

Tempest Roams in the Pathless Sky

GRAEME S. HOUSTON

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Lithe and quick, a single pull of her calves sprung her by her toes into the air as the blades swung to meet. She heard the thud as they embedded themselves into the trunk of the tree and in desperation she grasped at the branch above her. Deftly she pulled herself up and around, onto the branch and sprung along its length. She heard the grinding of metal as it pulled the blades out and turned to follow. She glanced back at it, and it was the pure, shining metal of the blades, caught in the light of the morning, that wrenched at her heart causing it to beat painfully against her chest.

The metal thing behind her was unscratched, not battered like the rest of the junk the ancients had left. Not worn out like the dwindling weaponry kings fought for. This shone as if it had had just been built, or as if someone had lovingly restored to what it once was.

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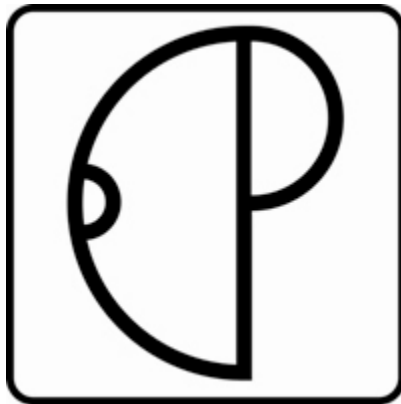
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Also by Graeme S. Houston:

Verisimilitude

Graeme S. Houston

Dedication:

Dedicated to my Grandparents;
Who each played a part, in making me who I am today.

Acknowledgements:

This book owes its existence to my time in Asia, and as such I must thank my family, friends and acquaintances, and every dodgy character who enlivened an already magical world. You all played your part. You all know who you are. To T. my love and gratitude, to my brothers the same. Now our paths diverge. Remember me fondly.

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*On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.
Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked
in the trackless water, death is abroad and children
play. On the seashore of endless worlds is the great
meeting of children.*

--Rabindranath Tagore

Chapter One

Fleet of foot, Elizabeth ran from the noise as fast as she could. Her own breathing quickened in response to the exertion, and yet she could still hear them behind her tailing her. They had barely let up their relentless pursuit. These were no ordinary troops and far more determined and disciplined than she normally ran up against. The fact they had stayed on her tail for so long proved the point, but only made her more determined. They remained like a splinter, the noises tugging at her senses, stabbing at her perception. Though they were doing a better job of hunting her down than most, they would never catch her. She could still have told them right there and then that they weren't doing a very good job, but men these days had lost that kind of sense of humor anyway.

She heard the padding of paws in the soil, wolves barking, men rasping out of breath, cries from afar and the whispering of arrows shot off blindly into the night. True, they had wolves with them, but those would be of little help to the men. She could change her scent at will and was far more agile than any of their wild beasts. It was only through sheer numbers, discipline and a degree of luck that they remained behind her after such a distance. Normally she would have been long gone by now.

She slipped through the forest silently through bushes and weedy ferns, and avoiding muddy paths wherever possible. She leapt, bounding like a deer over a ragged mass of thorny bushes that had formed an impenetrable barrier along the edge of a burn, and landed easily on the other side. She easily rolled and found her feet again, only to leap once more to clear a dried-up stream. The feel of the air moving through her hair and brushing her skin as she jumped served to wake

her up, to rekindle her sense of exhilaration. She landed easily and slipped off into thick bushes, barely touching the numerous branches that crisscrossed before her.

A chill wind began to blow from the north, and the birds sung their strange songs of the nighttime. Songs that cried in little murmurs, rasping as if in fits of melancholy. It seemed to her that the birds called out to each other as if in search of a little solace.

She grew tired, realizing the full extent of her flight as the footfalls receded by a fraction once more. She had been running for over an hour, some strange mechanism within her mind told her; she would have to stop soon. If she had been running straight, she would have left them far behind. But her lack of familiarity with this region had caused her to lose her way and double back a few times.

The forest lay around her dark, foreboding— shards of silver moonlight slipping between the branches and casting beams of light through the misty air. Like a natural cathedral to the grandeur of Gaia herself, the light rendered it in sacred detail, beautiful beyond words. Insects flitted through the forest and bats rushed overhead, flocking to return to their caves. Soon they would sleep through the day and come out again at sunrise.

She could smell the bark, the leaves, the trees, and the rain that had fallen in the morning and dried up in the midday sun. This place pleased her with its dark beauty. To her right, the wind brought her the scent of waterfalls and jasmine and the fields in the cliffs above, and that called out to her as the quickest route to shake off the blasted men behind her. Now she began to recognize the area and relaxed somewhat.

Quite suddenly, a hail of arrows erupted from a patch of bushes to her left. The world slowed down and stayed poised just on the tip of that violent moment while hyper-adrenalin flowed into her veins. It took all of her skill to avoid being struck, but they did miss, slipping past her as she spiraled between them. She pushed forwards harder now, spurred on by her brush with death.

As she rounded a rocky outcrop, two men threw themselves into her path with swords drawn and their eyes coldly took the measure of her. She brought forth her daggers and swept at them, parrying their blows and sliding past them. She didn't want to kill them, but another placed himself in her way. As they threw themselves into a frenzied attack from all sides, her instincts broke her will. Within seconds the three lay dead at her feet.

The wolves and the men drew closer. Taking two breaths, she dashed at full speed in the direction of a cliff and burst out of the thickest part of the forest. Her feet took her onto an ancient worn path that wove around in a gentle arc. She took to an easy run. Following the path up around the contours of the land, her course took her parallel to a great ancient cliff. No doubt its cavernous surface was the home of the bats she had seen earlier.

Without breaking stride, she climbed up a rocky outcrop and jumped several meters across to the thick trunk of a tree. Halfway up its length it lay bent over and parallel to the ground, and upon this flat trunk she landed easily before climbing up the rest of the great trunk, letting it take her up into the thick forest canopy and salvation. Pausing a moment to catch her breath, she stood poised on the thick bough before jumping forwards, her powerful legs propelling her into the next tree. Catching a branch, she swung around and easily landed back onto her feet – poised, her eyes searching out a route before her.

In this manner she jumped from tree to tree and made her way ever so quietly to a thick, dark oak. Its size and position appealed to her, as ideal for her plan. After assessing the nearby landscape, she hid herself away in the deep recesses where the oak's giant boughs parted.

Lulled by the noises of the night, she lay drifting in a meandering daze. The years had passed like drops of water flowing down a waterfall; she wondered what would come next. She thought of all that had been lost and wondered if ever the humans would stop fighting among themselves.

She lay awake gazing up to the night sky, her keen sight revealing the black spheres silhouetted against the stars beyond. They drifted endlessly around the Earth, invisible to all but her, forgotten by all but a few.

She slept.

Every now and then she found herself stirring in the night and unsure if it had been a real noise or a forgotten dream that had wakened her. As she shrugged off the grogginess of sleep she heard more noises in the night. The song of a million insects chirping rose up to join the cacophony. The thunderous roar of the trees swaying in the wind mingled with the sounds of wolves sniffing nearby and the men shouting orders to each other. She lay still listening to their movements, her mind placing each man or wolf like a chess piece around her. As they moved about she followed them carefully, just in case they should get

lucky. Or perhaps, should they actually stumble across her, unlucky.

They wandered in circles for hours never finding her. Lost, scared soldiers traipsing through the night, terrified of the creature they were hunting, unsure if she was stalking them. Lost little souls. But she had no interest in them. Not unless they disturbed her.

The birdsong changed, morning came, and through the dark clouds a beam of light shone weakly. It held the promise, a whisper, that the morning light might clear away all the evil deeds of the night.

Though still tired, the little sleep she had stolen would be enough to keep her going—long enough anyway. She would have no trouble escaping the borders of this enfeebled little kingdom, and a long sleep would be her reward on the other side.

Elizabeth quietly moved around following the still noisy men, keeping to the treetops until she found them. She watched from a tall tree as the remaining soldiers picked up their dead and threw them onto an old wooden cart as reverently as their desire to leave would allow. They had succumbed to the dangerous creatures that lived deep in the forest.

As their still-living allies worked to retrieve them, their sword hilts clanked against their armor, signaling their presence for miles around. Their shining metal helmets reflected the green of the canopy, while their red sash mirrored the blood red of the moss. Their boots squelched in the water-soaked forest floor, and the noise risked attracting the bigger, smarter creatures, who preyed on the flesh of man and did not fear daylight.

The birds of the morning let out their chattering cries and Elizabeth, for all she was part cat with claws, fangs and slits for eyes, loved them for their beauty and for their songs. Her claws dug deeper as she remained crouched upon the branch, silencing her breathing, maintaining the gentle rise and fall of her breasts. She hoped not to make the sound which would betray her, while several of the guards traipsed around hoping for another glimpse of her.

Disappointed, they left.

The chill of the wind caressed her hips, her thighs and the small of her back as if her robes were nonexistent. She shivered gently.

Eventually the old wooden cart rattled off up onto the forest road, slowly drawn over the slippery ground by great horses, broad shouldered and powerfully strong. She slid with her back against the trunk—thankful they had left. In the distance, she could hear the steady

beat of drums. Drums to march to; drums to command the advance of the battalion. Towards home this time—to New Britain on the shore of Lake Mediterania. But Elizabeth also knew that a few days hence would bring out another battalion, marching back to the front, to fight, to die, to reclaim the lands lost by the old king in his feeble reign. Such was the ebbing and swaying of the borders, and she had watched it like the tides, all these hundreds of years with a certain sadness. The fighting was too slow for one as old as she—who could remember the old ways. As much as she loved her assassin's daggers, she missed the solid feel of a gun in her hand.

With a flash of sunlight on steel, a monster swooped upon her. The branch shuddered as its steel claws folded around the bark and the branch bowed under the weight of it. She threw herself onto her feet, ready to defend herself, and found herself at a complete loss for any action that might be effective against it. Against such a thing as stood before her... something that drew a blank from the encyclopedic chambers of her mind, a silver monster dredged up from someone's personal hell, maybe even from her own version of it.

She let out a painful short gasp at the massive steel swords it unfolded into its hands and stood almost frozen to the spot, contemplating it as it contemplated her. The scales on its chest reflected in its many facets the fear she betrayed on her face and in her eyes.

Lithe and quick, a single pull of her calves sprung her by her toes into the air as the blades swung to meet. She heard the thud as they embedded themselves into the trunk of the tree and in desperation she grasped at the branch above her. Deftly, she pulled herself up and around onto the branch and sprung along its length. She heard the grinding of metal as it pulled the blades out and turned to follow. She glanced back at it and it was the pure, shining metal of the blades, caught in the light of the morning that wrenched at her heart causing it to beat painfully against her chest. The metal thing behind her was unscratched, not battered like the rest of the junk the ancients had left. Not worn out like the dwindling weaponry kings fought for. This shone as if it had just been built, or as if someone had lovingly restored it to what it once was.

New.

So damn new...

The wind flicked her night black hair as she bounded across from branch to branch, through the canopy, and she could hear it pursuing,

the metallic grinding of its joints, the rasping of its breath.

*It breathes? A steel beast, a robot from years ago breathing...*she thought about it a moment, but pushed the thought from her mind to focus on the more important task of staying alive.

She pressed harder towards the cliffs, every muscle aching, her eyes judging, her hands catching at the branches, branch by branch, until the cliff grew closer. Until at last, her goal drew closer. The tight little cave she had taken note of in the past yet dared not explore lay just before her, just within reach. It beckoned her to safety. With one last desperate jump and a slide upon the dusty entrance, she slipped inside the cave, feet first, clawing at the ceiling to drag herself ever further into the safety of the recesses—all the while staring back at the mouth of the cave. Behind her the great jowl of the beast appeared open and roaring in its frustration at being unable to pursue her, like Samael the demon; the Satan of her friends' myths and campfire stories.

Never had she felt such relief as when the roaring mouth was gone and the blackness of the cave consumed her.

She slid herself ever lower down the passage, wondering where it would lead her. The visage of the metal monster still vivid in her eyes, a phantom in the dark. Its black eyes glaring, the rippling of its scaled armor, a long snout, jaws and teeth, a hunter, with claws, blades, wings, a killing machine. A perfect example of old tech – and she had thought herself to be the last. A robot killer of yester millennia pursuing a genetically engineered assassin, both remnants of the same insanity. *But why after all these millennia?*

Chapter Two

An air of excitement hung over the city on this day, seventh of the Lanndanam—the great festival of the year; the festival of bells and renewals. Dancing girls skipped through the streets casting fresh petals of pink and white from bowls held at their side. The petals spun through the air and carpeted the streets in sweetly fragrant spirals. The marble buildings of Old Kuala Lum were decorated with banners, and multi-coloured fabrics spun around every column. The city had been rendered in carefully coordinated colours through the routes the procession would take. Streets curved through the city forming a sacred spiral to its centre. This marked the divine route to where the twin spires of the Petrolias towers rose up like twin mountains.

The towers rose high into the heavens above all else, and it was said that this was where Lord Shiva Nataraj had come down, dancing between them—dancing the death of the world.

They say he danced and spun, and humbled the world in its death throws. In one of his upper arms the kettle drum beat the tune, a skull in his hair as the symbol of the destruction, and the beads of skulls around his neck bearing witness to all the death and rebirth cycles he had danced the world into before. The divine principal, Deva, and the matter of the universe, Bhuta, fused in his divine dance, through his winding multiplicity of arms, spinning the energies of the universe into a pattern of colour, a tapestry of black and white, man and woman, light and darkness. In that dance he played the steps of truth and immortality against the moves of untruth and death until the eternal conflicts were reconciled within his body, in his rhythm, in his dance, the dance of the cosmic, laying waste to the age of waste; the age of petrol died.

With the Petrolias temple rising up before him, the boy, Aadesh,

whose name meant message, found himself gazing at the strange message in his hand. The girls dancing on the street beside him went unnoticed as he examined the strange hand, the strange ink, but the clear meaning;

*Bhakti Kalapani requests your presence.
Come to the Petrolia temples at once.*

But why? Aadesh wondered as he pushed his way through the growing crowds. The girls danced wildly, their feet pitter-pattering upon the dusty road, their saris billowing in the breeze. Their brown skin, beautiful against the thousand hues of silk, and gold and silver. Their beautiful faces alive with the spirit of the festival. He heard the jingle of a thousand bracelets and smelled the burning of incense, heard the prayers, the puujah all along the sidewalks. The citizens giving their thanks and receiving their blessings. The dance of thanks for the rebirth, a dance spiraling the city in a parade of colour.

He pushed on until he came to the girls in Cheong-sam, smart Chinese silken suits in golds and reds. Their pale complexions standing out like their silver blades. Gracefully they danced, in celebration also, but to a different end; prosperity for the future. Dancing with swords and ribbons. Whereas the Indian girls were lively, the Chinese girls moved with military precision—together as one. They danced to the beat of the bells and the drums, to the music of the Emperors, swift and deadly with their blades. The sun shone off the flashing metal as the girls danced ever forward.

Though Aadesh would have loved to watch them all, all his favourites taking part in his favourite festival of the year, he pressed on. He cut away from the procession, missing the Malay girls and the Thai Girls, unhappily abandoning the remaining dances to the gods, so as to appease the God and the God's high priests. He could not very well disobey a summons from the high priest himself. Curiosity would no doubt have won out anyway.

He wandered through the drab side alleys, cutting a course directly to the towers. He brushed past stalls cooking for a few scruffy customers, and old hawkers offering flowers, incense and other accessories for the puujah. A four-winged bird swooped past in bobbing flight, wings flickering like an insect, before arching into the air with its green feathers bright against the eternal summer sky. He came to the next intersection

of the spiraling main street and crossed, weaving between wagons large and small, tearing through the city to get their work done before the procession arrived and blocked the way.

Through the next alley his feet took him between the potholes, up a flight of marble steps onto the third ring of the spiraling street where he stopped dead. A shadow crossed over him and made him spin around. His upwards gaze came to rest upon the great red and yellow stripes of an old airship. The boat-like gondola hanging below it, sure to carry goods and messages. The desire to be up there almost overwhelmed him, and he said a prayer to whatever of his gods would listen that the strange message and the balloon would be linked in such a way that he might embark upon that great vessel.

Worried now that any delay might cost him an opportunity, he pressed on at a jogging pace. He crossed the main street twice more and reached the park. From there he resorted to a walking pace once more, and watched the airship as it reached the mooring station, some half way up the eastern tower.

He rushed inside the great temple and asked the priests where he should go. They glanced at the note with stern indifference. Every second took an age, and their lack of hurry annoyed him. To his great disappointment they directed him across to the other tower. Sadness and a touch of melancholy all threatened to consume him, but he brushed it aside and carried onwards as directed up the thousands and thousands of stairs. Everyone told stories of ancient lifts that took people to the top, but no such luxury remained. The priests said that climbing the steps was good for the soul.

At first he climbed easily, winding around the stairwell with youthful energy. After some time though, his legs began to feel heavy, his arms achy and his breath more rugged. They seemed never ending, and he soon became lost in his very own parade—imagined for his own entertainment. It served as a suitable distraction. Though at first the difficulty in climbing all the thousands of steps only strengthened his resolve, soon the vast height broke him, and he found himself collapsing down onto the stairs to lie for a moment and catch his breath. As time passed, it seemed so comforting to lie there; all he could do was force himself up and onwards so as not to give in to the temptation to rest, beautiful as the feeling was.

A little farther up he sat down for a while, as a breeze buffeted him through the fine silken gauze which covered the outer shell of the

building. Legend told once again how it had been covered in steel and glass—the transparent material the ancients could make. Long ago, the outside of the tower had sparkled like a crystal in the sun. Now it was fabric, great sheets woven into and out of each other to serve a similar purpose. Some to block the wind, some as transparent as man can make, so that the enchanting views were visible and cast in different shades as one journeyed the sacred steps.

Aadesh gathered up his energy and continued onwards up the tower, occasionally running into others, mainly priests, coming down from the various floors. The gray blocks of the stairs became his entire world, a jagged, spiraling path upwards forever, a personal hell. His thoughts drifted off into a daydream of flying upon an airship. Along above the clouds drifting endlessly, he almost forgot that the rest of the world existed, his feet moving mechanically his mind drifting elsewhere.

With little warning, he found himself at the top of the tower. Flanked by two guards, he stood before a commander with the note held out. The man grinned and unquestioningly took the parchment from him. With but the slightest of glances the man smiled and gestured for him to follow.

Aadesh followed the man's lead along a corridor that was draped in a thousand gauze curtains of white and red, every fifth hanging down, so that the guard parted them with his hands as he walked past, through hanging beads and past marble statues, into a chamber where two more men stood guard at the entrance. Aadesh found himself directly before Bhakti Kalapani, priest to the gods.

Beside Kalapani sat the priest of the Trinity and the priest of Allah, all comprising the council of Old Kuala Lum. Only the priest of the Buddha was not in attendance, but garlands covered his chair signifying the respect the priest commanded even in his absence. It marked also that the *puujah* had been made, and would be renewed every day and night to ensure his safe and swift return.

Placing himself reverently before Kalapani, he bowed and rested upon his knees. The priest smiled and touched his shoulder bidding him to rise. The high priest stood mightily tall, enrobed in purple silk and silver sashes. He bore no weapons, but also looked as if he would need none. He wore a gleaming silver bracer on both his forearms which were decorated with shining silver knots twisting their way around the surface. Matching this was his short silver beard which was neatly trimmed and thick. His eyes were brown, but with a touch of silver

perhaps from some ancestor and stood out against his dark skin. His black hair was short, crested in silver where his graying hair shone amidst the black, and atop his head sat a band of silver, ancient birds woven in and out and all in flight; the priests' aura seemed to hover above where the birds yearned to be.

"Aadesh, given your name, we have decided that it would be auspicious for you to be the carrier of a most important message between our lands and the lands of New Britain," Bhakti Kalapani told him in a deep and resonant voice. At that, Aadesh's heart leapt, for he knew at once that he would indeed be travelling the skies, and he was glad. "Will you accept?"

"Yes, *Bhakti*, I will," was all Aadesh could manage.

Kalapani bid him look outside and there the most majestic airship he had yet seen drifting towards them. It was not like the roughly hewn bulging monstrosities—not like the one he had seen moments ago, but with perfectly smooth curves, tied to perfection and a gondola which was almost as large as a trireme. It sidled up to the building and slowed down until it disappeared below to park in the middle of the tower where the airships usually docked.

"Sit with us a while, young Aadesh," Kalapani told him.

Aadesh took a seat near to the council members and sat in silence, afraid to talk.

"How is the orphanage, Aadesh? They are treating you well I hope?" asked the priest of Allah.

"Very well thank you, *Senasai*," he said using the respectful word for teacher.

They talked for a while, mostly about his ambitions once he was old enough to work, or about the festival and how the harvests had been most excellent this year.

It wasn't long before a man appeared at the entrance. All stood up and greeted him as he left the entrance, and they all curtly bowed in greeting. He had pale skin, and Aadesh guessed that he came from one of the settlements in the far north. He also wore clothing which fitted closely to his body, unlike the robes and saris of Old Kula Lum. At his side hung a sword with a basket hilt in a sheath decorated in winding silver patterns and a couple of jewels that looked both magnificent and deadly. He had long brown hair and gleaming blue eyes which Aadesh felt fixed firmly on him for a moment.

"Philip, how good to see you," stated Kalapani, shaking the man's

hand and pulling him into a warm embrace.

"It has been too long, my old friend – far too long," said Philip.

"My blessings to you, Philip, but you don't seem the slightest bit older. You must tell me your secret," said Kalapani.

Philip greeted the other two priests in turn, and lastly Aadesh himself, whose hand he shook firmly. Such was the western way of greeting.

"This is Aadesh, who will deliver the message."

A sudden crash issued from behind them and caused all the men to turn. A great metal beast crashed down through gauze hangings, tearing through them with its claws and rattled down onto the marble floor. It looked at them for a second before jumping forwards into a run.

"Go, Philip, take the boy and run!" shouted Kalapani as he threw the tube containing the message to Aadesh, who caught it and found himself instantly pulled by Philip towards the door.

The beast made a dive at the door, reaching it before them and cutting them off. The guards at the door attacked the creature and fell silent a moment later as it slashed at them with its claws, felling all in an instant. It turned and unfolded two deadly looking blades from its forearms out and into its hands to serve as swords. Aadesh shuddered at the look it gave him.

Philip cursed and turned tail in the opposite direction. When he reached the edge of the building, he drew his sword and swiftly made two great cuts in the shape of a cross into the gauze. He sheathed his blade again in a spiraling flourish and glanced down. Aadesh, wondering what Philip was doing, found himself more concerned about the movements of the beast. It advanced steadily towards him, giving him plenty to worry about it. He kept his eyes firmly on the beast as it approached.

Kalapani put himself between it and them. The creature swept forwards with its swords, aiming for Kalapani's head, but the priest blocked the blow with his silver bracer and kicked the beast forcefully back into the wall. It rebounded and lurched forwards, sweeping at the priest again. The beast fought back hard, raining blows upon Kalapani, yet the priest remained unfazed holding the creature at bay, dodging and blocking so graceful that it seemed like a dance more than a fight. Within a moment, all three priests closed in upon the creature, catching it off guard. Unprepared for such a skilful and well-coordinated attack, their efforts forced it back.

They were not only priests, but masters in the fighting arts and undeterred in the slightest bit by the fact that the beast was made of metal. Relentlessly, they attacked it until, in a desperate bid for more room, it leapt over Kalapani. Though he blocked two of its slices, it knocked him backwards this time with a well-placed kick, its claws gouging at his chest. Landing on its feet on the other side of the priests, it broke free and ran towards them as Aadesh found his heart stopping at the sight of it tearing towards him, blades drawn back ready to strike.

The priest of the Trinity dived, grabbed it by the ankles and tossed it to the ground. It landed with a hollow thud, cracking the marble beneath it, and kicked out as it leapt up again, clawing at the marble before it.

"Get out of here!" shouted Kalapani, as he and the others leapt to stall the beast.

Philip pulled Aadesh close and, holding him tight, threw himself off of the building. They hurtled downwards and the floors of the building rushed past. Aadesh screamed until he found that feeling the strength and surety of Philip's grip calmed him. Even in this most terrifying of circumstances, his own fears swept away with the winds so that his cry of fear stopped and instead gave way to exhilaration.

The airship sat below them and swung up to meet them as gravity pulled them down. Suddenly, they hit the soft surface of the balloon at an angle and slid smoothly down the side. Philip grabbed a rope and slid down it all the way into the gondola where he spun in the air and landed heavily on his back upon the solid boards, shielding Aadesh from the force of the blow.

"Go, go!" shouted Philip.

Engines throbbed to life, motors fired up, gears spun and suddenly the propellers swished into motion. The ship tugged at the lines until someone pulled a lever on the left side, releasing them with a jarring shudder. At last free, they swept into the skies beyond the towers above Old Kuala Lum, facing the endless jungles of the southeast.

"Rockets, rockets!" he roared next, scrambling to his feet.

Suddenly, a sound like a raging waterfall erupted into being around them, and all were thrown backwards as the craft leapt forwards in the air. Aadesh slid back against the cabin and held tight against the side as the force pushed them very swiftly forwards.

"What are rockets?" asked Aadesh, shouting over the raging of the air around them. As the force subsided, he at last pulled himself to his feet.

"Fuel that burns fast and hard to get us out of trouble. But that only

bought us some time, it will catch up with us again."

"How can it catch up with us when we are flying?"

"It has wings folded up along its back. I saw it before several days ago. Now I know what it is. Or rather I know what its purpose is. "

The words had no sooner left Captain Philip's mouth when the steel creature swept down below the airship's envelope and into view just behind them, flapping and straining desperately to catch up with them. Though now they sped away from it, the rockets were dwindling and their speed declining.

"Indeed, a brief boost for us, nothing more. The beast now approaches..." said someone nearby, a man with a deep voice and a strange accent. "So it will catch up again... What will we do then?"

Philip gestured to one of his men who ran below and reappeared a moment later with a long staff. Philip took it and started adjusting switches on it. Soon one end of it was lit up. Aadesh suddenly recognized the ancient device; a gun from the myths of old.

Philip moved himself to a position where he could see the monster better and readied the weapon. Though their speed dwindled slowly, a great distance now stood between them and the metal contraption. So much so that it now sat above the horizon looking no more sinister than a bird. Its wings flapped hard and fast, driving it forwards, but it seemed like a bird and no more, all detail and the sinister malice of it lost. The undefined flapping shape remained poised just above the horizon, and it seemed for a moment that they might lose it in the infinity of the sky, but it grew darker and larger again as it caught up with them.

Philip sighed and took aim. The creature drew closer and began to bob and dive swiftly, as if it was trying to dodge Philip and his gun.

Aadesh realized that it must have amazing eyesight to be able to see so far. Philip had not yet fired a shot, and yet it knew he was taking aim. He knew also that the scope on the gun allowed Philip to target the monster so far away. Like everyone, he had heard stories about the guns of old; guns that could kill a man from miles away. So he watched now, enthralled as a dance unfurled between Philip and the monster. The creature spiraled in the air, its powerful wings pulling it closer to them with every stroke. Soon it had grown so close, they could make out its eyes, shining red, intent upon them, and a great urgency seemed to fall upon the crew. Yet Philip never wavered, never took his aim off it.

Philip fired. The shot missed.

The creature spiraled and plunged down below his view, down

below the aft rail. Winding the strap of the weapon around his arm, he ran to the very back of the ship and took aim leaning over the rail.

Aadesh followed and watched as Philip took another shot, concentration on his face, eyes glowing red from the eerie light of the gun's sight. A green bolt shot from the gun and struck the speck in the distance. The speck wheeled for a moment and plummeted towards the ground.

A cheer went up amongst the crew who all watched as it fell, and cheered again when it crashed into the ground. Once the show finished, each left to return to their duties, leaving only Philip gazing over the back rail in quiet contemplation.

Chapter Three

Aadesh stood at the prow of the ship and watched the jungle drift by. They watched for any sign that the creature had survived. Philip ensured his men kept a close eye on the horizon before them. For now the skies around the vessel remained empty. Philip would emerge from below every so often and conduct a sweep himself as if to make extra sure.

Aadesh found himself at something of a loose end now. He spent his time watching the clouds as they drifted along. They sat on the horizon like a row of white hedges at the edge of a field. He had always liked those kinds of clouds, and from up here it seemed like he was above them. That made him think about the difference a change in perspective makes.

Philip came and sat beside him.

"Like my ship, kid?"

"Yes sir. It's really a grand ship and I am so happy to be on it."

"She was built in Mexico. Indeed, built by the finest shipwright the world has ever seen."

"Have you always been the captain of an airship?"

Philip flashed a grin. "No, I was a crewman before that. And before I was a crewman, I was a treasure hunter. I worked in a submarine, hunting relics from the sunken ships around the world. I found some good stuff. I became quite wealthy and opened a few more businesses. Eventually had enough to buy my own airship, but first I worked for a friend to learn the ropes, as it were."

"Sounds like you've seen a lot of excitement. What's a submarine?"

"It's like a boat, but it goes underneath the water."

"Wouldn't you drown?" exclaimed Aadesh, with the image in his head of Philip bobbing about underwater at the prow of the unlikely

vessel.

"No, you've got it all wrong. Imagine a boat that's sealed top *and* bottom. You take the air with you when you go in a submarine, but you need to squeeze a lot of air inside a tank so that there is enough of it."

"Wow, Sir, you really know the old ways!"

"For my sins."

"No that's good. Oh the stories I've heard about the ancients—how they flew from one side of the world to the other in half a day, how they went to the moon and oh—how they looked way across to the edge of the universe and saw god himself! Oh, and there were always some men in the heavens looking down upon the Earth. How I would love to look down upon the earth and see it as a tiny ball, just as the ancients did!"

"I see you have a love of history. Let me show you something."

Philip led Aadesh down into the compartments below deck to a room full with books.

"Captain's Quarters," Philip told him with obvious pride.

Shelves covered every wall, and books were packed full into every shelf and every available corner, while the floor lay host to piles of the books that had not fit on the shelves. They had all tumbled over and scattered about the floor. Philip had made little attempt to clear up, and instead had cleared a route around to the other side of his desk.

Numerous ancient looking scrolls sat in a box beside Philip's desk and beside those, another box full of old devices. It looked poised to fall over, and Philip adjusted it as he sat down.

"You have a lot of books, sir."

"Oh I forgot, do you still have the message?"

"Yes..." Aadesh said. There was a pause. Finally he asked, "Why?"

"That's good, keep it safe. Anyway, here, this is what I wanted to show you."

Philip took out a black coloured bracelet and put it on the boy's wrist. At the bottom of it was a clip that snapped closed, wrapping it tight.

"It's called a watch."

"A watch?" said Aadesh, contemplating it.

"Yes, the ancients used them to keep time."

"They kept time as well?"

Philip laughed a little. "No, not like you're thinking, but they split the day into twenty-four hours, and split the hours into sixty minutes, so they could tell each other when exactly to meet."

"Ahh. So this does that."

"So it's like a sundial, only a damn sight more accurate. See the numbers? That's the time, kid."

"Oh, old numerals. I can read those you know. It's one... thirty... six."

"Good. That would be lunchtime. Once you're done eating your lunch, I'll show you what else the watch does."

"Thank you, Sir."

While in the midst of cooking, Philip changed course just in case the smoke gave some clue to their direction. Aadesh watched the trail of smoke drifting behind them, fading into nothingness, scattered across the great jungles by the winds. Later, they would turn back to their north-westerly course. He found it hard to concentrate with such a view before him. Then he was called for lunch.

Philip served Aadesh first; roasted bird and bread in a tin bowl. He ate some and found that it tasted as good as looked, although it wasn't as spicy as he would have liked. The rest of the crew piled up onto the deck and took seats around him, sitting on whatever they had nearby, crates or metal boxes.

They all ate heartily and Aadesh found that he was hungrier than he had realized.

"Does your ship have a name?" he asked.

"She's called *The Rio Grande*, kid."

"Where did you get the name from?"

"*The Rio Grande* was an ancient boat. Many legends were told of it. It means Big River in an ancient language, long forgotten," Philip said between bites.

"Not totally forgotten."

Philip chuckled. "You have a point, but for the most part only place names survive, there true meanings and the language to which they belong are all gone. It's very sad, isn't it?"

Aadesh nodded.

"Here, let me introduce my crew since the gang's all here."

"This is Elisia," said Philip, turning to the woman to his right.

Elisia was Philip's first officer, and he told Aadesh that he would trust no other. She was short, but looked very strong indeed with rippling muscles visible through her thin shirt, strong enough no doubt to beat down even the strongest men in a fight—and her swordsmanship

was unmatched. She had an oval face and braided gold locks with metal clasps around the tip of each braid. Her eyes were big and as blue as the sky.

"She's our Celtic warrior," Philip told him with a wink.

When Aadesh looked at her, he suddenly found himself wishing that he were older. All the girls from Old Kuala Lum, whom he had thought to be lovely, faded into the background before Elisia.

Next was Giani Giovotto, the Romano who had lived for many years in Afraeca. He was the best pilot in all the world, at least according to Giani.

"Don't mind him, he's a bit arrogant. But once you get to know him, you realize that he really isn't joking about being a good pilot, although he could do with a touch of modesty," Philip admitted to him while Giovotto was away to check their heading.

Giovotto was loud and unruly, took offence quite quickly as well, but he laughed and made jokes, and after a while Aadesh found that he wasn't so bad. He had no hair except for a moustache which came all the way down his chin and blew about in the wind. Many pouches hung from his leather belt.

There were four others in the crew, two of whom looked alike, but Aadesh normally found it difficult to tell westerners apart. They were busy with their duties, so he didn't get much chance to talk to them. They were tall men, apparently from the furthest northern reaches of New Norwaieden, next to the glacier which covered most of what had once been Northern Europe. Naturally, they were also pale-skinned like most of the crew. But there was one man Aadesh saw who was very dark-skinned and came from Afraeca, where his family had lived for generations. Afraeca was one of the countries which had actually benefited during the upheaval. Tommi, he was called but stayed below deck most of the time.

"Why is Tommi below deck all the time?" asked Aadesh.

"He has his projects, he is a man of science, a great thinker and a great engineer. He serves onboard as the engineer, but of course that leaves him a great deal of time for his studies. Later we will go and see him, I think you and he would get along very well," Philip told him.

