

Chapter 1

Paul Woodend had landed, well and truly, landed. He had not just got off some craft or ship. The groundcar had dropped him off late last night. He had been led to this apartment by the night-watchman, or whatever he was called. Few words passed between them. The man had left him outside his new home with a key and a stripocard, pausing only to give him some instructions on their use.

When Woodend had finally got into the room, he had found that his things had beaten him to it. It had been decided, at the CCC, finally, that he would travel separately to his few chosen possessions. A rather small and sorry looking pile of boxes and bags awaited him. Some guard, or other, had left them there for him. Woodend wondered whether it had been one of the City Central guards, or, more likely, one of the College types. Either way he left the pile where it was and went to sleep. He never had any trouble sleeping, not since the prokaryote had become part of him.

Now, as he pressed the button that released the window screens, they prepared to look out on this first, new morning for them. Paul Woodend, lately resident of the Zone and just cleared of involvement in a series of murders; the ex-member of the Quizmasters, who would soon be enshrined in Zonie myth. He had been expelled from the Zone for his own safety and sent to live where he held down a low-class lecturer's position at the College. Paul considered that it would have been difficult to carry on in the Zone after the terrible

and deadly last quiz. He saw again Ronnie's blood splattered body lying on the floor of the Monarch. His face fixed with one last questioning look.

Difficult, yes, but not impossible.

No, the authorities wanted him where they could keep a better eye on him. He had not been cleared of all involvement in what had become a notorious and rather shocking series of events. At least shocking for the relative calm and order of life after the 'trouble'. The violence of which was leaching gradually out of the common consciousness.

No, Paul Woodend was under suspicion.

Had he been party to the Quizmaster murders? If so, how had he beat the interrogation? Was he a member of the Resistance? There were those among the authorities who wanted to know the answers.

As Woodend gazed out of the window the prokaryote saw through his eyes; in fact, it could access information through all of Woodend's senses. It had described itself to its host, once it had completed the process of gaining control over all the physiological and mental mechanisms that worked this creature that called itself human. Paul was unable to do anything without the prokaryote's consent. A condition that had saved his life in the carnage of the Monarch. It had also got them through the resulting interrogation. They had passed the sensor pad test and survived the attentions of other intrusive technology. The prokaryote had changed his fingerprints and kept Paul's conscious self, detached, so to speak, to achieve this.

The prokaryote did not pervade Woodend's every thought. It allowed the host some measure of mental and physical freedom. But always it was there, and always it was

working towards its goal. It had travelled the solar system for millennia protected within asteroidal material. An unfortunate close encounter with a passing comet had removed it from its home in interstellar space. Drawn into the solar system by the various competing gravities of the planets and their star, it had tried to manoeuvre its rocky 'spaceship' into a collision with the third planet. It was well known that forms of life were developing there. Eventually it had crashed into this planet. Having survived the impact, it had waited till a suitable candidate appeared. None were immediately apparent. It was getting desperate when at last it had engineered a point of entry into the human calling itself Paul Woodend.

This had served the purpose of removing itself from possible detection. However, it had found itself inside a host caught up in the intrigues of its world. Also, it was in the middle stages of its existence with a certain amount of physical disrepair. It was relatively easy for the prokaryote to improve the host physically; being really a loose collection of many cells it concentrated itself inside the neural networks of the creature, but it was also able to move any number of its cells to any part of the host's body. It could pass through any membrane and use any of the organism's transport systems. It revelled in the biochemistry of the creature, both creating and destroying cellular structures. It acted on the creature's many processes and organs to enhance its overall performance.

Most fascinating of all was this organism's brain. The centre of its intelligence, knowledge and thoughts. It was a truly complex creature with an incredible data storage capacity in this brain. Also, within this largely untapped resource were qualities, powers the host would call them, waiting to be developed. It was going to take generations to develop them naturally. The prokaryote could not wait that long. It pushed the process on inside the host. It used the great data storage capacity to learn all it could of this world, to help it with

its desire to return home to interstellar space. They had escaped the Zone. Now, here in the College, it knew from Woodend's stored knowledge and memories they could begin the next stage.

For his part, Paul Woodend, gazing out of his window, was aware of the prokaryote's intentions. He knew resistance was futile. He knew he had the thing, as he called it to himself, to thank for his survival, so far. He was also aware of some of the physical changes that had been wrought within him. He was particularly impressed by his enhanced senses: smell and hearing especially. The thing had told him of the potential for greater mental powers; but he did not really understand. What he did understand was that the thing would use him for as long as it thought he could be of service. Then it would leave him. It was not malevolent. It meant him no harm. But it was determined to achieve its aim. If Woodend was in danger of dying and it could not prevent it. Then it would transfer. If it could be better served by someone, or something else, it would transfer. There were many ways in which it could achieve this. It would have to go eventually. They both knew this. It had assured Paul that he would be left, largely, unaffected by this.

Largely, Paul thought again and wondered.

The thing did not respond to him.

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The view from the window was of the College campus and some of the land beyond. The apartment block that housed Paul's new home was five stories high; he was on the fourth floor. The position of the building allowed it a great panoramic view of most of the campus

buildings. It lay at the 'handle' of the fan-shaped campus layout. Only one structure rose higher than the apartment block: the administrative centre. It stood smack in the middle of the fan-shape. All the other offices, faculty buildings, halls, labs, student blocks and so on, were laid out around it. Everywhere buildings stood comfortably in their grounds. There was no overcrowding here. Any new buildings were just placed further out in ample space of their own. It was a superb place to work with very good facilities. All of which were most suitable for a centre of excellence.

At the top of the administrative centre, with a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the campus surrounding it, was the office of the man responsible for it all: The Director. A man who walked the corridors of power and had the ear of the mighty in this post- 'trouble' era. The man who had been the saviour of Paul Woodend previously and who was again to be his benefactor. He had given Woodend his position in the College and allowed him to run his special course on Mechanics. Often local opposition had conspired against the Zonie lecturer and complaints were made by the students. Mainly the children of those who had come to power during and after the 'trouble'; the students despised him for being a Zonie. But throughout, the Director was implacable and protected Paul. However, he had always maintained that Woodend would have to leave the Zone eventually. Perhaps he had kept this nice little apartment ready for him? Anyway, he would be happy now that Paul had come 'home' to stay.

Time to get a move on.

The thing stirred Paul out of his musings. It wanted to see more of this new place for itself. It did not always trust the quality of the host's memory.

Let's tidy the room up first. Paul communicated to it. Being inside his head, he just thought, and it knew.

Ok.

The next ten minutes or so were spent organising his possessions, at least what had been brought from his house in the Zone. Mostly it was clothes and books. The apartment had plenty of wardrobe space and shelves for his books. His other bits and pieces he found room for around the apartment. The bathroom was already stocked with every conceivable item you could use in there. Woodend did not recognise some of the stuff; he wondered idly who he could ask about them. The kitchen was small but contained everything you might need if you were into cooking. Paul was not. He had survived in the Zone, largely, by simple cooking of his own combined with eating in the Times Past, his local. There was no food in the kitchen. Although he did smile when he found about twenty cans of the local brew in the fridge. It was not as good as Zonie beer, but it was passable. Someone knew he liked a drop or two, evidently. Was it the Director's way of welcoming him into the fold?

You are not having one now.

Spoilsport.

You need to eat. Let's go. It is time for me to familiarise myself with our new environment.

With a last look around his new home Paul Woodend pulled on a heavy coat to protect against the late January chill, and left. The door would automatically seal behind him. He made sure he had his key and stripocard with him.

Chapter 2

There were lifts, obviously, in the apartblock. But Paul took the stairs. He could do with the exercise, apparently. The apartblock was mostly occupied by College employees. People who worked in the offices rather than the lecturing staff. These tended to live off campus, usually in little clusters, or on their own, in the countryside. So, he was a little surprised not to come across anyone on his descent and exit from the apartblock. Perhaps he was too early, it was only eight after all. Most people presumably left for work a little later. Also, it was still vacation time. Who knows? He would have to keep his eyes out and learn the routines around him.

Woodend set out to tour the campus. He first walked right around the outside until he arrived back at the apartblock. He followed the paths that skirted the edges. Many people could be seen moving, generally, into the campus proper. He was passed by a few people who appeared to be doing circuits of the campus in the early morning peace. There were slight acknowledgements second around. Paul appeared to be taking his constitutional too. He walked at his usual brisk pace, looking all around him but concentrating more inwards. He stopped only twice.

Once to watch some students who were playing football on one of the playing fields. Curious time to be playing, he thought, and mixed sexes too. It was not a serious game. He wondered how many students were left here during the holidays. Whether any of them

were the children of Zonies who were not allowed home? If so, how was their indoctrination going? Were they not bothered about returning to the Zone anymore?

The second time Woodend stopped he had reached a point directly opposite the apartblock. The whole campus lay between him and his new abode, which he could see clearly in the near distance. The adminblock stood in the middle. But Paul did not stop to look that way for long. His gaze was aimed away from the campus towards the open country. It took in the long slowly rising ground that ended in the low ridge in the distance. At least a mile away, the ridge was topped by a line of trees of varying height. Surrounding and among the trees were bushes and hedges, again of different types, and thickness. Up to the ridge only a few dotted trees interrupted the expanse of grassland.

Beyond the ridge lay the Research Complex. Out of view of any inquiring eyes. It was said that not one building could overlook the area. Woodend knew the Complex was there. Everyone knew that. But he did not know how far beyond the ridge it lay, or how many buildings were there. It did not appear on any maps in the campus. None that he had seen anyway. He did not know what research went on there. Whatever it was, it was important. The place had serious security. Top secret was not the word for the place. It was more than that. Woodend knew of only six, or seven people from the College, other than the Director, who had access to the Complex. They qualified by their expertise in their fields, for clearance, to work there when needed. It was a joke at the College that if you thought the College had the finest minds, then pop over to the Research Complex sometime and watch the real ones at work!

What do you want over there?

Easy. It acted to soothe Paul's growing concern.

We are not going over there, are we?

I, we, feel that it will be important to us. Our destiny or fate lies in what they might be doing there.

But how am I going to get clearance to get into the Research Complex?

Well, we will have to see, won't we?

They continued until they got back to the apartblock.

From the apartblock, second time around, Paul cut into the campus itself and followed a spiral like path through the place until he arrived at the adminblock in the centre. The prokaryote now had the layout fixed and Paul, who had not really paid that much attention before, knew too. He had only come here to work before and had left as soon as he could. He did not hang around. He usually only moved between the S-train station and the Applied Sciences building, where he put his course on and where what passed for his office was. The S-train station was outside the campus, just the other side of the apartblock.

Woodend had encountered more people on his way to the adminblock. Nobody he knew, but then he knew so few people here anyway. There were the usual College guards around. Always, outside each campus building and on some of the crossroads. However, the guards were mainly concentrated at the three road entrances to the campus. They had stations positioned there, at the three corners of the fan shape.

The smell of the main campus refectory had assailed them once Paul had reached the centre. He crossed the road and went inside.

The library and the refectory formed a triangle with the adminblock. The refectory was a two-storey structure. On the first floor you could find the actual self-service area and the tabled space; the kitchens were upstairs too. On the ground floor, there were a series of

coffee and sandwich bars, newsagents and some actual bars; easy seats, low tables, were the norm. The layout allowed for rooms to be set off and for some cosy alcoves.

Paul had only been inside the refectory once before. Along the left-hand wall were placed the stairs for the first floor. A lift was there to. On climbing the stairs, Paul found only one of the entrances to the serving area open. He picked up a tray and joined a small queue of four people. He watched carefully how the system worked, particularly how the stripocard was used to pay for your meal. He successfully negotiated the whole process and found a table by a window where he could sit alone. A while ago an unfamiliar situation like this would have had him a bit worried, in case he did something wrong and embarrassed himself. But the prokaryote would not let him draw attention to himself these days, unless, of course, it suited itself to do so.

Paul was pleasantly taken aback. Normally the thing was quite particular about what he could eat. It knew from its own analysis of his body chemistry, and from the information it had gleaned through Paul's eyes, what was good for his body. It had even managed to produce an antidote to Ronnie's plant poison, that they had used to dispatch undesirables in the communities of the Zone. So, Paul was thankful that it had allowed him to 'pig' out on a large, old-fashioned style, fried greasy breakfast. A treat for the host? Why? He wondered. Mind you, he still had what seemed to other diners a large amount of fresh fruit on his tray. Paul Woodend was going to enjoy this.

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Roland Agen got up from the monitors. He nodded at the guard and left the control room. He had just watched Paul Woodend enter the refectory. Earlier, he had missed Woodend at the apartblock by a matter of minutes. It did not matter; he was allowed access to almost everywhere on campus. He went up to Woodend's apartment with a guard for the apartblock. He let himself in and had a quick look around, noting where Woodend had put his paltry belongings. Then he turned to the guard and said.

"Wait here until the operator has fitted the vidscreen. Nobody allowed in until then. That especially includes Woodend. The operator should be here in five minutes. If he isn't, buzz me. Got it?"

"Understood sir," the guard smartly replied.

Outside the apartblock Roland Agen, assistant to the Director, looked around. There was no sign of Woodend. I wonder where he's gone this early, he thought to himself. No matter he could soon find out. All the security monitor operators had been ordered to keep a special eye out for their new arrival. He headed for the adminblock.

The Director's assistant was the second most powerful person on the campus. He was responsible for the day to day functioning of the place. Not least of which was the security and monitoring of the campus and the personnel. He was answerable only to the Director and some said even higher authorities. He had below him a chief of security and a chief of administration and ancillary staff. Just the right side of thirty, losing the battle with hair loss, and only about five two or three in height, Roland Agen often struck people, at first, as an unlikely Director's assistant. However, one look in his cold blue eyes, and a realisation that his small frame was very muscular and athletic, caused a change in mind. Any

conversation with him left you in no doubt that here was an extremely determined and capable man. He held people's eyes uncomfortably long.

Roland's history included service in the forces where small men rapidly acquired toughness or fell. There followed duty overseas, although nobody seemed to know where, or for who, or for how long. It was common knowledge that he had some French ancestry in him. He was well educated but not an academic. After the 'trouble' he had been appointed the Director's assistant, rumour had it by the highest possible authority. He had proved invaluable to the Director and they had become firm friends. Quite simply Roland Agen ruled the campus.

At the adminblock Roland followed Woodend's progress around the campus and used the time to run his eyes over his, he hoped now, complete file on Paul Woodend. Lecturer, ex-Quizmaster, possible murderer or should that be probable assassin. He had met Woodend only once before, which was not surprising really. He had felt that Woodend was a quiet sort who did not really want to be there, but who was very keen not to put a foot wrong. Now all this carry on inside the Zone. The Arbiter of the Zone and the Director getting together to dump Woodend in his lap. He knew that the Director and Woodend were old friends, and that Woodend's position on the staff was protected. Now he had to welcome him, like a prodigal son, into their big happy family.

He snorted to himself at the thought.

Well, better get it over with, he thought, as he crossed the road to the refectory.

Chapter 3

We are the subject of someone's attention.

Paul snapped out of his day dreaming. He turned from the window to face the room. Making his way towards him through the half-filled room was a short man, balding and somehow strong-looking. Despite several greetings and brief exchanges, he continued his purposeful progress to Woodend's table. Paul recognised the Director's assistant. He could feel the prokaryote's interest in him. Even so, he was surprised when he took a seat opposite him. His tray contained a breakfast, continental in makeup, a little fruit and strong-smelling coffee.

Paul could feel the interest generated in the room. The thing had heightened his awareness. Paul glanced around the room. Many people returned his look trying to work out if they knew him. A couple, wrongly, thought they did, and attempted to explain to their neighbours. He smiled at the explanations. The thing was on full alert. Paul could feel the effect throughout his body. Adrenalin was no match for the state of readiness he was now in.

Roland Agen looked at Woodend.

"Too much of that stuff will do you no good," he said.

"I know," replied Woodend. "But it is nice now and then."

The assistant started to eat. Woodend continued with his feast.

What does he want? Paul asked inwardly.

We are working on it. He does not mean you any harm. Rather that he considers you an annoyance. There is some contempt and disbelief, but no antagonism. This is an interesting one indeed.

Paul always wondered whether interesting ones were being assessed for possible transference. It made no comment.

Roland Agen looked out of the window.

"I popped round your apartment earlier, but I just missed you," he said. "You had gone on your grand tour of the campus." He looked at Woodend. The look told him that they were keeping an eye on him.

"I needed to get my full bearings," Woodend said. "It helped work up an appetite for this." He gestured at his now finished meal.

The assistant nodded. He held Paul's eyes.

"When you return you will find a vidscreen on your wall. Nothing fancy, you understand, and of course only standard reception setting."

Woodend could not hide his surprise.

"Really?" he asked with disbelief in his voice.

"Yes, really," Roland replied and let a smile cross his face. It was amusing to watch Woodend cope with his new-found privilege.

"I don't know what to say," Woodend gushed, he was beaming. "I don't see why. I mean what have I done to ...". His voice died away, and a frown replaced the smile. He looked cautiously at the assistant.

"Done to deserve it?" Roland completed the sentence for Woodend. "I fail to see the reason, except of course you are a friend of the Director. Now you are here for good,

perhaps he wants to make you feel comfortable. Of course, having your own vidscreen will make you friends, rather quickly, I would imagine."

Roland studied the forties something man opposite him. He knew he was average height and build. He had white hair; it had been so for a long time. In person, he looked better than his file photo. Healthier and quite fit looking for someone who did no serious exercise. There was no apparent evidence for his well-documented penchant for a drink or two. He held his eye well. He appeared to be an open kind of bloke; someone you could easily approach, someone who would help, someone who would give you the time of day. It was hard now to believe that this man opposite him was suspected of involvement in over twenty killings using a blow pen and poison. He seemed more likely to...

He shook himself and looked out the window again.

"Perhaps the Director hopes it will help to keep you out of trouble," Roland continued. Yes, he thought, someone who had seen and done what Paul Woodend had during the 'trouble', was not someone to take too lightly. He fixed Woodend with his best steely eyed look.

"You are planning to stay out of trouble?" he demanded of Woodend. "You see I will be keeping a close eye on you. I do not want to waste any more of my time on you." There was an emphasis on the 'any more' that suggested that he did not wish to be here now, wasting his time.

Paul returned the assistant's piercing look; he left any aggression or stropiness out of his voice.

"I have had quite enough trouble lately." It was himself speaking, Paul Woodend, tired and hunted sounding.

Roland Agen looked closely at Woodend again. He seemed to have crumpled slightly in his seat. He still held his eye well, but there was no spark any more.

"What will you do with yourself?" he asked Woodend, the tone of his voice softening and a relaxation visible in his posture.

Paul could feel the prokaryote almost purring with delight.

"I think I'll spend some time in the library," Paul replied. "I know the Director wants me to contribute to a new astrophysics course due to run next term." He paused, that much was true. "And I think I'll try to make some friends." He looked at Roland Agen. "Of course, that might be difficult."

"Yes, it might well be," Roland agreed. "But people are sometimes attracted to notoriety." He finished his coffee and got up. He left Paul with a last warning.

"Keep your nose clean Paul Woodend, a number of people will be taking an interest in you."

"Why have you come to tell me all this?" Paul asked.

"And not one of my operators?" Roland returned. "Because I was told to."

Roland Agen made his way out of the refectory. He was experiencing some curious feelings. News of the arrival of this Woodend person had made him annoyed, anxious and suspicious. It was almost certainly going to complicate things. It would mean more for him to watch out for and might prove distracting. But now he had met the character. This terrible figure from the dangerous Zone. Famous and now notorious. Well, it was hard to see what all the fuss was. In fact, he could not help feeling a kind of attraction to him. He may prove to be one of the campus' more interesting types. He agreed with the analysis of the City Central Control men; it was unlikely that Woodend was mixed up with the Resistance. Although you could see that they might be interested in Paul Woodend.

Well it was time to get on with his normal day. He would check up on his new charge later in the week.

Paul Woodend stayed sometime in the refectory. He got a pot of the strong-smelling coffee and just sat there looking out of the window. The view was not particularly interesting; there was more going on in his mind. The thing allowed him to remember all that had happened to him in the last few weeks. While he reminisced, the prokaryote was taking stock of things; the new surroundings and this interesting Director's assistant, who could prove very useful. It was pleased with their first encounter. The host's naturally engaging personality was a great help in these first contact situations. It looked forward to the next meeting, it had achieved some influence already. In the meantime, it needed more information and Woodend needed much more knowledge.

Chapter 4

The next few days were spent mainly in the library. Meals were all taken in the refectory.

Paul had to re-join the library, it required a little patience and a visit to the adminblock. But eventually he was given full lecturer's rights and access. He had, of course, met a few comments, made aside, and the chief librarian had taken an unnecessary interest.

Presumably, curious to see this Woodend fellow. Some of the library staff were helpful and he had developed a kind of rapport with them.

Paul spent all his time in the sciences section, particularly in the Astroscience sections.

Paul told the staff he was researching his new course. He was not sure yet what it would be on, so he was considering as many aspects of the Space sciences as he could lay his hands on.

After only a couple of days research Paul had stirred up some interest in the section. He never carried any materials for making notes. He never took any books or copies of papers out. He seemed to be systematically working through the entire section. At first, he took the books and journals and papers off the shelves and read through the entire thing standing there. He appeared to be reading fast, very fast. One of the younger staff thought it was a type of speed reading. When he had finished one, he replaced it, and took the next one down. He carried on doing this for a few hours, then he would take a rest. Usually he

would go to the library coffee bar for a drink or a sandwich. Sometimes he left the library to go to the refectory, or for a walk.

They soon realised, Paul and the prokaryote, that undue attention was focused on them and their actions. Paul began to use the cubicles that lined one side of the section. Behind the door it could push Woodend into a faster rate of data accumulation. There was an incredible amount of storage space in this creature's brain. All it had to do was get it to run its eyes over the pages and then put the information away inside this brain.

Paul had been through one of the thing's drives for information before. He knew that all the knowledge that was being downloaded into him would become his. He would be able to recall any of it, at any time. The things he had knocking around in his brain already. Incredible - it had promised that all this recently acquired knowledge would be left with him when transference occurred - fantastic.

Paul also knew that the thing would become frustrated by his physical shortcomings. That he would get fatigued, need rest, fresh air and feeding. It would be annoyed by closing time in the library. Even at their phenomenal rate of data absorption it was going to take the best part of a week. The library's Space sciences section was the best in the country and it also had extensive computer files, that Paul could log onto from a terminal inside his cubicle.

Occasionally, one of the staff would try to tiptoe past the cubicle, trying to see what he was up to. Usually they saw Woodend smiling back at them with an eyebrow raised quizzically. Once they found him asleep with his head lolled forward, chin on chest. Open in front of him, a paper on conditions inside interstellar molecular clouds. Another time he seemed to be in a trance. His unblinking gaze fixed on a computer simulation of past and

projected interplanetary trajectories. The young librarian watched his unwavering attention to several runs of the entire simulation. Then, as if coming around from a deep sleep, he stirred and glanced at his observer with eyes that seemed to take time to see clearly.

"Very useful," he said as he logged off. "That shook some memories loose." Then he left for one of his breaks, a little early.

On his seventh straight night, the Friday of his first full week on the campus, Paul was about to call it a day or rather a night. He sensed that even it was weary for once. Or, perhaps it was bored. It was near closing time anyway. He would get some food to take back with him. It was a clear night and the thing liked to look at the stars. The campus had been designed to limit light pollution, all you had to do was get a little distance away from the edge of the campus, and a fine night view offered itself. They had found a good place not far behind the apartblock.

A flash.

Lightning? He looked up.

Paul felt the vibration first, through his feet from the floor. Then he heard the rumble followed by a range of different noises: crashing sounds; smashing sounds; the sound of splintering glass and heavy objects hitting the ground. Paul heard the window pane being stressed. He thought that he could see it bulging slightly - his new hyper-sensitive senses had kicked in. The window held.

Outside he could see a newly formed fire in the distance. Smoke rose around it. Sirens began. People were running below, and there was the sound of screaming outside and in the library. Lights came on around the campus.

What few people were left in this section had gathered to stare out at the shocking new sight. There was an uneasy feeling, no one knew what to say. After a while, someone suggested they go to the coffee bar and see what was going on. Woodend followed them.

Chapter 5

He flicked the high-tech part of his key system through the slot. The holographic and magnetic strips did the trick and the front door to the apartblock opened. It was past midnight, and one of the two night-watchmen nodded at Paul. The other one was scrutinising the monitors closely and did not look up when Woodend's entrance was announced. They were obviously a little edgy tonight. Paul had worked hard at trying to develop a relationship with the apartblock guards. However, it had only got to the nodding back at him stage. Paul walked past reception and headed for the lifts. He could see about ten people, still up, watching the apartblock vidscreen. The campus channel was on. Most of the viewers were the older residents, who resented the fact that Woodend had his own vidscreen. They treated him with studied indifference, usually, while one or two were openly hostile. But a couple of the younger residents had stayed up too. He had managed to forge a burgeoning relationship with some of them. Paul had reached the lift, when he was spotted, and called back by the younger ones.

He met them at the edge of the vidscreen lounge: Alexis and Tania. He was a research assistant in the engineering faculty, working on intelligent buildings, whatever that was. She was working in the Language's faculty in office administration, and slowly completing a degree in her spare time. It seemed to be a bewildering mixture of components; some

modern and some classical languages. She had a partner who was in his final year of the extended law course. They shared a double flat on the floor below Paul.

"What have you been up to then?" Alexis asked jokingly.

"We were told the guards took you away for questioning?" There was more concern in Tania's voice.

