

NumbaCruncha
or
Dystopia meets Utopia

A Cautionary Tale of the Future

By

Rigby Taylor

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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it
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Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
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Other titles by Rigby Taylor

Sebastian
Rough Justice
Dancing Bare
Dome of Death
Time to think
Jarek

Cover: *'The Tower' by Salvador Dali*

Men! A land of men, in spite of everything.

The one manly quality, undying, acrid fearlessness.

The eternal challenge of the un-quenched human soul.

Perhaps too acrid and challenging today, when there is nothing left to challenge.

But men—who exist without apology and without justification.

Men who will neither justify themselves nor apologize for themselves.

Just men.

The rarest thing left in our sweet Earth

Aaron's Rod ... D H Lawrence

NumbaCruncha

The tale begins with a chilling peek into the near future when Sebastian and Jarek, now in their eighties, confront a particularly vile religious autocrat, whose reign of terror has led to the destruction of their laboratories, but not their secret weapon.

We then take a thousand year leap to a future city-state in which the human aptitude for duplicitous and unjust social schemes has reached its logical culmination in Oasis, a flesh-crawlingly evil dystopia ruled by the most unpleasant gang of conmen and women you're ever likely to encounter.

A couple of young scientists who have recently invented a new means of transport, begin to question the morality of the Oasis social order, and decide to do something about it, despite the tremendous odds.

Meanwhile, back in the forest, Sebastian and Jarek's secret weapon is patiently waiting.

NumbaCruncha is a thoughtful, perhaps shocking, certainly controversial, at times amusing, and always cheeky assessment of the apparently intractable problems facing humanity. Although the future for life on planet Earth seems hopelessly bleak to people who care about the destruction of the natural world in which Homo sapiens evolved, NumbaCruncha suggests there might be some hope ...but only if...

1: Somewhere in Far North Queensland Towards the End of the Twenty-First Century

‘Make sure there’s nothing left to salvage, or tomorrow there’ll be nothing left of you.’ The priest’s twisted smile, more venomous than his customary frown, underlined the threat. Ignoring the nervous nods of his sweating acolytes, he turned, raised an imperial finger in warning and waddled back to his limousine, slashing the air with his stick to ward off mute offers of assistance from heavily armed bodyguards.

After passing silently through the gates the black car stopped to allow the priest to gaze back through tinted windows. Impassive, he watched as the splendid old buildings exploded in a gigantic fireball that briefly rivalled the sun. This wasn’t the first such establishment he’d had the pleasure of demolishing, and wouldn’t be the last. Releasing a wheezy sigh of satisfaction he nodded slightly and chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip. There were few pleasures to match erasing the stench of Roman Catholic blasphemy, nonconformist freethinking tolerance, and secretive research by ungodly intellectuals bent on disrupting God’s plans. He tapped on the bulletproof glass and the chauffeur drove smoothly away, leaving the once grand edifice’s executioners to ensure all had been destroyed.

After poking at ashes and embers long enough to ensure nothing useful remained, the demolition team drove noisily away in three small matt black trucks bearing the same gold logo of intertwined crosses as on the doors of the priest’s limo.

Forty kilometres inland, two elderly men were attempting to relax on the wide verandah of a house nestled in a luxuriant garden that merged with dense surrounding rainforest. The leaner and taller of the two snapped his phone shut with a sigh.

‘That was Lindoro. The Research Institute is no more. Brother Dominic has just left so we have about half an hour.’

‘Half an hour. You say it as if it were a lifetime. You’re always so positive, Sebastian.’ Jarek’s sigh was even deeper than his friend’s. ‘I know we’ve been expecting it, but it’s still a shock to know the party’s finally over.’

‘It’s not over till we’ve given the fat priest the welcome he deserves.’

‘I wish I was fifty years younger.’ Jarek levered himself to his feet, opened a concealed panel in the wall and pressed a switch that triggered lasers to reflect off multiple mirrors, creating tiny pinpoint points of light at strategic locations throughout the forest. ‘We may not be much use, but at least the guys will be ready.’ He turned and leaned against the railing, staring thoughtfully along the driveway, mentally preparing himself for their unwelcome guest.

Sebastian stood beside him, equally pensive. ‘The mad monk’s done us a favour—saved us having to close the place ourselves. At least we’ve avoided depressing farewells.’ He shook his head in despair. ‘It feels odd knowing I’ll never see the place again. That’s where I found my father. Then when I lost Reggie and thought my life was over, you turned up. Since then every moment has been the best possible.’ He grunted a short laugh. ‘It’s strange that memories of seventy years ago are as clear or clearer than those of last week.’

Jarek nodded and smiled softly. ‘I can’t believe we’re both eighty-six! If I don’t look in a mirror my head still thinks I’m a young man.’

‘We *are* young! Sagging skin’s simply a clever disguise.’

‘If only. Did Lindoro say if anyone was hurt when the school went up?’

‘He fears so. They’d been expecting the attack so last week they took away everything that was still useful. He’s been hiding in the old house for the last few days to get video evidence of any attack. Arnold turned up this morning looking for something. Lindoro warned him to stay clear, but he went in not long before the wreckers arrived and didn’t leave, so he must have hidden when the demolition gang arrived and died in the conflagration.’