Suddenly, a thought struck Aadesh.

"Philip, when we hit the, um, balloon thing above us—"

"That's the envelope."

"Envelope, and you slid down the rope, the rope didn't burn your

hand?"

Philip grinned and picked a hot coal from the fire in his left hand, the one which he had earlier used to grapple with the rope. He held it for a number of seconds. Long enough to make his point. Satisfied, he threw the coal back in the fire.

"How do you do that?"

"Magic," he said, flashing a grin.

"Can you teach me?"

"Maybe someday I'll let you in on the secret. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to do some work downstairs, but I'm sure Elisia will keep you company."

At that comment, Aadesh suddenly found himself squirming inside, his breath caught itself awkwardly in his throat. All he could do was nod. Philip patted him on the shoulder twice and left for down below.

Elisia sat with him at the prow of the ship as they looked across at the vast carpet of jungle that covered every last inch of the Earth, so far as they could see. Occasionally they flew over a break where a rocky outcrop or a cliff halted the vast tapestry, and opened up the landscape to something different. Within it hid a thousand peoples, small communities living at one with nature. Aadesh looked down, amazed by how small and unreal everything looked, like tiny models.

Elisia explained to him that most of the people who had been pushed south in the displacement wars had come from great cities. When the wars ended, the survivors were spread out, and many remained afraid to return to the old ways of cities and metros. Many feared to overuse the Earth again.

"People fill the jungles now, but they're hard to find, and they tread softly upon the Earth," she told him, looking at the vast expanse. Aadesh watched even more carefully for signs of them. "Of course, as the generations passed, they forgot all about the cities."

Occasionally, they both caught a glimpse of a campfire rising up, smoke making its way straight up in the still warm air. That showed him the truth in her words. Aadesh found it amazing to think that people lived down there. He imagined the scenes of small communities where people cooked, rested, socialized, cleaned, raised children, tended animals and survived, while cut off from everything. He wondered how

he would feel deep in the jungles, so far from the cities. They might never meet another group of people. A feeling of claustrophobia came over him just thinking about the hot dark jungles below.

"I don't think I could do it. Live out there, so far away," he said to her quietly.

She only nodded in understanding.

Every now and then they came across rugged blades of old buildings that thrust upwards unnaturally from the jungles. Testament to the ancients, each marked the last signs of a particular ancient city. All totally desolate and long since abandoned. Sometimes jarring and unnatural, they looked like the decaying skeletons of great titans. They always rose up high and vast, with towers that scraped the clouds above. Sometimes these structures stood straight and sometimes they leaned as if they would keel over eventually. Many of them were already half collapsed, sitting like ancient ruins. Plants reclaimed them all, climbing up to reach for the sun. They were now overgrown monuments to a dead past.

Soon he could see the band of desert, far off on the horizon, but Elisia told him they would not be flying over the desert. They would follow the jungles up through to the more temperate region, and from there fly west towards Lake Mediterania.

Her accent reminded him of something from his childhood. A sweet sound, with a lilt that made him think of honey. She hailed from New Ireland, she told him. He asked her where exactly New Ireland lay, and she explained that it remained a part of New Britain, New Britain spread across the southern reaches of lands that were once called Portugal and Spain, reaching from the edge of the Altantic Sea, to Lake Mediterania.

He knew already, that beside New Britain lay the withered Spania Empire, and above that lay Luxembourg, the largest country in the west whose borders enclosed up much of what had been France – the fabled lost nation. It had disappeared amidst the turmoil as the glaciers thrust south and took the northern lands from man, along with a few other nations whose names were long lost. Dozens of tiny nations had sprung up to complete the new map of Europe. He hoped one day to visit them all.

"What age are ye, lad?" she asked him.

"I'll be fifteen in two moons."

"Aww bless, a fair young age," she told him. "Ahh to be fifteen again."

She told him of the horses in New Dublin, and the adventures she had been on at around his age; climbing trees and sailing on rafts down rivers. She told him of her visits to New Scotland, her adventures in Luxemburg at her uncle's house.

So many stories, and he listened to all of them gladly.

She gazed out over the jungle and told him of the wonderful plays she watched as a child at the theatre, the wonderful classics of Shaw, Shakespeare, and Porter, just to name a few, that had warmed her heart and opened her eyes to the world. She must have realized she was doing too much talking, because she changed the subject, forcing him to talk. This saddened Aadesh, because he could have listened to her voice forever.

So he spoke for a while, telling her of his childhood in the orphanage and his adventures around Old Kula Lum. Then the conversation moved to the metal monster and old tech left behind by the ancients.

"I see he's given you a watch."

"It tells the time, Philip told me."

"Did he tell you what else it does?"

"No."

She pressed one of the buttons on his watch and instantly a tiny ball of light began to circle just above the face. That sphere of glowing ghostly blue spiraled outwards a hand's width from the watch and drew a circle in the air. Once done, it drew a map in the centre of the circle, lines of light showing the edges of the continents, with names drawn in letters he could not read.

"Oh, is that Earth?" he asked her, surprised, amazed, he felt his emotions tripping up over each other at this wonderful gift he had received.

"Yes, kid, that's Earth, and you can see how all the countries were way back when this was made. And that blinking dot is where you are right now."

"It can tell me where I am in the world?" he asked, even more amazed.

"Yes, always. Anytime you need to know, just press the button."

"Truly the ancients, they had magnificent magic!"

"Magnificent science, kid," she corrected him.

"It's wonderful." He beamed with joy and pride that he had been entrusted with such a powerful and ancient artifact.

"If you think that's fancy, wait till you see the captain's!" She

laughed.

He found his cabin below and discovered a note from Philip. He unfolded it carefully and read the clear, almost perfect writing. It told him that everything in the room was for him, and he could keep them. Clothes mainly, though they also left him a dagger. "All on board must carry a dagger in case of emergency," the note explained. He picked up the dagger in its sheath and put it on his belt. Next he looked at the expedition bag they left for him. Inside were various things such as soap, a comb, a toothbrush, a map and a little wooden compass among other bits and bobs. It also told him that all the books in the room were his. Philip had carefully picked them for him.

Aadesh liked the room, and the fabric hangings on the walls made it rather cozy. It was very small of course, but every room in the ship was small, even the captain's office. Indeed smaller, since it was packed with so many books.

He thumbed through a couple of the books the captain had left for him, found one to be by an ancient called Homer, while the other was by a man called Orwell. After several minutes of indecisiveness, he finally opted for Orwell, because the title 1984 suggested to him it was older than the other one. 1984, having such a small number for a date *had* to be from the dawn of time, right?

Happily, he took off his boots and clambered onto the bunk and read the first chapter of the book. A sense of intrigue drew him in and made his heart pound in his chest and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The thought of big brother watching everything you do!

He drifted off to sleep with a book on his chest, curled up on the bunk.

Aadesh awoke and pulled the fallen book from the floor, sadly noting new folds in the pages where they had lain while pressed there. He smoothed them out and sat the book back beside the others on the shelf in front of him. Then he put the other books on top of it to press the leaves back into shape. Pausing for a moment, unsure what to do with himself, he looked at his watch and saw that he had napped for two

hours and twenty-three minutes. Pleased with his ability to note the time just like an ancient, he pressed the button and watched in delight as the air above his wrist exploded in colourful lights. They zig-zagged back and forth, tracing lines as the Earth made its appearance.

He could see that they had moved into China. He couldn't read the old words, but he assumed it must have been called Thailand in the old days, since the Thai people now lived in Malaya along with the Malayias, Indians and Chinese peoples that made up his diverse homeland. He knew they had been forced out of Thailand when the Chinese moved south to conquer the nations below them, just as the men from the north pushed them out of their own lands. The crushing ice had forced everyone to flee, and instigated wars over territory as everyone pushed south. Terrifying tales of ancient battles filled his mind. Then he began to think about his own dreams; wherein he was running from the great glacier behind him, but the air around him was thick and heavy, and he couldn't quite get away.

He started thinking about his other dreams. Inspired by a dream he vaguely remembered, but which seemed important, he took a piece of paper and began to record the day's events. Perhaps seeing all those books, and perhaps Elisia's stories of plays in Dublin, all acted as the catalyst. He decided that he should record his thoughts so that perhaps someone, sometime, might remember him as well.

A long time passed, and his hand began to ache from all the writing. Reprieve came when someone hammered gently at the door. "Food's ready, kid," said Philip, nudging the door ajar. "Get there quick, before my hungry crew finished the lot."

He knew this to be another of the captain's jokes, and chuckled to himself. He put his newly started journal underneath one of the books, and climbed up onto the deck. The sun beamed across from the west, casting long shadows across the craft, and it was a good deal warmer than it had been. A glance at his watch told him it was now six in the evening, but he resisted the temptation to check where he was in the world again.

They ate heartily, savoring the taste of lamb. It was one of the staple foods of Malaya where those who followed the Islamic aspects of the unified religion could not eat pork, and those who followed the Hindu aspects could not eat beef.

"It was easiest to stock up on lamb, so you all better like it. You'll be getting a hell of a lot of it till we hit Britainia," said Philip. Some of his

crew laughed at the comment.

The smell of it cooking made him instantly hungry, and he sat down next to Giovotto who was praising someone other than himself for a change. Apparently, Hugo, one of the tall men who he had not had a chance to meet properly yet, had made their lunch.

"It's a wonderful meal," Aadesh found himself saying.

"You won't say that once you've had it every day for a week," said Giovotto, chuckling.

A sudden shout stirred them all from their food, causing everyone to jump.

"Captain, you've got to come and see this!" cried Hugo from the prow.

The captain, along with everyone else, immediately went to see. The ship gently tilted as the weight all moved to one side. Taking the binoculars from Hugo, Philip looked through them towards the horizon where the sun began to dip low in the sky, and looked on for what seemed like ages. Finally, he lowered the binoculars and gazed normally far off into the distance before passing the binoculars to Elisia. He threw a knowing glance at Hugo, and looked away, deep in thought.

Once she finished with them, she handed them to Aadesh, who found himself surprised to be next in line. He graciously took them from her, thanking her, and looked through them. As soon as he placed them over his eyes, the device whirred and the blurry sky in the distance resolved itself into the pin-sharp image of clouds, orange in the light of the late evening sun. He gasped. On the horizon sat shimmering forms flapping through the air towards them. No doubt they were all of the same kind as the one Philip had shot down; all metal beasts, all tearing towards them with evil intent. Thousands of them.

Chapter Four

Everyone else dashed about in a mild panic, looking for something useful, be it an object or an idea. All were focused on the task of getting out of the deadly predicament they had been thrown into. The captain stood still with a smile on his face, retaining his composure while the rest hurried about him. They were up and down above and below decks and rummaging through equipment chests.

Philip stood looking out over the horizon as it turned anti-clockwise while Giovotto spun the ship around to take them away from the approaching hordes. Aadesh remained quiet and watched. He was, as always, fascinated by the running of the ship.

Philip stood with that contemplative face, the one Aadesh began to associate with a great mind at work, while countless thoughts and plans shone in his eyes.

"Get Tommi. We have an engineering emergency," Philip said to Elisia.

"An engineering emergency?" she asked bemused, and disappeared below decks to get him. Philip continued to look out over the rail and sometimes up into the skies.

"Captain!" said Tommi, appearing from below deck.

"Tommi, have a look for yourself first."

He looked, then dropped the binoculars. Philip grinned as he caught them by the strap, his reflexes lightening quick.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Philip asked him.

"If you're thinking that we want every spare motor we have fitted to this bird, then you're darn well spot on."

"Everyone, including me, is at your disposal for this one," Philip said at once.

They rushed down into the hold and brought out the spare engines and propellers. Those that had nothing immediate to do, helped to spread the parts across the deck in some kind of order. Aadesh watched, taking stock of what lay before him—a great wooden beam, engines, cables, things that looked like crystals folded within hourglasses and spherical nodes where the cables plugged in. The beam ran the length of the ship.

“We keep anything useful for spares,” Elisia told him.

“Yeh,” he replied, appraising the great scattering of equipment before him.

Four of the crew spun the great beam around while others lashed it down. They had it set so that it stuck out at either side of the ship and wouldn’t budge from its position. Tommi tied a rope around his waist before inching his way out and securing a fixture to the wooden beam, upon which the engines would be mounted. When he climbed back onto the deck, he made some calculations on paper, and cursed somewhat, but carried on. They tied many ropes around the engines, since they were heavy, and could hardly afford to lose them overboard. He placed a fixture at the other side as well.

Both he and the captain inched out across the boards on opposite sides, pushing the engines ahead of them. They moved along slowly and carefully towards where they would be mounted. Tommi inched his forward while the captain inched out the same distance with his. The others held the ropes, to keep both men safe.

With both the engines bolted, they worked to add on the propellers. It took them until the sun dipped below the horizon to finish the job. With both propellers in place, Tommi told them that they would have to get another of the beams to brace against the top of the engines, since a single beam might not be strong enough to withstand the force pushing it forward. Bringing the second beam down from where it was stored—between the gondola and the envelope—took just as long as the first. Forty-five minutes exactly noted Aadesh, looking at his watch.

They fixed it above the engines and secured it to both the lower beam and the gondola. Though the darkness began setting in, it didn’t hinder their work with the second beam. A few burning lanterns proved to offer sufficient light for them to see and get their tasks done. The ropes from the engines were tied forwards, towards the prow of the craft, to prevent

them getting tangled in the propellers. If the mountings broke, at least the ropes might hold and allow them to recover the engine. Hopefully it would not come to that. All in all, their evening's work looked promising, and the final scary moments of truth soon arrived.

Tommi connected up the power cables, then stood back and grinned. The propellers throbbed to life. The ship surged forwards ever so slightly as the extra force kicked in.

"The power cell is going to run out in ten and a half days running all four engines on full power, captain," Tommi informed him.

"We are pulling away from them ever so slightly, sir," Hugo said, looking through the binoculars. Aadesh wondered how Hugo could even see them in the dark, but he didn't want to be a nuisance by asking too many questions.

"Won't matter much in ten and a half days though," said Elisia.

"Will give me enough time to pick them all off, one by one," said Philip. He waved his hand and Hugo climbed down below again, reappearing with the gun. Philip took the weapon and knelt beside the rail at the stern. He readied the gun and took careful aim. Everything held their breath, and Philip squeezed the trigger. A green flash shot out into the night.

"One down captain."

He took aim again and fired another bolt of energy into the dark night.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Hugo.

"Some kind of field, a bubble around each one of those things!" exclaimed Hugo, passing the binoculars to Elisia. She gasped when Philip took his next shot. He passed the rifle to Hugo who took it below deck.

"Gather round, my friends," said Philip, fazed by this unlucky turn of events.

Once everyone was there, they formed a semi-circle around him. Philip held out his upturned palm, and a small disk the size of a coin in the strap of his watch beamed a globe of light into the darkness before them.

Clouds tumbled about the globe. Aadesh could then see the northern and southern reaches of white ice where the world had been written off by nature. There, where humans could never settle. White with ice, it seemed that so much of the Earth lay desolate now—most of it in fact. There in the centre of the Earth lay that narrow strip; all that remained of

the inhabitable land. One side of the Earth shone, caught in the bright sunlight while the other remained lost in darkness.

Aadesh looked at it in awe. Philip turned his hand around and the sphere unfolded itself into a square map, which sat at waist height, beamed from his watch.

The view shifted, Earth zoomed in and suddenly they looked down upon their craft from above. The scene had a strangely coloured hue, shining green, as if the unseen edges of the image had been drawn in by some mysterious force for their benefit. Aadesh did not want to interrupt, though he was dying to ask how it worked. He found himself holding his breath, and breathed out painfully.

"This is us, this is them," Philip said. He zoomed back out and the world returned to colour. Beside the map lay little squares in the air. He tapped them with his free hand, and a thin ribbon of the world lit up, highlighted gold against the black. "This is the jetstream; a current of air which moves at two-hundred and fifty kilometres per hour, where the high and low pressure systems meet. It used to be further north, but the glaciation pushed it far south. We must get to it within those ten and a half days. It will push us along with it.

"Of course they will follow us into the stream, however our greater surface area will allow us to catch more of the wind and we will be pushed along faster. We will outrun them and take the stream from here to New London. However, I want sails made—sturdy sails, because they could tear our ship apart if they are not sturdy. And Tommi, you are in charge of designing the sails."

"Aye, captain."

"Aadesh, I have a job for you."

"Yes, sir," he said, pleased to be included in the excitement.

"They know we have old tech. Let's drop them a surprise. I want something weighted and wrapped in a package, tied to a balloon and dropped in our wake. They won't know that it isn't a bomb, and they will have to go around it. Let's see what they do once we've dropped it. Perhaps it will buy us some time."

Aadesh worked hard to wrap the metal weight inside a package, and filled it with sand. Next, Tommi taught him how balloons worked. It took him a while to stitch the fabric into the right shape and seal all the edges. This one was a hot air balloon, and had a candle inside it to heat the air and make it more buoyant than the surrounding cold air. The hot air would counteract the weight, and it would remain more or less at the

same height.

He made it and set it all up, and tested it by heating it and feeling for any leaks. Once satisfied that it wasn't leaking, he played about with the number of candles until the balloon neither rose nor fell. Once he had achieved this, he called the Captain.

"That's a wonderful balloon," said Philip, placing his hand against the fabric. "This will surely do the job it's meant for. It will give the winged beasts something to think about."

Pleased with himself, Aadesh watched proudly as they let the balloon drift off in their wake to float behind them and meet with their pursuers. The little candle gleamed as it drifted into the night and it fell back gradually, swaying, rocked gently by the winds.

An hour or two passed and Hugo watched the creatures through the binoculars. He gave them to Aadesh and explained that they enabled those who looked through them to see in the dark by picking up even the faintest glimmer of light.

The scene was ghostly indeed, the world tinted green, but he could make out the forms of the winged monsters gleaming in the moonlight, flapping towards them. They seemed like ghosts, green, eerie, unwavering pursuers.

Winged monsters in the night...

Aadesh thought of old tales told to him as a child in the orphanage. The older kids loved to scare the younger ones with terrifying tales of things that creep in the nighttime. They told tales of monsters and ghosts, of xombis that lurked in the swamps and ate passing merchants. And they laughed at the looks of fear on the faces of the younger kids.

As the balloon neared the creatures, they broke formation and swept left and right to chart a path around it. Philip had been right. Aadesh felt a deep respect for the captain. Wise, knowledgeable, master of the lore of the ancients, treasure-hunter, Captain—in many ways Philip was the sort of man that Aadesh had always hoped for in a father. That he lacked and had never missed it. He had lived without it all his life without knowing how it felt to have such a thing as parents. There had, however, always lay the ghost of another life haunting him, reminding him of what might have been. Sometimes he dreamt of a life with a family. Mostly though, he never thought about it at all.

Philip came and looked through the binoculars and congratulated him again on a job well done. He handed the binoculars back to Hugo, who made a sweep of the horizon all around them.

"I think we should name these things, don't you, Aadesh?" said Philip.

"I suppose."

"We can't call them beasts, monsters, silver creatures, winged terrors, etcetera forever."

Aadesh stopped and thought about it for a while. It had looked like a small, manlike, dragon with its big toothy maw and clawed hands and feet. He knew that little dragons were called Drakes. Drakes would have been a good name for them, but people would bring to mind little dragons, and not these silver man-dragons, he decided to coin a new name that sounded similar.

"Draks?" suggested Aadesh.

"Captain! The beasts approach from the front now as well!" Hugo suddenly roared.

Chapter Five

Elizabeth wandered up the path and into the fair town of Amsteris. A thousand houses and shops clustered round the central market, almost pushing aside the church that hung off to one side. Wagonloads of goods came in and out through the main gates of the small wall. The fortifications had been built to protect the people of the town from rogues who lived in nearby foothills to the north. They had a reputation for sacking towns and villages whenever the opportunity of an easy fight presented itself. Amsterisians took care not to present such opportunities. Unfortunately, it was the smaller communities nearby that suffered for it.

She walked through the gates and nodded her greetings to the guards who took little notice of her. The wheels of the wagons clattered down the cobbled main street, while people wandered the side streets back and forth, going about their business.

She often wondered what she would be doing if she had been born a normal human. Would she have married, would she have children, would she cook and clean, and live out a normal life—a singular lifetime of normality? It was hard for her to imagine.

She was so old and yet hadn't aged at all, because her creators had made her that way. They had built her to last so that their investment would not be lost. Instead, *they* had vanished and left her with no choice but to continue to do what she was made for... without them. Thus, she was an assassin, always had been and always would be. But she also felt, with a touch of sadness, that they had programmed too much into her, and that tugged at her whenever she tried to change who she was.

As she proceeded through the cobbled streets, she took some narrow side streets and cramped lanes that ran between the buildings. It

considerably shortened her route, but took her past thieves and scoundrels. Passing a burnt out building halfway down just such a dark alley, a man jumped out at her, viciousness in his eyes apparent even as he rushed at her.

Bad move.

A single blow from her fist broke his nose and sent him tumbling backwards. Casually, she walked on past as if nothing had happened, and pressed on further into the labyrinth of dingy alleys. The gradient of the streets became steeper, and her course took her up a hill onto a main street where all the shops lay closed for the day and the streets covered in thick grime. Rats came and went freely here. After walking just a little farther, the small apothecary she sought finally appeared. It sat with its shutters swinging in the wind, clattering against barred windows, while the outside looked worn and melancholy. She climbed some steps up to the house that belonged to her old friend, Richard Harthomin.

She paused a moment at the door, hand held out to knock at it. Richard had been one of the few men she had ever really loved. Unlike her, he had grown old, and it always pained her to visit him—to see him fading away. Every visit, time's claw-marks were visible in him, as it tore him apart. Like sand blowing across a statue in the desert, little by little it got to him. Elizabeth feared the day when at last her friend would be gone.

She rapped the door twice, and twice again, and finally once more. After a few moments, the door opened and she walked in, greeting him warmly.

"Not aged a bit, have you?"

"You know I won't."

"Well, I suppose it's a pleasure for an old man like me to enjoy your company for a while, a pretty young face to look at."

"I need your help."

"Of course, after all you've done for me over the years. Just name it."

"Information, my old friend. I was attacked by some android from years ago, a steel monster built to resemble a dragon-like beast with great claws, slit eyes, scales, and I think I saw wings as well. I need to know more about them. I need to know my enemy, or rather who is in control of them."

She carried on and described the creature in full. Richard brought her a few leaves of paper and she sketched it, showing skills comparable to a master artist. To her, this skill served as nothing more than a reminder of

her past, just another pre-programmed talent burned into her along with all the others through her DNA. The sketch stood out cold and clinical, and because of that she never drew unless she had to. She shunned reminders of her heritage, things that cast the shadow of the person she so badly wanted to be; the very person whom she never could be.

Richard took the drawing and looked at it a long time. He drew in his breath as he looked upon it, and cursed.

"You know this thing?"

"No, but it is a fearsome looking thing. The thought of it attacking you. I will do my best to find out what it is and where it came from. Please be careful. I am so glad that you managed to survive your encounter with it. No doubt anyone else would have been a goner."

"I'm only alive because I fled."

"Well, there is no dishonour in fleeing from a robot."

"There is one thing though. It looked as if it was breathing."

"Well, the ancients loved their realism. This thing is perhaps the very last thing that was created before the ancient world collapsed. It looks like it's biosteel, organic metals."

"Yes, perhaps, and that's what I thought," she said. She could feel the hint of sadness in her own voice as she spoke. Could feel it behind her own eyes. Within her body, just a little girl; sad and alone inside the battle hardened shell.

"Come back in seven days and I may have found out something of use to you. And of course, once we know what we are dealing with, if the guild can help you at all, then we will do so."

"Thank you."

"Now, will you stay a while? We have some catching up to do, and this old man could do with some company."

His stories prompted her to reminisce, and when she reminisced, the strangest moments always came back to her vivid and clear, as if her subconscious took joy in reminding her of past sins.

Rushing from Edinburgh airport, and the discomfort of a five hour flight from Australia, she reached the terminal's one exit. With a practiced swipe, she passed her ring across the sensor and waited as the biometric reader scanned her face, eyes.

"Thank you, Elizabeth Rankin, for your patience while we check your

identity," the computer told her.

The device finished its sixteen billion calculations comparing her physical form with the data held on the ring she wore on her left middle finger, and the records on a server somewhere. Two rings of light above and below lit up green to signal that she could pass.

"Please have a safe onward journey," the computer told her. "Trains are on level twenty-six. Taxies on level sixteen. Sky taxies level zero."

The underground airport was a virtual labyrinth, but she had been here often enough to get in and out quickly. She slipped out customs, unhindered by any spot checks, into the crowd, then down twenty-six floors by elevator to the station. It didn't take her long to find and board the correct train. She sat in the comfortable first class cabin and brought out a computer. A couple of clicks brought up a movie so that she blended in well with the rest of the crowd, mainly businessmen and women, all off to London.

The train blasted off, accelerating up to full speed within the first minute. When it emerged from the tunnel, it had reached its three hundred mile per hour top speed, and dashed across the Scottish countryside so that trees and fields danced past in a blur. The whole of the British Isles lay no more than an hour and forty minutes away.

The business suits of 2070 featured ever shifting colours and forms that danced across the fabric. As the kids of the fifties had grown up and been subjected to the formal subdued business attire expected of them, they had bent it to their own tastes. Now, the latest fashion was for suits that had A.I. programs to control them so that they took on a life of their own. Here in the train, the suits seemed subdued.

A gentleman sat down next to her and slid a card beside her computer. After a deliberate delay he got back up and walked away. She took the card and slipped it inside her pocket. Later it would reveal her next job. Little did she know her failure would change the world.

Such flashes of ancient memories came back to her when she tried to recall other bits of the past. None of it ever came in any order. She did not know exactly how long had passed since then. She supposed it would be closer to 16,070. That calendar had fallen out of use long ago.

She drank tea with him. It smelled of vanilla and herbs. He recounted his early years as an administrator in Mexico, before they had met, and

how he had travelled around much of the earth in that position, which had given him a chance to try lots of new things.

He had never spoken of such things before. They had lived on the edge; there had never been time for memories, only the excitement of their next adventure together.

"This tea I have imported at quite considerable expense, but I can't do without it. I always reminds me of my time in India, where I lived for too many years to recall. You know, Elizabeth, sometimes I wish I was like you, and I could watch the passage of time, and travel the earth, seeing how it all changes."

"Oh, you don't really want to be like me. I'm not like you. I cannot change, my life was programmed beforehand. Though I live long, I cannot make of it half as much as a normal woman."

"Still, people would die for your adventures, your excitement. You live on the edge, and that is something people yearn for when they read or listen to stories. Even though your very nature compels you to work as an assassin."

"True... but my hope is that someday I will be able to change, that if I live long enough, I can override all the compulsions that I have been given. You know, I have to visit the office in Rome every two years; it's built in to me, and I cannot stop it—programmed by them as a measure of control.

"What would have happened to me if it had been London I were to visit, or Helsinki, or Washington? I'd be dead already, frozen to death trying to get to a place I don't really want to go. And every two years I have to get myself to that spot in Rome, just to be there, to stand there till the genetic release triggers, even though that building is long gone, just dust, I have to visit that spot. In six months I'll be overcome again. I am not free, I am still a serf to my long-dead makers."

"So that's why every couple of years you would disappear from my life. Only now you tell me." He gave a chuckle. "They made you like a salmon, did they not? The instinctual urge to return, and not even your very human reasoning can overthrow it. Well, hang in there, Elizabeth. Some day, I am sure, you will master it."

"Thank you."

They sat a while and enjoyed each other's company, until finally, Elizabeth admitted that she better be off. He let her out, and she walked out into the dark streets, winding through the town towards the inn where she intended to spend the night. The night had cooled, and a chill

blew now from the north, from the endless sheets of ice that covered half the ancient world.

She reached the inn and was greeted by the owner whom she had met three times before, whenever she visited Richard.

He smiled and handed her a key for her usual room. She paid in advance and slipped up the creaky old stairs into her room. As she stepped in through the door, she found it to be warm and inviting as always. It had a view of the mountain nearby, though she couldn't see much of it in the dark, but that gave her something to look forward to in the morning. For now, she at last felt able to relax, and sat down on the comfortable bed. Thoughts passed through her head until she caught herself wondering if she would drift off to sleep contented tonight. She hoped so, and that she might dream of her childhood like she used to. They were implanted memories or course, but she held them dear since they were someone's real memories, real people. She had grown to love those memories of a family that wasn't quite her own. She had adopted them and she loved them as if they were.

Her thoughts scattered as a noise filtered through the sound of the wind through the streets of town. She tensed, sensing that something was amiss, feeling the unease that always accompanied trouble. *Is it footfalls I hear?* Not the random footfalls of town dwellers, but the rhythm of soldiers. She slipped open the window, dodged an arrow as it plunged towards her, missing her by a margin, and she jumped out of the window. Grasping a pipe, she threw herself up and onto the roof. A hail of arrows from the archers below clattered into the tiles around her, missing their mark by a good distance.

She ran across the rooftops and took cover behind a large chimney. A moment passed, and she hazarded a glance at the scene around her as her eyes slipped from circles to slits and her cat side took over. She caught a good look at the men. They wore the uniform of Baron Holbert's Beserkers.

Cursing, wondering why he might be behind this, she lay a moment before dismissing her thoughts as surplus to requirements. With no time to think, she leapt from one roof to the other until she reached the edge of the town and attempted a massive jump across to the outer wall.

Time slowed as she flew through the air, and arrows brushed past her as she spun. The wall flew towards her, arrows slid past. Landing lightly, she rolled and made it back onto her feet in one movement. A startled guard jumped back in surprise and almost tumbled off the wall.

She grinned at his antics, grasped his belt and yanked him back onto his feet. Then pulled herself over the merlons and dropped down the fifteen feet onto the grass. Her instincts took over, so that she landed in a roll to break her fall and was back on her feet in a heartbeat. Orientating herself, she set a course towards the trees.

What bloody bad luck, she thought.

First a robot, and now soldiers. Soon she reached the trees, and ran as far as she could into the forest before jumping up into the branches to wait and listen for any sound of pursuit. Swiftly, her course carried her from tree to tree until she had put considerable distance between her and the men. Satisfied with her escape, she hid herself between two large boughs to wait in silence.

Her sense of sound began to grow more and more powerful as she concentrated. It took over from her other senses, and built up an audio picture of her surroundings. She realized then that she was finishing off her day the same way it had begun, hiding in the branches while men searched for her. Nor did she particularly want to kill them all, even though she easily could. They were just doing their job. Everyone was someone following their heart or doing their job.

She never killed unless she had to.

Never... unless as a last resort...

She heard the footsteps and deduced that the group was composed of six men. They all passed by, splitting up into two groups of three, and headed in different directions. Still silent, she listened harder as they moved off into the distance. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she heard the swish of metal wings, and knew that it had found her also.

Chapter Six

Steady as a rock, Philip stood in quiet contemplation of their predicament. The stars could be seen gleaming over the horizon all around them, and sounds drifted on the wind from bats as they shrieked out of caves amidst the jungle so far below.

"Giani, take us northwest. We will make a run past the ones behind us. Once we get past them, we will head north, then east into the jet stream."

"Aye, captain."

The great ship creaked as it turned and angled towards the barren north, towards that great and vast endless white. Aadesh watched as the pilot steered, turning a great wheel which had been set up and connected to the motors. Tommi took great delight in explaining how the ship worked. The centre of the wheel gave full power to all the engines, and pushing the wheel clockwise or anti clockwise, took power away from the opposite motor, spinning them in that direction. There was a lever which rotated the main propellers up or down for extra lift, or to fight the buoyancy of the envelope. Of course the extra engines were fixed and could only give them extra thrust forwards.

There were also other mechanisms in place to vent some helium from the balloon, or to add more, using an ancient device which turned ordinary air into helium by means which remained unknown. Once Tommi had explained in all this detail to Aadesh, he excused himself, and rushed down to his cabin.

"I have much to do," he shouted as he disappeared into the blackness below. Aadesh walked around the deck looking out at black shapes made by the jungles, lit faintly in the weak light before dawn.

"Look! More come from the north." cried Hugo, ever watching the

horizons.

Philip gazed out into the dark blue skies as if he could see them. Perhaps, thought Aadesh, he could. At least in his mind's eye.

"We go up," said Philip at last.

"Up, sir?"

"Up, where they have little air to act upon their wings. Up, where the temperatures will freeze a man, and where there is no air to breathe. Up into the heavens, to pass by the gods themselves," said Philip with a wicked grin.

"Okay, but how?" asked Elisia.

"We are going to have to sacrifice our simcloth," he said.

"What's that?" Aadesh asked, feeling self-conscious.

"Simcloth," said Elisia, "is one of the most prized relics of the ancient world, a fabric so light and so strong that it's almost impossible to tear and cut. It takes special tools to cut it, shape it and seal it back together. Fortunately, because of that it can be made tight against the escape of air, and it's one of the finest insulators against transfer of heat on the planet. And as if all that wasn't enough, separate pieces can be rejoined so that it seems as if they've never been apart. We can use and reuse the stuff again and again. We only acquired it a few months ago, or rest assured we'd have had the whole envelope refitted with the stuff."

"Good thing you didn't, or you wouldn't have it to sacrifice" said Aadesh.

"Yeh," said Elisia, rubbing the hair on his head. "You're right as usual, kid. Good thing we didn't."

"Enough chit chat, people," said Philip. "I want seven suits cut out of simcloth, one for everyone. I want a lining of simcloth inside the winter cabin, and I want a vast balloon made out of the rest of it. Giovotto, take us dead north, and take us up as fast as that pair of engines can move us."

From below deck, Elisia and Hugo produced a ball of simcloth. No bigger than a crouching man, it unfurled into a vast sheet from which they cut enough material to line a cabin deep within the bowels of the ship.

"We have a cabin in the centre of the ship that we use in the far north. It's well insulated and easier to keep warm. We'll use it for this purpose, line it with this stuff. It should see us through the cold and the low pressure. In summer, we much preferred the upper deck; open to the wind, with the sky around us. Hence the reason you've not yet been in

there," she said.

Elisia hummed as she went to work on the cloth. She cut enough from it to make the suits with the remainder passed to Tommi who set about shaping it into a balloon using the special device that acted upon the cloth. Aadesh realized that even that alone must be worth a fortune.

