



THE GANG OF FOUR

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The Gang Of Four is a work of fiction, and except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Thanks to Jay S.

Cover picture: The British Houses of Parliament from Victoria Embankment.

Chapters

Monday (Armageddon)

Tuesday (Revelations)

Wednesday (The Malevolence)

Thursday (Third Eye)

Friday (The Human System)

Saturday (Epilogue)

Author

Chapter One

Monday

(Armageddon)

‘Come on, Margaret! Remember, no pain, no gain!’

The septuagenarian grimaced at Russell and began pumping her arms back and forth like the pistons of a steam locomotive.

Russell Tebb, of Russell Tebb Aerobics, nodded his approval and moved on to appraise the other members of his class. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ he enthused, pumping his fist in time to the music. ‘Nice thrusting, Joyce! Let’s see if we can’t shake those new hips loose!’

‘You’re killing us, Russell!’

Russell turned, ready to bawl-out his complainant but a movement in the corner of his eye distracted him; his secretary, Meg, stood at the office door, mouthing the word “urgent” as she brandished a phone receiver in the air. This was followed by a shrug. Obviously the caller thought it was important, but Meg wasn’t so sure. He batted her away and returned his attention to the class.

‘That’s good, Stephen, one hundred and ten percent! We tolerate nothing less here!’

Eventually the song ended, much to the relief of everyone except Russell, who frowned menacingly at his class. He set up the next track but then glanced back at his office. Maybe he should take that call; give this lot a break before one of them keels over. ‘Five minutes, everyone... but I’ll be back,’ he said, with a wink at Margaret.

‘What’s this urgent call, Meg?’

‘Dunno, someone called Michael. Claims you need to call him back asap,’ replied Meg, with little interest.

Did he know any *Michaels*? Probably, but no close friends or business associates sprang to mind. He sighed loudly. ‘Well did you ask what it was about!?’

‘He wouldn’t say, just that—’

‘—it was urgent. It’s probably just spam.’ Russell regarded his class through the office window. They were exhausted for this session, anyway. ‘What the hell, give me the phone!’

‘Hello, this is Russell Tebb, am I speaking to “Michael”?’ A few electronic clicks and splutters followed suggesting he was about to be put through to a call centre. Russell dabbed sweat away from his eyes and waited, temper rising...

'Hello, Russell, thanks for returning my call,' came the polite English voice. *'We met during your recent visit to Ayahuasca.'*

'Excuse me?'

'We met during your recent visit to Ayahuasca.'

What the hell was this guy talking about? He'd not stepped outside of London for over a year! But then the penny dropped, and he thought he knew who this person must be. This "visit to Ayahuasca" was the caller's glib way of saying "ayahuasca trip":

About six months earlier Russell had come to hear of a visiting Brazilian shaman who was running an ayahuasca-based workshop in Hammersmith. The controversy surrounding this had received some publicity and Russell began to take an interest in the story when it was reported that drug addicts had been able to kick their habits after only one session with the shaman and his powerful hallucinogen. Some friends of his then suggested he try it himself – for his own cocaine dependency. Russell was somewhat affronted by this, and sceptical, but he was willing to give it a try, since nothing else had worked, and he did want to be clean. He booked himself a rather expensive session with the shaman.

'This your first time?' the long-haired eco-warrior type had enquired, as he joined Russell in a waiting area.

'Yeah, first and only probably... got a bit of a coke issue.'

The man nodded. 'If you're looking to break a drug addiction, this will certainly help, it's very good at that – as long as you have a shaman along to prepare everything and guide you through the ritual.'

'Ritual!?'

'Yeah, but don't worry, man, this guy's good. One of the most celebrated shamans in the world!'

'Well, that would account for the cost,' replied Russell, with a nervous laugh. The crusty scrutinized him closely, but did not reply.

'Have you done this before?' Russell asked.

'Yep, this'll be my fourth trip on A,' replied the man, with some pride.

'What, so it didn't work first time for you?'

Russell's new scruffy friend grunted a laugh and replied rather grandly: 'I'm not here to deal with any drug or mental-health issues, I'm here to "commune".' Russell stared blankly at the man, who then pointed up: 'With ET.'

No mental-health issues, right? But Russell's companion picked up on his scepticism.

'Oh, they're real, man. They're called the Sponsors, and they've been involved in human affairs for a *very* long time.'

Russell had wanted to end this conversation and was even thinking of leaving, but the man persisted: 'Every aspect of human affairs is run, err, *guided*, by the Sponsors. Only with ayahuasca do you get to deal with them on equal terms.'

'Are they friendly, these aliens?'

For the first time the man looked pensive, 'Not really—'

It was at this point that Russell, his new chum and about eight others had been ushered through to the main hall and instructed to drink from a communal bowl of milky

sludge. Not long after, the whole ghastly business began...

'Hello? Russell? Are you still there?'

Russell glared at the phone receiver. If this "Michael" thought he'd be interested in another dalliance with ayahuasca he could shove it!

'Michael!! That "visit to ayahuasca" was utterly horrifying,' Russell bellowed down the phone, to the shock of Meg who jumped back, 'I was completely off my head!!'

'Yes, haba, you were talking nonsense most of the time. It was very funny!'

'Funny!!??'

'Yes, anyway, I want to talk to you about the Sponsors. We've looked into the matter and there is, as you pointed out, a serious issue here.'

Oh, God... 'Listen, Michael... wait a minute, *you* told *me* about the bloody Sponsors.'

The caller persisted, *'We need to meet right now.'*

'I know shit about any of this, Michael, so why don't you go and take a running jump, ...into the Thames, preferably!?' *'What would be the point of that?'*

Russell was lost for words. He really didn't need this; the ayahuasca was something he thought he'd put behind him, but it sounded as though Michael had persisted with the drug, finally becoming addled enough to believe that all this alien conspiracy crap had originated from *him!*

'You need help, Michael.'

'Yes, help from you, Russell. I'm outside your studio now.'

This was starting to take a somewhat sinister turn. Russell did not recall telling this person anything about himself nor where he worked, and yet... here he was. He peered out of his office window down to the busy street below but was unable to see anyone obviously loitering. No sign of the crusty. He briefly considered calling the police but then decided he really needed to deal with this himself.

'You're outside now?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, I'll see you briefly but I'm running a class at the moment, so you've only got a few minutes, and if you start any trouble, I should warn you I'm—'

The phone line went dead just as the front door buzzed several times. Urgent bastard, Russell thought, as he put down the phone and wondered how to proceed. His class had almost finished their session and would no doubt be grateful if let off a little early, but he didn't want this geezer entering the premises and bothering them, or Meg. He'd release the class and deal with Michael at the front door.

'What on earth was all that about?' enquired Meg.

Russell smiled and shook his head, 'Nothing much, just some rubbish, I'll deal with it now. Could you inform the class that their session is over?'

'Sure,' replied Meg, frowning.

Russell departed from the office with Meg and paused briefly at the dance-floor door to check there were no complaints about the early finish. As he'd hoped, there were none. He headed down the stairs and braced himself for a potentially difficult confrontation. He paused at the front door, inhaled to puff himself up and opened it.

‘Hi, I’m Michael. We met during your recent visit to Ayahuasca.’

It wasn’t the crusty guy after all, but Michael was correct, they had already met:

The ayahuasca trip turned out to be a chaotic, delirious nightmare set in some fetid jungle swamp. Everything around him was alive and stinking: plants, insects, things in the water... Worst of all was that damned spider! The oversized tarantula kept approaching him from the undergrowth, or from the trees. He would try to kick it away but it would always evade him with its lightning-fast reactions. Then it would be back. Sometimes it was literally *on* his back. He’d struggle frantically to grab it and wrench it free, but again it would dodge him and be lost to the jungle – only to reappear again shortly thereafter.

During a partially lucid moment – one in which he knew himself to be tripping, but was still nonetheless stuck in the jungle – he remembered the man and his blissful communing with aliens. So Russell closed his eyes, deliberately steadied his nerves and his breathing; he ignored the sounds and smells of his surroundings and thought only about flying saucers and shit. But when he again opened his eyes, the spider would be standing directly ahead, mere inches away: black and lustrous, the size of a dog, its multiple eyes blazing an iridescent green. And then it would dart away again. At least it never bit him.

And so the nightmare continued – for hour after torturous hour. When he did finally begin to straighten out he felt terribly, terribly ill and the nausea that had accompanied the trip persisted for weeks afterwards; ironically it was *that* that finally got him off the coke.

The giant spider from the jungle swamp extended a forepaw and Russell instinctively shook it. ‘Can we come in? Thanks.’ Without waiting for a reply the spider pushed past Russell and scuttled up the stairs; behind it strode a statuesque woman, and behind her came a fat tomcat. The cat glared at him as it sauntered in. In a moment all three were out of sight.

Russell was stunned. Seconds later his dance class came down the steps.

‘See you next week, Russell,’ said Margaret, with a wink. The others smiled; everyone seemed to be in good cheer.

‘Great workout!’ said one old chap, Russell couldn’t remember his name.

Meg followed, putting on her coat.

‘See you later, Russell,’ she said, with a smile.

Russell grabbed her arm, ‘Did you just see what came up there!?’

‘Was that your phone call?’

‘Huh?’ Russell was about to describe exactly what he’d just seen but then it occurred to him that all of this could just be some kind of flashback. No point advertising the fact to Meg, so he just said: ‘Yes.’

Meg shrugged, ‘See ya later!’ and she was gone, closing the front door behind her.

The aerobics studio should be empty now, apart from the visitors, but were they real? Christ, he hoped not, although that would imply he was seriously delusional. Better that than Mike the spider! He dashed up the stairs and onto the dance floor.

He was not alone. The three manifestations of his “flashback” were present also, but

spread out across the large room. The tall woman stood near him by the front door, the tomcat paced back and forth on the low stage Russell normally occupied during dance classes and “Michael” was stationary by his office door. All of them were staring at him. He decided to start with the woman and regarded her closely for the first time:

She had short, wavy-brown hair, and wore a simple, black, knee-length dress. She was well proportioned, athletic even, with clear muscle definition to her arms and legs. At well over six feet in height she towered over Russell. Her eyes, a vivid blue/green surrounding small, penetrating pupils, focused hard on Russell. Was that a shotgun over her shoulder? The woman leant against a wall so it was not easy to tell; the meat cleaver held in a calf holster was in stark view, however. She seemed to be very tooled up. And there was a smell, what was that? Raspberries? The woman’s full red lips pursed as they sucked languidly on... something. Russell stared, hypnotized.

At that instant the woman suddenly spat out the contents of her mouth and Russell felt something adhere to his forehead; he wrenched it off and inspected a red boiled sweet. He heard sniggering and quickly turned around. The cat and the spider were still gawping at him but the cat had stopped pacing. As Russell tentatively approached, it squared up to him in a classic *come-and-have-a-go-if-you-think-you’re-hard-enough* stance. With its Mike-Tyson head, muscular, thick-set body and gunmetal grey pelt – more like that of a seal than a cat – it certainly looked dangerous. If the woman had the demeanour of a gangster boss then this cat was the hard-man enforcer. Russell stopped, he wasn’t going to step any closer to it.

And so that left Mike. Odd that in this company only the gigantic tarantula appeared to be the approachable one. Well, it did have a pleasant phone manner.

‘Alright, Michael,’ said Russell, approaching the spider slowly, ‘You want to talk about the Sponsors?’ but the spider moved away to its right without replying. Hmm, surreal though this experience was it completely lacked the chaos of the original ayahuasca trip. An obvious thought occurred:

‘Are *you* the Sponsors?’ he asked, but the spider kept moving away to its right without answering. Russell continued approaching realizing that he was walking towards the stage, and the angry tomcat, but the cat had also moved away to its right. He glanced back at the woman and saw that she too had begun to circle in the same direction. Russell continued to advance on the spider as it retreated right, but as the pace quickened he suddenly realized that the three things were not just circling, they were in fact spiralling in towards him. He stopped abruptly.

‘Halt!’ he shouted, and the three things obliged; all were suddenly motionless, now just a few feet away, surrounding him. He made ready to bolt. The exit door! But something new had caught his eye. ‘Is that a blackboard?’ An old-style wooden blackboard, made lighter and shinier from years of overuse, now stood in the centre of the room...

And then the room seemed to swim as he found himself standing directly before the blackboard. The woman stood next to him brandishing a piece of hard, flinty chalk under his nose; she then deliberately placed it on the board and pressed hard, causing the tip to splinter.

‘Brace yourself, Russell,’ said the spider, finally breaking the intolerable silence, ‘at least this will be quicker than your visit to Ayahuasca.’

But Russell barely heard it. The tall, glamorous woman smiled a sort of ear-to-ear sneer as she began to drag the reluctant chalk down the blackboard. The high-pitched, ear-shattering screech was utterly unbearable. Russell primal screamed.

Alan Dosogne began to think about lunch; he fancied sushi. He was confident there would be no delays today as this meeting was progressing well.

‘And you want us to divest out of all of these?’ asked Al Nasa.

‘Yes,’ replied Alan, ‘and you should follow the schedule marked out... here,’ he handed the UAE citizen, distant cousin to the Sheik, another sheet of A4, ‘...to ensure the other investors don’t get spooked and drag the prices down.’

‘Indeed,’ the Arab chortled. He would be confident that Alan’s advice was correct, just like all the other advice he had provided over the years. To Al Nasa and the other investors, Alan Dosogne of Global Finance Sponsorship was a financial genius, a savant, a divvy. Everything always panned out as predicted, allowing Al Nasa and his associates to steadily convert billions into tens of billions.

‘And what about the cash pile that will result? Have you found me a football club yet, Alan?’ Al Nasa half-joked.

Alan laughed, ‘no, not yet, but for the time being you should just sit on the cash, there will be a correction in the markets shortly, but after that we should have some very interesting morsels with which to tempt you.’ His thoughts returned to lunch...

‘What about gold?’ asked Al Nasa.

‘No,’ replied Alan, casually, ‘it will continue to drift sideways. You could consider government bonds?’

‘Nah, too cumbersome, too visible,’ replied Al Nasa, just as Alan knew he would. Alan sat back and patiently waited for Al Nasa to ask his remaining questions.

Twenty minutes later and the meeting concluded with the shaking of hands and much hugging and back slapping. Al Nasa and his people were happy, Alan was happy. No doubt his reputation as a miracle worker would be further enhanced by these transactions, assuming Al Nasa did as he was told, and why wouldn’t he?

But in truth Alan knew next to nothing about high finance, his only skills were in handling the rich and powerful, being diplomatic and always being able to read the mood of the room. The investment details were handed down to him by his boss, who probably understood more, but not that much more. It was the system that really called the shots, the system set up and controlled by the Sponsors. High finance deals were just a small part of it. Manipulating politicians was more important but Alan, at only 0.3 percent Sponsor, as measured by genome, was too human to be allowed near all that. Pity, it looked like fun.

With the morning’s business completed he grabbed his jacket and made ready to leave his office. Out in the open-plan section of the department he spied his boss addressing one of the secretaries. Bruce, at 0.8 percent Sponsor, had Sponsor characteristics to his personality, unlike Alan, who merely boasted the few alien ‘apps’

that gave him his negotiating skills. Bruce was a humourless workaholic who demanded the same from all his underlings. He would not be happy seeing Alan sloping off for an extended lunch. Too late, he'd been spotted, and Bruce was beckoning him over. Shit, the dickhead was probably telepathic. Shit, he must stop thinking these thoughts, and he must stop referring to Bruce as a dickhead.

'Alan, quick word please.' Bruce led Alan into his office and closed the door behind him. Whether or not he'd heard Alan's thoughts was not clear. It never was, but it was doubtful he really cared, as long as the work got done.

'Wassup?' asked Alan, knowing such a jocular manner sailed right over Bruce's head.

'The division supervisor will be paying this department a visit this afternoon to discuss how we'll handle the recession.'

'What recession? Oh, you mean the one that's planned for September 16th.' Alan felt queasy, not about the recession – but about meeting the division head. At 1.9 percent Sponsor he was as good as alien as far as Alan was concerned. Fully telepathic, he'd pick up on all of Alan's disloyal musings. However, it wasn't as if any aspect of himself remained hidden from the Sponsors, they simply wouldn't care what he thought as long as he did his job. Alan imagined the Sponsors viewed him as a farmer might a temperamental sheepdog: who cared what the dog thought as long as the sheep ended up in the pen? Still, this news had put him off his sushi.

Russell became aware of his surroundings; he was sitting in his office chair and was apparently alone, but within seconds Michael suddenly emerged from around the side of his desk to place several of its legs over his. Russell involuntarily jerked.

'Cup of tea?'

Russell nodded weakly and the spider dashed off only to instantly return with a steaming mug. 'Careful, it's hot.'

'Thanks,' said Russell, taking the mug and placing it carefully on his desk. Michael scrutinized him from a distance of inches; clearly this oversized arachnid didn't care much about personal space.

'How are you feeling? Bit shaky?' Michael asked.

'Hmm,' offered Russell, reaching out for his tea. He sipped it and gave an appreciative nod to the spider. He placed the mug back on his desk. 'What just happened, Michael?' But he didn't need to ask. For once everything was crystal clear. He had been made aware of the facts, almost all facts.

'You were shown *The Truth*, Russell. Drug effects, delirium, perception filters, mind control, madness, you name it – they all reside to the *right* of your sense of reality, only *The Truth* lies to the *left*... Not literally, of course.'

Russell knew exactly what Michael meant but now that his awareness had degraded back to "reality" a lot of the detail was becoming hard to grasp. However, the main theme remained shockingly vivid. He glanced out of the office window towards the

dance hall. The woman and the cat were both standing at his stage, but their attention had shifted to his sound equipment. The cat in particular appeared to be fascinated by it.

‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Yes you can.’

‘I mean... *those two*, ...and you! I can’t believe...’

‘You can’t believe that we’re here in your studio?’ The spider chuckled. ‘Yes, I suppose that must seem odd... why you, huh?’

‘Exactly!’ agreed Russell, drinking more of his tea.

‘But you know that we *are* here.’

Russell glanced over again at the two individuals on his stage. The woman seemed to be explaining something about his equipment to the cat, who was still engrossed by it. She shot a glance back at Russell and he quickly averted his gaze.

‘Now, Russell,’ began the spider, in a serious tone, ‘the aliens known as the Sponsors—’

‘I told you, I don’t know anything about them, it was some other guy who claimed to have had communications with them – during an ayahuasca trip.’

‘Yes, we know, but *you* brought this information to our attention. You are the catalyst. You may even be able to boast one day of having saved the planet! What do you think of that?’

‘That I wish some other chump had been the catalyst.’ Russell felt close to tears.

‘Oh, *Russell!*’ the spider admonished, ‘you need to man-up!’

‘Why do I need to man-up!?’ wailed Russell, ‘I mean, why have you come to see me anyway?’

‘It has been decided!’ replied the spider firmly, closing down any further discussion on the matter. Russell gulped down the remainder of his tea and felt better. The trauma of *The Truth* was fading fast, but there was still the question of why these things were here – in London.

‘So this is a fact-finding mission, is that it?’ asked Russell, ‘a chance to get some intel on the aliens?’

The spider considered this for a moment. ‘Knowledge and understanding is always important but we have more immediate goals concerning the Sponsors.’

‘And what are those?’

‘We’re going to obliterate them, Russell. Here, grab these keys, your first job is to be our driver.’

Alan returned from a rather unsatisfying lunch to discover that the division supervisor had already arrived and was sitting in Bruce’s office. He knocked a couple of gentle taps and entered.

‘Good afternoon, sir.’

The supervisor, a tall, well-built man, wore a black suit; it matched his charcoal eyes – eyes impenetrable but highly penetrating. Don’t think the c-word, thought Alan. Too

late. The supervisor stared hard at him and motioned that he should grab a chair from the open-plan office. Alan did as instructed and then placed it down in an open space in Bruce's office.

'Over here,' said the supervisor, and Alan reluctantly complied by pushing his chair next to the supervisor. He then sat down and looked over to Bruce who was also watching him closely.

Alan couldn't be sure of the origins of the supervisor, but he suspected *vat-grown*. Operators such as himself, the "low percentages" who did the grunt-work, were typically abducted several times throughout childhood and tampered with genetically. At some point in adolescence another operator, like this supervisor, would make contact and reveal much of the truth about how things really were in the world – how humans were all just sheep. A sobering and disturbing revelation for an adolescent but one that came with some reimbursement: as a human/Sponsor hybrid he'd occupy a privileged position in society. He'd know more, he'd have special abilities, and he could be supported by the system should he need it. He'd be able to call upon better medical and financial resources...

Alan listened as Bruce and the supervisor explained a complex web of transactions and their immediate consequences. These were due to take place during the forthcoming recession. But to what end? It was impossible to see how all this contributed to the bigger picture as everything discussed here was just a tiny part of it. What he did know, or could surmise, was that the recession was a simple device utilized with the underlying aim of causing much fear and panic – particularly amongst the people the Sponsors wanted to be fearful and panicked. Thus the 'human system' as it was sometimes known could be realigned more quickly. It was like taking a super tanker and lifting it bodily out of the water to point in a new direction. And what would be the point of that? Again, the whole operation would be but a small manoeuvre in the larger dance that was humanity's artificial evolution. The fact that the Sponsors had been manipulating humans from behind the scenes since they were lowly hominids demonstrated the scale of their operation.

What was their ultimate long-term goal? It was unlikely that any being containing human DNA was privy to that secret.

Alan listened as attentively as he could as the two bores droned on.

Michael shepherded Russell down to the street door with a number of heavy prods to his lower back every time Russell slowed, spoke, gestured or veered – which was often.

Before he knew it Russell was out on Tooley Street taking in the familiar sounds of traffic and bustle. It was reassuringly familiar and for a second he forgot about everything that had just happened. He thought of Meg, she would be back from her lunch soon and within an hour another aerobics class was due to begin. He wheeled around:

'I have obligat–' His three new pals were out on the street with him and looked

extraordinarily incongruous – even for London, but they were being ignored by the passers-by. ‘Why’s no one paying you any attention?’

‘Light perception filter: a selective misdirection, sleight-of-hand if you will,’ replied Michael, nonchalantly. ‘Regarding your obligations: Meg is currently on a tube passing through Wembley on her way home and as for your class – by the time it is due to commence they’ll either be dead or preoccupied by various bits of shit hitting various bits of fan.’

Russell was aghast to hear this and was about to demand an explanation when he received more prods to his lower back. ‘This way,’ commanded Michael, ‘check out your new motor!’ Russell was pushed unceremoniously along the street to a waiting, blinged-up, open-top Bentley. It was crimson with cream leather seats. ‘Ma’am.’ Michael opened one of the rear doors for the woman. ‘Open the other door for Mr. Waterstone, would you, Russell?’ he added. Russell complied and in stepped the tomcat, eyeing Russell with menace. Michael opened the front passenger door and hopped in. Russell stared at them all.

‘Get in!’ growled the tall woman. It was the first time he’d heard her voice. Deep and loud it was the voice of authority, one that would clearly brook no dissension. So Russell got in. Michael fussed over this-and-that and mentioned a few aspects of the car’s controls to Russell. He explained the satnav and indicated their destination, Whitehall. He then instructed him to drive.

But Russell was still attempting to digest the spider’s words from earlier. It sounded like some impending catastrophe was about to befall London, or maybe the whole world. Michael’s voice interrupted his thoughts:

‘Drive, Russell!’

Shaking his head, Russell used the ignition key he had been given and the car purred into life; it rolled slowly into the busy street.

‘Watch the cyclists!!’ Michael shouted. Russell, more used to driving a Fiat500 around London, was finding the long-wheel-base Bentley somewhat cumbersome. One of the cyclists that Russell had only narrowly missed gave an aggressive, multi-faceted hand gesture towards the Bentley. ‘Try it!!’ Michael yelled back.

Stopping at the first set of red lights Russell turned around to face the woman who was seated behind Michael. ‘Why do you need to take military action at this stage? Why not *talk* to the Sponsors, maybe negotiate a deal or something. Is there some sort of cosmic rule that says extra-terrestrials can’t live here?’

The woman leaned forwards: ‘Drive.’

‘What!?’ replied Russell.

‘The lights have turned green!’ shouted Michael.

‘Oh.’ Russell sent the whale of a car trundling along towards the next set of lights. As he was forced to stop at these he tried to engage the woman again, but Michael pre-empted him.

‘The Sponsors have been extracting heavy metals from the Earth’s core,’ he said, by way of justification for war.

‘Mr. Waterstone is livid,’ added the woman, in a voice dripping with foreboding.

Russell glanced over his other shoulder to view the cat but it was studying the various sights and sounds of London with interest. It did not appear to be engaged in the

conversation.

‘Green!!’ barked Michael again.

Russell sighed and followed the satnav directions onto Southwark Street eventually crossing the Thames via Blackfriars bridge. On the north side he drove along the tree-lined Victoria Embankment. It was another pleasant summer’s day in London with mostly unbroken blue skies overhead, but big cumulus clouds were beginning to tower in the west.

‘How many deaths are you anticipating?’ Russell asked bluntly, glancing to his left. There was a pause and he anticipated not getting an answer, but Michael eventually had a stab at it:

‘Difficult to say. It all depends on what the Sentinel does.’

‘The Sentinel?’

‘Yep, their big mother ship. It is currently parked around Jupiter, but it will be turning up overhead soon enough.’

‘Good God!’ said Russell. He pulled up at a set of lights near the Houses of Parliament and glanced back at the tomtom. It noticed him looking and began to assume that aggressive stance again. Russell turned away. The spider leaned across him and pointed right.

‘There’s Whitehall.’

Russell felt his bowels loosening.

The Prime Minister left his aides at the top of the blue carpeted stairwell that spiralled down to Number Ten’s basement. He wasn’t happy to be called away at such short notice for this security briefing when he should have been locked in emergency consultations with his chancellor and various Treasury staff discussing the developing financial storm clouds that were brewing up alarmingly quickly.

The general public were still enjoying an extended economic boom, but this had begun to overheat as early as last year, and now a crash seemed imminent. The stock markets, too, remained blissfully unaware and were simply serving to fan the flames by inflating asset prices still further. Save for a few doom-monger pundits, only a small select number of government officials knew the full scale of the crisis. Soon there would be leaks, and once the more savvy within The City put two and two together they’d start shorting the life out of equities. Then the whole house of cards would come crashing down. The Prime Minister felt panicked by this. They’d all blame him. And they’d all be right, he thought.

‘Prime Minister.’

‘Sir James.’

Pleasantries over, the Prime Minister and Sir James Hampton-Staines, the most senior civil servant in the land, awaited the opening of the large metal blast door ahead.

Sir James was even more senior than the Cabinet Secretary and yet he never got mentioned by the press; a secretive, shadowy figure he somehow managed to stay hidden

below the radar. The Prime Minister was secretly jealous of this fact and had almost forgotten what it was like to go about one's business without being scrutinized ferociously. At any time he could be felled by some controversy or other, something he himself would have no inkling of, and yet he'd have to be the fall guy. God, how naïve he was in the early days to think he had power. This man standing next to him really did have power and he'd been wielding it in and around Whitehall for decades it seemed. Civil servants and politicians feared him, but based on reputation alone, apparently, as Sir James never directly bullied or threatened. He just existed – like a bad smell in a cake shop. The silence of the press could only mean that the proprietors were similarly wary, and probably without ever having met him.

Face to face he lived up to this scary image: Tall, thin, serious, observant. You felt he missed nothing. Those bloody eyes, too big for his head, and irises so black you couldn't tell where they stopped and the pupils began. Thankfully he tended to wear shaded spectacles most of the time so you rarely got a clear view of them.

There was a loud buzz and the huge steel blast door leisurely swung open. Sir James politely indicated that the Prime Minister should step through first.

The two men walked for some time along a long echoing corridor that branched off to the left and right a few times. They were no longer under Number Ten but, presumably, somewhere deep underneath the Foreign Office, or some other Whitehall building.

The loud sound of their footsteps gave a dramatic air to the bland setting but the Prime Minister had walked these corridors many times before. He wondered what this briefing could be about; if it weren't for the looming financial crisis he might be interested, though all past briefings had been frightfully dull. Come to think of it: so dull he couldn't recall a single detail from any of them. Christ, he needed to pay more attention to these things, but, as always, his preoccupation was with saving his political neck, and so his attention invariably tended to focus on press and parliament, just about to the exclusion of everything else – including family.

They arrived at another closed steel door and Sir James leaned forwards to enter in a key-code. The door opened and the two men entered an office complex full of men and women at computer consoles. The place was busy, but there was no conversation at all.

The PM was ushered to a desk in this area and he sat down, still distracted by his worries. Thankfully his mind went blank as the insectoid thing sat down opposite him.

Alan followed the division supervisor's rapid-fire analyses on the tablet he had been given. Charts, numbers and large blocks of text all had to be assimilated quickly and his alien apps were the only thing making that possible. He was grasping the essentials, the stuff he'd need for future dealings with investors such as Al Nasa, but it was a strain. However, when the time came he knew he'd be able to perform his duties capably and in

a less fraught manner than this. The supervisor was certainly no skilled orator, droning on quickly in that flat manner; the sound reminded Alan of a bluebottle bouncing off a pane of glass. Imagine if this guy had to deal with the likes of Al Nasa directly, he'd confuse the hell out of them. This thought instilled in Alan a modicum of pride; he may well be the most human of the hybrids present but only he had people skills.

'Alan.' It was Bruce.

Shit, he'd lost the thread of the supervisor's discourse.

'The supervisor asked you a question,' added his boss.

'Will you be able to convince Helen Warner to start shorting the banks on this date, or will you require assistance?' The supervisor repeated.

'Yes,' replied Alan, assuming he could handle it. But Helen Warner was never easy, she was another of those powerful players that this department 'herded' from time to time, but she was extremely smart and occasionally, inexplicably, didn't always do what was required of her.

'Good,' replied the supervisor, apparently satisfied. He started off again but then paused, 'Ah, our esteemed Prime Minister is receiving his conditioning as we speak.'

Alan knew from the material covered in this briefing that the British Prime Minister was to be a key player in all of this. By manipulating his limbic system, and planting a few subliminal commands, the PM would be made so fraught by this upcoming recession that at key moments, when it truly would be his call, he could be relied upon to make the wrong decisions.

The conditioning was most likely being administered directly by a thoroughbred Sponsor. The hybrids had many skills equivalent to mind control, but an important player such as the PM needed expert handling. How distasteful, thought Alan. Manipulating bankers and investors by giving them such obvious logical choices was one thing, but dragging the leader of the country away to be brain-fucked by an alien was quite another. At what point would humanity ever operate independently from these praying-mantis beasts? Alan silently fumed, oblivious to the fact that the supervisor had stopped, and was regarding him closely.

'Your persistent hostility towards our Sponsors is perplexing, Alan,' he said, flatly.

'I'm sorry, sir, I can understand how they have helped us, and continue to do so, but manipulation like this is... it is a reminder perhaps of how far we still have to go.'

The supervisor considered this for a moment and then placed his tablet on the table and swivelled his chair to fully face Alan. 'You know that without them the human system would collapse?'

Would it? Thought Alan, it seemed like most of the time the Sponsors' interventions just increased unrest and general angst around the globe, but he replied: 'Yes, sir.'

'They have also prevented a full-scale nuclear conflagration on more than one occasion: 1962, 1973, 1983, 20—'

'Yes, sir, but why let us have nukes in the first place?'

The supervisor reached for his tablet as he replied to Alan's question: 'Because it's a problem to deal with. Just like this recession. The human system as a whole learns slowly and only by presenting it with quandaries such as these can it gain wisdom, and overcome them.'

Alan considered this. It sounded logical, he supposed. Humanity was a young species; it was barely a dozen-or-so generations into industrialization. 'I'm sorry, sir. I do understand, umm, please continue with the briefing.'

The supervisor studied Alan for several seconds before continuing with the day's business. '...and by November 2nd the scale of household debt will become a focus for media outlets in...' he trailed off and stared into space. 'That's odd,' he said.

'What is it, sir?' asked Bruce, looking a little concerned.

'...An anomaly,' replied the supervisor. And then he frowned.

My God, thought Alan. Either this guy's on Botox or he's never tried to frown before.

The red, chrome-trimmed Bentley slipped around Parliament Square before taking the turning to Parliament Street and moving on to Whitehall.

'That's Downing Street over to the left,' said Michael, acting like a tour guide.

'Is that where we're headed?' asked Russell.

'Nope, just a bit further along... there.' Michael indicated a large, white, stone building opposite Horse Guards Avenue. 'Park here.'

'There is no parking here,' replied Russell.

'Are you worried about a ticket? Just mount the pavement if you have to!' Russell found a section of road that was clear but also a restricted parking zone. He pulled up there.

The doors flew open and his three passengers alighted sharply. Michael raced around to the boot where the other two met him. Russell followed awkwardly, eyeing the street for traffic wardens or cops.

'Russell, grab this,' Michael ordered, flinging a large briefcase from out of the boot of the car. 'Sir.' Michael then handed Mr. Waterstone a holster of sorts and tried to help him put it on. It strapped over the cat's bulbous trunk presenting a metal support structure at the top that stretched the length of the cat's back. 'Fetch the tube gun, would you, Russell?'

Russell looked into the cavernous boot of the Bentley but failed to spot any guns. There was a hollow metal tube, however. He picked it up, surprised by its lightness; it closely resembled a relay baton. 'This it?'

'Yes,' replied the spider, 'give it here!'

Russell watched as the spider clicked it onto the cat's holster. It looked feeble.

The woman studied her own gun, an oversized, single-barrel shotgun with a flared mouth: an elephant gun. Following the revelation of *The Truth* he had taken it as read that this outfit could take on the Sponsors, but now he started to have serious doubts; maybe he'd simply jumped to the obvious conclusion, the wrong conclusion. He decided to voice his concerns:

'You sure you have a handle on the alien tech you'll be facing? You know you'll be up against a: "formidable, ruthless and highly advanced alien race" – your words,

Michael.'

The woman just snorted in derision. Michael and Mr. Waterstone ignored him; the cat had contrived to get a strap caught around one of its legs and the spider was attempting to free it.

'Oh, this'll work,' said Russell, to the woman. She responded by pointing the elephant gun at his head and making a shooting sound.

'Okay, we're ready,' declared Michael, almost sounding tense. 'Ma'am,' he added, pointing to the revolving-door entrance.

The tall woman walked towards the front of the grand building and beckoned Russell to follow her. The spider and cat followed behind him.

As Russell entered the building behind the woman he instinctively glanced back to ensure the others had managed to negotiate the revolving door without incident. They had, and Russell felt slightly relieved. First obstacle over, he mused, now to slaughter some unknown, and possibly unknowable aliens.

The lobby to this (presumably) government building was oak panelled and rich with ornamentation. Huge and ancient oils hung from the walls, suits of armour and other details hid in the various recesses. The floor was marble and comprised of alternating dark and light diamonds, but the central section was carpeted with some kind of rich, patterned, burgundy shag. The sunlight streaming in from the street was minimal and so further illumination was provided by various wall-mounted lamps and further still by an enormous crystal chandelier.

Halfway between the door and the front desk, the wall panels made way for floor-to-ceiling mirrors on both sides. As Russell passed by these he glanced over and was shocked to realize he still had on his aerobics garb: Tight, pink lycra top, yellow, too-short shorts, white socks and chunky white trainers. To top it all, literally, he sported a head band. Oh God, he and the others looked like a circus act about to try their luck on *Britain's Got Talent*. He tore off the head band.

The woman arrived at the desk and from behind it an unfriendly looking chap shouted: 'This building is not open to the public!' The woman held her ground and the man returned his attention to the various screens on his desk. Behind him, two heavily armed police or special-forces types gazed at the group but with only casual interest. The woman stepped around the desk and studied a floor plan before gesturing towards the corridor that branched off to the right.

'Come on,' murmured Michael, and Russell and Mr. Waterstone followed.

'What about her?' whispered Russell.

'Why are you whispering?'

'Erm...'

'You can follow what ma'am gets up to once we are on the roof.'

'The roof?'

'Yes! now come on... and you, too, sir.'

Russell and the cat followed the spider down the corridor and through some doors on the left. He half expected to hear '*Halt!!!*' or some such from the security personnel in the lobby, but when he glanced back he saw that the three men just seemed to be going about their idle business. Presumably the perception filter, or whatever it was that had allowed this bunch of oddballs to pass through central London without being molested

by pedestrians or fellow motorists, was still in force and working adequately here. Although the guy at the desk had shouted at them before becoming quiescent again. Were they trained for this sort of thing? And would it work on an alien? Russell was about to put this point to the spider but when he turned around again he found himself alone in a stairwell. Hmm, well, the roof had been mentioned; he ran up the steps as quickly as he could.

After a six-storey dash, made all the more exhausting by the heavy case he still carried, Russell finally emerged onto the roof of the Whitehall building. The views were impressive but not an unbroken panorama. Several of the neighbouring buildings, most obviously the Houses of Parliament, loomed over him, but there was a clear view out to the east and south. Only up to the north where the land rose gradually did London close in and significantly restrict the prospect. Up above, the sky had become noticeably more cloudy since he'd last paid it any attention, but the sun still shone on their location, and much of the scene around; mild summer zephyrs carried smells of diesel and cooking. He spied Michael and Mr. Waterstone standing on the highest flat surface amid various air-conditioning vents. The spider beckoned him over.

'The case, here?' Michael's voice was a bit breathy, was he nervous? Russell handed over the case and watched as the spider deftly re-orientated it, opened the clasps and extracted the contents: a large laptop and some exotic brass instrument that resembled several binoculars fused together. As the computer fired up, the spider grabbed the binocular device and held it to his eight emerald eyes. Ah, a telescopic lens for each of his eyes, nice. Michael perused the sky, the various telescopes adjusting their focus and orientation.

'Anything?' asked Russell.

'Partly cloudy,' replied the spider, removing the octoculars, but keeping them close. He focused on the laptop. 'How's your awareness, Russell?'

'I... come again?'

'Can you sense what ma'am is seeing?'

Russell was baffled by that remark but then realized that part of what he assumed to be his imagination was now providing strikingly vivid visual imagery.

'Oh yeah...' He trailed off as his focus changed.

"Russell" entered an open office space and studied the sober, near-silent scene. Along with the predominantly human workforce various "things" moved slowly among them, apparently overseeing proceedings. So these were the Sponsors. Unpleasant looking bunch. He'd expected the Sponsors to be the classic 'greys' of ufology mythos; if aliens were real then it followed that most of the canons of ufology should likewise be true. But these aliens were tall, and clearly insect-like; their bodies a chaos of scaffolding, shiny-black and chitinous, like that of a beetle. Nevertheless, there were some overlaps with the ufo greys: the large, black eyes and almond head shapes seemed similar. Russell guessed that ufology as a whole was under the direction of the Sponsors who, perhaps, dropped it into the human subconscious experience from time to time, both to misdirect and to provide the occasional teaser – maybe to test reactions should the two species ever formally meet.

Such a meeting of equals would not be occurring anytime soon, though. He noticed

the Prime Minister sitting at a desk opposite one of the Sponsors. This was no meeting between statesmen, no interspecies negotiation. The PM was “out of it”, glassy-eyed, mouth agape and dribbling. He was like some poor beast at the vet’s: knocked out by general anaesthetic as the surgeon poked about amongst its innards. Except the innard here was the PM’s brain. Russell felt outrage!

‘Disgusting, init?’ remarked Michael, and Russell’s focus jerked across to the rooftop where he stood.

‘Yeah!’ he agreed, glancing the spider’s laptop. ‘What’s all this?’ he asked.

‘I’m tracking the Sentinel and any local aerial traffic.’

Russell studied the increasingly cloudy sky. ‘What’s up there?’

‘Sentinel’s still orbiting Jupiter, reciprocal to Ganymede,’ replied Michael, matter-of-factly, ‘no local traffic, unless you count that Airbus.’

The laptop indicated the presence of the twin-engine jet passing nearby to the south on its way to Heathrow. Russell strained to hear it over the street sounds below and thought he could, just, although the heavy clouds were distorting and muffling its engine roar. Other blips moved over London, presumably more aircraft.

A clear image of the Sponsor facing the Prime Minister grabbed hold of his attention. The insect-thing was very close, presumably that meant the woman was very close to it. Russell tried to catch her actual thoughts, but there was nothing. It just felt as though he was watching this from a fully packed football stadium: there was a palpable sense of anticipation as “our guy” prepared to take a penalty. Russell pulled back to the roof.

‘Is this being broadcast to the whole population?’

‘No, just you.’

Russell shrugged and the scene occurring several storeys below returned.

The Sponsor’s head filled his “view”. He was observing something that very few fully-human beings had ever beheld without becoming ensnared by their exceedingly capable telepathic manipulation.

‘This mind control they exercise is creepy!’ Russell said, out loud.

‘It’s more of a hack, than mind control,’ remarked Michael, seemingly in his head. ‘When they constructed you they built these various “backdoors” into your mental architecture. Simply a case of accessing them. Even a human could do it – if it knew how.’

Russell watched in shock as the woman’s finely manicured hand reached out to the Sponsor; thick, claw-like scarlet nails dragged down its face ripping into flesh, bursting it open. The wounds instantly filled with a yellow puss and this soon began to sprout fungal structures. The Sponsor let out an ear-shattering shriek.

Russell continued to gaze as the Prime Minister came abruptly to his senses. He first looked confused, then horrified as he observed the disintegrating Sponsor before him.

‘Get out of here!!’ shouted Russell. The PM stared at him, or her, but then he vanished from vision and awareness.

A wider view. The humans, or human things, were slowly standing up and staring blankly at him. The other Sponsors, the insects, had stopped dead and were glaring.

‘Ooh, looks like we have a nibble,’ commented Michael, as Russell’s attention

returned to the roof. ‘The Sentinel is on the move.’

‘What anomaly, sir?’ asked Bruce, now clearly very anxious.

The supervisor did not reply, but his frown began to morph into a look of absolute horror.

‘He’s picking up something from the psynet,’ suggested Alan, who was also growing very concerned. He’d never seen anything like this before.

‘Yes,’ replied Bruce, ‘but I can’t access the traffic, can you?’

Alan, along with all the hybrids, had access to the Sponsors’ psynet, an alien internet of sorts but one where the connections were purely mental and the transmission of data instantaneous. It could have been a treasure trove of information but unfortunately the Sponsors had seen fit to add numerous “parental controls” that effectively rendered it useless as a knowledge database. Alan could only access information that related to his work, and a few other boring features, like accurate weather forecasts. By the sounds of it Bruce was similarly constrained. But who knew what the regional supervisor was seeing, or *experiencing*? The psynet, when it did grant access, was remarkably immersive.

Alan attempted to gain access. Hmm, it seemed to be down, but the supervisor was clearly picking up something. He tried again and this time noticed a knot of activity, but it was more than a knot – *all* activity within their bizarre cyberspace was concentrated here – wherever *here* was. As expected, Alan found himself blocked and was about to pull out when he decided to play a hunch. Yes! The rest of the psynet did still exist – as a sort of framework, more like the internet now – and there were no lockouts in evidence! He’d have to move quickly, normal service could be resumed at any moment. He began to search for information on the Sponsors’ overall mission here on Earth. What was their master plan? Bombarded with an overload of data, Alan stopped and tried again; he needed a more specific question.

What are the Sponsors doing to our genomes? There was the answer: Nothing! They had barely tampered with our genetics since the beginning. But weren’t we hominids back then? Wait, there was a huge chunk of data on something called epigenetics. Alan began to read but struggled with the onslaught of alien technobabble...

The supervisor suddenly screamed and Alan was forced to abandon his searches.

‘One of our brethren has been destroyed! There is an enemy... there is an *enemy*... the controller is imperilled, exposed!!’ He then slumped, apparently unconscious.

All hell broke loose. A group of three Sponsors suddenly surged forwards only to be instantly cut to splinters by something that had emerged from the elephant gun – it was

an elephant. After scything through the Sponsors it punched a hole through the wall and was now bouncing around like a pinball in the next room cutting up more Sponsors. A stream of insects, then clouds of spores, along with numerous larger animals and plants burst out of the elephant gun and sprayed over the nearest Sponsors and hybrids. The reactions in every case were the same: violent thrashing of limbs, screams of agony and then a prompt death.

The scene changed and became chaotic as the woman rushed through the complex cutting down anything that moved. The speed and carnage were incredible and Russell began to feel dizzy. He pulled back to the relative calm of the rooftop.

'Bloody hell!' he exclaimed to the spider, who was engrossed by the patterns and blips on his laptop.

'The Sentinel is almost over us,' stated Michael.

'What, already!? That thing can shift!' Russell studied the sky again, 'Where is it?'

'Approximately one hundred kilometres to the east; eighty up. Just grazing the atmosphere over Belgium and heading this way.'

'Can we see it?' asked Russell.

'If there is a break in the clouds,' replied Michael. He donned the octoculars and scanned the eastern skyline. 'Yep, there.'

Russell was handed the octoculars but he could barely handle them let alone see anything out of them; he scanned the firmament with just his eyes. Banks of towering cumulonimbus were building up in all directions but the eastern aspect remained more broken with sections of pale, hazy-blue sky visible beyond the clouds. No sign of any spaceship; maybe at its present distance it was still too small to see with the naked eye.

'I'm not seeing anything.'

'Use the field glasses.'

Russell reluctantly picked up the heavy brass instrument. Studying it more closely he realized that the two central lenses could just about function as binoculars; lifting them to his eyes he viewed his surroundings: The London panorama appeared sharper than before with Michael's instrument cutting through the haze, like a knife through butter. The sky in most directions turned a deep cobalt blue, except to the east, however, where it remained hazy. That was odd...

Russell studied a point in the sky where the two sections of blue met. The transition was very abrupt and as he traced the boundary between the two he suddenly realized that it formed an arc. The hazy sky was in fact the underside of the Sentinel.

'My god that thing's gimungus!' Russell shrieked, startling Mr. Waterstone who had hitherto been engaged in a stare-out with a seagull which had also taken up a position on the roof.

'Yes, bigger than Greater London, on a good day!'

Russell was astonished and overwhelmed by the scale of the spaceship. How were they going to deal with *that*!? And what was *it* going to do!? 'Does it possess weaponry?'

Michael was about to reply when the woman suddenly joined them on the roof. She was covered in slime and debris but looked to be extremely happy with her afternoon's work. The elephant gun had been re-holstered over her shoulder and in her right hand, held aloft like a trophy, was the head, exposed brain and spinal column of a Sponsor. Except this one was different, larger. She came up next to Russell and, grinning from ear-

to-ear, slapped him hard across the back of his head.

‘This is their controller, Mr. Tebb,’ she declared triumphantly, brandishing the oversized Sponsor in Russell’s face. Various bits moved or thrashed, the beast was clearly still alive. ‘The only truly independent mind in the whole outfit. They will not tolerate its capture!’ she added.

‘Sentinel moving in over London, ma’am,’ declared Michael. The woman did not reply but just gazed up to the skies. ‘They are activating the Armageddon device,’ he added.

‘The *what!?!?*’ shouted Russell.

‘They have concluded that this planet is lost,’ declared the woman.

‘And so,’ added Michael, ‘they will now scorch all of their assets.’

‘That means you lot,’ the woman whispered into Russell’s ear.

Russell pulled back and calmly regarded the demented glee painted over the woman’s grimy face. So it was heading for this! Probably the plan all along: take out the Sponsors, then take out their unnatural experiment – us, humanity. There was nothing to say.

‘They’re firing!!’ yelled Michael, almost hysterically.

Russell closed his eyes and awaited extinction.

Alan assisted Bruce in trying to revive the supervisor who groaned quietly but kept his eyes closed.

‘Shouldn’t we try to find out what’s going on!?’ Alan demanded of Bruce, but in that instant the supervisor suddenly shuddered and fell to the floor, lifeless. ‘Oh my God!!’ Alan shouted at Bruce but his boss had slumped over his desk, also clearly dead.

Alan scarcely had a second to take all of this in before he felt agonising pains surge throughout his body. His head pounded and his vision swam as he collapsed to the floor. But he remained awake. He vomited a yellow/green foul stinking goo. What the hell was happening? The Sponsor network seemed to be under systemic attack and that, of course, included himself. He forced himself up to a kneeling position and hobbled to the office door. Just as he was about to open it a secretary burst in and began screaming hysterically. Alan fazed in and out of consciousness, barely caring.

Russell opened his eyes. Nothing had happened! He was still on the roof of the Whitehall building, the woman still gazing at him with expressions of mirth and madness. The Sponsor controller had been reduced to a black tar that dripped in globs from the woman’s hand.

‘Losers!’ exclaimed Michael.

‘What happened?’ Russell weakly asked.

‘Their Armageddon device keys onto species-distinct gene sequences. I took the liberty of hacking their armament software and replacing the unique human DNA with unique Sponsor DNA,’ the spider proudly replied. ‘They’ve just wiped their earthbound selves out!’

Russell glanced furtively at the woman. She looked less deranged than before, but that smirk was still on show. She turned to the cat. ‘Over to you, Ducky.’

Mr. Waterstone ignored everyone. Once again he was locked in a staring contest with that foolhardy seagull.

‘Sir!!’ yelled Michael, and the cat’s attention switched to the looming spaceship. The tube gun began to rumble and Russell felt an arm grab his; the woman dragged him forcibly away from the cat and threw him behind a protruding air-conditioning duct. The spider scurried about hither and thither looking for something to shelter under, eventually settling on the rear face of the stairwell.

Mr. Waterstone let rip. The tube gun sent out a deafening and continuous sheet of white-hot lava and pyroclast. It arced into the sky evaporating the clouds in its vicinity. After a few tens of seconds it impacted upon the hull of the Sentinel, first billowing out on contact but then it began to breach. Within seconds there came a massive flaring of white light that bathed all of London.

Mr. Waterstone curtailed the eruption of the tube gun in a series of spluttering down steps, the last of which sprayed the contents of the gun over the local area. Volcanic ash began to settle over the roof and surrounding parts of central London.

Michael was the first to emerge from his shelter. He hurried to his laptop and studied the data. Russell and the woman soon joined him, as did Mr. Waterstone – all were awaiting the next pronouncement:

‘It’s broken up; smashed to pieces. Twelve megaton blast – watch out for the shockwave, forty-five seconds...’

On cue an enormous thunder clap sent the recently settled dust and other light debris back into the sky. It was all too much for the seagull which finally fucked off.

Everyone seemed satisfied but then Michael suddenly shouted: ‘We have a survivor!!’

The woman’s face swiftly turned to a scowl, ‘What manner of abomination is this!?’ she screamed.

‘It’s one of the hybrids, ma’am. Location: Finsbury Circus. Minimal Sponsor tissue, but he *is* dying. What should we do?’

The woman turned to Russell and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. ‘Drive!’ she commanded.

Alan dropped in and out of consciousness as spasms of pain continued to flare. He was dying, and of that he felt sure; his body had been pulverized but temporarily left intact, left to disintegrate on its own terms, like a condemned building that had just been

dynamited but, for a moment at least, was still bravely standing. Death could come in seconds.

He became more lucid for a while and noticed he now lay on a sofa in another office, and someone had placed a blanket over him. He tried to look up but the agony surged. He slumped back and tried once again to access the psynet. Nothing. Truly nothing at all this time. It simply didn't exist. Something had done a right proper number on the Sponsors, and the hybrids, but apparently left the humans unharmed. He may well be the only survivor, but not for long.

Someone burst into the room. 'We've called the company doctor, Alan, luckily she is still in the building. Hang tight, darling!' he felt a hand on his brow. It was one of the administrators, Tilly, a sociable young woman with whom he'd shared office gossip from time to time, usually at the expense of Bruce. But he needed more than a house doctor.

'Ambulance,' he managed to drawl, almost choking in the process.

'We called them as well, hopefully they'll be along asap, but they're probably struggling with casualties from the disaster. They're saying an asteroid has exploded over London! Can you believe that!?!??'

'No,' replied Alan, truthfully. He did not believe that.

Tilly continued with enthusiasm: 'Apparently it was massive and there's a lot of debris coming down, and some windows blown in by the blast, but we're alright here, most of the damage is out to the east! Do you know Bruce is dead, and the supervisor? Maybe you got hit by some 'shrapnel' or something. Strange, though, that no windows appeared to be broken, but maybe something small got through. We've locked Bruce's office and we've called the police and...'

Alan stared at the pretty, young administrator as she continued to gabble. He felt concern for her, and everyone else. Maybe death was the preferred option right now, he pondered. What had done all this? It appeared as though the Sponsors had been wiped out and there was no force he knew of that could do that. That only left aliens: different aliens, extremely powerful aliens. What would be *their* plans for humanity? Several grisly images from Sci-Fi movies passed through his mind: images of farming, harvesting. Oh God!

'Would you like a cup of tea?'

Alan dry retched at the thought of that as Tilly tried desperately to comfort him. 'I'll see where that doctor has got to,' she said, in a panicky voice, before dashing out of the room.

Alan awaited the inevitable, but his body stubbornly held on. Maybe medical intervention could help him after all. The door to the office flew open and a tall woman stood at the entrance, glaring at him. At last, the doct-'agh!'

What the—! He was being dragged by his hair along the floor of the open-plan office. He tried to see, but his eyes were rheumy; he tried to complain but could only make grunting, gurgling noises. He was now in a stairwell being forcibly dragged up the stairs.

