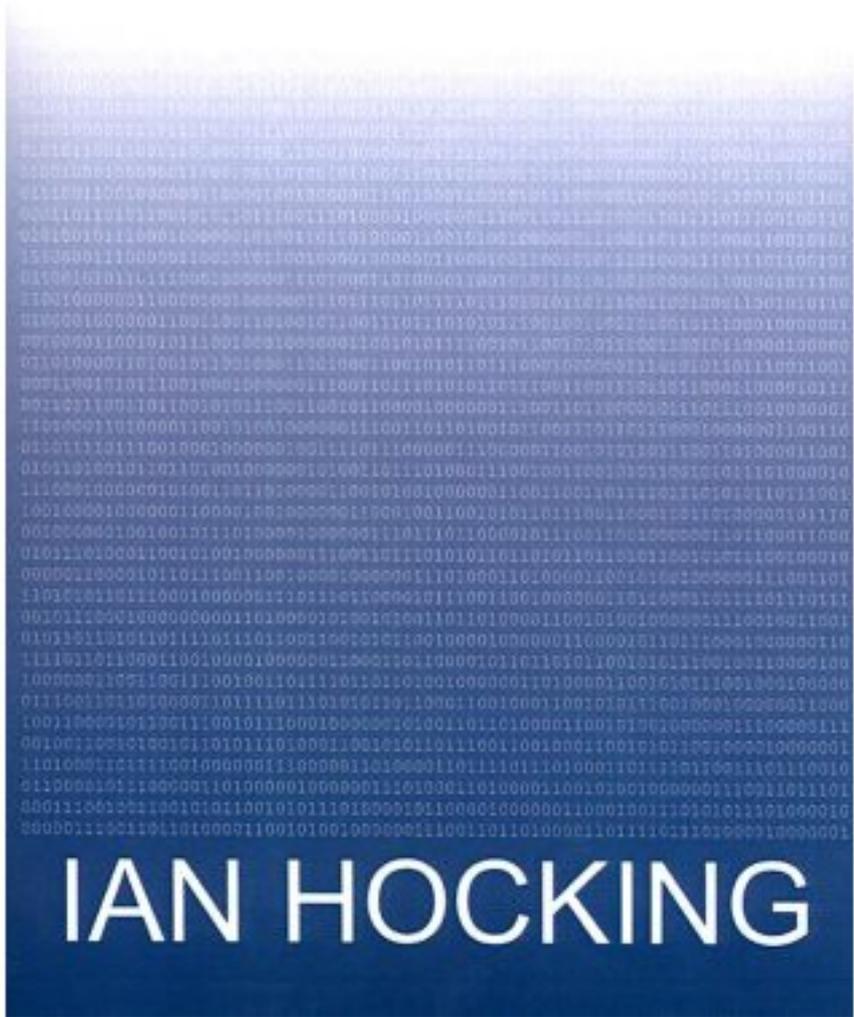


DÉJÀ VU



IAN HOCKING

Déjà Vu

A Novel by Ian Hocking

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Prologue

Déjà vu noun a feeling of having already experienced the present situation. Origin: early 20th century French, literally 'already seen'.

New Oxford Dictionary

Prologue

May 2003: The West Lothian Centre, Scotland

From his retirement, Professor David Proctor would see only pieces. Ticks of the clock. Each a tableau, none truly still. Before the explosion, he plucked the last notes of the opening concerto. After it, the blood on Helen's scalp would be black in the red emergency lighting.

At the coda, he met the eyes of his audience. It was a vain flourish. His wife's eyes, Helen's eyes, would be closed, never to open again. Bless him, David thought, now seeing Dr Jeffreys, who sat in the front row with his eyes closed. David would discover his wife in the corridor, grasp her face and shout her name, "Helen, Helen," because, even as masonry struck his head, he knew that hearing was the last light to fade. He slowed, his arpeggio slowed, and his left hand slipped from the neck of his antique guitar, The Nymph. She had been played by Fernando Sor at the court of Tsar Alexander I. Concrete would concuss him and blood sting his eyes but it wouldn't be enough because Helen was dead and his survival was treachery. The arpeggio meandered to a stop. David felt the vibration die against his chest. His colleague, Bruce

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Shimoda, would slap his face and heave him clear of his wife. Choking, they would follow the strip lighting and stand, mute, at an emergency exit. Jeffreys dug a tear from his eye. He would fall on glass and bleed out before help could arrive. He was the first to stand and clap – fingers on palm, oh, quite wonderful – and nod seriously to his neighbour. Bruce and David would climb into the night air and collapse on the grass. Beneath them, the research centre would vibrate like the deepest drum. The applause covered David's modest smile as he took a sweeping, medieval bow.

Part I

The nightmares had lasted years. In them, David had run through the research centre as if it were a submarine stuck in a crash-dive. Post-traumatic stress, the psychologist had said. But those nightmarish corridors had been faded memories from a younger man's mind. They were ghosts of something already dead. Here and now, they were more hostile and grotesque.

The Time Machine

The Nevada Center, USA

Friday, 8th September 2023

Twenty years and four months later, Jennifer Proctor heard a splash. She heard it quite distinctly. She stopped mid-stride on the gantry and raised her goggles. Professor Michaels was nearby. He leaned on the rail until his knuckles were white.

“Extraordinary,” he said. “It worked.” He tapped his earpiece. “All sections report.”

On her own earpiece, Jennifer listened to the replies.

“Comcon, green.”

“Powercon, green.”

“Retcon, green.”

“Techcon, green.”

“Wormcon, green.”

Michaels sagged. “I honestly didn’t believe it would happen.”

A voice on the loop said, “Retcon.”

Michaels replied, “Go, retcon.”

“Permission to retrieve, Jack?”

“Negative.” To Jennifer: “Shall we?”

It took them thirty seconds to reach the floor by crane. As they stepped out, a quick-thinking technician took some photos and a group of suited VIPs, mid tour, no coincidence, gave them a round of applause. Michaels blushed but Jennifer curtseyed gracefully.

Michaels headed towards the centrifuge. Jennifer hurried after him. They collected a crowd. Michaels walked so briskly that his ID tag fell off. As they neared the centrifuge, he veered left and began to jog, skipping over the thick electrical cables.

The 1000-gallon tank was vertical and still. It rocked gently on its hinges. Water spilled. Jennifer felt her muscles quiver. She had just witnessed the most significant technological event since the moon landing.

Though the professor was ten years past retirement age, nobody was surprised when he climbed the ladder alongside the tank and jumped in. The closest onlookers were caught by the wave. There were chuckles. Jennifer felt people stare at her.

Michaels's bald head reappeared. He spat water and wiped his eyes. He threw his arms over the lip of the tank and rested for a moment, panting.

"Professor?" she asked.

Michaels opened his right hand. A camera flashed. In the palm was a polystyrene box. He removed the tape that bound the two halves together. They fell open to reveal an old analogue watch. He was careful to cover the back of it. "What time is it, Jennifer?"

A few voices beat her to it, but Jennifer said, "11:02 a.m."

"By my watch -" he held it up, to more hearty laughter - "it is 11:32!"

The crowd broke out into full applause and the words that Michaels had been practising for over six months were lost in the noise. Like Armstrong, he'd fluffed it, but Jennifer could see that he didn't care. Two technicians helped him from the vat.

The professor was reeling from claps on the back when he reached Jennifer. They embraced again. The crowd made a circle around them. Michaels was relaxed. He showed her the watch. In reply, Jennifer produced a small polystyrene box of her own and opened it. There was also a watch inside. Jennifer's had the correct time. Michaels's was half an hour ahead.

He looked at the back of his watch without letting anybody see. Then he produced a small notepad and pen, juggled the three, and finally wrote something on the pad. He covered it immediately.

"Generate the code word," he said.

Jennifer produced her own notepad. Hers was electronic. She said loudly, "I'm now generating a word randomly from the Oxford English Dictionary." She stared at the screen. She looked at Michaels.

Michaels nodded. "Write it on the back of the watch."

She reached over and took a magic marker from Michael's sodden labcoat. He smiled. She wrote the word on the watch. "You done?" Michaels asked.

"Yes."

"Tell folks what the word is."

Jennifer said, "The word is 'electron'." She showed the watch around. Some VIPs nodded solemnly.

Michaels raised his eyebrows. Milked the moment. He held up his own watch. On the reverse, in Jennifer's own bad handwriting, was the word 'electron'. The crowd exploded. The younger technicians whooped and hugged. The older ones watched them proudly. Michaels showed the VIPs his notepad.

They clapped him on the back and shook his hand. Nobody could accuse him of cheating.

When the moment was old enough, Michaels raised his palms. The crowd became quiet. He thought about saying his poetic words. No. They didn't have time. "OK, everybody. Look sharp. We've got an appointment to keep. It looks like we'll be sending this watch back in half an hour."

That night, Jennifer dreamed of her father. He was young. He was running down a smoky corridor with a flashlight – torch, he would say – calling for his wife, and her mother, Helen. There were rumbles of impending collapse. Jennifer wanted to call a warning but she was only a ghost from the future.

"Helen!" he called. "Helen!"

The walls began to collapse. Debris fell like tears. The larger chunks exploded on the floor. The light was snuffed out. The underground research centre had vanished. Like a gut expelling trapped air, the space had simply disappeared.

"Jennifer!" he called. "Jennifer!"

She couldn't breathe.

She awoke and looked around. Her muscles ached. The air had a dull resonance, as though a great sound had come and gone. Had she screamed? Light and dark traded places as a cloud crossed the moon.

The night embraced her once more and, with trepidation, she fell asleep.

Professor Michaels offered his elbow to Jennifer as they approached the outer edge of the biome. They passed through a plastic curtain into its cool, wet interior. High above them was a domed transparent ceiling and, beyond it, the sandstone roof of the cave. Suspended light panels provided energy for the plants. The air conditioning drew a wind across them. They stirred like chimes.

They walked on. Jennifer waited for Michaels to speak. He said nothing. The gravel path meandered among exotic species that reached ten feet in the air. Below them were red, green and blue lines in the gravel, representing ten minute-, half-hour- and one-hour walks. Michaels followed blue.

“I would like you to meet an acquaintance of mine,” he said finally. They were near the centre.

“Who?”

“John Hartfield.”

Jennifer stopped. She knew the name. Hartfield was a millionaire who had earned his first fortune in race-horse breeding and his second in revolutionary cancer treatments. That was public knowledge. But he also had a third interest. He part-funded the Nevada Center with the US government.

“Is this meeting going to make or break my career?”

Michaels adjusted his glasses. “You’ve already made it, Jennifer.” Abruptly, he took her hand and kissed it. Jennifer smiled. Perhaps this was the intoxication of success. She looked into his seventy-year-old face and realised, as he smiled back, that he would have been a handsome man in his youth. “Take care of yourself.”

“And you,” she said, still holding his gaze. He backed away.

As she walked, the hedges became thinner. She entered a clearing with a beautiful pavilion at its centre. Its black eaves curled toward the roof like the helmet of a samurai. Around its perimeter was a wonderland of bridges that crossed hidden streams. She could hear the flutter and call of birds, but see none.

The pavilion had no walls. Its varnished wooden floor was empty.

“Good morning,” someone said.

She turned. Standing behind her was a man in his mid-forties. He wore a blue suit and a broad-brimmed hat, not ten-gallon, but close. His smile was lopsided and friendly. He was tall, but not very tall; thin, but not very thin. His eyes were cold and blue. The sun had bleached them. As he walked towards her, she noticed his limp. He had a cane.

“Good morning,” she said. “Mr Hartfield, I presume?”

“The same. What a beautiful day.”

He was very close now. She could smell his aftershave. She could see his hearing aid.

“Would you like to walk with me? Slowly, I’m afraid. My leg.”

She smiled. He had no accent but English was not his first language. She recalled her dream of the night before. Her father running through the doomed research centre. Looking for Helen, his wife, her mother, who was dead.

They walked for minute in silence. He said, “There was a time, many years ago, when I fell in love.”

“What was her name?”

He laughed and made an odd, dismissive wave with his cane. “Science was her name. It was Christmas 2002. I was in France. I bred horses. I was happy. But I began to develop

headaches. They grew worse and worse. I went to my doctor and he diagnosed a brain tumour. It was cancerous.”

He paused as they passed a gardener, crouching to plant some bulbs as a small robot handed them over, one by one.

“Go on.”

“It was inoperable. They gave me six months to live. Give or take six months.” A smile touched his lips, then was gone. “I tried various therapies. Alternative treatments. Chinese medicines, Japanese pressure therapy, Indian remedies. Nothing helped. After six months, I was desperate and ready to try anything. I offered ten million dollars to anyone who could cure me.

“Of course, I received a vast number of communications from fakes, con-artists and idiots. But one letter, from an Argentine medical student, intrigued me. He had an idea for a surgical procedure using, in essence, legions of tiny robots, designed to hunt and destroy cancerous cells.”

“Orza’s nano-treatment,” Jennifer said quietly.

“Yes, it is quite famous now. Not so then. I gave him the money and all the resources he needed. He developed an experimental treatment. I was already experiencing blackouts, memory lapses and language problems. I was desperate. I took the treatment and it cured me.”

“I heard,” she ventured, uncertain of her role, “that the technique was rather imprecise in the beginning. Non-cancerous cells were also destroyed.”

Hartfield’s face was blank. “True. The same may be said for more traditional treatments, of course, such as chemotherapy. But the nano-treatment demonstrated to me the effectiveness of

science. I fell in love with its conquering power. It was love at first bite.”

He smiled. To Jennifer, it was the smile of someone who did not know humour; someone who had taught themselves to smile by looking at pictures. They walked into the shade of the pavilion and sat down on some chairs near the centre. The chairs had not been there a few minutes ago. She pictured a group of sycophants who scuttled around this rich, powerful man, arranging his world.

“A great man once said that science lights a candle in the darkness of ignorance and fear. I have lit my candles here in Nevada, in Siberia, in Australia, in Canada and in northern Africa. My research centres specialise in fast-track, radical endeavours. I am particularly proud of the work being undertaken here, Jennifer.”

“Thank you, Mr Hartfield.”

Here it comes, she thought. The rub.

“I had a research centre in Scotland, once upon a time. It was my first. It was bombed back in 2003.”

“Yes, West Lothian,” said Jennifer. “My father worked there before moving to Oxford.”

“Your father?” he asked.

“David Proctor. He is an artificial life researcher.”

There was a long pause. Jennifer examined her nails. “Mr Hartfield,” she said, “is this about my father?”

Hartfield smiled. “My dear young lady, you are quite perceptive. Like your father. Have you seen him recently?”

“Not in five years.”

“Pardon me. I do not mean to intrude.”

Jennifer shrugged. “We don’t get along, I guess. Separated by a common language.”

“The language of science?”

“No, I meant English. You know, he’s a Brit, I’m an American.”

“But you were raised in England.”

“I did my growing up over here.”

Hartfield’s on-off smile surfaced again. “Jennifer, your father may be in some danger.”

“Danger? What kind of danger? Physical danger?”

“It pains me to say this, Jennifer. I believe your father has fallen in with the wrong people. I knew your father a long time ago. Somebody has tricked him. Now he is in danger.”

Jennifer wanted to leave the pavilion and enter the artificial sunshine once more. “What can I do?”

Hartfield turned to her. “Talk to him. Tell him to be careful. Tell him to stay in Oxford.”

Jennifer Proctor, who was twenty years old, had never dealt with a man like Hartfield before. But she was fiercely intelligent. “Mr Hartfield, may I ask you something directly, and you’ll forgive my frankness?”

“By all means.”

“Does the danger come from you?”

Hartfield laughed – like his smile, it was fake – and stood up. He shuffled his legs to stir their blood. “I must go. Can I rely on you impress upon your father the severity of the situation?”

She nodded once. He touched the rim of his nine-gallon hat and walked away.

When he was gone, Jennifer listened to the wind of the air conditioning system. She thought about her dream again. She

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thought about her father running down smoke-filled corridors
calling for his dead wife.

Best Served Chilled

FIB Headquarters, Brussels

Sunday, 10th September 2023

Saskia Brandt examined her reflection. It was unfamiliar. She reached down and splashed some water over her face. There was something wrong. The water soothed the burn on her forehead. She touched it with her finger. It still throbbed; it still retained its heat, its energy.

Something wrong.

You are a detective, she scolded. Detect.

There was a bottle of hand-soap near the sink. The label read 'Föderatives Investigationsbüro', the Federal Investigations Bureau, German section.

She recalled the day's events.

She had taken the lift to 51st floor and walked to her office. She had greeted some people. It was a hot day. Brussels was enjoying an Indian summer. Once in her office, she had told the computer to open the blinds...

"Yes, Saskia."

"Dim the lights."

"Yes, Saskia."

Saskia wiped away the last of her tears. The window wall darkened. There was a picture on her desk: Simon, her English boyfriend. It rested on top of an antique blotter from the 1920s,

which rested upon an austere wooden desk, which backed against the window wall.

“Why is it so hot in here? Lower the temperature by five degrees.”

Saskia took off her blouse and flapped it. The heat seemed to lean against her.

“The air conditioning is broken,” said the computer.

Saskia groaned and paced the room. From two corners, cameras followed her movements. Each kept a tight watch on her mouth.

“What happened?”

“I do not know. A repair man should arrive soon. Perhaps you could take a cold shower.”

She stopped and looked at one of the cameras. For the computer, her expression was statistically infrequent and quite unreadable. “Thanks for the advice.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Where is my secretary? Why didn’t she report it?”

There was a pause as the computer interpreted her words, a task made difficult by the jump in context. “Your secretary is on holiday. You are also on holiday.”

Saskia grunted. Her holiday had been one day old when she had been called by Jobanique, her immediate superior, who had an urgent case. Her boyfriend, Simon, had been cooking pasta for a romantic meal and, without discernible romance, thrown the pot across the room. Saskia’s forehead had been splashed and burned. She had walked from the room with a coldness that told both of them it was over, finally. When she had found a taxi for the

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airport, she had lain on the back seat and cried. But Simon had not seen her.

From Marseilles she had flown to Paris and caught a connecting flight to Brussels. The proverbial sleepless night in the flat. The so-typical call to her mother. The predictable whisky at four in the morning watching the rain. How stereotypical. How ordinary.

She walked into the second anteroom. It was a small kitchen. There was a refrigerator. It contained cold, still mineral water. She pulled the handle and her secretary fell out. A bottle of water rolled out too. Its label read 'best served chilled'. As for the secretary, she was dead.

The Return

West Lothian, Scotland

Sunday, 10th September 2023

Around midday, the rain eased. A car arrived at the Park Hotel. The ruin of the West Lothian Research Centre lay beneath its foundations. Its entrances were capped. It lay dormant. No longer were approaching vehicles checked, visitors searched, or the expansive woodlands patrolled. The hotel was open for business as a retreat for writers and anglers.

Inside the car, the arrival gazed out. He had grown in the years since he had cradled the head of his dead wife. On that autumn morning in 2023, David Proctor was an Oxford professor in his early fifties. He looked at the hotel and felt like he was attending a school reunion.

“Destination reached,” said his computer.

“Thank you, Ego.” He opened the door and relished the cool, damp air. It had been a five-hour journey.

“One moment, please. Professor Proctor, you have a phone call.”

“Tell them I’m busy,” he said.

“It is your daughter.”

David paused. He pulled his leg back into the car and closed the door. He steepled his fingers and tried to think. It didn’t work.

“Professor Proctor? Your caller is waiting.”

“Fine. Put her on.”

The computer displayed a little egg-timer and did nothing. “Is there a problem?” he asked.

“The communication appears to be encrypted. I do not know the cipher.”

David smiled. “Find and read the file on Jennifer’s highschool maths project.”

“Understood.”

Immediately, the image of his daughter appeared.

Jennifer. David drew a breath. He had last seen her aged sixteen. She wore thick glasses, no make-up, and she had scraped her hair into a bun. She was pale and stern. She looked like her mother.

“Hello, Jennifer.”

“Hi, dad.”

David laughed. She had an American accent. Jennifer, in contrast, remained calm. His laughter died. “I’m glad you called,” he said.

“Are you?”

“Yes. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Talk, then.”

David watched the rain run down the windscreen. He wasn’t ready for this. Not now. “I – I’m sorry. After you went to New York, I thought maybe you needed some time to yourself.”

“You sent me away. You sent the freak to the freaks then skipped the country.”

“Look, you couldn’t stay in Oxford any more. You would have been shunned because of your – because of the way you were. You wouldn’t have realised your full potential.” David sighed softly, but his heart thumped in his chest. “We’ve been through this.”

Jennifer leaned towards the camera. “I was the one who had to go through it, not you. Do you know what it was like in that school?”

“I got your emails.”

“I didn’t get yours.”

“Jennifer, why did you call?”

“Not to sing happy birthday,” she said. She blinked a few times. “I have a message for you.”

David looked at her. “What is it?”

She paused. “Where are you?”

“Actually I’m at the old research centre, in West Lothian.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I can’t tell you that on the phone.”

“This isn’t a phone, Dad,” she said. She had the trace of a smile.

“I know. It’s a secure server. You’ve encrypted the transmission.”

She nodded. “You remembered it.”

“What’s wrong, Jenny?”

“Just – can you go back? I need you to go back.”

David gazed around him. The hotel looked tearful. “I haven’t passed the point of no-return, I suppose. But why should I go back? Has someone been talking to you?”

Jennifer said softly, “Be careful. Watch your back. Something may happen.”

He was grim. “Something already has happened. And I’m late. Can I call you later?”

Jennifer smiled. It was hollow. But it was an effort. “Sure.”

She cut the connection.

David Proctor removed his personal assistant from the dashboard and put it in his wallet. It would pass for a bank card. He stepped from the car and his jacket flew open. He inhaled the Scottish air. Around him, high firs bowed and produced a sound that, to David, had always been indistinguishable from crashing waves.

He began to walk towards the hotel. He nodded to the doorman. The doorman turned and nodded to someone in the bushes. David glanced at the bushes and saw a suited man with an earpiece nod in yet another direction. Nothing else happened. David went inside.

Ahead of him, across the large foyer, a tall man with steel-grey hair was speaking to an elderly receptionist. It was the inimitable Colonel McWhirter. He turned at the sound of David's footsteps and smiled. They had met only twice in the past twenty years. "I see they haven't changed the décor," David said.

"Hello again, Dr. Proctor," said McWhirter. They shook hands.

"I've had my title changed to 'professor'," he replied, deadpan, "so that it doesn't rhyme."

McWhirter took one look at him, blinked, and they laughed. The receptionist frowned.

"Professor."

"David, to you, Colonel."

"It's been six years."

"The robotics conference."

"Yeah."

The banter evaporated and McWhirter rubbed his hands. The foyer was cold.

“Can you fill me in?” David asked.

The colonel took his elbow and steered him from the receptionist. “It’s Bruce. He managed to break into the lower levels and get to your old laboratory. Last Wednesday morning, he put New World back on-line.”

David tried to look surprised. “Wow. Where’s he getting the power from?”

“The hotel supply. That’s how we got wind of the whole business,” he added.

“I see. What’s the environmental situation down there?”

“Not good. Near freezing. We’ve got some temporary lighting, nothing else.”

“And Bruce’s physical condition?”

“Well,” the colonel said in a quiet tone, “not good, but stable. I thought maybe you could take a look at him.”

“Medical school was a long time ago. I had long hair then. Christ, I had hair.”

“Ah, you’ll do fine.” McWhirter’s eyes were humourless. “Shall we go?”

“Where?”

“Down below.”

David took a step backward. It was important to play on McWhirter’s expectations. “You want me to go down there?”

“Come on, David. I didn’t invite you here for the fishing. I need an expert to assess the situation.”

The emeritus professor, once a young and irascible scientist, now a cold, meticulous thinker, nodded and said, “You’re right. The old route?”

“The old route.”

They walked through a connecting door to the west wing. A conservatory on their right boasted a view of the hotel’s rear grounds. On their left was a smoking lounge. He imagined old men talking in lowered tones over their broadsheets. But there was nobody. The hotel had been emptied the day before.

They turned left into the cloakroom. It was the size of a snooker table. In the old days, David would stand exactly as he did now, place his thumb on the wall and wait for the computer to recognise his blood. Then the whole room would sink downwards. But there was no longer a computer. Instead there was a splintered hole in the floor with a ladder leaning against its edge.

“What happened to the lift?”

“It was dismantled. All part of the clean-up operation following the bombing.”

David paused. He did not want to talk about that. The regrets were shards of glass. “Me first?”

“No, me. The guard knows my face.” He cupped his hands and shouted down the hole: “Two coming down!” There was no reply.

The colonel had twenty years on David but he shinnied down the ladder without complaint. David waited until his head was out of sight and then pulled a card from his wallet. It was Ego. He tapped it once and its exterior assumed the contours of a female face.

“Send an email to my daughter,” David said quickly. “Tell her I’ve gone past the point of no return.”

“Unfortunately I cannot get a good signal,” replied the machine. It was already back in his wallet but the voice was clear. David had a microscopic earpiece.

“Alright, just stand by,” he said.

“David,” called a voice from below. “Are you alright?”

“Fine. I have a thing about ladders and heights.” Which was true. “I’ll be right with you.”

The professor stepped gingerly on to the ladder and began to climb down. There was a safety line. After some consideration, he hooked it to his belt buckle. When his head passed below the level of the floor, he looked down and saw a circle of temporary lighting. It was twenty metres below – the lowest floor of the research centre.

One minute later, his feet made contact with the ground and he unhooked the safety line. Four spotlights blazed. They made impenetrable shadows in the corners, which were full of odd-looking shapes. It seemed that nobody had cleared the area before it was sealed. There were broken cabinets, chairs, and computer monitors. There was even an old mattress. Paper was everywhere. In the centre, a space had been made for the lighting rig. Cables snaked away to nowhere, though, in the distance, David could hear the put-put of a diesel generator. Standing motionless in the cramped space, next to the ladder, was an armed man. He wore a builder’s hard-hat and outdoor clothing. He avoided David’s polite nod.

“Going up is more difficult,” said McWhirter.

“I can hardly wait.”

“Shall we?”

“After you.”

They stepped from the chamber into a corridor that was as derelict as the lift shaft. David remembered an air-conditioned expanse with beautifully decorated walls and light muzak. Now there was nothing more than a sense of space in the darkness, and he hugged himself against the cold.

McWhirter threw a relay. Lights erupted along the corridor – perhaps fifty metres – clang after clang. It was much larger than he remembered. The fire doors were gone. The walls were black as charcoal. Doors leading from the corridor were now nothing more than gaping holes, some filled with cabinets and chairs, others with wood and masonry. Like the lift shaft, there was paper everywhere.

“Take this,” said McWhirter. It was a heavy outdoor coat. “It’s a steady five degrees in here.” He also handed David a hard hat, some gloves, a first-aid kit, and a laminated map of the complex. “We’ll need to keep in contact if we get separated. Do you have a computer?”

David thought about Ego. “No,” he lied.

McWhirter nodded. He handed him a walkie-talkie. Then the old colonel paid out a length of climber’s rope and tied himself to David.

“We going potholing too?”

McWhirter tested his torch. “It’s a possibility. We’ve already lost a guard.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No,” said McWhirter. “He was checking out one of the higher levels and the floor gave way.”

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There was a long pause as David gave the colonel time to admit that, aye, he was kidding.

“Bloody hell,” David said.

“OK, we’re ready. Step only where I step. Let’s go.”

They crept away. McWhirter went first, sweeping to and fro with his torch and sliding his feet, testing the floor’s integrity with each step.

Deadline

Saskia Brandt watched her secretary. Her secretary did not watch back because she was dead. Saskia was pensive. Somebody wanted to frame her. She walked back to her desk – retrieving her blouse on the way – and asked the computer for a list of her most recent cases. The computer did nothing.

“Computer?”

“Who are you?” it asked. “Your voice print is not identified.”

Saskia was intrigued. “I am Saskia Brandt. This is my office.”

“Update records?”

Saskia blinked. “Yes. Also run an internal systems check.”

“Check complete. No problems found.”

“Can you explain why my voice print was unavailable?”

“Yes, it may have been deleted accidentally, which is unlikely, or by a malicious user, which is likely.”

Was the malicious user the person trying to frame her? Why had the computer been able to recognise her voice before she opened the fridge? “Saskia,” it continued, “your refrigerator reports that it is broken.”

“Yes, I know that. My secretary is inside.”

“I do not understand. Why would your secretary be inside the refrigerator?”

“Do you know why?”

“I do not understand. Why would your secretary be inside the refrigerator?”

“Oh, switch off.”

“Yes, Saskia.”

The call came five minutes later. It was Jobanique. Saskia donned her blouse, though it was too hot to do so. Outside, the air was brown with dust and heat. The window became opaque with the image of her boss, Jobanique, sitting at his desk. He gave the impression of a middle-aged German businessman, but the whole scene was a computer-generated façade. His identity was secret. His name was certainly not Jobanique. Only one thing about the man was true: his voice. He spoke German well but crisply, without the fluency of a native speaker.

“Saskia, my dear. So nice to see you.”

“Thank you. Actually, I’m glad you called. I have a domestic problem. I won’t be able to take the case.”

Jobanique laughed. “My dear Saskia, you are already on the case.”

“This is the case?”

“Yes. I’m turning on high-strength encryption.” His image shimmered. In a more serious tone, he continued: “In the early hours of this morning your computer sent a report to a refrigeration subcontractor concerning your fridge.”

Saskia leaned against her desk. “Go on.”

“I intercepted the email and sent a man around to investigate.”

She began to pace. She looked at the picture of Simon, the blotter, the plant in the corner and the secretary’s little desk. There were no signs that someone had been in the room. “Why did you do that?”

“Instinct.” Jobanique shifted in his chair. “You had a new fridge fitted last year. A simple statistical test indicates that the probability of it failing within five years is less than one in twenty. I don’t like unusual occurrences. I sent the man around as a precaution. Stone.”

Saskia slumped in her chair and threw her feet onto the table, though she really wanted to put her head in her hands. “Stone?”

“He doesn’t talk. I don’t want Internal Affairs on this case before I have all the facts.”

“What are the facts?”

Jobanique played with his pen. “Your secretary was killed two days ago, Friday evening, by a single stab wound just below the ear. It led to a fatal brain haemorrhage.”

“How do you know that?”

“Stone brought a scanner with him. He’s into gadgets. The haemorrhage was effected by an extremely sharp blade more than six centimetres in length. She died almost instantly. What was her name?”

“Mary,” Saskia said.

“Poor Mary.”

Saskia stared at him. “Back to the killer’s movements. Why put her in the fridge?”

“Simple. She’s in the fridge. She’s a big hot object. The fridge’s gas compressor can’t cope -”

“Even less so with broken air conditioning,” Saskia interrupted.

“Agreed. So the fridge breaks. The computer makes an automatic report to have the fridge repaired. They send around a

guy first thing on Monday morning, he discovers the body, presto, you're framed."

Saskia nodded. "Yes. I wasn't due back until Tuesday. But why put the body in the fridge? Why not just call the police?"

Jobanique was silent for a while. "I don't know."

"Hang on. I've got it. I left the office at about six o'clock on the Friday evening. If the murder demonstrably happened a little later than that – which it probably did, considering that Mary was still in the office when I left – then I would have a cast-iron alibi. Witness statements from the taxi-driver, airline tickets – watertight. But by storing the body in the fridge and having the fridge break, the time of death is unpredictable. It would leave open the possibility I murdered Mary before leaving for Marseilles."

"Fine so far," said Jobanique, scratching his chin, "but why would you, as a murderer, put the body in the fridge?"

"Perhaps I wanted to store it temporarily and dispose of it later."

"And just sneak out of the FIB building with her under your arm?"

Saskia smiled. "The mind of the murderer is not always clear. Take the motive, for example. What could that be?"

"Well, Frank did find something," said Jobanique. "In Mary's pockets are a number of...interesting photographs. Lesbian. You and her. Oh, forgeries I'm sure."

Saskia did not respond to his embarrassment. "I see. Blackmail gone wrong. A lover's tiff."

Jobanique looked at his watch. "OK, it's 1:15 p.m. You have twenty hours."

Her feet dropped from the desk. "What?"

“Think about it. We can’t cancel the repair man. The murderer is certain to check that we’re on his tail, and that would be a give away. Your only advantage is his belief that he’s got away with it. He might make mistakes. At the very least, he won’t be on guard.”

Saskia stood. “Fine.”

“One more thing. The repair man will arrive at nine o’clock on Monday morning. Tomorrow. If you haven’t solved the case by then, IA will move in. If you have, you’ll hand over your notes to Stone and we’ll nail the guy.”

Saskia left her office. In the corridor, thank God, the air conditioning worked. Everything worked, from the freshly-picked friezes to the brass finishings. But the FIB did not suffer from cash flow. As a private organisation, it loaned itself to certain governments and wealthy individuals. The crime game could be good for both sides of the law.

She entered the lift and said, “Lobby.” Beneath the manual panel someone had written: “Another fine product of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation.”

At the bottom of the building the doors opened onto the mezzanine floor, which held a bar, restaurant and café. The entire area was brightly illuminated with natural light from huge windows. The air was filled with a thousand busy footsteps. Saskia took an escalator to the ground floor proper and entered a second elevator. She pressed her thumb against a panel and said “Down”.

The basement was a stack of grey corridors and grey people. They walked on silent errands. They ignored her and each

other. To her surprise, one of them stopped and said: “Have I seen you somewhere before?”

She tapped the ID on her lapel. “Detective Saskia Brandt. Is there a problem?”

The man gave her an appraising look and continued on his errand. “Never mind,” he said.

Saskia located the domestic surveillance office and went inside. She found the operator in charge of camera security and told him the boss wanted to see him. He left irritably. When he returned, Saskia had gone.

Into the Dark

The nightmares had lasted years. In them, David had run through the research centre as though it were a submarine stuck in a crash-dive. Post-traumatic stress, the psychologist had said. But those nightmarish corridors had been faded memories from a younger man's mind. They were ghosts of something already dead. Here and now they were more hostile and grotesque.

"Bomb damage," muttered McWhirter, and David, by this time, was too tired to reply. They had been walking for fifteen minutes, but in the cold darkness, his energy and motivation were at low ebb. A colder silence had descended between the two men.

"We must be nearly there."

"Aye."

They began to make their way north, along the third corridor of the H-shaped floor. McWhirter called a halt and checked his map. Warily, David dug him in the ribs. "What the hell do you need a map for? This place is laid out like a hotel."

David stood and panted. He was out of shape. His eyes caught the sparkling orbs of the old colonel. As dust trickled down between them, David saw those orbs narrow.

"I suppose you know this place pretty well."

A groan came from above their heads.

"I suppose I do. I worked here. So did you."

McWhirter stepped forward. He was much taller. "The bombers knew this place well."

"Agreed," said David. "It was an inside job."

The colonel ignored him. “They knew where to set the charges. They knew when the scientists would be in the hall, away from danger. And they knew precisely which project to bomb.”

David held his gaze. Behind his own, blood was rushing. “Aren’t you a bit old to be playing games, Colonel?”

The colonel pointed his torch at David’s face. The world went white. “Now tell me, laddie. Just between us. Did you do it?”

There was another noise from the ceiling. Neither man dared to check it. David said, “My wife died in the explosion. My Helen. I’ve been haunted by her death for twenty years. If I ever saw the man who did it, I would kill him. Now forget about it. It’s not my fault you were caught napping.”

The torch light did not move. David kept his stare fixed, though he could see nothing. McWhirter moved the torch. The whiteness vanished, replaced by an enormous afterimage that was equally blinding.

“Let’s go.”

As David was about to step forward, to follow McWhirter, he heard a splintering sound. He looked up and saw the ceiling bulge. The walls quivered and dust rained. David spat and coughed. He scrambled forward, tripped, and knocked his head against a rock-like protuberance of reinforced concrete. His hardhat saved his life, but the world rolled from side to side and he couldn’t stand. Dizzily, he guessed that he was about to die, and at that moment hands grabbed the hood of his coat and hauled him across the floor. There was a booming rumble as masonry fell into the corridor behind him. It missed his toes by inches.

In the silence, the air was thick with dust and a pungent odour. David coughed and groped about. He couldn't open his eyes.

"Colonel?" he called out. "Colonel!"

He stood and the blood drained from his head. He nearly fainted. For support, he leaned forward on something dark. It felt like a shoulder. He whipped away his hand and, carefully, opened his eyes. It was McWhirter. The colonel had fallen backwards in the shape of a star. He had tripped after pulling David clear. Emerging from his abdomen and chest were three fingers of rusty steel. That explained the smell. The steel protruded from a large block of reinforced concrete.

"Oh God."

There was no reply. Blood dribbled from the colonel's mouth. His eyes were dry. David stared at him. There was no sense of panic. Just utter unreality. Eventually, his stupor was broken by the pop of McWhirter's torch as it fell from his relaxing fingers and broke on the floor. The corridor became black. David pulled out his walkie-talkie.

"Hello?" he whispered. There was no reply. He tried to remain calm. Touching the walkie-talkie revealed that the antenna had snapped. He needed to replace it. He pulled open the case and touched the antenna wire. It was bare. With the wire held against the bare metal protruding from McWhirter, he tried again. "Hello? Any person please reply. I need help. McWhirter's dead. Hello?"

Very faintly, a voice answered.

David sighed with relief. "Say again, over."

The voice belonged to a young man. He said: “Repeat, identify yourself. Over.”

“My name is David Proctor. Professor David Proctor. I was with Colonel McWhirter. I need some help. Over.”

“Say again? Where’s the colonel?”

“He’s dead.”

There was a pause. “What happened?”

“There was a cave-in. The corridor is blocked. I don’t have a torch. I’m at the junction of D-corridor, on the lowest level.”

“OK, David, keep calm. Is the roof stable now?”

David scowled. “I’m perfectly calm. The roof has stopped making noises, which is a good sign.”

“Sit tight.” The voice added, “And don’t speak too loudly. Out.”

David stared in disgust at his fingers. They were wet with visceral material. He sat on the floor, contemplating the swiftness of the disaster, and what would be happening if he had rejected McWhirter’s summons that morning, or if McWhirter had managed to stay alive, or a thousand things. After a long, lonely moment he heard a bleep in his ear.

“Not now, Ego,” he whispered.

“But I have an idea.”

On the same level as David, only thirty metres away, a young woman put down her walkie-talkie. In front of her was a large object that resembled an aquarium. Through its transparent panels she could see something akin to the coloured gases of Jupiter. During her briefing, McWhirter had told her that it was a

prototype liquid memory storage device, capable of holding more than the sum of mankind's knowledge a billion times over. Light from its exotic interior cast patterns on the walls.

She noticed a glow, like moonlight, in the corridor outside.

She lay prone along one flank of the storage device. She trained her rifle on the doorway. In the relative brightness of the room she saw little of the corridor.

The glow became brighter. Everything was silent. She wondered if the research centre had ghosts.

She called, "Stop. Identify yourself."

A man emerged and stood on the threshold. In his leading hand he held a flat object, which she guessed was an infra-red camera. "I said halt," she repeated. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"I asked first."

"Professor David Proctor. I've just come from McWhirter. He's dead."

"I told you to wait at the scene."

"And I continued to my old laboratory to find you here. There, summarized."

She regarded him blankly. He was an unremarkable, middle-aged man. He was exhausted and dusty but impressed with himself. He had been issued with standard equipment and even wore a hard-hat, albeit at a foppish angle. His appearance and his story were credible. "Throw me your ID," she said.

"Where's the man I talked to?"

"You're looking at him. Throw it."

David pulled out his wallet. He slid it across the floor.

“Nice gun,” he said, as she scrutinised the ID. “Who are you going to shoot in a deserted tomb like this?”

She smiled and threw the wallet back. He caught it awkwardly. “You, maybe.”

David forced a laugh and stepped into the room. He pulled his eyes from the gun and gazed at the familiar-unfamiliar laboratory. This had been his workplace for a number of years. From here, he and his research partner, Bruce Shimoda, had programmed the software that took advantage of the massive computing capabilities of the storage device. Three doorways led from the room. One went to the corridor, one to a computer suite and one to overnight living quarters.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? We used to call it the fish tank.”

“I told you to stop where you are. I want to ask you some questions. You don’t seem too concerned about the colonel’s death.”

“Neither do you, young lady,” he snapped.

“Did you kill him?”

He noticed that the gun was tracking him. “Absolutely not. He died when the ceiling caved in. A tricky way to murder someone, wouldn’t you agree?”

She didn’t lower the gun. “Yes, it would be tricky.”

“Young woman, please move aside. I have work to do.”

She lowered her rifle and watched as he walked into the living quarters.

He used Ego to view the room and remained near the doorway. McWhirter's death had made him cautious. Not scared, exactly; not yet. But he checked the ceiling and walls.

The room was comparatively tidy. Most of its furniture had been destroyed by fire. There were pipes that terminated in a filthy sink, a torn mattress, blackened plastic chairs and some unidentifiable debris. The walls were crumbling and the interior partitions, which had divided the area into a dining room, bedroom and bathroom, were gone. David held his light on a shape in the corner. He felt the guard enter the room.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself," she said. "I'm Caroline."

"Hello, Caroline. Call me David. Never Dave." They shook hands and David had the fleeting impression of participating in something utterly absurd. "Shine your torch over here."

He knelt alongside the mattress and tugged carefully at the zip of a sleeping bag. When the zip was open he flung back the fabric to reveal a body.

"And this," he said, "is Doctor Bruce Shimoda."

Though David had not seen that face in the flesh for twenty years, he recognised his old friend immediately. Bruce appeared to be dead. His oriental, sunken face was lifeless and curiously lopsided. He wore two or three jumpers, a scarf, and there was a blanket around the legs. Nevertheless, his body looked small and vulnerable. His hands were drawn against the chest, little more than claws. Two rolls of fabric, which cushioned his head, aroused David's interest. They had been placed either side of a device that resembled a neck brace. David checked between the rolls and saw, sure enough, the wet-wire connection. He sighed.

"Is he breathing?" asked Caroline.

“Yes, he’s alive. But barely.” David ripped open the Velcro cover of his first-aid kit. “Couldn’t you have done something for him?”

“I’ve only been here a few hours. McWhirter couldn’t get a medic down. It was too dangerous. I thought you were a medical doctor.”

“Like I told the colonel, that was a long time ago,” he said, but he examined Bruce thoroughly. He had lost a great deal of fluid from bedsores. They were badly infected. “He’s been inside for two or three days, I’d guess.”

“Inside what?”

“See the cable?” He pointed at the wet-wire connection that led away from Bruce’s head. “This plugs into his brain stem. The connection leads to the computer. The computer is running a virtual universe. As far as Bruce is concerned, he’s now inside that universe.”

Caroline smiled. “Weird.”

“Weird and, as it happens, fatal,” David said sharply. “The connection can’t be removed.”

“Why not?”

“We were never sure. When we unplugged the rats, they died. Same with the chimps. Apart from one. He had a series of strokes and slipped into a permanent coma.”

“Well, then,” she reasoned, “just cut it.”

“That had the same effect.”

“Or turn off the computer.”

“That too.”

“Oh.” Caroline stared at the sleeping face and the room around them. She waited while David applied fresh dressings. She said, “It’s funny.”

“What is?” said David, not looking up.

“The lights are off, even though this section has power. How did he connect himself in the dark? He doesn’t have a torch. There was no fire. Do you think there’s someone else down here? Someone who turned off the lights after?”

David’s hands froze. “He did it in darkness – the same way he did everything in life. He’s been blind since the age of ten.”

“Oh.” She watched as he opened Bruce’s eyes and cupped his hand over each. “What are you doing?”

“He’s had a minor stroke already. He’s got two more days left, maybe three.” David took a syringe from the first-aid kit, attached a needle, drew some liquid from an ampoule and injected the sleeping form. “I’ve just given him some antibiotics. Help me set up a drip. He needs fluid.”

He went about his work efficiently and calmly. A saline drip in one arm. An antibiotic drip in the other. But it was impossible not to think of former, better times. They had been best friends. Impossible not to think of Bruce living like a rat in the darkness, preparing his nest, preparing to die. David was coping well until he found a note in his trouser pocket. It read:

Well well well after all these years! I’m looking forward to seeing an old friend. Come into my parlour and let me take a look at you...

“Aw, shit,” he said. Then he sat back, hugged his knees and wept. Caroline nearly touched his shoulder. A moment later, she left.

David emerged after fifteen minutes. Caroline was watching the patterns inside the liquid storage device. She felt him stop behind her. Instinctively, though she couldn't be sure why, she cradled her rifle.

“Hypnotic,” he murmured, as though hypnotized himself.

“Mmm.”

“Tell me,” he said cheerfully, settling beside her on the cold floor, “how are we going to get out of here? The cave-in that killed McWhirter blocked the main passage.”

“Yes, I checked thoroughly. There is no way out. The radios aren't powerful enough to get through to the team in the hotel.”

David laughed. He wanted to sound coolly detached, but his laughter was shrill. “So we're up to our necks in the bad stuff. I hope you've brought an extra suicide pill.”

Caroline got up and walked to the corner of the room. For the first time, David noticed a strange-looking device in the shadows. It had a keyboard and a chunky, orange exterior. It looked like a 'black box' flight recorder. She reached down and tore a strip of paper from the top.

“This is an Extremely Low Frequency transmitter,” Caroline said. “It can transmit and receive through solid rock. While you were with Bruce I managed to send a message and get one back, but now they're not responding.”

“What was the message?”

“I told them McWhirter was dead, you were alive, had made contact with me, and all exits are blocked.”

David nodded. He wondered how deep they were. “And what did they say to that?”

She handed him the paper. It read:

TESTACEGIKMOQSUWYTEST###YRMSGRCVD#EVAC#2
(TWO)HOURS#RPT#2(TWO)HOURS#FNDCVR##END

“How moving. What does it mean?”

“The first part’s a test pattern. Then: ‘Your message received. Evacuation in two hours, repeat, two hours. Find cover. Message ends.’”

David’s eyes widened. “They’re not going to blast their way down, surely? They’ll bury us all.”

“Relax,” she said, taking the paper from his hand. “The demolitions expert is a friend of mine. He’s good.”

He examined his watch. “So at 7:30 p.m. we’ll be busted out. But why so soon? We can last down here a while. There are things I need to do.”

Caroline crouched and looked into his eyes. She was attempting a very serious moment, but David, who was old enough to be her father, noticed that her eyes were very, very green.

“McWhirter didn’t tell you, did he? About the air.”

“What air?”

Caroline said nothing.

David took Ego from his wallet and said, “Ego, check the atmosphere.”

“It will take ten seconds,” said Ego. Caroline narrowed her eyes. She couldn’t hear Ego, but she could read David’s expression.

“Nice,” she said. “I’ve never seen a model so advanced.”

“You wouldn’t have,” he replied. “Ego is a prototype. This test is designed for travelling businessmen worried about air pollution.”

“Businesspeople. Who designed it?”

“Designed her. Me.”

“Atmospheric analysis complete,” said a little voice in his ear. “Though gaseous elements are at their normal proportions, the air contains a significant amount of dust. The dust particles are dangerously radioactive. Exposure is not recommended for longer than one hour.”

He checked his watch. When rescue came, they would have been underground for two hours. He was suddenly not so sad that McWhirter had died. An army man to the last. “It is recommended,” continued Ego, “that you log these data with an independent server for pollution liability.”

“The air,” Caroline said. “Is it still radioactive?”

David put Ego away. “Yes. We haven’t got long,” he said. “Come with me.”

“What is it?” she asked. She played her torch over the sand. The light made rainbows in the glass.

“Technology that is twenty years old, but still far in advance of anything commercially available. We called it an immersion chamber. There are two more. It’s linked to the computer.” He

crouched and wiped some dirt from the glass. “You seem very interested in the technology.”

“I’m naturally curious,” she replied. Her gun was leaning against the liquid storage device in the other room, forgotten.

“You see the stuff at the bottom of the chamber? It looks like sand, but take one of those grains and look at it under a microscope and you’ll see a little robot. They look like metal bumblebees. There are billions of them. When the chamber is active, they engulf the user in a cloud. They work in unison. If the user steps forward, they will form a hard surface under each foot and allow him to move as though walking. By becoming immovable, or charging into the user, they can mimic any surface in the same way, and mimic any consistency – liquid, gas, solid – and, through vibration, temperature.”

There was a pause. In the distance, some concrete settled. “What about a knife blade?”

David shook his head. “You don’t even try to get away from that military stereotype, do you?”

“I suppose I’m a fatalist. How are you going to breathe in there?”

“There’s a mask. It’ll cover my face.” He looked at his watch. “There’s an hour and fifty minutes left.”

He took off his hat, coat and one of his jumpers. When he undid his trousers, Caroline stepped back.

“Relax,” he said. “The user goes naked. That’s what the microbots – those little robots – are configured for. When I appear in the computer, I’ll be given clothes automatically. Virtual clothes.”

David kicked off his boots and removed his coat. He removed his shirt and jeans. Disconcertingly, Caroline did not look

away. “Look,” he said, “Something may go wrong. The emergency release for the chamber is that big red handle over there.” He pointed across the room. Carole shone her torch obligingly. “If you see me make two claps above my head like this –” he demonstrated – “then pull the handle. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

David smiled crookedly and entered the immersion chamber. It was the size of a coffin. When the door closed and the rest of the dark laboratory became an indistinct blur, he said, “Go,” and the dust storm began. A mask descended and he attached it to his face. The seal was airtight. By now the tiny particles were flying about him in a rage, and on the interior of the mask, a picture began to form.

The Maker of Hats

Saskia felt the sweat run down her back. It itched. Her foray into the building's security records had come to nothing. The records were blank. Somebody had erased them. From her desk, the picture of Simon stared. Saskia was not in the photograph. She scowled and rubbed her back against the chair.

"Computer," she said. "I..." Her voice trailed away. She looked into the corners of the ceiling. Tiny cameras followed her movements.

"I beg your pardon, Saskia?"

"Computer, you use those cameras to help disambiguate spoken commands. Do you record the footage?"

"Yes. The footage is kept for one week, to use as a statistical aid for difficult utterances."

Saskia tapped her blotter. It became reflective then changed to display a graphical user interface. "Show me on my desktop."

"Certainly. It will take a moment."

Another icon appeared on the blotter. She tapped it and turned around to face the window. "Play it on the window."

The window darkened as the liquid crystal elements arranged themselves into a display with four equal sections. Each showed the view from one of the four cameras in the main office. They held Saskia's face in extreme close-up. The computer had no cameras in the bathroom or kitchen.

"Go back to Friday."

"Done. This is 12:07 p.m."

Saskia watched. All four cameras were trained on her secretary, Mary. From the limited background, Saskia guessed she was seated at her small desk near the door. She looked at the woman. Mary. She still had no feelings for her.

“Jump to 7 p.m.”

The computer did so. Each camera showed an empty room.

“Back to 6:30. Show the time on-screen.”

It showed the secretary again, seated at her desk. Saskia waited and then, as the timer clicked over to 6:34, there was a knocking sound. The secretary stood. She walked to the door and opened it. The cameras moved jerkily, tight on Mary’s head, so she could see Mary in great detail, but little else. Mary was expectant, then puzzled, then afraid. Pan out, Saskia willed.

The computer did.

As the murderer entered the room, two of the four cameras zoomed out, targeted his head, and zoomed in. He wore a broad-brimmed fedora. Because each camera was high on the wall, the hat masked everything but his hairless chin. Saskia thumped her desk.

It was difficult to see precisely what happened next. In little more than two seconds, the murderer grabbed Mary and stabbed her behind the ear. Saskia listened for clues and admired the murderer’s skill. She saw the secretary’s surprise and then her sleepiness. Both figures sank to the floor. The murderer laid her almost tenderly.

The murderer wiped his blade on Mary’s collar. Without ceremony, he began the process of hauling her towards the kitchen. Mary was a big girl and he struggled.

“Computer, stop it there. Go back to the full-length shot of the bloke who walked in.”

“I do not understand. Speak more slowly, please.”

“Back five seconds. Back five seconds. Forward two seconds. Back three frames. OK, print that on paper.”

A hot piece of paper slid from the desk. Saskia flapped it. It had some motion blur, but showed the murderer mid-stride. His height was average. He wore a long raincoat. He wore gloves. He didn't have a beard. He had narrow shoulders. That was it. She fed the paper into her shredder, but the feeder jammed and spat the paper back out.

“Computer, can you clean up that image? Sharpen it?”

“Yes.”

Nothing happened.

“Do it.”

The image sharpened. “Print that again.”

Once more, a hot piece of paper slid into her hand. The man's clothing was unremarkable. Perhaps an expert could tell her something, but they looked perfectly ordinary. Next, she scrutinized the hat. The image processing had revealed a band of blue and gold around the rim. And, yes, a little badge. A golden eagle.

Bingo, as Simon would say.

Saskia pressed her ID against the glass and pointed at the door. An assistant, exquisitely dressed, smiled under his pencil-thin moustache. He was hanging a feather boa in the shop window. He unlocked the door. Saskia shook the rain from her

umbrella and asked for the manager. The assistant asked, "Have I seen you somewhere before?"

"Sorry?"

"Excuse me. I'll get Jean-François."

The assistant vanished.

The sign above the door claimed that the shop had been established in the nineteenth century. Saskia looked around suspiciously. It was the kind of place that did not need to display its wares. Customers knew what they came for: the satisfaction of exclusivity and price.

A little man emerged from the backroom. He wore dungarees and delicate, expensive shoes. His hands hung limply from his wrists. A pair of pince-nez sat on the bridge of his nose, so far down that they seemed quite useless for anything but the appreciation of his beautiful shoes. His head was hairless but for large pork-chop sideburns. He held out his hand and she took it. Saskia looked down. He was holding a handkerchief.

"I apologise, miss," he said, in French. "I suffer from a delicate constitution."

"I need your help," Saskia said.

The man spread his hands in supplication, as though she had offered him something so expensive he could not possibly accept. "Everybody needs my help, madam."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Has someone else asked for your help?"

He smiled. "You are a detective, yes?"

"Yes." Saskia retrieved her wallet and held it up. She squeezed the sides and it became transparent, revealing her ID. The man did not seem to glance at it.

“Ms Saskia Brandt. Welcome. I am Jean-François Champollion. I am descended from the Champollion who successfully deciphered the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt.”

Saskia smiled politely. Her French was not quite proficient enough to understand what he had said. She smiled anyway. “I understand you make hats.”

Jean-Francois shrugged. He seemed to agree but with reluctance. “I ‘make hats’, yes.”

Saskia removed the computer printout from her pocket. It had been folded and unfolded many times. The edges were corrugated with finger marks. She offered it, but he made no move to take the paper.

“Do you sell this hat, Jean-Francois?”

“Hmm?” He craned forward. He devoted equal time to the paper and her chest. She shook the paper to get his attention.

“The hat.”

“The hat, yes.”

Saskia sagged. She had been to ten hat shops in the last three hours. All of them had fingered the picture. None recognised the hat. Jean-Francois, however, clapped a hand to his forehead and exclaimed.

“You recognise it?”

“It is the eagle.”

“The what?”

He said, “Der Adler, you might say in German. Not only did I sell this hat, young lady, but I made it. Let me show you.”

They walked to the back of the shop. It was surprisingly small and dark. They shuffled past the exquisitely dressed attendant, who was standing near an alley window smoking a

cigar. He stared at her. His tongue slowly emerged, snake-like, and tickled the end of the cigar. She remembered his earlier question. Have I seen you somewhere before?

They climbed down the narrowest stairwell Saskia had ever seen, slid through a tiny door and entered a room that was filled with hat boxes. It was lit by a single swinging bulb. Somewhere, high in the shadows, was the ceiling. Water dripped. She heard rats. Jean-François Champollion shouted, “Level ten, number three.”

There was a squirt of compressed air and a box came sailing down through the void and landed in the little man’s arms. His hands were tiny. He gave her the box and removed the lid. Inside was a navy-blue fedora with an eagle on the band. “This is a design exclusive to my establishment.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Does it sell well?”

“Madame, I make them to order. This particular one is for an Italian duke.”

“How many have you made in the past six months?”

He paused and twiddled a sideburn in his fingers. “...Three.”

“I need to know who you sold them to.”

The man smiled. “Of course, madame. Please wait here.” He left and closed the door behind him.

Saskia waited for a while. She began to feel uneasy. Why did he take her to this room? What did she possibly need to see in a room full of hats? The light bulb swung. Shadows stretched and contracted.

She tried the door handle.

It didn’t move. She barged against it. Nothing.

There was a puff of compressed air and a hat box dropped out of the air. She stepped aside but it clipped her shoulder and she stumbled into workbench. Tools clattered to the floor.

She ran against the door once more. She hissed in pain. Wood splintered. Her shoulder would be like pulp in the morning. Her chest would be worse.

Another box hit the floor. And another.

She reached down and grabbed one of the fallen tools. It was some kind of awl. She forced it into the gap between the door and its frame. The wood split easily. There was a hiss of compressed air from above. She took one last run against the door and it fell like a drawbridge. She ran up the steps. At the top was the backroom. It was empty. She crashed into the shop proper.

The hat maker and the attendant were standing by the door. The attendant was helping the old man into his coat. He was still smoking the cigar. They turned as Saskia approached.

The attendant first: she slapped the smouldering cigar into his mouth and, as he gagged, she pulled his buttoned jacket down to his elbows. To keep the old hat maker busy, she chopped the side of his throat. The attendant cowered. She grabbed his balls. He bit the cigar in two.

“OK, what are you going to tell me?” she asked.

“Huh-huh-have we met somewhere before?”

Saskia shook her head. She certainly did not want to hear that. She swivelled her wrist. “Hhmmph,” he said, and dropped.

She turned on the old hat maker and pressed the awl into his midriff. He backed away until he reached the coat rack.

“Tell me all about it.”

“We were only trying to protect ourselves.”

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“From who?”

“I’m not allowed to say.”

“You have five seconds.”

“Don’t kill me!”

“Four seconds.”

“Very well. I will tell you. Please take your fingers away. Let me breathe.”

Saskia did so.

The hat maker looked relieved. He pulled out a gun.

She swore.

Someone grabbed her shoulders. It was the assistant. He pushed her against the door. She could see the street outside through its marbled glass. A small boy saw her. He tried to attract his mother’s attention but she pulled him along. The butt of the gun hit Saskia near her ear and she slid to the floor, switched off.

A Walk in the Woods

The world was distorted. Light was scattered somehow. There were shapes. Forces. Temperature. He writhed. He wanted to rub his eyes but the mask prevented him. Then he realised that the shapes were clouds. He was in the upper atmosphere of Shimoda, the virtual planet. He could see little.

He shivered. His virtual arms were covered by a shirt and, as he checked himself, he realised with some relief that the computer was working correctly. So far. It was accessing the liquid storage device, supplying sound through the earpieces, vision through the mask, and feel through the microbots.

“Supervisor,” said David. The computer heard the keyword and checked his voice against a database. His voice had not changed in the twenty years since he had last spoken.

It asked, “Password?”

David said, “Prometheus.”

A white square appeared before him. It was perfectly two-dimensional. The square displayed a standard graphical user interface: a file system with various options like open, move, copy and shut down. One icon would summon The Word, the programming language that controlled this universe. He moved his hand over this panel and an answering blue dot appeared beneath his index finger. A touch of the panel would select the option. He hesitated over ‘shut down’. It would stop the program. It would send him back into the real world forthwith, game over. He could not guess where it would send Bruce.

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He touched another icon. It was a picture of his younger self. The computer represented all organisms with a long genome. For visitors like David, the computer used his DNA. Many years before, he had contributed a blood sample. It had been read, decoded, and used to construct his virtual body: his body as it would appear to the eyes of those creatures on Shimoda. He was young, fit, scarless and pale.

He smiled and dropped to the surface.

In another universe, David's glass booth swung about its horizontal axis. His naked body floated, supported on its cushion of microbots, oblivious to the real silence around him. The room was dark. Caroline was not there. She was in the main laboratory.

She bit her lip. Slowly, carefully, she drew a knife across her little finger. A red drop, shiny and bright by torchlight, fell upon a microscope slide. She sucked the wound. She placed a sliver of clear plastic on top of the blood and pressed. It bloomed into transparency.

David flew over lakes and trees, up valley walls he had not seen in years, past waterfalls barely changed, into grasslands and desert, over ice floes and black volcanic islands. Night fell in seconds. He touched down in a small glade near the equator. Nearby, he heard the bubbling of a hot spring. Shimoda had many. It was a truly alien planet. Alien too were the plants and trees around him. Their leaves were blue, not green, and typically

angular. Blossoms came in all colours. It was difficult to remember they were essentially digital.

In the darkness, he could make out a path. Shimoda had no moon but he could adjust the brightness using the command console. He walked on. Under his virtual, perfectly fitting hiking boots he felt the forest floor. It was a spongy carpet of wet leaves and twigs. He would never smell it. Low branches and leaves touched him. He imagined they thought of him as God. Did they want to cure their ills? But they were beautiful trees.

Their weirdness washed away the anaesthetic of familiarity and made him think. He stopped, took a breath, took stock. Experience told him not to imagine his real body coexisting with its virtual counterpart. That would lead to nausea. He made a mental effort to place himself here, now, walking in the woods. The beautiful woods.

He sang a hiking song and disappeared from the view of the large creature that stalked him. It stepped onto the path. Sniffed the air. Though it move twice as fast as David, it followed him slowly and silently.

Caroline trod carefully. She did not want to cut her feet on debris. She glanced at the emergency release handle, then back at David, then at her watch. She approached the second of the three glass coffins. With the touch of a finger, the booth opened and she stepped inside. She was already naked. She was prepared. She fitted the mask over her face and felt the sting of the microbots as the fans stirred them into a storm.

The Metadillo

David heard a twig snap. The sound came from behind him. He realised that the steady background noise of tiny animals – forest static – had ceased. He turned.

It was three metres in length. Its eyes were multifaceted. Covering the shoulders, back and limbs were rigid metal-like panels. They glistened in a light that only David could see. A knight crawling silently on all fours. Its profile was low; its legs worked beautifully. Its feet sank far into the soft humus. The creature was heavy.

The multifaceted eyes did not move. David wanted to run, but the creature was interesting. It had a predatory stalk, but its 360-degree eyes were better adapted for watchfulness. And they were insectile. The creature would only be able to detect motion. Or body heat.

He needed to stop thinking.

This was a predator emerging from the pitch-black.

He needed to freeze the computer's program.

Its mouth opened. Quite silently. Inside were three rows of teeth. The second lay behind the first, the third behind the second. David had enough time to think of one word – shark – when it froze, settled, and sprang. Its snout dug into his chest and flipped him aside. He impacted a tall, hard tree and slid slowly down the trunk. In the virtual world, his back was scored by a thousand thorny fingers. In the real world, the microbots formed razor-like edges and copied the pattern faithfully. He shouted, half in pain, half in anger.

“Computer, give me supervisor access. Password is Prometheus.”

The opaque rectangle of the command console appeared and obscured his view. He heard a scream – his own, he realised, his own. “Computer, free- ” he began, and then saw a small arrow of metal fly through the desktop. It happened so fast that it simply became a memory before he experienced it. The arrow was in his neck. The creature had pinned him to the tree. Why? He waited for the blood to pour but it did not. The stiletto plugged its own wound.

Unused, the opaque desktop became transparent. He saw the creature. It moved left and right like a crab. The movements became stylised and repetitive. It pounded the forest floor his front legs. He heard deep roots crack. Finally, it shuffled backward and sat on its haunches. It took a deep breath – it has lungs, he thought – and bellowed towards the sky. There was an answering call from miles away.

David swallowed carefully. Dinner is served.

It walked towards him.

David did not dare move. The stiletto might snick an artery yet. But he managed the words, because he knew only they would save his life. His voice was hoarse and he could taste blood at the back of his throat. He desperately wanted to cough. “Computer, freeze program.”

“Permission denied. Unable to match user with voice records.”

The creature stopped directly before him. It knelt and regarded him closely. Did it realise that it looked upon its Creator? Did it relish this power?

Slowly, its mouth opened again. David imagined the legions of microbots ready to assume the shape of those teeth. The New World computer would kill him.

There was a sound in the undergrowth. The creature turned. A spear struck its flank and fell to the ground. The creature shifted to face the threat. David could not.

The creature – *Metadillus carcaradon*, mused David – seemed to drift, not walk, across the path. There was no sound. Until Bruce Shimoda, PhD, whose body was lying near-dead in its cold tomb, burst into view. He was wearing a combination of leather and metal armour. He looked like an American football player. He shouted, “Get some, get some!” He swung a vine-lasso above his head. There was a rock on the end of it. David wondered if might lasso this creature, this *metadillo*, but he remembered that this world was utterly dark. Bruce had no source of illumination. The rock lasso was his antenna.

The *metadillo* charged after him. David sat in silence at the base of the tree. He heard Bruce’s war cry and the clang of metal on metal.

He fainted.

Saskia Makes a Discovery

Saskia awoke and wanted to be sick. The world was distorted. Light was scattered somehow. There were shapes. Forces. She was being prodded. She rubbed her eyes. It was a policeman.

She took his baton and pulled it. The policeman pulled indignantly in the opposite direction. They danced until, with a wrench, he reclaimed it. He was breathless. "I could arrest you for that." He added, "I thought you were dead."

Saskia pushed herself upright and looked around. She was outside the hat shop. Metal blinds had been pulled down over the frontage and secured with fierce locks. In marker pen, someone had written, "Closed indefinitely".

She considered her situation. The shop was her only lead. Perhaps she might chase the two men to the airport, but airlines did not permit access to flight manifests without a judge's warrant. She could not search the shop without a warrant either. Breaking into it was a possibility, but how could she get the records she needed? Customer receipts were not kept on paper. They were held on a computer. Breaking into that would be far more difficult. And there was the additional risk of being caught and losing time in the process.

She needed another lead. She needed to think. The time was 8:15 p.m. She had been unconscious for four hours. The little hat maker had covered her with a blanket.

"Officer, I apologise." She produced her wallet and flashed her ID. "I need a helicopter back to FIB immediately, please."

He scowled. She knew that most police officers did not trust private detectives, even if they were in the employ of the state. They saw the job as glamorous and overpaid. “Yes, detective.”

“Help me up?”

