

THE HIDDEN REALM

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Prologue

For the third time in as many months the Group of Nine convened in a subterranean room. Onyx walls, a marble ceiling and floor, ensured isolation from detection or infiltration; protected from any attack.

This time the US representative chaired the meeting. As always for these meetings he wore the navy-blue ‘patriot’ uniform: understated yet authoritative in accordance with the others.

‘So, conclusions to evaluation report seven.’ He looked across a long dark and reflective glass table to his appointed second, the Russian representative.

‘There have been rumblings of discontent in Moscow over the cyber espionage incident,’ the man replied. ‘Intelligence operatives suspect their old superpower foe, and insider bribery.’

‘Why not an *outsider* – a Cyber-mercenary or a hacker just wanting to make a fast buck?’

‘No one, they believe, can penetrate their key files, because of such deep level encryption behind a *Fortress* firewall,’ No.2 said. ‘They think it had to be only one of a top level of personnel with clearance.’

‘Sold out, huh, with the chance of a life of luxury – is that convincing?’

‘It’s not as if they’ve renounced their culture of austerity,’ commented No.3, the overseer for Western Europe.

No.2 said: ‘We carefully selected the most likely candidate and planted the necessary evidence, removed him and altered his identity.’

‘Well, in any case,’ said No.4, Eastern Europe’s overseer, ‘who would ever suspect the man at the top being in on it?’ He then chuckled briefly.

‘I am confident no one will ever make the link,’ affirmed No.1. ‘Only the US has a strategic interest – and they’d go to any lengths to secure an advantage.’

‘Indeed, if only for security – the old paranoia.’

The evaluation was agreed by a majority vote. Stage three had been a success.

Chapter 1

It was in many ways a typical night for mid June. Only now had the heat of the day noticeably faded. At least here, in a moonlit bay facing the English Channel, he felt cooler.

Approaching eleven, the last bit of daylight had finally drained from the horizon. He'd been here for about half an hour, stood on the arm of this sea-defence barrier, elbows resting on its smooth metre-high wall. He looked below him to see lines of yachts moored along jetties, sleek in their own uniquely opulent designs. A few others beyond the harbour's embrace, luminescent in pastel tones, cutting across the calm water towards ... *Doesn't matter really*, he thought. It seemed everyone just wanted the chance to get away from land. The sea was a place of untrammelled freedom.

In the other reality it could all be his, instantly, with a single voice command. One day it would be so convincing he'd have nothing to question. How distant that prospect seemed, as out of reach as one of those yachts. But something *had* changed; his experiments were yielding significant results, and this recent success had been recognised ... though not just by anyone.

In his thoughtpattern-capture diary, he recorded: entry-462 <You may wonder why I allowed her first level access to my research when secrecy is of paramount importance. It is simply because she understands; she sees my vision. There comes a time when one must emerge from hiding. A world in which no one can be trusted is a world without progress, without hope.>

A TCD seemed to be the only safe way of information storage; and yet even an implanted device was not guaranteed to be impervious to the infiltration of corporate thieves with their Trojans.

Thursday night at La Tolina, a place of soft lighting and equally soft music. She had suggested the meeting; he suggested the location. By the time they reached their table the restaurant had emptied to only a few lingering couples.

Monique was there before him about a metre away. An imposingly large candle in the centre gave a generous glow. As she peered down at her menu, Gerrid took in her extraordinary form. To him she seemed too good to be true.

Entry-481 <Monique Bellishi appears to have every quality in even measure. Perfection unmatched, unrivaled, by any simulacrum. Who could ever ascend to her standards?> Sub entry <Gerrid Lytum: destined for great things, not just the nerd dismissed by others as a bit weird but essentially harmless. I've finally achieved what others would have derisively thought impossible; I'm actually on a *date* with her. Of course, it's cautiously disguised under the pretext of a journalistic interview for her apprenticeship at *Science World Interactive*. But she knows what this place means.>

The waiter arrived; Gerrid thought he detected a look of disdain in his direction, a what's-a-geeky-guy-like-you-doing-with-a-beautiful-woman type look. *Stop it! You're being paranoid*. He wondered if his age would draw attention; only a few weeks turned twenty, he must certainly be the youngest there.