'Are we doing another roof?'

came a complaining male voice from somewhere. There was the sound of many feet around him, crowding him. Near the top he was forced to a standing position and then used as a battering ram to burst open the fire doors. Out onto the roof of Finsbury Circus he flew.

Alan lay face down resting against the loose asphalt roofing for a few seconds, trying to make sense of the nonsensical. He was dead. That was the best explanation, nothing else worked. On the other hand his agonized body forced him back to the land of the living, if only for a brief, final hoorah. He made himself stand. Holy crap! What had happened to the sky!? Boiling black clouds; dancing, almost continuous lightning; a cacophony of thunder and other explosions. Never mind his body signals, he was right the first time, this was death, this was Hell!

His focus cleared somewhat and he noticed the surrounding buildings of the City district, the Square Mile. The nearby Tower 42, the Lloyds building and others all had their internal lights blazing. Below, street lamps were also on, and amid the continuous crashing and banging, a wailing soundtrack of sirens.

He was alone on the roof, just him and some hell beasts: An enormous tarantula paced around the edge of the roof; a demonic cat sat near his feet and studied him with a look of mirth; a furious banshee gesticulated wildly, shouting and screaming unintelligibly; and... a jogger! Yes, Hell, or Hell's vestibule.

Tearing, groaning sounds came from above. A huge sheet of flaming something emerged from the pitch and glided across the sky, soon to be lost again to another angry wall of cloud. Dante would have loved this...

The banshee screamed at him: 'Your Sponsors are no more, traitor!!' Alan cowered before the onslaught of rage. 'You will soon join them!!' she wailed.

Eventually Alan glanced up... distracted.

'Is that a blackboard?' he asked, casually, no longer mindful of anything else.

'Brace yourself!' came a distant voice.

His own nails; somebody else's nails; or a stick of shiny chalk, flinty and rough-hewn, plucked straight from the Cliffs of Dover. It does not matter which. The implement and the blackboard are fundamentally ill-matched. Matter and anti-matter dragged together and releasing their grievance in a purely acoustic blast. Endless, unbearable, tearing his mind apart. Or tearing it open!

The screeching stops.

A planet seen from space! And a nearby moon. He understands this: the closing stages of the late heavy bombardment, 3.9 billion years ago. Planet Earth as it was then. In place of oceans and continents, many seas and volcanic islands. In place of blue, a hazy grey/brown. And lifeless, just a ball of water and stone. But a perfect ball: perfect location, perfect mass, perfect sun, perfect moon, perfect balance of elements and minerals...

Mr. Waterstone has undeniably struck lucky pitching up here! But the truly hard work still lies ahead. How to assemble the jumbo jet from the scattered rubbish of a junk yard? There can be no planning, no intent. But Mr. Waterstone has luck, and he has will.

Directionless primordial chemistry sets to work and in due course Mr. Waterstone believes he is onto something: a simple RNA nucleus nestling in a haphazard bed of proteins. He examines it in the harsh light of the new sun. It is fragile, immobile and it needs exactly the conditions supplied here by this muddy volcanic vent.

But it is the first viable self-replicating entity: Ceres.

The cell copies itself, it mutates, it improves. At first progress is tortuously slow, but the adaptations keep coming. Photosynthesis! Now it can spread to many other environments on the planet.

Gradually that first clumsy cell evolves into a myriad of others. Internal complexity develops like a runaway mega city. These advanced cells begin to seek out cooperative arrangements with others: mats of bacteria, fungal macrostructures. Then tiny worms, true multi-cellular creatures begin to emerge.

Oxygen is infiltrating the atmosphere and oceans, providing a means to step-up metabolism and now there is an arms race. The mature biosphere emerges: rainforests, dinosaurs, oceans teeming. Then mammals, primates and the modern world.

The view pulls back to show the planet today: bursting at the seams with life. The view pulls back further and the planet becomes an eye, and the eye a face; all life on Earth given a single identity, the same identity it has always had: Ceres. Now it is all of Earth's 10^{38} living cells, and standing before him, fierce and accusing.

Alan gazed blankly at the tall woman then collapsed to the ground, motionless, the aneurysm in his brain having finally popped.

Chapter Two

Tuesday

(Revelations)

‘Make it happen!’

The Prime Minister slammed the phone down and rubbed his irritated eyes. It had been like this all night. Crisis management, and plenty of it, enough to share out, except the PM had absolutely no intention of doling out power and influence to anyone. This would be *his* gig! The PM at the sharp end: sleeves rolled up, banging the table and telling sundry underlings what to do.

But why was he getting away with this? He had grown accustomed to politics working in a different fashion. Usually, by the time he’d managed to ask the question: “what should we do about this?” someone or some group was already quietly working on it, leaving the leader out of the loop: sleeves rolled up, banging the table in frustration and asking sundry underlings what was going on.

But a lot had happened in the last twenty-four hours: most visibly, the meteorite strike on London, or, more accurately, the upper atmosphere above Thames Estuary. That was the principal global news story at the moment and dealing with foreign leaders and their ambassadors was certainly part of the PM’s work, but it didn’t seem that important. Ditto, the press; his MPs; the Civil Service. Even the emergency services. Whatever any of these groups, or power blocks, thought about any of this didn’t really matter. Naturally, he’d talk to them, reassure where possible, be statesmanlike – given the chance... but who was there to take this from him?

That led the PM to ruminate over the other of yesterday’s big happenings: the peculiar trashing of a Whitehall building. The press were sniffing around that one but fast action on his part had effectively quarantined this story, at least for now. And that was another strange thing: mobilising Special Branch, MI6 and the army would usually result in phone calls from ministers or advisors explaining in urgent tones why the legal case for *this-or-that* simply could not be made. That was the aspect of his job he loathed the most: every action inevitably met by legal inaction. The most notable change was in the behaviour of the Civil Service. With Sir James Hampton-Staines among the confirmed Whitehall dead that behemoth organization seemed to have rediscovered its primary role – meeting his demands.

The PM smiled at the novelty of all this but as he reflected on *why* the changes had occurred his features and mood darkened. He had been in that building just before it all kicked off. He couldn’t be sure who or what organization was behind the attack but it

did appear to be aimed at aliens! Yes, aliens! In Whitehall!!!?? How long had that been going on? He had no way of telling, but he did feel sure that these aliens, disgusting insect things, had been taken out, and, perhaps as a direct consequence of that, the Whitehall machine was now unclogged.

The PM's intercom buzzed.

'Talk!'

'Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonehatch is waiting.'

Good, the head of the security services. Time to find out what he really knows. 'Yes, send him in immediately.'

Sir Neville Stonehatch leisurely sauntered into the Prime Minister's office languidly and ostentatiously gripping a manila folder between the ring and middle fingers of his left hand.

'Some alacrity, Sir Neville, please. I don't have time to watch you show off!'

Sir Neville looked as though he'd just received an electric shock. His bearing suddenly stiffened and his pace quickened. That was more like it. 'Prime Minister,' he said, with a slight bow as he reached the other side of the PM's substantial desk. The PM reached forwards and shook his hand.

'Take a seat, what have you got for me?'

Sir Neville opened his file and began to huff and puff over the bullet-point contents page. The old ham, thought the PM, preparing to get angry, but the intelligence chief quickly hit his stride: 'As widely reported in the media: at fifteen twenty-three UTC-plus-one an object believed to be a meteorite or comet fragment impacted upon the Earth's atmosphere at an altitude of approximately 65 kilometres. This resulted in a megaton-scale explosion, or air-blast, centred just to the north of the Isle of Sheppey. The blast from this event has been responsible for the significant damage reported over a large swathe of mainly eastern London, the Thames Estuary region, and parts of Kent.' Sir Neville paused and glanced up at the Prime Minister.

'Yes, thank you, BBC. Most informative,' replied the PM, and before the security chief could reply he asked pointedly: 'And do you believe this?'

'No,' came the blunt reply.

The PM was momentarily taken aback by this, but he was also relieved to hear the security chief being apparently honest with him.

'Well!?'

'The meteorite story does not square with the evidence and is actually one of our concoctions. For a meteorite explosion to match the blast characteristics the rock needed to be approximately eighty metres in diameter, and such a body should have been tracked as it approached the Earth. It should also have been known about before its approach. Most of the rogue asteroids in eccentric Earth-crossing orbits are continually tracked and their future paths are fully understood. Something like this could not have slipped through.'

'Are you sure? What about a comet fragment?'

'Even less likely, sir.'

'I see, so nothing was tracked, not even when the data was rechecked afterwards?'

'No, sir.'

'Any visual observations of the explosion?'

'The explosion itself, yes, but nothing from before.'

'Hmm... The MOD tell me it was definitely not an atomic weapon.'

'Yes, thankfully we can rule that out, sir – no radiation.'

'How about a smaller rock, travelling faster?'

'No, sir. None of the meteorite/comet scenarios fit. None of them can explain the large amounts of ash and pumice that fell over most of London, and surrounding areas. Estimates suggest that collectively this material amounts to several million metric tonnes.'

'Christ! What would a meteorite that size do?'

'That would be a full extinction event, sir.'

'My God!'

'It means that the object, if indeed there was one, was travelling considerably slower – many orders of magnitude slower.'

'I take it social media is having a field day with all this!'

'It is, but the wider public are accepting the official line. We are trying to discredit the more plausible amateur pundits with our own misinformation programme.'

The PM thought about this for a moment. 'What about physical evidence? Is there anything apart from the ash?' he asked.

'There may be, sir. Some large fragments reportedly crashed and subsequently disintegrated into the English Channel. We've got some ships out there looking for anything anomalous.'

'What about the press?' asked the PM.

'Not my area, sir, but from my experience they won't go near this, unless it is to debunk.'

'Hmm, that could change,' said the PM, half to himself.

'Sir?'

'Nothing. So what have we got on these fragments?'

'Anything we collect will be sent to Porton Down for analysis.'

'And you will inform me.'

'Certainly.'

The PM gazed at his security chief for a deliberately long time. 'Sir Neville, you must inform me of anything Porton Down discover.'

'Yes, Prime Minister. But we haven't actually found anything "concrete" yet.'

'I doubt this thing was made out of concrete, although it could explain the ash, I suppose.'

'I just meant—'

'Yes, I know what you meant, Sir Neville.'

Satisfied, the PM delicately moved on to the incident that still disturbed him the most.

'What have you got on the Whitehall... event?'

Sir Neville looked uncomfortable. The laid-back indifference he'd projected at the start of this briefing was giving way to guardedness and also some stammering.

'At fifteen twelve UTC-plus-one, a call was forwarded to Special Branch regarding a disturbance and possible terrorist attack at a Whitehall address corresponding to a Foreign Office annex...'

The PM sat patiently while he heard the long version.

‘...as well as all CCTV footage pertaining to this matter. The building remains sealed and patrolled by the army, but it will take an estimated twenty-four hours before all biological contaminants have been bagged and removed.’

‘For transfer to Porton Down?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

‘And... has anyone handling this *stuff* become ill..?’

‘They wore full bio-suits, Prime Minister, but early indications suggest the material is harmless.’

The PM nodded on hearing this. ‘Thank God! Keep me informed on the analysis of this material as well, Sir Neville.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And apart from the bio-material, what else was found?’

‘The deceased remains of twenty-six office workers. Mostly very senior Civil Servants, including Sir James Hampton-Staines.’

‘Causes of death?’

‘Still with the coroner, sir.’

The PM paused for a while as he considered how much of his own experiences regarding this matter he wished to disclose. The secret service chief had been most forthcoming so far; that did not mean he had to respond in kind. There was no need to reveal anything just yet, let’s just prise out what Sir Neville knows first...

‘You are aware, Sir Neville, that I was attending a security briefing in that building, at that time?’

‘I understood you were able to make your escape before the attack took place, sir.’

The PM paused again as he recalled the shocking events of yesterday afternoon: After apparently jolting from a deep sleep he had found himself staring at a disintegrating and screaming man-sized bug. Then he saw that the room was full of intact versions of the insect-thing, and people. Next, the terrorist, or freedom fighter, whatever she was; that fearsome visage... and then the command to run: ‘*get out of here!!*’ And so he did. He ran for the metal security door, locked it behind him and ran back to Number Ten just as the booms and screams began.

The PM shuddered and glanced over at Sir Neville. Yes, the insect aliens would remain his secret – at least for now, but he would give an accurate account of the rest.

‘Yes, Sir Neville, I was lucky. Before I escaped I clearly saw the perpetrator. Female, tall, err...’

‘Would you be prepared to sit with a photo-fit expert and perhaps flesh out that description, sir? I believe this to be of the utmost importance.’

Was Sir Neville being impertinent? Well, he had a point. This woman needed to be tracked down.

‘Erm, yes, I would. Can you arrange that, Sir Neville?’

Sir Neville nodded and reached for his phone before remembering he’d been required to relinquish it at the lobby of Number Ten. ‘Yes, Prime Minister, I will arrange this now. If I send a chap around here can you prioritize this?’

‘Yes I will... and, Sir Neville?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister?’

‘Assuming Porton Down discover anything that could be classed as an

extraterrestrial smoking gun – I need to know!! The PM half expected the security chief to rubbish the notion of an ET connection but he plainly did not:

‘I can have a further briefing ready for you by noon, Prime Minister.’

‘Good, report back, asap.’

‘Yes, sir, will that be all?’ Sir Neville began to stand.

‘Just one last thing. If we are under threat from something – ET or otherwise – I’m sure you grasp the importance of clarity with regard to the chain of command.’

‘Yes, sir,’ but the security chief looked hesitant.

‘You report to *me*. Not me and the men in suits, just me. I am the next link in your chain of command. Do not let anyone deflect you, or stonewall you. And if anyone does, tell them you are working under my direct orders, and if need be, call me and I’ll bang heads.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister!’ Sir Neville appeared to have been cheered and emboldened by that little speech. Everyone appreciated strong leadership. And that’s what they were going to get from now on.

The phone rang.

‘Speak!’ shouted the PM, as he watched Sir Neville leave his office.

Alan gradually emerged from troubling dreams of rushing frantically through rainforests, savannah, ocean depths. Always the pursued; the pursuer – nature. Every beast and creepy-crawly imaginable on a relentless quest to grab him.

Lying on the Finsbury Circus roof, he squinted into the sharp sunlight and then studied his surroundings. Traffic sounds. He stood up and slowly walked over to the edge and viewed the scenes below. A road sweeping truck trundled by sucking up crap and debris from the road below. Other trucks performed the same duty in other streets, and pavement sweepers were also out in force.

London looked battered. Most of the roads and pavements were covered in something and his roof locale was similarly affected. He rubbed the stuff between his fingers: a fine volcanic ash by the looks of it. It began to penetrate his skin so he hastily brushed it off. Further afield, isolated plumes of smoke rose up.

His memory of events remained vivid but disjointed, so much had happened in such a short space of time. He was no longer Sponsor, his alien tissue and genes brutally ripped away, almost killing him in the process. Recollections of his final moments on the roof were particularly vivid but also nonsensical, blending into his nightmarish dreams. The Earth had done this. Its primary agents were on the roof with him, goading and mocking – the Sponsors probably never stood a chance.

Alan brushed some of the ash and muck from his crumpled clothes and slowly headed for the stairwell. Considering how ill he had felt in the aftermath of the attack it was puzzling just how well he felt now. But he did feel different: fully human, no longer part Sponsor – like switching from digital back to analogue. Capabilities lost, thought processes a bit sluggish but a compensating ripeness to his senses: smells and sounds, all

just a bit more vibrant. Contemplating how different his life would be from now on he made his way down the steps and headed for his place of work, three floors below.

On entering his department he stopped and took in the buzz and activity of the open-plan office. He no longer fitted in here. Not only was he now incapable of performing his duties, of working any kind of number on the clients, but that whole line of work simply did not exist any more. The first jolt of anxiety. Of all the hybrids he was the least on-message when it came to the Sponsors' programmes but he knew they were essential. What was going to happen to the human system now!? Why, only yesterday the supervisor had listed the number of times the Sponsors had prevented a nuclear war. But that was merely one obvious aspect of their work. What about the environment? The global economy? Did economics even work without Sponsor intervention? So many of the threads keeping modern society intact and healthy would now be pulled apart. Disturbed by this notion, Alan decided he would attempt contact with the Sponsors; he knew the psynet was down, and felt sure they were all dead on Earth, but maybe something remained... in space perhaps.

He entered his office unnoticed and was immediately taken aback by the foul stench. Time to open a window, and check out a few things.

Unlocking a lower drawer on his desk, he quickly discovered the source of that acrid smell: secret communications equipment, fully Sponsor technology, now reduced to a pool of crude oil and the odd bit of metal. He carefully removed the drawer and took it to the toilets for a thorough rinse. Various office workers reacted badly as he passed by with the drawer dripping all over the carpet.

'Sorry.'

As Alan returned once again to his office he was intercepted by Tilly who came running over to meet him.

'Alan!'

Alan offered a weak smile. 'Hello, Tilly.'

'What happened to you!? I left you for just a moment then when I returned with the doctor you'd vanished!'

'Well I, err...'

'I'm just glad you are still with us, you looked terribly ill, on death's door! Did you go home? You should have waited for the doctor, Babes!'

'Err, yes, well, I...'

'You know Bruce and the division supervisor are both dead. Horrible it was, they... I won't go into details. But *you* seem to have recovered, are you feeling okay, Alan? We should still get you checked out by the doctor.'

'It's alright, I have received treatment,' he lied, 'and I am fine.'

'Okay,' said Tilly, noncommittally, before remembering something else: 'The police are here, investigating the deaths. Apparently there have been quite a few like this all over London! Something toxic from the asteroid, according to Twitter. They'll want to speak to you.'

'Who, Twitter?'

Tilly laughed, 'No, *the police*, they are still around, somewhere. They've got *Scenes of Crime* over in Bruce's office. Oh yes, and we've got a new boss! James Something-or-other, although he prefers Jim.'

‘Fairclough?’

‘Yes, that’s it. How did you know?’

Alan had checked his list of new emails and a certain Jim Fairclough featured prominently. He showed Tilly.

‘Ah, he’s been firing off lots of those this morning.’

Alan sighed loudly and unhappily. He did not want to talk to this guy! Jim Fairclough, presumably human, was no doubt looking forward to working with the company’s financial guru and whiz kid, but he knew squat about any of that now! Oh God, he felt like resigning on the spot, but this remained a very well-paid job, and he still had bills to pay. Real life crowded in; how exposed he felt as a human: no special skills, no powerful benefactors.

‘I presume they have replaced the supervisor as well?’

‘I don’t know, Alan, I think that job may be advertised,’ replied Tilly.

After a few more minutes of chitchat, Alan began to cheer up. Maybe he could handle this after all. He could give himself a crash course in financial advice, and the likes of Al Nasa would be happy to take guidance for some time to come, assuming he played that safe. Yes, he had a great client list – if he concentrated on the really dim ones. That meant dropping Helen Warner. No problem, Alan thought, that woman gave him the creeps anyway.

It all hinged on this Jim bloke: if he was more manager than financial expert then Alan could just affect an enigmatic act and refer to patterns and stuff. Bamboozle the guy with bull! Ah, but that suited old Alan, new Analogue Alan would more likely put his foot in it. Still, he could be the *silent* enigmatic type. Maybe he should get a cape... but what if this guy was red hot on finance..?

‘Where have you put Jim? I suppose I should say hello.’

‘He’s in the Blue Room at the moment. When the police have finished with Bruce’s office I presume he’ll switch over.’

‘Cheers, Babes. Catch ya later.’

Alan began to make his way to the Blue Room via a circuitous route that included a sweep past Bruce’s office. Not much to see, as it turned out – just some bloke in a tight grey suit fiddling with his smart phone. The bodies had been removed.

Arriving at the Blue Room – more of an extension to the open-plan area than a proper office – Alan gave a little wave to the man behind the desk who was talking to another man he did not recognize. Already Alan had doubts about his ability to do this. His body language seemed off. Was a friendly wave appropriate?

The man behind the desk motioned the other to stop and then turned to Alan.

‘Yes, can I help you?’

‘Hi, I won’t interrupt, if you are in a meeting,’ Alan advanced with a lurch into the office space, ‘I’m Alan Dosogne, I just popped in to say hi, welcome.’ Alan extended a hand and thankfully the other man grasped it without too long a delay.

‘Alan! I am surprised to see you in, I heard you were very ill. I am Jim Fairclough, this is Superintendent Walters; I believe he wants to speak with you about yesterday’s business.’

Alan was lost for words already.

‘Good morning, sir,’ said the police officer. ‘Glad to see you in the land of the living, we did fear the worst. Where have you been, Mr. Dosogne? We have been trying to track you down all night, but you weren’t at home, or admitted to any hospitals.’

What was Alan going to say? He hadn’t done anything wrong, but he felt guilty, and telling this cop he’d spent the night on the roof would not help matters. It probably wouldn’t go down too well with his new boss, either.

‘I don’t rightly recall, to tell you the truth,’ said Alan, shiftily. ‘It’s all a bit of a daze.’

Would that be good enough? Both men stared at him. Eventually Supt. Walters replied: ‘Of course, Alan. Yesterday was disturbing for all of us. It’s alright, you are not under any suspicion, but I will need to take a statement from you. We can do that now, if you like, or you can pop into the police station.’

Alan checked the cop’s insignia: not City Police. ‘Which nick, I mean, police station?’ God, get a grip!

‘South Norwood. Do you know where that is?’

‘Is that down by Crystal Palace way?’

‘Yes, near there.’

Another pregnant pause.

‘I think we should do it here then.’

Yet another pause.

‘Okay, Alan.’ The superintendent glanced over at Jim Fairclough, who promptly indicated that the statement could be taken here in the Blue Room.

‘Here, take my seat,’ said his new boss, standing, ‘and, Alan, after the statement I think you should go home, get some rest. We’ll talk tomorrow.’

Jim departed leaving Alan to ponder on how embarrassing their first meeting had been. Was he coming across as zonked? He knew he wasn’t, he was just no good at chitchat any more. Even though first impressions had been extremely brief, he sensed his new boss was no fool.

Alan provided the police with their statement: accurate in all matters up to the attack; indistinct and misleading, thereafter. He decided to go with amnesia, and vague recollections of wandering the streets, blah, blah, blah. That seemed to satisfy the superintendent.

With that business over, Alan returned to his office to collect his jacket before leaving for home. What was he going to do with the remainder of the day? He never took days off..! The thought of a pile of junk food, a bottle of wine and a box-set seemed both novel and enticing. Maybe new Analogue Alan could reinvent himself as a couch potato...

On entering his office he found Jim Fairclough using his phone. Someone really needed to give this guy a permanent office!

‘Ah, Alan,’ said Jim, waving the phone receiver at him, ‘before you nip off, could you field this call, please, it’s from Helen Warner. A matter of great import, apparently.’

Alan reluctantly took the phone and noticed with horror that Jim was sticking around, watching him. ‘Might be confidential,’ Alan mouthed to Jim, who nodded but stayed put. Christ, if he leaned forwards to put this on speaker phone he’d witness Alan’s newfound lack of competence. Maybe he could bluff it out with one of the other clients

but Warner had a nasty habit of catching him out, of questioning his analysis and arguing every point until it was beaten into submission. Even with access to the psynet, old Alan sometimes struggled. Hence, occasionally, Warner went her own way. When that happened it could disrupt the human system and so, when the stakes were high, he'd be given help: Mr. Harman: 1.1 percent Sponsor, financial savant and able to muddle and bamboozle even Warner. He could do with his assistance right now, but he would be dead, of course.

'Helen, hi! Alan Dosogne speaking.' Alan glanced over at Jim who was still watching and listening intently. Nothing on the other end of the line, '...hello?'

'Hello, Alan, Helen Warner.'

Damn! 'Morning, Helen, what can I do for you?'

'I am pleased to hear you are well, Alan. The police had been keen to get hold of you.'

'Yes, I've just given my statement—'

'Yes, and I've just read it. I like to keep up with the boys in blue, you know?' replied Warner, with relishes of innuendo. *'You have been through the wars, haven't you, Alan?'*

That Warner routinely hacked police communications was not so much of a surprise; she boasted of similar surveillances on rivals and officials all the time. But her interest in him was disconcerting.

'Yes, it's been a very trying period for all of us. You presumably heard about Bruce Claxton?'

'Of course, I've just been talking to call-me-Jim, his somewhat inadequate replacement.'

Alan deliberately avoided glancing over at Jim.

'Yes, and I'm still not quite firing all cylinders. I am actually on my way home now.'

'Oh! You're taking a sickie!' Warner laughed uproariously. *'That must be a first for you!'*

'Yes, I think it probab—'

'Before you head off home, Alan, how do you fancy swinging by my office? I'll treat you to lunch!'

Lunch with Helen Warner? Alan did not fancy that at all.

'Well, thank you very much, Helen, but I am not able to offer you my best at this moment. Could we schedule this for tomorrow, or later in the week?' ...or never!! So much for dropping Helen Warner from the client list! Alan peeked up at Jim who was frowning slightly.

'It's just for a chat, Alan. It concerns your present predicament.'

What could she mean by *that*? Oh well, there was no way out of this, not with Jim assessing him so intently, and possibly starting to question his zeal: 'Okay then, I'll head over. See you anon.'

Warner hung up.

Alan placed the receiver down and sighed. 'I'll be taking lunch with Helen Warner.'

'Good Man!' replied Jim, with a smile. 'Keep her sweet, then head home. I'll see you tomorrow. We can have a proper chat then!'

'Yes, sir, will do. Looking forward to it.'

'And call me Jim!'

'Yes, Jim.'

Alan watched as Jim Fairclough left his office. I wonder where he'll pitch up next, he wondered. He knew one thing, however: he did not like his new boss.

Russell awoke from a deep and relaxing sleep to discover himself immobilized, almost paralyzed, and unable to breath. A dozen or more pythons appeared to be constricting him from every angle. Something furry and dense pressed heavily upon his head.

‘Aagghhh!!!’

A sudden writhing of limbs, a panicked thrashing, and Russell found himself forcefully bouncing off a bed and landing on a carpeted floor with a thud. When he looked up he saw Mr. Waterstone standing on the bed, looking confused, ears back, tail flicking. Ceres and Michael stood at the opposite side, both gazing at him silently with inscrutable expressions.

This was his bedroom, in his flat above the aerobics studio in Bermondsey, but what were this lot still doing here!? And how exactly had they slept!? In one tight confusing ball of limbs, by the feel of it, with him in the middle, contorted, stuck, and suffocating. Russell held no memory of ending up here but the rest of the evening and night were clear enough:

After leaving the hybrid on the Finsbury roof, Russell had been instructed once again to drive. This time west. Out of London altogether and then all the way to Wiltshire. Traffic escaping London clogged up the M4 but Michael’s satnav found him uncongested routes on various B roads that allowed the Bentley to reach its destination before dusk: a wheat field. One apparently in need of a crop circle, which he and Mr. Waterstone had to beat down with wooden pallet boards. That was exhausting and took over two hours to complete, mainly due to Michael’s strict supervision from the side of the field using a night-vision drone.

Following that, it was a drive all the way back to London and a night of hedonism and high living. First there were the London super clubs and private raves and then on to the sex parties hosted by wet-lipped oligarchs. Sweeping through London that night, Russell felt as though he were part of a larger organic entity composed of hundreds of partygoers: like a flock of starlings in the late evening sky searching for the next roost, but always maintaining a beautiful and fluid shape. Bits occasionally broke off from the main group, and sometimes he found himself hooked up with other revellers and with no idea of the whereabouts of the crazy gang. Then they’d all meet up again at some other venue down the line. Ceres cast the most intoxicating of spells on that hottest of nights.

And then suddenly he was here...

‘Breakfast?’ he eventually managed.

Without waiting for a reply he headed down the hall to his kitchen, the memories of the previous night still vivid in his mind. He could get used to this! But something needed to be done about the sleeping arrangements.

He examined his fridge and was happy to see it well stocked.

‘Nice one, Meg,’ he muttered to himself. As well as her secretarial work Meg made extra cash working as Russell’s personal shopper. A newspaper sat on the table and

Russell idly perused it before realizing the significance of it being today's. That meant Meg had already been in here!

'What time is it?'

'Nine forty-three.'

Russell turned around to see his three house guests taking seats at his table. 'Full English,' declared Ceres. Mr. Waterstone extended a paw; presumably he wanted the full English breakfast as well.

'Michael?'

'Just a black coffee for me, thanks.'

'This all seemed very domestic. The time suddenly sank in:

'Nine forty-three!!??'

'Well, nine forty-four now,' replied Michael.

'Shit, I've got a class at ten!' Russell frantically began preparing the breakfasts. It had been some time since he'd last prepared an English, but it was fairly easy to put together: fried eggs, fried bacon, fried bread, fried sausage and fried mushrooms, and something else... fried beans!

He eventually placed two, large, greasy servings on the table, and Michael was handed his black coffee. Everyone seemed satisfied. Mr. Waterstone began to wolf his down with gusto, and the woman ate hers with an accompaniment of erotic noises. Meg suddenly burst into his flat.

'You're up!' she shouted at Russell, 'you know you've got a class in like five minutes!?' Oh, hello.'

Meg gawped at Ceres and Mr. Waterstone.

'Err, Meg, this is Ms. Ceres,' said Russell, nervously.

'Delighted to meet you, Meg,' replied Ceres, with a huge food-splattered grin.

Meg smiled, seemingly transfixed by Ceres's luminous beauty, but then her attention switched to the cat. Mr. Waterstone was finishing his breakfast.

'Whoa!! That cat's using a knife and fork! Hahaha!!'

Crap, shouldn't the perception filter take care of that sort of thing? 'Yes, he's called Mr. Waterstone. Ceres here is training him.'

Meg looked thrilled. She turned to Ceres: 'You should put him on YouTube!'

'Wait till you hear him talk,' replied Ceres.

'Really!!??'

Russell intervened: 'Yeah, it's mainly just "sausages" it needs a bit of work.' He was growing uneasy by this banter, but at least Meg was ignoring Michael. As her attention switched again to Russell the smile on her face vanished.

'Russell, for God's sake, change out of those stinking clothes! You can't go down looking like *that*!'

Russell looked down and was aghast to discover that he was *still* attired in yesterday's aerobics outfit. It was filthy, stained and torn and it smelled a bit ripe. The too-short shorts had a giant split in the rear.

Russell reluctantly left Meg with the others while he took a quick shower and, at last, changed into a new outfit. When he returned to the kitchen Meg had gone. He turned to the others:

'If there are no objections I must now conduct a one-hour aerobics class.' The

others stared at him. 'After the class perhaps we could clarify our, err, relationship. I mean do you still require me? The Sponsors are dealt with, right?'

As Russell sidled towards his front door, Mr. Waterstone and Michael jumped down from their seats and followed. Were they going to stick to him like glue from now on?

'You want to join my class?' he enquired, flippantly.

'Wouldn't miss it!' replied Michael.

Russell turned to Ceres but she held up a hand. 'Conduct your keep-fit class, and take these two with you.' She then pointed behind Russell to the corner of the kitchen and Russell instinctively turned to look. The demonic blackboard had made another unwelcome appearance.

'Oh no, not that again!'

'Settle down, Mr. Tebb, there is an important truth to be told but this time we can just utilize words and pictures.'

Russell wasn't sure what that meant. 'Alright,' he said with a shrug. He then led Michael and Mr. Waterstone down to his studio.

The hour seemed to speed by. The regulars in his class accepted the two new members without any carry-on and both Michael and Mr. Waterstone acquitted themselves quite well, although Mr. Waterstone did have to retire early due to a stitch, presumably caused by his recent large breakfast.

On returning to his flat Russell was once again confronted by that blackboard. It had been moved to his lounge and placed in front of the TV. Three pictures were stuck to it.

The image in the top-left corner appeared to be a photograph of a mountain gorilla, or yeti-type creature. It stood on its hind legs and was covered from head to toe in long blonde hair, with a darker Mohican running from the top of its head down the length of its back. A roughly hewn club was gripped in its right hand. The picture actually looked staged: that furtive glance at the camera at odds with its fearsome expression, as though it were saying to the photo-shoot director: *"Is this enough for you? I can give you more"*.

Russell studied the picture over on the top right: a grey 'ufology' alien. As he had noticed yesterday when staring closely at the Sponsor, certain overlaps in the features could be discerned. So these creeps did exist after all! Presumably a related species. Russell supposed he was being shown the next targets – the next set of non-terrestrials that were in need of a smack-down. The grey was sinister, but old Boris Johnson on the left there didn't look like much of a threat.

The picture at the bottom was of a particularly ornate and complex crop circle. It was amazingly detailed. Russell recalled with a smile his and Mr. Waterstone's shambolic efforts the previous night. Come to think of it, he had not seen the completed image. Could this be it!? The photo on the blackboard was not a standard daylight shot, but rather some graphically enhanced night shot.

As Russell studied the pictures closely he could not begin to guess the connections between them, if any existed, nor the nature of this 'truth' Ceres was about to dispense.

'I'm still not happy with the nose.., hello?'

'Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonebatch is waiting.'

'Send him through, oh, and let him keep his phone this time.' The PM returned his attention to the developing facial composite. It was getting there, but...

Sir Neville entered the PM's office carrying another manila folder and a smart phone.

'Thank you, Prime Minister,' he said, brandishing the phone. He glanced at the photo-fit: 'Is this a good likeness, sir?'

'Sort of, I think.' The PM noticed Sir Neville's folder. 'Okay, officer, why don't you take a break. They may serve you coffee if you smile nicely.'

'Yes, sir.' The Special Branch officer collected up his equipment and departed the office as Sir Neville took his seat opposite the Prime Minister.

'Shoot,' said the PM.

Sir Neville first briefed the Prime Minister on the latest analyses from Porton Down: 'Initial studies of the organic material recovered from the annex suggest an exclusively terrestrial origin, with DNA from numerous species identified.'

'Numerous *species*!?'

'Yes, sir, including, remarkably – elephant!'

'What!?'

'I don't have an explanation for this, sir.'

'I bet you don't..! but nothing "ET", you say?'

'No, sir. Nothing positively identified as non-terrestrial tissue.'

The PM shook his head: 'How the hell did an elephant get in there!?'

'I reiterate, sir–'

'Yes, yes!!' The PM rubbed his eyes vigorously: 'We don't seem to be making forward progress with any of this, do we?'

'Ah,' Sir Neville reached for his phone and studied it for a few seconds: 'You should take a look at this, sir.'

Sir Neville placed the phone so that both men could observe the screen.

'What am I looking at, Sir Neville?'

'We pulled this from an ESA satellite. It is a time-lapse sequence updated once every thirty seconds. As you can see, nothing untoward on the visible channel, also nothing on the infra red and radar channels... but look at this!'

The PM and his security chief watched the ultraviolet satellite channel, clearly showing something circular and white appearing first over northern Germany, before slowing rapidly as it progressed westwards. As the circle moved over the developing thunderstorm covering London, it flared, and then vanished.

'It's a spaceship, and a giant one!'

'A USO, sir – Unidentified Space Object.'

'Whatever, it's bigger than London!'

'The apparent size is perhaps due to its proximity to the satellite, but yes, it does appear to have been rather large, sir.'

The Prime Minister laughed at his security chief's apparent need for pointless understatement. Was it a comfort blanket? He returned his attention to the small phone screen.

'Can you transfer these images to my desktop?'

'Yes, sir.'

After a moment: 'Okay, let me see the visible channel again.'

The visible sequence repeated on a continuous loop. The PM and his security chief both scrutinized the imagery closely, looking for any signs of the spaceship before it exploded. There was absolutely nothing.

'This thing was cloaked,' remarked the PM.

'Indeed, sir. Nothing on visible or longer wavelengths but at UV, we find it. It's not resolved very well, and would be dismissed as a data ghost were it not for its appearance on several frames.'

The Prime Minister turned to his security chief: 'I presume the European Space Agency will have seen this... is this material available to the public!?'

'No, sir. We took this from a restricted archive, which we've since deleted. It's likely they – ESA – missed it.'

'I hope so, the shit will hit the fan if this gets out. Can anyone trace our interventions here?'

'No, sir... almost certainly not.'

The PM shuddered.

Both men continued to view the satellite imagery, switching from channel to channel as they looked for clues. The PM finally gave up, exasperated.

'What else have you got for me?' he asked his security chief.

Sir Neville looked pained: 'Some of the fatalities remain unexplained, and very puzzling.'

'Oh, how so?'

'There have now been over two hundred such deaths reported across London. All with the same distinctive characteristics of the Whitehall episode: massive chromosomal damage, multiple organ failure and haemorrhaging. And all occurring at precisely the same time. And there are even reports of this abroad.'

'Really!? Where abroad?'

'New York, Washington, Moscow and several other locations, mainly big cities.'

'That doesn't add up! There have been no other reported meteorite strikes, have there?'

'Not to my knowledge, Prime Minister.'

The PM fell silent for a moment. Once again he recalled his last moments at the annex: 'Do we have anything on aliens? Do we keep an X-file?' To his surprise Sir Neville removed something from his folder: a picture of an alien: small, grey, and obviously an artist's impression, and obviously not what he had seen yesterday in Whitehall.

'No, that's not right,' The PM said, absentmindedly.

'Not *right*, sir?'

The PM realized his slip. Should he now confide in Sir Neville?

'I, err, I believe I might have glanced some extraterrestrial entities at the FO annex.'
Sir Neville looked shocked.

'Oh come on, Sir Neville! Is it not now blindingly obvious that some form of extraterrestrial attack occurred yesterday?'

Sir Neville looked as though he were about to lose his composure. He shuffled his papers but did not reply for a long time. 'Can you describe what you saw, Prime Minister?' he finally managed.

The PM reluctantly gave a description of the aliens. Sir Neville looked flabbergasted.

'I know what I saw,' the PM affirmed.

Sir Neville sighed and leaned over to view the facial composite on the PM's desk just as his phone began to ring. Before answering it he addressed the Prime Minister: 'Maybe Porton Down can throw up something new for us but, as far as I see it, our investigation hinges on tracking down this individual... Yes, what is it?'

As Sir Neville took his call the PM studied the police image with a frown. It wasn't yet a true representation... and he wasn't sure why.

Sir Neville put his phone away and raised both eyebrows at the Prime Minister.

'Something?'

'A development on the fatalities, sir – a survivor! One Alan Dosogne of Global Finance Sponsorship Ltd. According to a statement he has just given, he succumbed at the same time as two others in his organization both of whom subsequently died. He was expected to follow, but then promptly vanished. Now he's just reappeared at work, and is apparently well.'

The PM looked hard at his security chief. 'Pull him in. You'd better do it now!'

'Yes, Prime Minister.'

The PM pressed a button on his desk. 'Send in the police inspector, please.'

The cop re-entered the PM's office just as Sir Neville departed.

The Docklands Light Railway metro traipsed its way to Canary Wharf. The damage to London was worse further east, more windows blown in, more street cleaning in evidence, but at least those distant plumes had now been extinguished. The city would recover from this, as it always did when attacked.

Recovering from the 'meteorite hit' was one thing, but what about further down the line? As well as his general concerns for the human system, Alan continued to ponder the significance of his final psynet visit. In attempting to uncover the Sponsors' master plan he'd found some technical stuff on genetics and epigenetics, with indications that the Sponsors exclusively utilized the latter on the human system. Was this significant? He pulled out a phone and searched the term epigenetics on Wikipedia:

...Physiological variations caused by external factors (instead of changes in the actual DNA sequence) that switch certain genes on or off, affecting how cells read genes.

...Epigenetic changes can last through cell divisions for the duration of the cell's life, and also for multiple generations even though they do not involve changes in the underlying DNA sequence of the organism.

Biology had never been a strong subject for him. Maybe epigenetic tinkering worked better than full-on genetic engineering because it was more flexible and less risky should mistakes be made. Presumably even the Sponsors made mistakes from time to time.

Alan shrugged. There was enough to worry about without this. Like his imminent lunch with Warner. He returned the phone to his pocket as the metro approached Canary Wharf station.

Helen Warner's offices occupied almost an entire floor of the Trenchard building – a prime Docklands location situated next to the HSBC tower. Alan was met at reception and immediately taken to meet Warner.

'Alan! Thanks for coming! I thought we could have a quick chat, and I could show you a few things, and then we can take a nice lunch at the executive restaurant here. Trust me, the food is to die for.'

'Okay.'

Alan was struck by Warner's manner which seemed unusually upbeat and oddly friendly. He was used to superficial courtesy disguising relentless passive-aggressive goading – something he easily dealt with in the old days but a terrifying prospect now. Once the money-talk began he'd be in real trouble. Alan began to sweat, realizing how out of his depth he was. And a bad report sent back to GFS could even leave his job in jeopardy. Certainly he'd not made the best of first impressions with Jim Fairclough, no doubt coming across as a bumbling fool. So far the damage was minimal as this could all be explained by yesterday's traumatic events but if a primary client such as Warner withdrew her business, citing Alan as the reason, then a sacking looked a very real prospect.

'You appear to be rather tense, Alan, are you still shaken up by yesterday's shenanigans?'

'Shenanigans!?' Odd choice of word, but this was good. He would milk that excuse with Warner as he had done with Fairclough:

'Yes, I am a bit but, err, I'll, you know...'

Warner nodded sympathetically as Alan's speech trailed away to a silent shrug. 'Of course. You'll feel better after lunch, but first, let's talk about your *real* predicament.'

'Predicament? You said that on the phone, what do you mean, *predicament*?'

'The Sponsors have been wiped out,' Warner replied casually.

Alan was stunned. How on earth did Helen Warner know about them!? Knowledge of the Sponsors' existence did occasionally leak out but it was always promptly dealt with and turned from a conscious knowing into a subconscious suspicion. Collectively this formed the basis of ufology, but that "field of study" was riddled with so much misinformation that it presented no threat to the Sponsors or their various operations. It was obvious, however, just from knowing Warner, and looking at the smug expression on her face now, that she was no UFO nut: she didn't just *suspect* – she truly knew the score. And she'd somehow kept this hidden from the Sponsors, even though she fell into

their spheres of influence via Alan and the work of GFS.

‘Are you still with me, Alan?’ Warner said, with a laugh.

Alan nodded, but did not reply. No wonder Warner was difficult for the Sponsors to deal with, if she knew this information and they didn’t know that she knew... Amazing!

‘Are you human?’ Alan blurted. Old Alan would probably have avoided asking that at this stage.

Warner guffawed: ‘Last time I checked! How about you?’

She really did know!

‘Yes, I *am* human!’

‘How are you finding it?’ asked Warner, ‘Being human, I mean.’

‘Err, difficult. Do you mind if I sit down?’

‘Of course not, where are my manners? Here, take a seat.’

Alan sat down on a comfortable sofa and Warner took the seat next to him.

‘So what *do* you know about the Sponsors?’ asked Alan.

‘Quite a lot. I have my own version of the psynet. I’ve been hacking them for a decade.’

‘You have the psynet!?!?’

‘Well, my version of it. All stored on terrestrial computers etc.’

‘How did you keep *that* hidden from the Sponsors?’

‘By being very clever, and very, very careful. The psynet told me how to do it. All I had to do was “surf” there without being detected and that aspect turned out to be rather easy. The psynet is actually wide open to a skilled hacker; their internal security is extraordinarily lax. They’re just not used to security threats. Between you and me I’m sure they are actually de-evolving! Well, they *were*. Now they’re all dead, haha!’

‘I knew you were smart, Warner, but this..?’

‘Warner? Don’t you mean, Helen?’

‘Err, yes, Helen, sorry. I’m not quite myself, remember.’

‘Don’t you mean you *are* quite yourself?’

Warner was playing him as she frequently had during financial briefings. But this was unprecedented. What kind of Bond villain was he dealing with here?

‘Mr. Harman was always a thorny problem, however. As a full telepath he could have busted me at any time.’

‘How come he didn’t?’

‘With much mental discipline and a bit of help from a perception filter.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a skill humans can master, but it’s difficult. It just draws attention away from where you don’t want the attention to be i.e.: my mind. If anything, it works better on a Sponsor hybrid, than it does on a human. But Harman’s bogus “advice” still tended to get through subliminally as it was meant to. I would evaluate it later and sometimes go against it. Just to annoy them.’

‘Risky.’

‘Calculated.’

Alan shook his head. ‘So you knew I was a hybrid?’

‘Indeed. 0.3 percent. The most human of them all. That’s why I always liked you, Alan. And you were a bit of a loose cannon for them – I liked that about you even more!’

I can't tell you how happy I am that you survived. I'm pretty sure you are the only one left standing. Though I am surprised. Whoever or whatever did this would surely not leave any loose-ends.'

Alan exhaled noisily and nodded. He had been saved and apparently fully repaired but not before the very moment of his death. There must have been a motive for doing that, even if it was just gloating.

Warner continued: 'As you know, I read your statement, but it doesn't quite add up, does it? I don't suppose you'd care to expand upon it?'

Alan shrugged. Was it worth telling Warner everything that had transpired on the roof? He'd left that stuff off his statement because it was just too fantastical, they'd have locked him up in Broadmoor. Warner, on the other hand, would believe him. He remained silent.

'Who did this, Alan?'

Ah, that was the direct question. Presumably what this meeting was all about. This was something Warner didn't know, and it was no doubt driving her mad. That meant leverage.

'Why should I tell you?' Alan replied, in due course.

'So you do know.'

Alan remained silent.

Warner smiled and stood up. 'Let's just kick this into the semi-rough for now. Here, follow me, I'll show you my psynet.'

Warner led Alan through her busy office complex and on towards a heavy orange fire door situated at the end of a corridor. A swipe card granted access to the rooms beyond and there instantly came a roar of cooling fans. The air quality, now a soup of ions and ozone, noticeably deteriorated.

'My mainframes. Enough computing power to simulate a universe!'

'Really!?'

'No, I was exaggerating. Follow me.'

Warner led Alan down banks of electronic wizardry to another door that Warner opened with a standard Yale key. The room beyond was bare, save for a seat and small desk on which sat a computer terminal. Warner closed the door behind them and the computer racket dropped away to a distant murmur.

'Ah, that's better,' stated Warner, with relief. 'Take a seat in front of that terminal, please.'

Alan sat down, and Warner began to type in some commands.

'Okay, you're in. Is this like the psynet you remember?'

Alan gazed at the screen but didn't recognize anything. Since the real psynet was a telepathic mind-net accessed purely via thought this came as no surprise to him; translating all that into a form a computer could decipher was a great technical achievement, but, frankly, hard to comprehend. There was a mouse, and Alan began moving the cursor around with it. He still didn't recognize anything.

'Err, I'm stumped.'

'Okay, well let's look at the sort of material I'm sure you accessed before, the financial stuff.' Warner clicked on lines of text and the pages altered. 'There.'

Again, nothing. Screeds of text in English, but...

'Ah!' exclaimed Alan, 'Yes, okay... I see now. I just needed a reference point.'

Alan was staggered. Yes, this was the psynet, at least the framework part of it. That was good enough, it contained all their secrets, all their know-how. The only things missing were the actual Sponsors and hybrids.

'Incredible!!'

'Thanks!'

'You have downloaded the whole flaming lot!!'

'Yes. Except it's now static, as there's no new data being added, obviously.'

Alan looked up at Warner with an expression of awe. Then suspicion. 'What are you going to do with all this?'

Warner smirked: 'To paraphrase Ken Livingstone: There is a power vacuum, and we need to fill it!'

'We?'

'Absolutely, Alan. You know this exists and you have some experience in using it. You also have experience of Sponsor techniques. The world is now a dangerous place, as I'm sure you have worked out. We need to keep the global financial system afloat, and we need to manoeuvre ourselves quickly to acquire hegemony over the global political system.'

'Oh, is that all!?'

'We can do it! We have this, not to mention my own company's resources. But I do need you.'

Alan felt very flattered. 'Are you offering me a job, Helen?'

'I am. And you can forget about salaries or conditions. You will have *power* and be far more privileged than ever before.'

Alan returned his gaze to the screen and began fiddling with the mouse – pulling up new pages and beginning to feel comfortable navigating in this new format. 'It's going to be more difficult than before without an army of enforcers to do the heavy lifting,' he remarked, idly clicking the mouse on anything that caught his eye.

'You mean people like you?' asked Warner, with a smile.

'I mean the telepathic hybrids capable of full mind control. I merely had the power of suggestion, at best. And now I don't even have that.'

'We'll have to set up alternative structures. Once we start acquiring real power we can get the bureaucracy of the nation states to do most of the work for us.'

Alan considered this. Warner was probably correct about the level of control and power that could be exerted from here. But only someone as clever as Warner could hold it together and keep it all utterly hidden. This went a long way to assuaging his various fears about the human system. He swung around to face Warner again:

'Alright, I'm in!' he announced, with a grin.

Warner offered her hand and Alan shook it vigorously. 'Fantastic, Alan! We can shape the world in our own image, now!'

'Ooh, steady, Helen,' replied Alan, 'we just want a viable system, don't we? Something generally meritocratic?'

'Sure, that's what I meant.'

Alan nodded. Warner may need to be watched to ensure her hubristic tendencies

didn't spin out of control, but this really could work. He suddenly recalled the psynet material on genetics:

'What do you know about epigenetics?'

Warner looked blank for a second: 'Excuse me?'

There is a lot about it on the psynet, presumably you have looked at it?'

Warner frowned: 'No, actually. I have tended to focus on aspects that affected me and my business. What is this material?'

'Oh, it's a lot of technobabble about how the Sponsors manipulated our genes in the early days of their operation.'

'Let me see.'

Alan stood and allowed Warner access to the terminal. He watched for a minute or so as Warner's cheerful, optimistic demeanour slowly began to darken. She turned to Alan:

'Forget what we've just been discussing – we're all screwed!'

'Homo Dumbass?'

'Yeah, that's not actually its Latin name. I believe ma'am was just making a joke. In fact the Sponsors scrupulously kept this fella *off* the fossil record,' declared Michael.

'Meet the ancestors!' added Ceres. She was sitting languidly on Russell's sofa, long limbs stretching out in all directions.

'Ah,' said Russell, nodding, then switching his attention to the other picture: '...and this is a grey alien?' he asked.

'Grey, yes; alien – no,' replied Ceres. She then reached forwards and stuck another image between those of the hominid and the grey. It was an oval cut-out of Russell's head. He was smiling, possibly laughing. The blackboard was beginning to resemble a bizarre pantomime advertisement.

'What do you imagine these three have in common, Mr. Tebb?'

'Dunno., wit, charm and charisma?' replied Russell.

'You all lack those attributes. Try again.'

Russell shook his head. 'I don't know. This grey isn't a descendant of ours, is it?'

'Yes it is!' replied Ceres. 'Here we have three manifestations of the human animal, but only two of these are stable. Guess which one isn't.'

Russell turned to scrutinize Ceres. 'Would it be me?' he half-heartedly suggested.

Ceres nodded and stood up. She stepped towards the board and prodded the picture of the hominid: 'This ape-man creature was the Sponsors' source material. They began tinkering with it nearly four-hundred-thousand years ago. In due course, they produced you.'

'Wow, they were at it a long time!' remarked Russell. 'Where exactly are you going with this?' he added, with a shake of the head.

'This is not just your hominid ancestor, it is almost genetically identical to modern humans. The Sponsors affected the transition merely via the activation and deactivation

of selected genes on the pre-existing chromosomes.'

Russell was lost.

'Which means,' said Michael, picking up the narrative, 'now that Sponsor genetic manipulation has been removed, your genome is free to decide for itself which genes it wants to turn on or off. And it will do this according to natural selective pressures.'

Russell was still lost.

'You've got two generations before reverting to dumbass,' added Ceres, with characteristic bluntness.

Russell slowly began to grasp the magnitude of this revelation. This was a disaster for humanity. The modern world would literally come crashing down. And it was imminent!

Ceres placed an arm around Russell's shoulder. 'A rampaging idiocracy within twenty years and full ape-man by mid-century. How do you feel about this prospect, Mr. Tebb?'

'How do you think I feel!?' replied Russell removing Ceres's arm. He studied the blackboard again. 'Seriously, are you going to let this happen?'

Ceres looked sympathetically at Russell. 'Well, we all agree that the human is the aggrieved party here. So we have decided to offer you the one alternative that still remains.' She glanced over at the picture of the grey.

'What!? *That* thing!?'

'I quite agree. You should still plump for dumbass, in my opinion.'

'No one's plumping for anything..! Is this a wind up?'

'No wind up,' replied Michael. 'The grey is the version of you the Sponsors were keen to get off the ground. We have acquired their know-how on this matter and could easily reintroduce the Sponsor programme – with some tweaks of course: the Sponsors would not be involved and would no longer hold sway over you.'

'Fine, let's go with that option, then,' said Russell, quickly.

'Are you sure?' asked Ceres.

'Anything's better than dumbass!'

'This isn't,' she replied ominously.

Russell slumped down into an armchair as Michael began again:

'The Sponsors' estimate was: 2063. That was their forecast for the technological singularity, an event related to the dawn of artificial intelligence. What emerges out the other side will be fundamentally altered: a cybernetic hive-mind devoid of any emotional links to the current human system. In fact, the only thing human about it will be the DNA carried within its biological components. The first signs will be evident within a decade when AI bots begin to take control of the internet. They'll hack into everything including, eventually, your brains. Then it will be a race to the singularity.'

