would be very embarrassing both for her and her husband. Not to mention a horrible setback in what seemed to be a miraculous new development.

Well, the bio-scan would reveal a lot, once they received the equipment. She'd made an order through a local hospital, pretending to take a personal interest in one of her attending girls, wishing to see her through an emotionally distressing pregnancy...which, in a way, was true, although this particular mother-to-be would find her postnatal situation a lot more distressing than her prenatal one when Emilie took her baby away from her. Most likely the slavegirl, *Katerina*, would end up in a research or breeding facility where her particular talents would be of most use.

Emilie herself longed to be a mother. She *deserved* to be a mother, and even if this child would not be hers, then at least now she could begin

to entertain the hope that some day she could give birth herself. If the Omega men were capable of fertilisation, the same must be true about the women. She'd dreamed of being a mother...although it would certainly not be with Jonas, that much she'd already promised herself.

It wasn't the fact that the bastard had cheated on her – she'd done that herself a thousand times over...they all had. Lifelong monogamy just wasn't an option after a few hundred years in a moribund marriage. No, it wasn't his infidelities that made Emilie loathe Jonas. It was his *arrogance*, his self-obsession, his sickly smile, the way he ate his food, the noises he made when he slept, every word he spoke, every breath he took...*everything*. Sure, she'd loved him once, briefly, a very, very long time ago, and true, there was nothing that bound her to him now aside from the fact that he was a very powerful man, a step up the long and excessively slow career ladder. But Emilie still found herself unable to leave, unable to stand up for herself. If she could only be fertile, however, if she could look forward to the promise of new life growing inside her, she'd get up and leave in a second. She'd find herself some kind and gentle soul, perhaps even a slave (although that was definitely against company rules), to impregnate her then leave her alone and let her raise the child by herself.

Yes, that's what she wanted: a future with a purpose beyond her own amusement and enrichment, a selfless life lived raising a child...

If she could only have that, then everything would be good.

A week passed. The girl Katerina stayed with them, and the doctor and his wife worked exhaustively to find the answers they were looking for, but finally they'd had to admit that they'd met the wall.

There had been a series of complex bio-scans, all manners of genetic tests; they'd injected the girl with diagnostic bots, run tissue samples from the foetus, questioned her, examined her family tree...and still there were no obvious answers to the burning question: Why had this particular girl become pregnant at this particular moment with this particular Omega?

The child was his; that had been decided quickly. And it – he, the baby boy – was healthy, displaying every normal characteristic of a five-month-old foetus. But aside from these basic facts, which any person with a modicum of knowledge could easily have obtained, there was

nothing their research could reveal.

After the first week, Jonas and Emilie Stenberg were resigned to the fact that they'd need to bring in outside help, Omega doctors who were working on the non-fertility problem on a daily basis, to assist them. The doctors wouldn't be particularly pleased that the Stenbergs had waited as long as they had, or that they'd tried to find answers on their own, especially regarding something as imperative as this, the continuation of the Ark Project.

Even more acutely, however, Dr. Stenberg dreaded the reaction of the Farmatek board. The corporate code stated quite clearly that all research, no matter how insignificant, had to be approved by the appropriate people. And this research was far, far from insignificant. It was in all honesty the most important research since the development of the bots, back in the twenty-first century.

But...no matter. It couldn't be helped now. He'd made a judgement call, and Emilie had stood by him. If, in the end, this led to the Omega's salvation, then his surreptitious behaviour would soon be forgotten and instead he would be remembered as a crucial contributor to the development of their society.

His wife, Emilie, disagreed. "If we crack this case on our own," she argued, "the benefits for us will be much, much greater and we won't have to wait for the board's approval before we have more children. Our *own* children," she added, as if this was crucial.

"Even if we could 'crack' the problem on our own," he said, "don't you think they'd start to get suspicious if we suddenly have a number of infants in our family?"

"That's not a problem. We can tell them we've adopted the children from some of our slaves—"

"Something that you know is highly illegal, Emilie. Where would that get us? I don't want to be censured by the board, not now. And if the truth came out, if they realised we'd been lying to them..." He shuddered, involuntarily. The harshest penalty of all was being denied access to the rejuvenation chambers, and a fresh supply of bots. "No, we should take this to the company, apologise for the delay, and hope that they'll know what to do."

"They'll take the baby, Jonas! They won't let us keep him."

"So? What do you care, anyway? He's not even your child."

But he was! thought Emilie. Maybe not biologically, but in every other way it was *her* child! He was her husband, and it was his seed that had made this child, so why couldn't it be hers?

No, she decided, it would be. It *would* be her child. If she had to kill to keep it, she would. For a week now she'd seen the baby move inside the slave girl's stomach, feeding on nutrients, sleeping, perhaps even dreaming. She'd invested a lot emotionally in this child. It represented a future that she longed for with all her heart, and even though, in time, she would hopefully have her own child, for the moment this was all that she had.

Granted, if the Farmatek doctors weren't told about the pregnancy, if they couldn't do their tests and conduct their experiments, it would take more time before the mystery of the Omega sterility was solved. But she had time. She could wait. If it'd happened once – a pregnancy between an Omega and a Solitus – it would happen again.

She wasn't about to sacrifice this chance at motherhood simply to accelerate a process that was bound to occur at some point in the future anyway.

For now, this baby boy would have to do – a substitute for a child of her own – and she wouldn't give him up for anything in the world. He was *hers*. She would take him from his mother immediately after birth and the baby would never know the truth of his heritage.

Emilie had even picked out a suitable name for her little boy:
David.

*

Katerina crept slowly down the hall, her naked toes sinking into the soft carpet, her breath cautiously soft. The house was still and the Stenbergs were asleep. There would be guards outside, but she knew their routes now, and she would be able to sneak by them undetected.

They weren't looking for anyone coming out. Most days, they weren't looking for anyone at all. No one in their right mind would threaten an Omega household, and yet they had enough guards for a small army. Why were they so afraid, so paranoid? Didn't they even trust their own?

She knew she was supposed to stay with the Stenberg household until the baby was born. She knew this like she'd known to come here in the first place. Her child was meant to receive the kind of upbringing and support that was denied the Solitus, the slaves. But she couldn't *stand* it anymore. She couldn't stand Emilie's constant hungry looks, and she couldn't stand Dr. Stenberg's busy hands. They were monsters, both of them. They were petty and greedy and cruel. And Katerina knew she didn't want her boy to grow up to be like them.

She was due in a few days. This was the last chance she had to get out, go underground, get the assistance she needed from her own people.

Downstairs, she let the image scanners target and analyse her. The soft green light trickled down her body like water. She was in the databanks, and she often wandered around the house late at night – the baby's kicking often woke her up, and she had a tough time falling asleep again – and so the alarm would not be activated.

Without a sound, the light disappeared, and she was left in darkness.

Outside, a guard passed by the hallway windows, heading towards the walled garden where he'd probably light a cigarette. His name was Evan, and he was a slave, but she was certain he'd not help her, not in a million years. He had a good job; she couldn't blame him.

She tiptoed across the marble floor towards the kitchen entrance. From the pantry, there was a staircase down into the basement, and from the basement there was a tunnel to the boathouse, and the guards only passed by the boathouse once every two hours and...and she'd finally be able to escape from this place, this decadent and evil place.

Katerina was quite proud of herself. For the first time in her life, she'd thought something through properly. Usually, she just followed her instincts – and sometimes her strange dreams – but now she was doing something on her own accord. She'd planned this escape for weeks; she'd studied the guards, she'd spoken with them surreptitiously, pinpointing the one day when there'd be the fewest sentries on duty, she'd set up an escape route and packed a bag—

The bag! She almost stamped her foot down in irritation. She'd left the bag in her room, upstairs. Did she need it? Katerina thought for a few seconds. Yes, yes she did. There was the food, the warm clothes,

the stolen jewellery (she hadn't been particularly proud of her theft, but Emilie never wore those things anyway) that she'd need to sell for food and transportation. Slaves weren't allowed to travel far without papers, but there were places you could *get* the papers you needed...if you had the money to pay for it, of course.

And she'd been stupid enough to leave the bag in her room! What an idiot she was. Served her right for thinking she was smart all of a sudden.

Katerina snuck back through the hallway and up the stairs, her heart beating much faster now than it had the first time, and down the corridor to her bedroom.

They'd given her a nice room with a big, soft bed, and all the comforts she could possibly need – and which she'd never had access to before – but none of those things had made her particularly happy. True, the food had been good, and the garden outside was very beautiful to sit in when the sun was out. She'd miss it, for sure, but she wasn't doing this for herself; she was doing it for her child. Being in this house made her feel like it wasn't her child at all. Emilie had even suggested to her repeatedly that she name her child *David*, as though Katerina wasn't capable of picking a name for her baby boy by herself!

She realised something was amiss the moment she pushed the door to her room open.

The bedside lamp was on (had she forgotten to turn it off? She couldn't remember), and the drapes were closed (she *never* closed the drapes), but still Katerina couldn't quite make herself turn around and flee. She just had to get her bag.

She was halfway into the room when Emilie spoke from the corner where she was sitting.

"Where are you going, Katerina?" The calm, cold voice made her freeze on the spot, but she didn't turn around to look. "Leaving us so close to the birth of your baby? Don't you think you owe it to us to at least let us see the little boy?"

"I'm not leaving, ma'am," Katerina whimpered. "I was just...just...taking a walk around the house."

"What's this thing doing here, then?" Emilie asked, and Katerina turned to look.

The woman had the packed bag on her lap; it was open, and

Emilie had pulled out a stolen thermos and a necklace. “You’ve been borrowing a few things from me without permission,” she continued without waiting for an answer. “I don’t think that’s very nice, considering we’ve allowed you to stay here for free for so many months.”

Katerina turned on the spot and ran for the door. Once through, she slammed it shut behind her and heard Emilie curse loudly on the other side. Holding her hands to her tummy, keeping it from bouncing up and down, she sprinted down the corridor as fast as she could. She’d just reached the top of the stairs when Emilie burst through her bedroom door.

“Stupid girl,” the woman hissed, “don’t endanger my baby!”

My baby? Katerina was dumbstruck. Was this what Emilie had been thinking all along? That it was *her* baby? She couldn’t stay in this awful, awful place. She had to get away!

She started down the staircase, and then her foot caught on the third step down, and her legs got tangled in her skirt, and before she knew it she was toppling over. She vaguely heard herself whimper, and Emilie scream, and then the stairs rose up to meet her and she tumbled down, over and over again, all the way down, where she suddenly stopped with a sickening crack.

Emilie raced down the stairs to where the lifeless body was lying, twisted and ugly, blood flooding from the idiot girl’s head where she’d hit the floor. She immediately checked Katerina’s pulse, and when she found none she started screaming for her husband.

He appeared seconds later, having already woken from all the commotion, and together they carried the limp body into the study. They didn’t have long; the baby had to be saved. Thank God, she thought, that it was only a few days premature. If this had happened when the slave girl first came to live in their house, there wouldn’t have been anything they could’ve done. Now, chances were they’d be able to save the child...unless it, too, had been hurt in the fall.

The procedure took less than ten minutes. Her husband carved the corpse open, a Caesarean section, slicing through Katerina’s abdominal wall and womb, and then she lifted the wailing baby out – the screams were a good sign – while he cut the umbilical cord.

Not half an hour after the slave girl’s lethal tumble down the

stairs, Emilie was holding the baby boy – *her* baby boy – in her arms, cradling him with infinite tenderness, coddling him, loving him.

He was hers now, finally, and this night had suddenly become a good night; from death there came life, and now she didn't have to feel guilty for having the girl Katerina murdered, like she'd planned to, after the birth. Quite conveniently, Katerina had murdered herself.

What a stupid, stupid girl, thought Emilie. She hoped fervently that the boy would get his intelligence from his father's side, if nothing else.

"We have to go to the board," he said to her. "We don't have any choice now. We've lost the girl, and now there's only this boy—"

"David," she said. "His name is David. You would do well to remember your own son's name."

"Whatever," he said. "I'm as ecstatic as you are, Emilie." But he didn't feel that way. He still didn't feel anything, not like his wife; she'd embraced this child like it was her own, but selfishly, unwilling to risk losing it. He felt there were opportunities, but without the involvement of Farmatek scientists, the opportunities would come to naught. Who knew how long this baby would live? Was it more Solitus than Omega, or was it something else entirely? They didn't have the knowledge or the tools to find out, and it would serve all Omega better if they just relinquished the child now and admitted their crimes.

"You're as cold as ever, Jonas," she snapped at him. "Don't even pretend anything else. You want to hand David over to doctors, for experiments? Ruined though we've become, we're still *human*. And we should act like humans."

"What about everyone else? Should I be the only one allowed to have a child? What about our race, Emilie, what about the Omega? For every one of us who's lost, there's no one to take his or her place. We're dwindling, slowly but surely. We won't stay immortal forever. We, too, will disappear, unless we can procreate, unless we can expand and maintain our control! The Earth is being victimised by the slaves...can't you see? They're breeding illegally, becoming more for every day that passes, and you're unwilling to allow our race a chance to compete?"

She didn't want to listen to him, because he was right, he was right in that it wasn't fair of her to keep David to herself, it wasn't fair to

deny the Omega the chance to have the children, it wasn't *fair*, but she didn't care. She wanted David, she wanted him as her son, and if they went to the authorities now, David would be taken away from her for ever.

"You're not taking him," she said. "I refuse to allow it."

He nodded. "Then I'll have to see them myself," he said. "I won't let you destroy the Ark Project because of your desire to be a mother, because of hormones. Think about the consequences of your actions, Emilie."

He turned away from her to leave, and she thought about the consequences of her actions, and she came to a decision, she came to a decision with such clarity and immediacy that she couldn't help but act on it.

To kill an immortal was the greatest crime of all. If a slave was found guilty of such a crime, that slave would be subject to the slowest, cruellest deaths of them all; surgical garrotting, infinitely extended with the use of bots, witnessed by all the other slaves of the commune. It'd happened only three or four times in the last six thousand years, and yet that seemed enough of a deterrent, because not even the most mutinous of slaves would ever consider murdering their masters.

Murder between immortals, however...that was a touchy issue.

Immortality wasn't a sure thing. The combination of bots and rejuvenation chambers, as well as the regular medications and injections, ensured that their bodies were constantly regenerating itself. There was no deterioration of tissue, no diseases, no cancer, no infections...they were cleansed continuously by the presence of the tiny machines. Even violent trauma was counteracted by the bots; a bullet-wound to the chest, for example, was stitched up almost instantly, unless the bots had not been replaced recently, or if the body lacked the sufficient energy for the bots to function. But that took a while, there were more than enough chambers around, and no Omega was stupid enough to venture far from a medical laboratory for any length of time.

Still, the immortals could be killed, which meant they weren't truly immortal, only very, very long-lived. The immortality label was useful when dealing with the slaves, and in essence it was the truth, because, with prudence and caution, any Omega could live forever. Suicides were rare: even though depressions and feelings of hopelessness

and pointlessness were rife, no one who'd lived for as long as they had wished to risk their lives for the uncertainty of death. Suicides were for the Solitus with their short, desperate lives; to die at thirty or at eighty made little difference to someone who'd already lived eight thousand years, and even to a slave, a lifetime was a very, very short time. Too short. Which was why they lived so ferociously in the little time they did have.

But there were murders – because emotions flared, even dead ones, when spending so much time with someone else – and to punish an immortal for killing another immortal was a highly sensitive issue. Usually, the killer was just deprived of fresh bots and use of a chamber, and he or she was kept in house-arrest until they grew old and frail and death came naturally.

To the Omega, this was just as harsh as garrotting.

Emilie figured it was worth the risk.

To kill an Omega, you had to cause a huge amount of damage in a very short time span so that the bots would not have time to make repairs before the brain was deprived of oxygen for too long, although, with the revival techniques at their disposal, that might take hours. Or, in a much less messy (but potentially much crueller) approach, confining a person so completely for so long that the bots stopped functioning and the body was returned to its mortal, and vulnerable, state, at which point death would be inevitable.

Emilie opted for the latter.

She stepped up behind him as he was leaving the room and slammed the scissors through his left ear and into his head. He screamed in agony, and fell to the floor, but Emilie knew she only had a few seconds before the bots had repaired the most critical damage. She pulled the scissors out, kicked him over, and sat across him with a knee on his chest. With surgical precision, she slowly and deliberately ran the scissors through first his left eye and then his right. Then, without pausing, she used the sharp instrument to open him up from his navel to his ribcage in a long, languid rip, and (frowning now, the smell strong, her distaste over her actions growing from moment to moment...what was she *doing?*), tossing the scissors to the side, she grabbed hold of the flesh on each side and ripped her husband's abdomen open, exposing his intestines. She stood up, grabbed a hold of his entire insides with both hands, and pulled.

The wet scream and the moist rip were so similar, she couldn't even tell where one ended and the other begun. Mercifully, he passed out quickly, and as she grabbed the scissors again and carved a path through all of his organs, she had the time to think about her next step.

She would need to incapacitate him completely, for a very long time. The bots were already repairing his insides, stitching him up with abandon, happy (she imagined) to finally be of some use. In ten or fifteen minutes, he'd probably wake up, and he probably wouldn't want to talk this over. If she couldn't find a way to finish him off, she'd be in front of the board tomorrow morning...and her punishment was non-negotiable. Even worse, they would take David away from her, and all this would be for naught.

Reinvigorated, she made a last few incisions through his ribs and into his beating heart. Blood squirted everywhere (if she managed to finish this, she thought, she'd have a heck of a cleaning job to do tomorrow, and it wasn't as though she could set her maids on the job), drenching her, soaking into the carpet and splattering the walls.

Quickly, she began pulling her husband's twitching body through the door and into the hallway. Desperation gave her strength; she half-carried, half-dragged the heavy body into the kitchen, through the pantry (realising as she did it that this was Katerina's brilliant escape route, as described in her journal; what a moron that girl had been), and down into the basement. There, she dropped the body on the concrete floor, and looked around.