‘I hope that fucking priest didn’t get his hands on him first!’

‘It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

‘It’s all over then.’ Jarek turned and peered into the rainforest as if searching for something, then shrugged and raised his eyes to the massive western escarpment several kilometres away that seemed to float above the treetops. Large birds wheeled in thermals and dense clouds accumulated beyond the towering cliffs. He sniffed the air. The storm wouldn’t arrive till evening. Meanwhile a pitiless sun rendered outside activities dangerous. The oppressive heat infected his mood.

‘I can hardly bear to leave. This wonderful house you built; the memories, the work, the fun...I’m glad no one will live here after us—it would be sacrilege.’

‘Coming from an atheist them’s powerful words.’

‘You know what I mean. Are you sorry to be leaving?’

‘Not if I think about it rationally. We’ve had an excellent life. I’m not greedy, and politically we know it’s impossible. My brain wouldn’t mind hanging on for a bit but my body and common sense tells me to get out while we can.’

‘So this is the end.’

Arms linked they wandered indoors to the relative cool of the lounge.

‘Only the end of the beginning. Now the exciting part is starting.’

‘But we won’t be here to see it.’

‘Thank goodness. Things are going to get much messier than they already are, so I reckon we’re quitting at the right time. You’re not having second thoughts?’

‘No way. Even if things remained as they are I’d not want to stay. We’ll deal with Dominic, bid farewell to the guys and...’

‘You think they’ll survive?’

‘No question.’

A car horn gave three sharp blasts.

‘Ah ha. We have visitors.’

They watched through the window as a large black car crunched over the gravel and parked directly in front of the house. Two guards in glistening black leather sprang from the rear doors and crouched each side of the car, assault rifles at the ready, heads and eyes flicking from side to side, noses thrust forward as if to smell danger. When satisfied it was safe, the driver got out, crossed to the verandah, tapped on the wall with his rifle and shouted, ‘Everyone outside! Now!’ underlining his order by firing a volley into the air through the verandah roof, startling a flock of kookaburras into maniacal laughter as they flew off.

Jarek and Sebastian wandered out, hands in the air. The driver patted them down, told them to keep their hands on their heads and wait in the centre of the driveway. The sun was searing and they began to sweat while he made a thorough search of the house. Eventually he returned and signalled to the car. A fat man in black emerged, shuffled to the verandah, hoisted himself with visible effort up the steps onto the deck and sank into the largest of the rattan armchairs. A casual flick of fingers summoned the two elderly men who stood and stared at their unwelcome guest; faces devoid of expression.

‘We meet at last. From the reports I’d expected a pair of giants, not a couple of scrawny old men. You look as if you’ve suffered a famine.’

‘You look as if you caused it.’

‘Touché.’ The fat man’s lips drew back in a humourless smile. ‘OK, where are they?’

‘Who?’

‘The mutants you’ve been breeding.’

‘We haven’t been breeding anything; we’re too old and neither of us have ovaries.’

Brother Dominic leaned forward and slashed at Sebastian with a whip he'd concealed in his surplice, nicking him on the cheek, drawing a trickle of blood.

'Before disposing of that charnel house of yours, I had a chat with a young man who, after a little persuasion, told me everything. Arnold I think he said his name was. Unfortunately, having no lips made him difficult to understand, so I thought I'd visit you to clarify a few details.'

'You fucking bastard.'

'My vows of celibacy preclude fucking, and both my parents were married.'

'What about your gentle Jesus meek and mild Christian vows? Don't they preclude the use of torture?'

'He who sees evil and does nothing is also evil. One of my multitude of burdens is to rid the world of evil. According to what that unfortunate individual told us, you've been playing God.'

'We wouldn't contemplate emulating the incompetent, vengeful, vain, infantile figment of your imagination you call god. According to your beliefs he designed and made you. We, on the other hand, have brought into this world creatures of wisdom, sensitivity, grace and beauty—as unlike you and your ilk as it is possible to imagine!'

The fat priest smiled; he'd angered them. 'Your passion is commendable and increases my curiosity. Arnold was only able to give me a vague idea of what's been going on before he gave up the ghost.' Brother Dominic's phlegm-filled chuckle failed to elicit the response he desired so he continued in placatory tones. 'If you tell me everything, and convince me that the results of your work do not pose a threat to the State, there's no reason not to let your protégés live.'

The old men remained silent.

'Be reasonable,' Dominic cajoled, 'you've nothing to lose and everything to gain.'

Jarek and Sebastian looked at each other, shrugged, and nodded.

'Can we sit down?'

'Of course. Of course.' The priest flicked fat fingers at the driver who brought two straight-backed chairs from inside and placed them facing his boss. The old men sank gratefully onto them, thought for a bit, exchanged glances and wry smiles, then nodded acceptance.

'It's a long story,' Sebastian cautioned.

'I've an hour to kill.'

