

TIME OVER

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Part I: Discovery

<Torbin Lyndau

Entry: September 25th 2293. Priority-A rec.

If you're reading this then it might not be too late. You might even know just what it is they are planning, and have thought of some way to stop it. You might have uncovered the clues, seen the evidence, seen that I'm not insane.

Maybe you've seen *them*. But I doubt it. Or you might doubt what you've seen ... because they're not big on publicity. Anyway, in those rare moments they'd appear before me I found that communication – much less conversation – is futile. Yet I'm sure, even as I dictate these words, they are listening. So I say to them: “If you're planning to destroy the text-file, you will achieve nothing. I will copy and copy, until I know one copy is safe. So do what you like to my memory. These words will live on.” (*Pause*)

(*Resume*) It's strange to think of things ever being normal. Yet they were before it all started to go wrong three years ago, ever since that first visit to Mars.

To the people back on earth it seemed we were the successful ones; that we should be thankful for no repeat of the catastrophe of those early Earth-based experiments, the horrendous casualties. The utter failure. For us, on a technical level, every safety measure was precisely in place.

We were testing the prototype for a new technology which should allow the transference of information across vast distances of space – essentially a wormhole for communication purposes (though if you believed any of the media reports, it was about much more than that: Wormhole equals space travel). The experiment itself was not a roaring success, not what we hoped for; stability for less than a second. At least we did achieve our first goal – we sent information to some distant part of the galaxy. To where? We didn't know. The

light (information) pulses disappeared from observation. All we had were the calculations based on the early experiments, for power and matter injection levels. So really we could only *infer* a result.

All I ever wanted was a normal life. When I say normal I don't mean in the boring sense ... just not completely off-the-scale weird. On that first day of our stay on Mars, the notion of life ever returning to a state of normality was more than a forlorn hope. Others had managed it, got back to their families, lived lives as minor celebrities for a while, until the media moved on to the next big thing. That was my hope, just to settle back down into a comfortable obscurity, working in the background to make the final preparations. But no, They had to ruin it.

They are still with me, every day. I feel their presence. It might only be a stirring of the air around me, or even just a glimpse out the corner of one eye. Like ghosts, you could say – just apparitions that leave no trace that anyone/anything can observe. But they do things to my mind. It's not something I can explain in any way that would make me sound like a sane person rather than anything less than delusional. I'm sure there are medical/psychological terms more precise. But since I've avoided any "help" the diagnosis can be yours, dear reader.

So let me tell you that to date I was made to witness the destruction of my home city at some unspecified time in the future, but there: as I stood on the site. Silver objects shaped like huge raindrops, descending rapidly to destroy tower-blocks. And on the ground biped mechanoids with wide rapidly pumping legs, supporting an oval centre, scanning with dark eye stalks; not merely killing but taking them into its body – screaming children drawn upwards by some levitation field.

But you don't believe me, do you. Why should you? That's the thing about the future, no way to verify it. And I doubt one person can change it, at least not me, or can know what action is not part of the tapestry of events leading ineluctably to that feared outcome. Philosopher I R Chuang said, "If time is like a river then we are the fallen leaves carried helplessly in its flow." But

perhaps I've defied that flow. I've seen – no, *experienced* the past as well: hundreds, even thousands of years ago; the stuff they don't tell you in history lessons or in any media form, atrocities people in previous centuries have committed. I shan't tell you about the pain of being shot, stabbed or executed. You couldn't even imagine! But for those vicariously I got to be, it was simply a matter of being on the wrong side at the wrong time. Only, for me, not the mercy of death but on to the next life.

Eventually it all became a morass: a millennium of suffering in one hour.

It wasn't all bad. In the process of being made to feel the worst of humanity, I got the experience to best of how it can be: that mythical utopia which only really exists in fragments – the small scale; tranquillity and happiness, like something *I* once had, or thought I had, before it was all taken away. So it was not enough just to see these two extremes, they knew I had to *feel* them.