The cement mixer was where the workmen had left it. There were more modern construction techniques around, but why spend the money when there was enough manual labour, and enough time, to build a thousand pyramids in their back yard?

Right next to the mixer, exactly where she remembered seeing it last, there was a spade.

This part would be *most* unpleasant. But...it couldn't be helped. He'd been difficult. He only had himself to blame, the stupid man.

She put the edge of the spade to her lifeless (but very much alive) husband's throat, put her foot on the flat end, closed her eyes, and *pushed*. It took four pushes to take the head clean off.

When she opened her eyes again, she could actually see the bots at work; or not the bots exactly, but the effects of their work. Tendrils of

tissue were already trailing between the severed head and the neck, and a host of bots would be busy feeding the brain with oxygen until it could be reunited with the arteries of the lower body.

Dr. Jonas Stenberg might be headless, but he was far from dead.

Emilie wiped her mouth on her sleeve and tossed the spade aside. She'd only bought herself another two hours or so, but that was probably all she needed.

She'd watched the slaves at work, and she knew what she had to do. She filled the mixer with the concrete powder, poured several buckets of water into the machine, and turned it on. It churned around and around, mixing the powder and the water into a thick, grey porridge. Then she grabbed the spade again and began scooping the mix up and out, and applied it to her husband's body, starting with the head.

When she was done, it looked as though the floor had bulged up in a shape vaguely recognisable as human. The concrete was fast-drying, though not nearly fast enough, but Emilie had paid close attention to the workers (admittedly because they'd been quite handsome, but still, she'd picked up a thing or two). She rummaged through the shelves next to the mixer, and found what she was looking for almost immediately. It looked almost like a doctor's instrument; an indistinct grey box, with two black cables extending twenty-five or thirty centimetres out, terminating in silver plugs. The box itself had two buttons: one red, one green.

She placed the two plugs into the cement covering the body, and pressed the red button.

There was a crackling sound, and the cement hardened instantly and perfectly, smooth as skin. As she pulled the two plugs out, the holes where she'd put them filled it and hardened too, leaving no evidence of the device.

Satisfied, she tossed it aside.

Now. It was done. He was still alive, and he would be for a while – the bots would feed him oxygen and nutrients, and they would continue to repair his body until he was all stitched up – but sooner or later the bots would deteriorate and die, and then...

She smiled.

She would stay close until she was absolutely certain. Then, and only then, she would arrange for a proper burial. Quite privately, of course. No need for anything big. After all, Jonas had always abhorred

parties.

And if anyone should ask where her husband had disappeared to, she'd act as innocent as can be and tell them that, gee, she didn't know; he'd taken it upon himself to take a pilgrimage or something...she'd have to find a better excuse than that, but she had plenty of time now.

But first, first and foremost, most importantly of all – her son, her David, needed looking after.

She walked up the stairs from the basement to the pantry, and shut the door behind her.

*

“Tell me again about my father,” the boy said.

“Very well,” said his mother. “Your father was a brave, brave man...he helped a lot of people get better—”

“A doctor, right?” the boy asked eagerly, knowing full and well the answer he was going to get, eager for a response nonetheless, a confirmation of his intimate knowledge about the subject.

“A doctor,” his mother confirmed (as per the constantly rehearsed script), and continued, “A very good doctor who was always doing his very best for everyone...both Omega and Solitus...”

“He helped the slaves, Mom?”

“Even the slaves, David,” Emilie said. “He was kind to everyone. Which means that you, too, should be kind to everyone you meet, even if they're just slaves.”

Her son David was sitting on her lap, staring up at her with wide, trusting eyes. This was a *séance* they performed quite often, ever since the six-year old boy had begun asking about the father he knew he was supposed to have.

And she complied, exorcising some of the guilt she had in the process, building an image of a perfect father, a perfect husband, in her son's mind. Better that than the truth, certainly.

They rarely ventured out of the manor. She'd cut her staff in half, maintaining only a nominal workforce, whatever was needed to keep the place running. She'd told anyone who asked that the child was Katerina's, the slave girl they'd taken in to be her personal maid, and that Katerina had died in a tragic accident. Of course, children were supposed to be

returned to the communes, for general care until they were old enough to start working, but she'd managed to explain it away by saying David was sickly and that he needed special care.

Besides, the slaves didn't much mind the fact that she was looking after one of their own. As far as she knew, no Omega knew about the boy thus far.

They had been asking about her husband, though. At first, they'd accepted her story about Dr. Stenberg going away on some sort of business, she wasn't quite sure what, no, she wasn't sure when he'd be back, they hadn't exactly been on good terms lately. But the longer he'd stayed absent, when months turned to years and still no one had seen or heard from him, suspicions were voiced, questions were asked. And now, recently, they'd launched a full investigation.

Six years was only the blink of an eye to the Omega, but still it was unusual for anyone to be absent for this long, especially when that someone hadn't used a chamber since before his disappearance. Wherever Dr. Stenberg was, his body was deteriorating, and no Omega, no matter how secretive he or she wished to be, would let that happen.

The Farmatek board was quite certain that he'd been murdered, and they were pretty sure that she was responsible.

Still, they needed proof. There was little legal recourse for the slaves when accused of a crime, but the Omega demanded a fair and impartial legal system when they were involved, and so investigators were investigating, people were interrogated, and their manor turned upside down in the weeks and months that had followed the onset of the case.

Emilie was certain they'd find some evidence sooner or later. Until then, she was resolved to spend as much time as possible with David, because he would be taken away from her, and then she would have nothing. She wasn't afraid of death, not anymore. But she was adamant on her son receiving the life he deserved, not some slave's life, not an Omega life, but a unique life, a special life for a special child.

So she told him as much as she dared tell him about how different he was, how important it was for him to understand both the Omega and the Solitus (even then, however, she made it perfectly clear that the one was superior to the other, and that he should count himself proud to be an Omega).

The evening before they came to take her away, the very evening

when she was telling her son David about his father yet again, they received a visitor.

The old man, wizened and grandfatherly, stood in the hallway where he'd been told to wait by the maid, and as Emilie entered he bowed respectfully and muttered a polite greeting. David, she noticed, was listening in the doorway to the salon, but she didn't have the heart to shush him away. Whatever this man had to say, he might as well hear it.

Before she had time to ask the man what he wanted, however, he spoke:

"Mrs. Stenberg, I've come to take David."

She froze, and found that she couldn't speak. What did he mean, take David? Was he threatening her child? How stupid could he be; the building was surrounded by guards!

"Don't worry," he continued, "no harm will come to him. He's a special child, ma'am, I know. He's the only one of his kind." He glanced over her shoulder at David, and winked. "Only thing is, when they come to take you away tomorrow, they'll take him too, and they'll put him somewhere you don't want him to be."

"What do you mean, take me away?" She'd found her voice again, but now she was sick to her stomach, and her head was buzzing. Who was this terrible stranger who could say such awful things?

"They're going to find your husband's body tomorrow morning," he whispered softly, low enough to prevent David from overhearing. He took a step closer to her, and though she wanted to back away she found that she couldn't. "You'll be found guilty of murder, and you'll be confined to this house. You'll grow old and die, just as us slaves, but they won't let you keep the boy, as you very well know. If you tell them he's the son of slaves, they'll put him in a commune. And if you tell them the truth...well, you don't want to do that, ma'am. They'll want to do terrible things to him."

"How do you know these things?" she whispered back. "How do you know?"

"Oh, I'm just a messenger," he answered. "I receive instructions."

"How?"

"I dream," he said. "Like your boy, I'm of Alyssa's clan, last one surviving...aside from the boy, of course. Katerina's child."

Emilie went pale, but the old man waved his hand.

“I don’t judge, ma’am. We all answer to a greater power.” He looked up briefly, blinked, then looked back at her. “And if you ask for forgiveness, you will receive it. But you’ll also need to do what’s right for the boy...or you won’t ever be able to forgive yourself.”

“What will become of him?” Strangely enough, she knew the old man spoke the truth. Something had come over her, some serenity, some knowledge that this was the only answer, this was why she’d looked after David. He was born to something greater, and she’d done all that she could for her boy, her beautiful boy. Now it was time to hand him over to someone else who would be able to help him fulfil his destiny.

“He’s going to free us all,” he said, and his eyes lit up like a child’s eyes. “And I don’t just mean the Solitus, you see. I mean humanity. His future is the most important thing there ever was. That’s why I have to take him away.”

“Let me say goodbye,” she told him, and even as she said it she couldn’t quite comprehend what she was doing, but it seemed right somehow, right but terrible, terrible, the most terrible thing she’d ever had to do, but still the right thing, still right.

She knelt down in front of David and calmly, perfectly composed, she told him that she’d need for him to go away, to go with the old man wherever he would take him, that he needed to be safe because bad things were about to happen. David didn’t utter a single word; he didn’t cry or refuse to listen to her. He just listened, and when she was done he touched her cheek and said, “I love you, Mom,” and then he walked over to the old man and together they left...just like that.

But just as they passed through the front door, the old man turned around and said, “What should I call the boy? He needs a name other than just David, and it can’t be Stenberg, now can it?”

“Marlin,” she said. She was close to tears, but it wasn’t quite time, not yet. “It’s my maiden name.”

“David Marlin,” the old man answered. He smiled, nodded. And then the door closed behind them and Emilie Marlin Stenberg started weeping for the first time in a thousand years.

Chapter Sixteen

Switzerland, June 7th 12305 AD

“DNet interrupts this stream to bring you an Instant Report from our primary hub in London. Please select your preferred anchorperson, language, and dialect.

“Thank you. Here is Anita Berg with a DNet Instant Report in Standard English:

“Good morning. David Marlin, acting president of the world council, has vanished from his home in Zurich, Switzerland. Authorities reportedly fear that Mr. Marlin may be the victim of a carefully orchestrated abduction. According to reliable DNet sources, six members of the president’s fifty-plus armed security staff were found sedated inside the president’s mansion early this morning. Mr. Marlin may have been airlifted from his property by a sound-masked floater which was granted access to the property’s private flyport shortly after midnight to offload three authorised visitors. The abandoned floater was found this morning about one hundred kilometres south of Zurich, but no suspects have, as of yet, been apprehended.

“The president’s spokesperson, Monique Cavan, told the press in a prepared statement this morning that it was too early to speculate on what had happened to Mr. Marlin, and that there was still no evidence of a criminal act. She did emphasise, however, that there is some concern for the safety of Mr. Marlin, and that law enforcement agencies across the globe will mobilise immediately to assist in locating the president.

“The World Council will go into an emergency session this after-

noon, and acting vice-president Paola Sanchez will take over President Marlin's duties, effective immediately. Experts believe that the short-term effects of the President's disappearance may result in a dramatic drop in the world's financial markets, as well as political upheaval in certain unstable Asian and South American regions. Stay linked with DNet throughout the day for updates on the situation, or launch a DNet DataMiner to search for more information on the subject.

"Thank you. A DNet DataMiner has been launched. You will be continuously updated on its progress.

"This is Anita Berg, for DNet, in London."

David closed his eyes and settled into the soft leather seat.

The gentle hum of the ancient car's hydrogen combustion engine lulled him into a trancelike state where he finally found himself contemplating the things to come rather than what had been.

Much like the snow-capped mountains of the Swiss Alps outside his window were now giving way to the green, rolling hills of France, his past was slowly slipping away behind him, and the future...well, the future was uncertain.

Right now, all David wanted was to sleep a long, long time. Real sleep, not the shallow imitation of sleep that he'd made due with ever since the world began to depend on him for guidance and leadership. Soon, by the grace of whatever force had led him this far, he *would* be able to sleep.

For the first time in his adult life, he was free of all bonds and responsibilities, and although this would not, could not last forever, he would treasure the freedom for as long as it was his. Until destiny caught up with him – or he caught up with destiny; David wasn't sure exactly which it would be – he'd be alone with the myriad of stars. Truly and utterly alone.

What a divine blessing that would be.

Among the few people he'd counted as his closest friends and confidants, no one could empathise with, or even understand, his plight: to have an immortal body but a mortal mind, a mind that, without the respite of sleep, could grow as weary as – perhaps wearier than – any man's mind.

While David didn't particularly wish for mortality, for death, he did need peace, more so than anyone could understand. Perhaps the

greatest irony of all was that only his oldest and darkest enemies would be able to empathise. Wherever the old guard of Farmatek had slinked off to, they too would feel weary and haunted.

Yet surely they had their methods to alleviate the weariness and the pain, to cope with the enormity of their lives, the thousands of years lived, the thousands of years still to live.

Sometimes he wished he could speak with them; not to lecture, but to learn. Next to them, he was still just an infant.

But there would be no meeting between him and the Omega. For one, they'd disappeared completely, to where he wasn't sure, but he knew what strings they were pulling and what devices they were employing in their quest to regain the upper hand. His own trusted advisor, Anagha Singh, had been seduced by Farmatek agents and, like Judas Iscariot, sold his soul for thirty pieces of silver.

Of course, it'd been inevitable. David had only been waiting for this to happen. He hadn't known when, or how, only that the rules of the game had been set, the pieces played, and the endgame was commencing.

Because now – and this was the second reason why he would never have the opportunity to meet his enemies face to face – David was leaving. He was leaving this world and he would never return.

There was nothing left for him here. His family was long dead, his friends had betrayed him, his position was growing less and less important with each day that passed. The world congress would do fine without him. In fact, congress would do *better* without him constantly reminding them of a past they tried so hard to forget, and in the past few years of his presidency, David had deliberately had little direct influence on their policies.

If there was ever a good time to leave, this was it. His work here on Earth was done.

His last mission was waiting for him, somewhere down the line, at some point in the distant future, on another world.

It was really quite absurd, when he thought about it. But then his whole life had been one absurdity after another. His birth, his upbringing...to be schooled in becoming the saviour of mankind by people who worshipped you because of *dreams* they'd dreamed, because of prophecies and suppositions...

No wonder he was so screwed up. He was neither Omega nor

Solitus, neither master nor slave, and he'd never truly fit in anywhere.

O why was I born with a different face, he thought ironically, why was I not born like the rest of my race?

William Blake. Another haunted soul and, fittingly, his favourite poet.

It wasn't as though David particularly enjoyed bemoaning his fate. It seemed petty and strangely pretentious, as though his heritage was an affectation. But sometimes it was all he had left.

We are what we have become, what life has made of us, what others believe us to be.

What did people think of him? Generations had passed since the liberation and, aside from the Omega (and himself, of course), not one person alive today had been there during those crucial years when all eyes were turned to him for guidance. It'd been a trying time, but at least he'd had *direction*.

Not that he didn't have direction now...yet it seemed he had a long, long journey ahead of him before he would again be able to affect history. Bemoan his fate though he would, he did like to feel as though his actions were of some consequence.

Between the end of the war with the Omega and the beginning of the reconstruction, during those endless years when nation battled nation and the world was thrown into utter chaos, he'd lost direction completely. He was angry with everyone, angry with the warlords who'd sworn allegiance but still refused to put down their arms, angry with a world congress that seemed unable to agree on anything unless he put his foot down.

Most of all, he was angry because he'd lost the two people he'd loved most of all, angry that a war he was responsible for had taken them away from him...

Angry with himself for setting all the different wheels in motion to begin with.

There wasn't much anger left in him now. The years had robbed him of that. As the world grew more and more prosperous and there was little use for anger anymore, he'd begun to wall himself in, thinking, remembering...waiting.

Waiting for something – someone – he knew would come, sooner or later. And now *they* had come, and he was on his way, on his way away

from this place, away from the past, a past he'd willed away but which kept returning, returning to haunt him...

*

Jerusalem, June 9th 12101 AD

"This is the Voice of Freedom, people! Listen up!

"For the very best of reasons, this is a once-only broadcast, so for those of you who're with us right now your task is clear: give the word to the others as soon as possible! Tempus fugit! It's of prime importance that our initiative is coordinated, focused, and quick. For every Solitus who isn't taking part in the push, there's a smaller chance we'll succeed. And I don't have to tell you what losing this battle will mean. There won't be a second chance, not anytime soon.

"Right, since I'm being told that we're already being tracked down, I only have a few seconds – but that's all I need. Comrades, make for the nearest depot right now! If you don't know where that is, follow someone who does! Claim your arms and join your faction. Do *not* hesitate! Follow the directions of your assigned leader without question! There's a time for democracy, and there's a time for obedience. You will all have a voice when this is over. For now, do as you're told! It's the only way we'll win. Our enemies are coordinated, they're strong, and they have armies to command. We, on the other hand, are many, and we are fighting for the most important thing there is; our freedom. But that won't matter unless we stick together, and follow commands! The Omega have a lot to lose, and they won't surrender easily."

Zeev turned his chair away from the terminal to gaze out the window.

Already the gates were taking heavy fire from Omega forces. They wouldn't last long, not under this onslaught.

The Omega had caught on a lot faster than he'd predicted, but it didn't matter, not now. The word was out. David was safe. Whatever happened to Zeev himself, he was confident that the revolution would succeed. A year ago, it wouldn't have. A year ago, they weren't organised enough. Despite ten thousand years of slavery, they didn't have a

common goal, a uniting force. Now they did. Now they had David, and despite Zeev's misgivings, the man was a true Messiah to most of the Solitus. Which also made him a target for the Omega armies, but they wouldn't find him. They would look in all the wrong places.

He continued:

"We're under siege, but for the time being, we're holding out. We'll stay live as long as we're alive...just don't count on us being around when the proverbial hits the fan. Like I said, stay with your faction, listen to your leader. Their commands will come directly from David himself."

There was a loud explosion, and the gate parted. Soldiers swarmed through. Zeev turned away, facing the console again.

"Okay, people, the moment is close. Go! This broadcast will continue, but I've said all I have to say. I'll keep repeating my message for as long as possible, but for those of you who've listened in...it has begun! Fight! Don't look back! Don't surrender! Remember David's words..."