He offered the baton.

The traffic helicopter banked sharply and landed on the roof of FIB headquarters. Saskia jumped out and crouched to avoid the whirling blades. Moments later the helicopter pulled away and Saskia took a lift down to the 53rd floor. Once in her office, she walked to the transparent window and asked the computer to play some Vivaldi.

“Which symphony?”

“Four seasons.”

“Which piece?”

“Winter.”

The office was still hot. She had a long, cold shower. Her ear was bruised and rang like a bell recently struck. Her shoulder was grazed.

Half an hour later, she sat down at the desk. She drummed her fingers. She wanted to go home but felt compelled to remain in the office.

“Computer, play the tape again. Go back to 6:34 p.m.”

The wall showed the four cameras. The secretary came into view. Once more, there was a knock at the door. The murderer had arrived. Once more, the secretary went to open it. Saskia leaned forward. The tight angle was frustrating.

The murder occurred. She rewound the tape. The murder happened again. Each time she felt nothing. She drummed her fingers. The polished wood reflected the underside of her hand. She stopped.

“Computer, back five seconds. Forward two seconds.”

The images froze on the murderer as he wiped the knife on the secretary’s collar. “Close up on the knife.”

“What is the knife?”

Saskia thought for a moment. “The rectangular, shiny object oriented at twenty degrees from the vertical on camera one.”

The computer zoomed in. The knife filled the frame. On its surface was a grainy, ghostly image. “Expand camera one so that it fills the screen.” Obediently, the image expanded. Saskia looked at the reflection again. She walked to the other end of the room and squinted to blur her vision. Yes. The knife blade reflected a complex, oval object. It had to be the murderer’s face.

“Computer, can you analyse the image on the surface of the knife?”

“What for?”

Saskia smiled. “Because I told you.”

There was a pause. “For what?”

“I want to have a true representation of whatever is reflected in that surface. Factor in everything: probable surface of the knife, lighting conditions, motion blur, everything. But don’t send this away for analysis. Analyse it yourself.”

“If I send the image away, it will take seconds to analyse. If I process it myself, it will take hours.”

“How many hours?”

“Twelve hours, plus or minus one.”

Saskia looked at her watch. It was eight o'clock. That meant the image processing would finish just before the repair man arrived and, with him, the end of her career. Perhaps her life. The death penalty was often given to murderers and rapists, though lately some murderers had had their brains wiped and sent back out into the community as street cleaners. Saskia shuddered at the thought.

“Saskia?”

“Yes?”

“Should I continue?”

“Yes.”

It would be a long night. She still didn't want to go back to her apartment. She took an old tennis ball from her desk draw. She hefted it. She bounced it. She threw it at the wall and caught it.

From his frame, Simon watched. His eyes seemed to follow her. They were reproachful. In the corners of the room the computer's speech recognition cameras remained trained on her head.

The Rendezvous

In David's nightmare, a dark shape pressed a knife into his throat. He heard a question: "Isn't he pleased?" He tried to scream but could not; tried to move but could not. Then, abruptly, he awoke to see Bruce Shimoda fiddling with the stiletto that had skewered him, through the throat, to the tree. The sun was high in the sky.

Bruce shifted his grip and David hissed. "Watch it."

"I am," Bruce replied.

"Then watch it better."

Bruce waggled some more, then gave up and sat down. He coughed into his hand, looked at the contents, and wiped the palm on his thigh. This was their first conversation in twenty years. It seemed natural to fall back into their bickering routine.

But Bruce was now in his early twenties. The coded instructions in his DNA had been followed faithfully by the computer. He had a week's worth of beard. His hair was greasy and new. His acne scars were gone. His eyes, in particular, were bright and clear. They had none of the random, roaming stare that they had once had. Bruce Shimoda, blind in real life, could now see. Through the wetwire connection, tiny robots had carried cables barely nanometres across into his brain, uniting computer and brain in the most fundamental way.

"Hey. Good to see you," said David.

Bruce smiled. Was it really Bruce? He looked more like Bruce's younger brother. So much individuality had been lost – or

gained, or both – with Bruce’s new eyes. “It’s good to see anything.”

David bristled at his flippancy. “Is that why you came? Why’d you spend those days firing up this old computer? You’ll bloody die in here.”

“I – we should talk about it later. The metal shark may come back.”

“Where is it?”

“They can’t swim. I ran over a log that’s fallen over the river, down there, about a mile. It slid off, into the water.” He chuckled in his reverie. “It was fun the first time. I didn’t know it would work.”

“Look, talking about time. We don’t have much of it. There was a collapse in the centre. McWhirter’s dead. They’re blasting down to rescue me.” He thought of Caroline. “Us.”

Bruce nodded. “We need to find some shelter. The shark’s call reaches for miles. Others will come.”

He adjusted his skins and rubbed his hands together. The light was fading. Unlike David, he could not address the computer directly. He had no privileges. “Now, let’s get that dart out.”

He took hold of the stiletto with both hands and put one fur-clad foot next to David’s head. David closed his eyes. Bruce tugged and he felt the shaft slide through his neck. When it was out, he clapped a hand to the wound. Blood trickled between his fingers, but not much.

“Let me see,” he said.

Bruce showed him the dart. It was nearly fifteen centimetres long and as thick as a pencil lead. The point was needle-sharp. “They immobilize their prey. They never eat alone. It’s a social thing.”

“Is it poisonous?”

“I don’t think so. Come on, before it gets dark.”

They walked down the valley and crossed the river that Bruce had mentioned. Insects dotted the air over its banks. It did not look strong enough to wash away the metadillo. David repeated his attempts to access the computer. None were successful. The stiletto had somehow damaged his vocal chords. His voice was lower.

“Computer, give me access. Password is Prometheus.”

“Password rejected.”

“Please.”

“No.”

It was murky on the valley floor. This forest now had a name. He called it Mirkwood and it was so. Its strange blue fronds; its dampness; its predators. Was the metadillo watching them? He spun in a circle as he walked. There were too many shapes and too many hiding places. Through breaks in the canopy, he saw a snow-capped mountain. The peak was still bright with daylight.

David could feel his youthful muscles ache – aha, but these muscles did not ache. The aching muscles were in another universe, under Scotland, in the ruined research centre, in a glass coffin along with his body. He imagined the legion of microbots forming facsimiles of the terrain under each foot as he pressed down. The same microbots had assumed the shape of the metadillo’s stiletto.

Bruce lead him to the right. The ground began to incline gently. The vegetation thinned. David forged on. His hiking boots

were excellent; Bruce's skins were not. He trudged as though his legs were too heavy. Often, he stopped to steady himself against a trunk, or cough.

They came to a small cabin high on the hill. The trees were larger, higher and spaced at wider intervals. The cabin was built on stony ground. David had forgotten it existed. It was modelled on an Alaskan ranger station he had found in a hiking magazine. A designer had rendered it in 3D and presto, by dint of Word, the cabin had appeared. It overlooked the lower forest. The valley deepened to the south and David could almost see the mist of a waterfall fifty kilometres away.

"Quite," Bruce gasped, "a," he gasped again, "view. You want some food?"

"Leave it," David said. "We don't have much time. I could be rescued at any moment."

Bruce leaned on his knees to give his lungs some more space. He flapped a hand. "I'm starving. I'm getting some food."

At length, Bruce entered the cabin. He knocked against a crude wind chime and David realised that he not felt the wind since emerging from his car outside the hotel. Perhaps that was a subtlety beyond the artful microbots. He looked up at the darkening sky and saw nothing. There were no stars. He felt as though this hill was a Tower of Babel, but he was God, wasn't he?

Not until the computer recognised his voice.

He approached the cabin. He crouched to examine the wood of the veranda. It was not wood. He knocked. It was very hard. It had no echo. It did not have a grain. He walked to the corner of the cabin and ran his fingers along the edge where the front met the side. He withdrew his hand quickly and looked at his palm. There

was nothing at first, and then a hair-line tear seemed to open by itself. Blood slipped out. He made a fist and looked closer. The front and side of the cabin did not precisely align. The overlap was razor sharp because this universe had no atoms. In fact, it was infinitely sharp.

The veranda ringed the cabin, so David walked around. He looked through a window and saw Bruce making fire with a bow and dry tinder. There was a brick fireplace, armchairs and other normal furnishings. Rendered by the graphic artist. Perhaps armchairs were rock-hard. He walked on.

He daydreamed that a race of intelligent beings evolved in this universe and developed science. Physicists would discover that matter is continuous, not discrete. Astronomers would find that their planet is the only planet, their star the only star. They would correctly see themselves as the centre of the universe. Mathematicians might uncover the principles of the general computing machine. If built, it would never outrun the computer that ran their universe: and what, indeed, would they hypothesise the limiting factor to be? God? They could use science to uncover their God.

It was getting too dark to see.

Smiling to himself, he walked inside.

“I was ten years old when I lost my sight. It was diabetes. The doctor had warned my mother about it and she had warned me but, well, I didn’t listen. It didn’t happen quickly. Oh no. I saw it coming.” He broke another leg off the meat he was eating. He tossed it to David.

David caught it, burned his hand, and dropped it. “Maybe later.”

Bruce’s laughter was interrupted by a cough. “How much longer do we have?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. Maybe no time at all. How long since the metadillo attacked me?”

“Metadillo. Nice word. About two hours.”

David leaned back and glanced at the window. It was black. As black as when he had arrived. The days on Planet Shimoda lasted less than three hours. More than ever, David wanted to access the computer and increase the brightness. That would put him on even sensory terms with the metal predator. The rain poured down. Maybe it would rust.

“Well,” he said, “they could arrive at any minute.”

“Who could?” Bruce asked absently. He coughed again.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Bruce smiled. There were red flecks on his teeth. “My guess is a virus. Remember that evolution is working just fine in this universe. We’ve got all sorts of predators, herbivores, omnivores, insectile thingies, bacteria, and, right at the bottom, viruses. I wasn’t born in this world. I have no history of exposure to any microscopic organisms as a child.”

David nodded. “Your immune system hasn’t been toughed up. Vaccinated.”

“That’s right. But there are other systems in my body that – in our world, where my body was ‘designed’ – need environmental stimulation to develop. My visual system, for example. We know that it would never develop without light. And yet mine has.”

“But you intended that, didn’t you?”

Bruce shrugged. “The program I wrote should have compensated. But it was never tested.”

“Until now.”

“Me. The test pilot. The dog in orbit.”

“Maybe this virus is particularly dangerous to humans.”

“It could be. Maybe we should call McWhirter – yet another military application for the project.”

David frowned. “McWhirter’s dead.”

“Oh yeah. You said. She’s still up there, you know.”

“Who?”

Bruce bit his lip. “The dog the Russians sent up. She was called Laika. She’s still in orbit.”

“Not around this planet.”

David’s eyes dropped to the floor. He breathed in little sighs.

“Dave?”

“What?”

“I’m dying. But.”

“But what?”

“I’m living. I haven’t seen hills and trees for thirty years.”

David laughed bitterly. “Was it worth the wait?”

“Yes. You want some food?”

“Is it insect?”

“Of course.”

“No thanks.”

David stood up and walked around the room. The rain sizzled against the windowpane, as though something was frying on its surface. He felt confined by the darkness and he was confused. Why had Bruce brought him here? Both had risked their lives to have this conversation yet they spoke guardedly. The

soldiers could bomb their way into the research centre at any time.
“Bruce, I’m here. You have my full attention. What do you want?”

Bruce stopped chewing his food. He spat it out.

“It’s been twenty years, David. Why didn’t you get in touch?”

David sighed. First Jennifer, now Bruce. He was being scrooged. “I didn’t know what to say. When the project was bombed, it was finished.”

“Except it wasn’t finished, was it? The fish tank survived and here I am. Listen, do you ever have nightmares? About children with no eyes?”

David ignored him. “We had this great dream of experimental genetics. We got so caught up in engineering this world that we forgot about the research. What questions did we ever answer with the this?” He gestured about him. “This is nothing better than a cheap video game.”

“No. You’re wrong. I’m living in here. This video game gives me life because it gives me my sight. Do you know what that means?”

“Of course not. I’ve never been blind.”

There was a silence. Bruce chewed some more food with his mouth open. David’s muscles began to tighten. Finally, Bruce said, “I brought you here, Professor Proctor, to tell you something in private.”

“Private? Is this a joke? You brought me here to whisper in my ear? For all we know, there’s an entire company of soldiers standing a few feet away from me. I suppose a walk in the park would have been too much for you.”

“And I came here to die. Kill me.”

“What?”

David felt fury build up inside him but then, when he looked into Bruce's helpless eyes and the blood on his teeth, his anger evaporated. Bruce was right. He was already dead. If he were removed from the computer, the trauma would kill him. If he stayed, the virus would kill him. The computer had him in checkmate.

David didn't know what he was supposed to say. "Is this why you wanted me to talk to Hypno? You're fucking crazy. No way." There was a noise from the doorway. A footfall on the veranda. Bruce put a finger to his lips. David's scalp tingled. It was the metadillo. It was back to finish them. Bruce retrieved a spear from his place near the fireplace and stood poised in the middle of the room. Then he nodded at the door.

David groaned. Bruce wanted him to open it. The metadillo would come charging in and then Bruce would spear it, and then the spear would break, and then it would fire its darts at both of them like a spider wrapping flies.

Bruce nodded again irritably.

"Alright, I'm going," David whispered. He considered removing his mask and leaving the computer. It might save his life. With a shake of the head, he turned the handle. He looked back at Bruce and remembered his words from moments before: 'Kill me'.

He flung the door open.

Crouched in the darkness, wearing an exact duplicate of his hiking clothes, was Sergeant Caroline Benson. The jacket was too big for her.

"Bloody hell," David said.

"I know what you're thinking," she said calmly. "But, actually, I can explain."

Bruce did not lower his spear. “I don’t know who you are, but get inside now and close the door behind you.”

Caroline stood and brushed the dry mud from her lapels. “Certainly,” she said. She entered the room and sank to her knees. She frowned at David. She genuflected to the floor and sighed. She did not take another breath. There was a stiletto in the base of her skull. It still quivered. David simply vomited. Bruce said, “Shit,” and took Caroline by the shoulders. He threw her outside. He closed the door and braced it with the spear. David heard her body flop down the veranda stairs.

“We’ll have to sit this one out,” Bruce said. He began to check the windows.

“What about Caroline?”

“She’s dead.”

There was a distant booming sound. David’s fillings vibrated. He slid a metre into the floor.

“Did you feel that?” David gasped. Somewhat self-consciously, he climbed out of the floor.

“Feel what?” Bruce asked absently.

“It must be the soldiers. They’ve blasted through.”

He heard breaking glass. His head snapped to the window, fearing the metadillo. But the window was intact. It must have been the sound of the glass immersion chamber smashing.

David gagged. Somebody was trying to pull the mask from his face. In New World, he appeared to wrestle with his own head. “Bruce,” he gasped, and tried to move forward. There was no time left. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

He tried to embrace his friend because he appreciated – far too late – that he would never see him again. His arms reached

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Bruce but they passed through. The microbots were malfunctioning.

Bruce smiled and he waved a goodbye. He pointed towards his eyes and then out towards David.

“See you later, alligator.”

“Bruce!”

The Murderer Unmasked

Monday, 11th September 2023

Saskia examined her face in the mirror. She pulled different expressions. Her eyes had rings. Her lips were too thin. A smile didn't suit them. She thought about faces. A person's face should be greater than the sum of its features. But not hers. It lacked something critical.

She yawned. It was fifteen minutes to nine. At nine o'clock the repair man would arrive. If she did not allow him to find the body and call the police, then Jobanique would.

She left the mirror and entered the main office.

"Computer, are you finished?"

"Ten minutes of image analysis remaining."

Saskia rubbed her eyes. "Computer, what records do you have following 6:33 on Friday evening?"

"None for approximately fifteen minutes. No real-time data was collected during that period. It was likely that my operation was terminated for maintenance, though this was not recorded in the maintenance log."

She smiled. It was the murderer. He had returned to temporarily deactivate the computer just as he had erased the central surveillance tapes. But why deactivate the computer?

Simple: so he could do something in the office without threat of observation.

Saskia's eyes touched every object in the room. She looked for the slightest change: picture frames moved; pens rearranged; a

plant pot turned by ninety degrees. Impossible to tell. She did not have a perfect recollection of her office. She examined the desk. She opened the drawers, emptied their contents and checked every surface. Nothing. Then she examined the shredder. It was still broken. In a flush of excitement, she realised that she couldn't remember breaking it.

The shredder was integral to the desk. It had a thirty-centimetre slot, the mechanism itself and a detachable hopper. She removed the hopper. Inside were slivers of purple fabric. Next, she broke open the shredder itself. Deep in the mechanism, held in tiny teeth, was a little golden eagle. The hat maker had been particularly proud of it.

You are a detective, Saskia Brandt. Detect.

This, then, was the murderer's hat.

Why did he take pains to shred it?

Because he could not take it with him.

Why couldn't he take it?

Because if he had it, he could be identified.

Who could the murderer be if the hat was so crucial?

And then remembered examining her face in the mirror.

Something had been missing. The burn.

Saskia collapsed into her chair. It was five minutes to nine o'clock. Everything fell into place: the burn, the hat, the timing, the secretary in her fridge, the knowledge of the computer system and the workings of FIB. She knew who the murderer was. And she knew who to call.

Jobanique.

He let the phone ring for nearly a minute. She gave him proud stare. In truth she did not feel angry. She lacked the energy. Solving the case did not lift that burden. Somehow, it made her sink inside her.

“You bastard.”

“Good morning, Detective Brandt,” he replied mildly. He waited for her to speak.

“It is two minutes to nine o’clock. I have time to spare.”

“To spare for what? I’m late for a meeting.”

Saskia erupted. She was surprised. Though her mind was calm, her body thrashed, hammered the desk, picked up the case of the broken shredder and threw it at the window, at Jobanique’s computer-generated face. “You listen to me!”

Jobanique screwed the lid on his fountain pen in the manner of a newsreader. “I’m listening.”

Saskia breathed in and out, in and out. She willed herself not to cry. He would misinterpret it. “I know who the murderer is.”

“Do you.”

Behind her, the computer beeped to indicate that it had finished its job. “Image analysis done,” it said quietly.

“Give me a hardcopy.”

The desk ejected a sheet of paper. She scooped the computer print-out and held it high. It showed the image that had been reflected in the murderer’s upturned blade. It showed Saskia Brandt frowning in concentration.

“I did it.”

Jobanique smiled robotically, as though for the first time in his life. “I’m still listening.”

“Fine,” she said quietly. “This is what I think happened. On Friday evening I did not fly out to Marseilles. I know this because I remember Simon, my boyfriend, throwing a ladle of boiling pasta at my face yesterday morning. It made a burn. The burn, today, has gone. For a burn to heal so quickly is impossible. What is not impossible, even if it is improbable? That I was not burned. If I was not burned, then my memory of being burned by Simon must be false. If that memory is false, then it is likely that all my memories of Marseilles this weekend are false. So I did not fly out to Marseilles. That would certainly fit with subsequent facts. I would suggest that the memories were deliberately implanted. By you.”

Jobanique gestured impatiently. “I’ve got a meeting to attend.”

“The murderer killed Mary, my secretary, the moment my first memory of the trip to Marseilles begins. This fits with the hypothesis that I am the murderer. The surveillance footage shows that Mary was not surprised when the murderer entered. This is also consistent. Mary was killed by a single stab wound below the ear. That, I suppose, is consistent with a female murderer. Again, when the murder tried to move the body she struggled. I would struggle. And the hat; a broad-brimmed fedora. Concealing not only the entire face but – more than most simple disguises such as a handkerchief or scarf – it concealed the sex of the wearer. I had nowhere to hide the hat where my future self couldn’t find it so I shredded it here. When I visited the hat maker he was surprised to see me. He also knew my name without examining my ID. Clearly I had warned him. And, into the mix, we must count the murderer’s knowledge of the computer system in my office. She was permitted entry to the surveillance tapes because, being me, she had

clearance. By the same token she was permitted to perform 'routine maintenance' on the computer. And...I remember now that the computer failed to recognise my voice following my discovery of the secretary. That fits: that was my first conscious moment after the memory implant. The computer suggested that my voiceprint had been altered by a malicious user. That user was me. My former self. But this is all indirect. The conclusive evidence is the computer's analysis of the blade. It reflected the face of the murderer. Here she is. It is me."

Saskia walked around her desk. She had walked further this weekend than she could ever remember. But what, actually, could she remember? "What did you do to me, Jobanique? Who are you?" She picked up Simon's picture from the floor. "Who is this man?"

"He is nobody. You've never met him."

A shadow fell across her. "But I remember him."

"So what? I remember Elvis Presley. Down to business. You only have a minute left."

Saskia sagged. Her world was vanishing, piece by piece, and her mind with it. So what. Why not dance off the edge of the stage? "So. The question must be why. Why did I do it? Perhaps I was hypnotized. Post-hypnotic suggestion would explain both the murder and the false memories. But a moral human being will not commit murder even under hypnosis."

Jobanique shook his head. "Allow me. Until last week, you were in jail."

Saskia blinked. She fought with her mind, tried to remember anything. She could not. She had no childhood, no teenage years, no friends...did she even have an apartment? She realised, then,

that she did know where it was. Presumably it did not exist. That explained her urge to remain in the office all weekend.

“My brain has been wiped.”

“Yes,” said Jobanique. “On Friday morning I visited you in custody. You were being held in a woman’s prison in Bonn following a fast-track trial. Your murder was thorough and meticulous. It is one of the more unusual aspects of the female criminal. Your premeditation made it very hard for your lawyer. But it makes you very attractive to me. Have you ever heard the expression –” he switched to English – “‘set a thief to catch a thief?’”

She didn’t understand. “What’s that in German?”

“Einen Dieb aussenden, um einen Dieb zu fangen.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“Over the past few years I have recruited members into my organisation who were, shall we say, semi-retired versions of their prey. That is, detectives with a unique –”

“Criminal.”

“Perspective on crime. We have had some problems, of course. ‘Wet’ incidents. In the past six months, however, a particularly interesting liberalisation of the punishment of murder has emerged. It involves a systematic removal of the murderer’s memories and personality. A true ‘brain-wash’. The murderer is rehabilitated. Everybody is happy.”

“What about the families of the victims?”

Jobanique laughed. “For their own sakes, they are seldom informed. In fact there have only been six of these ‘brain wipes’. Two of them are in your office.”

“My secretary, Mary. And me. What did she do?”

“She played her part, nothing more. We can consider her rehabilitated.”

“So I was lucky.”

“Your crimes were more spectacular.” His smile broadened. “You were given the task to solve a murder and you have succeeded. Well done.”

Saskia frowned. She could no longer look into the face of this man. She was...had been...a murderer. Unbelievable. She did not feel like a murderer. But what did murderers feel like? Did they feel evil? Surely she was evil. What crimes had she committed? Why were they spectacular?

“What happens now?”

There was a knock at the door. “Your time is up, Saskia Brandt. It is 9:00 a.m.. With this day your new life begins or it ends. Open the door.”

She did so. Outside was a woman in a fashionable blue suit. She had both hands behind her back. She was wearing a purple fedora a la Saskia. Their eyes met like gladiators. The woman brought out her hands: in the left was a small green box; in the right, a small red one. Then she said, “Have we met somewhere before?”

Jobanique said hastily: “That, Saskia, is a code-phrase. If it is directed at you, then you have been recognised as one of my special detectives. You must be very careful with your answer. If you reply freely, then the person knows that you do not yet work for me. This has been perfectly acceptable until now. From this point on, it will lead to your death; immediate or otherwise. So you must give the correct response. That is: ‘In a previous life,

perhaps'. The comma is crucial. The other agent will then laugh and you may conduct your business. Do it now."

"In a previous life...perhaps."

The woman nodded and laughed tonelessly. She still held the two boxes at arm's length. "What do I do now?" asked Saskia.

"Now this depends. You may select the red box if you wish to decline my offer. This will probably lead to your survival, although the judge in charge of your case may press for the death penalty. To accept my offer, select the green box. This will bind you to me. You will be my property, though you will receive a generous income and the respect of your peers. Your secret will be safe with me. You will be a full-rank detective in the FIB, which is to say that you will investigate serious crime on behalf of the EU government, who employ us. In the event that this contract is terminated, it is likely that a warrant for your death will be issued. I will execute you if you attempt to leave my employment. I will execute you if you tell anyone your real identity or the details of your recruitment. I will execute you if you fail to perform your duties to my satisfaction." Jobanique waved as though swatting a fly. "Don't worry too much about the formalities. I'm obliged to spell out the fine print. So which is it to be?"

Saskia could not think. Her right hand, seemingly guided by an invisible force, reached out and took the green box. Her left hand opened it. Her fingers ran over the polished gold metal of a badge and a short, stub-nosed gun. The badge was gold and blue. It held the emblem of FIB and some Latin: *Ex tabula rasa*. Embossed under her the motto was the name Saskia Brandt. Was that name an implant too? Now it was real.

She took both badge and gun.

“Welcome to the FIB,” said Jobanique. “Your new secretary can fill you in on related matters. Good day.” His image vanished from the view screen.

“My new secretary?” she asked.

The woman stepped across the threshold and put the red box on Saskia’s desk. She removed the fedora and grasped Saskia by the hand. “Nice to meet you,” she gushed. “I’m Alice, your new secretary. Let’s get this place cleaned up, shall we? And we’ll have to do something about this smell.” She disappeared into the adjoining kitchen.

Saskia’s arm remained in the hand-shaking position for a few more seconds. Then she walked, clumsily, to her desk. She squatted down and teased open the box’s lid with the edge of her new badge. It was dark inside. Before she could open it further, there was a loud bang and burning a smell. A hole appeared in the front of the box. Saskia examined the window and found a corresponding hole.

The new secretary came out. “What happened?”

“Never mind. Better have someone come up to fix this window. And what about the air conditioning?”

“Yes, Detective.”

Saskia walked back to the desk and grabbed the picture of Simon. It was, she realised, the only photograph she had. She threw it in the bin.

Unfinished Business

David felt sick. He saw himself crouching in the darkness as scientists ran past him. This was a dream or a memory. His wife, Helen, was with him. He tried to shield her from the falling masonry but he could not. Something hit her. Before his eyes, she died. He brushed the hair from her face and realised it was not his wife but Caroline, the beautiful soldier. Her dead mouth opened.

“Professor Proctor,” said a voice. Somebody was shaking him. His back hurt. He was lying on glass. He saw flashes of light.

A man in army uniform pressed a finger to David’s throat and counted aloud. There were other sounds too. Someone shouted “Clear,” another coughed, another kicked aside rubble. Dust drifted.

Helen was there.

It wasn’t Helen. It was her ghost. She had to stay in the underworld, while he had leave it. It was treachery. A blanket was thrown over him and, roughly, he was put into a stretcher and some kind of harness. They carried him away. As the procession passed the second immersion chamber, where Caroline had been, David craned to look. He saw something red.

There were more shouts. They carried him to the corridor outside. It now had a hole in the ceiling. The air was fresher. His stretcher was tied at both ends to a dangling rope. Hands checked his harness and someone whistled loudly. He ascended through the dark levels of the research centre into a large white tent. He could smell grass and wet earth. They had dug into the hotel lawn.

He wondered if it was night or day. A man in a green jumper patted his shoulder.

“I’ll talk to you later, mate.”

Helen was still down there. He needed to tell this man, but he could not.

He awoke, cold, in a tent. It was a different one. It had a high ceiling. People spoke in quiet voices and walked in white gowns. No, they were lab coats. He blinked. He smelled disinfectant and damp fabric. A man walked into the tent and David saw, briefly, that it was morning outside.

A nurse appeared. She asked him if wanted some breakfast.

“There’s a Japanese man down there. Has he been brought up yet?”

She shook her head.

Within half an hour, a doctor had checked his condition. “All clear,” she said. “I think Colonel Garrel would like to talk with you.”

He began to dress. He found his earpiece in his trouser pocket. A taciturn soldier joined him and they walked out. On the floor near the doorway was a black body bag. It was probably Caroline. Outside the tent an early-morning drizzle had set in. The sky was the colour of steel. David took a breath and realised that he loved Scotland. He should have come back sooner. The trees hissed. The wind blew rain from their leaves. The hotel, too, seemed to bend in the wind.

David and the guard walked around the northern side of the hotel towards the south lawn, where the rescue shaft had been sunk the day before. At the bottom lay the corridor outside his old

laboratory. Bruce was still down there in body, though his spirit was elsewhere.

David turned to the guard and gestured towards the site. “Could I go to the demolition site? Where you dug down for me yesterday?”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. As with most of the on-site personnel, his uniform had a number of non-regulation additions. He wore a baseball cap. David wondered whether these people were real soldiers. The guard tugged on his cap and glanced back towards the tent. He wanted help, so David gave it to him. “To pay my last respects to my friend. I’m feeling a bit weak. You know, from the radiation?”

“Alright,” said the guard slowly. “But we’ll make it quick.”

“Too kind.”

They walked further down the hill. The trees closed in. The large white tent that covered the excavation shaft came into view. They entered and drew a few glances. The guard waved his hand to dismiss them. They returned to their work, which appeared to be data analysis.

David approached the hole in a weak shuffle, still helping the guard, and knelt before the yellow barrier tape. He made the sign of the cross and tapped his earpiece. It had been mistaken for a common hearing aid and placed in his locker. In prayer, he whispered: “Ego, are you there?” The earpiece picked up the vibrations in his jawbone and transmitted them dutifully. They were received in a discarded pair of trousers twenty metres below.

“Yes, David. I am here.”

David Proctor rose awkwardly and walked back to the medical tent. He expected to hear the siren within two minutes. In the event, it was nearly five. People began to overtake them while the guard spoke gruffly on his walkie-talkie. David glanced back. Black smoke billowed from the tent. He smiled. The fire would lead to an immediate evacuation before a fire crew could be sent down.

The guard told him to stay put and ran towards the hospital tent. David sat on the wet, morning grass and waited.

Twenty metres below him, black smoke had replaced the air. Ego lay on the floor near the ruined immersion chamber where David had entered New World. It interfaced once more with the military's radio network. It cracked the encryption and checked the status of the situation. The research centre was fully evacuated. Soon the soldiers would return. Ego cut the connection to the radio network and turned its attention to the New World computer.

Five minutes before, it had connected to the same computer and given the instruction to deactivate its legion of cooling fans. The ensuing heat had started a small dust fire, which had spread, feeding on the flammable debris.

Now it was time for the second phase. Ego began to count backwards from ten.

On the surface, David gazed across the lawn, down the valley, where the morning mist had collected in the damp air near the valley floor. Sunlight reflected from its apparent surface. He checked his watch.

In New World, Bruce Shimoda reached the summit of a hill and stopped sprinting. He sagged, hands on knees, and let the thin air into his lungs. Fifty metres away, the pursuing metadillo

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stopped too. It turned its head towards the darkening sky. Bruce did the same. He wondered what this would feel like.

Ego said, “Three, two, one, zero,” and detonated.

Bruce saw the sky tear in two. He took a final look at the valley and vanished, deleted.

David was bounced by the concussive force. There were shouts of surprise. Smoke ran like black water from the cracks in the tent and personnel spilled out. They choked and shouted. The ground vibrated once more and then was still. Everything was still.

It was over.

Again.

A Talk with Garrel

His interrogator was Colonel Andrew Garrel. He had given David drugs. Personally. The drugs led to nightmares but the nightmares helped. He knew who the enemy was. It was Garrel. He smoked constantly.

They were alone together. There was a tape recorder. At least, David thought of it as a tape recorder. It was probably a digital recorder of some kind. He watched it. It did not move. It had no spools. There was no sense of time.

“How long have I been in here?” he asked.

Touch now meant pain. The drugs had somehow heightened his senses. Noises were too loud, the chair too hard, the smoke almost unbearably acrid.

Garrel leaned on the desk. He sucked on his cigarette and David saw the end glow for long time. Was time wrong, or was he? Then Garrel let out a breath that billowed blue-white and stank. David’s eyes watered.

“Not long enough, sunshine.”

“You should let me go,” David said. It was an effort. The words would not come fast enough. “I should have a lawyer.”

Garrel laughed. “Do you even know where you are?”

“No. Where am I?”

“You’re in deep, twenty-four carat shite.”

David put his hands on the table. That stopped his fingers shaking. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple, Dave. You’re a terrorist. You like to use bombs and kill people. We’ve got special rules –” he leaned in – “special rules for fucks like you.”

“This isn’t legal.”

Garrel slammed his palms on the table. David felt like his head and come between two crashing cymbals. He gripped the table, concentrated, forced his mind to turn from the nausea. “Legal? You want legal? How about ‘murder’ for a legal term? You like that one?”

“I told you, I made sure that...people were evacuated first. The fire.”

Garrel grabbed his chin and tilted it upward. The light was blinding. “Why should I believe you? Tell me.”

David tried to pull away but he was too weak. Garrel seemed to be pinching a nerve under his chin. “I wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Wouldn’t hurt anybody?” Garrel released his grip and walked away briskly. It was a small room. When he reached the wall, he whirled around. “What about Bruce Shimoda? Remember him? What do you think your bomb did to him? Gave him a light dusting?”

“He was going to die horribly. Eaten alive by creatures you don’t understand. He asked me to kill him.”

“Ah, we’re back to shark story. Sharks that swim on land. Just when you thought it was safe to go for a walk.”

David breathed deeply. Despite his tremors, he could feel that the effect of the drugs had begun to subside. His mind became clearer. “These aren’t fish, damn it. These are animals. They only look like sharks. They’re made of metal.”

“Well, they’re not made of anything, are they? They’re just figments of that computer. And now that the computer’s about as functional as a bag of spanners, where’s your evidence? Because let me tell you, Davie boy, the only evidence I see is that you just murdered a guy, and risked the murder of more than a dozen of my men.”

“I told, I made sure my computer checked that.”

“Your miniature computer. A computer that can hack into an army network. A computer that happens to come with enough explosive to demolish a block of flats.”

“The computer is a prototype. I developed it along with Marquis Future Computing. I do consulting work for them. It’s a new model. I already told you this.”

Garrel leaned against the wall. His energy, like his drugs, began to fade. He now switched from ball of fire to iceberg. David observed the transition. “And this new model comes complete with remote access capabilities and, in case the man on the street needs it, a shit-load of explosives.”

“No. I added the explosives myself.”

“From where?”

“I told you. A man I met on the internet.”

“Any name for this man?”

David sighed. “Yes. He was called Hypno.”

“Did Mr Hypno leave an address, perhaps? A phone number? Webpage?”

“This guy was an arms dealer. He doesn’t work that way. We always met in private chat rooms on the internet.”

“What type of explosive?”

“It’s a liquid-based explosive smuggled from China. It doesn’t have a name yet.”

Garrel laughed and ran his hands through his hair. “At the risk of sounding cynical, how fucking convenient. How did you get the explosives?”

David closed his eyes. He felt much better now, but he wanted to look worse. “Courier.”

“Name?”

“Don’t remember. Anyway, it was a series of couriers, one after the other, each one given a false name and address. No one courier carried the explosives. They all carried components. Dropped them off at the school of chemistry in Oxford addressed to a Professor Macbeth, who does not exist. I collected them at the weekend, on the quiet. Took them back to my house. I assembled the explosives in my garage.”

“How?”

“Instructions from Hypno.”

“When?”

“Three days ago.”

“Why so recently?”

“I’ve only known that Bruce was here since Wednesday, five days ago. When I received that information I knew that was would I would have to do.”

Garrel stubbed out his cigarette and lit another one. “Do what?”

“Kill Bruce.”

“So you came here to murder Bruce.”

“No. Euthanise him. I needed to be prepared.” David was calmer now. It made the lying easier.

“Why such an elaborate method?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know any other way to do it. This way, I could kill Bruce – knowing that was bound to die anyway – quickly and almost painlessly. In the same way, I could destroy the computer. Destroy the technology that made it possible. The technology that, ultimately, killed Bruce.”

Garrel stroked his chin thoughtfully. He drew on the cigarette. “Interesting. I don’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“Come on, Dave. You have medical training. Even if you didn’t, you’re clearly a resourceful individual.” David smiled inwardly. Garrel was playing the compliments game. Soon he would become the ball of the fire again, and the dance would go on, cha-cha-cha. “You could think of more and better ways to kill Bruce than that. What about an injection of morphine? Or a chloroformed pad over the mouth? Or a bullet through the brain? This is the second time this place has been bombed. Both centred on your own project. Coincidence? My arse. And as for your crusade against technology...frankly, I don’t believe it. Especially not from someone involved in the design of cutting-edge computer agents.”

They spoke for the rest of the day. Garrel softened. He no longer administered drugs. He asked fewer questions, though they were all on target. David managed to glean that they had not found any pieces of Ego. They believed his account of McWhirter’s death but he would be charged with the murder of Bruce and Caroline. The first by bomb, the last by...they were working on it. They leaned on him. They raged a storm around him. At the centre, David was quite calm.

Part II

She rose at six when the sky was blank, unwritten. The night before, she had sipped a martini on her balcony. In the middle distance, the casinos had sent up multi-coloured searchlights, fountains of water and balloons: the Aurora Las Vegas. She had read that Las Vegas was the brightest man-made object visible from space. She preferred the day. The dawn over that. A blank sky, unwritten.

Bad Dreams

David dreamed.

It was a place full of dark, winding stairs, suits of armour and secret panels, flags of heraldry hanging high on walls and portraits of long-forgotten ancestors following him with dead eyes. Lightning struck nearby and illuminated a monstrous creature.

It moved towards him. The monster was short. It walked clumsily. It walked like a person balancing on their hands. Somebody said, “Look, isn’t he pleased to see you? Isn’t he pleased?”

The legs. They sagged in a way that suggested the skin was loose. He looked closer. The legs were prosthetic. It had a fat, distended belly and a small torso, all covered with a little summer dress. It was a little girl, perhaps built by aliens from the body parts of a girl, aliens who had never seen a whole one.

David was nearly sick. His stomach cramped and heaved. The creature was close now. It held out its arms to embrace him. It smelled of hospitals, plastic and unwashed bed clothes.

“Isn’t he pleased to see you. Isn’t he pleased.”

Statements, not questions.

Her eyes narrowed. She had waited too long for her hug and she knew it would never arrive. She sensed his disgust. The eyes turned, changed, became lifeless buttons. And David knew, the dreaming David knew, that she hated him. She would never have her love returned and so it was transmuted, coloured red, to become hate.

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David knew he was dreaming, but he could not wake himself.

“Isn’t he pleased?” asked the voice.

“He isn’t pleased,” said the creature.

The dream raced on. He saw himself in a family. Always present, but never speaking, was the creature. She made sure that she sat next to him at meals. She entered his room at night and watched him breathe. In company, she said nothing. When they were alone, she produced a knife and showed it to him, her little secret. There was hate in her eyes. She wanted to kill him. She could wait.

David knew that nobody would believe his suspicions. One day, when he least expected it, that little stiletto would slip into his side and he would look down, gasping in surprise, to see the creature.

He rolled in his bed but there was nowhere to go.

And Saskia dreamed.

Her eyes opened on darkness. She took a step across the dusty floor. There was no light, and then, quite suddenly, there was a torch in her hand.

She was on a case. She had a team of co-workers. She had been in love with one of them. She couldn’t remember his name. It began with ‘u’. He had been murdered and hidden in her fridge. There had been a scrap of paper in his cold fist. The warehouse’s address.

Somebody said, “By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.”

She took another step.

She replied, “The witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.”

The space was vast. Her shoes rapped to an echo.

Her torch caught something reflective. She approached and saw that it was a shop mannequin covered in a transparent sheet. It looked at her with dead eyes. She sighed with relief. She had thought, maybe, it was alive.

The mannequin moved.

She ran. She couldn't hold the torch steady and she tumbled over barely-seen, shadowed objects, unidentifiable things, upturned chairs, tables. She fell through a door.

She was in a small office. There were bodies hanging on the wall. Her co-workers. They were all dead. There could be no rescue. They had been impaled on the wall with long pieces of metal that extended from their necks. Each of them wore an impression of absolute horror. At the end of the gallery was an empty skewer.

Behind her, she heard a single footstep.

She turned and saw the murderer in the doorway. It stood tall, languid, dressed in black. Its head was nothing more than a skullish silhouette. A bony finger reached and pointed towards the empty skewer at the end of the row of bodies. As she watched, the finger became darker, grew hairs of muscle, which knitted, smoothed and grew skin. It was like watching a time-lapse film. A fingernail sprouted from the end. It was red with varnish.

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It pointed at the empty skewer.
A greater darkness fell.

The Light of Day

On the Monday night, David was transferred to a small police station in a town called Whitburn, some miles to the east of the research centre. He was led to a cell and locked in. The police did not interview him. He saw no lawyer, no bail and no cigarettes. He wore orange paper overalls. His toilet folded from the wall. On the second night, he was given a mattress for good behaviour. He exercised for two hours a day: he watched the rain from the corner of a concrete forecourt without a cigarette.

Opposite his cell there was a man who screamed for his wife. Constantly. Elsewhere – left or right, he couldn't tell – there were singers, drug addicts, and a darts player from Glasgow who had thrown his darts at the crowd. All the while, David sat on his mattress and drummed his fingers. He drummed prime numbers, re-invented Morse code and listened to perfect guitar concertos in his head.

They came for him on the morning of the third day.

The shutter opened. "Stand facing the back of the cell. Place your palms on the wall and cross your legs."

David did so and felt the cold air on his slippered feet. He heard footsteps. His hands were locked in shackles that closed like stocks. From the middle of the cuffs, a chain was looped around his knees and tied to another set of cuffs around his ankles.

He turned around. There were only two people. One was a short, attractive WPC carrying a telescopic truncheon and CS gas. No gun. The other, who had spoken to him, wore a civilian version of the same uniform. He was a jailer. The only weapon on his belt

was a can of CS. He had a chain with a huge number of keys.

“Shall we, sir?”

The politeness was baffling. It had been three days since David had had a conversation. “Shall we what?”

“Shall we go?”

As they walked out, the WPC said, “I’m Mary. This is Jonathon.”

“Hi Mary. Hi Jonathon. Sorry if I don’t shake your hands.”

His captors led him to the front of the police station where a van was waiting. David had guessed that he would be loaded from a secure courtyard, but the scene was the utterly mundane West Main Street. Twenty years ago, he had lived on an estate less than a mile away. He watched the cars, the shops, children led by their parents, the cold Scottish sunshine, the hubbub of life. He felt saddened.

He had been denied his phone call or email. He had been under the tightest security. The police at the station had no idea what crime he had committed. He was certain of that, because he had seen the sergeant’s charge sheet. His name was not on it.

“What day is it?”

“Thursday. Step into the van, please, sir.”

Awkwardly, David clambered inside. It was warm and smelled of diesel. He imagined his autopsy report. Suspect falls awkwardly: dies from crushed windpipe. Suspect enters van: dies from accidental exposure to exhaust gases. Mary and Jonathon got in too. “Shit, stinks in here,” Mary said. The spell of fear was broken.

There were two benches running each side of the van. David sat down and they fed his leg chain through a study hook in the floor. It seemed to be connected to the chassis.

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Ten minutes?” she asked Jonathon. He nodded and fastened his seatbelt.

“Sorry?” David had assumed they would cross into England. Down to a court in London. He closed his eyes but still saw them leading him into the woods, telling him to take a piss, loading their guns, blowing his brains out, burying the body.

“The church. Five or six miles away, I reckon.”

“Sorry, church?”

“Yes, for the funeral.”

“Whose funeral?” he asked carefully.

Mary gave him a wry smile. “I can’t remember what the bloke was called. He died in a climbing accident. I think there was a special request from his family that you should attend. Shoda?”

“Shaida, I think,” offered Jonathon.

“Shimoda? Bruce Shimoda?” asked David. “Died in a climbing accident?”

Mary raised an eyebrow. “Did he or didn’t he? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Mary...” said Jonathon.

“Well, there can’t be any harm in asking.”

“Yes, there bloody can, lassie,” Jonathon warned.

She turned to David, who was thinking hard. “What are you then, a spy? Did you get caught?”

Do I look like a spy? he thought. “Give me a cigarette.”

Red leaves rained as the wind blew into the face of the church. A blue sign read:

A warm welcome to a Congregation of the Church of Scotland. All here are a part of the Presbyterian family of the World-Wide Church of Jesus Christ. We have a history stretching back to 1658, and we're confident of God's Blessing for the next 300 years!

There were some community notices underneath it. The day was dull. The van had stopped in a large gravel car park outside the churchyard proper. It had taken twenty minutes, the last five up a steep hill through a collection of lovely houses, each more postcard perfect than the last.

"Can I take the chains off?" David asked.

"Sorry, mate," replied Jonathon. "They need to stay on while you're walking about. Orders are orders."

David took a breath and span in a circle. High trees rose on three sides. Their leaves were red, bleeding in heaps. To the left, the valley widened. He looked up. Something moved in the air. For a moment, he thought he saw a pterodactyl. But it was a man-made glider, riding the thermals in increasing circles.

They walked inside. It was gloomy. An organ played. The foyer was carpeted red. Wooden panelling appeared here and there, almost at random, decades old. An elderly Asian gentleman was resting on a cane and dabbing his brow with a red handkerchief. As David shuffled in, the old man turned myopically

in his direction and gestured that he should come forward. Jonathon and Mary stepped quietly into the background.

“David. David Proctor.”

David did not know what to say. He could not meet his gaze. He muttered a Japanese greeting. “Shimoda-sama.”

The man bowed. “I asked the Japanese ambassador to arrange for you to attend. I am pleased he succeeded Did you kill Bruce?”

“Yes.”

Keiseke Shimoda considered this. “I loved my son, David. I did not always agree with his choice of profession. You remember the arguments we had. It appears we will have no more. That is sad.” He paused. “In my country, in our past, we had the ritual seppuku.”

“Ritual suicide,” David said. He wanted – needed – to say something more, but he knew that nothing would work. There were no words that could communicate his grief or assuage that of Bruce’s father. Language had its limits.

“Ah, suicide. That is the word. Seppuku is a brave death, David. Do you understand? It takes great courage to disembowel oneself. My father did so this way in 1945, following the surrender of Japan. He felt it was his duty. It is often the case that a relative will stand by, with a sword, and complete the death if one’s strength fails. For my father, my mother stood by. For Bruce, you stood by.”

“I...” David felt a dryness in his throat and desperately wanted to reach out to this man. But the other’s body language was quite closed.

“I would not have my father dead, David, or my son. I would have them alive, and perhaps we could share a drink and a meal. That will never happen. I do not believe that my son should have killed himself, but he did, and I am glad you ended his suffering cleanly, and with courage. Your chains are your distinction. You must wear them proudly.”

The old man bowed and did no more. David could not speak. It was time to go inside. Other mourners were queued behind him. David wondered what he would say to each. He entered the church.

Saskia was rocked left and right as the tram wended through the streets of Brussels. She studied the passengers. She wondered what secrets they had. She watched the streets flicker past. The sky was overcast and, though it was early afternoon, the light already had a dusky quality. She thought of sunsets. She could not remember having seen one.

She wandered around the district for an hour or more. She drank coffee, read the news, tried on clothes and, finally, found herself in an internet café staring at a blank computer screen. It was an old ray-tube box that flickered. She located a search engine and typed saskia brandt.

The computer searched the internet. It found over two million pages. She checked through the first fifty. Nothing. Next, she typed, bonn AND prison. The computer found the official prison webpage. Jobanique had said that the prison had held her the previous week, but the public webpage unhelpful.

She dropped her fists on the table. What could she do? Her mind seemed to jam. She couldn't think of the next step. Maybe whoever had programmed her brain had, after wiping her memories, inserted a safeguard. Maybe she would never be able to investigate herself.

She couldn't breathe.

She fell from the café. One or two passers-by stared at her. A tall man regarded her with interest. She walked away self-consciously. She soon reached Fauçon and took the steps to the upper city. The streets were simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. She crossed the street and ascended the ramp that led to the Palais de Justice. Though its ornate entrance was inviting, she did not enter. She could see its huge foyer. It was not huge enough to accommodate her claustrophobia.

"Be careful, Saskia," said a man.

She made a fist and turned. Her nails scored her palm. With the pain, she focused and became more calm. She remembered her revolver in its holster.

It was the man who had stared at her outside the cyber café. From his mode of dress and his expression, she guessed he was English. "Relax, Saskia," he said. "Have I seen you somewhere before?"

"In a previous life, perhaps."

The man laughed and the ritual was complete. This was another of Jobanique's agents. He was intimidatingly attractive and tall. His shoulders bulged under his coat, but his eyes were gentle. The eyes swept across her and then to a piece of paper in his hand. Saskia guessed he was checking a photograph. He nodded.

This was her. Then his gentle eyes glanced around the street. Keeping to German, he said: “Cigarette?”

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke.”

“You did until last Friday.”

His statement found its way into her head and exploded. She faltered, as though ready to faint, and, when the man thrust the cigarette in her face, she was confused enough to accept. It was already lit.

He laughed again. “Pretend you know me. Keep the fag in your mouth when you talk. It’ll make it harder for them to read our lips.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know precisely. I can see three or four possibilities. Don’t look now. The woman by the tree wearing the long coat. The black bloke over there talking into his phone. We need to move.”

Saskia drew on the cigarette. She held her breath and let her grateful blood soak up the nicotine. She felt good. She felt normal. “OK. Thanks for the cigarette.”

“We need to get moving.”

“Moving where?”

“A park. Somewhere with people. On foot but near.”

Saskia did not consciously decide to go to the Place Poelart, but go there she did; she was surprised, but not surprised, to see the panoramic view of the downtown area, and the telescopes available to search it, and the children playing and the dogs barking. She sky was larger here. She followed her feet through the subway under the rue de la Regence. She turned into the British memorial garden, but he grabbed her arm. “Too quiet,” he said.

She took them past the memorial. They walked downhill. A gradual sense of her position had begun to emerge. It was as though she had walked these streets in a past life. They passed through the wrought iron gates of Place du Petit Sablon. It was busy with tourists. He nodded. The park was a combined recreational space and monument. Countless bronze statues stood on columns: caricatures of The Carpenter, The Baker, The Fish Monger and forgotten trades from the medieval guilds. In the centre was a statue of two noble-looking gentlemen.

Autumn leaves of gold, red and brown blew across the wet grass. A bored-looking civic employee supervised a dozen insectile robots, painted autumnal tones, as each collected the leaves in a hopper strapped to its back.

Near the gate, the man bought two croquettes and handed one to Saskia. "Don't eat it till we reach the statue."

They wandered slowly. The path was gravel. It crunched under their feet. He did a full circle of the plinth with his fingers running along the edges. Saskia took the opportunity to read the inscription. The noble gentlemen were the Counts Egmont and Hornes. They had been executed by Spanish oppressors in 1568. Saskia looked at their faces until the man walked into her line of sight. He said, "Go on, eat your croquette."

She bit into the cheese snack and burned her mouth. "Ow."

"That's right, act natural," he said. He stuffed his mouth with food and managed to say, "Always talk with your mouth full." He winked.

"Fine. So what's going on? Why did you walk around the statue?"

“Checking for bugs,” he replied, spitting cheese. “I have a little gadget in the palm of my glove. Just a little home-made electromagnet and a battery. If it detects an electrical field – even the weak one from a listening device – it makes a buzzing sound. It’s not so good here. Radio interference from the litter robots.”

Saskia began to relax. “Who are you and what do you want?”

He gobbled some more croquette, “My name is Fang Hoe.”

“What?”

He tossed the croquette from one side of his mouth to another and made little gasping sounds. “Sorry. It’s hot. Frank Stone. I am an agent for J. I’m stationed in Moscow. I’m on leave.”

“Jobanique.”

“Call him J. I’m the guy he sent to search your apartment on the Saturday afternoon. I found the woman in your fridge...”

“Hang on. J said as much when he first briefed me on Sunday, but that was before I’d found out...the true identity of the murderer. You were part of the backstory. You didn’t have to actually be there.”

“Yes, I did. You see, J was concerned that your previous self would have planted clues, even though you killed that woman under a form of mind control.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I mean, your past self could have made it really easy for your future self by, say, writing a note and concealing it somewhere. Like a note saying ‘It was you what did it!’ Of course, that was expressly against J’s instructions, but not everybody follows orders, do they? Especially when greater things are at stake.” He winked again. “I was called in to clean the place, make

sure that no obvious clues were lying about. Not tamper with evidence. Clean.”

Saskia finished her croquette and threw the paper on the floor. A robot scampered over and grabbed the ball before it had stopped moving and tossed it into its hopper. Then it ran away to find more leaves.

“You didn’t go to this trouble to tell me that.”

Frank ate the last of his croquette. He put the paper in his pocket and retrieved his cigarettes. He lit two and gave one to Saskia. “You should have this.”

She looked at the little stick. Her hand, quite independently, took it. “Yes, I think I should.”

Frank sat on the edge of the plinth and stared into the sky. “Here’s my story. One year ago, I found out that I was...a fraud. I had been working cases for ten years – or so I thought. In fact I had been working as a detective in Moscow for about two months. Before that, I was a bit of a naughty boy. I guess that J told you what you were, didn’t he? About his unconventional recruiting methods?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Well, when he told me, he must have had my memory wiped again. I thought I was a detective and always had been. Then I had a big wake-up call. This summer I was on holiday in Poland and I was practically lynched.”

“By who?”

“Who do you think?” His cigarette wagged. “It was a father fishing with his two sons. He took one look at me and practically had a heart attack. I had no clue. He went after me with the rod. Finally he managed to get it across to his sons – his grown-up

sons – that I was the bastard who had killed his wife – their mother – last year during a bank robbery. Can you believe that shit?”

Saskia was rapt. “That you were a bank robber, or that you were recognised?”

“Both!”

“Like winning the lottery.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What did you do?”

“What did I do? What could I do? I couldn’t let them raise the alarm. I shot ’em up and came back later, dug a pit for their bodies, and that was it. The local police couldn’t find a stitch in a quilt, as the Polish saying goes. I was two hundred miles away by morning. I went straight to J, confronted him, and he spilled the beans.”

They sat in silence for a while. Saskia watched some pigeons descend on the statue. The air was damp and chill. The robot manager leaned moodily on his cane and kept one eye on the scurrying robots. They were nearly finished. The grass was immaculate. “Listen,” Frank said, “I...I don’t normally do this. Talk to other agents, that is. But I wanted to warn you.”

“About what?”

“You know what. If Jobanique finds out that you’ve been investigating your own history then you’re in big trouble.”

Saskia sighed. “I know. Execution.”

“I saw you in the internet café. You were trying to download biographical stuff about yourself, weren’t you?”

“How did you know that?”

He leaned forward, uncomfortably close, and she saw the tell-tale circle of a contact lens around his iris. Embedded in the lens were squares of grey that rotated and flashed.

“My lenses have image enhancers. They read my blinks. Cool, eh?”

“Did they come free with your electric bug glove?”

Frank looked hurt. “Actually, no.”

She punched his shoulder. “I was kidding,” she said. She smiled. It was the first genuine, non-sarcastic, non-threatening smile she had produced since...since she could remember.

“OK, now for the hard stuff. I’m going to show you something.”

“Is this the kind of thing strangers like to show women in parks?”

Frank blushed and Saskia was reminded of her English boyfriend, Simon. Or rather, the false memory of him. “Oh. Nice one.”

He handed her the front page of a broadsheet newspaper. The script was Cyrillic, the language probably Russian. The leading story had a picture of her, Saskia Brandt, glaring defiantly at the camera. Her hair was much longer and the wind had blown it wide. She looked good. Two German police officers held her arms. Immediately above the picture were four Russian words.

“Sorry it’s in Russian. I could translate it for you, but you don’t need to know the details. I can’t let you keep it, I’m afraid. CYA is in operation – Cover Your Arse. Mine, in this case.”

“What does it say?”

Frank took another glance around the park. “Which bit? That bit? Oh, ‘Angel of Death in Custody’, or, more accurately ‘Angel of Death is Grabbed.’”

Saskia felt a tingle in her belly. “They call me the Angel of Death.”

“Yes. The story basically says that you are a mass murderer. You were captured in Germany. Near Leipzig, I think.”

“No. No. That can’t be. I’m not a murderer.” She sounded pathetic. She was near tears.

“Hey, listen, love. You’re not a murderer. You were. Past tense. You’re a blank slate, now. From last Friday, you’re a different person.”

“But...surely I’m still responsible.”

He said sharply, “No, you’re not. You’re not responsible for the old you anymore than you’re responsible for your parents.”

“But surely I’m more than just my memories.”

“Look, if you want to get philosophical about it, maybe yes and maybe no. But be pragmatic. Do you feel like a murderer, like a criminal? Could you kill someone now in cold blood? That’s what’s important.”

Saskia’s eyes were fixed on the article. The nonsense words seemed to blend together. “You did,” she said quietly. “That Polish fisherman and his sons.”

“That was self defence. Besides, he wasn’t Polish.” He took the cutting and put it in his pocket. Saskia wanted to take it back but, suddenly, she was too weak. Perhaps she should have another cigarette.

“Saskia, I have to go. You’ve seen the past, now let go of it.”

“Let go of it? Are you insane?”

“I just wanted to help you. This article is what you’re looking for, and there’s nothing more to it. You’re just a tabloid horror story. Editorial fodder. Now watch your back and avoid Germany. See ya.”

He walked away. “Wait, Frank!” she called.

He jogged back immediately. “Keep your voice down.”

“Where do they get the memory implants?”

Frank vacillated briefly then sat down. “OK. Here it is. The long version. So you won’t keep asking me questions.” He smiled. “Now, your brain is made of little cells. Most of them very similar. Actually, they’re similar to mine too. The reason that I’m me and you’re you is that they’re wired-up differently. One pattern of wiring is me, one pattern is you, and another might be the King of England. It’s all about the pattern. If you took a recording of my brain somehow – no mean feat, I can assure you – and imposed that pattern over another brain – even more difficult – then the other brain, and therefore the other person, will start to sound and act like me. They’ll think that they are me, and, in important ways, they are. It would be like having a mental twin. Cool, eh?”

“Cool,” she whispered.

“At the moment, the way they do it involves a wet-wire chip. That’s computer chip that interfaces directly with the brain. It’s usually placed on the surface of the brain itself. Let me feel the back of your head.” His fingers touched the base of her skull. It was still tender from the hat maker’s blow. “That’s it. You have a scar. They fire it in. No surgery required. That chip contains the memories of another person – probably a medical student getting some extra cash – and is connected via tiny nano-filaments to over half the neurons in your neo-cortex. Your neo-cortex is where the more ‘human’ brain functioning goes on. The chip is more like a processor than a memory storage. It stays in constant contact with the rest of your brain, constantly imposing the alien pattern over your own ‘normal’ pattern.”

“Why does it have to be constant?”

He shrugged. “The reality of playing about with the brain, I suppose. They say that the person’s own pattern soon becomes dominant again. You see, your own pattern is not really destroyed by the new, alien pattern – it’s kind’ve knocked sideways. The chip is really mixing the new pattern with the old. It isn’t a straight swap. If the update only happened once, then your old personality would eventually take over the new one. Sounds awful, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. But whose memories do I have?”

Frank took a slow, clear look at his watch. “Dunno. Normally someone clever though. J says that I was a bit of an idiot before the chip went in. Only spoke English. Now I speak fluent Russian, Polish and...what language are we speaking?”

“German.”

“And German. Maybe one or two others. I won’t know until I try. People’s brain patterns don’t come with instruction manuals.”

“So me, I person I think is my ‘self’ right now...that isn’t me? I mean, it’s someone else?”

“Like I say, I’m not a philosopher.” He stood up. Saskia could see that he needed to leave.

“But if I have someone else’s brain pattern, why don’t I have any memories of childhood, for instance?”

“With memories, it’s not what you’ve got but what you think you’ve got. I mean, you can’t find memories unless you know what you’re looking for, or they’re jogged by something similar.” He walked away. “Try some free-association tasks, it might help those memories surface. And remember – you’re brand new. You’re not responsible for your old self. Bye-bye.”

She examined the backs of her hands. She needed another cigarette. “Goodbye.”

“Oh, which way to the central station?”

“Out of here, get a blue tram going south. It’s four stops. You can’t miss it.”

“Bet I can. Bye.”

Half an hour later, Saskia left the park and walked home. The robot manager watched her. When she was out of sight, he whistled. The litter robots halted and turned their cameras in his direction. He pointed at one and it skipped over. He crouched and pressed a button on its back. A panel slid open. Inside was a flat screen. He said, “Rewind forty-five minutes,” and the picture became a shaky close-up of Saskia and Frank. Frank was saying, “I saw you in the internet café.” The robot manager rose up and clapped his hands sharply.

“Alright, you lot. In the van.”

The Office

She rose at six when the sky was blank, unwritten. The night before, she had sipped a martini on her balcony. In the middle distance, the casinos had sent up multi-coloured searchlights, fountains of water and balloons: the Aurora Las Vegas. She had read that Las Vegas was the brightest man-made object visible from space. She preferred the day. The dawn over that. A blank sky, unwritten. She took the elevator down to the subterranean car park. The traffic was already heavy, but manageable if she rose at six and avoided the Strip. She read some paperwork while the car turned north, then east, then joined I-15 heading north-west. Twenty minutes later, she turned onto Route 169 at Crystal.

The car bumped over a pothole. Jennifer Proctor said, “Slow down.”

The car slowed. The road surface worsened as she had entered the Valley of Fire State Park. Sunlight struck the red sandstone and they did seem to ignite, but Jennifer did not look up from her notes until they had reached Met Four, a weather station in the northern area of the park. The car dropped her near the base of the outcrop. Sixty feet above her she could see the white walls of the centre. They were yellow in the early light. As she began to ascend the seven flights of stairs, the car parked.

A delicate but chill north-easterly wind stirred the air, still cold from the cloudless night. Jennifer raised her collar. Her feet clanged against the iron stairs. When she reached the top, she ignored the sign that said:

Warning! This is US Government Property Protected by
Federal Law

If you are unsure whether you are supposed to be here, you are not. Return to the authorised trail immediately. You are committing a federal violation punishable by up to 20 years in jail. For medical assistance please contact State Park authorities.

The top of the outcrop was surrounded by a natural parapet of rock. Jennifer knew that it was not natural at all. There was only one gap: the top of the stairs. It was covered by a chain-link fence with an inset door. There was a slot near the handle for a card. Jennifer produced hers and swiped it through. She tried the door and it opened easily. She stepped through, closed it, and waited.

Met Four was two pre-fabricated buildings. An array of antennae and dishes sat on the top of the first. On the second, there were two flags: the Stars and Stripes and the standard of the US meteorological office. Around the buildings was a gravel path of chipped white stones. There was no sound whatsoever. The flags hardly stirred.

A door opened in the first building. A man walked out. He had no weapon, but Jennifer knew that another man with a sub-machine gun was standing out of sight.

“Morning, ma’am,” he said. If he had said, ‘Morning, miss,’ then she would have to turn away, go home and await instructions.

“Morning,” she said.

She walked to the door of the first building and went inside. It was perfectly unremarkable. A fortyish man sat at a desk and pecked at an old computer keyboard. Behind him, a secretary

placed some papers in a filing cabinet. Jennifer had walked into the same room once a day for an entire year. The woman and the man had not moved. Her department chief had told her that the woman had a revolver in the filing cabinet, the man a silenced rifle alongside his chair.

“Good morning, Jim,” she said.

“Morning, Jennifer.”

She walked through a chipboard partition into a cloakroom. It was an unpractical distance from the door of the hut. She placed her coat on a hanger and did a twirl. Up high, behind a one-way panel in the false wall, a camera watched her. A computer calculated the probability of a concealed weapon based upon her height, weight, movement and her microwave reflectivity.

There was an old trench coat in the corner. She moved it and pressed her thumb against the wood. The nail glowed pink. Partial sections of her DNA were read by a laser, decoded and checked with a signature file. They matched.

A voice said, “Stand with your hands by your sides. Maximum capacity ten people. You are being constantly monitored. If you encounter a problem, please wait for assistance.”

She began to sink. She stood carefully and waited for the floor to clear her head. There was nothing to hold on to. When she was three or four metres down, a panel slid over the top of the shaft. Fluorescent panels provided light.

A gap appeared near her feet, then widened. She had reached the top floor of the research centre. From here on, she would need to use conventional elevators and stairs to navigate the complex.

The platform stopped. There was a transparent booth with a uniformed guard inside. Another transparent panel blocked access to the main corridor. A few hundred scientists worked in the centre, with a few hundred more support staff, technicians, and security personnel. Only those with Jennifer's level of clearance could enter through the weather station. That included the bulk of the scientists. Those with military credentials had a number of other, more convenient routes. Tunnels, she guessed.

The guard looked up.

"Jennifer Proctor," she said. "Scientist."

He smiled. "How are you today, Jennifer?"

"Fine, Dan. How are you?"

"Having a good one. Anything to declare?"

"Only my of love of Beethoven."

"Okidokey. Step through."

The transparent panel swung open. The sounds of a thousand busy people. Air-conditioning. Electricity.

Dan gave her a laminated ID card. She grabbed a lab coat from a nearby rail. The ID stuck to the Velcro on her lapel. IDs were taken seriously. A few months ago, hers had fallen into the toilet and she hadn't had the guts to take it out. As soon as a guard had seen her, she was arrested until the story was confirmed. The guard had turned out to be vaguely human, just a guy called Dan.

"Have a great day," Dan said.

"You too."

She walked down the main corridor. It was packed with offices. People emerged carrying pieces of paper. Minicars rolled past. She walked on. This was the top level of the research centre. It had six floors. The lowest one was thirty metres below. The

lower floors were mostly workshop, testing laboratories and equipment stores. The higher ones had administrative offices and recreational areas. There was a gym, a sauna, and a small swimming pool. All the facilities were under intense pressure. Booking was essential. Jennifer seldom bothered.

She headed towards her lab. It would take twenty minutes

“Hey, Jenny, wait up.”

She turned. It was Mikey. “Hi, Mikey.”

He was in his early twenties. Not as young as Jennifer, but young enough for them to feel an affinity. She was the resident wonder child and it often made her feel excluded. Mikey wanted to play outsiders with her. He was sweet.