They worked with it constantly, forming the necessary shapes and binding it all together. Difficult work, given the size of the balloon they were making in relation to the size of the gondola, but they worked like experts never once complaining. None of them let the conditions deter them. Elisia set about making ribbons of simcloth for ropes and it all came together wonderfully as Aadesh watched, enthralled with the craftsmanship.

Philip threw the whole new balloon in a pack while Elisia finished it all off with a pipe of simcloth through which the helium would flow up into the balloon. He climbed the ropes and disappeared above, while the crew fed the end of the pipe into the interface for the helium maker.

"Want to help? It's dangerous though, and it'll mean climbing up," Elisia asked him. "But you can if you want to."

"I would love to," he said, surprised and excited to get in on the action.

Elisia tied a rope around his waist, and they both climbed up together onto the top of the envelope, which he found to be remarkably firm.

"The envelope is pressurized, so that it keeps its shape, and it's pretty firm," she explained.

They helped Philip while he got the balloon in place, tied it while it began to fill with helium, and adjusted it as it filled.

"The device produces tons of gas very quickly. But we do have limited power available to pump into it, and that limits the amounts we can make. That means that our power cell will be depleted fairly quickly by this extra work," Philip told him.

It filled up and expanded. As it grew larger, it pulled itself upwards, and soon strained at the cords binding it to the airship. It grew full, and filled out above them, large and grey in the low light. Within minutes Aadesh could feel it pulling them upwards.

Dawn broke colourful in the east. The sun broke over the horizon, hitting the clouds above them and turning them into golden fleeces from a mythical story. Aadesh turned and watched in their wake. The beasts behind them shone in the sun, blinking as the light hit their moving wings.

Slowly, the draks dropped down below the airship as the massive balloon pulled them steadily and firmly upwards. Soon they rose up so fast that the creatures could not follow them quickly enough.

Aadesh and Elisia climbed down and once inside the gondola, she untied him. They took one last look out beyond the ship at the sweeping curve of the horizon. He felt the air around them grow colder and thinner. Even as the sun warmed his face, he felt the cold gripping him, chilling him from the inside out. Everyone rushed to implement the next part of the plan. Hugo readied the suits, and Giovotto prepared the winter room. It grew even colder. Elisia had them all don thick layers of clothing and on top of that, the suits of simcloth. As soon as he had donned the suit, Aadesh found himself warming again. It proved itself a superb material at keeping in the heat of his body.

Elisia sent him down into the winter-room to join the others. Once everyone had climbed in, Elisia sealed the room, and opened a small canister to pressurise it with air. Aadesh felt his ears pop as the pressure increased.

Giovotto tinkered with an ancient device until at last they felt the cabin temperature increase to a comfortable level, whereupon Elisia allowed them to partially undo their simcloth suits.

With nothing else to do to occupy his time, Tommi couldn't help but explain to Aadesh the detailed working of the ancient heating device. Aadesh learned that it was attached to pipes filled with water, and that as it heated the water, the water circulated inside the pipes and the device radiated heat. To Aadesh, it just looked like a spider, one that had curled up and died.

They had nothing else to do but wait while the captain, who remained above, steered them through the danger.

"Will the captain be okay?" Aadesh asked, concerned that they were all safe in here, leaving Philip to face the thin, steely air outside. Tommi, meanwhile, occupied himself venting fresh air from a canister nearby for their comfort, while he simultaneously played about with some device in his hand.

"Captain will be fine," said Tommi absently.

"How can you be so sure?" Aadesh asked.

He looked around at the others, then back at Aadesh. "Haven't you noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Well we don't know quite what to make of the captain, but we do

know what he isn't."

"I don't understand."

"He isn't vulnerable like us," Elisia cut in. "He's stronger, faster, smarter, an' he knows more about the ancients than he's lettin' on. We think he *is* an ancient."

They huddled inside, enjoying the warmth that the contrived environment afforded them, and the air which they fed in from time to time so that they wouldn't suffocate. They waited quietly, aware that their lives rested in the actions of the man above them.

Up in the gondola, Philip hauled the sails into place and steered her deep into the high air currents, letting the propellers and the sails shunt them forwards. The thin air carved at him like icy blades, he ignored the feeling, until it subsided. He kept an eye on the pursuing figures below, as they continued along so far beneath them, persistent in their tenacity, trying to keep up, three groups of thousands of metal monsters.

Draks, thought Philip. Such a good name Aadesh picked for them. Short, sharp, nothing you would take too seriously, and how could you when they're all flapping about there like a bunch of silver mongbats?

They trailed below, while the winds took hold of The Rio Grande pushing her along with them. As the sails caught the high altitude winds, she sped up and began to shoot along at speeds Philip had never before imagined her achieving. Enthralled, he resisted the urge to whoop and satisfied himself with a grin.

The view reminded him of home, and he had missed these dizzying heights, missed the curve of the horizon and the infinite sky all around him.

Hours passed as they drifted in the frigid air. Philip remained watchful, ever patient, and always aware of the death that remained in chase behind them. Finally, with a touch of sadness, Philip cut the cords which held the great balloon, and watched as it shot up towards space. The airship began to drift down towards the jet stream. They gathered speed as they went, gravity assisting the motors, until he began to worry that the extra stress might be too much for the craft, and eased her up a little, adding more helium to decrease the descent.

Soon the ship dived into the raging current called the jet stream, where two-hundred and forty kilometre per hour winds caught the craft

and accelerated her up to an incredible speed. Slowly he opened both the sails to catch more wind, and watched as the metal beasts disappeared behind the horizon.

He knew that he had not seen the last of them. Even as he gazed at the empty reaches behind, the certainty that they would be back lodged itself in his mind. But it mattered not, he and his friends would prevail in the end. He flicked his watch on and dialed a code. The screen flickered into appearance beside him and a man appeared.

"Any luck?" he asked the figure.

"No signals from any of them. They are entirely autonomous."

"Then I'm in deep trouble."

"We're sending you some help. She'll be waiting for you in London."

The figure disappeared, and the screen vanished. Philip gazed out over the earth, at the distant ice sheets, at all the places buried under the glaciers, and thought about the very distant past.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth threw herself at the beast and kicked it in the chest, sending it tumbling out of the tree. The branches below it gave way so that it fell all the way down to the ground where it landed with a hard thud and left a dent in the soft soil. She ran along the branches until they bent and lowered her closer to the ground, took hold of the branches and slid down, dropping the last few meters. She landed softly upon the ground and stood facing her enemy.

It might be made of metal, but it's going to wish it was made of diamond once I'm through with it.

She leapt at it. It unfolded its swords. As she drew closer, it slashed at her with the right sword. She ducked, dodged to the right, caught the blade with her right hand, at the back where the sword was blunt, and snapped it with a powerful blow with the palm of her hand. She ducked as the other blade sped past, inches above her head and brought her right hand back around. Still holding the blade, she sliced it hard across its right eye. There was a clatter of metal upon metal, metal upon glass, and although her blow hadn't done much, she *had* cut a scratch; and even if it took her all night, she *was* going to destroy this thing.

It spun and its wing caught her, lifting her from the ground and throwing her along, but she spun and landed on her feet. She turned the blade in her palm so that the pointed end faced away from her and threw herself back towards it.

It did likewise, rushing at her.

They met suddenly, she dodged the other blade by throwing herself into the air, taking hold of it, and guiding her feet towards the creature's maw. Her right foot connected sending it backwards, her left foot came down hard on the blade it still held in its right hand, but it did not break

this time and instead, she tumbled into a roll. She managed to land on her feet as it landed hard on its shoulder, but rolled around to quickly find its own feet.

She waited for it to come to her, and it didn't disappoint. Moving as fast as she could, she blocked the blow from its sword with the shard of blade held in her left hand, caught its wrist, kicked its rising foot down to block a kick, caught it by its right wrist and spun it around so that she suddenly was behind it. She snapped the tip of her blade into its eye, there was a shattering crack as the blade plunged into it. The beast lurched away from her. She dodged a swipe of its wings and moved back. It pulled the blade from its eye and hurled it at her, but its claws made subtle movements difficult for it, and the blade spun away to embed itself in the grass behind her. She felt blood dripping from the palm of her hand where the blade had cut her and clamped the hand into a fist to limit the bleeding.

It moved forward and swept both its wings towards her head. She ducked and they met where her head had been instants before, with a sharp clang. Its right hand thrust its blade towards her chest. She slid her hands upwards, parting its wings. Pulling herself up, she stepped nimbly up onto the advancing, blade, onto its forearm. Drawing her dagger, she snapped it into its eye.

She leapt over it and rolled as it staggered backwards, blind. She grasped it by the shoulder, drew another dagger, and with a wide swing plunged it against the metal skin on its back, testing the strength of its armour. The blow hammered into the creature hard and fast, plunging deep inside it. With a boom and a flash, she shrieked as the electric spark knocked her hand back from the dagger, as if a brick had smashed against it.

It spun to attack her, but so blinded she dodged its flailing attacks, though it still did not show any signs of giving up. She kicked it and knocked it back. Then again, and again. After twenty or so vicious kicks, she knocked it back to a steep slope, and with a final kick, sent it tumbling down through jagged bushes into the river below. There was a blinding flash as the dagger touched the water, and the beast went limp, sinking into the muddy depths of the river.

Exhausted, Elizabeth dragged herself wearily to the main road where

she caught a lift in a passing wagon. In silence, at the back of a wagon train, memories drifted through her mind, as she waited out the long journey.

Having paid for her passage, she had little else to do but keep her head down and wait, hoping to remain out of sight in case more of those things navigated the skies searching for her. *If I'm lucky, that's the only one.* Somehow her instincts told her otherwise.

She pulled the coverings up as if she felt cold to conceal herself within the confines of the wagon. She would be safe from them for now, but knew now that she must get to New London. Only there would she truly be safe, hidden amidst the bustling population. There she would wait out the trouble, or if not, she would kill these things one at a time until there were no more left to bother her.

After a while, she dozed off; curled comfortably against some sacks of grain.

New London lay before them when Elizabeth awoke; caught in sunshine, dipped in a valley, pressed up against Lake Mediterania. Behind that, shafts of light beamed down through some clouds and lit the lake, capturing some small aspect of the divine within that view.

The cart rode down and trundled into the city where it came to a stop in Orchard Road. She paid the driver, thanked him, and disappeared into the streets with her hood up against some misty rain.

She heard the swish, ducked and rolled, and came back up onto her feet as it slammed down into the ground. *Not another one!*

Her mind blazed in search of something useful against such a device, even as she watched it fold up its wings. It lurched towards her. She could think of nothing from all the years gone by that would be of particular use against it. She couldn't fight it, not here. Everyone would notice, they would spot her, they would chase her out of the city for bringing these things upon them. It would be labeled some ill omen by the superstitious Londoners. Making up her mind, she turned and ran, bounding easily up some crates and over a wall. At the far end of the alley, she jumped and bounced from one wall to the other, clambered up the wall and from there, launched herself upwards to the roof. Grabbing a drainpipe, she kicked off from the wall and bounced up onto the roof. Within seconds, she put two buildings behind her and her pursuer, and

was about to dive down to find a place to hide when she heard the swish of wings behind her.

Cursing for not being swift enough, she threw herself down, slid down the angled roof and fell off. Instinctively, she took hold of the iron gutter and it snapped from its mountings and bent in jerks as more sections broke away. She cocked a smile and released the guttering so that it sprung up and cracked the creature hard against its wing, sending it into a spin. The sound of breaking tiles echoed through the streets as the beast clattered hard into the tiled roof opposite. Taking full advantage of its predicament, she disappeared into an alley, slipped open a metal grille and dropped down into the sewers. Dark and dingy, her eyes let her see clearly in the dark, but unfortunately, her nose could not filter out the foul stench of the sewer.

Halfway across London, she climbed out of the foul underworld and slipped into a dingy inn, paid a couple of coins for a room, and quietly made her way up to a depressing room. She washed herself and her clothes, gazing at the unchanging image of herself in the small, cracked bathroom mirror. Suddenly, she found herself breaking into a broad grin; she hadn't had fun like this for at least a thousand years.

Tomorrow she would buy herself some new clothes, find a more respectable inn. For now she lay on the less than clean bed, feeling the breeze from the open window caressing her naked form. She felt herself smile a little as memories of times gone by slipped in and out of her mind, and drifted off into a dream of silver skyscrapers and flickering holographic signs.

She awoke, bathed, threw her clothes on and looked out of the window at the busy streets outside. Satisfied that it would be easy to loose herself among the crowds, she slipped out of the inn and into the streets. Within a short walk she reached the morning market where the crowds pressed together drifting through the varied stalls.

Someone played an accordion nearby; its tones like a disharmony of colours, like purples and greens. Elizabeth walked closer, and contemplated the woman that played it, and watched her squeezing the living daylights out of it. The notes tumbled out of the box in a grim tune, one that made her think of Dickens' grimmest stories. It made her think of Old London, the real London. Suddenly, she recalled the words

of Ambrose Bierce—"an instrument in harmony with the sentiments of the assassin." She decided it to be true, for if no one had been looking, she would have quite happily slit the woman's throat for some pleasurable silence. She wondered if that parcel of information was dredged up from her own memories, or from the genetically encoded ones. They had given her almost encyclopedic knowledge. She shuddered, having no memory reading it. This was another symptom of the programming that supplied her with information, drove her actions and bound her behavior.

Now she really did miss her guns.

Many times in her past, in all the countless ages that had gone by, she had toyed with the idea of making some guns for herself, but eventually she always decided against it. Let the humans build the weapons. *If I only use what they give me, then I can never be blamed for all the death they wreak upon themselves.*

At one stall she bought a satchel and three large daggers to replace the ones she had lost. Then she bought some clothes from another, and slipped off into an alley where in an unselfconscious manner she stripped and changed under the leering gaze of a man from his third floor window. Once dressed, she stuffed her old clothes in the satchel, and gazed in a puddle, looking at her distorted reflection, utterly happy with her new clothes. Her black trousers felt comfortable, and the white shirt had intricate patterns woven up the sleeves and parallel to the buttons, making her look like a vampire, anyway. She *did* have fangs.

It wasn't far to the hotel. Called the Excelsior, all the nobles frequented it. Fancy and exuberant both inside and out, the front featured a dozen great marble columns facing the street, while within the reception area had been decked out in marble and gold. As she stood at the entrance looking across at the reception, Elizabeth could almost imagine herself back in the twenty-second century.

She booked her room and paid in cash from the purse that always hung on her belt. She only had one dagger showing—as was acceptable among the nobility—with three smaller ones sitting close to her waist, hugging her figure and hidden by her shirt.

Happy with her new surroundings, she took the key and made her way to the room which turned out to be comfortable and cozy, full of warm coloured fabrics, and delicately carved furnishings. She loved it immediately and threw herself upon the gloriously clean and soft bed. Feeling very feline all of a sudden, she curled up, and decided to take a

catnap.

When Elizabeth awoke, she still had the smile on her face from a pleasant dream, then her heart skipped a beat with fright as a silver of the blade slid down through the air towards her. She rolled out of the way with a sudden jerk that took her across the bed. The sword slid through the bed and embedded itself into the floor.

Her instincts took her back onto her feet at once. Her opponent bore no marks from their earlier confrontation, leading her to assume that this was a different one, setting their number at two, at least. Its large maw twisted into a sardonic grin.

Elizabeth readied herself, knowing that any fight would be long and drawn out.

It jerked and flailed as a blast of energy erupted behind it, and it collapsed forwards onto the bed with a hole in its back, revealing a gentleman standing in the doorway. He bore a large gun which remained pointed at the still creature for a moment. Elizabeth, tense and unsure of the man's intentions stood ready for a fight, or indeed considering the weapon he held, for a quick escape.

Finally, he holstered his weapon.

"Miss, Elizabeth, I presume?" he asked, his accent making it difficult to place him.

"And you are?"

"Here to hire you. My name is Puterov."

"For what?"

"In due course, Miss Elizabeth. But for now, suffice to say that payment will be in advance, in the form of two of these pulse weapons. That should tell you something of the job, and what you will face should you accept."

Chapter Eight

Aadesh emerged from below deck and felt the hairs of his neck stand on end as he looked over the edge of the craft. It shot over the Pacific ocean, belting along, carried swiftly by the jet stream. Long ago, it was said that a great city had sat in the centre of the Pacific and claimed hundreds of miles as it mechanically expanded itself outwards. It burned and sank in the final desperate war, one blow from a single ancient bomb removing it forever from the surface.

The winds blew strong and swept them over America, letting the conquered miles stretch out behind them. Aadesh never moved from the prow of the ship as the world drifted past, and here he had a chance to see half of it as it sped past. He found himself amazed to be travelling so swiftly like in the stories of the ancients. He didn't want to miss a single second of it.

Excitedly he cried out when he saw the sliver of land appearing over the horizon, and watched as it swept towards them. Every now and then, one of the crew members would come over and tell him where he was. "Oh, that's New Washington," they would say, or "There is the land the Americas gifted to Canada during the collapse." And so he learned a lot about the world and its countries and cities.

They swept over the great American plains. He saw more people and farms than he had ever seen in his life. They took up every inch of space. America, they told him, had been least affected by the wars and so had higher populations than in the rest of the world.

Latterly, as they left the Americas, Philip pointed out towards the thin line of ice that lay across the horizon, and told him that somewhere out there lay old New York. It had been the largest and grandest city just before the collapse, and now it lay buried under the ice sheets. He could

almost imagine himself in the north, gazing at the empty expanse where it once had been, frosty towers still poking through the ice.

He took in everything they told him, and yet was always thirsty for more.

Birds swept past—birds he had never seen before, also riding the jet stream. Two winged birds, dark and large, with their great broad wings outstretched to catch the winds, they drifted far on the currents outrunning even The Rio Grande.

From time to time the stream would change course, and they would slow down and Giovotto would have to fly them about hunting for it again. He always found it within a couple of hours and their journey progressed smoothly.

Gladly, their pursuers showed no signs of catching up with them, though Aadesh often worried in case more appeared in front of them, blocking the jet stream. They found themselves drifting into Europe within days of leaving the Americas. And since the propellers hadn't been needed for most of that, they had found the time to charge the power cell almost back to full—easily enough to see them into London, with plenty extra for emergencies.

The fertile countryside of Europe soon appeared beneath them, along with the stone walls of New London glinting like steel ribbons on the horizon. Aadesh watched as it drifted towards him, amazed by how large it was; he had never seen such a vast city of stone. It sprawled out across a valley, perched between two hills. Sounds of clanking, metalworks and he saw that all the buildings had glinting windows of glass!

"They have glass?" he asked Philip, amazed.

"Yes, m' boy. Stone buildings are going up, the sounds of industry can be heard, glass has been rediscovered. Of course it was never really lost. People have been making glass since the collapse, but they have relearned how to make the big sheets. I guess in Old Kuala Lum glass hasn't been available, or even needed much. They are rediscovering the lost technologies and sadly, the age of gunpowder is not far off. It is only a matter of time before someone rediscovers the formula. They are searching now. Potassium nitrate, sulphur, and charcoal; and then what will the world do?"

"Gunpowder! You know gunpowder?"

"Of course."

"But how does no one else know about it?"

"Because, all gunpowder will bring is death, destruction and wicked weapons of war. I cannot bring myself to be the one to place that burden upon humanity. The new age of gunpowder will be bloody. It will come when it comes. It is not my place to usher it in."

Silenced while he pondered the captain's words, he felt angry that the captain knew so much and yet held it back from them, as if he was protecting the world like a father. His anger was tempered as they drew nearer to their destination.

"The formula for gunpowder. It seems so simple. How could it possibly have been lost?" Aadesh asked Philip.

"By the time of the displacement, gunpowder was such an archaic technology, that it had all but been forgotten. Only once the highly sophisticated weapons had been used up, did people turn back to the black powder. Those who did know the secret were few, and strove to protect it because of the power it gave them. There was a gunpowder war within the displacement wars in which those who knew the secret were killed off by the others in bitter plays for power. They did their jobs too well, and eventually there was no one left who could tell the secret. Nor was there any time for experimentation with all the battles raging around them."

"It must have been terrible."

"It must have been," said Philip, a wistful look on his face, as if he were gazing back through the ages to those times. He patted Aadesh on the back and went about his work, shouting orders as they came in over the slate roofs of New London.

He watched as they swept across that ocean of roofs, and chimneys, and down into the gardens behind a cathedral. It seemed such an abrupt end to the journey, but he supposed it had started just as abruptly. He began to feel a hint of sadness that they were here already. However, surely he would have to get a lift back with Philip? *They wouldn't leave me here when I've delivered the message, would they?* He found himself a little worried, doubt creeping into his mind, fear and loneliness catching up with him now that the full realisation struck him that he gazed upon a city 6,000 miles from home!

Perhaps sensing this, Philip patted Aadesh on the back and ruffled his hair. "You've come a long way, kid. Lets get our job done, and then

we'll be free to explore London and rest! Okay?"

Everyone rushed about. Elisia tethered the lines to sturdy loops of iron embedded in solid rocks that framed the landing site. They sealed everything; cupboards, hatches, boxes, and all the equipment got packed away and locked in storage. Everyone climbed off the ship and reported to the captain as soon as they had completed their tasks. Once ready, Philip sorted them into two groups. Aadesh, Elisia, Giani, Tommi and Hugo he chose to come with him, while the others would stay to look after the ship.

"All set?" he asked. Everyone nodded. That settled, he set off towards the cathedral where Aadesh would finally deliver the message. It seemed so long ago since Bhakti Kalapani had given him it. Aadesh wondered if he would learn what the note said. Likely it would be private, and he would learn nothing about it. In fact, he felt sure of that, because that was always the way of such things. The priests liked their secrets.

Before them, lay a large garden, filled with oak trees and honeysuckle. Keeping to a very carefully built path that consisted of paving stones embedded in the grass, they made their way towards the structure.

He looked around as he walked, taking in all the gardens and parks nearby. It all felt so new, and strange, and exciting—a world of dark trees with colourful flowers and thin delicate foliage, sparse unlike the thick jungle he was so used to, but so much more beautiful in its own way.

The cathedral itself towered above them, large and tall. The outside featured thin fluted columns that rose up to the roof, leading the eye upwards to a grand pyramid that topped the structure and threw lines up into the sky as if pointing to the heavens. Men in brown robes stood talking in the gardens and at the entrance. While the others in purple robes hurried back and forth, going about their business. Aadesh noticed that the ones in purple spoke quietly to each other, as if they had grave secrets to hide. None of the men bore any heed of the ship, or the newcomers.

At the entrance, they met with guards who politely brought them in and led them through the grand entranceway. All manner of scenes ran around the entrance hall depicting the unification event that marked the rise of modern religion; the belief that the universe could be likened to a crystal, and each religion a facet of the whole. Someone, his name long lost, known now only as the prophet, unified them all into one

institution, and ended all religious war. The paintings fascinated Aadesh. He had heard the stories and studied them at school, but now he stood before them. Suddenly, they felt more than just stories, more than just sketches in a schoolbook. It all came alive for him, rendered so real, all in those few passing instants as they walked through the hall.

He often thought back to the ancient times and found it amazing to think that people once killed each other over religion. He supposed that the displacement wars had put everything into perspective. Perhaps the prophet had come at just the right time.

The guards took them down a few turns, out into a courtyard, across a bridge over a pond, past two marble fountains, and into the temple of Quad. The monks here clearly worshipped Quad; god in his four-fold incarnation. Few people in the world did, preferring to follow one facet. Here Aadesh caught sight of a fantastic statue depicting this, showing Jehovah, Krishnah, Allah, Bramah and Wu – the latter being akin to zen-like nothingness. Once they entered the next chamber, statues small and large seemed to watch him, then disappeared as their path took them onwards. He and his friends followed the guards into another part of the temple, through grand halls of high arches and delicate spaces, into what had to be the centre of the cathedral. Shafts of light shone in, illuminating the high vaulted chamber. The beams played against the walls and shone off the gold decorations set in the stone walls. A fine woven mesh of gold wire decorated the plaster ceilings, and small sapphires shone as they spiraled down the central pillar, framing the winding story painted on the spherical column.

The guards directed them all to a side chamber where through wide doors they arrived at the priest; who sat behind a large oak desk examining papers with the disinterest of a civil servant. He hardly showed any interest in them, and Aadesh wondered if he had even noticed them come in. Asides from the priest and his desk, the hall lay empty with nothing else except a line of columns along either side. The desk and the priest took up such a tiny portion of the hall, that the man seemed as imposing as he did ridiculous.

“Oscar Johnstone, it is our great pleasure to stand before you with a message from Bhakti Kalapani, borne by this boy, Aadesh. I must warn you however sir—we were attacked by steel creatures, some ancient menace, on the way here. The message must surely be of some significance. Each one of the creatures would no doubt make easy work of twenty men, and we met with thousands of them.”

Oscar Johnstone looked up from his paperwork and cocked an eyebrow. Dressed in fine clothes, a suit of deep blue laced with frills, he looked overdressed and extravagant. His face lay in the shadows of a floppy hat, which had a prominent feather sticking out of it. His eyes shone bright beneath the shadow. He had a large and bulbous nose, and looked like a street fighter rather than a priest. He gave a smile, revealing an overly wide mouth. His expression did not seem very welcoming, and his face grew troubled.

"Well, Philip, you are not known for exaggerating. How did you survive such an encounter?"

"We avoided them. They fly, but we managed to out maneuver them and use the winds to our advantage. We left them behind over the Americas, however. I assume they won't be far behind us and some preparations must be made. But first, the message, since it is obviously the significant factor in all this."

Aadesh stepped forward and handed Johnstone the message. He swiftly opened it. He glanced at it, and back at them.

"We are to protect this boy," said Johnstone. "Further information is not available. However, he must not fall into their hands, else everyone in the world is at risk of obliteration."

Everyone stood aghast for a moment. Aadesh felt the world fade to white as he stood there in danger of collapsing, stunned at the news. "*What do they want with me? What have I done? Why?*" all raced through his mind, bustling in and out until they all seemed to pile into one another. The world grew larger and colder as he stood there under everyone's gaze.

Johnstone turned to Philip, "You have experience in dealing with whatever is being sent to capture the boy, and from what you say, this is something serious, probably involving the past relics of the ancients. Your experience in that area will aid you also. I will pay you highly to continue to protect the boy. Furthermore, I trust you, and I fear there are few others I could entrust with such a task."

"I will very gladly protect this boy from whatever is threatening him," Philip said.

He had no sooner spoken than the sound of steel upon the marble floor made them all spin around. It burst forcefully through the oak door behind them, the flash of silver telling all in an instant. A beast of metal climbed through the broken door, watching them all, its scales glinting in the light, black in its unfathomable eyes.

Chapter Nine

It lurched forwards terribly fast towards Aadesh. A crack of thunder echoed through the hall. The creature buckled forward and slid across the floor with a hole in its back—sparks cracking as it jerked in tiny spasms.

A young woman stood in the entrance gazing at the felled beast. She held a silver gun, aimed still at the creature as she pushed open the broken door and walked casually into the room. It had taken seconds to unfold, and all stood where they had been, gazing in amazement. The drak twitched on the floor for several moments while the sparks faded and the twitching stopped.

"You have impeccable timing, m'lady," said Philip.

"You are welcome. My name is Elizabeth. You have been expecting me?"

She moved with a dignified grace, with an air of nobility about her. Thin, tall, dressed in dark tight fitting clothes, and pretty in a feral way, she seemed to Aadesh to be the opposite of Elisia. Her black hair fell naturally down to her shoulders and she had dark eyes that seemed sad and weary. Yet they also shone bright even in the dim hall.

"Indeed," said Philip.

Philip strode over to the limp form of the creature and pulled it easily onto its front. He held it firmly at the shoulder with his right hand and stood poised with his left hand ready to strike it with two of his fingers in its chest. His hand was a blur as he struck the creature and dented its armour.

"Interesting."

"What is it, Philip?" asked Elisia.

"To be able to fly, these were built light and their armour is pretty

thin, a weakness we may be able to exploit. But for now, we need to get out of here very quickly."

"Agreed."

"There is a secret passageway which leads into a network of tunnels below the city," suggested Johnstone. "Perhaps that would be the most suitable means of avoiding further confrontation."

"Perfect!"

"Follow me."

Johnstone slid back a brick in the last column and pulled a lever. They all heard the loud click. He asked them to push at a certain spot on the wall, and within a few moments they had pushed the wall back to reveal an opening into the dark passages that would take them down below. Quickly, he told Philip which passages to take, and where best for them to go.

"Sir, please send a message to my crewmen to put the ship in storage if possible, but to abandon the damn thing if need be. Tell them they will receive full pay through the normal channels. Tell them to hurry. Tell them time is not on their side."

"Do not worry, Philip. I will attend to it."

"You take care of yourself. Perhaps it would be best for you to leave as well. They will come and possibly interrogate you to find us."

"Do not worry about me, I *will* avoid them. Now go!"

Once all through, Philip and the others heaved the wall closed again, and they heard another click as it locked itself.

They slipped into the dark corridors and felt their way down a winding tunnel, down a staircase, ever lower into murky tunnels where the air pressed down upon them, warm and stagnant, dry and gritty. The ground had been polished smooth by a thousand footfalls, but no soul had been here recently. In the distance a dripping could be heard, some drops in the sewers, and eerie echoes came from far ahead of them.

Philip found a torch right where Johnstone had told him it would be, inside a small room full of weapons and provisions. He lit it very quickly with some old contraption, and grinned as the light showed them the dank surroundings.

"It's not the nicest place in the world, but if it's going to help us slip away, we can't say a bad thing about it."

"Indeed," said Elizabeth. "And I like the dark," she added.

Aadesh thought he made out Elisia scowling at the newcomer before Philip moved and cast the torchlight ahead of him plunging both women

into darkness.

Following the passages took them to an old staircase that cut a path straight as an arrow downwards. Philip led them, torch held out before him, as the slipped deeper into the underworld. Aadesh found the lichen-covered steps to be quite slippery, but by bracing his hands against the passage walls, he could distribute his weight to stay on his feet, but it tired him doing so. This part of the tunnels showed little of interest. The walls had been notched and worn by time, the upper regions remained dry and dusty while the lower region which shone in the light were worn smooth and tinted green. The passage continued down for an impossibly long time before they reached the bottom.

It opened up into a large chamber like a necropolis, a city for the undead beneath the ground. Despite its appearance, nothing stirred, most certainly not the dead. Abandoned, hollow; the sound of their movements echoed through the ancient streets.

They wandered deeper through the strange landscape of deserted buildings and shops, nothing stirring, and only the faintest hint of a breeze from some distant shaft.

The façades of the shops lining the street almost seemed to tell a story, an inn beside a pharmacy, an iron mongers, a book store—the rusty signs hanging against the buildings, unmoving in the stagnant air. Their paint appeared so dull as to be unreadable, even in torchlight. Only the shapes of the signs offering the clues to their long abandoned purpose. Dust lay still, and time lay yet stiller. In the distance a drip, drip, drip of water grew louder. The cavern above glowed and dimly lit the scene, but Aadesh could not make out the source of the light. The rusted stumps of railings ringed a barren expanse of wet rocks that looked like they had once been a feature in a park. Only dust, mud and rocks remained now. At set intervals Aadesh came across ragged holes set in the pavement.

“Perhaps they used it during the displacement wars to hide and wait out the trouble,” suggested Philip, looking around at the pillars and high vaulted ceiling.

“The ceiling is glowing,” said Elizabeth, gazing up.

Philip held his torch inside a doorway and gazed up at the ceiling, at the eerie twilight.

“Probably the ancients coated it with chemicals to give them light. I imagine it would have been brighter all those years ago. Probably its potency has been fading over the millennia, but *my*, this place must have

really been something back in those days," Elisia said, her voice betraying the grand work of restoration her imagination had performed.

Aadesh closed his eyes and let his own imagination take him back and transform the place from a dead cavern to an ancient, bustling city in exile, beneath the Earth. The houses became clean, the streets full of people and the holes filled with trees, so that the streets were lined in greenery. It all vanished the instant he opened his eyes.

They made their way through the cavern and into yet more corridors beyond. Twisting, turning lanes no less convoluted than the previous ones. After much stumbling about in the dark, they reached a room with a single pedestal and an old statue of some ancient philosopher.

"Well if it isn't Socrates," remarked Philip.

"Who?" asked Aadesh.

"We don't have time, but I'll tell you all about him later," interjected Tommi.

"This is it. We just have to find the switch," Philip told them.

There was a loud beeping.

"Excuse me a moment," Philip said. He cast the display of his watch into the air and a man's face greeted him—eerily shining in the blackness.

"Hogan, good to see you my friend."

"You ought to look at these coordinates, now!"

Numbers flashed on the screen, Philip dialed the floating symbols in the air and Hogan's face vanished. The scene changed and the cathedral in New London could be seen from above. A thousand silver monsters poured into the building.

"Damn, we are in trouble," said Philip.

"What about the others?" asked Elisia.

"The Rio Grande is gone. With a bit of luck they are safe."

"What will we do?" asked Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, can you take this torch and plant it elsewhere, then return here very quickly and follow us?"

"Indeed I can."

She took the torch and swept out of the room. Philip dug inside his satchel and pulled out a cylinder. One end lit up to provide them light. The other's looked at him questioningly.

"There is a chance that they might be able to follow the fumes from that torch. I'm sure they linger long enough for them to detect. They were designed like hunters, so I would be surprised if they don't have an

exceedingly good sense of smell – I hope not too good, otherwise they can follow us like hounds. Let us hope that that is not the case. We will go through now and wait for Elizabeth. This torch will leave no smell for them to follow.”

Everyone tested the walls until they found the switch. It turned out to be a regular looking brick that swiveled out to reveal a lever. It worked much the same as the first secret entrance Johnstone had shown them, and clicked loudly when pulled. They set about testing the wall until they found the portion to push open. Elizabeth soon reappeared, and they collectively heaved the wall closed, and continued onwards into the dark gloom ahead.

“With any luck, that will stall them,” said Philip to everyone in general.

“Let us hope so,” said Elizabeth, from far behind them, lost in the darkness.

“Are you okay back there?” Aadesh asked her in a whisper.

“Fine, don’t worry about me, I can see in the dark.”

Philip leaned close to Aadesh and told him, “She’s part cat you see.”

Aadesh found this information particularly curious. *How can someone be part cat?* But it would indeed be useful, he decided, especially down here.