They both agreed on the vegetarian lite option, ideal for late evening.

‘This is all being recorded for SWI,’ she said; her voice had the precise English tones he would expect to hear in an archive newscast. ‘But don’t worry, I won’t ask you to reveal *all* your secrets. These are just standard questions, to give a general overview.’

‘Sure. That won’t be a problem.’ Gerrid finished the remainder of his wine, and watched as the warm light played in muted patterns on her skin.

‘You have some quite original ideas in your thesis on artificial reality constructs – the potential use of evolutionary AI simulacrum software....’

They discussed the world-enhancing possibilities.

After a while he felt certain: this must be the real thing. It was all just perfect.

So afterwards, once she had completed requisite interview, it was time to make his move.

Outside, on a nearby terrace, they stood in the jasmine-suffused air. Stars glimmered beyond a dark line of trees. A yellow glow from paper lanterns above, just enough to highlight her dark hair caught in the warm breeze.

She seemed grateful for his insight into his field of study. Sure, he’d revealed concepts, applications of theories no one had discovered. But she needed to know his potential, for her to be included – willingly – in his scheme.

Maybe it was intoxication from the drinks or various factors in the general ambiance. He moved forward, slight clumsiness at first, and kissed her full on. The moment was complete. And for a few seconds she put up no resistance ... until her gentle rejection became increasingly forceful.

A wave of sobriety hit Gerrid. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, looking to the ground. Except he wasn’t sorry. But she’d rejected him.

‘I do like you, Gerrid,’ Monique said gently, though precisely. ‘But I didn’t mean to give you the wrong impression.’

‘So I guess I’m not good enough for someone of your high standards.’ Gerrid looked up at her. ‘You think I’m too *young*?’ He sounded like the hurt teenager he thought he’d left long behind.

‘Gerrid, you have so much to offer. I’m sure there are plenty of girls out there....’

It didn’t matter; he realised that now. Away from the emotion, in the cool blue light of his apartment, he could set in place his original scheme – only without her willing compliance.

The Multiwave imager had recorded a multitude of physiological information. It would be the most perfect simulacrum of Monique Bellishi that technology allowed, right down to the length of her fingernails. Except it wouldn’t *really* be her in any more than an outward physical appearance. At best, the scanning resolution had only recorded down to the micron (5-unit) level, and almost entirely from that restaurant meeting. It wasn’t enough; he would still have to use AI software to complete the picture – and add in a compliancy sub-routine of his own tailoring: the *piece de resistance*, he thought.

Entry-537 <I know what people want. Hikiro Tanoshi thought he knew it, he had the basics – the unrefined tech – but he failed to synthesize the knowledge. The virtual

communities where people indulge their most outlandish fantasies: real minds and invented bodies. He failed to anticipate the conflicts, the relationship break-ups. My solution? To create an entirely artificial community. No directly interacting avatars but instead based on real people, with optional tweaks tailored to the individual's preference. The problem – the bane of my work – is to make it all seem authentic. Perhaps you could switch from shared communities to individual ones when it all gets too much. It's all about convincing the percipient that it's not merely an escape ... but *real*.>

From the near-darkness of his bedroom, Gerrid slid a plastic band over his forehead; its dropped eye-shields pushing rubber cups, like old-style binoculars, to create a seal. He patched himself in. Still a prototype, the neural-interface array was only based on the standard AR model but with a few modifications for increased resolution; the psychotropic-stim routine hadn't been fully tested for safety. *But how more virtuous for me to be the guinea pig!*

A shift from rational focus, not quite like a dream, but a slight diminution of his analytical abilities. That was good: you couldn't function with a full critical perception *and* believe.

She stood there. Her: the girl of his dreams. The surroundings almost seemed irrelevant, but they were not what he would've expected. A white, rather austere, partially lit room. He expected something more conducive, similar to the restaurant terrace or somewhere more private. There was, nonetheless, a faint fluorescence to her. Subtle perfume an enticing gesture. Strategically exposed flesh, revealing and concealing in a tantalising concoction of sexual promise with coquettish allure.

'Monique?' It wasn't really meant as a question of her identity, more a cue for her to be ... her.