'You're going to get gang-raped by your machines and then turned into one,' added Ceres.

'Oh, charming!' cried Russell.

'It is a difficult choice,' agreed Ceres, with great solemnity.

'And *I* have to make this choice!?' Russell felt faint.

'Not you personally, Mr. Tebb,' replied Ceres, 'all humans, your collective unconscious will evaluate the problem and select an outcome. It has been informed.' The

woman tapped the picture of the crop circle.

‘With that thing!?’ Russell shrieked.

‘It is best to go through established channels,’ replied Ceres.

‘It contains all relevant information pertaining to this matter, thus allowing you, as a species, to make the sound and informed choice,’ added Michael.

‘We’ll have the answer by Friday,’ stated Ceres. ‘In the meantime, we have to deal with a more pressing matter.’

‘Oh, God. What now!?’

‘Lunch. I believe Mr. Waterstone wants to try out one of the river-boat restaurants.’

Lunch, it turned out, *was* “to die for”. At least for Alan. A very sullen Warner just picked at hers.

Alan fully shared Warner’s dismay at the evident fate now awaiting humanity, but he hadn’t eaten a proper meal in nearly twenty-four hours, and as a bona-fide human he now appreciated food as never before. He even ordered a pudding which seemed to annoy Warner greatly. ‘The food’s great!’

‘Yes, I suggest you eat yourself to death before you revert to a monkey!’

‘Mm-hmm,’ agreed Alan, absent-mindedly, as he indicated to the waiter that he wanted more custard. As a hybrid he had been kept away from alcohol, but this was what he imagined being drunk was like; he knew the ‘hangover’ would follow. For now, however, he just wanted to stuff himself.

‘Christ!’ muttered Warner, ‘I think I must have misjudged you, Alan. You are a common little tyke, aren’t you?’

Alan nodded. He assumed the job offer was now rescinded and frankly, who cared what Warner thought of him.

Alan finally could take no more: no more food and no more of Warner’s hostility. He leaned back in his chair and fixed a cold stare at his companion:

‘I am rediscovering what it is to be human, Helen. Experiences like this are novel to me. And if we *are* all doomed, as you say we are, what would you have me do?’

Warner glared at him, but said nothing.

Alan, now sobering quickly from his food-orgasms, decided to try a different, more constructive approach:

‘Surely the psynet explains how they kept us like this?’

Warner emitted a sharp, sarcastic yelp: ‘Ha!’

‘You’re saying it doesn’t?’

‘I’m saying it’s not feasible. Every human would have to be ‘flagged’, every sperm cell, and every egg. And every individual person would need a bespoke arrangement. Can you imagine the infrastructure needed to execute this? Not to mention the expertise required!’

‘What infrastructure did the Sponsors use?’

‘I haven’t bothered to look but I assume they used orbital platforms, or spacecraft

of some description. Highly focused microwaves probably performed the actual DNA editing.'

'I see,' said Alan.

'Oh, good.'

'What's likely to happen in the next five years or so?'

Warner shrugged: 'Not much to the existing population, I suppose, but humanity will be set squarely on a path towards degeneration. I pity those who give birth. They'll be in for a very nasty shock! Once societies twig what's going on – they'll collapse. It *could* happen within five years.'

'Suppose we construct replicas of the Sponsor technology and then assemble a team of expert geneticists to administer it. Could that work?'

'I doubt it. Even if it did, the 'landscape' in which our genomes now sit is significantly altered and so the outcome of any manipulation is unpredictable. In short – expect serious mutations. We'd wipe ourselves out even quicker if we tampered with this!'

The table fell silent as both diners contemplated the inevitable.

'Mr. Alan Dosogne?'

Both Alan and Warner flinched and looked up at the two burly men standing by their table.

'Excuse me, who the hell are you!? This is a private restaurant!?' shouted Warner, with fury.

'Detective Chief Inspector Cranford of Special Branch, and this is Detective Sergeant Landers. We have orders to escort Mr. Dosogne for questioning.'

Alan glanced nervously at Warner.

'They tracked you with your phone,' remarked Warner with little interest. 'Well go on! Go with them!'

Alan stood and offered his hand to Warner but she ignored it.

'If you could follow us please, sir,' said Cranford, indicating the door.

'...And Mr. Waterstone will have the beef.'

'Excellent. And anything to drink, madam?' enquired the waiter, collecting up the menus.

'Orange juice for me, please,' requested Michael.

'Nothing for me,' added Russell.

'And two lagers,' added Ceres. The waiter nodded and departed, leaving an uncomfortable silence to hover over the table. Russell was still furious, though furious at *what*, or *whom*? If humanity opted for the singularity option, unpalatable though it was, it was still a marginal improvement on what was due to occur anyway. At least now this new entity would be independent of the Sponsors...

It was no solace. Whilst Russell could accept humanity not persisting in its present form forever, the thought of an abrupt extinction occurring within this century, a total

collapse of civilization and an aggressive takeover by the machines... well, it was almost disgusting! Russell glanced over at Michael: 'Wait a minute, aren't you the collective-machine? Can't you, umm...'

'Intervene? Not going to happen. You reside on a genetic gradient, Russell. We can push you up the slope, to flatter ground, or you can fall down the slope, of your own accord. But you can't just stay put! It's not natural.'

Russell sighed, and glanced hopefully at Ceres, but she shook her head: 'The singularity is a rite-of-passage for every space-faring species, Mr. Tebb,' she declared, 'but it is different in each case, and because the Sponsors accelerated your evolution you are now set to hurtle through it like a rifle bullet. If you want to avoid turning into cybermen you will need to evolve more slowly. Instead of taking a few thousand years to move from stone-age to space-age you should take *millions*. If you revert to dumbass you can at least try again, and this time – get it right!'

Russell gave a weak, sarcastic laugh as he took in his surroundings: It was another beautiful sunny day. The Thames shimmered in the sunlight, and London, at least here in the west, looked superb. It would have been nice to enjoy it. 'All this culture will go...' he muttered to himself.

'Dumbass will have a culture!' offered Ceres, still trying to sell the idea that reverting to an ape was a sound career move.

'With respect, ma'am,' interjected Michael, 'banging a couple of rocks together is hardly a "culture".'

'It's a start!' argued the woman.

Russell listened glumly as Ceres and Michael argued the merits and pitfalls of life as a hominid verses that of a space-faring *thing*. They disagreed on what would be the best outcome for humanity, but Michael failed to sell the singularity option to Russell. It sounded like this new entity would not only lack all connections back to the modern world it would also lack *all* recognizable human emotions; even scientific curiosity would be thrown out – replaced by mindless logic algorithms or something, Russell wasn't interested. Maybe Ceres was right. Maybe the hominid lifestyle would be better... The food arrived:

'The scallops?' asked the waiter.

'Yep,' replied Michael.

'And the stewed squid with tomatoes was for you, madam. The burger for *sir*, and...'

'...And Mr. Waterstone will have the beef,' replied Russell, indicating the cat sitting impatiently, gripping his knife and fork vertically in front of him.

'Very good, sir, I'll just get your drinks.' The waiter departed.

'That burger looks good,' remarked Michael, through a mouthful of scallops. They made an unpleasant crunching sound as Michael consumed everything including the shells.

'Keep your paws off it!' warned Russell, sampling the burger for the first time: 'Hmmm!! ...How's the squid?'

Ceres sucked up a tentacle and smiled at Russell.

'As good as *that*?'

After the waiter had served the drinks there was a lull in the conversation as

everyone ate. Michael's noisy crunching seemed to be disturbing some of the other diners, but the perception filter continued to do its job. Only Mr. Waterstone and his cutlery attracted attention, but not much.

'Why doesn't the perception filter work properly with him', asked Russell, jabbing a knife in the direction of the cat.

'It requires subtlety,' Michael explained, 'that is not really his MO, is it?'

With the meals finished, Ceres addressed the group in general: 'So, what shall we do this pleasant afternoon?'

'Yes, the weather here is very agreeable, isn't it, ma'am?' replied Michael.

'Mm-hmm. So what are we going to do with it? Mr. Tebb? Care to chip in with your local knowledge?'

Russell thought about this... *'Shit!'*

'What!?' enquired Ceres, with raised eyebrows.

'I've got a class at two!'

'It's almost two now,' observed Michael.

'Meg will take care of business, Mr. Tebb,' added Ceres, 'You are sticking with us.'

Russell slumped in his chair. What did it matter now, anyway? He began to think of stuff to do:

'London eye?'

'No.'

'Covent Garden?'

'No'

'Take in a show?'

'Maybe later.'

'Museums?'

'No'

'For God's sake!'

'Keep thinking.'

Russell was becoming exasperated, but then a notion struck him: 'Are there any other extraterrestrials running around London? Non-Sponsor ETs, I mean.'

Ceres stared at him for a while and began to grin.

Russell belched. 'Let's check 'em out.'

The drive across London became increasingly unpleasant as Alan's bloated insides began to flag up travel sickness. It didn't help that the young police driver insisted on speeding through red lights and swerving around traffic, alarms blaring.

'I feel sick!' Alan finally admitted, as the police car rounded Parliament Square.

'We are nearly there, sir,' offered DS Landers, who sat next to him in the back.

Alan hoped he was not understating the journey ahead: Parliament Square was still north of the Thames, but South Norwood was miles away on the other side, somewhere

in the distant, random south. But as the car sped along Victoria Street and took a turning to the right, he recognized a famous rotating icon.

‘Are we doing this interview at New Scotland Yard?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Alan was escorted through the NSY lobby and then passed quickly through various security desks. He was finally asked to take a seat in a small, bland office.

‘Can I get you a coffee, sir?’ enquired a female plain-clothes police officer.

Alan groaned.

‘He’s feeling sick,’ stated Landers. DCI Cranford had vanished somewhere.

‘Oh dear. Should I fetch a doctor?’

‘Just motion sickness, it’ll pass,’ replied Landers.

‘I could manage a cup of tea,’ suggested Alan.

‘No problem,’ replied the woman officer, departing.

‘No problem fetching you tea – a big problem making it palatable!’ remarked Landers, with a smile.

After five minutes the ‘refreshments’ arrived, but there was still no sign of any interview beginning. Alan tentatively sampled the tea. It was disgusting.

‘Told you,’ said Landers.

‘Are we ready to begin? Where has Inspector Cranford got to?’

‘Won’t be long, sir,’

In fact, it *was* long. Alan was kept waiting in the small office for nearly an hour before being asked politely to move to another location within NSY. He and Landers, who was also growing very impatient, finally pitched up in a formal interview room with a one-way mirror on the wall.

Alan was ushered to a seat and Landers took up a position near the door. A further ten minutes went by without anyone joining them.

Alan finally spun around to face Landers: ‘If this interview doesn’t start soon I’m—’

The door burst open and two men and a woman came striding in, all exuding an air of professionalism and efficiency as they each sat down opposite Alan.

‘You’ve kept me waiting here for two hours!’ Alan exaggerated.

The woman, who sat in the centre and was presumably the most senior, smiled warmly at Alan: ‘Yes, we’re very sorry, Mr. Dosogne, but as you can imagine, it has been a very busy day, for all of us!’ She glanced at one of her colleagues who nodded slowly.

‘Hmm, whatever,’ mumbled Alan, staring deliberately hard at the mirror.

‘Thank you, Sergeant,’ said the woman to Landers, who departed with an exasperated sigh.

‘Now, Mr. Dosogne...’ The woman opened a file and began to read from a sheet of A4.

‘Let me guess, you have some questions about my statement. I have nothing further to—’

‘Of course, Mr. Dosogne,’ said the man to the woman’s left, ‘we just want to have a little chat.’

Alan realized that his three inquisitors had not formally introduced themselves –

nor had anyone mentioned lawyers. He'd be sure to bring that up if this dragged on much further but for now he was curious: What did the authorities know? What had they pieced together in the last twenty-four hours?

'Okay, let's chat!' said Alan, folding his arms.

The woman in the centre who had been studying Alan closely throughout this short exchange returned her attention to Alan's statement. She frowned and placed it back in the folder. She then retrieved another item, a photograph. No – a photo-fit. She slid it across the table to Alan.

'Do you recognize this woman?' she asked.

Alan was shocked to make out the very striking features of the life-entity from the Finsbury Circus roof – Ceres. The image was very close to the real thing, with the eyes in particular showing that distinctive hard focus, like the picture was scrutinizing *him*, rather than the other way around. Alan felt his heartbeat racing.

'Nope,' he lied, knowing that almost anyone, never mind this lot, would have picked up on his uncomfortable body language. Christ, he'd even scratched his nose! He pushed the image back to the woman.

'I think you *do* know!' said the man on the woman's right.

Alan smirked. 'You're the *bad* cop, are you?' He fully grasped that this confrontational attitude of his would be doing him no favours but following the recent revelations concerning humanity's fate, just how scary was a police interview? The answer seemed to be: deep down, not scary in the slightest, almost amusing. He didn't even care how much of the full picture they managed to winkle out of him. Though he was damned if he was going to make it easy for them.

'Mr. Dosogne, you have no idea how bad I-' the guy began, but the woman raised her right hand and he abruptly stopped, but a livid expression lingered on his rotund face.

'Tell us about the work you do at Global Finance Sponsorship,' requested the woman.

Alan shrugged: 'I provide financial advice for our various clients.'

'Yes, and it is quite a client roster, isn't it?' The woman glanced down at another document: 'big global players: cousins of Arab royalty, private equity and hedge fund managers, billionaire oligarchs...'

'Yeah, we do alright,' agreed Alan, with conspicuous pride.

'You *did* alright!' declared the angry man. 'Your line manager and division boss are now both dead; killed under very mysterious circumstances, and you turn up after having wandered about London in a daze.'

'You can see why we have questions, can't you, Mr. Dosogne?' added the woman.

Alan fidgeted in his chair: 'Yes, and when you get the answers is there any chance you could inform me? I don't understand any of this either!' Since there was more than a grain of truth to that answer Alan felt more comfortable. Telling the truth was easier: the truth and nothing-but-the-truth. The *whole-truth* bit should be left out, however.

'What is the name of you division supervisor?' asked the angry cop.

Alan was taken aback. He didn't know, and had never thought to ask: 'I don't know his name.'

'No, neither do we, despite rigorous background checks. He has no national

insurance number, no employment record, not even anything listed at GFS. We also can't identify him from dental or fingerprint records.'

Alan had always assumed the supervisor to be one of the vat-grown hybrids, so if the Sponsors actually housed him as well there would be no need for any human documentation at all. This interview was going to get very awkward.

'And where is GFS's division headquarters located?'

Again, Alan did not know.

'GFS is registered at Company House, but as a fully independent, limited company. There should be no external division HQ. And what, for that matter, is this mythical entity supposed to be a division of?'

'I just got on with my job, and didn't think about these things! Bruce Claxton provided the client roster and technical advice on investments, I just packaged this up for the wealthy individuals who perhaps lacked the necessary financial acumen to act on their own.'

'Okay,' said the woman, returning attention to her various papers. 'Let's move on to the actual events of yesterday afternoon.'

'It's all in the statement,' indicated Alan.

'No, it isn't. Neither Claxton, nor this "division supervisor" died under natural circumstances. Preliminary reports from the coroner's office suggest cell nucleus ruptures occurred. This resulted in near instantaneous death for both individuals.'

The other male officer chipped in: 'And there are hundreds of examples of this across London and across—'

The woman stopped him with another raised hand. Was he about to say: *the world*?

'Well obviously something came from the meteorite!' insisted Alan.

'Except that the timing is out.'

'How do you mean?'

'The deaths all occurred at precisely fifteen nineteen. The meteorite did not air-blast until fifteen twenty-three.'

'So!?'

'So how could fragments of a meteorite kill so many people when said meteorite had yet to enter the Earth's atmosphere?'

'Astronomy was never my strong point.'

'*Mr. Dosogne!* It was the woman, and she was getting angry.

'What?'

There followed a short pause while the police interrogators, if that's what they were, tried to recompose themselves. They were clearly rattled. Not so much by Alan's glib replies, but by events in general. Alan almost sympathized. This all must seem so bizarre from their perspective. They were probably used to foiling terrorist attacks...

'Do you think this was a terrorist attack?' asked Alan, earnestly.

There was no reply, but in due course the woman began again:

'If it were a terrorist attack, it was not indiscriminate.'

'Oh?'

'The victims were exclusively business leaders, very senior civil servants, and celebrities.'

'And you!' declared angry cop.

Alan shook his head: 'but I am clearly still here, alive and well!'

'But you were taken ill at precisely the same time. And statements from your company suggest most of the staff present thought you to be at the point of death.'

'GFS was clearly targeted,' said the other man. 'No collateral damage to the building, just a surgical strike taking out the key players: The boss, his pretend boss, and you.'

'His pretend employee?' accused angry man.

'Hey, I have documentation, I pay taxes!'

'Well, maybe you just got struck by the cross-fire,' suggested the woman. 'You were in physically close proximity to the other men, weren't you?'

'Precisely!' stated Alan.

'Even so, you have apparently made a miraculous recovery, Mr. Dosogne.'

Well, I don't understand *that!* declared Alan, with conviction. The interrogators, appearing to accept this assertion, glanced furtively at each other. The woman slid the photo-fit across the table again.

'This is the terrorist, one of them, anyway. Witnessed at the Foreign Office annex where the worst of the attacks took place, and— look, we know you recognize her, Mr. Dosogne! Who is she!'

Alan felt trapped. These three were damned if they were going to let him go without a positive ID on this woman. He considered coming clean, telling them everything.

There was a loud knock at the door. The woman collected the photo-fit image and returned it to her folder. 'Come in.'

It was Sergeant Landers, he indicated to the woman that she should follow him.

'Excuse me a moment!' she hissed, as she stood to leave.

Alan was left alone with the two hostile men. He glanced up at the one-way mirror and wondered if the woman was now behind it, perhaps discussing future lines of questioning with her bosses, whoever they might be.

The woman returned after less than a minute. She looked very unhappy. 'Well, Mr. Dosogne, it seems you still have some friends in high places. Your legal team are demanding your release, and unfortunately we are obliged to comply.'

'Oh!' Alan was perplexed. *His legal team?* He stood up to leave.

'This is far from over, Dosogne!' declared angry cop, with menace. 'We'll be talking to you later once this legal bloater has been removed from the pipes. Maybe we should conduct part two at Guantanamo Bay,' he said to his colleagues, with a smirk.

'Fuck off!' replied Alan, as Landers stepped in to escort him out of New Scotland Yard.

Mr. Waterstone began to snigger.

'What is it?' asked Russell.

The cat showed Russell the contents of the file it was reading, marked: *Top Secret*.

'The Loch Ness Monster!?'

Mr. Waterstone began sniggering again.

'Seriously!? What the hell is MI6 doing filing secret reports on that!?'

'Let me see that report,' said Michael, who had been rifling through a filing cabinet at the other end of the large office. He came scuttling over at great speed.

'Whoa!' said Russell, 'I can get used to your spider-form but this sudden acceleration of yours is still freaking me out!'

'It's a widely held view, regrettably. Spiders don't seem to be that popular with anyone, or anything. I put it down to envy. Would you prefer me to move slower?'

Without waiting for a reply, Michael moved to the side of the office sofa on which sat Russell and Mr. Waterstone. He then proceeded to advance on Russell very slowly, clambering over the arm of the sofa with menace.

'On second thoughts,' decided Russell, 'stick to nippy.'

'Thought so,' replied Michael, 'Now, show me that file on Nessie.'

Russell passed it over and Michael began to read some lines out loud:

'Non-corporeal projection of collective sub-conscious desires. Telekinetic abstraction. Sexual metaphor...' Michael checked the title page: 'Who has written this shit!?'

'Is it bollocks?' asked Russell.

'Of course it's bollocks!' replied Michael, returning the file to Mr. Waterstone, who promptly threw it over the sofa causing the papers to splay out all over the plush carpet.

'Keep looking, guys,' said Michael, returning to his filing cabinet.

Russell picked up a file marked: '*Restricted*'.

'What exactly are we looking for, Michael?'

'Your non-Sponsor ET.'

'Hmm, to be honest I assumed you would *know* whether anything existed or not.'

'It exists, Russell. But it's stealthy, and it's staying in the shadows. The Sponsors' database has nothing at all. Human data stored on computer is vague at best.'

'You know everything that's on computers, don't you?'

'Yes, so these old paper records are all that's left. Trust me, it will have been careless before the computer age. We will find something.'

'What are we going to do when we find it?'

Before Michael could reply there was a clattering at the office door as Ceres wheeled in a tea trolley.

'I found this!' she declared, with pride, 'I've got tea, coffee, a range of cold drinks and...' she examined the lower trays, 'biscuits!'

'I'll have a coffee and a couple of biscuits, thanks,' requested Russell.

'Coming up!'

'Nothing for me,' said Michael.

Ceres handed Russell his refreshments and at the same time gave Mr. Waterstone a can of Red Bull. The cat pulled it open with a single claw and took several swigs with relish.

'Found anything?' she asked.

'Nothing pertinent, ma'am,' replied Michael.

‘Can’t you just access the minds of the people who know the secret, or something?’ asked Russell.

‘They’re all dead. No one has dealt with this for perhaps a century or more. So it’s rather hard to pin down, it’s like a vague memory for me.’

‘Sounds like the secret’s lost, if you ask me,’ remarked Russell.

‘No, they moved the old archive here,’ stated Ceres, examining the walls with the flat of her hand. ‘The architects of this building added an alcove behind this wall. Hmm...’

‘Nothing?’

‘No. Unfortunately the present incumbent does not know of its existence. Knowledge was passed on by word-of-mouth but his predecessor died before relaying it.’

Michael came over to examine the wall: ‘No EM fields, no wiring of any description. It must be a physical mechanism. Scanning... There is a small catch down near the floor, imbedded in the skirting board, and another directly above it, near the ceiling. We need to press them both, probably simultaneously.’

Russell watched as Michael jumped onto the wall and sidled up to the ceiling.

‘Ready?’

‘Ready.’

Click. A section of wall lowered to reveal an alcove containing shelves of files. Ceres reached in and grabbed them all. ‘There’ll be some ripe stuff in these!’ she said, handing out the files to the others.

‘I’ll say,’ said Russell, ‘talk about musty!’

‘Yeah!’ agreed Michael, seemingly less than impressed by what he had been handed. ‘They should have archived these files in a sealed nitrogen atmosphere.’

Mr. Waterstone held up an ancient, battered file. It was marked: *Majestic*.

On seeing the classification, Ceres smiled broadly: ‘Well done, Ducky!’ She collected the file from the cat and glanced through it. ‘Yes, we have it! Now, hold onto all the files from the alcove, I think it’s time we departed. You can leave the other files, Mr. Tebb.’

The group collected up their files and made ready to depart.

‘Just a moment,’ said Ceres, ‘let’s take a group selfie. Michael, can you do the honours?’

Michael ushered everyone around him and then extended one of his paws. ‘Smile! ... Done.’

‘Good, once we are clear of the building, send it to Sir Neville Stonehatch’s phone.’

Russell and the others departed Stonehatch’s office and walked out onto a wide, carpeted balcony that overlooked a complex and busy arrangement of floors and offices.

‘This place is a maze. Which is the way out?’ asked Russell.

‘This way.’

As the gang departed the MI6 building at Vauxhall Cross and headed for the Bentley, which was parked haphazardly near the front entrance, the building’s alarms began to wail and various partitions started to drop.

‘No, Michael, I’ll take the front passenger seat,’ said Ceres.

‘As you wish, ma’am.’

The Bentley crossed the river and glided down Millbank towards Parliament Square, the early evening sun casting a rich golden hue over the Houses of Parliament as they loomed up, directly ahead. All the prominent buildings in sight were highlighted in a similar way.

'Where are we going?' asked Russell, glancing at Ceres, but she ignored him as she continued to study the 'majestic' file with obvious fascination.

At the next set of red lights Russell tried again: 'So where is this thing?'

'The Victorians referred to "this thing" as "the Malevolence".'

'Oh,' replied Russell, continuing to drive eastwards along the north shore of the Thames. Ceres eventually closed the file and studied Russell.

'Proceed to Drury Lane, Mr. Tebb,' she instructed, clicking on the car radio. Phyllis Nelson sang *Move Closer*, and everyone joined in.

Alan caught a tube at St James's Park, hoping for a few minutes of relaxation following the day's relentless strain. The police interview in particular had left him shattered, but the revelations of earlier still formed the nub of his anxiety. Right now, all he wanted to do was ride a tube with his eyes closed, and his thoughts shut down. Unfortunately his timing was off, and he found himself standing, grappling with a dense mass of evening commuters. There was also an atrocious armpit smell. Oh God! To Alan's horror, he realized that *he* was the source of the stink!

Nineteen unpleasant minutes later he alighted at Tower Hill and rode an escalator to fresh air.

His apartment was part of a recent build on the north bank of the Thames near the Tower of London. He entered and gratefully closed the front door behind him. He sighed and closed his eyes but then promptly reopened them again to study his surroundings, as though seeing them for the very first time: how remarkably sterile, he thought. No pictures on the wall, minimal furnishings, a pristine kitchen completely devoid of food, except for the leftovers of takeaways. No neighbours. No one above or below him, either. Most of the units in the building were owned by speculative Chinese property companies that bought this kind of stock all over London. They never bothered to live in them and often did not even rent them out, in case there was an opportunity to sell again at short notice.

This had been his life. No, *work* had been his life. This was where he slept his dreamless sleep. He took a long shower and changed into some fresh clothes.

His intercom buzzed.

'Agh!!!' he screamed. He could not take another session with the police, but... he'd have to answer it:

'What!?!?'

Hi, Alan, it's Helen, can I come in?

'Huh? How did you— oh, never mind... come on up.'

Helen Warner entered the flat and appeared to reach the same conclusions as Alan.

‘Ah, the bohemian lifestyle of the carefree hybrid! You must put me in touch with your interior designer.’

Alan nodded. ‘I’d offer you a drink, but I don’t have anything in. Err, what is it you want, Helen?’

‘Right now? To get out of this apartment. I also want to apologize for my rudeness earlier. What is it they always say: don’t shoot the messenger? I believe I was guilty of that.’

‘Hmm,’ said Alan, regarding Warner, ‘forget it. Have you had time to consider things, come up with any solutions, maybe?’

Warner shrugged: “‘Solutions’ is perhaps too strong a word for it but I have decided to go down fighting. I’ve come around to your view regarding “interventions” with the *you-know-what*...’ She cast another disapproving eye over Alan’s apartment: ‘Let’s get out of here!’

Alan agreed and followed Warner out of the apartment block. They both walked over to the quayside and took in the river scenes ahead: a small boat pattered about nearby; diesel fumes hung in the air. Warner idly regarded The Shard directly across the water.

‘Got anything over there?’ asked Alan.

‘Hmm? No. I considered buying one of the luxury apartments near the top, but they’re like your flat, just more lavish and with worse vertigo. Oh! By the way, talking of “interventions” did you enjoy mine earlier?’

‘...My *legal team*?’

‘Your legal team! It was a chance to road test our psynet. You noticed how quickly it forged a path through their bureaucracy? In seconds they were turfing you out the front door, haha!’

‘Good timing as well! Things were just starting to get– you weren’t behind the mirror, were you?’ asked Alan.

‘I tapped into the cameras. No audio, but it looked like you needed rescuing. Besides, only after you left the restaurant did it occur to me that your new tendency to blurt could land us all in hot water. We can’t have the British state getting its hands on the psynet! Can you imagine the carnage!?’

Alan shrugged in agreement.

‘However,’ continued Warner, ‘I have changed my view regarding how we deal with the state, all of them.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, before, I intended to reintroduce something similar to the Sponsor programme, leaving the state continually tangled up in legal red tape.’

‘Yeah, that still sounds good to me,’ remarked Alan.

‘Yes, but it’s too slow for our needs. If we are going to build expensive Sponsor technology and put it into space, we’ll need a strong state that itself can push aside bureaucracy.’

‘I see,’ said Alan.

‘The levers of power now reside with our Prime Minister, and he seems to know it.

'The fella's not as dumb as I thought. We need to nurture his power, and direct it where it is needed.'

'Hmm,' said Alan, noncommittally.

'I'm wondering whether he, and he alone, should be brought into the loop,' remarked Warner.

'I don't like the sound of that, Helen.'

'If I'm honest – neither do I all that much! But I think we have no choice.'

'So what's your immediate plan?' asked Alan.

Warner thought for a moment: 'My immediate plan? How about Soho?'

'Yes?'

'Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonehatch and Mrs. Collier are waiting.'

'Send them through.'

The PM stood and walked over to his drinks cabinet. He collected a large tumbler and began filling it with small lumps of ice until the glass was full of it. The security personnel entered his office.

'Ah, Sir Neville, Mrs. Collier. May I pour you a drink?'

'No thank you, sir,' replied Mrs. Collier, standing prim and upright.

'What about you, Sir Neville?'

'Nothing for me, either, Prime Minister.' The security chief looked to be showing the strain. His posture was stooped and he kept rubbing his eyes.

'Oh, very well, as you wish...' The PM dribbled a single malt all over the ice allowing it to fill the gaps. 'Come and sit over here, on the sofas. This will be my last security briefing today – barring absolute emergencies – I've not slept for...' The PM tried to calculate the hours but quickly gave up, '...for ages!'

He joined the others on the sofas, his drink making agreeably loud clinking sounds as he slurped from it. Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier regarded him with hatchet expressions.

'What have you got for me?' the PM asked.

Sir Neville sighed and pulled something from his ever-present manila folder. He handed it to the PM.

'What in God's name is this?'

'It's a selfie,' replied Mrs. Collier.

'Taken in my office at Vauxhall Cross, less than an hour ago,' added a clearly agitated Sir Neville.

The PM tried to make sense of what he was seeing...

'That's the principle subject of our investigation on the left, sir. And an as yet unidentified male on the right...' drawled Sir Neville, apparently in physical pain.

'And what is going on in the middle here, is that a cat?'

'It appears to be, sir. The other member of the ensemble has been identified as an extremely large tarantula spider... possibly a trapdoor, sir.'

The PM laughed and took a sip of freezing whiskey.

'I don't think you grasp the significance, Prime Minister,' stated Mrs. Collier, 'Sir Neville's office was ransacked, with top-secret files left scattered all over the floor and they appear to have gained access to a secret room that, regrettably, does not appear on any records or building floor plans...'

The PM was now grasping the significance: 'Did you know about this room, Sir Neville?'

'No, sir. I was aware of the rather arcane and risky practices that used to prevail in my department, including the passing on of secrets – the really hot ones – by word-of-mouth only. Regrettably Sir Hamish Godfrey Smiles never told me anything about this.'

The PM was horrified: 'Incompetent old duffer! What was in that room?'

'We just found empty shelves, Prime Minister.'

'Good God! How did this... "crew" know about it? And how the hell did they manage to break into your office, Sir Neville? This is not looking good at all!'

The PM shot his security chief a furious look as he drained his glass of fluid and stood up to pour more whiskey over the ice.

'Perhaps I will have one of those, sir,' said Sir Neville.

The PM rolled his eyes but said nothing as he fetched another tumbler. 'What were in the other files, the ones in your main office?'

'I had them transferred from archives earlier today. Those "X-files" you mentioned, sir. They have proved generally useless to our investigation, thus far.'

'Well, *they* seemed interested in them!' replied the PM, pointing at the picture. He handed Sir Neville his drink and glanced over at Mrs. Collier, who shook her head. He then sat down and silently regarded his two security officers. 'Anything on CCTV?'

Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier exchanged furtive glances.

'Well!?' demanded the PM.

'The internal camera network went down approximately one hour before the picture was sent to my phone but—'

'Whoa! They sent it to your phone!?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Jesus!' the PM took another sip of whiskey and stared sullenly out of his window for several seconds, before demanding: 'What was that "but" you were about to mention?'

'But the camera in my office remained active throughout. I have the video on this tablet, if you would like to view it now, sir.'

The PM remained silent, jaws clenched, as Sir Neville showed him the silent footage from his office:

To start with it just showed the office empty and undisturbed. Then the door opened and the tall woman terrorist strode in, followed by a gigantic spider, a fat cat and finally a man dressed in lycra. They proceeded to rifle through everything they could find, studying each file closely. There appeared to be a dispute at one point and a file went flying.

The PM continued to stare as the spider jumped onto the wall and the opening to the secret room lowered, allowing the woman to collect a sizable pile of ancient secret files. God only knew what secrets they held. The footage finally stopped when the group took their selfie and departed the office.

‘That’s a fucking big spider!’ the PM eventually managed.

‘And no one noticed it,’ remarked Mrs. Collier.

‘They’re taunting us,’ the PM added.

The room fell silent for a minute or more, with no one apparently eager to offer any further analysis or insight regarding this disturbing turn of events. Mrs. Collier finally spoke:

‘Prime Minister, I can also brief you on Alan Dosogne’s interview if–’

‘I must say,’ interrupted the Prime Minister, ‘I am amazed that you let him scuttle off on legal grounds, what legal grounds!?’

‘His legal team made–’

‘Nonsense!’ shouted the PM. He drained some more Scotch and glared at Mrs. Collier: ‘Proceed!’

‘Sir?’

‘With your briefing on Dosogne!’

Mrs. Collier summarized the interview, occasionally showing actual footage to highlight Dosogne’s nervous manner, his furtiveness, and his occasionally surprising responses to specific questions. His reactions to being shown the photo-fit were of great interest to the PM.

‘He knows her!’ he declared at one point.

‘Yes, sir, and note his obvious fear, or terror even, every time he is confronted by that image,’ observed Mrs. Collier.

The PM could understand that. Perhaps, like himself, Dosogne just found himself caught up in events, receiving a ‘glancing blow’, as it were, but was otherwise an innocent party in all this.

‘He’s a chump,’ declared the PM following the conclusion of Mrs. Collier’s briefing. ‘He probably witnessed something-or-other but I doubt he is a real player in all this.’

‘We are inclined to agree, sir, but there still remains the question mark over his illness and subsequent full recovery.’

‘Caught in the crossfire, as you suggested in the interview, Mrs. Collier? We would know by now if you hadn’t let him go!’

The PM’s security officers remained silent.

‘Alright,’ declared the Prime Minister, standing up, ‘We’ll leave it there for now. We will reconvene tomorrow morning, nine sharp, and as well as any updates I would appreciate it if either of you could come up with some sort of narrative to explain all of this.’

Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier both rolled their eyes in perfect unison.

‘Yes, I realize that is a tall order but if we can at least try to make some sense of this madness, then perhaps we can best figure out what to do about it! Do you have any questions?’

Sullen silence.

‘That will be all.’

Chapter Three

Wednesday

(The Malevolence)

The hangover smashed into him like a polluted ocean wave.

'I'm dying!' he wailed.

The pounding headache, the intense nausea – this was worse than his forced genetic conversion! That was probably an exaggeration but now Alan finally understood how his fellow workers at GFS sometimes felt when they stumbled into work complaining of feeling like “death warmed up”.

'Ahh, is my little pussycat feeling unwell?' A long slender arm fell languidly over his thin hairless chest. Alan opened his eyes, the hangover momentarily forgotten.

He was lying on a king-sized bed. Black satin sheets lay tangled up near his feet. He squinted and recognized his companion: a tall, deeply tanned escort girl, one that Warner had directed his way at some point during the night after he'd tried, rather clumsily, to proposition *her*. God, he'd been hammered! The hangover reappeared from stage-right.

'Scuze, thank you.' Alan gingerly removed the arm and attempted to sit up ... He was going to throw up! He quickly stood and raced out of the bedroom only to find himself in an open-plan lounge/kitchen area in which sat several sophisticated chattering-class types, all engaged in a murmuring conversation. One of the group was Warner, the others were vaguely recognizable from the previous night, though he could not remember any names.

Alan stood before the group, naked, still preoccupied with finding a bathroom. He barely had seconds... Warner shook her head and silently indicated a closed door opposite. He charged into the bathroom and promptly projectile vomited, mostly into the toilet bowl.

This eventually helped, and once the peristaltic waves had finally subsided Alan at last felt able to function. He gave himself a quick wash, and the bathroom a wipe down with toilet roll. He then wrapped a large white towel around his middle and returned to the main communal room.

The sophisticates regarded him with varying expressions of pity and disgust. Alan just gawped at them. He'd been having a fun time with this crowd only a few hours earlier but right now they felt like strangers. He had nothing whatsoever to say to any of them, including Warner.

'How are you feeling, Alan?' asked Warner, not apparently very amused.

'Rough,' growled Alan. He then began to cough violently and felt new waves of

nausea take hold.

One of Warner's group stood: 'I think it's time I split, Helen. Thanks for the hospitality and the...' he gave Alan the once-over, '...entertainment.'

The others, with the exception of Warner, laughed at this as they too made their excuses to leave. Warm farewells and much air-kissing followed, and in due course Alan found himself alone in the room with Warner.

'What do you want?' enquired Warner, 'black coffee or soluble paracetamol?'

'Yes,' agreed Alan, perching himself on a stool in the kitchen, 'I haven't embarrassed you have I?'

'Oh, good Lord no! Whatever gave you that impression!?' Warner was annoyed. To hell with her.

'Where's that paracetamol!?' Alan demanded. He really felt sick again.

Forty-five minutes later, Alan, now lying on one of Warner's sofas, decided he was well enough to get dressed.

'I should put some clothes on,' he declared.

'Only if you feel ready, Alan,' replied Warner, eyes fixed on the BBC's news channel.

Alan's escort joined them in the lounge. She kissed Alan on the lips and sat down next to him and began playing with his hair.

'Is she still on the clock?' asked Alan.

The woman removed her hand and shot Alan an enraged look.

'Excuse me!??' she screamed.

'Right, that's it! Get out!' Warner shrieked.

Alan thought Warner was talking to the woman but her steely eyes were fixed on him.

'Excuse me!??' Alan exclaimed, trying to channel some of the woman's outrage and direct it at Warner.

'You heard me, get out!'

Alan held his ground for a second or two but the fury directed at him forced a retreat. He returned to the bedroom and began to dress; he soon reappeared in the lounge.

'I didn't mean to cause any offence!' he offered, but both women ignored him.

As Alan headed for the front door, Warner finally piped up: 'Head for GFS, I'll contact you if-and-when I need you.' She did not look up from the TV.

'Yep,' said Alan. He departed Warner's luxury Mayfair apartment and staggered towards Oxford Street. It was another warm cloudless day in London.

'What is it!?'

'Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonehatch and Mrs. Collier are waiting.'

The PM checked the time: precisely nine am.

‘Good, send them in now.’

The Chief of the Security Services and his deputy entered the PM’s office.

‘Morning, morning, do sit down... So, what new horrors do you have for me today?’

Sir Neville Stonehatch began with a briefing from Porton Down:

‘The ash material collected from London has been chemically analyzed, sir. It is a type of felsic volcanic ash more commonly associated with violent volcanic eruptions occurring near tectonic plate boundaries.’

‘Really? Why is that material present here? Was this thing made out of silica? Was it a meteorite after all?’

‘We don’t know for sure that this ash is the remains of our USO, sir. It may be part of a weapon, or weapons, that was used to destroy it.’

The PM ruminated on this for a moment: ‘Is this just a hunch or a logical deduction?’

‘Analyses of the ash fields indicate decreasing concentrations the further from point-zero we get, as would be expected, but there is a second, much higher concentration centred elsewhere: Whitehall, to be precise, Prime Minister.’

The PM shook his head in disbelief.

‘There is also a variance between the two ash populations. The Whitehall material is recognizably felsic; but the bulk scattered over London also contains high concentrations of certain rare earths including yttrium, neodymium, cerium and erbium. We believe these elements constitute part of the leftovers of the USO, sir.’

‘Weight for weight those are worth more than gold!’ remarked the PM.

‘Indeed, sir, considerably more, and the concentrations in the ash are even higher than is typically found in the ores mined commercially.’

‘Wow, so we can do the same with the ash!?’

‘Yes, sir. In theory there is currently as much rare earth scattered across London as has been extracted from the world’s mines to date.’

The PM was amazed. The first piece of good news! ‘We need to step up the collection of ash and take steps for its quick processing.’

‘Already in hand, sir,’ stated Mrs. Collier, DEFRA, ‘The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be handling the red tape. They have been instructed to keep all of this classified.’

‘Good! Any idea how much all this could be worth?’

‘Estimates vary widely, as it is still far from clear how much can be extracted.’

‘Guesstimate?’

‘Anything from a few billion dollars to this being a new “North Sea Oil”, sir.’

The PM gaped at his security staff, mouth truly wide open.

‘A ray of light punching through the gloom, sir,’ said Sir Neville, without any hint of levity.

‘Yeah!’ The PM began to think how best to exploit this politically. It would require some thought, the dividends were enormous... his political opponents could be eviscerated with this! So much for the looming recession. That reminded him, he really should check up on all that stuff...

‘Sir, regarding the overall picture, we have attempted to develop that “narrative”

you asked for.'

'Hmm? Oh yes! Shoot!'

Mrs. Collier began to describe the series of events as MI6 understood them to be:

'On Monday afternoon an attack was launched against Extraterrestrial Biological Entities (EBEs), who, for reasons unknown, were concentrated at the FO annex. The EBEs then called in reinforcements from a large "mother ship" or USO...'

Mrs. Collier paused, apparently barely able to believe any of this herself, but she soldiered on:

'Between the arrival and subsequent destruction of the USO – during those critical few minutes when the gigantic ship hovered over London – several hundred humans were killed. We assume the mother, I mean, USO, was responsible for those deaths, motive unknown. Then it was taken out by means not understood but apparently involving a focused channelling of volcanic energy and mass.

'The perpetrators have been observed, but remain unidentified. Their status as friend-or-foe is also still to be determined, but their ransacking of Sir Neville's office tells us a few things, sir.'

'Go on.'

'The files they were interested in covered paranormal activity, UFOs etc. We think the gang may be gathering intel for a new assault against these aliens.'

'Or other groups of aliens, sir,' added Sir Neville.

'That it?' asked the PM.

'The best we can manage so far, sir.'

'I see. Plenty of loose ends, though: What about all the different DNA found at the annex? Why have deaths occurred worldwide? And why just a few hundred? And who are the individuals that fought back and then broke into your office, Sir Neville?'

'The investigation into the Vauxhall Cross incident is ongoing, sir. Fingerprints found there do match with some found at the annex. Mainly the male. But the female has been leaving marks as well. Other forensics are being analyzed at Lewisham.'

'Are these "normal" fingerprints?'

'They appear to be, sir: the man has mainly arches, the woman mainly ulna loops. Both are common.'

The PM listened to some further conjecture until it became clear that both Mrs. Collier and Sir Neville were now just throwing around unsubstantiated ideas. He held aloft a statesmanlike hand and silence returned to his office.

'Where do we go from here? What, in your opinion, is our priority in this investigation?'

There was a pause. Sir Neville shrugged, suggesting that beyond ongoing investigations there was nothing much else they could do, but Mrs. Collier was focusing hard on some inner thought, or idea...

'Mrs. Collier?' prompted the PM.

'The Gang of Four, Prime Minister, there—'

'Is that what we are calling them now? By the way, how many people in the secret service know about all this?'

‘That know *all* of it – just the three of us, Prime Minister. But there are teams working on aspects: the satellite footage, the recovery of ash, the Whitehall and Vauxhall Cross incidents, Dosogne etc.’

‘Hmm, that sounds like a lot of people and a lot of potential security issues.’

‘These people are reliable, sir,’ replied Sir Neville.

‘I hope so, just ensure that only *we* continue to know the full picture.’

‘Indeed, sir. That’s our aim, too, sir.’

‘Good. Now, Mrs. Collier, I’m sorry I interrupted you, what were you going to say about “*The Gang of Four*”?’

‘We have been assuming, because of their brazen antics, that they are... untouchable. And can’t be caught.’

The PM noticed that Sir Neville was nodding slowly, clearly this was his view as well.

‘Go on, Mrs. Collier,’ the PM urged.

‘It’s probably just a minor detail, Prime Minister, but their selfie can be time-checked from the camera in the office. It was not sent to Sir Neville’s phone until a full ten minutes later.’

‘Enough time for them to exit the building!’ exclaimed the PM. ‘Sir Neville, when you received the image on your phone, what did you do?’

‘I recognized my office instantly and used my phone to trigger the alarms and initiate an automatic lockdown.’

‘And then you conducted a thorough search of the building and found nothing!’

‘Yes, sir, although we assumed–’

‘You assumed the search would be fruitless as these birds had flown, teleported out of there, or something.’

‘Well, yes, something along–’

‘But they needed those ten minutes, enough time to just walk out of there! ... Okay, so we can assume they are travelling about London via conventional means ... Good deductions, Mrs Collier, but how does this help us?’

‘Well, there is also the question of the CCTV covering the building as a whole. They took it out, but why bother if no one notices them?’

‘Your point?’

‘Somehow, they can avoid being noticed but they can’t keep their images off closed circuit television. They shut down Vauxhall Cross’s network and there have been many glitches to the city-wide network this week, including Whitehall at precisely the critical time.’

‘I thought you put that down to an EM pulse from the exploding ship?’

‘It could well have been an EM pulse,’ remarked Mrs. Collier, ‘but cameras were going off-line before that. I believe we can use this to map their movements!’

The PM leaned back in his chair and regarded a rather self-satisfied Mrs. Collier. ‘I’d give you a promotion for this, but I guess Sir Neville would object!’

The PM and Mrs. Collier both laughed.

‘There is also the question of Dosogne,’ observed the unsmiling Sir Neville.

Mrs. Collier suddenly sobered up: ‘Dosogne needs to be pulled in again. And we take the gloves off this time.’

'I'd urge against that, sir,' said Sir Neville.

'Why?' asked the PM, 'Oh, let me guess, his *legal team*! I'm telling you, Dosogne's "legal team" is the biggest bogey man in all of this! Throw them in the Thames if you have to!'

'No, it's not that, sir.' Sir Neville began fiddling with his phone; he then placed it on the PM's desk so that everyone could observe its small screen: 'CCTV, currently from Oxford Street: one rather worse-for-wear Mr. Alan Dosogne.'

The PM and his two security officers watched as Dosogne staggered and lurched down Oxford Street, stopping frequently to prop himself up against lampposts, shop fronts, waste bins – anything that came to hand.

'What the hell's the matter with him?' asked the PM.

'He's drunk or hungover, sir. He's been out partying all night with some of London's elite. We've been tracking him since he left NSY.'

The PM shook his head: 'What a loser! But why does this mean we shouldn't pull him in?'

'Well, I feel he can be pulled in at any stage, if we so desire. But in the meantime, why not just follow him and see who he talks to. Who knows, even the Gang of Four may turn up.'

'Yes, I suppose, you're right,' remarked the PM, still viewing the live footage from Oxford Street: 'What's he doing now!'

Everyone studied the phone closely: Dosogne had slumped over a railing and was not moving. Mrs. Collier frowned: 'If he were my son I'd be very concerned!'

'Your sons never had one-too-many, Mrs. Collier?' asked the PM.

'It's not that. His profile and background suggest a very sober young man: sharp, intelligent and generally very well-liked. But since his reappearance yesterday... well, he's been like this!'

'A bit of a dork,' added the PM.

'Hmm. He did not emerge from Monday unscathed. Something's happened to him!'

'He's on the move again,' observed the PM.

The Prime Minister and his security staff continued to watch Dosogne until he finally tripped down the flight of stairs leading to Oxford Circus tube station.

Sir Grievous Mielczarek's revival of *Cats* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane was, by common consent, a triumph, with Mr. Waterstone in particular gushing with fulsome praise. He even insisted on dragging the others backstage afterwards to meet the cast.

Russell was happy to tag along. This was perhaps the third time he'd seen *Cats* over the years, but the first at the West End. The production values, he had to concede, were impeccable. Maybe if anything it was all a bit *over*-produced. But Mr. Waterstone was having none of it.

The gang finally departed Drury Lane some time after midnight and headed straight for the karaoke bars. Mr. Waterstone performed numbers from *Cats*, much to the hilarity of the mainly Chinese clientele, while Ceres reduced grown men to tears with her immaculate and soulful renditions of various pop classics. Michael, with the help of Russell, and a deliberately malfunctioning perception filter, banged out a disturbing version of The Prodigy's *Diesel Power*. Like Ceres, he had demonstrated the ability to touch his audience emotionally, but not in the same way.

After the karaoke came the clubs, and then it all got a bit hazy...

The loud banging at his bedroom door jolted Russell awake. Once again he found himself contributing to a Gordian knot of twenty intertwining limbs, unable to move or breath. He could not even cry out!

The banging returned, more insistent: '*Russell!?*'

The Gordian knot flew apart, with Russell forced down into his mattress before being sent skyward again by the rebound. He bounced back onto his bed.

'Christ! Why do we have to sleep like this!?' he demanded of the others.

'Russell!?!'

'Oh shit, that's Meg!' he shouted.

'I heard that! Russell, open the door!'

Russell unlocked the door and Meg burst in. She looked over at Ceres and then Mr. Waterstone; she even glanced at Michael, who was stuck to the ceiling. But it was Russell she was interested in.

'Russell! A word please – in private.' Meg dragged Russell from his bedroom and towards the front door of his flat.

'Russell, what the hell is going on!? I had to cancel two classes yesterday because of your no-show, and you're already keeping your ten o'clock waiting today! What the hell are you playing at and—' Meg added in a loud and hoarse whisper: '*—why are you still hanging around with this crowd!?*'

Ceres pushed by them, reaching for the front door. She beamed a large smile at Meg. 'There's a bakery down the high street, Mr. Waterstone has a hankering for croissants. Can I get either of you anything?'

'Not for me, thanks,' replied Russell.

'You shouldn't feed a cat croissants, it's bad for their digestion,' added Meg, eyeing Ceres with obvious disapproval.

'Who, him!?' snorted Ceres, with laughter, as she departed Russell's flat: 'he's a dustbin, he'll eat anything!'

'She's a bit eccentric,' said Russell, with a chuckle.

'That's hardly the point! You're missing classes because of them and you're running the business into the ground!' Meg's eyes began to moisten and Russell reached to comfort and reassure her but she pushed him away. 'Get your arse down there asap! And change your stinking clothes!'

Meg stomped down the stairs that led to the studio, slamming Russell's front door behind her.

'Staff problems?' enquired Michael, who had appeared from nowhere.

'Piss off!' Russell pushed past the spider and it followed him into the kitchen.

‘Just a black coffee again for me, thanks.’

Russell began to fill the kettle and glanced over at the cat who was sitting at the kitchen table expectantly: ‘Your croissants are on their way, Mr. Waterstone... you won’t need the knife and fork this time.’

Russell conducted his ‘ten o’clock’ in a distracted frame of mind. As well as the ‘issues’ facing humanity and the fact that Meg was on his case, there remained the disquieting prospect of dealing with an ET known as: “the Malevolence”. After the class he joined the others, who were watching television in his lounge.

‘What’s the itinerary for today, then?’ Russell asked, checking to see if the blackboard was anywhere in sight. He was relieved to see that it wasn’t. Every time that thing showed up his universe disintegrated.

‘We will be leaving London today, Mr. Tebb. I suggest you pack a suitcase,’ replied Ceres.

‘Now hang on! You heard Meg. I can’t just leave my business to hang like this. I have responsibilities, obligations, *duties!*’

‘Oh put a sock in it, Russell,’ said Michael, ‘you’ve got bigger fish to fry. Besides, you just need to cancel classes for today, tomorrow and probably Friday. If, after that, the world is still standing, you could resume classes by the weekend. Do you conduct classes at the weekend?’

‘Yes!’

‘There you go! *Russell Tebb Aerobics* will survive, people are always going to need fitness instructors! – Unless, of course, your business model is flawed. How’s your cash flow?’

‘Never mind my cash flow, what about Meg!’

‘Would you like me to talk to her, Mr. Tebb?’ enquired Ceres.

‘Err, no. I don’t–’

‘Yes, you can talk to me!’ Meg had been eavesdropping from somewhere, but she now strode directly into the lounge for a showdown with Ceres. She stood before her, arms folded.

‘You’ll have to close the shop for the remainder of this week,’ said Ceres, leaning around Meg to maintain her view of the TV.

‘What!? Why!?’

There was a groaning sound. Everyone turned to look at the cat.

‘Did you feed him those croissants? He’s probably in considerable pain right now!’ declared Meg.

‘Well, let’s hope he doesn’t blow, or we could lose California,’ remarked Michael. The cat farted. ‘Too late!’

Everyone, including Meg, erupted with laughter.

‘Happy to report: California still intact, ma’am,’ added Michael, once the laughter had subsided.

Meg shifted her position slightly to block Ceres’s view of the TV. ‘Why should we close the business on your say-so? Who the hell do you think you are!’ demanded Meg.

‘It’s just for a few days, Meg,’ cajoled Russell, ‘We’ll be alright. You can take the remainder of the week off!’

'No. I want to know why she's calling the shots.'

Ceres stopped trying to view the TV around Meg's blocking form and calmly regarded her. 'Mr. Tebb is assisting us with very important work.'

'Legal work?'

'Not *illegal*.'

'Fine!' shouted Meg. 'And what is "Mr. Tebb" being paid for this "very important work"?!'

Mr. Waterstone dropped down from his chair and deposited a small gold nugget at Meg's feet. She instinctively picked it up: 'Is this solid gold? Eeww! It's slimy! And it stinks!'