Mikey adjusted his glasses and grinned. “You gotta see this.”

“See what? I’ve got a meeting with Michaels in, like, half an hour.”

“But you gotta come.” He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her towards the nearest stairwell. He began to talk. He had a habit of twisting his fingers in his beard as he did so. Jennifer liked it. This was the first time he had ever spoken about his research – strictly speaking, he was forbidden – and she felt like an honorary member of his weird, fun club. “See, we got her all fired up but the notes we had from the last time weren’t entirely complete. There were some...inconsistencies.”

“Inconsistencies? What are you talking about?”

“Follow me.”

They arrived, some minutes later, at the door to Mikey’s laboratory. Rather ominously, blue flashes could be seen through the gap underneath. “Don’t worry about those. Some last minute repairs.” He opened the door and they went inside.

The room was large. It had a low ceiling but extended ten metres either side of her. The floor was covered in white tiles and sloped towards the centre. There, dwarfing everything else in the room – even Mikey’s friend, Groove, with his enormous welding gun – was a object that almost defied description. It was clearly a tank full of liquid, but the liquid shifted and stirred as though it was alive.

“Come take a look,” Mikey said.

Jennifer approached the tank. She saw blues, reds, yellows, all mixing together. A memory surfaced. It was her father. She had been four years old. He had put three or four watery splodges of paint on an empty dinner plate. Then, barely on the edge of this mess, he had dropped a tear of washing-up liquid. The effect was immediate: the colours panicked, chased into one another, mixed, pulled back. She had giggled and begged to do it herself. All the while, whispering in her ear, he spoke of particle diffusion.

“It’s incredible.”

“Yeah. Touch the surface.”

Mikey stared at Jennifer’s face. She reached up and placed a hand on the surface. It was warm. A cloud of red appeared from nowhere and swelled under her fingertips. It grew warmer. She took her hand away and the red departed, replaced by an inky blue.

Mikey took her hand in his. A distant part of her felt that his action was unwelcome, but the device held her attention. “The things in there are attracted by the static in your fingertips.”

“Really?” she said dreamily. She hardly noticed that Mikey was stroking her fingers.

“Mikey, quit dribbling over the guests.”

Jennifer looked round and saw that Groove had stopped welding. He was clearly pleased with his one-liner. The welding gun rested on his shoulder, pointing skyward, and his visor was snapped back. Mikey released her fingers. The moment was over.

“Groove, shut the fuck up.”

“Whatever. Hey, Jennifer.”

“Hi, Groove. You haven’t seen me, right?”

Jennifer held his gaze. Mikey or no Mikey, she had no permission to be there. They all knew it. It was a rule like the mandatory ID tag. If broken, even innocently, there would be royal hell to pay. “It’s cool,” said Groove. He slapped his visor back down and continued welding inside the computer. Jennifer wondered what component could possibly require welding.

Mikey cleared his throat and pulled her into an adjoining room. “Take a look.”

This new room was smaller. It was unremarkable apart from four frosted-glass chambers set into one wall. They looked like shower stalls. In the third stall, Jennifer could see a red stain on the interior. Mikey said, “Computer, open and activate cubicles one and two. Safe mode. No microbots.”

“Microbots?” asked Jennifer.

“We’ve been having some problems with them.” He chucked a thumb in the direction of the third stall.

“Mikey, are you going to tell me what this is all about?”

Mikey twitched. He looked left and right. He whispered, “The notes we’ve been using. We wouldn’t have got very far without them. We’re standing on the shoulders of giants, here.”

“Which giants?”

He grinned. “David Proctor and Bruce Shimoda. Ring a bell?”

DÉJÀ VU

Jennifer frowned. “You know they do. That’s my father and his research partner. But they abandoned their research twenty years ago.”

“And now we’ve taken over. I knew you’d be interested.”

Mikey stepped into one of the cubicles and put on the virtual reality headset. Jennifer, reluctantly, did the same. “You’re gonna love this. You know what we call it?”

“What?”

“Project Asgard. Computer, run that bad boy.”

Songs at My Funeral

David stepped slowly, as though his footfalls might crack the fragile floor and drop him into the crypt below. Organ music echoed from the stone, from the dark pews, and the dull stained glass. He bowed his head.

He expected to be seated at the rear, but his jailers told him to keep walking. The coffin loomed. He wondered how many pieces were inside. The church was almost empty. Four or five Japanese sat in the front row. David didn't recognise any of them, but he could guess: brother, mother, sister...aunt, cousin, who knew. There were no friends. What had Bruce been doing for the last years of his life? Had he been hiding?

The family weren't crying. David guessed that they had already buried him, years ago. Perhaps even twenty years ago. But Bruce's family lived in Japan. Why were they here? Did they know that he was going to die? Did he tell them?

"Sit down," said Mary.

He did so. It was the foremost pew on the left-hand aisle. He sat by a young man in his mid-thirties. The two jailers sat immediately behind him. His feet could stretch out. Not far, because of his chains; not so far they would reach the coffin.

Coffin, he thought. Now there's a horrible little word.

Yet the organ played on.

The coffin lay on a solid conveyor belt. Artificial flowers of white and yellow hid the hard edges. David could smell formaldehyde and decay. Again, he imagined the interior. It would be dark in there: air-tight; the air foetid, warm. Bruce's fingernails

and hair would be growing still. His immortal skeleton, even if it was in pieces, would outlast the flesh. Unless they burned him. Burned his friend Bruce.

Jennifer flew through trees, cartwheeled, and hit the ground. Went into the ground. She rose up again and found herself in orbit around the planet. She heard a voice in the distance: “Jennifer, think slow. The headset picks up your intentions, but not real well. It’s learning, but you have to learn too. Picture me.”

She pictured Mikey’s face and heard a little beep. The computer had matched the pattern from her visual cortex with its own representation of Mikey. Abruptly, she pitched towards the surface, rushed into the largest continent, into a patch of green, which turned out to be a forest, and down to a valley floor with a little stream. Next to the stream was a moving translucent shape. Jennifer remembered a dream and became scared. Then the shape moved forward. It stepped across the stones that forded the stream. It extended an arm and waved.

“Dude, it’s me.”

“Mikey?”

“Yeah. This is how the computer represents visitors in the artificial universe.”

Jennifer imagined herself walking closer and, sure enough, it happened. “What do I look like?”

“Trust me, not a patch on the original.”

“What is this place?”

“A whole other world.” The metal shape walked towards her and cast an arm. “All of the living things you see here, they’re real.

Real in the sense that have DNA. They were born here. They think and feel and see. This is their world.”

Jennifer walked down to the bank. The stream extended to the south, where the horizon was close. She heard the groan of a waterfall. She crouched and looked at the stream. There was not the slightest indication that a computer was behind these ripples, the glimmer of light, the occasional fish. “There are fish.”

“We have all kinds of animals here. But none of them are indigenous. I think your father’s research project had a large number of specialised organisms – they evolved basically from scratch, randomly. We don’t have time for that here. All of the plants and animals in this world are copies of the ones from the real world. So if we want to introduce a plant, we tear off a leaf, read its DNA, and then introduce it into the computer.”

“That simple?”

Mikey laughed. “No. There’s other stuff, which is Groove’s domain. The animals we introduce aren’t exactly born . . .they appear as adults. So there are all kinds of things about the growth steps between the fertilized cell, the childhood, and the adult animal that we just miss. Now that’s fine for the plants. Here they are. But some animals, particularly the intelligent mammals, seem to require this development period. Mentally, I mean. When they appear as adults they lack a backlog of memories, of play, interaction with the world or other members of their species. They act weird.”

Jennifer looked into the forest. Its thick walls formed a green canyon. “Dangerous?”

“I guess you’d say ‘psychotic’. But they can’t touch you. You’re just made of light.” He added, quietly, “Like an angel.”

Jennifer did not feel embarrassed. She prided herself on a deficiency in that department. But she felt a little unsure. She knew that Mikey faced a severe penalty if she was discovered in his laboratory. Did that mean she owed him?

At that moment, Mikey's hand went to his ear.

"Everything, OK?" she asked.

"Sure. Just a little problem Groove wants me to sort out. Stick around. When that's meeting of yours?"

"About twenty-five minutes. You mind if I explore?"

"Mind? I want you to. It's so rare I get to show this thing off."

His image vanished.

David leaned forward and clasped his hands obediently as the vicar – or reverend, or whatever they called them in the Church of Scotland – went through a litany of prayer and empty comment. She was a tall woman and quite beautiful. She was in her forties. She was not Scottish. As far as David could tell, she was not English either. She had a careful and accentless delivery. She interested him, but his interest was passing. Like a rolling ball finding the lowest point on a landscape, his attention always came to rest on the coffin.

They sang a hymn: "All Things Bright and Beautiful". It was pitiful. Bruce's family were clearly non-practising Christians. David was no help. As a card-carrying atheist, he knew only the songs he had been required to sing in school. The one voice that rang true was that of the minister. During the hymns he would find her looking at him.

When they finished the final hymn, an old Beatles song began to play. The little curtains at the head of the coffin parted. It

began its slow journey along the conveyor belt and, at length, was gone, but David wasn't sure where. The church was surely too small to have its own crematorium. The minister walked over to a large device that he had not noticed before. It looked like a 'ghetto blaster' from the 1980s. She pressed a switch and retreated.

Bruce's ghost appeared.

He stood a little hunched, smiling, his eyes blindly scanning the crowd. Everyone drew a sharp breath. The hologram raised its hands in benediction.

"When you see this hologram," he said, "the rumours of my death will be, unfortunately, entirely true. I'm sorry I had to wait this long to make an appearance, but I couldn't resist being late for my own funeral." Bruce grinned and David laughed and a tear, finally, rolled down his cheek. This was Bruce, the old Bruce. David checked the audience. Bruce's family were expressionless except for his father, who sat with a Mona Lisa smile and a constant, thoughtful nod.

"So, who do I see before me?" He clasped his eyes with one hand and reached towards the audience with the other in the parody of clairvoyant. "Is there anybody here who has recently lost a...son? Bernard, Berty, Bruce? Ah, you, father," he said. He opened his eyes and smiled at his father. "So this is it. Goodbye. I know you didn't quite approve when I came to England. I guess you'll never approve now." Bruce bowed his head. He said something in fast Japanese that David, though he knew a few words of the language, couldn't catch. Bruce's father nodded.

"And, mother..."

The organ music start became louder. It was difficult to hear what Bruce was saying. Then David almost cried out as the

holographic projector threw a harsh beam at him. The light was painfully bright.

Someone grabbed his ankle. He opened one eye and looked down. The hand had emerged from a crack in the floor. A slab had been moved sideways like a manhole cover. Was it Bruce? Was he already down there? A second hand grabbed his other ankle and, with a sharp tug, hauled him feet-first into the floor.

Because his feet were chained he landed cleanly. He rolled to one side in a parachutist's fall. It was gloomy and very damp. There was a sense of space in the darkness. It reminded him of the bombed-out research centre. A woman's voice said, "Keep quiet. I mean silent."

Slowly, she dragged the slab back into position. It became black. She said, "Are you OK?"

There was a click as her torch was turned on. David watched as it played up and down his body.

"Yes thanks, the chains broke my fall," he said acidly. "Who are you?"

"I gave the service." She placed the torch on the floor and reached inside her robes. "The speech will last for another five minutes. That's how long we've got." She added grimly, "Unless you were noticed."

David guffawed. "Well, gee, how could they notice? The floor just opened up and pulled me down. Happens every day...in cartoons."

"Shut up, David. They didn't see you. I recorded your image earlier and the projector is now playing it back, as a hologram, right in the place where you were sitting."

"Well, I hope it's a good projector."

She produced a device that looked like a pair of garden shears. “Hold still.” She grabbed the crossover point of his leg chains and placed it between the jaws of the shears. There was a hiss of compressed air and the shears cut through. David looked at her. His hands were still cuffed.

“Now for my handcuffs.”

“Be quiet and follow me.”

She took the torch and left in a direction that, by David’s reckoning, would take them underneath the altar. He could hear Bruce’s voice above their heads. He had given a final message to his father. Was there a final message for David too? He would never know.

They walked down a narrow channel with a low ceiling. To the left and right were cots with lead coffins. David glanced at the Latin inscriptions. The tomb was incredibly old. Burials dated back to the fifteenth century.

“Where are we going?”

“Nearly there.”

They came to a larger, newer room. It smelled musty. There was a small mattress, some candles, tins of food, and some gardening tools. There was a wooden door on the left wall – an exterior door, judging by its halo of daylight. Rather incongruously, there was a satellite dish behind the mattress. It was connected to an old-fashioned laptop computer. On its screen was the view from a plane or a helicopter. A rough sheet of pink paper with some handwritten notes lay on the keyboard. He could just make out that they were instructions for remote control. Next to the computer there was a small blue rucksack. The minister said, “Take that rucksack and put it on.”

“How do I do that with my hands cuffed?”

She stopped and scratched her head. Then she grabbed the rucksack and began to untie the straps. Obviously she would re-tie them around his arms. “Look,” he said, taking advantage of the lull, “thanks for helping. But what do I call you?”

She pulled a strap tight. “Not ‘Your Holiness’. I’m not a priest. The real minister is otherwise engaged.”

She grabbed two strips of sacking and pushed them under his cuffs.

“What’s that for?” he asked.

She checked the computer. Then she studied the pink notepaper and, with crossed fingers, pressed a key. “It’s done. There’s not much time. Let’s go.” She flung open the door.

As they ran outside, David heard a noise behind him. In the far corner, some rags moved to reveal an elderly lady, woken by the sunshine. It had to be the real minister. The fake one grabbed his arm and said, “David, come on, keep moving.”

The day was dull, but he felt the light as a physical force. He almost tripped. The minister zigzagged through the graveyard and jumped over the wall. David followed. The autumn wind blew up the valley, which, after his spell in the cool church, cut him to the bone. They headed towards a lonely tree. He found that he could not run very fast with his hands tied. He panted. At the back of his mind was the thought that men younger and fitter than him had been known to collapse and die for less.

They reached the tree and the woman checked her watch. “A few more seconds,” she said. “Give me a boost.”

“What?” David gasped.

“A boost.”

David just did it. She put her foot in the stirrup made by the handcuffs and, before David could whisper that his wrists were breaking, she was gone. He waited. He glanced at the church: no sign of pursuit. He stamped his feet to warm them. His slippers were wet.

“What the hell are you doing?” he called. “How far do you think I can climb with my hands cuffed? What a crap escape plan.”

“Like I said,” she shouted down, “you’ll need those cuffs.” She looked back towards the church. “Scheisse. They’re coming.”

David turned. The entire congregation had poured from the church. In his bright orange overalls, he was not challenging to locate. Leading the charge was Mary, the WPC. They would reach the tree in half a minute.

“Can we move on to the next stage? Hello? Hello?” There was no sound from the tree. David stepped about, peered into the branches. He couldn’t see her. But he did notice something circling overhead. It was the glider he had spotted earlier. It circled like a vulture and trailed a cable.

“Look out,” the minister called. She landed nimbly next to him. In her hand was a thick cable with a hook at the end.

David looked at the hook.

He looked at the glider.

He looked at her.

He looked at the crowd running towards him.

He backed away. “What I said about things only happening in cartoons...” He looked up again. The glider was no longer circling. It had peeled away. Its tow cable grew taut.

Mary, the WPC, rushed up. She grabbed his arm. “Gotcha.”

“Then hold tight,” the minister said, and looped the hook around the chain between his cuffs. David felt the cuffs rub against the sacking she had stuffed underneath them. The sacking would not prevent his wrists from breaking.

Mary frowned. David took a breath. The minister said, “Until we meet again.”

And then David was jerked towards the sky with such force that his rising arms struck his face. He tore through the tree and departed the church and the funeral unconscious. He did not hear Mary cry out in frustration, or the minister whoop with delight, or the fluttering of his paper overalls in the wind.

Jennifer flew over the edge of the waterfall and, as the ground fell away, she gasped. It was a world perfectly imagined. She could discern not the slightest error in perspective. The forest continued on either side. The fall erupted into a large lake. In the distance, she could see the beginnings of a large delta, and perhaps the ocean. She settled on a rock near the lip of the fall.

She would soon have to leave for her meeting with Michaels.

And then a black speck appeared in the sky. It was impossible to tell its size, but it fell in a straight line. It passed through a rainbow and landed in the lake with a brief flash of foam. Jennifer craned to see it. As she squinted, the computer read her thoughts and propelled her towards the centre of the lake, towards the landing splash.

Her stomach lurched. She was aware that she was both flying, somehow, but that she was standing perfectly still. The

images washed around her. The world moved. She remained at rest.

The lake rushed up. The water was calmer here. It was perhaps twenty or thirty metres deep, though it was near the shelf. The water was very clear. Fish swam in shoals and a naked man rose to the surface.

He burst through with enough force to rise halfway out of the water. He took an enormous breath, went under, and then bobbed up once more, treading water, choking, wiping the long, matted hair from his face and wringing the water from his beard.

For moment Jennifer thought he was crying, but it was hysterical laughter.

Glider Down

Thursday, 14th September 2023

First, he noticed the wind. It was loud and strong. Then the wetness beneath his head and legs. Then the cramp. He opened his eyes. It was evening. He remembered everything. He had been grabbed by the ankles, pulled down into the crypt, had walked around the land of dead with the fake minister, and been yanked into the sky by the tow cable of a glider. He smiled. Things were unreal: memories from someone else, inserted into his mind piece by piece with no attention to overall coherence.

He was dangerously cold. His neck was stiff. It was difficult to breathe. There was a familiar pain in his chest. An old rowing injury. He raised his head. He was on a hillside. In the darkness he could see grass in every direction. The sky was grey-black. The bleating of sheep came from lower down the field.

He stood and the wind brushed the last traces of heat from his body. He was too cold to shiver. Deep inside his mind, where the cold had yet to penetrate, a voice said, Find shelter.

He staggered forward. His wrists were bleeding from the cuffs. The blood did not feel warm. The chains around his legs jingled like the bells on Santa's sled. The ground became white. Was it snow beneath his feet? Could he hear children singing? Was it Christmas?

The voice said, Hallucinations. Your core temperature is dropping.

He raised his head to the wind and sniffed. Yes. There was...something. A clue in the air. It was not an odour. It was heat. Warmth.

He shuffled windward. Somewhere ahead of him, in the darkness, was shelter. There had to be.

What month was it? September? October? Perhaps it was even December. Christmas time. He smiled. The warmth of the fire. A good brandy in the right hand, TV remote control in the left. Funny paper hat on the head. King's speech.

There was something white ahead. It was not a building or a sleigh. It shined; it was plastic. It jutted skyward.

Jingle-jingle, went his chains. Whose ghost was he? Bob Marley. That was it. The Dickens story. Bob Marley's ghost.

He wanted to whistle that he had shot the sheriff, but his lips would not work. They were broken. If he was in Jamaica, he would be warm. He wouldn't be able to even imagine the cold. It would be a hot night, the shirt stuck to his back, the buzz of mosquitoes, a rum and coke.

David tripped and seesawed over the glider's fuselage. He regained his composure and, with a clearer mind, looked hard at the glider. It canted to one side because the design meant it would never stay upright while it was on the ground. David blinked, slowly, and examined the cockpit. It had some markings. Some letters. He tried to read them, but he could not. Interesting. His brain had become so cold that he could no longer read.

The voice in his head piped up: It says 'rescue'. The word points to a handle. Now, pull the handle.

David did so. He did not pay any mind to who was telling who. He just did it, expecting the canopy to swing up like the boot of a car. It did not. Instead, it wobbled on a simple hinge like the door from his old Citroen 2CV. That had been a great little car. Real character.

Get in.

He tumbled into the dark interior and felt his slippers crunch some equipment. For a horrifying moment he wondered if there was room for him. There had been a computer in the crypt and instructions on the pink paper. Perhaps the cockpit was full of remote control equipment. But there was room on the bucket-style seat and he settled in gratefully. He closed the canopy. It did not close with a satisfying clunk. It clicked like the spring in a cheap pen. He hadn't climbed into the glider as much as put it on. Worse, it was freezing inside. Removing the wind chill would not do enough to warm him up, to beat the hypothermia.

I'm going to die, he thought. But I'm tired. And then he thought: No. What am I going to tell Jennifer? She'll kill me.

His hands, still cuffed, groped around the cockpit. It was utterly dark and tilted, stuck in a phantom turn. Some stray moonlight caught the canopy sideways and highlighted its imperfections, scratches, insect-pits. His fingers touched upon the control panel. Something sharp cut his finger. He swore, though he felt no pain.

There was a control lever, a group of circular dials and very little else. The glider had no engine. No warmth. A battery? Perhaps. He began to flick switches and press buttons, but soon gave up. They were all dead.

He was getting colder. But his cut finger had begun to throb with pain, and he was glad. It offered something to focus upon. And then he closed his eyes. Not to sleep, which was tempting, but to think. Whoever devised this plan would have anticipated this. Hypothermia in Scottish field at night was surely a likely contingency. What would be the best way to counter that?

“A flask of oxtail soup and a blanket wouldn’t go amiss,” he said. His voice startled him. It was slow. He sounded like a person who had experienced a stroke.

Hmm. Might he have had a stroke? He touched the left and right sides of his face. Each had about the same level of sensation. He waggled his fingers. They moved slowly. “OK, stroke’s unlikely.” he said. “Now about that soup.”

He raked his fingers around the foot well and felt a shiny, crinkly surface. He grabbed it and held it up to the moonlight. It was heavy. It shone brightly. In its surface he saw, or imagined, finishing marathon runners hugged by paramedics with great sheets of silver foil. A so-called ‘space blanket’. He unfurled it. “Nice one. Things are...”

He stopped. A metal flask had tumbled into his lap. David unscrewed the lid. He did it by sight because his fingers were numb. When the cap sprang off, a plume of steam rose up and fogged the glider’s canopy.

Oxtail soup. His favourite.

“...getting weird.”

The Missing Person

Friday, 15th September 2023

Saskia Brandt carefully opened her fridge. Some cheese. A little bread. Space. She closed it and the kitchen darkened. She hadn't opened the curtains. Perhaps the neighbours would think she was in mourning. Perhaps not. It was an exclusive, isolated apartment block. She sipped her whisky.

She returned to the living room of the studio. Like the fridge, its signature was emptiness. She had not bought a single item since moving in. She felt like a burglar without the courtesy to leave.

She swapped her whisky for her gun. It was a heavy little revolver. She relished its weight. She wandered back into her bedroom and stared at the full length mirror.

She was naked. She had found clothes in the wardrobe but couldn't wear them. Whose clothes were they? Who had they been bought for? Had the real Saskia Brandt been murdered and this impostor – there she was, in the mirror – inserted in her place?

She jumped into a firing position. Nobody had taught her. She just knew. She aimed at her scowling, determined face. It was quite beautiful. So beautiful on the outside, so ugly within.

She put pressure on the trigger. The barrel turned and the hammer yawned. She increased the pressure. The barrel offered a new chamber and the hammer snapped home. There was nothing but the sound of a firing pin on dead metal. It sounded like a sculptor tapping a chunk from his masterpiece.

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Saskia growled. She put the gun to her temple. Pulled the trigger. Snick.

Back to the woman in the mirror. Pulled the trigger. Snick.

Head. Snick.

Mirror.

The mirror exploded. There was a thumping sensation in her shoulders. Her palm stung. A blue wisp drifted into her eyes, making them water, and when the tears left the mirror had gone. She looked at the shards on the floor. A thousand of them. Not safety glass. But the mirror-Saskia had not been killed at all. She stared back at the real Saskia with a thousand eyes.

Saskia went back to her bedroom and collapsed on the bed. She wept hysterically and wished that Simon, her English boyfriend, would put a hand on her shoulder, lie next to her and promise to help her.

But Simon was fiction. Romantic fiction.

She fell asleep.

In her dream, she saw three witches.

The witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

Spin, measure, snip.

“Saskia, wake up, Saskia, Saskia, wake up –”

“Wha...who’s there?”

“This is your apartment computer,” said a female voice. “You have not yet given me a name. Shall we give me a name?”

“Fuck off.”

There was a pause. Saskia opened one eyelid. Through a crack in the curtains she could see daylight outside. She had not slept long. She stretched and found that the revolver was still in her hand, pointing to her chin.

“Saskia, you have a call.”

“Who is it?”

“It is Jobanique. I have the authority to wake you if Jobanique calls. If you wish to review your authority list, you may do so at any time.”

“Fuck off.”

The computer paused again. “Shall I tell him to call back?”

“No, tell him,” she paused, smiled, “to fuck off.”

There was a non-compliant buzz. A man’s voice said, “Your computer has blocked access to the following potentially unsafe statement: ‘Jobanique, Ms Brandt would like you to fuck off’. For more information concerning expletives, call for Help.”

Saskia said, “Tell him I’ll call back.”

She donned a black trouser-suit with a white shirt. She upturned the collar. She brushed her shoulder-length hair until it assumed a reasonable shape. She applied some eye shadow. Put on some nice shoes she had found in the wardrobe. They fitted perfectly. She applied a little more makeup: lip gloss, red nail varnish. She looked at her nails and remembered her Russian nickname. The Angel of Death.

She opened the curtains around the apartment and the windows too. The gloom left with a bow.

“Computer, call Jobanique.”

“Certainly.”

The apartment rattled with the sound of ‘Greensleeves’ played on a mouth organ. After ten seconds, a voice said, “Jobanique can speak to you now,” and her boss appeared on her white, bare wall. The computer drew some curtains to enhance the image.

Saskia said, “Hello.”

Jobanique said, “Hello.”

“I like your ‘hold’ music.”

“Why thank you.”

“Shall we?”

“Lets,” he said. Then his head turned, like a newsreader moving on to a new story. “A man has escaped custody. He is a wanted criminal. A murderer. It is a matter of global security. I have been asked to handle this case personally.”

“I see.”

“My assistant has completed its meta-analysis. It’s trawled through years of information, picked up impressions here, guesses there, the occasional fact. It has produced a psychological profile based on the frequency of certain trait-based behaviours and put them into a model.” He shrugged. “I find them useful sometimes.”

“Go on.”

Jobanique put the lid on his pen. “His name is David Proctor. Look at the photo. This was taken in Oxford, England. It was published five years ago in the local newspaper. His hair is whiter now. Some background, then: our man is born in France in 1971 to Amelie Lombard, a language student, and Duncan Proctor, a student of human nature and alcohol, in the middle of Duncan’s

year abroad. Duncan and Amelie have known each other for over three hours when David is conceived. Duncan panics. He goes back to university to complete the final year of his degree. We don't know what he studied. Both Amelie and Duncan are nineteen at the time.

“That Christmas, Duncan flies back to France, finds Amelie and proposes to her. There is no clear reason for his change of mind. Amelie's parents are disgusted and oppose the marriage, but Amelie is adamant. She wants him. They return to England and marry. For the next ten years, both of them fall in and out of various jobs. There is no evidence to suggest the home was unhappy. The young David's school reports are average. They move house almost constantly. Duncan Proctor manages to hold down a job with a computer company in Reading as a marketing assistant.

“Meanwhile, young David's school marks improve. In 1982 he scores a maximum mark on his primary school leaving test. There is a dramatic scene at the school: the headmaster calls him a cheat in front of David's parents. The headmaster is verbally and physically assaulted by Duncan. David then wins a scholarship to a school for gifted students called Two Trees. The school is in Kent and he refuses to go. David and his father have the first in a series of serious arguments. In the event, Amelie convinces David that he should go. He does. Diary entries indicate that David was extremely unhappy in his first year.”

“You read his diaries?”

“And his report card. He was a troublemaker in that first year. It was only in the second year that he began to improve, following the mentorship of a maths teacher. He excelled in the sciences,

particularly physics. He learned Latin and Persian. According to his physical education teacher, he had poor hand-eye coordination, frequent bouts of asthma, though none serious. However, there are some reports that he entered the cross-country team in his final year and won an inter-school medal.”

“Is this relevant?”

“In 1987, he left Two Trees for a university course in artificial intelligence at Durham. He married Helen Cassidy in his second year. They were both aged eighteen. They made repeated attempts at children –”

“Artificial intelligence?”

“The development of virtual or physical machines designed to display behaviours consistent with human intelligence in the solution of particular, well-defined problems. For more radical researchers, a long-term goal is to reproduce the human mind within a man-made machine.”

“I see. Back to the children.”

“There were none for several years. Aged twenty-one, David left to complete a PhD in artificial life systems at Dartmouth College, North-East United States. The degree was completed in three years. He did not like America or his career direction. He returned to England in the summer of 1994 and began a medical degree. He dropped out after three years and took a junior psychology lectureship at Durham. Then, one year later, he moved to Scotland.”

“To do what?”

“The following information was difficult to obtain. It was procured using the USA’s Freedom of Information Act. There is no

such act in Britain, but America had a certain interest in the affairs surrounding David Proctor.”

“What affairs?”

“The West Lothian Centre. So code-named. A classified research institute. It was a public-private scientific think-tank funded mostly by the British government, partly by the American government, partly by John Hartfield.”

“Who?”

“Third richest man in the world. The aim of this complex was to investigate scientific ideas and applications deemed too radical for the academic environment. Such projects also had strong military ties. All were classified and still are. David remained at the research centre until 2003, when it was bombed by persons unknown. Suspects ranged from the Real IRA to remnants of the al-Qaida network. David was also under suspicion.”

“Why?”

“The bombers had inside information. The kind of information that David Proctor would have known. The centre of the blast was very close to David’s laboratory – he, and all other personnel, were at a musical recital when the bomb detonated. Additionally, in several memos, David spoke about concerns over the nature of his project.”

“Concerns?”

“About its application.”

“Would he have felt strong enough to destroy his own project like that?”

“It’s not clear. It counts in David’s defence that his wife was killed in the explosion. In the formal enquiry that followed, David was exonerated.”

“Tell me more about his wife.”

“Helen Cassidy. Born 1971. A research scientist. One child. Helen died May 14th 2003 from head injuries. No resources on this individual without another meta-analysis.”

“One child?”

“Just one. Jennifer Proctor, aged twenty. Born February 2003. Raised by her father following her mother’s death. A few years ago she was sent to a New York school for gifted children. Most information sources indicate that they were close before this happened, but they have since become estranged. There are no records of any communications in the past few months, except for one email last Sunday.”

“What was in that email?”

“You can get these details from the West Lothian and Borders police liaison office.”

“Where is Jennifer now?”

“There are no current records of her whereabouts. This is quite unusual. It is likely that she is involved with people who can conceal her identity from the US government.”

“Like who?”

“The US government.”

“Back to David. What are we chasing him for?”

“Police records indicate he is wanted for the murders of Caroline Saunders, a sergeant in the British army, and Dr Bruce Shimoda, a scientist. He is also wanted on several charges of terrorism. He is presumed dangerous.”

“Does he have access to a passport?”

“His accounts and credit cards have been frozen. His documents, both physical and electronic, have been confiscated.”

His house in Oxford is occupied and under surveillance. Several of his close friends in Oxford are also under surveillance.”

“How did he escape?”

“Plucked from the ground by a glider while attending the funeral of a colleague.”

“Colleague?”

“Dr Bruce Shimoda. Proctor is charged with his murder. They worked together in the West Lothian Centre. Equal partners. Seventeen joint publications in scientific journals produced by the Ministry of Defence. All classified.”

“OK. I have enough of a feel for the man. I need to see the crime scene.”

“Do you feel that?”

“What?”

Jobanique leaned towards the camera. “The thrill of the chase.”

It was dawn when he awoke. His face, the only part not covered by the foil, was incredibly cold. His breath condensed in clouds. His legs were twisted and numb. His hands were tense balls of bone and sinew.

“And he’s alive,” David croaked.

At length, he struggled from the glider and collapsed upon the wet grass. The sky was overcast. It pressed on the hills. David managed to discern three or four farmhouses. Was he still in Scotland? How far had the glider taken him?

The closest house was about five miles away. Its owner probably owned the field as well. But more interesting was the wooden hut barely twenty metres away. It had been rotten luck to miss it the night before. The nose of the glider was pointed at its door. He pulled the space blanket closer around his shoulders and held it tight by his midriff.

His thoughts turned to the glider. Even though the day was overcast, it could be spotted easily. David had read about spy satellites with the ability to detect metal and other materials through cloud. He had to do something about it. He couldn't fly away because a glider needed power to get it airborne, not to mention a runway and a pilot. Destroy it, then? No. The smoke would be seen for miles. He looked once more at the isolated farmhouses.

Clearly, he had problems. He walked over to the hut and gave it a summary stare. It was a wooden structure. Difficult to imagine its purpose. It was too small to store food. Perhaps it housed a snowmobile or a spare tractor, or engine parts. There was door on one side and a larger garage-like door at the front. The smaller door was padlocked but, interestingly, the padlock still held its key. A careless farm worker or an invitation to enter? He pulled off the padlock, held it as a weapon, and went inside.

"Hello?" he called. It was gloomy. There were a few tool-laden work benches. On one was a briefcase. To his right, the shed was partitioned by a hanging wall of sacking.

A loud beep came from one of the benches. He raised the padlock high. It was a laptop computer. Its screen flickered into life and displayed an impressionistic sketch of a woman's face. It was an agent.

“Hello,” it replied.

“Hello,” he said. He put the padlock on the bench.

“Hello.”

“What do I do?”

The agent said, “Are you cold?”

“Freezing.”

“There is a flask of hot oxtail soup in the glider.”

“I had that last night.”

The agent nodded. Or, rather, its sketchy face bobbed up and down. “That explains why it has taken you so long to arrive. You should be aware that this significantly increases the probability of your apprehension.”

“Let’s get moving then.”

“Agreed. Under this computer is a pile of clothes. You may put them on. Please do not touch any of the other clothing in this storage shed.”

David threw off the space blanket and grabbed the clothes. They were all new. There were some expensive hiking boots, thermal underwear, jeans, T-shirt, over shirt, gloves, a heavy-duty sports jacket, scarf and woollen hat. “Why not take the other stuff?”

“It does not belong to you.”

He paused. “Oh.”

“Be sure to take your rucksack with you.”

He remembered the fake minister putting a rucksack on his back in the moments before the escape. He had forgotten all about it...though only his head and his legs had been wet when he woke up in the field the night before. He hadn’t put the facts together. The rucksack had protected his back. He shrugged; it was tiny and felt empty.

“Your rucksack,” said the agent, “contains important travel documents. They cannot be replaced.”

“Great. Now, listen to me. I can’t put on any of these clothes until I lose these handcuffs.”

“Agreed. At the end of this bench, underneath the canvas, is a circular saw. Have you used one before?”

David flung the tarp to one side and studied the saw. It comprised a metal cutting platform and a mounted circular blade. The assembly could be moved up and a down with a lever so that the blade passed through the groove in the middle of the cutting platform. The blade looked wicked. He reached around the back and fumbled for a switch. He found it and the blade whirred into life. Odd that a shed in the middle of nowhere would have a power supply.

He put his hands on the plate and stretched them apart to put the connecting chain was under tension. Next, using his chin, he pressed the lever that lowered the saw. The lever hurt like blazes. Garrel had pressed the same spot during his interrogation on Monday.

The blade met the chain and sparks poured onto the floor. Fortunately, the blade had a large housing designed to catch the sparks, so David did not cook his face. He noted the lucky escape and reminded himself to be more careful in future. Another part of his mind – perhaps that inner part with the immunity to cold, the part that had guided him the night before – reminded him that he had been making those mental notes since he was a boy, and had yet to remember one.

He rammed the lever home and the chain came apart. He turned off the saw and began to dress. Heat returned with every layer.

“What’s the plan, computer?”

“Beyond the partition you will find a motorcycle. Listen carefully –”

David turned white. “But I can’t ride a motorcycle.”

“That is why you must listen carefully,” the computer said. Its screen changed to show a cartoon motorcycle. “Observe. It has a key ignition. The keys are in the bike. Turn the key to the second position, then press the start button. The right-hand grip is the accelerator and its lever is the front brake. The left-hand lever is the back brake. Always use both brakes simultaneously. Clear?”

David struggled with his hiking boots. The computer sounded like an air steward giving a safety briefing. “Yes.”

“Remember, the left-hand lever is not the clutch. The bike is has automatic gear transmission. The on-board processor will select its own gears based on speed, predicted future traction, orientation and so on. In the event this processor malfunctions, the bike will revert to a mechanical automatic transmission.”

He pulled on the gloves and the rucksack. “Uh-huh.”

“Your left foot will rest naturally with the metal tab under the heel and another tab over the toes. The same for your right foot. If you squeeze the bike with your heels together, like so –” the stick-figure on the computer screen squeezed its heels – “then the engine will increase its power output by one quarter for five seconds.” The stick-figure and its bike raced off the screen.

“Got it.”

He brushed aside the sack-cloth curtain and examined the bike. He had never ridden one before, but he felt a flush of excitement, because this was a toy and he was a boy. It seemed perpetually crouched, like a sprinter at the starting blocks. It had a startlingly low profile and wide, spiked tyres. It sparkled. Some features were odd: the large dashboard and a superfluous set of hydraulics connecting the chassis to the steering column. The colour scheme was chrome silver. On the tank, in the precision flourish of an artist's signature, was the word *Moiré*.

"David," said the computer. Its voice was louder. "There are two, possibly three, motorcycles approaching from the south."

David heard his heart in his ears. Farmers had seen his downed glider. He searched near the bike and found a helmet. He threw it on his head; he'd do the chin strap later. "OK, computer. Thanks for your help."

"Wait. Have you got everything?"

"I think so."

"Do you have the second rucksack?"

He could hear the other bikes now. "Christ, I don't know. Hang on, here it is." He found the second rucksack under the bench, near the wall.

"Please take it. It is not essential, but will be useful."

David threw it over his back. "One more thing," said the computer, more quietly.

"What now?"

"Please press the red switch on the computer. It is an explosive device with a ten-second delay."

David pressed it and then jumped on the bike. Outside, the other bikes had arrived. Their engine tones dropped. The riders

shouted to each other. He could smell their exhausts. He turned the key, pressed the ignition switch and the bike roared underneath him. He felt the suspension rise and watched as a clear visor rose from the steering column.

David was poised to walk the bike forward when a helmeted man burst into the shed from the side door. To judge by his clothing, he was a farmer. Their eyes met, David's widened, and the laptop exploded. The sound was loud and concussive. It showered the man with debris. He retreated from the shed in a crouch, one arm across his face.

David lowered his head, gunned the engine, and went absolutely nowhere. He looked down. The back tyre was spinning itself into a blur. It slowed, bit into the concrete floor and the bike reared like a startled horse. David came off the power and waited for the front wheel to drop. It did and he bucked forward into the door. It was flung upwards by the impact.

He burst into the field and contemplated his next move. The bike slithered left and right. The back wheel seemed to be greased. Its treads didn't offer enough traction. From the corner of his eye, he saw another bike flash by. It was difficult to guess what they were doing because he couldn't see behind him. The bike had no wing mirrors.

"I could really do with a backwards-facing camera," he muttered.

There was a beep from the steering column and David glanced down. The transparent visor had risen further and become opaque. Its concave interior showed the view from a small camera mounted on the back of the bike. He saw three other bikes, riding

in an even, wide spread. The bikes were gaining because their riders could ride.

“Shit,” he said. He aimed downhill. The bike rode easier. He looked down, unsure of what had changed. The hydraulic rods that connected the chassis to the steering column were not superfluous after all. The bike was using them to correct his steering. He felt an odd mixture of relief and indignation. “Have it your way. But where am I going?”

There was a hedge approaching. Impossible to judge its height, but it would certainly hurt at – he checked the speedometer – thirty miles per hour.

Another bleep and the visor showed a contour map of the area. A red dot flashed in the centre, which David took to be his own bike. A blue arrow trailed to the southwest. At the bottom of a map, a revolving logo read Easy Rider™ SatNav. The blue line pointed left so he pulled a wobbly left-hander and rode parallel with the hedge. The ground became muddier.

A biker slid into view on his right, between himself and the hedge. The profile of this man’s machine was much higher than his own. His helmet was opened-faced but he wore goggles and a bandana, covering his nose, which bore the blue and white Scottish flag. The man flapped his arm at him. Pull over.

On David’s left, another bike came alongside. It also bore a scruffy rider. It was the man who had retreated from the shed when the laptop exploded. David watched him with envy. He seemed to ride the bike with his fingers and toes. The bike undulated and swerved yet the rider kept a perfect, comfortable line. David, by contrast, was constantly at risk of bouncing from his seat.

“Computer, rear view.”

Another bleep. The visor showed that the third bike was still behind, but not far. They had him in a pincer.

“Computer, fire rearward missile.”

There was no beep. “Worth a try.”

There was movement to his left. A boot connected with the side of the bike. David swore. He wobbled, veered sideways, but managed to stay upright. Moments later he felt his palms go slick with sweat. That had been close. Even a landing on grass held the potential for a fatal injury. His stomach and fingertips tingled. His scalp grew itchy and hot under the helmet. These blokes weren't just farmhands. They wanted him injured, possibly dead.

David searched the area for a way out. There was low ground on the other side of the hedge. To his left the ground banked steeply upwards. That way led back to the equipment shed and the downed glider. The bike dipped into a small depression again and David almost fell from the seat. He gripped the tank tightly with his knees.

He had to get over that hedge and into the next field. There was no way he could outrun his pursuers. On the flat, maybe. Not in a field.

The bike dipped into a steep ditch and he had to brake hard. The wheels slid, locked, and he walked the bike up the other side. He turned to see that the other bikers and gone high to ride around the top of the ditch. They were waiting for him. Abruptly, he heaved the front of the bike around, surprised at its sudden, dead weight, and headed back the way he came.

He retraced his route along the hedge. He was desperate to put empty space between himself and the other bikers. The engine whined but the bike stayed close to the ground and fast. He built

his straight-line speed. After a glance at the rear-view camera, he pulled heavily on the rear brake and spun the end of the bike. He sat and panted. Breath clouded. There were lines of sweat on his temples. He faced the oncoming bikes.

Time to fix his helmet strap. He had maybe four seconds.

He threw his gloves away because they made his fingers too clumsy, but the gloves hung from his wrists by strips of Velcro. He looped the chin strap through its metal link and tugged. It held.

The bikes were almost upon him.

He slapped down his visor and raked the throttle. The bike roared.

Something in his expression, or his body posture, gave pause to the incoming riders. They slowed a little. Perhaps they wondered if he had found the desperate strength of a man who had nothing to lose. They fell to the left and to the right and David shot through the middle of them – bare centimetres of clearance on either side.

He rode on now, towards that large ditch. He did not bounce around as he had done before. Now he rode with his fingers and toes. A glance at the rear-view camera confirmed that the other bikers were following. With some disappointment, he saw that they were moving as fast as he was.

The ditch approached.

Here it was.

Shit.

“Shit.”

He swerved left, hillward, then cut right, down towards the ditch at a diagonal. He spurred his heels and felt the answering ssss of valves opening by his ankles. Nitrous oxide mixed with the

fuel. The engine whistled like a jet on take-off. The bike found a whole new speed and he dropped low to its tank, hugging in wonder, willing himself to stay onboard.

He rode up other side of the ditch, now pressed into the seat, and caught its lip as a ramp. He was airborne. The hedge was a brief glimmer of dark green below. He heard the wheels swish across its surface. He reached his apogee and became weightless. The bike touched down on its front wheel. It bounced immediately. David watched as the steering column rose up and met his chin. His teeth bit together with a crunch. The back wheel touched, bounced, then the front did the same again. The bike became a bucking bronco. But the intervals shortened and, though the bike wobbled and swerved, the onboard computer was able to keep the bike and its rider upright. It came to a graceless halt some thirty metres from the hedge. David sagged in exhaustion and tapped the petrol tank.

“Good job,” he breathed.

He flipped his visor and risked a look over his shoulder. The other bikers had stopped to watch him. He wondered why they didn't race on to the nearest gate. Surely they would know its location. But they didn't move. They stared at him. David managed a little wave and began to ride away.

When he looked back again, he saw that one of the men had removed his helmet. He was speaking into a phone. His free arm was waving about madly.

David carried on. In a few minutes, he came to a road and turned left. The spiked tyres rattled uncomfortably before the computer retracted the spikes. According to Easy Rider™, that way led, via a tortuous pre-programmed route involving minor roads

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and country lanes, to London Heathrow. It would take one day, nine hours, twenty-eight minutes and twenty-seven seconds. If he rode without a break.

It was 8 a.m. It would be a long day. He rode on.

The Scene of the Crime

Saskia took a taxi to the airport. With no time to pack, she had taken nothing but her gun. She checked-in early and shopped: a coat, a few T-shirts, some nice blouses, shoes, a skirt, and some jeans. She also bought some tampons. Thanks to Jobanique, she had no idea when she had had her last period. In the supermarket she flashed her ID and jumped the queue.

She flew into London Gatwick at 10:40, twenty clock minutes after her departure, and spent the next hour wandering. Her attempts at English were largely successful, though she felt no familiarity or confidence.

Gatwick was uninspiring. She bought another coffee and listened to the announcements. She watched children play and discussed British hamburger beef with a French businessman.

At midday she sat in an old Boeing 737 as it lumbered up the runway and, almost impossibly, achieved flight. She touched down an hour-and-a-half later in Edinburgh. She spent some time talking to a customs officer who was unimpressed by the paperwork for her revolver. Two phone calls later, the gun was in back in its holster on her hip.

In arrivals, she saw a suited man with a card that read 'Brandt'. She shook his hand. He directed her to a car and they climbed into the back. It was an old manual Ford.

"In your own time," he said to the driver. Saskia wondered what would happen. She was relieved, but also puzzled, when they pulled away into traffic. "Your luggage has been sent on. You're

staying at the Old Train Inn in Whitburn. Why did you want to stay there? The last sighting of Proctor was in Northumbria.”

She considered his words before replying. He spoke in a whisper she associated with French. “The murder,” she said simply.

He nodded and flicked some ash from the window. Some fell on a ‘no smoking’ sign near the handle. She guessed the man was in his mid-fifties. In England, she knew, police officers could serve a maximum of twenty five years. He would be near retirement age. His cheeks were rouged with broken blood vessels. White hair had begun to creep from his ears. She wondered what he thought of her and was surprised, given what she knew about British politeness, to be told immediately.

“You’re a bit young, aren’t you?”

“Between us, I forget how young. Will you offer me a cigarette?”

He seemed surprised. She smiled sweetly. “Aye. Have one.”

She took it. “Not many people smoke any more.”

“They do in Scotland.”

“Why’s that?”

“First time in Scotland?”

“Yes.”

“Light?”

“Please.”

He took out a gold Zippo, flipped it open on his thigh on the downstroke and lit the wick on the upstroke. Saskia watched the gesture. She had seen it before. It was a memory with roots beyond the black wall that had fallen between her new life and the old. She reached out.

Nothing. Nothing more than a familiar gesture. Soon, even the familiarity was gone.

The man frowned and checked his lighter. "I'm Hannah. Detective Inspector George Hannah."

"Oh." She shook his hand. "I'm Saskia Brandt. Detective FIB."

She looked at his warrant card, nodded, and he examined her gold badge, smiled.

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No. I –" she faltered, and lost herself in the shops passing by. She felt a deep frustration about travelling...a frustration she was certain she had felt Before too. She could never get far enough away that the scenery really changed, became properly alien, properly foreign. Edinburgh was full of traffic lights, people, modern buildings. Brussels with different lighting. "I once knew a man who did that with a lighter," she lied. Then she added, almost to herself, "He's dead now."

The detective nodded. "It happens."

"Tell me about Proctor."

He opened his notebook. "Professor David Proctor, aged fifty-two. Wanted for the murders of Sergeant Caroline Saunders and Dr Bruce Shimoda, both in Whitburn. Details are sketchy. Official Secrets Act covers a lot of it."

"Official Secrets Act? Is that a law?"

"Yes. Once you've signed a secrecy contract, the government can stop you from snitching. Talking about certain things, that is. The act means that we can't know certain things about the murder."

Saskia was puzzled. “That makes it rather difficult to investigate.”

Hannah sighed. “Yes. But our job is to find him, not solve the murder. My Super and a judge – a sheriff, actually – looked at the evidence. They’re satisfied he’s guilty and have authorised all reasonable force in getting him before he skips the country.”

“What kind of trial will he have?”

“A closed hearing.”

Saskia was intrigued. “And if he is sent to prison, what if he tells fellow prisoners?”

“If he knows something really important...well, how can I put this delicately?” He leaned closer. “He’ll be silenced. One way or another.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, I’m not.”

She considered the situation. In truth, she had no clue where to start. She had had no training that she could remember. Jobanique had given her the job because of her gut instinct. It told her that she should retrace his steps from their beginning, not their point of disappearance.

“Detective Inspector Hannah, could you please tell me our destination?”

“Belford, Northumbria. That’s where the glider came down.”

“How long a journey is that?”

Hannah spoke quickly to the driver. The driver sucked air through his teeth and shrugged, then shouted something back. Saskia watched Hannah expectantly. She had not understood a word.

“It’s about seventy miles. In kilometres,” he continued, prompted by her expression, “about a hundred and ten. Should take around an hour and a half. We’d be there by 4:15.”

“No. I would like to go to the West Lothian Centre.”

He frowned. “Where? The community centre?”

“No. The scene of the murder, please.”

“Oh, right. You mean the Park Hotel. I’ve just come from there.”

“How long is the journey?”

“Half an hour.” He tapped the driver. “Park Hotel. Just out of Whitburn, on the way to Harthill.” The driver nodded.

Saskia finished her cigarette and threw it out of the window. She could tell Hannah was amused by her blatant littering. She leaned closer. “What are your orders regarding me?”

Hannah’s eyes were hard rocks. They had met the stare of murderers, rapists, paedophiles and con-men, and seen through ghosts and bluff. Saskia was easy. “I’ve been asked to give you every cooperation.”

“Asked?”

He smiled. “Told.”

“And what do you think of me?”

He regarded her. “Detective Saskia Brandt. You are a foreign consultant with experience of fugitive murderers. You’ve been working for the Brussels office of Föderatives Investigationsbüro for five years, following a degree in modern languages and psychology at Bochum University. Section chief is codenamed Jobanique. Not married. No pets.”

Saskia leaned in. “And do you believe all that?”

“Shouldn’t I believe it?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“What are you saying?”

“What do you think I’m saying?”

Hannah took a long drag on his cigarette. He waited until the claustrophobia of the moment passed. “You think I disapprove because you’re private. That is, that you’re not directly employed by the state. You think I’m against having a private detective on the case. And, maybe, that I’ll feel territorial.”

She could feel his anticipation. He wanted her to say And do you?

Saskia relaxed and stretched her legs as far as they could go. She put her fingers through the gap in the window pane. The wind’s howl change pitch. She sighed.

Hannah muttered something.

“What?” she asked.

“Nicest interrogation I ever had.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She closed her eyes. “Please tell me what you know about our destination.”

The Park Hotel, Hannah began, was an old, renovated manor house that stood watch over the largest national park in West Lothian, Craillie Park. The Craillies, who had lived there since 1620, had played a major role in the local community. They were philanthropists and businessmen. In the early part of the twentieth century they had allowed local sportsmen and women to use their bowling green, golf course and tennis courts. By 1957,

with mounting debts and dwindling income, the remaining Craillies left their one-hundred-and-sixty-nine-acre home for various careers in various countries. They were variously successful. The park became derelict, overgrown and forgotten by everyone but a few locals. Then, in 1978, the District Council decided to buy the property. They reinstated the facilities. It cost millions. The old mansion house became the Park Hotel.

The hotel was unveiled in 1981. At the same time, the nearby outdoor sports facilities, but not the hotel, were opened by an MP and placed at the disposal of the local community. The hotel remained an exclusive retreat for tourists – mostly rich Englishmen – who played a little sport, tried their luck against the salmon in the River Almond and enjoyed cigar-smoke conferences in closed backrooms. In 1995 an adjunct to the hotel was constructed to provide public indoor sporting activities. The council also built a patio area for barbeques.

“How long did that building take?”

“I’ve got no idea. Why?”

“I suspect it was a cover. They were also building an underground research centre.”

“Should you be telling me this?”

“The centre is now...defunct.”

In 2003 the hotel was damaged by fire. Accidental, in the opinion of the local papers. It was renovated with an estimated eight million from the insurers and re-opened one year later by an MSP. From that time to the present day, it has served in the exact capacity envisaged by the District Council in 1978: the exclusive hotel, which rakes in the money, and the indoor-outdoor sports facilities, which the Whitburnians enjoy.

“Have you ever met someone who has stayed at the hotel?”

“No.”

They pulled up outside the hotel. Gravel crunched under the tyres. Saskia got out and breathed. The air was cold. It had an overtone of pine. She could also smell running water and damp vegetation. The surrounding trees were high firs and Saskia was gripped, albeit briefly, by the child-like urge to run into that woodland and just be in there, where it was silent and safe.

“Like an enchanted forest, isn’t it?” said Hannah.

“Genau,” she muttered. “Exactly.”

To her left, past the bushes and down the valley toward the River Almond, she could see the corner of a tennis court. It was quite separate from the hotel itself. In that direction, presumably, lay the other courts, the golf course, the bowling green, the barbeque area and more. But the hotel stood alone.

“Is the centre closed?”

“Aye, it’s a crime scene.”

“But there are no markings.”

“No need. They can stop people at the gate.”

The hotel had six floors. Its two wings reached out to incorporate a little of the car park. There was a dry fountain in the centre. It showed a bearded man passing a lighted torch to a smaller man. It took only a moment to see the reference: the Greek god Prometheus passing Man the secret of fire.

Prometheus, who had been chained to a rock by Zeus for his treachery. Prometheus, who had suffered a hawk eat his liver. The liver that grew back; the hawk that returned.

The chains...

...the hawk that returned.

The Zippo lighter. The gesture.

The hawk that returned.

All these images. They seemed to fit like jigsaw pieces, then fly apart, then fly together again. What did they mean? Were they memories? Were they memories of the old Saskia?

Not now. This is a different chase. Who are you hunting?
Proctor or Brandt?

The hawk that returned.

Spin, measure, snip. The witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

She began to walk towards the entrance. She was suspicious of the high bushes either side of the car park. A whole army could lie in wait.

Hannah fell into step beside her.

“The driver. Can we trust him?”

Hannah shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“This murder scene is the key. We can’t find Proctor if we don’t know why and how.”

“You remember what I said about the Official Secrets Act? They could refuse to tell us.”

“Refuse? Are you certain?”

“Actually, no.”

“Then we must act as though we are certain. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

They stepped into the foyer.

Neither of them saw the glaring lens of the sniper that lay in the bushes nearby. He had received no orders to shoot. He had used his telescopic lens to get close up digital pictures of both newcomers. They were sent instantly to his commanding officer, Garrel. The long walk to the door meant that there was time to send the pictures, receive them, send orders back, and shoot the pair of them. No orders were received. No action was taken.

The foyer was long and undernourished. A chandelier did hang, but it was gnarled. Some of its bulbs were broken. Paintings covered the walls. Each, when viewed as an individual, was the odd one out. Dark, varnished wood and green felt were endemic. The smell of damp wood and dust was overpowering. Two people were talking quietly. Saskia's heels made loud, sharp clicks that rang like a knife tapped against a wine glass. The two people turned to face their visitors.

"Good afternoon," Saskia said loudly. She favoured each with an intimidating look. First was a tall lady wearing a sensible, simple dress. She stood behind the reception desk and said nothing. Second, slouched like a cowboy at the bar, was a shorter man wearing jeans and a navy blue jumper with elbow patches. He was in his late forties, thickening around the middle, with strong shoulders.

"DI George Hannah," said the man. He ignored Saskia. "Nice to see you again."

"And you," replied Hannah. He was impassive. Nobody shook hands.

“I must say that you are persistent, DI Hannah,” the man said.

Saskia smiled thinly. “You have not met me yet.”

“I do apologise. I am Andrew Garrel. I am in charge here.”

Saskia reached inside her jacket and withdrew a small, black device. She noted that Garrel’s thumbs, hooked through his belt-hoops, were pressed white. He was nervous. “Do you mind if I use my voice recorder?”

“You can’t, I’m afraid. Security.”

“Hmm.” She returned the device and, from another pocket, took out a notebook. “Is this safe?”

Hannah made a noise. It didn’t sound like a guffaw, but Garrel’s expression became frosty. “Yes. It’s safe. It’s a bloody notebook. It was nice to meet you. This is as far as you may go. I will have someone escort you out.”

Saskia nodded perfunctorily. She scribbled a note. “Of course. But before we leave, please. I have a question. What do you do, Andrew?”

Garrel folded his arms. “I am in charge of security, miss.”

“Detective,” she corrected. Garrel raised his eyebrows and glanced briefly skywards. “Your rank?” She added quietly, “I assume you are military.”

“I cannot tell you that,” he said.

Saskia exchanged a glance with Hannah and made strokes with her pen. “Why cannot you tell me?”

“I have my orders.”

“Why is that?”

“I also cannot tell you that.”

Saskia peered at him over the notebook. She worked to generate the impression of a school teacher. “Andrew, do you know why I am here?”

Garrel smiled indulgently. “Yes.”

“Why am I here?”

“To do some private police work.”

“What police work?”

“Find a murderer.”

Saskia hit the notepad with the nib of her ballpoint. “Punkt. A murderer. Is this the scene of the murders?”

Garrel shrugged. “I cannot tell you that.”

“Do you want me to find this man?”

Garrel’s grin faltered. “If that’s your job, then, of course.”

“And would you expect me to succeed without your cooperation?”

“Look, love –”

Saskia flashed a dazzling smile. “Detective,” she said.

“Detective. Why do you need to know about here when he’s out there?”

She laughed coldly. “A crime has been committed. I shall solve it. But I work from the start of the trail, not the middle.” She stepped forward until her face was close to Garrel’s. She saw the blackheads on his nose, the bloodshot sleepiness of his eyes.

“Now, you have ten minutes. Call your superior and get confirmation that Detective Saskia Brandt from the FIB is to receive your full cooperation. Understand? Then return and explain to me, and my good friend Detective Inspector Hannah, why you have obstructed our investigation.”

Garrel opened his mouth. Then he closed it.

Saskia shooed him away. "Go."

Garrel frowned. He did not appear to be angry, merely confused. Saskia imagined him as an actor who was dumbstruck by the improvisation of a colleague. After a moment's pause, he turned on his heel and crossed the foyer. He stepped through a side-door and was gone.

The receptionist said, "You should sit down and wait," and disappeared through a green curtain behind the front desk. From behind it came the sound of a low conversation. Saskia turned to Hannah but he pointed to a corner with a sofa. As they sat down, Saskia said, "Not bad for a foreigner."

"Not bad," he agreed. "We'll either get the facts or a bullet in the head. Anyway, it's further than I got."

Hannah undid a button on his jacket to let his belly out. Saskia stared at the fat mass in wonder. This was the least vain man she had ever met. He reached for a cigarette, offered one to Saskia, and they smoked thoughtfully.

"Have faith," Saskia said.

Hannah became serious. "Faith is believing in something without evidence. The hallmark of a fine detective."

"Do you mean that?"

"Absolutely."

"Look." Saskia took out her notebook and showed Hannah. She watched his face, a smile on her lips. There were no notes. She had drawn a caricature of Garrel: bow-legged, a chest full of medals, swagger cane in one hand and a salute in another. It was signed: "Brandt".

Hannah chuckled. "Not bad."

Garrel walked briskly across the foyer with the air of man who had marched in his youth and had never recovered his relaxation. Saskia was glad that Hannah did not stand.

“Detective Brandt, follow me please.”

Both Saskia and Hannah stood, but Garrel shook his head at the DI. “I can talk to the FIB, no one else.”

Garrel walked away. In the middle of the foyer he realised that he was walking alone. He turned. “Are you coming?”

Saskia was busy with her notebook. She was writing something.

“Sign here,” she said to Hannah. He scanned the sheet and grinned.

“Fine.” He signed.

Saskia and Hannah approached Garrel. “DI Hannah is now an emergency deputy of the Föderatives Investigationsbüro. As such, he is now entitled to the rights and privileges of a detective-officer.” She imagined she had said the words a thousand times before.

Garrel slapped his haunches in resignation. “What a circus. Come on then, otherwise we’ll be here till midnight.” They crossed the foyer in silence. Garrel turned left into a corridor that was narrow and dark. In the distance, she could hear the crackle of handheld radios and an unplaceable, constant tapping.

“Ooh, this is exciting,” said Hannah. He mimicked Garrel’s march. Saskia giggled.

They walked past picture windows. She had expected a garden, but it was a lawn, lush green and smooth. It was surrounded by firs. Secluded. It would be peaceful even when the

community's nearby sports facilities to the were busy. One more thought struck her: Garrel was right. The circus was in town. Two huge tents had been pitched.

“What is the purpose of the tents?” she asked.

Garrel glanced over his shoulder at them. “One is a hospital. The other covers an excavation.”

“An excavation of what?” asked Hannah.

“Hasn't she told you, deputy?”

“No, she hasn't.”

“Yes, I have,” Saskia said. “The West Lothian Research Centre is beneath our feet.”

Hannah said, “Oh.” He dropped back and murmured to Saskia, “You make me feel like a sidekick.”

“A kick?” Saskia asked.

“You know, a sidekick. He asks the hero dumb questions so that the audience knows what's going on. The sidekick is also the first to die when there's any trouble.”

“Ah, I understand.” Saskia smiled. A memory – a precious jewel – glinted. “That happens on Enterprise, the TV show. You beam down with the captain. If you are wearing a red shirt you will be subject to a fatal special effect.”

Hannah laughed heartily and clapped her on the back. It hurt. “You'd better call me Scottie, then. He never gets killed.”

They came to a cloakroom. It was empty. Saskia could not understand why the cloakroom was so far from the main entrance. Garrel stepped to one side and she saw a splintered hole in the centre of the floor. She felt, simultaneously, a need to jump down the hole and a need to run away from it. Another discovery, then: she was scared of heights.

“This room is where the scientists entered the research centre. The whole room would sink to the ground floor of the complex, twenty metres down. Proctor went down there last Sunday.” Garrel spoke like a tour guide.

Hannah whistled. He stepped as close to the edge as he dared. Saskia remained in the doorway. Hannah stepped back. He said, “Are you saying there was a research centre down there?”

“Yes. The corpse, anyway. It was operational from 1996 to 2003. It was bombed in May 2003. The structure was seriously weakened, but it didn’t collapse.”

“So you just left it?” asked Saskia.

“Not me. But yes, it was left. All of the access routes except for this one were capped. It was unusable. There was nothing else to do. Though, actually, I believe a good deal of reinforcement work was carried out to alleviate the threat of a cave-in.”

Hannah nodded. “What kind of projects did they do here?”

“Radical stuff. The kind that doesn’t normally get funding.”

“For ethical reasons?”

Garrel laughed. “For John Hartfield. Heard of him? He runs research centres all over the world.”

“But he has government help.”

“Yes. A public-private partnership. I’m sure that, as a new employee of the FIB, you’d appreciate that even better than me.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Saskia said. “I would like to view the crime scene.”

Garrel led them out. “We can’t go down this way. It’s blocked. There was a cave-in ten minutes after Proctor went down with McWhirter.”

They emerged from the rear of the hotel onto the enormous lawn. They headed towards one of the two circus-sized tents. It was eighty metres away on the uphill. They were silent for a while.

“Who is McWhirter?” Saskia asked.

“Head of security before me. He’s dead.”

“I see. How did he die?”

Garrel didn’t turn around. “We haven’t found the body yet. We only have Proctor’s statement. There was a cave-in. Convenient, perhaps. McWhirter believed that Proctor was responsible for the first bombing.”

“In 2003.”

“The same.” Garrel slowed down. He was sweating and so was Hannah. Garrel continued, pausing often: “There wasn’t much direct evidence, but plenty of clues. Proctor had put in a number of complaints about the new direction of his research. In this kind of place, the scientist doesn’t control his research programme – it is dictated by his superiors on the basis of his,” he glanced at Saskia, “or her, findings. If you don’t like it, you quit and don’t ask for a character reference.”

“About the bombing,” urged Saskia.

“Getting there.” He took a breath. “The afternoon it happened, there was a concert in the main hall. Proctor organised it. At one day’s notice, this is. In the intermission, the bomb went off. Most people were at the concert so casualties were minimized. The bomb was placed inside Proctor’s laboratory. Inside his locked work room. It should have destroyed the equipment in Proctor’s lab, and only that.”

“But it didn’t.”

“No. It started a fire, which soon spread. Ceilings collapsed. Eight people were killed. Six staff and two scientists.”

Saskia pursed her lips. She was not sure if this information was relevant but she wanted to feed her instinct. “What about his research partners?”

“He had only one. A man called Shimoda. He was ruled out because he was blind. Oh, he was fairly capable, but planting a bomb was beyond him. He also had a watertight alibi. Proctor, on the other hand, had the motive, the means and the opportunity. He had no account for whole portions of that day and the surveillance tapes for his laboratory were missing.”

“It does point to him,” agreed Hannah.

“Plus,” said Garrel, “he was evasive during his initial interrogation and then again to the panel who carried out a confidential inquiry into the bombing. In their report they mention their suspicions, but there was never enough evidence. He slipped through the net.”

“Until now,” said Saskia. “When he slipped through the net again.”

Garrel grunted.

They had reached the tent. It was nearly ten metres in diameter. A man in civilian clothing stood next to its entrance. He had a long machine gun cradled in his arms. He saw Garrel, saluted, and the three of them walked inside. In the gloom, men and women wearing army fatigues steadily and silently packed office equipment into large, green crates.

Garrel turned around. “Lucky you came today. We would have been gone by this evening.”

Saskia and Hannah ignored him. They were staring at the centre of the tent. The structure did not have a pole because it was self-supporting, which left room for a crane-like rig to hang suspended over a hole large enough to swallow a car. Three or four ropes dangled into the shaft.

Hannah walked gingerly to the hole and peered down. Then he looked at the rig. From his expression, Saskia could tell that he was not impressed by the method of transportation. “You were going to tell us more about Proctor,” he prompted.