I'd ask: "What do you want from me? Why are you making me go through all this?" But such simple questions never elicit an answer.

Except they did tell me one clear thing: "The erasure is coming."

She waved the projection into dark quiescence.

Yet his last words seemed to linger in mid air. *“The erasure is coming.”*

Raiya had been studying the Lyndau case for two days now. Assigned to her in recognition of her services, according to her boss. Not that there was any accompanying pay rise. Still, this was the diversion she needed. Perhaps the old professor had sensed this, or just no longer wanted charge of ‘the loony physicist’s file-set’ as he had not entirely jokingly referred to the journals. The professor had given them a cursory dismissal diagnosis of ‘indications of insanity’ in his cover comment. The Lyndau diary had been stored at the institute for seventy-eight years, discovered in a crystal memory-tab in an old abandoned apartment that’d been designated for demolition. It was kept under a floorboard already for thirty years. This man, she surmised, had become so paranoid he believed it to be the only safe place to keep his journal, rather than the standard cyber-lockup. All those years. He wanted it found, surely. But after his death?

Her comm buzzed, it was her colleague, Dr Leonard Heigener. His bulky form materialised fully opaque, in his usual mauve shirt, seated in the vacant chair opposite. He was always particular about seeming to be personally present, ever since moving to the US, effectively as a promotion – but he would never admit it was that, not to her anyway. ‘Raiya, I hope I’m not interrupting anything too pressing,’ he said, and without giving her a chance to respond: ‘So you’ve been studying the Lyndau case, I hear.’

‘Would that be through the shrinks’ grapevine?’

‘I’ve been allowed secondary access rights. Conventions are out the window for now.’

‘So whether or not I send you the file is irrelevant, you can just snatch it from the grid.’

‘Raiya, we’re friends.’ She could see the dismay in his life-like image. ‘I just wanted your formal approval.’

‘Sorry, Len. It’s been a tough day. They’re still giving me the usual neurotics.’

‘Yep, there’s nothing like a real shrink, especially when she happens to look as good as you.’

‘Flirting doesn’t become a married man.’ She tried to smile warmly. Lighten the mood.

‘So my wife tells me at dinner parties. But my intentions are honourable this time: I want to know what you’ve made of that file before---

‘Before you let it influence you personally.’

‘Right. Just need an overview, really.’

‘Then you might be disappointed.’

‘Try me.’

‘Okay. Well I really don’t know if he went insane from internal factors, or outside events – albeit perceived events.’

‘You want to reserve judgement. Prudent.’

‘I’ll send you the file now.’

She gave the protocol. It should have been a simple process, taking only seconds: a level 3 qubit encryption applied before transfer. Instead: ‘Cannot send. Suspected infection – possible Trojan. Please wait,’ her digi-assistant informed in its expressionless tones.

‘I don’t understand,’ Raiya queried. ‘Why did you not detect it sooner?’

‘Ninety-nine point five percent chance it was not present during previous scan.’

‘Less than twenty minutes ago. How could it get infected in that time?’

‘Unknown. Need to run a full systems scan.’

‘Just incredible!’

2

Stars changed from sharp points, moving imperceptibly, to streaks across his vision. It was a relief to be in this place, alone, where the air was cool like an autumn Calgary night.

Scott Alendry had felt no physical sensation when it happened. One second the ship was travelling through space at less than one per cent of lightspeed; the next ... he had to admit to himself he didn't quite understand. What he knew is that any concept of distance no longer applied. It was not that they would travel from one place to another – as the original pioneers in their sub light ship – through the random particles of dust, of hydrogen atoms. What enveloped them now was the stretched light of stars; devoid of baryonic matter. But also something more exotic. Energies unimaginable, harnessed from antimatter. So much technology on a knife-edge between optimal performance and total annihilation – observed one engineer in an interview, who worked for a rival contractor. He claimed if this balance were to be tipped in the wrong direction the consequences would be visible in Earth's daylight, whatever distance of the 2,300 light years they had travelled.