Meg continued to eye the nugget in her hand: 'It looks and smells like a turd. Where did it come from?'

'From deep inside the bowels of the Earth,' replied Russell, taking the nugget off Meg, who did not want to give it up. He then took it through to the kitchen and washed the warm steaming lump under a tap. Once clean he handed it back to Meg. 'There must be about an ounce there; and it's definitely real gold. You can take it to one of London's gold merchants to exchange for cash.'

Meg gauged the weight of the gold nugget and seemed happier now. She turned to the cat: 'Have you got any more of these?'

'Just wait till yesterday's Full English works its way through the pipes,' remarked Michael.

The distraction of the gold nugget was enough to finally get Meg to calm down and get off everyone's back. Russell packed his suitcase and instructed Meg to contact all the clients who had booked sessions for this week. He finally departed the Bermondsey studio close to noon, and joined the others at the Bentley.

'Okay, West Country is it?' asked Russell, starting up the car's motor.

'Yes,' replied Ceres, 'but first, it's time we dealt with the Malevolence. Are you happy to take the lead with this one, Mr. Tebb?'

The Bentley soon found itself in gridlock at Southwark and Ceres began to read out loud from her secret file:

'The Malevolence roughly extends from Belgravia in the west to Blackfriars in the east, although it does have extensions beyond this, mainly continuing along that east/west axis. It seems to favour proximity to the Thames, and has very little interest in south London.'

She turned over several pages of the secret "Majestic" report and continued Russell's briefing:

'Its nearest Earth analogues are the Eukaryote—'

'The what!?' asked Russell, as he slowly edged the traffic-snagged Bentley forwards.

'Fungus, Mr. Tebb. The majority of its physical form is made up of hypha, a branching filament network used to transport water and nutrients; it resides exclusively underground. The Victorians discovered this when they were building their underground network.'

'Did they know it was ET?' asked Russell.

'They did when it started possessing people.'

‘Shit!’

‘It’s the fruiting bodies that exhibit this capability. The material underground is largely harmless, but the Victorians did not realize this, and they went to war against it. For nearly ten years it was the worst kept secret in London, everyone knew about it, or thought they did. Only when the state stepped up its attacks to an industrial scale did the Malevolence retreat. It vanished from the scene and the Victorians believed it to be destroyed. They then concentrated on spinning the whole tale into something more prosaic. Through an onslaught of misinformation and bullying of the international press it soon became but a rumour, then a myth, then after a generation or two – everyone forgot about it.’

‘They managed to quash the whole story!?’

‘Yes, in the era before the internet, when even the telegraph was in its infancy, the bureaucracy of the state could easily kill it – the story, that is. Then, thanks to Sir Hamish Smiles, the British secret service even managed to forget about it.’

The Bentley negotiated its way into lighter traffic but subsequently ground to a halt again near Waterloo station. Russell listened with growing unease as Ceres explained how the fungus took control of its attackers.

‘It sounds as though the Victorians got the upper hand in the end. Are you convinced they didn’t wipe it out altogether?’ he suggested.

‘Yes. They destroyed biomass but the creature itself could re-spawn from even microscopic fragments. Destroying this thing outright would be like trying to kill giant knotweed: a virtual impossibility for Victorian technology. The Malevolence *chose* to retreat, not because of the humans, but because all this human activity risked alerting the Sponsors.’

‘Ah, you’d think the Sponsors would have noticed all this activity anyway!’

‘Indeed, Mr. Tebb, which leads us to conclude that this entity is some form of naturally evolved Sponsor parasite. Something very adept at concealing itself from them. The *boo bah* generated by its discovery was probably the last thing it wanted, so when things all became a bit too hot, it sloped off into the shadows. Then when the fuss finally died down, it restored its physical form.’

The Bentley crossed over Westminster Bridge, heading north.

‘Are you sure it is still around now?’

‘Oh yes, after first reading this report yesterday I instructed the local bacterial community to investigate and confirm its extent. They reported back this morning: Their mapping analysis closely matches the Victorians’ findings. Although it now keeps clear of the Underground system.’

‘Bacterial community!?’

‘Yes!’ affirmed Ceres, with some force.

‘Valued members of our team, Russell,’ added Michael, rather sternly.

‘I’m sure they’re all lovely fellas,’ replied Russell. ‘...So what’s the plan? Are we going to send in Mr. Waterstone to give this thing a taste of tube gun?’

‘No, that would be overkill. Besides, the Malevolence, unlike the Sponsors, does not mine the Earth for rare heavy elements, so Mr. Waterstone has no direct gripe this time. And it is not growing or displacing any pre-existing ecosystems, so I’m not that bothered either. But it is interested in the human system, very interested.’

‘So this is why you want me to “take the lead”?’

That’s correct, Mr. Tebb. Find out what it’s doing here. Discover the full extent of its capabilities. Then decide what action you want us to take. You may decide that *no* action should be taken. But it is your call.’

‘No problem,’ replied Russell, sarcastically. ‘So I’m just going to saunter up to...’

‘One of its fruiting bodies.’

‘Yes, one of its fruity bodies—’

‘Fruiting bodies!’ interjected Michael.

‘Whatever. And then say, “hi, I represent Earth, do you mind filling out one of these immigration forms!?”’

‘Something like that. We’ll play it by ear.’

Russell shrugged as he drove the Bentley along Birdcage Walk. ‘That’s Saint James’s Park on the right,’ he remarked, bringing the car to a gradual halt.

The gang jumped out and assembled around the boot. Once Michael had retrieved various bits of tech, they were ready.

‘Start looking for exotic flora,’ said Ceres, ‘when Mr. Tebb starts acting strange – we’ll know we are close.’

Alan stared blankly at his computer screen. The market report was finished and could now be sent to his full roster of clients. But did he want to send them *this*? The pampered GFS clients paid for, and expected, real insight, even prescience – information they could use to keep one step ahead of the herd; information that would enrich them. Today they were going to get a cut-and-paste job lifted from various free online sources and financial magazines. It was the best he could do. God he hated this job! He had *real* work to do! Where the hell was Warner!? No emails, texts or calls – Was she still fuming over Alan’s “performance” this morning? Get over it Warner!

Alan sent his report and leaned back in his chair. He still felt somewhat liverish but at least this was the home straight now. Or so he hoped; there had been several false-dawns this morning. Hangovers! They always looked like such fun.

‘Never again!’ he said to himself, rubbing some crust from his eyes. He departed his office and decided to check up on Tilly; maybe she’d like to join him for lunch. Assuming he could handle lunch himself.

Before he reached the admin section he decided to drop in on Jim Fairclough who had finally moved into Bruce’s office and was busy rearranging the office furniture when Alan knocked on his door.

‘Alan!’ declared Fairclough enthusiastically, ‘come in! come in!’

This guy was so different from the taciturn and distant Bruce, but Alan still didn’t like him.

‘I’m glad you’ve popped in. I was just about to grab lunch. Fancy joining me!?’

‘Sounds great! Thanks!’

Fairclough and Alan departed GFS and strode out into the sunlit park at the heart of Finsbury Circus.

‘Ever thought of taking up bowls, Alan?’ asked Fairclough, indicating the bowling green now recently restored to the centre.

‘I’ve never given it any thought’, replied Alan, truthfully, ‘this place has been a Crossrail building site for as long as I’ve been here.’

‘Ah yes, glad I missed all that! It’ll soon be back to its former glory. Though it is lacking something, mature foliage, perhaps.’

‘Whiffs a bit,’ noted Alan, screwing up his face.

‘Yeah, there must be a sewer outlet around here. I think this heat is fermenting something down there. Let’s get out of here, I know a great sandwich and sushi bar.’

‘Chances are it’s the one I usually go to. Where did you work before, Jim?’

‘Just over there: Tower 42 they call it now, but it’s still the NatWest Tower to me.’

It turned out that it was the same sushi bar. And quite probable that both Alan and Fairclough had frequented it in the past at the same time. Fairclough explained how he’d run a similar outfit to GFS but from within a merchant bank. He’d been laid off six months earlier and was notified of the GFS vacancy via a recruitment agency.

‘That was remarkably fast, though, Jim. When did they interview you!’

‘There was no interview. I was just informed by the agency on Monday evening. They needed a manager to run GFS and if I could start on Tuesday morning they’d take me! ... So I said: “yes, thank you, thank you very much!”’

Alan listened as Jim then unburdened himself of all the typical stresses associated with starting a new job. It wasn’t particularly interesting, but Alan was becoming curious about the actual recruitment itself. He knew so little about GFS, he realized. The police had pointed out, to his great surprise, that GFS was not a subsidiary of anything; so the ‘division supervisor’, and Mr. Harman for that matter, didn’t work for a real corporate entity. Maybe they were just “thawed out” when needed. It explained why the supervisor could not be identified.

Alan had never paid much attention to the internal structure of his company but he had always assumed that above him was Bruce and above Bruce were the Sponsors. But the Sponsors had merely *used* GFS; they never formally *owned* it. So who did?

Jim started talking about purely financial matters and Alan decided to change the subject:

‘Jim, this is going to sound strange, but after I gave my police statement yesterday, they pulled me in for further questioning.’

‘I’m sure it’s just routine, Alan. The deaths occurred all over London. Ghastly business!’

‘No, it’s not that, it concerns the division supervisor, one of the deceased, along with Bruce Claxton.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, are you under the impression that we – GFS – are part of a division, or are a subsidiary of another company?’

‘I’m still trying to get my feet under the table. To be honest I am more interested in the work you do, Alan. You’ve built up quite a client list! I wanted to talk to you about—’

‘Sorry to cut you off, Jim, but the police had serious questions concerning Global Finance Sponsorship’s ownership and structure.’

Jim looked perplexed: ‘How long have you worked for GFS, Alan?’

‘Yep, long enough to know these things, but, I don’t. I just kept my head down. My only superior was Bruce Claxton.’

‘And this division supervisor...’

‘Yes, – a man who advised Bruce but who has eluded identification. He has no employment record, nothing! You can see there is an issue here, can’t you?’

In his eagerness to avoid any money-talk Alan had possibly just opened a can of worms with all this. But the questions existed anyway, and the police wanted the answers. If he had access to the psynet he could clear this up in no time, but for all he knew that had gone now.

‘Hmm,’ said Fairclough, finishing off his lunch, ‘I think we should clarify all this when we get back, don’t you? I’m sure admin can put us straight.’

They won’t know who the division supervisor was, thought Alan, but this could be interesting, nonetheless.

‘Yes, Jim. What harm could it do to find out, eh!?’

Alan and Fairclough returned to GFS after lunch and headed straight to the administration section to seek answers. Alan was happy to let his boss take the lead while he flirted with Tilly. Fairclough quickly came up with the answer:

‘Sponsor Holdings,’ he declared, reading from a file.

‘Who owns that?’ asked Alan.

No one knew offhand but a quick check online gave the answer. It shocked Jim Fairclough almost as much as it did Alan.

‘Helen Warner!’

St James’s Park was blanketed from end to end by reclining office workers, tourists and tramps – all eagerly soaking up the unbroken sunshine. Only the tourists looked comfortable and happy. The office workers were sweaty and overdressed, whilst the tramps were beginning to resemble overcooked beef.

Russell reconvened with the others at the lake bridge.

‘Anything?’ he asked.

‘No,’ replied Ceres, ‘I wasn’t expecting much from a cursory inspection. This thing prioritizes stealth and will surely be well hidden, possibly in plain sight thanks to a crude perception filter.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought you would be susceptible to a perception filter,’ remarked Russell, as he observed the sunbathers.

‘Anyone can be fooled by sleight-of-hand. The trick is to recognize that it is present and then... second-guess it, so to speak.’

‘Okay,’ asked Russell, ‘so how do we “second-guess” it?’

‘By investigating what we feel most inclined to dismiss,’ replied Ceres. She cast an eye over the sunbathers and the park in general. ‘Who checked the islands?’ she asked.

‘I did, ma’am,’ declared Michael, ‘plenty of waterfowl; no fruiting bodies. No suspicious EM signatures of any kind that I was aware of.’

‘Maybe we are making the mistake of presuming this thing is static,’ suggested Ceres.

‘You think it could be one of the ducks!?’ asked Russell.

Ceres glanced at Russell and shook her head: ‘let’s take another sweep through the park, this time – stay together. Mr. Tebb, take the lead.’

‘As you wish,’ said Russell, eyeing up a group of young women sunbathers, ‘maybe we should investigate over there—’

‘No, take *this* lead,’ Ceres thrust a leather strap into Russell’s hand.

‘Attach this to Mr. Waterstone’s collar. And try to ensure that he doesn’t attack the birds.’

‘How the hell am I supposed to do that?’ asked Russell.

‘There’s a clasp at the front of his collar, just hook it on,’ advised Michael.

‘I meant: how am I supposed to stop him going after the birds!?’

No advice was proffered by anyone so Russell reluctantly dropped down to his haunches next to the cat. From a distance of only a few inches he gazed into Mr. Waterstone’s large black eyes. The cat did not look happy.

‘Now, you’re not going to give me any trouble are you, fella?’ whispered Russell, as he attached the lead. Mr. Waterstone remained silent, but he still looked cross. Russell instinctively stroked the cat over the top of its head and back, realizing that this was actually the first time he’d touched it. Mr. Waterstone was a bulbous barrel of iron-hard muscle; if he chose to give Russell trouble then trouble was what Russell was going to get.

‘Okay, we’re done. How about checking over there?’ he suggested, pointing to some distant corner of the park.

‘No,’ replied Ceres, ‘I think we should check out the ducks.’

To Russell’s great relief Mr. Waterstone generally behaved himself, even walking to heel most of the time. The birds, and the pelicans in particular, were a great fascination to the cat, but apart from the odd tug on the lead, Russell was given no real trouble.

After rechecking all corners of the park, the group returned once again to the bridge.

‘You are certain a fruity body is located here?’ asked Russell, now perspiring heavily under the relentless sun.

‘The bacterial report reveals a sharp concentration of hypha at this location. So, yes, I am certain, Mr. Tebb.’

‘*The bacterial report!*’ Russell snorted with contempt. ‘All this on the say-so of a bunch of germs? I mean – *seriously!*?’

For the first time since obliterating the Sponsors, Ceres appeared visibly angry. She rounded on Russell: ‘The misplaced conceit of multicellular life forms! *Yes, seriously!*’

Russell was cowed into silence.

‘Over there,’ said Ceres, in due course. The group advanced on some hobos quietly drinking under the shade of a tree.

‘Good afternoon, madam!’ said one, with an unrecognizable accent.

‘Good afternoon, sir,’ replied Ceres, with a warm smile.

The man smiled back: ‘Would you like a lager?’

‘Thanks!’ replied Ceres, collecting a cold can that one of the men had removed from a cooler. She took a long swig and beamed appreciatively at the tramps. ‘Do you gentlemen visit this park frequently?’ she asked, offering the can to Russell, who refused.

‘We’re the Saint James Homeboys! This is our turf!’

Ceres inspected the park: ‘It’s lovely!’

‘Thank you! We like it, don’t we, amigos?’ Everyone agreed that they liked it.

‘Not so nice in the winter, I bet,’ replied Russell.

The smiles on the tramps’ faces subsided slowly as they tried to focus on Russell: ‘Is he your fella? You could do better,’ said one.

Mr. Waterstone began to snigger.

‘A cat!’ observed one of the tramps, ‘he’s a chunky chap, isn’t he?’

Michael stepped forwards: ‘have any of you noticed anomalous activity here? Electrical or physical inconsistencies that you deem erroneous to this particular environment?’

The tramps gazed blankly at Michael.

‘What the fuck is *that!!!??*’ screeched one of them.

‘Hmm, interesting, ma’am. Long-term alcohol abuse appears to have allowed this individual to slide past the perception filter!’ Michael advanced on the tramp who screamed at the top of his voice causing others in the park to turn and look. When they spotted the tramps they quickly lost interest.

The man kept on screaming until Ceres slapped him hard across the face.

‘Marcus is inclined towards hysterics, madam. Please forgive him,’ said the first tramp. Marcus silently rubbed his cheek and kept a fearful eye on Michael.

‘Marcus,’ said Ceres, in a soft reassuring voice, ‘don’t worry about him, he’s not a real spider, he’s just a machine gestalt—’

‘*Just!?*’ exclaimed Michael.

Mr. Waterstone began sniggering again.

‘Marcus,’ Ceres tried again: ‘what’s your least favourite part of this park?’

Marcus looked nonplussed, ‘stupid question!’ he said, before returning his attention to Michael: ‘Right here, right now!’ he cried.

Ceres began to look exasperated. She flicked a quick gesture at Michael who promptly vanished into some nearby undergrowth. She returned her attention to Marcus:

‘Forget about the spider—’ she began.

‘You said it wasn’t a spider, you lying witch!’ screamed Marcus, and he received another hard slap for his troubles. He began to weep.

‘Alright, Ceres, tone it down!’ demanded Russell, half expecting to get slapped himself. But Ceres backed off.

‘You talk to him, Mr.—’

‘Dog-Shit Alley!’ shouted Marcus suddenly. The other tramps burst into cackles that soon descended into coughing and also some retching.

‘Is that a place, or your state of mind?’ demanded Ceres, moving in on Marcus.

‘Over there! Over there!’ Marcus pointed across the park, over the lake, towards

Horse Guards Road, near where it met Birdcage Walk and the parked Bentley. The area contained several mature trees and was relatively shaded and deserted compared to the rest of the park.

‘Thank you!’ replied Ceres, as she strode purposefully towards that area of St. James’s Park.

Russell offered the tramps some cash which they readily accepted, except for Marcus, who grabbed hold of Russell’s arm:

‘Be careful of that one. She’s not your friend!’

‘Tell me about it,’ said Russell.

Russell, Michael and Mr. Waterstone – now off the lead – caught up with Ceres as she approached “Dog-Shit Alley”.

‘Agh!! This place is rank!’ exclaimed Michael, ‘the council really ought to do something about this. Aren’t there laws against dog fouling!?’

Everyone began to take greater care of where they placed their feet. All attention was focused on the turf.

‘We didn’t linger here on the previous occasion, did we?’ remarked Russell, gingerly pacing about, any thoughts of the Malevolence forgotten.

‘Gee, I wonder why!’ muttered Michael. Perhaps because of his extra legs and the fact that he didn’t wear shoes, Michael felt more sensitive to this issue than the others.

‘Where is the dog muck?’ asked Ceres.

‘Probably trodden into the grass!’ replied Michael, clearly still not happy.

‘For someone who relies on a perception filter you are remarkably blind to the filters of others, aren’t you, Michael!?’ remarked Ceres. She turned to Russell: ‘The limitations of the machine mind,’ she whispered.

‘Unlike hearing!’ replied Michael, indignantly, as he continued to study the ground intently. Then he suddenly stopped. ‘Oops!’

Trodden in something?’ enquired Russell.

‘No,’ replied the spider, ‘I’ve just twigged what ma’am was on about. It’s in the trees, isn’t it?’

The group turned their attention to the overhead canopy of mainly beech and sycamore. Nothing looked out of place, but in late summer the foliage was sufficiently dense that almost anything could remain obscured.

‘This thing really does hide well!’ remarked Russell, ‘assuming it’s actually here and this isn’t just a dog dumping ground.’

‘Ma’am, the smell is genuine, and caused by particulates in the air – so I should be able to locate the source... Yes, over there, I believe.’

Michael led the others north-eastwards towards Horse Guards Road and close to where one arm of the lake extended. The foul stench was no more intense, as far as Russell could tell, but the desire to leave increased.

‘There it is!’ whispered Ceres.

‘Where?’ asked Russell.

‘I see it, ma’am,’ added Michael.

Russell followed Ceres’s gaze towards the top of a mid-sized poplar tree. On the main trunk, approximately thirty feet up, sat an odd looking outgrowth. Vaguely

resembling a partially closed tulip flower, but about five times the size and dark, featureless grey, the thing seemed to absorb light; there were none of the highlights or shadows that should have been observable in this sharp sunlight.

‘I don’t like the look of that!’ said Russell. ‘Does it know we are here?’

‘I don’t think it does,’ replied Ceres. ‘Look, it’s directional, like a satellite dish. It’s focused elsewhere. Very specifically – *somenwhere!*’

‘Where?’ whispered Russell.

‘Beyond the park to that building there!’

‘And where is that?’

‘That’s Downing Street, Mr. Tebb. Our Malevolence is pointing directly at Number 10.’

‘Yes!’

‘Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonehatch and Mrs. Collier are waiting.’

‘Send them in!’

‘Sir, you are also due for a working luncheon with the chancellor at Number Eleven.’

‘Cancel it.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister. There is also—’

‘That will be all.’

The PM eyed his security personnel as they briskly entered his office.

‘I’ve had to cancel a meeting with the chancellor because of this, so I hope it’s worth it!’

‘Yes, Prime Minister,’ replied both Mrs. Collier and Sir Neville in unison. ‘It is,’ added Mrs. Collier on her own.

‘Shoot.’

Mrs. Collier opened a laptop and placed it on the PM’s desk.

‘One of our boffins has put together this, sir. It shows the status of every surveillance camera in the capital. They are represented by these camera icons. Green for on-line, red for off-line. You see?’

‘Yes.’

‘We can type in a date and time and then fast-forward to observe the changes that occur.’

The PM viewed a graphic showing the locations, status and serial numbers of every camera in London. Most were green, but some turned briefly red.

‘Most of the suspicious behaviour is concentrated over central London, so if we zoom in...,’ said Mrs. Collier, leaning over to press some keys, ‘...and remove all the cameras that remain functional throughout this time sequence... there!’

The PM studied the sequence: On Monday afternoon a series of ‘breakdowns’ swept along the map from just south of the river, through to Victoria Embankment on the north bank, and then on to Whitehall. At a time corresponding precisely with the destruction of the USO everything went down, but minutes later all the cameras were

back again and stayed that way until the following day. Tuesday's sequence showed a new set of breakdowns that snaked all over central London taking in Vauxhall Cross along the way.

'Where's that!?' asked the PM, pointing at the map.

'Bermondsey, sir, part of the borough of Southwark,' replied Sir Neville.

'It always starts there!' remarked the PM. 'Could this be their base of operations?'

'Could be, sir. We've sent some agents over there to quietly look around, but they're reporting nothing erroneous.'

'Obviously not if they can hide a dog-sized tarantula in plain sight!'

'No, sir. We will be commencing door-to-door enquiries shortly to ascertain if anyone recognizes the male or the female from the Vauxhall Cross photo.'

The PM nodded and the room fell silent for a moment... 'Have you got the camera data for today?' he eventually enquired.

'It's not a real-time feed, sir, not yet, anyway. This is still just a rough beta program,' replied Mrs. Collier.

'Check to see if today's data can be added yet,' said Sir Neville to Mrs. Collier.

'Yes, sir, just a minute...'

The Prime Minister and Sir Neville waited while Mrs. Collier made a phone call. She then clicked her phone shut and studied the laptop.

'The data is ready and is being uploaded now, sir. It'll just take a moment...'

The Prime Minister and his security personnel studied the new camera data:

'Starts at Bermondsey again!' remarked the PM.

'And it ends at Saint James's Park,' added Sir Neville, preparing to make a phone call:

'Give me the current status of surveillance cameras ds3-k509 through ds3-k543.'

He nodded at his phone and terminated the call:

'The cameras covering Saint James's Park are currently down, Prime Minister.'

It took a few seconds for the PM to realize the significance: 'This is a bit close for comfort! It's just beyond the end of Downing Street! Do you think they are planning an attack here!'

'Downing Street's cameras are functioning normally, sir,' said Sir Neville, 'it's just St James's Park that's down, but those cameras have been down for some time now,' he shook his head vigorously: 'I really don't like this, sir. We should send a squad over there. Now!'

'Do it!!'

'No, not that side!' Ceres ushered the group around to the "safe" side of the tree. 'You don't want to be standing anywhere near its line-of-sight, just in case.'

'You think it could possess me?' asked Russell, somewhat breathlessly.

'Who knows?' replied Ceres, examining the base of the trunk of the poplar. 'Take a look at this!'

The others stepped forwards and observed the fine hyphal filaments as they snaked up the tree, like a creeper, to join with the “tulip” up above.

‘Don’t touch those, whatever you do,’ ordered Ceres, ‘the Victorians reported that hypha directly linked to fruiting bodies packed a sizable electric charge, but I’m more concerned that we’ll alert this thing if we short out any of them. Thoughts, Michael?’

‘Agreed, ma’am. I can bypass the electrocytes with inert material to grant you access to its tissue.’

Ceres nodded.

‘You are going to hack it!’ said Russell.

‘Yeah, we could communicate with it via the fruiting body, but that would probably induce a panicked reaction, or we can get into its innards and just take control.’

‘A channel to its chromosomal tissue has been established, ma’am. Before you interface may I suggest I take a closer look at that fruiting body, it may be booby trapped,’ replied Michael.

‘Go on then, but avoid being noticed.’

‘Yes, ma’am. Excuse me a moment.’

Michael lumbered up the tree, careful to avoid contact with the hyphal filaments. He stopped and extended a paw to within a few inches of the tulip before retreating back down again.

‘Yes, it is booby trapped. The fruiting body is composed exclusively of spore clusters. When it is touched it will explode causing the spores to adhere to any attacker. Probably not deadly, as that would attract further scrutiny, but liable to ruin anyone’s day. I suggest Russell stands back.’

‘Not a problem,’ said Russell, standing back, ‘is Chelsea far enough?’ he asked.

‘Just move away from the tree, Mr. Tebb,’ advised Ceres, as she prepared to interface with the creature’s genetic tissue. Mr. Waterstone and Michael decided to stand back with Russell.

Whatever it was that Ceres was doing did not take long. After just a few seconds she joined the others.

‘Well?’ asked Russell.

‘Well *what?*’ replied Ceres.

‘Well., are we ready to commence “negotiations”?’

‘In a manner of speaking. But you can stand down, Mr. Tebb, your negotiating skills will not be required after all.’ Ceres placed the “Majestic” report at the base of the poplar tree and turned to Michael: ‘Find the nearest surveillance camera presented with a clear view of both the fruiting body and that report. Zoom in on the fruiting body, but do not reactivate the camera just yet.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Hack the laptop currently being viewed by the Prime Minister and send it the feed from the camera when I say so.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘We should all get back to the Bentley now. This place is going to get hot very shortly,’ advised Ceres.

The group returned to the nearby car and stopped to view the fruiting body, that, even

from this relatively close distance, was almost impossible to see.

‘Keep your eyes on it. Okay, Michael, knock out all of London’s cameras but reactivate the one you have trained on *that!*’

‘Yes, ma’am... done.’

‘Send the feed to the laptop... *now!*’

The group watched the fruiting body intensely. After about ten seconds it exploded with a just-audible bang.

‘Ha! That will have spooked it!’ exclaimed Ceres. ‘And finally: lower the camera to view the report.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Good. Mr. Tebb, drive us out of here, please.’

The Prime Minister, Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier were tensely viewing the live footage on the laptop; the plainclothes special-forces squad sprinting along The Mall had just reached the corner of the park and were now fanning out.

‘They are keeping their weapons concealed, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

The camera feed from the commander abruptly switched to a fixed image of branches and part of a narrow tree trunk; a bizarre colourless object extruded from it.

‘Agh, damn it! We’ve lost the feed! Contact the commander!’ shouted Sir Neville to Mrs. Collier.

‘What is that?’ asked the PM, but before anyone could answer, the object promptly vanished. The view then descended down the tree towards what looked like one of Sir Neville’s manila folders, propped up against the trunk. The view closed in to reveal the word *Majestic* on the front cover.

‘I recognize that from the Vauxhall Cross office footage. That’s one of the files the woman stole from the secret room!’ said Sir Neville.

‘Are you sure?’ asked the PM.

‘Certain. “Majestic” is an obsolete secret classification, the highest classification.’

The image remained fixed on the report.

‘Where is that? Is that in St James’s?’ asked the PM.

‘There is a serial number in the bottom left corner,’ remarked Mrs. Collier, ‘ds3-k514’.

‘Yes, that’s one of the St James’s cameras,’ replied Sir Neville, as he grabbed his phone: ‘Check again the status of the St James’s Park cameras... Good God! ... Where is ds3-k514’s exact position? ... Copied!’ Sir Neville terminated his call: ‘All of London’s cameras are now down, save for that one! ... Is the commander standing by?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Mrs. Collier.

Sir Neville ordered the squad commander to collect the file and return it to 10 Downing Street immediately.

‘I’ve got the commander’s feed,’ stated Mrs. Collier.

Images from the commander's discreet spectacle-mounted camera fed through to the laptop in apparent real-time and the group watched as he quickly found and collected the file; they continued to watch as he raced back to Downing Street.

'I'd better meet him,' said Sir Neville, standing.

'Yes,' agreed the PM, 'the less time he has to take a sneaky peek the better. We'll keep a close eye on his camera feed.'

After about ten minutes Sir Neville returned to the Prime Minister's office with the *Majestic* file grasped firmly in his hand.

'Good work, Sir Neville,' said the PM, smiling. 'There have been no indications from the squad of any incongruities at St. James's Park.'

'No, sir,' said Sir Neville, breathing hard, 'I doubt they will notice anything, but I've instructed the commander to examine the park thoroughly. He'll be back at the park any moment; then we may notice something via his camera.'

'Indeed!' replied the PM... 'In the meantime, what's in it?' he added, nodding at the file:

'No-can-do, sir. The file has been freshly sealed with wax and marked: "*Prime Minister's Eyes Only*".' Sir Neville handed over the secret file to a slightly startled Prime Minister. The PM examined the outside of the file: It was musty, ancient.

'Thanks, ... wait a minute! What's this?'

The laptop showed that the commander was moving in on some kind of disturbance. One of his men appeared to be jostling with a group of winos.

'What's going on there!?' barked Sir Neville to his squad commander.

'A homeless guy is giving one of our men some static. Garbled nonsense about a gigantic spider running around the park. I'll move on, let the lieutenant handle that one.'

'Negative, commander!' ordered Sir Neville, 'pull that man in – but softly, softly.'

'Sir?'

'That's an order!'

Sir Neville turned to Mrs. Collier: 'Find out that man's story!'

The Bentley ground its way through west London, held up by bumper-to-bumper traffic and a seemingly endless chain of red traffic lights. It was not until reaching the M4 that Russell finally found an opportunity to put his foot down. The car effortlessly accelerated. Some punk in a BMW fancied giving Russell a race but his car inexplicably developed engine trouble and was forced to pull over onto the hard shoulder.

'Tosser!' shouted Russell.

'Reactivate the cameras, Michael,' instructed Ceres, 'and, Mr. Tebb, stick to the approximate speed limit, if you would.'

Russell slowed down to ninety mph.

'So what happened back at the park?' he eventually asked, 'I got a bit confused towards the end there.'

'Imagine you are a peeping tom, Mr. Tebb—' Ceres began.

'Sounds plausible,' interrupted Michael.

'—and you've been spying on someone who is viewing a computer screen. Then live footage of you viewing them appears on that screen. How would you feel?'

'Busted!' replied Russell, with a giggle.

'Exactly!' replied Ceres, 'that's how our *Malevolence* is feeling right now – busted, and worried. It knows the Prime Minister and his people observed it, and it is wondering what the consequences of that will be. That's why it exploded the fruiting body. If the Victorians could give it hell, then imagine what the twenty-first century state could do if it were fully mobilized.'

Russell frowned: 'But we don't want a big war kicking off in London, do we?'

'No, I suppose not; the Malevolence certainly does not want that, and when the Prime Minister reads the secret file, which now includes some updates of my own, he may also think twice before reaching for the military option.'

'You want them to negotiate a deal, something along the lines of what I was supposed to arrange?' speculated Russell.

Ceres just smiled.

Russell allowed the car to slow down to seventy as he moved over to the slow lane.

'So this thing wasn't brainwashing or controlling our Prime Minister?'

'No, just passively observing. It's been doing the same with the hybrid.'

'That chap we left on the roof?'

'Mm-hmm.'

'What's its interest in him?'

'He survived. It has been greatly disturbed by the demise of the Sponsors, its "*host*" in a manner of speaking, so it is very curious about Alan Dosogne – and us.'

'Us!?'

'We have generated much turbulence over the last few days. Your Prime Minister, the secret service, the Malevolence – they are all interested in *us*.'

'Do they know what they're dealing with?'

'No, only the hybrid knows, but I've firewalled his thoughts regarding our identity, and Mr. Dosogne has so far chosen not to share his knowledge. The Malevolence, however, is no fool. It has sent up a great many fruiting bodies in recent days, and it is piecing together some of the picture; it does not know who-or-what we are, but it has worked out some of the issues facing the human system.'

'Really!?'

Ceres nodded: 'And it rejoices over that prospect about as much as you do, Mr. Tebb.'

'Really!?'

'Yes, *really*!'

Russell contemplated all of this as the Bentley sped past the M25 and began to hit open country.

'Why?' he eventually asked.

'The Malevolence is a sensationist: it seeks out experiences that are varied, novel, complex and intense. The natural world holds little interest, and the type of space-farer the Sponsors usually excrete is even less enticing. But there is always that "sweet spot"

between the two – when the uplifted species begins to develop a culture and a science but while it still also retains its animalistic roots. That is what it likes.’

‘You mean us, as we are now.’

‘Yes, Mr. Tebb. You have a potential ally, but the likelihood of it influencing your fate in any positive way remains very low. It may try to stave off *dumbass* with some kind of reckless intervention but the genetic wreckage that would ensue...’ Ceres’s words trailed off as she became preoccupied with the sights and smells of the English countryside. The Bentley continued to zoom westwards into unbroken blue.

‘Reading Services will be coming up shortly,’ she remarked, ‘shall we stop for afternoon tea?’

‘Looks yummy, sir,’ encouraged Michael.

‘Looks radioactive,’ observed Russell.

Mr. Waterstone continued to examine his dish with suspicion: a slice of whiter-than-white cheesecake topped with a thick, fluorescent-green jelly. He began to prod it with his small plastic fork.

‘You chose it, dear!’ remarked Ceres.

The cat reluctantly took a slice off the apex and had a tentative nibble. Everyone watched keenly, awaiting the verdict.

‘Well,’ asked Russell, ‘is it novel, complex, intense, or... what was the other one?’

‘Varied,’ replied Michael.

Mr. Waterstone considered the question.

‘Are you trying to imply something, Mr. Tebb?’ enquired Ceres.

‘Yeah, just that your description of the Malevolence sounds rather familiar. It sounds like you lot!’

Mr. Waterstone sliced off more cheesecake and, with each bite, consumed it with more vigour and enthusiasm. Before long it was all gone. He eyed Russell.

‘Was it “yummy”?’ asked Russell.

The cat gave him an ambivalent look.

‘A bit too sweet?’

The cat nodded.

Russell tucked into his cob sandwich. This particular restaurant at the services was largely deserted, its muted atmosphere, strangely relaxing. He studied Ceres, who was gazing out of the window, her mind seemingly elsewhere.

‘Do *you* consider the human system to be more interesting in this form?’

Ceres turned and regarded Russell, but did not speak.

Russell persisted: ‘I’m just wondering because you used the term “sweet spot” to—’

‘That was for the Malevolence.’

‘I know, but it sounds like you are all sensationalists as well!’

‘*Sensationists!*’ corrected Michael, ‘and who says we are!? I suppose we are a bit, if I’m honest.’

‘Ah ha! An admission!’

No one reacted, so Russell tried again: ‘So let’s say you are “a bit” sensat...’

‘Sensationist?’ suggested Michael.

Yes, that. So where is *your* personal “sweet spot”? ...Ceres! You can go first.’

The woman rolled her eyes and groaned ostentatiously:

‘Go on then, give me the options!’

‘Present day?’

‘Over populated and over-reliant on out-of-control technology. Too close to the singularity, in other words.’

‘Alright, pre-internet, post war?’

‘Most humans felt trapped in monotonous lives.’

‘Victorian era?’

‘Too much hard labour and smoke.’

‘Renaissance?’

‘Too many diseases and despots.’

‘Early civilizations?’

‘See previous... and too much ridiculous superstition.’

‘Well that’s it,’ said Russell, ‘I give up!’

‘What about pre-civilization? Hunter gatherers?’ suggested Ceres.

‘Okay.’

‘Worked better before the Sponsors stuck a spanner in the works.’

‘That gets us back to dumbass!’ Russell shook his head and turned to the spider: ‘Michael?’

‘I’m The Machine, Russell, so I’d suggest the future is where my sweet-spot lies. Perhaps the period just prior to the singularity, but no, that’s going to be no fun for you... I generally prefer a mature high-tech blend of bio *and* machine, but not cybernetic fusion as is your fate. I don’t think your system truly has a “sweet-spot” that is to my absolute liking, actually.’

Russell considered Michael’s reply: ‘So you’ve experienced others? Systems more to your liking? How’d you manage that?’

‘We’re Earth’s 5-D gestalts, we get about, you know? Your world, even your timeline, is but a small part of the *Infinite Earth*. It’s a bit of a backwater, actually.’

This esoteric idea had been revealed in *The Truth*, along with many other incomprehensible concepts. It was too much for Russell to retain back then and he didn’t really want to get bogged down with it now. Only the fate of the “human system” interested him, even if it was just a “backwater”. He was still not ready to give up on it:

‘You said before that we were heading for the singularity like a speeding rifle bullet?’

‘Did I say that?’ asked Michael.

‘I did,’ replied Ceres.

‘Ah, yes,’ replied Michael, ‘what of it?’

‘And that rate of travel is what’s going to result in us—’

‘—becoming a cybernetic hive-mind,’ finished Ceres.

‘Yes! So if the human system were... regressed somehow, to an earlier pre-industrial state. Could we then avoid this outcome?’

Ceres sighed: ‘We explained all of this to you yesterday: your system is set up for an accelerated collision with the singularity. Reverting to an earlier state simply delays the inevitable: sooner or later you *will* industrialize and the machine networks *will* subsequently take over. You should revert all the way back to the natural hominid and

then take the slow path. That strategy will work!’

‘But that’s *millions* of years!’ Russell complained.

‘Why do you care, anyway, Russell, it’s not like you are going to have to live through it?’ said Michael.

‘My descendents will... What about you, Mr. Waterstone? What do you—?’ Russell glanced to his side, but the cat had vanished.

‘He’s no fool,’ remarked Michael.

Russell gave up and stared out of the window. A family of four were engaging in good-natured horseplay as they approached the services; he noticed that Ceres was watching them intently:

‘Your world is certainly interesting and stimulating. But we’re just focusing on the positive side of the ledger, aren’t we? What about your endless wars or your exploitation of each other or your environmental vandalism? How’s the world going to look if you persist like this for any length of time? You’ll trash the place!’

Russell remained silent.

‘How’s the cob?’ asked Michael.

‘Yummy,’ replied Russell, with little enthusiasm.

The group made ready to depart.

‘Where *is* Mr. Waterstone?’ asked Ceres.

There was no sign of the cat so the group split up to begin a search. In due course, he was located with the family of four. The youngest child was surreptitiously feeding him every time her parents weren’t watching.

‘You’ll make him fatter,’ admonished Ceres, with a smile as she picked up the cat.

‘He’s yours?’ asked the father.

‘He doesn’t belong to us,’ replied Ceres, ‘but we are looking after him.’

‘A rescue cat?’

‘No, but somewhat feral.’

‘You should see him when he loses it!’ replied Russell.

On cue Mr. Waterstone began to growl and Ceres hastily put him down. ‘Let’s head back to the car, shall we?’ she suggested.

‘I knew that cheesecake would make him fractious!’ remarked Michael.

‘What the hell is she playing at, give me that phone!’ demanded Alan of one of the administrators.

‘To be frank, Alan, owning the company does not bar Ms. Warner from utilizing its resources,’ commented Fairclough, alarmed by Alan’s strong reaction to the news that GFS’s largest client was also its owner. ‘Let sleeping dogs lie and worry about the bottom line – *our* bottom line.’

Alan replaced the receiver. Fairclough was correct, this did not imply illegality, it was just odd. He still wanted to have it out with Warner but this was not the time or the

place.

'I suppose you are right, Jim, I should get back to work.'

'Good man!' Fairclough gave Alan a friendly pat on the shoulder and departed for his own office to move more furniture around. Alan retreated to his own office to make the call there.

'Helen Warner, please ... Alan Dosogne of GFS ltd...'

Alan found himself being bounced between unhelpful underlings; he was about to hang up when:

'Alan! I'm glad you called, we need to book up, my office, asap! Exit GFS via the back door, and leave your phone, they're still using it to track you.'

'Wait a minute—'

The line went dead. Alan felt like smashing the phone receiver into his desk, but at least Warner wanted to see him. And urgently. He deposited his mobile in a drawer and surreptitiously grabbed his jacket. Eyeing the open-plan office for signs of Fairclough he crept out of the building.

Helen Warner met Alan at the reception desk of her Canary Wharf offices. She hurriedly ushered him to the mainframe room and on to the psynet terminal without any discussion.

'Do you mind telling me what this is about, Helen?'

Warner seemed fidgety, nervous: 'Remember I said we should bring the Prime Minister into the loop?'

'Yeah...'

'Well events are moving forwards apace, and now we *have* to contact him.'

'What, really!? Are you sure this is the soundest approach?' asked Alan, who had remained extremely sceptical about alerting others to the existence of Warner's psynet. Especially a politician.

'We either work with him or have this baby taken from us!'

'You're kidding!?'

'No, I'm afraid I have seriously underestimated the capabilities of the state, Alan.' Warner looked frazzled.

'Alright, calm down. What's happened?'

'Let's just say that the PM is onto us, and when he finds out about *that*—' Warner pointed at the terminal, '—he'll take it from us, unless we act now to make ourselves indispensable.'

'I see, and how do you plan to convince him?' asked Alan.

'Not me, Alan, *you*. You need to contact him now, using the psynet. I'll advise you from off-camera.'

'Why me, for god's sake!?'

'Because they're greatly interested in you, and still largely ignorant of me, though that could change.'

'But, I..?'

'Shut up and put these headphones on.'

‘The outgrowth from Finsbury Circus has been bagged and recovered. The others you indicated appear to have self-destructed, but we have a crew collecting samples of hypha.’

‘And they *are* wearing full bio-suits?’ asked the Prime Minister.

‘Yes, sir, as per your instructions,’ replied Sir Neville.

‘Good.’ The PM perused his antique file. After two days of shocks and revelations Wednesday had actually commenced on a much happier note with the discovery of large amounts of extremely valuable rare earths in the ash debris. Since then, however, it had quickly spiralled down to business-as-usual for this week: panic and occasionally chaos as one preposterous development took over from the last. It finally led to this – the discovery of the Malevolence.

‘It’s one step forwards and two steps back with this shit, isn’t it?’

‘Or the other way around, sir.’

‘I appreciate your optimism, Sir Neville.’

Sir Neville Stonehatch fidgeted in his seat and kept eyeing the Majestic report. It was highly unusual for the Prime Minister to be so directly involved in security matters as he had been all through this week, but to actually hold the key secret himself – that was unprecedented. His security chief, whilst rigorously respecting the chain of command, did not seem to appreciate it.

But what of this “Malevolence” thing? Was this bad news or good? On the face of it, discovering an intelligent alien fungus hiding under London, one that had been actively *spying* on him, could only be considered as absolutely terrifying. And the name didn’t exactly inspire confidence! The report went into some considerable detail about how the Victorians had dealt with it, or thought they had. However, it was the new material, presumably added by the Gang of Four, that really knocked the PM for six. This beast, the report urged, should be quietly talked to, negotiated with, and ultimately – exploited. But exploited to what end!? And how, for that matter, does one negotiate with a fungus? He decided to reveal some of the information to Sir Neville:

‘At least we have a name for our first set of aliens. Apparently they’re called “the Sponsors”, they’re from our galaxy and they’ve been running our affairs in secret since the dawn of humanity.’

‘My God!’

‘Indeed. And the Gang of Four just wiped them all out! As a result we are now rather... *exposed* as a species.’

‘My God... exposed to what?’

‘The report does not specify, although it does suggest we... talk to this new player.’

‘The fungus?’ asked Sir Neville, incredulously.

‘Hmm, it is allegedly a highly intelligent Sponsor parasite and, according to this, a lot more on our wavelength than the Sponsors ever were.’

‘Can this advice be trusted?’

The PM shrugged. ‘We’re not yet in a position to say, but I do believe we should

attempt a communication with this entity.'

'How?' asked Sir Neville, 'if it doesn't make the first move I'm not sure what we can do.'

'I'm sure a boffin will think of something.' The PM rubbed his face. 'In the meantime, has the Bermondsey investigation revealed anything?'

'Ah, yes. In all the commotion I regret I forgot to mention it earlier. Apologies, Prime Minister.'

'Understandable, so what have you got?'

'We have an ID on the human male, sir: He's called Russell Tebb and he runs an aerobics studio on Tooley Street.'

The PM held his head in his hands: 'Oh dear.'

'Sir?'

'Human chancers! I would have preferred powerful aliens. At least then we could assume they actually knew what they were doing. Instead we have a bunch of activists or idealists who somehow acquired alien tech and then used it to destroy an alien race that may well have been our saviour as a species for all we know.'

'But the spider and the cat--'

'They manufactured them! Or modified pre-existing animals.'

'Sir?'

'Well I don't know! Who knows what you can do with alien technology... I take it we have nothing on the woman?'

'Not an identification, sir, but a name at least: Ceres. According to a Ms. Meg Rodriguez, who works at Tebb's aerobics studio, the woman turned up on Tuesday morning, a stranger to Rodriguez, but she called the shots on everything.'

'Ceres..? You say she first appeared yesterday, not Monday?'

'Apparently not, sir.'

'What does Ms. Rodriguez have to say about the animals?'

'The cat, it seems, can understand English fluently. The spider was simply acknowledged as "Michael". When pressed, it appeared she thought he was a man, well spoken, apparently. She was unable to give a physical description.'

'Christ! They probably escaped from some Sponsor genetics lab or something..! Nothing else on the woman?'

'No, sir.'

'And this Russell Tebb: background?'

'Regular Joe. Had a heavy cocaine dependency but has been off the drug for several months. The only slightly unusual detail was his decision last year to join a Brazilian shaman's "church" and partake in the hallucinogenic drug, ayahuasca. Apparently he experienced "hell" and has been threatening legal action against the shaman ever since.'

'Where is this shaman based?'

'Brazil, sir, he's left the UK. You think the shaman is relevant?'

'Maybe. Track him down if you can.'

'Yes, sir.'

The PM continued to flick through his report but could not summon up the willpower to actually read anything; his eyes just glazed over the text. He was burnt out for the day. Too many more days like this and he'd be heading for permanent burnout.

‘We’d better leave it there, Sir Neville, unless you have anything further to add?’

The head of MI6 rifled through his papers and with considerably more focus than the PM had managed. Sir Neville had seemed to be flagging yesterday but he’d clearly found some second wind since then.

‘There’s just the question of the Gang of Four,’ he replied, ‘we’ve staked out Tebb’s studio with new cameras on a different circuit; these are to be viewed continuously from a remote location should they return to Bermondsey tonight.’

‘That camera method has not paid dividends yet.’

‘We’re still analyzing the St. James’s Park footage, sir, so assuming it does, do you authorize the use of deadly force in their apprehension?’

The PM sighed and vigorously rubbed his face again; it felt and sounded like sandpaper: ‘No, I do not! We need answers from that lot, not a bunch of corpses for the Black Museum! In the event of contact instruct your operatives to *talk* to them – nothing more! Clear?’

‘Absolutely, sir. I concur. I suspect they’re not going to return there tonight, anyway.’

‘Oh, why?’

‘Ms. Rodriguez indicated that she’d been forced to cancel aerobics classes for the remainder of the week. She seems to be under the impression that Tebb and the others are about to take a road trip. Also, the CCTV is all showing green.’

‘For all of Greater London?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I see, well keep your Bermondsey operation going, in case we’re being misdirected again, but, yes, it does sound like they’ve scarpered. By the way, what did the tramp have to say?’

‘Mrs. Collier is interviewing him now, sir.’

‘And “softly, softly” as you put it?’

‘Absolutely, sir. I believe Mrs. Collier is deploying tea and biscuits this time.’

‘Ha! Make that alcohol and biscuits and we’ll be in business. Do you think this old drunk has a genuine sixth-sense or something?’

‘Quite possibly, sir! He could be a very valuable asset!’

‘Yeah, well you can update me on that one tomorrow.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Sir Neville began to collect up his papers: ‘That’s all I have for now, Prime Minister. I presume you wish to receive a briefing tomorrow morning, same time?’

‘Yes, be here, 9am.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Sir Neville stood and grasped the Prime Minister’s outstretched hand.

‘Hang in there, Sir Neville, it can’t go on like this forever!’

‘I hope not, sir. It has been...’

‘It has, hasn’t it! Don’t worry, you’ll be back chasing jihadists by next week!’

‘One can but dream, sir,’ replied Sir Neville, with the slightest of smiles.

The PM watched him depart and then promptly headed for his drinks cabinet. I must touch base with Mrs. Prime Minister, he thought as he poured himself a large G&T. She was going to give him hell over his repeated no-shows! Ditto: the chancellor.

‘Prime Minister.’

The PM abruptly wheeled around. The room was empty.

'Prime Minister, can you hear me?'

The directionless voice seemed to hang in the air, like mist.

'Who is this!?'

'This is Alan Dosogne... of Global Finance Sponsorship... err, if you require a visual reference point just turn on any of your computer screens. You don't need to be online.'

The PM hastily placed the untouched drink on his desk and marched around to his chair. He reached for a hidden alarm.

'Please don't, Prime Minister. If you alert your security I'll simply vanish into the ether, and I think you are going to want to hear what I have to say.'

The PM hesitated. 'What do you want, Dosogne?'

'Please turn on your desktop monitor.'

The PM felt inclined to press the alarm regardless, but these were exceptional times; what information did Dosogne wish to impart? He reluctantly turned on his monitor. Alan Dosogne's narrow, pasty face filled his screen.

The Bentley crept through the busy car park of the Red Lion Hotel spitting gravel from under its fat tyres.

'There is a space over there,' observed Michael, pointing.

Russell parked the car and alighted to study the scene. The hotel or pub, located in this small village somewhere in the rolling fields of Wiltshire, radiated an otherworldly bucolic ease; an impression helped along still further by incessant birdsong. A swollen sun hung in the western sky, still high enough to produce a pleasant heat, but low enough to have lost some of its earlier power. The skies remained cloudless with not even a wisp of cirrus to interrupt the unbroken cobalt blue.

'So this is *Crop Circle Central*, is it?' he remarked.

'You could say that,' replied Ceres: 'crop circle enthusiasts, new-agers, neo-druids, scientists, pseudo-scientists, documentary makers and..,' turning to Michael: 'scan the boots for pallet boards, would you?' – '...crop circle makers. They all come here.'

'To argue mainly,' added Michael, 'four vehicles contain pallets, another four contain ancillary stuff for making crop circles.'

'Good, sounds like one or maybe two crews are here now. They're probably in the bar, come on.' Ceres led the others to the front door of the hotel.

'What's with him!?' asked Russell, pointing at Mr. Waterstone. The cat was prancing forwards like a dressage horse.

'There's a lot of Earth-love in these here parts,' replied Michael, 'at least he's happy! Let's leave him be.'

Ceres, Russell and Michael entered the hotel and left Mr. Waterstone to gambol through the fields and meadows. They soon located the large bustling bar. The din was testament to Michael's earlier assertion that this was a place to come for a heated argument. Several seemed to be occurring at the moment. Russell tried to listen in on the

nearest but lost interest when he realized the participants were arguing about politics.

‘Who wants what?’ asked Russell, pointing at the bar counter.

‘Pint of cider for me, please, Russell,’ requested Michael. Ceres nodded in agreement.

‘Three pints of cider, cheers,’ Russell instructed the barman.

‘Would that be the Strongbow or the scrumpy?’ enquired the barman.

‘Is it supermarket scrumpy?’ asked Russell.

The barman pointed to a huge wooden hand pump: ‘Local brew, pokey stuff!’

‘Yes, three of your fighting scrumpies, please.’

‘It’s more than fightin’ young’un, you sure?’ asked the barman, with a cynical expression.

Russell conferred with the others: ‘Yes, three of those.’

‘Alright, on your heads be it.’ The barman grappled with the wooden pump and struggled to transfer a cloudy, yellow liquid into three pint glasses.

The trio took their drinks to the only set of three seats available – part of a long table that was otherwise occupied by a group of five scowling locals, their unwelcoming demeanour possibly explaining why the seats were available. This all appeared to go over Michael’s head: ‘Budge up, fellas, we’re a bit cramped over at this end.’

The five locals looked as though they’d rather hog the available space but were forced to make room by Michael’s invasive encroachments.

Russell tasted his cider: a soft, apple-juice flavour and only lightly sparkling. But very cold and extremely refreshing; when he replaced his glass on the table it was almost empty.

‘Boy, that was good!’ he said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

‘Steady, friend,’ said one of the locals, a large man with a clean-shaven head, ‘round here we use that stuff to degrease the engines.’ His companions all laughed. ‘It’s not meant for human consumption!’ More laughs.

Ceres sampled her drink, and then quickly downed it all with a complementary medley of groans and grunts. This made the locals laugh all the more.