'A foolish expression.' Sebastian sniffed his distaste and cleared his throat. 'Sixty-three years ago, instead of closing the School because of falling rolls, my parents decided to use the facilities for research into social change. Philosophical and practical solutions to the abundance of problems facing humanity were solicited from all over the globe. Millions of responses were computer crunched, analysed, sorted into ideas and mulled over by the philosophers, scientists and medical personnel who had become interested in our project and joined the institute. It soon became clear that because human problems stem from the way humans think, we can't expect to think our way out of problems our thinking has created. So we adjusted the question and ran it through the computers again. The solution at first surprised, then after consideration made sense. We would have to eliminate some things that once ensured survival, but are now destroying us along with the environment in which we evolved.'

'And what did your computer suggest you eliminate?' Dominic's sneer irritated, as he intended.

Sebastian smiled equably. 'Two genders, and brains that can be taught in infancy to believe nonsense, despite evidence to the contrary, simply because the person wants to believe it.'

'What nonsense?'

'Things like believing there's an invisible, omnipotent, omniscient superman in the sky, or that democracy will ensure good government...that sort of thing.' Jarek replied, face a picture of innocence.

'And you want to eliminate sex?'

'No—merely the duality.'

'Quit the smart-arse act. Cut to the chase! What are you talking about?'

‘It’s obvious that the qualities of both sexes are essential, but having two different sexes is an evolutionary compromise. It worked in other animals, but in humans is a recipe for conflict because of our ability to see ourselves as individuals rather than part of a pair or group. The different desires and expectations of males and females...’

‘Give an example of these different desires,’ the priest interrupted brusquely.

‘Males are usually content with a simple life as long as they feel useful. Left alone we would still be relaxing in the Garden of Eden. Females drive change by demanding ever more impressive evidence of their partner’s ability, demonstrated by the Adam and Eve story in your bible.’

‘So?’

‘So humans are in a constant struggle to get more and more, bigger and better, regardless of whether it is useful or essential for survival. We swapped paradise for a work camp. Instead of remaining in the natural state in which we evolved like all other animals who only do what is essential for their survival, leaving the planet fresh, clean, and able to provide in abundance, we’ve become slaves to our unquenchable desires.’

‘What rubbish! Our ancestors could have remained in a state of nature if they’d wanted.’

‘I disagree. You see humans don’t have a cut-off switch. They aren’t able to say, “I’ve got enough, so I’ll stop for a while.” Once the climate stabilised, men’s problem-solving brains allowed them to indulge their insatiable desire to impress and provide for the insatiable desires of females. This led to agriculture, cities, heavy industry, commerce and wars with increasingly powerful weapons. Increased security allowed women to breed more, and medical interventions have permitted most children to survive. Twelve thousand million people now eke out an existence in a death struggle for survival on a tiny planet that our evolutionary impulses have rendered virtually uninhabitable.’

‘If the characteristics you describe are indeed human nature, then I’m living a natural life.’

‘Sadly true. You’re a living example of how humankind’s natural behaviour contains the seeds of our extinction. Your insatiable desires have led you to excess in everything. You’ve become the most powerful person, the most feared, the most cruel and hated. You’re a vile, obese monster whose selfishness and unconcern for others knows no bounds. You’re the result of ten thousand years of civilization in which men grabbed, killed, conquered, made slaves, built empires, multinational conglomerates...and so altered the planet that it’s no longer a benign environment for most living organisms.’

‘Only ten thousand years?’

‘That surprised you, didn’t it? For the first two or three hundred thousand years of human existence, Earth’s weather was too unstable to allow civilization to develop, and humans remained as they evolved—hunter gatherers living in precarious balance with nature like all other animals.’

‘It’s human ingenuity that enabled you to do your research. You’re no better than the people you criticise. Where do you get these stupid ideas?’

‘They’re far from stupid. There have always been a few humans throughout history with the ability to observe the world objectively, think about what they see, and by understanding how nature works, suggest ways to live well without destroying everything. But they’ve never been able to influence human behaviour. Instead of facing facts, the overwhelming majority of humans believe what they want to believe instead of the truth because of childhood conditioning and constant propaganda. So now we’re living with the result—a filthy, degraded, overpopulated, overheated planet. Few humans will survive the collapse of civilization.’

‘What a Jeremiad! The sky’s falling in—civilization is collapsing! Rubbish! There’s no limit to human resourcefulness; civilization is far from over!’

‘Half the city that used to be down the hill from here, is either under water or a suppurating, lethal swamp.’

‘Which begs the question, why haven’t you offered sanctuary to refugees?’

‘Our forest has been designated a sanctuary for displaced non-human animals.’

‘That will change! Surely you don’t consider animals as important as humans?’

‘More important than the current crop of humans, which is why we embarked on our research.’

‘Ah yes, your creation of a superior breed of human. You were about to tell me what your computer advised.’

‘In essence, it said we should do nothing and let nature solve the problem by allowing most humans to die, leaving a few to revert to the prehistoric state. If they didn’t die out, in another million years or so they might evolve into a species able to live with nature instead of fighting it—but the chances were they’d just repeat the mistakes of the past as they’ve always done. That gave us the idea of shoving evolution along by tweaking a few genes and creating a race of humanoids different enough from us to survive and flourish in a future of wildly unstable weather.’

‘You decided to play god.’

‘Are you a creationist?’

‘Unless you’re a masochist I suggest you stop wasting my time. What did you do?’

‘The entire human genome’s been mapped, so it wasn’t difficult to modify both behaviour and physical attributes.’