He paused, resenting for a moment the role their apparent saviour was playing in this war, the role he himself had been forced to play.

"'We were all born slaves, but the world belongs to us. We are the future of mankind.' Go now, kids. Go. Be the wave that washes over the sand castles of the Omega, laying them bare for us to rebuild."

Zeev shut the mike off for a brief moment, forcing his fists to unclench, swallowing the lump in his throat. He had to be *strong*.

He flicked the switch back to 'live', and started from the top.

*

Ulaanbaatar, November 3rd 12120 AD

The war raged on and on.

Across the killing fields of the territory once known as Mongolia, the metal dinosaurs of destruction rolled over mounds of bones, remnants of a city destroyed, an entire people slaughtered. But there was no one left to witness this desecration. The machines were soulless, controlled remotely by Omega generals. Whatever armies the Solitus had once mustered in this cold and barren landscape were long gone.

For the moment, the Omega had the upper hand, but this wouldn't last. Already, the cracks were showing, and the unceasing dedication

of the Solitus – led by the greatest warlord of them all, David Marlin – served as constant inspiration to the prior slaves, created hope in their ranks, and made their victory as tangible as the first scent of flowers in spring. It was inevitable: In the end, the Omega were destined to lose. It was just a question of time and of how many Solitus had to perish before destiny prevailed.

There had been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of casualties, most of them amongst the Solitus. But then there were a thousand of them to each Omega, and unlike the Omega they were not afraid to die for their cause and for their families. Meanwhile, the Omega clung to their manufactured eternities, afraid to risk their immortality, and in the process lost whatever chance of victory they may have once had.

Since emerging from beneath the earth like pale-skinned aliens, almost ten millennia ago, the Omega had made this world their paradise; a green and beautiful Arcadia, a society that never progressed yet which, to their eyes, was perfection incarnate.

And now that paradise had been ravaged by hailstorms of fire from the skies, by ever-advancing mechanised troops, by bullets and shells and blood soaking the green grass crimson red.

And yet neither side would surrender.

For the past slaves, there was too much to gain, for the masters, too much to lose. There were still years of strife left – the armies were still numerous, the arsenals still plentiful. In the meantime, in camps and ravaged cities and under ground, warlords rose; with the power to command thousands of people, they led – in the name of David, mostly without his blessing – their armies into battle every day; sometimes, inevitably, against each other, but more often against the Omega armies, and sometimes against the immortals themselves.

These warlords had a common cause, the one thing that separated them from the Mongol armies of ancient Earth; they existed not to pilfer and steal and gain fortunes, but to free their people from the shackles that bound them. One day, they would have to give up their kingdoms – this, they knew – but as long as David was alive to accept their allegiance, this would not be a difficult choice to make. He was their once-and-future king, the man who would reunite the lost tribes of the Solitus and hunt down the remaining Omega to stand trial for crimes against mankind. He would free the Earth and start a new age, a new calendar.

The clock would be turned back to the year zero, and the victors would rewrite history...as they always did.

Meanwhile, the war raged on and on, and the black clouds that covered the planet would not lift anytime soon.

*

Hyderabad, Pakistan, November 4th 12120 AD

David lowered his goggles.

The night sky was lit up from horizon to horizon. It was quite beautiful. It reminded him of the fireworks he'd seen when he was six years old, at a New Year's celebration he'd attended with his mother. But this time the lights were a harbinger of death, not rebirth.

All around him, twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, a war he'd never wanted but was unable to prevent was being waged, and he was at the centre of it all.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He didn't turn. Her mind was lit up like the sky above him; loving, worried, sad.

"I think the Sanders camp is moving east again," he said. "They shouldn't have pushed in so soon."

She slipped her arm through his, leaned into him. She was warm. She'd been sleeping, he could tell. Her thoughts were still slow, coloured by her dreams.

"You can't worry about everyone, David."

As ever, her soft voice calmed him immensely and immediately. He had a vision of his mind entwined with hers, their thoughts wrapped together. She didn't have the talent, but she didn't need to. She knew what he was thinking – what he was feeling – better than he did.

"Yes, I can," he replied. "I can worry about them all, each and every one. And I will. I am the reason they're out there, Nika, fighting...dying. They've put all their faith in me. I can't ignore that."

She turned him around to face her, looked up at him with her deep brown eyes.

Her face was round, her cheeks red from sleeping down in the bunker in the sweltering heat and humidity. Her hair was raven black and long, reaching halfway down her back. She had a full figure, not slim by

anyone's standards, but shapely, and he loved every inch of her. She was wearing combat fatigues, and she had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders; it was cold up here, and windy.

"Perhaps you can't ignore it," she said, "but no one expects you to worry all the time." She pronounced it 'time-uh', and puckered her lips in a way that he couldn't help but smile at every time. She scowled at him, and pushed him away playfully.

"Stop making fun. I'm being serious."

He grasped both of her arms, held her at a distance.

"I know, Nika. But knowing is one thing, doing it is quite another. Unless this war ends tomorrow, I won't be able to sleep peacefully."

"It won't end tomorrow, or the day after."

"No, it won't." He was so tired. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep a thousand years. "It will be a long time before this war is over, I know. Right now, we're not doing too well. We're not well organised, we don't make the right choices. Thousands die every day."

"That's not your fault, David!" She was angry with him. She always was when they were having this discussion. He perceived her mind as a hot, glowing ball of fire, her emotions strong and true. "They worship you, yet they don't follow your commands. I don't understand it!"

It came out as 'eet', but he knew better than to smile. Not that he felt like smiling.

"They're not mine to command, Nika."

"Oh, please!" She threw her hands up, exasperated. "David! How can you be so perceptive, yet so stupid?" She was the only one who would speak to him like this, and he loved her for it. "They need you to command them! Why do you shy away from that? Tell them what to do! They listen to you!"

"I do tell—"

"You tell the so-called council when you should be speaking directly to the warlords. You're one of them, David! They look to you as the greatest warlord there ever was. Why be so circumvent?"

He turned away. The answer was obvious. He didn't want the responsibility. He didn't want each and every death out there to affect him personally. Yet it already did. He already *was* responsible, and no

hiding behind a council or behind generals could disguise that fact. She was right, but he knew that already. It didn't change anything. He wasn't ready to step out of the shadows and become the great warlord that destiny had foretold he would become.

"Have you eaten?" he asked. Changing the subject. Every time.

She sighed. "No. I'm not hungry. But you should. And you should sleep also."

"You know that's futile."

"If you say so." A pause. "She's asking for you. I'm taking her to class in a little while. Do you want to see her?"

"Of course." So tired. "How is she?"

"She doesn't like being out here, but you know that." Another pause. "I don't either."

"Nika—"

"I know!" she interrupted him. "David, I know. And I'd rather be here with you than anywhere else. But I wish we didn't have to."

Again, he turned to look at her.

When he'd first spotted her amongst the refugees along the road, ten years ago, he'd arranged for her and her family to be sent to St. Petersburg. The war hadn't yet reached that city, and there was still plenty of food and water. He'd become instantly infatuated with her, but he didn't know how to approach her. To most of the prior slaves, he was a mythical figure, a Messiah. They treated him reverently, not like a human being but almost like freedom incarnate, an answer to all their prayers. And he wasn't comfortable with that. He needed someone who could be disrespectful, who would question his motives and his actions and keep him grounded in reality. So he kept his distance from her, but he visited the camps often, gently touching her mind with his, not probing her private thoughts, but simply looking for a sign that she considered him to be only a man, not a god.

In a town hall meeting he'd attended, where arguments had raged between two reigning warlords, David trapped in-between as a moderator, he'd found just the sign he'd been looking for.

She'd stood up and disagreed with him. Her father had quickly hushed her, but afterwards he'd sought her out, intrigued by her suggestions and comforted by her unwillingness to keep quiet, by her disrespect of him.

After that, they'd been inseparable, and a year later, Nika had given birth to a baby girl.

In Nika, he'd found everything he'd ever wanted; a friend, a partner, a steady rock in the ever-shifting currents of his life. Before, he'd avoided intimacy, knowing that sooner or later, the people around him would die while he lived on...perhaps forever. But somewhere along the way he'd realised that life, and love, was precious, and if he could only experience a brief respite of intimacy then that was infinitely better than not having known it at all.

Besides, how could he be a leader if he didn't understand the things that made the lives of his chosen people worth living, worth fighting for?

Some day she would grow old, and he would stay young, and when that happened... With his friends in the past, it'd been painful, and he'd slowly distanced himself, seeing the envy and desperation in their eyes. How would it be with Nika, or with their daughter? Would they understand his pain as well as their own? He could only hope. Right now, he could only sense Nika's concern for him, her deep love, and her fear of the future. And he knew that he could make that pain go away.

He smiled. "Let's go spend some time with our daughter. I feel like a big breakfast."

She smiled back. "I'll make you both some porridge."

He grimaced, playfully, and she laughed. For the moment, all was well. There was hope. The future was in their hands, and they would make the most of it, come whatever may.

*

August 1st, 12127 AD

The war ended with his wife's death.

David felt it, the moment it happened. As from a great distance, he saw the bright white light, the sand turned to glass, the seared faces of soldiers caught unaware while celebrating their victory.

He saw (felt) his wife's tears, crying for him, crying with happiness. The tears evaporated in a millisecond when the walls exploded, crushing her. She died in an instant. His face was the last thing she remembered.

When they played the recording back to him, he couldn't bear to watch. He sat and listened to them explain how something like this could happen, how it'd been impossible to foresee, impossible to prevent. He nodded, accepted their condolences, spoke when required to, and congratulated them all on the victory when they left.

Later, when he was finally alone in the room, David watched the whole recording through from beginning to end.

They'd cut together security feeds from various rooms in the bunker. One moment, there they all were, all his comrades, walking around, grinning, shaking each other's hands. The next...black. The blast itself was so sudden that it didn't even register with the visual circuits.

The second time he played it through, he spotted his wife. She was sitting at a table in the back of the mess hall, writing something on a pad. He paused the playback, tried to zoom in as far as possible, but the resolution wasn't good enough to make out what she was writing.

When he focused on her face, he thought he could see her eyes glistening. She was crying. He'd been right about that.

He hadn't been there for her, but would it have helped if he had? Would greater powers have intervened on his behalf, when they'd failed to do so for his wife?

Was his life worth so much more than anyone else's life?

That night, he told his daughter about what'd happened, and she screamed and wept and told him that she hated him. Why did you save all those other people, she shouted at him, and not my mother?

He didn't have an answer.

The next day, before making memorial arrangements with his staff, he took stock of their situation. Most of the Omega had already disappeared. A few had been captured, too few, the Solitus who'd fought on their behalf were dead, and the machines that constituted most of the Omega forces were destroyed.

Yet they'd only substituted one war for another. Without a common enemy to fight, the warlords would turn on each other, and soon.

But David found that he had suddenly stopped caring. He'd let

the war into his home, and now his family had been torn apart.
Would he *ever* find peace?

*

Paris, August 13th, 12127 AD

Bryce kept a vigilant eye on the crowds.

Friendly or not, you never knew with crowds. Even amongst their own people there were enough crazies to warrant an army of bodyguards. Besides, who really knew how many of the Omega had survived? They could very well have a mole right here. Come to think of it, they most certainly did. But chances were that if an Omega had made it this far, he or she wouldn't be too keen on being noticed.

Still, you never knew.

So he let his gaze wander from person to person, expecting the worst. He didn't like it when the boss went public this way, but he understood the reasoning. The people wanted to see their leader, even if it was under such...unfortunate circumstances.

Behind him, David Marlin stepped up to the stone. He was surrounded by twelve bodyguards, and trailed by several dozen warlords...no, that wasn't what they were called these days. *Ministers*, Bryce reminded himself. The few warlords who'd surrendered their fiefdoms after the war had been granted token positions in the newly formed world congress. In addition to the bodyguards and ministers, kept a safe distance away from the cemetery by armed soldiers, there were tens of thousands of civilians, all paying their last respects to the deceased, and using the opportunity to get a rare glance of their beloved leader in person.

The boss looked increasingly tired these days, Bryce had noticed. Leadership of a divided Earth facing years of civil war, combined with the sudden and tragic death of his wife – it all weighed heavily on him, Bryce knew. Freedom from slavery had brought hope for millions, but for David it had only brought pain.

On the very eve of liberation, the Omega had launched one last attack aimed directly at the command HQ where David was supposed to be. Except on that one occasion he'd been airborne, surveying the last bat-

tlefields near Berlin. His daughter was in the field, luckily, but his wife, Nika, had been back at the bunker. The impact had completely destroyed everything in a ten-mile radius, turned the area into a glass desert. It wasn't supposed to be possible; there were safeguards in place. But Bryce guessed the Omega had had one ace up their sleeve. Too bad for them it'd been too late.

They'd only been able to capture eighteen of the immortal bastards, and they would be facing trial within the month, charged with crimes against humanity. The verdict had already been passed, long before a jury was selected, and the death penalty would be enacted one last time – it was a given; the people were crying out for blood – and then, hopefully, it'd all be over.

But lingering in the minds of all Solitus was the fact that there were probably a lot more of the Omega out there, disguised, hiding, escaping their just punishment. Sure, they'd be able to smoke a few of them out, but they'd never get all of them. Some of the murderers would go free and live on into eternity, unpunished. Except they'd never be able to relax, to feel safe; as long as someone remembered the war, the Omega would be a hunted breed.

The Omega – the last humans.

Right, yeah; they were the last of their kind, but they would never be the last humans.

Something caught Bryce's eye: A man, wearing a coat, with his right hand concealed.

Bryce flipped a mental switch, targeted the subject. He was a Caucasian male in his late forties, tanned, unshaven. Bryce ran the face through the banks but came up blank. Not an Omega, then – they would never be this obvious – but still a potential problem.

He sent a message to the nearest soldier, and the man was quietly pulled from the crowd, searched, questioned. It only took a few seconds to eliminate the problem. Whatever happened to the man, if he was innocent or not, Bryce didn't care. Caring about civilians wasn't part of his job. His job was to protect the boss, and if that meant stepping on a few toes, then so be it.

Behind him, David Marlin was kneeling down with his daughter, placing flowers on his wife's tomb. Probably shedding a few tears. Genuine ones, mind, but still – good stuff for the cameras. People would

be eating this up all over the world. His ratings would skyrocket. Not that David needed it – his last approval rating was at ninety-five percent. And until the day he decided to step down, he would never have to fight to keep his position. They called it a democracy, but no other candidate would ever stand a chance against the greatest man that ever lived. Jesus Christ couldn't hold a candle to this man. Bryce wasn't too sure he was human at all. Sometimes David Marlin seemed like the Messiah incarnate. But he still needed protection, if only for show and to keep the bureaucrats from growing ulcers. The administrative apparatus around the boss' government was immense, and they all depended on his decisions every step of the way. No one wanted it any other way.

Behind him, the procession of warlords – strike that, *ministers* – each placed a flower in turn at the tombstones commemorating the dead, and then they turned and walked to their floats. There would be a memorial service at the cathedral for all the Solitus who'd died in the war – the number was staggeringly high, millions, too high to even comprehend – and then there'd be meetings with visiting ministers and dignitaries.

Bryce had a long day in front of him.

He scanned the crowd again. What was that girl holding? He sighed, and flipped a mental switch.

No rest for the wicked.

*

Below the Earth, October, 12127 AD

So now they were underground again. What a laughable state of affairs.

When it came down to it, Anna knew, ten thousands years was really not very long at all, but that was all the time they'd had in the Garden of Eden. It was supposed to have been *forever*. Now, looking back on it, ten thousand years was the blink of an eye, a single moment in the sun...in the end, it was only a short respite from what might prove to be eternal subterranean imprisonment.

Their brief stay in paradise would haunt them until the universe itself went dead and cold and the darkness on the other side caught up with them all.

They'd been transformed from revered gods to hunted (and haunted) demons in the space of a few, short years.

Still. They wouldn't give up. There was always that. However many there were left of them – down here, there were now sixteen, seventeen including her, should she choose to stay – there would be enough to carry out *some* kind of plan. They could all wait a good while for things on the surface to cool down, for people to forget. A few generations, perhaps; a hundred years, perhaps even two. By that time, the slaves would've grown fat and lazy and probably content with their short and pointless lives.

Ripe for the plucking, to coin a popular phrase. They would have come full circle, and the Earth's rightful inheritors would yet again emerge into the light of day.

Anna let the thought warm her chill bones. Revenge. Payback. For the humiliation, the insolence, and the monstrous pain.

Yet there was one nagging thought that kept bothering her, a loose thread that she just wasn't able to resolve: What had happened to the Farmatek board, the nine elders? There was no chance in hell they'd been caught or killed. They had lived far too long, seen too much, to let a little thing like losing a war get in their way.

No, they were alive, for certain, and that meant they were hiding *somewhere*. Anna was prepared to wager her precious life that they were already preparing to strike back somehow. She'd have to make sure that her plans didn't conflict with theirs.

She was confident, true, but she didn't for a moment believe that she would ever measure up to *them*.

She looked at the others. They were huddled together in a corner of the room, wrapped in thick blankets, shivering. God, what had they been reduced to? They'd managed to get one of the thermal panels operating, but that was all she was prepared to risk. The hunters were out in force, and although she doubted that any of the Omega POWs would speak, this location might yet be compromised.

Until the current generation of slaves had passed on – fifty, sixty years from now – she doubted there would be a respite from the hunters with their filthy *seysense*.

She'd have to think about that some more. The longer the bloodhounds went without meat, the hungrier they'd get. It might be a good

idea to feed them...something. And as chance would have it, Bruner was starting to get on her nerves. The only times he stopped complaining was when they were screwing, and she was pretty sure there was nothing to gain from that anymore.

No, he might be a good, tasty morsel to throw to the dogs. If she could only arrange it so that he wouldn't speak, and so that the hunters would think he was by himself.