“Indeed.” Garrel folded his arms and stared at the loading operation. He clearly had faith in the discretion of these people, because he began to talk freely. “Proctor was invited to come here on Sunday and help with some consultation. It appeared that his former research partner, Dr Bruce Shimoda, had broken into the research centre and connected Project New World to the hotel power supply. New World was the codename for their research programme. I know very few details. It seems to be some kind of virtual reality computer. A user enters it as though it were a game.”

Saskia produced her notebook. Proctor’s movements were critical to her understanding. “How did Shimoda enter the complex? You said it was sealed.”

“Good question. We don’t know. And now that he’s been blown to smithereens, there’s a good chance we’ll never know.”

“He was blown up?” asked Hannah.

“Yes, remotely. Proctor detonated the bomb from where you’re standing.”

“Hang on,” said Hannah. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. Proctor arrived for the consultation and then what?”

Garrel related the events of the previous weekend. He did not seem to mind that Saskia recorded his words in shorthand. Her scribbles were a mixture of broken German, Greek maths-like symbols, and pictograms. Her hand produced the script quite automatically. P for Proctor. WL for West Lothian Centre. Sam for Saturday, Son for Sunday. C for computer.

As Garrel paused to order his thoughts, Saskia chewed her pen. “The miniature computer contained the bomb.”

“Exactly. He managed to sneak it past security because McWhirter underestimated him. He did not insist on a body search. This personal computer contained enough explosive to bring down a small building, if put in the right place and given a little luck. Proctor left his bomb haphazardly. It was near enough to the computer for it to be destroyed but it did very little structural damage. Apparently that was due to its proximity to the shaft we sunk over there. It acted like an open pressure valve.”

“What evidence is there,” asked Saskia, “that Proctor killed this soldier called —” she consulted her notes — “Caroline?”

Garrel shook his head. “If you’re looking for a smoking gun, you’re not going to find it. It’s not how this guy works. He’s a thinker. A professor, remember.” He tapped his temple. “But Proctor must have lured her into the computer. Why else would she have gone in? She was under orders to protect the computer and Shimoda, nothing more. Guard duty is not the kind of job that you interrupt for a quick game of Scrabble.”

Saskia smiled. “I am sorry. Sometimes you talk too fast. Could you repeat this evidence?”

Garrel became still. His eyes took on the hawkish look of the man they had met in the foyer of the hotel. “Your job, Detective Brandt, is to find this man, not advocate his innocence.”

Saskia took a deep breath. It was counter-productive to antagonise him, even if she felt good doing it. She needed more facts. “I apologise. Proctor is clearly a criminal who should be apprehended at the earliest opportunity. I only wish to gauge the extent of this criminality.”

“Fine,” Garrel said. His expression softened. “All I’m saying is, this guy is dangerous. I debriefed him after the event. I read his file. I know him. I am in no doubt he killed that guard. No doubt.” He paused to direct some packing. Saskia wrote G P V: Garrel interrogated Proctor. “As I was saying, Proctor was injured during the evacuation and slept it off in the medical tent. Next morning, he woke up and persuaded the doctor to let him go for a walk. At that point, you understand, he was not really under suspicion. He was still in the role of ‘consultant’. He walked into this tent, sent a radio message to his discarded personal computer, which started a fire to clear remaining personnel from the research centre. It was a prelude to the bomb.”

“But Shimoda remained down there?” asked Saskia.

“Had to. If we disconnected him, he would have died from strokes.”

“And then the bomb went off.”

“Indeed. It killed Shimoda.”

Hannah asked Garrel about Proctor’s escape from custody. He spoke at length. Saskia did not take any more notes. She had read the police report on the flight to Edinburgh. She was impressed by Garrel’s innocence. The blame could be attributed to

every object and process in the known universe that was not called Garrel. He was particularly piqued by the funeral. “God only knows whose idea that was, to send a terrorist to the funeral of one of his victims.” He went on. An expert lawyer and sympathetic judge – combined with the lamentable fact that the closest Japanese translator was in Leeds – meant that the entire family were now en route to Osaka.

Saskia smiled. This was an interesting case. She did not mention that it was her first. There were many fascinating aspects. Someone had helped David Proctor. They had made sure he attended that funeral, even made sure that there was a funeral. They had arranged a complicated escape. Was the fake priest behind everything? Or the family?

“What about the priest?” Saskia asked.

“Her description narrows the search to about five million suspects. She’s aged between late thirties and early fifties. Bit of a looker. Long brown hair. English. That’s it. We would have her in custody if it wasn’t for the local police. They had a WPC and a jailer on David, plus a guy driving the van. This priest tied them up with their own handcuffs before disappearing. All of this was watched, of course, by the cast of *The Mikado*. As for a photofit, you should ask DI Hannah. His friends are taking care of the plodwork.”

Hannah smiled as though receiving a compliment. “We like to be useful.”

Saskia put the notebook in her pocket. She removed her coat, handed it to Hannah, and removed her suit jacket. Both men stared at her. “What do you think you’re doing?” Garrel asked.

“I came here to see the crime scene.”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Garrel said quickly.

“Me either,” said Hannah.

Saskia removed her earrings and put them in a trouser pocket. “Colonel Garrel, or whatever your rank is, I am not asking for your advice. Just your cooperation.”

“Listen, Brandt,” Garrel said. His face was close to hers. “I need this hole capped, soiled and turfed by six p.m. That gives me,” and Saskia noted he did not check his watch, because that would have involved looking away, “just over an hour.”

“Then we should proceed immediately.”

Garrel held her stare for while and then threw up his arms in resignation. “Splendid. Why not? We’ll call it ‘The Magical Mystery Tour’ and charge at the gate.” He looked at Hannah in exasperation, but the DI ignored him. “We’ll need some equipment.” He found an open crate and began to dig inside.

Saskia gave Hannah her suit jacket. He draped it across one arm, solemnly as a butler, but as she reached to remove her pancake holster, his hand clamped hers. She read his eyes and nodded. The gun stayed.

“Take this,” Garrel said. He passed her a harness and a climbing helmet, complete with lamp. She fed her legs through the seat and locked the pelvis connection. She watched her hands as they manipulated the ropes and double-sprocket mechanism with considerable expertise. Lucky. These motor actions – abseiling, weapon handling, shorthand – were probably implanted skills.

“What are you waiting for, Brandt?” Garrel stepped over the yellow cordon and attached his harness to one of the ropes. Each rope was a different colour. “Twenty metres. I’m on the blue rope.” He tapped his helmet and the lamp shone. Then he jumped into

the blackness and fell like a dead weight. The rope whistled through his decelerator.

Saskia wandered over to the hole. Her palms were slick with sweat. "You want to come down too, Scottie?"

Hannah smiled. "No thanks. A friend of mine was paralysed using one of those decelerators. Anyway," he said, hefting her coat and jacket, "I'm being useful."

"Right." Saskia clipped her harness to the rope. She chose the red one. She unhinged the decelerator and fitted the rope around the two sprockets. She closed it firmly and checked, with a tug, that the rope was gripped tight. There was a disc attached to a sprocket axle. She pulled it out and turned the dial to twenty metres. Then she snapped it back, checked it was locked, and jumped.

Dinner At McCabe's

David pulled into a narrow alleyway. The engine faltered and stopped. He dug for the kick-stand and eased it to a stable tilt. He slid off. He removed the key and the dull glow of the windscreen's display faded to nothing. The suspension sank and the windscreen slipped into the steering column.

He stepped back and flexed his arms. His wrists cracked arthritically. His vertebra settled.

"Oi, sunshine," said a voice.

David looked up. An old woman was leaning into the alley from her window, her ample bosom resting on her white folded arms. He could hear a TV babbling behind her. Her hair was in curlers. A cigarette wagged in the corner of her mouth when she spoke: "You. That. You can't stop here."

He flipped open the visor on his helmet. "Firstly, I am not your sunshine. Secondly, this bike will stay here, undisturbed by you, for the entire night. And if I find so much as a scratch in the morning, we can talk about it down the station."

The old woman was a dark silhouette. There was a pause of several seconds. "My Barry would sort yous out."

David gave her a tired, tired look.

She snorted and wriggled back inside. The single-glazed window slammed down. David sagged against the wall and tried to ignore the drumming in his ears.

It was nearly 6 p.m. He had been on the road since eight. A total of nine hours with an hour for lunch in little town called Cramlington. Behind the counter in the chip shop there had been a

picture of him. A very old picture, thankfully, with more, darker hair and a smiling face. He had frozen, mid-chew, but the owner had not given him a second look. David left immediately. He could not mimic accents, but he could produce the Scottish “Aye,” “No,” and “Is it not?” well enough. He had not disguised his voice for the old bag at the window and if she didn’t buy his story then, well, perhaps her Barry would soon sort him out and so bloody what. He was tired.

On the road he had watched the sun climb, ridden through rain, seen a rainbow, swerved around road kill. His body was near exhaustion. His shoulders and neck hurt from the constant hunch. His kidneys felt bruised from the vibration. Same story with the wrists.

Now he was finished for the day. He had washed up in Northallerton. A few miles to the north was Middlesborough. A few more to south was Leeds. He was still hours from his England.

He emerged from the alley. It was dusk. Parked cars lined each side. Across the way was a pub called The Horse ’n Groom. Multicoloured lights flashed from its windows. Music played so loudly that it transformed from sound to dull touch.

He walked a little further down the road. He still wore the bike helmet but he didn’t want to remove it until it was necessary. A few metres on was the Mulberry Guesthouse. It was a converted semi. Not a palace. Perfect. Next to the door was a box with a plastic front. Inside, a visible bulb illuminated a piece of paper with the words, ‘We have Vaccancies’.

David slid his helmet upwards. His ears had somehow grown into it. He breathed a huge gulp of cold air and ruffled the cowlick that used to be his hair. His neck had lost some movement. He

restrained his urge to twist his head and loosen the cartilage with a crack.

The helmet was surprisingly heavy. He reached to press the doorbell when a voice said: “Yen’t a coppeh, man.”

There was somebody there. He looked hard. A boy stood in the shadows, hands in pockets. He stepped into the light. David could tell immediately that he was homeless. He wore a woollen cap, an eskimo-style jacket with the hood down, jeans, and bright white trainers. They were scuffed to hell. He was skinny and bird-like in his movements. His eyes were red-ringed.

“What?” David had barely understood his words. He had no grip on the Northallerton accent. It sounded Geordie, but no doubt the boy would be offended by the comparison.

“I said, you aren’t a copper. On holiday?”

David shrugged as the words came into focus. His finger still hovered over the doorbell. “Business. Yourself?” He wanted to wrap up the conversation quickly, get inside, have a bath.

“Touting for business.”

Something in his voice spoke directly to David’s stomach. He felt nauseous. Saliva squirted into his mouth. “Sorry, what?”

“Wannafuck?” asked the little boy. He was relaxed, but prepared to run. David realised that he had asked that question a thousand times and, with repetition, the meaning had melted away. It was now just a matter of mouth shapes and air.

David’s hand finally fell from the doorbell. He crouched down. His eyes were wide. He reached over to the boy and, with a gloved finger, turned his face. “You’re not a boy at all,” David said softly. “You’re just a little girl.”

Suddenly he wanted Jennifer.

“Alright, you’ve touched the merchandise. Cash or plastic?”

Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were sunken. She had a large cold sore on her bottom lip.

“Can you come back?” he asked. “Twenty minutes? We can go somewhere.”

Twenty minutes later, David was sitting on the edge of his bed. He hadn’t removed his coat or his gloves. He had checked in, handed over his new, fake credit card, signed with his old, unreadable signature and found his room on the first floor. He had thrown his rucksack on the bed. Earlier, it had revealed a passport, driver’s licence, credit card, and a small brown envelope. He knew that he should open the envelope, discover its secret, but he did not.

He thought about the girl.

There was a knock at the door.

“Mr Harrison?”

Unforgivable, he thought numbly. Unforgettable. How could he have been so stupid? It was not a moment’s lapse. It had lasted years.

“Yeah,” he cacked.

The landlord opened the door a crack. He was a fat, nervous Welshman with a bushy beard. “Someone to see you downstairs.”

David kept his back to the door and dabbed at his eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time he had cried.

No, not true. Bruce’s funeral. Unforgettable.

“Thank you.”

The door closed.

David patted his pockets. He would need money.

Outside, he did not have to look far. She was waiting in the shadows. It was dark now. He glanced around. They were alone. She emerged and read his mind.

“They know where I am,” she said. “My friends.” Her breath made little white clouds.

“I’m hungry. Want to get some fish and chips?”

She frowned. “You want to eat.”

“Yeah. Come on. Name a place?”

“McCabe’s. It’s over there.” She indicated the direction with a shoulder. Her hands stayed in her pockets and David wondered what weapons she held. She did not let her eyes leave his until he walked past her. She fell in step. Her head reached his elbow. Her strides were fast and his were slow.

“What are your prices like, then?” he asked. The nausea swirled in his stomach again. That old feeling. It spread to his fingertips and they seemed to sparkle. He took deep breaths and concentrated on the horizon though, in the blackness, there was none.

She sniffed. “This your first time?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, playing for time he would never need. His mind was almost paralysed by the proximity of this child and what she was prepared to do. In his coat pocket he felt the reassuring weight of his stun gun. There was an alley coming up. It would do.

“The first time you want a bit of underage?”

He tried to sound relaxed. “No. Not the first time.”

“Oh.” She sounded uninterested.

They walked past the mouth of the alley. David seized her by the hood and hauled her in. He could lift her with one arm. Nobody saw. He crouched. Their eyes were level.

“Have me, don’t kill me,” she said quickly.

“You’re not taking me to a chippy, are you?” His voice was controlled. His policeman’s voice. Everybody trusts a policeman.

She shook her head. He saw the fear in her eyes and saw it was controlled too. She was calculating, weighing options. “What’s in your pockets?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Let me see.”

A car drove past. The light did not reach them but some reflections caught her eyes as a glint moving from right to left. Slowly, she produced her hands. In each one was a fair-sized rock.

Clever girl, he thought. “Drop them.”

He saw her calculating again: crash the rocks into his head like cymbals.

She dropped them.

“You’re taking me to a get-together, aren’t you? You got some friends and told them you had a sure thing. They were going to knock me about, nick my cards. Anything else?”

Now her eyes fell. Their light faded. “You are a copper.”

“We’re going to walk out of here. We’re going to have some fish and chips and a chat. And if you still want me to meet your friends, there’ll be fucking aggro.” He brandished the stun gun.

“You going to kill me?”

“No, I am not.”

“You going to rape me?”

“No.”

“Then what? Then what?” She looked at the stun gun. He put it away. Her brow knitted. “Oh, I get it.” Her voice rose. “You’re a hero. You’ll go home to your little family in fucking Chelsea and brag about how you played Dr Bernardo up north. I don’t want your money and I don’t want to eat your food. You think fish and chips and ten minutes of good society are going to make me grow up and want to be like you. You sorry bastard.”

David stood up. He did so casually, but the girl flinched. He took out his credit card. “Hold your fire. I’ll pay for your time. We’ll have a chat. I want half an hour.”

Her eyes settled on the card. They stuck. “Why didn’t you say that before? I thought you were going to kill me.”

David snorted. “You did not.”

“I don’t know what I thought,” she said, looking at her shoes.

“Would you have believed me? That I wanted a talk?”

“No. They all say that. But who says I’ll believe you now?”

David looked at her. She was so adult. “Nobody. You say. You choose. I’m going to have some chips. Maybe a coke. Lashings of salt and vinegar. You?”

“You’re weird.”

She followed him when he left, with fast, long strides to match his.

They sat in McCabe’s under off-white light. McCabe, who was Turkish, whistled behind a large counter, battering sausages, fish and burgers and frying chips. The air was heavy with grease, the floor slippery with it. The place was empty. They had taken a

table for two in the far corner. David let the girl sit so she could look out of the window. So she would feel safer. She had no reason to trust him. Between them were two unfurled portions of fish and chips. David busied himself with vinegar while the girl stared at her food.

“Eat it before it gets cold,” he said.

She bristled. “I’ll eat it when I fucking want.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Your name.”

“My name is Janine.” She took a chip reluctantly. “What’s your name?”

“My name’s David. You have a surname?”

“Yes.” She ate a few more chips. At the counter, McCabe smiled at the father and daughter sharing a meal in his little chip shop. Janine lifted the fish and tore a great bite from the end. David watched her. She chewed once, twice and swallowed. “You have a daughter don’t you?”

“Sort of. I sent her away.”

She took another bite. With her mouth full, she waved him on. “Out with it, then. You’re paying me to listen – and paying well, by the way – so get your money’s worth.”

“My daughter is called Jennifer.”

“Me and her would get on like a house on fire, right?”

“Actually I’m not sure if she’s your type.” David glanced at her guiltily and Janine, seeing his expression, laughed. Particles of fish hit his fingers. “What I mean is,” he continued, “she’s quite old now. She’s twenty.”

Janine nodded. That was obvious. “Why did you send her away?”

“I could give you facts: she was a genius, a real genius. The schools in this country couldn’t do anything for her. I decided, on a friend’s advice, to send her to a school in New York for gifted children. Sent her aged twelve. That was eight years ago. I think she works for the American government now.”

“New York. Fuck, you have money.”

He shrugged and watched, his mind idling, as a customer walked in and placed an order. It was an old man in faded jeans. “Yes, you’re right. I have money.”

“So what else could you give me?”

“Hmm?”

“You said you could give me the facts. But that’s not the whole story. Am I right?”

David ripped a chip from its sticky pile. He pointed it at her. “You know, you’re good. You could do this for a living.”

She nodded seriously. “Yes. Now what about the rest of story?”

“I...” he began, and Christ if he wasn’t near crying. He could suddenly feel his eyes, a tingling in his throat, and a juvenile sense of hopelessness. “Here we go: ‘I am not a good parent’. That’s it. That’s the whole story. Some people would spend millions on a shrink before they could say something like that.”

“You haven’t had my fee yet.”

David laughed and bounced out of his self-pity. “What about your own parents?”

“Ah, the psychiatrist cannot talk about herself. It’s a rule.”

“You have rules?”

“Of course. Let’s be professional. What happen to her mother? Did she leave you?”

David felt off-balanced. His smile weakened. “Her mother was killed a few months after she was born. There was an accident where we both worked. She died in my arms.”

“Bollocks.”

“Nope. It’s true.”

She leaned closer. Half-chewed food lay in one side of her mouth, forgotten. “Did she wake up just before she died, like in the pictures? They usually do that.”

“No. She was lying in corridor when I found her. It was dark, you know, really dark. But I found her anyway. She’d been hit on the head by something.”

“Someone?”

“Something.”

Inside, he was silent, his mind just listening dumbly to his mouth. “She was sleeping. Or rather, she seemed to be asleep. I tried to wake her but her mouth just fell open. She wasn’t breathing. I remember screaming, then someone led me out of the building. I kept thinking that she had died alone. I thought that was the worst part.”

“Hmm,” Janine said. Her fish was nearly gone. His was hardly touched. “Did you work in the World Trade Center?”

“You remember that. No. It was the year after.”

“Oh.”

“You want some more fish?”

“No thanks.”

David took his own fish and plonked it on hers. “What’s wrong with you?” she hissed. “I don’t want your fucking leftovers.”

He smiled and watched her eat it. “Stop fucking smiling,” she said, spitting fish.

“Sorry.”

She rolled her eyes. Again, so adult. Jennifer could roll her eyes like that.

“Guess what?” he said.

She stopped mid-chew. “Wha’?”

“I’m on the run from the police.”

Her relief was evident. She resumed her chewing. “I see.”

“They want me for murder.”

“They want me for shoplifting. Small world. Stop watching me. What are you, a fucking perv?”

David asked mildly, “What would you do without the word ‘fuck’?”

“That comes under the heading ‘philosophy’. I’m a street kid. Don’t you read Dickens? We’re more practical.”

“You’re –” David said, but interrupted himself.

Janine read his mind. She said, “I don’t really do it, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Have it off with people. For money. Like I thought you wanted.”

Something swept through David. Was it relief that he had been talking – playing Dr Bernardo, hero for a day – to the worst example of society’s failure, only to find that she had beaten him at his own game? She had played on his pity, eaten her meal, and now revealed the trick behind her sleight of hand.

And haven’t I done the same to her? Disguised myself as lowlife, and gotten what I wanted? A dry run at reconciliation?

“So you do what do you?” he asked.

“I lure them in and take ’em round somewhere. Back of the Horse ’n Groom. Down to the canal. Or Blackboy Road. Somewhere. Then me mates grab them and we rob them for money. Or cigarettes.” She stopped eating. “Sorry.”

David sighed and tried to push his chair from the table. It was stuck to the floor. He wormed his way out and put on his gloves. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’m going to sleep. In the morning I’ll ride on.” He leaned closer and winked. “Remember, I’m on the run.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, playing along. “I forgot. But what about your life story?”

“Life stories are boring. You should be thankful you only got the edited highlights.”

She shrugged.

David was motionless for the while. Then he said, “Janine, you want your money?”

She burped and nodded. “Oh, yeah. That. Make it a thousand.” She said it casually, too casually, ready for David to protest and rant. He did not.

“Got a card?”

She had it ready and handed it over. He connected the two and there was a little beep as the transaction was made. He gave hers back and pocketed his own. “Can I ask you something without you getting angry or saying ‘fuck’?”

“Maybe.”

He placed a gloved hand on her head. He didn’t ruffle her hair or pat her head. “Take care of yourself.”

“We’ll see.”

He walked out and Janine watched him leave. McCabe was smiling at the scene. Father and daughter eating out. He did not find it strange that the father had left without the daughter. He whistled a tune and went out back. Janine waited, picking at her fish bones, until she could wait no longer. She grabbed her card and checked the balance. Her eyes widened.

“Fucking bastardain fucker.”

David opened his rucksack and spilled the contents on his bed. Outside, it began to rain. He was glad to be warm and dry. He worried about the next day’s travelling. His coat and the rest of his clothes hung on the back of a wooden chair next to the mini desk and coffee-making utensils.

He ripped open the brown envelope. He smiled. Inside was an object the size of a bankcard but a little thicker. An Ego personal computer. There was an earpiece taped to the back. The warmth of his fingertips caused the surface to assume the shape of a woman’s face.

“Hello, Ego.”

“Who are you?”

“Professor David Proctor, at your service.”

There was a beep as his voice was identified. “No, I am at yours.”

“Oh, you.” David fitted the earpiece. “Switch to earpiece.”

“Done,” said the voice in his ear. He slid Ego into his wallet. There was some cash in envelope too. This he put into his coat’s inner pocket.

“Do you have any instructions for me, Ego?”

“Yes. Get to London Heathrow Terminal Five and open baggage locker J327.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

David walked into his bathroom and turned the taps. A trombone sounded and under-pressurised water fell into the bathtub. “Who arranged my escape?”

“I have been asked to withhold that information.”

He nodded and began to scheme. The Ego model used a so-called ‘semantic network’ to encode its information. Knowledge was stored haphazardly, with items sharing semantic connections in a great web. Thus, “cat” had a connection to “dog”, but also to “paws”, “lion” and “yacht”. Even the most efficient computer operator would find it difficult to barricade all the routes to that knowledge: connections to just one knowledge item might run into the millions. David set about probing those barricades.

“Where were you yesterday?” he asked.

Ego paused. “I was not active yesterday.”

“Think of a name, randomly.”

“Sam.”

“Why did you think of that?”

“I have no reason. That is what random means.”

“Touché . Tell me about Heathrow.”

“Heathrow Airport is the foremost centre for air travel in the United Kingdom. Last year alone –”

“Is that what you think?”

“No. I am reading verbatim from publicity material.”

“Do you love?”

“No.”

“Are you alive?”

“No.”

“Do you want to be alive?”

“I neither want nor do not want.”

“Do you have emotions?”

“No.”

“Who programmed you?”

“Dr Hilbert Nagarajan and his development team at Marquis.”

“Sing me a song.”

“Which song?”

“Daisy.”

“One moment.” There was beep and David heard a little hiss in his ear. The earpiece was picking up Ego’s attempt to access the internet via the wireless telecommunications network.

“Forget it.”

He went back to the bedroom and stowed the passport in the rucksack. Then he removed his clothes and brushed his teeth. Finally, he sank into the bath and felt the heat sizzling into his extremities. His genitals began to thaw and assume a respectable size. His fingers tingled. Muscles in his legs and back began to slacken.

“Ego, can you monitor local police frequencies?”

“Yes,” said the whisper in his ear. “They are, however, encrypted. The deciphering key changes each day at midnight. I could not decode today’s transmissions until tomorrow morning.”

“You are remarkably well informed.”

“Yes, I am.”

David sank a little lower in the bath. The brownish water washed over his stomach and lapped around his ears. He looked

again at his stomach. Certainly smaller. In all the excitement, he was losing weight. “Ego, if I make a telephone call, can I be traced?”

“An internet call would not be traced. A telephone call would be. However, internet transmissions are more vulnerable to interception. I have been given instructions to dissuade you from communicating with anybody until you have reached Heathrow Terminal Five and opened locker J327.”

David slapped the surface idly. Who was he going to call anyway? He had some friends at the university, some family in Wales, and one or two old, good friends near London. Undoubtedly, his small circle would be under surveillance. He had some acquaintances abroad at various universities in Europe and America. He could contact them safely, but what could they do from such a distance?

“Ego, how many news stories have been filed about me in the last twenty-four hours?”

“That analysis will take approximately two minutes.”

“Do it.”

He stared at the mouldy patches on the ceiling and the occasional fly. He thought about Jennifer and wondered what he would next say to her, and what she would say back, and whether they could they even talk without arguing. His mind drifted.

With his eyes closed, there was nothing to do but listen to sounds through the building’s thin walls and floor: the gurgle of hot water, footsteps, the rumble of conversation, the odd cough, the car pulling up outside.

He heard a knock at the front door. Although the ground floor was a pub, there was a separate entrance for guests. Answering

footsteps travelled across the wooden downstairs hallway. There was a creak as the door opened. David heard two men speaking. Only low-pitched sounds reached his room. He couldn't hear individual words.

One man spoke slowly and seriously. A policeman's voice. The other responded quickly and made affirmative sounds.

David stepped from the bath and towelled himself. He did not waste any time straining to hear them. He pulled on his clothes. The coat was reversible so he turned it inside out. His heart thumped like a fist on a wall: Lub-dub, lub-dub; get out, get out.

He remembered the sparkle in his eye when he had told Janine that he was on the run. He had wanted to see his own excitement reflected in her. He had felt that excitement riding down from Scotland and he had felt it in the fish and chip shop. But he had not felt it when chased by the bikers and he certainly did not feel it now. This was excitement at another level: a surging energy that was barely controllable.

He opened the rucksack and poured every loose object into the main compartment. He did not check to see to what he was putting in; he simply checked that the room was empty when he finished.

He stood by the bed. He did not dare to move because he was listening. He wanted to pick up the trail. Yes, there it was: footsteps. The low voices were moving. They were making small talk while they walked. To him? He had to be certain.

David reached the window in one stride. A police car was parked outside. Two of its wheels were on the pavement. He tried to slow his breathing. The street was well-lit and, as he watched, a car drove past. The six-metre drop was sheer. No escape from this

window. Across the street he saw a uniformed officer emerge from a small bed and breakfast, tip his hat to the landlady, and walk on.

The local police were carrying out house-to-house enquiries. In pairs. The one in David's place was still checking.

Silently, he turned off the light. With the darkness came a momentary taste of safety. The moment ended when footsteps fell on the landing outside and he heard the Welsh landlord say: "One on this landing. Bit of a character. Popped out with a Dodger not more than half an hour ago. Under-aged."

Another voice: "Is that right, sir. Come back, did he?"

The landlord: "Oh yes. Came right back."

"Did he, sir."

David shifted his weight but he could not move. He needed a plan. He could not leave via the window. The fall would hurt him badly. But he could not leave via the door.

His thoughts jammed.

Think, think.

Get out, get out.

There was knock at the door. David had fought to prepare himself, but he drew a sharp breath. The knock galvanized him. He sank to a crouch. This would make him more difficult to make out when the policeman came in. Just a second's worth of advantage.

"This is the police, sir. Open up please."

David's hand reached into his jacket pocket.

The landlord: "I bet he's hiding in there. I bet. I've got me keys."

His fingers snaked around the envelope of cash to the stungun.

The policeman, more quietly: “Go on, then. Unlock it. Don’t open it. Understand?”

David drew the stun gun and pointed.

In his ear, Ego said, “The latest story was logged at BBC News On-line –”

“Ego,” he hissed, “fucking shut up.”

“Understood.”

“Do you hear something?” asked the landlord.

The policeman did not reply. Keys jingled and one rattled nervously into the lock. It pushed his own onto the floor (Shite, why didn’t I just turn the key to block the lock? he thought, block the lock, blockthelock) and then turned. There was a pause. David imagined the two of them standing there, wondering what horrors lay behind this door, what the animal would do when cornered. He looked down and saw their motionless shadows in the gap of light under the door. The policeman would be concentrating on procedure; the landlord on each detail, to make his storytelling all the sweeter.

David raised the stun gun. It was plastic and shaped like a normal gun. He released the safety catch and the laser-sight projected a red dot on the door. His finger tightened on the trigger. If he squeezed hard enough, two barbed darts would fire at the speed of air-rifle pellets. Each would trail an insulating conducting filament back to the gun. On contact with the chest, they would lodge under the skin and unleash 50, 000 volts, 18 watts and 133 milliamps. The brochure had been quite specific.

He eased the pressure a fraction.

It was a monstrous weapon, but it had the stopping power of a high-calibre projectile firearm with one difference: the victim would survive.

The two shadows remained still.

Suddenly, a third voice erupted into the silence: "Delta Echo Two from Delta Echo Three, over."

"Go ahead Three," said the policeman. It took David long seconds to realise that the new voice had come from the policeman's radio.

"Report of a six-four in progress, end of Main street."

"Three, I'm assisting, assisting," he said.

David froze in his marksman's crouch. He couldn't believe his luck. The landlord whined, "Aren't we going in?"

The policeman hurried down the stairs. "Six-four is a rape in progress, Sam. Takes priority over a routine check."

"Oh."

The policeman's footfalls became quiet and then louder as he ran out into the street. David kept the weapon trained on the door and his eyes on the shadow of Sam, the landlord. The door was still unlocked.

Sam muttered something and began to walk slowly down the stairs. David imagined his face: a little defeated, angry, and shamed that did not have the courage to face this potential murderer alone.

David held his position for a time. It might have been a minute or a few seconds. Only then did he exhale. His fingertips tingled. His heart thumped and his head ached with hot blood. He took another breath and pocketed the gun. He thanked the Fates

for his outstanding luck and grabbed his helmet from the bed. He checked that his backpack was secure.

He walked to the window and parted the curtain with a finger. The policeman was running down the road and David felt a momentary flash of guilt. He had been ready to shoot that man, electrify him. And yet there he was running to help a woman in danger.

David went to the door and pressed his ear against it. There was no sound. He turned the handle and braced the door with his foot to dampen the noise. It opened silently on an empty corridor. He made his way downstairs. It was difficult to be silent in his hiking boots. He heard the far-off sound of a jukebox, some laughter, a breaking glass and then louder laughter. At the bottom of the stairs, he risked a glance into the bar. He saw Sam, the landlord, clapping someone on the back. He was not looking in David's direction. Lucky the man hadn't stood guard.

David took three huge steps across the entrance and slid through the exterior door. The street was deserted. He swung the helmet over his head and jogged down the road towards his bike. An inner voice kept telling him, Act natural, easy does it, but he had too much spare energy. He dipped into the alley and noted that the bike had not been moved. He glanced up at the old woman's window. 'Her Barry' had clearly not come down to teach his bike a lesson in parking.

He jumped on the back and made ready for the long ride. He did this with frequent pauses in which he listened for running footsteps or a shout of alarm. Finally, he zipped his jacket and kicked up the stand. The alley was too narrow to turn around in, so he waddled the bike backwards to the pavement.

“Ego, are you there?”

“Yes,” said the voice in his earpiece.

“Can you interface with the bike’s computer?”

“No. It is a closed system.”

“Fine. Listen, the bike computer uses a vocal input. I don’t want to get the two of you confused. From now on, I’ll refer to you by name if I’m talking to you.”

“Understood.”

David cleared his throat. Still no police. He held the brake, turned the key and pressed the ignition. The bike rumbled into life. Its windscreen rose and the suspension adapted to David’s preference. The Heads-Up Display gave him the time, his fuel load and a route map. The excitement of escape began to creep over him. He had enough petrol for about one-hundred kilometres on the straight.

“Ego, what do you think will happen when the police find out I’ve disappeared?”

“A high state of alert for all police officers, particularly the local traffic division. Records indicate that the local constabulary has one helicopter. If it locates you, the probability of reaching Heathrow is almost zero. You must find a motorway immediately to leave the area before roadblocks are set, then transfer to minor roads to avoid detection. As the roadblock containment circle becomes larger, the number of roadblocks required to make it increases hugely.”

“OK, I agree. Computer, I need to get to a motorway fast.”

Nothing happened. He clicked his tongue.

“Computer, show me the fastest route to the nearest motorway.”

The route map changed. He could be on the A1 in just under twenty minutes. It was a labelled a 'main route', not a motorway, but it was fast. The first motorway was the M18, an hour and a half to the south. He would pass through settlements called Walshford, Fairburn and Darrington. Names he would never remember. He could reach as far as Leicester without stopping for fuel.

He gunned the throttle, then let the engine idle. He released the brake. He rode slowly to the T-junction. The route map indicated that he should head in the same direction as the running policeman. That was fine. They would be inside, or down an alley.

He reached the junction and looked left. The two police officers were standing not ten feet away. They had their backs to him. Between them, being berated vigorously by one, was a little girl called Janine. Her eyes dropped down briefly and touched upon David's. Her expression did not change. David nodded his thanks.

He controlled his breathing. He turned in the road and raced away, retracing himself along Main Street. The police did not glance around.

"Bike, change colour."

The motorcycle rode through one pool of white streetlight with a silver finish. By the next, it was midnight blue.

The Magical Mystery Tour

The blackness rushed up and engulfed her. Her stomach rose. An older, wiser part of her brain began to cringe. She accelerated. She was falling too fast. She heard Hannah say, “A friend of mine was paralysed by one of those,” but he wasn’t with her. It was a memory. Dust filled her nostrils. Smoke. She was still falling. Her bladder tingled in anticipation that the equipment had not worked, that she was going to hit the ground

(spin, measure, snip)

fast enough to break into pieces, mirror fragments.

She saw a circle of light below her. The universe was moving but she was not. She began to (spin) slow. The decelerator squealed and the harness bit into her pelvis. Gravity reached from the darkness and clawed her down.

Garrel said, “You took your time.”

She opened her eyes. She could (measure) see her feet centimetres from the ground. She pinched the decelerator. It sprang open and the (snip) rope was released.

She landed without grace, but upright. A quick pat confirmed that her gun was still in place.

“I was examining the shaft,” she said half-heartedly.

Garrel began to creep away. His steps were slow and high to avoid the debris. “Your light. It has three levels of brightness. It will go through them in the order when you tap your helmet.

Understood?”

Saskia tapped three times. The beam became very bright and localised. The spot stained her vision. She looked around.

This had once been part of a corridor. It was a long, grey chamber, almost completely choked with remains. She saw corners of furniture, computer equipment, filing cabinets and paper. Mostly paper. As she moved forward, the shadows they cast moved backward. The air was stale.

“What happened down here?”

“Fire. Proctor tried to clear everyone out. The ventilation is poor. Don’t be surprised if we suffocate.”

“Understood. May I use my recorder now?”

He turned his light in her direction. She moved her head to protect her night vision. “Your what?”

“It is simply a recording device. It takes pictures.”

“Go on, then. Just be careful where you step. Don’t touch anything unless I say so. There’s a good chance it might cave-in again.”

“May we see the lab?”

Garrel stopped again. Saskia could not see his face. “Of course. We’d already be inside if I hadn’t stopped to answer your questions.”

“A good point. In future, perhaps you could try walking and talking at the same time.”

She heard an intake of breath as his formulated a reply, but it was followed by silence. Saskia smiled.

Immediately before them was a ragged empty rectangle that had once held a door. Garrel stepped through and Saskia followed. Puddles splashed under their feet. The room was even darker than the corridor. It was so black that she had no sense of its true dimensions. The torches didn’t help because the dust and smoky remains made the light scatter like headlights in fog. Garrel

stepped aside and she saw a great, smashed tank. The sharp edges sparkled.

“What was in there?”

“That,” Garrel replied, at length, “was a liquid storage device. A prototype.”

“What did it store?”

He laughed. “A whole world. A world in a fish tank.”

“I do not understand.”

He turned towards the right. “Proctor’s old office was in there. That was where the first bomb went off.”

She took a picture. The recorder charged and clicked. There was no visible flash. It used an infra-red bulb. “It must have been a very localised explosion,” she mused. Something crunched under her foot. She glanced down and saw the glassy eye of a flattened rat. She stepped back. She bumped into an overturned chair. Her heart seemed to grow large and hot in her chest.

Garrel continued obliviously, “It was big enough to kill.”

“I see,” she said automatically. Not the rat, the bomb.

Garrel shone his light in her direction. The glare blinded her. “You know, we have a saying in England: ‘The murderer always returns to the scene of the crime.’ Shimoda’s body was in that room along with the bomb. He still is. Pieces of him, anyway.”

Saskia tried to ensure that her light pointed at Garrel’s face. She sensed a change in his mood. Perhaps he thought she was scared. Perhaps he was right. She remembered crying in the back of a taxi after Simon, her boyfriend, had thrown the pasta pot at her face. The boyfriend that never was. “Are you trying to scare me, Andrew?”

He laughed and turned away. She could not see his expression. “Where is the interface with the computer?” she asked.

“Over here.”

He clambered across the room towards a doorway in the left wall. The plaintive cries of the rats became more audible. So did their smell. Why were there so many? What did they have to eat down here? Each other? She stepped through the gap in the wall.

The room was small. There was a certain power here: it was a room in a room in a room, buried deep in the earth. It had lain in wait for twenty years before Bruce Shimoda arrived. Saskia was struck by the thought that, after she and Garrel completed their underground tour, and this place was capped, its silence would be preserved and its power – the fear it could generate, just this small, concrete-lined room – would grow again. An Egyptian tomb would feel the same.

“It has a creepy feel, don’t you agree?”

Saskia cleared her throat. “It is certainly dusty.”

“Look over here.” He trained his light on the wall to their immediate right. There were two alcoves. On her first sweep, Saskia had mistaken them for shower cubicles. The transparent doors were broken. One was discoloured. She sniffed and there it was: dried blood. “That’s where Proctor killed Caroline Benson, the soldier assigned guard duty.”

She walked tentatively to the booth and peered in. She saw only pieces of meat. There were no impurities. Caroline had died naked. She took another picture. “Tell me how she died.”

“The computer interface works like a dust-storm,” Garrel said. She was struck by the casual interest in his voice. He was not, she realised, the technophobe she had taken him for. “It uses

tiny flying robots to simulate surfaces. If you change the arrangement, you change the apparent surface. A small army of those little robots could form a very solid edge. A sharp edge. Or very many sharp edges. That's how she died. There were safety mechanisms built into the program. They were turned off. For technical reasons, Shimoda did not have the power to do that. Proctor did. He turned that booth into a giant blender."

Saskia nodded. There was another smell. Decay.

"That what you want?" asked Garrel.

"Please?"

"You wanted to get into Proctor's head. Are you close enough? You can almost smell him, can't you?"

"I-I would," she stammered, "I would like to leave now."

"It has atmosphere, doesn't it? My little Magical Mystery Tour."

"I would like to leave." Her voice was firmer. Her hand rested on her gun. "Now."

He laughed. She saw, despite the darkness, that his expression hardly changed. This man was strange. But what power did he really have? What was he compared to the Angel of Death?

"Of course," he said. "Let's go."

They retraced their steps through the debris. When they reached the corridor, Garrel was quick to attach himself to a rope. "Going up is more fun than coming down," he said. He connected the decelerator and climbed upwards in a caterpillar-like motion, alternately grasping the rope his hands and feet. After a few metres he looked down at her. "Are you coming?"

“Yes. I just need to check my recorder took those pictures. I don’t want to get to the surface and find there was an error.”

“Well, don’t stay too long. I heard some noises just now.”

“What kind of noises?”

“Just noises.”

He caterpillared upwards. His breath echoed down the shaft and sounded close. She was alone. She willed herself to picture a summer’s day and her fear withdrew. On with the job. She gazed at the luminous screen on her recorder. The first picture, being the last taken, showed Caroline’s remains. It was monochrome and crisp. It showed every detail and more. The room had contained an upturned filing cabinet, three broken chairs and large chunks of masonry. She had not seen them. In fact, she had imagined that part of the room to be empty. Next, she checked the picture of the main laboratory. Next, the corridor shot.

The blood fell from her head. She did not collapse quickly. She fought hard. She sank into a curtsey.

No, she thought. Impossible.

The picture showed the corridor – this corridor, right now – in almost perfect brilliance. She saw wreckage, charcoaled furniture and loose paper. But on the wall immediately to the left of the doorway, someone had written a message.

Impossible.

It had been intended for her. It had been written in German. It had been written on the wall where she took the infra-red photograph, where it appeared white on the grey surface. Carefully, she played her torch over the wall. Nothing. She looked again at the recorder. The text was clearly visible in the picture.

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She swallowed. The writer had used a form of paint that was visible only in the infra-red portion of the spectrum.

The message read:

Das Kribbeln in meinen Fingerspitzen lässt mich ahnen,
es scheint ein Unglück sich anzubahnen.

Her heart sucked and pushed. She could hear its valves. She looked back at the text. Translated into English, it would read:

The pricking in my fingertips lets me say
(it seems) bad luck is on the way.

It was a translation of a line from Shakespeare's play, Macbeth. By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes. It was horribly familiar. And yet she had no memory of the play itself. Macbeth was a play, wasn't it? Didn't it have three witches? The Fates? Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

Spin, measure, snip.

A tear ran down one cheek. Her mind had bent under two personalities (though she felt whole) and now, like an overloaded bridge, it had snapped.

"No," she said firmly. The word echoed. The darkness sent it back. "I am not mad."

The message had been written by Proctor. That was certain. He knew, somehow, that she would have been sent on his trail and had, perhaps, picked upon a distant memory of her past life – a

memory that she could not yet fully recall. Plus, he knew she was German. That was all. That explained it.

She wiped away the tear.

There was one more element to the graffiti. A long, white arrow pointing to the bottom right corner of the frame. She held the recorder in her line of sight and tried to match the image with the wall. She looked at the area indicated by the arrow. There was a piece of masonry.

Leave now, said a voice. It may be a bomb. Or something poisonous. Remember the box that your new secretary carried. Remember the neat little hole it put in the office window.

Saskia accepted the concerns and dismissed them. She was a detective. It was her wont to detect.

The masonry turned out to be a blackened piece of foam insulation. It flipped easily. Underneath was a small rock and, underneath that, a plastic folder. Saskia took another picture and placed her recorder a few metres away. If it did explode, her would-be rescuers might know what had happened.

The rock lifted easily. It was merely a paperweight. The transparent folder was grimy but still sealed. Inside was a single white paper envelope. It was impossible to tell how long the folder had lain there. There some words on the exterior.

“Saskia!” called a voice. “Are you alright? I’m...I’m coming down.”

It was Hannah. She remembered his fear of heights.

“Stay there, Scottie. I am coming now.”

She concealed the folder inside her jacket and dropped the recorder into another pocket. She reattached her decelerator and began a slow caterpillar creep upwards. The hairs rose on her

neck. If something from the blackness wanted to grab her, this was its last chance.

Nothing touched her. She looked up. Water droplets fell past her. They sparkled. She looked down. Three metres from the floor. She was safe.

Saskia arrived at the Bed and Breakfast early in the evening. Hannah drove on to Edinburgh. Mrs McMurray, who used to be lawyer, was married to Barry, couldn't eat such a thing as meat in the morning and who thought Saskia looked very, very tired, gave Saskia her key. Saskia thanked the woman bluntly and walked heavily to her room. She had fantasied about collapsing on the hotel bed and sleeping dreamlessly, but her mind had not spent its momentum. It turned over still, rolling facts around, seeing how they mixed, how they fitted. The death of Caroline Benson. The death of Bruce Shimoda. The bomb. The bomber. The research project. The centre. Back to the beginning: the death of Caroline Benson...

On the pillow, her notebook was open to her caricature of Garrel. Near her feet, on the edge of the bed, was the dusty envelope in its plastic wallet. On the face of the envelope were the words: 'Do not open this envelope'. It remained unopened. She rose five minutes later, she needed a cigarette, she couldn't have one, she wanted to sleep, she swore.

She thought about the envelope. She turned away from it.

Saskia slid off the bed and walked to the window in one stride. She gazed into the street. The lighting was white, not

yellow. The occasional car drove past on the left, not the right. Were it not for those details, she might have been looking from the window of her Brussels apartment on a quiet, cold night.

It was not homesickness she felt. Brussels was not home. It was her current residence.

She felt cast adrift. The dizzy spells were the steady up and down of her raft over each ocean wave. The fear was the threat of drowning. The frustration was the hunger, the thirst for knowledge about herself.

Murderer, murderer, she thought. By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.

The witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

Spin, measure, snip.

The window panes were black. They were touched with the white impressions of the scene outside. The impressions merged and snapped into focus. A human face.

Saskia stepped back. Her calves met the edge of the bed. In that first moment, she did not see the face as a reflection, but a visitation. Something wicked. Her right hand reached over to her left hip and, in the blink of her murdering eyes, the gun was in her hand.

She stood strongly: her legs slightly apart, the gun in her right hand, her left cupping the handle for stability. She was utterly comfortable. She could turn in any direction with the confidence that her eyes and the barrel of gun would favour the same object. Time would slow. She would react faster than her adversary because she was relaxed.

There was a knock at the door.

Saskia screamed and turned in mid air. The door opened and Mrs McMurray, the elderly proprietor who had asked her not to smoke, there's a dear, dropped her tray of tea and thin British biscuits.

“Frau McMurray –” Saskia began. The right words were stuck in her throat. “I am...so sorry,” she said finally. She braced herself for hysteria.

“Why, my dear girl,” Mrs McMurray gasped. Her mouth was clearly on autopilot, because her eyes were glazed with horror and roamed independently. “I’m very sorry. I should’ve knocked, should I not.”

Saskia was confused. Why was she apologising? “The tea,” she said weakly.

“Aye. Look at that. I’ll get that away.”

But she stayed exactly where she was.

Saskia smiled. It took some effort. “Don’t worry about the gun. It isn’t loaded. I was just oiling it. It needs maintenance like that. From time to time.”

Ah, but it is loaded, she thought. Fancy a snip, Frau McMurray?

She put the gun on the bed near the pillow. She said, “Here, then. You clean the mess and I shall make us a fresh pot of tea.”

Mrs McMurray brightened. Her eyes had never left the gun. “That’s a fine idea. We’ll have a cup of tea.”

Saskia walked slowly out of the room and down the brightly-carpeted stairs, past the china figurines and plastic ducks flying up the wall. Her heart rate dropped with each step. The noise of a television became louder. She remembered the ghostly reflection and decided that Mrs McMurray had been right. She needed sleep.

Why was she so nervous? Again, she thought of the envelope on the bed. Again, her mind turned away. Not yet.

Mrs McMurray. Walking into a room like that she got what she deserved. She marvelled again at the therapeutic powers of British tea. What Mrs McMurray really needed was -

A bullet?

She froze on the stairs.

Is that what she needs, Frau Brandt? Spin, measure, and...snip!

Saskia cleared her throat and continued walking. That voice was just her conscience. Had to be. But she remembered the words of Frank Stone when he had spoken to her in the park: "Your own pattern is not really destroyed by the new, alien pattern – it's kind've knocked sideways."

Was it her real mind rising from its subconscious swamp? She could not be sure. One thing was clear, however. If she even suspected that she could lose her new mind to her old one, then that gun would find itself pointed at her temple.

The final murder, said a voice. Snip.

Breaking the Code

Saturday, 16th September 2023

At 9 a.m. on Saturday morning, one week into her career, Saskia found herself being driven across Edinburgh with Hannah. Their driver had the radio on. She didn't recognise a single song. Hannah started his report. There had been a sighting the night before. Proctor had checked into a hotel in Northallerton, two-hundred and thirty kilometres from Edinburgh and one-hundred and sixty kilometres from the downed glider in Belford. Hannah had been keen to go there, but not Saskia. Her instinct told her that she should not waste time driving to Belford. Hannah shrugged. Local police and some officers from the Edinburgh team were on the case. They were competent.

Hannah continued his report. As Saskia had suspected, there was little useful evidence at the scene. The glider had been discovered by a farmer. It was near an isolated, empty equipment shed. The remains of a laptop computer had been found: a generic Korean model, available from hundreds of outlets nationwide. It had self-destructed. A wider search revealed motorbike tracks. A forensic SOCO, Scene of Crime Officer, had reported that there were four bikes. The farmer had no clue. They were not his. He owned two trail bikes and they were kept in a garage at the main farm. They were untouched.

“What about the hotel?”

“Well, late last night, a constable in Northallerton reported the flight of a man who matched Proctor's description. He had

checked into the hotel under the name Harrison. He was moments from being arrested when the constable was called away on a rape-in-progress, which was found to be a false alarm. The constable had abandoned the scene and, when he returned some twenty minutes later, following a cup of tea at a place called McCabe's –"

"Donner Wetter," Saskia exclaimed. "The English and their narcotic tea."

"– following that," continued Hannah, "he found that Proctor had vanished. He had used a legitimate credit card to pay for the accommodation. The name was David Harrison. The number was traced to a Mr David Anthony Pearson, formerly of Fife and life. He's dead."

"What else?"

Hannah frowned at his handheld computer's screen. "It's so much easier to read paper." He cleared his throat. "House-to-house enquiries turned up Mrs Taome Gallagher. Tay to her friends. Bit of a wind-bag by the sounds of it. She spoke to a man matching Proctor's description around the time he checked in. According to the credit card people, that was 6:02 p.m. Said he was riding a shiny, chrome motorbike and wanted to park in her alleyway. We have an APB on him."

"Ay pee bee?"

"All Points Bulletin. The description is released nationally."

Saskia stared at the shops flashing by her window. They were approaching some traffic lights. "I thought the investigation was intended to be more secret."

“It was.” He shrugged. “But we all agreed and the guv said he was fed up working with one hand tied behind his back. Anyway, they can’t fire all of us.”

“English has some nice expressions,” Saskia said, partly to herself. “Does Proctor’s bike fit with the tracks found next to the glider?”

“Yes, but what about the other tracks? My guess would be that he was met by a group of people. His team. They gave him some supplies and then rode away.”

Saskia shook her head. “No. I think that would be a waste of effort. According to the abducted minister, the glider was computer controlled. Proctor’s benefactor knew it would land there. Why not put all the supplies in the shed?”

Hannah consulted his notes. “Dunno. About the glider being computer controlled, I’m not convinced. How reliable is the minister’s statement? She got thumped on the head. You should have interviewed her. Checked her out.”

She waved her hand. They pulled away from the traffic lights. “No. I will get my information from you. I want to concentrate on Proctor’s destination. We will find him that way. The other information is...it makes my reasoning cloudy. But I do think that the glider was computer controlled. The sudden increase in its weight when Proctor was pulled into the air would have made flight very difficult. I do not think we should search for a pilot.”

“Well, you’re the expert.”

Saskia looked at him to see if he was joking. His eyes were fixed on the computer screen. He was trying not to smile. She flicked his thigh with the back of her hand.

“Ow!”

“How many churches in Scotland have a female minister?”

“Not sure. Not many.”

“Yes. Therefore, not many churches from which the fake minister could choose. She was constrained again by the proximity to research centre. Anything further away would have aroused suspicion”

“You’re not wrong.”

Saskia paused. Again, she gazed through the window. The banality of Edinburgh’s streets settled her mind. Think. What are the important questions? “Where else was the card used?”

“Two filling stations between Belford and Northallerton.”

She drummed his fingers on her knees. “Do they have cameras?”

Hannah shook his head. “We checked. He chose little one-pump jobs. Those are quiet places. He must be using minor roads. One or two lads remember seeing him, but they can’t give a good description. They say his bike was chrome. Maybe some kind of trail bike.”

“So. The trail bike. Probably the same bike he used to ride away from the glider.”

“Yes.”

“OK. Back to last night. You said there was an accusation of rape? Subsequently falsified?”

“I came over the radio just as the officer was about to interview Proctor.”

“That is convenient. In Germany we say somebody has ‘cried wolf’.”

“Here too.”

“Who was the woman? Do we have any information about her?”

“No. She wouldn’t give her name. Anyway, she was just a kid. Truscott – the reporting officer – said she looked to be on the wrong side of ten.”

Saskia nodded slowly. Hannah said nothing and Saskia remained silent. Just before they reached the Special Incident Unit, Saskia said to him, “Scottie, if you had heard about this escape from a friend, what would you think? If you heard that this man had been pulled away from a hillside attached to a glider?”

“Me? Och, I’d say it was something out of a cartoon.”

Saskia felt a memory move, like a baby’s kick. “Me too.”

They had arrived.

David had reached the M1 and ridden steadily until Northallerton was far behind him. He had turned off and entered the countryside, a maze of lanes and high hedgerows. The lights of Sheffield coloured the western sky. He located a quiet ditch and rolled the bike to the bottom. He let it tip into the high nettles. He collapsed and lay against it with his head against the muffler for warmth. He opened his visor a fraction but did not remove the helmet. It was nearly 9 p.m. He closed his eyes and awoke eight hours later. The night had stolen his heat, his neck was stiff and he couldn’t look left. Morning mist rolled into the ditch. The sky was grey and close. Small birds sang. He lifted his helmet and shivered.

He defecated in the bushes, crouching and embarrassed though there was nobody for miles. He returned and opened the

rucksack. The passport and driver's licence were still there. Both were cards fitted with smart chips. The passport had an additional wallet with pages for immigration stamps. All the documents were in the name of Mr David Greenspoon. He was a nondescript, average-looking man in every sense. It would be as easy to copy his appearance as it would be difficult to remember it.

Greenspoon's birth date was David's own, but there was no other biographical information, so David had invented his life story and memorised it.

He dropped the helmet over his head. He felt the warm, spongy interior and a moment of claustrophobia. He made his ears comfortable and tied the strap. He was tired. His eyes watered, though they felt dry, and his kidneys hurt. He pushed the bike up the bank but it was too heavy. They spent thirty seconds in an angry waltz.

"Fuck this," he shouted. He jumped on, gunned the engine, and rocketed out like a good bunker shot. Birds flew from their nests in protest. They watched him tear down the road. They watched him return twenty minutes later for his rucksack.

Hannah led Saskia through the building. He stopped to talk to the occasional friend. Saskia did her job well. She acted with interest, smiled, ignored the sideways looks at Hannah. The SIU was on the third floor. They passed no uniformed officers. This was a division of the Criminal Investigation Division, who wore no uniforms.

Saskia learned that the hunt for Proctor had been divided into 'cells'. One cell worked on one problem: a 'line of enquiry', in

CID terminology. Cells were forbidden to communicate laterally. This rankled with most officers. It smelled of bureaucracy. It tacitly questioned their loyalty and professionalism. Only nominated officers such as DI Hannah, acting as a liaison between CID and the Continental European FIB, were permitted an overview of the cells. The 'geographic' cells were involved in the investigation of the three crime scenes: South Parish Church, the glider landing area at Belford, and Proctor's hotel at Northallerton. There were also a number of 'abstract' cells.

An abstract cell was working on the encrypted transmission that Proctor made prior to his appearance at the hotel. Saskia wanted to check their progress. The office was large and windowless. It was stunningly cold. Two coffee makers babbled away in a corner. Steam boiled from them like dry ice in a bad horror film. Saskia was surprised by their equipment. The computer displays were old CRT boxes. She remembered the state of the art equipment in her office: a voice controlled, social-interface computer with a parallel processing engine. Here, not one piece of equipment was less than fifteen years old. Apart from the coffee machine. Priorities.

Hannah clapped his hands. "Hello, boys and girls."

The occupants turned in their chairs. One was a short, dark-skinned man with glasses. Another was a rather plump, attractive woman. The last was very tall man with his hair scraped into a ponytail. All of them wore coats. Saskia's face was blankly benign, but a ponytail would never have been permitted at the FIB.

"Allow me introduce a liaison officer from Brussels –"

"Germany, originally," she corrected, with a smile.

" – called Detective Saskia Brandt."

She raised a hand and wagged the fingers. Nothing happened. Eventually, the man with glasses offered a nod in reverse, as though he was pointing his chin at her. His expression was bovine. Nothing else happened.

“Who is in charge?” asked Saskia. This provoked a response.

“Me, Paul Besson,” said the man who had nodded. The others swivelled back to their consoles.

Hannah and Saskia walked over. She asked tersely, “So, have you decoded the transmission? Give me a report.”

“No we haven’t. It was a standard videophone transmission between here and America, possibly the West coast area or the Mid-West. It ran for about two minutes. There were two people involved.”

Hannah’s eyes were glassy. Saskia guessed that computing was not his forte. But was she an expert? Perhaps, because her next question was natural: “They were encrypted at source?”

“Yes,” said Besson. Abruptly, he became animated. “I know what you’re thinking: that Proctor’s side might have been picked up by a radio hack. They do listen.”

Besson mumbled. She had to remember what he said wait for her understanding to filter through. At length, Saskia said, “I am sure they do.”

“Let’s get some coffee and I’ll tell you about it,” Besson said. He stood up and walked over to one of the babbling machines. Saskia exchanged a glance with Hannah. Yes, his face said, he’s a maverick. Give him time.

Saskia remembered a nice English expression, but she had no opportunity to say it: Time is a luxury we cannot afford.

“Listen, Paul, we really appreciate this effort.”

“Not a problem, DI Hannah.”

They were standing by the machine. Saskia watched Besson make the coffee. He frowned with concentration. He seemed to be running through a mental checklist, picking up objects as they came to mind: cups, sugar, milk. Then she twigged. “You’re not with the police, are you, Paul?”

Besson gave her an owlish stare. “I was. Then I hit some trouble. I’m on a two-day release.”

Hannah put in, “He’s a non-profit hacker.”

“What did you do, Paul?” asked Saskia. He was pouring the coffee and his arm twitched. She wondered if interrupting him at such a crucial time had been a good idea.

“The multi-nationals,” Besson said to Saskia. He whispered it confidentially, as though that told her all she needed to know.

“The multi-nats?” she prompted. Besson nodded and handed her a coffee. He had added milk, but she sipped anyway.

“I diverted about a million dollars of their funds to various charities. African charities.” He added proudly, “I’m African.”

“Good for you,” she said, smiling.

Hannah grunted. It was an ambiguous noise, sarcastic or neutral depending on the listener. Besson thrust a mug of coffee at him so that some of it spilled onto the floor. It was black. “Thank you, Paul.”

“No problem.” Besson slurped the coffee and smacked his lips. He looked around. Then he remembered his report. “I was going to tell you about that transmission. You know anything about cryptography, Agent Brandt?”

“No,” she said.

“Fine.” He dropped his cup on a nearby desk to free his hands. They chopped and patted the air. “We’re talking English, right?”

“Right,” she said.

“In order for you to decode what I’m saying, you need to know the rules of English. By the same token, I need to know them too so that I can encode the message properly.” He made fists and shook them once. “The rules are the key. If they are wrong, then the message may only be partially understood. More likely it won’t be understood at all.”

“Fine so far.”

Besson looked into the distance for inspiration. In the pause, Saskia gave Hannah a little nod. They swapped coffees.

Saskia said, “Proctor’s transmission, Paul. Why is it so problematic?”

“Right,” Hannah interjected, “you can forget that name right now. I mean it.”

Besson folded his arms and giggled. “You did bad.”

Saskia looked defiantly at them both. “I do not agree with your superiors’ policy. And they have no control over my behaviour.”

“I like your attitude, Agent Brandt,” Besson said.

“All the same,” said Hannah, “we’ll keep things on a need-to-know basis where possible.”

Besson’s smile faded. His mind had already returned to his briefing on cryptography. “You see,” he said, “simple secret codes that apply the same rule to each letter, one after the other, are very old, and not so good because they can be easily cracked. The Romans and the Ancient Egyptians used those kinds of schemes,

or 'ciphers'. Because they are regularly applied to the same document, they lead to regularities in the product – the coded transmission. That is, any intercepted message will contain clues about the cipher, even when it appears to be scrambled. Proctor's transmission doesn't use that method. We'd have been surprised if it did." Besson gestured to the other people in the room. "We would have cracked it before now." He smiled and clicked his fingers. "Do you remember the Enigma code?"

Saskia frowned and looked at Hannah. He shook his head. "No," she said.

"The Germans used it to encode military transmissions during the Second World War. The cool thing about the Enigma cipher was that it changed itself with each letter of the transmission. The odds against breaking it were 150 million million to one. But it was cracked."

"How?" asked Hannah.

"Simple. It was systematic. It was predictable. With modern computers we could break it easily. But if there is no system, then there is a real problem. I have a feeling that Proctor's code falls into that category. I think it's a one-time pad. Unbreakable."

Hannah raked a hand through his grey hair. "Come on, how can it be unbreakable?"

"Easy. Just remove the systematicity."

"What?" asked Saskia.

"We get rid of the pattern. Without the pattern, the chances of breaking the code are nearly zero. It would be like rolling a million dice and getting a six every time. I mean, really low. Unlike the Enigma code, there is no system behind it. That means it's unpredictable. With Enigma, if you could work out the starting

arrangement of the connecting wires and the position of the rotors on the machine itself, the cipher would be entirely predictable from then on. But the method we're using here, a one-time pad, has no pattern. The sender has a copy of the huge cipher booklet needed to encode a message, and the receiver has a copy. Once used, they are never used again. Unbreakable."

Hannah adjusted his tie. "Let's just hope there was nothing important in the transmission, then."

Saskia shook her head. "No. I think that message is vitally important."

Hannah opened his mouth then shut it again. He took her elbow and walked her away from Besson, who looked at his shoes. "Why?" he asked.

"Proctor gets a call moments before he walks into the West Lothian Centre with a bomb. Did he receive instructions? Or was it the last message of a man who expected to die? In either case, we must know the person he was talking to. There is good chance that the second party will have arranged his escape. Perhaps they are waiting for him."

"Maybe you're right."

"It feels right."

"That 'gut instinct' of yours?"

"Yes." She smiled and called Besson over. "You say it is unbreakable. I want you break it. It is critical to the investigation."

Besson trembled "Kay," he said.

They used four computers simultaneously. Though each had a CRT monitor, the computers were not as elderly as Saskia had

feared. They had processing chips arranged in parallel so that, as a group, they could perform a huge number of calculations in a fraction of the time. “Of course,” said Besson, “it will take a vast number of calculations to test a single cipher. We just don’t know. Right now the computers are trying random combinations. We could sit here for years.”

“Yes,” Saskia agreed. “You said that the one-time pad would be a large list of numbers.”

“If we were talking about a text message it would be large. But we’re talking about a broadband audio-video transmission: good quality visual image which changes twenty-five frames a second, and two sound tracks. That’s before we even consider the format.”

“Format?”

“Format. If we get it wrong, it would be like mixing up the metric system with imperial. Even if we cracked the cipher, we wouldn’t know it was right.”

“So the list of numbers for the cipher would be very large. What if Proctor used...a telephone book?”

Besson pouted thoughtfully. He shrugged. “That would be a start. But telephone books are systematic and have a limited range of possible numbers. When you limit the range, you limit the complexity, and you make it easier for a cracker.”

Hannah sighed. “Listen, people,” he said. “We’re not talking about Nazi HQ sending out the order to fire torpedoes.”

Saskia nodded and sipped her coffee. “Yes. Good idea. Let us wriggle this through.”

“Hello?” asked Hannah testily.

“I mean, let us work it out by returning to the facts. Firstly, Proctor is not a criminal in the classic sense. I mean, he has a criminal objective but, like most terrorists, he is likely to be politically or otherwise principled.”

“Some might disagree with you, but go on,” said Hannah.

“Second, he has never sent an encrypted transmission. True?”

“Dunno,” said Besson. “But he could send coded emails pretty easily using an undisclosed email address and check his email from any computer worldwide in complete anonymity. There are probably over a billion email addresses used for that purpose worldwide. And, of course, there’s physical mail.”

“That is correct. Now, let us hypothesise that Proctor did not intend to encrypt this transmission.”

Besson became pensive. Hannah snorted and folded his arms. “Eh?”

“Tell me: who sent the transmission?”

“Who? Proctor.”

“Fine, Scottie. Why do you say that?”

“Well –”

Besson clicked his fingers. “You’re right. We grabbed the transmission on the basis of a surveillance tape of Proctor talking in his car. The timing was verified, we worked out the service provider, then sent a request to acquire the raw data. We don’t know who initiated the call. We know nothing. We just have several gigabytes of scrambled crap that was received and transmitted by Proctor at that time.”

Hannah looked at both of them. “What are you saying? Someone sent a message to Proctor?”

Saskia nodded. “My gut feeling, Scottie, is that Proctor would not have waited until he reached the West Lothian Centre –”

Hannah groaned and pointed at Besson. “And you can forget you heard that, too.”

“Natch.”

“– My point,” Saskia continued, “is that he knew he would be under surveillance. It is a former government installation with a security breach. Why would he encrypt a transmission and then allow people to see clearly that he is making it? This would counteract the goal of encryption: concealment. But if he had made the call on the way to Edinburgh, nobody would know.”

Hannah nodded. “OK, I’ll buy that.”

She paused to work out the likely meaning of his idiom. “You are too kind. So,” she said, raising her voice so that everyone in the room could hear, “we need to determine the names of any individuals, perhaps of a mathematical persuasion, who may have contacted David Proctor, an Oxford professor, at that time of transmission. Full personal details on each.” She pointed at the woman called Charlotte. “You look for family.” She pointed at the tall man with the pony tail. “You check for friends.”

Hannah gave her an approving nod. Saskia smiled. Perhaps Jobanique’s faith had been well-placed after all.

“What shall I do?” asked Besson.

“Keep trying. You may become lucky.”