‘Better contact Salisbury A&E department, Danny – let ’em know to expect three more admissions this evening,’ giggled the bald man. The locals were now crying with laughter. Michael took a dignified sip of his cider and replaced it on the table. The spider almost looked uncomfortable.

Russell drained his glass and asked Ceres if she wanted another: she nodded but kept her eyes on the men.

‘Two more, please, barkeep!’

The barman rolled his eyes: ‘There’s no telling some folks.’ He began once again to wrestle with his oversized pump.

When Russell returned to the group he decided to just leave his drink untouched, on the table. Ceres did the same and glared at the men. Michael continued awkwardly sipping at his.

‘Are you gentlemen crop circle enthusiasts, by any chance?’ enquired Ceres.

‘Who, us? *Nah!* We just come here to wind that lot up. We know it’s all just a load of bull,’ replied the bald man, who was obviously the group’s only spokesman.

‘So you think the crop circles are all made by humans?’ Ceres asked, taking a swig

from her second pint.

The locals smirked at each other. 'We don't *think*, love, we *know*! It's just a swindle to extract cash from gullible tourists... like yourselves... no disrespect.' There were more muffled and echoing sounds as the locals all sniggered directly into their glasses. 'Look at this pub!' the man continued, 'middle of bloody nowhere and yet it's as busy as the bar at Old Trafford on a Saturday afternoon. Why? Crop fucking circles!'

'So why do you make them?' asked Ceres, casually knocking back more of her cider. That stopped the men's laughter in its tracks.

'I guess you've been viewing some of our YouTube vids. We don't hide the fact that we make the circles, in fact we point it out to this shower every time they announce that one of our creations is "the real thing". They just never believe us!'

'Numpties!' said another man, finally finding a voice that was capable of more than derisive laughter.

Ceres nodded. 'Do you have any pictures of your recent work?'

'Err, yes,' said the bald man, retrieving a tablet from his rucksack. 'We made *this* last night.' He showed the group an image on his tablet. It was rather small and indistinct: 'What you're seeing here is only the first part of a planned set of three – if we manage to finish it all before the harvest. It's a complex design overall, our most ambitious yet, I'd say!'

The other men nodded in agreement.

'We're waiting for it to be endorsed by one of their "scientists" and be featured on a documentary. There's a German film crew and "research team" at large at the moment.' The man craned his neck to view the packed bar: 'I don't think they're in right now, but they'll turn up.'

'Why do you bother?' asked Russell.

'Duh! Packed bar! And some of the local farmers charge for access to view the circles. It all helps to keep the local economy ticking over, if ya get me.'

Ceres smiled conspiratorially at the bald man and pointed at his tablet: 'Is this the only image you have of the new one?'

The bald man stood up and pointed to the far side of the bar: 'See that door there, next to the gents' bogs? Try there. It's a sort of communal hall and it's been taken over by the croppies; they use it for meetings and shit and they also display the most recent pictures on the walls, along with their grid references. We're not welcome in there but you will be – they like tourists! You know.., sometimes I think we're all in this together, us and the croppies: honourably extracting cash from the naïve and the bewildered... no disrespect.'

More spluttered sniggering into pint glasses.

Ceres rose and indicated to Russell and Michael that they should follow her into the "communal hall". 'Catch ya later, gents!' she said, as she departed.

'You were very patient with them, Ceres, I thought you were going to slap that bald fucker!' said Russell, once they were safely out of earshot.

'Maybe later,' replied Ceres.

The three stepped into the communal hall taking their drinks with them. As promised, the walls had been given over to large high-resolution photographs of crop circles. More

pictures, charts and maps etc covered most of the huge conference-style table that dominated the centre of the hall. Approximately twenty people fussed over the table or studied the pictures on the walls.

‘Who’s in charge here!?’ demanded Ceres, in a booming voice that could not be ignored. Every head turned to look, then most turned to look at a woman with short, greying hair.

‘No one’s “in charge”, dear, but maybe I can help you? Celia Browning,’ replied the woman, offering her hand.

‘Thank you, Ceres,’ replied Ceres, shaking the woman’s hand. ‘We’d like to see images of all the crop circles that have appeared since Monday, please.’

The woman studied Ceres with an unreadable expression and after a deliberate pause pointed to a wall: ‘Certainly! The most recent are on the wall there: the dates of discovery are indicated, along with their locations. May I ask what your particular interest is?’

‘She thinks we could be crop circle makers, ma’am,’ stated Michael.

‘No, we’re not that!’ replied Ceres, looking at the woman, ‘we’re just naïve and bewildered tourists!’ She winked at Celia.

Celia Browning smiled and frowned: ‘Excuse me?’

‘We were talking to the local crop circle makers in the bar,’ replied Russell, by way of explanation.

‘Oh! You mean that reprobate Gerry and his gang. Don’t pay any attention to anything they say. They are *not* creating all the circles as they would have everyone believe. Just some of them – and they’re obviously manmade! We can tell the moment we step into a circle whether or not it is a genuine one or not.’

‘How?’ asked Russell.

‘The artificial circles show disturbed soil, snapped stems, footprints. Even the occasional discarded Mars Bar wrapper!’

‘And the genuine ones?’ asked Ceres.

‘Blasted nodes, bent but undamaged stems, undisturbed soil, elaborate weaving of the flattened crop and atmospheric and electrical anomalies.’

A stocky man stepped forward to join the conversation: ‘Perversely a lot of the anomalous features we encounter are manifest in both the genuine and the manmade circle.’ The man had a continental accent.

‘This is Gunter Bosman,’ replied Celia, ‘he heads a research team that is currently studying the circles.’

‘A pleasure, madam, sir,’ replied Bosman.

Ceres, Celia and Bosman continued to chat for a while and Russell gradually drew away to study the pictures on the wall. One quickly caught his eye:

‘What about this?’ he asked, pointing at his own and Mr. Waterstone’s creation from Monday night. This image was a daytime shot which rendered the circle even more striking.

‘Yes!’ replied Bosman, ‘a genuine masterpiece, but also a genuine fake. Human-made, unquestionably, but an example of that to which I referred: many who enter that circle report of feeling faint and their phones and cameras begin to malfunction.’

Two pictures to the left was another similarly dramatic image, although this one

was a wedge rather than a full circle. It closely resembled Gerry's image:

'And this?' asked Russell.

'Another high-quality human-made formation, but, nonetheless, one that attracts orbs of light to it, and screws up recording equipment,' replied Bosman.

'That's Gerry's,' murmured Michael to Russell, 'let's take a closer look at it...'

Russell nodded and moved on to study some of the other photographs: 'So where are the real ones?' he asked Bosman.

Everyone in the hall began to crowd around the wall-mounted pictures. Various people pointed to various pictures to pronounce them real with Bosman occasionally contradicting them by insisting that some were in fact of human construction. The crop circles that everyone agreed were genuine tended to exhibit a simpler design. In time, interest in Ceres and the others began to wane and they were left alone to study the pictures.

'Ma'am, Gerry's here, the 120 degree segment, mimics some of the design features of our original circle. I suspect it is *the response*,' reported Michael, rather breathlessly.

'Are we not looking for one of the so-called "real" ones?' asked Russell. 'We know this one is manmade.'

'This is a human issue we're dealing with, Russell, ergo: we're only interested in human-made circles,' replied Michael.

Ceres came over and studied the image: 'Hmm, it is very detailed...' she remarked.

'Indeed, but this detail appears to be random,' replied Michael. 'The pictogram looks in fact to be nothing but gibberish! Can you divine meaning from it, ma'am?'

Ceres studied Gerry's creation for several minutes before finally admitting that she could make no sense of it.

'Maybe it's not the one we're looking for,' suggested Russell.

'It is,' replied Ceres, 'but obviously not all of it.'

'Yes, we still need to see two other parts, right? Maybe only then will it will become "interpretable",' suggested Russell.

'Yes, I suppose,' replied Ceres, but she looked tense. Russell had never seen that before.

'I think that went quite well, don't you?' suggested Alan, as he removed his bulky headphones.

'As well as could be expected,' replied Warner.

'It felt like the old days: dealing with clients whilst always keeping control of the agenda. Not bad considering I was dealing with *him*!'

'Yes, you did fine job, Alan. Maybe your current mental enfeeblement is just a temporary phenomenon.'

'Alan regarded Warner with a cold smile: 'You reckon?'

'Not really. The headphones certainly helped: I used them to tighten up your brainwaves a bit.'

'You did *what!*?'

'Relax, Alan – you'd get the same effect from a strong cup of coffee! It's just enhanced beta wave production. Jeez, don't be so touchy!' Warner stated, with a mischievous glint.

'You could have told me!' replied Alan, picking up the headphones and regarding them closely before throwing them back onto the desk.

'Careful!' warned Warner.

Alan shrugged: 'Well, I have to admit, it did feel like the return of old 'Digital Alan'. Can I have a pair of these?'

'They'd cook your cerebrum with extended use, and you'd look stupid wearing them all the time. By the way, who's Digital Alan? The old hybrid?'

'Yeah, and I've since been reborn as Analogue Alan. He kind of sucks! What sort of extended use are we talking about here?'

'Forget the headphones – save them for psynet sessions. If they worked you've got it in you anyway. And trust me, Analogue Alan is an improvement, even if you are something of an imbecile. But if you want to sharpen up your wits I may have some non-invasive techniques that could help, but you'd have to work at those. They are not quick fixes.'

'Alright, let's do it!'

'I think we should discuss your "meeting" with the Prime Minister first. There were one or two issues.'

'Oh?'

'Hmm, like why – when asked directly by the PM – you refused to explain your connections to the so-called "Gang of Four". You've not even told *me* about them!'

Alan fiddled with the computer mouse: 'I'm not sure what he was on about there.'

'Pull the other one!'

'Alright! It's not something I'm happy talking about. I can't quite get my head around it.'

'Neither can I; neither can the Prime Minister; neither can MI6! Four freaks, one of whom is an aerobics instructor for God's sake, took down an alien martial power like they were swatting a fly, and they've been running rings around everyone ever since, including me!! ...It's time to 'fessup. Who are they?'

Alan remained silent.

'Would it help if I plied you with more alcohol?' suggested Warner.

'Absolutely not! I've only just recovered from last night!'

'Which is more than can be said for my bathroom... Come on, I know a nice wine bar in Holborn...'

Alan sighed. 'Alright, but *quid pro quo*: I'll tell you about them, but you'll tell me about your GFS ownership – yes, I know about that! – and this "Sponsor parasite" that apparently I'm working for! I presume he was referring to you.'

The Holborn wine bar was generally pleasing on the eye with its affected pre-industrial charm, the ambience enhanced still further by the rich hues of sunlight that came refracting through the bar's ancient stained-glass windows. At 6pm it was already full.

'Why don't we spill out onto the street and catch some sun; there's nowhere to sit

in here anyway,' suggested Warner.

Alan followed Warner outside; he tentatively viewed his chardonnay and swilled it around his glass.

'See, it has legs. That's a sure sign of quality,' said Warner.

Alan sampled the wine and pulled a face.

'No good?'

'It's alright. I prefer Red Bull.'

'You pleb!' Warner sipped her wine and viewed the comings and goings on the street with interest: two taxi drivers were arguing loudly with each other in almost hysterical tones. Once they'd both finally driven off, she turned to Alan: 'Right, you go first: Who are the Gang of Four?'

'No, you go first: You own GFS! What gives?'

Warner looked uncomfortable: 'I have to admit, up until a few days ago that was a critical secret, but now the Sponsors are gone I guess it doesn't matter anymore. I am very surprised, however, that you managed to uncover it at all: there were layers of perception filters obscuring my ownership. Did "Call me Jim" have anything to do with this?'

'He helped me, yes, but it was his ultra-fast recruitment that puzzled me – it got me thinking.'

'It shouldn't.'

'Why?'

'Perception filters. Either you can get past them now, or Jim can. I hope this isn't indicative of a wider failure in this area, we'll be screwed if it is!' Warner gazed blankly into the middle-distance.

'You still haven't explained *why*,' asserted Alan.

'Well, isn't it obvious? GFS was a principle hub of their financial operations. They needed an entity that legally existed within the human system. I made GFS look attractive by giving them the impression that I was a sleeping owner: happy to take the dividends, but disinterested in the day-to-day running of the business. They knew about me at the start; I even let them do a number on me to ensure my docility. After that they lost interest and I was able to then infiltrate via my status as *client*. Simple!'

'You are so... *Machiavellian*!'

'Thanks! So tell me about the—'

'Not so fast, Helen, you said earlier that the Prime Minister was onto you, and you were clearly nervous, but he never mentioned you by name and instead – when he cottoned on to the fact I was taking instructions from someone through the headphones – referred to a "Sponsor parasite". And why did he refuse to tell me its name, even though it clearly has one? He kept on calling it "the—" and then he'd stop himself. Unless he was going to say: "The Helen Warner".'

Warner chuckled: 'This Sponsor parasite must be a reference to the psynet. He seems to have got hold of some intel from somewhere, god knows where, and concluded that my psynet is, or was, a parasite of the Sponsors, which I suppose it was, in a sense. The psynet was giving me oblique clues about this earlier hence my own panic, which I now suspect was misplaced, or at least premature.'

Alan nodded: 'So he wasn't referring to you personally? He seemed to be implying

that I work for this parasite.'

'He just has a few pieces of the jigsaw but can't yet see the whole picture. So he's reaching; jumping to conclusions.'

'Yet?'

'Which is why we need to bring him in... before he does! Incidentally, he did appear to grasp the seriousness of the genetic issues and I found that encouraging. I think we will be able to reel him in. We'll get down to some of the nitty-gritty tomorrow if that is the case, but let the poor sap sleep on it first, eh?' Warner winked at Alan as she drank more of her wine.

'Okay', said Alan, 'but just to clarify: you *are* human, aren't you?'

Warner spluttered on her wine: 'Born and raised in Barnet, dear boy. Of course I'm human! Just a staggeringly intelligent one, that's all!'

'Alright! Alright!' Alan tasted more of his chardonnay and pulled more faces, but the wine was already starting to relax him, and it was starting to taste better.

'Your turn,' said Warner.

Alan suddenly drained his glass and looked for somewhere to place it. Warner took it off him.

'They're Earth Gods.'

'Come again?' Warner's expression was hard to read, as it often was. There was a mixture of incredulity, dismissive disbelief, anger at Alan for being flippant – and fear.

'It's true. Really true. As in – *absolutely* true.'

It was Warner's turn to remain silent. She gazed wide-eyed at Alan, waiting...

'You know there is a woman, a cat and a giant spider?' asked Alan.

'Yes.'

'Right, well the woman's the biology, the cat's the chemistry and the spider's the engineering.'

'Warner's mouth was agape: *'What!?''*

'The woman is a "gestalt", I believe is the term; she's the collective identity and life-force of every cell on Earth, the cat actually *is* Planet Earth and the spider is a gestalt of every computer and machine on Earth, including your psynet, presumably.'

'Christ!' said Warner, draining her glass, 'how do you know all this?'

'When my boss and the other hybrids were taken out – by their own weapon on the sentinel, incidentally – I was not killed outright due to the limited amount of Sponsor tissue in my body. I was about to peg it, though, and then the fucking banshee appeared, grabbed me by the hair and dragged me to the roof to witness the destruction they had just wrought. Then I was shown *The Truth*.

'The truth?'

'Yeah, an amazing but terrifying trip back in time to the dawn of life on this planet. It felt instantaneous but also eternal – like I got to experience the life and death of every single organism that has ever lived on this planet – including every bacterium and virus.'

Warner continued to stare.

'Another wine?' suggested Alan.

Chapter Four

Thursday

(Third Eye)

Russell awoke to find himself alone in a small featureless room. No Gordian knot, no sign of the others at all. Where was he?

As his eyes slowly focused on the heavy metal door he came to realize that he was lying in a police cell. Fragments of memories returned but how he'd ended up here remained a mystery. He unsteadily rose to his feet and lurched towards the door. Locked, obviously. He began to bang hard.

'Hey, let me outahere!'

After about ten minutes of fruitless banging there came the sound of rattling keys and heavy footsteps. A gigantic police constable unlocked his cell.

'Alright, Mr. Tebb, you can clear off now!'

'What am I doing here?' asked Russell.

'Don't you recall, sir? No, I suppose you don't. You were arrested last night for drunk and disorderly behaviour; given a formal caution and shown to our guest quarters.'

'Guest quarters?'

'*Here*, you pillock!' replied the constable, ushering Russell out of the cell. 'We threw you in the cells to cool down. We'd have let you out earlier but you promptly passed out.'

After a short ticking off from the sergeant Russell was released. He stepped out of the police station and onto a bustling early morning high street. Clearly this was not the crop circle village.

The red Bentley was parked directly outside the police station and standing in front of it was Michael.

'Morning, Michael; another lovely day,' Russell said, in a cheery voice.

'Hmm,' replied the spider.

Russell glanced inside the car – empty. 'Where's Ceres?'

Michael pointed at the police station: 'In there!'

'Oh,' replied Russell, sheepishly.

'Precisely!' replied Michael.

The memory of his arrest, though blurry and confused, and shrouded in a drunken rage, returned. Both he and Ceres had been arrested at the same time. But that was all he could remember.

'What happened?' he asked Michael.

'Well, let's see: both you and ma'am started needling Gerry and his chums

aggressively after about the fourth pint. They responded in kind and inevitably—

‘—a fight broke out,’ finished Russell.

‘Not exactly,’ replied Michael, ‘you threw your drink over Gerry and at that point the landlord threw us all out. The spat subsequently continued in the car park.’

Russell felt ashamed: ‘I’m sorry you had to witness all that, Michael. I don’t normally get involved in pub brawls.’

‘Hmm,’ replied Michael.

Russell rubbed his left eye which was throbbing painfully. ‘Did Gerry punch me?’

‘No, you both engaged in a lot of pushing and shoving but I never noticed anyone actually landing a real punch.’

‘But my eye is killing me!’

‘I think you can put that down to the very high levels of congener by-products in the Red Lion’s scrumpy, not to mention the wormwood that Pete surreptitiously adds into the mix. Gerry was correct: that stuff is not fit for human consumption.’

‘Wormwood? Isn’t that toxic? Who’s Pete?’

‘Can be, it used to be an ingredient in absinthe, but Pete – he’s the landlord and barman, obviously – likes to add it to his scrumpy for some reason. No wonder it sends everyone demented!’

Russell shook his head: ‘Ow!’

‘Serves you right!’ replied Michael.

‘So how did plod get involved?’

‘They turned up in their panda car almost as soon as we hit the car park; you decided to square up to them; ma’am knocked off one of the constables’ helmets and insisted she was entitled to use it as a toilet; you demanded the same and tried to urinate into it. Then you both got nicked.’

‘Shit! Is that true?’

‘Of course it’s true, why would I lie?’ replied Michael, indignantly.

‘I mean about urinating into a policeman’s helmet. I’ve heard somewhere that it is the right of every British citizen, or something.’

The spider snorted: ‘Well, I don’t know where you, or ma’am for that matter, got hold of that particular urban myth but I can assure you that it is *not* one of your statutory rights!’

‘I’m sorry, Michael. It was the scrumpy.’

‘Hmm, you don’t say,’ replied Michael.

‘What about Gerry?’

‘What about him?’

‘Did he get arrested?’

‘No, Gerry and the others melted away when the police arrived.’

‘Typical!’

‘It’s just as well they did! They went on to construct another crop circle and...’ Michael retrieved a picture from the car’s back seat, ‘...it’s one of ‘ours’: see, another 120 degree segment. Similar busy design.’

Russell studied the picture. As with Gerry’s earlier pictogram it was magnificently detailed. ‘So we have parts one and two now, correct?’

‘Yep,’ replied Michael, ‘and I can’t make head-nor-tail of this one either!’

'Why is that?' asked Russell, 'Can't you crack *any* code?'

'Hmm,'

'I wish you'd stop saying that!' said Russell. He regarded the busy high street and its scattering of old sandstone buildings: 'Where the hell are we?'

'This is Trowbridge.'

'Is that in England?'

'We're still in Wiltshire!'

'Oh.' Russell checked the car again: still empty. 'Where is Mr. Waterstone?' he asked. He hadn't seen the cat since the previous afternoon.

'He's hooked up with a bunch of druids. They're over at Avebury right now, checking out the stones. We'll swing by later, see if he'll deign to join us.'

At that moment Ceres emerged from the police station. It was hard to tell how she felt. Maybe some of the usual swagger was missing but there were no obvious signs of a hangover, or shame.

'Morning,' she said, in a slightly flat and distracted voice.

'Morning, ma'am,' replied Michael, 'I trust you slept well!' he added, sardonically.

'Like a log, thank you, Michael, but...' Ceres rubbed her forehead, 'I'm not feeling...' she turned her attention towards Russell: 'That "more-than-fighting" scrumpy certainly lived up to its name, didn't it, Mr. Tebb!?' she declared, giving Russell a sudden, playful shove.

'*You* are hungover!?' asked Russell.

'Yes! ...and you?'

'Most definitely, but it is all concentrated behind my left eye!'

'Are you sure that wasn't where Gerry hit you?'

'Well, according to Michael—'

'Oh yes, that's right, you both fought like girls, haha! What a sight!'

Russell rubbed his eye.

'Let me look at that.' Ceres moved close to Russell and, stooping slightly, examined his eye. 'Would you like me to remove the pain, Mr. Tebb?'

'That would be appreciated, thanks!' replied Russell, taken aback somewhat by this unexpectedly generous gesture.

Ceres opened the front passenger door and reached into the glove compartment; after a brief rummage she fished out a packet of paracetamol tablets and handed them to Russell with a smile.

'Take two of these with water,' she instructed a nonplussed Russell.

'And don't exceed the dose,' added Michael.

'Thanks,' replied Russell, 'and the water?' he asked.

'Do we have any water, Michael?' enquired Ceres.

'Negative,' replied Michael, rather abruptly.

'What's with him this morning!?' Ceres asked Russell.

'I think he's a bit peeved with us,' replied Russell.

'Oh!?' Ceres raised her eyebrows at Michael.

'Yes,' Russell remarked, 'apparently we almost stopped Gerry and his gang from making their second crop circle.'

'Nonsense! ...Did they make it?'

‘Yes, ma’am, here.’ Michael showed Ceres the new picture; she squinted at it briefly before returning it to the spider. ‘I’ll study that over breakfast, come on, let’s find a café and some water for Mr. Tebb.’

Ceres led the others down the high street and into the nearest greasy spoon. She ordered a bacon sandwich and Russell did the same. Michael, as always, stuck to his black coffee. Over breakfast she restudied the crop circle picture:

‘Gibberish,’ she finally declared, ‘just like the first one! What the hell are they playing at!?’ There was disappointment and perhaps even frustration in her voice.

‘You mean Gerry?’ asked Russell.

‘No, not the monkey, the organ grinder – your collective unconscious! We’re putting ourselves out for you lot and you appear to be responding by taking the piss!’ Ceres shot a furious look at Russell.

‘Hey! Calm down,’ said Russell, ‘maybe we simply don’t care for the choices on the table! And besides, how much information does it take to say: “we’re plumping for dumbass”?’

‘There’s probably more to it than that!’ replied Ceres, ‘some form of statement or testament will be presented I would suppose, something for posterity before you transform. But maybe I expect too much from you as a species.’

‘Do *you* think they are going to go for the hominid option, Russell?’ asked Michael, taking a noisy slurp of coffee.

‘Well., I dunno,’ replied Russell. He glanced over at the picture still in Ceres’s hand: ‘I presume you’ll need all three parts to crack the code.’

‘Hmm,’ replied Ceres, handing Russell the picture, ‘presumably!’

Russell took another long look at the new pictogram but it meant nothing to him. Michael then tapped it with one of his forepaws; he turned to Ceres: ‘I took the liberty of visiting the site first thing this morning and it seemed to me that every single plant had been specifically positioned. It’s therefore possible, ma’am, that in order to decode this we will need to take standardized images: each taken at the exact same time of day and from the exact same height. I recommend sending up a couple of UAVs at noon and retaking the photographs of parts one and two from a height of precisely one hundred and fifty metres.’

Ceres shrugged: ‘Alright, but we’ll drop into the Red Lion first in case part three has turned up, then we can do them all at the same time.’

‘Agreed, ma’am.’

‘Wow, this is some operation!’ remarked Russell, ‘this is going to be one stonking crop circle when all the pieces can be viewed together!’

‘Indeed!’ replied Michael, ‘it’ll be “stonking” alright, but–’

‘–still gibberish!’ finished Ceres, glumly.

The discovery of the Malevolence had not been the bottom of the rabbit hole after all. The latest revelations, furnished by that degenerate Dosogne, trumped everything else.

Oh for the days of worrying about recessions! Ironically those days were probably now over, regardless of what happened next. Updated reports on the London ash debris continued to upgrade the potential financial rewards. Even if he were to be forced into enabling Dosogne's insanely ambitious industrial projects – the funds, incredibly, would be available. Moreover, any political resistance generated by this project could, according to Dosogne, be neutered very effectively by the same alien technology that the original aliens, the Sponsors, had used to entrench their own power over humanity.

Dosogne had talked of a tremendous increase in the PM's personal political power. He'd been keenly aware of that himself throughout this bizarre week as he continued to slice through all the usual red tape. But Dosogne was talking about extending that power internationally! At least in the context of forcing through this extraordinary project. Basically he'd be instructing the leaders of the world's most advanced industrial nations to create black-budget operations each as large as the Manhattan Project.

If all that weren't daunting enough there were also the consequences of *not* doing anything! The PM did not fully understand the science but the gist was clear enough: do nothing and humanity degenerates. And damned quickly! The PM shuddered...

But what of the Malevolence, the Gang of Four? Nothing, the PM realized, was trivial or irrelevant in this madhouse! Everything tied in together and that bloody alien fungus might well be key. For starters, the Gang of Four were urging "contact" with the entity, hinting that cooperation here would be very expedient. Furthermore, maybe contact had been established already. Dosogne, or whatever gave him instruction, could actually *be* the Malevolence!

And as for the Gang of Four—!

The PM's intercom buzzed.

'Yes?'

'Prime Minister, Sir Neville Stonehatch and Mrs. Collier are waiting.'

'Send them through straight away, please. Thank you.'

Sir Neville and his deputy entered the PM's office and took their usual seats.

'So, anything happen at Bermondsey last night?' asked the PM.

'No, Prime Minister,' replied Sir Neville, 'our surveillance equipment remained fully functional throughout the night but our operators reported nothing unusual and no sightings of any of the Gang of Four. Also, all CCTV covering the capital has been functioning properly since yesterday afternoon.'

'Okay, to be expected, I suppose, and what about the St James's Park investigations?' the PM enquired.

'We have cordoned off the section of the park adjacent to Downing Street and we continue to take samples from the site for analysis, but initial feedback from Porton Down suggests that the material is decomposing so rapidly that no useful data is expected to be recovered from it, sir. Certainly no intact DNA has yet to be isolated, nor anything like it. In fact there are no biological markers that can be absolutely confirmed as non-terrestrial.'

'Hmm, that's interesting. Obviously it does not wish to be analyzed,' replied the PM. He then turned to Mrs. Collier: 'And the homeless guy who claimed to have seen the spider? What did he have to say to you, Mrs. Collier?'

'Good morning, Prime Minister,' replied Mrs. Collier, 'Yes, one Marcus McManus,

of no fixed abode, provided us with a most interesting statement: He confirmed seeing a large spider, describing it as: “the size of a chimpanzee”.’

‘A chimpanzee?’

‘Apparently that’s what he thought it was initially, before it, and I quote: “resolved itself into a spider before my eyes”. He also claims that the woman described it as a “machine”.’

‘So he spoke to the woman!’

‘Yes, sir, he also claims she assaulted him several times in unprovoked attacks.’

‘What!? Do the other tramps confirm this?’

‘They confirm that McManus was slapped forcefully several times but they insist it was his own fault because he became hysterical for no reason. I should add, sir, that only McManus claims to have seen the spider. The others just recall seeing Tebb, the woman and the cat.’

‘I see,’ remarked the PM, ‘what did they have to say about the cat?’

‘Just that it was fat.’

‘Yes, well I can see that from the Vauxhall Cross picture! So what was the substance of their conversation?’

‘That’s somewhat unclear, sir. According to McManus the woman was asking “daft” questions such as what part of the park do they all dislike. They were directed to the corner that now concerns us and the Gang of Four promptly departed to that section of the park. The tramps continued to observe them milling about there for a several minutes before departing in a large, red car along Birdcage Walk.’

‘What make of car?’ asked the PM.

‘Sir Neville?’ prompted Mrs. Collier, looking over at her boss.

‘We believe it’s a Bentley, sir,’ replied Sir Neville, ‘we have a few low-resolution images from the commander’s headcam as the vehicle sped along Birdcage Walk. We can barely confirm the car’s make, and nothing about its occupants.’

The Prime Minister leaned back in his chair. ‘Even so, if they do drive a red Bentley, we can find them!’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Sir Neville. ‘We are prioritizing that. However all the red Bentleys registered in London check out. This could be an unregistered car or it’s come in from somewhere else.’

‘Do we have any tracking, or perhaps pattern-recognition technology? Something that could tell us where all the red Bentleys are located at any given time?’

Mrs. Collier took a deep intake of breath: ‘Unfortunately we can’t guarantee that our car has a tracking device on board, and as for pattern recognition, that’s not really feasible. But if we notify the police then I’m sure—’

‘But we don’t want to be doing that, do we? The police could either be sent chasing their tails or they could blow this thing wide open. *We* need to find the Bentley!’

‘Yes, sir.’

The PM continued to listen as his security staff concluded their briefings. For once it all seemed rather low-key. There were some interesting developments but he was feeling distracted. At 10am he’d be getting another “call” from Dosogne. It was galling, but right now Alan Dosogne was the only show in town.

Alan was jolted awake by the persistent stabbing sound of a door intercom. He opened a crusty eye to confirm that he was lying in his own bed. Alone. At least this time he wasn't horribly hungover, though that came as something of a surprise considering just how much wine he'd knocked back the previous night. It hadn't taken him long to acclimatize to alcohol, he mused; it hadn't taken him long to acquire a taste for it either. Maybe he'd need to watch that: certainly alcohol took away the crushing stress he always seemed to be feeling these days as Analogue Alan, but there had to be an alternative: drugs? – The intercom fired off another staccato barrage – he'd look into that later, right now he needed to deal with that infernal buzzing!

He padded across to the intercom and speculated on his noisy assailant: Warner: odds on; the police or MI6; 3to1: Jim Fairclough: 10to1.

'Hello?' he said, into the wall-grill.

'Get your slack-ass down here asap!' came the angry reply.

Who was that? Hard to tell. The voice was so loud it caused feedback and distortion, but surely MI6 wouldn't talk to him like that! Ditto Fairclough, unless he'd finally lost it at Alan's ongoing absenteeism. He checked the time: nine forty. Shit, it could be Fairclough!

'Who is this?' he asked.

The reply was unintelligible, but it was definitely Warner.

Five minutes later Alan departed his apartment block and walked over to Warner who was waiting impatiently in the back of a chauffeur-driven BMW.

'Get in!' she barked, 'you've got a conference with the PM in... fourteen minutes! ...Okay, Gavin, back to the office. And as quickly as is legally possible please.'

Gavin attempted to drive the BMW "as quickly as legally possible" but the streets were still clogged up with late rush-hour traffic and progress was slow – tortuously slow for Warner who was clearly becoming very stressed.

'Can't you go any faster, Gavin!?' she demanded, leaning forward to observe the bumper-to-bumper traffic.

'We should get a clear run after this next set of lights, Helen,' replied Gavin, who sounded like he was used to dealing with Warner's sudden surges in volatility.

'Good!' replied Warner, bouncing back into her seat to glare at Alan. 'Don't you have an alarm!?' she shouted.

'I forgot to switch it on,' replied Alan, honestly, and knowing that his relaxed manner would enflame Warner all the more. Alan found Warner's high intelligence intimidating at the best of times, as, no doubt, did most of Warner's staff, but he took some comfort from the fact that he could at least wind her up. His own association with the so-called Gang of Four also appeared to have placed Warner on the back foot. Dealing with aliens or prime ministers never appeared to phase the business mogul, but she seemed at a loss to fully comprehend the scale of the Earth Gods or how to

“handle” them should the need arise.

‘*You forgot to—!!??*’ Warner paused, apparently performing an emergency “count-to-ten”, then in a calmer but very strained voice she added: ‘You know these communications with the PM are vitally important. He’s a powerful man, and becoming more powerful by the minute!’

‘By the *minute!?*’ replied Alan, with a smirk, ‘you make him sound like a comic book villain who’s just accidentally sat on a hypodermic needle marked: “research chemical”. What’s he going to do next: change into—?’

‘That’s enough, Alan!’ admonished Warner. The remainder of the car journey to Warner’s offices at Canary Wharf was completed in silence.

Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier departed at nine fifty looking just a little put out at effectively being shooed out of the Prime Minister’s office. The PM even subconsciously widened his arms as he stood with them near the door, lest one of them try to bolt back in again, like a cat that doesn’t want to go out in the rain. Whether or not they would ever be privy to Dosogne, and his plans for world domination, remained to be decided but, the PM realized, he’d need to give them the impression of continued full involvement, otherwise they might decide to conduct business in the old-fashioned way – with the PM out of the loop. Not that that was really feasible any more. Ultimately he might need them for moral support, who else could he confide in? Dosogne?

The PM checked his watch: nine fifty-eight. He pressed his intercom:

‘I’m not to be disturbed for the next half-hour, is that understood?’

‘*Yes, sir,*’ came the voice of his diary secretary, through the loud speaker.

‘Not even if World War Three has just broken out.’

‘*I understand, sir.*’

The PM was satisfied; he sat back in his chair and waited for Dosogne’s voice to manifest in the room. Or in his head. Apparently that was the nature of this “transmission” – everything, including the images he imagined seeing on his monitor, were all being beamed directly into his head. The PM shuddered and checked his watch again: One minute past ten. Dosogne was late! From what he’d seen of Dosogne so far he had very little faith in his professionalism. But his *capabilities*, or the capabilities of the Malevolence, that was a different matter. But maybe not as different as Dosogne or the Malevolence thought. True, some interesting demonstrations had been provided the previous evening, but that did not automatically mean that this arrangement – whereby Dosogne instructs the PM on what to do and he then obediently does it – would be their default method of operating. If Dosogne demonstrated any lack of political or intellectual rigour then there were alternatives: like Mrs. Collier’s assertion yesterday that Dosogne should be pulled in and dealt with, without gloves! But that was a last resort. In the meantime, he’d throw Dosogne a few curveballs and see how he handled them.

The PM checked the time again: 10:07. Where the hell was he!? A delay of seven minutes might not sound like much but under the circumstances, it was wholly

unacceptable.

'Testing, testing. Good morning, Prime Minister, this is Alan Dosogne. Apologies for the slight delay, you can expect subsequent conferences to begin very precisely on time. I know you are a busy man.'

'Oh, do you now!?' replied the PM, frostily. But he was privately relieved that the issue of timekeeping was being taken seriously.

'Yes, can you turn a monitor on, please?'

'Why is that necessary if this is being beamed straight into my brain?'

'It makes it easier to calibrate the visual data if we know where you expect to see it. Otherwise my face could just appear in front of yours wherever you look.'

'I see,' said the PM, switching on his monitor. Dosogne and his big comedy headphones appeared on the screen. The PM moved his head, looked away, looked back again. Presumably Dosogne knew what he was talking about: no matter what he did, his image remained fixed at the monitor screen.

'Have you had time to reflect on yesterday's meeting? There is an action we'd like you to take today, with the American ambassador. Could you invite him over for drinks later?'

'For what purpose?' asked the PM.

'As discussed yesterday, we need to get some pretty hefty secret, or "black", operations up and running and as quickly as possible. I know it sounds daunting but it will work remarkably easily once certain key individuals have been conditioned.'

Like the US ambassador?'

'Well, he's a minnow, but yes, after he's conditioned to send Washington certain rather inflammatory reports it'll be possible to get hold of the key players, and work on them.'

'This all sounds very distasteful,' remarked the PM.

'I agree, Prime Minister. But this is how important human affairs have been conducted throughout history. The difference now is that it's not the Sponsors calling the shots, it'll be you'

'Except that it seems to be *you* that is calling the shots, Mr. Dosogne!'

'I'm merely the technical aid. You will have the political power. We do not crave it and we are not expecting you to share it with us.'

'Gratifying,' the PM said blankly, 'but who is this "we", this "us"?''

'I can't reveal that at this juncture, but once some trust has been established, and once it can be demonstrated that this arrangement works as well as we think it will, then perhaps some further disclosure will be provided.'

The PM sighed: 'Perhaps you, or your accomplice, would be interested to know that a government research establishment is currently studying organic material recovered from St James's Park and other locations, including Finsbury Circus. All I can say is that it doesn't look very robust!'

'Are you referring to this Sponsor parasite that you mentioned yesterday? I have to say, after years of working for the Sponsors, I never even heard a rumour about such a thing. I assumed you were describing our current means of communication and control. But I can assure you there is no organic matter involved!'

'What about your accomplice?' asked the PM, pointedly, 'does he, she or *it* know anything about this?'

It was Dosogne's turn to sigh: *'err, standby...'* The image on the PM's monitor returned to the screensaver for several seconds before Dosogne's face reappeared. *'No, we don't know anything about that,'* he declared.

'I see,' replied the PM. There was a short pause. Dosogne stared blankly at the PM for several more seconds before resuming, presumably having received new instructions or advice:

'So, do you agree to meet the ambassador? We'll need precise timings and you can indicate these when they are known by sending a text message to—'

'A text message!' exclaimed the PM, 'will that be secure?'

'One hundred percent secure, Prime Minister. Just send us the time in the form of a four digit number. Send it here.'

A text number appeared on the PM's screen and he hastily scribbled it down.

'Did you get that, Prime Minister?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent, well that's all—'

'Not so fast, Mr. Dosogne. I am going to do precisely nothing until I have received proof that you... and your accomplice... can actually deliver what you claim.'

'The proof is in the eating, Prime Minister, you will see it when you meet the ambass—'

'No, forget the ambassador. I want to see hard evidence that you can establish a hidden and wholly unaccountable "black-budget operation", one that is shielded from scrutiny, one that will work and one that won't come back later to blow up in my face! It's not a test of your alien gizmo that I'm interested in, you demonstrated that yesterday, it's a test of your competence in utilizing that gizmo to perform a very difficult, almost impossible, political and accounting manoeuvre.'

'I see, well these will be rolled out over the next few—'

'No, Mr. Dosogne, you are not listening to me. I want a demonstration today, before I speak to the ambassador. I'll arrange a meeting with him, but if you can't deliver what I ask, it'll just be a cosy chat about golf! And you may still get pulled in for further questioning.'

Silence at the other end! Ha! Dosogne looked rattled. He was glancing furtively to his left and that, the PM had now worked out, meant that he was receiving more instructions. Time to step in before Dosogne spoke again:

'I have something specific in mind,' said the PM.

'Go on,' replied Dosogne, after a short delay.

'It concerns the ash cloud that fell on London, we've since discovered that it's loaded with rare-earth elements. Enormous amounts. Enough to finance much, if not all, of the operations planned. At the moment the discovery is classified; that much is easy, but how do we gain exclusive and absolute control over this wealth? Presently the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is handling this – not an organization very capable of keeping secrets, nor one that would approve of any dodgy accounting... So how would you like to handle that one?'

'Standby, Prime Minister,' replied Dosogne, before his image vanished again. Several seconds passed without any response, so the PM stood to stretch his legs. Eventually Dosogne returned:

'Yes, Prime Minister, this is actually very good news, the more real money we have to work with, the easier this will be to run. What you ask is, in effect, what the Sponsor system was designed for. We can set something up and have it ready for your approval by... 5pm? Is that acceptable? I respectfully suggest that you arrange your meeting with the ambassador for some time after that.'

So casual about it, thought the PM. Either this apparent confidence was real, or it was not:

‘Yes, that is acceptable, but talk is cheap, Mr. Dosogne. If you can show me a system that works, one that funnels the funds from rare-earth sales to where we want them, and can do that without anyone noticing, and do all that by 5pm! Well, we’ll be in business. No doubt about it!’

The PM instantly regretted the enthusiasm that had crept into his voice at the end. He knew now that he could push Dosogne onto the back foot, and that’s how he should leave him – tottering on it at all times. Acting star-struck did not help with that!

‘*Excellent. We’ll be in touch,*’ replied Dosogne.

‘Just a moment, Mr. Dosogne, there is another matter, although this is not a test as such.’

‘*Yes, Prime Minister?*’

‘The Gang of Four.’

The PM watched as Dosogne’s smile vanished more quickly than a British heat wave, current one excepted.

‘*What about them?*’ asked Dosogne, almost peevishly.

‘We’ve lost their trail, we even think they’ve departed London—’

‘*I would suggest we leave them be, wherever they are. They’ll not help us, but they could cause us significant problems.*’

‘The British government does not share that view, Mr. Dosogne, the Gang of Four precipitated all of this and since you continue to stonewall us on their true identity we feel obliged to continue our investigations. Maybe tracking them down is impossible or even foolhardy – or maybe it’s not. Bottom line: We still want them, Mr. Dosogne! All we want from you is their current location, if you know it.’

Dosogne looked horrified. At least this made it all but certain that the Gang of Four were not the party behind Dosogne and his alien bag of tricks. ‘*Stand by,*’ he said reluctantly, before his image vanished for a third time. After about a minute he returned:

‘*Russell Tebb and Ceres were arrested last night and charged at Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Drunk and Disorderly. They have both since been released.*’

‘What!?’ The PM could hardly believe his ears. Being arrested for drunken behaviour was one thing, the fact that they were both briefly held in police custody and neither himself nor MI6 had apparently got to hear about it was quite another!

‘*They’re trouble, sir. I reiterate: if they’re not causing trouble in London – we really should leave them alone!*’

In due course the PM terminated his “conference” with Dosogne. He pressed his intercom:

‘I want to see Sir Neville Stonehatch and Mrs. Collier in here – now!’

Alan removed his headphones and placed them on the desk in front of the terminal. He

turned to Warner:

‘That went okay, didn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ replied Warner, with a shrug, ‘I was expecting the PM to pursue the matter of black operations, though I have to admit I wasn’t expecting a request to establish one today.’

‘But we can do it, right?’

‘I assume so; I’ll have to look at the structures currently in place before I can say for sure, but, yes... it looks doable.’

‘Good news about the rare-earths.’

‘Yes, very good! When we wrest this from DEFRA it’ll make our other operations a lot easier to run – there’ll be fewer brains that need frying, for a start.’

Alan grimaced: ‘Lovely image..! Although I’m wondering if we also need to “fry” the PM’s brain! I did not care for that threat about being arrested again!’

Warner laughed: ‘He’s just trying to rattle you. Relax, he knows the stakes and he’s committed already with his request for the black op! Besides, we can’t run everything from here. It’s much easier to have him fully independent but on-side and restrict any controls to the relevant people he meets. They’ll just require one-off specific manipulations – we perform them once and move on. Controlling the PM would require almost constant interventions. And by *not* controlling the PM we also do not need to exercise general control over the civil service or his cabinet. You understand?’

‘Yes, I think.’ Alan stared blankly at the terminal screen. ‘But I wish we could get the PM and MI6 to drop this pointless pursuit of the Gang of Four.’

Warner did not respond.

‘Don’t you agree?’ asked Alan, insistently.

‘I’m... conflicted on that one, Alan. I accept your view that these Earth manifestations are potentially dangerous and should really be avoided, however...’

‘What?’

‘I’m curious! Just as the PM and MI6 are. The PM himself said: “The Gang of Four precipitated all this”. But to what end? What is in it for them? And why such a ruthless treatment of the Sponsors? Nothing about them quite adds up.’

‘Perhaps the rare-earths—’ began Alan.

‘Surely an incidental matter for them. But here’s another question that’s been vexing me: Why are they still around? And why decamp to *Wiltshire*, for God’s sake!’

Alan shrugged.

‘Either they are hunting down more extraterrestrials, or—’

‘Or, what!’ asked Alan.

‘Precisely! I want to find out, *what!*’

Alan loudly exhaled: ‘Curiosity killed the cat, Helen! Trust me, you don’t want to get involved!’

‘I suppose you are right, Alan,’ replied Warner, with a smile, ‘we won’t get involved – directly. But let’s continue to help the PM and MI6. If we can find the gang again and keep track of them this time – why not direct that information to the PM and allow *him* to make “contact”.’

‘What will that achieve?’ asked Alan, nervously.

‘I’m not sure,’ replied Warner, staring blankly ahead; she then promptly snapped

out of her reverie and turned to Alan: 'Anyway, I'll get to work on this ash business, and you should return to GFS and be ready to administer the new entity from there, I think a GFS subsidiary, something even hidden from GFS itself, would be ideal for our needs. The accounts at GFS are already a spiral-staircase of impenetrable contradictions!'

'Christ, Fairclough is going to have a cow when he sees me!'

'Forget about him! His days are numbered. Soon *you* will be running GFS, Alan.'

The Bentley arrived at the village of Avebury and headed towards the two-mile-long West Kennet Avenue, a line of paired standing stones that linked the village to the Sanctuary, one of several other Neolithic structures that peppered this landscape.

'There he is!' stated Michael, pointing down the length of the stones towards the Sanctuary.

'Where?' asked Russell.

'He's on that stone, there!'

Russell finally caught sight of Mr. Waterstone. Sat atop a large standing stone, the cat was giving instructions to a group of men and women through a walkie-talkie. Everyone except Mr. Waterstone himself was dressed up in full druid regalia; they appeared to be conducting a geophysical survey of the stones.

'What are they doing?' asked Russell, as the Bentley approached.

Michael studied the activity intently: 'There are many ley lines that converge on this location. Mr. Waterstone is no doubt running some form of audit.'

'Huh?' replied Russell.

The spider laughed: 'I'm not sure either to be honest, ley lines, hay lines! It's all pseudo-science to me – but don't tell him I said that!'

Everyone watched as the cat lowered the walkie-talkie from its mouth and began gesticulating to a distant druid who was standing within the avenue and looking confused. The man eventually sidestepped several times to his right which seemed to satisfy the cat. It signalled something on the radio and the man stopped and placed a pole in the ground.

'Pull over there, Mr. Tebb,' instructed Ceres, indicating a lay-by in which a Ford Transit was parked.

Russell parked the car behind the van and everyone got out.

'Hmm, "Warwick University Geology Department",' remarked Michael, reading the livery on the side of the van, 'I guess they're not real druids after all.'

'You don't say,' replied Russell.

'Hello!' shouted one of the "druids" as she approached, 'Sophie Haysom, Warwick University,' she added, shaking Ceres's hand.

'Ceres. This is Mr. Tebb and Michael.'

'Hey, guys! We'll have to ask you to stay back while we complete our survey.'

'No problem, we're just here to collect *him*,' Ceres replied, pointing at Mr. Waterstone who had now noticed them. The cat jumped down from his stone and

handed the walkie-talkie to the nearest druid. There then followed a short conference as the cat and several druids hunched over a laptop to discuss their findings. In due course Mr. Waterstone came sauntering over to the car.

‘Earth energies suitably topped up, sir?’ enquired Michael.

The cat nodded as it entered the Bentley and took its usual seat at the back.

‘Excellent,’ muttered Michael, somewhat sarcastically. He turned to Ceres: ‘Suggest we head on to the Red Lion now, ma’am, we’re a little pressed for time if we’re going to do those pictures at noon.’

‘Agreed, step lively, Mr. Tebb. Thank you, Sophie, you don’t mind if we take the cat with us do you?’

Sophie Haysom signalled to the group by the laptop: ‘Are we finished with his project?’ One of the blokes nodded, and extended a thumb.

‘That would be fine.’

No crop circles were evident as the gang sped through the picturesque rolling fields of Wiltshire on their way to the Red Lion Hotel, but the landscape did seem to have a strange unearthly quality about it. Russell glanced at his companions and realized that the term “unearthly” was a risky adjective to use. And besides, this impression was perhaps due only to the season and the weather: bleached by the endless heat wave the countryside was now completely devoid of greens. Pale buffs and yellowish off-whites stretched everywhere at ground level, while above, the hedgerows and trees, ripe and verdant as recently as a few weeks ago, had darkened significantly. With the appropriate backlighting and in sharp contrast to the pale fields, the trees rose up like silhouettes.

‘It’s quite a place this, init? Has a strange earthly quality about it, don’t you think?’ Russell remarked, as the car rounded a bend and the view ahead dramatically opened up.

Ceres nodded, but she shot Russell a mocking and sarcastic look. It was just impossible to read that woman, or bond with her. Come to think of it, everyone who met her *did* bond with her! That ten-thousand watt charisma got turned on for almost anyone, even that idiot university woman dressed up as a druid. The only exception was Russell himself, who even now felt as though he was being treated like a fool. Of course, Ceres frequently turned on the flip-side of her charisma: the raging temper, the put-downs, the physical violence. At least Russell received his fair share of that.

The panorama ahead revealed something that Michael clearly did not want to see: ‘Uh oh!’

‘What is it?’ asked Russell.

‘Combine harvester... and there’s another.’

‘So!?’ Russell snorted.

‘They’re bringing the harvest forward because of the hot, dry weather. They’ll all be at it within a few days.’

‘What’s the problem?’ Russell persisted.

‘Crop circles,’ replied Michael. ‘They don’t mix with combine harvesters.’

‘There’s a couple more over to the left,’ added Ceres, looking pensive.

‘Pull over at the next lay-by, Russell,’ ordered Michael. Russell did as he was told and as soon as the vehicle had come to a stop Michael bounced out over his closed door and scuttled around to the boot. The others quickly followed.

Russell watched as Michael retrieved a couple of aerial drones and then sent them into the air. Within seconds they were both dots. Seconds later, they were gone.

'You're not going to take out the combines are you, Michael?' asked Russell, concerned. This gang never gratuitously picked on humans but anyone who got in their way soon knew about it.

'The UAVs are going to investigate our two known circles. Just to make sure they haven't been harvested!'

'And what if the farmer is *planning* to harvest, as he may well do if his crop is being ruined by circles.'

No one replied.

The Bentley arrived at the Red Lion at precisely eleven twenty-eight, according to Michael.

'Do we have enough time for your images?' asked Russell, as he nervously eyed the car park. This was the location of their arrest the previous night; it occurred to him that they might not be very welcome here now.

'If "part three" has turned up and the croppies can give us a grid reference then we can just fire up another drone, but let's get a move on; chop, chop!' replied Michael.

'Perception filters to maximum,' said Russell, as they entered the hotel, but he knew what was coming: only Michael would remain unnoticed; yesterday's commotion would be vividly remembered.

'How about relying on your diplomatic skills instead?' replied Ceres. That confirmed it, as did the initial reaction from the landlord:

'OUT!! You lot are banned!! Get out NOW!!'

'Over to you, Russell,' said Michael, with a smirk in his voice.

'Err, umm, can we just have a quick word with the croppies, please.'

'You can get the hell off my premises is what you can do! I'm calling the police.'

Ceres began giggling uncontrollably.

'You, "madam", are just as bad as him!!' shouted the landlord at Ceres, 'I'm calling the police!'

'Would it help if we agreed to avoid your filthy cider?' replied Ceres, still laughing.

The landlord looked ready to spontaneously combust, but he failed to find any words.

Russell turned to Michael: 'I can't handle this, what should I do?'

'You could try apologizing,' replied the spider, 'but you'd better make it a good one. He does look rather cross.'

The landlord reached for his phone but then changed his mind: 'Kev!! ...KEV!!' he screamed.

After two more shouts a large, burly twenty-something burst into the bar: '*What!?*'

'Escort this lot out of the hotel, now!' replied the landlord.

Kev turned to regard the group, but he only seemed to notice Russell. He smiled slightly, anticipating trouble. 'I remember you! Fancy yourself as a hard nut, do ya?'

'Yes, he does,' replied Ceres.

Before Russell could say anything Kev grabbed hold of him and was about to frogmarch him out of the hotel.

'Wait!' Ceres bellowed. She turned to Michael: 'We don't really have time for any of this, do we?'

'Umm... regrettably not, ma'am, suggest we try Russell's original idea – "perception filters to maximum" whatever that means!'

Kev still held Russell by the back of his collar, with his other arm poised ready to place him in an arm lock. But he wasn't moving. Russell glanced at the landlord who, though still glaring at him, wasn't saying or doing anything else either. Russell struggled to free himself but that triggered Kev to apply the arm lock.

'They're waiting,' said Ceres.

'Waiting for what?' replied Russell, still struggling in Kev's vice-like grip.

'For an apology,' Ceres added, looking genuinely annoyed.

'That's right, sonny, let's have it!!' added the landlord.

Russell prepared to hurl abuse at the landlord.

'Russell!!!' warned Michael.

'Oh, all right! I'm sorry I got drunk on your scrumpy and caused a scene with your inbred brain-dead clientele... It won't happen again... Pete.'

Mr. Waterstone gawped at Russell, then Ceres and then Michael. He was clearly fascinated by all this and probably wondering what he'd been missing.

'Was that so difficult?' replied the landlord; he nodded at Kev who grudgingly released Russell.