Yes, he should be the one.

Louise Cochrane was coughing again. The harsh, unfamiliar sound irritated Anna. It was so peculiar, this new sensation, their bodies being susceptible to infections and disease. Without the constant replenishment of bots, the old ones were dying at a frightening rate. Anna was certain that they'd get through the next few months before it became a crisis, but at that point, they'd really need access to the chambers. Luckily, she was the only one amongst them who knew the precise location of the nearest laboratory, and she knew how to operate the chambers, so she was of immense value to the others. That made her their leader. Even without her natural ability to take charge and to dominate, the others would've looked to her for guidance. Problem was she didn't dare take the tunnels quite yet. Though few outside the trusted circle knew where the chambers were, the hunters were fierce.

The way they just *gazed* into your mind...

Anna shivered involuntarily. A month ago, she'd been so close to one of them, had felt his icy fingers intruding her most personal thoughts; had felt him grasping for a hold, attempting to wrest control over her body, to make her panic and scream and reveal her location. But she hadn't. She'd managed to push the rapist out. In some strange way, Anna realised, this meant she had to have some of the talent herself; dormant, concealed, but *there*.

Suddenly, she felt like taking a long, steaming hot shower. The thought of *seysense*, small though the talent may be, residing inside her own mind, made her feel dirty. The hunters were mutants, aberrations of nature. Still, they were useful. There was no denying that. The warlords had made good use of them in the war. The slaves would have won without them, no sense in believing anything else, but perhaps it would've taken longer, with a greater number of casualties on the enemy side.

Anna herself had not been on the frontlines at any point, but

she'd not been afraid of war, nor of dying. Most of the Omega were so cowardly, clinging to their lives like it was the only thing that mattered. What was so terrible about death? Either there was something waiting on the other side, or there was absolutely nothing at all.

In either case, she'd be no better off or worse than anyone else.

She might live a lot longer than most humans, but she was under no illusion that she was a true immortal. Even though she might, theoretically, escape extreme physical injury for millions of years to come, in the end the odds were against her. And would her mind survive for that long? She was young by Omega standards, only a few thousand years, bred from a cryogenically frozen foetus in a tank and mixed with genetic material from slaves...an experiment, one of the few to succeed.

Another attempt to battle fate, to ensure the survival of her kind.

Not long after she was born, however, the whole program had been abandoned. Out of a million fetuses, only eighty-five had developed properly, and of those eighty-five, only seven had grown past infancy. It seemed that no matter how much energy and work they put into creating offspring, their race had been destined to perish.

Personally, Anna was sure that it was because of a lack of true dedication, a wrong focus. The Omega were old and tired, and she knew that with her fresh insight, they might have been able to make progress. But by the time she came of age, all breeding programs were suddenly stopped. Partly because of the traitor David Marlin – the Omega feared another one like him, and rightly so; if there was one thing that gave the slaves an upper hand in the war, aside from their sheer numbers and bloody-mindedness, it was David, their surrogate Messiah – and partly because the Farmatek board had decided it would be so.

No one argued with the board.

Frankly, she'd been puzzled by their decision. It wasn't like them to abandon something as important as the breeding programs. And the board wasn't exactly known for making rash decisions. They were used to taking their time. Anyone who'd been around since the long winter knew that everything took time. What had happened to affect their decisions to such a degree?

That was something to ponder, for sure. Could it have something to do with their disappearance now? Were they secretly working on something so important that their continued heritage didn't really matter?

Anna wished she were with the board, wherever they were holed up. Sure, she wouldn't be allowed to make any decisions, but her input would at least lead to something concrete.

Not like with these morons.

She'd have to get rid of the worst ones before too long; they would just drag them all down. Bruner, for certain...and that Cochrane woman, if only to get rid of the awful coughing.

She was no better than a slave, letting herself get *sick* like that.

Anna pulled the last grenade fragment from her leg. It looked a right mess, that was for sure, and the bots were getting sluggish. Tissue regeneration was worryingly slow. Maybe she'd been wrong; maybe they needed to get to the chambers sooner than she'd expected.

She tested the leg. She could stand up, she could walk...perhaps she could even run, for a short distance. But there might be infections. She didn't want to risk losing the leg; not now, not until she had a plan.

She walked back to the others, making sure she didn't limp. No point in making them aware of a weakness, give them an opening to tear into her. She had no doubt they would, if given a chance. She knew *she* would. In a second.

"Okay, people!" she said, throwing Bruner a sweet, little smile. Let him think he was still the favoured one before stabbing him in the back. "This is what we're going to do today..."

*

Venice, Italy, November, 12127 AD

The nine were seated around a table in the dimly lit hall, grey marble floors and dark stone walls echoing their every move. Flickering torches – a nice touch, the man at the end of the table thought to himself; after all, it was his idea: he enjoyed the air of mystique and conspiracy – and authentically replicated furniture completed the picture.

For all intents and purposes, they'd been transported eleven millennia back in time.

The man at the end of the table let his gaze wander from left to right around the circumference of the long oak table. Pale faces looked back at him. Some averted their eyes quickly, while others gazed into his

eyes without expression. Some smiled, some frowned, and one or two scowled at him, bloody murder on their minds.

Everything as it should be, then. All present, all accounted for.

No surprises there. They had all been safely ensconced in this underground chamber – a submerged relic of an ancient Venice, part of Farmatek's long-forgotten subterranean network – since before the war, although the latest excursions had made some of them a bit jittery. Again, that wasn't so surprising. In fact, it was almost amusing how afraid some of them were to expose themselves to danger. Ten thousand years of constant self-preservation had its drawbacks to be sure; the worst of them all a constantly decreasing willingness to take any sort of *chance*.

Roman Dragovich Zubov (the other eight knew the man at the end of the table only as Roland Drake) took chances. They were measured chances, to be sure, and the odds were always in his favour. But they were still chances. Something *could* go wrong. Nothing ever did, because Roman knew he was watched and looked after, and, perhaps even more importantly, he knew the importance of preparation and planning. That was why he was still in charge after all these years, after what had appeared to be a fall from grace and a shameful retreat back into their burrows deep below the sunny meadows that now belonged to the Solitus. Others may have had the drive, the ambition, but few had the sheer guts that he had. He was willing to risk it all, and to do it with a coldness and precision few could ever muster.

And now that willingness to take risks would pay off in a big way. Their reign was over...for the time being. But that was as it should be. No paradise could last forever without change. And *they* had finally presented him with a fresh vision of the future; a vision in which one of the nine now seated here would eventually take on a higher calling. Roman had no doubt it would be him.

He would make damn sure of it.

But first: cooperation. There would be plenty of time for backstabbing later on. He needed them all now, the other eight. Like him, they were ancient and eternal, and they possessed wisdom and intuition and ambition and cruelty (let's not forget cruelty, he thought, no, let's never forget cruelty). The ability to put aside human emotions was very important. He needed their cruelty more than anything else.

The way forward now was subtle and slow, and it would take a

long, long time before all the threads could be woven together, but then time was the one commodity they had more than enough of. The corporation would rise again, albeit without them – at least in day-to-day operations – and this time the company would be all-pervasive without causing undue resentment.

The slaves would remain slaves, but this time they wouldn't even know it.

It'd been stupid to think that there would never be consequences to their actions, or that a revolution wouldn't be successful. You couldn't suppress millions of people the way they had been doing *forever*. Morally, Roman had no problems with what the Omega had subjected the Solitus to. The slaves had never lacked for food or shelter, and they'd been a sight better off than they were now, in a ravaged world where starvation and extreme poverty were rampant in the wake of a long and bloody conflict.

And when the Omega first emerged from their arks, did they not bring peace and prosperity to a world in dire need? But people wanted, needed, freedom – or at least the illusion of freedom. He'd learned that now. And he would *give* people freedom, until that freedom corrupted mankind totally and made them a ruined people, unable to progress, incapable of spiritual or ethical evolution.

In the meantime, he would build an empire to span worlds – a corporate entity that, in time, and if all went well, would bridge galaxies. Nothing like Farmatek, true: Farmatek had been an autocracy, and there were limits to what one man could accomplish, even an adept puppet master like himself. No, this new beast would be something much, much greater.

From the ashes of Farmatek would grow the Hydra, with countless heads that could spawn and multiply. And every head would think alike, yet be autonomous, and together they would gaze down upon a universe where no person would ever remain invisible, and where no event would go unnoticed.

It would be omnipresent, omnipotent.

Omni. All-encompassing.

There it was. He'd been looking for it, and now he'd found it. For lack of a better word, he'd been granted a visitation from a muse.

The man who was both Roman Dragovich Zubov and Roland

Drake, the man who'd began his voyage into immortality ten millennia ago, cleared his voice.

It was time to get started.

*

France, June 8th 12305 AD

David woke to the deafening sound of silence.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes. He was still in the back seat of the car, but it wasn't moving. He leaned forward, looked out the window.

The car was parked inside a huge hall – or perhaps a hangar – and it appeared to be night; at least the row of windows thirty meters up was dark.

He checked the door. It was open.

He climbed out and looked around. A floater was parked right behind the car. It was smaller and sleeker than most of the floaters he'd seen. It couldn't possibly seat more than one passenger.

He approached it gingerly.

“Good morning, David,” the voice intoned. “Thank you for coming.”

The voice was emanating from everywhere, nowhere, and David suspected the person on the other end wasn't anywhere close.

“I didn't have much of a choice,” David said. “I'm done here. Who are you?” he added.

But whatever device transmitted this voice, it didn't seem to be wired for two-way communication: “This floater will take you west,” the voice continued, “out over the Atlantic Ocean. The next leg of your journey will take thirty minutes, at which point you will land on a floating island where you will receive further instructions. Thank you,” it said, and went quiet.

It was strange to be ordered around like this, strange and somehow liberating, as though he'd been absolved of all responsibilities. Whatever happened happened. He could no more shape his immediate future than he could change the past. He could refuse to get into the floater, perhaps, but that would change nothing.

After all, this entire drama was of his making. He'd written the

script, and although someone else was directing it, he knew how it ended. He knew the twists and turns of the story.

Besides, even if he were to ignore the instructions, he didn't relish the thought of returning to his home in Zurich, to his job, to questioning faces and suspicious journalists.

He opened the floater's door and climbed inside.

*

Bombay, India, April 2nd 12272 AD

Anagha Singh knew that this was wrong, to speak on behalf of his boss, the *president*. But he also knew that David Marlin would reject the offer outright, without even giving the emissaries a chance to properly present their case.

And he also knew that accepting the offer these men had brought to the table was the right choice, the only choice, despite what David might think, and so he'd taken it upon himself to accept the invitation to meet, and to speak for the president in his stead.

The hard part wouldn't be convincing David to sign off on this, not once he'd been able to put together a full report, not once the wheels had started turning. David was pliable, more so recently than ever before. No, David Marlin was simply a nuisance. The difficult part would be to convince all the various faction leaders seated in congress. They would not be happy. And that was putting it mildly.

Most of the ministers, diplomats, and senior advisors that made up the world congress were violently opposed to anything that would remind them and their constituents of Farmatek's almost ten millennia long dominion over Earth. To suggest so soon after the end of the war (despite the fact that the war with the Omega had ended more than a century and a half ago) that their facilities should be pulled together into a large and potentially all-encompassing company...a world-spanning corporation...

This might prove to be more than troublesome. To even suggest it might be professional, perhaps even actual, suicide.

Still, it did make perfect sense. The world needed structure, now more than ever, and conventional production lines would have to be rein-

stated as quickly as possible. With the age of the warlords finally at an end – only one or two minor conflicts were still being waged; to all ends and purposes, the century-long war was over – famines and epidemics were sweeping across the North American continent, across Asia, Australia, and Eastern Europe. It wouldn't be long before people began to die in massive numbers. They needed the factories up and running, they needed to manufacture medicine, tools, surgical instruments, food...all the required necessities, and to do so quickly and efficiently they needed a centralised production facility. At least to begin with.

Within a few years, according to these men, they could reintroduce Omega devices to the market...like the builder, for example, and hopefully even nanotechnology, in some shape or other. Certain secrets had been lost with the absconded Omega, and it would take time for Solitus scientists to decipher the technology. But there were a million designs waiting to be put into production, and the sooner, the better.

Once he got David to agree, however...no one would oppose *him*. The man had become increasingly distant of late, gradually withdrawing from all aspects of public life. It was a struggle just to get him to speak up in congress, even though they all wanted him to, even though they needed their chosen leader to stake a course that they could follow, blind sheep that they all were.

Soon, at some inevitable point in the near future, they would have to face the fact that the world would go on without David leading them along. This would mean a splintering of factions; old borders being redrawn, old rivalries being awoken, warlords returning to their lands...perhaps even new wars. But if they could get the global industrial machinery going again, under one, centralised leadership – run, of course, by the world congress (Anagha envisioned himself in a benign, but powerful, administrative-slash-political position) – there would be hope. Wealth was the great equaliser, and people would be less inclined to embark on a new revolution if they had the basic necessities. And after that, after restoring the Earth to at least a semblance of its former glories...

The sky was most certainly not the limit. Anagha believed passionately in off-planet expansion, knew that it was only a matter of time and resources. The planet needed it. Earth had been ravaged by too many wars to keep count of, and the population would soon begin to

increase dramatically in numbers as soon as living conditions improved and the last vestiges of the old regime had finally disappeared.

Which was why he was in this very meeting, at this very moment.

He'd taken his visitors into the congress building's cafeteria, a large white hall with tall windows, constructed in the style of early twentieth-century Indian architecture. He didn't want this to be *too* official; he hadn't yet made up his mind about his guests, and besides, David didn't know.

It wasn't as though he was going behind his back, Anagha thought. He was just listening to a proposal, taking notes, helping to put together a plan of action.

He was, after all, a politician.

"You will be a key partner in this," said the man to his left. A tall fellow, sun-browned and broad-shouldered, impeccably dressed, if somewhat dishevelled. He'd fought on the Pacific frontlines the past few decades, a staunch supporter of the world congress who'd done his share to battle the warlords. A veteran, then, someone who'd made a conscious investment in the future. Anagha liked that. He trusted people with passion. "We wouldn't be able to do this without your support, Mr. Singh. We'd talk to the president personally, but..." He trailed off.

There was no need for him to continue. No one spoke to David these days except for his trusted inner circle, of which Anagha Singh was an important part.

"If we don't get this rolling shortly, I'm afraid some of the industrial facilities will be beyond repair, and the reconstruction will be so much harder." This from the second man, to his immediate right; a large man, skin as black as night, from the looks of him he was in his late sixties or early seventies – striking, personable, and utterly persuasive. Another veteran, Anagha was sure, although the man hadn't made any mention of the war...yet.

"Let's not push Mr. Singh into a corner," said the third man, seated right in front of him. Unlike the first two, he didn't look like a soldier; he looked like a bureaucrat, and Anagha wasn't quite sure he liked this one yet.

They were enjoying a late lunch. The hall was almost empty. Privacy.

"I know Mr. Singh agrees with us in principle," the third man

continued, “but I sense his doubts regarding congress, about their willingness – or lack of it – to venture down the...corporate path so soon.”

Sense? Was the man a psychic? If so, why wasn't he a hunter, helping to unearth traitors?

“I mean...am I right, Mr. Singh?” the third man said. “Is this your primary concern?”

Ah. So it was merely an *assumption*. Anagha relaxed. He wasn't comfortable around *seysense* hunters, despite their staunch allegiance to the president. They were...unnerving.

“Yes,” Anagha began. He paused, thought carefully about his reply. “I firmly believe that congress would agree...eventually. But consider your timing for a second: it's been less than a year since the last great warlord fell, and his control over certain Farmatek production lines ceased. To suggest that we restart these factories, even though we're not about to manufacture weaponry, when what people associate with them is war...”

“We have time to wait,” said the second man. “That is not the problem. The problem is; can the world afford to wait? I'm sure you're very aware of the situation in North America, Mr. Singh, and frankly...I can't stand thinking about what will happen if we don't get rolling pretty soon. We've seen enough death and destruction, and if the Omega left us a legacy of any worth, why not accept that and turn it to our advantage? Without using it to create weapons of destruction? There's a lot of political support for this idea, I'm sure you will find. We will do our utmost to sway congress in your direction. But we cannot do it without you and without the president. We need to have Mr. Marlin on our side, and quickly.”

“Mr. Marlin...David,” Singh corrected himself, “isn't *opposed* to your plans. I can assure you of that, Mr. Mamello.” That was a lie, but Anagha was in this for the benefit of everyone, not to support his boss' private philosophies. “He's just...aware of the many factions that threaten to sometimes tear our precious alliance apart. When congress took control of some of the old Farmatek facilities, it was for a *purpose*; to fight the warring factions, to subdue the warlords. It's been a hundred and fifty years, gentlemen, and only David knows how hellishly long this war has really been. They closed the production lines down not just because the world congress was winning, but to send a clear sign to everyone that we'd

left the past behind for good, that there would be no autocratic corporate entity, not even in the guise of a political democracy. They were shut down, and the technology destroyed, so that mankind could carve its own path into the future.” David’s words, not his.

“We understand,” said the first man. “But times have changed, and I cannot imagine there’d be any argument if the president himself presented our case. In all honesty, would anyone publicly oppose Mr. Marlin and still expect to be able to walk safely down the street? For God’s sake, gentlemen, the man’s got a ninety-eight-point-five approval rating! And if the remaining one-point-five percent is anything more than a margin of error, I’d be very surprised. Those people would never dare admit their position publicly. The man is a political mountain! Unshakeable. If you truly have his ear—“

“Mr. Singh,” the third man said, interrupting his partner. “We don’t expect miracles, but we are offering you a solution to the problems the world congress will be facing in the next few decades. The fact is, the factories and laboratories and production facilities can be used for so much aside from weapons. With an initial investment of a few billion dollars, and a fair relief from taxation, a global company – run, of course, in *close cooperation* with congress – will be able to be up and running in six to twelve months. We will, naturally, make a modest profit from this. We need to pay our workforce, invest the money in new developments... But obviously *everyone* will profit! Financially, politically...we can return this world to the state it was in prior to the war, but without the dominance of an elite. Omega technology for the people! Omni-Tek will be the first true global company, a corporate entity ruled by the masses. Actual democratic capitalism, if there ever was such a thing.”