‘Physical attributes...you mean you...?’

‘Yes we made an androgyne.’

‘How?’

‘The default state of a human foetus is female. At various stages throughout pregnancy the embryo’s xx or xy chromosomes cause the mother to release hormones that trigger changes in the way its body develops. If the foetus is destined to become a male, doses of hormones at specific times cause what could be ovaries to descend and become testicles, and the clitoris to lengthen and curl into a tube, which then conducts urine, and by a complex arrangement of finer tubes, sperm. Other doses of hormones remain dormant till puberty when they trigger the growth of breasts and the menstrual cycle in females, and such things as enlargement of the voice-box, hair growth, and, in both genders, the way they perceive the opposite sex.

‘Errors can and do occur. For example, in about ten percent of the population an insufficient or poorly timed release of hormone affecting the potential adult male’s perception of females will result in an otherwise perfectly normal male reverting to the default state and seeing males as sexually arousing. What your religion still hasn’t accepted is that a person’s character, sexual identity and gender is hard-wired in the womb, and there’s no way they can change it, any more than they can change the colour of their eyes.’

‘How convenient.’

‘No, it’s just the way it is.’

‘Where did you get the foetuses? Whose eggs and sperm? Surely the donors didn’t want you to experiment on their offspring?’

‘We developed an artificial womb capable of growing a genetically modified foetus and administering the required doses of hormones to create exactly the result we desired. The first spermatozoa and eggs were donated by my father and stepmother. Both were the finest people I’ve ever known and fully supportive of the program. Importantly, both come from exceptionally hardy ethnic stock—Australian Aborigine and Melanesian.’

‘You’re not black!’

‘Half. My mother was a European of the most vile sort, which is why I would never contemplate using my sperm.’ Sebastian turned to Jarek. ‘Can you finish this off? I’m suddenly very tired.’

Jarek took Sebastian’s hand, smiled and looked the fat priest in the eye, daring him to comment. ‘There’s not much more to tell. We succeeded in breeding a race of hermaphrodites who, while looking exactly like perfect human males, have a womb with ovaries as well as functioning testicles. The womb opens into a vulva in the usual place for females, the penis still serves as a conduit for both urine and sperm, and the pelvis is modified to allow easy birth.’

‘Why choose the male body? Personal preference.’

‘Pragmatism. Males can move faster, are stronger and more flexible, have greater endurance, and higher tolerance to pain. In all other respects our New Men are balanced individuals who exhibit the best characteristics of both genders.’

‘How many of these...these monsters have you created?’

‘They’re not monsters, they’re quiet, intelligent, charming, thoughtful people who know how to live in harmony with their environment. They are also well equipped to defend themselves against the stupidity and ignorance of people like you. Our tinkering with genes has worked better than we hoped. The tension that normally exists between the two halves of a human couple has been eliminated. They are Aristotle’s complete man.’

‘I asked how many!’ Brother Dominic snapped nastily.’

Jarek wasn’t intimidated. ‘Enough to ensure their survival,’ he said with a slight smile.

‘All you’ve done is create a gang of queers who’ll be fucking and screwing and murdering each other in jealous rage. Ha! Live in harmony? I’ve never met a single queer who even understood the meaning of harmony, let alone lived it.’

‘Yes you have.’

‘When?’

‘You’re looking at them.’

Brother Dominic stared at his two opponents in silent fury.

‘As for screwing each other, they may, but not for the reasons women get men to fuck them. They’re able to self fertilise as well as cross with other New Men, but will only conceive if the conditions for raising a child are perfect. As there can be no sexual tension within individuals, relationships with others are for friendship, and sexual congress becomes no different from sharing any other activity.’

‘How can you be sure of that?’

‘We’ve been monitoring them for the last fifty-four years.’

‘If they fertilise themselves, that’s inbreeding—a recipe for idiocy. There’ll soon be a gaggle of idiot clones cluttering the planet.’

‘Wrong again. It’s line breeding, as practiced by all pedigree breeders. If you start with excellent stock there’s seldom a problem. If the occasional child turns out imperfect, then it will be killed at birth. As for clones, you’ve been misinformed. Siblings are the progeny of the same parents, but usually they’re only slightly similar because the genes of the egg are different from those of the sperm and every time they mix in a different way. Over the years we’ve been able to secure twenty other superbly suitable egg and sperm donors, so the gene pool is more than sufficient to keep the race healthy.’

‘How long do they live?’

‘No idea, no one has died yet. They don’t age because we eliminated the design fault the rest of us have—the telomere that loses bits so that after half a century or less our DNA forgets how to repair organs properly, and so we age. Not suffering the debility of ageing means they won’t need care as they get older.’

The priest sat staring at his clasped hands for several minutes, then looked up. ‘Why did you do this?’

‘Because the idea of a sentient, rational, reasonable, sensible, self-aware creature that bases their life on observable facts, not wishful thinking, is too beautiful to let go. We hope they will somehow be able to counter the destruction of Homo sapiens. All religious texts, including your bible, admit that humans are fallible—born in sin your bible says. Yet as Sebastian mentioned, throughout the ages there have been wise men pleading with humans to behave differently and live within their means and leave the world richer and better able to support life than they found it, understanding that more than enough is too much. Instead of listening to these sages and changing their ways, humans have continued to demand unsustainable profits.’