Ceres led the rest of the gang into the communal hall. Once again Celia Browning was in attendance and analyzing with great interest the new crop circle pictures.

'Good morning!' said Ceres.

'Oh, hello,' replied Celia, somewhat haughtily. She shot Russell a disdainful glance but said nothing to him. Her attention returned to the pictures.

'Anything interesting come in since yesterday?' Ceres enquired.

'Yes, as a matter of fact we're all quite excited by this one!' Celia pointed to a large photograph on the table. 'Gunter Bosman and his team are over at the site now. They're sure it's not a manmade circle.'

Michael studied the image: a full circle composed of intersecting smaller circles and triangles. 'Not one of ours. It's probably just a real one, ma'am.'

'Hmm, yes,' replied Ceres; she studied the picture for several seconds before pointing something out to Michael: 'Look.'

'Oh yeah, I missed that,' replied Michael.

Ceres's attention moved on to the other images scattered over the table.

'Hang on,' said Russell, 'what do you mean: "it's probably just a real one"!?''

'Look for another 120 degree sector, that's all we're interested in.'

'So who, or what, is making the real ones!?' Russell persisted.

'You wouldn't understand,' said Michael.

'They originate from the Earth itself,' replied Celia, 'the planet communicates with us through these.'

'Is that right, fella? This all your doing?' asked Russell, looking to see where Mr. Waterstone had got to. There was no sign of him.

'Yes,' replied Celia, 'we believe the planet is warning us on a whole range of issues. We have some very talented people who are able to interpret these pictograms: Earth, it

seems, desires us to lead a more harmonious and empathic existence...’

As Celia droned on, almost lost in her own reverie, Russell sidled over to the door; he opened it slightly to steal a look at the bar. Mr. Waterstone had plonked himself on one of the barstools and was finishing off a pint of scrumpy; he was already ordering his second. Kev sat next to the cat and was also knocking back the cider. Russell continued to watch as Kev took Mr. Waterstone’s empty glass and carefully placed it on the cat’s fat head. It was a good fit, much to the merriment of Kev, and the landlord.

Mr. Waterstone didn’t react much, he seemed preoccupied with the arrival of his second pint. He made no attempt to remove the glass. Russell carefully closed the door and returned to the others.

‘Trouble brewing,’ he muttered to Ceres.

‘I’ve just been on the phone to the Chief Constable of Wiltshire Police. They’ve been holding Ceres and Russell Tebb in their cells overnight!’

Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier were both dumbstruck.

‘Yes, quite!’ continued the PM. ‘They were arrested for drunk and disorderly behaviour at one of the Alton villages and were subsequently detained at Trowbridge because both were, quote: “paralytic and aggressive”. They have both since been released.’

The PM glared at his security staff: ‘Well!’

An awkward silence descended over the room.

‘This information should have reached you! Their arrest was logged and even appears online, so how come it never came to your attention?’

Eventually Sir Neville spoke: ‘I’m at a... how did this come to *your* attention, sir?’

‘I Googled their names,’ the PM lied.

‘I see, well that was an innovative—’

‘How is using a search engine “innovative”. You’ve been trying to track down these individuals using all your fancy *Spooks* bollocks and all that was required was a simple online search! This simply isn’t good enough!’

Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier both looked terrified.

‘Of course we follow online traffic, sir!’ Sir Neville finally managed. ‘There should have been a flag on their names. I’ll investigate immediately, Prime Minister, to ascertain what’s gone wrong.’

‘Don’t bother,’ said the PM, in a slightly less furious manner.

‘It could be that the Gang of Four deliberately prevented MI6 from discovering this fact somehow,’ suggested Mrs. Collier.

‘I agree, Mrs. Collier. Which is why we need a new approach, otherwise we could be chasing our tails for ever on this one,’ declared the PM. ‘I want to go to Wiltshire, personally; I want you two to accompany me, and I want Marcus McManus along for the ride as well. I will also require authority for a drone strike, should one be needed.’

At that moment the PM’s intercom buzzed.

‘What is it!’ he shouted at the machine.

‘It’s the chancellor of the Exchequer, sir. He’s insisting on seeing you on a matter of great urgency.’

‘Tell him to fuck off... and use those words.’

The PM turned to his security staff: ‘Any questions?’

A search through the various crop circle images at the Red Lion communal hall failed to yield any more relevant pictograms. Noon arrived and Michael used the drones to take extremely high-resolution images of the two already discovered.

‘So what happens now?’ asked Russell, as a blast of loud techno suddenly burst through from the bar.

‘I’ll send the UAVs out on a wide search of the local area, in case something’s been missed. Though I doubt that will be the case: these things are specifically designed to draw in the croppies... What the hell is that racket!?’

‘Mr. Waterstone and/or Kev, I imagine,’ replied Russell. ‘At least they’re not fighting!’

‘How do you know they’re not fighting? Can you hear anything over that!’ asked Ceres.

‘I can’t even hear myself think! I’m going to have words with Petel!’ shouted Celia. She strode purposefully to the bar door. As she opened it the sounds became almost deafening. The door closed behind her. Seconds later – silence. Then Celia strode back into the hall looking pleased with herself.

‘I pulled the plug out!’ she declared.

Russell waited for all hell to break loose, but that disturbing silence persisted. His thoughts returned to the circles: ‘Okay, so we have parts one and two in the bag... and we’re expecting part three to be done tonight, is that correct?’

‘Sounds about right,’ agreed Michael.

‘Gerry’s team again?’

‘Probably, or it could be another crew; we’ll know more by this evening.’

‘So how are we going to kill time between now and then?’

‘We could check out that real one,’ suggested Ceres.

‘Yeah, let’s do that! Where is it?’ asked Russell.

‘It’s within walking distance,’ replied Celia, ‘beyond the rise behind the hotel. Just remember that Gunter is analyzing it at the moment so please avoid trampling on the actual circle.’

‘Sure,’ replied Ceres. Then turning to Michael: ‘We’ll take a look at your new images, first.’

‘Yes, ma’am. I’ll get them printed out at the Bentley.’

Ceres led the others back to the bar. The atmosphere was strangely subdued. Only the landlord was present, sat behind the bar reading a newspaper.

‘I was half expecting Mr. Waterstone to have trashed the place,’ remarked Russell.

Back out in the car park the group were met with an ominous sight as they

approached the Bentley: The boot was up and behind it Kev was attempting to fit Mr. Waterstone's holster onto the cat. The tube gun lay on the gravel nearby. Due to Mr. Waterstone's frantic wriggling the donning of the holster was proceeding badly. The cat was getting progressively more tangled up. The expression on its face, one of primordial rage.

'Holy crap!' exclaimed Russell.

'You can say that again!' shouted Michael, 'if he fires off that tube gun we'll lose most of the surrounding countryside, and bang go our crop circles!'

The group watched as Kev continued to fit the harness, making some progress now that the cat had finally paused for breath.

'Step away from him, Kev!' commanded Ceres. Kev immediately stood up and took a few steps back. Apart from the oddity of his association with Mr. Waterstone, he seemed to be acting normally.

'Why's he so angry?' asked Russell, eying the cat with growing unease. Mr. Waterstone's demeanour reminded him of their first encounter on Monday. The cat had chilled significantly since then, but this was a huge swing back in the opposite direction.

Ceres seemed to share his concern: 'We need something to soak up that cider and give him a distraction. Kev, are you serving food in the hotel right now?'

'Just bar snacks,' replied Kev.

'What about a butcher's shop in the village?'

'Yes, there's—'

'Good, get a huge T-bone steak. Michael, go with him. Run!! ...Mr. Tebb, remove Mr. Waterstone's harness, and then attach his lead.'

'You what!?'

'Do it!!' Ceres pushed Russell down to his haunches so that he was directly facing the demented cat. He reluctantly reached for the holster but Mr. Waterstone spat at him. He backed off, but then had an idea:

'Your harness is all snagged up, fella, let me straighten it out for you.' The cat eyed him with menace, but then suddenly nodded.

Russell reached forward and touched the harness where it crossed over the shoulders. He unclipped and untangled that section.

'What are you doing?' asked Ceres.

I'm playing for time! Russell thought, hoping that Ceres would receive this, though that was unlikely: this group had made it clear on numerous occasions that they disdained telepathy and all forms of mind-control; they played it a bit fast-and-loose with that perception filter of theirs but they always insisted that that was different. Ceres looked questioningly at Russell.

'Let's have a go at freeing that leg, shall we?' said Russell, attempting a soothing voice. Mr. Waterstone obligingly raised his paw and Russell set about untangling it. He proceeded as slowly as he could until the cat began to growl.

'No, I've done that wrong,' Russell announced. Mr. Waterstone looked livid.

'That's good,' said Ceres, 'maybe we can get him to vent his anger on you!'

The cat appeared to be considering this option.

'Forget it, cat!' shouted Russell, 'you can take out Wiltshire but leave my ass alone!'

Mr. Waterstone let out a loud adenoidal grunt-laugh. Progress, possibly. Russell

looked up to survey the surroundings: 'Christ, where's that bloody T-bone!?' There were no signs of Michael or Kev. He returned his attention to the cat.

'Look, it would be crazy to set that thing off here. It would cause mayhem! So please calm down.'

The cat nodded.

'Does that mean you agree it would cause mayhem or you agree to calm down?'

The cat nodded.

'Pack that in!' said Russell, and the cat began to snigger, but it still looked pissed and dangerous.

Ceres, meanwhile, had moved over to the Bentley; she activated a machine at the back of the boot and a single, large sheet of glossy paper began to emerge. Russell could see that the new image amalgamated the two known segments. She took the sheet over to Russell and the cat and placed it down on the gravel. Pictured from the zenith and as sharp as a razor's razor the developing circle already looked as though it were the product of a thousand man-hours.

'Awesome!' said Russell.

'But still nonsensical to me,' Ceres replied, 'what do you think, Ducky?'

Mr. Waterstone belched loudly to express his disinterest. The cat was beginning to get angry again, but then the lumbering form of Kev suddenly hove into view, he was carrying a large carrier bag. There was a look of urgency to his face but God only knew what was really going on inside his head. Michael scuttled forwards behind him.

'Got it!' shouted Kev, waving his package in the air.

Mr. Waterstone licked his lips as the T-bone steak was placed in front of him. Michael quietly collected the tube gun and placed it in the boot of the Bentley.

'It's cooked!' observed Russell, 'and well-done by the looks of it!'

'I did that, he prefers things a bit burnt,' replied Michael.

Everyone, including Kev, gazed at Mr. Waterstone as he launched into his meal. After about forty seconds he had stripped out all the flesh and was now setting about the bone itself. Horrible crunching and splintering sounds disturbed the peace of central Wiltshire.

'When he's finished, stick the lead on him,' Ceres instructed Russell.

The PM sat at his desk and drummed his head with his fingers. He'd screwed up badly – and twice!

First of all he'd overlooked one important aspect of the new, more linear, power hierarchies. Whilst he remained sure of his abilities to cut through any red tape that had the temerity to get in his way, there was still the human element. He had the power to sack both Sir Neville and Mrs. Collier on the spot and make things very difficult for them afterwards, and that tacit threat alone, he presumed, should have been enough to make them follow his orders. But they had both flatly refused to give him authority for a drone strike, and they clearly had no intention of joining him on a jolly to the West Country

either. Following a short and heated exchange he'd dismissed his security staff, but only from his office. He still intended to get his way on all of this but to do so would now require some old-fashioned diplomacy. Flattery, bribery? They weren't politicians, so he'd have to think outside the box on that one... fear of being left outside the loop! That was it! He'd start dealing with the army instead... No, bypassing MI6 like that would be messy, unless he got Dosogne to do his dirty work for him. Hmm, maybe as a last resort...

The other screw-up concerned the chancellor who, even before today, had been briefing journalists on "the Cabinet's concerns" over the PM's recent conduct. Now he would be apocalyptically furious, and was no doubt plotting the PM's downfall. And who knows: if politics moved very quickly today, as it sometimes did, he could be out of a job before Dosogne had a chance to fully cement his power.

The PM continued to drum his head: all of these players would have to be appeased and cajoled, starting with the chancellor. Apparently he'd been standing by his diary secretary and had heard the PM's response to his request for an urgent meeting. Hopefully he was still too shocked to have started any actions...

The PM pressed his intercom:

'Yes, Sir?'

'Invite the chancellor over here right away and please extend my sincerest apologies for my earlier outburst.'

'Yes, Prime Minister.'

At least the chancellor should recognize that since the "meteorite air blast" a state of emergency was in force, even if the outside world wasn't aware of it.

The PM pressed his intercom again:

'Yes, Sir?'

'I'd also like you to invite the American ambassador over for drinks at 6pm. Also invite Sir Neville Stonehatch, actually make his invitation for 5:30.'

'Yes, Prime Minister.'

Maybe the drone strike was premature, but he *was* going to go to Wiltshire and Stonehatch and Collier *would* be attending! Dosogne could see to that if need be. He reached for his phone and texted: 1800.

Once the cat had polished off the T-bone its anger fully dissipated and it became sluggish. It took the lead without any objections and was prepared to walk to heel but only if Russell walked extremely slowly. It occurred to Russell that it was in fact *he* who was walking to heel.

'Hurry up!' shouted Ceres, from the edge of the car park.

Reluctant to rush Mr. Waterstone, Russell maintained the slow pace, finally reaching a stile that separated the Red Lion car park from a bridleway that led up the slope behind the hotel. Russell carefully negotiated the cat through the stile but as soon as the gradient kicked in Mr. Waterstone sat down. And wouldn't budge.

‘You’ll have to carry him,’ shouted Ceres; along with Michael she had not waited for them and was now marching purposefully up the hill.

Russell glanced down at the cat which was staring blankly at nothing, like it was asleep with its eyes open. It was a relief to see it quiescent at last but how near the surface was that literally volcanic temper? Probably not far, which meant there was no prospect of just leaving it here...

‘All right then, fella, I’ll have to carry you. I’m sure you’ll let me know if that’s a problem...’

Mr. Waterstone did not react and so Russell tentatively reached down and placed his hands under the cat’s massive belly. Contact. Still no reaction. Good. Russell began to lift.

‘Bloody hell, cat! You’re like a sack of coal!’ Russell groaned. Mr. Waterstone was heavier than he looked, and that was saying something. He brought the cat up to his chest and held it in a double-armed cradle lift. ‘If I do my back in do you think Ceres will fix it for me?’

Mr. Waterstone let out another adenoidal grunt.

‘Nah, me neither!’ Russell muttered, as he began to climb. The slope, the heavy cat and the intense heat all combined to make the journey up the bridleway hellish. On several occasions Russell tried to stop for a rest but if he ever attempted to lower the cat it would begin a rumbling growl.

After fifteen minutes, going on ten years, the gradient finally began to flatten out; Russell and Mr. Waterstone caught up with Ceres and Michael at a gate that led to a wheat field.

‘Are we there yet?’ enquired Russell.

‘Not yet,’ replied Michael, surveying the view beyond the gate. ‘We need to head along this field, then through that small copse over there. The crop circle should be in the field beyond that.’

Russell lowered Mr. Waterstone to the ground. ‘You can walk it from here, buddy!’

The cat just looked glazed.

‘Where’s the nearest drone, Michael?’ Ceres asked.

‘Six kilometres to the south, ma’am.’

‘Get it over here to check out the characteristics of this one, would you?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘We already know what it looks like,’ remarked Russell.

‘They have other properties,’ replied Michael.

‘Such as?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Ceres led the others to a tramline in the field but Mr. Waterstone again flopped down and refused to move as soon as the wheat began to surround the group. Russell, out of frustration, began to drag the cat by its lead but a snarling growl persuaded him to carry it once again. The group entered the small wood and slowly made their way to the other side. The canopy provided blessed relief from the relentless sun but fallen branches and hidden potholes made the going particularly difficult for Russell. Before reaching the other edge Ceres instructed everyone to stop.

‘Where’s the drone now?’ she asked.

'Directly overhead this copse, ma'am.'
 'Has it made a pass over the circle?'
 'I thought it prudent to bypass the circle for now, until we conduct a blue analysis.'
 'And?'
 'Still processing, ma'am.'
 Everyone waited.
 'Processing complete... Oh, category 5: *Grand Cerulean!* ...and some spikes into the ethereal...'

'So is that a good thing?' asked Russell.
 'Yes and no,' replied Michael, 'on the one hand, it packs some genuine cosmic power, that's always nice...'

'But on the other hand?' prompted Russell.
 'It'll interfere with our perception filters.'
 'Oh,' replied Russell, 'that is going to be a problem if Bosman and his team are still here,'

'They are,' replied Ceres, 'look! The field is crawling with croppies.'
 Russell followed Ceres's gaze and saw that the field ahead contained at least twenty people. 'Would it be alright if you stayed here in this wood, Michael?' he asked.
 'It would *not* be alright if I stayed here in this wood, Russell! I'm not missing this one for anything!'

Ceres beckoned the group to follow her again.
 'Wait!'

'What is it, Mr. Tebb!?'
 'I have an idea!'

'This should be good,' replied Michael.
 'We're researching locations for a film shoot!'

'Brilliant.'
 'Okay, you, Michael, are an animatronics model. Can you walk awkwardly?'

'I dare say,' replied the spider.
 'And if you could make some crude gearing sounds, etc?'

'Whatever.'
 'Good, and Ceres, you are the star of the movie.'
 'Naturally,' replied Ceres, '...what's the movie called?'

'Erm... 'Trapdoor!'
 'Christ!' said Michael, 'and you think the croppies will buy all this with me clunking around like a robot?'

'Well, if anyone queries this we'll say it's mainly CGI, and we just use you for some of the close-ups.'

'Okay, what about him?' asked Michael, pointing at Mr. Waterstone, who was now asleep and snoring gently.
 'He's a stunt cat.'
 Both Michael and Ceres laughed.
 'Yeah, he looks like a stunt cat!' replied Ceres.
 'Well, he's knackered after a hard day's stunting! Come on, work with me!' pleaded Russell.

Ceres glanced at Michael: 'Shall we do this?'

'Oh, what the hell!' replied Michael, 'I suppose I'd better practice my "moves".'

The spider advanced down another set of tramlines in a series of rudimentary steps, all accompanied by loud machine noises.

'Don't overdo it, Michael,' advised Russell, 'this is not an episode of classic Doctor Who we're filming here, you can be a bit slicker than that!'

'Noted,' replied Michael. He adjusted his gait and sound effects until Russell was satisfied, and the group progressed slowly towards the busy centre of the field. The weight of Mr. Waterstone was, once again, beginning to strain Russell. He needed a distraction until he could finally drop the cat at the circle.

'So, is there *anything* you can tell me about this circle? Like, who made it? And please don't say "you won't understand"!'

'It's the universe, init,' replied Michael. 'The pictogram displayed in this field is a multi-faceted representation of the golden ratio. Any ratio you care to measure within the circle reveals this. The fact that there are literally hundreds of them here is evidence that we are in the presence of a true mathematical masterpiece!'

'You were right the first time, I don't understand.' Russell shifted Mr. Waterstone to a side-hold in an attempt to relieve his straining sinews. 'You don't think our collective unconsciousness is responsible then?' he added.

'Collective unconscious,' corrected Michael, 'no, not this time.'

'So what's the point of this thing?' enquired Russell. 'Does it convey a message, or is the universe just showing off?'

'It can be interpreted,' replied Ceres, from behind Russell.

'...And!' replied Russell, starting to lose his cool.

'It's difficult to translate into English, Russell,' replied Michael, 'but I'll have a stab at it: hmm, let's see... perhaps: "*Third Eye*"..? or maybe: "*All-seeing Eye*"..? That's not quite right, though. Any thoughts, ma'am?'

'Nothing I wish to share, Michael.'

Apart from Michael's machine sounds, the group completed their stroll to the centre of the field in silence. Once there, everyone promptly ignored Celia Browning's earlier plea about stepping on the actual circle, but with the site already compromised by this army of croppies the request did sound rather redundant now. Before Russell could drop the cat it suddenly bounded out of his grasp and then proceeded to perform its strange dressage prance around the outer rim of the circle.

'Well, *he's* lost it!' observed Russell.

'Excuse me, we are conducting— *what the hell is that!*' shouted Bosman, as he came striding over from the centre of the circle.

'*That* is an animatronics model, *he* is a stunt cat, *he* is an assistant producer and *I* am a *star!*' replied Ceres, imperiously.

'Yes, and we will commence filming here shortly so I'm afraid you will all have to leave now,' Russell added.

Bosman and the others quickly gathered up their equipment and evacuated the field. Russell watched as they congregated at the edge near a series of parked cars.

'Is there a road over there!?' he asked, incredulously. 'So why did—!?'

'Is that all you can think about?' said Ceres.

Russell turned to face her: 'Whoa!' he shouted, taking a few steps back. He'd been so preoccupied with the prospect of Michael revealing too much, never had it occurred to him that Ceres would do the same, or that he himself had been subject to some form of subtle perception filter these last few days.

'Nothing's changed, Mr. Tebb,' replied Ceres, with a predator's glint.

True enough: she was still a tall and very beautiful woman by appearance. Physically human, as before. But now so much more. Was it an enhanced aura he was sensing? More like a tsunami of massive, almost limitless, psychic power.

He turned away, not because she was now too unbearable to behold, or anything remotely like that, but simply to get a sense of perspective: the surrounding landscape – the crops, the trees, the hedgerows. The croppies! The birds. The other creatures that hid from view. All this was *Ceres!* And a tiny, tiny part of it! Even *he* was part of it! He recalled this impression from *The Truth* – revealed back then in but a fleeting moment. Now, however, it could be studied; he returned his gaze to the woman. She was... *vast!* But vast like a view of the ocean, or the rainforest – no real reason to be overwhelmed by it.

'I finally get you,' he whispered.

'No you don't,' replied Ceres. She slapped Russell across the back of his head to break him out of his trance. 'But at last you *see* me...'

'Whatever,' replied Russell, rubbing his head.

'Ha! That's more like it, for a moment I thought I'd swallowed you up, Mr. Tebb. Come on, if you think I'm amazing, come and take a look at this circle!' Ceres turned her back on Russell and began to inspect the flattened crop as she slowly made her way to the centre.

'This circle is brill!' exclaimed Michael, adopting his own version of Mr. Waterstone's prance, albeit a more mechanical version. He skipped and sashayed along the edge of the circle directly opposite to the cat. 'Come on, Russell, check it out! It's like undoing the top button of your soul jacket!'

Meanwhile Ceres had reached the exact centre of the circle and was now beginning to rotate on the spot with her arms stretched out and pointing directly at both the cat and the spider. What would the croppies be making of all this!? Russell glanced over to the cluster of people standing at the edge of the field. From this distance it was hard to read their expressions but all were staring back intently, some through binoculars. He turned around and looked for the drone that was supposedly overhead the copse: it was visible, but only barely – just a tiny black speck. Maybe the movie-set idea would work if that was believed to be the camera. Who was he kidding! He stepped out into the circle and briefly thought of joining the others for a skip, but whatever it was that was floating their collective boat did not seem to be affecting him.

The first thing that struck Russell about the circle was its extraordinary precision: the boundaries between flattened and standing crop formed perfect lines and arcs; no wheat stalks were half-up; none were broken; the flattened crop was woven expertly, rather than just battered down.

But beyond that there really wasn't much more to see from ground level, and he'd already viewed the design back at the Red Lion. He considered getting bored, but felt he surely must be missing something. The others were certainly having a whale of a time. As

he continued to investigate, a bizarre notion began to take hold. At first he just assumed it was an idea that had popped into his head but as time went on he started to really feel it. It was a sense of viewing this entire scene from the perspective of a very ancient past life.

‘Is there such a thing as reincarnation?’ he asked, as the group continued to rotate.

‘All life is *Ceres*,’ replied Ceres.

‘In other words, Russell, your question is redundant,’ added Michael: ‘Everything now dead is a past life – for you, and for everything else. Something or someone must once have had a vision of this moment: The intelligent question would be: why?’

‘Okay, why?’ asked Russell.

‘No idea, you tell me,’ replied Michael.

Russell shrugged, he had no idea either. Like *déjà vu*, this tantalizing impression just melted away when scrutinized and only returned as his focus drifted. If indeed an ancient Briton had once foreseen this scene – whilst *he* stood within this *stone* circle – he did so directly through Russell, through his thoughts and sensations of the here-and-now. For him to focus on the seer amounted to the seer focusing on his own real life. Thus breaking the connection. Russell did have a sense that the ancient vision had dropped in-and-out at times, like a bad phone signal. Try as he may, he could make no further progress with this. He suspected the seer’s life and times were not important. The *present* was important; the fate of humanity rested on it! And the long-dead ancient cared about this. Why? Did he know about the Sponsors? No impression. If he did he either saw them as gods or devils. If Russell knew the answer to that it could help him decide where he himself stood on the ‘big question’. Did the seer know about Ceres, or maybe even Mr. Waterstone? Still no clear impression. What about emotions? Finally something tangible: Anxiety. Fear. The seer was witnessing the present – and he did not like it one little bit!

Russell did not reply to Michael.

After about ten more minutes the reverie began to wind down as, reminiscent of Russell’s first encounter with this gang, the spider and cat began to spiral inwards. When they reached Ceres both offered and received something akin to a high-five. Then it was all over.

‘Come on, let’s get out of here,’ declared Ceres, ‘We’ll have one of the croppies give us a lift back to the hotel. I fancy a pie.’ She led the others down a tramline that would take them directly to the croppies who were now milling around restlessly, but still watching closely.

Michael followed, with Russell ambling slowly behind, still troubled by his experience. Where was the cat?

‘Will Mr. Waterstone need–?’ began Russell, but the cat suddenly zoomed out from the nearby standing crop directly in front of him, and then was lost again to the field.

‘No,’ replied Ceres.

Russell eyed the croppies nervously: ‘We may have some issues with them. They’ve been watching us intently the whole time and I’m not sure your, err... I’m not sure the movie line will quite work now. And I think they’re somewhat awestruck by you, Ceres. You have been giving it large!’

'It'll be fine when we reach them. Just feed them any old flannel, Mr. Tebb,' replied Ceres.

'My perception filter will be broken now that they've focused directly on me, so I'll have to carry on with my updated K-9 shtick,' remarked Michael.

'They've seen you cavorting around the circle, Michael!' replied Russell.

'Just say it's a pre-programmed set of moves,' suggested Michael.

In due course the group reached the croppies who immediately surrounded them; scraps of paper and other items were being waved frantically. Ceres graciously stopped to sign her autograph for anyone who wanted it. No one was interested in getting Russell's autograph, instead he had to endure a barrage of technical film questions and it soon became apparent that he would receive no help in answering those. In fact Ceres, when asked any kind of question, always directed the inquisitor to: "Little Mr. Tebb".

Little Mr. Tebb tried his best:

'What's the movie about?'

'A bunch of mutated trapdoor spiders are attacking Wiltshire.'

'Why?'

'They're interested in the crop circles, they're an energy source.'

'Who made the spider!?!'

'Japanese company, we blend in CGI as well.'

'Which CGI house are you using?'

'err, BSDW.'

'Never heard of them!'

'They're new, you will!'

'Who's the director?'

'James Cameron.'

'Wow! Where is he?'

'See that drone?'

'Wow!'

'Can we meet him?'

'He's a very busy man, and he's got a hell of a temper on him!'

'Holy shit, what was that!!??'

'That's Mr. Waterstone, our stunt cat. He's also got a hell of a temper on him so don't try to pet him.'

'What's he used for?'

'You know, general stunting and that, he's mainly used in the battle scenes. Anyway, if one of you could give us a lift back to the Red Lion Hotel we'll happily get out of your hair and leave you to your research. Okay, people, don't crowd the talent! Thank you! Move aside please!'

One of Bosman's star-struck underlings, Kerstin Wahlmann, drove Russell and the others back to the Red Lion in her Toshiba hire car. Ceres sat at the front and chatted enthusiastically with Kerstin in fluent and very rapid German. Kerstin would frequently giggle and attempt a surreptitious glance back at Russell in the rear-view mirror. Russell sat behind with a motionless Michael to his side and a squirming, hyperactive Mr. Waterstone on his lap. After about five minutes they arrived at the car park and were

dropped off near the Bentley. Kirsten then drove off, presumably straight back to the circle.

‘Collect your suitcase, Mr. Tebb, I’ve booked a room,’ announced Ceres.

‘For all of us?’ replied Russell, eying Michael with ill-disguised distaste. Michael responded by lying on his back and wriggling his legs about in the air. Russell ignored him, and as he reached into the boot to grab his suitcase he noticed the machine that had previously been used to print the human crop circle photograph.

‘Do you have a high-res picture of that circle up there?’ he asked, pointing in the general direction of the rise behind the hotel.

‘No problem,’ replied Michael, as he quickly reoriented himself and began fiddling with the machine in the boot. Another large sheet of glossy paper began to emerge. Ceres then grabbed it and, as before, placed it on the gravel near the car. Everyone studied it in silence.

It was certainly a beautiful pictogram, and the knowledge of its extreme precision, not to mention the various effects it had had on everyone, added to its mystique and grandeur. But...

‘It’s nowhere near as detailed as Gerry’s efforts,’ Russell finally declared.

‘Philistine!’ replied Michael.

‘Do you not find this circle fascinating, Mr. Tebb?’ asked Ceres.

‘I do. By the way, did a *stone* circle once occupy that area in earlier times?’

‘It did indeed,’ replied Michael, ‘well spotted. The Romans eventually trashed it.’

‘So, is it a sacred site or something?’

‘You could say that. It’s a hotspot over the saltwater aquifer that covers this entire region. It tends to attract circles of one form or another,’ remarked Michael.

‘Hmm, that *is* fascinating!’ replied Russell, honestly, as he continued to study the picture.

‘Do you know what else is fascinating about this crop circle?’ enquired Ceres.

‘What?’

‘It is directed at a particular recipient.’

‘You lot?’

‘No, you.’

‘You mean humanity?’

‘No, Mr. Tebb – just you.’

‘You need to sign for this.’

‘Sure.’ Alan scrawled his signature on the courier’s electronic pad and collected the package. He opened it to reveal a CD and a ninety-four-page manual.

‘Good grief!’ The manual was pure business technobabble! It even included mathematical formulae! Had Warner written all this in just the last few hours – *and* set-up The Rare-Earth Trading Company (RETC)? Well, apparently she had, and now she was expecting Alan to do his part! There was a scribbled covering note: *“Load the CD and*

follow the set-up instructions. Make sure you understand Chapter 2, you will need to explain this in layman's terms to the PM at 5pm. Gavin will pick you up at 4.30!"

That gave him just over an hour of study time. Crap! Chapter 2, entitled: *Vacant Portals*, was thirty-three pages long! Alan skimmed through it. The gist seemed to be that there were five secret access points to RETC: one for Alan, one for Warner, one for the PM – and two spares. These would allow the users to buy and sell rare earths on the international commodities markets without: a/ being noticed and b/ driving the prices down if the market for a particular element became over-sold. So not only was it utilizing the markets, it was also hiding from them and distorting them as well. Warner was a piece of work!

Alan checked the other chapter headings: mainly corporate governance; embedding the structure within GFS; secret bank accounts; Cayman Island holding companies etc, etc. Sooner or later he'd have to understand all that as well. There was also a chapter entitled: *China*. That nation currently enjoyed a virtual monopoly in some rare earth mining and so would not take kindly to being pushed aside, even if it had no idea how that was happening; dealing with them would require special treatment, including a few "fried brains". Hmm. He loaded the CD and viewed his screen as various installation wizards did their thing. Ah! Finished! That was remarkably quick and glitch-free!

He began to study chapter 2...

4.20. Alan closed the manual and rubbed his eyes. He'd managed to install his "portal" and even test it with a couple of dummy transactions: all seemed well, but now he'd have to describe this to the PM and that would be more challenging since he still did not truly understand the tangled and labyrinthine processes involved – and the PM surely wouldn't either. It was unlikely, for example, that he'd be able to answer any questions the PM might raise. He was banking on Warner's headphones doing some of the work for him, but he'd also need to keep this manual to hand as well.

He placed the manual in an attaché case and the CD in his lower drawer which he then locked, despite Warner's assurances that neither the CD nor the material now on his computer constituted any kind of security risk. He'd take her word for that, naturally, but it was still disconcerting to have this powerful software at his disposal – and it wasn't even protected by any passwords or encryptions. His own firewall had ignored it. Anti-virus software also failed to acknowledge its presence. "Hidden in plain sight", was all Warner offered by way of explanation.

Alan stood and put on his jacket.

'Going somewhere?'

It was Jim Fairclough, standing by his door.

'Hi, Jim, I have an appointment with Helen Warner at 5pm,' replied Alan.

'Another one? You two have been as thick as thieves lately. So what does our esteemed owner want that requires so much of your time?'

'It's a complex financial deal that she's putting together, difficult to explain.'

'Try me,' replied Fairclough.

Alan grimaced. His next meeting with Warner would have to address the issue of Jim Bloody Fairclough! Considering the issues at stake, and the promise of running GFS, it was becoming ridiculous that he continued to feel the need to obfuscate and dance

around his boss like this! The trouble was that he actually felt slightly sorry for Fairclough. He'd never experienced proper human empathy before, just the manipulative, knowledge-based empathy the Sponsors had equipped him with. But this was different, this was sympathy. Fairclough could, and would, be bounced out of the way soon enough – but he simply didn't deserve to be treated like this! Fairclough had already demonstrated his competence, both as a financial expert and also as an office manager. The staff had quickly warmed to him and were happily initiating the reorganizations he was beginning to introduce, most of which seemed to be aimed at making the staff happier at work. Bruce would never have done anything like that! Maybe it was time to bring things to a head right now.

'Jim... I haven't got much time, Warner's driver will be picking me up shortly and I can't afford to delay him, not even for a minute–'

'Go on!' urged Fairclough, looking both serious and intimidating.

'I will be taking over the running of GFS shortly.'

Fairclough was clearly flabbergasted and he shot Alan a very hostile glare. He began to breath heavily, but said nothing.

'You will be retained as office manager, you seem to be very adept at that,' added Alan, winging it.

Fairclough remained silent for a few more seconds before replying: 'I was taken on to *run* GFS – not be the office clerk! This is totally unacceptable. I feel more inclined to resign, quite frankly!'

'Whoa! Steady on, Jim! You still will be effectively running GFS, but under me. And you can take over most of my client roster as well and add to it as you see fit. Perhaps by poaching some of the clients from your previous employer, the merchant bank.'

Fairclough looked thunderous and Alan wondered if he was about to get punched. 'So, more work and a lower status. What about my salary!?'

'That will remain the same. We can negotiate bonuses etc.'

'And Ms. Warner has approved this?'

'Of course,' Alan lied. This was getting horribly out of hand: he'd just offered a guy that was due to be fired both his job back and much of Alan's – and the same salary. Jesus! Warner would have a cow over this!

Fairclough began to mull this over as Alan's office phone rang.

'Yes?'

'There's a Gavin Sturgess at reception.'

'I'll be right there!' replied Alan. 'I have to go, we'll go over the details of this tomorrow.'

'Yes, we will,' replied Fairclough. Alan offered his hand and after a short but agonising delay, Fairclough grabbed it. He almost broke Alan's fingers.

Alan sat glumly in the back of Warner's car and reflected on his first experience of management. He sucked at it! Luckily Gavin wasn't the sort to make annoying small-talk. The entire journey proceeded in silence.

'You *what!*?'

'I don't see why this is an issue! Fairclough is good with the staff; he's introducing

efficiencies to the office; and he can take over the other clients! I can't do all that *and* this shit as well!

'It was not your call to make, Alan! Did it not occur to you that *I* have plans for the reorganization of GFS!?'

'Yes, making me boss and—'

'No! you were going to be the office manager and I the boss! GFS will be the linchpin of our entire operation and we can't have an idiot like Fairclough in the middle of it.'

Alan felt humiliated, and worried. 'What are we going to do then?'

'*We!*? ... *You* are going to fire him first thing tomorrow!'

'But—'

'No buts! Have you studied chapter two of the RETC document?'

Alan sighed. 'I have.'

'Well that's something, I suppose,' Warner checked the time. 'You're on in six.'

The PM paced around his office; it was nearly 5pm and time for another tête-à-tête with Dosogne. What would he have for him? The terse text message received in the middle of his awkward meeting with the chancellor had not revealed very much – just the time of this appointment. He chose to take that as a positive sign. He needed a positive.

The chancellor had, as expected, been furious at the perceived show of disrespect earlier. The PM was hoping to spin his profanities as a stress induced outburst but the Asperger's chancellor had always been oblivious to the troubles and perspectives of others and that excuse just wouldn't wash. The PM had been forced to eat humble pie and apologize. Profusely. That at least had averted the immediate threat of a coup but, longer term, the threat remained. The chancellor was, of course, preoccupied by the prospect of a severe recession hitting the country and damaging his reputation; he was demanding the implementation of various draconian economic measures to pre-empt disaster as he saw it. The PM had no intention of signing up to any of these as he now no longer saw the point: the UK could simply spend its way out of trouble, bankrolled all the way by countless rare-earth billions. But he couldn't spell that out to the chancellor, not without at least partially bringing him into the loop, and he was never going to do that! He gave his chancellor the impression of consent, largely by agreeing with everything he said. However, if Dosogne could *deliver*, he'd get rid the chancellor at the earliest appropriate moment and then use Dosogne again to deal with any political fallout. He almost couldn't wait!

He shook his head. The old political instincts were coming to the fore again, and, quite frankly, there were much more serious matters at hand – like saving the human race, for example.

'Agh!!' This stank! This wasn't politics, not *his* type of politics! This required... 'a statesman,' he finished, out loud. Actually, if this all panned out—

'Testing, testing. Good evening, Prime Minister, are you receiving me?'

The voice came from his left and he quickly spun around to view his monitor, yep there he was, and bang on time!

‘Receiving you loud-and-clear, Mr. Dosogne.’

‘Good. The black-budget operation has been established according to your earlier guidelines: DEFRA are no longer involved and you can now manage the funds yourself, with or without our assistance. Should you wish to divert monies to or from the treasury – you can do that as well.’

The PM was impressed, impressed as a ten-year-old boy would be on receiving an amazing birthday present. It was incredible! This *must* be the work of the Malevolence, no human could do this! He studied the image on his screen: Dosogne looked distinctly frazzled; maybe even alien fungi occasionally got stressed! Except Dosogne, of course, was just the human lackey.

‘I’m impressed, Mr. Dosogne, but proof of the pudding and all that...’

‘Indeed, Prime Minister. I will now attempt to talk you through the technicalities, erm, they are quite formidable, but I can assure you that security is not, nor ever will be, an issue to worry about.’

‘Does that include knowledge of the ash cloud’s composition? There’s still a lot of ash to be collected, and anybody can have it tested.’

‘Yep, we managed to place a stop on that before it went viral. Several parties have been investigating, but only a small handful of labs can handle the relevant tests and we’re doctoring their reports as they are sent back. It just needed a classic Sponsor solution: break the communication links; disrupt all online gossip concerning the matter; ensure the power brokers only know what you want them to know. Nevertheless, a number of people do know about this, but they’ve been effectively quarantined. It’s dealt with.’

‘Very thorough, Mr. Dosogne. Okay, proceed.’

5.30. The PM’s intercom buzzed. The interruption came as something of a relief. He spoke into the speaker: ‘Stand by a moment, please.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s my five-thirty, we’ll have to wrap things up for now, but, err, I think we’ll need to schedule another meeting regarding all this. It is, as you say, rather technical. Anyway, despite that, I am fully satisfied that this is viable and so I will proceed as per your instructions re: the American ambassador.’

‘Excellent! Are you meeting the ambassador now?’

‘No, he’s at six, as I indicated in the text. This is MI6. I’m following up on your lead concerning the “Gang of Four” and I don’t want any interference with this one, understood?’

‘Yes, please text us when you want to go over the RETC procedures again.’

‘Sure, will do.’

Dosogne’s image vanished from his monitor, but he would be back at six to “condition” the ambassador. That would be interesting to observe; would there be any signs? It was disquieting to think that Dosogne – and chum – could just as easily be doing that to himself, although he’d received assurances that that would not be the case and would in fact be counter-productive. Smelled like spin. He hoped not. Well, if he had been nobbled surely he’d grasp all this black-budget shit better...

‘Send Sir Neville through, would you?’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

‘Good, that went well enough: he’ll position the ambassador for us now. Shall we head back to my office? No point just hanging around here for the next half hour.’

‘Do you not want to listen in to the MI6 stuff?’ asked Alan, removing his headphones.

‘Nah,’ replied Warner, as she led Alan through the roaring mainframes and then back to her plush office: ‘I know he’s now dead-set on confronting the Gang of Four tomorrow and he’ll rope in MI6 to help.., you know what? – we should go too.’

‘What!? To Wiltshire? With the PM?’

‘Not with the PM! But yeah, why not? We’ll get Gavin to drive us. It’s not every day one receives an audience with a god – let alone three!’

Alan winced. ‘What makes you so sure we’ll receive “an audience” with them, or that such a thing is even worth having!? They’ve been very slippery up to now.’

‘Correction, Alan, they *were* slippery whilst in London, but since decamping to Wiltshire they’ve been leaving trails everywhere, and their base of operations is now almost certainly established as the Red Lion Hotel near Alton. Either they’ve suddenly grown careless or...’

Alan waited impatiently for Warner to finish her sentence. ‘...Or what!?’

‘Or they want us there. Do you not feel the pull?’

‘No, Helen, I do not. If you’d been shown *The Truth*—’

‘Rubbish! I reckon Russell Tebb was shown “The Truth”, and he seems quite happy to be working with them. You just had a rough one because of your Sponsor connection.’

‘How do you *know* that?’

‘I don’t, just... intuition I guess. Sherry?’

‘Go on then.’ Alan watched as Warner poured sherry from a crystal decanter into a couple of small, dainty glasses and handed one to him: ‘Thanks. So you actually feel a “pull” do you?’

‘Well, not in any tangible sense, more a burning curiosity. Curse of the super-bright, I guess.’

Alan downed his sherry in one go.

‘Sherry is for *sipping*, Alan. We may need to send you to finishing school.’

‘Huh?’

‘Nothing. Another?’

‘Thanks... How’s this: you go to Wiltshire tomorrow, and I stay here – well out of it thank you very much.’

‘As you wish,’ replied Warner, sounding slightly disappointed, ‘you can stay here and deal with the dismissal of Fairclough.’

All of a sudden another confrontation with the angry Earth banshee no longer seemed quite so bad. ‘I s’pose...’

‘Great! That’s settled then. You can deal with Fairclough on Monday. In the

meantime you could do with a day off – I’m starting to worry about your stress levels!’

Alan rolled his eyes at Warner: ‘I need a holiday from *you*, Helen!’ He drained his second glass of sherry, and glanced over at the decanter.

Warner frowned: ‘I thought we could head over to the Holborn wine bar later, so no more sherries for you!’

‘Alright, Mum!’

‘Don’t call me that! Although God knows you need one, “*Analogue Alan*”. In some ways you’re like a newborn baby!’

Alan shrugged, but he felt uncomfortable. Thoughts of his real parents flooded into his mind, filling him with a sense of guilt and regret. Warner, of course, picked up on this:

‘Do you keep in touch with your mother and father?’

‘Let’s drop it!’

‘Why?’

Alan sighed: ‘I haven’t seen them for a few years. The Sponsors never encouraged contact, although they never actively barred it, as such. We’ve just kinda drifted apart.’

‘Hmm, I see,’ replied Warner, reflecting on this. ‘The Sponsor’s may well have quietly barred it. They clearly had no interest in your humanity and they provided you with a lifestyle that suited *them*: hence you lived alone, in a sterile apartment and you forgot about your past.’

‘I did not forget my past! Look, what’s your point, Helen?’

‘I haven’t got a point.’

‘Well please stop making this... *non-point!*’

Warner did not reply but she continued to regard Alan closely. He decided to change the subject:

‘Your work on RETC was superlative – even for a genius!’

‘Thanks!’ Warner was clearly flattered by this and her close scrutiny of Alan suddenly ceased, much to his relief.

‘How did you do all that in such a short space of time?’

‘Oh, you know me, I don’t like to blow my own trumpet.’

‘Yes you do!’

Warner laughed: ‘True enough! Okay, well, I have similar structures in place elsewhere so it was largely a cut-and-paste job, if you know what I mean?’

‘Not literally, but I can imagine. Are you the cleverest person on the planet?’

‘I’m the only one that outsmarted the Sponsors!’

‘So that’s a “yes” then.’ Warner did not respond.

Alan opened his attaché case and retrieved the RETC document; he began flicking through it... ‘I haven’t had time to study all of this in detail yet, but something concerns me...’

‘What?’ enquired Warner, glancing down at the document with an expression of complete confidence.

‘Isn’t allowing the PM to transfer funds to and from the treasury risky. I mean, I can understand that we will keep the actual transactions hidden, but surely sooner or later this will all have to get audited: you can’t cheat basic maths, if the numbers don’t add up they’ll go looking for a trail, and if they don’t find one that will surely raise alarm bells!’

'Who's this "they"?'
'Treasury officials: accountants, auditors etc.'
'Precisely! You've answered your own question!'
'Huh!? Oh, you mean we "fry" them!'
'Yeah, already done. The human element will always need special treatment. There's more on how that's done in the "China" section.'
'But... how did you reach the treasury officials? I thought the PM was our only conduit,' asked Alan, as he rifled through the document.
'Later, Alan – we should head back to the terminal room now, it's time for a light fry-up.'

'Bolly!'
'Prime Minister!'
'Always a pleasure!'
'The pleasure is all mine!'
The two men engaged in a hearty and prolonged back-slapping session before breaking off in perfect unison.
'Bourbon?'
'I'd prefer a gin and tonic!'
'Coming right up! Twist of lemon?'
'Sure.'
The PM poured the ambassador's drink and glanced over towards his desk monitor: still just the screen saver...
'Expecting something? Thanks,' enquired the ambassador, as he received his drink.
'Ha! You don't miss anything, do you!? Yes, there's some material due at any moment – secure line from MI6 – just checking.'
'Material for me?'
'Of course, Bolly, I haven't just asked you over here to talk about golf. By the way, how is the handicap?'
'She's doing fine.'
The PM laughed uproariously at the ambassador's joke as he ushered him over to view his monitor screen: 'Please take a seat.'
The ambassador sipped on his G&T and idly fiddled with the mouse to remove the screensaver, but it persisted.
'So what have you got for me?' he asked, after a moment, 'I'm assuming it is to do with Monday's unfortunate events, we've been trying to contact you guys but parts of the British government are now in virtual lock-down since– ah, what's this?'
The screensaver had been replaced by an official-looking document.
'Eyes-only on this one, no hard copies, sorry,' said the PM, as he averted his own eyes from the document which was in fact largely nonsensical and loaded with potent subliminal tags.

'The explosion over London was caused by a meteorite air-burst. The mass was totally reduced to pumice and this subsequently fell to earth as ash,' stated the PM.

'Uh huh,' replied the ambassador, speed-reading the document.

'Analysis shows trace amounts of various rare-earth elements but nothing at all significant, despite what the rumour-mill might be saying.'

'Uh huh.'

'There is nothing mysterious about this event. But it has caused significant dislocation in this country, accounting for the "lock-down", as you put it.'

'Yeah.'

'This information is very reliable and should be trusted.'

'Absolutely!'

Good, that was "phase one" out of the way. The PM checked the ambassador's face: he seemed normal; he continued to read the document rapidly and even broke off at one point to take a swig from his drink.

'We are concerned, however, that more, even larger, asteroids are currently earthbound.'

'Yes, I see. This is alarming!'

'You can confirm all this with your own tracking systems, but you must avoid telling the public.'

'Of course!'

'We, the UK, possess special technology and have devised a strategy for deflecting this space-debris, but it will require sending a lot of hardware up into orbit. We'll need the help of our most trusted friend for that: The United States of America!'

'You can always depend on us, Prime Minister!'

'You must stress the importance of this to your political leaders.'

'I will! I can assure you of that!'

Thanks, Bolly! You are a true friend to Britain, and to the wider world! I'm sure your political currency will rise sharply if you play your cards right on this one!

The ambassador did not reply but seemed to agree wholeheartedly. After a few more seconds the document vanished and the screensaver returned.

'Whoa!'

'Indeed!' The PM gave the ambassador a friendly pat on the shoulder and then handed him a small sheet of paper on which were printed several names: 'We will need to speak to these industrialists and these security directors. I am prepared to brief them personally. Can you make arrangements for them to be flown over? They will all receive full diplomatic status.'

The ambassador knocked back the remainder of his drink and stood up sharply. He shook the PM's hand: 'I'm on it! You can rely on me, Prime Minister!'

'I know.'

The band members returned to the stage to commence their second session. If it were

anything like their first, he'd consider retiring to his room.

'What's up, 'Tebby? You look glum. Don't you like your buddies' music?' enquired Gerry. He was sneering, but not because he too found the "music" to be a cacophonous discordant racket – he was just sneering because that's what Gerry did. At least relations had been normalized since the previous night, Gerry and his fellow crop circle makers weren't the type to hold a grudge and had in fact cheered loudly when they spotted Russell entering the Red Lion's bar. This, of course, had wound Russell up, but with Ceres and the others responding in kind to Gerry's bonhomie he'd been forced to go along with it and be friendly. It remained difficult, though, Gerry was such a relentless piss-taker!

The music began, and, as before, it was utterly unbearable.

'No, I can't stand it!' he said in reply, but Gerry ignored him; as with the other circle makers and everyone else in the bar, his attention was now exclusively directed at the musicians.

Reluctantly Russell joined the others and focused on the performance. That should be performances, because every band member was playing a different song; in fact, they were all playing a completely different genre of music: On lead vocals, Ceres forcefully projected a soul ballad, in the style of Adele or Whitney Houston. On support vocals and lead guitar, Kev was hammering out thrash metal. To the right of the stage, and surrounded by keyboards and laptops, Mr. Waterstone dispensed some form of trancey, high energy house. At the back of the stage, and supplying the relevant percussion for everyone else, sat Michael. He was surrounded by an enormous drum kit and was gripping a stick in every paw as he bashed out several jarring rhythms with force.

Russell could bear it no longer. He stood to leave but found himself making eye-contact with Ceres. She smiled at him and brought her left hand up to her ear and made a turning motion. "Tune in" seemed to be the message. He had previously tried to focus on the individual band members but that got him nowhere: the other sounds kept bleeding through, but as he attempted to feel the spirit of their genres he found himself more able to tease bits out individually. This approach worked better because each band member was in fact also supporting the others. They were all doing what Michael was, more obviously, doing.

Ceres's power ballad was not his thing, nor was Kev's thrash metal. But a good bit of house always went down well at the aerobics studio. He focused on Mr. Waterstone's music...

Wow! Now he was getting it! Presumably the band were performing in this manner in order to cater to the various musical tastes of the audience; add a sprinkling of perception filter to make it all seem believable – and everyone in the room was probably hearing something close to perfection!

Russell, however, as always, had to work at it – never a perception filter to help *him* out...

Mr. Waterstone's house was a potent and hypnotic arrangement. The cat only seemed to use the keyboards intermittently and instead spent most of his time just dancing on the spot, throwing shapes and glaring at the audience; his moves were both languid and easy on the eye. Fat cats, it seemed, in common with fat men, always looked good when they danced.

The audience members tended to fixate on one or other of the band members. For Gerry and his crew it was either Kev or Mr. Waterstone; for Bosman and *his* crew it was either Ceres or Kev. Alas Michael, for all his physical effort, appeared to be a background figure for everyone. Curse of the drummer perhaps, although it was just as well: Michael and the others, but mainly Michael, had been forced to realign their perception filters for the croppies following “exposure” at the Third Eye crop circle. Michael was now visible to them as a giant animatronics spider, with the perception filter explaining away all his fluid movements as: “programmed”. Mr. Waterstone was simply a versatile stunt cat. Meanwhile Ceres’s Gaia radiance had dimmed since leaving the circle and what was left could be put down to star quality, or X factor.

As one of the songs ended Kerstin Wahlmann came over and sat down next to Russell. ‘Ceres is amazing! So much talent!’ she beamed.

Russell smiled in agreement and regarded Kerstin closely. She was very hot. And possibly interested, too, but it really was hard to tell: any attraction she might be harbouring for Russell was clearly eclipsed by an utter love and adoration for Ceres.

Russell felt jealous, and outgunned: he was competing against every other life form on the planet, even the wombats. Oh well, what did it matter; tonight he would be stuck in another one of those goddamned Gordian knots, but then *after* that... his association with the crazy gang might come to an end. So, who knew..? Kerstin smiled back at him as she moved somewhat dorkishly to the music. Yep, she was extremely hot.

The second set eventually came to a close and the band members promptly descended on Russell’s table, much to Kerstin’s delight, and Gerry’s irritation – he exchanged glances with his pals and then they all stood to leave.

‘Busy day tomorrow, bringing the harvest forward, coz of the weather and that. See ya, Tebby! Great gig, Kev, didn’t know ya had it in ya, ya big ape, haha!’

Everyone watched them leave.

‘They’re off to make the final part of the circle,’ remarked Ceres, winking at Kerstin.

