

Downtime in the MKCR

By Eric Brown.

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Sinclair left his villa and walked down the hill to the taverna. As ever, this early in the morning, his usual table was free. He sat down in the shade and stared out across the bay. The quayside was without its picturesque line of fishing boats; they would arrive back, in ones and twos, around mid-day. The water was blindingly blue - almost too perfectly aquamarine to be true. Directly opposite the taverna, the village of Mirthios climbed the hillside, a collection of square, whitewashed buildings among the hazy green olive groves.

The proprietor - an ancient, bewhiskered woman dressed in traditional black - shuffled out with his regular breakfast: a small pot of coffee and a bowl of yoghurt. He thanked her. Despite the situation, he was determined to convey the usual courtesies to the locals. Last night he had met a group of fellow tourists whose pragmatism had almost made him ashamed of his old-fashioned manners. He'd complimented the proprietor on his meal.

He became aware of the four young men across the table, staring at him as if he were mad.

"You don't for a minute think that it matters, do you?" one of the men - Eddie, a computer programmer from Watford - asked him.

Sinclair blushed. "Perhaps not... but that's no reason to be rude."

Eddie had turned to one of the others and laughed.

Sinclair finished his ouzo and left. Their muttered comments had followed him back along the quayside.

One of the young men - the quiet one, who had not stared or laughed at him - had made some excuse, left the others and caught up with Sinclair.

"I'm sorry about all that. I know what you mean. It's quite natural to be civil - in fact, I think they make an effort not to be. Anyway... good night."

And the boy, whose name Sinclair had not caught - did his eyes linger, his smile widen in invitation? - sketched a wave and ran back to his drinking companions. This morning, Sinclair had awoken to an immediate and aching regret: he should have said something, invited the boy back for a nightcap.

Here on New Crete, he knew, he was free of the constraints that inhibited him back in London. He wondered how long it might be before he convinced himself of this fact, before he could let go and enjoy himself. Five years of living with death, of turning his mind away from the needs of his flesh, had made him insular, inadequate.

He looked up from his coffee, sure he had seen something flashing on the horizon. If it was the reflection from a boat in the morning sun, it had passed, and even the boat was not visible.

Then it flashed again. It was no boat. The corona exploded on the ocean's horizon, expanded east and west in two long, thin pincers, then vanished. He would have put it down to some natural effect - unknown to him - had he not experienced a similar effect, or anomaly, yesterday afternoon while swimming. Wading in from the shallows, the gentle tug of the undertow retarding his progress, he thought he had seen a patch of sand, up the beach beside his rattan mat, begin to swirl, the individual grains crawl in a neatly patterned spiral. As he approached the phenomenon, it had ceased. He had thought nothing more of it, putting the effect down to a trick of the sunlight and too much ouzo the night before. Now, he began to wonder.

"You start early."

"Oh." He looked up. "Excuse me. Miles away."

"Andrew. Andy. We met last night-" This with some hesitation, as if afraid that Sinclair might not recognise him. As if!

"Of course. Nice to see you again. Won't you join me? Coffee?" He was talking too much. He was quite unused to such meetings, the possibilities that such meetings promised.

Andy wore shorts manufactured from cut-down jeans, a white tee-shirt that showed off his tanned biceps. A pair of sun-glasses were clipped by an arm to the neck of his shirt.

They exchanged meaningless smalltalk for a while, Sinclair's unease rising as he realised that he really liked the boy, was not merely infatuated by his physicality. Andy had a gentle, unassuming manner and a sense of humour. Sinclair told himself that holiday romances never worked. And especially not here.

"For the past few years I've been directing a few things in the provinces," Sinclair found himself saying. "If I were honest, I'd admit that I was never a very good actor. But have you ever heard an actor admit as much? It's always that the lines were crap anyway, or the directions bad, or a hundred and one other things. So I moved into directing..."

Andy seemed interested. "What have you directed recently? Anything I might have seen?"

The last thing he'd been involved with had been a Christmas pantomime at Bognor, and that had been four years ago.

"Othello, Stratford - last summer," he heard himself saying, and hated himself for the lie.

"Anyway, enough of me. What about you?"

Andy Lincoln was a quantity surveyor from Bristol, was unbelievably beautiful whichever way you looked at him, and was, Sinclair had convinced himself by now, as bent as a nine ecu note - or I'm not a dying queen.

"Staying nearby? Andy asked now.