Scott had another sixty-four hours to contemplate this. Another sixty-four hours to think about the more sensationalised media reports. It made little difference to him that this ship had been 'test-onauted to its operational limit,' taken on a four thousand light year round trip to no particular destination. Those guys lived on the edge of death as part of their thrill; the rewards an added incentive. Ah yes, the rewards! Yet it occurred to him, if there had been any problems on that test journey would they ever be reported? The only requirement was proof that the test had taken place and that the ship passed the same additional safety tests required of more basic craft. No new standard for a totally unique vessel.

A short, rotund figure emerged through the 'swish' door into the observation lounge; his girth held in by a long white, pocket-festooned jacket,

the tapering grey plastic of medcorder protruding from one. Ostensibly the doctor.

‘Long time no sleep?’ the man asked. ‘Same here,’ he continued without pause for an answer. ‘Being the first, it’s psychologically fraught. I mean, we’ve been sent into something ... well...’ He trailed off as he seemed to realise the potential of making the situation worse.

‘I know the risks, doc. I’m just...’ Now *Scott* couldn’t quite finish.

‘Overawed,’ the doctor completed. ‘Who wouldn’t be? After all, we’re making history.’

‘Well, since you put it like that I think I will have some tranqs.’

‘Hey, I’m not here as drug dispenser.’ His expression serious now. ‘If that’s all you wanted you could’ve got a medibot. You may not know but I’m also the ship’s counsellor.’

‘Yeah, I expect we’ll all be in need of counselling in a few days.’

The doctor went to pull something out of his lower jacket pocket. ‘If you really need something to help you get through the night...’

‘It’s all right, doc, I’ll just watch the stars and hope they send me into a trance.’

‘So long as they don’t send you mad in the process,’ he said as he left.

3

Raiya had always made a conscious effort to put her work out of her mind; she imagined her latest study subject's file as an old paper version in a cardboard sleeve being placed in a drawer and that drawer locked. This time it didn't work.

She entered the institute's interior parking zone through a door which opened after confirming her identity. The same DNA scan would take place on leaving in her car. No one left or entered the institute without this thorough scan. Perhaps this was one of the securest buildings in Canada. Yet, when the primary lighting failed to illuminate, she knew something was wrong beyond a mere technical glitch.

Then in the muted yellow light a tall, darkly clad man seemed to appear from nowhere, intercepting her just before she reached her vehicle. After the initial shock, she couldn't help but muse over his curiously outdated fashion: the dark suit and a homburg style hat – it was a revivalist look from about twenty years ago.

'Hello, ma'am,' he said, removing his hat in a oddly courteous manner. *Ma'am*; there was something in the way he emphasised that word which made her feel only more intimidated.

'Yes, can I help you?' she asked, aware of the tension in her voice.

'Indeed, I believe you can,' he affirmed. 'You have recently been studying a file of Torbin Lyndau. He has had some rather ... *curious* experiences, I believe, the nature of which is of interest to our organization.' The accent was strange: not quite Canadian or from any state of America, but as if a mixture of regions.

'Organization?'

'The Western Alliance Security Directorate.'

'WASD. Never heard of them.' She knew it was standard protocol to ask for ID, but somehow, here, the question seemed unreasonable – a step too far.

‘Of course not,’ he snapped, ‘we’re a highly covert organization. After all, if people knew about us it could compromise our effectiveness. We deal with matters affecting national security.’

‘I don’t understand. How does Torbin Lyndau affect national security?’

‘The technology he had been involved with was highly dangerous. And if technical knowledge of his research were to fall into the wrong hands ... Well, who knows the trouble it could cause if, for example, a terrorist or dissident group were to use it for their own ideological ends.’