'Well done, Gerrid,' she said without any detectable irony. 'I know what you're expecting, but it will have to wait.'

'Huh?' His mind began to race, but he couldn't formulate an adequate explanation whilst immersed.

'Allow me to explain. Firstly, there is nothing wrong with any compliancy protocol. That part of the program has been overridden ... temporarily.'

'How can--'

'I know about the imaging device and I have known all about your work for some time, that is why I've been interested in you.'

It did occur to him that all this was merely an element of her sophistication within the program – to seem more authentic.

'No, Gerrid, it's not what you believe it to be.' *She can read my thoughts?* 'I'll get to the point. I am here to recruit you. The work you have been doing is important, important enough to save the population from a disaster unparalleled in history.'

'I'm almost convinced this is real.'

'Please listen,' she chided. 'The two sides have reached a critical point. There will be horrific death, suffering for years from the fallout if this happens, if nothing is done to help these people.' She looked at him sternly, a magisterial beauty. 'We can – you can – provide them with an alternative.'

He had no response. Just his thoughts.

Something wasn't right; colours swirled, and he felt dizzy. Even in this lower level, it had taken a while for Gerrid to remember the program exit-word.

Reality seemed only a pale simulation to the point where he questioned whether he'd really left the program or had entered a lower immersion state. For a start, everything exhibited a fuzzier quality as if its physical structure had weakened; atoms and molecules not properly adhering to each other. He felt he could slice his hand through a hardwood table. And even the pain when his hand slammed down seemed duller than it should have been. Still, he realised this could well be an effect of returning, with no longer the cortical stimulants reinforcing an image-feeder. No one had gone this far. Perhaps there needed to be a virtual decompression of some sort.

With normality returning, Gerrid knew he had to find her. It shouldn't be difficult. Even though Monique rarely attended the university, he could contact her through her publication – a simple matter of bypassing the 'opinions' forum to the expert's response input-link. But when he tried, circumventing the usual ident protection barriers preventing non-authorised, not even her name appeared. By law, all names associated had to be obtainable for investigative purposes. Someone cannot give an opinion on a science matter and not be accountable.

He tried other methods, university post-grad student files, public records, electoral lists. It was as if she had never existed.

That day he attended a lecture on the philosophical analysis of interactive character constructs. Such a peripheral subject would normally only warrant a virtual connection. Yet here he was in the lecture hall amongst two hundred or so others, still nowhere near full but more than he expected. Faces intense with interest; they were wannabe geeks hoping to absorb this new aspect of AR's future. His mind was not really focused on the subject today, but he had his data-tab recording; there might be something useful for his work; his actual degree project was now left fairly much by the wayside.

'A simulacrum may appear to appreciate the consequences of their own intended action when about to betray you, the protagonist,' the man said, in his faux-trendy garb and nocomformistly long hair. 'Independence of thought, as demonstrated in the latest beta level experientials, are simply multi-layered contingents; a progressive psychological analysis---'

After forty-five minutes the lecture had finished. Gerrid stayed behind. He approached the wary-looking tutor. Gerrid had attended his classes a few times, and he was sure Monique had been his student. He couldn't think of any way to phrase the question without it seeming odd. 'Do you know where I can find Monique Bellishi?' he tried simply.

'I'm sorry but I don't know who you're talking about,' replied the lecturer, who now stared at Gerrid curiously.

'I know she once attended your lecture on AI pre-sentience,' Gerrid asserted.

'No student by that name has ever attended, not two years ago, or at any time,' the man said guardedly. Gerrid had never before heard the teacher speak in such a rigid and formal manner, as if

cross examined in court, rather than questioned by his own student – it was in such contrast to the way he'd been speaking to the other students: exchanges of banter at some points.

So maybe Gerrid had portrayed himself as some kind of obsessive stalker. He seemed to share the same interest as her, attended many of the same courses, albeit in different years. There was some logic to that assumption. Strangely, the teacher didn't question why *he* wanted to know.

Other students were no more helpful. He'd tracked down a post-grad of her year and study course. The response: 'If she had been in my class I would have known about it, the way you describe her – no way I'd forget.'