Saskia stood with Hannah under a huge glass awning at the front of the building. It was raining. Before them, a great lawn spread out either side of a gravel path. It led to some steps, and

then down to a road where the traffic was gridlocked. She had no idea what part of Edinburgh they were in. The rain became a downpour.

Hannah broke the silence. "This is September. Monsoon season."

She nodded. "Do you have a spare cigarette?"

"Aye. Could you not buy your own?"

"No. It would shatter the illusion that I do not smoke."

He took out a packet of cigarettes and knocked two examples into his hand. He offered one to her. She touched it and

—

The lighter.

The feeling that returned: déjà vu.

Where had she seen that lighter?

She saw a long thread, glistening as though it had been oiled. She saw a pair of scissors yawn around the thread and then stop. She felt a deep longing to protect the thread. It was too precious to cut. Once cut, never remade.

She saw a hawk.

The hawk that returned.

Her eyes closed. The scissors and thread vanished.

She heard laughter. She smelled cigarette smoke. The flick of a card being laid on a table. More laughter. And then the laughter stopped. The smoke changed from the thin blue wisps (cigarettes) to thick black plumes (furniture, wood, the office, my gift, the mannequins).

"Saskia?"

She opened her eyes. Hannah was holding her shoulders. She heard the rain again. The cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"Yes. I felt...dizzy."

"Migraine?"

"No. It is not that."

"Do you want something to eat?"

The questions forced her to take a step back. "No, Scottie, I'm fine. Give me a cigarette."

He did so and lit it. She glanced tentatively at the lighter but it was just a lighter. Its power was spent. The power to trigger hallucinations.

No. They were memories.

'Your personality isn't overwritten by the wetwire chip. It's kind've knocked sideways,' she heard Frank Stone (who had killed a Polish fisherman) say.

They watched people walk in and out of the building, watched them curse the rain, hunch themselves, and run. After a moment, Hannah said, "You muttered something."

"What?" Her fingers were trembling. She took a drag and held the smoke.

"Sounded German: ootah."

Ute.

"A girl's name."

"Mean anything to you?" he asked.

"No, Scottie."

Hannah nodded. His eyes were narrow because of the smoke. "But you know she's a girl."

At 10 a.m., Saskia called a meeting. They sat in a circle. Hannah stood outside it, leaning against a desk. Saskia crossed her legs and nodded to Paul Besson who, like Charlotte and Henry, the man with the ponytail, seemed tired and distant.

“I’ve got nothing so far,” said Besson. “The computer could run for ten years and not crack the code.”

“Fine.” Saskia turned to Charlotte. “What about Proctor’s family?”

“His parents are dead. He has an uncle living in Australia that turned up after a fairly invasive search. I’d bet that they don’t know of each other’s existence. His daughter, Jennifer, left for America four years ago, aged sixteen. She attended a school for gifted children in New York and graduated aged eighteen with two undergraduate degrees: theology and physics. Her current whereabouts are unknown.”

Hannah stirred. “What do you mean, unknown?”

Charlotte folded her arms and said, testily, “Exactly that, sir. She has no bank account, passport, no American social security number, insurance of any kind, no bonds or shares, nothing. Her records would lead anyone to the conclusion that she died aged eighteen. Except that there is no death registration.”

“That’s unbelievable. I couldn’t wipe my arse without a computer somewhere going ‘beep’.”

“Indeed,” said Charlotte to Saskia.

Saskia nodded. It made perfect sense. “What about Proctor, Charlotte? From 2001 to 2003. Are there any similarities with his daughter’s situation?”

Charlotte did not need to examine her notes. “Yes. During that period every record of Proctor’s comings-and-goings are blank. Just like his daughter.”

“In that time,” said Saskia. “Proctor was the member of a high security establishment. The West Lothian Centre.”

Charlotte said, “Hmm,” and Hannah made a quiet wounded sound.

“So, you think we have a daughter who entered her father’s profession,” he said. “You think she came back to England?”

“Well, she could still be in America,” said Besson. “You know, they’ve got these secret research places everywhere. Area 51 is most likely. That’s in Nevada.”

“Thanks,” said Hannah, heavy on the sarcasm.

Saskia ignored him. “Good. I think we should concentrate on the daughter.”

“Are you sure?” Hannah asked. “We should cover all the evidence. Poor Henry here hasn’t even spoken yet.”

Henry opened his mouth, but did not utter a word. Instead he pointed to Hannah and nodded. Everyone but Saskia laughed.

“Yes,” she said loudly. “This is what I want to do. If we run down a ‘blind alley’, then we can retrace our footsteps. But I want to emphasise, that speed is primary. Proctor is moving. He is going somewhere, perhaps to a rendezvous. We need to go where he is going and I am certain that this transmission is critical.”

Hannah shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“Right. Who is the best media analyst?”

Nobody moved. Slowly, heads turned towards Besson. He raised his arm. “Me,” he said.

“Good. Everything is clear. Charlotte and Henry, I want you to locate Jennifer Proctor. You have one hour. Paul, Scottie – I have an idea.”

It was lunchtime. Paul and Saskia sat in front of large computer with two displays. The left-hand screen showed a complicated array of image processing tools. The other, nearest Saskia, displayed the image of Proctor’s car. After three phone calls to Colonel Garrel, who was now in London, Saskia had finally obtained permission to review the Park Hotel surveillance tapes. Hannah was impressed. He had already tried and failed.

“Army types. They must trust you more than me.”

She shook her head and thought of Jobanique. “I have powerful friends.” She sipped her coffee. It was her third. On the desk lay an uneaten sandwich. She had not known what the word ‘sandwich’ really meant until Hannah had dropped this specimen, triumphantly, in her lap. She had peered through the cellophane at the soggy white toast-bread and decided that she would remain ignorant.

“Not hungry?” asked Besson.

“No. Are we ready? Come sit, Scottie.”

Hannah sat down behind their and ate his sandwich. He sounded like a man struggling through mud. “What are we looking at?”

Besson said, “This is the tape of Proctor arriving at the West Lothian Centre, last Sunday, the 10th. I’ll start it from the beginning.”

Using the complicated software on the left-hand screen, he started the video. Saskia and Hannah watched intently. Hannah kept eating. She turned her ear towards the picture but could not hear the ambient noise. “Scottie, your food is already dead.”

Hannah stopped mid-chew. “Sorry.” He gulped the mouthful away.

“I’ll turn up the volume,” said Besson.

They viewed the video from beginning to end. It was unremarkable: a wide-angle shot that encompassed most of the car-park and a corner of the hotel’s west wing. It was a low-definition video, barely VHS. The audio was almost exclusively bird song and wind. The story was simple: a car drove in from left of frame and stopped; its driver, Proctor, opened the door and closed it again without getting out. He opened it a second time about five minutes later, then walked out of frame to the right. During those five minutes he had made the transmission. For that period, the windows remained opaque with reflected sky.

Saskia sighed. “Any ideas?”

Hannah gestured with his sandwich. “I don’t know about ideas, but there is an odd thing: the door. Why did he open it twice?”

“Yes. The door. He is the only person in the car. What model of car is that? Does it have an advanced computer onboard?”

Besson shook his head. “That’s a Merc. An expensive model with hands-off driving module, but the computer is thick. Course, Proctor may have installed a computer himself. It could interface with the car, control it. Anything’s possible.”

Saskia checked against the notes on her recorder. “Garrel mentioned that Proctor had a personal computer. A very miniature

one. Perhaps the computer handled the communication. Picture it: Proctor arrives, he opens the door, then the computer calls him back in. He closes it again and receives the transmission.”

Hannah grunted. “Maybe the computer said who’s calling.”

Saskia snapped her finger and thumb. “Maybe. You will make a fine FIB Detective one day, Deputy.”

“Gee thanks. Am I allowed to eat my sandwich now?”

“No. Paul, can we see a visual of the sound at that point?”

“Yeah. Hang on.” Besson spun the dial on his mouse anticlockwise and the video began to reverse. Proctor walked backwards to the car and opened the door. “That’s the end of it the transmission.” He wound it back still further. The door closed. He kept cuing. Thirty seconds later – for Proctor, five minutes earlier – the door opened again. “Right,” Besson said. “Here’s the visual of the sound. There are two waveforms because it’s stereo.”

The image was replaced by two graphs. They were flat but for a little peak in the middle of each waveform. Despite the cold, they reminded Saskia of lonely, Pacific islands. “Play it,” she said.

“Way ahead of you,” muttered Besson.

He played it. It sounded like the wind. Somewhere far away she heard an irregular sound. It might have been a footfall, a snapping branch or a voice. “There is definitely something,” Saskia said.

“I agree. Let me get this cleaned up. I’ll filter out the noise and have the computer make a guess. It’ll take about an hour.”

It took forty-eight minutes. Hannah’s phone rang as he and Saskia were finishing their fourth cigarette under the awning. They

had been discussing the facts of the case. Hannah had said, “What do you reckon to Proctor then?”

Saskia thought for a moment – primarily to infer Hannah’s intended meaning – and then said, “I think he may be innocent of some crimes. At least, not guilty in the way we think. I don’t trust Garrel.”

“A stitch-up?”

“A conspiracy perhaps. Trust me, it happens.”

And then Hannah’s phone rang: ‘Scotland the Brave’. It was Besson.

“I have it,” he said, and hung up.

Saskia and Hannah jogged back up and found Besson sitting triumphantly before the computer. Leaning over his shoulder were Charlotte and Henry. Hannah wheezed to a halt and Saskia looked at Besson’s finger, poised over the mouse button.

“Do it,” she said.

Besson did it. Over the speaker, with some digital distortion, a woman’s voice said, “Professor Proctor, it is your daughter.”

Everybody laughed. Saskia clapped Besson on the back and Hannah elbowed Henry in the ribs. “Not too shabby, eh, Henry?” Charlotte nodded with pursed lips.

“Good work, Paul,” said Saskia. She stood back and let her smile fade. “Now, I want a complete analysis of every electronic communication between Proctor and his daughter. Everybody work on it. Divide the labour according to three equal periods of time since her tenth birthday.”

Charlotte said, “You know, it would save us some time if we had some access to the GCHQ files.”

“Explain.”

“The General Communications Headquarters. It is part of the UK government intelligence apparatus. It monitors electronic transmissions. Sifts through emails, too, if the person is flagged for surveillance. Do you think Proctor is flagged?”

Saskia turned to Hannah. He nodded. She remembered her conversation with Garrel. The West Lothian Centre had been bombed twice. Proctor had been strongly suspected of the first. Unofficially, he was guilty. In 2003 all governments had been more sensitive to terrorism following the World Trade Center bombing. He was certain to be flagged.

“Call ’em up,” said Hannah. He began to walk towards to door. “I’m going to talk to the Super about the new lead. We can check her emails, but I’d rather interview her.”

Charlotte, Henry and Besson set about their computers. Saskia grabbed a phone and called Jobanique. She said, in clumsy German, “I need to access GCHQ electronic surveillance on Proctor.” The line went dead. Five minutes later, Jobanique called and said, “You have it. There’s a website. I’ve sent the address via email. Log on with your badge number.” He hung up.

The day had begun so slowly, and now the speed of events began to accelerate. Saskia logged onto the GCHQ computer and deferred to Charlotte. Charlotte trawled the emails for over two hours: text communications first because they were quicker to process. She made better progress than her colleagues, who were confined to more conventional snooping techniques. They could not help because the GCHQ computer would not allow Saskia to log on from more than one computer. It was frustrating, but they were rewarded with good indications early on: an email from Jennifer Proctor, aged sixteen, enthusing about her mathematics

class, writing that it would 'b2kool' to use an encrypted transmission.

Hannah became excited. He smelled the scent.

Saskia, for her part, was saddened by their story. The emails were long from the daughter and short from the father. In the most recent transmissions, Proctor wrote only one or two lines. They were invariably apologetic: "Sorry I can't write any more right now," "CU Gotta go," "Write more soon, I proomise!", and so on, but the promised emails were not sent. Jennifer's became short, mostly comprising jokes about her father's paucity, jokes that became sardonic and accusatory, while Proctor's emails became defensive, hurt and confused. Saskia could hardly bear to read them. They were a perfect record of the downward slope of a dying relationship. For the others in the room, it was routine. They were case-hardened and she was not. She thought of that poor girl in America, sent to a boarding school by her father and, seemingly, abandoned by him; and a father who had not realised that his daughter was slipping away until it was too late, and who lacked the emotional eloquence to repair the damage, preferring hurt silence.

The emails dried up. There was no code.

"OK," Saskia said. She pulled at her bottom lip and watched the expectant faces. "The email about the cipher. When was that?"

"Back in '21," Charlotte replied.

"The cipher would have been complicated," said Besson. He was staring at Saskia but his eyes were blank. "Maybe she completed it as part of a school project."

Saskia asked, "What was the name of her school? The one in New York?"

“Wayne’s College,” said Charlotte.

“Go to the website. Find their electronic documents archive. Search for projects by Jennifer Proctor. If there is nothing on the web, phone them.”

They waited anxiously as Charlotte navigated to the webpage and typed in the search terms. Each of them craned towards the monitor screen. None of them dared speak. Charlotte mistyped a word and the irritation was palpable. A list of projects appeared. At the bottom of the screen, an entry read: “An algorithm for one-time PAD encryption and decryption, by Jennifer B. Proctor”.

Somebody squeezed Saskia’s shoulder. It was Hannah. He was nodding.

At 3:45 p.m., Saskia watched as a plain-clothes detective walked into the room. Everybody stopped working. This was the Detective Superintendent, or DSI – a high rank in the British police force. He entered the room as though he owned it, winked at Hannah and said, “Might have known you’d be in the middle of it all, George.” He walked and talked like Garrel, which made Saskia suspicious, but he shook her hand warmly enough. “I’m glad you’re here, Detective Brandt.”

She shrugged. “Team effort,” she said, and gestured to the Charlotte, Besson, Henry and Hannah. They smiled.

“Do you have a transcript?”

“Here.”

Evidence: Audio-Visual Transmission, Date: 10.09.23, Time:
11:16 a.m.

Participants: David Proctor (DP) and Jennifer Proctor (JP)

DP: Hello, Jennifer.

JP: Hello.

DP: I'm glad you called.

JP: Are you?

DP: Yes. I wanted to talk to you.

JP: Talk, then.

DP: I'm sorry. After you went to New York [unintelligible 1.5
seconds]

JP: You sent me away. You sent the freak [unintelligible 0.5
seconds] then skipped the country.

DP: Look, you couldn't stay in Oxford any more. You would
have been shunned because of your, because of the way you
were. You wouldn't have realised your full potential. We've been
through this.

JP: I was the one who had to go through it, not you. Do you
know what it was like in that school?

DP: I got your emails.

JP: I didn't get yours.

DP: Jennifer, why did you call?

JP: Not to sing happy birthday. I have a message for you.

DP: What is it?

JP: Where are you?

DP: Actually I'm at the old research centre in West Lothian.

JP: What are you doing there?

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DP: I can't tell you that on the phone.

JP: This isn't a phone, Dad.

DP: I know. It's a secure server. You've encrypted the transmission.

JP: You remembered it.

DP: What's wrong, Jenny?

JP: Just...can you go back? I need you to go back.

DP: I haven't passed the point of no-return, I suppose. But why should I go back? Has someone been talking to you?

JP: I don't know. But be careful. Watch your back. Something may happen.

DP: Something already has happened. And I'm late. Can I call you later?

JP: Sure.

Transcribed by Constable Paul Besson 38501-42654, B
Division St Leo SIU 16.09.23

The DSI folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "Well done, everybody."

"Thank you, sir," said Charlotte.

He turned to Saskia and Hannah. "What do you make of it?"

Saskia smiled. "I have a...gut feeling...you call it a 'hunch'?"

"Go on, Detective."

"I think that Proctor has left the country, perhaps via a major airport."

"Why?"

“He has received a threat to his life. His daughter says, ‘Watch your back. Something may happen.’ This warning comes true, does it not?”

The DSI raised an eyebrow. “I thought that the ‘something’ was a result of Proctor himself.”

Hannah cleared his throat. “Put yourself in his shoes, sir. You get a warning from your daughter. Let’s say, for the moment, that what happened down in the research centre did not go according to Proctor’s plan. The cave-in where McWhirter was killed, for example. Or the death of Caroline Benson. Christ, Proctor might have been the intended victim in both cases. You never know.”

“The cave-in?” asked the DSI. “Hardly, George.” He was sceptical, but he checked the transcript again.

Saskia said, “I realise, sir, that we are not in a position to verify or falsify Proctor’s charges. But we are also not required to accept them. I mean, we must not accept conclusions unless we generate them ourselves from available evidence. Nobody, so far, has been able to produce evidence to show that Proctor is responsible for anything. It is all...conjecture and circumstantial evidence. A jury would not convict him.”

The DSI was grim. “You should attend more trials.” Saskia looked uncertain. He pulled a face, as if to dismiss his own comment, and motioned that she should continue.

“If Proctor is an innocent party, then I believe he will attempt to gather more information about the attempt on his life. At the least, more information would provide him with a defence against the charges.”

The DSI chuckled. “You are aware, Detective Brandt, that you are talking about a mass-murderer who is on the run?”

Saskia blinked. “I believe that he is a suspected mass murderer, Detective Superintendent. His flight is no proof of guilt. Under the EU constitution, it is not illegal for an innocent person to attempt an escape.”

Hannah gave her warning look but the DSI folded his arms and nodded. “Well, I can’t argue with your principles, Detective Brandt.”

“Proctor is a university professor,” she continued. Her voice was clearer. “It is a comfortable existence. We know from the emails that his relationship with his daughter is poor. The last few days will have proved to be very stressful, even life-altering. Proctor will undoubtedly feel the need to leave the country. Here he is hunted. In America he is not. His daughter is in America. In addition, she gave him the warning. If he is indeed innocent, the his search for answers must begin with her. Flying out would ‘kill two birds with one stone’. Judging by the escape from the church, it is within his capability.”

The DSI said, “There’s something else. Jennifer is his daughter. The person who helped organise his escape is someone who would risk everything for him. Jennifer fits the bill. Was she the ‘fake’ minister? Who knows, maybe her ‘employers’ – if they are the US government, like you say – helped to falsify her passport and formulate Proctor’s escape plan. If we get her, we get Proctor. But is she still in the country?”

“I think it is unlikely,” Saskia replied. “If you are correct and she has the backing of the American government, they would advocate a plan with minimum risk. Perhaps she has already

risked a great deal by personally overseeing her father's escape. If they were to attempt an escape together, the probability of their apprehension would increase. In that case, I would suggest that she left immediately via the local airport at Edinburgh."

Hannah shook his head. His expression was pained. "I don't know. If the Americans really wanted Proctor – perhaps to work with Jennifer in a thinktank somewhere – why not smuggle him out by submarine?"

"Cost," the DSI said. "How much do they want him? What can he be worth?"

Saskia said, "Perhaps everything, perhaps nothing. However, with the correct advice and documentation, there is no reason why Proctor should not be able to leave the country 'legally' through an airport."

"Edinburgh?" Hannah asked. "You think the glider took him down to Belford to throw us off the scent?"

Saskia's reply was interrupted by the DSI. "No. We had Edinburgh locked down tight. To get lost in the crowd he would need somewhere bigger."

"Like where?" Saskia asked.

"Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton, Stanstead," Hannah said. "Take your pick."

"Which is the largest?" she pressed.

"Heathrow," said the DSI. "Its surveillance is poorest because of sheer volume of traffic. Now, we looked at this scenario yesterday. If he took a car or a train, he would have left the country by now. If he's still on the bike, and using minor roads, he could catch a flight at midnight tonight – if he rides hard. Personally, I think he'll lie low for a week."

“Those flights need to be checked, sir,” said Saskia.

“I agree with you, Brandt. Check each person who flies to America between midnight and 6 a.m. Check them personally. If you don’t find Proctor, we can assume he’s already gone or he’s lying low. We have other people working those leads.”

Saskia nodded. Hannah swore and slapped his forehead. “There are about five thousand people who can do that for us, sir. They’re called the Metropolitan Police.”

The DSI shook his head indulgently. “Think it through,” he said. “If Proctor takes his holiday tonight, I want Brandt to nab him, not our Cockney friends. No sense having the Met solve our cases.”

“But Saskia is a neutral party.”

The DSI pointed at Hannah with the transcript. “It’s that kind of clear thinking that stops you advancing through the ranks. She is a neutral party accompanied by a West Lothian and Borders liaison.”

“Yes, sir,” Hannah said quietly.

“You two can hitch down to Heathrow with a friend of mine, Sam Langdon. He flies up most weekends for the golf. My secretary will give you his number. Have a nice trip.” He strode from the room.

Hannah said, “I was his mentor when he joined the force. Right, we’d better get organised.” He checked his watch. “Are you alright?”

Saskia watched the team – Paul Besson, Henry and Charlotte – as they walked over to the coffee machine. She wanted to stay with them. She was one week old. Even the loneliest

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person has the memory of company, but she did not even have that. Where were her old friends?

“I’m fine, Scottie.”

The Calm

David glanced at the computer screen. It was 4 p.m. He had ridden into a town called Kilby or Kilsby. He could not remember. He only knew that he had been riding for nearly nine hours. It was time to buy his disguise. He took his instructions from Ego, who had been reading internet guides by ex-SAS personnel and presenting them to him in a digestible, if sensational, form. Now he knew all about dead-letter boxes, anti-surveillance riding and how best to snare and cook rabbit. Ego had counselled that he should change his vehicle and clothing at regular intervals. David disagreed. Clothing, yes; vehicle, no. The bike was painful but it was fast, it could ride across most terrains and it could change colour.

He stood next to the bike. A tall building provided shade. The town was nondescript, another English architectural mistake on a grand scale. There was nobody around. He leaned towards the microphone in the helmet, which was attached to the petrol tank. "Bike, change to green," he said. "Do it gradually, over the next hour."

He found the high street. It was pedestrianized. Buses charged and the pavements were thick with shoppers. After only two days on the bike, David had forgotten how to walk in a crowd. He located his first shop quickly.

"Be sure to buy each item in a different shop," said Ego's voice in his ear.

"Yes, yes," David replied. The shopkeeper overheard and his smile froze but he made no comment. To be sure, David was a sight. He had a thickening beard, a down-turned head to avoid the

security cameras and he paid with cash. Using paper money was risk, but he had to assume that the credit card, in the name of David Harrison, was blown. Thankfully, the passport was in a different name.

The shopkeeper nodded goodbye as he left. Once outside, he removed his old jacket and lay it across a homeless person. The recipient appeared to continue his sleep – not easy with the sharp north-easterly – until a tanned hand snaked out from underneath and gave David the thumbs-up.

He walked on. He bought new clothes, item by item, and gave their old counterparts away. Nothing was to be thrown away. Ego was insistent. In a gentleman's outfitters he bought a suit. In another he bought a beige leather briefcase. He bought a pair of tinted glasses, a shaving kit, some paper overalls, a wedding ring, and a hugely expensive belt. In each shop he lamented the loss of his bankcard and shrugged wistfully at the need to carry so much cash. The shopkeepers made little clicking noises and were sorry to hear that, sir, and said no more. Finally, he bought some aftershave and a universal storage crate for the bike. Bemygusted by the sales assistant, he stuffed his shopping into the box. Both he and the assistant stared at the crumpled suit for moment.

“Travel iron, sir?”

“Yes please.”

David wandered back to the bike. The universal box was not quite as universal as its manufacturers had enthused. It took fifteen minutes to attach. Once done, he sat on the bike and felt the old bruises meet their angles on the seat. David rode away with his new clothes and his bike that was nearly green. A different person.

Different enough?

He was still a man on a bike.

“Ego,” he said, pulling into light traffic.

“Yes?”

“Does it strike you as odd that I haven’t been captured?”

“Repeat that, please.”

David lowered his voice. Because Ego listened to his voice via vibrations through the earpiece, the bike engine made communication difficult. “I have not been captured. Discuss.”

There was a pause. “Yes, you have been lucky, but it is not surprising that you have evaded capture. I have been monitoring the internet and the radio. It seems there is an All-Points Bulletin for your arrest. However, the description is inadequate because it is rather average. I have read two more espionage novels in the past hour. I do not believe that the British police have the manpower to locate you unless you make a serious mistake: that is, break the law. They do not know your location, your destination, your purpose, or your correction physical description. So, if you continue to ride under the speed limit and use minor roads, your chances of reaching locker J327 are good.”

David snorted. “I’m sure I broke the speed limit once or twice.”

“No, you did not.”

“Hmm. Maybe up near Sheffield. I was going pretty fast.”

“I can testify that you have not broken any speed limits.”

He turned onto the southerly road, out of town. “Testify? You sound like a witness.”

“Indeed. I have taken the liberty of recording all our conversations. I have also interfaced with the motorcycle’s rear- and front-mounted cameras. Your journey has been recorded.”

David said glumly, “You’ve saved me.”

“I do not understand.”

“Like a data file. Saved.”

“It is a precaution designed to provide an objective source of information. It will guard against evidence tampering and deliberately fictionalised scenarios by antagonistic parties. Perhaps I may also act as a ‘black box’ in the event of an accident. The probability of my survival is many hundreds of times higher than your own.”

“Ego, how much battery life do you have?”

“Thirty hours.”

“Switch off for now. Recharge.”

“I am still monitoring ten radio stations and several internet sites.”

David revved the engine and accelerated. It was time to break the speed limit. “Switch off. Now.”

Saskia asked to be excused. Hannah gave her a questioning look, but she waved him away. The headache was strong. It could be a migraine. Did she get migraines? She walked into the toilet, which was, incredibly, colder than the office, opened a cubicle and collapsed on the seat. She held her head and pushed at her temples. If she pressed hard enough she could override this pain with another.

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Somebody walked in. She wore heels. They tapped on the tile floor like a knife against a glass to call polite attention. Saskia's eyes sprang open. She had heard that sound before. Where?

The hawk that returned.

"Which hawk?" she asked. "What returned?"

The footsteps stopped as the owner paused to listen. Saskia watched the shadow. It began to move again. The owner just washed her hands and left the room.

Spin, measure, snip.

She closed her eyes. What did these things mean? Think, Detective Brandt. Detect. The memories were islands. They were an archipelago. She could only access them when she had a bridge: the Zippo lighter in Hannah's hand, the statue of Prometheus at the West Lothian Centre. Phrases. More memories returned: the smell of smoke. Cigarette smoke at first, which changed to acidic, burning-plastic smoke. A building was on fire.

The hawk that returned.

Somewhere in the boiling mist of yellow-red, somewhere in the blood in her eyelids, she saw a flame. The flame grew. Underneath it was green cloth. The cloth was on fire.

Ute.

Snip.

Snip snip snip.

"Detective Brandt?"

Saskia gasped. She looked around. Still in the toilet cubicle. Not in...

...in Cologne.

"Detective Brandt?"

She made a fist. A victory. The fire had taken place in Cologne. It had involved burning green cloth. Green curtains maybe, or a suit. There were men there. One of them had a lighter. He had said something. Saskia smiled.

But what was she remembering?

The scene of the crime. Her crime.

Her murder.

The smile switched off.

“Detective Brandt, are you OK?”

It was Charlotte from the office.

“Yes, Charlotte, I am fine. Is there a problem?”

“DI Hannah says that he’s organised the flight. You have to leave right away.”

“I’m coming.”

David sneezed, and when his head rose he could not remember the past few hours. He did not know what time it was. He thought about midnight. Why did he need to use minor roads? Perhaps he could be spotted more easily on a motorway, but it was not certain. It was just a probability.

Each year he gave a seminar to the psychology undergraduates at Oxford about fractals and chaos, a prelude to questions about machine intelligence. Each year, he would ask them: How long is the coastline of the British Isles? One or two would usually know the official figure. Aha, David, the Professor, would say, isn’t that a rough approximation? What about if you looked a little closer, a little deeper into the nooks and crannies of the rocks? Wouldn’t that increase the estimate of the coastline’s

length? Well, yes, they would say. But it goes on, David would reply. More detail, more length. More detail, more shapes, different shapes. A vastly detailed shape. The coastline of Britain? Longer than the distance between the earth and the moon, or the earth and the sun, or the earth and the centre of the universe.

Perhaps he should get back to the motorway.

A voice from the back of his mind, like a prompter from the wings, whispered, Don't think. Don't make decisions. You're in no state. Go with the flow, Joe.

"Stick with the plan, man," he said aloud.

David began to sing. He sang old Beatles tunes. The Beatles, whose star was falling. Less and less talked about, less and less famous. Losing detail. Losing edge. Becoming smaller. A new generation with a new culture.

"Lovely Rita, meter maid, lovely Rita..."

It was 5:15 p.m. Saskia reached into the pocket behind the driver's seat and found a blister sheet of travel sickness pills. Three seemed a good number. Four better. She slapped them into her mouth and crunched them to a bitter dust. Hannah was beside her. He gripped the handle above the door, unconcerned.

She felt the back tyres lock. The car skidded then regained its traction. Shops and people flowed by. It was dusk. The two police officers in the front of the car exchanged a glance. In the back, Hannah gave Saskia a wink. She smiled humourlessly. "I do not believe that I have often experienced cars with human drivers. It does not feel safe."

Hannah rolled his eyes. "I've been driving for thirty years and I'm still alive."

"That does not mean it is safe."

"What about the flight over?" he asked through gritted teeth as the car banked. "That plane was flown by a human."

"Yes, but he is a professional."

The driver looked around. "Hey, I'm a professional too."

Saskia pointed. "Bloedmann, the road is in front."

The airport was about ten kilometres away. In the early evening traffic, it would take half an hour. The co-driver activated the siren intermittently. "Come on, Mike," Hannah shouted, "you can do better than that." The driver pulled out and drove down the middle of the road. "That's the stuff," Hannah muttered. Saskia blinked and bent the handle. It wasn't the stuff at all.

Before she saw an airport sign, they turned right into a road that was marked 'Airport Cargo Only'. It was empty. The car accelerated into the space.

When they reached the entrance, Hannah said, "Straight through, they're expecting us." The guard waved and lifted the barrier. They drove into a huge fenced enclosure. Planes were parked in rows. Saskia examined them carefully. They seemed flimsy. The car braked to a stop.

"This is where you get off," said the driver. He reached round to shake Hannah's hand, but the DI had already left the car.

Saskia shook it on Hannah's behalf. "Congratulations."

Outside, the air was chilly and redolent of fuel. The airport was a constellation of itself. Lights marked the terminal building, the roads, the wire fences, and the multi-coloured patterns of the

runway. As she watched, a jet landed. Its exhaust blurred the air. She felt the vibration in her teeth.

“Saskia, get a move on,” Hannah called, and she ran to catch up.

They climbed into a small four-seater aircraft. Hannah collapsed into the back and Saskia took her place next to the pilot. It was too dark to see his face. “Finally,” he said. He handed Saskia some headphones. “I’m Sam. Sam Langton.”

“Saskia Brandt,” she replied.

Hannah rasped, “Did we make it?”

“Your timing is impeccable,” Sam said. He gunned the engine. Through her headphones, she heard him say, “Control, this is Golf Tango Foxtrot Two-One-Two requesting clearance for take-off, over.” There was no reply. “Roger, Control, I’m taxiing to runway two, over.”

“We appreciate this,” Hannah said.

“No problem. I was flying back anyway.”

“Send the invoice to St Leonard’s.”

“Yep.”

Saskia settled. The darkness was reassuring. “There’s a blanket between your legs,” Sam said as they rolled forward.

“Careful not to touch the control column.”

“Do you not have anything more nourishing?” Hannah asked.

“Take a look behind you.”

Saskia listened to Hannah’s exertions. She settled the blanket over her legs. “Latest weather report shows poor visibility over South-East England,” Sam said. “There’s a low pressure front moving north.” He switched on a red reading light near the door.

He held the column between his legs and noted the time in a small logbook. Saskia watched for traffic on his behalf.

“How long to Heathrow?” she asked.

Sam laughed. “We’re not going to Heathrow, love.”

“Oh?”

“I’d need to sell the plane just to afford the landing fee. No, we’re going to Farnborough.”

Hannah tapped her on the shoulder. “Sandwich?”

Saskia looked back. Obliging, Hannah peeled back the skin of white bread and displayed the filling. Sliced sausages.

“English sausages?”

He nodded. Her stomach turned. “The best,” he continued. “Plenty of brown sauce.”

“What is brown sauce?”

Hannah shrugged. “Good question.”

“You don’t know?”

“Why should I?” He took a bite. “Must be one of the fun things about foreign travel. New foods.”

The pilot laughed. “How long have you two been married?”

“Too long,” she said. She read his log book. “Please tell me where Forborough is.”

“Farnborough,” the pilot said. “Three hundred miles to the south. In new money, that’s about five hundred kilometres. They expect us for 9 p.m.”

Saskia closed her eyes. She opened them again before they became airborne. She watched the runway lights stream by. She became drowsy. She could hear a stream of English inside her head. They were nonsense words. She supposed that part of her

brain that processed language was still working. She let it and fell asleep.

David recalled a phrase from his youth: 'highway hypnosis'. Strange how phrases drifted into a language, took a bow, and left again. Most were fleeting clichés. But highway hypnosis was apposite. The feel of road: the warp of objects and contours as the world flowed past, slower in the middle and faster towards the edge; ideas that could only feed on the thoughts of a few moments before, feed on the same things, over and over, like the bike wheel turning, over and over. Midnight was far away.

The Grantham, being a light aircraft with no oxygen cylinders, could not climb above the weather. It flew low where the air was thick and contrary. The rain was a constant. It was 9:30 p.m. before they touched down. Saskia had not moved since she had climbed aboard, but when she stepped onto the concrete of the holding lot, she almost collapsed with fatigue. "Thanks, Sam," shouted Hannah above the propeller noise.

"No problem. I have to park. See you."

Saskia gave him a little salute and searched for a terminal building. She could see none in the fierce rain. The area was flat and huge. It was full of small aircraft. "Where now?" she asked. She ducked to avoid the wing as Sam taxied away.

Hannah pulled his suit jacket over his head. "There's a blue light over there."

They watched as a traffic patrol car approached. It weaved cautiously through the still aircraft and came to a stop ten metres away. A uniformed officer jumped out with an umbrella. He ran across and opened it over Hannah. "Piss off," Hannah said. They climbed in the back. The men made conversation. It was a twenty-minute journey to Heathrow. Saskia fell asleep against the window before the car pulled away.

When she awoke, she knew that too much time had passed. She looked at her watch. It was 10:30 p.m. Ahead, the traffic was heavy. Some larger vehicles were flashing their hazard lights.

"Why haven't we arrived?" she asked.

Hannah looked over. He was sweating. A vein throbbed in his forehead. "An accident. It happened just in front of us." He dabbed at the vein with a handkerchief.

"What's wrong?" She put a hand to his forehead, expecting it to feel hot. But it was cold.

He grimaced. "Heart burn. You know, acid indigestion. The bloody sandwiches. I knew I shouldn't've eaten them."

Saskia heard the co-driver talk urgently into his radio. The words were abbreviated. She didn't understand, but when he replaced the handset on the dashboard, everybody but her swore. Hannah said to her, "These guys have to secure the scene."

She nodded calmly. Perhaps some over her calm would creep over Hannah. "Then they will call us another car."

The car shook as their co-driver slammed the boot. He shrugged a fluorescent jacket over his shoulders and jogged ahead alongside the driver. Saskia gripped the handle. She felt an

urge to see the accident. Hannah looked at her. Saskia opened her mouth but stopped. They talked with their eyes. He wanted to go too, but he felt too ill to leave the car; Saskia would stay with him, and judged that she would force him to leave if she told him so; he smiled, knowing that he was understood, and she smiled in return.

When David blinked, his eyelids scratched his eyeballs. He took an enormous breath and said, “Come on, come on, not long now.” The bike computer’s graphic indicated that he was nearly there. He was on the M4. He was five minutes from Heathrow.

“Ego, what will happen when I open that locker?”

“I cannot tell you that.”

David pulled a wry smile. It was not the first time he had asked.

He crouched forward. This was his second riding position. His first was to lean back, let the wind push his chest. Occasionally the bike would wobble when he alternated between the two. He didn’t care. He thought of his daughter. He had taught her to ride in a cul de sac near the old house in Oxford. He had pushed her for miles, constantly reassuring her that he had a firm grip.

Finally, he let go and she wobbled all the way to the turning space. He felt proud. He felt like a real father. At the end of the road, he heard her faint voice say, “I nearly did it that time, daddy,” and he cupped his hands and shouted, “You did! I’m back here!” and she turned around and fell off with a scream. He ran down and picked her up, bike and all, and took her inside. He sat her on the washing machine and dabbed her grazes with TCP. Through her tears, she smiled. “I did it.” That became her catchphrase. When

she passed her maths GCSE aged nine, had her poems published, when she got into the New York school, she always said, “I did it.”

And now he had learned to ride too. He had done it.

A blue light flashed on the dashboard. He glanced down, thinking it was a warning. But the light was merely a reflection. He turned around

(and fell off with a scream)

and the bike wobbled. There was a police car bearing down on him. He indicated right and slid into the slow lane.

“Hello hello hello,” said the co-driver. She leaned forward. She turned to her colleague and muttered something.

“What is it now?” Saskia asked. She felt travelsick and she longed to leave the car, stretch her legs. They had been at the accident site for over an hour but Heathrow was, finally, only five minutes away. Hannah jerked awake and rubbed his eyes.

“What’s the description of Proctor’s bike?” asked the co-driver.

“A bit fuzzy,” said Hannah. “A new bike. It could be a trail bike. Green, but possibly a different colour by now.”

The co-driver whistled. “That new?”

Saskia said impatiently, “Yes, that new. Do you see him?”

“Could be. Can’t be that many Moirés on the M4 this time of night being driven by a weekend rider. This year’s registration. Fair-sized luggage container on the back, too.”

“A weekend rider? What are you talking about?” asked Saskia.

The co-driver seemed unable to detect any edge to the question. She was calm. An easy day's work for her, Saskia guessed. "He couldn't ride a bike to save his life. Obvious from the way he's sitting on it."

"Pull him over," said Saskia.

"Easy, tiger," Hannah said. "We can't pull over every bike we see. How many bikes have we seen tonight, Teri?"

"Five or six," replied the co-driver. "What to you want to do? He's moving lane. Shall we pull back?"

Saskia laid a hand on Hannah's arm. "Scottie, pull him over. It will cost us five minutes if I'm wrong, but if I'm not..."

Hannah expelled a great breath of air. His lips flapped. "Fine. Dan, pull him over."

The Fugitive

The co-driver activated the siren long enough for it to whoop once. Their headlights flashed. The rider glanced over his shoulder, wobbled, and changed lane. They were alongside the hard shoulder. The rider seemed uncertain whether to pull onto the hard shoulder or come off at the next exit. Teri gave him a clue and the siren whooped once more. Their little convoy crossed onto the hard shoulder and rolled to a stop.

The driver, Dan, opened his door. The interior light was abrupt and dazzling. Saskia said, "Be careful. He may be armed."

He froze. "You sure?" The rider was sitting motionlessly. He had not looked around since stopping.

Saskia groaned. British police. No guns, but ready to be very disappointed. "Wait here."

She slipped from the car and shook the life back into her legs. She unpoped the gun's fastener and rested her hand on the butt. She moved forward until she was standing between the police car and motorcycle. With the car headlights on either side of her, it would be difficult for the rider to see what she was doing. She knew, instinctively, that it would make him more careful.

"I am armed," she shouted. "Switch off the engine."

Nothing happened. The man held on. The engine revved. Behind her, Saskia could hear people stepping from the car. She felt their eyes.

Stay in the car, she thought. I'm in control.

The footsteps stopped. She exhaled and took a pace closer. "Armed police. Turn off your engine and show me the key."

This time a gloved hand plucked itself from a grip. It disappeared behind the rider's torso. Was he reaching for a gun? The engine spluttered to a halt. Saskia's fingers drummed the gun. She had to think slow, think relaxed. She was in control. She was behind the suspect and she had a loaded gun; she was ready to draw it and ready to fire it. She ignored the expectations of the Brits behind her, the occasional car tearing by, the flashing blue lights. The rider's hand appeared again. This time it held the keys. The fingers opened. The keys dropped to the ground and lay there, forgotten.

Saskia stepped forward again. She barked commands and, as she spoke, the rider did exactly and precisely as she instructed: "Put down the stand. Get off the bike. Take three steps to the right. Face away from me. Remove your helmet. Slowly. Place it on the ground that it cannot roll away. Lie down on your face. Put one hand behind your head, the other one over the small of your back. Cross your legs."

Only at this point did she glance behind her. The three men stood there, tense. Teri and Dan had shotguns trained on the suspect.

"Finished, dear?" Hannah asked. He walked past, gave her wink, and sat on the suspect. He produced handcuffs and worked on the man like a sailor on a knot. Throughout, everyone was silent.

Saskia called, "Well?"

"See for yourself."

She walked over. Her heart thumped. The man's head came into view. He was black and in his early forties. He was breathing

heavily. Spit hung from the side of his mouth. For a moment, their eyes locked. She smiled apologetically. He looked away.

Hannah climbed to his feet. "Satisfied?"

"OK." Saskia turned to the uniformed officers. "It's not him."

"Great," said Dan. They gave their shotguns to Hannah, who took them back to the car, and began to release the motorcyclist. Saskia walked with him. She felt drained and faintly embarrassed. She overheard Dan's raised voice. They were giving the rider a hard time. He would be less likely to complain.

"I did not think British police were armed," she said.

"Welcome to the twenty-first century."

They leaned against the bonnet and watched the traffic. The air was crisp and smelled of exhaust gases. Saskia buttoned the fastener on her gun holster. "Sorry, Scottie."

He snorted. "Come on, we had to take the chance. What if it had been Proctor?" He took a deep breath. "Besides, I needed the exercise."

Saskia smiled. She watched more of the traffic. A police car fired past. Its blue lights were a racing heartbeat. Seconds later, she saw another motorcyclist. Was it Proctor? She would not cry wolf again and she had no confidence that they had second-guessed the fugitive. She expected to spend the next six hours in a vain computer search.

David saw the parked police car, with Saskia and Hannah against its flank, and the parked motorbike. His speedometer read 65 mph. He dropped to sixty.

DÉJÀ VU

Heathrow

It was midnight when David rolled into the car park of Heathrow's Terminal 5. In the distance he could see the main building and its two satellites. There was one runway on the left and another on the right. He rode into a parking space and stopped. As the engine died, he slid off. He used the last drops of his strength to push the bike over its lay stand. When he finished, he was breathless. He leaned on his kneecaps and gasped. Blood filled his head. The helmet was stuffy because he was no longer moving. He tore clumsily at the strap and rolled it from his head. It fell to the floor and bounced into a nearby car.

The car park was a great, gleaming mass. It was nearly full. Security lights illuminated islands with orange signs that marked position. A car pulled in and David felt a brief flush of panic. But he calmed himself. Nobody knew where he was.

The voice, the sensible voice, said: Remember the bikers up in Northumbria? Forgotten about them? I bet they haven't forgotten about you. They weren't farm workers. They were professionals.

David sighed. It was pointless standing around. He slapped his face, hard. He shook his head like a dog throwing off water. He needed to be awake now. He needed to be careful.

"Ego, I'm at the airport."

"Excellent," said the voice in his ear. David had long abandoned reading human emotions into Ego's tone, but it was hard to ignore its obvious surprise. "Change your clothes then find locker J371."

"Am I going to fly?"

“I am not in a position to tell you that. If you are captured, it is better that you know nothing, in case you jeopardise a future escape attempt.”

David watched his breath condense. His eyes followed the vapour and continued to stare long after it became invisible, as though even the muscles of his eyes were exhausted. “So the minister is still around? The fake one?”

“I do not know. I suspect she has avoided capture.” Ego paused. “You must change now. Time is short. You must change.”

David checked his immediate surroundings. He did so in the manner of a careful drunk. There was a small hedge that ran along the back of the row. It was nothing more than a trough of blackened wood chippings with regularly-spaced shrubs. It held no cover. He looked at the car that he had hit with his helmet. It was a high-sided eight-seater. That would do.

He took off his clothes piece by piece. First the coat, then the jacket, then the inner fleece. He removed his waterproof trousers, his riding trousers and his boots. He laid them all in a heap. He opened the carrying container that he had bought in a town he had forgotten and retrieved the beige briefcase. He ripped off the transparent wrapper. Underneath, it was pristine. Shivering, he transferred his essential documents from his jacket to the briefcase. There were some non-essential items too: in the event, he had carried with him most of the bathroom from that little bed and breakfast. There were a couple of sachets of shampoo and a useless little soap. He kept them.

He grabbed new underwear from the container and stuffed it into the briefcase. In another bag he found a pair of tinted glasses, a shaving kit, a wedding ring and a belt. He packed those too. He

found a travel iron and wondered why he bought it. He left it in the container.

There was a pair of paper overalls at the bottom. He donned these carefully, though the paper was tough. He put his boots back on, but not his bike jacket. Instead he retrieved a light nylon coat and threw it across his shoulders. Now he was an invisible everyman, albeit a very cold, tired one. Along one side of the container was a dry-cleaning bag with a complete suit inside. He rummaged some more and found a bottle of aftershave. He tossed it into the briefcase, closed it, and set about stuffing his old clothes into the bike container with one hand. In the other he held the suit.

Finally he closed the container and unfastened it. He walked to the front of the bike and remembered his escape from the farm hands two days before. He had roared from that ditch and jumped the hedge like a champion showjumper. He smiled and patted the light. It didn't feel like a bike; it felt like a horse.

"Ego, can you hear me?"

Ego was inside the briefcase. "Perfectly."

"Is it alright to leave the bike?"

"Of course. Where better to hide a tree than a forest? And, because this car park is designed to issue tickets on the way out, it should be a long time before anybody notices anything suspicious."

"Did you read that in a spy novel?"

"Yes."

David walked towards the terminal building with the container under one arm and the briefcase under the other. He lengthened his stride. The physical pain of the past few days seemed to hang

one pace behind. He was nearing the next stage. After miles on the bike, things were moving again.

The sky had cleared. The moon shone. Saskia watched an aeroplane land. In the moment before its wheels touched the ground, it seemed motionless. It seemed too big to fly. It seemed an impertinence.

“Scottie, do you believe in God?”

Hannah sat with his collar upturned. He seemed occupied with the traffic around them. They were about to pull into the airport. Teri had suggested Terminal 5 because most transatlantic flights originated from there. “Do you?” he asked.

Do I? she thought. Is religion a memory or a feeling?

“I don’t know.”

“I hope I never have to find out.”

She smiled. “Die, do you mean?”

“That’s the word.” He looked out of the window again. This time, he watched the sky. “When I was wee – when I was a boy – I thought that God was the sea. The sea was the biggest and most scariest thing I knew. It took my old dad.”

“I am sorry.”

He shrugged. “He was a fisherman. He took a gamble one day and he lost.”

“Do you think,” she began, and then stopped. Hannah glanced at her.

“Say it.”

“Do you think religion is a memory or a feeling?”

“Feeling,” he said. His eyes darted forward at the two police officers and Saskia realised she had embarrassed him. But then he said loudly, “Do you ever get a religious feeling, Dan?”

“Only when Teri’s driving, sir,” he replied.

Saskia grinned. Inside, she felt cold.

David slipped between two parked buses. A driver, who was loading heavy cases under the impatient eyes of his passengers, scowled as he walked past. David avoided his gaze and walked on. He avoided everybody’s gaze: the groups of teenagers back from Majorca, the retired couples with their redundant sun hats, the families with faces as long and grey as the English winter. All of them tanned, all of them freezing in the midnight chill. David avoided them all. He walked down the length of the large bus shelter and cut across the taxi rank. The terminal building towered like a glass cliff. It had a microclimate of exhausts and short tempers.

Inside he ignored the bright yellow signs with directions to arrivals, departures, the shops and the train and bus services. He ignored the ceiling that seemed so far away. He ignored the fleet of roaming trolleys. He stepped over a fallen teddy bear, countless old luggage labels, a Panama hat, and a sleeping man. He ignored the urgent flight calls and the thousand conversations, which reminded him, obliquely, of an orchestra tuning up. He particularly ignored the black-and-white figure of a police officer. The man was walking away from him. He held a sub-machine gun pointed at the floor.

David ignored everything but the arrow pointing to the gentleman's toilet. He walked over, concentrating on an innocent stride and an innocent expression. There was a guiltiness about both. He stopped to examine an urgent message board. He drew slow breaths.

"You must proceed directly to the toilet to change," prompted Ego. "The computers linked to the security cameras are quite capable of recognising you, but they sample randomly. To reduce the chance of being caught you must continue now."

David said nothing. He did not want to arouse suspicion by talking to himself.

He walked further along the terminal. As he came to the toilet, its door opened and an arachnid robot emerged. It carried a number of cleaning utensils. It wore a blue cap and a shiny boot on each of its eight feet. David watched it creep away. A baby in a pram pointed and clapped.

The toilet was large and white. It sparkled. He could see boot-marks on the walls where the robot had climbed. The room had a low ceiling. The stalls were either side of a wall of wash basins. There were no shower cubicles. On the far wall was a store cupboard door. He collected the information without interest. There was a constant flow of people. At a given time, there would be no less than ten people present. If none of them was a security officer, then he had a good chance of assuming his disguise without capture.

He selected a basin in the middle of the row. Not at the end. He did not want to look like a man with something to hide. He dropped the container and massaged his shoulder. He whistled to fill the air and smiled at a teenager two basins down. The teenager

offered his back. David opened the container and retrieved his shaving kit. He proceeded to shave. Nothing strange about that, he told himself. Just a normal bloke having a shave.

When he had removed the last of the foam, he leaned into the mirror. Not bad. He was beginning to assume his old, respectable (and, he realised, vain) self. He preferred the beard.

Next he doused his hair with hot water. He cupped it on and relished the burning sensation. It would banish the cold from his fingers for good. He took a sachet of shampoo and rubbed it into his hair. He began to feel that he was being watched. He rinsed the soap away. He was still just a normal bloke washing his hair. He whistled.

His hair was clean but dripping. He gathered his things and retreated into a stall. Locked the door. He slipped off his boots, his nylon coat and the paper overalls. He used the toilet and set about his transformation. Soon he was wearing the suit. He folded the tie from memory, but it would need straightening in front of a mirror. He splashed some aftershave around his neck and gasped. Moments later he opened the briefcase. He checked the contents: his wallet, which contained Ego and some cards; the watch; his passport; his cash. He had no physical business documents. That was normal. Everything would be stored in his personal computer. He dropped the wallet into his inside pocket and closed the briefcase.

He opened the door and walked to the store cupboard he had noted earlier. It was locked but the mechanism was a simple magnetic strip reader. Ideal. There were only two people near him. They weren't looking. Quickly, he took Ego from his wallet, whispered, "Ego, it's a magnetic strip lock," and swiped it through

the reader. The door clicked. He eased it open and looked inside. There were paper tissues, a replacement hand drier, an assortment of bottles, and some mops and brushes. Plenty of room. Quickly, he grabbed the container and shoved it inside. A glance around the room reassured him that he had not been seen. He opened the door again and threw a package of toilet rolls over the container. Only the robot would use the cupboard on a regular basis. It would simply work around the obstruction. He closed the door. It locked automatically.

He took his briefcase from the cubicle and left the room, pausing only briefly to straighten his tie in the mirror. Then he flattened his hair with a palm and walked on his way. Just a normal businessman walking out of a toilet. His motorcycle boots rapped a loud tattoo.

The majority of transatlantic flights originated from Terminal Five. The police car stopped at the building's entrance and its cargo clambered out. Saskia folded her arms and shivered. Hannah leaned through the passenger window, said something dry, waited for a response, and slapped the rump of the car as it rolled away.

The terminal was huge. The roof was far away. But people could not take flight and use the space. They were trapped on the ground. They crossed paths again and again. Saskia shared the air with thousands of people. It was cold but not fresh. It smelled like the café in Brussels, where she had become wrapped in claustrophobia. It would be difficult to remain. Hannah touched her

shoulder. She turned in surprise. “Can you wait here? I need the toilet.”

He was tired and distracted. He did not appreciate the spell he had broken. When Saskia smiled he was surprised. “Of course.”

He jogged along the wall and disappeared into the toilet. Saskia leaned against a huge poster advertising a travel company. She felt the picture change. Minutes passed. She gazed at the ceiling and wondered if clouds might form up there. Hannah grabbed her arm.

“Finally.”

Hannah’s face was close. It was ashen. “Proctor’s here.”

The crowds faded and they were alone. “Here?”

“Look.” Hannah opened his hand. It held a crumpled plastic sachet. Saskia shook her head. She didn’t understand. Then she saw the text. It read: Rinse and Shine at the Horse n’ Groom! Underneath, smaller, was: Wickering Breweries Ltd., Northallerton.

“Proctor’s hotel,” Saskia said. She could think of nothing else. Then she asked, “But when was he here? Perhaps he has come and gone.”

Hannah had the thin smile of certainty. “It was on a basin that still has condensation. I felt the bowl. Still warm with hot water for his hair. The other bowls are cold. It’s him. He’s cleaning up.”

“Fine, good, OK,” Saskia said. She looked away from Hannah in order to concentrate. “If we follow our original plan, then Proctor is travelling to America. To Nevada. We should check the departures board.”

David stepped from the lift into the basement locker area. His motorcycle boots had been replaced by a pair of Brogues. The floor was tiled and sang underfoot, tick-tock with each step. There were few people about. An attendant was slouched over the counter of his kiosk with his nose on a newspaper. He ignored the world around him. As David walked past, a terracotta army of lockers emerged on his right. They had been arranged in perfect rank and file. About half were ajar.

Locker J371 was a short walk away. David moved slowly. He was conscious of the tapping that betrayed him, but he saw nobody. He did not see the woman, some metres to his left, step back into shadow.

“Ego, I’m here.”

Ego said, “Good. Type in this code: P7L6WE2.”

David did so. The locker sprang open. It was as tall as a man and deep enough for several large pieces of luggage. It was empty but for an envelope. It was addressed to ‘D’. He checked up and down the row before tearing the seal. Nobody. He did not see the woman duck out of sight once more, but he heard her footsteps on the tiles. The sound came from everywhere. Because it was receding, he ignored it.

Inside the envelope was a single ticket to Las Vegas, Nevada. That was unsurprising. So he was en route to Jennifer. He was more interested in the text on the piece of paper. The paper had been perfectly white; now, as he touched it, it began to darken. The text became less distinct.

“What is on the paper?” asked Ego. “Tell me immediately.”

“It says, ‘Jennifer Proctor...’ Christ, it’s fading.”

“A security precaution. Keep reading.”

“Sounds like a car-parking attendant belongs to the finest.’
That’s all.”

“Information stored and encrypted.”

David laughed mechanically. The tiredness of the bike journey seemed to overtake him once more. He sagged against the locker door. “Sounds like a car-parking attendant belongs to the finest.’ What is that? A crossword clue?” The paper had turned black.

“Please, David, examine the ticket.”

David rubbed his eyes. He had a headache and found focussing difficult. “A ticket to McCarran International, Las Vegas. Via Chicago. So what?”

“The time?”

“12:30 a.m.”

“It is now 12:10. I would suggest that you leave immediately. It is unlikely that you will still be at liberty for the next flight.”

David noted the check-in details and tucked the papers into his jacket pocket. He hurried away.

“One final thing,” Ego said.

“What?”

“You must eat the paper.”

“Bloody hell.” He reached for the paper and stuffed it into his mouth. It tasted like liquorice.

The flight left in a few minutes. As they ran, Hannah told Saskia that it might be too late to ground the plane. They had to get aboard. The simplest method was to buy a ticket and arrest Proctor in the air. They found the check-in and jumped the queue.

Saskia glanced at some faces. She did not linger on their interested expressions. Proctor would be on the plane already. Hannah knew the same. He slapped his hand on the counter and demanded two tickets for Las Vegas. The attendant shook her hand indulgently. "That flight leaves in fifteen minutes, sir."

"Yes, with us," Hannah said. He produced his documents. The attendant studied the passport. In the pause, Saskia placed her FIB wallet and passport alongside Hannah's. As her fingers left the surface, she was a chess player committing to a move. Jobanique had told her to remain in the European Union. She needed to take the next flight back, and she needed to have Proctor in tow.

The attendant looked over Saskia's shoulder. The glance was deliberately indifferent. Saskia turned. A plain-clothes security guard stood behind them. Hannah saw her movement and turned too. The queue became still.

Hannah snorted, "Who are you, the bloody prefect?" He pointed at the attendant then stabbed a thumb in the direction of the security officer. "Tell him to piss off."

As the attendant explained to the security officer, slowly to be clear, that Hannah was a policeman, David Proctor, who was standing not far behind, stepped sideways from the queue. His hands, which had been dry, began to drip sweat. His face, recently shaved, itched. He walked to the next attendant and said, quietly but not too quietly, "Excuse me. My flight leaves in a couple of minutes. May I check-in for Las Vegas here?"

The attendant smiled. "You got lucky, I was about to open up." She started her computer with a flourish. "Have you flown before, sir?"

He turned so that he was facing away from the police. "No."

"Thought so. The first time is the best, believe me. Luggage?"

He tried to swallow but his throat was too sticky. "Just the briefcase."

To his left, close enough to touch, the middle aged police officer raised his voice and said, "Jesus, we're in pursuit of a bloody criminal. He's about to skip the country. Take your time."

David released his air. He wanted to bite his knuckles. His heart raced so fast its beat became a constant hum. He could hold out for a few more seconds, and then he would scream. Instinctively, his hand crept towards his jacket pocket. Then he drew it away. The stun gun was gone. It was in the bike container, which was in the gent's toilet, which was a lifetime away.

"Sir?" asked the attendant. Their eyes met. Hers were sympathetic.

"Yes?"

"I asked, is there anything in your briefcase that you are carrying for somebody else?"

"No."

"Fine. Here's your boarding pass."

David showed his teeth. "Thank-you." He reached for it, but she pulled it back. He swung from victory to defeat. The scream was near. Had the police officer seen him? Made a signal? Pulled a gun? But the attendant smiled. He released another breath. The air was stale and hot. He was not caught. Not yet.

“Here is the gate,” she said, pointing to the boarding pass with her pen, “and here is the seat.”

And here is the steeple, open it up and here are the people, he thought, still showing his teeth. He had not blinked. His eyes were itching.

“Look, I’ve just about had a tit-full of you,” said the police officer. “Get a fucking move on.”

“I’ve put you near the second emergency exit,” David’s attendant continued indulgently. “So you’ll have more leg room.”

The world was reduced to primitives. The nuances of conversation were gone, human interaction was a memory. The one remaining element was a script; normal behaviour at an airport. It was normal to take the ticket and the boarding pass.

David reached for his documents. They stuck to his sweaty fingers. The attendant said, “Good luck,” and he nearly laughed. He turned carefully and began to walk away. He inclined his head. With each step he felt the certainty build, the certainty that a voice would shout, “Stop! This is the police!” but it never came. He walked on. He watched his feet. It was the only way to be sure that he would not fall over. After twenty metres he realised that he had escaped.

For now.

They were on his flight.

Saskia took her boarding pass and ticket and stowed them with her passport. She remembered the gun and almost asked the attendant whether it would be possible to take it on the flight. But the attendant had already turned her attention to the next couple in

the queue. Anyway, it would cost them time. "Come on," said Hannah.

They headed towards passport control. Saskia glanced at her watch. Hannah saw her. "How long have we got?"

"Five or six minutes."

"Let's go," he said, and broke into a jog. Saskia joined him. Nobody so much as glanced. Just two people late for their flight. Saskia remained a little behind him the entire way. She did not want to encourage him to run faster. She could hear keys jangling in his pocket. She could hear his panting. The tails of his overcoat whipped back and forth. His neck became red.

"Scottie," she said. She tried to sound breathless. Proctor became less important. "Let's slow down."

Hannah turned around and jogged backwards for a few paces. "Come on, I can do with the exercise. It'll look great in the report."

They reached passport control a minute or so later. It was busy. Hannah stood with his hands on his hips. He took great breaths. Sometimes leaned backwards, as if to straighten his back, sometimes forwards, with his hands on his knees. He whistled and grimaced. "Saskia," he gasped. "Let's...jump the queue."

"Are you feeling alright, Scottie?"

"Those bloody sandwiches," he said. He finger-combed his hair. "OK, let's go."

"No, let us not," she said. "Take a moment to recover. I can see the plane. The gate is very close and we have several minutes. We will have time to reach it."

Hannah nodded. His breathing "OK. You're right. I'll just get my breath back."

Saskia reached over to his tie. She waggled it loose. “Yes. Relax.”

“You are sweating, sir,” said the passport control officer. “May I see your documents?”

“Yes, of course,” David replied. He watched as the man fingered the documents. He watched his eyes flick from the passport to David, from David to the passport. The silence was heavy. Or was it? David forced himself to slow his breathing. His hand flexed around the briefcase handle. His nails drummed on the material.

“You seem a bit nervous, sir.” The officer cocked his head. It was a deliberate affection. It suggested control. David saw himself reflected in the man’s designer glasses. He glanced at his name tag. Christopher Garner. Senior Passport Control Officer. Then David’s stomach seemed to drop. He was nearly sick.

What was his own name?

His fake surname?

“Mr Greensburg?”

David kept looking. The officer kept looking. The queue kept looking too. David could feel their eyes, hear their whispers. They wanted drama. Greensburg. The name wasn’t right. Think. He had created an entire backstory. There was a wife living in Leeds, a son at university, a blue Corvette, lovingly restored, a farmhouse kitchen...

“Greenspoon,” he blurted.

The officer was disappointed. “Of course, sir. My mistake.”

“I’m just a little nervous,” David said. The regret followed immediately, followed by the memory of Ego’s last words to him: “Remember, less is more.”

“Really, sir?”

“Of terrorism.”

The man handed back the passport and boarding pass.

“Naturally, we all are, sir.”

David nodded. He stepped over to the detector and felt a physical relief when he heard the officer turn his attention to the next person in the queue. His fingers trembled as he dumped his wallet into the little pot on the conveyor belt. The briefcase followed. He stepped through the archway. A waiting police officer with a sub-machine gun cast a lazy eye over him. Would he be recognised? The picture he had seen on posters was old: he had longer, darker hair, a heavier build. Did they expect him to flee the country? He checked around. There were at least three security cameras. Would a computer recognise him? Nothing happened. No alarms. He collected his wallet.

He was getting closer. Closer to the plane. Closer to a future he could not yet imagine.

Saskia had watched the man for a few seconds. She tried to recall Proctor’s height, but could not. She turned to Hannah and dug him in the ribs.

“What?”

“Him. The man walking through the detector.”

Hannah squinted. His breathing was still heavy. They were about six metres away. “Could be.”

“The passport checker talked to him for a long time.”

“Did he?”

David took two strides before he remembered his briefcase on the conveyor. He laughed a little too loud. He caught the eye of the armed police officer. The man’s face was blank. David turned. He was more relaxed now. He reached for the briefcase. He looked directly into the eyes of Saskia Brandt.

She did not react quickly enough. The man was too dissimilar to his picture. His hair was much shorter. His eyes were hooded, shadowed. He had lost some youth. He was thinner. But he was David Proctor.

“Proctor! Stop!”

She barged into the man in front of her, who tripped, dropping his case. Hannah cut in from the other direction. He trod on the dropped case and twisted his ankle. He pitched forward. His shoulder caught Saskia behind the knee and they both went down. It happened so quickly that people could do nothing but stare. The passport control officer and his colleagues were frozen. The armed police officer was motionless but for his thumb, which found his weapon’s safety catch and pressed.

Saskia tried to stand but there was a man sitting on the small of her back. She flicked her elbow at the narrow end of his thigh muscle. She heard a scream and the man convulsed off her. She climbed to her knees, blew her hair from her eyes and located Proctor.

Her hand went to her holster. She undid the strap with her thumb and withdrew the revolver.

There was another scream. “Oi, she’s got a gun!”

David froze too. His hand remained on the handle of the case. He was so close to the plane. It was ready to leave. It would get him out of here. He stared at the nose of the revolver.

The armed officer looked at David. His expression was blank, but the muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched. David grabbed the briefcase. He heard someone shout, “She’s got a gun!” He expected to see people flee. Instead, the crowd roared. Like a tide, it turned on his two pursuers. Saskia went under.

The armed officer pressed his ear piece and said, “Red, red, red.” Then he advanced on the crowd. His machine gun was pointed at the floor. David hurried towards his gate.

Saskia struggled. Somebody was sitting on her again. She felt her ribs bend like bows. In case she lost control of the gun, she felt for the gun’s safety. It was off. She pushed it back.

Abruptly, the man was pulled from her back. She heard shouts. Another man said, “Break it up.”

Saskia climbed to her feet. Thirty or forty people were staring at her. Some of them wore security uniforms. One of them was a police officer with a submachine gun. The blood fell away from her head and she stumbled. She spread her arms for balance and the crowd gasped. She still held the gun.

“Armed police! Drop the gun!”

Saskia bent double and let herself breathe. Her vision began to clear. She saw Hannah being held down by a frightened security officer. “Föderatives Investigationsbüro,” she said.

The officer looked at her. “Föderatives Investigationsbüro,” she repeated. And then, to the crowd, she said, “I am from the Federal Office of Investigation. I am in pursuit of a suspect.”

The armed officer stepped forward. “Drop the gun now,” he said.

Saskia hissed with frustration. She dropped the gun. She looked at the area beyond passport control. Proctor had gone. A voice from everywhere asked Mr Hannah and Ms Brandt to please board flight IAL 778 immediately.

“Let me show you some identification,” she said to the police officer.

“I totally agree. Slowly. Left hand. Throw it over.”

Saskia slid her badge across the floor. She noticed three more police officers running down the terminal towards her. Each wore the same outfit: black baseball cap, bullet-proof vest, combat trousers, black trainers. Each had a submachine gun pointing at the floor. The civilian security officers began to push people back. The crowd were silent at this unexpected street theatre.

Her ID landed back in her lap. “That’s yours, detective. Nice to meet you, Brandt. I’m Sergeant Trask.” He waved to the new arrivals. “Stand down, stand down.”