Sinclair pointed to the villa on the headland. "I've got that place for a month. Perhaps, if you're not doing anything... That is - I'd like to show you around."

"Great. I'd like that."

Oh, Jesus... Sinclair had forgotten how it was, that sudden inner exquisite throb of lust mixed with the ridiculously romantic notion that, this time, it just might be love.

He wanted to tell Andy the truth, but that would destroy everything.

As they left the taverna side by side, Sinclair recalled the words of his tour operative. "Enjoy!" he'd said. "Remember, Mr Sinclair, where you're going there are no risks - and that's guaranteed."

They made love on the double bed which for the past three nights had mocked Sinclair's isolation. Later, he pulled on his shorts and stepped out onto the balcony. He stared out at the bay, the fishing boats returning through the gap between the thumb and finger of the headlands. A few tourists promenaded along the quayside before the taverna.

Sinclair recalled how it had been, all those years ago; the lovers, the wild times. Then he considered the emptiness of the past five years, the isolation and the agony. He could hardly believe his luck now. He had come to New Crete in the hope that he might find someone, but that was all it had been, a vague hope: he had reconciled himself to spending the month alone and celibate, thankful that for the period of the vacation he would be spared the pain that had plagued him over the past few months.

He tried to banish the sadness he felt: he told himself that he had found sex and affection, and that he should enjoy it while it lasted; three weeks with Andy would be better than three weeks without, even if the return to the cold reality of London, alone, would be all the more difficult after experiencing what he liked to think of as love.

He was staring at the mountains that rose behind the bay when he saw the aerial explosion. Like the other effects he'd noticed, it happened spontaneously and without warning. One second the sky was a perfect cerulean blue, and the next it was rent with a silver starburst. This time, though, the effect lasted. The blinding illumination shot out filigree vectors in every direction, so that within seconds the whole of the sky was divided into parallel strips of bright blue.

Sinclair gripped the balcony rail, overcome with sudden dizziness. What if the effect was not external, he asked himself, but internal, a manifestation of the disease, some neural dysfunction?

He contemplated the tragedy of such an occurrence so soon after finding Andy. Then, to his immediate relief, Andy yelled: "What the hell-?" He ran onto the balcony and stared into the sky overhead. "What's happening?"

"You see it too? It isn't the first. I noticed one yesterday, another this morning. I thought there was something wrong with me."

Andy smiled. "It's quite spectacular. Probably some glitch in the system." He laughed when he realised that he was standing on the balcony, in full view of whoever should look up from the street below, stark naked.

He took Sinclair's hand and pulled him back into the bedroom.

At sunset they left the villa and made their way down the hillside. The sky was innocent of its lateral vectors, once more a burnt-orange Mediterranean twilight. They avoided the restaurant where Andy's erstwhile travelling companions - friends of just

two days, Sinclair was pleased to learn - were eating, and selected a cosy bistro romantically overlooking the moored fishing boats. They ordered grilled squid, french beans cooked in spiced sauce, Greek salad and retsina.

They talked for hours, or rather Sinclair steered Andy into talking about himself. Sinclair experienced a deepening of affection, a heady rush of feeling he had no hope of controlling.

He asked himself why this was so wrong when it seemed so right.

Five bottles of retsina later, the sun long set and the full moon high over the bay, they finished desert and ordered coffee.

Andy leaned back in his chair. "All this..." He looked about him, spread his hands to indicate the bay, the bistro, the two of them. "I've never been so happy for a long time."

Sinclair felt something open up within him, a wound with no hope of cure. "Andy..." Sinclair reached across the table and gripped his wrist. "It means a lot to me, too." He thought of a way to break it gently, shook his head.

Andy stared at him. "But - what?"

Sinclair braced himself. "I'm dying-" The sudden pain in the young man's eyes made him stop.

Andy was shaking his head. "How... how long?"

"I've got two months at the most. I wanted to remain here right until the end, but according to the medics I'll be too sick during the last month to maintain the link."

Andy said nothing, just sat and stared at the table.

Sinclair closed his eyes. When he opened them he saw that Andy was crying. "I don't want you to see me, back home. I'm a walking skeleton - no, I'm a bed-ridden skeleton. Have you ever seen anyone with Kaposi's sarcoma?" He paused, then put a hand to his chest. "This is how I looked six years ago, before the illness." He reached across the table and squeezed Andy's fingers. "I'm sorry. I should never have... It's my fault. I wanted to tell you right at the start, but at the same time I wanted you so much..."