Beyond them, Paul could see the others had turned in their seats to take an interest in his answer.

"Yes, they wanted to eliminate me from their inquiries," Paul replied. "So, they took me for the dog and chemical tests for explosives."

"They picked you a bit quick, didn't they?" Alexis again.

"Well, new boy in town, and all that, you know." Paul smiled at him.

"But somebody said you had been in the library all evening," Tania said.

"As they said," Paul answered her, "there are such things as timers and remote controls."

He looked towards the group listening, "but, I am completely clean. Nothing on me chemically that could have been used in the bomb."

Paul looked at the two in front of him, "what has the vidscreen got to say about it all?"

Alexis answered him, "nothing on the national channels, yet, probably a news blackout still. Campus channel has given some details: time it happened; amount of damage; number killed; what the guards are doing. That sort of thing."

"Sounds quite a lot really," Paul said. He noticed that the others had turned back to the vidscreen.

Paul headed back to the lift and pressed the button for his floor. Alexis and Tania had followed.

"You going to bed now?" Tania asked Paul.

"No, I think I need to unwind a bit first," he replied. "Where's your Jon got to?"

"Oh, he's gone to bed already, big seminar thingy tomorrow, you know." She smiled as

she said it.

The lift arrived.

"Got any beer left, Paul?" Alexis asked suggestively.

The doors opened, Paul walked into the lift and turned about. They were looking at him, expectantly.

"Fresh supply today actually," he said. "Come on then," he grinned.

Tania did the honours, pressed the buttons, and soon they were inside Paul's apartment.

Alexis had been the first person to approach Woodend. He had been waiting for Woodend when he came back from the library. Woodend was tired, the thing had worked him hard on their first full day in the library. But he was grateful for the interest of Alexis.

Stopping him in front of the lift he said, "so you're the big bad bloke from the Zone then. I've seen you around before."

Paul looked at the well-built six-footer who was blocking his path. He was very sturdy looking and there was a glint in his eye that told of a fondness for mischief. Paul liked him immediately, another Tapper the thing informed him. No danger. Paul wondered how much this big lump might be like his friend in the Zone.

"I know someone who did your course," he continued. "Best course he's done yet. He reckons. I'm Alexis." He extended his hand.

Paul shook his hand and introduced himself too. They talked for a while, during which it was obvious that Alexis knew Woodend had his own vidscreen. He took it for granted that Woodend would be into football and made a clever guess as to who he supported. Before he knew it, Paul was handing him a beer in his flat and they were settling down to watch that night's match. Every evening after that, Alexis came to watch something on Woodend's

vidscreen, and each time he brought new people to introduce to Paul. They were all the younger ones in the building, fascinated to meet this newcomer with a history.

That was how he had met Tania and Jon. She was quite attractive; he was a bit aloof. She was open and very inquisitive; he was reserved. She had got Paul's life history out of him very quickly and told him hers too. Jon was very much into his course and what he would do after it, and where he would go. She asked the questions they were all dying to know the answers to about Woodend. He obliged as best he could. Of all these new 'friends' the prokaryote registered real warmth from Alexis and Tania. Although it was a little reticent on its analysis of her, it wanted Paul to develop his relationship with her and Alexis too. It knew Woodend would function better with some of his own kind to interact with. Besides, they needed to make contacts.

Alexis was slumped in a chair facing the vidscreen, remote control in his hand. This was rapidly becoming his position. Tania sat on a sofa type of thing to one side. Woodend usually sprawled out on it when he was alone. Woodend came out of the kitchen and gave them a beer. He walked to the window and gazed up at the night sky. Pity, he thought. There was always tomorrow.

"Was it ok with the guards, Paul?" she was asking.

"Oh, it was fine," he replied. "I've had some experience of guards."

He kept staring out the window and noticed, by reflection in the glass, the look Alexis and Tania exchanged. Yes, he was used to guards, although these campus guards were quite tame, by Zone standards, not accustomed to regular trouble as they were. Staring into the night, he cast his mind back to after the explosion.

Most of the people who had been working in the library had found their way to the coffee bar. He sat down near the door, but luckily away from the draught, as it opened and closed, which it did many times, as lots of people came and went. Every person brought a news update, which filtered through the crowd sat at the tables. Paul sat there and kept his ears open. He missed nothing.

Guards everywhere.

Campus sealed off. No one in or out.

Fire being tackled.

Student block hit.

Biochemistry labs hit.

Search going on. Sniffer dogs out.

The student block hit only.

Three dead.

Loads more injured.

Ambulances moving out.

Officers in from the Research Complex.

Fire put out.

Smoke causing some problems.

Only two dead. Four badly injured.

Guards are very sensitive. Touchy!

No one to leave the library.

This last one came with a couple of guards to stand in the entrance. The coffee bar stayed open and sold out of all its food; the coffee kept coming though. Nobody came and sat down at Woodend's table. He could feel some attention on him. But nobody was prepared to hold his eye, except one of the astroscience section staff, who smiled uncertainly back at him. He gave her a 'what can we do' shrug.

Then two more guards arrived, and soon found him near the door. They came up to him and told him to follow them. Paul got up and put his heavy coat on. Everybody watched them go. Paul looked back. He could see and sense a whole gamut of emotion from the room. It ranged from open hostility, through curiosity to incredulity. He nodded, slightly, at the astroscience person. As they left the library, a couple of groundvans pulled up, and a group of guards entered the building carrying some equipment. He learnt later, that everyone there had to go through the scanner for explosive chemicals; much to the disgust of some of them.

"We shall walk to the east guardhouse," one of the guards said curtly. They flanked him. It was not far away, true, but Woodend wondered why they weren't going by groundcar. Perhaps they wanted him to make a break for it. Paul could not help feeling uneasy.

Calm down. There is no problem. Let's just go along with it.

As always, it reassured him, and started to prepare him for any possibilities.

They had done nothing.

The bomb was nothing to do with them.

They could not be tied to it. If it was a frame up, they would beat it. Had they not beaten the interrogation at City Central Control? It made sense to pull in the newly arrived problem from the Zone. Would he not be suspected of every little thing that happened?

They had arrived at the east guardhouse. The escorts left him, and he was passed through and shown into a small waiting room. Through the window Paul could see into the main control room. He observed an atmosphere of relative calm. His eye was caught by the desk officer and realised that this was the person responsible for the good order.

Soon the chief of security arrived with his aide and a dog handler. It was one of the sniffer dogs; presumably the explosive chemicals variety. There was a brief discussion and a get-together around a terminal. Then they turned and looked directly at Woodend. Woodend watched them all approach. The door opened and soon the room was full of people, equipment and a dog.

The chief's aide spoke, "would you stand up Woodend, we need to test you for chemical residue."

Paul stood up. The handler led his dog around him and let it give him a good sniffing. Special attention was given to his hands.

Negative response.

"We will use the scanner next," the aide said to Woodend.

A guard came forward and waved the sensor over him from head to toe. Again, special attention to his hands.

Again, negative response.

The chief waved everybody out of the room except his aide. They sat down. He motioned Woodend to sit down too.

"Can you tell us exactly what you have been doing today, Woodend," he said. It was a southerner's accent, surprisingly soft though. "Don't leave anything out."

Woodend told them everything he had done and everywhere he had been since he had left the apartblock that morning. He left nothing out. He knew that the monitors had supplied them with all the details anyway and he made sure he was spot on.

When he was finished, the chief and his aide had a brief hushed conversation. Release him now, or keep him for a bit, Paul picked up.

"Somehow, I did not think you would test positive," the chief said. "From what I know about you, I would expect a more direct action. A more hands on approach, shall we say, if you were going to do something that is."

"I was hoping to leave all these kinds of experiences behind me," Woodend said. "I was hoping for a new start."

"It will be difficult for you to have an easy, new start anywhere," the aide interjected. His voice was much the same as his boss.

"You are free to go home, Paul Woodend," the chief added. "Go straight home."

"Thank you," Woodend said, and left the guardhouse. He went straight home, avoiding eye contact with all the guards on his way.

"You were right, he's clean sir." The aide began after Woodend had left.

"Not his style," the chief said. "Besides, he has not had the time to get the materials together and we know exactly what he has done since he landed here. No, this could be the start of that spot of trouble we were promised."

"Pity the RC people got involved so early though, sir," the aide continued. "We could do without them as well."

"They may be a pain," the chief added, "but I think we will need them."

"Why, sir?"

The chief looked at his aide a little wearily.

"Where else around here, would you find the expertise to pull this off."

Yes, the chief thought, within the Research Complex was all the expertise needed, including masking the chemicals if necessary. But who had a motive? And who was the

connection on the campus? What exactly was this Resistance tactic all in aid of? What was going to happen next?

Well, he had a report to prepare for Roland Agen in the morning and the Director was on his way back from holiday.

Paul turned from the window and pressed the button to release the screens. He sat down on the sofa next to Tania. They were watching what passed for a music program these days. They looked settled. Paul sensed it was going to be a long night, the beer was likely to go down a bit.

Tania started to talk to him.

Chapter 6

Paul was late up on Saturday morning and by the time he got to the refectory the breakfast menu would be removed. Oh well, he could have an early lunch. He was hungry, and he needed to rehydrate. That pair had finally left at around three in the morning. His beer supply would need replenishing again. Do that today sometime, he thought. But the main priority was to show his face in the library again. It was important to keep up appearances and show them he was not implicated in last night's deed. They also needed to keep up the data absorption. Good job one of the first alterations the prokaryote had made to his body was an ability to cope with any alcohol abuse; no thick heads or grotty guts. He just had to take in a fair amount of water.

How that girl could talk. What did she not talk about? At first Paul was out of his depth. She was trying to make sense of the bombing and link it to recent events. But Paul was out of touch with what was going on outside the Zone area. Inside the Zone they were only allowed access to selected news, often more likely to be foreign than internal. He had little idea what was going on in the rest of the country and how it affected events here. In the Zone they had heard rumours about the Resistance, and often Paul had been able to relay and confirm these, on his return from working on the outside. He was one of the best-informed people who lived in the Zone, but even so, he knew little really. All he could do

was listen to Tania and Alexis throw some ideas around and reiterate commonly held views. He could only manage to give some unqualified opinions when asked.

But he learnt a few things.

Resistance activity was on the increase.

Still sporadic and seemingly dotted about the country, Alexis felt the more recent outrages, as they were described, seemed to be centred more around the Midlands. He warned that they lay at the heart of a Resistance hotbed. He thought it quite amusing.

This was the third bombing. The other two had been directed at rather insignificant targets: disrupting the S-train network; destroying a warehouse of special guard supplies (never revealed what exactly). There were plenty of jokes about what supplies. Neither of these attacks resulted in loss of life. So, hitting a prestigious site like the College and taking life represented a step up in level. Tania believed it to be an important development.

Other targets included computer networks: knocking them off line; introducing viruses; hacking into them and generally causing a considerable amount of nuisance, only. There were rumours, just that, of more serious sabotage in important authority installations and factories. Some reckoned that people had been detained, others rounded up later, some killed or committed suicide.

It was not clear that there was any overall coordination in the Resistance activity nationally (now where had Woodend seen this before?). But Tania agreed with Alexis that there appeared more of a pattern here in the Midlands. But what was the Resistance after? Tania wondered. Again, and again she pulled the conversation back to the question. The Resistance members were obviously technically sound. But did that mean that they were from the science and technology community? If so, it seemed strange that the people who

had benefited most in the aftermath of the 'trouble' were stirring it up. What did they have to gain? Perhaps it was a few mavericks.

Woodend agreed that those who had survived the period of carnage and terror that was the 'trouble' were generally better off. Even people in the Zone were quick to forget those who had died, he had noticed. They had a disagreement at this point about just how many people had died. Paul found Tania unable to accept what had happened, the scale of loss of life and damage caused by the actions of the authorities. He did not push the point. Alexis noticed that this was the only time Woodend got emotional, almost. She was more in line with him when they tackled the worldwide effects of the orchestrated time of unrest. Truth was, she knew more than he did, with exchanges between language experts proving informative.

There had been a big investment in science and technology using the greater resources now available. The result was a considerable leap in the living standards of everyone, even the survivors of the Zone. People, in general, had a lot more time and 'luxuries' available to them. True, there was little in the way of democracy available now, and there were guards everywhere. Passes were required to go everywhere; security was in your face. But then, crime levels had dropped off the scales, and people soon stopped wondering what had happened to 'proven' criminals. Everybody knew if you kept your nose clean, and your nose out, well, it was a good life.

So why the Resistance?

Woodend settled for the old chestnut. Freedom. Tania and Alexis thought they were quite free. Woodend suggested that some people wanted more control over their lives.

More freedom, less oppression. They did not feel oppressed they said. As he ushered them out of his apartment, Paul told them to listen to an old Zonie, yes, they were.

Later as Paul was climbing the stairs to the Astroscience section in the library, across the way in the admin block a security meeting was about to get underway.

The Director was not a happy man. Roland thought, it was unlikely that a curtailed holiday was the reason. The Director had been loath to take a break in the first place. Nor was it likely to be the extra attention that the College would now receive. He could live with that. Although it would be left to Roland to give the College's official response to the controlled media. That would be later today. No, it was the loss of life that had upset him. The Director was a compassionate man. He liked to look after people, witness his treatment of that Woodend character. Compassionate and concerned he maybe, but a wily operator in the corridors of power he was, too. Roland knew he was keenly aware of all the intricacies of campus politics, and quite willing to be manipulative when he had to be. As a result, the College ran well and produced the results that were demanded at the highest level. The Director had the ear of the mighty, and their trust, also. Roland thought he knew his boss well. Even if he was not particularly keen on the dead students, he would not have wished them to come to this end.

They were sat around a large circular wooden table in the Director's top floor office. Roland, the Director, the chief of security and his aide. On a separate table, to one side, a secretary sat ready to make notes. No minutes, as such, would be taken. The chief would be unlikely to receive a copy of the final report that would be sent to the Director's masters. Roland would see it; he would write it. When the Director ok'd it, then down the highest security link it would pass.

"Well, chief, I wonder would you give your report, please." The Director started the meeting.

The chief cleared his throat and began his report.

"At 20.02 the device went off. It was a small amount of semtex placed inside one of the refuse bins that line one of the outside walls of the student block, B24. The effect of the explosion was to blow in that wall, and thus compromise the structural integrity of the block, resulting in the rooms on the first floor partially falling in. You will recall Director, that these blocks have a large communal sitting stroke eating area that takes up the best part of the ground floor and is open up to the roof."

The Director nodded. Roland nodded too.

"The blast caught the occupants at dinner time. Apparently, they were famous for trying to get as many of themselves to sit down for dinner at the same time. The two initial casualties died instantly, being immediately behind the outside wall. Luckily, they were the only ones in that area at the time otherwise we would be looking at more deaths. However, a fire developed in the kitchen part, obviously dinner was being prepared. This spread rapidly through the debris and caught some of them trapped in the rubble."

The chief paused at this point and looked at the Director.

"Although guards got to the scene quickly, there appeared to be a delay on the fire services arrival. Two more have since died in the College hospital from their injuries, including burns."

The Director held his hand up.

"Look into it please, Roland," he said to his assistant. "Carry on please, chief."

"To date we have four deaths, eight injured and two escaped unscathed. The injuries include broken bones, crushed skulls, some severe lacerations, burns and smoke inhalation problems. Of those on the injury list two are critical, one is unlikely to survive."

The chief paused for a drink of water.

"The student files are on your screens now," he continued. Small monitors were set into the table top. "Do you want time to read them, Director?"

"No, carry on, chief," he answered, "we can scan them as you go on."

The next part dealt with the immediate aftermath of the blast. The fire was brought under control in fifteen minutes. The casualties and injured were all removed by twenty. The campus had been sealed off ten minutes after the blast. Nobody had been allowed in, or out, except the chief, who had arrived from home half an hour after the blast, and two officers from the Research Complex, who followed the chief in through the West entrance. The chief's aide had got to the scene only five minutes after the blast; he lived on the campus. He had coordinated the immediate response to the explosion.

A list of the comings and goings for the campus, for that day, was supplied, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. The explosive experts reported a primitive timing device, designed to cause the device to go off about one hour after it had been deposited in the rubbish bin. No one, who had been on campus up to several hours before the explosion had been allowed to leave. Extra guards had been drafted in to patrol the surrounding countryside to prevent anyone escaping that way.

"Could someone have escaped cross country before, or at the time of the explosion?" the Director asked.

"Yes, Director," the chief grimly replied. "But we have had patrols scouring the area up to twenty miles around, including swifts. We have received reports from every guard post in the Midlands. Of course, all the data has not been analysed yet, but preliminary findings do suggest the perpetrator is a campus person, and that they are still on the campus."

The chief paused to let that sink in.

"We have begun to systematically test everybody on campus, and as a precaution, everyone who has been on campus during the last week."

"How long will that take?" the Director asked.

"All the campus people should be done by the end of tomorrow. The others by the end of today."

The Director thought for a while.

"It is possible to mask, or remove the tell-tale chemicals, you say?" he asked the chief.

"Yes, if you have the know-how, and of course access to the right chemicals or facilities."

The chief responded.

"How many people fall into that category here on campus?"

"A rough estimate puts the figure at five hundred, sir." The chief gave the Director a wry kind of smile. "My aide is dealing with these people himself."

The Director considered the aide and raised his eyebrow at him.

"Sir, we will have tested all these people by the end of the day," he assured the Director.

"But it would be safe to assume that our culprit has already cleansed himself, yes?" the Director asked aloud.

The chief had anticipated this and was ready with his reply.

"Yes, sir. Of course, if we ran them through the sensor pads." He stopped; the Director was nodding.

"Do it chief, soon as possible." He said. "My authorisation. No exceptions. Take no nonsense from anyone. I want people to realise how serious this business is."

The chief could hardly contain his pleasure. This was what he wanted, no pussy footing around. Now they would get some results.

"Who alerted our friends in the RC chief?" the Director was moving on.

"No proof, but I suspect one of my officers in the East guardhouse," he replied. "A scrambled transmission was made by a portable sender near the guardhouse, ten minutes after the blast. Knowledge, that the RC people had, points to one particular officer."

"Any action chief?" the Director inquired.

"I don't think so. It has helped to confirm our suspicions."

The Director thought again.

"Could someone have come from the RC and done this?"

"It's possible. But they would have to have got out, and back in, without anyone noticing in the RC. That would be some accomplishment."

"Our friends, a help or hindrance, chief?"

"Neither, really. Just keeping an eye on things. Making sure we are doing things properly. They are back today. I've given them an office and direct access to all our information."

Nobody at the table needed reminding that the College had no jurisdiction over the RC, or its people. They, however, could interfere in College affairs. They did, too, often just because they could.

"Have you tested them, chief?" the Director asked with a wicked smile on his face.

"Not yet, sir," he laughed back. The mood lightened in the meeting. Even the secretary risked a smile. Everyone had a sip of water together.

"Let's turn to the victims, shall we," the director brought them back. He saw some concern on the chief's face. "I realise that we have the offspring of some pretty powerful people here. I will, of course, keep them off your back chief. I will deal with them personally. Have no worries on that front."

"I appreciate that, Director," a look of relief passed over the chief's face. That was his main worry out of the way. Dealing with these students had been difficult enough when they were alive. He was not looking forward to coping with their parents after their deaths.

"I am quite aware of the reputations of the students from B24," the Director continued. "They will have had few, real friends on campus. But would their insufferable superior behaviour have been bad enough for someone to do this to them?"

He did not stop for an answer from anyone.

"I doubt it, somehow. It would be a big risk and there could be a backlash that would affect everyone." He looked at the chief expectantly.

"I agree. I think that this is the start of that period of unrest we were promised by recent intelligence."

"You are convinced it is Resistance activity then."

"Yes."

"Have our known suspects been tested?"

"Yes, and they have tested negatively."

"So why the College and why B24?"

"Well, the College represents a step up in target importance. Sooner or later, despite any news blackouts, a lot of people would know about it. It represents a flexing of their capability, I think. If they could get away with this, then perhaps next time, a step up again, who knows? B24 is a soft target really. They obviously know that most people on campus

would not miss the students from B24. But the shock on campus is palpable, nevertheless. There will be widespread unease at this strike. Witness reactions this morning."

Heads nodded around the table.

"But I think the real point of this action," the chief carried on. All attention was focused on him. "Is a strike at the parents of these students. After all, they are members of our ruling elite." He was acutely aware of the care needed in his choice of words here. "They are unable to strike directly at these individuals, perhaps, yet. So, why not hit the next generation and hurt the present one at the same time. Of course, security will be stepped up from now on. From their point of view, this has been a very successful action I would think."

The Director considered this for a while.

"I tend to agree, chief," he finally said. "I think we will be in for a few more actions yet. So, I endorse your proposed new security measures. Shake the place up a bit chief. It will do us no harm and you might shake something useful loose. I look forward to some squealing," he smiled.

The meeting was ending.

"What about my friend, Woodend?" the Director asked finally. No one in the room missed the significance of his choice of words.

"Clean as a whistle, sir," the chief replied. "No suspicion of any involvement. He did not seem at all put out by it all and behaved well throughout."

"Well, I doubt if anyone else on campus has experienced and seen what he has seen. Except yourself." He turned to Roland. Roland Agen remained expressionless under their gaze. "A little bombing is unlikely to ruffle him, I would say."

Looking back at his chief of security, "he has had no contact with any of our suspects?"

"None at all, yet, sir. They may well be as suspicious of him as we are and are watching to see what he does."

"Anything to report from your end?" Director to Roland.

"Nothing of note," Roland replied. "He has lived in the library so far. He appears to be studying the entire Astroscience section. One of my agents has made friends with him but reports nothing untoward. A certain naivety about affairs outside the Zone, that's all. He is encountering low levels of hostility, but he's coping fine."

"I want a close eye kept on him," the Director said to all of them present. "Have no doubt that he is a capable man. Whatever his involvement in that Zone affair, he was able to get through the interrogation. There is much more to him than even I thought. I want him on our side, if any. He could be useful, very useful to the Resistance."

The meeting broke up. The chief and his aide left. Roland was about to leave with the secretary. He would work on the official report immediately.

"Roland, arrange a meeting with Woodend for me."

"How soon?"

"At the end of the week." He held Roland's eyes. "Tell him yourself."

Roland could not prevent a frown. Running errands again.

"I value your impressions of him." Roland nodded at him then left.

Chapter 7

Meanwhile in the library Paul went about his business. He was working his way through some of the computer banks. The reaction to his presence was mixed. Most of the people who had been working there last night were back today. Some of them openly acknowledged him, for the first time. Others scowled at him with even more feeling than before. Paul ignored them, after making a point of eyeballing them out. Not one of them could hold his gaze for long.

When he had first entered the section, the librarian in charge had been quite taken aback.

"Surprised to see me?" Paul beat him to it.

"Well, yes," he had recovered quickly, "we thought that, well after last night, when you were led away, well...er..." He was struggling under Paul's boring look.

"Hasn't word gone out that I was released, uncharged, not guilty." Paul helped him.

"Well, yes," he replied again.

"But you thought I would lie low, or something," it was not a question.

"Well, yes," came the response again.

"Obviously, with my recent history, it is understandable that I would be tested," Paul went on. "But I am in the clear, I have nothing to hide. I hear that they tested everybody left in the library, afterwards."

"Yes, they did," his voice gained an indignant edge. Paul had touched a raw nerve, as he had hoped.

"Damn cheek, I mean as if anyone here could be a bomber," he burst out. "Kept us here till near midnight, some of us. There will be some complaints I'll tell you."

"Will that do any good?" Paul asked him. "Really?"

The librarian looked back at Paul and thought for an instant.

"No, I don't suppose it will." The tension went out of his body.

"Well, I had a late night also, but I want to put some useful hours in today if I can," Paul said, and started to walk off.

"There'll be some changes around here," the librarian called after him. "More checks, more security, you'll have to have your pass on you all the time."

"I'm used to it, I'm afraid," Paul called back.

I bet you are, the librarian thought to himself as he watched Woodend go around the corner. Bloody zonie.

As Paul approached the cubicle he normally used, the section worker who had smiled at him last night came out of the computer area. She beamed a real smile at Paul.

"Good to see you back today, ahh..." She was uncertain how to address him.

"Thank you," Paul said trying to put as much warmth and appreciation into his voice as he could. He smiled back at her.

"I would be really grateful if you called me Paul." She smiled again.

"Mind you, I am used to 'Woodend' if you prefer." She had a little laugh then.

"Can I help you in anyway today, Paul?" she asked him.

"What can I call you?"

"Julie."

"Ok Julie, I would like to look at the spectra information, please. Can you feed it through to my cubicle?"

"Number thirteen," she said, "coming up." She knew where he liked to work.

Paul sat down, logged on and waited for the data to appear on the screen. Pretty girl.

Nice figure. Nice hair. What a change it was to meet someone helpful and, well, nice.

Steady on, she's young enough to be your daughter.

I thought you were being a bit quiet.

We are never far away.

That's for certain. She is nice, yes?

She appears most genuine; she is no danger. Although what she might think if she could see the images in your mind now, I, We, don't know!

Just a little fantasy. Imagination you know.

It was suppressing the physical response to his day dream.

Shall we project your thoughts into her consciousness?

Paul was startled. This was new.

You can do that?

We can do it with one of your undeveloped brain systems. I, We, think we know how to do it now.

You had better not. I don't want to put the girl off. She might prove to be our only friend in the library.

Yes, you are right. But we would like to test it.

Well what sort of range has it got? Paul was thinking.

What a good idea. It had seen his intention. *Here goes.*

Paul felt a slight tightening feeling behind the eyes.