Saskia didn’t hear. Hannah, her deputy, was dying. His eyes moved but he didn’t see. He held his chest as though his heart was trying to break out. His skin was grey. Sweat ran from his forehead. “Scottie?” Saskia asked. Her voice cracked.

A shadow fell across Hannah's face. It was Trask. He said one word. "Paramedic." Saskia guessed he was talking into his radio.

She reached for Hannah's hand. The palm was slick. She turned his chin, hoping to make eye contact. Trask touched her shoulder.

"Brandt," he said. "We were told you were coming down. Didn't expect this drama though."

She nodded. Kept her eyes on Hannah. "Neither did I. What is happening to Scottie?"

"Paramedics are on the way."

Saskia felt his wrist for a pulse. She found none. Hannah's silver watch read something but it had an analogue display. Hers was digital. It read 12:29 a.m. Proctor's flight left in one minute. She turned to Trask and studied him for the first time. He was a young man. He had a hard, dependable face. "I am in pursuit of a fugitive."

He nodded. "I know."

"The flight leaves now. I need to ground his plane."

He nodded again. "What's the flight number?"

She passed him her boarding pass and tried to wipe the sweat from Scottie's forehead. His rictus had sagged into a stroke-like gape. His hand, which had been holding hers tightly, began to quiver.

"That may be a problem," said Trask. Saskia followed his finger. Through the transparent wall of the terminal she saw the huge A380 reversing.

"Stop the plane. Call the captain."

The police officer seemed sceptical. "I'll try, but the captain won't abort unless the bloke is a terrorist threat. I know from experience. We could radio ahead. Your man's not going anywhere. The Americans can take care of him."

"Not good enough. I do not know his name. There are over six hundred people on that flight. Please, contact the captain."

The man sighed. "Control from Bravo Two at Tango 5, I have a request to talk to the captain of the A380 now taxiing towards runway four. Flight ILA 778, runway four. This is most urgent, most urgent. Over." He tapped the device on his lapel and the controller's voice became audible.

"Bravo Two, stand by, over."

Saskia looked around for the paramedics. Hannah had lost control of his bladder. His body was relaxed but his breathing had dwindled to tiny gasps. Trask crouched and turned Hannah's head. He was encumbered by his swinging machinegun. "Keep his airway open."

From his radio an American voice said, "Bravo Two, this is Captain Jameson on ILA 778. We're moderately busy here."

"Captain," the police officer said, "you have a fugitive on your flight. There's an FIB agent here ready to arrest him. We request that you return to the terminal."

"I'm about five minutes from take-off. Is this a danger to my airplane?"

Trask turned to Saskia. She saw Proctor making his bomb. Then she saw Jobanique recruiting her into the FIB. He wanted her gut feeling. Reluctantly, she shook her head. "No, Captain."

"I've got six hundred and twenty paying passengers. I'm responsible for getting them to America on time. This guy isn't

going anywhere. Give me his name. He'll be arrested when we land."

"But I do not know his name," she whispered. Scottie had almost stopped breathing. Paramedics ran towards her. They had come through the gate. Their ambulance was parked outside. She kissed Scottie on the forehead and whispered, "I promise to come back."

To Trask she said, "Tell him to request that he is pushed down the take-off queue. I intend to catch his flight. It is a matter of your national security."

She took her gun and ran through passport control. Trask shouted that she should be let through. Then he relayed her last message to the pilot and ran after her.

Saskia ducked left down the emergency stairs that the paramedics had used. She stepped over a barrier that said 'Heathrow Personnel Only'. Through the terminal's glass wall she could see her aeroplane. It had reversed clear and now waited for the tractor vehicle to disengage. Then it would taxi onto the slip road that joined the runway and wait for final clearance. Somehow, she knew.

She reached the ground floor and ran outside. She was on the eastern flank of the terminal. Ahead, lost in the lights, were the four other terminals. To her left and right were docked aeroplanes. Only dashes of colour spoke to their shape and size. The air was thick with darkness, fuel and the wail of jet engines.

The ambulance had been parked neatly in a red-lined space. Nearby was a orange-coloured van with a flight of steps on the

back. It was unlocked. She eased herself into the driving seat. She ran her fingers over the steering wheel. Touched the gear stick. It was unfamiliar.

She couldn't drive.

When she had dropped into the West Lothian Centre using the decelerator, an unknown expertise had guided her. But she had no such feeling with this vehicle. She slammed her palms on the wheel.

"Need help?" asked Trask.

She moved over to the passenger side. "Follow that plane."

He reversed it out aggressively and swung the wheel. The van skidded to face the receding aeroplane and swayed under the weight of the steps. Saskia fumbled for the seat belt. "At the FIB, our police drivers have thorough training."

Trask grinned. "Vive la difference."

The van pulled out. Saskia stayed vigilant for other vehicles and aircraft. She overheard Trask's conversation with the ILA captain. "Yes, captain...we're nearly alongside...I'm curious about that too...German, I think." He turned to Saskia. "He'll stop just before they get to the runway. That'll be our one chance."

"Please keep your eyes on the road."

"But there isn't a road."

He swerved left and right to demonstrate. Saskia groaned. Her abrasiveness was amusing him. At length she said, "Trask, I appreciate this a great deal."

"Dinner."

"Not that much."

David sat with a whisky in one hand and his briefcase in the other. To his left, a young boy stared at him. To his right, the boy's mother read a paperback novel. The safety briefing had just finished. David stretched his legs into the access aisle for the emergency exit. The briefcase lay across his shins. He drained the whisky with a single gulp. As his eyes lingered on the bottom of the glass, a stewardess appeared and took it from him. She also took his briefcase and placed it in the overhead compartment. The boy, who was still staring, said, "First time?"

"No."

"But you asked for a seat near the emergency exit."

David regarded him coldly. He was about ten years old. He had a crew-cut and glasses. "Why do you say that?"

"I asked the stewardess. I like to know who I'm sitting with."

"Oh, do you," David said. He wondered if there was time for another whisky before take-off. He relaxed. For the first time since leaving the terminal, he began to think clearly. The police officers should have grounded the plane and searched it. That was within their power. They hadn't, so...they were intending to have him arrested when the plane touched down in Chicago. They knew he was on the flight. Everything was over. He would fly to America, be arrested, and be flown straight back.

"Are you deaf?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have a hearing aid," the boy said. He touched David's ear.

"Don't touch. It's for my phone."

“The stewardess said that phones should be deactivated, along with any other electronic devices such as computers and music players.”

“Did she.”

The boy patted David on the arm. “I haven’t flown before, either.”

David closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

He awoke when the boy poked him in the leg. He had been dribbling. His neck was stiff. His back was a corset of hard muscle. “What’s happening?” he asked.

“They’ve opened the door.”

David gripped the armrests. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry, we’re not in the air.”

There were two aisles on their deck of the aeroplane, but David was too far away to look down one. To stand would draw attention. He could hear passengers muttering. There was a bleep as the screen on his armrest flickered into life. It was the captain. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We are halting briefly to welcome a police officer of the Continental FIB on board. There is no cause for alarm, unless you haven’t filled in those tax returns.” Pause for polite chuckles. “While I’m here, I’d like to welcome you once more on board this ILA flight 778 to Chicago. In a few moments we leave Heathrow in an easterly direction before turning towards the north-west...”

An air steward had opened the forward door and was leaning out. Saskia had already passed him her shoulder bag. Five metres below, Trask gave her the thumbs-up. She could not be sure if this was a sign of general encouragement or a signal to jump. She decided to jump. Only her arms were successful. Her body whipped against the fuselage. For a long moment she swung helplessly. She watched Trask. Her fear fell away when she saw him spread his arms to catch her. Then two stewards hauled her inside. Her breasts were squashed painfully. She felt carpet on her face and warm air. Some passengers near the door clapped slowly.

“...Chicago, which is five hours ahead.” There was a pause as the captain turned away from the camera. “OK, ladies and gentleman, we now have our full complement. On behalf of ILA, the crew, and myself, I would like to wish you a pleasant trip. Cabin crew, final pre-flight check, please.”

David did not believe he would have a pleasant trip. He tried to sleep but he could only think of what might have been. Had his benefactor created a new life for him in America? It made no difference. He would be arrested and kept in a maximum-security prison. When he saw trial (though he knew, on one level, that he might not) his bail would run into millions. He would never see his daughter after all.

There was one thing he could do.

He could use his head. Plan.

Twenty minutes passed. He had an idea. He saw a woman walking down the aisle. He recognised her as the owner of the gun

that had been trained on his face only a few minutes before. She was carrying a clipboard. She stopped twice to check passengers. Males travelling alone, perhaps. Males in their early fifties. People who might be David Proctor.

He raised his hand. She saw him and approached.

“My name is David Proctor,” he said. “You are looking for me.”

The woman was pretty, though she looked tired and serious. She had long brown hair and emerald-green eyes. Her suit was creased. She nodded. “I have been following you. I am Detective Saskia Brandt.”

The boy, who David had forgotten, asked, “Are you a murderer on the run?”

David wanted to say that, certainly, he had eaten the liver of a little boy and washed it down with a nice Chianti, fuh-fuh-fuh. Instead he replied, “Yes, I am.”

“You are arrested by Detective Saskia Brandt of the Föderatives Investigationsbüro, badge number 077-439-001, on two counts of murder. These charges will be pursued under the British constitution. You have the right to remain silent,” she said. “Anything you say may be recorded at the discretion of your arresting officer and reproduced in a court of law as evidence against you. This data is the property of the FIB. Do you understand? Come with me.”

She made sure that David walked in front. They found the bar in the middle of the plane. He had a scotch on the rocks. She had a gin and tonic. She said, “Talk.” He told his story. The whole story.

The paramedics wheeled Hannah down to the ambulance. He was covered to the chin with a red blanket. His head and shoulders were raised. He breathed cold oxygen through a loose mask. His hands lay on his belly with the fingers knitted. One paramedic, called Gareth, chatted the entire way.

He did not see a woman detach herself from the crowd as he was led away. He did not see her follow the trolley. He did not see her reach the ambulance shortly after the paramedic had closed the door. She opened the door and stepped in as Gareth's back was turned. He showed no surprise. "Can I help you?"

She sat down opposite and produced a badge. Gareth grunted and returned to his work. Hannah looked, but not quickly enough to read it. She slipped it in into a trouser pocket. He tried to focus on her face. She was in her late forties. She had long brown hair and emerald-green eyes. The paramedic turned away.

"How is he?" she asked.

"He's stable at the moment."

Hannah pulled weakly at the mask. His arms were too heavy. The paramedic forced his hand away. What was happening? Where was Saskia?

"I'm here, Scottie," she said. "As promised."

She leaned forward and smiled. It was Saskia, but she was older. He smiled back until the heaviness reached even his mind. He slept.

Part III

The ravine was widest at their point of landing. To their left, rock had tumbled from the face to form a scree slope. To their right was a flat plateau of shingle. It stretched out for nearly a kilometre before it met the right-hand wall of the ravine. At its face was a little hut. It was crude but sturdy. From this distance, nothing could be seen but for a bonfire set before it.

The Devil, Jobanique and the Deep Blue Sea

The mirror buzzed against its screws. Somewhere, a woman laughed. Saskia looked at her eyes. In a staring contest the reflection was always last to look away. She considered Proctor's story. It was plausible. He lacked the edge of Hannah, the menace of Jobanique. Her mind floated as a compass above an inscrutable magnetic source – her lost memories, perhaps – and believed Proctor.

She reached into her jacket and removed her badge. The golden letters of the Föderatives Investigationsbüro reflected her many times. Underneath, 'Saskia Brandt' had been stamped on the metal. It was not her name. She was not Saskia Brandt. She was a German woman in her late twenties; she knew nothing more. Her skills were fake. Her knowledge of arrest procedure: inserted. Digital.

Did she believe Proctor?

Could he help her?

You are a detective. Detect.

Her eyes closed. Sleep was close. In her mind, she saw the witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

Who were the fates?

There was a knock at the bathroom door.

"Yes?" she called.

"I really need the bathroom."

"Of course."

She collected her things. She guessed she had been staring in the mirror for nearly ten minutes. It was an indescribable feeling to find one's own face unfamiliar.

She found Proctor in the bar. He was sitting as she had left him: slumped, exhausted. She had said virtually nothing for the past two hours. For Proctor, by contrast, words had been a great pressure inside him. She had sipped her gin and tonic. He had sipped his whisky.

"I have thought about your proposal," she said. She sat but did not unbutton her jacket. She did not want Proctor to reach for her gun, though the captain had insisted that she unload it.

"Go on," he said. His eyes moved around the small room. Occasionally they settled on her. Mostly they settled on his glass.

"It is unacceptable."

Proctor nodded. "Ah."

"Professor Proctor –"

"David."

"– it is not within my power to release you. You do not even know where you are going."

Proctor smiled. "No. My guide has become curiously silent on the matter."

Saskia swivelled on her stool to face him. "I have arrested you. It is my duty to return you to England. There you will face the British authorities."

"But you believe me."

"I do not have the luxury of believing you or disbelieving, Professor. I only have my orders."

Proctor rolled the empty glass between his palms. Saskia half-smiled. It was a curious gesture. She recalled an old memory

– surely from her former self – of man sitting at a bar, making the exact same action. He was a sheriff in the American Wild West, but character in a film, building his courage, drop by drop, so that he could run the bandits out of town. “Look,” she said. “Tell them what you have told me. If you are speaking the truth, you will be acquitted.”

He laughed. He wobbled the glass at the steward and Saskia, as her attention switched, remembered the film’s name: High Noon. “There may be a trial. You know what happens in these David-and-Goliath contests, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “David beats Goliath.”

“No, that’s the fiction. The truth is that David is beaten every time.”

Proctor surrendered his glass to the steward. The man placed the glass under a small bottle that was attached to the wall. The bottle was upside-down. He pressed against the nozzle and some amber liquid fell into the glass. As liquid fell, bubbles rose. Saskia watched David. The process fascinated him. When he received the glass, he took a sip and tossed the liquid around his mouth like a wine taster. He swallowed. “Detective Brandt, I’m sorry. You remember what I told you about your role?”

“Yes. You said that were certain that I have a further part to play. But you cannot tell me how you came to this conclusion.”

“You must come with me.”

Saskia held his gaze. “Professor Proctor, I have spoken to you from politeness because I am curious and this is a long flight. It is well within my power to have you chained to a bulkhead in the cargo bay. You can keep the poodles company.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

Saskia raised an eyebrow. It was difficult to feel threatened by a scruffy, middle-aged man who had protested his pacifism only moments before. “Go on.”

“Your full name is Saskia Maria Brandt. You speak German, English and a little French. You are proficient in firearms and aikijutsu. You live on Rue Franz Merjay, 1070 Ixelles, Bruxelles. Your FIB badge number is 077-439-001.”

She dropped her hand to rest on her thigh. She needed to feel closer to the gun. Professor Proctor was not an unthinking zealot after all. He had researched her. She should have realised earlier. “Who told you that?”

“It is being dictated to me by my personal computer, which is always on the look out for other friendly computers. Like the one in your brain. My personal computer wonders if I want to deactivate it.”

Saskia did not blink. She did not wet her lips, swallow, or cough. She had no bullets. There would not be time to find them, load the gun, and blow her malfunctioning brains out.

“You have spent nearly two hours explaining your principles, Professor. Have they now deserted you?”

He smiled. “David. No. They haven’t deserted me. In fact I still hold them in high regard. In the end, it comes back to protecting those principles.”

Saskia laughed bitterly. “How pathetic. That is the age-old drivel spouted from the mouth of any idiot with a cause, from the religious fanatic to the political terrorist.”

She expected, hoped, that he would react angrily. Instead his head drooped. “Saskia, you don’t understand. I don’t want to do this.”

“Listen to me,” she interrupted. She grabbed his wrist. “You must understand. My boss. The way he operates.” She checked the room for eavesdroppers. “This chip contains me, the real me. I do not want to go back. That is not who I am. I choose to remain this way.”

“What does the chip do? My computer says that it has interfaced with your cortex.”

“It is a new personality. A donor. It suppresses the old. I was...a criminal. My boss wishes to harness that criminality. That criminality gives me a certain empathy with the people I try to catch.”

Proctor’s expression was blank with competing questions. She released his wrist. “But,” he said, “doesn’t the new personality overwrite the old one? Doesn’t that mean that the element of criminality from the old you has been, so to speak, deleted?”

“No.” Saskia stared into her empty glass. “Someone once said it has been ‘knocked sideways’. It is still there. It is dormant. If you deactivate the chip, I will become a murderer.”

David frowned. “Do you think that will be a significant change?”

“Of course I do.”

“You think murderers are insane?”

“No. I do not wish to talk about this any more.”

“What would you do if I told my computer to deactivate the chip?”

Saskia shrugged. “I would load my gun and I would commit suicide.”

Proctor said, “Oh.” She had embarrassed him. He called the steward over. “Another whisky, please. Double.”

They watched the steward inject two shots. He placed it before Proctor, who pushed it towards Saskia. “That’s for you. Come with me to find my daughter.”

“I have no choice.”

He smiled. The man with principles. He had blown up a research centre because of them. He had murdered his friend. He was the real murderer, not her. But as he looked, shyly, at the backs of his hands, she was reminded again of the sheriff waiting for high noon. She took the whisky and knocked it back.

John Hartfield smiled and blinked as the aide held open the side door for him. “You may take the call in here, sir,” she said. As the door closed, the corridor noise muted. Hartfield sank into an ornate armchair and appreciated the bookcase to his left. His eyes stopped on a leather-bound Mark Twain.

The aide said, “The room is secured with lead-panelling, sir. The second Bush.” She paused. “Would you like some privacy?”

He smiled and blinked again. The gesture unnerved some people, but the aide was blank. Hartfield could imagine her as a personal assistant.

“Would you like to work for me?” he asked “I will double your salary.”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question.”

The aide left the room in a perfect reverse of her entrance. Before the door closed, Hartfield had placed his computer – a cylinder the size of cigarette – on the edge of the adjacent table. He licked his index finger and dabbed a four times on the surface.

In the rough square, a graphical interface appeared. The bottom half showed a keyboard. He began to type.

A face appeared and he sat back.

“You are connected to the local server. Your caller is waiting,” said the face.

“Take the call,” he replied.

Another face occupied the square. It was a young man in a cap. He was unshaven and nervous. Behind him was a highstreet. “Hello?”

Something changed in Hartfield’s expression. A light began to radiate, or the muscles around his eyes and mouth began to work properly, or his concentration returned. But it was a mask. When Hartfield did not wear that mask, talking to him was like talking to an answer phone. The aide knew that.

“I am here,” replied Hartfield. He leaned back further. The cigarette-sized computer contained a camera, but he did not adjust it for a better angle. The computer would supply a false image and a false voice by default.

“I’m in a public phone booth,” said the man.

“That is good. What do you have to tell me? I’m about to have an important meeting.”

“It’s our man. He’s en route to Las Vegas. There was a drama at Heathrow. It was on the news.”

Though he was unseen, Hartfield frowned. His voice was easier to modulate when he immersed himself in the role. “I told you to follow him. You should be on the plane.”

The man adjusted his cap nervously. “It would have been easier to take him when the glider crashed.”

“I wanted you to follow him. To lead me to his benefactor.”

“Not in Scotland. Too open. Spot a tail in a no time.”

Hartfield steepled his fingers. He had read many books on body language. Finger-steepling indicated control. Control was an impression he wished to create. “You may die tonight. You should put your affairs in order.”

The man clapped a hand to his mouth. Hartfield noted the gesture. He associated it with women, or effeminate men, but the operative on the phone was an especially brutal individual. “You can’t do that,” he hissed.

“Remember what you are,” Hartfield said. He cut the connection.

He dropped the computer in his pocket just as a knock came at the door. It opened immediately and the aide entered. Corridor sounds followed her. “The President will see you now, Mr Hartfield.”

He stood and brushed his thighs, though there was nothing to brush off. He felt a pause was needed. “I’m afraid that’s out of the question.”

“Sorry, what?”

He smiled and blinked. “I have urgent business in Las Vegas. I’ll be in touch.”

The Las Vegas Connection

When the aircraft touched down at 5:15 a.m. in McCarran International, David was listening to his favourite piece of music, a guitar instrumental called Cavatina. He had not slept since the connection in Chicago. He unplugged the earphones and raised his cuffed left hand. Saskia's right arm rose too. She remained asleep. The airframe juddered and they began to decelerate. David stared at her. Her hair had fallen across her face. It was greasy. In their thirteen hours together, she had made no attempt to brush it or push it behind her ears. She was almost without vanity.

He looked through the window. It was still dark. In the east, the horizon was a chalky blue line. They had raced the sun and stretched the night to nineteen hours.

The juddering became worse and Saskia awoke. She wiped her mouth with a sleeve and looked around. She seemed to take in information in an oddly systematic way. David was reminded of an old film where a man lost the ability to form new memories. He had used instant photographs and body tattoos instead. He read and re-read them from moment to moment. Saskia looked at the ceiling: I'm in a plane. She looked down at her body: I'm Saskia Brandt. She looked at the handcuffs: I'm cuffed to someone. She looked at David: I'm cuffed to Professor Proctor.

David smiled. She did not smile back.

"We're here," David said.

"Is this Las Vegas?"

He wanted to ask, Do you know what Las Vegas is? Did you know it existed before you read your ticket? How do you feel about it? Can you name all the American states? but he said, “Yes.”

“I will remove the handcuffs soon,” she said.

“Thanks. I’m sorry about all of this.”

She smiled. “You’re English. You’re sorry about everything.”

They paused briefly for Saskia to make a phone call to Edinburgh. She didn’t say why. She couldn’t get through. They made their way through the terminal and came to a slot-machine parlour. Though it was 5:30 a.m., every machine in sight was occupied. Gamblers inserted their money, pulled the handle or pressed the button, and watched the result. Suitably reinforced, they repeated the process.

“Look at all the money,” Saskia said.

David nodded. The gamblers inserted dollar after dollar. While the rest of the developed world had made the transition from physical to electronic transactions – stored on a mobile phone, or a bankcard, or a personal computer – gamblers preferred cash. You needed to see physical money going in and money coming out. Mostly, thought David, going in.

They kept walking. Saskia said nothing more. David wanted to talk to her. Chat. He wanted her to know that there were no hard feelings. That it was a professional thing. That he couldn’t afford to be arrested. And that, Jesus, who could?

McCarran International was within walking distance of Las Vegas. They could see the casinos. The sky was cloudy and the soil was brown-yellow. The vegetation was a washed-out green.

David said, “Saskia, I need your help.”

She turned to him. There was far-away look in her eyes.

“What is it?”

They stepped onto a moving walkway and stood shoulder to shoulder. David checked in front and behind for eavesdroppers.

“How did you know I was going to America?”

Saskia pursed her lips. “I should not tell you that.”

David blurted, “But I told you my story.”

“Yes. A story. Remember that you have me under duress. I could call for help.”

David bristled. “You know what would happen if you did that.”

“And you know what would happen to you. You are surrounded by airport security. They are quite visible.”

“I would take my chances,” he said quietly. “I’ve got this far.”

“I accept that you do not intend any genuine harm towards me. Or, rather, that you would avoid it.”

“True. But remember that I’m a man with very little to lose.”

“Is that so? I would say, Professor Proctor, that, as a father, you have a great deal to lose.”

David’s fingers curled around the handle of the briefcase until the nail beds became white. “Don’t threaten my daughter, Detective, or I will harm you. Genuinely.”

Saskia said smugly, “The killer has a heart.”

“I am not a killer.”

“You have killed.”

“So have you.”

“We are,” said Saskia, “‘quits’ then, Professor. So, now that we have established each other’s qualifications, what help do you need?”

David was confused. He decided to ask his original question. "I need to know where Jennifer is. I think she's wrapped up in the whole thing."

"Whole thing?"

"The situation."

"I know what 'whole thing' means, Professor," Saskia snapped.

"Stop bloody calling me 'Professor'," David snapped back.

"Fine. You will not get my help."

David raised his voice. "Jesus Christ...do you know where my daughter is or not?"

A armed security guard, who was leaning against a coke machine, gazed at them as they drifted past. David smiled with embarrassment, pointed at Saskia, and made a circle by his temple. The guard did nothing. Saskia watched the exchange contemptuously.

"You are stupid, not me."

David stared at her. In the midst of his anger, he nearly gave Ego the command to deactivate her chip. He was a single breath from killing her. He stared at her a little longer.

"Saskia." He touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry. As soon as I find Jennifer you will be free to leave. I promise."

She adjusted her shoulder bag. "Do you want me to feel grateful?"

He was back in Northallerton. "Oh, I get it. You're a hero. You're going to go home to your little family in fucking Chelsea and brag about how you played Dr Bernardo up north.

"No, of course not." He struggled to catch the right words. "Just...I'm doing what I'm doing for the right reasons."

“As they seem to you.”

“Yes.”

Saskia pointed. “Watch out. The end of the walkway.”

They both stepped down. David followed the arrows and walked ahead of her. From the periphery of his vision, he watched her shadow.

“Fine,” she said. “I will help you find your daughter because it will aid my own release. I can tell you now that she is somewhere in the state of Nevada. That is all.”

“Great. That narrows it down to about a million square miles.”

A voice in his ear said, “Actually, 110, 567.”

“Thanks, Ego,” David replied acidly. “Ego, I don’t suppose you know where Jennifer is?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not. My information has been limited to the essentials from the very beginning. This is for security reasons in the event of my capture.”

“Can’t you give me a clue?”

“You already have one.”

David winced. Of course. The paper he had eaten. How did the clue go? Sounds like a car-parking attendant belongs to the finest. Was that a clue to Jennifer’s location? Had to be. He repeated the clue aloud to Saskia.

“A cross-word clue,” she said. “The difficult type.”

“Ah, clever. That must be why you’re the detective.”

Saskia nodded seriously. “Indeed.”

They found a hotel and slept until 9:00 a.m. David was more tired when he awoke. His back was tight; his muscles ached. If he

were a young man, he would have recovered by now. They headed towards the centre of town and soon came to the central artery known as the Strip. The traffic was cattle stampede. David hugged his coat closer – it wasn't warm – and nodded towards a diner on the corner of their block. Saskia followed him with her arms folded and her head bent against the wind.

The diner smelled of plastic and coffee. A single fan swung in the centre of the ceiling, too slow to stir the air. A large screen showed a baseball game. It was muted. Three or four customers sat silently in booths. An old man sat at the counter. A Latino waitress was wiping the counter around him. The man didn't move. "Morning, folks," said the waitress.

"Good morning," David said. The other customers glanced at them briefly, blankly. He steered Saskia towards a booth near the window. They sat with David looking out and Saskia looking in. That suited him.

The waitress wandered over. She had a pencil behind her ear and another in her hand. She wore horn-rimmed glasses. Her make-up had been applied unevenly. She produced a pad from her apron and stood poised. "What'll you have?"

"Just a coffee for me, please," David said.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you have croissant?" asked Saskia.

"We do, honey," replied the waitress. She smiled brilliantly.

"You bet. You want some jellies with that?"

"That's jam," David whispered.

"I know what 'jelly' means," Saskia said. She looked up at the waitress. "You'll have to forgive my husband. He used to be in the

army. He is not the sharpest tool in the shed. All his friends say so. Don't they, Claedus?"

David held her stare. He tried to think of an awful name for her but the pressure of the moment was too much. "Yes, dear," he said slowly. "Not the sharpest tool in the box."

"Shed."

"Shed."

Saskia looked at the waitress again, as if to say, See what I mean? Then she said, "Strawberry jelly, please."

The waitress smiled politely and reversed away. They sat listening to soft rock and the swish-swish of the fan. Outside, a thousand people walked by. David became hypnotized by them. Where did they come from and where did they go? They looked like a forest seen from a train window: each the same, quite untouchable, more interesting because of it.

"I speak English, you know," Saskia said.

David re-focused his attention. She was staring. He saw then, for the first time, how beautiful she was. Not a classically beautiful face. Not simple and clear-cut. But her emerald-green eyes. "David? Hello?"

"Hello, Saskia. I know you speak English. We're both tired. Help me with the clue. The sooner we find my daughter..." His words trailed away as he yawned. He heard a bone click in his ear. He waggled his jaw experimentally.

Saskia looked away. She placed her hands on the table with her fingers spread. She stared at the nails. "OK, then. 'Sounds like a car-parking attendant belongs to the finest.' Where do you start with a clue like that?"

“Well, it could be phrased like a cryptic crossword clue. They often have part of the answer in the question. One of the words may be an anagram of the answer.”

“Wait,” Saskia said. She took a napkin from the dispenser. She found a pen in her shoulder bag and wrote down the clue. “‘Attend-ent’ or ‘attend-ant’?”

“‘Attend-ant.’ Make two copies, will you?”

A police car flashed by the window. They each took a strip of napkin and stared hard. David found that he couldn’t form a new word from any of the old ones. Not one. “How about you?” he asked.

“Nothing. What about the ‘sounds like’ part?”

“I can’t make any words from that.”

“No, I mean...perhaps that does not refer to the entire answer. Perhaps only part of it.”

David smoothed his strip. He had to blink to wipe the sleep from eyes. “Of course. ‘Sounds like a car-parking attendant’. What’s another word for a car-parking attendant?”

“You’re the English speaker, not me.”

“Ah, but you fake it so well,” David replied. Saskia smiled. “Another word...would be ‘traffic warden’, ‘attendant’...no, we have that. Come on, Saskia.”

“I’m thinking.”

“What’s the name of the bloke who sits in the booth at a car-park?”

“That never happens. There are ticket machines. In former times, maybe.”

David grunted. “Fine. It could be an American word. We’re in America. ‘Valet’.”

“What’s a valet?”

“Somebody who parks your car for you.”

Saskia reclined and tugged at her bottom lip. “It fits better than ‘traffic warden’.”

David re-read the clue. Sounds like a car-parking attendant belongs to the finest. The finest what? “Does it mean the best example of a valet, like a super-valet?”

“What’s a super-valet?”

“Like Superman, only cleaner.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I was thinking aloud.”

The waitress walked over. David laid his arm across the napkin. Saskia noticed and used her own to wipe her mouth. The waitress placed a cup on the table and poured him a coffee. The aroma was beautiful; the finest morning perfume. His eyes began to clear. His headache evaporated. He turned to the waitress. Her expression was neutral, as though she was setting an empty table. David took a chance. Ego, having read all those espionage novels, would have been aghast. He lifted his arm. “Excuse me, miss,” he said. He scratched his ear and feigned touristic helplessness. “We’re tourists.”

The waitress smiled. Some of her warmth returned. She slouched and rested the coffee pot on her hip. “Really.”

“Yeah. You see, we’re out here to visit my younger brother, Bruce. He’s a bit of tearaway. He works in computers. Now, we know for sure he’s in Las Vegas, but he’s fond of practical jokes.”

“And cryptic crossword clues,” Saskia said brightly.

“Yes, and those. He’s given us this clue.” David handed her the napkin strip. “Knowing Bruce, it’s a clue to where he lives. That’s all we have. It’s like a treasure hunt.”

The waitress stared at the napkin. Saskia stared at David. He stared right back. They waited while waitress sighed, nodded, frowned and shifted from one slouch to another. “You hang on there, I’ll be right back.” She walked through a beaded curtain that led to the kitchen.

“Have you done this type of thing before?” Saskia asked.

“Subterfuge? No.”

“I thought not.”

David sipped the coffee. It was weak and stale. He gulped it down.

The waitress returned. She smiled and refilled David’s cup. “It ain’t cheating to ask a stranger?” she asked.

Saskia and David shook their heads. “Certainly not,” Saskia said.

The waitress pondered for a moment longer. She knew how to heighten the suspense. David’s idiot smile began to sag. “OK,” she said finally. She put the napkin strip back on the table. She pointed to the first part. “A ‘parking attendant’. That’s a valet. And ‘finest’. That means the police or the fire service. Probably, it means fire service.”

“Yes, we got the first bit,” David said. “But why the fire service?”

“Because ‘valet’ sounds like ‘valley’, and there ain’t a ‘police valley’ around here. There is a ‘fire valley’, though: the Valley of Fire national park. It’ll take you about half an hour to get there on the interstate.”

They collected a new Ford from a nearby Rent-A-Car. David drove. The sun was high in the sky and dust blew in from the north-east. It collected under the wipers. Saskia looked at the map and announced that they would need to drive along the Strip. David said a prayer as they did so. His fingernails dug into the wheel. The traffic was so thick it felt like they were in a car park.

David said, "Are you sure this the right road?"

Saskia consulted the map. "Yes. Turn right here towards the I-15."

They drove on. Saskia reached into her jacket and David shouted, "Hey!"

"My sunglasses, not my gun," she said wearily. "Anyway, it is not loaded."

He relaxed. The sunglasses were tinted and reminded him of John Lennon. He didn't dare to mention it. She would ask, "Who is John Lennon?" and he would despair.

On the interstate, the world opened before them. Las Vegas was a large city by America standards, but withered in comparison to the surrounding spectacle. Within its limits were green trees and water. Beyond them the trees died and the water evaporated. David opened his window. Loud, cool air invaded the car. It dried his throat. The road ahead was empty, so he turned to his right and admired the view. He was struck by its emptiness. On the map, it was called the Mojave Desert. In the middle of that desert you could die just for walking. Incredible.

Saskia said, "I hear the view is also good with the window shut."

David pressed a button. The window closed and his mind fell back into the car. They drove for another two miles or so. David said, "What do you think of the view?"

"I don't like it. No trees."

She tugged at her jacket and smoothed the material of her trousers. David had seen her do that once or twice in the time he had known her. She was formulating a difficult question. "When we met on the aeroplane, do you remember what you said?"

"No."

"You asked me if we'd met somewhere before. That made me think that you were an FIB agent."

David laughed. "Don't you need to be a certain height to get in?"

"I'm serious, David."

She's calling me David, not Proctor, he thought. Politicians call it detente.

"Go on."

"That is a code-phrase. Surely you remember what I told you yesterday."

"Yes, you have a boss called Jobanique who wiped your memory and gave you a new personality. If I didn't remember that, then I wouldn't be able to threaten you with switching it off."

Saskia pushed her sunglasses a little further up the bridge of her nose. David wondered why she was wearing them. The day was quite cloudy. "I wonder if you are another of Jobanique's agents," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I have been tricked before to test my detective powers."

“Wow. You must have got some bonus paranoia software on that chip.”

“Be serious.”

David let one hand drop from the wheel. There was no gear stick so he drummed his fingers on his knee-cap. “What do you want me to say, Saskia? I told you my story. You know why I’m doing this.”

Saskia said, “That is precisely my point. Your story did not seem very plausible.”

David’s voice rose in pitch. “What do you mean, not plausible?”

“Just that, not plausible. Incredible. Unlikely.”

“I know what ‘implausible’ means,” he snapped.

“David, keep your voice down.”

He shifted uncomfortably. The clothes he wore – the businessman’s disguise – were not ideal for travelling. He would buy new at the next opportunity. “Do you know why I asked you if we’d met before?”

“No, that is my point –”

“It’s because we have. We have met before. You might be chasing me now, Saskia, but precisely three days ago you helped me escape. You gave a funeral service in a church in Scotland. You overpowered the real minister. You arranged to have me towed away by a glider. And, into the bargain, you were about forty years old.”

The Valley of Fire

Saskia watched the rocks. She tried to find a flaw in his story. David claimed that she – the fake minister – had been about forty years old. It would be a difficult make-up to make someone look forty years old, but not impossible. Film actors could radically change their appearance. Plus, the fact that this impostor had been elderly meant that only an approximation of her appearance would have been necessary.

But it wasn't plausible. Why copy a future Saskia?

That was the flaw. She told David.

He had prepared his reply. "Time travel," he said.

She gave him a hard look. "Explain."

"Time travel is implied by several theories. Not, perhaps, time travel as you or I conceive of it, but time travel nonetheless. The general theory of relativity predicts that objects travelling at a relatively faster speed will experience time at a rate slower than objects travelling at a relatively slow speed."

"You are beginning to sound like you did yesterday, when you were telling me your story. Does this argument conclude that neither of us have free will?"

David rubbed his chin. "I don't think so."

"I was joking."

"Gotchya." He cleared his throat and kept his eyes on the horizon. "There's a famous example of this kind of time travel called the Twin Dilemma. It goes like this: there are a pair of twins. One of them becomes interested in space flight and gets a job as an astronaut. One day – on, say, their thirtieth birthdays – the

astronaut twin takes off on a spaceship that travels near the speed of light. On board that ship, clocks work just as they always have; the astronauts live their lives and notice absolutely nothing. Back on Earth, things proceed normally too. There is nothing abnormal about either the ship or the Earth. The spaceship returns to Earth. On board ship, only six months have passed. On Earth, twenty years have passed. The twins are reunited, but the Earth-bound twin is fifty years old, whereas the spacefaring one is still thirty. This is entirely consistent with Einstein's theories. In fact, it has been proven by comparing atomic clocks on aeroplanes to those on the ground. On aeroplanes, clocks slow down."

Saskia's eyes were wide. "Interesting. I have been on a spaceship while my twin sister stayed on Earth. At some point she entered a Scottish convent. Later, she became entangled in a conspiracy to help you escape. Meanwhile I crash-landed on the FIB roof."

"Saskia, do you get formal sarcasm training in the FIB? Vulcan neck-pinch in the morning, sceptical-eyebrow work before lunch, sarcasm in the afternoon?"

"I cannot believe that you are seriously suggesting time travel as an explanation for your experience. Hallucinations or memory problems are more likely."

David shook his head grimly. "There's more. It gets too complicated for my own understanding, unfortunately. It seems to be that particles that are accelerated – just as the spacefaring twin was accelerated – experience a slow-down of time. The faster those particles travel, the greater the slow-down. If you were a particle like a photon – a light particle, which travels at the speed of light – time would be so slow for you that the lifetime of the

universe might pass in an instant. If you went even faster than that, you would travel backwards in time.”

“How is that?”

“I don’t know. Professor Michaels would, though.”

Saskia sighed. “And who is Professor Michaels?”

“He is the supervisor of the research project that Jennifer is involved with.”

“A research project requires a research centre.”

“Yes, I know that. Jennifer works at one. I would guess it’s somewhere near the Valley of Fire. John Hartfield partly funds it. He’s a driven man. He threw a great deal of money at me when I was a young researcher.”

Saskia was silent for a while. She did not like the way the conversation was developing. Time travel was easy to dismiss in the normal course of things. It was less easy when they were heading towards a research institute designed to further knowledge of cutting-edge and experimental technologies. “If this time travel theory is true...”

“Then you have no choice. You must go back.”

Her heart lurched. “But I don’t want to.”

David looked at her. “Saskia, I saw you in Scotland. That means that the choice has already been made. Whether you want to or not, you’re going. It could be that the universe itself will ensure that you do. It would be an interesting experiment to try to avoid it. It would be a law like gravity, but one that operates in almost intelligent way. I saw you there. You were in good health. That means, I think, that from now until then, you are, more or less, invulnerable. You did go back, therefore you will go back. Trust me Saskia, it’s less easy to dismiss time travel when you consider the

ingredients: huge financial backing, a driven and clear-thinking physicist, and a theoretical foundation that has already been proven. It's no longer science fiction. It's a cutting edge technology."

Saskia was saddened by the strength of his delusion. Undoubtedly, the time travel story would be disproved by events. As with a haunting, an improbable physical cause would no doubt be at the root of the ostensibly straightforward supernatural one. David interrupted her thoughts. He said, "One more thing, Saskia."

"What?"

"When I saw you, you were aged about forty, I'd say. How old are you now?"

"Actually, I have no idea." She reached into her jacket pocket and retrieved her FIB identification. She flipped the golden badge and read the laminated details underneath. It stated her height, hair colour, weight and age. "I'm twenty-seven. Strange. I feel older."

"OK. Twenty-seven. Now, remember that if you travelled back in time more than a few months, you wouldn't be able to get back. There –"

"Why not? Wouldn't it work both ways?"

"Could be, but you'd need a time machine at the other end. If Michaels's machine does work, it is bound to be a recent invention. So it would be a one-way trip. If I saw you aged forty, then it would take about fifteen years to reach that age. So you travelled back in time fifteen years. That would be 2008."

"Why would I do that?"

David took a deep breath and held it. Then he expelled the air and scratched his head. "I really can't remember anything that

happened in 2008. You know, I might have misjudged your age. You might have been a well-preserved fifty-year-old. Or a thirty-year-old who really needed to get some sleep.”

“So any time from 1998 to 2013.”

“Give or take.”

Saskia grunted dismissively. “This is all hypothetical anyway. We are going to find your daughter and then I am going to leave.”

David said quietly, “Only to return for me.”

“That is correct.”

They arrived fifteen minutes later. The Valley of Fire lay in a rocky basin about six miles long and four miles wide. They drove into the valley from the east. For the first time, David felt uncertain about their interpretation of the clue. Where could a research centre hide in such a small, public area?

“Should we drive round to the visitor’s centre?” he asked.

Saskia pointed to a large map near the car park entrance. “I think we should examine the map first. Perhaps it will be marked.”

“Are you serious?”

Saskia pointed to her mouth. “Observe the slight muscular twitch. That indicates irony.”

David considered this. He extended his middle finger. “Can you guess what this indicates?”

David sighed. He was getting hotter and the display was becoming difficult to read in the direct sunlight. “Map computer, are there any places that are out-of-bounds?”

“Yes,” said the female voice.

Five seconds later, Saskia snapped, “Where?”

“There is a government meteorological station east of the White Domes. This area is prohibited.”

“What and where are the White Domes?” continued Saskia.

“Welcome to the Valley of Fire,” said the computer, “the oldest State Park in Nevada.” On the map, at the northernmost tip of the park, a red dot pulsed. As they watched, it became a piece of video footage that showed huge, sloping banks of sandstone stained with horizontal ribbons of purple, yellow and blue. “The White Domes area contains a breath-taking arena of coloured stones. The bands you see here were stained by powerful oxides, including iron and manganese –”

“Computer, we want to go there,” David said.

The computer stopped. It remained silent. He wiped the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve. He had forgotten, in his dealings with Ego, how obtuse and frustrating computers could be. “Computer, can we go there?”

“Yes.”

“Computer, give me a map.”

“Please insert your card.”

David took Ego from his wallet and examined the edges of the display. Sure enough, there was a magnetic strip reader on the right-hand side. “Ego,” he said, “This is a magnetic strip transaction. Cash. Don’t give it any personal information.”

“Understood,” said Ego.

David swiped it through the slot and heard the answering bleep. He replaced Ego. The computer chimed, “Thank-you, Anonymous Contributor. Car park and camping fee gratefully

accepted. The map has been transferred to your personal computer. Enjoy your stay.”

It was a seven-mile drive to the White Domes. The sun climbed higher but the air conditioning kept them cool. The sweat dried on his forehead. Saskia said nothing.

The laser shone on David’s window. A small camera, placed high on the outcrop of the Met Four weather station, collected the invisible reflection. The light was analysed over the next half-hour as the window vibrated in tune with their conversation. The computer converted the vibrations to sound and searched their utterances for key-words. It found none.

They did not see the dusty rooster-tail of a car as it approached from the south. It drove itself. Both of its occupants were quite still. One was reading.

There was only one security laser. It switched to the new arrival. There was nothing to analyse because the passengers said nothing.

Saskia and David saw the car. If the laser had been trained on them, it would have heard David say, “My God, that’s Jennifer. My daughter. Who is she with?” and Saskia’s reply, “That’s Detective Frank Stone. FIB. Based in Moscow. Or so I thought.”

Jennifer shuffled her papers and pushed them into her satchel. She turned to Frank and said, “Are you going to follow me inside?”

“I have to accompany you the entire way. That’s my brief, ma’am,” he said stiffly.

“Well, I hope you have clearance,” Jennifer replied doubtfully.

Frank unfolded his legs and pulled himself from the car. The roof almost reached the belt of his trench coat. Sweat ran from his fingertips but he would not remove the coat. “I have clearance from Hartfield himself. A renegade agent from the FIB is treated seriously.” He waved a blue ID badge. “Level one clearance.”

Jennifer had never seen a level-one clearance. Frank had the key to the city.

“Seems quiet,” he said. He scanned the car park and his eyes fell upon something. He was an eagle on the verge of prey or a hare transfixed. Jennifer could not decide which. Frank needed more sleep. He had flown the Atlantic through the night to reach her. “Jennifer, get back in the car.”

“What?” she said.

“Get back in the car. It’s her.”

“Who?”

“Saskia Brandt.”

Jennifer found it difficult to balance. So Frank’s story was true. The renegade agent wanted to contact her. She had asked on her balcony this morning and she wanted to ask again: for what reason? He would not say.

His hand fell to his hip and she realised why he had been reluctant to remove the trench coat. There was a shape under the cloth.

“I’ll get back in the car,” she said. She turned on her heel and climbed back inside. She stole a glance at Met Four. Would their cameras be trained on the car park? Definitely. But no there were no human eyes behind those cameras. They were computer

controlled; a computer would not be sensitive to the precipitation of violence. It could only respond to overtly suspicious behaviour. Jennifer crossed her fingers and sank behind the driver's wheel. It had never been useful before.

Frank looked back at her. He saw that she was in the car and nodded. He pushed a palm towards her. Stay there. The palm fell back to his hip, to the shape.

Jennifer made a plan. If something happened to Frank, she would run from the car. Perhaps she would make the steps of Met Four. She didn't know what Brandt wanted from her, but Frank had warned her of the danger. Everything that he had said had come true. Yes, she would run from the car. Her running would alert the computer, which would alert guards, who would come to her rescue.

Through the arch of the steering wheel she saw Frank begin to move. He walked slowly, his trench coat flapping. He flexed his hand into his gun hand. Someone emerged from another car. He stopped. Nothing moved but the tail of his coat.

The sun was high. He looked like a gunslinger. Jennifer made a mental note. When he returned, she would kiss him.

Frank stood with his legs apart. He could see that Saskia was alone. Her hair was constantly redrawn by the wind. He looked at her waist and, at that moment, her jacket blew open. She had no gun. Next he checked the car. There was a sun reflection on the windscreen, so he blinked twice. His contact lenses rotated. Their polarizing filter changed and the windscreen became transparent. He looked again and again, zooming as necessary. The car was empty.

In German, he said, “You are arrested by Detective Frank Stone of the Federal Office of Investigation, Russian section, badge number 012-919-001, on the internal charge of desertion. This charge will be pursued under the EU constitution. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be recorded at the discretion of your arresting officer and reproduced in a court of law as evidence against you. This data is the property of the FIB.”

Saskia did nothing. Hair blew across her face and she made no move to wipe it away. Frank flexed his calf muscles nervously. He visualised reaching for his gun and pulling the trigger. He imagined crouching, rolling, coming up with the gun. He imagined a dozen scenarios.

Frank took another step forward. “Saskia? Did you hear me?”

The wind gusted again. Saskia’s hair flew behind her. She said, “You lied to me, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“In Brussels. You didn’t follow me because you wanted to help. You were under orders. The orders were to give me misinformation about my past. To stop me searching. The newspaper story about the Angel of Death was a complete lie. Putting it in Russian stopped me from reading the details.”

Frank smiled. He had charmed Saskia before. He would do it again. “Saskia, I have to take to you back. Are you alone?”

“Just me.”

“Where’s your gun?”

Frank continued to speak in German. It was unlikely that an American security computer would speak the language. He did not need a jurisdiction problem; partly on general principle, but also

because he had not been briefed on the background to Saskia's presence. That would give her the advantage in manipulating the situation if security officers began to ask questions.

"Gun's in the car. Shall I get it?"

Frank held his smile, but, inwardly, he was disappointed. They were amateurs, of course. All of Jobanique's agents. Previously murderers, but what qualifications did that give them? Enough to track down one of their own kind. The intelligence of a bloodhound. Not enough to avoid simple mistakes. For that, you needed experience.

"No, I think I'll get it," he said.

He walked over to the passenger side and pushed Saskia away with the back of his hand. He made sure it brushed the top of her breasts. She scowled.

The wind was becoming stronger. He squinted against the spray, held the car door open and leaned inside. Information reached him in waves. First, he remembered that Saskia had emerged from the passenger-side of the car. That unsettled him. If she was on her own, why would she sit in the passenger seat? Second, there was no gun. The two realisations combined, fought, and he froze. He began to imagine scenarios.

He began to back out.

A hard, cold cylinder jammed between his buttocks. He gasped – a backwards-scream – and stood, but Frank Stone was a tall man in a small car. There was a sound not unlike a car door being slammed. Then he slid forward onto his belly, unconscious.

Saskia paused. She wondered if Frank was faking. He had believed her too readily. She had lured him into the car and waited

for David to creep around from the boot, where he had been crouching with her gun. As she had guessed, David had not tried to play to the hero. He had passed the gun to her. She had jabbed the gun in Stone's back. Somehow she had aimed too low and pushed too hard. He had knocked his head and collapsed.

"OK," David prompted.

She blinked. She did not understand.

He managed to indicate Stone with his left eyebrow. His face contorted. Met Four was behind him. It was behind them both. Frank was obscured and Saskia herself obscured the gun. That gave them time. What did David mean? Then he whispered, "Inside."

Quickly, they pushed Frank's legs into the car. Now he lay across the driver and passenger seats. His gun was still in his hand. Saskia reached over and squeezed the top of the weapon. She shook it and the magazine slipped out. She put it her jacket pocket. Then she grabbed his shoulder to lift his torso and felt underneath with her hand. She snaked into the lapel pocket and found the security pass.

Frank was dribbling. She knew that he would have executed her. Her instinct was clear on that. With that realisation came another. She needed to understand Jobanique's motivations. That was her thread from the labyrinth.

Why had Frank Stone been improperly briefed? He should have expected to find two people, not one. Frank had acted as though he had been given only Jennifer's name. If Jobanique had wanted to recapture Proctor, why would he limit Frank's effectiveness? Frank was eminently capable of retrieving Proctor.

He was more capable than Saskia. Why had Jobanique abandoned Proctor?

Saskia pulled at her lip. No, that wasn't the right question. There was nothing to suggest that Jobanique had given up on Proctor. He had tried to remove Saskia from the scene.

She turned and looked at Met Four. The wind howled. Sand rushed around her.

Jobanique had changed his mind. His enigmatic, closed mind. If he did not want Proctor to be captured, that meant he wanted Proctor to reach his destination. His daughter. What did she have to do with this?

That was the real question.

Jennifer raised her head very slightly. The agent was approaching. A man accompanied her but it wasn't Frank. He had been knocked out and now they were coming to get her. She considered telling the car computer to get her out of there, but the computer would take several seconds to do it. By then, they would have reached her.

Her fingers trembled. She felt for the door handle and gripped it hard. She would make a run for Met Four.

No, she thought. Lock the doors first, then just drive away.

She touched a button on the dashboard. The doors locked. She touched another and the engine sprang into life. She looked up. Brandt and her companion were closer.

She said, "Computer –" but she did not finish her sentence. She could not look away from Brandt's companion. He bore an astounding resemblance to her father.

The man caught her stare and smiled.

Jennifer's mind cartwheeled away.

A summer's day in Oxford. They were walking down Broadstreet, close to Balliol College. The sky was blue. It was August; most of the students had gone. She was six or seven years old. They had been walking down Broadstreet, just the two of them, students gone, and Jennifer had announced to her father, "Daddy, did you know that the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body?"

Her father stopped short. Passers-by were forced to walk around them. He frowned in concentration, as though he was checking her question against a mental database of brain facts. Then, tentatively, he reached up and touched right side of his head. Suddenly, his left leg flailed into the air behind him, seemed to rise up past his shoulder, and finish in front. Jennifer clapped her hands and giggled. Her father, who was so tall, looked down. His expression was utterly serious. "Do you know – I think you're right." Then, he reached up with his left hand and prodded the other side of his head. His right leg swung around just as the left had done. This foot landed in front of the other. "Jennifer," her father said, "you are right." Jennifer began to laugh. Her father began to walk. One leg at a time, he goose-stepped down Broadstreet, crash crash crash, Jennifer running circles around him. She laughed so much it began to hurt. When she saw the expressions of those around her, she laughed even harder. They continued until her father began to giggle as well. Finally, he removed his fingers from his wavy black hair and took her hand. He said, "Jennifer, your father's a fool," and Jennifer had beamed.

She had wanted to say that she loved that about him, but couldn't find the right words.

She unlocked the door.

Her father was standing outside. His face was older now, an impressionistic sketch of man who had goose-stepped down Broadstreet thirteen years before. He was trying not to laugh. Jennifer opened the door and stepped out into his arms. She could not cry. She wanted to hold this man but didn't know what it would do to her. There was no feeling that his proximity – his physical presence – meant that everything was fine...but it meant that, perhaps, some day, it would be.

David clung to her. She squeezed the breath from his lungs. She had grown. She was as tall as him. He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. Her ear brushed against the stubble on his cheek. Her hair blew across his face – he could smell her shampoo – and he realised, with some sadness, that his girl had become a woman.

The hair blew away and he opened his eyes. The Valley of Fire had gone.

It was the late 1970s. He was seven or eight years old. He lived with his mother and father on a farm in Kent. That autumn, he had wandered into his father's garage. The garage was a place of power. It smelled of sawdust, black paint and oil. His father had looked up from his workbench and asked him what was wrong. Nothing was wrong, David stammered. He would like a rabbit. Thomas, his best friend, had one, and he wanted one too. His father set down his drill and reached for a cloth to wipe the oil from his hands. They were always oily. "What does your mother think?"

he had asked. She said it was OK, David replied. He was looking at the floor.

That same week, David and his father bought the rabbit from a gruff farmer in the neighbouring village. They put it in a hutch and David promised to feed it every day and clean it out once a week. He named it Bugs Bunny. His father wrote Bugs's name on the hutch with a gold pen. The autumn came and went. Near Christmas, David began to do well in school. He became absent-minded. At the back of his mind he knew that he had not been taking care of Bugs as he should, but he knew that his father would. After all, Bugs lived in the garage, his father's work place.

On Christmas morning, before he could open his presents, David's father told him that they had to see something the in garage. David could not help but smile; he guessed it was a new bike like Thomas's.

David knew something was wrong when he saw that the garage was the same as ever. There were no presents. He glanced, puzzled, at his father. Before he could ask a question, his father clipped him around the ear. He was a big man with hands like shovels. David fell onto his knees. He landed on the wooden planks of the car pit. The edges of his vision to sparkled.

"Look at Buggy," his father said quietly.

David climbed to his feet. He was too surprised to cry. He was too surprised to think very much at all...but he was sure that he did not want to look at Buggy.

"Look at Buggy," his father said again.

David took a deep breath. It shuddered into his chest. It was awfully loud. He didn't want to cry. He turned and looked at Buggy.

Bugsy's hutch was in shadow. He stepped forward and peered. Bugsy was in a corner and David began to cry. The wood shavings that made Bugsy's bed had been pushed into one corner. They were bloody. There was blood on the meshed window, and blood too on the straw of his water-feeder. Bugsy himself was in the corner. He was stretched out. His grey-white hair had yellowed. He was lying on his side, lying on weeks of his own shit. David could see his ribs. His belly shuddered just as David's did right then. Bugsy's face was pinched. Red-coloured spit bridged the gap between his nose and his front paws.

Bugsy sensed David was there. It was the first time they had seen each other for three weeks. One transparent, reddened eye rolled towards David. It fixed on him for a single moment and then, with gravity, assumed its original position: staring at the roof of its little hut. That was last time David saw Bugsy. A week later, Bugsy had been carried away by the dust men.

"See what you did, David?" his father asked. His voice had become quieter.

David turned towards his father. He knew that should stand up to this man. He should shout and scream that he was a kid – he couldn't be expected to look after a whole rabbit on his own. As an adult, his father should have helped him. He wanted to shout that this wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

Instead he turned away and walked inside.

They spent the rest of the Christmas morning opening presents. Superman slippers, a wallet, and Abba cassettes. They were all very expensive. Under the feeble gaze of his mother, who dared not ask him why he had been crying, and his father, who

seemed impassive, he tore paper after paper. His expression was blank.

When he opened the final present – a plastic model of the Millennium Falcon - his mother clasped her hands to her chest and said, “Isn’t he pleased?”

His father said quietly, “He isn’t pleased.”

Saskia opened the rear door and pushed David inside. It would be best to have him in the back and Jennifer in the front. Otherwise, he would be sitting chatting to her and Saskia would never have her answers. She walked around to the passenger seat and jumped in. She searched for a button that would stop the engine. She found it on her second attempt.

She could see that Jennifer was shocked. The girl sat, almost fully turned, gazing into the eyes of her father. Her father was smiling. Saskia was not touched by the scene. Not under these circumstances. Not with Frank unconscious in the other car.

“Do you speak French?” she asked, in French.

The girl ignored her. Saskia reached across and turned her head by the chin. “We are under surveillance,” she said again, this time in German.

Jennifer stared at Saskia’s hand. Saskia withdrew it. In German, Jennifer said, “I know.” Saskia looked at David expectantly. He nodded. He understood. No English.

“Your German is good,” Saskia said.

“Yes, I learn it in school.” Jennifer spoke from far away. For a moment, Saskia wondered what she was thinking. But only for a moment. There was no telling how much time they had.

“Hello, papa,” Jennifer said.

“Hello, Jennifer,” David replied. Saskia glanced at her watch. She remembered the emails that she and Scottie had examined in Edinburgh: documentary evidence of a father and daughter drifting apart. She would give them two minutes.

“Why are you here?” Jennifer asked. Her voice was emotionless.

“For you.” David slapped his hands together in frustration. His German was worse than his daughter’s. “I returned to Scotland. Thunder and lightning in the building. I killed Bruce Shimoda. Now Saskia Brandt hunts me. She is the police. She wants to return to Britain with me.”

“Bruce Shimoda is not dead,” Jennifer said quietly. Her eyes had fallen to the floor.

David shook his head. “I am sorry, Jennifer. He is dead. He was in the computer. He was dying. He asked.”

“Why did you come here?”

“I do not know. I have...Saskia...I mean, Saskia déjà vu. Understand?”

“No.”

“I think Saskia travelled...over, no, through...” he trailed off in exasperation. He tapped his watch.

“He means time,” Saskia interjected. “He’s got this crazy idea that I travelled through time. He thinks he saw me in Scotland a few days ago. I told him that time travel is impossible -”

Jennifer shook her head and, with that, her eyes began to clear. “Time travel is possible.”

Saskia said, “Ah.” She composed herself, avoided David’s face, and tried to focus on her questions. “Jennifer, what did Frank tell you about me?”

“He told me you were an independent agent. He said that you wanted to talk to me and that you were...”

“Dangerous? Listen, Jennifer, I’m not. I was assigned to find your father. Nothing more. Isn’t that right, David?”

“Yes,” he replied, though he not really listening.

“Jennifer, Frank Stone lied to you. He needed to find me through you. But I need to ask you a question: How did he know where I was? Did he mention anything?”

Jennifer stared at the ceiling. She closed her eyes. “No. I remember the conversations in total. He said nothing.”

Saskia turned to David. “But he didn’t know about you. That means he wasn’t told. If he wasn’t told, then he didn’t need to know. Why didn’t he need to know? Simple: because his only task was to collect me. Somebody told him where I was. Now, who else knows that I am here?”

“Also simple,” David said. “Your boss. He wants to find you. Get you back in your office.”

“But I haven’t done anything wrong. This is the job I was asked to do. I’m still in the process of doing it. And what about you, David? Frank was never told about you. You are, however, the reason that I’m out here. It makes no sense. Why would my boss let you off the hook? He gave me the specific task of doing that, and now he just gives up. No sense.”

David said evenly, “Sense, yes. Your boss thinks you have performed badly, he wants you back. He sends out an agent.”

“The same agent who gave me misinformation earlier this week. Quite a coincidence.”

“You do not know that the information was bad. Perhaps you are too...suspicious.”

Saskia stared at Met Four. “Suspicion is what I’m paid for. I’m a detective.”

Jennifer looked at Saskia for the first time. “Detective –”
“Saskia,” she corrected.

“– Saskia, do you still want to take David back?”

Saskia smiled bitterly. “My life depends on it.”

“I can prove that my father is innocent.”

“How?” asked Saskia and David simultaneously.

Their footsteps echoed on the wrought-iron stairs. They walked in single file. Jennifer led, followed by Saskia, then David. Saskia had needed convincing. The chances of getting into Met Four security was low. He rolled the dice one more time. Saskia had to reach the time machine somehow. If the universe itself would conspire to keep her appointment, perhaps they could all ride her luck.

They reached the top. The wind was so strong that it was an effort to breathe. David surveyed Met Four. There were two buildings, old and worn. Atop the second building was a clutch of antennas. Two flags rolled in the wind. Immediately before him was a high wire gate with an inset door. Jennifer swiped her card through the box near the handle and the gate opened. She stepped through and closed it behind her. Saskia repeated the procedure with her stolen blue-clearance pass.

David watched them go through. His card was least likely to succeed, because his card was Ego, which had read the magnetic code from the Saskia’s blue card. After a few seconds of analysis, Ego had announced that the code was a several-billion digit prime

number. Jennifer suggested that Ego pick the next-highest prime and present the number to the lock. Ego found it seconds later on a university website.

David swiped it through the reader. Nothing happened.

John Hartfield shouted, "If Proctor makes an entrance, I want him to be allowed in. Did you get that?"

He strained to hear the reply over the thump of the rotor blades. The helicopter banked. They were twenty minutes from Met Four.

"Hold on, sir," said the pilot. Another gust of wind turned the aircraft. They began to fly sideways.

The Mojave washed by. Banks of sand rolled beneath them. The voice on the mobile phone finally replied to Hartfield's question: "Copy that, sir. Updating the computer now."

The lock sprang open. Jennifer was numb to the surprise she had every right to feel. She had not thought clearly since Frank's arrival that morning. Now she watched her father close the gate behind him. He was dizzy with relief.

And where was her anger? When she had argued for extended lunch privileges at a committee meeting the day before, she had ridden it hard, as always, and she knew its source. She had not shouted at the chairman but at her father. At her father, who had left her in a school in New York and returned to England.

She looked at him. He shrank. He shrank like a rebuked little boy. Her fury, too, shrank to nothing. Perhaps she had passed into its eye. Her father had given her the best education in his power.

DÉJÀ VU

For him, the pursuit of education – the mind, science, truth – was the noblest of causes. It was the one true aspiration. He had put that aspiration above their relationship. He was a principled man. But for others who did not share those principles, what was he?

Saskia said, “Keep moving.”

The Golden Thread

They said nothing the whole way. Nothing as they walked into the second building, nothing as they descended in the rock, nothing as they took their first steps into the research centre proper. It was not until they had been walking for five minutes through low-ceilinged, busy but well-lit corridors that David whispered, in English, “Where are we going?”

Jennifer said, “You’ll see.”

They came to a door. Like all others, it was large enough to accommodate the passage of machinery. It was heavy and closed. Underneath David could see blue flashes. To one side was a swipe-card reader. Jennifer ignored it. She glanced up and down the corridor – David couldn’t see what she was checking for – and then rapped her knuckles on the door.

The welding stopped. They heard footsteps. The door swished open. A man stood in the doorway with his welding visor tilted. He had a great, bushy beard and wore huge dungarees. Around his waste was a utility belt brimming with tools. To complete the costume, he wore a tent-like lab coat. His welding gun was perched on a shoulder, pointing at the ceiling. Its cable snaked away into space behind him.

“Help you?” he asked curtly.

All eyes were drawn to Jennifer. She smiled. “Hi, Groove.”

“Hey, little lady,” he said. He did nothing other than chew his gum.

“These are the VIPs Mikey told you about,” she began.

“Mikey did tell you, right?”

David and Saskia stood slowly to attention. Groove glanced over them. “Mikey didn’t. If you got clearance, how come you didn’t use your ID card to get in?”

Jennifer faltered. “I...did, but it didn’t work. I’ll get it checked out later. Damn thing must have a glitch.”

Groove nodded. “Don’t these two have ID cards?”

Jennifer said, “Well now,” in a way that made David realise she had no idea what to say next. He cleared his throat.

“There was no time to have them activated for your lab,” David said irritably. “We’re making an unscheduled stop. As you know, part of our rolling review programme means that you must be evaluated every six months. It is all part of the Assurance of Quality Exercise. We’re stepping in at the last moment for the team who were going to evaluate you.”

“Quality Exercise?” asked the man.

“He hasn’t heard of it,” Saskia exclaimed. Jennifer and David exchanged a look of disbelief.

“Well, he has now,” David continued. “And there will be no prejudice to the evaluation if you let us continue without further delay. If we have to go the trouble of getting these cards activated for your lab, we’ll lose valuable time. And time is money...” David couldn’t remember the welder’s name “...isn’t it?”

The man shrugged. “But it would only take a few seconds to get them activated –”

David pushed past him. “It’s that kind of attitude that’ll get you a low mark in your review.”

The laboratory was startlingly similar to David’s old workshop in the West Lothian Centre. It had the same Spartan scheme.

There were computer terminals around the periphery and connecting doors in each wall. The ceiling was low and the lighting muted. To his right was a machine David did not recognise, undoubtedly because its guts were strewn over nearly a quarter of the floor. It was some kind of supercomputer. It smouldered.

Groove stepped over to the machine, slapped down his visor, and continued. He was unwilling to actively participate in their review.

In the centre of the room, where the white tiles sloped gently down, was the LSD: Liquid Storage Device, and David's twenty-year-old pun was certainly intended. The great tank swirled. Colours rolled into one another, reached the exterior, touched the transparent plastic, and sank back. David watched the tank and he watched Jennifer and Saskia. They were both slightly hypnotised. They were looking at a distributed processing computer. It was constructed of microscopic computing devices that did nothing but receive chemical activation from their counterparts. They were a legion of stupid little devices. But when they acted in unison, they formed a powerful storage and processing unit: a general computer. The colours arose from sweeping patterns of activation: at one end of spectrum, red, were inhibited cells; at the other were blue, excited cells.

This device was a larger copy of its predecessor at the West Lothian Centre. That device had run New World, the artificial universe in which Bruce had seen and Caroline had died. David wondered at the purpose of this newer device. It would not necessarily perform the same job.

He snapped out of his thoughts. They had a role to play or Groove would become suspicious.

“So,” he announced. “Where shall we start?”