Gerrid, as a fresher, had seen her himself, Monique in her final degree year. Of course he hadn't ever the courage to approach, much less speak to her. But she had spoken to this guy; they may have had a relationship. So somehow someone had got to him, told him to keep quiet or (and Gerrid read of cases of this in an investigative journal) removed his memory.

In the muted light of his apartment Gerrid held the neural-interface array in his hand, its grey-plastic central band flecked with OLEDs flashing, indicating their own colour-coded input-output state. Quiescent now, ready for transmission from his console.

Entry-675 <Much of the immersion program still needs refinement. For example: a safety-override in a perceived situation of extreme danger or pain; if you had been shot in artificial reality designed to feel utterly real, then would you die? The physiological reaction mimicking reality?>

He slid the band on. These were questions he no longer had time to consider as the program took hold.

This time Gerrid found himself in a large onyx-walled room. There she sat to the side of him at a long table, a formal charcoal jacket this time. There were others: much older, in a type of military uniform, but not of a type he recognised.

An imperious-looking old man sitting opposite spoke. 'No,' he said, 'this is merely a simulation of reality.' A gruff, unhurried voice, which could have been created.

'I don't understand how this could be?' Gerrid admitted.

'You scanned more than you realised on that night, including the encoded details of this inner sanctum and our good selves.' A smile formed. 'Though, of course, not in anywhere near so much detail as the lovely Miss Bellishi here.'

'Monique Bellishi, if that's her real name, no longer appears to exist in the real world.'

She turned to face Gerrid, an earnest expression. 'I hope you can excuse my methods of deception. What you are seeing here is based on reality. No more subterfuge. We want you to be with us.'

With the exception of Monique they looked like a gathering of military advisers for a government, retired generals. He said, 'Why should I believe any of you?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'I'm being manipulated here. You just want what I know – because I'm on to something

that could change the way people live. You want to have control over that.'

'No, Gerrid. This is yours, it will always be yours.' At that moment the room faded and he was back in his own apartment.

Chapter 2

In her office, Elekka sat before a holo-display perusing the layered stacks of documents, sections of text highlighted, suggesting information that may provide a clue. They pushed at her mind; she pushed them into the background. Hacked files, messages, and netsphere inserts which had been encrypted within standard news-docs, their concealment fleeting until the overseer in its coldly efficient way identified such rogue information. At some point they would all come together to form the basis of something substantial, emerging again like an ancient forgotten city from the mist; the seeker of truth as she had been since her teenage years and that first fictional foray into The Hidden Province.

Elekka Nushak never claimed to be psychic as her peers, who worked for Investigative Monthly, had suggested (although she could never convincingly deny it). It was envy, pure and simple. At least that's how it seemed to her in those early days. The remit had changed and the team was reduced to a few dedicated and trusted colleagues. She was now regarded as their chief investigator – and she always got her story, maybe from a hunch, no more than intuition. But in the process – as a requirement for remaining alive and unharmed – she had to endure countless changes of identity to the point where sometimes even her family could no longer recognise her. It was the price you paid to get to what particular reality lay behind, thereby avoiding the wrath of those whose precious secrets became less protected each time their conspiracy had been exposed. Their machine of disinformation was powerful, and was still able to throw the general media and public into a state of bewilderment ... if only at the level of absurdity generated.

This time Elekka could sense it was something special. A tip-off from her net connection, from someone who seemed to be becoming embroiled in a conspiracy she had known about since she'd been given her job. Before, there was never the proof, no one on the inside to provide something tangible. There had previously only been the odd disappearance and, what appeared to be, alien abductions, causing the trademark loss of memory. Now this contact had already done some investigating – clumsily. A different approach was required, though something that would be a departure from her own subtle methods.

She used ways to infiltrate that left no clues. This is what gave her the edge. There had been various theories for her perceptual abilities: aspects of soul leaving the body or a conscious link with remotely entangled particles. The science had been obfuscated along with the truth of those who'd been exploited by the intelligence services. When her mind became focused and meditatively calm, it was like seeing the elements of a painting gradually coming together to form a composition. She would see mere fragments – a shape, a colour, little clues eventually culminating towards a whole.