Anagha sighed. He should take this to David first, he knew. But these days, he just dreaded facing the man, even though they were – had been – good friends. There was something in his eyes, something that hadn’t been there before. Or perhaps something had disappeared: a fire, zealotness, a spark of dedication and of total commitment.

While David had always opposed his own deification, he’d grown to accept the awesome responsibility and made the most of it. He’d freed his people, changed the world...and somehow, the war had kept him going, year after year, decade after decade, while one by one the warlords fell.

But now, when they needed him the most, when the world was *finally* being stitched back together and turning its back on war, David was fading away. It was like he was withering, turning old. Maybe he *was* turning old. Maybe the interbreeding of Omega and Solitus meant that he wouldn't live forever, only for a few thousand years.

Maybe David was *dying*.

The shock of that possibility jolted Anagha out of his thoughts. They really did need to act on this now, no question about it. Say what they would, congress wasn't unreasonable, and even if David *did* decide to disagree...

Could they go against his word? In principle, yes, they could. The congress had the power to veto David's decisions, although so far, they'd never done that. But if David were sick, if he was dying, then at some point, sooner or later, they'd need to start making decisions on their own. And this would be the perfect opportunity to do so...if David would indeed argue against the creation of this global corporation. Which Anagha would try to prevent, to the best of his abilities.

David trusted him. Anagha had already broken the man's trust, but it was for a purpose, and if he changed the details of the deal just a little bit...to make it more manageable... David wouldn't even take the time to look through his report, he'd trust that Anagha would do the right thing.

He would sign the papers. He'd make the statements.

"We're talking the same language," he said to the three men, "and I'm with you on this, one hundred percent." If David had heard him now, he'd have had definite issues with his choice of words, but so be it. "However, I cannot make any promises. Even if David decides to go with this – and chances are, with my help, he will – there's still congress to convince."

"We'll make contributions, whatever it takes. There are strings we can pull, donations that can sway certain key players to our side. Give us David, Mr. Singh, and we will give you congress."

Anagha rose, and the three men rose with him. It appeared they were willing to let *him* lead now that he'd agreed to cooperate. Funny, that.

"I appreciate your offer, sir," said Anagha, and shook each man's hand in turn. "I look forward to reading your proposals and to bring this

up with David. I'm sure he'll see the importance of creating a corporate entity to bring human development up to speed. And this...uh...Omni...?"

"*Omni-Tek*," said the first man. "As in 'all' and 'everything'."

"Yes," said Anagha. "Omni-Tek. Very...fitting." He smiled. "Very fitting indeed."

*

Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, June 8th 12305 AD

The ground was remarkably still considering they were on an artificial floating island in the middle of the ocean with a raging storm bearing down on them.

Huge waves broke over the edge of the island, thundering fists beat on the massive metal – accompanied by vivid streaks of lightning all across the sky – and yet the ground was as unyielding and tranquil as terra firma.

David was impressed that anything this size could be kept a secret...or if not exactly a secret, then at least unnoticed, forgotten. It'd been an Omega outpost during the war, he was informed (the personnel on the island didn't seem to recognise their president; at least they pretended not to), where airborne armaments could refuel and repair. Later, it'd been occupied by some European warlord with grand visions of a marine empire. And now it'd been turned into a launch platform for sub-orbital jets bound for one of the many geostationary factories.

This was, of course, an Omni-Tek operated outfit. In the past decade, other corporations had managed to gain a foothold in certain industries – the world congress and the recently formed ICC, adamant on keeping Omni-Tek in check and prevent it from becoming a monopoly (despite it being granted the patent on Farmatek's nanotechnology), had imposed all sorts of legal and commercial restrictions, much to the frustration of the rapidly ballooning corporation – but Omni-Tek was still a dominant force. It controlled over eighty percent of the world's manufacturing facilities, and it was currently the sole player in the burgeoning space industry.

In the course of a quarter of a century, humanity (and Omni-Tek)

had taken giant steps forward. The wars were a distant memory to most people. Even the initial scepticism over Omni-Tek – a name that David had always thought disturbingly close to its immediate antecedent, Farmatek – had dissipated once the quality of life had improved for everyone. And with discontinued Omega technology being rebuilt and improved upon every day – not the least of which was nanotechnology, though with necessary modifications to prevent abuse – progress was far quicker than it would have been under normal circumstances.

With Omni-Tek at the wheel, the future was bright for everyone. According to history, David had played an important part in bringing about the birth of that company. He'd signed the initial edict presented to congress...an edict that his former senior advisor, Anagha Singh, had fashioned.

Unwittingly, from the ashes of Farmatek, he'd created a *new* Farmatek. That had never been part of the plan, and yet it had been – it'd been a part of someone's plan, because now, whatever he may think of Omni-Tek and their ceaseless expansion, it was their technology that would send him onwards to his ultimate goal. And while betrayal had played an important part in the foundation of Omni-Tek (a betrayal that was repaid, tenfold, at Mr. Singh's expense) at least he was now able to use the corporation's resources to his own avail.

David stood safely ensconced from the storm, on the fourth floor of the central communications building on the island. Panorama windows gave him a good view of the entire edifice. Half a dozen jets were lined up in a neat row just below the tower. All, except one, which had been towed to the takeoff strip where mechanics were now performing one last check-up before launch.

Even Omni-Tek personnel didn't trust everything to their precious machines, he mused. Was that a good sign or a bad sign?

"The jet's ready for takeoff, sir." The young man was drenched with water. David looked him up and down.

"In *this* weather?" It didn't sound very reassuring.

"Not a problem," the young man said proudly. "We haven't lost a single jet yet, and the weather's often pretty ratty out here."

"Right," said David. "Except there's a storm out there...at least I think it's a storm." He shrugged apologetically. "I'm not much of an expert. But lightning is usually a good clue that there's something amiss."

He pointed out the window. “And big waves. That means it’s windy, right?”

“Yeah, except you won’t have to worry about any of that, sir. The pilot will take care of it for you. Come along – we’ll need to maintain our flight schedule, I’m afraid.”

Ten minutes later, despite his misgivings, David had strapped himself down in the rear seat of the suborbital jet. The ground crew had given them the go-ahead, and the engines were revving up. He’d been aboard one of these things before, and he was familiar with the physical discomfort.

The jet’s sojourn into space would be a brief one. It would only stay long enough for him to disembark before it engaged its thrusters and re-entered the atmosphere.

His real journey would begin once he was out there, amongst the stars.

They’d been working on the ship for a decade, and it was finally ready for departure. He was the only part missing before it could disengage from the satellite and set course towards infinity.

Two days from now. Long enough to have second thoughts.

David Marlin closed his eyes as the jet surged ahead on the strip and lifted off.

“The Earth is just too small and fragile a basket for the human race to keep all its eggs in.”
- *Robert Heinlein*

Chapter Seventeen

Rubi-Ka, 28702 AD

Min-Ji Liu took a deep breath as the atmospheric pressure in the compartment normalised with the external environment. Oxygen-rich air washed through her body from head to toe. She felt abruptly reenergised, and the feeling wasn't all artificial. She swung her arms back and forth, testing the limits of her mobility. The suit was cool and light and flexible, and she was ready, as ready as she'd ever been.

Min-Ji loved this part more than anything in the world. This was what she'd signed up for when she'd joined the academy; to be the one to take that first tentative step onto alien soil, to open her eyes and look around, to see what no human being had ever seen before:

A new world. A brand new, brave new world, untouched by technology, unaffected by habitation, unmarred by terraforming. Still free of human interference. An extraordinary place not yet made ordinary.

She was the first to see these alien planets in their primal beauty, as they had been for all of creation. And she was the last to see them for what they were rather than what they could be. It wasn't her job to assess; she just did initial recon. And she liked it that way. She liked the pure innocence of it. Later there would be surveyors and geologists and urban planners, and they would be blind to the purity; they would project their ideal future onto the present and the past, and they would decide whether or not mankind would shape these worlds into virtual mirror images of Earth.

A series of short beeps sounded. Her suit had run through every

single internal diagnostic and had transmitted a report back to the lander's core databases. A few seconds more and she'd see another new world with her own eyes for the very first time.

Now, this place...this— what was it called again? Min-Ji was momentarily embarrassed to have forgotten the name of the planet she'd soon walk on. But there'd been so many, and the names didn't always stick, because they were human names, not true names. They would never know this planet's true name unless there were natives, and there never were. If there was intelligent life in the galaxy – and why wouldn't there be? – so far it had proved elusive.

She accessed the mission briefings via her NCU and the name popped instantly into her head:

Rubika. Or, no...there were two separate words: Rubi and Ka. With a hyphen. Rubi-Ka.

What a *strange* name.

She scanned quickly through the planet's profile, letting the mental images bombard her consciousness in rapid succession. Her trained intellect discarded most of it off-hand; she didn't need all the details.

She'd already absorbed most of the information available in the database, but she hadn't yet learned it by heart, and using the information was an instinctual process rather than an intellectual one.

Despite having grown up with an NCU, Min-Ji wasn't entirely comfortable with the concept of instant, always-accessible knowledge. In some ways, however much she hated to admit it, she felt as though knowing something that she hadn't worked to understand and remember was slightly immoral, like cheating.

Her parents, liberal neo-technologists and devout New Catholics, had insisted on a traditional education in addition to the standard implants. They didn't want to risk alienating their own children, subjecting them to the handicaps, prejudices, and career disadvantages suffered by NCU oppositionists, but her parents had also firmly believed in imprinting their children with a solid moral foundation. Thus she and her brothers had spent their formative years in school, cramming for tests that they would easily have passed with an instantaneous upload to their memory banks.

She'd had to work for her knowledge, and cheating had been out

of the question. There had been sensors in all the study halls and classrooms. Even to this day, every time she looked something up, something she didn't know off-hand, she felt an urge to glance over her shoulder to see if a Sister was sneaking up on her from behind with a neural suppressor.

Now, as always, the NCU responded immediately, as though it was a natural part of her own mind. Which, in a way, it was: The biotech implant fused with the natural neural network of the human brain within eighteen to twenty-four months after insertion.

She blinked, and there it was...a vast web of information with strands tapering off in every conceivable direction, all converging on a single entry in the database. A grid constructed from an infinitely complex matrix. All the information she would ever need, multiplied a thousand-fold. She sighed, and allowed the data to filter through the electro-organic pathways into her consciousness. The sensation was not unlike the involuntary triggering of a latent memory through a nostalgic scent or a familiar sound.

According to the records, Rubi-Ka was named after the enormous deserts that covered the entire planet. Min-Ji didn't see the immediate connection, and that particular piece of explanatory information had been left out of the records, but she was sure that the Omni-Tek astrophysicists and planetary surveyors knew what they were doing.

At least they had started giving the planets proper *names* now, rather than the abstract designations they'd used in the past.

Rubi-Ka. She tasted the word again, allowed it to bloom on her lips. Ru-bi-ka. It was a good name, and somehow it suited this place perfectly. It was a heck of a lot better than OT3934-12 or whatever it was the charting systems had come up with.

Another short bleep – this one soft and baritone – alerted her to the fact that the outer doors were open, and the ramp was starting to descend.

The room convulsed, briefly, and dimmed, and then a sliver of light – sunlight – appeared in the bulkhead six feet in front of her and eight feet up.

She took three steps forward, and stopped. Above her, through the widening crack, she caught a brief glimpse of a crimson alien sky.

Min-Ji closed her eyes. She wanted the world to reveal itself when

she was ready. The ritual was important, to find peace with this new world and to see it untainted by humanity.

There was a shuddering thud as the ramp struck the ground and stopped. Min-Ji took another three steps forward and then tilted her head down and opened her eyes. In this unfamiliar light, the ramp looked extraterrestrial in origin, shaded an eerie red and flat, featureless. She crossed the threshold onto the ramp.

The dark red metal sloped gently down to the planet surface. Min-Ji closed her eyes again and walked confidently forward. She'd performed the ritual dozens of times, and she knew exactly how many steps before she reached the end of the ramp and solid ground. And she was absolutely confident that the ground was solid. After all, they'd done extensive scans.

Besides, the lander itself didn't seem to be sinking.

Not yet anyway.

The sand crunched beneath her soles and she stopped, took another deep breath of oxygen – her head tingled, but she was sure that it was just exploration jitters and not a bad mix – and then she opened her eyes.

The twin suns blinded her momentarily, but the helmet's tinted visor had already darkened to protect her eyes from corneal damage. As her sight adjusted to the bright, otherworldly light, she began to distinguish shapes and colours: there was a predominance of earthy red, rock and sand, and steep, natural stone spires like in Earth's Monument Valley, but grander, and distinctly alien.

She began to turn her head, slowly, enjoying those first few seconds when everything was new and she was the first and the only human in the world. The only sound she could hear was her own breath and her heart; she wouldn't turn on the external monitors until she was ready. That made the visual impact so much greater, so much better.

Then Yves Boulez's voice came through on her communicator and the moment was spoiled.

"Hey, Lulu, you going through that ridiculous pantomime again? Get on with it, for Christ's sake. I want to stretch my legs sometime this century."

Lulu?

She hated him. She hated this man, the revered and respected

Captain Boulez, the world's biggest ass. She hated him with a vengeance, hated him more than anyone she'd ever known.

She didn't have a problem with authority, not in general; she respected the chain of command and understood the necessity of leadership, of leaders. She didn't resent being ordered around by anyone, not normally. No, it was just this one man, this one boss. She hated this one with her heart and soul.

They'd been travelling together for eight months now, and not a day went by when he wasn't trying to get into her pants. She'd have sued for sexual harassment if it weren't for the fact that they'd been nowhere near a civilised colony – or at least one with a proper judiciary courtroom – since they first left Jupiter.

Not that it would matter whatever she did or said: Yves had major connections with Omni-Tek brass, at least the ones running the colonisation program. He wouldn't have gotten the job otherwise, no way no how. He was competent but cocky, and his navigation left a lot to be desired – or, in this case, to Min-Ji, who had to do all the dirty work.

Their third crewmate, Angelo, did the scans and the prospecting, but he kept mostly to himself. If he ever picked up on the conflict between Yves and her, he kept his mouth shut, and Min-Ji couldn't blame him, not really. Angelo had a job to do and he didn't want to pick sides when they were well over a hundred light-years from the nearest colony.

But in the face of it all, there was her sworn duty to Omni-Tek; to follow the chain of command and to do her job to the best of her abilities, no matter the circumstances.

Thank God their ship (now holding orbit above them while they finished the job) was big enough to get lost in. Between stops, she rarely had to see the bastard. When she did, though, she had to be polite and professional. Anything else would just add fuel to the fire.

So this time, like every time, she ignored the innuendo and the name-calling, and all she said was, "Roger that, captain, proceeding according to schedule."

Rubi-Ka wasn't like the other planets she'd seen on this trip. It was beautiful – stunningly so – but also harsh and without native vegetation or surface water, and Min-Ji couldn't even begin to imagine how hard it would be to establish a colony here and to terraform such a terrifyingly alien environment.

In fact, given a choice, she never would have selected this planet for a visit at all. Twin suns and a highly ellipsoid orbit that often brought the planet too close or too far away from the suns would make this one a tough terraform. It'd be a challenge just to set up camp, let alone create a consistent and temperate environment where vegetation could grow and evolve. They would have to do some major genetic alterations to all imported flora and fauna, and even then only the hardiest would survive the first month.

But Omni-Tek has been peculiarly adamant in this case. In fact, their ship had been following a mostly straight line for this system, jumping out of hyperspace only when necessary or when passing within reasonable distance to a potentially interesting system.

Could be the brass knew something she didn't, that there were valuable resources out here worth mining. But how was that possible? No one has been this far out before, she was sure of that. If nothing else, she knew her space history. Or rather, her NCU was programmed with the relevant space history.

Sometimes the boundaries between mind and machine were vague.

"What's the word, Min-Ji?"

That was Angelo. He was impatiently awaiting his turn on the surface. He loved his job, though not for the same reasons Min-Ji loved her job. He was a scientist with a mission, and that mission was not to appreciate or preserve the alien beauty of the worlds they visited. Angelo took samples from the ground and the air, evaluated the potential for life, estimated the ETA on a breathable atmosphere, and wrote up an evaluation of the planet for the Omni-Tek executives. Angelo was the consummate professional: he lived for his job, and it was the only thing he ever wanted to do, preferably in peace and quiet with no one else butting in.

He was also a very funny guy, though Min-Ji realised she was probably one of the few people who'd ever bothered to find out.

"Any sign of furballs yet?"

She could hear him grinning. This was a typical prospector joke. Furballs. *Aliens*.

"No furballs, Angelo, sorry. We got dust and sand and rock. Pretty much your ADP." Average Deadbeat Planet. Another prospector joke. The fun never stopped.

“Figures. We come all the way out here, and our welcome party neglects to show up.”

“Maybe we’re early?”

“Could be.” He chuckled. “Turn around and wave to the camera. Screw the natives; we’ll make our own postcards. Need something to preserve this moment by, y’know?”

Min-Ji smiled and turned towards the lander.

The old hulk was butt ugly; there were no two ways about it. She looked like a piece of junk, and looks did not deceive. She’d done a hundred planet-falls, and it wasn’t like prospectors were given the best hardware in the first place. That luxury was reserved for the traders and military escorts and colonisation vessels.

She was a reliable piece of junk, however, and Min-Ji felt safe inside the lander’s large compartment, even in the less-than-capable hands of their intrepid captain. Triple redundancy circuits and safety systems worked to prevent pilot accidents, despite incompetence, and it was very rarely that landers broke down completely or suffered critical systems failure.