“In here,” Jennifer said quietly. She checked to see that Groove was absorbed in his work. Then she opened one of the connecting doors. The new room was much smaller. It had the same white-tiled floor. On the right-hand wall were four cubicles with closed, transparent doors.

“What’s this?” asked Saskia.

Jennifer opened her mouth but David answered. “These are virtual reality cubicles. They’re closed because they’re designed for microbots. However, I’d say that the microbots are malfunctioning.” He pointed to one of cubicles. There was the ghost of a red stain on its door.

“What’s a microbot?”

Jennifer continued in her father’s tone of voice, “It’s a very small robot, too small to see. They hover in the air while you’re inside the computer. When there are millions of them, they join up to form surfaces.”

“OK, what’s going on?” Saskia asked wearily. She massaged her temples. “What do you mean by ‘inside the computer’? And why should they form surfaces?”

“The device in the laboratory contains and runs a whole universe,” Jennifer said.

“Oh really,” Saskia replied. She became weak.

“More or less,” David said. He had given this speech a thousand times to VIPs in the West Lothian Centre. The intervening years fell away. “You can describe a square with only one value: the length of any given side. Using the same kind of economy, you can describe complicated shapes and systems too. The information content of the whole universe – everything you

would need to describe the galaxies, the systems, the planets, all the way down to the leaves on a given tree – is not the same size as the universe itself. Oh yes, it's a mind-bogglingly large amount of information. But there are ways to cut down the bulk. For example, I expect this computer has a single planet. Correct?"

"Correct," Jennifer said. She was standing by her father's side now. Saskia took a small step back.

"Our universe, of course, is detailed all the way down to the quantum level. But it isn't really necessary. As long as some kind of supervising agent – the computer itself – ensures that mechanical actions work according to the simplest laws of physics, everything is fine."

Saskia opened one of the cubicles. "David, please understand that I have had little sleep. My boredom threshold is therefore much lower."

David raised his palms defensively. "I just want you to be informed, that's all."

"Right," she said. It looked no different from a shower cubicle. "I put on the headset, we play a computer game. A fair summary?"

Jennifer said, "We should get going."

Each of them stepped into a cubicle and put on a headset. David jiggled his until it fit over Ego's earpiece. Jennifer said, "Computer, activate all cubicles. Safe mode. Confirm microbots deactivated?"

"Confirmed," said a voice in David's ear. It was the computer.

Then Jennifer: "Computer, run Project Asgard."

Jennifer heard a click as an audio channel opened. Before her was perfect blackness. Then a blue grid. Overwriting it were the words: "You are: Supervisor". The display faded to nothing.

"Nothing's happening," said a voice in her ear. It was the German policewoman.

"You must picture the planet," Jennifer said. "The computer picks up your thought processes and scans them for images."

Her father whistled. "Nifty."

"Fine," Brandt said. "But I haven't seen the planet yet. How do I know what it looks like?"

"Saskia, just imagine any planet," her father said tersely.

Jennifer closed her eyes. The blackness became deeper. She pictured the planet, opened her eyes, and she was in orbit. The huge world shone beneath her. She could see clouds swirling over the continents below. From space, the clouds had a three-dimensional quality. The land was green-yellow. The seas were a sparkling blue. They darkened, still glistening, as they passed into the shadow of the sun. The terminus was directly below.

"Computer," she said. "Locate Point One."

A green square appeared over a quadrant of the largest continent. It was far to her left, well beyond the terminator, where it was night. "Everybody, can you see the green square? Picture it and the computer will take you there."

"Something's wrong," said Brandt. "My screen is still black."

"Can you see any text?" Jennifer asked.

"No," Brandt replied. "Wait. Yes. It says 'Visual cortex scan failure'."

From nowhere, David said, “Jennifer, Saskia has some...individual characteristics that the computer may have problems with.”

Jennifer frowned. Mikey had said that the visual cortex reader had a ninety per cent success rate. “Computer, lock guest two with my position so that she is five metres to my left with my orientation.”

A moment later, Brandt whispered, “Fantastisch.”

“OK, Dad?”

“Here,” he replied.

“Picture the square. That’s how we get about in this world. Picture a place and you go there.”

Jennifer closed her eyes and thought about Point One.

She dropped.

Her stomach rose and her fingertips fluttered. There was no wind, no sound, only the sudden expansion of an object that was the size of the Earth. It was like catching the eye of God. The clouds met her and she passed through. She did not get wet. Underneath were forests of thick vegetation. On this planet the environment was pristine. Vegetables ruled the Earth. Further down she fell. In real terms, her speed would have been thousands of miles an hour. She turned to her right and saw the setting sun become obscured by the planet’s curve. It was like a time-lapse film. And now, as she came closer, her perception of up and down shifted. She felt that only this planet could be ‘down’ – not her own feet, though she would never feel the tug of this new world’s gravity.

And then she stopped.

She was in a ravine. The only light came from a bonfire, far away. There were no stars or and there was no moon. A glance to her left and right confirmed that her father and Brandt were there. They were spectral, translucent figures. The ravine ran north-south. The central stream was wide but shallow. Jennifer crouched and saw the bed of rounded stones. As always, she reached out to touch them. As always, her hand passed through the water and the pebbles effortlessly. They could touch nothing. They were visitors.

The ravine was widest at their point of landing. To their left, rock had tumbled from the face to form a scree slope. To their right was a flat plateau of shingle. It stretched out for nearly a kilometre before it met the right-hand wall of the ravine. At its face was a little hut. It was crude but sturdy. From this distance, nothing could be seen but for a bonfire set before it.

“There,” she said, pointing. “We need to go there.”

“OK,” her father said.

She closed her eyes and imagined the bonfire. Upon opening them, she had arrived. The hut was in full view now. It had been built in an easily-defendable crag. Two large rocks flanked its sides. The cliff was insurmountable. Any predator would need to cross the unprotected flat. The hut was, up close, a log cabin, and a well-crafted one at that.

As she watched, the door opened and man walked out. He seemed to move cautiously. He gripped the rail of his veranda with one hand and a long spear in the other. He crept down the steps until he was quite close. Then a grin broke on his young face. He ran towards the flames. He was wrapped from head to foot in fir fronds. They had been tied in place with a string-like material. They

allowed to move his limbs quite freely. He even wore – Jennifer noted with a smile – a fir skirt.

“Welcome, one and all!”

“Oh my bloody God!” David shouted.

“David! Alright, mate?”

“Fine! You? How?”

“Could people stop shouting,” Brandt asked.

Bruce walked nearer the fire and sat. His guests remained standing. “How? This is me, with my memories, backed-up a few moments after you left, back in Scotland. A little bird told me about Project Asgard, which is where it’s happening for digital folk, so I had to drop by.”

David’s voice was incredulous. “What do you mean, a back-up?”

“I’m just a code now, just digital. There’s nothing physical about me. That means I can be copied and downloaded like any other file. A pretty big file, of course.”

“Do the researchers know that you’re here?”

Jennifer answered, “No, they don’t. That’s why Bruce has tucked himself away in this ravine. I saw him the day he arrived. He fell from the sky.”

“Excuse me,” Brandt said. She sounded angry. “Are you the same Bruce Shimoda who was killed by a bomb four days ago?”

“Ah,” Bruce said. He sat back and looked sadly into the fire.

“Go easy, Saskia,” David remonstrated.

“What?” she snapped back. “Was he killed or wasn’t he?”

“I don’t remember,” Bruce said. “I remember running from the metal shark. I ran up a hill...and then I was here. I guess that was

the last back-up point. I had already written the instructions to have it sent to this computer.”

David asked, “How could you do that? And how, incidentally, did you make this nice little log cabin? I don’t see a crane.”

“Jennifer was kind enough to give me access to the computer.”

“That explains it,” David said.

Saskia cleared her throat. “Again, I would like to interrupt. Jennifer, you said that you had some evidence. Is it this man? I’m afraid that merely having a back-up of someone does not allow you kill them.”

Bruce turned to her. “Saskia, that was euthanasia. I was dying. New World had a free-running evolutionary program that meant it was full of viruses. Asgard – this place – isn’t.”

“Nobody has mentioned my name until this point. Explain.”

“You two have met before, yeah?” asked David.

“Everybody calm down,” Bruce said. “I want to tell you a story. A campfire story.”

Once Upon a Time

There was a virtual universe. It was called New World. New World had a single planet, and upon that planet were many creatures. Some ran, some flew, some swam. Many of them were copied from another place. That other place was called Real World.

One day, visitors arrived from Real World. They wore long white coats and did not appreciate the beauty of New World. They did things not for beauty but for a Real World stuff called Cash. They were Gods. They could change the way creatures grew, where they grew and if they grew at all. They could raise oceans, cast down mountains and know the mind of any creature but Themselves.

Thousands of years passed in silence but for the ticking of a great clock that no creature could see.

Then, one day, the visitors returned. They brought with them a little girl. She was not really a little girl, of course. Nothing in New World was real in the same way as the things in Real World. This little girl was simply a long, long series of zeroes and ones. She was just information about how to build a little girl.

The little girl ran and played and fell down and bled, but she was not real because only things in Real World were real.

The visitors observed her and ticked boxes on Their questionnaires. Then they went back to Real World and reported to Their Leaders. Their Leaders nodded in a solemn fashion and handed over more Cash.

The visitors came back and observed the little girl some more. They observed as she ran away from predators and searched the planet for company, but They did not help her because she was not real. They watched as she grew into a woman. They watched as she slipped into a stream and drowned.

When the visitors returned to their Leaders, the Leaders nodded in a solemn fashion. "You must test some more," they said. More Cash was produced.

And so it went on.

A hundred years passed. The number of humans – though they were not humans, they were just long, long strings of zeroes and ones – grew. They developed a language, and clothing, and huts, and cooked their food. Some died of a mysterious sickness that was carried in the air; some were eaten by ferocious animals. The visitors observed. They ticked boxes on questionnaires.

Children were born at a steady rate. But these children were not the same as those in Real World. They were born with two heads, or with extra-long tongues, or fluorescent teeth and fingernails. Some would never learn to talk. Some were born insane and grew into monsters and were banished.

Still the visitors ticked the boxes on Their questionnaires. But They were less happy with Their job. It was not because of the Cash. The Cash was good. They were becoming squeamish. They had seen so much suffering that They began to regard the New World people as Real. It was difficult because They knew that the New Worlders could never be Real. To be Real, you must be born in Real World. After all, that is what Real means.

But Their doubts remained. They told Their Leaders. Their Leaders nodded solemnly and produced more Cash. They told

stories of glory in the domain of Genetic Research: a cure to aging, cancer, brain disease and anything wrong with Real people. The New World people would give them the information they needed.

And then, one day, a child was born in New World. This child was perfect but for one thing. He was born without eyes. Now, one of the visitors, called Bruce, was also blind. You would not know it because this person was very cavalier and helped by his great friend, David. In fact, he had never seen New World. It had only been described to him. When Bruce learned of the child who had been born without eyes, he returned to Real World and shouted at his Leaders.

They did not nod solemnly. Instead, they said he was suffering from stress. Stress is something that people can get in Real World. They told him that New World people were not real. How could they be Real, when they were just zeroes and ones? They could not be Real because only people in Real World are Real. After all, that is what Real means.

Bruce talked to his friend, David, until They were both in agreement. They decided that the New Worlders had been treated unfairly. Bruce and David knew that They should stop interfering with their zeroes and ones, but even if They never came back, other visitors (with their taste for Cash) would continue their work.

They decided delete New World.

Their plan was complex and took weeks to prepare. It would all happen in Real World. Finally the day came. The hours ticked by. Three hours before they were due to delete New World, a terrible explosion blew through Real World. New World was damaged but it was not deleted. It slept.

When the fires were doused and a new morning came, David and Bruce were summoned to their Leaders. The Cash stopped. The Leaders wanted to jail Them both. But David and Bruce were innocent. They went free.

And so ends the parable of New World.

Saskia scratched the scalp beneath her headset. The story – not a parable, but it would unkind to correct the English of the dead – matched David’s account in an approximate fashion. But it was not hard evidence. The point was that Bruce Shimoda was alive. No. The point was that he was not alive. An entity that looked and sounded like Bruce – even believed himself to be Bruce – had replaced the flesh-and-blood original. But the original had died; murdered by David. It mattered very little to her that she sympathized. It mattered less that a jury might nullify his conviction because, in the event, it was unlikely that David would see trial.

Her thoughts returned to Bruce’s parable. What did it prove? Jennifer had risked so much to steal them into Met Four but there were a thousand ways of proving this computer-version of Bruce existed.

“Jennifer, Bruce told you to bring me here, didn’t he?”

Jennifer did not reply. Instead, Bruce smiled. He did not take eyes off the bonfire. For Saskia, the flames held no heat. “You have a good intuition,” he said. “I wish I could see your face.”

“Allow me to describe it,” Saskia said. “I am scowling.”

“Do you understand the point of the parable?”

“Yes. You believe that an artificial life form is truly alive and subject to proper ethical considerations. That is rubbish. You say this because you yourself are artificial.”

Bruce grabbed his spear and began to stab idly at the bonfire. Saskia sensed both Jennifer and David stepping back. “Well put,” Bruce said. “Tell me, how long have you had that chip in your head?”

Saskia laughed and shook her head. Shook her physical head; her virtual one remained utterly still. “No, tell me how you know that. And tell me how you came to know my name. You must tell me immediately and clearly or I will have no further part in this discussion.”

“Fine. I know it because you told me about two weeks ago.”

Saskia felt a squirt of adrenaline in her belly. This digital man seemed so sure. “Go on.”

“Let me see. You are German in origin, though your English is excellent. You work for the FIB. You wear you hair long. I have no idea what colour it is. I could tell you more about yourself, but I’ve already reached the extent of your own knowledge.”

“Stop this,” Saskia said. She fought to transform her fear into anger. “Any of this information may be have been acquired from Jennifer, via her father.”

David said quietly, “Saskia, you know that I haven’t been in contact with Jennifer since we met.”

“An act,” Saskia replied, but her voice had grown quiet too. She was in stalemate. Bruce had control of the situation. Now she would wait.

“That chip, Saskia. Describe it to me.”

“I can’t describe –”

“Tell me what it does,” Bruce said firmly. He looked into her eyes. He was still prodding the fire. Embers were carried upwards on the rising air. They were not real embers.

“It contains a new personality.”

“How does it contain it?”

“I...I don't know,” Saskia stammered.

She did know. Abruptly, she realised why they had brought her here. They were all conspirators: David, Jennifer and, of course, Bruce. They were agents of Jobanique. No...one of them was Jobanique. She had never seen his face. It had always been replaced by a computer-generated façade. Perhaps Jobanique was Bruce. She had to get out.

The cubicle door rang under the impact. Snowflakes appeared at the edge of her vision. She fell to one knee, gasping.

“No, Saskia,” Bruce said. Then he added, in mispronounced German, “I am your friend and I am going to help you.”

Her vision cleared. Her fingers dug into the headset and she was ready to cast it aside, but her fingers stopped and fell away. She stood. “I'm listening.”

“Each of us has a brain that is wired up individually. There are fundamental similarities, just as New York and London have fundamental similarities: streets, a sewage system, electricity, water, gas, and so on. But taken as a whole they are quite different. The brain is similar in as much as, say, David's brain and your brain have anatomical differences because you have led different lives. But they are similar for the most part.”

“Like a city,” Saskia said dreamily.

“Somebody, somewhere, was scanned by a computer. A wiring diagram of their brain was recorded and put on that chip. Understand, Saskia, that the person is dead.”

Saskia asked, “Why?”

“The donor brain would have been sliced into wafer-thin pieces, analysed, and the results put onto the chip in your brain. You would have been in an office operating theatre under sedation. A surgeon would have fired the chip into your head. It’s at the rear, in the centre, just above the cerebellum. Over the next two or three days, while you were still sedated, a network of filament-like elements would have worked their way into your brain like an aggressive cancer. Each filament grows for about a millimetre and then divides in two; this happens once every hour, so that within six hours there are over four-hundred million million of them. They form a net that increases the weight of your brain by one-hundred grammes. Then the next phase begins: the net starts to retrain your brain. It happens a little at a time. The chip activates some cells, compares the actual activation with the desired activation, and then changes the wiring to make it more likely that the desired activation will occur next time. It’s like rebuilding a house by swapping bricks; it takes a while, but you’ll avoid having to knock it down.

“As a child, your brain was quite plastic – that is, you could learn many things quickly. That property diminishes as you get older. The chip mimics it. Instead of learning slowly over a long period, you learn another person’s lifetime of experience in hours. You also learn their skills. If they could ride a bike, so can you. If they had been a concert pianist, you will be too.”

“...But I don’t have any memories,” Saskia said.

“The degree of change can be varied. Imagine it as a seesaw, with the opposing personalities at either end. Your chip pushes the balance towards the new personality, but the seesaw won’t tilt the whole way. There is another force acting within you. An unconscious one. A relic of the past. That’s the way Jobanique likes it.”

“So who am I?”

Bruce paused. He looked into the fire again, as though his answers were written there. “Your mind is Kate Falconer, a forty-five-year-old art and design student who was kidnapped in Berlin two weeks ago. Her body will never be found. Jobanique is quite thorough. As for the identity of your body, a beautiful woman in her mid-twenties, nobody knows...though perhaps the woman herself does.”

Saskia stared into the fire. This body was not hers. She had the subconscious of a murderer, if Jobanique was to be believed. The part of her personality – her self, Saskia – had been mixed with another. The notion of a dividing line was nonsensical. Bruce spoke of the conscious and unconscious. Saskia shook her head. She was not a pattern on water shaped by the rocks below. And yet she could appreciate an essential dichotomy between thinking and doing: her mind was uncontrollable within its own realm, but her body was assured and controlled. Her body would move only when her will exceeded a threshold. What did that threshold represent? What line could be drawn between her mind and her body? Between the mind of Kate Falconer and the personality she had usurped?

She closed her eyes.

Kate Falconer was dead. She was, Saskia Brandt was, dead too.

She saw the hawk.

The hawk that returned...The witches, the Fates: Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it. What did those things mean? Was it a message?

Saskia opened her eyes. She needed to reassert control. She needed to escape from Jobanique. He could track her; he had the support of the law. There were few places on Earth she could hide.

She thought of the time machine. David had seen her aged forty. And now Bruce corroborated his story. She believed them both. In this research centre, in this virtual world staring at a fire that was not real, she realised that travelling back in time would not be such a bad idea. It was, possibly, the only place she could really hide.

But one question remained unanswered.

You are a detective, Saskia. Detect.

Why had her future self not visited her? A meeting would have dispelled all her doubts.

“So,” said Bruce. The fire crackled. “Your body is unknown to you. Your unconscious mind is a stranger, your conscious one a ghost. But it is a digital ghost. You are one of us now. Welcome to the land of the unreal.”

Ghosts

Before Saskia could reply, a sharp object jabbed into her sole. She looked down and saw that her spectral feet were now resting on the shingle floor. Heat assaulted her face and chest as though a furnace door had been opened. It was the bonfire. She could now feel its heat.

She stepped back. Instead of crashing into the cubicle door, she simply walked backwards. Her feet crunched over the ancient riverbed.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

In unison, Jennifer and David replied, “Microbots.”

“What?”

David said, “The little flying robots. As we speak, each of our cubicles is full of them. They act like large molecules. They can mimic any surface. They can mimic any temperature. This isn’t good.”

She imagined tiny robots creating temporary platforms beneath her feet. She stepped backwards again. The heat diminished. “But why is it happening?”

Another spectral figure appeared. It shimmered like a signpost on a desert road. It began to walk closer.

Frank did not feel well. His head hurt and he could not shake the ringing noise from his ears. He remembered nothing after leaning into Saskia’s car. She must have overpowered him somehow. She might have hit him with a rock. Crafty cow.

His orders were clear. Bring back Saskia for re-programming or, failing that, kill her. It would be a shame to lose Saskia's body, but Frank knew all about orders. If he disobeyed, there would be another Frank Stone, from another FIB office, who could kill and dispose of him in the same manner.

He could not remember how he got inside the computer, but he had impressions of ghosts in the corridors, people ignoring him, and violence. He only knew that he was here. Inside the computer. It was a game. A computer game. His orders were to win. Saskia and her friends had to lose.

Frank hummed a Europop tune from the previous summer. It was called Yeah, Baby. He had heard it first on the radio when he drove out of Poland after his fishing trip. Loose ends. Had to tidy them up. Yeah, Baby.

David reached towards his headset and but it was blocked by an invisible shield. He prodded it systematically. Impenetrable. Whoever had activated the microbots had programmed some additional measures to stop him – and presumably the rest of them – from leaving Asgard. The hairs rose on his neck.

The fourth figure came closer.

“What do you want?” David asked.

Far away, so quiet it might have been a memory, he heard a man hum a tune.

The figure halted. They might die without even seeing the face of their killer. The microbots could mimic any surface from rocks to spears to boiling oil.

“What do you want?” he asked again. He looked Saskia and Jennifer. They were struggling uselessly against their headsets. Bruce was drawing in the shingle with his spear. Still, the new figure remained motionless.

The humming stopped.

Bruce shouted, “Computer, this is Heimdall. Password: Rebirth.”

The ground shook and they were thrown into the air. David saw the riverbed rush away. He clutched at it. He whispered, “This is not real, this is not real,” but as he reached apogee, and tumbled, and fell, it was real, it was real.

The ground charged towards him.

No, he thought, the microbots can’t mimic a surface at that speed.

He crashed feet-first into a cold lake. He dropped, barely conscious, until his feet found the single bottom once more. It was restful and silent. He kicked once and rose like a balloon.

David saw a huge white disc in the sky. It radiated moonlight. He saw two anonymous, spectral figures treading water nearby. Further up the ravine, a sodden Bruce sat on the roof of his log cabin. It had become an island. He typed on a large white tile, which hung unsupported in the air before him. It was a virtual computer console. At that sight, David’s confusion cleared. The intruder had somehow tossed them in the air. Bruce had countered with this water for protection and the new moon for light. David was astounded by his calm. Bruce would have written the commands while falling to his death.

David treaded water. Some entered his mouth. He coughed. The water was really a bag-like constellation of microbots. This water could never drown him, but he could suffocate.

“Jennifer!” he called.

“Here,” she replied. One of the two bobbing figures raised an arm.

“Saskia? Is that you?”

“Yes,” she said. The other figure waved.

David rotated. He searched the skies and the horizon for the intruder. It was possible that their opponent had deactivated the microbots for his own cubicle, which would allow him free movement through water and rock.

“Jennifer, do you still have access?” David asked.

“No,” she replied. She was panting heavily. “I tried. The computer doesn’t recognise my voice.”

“He must have deleted your account somehow.”

“Where is he, Dad?” she asked.

David felt a protective tug. He searched again. The canyon walls were far away and empty. The roof of the cabin was occupied by Bruce alone.

Then he looked down. The water was murky. He could see his virtual legs paddling. Two metres below him was the rocky bed. Further away, the surface became reflective, impenetrable.

“Jennifer, is there any way you can get us out of here?”

“I don’t know,” she said fearfully.

“Not to worry. I’ll think of something.”

“No, wait,” Jennifer replied. “Mikey!” she shouted. “Groove! Help!” Her amplified voice was painfully loud. “They might be able

to hear us from the other room,” she explained. She took up the call again.

David wasn't so sure, but Jennifer's moment of fear had passed and he would say nothing to bring it back. He had heard a man humming a tune: their opponent was in the spare cubicle. If Groove or Mikey were around, they had either collaborated or died.

Movement.

He blinked, checked again. He saw a spectral figure pass through the visible area below his feet. “There he is,” he said quietly.

“Where?” Jennifer asked.

David regretted his words immediately. The intruder had access to their voice communications too, and he proved it with a chuckle. He said, “It's a bit wet down here.”

David thought: English, native speaker, southern England, London.

Saskia and Jennifer both said, “Frank?” Saskia sounded weary, Jennifer incredulous. Saskia's tone told David everything. Frank was a policeman but there would be no arrest.

Saskia continued, “Frank, this is a mistake.”

“What is?”

“Killing us.”

Laughter.

David willed her on. More talking meant more time, though fighting Frank was like fighting God. He had total control of the environment. Bruce's countermeasures, though they had worked so far, were doomed because he could be killed. The microbots in Frank's cubicle were not activated. He was a ghost. David tried to remove his headset once more. The microbots formed a protective

shield. He swore, took a breath, and head-butted the cubicle wall. There was nausea before the pain. The world became dark. Then the pain – a searing, crackling super-headache – began to spread from his forehead to his temples. The pain roused him. The world became floodlit.

His plan was to damage the microbots. Though they were small and strong, they were still machines, and they still had to absorb the energy of an impact. If he could destroy enough then he could remove the headset.

Jennifer said. “I knew as soon we met this morning that you were a brainless type.

Good, keep him talking.

“Show me some respect. I’m your new God.”

Frank’s spectre flew towards the moon. He beckoned the river. It rose in a foaming tower, miles high, and David could almost see its boiling pinnacle. The water level began to drop.

“Call Jobanique,” Saskia said. “Verify your orders.”

“I know exactly what they are,” said a voice in their ears.

David flung his skull at the wall. He gasped, but quietly. His vision thinned. He stumbled and heard splashes. He looked down. The river had vanished. Looked up. The tower of water too.

“Keep him talking,” Bruce said from the cabin roof. He was still typing furiously.

Frank flew like a dragonfly. He was a blur one moment, frozen the next. He zigzagged down to the cabin and stopped inches from Bruce’s nose. David was sleepy with pain but he willed Bruce to finish his spell. “Too late,” Frank said, and pointed. Bruce raised his arms but the fire dashed through them and through his

chest. It scorched the cabin behind him. He fell lifelessly from the roof.

Jennifer whispered, "Oh, you bastard."

David crouched and watched his hands claw the shingle. He vomited. Moments passed in darkness. Not Bruce. Not again. Bruce had poisoned his science teacher's coffee with copper sulphate. He had been blinded by diabetes. He had taken up archery for comic effect. Now, all of that was gone.

Saskia said awkwardly, "Jennifer, it's OK."

David opened his eyes. There was a tapping sound. He was slow to discover its source. Vomit was dripping onto his knuckles. That could not be. He patted the shield around his head. Yes, there was triangular section missing. His last head-butt had been successful. Gingerly, because the edges were sharper than a razor, he hooked a finger around the headset and flicked. The world disappeared. David was back in his cubicle.

He could hear the buzz of the microbots as they began to deactivate and return to their slots in the ceiling. The computer had automatically cut his connection with Asgard as the headset was removed. It was not a safety feature, merely a convenience, and because it was mechanical it could not be deactivated by a malicious programmer. David let the headset drop to the floor. While he waited for the cubicle door to open, he wiped his shirt sleeve across his forehead. It came back bloody.

The heavy door swung open and he stepped out. Jennifer's cubicle was next to his own. He threw his shoulder against her door. The shoulder cracked; the door did nothing. Desperately, he watched her. She was suspended a few centimetres from the floor.

She was running. David looked over at Saskia. She was running too.

He staggered from the room.

In the main laboratory David found a man tapping at a keyboard. The sight was an unsettling echo of Bruce's frantic programming only seconds before. "Turn that fucking computer off," he shouted.

"I'm trying," said the man. He glanced up briefly. "You don't look too good."

"Just get a bloody move on."

He limped towards the middle of the room and leaned against the storage device for a rest. The floor seemed to tilt. Walking had become as difficult as skateboarding. He wiped his forehead. More blood. He remembered that there had been a man, Groove, who had a welding torch. He could use the torch.

He stepped with the deliberation of a drunk. His shoe snagged on something. It was Groove. He was unconscious.

The hard kernel of David's mind – the part that had counselled him against hypothermia in Belford, and had kept him safe while fleeing on the motorcycle – told him that he was in no position to light a welding torch. His hands were oily with blood and sweat. He could barely walk. And, if he lost concentration, he might faint.

He looked at the torch.

Not the torch, said the voice. It sounded like a mixture of his mother, his daughter and God. It was irresistible. The cable. Follow it.

His head traced the path of the welding cable. Back to the cylinder. The cylinder.

That's right.

The cylinder was a metre high. Three quarters of it was blue and the rest yellow. It rested on a trolley. He managed to get around the back of it without falling over and grabbed the two handles. He pushed. It rolled forward like a wheelchair. The welding torch trailed alongside.

Go.

He fell into the tiny cubicle room and managed to keep his balance only through sheer speed and a glancing impact with the far wall. He screamed with berserk rage and hoisted the welding bottle above his head. For a moment he tottered backwards but the wall was there again – this time to save him – and he swaggered towards Frank Stone's back. The cylinder glanced off the middle of the pane and left a large white star. Frank turned.

Jennifer and Saskia sprinted faster than a thrown stone. Behind them, where they did not dare to look, they heard laughter and thunder. Frank was coming after them. It was impossible, thought Saskia, to outrun a god in His own universe.

"Must run a bit faster," she heard Jennifer say.

"I've never run this fast in my life," Saskia called back.

They were heading for a rocky crag. It was nothing more than a blue edge, sparkling in the false moonlight. "That's because," Jennifer panted, "we're not really running. We're running on the spot. Less fatigue."

"Can we make it?" Saskia pointed to the crag.

Jennifer – an anonymous will-o'-the-wisp – shook her head. “No. Even if we did, there wouldn’t be any protection.”

The thunder rolled and Saskia felt heat on her back. The planet shook beneath them. Finally, unbelievably, they reached the crag and jumped into its shadow. They crouched, breathing heavily. Saskia looked over the top of the spur.

Frank was flying through the air. Except he wasn’t really flying...he bounded, as though gravity held him in the gentlest of grips. Red, not blue, forks of electricity cracked connected the ground with the sky. The edges of the canyon began to crumble.

“Watch out,” Jennifer said. Saskia was pulled deeper into the crag. Pebbles dashed upon the rock she had crouched behind. “What’s happening?” Jennifer asked. Her arm was still on Saskia’s shoulder. It would not let go, even when Saskia shrugged.

“It seems that Frank is fighting an adversary.”

“Is it Dad?”

“I cannot tell. We don’t know that he is still alive.”

Jennifer’s hand, which was not a hand, but a legion of microbots, gripped her hard. “Of course he’s alive. He’s outside the computer. He’ll help us.”

Some fist-sized rocks thumped into the ground nearby. Saskia hugged Jennifer roughly. “Be careful. I think those can kill.”

“Of course they can,” Jennifer said petulantly. Then she added, “Thanks.”

There was a roar. Saskia peeked out. Frank was flitting to avoid the red bursts of lightning. She realised that the lightning was following him. Frank stopped on a cliff-edge. The moon hung behind him. “Who are you?” he shouted to the sky.

Thunder pealed like the bell of some final battle.

Mikey shifted in his seat. He typed 'lightning.at.user4 = 1' and checked again the little box on the screen that contained the text, 'Status User 4: Present, Full Privileges'. The text did not change. Frank - or User 4 - had avoided the bolt. Mikey slammed his palm into the monitor. He would have given his life for Jennifer, but he was he was checked at every turn: it would take too long to run into the interaction chamber and manually remove her; it would take too long to write an automatic script for the computer to fight Frank on his behalf; everything would take too long. His one last hope was the stranger who had emerged from the chamber only seconds before. That man was in a bad way, but he was fighting for Jennifer too. They both were.

He pulled a hand through his thinning hair. It was a disaster. Mr Hatfield hadn't said people would die.

You were fooled, he thought. Played for a fool.

It ate at him; ruined his concentration. The one thing he prized above all else was his mind. It had seen him through childhood cancer, bullying, puberty. It was the best. The knowledge that it had let him down – that he had let himself down – was a deep wound. He was an active member of a one-in-a-million IQ society. His mind was his one world-class asset. If that could be beaten, what was he?

You are a fool.

He typed faster. He began to make more typos. His rage grew. He looked at the wall again. Underneath the large glass chamber was a sign that read, "Use Ax in Fire Emergency. Do not use Hose on electrical fires. Know your exits!"

The madman I let in, he thought.

He turned back to the screen.

He tried everything – crashing the system, rebooting it, invasive diagnostics designed to overload the computer – all came to nothing. His rage intensified. His glances at the axe became more frequent.

The screen went blue. In the middle, a white text box read, 'User 4 has locked you out.'

"Frank, you bastard, die," he shouted, and flung the keyboard across the room. He reached up and elbowed the glass container. Reached inside. Hefted the axe.

It was perfectly weighted. He tossed it from hand to hand. Time to shut down the computer. He rotated the axe to use the blunt, hammer-like end. He whirled it like a lasso. The axe smashed the desktop processing units. Electricity sparked. His monitor he clove in two. The coffee machine he obliterated. Again and again the hammer fell. He smashed the desks, the chairs, the lights, and, when he finally dug the axe into an electric outlet and his muscles arched with the strength of ten men, and when his brilliant mind thought, You've killed me, you've killed me, he died.

The lightning had stopped. The battle was over. Jennifer put a finger to her lips and Saskia nodded. Perhaps they would make it difficult for Frank to find them if they remained silent. Saskia looked up at the white featureless disc that provided light. She felt an urge to pray. But to whom? Frank was God. For him to hear, she only needed to speak.

"Frank, we need to talk," she said.

Frank appeared in front of her. He said nothing but she could hear his irregular breathing over the open microphone.

“Frank, I want you to think about what you’re doing. I want you to think about the rationale behind your orders.”

He paused. “There is no rationale. There are orders.”

“Why?”

“You’re a witness.”

“A witness to what?”

“What happened to the third one of you? The man?”

Saskia ignored him. “What are we a witness to?”

Frank was interrupted by a dull clang. There was nothing metal in Asgard. It had to come from the real world. Frank seemed to realise this and, though Saskia was interested in the answer to her question, she was happy to see him distracted. “Did you hear something?” she asked mischievously.

Time traveller, she thought. David’s time travel theory. She had quite forgotten about it. It had been corroborated by Bruce. If it were true that she would travel back in time – and she had been spotted aged forty – then she was indestructible.

Frank said simply, “Time’s up. I have to kill you now.” He sounded empty, a bored actor just reading his lines.

Jennifer stammered, “N-no...please.”

Saskia stepped between Jennifer and Frank.

There was another dull thud. This time, it was accompanied by the treble of breaking glass. Saskia smiled. It was David. He had managed to free himself. The damsels would be rescued. “Did you hear that?” Saskia whispered again.

Frank stepped back. Saskia waited. Then, sure enough, he doubled at the waist and fell prone. Saskia heard him gasp for air.

Jennifer said tentatively, “Dad?”

“He can’t hear you,” Saskia murmured. The seconds passed and nothing happened. David, finish him, she thought. Frank felt the space around him. There was something invisible at his feet. Saskia sighed with disappointment. Frank was touching David’s physical form in the cubicle, and the computer was projecting that motion here.

Frank turned to them. “He’s dead.”

“No,” Jennifer whispered. She was about to collapse. Or become berserk. Saskia could not be sure. She put an arm around her shoulders.

“We don’t believe you,” she said.

Frank laughed. He kicked out with his foot. “Seems pretty dead to me. Not breathing. I reckon he’s bled out.”

Saskia could feel the sweat under her headset. If she did not survive this moment, she would not be able to travel backwards in time. But she already had. David and Bruce had said so. Surely Time Itself, an unthinking God like Frank, would intervene to avoid the paradox?

Time passed.

She felt Jennifer straighten her back.

Her invulnerability melted away. David and Bruce were mistaken. She was going to die.

The Enchanted Sleeper

Frank raised his arm. Saskia guessed it was a signal to the computer that would see Jennifer and herself evaporated, or pummelled to a paste, or drowned, or burned, or something only a psychopath like Frank could dream. He raised the other arm. The gesture was almost benedictory. Saskia grimaced and waited.

Nothing happened.

Jennifer twitched nervously. "What's happening?" she whispered.

Saskia said, "Frank?"

He growled, "I can't move. I'm stuck."

"Like a fly in amber," came a fourth voice.

A figure strolled briskly into view from behind Frank. He was completely naked. Saskia marvelled at his comical appearance. The damsels had been rescued after all.

"Hello, ladies," he said. "Pardon the attire."

Tearfully, Jennifer said, "You were killed."

Bruce's smile faded. "Yes, I saw my body. This body, me," he touched his chest, "is a back-up made when I was sitting on the cabin. I was born about two minutes ago. I've been inside the cabin writing more instructions for the computer. Still alive, Frank?"

"I can't move," he spat.

"No. Your privileges have been suspended."

Jennifer said, "Bruce, Dad's hurt. Let us out of the computer."

"Already done. Go."

Jennifer vanished.

Saskia was subdued. They had been saved by Bruce Shimoda. But this was not really him. It was a digital ghost based on a computer file that contained the real Bruce Shimoda's DNA and the wiring of his brain. He was not real.

She remembered Bruce's story. The digital creatures were not Real because they were not from the Real World.

She still believed that Bruce was not Real, but here he was, naked, a man who had risked his existence to save them. She struggled for a new word: a word that meant alive but not biological. In English and German the only candidate was 'soul'.

You are not real, she thought, speaking of herself. You and Bruce are the same. Just information. The chip in your brain – the very seat of your personality, the Real You – is just information too.

Saskia gazed and Bruce. He sensed her attention and smiled.

She thought, You are one of the Unreal like Bruce. You have made the transition from physical to non-physical, concrete to abstract, flesh to ghost, fuel to fire.

She saw three witches sitting around a fire. One turned to her and said, Your fate is decided, for I have written it.

You will return, said another, as you have returned before.

She saw Scottie. Poor, dear Scottie. It was night. He was walking towards a small boat, which was tied to a small jetty. On the boat was a hooded man. Saskia called out and Scottie turned. He smiled and said something she couldn't make out (Don't worry about me) and reached into his pocket. He withdrew something (a Zippo lighter) from his pocket and struck it on his thigh: the lid opened on the downstroke and the wick lit on the upstroke. She waved. His lips moved but she couldn't hear (The gift of fire) him.

She blinked.

She was back on the smooth riverbed. Bruce was near the cabin. By moonlight, he was digging a grave. His own, dead body was nearby. She reached up to remove the headset. She had to help David. Just as her hands touched the dull plastic, she heard Scottie calling from (Remember what you're carrying) a far away place, though she could not make out his (...Ute) words.

Jennifer looked down on her father, who lay bloodied and curled around Frank's feet. Though this was still the man who had sent her away to America, the last of her anger disappeared.

The cubicle was cramped, so she hauled him out by his lapels. He was oiled by his own blood. Frank was immobile. His muscles clenched and unclenched, but the thin film of microbots held him rigid. She wondered if he could breathe. She didn't care.

"Dad," she said. She slapped his cheek. There were cuts and several large swellings on his forehead. There was blood everywhere. Perhaps he had lost a great deal, perhaps not; she had no idea.

Think.

During the weeks of preparation prior to her arrival at Met Four, Jennifer had been given numerous intellectual and psychological tests. The first-aid exam had been the last. For a job in a research facility that teemed with hidden cameras and expert medical staff, Jennifer had viewed the exam with some contempt. She had downloaded a manual on the Friday evening and memorised its contents for the test on Monday. She had not given the topic a single thought since.

She pictured the first-aid manual and read the cover: There's no place like home.

She saw a door with the letter 'A' written above. It was the garage door from their old house in Oxford. She would need to remember its layout – and her past – to unlock the medical knowledge she had stowed there. The garage was main route. Each room was a mnemonic that corresponded to the table of contents in the first-aid manual. She could readily summon help from research centre's medical sickbay; but she would not do it yet, because it would mean disaster for her father, herself and Saskia.

Underneath the letter A – it was not coloured, but neither was it colourless – was the word 'Airway'.

Jennifer knelt by her father's head and checked his airway. On the garage door, beneath the word 'Airway', there was a picture. It showed a cartoon woman with her cheek near the casualty's mouth. Jennifer did the same. She eased two fingers under his chin and tilted. She could not feel breath on her cheek or see his chest rise.

She imagined the garage door opening. It tilted upwards with a creak because her father had never cared to oil it. From inside came the smell of black paint and sawdust. The best smell in the world. It was a friendly place. She remembered running inside, aged four or five, to watch her father tinker with chairs and cupboard doors. She watched him clamp them to his Workmate and commence torture with screwdrivers, hammers and electric sanders. Invariably he would become angry with the chair or cupboard door: a screw would not enter correctly, or it would drop to the concrete floor, never to be found. "The universe conspires

against me," he would rage, and Jennifer would clap her hands, because she knew that he would never be angry with her; she could disarm him with a glance. When she was older, she would fetch him cups of tea, though he worked in the garage less and less. He spent more weekends at the department. The times when he worked there became more precious. He talked her through her homework as she sat in a corner of the garage at a badly-constructed desk. Once he had made a hanging mobile from marbles and strings in order to demonstrate the movement of the planets. She watched silently with amusement. The mobile did not work; few of his creations did.

But his enthusiasm was a powerful force. She saw it less and less as she grew older. She became a woman. Her father became more distant. He was not sure who she had become. Their conversations became more superficial. More silences. Not awkward, but more frequent. She began to excel at school and, with that, came the bullies. David did not know how to help her. It was not an equation to be solved or a mobile to be built. Her bullying found his limits.

She looked back now, almost smelling the garage, and realised that she had overreacted. At the age of twenty, she had an aerial view of her teenage years and realised that her tantrums and silences and her solemnity were acts of a kind. They were not real. And she knew that, when she reached thirty, she would look back and say the same of the mistakes of her twenties, and again when she was forty.

These thoughts flashed through her mind in a second.

She looked now into the garage.

DÉJÀ VU

The first thing she saw was the Workmate. She saw that there were two balloons jammed, trapped, between its two planks of wood. Good. That meant 'air'.

She pinched her father's nose with her right hand and kept his head tilted with her left. She sealed her lips over his and blew. It really felt like blowing into a balloon: there was a building resistance, the sound of rushing air, and the expansion of her father's chest. When she withdrew, her warm breath was returned to her. Nothing else happened.

Her father's eyes were open. She could only see the whites. There were two balloons so she breathed twice.

David awoke slowly. He blinked because there were strong lights in the room. He was on his back. Close by, two women were talking in a low murmur. He blinked again to clear the haze from his mind. He remembered nothing.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Dad," said a voice. It was Jennifer. She came into view. It was shock to see her so old. He realised that he had been dreaming of her as a child. "Do you remember anything?"

He nodded and sat up. "Yes, everything. I feel sick."

"You stopped breathing. I gave you mouth-to-mouth."

David closed his eyes and took some long, slow breaths. The blood was draining from his head so he lay back down. As the back of his skull tapped the floor, he gave a yell.

"What's wrong?" asked another voice. It was Saskia.

"Did I walk into a door?"

Jennifer squeezed his hand. “Do you remember when I was kid and said that, when confronted with a problem, I should use my head?”

David groaned. “Now I remember.”

He opened his left eye a fraction and looked at Jennifer. Her hair had fallen from its Alice Band. Her features had relaxed. She seemed younger. He felt an awkwardness inside and it was so familiar – and so destructive – that he threw it aside and said, “Jennifer, I love you. Very much.”

Jennifer let out a burst of laughter. “Well. Great. I love you too.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever said that before,” David said.

“Me either,” Jennifer replied.

The awkwardness returned, but it had a different character.

Saskia said, “Na prima, the English brain. Once delivered a stunning blow, it works fine.”

“Tell me what happened,” David said.

Saskia recounted the last moments of their dealings with Frank. David laughed when he heard that Bruce had cheated death once more. It was somehow unsurprising. “What happened to the bloke at the computer out there?”

“Mikey electrocuted himself,” Saskia said quietly. She gave Jennifer a sympathetic look.

David caught it. “Was he your boyfriend?”

“Not really,” Jennifer replied. “But I think he tried to save us.”

“Yes,” David said. “He did. I saw him. He was working hard. But how did manage to get electrocuted?”

“He tried to shut down the computer with a fire axe,” Saskia said.

“Oh. And what about Frank?”

“He’s on ice,” Jennifer said.

David, who had sat up to listen, looked over to Frank’s cubicle. Their assailant was encased in a fine yellowish film. It had to be made of microbots.

Saskia said, “I think we should keep him there until we leave.”

“Leave?” David asked. “I don’t think we’re in a position to leave yet. For one thing, you’re still here.”

Saskia sighed. “What do you mean, ‘still here’? Please do not tell me that you still subscribe to this time travel theory.”

Jennifer said, “It is a theory, but it works. We can send you back.”

Saskia slapped her forehead. “How many times do I have to say this? I do not wish to go back. There is no reason. Am I speaking English?”

“Very well,” David said evenly. “But I saw you. Bruce saw you. That means you’re going back, and I don’t think you have a choice.”

“I always have a choice. Everybody does.”

“Do they?” David asked playfully.

“This is not a tutorial, Professor,” Saskia said. “And it is time to leave.”

“Oh, I disagree. You should all stay a little longer,” said a voice. The tone was so similar to David’s own that he was forced to check that he had not uttered the words himself. And then he saw a figure in the doorway.

Jennifer said, “Mr Hartfield!”

And Saskia hissed, “Jobanique.”

“This is a gun. Keep still.”

Saskia felt her cheeks burn. Even as this newcomer had spoken, she had not been sure, but her suspicion was barely formed before she knew. This was Jobanique. His voice. She tried to wrestle from his power – the fascination she had with his true, ordinary face, his simple suit – but she could not.

He was three metres away. If she could get a metre closer, she could slap the gun aside. Her only tool was her shoulder bag, which she had retrieved from the floor.

Her breathing became tidal. She sank back and watched.

“Hartfield,” David said slowly. “Long time, no see.”

The man blinked but his eyes were dead; grinned but it was wrong, a bad copy. She understood, right then, that he was insane. “Hello again, David. And perhaps I should say hello to the two ladies. Hello and hello.”

“Hello, Mr Hartfield,” Jennifer said solemnly. His rictus turned at one corner, its single variation.

“Guten Tag, Jobanique,” Saskia said.

“Jobanique,” he repeated, as though the name had touched a cherished memory. “Saskia, I have a number of identities that allow me to –” he paused, but his expression did not change. She felt that he already had the next word. He merely wished to pause for effect. He continued, “They allow me to perform certain duties, or to solve certain problems. This face –” he pointed to his chin with the gun, and in that instant Saskia knew (or judged, or guessed) that he had never undertaken firearms training – “this face is rather too well known.” He looked at David. “Is it not?”

“Saskia,” David said weakly, “allow me to introduce John Hartfield, eighth richest man in the world. Owner of the West Lothian Centre and this place too, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Seventh,” Hartfield corrected. “Rottstein died on Mars last Tuesday. More money than air.”

“Did you kill him?” Jennifer asked. She was distant, like Saskia. Watching.

“No, I did not.” He shifted his weight. Saskia noticed that his left leg was weak. “I am not normally a man who says ‘I told you so’, Miss Proctor, but you should have passed my warning to you father. You would have avoided this situation.”

“Exactly what situation are we in?” Jennifer asked.

She doesn’t know, Saskia thought. She doesn’t sense the danger.

Hartfield leaned forward to check on Frank, but not far enough for Saskia to disarm him safely. “I see that I have made two, not one, bad choices of agent. I wanted Frank to take care of you. I saw to it that things would be easy for him. He must be exceptionally incompetent.”

Saskia wanted to interrupt the smoothness of this man, wanted to say “We had help,” but Bruce was an ace in the hole. Instead she said, “I think you owe us an explanation. If not them, then me.”

Hartfield checked his watch. “Do you remember James Bond, Miss Brandt?”

“No.”

“Before your time, perhaps. James Bond was the secret agent star of rather formulaic but enjoyable action films. There was always a colourful villain –” he gestured towards himself – “a

defeated sidekick” – he pointed to Frank – “a suave hero” – David – “and, of course, the delightful Bond girls –” Saskia and Jennifer. “During the finale, certain in the knowledge of Bond’s imminent death, the villain would take time to explain, somewhat lengthily, the ins and outs of his plan. But in the real world, we villains have a schedule.”

He aimed the gun at Saskia’s chest. He pulled the trigger.

She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and raised her hands.
Something wicked...

Stirred. She heard the grind of ancient machinery, as though the stage upon which the universe itself was built, firmament or dreams, rolled towards a new configuration.

She felt exposed.

The sound faded.

The sensation passed.

...this way comes.

Saskia opened her eyes.

She heard the diminuendo of Jennifer’s scream.

The smell of the gun.

It took her a moment for her mind to recover its balance. The bullet had come and gone. Nobody moved, but Hartfield’s eyes jumped. He looked at Saskia, though not at her eyes. Then he looked at the ceiling, for so long (though it was barely a tick of Saskia’s racing brain) that she followed his blank gaze. There was a small, black hole. Smoking.

He looked at her hand.

So did she.

She had been holding her shoulder bag. Now it was smoking too. Now.

Now grab him now, grab him.

She slipped forward. She watched her body perform. Her wrist struck Hartfield's own. His hand drooped but retained the gun. Next she moved to his far right, beyond the angle of the weapon if it discharged, and barged him. He was forced onto his weak left leg. Saskia grabbed the gun barrel securely, twisted, and stepped behind him. She pushed him once more and he fell onto his belly, sliding over the tiles until he came to rest alongside David.

"Hello," David said dryly.

Saskia pointed the gun at Hartfield's centre mass. "Don't move."

His breathing was hard but his expression was sleepy, dead.

Jennifer, David and Saskia shared a moment of victory and fear. Saskia had reversed Hartfield's threat. But she knew it would not be enough. They needed information. "It's question time," she announced.

"Agreed," David said. "Who's first?"

"Me," Hartfield said. He exposed his canine teeth. "Will you let me go for free passage? I own this centre. I guarantee your safety."

Saskia frowned. "You own it?"

"Yes, and four others. I used to own the West Lothian Centre. Until it was destroyed."

"Hartfield was out for my blood back in 2003," David said.

"He's quite the prosecutor when he gets going."

“Fine,” Saskia said. “I have a deal for you. Answer our questions truthfully and I’ll let you go.”

“I don’t believe you,” he replied.

“Wait,” David said. He fished in his jacket pocket and retrieved his wallet. From that, he pulled out a bank card. Saskia craned closer. No, this was Ego, his personal computer. She had never seen a computer so small. It was as practical as a phone the size of a peanut. “Ego, switch to speaker mode. I want you to analyze my voice stress patterns to see if I am lying. Ready?”

“Ready,” came a tiny voice.

“Hartfield will be set free if he answers our questions truthfully.”

There was a pause. “You are lying.”

David coughed. Saskia said, “Ego, analyse me. I’m the person with the gun. Hartfield will be set free if he answers our concerns truthfully.”

Another pause. “Saskia, you are telling the truth.”

Hartfield began to ease himself upright. At the flick of Saskia’s wrist, he did so slowly. “I believe you,” he said. “And don’t worry, I have no concealed weapons.”

“Empty your pockets,” Jennifer said. She was too close to him and Saskia panicked silently, ready to strike his temple with the gun, but he merely emptied them. He had a set of keys, a wallet similar to David’s and a blue all-sites all-times pass card. Jennifer poked through the pile. “No weapons.”

“Answer my question first,” Saskia said. “You know what it is.”

Hartfield nodded. He paused. She hoped that he wasn’t preparing a story. “There are two sides to any successful business.

The legitimate, public façade, and the illegitimate underbelly. You are part of the latter. The FIB is a real institution, of course. I know because I own it. Your section is known by the codename Munin. In Norse mythology, Odin had two ravens, Munin and Hugin. They would fly out at the beginning of each day and return at dusk with news from the world of Man.” He checked her expression. “I recruited you specifically to deal with the Proctor problem.”

Ego said, “He is telling the truth.”

“Tell us only when he doesn’t,” snapped David. “What, pray, is the Proctor problem?”

“There were reports that the New World computer was back on-line. Further reports implicated Bruce Shimoda. As you know, David – but perhaps the ladies do not – Bruce’s achievement was extraordinary. That tomb was sealed for more than a quarter of a century and its infrastructure was decaying. I didn’t believe Bruce could do it without help. In my business I develop a nose for these things. I suspected your hand in this, David. Therefore I arranged to have you sent to him under the guise of a summons from Colonel McWhirter.”

David shook his head. “In doing so you set this whole thing in motion.”

“There is an ancient saying: keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Within the research centre I had good, invasive surveillance. I had hoped that Colonel McWhirter could handle you. He could not.”

“The roof collapsed. He was killed.”

Hartfield gave David a sideways look. “You don’t have to excuse your actions to me. I have no interest in McWhirter’s wellbeing.”

“Or the law,” Saskia said. “Go on.”

“Perhaps I could have a glass of water?”

Saskia fired the gun. The cubicle door behind Hartfield shattered. David and Jennifer exchanged a glance. Hartfield straightened his tie. “I understand perfectly, Miss Brandt. As I was saying, David, I was unprepared for your second terrorist attack.”

“Bloody hell, how many times? There was no first attack. Not by me.”

Hartfield shrugged. He glanced briefly at Ego. “Your computer seems to think you are telling the truth. I, however, do not.”

“Tell me how you found the glider,” David said. He was conscious that time might be short. If security did arrive, Hartfield would have a difficult job in explaining things, but his word would overrule theirs. “Did you know where it was heading? Did you have a tip-off? Who were those people, the riders, who attacked me?”

“Attack is a rather dramatic word. Those men were some local thugs under the supervision of a Scottish agent I sometimes use. Routine satellite data led them to your location. They had orders to engage you and let you escape –” Saskia saw David’s expression sour – “under surveillance. They only did half the job.”

“And why did you let me escape?”

“I underestimated you once, David. At the inquiry that followed the first bombing. That was a mistake. Nobody takes me on and wins. Nobody.” Hartfield smiled again. “I wanted to collect enough information to put you through a trial. Garrel’s interrogation was fruitless.”

David nodded. “You seem rather confident, considering there is a gun in your face. By the way, my personal assistant, Ego, is tireless with its observation, aren’t you, Ego?”

“Yes, David,” Ego replied. “Everything is being recorded.”

Hartfield let out a single, bark-like laugh. “Nothing matters now.”

“Now -” Saskia began.

“One last question,” David said, interrupting her with a finger. “Tell me about the soldier who was guarding the New World computer when I found Bruce. What was her role?”

“Nothing more than to collect information.”

David said nothing. He stared sadly at his shoes. Saskia wondered what he could see. She asked, “And now my part. You sent me after David as a back-up – to collect information.”

Hartfield said, “No. At that point, I merely wanted you to collect him. Then I realised how persuasive a man David could be, and how difficult it had been to fully control your behaviour. I decided to end the matter by sending Frank. If he found you here, then my suspicions would be confirmed because only David could lead you to his daughter. If he had not found you, then David would be in your custody and on the way back to England. And once David and I were reunited...well, I had resolved to interrogate him personally. I would do a better job than that idiot Garrel. Any man will talk if you know his weakness, his soft spot.”

Jennifer raised her hand. It was an oddly student-like gesture. “I have a question. Why are you here?”

Hartfield nodded. “The most important question. You remember, Jennifer, that I was a young man when cancer struck me down. I offered my fortune to any person who could cure me.

The one who came forward was Fernando Orza. His treatment involved an invasion nanobots – robots smaller than blood cells – that could seek out and destroy cancer cells. I was cured. That, in sum, is the official version of the story. In the unofficial version, the nanobots killed not only cancerous cells but particular types of healthy ones too. I was left with a severe mental handicap from which it took me years to recover. I received a number of treatments, including embryonic stem-cell injections directly into the brain. We went through kilos of foetal tissue. Expensive stuff. Finally, the doctors told me that I had been left with a permanent condition. A rather heady combination of Asperger's Syndrome – a mild form of autism – and psychopathy.

“Orza's nano-treatment became public after 2010 or so. But that day in 1999, when I received the test results, I turned my energies towards investment in radical technologies. New World, for example, was designed – although you did not understand until later, David – to unlock the secrets of genes, using the kind of experimental approach only previously possible with creatures like fruit flies. Another example is your time travel programme, Jennifer. Not one single project was given the green light unless I thought it might take me one step further towards my treatment.

“That is why I am here now. I have with me the specifications of the correct nano-treatment. I have studied the operation of the time machine and cleared the area of personnel. I will return to the year 1999 and give Orza the correct nanobot specifications. I will be cured and my future will change. So however much you think you have gained by my confession, it will not help you. The world of 2023, this version anyway, can go to Hell.”

The arrogance of this man finally wrote an emotion on his face. Hope. He had reached a climax. Something bad (something wicked) was imminent. Should she shoot? His expression became blank. He said, "Goodbye, Saskia," and it was too late.

Darkness fell.

David cried out, "Get him!"

Saskia felt Hartifeld brush past her. He was not as weak as he had feigned. She tried to turn but her legs were somehow immovable. So was the gun. She had become a statue like Frank.

Somewhere, Ego said, "David, I have detected the presence of another Ego-class computer. It has sent two coded radio bursts. The first instructed the central computer to deactivate the lighting throughout the centre."

David's voice was grim. He asked, "And the second?"

"An instruction to Saskia's brain chip to deactivate."

"Saskia?" he shouted. "Saskia?"

But she was in a coffin. She wanted to scream but she had no air. Nor could she open her mouth. She was two weeks old and she was dead. She smelled formaldehyde, corrupt meat and wood. Her chest itched from the coroner's incision. Smoke reached her nostrils. With that, she felt a draught from the dark curtain that separated now from then. The light from another world found her, even as she lay inside her box, and she remembered everything, and everything was

Revenge

The train station, with its tusk-like arches, emerged on her left. On her right, a department store. She stepped between them a wounded figure. Her eyes, cold under sunglasses, saw an office block with a particular atmosphere. It was still an hour's walk away.

She reached Oppenheim Street and found a bench. The sun was low. Late summer evening. Tourists wandered by, too happy to make straight lines. She opened her shoulder bag and removed an old camera. She pretended to photograph the street, but she shot an old office block. It had a particular atmosphere. On its ground floor was a perfumery. Above that were smoked windows. Ute took another picture and moved away. She found an alley that led to the back of the block. More photographs. There was a fire escape. Underneath it was a car park. Beyond was Father Rhine, steady as the sea.

She hooked some long brown hair behind her ears and returned to the main street. On the same bench, she ate ice cream by twilight.

She paused on the way home to buy a padlock and a tube of superglue. She also had the film developed. The attendant thought she was beautiful. He lamented the waste of a good film – she had used only ten exposures – and asked her out for dinner. Ute could never have dinner with his man, though she thought he was beautiful too. Her intestines shifted like a restless snake. She hurried from the shop and vomited into a bin.

The day grew darker. She avoided eyes and hugged herself against the chill air while others relaxed in cafés and watched

Germany's Indian summer. Ute heard them and seethed. It was not summer; it was autumn. If not that, then winter.

On the threshold of her apartment, the moment of change, she forgot who she was. Then she remembered. She was a romantic novelist. She had flexible hours. Flexible enough to allow her to take days off. She had been on holiday for a week now. She had never worked harder.

She had started work in the Kabana six nights before. Her friend Brigitte had accompanied her, and together they had scanned the crowd, looking for his face. But they had not found him. Brigitte had said, "Why would he come back? He might expect it."

"No," Ute said. "He would not."

"What are you going to do if you see him, Ute, what?"

Brigitte had accompanied her the next night too, and the one after that. Then she had stopped. Ute did not blame her. The music was too loud for conversation and, as Brigitte persisted with her questions, Ute persisted in her silence.

On the third night, alone, Ute saw him. Her expression did not change. A short, moustached man. He stood in the same corner wearing the same clothes. He chatted to two women just as he had chatted to her. He lit their cigarettes with a Zippo lighter swished down then up. But her fate and theirs took different paths; they smiled indulgently at his broken German and walked away, giggling. Ute watched them leave. She debated confronting the man. She decided not to. She watched him from afar for two hours before he left. He was on foot and he walked for kilometres. He meandered, took several turns, and doubled back on himself.

Ute matched him, and better. She had lived in the city her whole life and he had not. She stopped on corners, into shadows and reversed her coat. There were few places for him to lose her. They took the underground at Ottoplatz and emerged at Reichenspergerplatz. Eventually, they came to the office block. She recognised the small door where, two weeks before, she had been bundled though, blind-folded, by two large men. This was the place. She found a phone booth to call Detective Holtz, the policeman in charge of her case, but there was no answer.

The night was warm. She walked back to her apartment via the river. It was dangerous and she did not care. Only thirteen days before, she had been raped. Fear was nothing next to her anger. Fear was for the person who crossed her path. She had a stun-gun in her bag and a five inch flick-knife under the sleeve of her right arm. She taunted every shadow.

Back at her apartment, she considered calling Brigitte. No, she decided. Brigitte should not be involved. She might interfere. So Ute did not call the woman who had visited her in hospital on the first night when she was still curled, catatonic, bleeding from her vagina and with scrapes of her attackers' flesh under her fingernails. She did not call Detective Holtz. She did not call her publisher.

She took paper and a pencil, licked the nib, and planned.

It had come back to her on the threshold of her apartment. The moment of change. It was twilight, the brink of night. She was a writer. She wrote romantic fiction. On the afternoon of her last visit to the Kabana, she had been reading a book. She took it to

the sofa. She sat there, jacket on, door wide, and opened the book at its marker. There was a picture of three old women sitting around a spinning wheel. The caption read:

Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it.

She knew she was stronger than Brigitte. Her friend would have been damaged for life. Not Ute. She was made of stronger stuff. She had no fragile belief in right or wrong, or natural order, or of her own invulnerability to life's traumas. She had no creator to blame.

She had nothing.

She fell. Her house computer asked her if she needed assistance. She tasted the varnish of her floorboards. "I need..." she began, but did not know how to finish.

She never did know. Her prosecutor had some ideas. "You needed revenge, didn't you, Ms Schmidt? You needed blood, you needed punishment, you needed to kill. In short, you needed to commit murder. Isn't that so?"

Spin, measure.

Snip.

"No."

The next day she collected her developed photographs. She returned to her apartment and spent the day thinking, reading, smoking. She even tried to finish her novel. The romance wouldn't

come. She did not eat and, that night, she slept fitfully. At 3:00 a.m., she had a glass of water. She left the apartment.

She arrived back at 7:00 a.m. and left again at 8:00 a.m. The next time she saw the kitchen, living-room and bedroom would be in the photographs at her trial. She waited five minutes for the train. A part of her knew she should call Detective Holtz, tell him that she had found the office block and let him arrest the suspects. A nurse had collected sperm. It could be matched with the five men. All of them.

Five men. The train arrived and she got on. Her thoughts were lost in the crowd, in the pictures sweeping by, by her fingertips on the stun gun.

There was a little boy on the train. He was about ten years old. He was on his way to school alone. His cheeks were chubby. He was nervous. He saw Saskia and smiled. She might have reached for his eyes, but a pensioner shuffled between them and the moment passed.

She alighted one stop from her destination.

She emptied the tube into the lock. She put the tube in her pocket and left the alley. On the street, she cut right into the perfumery. The air was conditioned to a chill. It was precisely 9 a.m. The perfumery had no customers. Ute walked to the back of the shop and stood near a staff-only door. She pretended to inspect a moisturizing soap. When an attendant walked by, Ute clutched the woman's arm. "Excuse me, please, but could I have a glass of water?"

The woman's bright smile faded. "Of course."

She disappeared through the staff door and returned with a tiny paper cone. "I'll have the cup back when you're finished," she said.

Ute took two deep breaths, drank the water, and let the cone drop. She swayed. "I'm sorry..."

"Are you feeling alright?" asked the assistant.

"Perhaps some more water..." Ute said. She fell into the woman's arms, leaving her no choice but to take her into the back room. Ute saw linoleum and cleaning buckets. She smelled fresh coffee. The woman placed her on a chair in a small kitchen. Ute heard the running of a tap, and it was then that she looked up and withdrew her stun gun.

The woman turned. She had a mug of fresh water in each hand. When she saw the gun and Ute's cold eyes, she let the mugs drop. They bounced on the tiles. "You own the shop?" Ute asked.

"Yes," the woman said. She was tearful but her anger kept her alert. "What do you want? The takings? We have only been open for a few minutes, foolish girl."

Ute put a finger to her lips. "What I have to do today has nothing to do with you or your shop. I need to get into those offices." She pointed at the ceiling. "How?"

The woman relaxed. Ute noticed the blond highlights in her brown hair, her tan, her blue pearl necklace, and the red bandana that was tucked fashionably into the collar of her blouse. Her badge read, 'Sabine Schlesinger'. "The fire escape."

"No," Ute said. She pictured her journey that morning, before sunrise, when she had stolen up those iron steps in bare feet, attached the padlock, felt it click home.

“There is another way. Out of here, turn left. There’s an interior fire door that opens onto a corridor. Then there are stairs. You realise I must call the police.”

“Of course,” Ute said. She did not lower the stun gun. “Please do not follow me. This is for your own safety. Evacuate the shop.”

“What’s going to happen to my shop?”

“Nothing,” Ute said.

She walked backwards from the room. In the tiny corridor, there was nobody. She checked on Sabine. Still there.

Ute turned and ran through the fire door. She stepped through and closed it behind her. The corridor was empty. At one end was the door with the lock that she had superglued before entering the shop. She checked its handle. Immovable.

Her one problem was the connecting door with the perfume shop. It had a push-down bar on both sides. She had to act quickly.

She removed her shoes and walked up the stairs.

“A thorough and meticulous murder,” Jobanique would tell her, three weeks later.

There was an interior door on the first landing. She put the stun gun in her shoulder bag. Ute knew that the average police response time was four minutes, plus or minus one minute. Sabine, she guessed, would not follow her.

The handle turned. It was cheap door with a cardboard filling; it did not have the presence to squeak. It could not be barricaded.

For a second time, she stepped inside.

The empty office space was huge. Its walls were glass. The air was stuffy with sunlight. There were sheets of paper, old mugs, filing cabinets, chairs and sheets of plastic.

In the centre were the mannequins. They hadn't moved.

Immediately on her left was a small walled office. It had no windows but an open doorway. Nearby was the fire-escape that she had padlocked earlier that morning. She came closer. She felt dust on her bare feet. She heard snores.

Inside, it was dull and hot. She counted six sleeping men. They were lying, mostly naked, overlapping by foot and hand. Ute had once been scared by these men. Now she was disgusted. There was a camping toilet in one corner. In another, a television and a computer games console. There was a large duvet in the centre. The stench of sweat and semen was overpowering.