Her ultimate challenge now lay ahead.

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In the park, Gerrid approached the young woman he identified in a red T-shirt and faded jeans.

Upon reading the encrypted message he had felt a frisson of apprehension, sudden thoughts that he had landed himself in a whole heap of trouble, but also the excitement of what could be.

He put his arm along the top of the bench behind Elekka's back. Elekka was slumped forward. 'Are you OK?' He said, to begin.

As if those were the trigger words she responded: sat up in mock irritation at this intrusive stranger. 'Yes I'm fine thanks.' (For the electronic observers). Her voice faded to almost a whisper. 'This is the only way to communicate.' She looked briefly at him, delicate features, light blond hair and pale complexion seemingly unaffected by the southern English sun. She spoke quickly. 'The message I sent you will have been picked up from your data-link connection. Once their monitoring AI has decrypted it, sorted through the millions of dummy messages and looked for key words, it will know of our location. So we don't have long.'

'I wasn't sure you'd believe me.'

'What you have described to me I've been investigating for some time.' Her voice was barely audible even to him – and the increased speed of her words. 'They, the group of nine, have been planning this – their final solution – for decades.' She paused for breath. 'Well, actually, they're not the first ... They plan to appropriate the world for themselves, their decedents and the chosen few, maybe hundreds of thousands or millions, but still a fraction of the current population: only those they consider to be useful. This is their New World Order.'

'They want me to play a part,' Gerrid said. 'They don't want to kill everyone else, but to provide them with a means of escape.' He tried to speak at her cadence, almost tripping over his words. 'Artificial reality – the best type of escape. They don't have to suffer...'

'Don't be taken in by their offers and their manipulation. You may well be one of the chosen, but what you would be complicit in is the removal of all these people from their lives.'

'But I...'

'Just kiss me, Gerrid,' she whispered, looking at him straight on.

'What?' he couldn't contain his surprise; she surely didn't mean a peck on the cheek.

'Do it now.'

He complied, leaning across, gently grabbing her upper arms and administering a tentative kiss.

She pushed him back almost instantly their lips met. 'What do you think you're *doing*?' She sounded shocked.

'But you...'

Elekka jumped up, began to walk away, and then turned. 'I'm not ready for this,' she proclaimed loudly. 'We've only just met. What kinda girl do you think I am?' She walked off hurriedly

It was a good performance; he even believed it himself for a few seconds. The electronic monitors should at least be fooled until the data is analysed by their masters.

*

Elekka's breath quickened, she could hear the rapid pumping of her heart, that prescient-feeling knowledge of something bad. She'd barely reached the end of the park before it seemed they would pounce on her. The breeze picked up; branches of oak and ash trees swayed dramatically, all as if by

some external affirmation. Birds rushed across her vision in distress.

Hundreds of possibilities raced through her mind. Her abduction, elimination, could easily be concealed. She'd been through so many changes of identity that to the world she had already disappeared. Only her family and a few trusted associates would ever be aware she had gone. A suicide faked for their benefit? Or if not considered to be plausible, then their own lives would be in danger

Adrenaline flooded through her body as she exited the park. She had to focus.

With this ability of foresight Elekka had a chance to evade them. How many times did she avoid capture when getting so near to the full truth? This sense of imminent danger may be an echo from minutes or hours in the future.

It was nearly two in the afternoon, the streets were crowded; people still on their lunch break, or post-lunch shopping. This should be the safest time for her to pass unchallenged; too many witnesses. A young woman being accosted, forced against her will... No, not here. They operated in the shadows where only electronic surveillance observed.

Smaller roads now, the occasional car hovering by. Her only route, away from the crowds. No other way back to her office. Fear increased exponentially.

Her current home was doubtless under close surveillance, now a no-go area: an obvious target. Too obvious, though. The secured office; at least two of her associates should be there. Only admittance for positive iris and voice scans, otherwise a half-metre thick steel door prevented the most zealous of the unwelcome. Beyond that were secret tunnels.

Her own half-formed internal voice screaming; the unconscious warning that something terrible would happen so soon. The sub dermal multicorder picked up all the pre-processed information from her eyes and ears. Its EM signature was so minute that no known scanner would detect its presence. Military grade technology.