At his desk the librarian sat bolt upright and gave a strangled cry.

He quickly made reassuring signs to those near him.

What a terrible thought he had just had. A 'daymare'.

Paul chuckled to himself. There was someone who would be worried the next time he had to show his pass.

The prokaryote was even more pleased. They had another weapon to help them. Now, the reverse process was proving more elusive. But it would keep tinkering away in this fascinating maze.

During the next few hours as Paul busily scanned his monitor, they were aware of some discussions taking place in the section. It was plain that some people seemed to think that Woodend was a bad influence on the campus. Ok he had nothing to do with the bombing, it seemed. But his sheer presence was an encouragement to those who wanted to start trouble.

Why did he have to come here? He worked here.

Well couldn't he work somewhere else. The Director had personally vouched for him.

What does that old goat know about anything? Steady on now.

Well we never had a problem before. Now he arrives and suddenly we got bombs going off all over the place.

One bomb.

Five dead. Four. No, one more has gone.

Guards are all jumpy and uppity. You're going to need a pass, soon, to go for a piss.

Keep your voice down.

Why? I don't care if he hears. I'd like to...

It's not him I'm worried about. You don't want to attract undue attention.

From who? They wouldn't dare. Fancy testing us all. This isn't the Zone you know!

But it could be. What would stop it? Can you stop it?

Exasperated grumbling. Going off in the distance.

They had finished the spectra absorption.

Let's take a break.

That's a good idea. I'm surprised, we've only been at it for a few hours.

It is time to face something.

Oh, expecting some bother?

Probably. Let's see what happens.

Paul Woodend gestured to Julie that he was taking a break. He headed for the coffee bar.

As he descended the stairs, he noticed a young man following him. Walking through the main concourse another one rose out of a chair and preceded him out of the library main doors. As this second one went down the stairs that led to the coffee bar, he turned to make sure Woodend was going the same way. Paul obliged.

It had put him on full alert. I, We, detect three persons. Paul checked the full-length glass windows as he went down the stairs. In the reflection he could see only one person behind him. As the one ahead of him reached the bottom of the stairs, the third one emerged from the coffee bar. This was the leader, it told him.

Roland Agen had finished the report. He ran it by the Director who quickly gave it his blessing. The secretary then took it to tidy it up, and then to send it down the security cable. Then Roland went to the specially built, small studio on the ground floor of the admin block. He quite professionally cut his interview, only three takes. That would go out

on the campus channel almost immediately. Eventually it would make the nationwide channel, probably sometime tomorrow, he thought. There was now another thing to do and then he could relax. From the monitor room he found that Woodend was in the library, again. He headed that way.

As Roland approached the ground floor entrance, he could see Woodend coming down the stairs. Heading for the coffee bar, no doubt. He was momentarily distracted by the guards at the doors. He acknowledged them, and the doors opened. An interesting sight met him.

Two students were barring Woodend's progress. He had stopped two steps up. Another student was behind Woodend, obviously part of the same team. Roland was too far away to hear clearly what was being said. He decided to stop and see how this scene would develop.

One of the two that faced Woodend was pointing, stabbing his finger towards him and trying to look menacing. Woodend was shrugging and saying little. Other people were beginning to take an interest. Woodend put his hands out in front of him, palms out, as if in a peaceful gesture. Then suddenly he pulled one arm back. His elbow connected with the student behind him. Somewhere in the groin area. He crumpled up on the stairs in agony. The two in front, stepped back a pace in surprise. The pointing one shouted and made a move at Woodend, who easily evaded it. The student slipped past Woodend and fell on the stairs. Woodend now faced the other one. The last student went to strike Woodend with his fist. Woodend stood his ground and caught his hand. With surprise the student lashed out with his other fist. Again, Woodend caught his hand. He held the student's hands for a second or two then he pushed him back across the floor. He fell on his backside.

Woodend then moved very fast to avoid the renewed attentions of the pointing student. They stood facing each other. The student lunged at Woodend repeatedly. But he missed each time, with Woodend dodging his assaults easily. But with deceptive speed, Roland noticed. Woodend said a few things to his attacker that served only to spur him on. Then suddenly, Woodend grabbed his hand, pulled his arm to him, and smashed it down across his raised thigh. There was an audible crack, and the student screamed out as he sank to his knees.

Someone screamed inside the coffee bar. The guards rushed up but stopped at a command from Roland. He had reached Woodend now. He looked about him. The student on the stairs had moved little and was still clutching himself bent double. The other one had not moved off his backside. It had not quite worked out as he thought it would. Roland smiled at his pathetic look. The pointer looked up at Roland and growled.

"The bastard attacked us. The bastard attacked us."

To his great surprise, Roland laughed out loud.

"From what I saw of it, you got your just desserts. You are lucky I am not having you taken away." Then turning to the waiting guards.

"Have them taken to the hospital, those that need it. Send the others home." He watched the guards lead the three of them outside.

"Well, Paul Woodend," he said. Paul had not moved. "I see you are making friends easily." There was a sly smile on his face.

Paul smiled back but said nothing.

Roland considered the coffee bar; every eye was on them.

"Shall we give the tongues something more to wag about," he motioned towards the coffee bar. "I assume you were taking a break from your studies?"

"Yes, I was." Paul followed Roland into the room.

Soon they were sat at a table, steaming drinks and large sandwiches in front of them. No one tried to sit by them. But many tried to listen to their conversation. Many wondered why the Director's assistant was with this man again.

"You were quite light on your feet just then," Roland began.

"For a white-haired man in his forties and filling out a bit?" Paul offered.

"You look fit and healthy for your age; the hair does not distract me." Roland sipped his coffee.

"Well they were hardly dangerous opposition, were they?" Paul asked. "Just a few hotheads with something to prove."

"You have met more serious foes in the Zone, no doubt," Roland said.

"More during the 'trouble' actually," Paul responded.

"Yes, we all found the 'trouble', how can I put it?" Roland struggled for the word as memories flooded into his mind. "Interesting."

"Not the word I would have picked," Paul said.

They looked at each other. Paul knew that the presence of his helper improved his chances in every situation. It was still fascinated with Roland Agen for some reason. It had sensed the uncertainty in his would-be assailants. It had Paul's reflexes controlled well enough to prevent harm coming to him. Roland liked a person who could take care of themselves. Also, he appreciated that Woodend had not used more force than was necessary. He liked people who were in control. He had seen too many who had not got

the self-control. He had dealt with some of them himself in the past. He thought, it was time he had a workout. He made a mental note to book a session with the trainer.

"Were you looking for me?" Paul asked. "Or, did you happen to be passing?"

"The Director sends me with a message for you," Roland replied.

"I am honoured by the importance of his messenger," Paul said sincerely.

"You should be Woodend. I am unaccustomed to doing this kind of thing. The Director thinks a lot of you."

"Hard to see why, don't you think?" Paul asked him.

Roland smiled at Woodend.

"You do have a high interest value, Woodend."

It was happy Paul felt. What are you up to with him?

He could be a very useful man.

Useful for what?

Useful for my purpose. What is the message?

"What exactly does my friend the Director want?" he inquired.

"You have a meeting with him, noon, Thursday." Roland got up to leave. "You will not be late."

"As if."

"See you around Woodend."

Paul watched him go. As did half the coffee bar.

The prokaryote was quite happy Paul could feel. It was looking forward to the meeting.

Bet you, it's just about the new course.

"Is it safe to sit down?" it was Julie.

"It is now, I think," Paul winked back.

"I got you another drink," she sat down next to him, "hope that's alright?"

"Lovely, thanks." Bless her, she was an attractive young woman.

Chapter 8

The next few days passed quickly by. Paul spent Sunday with his new-found friends. He was expecting to have a quiet Sunday; it did not happen. At midday Alexis came calling. Did he fancy watching the match somewhere different? Half an hour later he was on the S-train heading down the line. They were booked in for lunch at one of the country pubs in a village, twenty miles away. There were ten of them including Jon and Tania: most of the younger element from the apartblock.

Paul found the experience like stepping back in time. Country village, country pub, straight out of the last century. Very 1900's-ish. The meal was superb, Paul had rabbit, much to the disgust of some of the women in the group. After lunch conversation meandered around a few topics. Paul made few contributions. As soon as they could, Alexis and Paul joined the crowd in the vidscreen lounge to watch the match. It was a real 'corker' of a game. Goals all over the place. Alexis was overjoyed to see his side run out winners. When the game was over, they hung around the pub a little longer. Paul and Alexis had managed a few drinks by then and were in heavy conversation with the locals. Eventually they caught the S-train back to the College.

At the apartblock they split up. Alexis, Paul and one of the girls decided to see the day out in one of the campus bars. Tania, after a hurried chat with Jon, joined them. They were late

back and pleasantly drunk. To Paul's relief Alexis went straight to his apartment. The day was over. As Paul got into bed it reminded him that they were due back in the library, the next day. It was only the second communication with him that day. Unusual.

Monday and Tuesday, Paul continued with his library routine. He managed to spend his breaks with Julie. They sat and chatted in the coffee bar or went to the refectory for something more substantial. She had been brought up in the Zone. A nearby community to the one Paul had, until recently, lived in. Her parents had applied for a move to a new industrial park area, fifty miles away. They had secured their escape and took their teenage family with them. She had left a lot of friends behind. Friends she was unlikely to see again. Although upset with her folks, she realised that there were few opportunities in the Zone. She had worked towards her librarian qualifications and was elated when she landed this prestigious job in the College library. She would complete her training on the job. Along with other young College workers she lived in one of the student blocks.

Paul did not, for one minute, entertain the thought that this young lady fancied him in any way. He did fancy her however, and he was glad for the thing's control. It had prevented any embarrassing moments. Being pushed together in a packed lift had been a close one. No, she had things in common with Paul and some similar experiences to share. He felt he was like an older brother who had returned home after a long absence. She felt sorry for him, no doubt. Especially when she heard the comments of those who had never struggled with life in the Zone. Their friendship gained her a certain notoriety. A knock-on effect which she was rather pleased about, in fact. Also, she was aware now of some attention from the young men. Attention she had not received before.

Paul had refused to accompany her back to the student block for tea. He preferred to keep their relationship one of friendly meetings in the campus buildings. Pleasant chats to pass the time of day. Occasionally they were joined by some of her friends. Some of her friends were equally attractive.

By Wednesday lunchtime, Paul had completed the trawl through the Astroscience section.

We are ready for the meeting with the Director tomorrow.

What's the plan then? Paul asked.

We must see what he has to say first. Paul sensed that it was looking forward to this meeting.

But it is apparent to us that if any progress is to be made then the next phase must involve a move into the Research Complex. Be on the lookout for a way in that direction.

It is not going to be easy.

Easy or not, I have established that our way forward lies there. Nothing is happening in the College. But it does look like something useful is happening over there.

Paul found himself gazing at the wooded ridge in the near distance.

Paul had a feeling of unease and doubt.

Do not worry. We will find a way.

Paul nodded internally.

The last piece of information they had consumed was the list of all the scientific and technical people working in the College and the RC. It gave their qualifications, history and present research areas. Paul doubted that the list was complete. There was too much secrecy involved with the RC. Paul went for his lunch. He was soon joined by Julie. He explained that his work in the astrospace section was finished, for the time being. She

knew of his meeting with the Director and made him promise to meet her on Friday. He could tell her what had transpired then.

After lunch she returned to her work. Paul was taken for a walk. He headed for the playing fields. Wednesday afternoon was traditionally sports time and despite it being vacation time, there was a game on. It was a friendly between some students and some of the academic staff and a reasonable crowd of about fifty were enjoying the action. Paul moved around the pitch during the first half. At half time he was on the side facing the campus. He let the second half begin before he walked off away from the direction of the campus. It was January, but there had been a dry spell. The ground was firm underfoot and Paul was wearing his trusted boots. They had served him so well in the Zone. He followed a path that led towards the east road. Occasionally, he stopped and looked back, especially when there was a shout from the match. As he looked back, he tried to see if his wandering had attracted any attention from the campus. He did not know the range of the monitors, or even, if any were directed this way. There appeared to be no change. It felt nothing either.

Ten minutes later Paul had reached the east road. The path followed the road away from the campus. Paul carried on. He met nobody except various animals disturbed by his progress. A few groundcars and cargo carriers went by, on the road. Paul ignored them. Paul looked ahead and saw the path veer away from the road. Across the road Paul saw another path that took the route he wanted. He waited till an approaching cargo carrier passed by on its way to the campus. Then he calmly crossed the road and without a look in either direction clambered over the fence and then he joined the path. It led away from the road, and in a broad curved sweep turned towards the north. There lay the wooded ridge.

Is this wise?

Can it do much harm?

We probably will be picked up before we get there.

Perhaps. But a look at the place is required.

They reached the edge of the ridge without incident. It stopped Paul from looking over his shoulder every ten paces or so. They kept on the path for a short while as it skirted the grassy bottom. This part of the ridge was about a mile away from the part Paul had looked at from the northern side of the campus. He stopped and took in his surroundings. The east road entrance and the guard house were out of sight. He was also not visible from the road itself. He looked skywards. Nothing there, that he could see. Paul expected to see a swift hovering there. It was chilly, but his heavy coat was doing its job. However, as Paul moved up the slope and into the bushes he wondered if it might become a hindrance.

He needn't have worried. Once he had passed inside the first line of bushes, he found plenty of room to move in between the trees and the shrubs. Alright, he had to duck and dodge a bit, but he was able to move quite freely. Through the trees and undergrowth, he could see a fence. It was high, about twenty feet, or six to seven metres. Barbed wire on the top and at the bottom on this side. But not on the inside. Beyond the fence there was no growth, except for grass that seemed to be kept cut back. Paul walked alongside the fence for some distance before he found a suitable spot to get closer. It wanted to get as good a view as possible. But to remain hidden from any eyes who were trained on this section.

From their vantage point they surveyed the Research Complex.

The land fell away with a sharper incline the other side of the fence. About a hundred metres away the slope levelled out. There then extended a plain for as far as they could

see. It must have been many miles by many miles square. The whole area gave the impression of being artificially flattened, scooped out really, leaving this unnatural vast amphitheatre appearance. Presumably, gently sloping walls of grassland surrounded every side of the bowl.

On the RC plain, a small town was laid out. Lights were on in many of the buildings. Tall street lights helped them to mark out the road layout. The buildings came in a wide range of sizes and height. But unlike the College all the structures shared a common design. Certain parts had the appearance of barracks. They spent some time studying the huge area as best they could. But always their attention was drawn back to a structure just visible in the distance. It had to be big, very tall, for them to be able to make it out from this far away. It was impossible to tell if there were many other buildings near it. A giant upright rectangular monolith, dark against the background. There were no lights on it.

The thing was intrigued by this.

Is that what we think it is? It was obviously excited.

If that is what I think it might be? Well it would explain. He thought.

It was not communicating with him.

Paul tensed and strained to sense what had distracted the thing.

Something is coming.

Where?

Above.

The Research Complex had only one road entrance. Everyone and every vehicle had to pass through there. The perimeter was fenced entirely. At various points along it, there were small guard posts, set back from the fence. Usually only two guards filled these lookouts, doing four-hour shifts. Their chief surveillance tools were links to sophisticated sound equipment and infrared tracking cameras.

Within the Complex area there were many small guardhouses and checkpoints. Some of the more important and secret research blocks had extra security, again, before you could get inside them. Everyone who worked in the RC, no matter what they did, had their physical and physiological characteristics stored in the main security computer database. Courtesy of the sensor pads of course. Regular patrols moved beside the perimeter and throughout the whole RC plain. The extent of the checking, cross-checking, pass showing was wearing to put it mildly. However, the workers were wise not to moan. Not openly.

Those involved in some of the nastier research projects did not complain. Their work was now being actively promoted and encouraged, but none the less it was not for general discussion. One day some unfortunate souls would end up consuming the product. This did not necessarily mean eating.

In one of the guard posts close to Paul's position, the two guards were trying to decide. They had listened to the sound of a large animal moving the other side of the fence. It had got slowly closer to their position. Now it had stopped for about ten minutes. No sound. No movement. If that was not suspicious enough, it had not sounded like any animal they were used too. Experience had taught them how certain animals moved. This included large deer which had become quite numerous in this area in recent years. But the pattern of these movements did not match. Too regular, and now the long pause. They had scanned the area using the infrared camera. It had picked up the usual small animal signatures. But there also appeared to be something large in amongst the undergrowth to the right of their position. It was not clear what though. The shape was possibly that of a person, unnaturally blurred at the edges

Should they alert the Captain? What tipped the balance was the fact that they were due to be relieved in half an hour. It would not do to have an unresolved situation.

They passed on their concerns. A swift was mobilised. A patrol was despatched to come around the other side of the fence and investigate. Truth was, the guards in the patrol were hoping for the chance to knock off one of those large deer. Very tasty it would be in their guardhouse.

The swift dropped out of the sky right above Paul's position. It hovered about ten metres from the tree tops. They had only seen it approaching at the end of its dive. Paul was familiar with the machines from his time in the Zone. The thing had been made aware of them too. It was fair to say that it was impressed by this human machine.

Named after the bird that it resembled in shape. It was restricted in range but had tremendous manoeuvrability. Small size gave room for only one occupant. State of the art technology was crammed into its armaments and surveillance systems. It had advanced communications equipment with direct access to the security computer. All this, within a shell made of the latest wonder materials with the most compact and steerable jet engine yet designed. This, along with the ability to alter the position of its wings, allowed it to rise and descend virtually vertically. Dropping on its unsuspecting victims with very little noise. It had a frightening rate of acceleration and deceleration, in any direction.

We have been discovered.

Really? Well I never.

Paul sensed mirth, or the closest feeling to it, that the thing could exude. They were moving away from the fence.

Is this wise?

Do we have any choice?

Above them the swift kept pace. Paul soon emerged through the thickets and stopped to look up at the menacing machine that now hovered only feet above his head.

No danger?

No danger. You are being checked out.

"Do not move." A voice boomed out of the swift. "A patrol will reach you in a few minutes."

The operator of the swift had taken an electronic photo of Paul and flashed it to the command centre. It had then patched into the security system and shortly been sent the name of this person now stood below him. It had also been given an estimate of the potential risk from this Woodend. In response it eased itself a little higher in the air.

Paul Woodend watched the patrol approach in their groundcar. He was careful not to do anything to alarm them. They would not hesitate to shoot and kill him, if that was their orders on this occasion. The groundcar came to a halt but stayed in operation mode poised a foot off the ground. Two guards got out and motioned Paul to come to the back of the groundcar.

"Put your hands on the pads," one said and held a portable sensor pad in front of him.

Different, Paul thought, as he did as he was told.

"What is your name?" the guard asked.

Paul felt the familiar grip of the special plastic surface.

"Paul Woodend," he replied.

The guard moved the pads away and pressed some controls on his remote.

Paul was ushered away, a few steps.

He heard the following brief exchange.

"Identity confirmed."

"Action?"

"Take him to the east entrance of the College and hand over to our people. Return to fence area and sweep for anything out of the ordinary. Report as soon as sweep complete."

It was not long before Paul found himself outside the east gate guardhouse again. He was facing the two RC officers sent to observe the bomb investigation. It was clear that they were not going inside the station.

"Did you take a wrong turn, out there, Woodend?" one of them would do all the asking, the other never took his eyes off Paul.

"No," Paul answered.

"Did you know where you were, Woodend?"

"Yes."

"Like to tell us what you were doing up there?"

"I was curious. I wanted to see what the RC area looked like."

"And what are your first impressions?" he could not hide his own interest.

"Big. Big, impressive," Paul appeared to struggle for his words. "Sinister and exciting at the same time. Pretty boring buildings though."

At this moment the campus chief of security arrived along with his aide. The asker's attention was drawn to his silent colleague. He was receiving information in his earpiece. There followed a discussion. The aide left the three of them to it and took Woodend aside.

"What are you playing at?" he tried to be concerned and put a conspiratorial tone into his voice.

Woodend looked questioningly back at him.

"Didn't you know they would find you up there?"

"I've got nothing to hide," Paul shrugged. "I just wanted to see the RC area."

"Why? most campus people want to stay away from it."

Paul fixed him with one of his piercing looks. "But that's the point you see. You don't think I want to stay on the campus forever, working in the College. Do you?"

The aide frowned.

"No," Woodend continued, "the action is over there. That's where I want to work. If I can."

The aide walked to the others, shaking his head. He relayed his talk with Woodend. They all turned to look at Woodend. Woodend smiled back at them. The asker gave a laugh and made a dismissive gesture towards Woodend.

"Go home, Woodend," the aide called.

Woodend turned to go. Went several paces then turned back.

"Any chance of a visit to the RC area?" the question was directed at the asker.

He laughed out loud. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he said, "if you can get the Director to ok it, I'll gladly show you round."

"I'm meeting him tomorrow," Paul came back, "I'll see what I can do."

The four of them watched Woodend head off. Not one of them doubted at that instant that Woodend would manage it. He would not fail to get permission. They did not know why. They did not talk about it.

Chapter 9

Thursday morning arrived, and Paul rose late. He pressed the release on the window screens. The long-awaited rain had arrived. It was heavy and looked set for the day. Luckily, he had a little food in. Some bread, milk, fruit, vegetables, that sort of thing. It would save him an extra drenching going for his breakfast. He spent some time just staring out the window. The thing wanted him to be properly focused today. It would not let him be anything but focused. It ran a few projected scenarios in his mind. How it might go today.

After breakfast, he sat facing the vidscreen and passed the time watching the various channels. Around eleven thirty Alexis took a chance and called round. He had only just got up. A heavy night with some friends from engineering. Paul reminded him of his important meeting with the Director. Alexis was not going to do anything constructive today, that much was obvious, and Paul left him with the vidscreen control, settled in his seat.

"Leave me some beer," he told him as he left the apartment. "I might need it when I get back."

Alexis grunted.

In the lift he considered whether he was sick of seeing Alexis. The person who monitored his room that is. The one who kept an eye on him through the hidden camera in the

vidscreen. He must wonder if Alexis lived there himself. Paul wondered if they kept a count of how many times, he picked his nose, or scratched his balls?

He walked into the admin block at five to twelve. Soon he was hanging his wet coat up in Roland Agen's office.

"I need to frisk you, Woodend," Roland said, almost apologetically.

Paul raised his eyebrows but did not try to obstruct him. Then he was in the lift and soon emerged on the top floor. The Director's secretary met him and led him straight into his old friend's impressive office. Paul had been here a couple of times before. The Director rose from his desk to greet him.

"Paul, welcome. Come and sit down here." He indicated some easy seats with a low table between them.

"Thank you, Director," Paul said smiling back mischievously.

"You can cut that crap out," the Director scolded him. "You are not too wet, I hope? it is a miserable day."

"I'm fine, old friend," Paul said warmly. "My coat took the brunt of it."

"Fancy some lunch? I usually have a bite to eat at this time."

"That sounds good," Paul answered.

The Director turned to his secretary, "bring it in now, please."

Soon they were tucking in to a light buffet lunch. The Director looked closely at his erstwhile teaching colleague.

"You do look well."

"I feel very well, actually."

"Settling in?"

"I'm making a few friends. But it's not too easy."

"Takes time you know. Have you got that Zone business out of your system yet?"

"I still miss it. I had a lot of friends there. "

"You can never go back, Paul." Paul nodded.

"I do hope you have left all of that business back there."

It was not a question. Paul said nothing. They looked at each other.

Remember! Trust no one.

The thing was with him.

"Are you ready to take that Space science course seriously? I hear you have been doing a lot of work in the library."

"Definitely. What do you want me to do? I will still have my mechanics course, won't I?"

"Yes. You will have an increased teaching commitment, and of course, an increase in pay to match."

Paul could hardly spend his money now.

You will need it when I, We, have gone.

"Paul, I want you to go and see Professor Smitdt, right after we have finished. He is expecting you. Thrash out between you, how the course will run."

Smitdt? It ran his details in Paul's mind for him. Got him, Paul thought, and a face flashed in his mind's eye.

"He is a good man, try to get on with him."

"I'm sure we'll work well together," Paul sounded very positive. The Director looked him over again. Perhaps, he had come to terms with his circumstances. As if he could read his thoughts Paul went on.

"I want to make a go of my life outside the Zone. I have seen enough trouble to last a lifetime."

The Director believed him.

"You will find Professor Smitdt in room J190 in the School of Astrophysics, it is on the second floor."

They spent some time then talking about miscellaneous things: some old memories; a little campus gossip, that the Director thought it was useful for Paul to know. Mainly to do with the Astrophysics department, seeing as he was about to spend some time working there. Finally.

"Is there anything I can do for you? anything you need?"

It is time to push it, Paul felt it stirring.

"I can't think of anything, for now. You have done so much for me already." He felt a tightening behind his eyes.

"What were you doing up on the ridge, yesterday?" as soon as he said it, the Director cursed to himself. Why had he asked him that? He had determined not to mention it. Roland and he had decided against bringing the business up.

"I just wanted to see what the RC area looked like. You know, as well as I do, that the real work goes on over there."

"The real work?"

"Well, I was thinking that in the long run, I need to move into research myself."

The Director was clearly amused. He considered his old friend once again. He was about to say something else but changed his mind at the last minute.

"Walk first, Paul."

"I will," Paul got up to leave. He was at the lift door.

Now is the time.

He turned back. The Director was watching him.

"I don't suppose you can arrange for one of those RC men to give me a little tour of the RC area. Could you? just to see what it looks like up close."

Afterwards the Director recalled that it seemed such a reasonable request. Surely no harm could come of it. Paul would, after all, be with their men all the time. It would give them the chance to put Paul through their systems, which they wanted to do. Why not?