‘Agh!’ screamed Kerstin, suddenly, ‘I will speak to Gunter and see if we can put a stop to this!’ She stood and signalled Bosman, who then came shambling over; he was clearly drunk: ‘Super gig, my friends, reminded me of *Destruction* at their finest, my most favouritest band in the world!’ He slapped Kev hard on his back and then joined the group at the table.

Kerstin was embarrassed by Bosman’s drunken manner and also perplexed by his description of the music. She ushered him back to his feet: ‘Come on, Gunter, let us purchase a round of drinks for the table.’

‘And crisps!’ added Ceres.

Bosman agreed and lurched towards the bar with Kerstin’s support.

‘How many has he had?’ asked Russell.

‘Just a couple of lagers,’ replied Michael.

‘Eh? Are you doing a number on him?’

‘Just a bit of incoherence while Kerstin complains about Gerry,’ explained Ceres, ‘who must be allowed to complete his work unfettered. Gunter will be sober enough when he returns, although very open: I wish to quiz him on his crop circle research.’

‘Speaking of which,’ added Michael, ‘you didn’t talk to Gerry about *his* crop circles, did you, Russell?’

‘No. I got what you were saying earlier.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah! It would be like, err, collapsing...err,’

‘The superposition?’

‘Yeah! What was that again?’

Michael sighed: ‘If Gerry ever stops to analyze his work, it would change the resultant circle: collapse it down from the human system’s to just Gerry’s own creation, thus effectively destroying its original content.’

‘Which you *still* can’t interpret.’

‘Whatever! Let’s wait for part three before jumping to conclusions on that one. I’ve not been beaten by a code yet!’

‘Are you sure there *is* a code? You all keep describing it as “gibberish”. Maybe Gerry *has* thought about what he’s constructing.’

Ceres looked pained but dismissed the idea with a shake of the head.

‘Impossible,’ Michael concurred, but then he revised that down to: ‘inconceivable.’

A depressive silence descended on the table and Russell felt it acutely. What if that jackass Gerry really was just producing nonsense? Perhaps his sneering, mocking manner was humanity’s only true message here. Perhaps when the whole image was combined all that would be revealed would be “the finger”. That meant ‘homo dumbass’ was on its way, and Russell had now finally come to the conclusion that, ghastly though it sounded, the technological singularity was the better option. As an artificially constructed species it was humanity’s destiny, surely?

He decided to change the subject:

‘By the way, got to agree with Bosman, it was a great gig once I figured out how to tune in! Loved your work, fella!’ Russell gave Mr. Waterstone a pat on his head. The cat seemed pleased.

Bosman and Kerstin returned with a variety of drinks and bar snacks.

‘For the ladies...’ Ceres was handed a packet of crisps and some sort of cocktail. Whatever it was, Kerstin had the same.

‘For the gentlemen...’ Bosman gave himself, Russell and Kev each a bottle of imported lager and a chilled glass.

‘And some rinds for our feline friend over there.’ Bosman threw a packet of pork scratchings over to Mr. Waterstone, who looked less than impressed.

Bosman finally turned to Michael: ‘Apologies, spider, but they do not serve WD40 at this establishment,’ he laughed heartily.

‘So I get bugger-all then!’ replied Michael, with obvious annoyance. This took both Bosman and Kerstin aback.

‘Whoa, I didn’t know it could speak,’ replied Bosman, studying Michael closely.

‘Yeah,’ replied Ceres, frowning at Michael, ‘it’s got a voice synthesizer connected to an advanced AI bot.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Bosman, still regarding Michael.

‘It still fails the Turing test. Try a few questions,’ suggested Russell, with a smirk towards Mr. Waterstone. The cat smirked back as it deftly opened its bag of pork

scratchings and began chomping on a large piece. It eyed both Michael and Bosman expectantly.

‘Very well,’ replied Bosman, ‘Let’s see... What is the capital of Lower Saxony?’

There was no response from Michael.

Bosman scoffed: ‘I believe it has fallen at the first, as you say.’

‘It helps if you address him by name,’ replied Ceres, now showing some amusement, ‘he’s called “Michael”.’

‘Okay... Michael—’

‘Hanover,’ replied Michael, abruptly. Bosman was delighted and clapped his hands.

‘Those sorts of questions are bread-and-butter to an AI bot, they just pull that stuff off the internet! Ask him a hard one,’ suggested Russell.

‘Very well: What is the meaning of meaning?’ asked Bosman, folding his arms in triumph.

‘Christ!’ replied Michael.

‘Is that it, spider?’

Mr. Waterstone attempted to contain a snigger by stuffing his face with more scratchings.

‘That’s all you are getting... and my name is *Michael!*’

‘Hmm...’ Bosman mulled this over: ‘It is very naturalistic, but as you say, it is not defeating the Turing test, is it?’

‘No,’ agreed Ceres. ‘Tell us about your crop circle research, Gunter. It sounds fascinating!’

‘Yes, yes, in a minute, I’ve got one more for Michael.’

‘Shoot,’ replied Michael.

‘Michael—’

‘Go on.’

‘Yes, Michael—’

‘What!?’

‘If you will let me speak, please!’

Michael remained silent, and Bosman tried once again: ‘Everything I say is a lie, including that statement, Michael.’

Michael still remained silent.

‘I have got him!’ declared Bosman.

‘No you haven’t!’ replied Michael, ‘your second statement was a truth.’

‘No, *everything* I say is a lie!’

‘No, you correctly identified your first statement as a lie, thus telling a truth. Ergo: you do not always lie. That was a lie.’

Mr. Waterstone looked very confused.

‘I *always* lie!’ shouted Bosman.

‘Oh, shut up!’ Michael shouted back.

‘Ha! I win!’ declared Bosman.

In due course the conversation turned towards crop circles and Gunter Bosman’s specific research in this area. Unlike others, Bosman was less interested in the physical peculiarities of crop circles – the bent or exploded nodes, the disruption to electrical

equipment etc – and was instead regarded as something of a scholar when it came to pictogram interpretation.

‘What did you make of that circle where we conducted our filming today?’ asked Ceres.

‘Very impressive!’ Bosman replied, ‘excellent mathematical precision, novel presentations of the golden ratio, repeated on many scales—’

‘What’s the point of it?’ asked Russell.

‘The point?’

‘Does it convey a message?’ After hearing that the Third Eye circle had been sent, like a cosmic email, specifically to him, he’d pressed the others to explain further, but they claimed not to know. It seemed unlikely that Bosman could furnish an explanation but it was worth hearing what he had to say on the matter.

‘We believe it is a warning about Earth upheavals, climate change etc,’ replied Kerstin, keen to jump in.

‘Sounds like guesswork,’ replied Ceres, sceptically.

‘No,’ asserted Bosman, ‘we cross-reference the pictograms with ancient, interpretable rune symbols from all over the world and there are commonalities. This circle does appear to be forecasting a climate disaster, maybe volcanic upheavals.

‘It never rains but it pours,’ said Russell, firing a look at Mr. Waterstone. ‘You had to get yourself a piece of the action, didn’t you?’

Mr. Waterstone was still looking confused from earlier and he gave no indication that he knew what Bosman was talking about. Russell realized that everyone was staring at him.

‘I’m sorry, I was referring to, err... Please continue, Gunter.’

‘Well that’s it!’ Bosman declared.

‘So who is this message directed at?’

‘Depends on which references you take: either “the high priest”, or “the court jester”,’ replied Kerstin.

‘Court jester!?’ cried Russell.

‘Yes, as in “*the fool*”. I believe it means all of us: the perpetrators of our own fate.’

Russell deliberately avoided looking directly at Ceres, but he could hear and feel her mocking laughter. It was a tangible force.

Chapter Five

Friday

(The Human System)

For once Alan had awoken early and on his own terms; he was appreciating this short period of me-time.

He inspected himself in the mirror: another pale-grey suit and a plain-white shirt. He looked presentable, as always, but he really needed to do something about this dreary attire: fine for Digital Alan, who was only ever interested in looking smart, but now he wanted to look *sharp*.

He removed his navy-blue tie and undid the top button of his shirt. Better, but this just brought him into line with the typical male City worker; it was still a somewhat stuffy look for a “day out” to the West Country. Not that today felt like a holiday to him, he was actually dreading it, and harbouring more than a suspicion that this was in fact a terribly ill-judged move by Warner, and, by extension, himself.

Alan ruffled his hair a bit. Better still! He was actually quite good-looking. He threw a few poses... If he could just drop the suit and perhaps... How about t-shirt and shorts? They would suit the weather better... His intercom buzzed. Too late. Anyway, he didn’t possess any t-shirts or shorts.

‘I’ll be right down.’

He left his apartment – possibly for the last time, he mused. He’d miss this place. No he wouldn’t! If he somehow managed to survive this perilous day, the first thing he’d do would be to replace it – the same time he replaced his wardrobe.

‘Got an appointment in court? Ah, no, you’ve taken your tie off.’

‘Actually, Helen, I was thinking the exact same thing. These bloody demob suits seem to be the only togs I have!’

Warner laughed. Unlike Alan, she had fully embraced the summer day-trip ethos and was standing proudly by her car wearing a bright flowery dress, matching hat and sunglasses. All very different from the dark power suits she normally favoured. She was almost unrecognizable.

‘You look...’

‘What!?’

‘Radiant!’

Warner truly deserved a better complement than *that*, however, she seemed to be happy with it. ‘Thank you! Now hop in, there’s a long drive ahead of us and perhaps we

could start off by finding a replacement for that “demob suit”.’

Warner instructed Gavin to drive to one of the West End’s large department stores where she set about finding some “suitable” clothes for Alan. An hour later, he emerged in knee-length shorts, navy plimsolls, and something called a granddad shirt. He felt horribly self-conscious; the only thing missing from this ensemble was a baseball cap with a yellow propeller on top.

‘You look fabulous, Alan,’ remarked Warner. Alan glanced over at Gavin for moral support but the t-shirt-wearing chauffeur ignored him.

The journey through London was slow but relaxed, with the conversation sticking to easy generalities such as fashion, celebrity culture and reality TV. Alan knew very little about any of these but Warner made them all sound fascinating and vital. They were the sorts of things Alan should understand better, he thought.

Eventually, perhaps after one traffic jam too many, the conversation began to stutter and Warner started to grow impatient, even fractious.

‘How long before we hit the M4, Gavin?’

‘About ten minutes?’

Warner was not impressed: ‘It would have been quicker to walk!’ The comment appeared to be directed at Gavin but she glared at Alan. And she seemed to be waiting for a reply.

‘Yep,’ agreed Alan.

Warner rolled her eyes and began studying her smart phone. Alan sat back and vacantly viewed the scenes outside the car: buildings, traffic, people... same-old, same-old – but for how much longer..?

‘Do you think we will be able to save all this?’ he asked.

‘Save *what*?’

‘The modern world!’ Alan glanced over at Gavin, and then whispered to Warner: ‘Can we speak in front of–’

‘Yes,’ replied Warner.

‘Was that a yes to–’

‘To both questions: yes we can save “this” and yes, ignore him!’

Alan felt reassured by this reply. The probabilities of success had not been discussed since Tuesday when Warner had announced that she would “go down fighting”.

‘So the odds have improved then?’

‘Not exactly *improved*, just more clearly and quantifiably understood: The genetic switching required is explained on the psynet and the technical challenges are just about compatible with modern engineering.’

Alan nodded: ‘And the psynet has demonstrated its other capabilities, and we’ve got the PM in our pocket.’

‘He’s not exactly in our pocket, but yes, we have made a satisfactory start.’ Warner continued to study her phone.

‘So what *are* the worries?’ asked Alan.

Warner switched off her phone and grudgingly replied to Alan: ‘The overall shape

of this thing.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's not just a case of activating or deactivating certain genes at certain times. This activity is in a continuous feedback loop with the human system itself, and it is this linkage that informs on what further epigenetic changes need to be applied going forward.'

'...And that's not explained on the psynet?'

'It can't be, not fully, The Sponsors were expected to work it out as they went along, to continually adapt and edit – as they had been doing for thousands of years.'

Alan frowned: 'Well that sounds bad.'

'Hmm, yes and no.'

'What do you mean?'

'The configuration needed to retain our physical forms and, broadly speaking, our mental abilities, is in place now within our genomes and can be reapplied indefinitely, every time nature, or natural selective pressure, tries to switch it back to the pre-human configuration. It'll be like weeding a garden: an endless chore rather than an impossible technical challenge.'

'Okay, *not* so bad.'

'Yes, that's the physical side of things taken care of, but remember that feedback loop I mentioned? The human system is now developing exponentially. It will soon become incompatible with the current "code" and so that code will require editing in order to keep up. And I have no idea how to do that! Any hasty intervention could spell disaster, as could no intervention.'

'We're back to bad again!'

'Hmm, well there is one morsel of hope: if the human system develops ahead of the switching code currently in place it itself may furnish the answers we need to revise the code.'

'You've lost me, Helen.'

'The study of genetics and epigenetics needs to be placed as a top priority, especially once the engineering and political battles have been won. It needs to be at the cutting edge of human-system know-how, in other words: we'll need to set up dedicated genetics labs, and we'll need the best brains the planet has to offer.'

'My god, this does sound daunting!'

'Yeah, you can say that again,' replied Warner, suddenly looking as though she carried the cares of the world upon her slender shoulders, 'and assuming we do manage to keep the whole show running, all we're effectively doing is maintaining the Sponsor programme. Should we even be doing that?'

Alan nodded: 'I've also been wondering about the Sponsors' ultimate goal. But, that's the future, right? We should just worry about the present.'

'Yes, well the future may be coming sooner than you think. Once technology passes a certain threshold it will *become* the human system. Where do you imagine actual humans will fit into that?'

'Dunno,' replied Alan.

'As slaves, bio-material or not at all, would be my guess.' Warner gazed out of her window... 'Perhaps these "Earth Gods" of yours may be willing to guide us.'

‘They’re not *mine*,’ replied Alan, ‘and why would they help? They’re more likely to hinder!’

‘I don’t think so. They have been helpful already.’

There was a knock at the door and Russell flew towards it at great speed.

‘Ughh!’

‘Goodness, whatever was that?’ came a voice from beyond the door. Russell recognized it. He opened the door to find himself facing Kerstin and Ceres. They were tightly gripping each other, and both seemed to be flushed from a night of exotic lovemaking. Russell glowered at them.

‘What do you want?’ he demanded.

‘Just wondered if you cared to join us for breakfast,’ Ceres enquired. ‘My god, what the hell are you wearing?’ she added, giggling at Kerstin who giggled back.

‘Pyjamas!’

‘Are you going to wear them all day?’

‘No!’

Kerstin was still giggling but as she leaned in to inspect Russell’s bedroom the laughter suddenly stopped: ‘How can you sleep with that thing directly above you!?’

‘*Above* me?’ Russell glanced back and spied Michael: once again the explosive release of the Gordian knot had sent him to the ceiling where he remained, static, and positioned over the bed. Kerstin had a point, who would want to sleep with that thing directly overhead. The reality, of course, was far more horrific.

‘I didn’t realize he’d clambered up there. He does tend to wander about at night.’

Kerstin shuddered and turned to Ceres: ‘Let’s leave. We will see you downstairs, Russell.’

Russell nodded and slowly closed his door. Through it he could hear yet more giggling; those two were going to be insufferable today. He turned and once again studied the spider on his ceiling:

‘Why, of all the spiders, do you have to be a trapdoor? You look like you’re made out of flexible black rubber!’

Michael suddenly dropped from the ceiling, skilfully reorienting himself as he fell to land feet-first on the bed; he glared at Russell: ‘I am not having this conversation again!’

Russell smiled benignly at Michael and then departed to take a quick shower and make himself ready for breakfast. He returned to the bedroom. ‘Will you be joining us?’

‘I don’t think so,’ replied Michael, ‘I do not wish to traumatize Ms. Wahlmann any more than I already have! ...Or the other diners.’

Michael still sounded peeved. He never liked being challenged on his appearance but, nonetheless, it was starting to cause real practical problems: he was now “observable” to much of the clientele in the hotel and this had placed significant restrictions on what he could, or could not, reasonably be expected to do. The perception filter made it – *almost* – believable that he could play the drums and answer a

few idiotic questions, but having him saunter down to the dining room and then order a breakfast was pushing it too far. The filter would snap, or burst like a balloon. Pandemonium would ensue.

If Michael hadn't been so prickly on the subject Russell might have considered lobbying for a change of physical form: "human" would be ideal! But, instead, he let it slide and turned to Mr. Waterstone: 'I guess it's just us. You ready, fella?' The cat nodded and licked its lips. Stupid question really, that cat was always ready for breakfast.

'What will you do, Michael?'

'I think I'll head over to the Bentley and fire up a drone; see how "part three" has turned out.' Was that tension in the spider's voice or was Russell just imagining it?

'If it is just "gibberish" again, like the others.., is that *it!*?' Russell asked, nervously.

'Not quite. "It" arrives shortly after noon, when we finally get to see the three segments together: amalgamated under identical lighting conditions, fused into a single narrative. However, if there is no narrative.., well, then I suggest you practice swinging from trees.'

Russell and Mr. Waterstone joined Ceres and Kerstin in the dining room.

'What can I get you, sir?' asked the waitress, with a smile.

Mr. Waterstone neatly sliced open a bread roll and applied butter as he perused the menu.

'Bacon and eggs, please,' replied Russell.

'And how would you like your eggs?'

'Umm, scrambled.' He glanced at Mr. Waterstone. 'And he'll have the full English.'

'With sautéed wild mushrooms?' asked the waitress.

The cat nodded.

'Free-range sausage?'

'Just give him everything,' suggested Russell.

Mr. Waterstone nodded in agreement and handed back his menu to the nonplussed waitress. Russell watched as she left the table; she exchanged a quizzical look with one of her colleagues who glanced over and regarded Mr. Waterstone for several seconds. Russell felt sure that some sort of "no pets at the table" order was about to be dispensed but, apart from some eye-rolling, nothing happened.

'The perception filter is barely holding on today. They're all noticing *him*.'

'He is very noticeable!' replied Kerstin, reaching over to give Mr. Waterstone a stroke.

'Yes, and Michael, is getting a bit too "noticeable" as well. I could say the same about you, Ceres, but maybe your preternatural glow has a, err—'

'Has a *what?*' demanded Ceres.

'Yes, Russell. Whatever are you prattling about?'

Russell sighed: 'Nothing, forget I mentioned it. So did you two have a, err—'

'Have a *what?*' demanded Ceres.

'Pleasant night?'

Ceres and Kerstin exchanged glances and began giggling again.

'I'll take that as a "yes".'

The conversation over breakfast remained awkward, at least for Russell. Every time he made an utterance it was invariably interpreted as innuendo and would be greeted with sniggers and guffaws. Eventually Kerstin appeared to be at the point of hysteria so Russell gave up. He turned to the cat:

‘How’s your sausage?’

Now Ceres seemed to be at the point of hysteria.

‘Oh, for god’s sake! Not everything’s about sex!’

At that moment Michael came scuttling into the dining room:

‘Problem?’ asked Ceres, still laughing.

‘Yes, ma’am, it’s the problem we anticipated yesterday.’

‘Did Gerry screw up part three!?’ asked Russell. Kerstin burst out laughing and Ceres followed. ‘What was funny about *that!*?’

‘Oh, he’s made it,’ replied the agitated spider: ‘I was talking about the other problem.’

‘What other problem?’

‘The one we discussed yesterday.’

The demeanour of Ceres’s face altered abruptly: ‘What are you talking about, Michael?’

‘Combine harvesters, ma’am, specifically *one* combine harvester: a Massey Ferguson MF Delta, with the 496 HP AGCO power engine and featuring a 10.74 metre cutting width – nice bit of kit! It also merges conventional and rotary technology, and incorporates—’

‘What about it!?’ shouted Ceres.

‘It’s currently bearing down on the new segment, ma’am. Sorry, I thought I’d already made that clear.’

‘There she is!’ exclaimed the Prime Minister.

‘Where?’ enquired Marcus McManus, squinting up at the still-cloudless but now opaquely hazy skies above London as he nervously gripped his carrier bag filled with cans of supermarket cider.

‘Visibility has deteriorated noticeably over the last twenty-four hours, sir,’ remarked an unhappy-looking Mrs. Collier.

‘Over London, yes, but PM-1 will soon take us clear of all this crap,’ remarked the PM, with childlike enthusiasm. He pointed towards a section of milky sky above Buckingham Palace: ‘*There*, Mr. McManus!’ Then turning back to Mrs. Collier: ‘I’m still not happy that Sir Neville has chosen to take a sickie, Mrs. Collier.’

‘He’s not taken “a sickie”, Prime Minister. We just felt that at least one of us should remain here in London.’

‘Right, and you drew the short straw.’

Mrs. Collier did not reply.

The distinctive drone of the British Army Merlin helicopter began to drown out all

other sounds as PM-1 manoeuvred over Horse Guards Parade in preparation for landing.

'I see you've already added the livery, sir,' shouted Mrs. Collier, over the increasing din.

'Indeed!' replied the PM, nodding with pride.

The helicopter landed, and with the rotor blades still spinning, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Collier, McManus, three special services personnel and three Downing Street aides quickly boarded. Within a minute it took off again and headed west.

Once airborne it quickly became apparent that PM-1, as a concept, still required work. As it stood, this was hardly the British answer to Air Force One: too cramped, too spartan, too smelly, too much vibration – and far too noisy.

An army officer handed out headsets that blocked out most of the external sounds. The Downing Street aides looked uncomfortable but, nevertheless, quickly settled down and focused on their own paperwork; one dour individual began to examine his phone but was ordered to stop and turn it off. The aide complained about this but his words went unheard; the officer then instructed him and the others on the use of the headsets for internal communications.

'Are we there yet?' came McManus's voice, through the headphones.

'We've only been in the air five minutes! No, thank you,' replied the PM, declining McManus's offer of a super-strength cider.

'Our current ETA for RAF Bolus is eleven twenty-two, sir,' stated a voice, presumably that of the pilot, or co-pilot.

The army officer in the main cabin tried to stop McManus from drinking and attempted to confiscate his carrier bag.

'Unless there is a very good reason, can we just let him drink?' asked Mrs. Collier.

'We do not allow alcohol on these flights, ma'am. No exceptions.' The officer grimaced as he struggled to wrest the bag of booze from McManus's grasp but the sober drunk was in no mood to let it go. The Downing Street aides looked on with expressions of horror and disgust. The special forces guys were also beginning to look "twitchy". In fact it all looked as though it were about to kick off. The PM reached across to McManus and placed a paternal hand on his shoulder:

'Let the officer take your cans, Marcus. Rules are rules. You can start getting well-bladdered as soon as we land.'

After a brief standoff McManus suddenly released his grip and the army officer fell backwards into the lap of a Downing Street aide. He quickly recovered his poise and took McManus's carrier bag to a storage area at the front of the cabin. The PM shook his head. This was already beginning to resemble a Keystone Cops operation.

'What am I doing here, anyway!?' wailed McManus.

'We've briefed you on this already, Mr. McManus,' replied Mrs. Collier.

'But why him!?' asked one of the aides, quite reasonably.

'I can see spiders!' replied McManus. His unbalanced manner and the meaninglessness of his reply compensated for what was actually a significant security breach. Only the PM, Mrs. Collier and McManus himself knew any of the details of this "operation"; the aides were along for the ride just to keep the machinery of government close at hand, and the special forces personnel were, in effect, just fancy-ass muscle, to be used mainly

for crowd-control, should there be a need. They were not intended for use in any confrontation with The Gang of Four. The PM himself would be handling that confrontation – somehow.

'Believe it or not he possesses a special skill-set. Now, no further questions – or comments, please,' replied the PM, to the group in general. The flight to RAF Bolus continued on in relative calm.

'Put your foot down!'

'I *am* doing! It's these bloody country lanes!'

'You've got four minutes before "part three" gets sliced!'

'What's our ETA for the field?'

'Four minutes!' replied Michael.

'Shit!'

Russell accelerated the Bentley into a blind corner and hoped for the best.

'Mind the cyclists!'

Russell narrowly avoided them and kept the speed high for the straight that appeared ahead but he was then forced to slow again as the narrow road wound itself around a small copse.

'We're not going to get there in time. Take the next turning on the left! *There!!*'

'That's just a track!'

'Take it!'

Russell sped the Bentley off the tarmac road and onto a small, loose-stone track that bisected a recently harvested barley field. As the car sped over a low rise in the centre of the field the far side became visible.

'Oh shit, there's a closed gate! Should I smash through it!?'

'Do it!'

The metal gate flew off its hinges and over the car, narrowly missing the windscreen and the heads of Russell and Michael. Ahead, in the next field – lay the beast.

'Where's the crop circle!?'

'Just beyond *that!*'

'We'll never intercept in time!'

'We just need to distract the driver...'
At that moment Michael suddenly leapt onto the bonnet of the car; he fired what appeared to be a lightning bolt at the combine harvester and it promptly stopped dead. Michael returned to the front passenger seat and instructed Russell to halt. They both waited.

'Well that certainly distracted the driver,' noted Russell. 'We should check if he's injured. What exactly did you do?'

'Just my version of a taser. Shorted out the electrics in the harvester, but the driver should be fine in his insulated cabin.'

They continued to wait but there were no signs of life from the combine harvester.

'Come to think of it,' began Michael, 'if his window was down and he was touching

any part of the frame, he might have received a jolt... Maybe we should make sure he's alright. Proceed ahead – *slowly!* – do not drive over the crop circle!

The Bentley edged up behind the harvester and stopped. Still no movement; it was less than twenty metres from the edge of the circle. Michael and Russell gingerly approached the cab and both were shocked by what they saw.

'Holy crap, it's Gerry!' exclaimed Michael.

The slumped and motionless form of Gerry sat in the cab, his head resting at an odd angle against the steering wheel. It did not look good.

'Is he dead?' asked Russell.

Gerry began to groan.

'No,' replied Michael. 'We should get outahere before he spots you.'

'*Tebb!!*'

'Too late! Get in the car!'

'*Tebb!!* What have you done? What have you done to the combine? You'll pay for this!!' Gerry jumped from his cabin but, still clearly disorientated, he stumbled and fell to the ground. '*Tebb!!* I will skin you alive for this! Where are you fucking going!?'

Russell and Michael raced back to the Bentley and drove with great haste from the field.

'At least we saved the segment!' remarked Michael, as they returned to the tarmac roads. 'The old Bentley's going to need a bit of work, though! Did you notice the front grill?'

'I can't say I did, Michael,' replied Russell, still frazzled.

'Good, don't. It's not pretty. Don't worry, though: I'll soon panel-beat it back into shape.'

Russell became aware of the Bentley's great speed as it hurtled through another blind bend. He made a deliberate effort to slow down.

'I can't believe Gerry was driving that thing!' he remarked, after regaining some composure.

'I know! What are the odds, eh?' replied Michael.

'I mean I can't believe he would just blithely mow that thing down after spending god-only-knows-how-many hours constructing it!'

'Yes! Just goes to show the level of control your collective unconscious exerted on young Gerry. He's probably barely aware that he made it now.'

'It would've saved us a lot of trouble if this control had been maintained for just a bit longer.'

'Ah, well, that's why they call it "the collective *unconscious*" – it might have great mental power but it's dumb at the tactical level. It would never have seen this coming.'

The Bentley overtook the group of cyclists encountered earlier and Russell made sure that he missed them and as a consequence almost hit a car that appeared suddenly ahead.

'*Shit!* ... This is so not the right car for these roads.'

'Not with you behind the wheel, no,' replied Michael. '*Anticipate!*'

'Yeah, whatever...' Russell took the speed down still further and checked his rear-view mirror.

'Worried Gerry is bearing down on us?' enquired Michael.

'Do you think he'll come after us?'

'I think he'll come after *you*, yes.'

'Yeah, well, so what? It had to be done. By the way: do you still have a drone over the field?'

'Mm-hmm,'

'And!'

'Gerry is attempting to restart the harvester.'

'Any joy?'

'Nope. That thing's fried, It'll need replacement parts: ergo, our crop circle is safe until noon at least.'

The Bentley began a winding descent towards the Red Lion and passed by the "Third Eye" field; Russell noticed that it, too, was in the process of being harvested.

'The combines are out in force today,' he remarked.

'It's the weather, init,' replied Michael. 'Too many more days like this and the crops will all be turning to dust. Crop circle season is certainly over now, anyway.'

'Hmm, have you amalgamated the three segments yet?' Russell enquired, nervously.

'I told you, we need to wait till noon. But yes, I have had a glance.'

'And?'

'What do you think?'

'Gibberish?'

'Looks that way, but, I reiterate: the stems appear to be positioned deliberately and on an individual basis – in fact, the whole thing has been made to such a high level of precision that parts one and two actually lined up perfectly – and I mean: *perfectly*. No discontinuity! Remarkable! The shadows cast appear to be part of the matrix as well, hence the requirement for the sun to be in the same position and as close to the zenith as possible. So let's wait until midday before we start bulk-buying bananas, okay?'

'Fine!'

The Bentley duly arrived at the Red Lion's car park; apart from the dozen-or-so parked cars, it was deserted.

'Good, no sign of ma'am,' observed Michael, 'gives me a chance to mend the Bentley before she witnesses the damage.'

Both Russell and Michael alighted and inspected the front grill. Michael let out a whistling sound and rubbed a forepaw against the top of his head. The front of the Bentley was badly mashed up; it was a wonder the thing still worked. Fluid dripped from somewhere.

'What's that?'

'Brake fluid. I'll get it sorted. Why don't you keep ma'am busy while I do this?'

'Sure,' replied Russell, half-heartedly, not particularly keen on the idea of facing Ceres at this moment, and besides, she was probably off frolicking somewhere with the future Mrs. Tebb. 'There's something I've been meaning to ask you about Ceres,' he said.

'And what would that be? Pop the bonnet, would you?'

Russell returned to the car and activated the bonnet mechanism. This prompted more whistling from Michael as he surveyed the interior.

'If she is *all* life on Earth—'

'There's no "if" about it – she *is*.'

‘Right, well, surely the human collective unconsciousness—’

‘Collective unconscious,’ corrected Michael.

‘Yeah, that. Surely it is part of her... matrix?’

‘Her *what!*?’

‘You used the word “matrix” just before!’

‘Yeah, to describe the crop circles!’

‘Okay, whatever the word is: it is a *component* of her.’

‘What’s your point?’

‘Why all this palaver!? Why doesn’t she just *know* already!?’

Michael scuttled around to the boot and retrieved a large tool box; he then returned to the front of the car and began examining its contents. ‘You make the mistake of assuming her true thought processes occur on your human timescales.’

‘Huh?’

Michael scrutinized a monkey wrench before returning it to the tool box. ‘You don’t really get the concept of the gestalt, do you?’

‘Well, I—’

‘Precisely! I thought not! We’re talking about Earth’s biosphere here. If it wants to evolve a new species, for example, it takes millions of years. You call it “natural selection”. The biosphere calls it “thinking”.’

‘I’m still not with you,’ replied Russell, genuinely bamboozled.

Michael stopped what he was doing and faced Russell: ‘The biosphere thinks deeply – but it thinks *slowly*. It can’t really deal with an unforeseen crisis, like, say, an alien threat. By the time it even recognizes there is a problem the aliens will have done whatever it is they intended to do. So there is a requirement for something else.’

‘The gestalt?’

‘Now you’re getting it!’

‘Am I?’

‘Yes. The gestalt thinks in what you might call: “real-time”. Its job is to take care of shit like the Sponsors. And it’s bloody good at it!’

‘I’ve noticed!’

‘Thanks! I’ll assume that compliment extends to me as well.’ Russell nodded. ‘But the gestalt has to convert “the many” into “the one” so as to function. Having achieved this miracle – and it *is* a miracle – it is not then well placed to examine, as you put it: “a component” part of itself. It’s all about bringing its components together, not separating them out again... Are you still with me? You’re looking confused, not that that tells me much – you always look confused.’

‘I think I am getting it now. The gestalt is to the biosphere as my conscious mind is to my unconscious mind.’

Michael made a loud exhalation noise to signify that the analogy was far from perfect. ‘I suppose that will have to suffice, yes. The gestalt is aware of the human system within itself, but, as ma’am explained earlier, it has to go through the correct channels for there to be an exchange of meaningful information. And that process has been occurring these past few days. It’s a sort of meditation I guess, to use your flawed analogy.’

‘Hmm, except the information you are receiving seems to be falling short of “meaningful”.’

‘That is a bit of mystery, I have to admit. It looks as though something might have gone wrong.’

‘Can’t you repeat this exercise? You know, do another crop circle?’

‘And get the same result, probably. There’s also the combine harvester issue. Unless you’d have me taser them all!’

Russell shrugged: ‘So what’s gone wrong, then?’

‘Dunno. Like I said, it is a mystery.’

The car park, situated as it was in a natural bowl that focused the sun’s heat, was no place to hang-out for any length of time. Russell left Michael to make his repairs and reluctantly sought out Ceres.

The interior of the hotel provided some blessed relief from the developing heat of the day. Several of the patrons relaxed in the bar or in the lounge; Celia Browning and a handful of croppies studied pictograms in the communal hall; but there was no sign of Ceres. Russell returned to the bar and ordered a pint of lager; he sat upon one of the barstools, next to Mr. Waterstone who was gazing, glassy-eyed, into space. He waited, restlessly – eyeing the clock at regular intervals.

‘In what way have they been “helpful already”?!’

‘They saved your life. How’s that for starters?’

‘I’m not sure it was an altruistic act on their part.’

‘Whatever the reason, it has helped us greatly. Look at what we’ve achieved in the last few days alone: we’ve identified the principle issue facing the human system; we’ve got a powerful politician doing the heavy lifting for us; we’ve got a plan worked out!’

‘To be honest, Helen, you were the driver of all that. What have I done, apart from act as the mouthpiece?’

Warner regarded Alan: ‘I don’t know if this is modesty or false-modesty on your part but either way – I don’t like it. You’ve been crucial Alan: you found the epigenetic issue, and you alerted me. Without you I’d still be oblivious to all this.’

‘I think you would have noticed the demise of the Sponsors!’

‘Yes, and I did, but that’s all. My only course of action then would have been to exploit the situation for the betterment of my business.’ Warner’s attention returned to her phone.

Alan stared out of the window as the BMW continued to trundle through west London. Why *had* The Gang of Four saved him? Why had they left a sole survivor from their brutal assault on the Sponsors? If altruism was to be ruled out, and Alan felt sure that it had to be, then there was a specific motive. And Warner had a point: he had been crucial to this operation, if only as a catalyst. The conclusion had to be that they desired this outcome, they wanted to see humanity saved!

Actually, that was *a* conclusion – there was another: Alan’s death had merely been postponed, just long enough for him to fully grasp the scale of humanity’s ruination.

Well, he understood that now: if the technical challenges that lay ahead proved too great, even for Warner, then humanity was going down. If the Gang of Four wanted to “give him hell” before finally disposing of him, then: mission accomplished; the past week had been hellish!

‘Approaching the M4 now, Helen,’ declared Gavin, flatly.

‘Not before time!’ snapped Warner. She glanced at Alan: ‘What’s up?’

‘Oh, you know, just thinking.’

‘God help us! Thinking about what?’

‘If we do somehow manage to make contact with the Gang of Four it’s possible they’ll just kill us.’

Warner looked shocked: ‘Why would they do that!?’

‘One: To squelch our little operation and so ensure that humanity – the bastard spawn of the Sponsors – is killed off. And two: To piss me off!’

‘Warner laughed: ‘They wouldn’t dare!’

‘I think they would!’

Warner considered this for a moment before shaking her head: ‘No, I’m not buying it. They’re pulling our strings: yours, mine, the Prime Minister’s, MI6’s. The Gang of Four are *involved*. They are engaged. They want our operation to succeed, and since that is on something of a knife-edge, an audience with the Earth Gods could prove very helpful.’

‘What if they *don’t* want our operation to succeed? What if they want us to revert to our natural form?’

‘A hominid?’

‘It’s earth-natural. Whereas we are not!’

Warner considered this point for a bit longer: ‘Still not buying it. If that were the case they would have secured that fate already. Instead they’ve decamped to Wiltshire and left us to our own devices.’

‘Yeah, that’s another thing: what the hell are they doing in Wiltshire?’

‘Don’t ask me! Although I have been curious, too.’ Warner waved her phone at Alan: ‘MI6 are tracking their movements with a surveillance drone.’

‘Really? No interference with that?’

‘No. The Gang of Four no longer seem concerned about hiding their whereabouts. They’re coaxing us in. All of us.’

‘Christ!’ muttered Alan. He glanced at Gavin: was he earwigging? He surely must be, but the stony-faced driver was giving nothing away. Alan leaned towards Warner and whispered: ‘are you sure we can...’ he surreptitiously pointed at Gavin. Warner smiled and made an odd motion with her right hand which left Alan baffled for a moment before he realized it was a frying motion that Warner was performing. ‘Ah!’

The BMW sharply picked up speed as it hit the westbound motorway.

‘So what’s the drone feed showing us?’ asked Alan, in due course.

‘Last time I checked: Russell Tebb and the spider were bombing around the countryside in their red Bentley convertible.’

‘What are they doing, joy riding?’

‘Perhaps they’re just killing time until we get there.’

‘What about the others?’

Warner consulted her phone: 'Hmm, dunno. The drone no longer seems to be tracking anything. Could be a glitch.' She began pressing keys rapidly.

Alan shook his head: 'What do we know about this hotel?'

'Not much. A German crop circle research team is currently staying there.'

'So the Gang of Four are there for the crop circles!?'

Warner shrugged: 'Seems rather farfetched!'

'Strange, though, aren't they?'

'The Gang of Four?'

'Crop circles.'

'If you say so. Gavin, what's our ETA for the Red Lion?'

Gavin checked his satnav: 'one thirty, give or take.'

'Let's aim for before one.'

'No problem,' replied Gavin.

Russell checked the bar's clock once again: eleven forty-six; that was close enough. Mr. Waterstone, beginning to resemble an Easter Island statue with that fixed and enigmatic stare into nothingness, was starting to grate on his nerves. He decided to rejoin Michael.

'I'll be out by the Bentley. Humanity's fate will be revealed shortly, if you care to join me?'

The cat did not react.

'Fine, suit yourself.' Russell made a quick sweep of the hotel, including his room and a knock-on-the-door of Kerstin's, but Ceres was nowhere to be seen, or heard.

He met Michael at the car.

The trapdoor vigorously rubbed a cloth over the front grill of the Bentley as Russell approached.

'How's the motor?' Russell asked, casually.

'Repairs have been affected,' replied Michael, proudly, as he backed off to grant Russell a clear view the car. It looked immaculate.

'Nice work! And very fast!!'

'Thanks! I'm good with metal: my first manifestation in any reality is always a sword, or a chisel. Usually a sword.'

'Hmm,' nodded Russell, admiring the flawless car.

The baking midday heat created shimmering mirages but it felt easier, more comfortable somehow, compared to previous days, especially those in London, which had been oppressively muggy at times.

'I think I'm finally starting to acclimatize to this weather,' decided Russell.

'It's a dry heat,' replied Michael: 'The humidity has been dropping every day this week and now most of the moisture in the soil has been evaporated – hence the urgent requirement for harvesting.'

Russell nodded. 'What time is it?'

'Eleven fifty-seven. Ah, here comes ma'am,' replied the spider.

Kerstin's hire car pulled into the car park and Ceres jumped out. Kerstin waved at Russell and the car then swiftly departed.

'Morning!' said Ceres, breezily, 'it is still morning, isn't it?'

'Yes, ma'am, Eleven fifty.....eight am, precisely,' replied Michael.

'And you managed to save Gerry's pictogram?'

'Indeed, ma'am. Turned out to be Gerry himself driving the combine harvester!'

'Really!? What are the odds, eh?'

'That's what I said!'

Russell rolled his eyes.

'And where's Mr. Waterstone?' enquired Ceres, idly surveying the car park.

'He's in the bar,' replied Russell, 'and he's acting rather odd, I might add.'

'Oh? I hope he's not back on the scrumpy.'

'I don't think so, he wasn't drinking anything at all while I was in there with him.'

'Wouldn't matter if he had been,' replied Michael, 'I took the liberty of chemically neutralizing the scrumpy's wormwood last night. It should now just be hangover-juice. ...Eleven fifty-nine.'

At that moment a cavalcade of three, large, black cars approached; they entered the car park and stopped near the entrance to the hotel. The occupants alighted and Russell was stunned to see a very recognizable face.

'My god, that's the Prime Minister, isn't it?'

An obviously drunken man cavorted and shouted next to the PM. The sole woman of the party attempted to subdue him but with limited success.

'Yep,' replied Michael, ducking down to remain hidden.

'Why are you hiding?' asked Russell.

'You should, too, Russell, and you, ma'am.'

Russell and Ceres joined Michael behind the Bentley, the three of them peered over the bonnet and quietly observed the PM's party.

'So why *are* we hiding?' Russell tried again. He watched as the large group conferred outside the hotel. The PM and the woman next to him had clocked the Bentley and were pointing at it.

'Take the drone out, Michael,' ordered Ceres.

'What!? Not yet!' hissed Russell.

'The MI6 surveillance drone.'

'What!? We've been under *surveillance*!?'

'Keep your voice down, Russell!' whispered Michael. 'I've already nobbled it, ma'am. It's been pointed at the village for the past thirty minutes. You want it taken out completely?'

'No, as long as we're not being tracked, that'll be fine. And as for the reason for remaining hidden, Mr. Tebb: don't you recognize that drunken idiot, there?'

'Err,'

'It's Marcus, the bum at St James's Park who "saw" Michael, MI6 are obviously using him to sniff us out. And now is not the time!'

'You mean there is a time?'

'Assuming the human system opts for the resumption of the Sponsor programme,

yes – your PM, and others, will be the ones overseeing the revised programme.’

‘Oh, I see. And what if it doesn’t opt for that?’ asked Russell.

The Prime Minister and one of the other men began cautiously walking over towards the Bentley.

‘Quick! Back behind that Citroën,’ urged Ceres, tugging at Russell’s collar. The three of them darted behind the neighbouring car.

‘The perception filter should handle this as long as Marcus doesn’t join them. Just as well, because we must have been seen!’ said Michael, breathlessly.

As they neared, the man accompanying the Prime Minister held his hand aloft and the PM stopped; he withdrew an automatic pistol and moved in to examine the Bentley closely. He inspected the front and back seats, checked to see if the boot and bonnet were secure, rummaged through the glove compartment, tried all of the door handles and scrutinized the underside of the car. Finally, he indicated that the PM could approach.

‘Anything?’ enquired the PM.

‘Nothing atypical, sir.’

Russell continued to watch as the PM studied the car. ‘What are they looking for?’ he asked.

‘Nothing in particular. The PM is just curious,’ Ceres whispered.

‘I could pick the boot if you want, sir,’ suggested the suit.

‘We don’t want them sticking their noses in the boot, do we?’ whispered Russell. ‘For Christ’s sake, Mr. Waterstone’s tube gun is in there.’

‘Leave it for now. But remain here,’ instructed the PM.

The Prime Minister left the unfortunate minion to bask by the car as he returned to the other members of his entourage who were observing closely from the front door of the hotel. After a brief deliberation, two men took up positions by the door and three other men returned to one of the cars. Only the PM, the woman and the drunk entered the Red Lion.

‘The *time!*’ Russell suddenly remembered.

‘Twelve o’ six. I’ve secured the image. Anyone care to take a look at the fully amalgamated pictogram?’ asked the spider.

‘Definitely!’ replied Ceres.

‘Err, just one problem – *him!*’ said Russell, pointing at the man, standing by the Bentley. ‘He’s not going anywhere, is he?’

‘He’s not a problem,’ replied Michael. ‘With Marcus inside it’s business as usual.’

Ceres stood and slowly walked over to the Bentley. Michael followed and Russell followed Michael. As Michael popped open the boot the man suddenly turned around and watched, but after a moment he seemed to lose interest and the focus of his attention returned to the hotel, and his colleagues patrolling by the entrance. Michael fiddled with the printer and a large, glossy sheet began to emerge. Ceres pulled it free and placed it on the gravel:

‘Behold, Mr. Tebb – the reason we are here.’

‘Part three slots in perfectly, as expected,’ observed Michael.

The spider was correct. If not for some obvious discontinuities in the surrounding standing crops, this image would have been taken as a straightforward photograph of a single crop circle – one gigantic and extraordinarily detailed crop circle, the like of which

had probably never before been seen. Unlike the “Third Eye” circle and many others, this one did not comprise simple geometric shapes. Nor was it a recognizable picture. It was actually a bit of a noisy mess – like a dot-matrix image of... nothing in particular. Technically brilliant, without doubt. But hardly beautiful.

A car suddenly sped into the car park and stopped abruptly and haphazardly near the hotel entrance. Gerry bounded out, slammed the door loudly and strode purposefully towards the hotel door, but the PM’s suits, obviously agitated by Gerry’s aggressive arrival and manner, barred him from entering. Something of a scuffle developed.

‘Oh, god, here’s trouble,’ said Russell, viewing the scene with growing disquiet. ‘Gerry’s arrived! We had to trash his combine and he’s majorly pissed about it.’ He glanced at Ceres and Michael but they were ignoring the squabble at the hotel entrance; they were staring at the pictogram.

‘So, can you, or can you not, finally make sense of this?’ Russell demanded.

No one replied. Ceres was frowning, and not in a good way.

The Prime Minister, Mrs. Collier and McManus entered the old-fashioned hotel lobby. There was no air-conditioning but a couple of whirring ceiling fans provided a welcome breeze. Tall palms and other house plants abounded as did a dated form of stained-wood panelling. Myriad faded prints depicting scenes of fox hunting and pre-industrial crop gathering covered the walls.

‘Rustic,’ remarked the PM, to himself.

The reception desk on the left was vacant, but from behind a door straight ahead, marked “Bar”, there came an indistinct drone of chatter. McManus drifted towards it, as though pulled by an invisible cord. At least now, he was silent. Mrs. Collier gripped his arm and held him back. She looked to the Prime Minister, awaiting instruction.

‘Shall we follow Marcus’s lead?’ the PM suggested.

Mrs. Collier released McManus who proceeded ahead and opened the door to the bar.

The surprisingly large barroom contained several tables, most of which were vacant. Around the remainder clustered groups of patrons or locals quietly talking as they hid from the intense midday sun. For a moment, no one seemed to notice the newcomers but then one woman suddenly shrieked: ‘O M G! It’s you!! ...it is you, isn’t it?’

The room fell silent as all heads turned to face the arrivals and there followed an audible intake of breath as the PM was recognized. Several individuals rose up and came over, and the PM switched to politician-mode, grinning broadly and shaking hands. ‘Any babies need kissing?’ he joked.

‘What the hell are *you* doing here!?’ asked one patron.

‘Just stopping off between engagements, hope you don’t mind. Even I need refreshments from time to time!’

Everyone laughed, including McManus.

The barman came rushing over: ‘Prime Minister! What an honour! Peter Fitzgibbon

– I’m the proprietor of this humble establishment. I’m afraid we’re not set-up to provide luncheon, but I’m sure we can rustle up something. A toasted sandwich, perhaps?’

‘Thanks, but no thanks, Peter,’ replied the PM. ‘RAF Bolus provided us with brunch earlier and it’s still sitting somewhat heavily within me!’ He patted his belly and everyone laughed again, including McManus. ‘Maybe a half of your local ale?’

‘Coming right up!’ replied Fitzgibbon, as he rushed back to the bar. The PM followed and gingerly edged his backside onto a barstool, next to the hotel’s enormous feline; he began, absentmindedly, to stroke it as his drink was being poured.

‘Prime Minister!’ McManus said, urgently.

‘Yes, order what you want, Marcus,’ replied the PM, impatiently. ‘You, too, Mrs. Collier.’

‘But, Prime Minister!!’ McManus repeated, in an agitated tone. Mrs. Collier, frowning, consulted her phone and suddenly looked alarmed: ‘Sir!!’ She handed her phone over to the PM: it displayed The Gang of Four’s selfie from Vauxhall Cross.

‘Why are you showing me this?’ he asked. He then glanced over at McManus who was pointing at the cat. The PM turned and studied it closely for the first time. Good god! It was one of The Gang of Four! And it was staring straight back at him with fierce, Stalin-like, black eyes. The PM slowly removed his hand from the cat’s head.

‘So what do you intend to do about the striking train drivers, Prime Minister?’ asked one of the patrons, who had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

‘What?’ replied the PM, vacantly.

Mrs. Collier quickly ushered the man away: ‘Give the PM some space, please. This is not PMQs.’ She then sat down on the other side of the cat, which still fixed its gaze upon the PM.

The Prime Minister’s drink duly arrived and he sipped at it awkwardly, breaking eye-contact with the cat in the process, but he then returned to study the cat again; it was now staring blankly ahead.

Remarkable! The whole point of this trip had been to make contact with the elusive Gang of Four, and here he was sitting next to the cat! If it were not for McManus’s special gift, he’d be ignoring it completely. In fact, all thoughts of the Gang of Four had somehow evaporated the moment he’d entered this hotel. All of his wits would be needed now. Think logically, he said to himself. *Rely on McManus!* He handed over Mrs. Collier’s phone:

‘Marcus, are the others in this picture present now, here, in this room?’

McManus nervously surveyed the barroom.

‘No!’

‘No giant spiders anywhere?’

McManus checked again: ‘No! Thank god!’

The PM examined the cat again: ‘Do you understand me?’ he murmured, keen not to be overheard by the bar’s inquisitive clientele. The cat turned to him and once again held steady eye-contact; it nodded slowly. The PM nodded back: ‘You’ve been leading us a merry chase these past few days, haven’t you?’ he said, in a deliberately light manner.

The cat suddenly sniggered, like Mutley – a bizarre, unnatural and disturbing sound to hear emerging from an animal. Hilarity stretched over its fat face as it reached forward and extracted a pork scratching from an open bag on the bar counter. It began crunching

noisily and offered the packet to the Prime Minister.

'Thanks,' said the PM, as he took a small rind. He hated pork scratchings; the last time he'd eaten one it had shattered a tooth. He placed it in his mouth and carefully applied pressure. Too risky, it was rock hard; instead, he sucked on the foul salty thing and nodded appreciatively at the cat, who then offered the packet to Mrs. Collier, who politely declined. McManus was ignored.

'Where are the others?' the PM enquired of the cat, as he tried, once again, to crunch down on the pork scratching. It suddenly gave way and he feared one of his teeth had as well. Fuck it: he began crunching vigorously.

The cat stared blankly at the PM.

'Your cohorts... Russell Tebb, Ceres ...and your arachnid chum?'

The cat nodded vigorously, as though suddenly understanding, and it attempted to speak! But its mouthful of scratchings rendered its "speech" unintelligible. It sounded like gravel being rotated in a concrete mixer.

'What!?' said the PM, flabbergasted.

The cat made an effort to swallow but couldn't, so it just pointed towards a door at the far end of the barroom.

'That's a communal hall that we let out to the croppies: crop circle enthusiasts,' announced Fitzgibbon. Then whispering, he added: 'Bunch of nuts if you ask me, but good for business.' He winked conspiratorially at the PM and the PM smiled back before turning to study the door to this "communal hall".

Mrs. Collier's phone suddenly beeped prompting McManus to yelp and drop it. Mrs. Collier quickly retrieved it: 'Yes!?' After a short pause she turned to the Prime Minister: 'There's been a disturbance at the hotel entrance, sir. A resident from a neighbouring village – carrying ID for "Gerald Jones-Everson", occupation: farmhand – is demanding entrance with menaces.'

'So we have an uppity yokel, so what?' replied the PM.

'He wants to see Tebb, sir.'

'That would be Gerry,' declared Fitzgibbon, with a sigh. 'He's a hothead, but he's mainly harmless. I'll send him on his way.'

'No,' replied the PM. 'Let him in, I want to speak to him.'

Mrs. Collier spoke into her phone and a few moments later a rangy, and completely bald man entered. He aggressively cast an eye over the room and its occupants, including the Prime Minister.

The PM rose to his feet: 'Hi, I'm—'

'I know who you are,' replied Jones-Everson, 'where the fuck is Tebb!' He continued to scan the room.

'That's what we are endeavouring to ascertain, Mr. Jones-Everson,' replied the PM.

'Gerry,' replied Jones-Everson, focusing hard on the PM for the first time. He did not seem overawed. He glanced at the PM's drink. 'Pete got you on the piss, has he?'

'Alright, that's enough, you're outa—' began Fitzgibbon.

'No!' interjected the PM. 'Gerry, calm down, take a seat. I want to talk to you. Peter, fetch this fellow a drink, would you? It's on me.'

'Pint of your scrumpy, – *Peter*,' Jones-Everson sneered at Fitzgibbon.

The barman reluctantly returned to the bar and grabbed a large wooden pump; a

pint of cloudy cider duly arrived and Jones-Everson knocked it back with enthusiasm.

'Cheers!' he said, turning to the PM: 'Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?' This guy certainly had plenty of chutzpah!

'Why do you want to see Tebb?' asked the PM, calmly.

'Err, to knock his block off!'

'And why would you want to do that?'

'He's just trashed my combine harvester!'

This provoked a wave of titters from the eavesdropping punters and Jones-Everson glared at them furiously. 'He zapped it with some kind of industrial taser device and now it's completely bugged. It's not even mine! I'm just hiring it! This will cost me an arm and a leg. Correction: this will cost Tebb an arm and a leg – literally!'