‘A race of rabid individualists.’ Dominic sneered.’

‘Of course, because only independent individuals value themselves and others. Societies and relationships based on dominance and servitude can never be happy, productive or stable.’

‘What about values?’

‘All wise men not infected by religious dogma have advocated kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity, humour, gentleness, equality, listening, egalitarianism, love of children and diligent respect for the land, plants and animals. These are sensible behaviours owing nothing to imaginary gods, and our Homo novus appear to embody these virtues.’

‘I want to see one of these paragons of virtue.’

‘We thought you would, so we asked Primo to stand by.’

‘Primo? I suppose he was the first?’

‘The first successful New man, yes. Primo,’ Sebastian called softly.

A slim young man appeared in the doorway where he stood and stared speculatively at the visitor. He was of average height, devoid of both fat and hair, well but not heavily muscled, with all the usual male sexual apparatus. Totally at ease, he emanated calm self-control.

‘The man who organised the destruction of our laboratories and tortured and murdered Arnold, would like to meet you.’ Sebastian’s voice was unnaturally harsh.

Dominic gazed from Sebastian to Primo and back. ‘I can see the resemblance—how remarkable. He is much darker than you, and more symmetrical, but despite your age difference there is something of you. How old is he?’

Primo’s voice was low and soft, yet uncannily penetrating. ‘If you wish to know anything about me, ask me.’

Visibly taken aback, Dominic uttered a surly grunt and repeated his question.

‘Fifty-four.’

‘But you look...’

‘That has already been explained to you.’

‘Why are you naked?’

‘Why should I wear clothes if I don’t need them?’

‘Will you show me your...other genitals?’

‘If you ask.’

‘You aren’t shy then?’

‘Of what should I be shy? They’re perfectly healthy, clean and normal. Are you ashamed of yours?’

‘No.’

‘Then show them to me.’

‘No way! They’re private.’

‘That’s a relief. Your body is physically repellent and I imagine your genitals are no better. I have no desire to see them; just thought I’d see if you were truthful. Now I know you’re not, I shall modify my behaviour. Well? Do you want to see between my legs?’

‘Yes...please.’ The priest was unaccountably nervous. He had never felt this way with another man.

Primo lay on his back on the floor in front of the priest and raised his legs, exposing a tight vulva between his anus and scrotum. ‘I suppose you also want to see how I self fertilise,’ he stated with a slightly bored sigh.

The priest nodded; overawed.

With practised dexterity Primo massaged his flaccid penis until it was long enough to bend between his legs and insert into his vulva. Then, squeezing his legs together, he worked his stomach muscles. ‘My penis is now erect and has penetrated far enough for me to fertilise myself,’ he said quietly. ‘However, as I have no desire to do that, I will withdraw.’ Spreading his legs he reached between and carefully pulled about twenty centimetres of turgid penis from his vulva. Sebastian and Jarek could scarcely control their laughter as Dominic, open-mouthed in what looked like lust, watched the erection return to normal.

‘Have you any children?’ Dominic asked huskily?

‘Yes, one.’

‘Boy or girl?’

Loud, musical laughter burst from Primo as he got to his feet. ‘Both, you stupid, stupid witchdoctor! You’re as dumb as most of your species.’

‘How much do you know about humans?’

‘Do you imagine I’ve lived in this forest for over half a century without curiosity? Like all my people I’ve spent most of my life among you lot, all over the country, working in various jobs, meeting as many humans as possible. We’re well aware that if people knew about us they’d demand our elimination. If we hope to survive we have to know the enemy.’

‘The enemy eh? You seem to have a low opinion of Homo sapiens.’

‘Homo sapiens! Ha! A misnomer if ever there was one. Homo destroyer would be nearer the mark. They’re little more than clever toolmakers. Like the other animals that evolved alongside them, humans have neither awareness nor respect for their mother.’

‘Do you mean the virgin Mary?’ the priest asked in surprise.

‘Nature, you stupid man. Just as a field of goats will unconsciously eat everything and create a desert, humans have turned the entire planet into a toxic and dangerous semi desert that will remain hostile to them and most other mammals for millennia. Coastal cities are partially under water. Millions of refugees are starving, homeless and rioting. The entire country is in violent chaos, ruled by insane warlords like you using a combination of physical terror and irrational fear of a supernatural god seeking vengeance. But you’re not winning. You think it’s bad now—well let me tell you the horror has barely begun. You think the weather’s wild now? You haven’t seen anything yet!’ With a contemptuous shake of his head he quit the verandah as unobtrusively as he arrived.

Jarek broke the silence. ‘Well? Are you satisfied?’

‘I am,’ the priest replied, ‘and have made my decision.’ As he heaved himself to his feet, three vehicles similar to those attending the destruction of the research laboratories pulled up in front of the house and disgorged a dozen Kevlar clad, heavily armed men who joined the priest’s two guards and stood in a circle facing outwards, bodies and assault rifles ready for trouble.

‘You’d made your decision to eliminate us long before meeting us. You’ve just been satisfying your curiosity and wasting our time.’ Sebastian stated pensively, gazing off towards the mountains. With a shy smile he turned to the Priest. ‘We’d also made plans before allowing you and your goons to be the first people outside the research team to learn about and see the result of our work.’