Ute took the can of lighter fluid from her bag. She squirted it onto the duvet. It was a good feeling. She was pissing on these men. Next she took a match and flicked it into the centre. The duvet erupted. Thick smoke poured outward in a carpet, hugging the ground, making for the door. She did not hurry to withdraw her stun gun. Humans cannot smell while they are asleep. She had checked.

She saw the moustached man who had led her from the club. He had bought her drinks. He was middle-aged and balding, but Ute had always preferred older men. He had drugged her Martini. Mildly, but enough. Later, he had injected her with scopolamine and morphine as she crouched to re-tie her shoe. Life had become hazy and slow. Her resistance had fallen away. For passers-by she was a drunk. The man waved them on with a laugh.

She fired the gun. Two darts flew out and embedded themselves in his buttocks. They connected to the stun gun with strong, insulated cables. The darts had barbs. They could not be extracted without ripping flesh. The man grunted but did nothing more. He was drugged. There was a second trigger to activate the charge. She did not squeeze it yet. First, she fired darts into all of the men. There were six of them; she had ten pairs of darts.

She shot the man who had taken her from the club. He had smoked a large joint the entire time. It must have been two or three hours. He re-lit with his Zippo, opening the lid on his thigh on the downstroke, lighting the wick on the upstroke.

She shot the others too. All of them. The drugs extinguished their pain.

The drugs. She remembered the moustached man injecting her again. He had put a fatherly arm across her shoulders and taken her for a walk. He had led her to the Rhine. One last injection: the rest of the syringe. A gentle push and she fell.

She pulled the trigger.

Callused arms had found her in that cold, empty hell. Pulled her onto a deck. Shouted words in a language she did not understand. Wiped hair and muck from her mouth. Shone light in her eyes. Injected her.

She pulled the trigger again. This time the groans were louder, angrier. Eyes sought her. They were monstrous but they were pathetic. She realised that they would never be as strong as her. She had returned.

They've killed you, said a voice, high in her mind, yet another voice, much lower, said And killed themselves.

She pulled the trigger a third time. Bodies convulsed. The smoke was thicker now. One of the men began to realise his fate. He tugged at the barbed darts in his chest. Ute watched the skin stretch. It would not rip. Finally the man collapsed in the smoke.

The only light in the windless office came from the doorway. She reached back and pulled the door shut. The burning duvets produced their own light. She watched the flame. It was as blue-green as a firework.

Something grabbed her ankle and Ute screamed. She pulled the trigger again and the hand tensed. It fell and lay flaccid on her foot.

She pulled the trigger again and again. The elements of her mind combined to urge her on. She was a mob that lusted for the death of these men, even as it hastened her own. With each pull of the trigger, she imagined herself raping them, firing into them, inching them towards the edge of an abyss with each dirty push.

The smoke was thick and poisonous now. Thirty seconds had passed. She felt sick and near collapse.

“This, gentlemen,” she shouted, “is what it feels like when you’re fucked.”

Someone muttered a word. She could not quite hear it. Behind the burning duvets, a figure rose. It muttered the word again. It shimmered through Ute’s tears.

The word was ‘Weibsstück’. Bitch.

It stepped forward and Ute gasped. It was a woman...and she was momentarily awed at her own stupidity. The men were lying supine, satiated. Of course there was a woman. A woman like Ute herself. She reached forward to help the victim from the room.

She would have a straightforward escape through the door to the staircase and, from there, through the perfume shop to freedom.

The woman grabbed her throat and pushed hard. Ute dropped the stun gun and they broke through the door. In daylight, her eyes seemed to be more animal than human. Cat's eyes. The eyes were familiar; she had been present at Ute's rape. She had looked on.

Ute tripped but the woman followed her down. Her grip remained. Like the men, she was high. Ute could feel her head expanding with trapped blood. She scrambled backwards. They made progress across the floor. Ute felt the world darken. Above them, the ceiling of the main floor was on fire. That's my gift, Ute thought. Plastic embers began to fall like ash. Still the world darkened.

They crashed into the pile of mannequins. The landslide covered them. The dolls were heavy and one struck the woman near her temple. Her grip relaxed momentarily. Ute took a breath before it was re-established. She had come here to die, but, more than this, she had come to kill her attackers. She would not be satisfied with all but one of them.

Inside her shoulder bag, which had not moved in the struggle, she found the canister of lighter fluid. Ute's fingertips and toes began to sparkle. Her bladder muscle trembled. She jammed the can into her attacker's mouth. It could not suffocate her, but that was not the intention. She twisted the can savagely so that it caught on the woman's teeth. The thin metal tore and Ute pulled it free. The stranglehold lessened as the woman realised that her prey now had a weapon with a razor's edge.

Ute did not wait. She rubbed at the woman's throat to the right of her windpipe. The skin opened like a second month. The woman's grip relaxed and, for the first time, her cat-eyes dropped away. She pushed off to escape into the mannequins. The air was blue-grey with smoke.

The woman slithered away. She had almost gone. Only her ankles remained. Ute grabbed one and pulled her back. The woman yelled.

Don't do it, said a high-up voice. Kill her and she wins. She's taken your life. Take control.

A deeper voice said: She deserves to die. Kill her now.

Ute reached for the other ankle. The woman jammed the cold ball of her foot in her throat. The pain stopped time. When finally she tried to move, she could see only the expressionless mannequins and their hard, plastic fingers. They seemed to crowd her. They were dead. They wanted her dead too. There was no up or down. And from the gaps between one mannequin and the next there issued only smoke, not air. She screamed.

The coffin lid would not budge. She was in the undignified oven of a crematorium. The darkness was no longer absolute. Cracks appeared. She saw her simple funeral clothes by orange light. She would escape her coffin now, oh yes, into a fire that might let her linger, let her relish the last few moments of life with a height of sensation she had never known. The crackling flames. Smoke. Distant organ music. The murmurs of David Proctor, thanking the priest for a lovely service. Saskia would have wanted it that way.

Saskia.

The hawk that returned.

DÉJÀ VU

The Time Machine (II)

Ute was back. Her ghostly passenger, who, according to Bruce, had been the late Kate Falconer, was gone.

She remembered her first kiss. It had been on tiptoe behind a supermarket. She saw the face of a local shopkeeper, Herr Horst, the faces of her foster parents, some fellow schoolchildren, and a poster of Saturn she had won at a fair. Spending hours learning to hula-hoop. A school trip to France. Her favourite film was *The Daughter-in-Law*. Her foster mother's name was Fride. They had lived in Cologne. Her Uncle Wolfi had once saved her from drowning. He had died within the year from skin cancer.

In the darkness, a woman said something. Ute decided it was Jennifer. David was here too. Jennifer spoke again. It was English. Ute didn't speak English. "Ich verstehe nicht, was du sagst," she replied. "Ich habe vergessen, wie man englisch spricht."

"OK, lass uns deutsch sprechen," Jennifer replied.

David asked, "Ist...alles klar, Saskia?"

"No," she replied. She kept her sentences simple. "I feel strange."

There was a gun in her hand, but she did not know how to hold it. She let it drop. Her memories blazed.

"You will feel strange for a while," said another voice.

"Who are you?"

"I am Ego, David's personal computer," the voice said in flawless German. "But before I was given to him, I was in your possession. I have some information for you."

“Tell me.”

“It is a message from Saskia.”

“Ach so,” she said. Her thoughts were disordered. But an undercurrent was clear: she mourned the loss of half her mind. “If the message is from Saskia Brandt, this must mean that I will travel backwards in time. It must also mean that the chip will be reactivated. I am Ute, now, but I’ll become Saskia again.”

“True,” Ego said. “Her message is: ‘Look in the envelope’.”

“Which envelope?”

“The one you found in the West Lothian Centre.”

“I remember. But I can’t see.”

A dim glow appeared in the centre of the floor. Ego grew brighter until the pale faces of David and Jennifer appeared. They looked like timid animals on the boundary of a campfire. Ute knelt and shrugged off her shoulderbag. As she opened it she noticed the dark polish on her nails. She never wore polish. Her long hair cascaded over her face. She always tied it back. In the bag was her badge, a handkerchief, some tissues and the transparent wallet that contained the white envelope.

There was neat bullet-hole through its centre.

It was fastened with a metal popper. She opened it and withdrew the envelope. Once white, it was now spotted with black mould. The edges had yellowed. On the front it read: “Do not open this envelope”.

She ripped the seal and pulled out of the contents. It was a single sheet of A4-sized paper with some hand-written German text. Her handwriting. It read:

Dear Ute

DÉJÀ VU

Remember the fates. Clotho, she spins the thread of life. Lachesis, she determines its length. Atropos, she cuts it. Together we are two, but we make a third: our combination.

Follow him and stop him. What he did to you he can do again.

Love

Saskia

PS To prove this is me, there will be a bullet hole just about here:

An arrow projected from the last sentence. Ute pushed her little finger through the hole. It was precisely at the arrow's tip. Without Ute, Falconer was no more than a memory. Her body had, perhaps, been dumped at sea or in building foundations, or fed to pigs.

Hartfield was getting away. He had killed Falconer to capture her ghost. That ghost wanted revenge. It was something that Ute understood. She had lived in Kate's shoes just as Kate had lived in hers. She loved her, and she loved her.

"Ego, can you reactivate the chip?"

"Yes."

"Do so."

"Done."

Nothing happened.

David said, "Aren't we going to go after him?"

The English made sense. Saskia crouched to retrieve the gun and checked the magazine. Five bullets left. “Let’s go.”

As they made their way from the laboratory, she remembered the vision she had experienced before disengaging from the Asgard computer.

You will return, the witch had said, as you have returned before.

Hartfield, blank, walked quickly and silently, guided by his computer’s infra-red camera.

He was a clever man. Another person would have emptied the research centre with a fire, or a bomb hoax, or computer sabotage. Hartfield’s plan – like any Hartfield plan – was a lesson in parsimony. As a moderately-skilled computer programmer (combined with knowledge that only the owner of such a facility might have the privilege to enjoy) he had simply instructed the main computer system to turn off the lights. The command was irreversible. There were no sources of light other than hand-held torches. Alas, the torches would fail rather quickly because of a malfunction in the recharging process – also under computer control, also under Harmon’s control, also part of the plan. Parsimony. Wheels within wheels.

Opening his eyes that day in 1999, he had known immediately that something was wrong. Orza had been at his bedside. His facial expression had seemed somehow alien. Hartfield could see which muscles moved and where; he could see how the skin stretched and sagged into shapes that were quite familiar. But the shapes meant nothing. He could remember

smiles, but not happiness. It was, as he explained to his late wife, as if he had lost the ability to appreciate colour. The world was now black and white.

My God but it was clearer.

Over the months, Hartfield's humanity eroded cell by cell as the nanobots completed their work. They would not respond to calls for their deactivation. They had been built to kill, and they continued as long as they had the energy to do so. They infested his brain and cut nerves in accord with some plan that their human creators could not begin to guess.

Hartfield felt the change deepen.

Humans became objects. The only object that was real was Hartfield. His acumen grew and transformed. It enjoyed new tools that were unchecked by morality. His first murder had been easy. To his dog, he had described it as prising jewels from the idol of a backward religion.

He limped down the blackened corridor until he reached the first set of stairs. A young guard stepped from nowhere. On the Ego computer screen, with its infra-red window, his irises were solid white. "Proceed to your evacuation station, sir," he said.

Hartfield put the computer in his jacket. "Thank you. I am on my way," he replied. The switchblade found his palm of its own accord. It gave him an idea. When the guard walked past, he jumped on his back. Hartfield heard laughter. Surely it was the guard. They fell to the ground. Hartfield wrenched his head back, the better to cut his pipes. He frowned like a cellist. When the man was butchered, he dragged him to one side.

Gently, to see how distant his emotions had gone, he touched the blade to his tongue. The blood tasted like soy sauce

and copper, or jewels. He put the switchblade back in its holster and took the guard's gun. If someone discovered the body it would scarcely change things.

There were twelve more flights of stairs. His ears clogged with air as he sank.

In the lull, he thought about Proctor and Brandt. It had been an interesting conversation. Advantageous. He had not planned to stop on his way down to the time machine, but he had wanted to check Frank Stone's work. The man was an idiot. His failure was not unsurprising.

His prediction that David, Jennifer and Saskia would be in the computer had been a masterstroke. Hartfield's face was blank. He did not smile without an audience. But he savoured the reasoning once more. He had been informed of a data-burst from the West Lothian Centre only seconds before it had been destroyed the previous Monday. The burst had been a simple text file containing about one-and-a-half times the amount of information required to build a human. The other half was some kind of compressed representation of human mind: fitted together, they had to be none other than Dr Bruce Shimoda making a clean getaway. It was a sensible conclusion. Hartfield knew a great deal about the New World computer from experimental reports. He knew that, once Bruce had transferred himself inside, he needed the physical body as much as a snake needs its old skin.

Hartfield tracked the data burst until it disappeared. A cold trail was no problem: there was only one place in the world where the digital Bruce could be reassembled. Hartfield owned it. And, by coincidence, Jennifer Proctor worked there too.

But Hartfield left nothing to chance. He had already honeyed the trap by warning Jennifer of her father's activities. Next, he arranged for Jennifer to meet Mikey, the researcher in charge of Asgard. Mikey had been given clear instructions to ensure that Jennifer and Bruce met.

It was all for nothing. The whole plan. He almost smiled. Hartfield had orchestrated the situation for two reasons: to gather evidence of David Proctor's complicity in the first bombing of the West Lothian Centre and to observe a digital human. The first was born of a petty revenge, the second as another solution to his illness and a means to immortality. Both had been superseded by the time machine. All bets were off.

He smiled.

Hartfield would return and cure himself. There would be no West Lothian Centre. He would never meet Proctor or any of the others. He would live a full life. For, while Hartfield could feel nothing towards others, he felt everything towards himself. He hastened towards his own death and the rebirth of something that he, even in his psychopathic world, held above anything else: the wish to be real again.

When the lights failed, Michaels had been moments from sending a chimpanzee to half an hour ago. He had been waiting patiently for an error because, half an hour before the scheduled trip, no chimpanzee. He patted his pockets. No torch. He sighed and relaxed in his chair. The gantry wobbled perceptibly. He heard the centrifuges slow. Below him, personnel left the chamber. He

whistled a French nursery rhyme and waited for the emergency lighting.

Nothing happened.

Over the intercom, a military-sounding man said, "Attention, ladies and gentlemen. There has been a failure of the centre's lighting. Please proceed carefully to your exits. Flashlights will be provided by your team leader. Repeat, please proceed carefully to your exits."

Michaels was on a gantry sixty feet in the air. He couldn't proceed safely anywhere. He watched the torch-lit procession below. The stars were at his feet. He patted his pockets. Still no torch. He would have to wait. He was confident that the repair would not take long. To pass the time, he played a game of Alphabetical Cats. "My cat is an amazing cat. My cat is an amazing, boisterous cat."

Fifteen minutes later, when his cat was becoming difficult to recall, the light returned. Michaels started. He looked down and saw that the control area was deserted.

But there was movement near the larger centrifuge. A man was working at the terminal.

"Hey!" shouted Michaels. "Step away from that computer."

The man looked up. From such a distance, he was unrecognisable. "Come down, Professor," he said.

Michaels grabbed his lab coat and threw it across his shoulders. His face was flushed. Within the Nevada Center, the culture of secrecy meant that project directors were territorial creatures. Michaels was no exception. He jumped into the cage and closed the mesh. He pulled a hydraulic lever and sank to the ground. Once down, he hurried to the control platform. Keys

jangled in his pockets. He found the man and swept his hands from the computer.

“I told you to take your –”

Hartfield had a gun. There was blood on his fingers. Michaels searched his face for an explanation, but saw only emptiness. “Mr Hartfield. How can I help you?”

Hartfield smiled. “That’s better. You see that I have a gun.”

Michaels raised his hands. It felt foolish. “What do you want to do?”

Hartfield stepped closer. He grinned – but it was not a grin. It was an imitation. It had no more meaning than the teeth-bearing response of Pliny, the chimp who was waiting in a cage not ten metres away. “I want you to send me back in time. Start your calculations. You have five minutes.”

David was dizzy and nauseous. The corridors were black. It was reminiscent of the bombing back in 2003, although there was no smell of panic in the air. Twice they ducked away at the sound of boots. It was not difficult to avoid detection. The guards were leading groups of scientists, not hunting for fugitives. Perhaps they would begin a search when they realised that three people – no, four including Hartfield – were missing.

Jennifer led the way behind the infra-red eye of Ego. Saskia was in the middle and David at the rear. Saskia held both their hands, bridging the gap. She pulled faster than David wanted to walk.

“Are we there yet?” he moaned.

“Shh,” replied Saskia as Jennifer pushed them against a wall. A guard marched past with a trail of personnel in high spirits.

To David’s relief, they reached the stairs moments later. They crept carefully down.

He found the steps problematic, even with Saskia and Jennifer tucked under each armpit. The slope of the staircase fought to become the true horizontal. He stumbled twice. On the second occasion he twisted his ankle.

When they neared the bottom of the stairs, Ego’s screen became dark. They were blind. David whispered, “Ego? What’s happening?”

Some words appeared on the screen: “System is busy. Please stand by.”

Saskia said, “Busy doing what?”

“Ego,” David said. “Stop being busy. Ego? That’s an order.”

Nothing happened.

“Should we wait?” Jennifer asked.

“We could turn it on and off,” Saskia suggested.

There was a beep and the infra-red view reappeared. Ego said aloud, “Task completed.”

“What task?” David demanded.

Ego did not answer.

“Come on, we may be too late,” Jennifer said.

They emerged onto the ground floor corridor. Ahead of them was an airtight door. Jennifer located a panel and pressed it with her palm. A dazzling bar of light swept under her hand. A green light came on. It was small, but illuminated their section of the corridor. David looked at the two women.

“Nice to see you again. Shall we go in?”

“Wait,” Saskia said. She withdrew Hartfield’s gun and handed Jennifer her shoulder bag. “Stay here. I’ll call you in.”

Jennifer touched the green light. The lock rolled audibly and the door began to open on a vertical hinge. David was reminded of a bank vault, but beyond was a cavernous enclosure. The light was blinding.

She stepped through. The gun followed her gaze. The cavern was enormous. The roof was thirty or forty metres above, adorned with daylight panels that provided diffuse illumination. Aside from a metal catwalk, the walls were bare. The ground, however, was littered with countless and unidentifiable pieces of machinery.

Immediately to her left and right were buildings surrounded by wire and danger signs. They had exhaust chimneys that extended to the roof. They were electricity-producing plants. The road continued between them towards a walled area. Because her position was slightly elevated, she could see over the wall. There was a large spinning arm inside. It was almost stopped. Beyond the centrifuge was another, smaller arm. It did not turn.

Saskia hurried forward and crouched behind a buggy. The sound of the electrical plants and the spinning arm masked any noise. Hartfield might appear from anywhere. She ran over to right-hand plant and sheltered by its fencing. She put her finger on the trigger. She continued her zigzag until she reached the wall of the centrifuge. Through a transparent panel she saw it flash past. The intervals became wider apart.

DÉJÀ VU

She was relaxed. She stood strongly: her legs slightly apart, the gun in her right hand, her left cupping the handle for stability. She was utterly comfortable. She could turn in any direction with the confidence that her eyes and the barrel of gun would aim at the same object. Time would slow. She would react faster than her adversary because she was relaxed.

“Hel-,” said a voice behind her, and Saskia jumped, turned, and fired before the man had completed his second syllable.

Snip.

Too fast. The moment shot straight into his memory. It bypassed his mind. He remembered seeing the woman turn. She had a gun. She fired. He remembered the heat of the bullet across his shoulder. His muscles pulled themselves taut. He held his breath.

Now, afterwards, he let the breath escape.

The woman was trembling. She smiled. “Sorry about that.”

Michaels opened his mouth to ask a question, but he was too preoccupied to draw air. His eyes rolled up and he fainted.

When, as a teenager, Jack Michaels fell asleep, he would contemplate nothing less than the universe. He started with the Earth, zoomed out beyond the Moon, then beyond the Solar System, beyond the arm of the galaxy, beyond the galaxy itself until his mind was stretched to nothing. He watched the turning Milky Way. It obeyed the same law that made his blanket feel heavy. Behind closed eyes, galaxies rushed into the vista. They

became a pin-point. Finally, he was in darkness, in the zone. He was outside the universe. He could feel it, ask questions.

Snip. His enlightenment would vanish.

He had been forbidden.

Half a century later, Michaels felt that presence again.

His eyes opened. The pin-point of the universe remained like an afterimage. He jumped to his feet. "Hello," he said preemptively.

A pretty young woman – the one who had just tried to kill him – reached over and shook his hand. "Hello, Professor Michaels. I'm Saskia." She shrugged. "I thought you were Hartfield."

Michaels felt his collar. It was torn. "I understand your enthusiasm. Hartfield was just here."

"Where is he?" asked a middle-aged man to his right. Michaels squinted. He looked a little like Jennifer.

"David Proctor?"

"Yes," said the man. He smiled. "I'm glad you remember me."

"Very well," Michaels said. "I believe I subjected you to a rather drunken discussion about time travel some years ago." He smiled. "I was looking for funding."

Jennifer said, "Professor, did Hartfield go back in time?"

"You bet."

Saskia groaned. "Then we're too late."

Michaels put his hands in his pockets. He asked, "Too late for what?"

David said, "Hartfield has been developing these technologies for one reason only. To cure himself."

“Ah, yes. He said as much. However, using people can work in more than one direction. I consider that I have been using him. After all, the time machine works.”

“But Hartfield will change time,” Saskia said. “He went back.”

“I doubt that time can be changed, my dear.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take that bullet as an example. You fired the weapon a yard from my chest. You were aiming at my chest, weren’t you?”

Saskia nodded. “Yes.”

“But you missed.”

“My aim was off,” she said. “It was a thousand-to-one chance, but that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

Michaels said, “I agree with you. If the odds are a thousand-to-one, then we should be surprised if it didn’t happen once every thousand times. But I have another, more crazy explanation. Want to hear it?”

Nobody objected.

“OK. Let’s say I’m a crucial component in a process that has already happened, but has already happened in the future. In other words, I cannot be killed because I’m required to help with something that has already taken place; if I were to be killed, then I would not be able to play this role. Understand? I am a cause. The effect has already happened. Any effect must have a cause that triggers it. It is a law that cannot be violated. Killing me would violate the law. Therefore I cannot yet be killed.”

David nodded. He said, “If the cause and the effect have been swapped around as you suggest, then it must mean that your time machine is involved.”

“Agreed,” Michaels said. “Any ideas what I’m going to do?”

Saskia reached into her shoulder bag. She took out a sheet of paper and handed it Michaels. She explained that she was destined to travel backwards in time to stop Hartfield. That this was a message from her older self. That the paper had been found in Scotland in a similar research centre. “The West Lothian Centre?” asked Michaels.

“Yes, why?”

“That’s where Hartfield has gone.”

David Proctor fixed him a stare. “I beg your pardon?”

Michaels nodded. “That’s right. My calculations were set for the year 1999, but the computer relocated the time insertion to 2003. I have no idea why. You used to work at the West Lothian Centre, didn’t you, David?”

“Indeed I did. Until it was bombed back in 2003.”

Michaels nodded again. “Guess what date Hartfield went back to?”

David was frowning. “14th May 2003?”

“Yes.”

“The day of the bombing.” David turned to Saskia. “Could it be that Hartfield bombed the place?”

“Why would he?” she replied. “It makes no sense. 2003 is four years after the young Harmon received his nano-treatment. It’s too late.”

“What might have made the computer change the date?” he asked Michaels.

Michaels ignored him. Instead, he took Saskia by the hand. “My dear, you must come with me immediately.”

David trailed behind. A pad of pink paper caught his eye. He snapped his fingers. “Of course,” he said, and took it.

Pliny, the chimpanzee, looked up from his cage as the buggy approached. He wore a black flight suit. Outside his cage was a screen that showed his heart rate, blood oxygenation and brain activity. The humans arrived. Pliny leaned on his knuckles to watch them.

“We don’t need to be concerned, Saskia,” Michaels was saying. Saskia agreed. He didn’t need to be concerned with very much; only one person would be going back in time: her. “Hartfield’s plan has not worked. If it had, then there would be no research centre, but here it is! It is solid.” He kicked the cage. Pliny moved towards the back. “However, that is not to say that we can afford to do nothing. It is possible that Hartfield has failed because you will go back in time and stop him. In one sense, we already know that our plan has worked. Of course, we do not yet know how it will work, or if the eventualities will be comfortable for any of us. I suspect, Saskia, that you are the most at risk.”

Saskia folded her arms. Below them was the larger of the two centrifuges. “But I am completely safe. I have been seen at the age of forty.”

Michaels paused over a computer terminal. He gave her a sympathetic smile. “I didn’t say that you were at risk of losing your life. Risk comes in many forms.”

“But if Hartfield does go back in time and change it, then he will have removed the reason for his future self to go back...”

“Exactly,” David said. “For some reason he thinks he can avoid a time paradox.”

“I know why,” Saskia said. “He hasn’t got all his cups in the cupboard.”

There was silence for a while as Jennifer and the professor busied themselves with the time machine. Saskia and David waited to one side. The control centre was a cluster of computers on a raised dais. A ramp led up from the road and another led away to the lip of the wall that surrounded the large centrifuge. At the end of the gantry was the open gondola. David reached over and squeezed Saskia’s hand. She smiled. Perhaps, when she returned to the West Lothian Centre, she would meet him as a twenty-three-year-old researcher.

“We have no time for explanations,” Michaels announced, though none had been demanded. “The huge centrifuge has little to do with the time travel process itself. It is merely a device designed to throw you, at some speed, through the worm hole we create over there.” He pointed vaguely towards the other centrifuge. Saskia could see a channel linking the two sections of the machine. “The second centrifuge also has little do with the process. It is merely designed as a convenient method of catching the object when it returns.”

“Why does that part need to rotate?” asked David.

Jennifer opened Pliny’s cage. She said, “It’s just a way of having a vat of water oriented at ninety degrees to catch the returning object.”

Pliny jumped into her arms. He looked sadly at Saskia, who rolled her eyes towards the distant sky. First Michaels, then David;

now she was getting sympathetic looks from the chimp. “So an object can be returned?” she asked hopefully.

Michaels stopped his preparations and approached her. “Let’s be clear on this, Saskia. This multi-billion dollar machine is nothing more than a slingshot. It tends to fire things where we want them to go, but it is always a one-way trip. So far the destination has always been the same place, more or less, but a different time: the bucket of water on little brother.” He rubbed his chin. “Getting you back here would require a time machine at the other end.”

When Saskia said nothing, he clapped his hands briskly. “To business. You need to put on Pliny’s flight suit. Last time now: are you sure you want to go through with this?”

She closed her eyes. Jobanique: the man who had taken the life of Kate Falconer while giving life to Ute Schmidt. His golem, Saskia Brandt, was going to return and stop him. Could she kill him? Ute Schmidt could. She was not sure about Saskia Brandt.

Together we are two, the letter had said, but we make a third: a combination.

She could not explain to Michaels what it meant to be controlled. He would never know rape or domination. That was her first motivation to stop Hartfield. As for the second, perhaps he would appreciate Bruce’s parable. In truth, she did not know if she was real or not. She only knew that she felt real. She wanted to live. If Hartfield succeeded, thousands like her would die unborn.

So one reason was a principle. It represented her mind.

The other was emotional. It represented her body.

In combination they were irresistible.

“Yes.”

The chimpanzee was a good deal shorter than Saskia, but his flight suit was adjustable. The legs felt like orthopaedic stockings. The shoulders pulled her arms back and her chest out. There were rubber pads at the knees and elbows. The suit was black. Along her left forearm was a computer display. It showed a map of the West Lothian Complex. In her right arm was a satellite transceiver. There were no Galileo satellites in 2003, so it would patch into the American military's Global Positioning System.

The suit had a hood that was stowed in the collar. It also had a waste recycling system. Not only was she about to travel in time, but she would get to drink her own urine too.

Jennifer finished tightening the straps around the ankles. "Owah," Saskia said.

"Sorry." She pulled the last one tight and patted the connection. It melted to leave a flush finish. "One more thing. The red button on your sleeve will lower the refractive index of the suit to zero."

"What does that mean?"

"The suit will become invisible. Well, not truly invisible. You'll look like a clear plastic bag underwater. Treat it like instant camouflage. The suit was designed to protect and conceal pilots who've crashed behind enemy lines."

"I see. Right." Saskia nodded thoughtfully.

"Saskia, are you sure you want to do this?"

"No," she replied. She smiled to show that she was joking. Half-joking.

"My...my mother is in that research centre. Was. She died in the bombing."

Saskia caught her eye. “You want me to give her a message.”

“No. I just want you to make sure you don’t die too.”

Jennifer hugged her. Saskia stroked her hair. “Jennifer, I’m not going to die. I can’t die. You could shoot me right now and the bullet will miss.”

“We don’t know that, Saskia,” she said.

“We don’t know very much,” said David, walking over. The dark circles under his eyes had begun to recede. His balance had improved. “But we know we’re grateful.”

“David, I know I have been hard on you in the past week. I suppose that now is a good time to apologise.”

David put his arm around her shoulder. “Come back and see us, will you? When you’re older? I for one would appreciate a visitor in jail.”

Jennifer looked up. “Are we going to prison, Dad?”

“Actually, I don’t know. Ego has recorded everything, including my journey and Hartfield’s confession. Maybe we can talk our way out.”

Michaels called, “You have to go now, Saskia. The computer is configured. This place will fill up with personnel soon.”

Saskia stood and took their hands. “Here I go. I hope Hartfield didn’t leave a banana skin somewhere.”

“Don’t worry,” David said. “Hartfield isn’t the kind of man to plan for failure. As far as was concerned when he left, this whole research centre would disappear like the tributary of a river diverted at source.”

Saskia looked at the two of them. Jennifer had David’s nose, but it was less easy for her to smile. She lacked his energy. Saskia

considered asking them, as a favour to her, to stay together, but it was a decision they had to make for themselves. “Auf Wiedersehen,” was all she could say. She did not cry, although these people were last friends.

“Wait,” David said. “I almost forgot.” He passed her a folder from a nearby table. It contained several pink sheets that were covered in diagrams, equations, arrows and blocks of hand-written text. “These are the instructions for the computer-controlled glider. Should work with any computer with the same programming language and hardware. Everything you need is mentioned. Of course, you could find this information anywhere. But I’d prefer it if you use mine. I know it’ll work.”

“Where did you find this?” she asked.

“I just wrote it. Only took ten minutes. They’re the same sheets from the church in Scotland. I saw them just before you busted me out. I recognised my handwriting.”

Saskia unzipped the map pocket on her thigh and pushed the papers inside. “You’re talking about something that is twenty years in my future. I hope I don’t forget.”

“You’ve got twenty years to remember.”

Michaels shouted, “Hurry up, Saskia.”

She smiled one more time and walked down the gantry to the gondola. It rocked as she clambered inside and closed the outer door. The seat was nothing more than a seat-shaped bag of water. She hoped it wouldn’t burst. The door closed with a flimsy click.

She heard Jennifer’s voice in her ear. “Saskia, personnel are starting to come back. There are guards too. We have to start immediately.”

“OK, go,” she replied. The gondola lurched forward and she fell awkwardly. The motor for the arm was as loud as a jet engine. The compartment began to accelerate. Through tiny windows, Saskia watched the world tilt. The gondola still felt upright.

She lay down on the water couch. The stresses left her body. She reached over and tapped her wrist computer. The hood flipped over her head. The arch-like sections melted together and formed a seamless, transparent bowl. The noise muted. She heard Jennifer say, “Are you reading me, Saskia?”

“Reading you, yes,” she said. The muscles in her jaw ached. The back of her head pressed painfully into the bowl.

“Fifty per cent speed,” Jennifer said. “Remember: feet together, roll.”

“Reading you.”

It was difficult to take a full breath.

“Seventy-five per cent speed.”

“Reading you.”

Her vision began to lose colour. The ceiling of the gondola blurred.

“Saskia,” said another voice. It was Professor Michaels. “We’re sending you back one half hour before Hartfield. That is, 2:34 p.m. on the afternoon of May 14th 2003.”

“Rea’ing you.”

Saskia begin to lose consciousness.

David’s voice: “No, no, that’s –”

The Scene of the Crime (II)

It was a disappointingly mechanical affair. A hatch opened in the bottom of the gondola and she fell not into the wall of the centrifuge but into cold, loud air. It was a bright day. She tumbled. The ground and sky swapped. She opened her arms and legs to form an 'H' as Jennifer had described. She noticed a bat-like webbing that stretched between her upper arms and her chest.

The tumbling stopped. She was still falling, but certainly slower, like a leaf, body-surfing her way to the ground. Operational Flying Squirrel was Go. To her left and right she could see the curve of the earth. There was a head-up display in the inner rim of her helmet. Some text read:

Attempting to contact GPS...stand by.

Without the Global Positioning System, she would not know where to land.

Saskia looked down. The earth was rising.

New text:

Contacted. Logging on...stand by.

It was difficult to judge her height and speed. The ground seemed to stretch out rather than get bigger. The edges of the horizon flattened.

Logon successful.

The display changed. Her landing point was marked by a green circle. Surrounding it were red arrows indicating predicted wind direction and strength. Also projected was a small diagrammatical figure that represented herself; a blue arrow indicated that she needed to tilt in a north-easterly direction. She did so and the arrow disappeared.

It was her first skydive. That had not perturbed Michaels, however. “The pragmatics of time travel, Saskia. We don’t want you appearing in solid rock.”

Seconds later, the parachute opened. Gravity pulled her blood into her boots. The air became calm. She aimed for the green circle but she was clumsy with the cords. They were poor for turning. As she pulled one, she dropped towards that side. She had barely enough height to curse the design before her boots connected with Scotland. Remembering Jennifer’s instructions, she held her feet together and rolled to one side. After the silence of the slow parachute descent, the sound of her impact was deafening.

She was sitting on a gentle hillside. There was no sign of anyone. The sky was clear above and some birds sang in the sparse trees. She disconnected her parachute and gathered it together. From her right thigh pocket she took a phial of enzyme. She broke the seal and dribbled it over the parachute. Soon it was gone.

Saskia switched off her hood and breathed the air of the glen. It was clear and cold. The computer on her arm indicated that she was in a valley on the south side of the research centre. It was

likely that David Proctor and his colleagues were working directly beneath her.

She was alone. Help was twenty years away.

Five minutes later they came for her. A parachutist descending on the complex would not be ignored. She checked again that her suit contained no markings. She had no weapon, food or spare clothing. If Michaels was correct, Hartfield would arrive at the same place in twenty minutes' time.

She fantasised that she would hide nearby and tackle him. She would destroy his notes on the nanotechnology, allow him to be captured, and make good her own escape. But she was destined to write a message for her future self, place it under a rock outside Proctor's laboratory, and write another message on the nearby wall.

So the guards came. She smiled. They ignored her German ramblings.

They took her downhill towards the River Almond and up again, past the tennis courts she and Scottie had seen, to the front entrance of the hotel. Again she felt the gravel crunch under her feet; again she smelled the pine. The hotel loomed. The east and west wings were welcoming arms, but Saskia had not felt welcome on her first visit and she certainly didn't now. An unarmed guard walked alongside while three others walked ten paces behind. There were no blind spots, no escape.

Again she walked past the statue of Prometheus. It was running. She thought of him chained to a rock, punished by Zeus, but now the thought was the key to a room that was already unlocked. It had no power.

They entered the foyer. Her boots were silent. The same chandelier; the same green felt; fewer paintings but each, when viewed as an individual, was still the odd one out.

A man emerged from the left. She disliked him after two steps. He was similar to Garrel. He had grey hair, bleached blue eyes and a pencil-thin moustache. He was handsome and intimidating.

“Can I help you, miss?”

Saskia’s smile was blinding. She pushed some hair behind her ear. “Ja, ja. Ich habe mich verlaufen. So. I am lost. Understand, ja?”

His mouth twitched. “You’re German.”

“Ja. Genau.”

He stepped forward and offered his hand. “My name is Harrison McWhirter. I’m in charge of the hotel.” He turned to the guards. “Back to your duties.” They fell away. The foyer was suddenly empty but for herself and McWhirter, whose body was undergoing a autopsy at the time of her last visit.

She shook his hand. Her right heel raised slightly from the floor. She was thinking fast. There were two certainties: first, she was destined to get into the research centre; second, she was destined to stop Hartfield. She realised that they might have made a wrong assumption about the man’s objective. Yes, he had a new nanotechnology treatment, but it was not necessarily the case that it needed to be administered before the first dose. The treatment may repair. Perhaps nanotechnology was being developed in the West Lothian Centre.

No; that didn’t work. Why should Hartfield choose to arrive on the day of the bombing? He would have little time to achieve

anything. Was Hartfield here to plant the bomb? Absolutely not. He would have nothing gain and much to lose.

She released McWhirter's hand.

Hartfield wanted to foil the bombers. The man was insane. The bomb would explode because it had already exploded. There was no way to stop something that had already happened.

"My name is Adler. Sabine Adler."

McWhirter nodded. "Perhaps you could tell me how you came to be parachuting into my hotel."

"I am with a – how do you call it – 'parachute school'? I have lost my friends."

"I'll get you a phone so that you can call them," he said.

"Thank you."

She held her left wrist as though it were injured.

He walked around the reception desk and lifted the receiver on the courtesy phone. When he offered it to his visitor, she was gone. He snorted. He reached for the red security button beneath the desk. There was movement on the edge of his vision. He paused and a figure in glass swept towards him. Something struck his throat and groin simultaneously. He lost his breath. His head found the edge of the desk. He heard the sound quite objectivity – a mallet on a tent peg – and faded to his knees.

Saskia became visible again. She switched off the hood. The space beneath the desk was large enough to hide McWhirter's body if she folded it, so she did. She wondered if this was the

correct action. McWhirter was sure to remember her when he awoke. But nothing could be changed; she could do nothing wrong.

There were ten minutes until Hartfield arrived.

“Good afternoon,” said a cheerful voice.

The hood flicked up. Saskia became transparent and motionless. The camouflage worked by capturing light on one side and sending it out the other. But her eyes needed those light rays, needed to stop them dead at the retina. She was blind.

She heard the man’s footsteps stop. “I must say that you’re looking well today, Colonel McWhirter.” Saskia could hear the smile. Only a blind man would compliment an empty desk.

His footsteps moved away.

Saskia switched off her transparency and followed. He headed for the cloakroom that Garrel would show her twenty years later. She checked for cameras. None. A guard walked by. She became transparent and curled into a ball behind a plant. She held her breath. The guard walked past.

One corner before the cloak room, the man stopped. He turned. His eyes roamed. He had high cheekbones and a restless, smiling mouth. Saskia was not surprised at his youthful appearance. Inside the computer, realised as a twenty-one-year-old, he would be no different.

“Hello,” he said. “I believe we’re walking the same way.” He held out a hand. “My name’s Bruce.”

“I’m Saskia,” she said. It was a mistake to offer her true name. She was not just visiting the year 2003. She was permanent resident. She needed to enter the research centre, but she needed to escape it too.

Bruce frowned. "Gloves? Aren't you too warm?"

"I have a skin condition."

"You're new here." His expression did not change.

"Yes. How can you tell?"

"Your footsteps. I listen to feet. Plus, you're German. We don't have any German scientists here."

Saskia opened her mouth. It remained open for a few seconds as she selected the words to fill it. She decided to change her approach. "Can we be overheard?"

Bruce's smile widened. "No. Not here. Why?"

She pulled him towards the wall. "Your name is Bruce Shimoda, but your parents christened you Gichin. They called you Bruce because you jumped around like Bruce Lee when you were a child. That was before you were blinded by diabetes. Your father told me this at your funeral. I'm from the future."

Bruce let out a shuddering breath. "What song did I ask to have played?"

"'In My Life' by the Beatles."

"Don't tell me the date."

"I won't. I need to get into the research centre."

"You can't."

"I must. We have five minutes before a bomb goes off in the centre. I have to stop it."

A lie, but she needed Bruce's help. It was five minutes until Hartfield arrived. The bomb might go off at any time. She had no idea.

"Will I die in the blast?" he asked quietly.

Saskia considered her answer. "No."

Samuel Howell tapped his monitor. This had to happen. He slumped and took a sip of coffee. He was required to check the computer on a random schedule. The computer, for its part, checked the security camera in the lift. If there was any kind of problem, it would cut power to the lift and send out a security alert. Samuel Howell, or a person like him, would come running.

He tapped the screen again. It showed Dr Bruce Shimoda. He knew Bruce well. He was a real character. But the screen displayed the ghostly image of another person standing immediately behind Bruce. Monitor burn.

He dialled the section head. "Houston, we have a problem. There's a glitch on monitor one. Yes, main entry, the lift cam. Yes." He glanced back at the screen. Bruce had walked away as expected, but the monitor burn had vanished too. "Bollocks. I'm seeing ghosts. Nothing."

The lift, which had no door, travelled all the way to the bottom of the shaft. Saskia heard the bustle and conversation of each floor, but she could see nothing. Bruce said nothing. The lift stopped and Bruce said, "Samuel, my friend, what a lovely day. Upstairs the sun is shining..."

Saskia dashed to one side. She felt for a wall and crouched. She should be directly underneath the sill of the guard's booth. It was a sheer wall with holes large enough for the muzzle of a machine gun. To the left of it was a transparent, bomb-proofed door that could only be opened by the guard. Bruce had quite precise in his description.

She heard him collide with the wall. “Hey, have you been moving things about?”

Another voice said, “Dr Shimoda, please. You’ll hurt yourself.”

She became opaque. The guard emerged into the reception area and took Bruce by the arm. She grimaced. The guard was less than a metre away. If he turned in her direction, he would certainly see her.

The guard led Bruce through the doorway. Saskia followed silently behind. Once through, she kept the guard’s back to her and skipped a few metres down the corridor. There was a rack of lab coats. She took one. She deactivated her hood and tousled her hair. She buttoned the lab coat and busied herself with a mounted floor plan, which she was too excited to read. Bruce touched her arm.

“Saskia?” he asked.

“I told you we’d make it. I have powerful friends.”

“Keep your voice down. Take this.” He plucked the security ID from his lapel. Like the ID she had stolen from Frank to enter the research centre in Nevada, it had no picture. “I’ll say that I lost mine. Where now?”

“Take me to your laboratory.”

She looked at her watch. They had two minutes until Hartfield’s arrival.

Samuel walked back to his booth. Dr Shimoda was quite a character. A flashing red light on the second monitor caught his eye. Some text read:

Unauthorised Personnel in Basement Reception Area

“That was me, shit-for-brains,” he said, cancelling the override.

Samuel downed the rest of his coffee. It was cold. He did not glance at the first monitor. It replayed a blackly-clad woman scuttling through the security door. She went through over and over again.

Saskia struggled to match Bruce’s speed. She knew he was racing to beat the bomb. He was courageous to the last. She checked her watch. It was time.

The corridor stretched ahead in ten-metre sections marked by blue fire doors. Hundreds of people had passed them. Bruce was leading her against the tide. They avoided him. Saskia wondered how many would die in the explosion. “Where’s everybody going?” she asked.

“There’s a concert. David’s organising it.”

“How far to the laboratory?”

“Not far. Two more sets of doors.”

Saskia checked her watch again. It was 3:04 p.m.

They strolled through the next set of doors. Ahead of them, chatting to a colleague, was Jennifer Proctor. Saskia stopped. How did Jennifer get here?

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just a feeling of...”

The woman turned. It was not Jennifer. Her hair was darker, she was older, and she had an easy walk that escaped her daughter. This was Helen Proctor. The connections formed. Jennifer's mother. David's wife.

Bruce leaned in. "Never mind that. What about the bomb?"

Saskia was about to answer when the floor shook. It was not precisely an explosion. It was as though a great tree had fallen nearby. The lights flickered, went out, and emergency lighting washed the corridor red. Saskia heard the infrastructure split. Dust fell from new cracks.

"We're too late," said Bruce.

And then the explosions began. They began quietly. Distant firecrackers. Then the structure was shaken by louder explosions. The smell of fire. Heat.

The floor dropped an inch and Saskia screamed. She, Bruce and everybody else were thrown from their feet. The pressure of the air changed: either it increased or dropped, she could not tell. They were caught in some giant machine never meant for humans; gaps would appear, close; the very walls might chew them. Saskia reassured herself that she would survive. Her God was Time, and It would protect her.

The Valley of Fire (II)

“Saskia,” Professor Michaels said, leaning into the microphone. “We’re sending you back one half hour before Hartfield. That is, 2:34 p.m. on the afternoon of May 14th 2003.”

David did not hear Saskia’s reply. There was something significant about the time. It was, in fact, so stunningly significant that it took him a few moments to step back and see the problem. “No, no, that’s half an hour before the bombing!”

Michaels snapped, “What?”

“The bombing,” David said. The ability to form sentences had deserted him. He could hear the far-away shouts of technicians who demanded to know why big brother was turning at such a speed. “The bomb went off at 3:04 p.m. She won’t have time.”

Jennifer was close. She gripped his arm. “But Hartfield went back to 3:04 p.m.”

Michaels smiled grimly. “How very accommodating of him. I already told you that he had intended to travel back to 1999, but the computer altered his exit point to 2003. May 14th 2003. To be precise, 3:04 p.m.”

Jennifer said, “That doesn’t make sense. Why did he do that?”

“Hang on,” David interrupted. He was conscious of the security personnel running towards them. “What would it matter? What does Hartfield have to do with the bomb?”

“A great deal, David. He is the bomb.”

David sagged against the rail. He put his head in his hands. “What the blue blazes are you saying?” he asked quietly.

Jennifer mused, “Objects leave this centrifuge at over seventy miles an hour. They get flung through the wormhole at the same speed. When they impact on an object on the other side, they will release ten thousand kilo-joules of energy. That’s equivalent to one quarter ton of TNT. More than enough to trigger an explosive chain reaction if it is targeted correctly. Trust me, I’ve done the math.”

“Maths, love,” David corrected absently. The circular nature of this business was bewildering. After all this time...the trial, the accusations, the damage. Even the death of his wife. It was Hartfield. Ah. It was not; it was the fault of the agent who had caused Hartfield to veer so fatally off course. “Who changed the computer?”

“That is the question,” Michaels said. Behind him, the computer beeped. “Saskia is long gone. She is now twenty years in our past.”

David bit his nails thoughtfully. He half-noticed that Jennifer was holding his left hand. “What would it take to influence your computer?” he asked.

Michaels said, “Jennifer?”

She shrugged. “We have a closed network here. The hacker would need to link physically. Then insert a program, which acts as a time-bomb – if you’ll pardon the expression – designed to activate at a particular moment or following a particular event. It would then interface with the computer at a stage so critical that it would be too late to undo the changes.”

“This network of yours – is it a radio network?”

“It is wireless, yes.”

David narrowed his eyes. “Ego, I would like a word with you.”

“Any time,” said the voice in his ear.

Someone grabbed his arms. The security personnel had arrived. There was also a crowd of technicians. Michaels, Jennifer and David were led away. Michaels said, “Don’t worry, I’m well connected.” With all that had happened, David could not fire back a witty reply. Jennifer took a deep breath and tried to avoid the questioning eyes of her colleagues.

The hospitality of the Nevada Center impressed David. There was no torture, no real interrogation, and endless supply of tea, coffee and biscuits. Andrew Garrel could learn something. The director of the facility was a woman called Castle. She had taken them to her office, which was underground but nearer the surface, and asked the armed guards to wait outside. They sat around an oval conference table. An original Rembrandt hung nearby. David was tired. He did not try to take charge of the conversation. When asked, he would simply tell the truth.

“These are the facts, lady and gentlemen,” Castle said. She was a sharp, lawyerly woman in her early fifties. She wore a blue power suit and thin-rimmed glasses. David liked her. “At the moment, all I’m concerned with are three things: Professor Michaels, your unauthorised use of government property; Jennifer, your compliance in this and the illegal entry of two other persons; David, your illegal entry. In good time, I would also like to discover the whereabouts John Hartfield, our co-patron, and Detective Saskia Brandt, who gained entry along with you, David.”

David raised a hand. “Yes?” she asked.

“I could clear most of this up if I tell you what has happened over the course of this week.”

She sipped her tea, no milk, and raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure you don’t want any medical attention before you begin?”

David smiled. “The opportunity to put my – our – side of the story may not arise again. The only attention I need is yours. May I?”

“Please.”

Jennifer and Professor Michaels looked on as David fought to remove his wallet from his trousers. He opened it and produced a little card. “This is my personal computer. Ego, switch to presentation mode, please. I would like you illustrate my story with pictures as you see fit, and audio and video where possible.” He turned to the others. “Ego has been recording every step of my journey. It is equipped with Eye Witness software. The British police use it. It’s tamper-proof.”

“I’m aware of that, David,” said Castle. “Tell your story. This is a modern office. It will accept communications from your computer.”

“Very well. Ego, patch into the conference facilities in this room. Dim the lights. Display a picture of the West Lothian Complex. This, Ms Castle, is where our story begins.”

Jennifer had her elbows on the table. She was nervous. Ms Castle would surely make a decision about their future based on David’s testimony. She stole a glance at Professor Michaels. He smiled and she relaxed.

“So Hartfield,” David said, “was sent back in time to the precise point of the explosion. In fact, he caused it. We think that the time machine’s computer was hacked by my own personal computer just before we entered the cavern.”

“And why do you think that?” Castle asked.

“It would need to be an external computer...but, more than that, we have to remember who gave me this computer.”

“It was Saskia Brandt,” Castle said. “She provided the equipment that was left in the shed. The shed that was in the field where the glider went down. I remember.”

“So?” prompted David.

“I see. You believe that Saskia Brandt carried out her objective after all. She managed to stop Hartfield contacting his younger self. She sabotaged his time travelling at source. By all accounts a girl with a long memory.”

“A very clever girl,” Jennifer said.

“I don’t suppose you can prove this, David? After all, even with a plausible story, if you have no evidence then we must fall back on the available facts: the computer belongs to you. You must accept responsibility for its actions. The Automaticity Act, 2006, I believe.”

David raised a hand and let it fall. “Well, whatever. I never expected to get off Scott-free. I all can do is give you the facts.”

Another voice came from the conference speakers: “Excuse me. I am Ego, the personal computer involved. I am now authorised to tell you that Saskia Brandt has provided three signed copies of her story. I must tell you that it tallies precisely with David’s version. For safe keeping, copies were given to three legal firms in each of the three cities of New York, London and Geneva.

Saskia filed them one year ago today. Physical, hand-written copies were also placed in safety deposit boxes in those countries. I can give full details.”

Castle smiled. “Perhaps we could also meet Ms Brandt.”

“I do not have that information,” Ego said.

There was a long silence. “Well,” Castle said. “I have a board meeting.” She stood and folded her computer away. David scooped Ego from the desk and dropped it in his wallet.

“Wait,” Jennifer said. “What about us?”

“For the time being you’ll stay in guest quarters here. They are quite comfortable. I have to speak to the board about this. At the very least, we need to discuss future funding proposals, if Mr Hartfield’s absence proves to be permanent.”

“I’m sure it will,” David said quietly.

“You will also need to speak to our legal team. However, I will advise the board that no charges be pressed. David, because you are here illegally, you will be sent back to Britain. There you will answer any charges. I will ask the board to provide legal representation for you; as a recipient of monies from the Hartfield foundation, I’m sure that our board will agree that we share some responsibility for your present situation. Professor Michaels and Dr Proctor, you will each have your security clearance suspended. Again, I’m sure this will be temporary.”

Jennifer asked, “How long?”

Castle looked at Proctor. “Two months. Take a holiday. I hear the weather in Britain is awful.”

“And our funding?” asked Professor Michaels.

“Professor, you have invented a time machine. You’ll get your money.”

DÉJÀ VU

Castle shook their hands. “The guards will take you to your quarters. You can speak to nobody apart from each other. I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, David?”

“Yes, Ms Castle?”

“Keep an eye on your wallet.”

The Murderer Unmasked (II)

Smoke filled the five levels of the West Lothian Centre. At the bottom, near the New World computer, the fire raged. Hartfield's body had destroyed a small electricity plant. The time machine had inserted him only metres below David's laboratory. The fire had begun slowly. It reached up to the Liquid Storage Device. Its hardened exterior did not crack; its digital inhabitants did not die; but the computer initiated an emergency shutdown. As Hartfield evaporated, New World froze, to be awakened in twenty years.

McWhirter opened his eyes. An alarm whistled in his earpiece. The continuous tone meant fire. He lay behind the reception desk. He remembered talking to a person, perhaps a guard, but nothing else. His forehead was crusty with blood. He climbed to feet. He saw a stampede of personnel. A guard, who was directing them, asked, "What happened, sir?"

"Nothing. Keep these people moving."

Two days later, McWhirter would check the surveillance footage for that afternoon. It would be blank. The fire had reached the computer before its data were archived at an off-site computer. It did not occur to McWhirter that an assailant had knocked him unconscious. He checked the tapes because he was a thorough man who thoroughly cherished his Distinguished Conduct Medal. Later, at the hearings, he told the panel that he had been making a manual confirmation of the computer's fire shut-down procedures. The panel nodded. Nobody checked his story.

The guard turned away and shouted, “Keep moving, keep moving.”

The concert theatre was ten metres below. It could seat one hundred people. When the explosions began they had been listening to Dr David Proctor take his antique guitar through the strains of Cavatina. Soon they poured through the exits. All of them made it to the emergency stairwells ahead of the other personnel. David fought against them, back down the corridor towards his wife’s laboratory. The explosions intensified and the floor dropped. Everybody fell prone.

But not David. He took advantage of the pause and charged over them. Helen worked five doors down on the left. He needed to make sure that she made it. He needed it for himself; he needed it for her; but, most of all, he needed it for their infant daughter, Jennifer, who was at home in Whitburn with a child minder.

He picked his way by the red emergency lights.

Saskia lifted her head. She licked her lips. They were covered with dust. Her eyes were dry and raw. She looked around for Bruce and saw that he had gone. She was not disappointed. She needed no further demonstration of his heroism. He was a blind man in a collapsing building. She must have lost consciousness and been unable to answer his calls.

As much as she was scared, she was satisfied. Hartfield was dead. The time machine had killed him.

The structure had stabilized. Although it was barely moments before that the walls and ceiling had ground together like teeth, they were now still and the illusion of strength had returned. It was

a feeling that something this big could never crumble. Like a mountain, it was eternal.

Saskia stood. She was quite fearless. She was destined to survive this catastrophe.

Ahead of her, southwards and away from the nearest stairway, she could see that some emergency lighting had been knocked out. She had seen Helen Proctor fall into that blackness. She clambered over. She stepped on glass, cabling, masonry and other debris. Her intention was clear. She would save this woman's life and restore the lives of David and Jennifer, give them the opportunity to avoid that future pain.

But Helen was destined to die; Saskia was destined to survive, just as the young girl called Ute Schmidt was destined to be raped and Kate Falconer destined to be killed and live again as a digital facsimile.

Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos: who were they? What were they?

A tear of frustration cut through the dust on her cheek. Her arms were pinned by Time, by an unthinking, controlling God-not-God that would never ask her permission, would only pull her strings this way and what. For what was fate but the pulling of strings?

And at what scale was her destiny planned out?

She had been destined to travel backwards in time. She had been destined to enter the building at, say, 3:55 p.m. because that was what she had already done. She had no control. She placed here foot here and here not because she wanted to...she placed them because of the determined arrangement of the muscles in

her legs, the state of the nerves connected to them, the state of her brain. And what determined the state of her brain?

The state of her brain a micro-second before.

She was a doll, a puppet with strings, and none was her own. Jobanique had not controlled her because he could not control himself. He was as predestined as every other man, other woman, any other object in the whole universe from the beginning of time.

She could see it so clearly now. History was fixed and unchangeable because everything was unchangeable. She had never worried about the fixedness of the past because its fixedness seemed self-evident. But she had not realised the implication of this: the future was fixed too.

She screamed.

“Are you OK?” someone asked.

Saskia blinked. She wiped the hair from her eyes. There was a woman stood before her. It was Helen Proctor. Helen smiled. Déjà vu. Jennifer smiled. “Listen to me, you’re going to be fine. You’re going to be fine.”

I know. But you will die.

“Listen to me,” Saskia said. “I am front...from the future. Your daughter, Jennifer –”

The woman frowned. “Who are you?”

The ground rumbled. Saskia felt and heard a small stone hit her head. “My name is Saskia. Your daughter will grow into a beautiful young woman, I’m from the future – she says that she loves you.”

Helen smiled. Saskia smiled too; she had got through to her. “You’re going to be alright,” Helen said. “We’re going to talk you out of here. You’ve have a knock on the head.”

Saskia’s smile switched off. “No, listen to me!”

There was a splintering sound from above them. They were three metres from the spot where, twenty years later, David Proctor and Harrison McWhirter would look up to see a crack appear. The gap grew wider. Saskia was spellbound. It was like a time-lapse film of a geological event.

The ceiling opened. Saskia saw the steel joist bending under its deadly cargo. Fist-sized pieces of concrete began to fall. She grabbed Helen and pulled her to the floor. She made sure that David’s wife was completely covered by her body.

She turned to look up into the abyss

Prove me wrong.

The ceiling caved. She felt the building hit the ground around her. Edges cut and scratched her. Twisted fingers of metal ended their journeys bare centimetres from her neck, her abdomen and her legs. Then it was over. The dust was thick. She remembered the hood on her suit and pressed the button. Nothing happened. The computer was broken.

She climbed to her feet and tried to waft the dust away. “Helen, get up.” But as the dust thinned, Saskia knew that Helen was dead. The ceiling had fallen to leave her own body untouched, but a finger of steel had passed through Helen’s head. She was conscious. Her breathing was shallow. Clear fluid ran from the wound.

“I am so sorry,” Saskia said.

Helen’s eyes were fixed and black.

If Saskia had not been there, this woman would not have died. And yet that thought seemed to give the illusion of choice. There was none. Saskia held the woman's hand until she just stopped living, like a clock not wound.

She heard a man calling, "Helen! Helen!"

It was David. He had black hair that was long enough to tie in a pony tail. Saskia stepped back. He took Helen's hand and held it to his cheek. He did nothing. Both of them were a tableau.

Saskia touched his face and left. She was not destined to know him. David gave a long, guttural wail. It reminded her of a wolf howling at the moon. An instinctive, unthinking behaviour. Saskia found a stairwell and pushed at a door. Then she remembered. She still had to write the message to herself.

The door immediately to her left was open. She wandered inside. It was a storage room. There were cans of spray paint on a shelf. She put her hand amongst the cans, closed her eyes, and pulled one at random. She checked the label. It was a security paint. It would only be visible in infra-red light. Saskia smiled. She remembered her confusion when she had read that cryptic message on the wall, seconds after Garrel left her alone in the darkened corridor. She remembered the envelope. She needed stationery.

There was a door in the cupboard that led to another. It was full of stationary. She felt dizzy with fatalism. Even the pen of the architect had not been his own.

She took a sheet of A4 paper, a pen, an envelope, a plastic folder, and scribbled the message that she would read in twenty years' time. She wrote from memory, wondering who the author truly was. She tried to write something different – as an artistic

flourish, a token gesture of her defiance against Time – but could think of nothing better to say. Finally she wrote, “To prove this is me, there will be a bullet hole just about here.” and drew an arrow towards the middle, where Hartfield’s bullet would pass through. She sealed the envelope, addressed it, and returned to the corridor.

David had gone. Helen remained. Saskia put the envelope inside the plastic folder. She put the folder underneath the rock that had killed Helen. On the wall, she wrote, in German: “By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.” Then another arrow.

She threw down the can and ran away from Helen. She made it to the stairwell and, from there, to the surface. The exit was at the rear of the hotel. Automatic charges had opened the final few metres. Saskia emerged into smoky daylight. A temporary field hospital had been erected on the lawn. Army ambulance crews stood by. Shocked personnel walked slowly and silently nowhere. Some cried. Saskia breathed the clean air and feigned breathing problems. An ambulance took her to a nearby hospital. An hour later, she escaped.

Night came to the woodland. The moon was large. She started a fire. One of her many foster parents, Hans, had been a keen hiker. He had taught her how to make fire using a wooden bow drill, but there was a flint-and-metal firestarter in the small survival kit in her flight suit. Nothing else in the suit worked anymore. It was smashed and torn. She collected moss, some dry kindling, and some dead wood logs.

DÉJÀ VU

She thought about Helen. She had known her for seconds. She felt responsible for her death but, at the same time, felt responsible for nothing from the moment of her birth onwards.

The firestarter was spring-loaded. The fire caught and she tended it.

The stars were bright. They were a little closer in 2003 than they would be in 2023. The sphere of humanity – the reach of its radio and television signals – was a little smaller. Just as she had looked from the car window soon after arriving in Edinburgh for the Proctor case, she looked now at the trees around her. Conifers, oak, sycamore, beech and horse chestnut. She had seen them all in Germany with Hans. The past, like another country, was always more striking in its similarities than its differences.

She noticed a pink sheet protruding from map pocket in her thigh. It was a part of David's instructions. She glanced through them. Most were incomprehensible. The penultimate page was headed "Financial Times for the Betting Lady". It contained a list of British prime ministers and American presidents since 2001, some British grand national winners, and all of the football world cup winners (prefixed with 'bloody').

On the final page were the words:

So good luck and bon voyage!

Love David

PS If you could stick a flask of soup in the glider for when it gets chilly, I'd be much obliged! And one of those 'space blankets' like they have in marathons.

DÉJÀ VU

PPS Oh, and make sure the bike is fast ;-)

PPPS Oxtail flavour, mind – none of that lentil crap!

Epilogue

November 6th 2023: Westminster, London

By November, David was very tired. A doctor had diagnosed an ulcer. He controlled it with medication. He had lost the relaxation of cigarettes. He saw a pigeon flutter to a stop nearby. A young couple wandered into the scene. They looked at David, who smiled. They looked at the remaining space on the bench and continued walking.

The Thames rolled by.

The special committee was due to reconvene at 2 p.m. Had fifteen minutes. He watched the pigeon fly away. Another day spent answering questions from MPs. He sighed. They had been unimpressed by his story. They almost believed it, but the evidence was not quite sufficient. It would take more than Ego's pictures and crackly audio to exonerate David from the crime of detonating a bomb in the West Lothian Centre. It didn't matter that David had the best of reasons. Even administered the usual way, euthanasia was not legal in Britain.

"Hello," she said.

David laughed. She was there, finally. "You give me an odd feeling."

"Like you've seen me somewhere before." She sat on the bench. She wore a black greatcoat with the collar turned up and a dark purple scarf. Her hair was tied in a ponytail.

"Something like that." She smiled. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and dimples in her cheeks. "It's been a while."

“I thought it was best,” she said.

“Walk me back? I have a committee meeting.”

They made their way towards Westminster Bridge. “Are you some kind of advisor now?” she asked.

“No,” David said. Unconsciously, his hand patted his belly, massaged the ulcer. “I’m still trying to explain myself.”

“To a committee? What kind?”

“A closed parliamentary enquiry. Closed to the public, that is. Ostensibly, they’re charged to find out what happened at the West Lothian Centre. The Chairman is Lord Gilbert. Lib-dem guy. He’s fair.”

Saskia looked at the Houses of Parliament. “What are you telling them?”

“Me? I’m singing like a bird.”

She nodded. “That’s good. Don’t worry about me. I am no longer called Saskia Brandt.”

“So what do I call you?”

She linked her arm in his. “I suspect that you are under surveillance. I’ll say nothing. What would be the best outcome?”

David sucked air through his teeth. “They’d advise the CPS – the state prosecutors – not to proceed with a criminal trial. Unofficially, that is. And they might clear my name. Then I could get my job back at the university. I’ve got another ten years before I retire.”

Then walked in silence for a while. “Tell me about Jennifer,” she said.

“She’s back in America. I’ll see her again at Christmas, I hope. Do you have any plans for Christmas?”

“Some.”

They continued towards parliament. The Westminster Bridge was quiet. The sky was the colour of pigeons. The Thames was grey-green. A wind had blown in from the north sea. It was bitter and they turned against it. After ten minutes they came to a fenced, elderly building near the Ministry of Defence. "I'll see you very soon, David."

"Where?" he asked.

In reply she placed a finger to her lips. Then she touched his with the gloved tip.

"You know," David said, "I could do with some help in there. Another witness."

Saskia bowed. "I have to go, David. Take care."

He waved. "I understand. You take care too. And thanks."

He showed his pass to the duty officer and walked through into the main courtyard. He found the committee chamber. It was a small room with an oval set of chairs for the MPs. There was one in the middle for David.

"Ah," said Lord Gilbert. He looked at David over the top of his glasses in the same way that David would look at a late student. "The star of the show." Gilbert chuckled. The men on the panel chuckled back.

Tony Barclay, the MSP for West Lothian, took a nod from Gilbert. "Perhaps we could go back to the man who you met on the internet, Professor Proctor. The man called Mr Hypno."

The stenographer watched his computer screen. David sighed, ready to begin again.

"Just 'Hypno'. Mr or Mrs I don't know."

David's hosts were confident that he would not try to leave the country. His hotel was a small one north of the river. It was dingy but, he guessed, not cheap.

He entered his room and locked the door. He was making progress with the committee. They were less enthusiastic with their accusations, anyway. He threw off his coat and walked into the bathroom. "Lights," he said.

He took the measure of himself. A slightly saggier, more worn version of the man who had arrived at the West Lothian Centre two months before. But he felt no different. He looked good for his age. He washed up and walked back into the main room.

There was an envelope on the floor near the jacket. He remembered Saskia linking her arm in his. On the envelope were the words: "Open in private." He opened it and withdrew a single sheet of paper.

D

Down in Marseilles there's a nice bar run by a man called Dupont. It's famous for its cat, which turned up one day and never left. See you there.

S

David watched the text fade until the paper was blank. He stuffed it in his mouth and chewed.

DÉJÀ VU

Déjà vu noun a feeling of having already experienced the present situation. Origin: early 20th century French, literally 'already seen'.

New Oxford Dictionary