Paul got into the lift. The prokaryote was making a major effort.

"I'll organise it Paul. Best behaviour mind you. Someone will confirm it."

Paul beamed at him, "thanks," he said. The doors closed. As the lift went down, the Director found himself making a call to the RC.

Paul retrieved his coat; Roland was not around. He left the admin block and set out for the Astrophysics building.

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Paul decided to walk up to Professor Smitdt's room. He went the long way around so that he could see as much of the building as possible. Might as well find his bearings sooner. He denied he was lost on three separate occasions.

On the short walk over, it had filled him in on this Professor Smitdt. He was a leading light in the Astrophysics world in this country. Yes, that was how you spelt his name. He had

access to the RC area and was thought to be working on a special project there. His research took him in various and many directions. Current interests included: dark matter; planets around other stars; and the interstellar medium. He was ideal.

Paul knocked on the Professor's door and waited. He knocked again. This time he heard a summons. He went inside. The Professor was on the phone, he gestured for Paul to sit down. Paul had not seen the Professor in the flesh before. He resembled his photo exactly. Thin, about five seven, Paul's age with thick glasses that presently, rested on his forehead. His room was like an academic's room should be with piles of papers and booklets everywhere and scraps of paper here and there with scrawled messages and reminders. There was barely space left on his desk to write. On the walls were shelves and cabinets filled with books and journals. Elsewhere beautiful posters of space decorated the remaining wall space. Paul easily identified them using his newly acquired knowledge. He recognised most of them anyway from his pre-prokaryote life. He had always had a fascination with space things, and stars, and galaxies and so forth. A long blackboard took up most of one wall. It was covered in the sort of scientific and mathematical symbols that appeared as a completely different language to most people. Paul had always considered the stuff left on boards to be a kind of artwork. Spontaneous, and often confusing, they rarely left a trail that showed any continuity as your eye travelled from one side to the other. This latest offering was probably left from his last tutorial. Weeks ago, I bet, Paul thought.

As he scanned the room Paul listened carefully to the Professor's conversation. He was receiving a report from one of his research team. They were obviously at an observatory somewhere. Their exchange was quite animated. Paul made no attempt to hide the fact

that he was reading the rushed scribbling of the Professor. The Professor made no attempt to hide his writing. Paul could tell that this man was an old-fashioned academic; a bit preoccupied, or even scatty at times. But often bright eyed and full of childish enthusiasm when excited by his work. He did not need the thing's assurance to know that here was a man he could work with and get on with.

The call ended. The Professor rose and shook Paul's hand.

"I must have a few minutes to sort out this news, before I forget it. We don't get the full details on the downlink until this evening."

Paul just smiled as nicely as he could at him. He continued to watch the Professor working on a fresh piece of paper. Paul suddenly realised that there was no computer in the room. He was amazed. A few minutes passed, then the Professor was ready to talk to him. Paul spoke first.

"It's good to see you still use the old chalkboard, Professor."

The Professor smiled, warmly, at Paul, "still prefer it."

"So, do I. The latest on your work in the Scorpius constellation?"

"Yes indeed, quite interesting, we think," there was excitement in his voice.

"Is that data from the Chilean observatories?"

"Yes, quite right," the Professor answered. "I have half my team out there, currently."

"Would it be the latest on the binary system? the red giant and white dwarf pair you reported on last September?"

"Right again," the Professor screwed his eyes up to take a closer look at his well-informed visitor. Then he remembered his glasses and slipped them over his eyes.

"How effective have been your attempts to allow for the intervening dust clouds? is the very long wavelength set up working?"

"It is indeed working, although we have had to make some adaptations on the way," gushed the Professor. They then spent the next half hour discussing the Professor's research. Professor Smitdt found this so-called low-level lecturer remarkably knowledgeable in the theory and practice of his work. He was even able to tell him of the latest publication of some of his fellow researchers' results. He had not had time to scan the latest journals. He even managed to give him an interesting idea to follow up on checking for certain organic molecules in interstellar space.

"I must be honest with you Paul," the Professor said eventually. Paul appreciated the use of his first name. "When the Director insisted that I work with you, well my heart sank. What with your reputation, you know? I expected it to be hard going."

Paul smiled.

"But now, I think we will have an interesting time."

"I have done a considerable amount of preparation and really want to make this course work," Paul responded. "It is important for me to make a good impression."

"I am sure you will. Let me show you what I had in mind for this course. See what you think and don't hesitate to tell me."

They then spent the next half hour reviewing the subject content and possible arrangement of the course. The Professor soon saw the value of Paul's teaching experience and training, as he watched him fashion a scheme of work out of his rough notes. He could see why this Paul Woodend was given grudging respect for his mechanics foundation course. Of course, he doubted if anyone had let the white-haired man know that. He was not at all as he expected him to be. He might learn a thing or two from this man.

When they had agreed the details, the Professor called up his first reader. He soon arrived. Professor Smitdt made the introductions. He noted the usual cockiness in his main assistant and thought, 'you'll learn, Mark'. Paul noted that Mark addressed him as 'Woodend'. He knew his type. Full of their own importance. He obviously was not keen on working with Woodend. He had more important things to do, so his body language said. Paul noticed that he had very thick black eyebrows and longer hair than was normal for College people.

The Professor let Paul take Mark through the course. He said little but made it clear that Paul was running the course. Mark tried to pick holes, but merely succeeded in showing up his inexperience of the teaching side of a course. Each time he thought he had seen a flaw, he found himself squirming with embarrassment as another aspect, that he had not considered, was pointed out to him. Finally, he accepted the arrangements. Paul would run the course and do most of the teaching. Mark would handle the lab work and give one lecture a week. The Professor sanctioned it. The course would be compulsory for the first-year Astrophysics students and open as an option for other Science students. Start date, the new term, two weeks' time.

Mark left somewhat chastened. All his attempts to catch Woodend out had failed. Like the Professor, he realised that Woodend had a formidable range and depth of knowledge. He had fixed a time to show Woodend round the Astrolab in the morning. Woodend had admitted that although his theoretical knowledge was up to scratch, he had not done any of the experimental work. He would need to practice this work for himself. He needed Mark to help him out with it.

"Why do you need to bother?" Mark asked.

The Professor answered for Paul, "you have a lot to learn about preparation, Mark. If you are going to make the big time you had better start learning quick. Now make sure you get all our latest data from Chile downloaded before you go tonight."

Mark left the room, but like a sulking child, he did not say goodbye to Woodend.

"He's not quite as big a berk as he seems," the Professor said to Paul.

"I can't believe you would tolerate him, if he was," Paul joked.

"No, I would not. He is very ambitious and quick on the uptake, normally. So, if he has any sense, he will learn from you."

"I hope so. But first I need to learn a few things from him."

Professor Smitdt studied his new colleague again. He felt a genuine affection, already, for him. What a pity they were similar ages. If he was more like Mark's age, he could begin to groom him as his successor. He was a more promising prospect than the upstart Mark.

Oh well, never mind.

"Do you have to rush off anywhere, Paul?" he inquired.

"No."

"Let me take you for a coffee in the Common Room. On the way I can show you the facilities and introduce you to people." Later, I must ring the Director and let him know how it had gone and thank him for this new addition to his team, he thought.

"Sounds good."

"I'll let the registrar know the details tomorrow," the Professor added as he led the way.

Chapter 10

The next morning Paul Woodend met Mark in the Astrolab and began his hands-on experience of the lab work that underpinned their new course. Much of it he was aware of, but he had never had a go at it himself. Mark was a little imperious in manner, there were a couple of junior staff present, but helped and explained things willingly. Paul got stuck in and enjoyed the activities with very little interference from his friend. Throughout the day it let Woodend get on with it. It was waiting.

When Paul returned to his apartment the previous evening, he had been surprised to find Alexis still there. He had clearly only just woken up. Paul was even more surprised to find the bulk of his beer supply intact.

The prokaryote was pleased with his performance that day.

It was particularly pleased with the impact on the Professor. It had done little to influence the play, so to speak. Providing Paul with the means to accumulate the knowledge had been its main contribution. Most of the good inroads they had made were down to his host's undoubted interpersonal skills; he had not been a bad choice of host. Of course, there had been no real choice originally. It had needed to get out of the rapidly cooling meteorite as a matter of urgency. But its decision to stay within Woodend had been a good

one. Despite the availability of some promising alternatives. If things progressed as it wanted, then the time would soon come when it would leave Woodend. Leave this planet. Head for home. It had promised Woodend that no harm would come to him when the time arrived. However, who or what it could transfer to was not apparent yet. Although it hoped it had seen the first sign of a means of returning home.

Paul, for his part, was also happy. He had got quite into it when discussing the course with Professor Smitdt. He was delighted with, and grateful for, his new expertise. The conversations with Smitdt had been interesting. Paul had started to see a future for himself. A future, after it had left him, that he could cope with. Even succeed at. Of course, he would have to keep up with things without the powerful assistance of his friend, but he would be left with enhanced abilities at least. Well, at least, that is, if he survived whatever it had in mind or whatever was going to happen.

Back in the astrolab, Paul was continuing his crusade to impress and make new friends. The younger staff found him very capable of taking a joke and having a laugh. They, Mark included, were impressed by his thoroughness and accuracy. He also worked at a good pace. Not bad for a white head who looked older than he was. They took a mid-morning break together, but Paul returned to his spectral analysis first. He declined to go for a lunch break, choosing to press on. It wanted him to do as many of the exercises as he could today.

At one point during the afternoon Paul was getting some help with CCD produced pictures. He was bent over the printouts, mapping contour lines of temperature and colouring them appropriately as he went. Suddenly, he felt the person next to him stiffen. Looking up he could see his attention was on the door. Someone was coming.

Roland Agen. It sensed.

Again. What's he after now?

Good news, perhaps. Yes, We think so.

"Could you leave us alone," Roland said to the junior staff man. He quickly moved away and left the room completely.

"What's it like being in school again, Paul?" he asked.

"Hard work, actually," Paul replied. "Finding the concentration difficult now. I've been at it since early this morning."

"Yes, I know. Is it proving to be useful?"

"Very. You can't really stand up in front of some of our cleverer ones and tell them about these things without having done them yourself. It's asking for trouble."

"I don't doubt it. Are you any good?" he looked round for someone to verify his question. But everyone had left the room. Paul smiled.

"What do you think?"

"I think you would be more than competent." He smiled and sat down on a stool.

"Am I getting in the way?"

"Give me a second or too," Paul finished off the contour he had been plotting. Roland cast his eyes around the astrolab.

Paul had finished, "well, Mister Director's assistant, sir, what can I do for you? Don't tell me you are running personal errands for your master again?"

Roland matched Paul's mock delivery, "indeed I am, sir, for who else can he entrust with such important duties?"

Paul laughed, "I fear, sir, that you are jesting, or else I am now thrice blessed by your appearance and so honoured indeed."

Roland, in turn, laughed, "I jest not, and," he broke character, "whether or not it is an honour, well that's a matter of opinion."

"Well you can certainly clear a room," Paul joked, looking around.

"Yes, I often have that affect," he mused. "Can be annoying, and useful I'm afraid."

"I didn't realise that most people call him the 'old man'," Paul said. "What does the 'old man' want? I should be in good books, yes?" he raised a slightly worried eyebrow.

"Oh, you are," Roland agreed. "He is very pleased with you. So much that you have been granted your wish."

"The RC area?" Paul raised his eyebrows, expectantly this time.

"Correct. You are to report to the east guardhouse, tomorrow morning, ten sharp. Someone will come for you; I think you know who to expect."

Paul nodded. It was very happy.

Now We might see what's happening there.

Progress, we are making progress, it thought to itself.

"Is there anything I should...wear? Or anything I should..." He was struggling to find the words again. Roland could feel the sheer excitement in Woodend. He was going to be disappointed, Roland thought.

"They don't care what you wear. But be prepared for constant searches and sensor pad tests. All manner of security measures, some you may not have seen or heard of before." He did not tell Woodend that they had been dying to run him through their instruments

since he had emerged from the Zone. They had lacked a reasonable reason and did not want to push it with the Director, who did not want to make Woodend unduly uneasy.

"What about any do's and don'ts?" Paul wondered.

"Use your common-sense, Paul," Roland replied. "Don't wind them up. Leave well alone, take no for an answer, be polite and cooperative. Do as you are told."

"Best behaviour job."

"Very best behaviour job."

They chatted a little longer, mainly about the new course. Then Roland left.

The others returned, and they carried on with the work. Paul laughed off his apparently good relations with one of the most powerful and influential persons on campus. He was not convinced it was that good.

He worked till around seven. By then he was tired. As he went to eat in the refectory, he hoped that Alexis would not be around when he got home.

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Tomorrow could not come quick enough for the prokaryote. It was monitoring the dreams of its host as he lay asleep. It could not work out these dream things. Seeing the world through his eyes and placing pictures in his mind's eye, as he called it, was easy. Straight forward. But this dreaming. It had not met anything like this before. Was this the process

that made this life on the third planet different? They had been told that there might be something special developing there.

The range of subjects he dreamt about. The depth they went into, sometimes. The effect they had on other parts of the organism, physically. The way they incorporated things in his past, in his memory, and maybe in his future. How aspects of these and his experiences triggered other responses and story lines. Complexity. It had only given him a glimpse of its home once. Yet it had recurred in his dreams. Perhaps it was its own yearnings and being so close here in his brain.

The dream he was currently having, involved many of the people he had only recently encountered around the campus. But it was taking place all over the 'shop', as the host might say. It had started here in the campus but had jumped into the Zone. It was now in some place lost deep in his memory. Years ago. Someone was after him. They were taking his friends. He was remembering scenes and scraps of conversations. But they were jumbled up. Different people saying different things. From yesterday, today, last week, years ago. He was anxious. His body was about to go into sweating mode. It was all very confusing to the prokaryote. Now he was getting an erection! All these females, popping up, in unexpected places. Where was it going to end this time?

He woke Woodend up. Paul turned over and glanced at the time. Early morning, not time, yet. Back to that dream. But he did not make it. He went off somewhere else in a different one.

Paul was a little early at the guardhouse. The officer from the RC was there already, however. He was talking with the security chief's aide. Paul was kept waiting for a few minutes until they had finished their chat. Then the officer came over to Paul and genuinely smiled a greeting.

"Well, it did not take long to arrange your visit, did it?" he said it as if he still could not believe it himself.

"I've been a good boy, it's my treat, apparently," Paul replied.

"Is that so? the officer doubted it somehow. If Woodend was going to the RC, it was because somebody upstairs wanted him there. Why that might be? He did not have a clue. Perhaps he could pick something up during the day.

"Get in the groundcar, Woodend. It will not take long."

Ten minutes later they were at the entrance to the Research Complex. The officer had said very little during the journey. As they emerged from the now parked groundcar he turned to Woodend.

"You will have the first of your sensor pad tests here. Expect more."

Paul nodded, "how many can I expect?"

"Hard to tell," the officer answered honestly. "I think you will have more than most."

"I don't doubt it," Paul agreed.

They went into the main entrance of the guardhouse. Now, this guardhouse put the College ones to shame, Paul thought. It was bigger than the three of them put together. They approached the main desk. It had three sets of sensor pads set around the curve of the desk. The officer led Paul to the right hand one.

"I'll be back when they have finished." He headed off down the corridor.

There were two guards behind the desk. One of them was studying the message the officer had handed to him. The other one was looking Paul up and down. No other person was in the front area. Paul searched the wall behind the desk for signs of cameras, etc. He soon found them. He felt the tension in the prokaryote. It was, well, hyper. More alert than during his meeting with the Director. This was like the state of awareness he felt before the interrogation back in the Zone.

Are you expecting another interrogation?

Something similar.

So, I can expect to be knocked out again?

Maybe. But We, I, think that this time you should stay conscious throughout, but We will take over as before. Anyway, We doubt there will be a long interrogation this time.

I hope you are right.

"If you could place your hands on the pads, Mr. Woodend." One of the guards was talking to him. "The sergeant will be here shortly to ask you a few questions."

Paul did as he was told. Immediately, they would start taking the read outs on him. If they had not taken the pictures yet, then now they would. All the responses from the sensors would be fed back to a control centre somewhere. The operators would be in contact with the sergeant through ear pieces and be able to tell him the reaction to the questions. Records would be made for future reference and analysis.

The sergeant did not take long. He seemed to be young for a sergeant.

"Just a few questions, Mr. Woodend." Paul could get used to this 'Mr. Woodend' business.

"Your full name is?"

"Your date and place of birth?"

"Your full address in the Zone?"

Paul rattled off the answers. There was a pause while the sergeant waited for confirmation.

"How long have you worked in the College?"

The prokaryote had the answer ready, but made Paul appear uncertain at first. He seemed to be working it out. It would give them his reaction, when he was unsure of an answer. That might give them valuable breathing space later.

"I think, it is about three years, almost." He did not sound convincing. In fact, he could not believe that it was barely three years. It seemed longer. Much longer. His course ran for about six weeks, then repeated itself all year round. This probably made it seem longer, he thought. It was not helping him out here.

"What is the purpose of your visit today?"

"I want to have a look around."

There was another pause.

"That will be all for now, Mr. Woodend. Expect random tests during your visit. Patrols have orders to test anyone they want within the area. Indeed, they are expected to."

He was obviously getting another instruction in his ear. He held his hand up.

"I am told to tell you to expect another, more formal, interview when you reach the command centre." He left. One of the guards motioned towards some chairs.

"Sit down there until the officer returns."

As Paul sat down, he noticed that the guard at the door began letting in other people. So, they wanted him on his own, did they. In case they missed anything. It did not seem to last long enough for that much bother. Two more guards appeared behind the desk and they worked at processing the steady stream of people. Most of whom appeared to be delivering something or other. Out of the window Paul could see their vehicles being

examined and tested with all manner of sensors. Dogs included. Many men were busy at the task. Paul wondered whether security had been stepped up after the campus bomb, or if it was always like this. Either way it did not seem possible to smuggle himself into the RC; they would have to be legitimately invited.

The officer came back and led the way to a different groundcar. Paul could see that this was a personal groundcar, furthermore, he decided that it was this officer's groundcar.

"Does this belong to you?" he asked directly.

"Yes, it does," he replied, smiling broadly. "Nice job don't you think?"

"Certainly is," Paul agreed. Has his own groundcar. This was no ordinary officer. People did not just have their own groundcars. He, clearly, must be important. Few people, even in a place like the RC would own a groundcar. Paul stared at the officer as if for the first time. It was making a re-appraisal of the man. The officer noticed Woodend's attention on him.

"Surprised?" he said.

"Yes," Paul answered truthfully. The officer laughed loudly.

"What do you think of your guide now, Woodend?"

"I think I had better watch my p's and q's."

"Yes, you had better." He was smiling an easy smile. "We will start here and work around to here." He pointed to a map that had just appeared on the small vidscreen panel on what used to be called the dashboard in the old days.

Yes, he will have monitors and sensors in here too. We are always here.

The groundcar pulled off.

The tour was taken seriously, Paul was pleased to say later to his young friends back at the apartblock. They did not rush it. Each building was seen and marked off the list that accompanied the map on the vidscreen. They were all pretty much like one another and as such, visually boring. What was more interesting was whether he was allowed inside them. On the yes side were Engineering, Applied Physics, Materials, Chemical Sciences. On the no side were Biochemistry, Virology and Bacteria labs, Applied Materials, Propulsion Centre. Paul had a longer look around the Civil engineering building. An old interest of his. They watched technicians testing models to destruction and comparing the results with computer generated predictions of how they would fail. No one answered him when he asked what these buildings were for.

Eventually, they came to the area where Paul had seen the huge structure from the fence. You could not miss it. It had been looming ever closer for what seemed like an hour. The road they were taking skirted the edge of the surrounding area to the structure. No buildings were on the surface in this area. Paul could make out the vents for what must be the underground control bunkers. In the distance Paul could make out people and vehicles moving near the base of the structure. It must be well over ten stories high, he thought. Higher even. Standing in acres of uncluttered land. Whatever it was, the thing was clearly excited by what it could now make out, up closer.

Well what do you reckon it is?

It did not answer, but Paul got a picture of the old American and Russian launch pads. They kept their attention fixed on the structure for as long as they could. As it passed from their clear view, the top being still visible in the distance, Paul turned to the officer.

"Was that what I think it was?" he inquired.

"What did you think it was?" the question was thrown back at him.

"Well, I would say that it was a rocket launch area." He looked questioningly.

"You would be right."

"I did not know that we had our own capability to launch... whatever." Paul said, obviously excited.

"It is not a state secret. But the public, in general, are not fully aware of it," the officer informed him.

"What is the mission?" Paul asked.

"I'm afraid that I am not really up to date with the details." He said. "Interplanetary probe, I think."

It was purring again. Paul could feel the intensity of the thing.

Don't blow any of my circuits, he thought.

"When is the lift-off due for?" he asked for the prokaryote.

"In two weeks," the officer answered.

Two weeks! Two weeks! It was positively having palpitations, Paul thought. *Two weeks!*

How could they infiltrate the program in that time? We are so close! Two weeks! Two months is more like what we need!

Paul found himself telling it to calm down. That made a change. We will find a way. Somehow.

"Can I look round the Space Sciences department? And do they run the probe mission from there?" he asked rather breathlessly. He coughed to hide it.

"Yes and no," came the reply. "Yes, you can look around it, and no, they don't run the mission from there. They do have the best canteen in the RC, however. Do you fancy lunch?"

"Yes, I do actually. That's a good idea." He needed it, and it needed to take stock of things. What better place than in the Space Sciences building. Maybe, just maybe, something might turn up. Soon they were entering the building. It looked just like all the rest. Every building they went into they were tested. That included the officer. It was the same process as Paul had gone through on the ridge. Simple sensor pad test and formal identification. So far, one patrol had stopped and tested them too.

Inside the building they decided to look around first and then have lunch. A technician took them on a tour. Again, Paul impressed them with the range and depth of his knowledge. The officer was impressed because the technician was impressed. He had specifically requested their best young worker. He had been pulled off his research project to take them around. Initially, the technician tried hard not to show his impatience with the task. Paul could sense it, so he tried hard to make sure it was not a waste of time for the young man. He was so successful that the technician joined them for lunch, and seemed very happy to discuss his own research, at length, with Paul.

But it had been fruitless for them. There was no sign of any work being done on the probe mission. The technician knew nothing about the details. He, ruefully, acknowledged that it was all happening elsewhere, and he was not in the know. A glance at the officer told him to say no more. So, Paul used the experience to find out as much as he could anyway. There seemed to be similarities in the work being carried out here and back in the College. However, the intensity was greater here. You could feel it in the atmosphere as you walked around. It was like this was a company and people were paid by results. There were a lot more people on the ground here, more staff, and of course the facility was bigger. Paul

wondered how many people had come from the College to work here. He asked the technician.

"I don't know?" he shook his head.

"About half the workforce," the officer supplied the answer.

Paul thanked the young man and wished him well in his research as he left.

As they got underway again the officer asked him if he had seen enough. Paul said yes.

"Next stop, our command centre and some more questions," the officer said to him. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Paul answered. "Would it matter if I wasn't?"

"No."

They spoke no more till they reached the command centre.

Paul was put in a waiting room at first. They brought some drink in for him.

Immediately, it was on its guard. His enhanced smell sense was working overtime. He held the cup close to his nose. There was something there alright. He left the drink untouched.

Shortly a new drink was brought for him. It was clean this time. He chose to leave it anyway. Eventually he was led to an interrogation cell. Exactly like the one in the City Central Control. He hoped he would not be spending as much time in this one. He sat down and placed his hands in the sensor pads ready. A man he had not seen before sat across the table from him. Behind the glass wall to the side would be the observers, the operators and the sensor banks. It was opaque his side.

"Have you any idea how long this is going to take?" he asked the man hopefully.

"Not as long as some of your previous experiences," the man held up his question sheet.

"I only have these to go through."

Paul could not make out the actual questions, just that they occupied only half the sheet. The man was getting the message to start. The usual questions to start with. It allowed the operators to get the feel of Woodend's responses. Then they got down to it.

"Why were you on the ridge?"

"I wanted to see what the RC area looked like."

"What were your impressions?"

"I saw a building, well a huge structure really, that intrigued me."

"Was this the launch pad area?"

"Yes."

"Why did you want to visit the RC area?"

"To see it up close and hopefully find out about the structure."

"Have you any ulterior motives in your interest?"

Woodend paused at this point the observers noticed and looked towards the glass. There had been no problems with his read outs so far. All confirmed his veracity.

"Yes," he said.

"Will you elaborate?"

"I have always been interested in Space Studies. Recently I have done a considerable amount of work in this area. I will be running a new course, soon, at the College, you see. But I know that this is where my future lies, and I would like to work where it is all happening. I know that the College is not really at the cutting edge."

"You hope to work here?"

"Yes."

He could feel the laughter almost behind the glass. There was a pause. The questions suddenly went back to old history.

"You had nothing to do with the Quizmaster murders?"

"No."

"You were not a member of the TPF?"

"No, but I did sympathise with them."

"Please do not try to anticipate questions."

Another pause.

"How did you beat the test?"

"Which test?" he was confused.

"How did you change your fingerprints?"

"I didn't."

"How did you get past the sensors?"

"You can't, can you?"

"You are doing it now, aren't you?"

"I'm not," he looked slyly at his inquisitor. "How can you tell?"

"You admit to being able to manipulate the tests?"

"I can't do it myself."

"You can't, but then who can? How is it done?"

"Well, I have some help."

"From who?" the man thought he was onto something here.