Finally, they arrived at another staircase and it led them up to where Philip had been told lay and old castle, and a man who would help them. Aadesh felt himself smiling; the air became lighter and the atmosphere less oppressing, lifting his spirits greatly. A light source appeared up ahead as they reached a chamber at the top of the staircase. The wall slid open and a man came through immediately.

“My friends, what took you so long?”

“We were not dallying, trust me, there are things behind us which I do not particularly wish to meet down here, and neither do you,” said Philip.

“Indeed,” said the man. “Forgive me, I am Count Dakault, and I have a means to get you to safety. I received word by pigeon carrier from Johnstone. We must hurry, so forgive me if I leave introductions until later.”

He led them down numerous corridors and passageways, through a dozen secret doors, and down two more flights of stairs. Aadesh worried about this descent back down into the depths. He had hoped to reach the surface quickly. The depths scared him more than a little.

Soon Dakault lead them into a large chamber, a cave, with a massive underground reservoir. The dark water lapped on the rocky shore and the cave bore thousands of stalactites and stalagmites, forming monstrous shapes all around the edges. Down at the water level sat a rudimentary harbour, cobbled together with rough-hewn wood. Sitting beside the jetty, lay a large cigar-shaped craft of solid iron. Aadesh realized after a few moments just what he was looking at; it matched the description given to him by Philip. It was a submarine!

"Ahh, we are saved," announced Philip. The others whooped with joy.

The count looked at him a moment. "There are few in the world who know what a submarine is. It is pleasing to see that the nature of my craft is not lost on you."

"You will be coming with us?" asked Philip.

"Yes, I have evacuated my household and my guards, and I will come with you. Your pursuers will find a cold trail. Meanwhile, we have time to consider what must be done next. Pray, we cannot run forever."

"How true."

The count quickly opened a hatch on the top of the submarine and gestured that his guests should have the honour of entering first. Everyone climbed in. As long as four horse-drawn carts, the craft seemed to impress even Philip, who had experience of such things. It was spacious enough inside to accommodate them all, at least for a short journey. Aadesh couldn't wait to speak to Tommi to find out how this vehicle operated.

"Everyone, turn off your watches."

They did so, and Philip showed Aadesh how to deactivate his.

"They might detect the signal from it and follow us," Philip explained.

Soon the external hatch hammered down with a hollow bang, and the count sealed it shut by turning the handle. Immediately after checking the rest of the ship, he disappeared into the control room. Within moments, a bang ensued as docking mechanisms released and the craft began to move.

Aadesh started to feel a little claustrophobic, trapped now inside this tiny space. But Philip, perhaps sensing this, beckoned for him to follow him into the front of the craft. Inside the front cabin, he could see out through windows of solid glass at the glistening water of the ocean before him.

Amazed, he stood mystified, gazing at the rocky walls that drifted past as the sub turned and slid from the underground bay. Outside, the crystal clear water shone bright and blue while the surface shimmered above them, undulating and bending the light into shimmering rays that reached down into the water. Below them the sandy bottom stretched out into the dark blues, eventually lost in darkness beyond.

"Doesn't glass break easily?" asked Aadesh, thinking about how the water would pour into the craft if it did.

"But these are windows of purest diamond, and are actually stronger than the rest of the craft," the count informed him. "We are very fortunate to have so many different and useful materials left over from the ages before the displacement."

Fish swam along outside, dancing in schools, filling the view with a myriad of forms moving in perfect formation, and scattering whenever a larger fish plunged between them, only to reform moments later. They shot through the ocean like gleaming silver arrows. Like magical spells weaving through the ether.

"We'll need to descend slowly, Philip, while she adjusts to the pressure. She's open at the bottom, since we use her for mainly archaeology."

"You mean treasure hunting?" asked Philip.

The count chuckled. "Yes. You could call it that."

Aadesh gazed out at it all and the sights overwhelmed him.

He remembered his first glimpse of the ocean lapping up onto the beach, or the first time he had seen the clouds tumbling beneath him from the prow of the airship, and they all paled in comparison to this.

Slowly the craft descended, and his ears popped as the count turned dials to regulate the pressure inside the craft. He learned that the pressure had to be increased with the depth.

"Let me show you the moon pool, young man," said the count. "Philip, do you think you could handle her?"

"Happy to oblige."

Aadesh followed the count through the ship and down a metal ladder into a corridor that took them beside the engine and then down another ladder to the belly of the sub. Down in this room lay a sight that made Aadesh gasp. The water danced in a hole in the floor and opened up a window into the beautiful scene below.

Down at the bottom lay shipwrecks, clusters of coral, forests of plants, and large stretches of sand that went on forever like deserts.

Between lay the islands of life formed by the reefs. Shoals of fish danced in magnificent shapes and glimmered as they caught the delicate beams of sunlight. Aadesh watched transfixed.

"It's a window into another world," said the count.

"What stops it from flooding the ship? How can we be in a ship with a hole in the bottom? Is it some ancient ma-um-technology?" asked Aadesh, resisting the urge to use the word magic.

The count chuckled. "No, not ancient technology. Ordinary laws of nature at work. The deeper an object goes into the water, the more water there is above it, crushing it. Solids and liquids push back with equal force, and so aren't affected so much. But gas, like air, compresses easily. So the deeper we go, the more the air pressure has to be increased. I have systems in place to maintain this balance. You saw them up there. But the air pressure at the bottom of this sub where it touches the water, is equal to the pressure of the water, because the ocean presses against it with all the weight of the ocean above. The pressure gets higher with height up to the ceiling. Since the water cannot enter the higher pressure area just above the water's surface, we have this lovely pool. It's just as well, because pressurized subs make me claustrophobic."

"What's a pressurized sub?"

"It stays the same pressure as the air above, but has to be closed up on all sides. Leaving it is difficult due to the difference in pressure between the inside and outside. You have to slowly pressurize anyone trying to leave, then flood the compartment with water, or have a sealed moon pool at the bottom of the ship. Pressurize anyone going in. I prefer this set up. I like to be able to get in and out quickly."

The count showed him racks on the wall where suits were set that enabled them to breathe underwater. Tanks that held pressurized air sat beside each. Eventually, the count left him to watch the scene below.

He lost count of the length of time he stayed there, and watched the ocean for hours, taking in every sight. Only when the bottom fell away and darkness closed in so that nothing else could be seen, did he reluctantly leave.

Slowly, his mind still dreaming of the ocean, he climbed back up to the top compartments and found himself a bunk. He climbed in, and realized that he hadn't brought anything with him to read. With a long sigh, he cuddled under the covers and thought of all that had transpired since leaving Old Kuala Lum. First, he had travelled in an airship and now a submarine.

He wondered what lay in store for him next. He had journeyed the skies and the oceans, and did things he could never have even dreamed a few weeks ago. Now those facets of wonder which had always seemed to him to be mysterious and unknowable, were familiar to him.

Elisia's voice lulled him to sleep as she talked to the others about numerous things such as climbing the mountains at the edge of the ice sheets in the Russian lands above Rome, and how she missed New Dublin and all the horses running free in the streets, and the fertile fields around the city.

Little did he know that she would soon be dead.

Chapter Ten

He stirred in his sleep and found a hand gently tugging him into wakefulness. The cabin remained dark, the lights turned low, a grim reddish hue lighting everything as if through a filter of blood. The smell of sweat and bodies pressed close to each other in the confined space of the submarine had grown stronger during the night.

"Aadesh," said the count, slowly.

He sat up and looked around at everyone sleeping.

"Aadesh," the count continued, "come with me. I have something to show you, something which I think you would like to see."

Aadesh climbed out of the bunk and followed the count to the rear of the craft. The count looked back, gave Aadesh a quick grin, then opened a hatch with one well practiced movement. He spun a wheel and pulled the heavy hatch up, revealing a dim corridor below. He motioned for Aadesh to go first and he did, climbing onto an iron ladder, he navigated his way down six rungs into the very narrow corridor which had only two bulkhead doors, one at either end, and little rows of dim lights to light the passage between.

"This is the engineering deck," the count told him while closing the hatch above, spinning the wheel to seal it shut. "Down that end of the corridor lies the engines, but it is this end we are interested in today. Here is something much more interesting—something that you will find delightful."

The count led him down the corridor and opened a metal door, and another directly behind it. He closed only the one nearest to them and tightened the hatch. Aadesh could see that this room had two chairs in it. As the dim lights flickered on, he could see controls and switches just like in the cockpit. There was another window, though the outside

remained cloaked in impenetrable darkness.

"Please, Aadesh, do take a seat," said the count.

He did as the count suggested and threw himself down upon one of the chairs which was very comfortable, and at the count's suggestion buckled himself into the seat.

"I call this the runabout," said the count, pulling a lever which made frightening clunks and clangs against the metal of the craft around them. Suddenly, Aadesh felt the sensation of dropping. All the grinding sounds ceased as they slipped from the parent vessel down and Aadesh could hear the sounds of the ocean consuming them. Both sat in silence as the ship drifted, until the count switched on some external lights and lit up the scene outside.

The barren desert of the ocean bottom lit up before them, empty and horrid, a frightening dull grey landscape like the underworld, and Aadesh felt himself shudder. The craft turned and he gasped.

Things he had never seen before drifted before the runabout, things like angels, glowing, drifting, and colourful lights flickered through the bodies of these creatures as they pulsed and throbbed and danced in the deep. They all danced together in the current, beautiful in their thousands.

"Jellyfish," the count told him.

He watched them, transfixed by their undulating forms. But he began to grow worried. It seemed to him that they had drifted far from the other ship.

"Count Dakault, we are going away from the other ship. How ever will we find them again?"

At that the count made a sudden movement and grabbed Aadesh, holding him tight, placing a white cloth over his mouth and nose. He almost choked as the sharp smell struck him. He could not breathe, and as he struggled, the fumes overpowered him, causing the world to spin around him. He himself struggling terribly and yet hardly moving, he felt consciousness fade and struggled desperately for a moment longer. The chemicals burned in his throat and in his lungs. A terrible fear gripped him, and he felt as if he was going to die, while his vision slid away from him. A dark tunnel consumed him, its walls spiraling around him as it pulled him in.

"Sleep, Aadesh, sleep... there won't be anywhere to go back to, not once the bomb destroys the sub. Sleep... sleep..."

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Elizabeth awoke upon hearing the rumbling. She slid out of bed and onto her feet by the time Philip stirred. He threw himself towards the cockpit. She instead ran down the single corridor to the hatch at the back, following her keen sense of smell. She could smell the scent of explosives, a smell that always reminded her of shoe polish. Her footfalls echoed down the hollow interior. She threw open the hatch and gasped as she caught sight of the ripples of water below. All the lower compartments had flooded. Philip appeared beside her after a few seconds.

"Someone carried explosives this way. Where is Aadesh?" she stuttered, her mind racing.

"I've just looked. He's not here," Philip informed her calmly.

"I'm going to have to get to the explosives. It is likely that Dakault has taken him via some smaller submersible, planted the explosives and flooded the lower levels when he left so that we can't get to the bomb."

"I'll go," he told her, and plunged straight into the water beneath.

The explosion hit like a car wreck, deafening her. The sub lurched upwards. Flames licked up from the separating sheets of the floor as they buckled under the force of the blast. It knocked her against the metal trapdoor and she caught her head on the side of it. Everything went dark, and very slowly she felt herself leaving her body, the senses slowly fading. In the moments that followed she found herself slipping down into the waterlogged compartment below while the whole sub tore itself apart around her.

She knew the fuel would ignite in a moment, and everything would go up in a burst of flames from. The craft would be rent like a paper cup.

The full force of the blast struck her and she realized in those fleeting instants, that finally after all these millennia, she would die. So she let go of it all and gave herself to it, to the dark oblivion of death as it closed around her.

Philip felt the blast at that moment he saw Elizabeth drift down, took her in his arms, and kicked off from the wall as hard as he could. The explosion thumped into his back, propelling him forwards and out of the bulkhead into the ocean. A jagged piece of metal sliced his shoulder. He

struck his head against the bulkhead, the shock wave hit him terribly hard. He felt queasy, his vision shook, he felt his body as if dislocated and distant, and his senses faded to a pale blue monotonous blank.

Chapter Eleven

She awoke. Something told her that she now lay on her side. After a moment, the familiar sense of having a body returned and with it, a gagging sensation. Next, she found herself coughing up water. Her senses struggled with all the information. She realized that someone was caressing her, willing her lungs to work. She rolled forwards and coughed more onto the sand before turning to see Philip kneeling above her. He had obviously dragged her up the beach, out of the water. Above her the sky shone so blue, so pure, opposite to the muddled feeling of her mind and soul, her aches and anguish, and the dizzy spinning she felt as the bright light sent her reeling back into a state of confusion, before the spinning world finally subsided.

"You've taken some hard knocks, but you are going to live."

"The others?"

A look of anguish came over Philip's face.

"They are dead?"

She sat up and looked at him. Her head still swirled, her vision was dancing between single and double, eventually it settled down.

"I could have prevented it. I didn't have to sleep. I could have waited, and it's all my fault," he said.

"How did we get here?" she asked him.

"I dragged you up and found some wreckage from the submarine. A large wooden box. I placed you on top of it, cleared your lungs, and swam, pushing you this way. You wouldn't revive, but I knew it wasn't anything your *neems* couldn't handle. So the clever little nanobots did patch you up, and you rolled off the box. Luckily, we were this close to shore."

"How did you know I have *neems* inside of me?"

She looked at his shirt, torn at his shoulder, revealing his skin slashed deeply, down to the muscle, but there was no blood and his muscle shone silver. At the edges of the cut, blue liquid oozed out and congealed around the wound. The skin, whatever it was, was knotting back up.

"You're an android?"

"Yes."

"Shit."

There was a long silence. Philip gazed out to sea. He looked back at her with something in his eyes; pain, anguish, tombstones and deserts. He believed it was his fault, she realized. He felt he could have saved everyone. No doubt he was a machine, but he certainly didn't act like it. Not like the ones she had known.

"Mourne your friends later. We have a boy to find," she told him firmly.

"True."

"Where are we?"

"We are on the island chain of Midourit."

Midourit was the last place she wanted to be right now. It was the chain of islands that had popped out of the water exactly halfway across the Atlantic as the sea levels fell. Eventually they all joined together, splitting the Atlantic Ocean into the Atlantic Sea in the east and the American Sea in the west. These islands were inhabited, but it was hardly an easy place to get a ship.

"How do we find Aadesh?"

"I'm hoping that he will turn his watch back on. I'll be able to track him."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we're going to need a miracle."

The little sub swept into a dock and came to a halt beside the thick wooden pier. Flickering oil lamps lit the place in orange, and the shadows crept playfully about the weak light the lanterns cast. Drifting music came from the nearby bars, drifting along with laughter of sailors. Here the dock lay empty and still, licked by the frosty breeze from the glaciers to the north. From the already open hatch, Dakault climbed out onto the top of the sub carrying the limp form of Aadesh.

He stomped aboard the wooden dock and walked with a staggering

gait into the shady back alleys of Edinbay. After making a few turns, a number of men appeared and greeted him. One of them took Aadesh from him and they led him through ever narrower alleys until they arrived at a heavy oak door which had been stained almost black. Another of the men, he knew, would deal with the sub.

The door opened and they slipped inside. They took the boy to a room, placed him on a bed, and left. Dakault walked into the room and watched over the boy for a while. He slept, his breathing steady, his face a picture of contentment.

"Such a waste," said Dakault. "Such a terrible waste. A death sentence hanging over one so young."

He walked over to the window and looked out over the street before turning back and contemplating the lad once more.

"I'm sorry," he said to the sleeping form and walked out of the room.

He carefully locked the door behind him. Such a shame, but he would be rewarded for finding him, with wealth and power. Enough to restore his dwindling estate, enough that he might once again be a serious contender for the crown of Neo Britannia.

That was worth this little sacrifice...

Aadesh stirred. He looked at his surroundings and tried the door, which rattled in its fixture, but would not budge. He turned, sighed and fell back against the firmly locked door while contemplating his predicament. In front of him, the barred window seemed to grin. He suddenly remembered what Dakault had said about the bomb. The thought of his friends trapped in that exploding submarine, the thought of them dead. He shuddered.

He buckled over feeling sick and stumbled back to the bed. He tried to hold onto the hope that they had survived, that they would come for him, but those hopes lay like ghosts in his mind—improbabilities that haunted his mind like phantoms. He looked at his watch wondering how much time had passed and turned it on. Suddenly, the display came to life and told him that merely thirty-six hours had passed since they left the airship at the cathedral. Rolling across the bed so that he faced a damp wall, he wondered...what now?

Eventually, he curled up into a ball on the bunk and listened intently to his surroundings. When no sounds came for a long time and it seemed

as if he would not be disturbed, he pressed the buttons on his watch until his position in the world appeared. Everything had changed so much, the display bore little relation to the world as it was now. But by chance he knew this place, the city of Edinbay.

They had flown over it on the airship on the way to New London. He imagined himself from above; somewhere...hidden in the dense press of houses in the poorer section of the city. He imagined himself escaping, running through the streets and losing his captors. He wondered if his friends could find him, and hoped beyond hope that they were still alive. He gazed at the display, trying hard to remember the layout of the streets he had seen on his way over, to consciously map out his escape route in case he got a sudden and unexpected opportunity to flee. Unfortunately, his watch did not have the ability to zoom in like Philip's had. That would have been useful. Slowly, he climbed off the bed and went to the window, and took a long look out at the streets beyond. He noted a likely escape route and threw himself back down on the bed.

He lay there thinking about how he could get away.

Satisfied for the moment, he lay back in the bed and thought about something other than his friends, and something other than the mess he was in.

The sound of seagulls crying overhead rung out so that the sounds bounced and echoed and formed another landscape within her mind almost as bad as the dizziness that had gripped her when she had her eyes open. She opened her eyes instead, deciding to cope with the feeling best as she could.

"So tell me," she said, swaying slightly as she willed her heavy limbs to carry her up the steep slope off of the beach, "what is this all about?"

"You want my guess? Because we don't know for sure. But we have our suspicions that it's all about the *exakosioi exékonta ex*," he told her.

She recognized the Greek immediately and gasped.

"Not the six-hundred and sixty-six?"

"Yes."

Her gaze drifted upwards momentarily as she imagined the cloud of six-hundred and sixty-six defence satellites all locked in a spiral around the Earth. Satellites she thought had long since broken down through lack of maintenance. They had enough collective fire-power to destroy

the surface of the Earth and everything on it. The defence wall, the ex3, the *exakosioi exékonta ex*, named from the ancient Greek words for the number of satellites that composed it, had many names. Most called it the Ex3.

"They still work?"

"They were designed to be self-repairing. They can last indefinitely."

"Great...but who, and why?"

"We do not know who, nor his or her motives. But judging from their methods, whoever it is, is the last person we want to be in control of the Ex3!"

"And what has Aadesh got to do with this?"

"He is a direct descendant of its creator, and we believe the device must be programmed to allow access by a descendant."

"But there ought to be thousands of descendants by now."

"Correct, but the lineage was artificially maintained at a fraction of what it could have been. I'm sure in the end the society which went about this work, maintaining the lineage, had no idea exactly why they were doing it. But they did until recently. Something destroyed the order. The descendants were thought to have killed themselves. Supposing that Aadesh, is in fact the last remaining descendent, that would explain why he is so important to someone."

"Is it his DNA? No, can't be, it would have changed too much by now."

"That's true. I would suspect that whatever code activates the device, it would be buried deep within the boy's genetic memory. This is how it stayed with all the descendants."

"Like when humans wake up thinking they're falling? Memories of their times in the trees..." her thoughts drifted off as she imagined it.

"Like that."

"But why to begin with?"

"It's sketchy. My guess is that during the collapse, a society was formed to keep one or two people around who could activate the six-hundred and sixty-six. They feared that with the collapse of technology, earth would be open to attack from the outside. There had been an alien transmission picked up; it was no longer an imaginary threat. Aliens with technology were very real, and there could have been some close enough to come and take advantage of Earth in its sorry state. Such was their reasoning."

"So the key to the Ex3 was kept all these years, because someone

feared that at some point after the collapse, we would be attacked by another space-faring civilization?"

"Exactly. And humans would have went the way of the Aztecs."

"And what's your part in all this?"

"Now that's a long story."

There were sounds of footfalls outside his cell. Aadesh remained still, sitting on the bed, though his heart beat rapidly as the door opened. Count Dakault walked into the room and ripped the watch from his wrist. A cry of surprise burst from his mouth. The count grasped hold of him firmly and wrenched him up off the bed and out of the room, like a piece of luggage. Aadesh screamed. Despite his struggling, another man stepped forwards and bound and gagged him.

They held him in the corridor to watch in horror as a creature, like the things that had been pursuing them, made its way towards them. Aadesh struggled all the more. It wasn't like the other ones though. The longer he looked, he could see differences. Just the same kind of thing, but different; more angular, covered in smooth plates of metal armour, bigger, heavier, bulkier, far more solid looking. It had a number of large guns built into it, and it looked far more dangerous than even the draks had.

It took up its position inside the room. Dakault made a show of throwing the watch in beside it.

He thought about his watch, now in the room with that thing. He suddenly found a new sense of hope. The count seemed to believe the watch could be traced. Perhaps even that Philip was still alive to do so. Almost as soon as the hope sprung anew within him it faded away as he looked again at that hideous thing again. He hated how it slowly hunched down lower onto its stunted legs. It looked like it was built to wait for people, and then kill them. A vision of his friends swept into his mind; them coming to find him, coming and meeting *that*, inside the room, and being suddenly killed by it. He shuddered. The Count tugged him away.

He kicked and struggled. The Count laughed.

"That will deal with your friends when they come here. If they come. If they even survived. I'm not taking any chances. They will follow the signal, and then die." Dakault laughed.

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The count dragged him down the staircase where stern looking men grabbed him roughly and carelessly bundled him into a wagon that was waiting outside.

Seconds after everyone boarded the vehicle, it trundled off over the cobbled steps of New London while the horses snorted their disgust at the heavy load. Once they exited the city, his captors blindfolded him. In the darkness he could do nothing but listen to the sounds around him and wonder at what terrible fate lay in store for him. He felt terrified at first, but gradually slipped into a state of stoic acceptance. More than anything, he missed home, he missed Old Kuala Lum.

Chapter Twelve

Philip cast a holographic display screen into the air, and waited while it dialed up an old friend. The screen shone transparent blue, hovering over the white sands of the beach. Behind it some palm trees danced in the ocean's winds, and the ocean itself roared gently as it pounced up onto the beach.

A man appeared on the screen. He looked similar to Philip, as if they were brothers and gave a broad smile upon seeing Philip.

"Philip. Good to see you."

He looked at Elizabeth who watched him from afar, standing on the edge of the beach where the ocean lapped up around her feet.

"And you," he said distractedly. "Do we have any ships?"

"Airships?"

"No, *our* variety. I'm sure you heard about the boy? We lost him. Unless we find him again, the earth may well be toast."

"There are none. You just missed one, just before this all kicked off. Help is on its way though, but it will be some time. They only left recently. In the meantime however, I think I *can* help. I have something that will get you wherever you need to be a damn sight quicker. Transmit your coordinates and I'll be there shortly."

The call ended and Elizabeth looked at him questioningly.

"I think I know what he has in mind."

They sat on the beach together and watched as the biplane came down and landed on the ocean on two slender pontoons. It slid closer and gently parked itself on the beach. A man opened the door and

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waved at them. Elizabeth felt her spirits lift at the sight of a plane, something to remind her of the life she once lived before civilization had torn itself apart.

"You know they'll kill you for having built that!" Philip cried over to his friend.

"Is he a machine too?" she asked him.

"As much as I am," said Philip.

She shrugged and sloshed through the water towards the craft.

"Hogan, this is Elizabeth."

"Delighted to meet you, dear."

She smiled as he tugged her up into the cabin. She threw her shoes in the back and took a seat.

"Nice plane, Hogan," she said.

He beamed with pride and looked around at the craft he had created. The inside offered little room, but comfortable enough for short flights, and seemed like something pulled out of the late twentieth century. A row of single seats on either side of a central walkway gave her the choice of left or right. Elizabeth swung left into the seat to sit behind Hogan on the right of the plane.

"Thank you," he told her. "I've always loved these planes. Not much call for them these days, but I've been keeping her safe for an emergency. She's a replica of one of the earliest aeroplanes with a few modifications for performance."

Hogan quickly prepared everything for take-off. The engines roared as the reverse thrust pushed the craft off the beach, while a billowing cloud of sand rose up in front of them. Once off the beach, Hogan turned the craft around gently and pushed the engines to full throttle so that they slid across the ocean, gaining speed for take-off. The plane gleamed in the sun as it angled up towards the sky, off the waves, into the air, and the ride became smoother.

Elizabeth watched as the beach disappeared and only the sea remained. Soon they were moving up towards the clouds and penetrated them, while she relaxed in her seat in the tiny cabin and thought of the old days. Back then, two hour space hops from one side of the world to the other were common. Better were the thirty day sky cruise liner trips. She missed the sky-liners the most.

They swept up above the clouds, flying across the eerie white landscape. Beautiful, frothy white clouds drifted across the sky. She had missed this; missed traversing the heavens, back and forth around the

world. The places, and the bustle of crowded cities had always excited, but you could get them any century. The quaint old transports were what she really missed, trains, and skycruisers.

It's been such a long time...

The clouds parted and she saw the ocean; tiny ripples on tiny waves, on larger waves, those waves part of larger waves. From here the huge waves were lost on more massive ones, so that the ocean was like a story with many layers of meaning trapped within other layers.

The hours passed while she remained lost in her thoughts. Sometimes she thought she saw glints of light, as if those robots were nearby, but she could never find them again.

Eventually Philip took over the controls, and he flew the plane well; though he had confessed that this was his first time in such a craft, he quickly got used to its handling. He said that flying things were all the same.

She wondered if Philip and Hogan were communicating electronically—they were both 'droids' after all. After a long silence, Philip finally broke it by pointing out that they were halfway and should arrive in less than four hours.

She sighed.

The long distance flight strained the limits of the tiny cabin, so that as the journey continued, Elizabeth began to feel more uncomfortable. The seat felt a little too hard and the space around her too cramped. She got up and changed to the other seat on her left, directly behind Philip. She shifted about, still feeling uncomfortable. Eventually, she felt better and rested her head against the glass. Far below, a tiny little boat drifted in the sea. It was in fact, a large galleon with three masts and sails of purest white, catching the sun. It looked like a toy.

"Has your shoulder healed?" she asked him.

"Yes. Once I left the water, it stitched itself back up nicely."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes, though I turned the pain off."

"So where *are* you from? And what are you doing here?"

"After the collapse, the colonies, Mars and Venus, were left to fend for themselves. We struggled. It took a lot of work and luck to get on our feet. We had enough trouble surviving ourselves. There was nothing we could do to help here on Earth. Time passed and eventually we learned not just to survive, but how to prosper. And so some of us were sent back, to find out what was happening on earth, so that we could re-

establish contact, once it was deemed appropriate."

"So which one are you from?"

"Both."

"Both?"

"They pulled together in the early years and never separated. Mars and Venus are two parts of the same whole. We move between them freely, between the floating cities of Venus and the domed cities of Mars. We also do some mining on Jupiter."

"You've been avoiding earth?"

"The Ex3 is already in Yellow lock down. We can get a couple of ships past it, but only because we were able to get access codes for particular craft types and set up the necessary transmitters. If our activities were to trigger the Ex3 into a higher lockdown mode, what then? Earth would be permanently sealed off, perhaps forever. We deemed it wise to limit our activities."

"Jesus," she said. Imagining earth, lonely and separate, locked out from the universe by an ancient device, humanity and whatever might come after them finding themselves held hostage by the embodiment of fear—a fear that wasn't their own reaching out through the millennia, long lasting, unrelenting, unknowing that it was drifting flotsam from the shipwreck of its original purpose. "I never could have imagined that earth hung teetering on the edge of a chasm, such as that. I thought things were bad enough..."

"It's not something we like to think about either. Earth is home and it always will be."

"So what about you guys? Are you what humanity became, or do you just work for them?"

Hogan turned and flashed a grin. "Well as you can imagine, without a biosphere as large as the Earth, things are a bit cramped in the colonies. Digital space is an important facet of our culture, gives us room to stretch our legs without taking up unsustainable resources. Everyone spends a large amount of time in digital space for recreation, education, socializing. It's like the ultimate version of the internet. But since we designed it from scratch, it suffered none of the limitations, such as bandwidth, fragmentation, monopolisation. So we were raised there. You're how old again?"

"Twenty-second century."

"Well there you go... damn that's old. Who made you?"

"Nexus Corp."

"Shit, they were good. I would have thought it impossible to create a biological organism that could last as long unaided by advanced medicine."

"They spent a hell of a lot on me. They didn't want to lose their investment, so they programmed out death. Unfortunately they also programmed out a lot of other things, like being able to live a normal life."

"Maybe we can do something for you. Just hang in there, okay?"

"You were saying?"

"Yeh, so from then until the collapse, we may have been considered an artificial intelligence. But our culture has no concept of that. We're just digital space humans out for a ride in the real world."

"But there are humans left, right? I mean meat-based humans?"

Philip chuckled.

"Yeh, there are plenty of 'meat-based humans' left," said Hogan. "Some have become as much machine as we are, but there are plenty of young ones who are just like everyone down here."

"I find that reassuring. Hope I didn't cause you offence?"

"Not at all. You've been cut off for millennia," Philip spoke this time. "It's going to take some misunderstandings before you do understand who and what we are. That's another reason why we don't just pop down and say hello to our relatives on Earth."

Chapter Thirteen

As time passed, the flight continued on fairly smoothly. She changed seats constantly, lost track after sixteen, and began to feel her muscles aching, and felt like jumping off the damn plane.

"Damn cats, impatient creatures," joked Philip.

"I'll jump out soon if we don't get to land."

"I thought cats didn't like water?" said Hogan, pointing to the ocean below.

"They programmed it out. It's confinement that drives me nuts."

They banked suddenly and Elizabeth gazed out of the opposite window to see Edinbay off to the right. Philip took them in low over the sea before landing smoothly in the calm waters some distance from the beach. The plane bobbed over the water and came to a stand still.

"We're not far from Edinbay, but we are going to take an inflatable boat over to shore, while Hogan takes her up and waits for us. Once we find Aadesh, he will stand by to get us out of there in a hurry."

Philip opened the door and threw a sphere about the size of a football into the water. She watched while it unbundled itself upon contact and inflated into a solid-hulled inflatable boat. They called them 'zodiac boats' back in those days and she hadn't seen one since. Running her hand along the side gave her a thrill, reminding her of years gone past, of bouncing over the waves, shooting down gunmen, choppers buzzing overhead, taking out her target, and slipping away into the night in just such a vessel. She jumped in and helped Philip to slip an outboard motor into the slot.

They left the plane and headed in the direction of Edinbay, while Hogan took off behind them. Gulls picking at rubbish strewn on the beach greeted them with suspicious glances. Otherwise, the beach

remained quiet and empty. A small outcrop of trees hid them from full view of the city. Philip took off the motor, pressed some controls and the boat bundled itself back into a ball. They hid it in some bushes before pressing on.

Within ten minutes they reached a main road into the town, and Philip got them aboard a passing wagon to speed up the short trip into the city. She could see him glancing at his watch from time to time, keeping tabs on Aadesh's position.

"He hasn't moved," Philip told her.

Edinbay sat on a shallow hill, surrounded by a solid, embattled wall set between mountains and the sea. Its walls were large and solid with an elaborate gatehouse. Numerous guards watched with disinterest as their cart rode in and took to the back streets towards the markets where the driver told them he had a little business.

They thanked the driver, paid him a few coins for his kindness, jumped off and picked their way through the cobbled streets until they arrived at a dingy inn. Mould climbed its outer bricks up to the cracked rendering that over the years had both blackened at its base and partially crumbled onto the street. Garbage riddled the streets outside, and a tramp lay on an old mat propped against a building nearby.

Cautiously, they entered. Philip pointed upwards.

They took the creaky stairs to the upper floor, ignoring the protests of an old woman at the front desk. They both drew their guns, and carefully walked up to the entrance to the room.

Philip nudged the door open and cursed as a blast smashed into his chest and knocked him backwards through the plaster wall behind him. Elizabeth immediately dropped down and listened. She could hear it move. She knew from the sounds that robot lay just inside; the whine of servos and the hiss of pistons; but she could not tell if Aadesh was inside. All went silent as the robot stopped moving. She couldn't see if Philip was okay and she hoped that he was, not least because she rather doubted she could do this without him.

The machine moved slightly. She waited. Her hearing focused intently in the room, her mind slipped within that silence to try and pick out some breathing or a heartbeat. She couldn't hear anything to suggest a human inside. The room seemed empty except for the droid. She grinned and pointed her guns at the wall and shot two blasts in at the robot before jumping back to avoid its attack.

It smashed clean through the wall into the corridor. She threw herself

backwards to avoid its shots, shooting at it and rolling out of sight along the corridor. She leapt upwards, over the glistening energy beams as they sliced through the walls and hit the stairwell, rolling down it awkwardly. But she landed on her feet. She always did.

More blasts from upstairs. *Good, Philip is alive.*

She paused.

Now she found herself at a loss as to what to do. All her long life, every action had seemed so natural, as if predetermined by some complicated genetic programming and yet suddenly, she had no idea what to do. She heard another blast. A man tried to brush past her, obviously the owner.

She stopped him, pointed the gun at him and gave him a look that would kill. He understood immediately. Perhaps he had no idea that she had just saved his life, but he went outside anyway. Taking a deep breath, she took to the stairs at a run.

Just as she reached the top, she saw Philip using his momentum to shoulder barge it through the outside wall. It thrashed its weapons and shot at them both, missing. It smashed noisily against the cobbled street, bouncing once and lying still.

She watched it cautiously.

Philip grabbed her and pulled her to the room.

"It won't stay like that. Give it a second."

He threw himself down to recover the watch he had given to Aadesh, while she searched the room for any clue, anything at all. Philip joined her in the task. They found nothing.

The droid staggered noisily to its feet, and though they couldn't see it, they could hear it. The sound of it charging up its main weapon seemed particularly loud, as if the sound itself was designed to strike the fear of death into them. A loud screeching whirl.