He turned towards the driveway and watched impassively as the invaders appeared to freeze then drop to the ground, gloved hands scrabbling at their faces.

‘Kill these two whores!’ Dominic shouted to his driver. But like his fellows on the drive he too had sunk moaning to his knees, clawing at his eyes, body in spasm.

‘Whoever designed those uniforms should be fired,’ Jarek observed calmly. ‘Eyes need as much protection as everything else. Don’t worry, they’re not dead,’ he added, ‘a tiny dart in the eye has dissolved and released toxins that zipped along the optic nerve to the brain where they’re interfering with muscular coordination.’

‘My god but you’ll pay for this!’ Dominic shrieked hysterically. ‘It had better not be permanent!’

‘They’ll be able to see through the other eye if someone props it open for them, and they’ll be able to hear, but never able to hurt anyone again.’ He turned to Primo who had reappeared beside him. ‘What’ll we do with this blubbery pawn of his malignant god, Primo?’

Primo stepped forward and gazed coolly down at the quivering heap of fear. ‘Do you think we should do unto others as your henchmen do unto us?’ he asked the priest seriously.

Dominic’s eyes widened and strangled noises issued from slack lips. Primo slammed him across the face with the back of his hand, breaking his nose. Blood gushed.

‘Answer me!’

Dominic nodded.

Primo raised his hand again. ‘I said answer me,’ his soft voice adding menace.

‘No.’ The usually strident voice a mere whisper.

‘Tough luck. During my visits to your world I heard many, many tales about the methods you use to punish those who oppose you. You are now opposing me and my people so I reckon it’s time to balance the equation.’ He turned. ‘Do you agree, Sebastian and Jarek?’

‘We do.’

With a cry of terror Brother Dominic heaved himself from the chair, only to be felled by a casually administered light chop to his throat. With no apparent effort Primo dragged the inert lump by one foot down to join the oddly jerking guards by their vehicles, and held him while Sebastian fetched a chair. After dumping him upright in it, Primo stood back and watched Jarek bind him firmly in place with thin rope. Sebastian produced a small, sharp, skinning knife and handed it to Primo who waved towards the trees that bordered the driveway. The priest groaned and gazed in horror at the crowd of New Men that was gathering around them.

‘What...what are you going to do?’ He croaked through his smashed voice box.

‘If I did even an eighth of the things you and your henchmen have done to others, you’d die, and we don’t want that, do we?’

The heavy head shook slightly and the eyes registered a slight flicker of hope.

‘No, it’s important to us that you remain alive and fully aware of the horrors perpetrated by you and your regime. We want you to live for many years so you can fully comprehend the enormity of your foulness. Therefore I’ll only remove your fingers, lips, nose, ears and eyelashes, and peel the skin and hair from the top of your scalp. Each of those things are excruciatingly painful and bleed messily, but the blood coagulates quickly enough to prevent serious loss, so your only long-term problems will be infection and keeping your eyes from drying out.’

He stood back, took the knife from Sebastian and tested its sharpness.

Jarek stood behind the priest and tousled his hair as if he was a child. ‘You’ll miss these pretty locks, I suppose, but luckily for you you’ve banned voluntary euthanasia, so no matter how you plead you’ll be looked after until the day you die. That should give you at least thirty years to think about the meaning of it all. And your paralysed and semi-blinded guards will create loads of useful employment with their requirement of constant care and attention.’ He glanced at Primo. ‘But I’m wasting time. OK, Primo, over to you.’

Shock and pain such as he’d never before experienced prevented Dominic from uttering more than a high-pitched wail as his torturer performed the operations with exquisite skill, casually tossing skin, hair, and the amputated bits and pieces over his shoulder into the dust and grass as he worked. When finished he wiped the blade on his bloody victim’s clothes and handed it back to Sebastian.

‘We haven’t long,’ he said urgently. ‘There’ll be a back-up force arriving soon because their headquarters haven’t heard from these guys for a while, so I reckon we’ll be off. Will you two be OK?’

‘We’ll be fine, thanks.’

Primo sent a couple of his brothers to drag the guard from the verandah onto the drive while Jarek and Sebastian briefly embraced each New Man.

‘My dear friends,’ Sebastian said calmly, ‘it’s time for you to take total control of your lives, owing nothing to, and depending on no one except yourselves. You will never be safe among Homo sapiens, so take the greatest care to avoid all contact. Jarek and I are also leaving. We love each of you as our sons and wish you success, contentment and enough happiness to make your lives a pleasure. Goodbye.’

The air filled with the deep rumble of two hundred and thirty voices bidding their mentors farewell, then as silently as they had arrived they vanished.

Suddenly exhausted, the two old men returned to the verandah. Sebastian took a flask from a cupboard, poured the contents into tumblers, offered one to Jarek and sat in the chair beside him. After raising their glasses in a brief toast they tossed back their potions, then held hands and relaxed into armchairs, smiling for the last time into the eyes of the person they had loved above all others.