"I have an organism from outer space in my brain. It does it." Woodend looked dead serious for a moment and straight into the man's eyes. Then he smiled. The man burst out laughing. He got a message in his ear piece. It made him laugh more.

"Did I lie, then?" Woodend asked him.

"Yes," he smiled at Woodend. Then he got back to the business at hand.

"Are you a member of the resistance?"

"No"

"Did you have anything to do with the bomb?"

"No"

"Do you know any members of the resistance?"

"No"

"Where do you go from here?"

Woodend thought for a while, then said, "I'd like to get onto the staff here. Perhaps on the interplanetary probe team?"

"That's all. Wait here."

He left the room. Soon a guard came to escort Paul back to the waiting room.

Behind the glass wall the officer joined the rest of the team to watch the computer analysis. It was looking at the three recent sensor pad tests for Woodend and trying to match them with his interrogation in the CCC. They were matching perfectly. Another group were watching the video of his performance on a split screen and comparing it with the CCC one. They had a superfast facility on the frames. Elsewhere his different fingerprint records were matched and displayed. They spent some time studying his deliberate lie.

Finally, after some discussion he left and went to report to his superior. They could find nothing wrong with Woodend's answers or his responses. Everything matched and there was no evidence of any recent tampering with his fingertips. There was a genuine desire to work on their patch. He did seem to have a particularly calm approach to the process. One operator observed that he appeared to go almost trancelike during questioning. Very little of the usual fidgeting that suspects showed.

"What is your gut feeling?" the officer was asked.

He thought briefly.

"Well, he seems quite genuine, his knowledge about his subject is up to date, we have our own confirmation of that. I feel he has something about him. The drink, he seemed to

know it was contaminated. He is almost too good in the tests. I think he needs further watching. Especially as he might receive contacts from the resistance in the future."

"Risk assessment?"

"Small."

"Take him back, I'll inform the Director."

The officer went to get Woodend. Before long they had reached the entrance to the RC area again. They transferred to the another groundcar. The officer drove Woodend still. They did not speak to each other until they were outside the RC area.

"So, did I pass again?" Paul eventually said to him.

"Looks like you did." Paul thought he did not seem completely convinced.

"How did you know about the drink?" the officer asked Woodend as they approached the College guardhouse.

"I've got a powerful sense of smell," Paul replied. "It did not smell quite right."

"Do you get that from your space friend?" the officer asked.

"Well, of course," Paul winked at him. "He came too late to help my looks though."

Paul got out of the groundcar. Before the door closed, he asked, "what was in the drink?"

"Something to give you a mild reaction."

"That's nice."

The officer winked at Woodend. The groundcar pulled away and headed back to the RC, Paul watched it go. He checked his watch. Time for a beer he thought. It had gone quiet again. It did not argue.

Paul spent an hour or so in one of the campus bars. He sat alone and was not disturbed by anyone. He took a longer way back to the apartblock. He passed the refectory on the way but did not feel hungry at that time. Then he walked through the astrophysics building,

but nobody was working in the labs. He strolled on home. They were both feeling a little lost to the world. Each with their different thoughts.

At the entrance to the apartblock the guard called Paul over.

"Message from the Director's assistant. Go to the adminblock right away."

Paul retraced his steps and was soon at the adminblock. To his surprise, Roland Agen was sitting to one side of the reception. He seemed to be waiting for Paul.

"I came as soon as I got your message," Paul said apologetically.

"I know you did. I decided you should come to me for a change."

Paul nodded. He was aware that Roland had not asked him to sit down.

"Your rehabilitation is coming on leaps and bounds, Paul, it seems."

Paul said nothing but appeared curious.

"You have been invited to the Director's party, tomorrow." He paused to judge any reaction from Woodend. "It is a privilege. You are very fortunate."

"Yes, I see that," Paul replied cautiously.

"The Director says you can bring any friends you like."

Paul thought for a while, then said, "could I bring Alexis, Jon and Tania, and Julie from the library?" it was too much to ask. He regretted saying it immediately. Roland considered the names for a while as if putting faces to them.

"Yes, I think they would be in order." Roland made ready to leave.

"Well, what time is it? How are we going to get there?" Paul asked, afraid he would go before giving him the details. "What should we wear?"

"You will receive the details in the morning, Paul." Roland smiled. "Be prepared, have your people ready to leave not long after midday."

With that he was gone. Whisked away in a waiting groundcar. Paul rushed back to the apartblock. They were both delighted by this unexpected development, and perhaps opportunity.

Chapter 11

On his return to the apartment Paul went to Alexis' apartment and told him of the invitation. Initially his reaction was one of shock followed by a measure of disbelief. Then he was very happy. The Director's party! This could keep him in beers for a while if he played it right. To celebrate he gave Paul one of his beers. They quickly sank a few more. Paul thought he could use Alexis and better to do it before he had had too many beers.

"Alexis?" he began.

"Yes, Paul? What is it?"

"Would you mind doing the leg work for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I haven't told the others yet. Would you do the honours?"

"No problem. It will be a pleasure. I can't wait."

"You never know they might not be able to make it. Some of them."

"Are you joking, Paul?" he looked at him incredulously. "You don't miss a chance like this.

Not if you're in your right mind."

"What is so special about the Director's party anyway?"

"You're still not with it, are you Paul." It was a statement. "Everyone who is anyone on campus, in the College, will be there. People from outside, important people, will be there. RC people will be there. Maybe even sports or vidscreen people. Maybe even some of the big ones. You know Ruling Council," his voice went to an exaggerated hushed tone.

"You don't seriously think those people will want to talk to us, do you?" Paul countered.

"Maybe they will, maybe they won't," Alexis smiled back. "But that's not the point, is it?"

Paul raised his eyebrows at him.

Alexis teased him by taking a long pull on his drink, his smiling eyes never left Paul.

"It's not who is there that counts," he said finally. "It's who is not there. Most people on campus will not be invited. Those that do will be able to drop it into conversations, mention it over coffee, get a beer out of it, whatever. A bit of kudos for us. We will be the envy of most of the campus. I can't wait."

Paul laughed, "you snob, Alexis."

"I am not," he denied. But he was smiling broadly.

"Well come down off cloud nine long enough to do the favour for me."

Alexis had forgotten what he wanted. He was straining to remember.

"Tell the others," he repeated. Recognition flooded Alexis' face.

"My place in the morning to find out what's happening. We've got to be ready to move after noon."

Paul left and returned to his apartment. He could imagine Alexis gleefully telling the others the news, and anybody else he knew on the way no doubt.

A little later he got a visit from Tania and Jon. Ostensibly to ask him out for a drink. But really to confirm what Alexis had told them. Just in case. Before they said anything to anyone else. Jon was quite warm to Paul. He could not hide his amazement, or delight. What an opportunity for you, Paul thought. Tania smiled knowingly at Paul and dragged Jon off. She mouthed a thank you at Paul before the door sealed. Paul felt she was not overly pleased that Julie was coming too.

Paul made sure he would not be disturbed again that evening by leaving a message on the door panel. It turned out that he had little to worry about. Alexis and Julie were out celebrating together. He ate what he had in the fridge, showered and retired for the night. Before he was put to sleep, he wondered again what tomorrow would bring.

The next day Paul was up and about early. He went to the refectory and had a large breakfast. Then he returned to his apartment and studied the vidscreen; the news and information channels. It was a bit late to be trying to keep himself up to date. But something he saw might come in handy later that day. Then at nine thirty the guard downstairs rang him.

"Standby for a vidscreen message. Turn to channel 35."

Paul did as instructed and waited. The screen went deep blue and then an audible click-like noise accompanied a change in colour to black. Paul read the message as it arrived line by line.

Paul,

Welcome to the party. In case I don't see you when you arrive.

You and your friends must be ready to be picked up by groundbus at 12.30. Be warned the groundbus will not wait for anyone!

No dress code, although it is cold outside at nights, you may wish to bear that in mind.

All drink and food provided, throughout the day.

Enjoy yourself!

Yours,

The Director.

At ten Tania came calling.

"Any news yet?" she asked hopefully. Paul gave her the details.

"Could you pass it on to Alexis?" Paul asked her. "I'll go and tell Julie."

"No need," she said smiling, "I think she stayed with Alexis last night."

"Oh," Paul could only reply. He found himself unable to say more.

Tania seemed pleased by this. She was trying to catch his eye, to judge exactly how he was taking this news. He avoided her.

"Well, will you sort it out Tania, please." He said.

"Will do, see you downstairs later."

"Ok," Paul said. She left.

What's the matter with me? I almost hoped this would happen. So why do I feel disappointed now?

You always do, it said. He looked out the window thinking about the party again.

The groundbus came on time. Some other people got on with Paul and his crowd at the apartblock. The groundbus was now full of excited people all dressed up and with somewhere to go. Most of them were trying not to be too excited, had tried not to make it too obvious they were dressed in their finest and were trying hard to appear cool. Except, of course, Paul's crew. Even Jon was failing to take it all in his stride. He had the biggest smile of the lot on his face. Yes, there was more than an element of smugness.

"Where does the Director live, Paul?" he asked. "How long will it take to get there?"

Excitement. Other people seemed to take an interest in Paul's answers.

"I haven't got a clue, sorry," he disappointed them.

"I don't know where it is, but it is about an hour away by groundcar." A voice answered.

They turned to see who the informer was. It was Julie, big grin on her face. "I just heard it somewhere." She added. There were a few grunts of different kinds in the groundcar. People started to settle down more. It was nice and warm in the 'bus. Paul always had trouble staying awake in trains and buses. This time it allowed him to nod off.

He awoke just as they passed the outer wall of the Director's residence. Lots of guards. The groundbuses were directed to an area near the hoverjet landing strip. There were many private groundcars lined up on one side. Each one had a guard to watch over it. Everyone disembarked. They joined a line of people who were waiting to be searched before being allowed to make their way into the large house. Paul studied the Director's 'house'. Very nice, he thought, you have not done badly out of all this, have you. A mansion that must have belonged to some of the old-style nobility. Most of whom had long since been swept away, or fought, or bought their way into the new order. Signs of modernisation were all over it. Paul doubted it lacked any thing.

Soon they were allowed into the house. Their coats were taken off them and placed in a cloakroom. They were left to their own devices. Except for one important addition. A small electronic tag was placed on the back of their hands. They were warned not to interfere with it and told it allowed security to check the whereabouts of every guest during the party. Paul noticed that all the guards and the other staff working also had the tags. There were some grumbles from people ahead of Paul in the queue who thought it was a bit over the top. But they soon shut up when offered a return trip. Alexis made a few cracks about going to the toilet and what happened if some of the guests became close, shall we say. They all had a laugh.

"Let's find the booze," Alexis cried and led the way. They soon found a large room with a large make shift bar. There were many waiters coming and going. Going with trays full of various drinks and coming back empty with new orders. They avoided the waiters, this time, got their own drinks and sat down to see what was happening. At that moment only about a third of the tables were occupied. There was a huge buffet down one entire wall. It would be constantly replenished all through the day. On the table there was a card that outlined what was available. Paul noted the extensive facilities on offer to keep children amused and separate from the adults. There was a layout of the rooms open and the position of bars and eating places, toilets, even showers. Recently released films would be shown at intervals in a small cinema. Bands would be playing in the ballroom area, and other music, courtesy of famous DJs, would be played in select rooms throughout. Quiet rooms were designated; you could even have a lie down. There were games rooms, gyms and the grounds were open for those who fancied a stroll in the cold winter air. You could eat and drink as much as you liked. However, you were warned that staff had orders to deal with high spirited partygoers. Guards were always present. Usually discreet, but present. Paul imagined that hidden sensors would miss very little in the party areas.

Nevertheless. It was wonderland. Paul could understand the fuss now. He watched his companions' faces light up as they read the information. Their eyes were already shining. They quickly drank the first drink. A waiter brought them more. Paul said that he was going to have a good look round. The implication was, on his own. But he met no resistance. They all had their own agendas and were thinking only of what they wanted to do. They arranged to come back to this spot from time to time to check if there was... Well if there was a problem or if someone had become bored or to leave a message. Paul picked his drink up.

"Don't forget you've got all day Alexis," he said. "Remember to eat everyone. Be good!"

"Yes dad!" they all chimed in unison, laughing. Paul walked away smiling. He heard Alexis, trying to be quiet, say, "I told you he would be a useful bloke to get to know, didn't I?" sounds of agreement. "This is the big time. I am going to enjoy this," he added.

Paul went on a round trip through all the rooms open to this monster party. He popped out at one point to look over the gardens, but without his coat he soon went back in.

It was a little impatient. *Not many people here yet.*

No. But then it is only early yet. I expect people will come at different times throughout the afternoon. It might not become busy till the evening.

Paul passed one room and waved at the Director. He was surrounded by fawning people. Yes, things have certainly changed for you, old friend. In another room he watched Roland Agen talking to what was obviously a group of security men. Roland nodded at him when he finally noticed Paul. Paul raised his glass to him and moved on. He passed Alexis and Julie coming the other way.

"It's a huge place," Julie gushed.

"Not that many people here," Alexis sounded a little disappointed.

"I can't see it warming up for a long time yet," Paul said. "It's going to be difficult to stay sober."

"You're telling me," Alexis agreed, "this is my third drink already."

"Well, see you later," Paul carried on with his stroll. Once he had been around the rooms once and got them fixed in his mind, he decided to have something to eat. It agreed. He filled his plate and went in search of somewhere quiet to sit down. Jon and Tania were talking to some other guests. There was room by them. Paul winked at Tania but walked by. He found a side room that overlooked one part of the garden. A middle-aged man was

napping in a luxurious armchair. A small child was sat on a raised stool. She was playing chess on the table. Paul sat down near enough to her to see what she was doing. He began to eat his meal.

Someone must have put her on the stool. She was quite small, perhaps only three years old. She could barely reach across the board. At first Paul was worried that she might slip off the stool. But she had good balance. Remarkable, Paul thought, she was so young physically, yet she had an older air about her. She was playing the computer at chess. It told her the moves by a display, set into the table. She then moved the pieces. Paul had some experience of chess computers, but this type was unfamiliar to him. It sensed the position of the pieces somehow and could tell if she put them in the wrong place.

When Paul first sat down the child looked at him and responded to his smile by asking him who he was.

"My name is Paul," he replied.

"My name is Tara, I am three." She said proudly. "What do you do?"

"I am a teacher."

"What do you teach?"

Paul thought she must be a prodigy of some kind. She sounded like she was eleven, not three. A bright eleven.

"I teach Physics at the College," he answered, "only a few courses."

"Oooh," she said childishly, "I like Physics."

I bet you do, thought Paul. Where has she come from?

"Where is your mother Tara?" Paul asked.

"Oh, Mother is somewhere." She appeared unconcerned. "That's my uncle there." She pointed at the man in the armchair. He appeared asleep.

Paul had finished eating. She had lost her game. She did not like losing, that was obvious.

"What level are you playing it on?" Paul asked.

"I think it is set on level four," she answered, "uncle set it up."

"It probably goes up to level eight or ten," Paul said. He stood up and inspected the game. "Do you know how high a standard it goes up to?"

She shook her head, "I can't even beat it on this level."

"How long have you been playing?" he asked her.

"Uncle taught me last month." She said, in a matter of fact-like tone. Paul laughed and looked at this wonderkid in front of him. She was setting up the game again.

"Can I offer you some advice, Tara?" she looked uncertain.

"It wouldn't be cheating, would it?" she said.

"No, I don't think so," Paul reassured her. "At this level it reacts to what you do. It has a limited set of moves to follow on its own. It also has a value system. All the pieces have a value rating. It will take a piece because it thinks it is winning the exchange. It can't see beyond that. This makes it susceptible to sacrifices. If you sacrifice a piece for a better position, it will fall for it. You must also not give up control of the centre so easily. Develop your pieces much more. This is something that we all have to learn when starting out."

He looked into her eyes. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so." She started playing white. "My mother is a famous scientist. She's really clever." It came out of the blue. Paul watched her playing.

"I'm sure she is Tara."

"And I am going to be really clever too," she added. She did not look at him.

Paul sat back down, "I'm sure you will be too," he agreed.

She quickly won. Then she won again to prove it was no fluke. Paul was supping his drink very slowly. He did not have to worry about getting drunk today, it would not allow it. He had brought some more food for them and some pop for her. At least she liked pop. Uncle had only stirred a little.

"You play the machine," she challenged him. Paul had been quite a useful player in his own right, but now he had the knowledge of several chess books on tap and whatever the prokaryote could contribute. It wanted to play. He could feel the desire to win in it. To pit itself against this machine.

"Shall we put it on the highest level?" he asked her. She nodded. He set it. "I will watch how you both play," she commented.

"I'll explain what I'm trying to do, if you like?" Paul offered.

"No thank you. I will try to work it out," she said.

"At this level it will probably take some time to respond." Paul told her. "One game will take over an hour I should think. You alright to stay that long?"

She had her own watch. She glanced at it.

"Mother will not be back for two hours yet, at the earliest." She looked at her uncle. "We were going to watch a film, but I would rather stay here with you." She smiled at him. "It would be a shame to disturb uncle."

Paul smiled back and nodded. He opened. The computer responded immediately. Concentrate. Treat the computer with respect he reminded himself.

Fascinating.

What? She is?

Fascinating creature. She is unlike anything we have met.

Frightening more like. What kind of a childhood will she have?

She will only have a short childhood. Her body will lag her mind. Inside she is very old now. There are few childish thoughts. A childhood will soon be irrelevant to her.

Seems a shame.

That is only your perspective. Because your mental maturity was slower developing you are unable to see it.

Perhaps. But what about emotional maturity? There's usually some fallout there later.

Not with the right handling.

It was very interested in this little girl. Paul could feel there was more intensity in the thing than he had felt before. It was giving her its complete attention.

Her brain power is still forming. What an opportunity she represents.

Paul had the feeling some decision was being made. He was not party to it. He concentrated on the game. The computer was quite happy to have a cluttered centre and had avoided some exchanges. Time to open it up a bit he thought.

The game took almost two hours. Eventually, after fortunes had swung from one side to another, a draw was declared by the computer. Paul agreed. Tara had said very little during the game. She sat on her perch and followed the moves intently. She was a sponge Paul thought. She would soak up anything you threw at her. Somebody must be developing her. He wondered what she would develop into. He felt the prokaryote was forming an opinion on that. A plan, rather than opinion, he thought.

"You play very well," a new voice from behind. Uncle was awake. His voice had a European accent. German or central European. Czech perhaps?

"I knew you were not sleeping, uncle," Tara cried.

"You are familiar with that opening, Paul? May I call you Paul?" he asked.

"Please do," Paul rose off his chair and shook uncle's hand. "I have dabbled a bit with it. But I like to get away from it early on."

"Yes, I am not familiar with the variation you played. Nor was the computer it seemed." He smiled at Paul. "You have just played at international master standard. Well done."

It was Paul's turn to smile. He was very happy and full of a sense of achievement. It wanted to play again and beat it.

"Where did you learn to play?" Uncle asked.

"I'm largely self-taught," Paul replied. "Although you may be surprised at the quality of players inside the Zone where I have played recently."

Paul noticed that uncle did not bat an eyelid at the mention of the Zone. Tara however gave a gasp. She looked surprised and stared at Paul with wide eyes.

Uncle smiled at her and reassured her.

"Am I right in thinking you are Paul Woodend?" Uncle inquired.

"Yes, I am." Paul was surprised that uncle shook his hand again.

"Call me, Vaclav. I find it difficult to have a good game with anyone round here, Paul.

Would you give me a game?"

"Fine, I'll just get a refill." Paul quickly left to find a waiter.

Everything was set up ready when he came back. Tara's stool was now placed next to her uncle. She returned his smile. She seemed to have got over her shock.

"My uncle is very good," she said proudly, "he beats the computer."

"Yes, I've a feeling he is," Paul agreed, smiling at uncle.

"I think you will find we are evenly matched Paul."

"I hope so." It was stirring itself.

They played a slow cagey opening. Paul got that feeling behind his eyes.

No! We can win without that. No!

Tara reached for some of her pop. She missed the glass; her eyes on the pieces. She moved her hand to compensate but looked at her glass too late. She knocked it off the table. It broke on the floor spilling the pop. She cried out in embarrassment. Paul leant down and picked up the glass fragments. He placed them on the table well away from the board. Uncle Vaclav called a passing waiter to tidy up the mess. Paul had cut his finger on one of the shards. It was a clean cut, nothing to worry about. If he sucked it then it would soon clot up.

"Oooh, you have cut yourself," Tara noticed and reached over for his hand. "It needs kissing better."

Before Paul could react and much to his and Vaclav's surprise, she pulled his hand towards her and kissed his bloody finger. She smiled at him and licked her lips. Paul moved his hand back. He sucked at the little cut. It seemed to be healing in front of his eyes. Then something, the thing had told him once, came into his mind. He suddenly looked at Tara, uncertainty on his face.

"Everything alright, Paul?" Vaclav had caught his look. "It is just a child's reaction, yes?"

"Yes. No, I'm fine." He returned his attention to the game. He stole occasional glances at Tara. He could feel that it was still with him. There was nothing on her face to suggest a change.

Transference has been achieved.

What do you mean? You are still here.

Some of us are now in this creature. Control is being completed.

You said you would leave me.

There is only need for some of us to be in this one. She is young and still developing. We can do much with her.

You said you would leave me.

This is not full transference. You are needed yet. You represent our best chance of succeeding still.

Paul stared long and hard at her. She stared back. Then she gave a knowing wink. Paul looked to Vaclav, but he was lost in his stratagems. How was a three-year-old wonderkid going to help them? There was no answer. He concentrated on the game. He could see a way of gaining an advantage. It concentrated on Tara.

Now there was two of them. For the time being.

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As the first game between Paul and Vaclav entered its middle stage a short meeting took place elsewhere in the mansion. Three individuals gathered in a darkened room.

"This room is sealed from any outside surveillance," the leader's voice began. "We may speak freely. May I remind you that this must be a quick meeting today. We don't want to set off any unnecessary tongue wagging."

Noises of agreement came from the others.

"The question we must address today, is, do we keep to the original plan and targets? Or do we stop? Or do we change our focus, perhaps?" the leader waited for their responses.

The first reply was not long coming.

"I believe that we should press on with our original intentions," one of them said. "The campus bomb produced the expected results, along with some new information. A strike inside the RC will move the process on. I think it will really stir things up in there, in the way we are after. And it may well throw up some new lines."

"And, of course," the other one chipped in, "it will cause reverberations elsewhere. We must not lose sight of that aspect." The others nodded their agreement.

"Right, we will proceed with the original plan," the leader was winding up the meeting. "You will organise the work on the ground, a strike before the end of this week would be desirable and would keep to our schedule. I will concentrate on providing some

distractions, principally, placing our foil in the RC. He proved more useful than we could have hoped for on the campus."

Nods of agreement again. Then they left the room together. They made no attempt to split up until they were back in the thick of the party. The truth was, that detection was not really the worry, certainly not here today.

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Paul won the first game, just. He was delighted, he always liked winning at chess. Vaclav was a little put out. He had underestimated his opponent and missed a key positional exchange at the end of the middle game. After that, despite his efforts, Paul had closed him out. Vaclav waited for him to make a mistake, but he did not.

"Well played, my friend," he said to Paul genuinely. "Let me play white this time." He started to reset the board. Paul smiled; he recognised the look in Vaclav's eye. He was sure he had the same one himself in the past. When you lost to someone you immediately wanted to try again and get your revenge.

"I need to restock my supplies of food and drink, Vaclav." Paul said and got up to leave.

"I, also," Vaclav responded, "I will accompany you." He got up too, then glanced at Tara.

"Will you be alright there, Tara? Do you want anything?" he asked the quiet, thoughtful looking girl.

"I am fine uncle," she answered. "Perhaps some more pop."

"It's bad for your teeth, you know," Paul chipped in. The young girl just smiled at him. If he had been allowed to, Paul would have shivered.

As they made their way to the food Paul turned to Vaclav.

"She is, of course, a child prodigy?"

"Probably the one with the greatest potential I have come across," Vaclav replied. "I am not really her uncle. I am responsible for her development."

"Responsible to who?"

Vaclav smiled, "her mother of course. She is a famous scientist as she said. I am an old friend."

"Just the mother?" Paul asked him.

"What do you mean?" Vaclav turned to him. They eyed each other.

"Well, I would find it hard to believe, in today's climate, that the authorities would not be interested." He paused. "I would imagine that they would be actively involved with these kinds of children's futures."

"You are an astute fellow," Vaclav smiled at him. "There is a system in place shall we say. But let us say no more than that. You understand."

"I do," Paul said ruefully.

"Does she make you uneasy, Paul? Tara has that effect on people."

"A little at first. But no longer. I have met some pretty clever kids, before, myself."

"I am sure you have Paul. But I doubt if any of them compare to Tara."

Paul was sure of it. He thought to himself that Vaclav was going to be in for a surprise or two soon. Tara was about to reach new heights.

On the way back with their refreshments Paul managed to get an outline of the training scheme Tara was following. Amazing and frightening. Whatever she might have achieved or become before; he could not imagine. But now, with a prokaryote also?

On their return to the table they found her relating the game her uncle had just lost to some interested people. They looked like they were going to stay to watch game two.

"I think we will have an audience for this one," Paul said to Vaclav.

"I am used to it," Vaclav settled into his place. "Can you cope with it?" he added with a sly smile.

"I think we'll have to find out." Paul was ready.