Andy said through his tears, "There's no reason why we can't enjoy the time we have left together, in here."

"I lied, Andy. I wasn't truthful."

Andy looked up, met Sinclair's eyes. "I understand... I understand how difficult it must be."

A silence descended. Sinclair signalled the waiter. "Enough of this, okay? We're here to enjoy ourselves. How about a nightcap?"

Andy said, "Just one more thing..." he paused. "Out there, in the real world, do you have anyone to be with you?"

"Andy..." Sinclair closed his eyes, trying to banish the fact of the real world from his thoughts.

Seconds later the first explosion ripped through the warm night air.

The deafening crack seemed to detonate directly overhead. Instinctively Sinclair closed his eyes and ducked, and when he opened them again the sky was no longer midnight black, but blue. A second explosion followed hard on the first, and instantly a series of narrow white stripes laid themselves over the sky from horizon to horizon.

"Jesus Christ," Andy said, staring up in awe. "It's the Greek flag!"

Sinclair pointed out to the sea horizon, where letters stood as tall as buildings. "Kriti Popular Front," Andy read. He laughed, nervously. "I think this is more than just a minor glitch."

A jeep roared into the village and screeched to a halt on the quayside. Two armed men in army fatigues, their faces covered by balaclavas, jumped out and strode over to the crowded patio of a restaurant.

As Sinclair looked on, a part of him thinking that this was some display put on by the tour company for the benefit of the tourists, the militia took aim and fired into the massed diners. Screams took up when the rattle of gunfire ceased.

Andy was up and running towards the scene of the carnage.

Sinclair tried to stop him. "Andy!" He gave chase, knocking over tables in his haste.

The armed men sprinted back to their jeep, and were in the process of jumping aboard when the air around them became agitated. For a second the two men, the driver and the jeep slipped out of focus - then vanished.

Andy had come to a halt at the edge of the massacre. Amid overturned tables and chairs, the bodies of tourists lay dead and dying. Blood and krassi were spilled in equal measures, staining the table-clothes and the white marble floor two shades of red.

Andy was kneeling beside a blonde woman lying on her back, bullet wounds drilled across her white blouse. She was staring up at Andy, her face twisted.

"It shouldn't hurt," she said in barely a whisper, her tone incredulous. "They said nothing could hurt us!"

She winced, the colour draining from her face. As Sinclair stared down, her eyes glazed and her feeble protests ceased.

Then the bodies, one by one, lost their solidity and dissolved, along with the spilled tables and chair, the blood and the wine. Within seconds, nothing remained to evidence the slaughter - except a ring of appalled onlookers, strangely silent under the vast domed awning of the Greek national flag.

He grabbed Andy's arm. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Back to the villa."

As they hurried up the hillside, Andy said, as if in a daze, "They should have pulled us out. There's obviously some terrible malfunction in the system - why didn't they just pull us out?"

Sinclair tried to calm him. "They're no doubt working on it. It probably takes time."

"And what about the tourists? Did they really die?"

"Of course not! There's no way... You read the company guarantees." But he did not, even to himself, sound convincing.

They reached the villa and locked the doors behind them. In the bedroom they shut and barred the balcony door against the garish flag that served in lieu of a sky.

Andy sat on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "If you bastards are listening in," he said, levelly, "I'd like to tell you that we want out."

Sinclair stared at his reflection in the wall mirror. It was still a shock to apprehend how he had looked six years ago, before the ravages of the disease had reduced him to little more than skin and bone. While across the room Andy quietly petitioned the operatives to pull them out, Sinclair contemplated the healthy slabs of muscle on his arms and legs.

They made love on the double bed in silence, as if they each realised that it might be for the last time. Later, while Andy quietly slept, Sinclair disengaged himself, pulled on his shorts and walked across to the balcony. He unbolted the door, stepped through and closed it behind him.

The Greek flag no longer adorned the night sky: piercing stars shone down from a jet backdrop. He thought for an exhilarating second that perhaps the malfunction had been repaired, that perhaps he might yet see out the full span of his vacation. Then he noticed, across the bay on the slope of the opposite headland, purple and orange luminescent blobs where olive trees should have stood.

Before him, the air began to shimmer - an effect not unlike a heat haze above a hot road in summer. As he stared, a figure materialised beyond the balcony, suspended in mid-air like some phantom visitation. Fearing another attack, Sinclair stepped back - then he made out the ghostly features of the operative responsible for his translation at the Milton Keynes holiday centre.