But it did happen. Even in the best of hands.

Still, they’d made it this far, and now, after this one, it was back up to their ship and a straight course to Jupiter for a debriefing and – hopefully – reassignment. Even if they chose not to follow up on the complaints she was planning to file, they wouldn’t assign Boulez and her together again. They were always worried about bad press, especially with all the influence ThruSpace Networks was getting – they’d even started to compete with Omni-Tek in a lot of areas – so she’d probably end up on someone else’s crew.

No promotion, though; she could wave that goodbye, at least for the time being. But she wasn’t planning on staying quiet, no matter what the consequences may be. Pricks like Yves couldn’t be allowed to carry on without some kind of warning, and she intended to give him that warning with the help of the complex and bureaucratic machinery of Omni-Tek’s legal department.

Something caught her eye. She turned her head slightly to the left, and ordered the visor to lighten a bit.

A fiery streak cut a swathe across the western sky, descending in an arch below the red rocks in the distance. A second ship, their twin.

Prospecting vessels usually travelled in groups of two or three, both for safety reasons and to maximise their ability to do solid groundwork on interesting planetary bodies. Like this one. The second crew would be out and about in a few minutes, but it didn't matter.

She'd been the first.

"So, what's the word, Angelo?"

She leaned over him at the console. She knew not to bother him when he was working on an analysis, but he seemed to be finished, and he was putting together a report.

"It's all right," he said. "Not a lot of groundwater, absolutely no surface water. Lots of sand—"

"I could've told you that," she said. Angelo looked up at her, his face blank. She grinned. "Sorry."

"Sand with some mineral content, not much." He tapped his finger at some meaningless numbers on the screen. "There ought to be a fair amount of ore here, shouldn't be a problem to manufacture steel for construction purposes."

"So you're saying you're going to recommend terraforming?" She wasn't sure she saw the point of it. Why would anyone want to live out here in the sticks? There was still room on Mars, for crying out loud! Heck, even Earth had available apartment space these days. Expensive ones, true, but better living in eternal debt than being stuck on this dust-coated rock.

Angelo looked puzzled. "What do you mean, recommend? We're not here to ascertain the potential for colonisation, Min. That decision was made years ago."

"To terraform?" She was surprised. The company rarely made these calls until there was a full on-site report.

"To colonise," he said. "The ships are already on their way."

What? That made *so* not sense. "Then why are we out here, Angelo? For fun? Because this isn't my idea of the perfect vacation. There's sand, there's sun, but there's no sea. That's a big no-no."

He was about to answer when the captain entered the room.

"You're requesting access to classified information, Liu," he growled. "You know better than to ask those kinds of questions. Do your job with a smile and let me worry about the stuff you don't understand."

She breathed deeply. The trick was to translate everything he said into nice people speak. That way, she wouldn't feel like stabbing him.

"I just want to think I'm doing something useful, sir," she said. "I don't want to feel like I'm wasting my time."

"You don't want me to put that in the report," the captain said. "Trust me. OT's investing a lot in this rock, which means that whatever you're doing, it's useful to somebody. Our job is just to ascertain the veracity of some research, clear the way for the colonists."

"How many?" she asked.

"First load?" The captain thought about it for a second. "Just over one hundred. Skilled labour: geologists, biologists, terraforming engineers, some of their nanotech people." Angelo looked up, his interest piqued. "Basically, I think they want to test out how the bots will behave in this atmosphere."

The one good thing about Captain Boulez was his incessant mouth. He couldn't keep a secret for long. Let him talk, and sooner or later he'd say something interesting. Like now.

"That's it!" said Angelo. He sounded excited. "That's what I'm looking at."

"What?" The captain leaned over Angelo's other shoulder. In the on-screen reflection it looked as though the scientist had grown two new heads, one male, one female.

"This—" he pointed to a curving line intersecting with a whole bunch of other curving lines "—is the reading for Min-Ji's bots. We always keep a check on that, just in case something goes haywire. See where it suddenly leaps and then flattens out?" They nodded, though Min-Ji guessed the captain was as confused as her. "I didn't think anything of it. Bots do the weirdest things sometimes. Did you know there's a church devoted to worshipping bots? They think the nano-robots are sentient and holy, and that nanotechnology is a sacred conduit between man and God." He cleared his voice, obviously noticing the captain's impatience. "Besides, Min might've just run a bodymod program, like muscle stimulation or heat reduction." She was about to shake her head when he continued. "But I just checked the readings now, and she didn't run a damn thing. And I've seen bots do weird things before, but nothing as weird as this." He tapped the screen with a finger. "According to this, the moment Min stepped outside the lander, her bots increased their

energy output by about five hundred percent, and yet their energy *consumption* remained the same. In addition, they completely stabilised, meaning they didn't degenerate at a normal rate, nor did they jump around erratically like they normally do when they're not being fed instructions."

"Meaning..." The captain was completely lost. Min-Ji was starting to see what Angelo was hinting at.

"Meaning the bots got a heck of a lot more productive when Min was outside the ship. With that kind of energy output – and keep in mind that she was protected pretty damn well against radiation – the bots have the potential to be a lot more effective on this planet than they'd ever be back on Earth. A *lot* more. And that's prior to any kind of system optimisation or modifications." He paused to let the facts sink in with their dim-witted boss. "And then there's the lifespan issue, captain. It's quite possible that this planet's native environment will allow the bots to exist *outside* the human body, and to remain active without regeneration. That's the holy grail of nanotech. With that kind of freedom, we're looking at a complete revolution in the application of bots."

"So you're saying this place is some sort of nanotech Mecca?" She couldn't help it. She had to ask.

"I'm saying there's *something* about this place," he answered, "but I'll be damned if I know what it is. I'm guessing radiation... though from what, and where, I can only guess. Perhaps it's some kind of new, naturally occurring element, something in the soil or the sand, or maybe it's radiation from the suns. I'll have to run tests. Whatever it is, I'm guessing we've just learned why OT's so interested in this place."

"And it's something you're going to keep mum about," the captain said gruffly. "This is not our concern. We've been told to run a series of tests, and that's what we're going to do. That's *all* we're going to do. And when that's done, we're going to sit tight and wait."

What? "Hey, hey, hold on a second." Had she heard him right? "What do you mean, wait? Like a few days?"

Captain Boulez shook his head. "No, Liu, we're going to wait for the colonists."

Both she and Angelo stared incredulously at their captain, but she was the first to speak.

"You must be joking...sir," she added, knowing that the first part

of that sentence might be interpreted as disobeying a direct order. It was an insane order, though. It could take months for the colonisation vessels to get as far as this, and in the meantime they were supposed to wait? Together? *Here?*

Utter insanity.

“Orders from the very top,” he said. “Only received them a few days ago, straight through top-priority subspace channels. ‘You are not to leave Rubi-Ka until qualified personnel arrives to relieve you’, the message read. Believe me,” the captain told them both conspiratorially, “I’d rather be going home as soon as possible after we’re done than to be stuck out here with you two.” This, apparently, was Yves Boulez’s sincere attempt at bonding. “But I know better than to question HQ. They’ve got plans for this place, and it’s not my job to second-guess them. We’re going to have to do what they ask.”

“But months?” She couldn’t believe it. This was the worst thing that could have happened. Even their lander blowing up would have been preferable to this. Now she had to sit here with Angelo and Captain Boulez for *months?*

Why hadn’t she taken that desk-job her parents had wanted her to take? She could be enjoying a peaceful and fulfilling life on Earth right now, somewhere with green trees and water, and no Yves Boulez.

Her life just sucked, didn’t it?

Later, when she and Angelo were alone again, she asked him about the bots.

“My guess it’s got something to do with stabilising the atoms,” he said. “But I’m not a nanotechnologist, so I can’t be certain what’s going on. See, from the very beginning the problem with bots was their inherent instability and their inability to exist outside the host body. According to history, the Homo Omega who died out during the Emancipation War in, uh, twelve thousand something, were able to use bots to halt the effects of aging. How they did that, we don’t yet know, even fifteen thousand years later. They had to be able to stabilise the composition of the bots, somehow, maintaining their lifespan past the ten-and-some-odd minutes we’ve got now. They didn’t have NCUs, so they probably used more complicated and complex implants, specifically tailored to run a pre-defined set of programs. Hugely impractical for our

uses, but a lot more effective. In addition, they might've used drugs or radiation treatment, something we haven't yet thought of or tried.

"The point is, the bots we're using today, and the nanotech we've got access to, can only do so much. They're okay for diseases, for minor trauma, but according to what I've read, the Homo Omega could be shot to pieces and seconds later be stitched up and healthy as ever. We're not able to make our bots do anything like that. Why?

"It's all got to do with energy consumption versus energy output: the human body just doesn't produce enough fuel for a billion little machines to buzz around doing maintenance work for any extent of time. It doesn't make sense. That energy would have to come from somewhere *else*, and I think that's what they were doing, charging themselves up artificially. Additionally – and I don't think the Homo Omega ever cracked this one – to allow the bots to flow out from the host body into the air requires not only an enormous amount of energy, but also a completely new atomic composition of the bots themselves. Otherwise, they would just disintegrate, tear themselves apart. Last but not least, how do you control the bots once they're separated from the body's natural neural network? How do you prevent them from just deprogramming and dissipating? It's not as though a single bot can maintain its programmed instructions for any period of time. They're not particularly smart.

"Fact is, Min, after looking over the readings I did, I've come to realise that this planet's already got a microscopic substance resembling nanobots in the air. That's simply amazing, and it means there's a good reason why Omni-Tek has chosen to colonise Rubi-Ka. If this power, whatever it is, can be harvested..."

"It would mean that we're sitting on the most valuable resource in the whole universe," she said, finishing his line of thought. "Nothing could compare. With a lease on this planet from the ICC, Omni-Tek would be completely indomitable for all time to come."

"What if someone were to tell the ICC about this planet, about what we've found?"

She looked at him. "They'd be very interested. They certainly wouldn't let Omni-Tek have it all."

"Of course, we'd be violating our contract with OT..." He trailed off.

"Angelo, answer me honestly; if your readings are correct, if even

half of what you suggest is true, do you want Omni-Tek to gain full and total control over Rubi-Ka?”

“No,” he said, without hesitation. “But do you really think the ICC would handle this case fairly? Don’t you think they’d just find a way to exploit this for their own gains?”

“Maybe.” She didn’t trust any of them, big government or big corporation. Which was the lesser of the two evils? It was too late to keep their discovery a secret: obviously, Omni-Tek knew there was something here already or they wouldn’t have sent an entire fleet of vessels in their wake.

“I think it’s a moot issue anyway,” he finished. “We can’t open communication with anyone without going through corporate channels, and the captain would never see eye to eye with us on this issue. He’s a company man to the core. We’ll just have to sit tight and see what happens.” He shrugged. “It’ll be interesting, I’ll give them that.”

“So that’s it? We’re going to let the company appropriate the biggest bounty in the history of, well, *history*?”

“Why not? It is after all *our* company. We’ll see some windfall, I’m sure.”

“Yeah.” She felt strangely dejected, as though she’d just seen the class bully rob all the other kids of their lunch money. It just didn’t seem fair, that Omni-Tek should grow to dominate the entire universe because of one lucky discovery.

That was, of course, if luck had played any part in it. It seemed far-fetched that they’d strike pure gold on a planet this far away from any other inhabited system. Even if they’d sent remote scouts out here – how else would they’ve known about the planet in the first place? – it was like finding a single specific straw of hay in a haystack the size of a galaxy. It just didn’t happen. No one got *that* lucky.

Something must’ve led them here, something must’ve pointed a finger at this particular system, at this planet, and said, ‘Go forth, and ye shall find’.

She shuddered. The thought was strangely disconcerting. If God did exist, He would certainly not speak directly with Omni-Tek management, would He?

Would He?

Chapter Eighteen

Rubi-Ka, 29475 AD

The rain had abated somewhat when Philip Ross finally emerged from a side entrance into a cul-de-sac five blocks from the river.

The fissures in the sky had closed up again, shutting out the sunlight and casting a deep gloom over the city. The streets were slick with water and pedestrian traffic was almost non-existent, at least in this quarter.

He'd circumvented his own security systems with the master password, overriding the elevator's controls and forcing it to take him down, all the way to street level, without stopping. His only companion was the mute droid; it'd had to hunch over in the elevator with the comic awkwardness of a gigantic, dejected child, but now it appeared to be in its right element: its head snapped back and forth, its red eyes were gleaming, its steel joints were tensed, and it was emitting a low, excited hum.

At least Ross thought of it as an excited hum. He didn't exactly have intimate knowledge of artificial emotions.

"Come on," he told it, "let's go for a walk."

His security force would be right behind them, probably panicking and cursing his wilfulness, and he might as well use what little time he had to walk around a free man.

They stepped out of the alley just as the rain ceased completely. It was still overcast, but visibility had increased dramatically. A sleek black skimmer whisked by, its windows reflecting the dark buildings around them. A leather-clad kid with his hands in his pockets looked up at the

droid and made a wide arc around the pair of them without stopping.

The city was quiet.

They began to walk, first left, then left again, until they were on a straight course for the river. He took four steps for every one of the droid's giant strides; its massive bulk had suddenly become catlike, gracious, and luckily the few passers by they encountered were more concerned with the hulking monstrosity than they were with him.

He remained quite anonymous.

From time to time he pointed things out to his mute companion. A particular building, perhaps, or a person, a vehicle. Once or twice, Ross thought the droid might have looked where he told it to, but it was probably a coincidence.

"Did you know that Omni-1 is the oldest city on Rubi-Ka?" he said. "Of course you don't. But it is. We started colonising this world less than eight hundred years ago. Not a great deal of time compared with the totality of human existence, but enough time for empires to rise and fall. Omni-1 has stood firm," he said with no small amount of pride, even though his contribution had begun only a few decades ago. "It's never fallen to rebels or natural disasters. Some of these buildings were built more than seven hundred years ago. Solid Omni-Tek craftsmanship, my friend; much like yourself, in fact."

They passed a group of fresh recruits, chattering excitedly and gazing up at the droid with awestruck eyes. There were more and more of them for each day that passed. Unfortunately, a too-large percentage of immigrants defected immediately to the clans, despite their contracts. The clans' propaganda back in the Sol system was surprisingly effective. The damn clan council even had its own information office on Mars, where it was protected by free-speech laws and safe from Omni-Tek justice.

Some people were attracted to conflict. He was quite aware that a lot of colonists who travelled here were less interested in building a life for themselves than they were in earning money and shooting things, preferably *human* things.

Birds of prey, they were, always on the lookout for the next step up, the tactical advantage. They made life harder for every honest working man and woman, clan, neutral, or Omni-Tek. They were the worst kind of scum: they were leeches, sucking at the rich blood of Rubi-Ka.

The recruits stopped behind them, and one girl – she was dressed in some ludicrous outfit, obviously a new fashion he wasn't aware of, or perhaps she'd brought the clothes with her from one of the other colonies, or from Earth; she wore a small black top, big sunglasses (why she'd be wearing *sunglasses* when it was this dark out or when a simple dimming program could do a better job, he'd never understand), tall red boots, and a pair of pants so tight it was a wonder she was able to walk, let alone *run* – jogged to catch up with Ross and his security droid.

The droid stopped, turned its upper body one-hundred and eighty degrees, and raised its gun-slash-left arm.

“Whatever you do,” Ross told the girl, “don't make any sudden moves at me.” He hooked a thumb at the giant next to him. “He's inclined to shoot first, ask questions later.” He paused, watched the girl slow to a halt with a concerned look on her face. “Or, more correctly, simply shoot. He doesn't much like to talk at all.”

“Sorry,” the girl said in a thick accent. “Didn't know. New.” She smiled shyly. She was quite pretty, he observed, although most young girls these days *were* pretty. With the tools at their disposal, unattractiveness was a design choice, and not a genetic affliction. “We land last night, go through immigration.” She patted her chest. “Get job. Now we leave the city. Question. Where we go to find clan recruitment?” she asked Philip Ross, CEO of Omni-Tek.

He was so shocked for a second that he couldn't even laugh.

Clan recruitment? How ironic was *that*.

“Well,” he began, “this may not be the right place to find any of the clans, I'm afraid.” She looked puzzled. “This city is run by Omni-Tek, didn't you know that?” She shrugged. Obviously, the information content presented on the colonisation ships wasn't particularly informative. “You shouldn't ask that question here, young lady. And,” he said, “if I may ask...why do you want to join the clans?”

The girl's friends had inched closer during their exchange. There were six of them in all, most of them young-looking, eager faces, bright eyes, ridiculous clothing. All except one: a man in his thirties clad in a full-length grey cloak, no eyewear, no tattoos, black leather boots. Simple, stylish, serious. He didn't seem to fit in with the others, but they were together.

A warning light went off in Ross' head, but he ignored it. He'd

become paranoid in his isolation.

“We join the clans because—”

“Because we want to make a difference,” one of the others piped in, another girl, more mature-looking, very forceful. “We don’t want to become bureaucrats,” she said. “Omni-Tek’s the antithesis to what Rubi-Ka’s supposed to be. A place of opportunity and progress. Omnis are reactionary, conservative. The clans are...more fun. They encourage individuality, reject conformity.”

“You are aware,” he repeated, “that this isn’t clan territory. That there’s a...conflict between the north and the south, between the clans and Omni-Tek?”

“Sure,” said one of the others, a man in his early twenties. “But we’re Omni-Tek employees, see?” He showed Ross his badge. “We’re just asking questions. If you can’t help us...”

“He thinks you’re idiots,” the man at the back said, the one who looked different. He spoke differently, too, and Ross realised that this wasn’t a fresh colonist: the man had the accent of someone who’d lived on this planet his whole life. Perhaps a guide; but why hadn’t he stopped his companions from asking dangerous questions in an intolerant city?