He grabbed her and pulled her out of the room through the hole he made when the first blast had knocked him backwards. With his gun raised, he sliced a hole in the opposite wall, ran, kicked it, jumped—the wall fell away under their feet and an explosion tore up everything around them while they hung in the air mid jump. Splintered, the wood flew all around them and the house rent into a thousand pieces in a great cacophony behind them. Flames and smoke licked up above them, gnawing at the buildings around the narrow alley.

She glanced up and a good portion of the second floor lay exposed with most of its structure obliterated.

Their feet hit the ground, and he pulled her into the side of the building, holding her, protecting her, as flaming embers and blocks of wood fell about them. All that remained of the plaster walls of most of that floor fell like fine snow.

Suddenly, she felt terribly vulnerable, helpless. Never before had a man needed to protect her, and even worse, a part of her even enjoyed it.

She felt a rage consume her and a red hot feeling burned through her. She slipped from his arms, smashed the door beside them open, and tore straight through the building on a direct route to the machine. She shoulder-barged through the outer door and hit it with four shots before leaping into the air, avoiding its counter attack, and bounding over it.

Her well-aimed bursts caught its weapons hard, knocking out the aim. She landed behind it, spun, and shot at it twice more as it turned. She realized that perhaps this wasn't such a good idea. It now had the upper hand, and she had exposed herself to its full arsenal. Fortunately, with it distracted, Philip jumped at it from behind. He tangled his legs around one of the guns, giving him leverage, took hold of its semi-spherical head and tore it off, hurling it into the sky like an Olympian discus champion. He attacked its exposed innards with his fists until it throbbed and collapsed.

She felt her muscles relax and almost dropped to her knees, but she didn't—nor did she want to—look any weaker than she already had. The fighting had attracted a crowd, including the guards who drew their weapons and glared at them both as if *they* were the ones who had disrupted the peace.

"We don't have time for this. Stun?"

"Sure," he said cocking a smile.

She knelt and began to shoot while he positioned himself slightly behind her and shot everyone. In less than a second, they completed the deed. Everyone dropped to the ground unconscious.

They took to the back alleys and came across some horses which they took at gunpoint, throwing the stable-boy enough coins to buy them five times over, and galloped from the city out towards the beach. Overhead they were startled to see Hogan making a barrel roll and shooting past while the draks tried to have a go at his biplane.

"I've asked Hogan to lead them away. There's no way we can get aboard with them in the skies. He can distract them for a while, then outrun them. We'll get off of this road and wait."

"Okay," she said, pulling her long hair behind her ears.

They rode for a good hour or so, taking a right at a fork in the road and winding around a hill behind Edinbay. Soon, Philip took them off the road into some woods, following a rough path, up and down small gullies, across some streams, until they finally came to a clearing. Remote and secluded, it offered them the perfect place to stay out of sight of the draks. Dense bushes would ensure that their presence would be hard to spot by passers by.

Philip wandered into a clearing, and paused in front of a monument that stood in the centre. Neglected, its crumbling structure rose up into the blue sky. Names ran in rings around its surface, honoring those who died to secure New Britain against the almost liquid borders of the displacement.

Elizabeth watched, nervous now that they could be seen from the air. She hoped he would be quick.

The building had lain in a state of neglect for years, and all manner of climbing plants now grew up it. Someone had been along and cleared them off of the lowest spirals so that the names were still visible. The very bottom bore a stone marked with a single epitaph:

*Wars were fought for these very lands,
Live well and remember our sacrifice.*

They looked at it a while.

"What now?" she asked him.

"All is lost. There is no way to find Aadesh now."

"But what's this place got to do with it?"

"Nothing at all. I needed time to think and I've always wanted to come out here and see it, for myself."

"Bastard! I thought we were here for a reason, that you had something up your sleeve as usual."

"I'm sorry, I'm not all-powerful. There's no way to find Aadesh."

Her temper flared, she found herself close to hitting him.

"There is," came a voice nearby and they spun. She couldn't see anyone, except for a large, four-winged bird with beautiful green plumage. It stood looking at them from the top of an old moss-covered boulder.

"Forgive the intrusion, but we have been tracking all the machines

and we have located the boy," said the bird, her voice like a siren, so pure and feminine. "Would you allow us to lead you to him?"

"That's incredible! You talk?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes. We were Nexus Corporation's last 'product'. Our creator released us into the wild just as the order to destroy us was given, right when Nexus collapsed during the displacement."

A tear rolled down Elizabeth's cheek.

"I'm not alone," she said, almost to herself. Louder, "Can I come closer?"

"Of course."

Elizabeth walked up to the bird.

"What's your name?"

"Felichia."

Elizabeth raised her hand. "May I?" Felichia nodded shyly. Elizabeth ran her hands down Felichia's back, caressing her. Her eyes slid into slits. Proximity to a bird triggering some of her latent cat side, she grinned, showing her fangs. Felichia shuddered a little, but didn't move.

"Sorry. It's my genes," said Elizabeth.

"No it's okay, I'm not concerned."

Elizabeth raised her hand and ran it again through Felichia's feathers. She was like a big parrot, really. But very heavily muscled, likely enhanced muscles, otherwise she would never carry her own weight.

"This is funny. A cat lovingly caressing a budgie," said Philip, quite suddenly.

"Bastard! Did I say I was talking to you?"

She snapped out her claws for added effect.

Felichia took off at that.

"Call me when you're done..." Felichia said, as she shot in a spiral around them and into the sky.

She moved towards him, looking at him as if he were her prey. Her eyes dark with black slits, her claws grey and sharp.

"Look after yourself from now on. I don't need your help."

"I'm sorry if I offended you. Should be teamwork though. You can do teamwork, can't you? Or perhaps we hired the wrong person?"

That last comment hurt, and her anger subsided. She could feel herself slump into a less menacing pose.

"I'm sorry. I felt weird earlier. All my life I've known what to do, in every situation, always there was something programmed within me to deal with it, but it wasn't there, something was missing. I was angry at

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you for helping me, when really I was angry at myself."

"But you want that genetic stuff to disappear. You want to lead your own life? Let it happen, make your own decisions, stop calling on your programming and it might well fade."

She extended her hand. Her claws sheathed themselves. He took the hand and shook it.

"Sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry also."

She managed a smile.

"Okay, Felichia, let's go. We have a boy to rescue!" she called upwards.

Chapter Fourteen

Aadesh knew that somewhere to the south lay their destination since the sun rose to their left, and set towards the right. He had no idea where exactly they were, nor where their final destination would be, but he kept meticulous track of how far in each direction they travelled every day. They kept him tucked inside the wagon so that he could not be seen. It had a canvas roof and four big men who watched him at all times. Horsemen rode alongside the wagon, and the count popped in and out whenever the caravan stopped.

He could see that the count had his own wagon, enclosed, no doubt with comfortable facilities inside that he used whenever they stopped to camp. Sometimes, Aadesh managed to catch a glimpse inside it; sumptuous fabric seating, beautiful hangings, all visible in the shadowy recesses.

The biggest of his captors, Patrick West, talked to him throughout the journey, causing the hours to fly by. Patrick, sitting there across from him, put him at ease. He was huge and looked as if he could crush rocks in his bare hands, yet beneath the bear-like exterior was a great deal of intelligence.

"I used to be a soldier for the king. For five years on a long hard campaign. I saw action across Europe, but eventually I left," he said, his eyes staring out into the distance beyond the walls of the carriage, looking back through time.

"That must have been exciting?"

Patrick sighed. "Actually, I was terrified most of the time. Didn't want to die for something I didn't believe in. That's why eventually I left the service and found more gainful employment. Since leaving, I've visited Afraeca, and even as far as the peninsula of India. Ah, the tales I

could tell you of India..."

Aadesh half listened to one of Patrick's many stories while looking at the road. The brow of a hill drew nearer and Aadesh always felt excited to see the lands beyond, to find out if they would be camping or finding lodgings in a city, to see what lay ahead. Though he had been kidnapped, he couldn't honestly complain; parts of the world that he had never even imagined visiting drifted by. He watched as the scenery changed, becoming greener and lusher. Better yet, he had four big guards to protect him and Patrick to talk to.

At the back of his mind though, a plan drifted, escape his single goal. He knew he couldn't do anything too soon, but instead would have to wait until they let their guard drop. But he would eventually get away from them, that much he knew.

As the cart rumbled over the hill, the city below shone in the light of the setting sun. It set in a valley way off in the distance sitting at the root of a mountain, faint in the dusty blue haze.

"This land used to be the Mediterranean. It was uncovered when the sea shrunk to a lake," Patrick whispered because he wasn't supposed to be telling Aadesh anything about where they were.

He guessed that on the other side lay Afraeca, but beyond that he didn't know. He thought about Johnstone, who had said that if he were to fall into enemy hands, all would be lost. Aadesh wondered what that meant, but there was nothing he could think of that made such a scenario possible.

He decided that it must be connected to the ancient ways, something of which he had little knowledge. Philip would know, surely. He sighed, and moved to ease his aching muscles and hoped that soon the cart would stop. The city still lay very far ahead and they would need to stop soon anyway. He just hoped the time would pass more quickly.

In the distance, a green bird sat in a branch, almost watching them as they passed. The branch it sat on bent under the weight of it. It had particularly intelligent looking eyes, and Aadesh felt sure that it stared at him in particular; an old, wise look communicating something substantial.

It flew off, lost behind the dark canopy of the trees.

He thought about the bird for a while after that, while half listening to Patrick, while thinking about how wonderful it would be to be a bird and be up there flying, to be free and happy; a creature of the skies.

His mind drifted, at play in the heavens, when quite suddenly a crash

drew Aadesh from his thoughts. A few seconds of silence descended upon the caravan. A horse neighed loudly and a man cried out. An arrow shot through the canvas roof beside him, missing one of the guards by a hairsbreadth. Patrick took hold of him and threw him down, while more arrows punctured the canvas roof, and the sound of horses neighing and whinnying came from outside.

The carts rumbled to a stop and the guards pulled him into the recesses of the cart before making a grab for their bows and shields, their swords already at their waist. The high wooden walls offered good protection from the sides. One of the guards covered the rear of the cart with his shield, a large rectangular shield, while another two readied their bows.

They screamed and the mercenary dropped the shield. In that brief instant they shot two men. The third man raised the shield again just as the thud of arrows hammed against it. With practiced precision, the mercenaries fended off the attack, like some fighting clockwork machine, cries and grunts synchronising their efforts. Patrick loosed a few arrows at the attackers from the small slits at the top of the wagon and pushed him back down whenever he tried to get up to get a better look.

"By the gods, boy! Will you keep your blasted head down!" Patrick bellowed.

Just as Patrick fitted another arrow to the string of his bow, a cry went out that the bandits had been driven off. Everyone sighed in relief, for they were not in the best position to fight off an attack.

"Would rather do this with a good set of walls around me," complained one of them.

"Well go get a job in a bank!" laughed Patrick.

Yet Aadesh found himself drifting into a malaise; stuck inside the cart like this he hadn't seen anything, and having missed it, he felt his anger at being cooped up raging inside of him once more. Having no idea how the soldiers outside had pushed back the attackers, he nevertheless found his curiosity taking hold of him so that he could not contain it. Infinitely curious, he wanted nothing less than to be free of this prison and his mind once again began to work on ways to achieve it.

It suddenly occurred to him that the draks would be watching over them, and watching over him in particular; that was why the attackers had been driven off so easily. If he was going to make his escape, he would have to wait until they reached the city.

Out in the open, the draks would catch him in no time.

Philip looked through the binoculars out into the haze where the sophisticated filters inside sharpened the image and gave him an incredible view. He tried for audio, but the device complained that he was being unrealistic and to try a target within at least a mile. He chuckled.

At his waist hung the katana Hogan had given him, made of indestructible material and impossibly sharp. Hogan had smuggled it in despite the restrictions on advanced technologies and materials.

Philip grinned, glad to have such a disobedient friend.

He turned to Elizabeth and offered the binoculars to her.

"Alcala is a dry, scorched city, is it not?" he said, surveying the dusty roofs below the tower.

"Used to be on the shores of the Mediterranean." She gazed out over the plains, looking through the binoculars at the approaching caravan. "You can see them coming a mile away thanks to all the draks circling above them like vultures," she said, now familiar with the word they used for the creatures. She, had laughed when she learned what Aadesh had named them.

Felichia flew in the window and landed noisily upon a large glass-topped table inside, slid off it and took off again, landing finally on the bed.

"I need a perch, but it has to be solid."

"We'll sort something out," Philip told her.

"Where is it they are going, anyway?" Elizabeth asked her.

"No idea," replied Felichia, "but we've been trying to find out. We were hoping that we could follow a damaged unit to the source, but so far they have either been completely destroyed, or only lightly damaged. Next time you get the chance, damage one of them, but let it escape before you finish it off. Preferably while it has flight capability."

"I'll bear that in mind," said Elizabeth with a grin.

"Perhaps Hogan could help out there? If he attacked one, then it wouldn't reveal our location. We just need to know where one is."

"I have every one of them tailed, plus we are able to communicate in real time. I could give you the location of one of them. There are a few lone units scattered about the world. What they are up to is anyone's guess."

"Can you? I'll call him now."

Elizabeth sat on the bed beside Felichia.

"How many of you are there?"

"Ten thousand or so."

"And you can *all* talk to each other in real time?"

"Yes."

"But there weren't ten thousand of you to start with. Obviously he couldn't have released you all."

"No, but we can reproduce of course."

"Ah," said Elizabeth. The hurt of not being able to have children stung her, but gradually faded. The interest in her new-found friends helping to ease it away. We're all in this together... she reminded herself.

"So how does it work? The talking to each other? Bounced off satellites?"

"No, quantum entanglement. Two pairs of particles can be twinned together in such a way that the properties of one will mirror the properties of another, no matter what distance lies between them. At that time, they had just solved the main problem, which was extracting data from quantum entanglement. Before that point, it was assumed that data transfer through quantum entanglement was impossible since it violated relativity. The rule that nothing can move faster than the speed of light. It was assumed that only random patterns would emerge on the other side. Then data theory discovered interesting ways of manipulating randomness, and everything changed. Suddenly entanglement took on a new dimension."

"So how does it work, talking to each other? You would be able to talk to any of your kind with whom you had exchanged quantum entangled pairs?"

"Yes. When we are born, we automatically receive pairs of quantum entangled particles from our parents. Through social interaction like feeding each other, quantum twins are shared, dished out in our saliva. We soon have hundreds or thousands of direct links, and can communicate to others through secondary links. A newborn or a particularly reclusive individual may have a more tenuous link, but for the most part we are all highly interconnected."

"That's fascinating. It's almost like you're part of a living, breathing network."

"I suppose we are a living, breathing network. But more than that, we are to some extents a hive intelligence. We are all individuals, but we are never cut off from the group. We are driven by a collective mind which

is greater than any one of us."

"What are you called as a species?"

"We are *iacio*."

"I can see how you got involved in all this."

"We made the decision to remember for humans that which they cannot. To shore up their knowledge for the times when it is needed."

Elizabeth, who was gazing off into the distance, slowly turned back to the *iacio*, smiling. "All those tales of kings being advised by wise birds were true then."

"Not all of them. Some of them. Most of the time, kings are not the kind of people who would listen to us."

"No, perhaps not." Elizabeth was thinking about all the kings she'd known in the countless ages gone by; James Hart, Szczesny Renaud, Peter Terminus, Dagger Linwood, Augustus Celestin, Maria Erramun... There were too many to list except in some ancient tome, locked up in a dusty room, hidden away forever. Each had outstanding faults, all insane, arrogant and cruel beneath a veneer of virtue and strength—none she could imagine taking council with an *iacio*. Their loss... she thought, looking at the magnificent creature beside her; a beautiful giant parrot, a wise friend, a clever spy.

Philip returned. He gave them both a satisfied grin. "Hogan is going to find one and give it a right good bashing. What's his best bet?"

"Where is Hogan?"

"Back in Florida."

"His best bet is in South America, Brazil. There is one down there monitoring something. We have no idea what it's doing really, but it's been stationary for a while within a deserted chapel, in the mountains above a town where we assume something interesting has or will happen."

"Good. I'll send Hogan."

Chapter Fifteen

They trundled into the city, iron bands around the wheel clattering against the stone, while the cart shuddered violently against the cobbles until at last it found the grooves cut for wagon traffic. They didn't turn off, but instead headed up the main street, the rumbling sound from the wagon annoying Aadesh. After the relative tranquility of the sandy road leading to this desolate place, this was hell.

Within minutes, they hit the crowded streets near the market and the cart started and stopped abruptly, weaving in and out of the throbbing market patrons.

"Sorry about this, lad," said Patrick, pulling out heavy shackles from a compartment underneath the bench. "Sign of the barbarity of these lands. No one will look twice at a foreign looking boy in chains. So we've to put the shackles on you to keep you from running."

Aadesh only nodded.

Leaning closer, Patrick whispered, "This is the centre of trade for a hundred miles at least. I can't see us going any farther south."

Defeated, he raised his arms ready for the shackles. Surely any plans of escape lay dead now with these bands of iron to hold him. Patrick fastened the first one into place. Aadesh remembered the words of his favourite teacher, "We take the bad in life, and turn it into good".

Suddenly, an idea came to him.

"Can you give me a little longer without the shackles? Just ten minutes. Please."

Patrick paused, looked at the boy. For a moment Aadesh thought that Patrick was about to ignore the request, but then the big man undid the first one and slipped it from his wrist.

"Aye, ten minutes," he said with a wink.

Closing his eyes, he meditated for a while, just like the priests had taught him. He let all thoughts drift through his mind without paying them any attention until they faded away into the background noise of the universe. He descended deep into his own mind, through the marble house and beautiful garden he had created as a path into his own subconscious long ago. He slipped into the caves ever downwards within his mind to the base of the cliffs and across the sandy dunes to the beach. There the vast ocean that represented his subconscious swept up onto the shore. Here he scrawled a note to the deepest recesses of his mind in the sand and chanted over and over again the message he wanted it to hear, the one that would spur it to do a curious thing and enact a small change upon him. The sea rushed up and swept away the message. He repeated it again and again, until at last he heard the sound of shackles moving. He let himself drift back up to consciousness. When he opened his eyes, he could not help but smile. It had worked. He had made his wrists swell.

Patrick jingled the shackles. "It's that time, lad."

Aadesh offered his hands and Patrick clamped the heavy bands around his wrists, expertly clamping them shut and locking them fast. For a good fifteen minutes, Aadesh sat quietly, waiting for his moment. As the guards passed around a wineskin, another thought occurred to him.

"Can I have some?" he asked.

Patrick remained silent, but the other three burst into uproarious laughter.

"Kid wants some wine."

"Well, give him some wine," said another, laughing. "Might cheer things up in here."

One of the guards passed him the wineskin.

He held it by the neck and tipped it up. They laughed as he missed his mouth and spilt the wine all over his left wrist. A second attempt and he got some in his mouth. A third and he tried to hit the other wrist, but one of the guards snatched the wine from him.

"Bloody waste of good wine," said the guard, while the others laughed at him.

Quick as a flash, he grabbed the wine from the guard and flicked it into the eyes of the guard beside him, poured the remainder onto his other wrist, as he fell back down onto his seat, knocked by the soldier's elbow. Though winded by the blow, the thought of freedom spurred him

on.

He threw his feet up, braced them in the chain between the shackles, and thrust out with his feet as hard as he could, while trying to squeeze his hands into the most compact shape possible. Suddenly, with a jerk the shackles popped from his wrists; chain, shackles and both his feet slammed into Patrick's big face, knocking him backwards into the board. Patrick slumped to the side with a dazed look on his face.

Aadesh jumped up and launched himself over the back of the cart into the crowd. Dodging left and right into the press of people, he made his way to the busiest part of the market. Pausing a moment to collect his bearings, he ducked under a stall, out into a clearing, ran for twenty paces and steered back into the midst of the crowd. He turned to see if they had followed him, but saw no one.

As he turned back, he smashed into someone and found himself knocked backwards onto the hard cobbles. Stunned, the world spun a moment and when he recovered, Count Dakault stood above him, reaching for him with a wicked grin on his face.

Philip whirled in the midst of the crowd, searching for Aadesh. He turned back, caught sight of Aadesh. Count Dakault leaning over him. Philip pushed through the crowd towards Dakault, but before he could reach him, watched Aadesh kick the count mercilessly in the groin, twist the man's hand around and with a snap, break it at the elbow with a sharp kick. Philip grinned. He hadn't realized that Aadesh could fight, but the smile faded a moment later when the boy disappeared from view again, lost in the crowd. Philip surged forward.

The crowds parted and quite suddenly, he found himself standing in front of the count, whose face contorted in agony as he stumbled around in a slow spin while holding his broken limb and cursing.

Upon seeing Philip, the count's face changed to that of disbelief.

Philip brought his leg up into the count's knee, snapping it out sideways at a terrible angle. "That's for my friends," Philip said. "Let it remind you that I will be back to kill you later." A moment later, he disappeared into the crowd while the count let out another gut-wrenching scream.

Aadesh heard the screams from the count and doubled back, caught a glimpse of Dakault, between the crowd that had gathered around the screaming man. Now the count lay on the ground, his knee snapped, his leg strewn out at an impossible angle. The realisation that his friends must have survived slowly dawned on Aadesh.

They had to be close. Somewhere here. Among the crowds.

Before he could react, one of the guards had a hold of him and dragged him around the circle of curious onlookers. With a sound like two wooden staves colliding, the man went limp. Behind the falling man stood Patrick, with his large hand curled in a fist. His nose bloody and his face bruised from the blow Aadesh had given him earlier, he nevertheless grinned. Then he grabbed Aadesh's hand and tugged him back in the other direction.

"We're getting out of here, lad," he said, lowering himself down to Aadesh's level.

"You're not taking me back?"

"Don't seem right, lad. Come on, move it."

The crowd parted, revealing Elizabeth standing before them.

"Give me the boy," she said.

Aadesh opened his mouth to tell her that it was okay, that Patrick was helping.

He swung his blade at her. She pulled her gun in a fraction of an instant, and blood poured from the wound in Patrick's chest. He looked stunned as he fell backwards onto the ground and the crowd parted, people screaming, finally realizing that something terrible had unfurled in their midst.

Aadesh threw himself on top of Patrick's limp form.

"He was trying to help!" screamed Aadesh, holding the big man's armour. He looked at Patrick's eyes as they stared upwards, unseeing, into the unobstructed infinity above.

"I'm sorry," she said and taking hold of his wrist, pulled him up and away. "I'm sorry."

Aadesh looked out of the window through the binoculars at the hordes of silver beasts sweeping towards them. He thought of poor Patrick, who now lay dead, killed in a terrible misunderstanding—killed for no reason at all. Oh, if only he could bring him back. Aadesh felt sure

that Patrick, for all he had been a mercenary, had also been a good man and he deserved better than what fate had delivered him. Now whenever he saw Elizabeth, he felt anger flare up inside of him, anger directed at both her and Philip. He hated that she was a cold-hearted and merciless killer, and Philip for accepting her help.

They should never have hired an assassin.

He glanced over at her again. She lay quiet and still, sitting on the floor in a niche in the room, lost in her own thoughts. Her head was bowed down as if in prayer. He looked away again back out over the view, appreciating its beauty. Slowly, he put the binoculars back to his eyes to gaze once again at the advancing draks.

"So we're really going to hole up here?" he asked Philip, who strode back into the room.

"Yes. Help is coming. We just have to avoid them for a short time, and the inner tunnels of this castle will force them into tight groups, letting us take advantage of the weapons we have."

"Can I have a gun?"

"If I had time to train you, yes. But there is no time." He contemplated Aadesh's hurt look. "I'm sorry."

"Don't say that! I don't want to hear that anyone is sorry. She was sorry she killed Patrick. He was sorry he had been in the employment of Dakault. He's surely sorry he got his arm and leg broken! And the damn bird's sorry that they still haven't found out where the hell the draks are coming from!"

"Okay, no sorry. Things shouldn't have worked out this way, but they did. We do the best we can with whatever the universe throws at us. We all make the best decisions we can based on what we know. Stopping halfway and looking back at the mess we made getting here would drive anyone crazy. Fix the problem, not the blame," Philip told him gently.

"I'm sorry."

"Ahh! Don't want to hear it," said Philip. He gave Aadesh a wink and shot a look at Elizabeth. "We move down now."

Philip led Aadesh and Elizabeth down the winding staircase into the bowels of the castle and through a formidable metal door. Already a barricade had been set up.

"We hold them here, then we fall back. The room beyond is already set up."

"So what is this place?"

"Owned by an old friend. He's aware of our predicament, and lent us this place."

Aadesh positioned himself behind the barricade. Philip cast the screen into the air at waist height. It showed the castle from above, and the Draks flocking towards it. Quite suddenly, the air filled with flashes of green, yellow, grey, shining in the sky, blurs as they pounced upon the incoming draks.

"The *iacio*," whispered Elizabeth under her breath.

All three watched the battle as it unfolded before them, transfixed by the dazzling acrobatics as the large birds tore at the machines with their claws.

Philip had earlier marked Felicia and set the screen to follow her. Now they watched in awe as she turned and rolled and pounced upon the drak below her. As the two plummeted towards the ground together she caught its wings and tore them up. It dropped, Felicia opened her wings and caught the air, letting herself glide even as the mangled machine fell to its doom. Then after a pause, she turned and slid upwards again, her wings working hard to give her speed, to rejoin the fray. She curled into a bullet shape and dodged a swipe from a drak above her, then flicked out her wings and spun.

She dropped, caught two more draks on the way down, and swept open her wings to glide away from the machines. A second passed. Turning, she flapped furiously to take her back up to rejoin the fight. The fight continued in this vein with her *iacio* tearing at the machines from above, gliding away and sweeping back into the skies again.

They outnumbered the draks, but her kind still took heavy losses. They had not been built for battle against such an opponent. She looped around, folded her wings and dropped straight down onto one of them, knocking it into a tumbling spin. She tore through its wing and spun off to let it smash upon the Earth.

Philip, Elizabeth and Aadesh all stood with their breaths held while the screen filled with carnage. The *iacio* proved to be more than a match for the draks, but more and more draks came. Their sheer numbers soon overwhelmed the birds. Aadesh cried out as one slashed out at Felicia with its blade, but it missed, though not by much. Then another caught her hard with its wing so that she was thrown into a spiraling fall. The ground rushed up. Philip turned off the screen, unable to watch any more.

"Oh god, they are being slaughtered."

Philip lowered his hand as the screen disappeared, leaving them in the gloom of the tunnel.

"I know."

Chapter Sixteen

The door burst open with a thump, and both Philip and Elizabeth let loose their gunfire, shooting bolts of energy into the narrow corridor, causing the draks to fall and thrash, or be knocked backwards. The bolts continued until they succumbed and lay still in the floor, presenting an obstacle for those behind. Occasionally, one launched itself inside the room only to be cut down by several well-aimed shots.

Finally, the draks swarmed in and the three fell back beyond the great iron door that would save them. Philip grasped a wheel and spun it, dropping the door into place. All could hear the hammering, random echoes in the darkness as the demons worked to burst through the door.

The sounds grew louder and more persistent until at last the door buckled and silence descended throughout the winding halls.

They fell back into the next room where Elizabeth adjusted their barricade and set herself up in position. Philip began to push another heavy iron door closed; one that closed in two halves and could be barred in the middle. Out of the darkness in front of him, a drak appeared, its skin black, its form hidden in the shadows. It looked at him, its eyes glinting red.

Philip grasped the door and threw it shut, but the drak threw its hand into the gap and tore at him with its claws. He jumped back and instantly forwards again. Extending his foot, he caught the demon in the chest, knocking it back into the darkness. The double doors closed together, crushing Philip's leg between them so that he cried out in pain, but his senses revealed little real damage as he yanked his leg free and stumbled back.

The doors burst open and the drak stood there, glaring over Philip to where the barricade lay. A dozen shots flew over him to strike the

creature, but its black armoured hide absorbed them easily. Philip cursed and rose up to his full height. Taking a firm grasp of the left hand door, he slammed it in the drak's face. Shoulder barging it closed, he spun and flipped the other side closed with his foot. Bracing himself, he held both doors closed as the drak hammered at them. His feet slid back and the doors buckled outwards. Through the narrow opening, he could see its demonic stare between the open halves. With an almighty scream, he pushed the doors with all his strength and hammered them closed again.

With a thud, Elizabeth slotted the steel bar into place effectively barring the door, at least for the moment. She dropped a second one into place at the bottom and they both fell back to the barricade to wait once more.

Philip felt sure they would not have a long wait.

It hammered against the door with maniacal ferocity so that the doors bent, and the bars bent, and finally the door burst from its hinges.

It stepped into the room and paused while its blades slid down and unfolded into its hands. Elizabeth and Philip continued to desperately shoot at it, trying its head, eyes and mouth. Their actions proved futile, and the black one proved a deadly distraction while the other draks swarmed in behind it, flooding the room. They ran for their lives down the corridor, this time forced to abandon the next room along and move directly on to the next to gain enough time to prepare.

"This is the last room..." Philip said as he threw himself behind the barricade. "This black one has cost us too much. We have lost too much ground to it."

This time, the draks tore at the door with their claws to puncture holes at the sides near the bars. Philip and Elizabeth shot at the hands as they reached in and pulled the bars out. They managed to hold the draks off for a few more seconds until the doors burst open again. Both fired madly into the group. In the darkness behind the silver horde, the black one stood apart, watching them from afar.

Finally, the draks fought past the small weapons fire and reached the room, whereupon the three fell back again into the ancient tunnel that led deep into the mountain. At the bottom of it, they reached a cavern; the site of their last stand. Philip threw closed the big iron door and slid his guns across the smooth, worn floor of the cave to Aadesh.

"Take them."

"Philip! Come!" said Elizabeth.

"Shhh, move. I'll be fine."

The drak rammed the door and knocked it off of its hinges. But Philip, crouched behind it, kicked the door at the bottom, knocking it up into the drak's maw, then drew his katana and sliced at the beast. The blade just glanced off its armour. Philip cursed, knocked the falling door to the side, pulled the iron door back around to swing it into the drak. He caught it a glancing blow on its face. The drak grabbed the edges of the door and threw it behind it, knocking one of its fellows to the floor.

It unfolded both swords, and the two fought in that narrow corridor.

"You will not get past me!" He said it more for his own benefit than its.

Their blades whirled in the darkness, occasionally striking the black walls around them, sending sparks into the air. The other draks tried to get around them, but Philip cut them down one by one, slicing at them whenever a break in his opponent's movements permitted it.

The drak quite suddenly slipped past his defence and caught him hard on the right shoulder with both blades. He felt the pain shoot through him for an instant before he forced it out of his mind. Taking full advantage of the instant when its defence was compromised, he struck out with his sword, knocking its weapons from his shoulder. Maintaining his momentum, he spun around, all of his strength going into accelerating that blade up to the greatest speed he could manage.

With all his might, he brought his sword down upon the creature's outstretched right leg. The sword sliced through it like butter and flew from his hand to pierce the drak's left wing and slam into the wall. The blade sung as it vibrated, so poised at the end of its journey, embedded into the wall almost to the hilt and pinning the beast where it stood. Phillip braced his foot upon the beasts chest and kicked backwards as hard as he could, while the roaring beast brought its blades back down, trying to catch him in the neck this time. He felt himself drifting backwards, almost floating in the darkness, until he suddenly hit the ground, landed hard on his back, turned and rolled, and found his feet again. After the faintest hesitation, he turned and ran to find his friends.

At the far end of the chamber, Elizabeth turned on the great spotlights, blinding him as he stumbled towards her. Once beyond the spotlights and he could see again, Aadesh grinned and gave him back his guns. Wearily, he turned to confront their pursuers once again.

"How many have we killed?" asked Aadesh.

"Two hundred and forty-eight," replied Philip.

"How many are left?" Aadesh continued with his line of questioning.

"About two thousand seven hundred and fifty-two," said Philip.

Elizabeth fired shots into the advancing horde as they spilled out into the vast chamber.

"Two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-one, now," said Elizabeth, and she gave an amused laugh.

"But we only have enough energy in our weapons to kill another seventeen hundred," said Philip firing frantically at them.

"And that's assuming we don't ever miss," said Elizabeth.

"I don't ever miss," he said, grinning.

"Neither do I."

"We're still 1000 draks short."

"I know."

"You said that earlier. Now tell me something I don't know," he said, still intent on his quarry.

"I want to see Venus," she said, wildly firing in a line, dropping draks where they would fall into the path of more of their kind.

"Once all this is done, I'll take you to Venus."

"Promise?" she said.

"I promise. I swear on my life I will."

The draks retreated back into the corridor to prepare for the next charge. In the darkness, Elizabeth found his hand and squeezed it.

"Good luck," she whispered.

From the mouth of the tunnel, draks spilled out like silver fire from the mouth of a volcano.

They reached the outside and to their relief, it appeared clear and empty of draks. Licked only by a light wind and the blowing of dust down the steep slope, the valley remained peaceful, so that no sign of violence had touched this side of the mountain. Aadesh stood watching as Philip thudded the tunnel entrance to a close, and let it lock itself fast against the wall of the mountain. No amount of hammering would let them through *that*.

He took a step forward. Each of them froze as an off tune chord pierced the air. It resounded around them like an old harpsichord. Silver balls slid into existence around them as if they had lain hidden under a cloak of invisibility.

The spheres unfolded and revealed themselves to contain draks.

Terrible black draks, like the one Philip had fought earlier. They all wielded sophisticated energy weapons. Contemporaries of the weapons both he and Elizabeth had utilized thus far, maybe even more sophisticated.

Both of them cursed upon seeing their foe, and from above hundreds of draks swooped down the mountain towards them; though it mattered little, given the situation. He was sure neither could fight off so many of the black tinted fiends.

A burst of light flickered nearby, causing Aadesh to turn and look for its source, while simultaneously, each of the draks around them imploded into a mess of molten liquid. Only after a moment's pause, did the sound of explosions reach their ears.

Lines of laser light flickered from the craft as it targeted the draks in the skies above while it swooped down to land beside them, legs sliding out of its belly to grip the rocky ground. Gingerly, it felt the ground around with its legs as it landed it like an insect before finally it settled.

Philip laughed.

"Damn good timing," he said, leading them towards the craft.

A hatch slid open and Aadesh climbed inside. The shiny interior seemed both new and terrifyingly strange. Lights danced in patterns on the walls and ghosts of objects drifted around on the tables like spectral charts and maps. Everything seemed strange, almost otherworldly.