If you were describing their second game for a paper or revue or something. The words 'bitterly fought' would have to have been used. Like a wounded animal Vaclav struck back at Paul. From the start he attacked and pressed Paul's position. Paul clung on, pursuing a policy of exchanging pieces and trying to keep the game uncomplicated and open. Eventually Vaclav's assault ran out of steam and the game drifted to a draw. Paul offered; Vaclav accepted.

It was now early evening. Would they play another? During the second game Alexis and Julie had discovered them. They did not stay long. They were well on the way, Paul thought. He hoped they would not get too drunk. The feeling he got was that things might hot up later. At one-point Tania popped her head into the room but left without saying a word.

Just checking where we are, it said.

It wanted to play another game. It felt that there was plenty of time for them to investigate the party. Besides, there was Tara now. He looked expectantly at Vaclav. A small crowd of people had now gathered, around ten or twelve. They were generating some interest. They were encouraging them to play again.

"Will you give me one more chance to even the score?" Vaclav asked him.

"Of course." They began to reset the pieces. The crowd settled themselves into positions, not too close to the table, but where a view was available. They were about to start when a woman's voice stopped them.

"There you are, my girl. I was beginning to wonder where your uncle Vaclav had hidden you."

Paul turned around. A woman in her early thirties, he guessed, was approaching the table. Glasses, long straight black hair. Good figure, but a bit plain looking Paul thought. Then he admonished himself. Not plain, just not particularly beautiful. Sort of pretty, maybe. He could not make his mind up. Average height and quite conservatively dressed. She could do more with her looks Paul decided. But she obviously was not bothered. She picked Tara up and they embraced affectionately.

"It's time for your bed, Tara," mother said.

"Oh, please mother, can I watch uncle Vaclav play. It's the last game."

She had learnt that tone of voice young children used when trying to get around their parents, Paul noted.

"Well, I don't know about that," mother looked at Paul and Vaclav. Then at the small crowd that had congregated.

"Uncle Vaclav is losing mother," Tara said.

"Is he indeed," the bait was about to be taken, Paul thought. "Do you think uncle Vaclav will win this game Tara?" the child considered for a moment.

"No, I do not think he will mother." Tara answered in a serious tone.

There were mumbles amongst the crowd. Paul laughed, and Vaclav continued to smile. He said aloud, "my own pupil deserts me."

"I think we will stay for this one game." Tara was delighted and hugged her mother. Paul watched the mother pull Tara's stool around and then sit down with the child in her arms.

"Paul, this is Dr More. Jane this is Paul Woodend," Vaclav did the introductions. There were a few stifled gasps from the crowd. Paul smiled at her, she smiled back, her slightly widened eyes giving away her surprise. Paul glanced at Tara quickly. She beamed back a smile; his notoriety amused her. She winked again. Paul noticed that more people had been tempted in to watch this match. The pressure was on.

They tossed for colour. Vaclav won and chose white. He started in a more cautious way this time. Paul urged himself to concentrate. It was drawn to Dr More. Paul could feel that build-up of interest. Perhaps it was getting input from the thing in Tara.

Are you in contact with your others in her?

Yes, while she is close like this.

So, what's the news?

. Good news. This woman is just what we have been seeking.

Why? Because she is the mother of this prodigy?

No. It sounded exasperated with him. She is involved in the interplanetary probe. You must talk to her after this game. Win or lose, get the game over with as quick as you can.

You've changed your tune.

We must make a contact with this woman. It is imperative.

Well I want to win.

Then I suggest you get on with it and stop distracting yourself with questions for me.

Paul did just that. The third game was the shortest. Vaclav attempted to draw Paul into a trap in the centre. However, Paul eluded him and bypassed the centre to launch a crippling king side attack. A decisive sacrifice brought a swift end to the struggle. Paul and Vaclav shook hands. The crowd showed their appreciation. Tara laughed and clapped her hands. She consoled her mentor but was evidently pleased to see him on the losing end.

"Pupils often enjoy their tutor's failings," Vaclav remarked. Paul agreed.

"Now it is time for you to go to bed, young lady." Dr More took Tara away. She waved at Paul and said, "see you soon." Her mother looked at her quizzically.

"I think that is quite enough concentration for one day," Vaclav was talking to Paul. They left the room and headed for a bar. On the way Paul saw his friends sat at a table. Some people he did not know were with them, other younger people.

"Do you mind joining the youngsters?" Paul indicated the group.

"I like young people," Vaclav replied. Paul made the introductions and Alexis followed suit. Paul left Vaclav with them and went in search of some drinks, via the toilet. Once the game was over, he felt the need quite strongly.

There was no one in the toilet. Paul stood there relieving himself and humming an old tune. A man came in and took his place right next to Paul. There were plenty of other places available. Paul decided to glance at the man. Roland Agen. He looked amused by something.

"That was impressive chess back there Paul," he said.

"I can play a bit Roland," Paul responded.

"A slight understatement. You know who Vaclav is, don't you?" Paul shook his head.

"Does the name Brloh mean anything to you? Vaclav Brloh?"

Paul looked confused, then realisation came over him and he looked questioningly at Roland, "really?" Roland laughed and nodded at him.

"Wow!" Paul said. They left the toilet.

"Enjoy the party, Paul," Roland said to him, "you've already caused a big stir." He went his own way. Paul got the drinks sorted and returned to the group feeling very full of himself.

But he did not discuss chess with Vaclav. The younger ones were bemoaning the lack of people of their own age at the party. Paul decided to listen to the conversation while keeping an eye out for Dr More.

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An hour went by. But no sign of the doctor. It was getting anxious. The conversation had gone through many turns. Alexis, and Julie, had become quite drunk. They were not alone. Jon had gone off to try to impress more important people. Tania was quiet. Vaclav was loving it. He was entertaining to listen to. Paul consulted his watch. It wanted to move on.

"Restless, my friend," Vaclav asked.

"I am interested in talking to your Dr More."

"Interested in talking, or just interested?" he raised his eyebrow at Paul. Paul smiled back at him.

"Interested in talking to her about her work," he replied, "for the moment."

"She is deceptively attractive you know," Vaclav insisted, "but ferociously committed to her work."

"You don't know where she is?" Paul asked. Vaclav shook his head. Paul made his apologies and set off. He had barely gone ten paces when Tania came up by his side.

"Where are you going Paul?"

"I want to find the science crowd, Tania."

"I'll come with you, if you don't mind."

"Might be pretty boring for you." Paul warned.

"I don't mind. I could do with a change." Paul glanced at her.

"Are you alright Tania?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine." She did not sound convincing.

Together they searched for the science clique. The place was filling up. More and more people of the kind you would not see in the Zone. Or on the campus for that. Wealthy people. Powerful people. People who had their own guards. People who now ran things on one level or another. Dangerous people. Paul tried to ignore them. Julie appeared fascinated by them. They were skirting one group of people when a voice called out to Paul.

"Woodend, Paul Woodend." Paul stopped; through the crowd he could make out a familiar face.

"Come here, Woodend." The group parted for them.

It was the Arbiter, the man who was in control of the Zone and City Central Control. The man who had removed Paul.

"Arbiter, how are you?" Paul was polite. "How are things in the Zone?"

"Quieter since you left Woodend. We haven't had a mysterious death, yet." Paul said nothing. The Arbiter looked at Paul, then Tania.

"I see you are doing well for yourself." The Arbiter continued. Tania said nothing. "When I said we would meet again, I must admit I did not think it would be in these circumstances." He made a gesture with his hands.

"I am trying to make a career for myself in the sciences," Paul told him.

"So, I am informed by our host," the Arbiter nodded. "If you are looking for the eggheads then you'll find some in the next side room." He waved his hand. The movement both showed the way and dismissed them. They followed his pointer.

"So, that was the Arbiter," Tania said.

"A dangerous man, Tania," Paul told her. "There are a lot of them about tonight."

"Yes, I know," she answered looking at him. Paul caught a funny look in her eye but ignored it. Here they are, at last. It had registered them too.

In a room, similar in size to the one he had played chess in, were about ten people: both sexes, various ages. There was a vidscreen in operation, connected to a portable computer. Nothing showed on the screen at that moment.

Professor Smitdt turned and recognised Paul.

"Ah, Paul, come in." He welcomed him. "Bring your friend. I have just been telling everyone about you and the new course. Come in, I'll introduce you."

Paul introduced Tania first. Then he met the scientists. Overall, they were friendly, one joked a greeting, "so, you are the renegade zonie we've heard so much about? Welcome."

"Pleased to meet you again," Dr More said, politely. "I have been telling them of your chess skill."

"And Professor Smitdt has been telling us of your thoughts in certain areas," another older one, more Paul's age.

"And your recent acquisition of such knowledge," another added suspiciously. "How did you manage it?" it was said with more of a sneer now. Before Paul could reply another one interjected.

"I'm told he has lived in the College library for weeks. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right," Paul answered him.

"About two weeks' worth, I was told," the sneering one again. "That's not long. Have you got a photographic memory or something?" he laughed. One or two of the others joined him.

Paul looked at his mocker, "actually you are not far off there. I do have a certain ability." He held the man's eyes until the mocker shrugged his shoulders and moved away. He went to stand next to Dr More. Professor Smitdt took him by the arm and sat him down in a seat. He sat next to Paul. Tania was left to stand behind them.

"We were talking about what lies beyond our Solar System and the chances for life other than ours, out there." He said aside to Paul as the discussion restarted. Many people contributed at different points. One of the problems was a lack of evidence.

And imagination, the thing told Paul. These people were unable to imagine anything beyond what their own world had produced. They were not even up with the variation that their own world had provided, it scoffed.

Paul listened as they went onto Comets and whether they had brought life to Earth in the first place. Paul did not join in. He listened and placed everyone in the room. Whether they were College, or RC, what their specialist research areas were. It fed him the information along with some first impression analysis. It was still most taken with this Dr More. Eventually she turned to Paul and asked what his views were. The others became focused on him. He felt the weight of their attention. The Professor made an encouraging noise. Paul and it knew he needed to impress now.

"Well, the first thought I have is that we do not really know much about some of our own life forms. For example, the archaeans and some of the life under the sea." Someone asked

what archaeans were. Another explained as much as he knew. This was more like what the prokaryote was. He had known this for a short while, but he preferred the name prokaryote. Archaeans sounded too much like archaic. Yes, it was a deep space intelligent archaean. Paul did not feel uncomfortable with the idea of a distant cousin of it being transported to the young Earth. Once there it and others like it developed into all the types of life now known. Paul wondered, not for the first time, whether this had been an intentional act by some other intelligence. Deliberately seeding the Solar System with organic life sent by comets and asteroids. Paul added what he knew about extremophiles, archaeans in general. He went on.

"Then you have things like that underground cavern discovered in Romania, or somewhere. Where no light gets in and an entire ecosystem has developed unlike anything else on Earth." Only one of them had heard about this. Paul explained what he knew, "because no light gets through the chemistry has gone down a different path. The start of the food chain is a bacterium or algae that uses the chemistry of sulphur to produce energy. It takes the sulphur out of the cavern rocks. The rest of the food chain then feeds in a similar way to normal, ending up with completely blind and colourless insects not found anywhere else in the world. The point is," he paused here. They were listening.

"We must not assume that no life exists out there because we can't imagine it. It is all to do with chemistry. For example, the reactions that drive our lives ultimately start with the reaction of oxygen in our cells. Now if it was possible to chemically drive those reactions differently. Or even substitute a new set of chemical reactions to do the job of releasing energy to our body on the larger scale. Then would we be any the wiser? We could perhaps

exist in an oxygen free environment. Didn't the early Earth have very little gaseous oxygen?"

There were mumbles from his audience. Even the one who sneered looked thoughtful. Paul continued.

"Take Europa. For years scientists entertained hopes of finding life there because of the signs of water. All life on Earth needs water apparently. Well there was nothing there. Mars proved to be a dead end for Earth type life long since halted in its evolutionary progress. I think you would do better to consider some of the more unlikely candidates in the Solar System."

"For instance?" one of the women asked.

"Well, Io for instance." Paul noticed many of them steal glances at each other at the mention of his suggestion. It said, *we are on to something here*. Even Paul could sense something in them. He tried to qualify his thought.

"We know of the vulcanism active there. See the sulphur link. The gravitational influence of nearby Jupiter makes the chance of heat being available if needed."

"But how would organic molecules or life get onto Io?" it was More asking.

"We know what a trap for comets Jupiter represents. Pulling them out of their orbits and snatching them gravitationally. Io, being so close to Jupiter, would statistically receive a fair share of watery organic gifts."

Dr More nodded her head. Paul had a good feeling about the way this was going. He pressed on.

"Of course, the best place to look for a different life form, I think, is beyond the Solar System."

"On planets around other stars," Smitdt said aloud. They all nodded knowingly.

"No, I don't mean that," Paul said hurriedly. "We are not going to be able to see or prove that life for a good while yet. Although I don't doubt that life is out there." A few mumbles.

"No, I was thinking a little closer to home. Out around the Oort cloud region in interstellar space." He paused again and judged their interest. Still with him.

"Out there, where the big comets originate, you have got dust clouds and molecular clouds. Organic material by the bucketful. Perhaps something is out there waiting for us to find it." *Not bad*, it congratulated him, a good effort.

"But surely the distance between individual molecules out there means they would rarely come into direct contact with each other," one of them stated.

"And the temperature of space is so cold," another one said. "Where would the energy come from?"

"Well try not to be trapped by your earthly preconceptions," Paul reminded them. "There have been billions of years for something to happen and perhaps there are localised mass concentrations where all the action is." They laughed in a thoughtful way, Paul thought.

"Perhaps a way to harness passing radiation has been found. A different kind of chemistry working. Or maybe the whole pace of life is completely different. Slower. Or perhaps there is a reaction with dark matter out there." He laughed. "Perhaps they were put there themselves, like our descendants were put here to develop on our own." He smiled at them and shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated way.

They all laughed, and the mood relaxed. Professor Smitdt patted Paul on the back, "what did I tell you. He is an interesting fellow, is he not?"

Nobody answered, but Paul felt the warmth of smiles from most of them. He looked at Tania, she looked bored. Well she had wanted to come along. The Professor was speaking again.

"Paul has some interesting ideas on dark matter, too, I can tell you. Verging on the spiritual at times." Paul laughed. "I must get you to tell us sometime. But now Jane how about an update on the mission."

She moved towards the computer giving Paul a long look on the way. The Professor picked up on her concern. He interceded before she voiced her doubts.

"Paul has already had a visit to the RC and has been tested by both our security forces. He has the blessing of the Director and the RC controller."

She grunted an acknowledgement. No one else objected to Paul's presence. Although the one who sneered, scowled. They did not seem to notice Tania. Unusually, it, was so interested in the probe mission that the prokaryote did not find this odd, recalling it only later. It settled Paul down to give his full attention to Dr More's update.

It was obvious throughout Dr More's update that she was the project leader, the mission controller. Only occasionally did she ask her colleague, the sneerer, for some confirmation of a detail. To most people present there was not much new. But to Paul and the prokaryote it was the first time they had the information they were after.

The probe was to be launched on top of a latest series rocket. Previous launches in China had all been successful, no problems to date. It would be the first launch from the RC launch pad. The test firings of the rocket system had been completed satisfactorily. One or two minor adjustments to the launch pad rigging were required. Work on this would be

complete within the next two days. One person had suffered an accident during these tests. He was recovering in the RC. Dr More illustrated her report with pictures and schematics that were fed to the vidscreen from her computer. The graphics were impressive, especially the moving ones. That could be a useful tool to have on his course, for tutorials. He must have a word with the Professor

Will you concentrate.

Dr Jane More was describing the payload of the mission. The probe would be carried into Earth orbit by the rocket system. Once safely in orbit it would be checked out for any problems. Then after only ten orbits of the Earth the probe's rockets would fire and it would head off. Aimed at a rendezvous with Jupiter in two years' time. Half the probe's eight tonne mass was taken up by its nuclear rocket propulsion system. Gone were the times when mission designers had to worry about cost and the subsequent effect on size. The scale of this mission would have made the engineers and scientists of the 1990's mad with envy, Paul thought. Not only a huge rocket to power the probe which meant no need for complicated sling shot manoeuvres round the inner planets. But also, the size of the probe itself and the scale of the experiments it was due to attempt was awesome.

During the flight to Jupiter, X-ray and infrared equipment would be available, along with ultra-violet and visible cameras, to investigate anything they passed on the way. This might include asteroids, Mars, and one comet that would come into range. Also, such was the scope of these instruments they could be trained onto objects beyond our Solar System and be able to do good science. Importantly, here was a flying, all be it smaller, space telescope that could respond to any developments in the larger picture as it flew to its primary target. Once it got close to Jovian space it would make a few adjustments to its position and

direction. Then it would go into an orbit just beyond Io's orbit. This would be the most perilous part of the journey. The effect of the radiation belts in this region were still not well understood. When in the correct position the probe would release its two 'children'. One mini probe to orbit Io itself, and a lander to drop onto the surface of the moon. Neither were expected to survive long. But while they did stay operating, they would flood Io with all manner of radiations of their own. Results would be beamed to the mother probe for storage and eventual transmission to Earth. The main probe would be moved out to a safer orbit once it had released its cargo. Throughout the mission there would always be a ground-based tracker and receiver, somewhere in the world, able and ready to contact it and receive signals from it. Of course, when you were as far away as Jupiter was it took time for the signals to get there.

There followed a discussion on the experiments and the availability of the vast amount of data that would be generated. There would be a lot of collaboration with other groups around the world. It was impressive, Paul thought. It was just what it wanted, it thought. Paul could feel the satisfaction in it. There was just one thing that Dr More had neglected to confirm. When was this all going up?

"When is your launch date?" he asked when they were finished.

"Launch is this Friday, 0900 hrs," she smiled, "all being willing."

FRIDAY!! It was going mad. Apoplectic. Paul felt pain in his head.

How are we going to get in there by then? We need another miracle. Or perhaps another intervention of some kind. Paul tried to calm it down again.

"Is that your only launch window?" he asked. *Good thinking*, it said. Thank you, Paul thought.

"No," Dr More shook her head. "We have another date one week later which we can manage. It would require a reprogramming of the navigational computers, but it is possible."

"Well, thank you for that, Jane," the Professor was bringing it to a close. "Those of us directly involved will be there of course. But I'm sure we all wish for every success."

The meeting broke up. People started to leave. The Doctor came over to the Professor and sat down. She took a drink from the Professor and sipped it delicately.

"Well, what do you think of the mission, Paul?" the Professor asked. "I know you have been dying to know all about it."

"Fantastic." Paul replied enthusiastically. "There's so much science crammed into it." She was trying not to pay any attention to him, looking the other way. "It must have taken a lot of coordination and organisation to get this going." She was smiling to herself. "Just think of the scientific data it will produce. It will keep people going for years. Tremendous."

The Professor smiled. "Our Dr More is quite something, isn't she?" he put his arm around her and squeezed her. She gave a squeal of protest.

"She certainly is," Paul said getting out of his seat. "Let's hope nothing goes wrong." He noticed a frown pass her features.

"Well, I had better be off to join my friends. God knows what state they might be in by now."

The Professor whispered something in the Doctor's ear. She nodded and grunted an agreement. The Professor turned back to Paul; he was smiling.

"Paul come around to my office tomorrow, we may have something for you."

"Ok." Paul was by the door.

"Oh, Paul," the Professor again, "make it the afternoon will you."

Paul smiled and nodded. Suddenly Tania was beside him. He had forgotten about her.

"I'm sorry Tania, I got so into that I forgot all about you." He was honest. She looked hurt for an instant. Then she smiled a crafty smile.

"Actually, I fell asleep in there. I needed it; I think. I feel a bit more with it now."

"Oh dear, are you?" he sounded disappointed.

"Yes, I am," she gave him a playful punch on the arm. "Come on let's find the others."

Chapter 12

It was Monday morning about ten. Paul lay awake in bed. It was reviewing the situation. Paul remembered the end of the Director's party. By the time he and Tania had got back to the others it was about eleven. Alexis and Julie had proved magnetic. Many of the younger partygoers had congregated around them. It appeared that Alexis had persuaded one of the bands to set up by them. People were dancing or just listening to the music. A group of the younger waiters seemed to have claimed the group for their own. They even had more than their fair share of guards to watch over them. Guards that smiled a lot and even swayed to the music occasionally. What was that old saying? The joint was jumping.

Tania found Jon still trying to impress people. He was quite drunk. She got him up dancing. It was almost as amusing as watching him impressing people. Paul discovered Vaclav still there and doing ok. He was not the worse for drink. Paul set about asking him about Dr Jane More and her wonderkid, Tara. He was very forthcoming. They stored away some useful information.

Then after midnight they were told that the party was finishing. The clearing up process began. They were slowly but steadily shepherded out of the building. All their coats were safely retrieved, and they were led to waiting groundbuses. For some reason the groundbus they found themselves on was barely half full as it headed back to the campus. They all lay flat out, dozing all the way. At the apartblock they got out, congratulated each other on a brilliant day out, then went to their homes. Exhaustion had finally struck. They were glad they had arranged easy days for themselves on the day after.

Paul got out of bed and dressed. He scanned the vidscreen channels before leaving the apartblock. Nothing interesting. He set out for a stroll. Eventually he made his way into the refectory and settled into a seat by one of the windows to eat. He took his time, he had time to kill for the moment. Before he went to meet the Professor, he would pop round the library and see what state Julie was in. Assuming she was working. Then he would look in on the astrolab to see if there was anything interesting happening.

As he left the refectory a guard stopped him. He was wanted by the Director's assistant, immediately. The guard followed him across the road, through reception and to the lift for Roland Agen's office, just in case, it seemed. Paul was ushered into Roland's office.

"Paul Woodend reporting, sir, as ordered." He quipped as he stood before his desk.

"Yes, indeed," Roland said dryly. He thought Woodend looked quite well considering he had been to an all-day party the day before.

"You look like you enjoyed yourself yesterday," Paul said, thinking that Roland looked the worse for wear today. Tired, slightly bloodshot eyes, bags under them. He had not shaved well. He had missed tiny areas Paul noticed.

"It was a good party, was it not?" Roland asked Paul. "How did you get on?"

"I had a great time, so did my friends. Really enjoyed themselves."

Roland nodded, he flicked a switch on his desk, "nothing now till I'm ready." He spoke into the desk top. He rose from the desk and motioned Paul to follow him.

"Let us go and see the old man, Paul." He touched something on the wall and part of it slid open to reveal some stairs. Paul followed him in and up the stairs. The panel slid back in place. Soon another panel slid open and they walked into the inner private office of the Director.

"Sit down, Paul," the Director said, "fancy a drink? Coffee?"

"Fine, thanks," Paul answered with a nod of confirmation.

"Same for you Roland?"

"That would be great," Roland sat in the seat next to Paul. The Director busied himself serving the drinks. Surprisingly he appeared fine. No visible effects of a heavy night. Paul felt relaxed, he suddenly realised.

There is no concern? He worried for a second that it was still preoccupied by its own thoughts.

Everything is fine. We sense no danger or bad intentions.

Good. I thought you had gone off somewhere then, for a minute.

We are always here.

So, what's up? Why am I here? Can you tell yet?

They want something from you. They want you to do something for them.

What is it? Is it risky?

We cannot tell yet. But they do not seem worried about you.

"Enjoy the party, Paul?" the Director started.

"I was just telling Roland; I had a great time. And my friends. Well, they were dead chuffed, shall we say, by it all. When's the next one?"

The Director smiled, "not for a while, now. How did you get on with the science crew? I understand you joined their little gathering."

"Fine, I hope. Professor Smidtdt introduced me and I tried to make a good impression."

"What did you make of them?" it could feel the interest growing in the Director.

"They seemed a nice enough crowd. Typical scientists stuck in their own world. Lost in their theories and ideas."

"What do you think of this probe mission?"

"Well it's a hell of a mission, a kind of mega science adventure. There's so much going on all over the place. Really interesting. It must have taken a lot of planning, organisation, resources and cooperation. Worldwide cooperation. To my knowledge this country has never done anything on this scale before. That Dr More must be something else, and she must have had a lot of outside help. Not to mention the sheer cost of it all."

"Yes, indeed," the Director was thoughtful. "It has cost a lot of money. Just as importantly it has cost a lot of goodwill too. From our friends and allies around the world. Goodwill and technical knowhow. Brilliant as Dr More is, and good though her team is, it would not have been possible to be ready now without outside help."

It did not surprise Paul. Even in this post 'trouble' time of liberal funding it was hard to believe that the country's space program had come so far so quickly. The implication was, who was pulling the strings? Was this just part of a global strategy? Were they being used in some way? Who did run things? Who runs this country? Who runs the world? And so on.

"Will it be a successful mission? Or should I say, how successful will it be? What do you think Paul?" the Director watched him closely.

"Well it's hard to tell from here," he began. "I don't know what problems they have had to date. Or how they solved them. There is a lot of instrumentation flying on the probe. It would not be unusual for some of it to play up from time to time or for one thing to fail to work at all. Assuming, that the mission has the quality of back up that you have implied it had in the planning. Then some of the faults that develop, you would hope that they might be turned around." He paused for another think.

Listen to me, I sound like I've been commanding missions like this all my life, he thought amazingly. His thoughts were so clear.

Do not forget you are very knowledgeable now. It reminded him.

The Director and Roland were waiting for him.

"Flying straight to Jupiter on that monster rocket helps. Less risk than those planet flyby slingshots. I don't think that any probe has been lost in the asteroid belt yet. But of course, the odd probe has been lost for whatever reason before. Usually attributed to computer failure of some kind. They have a triple back up system here. That's a lot of fail safe. The most dangerous part of

the mission, after the launch, is the meeting with Io and dropping the lander. But by then it will already have performed a lot of science." He stopped.