Elekka's heart felt about to explode as she reached the innocuous-appearing building, hidden within a residential avenue. Iris scan confirmed. Took a deep breath to try and calm her voice as she stood in the secluded porch. 'Hello, it's Yellana.' One of her pseudonyms.

The lock relented, but her fear remained.

Like a normal hallway of a house. Walking to the guestroom, half expecting someone to be there. Routine had it that an arrival would be met in that room, even though there were only four possible persons who ever had current access to enter.

Intercom to main office: no response for a few seconds, then... 'Oh, hi Elekka ... I'm just finishing processing my report... Johan's in the field at the moment so it's just me.'

Logically Elekka knew she must now be in the safest possible place, a biometric observer guarded the building over a five hundred-metre perimeter radius. (It was the safest avenue from crime the other residents had never been aware of!). So her heart should have eased it's pounding....

The office door opened at her ident. In her usual chair sat Elekka's assistant, Alicia. Only, she was not working, but bolt upright. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'Please forgive me.'

Alicia whipped out a gun and fired a shot at Elekka before she had time to react, much less consider just how her colleague and friend had been compromised.

*

The tall masked figure emerged from the overridden entrance. ‘You know you did the right thing,’ he said to the sobbing young woman, in a synthesized voice. ‘We are not in the business of torturing people’s families, but with so much at stake the ends justify the means. Extraordinary measures are necessary.’

In desperation and anger, Alicia fired the gun at him, for all the good it would do against his armour, before the inevitable. She may be fortunate enough to return to consciousness albeit without a memory of her work. Or in the worse case simply a death, like Elekka’s, made to appear to be suicide or an accident.

*

Gerrid knew his understanding of Artificial Reality was unparalleled. The risks: he could weigh them so precisely against the benefits. And yet some fear prevented him from entering.

He sat before his console staring at the lines of what even he had to admit was now fairly meaningless data, broken down from something which should have given a clue. Monique’s scan had been picked apart, its component algorithms and fragments of code of the pre-recorded message. There was nothing surprising in the technology of a program predicting his likely questions and responses. The only curious thing: his imaging device had not detected the hidden code. That considered, who could tell what covert technology existed out there possessing the ability to interact with a defined program? A stealth infiltration signal, perhaps, affecting the algorithmic matrix, only to return it to normal when disengaged.

Maybe that investigative reporter woman was making him paranoid.

That night sleep seemed an impossible destination. He knew he was meant to re-enter the program to be given instructions – it was his natural retreat.

Would I be drawn in and manipulated, coerced?

His third floor apartment had the standard security lock, iris scan, but now a motion sensor linked to a bleeper that only he was aware of. That discreet warning had now been activated, so he called up his wall monitor only to see someone in an official police uniform. *3am!*

Gerrid spoke through the door intercom, ‘Can I help you?’ observing the cops’ images to see an official search warrant produced. The burly officers had the usual weapons to subdue. He eventually opened the door.

‘I have here an official search warrant to check for possession of illegal AR scans and programs.’

The cop opened a bedside draw, and swept over it a memory reader. Contained within were scans, oblong crystalline memory tabs in various colours Gerrid had never before seen in his life, and AR titles that made him seem like some particularly twisted pervert.

‘Someone has planted these,’ Gerrid protested. ‘I’ve been set-up, can’t you see? They have...’ But his last words faded in the hopeless air.

‘Peddlers of filth like you don’t deserve a place in society,’ the police sergeant said to him as he

was frogmarched out, handcuffed in zip-tie cable. ‘Exploiting the vulnerable for your own sick pleasure – or was it just the money? Both I suspect.’

Gerrid said nothing, and the cop gave up trying to provoke a reply from him on the journey. From the glide-car, he stared down at the gentle glow of commercial buildings and the sleeping residential areas, receding as the vehicle climbed to cruising altitude.

Gerrid never believed a prison in his country could still be so austere; he remembered something similar from an archive film set in the late twentieth century. A simple bunk, metal toilet, basin, and a barred window allowing shafts of sunlight to project on the slab floor. The only indicium of modernity was the sliding door, which, once clunked into place, was reassuringly depressingly secure.