Raiya felt trapped, overwhelmed, like a small animal in the gaze of an unknown predator, something her twenty years of training and experience could not explain. Maybe it was his face: gaunt and hollow with sharp etched features. Also his height, of over two metres, added to the effect. He was standing too close, she realised. But to back away from him was not an option. Instead she took a breath, tried to calm her nerves. *Focus.*

She said, ‘As a psychiatrist I am bound by a strict code of confidentiality. Furthermore, this institute has a sufficiently high level of security to ensure the safe-keeping of all our files. And thirdly: as far as I can gather, Mr Lyndau has not revealed any technical information of his project.’

‘Doctor Fortenski, pardon my brusqueness, but I must point out that the account file you retrieved may well contain random spaced encrypted code; in other words, embedded data pertaining to the project.’

‘I don’t see why he would do that.’

‘Because of the highly prized nature of his research, the like of which has not been able to be replicated since.’

‘I understand he was quite a genius. But it’s not as if his work remained at the theoretical stage. I presume you know how his research led to the development of warp phase starship drives.’

‘Of course,’ he replied, as if insulted by her even mentioning it. ‘His work facilitated such technology. However, there were aspects of his research which were – could never be – used for space travel, the like of which was regarded as highly dangerous, hence the reason for the project to be on Mars.’

‘Dangerous? In what way?’

‘Such details I cannot go into, at least here. But suffice to say that anyone within viewing distance of his experiments may well have experienced some ... peculiar effects.’

‘I’m intrigued to know more Mister...’

‘Standford. Ebon Standford.’

‘Well, Mister Standford, perhaps you would like to accompany me to my office.’ Every protein in his body would be scanned before he got anywhere near her office. And then highly trained security staff would greet him and check his credentials.

‘No no, Doctor Fortenski, that’s not how we operate. You are obliged to bring his file in its original form to us, at a chosen location.’

‘But how do I know you are who you claim to be?’

‘You don’t. My organization operates at an above top secret level, which means without the knowledge of state authorities.’ He examined the hat he still held in both hands as if looking for some imperfection.

‘There are simply two options to consider,’ he continued. ‘Either you bring the file to us at the time and place of our choosing or we extract it.’

‘By whatever means. I see.’ She wasn’t used to being frightened in this way.

‘You will receive the coordinates, the time and date on your personal console. But don’t bother to trace the message’s origin, and do not bring anyone else or any recording device; we can scan for either of those presences. Is that clear?’

‘Clearer than a datacrystal.’

‘Then I wish you good day, ma’am.’ He walked off briskly, seeming to blend into the muted light before passing through an exit door. A second later the momentary dazzling white of full illumination.

Raiya pressed the comm tab affixed to her lapel. ‘Jansson, can you check a scan from the last few minutes from my location?’

‘Sure thing, Dr Fortenski,’ came his reassuringly familiar voice.

She waited half a minute.

‘No anomalies... Err, what did you want me to check for?’

‘Unauthorized personnel.’

‘The system would have flagged that. Nothing on visual except – lighting’s dim. That’s odd. And you ... appear to be talking. Audio is off line. I’ll run a diagnostic.’

She waited about two minutes, this time.

‘There appears to have been low level EM interference. Still, an intruder should have left some kind of trace pattern. How *curious*,’ he remarked.

‘Thanks, Jansson. I’ll check back with you tomorrow.’ She closed the link, then hurried into the welcome security of her car.

‘Home,’ she told it. The vehicle drifted gently away as the parking bay door parted for her exit.

This time no music or newscast; her mind would not focus on anything other than her strange visitor.

But analytical thought failed, had done right from the time he appeared, as if all those years had been stripped away when she needed them most. One word sprang into her mind: *Sinister*. No, not adequate. She simply wasn’t able to read him.

Clearly there’d always be the risk of being targeted or stalked by an ex-patient or client, and hence the need for utmost security surrounding her at all times. Some had been borderline insane, and would in any other century be institutionalised, except these days medication or neuro re-sequencing were able to fix even the most extreme psychotic tendencies. The ones she feared most were the obsessives, usually male: those who thought that allowing access into the private recesses of their psyche was something specially intimate, feeling what they believed to be true love with the only person who truly understood them. At least these men were predictable; her professional network a constant source of support and understanding, as a counter. Not that she’d break the code of confidentiality with any of these patients (or clients as the nomenclature many preferred); only the specific threats were discussed.