Ten minutes later, five black SUVs surged up the drive and disgorged twenty Kevlar clad warriors armed to the teeth. Their astonishment at the plight of their comrades turned to disbelief at the sight of the screaming, bloody skull of the fat man who, judging by his clothes, could only be Brother Dominic. Several crossed themselves—not because of the horrific spectacle—they’d inflicted similar wounds themselves on many occasions without compunction or compassion; the problem was what to do with him. The second in command raised his rifle to put the fellow out of his misery, but was stopped by his superior officer before he could fire.

‘What are you thinking?’ he snapped. ‘Only God may take the life of this holy man. He must live and serve as an inspiration to us all, spurring us on to even greater sacrifices in our battle against the forces of the devil.’

The discussion was interrupted by a gigantic firebomb erupting in the centre of the house.

2: About a Thousand Years Later

‘You've been gone dangerously long.’

‘It was worth it.’ Peteru removed the headset and rubbed his eyes. Even the muted daylight that seeped into their room seemed overwhelming after five hours of ‘seeing’ through digital pulses fed directly to his brain’s sight centre. He detached the tabs from the base of his cranium, stood, stretched and grinned.

‘It had better be worth it!’ Uretep growled. ‘You know that three hours attached to that thing is the absolute max! I was going bonkers! Five hours you were away! At least have something to eat.’

‘Not hungry. Perhaps later. Sorry to worry you, but I chanced on an archive and had to explore.’

‘What was so exciting you felt compelled to risk permanent brain damage?’ Uretep couldn’t keep the irritation from his voice. He’d all but given up hope of seeing Peteru alive again.

‘Look out the window—what do you see?’

‘What’s to see? Same old same old...’

‘Humour me. Look, and describe what you see.’

Uretep wandered to the window and stared out at the familiar scene. About a hundred metres below, people in greyish-brown, coarse hooded overalls swarmed with no apparent aim around and through a vast space dotted with small shrubs, freeform sculptures, kiosks, park benches and pavilions. Nothing unusual. Pressing his nose against the glass he peered right and then left. The walls of the vast edifice he called home curved away into the hazy air, completing its circle a kilometre away. Details of the facades on the far side of the structure were impossible to make out through the shimmering fog.

He had no idea of the identities, occupation or any other details of the people in the park—not because it didn’t interest him, but because the system decreed that there should be no social interaction between castes. In his entire sixteen years the only parts of the great circular city he had visited other than the floors of the module in which he lived, were Central Park, and the Arena. He had even less idea of what it was like outside the city. He knew it was a very dangerous place, but that was all. One day he’d ask someone. At the moment he was contented and comfortable enough living where he was with Peteru and working together on their research. He didn’t even enjoy the company of the other Science Aristocrats who inhabited the same levels of their apartment module. As far as he was concerned, the noisy, crowded, compulsory public functions in the Arena were more than enough contact with other humans.

Since the age of six, the two young men had been given *carte blanche* to research and investigate whatever they felt like. Funding had never been a problem and their request five years previously for their own superbly equipped facilities attached to their private apartment had been granted without a murmur, despite the existence of magnificently equipped, state of the art laboratories only a floor above them, which they could share with other Scientists and have all the technicians they desired. In his youthful ignorance, Uretep imagined everyone in the city of Oasis lived like him and Peteru in relatively luxurious surroundings with good food, enough living space, privacy, the right to choose celibacy or companionship with whoever they pleased.

Although he’d never been there, he knew the top dozen floors of the Aristocratic module were the preserve of the Mages, where security was impenetrable and few were invited. Below the Mages lived the Emperor and his entourage in, according to vidgrams, fairytale splendour. Beneath them, and for several levels above Peteru and Uretep, were the offices and residences of the Aristocratic Chiefs of the various arms of administration that ensured the peaceful running of Oasis:

maintenance, health, education, breeding, accommodation, employment, transport, surveillance and enforcement.

The bureaucracies and living quarters of the Overseer Aristocrats charged with the day to day running of Oasis were arranged in descending order of importance—population control, nursery and education, food, sanitation, work, and transport.

‘What am I looking for?’ Uretep asked impatiently.

‘Look up.’

‘OK...I’m looking up...’

‘What do you see?’

Uretep stared without interest at the softly glowing beige firmament that filled the world with a diffused, warm amber light creating no shadows. He turned back to Peteru. ‘Only the ceiling.’

‘Why’s it called that?’

‘Who cares?’

‘I do.’

‘Well I don’t! What’s this all about—I can usually guess what’s going on in your head, but today you’re an enigma.’

‘Things are not what they seem...’ Peteru’s voice trailed away.

‘Peteru, I’m renowned for my patience, for my understanding. I know you as well as I know myself—at least I should! But I’m tired, so tell me why I am staring out the window at the world? As far as I can see it hasn’t changed in the last hour, and will probably remain the same for the next thousand years.’

‘That’s it! The sameness. There’s something not right. Something we have to learn—to understand...’

‘Not right?’

Peteru shook his head as if to clear it. ‘I’m not sure what, but doubts about everything we assume to be reality are clogging my thinking. After what I’ve seen today I know there’s something wrong with this place...this life...It...’

‘What?’

‘It’s unnatural.’

‘Unnatural? How can the ideal environment for humans to develop and live be unnatural? Nothing could be *more* natural.’