He broke the sunbeam with his palm, feeling the gentle heat of a clear June day. When he looked up he was sure he now caught the sound of birdsong, barely audible. The curious thought occurred to him that this was being piped through a speaker from just outside, playing on a continuous loop, designed only to taunt.

Gerrid didn’t even want to know the details of these AR experientials. He always showed respect, even to a simulation. However, they – She was more than mere code represented as human. Scanning someone without their knowledge had for about a decade been ruled illegal. Perhaps a month’s sentence for that crime alone, depending on the ultimate use of the scan. Often that would be difficult to prove, sometimes only a matter of which side had the better argument. In his case the evidence was damning. His life in shame; finally and completely disowned by his disapproving parents, who had doubtless already been informed of his alleged crime.

He saw the headlines. *Gerrid the rebel prodigy: how it all went wrong.*

When the sun faded he lay on the thinly foamed bunk in an attempt to make up for his lack of sleep the previous night. As hopeless as his situation seemed it could only seem less so after he had slept.

But it wasn’t to be.

Something like thunder. A continuous rumbling, louder, more like an earthquake now as the ground shook. He expected reactions from the prison staff. Nothing. The wall beneath the window began to crumble, as if its constituent molecules were un-bonding. A gloved hand caught the barred frame before it hit the ground. A masked figure stood there, and Gerrid thought he was dreaming.

‘We have less than a minute before their bio-visual sensors come back on-line,’ the man said, distortedly. ‘If you do not leave with me immediately you will be removed to a more secure jail.’

There was never any choice really, just comply with the plan.

Chapter 3

A white light. Nothing else she could see but intense, dazzling at first.

Almost recumbent, she felt her head pressed against the rest of an angled hard-padded chair.

Memory returned and Elekka thought: *classic interrogation scenario* – the vulnerable position, facing a spotlight. She said, ‘Come on, get on with it then!’ Her voice as calm and matter-of-fact as she could manage.

What seemed like two minutes passed before the voice.

‘You’re an interesting case, Miss Nushak,’ A male voice synthesized to hide identity. ‘The fact it has taken us so long to track you down is quite remarkable,’ he continued. ‘You’ve been effective in your job. Creating suspicion throughout the sub-network streams has caused many a headache.’

‘You may flatter me, but it’ll get you nowhere.’

‘I am merely pointing out the fact that it will be necessary to apply a more comprehensive treatment to remedy this problem.’

‘So I’m the problem?’

‘You are a significant part of it. You will also be part of the solution.’

‘How do you intend that?’ Her voice still calm.

‘Oh, I’m sure you know what we do. We will readjust you’re thought processes, this will ... enable you to undo the damage you have caused, make you believe that everything you have discovered is merely a delusion. Induce a neurosis. Thus, ultimately, psychiatric help will be needed.’

‘I think you’re bluffing. But in any case you will not succeed in this crazy scheme of world domination.’

‘You put it so crudely.’

‘Then what do you call causing the planet to fall under a nuclear winter so a chosen few – or rather nine – can rule over a selected fraction of the population?’

A pause of about ten seconds. ‘Think how preposterous that sounds – your paranoid claim. Try realising that even *you* cannot have access to all our secrets. We know all about your perceptual abilities, we have spies who practice remote viewing. We may even have employed you if you’d ever shown any hint of compliance.’ Another pause for effect. ‘Unfortunately, this ability will no longer be possible once your neural structure has been re-configured.’

‘The technology for that doesn’t yet exist.’

‘Human technology has progressed exponentially since our alien collaborators provided their assistance.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘Would you like a demonstration?’

Elekka knew she couldn’t play this game for long. She was trapped; what possible escape could there be?

‘Whatever you do to me now it will make no difference ultimately. My contacts have ensured

that upon my disappearance events will be set in train. If you think you have control over the broadcast media ... think again.'

'Now whose bullshitting?'

The effects of a gas began to take hold as she looked around desperately for its origin. The light faded.

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In a sparse, yet infinitely more comfortable room than the prison, Gerrid felt an overwhelming need to sleep. Now he had accepted his fate there was nothing worth worrying about. Any moral choice had been taken from him the day he had been arrested.