Something, someone, a threat outside of this protective realm had got to her

in the way no psychotic or obsessive ever could. Even the thought occurred to contact her ex-husband – just a reassuringly familiar voice. No. Instead she'd stay at home, nervous, but too proud to admit it ... well, certainly to him. Her only company a subsentient minibot cleaner.

4

They sat around the “conference” table: Two architects and a medical doctor. In ten minutes, the ship’s computer informed them in its benignly androgynous voice, they would come out of warp.

‘Have you ever heard him speak, I mean the pilot?’ said Josh Adams, the second Architect. A bear of a man at least ten years older than Scott.

Scott shook his head slightly, knowing his question was loaded. ‘I don’t think he is actually a pilot; he’s more like a systems monitor. But no, he’s not even used the comm.’ He looked to the doctor.

‘I enquired after his heath,’ said Dr Fredrick Lichman, ‘and he assured me he was fine.’

Josh looked at the doctor sharply. ‘So you didn’t actually check up on him?’

‘Naturally I offered to, but I accepted his refusal.’

‘Fine, so he could have keeled over or be having some kinda episode from the shock of travelling in this *revolutionary* way.’

‘His vital signs are constantly being monitored.’

‘Hey, I’m not trying to get at you, doc,’ assured Josh. ‘It’s just this hyper-space warp travel must be a huge deal for even a space pilot.’

‘I’m off to the observation lounge, see it stop,’ Scott announced.

‘Well at least the pilot has no control over that,’ said Josh.

The observation lounge was an all-encompassing dome. For about a minute Scott still felt a slight disorientation at being surrounded by the white lines in continuous streaks, vibrating but without the sensation of this movement, above the platform that appeared to float in space.

‘Two minutes,’ announced the computer voice, intelligent enough to know they knew what was meant.

Lichman said, ‘I’m taking my seat for this. I don’t trust the zero inertia thing.’

Scott felt his heart race at the one-minute countdown, deciding there was no point to keep standing just for the sake of some superfluous machismo, and sat in the adjacent seat. Josh followed suit. Scott then considered the release button for the restraint strap, held off pressing it, turned to Josh. Ultimately, Lichman was the only one who activated the restraints.

‘Ten seconds,’ the computer informed.

There was a jolt, not enough to fling Scott or Josh out of their seats, but sufficient for them to grip the arm rests. The stars had instantly become fixed points. Scott stood, turned round until he noticed one blueish point rapidly enlarging amongst the star-field.

‘Our holiday retreat,’ Josh announced. ‘Hope you brought enough sun-screen.’

‘Some would think you serious,’ said Dr Lichman.

‘A *potential* holiday retreat,’ said Scott. ‘Looks too good to be true.’ The world was becoming recognisably Earth-like.

‘What are you suggesting – that those explorer images were faked?’

Scott had been in the virtual version, had seen the pictures from the approaching probe – the images matched. ‘I guess I’m being paranoid,’ he admitted.

‘That’s to be expected,’ offered the doctor. ‘So far from home, you feel cut off from the trueness of it – a distant reality.’

‘Alternatively,’ Josh piped, ‘we’ve unwittingly become their guinea pig space men.’

‘Don’t listen to him’ said the doctor. ‘He’s winding you up.’

‘For sure. Anyway, we all accepted the risks.’

Josh did a thumbs-up sign towards Scott. ‘Pioneers man!’

Despite the artificially controlled counter-inertia, Scott was sure he could feel the deceleration force pushing him forwards. The planet was now about twice moon size from Earth, and growing at an unnervingly rapid rate.

Leaving the orbiting ship was such a regimented and precisely controlled affair, it left in Scott nothing of the emotional impact he had been expecting.

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