‘You reckon? Today I learned that the word ceiling comes from an ancient word, ‘ciel’ meaning all the gasses outside Oasis—above and beyond the ceiling.’

‘There’s nothing outside but barren rock, poisonous air, lethal solar radiation. No life, nothing.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Everyone knows it. It’s why we live in Oasis and no one leaves.’

‘No one *knows* it—they *believe* it because the Mages say it is so. They also tell us we were chosen by gods Domino and Domina to inhabit this barren planet as a test of our worthiness, so that after we die we will return to the land of our ancestors. Everyone *believes* this; but a belief is what you have when you don’t know something. No one *knows* what’s outside. No one knows what happens after death. At least no one I know knows.’

‘Keep your voice down!’ Uretep’s voice held an edge of panic. ‘You said you learned it today? Where? How? What were you doing so long in the hood?’

‘When I told the Grand Science Master I’d like to research prehistoric relics he sneered and said to go ahead because the greatest minds haven’t been able to break the codes, or work the machines of the ancients, and neither would I. The consensus among the Elite is that the artefacts aren’t scientific tools, but artworks—fake implements built for decoration by our ancestors in previous ages.’ Peteru’s grin merely increased Uretep’s anxiety.

‘But...?’

‘But I discovered a way to read them.’

‘And?’

‘They’re the most amazing records of the distant past—our history.’

‘You haven’t told anyone?’ Uretep’s voice held an edge of panic.

‘No way! They’d destroy the machines in case other people learned to read them, began to think, and then challenged the beliefs!’ He fixed Uretep with a solemn stare. ‘We’ve been lied to! The real ciel is translucent blue during the day and you can see the source of our heat and light. It’s called the sun and it’s like a great ball of fire floating in space, but its radiation hasn’t always been lethal to life. At night the ciel is black and anyone looking up can see millions of tiny lights called stars that are other suns.’

Uretep was unable to conceal his nervousness. ‘This is blasphemy, Peteru. Too dangerous to even think about. We were given permission to do research because we convinced them it might be useful for NumbaCruncha. You’re risking everything by studying myths and legends that undermine the great truths. You know the punishment!’ His voice had sunk to a whisper and he looked around in fear of eavesdroppers.’

‘Nobody would believe I managed to read the old records, because they’re convinced it’s impossible, so stop fussing. I want you to join me and see for yourself.’

‘I’m not sure I want to know. Anyway, we’ve only just time to put something in our stomachs before we’re due to give the demo! Have you forgotten?’

‘Of course not. Stop being such a fusspot. Everything’s prepared.’

They showered, drank a bowl of sweet soup and were checking the contents of the demonstration trolley when, with scarcely a pause between light knock and entry, Augur, the red-faced, beefy young Mage with whom they’d been liaising in preparation for the demonstration of their invention, burst in and glared impatiently from one to the other. ‘You’re not ready!’

‘We are. We’re just checking we’ve got everything.’

‘Have you a death wish?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re not wearing your cloaks! Have you spent so long cloistered in this room you’ve forgotten the penalty for exposing yourselves in public? Get yourselves decent! Their holinesses are waiting!’

‘Of course we hadn’t forgotten, it’s just so hot everywhere nowadays because the air conditioning’s so often on the blink, it’s more comfortable working like this.’ Peteru’s voice betrayed his irritation.

Augur’s eyes became slits of fury. He drew a hissing breath in preparation for a severe rebuke.

Uretep quickly interrupted, his voice earnest and placating. ‘We apologise sincerely, Mage, for keeping you waiting.’ Peteru had never been good at remembering to grovel to people more powerful than he, usually leaving it to Uretep to extricate them from the gruesome consequences of annoying a Mage.

Augur sniffed irritably while the young men slipped their feet into soft shoes, pulled fine fabric gloves onto their hands, enveloped their bodies in long pale blue cloaks and concealed their heads with matching blue hoods. With only their faces exposed they turned to the increasingly irritable Augur, ‘OK, let’s go.’

He eyed them up and down, grunted satisfaction, reminded them to be silent unless spoken to, and to show suitable gratitude at being granted special security status to visit the Upper Levels.

The two young men nodded, unwilling to risk pointing out that surely they were the ones owed gratitude, not the other way round.

‘I sincerely hope, for your sakes, that this... thing you’re demonstrating is a hundred percent safe, especially as the Emperor and Empress will be the first to demonstrate whatever it is you’ve been working on, in front of all their subjects.’

‘Its perfectly safe, but how you’ll convince the plebs, let alone the Mages that it’s a good idea beats me.’

‘That’s because you are not a Mage,’ Augur snapped. ‘Hurry along, everyone’s waiting!’ He stalked out of the room.

‘I wish the little runt would wash,’ Peteru whispered.

‘Mmm... smells like death. It’s odd; he looks young but acts like a cranky old bastard. I hope the rest are less obnoxious or it’s going to be a long afternoon.’

‘Nervous?’

‘Shit scared, actually.’

‘Me too.’

Dragging the trolley they followed the irritable little man along a short corridor to a ne grav chute that disappeared above and below into the shadows. Augur entered a code, they stepped into space and were thrust swiftly up fifty floors to the domain of Domino and Domina and their human representatives, the Mages.

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