More titters, some of which emerged from the cat. The PM suppressed the urge to join in: 'Alright, once again, calm down, Gerry. Why did Tebb do this?'

Jones-Everson was ready to launch into another diatribe but his face turned blank. He clearly did not know or understand the motive, and presumably had not thought that far. He remained silent, fuming.

'How do you know Tebb?'

Jones-Everson shook his head: 'Turned up here a couple of days ago. Been causing trouble ever since. Even Pete threw him out at one stage, but, for some reason, he was allowed back.'

'Is he here on his own?' asked the PM.

'No, he's with a woman, but I don't think they're an item.'

'Anyone else?'

'Err, I'm not sure, but yes, I think so.'

'He came with this cat as well, didn't he?'

'What cat?'

'That-' began the PM, pointing, but the cat had mysteriously vanished. 'Never mind. We've been led to believe that Tebb is in that "communal hall" there, but we-'

'Right!' said Jones-Everson, making ready to storm the communal hall.

'Not so fast!' shouted Mrs. Collier, grabbing his collar and forcing him back.

'I was about to say,' said the PM: 'we have some important business with him, first. And so you need to stay out of our way, right? Or do I have to have you arrested?'

Jones-Everson slumped onto a barstool but said nothing. He nodded weakly at the PM.

'Good. Mrs. Collier, Marcus. We're going in there.'

The PM gingerly entered the hall, expecting trouble, but was in fact rather disappointed to find the room empty, or apparently empty.

'Marcus?'

'There's no one in here. No spiders either,' confirmed McManus. 'Wait, there's that weird cat again!'

The cat sat upon the central large table, watching them.

'Oh, hello again!' said the PM, with a smile. 'Gerry too much for you as well, eh? Don't blame you.'

The cat continued to regard the Prime Minister but did not react to his words.

‘Hmm,’ said the PM, to no one in particular. He began to study the room; it confirmed Fitzgibbon’s earlier statement about the so-called “croppies”: images of elaborate crop circles covered most of the wall space and several more had been scattered over the table. ‘Does MI6 have anything on crop circles, Mrs. Collier?’

‘Not to my knowledge, sir. Personally speaking, I’ve always considered them to be nothing more than manmade hoaxes.’

‘Yeah, me too, but, if our friend here and his accomplices are interested in them, then maybe there’s more to this phenomenon than we realized.’

‘Possibly so, sir,’ replied Mrs. Collier, studying the images. ‘Some of them are rather impressive.’

The PM and the others continued to mill around the room for a few minutes.

‘Why did you invite us in here?’ the PM eventually enquired of the cat.

‘Prime Minister!’ It was McManus, furtively pointing behind the PM to the door that led back to the bar; the PM instinctively turned. Standing by the door: the woman, Tebb, the trapdoor spider – they all observed him intently.

‘How did you get past Gerry?’ was all the PM could think of saying, as he addressed Tebb.

‘Never mind him,’ replied Tebb. ‘*Trouble at mill!*’ he added, in a cod Yorkshire accent. He pointed towards the large sheet of paper grasped firmly in the woman’s hand. She suddenly marched forward, past the PM and the others, and pinned the sheet to the opposite wall without uttering a word. The PM could now clearly see the image of yet another crop circle: complex, somewhat incoherent, and huge.

Everyone viewed it in silence.

‘Approaching the Red Lion now,’ remarked Gavin, in his characteristically detached voice.

Alan and Warner leaned forwards as the BMW entered the car park.

‘Looks like the PM is here already,’ remarked Warner. ‘I hope his grunts at the door don’t give us too much static. We should just act happy and relaxed, and if challenged: say we’re guests. Gavin, pull up in the centre somewhere, away from the entrance and away from that red Bentley, and wait for us in the car.’

‘May I propose that I come as well? They’ve seen me at the wheel and it could look suspicious if I remain in the car.’ This was the first time Alan had heard Gavin suggest something on his own without simply answering a direct question or commenting on traffic and suchlike.

‘Good point,’ replied Warner. ‘The three of us will go in together.’

Warner smiled warmly and Alan, rictus-style, as they approached the PM’s security detail.

‘Hold it!’ said one of the grunts.

‘What’s all this?’ asked Warner. ‘We are guests here!’

‘VIP inside. ID, please. If you don’t have any you’ll have to submit to a search.’

'You got ID?' enquired Warner of Alan.

'Err, no.'

The grunt advanced on Alan and vigorously patted him down. He then checked Warner's and Gavin's ID.

'Okay, enter. I apologize for any inconvenience caused.'

'Yes, I bet you do,' hissed Warner.

'Now what?' asked Alan, as they loitered in the deserted lobby.

For once Warner seemed to be at a loss.

'How about through there,' suggested Gavin, pointing at the door marked "Bar".

'Why not?' agreed Warner. Gavin led the way and entered the bar. Who put him in charge? Alan wondered. Maybe the guy just needed a drink, non alcoholic, presumably.

As they entered, all heads turned their way and the buzz of conversation abruptly ceased. Alan, Warner and Gavin halted by the door, as though frozen by headlamps, but within seconds a low sound returned and they were subsequently ignored.

'The Prime Minister's in here somewhere,' noted Warner, pensively. 'That's probably got them all spooked. Just carry on acting naturally,' she added, unnaturally.

Gavin approached the bar and enquired about lunch – ah, *that* was his motivation – but the barman gave him short shrift. Warner surveyed the pub before deciding that she needed a glass of something.

'Fancy a drink, Alan? Gavin, you can have *one!*' Both men nodded.

With drinks and bar snacks ordered, Alan, Warner and Gavin sat down at the table nearest to the bar. For a while nobody said a word, then, gradually, a generic conversation on current affairs developed: typical bar-chat. Alan began to relax.

'What the hell does our Prime Minister want with Tebb, anyway!?' demanded a gruff, shaven-headed man at the bar, of the barman, who ignored him. 'He's been in there, like...' The man consulted his watch but did not bother to complete his sentence.

'Did you hear that!?' said Warner, eyes wide. 'That man over there mentioned Tebb! Why have we forgotten about him, and the others?'

Alan shrugged.

'I'll tell you why,' continued Warner, 'the Gang of Four are running a perception filter, and it's clearly working on all of us! Shit! We need to focus! Remember why we came here.'

'Of course,' replied Alan. But his mind tugged him away and he soon forgot Warner's counsel.

Warner spoke again: 'Yeah, so why are we sat here casually discussing the state of the economy!? ...Come on, let's have a word with baldy over there.' She stood and approached the bar. Alan and Gavin followed reluctantly.

'Hello, are you a friend of Russell Tebb?'

The bald man studied Warner with a look of enmity. 'No, I am not a friend of Russell Tebb. Are you?'

'More an associate,' replied Warner.

'Hmm, my sympathies.' The barfly briefly gave Alan and Gavin the once-over before returning his attention to Warner: 'Would you be an "associate" of the Prime

Minister, as well?’

‘Yes, I would,’ replied Warner.

‘They’re all through there. You’d better hurry up, they’ll be wondering where you got to!’

Warner frowned in puzzlement at that last remark before checking to see where the man was pointing. ‘Thanks.’ She beckoned to Alan. ‘Come on. ...And Gavin, you stay here – you can keep this delightful chap company.’

‘Oh, joy! I’ve got *Gavin* to keep me company. Rejoice!!’

Warner frowned at the bald man for several seconds before grabbing Alan’s arm and leading him towards a door at the far end of the bar. ‘He’s an odd one, that one, isn’t he?’ she remarked, once they were safely out of earshot.

‘I’m sure Gavin can handle him,’ replied Alan, nonchalantly opening the door, and inviting Warner to step through first.

Alan followed Warner into the next room; as he glanced up it was as though a pane of glass had suddenly shattered directly before him; nothing visible, nothing audible – just the clear sense that the so-called “perception filter” had disintegrated.

The grinding anxiety he’d felt throughout the day, but which had mysteriously left him on entering this establishment, returned with a vengeance. He found himself standing face-to-face with The Gang of Four *and* the Prime Minister!

As before, Alan and Warner froze against the full impact of the assembled crowd’s scrutiny, and, as before, the crowd seemed to quickly lose interest. All heads turned back, attention fixed on the opposite wall.

‘I’m back in the room,’ muttered Alan.

‘What?’ muttered Warner.

‘I mean I’m fully lucid – the perception filter has gone.’

‘Oh, yeah, me too!’ agreed Warner.

Alan surveyed the room and its many pictures of crop circles. ‘What the hell is this place?’ he asked.

The Prime Minister turned and again focused his dark eyes on Alan: ‘Mr. Dosogne! A pleasure to meet you at last, ...and I’m assuming *you* are the Malevolence!’ he added, regarding Warner with a look of disgust.

‘What’s he talking about?’ Alan asked Warner.

‘No idea!’ replied Warner, nervously. She approached the group tentatively: ‘I see you finally located your quarry, Prime Minister,’ she said in a matter-of-fact voice that didn’t even convince Alan.

‘Who, *them*. “Gaia and friends”? Yes, for all the good it has done us. With hindsight I should have remained in blissful ignorance!’ The PM looked depressed, defeated. That was not expected, nor was it encouraging.

‘I believe she prefers “Ceres”, the Roman version of Gaia,’ replied Alan, recalling a snippet of information from *The Truth*.

‘Oh yes,’ replied the Prime Minister. ‘Apologies, madam, but you never actually formally introduced yourself.’ That almost sounded like a mild rebuke, thought Alan.

The conversation stalled. No member of the Gang of Four appeared to be interested in talking and the Prime Minister returned his attention to the crop circle

image; the two others present: the female interrogator from Scotland Yard, and a shambolic man Alan did not recognize, who looked rather out of place – did likewise.

Alan sheepishly cast an eye over the members of the Gang of Four; at least they hadn't just struck him down – yet. Nor were there any signs of that demented fury he'd been forced to endure on the Finsbury Circus roof. He studied the spider: it looked strong and fast, like it could be on his throat in the blink of an eye and injecting god-only-knew-what into his jugular! As with the others, it silently studied the crop circle image, but Alan felt sure that at least one of those eight iridescent jade eyes was watching him closely.

Then there was that cat, Mr. Waterstone, aka: Planet Earth. Like the Cheshire Cat, it seemed to exist above the fray; if everyone else in the room clustered around the crop circle image, showing varying signs of angst, not so the cat. It sat apart from the group, upon the large table, and stared back at Alan with the same languid expression he recognized from before: Schadenfreude amusement. Charming little fellow!

Ceres and Russell Tebb had their backs turned to him.

'Err, what are we looking at?' Alan asked, finally breaking the silence.

The Prime Minister turned to him: 'I'm afraid, Mr. Dosogne, our little project appears to be stillborn. I've been informed... by reliable sources...' The PM tilted his head towards Ceres. '...that it would never have worked. The genetic issues are far too complex for us – even for *you*!' The PM once again regarded Warner with an odd expression of revulsion that left Warner looking bewildered and upset. She finally piped up: 'Do we have issues, Prime Minister? Helen Warner. We've met once before – at the Mansion House banquet, but, if I recall, we got on fine! We chatted about offshore tax havens.'

'Hmm? I meet so many people at these functions. I'm sorry, I don't remember you. Your name rings a bell, though: you're a hedge fund manager, are you not?'

'Right! Down there with journalists and weather forecasters at the bottom of the nation's esteem, but I don't get this "malevolence" tag, nor do I understand your overt hostility!' Warner appeared to be genuinely hurt.

'She's also a client of Dosogne's, sir; for some reason we never fully pursued this connection,' interjected the Prime Minister's female minion.

'So it is *you* I have been dealing with these last few days,' stated the PM: 'Pulling his strings?'

'Well, yes.'

'Then you must be the Malevolence.' The PM turned to Ceres, seeking confirmation.

'Yes and no,' came a male voice from behind, and everyone turned. 'But I don't much care for that moniker. Bit on the nose. Please – call me Jim.'

Alan could feel his heart in his mouth as Fairclough menacingly advanced on the group, but he suddenly stopped short and briefly regarded everyone. His eyes finally rested on Alan's:

'Alan, I am very disappointed with you! You promised to discuss my employment status this morning!'

Alan felt ready to faint.

‘That’s enough of that!’ growled Ceres, and Fairclough’s hostile expression suddenly switched to an easy smile:

‘Yes, I suppose I will have to call time on this one. Oh, but it’s been so much fun, Alan, what with you grappling with your newfangled human emotions. The *guilt* you felt at my shoddy treatment! Marvellous! So sharp, so pungent!’

‘Err, excuse me, let me get this straight,’ began the Prime Minister: ‘*You* are the Mal– the, err, fungal entity, the Sponsor parasite residing under London? Or you... represent it?’

‘Again, yes and no. I’m a control node. Grown specifically to deal with this crisis. The Sponsor “parasite”, as you put it, is actually a community of talented humans tenuously linked to each other and empowered via the alien tissue. *Muz* Warner here is a member. In some respects it is the opposite of a gestalt: one becomes many, rather than the other way around.’

Alan forced himself to regain some composure. He turned to Warner: ‘And you knew all this Helen? ...*Helen*??’

Warner stared vacantly at Fairclough.

‘I’m afraid she can’t become fully aware of her “status” – it would cause significant mental trauma, and she is rather crucial to our operation, she’s the one with the relevant technical expertise, not I. Whilst I’m here with you in “person”, representing the interests of the alien tissue, she’ll have to be kept under tight control. At the moment she’s catatonic. Hope no one minds.’

‘I mind,’ said Alan.

Fairclough shrugged, clearly not giving a shit.

‘Wait a minute: you said you were “grown”?’ stated the Prime Minister.

‘Yes, from a pod outcrop located in Finsbury Circus. I believe your spooks later recovered some of it.’ Fairclough briefly glanced at the woman, before turning to Alan: ‘Remember that rancid stench as we went for lunch? Helps to keep inquisitive vermin and bankers at bay. Although, MI6 seem to be onto it now!’ He frowned at the PM’s assistant before finally resting his gaze on Ceres. ‘Of course, they got help...’ Fairclough continued to stare impassively at Ceres. ‘Earth is a very unusual planet...’

Silence hovered awkwardly over the room. The Gang of Four, the Prime Minister and his underlings, and Alan had nothing to say; Warner and Fairclough both appeared to be in a trance.

Finally, Fairclough snapped out of his daydream: ‘Now, I understand we have a problem. Is it true that Ms. Warner’s project is no longer deemed feasible? Is the human system definitely set for collapse? If so, I wonder if I could be cleared to use what’s left of it to build myself a space vehicle, so I can haul my alien butt outahere and reconnect with the Sponsors – I’m assuming they’re still out there somewhere... I’ll need about twenty years to fast-track the relevant technology.’

There was no reply. Everyone stared at Fairclough and he reacted as though sensing universal hostility. A look of concern, then panic, spread across his face.

‘Are you familiar with catastrophe theory, Malevolence?’ asked Ceres, as she stared at Fairclough, with a malevolent grin.

‘Err, yeah.’

‘Eight years.’

‘Excuse me?’

Ceres did not reply.

‘I think she means you’re stuck here with the rest of us,’ said the Prime Minister.

Fairclough’s demeanour became more panicked, almost hysterical.

‘But... eight years is not enough! And I can’t stay here!! I can’t function – I can’t *exist*, without intelligent life!’

‘Tough!’ said Alan.

Fairclough began to breath heavily. He searched for a chair and sat down, holding his head in his hands. After a moment he suddenly looked up and glared at Ceres: ‘What is the nature of this problem? I was under the clear impression that you were employing me to *save* the human system!’

‘Yes, that was the intention,’ replied Ceres, ‘but you need the help of Michael, here, to accurately reintroduce and adapt the Sponsor programme, and actually make it work. But that was conditional on the human system giving the go-ahead.’ She pointed at the large crop circle image behind her, the source of everyone’s interest: ‘They haven’t given it. So, regardless of what you and Ms. Warner do, sooner or later the hominid will return and reclaim its rightful place on Earth. You would be well advised to abandon your project now, and save the humans unnecessary and prolonged suffering.’

Fairclough stared at the crop circle image. ‘What is this?’

‘It’s a crop circle,’ replied Tebb.

‘I can see that!’ replied Fairclough. ‘Presumably it is relaying a message? What is that message?’

‘It’s gibberish,’ replied Tebb.

‘What!? Are you sure?’ Fairclough approached the image and studied it closely; he even ran his hand across it, seemingly seeking inspiration. After a minute or two he turned to Ceres. ‘It can’t just be gibberish, it’s so complex and multifarious! I have to admit I can’t understand it, but then, I’m not the brains of the outfit. Why not let her have a look?’ He glanced at Warner.

‘If you like,’ replied Ceres.

‘Okay,’ replied Fairclough, backing off, ‘I’ll retreat to the bar and return Ms. Warner. Show her!’ He bowed slightly, hesitated, and then exited the room.

Warner stared at the Prime Minister awaiting an explanation.

‘Forget it,’ said the PM, ‘it’s been a stressful day. Now, down to business: do you think you can interpret or decode this crop circle pictogram? It’s apparently key to the successful implementation of our operation, and you are probably our last hope in understanding it.’

Warner looked bemused and turned to regard the crop circle image: ‘Why is this key!?’

‘To proceed, we require the blessing of the human– of humanity, its collective unconscious, apparently. And if that has been granted, it’s encoded in there somewhere,’ replied the PM.

‘And the Gang of Four can’t read it?’ replied Warner, casting a sceptical eye at Ceres and Michael.

‘Apparently not.’

'Then I doubt I will be able to.'

'Can you at least take a look?'

Warner hesitated and then turned to Alan, who nodded encouragement. She sighed and reluctantly approached the image and studied it closely: 'This section here is a sequence of prime numbers,' she stated, pointing towards the top left.

'So what?' replied the spider.

'Just saying...' Warner continued to examine... minutes passed.

'Ah, what's this! If one treats *these* as discrete units then we start to get the first five, no *six*, numbers of the Fibonacci series!'

'Again, so what? What's it telling us?' replied Michael. 'We've already dismissed all that as artefact, just random noise that briefly throws up patterns.'

Warner grimaced at the spider: 'Has anyone tried looking for an ASCII code?'

'Of course! No joy.'

Warner continued studying the image in silence. Alan could see that she was running out of ideas.

Russell suspected that Helen Warner would eventually draw a blank. She might well be a genius and able to call upon the resources of the Malevolence's network, but how did that stack up against the mental powers of Ceres or Michael? He watched despondently as she turned to the group:

'I give up!' She moved away from the pictogram and stood next to Dosogne.

The Prime Minister turned to his female underling: 'Do you think GCHQ could make something of this? They're always boasting about their "world-class" code breakers?'

Before the woman could reply, Michael piped up: 'The odds of them solving this are nil.'

'Nil squared,' agreed Warner. 'I don't think there's anything here to be solved.'

'So is that it then!?' asked Dosogne. 'You're just going to flush humanity down the toilet, even though you have the power to fix this!'

Ceres regarded him coldly: 'Yes. The human system was offered the opportunity to reinstate and conclude the Sponsor programme, but it has, perhaps understandably, rejected that. They understood what this entailed and no doubt felt it was even less palatable than reverting to a hominid.'

'We were screwed either way, to be honest,' said Russell. 'The Sponsors' programme was leading us towards a cybernetic hive-mind, and by the second half of the century.'

'Whereas we are now looking at complete societal breakdown within *eight* years,' stated Warner, flatly. 'I'd still prefer the Sponsor programme: at least things would be relatively normal for the remainder of my lifetime!'

'Well, as it was explained to me--' began Russell.

'Where did this crop circle image come from?' interrupted Warner.

‘It’s human-made, i.e: a human crew physically beat down the crop,’ replied Michael, ‘but if you think they hold the secret – forget it! They were just arms and legs, oblivious to their actions at all times. In fact, we had to prevent the ring-leader from driving a combine harvester over one of the segments this morning! Isn’t that right, Russell?’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Russell, ‘but since Gerry is actually here in the pub, surely it wouldn’t do any harm to show him this! Who knows: it could jog something in his mind!’

‘Gerry made this!?’ exclaimed the Prime Minister. ‘Get him in here!’

‘*Absolutely!!*’ concurred Warner, with force.

‘Very well,’ replied Ceres, with a sigh. ‘Mr. Tebb, go and fetch Gerry.’

‘It’ll kick off if I go in there!’

‘So what?’ said at least two people in unison.

‘I suppose you’ve got a point,’ agreed Russell, ‘at least a pub brawl would relieve some of the—’

‘I’ll accompany you, Mr. Tebb,’ said the Prime Minister.

‘Me, too,’ said Marcus, ‘I need a drink!’

The PM and Russell fetched in Gerry, who was now significantly inebriated, and deposited Marcus, who clearly needed to be. The PM showed Gerry his creation and, unsurprisingly, Gerry failed to even recognize it. Both the PM and Warner then cross-examined him for a while but that just provoked his ire. After several more minutes of this Gerry excused himself and returned to the bar.

And that, as far as Russell was concerned, was that. The end of the road. ‘I think I’ll join Marcus,’ he declared. He left the others to continue their futile study of the crop circle.

Russell joined Gerry, Marcus and the malevolent Jim at the bar counter.

‘I’m gonna sue your ass off for the damage you caused, Tebb!’

‘Oh, shut up, Gerry! We’ll fix your bloody combine. We had to zap it to save the crop circle!’

‘What crop circle!’

‘Forget it!!’

After about ten minutes, Kerstin, Bosman and a couple of other German researchers entered the bar.

‘Where is Ceres?’ Kerstin immediately enquired of Russell. She looked hot and sweaty. Bosman just looked sweaty.

‘In there,’ replied Russell, ‘but she’s busy at the moment. You should just hang back for a while.’

‘Communal hall is off-limits!’ added Gerry, belching loudly into Bosman’s face: ‘PM’s here!’

‘Ah, yes! We all had to submit to a body-frisking!’ replied Kerstin, with a sly wink.

‘Indeed,’ added Bosman, ‘and what is your Prime Minister doing here?’

‘Crop circles or somit. I don’t know. Bollocks.’

‘The Third Eye?’ asked Kerstin.

'Yes,' replied Gerry. He was leaning so far back on his barstool that without Jim's steadying hand he would have toppled over. 'Thanks, pal!'

'No, it's not the Third Eye,' replied Russell: 'They're actually interested in one of his!'

'Yep,' agreed Gerry: 'The Third Eye.'

'The Third Eye is a genuine crop circle!' insisted Kerstin.

'Ha! whatever you say, darling. But actually, I made it!'

'No, Gerry, that's another one! Yours wasn't...' started Russell, but it occurred to him that neither the PM nor Warner had actually bothered to ask Gerry if his crop circle had a name. Their preoccupation had been exclusively focused on the design details and their possible meaning.

'Is that right, Gerry? It's called *The Third Eye*?'

'Yeah., no., wait a minute...'

'What?'

'It's something like that.'

'All-seeing Eye?'

'Nah!'

'Well, *what* then!? demanded Russell.

'Alright, Tebby, keep your fucking arse on!' Gerry attempted to recall the circle's name, if indeed it ever really had one: 'I can't remember, I'm too pissed. I'm not interested in naming them, what's the point?'

Russell shook his head. It probably didn't matter anyway, unless the title was something like...

'It wasn't hive-mind was it?'

'Huh?'

'Hominid?'

'You *what*!?'

'Sponsor?'

'Tebbster, what are you bloody gabbling about!?'

'The name of your crop circle!'

'I told you, I can't— ...*Ralph* will know! He's the one what takes this shit seriously.' Gerry unsteadily reached for his phone and examined it... 'Hey, Ralphy, my man! ...Yep, in the Red Lion. ...Yep, I'm with Tebb right now! ...I will do shortly! ...What are you up to, mate? ...'

'Ask him about the crop circle's name!' hissed Russell, resisting the urge to punch Gerry off his tottering barstool.

'Oh yeah! ...that circle we've been working on... Yeah, it's got them all shook up, uh huh! ... hahaha! ...Yeah, now, what did we call it again? ...Ah yes, that was it! ...Are you heading down? ...Later!'

Gerry terminated his call.

'Well?'

'We called it: *Magic Eye*.'

'Magic Eye?' replied Russell. That term rang a little bell inside his head, something from his childhood... He searched his mind and it suddenly came to him. He glared at Jim: 'My god, I've got it!'

Jim stared back uncomprehendingly for a moment, but then he suddenly smiled. He nodded slowly at Russell.

‘You’ve got *what*, Tebbs? Syphilis?’ grunted Gerry.

‘Single Image Random Dot Stereograms,’ replied Jim to Gerry. ‘Your enigmatic crop circle is one!’

‘Huh?’ replied Gerry.

Jim turned back to Russell: ‘You should get in there and tell them.’

‘Yes!’ replied Russell. ‘Are you coming?’

‘Can’t. Not with Ms. Warner in there. Better *she* studies it. I’ll follow proceedings vicariously from here, through her eyes, so to speak.’

‘Right.’ replied Russell, and he dashed back to the communal hall.

‘Help me shift this table!’ he demanded of the group. Everyone stared at him blankly but no one reacted, so he attempted to move the table himself but it was too heavy, and it did not help that Mr. Waterstone was still sat on it. The table remained stubbornly locked in place.

‘What are you up to, Russell?’ asked Michael.

Russell gave up and urgently pointed at the so-called “Third Eye” crop circle, still pinned to the side wall.

‘That’s not really called *Third Eye*, is it? It’s *Magic Eye*! And it was the message you said was directed at me. It was a *prompt*!’

Everyone continued to stare at him in silence.

‘It was a prompt about *that* one! It’s also called Magic Eye and it’s a single dot random stereo thing!!’

‘A Single Image Random Dot Stereogram?’ asked Michael.

‘Yes!! Now help me shift this bloody table!!’

The group hurriedly surged forward and the table was heaved to the side wall.

‘Would anyone care to bring me up to speed? What exactly does “Magic Eye” signify?’ asked the Prime Minister.

‘It’s how these...’ began Russell.

‘Single Image Random Dot Stereograms,’ prompted Michael.

‘Yes, it’s how they were marketed. There was a huge craze for Magic Eye images when I was a kid. And *that’s* one!!’ declared Russell, pointing at the picture of Gerry’s crop circle: ‘There’s a 3-D image imbedded in the pictogram, but to view it we’ll have to stand well back and focus our eyes to a point beyond the surface of the paper.’

Russell stood in the centre of the room and attempted to focus beyond Gerry’s crop circle pictogram to some imaginary point several feet beyond – but the image just dazzled him. Ceres stood by his side, viewed the image and then smacked him hard across the back of his head.

‘Ow!’

‘Well done, Mr. Tebb!’

‘You see it!’ Russell asked.

‘I’m in as well,’ declared Michael. ‘...Awesome!’

‘Holy crap, it’s the human genome!’ pronounced Warner.

Russell felt something suddenly impact his shin; pain flared. It was a head butt from

Mr. Waterstone; he wished to be lifted up so he too could view the stereogram. Russell reluctantly obliged and hauled the cat up to his own eye-level. The cat glanced at the stereogram and suddenly went stiff.

I guess that's four, said Russell to himself. He looked at the others: The PM and his assistant were frowning and squinting, as was Dosogne.

'I was always useless at these!' declared the PM, in frustration.

'Adjust your focus to seven-point-four metres beyond the wall,' advised Michael.

'Easier said than done with my old eyes!' replied the PM. 'Mrs. Collier?'

'Sorry, sir, my eyes aren't up to it either!'

'I'm in!' declared Dosogne. 'Wow!'

Russell was damned if he was going to miss out! Especially since he had been the one to solve this puzzle. He tried again.

Warner's description implied a spiral structure and, with hindsight, a vague hint of that could be inferred in 2-D. Russell focused beyond and tried to tease out this pattern. It was definitely there, but it still dazzled and remained stubbornly chaotic and blurry... And then: BAM! The full 3-D splendour of this most remarkable of constructions appeared before him. It took his breath away.

'I see it!'

Most of the pictogram had resolved itself into an extremely detailed and super-sharp rendering of the DNA double helix; it appeared to recede towards the centre, apparently travelling backwards for miles! Despite the enormous depth, all parts remained sharp and equally detailed and many aspects of the "molecule" seemed to be flagged or highlighted. The exact centre of the image, however, was different, but Russell felt disinclined to study that part too closely, almost as though a perception filter were at play...

'Anyone care to supply a commentary,' asked the PM: 'Ms. Warner?'

'Like I said,' began Warner, after a short delay: 'this appears to be a representation of the human genome, displayed graphically. As far as I can tell, it contains perhaps more information than a text version of base-pairs; I believe the epigenetic layer is also superimposed here, with markers to indicate which genes need activating, or deactivating... and possibly a time code as well: suggesting *when* these manipulations should be performed! But it'll be a devil of a job converting this into any kind of usable instruction manual!'

'Not a problem,' replied Michael. 'I can translate this into English for you and bung it on a CD.'

'Oh, thanks!' said Warner.

'What I don't get, though,' continued Michael, 'is that these edits are plainly *not* coinciding exactly with the Sponsor programme! And that simply won't do: either you're heading for the technological singularity – in which case you *will* need the Sponsor programme – or you're not – in which case you will crash at some point and then eventually settle, according to natural forces, back to your true, underlying, hominid state. Rather perplexing! Any thoughts, ma'am?'

'Yes, Michael, the answer lies in the centre. The human system is presenting us with the most audacious of proposals!'

'Whoa, when I attempted to view the centre I got bounced out,' said Warner. 'I'll

try again.'

'Me, too,' said Dosogne. 'It was like I was *shoved* out! Maybe that section is not meant for mortal eyes.'

'Yeah, same again for me,' concurred Warner.

'Only myself, Michael, Mr. Waterstone and Mr. Tebb can view the centre – because we've all been there before, millennia ago.'

'What!?' said Russell, not comprehending.

'Holy shit!' shouted Michael: 'Brace yourself, Russell – and view the centre when you feel ready.'

'When will that be?' asked Russell, feeling suddenly panicked.

'Now!' screamed Ceres.

Russell followed the DNA spiral to its apparent end and then moved beyond and into a recognizable scene.

The Red Lion's communal hall receded behind him and departed from his awareness altogether, as did the spiral component of the stereogram. He also no longer felt burdened by Mr. Waterstone's immense weight.

He found himself standing within the original "Third Eye" crop circle field, but in the distant past, when it was uncultivated and hosted a stone circle. He was the high priest of his faltering visions, and members of his clan, and many representatives of neighbouring clans, surrounded the stone circle, awaiting... something.

Ceres, Michael and Mr. Waterstone were present also within the circle but represented by simple orbs of light: yellow, in the centre; blue and red orbiting around the edge – duplicating the movements of Michael and Mr. Waterstone witnessed in the wheat field.

Except he, Russell, the high priest, the human system, was manipulating the movements of the red orb – Mr. Waterstone – knocking it off course, slowing it down, speeding it up. By doing this, he/it transmitted an appeal, no, an *entreaty*, to the planet itself: "bring forth fury and disaster!"

These were the "Earth changes" to which Bosman had referred when explaining the crop circle version of this scene.

Russell bounced out and returned to the communal hall, ironically dropping the cat in the process.

'Fuck,' he said.

'What did you see?' asked Dosogne.

'The solution,' replied Russell. 'You'll not like it, but it's a lot better than the rock and the hard place we were offered earlier. Michael, hopefully, can explain it.'

'Your collective unconscious, aka "the human system", has made a request,' began Michael. He pointed at Mr. Waterstone, who was standing on the floor and looking somewhat bemused. 'Of him! ...To avoid hitting the singularity and being converted into a machine-dominated cybernetic hive-mind, your system is prepared to see itself virtually destroyed.'

'By what?' asked Dosogne.

'By Mr. Waterstone – geophysical upheavals: volcanic and tectonic activity, climate

change leading to the melting of the ice caps, you name it. He's going to have a field-day! All this is due anyway, but your system wants it brought forward to some very specific dates. They want it choreographed to their own ends, so to speak.'

There was stunned silence in the room...

Warner was the first to speak: 'But – and I'm presuming there will be human survivors of this – won't that just precipitate the slide back to hominid?'

'Except you, the Custodians of the Human Genome, and your descendants, will make contingency plans to ensure the continuation of your great project – the ongoing manipulation of your genetics, according to the instructions laid out in the pictogram there. The singularity won't arrive because the Earth upheavals will effectively collapse your global civilization – fragment it – hence no machine networks worth the name. But you will keep your operations going and so your species' genes will remain human – *modern* human.'

'Wait a minute,' said the Prime Minister, 'so we stay human, but only as long as the Earth is hostile to our prosperous existence!'

'Yes, but this will not continue indefinitely. The process will radically alter your trajectory towards the singularity and, for want of a better expression, allow you to attain "orbit" around it, rather than pass directly through it in an uncontrolled fashion. You can then travel through at a time of your own choosing and determine what comes out the other side.'

'It sounds...' began Dosogne, but he couldn't decide what it sounded like.

'It sounds like survival,' said Ceres. 'The survival of a very tenacious Earth species. You should be proud of yourselves: you found a way.'

'Can we rely on "him" to affect the Earth changes?' asked Dosogne, pointing at Mr. Waterstone.

'Oh, I'm sure *he'll* be up for it. There's nothing he enjoys more than setting off a few super-volcanoes,' replied Michael.

The cat nodded in agreement as it stared fiercely into the middle distance. Maybe it wasn't sure exactly what it was it was "up for", but it *was* definitely up for it.

Epilogue

Saturday

'Mrs. Collier has arrived, Prime Minister; she's accompanied by Helen Warner and Alan Dosogne.'

'Excellent, show them all through, would you?'

The Prime Minister stood and strolled over to his window to view the ever-present cluster of press and photographers as they huddled near Number Ten's front door, sheltering as best they could from the heavy downpour. The PM smirked; no one down below had any inkling of the events that had occurred this week, since the "meteorite blast". In fact, that was no longer the biggest news story; the big ticket item now was an imagined bust-up between himself and his chancellor. Business as usual. There were even rumours of a putsch, with some media pundits openly speculating on the possibility of the chancellor taking over the top job by as soon as next week! That was not going to happen – with or without Dosogne and Warner's box of tricks. Still, he'd need to talk to his chief whip and get the lay-of-the-land regarding his perfidious and venal MPs. Perhaps the chancellor would be taking a back-bencher's job next week.

'Prime Minister.'

'Mrs. Collier, Ms. Warner, Mr. Dosogne. Do please come in.'

The PM pressed his intercom: 'Can we have some refreshments sent up? For four.'

The PM ushered his guests over to the comfy sofas. 'Please, sit here...'

'So, we are still in business?' he asked, once everyone had settled.

'We believe so, sir,' replied Mrs. Collier.

'Yes,' added Dosogne. 'We still need to develop our own projects, along the same lines as before, but—'

'—but we know for sure that this thing can be made to work now,' finished Warner.

'Good! Well naturally I'm happy to continue playing my part in all this, but the main reason I've asked the three of you to pop over this morning is simply to clarify the itinerary. Not so much my own, but rather... the cat's.'

'Mr. Waterstone, sir?' asked Dosogne.

'Of course. When's he going to start trashing the planet?'

'With respect, Prime Minister,' replied Dosogne, 'he *is* the planet.'

'Right, so when's he going to start self-harming?'

'I believe he's already started working with the spider. If I understood him correctly, the initial part of the plan involves erupting a chain of CO₂-rich volcanoes.'

'I see. And this is imminent?'

'Yes, Prime Minister,' replied Warner. 'We should start noticing a rise in global volcanism, including a sharp spike in activity around the Pacific Ring of Fire, later this year.'

‘Later *this* year!?’

‘Yes, sir, but it will just be treated as a scientific curiosity. Maybe a news item. Life will continue largely unaffected.’

‘Then what’s the point? I thought the so-called “human system” needed to be seriously stressed.’

‘Yes, sir, but the volcanism itself is merely the catalyst. With greatly increased CO₂ levels the cat believes it can then dislodge the icecaps, sending them into the oceans and raising global sea levels by several tens of metres. With most of the world’s coastline, and many of its major cities, underwater, the human system will then get very stressed.’

‘And what sort of timescales are we looking at here?’

‘Five years? Maybe less. The ice doesn’t even need to melt. As soon as it’s off its polar moorings, so to speak, and floating freely on the oceans, it will displace the water and hence raise sea levels virtually overnight!’

‘Hmm, sounds horrendous, especially for this place,’ the PM waved his arm to indicate London, ‘but will that be enough to disrupt the machine networks? Surely society will adapt. Cities can always be rebuilt further inland.’

‘Quite, Prime Minister. But all of this is just “phase one” – enough stress to allow our initial epigenetic coding to be assimilated successfully. But, as you say, the human system will learn to adapt so, a few years later, it will be time for “phase two”.’

‘Which entails? ...Dare I ask.’

‘The cat wants to blow the Yellowstone caldera, sir, and that will certainly tip us over the edge, bringing about partial societal collapse and fatally compromising the machine networks in the process. Thereafter, the maintenance of the human system should become simpler, easier to uphold – assuming we, the Custodians of the Human Genome as the Gang of Four referred to us, remain in business. So the human system can’t become *too* stressed otherwise we, or our descendents, would struggle to maintain the programme. Anyway, after five generations of this we should, as a species, be sufficiently realigned for a successful attempt at the singularity.’

‘One that will give us a Star-Trek future rather than a Cyberman future,’ added Dosogne.

The PM shook his head. ‘I hope all this shit proves to be worth it!’

‘We will be saving our necks, Prime Minister. It’ll be worth it,’ Warner stated firmly.

The PM silently regarded Warner for some time, occasionally glancing at the others. ‘...And this geological activity will be the full extent of the cat’s involvement?’ he finally asked.

‘We hope so, sir. However, the spider hinted at further “interventions” down the line should the machines prove more resilient than expected, so the cat is also looking at something in Indonesia.’

‘What sort of “*something*”!?’

‘He wouldn’t say, sir. Something big, that’s for sure.’

‘Christ!’

‘Well, let’s hope that Yellowstone proves to be enough.’

‘Yes, let’s.’ The PM sat back in his chair and focused on his security officer. ‘Mrs. Collier, what’s the current situation regarding the Gang of Four?’

‘Vanished. Off the radar, sir, but if you recall, we have agreed to terminate our

investigation of the Gang of Four.'

'Did we sign anything?'

'Sir!' interrupted Warner. 'We have to honour that agreement, even if it was just verbal. Without the Gang of Four's cooperation this project simply won't work!'

'Alright, calm down, Ms. Warner. I was only joking!'

'Hmm,' replied Warner, sceptically.

The PM turned again to Mrs. Collier: 'We *will* terminate all our current investigations pertaining to the Gang of Four, however—'

Warner took a deep intake of breath and rolled her eyes.

'*However!*' continued the PM, 'We'll maintain their file, adding to it if necessary every time they allow themselves to be noticed.'

'Yes, sir, but we don't even know if they're still with us – in physical form, I mean.'

'Well that would suit us fine, wouldn't it, Mrs. Collier, but for all we know they could turn up next week, arrested for drunken or lewd behaviour or something! So, I suppose, under exceptional circumstances we may have to intervene, if only to save them from themselves... I take it we'll be giving Russell Tebb a wide berth as well? Is he back at his Bermondsey aerobics studio?'

'All Bermondsey security personnel, plus their equipment, have been removed. We don't know where Tebb is.'

'We don't need him for *our* work, do we?'

'No, sir,' replied Warner.

'Then we'll leave him alone,' stated the PM.

Warner nodded. 'As long as we leave the rest of the gang alone we could at least keep an eye on Tebb, in case we need to contact the others in an emergency. There's no guarantee he could help with that but Tebb is our only known conduit – unless one of us fancies contacting them via ayahuasca.'

The PM snorted: 'Well you can count me out of *that!*'

'Alan here would be the obvious candidate, sir. He's the only one of us to have done their *Truth* thing. Seems like there would be more chance of "contact" if he does it.'

Dosogne shot Warner a furious glance and she responded with a smirk. The PM held aloft another statesmanlike hand:

'It's just a hypothetical, Mr. Dosogne. Hopefully none of us need deal with them ever again, but Ms. Warner is correct – if and when it comes down to it, and Tebb can't be found – you're in the frame.'

Before Dosogne could complain, the tea trolley arrived; the conversation then continued on for another forty minutes before the PM finally stood to terminate the meeting.

'Okay, we seem to have everything covered,' he said, shaking everyone's hand. As the group slowly sidled over to the door the PM placed a hand on Dosogne's shoulder, holding him back.

'If you could just wait a moment, Mr. Dosogne. I'd like a quick word with you in private. Ms. Warner, if you'd like you can wait for him in the lobby. This will not take long.'

Warner frowned as she departed the PM's office with Mrs. Collier.

'Do you enjoy a good working relationship with Helen Warner?' the PM asked, once he was alone with Dosogne.

'Well, I think so, potentially,' replied Dosogne, rather noncommittally. 'I've only been working closely with her this week, and she's a complex character, so...'

'Hmm, and it doesn't bother you that she's unwittingly part of an alien network.'

'That will take some getting used to, admittedly. But she is technically fully human and making her own decisions on things. Her intelligence is her own, it's just that the, err, what was it called?'

'The Malevolence.'

'Yes, – it's just that that thing provides her with access to the mental powers of other humans in the network. To my mind this is like having access to alien apps, as it was for me when I was a Sponsor hybrid. They're just enhancements, enhancements she'll need if she's to push through these programmes.'

'And would you describe her as mentally stable?'

'She's a genius.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means she's remarkably stable, considering.'

'Yes, well, genius or not, stable or not, we will be dependent on her for decades to come, and after that we'll need a replacement with similar mental abilities.'

'What are you driving at, Prime Minister?' asked Dosogne, looking a little unsettled.

'She'll need looking after, Mr. Dosogne. Only someone within our group can do that. And the only person she really likes and trusts – is you.'

'You think she *likes* me!?'

'Mr. Dosogne, you don't get to be a success in politics without knowing how to read people. Yes, she likes you, and rather a lot. You're just such a bonehead you can't see it.'

Dosogne was at a loss for words and remained so as the PM reopened his office door to show him out.

'Take care of her, Mr. Dosogne.'

'What did the Prime Minister want to talk to you about?' asked Warner, as she and Alan departed Number Ten.

'Oh, nothing much.'

Warner firmly held Alan's arm, forcing him to stop: 'It must have been something, you're as white as a sheet!'

'Honestly, it was nothing, Helen!'

'As you wish.'

Gavin and the BMW were waiting at Parliament Street. Alan and Warner quickly clambered in to escape the driving rain.

'Alright, Alan, keep your little secrets, see if I care. I guess you'll want dropping off at your apartment. We can resume with all this madness on Monday.'

‘Actually, Helen, I’ve been in touch with my parents and they’re on their way to London now. I’m to meet them at Paddington, and then we’ll hang out for the rest of the day.’

‘Oh, alright. Paddington, Gavin.’

‘I was wondering if you’d like to join us?’ Alan added.

Warner looked shocked but then shook her head: ‘You should spend some time alone with your parents. You’ve all got rather a lot of catching up to do.’

‘You’re probably right. But how about tomorrow? I don’t want to rattle around in my apartment all day, on my own. Would you like to do something? With me?’

‘Sure,’ Warner eventually replied, after an agonisingly long delay.

Russell sat alone in his office, idly perusing the five golden “droppings” in his hand. He felt their substantial weight and occasionally rolled them onto his desk, as though they were rune stones. He examined how they landed, before collecting them up again to recheck their weight.

So this was to be the fruits of his labour, his payment for services rendered. On the face of it, five ounces of pure gold was good going for just one week of chauffeuring, but, somehow... he still felt cheated.

All he’d craved this past week was a quiet life, a return to normality, aerobics classes, being nagged by Meg... and now that that quiet life *had* finally returned, it suddenly struck him as catastrophically dull. How could it compete with cruising around in a Bentley, tracking down aliens, studying crop circles and saving the human race!? He himself had been crucial in securing that last one. Or had he? The more he thought about it the more implausible it seemed that both Ceres and Michael had failed to deduce what he eventually would – that the crop circle was a 3-D stereogram thingee. He wanted to cross-examine them on this and on the many other questions currently burning holes in his head.

There would be no answers now, alas. Having finally resolved the issues of the human system at the Red Lion, at least to *their* satisfaction, they’d simply handed him the gold nuggets, offered a brief, and what seemed like rather grudging, thanks, and then quietly left. Russell, preoccupied by his gift, failed to notice their departure. By the time he did it was too late. He rushed out into the car park only to see an empty parking space. No crimson Bentley in sight.

So normality returned, and as abruptly as it had departed that Monday afternoon. Except he was in Wiltshire! And he had a hotel bill to settle! By the time he’d paid that – not to mention the taxi, bus and train fares back to London – about half a nugget’s worth of “wage” had been squandered. Four and a half ounces of pure gold would have to do.

He felt his stomach grumbling and checked the time: 11.10am. Time for some brunch. He placed the five gold nuggets in a drawer and decided to head out and find the nearest burger bar.

He stood by the entrance to his studio, despondently surveying the sheeting rain and the leaden, overcast skies; wet tyres on wet road surface made the traffic grinding along Tooley Street sound heavier than it really was. The party truly was over; even the heat wave had buggered off. Had Ceres and the others brought their own weather with them?

Pedestrians rushed by, heads down, and Russell soon joined them, scurrying eastbound, looking for that burger joint: Seppe's or Beppe's or something, where the hell was it? It was hard to see anything in this rain!

In due course Russell spotted *Beppe's Burgers* directly ahead; he peered in and was not surprised to see the place heaving, full of people seeking respite from the foul weather. He'd order a takeaway and eat it back at the studio, but as he pushed open the front door he noticed a momentary flash of red in the reflection of the door's glass. Turning instinctively he half-expected to see the Bentley and, surprisingly, a Bentley *was* the source of that red glint. However, this vehicle was slightly different – it had a metal roof. He checked the number plates before realizing that he'd never bothered to note the original's numbers. This car just had standard plates, no customization. Shrugging, Russell entered Beppe's.

Speculating that it actually was *the* Bentley parked outside and that a perception filter might be at play, Russell carefully scrutinized the eatery for signs of the others, but nothing appeared to be out of place: a giant spider flipped burgers, while a cat took the customers' orders. Despite the crowd in here a tall woman sat alone at one of the tables, stuffing her face with what looked to be a *Beppe Cheese Monster*... Oh crap!

Mr. Waterstone took his order and Michael nimbly put it together in double-quick time.

'Thanks.'

Russell collected his meal and seated himself opposite Ceres.

'Good Morning, Mr. Tebb!' Ceres said with a smile.

'Morning,' Russell replied. He stared down at his burger, realizing that he'd lost his appetite. 'I wasn't expecting to see you again. What are you doing here?' he asked, '...and why the hell did you make me find my own way back to London?'

'We had to attend to other business; not the kind of work that would have suited you.'

'Oh yeah, what sort of business?'

'The sort we normally have to deal with. In this case: a trans-temporal tear was threatening to destroy the fabric of reality in the Vale of Pickering.'

'Did you fix it?'

'Of course.'

Russell took a bite of burger; his mouth felt dry; he wished he'd ordered a drink. 'And so now you're back, to bother me!'

'I think you want to be bothered by us.'

'No I don't!'

'Yes you do.'

'Hmm. What I don't understand is why you would *want* to bother with me? Worried you'll be facing more conundrums only I can solve?'

'Not exactly, I think your insight yesterday was a fluke.'

‘So you’re admitting you really didn’t get the nature of Gerry’s circle, its 3-Dness.’

‘Indeed. As you might recall from this week, even *we* can be wrong footed by a perception filter occasionally. That “clue” left by the Third-Eye crop circle was not meant for us to solve, it was meant for you to solve.’

‘The universe did a number on you!’

‘It would appear that way.’

‘Ha! Why was it sticking its nose in anyway? What’s all this got to do with It/Him/Her/Them? You’d think the affairs of Earth would be too trivial to bother with. No offence.’

Ceres thinly smiled but then glared at an obese man who was contemplating joining them at the table. Another perception-filter-resistant individual, perhaps – like Marcus? Eye contact was made and the man quickly departed into the rain.

‘Maybe true for the Earth, but not the galaxy as a whole,’ replied Ceres. ‘The logical deduction seems to be that the universe *wants* you lot to make it into space – so you can set about stamping on the Sponsors’ toys.’

‘Really? That can’t be right. It doesn’t sound very enlightened. I’d expect better from the universe.’

‘What would you know about enlightenment? And, besides, who’s to say it is not! The Sponsors are a roadblock to evolution in this galaxy, they’re bad karma: as soon as a species independently makes it to the cusp of sentience, the Sponsors come along and convert that nascent intelligence into a form that is far too similar to their own. This has to stop! Clearly the universe thinks so!’

‘Does it? Is this the only logical deduction?’

‘Probably not, but it’s the one we prefer.’ Ceres took a large bite of Cheese Monster and coolly regarded Russell.

So saving humanity wasn’t the end of the matter, it was also to be moulded into an army! Was that really the desire of the universe, or more the desire of a blood-thirsty Ceres? Russell held Ceres’s gaze for as long as he could muster.

‘How did you know I’d be walking into Beppe’s?’

‘Lucky hunch.’

‘Yeah, right! And the *reason* you are here?’

‘It’ll be a long journey to Loch Ness, and none of us want to do the driving.’

‘Seriously!? You still need me to– did you just say *Loch Ness*?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I thought the Loch Ness Monster wasn’t real, Michael said so.’

‘No I didn’t! ...Budge up.’ Michael and Mr. Waterstone, both still wearing their yellow Beppe’s uniforms, joined Russell and Ceres at the table. ‘I was merely pouring scorn on MI6’s interpretation of Nessie. I mean: “Non-corporeal projection of collective sub-conscious desires. Sexual metaphor.” Purrlease!’

‘So it exists? What actually is it?’

‘Alien, init. Bloody big one, too.’

Russell sighed. He felt very conflicted. Every time he found himself in this company the tedium of everyday life would beckon, but when that everyday life *did* reassert itself, he’d find himself missing the excitement that only these three could offer.

‘There’s still the issue of maintaining my business. I might have gotten away with it

this last week but any more no-shows and my clientele will desert me. And what about Meg?’

‘You’ll have to resolve these issues as best you can, Mr. Tebb. You should also bear in mind that London will be underwater in a few years time. Perhaps the best thing for you, and Meg, would be to sell up.’

‘Sell up?’

‘Or relocate to higher ground,’ suggested Michael. ‘But in the meantime, work with us.’

‘*With* you or *for* you?’ asked Russell.

‘With us,’ replied Ceres, to Russell’s surprise. He could imagine Michael saying something like that, but never Ceres.

‘You see, Mr. Tebb,’ Ceres continued, ‘we’ve all quite enjoyed the working arrangement this week. Usually we are a *Gang of Two* – just Michael and myself – Mr. Waterstone only joining us occasionally when he can be arsed and when he has a direct interest in a particular operation, thus making us a *Gang of Three*, but then this week we heard ourselves being described as the *Gang of Four* for the first time, and we liked it. It sounded more complete: biology, planet, machine – and *being*.’

‘That’s me is it? The *being*. Maybe I should introduce myself as that: “Hi, Russell Tebb – being”.’

Mr. Waterstone grunt-laughed.

‘You should! At least when dealing with aliens,’ declared Ceres, apparently seriously.

‘I wouldn’t use the term with humans, though,’ added Michael. ‘They’d think you were being pretentious.’

Shortly after noon Russell and the other members of the Gang of Four departed from Beppe’s and congregated around the Bentley. The torrential downpour seemed to have eased a bit but the skies remained a dark and threatening overcast...

‘Well, Mr. Tebb?’ asked Ceres.

Russell sighed. ‘How soon will you be needing me?’

‘Is that a “yes”?’ asked Michael.

‘No, I want to know how soon you will be needing me!’

‘We can be flexible up to a point, Mr. Tebb,’ replied Ceres.

‘Okay, well if you are prepared to give me a couple of weeks, I’ll begin winding up the business. I’d also like some compensation for Meg.’ Russell glanced at Mr. Waterstone.

‘Worried she’ll sue?’ asked Michael.

‘No! Well, maybe, I just want to do what’s right by her.’

‘Very well,’ declared Ceres, ‘we’ll base ourselves here for the next two weeks. London can keep us entertained until then.’

‘When you say base yourselves “here” –’

‘We’ll stay with you.’

Russell considered this. It shouldn’t be a problem...

‘Alright!’ he finally declared. ‘I’m in.’

‘Great!’ replied Michael, and to Russell’s amazement, everyone shook his hand.

'I'll be insisting on a change to the sleeping arrangements, though,' Russell stated, as he led the others into the aerobics studio.

There was no reply.

'I'm serious! This is one of my red lines!'

Still no reply.

'Is anybody listening to me!!'

—Ω—

about the author

Richard Lawther graduated from the University of Central Lancashire with a degree in Physics and Astronomy. This led to employment as a Meteorologist/Physicist with the British Antarctic Survey, work that included a two-year stint in Antarctica. After returning to the UK he became a Fingerprint Officer working at New Scotland Yard in London. Finding this work to be both monotonous and stressful he decided to return to meteorology. After acquiring a Met Office postgraduate qualification he found work in the Middle East as a Marine Forecaster, providing forecasts for the oil industry on wind and sea states in the Arabian Gulf, forecasts that were occasionally correct.

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