"So, how successful will it be?" the Director was smiling at Roland.

Paul saw his point and smiled back. "Excepting some major loss. It will be very successful." Paul concluded.

There 'endeth' the word of Paul Woodend. He joked to himself. It did not respond.

"We, and our associates, agree," the Director said. "It would be a great loss to science if something went wrong. It would also be a loss to our standing amongst our friends, who have helped us so much." It was obvious which he thought the most important. "Not unreasonably they expect a useful return for their aid. There might be some," he paused to choose his words, "some ramifications for us all." He looked at Paul. "If something was to go wrong, badly wrong."

Roland nodded his head in agreement. They were getting to it now.

The Director continued, "we have reason to believe that the resistance will try to disrupt the mission in some way." Another pause to let that news settle in with Paul.

"Paul, we are aware of your desire to get involved with the RC and this particular area of its work."

Paul nodded. But said nothing. He kept his attention fixed on the Director. His old friend.

"We are going to get you attached to the project staff, even at this late date. Officially you will be an observer. It will not be explained who you are observing for, or what you are observing. You will not offer any answers to anyone. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Paul was stunned.

"Professor Smitdt intends to take you on a visit to mission control this afternoon. While you are there, it will be announced by the RC controller that you will be immediately assuming this role. You will have an RC officer with you at all times when you are over there."

He stopped to gauge the impact this was having on Paul. He was shocked, that much was evident. He had a faraway look in his eyes.

"Your brief, Paul, is to watch for any suspicious activity in the build up to the launch. You will have access to all the mission records. Use your unique talents to check the details."

Paul was still shocked.

"You will report to Roland; the RC officer to his controller. Do you understand Paul?"

It seemed to them that Paul came out of a dream and finally appeared with it. He looked from one to the other.

"Why me? I don't understand that?" he needed to know, he could not believe it, they felt. The Director indicated to Roland. Roland said to Paul.

"Well, there are a number of things going for you. You are completely new to the project. You have the technical knowledge, now. Those abilities that enabled you to gen up will also enable you to get to grips with the data. Don't deny it." Paul did not.

"You don't know anyone on the project and don't have any allegiances. You are the most heavily tested person we know of. If you perform this task well, you will be set up here for life. You want that." He looked for some confirmation from Paul. But Paul gave him none. He carried on.

"Your sheer presence will upset some people, ruffle a few feathers. It might provoke a response, or shake loose some resistance sympathisers, or perhaps persuade them to drop their plans this time. You could possibly be approached by them. Also, you can look after yourself and will not be afraid to act, take some action, if required. Witness your activities in the Zone."

It was the closest they ever got to saying that they knew he was involved in the Quizmaster murders. Paul was stunned, it did not have to control him physically. It was delighted at this fortuitous turn of events. The chance was there now. But at the same time, it also had the deepest feeling of trepidation that it had experienced since leaving the Zone. This could be some elaborate trap. There appeared to be more to their intentions than they were telling Paul. It began to feel that leaving Paul behind in safety might not be easily achieved.

"You don't expect me to join the other side, do you?" Paul asked. But his voice carried little conviction. It was the last throw of his old zonie self. He had to take this on. The prokaryote would have nothing less. He needed a life after it left him. His own instincts, though, gave him a bad feeling about it. But he could do nothing except trust in the prokaryote to protect him. Until it left him.

The Director and Roland looked at each other and smiled. They knew Paul had no option.

"We do not think you want the alternative, Paul," Roland said quietly.

"It's going to be strange working for the authorities," Paul said finally, acceptance in his voice.

"Hopefully it will only be for a short time, Paul," the Director said. "Do your best to carry it off this afternoon."

Roland left his seat and went to the panel. Paul followed. A few minutes later they were back in Roland's office.

"So, your rehabilitation is now complete, Paul Woodend," Roland said to him smiling grimly. "You have come in from the cold."

"What if I mess up?" Paul asked.

"I doubt if you will. You are a survivor." He said confidently. "Here is the latest communicator."

He showed Paul how it worked, pointing out how to contact various people with it. Then he saw Paul out.

On his way over to the Astroscience building Paul and the thing pondered what had happened. By the time he reached the Professor's office they were both ready for their unexpected trip to the probe mission control.

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The groundcar left the College east gate and set off for the RC. It was a personal and roomy groundcar. It belonged to Dr More. She sat up front with Professor Smitdt. They chatted about someone Paul had never met. It was idle gossip. In the back were Vaclav, Tara and Paul. Tara sat on Paul's lap holding his hand. She had insisted, firmly, without a tantrum that she wanted to accompany her mother that day. For some reason, Jane More could not remember why, she had agreed. Vaclav decided to come along too. Professor Smitdt had been a little surprised but pleased to have them on the trip. They were welcome and of course would not present a security problem.

He had told Paul of the trip and had been delighted by the look of anticipation and pleasure on his face. He wasted no time in taking Paul down to the common room, where they were waiting. As soon as Dr More had finished answering some students' questions they were on their way. Vaclav was suffering a little from the party and slumped in one of the back corners.

Tara, who had greeted Paul very warmly, said she wanted to sit on his lap. There was plenty of room for her to sit safely in the back. However, Paul did not mind. Jane had not seen her child take so quickly to someone before. The Professor muttered about how interesting Paul was, again. Paul and Tara chatted during the journey. However, they communicated less than their prokaryotes.

They went through the usual security at the entrance to the RC. Except of course Tara. She was not required to lay her hands on the sensor pads. They then carried on without an escort. Surprisingly no one came forward to be Paul's minder. Perhaps they were waiting till his new observer status had been announced. There followed one more security check during their progress in the RC area.

Close to one side of the huge launch pad plain lay a few typical RC buildings. The groundcar pulled up in front of them. There were no explanatory signs. But there was a small guardhouse with two guards at the entrance to the main building. They got out of the groundcar and Dr More led the way to the entrance. Only Paul and Vaclav were subjected to another security test this time. Once that

was over, they entered the building. Immediately they came across a reception desk. Greetings were exchanged between the Professor, the Doctor and the reception staff. Badges were filled in and given out, and they all signed in. Tara signed in too, which surprised the staff. She also proudly wore her badge. Paul noticed that the badge contained a strip which monitored exposure to radioactivity. Dr More then headed towards the lift. They all easily fitted in and the doors closed on them. Paul was confused. The building had only two stories. None of the buildings were linked. There did not seem to be enough space to fit in a control area. Then, this lift had more buttons for floors than it should have.

Dr More pressed one of the buttons on the panel. She turned to look at Paul and Tara. The Professor and Vaclav were also studying them. The lift started to move. Downwards. Paul suddenly realised what was going on and returned a smile to the others. Tara gave out a cry at first in surprise. Then she smiled and giggled. It was an infectious reaction. They all began to laugh and giggle.

"All of the mission control area is underground," the Professor explained. "It goes down a few levels and extends out quite a way under the area surrounding the launch pad."

"The work areas, labs and assembly rooms are here too," Dr More added. "The entire probe and most of the instruments have been constructed and put together here in this facility."

"I'm sure it is very impressive," Paul said genuinely. "I can't wait to see it all."

Dr More noted the anticipation in his voice. She shot a glance at the Professor who was smiling at Paul, again.

"You are only seeing the mission control room today, Paul." There was something in her voice Paul felt. She did not really want him around. Well, she was in for a shock. Paul said nothing. The smile left the Professor's face. He pondered how he could get her to accept Paul. Tara squeezed Paul's hand gently. He looked down into her eyes. They shone mischievously back at him.

They had reached their level. The Doctor led the way again. They passed many technicians and other staff on the way. Always there was an exchange between the Doctor, the Professor and the staff. Once or twice there was an extended discussion. The topics were all to do with the mission. Eventually, judging by the signs, they reached mission control. A guard stood outside. He pressed the necessary buttons and the doors opened. They swept inside.

It was just like those old NASA control rooms, Paul thought. It was a big room. They had entered on one side, about the middle. The room had a slope. Fairly gentle. To the bottom were all the typical mission control positions and terminals, arranged in three lines facing a wall of screens. There was plenty of activity with people milling about and gathered around computer screens. At the raised end of the room many offices were laid out in a semicircle around a clutch of tables and chairs that looked like a conference area. People were again busy about their business. A couple of people seemed to be relaxing in the conference area. They made their way in that direction.

Before they reached the tables, Paul recognised one of the men. It was the RC officer who had taken him on his visit. He must be the one he thought to himself. It agreed. Dr More had also clocked the officer. She did not hide a scowl. Interesting, Paul thought. The two groups came together. The other man was the mission control room chief of operations. Dr More introduced Paul and then left her group. She had given the officer a curt acknowledgement. The Doctor entered her office, the central one with a good view of the entire room. She began consulting a computer terminal. Vaclav and Tara sat down and accepted the offer of some drinks from the operations chief.

"Hello, again, Woodend," the officer greeted Paul.

"You two know each other?" the Professor was friendlier towards the officer.

"I took Woodend around on his first visit to the RC," the officer informed the Professor. "He was very interested in the mission area then and was keen to find out more. Looks like you have got your way." He turned to Paul. "Again," he added.

"Things seem to be falling into place for me," he said to the officer. "At the moment."

The officer nodded. Well are you going to break the news or not? Paul wondered. Perhaps he is waiting for someone else to do it. The drinks had arrived for Tara and Vaclav. The operations chief approached Paul and the Professor.

"Now what would you two like?"

Paul was about to reply when he felt slight vibration through the floor. A very low, quiet rumble followed immediately. Paul became alert.

Then it happened again. Paul quickly glanced at the Professor and the operations chief. They had noticed something too. Then another one and another one. The officer looked to Paul.

"Is that what I think it is?" as he said it yet another one occurred.

"I'd say so," Paul answered. Around the room people had stopped what they were doing and were concentrating on waiting for it to happen again. Dr More came out of her office with a worried look on her face.

Seconds went by. Nothing else happened.

"What was that?" the Doctor asked, to nobody as such. Throughout the room similar questions were being asked. The officer had pulled out his communicator and spoke into it. He moved away a little. Turning to face them he motioned to Paul to get his communicator out.

"Switch to setting 10, Woodend."

Paul switched to the channel. He heard a lot of frantic sounding reports, seemingly coming from several sources. A certain amount of confusion was apparent. The officer gave an instruction.

"This is the Keeper. I repeat, the Keeper. All reports to control on channel 5. I repeat to channel 5. Control, I want something sooner rather than later."

"Understood, Keeper." One voice responded. All the other traffic had left the channel.

The officer kept the communicator close to his ear. Paul could see the confusion on the Professor's face. He ignored his inquiring look. Concern filled the faces of the Doctor and the operations chief. Vaclav was attending to Tara; she had spilt her drink. Tara's eyes were fixed on Paul.

Not confirmed yet. Paul felt the message go out between them.

"Keeper, we have your report." The voice in the control centre. "As yet, unidentified missiles have hit the launch pad area. Five in total. Damage to structure and casualties reported."

"Thank you, control. I am on my way. Out." The officer turned to the others.

"Problems at the launch pad." To Paul, "coming Woodend?" he was off before Paul could answer. Paul followed.

"Paul, what's going on?" it was the Professor. Paul faced him.

"The launch pad has been attacked by the sound of it," Paul answered. There were gasps around the room.

"But Paul, what's all this?" the Professor pointed at the communicator. "What are you doing?"

"I'll explain later, Professor, I've got to go with the officer." Paul chased after him. Stay there, it said.

"I don't understand," the Professor was lost.

"What can we do?" it was Vaclav.

"Well, we can follow that pair for a start." The Doctor cried. "Vaclav stay here with Tara please." She was off herself. The Professor and operations chief rushed after her.

Paul caught up with the officer at the lift. There was a lot of uncertainty in the people they had passed. At the reception they neglected to sign out. They were not challenged. Quickly they jumped into the officer's personal groundcar and were off. Many other groundcars and vehicles were on the road ahead of them. They included ambulances and rescue vehicles. In the distance Paul could see smoke and dust around the huge launch pad structure. Various shades of black and grey billowing clouds. But Paul could not make out any fire at this distance.

"Have you had anything like this on the RC before?" Paul asked the officer.

"Never."

They had covered the plain and reached the launch pad structure. It towered above them. Crews of people were running about. A fire behind the structure was being dealt with. The injured were being carried away and treated. The casualties were being placed nearby. Some of the wreckage was being cleared in the search for more people. It looked and sounded like pandemonium. People shouting orders, others screaming. The twisted and broken remains of the damaged parts everywhere. Metal grating on the ground as it was dragged away. Vehicles moving about. The officer got out of his groundcar and stood watching the action in front of him. Paul joined him. The officer made no move to get involved. As they observed Paul realised that his first impressions were wrong. It just sounded like chaos. The whole operation was being directed with skill. It did not appear controlled, granted, but nevertheless was efficient.

They had been watching for a few minutes when the scientists turned up. Dr More pulled up alongside them. The three of them got out and joined Paul and the officer. Nobody spoke. Paul had counted six apparently dead bodies. Twenty or more injured. Hard to tell the seriousness of their injuries. They were quickly transported away. The smoke was clearing slowly.

"My God! What a mess." It was the Professor who finally spoke. He was taking the whole scene in.

"It's only the bottom of the rigging that's damaged badly." The operations chief said with a bit of optimism in his voice.

"It's hard to tell from here." The Doctor said quietly.

"The main superstructure is largely unaffected, and the rocket base looks in good shape." The operations man again.

"Yes. Thank God, they had the pit plates up at the time. They don't seem to have been hit or damaged at all." The Doctor.

"It looks like they have managed to get all the workers out now," the Professor, care in his tone.

"Have you ever seen anything like it, Paul?"

"Yes, I have Professor," Paul replied. "I have." He put his hand on the Professor's shoulder.

"Seen worse I would imagine," the officer added. Paul nodded.

"The damage might not be that bad, you know, Jane." Operations chief.

"You might be right." The Doctor.

Paul exchanged glances with the officer.

"I'll see what I can find out," the officer said to Paul, "it seems to have calmed down a bit." He gave a considerate pat on the arm to the Professor and walked towards the carnage. The Doctor started to follow. The officer spun round and glared at her. His eyes ablaze.

"Don't!" he hissed at her. She recoiled. The officer waited till she stepped back, scowling. Then he walked forward. He stopped at the edge of the active area. He waited there for a few minutes making no attempt to attract anyone's attention. Then Paul noticed one of the rescue crew emerge from a group and slowly make his way towards the officer. He looked at ease but was subdued in his manner.

There followed a discussion between the two. The rescuer pointed now and then at something behind him without turning around. The officer nodded and made the occasional comment. After about five minutes the rescuer went back to his men. The officer began to speak into his communicator. Paul moved away from the scientists, to the side. He listened to the officer's report. The Professor kept his eyes on him and tried to listen, but he heard nothing. Paul noticed that the Doctor was scowling at him once more.

The officer finished his report to control. There was a brief discussion on what to do next. Paul noted that the officer's recommendations were quickly accepted. He was clearly a top dog here in the RC. When it was over, he came straight back to them.

"What is it Paul? What's happening?" the Professor was anxious.

"Let's see what he has to say," Paul replied.

The officer spoke to the scientists, "there is nothing you can do here. We will begin the investigation. There is a lot of clearing up to do and when we know more you will be informed. Now return to mission control and wait for us, he indicated towards Woodend. Nobody is being allowed in or out of the RC until further notice. Warn your people to expect questioning and tests."

The Professor and operations chief nodded and made to move off. But the Doctor was not happy.

"I want to inspect the damage now. I am not prepared to let your people make things worse than they already are. And who do you mean by 'us'. What has this Woodend person to do with anything?" she was working herself up.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" the officer mocked her. "Woodend has been attached to the project by the RC controller. He is to observe and assist in any way he can. Right now, he will assist me in this investigation, Doctor!"

"I will talk to the controller about this," she said coldly.

"Doctor, he is expecting your call. Go back to mission control and do it."

She stormed off and jumped into her groundcar. The operations chief quickly followed. The Professor stood looking at Paul almost beseechingly.

"Go on Professor. I'll return to mission control as soon as I can and explain to you what's going on. Go on! she'll go without you!" the Professor scrambled into the groundcar just as it tore off back the way it had come.

They watched it go.

"You will, of course, not explain to him all that's going on," the officer said to Paul.

"No. I just wanted to reassure him. He's a bit shocked by it all. I doubt he's been this close to dead bodies before."

"No, to his credit he showed concern for the people. Unlike the other two. More interested in their precious mission than dead people." The officer made no attempt to conceal his contempt.

"You are no admirer of the brilliant Doctor, then?" Paul smiled stirring.

"She's a cow of a woman, Paul. A real heartless bitch." He spat the words out. He looked quite venomous. Paul was surprised at his choice of words.

"Are you going to call me by my first name now we are officially working together?" Paul asked him.

"Maybe." He smiled at Paul. "Come on, let's see what happened here." They walked towards the stricken structure.

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It was the next morning before Paul returned to the mission control building.

Most of the staff had slept rough waiting to be tested by security. All RC staff were quickly run through the sensors. Everyone in the area had been done by the end of the day after the attack. Both Paul and the officer had been tested. All the staff employed on the mission were tested. This included Dr More, very much to her disgust. Later that day the area would be opened again. Life would get back to normal, slowly. Of course, the events influenced the RC staff caught up in them. A lot of anger was expressed. Some accusations were made about some people. A frustration, not felt by many people in the RC before, swept across the place.

But much of this was yet to come when Paul took the lift down to the mission control room level. When he entered the room, many people were still asleep. He made his way towards Tara. He

could see her lying next to Vaclav in the middle near the tables. As he came close, she woke up and raised herself off the floor.

"Hello Paul," she whispered and held her hand out to him.

"Hello Tara." He gave her his hand. "Have you been sleeping?" he whispered in response to her raised finger to her lips.

"I have. Have you slept yet?"

"No, not yet, I have been busy with the officer."

As they continued with their whispered conversation the prokaryotes compared notes.

A door opened behind them. Tara turned around and smiled.

"Look mother, Paul is back." She cried out excitedly sounding more like a child again. Beside her Vaclav stirred. Paul could see the Professor standing behind Dr More. Other people began to wake up around them.

"Tara, come here," Dr More held her hand out. Tara ran to her. Paul smiled. Vaclav gave Paul a playful shove in the shoulder.

"So, there you are, mystery man." He said with a wink. "You really have caused a stir this time. What have you got to say for yourself?"

Paul laughed.

"Yes, Paul, you said you would explain to me what you were doing," the Professor had come closer.

"Well Professor, I have to admit I lied to you back there, I'm sorry."

Dr More snorted. She held Tara in her hands now. Paul had recall of everything that Tara had witnessed in his absence. He saw the scene where a fuming Doctor had raced past her daughter into her office. Then spent a few minutes ranting at someone in her terminal screen. To no avail it seemed. She came back out quietly.

"I can't do anything about it." She said to the Professor, "your Woodend has the blessing of the top brass. Very top brass." She was wounded. "The Director even asked for him to be put in."

"Really?" the Professor was surprised. "I thought I was making the running there."

She shot him a sharp glance. "Well, he is to help in any way he can, and he can have access to all our records." She was outraged.

"Don't worry Jane, I'm sure Paul is a good man. He can only be a help.

"I like him," Tara had said then.

"So, do I," Vaclav agreed.

In the present Paul could see the Professor was disappointed. He spoke to him.

"I am not allowed to tell you what I'm doing. Just accept that I'm here because some people are concerned. They want the mission to succeed. They were worried, with some reason it seems. They seem to think I can be useful." He shrugged his shoulders as the Doctor gave another snort which was cut short somehow. Paul could see Tara looking intently at her mother. The Doctor appeared to be in a moments discomfort.

"Anyway, I'll tell you what I'm allowed to. You'll be getting some data down the lines in a short while. Then tomorrow you can go and see the launch pad structure for yourselves."

"Well, get on with it, Paul," Vaclav again, "we're starving for information."

"Give me a coffee will you, I'm dying for one. Then I'll tell you."

The Professor fetched him one and the people awake in the room came closer to hear what he had to say.

He thought he would give them the good news first. Despite the assault of five explosive devices the rigging had held up well. Most of the damage was at ground level. Once the damaged parts of the superstructure have been removed then work could begin on the reconstruction. In answer to the question of when it could be finished by. He quoted the RC structural engineers as saying it could be finished, at the earliest, by next Tuesday. The Doctor cursed. They could still use the second launch window. However, once the rigging was repaired there would be no time to do the testing on it to make sure it would withstand the forces of lift off. The rocket would have to brought into place on the Wednesday. Then the probe fixed into its position on Thursday. It would be one

mad rush. There would be very little room for delay or problems. It would have to run super smoothly. Someone pointed out that they were lucky. If the attack had happened today when the rocket was meant to be put in place. Well that would have been an end of it. Paul thought that it would have been the end of a lot more people too. All that rocket fuel around.

The Professor, considerate as ever, asked about the number of deaths. Paul reported ten dead, with many injured in the infirmary. Paul again noticed a lack of concern here from many of the other scientists. A callous bunch.

Next, he gave them some details from the investigation. Paul had made sure he had not got in the officer's way. He stood a little off and listened and watched. He contributed only when specifically asked. He played his observer role. Never far from the officer, he missed nothing. The first thing the officer did was consult with all the rescue crews. He checked on the safety of the general area and took reports on the casualties and injured. He consulted with the engineers who had arrived to clear up the mess. Before they left the scene, he gave orders that all reports were to be sent to him at RC control.

They had reached the officer's groundcar and were taking another look at the damaged site, when one of the officer's men came running up. He reported that the weapon used in the attack had been identified from the remains of the projectiles. The name meant nothing to Paul. But it had significance to the officer and his man. The officer thanked him and asked him to keep searching for more evidence.

In the groundcar the officer explained to Paul that the weapon was a kind of mortar. It could fire anti-personnel bombs or something a bit meatier if necessary. The shell fragments found suggested the anti-personnel type had been employed against the launch pad. That would explain why the damage to the structure was not as bad as first feared. More important though was the fact that this mortar had a maximum range of two kilometres. The officer gave orders to concentrate the search in a two-kilometre circular area around the launch pad. Swifts, that had been mobilised as

soon as the explosions were reported, were directed to fly over this area and search it, section by section, for the tell-tale infrared signature of a recently fired weapon like a mortar. Out of the window Paul could see the swifts buzzing around in the sky.

It was not long before news came in. They had just reached the control centre when the officer was informed of the discovery of the mortar. Leaving his personal groundcar behind, the officer, followed by Paul, climbed into a larger one that was taking a team out to inspect the mortar. A swift had found it just outside the RC perimeter. It was lying in a small depression hidden from the view of any guardposts. In fact, it could have been set up without anyone from the RC being able to see it. Camouflaged and at the limit of its range. It had been fired by remote control. Apparently, a facility available to this type. The team quickly established that no evidence had been left behind for them. The range for the remote control was probably at least fifty kilometres. Which did not help at all. They brought the weapon back to the control with them and the officer asked for a trace to be put on the serial number as soon as possible.

Back at the control centre Paul was left on his own while the officer made a preliminary report to his superior, the RC controller. Paul took the opportunity to make a report himself to Roland. They had just heard the news in the College. There was utter consternation on the campus. This news was likely to cause even more reaction than the campus bomb. Paul promised to keep Roland informed.

Next the officer and Paul took time out to have a snack and a drink. They chatted quite amiably. Other officers sat around them. Paul had never been so close to so many guards before. Not like this, anyway. His early feelings of unease soon left him. He then realised that his companion had been very quiet during the time he had been with the officer. At the launch pad his nose had picked up many different smells; some it had identified for him. He recognised the smell of burnt flesh from the days of the 'trouble'. Then, and later, he had heard many conversations, some not intended for his ears. But otherwise it had been quiet.

We are absorbing everything. It reminded him.

What do my present companions think of me?

They are interested to a point. But for the time being, most of their feelings are tied to the attack and the jobs they must do.

And what of the officer?

He is troubled by something. His mind is concentrating on it.

At that point they were interrupted by a guard bringing the officer information about the mortar. It had been reported missing from a supposedly secure depot in the Midlands, three months ago. Depots crammed full of all kinds of weaponry were kept around the country. In case there was a need for the authorities to mobilise their forces to suppress any decent sized protest.

After their refreshments the officer led Paul to one of the main control rooms. Reports were coming in from guards on the ground and the sensor pad testing of the RC personnel. They spent the rest of the night monitoring these reports. Paul, as expected, paid especial attention to the testing of the space science people. Nothing of significance came up though. A few names were put to one side for further questioning about resistance sympathies. Also, one or two for criminal activities of a minor kind. Not everybody had been tested by the time they stopped, but it was looking unlikely that anyone in the RC had been involved in this attack. They decided to have a break.

The officer went to one of the rest rooms in the control centre. Paul got a lift back to the mission control building.

When Paul had finished telling them the news, he felt tired. It was time to get some sleep. The Professor showed him to a suitable room to put his feet up. Paul was soon asleep. In the mission control room things slowly got back to normal. Once everyone had heard the news, they settled down to finding things to do. There was still plenty of preparation to attend to. Some systems were checked again. When the data from the launch pad came onto their screens it caused intense

interest and analysis. They agreed with the report that Paul had given them. As soon as they were given permission, they all left the building and went to their homes. For most of them this meant quarters in the RC. The senior scientists had homes off the RC. Vaclav, Tara and her mother went home too. They lived with the Director in his mansion. Paul was summoned to a meeting in the RC control. A groundcar was sent to pick him up.