"Mr Lewis Sinclair?"

"What is it? What's going on?"

The materialisation was only partially successful. Sinclair could actually make out the bay through the bobbing figure. Its voice was slowed, slurred.

"I've come to explain the situation to all vacationers," the operative said.

"Are you going to pull us out?"

"Please, let me first explain." The figure was silent for seconds, like a radio broadcast on a poor frequency. "The Keynes computer network was breached by a team of hackers representing the Greek Popular Front. They planned to destroy the system and the five thousand vacationers currently enjoying the New Crete Consensus Reality. They are a political faction fighting for the economic independence of Crete - they claim that since the development of the Keynes CR, and other centres across Europe, tourism has ceased and Crete has suffered a debilitating recession. They also struck at other centres in Germany, France and Sweden. Fortunately, at Keynes they managed to inflict only minor damage."

"But the tourists we saw gunned down?"

"Tragically, they were real-time casualties - they suffered associative somatic trauma and perished as a result."

"Christ..." Sinclair struggled to overcome the shock, gather his thoughts. He asked, "So we're all in danger. Any second these thugs could materialise and blow us away?"

The spectral operative was shaking his head. "Not at all. We have dealt with the hackers; our own experts effected successful counter-measures. The anomalies you see now-" the figure indicated the luminescent shapes across the bay "-are the results of the disruption, minor glitches."

Sinclair felt his pulse quicken. "So we can continue with our vacation?"

"Ah... that's what I'm here to inform you."

"You're going to pull us out?"

"We deem it in the best interests of our clients if we disconnect you as soon as possible. We need to overhaul the system before the next batch of customers. Of course, you will all be adequately compensated, and you will have priority use of the MKCR when we re-open in a couple of months."

Sinclair felt a cry rising within him. He heard no more of what the operative was saying, but turned and hurried into the bedroom.

A ghostly figure was dematerialising from beside the bed. Andy was sitting up, staring through the formless haze at Sinclair with a look of shock. They came together and held onto each other, as if for dear life.

Seconds later Sinclair watched the reality around him go into a slow dissolve. He cried out, clutched at Andy's broad shoulders, but his embrace closed on nothing. Darkness swamped him. In his consciousness he recalled the horror to which he was returning, and screamed in silence.

When the medics had suggested that he spend a month in the MKCR, Sinclair had at first demurred. Would not a month of paradise make all the more appalling the reality of his situation when he returned? They had replied that surely a month of luxury would be preferable to the pain he was suffering now - and, anyway, by the time of his return he would be so drugged as to be oblivious of both the pain and the knowledge of his demise.

But he had returned three weeks early, to a skeletal frame wracked by a degree of pain he had quite forgotten. Powerful analgesics eased the worst of his agony, but nothing could obliterate the fear.

Days passed in a senseless blur. He spent great chunks of time unconscious. Occasionally he would surface and pass a few relatively pain free hours watching the sunlight through the hospital window, or staring at mindless images on the tv screen.

He was conscious, and sitting up in bed, when a nurse breezed in. "Mr Sinclair," she announced, "we have a call for you." She hauled the vid-screen down on its extendable boom from the ceiling, positioned it before him.

He shaped his lips to form the word, "Who?"

The nurse smiled, activated the set, and left the room.

The screen remained blank. Sinclair was too weak to reach out and adjust the picture.

"Lewis?" The voice was familiar - but, at the same time, altered.

Sinclair felt his pulse quicken. With all his strength he forced himself to say,

"Andy?"

"Of course. Who else? I want to see you."

A croak: "No! Please... I'm not-"

"I'm downstairs, in reception. I'm coming up." A pause, then: "I don't want to shock you, so..." Suddenly, the screen flared and showed someone staring out at him. For a second, Sinclair thought that he was looking at a mirror image of himself.

"Andy...?"

"You weren't the only one who wasn't truthful on New Crete," Andy said. "I just couldn't bring myself to admit..." He paused, then managed, "I didn't want to hurt you."

Sinclair tried to control his emotions. "And... now?"

"Now... now we need each other more than ever," Andy said. He smiled. "I'm coming up, but don't hold your breath. This might take some time." He disappeared, slowly, from the screen.

In preparation, arranging a smile of welcome, Sinclair turned his head towards the door and waited.