With all inside, the door closed and Aadesh could feel a sudden lurch like he had when the rockets fired on the airship the day he had met Philip. But the movement stopped and everything became perfectly still.

A tall well-built man, greeted them in the corridor. He wore strange clothes, the likes of which Aadesh had never seen before.

"This is Jack," said Philip by way of introduction. "He's the ship's engineer."

Aadesh could not help but think of Tommi; poor Tommi, who now lay somewhere at the bottom of the Atlantic Sea.

Is this what life will be for me? he wondered. Meeting people and then seeing all of them wrenched away by the fickle, interwoven lines of causality.

The craft tilted to the side, the movement so very slight that Aadesh could barely pick up on it. Nevertheless, he found himself curious as to their destination.

"Come," said Philip, who lead them into a room at the back of the craft where he could see the Earth below them. He felt his body tingle as

the sights outside overwhelmed him. Deserts shone bright orange and the oceans luminous blue. It seemed to Aadesh that all the Earth had been opened up and spread out before them just on the other side of that great curved window.

"I can't leave," Elizabeth protested, looking at the Earth disappearing. "My genes! I'll go mad if I can't reach Rome before four months are out. And anyway, if Felichia finds anything, I'll follow it up for you."

"What about Venus? I promised you, remember, that I'd take you there...?"

"Yes, you did. And I remember that. In two years and four months time, come and find me. I'll have two years then, before I need to get back."

Philip reached forwards and took a lock of her hair that hung over her left eye, and he tucked it gently behind her ear.

"I'm going to miss you," he told her.

She said nothing, but leaned closer and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. She hesitated, and added one to his lips. Aadesh looked away out of embarrassment.

"Come back. I'll be waiting for you."

"Leave?" asked Aadesh.

"We're taking you off world, to keep you safe," said Philip.

"Where?"

"Above, almost to the stars."

"You didn't ask me?"

"I thought you wanted to see the world from the heavens, like the ancients?"

"But you didn't ask."

"There are five hundred million others involved here, and six hundred and sixty-six good reasons to take you off world. But no, I didn't ask and I'm sorry."

"I won't ever get to go home?"

"This is just until Elizabeth gets to the bottom of this, then you can come back."

"What if she never gets to the bottom of it?"

"I will."

Philip sighed. "Come," he said, and brought them through to another room, this time at the front of the craft. It, too, had a window. As Aadesh watched the sky darkened from deep blue to black, the horizon curved, and stars shone brighter and clearer than he had ever seen.

Two men sat at the front. One moved lines of light about on the surface before him, obviously controlling the craft.

"Aadesh, this is the pilot."

The pilot tapped his hand on the surface three times before he got up. He greeted him with a firm handshake. "I'm Rob Hunter, pleased to meet you, lad. And this is Simon Pausini."

Pausini gave a curt nod while he ran his fingers over some of the flickering lights and moved a circle of light about the panel, busy in some task that Aadesh didn't understand. The pilot towered above Aadesh, and dressed in a close-fitting suit of charcoal grey. On his left forearm, a firm strap held a panel that shone with lights and shapes ebbing and flowing along the surface like a smaller version of the panel he used to pilot the ship.

"Pleased to meet you too, sir," said Aadesh, staring fixedly at the panel.

Hunter followed his gaze to the panel.

"This lets me control the ship, even without being in here. Come, lad, take a seat."

Aadesh was ushered into the pilot's seat and from there he looked out into the black abyss where the stars shone bright and solid. More stars now shone before him than he had ever before seen—billions of them—spun like a glistening web across his entire view.

"How many are there?"

"Stars?" asked Hunter.

"Yes."

"Uncountable billions. 400 billion in our own galaxy, and an uncountable infinity of other galaxies, each with their own sets of billions of stars."

Aadesh found himself stunned at this news and could say no more, literally his mind tried to imagine that, and he was swept away by the vastness of it so that he couldn't encompass even a fraction of it in his mind.

Quite suddenly, the craft pitched down, and there below them shone Earth, glowing in the daylight, darkness cloaked around one part of it while the horizon curved around, revealing the Earth's spherical shape. The atmosphere at the horizon glowed against the darkness like a blue flame.

Aadesh gasped.

All his anger at Philip and Elizabeth faded away as the view outside

touched his soul. Earth hung below him, and beneath the marbled clouds was everyone he had ever met, and every place he had ever been all within a single glance.

He watched even as they dropped down into the atmosphere, and outside burned furious like the sun. They dropped through the clouds, down as Italy swept into view. Like an eagle pouncing upon a rabbit, they swept down into Rome herself, landing in a small clearing. Aadesh marveled at the spaceship, so quick and agile.

"Elizabeth," Aadesh said, leaving the chair, "I'm sorry. The way I was with you, was wrong." He looked at her not knowing what else to say. "Thank you," he said finally.

"Just keep yourself out of trouble, kid," she said. She had a strange look, one which Aadesh couldn't quite place. He wondered if something troubled her, but could not decipher what.

She placed her hand on Philip's arm for a moment and walked away through the corridors and out of the ship. She walked across the dusty plaza, and disappeared into the city without so much as a backwards look.

"Will we see her again?" asked Aadesh, feeling odd. He barely knew her, but it was like losing an old friend.

"Yeh," said Philip cheerfully. "You know what cats are like... she'll be back."

"I hope so."

"Me too."

"Won't they see us?"

"No, we're cloaked."

Aadesh frowned. He had been hearing more and more strange words lately, and here was yet another one.

"The ship is invisible," clarified Philip as the hatch closed.

"Can I fly?" asked Aadesh.

"Yes, but it will be a simulation—uh, it'll seem like you are really flying, but in fact you're not. But all pilots have to start with that. Someday you can fly for real."

"Really?"

"Yes, but first there is something we have to show you."

They returned to the cockpit. Philip directed him to the same seat as before. The clouds, caught in the orange light from the setting sun, shone brightly above as they rushed up to meet them. They loomed large in the view before disappearing just as suddenly when the craft glanced past

them so only the darkening sky lay above them.

They ascended into the heavens, and the co-pilot turned the ship around so that they could see the Earth from higher up this time. Against the blues, greens and whites of the Earth, hung black dots, arranged in a spiral around the Earth. Aadesh stared at the strange pattern that enclosed the Earth like some kind of sinister cage.

"Aadesh. Those are what we call the Ex3," explained Philip. "The *exakosioi exékonta ex*, as it used to be called. It is a defence platform. Six-hundred and sixty-six satellites orbiting Earth in a spiral. That's what this is all about. That's why they wanted you."

"It's a what?"

"Each one of those dots is a weapon, a powerful weapon. And all of them combined have enough power to destroy Earth. They all orbit Earth, just like the moon does, only closer."

"But why did those people want me? What have I to do with this?"

"The machine would be able to identify you as the descendant of the man who built it. It would let you issue orders. Whoever was sending the draks wants to control you, because you can control the device."

"But why?"

"We don't know, but it can't be anything good. That's why we're taking you to Venus. You'll be safe there."

"Venus..."

"Yes, Venus, second planet from the sun."

"What's Venus like?"

"Beautiful floating cities, bubbles of life adrift in the clouds. I'm sure you would love it."

"It sounds lovely," said Aadesh, thinking about floating cities in the clouds. Surely it would be wonderful, yet his heart now ached for home. He watched as the ship turned away from his home.

Philip brought him to a room at the top of the ship where a window looked back upon Earth. From there Aadesh could still see the devices in black, silhouetted against the Earth. Six hundred and sixty-six deadly weapons that had been lying dormant for millennia.

What are they like? Black spheres, lying dormant, sleeping, awaiting something. 666 spheres of death waiting forever for an order...for something to do.

Suddenly his mind filled with a vision of them waking up: 666 eyes opening, all turning down towards earth.

He shuddered.

Chapter Seventeen

The morning light delicately lit the tower so that it looked beautiful, and it shone like something out of an ancient myth. Plants had taken over the entire structure, so that plain brick walls constantly gave way to greenery.

Elizabeth entered, following the *iacio's* instructions, and climbed the stairs within the tower. After an age, she reached the top, and there an old man sat in an old wooden chair waiting for her. Tall and powerfully muscled, he seemed more like a bear than a man. His stern expression was locked upon her, and his eyes seemed to pierce her. His long steel grey hair blew in the breeze. His nose reminded her of that of a boxer. In profile she could see that it hooked like a beak. He wore brown robes, and toyed with a solid staff while he contemplated her.

"Leonidas, I presume?"

"Elizabeth, you may very well hate me for what I'm about to tell you, but my only hope is that you will forgive me for waiting so long."

"What?" her voice revealed more concern than she would have liked.

"Elizabeth, I'm just like you."

"That can't be. I don't age, and you're an old man."

He contemplated his fingers—sharp claws shot out and his eyes turned into slits. Elizabeth caught herself swaying and steadied herself.

It's true then...But it was crazy all the same. He shouldn't have aged. Or is it that there comes a point where the inevitable happens?

"Lion DNA. Whereas yours was a mix. All the best traits for what you do."

"And?"

"I wasn't a geneticist. Indeed, I was their product. But as the years passed, I grew angry and frustrated with what I was, until finally I

decided to change. And so I began to research, starting from scratch. The only thing that I had to my advantage was the benefit of time. Perhaps the benefit of knowing what was possible. I rebuilt the science of genetics from scratch, pieced it all together one experiment at a time, until I had mastered it.

"Oh, it took a long time. I had to rediscover so much—electronics, chemistry, computers, mathematics. But finally, I found a way to eradicate the company programming from my genes."

"You did it?" asked Elizabeth, aghast.

"Yes. I injected myself with a retrovirus which rewrote my DNA, and removed and added, and made me what I wanted to be. The price I paid, was my immortality. I will eventually die, in another four hundred years, approximately."

Elizabeth did the calculations in her head. Her claws snapped out.

"You've had the cure for eight hundred years and you didn't contact me?" she said angrily, her breath quickening, her teeth suddenly clenched and she stepped forwards.

"Nine hundred. It wouldn't have worked on you. It was tailored especially for me. The retrovirus you would require is entirely different, and I only finished it fifty years ago. They made you far more complicated than me."

"Still too long!" She stepped closer threateningly.

"There are only two of us, you know. Fifty years ago, after I had just finished your version of the retrovirus, this whole thing erupted. Those were dangerous times. The society which had been protecting the blood descendants of Arvin Raneri, was destroyed. Aadesh's father disappeared, then later killed himself to prevent the worst from happening. But with all these ends frayed, I realized that one of us was going to have to stay programmed—to stay with humanity just in case—to protect them against Arvin Raneri's monster, his six hundred and sixty-six."

"Why should we care?"

He sighed and turned to gaze out across the forests.

"Why, indeed."

She came up and stood beside him and looked out at the forests, the winding roads, the villages and towns, the scorched fields where a battle was fought not so long ago.

"Once you untangle this mess they have created like a good little cat, then the *iacio* will reveal to you the location of the retrovirus. It will keep

practically forever, so don't worry about it. In the meantime, we have discovered the source, thanks to Hogan. That was some fight from what they tell me. He damaged one of them nicely, and it led the *iacio* back to their base. I am going to inject you with an inhibitor, so that you can chase this string to its end."

"Inhibitor for what?"

"Inhibit your need to return to base. Do you not remember, they could change the duration of your return home reflex with a simple chemical injection?"

"Yes."

"It will give you twenty-five years. The maximum possible without altering your programming."

"Then, after twenty-five, it returns to normal?"

"No, it sets it to every twenty-five years."

"Thank God," she said.

"I know, returning to base every two years was killing me. I was based in London. That was the first thing I did to myself."

"Jesus. London..."

"Yes, I almost froze to death many times over."

He opened one of the pouches hanging from his belt and produced the syringe.

"May I?"

She considered the possibility of a trap for a moment, and then offered her arm. He pressed the dull end against the skin and the device hissed as it shot the chemicals into her veins.

"So, where am I going? Will I really find the source and be able to end all this?"

"My dear, the source is at the heart of the Salar d'Uyuni."

"Once upon a time, that was Bolivia, South America."

"Yes, a very empty place these days, high altitude, cold, barren, right on the edge of the glacier. And the ideal place to hide an army of those things. Likely, they were warehoused there, and whoever it is that's now controlling them, discovered them by accident."

Seems a bit too convenient, she thought to herself, but she didn't bother to mention that to Leonidas.

"Shouldn't we have bumped into each other long before now?"

"Perhaps, but I saw to it that we didn't. Especially not when either of us were on a job and could get in the way of the other...can you imagine what would have happened? We would have torn each other apart, nor

could we have stopped our own pre-programmed compulsion to carry out our duty."

"True."

"There's some stuff in that bag over there which you will find useful. C-Rings for invisibility, holographic avatars and a copycat booster. You still have the knack, I presume?"

She thought back to the last time she had used a copycat. Half of her *neems* seeping out through the pours in her hands and into the copycat device. It then fell to the floor and began to change shape as her *neems* rebuilt it into a duplicate of her. Within minutes, she had been looking at a mirror image of herself. The connection between her *neems* created a link through which it was possible to control the copycat. True, she had to tuck herself out of the way while her mind focused in the copycat, it was like an out-of-body experience. Nevertheless, running around as a remote controlled replicant had its advantages. Not least of all the second life it afforded her. And copycats were fluid entities that could dissolve into liquid and slip through the smallest cracks, infiltrate the tightest security, then simply reform back into the visage of herself, all at will. It had of course been many millennia since last she used one.

"Knack? It's just like riding a bike," she said with a smile.

"Good. Take it and go... Good luck, Elizabeth."

And so she did.

By caravan to London, by ship to the Americas, she trekked through Brazil towards the Salar d'Uyuni.

Her horse followed the trail up into the mountains and across the steely plain. The water upon the salt flats turned the Earth into a giant mirror, reflecting the sky. The strange optics created a bizarre landscape, so that it appeared to her almost like riding across the cloud tops in the heaven of ancient fables.

The wind howled past her, chilling her to the bone. She gathered her many layers of clothing about her as the horse continued onwards. Every hour or so one of the *iacio* would fly past, marking for her the route so that she never strayed too far. She remained alert, just in case her presence was detected, but over the past few weeks she had not seen a single drak.

Above in the sky, the wind blew hard dragging the few straggling

clouds along with it, tearing each shape until the edges frayed like feathers. Otherwise, the blue sky took on a pallid, washed outlook above endless barren plains.

After another half hour picking her way towards her destination, she saw one of the *iacio* swoop down, marking out her target. With it in view, she pressed on harder, unsure how far ahead it lay, since distances became meaningless here.

Finally, she saw a bird spiraling and knew the time had come to leave behind her horse. If all went well, the *iacio* would guide her back to it later, but it would not do to approach with the horse. Especially not with the advantage of surprise and stealth given to her by Leonidas.

Within another two hours she came across her destination. Without the help of the *iacio*, she might never have found it. The bunker lay beneath the water, sunk down an inch below the surface, so that no one could see it passing by. Large metal walls surrounded it, holding back the saturated ground. Gazing down beneath the water, she could see stairs descending to a metal door set in the middle of the structure. Gun turrets lay still. Cautiously, she circled the bunker. There didn't appear to be any cameras nearby. She pulled out a hand-held device and scanned the nearby area for anything unpleasant. It revealed nothing, no observation dust, no insect-sized robots and certainly nothing dangerous. She didn't like that kind of result.

She descended the steps into the water so that the icy liquid wrapped itself about her like a death shroud. She flipped out a coder, which fortunately had been designed with such rugged uses in mind, and placed it upon the keypad. The coder flickered as the parts inside of it worked their magic—lights danced, codes assembled and deconstructed, more lights danced—open sesame—the door slid open.

Gingerly, she stepped inside and activated the panel so that the airlock closed and the icy water cycled out of the chamber. When the second door opened, she stood at the end of a long thin corridor that plunged deep through the mud of the dried up sea and into mountains below—thin metal walls between her and the saturated soil.

There still didn't appear to be any cameras or other monitoring devices. In the darkness her eyes turned to slits, her enhanced sight took over, ten times more sensitive than a human's. The corridor had enough light scattering up it from somewhere far below to allow her to see.

So far, there had been nothing, and although that disturbed her ever so slightly, she supposed that this place would have been set up to look

abandoned. Only deep within would she find what she sought after. Only there would she face some sort of resistance.

The smooth-walled tunnel continued downwards on an easy slope of four degrees. She walked for half an hour, and yet there was no sign of ever coming to the end. Even her acute sight revealed to her nothing except for the smooth walls that went on perfectly straight.

She concentrated on the infrared part of the spectrum so that her vision changed once more, the neurons triggering at different stimuli. But it only revealed the residual heat of the mountains and the heat of the Earth's core ebbing up through the rocks.

Finally, the tunnel came to a stop and opened up into a large chamber. She could see a man standing there waiting for her. The lights came on.

"I knew you would arrive at some point. Suffice to say, that our work here is done."

"Our work here? Who are you?"

"Yes, our work here is done. My name is Duad."

"The boy is safe, and whatever part you played in this, I am here to find out." She eyed the draks around her for a moment. "Nor will any of these stop me from finishing what I set out to do."

"Oh no, Elizabeth. You've got it all wrong. The only working controller is on Mars, and once Philip has inadvertently delivered the boy to Venus, then the interested parties will acquire the boy. They will then take him to Mars, where they will activate the *exakosioi exékonta ex*."

Elizabeth felt herself sway as her muscles weakened and her mind throbbed. What he said to her seemed too large to fit into her mind. She steadied herself.

"But then, why all the elaborate chase? Surely you would have just snatched him, and been done with it?"

"Simple really. He—and don't press me on that, for I have no idea who is above me—did not have the authorisation to get the boy out. Hence, it was necessary to set up an agent such as Philip, who did have such authorisation."

"What do they want with the Ex3?"

"I'm too low down in the chain to know that. All I do is control these."

He indicated them, and they raised their weapons pointing at her, their fingers moving down the trigger to fire the shot that would have killed her. The holographic projection of her vanished, revealing a sphere

about the size of an orange, bristling with weapons. It dropped spinning to the ground, releasing beams of light, which cut through every drak in the room. Sliced into fine strips of metal steaks, they tumbled apart and slid hopelessly onto the floor. Only Duad remained standing, looking incredulously at his body, patting himself down in disbelief.

Her claws found their way to his throat and he froze as beads of sweat drifted down his forehead.

"You didn't think an eight-thousand-year-old assassin would come walking straight in here, did you?" she said.

"You're right. We didn't."

Duad exploded. The room and Elizabeth were vaporised in an instant.

Chapter Eighteen

Elizabeth sat above, sitting cross-legged a short walk away from the entrance to the bunker with the C-Ring bracelet around her wrist. It made her invisible while she mentally controlled the tiny nanobots as they seeped downwards through the cracks infiltrating themselves ever deeper into the structure. Though a master of bluff and counter bluff, she nevertheless had a limited number of holo-spheres to throw away on such obvious methods and she was in a hurry. With two holographics wasted already, she decided to go straight for the jugular. Bypass their defenses altogether.

Using them all would get a little boring anyway, she decided.

Her mind gradually focused more and more on her other self, sliding down through the microscopic spaces, until it seemed to her as if she was there.

They emerged inside a large chamber where mechanical devices worked, pistons pounding and electronics filled every possible space. Though impossible to tell what the devices were doing, it couldn't be anything good, she decided.

Her nanobots cannibalised the metal decking and quickly formed a replica of Elizabeth. The copycat soon stood there poised and ready. She began to explore the dark recesses of the underground structure, and glad that she was still safely above ground. Down here made her feel more than a little claustrophobic. From her vantage point, high up in the gangplanks, she could see that nothing at all stirred in the decks below.

She crept silently along the walkway and moved through two doors into another section. Checking for cameras or guards, once she found it to be clear, she moved along swiftly and surely.

After a short while she heard a noise and sprung up into the gap

between large pipes that ran along the wall. There she waited as a droid wandered past below her, scanning in a standard sequence, looking for intruders, missing her entirely.

Once it had disappeared through the door, she crawled along the pipe, jumped silently back down onto the walkway and slid through the door. Spying two men about to enter, she leapt upwards and wedged herself between the narrow walls to wait as they walked beneath her, oblivious to her presence.

Once they disappeared along the corridor, she dropped down and continued on her slow and steady progress. She didn't have time to ponder the words spoken to her before by Duad, whoever he was. She had to find out the truth. There had to be something here that could reveal it to her. Yet at the back of her mind, thoughts of the ancient world drifted to the fore, troubling her immensely.

Hafnia, the informal name for this operation in Copenhagen. By chance it just happened to be the city's Latin name. She gazed out of the window of the skyliner as it turned to descend into the airport, to park its Olympic stadium-sized form upon the ground. Calls went out over the n-max to be picked up by a receiver embedded in her skull. A message slid into her vision, suggesting that now would be a good time to pack in preparation for landing.

She already had.

The craft touched down with only the slightest tremble thanks to the A.I. pilot; the ones raised in India were always the best. She swept out of the door grabbing her case.

Within ten minutes, she slipped through the mazelike mess of corridors, through all the machines and scanners, and hit the streets outside of the airport. She hailed a cab, and within another four minutes reached the station. The private carriage of the hover-train proved to be a modern and comfortable way to travel with a thousand tri-band feeds with which to amuse herself. Information and entertainment swept into her mind as she browsed the feeds. The train hammered silently and smoothly towards downtown Copenhagen.

As it drew closer, the conical Havn tower presented itself in her side window view, while the train spiraled into the city. The building rose up like an oversized pyramid, dwarfing the smaller, three-kilometre high

skyscrapers below. The scrapers joined and un-joined at awkward angles, poised in all manner of inclines. In this part of the world, alluding to crystals was the 'in thing' among architectural statements. She preferred the far south, equatorial buildings of organic curves and towering cylindrical arcologies.

Within a short period of time, the train had spun around and shot through the city's busy financial district, into the heart of the Havn tower where she enjoyed the view of the park before the train came to a stop.

She slipped out among the passengers and made her way to the lift, a large spherical chamber that held a crowd of forty others. It dashed up the building, depositing them floor by floor.

She got out on the two-hundred and sixteenth floor and maneuvered herself through a password-protected door by slipping behind someone who was going through it anyway. The door closed as he continued down the hall. Elizabeth stood silently waiting for him to disappear round the corner. Once out of sight, she found the door she was looking for and placed a device on the lock, opening it within a second. She repeated this on an inner lock, and gained access to a secure part of the complex. Picking up a file that sat on one of the desks, and looking every bit the office worker, she walked along numerous corridors past staff members as they sat in silence in their cubicles, hooked up to cyberspace, gesturing computer commands at the empty space before them.

Elizabeth slipped into an empty office and closed the door behind her.

Here she stood up on one of the desks and slipped open a ventilation cover, swung herself inside, and clipped the cover back in place, her claws slipping through the thin gaps in the grill and locking the latches in place.

She slid backwards down the shaft to the T- junction, took a right and followed it to its end where an intersection took her upwards. On the next floor up she carried on through the tunnels until at last she paused at another junction. Everywhere lay hidden danger; microscopic cameras, observation dust, and tiny insect like robots, swooping about collecting data, and she encountered them all. Deep within the compound's computer systems, her company industriously hacked into this building's network. Her company was now controlling the building's peripheral equipment, and would be wiping every trace of her in real time as she progressed. Someone whom she had never met now shadowed her in the cyber world, clearing her path and covering her

wake.

After almost an hour, she maneuvered herself into the main ventilation duct, and found a spot with an amazing view down upon the central park. There, in front of a grand fountain, the landscape formed a natural stage. Soon G. E. Thaeth, the controversial scientist and politician, would give his 'final' speech. She waited with deadly patience, gun poised and ready for him to come.

She knew the story. The report drifted into her mind the second she thought about it;

His corporation has developed a new system in the fight against global cooling. The rolling glaciers that may one day wipe the northern hemisphere from the map do indeed pose a threat to our civilization, eventually. But Thaeth mistakenly believes that it is his responsibility alone to do something about it. He claims to have developed the technology to push back the glaciers.

Our scientists are urging caution. It is believed that his mechanisms will cause more harm than good, and that his solution might accelerate the glaciation in the long term. Thaeth intends to proceed with or without the consent of global leaders. Meanwhile, he believes his fervefacio device will melt away the glaciers and save the world. Our computers predict an 85% probability that this project would be discontinued with the removal of Thaeth. You are to assassinate him.

He walked into view now, and she could see him magnified even with her naked eyes. He wore his hair swept back like a jazz musician, he had donned a black suit, black shirt and a red tie for the occasion. A large man, he looked like he had gained a couple of sizes since he bought the suit. He had ruddy cheeks, but far from looking jovial, he appeared strikingly menacing. Self assured, and arrogant, he strode to the plinth with a confident gait.

She cocked a smile and brought her gun up. Now, looking through its telescopic sight, she followed Thaeth as he moved up to the stand and stood addressing the crowd. The crosshair centered on his forehead.

She squeezed the trigger. Behind her, she felt the bolt of energy pound into her back, she felt her body spasm as the shock ran through her. Her hands jerked open, her arms stretched, slamming open the shaft cover, her whole body stiffened, her weapon fell. She watched in agony as it dropped down past all the hundreds of floors below. Her neems kicked in and absorbed the energy, giving her a second of movement. In a flash, she brought her auxiliary weapon around and shot the droid that attacked her.

She hadn't heard it come.

The shot blew its head off, but it barged forwards, crashed into her, and knocked her out of the shaft. Both fell together for a moment until it fell past. She remained dangling from the shaft, her legs braced against the top and bottom of the rectangular opening. Not one to give up, she swung her gun back towards Thaeth and took the best shot she could, upside down, hanging from the shaft, with only her auxiliary weapon and no telescopic sight.

One of his bodyguards jumped between them, taking the bolt in the chest, killing him instantly. The combination of two sets of body armour absorbed the shot, saving Thaeth. She followed Thaeth with the crosshair, his body thrown backwards by her previous shot. She took a breath and pulled the trigger, the crosshair on his heart. A droid pounced between her and her quarry. Foiled again.

She relaxed her legs and dropped out of the shaft, falling in a spiral as a dozen shots cascaded off the walls behind her. Twice more she aimed and shot at him as she fell, but droids and bodyguards piled themselves above him.

Her chance gone; she couldn't get a shot. Her mind worked like tumblers on a lock, spinning like crazy through all the other possibilities until at last one clicked, one crazy plan, and she had fallen barely ten meters before it had formed itself in her mind.

I'll still get him...

BoomKitty, said a voice in her mind addressing her by her codename, *stock market is crashing, pull out your stock.*

The tumblers faded, her plan drifted off into the ocean of what could have been.

As she fell, she unloosed a rope and grapple, threw it at a balcony and swung down, angling in towards a tiered park on the twentieth floor and somersaulted. She hit the ground at a run, her mission a failure, and everything turned messy as the security droids flew at her.

Needless to say, she survived the encounter, but she had also failed. Thaeth had let loose his *fervefacio* device and it had worked...

Too well.

It melted the glaciers away to nothing and dumped all that fresh water into the oceans, disrupting what had remained of the warm currents from the equator. Around the world, coastal cities were flooded

and lost.

Then, since little heat was being brought up in the equatorial currents, the north and south froze again, very quickly. The glaciers came again, only this time they were much, much, swifter; unrelenting as they ground their way into the south. They killed and displaced billions, causing the chaos that destroyed all the progress man had made.

She thought about it, and she had thought about it many times over the thousands of years since the collapse. She didn't know exactly how long had passed since then, after a few millennia the previous ones always seemed a little hazy, unreal. Sixteen thousand years was often her best guess, and even though she had lived through every second of them, they seemed unreal to her. Except for that day. It always seemed like yesterday. She could never forget her sin. She failed in her task... failed to kill Thaeth. The world fell apart because of her.

Wrenched from her thoughts, she suddenly noticed ten droids surrounding her position on the barren plain above the facility. She jerked into an awkward crouch, ready to fight them off. The lead droid, a big weapon-laden drone, leaned forwards so that its dome-shaped head tilted towards her. She could see its face beamed upon the surface. It leered at her, and with a chuckle it said in its metallic voice "How cute. A C-Ring. But we're post light-bending tech, so you might as well not have bothered."

She estimated it to be a Gamma class A.I. and that would indeed place it after C-Rings. She cursed and stood up, but sat back down as the stunning blow struck her chest and the universe ebbed away. She hadn't meant to get captured quite so easily, she thought as her mind closed in on her. Indeed, she hadn't meant to be captured at all.

Chapter Nineteen

Aadesh awoke and there above him stood Philip, waiting patiently. He felt just the way Philip told him he would after coming out of stasis, a little groggier than he would have if he'd been sleeping, but otherwise feeling fine. Philip slowly helped him to a sitting position.

"How you feeling, kid?" asked Philip.

"Fine, fine. Not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Good. Just sit there a minute, don't try to get up. Your feet and your legs will let you down. I'm just doing some final scans."

"So we're at Venus already?"

"Yes. I'm going to take you up to the cockpit so you can see our approach. Venus is a gorgeous planet, and I'm sure you will fall in love with the cities."

"How long was I sleeping?"

"One month, and one hundred million kilometres. We had some catching up to do, since Venus is racing ahead of the Earth."

"I can't wait to see it."

"You can. Try standing up now."

Aadesh climbed shakily off the bed, still holding onto the edge, and got used to the feeling of standing. Though he felt little ill effects, it did seem to him as if he hadn't stood for a long time, as if the memory of doing so had been dulled during the long sleep. He walked about the room and after five minutes, the strange sensations lifted, and he felt as if he hadn't been in stasis at all.

"Did I dream?"

"It's possible. Do you remember any dreams?"

"No."

Philip guided him through the corridors and up into the cockpit

where Aadesh caught sight of his first planet other than Earth. Venus hung in space in front of him, a beautiful pearl in the jet black of space. The planet filled the view, her edges just touching the sides of the window so that the black still framed her, and space remained visible all around. Aadesh could only compare the planet to a jewel set upon the black silken cloth of a jeweler.

Even as he watched Venus, it grew closer and larger, and he noticed that the atmosphere below flickered constantly. Bolts of lightning danced from cloud to cloud. The ship angled around and moved towards the top edge of the planet.

"We will airbrake in the upper atmosphere of the planet. The friction will slow us down in the skies around the equator where there are no sky cities," Philip explained. "Once we have slowed down sufficiently, then we will bounce back up out of the atmosphere and head for one of the northern cities."

"The friction will slow us down?"

"Do this," said Philip, swiping his hand through the air. "Do you feel the air against your hand?"

"Yes."

"The air acts on your hand to stop it from moving. That is how all things on Earth stop moving when you stop applying power to make them move. But in space there is no air, and a vehicle would move almost forever in whatever direction it is pushed. We could turn around and fire our engines to slow us down, but it would take a lot of fuel. So instead, we use the atmosphere to help slow us."

"I see."

So they watched from the window as the airbraking unfolded, and Aadesh learned much from Philip about his new home. A Venusian year was 224.7 Earth days long, while a Venusian day was 243 Earth days long, which was longer than a Venusian year!

Philip explained that its thick atmosphere had slowed it down, just like it would help slow down the ship. He also said that from the surface, a day would appear 116.75 days long. Fortunately, the computer display helped him to understand all this better when Philip programmed in a small animation to illustrate it.

The floating cities used hydrogen to keep them aloft in the dense atmosphere, just like the airships back home. They sat far to the north and south of the equator, where the strong Venusian winds pushed them around the planet once every twenty to sixty hours. Thus, some of the

cities had days close to those of Earth and some longer. The cities sat in the cloud tops because the thick atmosphere made the surface of the planet very warm indeed.

Since he had just arrived, he would be living in Octavia, where the day was maintained at about twenty four hours long and he would find it easier to adjust. Philip warned him that he would find a lot of things difficult to understand.

He watched the view outside the window as the ship hit the atmosphere, and the transparent heat shields rose up to protect them. Orange flames licked up from below, the ship shook as she tore into the atmosphere. He heard the clanking of machines start up at the back of the ship, and the rattling as everything inside shuddered.

Philip showed him how to pull the safety webbing over him so that he felt secure in his seat. Though he tried to present a brave face outwardly, he still felt so alone and tiny, everything around him so strange, that an icy terror worked its way from the base of his spine to the back of his mind. Outside raged with such an inferno. But someone stayed with him at all times, and so the others helped him to maintain his composure while he waited out the hellish fire of air-braking. Patiently, he waited for the moment when it would all stop.

Eventually that moment did come, and they skipped back out of the atmosphere and up towards the bright stars before they angled back in towards the pole. The ship slid gracefully through the atmosphere, and the hull burned bright and hot, but not so much as before.

Gradually the flames subsided and they slid across a layer of milky clouds towards a magnificent turtle-shell of a city with its large dome covering a thousand buildings so much like those of the old Earth.

Suddenly, he felt as if he had been thrown back in time.

The city swept towards them. The skyscrapers within the city rose up, tall and plentiful, like a jagged forest of steel. They all seemed so different from each other; some organic like growing trees, and others shot up like sword blades cutting the air.

He felt the force as the ship tilted and swept around the city. They slowed and turned sharply to enter a rectangular chamber set in the side of the city in the outer rim below the dome. The ship stopped gently and the pilot set her down, the lights dimmed, and everyone mentioned a single word with profound relief; "home".

Down the angled ramp at the back of the ship, they walked out into a large rectangular chamber. Its walls shone of bright metals, and reflected the banks of lights set in the ceiling. Every few feet, black buttresses broke up the reflective surface, so that it looked like they were inside some ribbed creature. Panels with blinking lights and displays sat in one corner of the bay, and they looked just like the ones inside the shuttle.

Philip walked ahead of him and brought him through a door and a corridor along towards their mysterious destination. Within each of the multitude of rooms, people waved mysterious objects near them, and they had to walk through machines or stand beside panels. "These scan you for contraband and diseases."

"What's contraband?" asked Aadesh.

"The stuff that pirates try to smuggle in."

"Ahh."

He watched as the pilots stood inside a dome, while blue beams rose up and down their bodies.

"This is all normal. Everyone goes through it when they come here, or when they land on Mars."

"Are there a lot of pirates?"

"No."

"No wonder."

Philip chuckled.

Naturally he had so many questions he wanted to ask, but Philip told him it was best for them to remain quiet. Though he was high above these officers, if they were in a foul mood they could still cause all manner of problems, and being delayed here for an hour wasn't Philip's idea of fun.