“Pardon me?” said Ross. “I don’t think any of you are...idiots.” It was true. They were pathetic and naïve, but Ross didn’t like to think of people as idiots. Too many people made the mistake of underestimating everyone else. Ross always overestimated the potential of the people around him; that way, no one would outsmart him without him being prepared.

“Can’t you see,” the man continued, “that he’s an Omni-Tek executive? Look at his clothes. Tailored, corporate, expensive.” He pointed at the droid. “And that thing... Who can afford private security this advanced? I’d venture we’re talking to someone quite important.” He smirked. “Isn’t that right, sir?”

Ross started feeling a bit uncomfortable. “I work for Omni-Tek, yes,” he admitted. “Although I fear you give me too much credit when you call me ‘important’.”

The man didn’t reply, but maintained his smirk and kept looking back and forth between Ross and the droid.

“Why?” the second girl asked. “Why keep working for the Omnis when they don’t have righteousness on their side, when they’re

doing everyone on Rubi-Ka a great disservice? They act as though this is *their* planet. And it's not. It's *everyone's* planet. It's supposed to be a democracy, not an autocracy."

"Strictly speaking," he said to her, knowing that any argument was bound to be futile, but unable to help himself (after all, the day had begun with doubts. He was doing his very best to exorcise those doubts), "this isn't supposed to be a democracy. Omni-Tek has a lease on the planet. All colonists brought in on Omni-Tek ships are company employees, and everyone else is either an illegal alien or independent workers on a temporary visa. It's not yet a 'free' world, as such."

He knew the second he said it that this was a bad turn of phrase.

The first girl was, fittingly, the first to lash out: "Not free? Not free? You say Omni-Tek enslave, then. Like Omega. And we slaves?"

The second girl picked up the thought, more eloquently: "The ICC would probably like to have a word in edgewise about that *theory*," she said. "Contracts are one thing, the freedom to speak out against tyranny and monopolisation quite another. Don't the Omnis already own half the galaxy? Why do they have to keep stepping on workers' rights? Why wage a war on innocent people?"

Ross noticed that they'd started surrounding him, the six of them, and he looked to his droid.

Its head was hanging lifeless to one side, its limbs slack and without the graceful lethality they'd posed only seconds earlier. A dull panic rising in his chest (the precariousness of his position still hadn't physically manifested itself), he looked at the culprit.

The man in the back held out his hand, showing Ross the tiny black box.

"It's gone to sleep," he said. "It looked a bit tired, to be honest with you. I thought it could do with some rest."

One of the hitherto mute guys struck first, pulling a steel-encased club from underneath his leather jacket and striking his security droid's right leg. The droid wobbled, but it didn't fall. He struck it again, and the sharp clang echoed through the street.

On the other side, a few people passed by, diverting their eyes. Did these things happen often? Had his city come to this, a violent, dangerous place where everyone minded their own business until someone attacked *them*?

Why wasn't someone doing something?

It was only after the fourth strike – the last of the group had now joined his mate in knocking the droid around – that it occurred to Ross to use his embedded communications device to contact the troops, to allow them to pinpoint his position. But when he tried, there was only silence.

“Sorry,” the man at the back said, and now Ross began to realise that this man was *dangerous*. “I’m going to have to block that channel. We’d like some privacy. And I’d like to know your name.”

“You’re making a grave mistake,” Ross said. “You want to put down your weapons and then you want to leave.”

“Why?” this was the second girl again. “Because you’re Omni, because you’re an enemy of the clans, we should leave you alone? I don’t know, man, but I don’t really see the logic in that.”

With a mighty clatter, the security droid toppled over and crashed to the ground. Three of the six were now beating on the pathetic thing with their Omni-issue clubs. Pieces were starting to come loose, and this seemed only to increase their thirst for blood, for violence.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked the man at the back, the leader. “You’re in the centre of Omni-1. You’ll never get away with it.”

The man shrugged.

“It’s all a bit of fun for the kids,” he said. “Let them play around with your executive toys. Don’t be such a miser. That’s going to hurt.” He pointed at something, or someone, behind Ross. “Be careful, don’t do too much damage right away.”

Ross only had time to turn halfway around before the club hit his lower back. It was as though he’d been stepped on by a giant foot: his legs gave way, and he fell to the street on his knees, crying out.

The second blow hit his right shoulder, and he suddenly found himself face to face with the ground, blood flowing from his mouth and pain shooting up and down his entire body.

“Good work, kids,” he heard the man say. “This is what’s going to happen to all of them, all the Omnis, once the clans have the upper hand. Payback. For all the death.” This last bit was filled with venom, and Ross realised that whoever this group’s leader was, he was someone with a long history in the clans, someone who’d experienced his share of the war. A dyed-in-the-wool terrorist, someone who’d recruited a bunch

of naïve recruits right here, at the core of Omni-Tek's operations. If this man could operate here, so close to his home and office, then his would-be assassins...

The thought was cut short by a blow to his left knee, and he cried out in pain. They were *killing* him, he thought, and he was completely helpless.

That's when the first shot was fired.

He lifted his head enough to see the first girl, the one with the thick accent, fall to the ground with a smouldering hole in her throat. Her eyes were wide open and surprised, and she let go of her club as she hit the ground.

She was dead before the smoke had dissipated.

The group fell into disarray, but Ross' eyes were locked on the sixth member, the terrorist, the experienced one. He wanted to point him out to whoever his current benefactors were, but his limbs failed him, and all he could do was croak feebly.

The man was fading away. He was actually *disappearing* into the shadows, and Ross realised that he must have been running some kind of cloaking device, probably an Omni-Tek model, easy to detect and trace but good enough to make a quick escape from the fracas while confusion still reigned.

Shots were fired all around him, and one by one the kids were falling over, dead. There would be no mercy here, not today, and Ross didn't mind the violence, didn't mind it at all. He'd been violated, struck down in his own back yard, made to suffer when he himself had been open minded. He wouldn't have reported those kids. He would've tried to make them think twice about joining the clans, but he hadn't come out here to lecture or to spy. He'd come out here to learn.

All right, so he had learned. He'd learned that, whatever accusations were directed at Omni-Tek, whatever crimes they were responsible for, the clans were just as bad. Violence bred violence, hatred bred hatred, and this hadn't begun with Omni-Tek...it'd begun with them, with the workers and the clans. They had brought war to Rubi-Ka, and now they had to live with that war.

If they were unwilling to listen or to reach a compromise, then so be it. He would wipe them all out.

Later that evening, in his office, patched up and composed once more, Ross thought about his dream.

He understood his dream now, better than ever. He understood why he'd been granted this mission. And he understood what it meant.

There was a war, and innocent people were caught between the two warring sides. Some of those innocents would empathise with the clans, which was inevitable. It was easier to understand their motivations. They fought for a theoretical freedom, for liberty, for democracy. It would always be harder to understand Omni-Tek's position, that order and obedience were necessary for this planet to survive, for *true* freedom to emerge, gradually, over time.

There would never be a compromise. The clans would never submit, and Omni-Tek could not afford to lay down their arms. Without Omni-Tek, chaos and anarchy would emerge, and there would be no freedom, no true freedom.

Rubi-Ka *needed* Omni-Tek. And Omni-Tek needed Philip Ross.

He would crush the clans, every last vestige of them, and then he would bring peace to this planet and her citizens.

They would curse him now, of course, but they would thank him later.

Of that, he was certain.

*

Jen woke to the crackling sound of a campfire. The scent of charred wood and fried meat was in the air, mingled with the muggy smell of swampland.

She wasn't exactly sure where she was – or even *when* this was. Events were jumbled up in her head. She had a hard time recalling where one ended and the next begun. She remembered the war, her mother...water.

Dark, cold water. Dark things in the cold water.

And Adam. She remembered Adam, but not one specific thing about him. Various images came to mind; the first time they'd met, the first embarrassing grope, a training mission...saving his life... Sacrificing her own life...

She sat up. Her head hurt. She looked around.

She was sitting under a bora tree by a blistering hot campfire. She was half-naked, her clothes stretched across two rocks next to the fire. Her equipment was laid out between the roots of the tree, drying. She took a quick stock of her belongings, not quite sure *why* she was here, what she was supposed to be doing, but her military instinct had already kicked in: it seemed everything was accounted for, even her weapons.

But someone must have brought her to this place. It wasn't her camp; she'd have remembered that, surely, and besides, she'd never lit an actual fire in her life. What was the point of that?

No, she'd been brought here. But what about Adam? Where was he?

She tried to stand up but found that she couldn't. Her legs were too weak. She flopped back down on the ground and scoped out her surroundings.

It was late, perhaps a few hours after sunset. She seemed to recall something about early dawn in her recent past, so she might very well have been out for an entire day. She ran a quick internal diagnostic and found nothing seriously wrong with her body. There weren't any active log files: she couldn't play back any events from the past twelve hours.

She was still feeling confused when a shadow materialised from the forest and entered the circle of light.

Jen grasped for her gun but when she looked at it she saw that it'd been deactivated, the ammunition removed. She closed her fist around a rock and waited.

The old man stopped when he saw that she was sitting up. He was holding an armful of firewood. He was in his late seventies or early eighties, still youthful, but greyed and hairy. His long beard looked unkempt, as did his hooded white robe. He was barefoot and didn't appear to be armed.

Looks could deceive, she knew, and tightened her fingers around the rock.

He dropped the firewood next to the campfire, and approached her. She tensed, prepared herself to strike out at the stranger if he appeared threatening in any way.

"Hullo," he said. "How are you feeling, then? All right?"

"I guess," she grunted. "Where am I?"

"Not far from the river," he said. "You were in a bad shape." He

tutted, blinked, and smiled. If not for his brightly intelligent eyes, she'd have thought the old man a tottering fool.

"Where's my partner?" Her friend's absence had begun to worry her now. She seemed to recall something about blood, about being attacked...

"Your partner?" The old man shook his head. "No, sorry, I didn't see anyone else. Just you."

"I have to find him," she said, and tried to stand up again. This time it felt as though she *would* pass out. Her head throbbed and bile rose in her throat. She fell forward on her knees, and the old man stepped quickly forward to support her. The rock fell out of her hand, but she didn't care.

"Watch yourself, Jennifer," the man said.

She looked up at him, stars flashing before her eyes. Had she heard him right? Did he say her name?

"How do you know..." she began, but she was too exhausted to continue.

"Who you are?" he finished for her. "I've been waiting for you, Jennifer Brody. I've been waiting for you for the longest time. And now you're *finally* here. My prayers have been answered. Our prayers."

He smiled; his soft, bright eyes were deep and friendly. They were the kind of eyes a person could lose herself in, labyrinthine and intelligent, mesmerizing...hypnotic.

"We can begin," he whispered, and his whispers wrapped warmly around her, words like pillows, soft and inviting. She faded away from the world, then; the sound of wind and fire vanishing into a void, the night embracing her and sheathing her like a blanket.

*

Between the stars, 28912 AD

He flopped down in the middle of the vast field of daffodils, the July sun beating down on his bare body, the scent of summer strong and redolent.

It had been a wonderful day, a wonderful week; it was a wonderful life. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this rested, this

happy. Everything was good. Everything was just as it should be. Everything was, well, *wonderful*.

He heard a little girl laughing.

He sat up and saw Amy bounce towards him through the field, a bouquet of flowers in her hand. Beside her, holding the little girl's hand, was Nika. She was dressed in a light white summer's dress, her black hair cascading in thick waves halfway down her back. Beautiful, the both of them: so beautiful.

"I picked some flowers for you," his daughter said as she stopped in front of him. She was six years old now, and looked more like her mother with every day that passed.

Good. The worst thing that could happen was Amy looking anything like *him*. They still weren't sure how his daughter would be affected by his genes; would she be one quarter Omega or all Solitus? Would she live to be just a hundred, or was she, like him, closer to immortality?

Something rubbed at the back of his mind, some dark thought, but he pushed it away.

"Thank you," he said to Amy and accepted the flowers. "They're beautiful." They were.

"So this is where you've been hiding," his wife said. She put the picnic basket down and spread a large blanket over the grass and the yellow flowers. "We've been looking all over for you."

"I just needed some peace and quiet," he said. "To think."

"Oh. Do you want us to leave, then?"

"No!" he cried, aghast, and then he noticed his wife's smile. She was just joking. She knew how much he loved them, how much he enjoyed their company.

He leaned over and kissed her, and for a moment – just the briefest of moments – her lips felt cold and dry, lifeless like a mannequin's lips, but then the warmth returned, the inviting moistness, and Amy, ever precocious, began making retching noises.

"Why don't you run off and pick some more flowers for Daddy?" Nika said as she separated herself from her husband, flashing him a sly wink. "I'm sure he'd like that."

"Okay," said Amy, and bounced off through the tall daffodils and the grass. In an instant, she'd disappeared, but he still heard her humming a happy tune that wound its way through the heat of the day like a

languid dream.

David lay back down on the grass. Tiny straws tickled him in comfortable places, reminding him of summers past spent running through endless fields just like this one, racing away from the inevitability of growing up.

His wife started to unpack their lunch. It smelled wonderful, and his stomach growled. He felt as though he hadn't eaten in days, although he distinctly recalled eating a huge breakfast his wife had prepared for him that very morning.

"Rubi-Ka," she said.

He frowned. "What?"

"Red and dry." She leaned across him and put an empty glass down next to him. "My feet. I think it was all the walking we did yesterday, on the beach."

"Oh." Something was bothering him, but he didn't quite know what it was.

Overhead, the blue sky was marred by grey clouds and it was getting a little chilly. He reached over to get his shirt, but instead of the white cotton jersey he'd worn earlier there was a dark-blue jumpsuit that he couldn't remember bringing.

When he looked back at Nika, she appeared concerned and bewildered.

"Is Amy there?"

"Is Amy where?"

"On Rubi-Ka," she said softly. "Where else?"

Rubi-Ka? What was she talking about? "No," he told her. "Of course not. She's here, with us."

He sat up and looked around, but he couldn't see Amy. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't hear her humming anymore either. But surely she was somewhere close. She couldn't have disappeared. Not here. Not in this paradise.

"She's not in this place," his wife said, shaking her head. "You're going to Rubi-Ka. I thought maybe Amy would be there. Why else would you be going, David? Why else, if not to find our daughter?"

"No, Nika, she's not on...on Rubi-Ka. She's right here."

But she wasn't, he knew. Amy was far away, and she wasn't six years old anymore. She was a grown woman, and...and she was *dead*.

No.

He willed the thought away.

This was his vacation; he wasn't going to think gloomy thoughts that weren't true. So Amy would grow up one day, she would grow up and grow old, she would grow old and some day she would die, and he might outlive them all, everyone that he loved, but that was the future and this was...this was *now*.

The grey skies cleared up again, and the sun came out.

From a distance, there came the meandering dreamlike sound of Amy's humming, a happy, happy tune. His wife was smiling again. She was preparing their sandwiches and humming along with Amy's strange song.

But he couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was wrong, that this place wasn't quite right. It troubled him. He couldn't relax.

"Where's Amy?" his wife asked. He sat up again, looked at her. She seemed afraid. "Isn't she with you, David?"

"No," he told her. "She's picking flowers."

"On Rubi-Ka?"

Suddenly, he got very angry with her. Why was she going on about this *Rubi-Ka* all the time? What was wrong with her?

"There isn't any Rubi-Ka," he said sharply, but he knew this wasn't true. There *was* a Rubi-Ka, and it had something to do with him, but he couldn't quite make the connection. "Amy is safe. She's right here. She'll be back in a few minutes."

"Oh," she said. "Then why are you going to Rubi-Ka, David? If you're not going there to find our daughter, then why are you going?"

There was something wrong with this, with all of this. David stood up and looked around.

The field with yellow daffodils extended as far as he could see in every direction. There was nothing else. Just blue skies and daffodils, daffodils and blue skies.

That couldn't be right. He'd been pretty sure that this was Switzerland only ten minutes ago. There'd been mountains. There'd been a valley with a river. And now there was just...vastness. A vastness of yellow and green and blue, with no end in sight.

When he looked back down, his wife was gone. He was alone in a vast field of daffodils, and now the clouds were coming back, swallow-

ing the yellow sun, making everything grey and dull.

But in the distance, calling to him, the entwined voices of his wife and daughter hummed an ominous tune, a dark tune that circled him like a snake and tightened around his neck, pulled him down, down into the darkness where the ghosts lay in wait.

David willingly followed.

The ship slipped slowly into orbit around the red planet, concealed by asteroids. Like a twin to those giant rocks, it tumbled slowly around and around, furtively feigning non-sentience.

It would wait here now, just as it'd been instructed to. Wait and watch, watch and wait. Wait for a sign, a message, telling it that the time had come.

Only then it would wake its precious passenger from that strange, restless slumber, that curious affliction which the onboard systems were unable to decipher. Meanwhile, they could do little but feed and water the passenger, monitor its vital signs, protect it from harm...and hope that, when the moment was near, this organic thing would awake again.

Until then...sleep. Sleep the long night away.

“Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without
honour.”
- *Matthew 13.57*

Epilogue

Rubi-Ka, 29475 AD

The caves ran deeper than deep, narrow burrows digging through the sand and the soft soil to the hard rock beneath, and further still to where the rough walls grew hot to the touch. There, he had made his shelter from the world; a perfect memory of the one place he wished he could go back to.

Technology allowed him an eggshell pretence, his imagination and yearning completed the illusion: Through artificial windows augmented by high-resolution screens he could see clear across the river with its quaint stone bridges to the parklands beyond, dazzlingly green fields, winding pathways, and lush oak trees framed by ancient buildings crowned with spires.

Though not true to life, not exactly, it was true to memory, and while the hallucination could never bring *her* back, his dreams could, and thus every moment not spent working on the project was spent sleeping inside this illusion, and when he slept here he dreamed of her.

Soon now, he would be able to join her again. Somewhere beyond eternity, she was waiting for him.