Situated somewhere inside a hill, perhaps way below ground level. He'd arrived after a journey in a helicopter, blindfolded but not treated roughly. So this was his new reality, and what was wrong with a new life away from the world that had never appreciated or understood him anyway?

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The Group of Nine convened for their first – and possibly penultimate – resolution meeting in the large onyx room.

'It seems we have cause for congratulations,' number 3 said.

'Let's not get carried away,' responded the Western Europe overseer, who was currently appointed No.1. 'Of course the successful recruitment of our systems designer is a major boon, and the capture of that nuisance investigator is one thorn out of our side. However, we may still have to deal with recalcitrant elements of the media.'

'We simply need to demonstrate the true threat of war,' offered No.2. 'Provide the evidence for the media to ascertain for themselves.'

'Indeed, we all agree on that,' No.1 said.

'The ground work is near completion,' said No.8, who had direct command of the intelligence services. 'Britain and the US have combined forces to present the case for an active Eastern Alliance plot to sabotage the coalition Mars project.'

'Ah yes, our plans to build biosphere cities on that planet's prime real estate.'

'Only the Anglosphere coalition had the funds to expend on such a venture; however, the Russians provided the greatest technical know-how ... until the US gained access to their classified information.'

'It's perfect therefore,' said the Russian representative. 'Our president is as mad as hell – and literally slightly unbalanced mentally.' He paused for a chuckle. 'Or so it would appear to the world.'

'Would he seek the agreement of the Chinese and Middle East countries before taking action?' inquired No.4.

'Yes, he'll certainly seek the approval of all alliance countries. But ultimately will go ahead, regardless, with his plan to annihilate anything or anyone they believe is connected with the Mars

project. There will be mistakes of course – and innocent lives will be lost. Then there's the act of state sponsored terrorism aimed at the greatest capitalist institutions. It goes without saying, there'll be a formal denial to such an outrageous accusation.'

'But my government will of course find the evidence of Kremlin involvement in sponsoring these attacks and will justifiably retaliate.'

'So we have established our escalation scenario,' said No1. 'It will depend on neither side being prepared to back down, even at the tipping point of full scale world war.'

No.5: 'how can it fail? A cold war has always been on the cards. It's not beyond the bounds of reason that things would heat up – so to speak. Old enmities brought into focus and magnified.'

No.3: 'With the ultimate end-game of nuclear war not only a possibility but an inevitability, the people will this time be desperate for an escape.'

'Then they will go readily when it's provided for them.'

'It will seem contrived,' No.4 said. 'Everything so perfectly prepared for them.'

'Not at all,' said No.1. 'The coalition will do anything to protect its people from the actions of that mad Russian president; Russia and the eastern alliance will want to preserve its citizens for the day when they will live to "realize the new era."'

'I think perhaps the prospect of a horrific death will be enough to convince them.'

The US representative looked across the table. 'Does anyone want to offer a predicted timescale for the first strike?'

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Central Council approved history file.

By the year 2180, Earth's human population had reached 14 billion. Global birthrate was actually in a steady decline, almost commensurate with the falling infant mortality rate; no disease existed without a cure. Only isolated places in Africa where cultures lived without interference, and subcultures within the developed countries (isolated by their religion), had remained unaltered. Life expectancy for those able to afford it could be as long as two centuries. Life had never been so good for anyone fortunate enough to live in the more habitable – temperate – zones.

The old divide continued between the wealthy and the poor. New and re-established superpowers China and Russia (with politically aligned Middle Eastern countries) became allied in cultural/ideological opposition to the West, but still only a softer form of capitalism. The United States viewed the Eastern Alliance as restrictive to its citizens; the EA viewed the West and the U.S., in particular, as profligate and imperious. But with an uneasy acceptance of each other's differences peace seemed assured. Treaties and trade agreements maintained calm relations.

It didn't take much to tip the balance, however. Once, it may have been religion, or governance of territory. Such disagreements had been settled a century before. This century there was a new province to compete over. Whoever had the knowledge to create technology to escape the bounds of Sol, to reach another habitable planet, would be the victor in this race. Success a vindication of culture and government.

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