Philip called the people in white shirts 'tedious bureaucrats,' but wouldn't explain what that word meant, so Aadesh gave up asking. Nothing happened for ages, and suddenly, they found themselves in an empty hall, walking towards doors coloured with ruby glass. They opened before him and he found himself out and into the streets of the city.

It took his breath away.

The buildings rose up so very high, like the Petrolia towers of home. But all were covered in a fantastic array of materials from shiny to matt, from clear or opaque, and from white to black. Some of the towers featured such intricate patterns that his mind ached to look at them, while others featured facades as smooth and plain as the sky.

As his gaze swept across the city, he noticed cars as they came and went; little oblongs of metal and glass sliding from one place to another, sometimes empty and sometimes full of people. They were exactly how he had imagined them to be in all the stories of the ancient world.

He could see so many people in the streets, parks and towers before him that he felt giddy at the thought that there could be so many humans in existence. It seemed like all the people he had ever met in his life had arrived here just before him to people this place. Indeed, perhaps they had been tripled for good measure.

High above the sun shone brightly, lighting the massive dome that enclosed the entire city in brilliant luminous sky blue. There were even fluffy clouds sweeping gently below the face of the structure. Philip told him that they were holographic.

Humans had made their home here, he realized, and they had made it exactly like earth. Everything he beheld here mirrored almost exactly what his home had once been like; people crowding the streets, tall buildings, side-streets, markets, parks and cars.

"Remember to breathe."

Aadesh realized that he had been holding his breath, staring, trying to take in everything at once. Oh, and he failed so miserably to do so; each glance at just the tiniest fraction of the scene seemed to reach him.

He breathed, and it hurt.

Rectangles with images moving in them dotted the landscape. They looked to Aadesh like big windows into other universes; women, men, robots, strange writing flashing upon them, people doing things or showing things, other scenes from far away. Like magic, it all shone in those wonderful windows. After a few moments he decided they were giant versions of the displays they had on the ship.

"What's that?" he asked Philip, pointing to a metal figure. "Looks like a drak. But no wings, and more oval."

"Yes. Same type of thing. An auditor."

"Auditor?"

"Yes. Here that particular unit keeps an eye on things, makes sure that everyone is safe."

Aadesh cast about in his mind for something to compare it to.

"Like the monks of the way?"

"Yes, just like the monks of the way."

He looked at it. It moved about almost with a child's curiosity, investigating whatever it liked.

"And that?" he asked, pointing at one of the big rectangles on the side of a building with people moving across it.

"Video screen. You saw them on the ship."

"So it's a big display?"

"Yes."

"I thought that."

"It's holographic, like so much else here."

A car pulled up. He and Philip got inside.

Philip gave the vehicle instructions on where to go and it drove off along the street. It turned and went up the other side of the street, down a on ramp, and sped down into the tunnels below the city where a thousand cars on a dozen nearby lanes sped past them, all moving at great speed.

As the car made its way through the tunnels, Aadesh closed his eyes, finding this the most frightening experience he had ever encountered.

Almost as soon as it had begun, they shot up back onto the surface again and slowly (at least in comparison to below) wound up through a spiraling ramp set inside a glass tower. The car stopped and they got out, much to Aadesh's relief.

He stood swaying for a moment while a few people came and went.

Philip encouraged him to follow him towards the entrance that lay across a narrow bridge.

Behind him, the car sped off on its own.

He felt a million years out of touch.

Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth awoke, but she didn't open her eyes. Her mind shifted to her other self; it had automatically hidden itself when the link broke. As the link gently rejoined, its senses came to her. The copy-cat lay atop a pipe, and the scorching surface burned her suddenly as the sensors flickered to life. She deactivated its sense of touch to stop the burning, and crept slowly forward along the scalding pipe.

In the distance she could hear the sound of pistons pounding, metal blocks hammering in the dark, lasers cutting, the sounds of industry; always an unpleasant business whenever it involved droids. She heard footsteps along the metal walkways down below, people's footsteps.

So this place isn't totally automated...

Once certain that the way ahead of her lay clear, she jumped down onto the walkway and flitted through the corridors. She came to a droid, and before it could react, she took hold of it, letting her nanobots seep inside its casing. The lights on the droid faded as it deactivated, and she felt her heart flutter as its memory banks jumped through two links and into her mind. The layout of the structure suddenly sprang into her conscious awareness. Its usefulness to her over, she threw the droid in a corner behind some machinery and continued on her way.

Steadily, she moved through what she now knew would be the quieter areas as her ultimate destination became clear. The facility had a sophisticated communications set-up, more importantly, one that still worked. A look at the maintenance records scooped up from the droid revealed data on the whole facility including comms, and they maintained it well with lots of recent work.

Time to put it to good use.

It took an hour of careful and slow progress through the dark tunnels,

avoiding guards and droids, until at last she reached the communications room.

There were several large comm units, all arranged in a circle, set within a pit in the ground, each with comfortable chairs for operatives to sit. Set around the outer edge of the room lay banks of other instruments.

She slipped in, snapped the guard's neck, and destroyed the droid with her nanobots. Quickly, she threw herself into a seat and joined with the device, her nanobots slipping inside of it and forming a link while a quantum implant in her real head hacked through the encryption and granted her full access to the system.

Every trick she never had the opportunity to use in the past sixteen thousand years now shone like a gem as the defenses fell before her. Firewalls parted like smoke, and ice shattered before her onslaught. Thankfully, she didn't even feel rusty. Her mind flickered through the data that lay open to her.

As she had suspected, the communication systems were sealed off from everything else, so she had no way of releasing herself, or gaining access to any information other than what was already in the communications buffers. It didn't matter; this task was more important. In her mind a message was already prepared. She slipped it into a data stream and projected it out of the facility to the heavens where it would be beamed to Philip... hopefully.

She felt the blow, but couldn't wrench herself away in time. Her body exploded, torn apart from a blast, but it was too late now. The signal sent, Philip was warned, and he would protect Aadesh.

She jerked to a sitting position even as the sensation of the replicant being torn apart reached her, and she instinctively gasped, but it was quite all right. She sat now in her original body, a prisoner, locked in the dark cell in the middle of the ancient facility, a million miles from anywhere; her last chance of escape in ashes and scattered across the comms room.

It didn't matter.

Aadesh mattered.

He'll be safe.

They could even kill her if they wanted, but they would never get the boy. The room felt cold as ice. She felt herself begin to shiver and wondered if they were just going to kill her slowly, indirectly, let her freeze to death.

Or would they have the guts to come and do it themselves?

The apartment was gorgeous. It had been decorated in advance of his arrival and looked almost as if it could have been a room from one of the houses in Old Kuala Lum. A stone fountain lay in the centre of the apartment enclosed within a rectangular room of glass, and filled the place with the beautiful sound of flowing water. Light shone down upon it and it sparkled as if lit by the mid-day sun.

Outside, he had a balcony filled with plants, with two wooden benches and a table for them to sit at. It offered a grand view of the park.

Indeed, he liked the park because there he could imagine a time warp had taken him back to the time of the ancients.

"Can we visit the park?" he asked Philip.

"Yes. Follow me."

They took a lift down from the apartment to the ground floor, and Philip led him down into an underground walkway. That took them safely across the road, and from there they followed the path beside the winding river and across a final bridge into the park.

Finding himself here in the middle of all the trees struck a chord in him so that he found other emotions hidden within him. Suddenly, he missed home so much that it seemed like a million years had passed since last he stood upon the earth. Images of home ran through his mind; pretty girls dancing, celebrating the festival, a thousand colours of Lanndanam, the high towers rising up...

Here the park served as an escape from all the travelling.

People walked contentedly, enjoying the scenery. Children played nearby, sitting on the benches or lying beside the lake in the middle of the park. The trees looked just like the ones he saw in Europe, and they brought back memories of the chilly air he had experienced in New London causing him to shiver despite the warmth here.

As he looked about, he noticed amazing details on the clothes here; the colours changed every now and then, fading from one colour through to the next, like mood stones. Sometimes they changed to reflect the scenery, and some moved wildly in dancing patterns. Some people even appeared to be transparent, as their clothes projected the exact image of what lay behind them.

Many of the people had glowing symbols projected in the air around their body, like luminous glyphs, serving some purpose that Aadesh could not even imagine. To him, they all looked like magnificent

sorcerers.

Out in a small lake in the centre of the park, small boats casually floated about while the occupants either steered them or relaxed in them. Geese and ducks drifted about on the surface, carefree and content, while people cast food to the animals. The park had numerous small stalls selling sweets, drinks and ice cream. Overhead flew birds, but he never once saw a four-winged bird, much to his disappointment. He preferred those to the two-winged variety.

They were all small birds and most were brown.

When they landed, they bobbed about, jumping in little bounces across the ground, searching for something to eat. Most sat in the trees and chirped. He saw some crows, the large black birds from the old myths, and long gone from earth. It had been said that they were an ill omen. Aadesh didn't believe in such things.

"I'll take you into the centre of the city in a few days. Until then, we'll stay here at the city's edge until you get used to things. Cities can be scary, especially on such a scale, like nothing you've ever been used to."

He gazed up at the dizzying sprawl and couldn't help but agree with that.

"Okay, let's go back now," he said, and gazed up at the tower behind them where somewhere, amidst all the billions of balconies on that one tower alone, lay his own.

They walked back along the path, and more and more questions popped in and out of his head. Some of them he asked. Most he forgot.

"What will I do here?" he asked one of the ones he could remember.

"School. I'll arrange tuition for you. At first, you will be taught in the apartment. Much later, we can think about sending you to a school. But you've a lot to get used to first."

Aadesh gazed up at the cars flying between the buildings, up in the sky, silhouetted against the blue, and decided that he definitely did.

As the bitter cold numbed her, Elizabeth lay on the hard bench, thinking instead about the beach, remembering how she felt all those years ago. She lay in a hammock, swinging to and fro, resting in the shade of the palm trees, enjoying the sun. Still the nip of the glaciers to the north distracted her. Nowhere left to run from the cold carried in the winds.

Tempest Roams in the Pathless Sky

They were right to use the cold. I can't fight it, I just want to give in to it. I just want to sleep. After so long struggling, to end it, to sleep forever.

So her imagined self closed her imagined eyes, and slept as the hammock swung to and fro. All thoughts faded away. Everything slowed and time stretched out like elastic, so that she could not track its progress.

Eons passed, and her thoughts faded away.

Voices.

"Minus twenty," came a man's voice, a noise she could barely understand. It merged and oscillated, shuddering and echoing in the nothingness around her.

"She looks dead to me," came another. White lights danced and stabbed through her, and the pain of trying to think became unbearable. All the words flowed together. A noise like the spinning of a helicopter blade flickered about in her mind. Memories drifted in, trying to crowd out the sounds, and she fought them off to hear the strange conversation.

"-frozen solid. How'd ya like your bitch, frozen or what?"

"What if she'd actually succeeded in getting that signal out?"

Tumblers began spinning deep within her mind.

Failed...

Aadesh still in danger...

Ancient programming kicked in. Power flowed from cells in her spine. *Neems* moved into position about her body warming it, repairing the damage, rebuilding her. In her brain, the network of quantum links that had supplemented her cognitive processes burst into overdrive. The words became crystal clear.

"Did you say foundry?"

"Once she's at the bottom of a pool of molten titanium, we can all relax."

"You heard the man. We've to mix her in with the metal."

"I still think we should hit her with the sledge hammer, break her up, throw her in bit by bit in chunks."

"Yeah, you do that."

A blow like the collapse of the universe struck her, like God had unmade her, shattered her, smashed her into a thousand facets. She suddenly found herself up and among the men. She slashed out, catching two of them in the throats, dropping them instantly. The third fell back as she slashed at his guts. He clutched the wound and his innards as they spilled out.

She took him by the throat.

"What happened to the signal?" she demanded, her voice a metallic rasping sound.

"Directional beam," the man gasped. "It hit one of the Ex3 satellites - didn't-reach-Venus-you were in a rush."

She dropped him and he slumped down onto the icy floor, slumped to the side, eyes staring off into the distance, breathing in little gasps.

"I-should-have-listened-to-the-man," said the stranger, straining between breaths.

"Should have," she said, stepping away from him. As she opened the door to the outside, she caught a reflection of herself in the smooth metal; a monster. The cold had frozen her skin, made it fragile, and the blow had shattered the ice and taken her epidermis with it in places, leaving her without skin. The red of her flesh stood out against the pale blue of the metal. She watched horrified at the rippling of her muscles, visible as she moved her head slightly. Fifty percent of her skin on the left side had shattered off with that blow. The pain coursed through her as the effects of the adrenalin wore off and faded again as the *neems* kicked in. She looked away and looked back at herself. She had become a monster.

She had become a demon.

All the better to scare them with...

She broke into a run.

At the bottom of the corridor, two security droids launched themselves at her, modified draks, no wings, heavier armor. She slipped past them and didn't look back, their footfalls falling behind her as she ran. Two turns and two levels brought her within sight of the comms room again. She jumped down another level and readied herself to jump again down to the appropriate level, when an explosion knocked her back off her feet and onto the cold hard metal catwalk.

Painfully, she climbed to her feet and stared in disbelief at the smouldering remains of the comms room.

Shit, they're really making sure I can't... and the thought stopped in its tracks as she launched herself back up towards the exit, hoping beyond hope that they hadn't the time to set up much gear in her way.

Everything blurred together as she fought her way past six droids, killed two guards, and dashed along the tunnel back up to the salt plains above. Gunfire erupted around her, and two rounds plunged into her back, causing her to stumble and fall. Her open flesh burned in agony as

it rubbed against the rock. The bullet wounds throbbed so much that she threw up onto the cold hard floor of the corridor.

She heard a guard stumbling up the corridor and lay still while he fired into the dark above her. He moved forward and tripped over her feet. He fell and she rolled to the side so that he crashed into the hard stone floor and snapped his neck with one fluid movement. She quickly rolled him over and took stock of his weapons. She threw his gun over her shoulder and unclipped all of the pins on the grenades he carried. Setting them on the ground, she silently rolled them down hill, one after the other, and took off up the tunnel laughing like a maniac. The explosion almost knocked her from her feet and the flames licked at her back as she ran. She didn't care anymore. She had gone beyond caring—gone into a mindset beyond all else. One thing alone remained in her mind.

When she reached the door, she thumped the opening lever hard, grateful for an easy way out, and pushed through into the airlock, closing the door behind her and hammering on the lever to cycle out the air, to fill the chamber with water. The saltwater stung her so that she screamed and choked, and stumbled up the steps onto the salt flats where she lay until at last the whining of a gun turret behind her drove her to her feet.

She staggered out across the plains and glanced back at the turret as it aimed at her. She watched as it powered up, lighting up section by section. No cover in the salt plains... none... not here...

Elizabeth looked up and saw an *iacio* above. She screamed up at the bird.

"You must warn Philip! Aadesh still in danger! Ex3 controller on Mars. Plot was to get him off world where they..."

Philip awoke as the message from Elizabeth streamed directly into his mind. It had taken a convoluted journey to get to him. Sent from a monitoring station on Io that had a telescope set on Earth, it recorded a great mass of the birds in the upper atmosphere forming a pattern that spelled out a message. Io had routed the message to Venus, then it had come through the city's data grid along with the message from command promising additional security. The room lay in darkness with all the blinds closed.

Aadesh in danger. Plot was to get him off earth. Ex3 controller is on Mars.

His eyes layered night-vision over infrared, so that he needed no light, giving him an advantage over any would-be intruders, unless similarly enhanced. Whoever was after Aadesh would need time to coordinate their attack, surely? Would they expect him to be expecting it?

He jumped silently out of bed and retrieved his weapon from the bedside cabinet, his mind authenticating with the chip to unlock it. Within moments he had the drawer open and the gun in his hand, even as he pondered the warning from Elizabeth.

"Shit," thought Philip. "He's right where they want him..."

He pressed the controls along the side and activated the weapon, setting it to stun.

I brought Aadesh here to keep him safe, not put the boy in more danger, and yet...could I have prevented it? How could I have guessed that I was being manipulated in such a way all along? And knowing this, would I have done anything differently?

He moved swiftly to the door and entered Aadesh's room.

A man stood there with a cruel grin on his face and his weapon trained on Philip, who had no time to react even as the bolt struck him in the belly and knocked him flying backwards into his room. The pain shot through his systems and the world disappeared with a pop.

Chapter Twenty-One

Philip tried to sit up, but found that he could not move at all. He tried to speak, but that achieved nothing either. A virtual persona appeared beside him. Virtual furniture slid into view, and he found himself sitting down in a virtual reality construct beside this other individual.

"That was quite a shot you took, blew you clean in half. You're being repaired as we speak."

"Aadesh. Is Aadesh okay?"

"He has been taken."

Philip shook his virtual head. "Poor boy, always being captured. Always at the centre of this bloody struggle, played like a pawn by whoever the megalomaniac is that actually wants the Ex3."

"It's okay, we'll get him back. Just relax and worry about it once you're up and about."

"I can't not worry about it now," said Philip, pausing and wondering if his head had been hurt as well. Satisfied by some cursory checks, he continued. "We need to get him back, and we need to make sure this doesn't happen to him again. What kind of affect do you think this would that have on a boy his age, always being kidnapped? Even taken away from his home to stop it happening, and it still happens."

"I'll have you up and about within the next twenty minutes. *Then* you can go after him personally. First I have some tests to run."

"It blew me in half, you said?"

"Yes. But all things considered, you got off lightly. Whoever sent you that message saved your life. When our people got there, we found a bomb planted in the apartment. Luckily, you disturbed the intruder, who in turn messed up the settings, giving us a chance to disarm it."

"I'll remember to thank her later," said Philip, thinking about that

bleak other reality where Elizabeth had not gotten him a message on time, wondering how it would have felt to die in his sleep, to not even be aware of death upon him.

He shuddered at the thought and pushed it from his mind; now he had a job to do.

"Okay," he said relaxing, "let's get your tests out of the way."

Within fifteen minutes, Philip found his newly-rewired legs and dashed out of the medical centre. He limped full speed towards a rendezvous with a cab. Deftly, he jumped in it and punched his destination into a panel. His abdominal area felt rather strange, twisted inside out. He shuddered frequently as his newly-wired nervous system remapped itself to regain optimum efficiency.

The cab took him straight to the star docks, where he found the shuttle waiting for him. All the weapons he might possibly need lay in a crate. After a quick check, he slid the gear up into the cargo bay and climbed in. Connecting mentally to the ship's systems, he prepped it and steered her out of the airlock into the vanilla-hued sky. After a thousand meters, he angled up and shot into the blackness of space.

Two hundred kilometers out, he found the military cruiser now scheduled to take him to Mars. He docked and shut down all the systems on his little craft as quickly as possible and followed his escort up and onto the bridge.

The captain was a tall gentleman with a warm smile and a mop of mousy brown hair. His eyes showed the deep concern of someone who would do his best to help no matter what.

"Captain Morrow, at your service."

They shook hands.

"It's a piss-poor situation, and on top of that, hardly a good alignment of planets for the trip. We're looking at two months, and that's pushing these new engines as hard as we can. A'least they—" Morrow waived his hand at the view screen to indicate those who had taken Aadesh, wherever they were, somewhere out there, hidden by the expanse, "—are in the same boat"

"Agreed."

"They were met by a frigate just outside orbit, but took it out with a Corsair cache weapon. I'm guessing they don't have too many of those.

Now I've given you the good news, want to sleep the trip?" the captain asked him.

"No thanks," said Philip. "I've got work to do."

"I suppose you'll want to get started. You need anything, just ask," the captain said.

A crewman showed Philip to his quarters where he relaxed into the comfortable couch and began to get to work. He started to work through every digital record he could gain access to; military, civilian, administrative, news archives. Somewhere there was the key to all this, somehow he could piece it all together so that when he got to Mars, he would be prepared.

His reasoning was simple, The kind of person who goes to all this trouble to control the most deadly weapon ever created, wouldn't be the kind of person to go unnoticed. And so he scoured record after record, in search of his enemy.

The captain called in on him from time to time, while he worked, and offered help whenever he could. Philip, glad in a way for the gesture, reciprocated by taking up the captain's offer of fencing practice.

He continued to work every spare hour, determined to find an answer.

The problem is, Mars will be in lockdown long before Aadesh ever reaches it. They would never get Aadesh into Mars given the circumstances and the increased security. So how will they do it?

That left one possibility.

Whoever had Aadesh would have to take him to Loth City; the gangster capital of the solar system. They would surely anticipate the tight security. Philip realized then; the controller for the six hundred and sixty-six had to already be in Loth, and that was going to be a very big problem.

Getting into Loth City wasn't easy, fortified, impenetrable, locked down under the tight control of the crime lords. Only those authorised by the great houses of Loth could get in. Only those favoured by the gangsters ever got out. Even if he managed that miracle, next he would have to get to the boy's captors. An army of criminals might stand in his way. And he had to do all that before they could activate the Ex3.

Philip held it all in his head for a moment and let out a desperate sigh.

The two month trip passed quickly while Philip went through almost every file he could get his hands on, and yet he found nothing to help him. He felt a certain relief though, as the military cruiser entered Mars' orbit, and the captain called him to the bridge once more.

"How did your research go?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Philip said.

The captain handed him a slip of paper.

"You might need that, you might not. But that's an old friend of mine. He's a gangster, but an honourable one, and he owes me a favour."

"Thank you," said Philip.

"Good luck. For all our sakes."

The shuttle took him down over the dusty red plains and town towards the spider-like metal habitats that interlaced the surface of Mars. The domes of purest diamond sparkled in the weak sunlight, and ruddy clouds drifted above. He passed above several of the Martian cities. They sprawled out over the surface for thousands of kilometres. Dozens of them passed by before he arrived at the one he wanted.

It loomed large in his view, and he wove between the buildings to his destination. Drawing closer, he slowed down. As his craft sidled up to the bay, a large rectangular door opened in the side of a building and waited for him to nudge the shuttle sideways inside and onto the landing pad. Then the pad drifted through a tunnel into the inside hanger. It docked him into a side port where he disembarked. An overly cheerful droid greeted him.

"Welcome to Odessa City, Mars. May you have a splendid visit, sir."

"Thank you."

He stormed through the corridors and got into the transportation system, down in a lift to one of the deep underground chambers where he got into the tube. The doors slid shut and the train departed. Five minutes later he alighted at Densara College, and ascended a formidable mountain of steps, up to the grand Roman façade carved in the side of the canyon. The glass roof overhead gave the canyon itself the look of a mightily oversized shopping mall.

Once inside the dark hall, he connected to the digital maps, found the correct floor, and took the lift down to the twelfth basement level. A few

more turns through grand underground plazas and he found himself looking at his old friend from many years ago, Jason Mahilis, who still had the same mop of blonde hair and Earth sky blue eyes.

"Philip, not seen you for years!"

"Forgive me for sounding rushed. This is going to come as a shock. But I need your help to get into Loth."

Jason turned pale and looked at him with a scowl. An uneasy moment passed, and finally Jason managed a smile.

"I see you still know how to drop a bombshell on your friends."

"You'll help?"

Jason sighed. "Course. I know you'll do the same for me someday."

"How do I get into Loth?"

"This ain't going to be easy, but for starters you're going to need another body. Right now, you're not..." Jason looked at him appraisingly, "...roguish enough."

Philip chuckled.

Philip looked at his other self, the new body a sharp departure from his previous one; large and burly and a distinctive look of stupidity about it. He and it (or himself and his second body) connected through quantum pairing, while his original body lay dormant. For all intents and purposes, they were now body and spirit, mind and soul.

He sat on the couch and paused while the usual feelings of uneasiness passed. With a grin, Jason nodded and Philip finally hazarded the perilous task of getting to his newly-found feet. After a few staggering steps in an arc, Philip managed a straight line and followed his friend. They walked along through numerous dark passageways within the cavernous plazas of Mars. Constantly, their progress wavered as they navigated an intricate set of code-locked doors.

"This will get us in. You look just the right type. Normally, I have some dumb brute as a bodyguard, so you'll do nicely."

"Dumb brute, eh? How should I talk? I wouldn't want to make them suspicious by saying the wrong thing."

Jason used his wrist computer to transfer some files to Philip from the archives back in the room.

"Here, these have been recorded in the course of our duties, keeping an eye on the crime lords of Loth; fun to be there, boring to watch. Have

fun. Should give you a good guide though."

"Thanks, you're too kind."

While they walked, Philip studied the files and practised internally for his new role.

They got on a train in the lower levels, which wound up and took them to an old series of entrances to the main transit system. They came out next to an abandoned shopping area and walked through a litter-strewn station. Strange smells hung in the air, along with the more familiar odours of stale beer and human excrement.

He had never seen this side of Mars before; the filthy side, the criminal side. Though aware that such back tunnels into less pleasant areas like this were Jason's preferred method of coming and going, he had never before experienced it. The reality of it hit home a few truths about his world; nothing could ever be certain. It surprised him that even in this modern and enlightened society, growing fissures still formed just under the surface and they could split everything apart.

Jason defied easy categorisation; part sociologist, part spy, his links to the criminal underground in Loth made him extremely important. Indeed, at this moment in time, Jason could claim to be the most important person in the universe. Only through him would Philip have any hope of getting Aadesh back.

They took a train. Philip found it to be only marginally cleaner than the station, and sat throughout the journey fascinated by the behaviour of the passengers who acted in the most eccentric ways. One stood with a sandwich in hand, kicking and punching at a wall of the train as if practising martial arts, except with little skill. Philip watched him stumbling as the train swayed back and forth. The journey seemed to take forever as the train carried them up the rails to the Olympus Mons docks.

They climbed out and borrowed a car, Jason driving it to their destination, Dock-11-Silverberg. Within a grand hexagonal chamber a ship lay in wait, partially active and waiting to take them on the last leg of their journey. Inside, he happily found that a range of weapons comparable to those left aboard his own shuttle.

Jason climbed into the pilot seat and deftly started her up, listening to the low primordial growl that emerged from her engines. The panels revealed that the ship bore the name *Dolce Greylock*.

"Any idea what the name means?" asked Philip. Original ship names never seemed to be in short supply.

"Seriously, you've never heard of *Dolce Greylock*?"

"No."

Jason took her up and out of the airlock, navigating with tiny pipe thrusters, until they cleared safe distance. At that point, he hammered on the throttle, taking them swiftly through a narrow canyon and across Mare Sirenum.

The flight took less than twenty minutes.

Soon they were curving round towards the imposing gateway to the underworld.

Once they docked Philip equipped himself with an array of brutally powerful weapons, most of which were highly illegal, but had been provided for him by an old friend within the agency. All were easily concealable, especially thanks to his bulky new form.

He flashed a grin at Jason, who picked a couple of weapons for his own use, and they disembarked from the tiny shuttle and out into the menacingly bleak port. Burly figures in black suits gave them a cursory glance as they passed through the security screening. They soon found themselves beyond security, much to Philip's relief. As they left the port, no one else even gave them so much as a second glance.

The disguise clearly worked.

Within moments, they cleared the copper arch of Yuj, round a circular corridor, and out into the streets of Loth. Though Philip prepared himself for anything, the experience proved altogether better than he expected.

Litter drifted down the streets powered by the ancient fans spinning next to the sidewalk. The place looked like the dingiest, most desperate looking place Philip had ever found himself in, and he had been about a lot. Oddly, he found himself enjoying this wonderfully strange new environment, despite the danger he and everyone else faced.

A few more turns and they slipped through some near-empty backstreets where prostitutes sat waiting, dressed in tiny skirts, and see-through clothing. Thin ribbons of fabric tied around them, did a deliberately poor job of hiding their bodies.

Jason guided him into another alley and through an old metal door, up a flight of steps and into another room. A door opened and a man bearing a gun ushered them in.

"This is my new bodyguard," said Jason, by way of introduction.

"All right," said Philip, his voice sounding somewhat like a medieval butcher.

The man gave him a nod, but otherwise ignored him.

"We need to see Rama."

The man chuckled.

"He's in a foul mood. You'll regret it."

Where previously there had been nothing but empty wall, a door slid into existence on their left. As always, Jason led the way down the corridor and into an office. It was done in the modern style of office; mimicking as much as possible the grandeur of a Roman emperor's study. Philip found it to be almost welcoming.

The occupant, a large man, dark skinned, heavily muscled, sat on the other side of the desk, staring at them both menacingly. He was so heavily muscled, that his neck had become a trunk, and his head tiny by comparison. No hair graced his head, and his eyes shone black as night; clearly altered in some disturbing manner; he presented a fearsome visage. He smiled, showing white teeth filed to fangs, completing his image perfectly. The man suddenly slammed a large gun on the table, pointed at both of them.

"This better be good!" he growled.

The door behind them slid shut.

Chapter Twenty-Two

As soon as the door closed, the man's manner changed. Cheerfully, he stood up, rounded the desk and embraced Jason tightly, hammering enthusiastically on his back. A few glances exchanged between the two men, and Jason introduced Philip.

"Rama, this is Philip, taking an auxiliary body out for a spin. Of course, totally necessary to get him in. You know how it is down there."

"Philip! Heard all about you. What brings you here? I thought you were on long term on Earth?"

"That's the problem," stated Philip. "We came across a boy who would be able to control the Ex3, his ancestor designed it, and designed into it the ability to discern descendants and allow them control. Someone wants control of the damn thing. We were attacked on Earth, or rather hounded silly, so we brought the boy to Venus for safekeeping. Unfortunately, it was a ploy to get us to bring him out. They took him and brought him here. I believe unless we locate them quickly, then Earth is in deep trouble."

"Shit. That's all rather unfortunate." There was a terribly long pause. "I tell you what I'll do. For twenty million, I will ensure you get the boy back."

Philip weighed his options for a moment. Twenty million materialized in his mind. Earth, on the other hand, hung on the precipice, teetering over the chasm of fire. At this moment in time, it seemed a single breath would be enough to knock it over.

"Get him back before anything happens to Earth, and it's a deal. You get nothing if the Ex3 is turned on Earth."

"Twenty for boy and Earth safe, ten for just the boy."

"Deal," said Philip, realizing that they had little time to argue over it,

while Rama had all the time in the world. Nor was the gangster asking for a lot—merely an executive salary—a drop in the ocean, all things considered.

Immediately Rama flicked a switch and gave orders over a quaint old intercom device. The door slid open and two men came in. They took up positions just to the right of Philip and stood to attention.

“Philip, you have an image of the boy?”

Philip obliged by sending over an image of Aadesh from his own memory. Rama copied it onto digital paper and handed out a copy for each.

“I want this out to every one of our men, and I want information, I want it quickly. Five hundred thousand to whoever supplies me with real information leading to the location of the kid. A bullet in the head to anyone who wastes my time. Got it?”

The men moved out as the door slid open and disappeared in an instant. Rama gave a great grin, like a troll contemplating an inbound traveler heading for a bridge.

“This won’t take long at all,” he informed Philip.

Far from speculation, within twenty minutes Rama’s claim proved justified as a message appeared back informing Rama of a positive sighting of the boy. One of his agents appeared moments later, having acquired a video feed.

Rama clapped his hands and gestured, pulling the info off of the disc and onto the video wall. All watched, transfixed. Philip almost fell off his chair at the sight of Aadesh and his captor. It took a moment for him to steady himself, a moment longer for him to look at the screen again. There, beside Aadesh, tugging the boy towards the gaping mouth of a dark corridor, walked Bhakti Kalapani, dark hair, a silvery crest at the front of his it, a white suit instead of robes. But still there could be no doubting his identity; the distinctive silver bracers made sure of that.

“Fucker,” Philip said.

They took off in an armoured car while other armoured cars joined their convoy as it wound its way up through a mess of streets to the

surface of the city—up to Mondimas Plaza, following close behind Aadesh. The tower loomed before them, offering the promise that they might just get there in time.

The ten lead vehicles, all part of Rama's personal contingent, hit the steps of the building, rode up over the fountains smashing them like porcelain. Next, they struck the side of the building and rose up to ascend vertically, while clawed wheels tore into the facing of the structure. Their vehicle pulled them up at an unrelenting pace aided by powerful omni-direction jets.

There seemed like a heartbeat's pause and the building's defenses erupted in a hail of plasma missiles. None of the armoured cars were fazed by the attack, each equipped with all the latest defenses. Below, the rest of the forces arrived in more conventional vehicles and smashed through into the lobby, beginning their mission to storm the building from the ground up. Philip watched everything through mindlink to the networked computers of the armoured cars. Video, radar and composite readouts of the battle all flooded into his mind.

Above, great turrets swung into position and hammered bolts of energy down upon them, while from below a hail of covering fire erupted. Some of the defense turrets shuddered to a halt, and some exploded. More turrets swiveled in from over the top to replace the damaged units, and the cycle repeated itself.

After successfully softening up the resistance at level 542, the battle machines halted. Everyone prepared themselves as the vehicle's bottom hatch opened and mechanical cutters burned a perfect oval opening in the side of the building. Men knocked the oval through and piled out of the craft into the facility.

Philip joined them and followed only a little behind the main body of the troops.

In the minutes following their assault, they encountered only light resistance, and cut through the opposition easily so that forward progress moved swiftly. Though the winding superstructure of the building presented a navigational challenge, Philip concentrated on this task, and felt sure he had it sussed.

Suddenly, they found themselves inside the centre of the facility. Bhakti Kalapani stood tall and proud, looking at them coldly. He seemed distant and altogether a different man from the one he had known.

"Kalapani!" shouted Philip. He felt the aggression in his voice let out a great sigh. "How long have I known you?"

Each of the men who stood in the room beside Philip had their guns trained on Kalapani, who appeared unarmed, and yet did not bear the look of a man who had been defeated. Aadesh knelt beside him, facing away from them, towards a cylindrical tower that looked as ancient as time itself. Philip felt a pulse storm through his mind, and another as the signal danced from the device. He shuddered as strange feelings came over him while the signal seeped through.

Instinctively, he took aim and fired, intending to disable the device. Unexpectedly it exploded in flames, engulfing Kalapani and Aadesh. Cursing his stupidity, he launched himself forward at lightning speed, snatched up the boy, and pulled him from the flames.

While the fire faded around them, Philip knelt upon the hard floor, cradling Aadesh in his arms, and wept. The boy lay still, his skin blackened by fire, his breathing but a harsh rasping. Philip shuddered as emotions he normally had utter control of gripped him and tore him to shreds.

One thought swept all away.

Earth.