One way or another, his long journey would end here on this planet. A thousand lifetimes ago *they* had told him it would. *They* had never been wrong. Never. Not back in the mother country where everyone had known him as Roman Dragovich Zubov. Not at the latter end of the twentieth century when, at their directive, he had initiated the Ark Project. Not even when he had exiled himself from humanity to let the

seeds of Omni-Tek – *his* Omni-Tek – grow untended. And *they* would not, could not, be wrong this time either.

Roman closed the curtains and shut down the simulation. The room went dark. It was time for work. He walked through the door from his living-quarters into the hallway with the authentically creaky floor – no expense spared – and turned left around the corner. Here, past the borders of his illusory cocoon, the panelled walls turned to solid rock. A few meters further down, the tunnel expanded into a large cavern, and the path crossed a natural bridge that spanned a yawning chasm where perpetual hot winds pulled at his long white coat. Surefooted, Roman never slowed. He could walk the trail blindfolded if need be. On the far side there was a set of winding stairs, and at the top, his control centre. Here, the walls were sheeted metal, not rock, and the eternal light didn't emanate from prehistoric bulbs, but rather from the walls themselves.

The consoles lit up silently when he sat down in the chair. He brushed his fingers along the panels and felt the texture of the consoles beneath his sensitive skin. Texture, and sand; a fine layer of red dust enshrouded everything, like a veil. Even here, the dry sand penetrated. Far below the surface, and yet the elements found a way in.

Why had Lady Destiny chosen this world for the dénouement of history? A world covered in sand, haunted by mutants, ravaged by war, and run by fools. It made no sense to Roman, but the modern world rarely did. History had passed him by, and that was fine by him...just as long as history did not interfere with his plans.

There were always things that could upset the delicate chain of events that, despite all odds, had progressed almost flawlessly since the middle of the twentieth century. This was disconcerting, and yet impossible to predict and prevent. Humans would always be erratic and wilful. The best he could do was to observe and act quickly when events spiralled out of control; the tools were at his disposal, and his job, as always, was to limit the damage and steer the project back on course.

“Good afternoon, Roman,” a soft female voice intoned. Her accent and wording were both old-world, the vernacular British English. Another one of Roman's concessions to his past, he had programmed her to sound as near to his memories as possible. And though no one but him had spoken it for more than twenty-seven thousand years, he still preferred to be addressed by his birth name. “How are you today?”

He skipped the pleasantries. She would not be offended. “Status?” he asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. There’s a storm approaching, and I’ve taken the liberty to close down most of the ventilators. We’ll be operating at ten percent of capacity, but that ought to carry us through at least the next forty-eight hours.”

“Fine. Any news?”

“Philip Ross has announced a pardon, effective immediately. By surrendering their weapons and allegiances, clan members are excused for all crimes against the corporation.” She paused. “It seems to have caught on. Reports are coming in from all corners of the realm, and several clans have been completely decimated. It appears as though people are losing faith in the rebellion, and Mr. Ross is taking advantage of this.”

“Smart man.” Roman had initially been wary of this Ross-character. He had appeared wilful and reluctant to accept outside control, but the central administration had persisted, and now Roman saw why. The man was quite perfect, and though Ross did not know it, he would play an important role on the day of reckoning. “Anything else?”

“I’m not certain if this is crucial or not,” the artificial intelligence said, “but I’ve been tracking two rebel soldiers for a while now. The identity of the male is unconfirmed, but initial visual records of the female pulled from a roaming security android match one Jennifer Brody. However...” The AI paused.

“However what?”

“Ms. Brody is deceased, Roman. She died five years ago.”

“Hardly. That’s just an old clan trick, to avoid retribution against members’ families. Dead soldiers make fearless soldiers. So what’s so special about these two rogues?”

“They’ve been heading south for a while now, staying away from cities and other travellers. I’ve spotted them three times – twice at neutral outposts where they’ve stocked up on ammo, once in a random encounter with one of our androids. They shut it down.”

“It’s out of commission?”

“From what I can tell, they tore it to pieces and buried it. I sent a maintenance unit out to recover it, but I could find no trace of the android. It appears as though they don’t want to leave any tracks.”

“Sounds like any good soldier to me, paranoid to the core.

What's so special about these two?"

"I'm not sure," she said, and Roman thought he could detect a note of disconcert in her voice. She was constantly evolving, true, and he had instructed the AI to be as human as possible, within reason. He preferred to interact with a simile of a real person instead of just a cold machine.

Still, it was unlike her to voice her doubts. She had her pride.

"I have a...feeling," the AI continued. "There's something about these two. Perhaps it's their pattern of movement or perhaps it's the woman's identity..." She cleared her virtual throat, a mannerism Roman could not remember adding to her behavioural programming. "Begging your pardon, I will investigate further."

"Please do." He was a bit worried himself, not about the two soldiers, not precisely. No, it was more a reminder of his lack of control. When a computer capable of supervising an entire world had to rely on instincts and synthesised emotions to detect anomalies...

He pushed the thought from his mind. Better to focus on his daily tasks than to worry about everything that could go wrong. "Anything else?"

"No. It's been a relatively quiet day so far."

"All right, let's begin. First off, Omni-1...what's the report from our eyes-and-ears?"

They wrapped up the day's work in less than four hours. As always, his brief communiqués were relayed through surreptitious channels, none traceable back to this place or to him, and all encrypted with an executive-level Omni cipher. There wouldn't be any questions; there never were. If the communiqués ever found their way back to Omni-Tek headquarters, no one had attempted to track down the author or challenge the missives. Corporate intrigues spanned the entire executive branch, which counted thousands, all pursuing their own agendas. Should anyone bring sensitive questions to the table, attention would naturally be focused back on that person, and they all had their dark secrets.

Roman had made sure of that, long ago, to nurture an environment of greed, backstabbing, and paranoia. And while he had never been in direct control over his Frankenstein's monster, Omni-Tek still danced to his tune. From day to day, the strings were quite invisible, but as with

a monstrous puppeteer – or a god – in time, a pattern could be discerned. But who would know where to look? They were all frightened of losing their little fiefdoms, even the apparently immutable Philip Ross, and they were all so eminently shortsighted. The movements of the strings were slight, the consequences modest in the short term. If one were to gaze across the vast expanse of almost thirty millennia, one would see the patterns clearly, but in the course of a person's career – few bothered to look much beyond that – the patterns were vague, perhaps even chaotic, as though seeing a complex weave from up close rather than from afar.

“See you tomorrow,” he told the AI. “Keep me updated on the two clan soldiers if anything interesting happens.”

“I will, Roman,” she answered. “Good night. Pleasant dreams, my sweet.”

He smiled a slight smile but didn't offer a reply. She would understand. Cautiously, he descended the stairs towards his home.

The moment he stepped back into the apartment, the simulation automatically reactivated. Outside, night had fallen, and it was raining. In windows across town lamps were lit and the streets were almost empty. Above him, someone crossed the wooden floor; as always, the effect was somewhat eerie, but Roman was used to his ghostly neighbours. Their invisible presence comforted him, made him feel less alone. In the absence of real companionship, sounds and images would have to suffice.

He sat down, reached for the bottle of vodka – authentic or not, he had a builder in the kitchen; he was loath to sacrifice basic conveniences for the pretence of realism – on the table next to the chair, and filled his glass to the top. A few drops spilled onto the carpet as he lifted the glass to his lips and swallowed the clear liquid in a single swig. He immediately refilled the glass. Though it clouded his mind, the liquor also warmed his bones and brought back vague memories of his first life, when he had worked for a ruthless man who had believed he could change the course of history.

Which he, admittedly, had, albeit not in the way he had originally intended. Yet that man was remembered still, despite the millennia that had passed between then and now, despite the wars, despite the fall of humanity. Who would remember Roman when all this was past and gone? Perhaps *they* would. Or perhaps he was simply one cog in a grand wheel that turned endlessly at their command. Whichever it was, he

could not bring himself to care all that much. Passion had become duty, dedication a responsibility, and ambition a task to be accomplished: nothing more, nothing less.

He closed his eyes and sipped from the glass.

Downstairs, someone had switched on a radio set. The entwining threads of Bach's violins drifted across the countless millennia and the billions of miles from his birth home to this place. Encased in alien rock, he was alone but not lonely, never that.

Slowly and inevitably, Roman Dragovich drifted off to a deep and bottomless sleep where bittersweet dreams lay in wait for him.

Her voice was in his dream and it kept calling to him from a great distance, but though he strained to hear what she was saying, the words remained unintelligible.

She was standing on the white cliffs above the ocean, and the roar of the water swallowed all other sounds. He wanted to go to her, but there was an invisible abyss between them, deep as all the years and wider than the universe itself. She was standing precariously close to the edge, and he wanted to tell her to step back, but even if he had been able to open his mouth, the ocean would have drowned out his words.

"...must talk..." The wind changed direction momentarily, bringing fragments of her message to him. "...immediately..." Again, the words faded and disappeared, carried out to sea by the restive currents of air.

He tried to move and speak, but it was as though he had been crucified and gagged; to even move his fingers was a struggle, and he felt sluggish and intoxicated.

"...up!" the voice said, clearer now, closer. But when he looked to the cliffs, they were further away than ever before, and Yvette was closer, too close, to the edge. She didn't even glance in his direction; her eyes were looking to the sea below. The salty wind had caught her hair and her wispy white dress, tugging at her like a cat playing with a mouse. He desperately wanted to warn her, to pull her away from the edge and into his arms.

"Wake up, Roman!"

Roman opened his eyes and looked straight into nothingness. The simulation had shut down to preserve power, and his apartment was

in a pitch black. Momentarily confused, acting on ancient instincts, Roman reached out for the light switch and knocked over the bottle, breaking it, and spilling vodka onto the floor and the carpet.

The sudden noise and the strong smell cleared his mind.

“Light,” he said, and the lights came back on. The simulation reactivated, but he wasn’t concerned with the pictures on the screens. “What is it?”

“You must come upstairs immediately,” the artificial intelligence said. If Roman hadn’t known better, he would have thought her worried. “Something is happening.”

“What’s happening?” He rose, sluggishly. He felt light-headed.

“The travellers, Roman. Something is going on.”

He frowned, attempting to put her words into context. “You mean those two clan soldiers? What’s the problem?”

“Events are converging, Roman,” she said. “Patterns you’ve made me look for...signs...they’re appearing everywhere. And those two are a part of it; they’re setting things in motion. I can’t explain it, it’s...it’s like a sensation in my...my mind. Roman, you have to see for yourself. *Please.*”

She *did* sound worried. His head was finally clearing up, the haze of alcohol yielding to determination, and he made for the door, quickening his pace with every step. Pinpricks were racing down his spine, and his heart was pounding.

Patterns. Converging events. Signs.

If it were so, if the AI was right, he had been caught completely off-guard. He would have thought that an event of this magnitude would be signalled far in advance, like black clouds gathering on the horizon before a thunderstorm. But perhaps he had been looking in the wrong direction. Perhaps his attentions had been focused on trivial matters...or perhaps he had ignored the trivial matters, taken them for granted, and missed the inherent signs.

“Roman,” she said. He was crossing the chasm. The winds were stronger now, and there was a deep howling below. Roman stopped. There was something wrong, something out of order. “Roman!”

“I’m coming,” he said, “just hold on a second. Something’s—”

“Roman, we have a visitor!”

“What?”

“I’m frightened,” she said, and then she went still.

“Frightened...” Roman walked forward a step and then he suddenly realised the implications of what the AI had just told him, and he froze, his body cold as ice. “Who’s here?” There was no answer. “What do you mean by ‘visitor’?” Still nothing.

The AI had never stopped responding to his questions before.

A sharp noise behind him made his jaw clench involuntarily, and his eyes went wide.

It sounded like a heavy boot crunching stones beneath its heels.

Roman glanced back over his shoulder.

Something moved in the shadows of the tunnel; something tall and dark. Roman turned on the spot. His palms were clammy, and his breathing quickened. Was this *panic* that he was feeling? For the life of him, he could not remember.

“Who’s there?” he tried to call out, but what passed his lips was barely a whimper.

The shadow emerged from the darkness into the light, a silhouette taking shape and becoming corporeal in the process. It stood there, in the penumbra between the pitch-black yawn of the tunnel mouth and the narrow, arching bridge, and it smiled at him.

“God in heaven,” Roman whispered, “this is impossible.”

“To your God...perhaps,” said the thing that was Vanya. On the surface it looked much the same as the man who’d brought him out of the Soviet Union twenty-seven thousand years ago. Beneath the tanned face and the ordinary clothes, however, there lurked something darker and older than time itself, something *not* human, not even close. Roman couldn’t explain how he knew that; he just did. And though the creature spoke in a human voice, spoke *Russian* even, the sound was of razorblades on steel: “We have destroyed our gods, so I wouldn’t know. Nothing is impossible to us, *Roma*. Life is a dream, and death a rude awakening.” The creature spread its wide arms wide and grinned an awfully toothy grin. “Welcome to the future, *Comrade*.”

Roman felt very small, very human, but he steadfastly refused to betray his fear to this monster and instead of falling to his knees and weep, he voiced a burning question.

“What are you doing here,” he said to the thing, “and how did you get in?”

“You didn’t believe we’d just let you run free for all eternity, did you *Roma*?”

“Don’t call me that.” Roman had found his voice again.

Vanya shrugged. “You may have forgotten one thing: you still work for us.”

“What do you think I’m doing here?” Impossibly, fear had given way to anger. “I wouldn’t be on this godforsaken rock, dug down in this...” He searched for the right word. “...prison, if it weren’t for you. I have a mission, and I’ve been doing precious little else.”

“Perhaps you should consider getting out and about,” the thing said. “Too much solitude just isn’t good for the soul. If you still have one.” It laughed. “We wouldn’t have need of you if you didn’t, *Roma*, so don’t worry. Oh, sorry: *Roman*. I do apologise.”

Vanya walked up to him, and Roman saw now what was different about the thing; its eyes were dead. It was as though the corporeal shell had been vacated, and the spirit absent. All that remained was a puppet with invisible strings.

The knowledge sent chills down his back.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said weakly. “How did you get here? And how did you know I was down here? No one can get in...it’s impossible.”

“What is impossible? The improbable, or the unlikely? For a human, you may be old. But you are *human*. And you know...so little.” The thing brushed past him across the bridge – for a split second, Roman thought that he was about to get pushed into the abyss – and made for the staircase on the opposite end. “We’ve always known.”

“Then why haven’t you contacted me before now? I was beginning to think that you were...” He stopped himself.

The thing turned to look back at him, an eyebrow raised theatrically and an amused smile playing on its lips: the sum effect was almost obscene.

“Beginning to think what, Roman? That we were dead and gone? We were immortal long before you gave humanity its fountain of youth, Comrade Dragovich. We are not going away. And neither are you. We still need you.”

“Why now?” The thing started climbing the stairs, and Roman followed. “There were plenty of times when I thought this entire thing

was pointless, never mind what promises you gave me aeons ago. Why wait so long?”

The thing had reached his control centre, and when Roman caught up with it, Vanya was admiring the consoles and screens covering all four walls of the room.

“This is very impressive, Roman. *Very* impressive. Our trust in you has turned out to be completely justified. As always.” It stared at him. “We left you alone, Dr. Zubov, because you are the architect of humanity’s future. You are our prophet, not our puppet. We never wanted to put strings on you and control you like a marionette.” Vanya moved his fingers in the air, smiling. “We gave you responsibilities, not chains around your neck. We gave you inspiration, not orders that had to be followed to the letter. The project is yours, my friend, not ours.” It sat down. “I think your friend is dead.”

“Friend?” Roman was confused.

“The machine you talk to. She’s dead.”

The AI. He means the artificial intelligence. “Did you—”

“Of course not,” said Vanya. “Something is happening.”

“That’s the last thing she said.” Roman went over to one of the panels, activated the AI’s manual controls. Everything seemed to be in order. “Yvette?” he said. “Status.”

“You named her after a dead lover, Roman?” The thing sounded amused. “How human of you.”

Roman ignored the aside. “It’s not responding. I have to run a full analysis to see what’s happened.”

“I can tell you.” The Vanya thing paused. “She’s been murdered.”

“By whom?”

“I...don’t know.” Vanya sounded angry, maybe even a bit worried. Roman found that both very reassuring and unbelievably frightening. If a thing as powerful as this could feel apprehension...

“What’s happening?” The AI had said something else as well, something about the two clan-soldiers. “Signs and portents,” he said. “We’re close, aren’t we?”

“To the end? I think so. *We* think so. *We*’re not omnipotent, Roman. And humans aren’t always easy to second-guess. You’re a wilful species.”

“You?” He knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“You humans,” said the Vanya thing. “Don’t tell me my disguise has had you fooled. I can tell it hasn’t.”

“It did, once,” he said. “We made contact fifteen thousand years ago, and I knew. I knew there was a link. There had to be.”

“There are others, you know. We couldn’t place all of our eggs in one basket, so to speak.”

“And have you made them the same promises that you’ve made to me?”

Vanya nodded. “But I will tell you, man to man,” – it winked at him, and Roman cringed involuntarily – “that you’re our most valued asset. See, there are other agents too, and we never know when they’ll strike against us.”

“Other agents?”

“Other prophets. Something’s happening, Roman – like you said, signs and portents. We have great need of you now, and I think it’s about time to show you the truth.”

“Which truth?” whispered Roman. He was suddenly very, very afraid, and he wanted to leave this place.

“All of it,” said the thing that wasn’t, and took everything off.

Roman fell to his knees, and suddenly he knew, he knew what he had done, what he had willingly become a part of.

They were here. And *they* were terrible but beautiful, like shadows in the sunlight, sharp and thin and infinite, spanning dimensions and time and alive yet not like him, not like humans, not at all like humans.

He stayed on his knees for a long time, his eyes cast down, and he wept and laughed and wept again. He knew that from this moment on everything, *everything* would be different.

They had arrived.

It has finally begun.

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