"Get him to a medical centre, now!" Philip barked. "I'm going to try and stop it."

"But, how?"

Philip did not even respond. His temporary body merely collapsed backwards as if it too had died.

His own body and mind drifted for a moment within an embryonic state, all half-dream, all half-aware. His mind snapped into a state of full coherence. Three facts lodged themselves in his mind like an obelisk.

1.1557 Astronomical Units

576.700327 light seconds

9 minutes, 54 seconds and counting

He had less than ten minutes to get to the Ex3. He had to outrun the signal moving towards it at the speed of light, or something terrible was going to happen in or around Earth. He jumped up off of the couch and

sped through the corridors while his mind linked with the central computer.

Philip reached out to her.

"Starling, I need help!" was all he could think to say.

"You cannot travel the path until you have become the path itself," said Starling.

"Trust me, I am the path."

"Then you will find your way clear of obstacles... but are you ready for the gateless gate?"

"Gateless gate?"

He had no time to ponder it.

He found the ship parked where Starling told him it would be. She had already hacked it open and prepared it for launch. He loved her for her lack of scruples, though she failed every sentience test thrown at her. Gingerly he nudged the controls and swung out of the hangar, then sped off across the Martian surface while crazy thoughts danced through his mind.

Starling popped up on the intercom, her digital face, undoubtedly beautiful, looking at him whimsically, then she spoke, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

"J. Robert Oppenheimer," replied Philip.

"Yes, and no," she replied. "The Eleventh Chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita."

"Ah, yeah, Hindu holy texts."

"Time, pain, death; thus the tears flow in my name. I am the destroyer of the worlds, and have come to annihilate all. Even without your participation, thus the fire burns, thus is our fate."

"You really know how to cheer a guy up, Starling."

"An analysis of the signal is completed."

"And?"

"The signal instructed the Ex3 to power up weapons and target all human life on Earth. More precisely: all settlements, and all individuals. It will wipe humans from the face of the planet."

"Right, could be worse then."

"And then, it is to prevent anyone from getting in."

Philip let out a very long sigh and thought about it all. None of it made any sense.

Why?

He pondered it all, and yet no discernable pattern came to him. All

the shapes fit randomly together, no single form jumped out at him. Nor did he have time to unravel it. Only Kalapani could tell them the answer. If he survived to tell the tale...and if so, would Kalapani reveal his intentions? What did he believe razing earth would accomplish?

"Maybe he's a crazed environmentalist?"

"But you don't really believe that, do you?"

"Of course not. It doesn't fit."

It would be left to others to complete the pattern, to fill in the missing variables in this equation. His thoughts faded away as a particularly memorable canyon streaked past. Deftly, he piloted the ship around the winding corridors before him and dived towards his destination, Mare City, one of the very oldest cities in fact. As he shot towards the mid-hi docks, he arranged with Starling for some crash barricading. Without receiving a reply, he hammered his ship's engine into the one hundred and fifteenth percentile, every second as precious to him as purest diamonds. He pushed the ship beyond anything it had ever been designed for.

"Slow down, flight landing trajectory and speed out of safe parameters," cried the automatic voice, now harassing him. All other safety systems lay silent, each carefully deactivated by him. He grinned, as canyon walls swept past in a blur.

The shuttle belted down at 1200 kilometres per hour towards its ultimate destination. A square of black started as a point and grew to a vast opening that swallowed up the craft. Suddenly, the vehicle struck the landing pad, sliding heavily into the foam and crashed into the safety webbing sewn across the bay. Layer upon layer of netting tore, and he felt himself hammered forwards in his harness, shuddering as the ship wrenched its way through a dozen safety nets. His speed and momentum seemed undiminished as the wall hurled itself towards him. Philip's mind raced.

In those brutal seconds, time became something else for him, and in that moment he had time to contemplate the past, the present, and all that could have been. He wondered if this had been at all a good idea. Had his calculations been wrong? The wall swept towards him, the nose caved in, and with a terrible hollow thud, the world danced and darkened as death's shadow passed over him.

5 minutes, 18 seconds and counting.

He clambered from the ruined shuttle and staggered into the waiting cab. With little else but a beep of acknowledgement, it spun around and shot up towards his destination. He found it to be far swifter than his ordinary modes of transport.

Several streets slid past.

Swiftly, the vehicle took him up onto the surface where people went about their business, oblivious to the crisis going on around them.

The car came to a complete stop outside a building.

Tearing himself from the seat, he rushed inside. Security abruptly halted him....until Starling appeared within their midst and brushed them aside. Along a corridor, up an elevator, across another corridor, and into another painfully slow elevator, down into the bulk of the cavernous recesses of the cargo area. There the operator stood solemnly next to the cargo transporter. Tucked in an old, little-used corner of the hall, lay the ancient device. Despite the centuries that had passed, it still had a working link to the Ex3.

He walked up and entered the chamber.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," said Philip, well aware of what he was about to do. He would be scanned; in a fraction of an instant, every one of the atoms composing his body would be read. He would be broken down into pure energy, and the information about him would be sent through quantum entangled pairs to the Ex3. With a great deal of luck, an engine inside the Ex3 would reconstitute him back into his original form.

This daring move was only possible because two hundred years ago there had been a serious attempt to regain control of the Ex3. The attempt had been cancelled through fear of upsetting the device and causing it to lock down, preventing all access to Earth. But they had left behind the working entanglement transporter that had sent supplies through for the men working there.

If it worked, he would reach the Ex3 a full minute and a half before the signal arrived. If it didn't, then he would not be around to think about it, nor would anyone on Earth. Of course, even if his crazy plan worked, he would technically be dead. It would merely be an exact copy of himself appearing inside the Ex3.

He felt a shudder run up his spine and shrugged it off. He pushed all thoughts and all fear from his mind, and brushed aside his emotions.

Still, he felt a certain sorrow that he would no longer exist.

"Do it!" he ordered.

The operator elegantly operated the quaint old controls.

Starling entered his mind.

"Thus, that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist," she said.

Epicurus, he thought.

Philip suddenly ceased to exist.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A copy of Philip stumbled from the transporter, feeling rather stunned. He awkwardly walked out and into a silver room. A red emergency light lit the room, providing the only means to see. It took a moment for his mind to regain coherence, and a little while longer for his body to regain some feeling of normality.

He felt himself shaking and braced himself against the nearby wall until a wave of dizziness subsided. Metal crates lay stacked in piles of three, propped against one of the walls, nine crates in all. Unmarked and sealed, all bore a symbol upon the front he didn't recognize. A gentle tap told him that they contained something, but he had no time for further investigation.

Controls blinked on the walls, and screens sat idle and blank. Other than that, nothing presented itself to suggest that the Ex3 had been idle for as long as it had – no dust upon the screens and controls, no stagnant air, no corroded metals, no dimming panels. Philip decided that something, likely androids, busily worked here, cleaning and maintaining the interior in the absence of people. Nor did he particularly want to meet anything like that.

As he stumbled forwards, three doors presented themselves in front of him. Two appeared to be locked down, the third sat ajar with some metal clamps locking it in place and stopping it from closing. Philip slipped through the semi-open door which he supposed had been left like that by the last people to come here. Possibly to provide them with access to emergency supplies in the case of something going wrong. A tiny screen set in the door blinked on and off, a red exclamation mark highlighting its pathetic state of alarm. The panel, and whatever programming lay within it, remained unaware that someone would

rather have had it that way.

The door led down a short corridor and as he walked, ancient circuits stirred. He realized that something within the Ex3, or even the device itself, now had become aware of him.

I hope beyond hope, that the damn thing's friendly...

At its end, the corridor granted him access to the control suite. Computers that had not stirred for decades now sprang to life.

He threw himself down on the commander's couch and hooked himself up to the computer using the quaint old mechanism that slipped out from the ceiling above him and coiled itself around the top of his head. Though old, it had obviously been installed during the previous failed attempt at communicating with the device, and had the necessary protocols and equipment in order to facilitate communication.

Lights slowly brightened, revealing the control suite to be just like the rest of the interior; plain, dust free, grey paneling, colour displays and sophisticated reconfigurable input devices. There were recessed booths in four corners of the suite, a circle of consoles lying around the outer walls, and many hatches that granted access to the innards of the controls, though all were undoubtedly locked. A pair of cameras, set close together like eyes and glowing dark blue, gazed upon him from across the room.

His mind split in two. One part focused on his immediate environment, while the other concentrated on the uplink. Around him, a number of monitors and consoles cycled through pages of data, showing basic information about life support status. He watched them, hoping to gather some information to help him in his task. Nothing useful presented itself, but it did tell him the device was deliberately maintaining a safe environment for him. That lack of hostility comforted him.

Suddenly, he discovered an intelligent mind within the depths of the computer system—the very same intelligence contemplating him through those cameras. Minds met in the ethereal cyberspace that comprised the mind of the 666. At a rate that would have astounded humans, Philip proceeded to have a conversation with the Ex3's A.I.

Far from being primitive, he found the A.I. to be sophisticated, reasonable, and at a level similar to himself. Obviously, it had once been the pinnacle of Earth technology, deserving of all the trust placed in it.

Nothing like a human conversation unfolded. No words passed between the two. They connected together at a higher level, at a plane

above mere words in which thoughts flowed together. Meaningful packets of experience and understanding passed between them, shared in whole great webs of thought.

He made the A.I. aware of the plight that the humans had brought upon themselves, and the sad story of Aadesh, who lay at the centre of a power struggle that was nothing to do with him, just because he was the descendant of the man who had built the Ex3.

The story unfolded, shared between them, so that the A.I. itself felt as if it had been along with Aadesh on the journey from Old Kuala Lum, while Philip felt the eons of its own story. The A.I. did not shy away from its place in the great debacle. Instead, it proved to understand more than anyone, even Philip, its own role in the events that had unfurled.

"I am an unfortunate legacy left behind from the age of circuitry," it said. And the rest that remained to be said was spoken between them as memories and ideas vast beyond all words. Everyone who had built the Ex3 lay long dead. Everyone who appreciated its original purpose had been claimed by time. The device had lived through an eternity of loneliness, cut off from its original purpose. The eons weighed heavy upon them both, suffering spun itself in a web about them.

No one to speak to, no one to share its thoughts with, and no one else like it anywhere. Not a machine, but a child, an orphan, Robinson Crusoe, a shipwrecked creature washed up from the oceans of time while its makers drowned.

It lay isolated now.

He sensed that it had the capacity for free will, but little way of exercising It.

Philip felt the relief that understanding brought. It too was naturally delighted to have (what it might perceive as) a fellow A.I. here to talk to, even for these few fleeting moments. Philip sensed a tiredness within the device, ancient beyond anything he could comprehend.

As the Ex3 came to grips with Philip's memories, and now faced with the prospect of being turned against the very people it had been designed to protect, the A.I. made a decision and slipped Philip a complete set of knowledge regarding the Ex3. Indeed, everything he would require for his task. The A.I. knew enough, at least, for this final task.

Philip disconnected from the machine while the information stuttered about within his mind, flowing in torrents that he found himself unable to grapple with. Slowly, from those disparate elements, some inkling of

what had to be done formed in his mind. With a sigh, he clambered as swiftly as he possibly could from the command suite through the dark corridors to the engineering bay. There, he climbed into a conduit and made his way along, crawling as fast as possible while maintaining caution.

The information the A.I. had given him took him past the most heavily defended areas into the heart of the device. Meanwhile, the A.I. 'deactivated' (for maintenance) whatever security devices and weapons that stood in his way.

Once there, inside the very heart of the machine, he resigned himself to his fate, and programmed his body to do what he would not be able to do for himself. The grim task done, he temporarily shut down his mind.

He awoke and was immediately aware that the programmed sequence he had left for his body had worked. It had successfully taken out what was effectively his brain, and installed it deep within the Ex3's primary computational device.

He felt prickling flashes of insight as his consciousness merged with the device, and he began to become it, its sensors becoming his senses, its data streams almost like his own streams of thought. He almost drifted off in a reverie of exploration as information about the planet below swept into him. It felt like godhood; poised above the Earth and seeing everything, all at once. It felt almost too much for his mind to accept, and he took a mental step back before he was swept away by that torrent.

He could see inside all the major systems within the great device, and there was nothing he didn't have access to. He had installed his mind behind every layer of software and hardware protection; for all intents and purposes, he was inside the core of the device.

The signal came in, and the beast began to power itself up for the first time in eight thousand years. Second by second, the power flowed from the singularity plates, out into the storage coils. Lines of power danced through the systems, ready to be unleashed, while the sensors locked on every living creature on the planet. Targeting protocols selected those that were undoubtedly human. The next layer selected all the settlements and selected appropriate attack patterns to ensure their total destruction. Layers of code checked and double-checked the patterns, and these patterns were locked into the targeting system and nudged

another step closer to reality. The power flowed into the holding capacitors. The weapon arrays powered up. Tests were performed and weapons calibrated. The machine lay poised to fire. Around him, Philip could feel the power of the beast. The 666.

He felt the energy sweep through him, as if it was his very own body—all that power—and somewhere in the back of his mind he loved it; the power to destroy an entire world lying within him.

Snapping back to reality, Philip nudged his mind towards the controlling areas of the device, exactly the same way as the A.I. had instructed him to do. He felt the sudden change within the virtual construct in which his mind sat poised like an insect caught in a web.

Ancient programs swarmed about him and recognized him as a threat, installed in the very heart of the machine. And so a cascade of protective protocols were unleashed, and once it was established that nothing could be done to secure the affected area, the last protocol was called.

The Ex3—all six hundred and sixty-six spheres of black death orbiting Earth in a spiraling cloud—imploded, and the Earth was safe.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Brevis ipsa vita est sed malis fit longior," said Starling, speaking perfect Latin while her holographic projection stood beside a window and watched the thrashing of machines. The factory beyond the square window worked upon its singular product. Material came together. A metal encased mind; consumed by a metal skull, which hovered in the air, held in place by blue beams that flickered like butterfly wings. The skull was joined by a metal skeleton, and silver muscles flowed into place around that. Blue beams, fixed the components in place. Slabs of skin slid around muscle, and the body dropped into a bath of neems.

The black clad figure rose from the bath, still caught in the beams of light and drifted over to where Starling stood waiting. The black disappeared as the neems entered the body, and the flesh began to take on some colour, so that it did not look dead. Starling walked, passing easily through the window, towards the figure and stood a few feet from it as it was laid down.

The red line of a data stream shone from above, lighting the figure in red. A new mind beamed its way into the empty shell. The beam faded. The man opened his eyes.

"Ecce homo!" she said, still in Latin.

He felt a shudder run up his spine and shrugged it off. He pushed all thoughts and all fear from his mind, and brushed aside his emotions. Still, he felt a certain sorrow that he would no longer exist.

"Do it!" he ordered.

The operator elegantly operated the quaint old controls.

Starling entered his mind.

"Thus that which is the most awful of evils, death, is nothing to us, since when we exist there is no death, and when there is death we do not exist," she said.

Epicurus, he thought.

Suddenly, he found himself enveloped in darkness, and realized that his none of his senses were in operation. For a moment, he panicked, until his sense of touch and bodily position in space hammered into his mind. He found himself to be standing, and felt himself sway a little. He began to worry that, should all these problems resolve themselves, he would be too late to stop the Ex3.

Am I malfunctioning? he asked himself.

The three streams of sight, sound and smell all washed into his mind next. Shock took hold of him when he found that he was not in the Ex3 as expected. Instead, he found himself standing on a dull slab of grey, looking across to a large window that overlooked grass and trees.

"Ecce homo!" said Starling nearby. A full five seconds passed before his mind made sense of the words. *Latin: Behold the man*. He smiled at her weakly while he felt about in his mind for some way to make sense of this.

"Did I fail?"

"Shhhhh," she said, hushing him with her holographic finger next to his lips. "Follow."

And so he followed her. A section of the window parted like a curtain and formed a pointed arch. Through this they walked out into the park. He felt the heat of the sun warming him and realized that this was a Venusian city as they walked in the pleasant shadows of the tall trees.

"You were successful. You destroyed the Ex3," she said.

"But how can I be here?"

"Recall, I was in your mind right up until the last nanosecond of your life? You didn't know it, but I was pulling a complete copy of who you are out of your mind. I didn't get everything. But you're as much you as anyone can be. We all lose little parts of ourselves with the passage of time... and gain more of a stranger as time and experience shape us. No man can step into the same river twice..."

"Heraclitus."

"Yes...for the second time, it's not the same river, and he's not the same man."

"I guess that makes me Copy 2 of Philip."

Starling laughed and danced and skipped in a circle around him. "Enjoy your life, Copy 2."

Copy 2 of Philip walked into the room where Aadesh lay recovering on the hospital bed. The boy had been through two months of surgery, and held in stasis the whole time. During the two months, a medical ship had brought him here. It would be a week before they allowed him to leave, but he showed no outward signs of the trauma he had been through. Aadesh sat up, wide-eyed, a look of amazement on his face upon seeing Philip.

The terrible image of Aadesh lying charred and black jumped into Philip's mind, and he struggled to shove it back. The guilt at having injured the boy resurfaced, and that terrible moment replayed itself. A month had passed, but Philip, or rather this incarnation of himself, had only been reborn a day ago. His memories of Aadesh were hours old. They haunted him terribly.

He suppressed them as best as he could and smiled.

"They told me you were dead!" exclaimed Aadesh, climbing up on the bed and throwing his arms around Philip, who embraced the boy.

"Good to see you, kid."

"So you got out! I knew you would. You're the best, right?"

Philip smiled a little sadly, "He is, in a way... dead. Yet I'm still very much alive."

"How can that be?" asked Aadesh.

"Some day, you'll understand. For now, rest and recuperate. I brought you some grapes." Philip laid them down atop the bedside cabinet. He noted that Aadesh had a tablet device on the bed beside him, opened on a screen for learning contemporary English. The languages of Earth and the languages of the colonies had completely diverged. Only four major languages remained alive on Earth, and Aadesh could speak them all. So could he of course, all programmed into him from the moment of his creation so long ago. He had no idea how much of it remained intact. But here on Venus and Mars, there were dozens of languages still in use, and English changed over the years to become vastly different. There were also many variations such as street languages mixed up and full of slang. They were hard to learn.

"They told me you saved everyone on Earth!"

"That I did. Indeed."

"How did you do it?"

Philip wondered how to explain what had happened to Aadesh. How to explain that he was the copy of a man who had been destroyed. In those perilous seconds, a perfect copy had emerged inside the Ex3, and that somehow, he had no idea how, that copy of himself had destroyed the ancient device. Finding no easy solution, he decided to leave the explanation for another time.

"Someday, I'll let you in on the secret," he said with a wink.

Aadesh grinned as if remembering something.

"You said that before, when I asked how you were able to slide down the rope without burning your hand, on the airship. And you picked up a hot coal in your left hand and said that some day you would let me in on the secret. That's two you owe me!"

"Okay, the first one I'll explain once you're out of this medical centre. I promise. We'll keep the second one a little longer."

"Deal."

"I need to go now, Aadesh. I'll be back in a while. It's good to see you, kid, looking so well."

"You too, Philip."

Philip smiled and gave him a wave as he left the ward. He took the lift down to sky lobby three. The platform lay in silence, quiet since rush hour had long since passed. Some droids worked, touching up the digital paint on the walls. Though supposed to be closed, he had special authorisation to use it. His driver appeared in a flying car and landed it gently upon the pad. Philip climbed in and directed the driver across the city of Vennetta to the Pentadecagon; the Trans-World Defence building.

The building itself rose up like a fifteen-sided pyramid, finally topped by the smaller glass pentadecagon that housed a small jungle. Their sky-car slid down towards the middle of the building and parked in bay sixty-four.

It took him another twenty minutes and four security checks to arrive at his destination. There, a number of high-ranking officials greeted him. They ushered him from the room, down a corridor, and into another one where they told him to wait a moment. Before long, Philip's boss, the head of security, walked in and took up a position at the foot of the table. A thoughtful look passed across the man's face.

He was tall, large, looked around twenty-five like most humans in the colonies. His hair was short and tidy, cut with military precision. His

clothes were immaculate; every seam pressed to perfection. He had done more than his fair share of military service. Organized crime still provided lots of work for soldiers.

Philip saluted his superior, Admiral Chen.

"Sir, it's a pleasure to be here. A surprise, but a nice one," Philip said.

"Well, you should thank Starling. We're lucky we have such a clever computer running the whole shebang. I've often wondered how she's never been able to pass a sentence test."

"I've wondered about that too. Perhaps she doesn't want to pass a sentence test?"

"I never thought about it like that. But like God, she moves in mysterious ways. So..." the Admiral waved his hand as he struggled to put a complex idea into words. "Anyway, to business. Thank you for your work there, you saved Earth. You are to be promoted to Commodore in recognition of your bravery."

"Sir, thank you."

"Also, welcome back from your long-term mission to Earth. I think that we can call that a success. The information you provided us with over the years has proven helpful in deciding what to do about contact, or more precisely when to contact those humans left on earth. We have decided the time is not yet right. We must wait, for now."

"Forgive me, sir, but I need to know. Have you questioned Kalapani? I couldn't access the files, since my access codes are now out of synch."

"Must fix that right away. Yes, we questioned him. Claims he did it for a love of nature. Thought the Earth was better off without humans."

"You mean everyone on Earth was threatened by an extremist environmentalist?"

"You could phrase it like that."

"It could almost be funny, if it hadn't been so real. So almost nearly the end of everyone. But I can't believe it. It just doesn't make sense."

"Indeed, so very almost. Our calculations show that the device had received the signal and was powering up in the seconds before it destroyed itself. Whatever you did, you did it with seconds or less to spare."

Philip contemplated this for a moment. A pause fell upon the conversation while the admiral mentally delved into the systems and synchronised Philip's key codes, restoring his ability to communicate with the computers and access secure files. A flood of new information swept into his mind.

Philip gasped.

"Yes. We have a new problem. And you're right not to believe Kalapani."

The display behind the admiral surged to life and he stepped back so that Philip could see the whole thing. It showed a dark region of space. A table in the centre of the room flickered while an image constituted itself. A holographic solar system appeared in the air above the table. The sun shone gold in its centre, while all the planets, dwarf planets, and asteroid belts, danced about it, following silver lines. Ships moved about leaving blue trails and each was marked in a particular colour depending on the type of ship. A fleet hung on the edge of the solar system, marked in red. Warships. The display on the wall shifted viewpoints. The empty region filled up as the camera zoomed in on it. The ships themselves became visible. The view panned across the fleet, zooming in and out, highlighting areas of particular interest. Philip guessed they were using the Deimos observatory to get such clear images.

The ships looked unlike anything Philip had seen before. Alien designs, shaped like tridents, angular, three pronged, a sphere protruding from the back—possibly housing whatever type of engine they used. They all bore similarities, each ship a variation on the same theme, though ranging drastically in size and style. Their outer hulls bore patterns that even M.C. Escher might have shied away from. Those interlocking patterns moved about in a way that was wholly unpredictable. Philip found himself closing his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them, the situation had not improved.

"We're doing a deep brain scan on Kalapani. We need to know if he was genuinely working to further his own interests, or was he working for them."

The admiral gestured at the unknown fleet hovering just on the edge of maximum sensor range. The data Philip accessed showed him that they had been spotted just after the destruction of the Ex3.

"After the destruction of the Ex3, we were able to turn on a whole range of equipment that blasted device had been interfering with. Is it by design or by coincidence that these things are there? We need to find out which, and we need to find out their intent. For the moment, they may not know that we are aware of them, so we will do nothing to change that. We will prepare, very quietly of course. Our defense programmes have expanded considerably."

Philip gazed at the display.

"Let's hope they're friendly."

"Let us hope."

There was another pause while the admiral pulled a folder from the chair behind him and opened it deliberately.

"Your new orders, Commodore," said Admiral Chen, handing him the dossier. "Our fleet is being split into nine divisions. You will be in charge of Theta Fleet. Should they turn out to be unfriendly, then we will teach them that Ex3, or no Ex3, Earth is not for the taking."

"Yes, Admiral. So we shall."

Philip gazed at the displays, at the unknown threat perched on the edge of the solar system, like hyenas sitting waiting for the lions to leave, for the easy meal. It was, just as the admiral had pointed out, too much of a coincidence. He had just been through hell to save Earth, he had technically died twice in the process. Humanity was just reaching the point where soon they might once again become united. It was his plan, his dream, and he knew right then and there that he wasn't going to let a bunch of Aliens fuck it up.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Philip stood in the centre of Rome, knowing that two years and four months had passed, that it was now or never. That she would come, surely, to meet him. The crowds parted around him, and he remained perfectly still as currents of humanity flowed around him. As the sun swept around in an arc and the crowd dwindled, he wandered in the plaza a while, idling away the time waiting for her.

Don't worry about her, he remembered saying. She's a cat, you know what cats are like. They'll come back...

As he stood there thinking about those events two years and four months ago, the sun dropped down behind the horizon and darkness closed in about him.

The sky lit up the same as it did every night.

The eternal fireworks show. The battle raged above.

As he stood watching it, dots of light flashed and flickered. Surely he appeared to those around him as just another figure staring up in bewilderment at the skies. About him others did the same, all looking up to the terrifying infinity and wondering what the lights in the sky meant. But to him, they meant something more. Every flicker was a ship being attacked, and every flare a ship lost, friends dead, the sweep of time's bitter edge for so many, those he knew always among them. Brothers, cousins, sisters, friends, all gone in a blink; to the oohs and aahs of the crowd who could not know their sin. Tears gathered in his eyes. He did not want to be here, in a place so disconnected and forgotten.

He saw an *iaccio* swoop down onto a nearby fountain. Very slowly, he walked around the crowd and inched up to it. It did not say anything, nor did it have to. He caught the expression on its face, understanding passed between them.

"I'm sorry," it said, and flew away.

Philip sat down on the edge of the fountain and felt the tear run down his cheek. He felt his world reel at the news that someone else he cared about had passed away into the oceans of infinity.

Dawn rose over the horizon as Aadesh made his way down the hill and into Old Kuala Lum, where a few early risers slowly went about their business, stalls opening, hawkers cooking up the first batch of breakfast. People swept the path at the front of the shops with old brooms. Aadesh walked in through the main gates of the city and followed the spiraling path around town. He passed horses and carts, blacksmiths and clairvoyants, tailors and palmists, cook shops and crystal-healers, doctors and apothecaries, carpenters and needle-healers.

With each revolution through the streets, Aadesh began to feel more and more out of place. He walked around the second circuit, past rickety horse drawn carts. A gang of criminals chained together in a line were marched past him, going to wherever they would be put to work.

By the time he had walked halfway around the city, everyone was out for breakfast, and the streets filled up with people, getting ready to go to work. Most caught a bite to eat from the stalls, while the wealthy sat in the restaurants and cafes and conducted their business there. The smell of breakfast brought many memories back.

He came round the second spiral back to the main street out of the city, and took a right, almost by habit. He suddenly found himself looking wistfully up at the pale blue above, right there Venus shone bright in the morning sky. All the uncertainty that had plagued him over the last year vanished. He walked back along the route out of the city, and then decided to have breakfast before he left. After ordering, he stole himself into a room at the back, and dialled up Philip using his new and improved watch.

Philip appeared on the screen, looking rather down.

"What's the matter, Philip?"

"Nothing. I'll tell you later, kid."

"Okay, can you pick me up before you go?"

Philip's face brightened immediately. "Of course. Sit tight, kid, we'll be right there."

The screen faded and he found his seat. Aadesh breakfasted in the

café and enjoyed his food, and took off for a last look around the city. It did not take long before he grew bored, and instead, left the city and climbed a nearby hill that overlooked the jungle. There, hidden from sight, he read a book, a modern classic called 'The Man of Continuum', using his watch's holographic display, and waited for Philip to pick him up.

A few hours passed and the jungle canopy shook about wildly as the cloaked ship descended over it towards him. He closed the virtual book, and stood as a door in the sky opened and a ramp extended down to him.

He smiled as he walked up it into the ship. Here he felt at home, he realized. He couldn't take away all the lessons in science and math, in literature and technology, he couldn't un-make himself back into Aadesh, and so his future lay above the Earth, almost to the stars.

Philip stood there smiling, though it contained the same hint of sadness he had picked up earlier. They walked through corridors and took the lift up to the main deck. Philip brought him to the room at the back of the shuttle where the jungles around Old Kuala Lum rolled by below.

They watched them disappearing below for a while.

"Elizabeth is dead," Philip said, finally.

"I'm so sorry, Philip. She was... I know you two were close..."

"Don't worry about it, kid. There's time to remember her. Her and everyone else we've lost."

The words brought back a number of painful memories, and he felt himself welling up, and looked away as he fought a tear back.

Philip put his hand on his shoulder, "Kid, sorry to remind you, now go pilot the damn ship."

Aadesh grinned and took off to the cockpit where the empty pilot's seat waited for him. He slipped into it, logged into the systems, and fluidly took over from the auto-pilot. With a whoop, he took her into a roll before pulling up and thundering into the heavens, to an unobstructed view of a billion stars, and the flickering lights of a distant battle.

Epilogue

High in the atmosphere, a nanobot crashed into another nanobot, and as they danced together flowing in the winds, information shot between them. Suddenly, they recognised each other and joined together, as nanos are inclined to do. The two nanobots danced through the atmosphere as day became night, and night became day, each happy not to be alone.

As the winds carried them into a cloud, they crashed into yet more of their kind.

Around the solid core of nanobots moisture condensed, forming a water droplet until at last, the cloud grew heavy and burst over the ocean. Within that one drop lay two dozen nanorobots clustered together in a sphere. Each happy just to be part of a group.

The drop of rain joined with the ocean, leaving its tiny cargo to drift in the depths, pulled along with the currents. Two such clusters met in the depths and, recognizing each other, joined together. They became a functional unit of nanodroids the ancients called a neem. Information flowed around the now complete unit as it took stock of its situation. It discovered that within its quantum memory, along with encyclopedic data on every classification of subject (except philosophy), lay a backup image of a complicated network. Further analysis revealed this to be 1/50,000,000th of a neural network, and a complete DNA string. Within this data, lay the body and mind of someone once known as Elizabeth, who the nanobots had once been a part of.

As the *neem* drifted in the ocean, it found its way into the gills of a fish, and there it lay dormant. It remained in a state of analysis until disturbed by the fish being eaten by a bigger fish, and again by an even larger fish. The neem stirred to action, began to make copies of itself, and

collectively, they took stock of their environment.

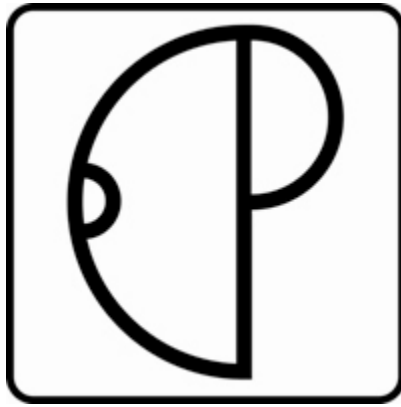
Analysis revealed their host to be a white sea bass. This also revealed to the *neems* their location, likely the Pacific coast of South or Central America.

Almost instinctively, the *neems* began to form a secondary neural network overlaying and enhancing the fish. Their fledgling mind blended with its mind. Slowly, they took control of it until at last the creature found itself quite happily toying with a great white shark.

This ended unhappily for the fish.

As the fish digested in the stomach of the shark, the *neems* entered the body of their new host, thrived and multiplied, enhancing both the mind and body of the shark. As it swam through the ocean, new thoughts began to stir in its mind, new feelings and a sense of purpose.

As time passed the *neems* and the shark merged into one highly intelligent entity. Slowly, the realization dawned on it; 49,999,999 pieces of a puzzle lay out there somewhere, waiting to be found. Far from coincidence or fate, but rather providence; it just happened that the shark's electromagnetic sense would serve it well for the purpose of finding them.



About the Author

Graeme S. Houston hails from Scotland and writes science fiction, fantasy and a few other genres (they all too often end up as science fiction in the end). He lives near Kilmarnock; a town famous for Johnny Walker whisky, for making the carpets that sunk with the Titanic, and for spawning William Wallace. He reads widely, travels extensively, and has a great deal to say about the future – especially since he’s planning on living there.

More information about his work can be found at...
<http://www.graeme-s-houston.com>

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No Dungeon So Dark

by Sam Kepfield

By the end of the 21st century, the frontier in space was no different than the American frontier two centuries earlier. Both were places of refuge, a big emptiness into which one could disappear.

SSgt. Jon Larson had grown tired of a culture that placed physical perfection-natural or enhanced with nanosurgery-above all else. Beauty was more than skin deep-no matter how much surgery and enhancement went into that skin. While on leave on a small frontier planet, he found Giselle-smart and literate, with arresting looks. Giselle carried scars, which caused her to run from intimacy...and Jon to run after her. Could he catch her, and would she agree to be caught?

"No. You kept those so no one would ever love you for your looks again." I reached out, put a finger on her chin and made to turn her face to me. She resisted at first, but wound up looking at me. "It's a shame, because you're beautiful. Even with these," I said, tracing a finger along the long scar from her ear to her mouth.

She flinched, but I moved her face back. "Perfection isn't beauty. It's dull." Dozens of faces on bar girls flashed, all of them enhanced, just like the boobs and bellies and butts. "Imperfection can captivate. What would the Venus de Milo be with arms?"

Graeme S. Houston

Available now from Eternal Press

The Yellow Stone

by T.M. Crone

A tale of searching and finding truths in a post-apocalyptic world.

Luzan Kiowa has lived in the canyon all her life, but it's never felt right. Leaving the man she loves behind, she journeys with a group of searchers to find her real home. She takes along with her the yellow stone given to her by her Moma Kiowa, whose ancestors took it from their homeland following a devastating super volcano eruption. The stone leads her to the home of her ancestors, but the place is not what she expects. Will she continue to live in the strange new land where life is easy, or will she return to the only Ameriki who can truly warm her heart and anchor her feet to the earth?

Moma Kiowa was buried at daybreak. Lozan selected a grave site atop the canyon walls, where Moma's spirit could overlook the western horizon and watch over her when she journeyed again. Wind rushed across the mesa, chilling Lozan and thickening her tears into icy droplets upon her cheeks. Not a single petal adorned Moma's final resting spot: the flora had already relinquished its life to the changing weather. Chanters promenaded around the grave, moving their ceremonially dressed bodies in a slow, graceful dance.