The meeting took place in the RC controller's office. Paul was initially taken aback by this striking show of trust. However, it was wary. Present in person were the controller, the officer and Paul. Present via a video link were the Director, Roland and the College chief of security. The first part of the meeting considered the information they had to date. Then they turned their attention to what to do next. It was decided that some investigations would have to be undertaken in the College and on the campus. The officer would spend the next two days helping the chief with these enquiries. Paul would use this time to run his eye over the mission records. Then they would oversee as much of the preparations for the launch as possible. Security on the launch pad and the nearest perimeter area had already been stepped up. Paul suggested that the finished probe should be checked as well. This would really upset the scientists, they knew. But it was considered important. Paul was told to get some things from his apartment and move into temporary accommodation near to the mission control building. He would be expected to sleep there that night. Vigilance was required.

After the meeting Paul found the officer none too pleased to be sent to the College again. He would have preferred to stay on top of things here in the RC; some of his men could easily do the job. Paul waved goodbye to him and went back to the College and his apartment. But he was not permitted to spend much time at home. The groundcar that had brought him back was waiting to return him to the RC. He had time to gather some clothes and things together. He emptied his fridge of beer, which he put in a separate bag. He did a quick scan of the news channels on the vidscreen but there was no mention of the incident, except for the campus program. He left a brief

message in the panel on the apartment door to explain his absence. He saw nobody he knew while he was there.

By seven on that Monday evening Paul was back in the RC, in a small but comfortable guest flat near the mission control building. He had eaten at a canteen for the launch pad workers. Now he lay on the bed, gazing out at the huge structure in the distance. He supped at a beer. Thankfully he had a fridge in the flat and the canteen sold beer. He was well supplied.

What's our next step? He communed with the prokaryote.

We need to know more specific details on the mission and the design parameters for the probe. We also need to be present when the probe is checked.

Well that's exactly what we are meant to be doing.

Yes, it is.

Handy that.

Yes, it is.

Paul considered for a moment.

No, we did not arrange it like this. Yes, it does seem to be too perfect. Yes, there could well be a real threat to the mission, although we detect no suspicious people here.

It kept its plan to itself. It would only shock Woodend.

Chapter 13

Paul Woodend spent the next few days studying the mission files. He was given an office down the corridor from the mission control room. It was very small. But it had what they needed. A computer terminal with access to the mission files and the RC network system. The first thing that he checked was, did he have all the listed files? He quickly ascertained that one was missing from the written list and he also deduced that some information was needed to complete the picture. Both the extra information and the missing file could be traced to Dr More. Paul did not bother to confront her straight away. He left it for a day during which he developed a good idea about what exactly was missing. The errant file contained worst case scenarios. These had been thrashed out by the mission designers in various meetings around the world, it seemed. The missing information was to do with some of the finances of the mission. It was very interested in the worst-case scenarios. So, the file would have to be retrieved from the good Doctor. The money did not concern them. Once Paul was pretty sure of his case, he put a call through to the RC controller's office. He got the backing he needed from the controller, personally. The controller was more interested in the financial picture. Paul was instructed to send on the fiscal data immediately he was in possession of it.

The resulting meeting, late that afternoon, between the Doctor and Paul was a little acrimonious. At first, she denied all knowledge. But Paul opened her eyes. Then she was

awkward, rudely abusing him. But Paul was not one to be intimidated. He kept his cool and produced the controller's authorisation. The Doctor continued to rage for a while in desperation. But to no avail, Paul was quietly steadfast. Eventually Paul was thrown the missing discs by the Doctor. She spat the command codes at him. As he left Paul let her know that he was not a blind bit interested in the finances but that they would be going straight to the controller's office. Behind him the mission director was angry and disgruntled in her office. As he returned to his office Paul caught a few stares from the mission control room workers. As if to say, 'thanks mate, now we'll get it in the neck!'

By the end of the second morning they had gone through all the relevant files. It was quite happy. Paul was even more impressed with the size and complexity of the project. It really was a credit to Dr More. She had done an excellent job. Paul could easily forgive her a little feathering of her nest. After all we were not talking vast amounts here. He wondered whether the RC controller shared his opinion.

The afternoon of the second day was spent running programs on the flight computer. Paul sat back and let the prokaryote work. He had no choice, obviously. It moved his hands and fingers and looked through his eyes at the results of its study. Paul tried to stay with the whirl of data and formulae and diagrams that flew across the screen. He noted the different flight paths that the prokaryote's variations produced. He pondered the implications of the variations in mass of the probe and the time of rocket burn that the prokaryote computed. A few ideas presented themselves to him. One of which he did not care for at all. But it did not respond to his inquiries.

It was a little annoyed that Paul had cottoned on to a vague idea of what it had in mind. So quickly. But then he was no slouch as humans went. He had a deal of intuition, as these

humans called it. Its annoyance was tempered by the fact that Paul was crucially off the exact mark. Overall it was very happy. Now the way home was there for the taking. A few more details had to be taken care of. But these were likely to be no problem. Not with some of them operating in the young human. The only threat appeared to be outside interference. However, it was developing a theory about that.

The officer spent the days fruitlessly following the investigations outside the RC and on the campus. Nothing new turned up. The people who had popped up before as resistance sympathisers were questioned again. The officer let the College security chief do all the work. Extensive study of the mortar launch site and possibly relevant recent movements in the vicinity produced nothing. Except that they could not be certain when the mortar had been placed there. It could have been that day, or the previous evening, or any time before up to a fortnight. Not even satellite pictures could help. More and more the officer was drawing a conclusion of his own. It made no sense to him. One thing was sure, poking around out here was not helping. He was pleased when at the end of the second day he was able to return to the RC area. He spent the night in his quarters near the control centre. As he lay in bed, he was convinced that if, and it was a big if, anything else happened it would occur inside the RC. Probably nowhere near the space probe mission. The next day he arranged to pick up Woodend from his flat and, together they would look at how the repairs to the launch pad were going.

They talked little on the way to the launch pad. When they arrived, the officer parked his personal groundcar well away from the construction work. They walked close enough to the structure to be able to see what was going on, but not to be in the way.

"It seems to be coming on," Paul suggested. The officer merely grunted a reply.

Before long an engineer spotted them there and made her way towards them. The officer greeted her in a friendly way. It was obvious that a long friendship existed here. For a minute Paul was forgotten. Eventually the female engineer reproached her friend for not introducing them. The officer made the introductions. She called out to a passing worker and soon they both had hard hats on.

"Right, now you're ready to have a look round." She said as she led the officer away. Paul followed discreetly. They were shown all over the launch pad structure, going all the way up in the lift to the top at one point. It was a great view of the entire RC complex, laid out in its vast bowl. It occurred to Paul that the complex seemed to be built in the crater of an old dead volcano. While they were at the top the prokaryote was disturbed. It was not happy. *There is a risk*, it said. Paul was not allowed to get close to the edge. Even though the steelwork was such that falling through was impossible.

All the time the woman engineer explained the work they were doing and gave them an indication of when it would be completed. The atmosphere on the site was hardworking and relaxed at the same time. Everyone was busy yet talked to each other without any sign of strain. The pressure must be on them Paul thought. Pressure to get the job done on time and not to make any mistakes. Paul made a comment to that effect.

"Yes, we have a good team here and everything's going well so far," the engineer said proudly. "Touch steel!" she laughed.

"Have any of the mission control team been down to check what's happening?" Paul asked.

"Only Professor Smitdt comes now," she answered glancing at the officer. "He comes at the end of the day."

"Does the good Dr More not come and see what you're doing?" Paul asked. Another look passed between the officer and the engineer.

"The good Doctor and I do not get on," she said. The officer gave a grunt again. Paul rather wickedly told them about his encounter with Dr More and the business with the financial information. They appreciated the gossip.

After the tour of the work they were taken back to the engineer's site office. It was obvious from the plans and the analysis that the design was plenty strong enough to take all the forces involved in the lift off. A twenty per cent over design had been employed by the original engineers. The structure should be able to withstand more than the expected forces. They had a drink in the site office and then left to talk to the man in charge of security.

A portable security facility had been brought in. It was housed in specially fitted vehicles. Paul climbed up into one of these, after the officer. Inside there were banks of screens and monitors. Operators manned them. Paul scanned the banks and saw the structure from every conceivable angle and height. The operators could also hear what was going on out there.

"The other vehicle is monitoring the area around the structure, particularly the perimeter." The officer explained. Paul nodded; he knew that patrols now operated on the other side of the perimeter fence. They had reached the back of the vehicle. A sergeant rose to meet them. He directed them to sit by his desk. He presented the Officer with a written report and supplemented it with spoken additions. Nothing much was happening to worry about. On the structure or around it. Most of what he had to say was procedure

detail. The officer thanked him and reminded him of the need for vigilance, particularly on the other side of the fence.

Outside the vehicle the officer checked that the extra patrols were operating around the entire perimeter. They were. He asked for their reports to be ready for his inspection at the control centre. On the journey there, he finally asked Paul what he had been up to the last few days. Paul gave him the details. As far as he could tell in his two-day study there was no flaw in the planning. There remained the checking of the completed probe to watch over.

"How are the scientists?" the officer asked.

"Getting a bit edgy," Paul replied. "Dr More has put off the checking of the probe until this weekend. This has worried some of them because if there is something wrong. Well, there might not be time to put it right. Also, she has picked a very select crew to help her with the probe check. This has caused a few ripples of resentment."

The officer grunted again, "the good Doctor, as you call her, strikes again."

"Yes, she is a character," Paul said.

"I don't mind telling you, Woodend," the officer confided in Paul as they pulled up at the control centre. "I don't care if something goes wrong with this precious mission. In fact, I hope the good Doctor," he sneered, "cocks up. What I don't want is trouble on my patch. It would not be good, for either of us."

Paul took the hint, "I appreciate that."

They went into the RC control centre.

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The rest of the week nothing significant happened. Paul and the officer spent their time mainly monitoring reports, visiting the launch pad area and the mission control centre. Paul spent his evenings in the bar used by the launch pad workmen and the engineers. One evening the officer joined him and Paul witnessed the friendship between him, and the chief engineer develop more.

On his visits to mission control Paul talked mainly to Professor Smitdt and the director of the mission control room. The Professor was returning to his College rooms every night. He kept Paul up to date with anything interesting happening there. Paul also had his reporting sessions with Roland to provide him with news. The Professor also passed on a message for Paul. By the weekend even the Professor was feeling it. Paul noted the strain in his face. He spent Friday night with Paul, at Paul's insistence. Paul took him to the workers bar. They had a great time. Paul gave him more of his insights into the region immediately beyond the Solar System. These were enriched by the prokaryote's knowledge. Also, they discussed the dark matter problem. As he departed for the College in a security groundcar the Professor looked less tense. They would see each other in the morning, when Dr More and her team would begin the checking of the probe.

That night the prokaryote put the image of its home into Paul's mind again. Before he fell asleep Paul gasped again at the beauty of the scene unfolding in his mind. There were the vast wispy thin clouds that extended into infinity, it seemed, on the one side. Paul could make out the colours. In amongst the shades of grey, black and white which predominated lay the prime colours; areas of glowing red, blue and green. Where they overlapped other colours were created. Everything shone with the light from distant stars. These stars stood

out on the dark background. Paul could make out their differing sizes and colours. He could almost feel their different luminosities and power. His eye could see for great distances with startling clarity. In the far distance tremendous nebulous clouds of colour and much further again other galaxies. Elliptical and spiral galaxies of such beauty and variety; gorgeous, gigantic, and glittering congregations of stars. In the near distance Paul could discern the stars of the Milky Way. Looking towards the centre of their home galaxy Paul somehow could see through the dust clouds in Sagittarius. There at the heart of the Milky Way lay the massive black hole with its accretion disk and frightening antimatter fountain, which spewed material out of the plane of the galaxy. On his other side Paul could see much closer to him the planets of the Solar System. Slowly spinning around the faint Sun. Closer still he could make out the icy and smaller bodies that clustered like some cosmic herd on the fringes of the System. Vast numbers virtually invisible from the Earth, containing the exotic cocktail of organic molecules that held the promise of life. Comets flew far overhead. He heard no sound and felt no cold here in interstellar space. Within the wispy cloud strange reactions with unseen and unfelt radiations warmed him.

He felt then the terrible yearning of the prokaryote for its home. The long years lost. The desire to return at any cost. Paul knew he was powerless under the prokaryote's influence. However, he genuinely wanted it to succeed. He would do his best to help. Whatever it involved.

Paul slept. At times later in his life the dream would return. Usually when Paul was troubled by a problem. It remained a beautiful legacy of the prokaryote's time within him.

Elsewhere the other parts of the prokaryote were providing an identical image to a young, growing, and ravenous mind. It also was projecting a far different picture of events into a nearby mind. Starting a process that would end in disaster for somebody.

Chapter 14

The next morning found Paul himself almost the first person in the mission control room. He had picked up a stack of sandwiches and snacks on his way, which he left in his office. He waited for everybody else to appear. He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock. The next to arrive were the Technicians. The first of the main players to enter the mission control centre was the director himself. He immediately gave orders to prepare the probe assembly workshop. The officer arrived next. He sat by Paul and watched the technicians at work on the monitors. Other scientists and engineers came and took up their positions around the room and in the various sections of the building. Lastly, Dr More swept in with Tara, the Professor and Vaclav. Tara waved at Paul and ran over to him. She ignored her mother's feeble attempt to prevent her. Paul watched Dr More shrug and then carry on to her office.

Dr More did not want Tara to spend time with that Woodend fellow. But somehow, she could not order Tara to do it. She tried, but nothing happened.

"Hello Tara," Paul said as she climbed onto his lap. "How are you today?"

"Hello Paul," she was breathless. "Isn't this exciting? I've been so busy since I saw you last."

"Have you indeed." Paul said. He looked at Vaclav. He appeared tired.

Tara held Paul's hand and appeared to watch the monitors with him. They each felt the prokaryotes communing, but they were not party to the exchange.

Paul could see a little of the tension had returned to the Professor's features. He and Vaclav were sharing a coffee and talking quietly together. There seemed to be something causing them concern. From their body language and their furtive glances Paul guessed the subject of their worry was about to come out of her office. Dr More moved towards the door. The Professor followed her. Vaclav began to make his way across the room to Paul and Tara.

"You had better go with her," the officer nudged Paul. "You keep an eye in there, and I'll keep an eye out from here."

"Ok," Paul got up. He left Tara on the seat. As Paul made his way to the door, he heard the young child speak.

"Hello Mr security man." The officer grunted an answer. He was not going to talk to this freak.

Paul met Vaclav halfway.

"You are looking tired, Vaclav." Concern in his voice.

"I feel tired, Paul." A weary man. "Tara has been wearing me out. She seems to have gone through a quite hyper period. I have failed to keep up with her, I must admit." He looked at the quiet child in front of the monitors. "She appears to have calmed down now."

"Perhaps it was just one of those things," Paul said reassuringly.

"I hope so," Vaclav sighed. "Be careful of Jane. Tara has been driving her mad. She is in a foul mood."

"Thanks for the warning. Have a rest if you can." Paul left the room.

A level below the mission control room lay the labs, workshops and preparation rooms. Paul made his way to the area where you put on the special overalls, hair caps, face masks, shoes, gloves, etc. The area beyond was especially screened, filtered and sealed. To

provide conditions of maximum cleanliness. Not to keep out microbes and such like particularly, but to prevent dust, hairs and anything else that might contaminate the probe and cause a problem with any of its systems. Paul passed through properly dressed into the room that housed the finished probe. He took up a position out of the way of Dr More and her team, but close enough to see what was going on.

By the time there was a pause for some lunch the probe had been opened, and the different instruments removed, very carefully, to separate work tables. The main parts of the inside of the probe were laid bare ready for inspection. After the lunch break each instrument would be examined by separate teams, while Dr More supervised generally but concentrated mainly on the probe itself. Each composite part would be monitored, and the picture sent to the mission control room. There, other scientists would check the work. Also, the officer had arranged a communications link with other experts around the world who would receive the pictures and act as another check.

During the lunch break Paul retreated to his little office. There he ate while the prokaryote called up the pictures of the probe and compared it with the schematics in the files. A good feeling came over him. As if something expected and hoped for had come to happen. Perhaps in response to the good vibes he was radiating, Tara slipped into his office. She had somehow escaped from the control room.

"How is it going?" she asked.

"So far, so good." Paul replied.

"Our friends seem to be very happy." She pulled herself up onto the seat beside him. She studied the screens. Paul stared at the small girl by his side. Hard to think she was only three. A child prodigy and now with part of it in her.

"Do you know the plan, Tara?" Paul thought it was worth a try.

Tara turned to him and looked long into his eyes. He expected a message. It did not come. She smiled at him.

"Do not worry Paul, you have nothing to fear." There was a slight emphasis on the 'you'.

Paul and Tara looked at the screens together. One wondering, one knowing.

Vaclav found them, "there you are Tara, I was a bit worried for a minute there."

"I am fine, uncle," the frighteningly mature voice came.

"She is not disturbing you Paul?"

"No, I am not uncle. Now go on, I will return soon." She smiled at him. Paul said nothing.

He had a fixed smile on his face.

"That's fine then," Vaclav said and left the room.

Tara nodded at Paul, "I will stay here until it is over. Here in this area near the probe."

Paul did not acknowledge. He gave her a sandwich and started to eat one himself.

In the afternoon Paul walked around each of the instruments in turn and watched the different scientists and technicians at work. He stayed out of the Doctor's way. Everyone tried to. But occasionally someone got too close to her or did something she was not happy with. Then they got the full force of her mood. Paul noted that despite her present temper she worked with tremendous care and skill.

No problems were recorded with any of the instrumentation. Diagnostics run on the computer systems showed them in pristine condition and ready to perform their functions. Checks on the outside and insides of the probe threw up nothing wrong. The nuclear reactor and the rocket propulsion system passed with flying colours. Everything was fine. It was early evening and Dr More decided to cover the probe and all its disgorged parts. They would leave them and put everything back tomorrow. This suited the officer as it gave him

time to receive all the reports from his observers. Guards were posted at the entrance to the clean area. Most people went to their RC quarters. This included Tara and Vaclav and the Doctor. The Professor stayed with the officer and Paul. Together with some of the mission staff they studied the reports and double-checked things through the night. No problems came to light. Now it would all have to be put back again, properly.

When the rest of the mission people returned in the morning those who had remained had managed a few hours' sleep. But everything was now go and Dr More wasted no time in putting the probe back together again. Paul observed and was struck even more this time, by the skill and dexterity of the people involved. There was no lunch break this time and the Doctor's mood had improved considerably. She was much more supportive of her staff. The probe was sealed by the Doctor herself in the middle of the afternoon. Everyone returned to the mission control room. There was a mini celebration. Not as big as when the probe had first been put together. The officer and Paul ducked out and returned to the control centre, via the launch pad area. They each filed their reports and then after checking on things generally they retired for a rest in their separate flats.

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Monday morning brought good news, apparently. Paul and the officer went to check on progress at the launch pad. They were met by a grinning senior engineer.

"We should be finished by the end of today," she claimed.

"Really?" the officer sounded sceptical.

"I told you, I've got a good team working here," she reassured him.

"Right I will tell the scientists," the officer said. "I would imagine they will be delighted."

"Not to mention other, perhaps more important people," Paul added. The officer nodded at her. She was pleased.

Back at mission control the reaction was indeed one of delight. Many took it as a good omen. Not a very scientific approach, Paul noted. But they took hope that now all would go well with the Io probe mission. Plans were made to bring forward the placing of the rocket on the launch pad. Apparently, this was good news, except that the prokaryote thought otherwise. This upset its own timetable somehow. Paul could feel it going through one of those considering the options routines. Eventually it came to a decision. Paul heard it speak.

All is well. We can cope with this.

Good. Glad to hear that. Paul meant it.

Tuesday began very early for everyone. To bring the rocket sections to the launch pad and assemble them would take all day. If there were no problems. Dr More and her staff took more of a backseat for this part of the mission preparation. The main component parts of the rocket were kept apart on opposite sides of the launch pad plain. The rocket sections were kept near the Space Science block of the RC in a large hangar like building. They would be airlifted by a very large hoverjet to the launch pad. The rocket fuel was stored near the perimeter on the far side of the plain. It would be transported by special tankers, slowly,

along a purpose made road. Potentially today, if something went wrong, there could be a terrible fireball and mission ending explosion.

Paul remembered that day afterwards as being the worst he had felt the prokaryote be, ever. They both knew that all through the operation they had no control over how it went. Only essential personnel were allowed in the launch pad area and near the structure. Everyone else, and that included the officer, were kept at a safe distance. In fact, Paul joined most of the mission staff and watched the operation on their monitors. The tension was palpable. There was not much idle chitchat. Everybody waited and watched. Each with their own thoughts. Tara stuck close to Paul. The Doctor and Tara appeared to have had a falling out. Vaclav and the Professor refused to discuss it with anyone. They were all happy to leave Tara with Paul. She was much calmer when she was in his company.

Maybe it was the massed desire for success, or the best efforts of the prokaryotes from afar, or the expertise of the launch pad crew. Everything went to plan. The rocket stood splendid in the light of a full moon. Faint puffs of condensation wafted around it now and then. It was secured to the rigging and the pit plates were up beneath it. Nearer the time for lift off the plates would be released, revealing the deep blast pit where the rocket exhaust gases would be channelled. The resulting concentrated push on the ground would in turn produce the huge thrust force on the rocket to propel it off the surface of the planet. Body A on Body B and all that. Action and reaction. Good old Newton's third law, leading to the first and second.

After the huge sighs of relief, a meeting was called for all senior staff concerned with the mission. It took place above ground in the mission control building. Paul and the officer attended. The point in question was whether to use the extra day they now had to put the

probe in place earlier than planned. There was no real consensus. Better to get it in place as soon as possible, some said, and then if there was a problem, they would have more time to correct it. Others wondered what problem could arise that they could not cope with in the time available. The process of placing the probe on top of the rocket was more straightforward and much less time consuming than putting the rocket up. The probe would travel underground on a track until it reached the surface hatch near the structure. Then it would be raised up and lifted onto the rocket using the same special cranes that helped put the rocket together. After it was secured and checked over on the outside for any damage to the radiation shields etc. It would be covered and then all would be ready for the launch build up.

The officer on hearing this suggested that the probe be left to its original schedule. Fit it on Thursday. While it remained underground it was protected as much as possible. It was at its most vulnerable when sat atop the rocket. If there was an attack then, well, there could be problems. As it was the guards were extending their search area to ten kilometres around the launch area prior to launch. He checked his watch. The patrols were starting now. Extra swifts had been brought in from the Zone.

There was a pause at this point. No one present was under any illusion that what the officer decided would happen. But what did Dr More think? Would she disagree and try to sway him? She had been unusually silent during the discussion. Many looked at her now and thought how tired she appeared. Of course, the last week had been a great strain on her. She had done so much of the work herself. Trusting herself to do it better than themselves.

Paul had felt it examine all the people in the room one by one. As if gauging where they all stood on the issue and the strength of their feeling.

No one here feels strongly either way. It reported to Paul. Except the officer. Dr More was more interested in Paul at that moment. She stared unrelentingly at him. It looked at her through Paul's eyes. Paul was merely aware that the Doctor kept watching him. There appeared no animosity in her eyes. Just the look of someone struggling with a problem they could not fathom.

She wonders why her young girl has turned against her.

Has she? Paul asked.

She wonders also what Tara sees in you. Why is she so attracted to you? What can her little wonder possibly get from you that she can't get from her mother. Even Vaclav admits Tara has changed since she met this Woodend. This bloody Woodend, who had suddenly become everybody's favourite expert on every bloody thing. Why couldn't he just piss off back to the bloody Zone? How had he got so friendly with the Director and the RC controller? Tara never stopped talking about him. Vaclav thought she was over reacting. The Professor, well, the Professor had been a bloody Woodend lover from the beginning.

Paul felt that tight feeling behind his eyes. It concentrated on the Doctor. Paul watched her blink a few times, as if she was coming out of some reverie. She stretched her shoulders and used her hands to gently massage the back of her neck. Looking around the room she realised all eyes were on her. She appeared lost for an instant.

"I think it would be best to follow the officer's recommendation and stick to the Thursday," she said aloud. No one responded.

"I need a rest," the Doctor said to no one directly and rising, she left the room.

For a while nobody moved, then they slowly drifted out talking to each other as they went.

Paul and the officer were the only ones left.

"I thought she might give us some grief for a minute then." The officer said to Paul.

"I think she has got a lot on her mind," Paul told him. "Besides, it makes sense."

"Well we had better not rest yet," the officer got to his feet, "let's check the latest reports."

Paul followed him out of the building. He was aware that the thing was satisfied

Chapter 15

Wednesday was the day. Today something was going to happen. He could feel the anticipation building in the thing from the moment he came around in the morning.

Are you going to let me in on it?

No response.

Can't you trust me?

No response.

What can I do anyway?

No response.

They had been through this before Paul thought. Well, he could do nothing about it, except wait till it happened.

The daytime was spent following the officer around. They went everywhere. The perimeter, outside the perimeter, mission control, the launch pad, everywhere. The officer knew that by turning up anywhere at any time his men would be kept on their toes. Paul thought that the chance of suddenly disappearing if they messed up might have an effect too. But he said nothing to the officer. Nothing at all interesting occurred. At one point they watched the blast pit being checked.

After the evening meal, which they took in the launch pad workers' canteen again, they split up. Paul found himself declining the offer of a drink and walked back to his flat. For the first time for ages it seemed, he noticed the cold. He stopped to look up at the stars.

Soon, it thought. *Soon*.

When he got to the flat, he lay on the bed and immediately fell asleep. It needed him physically alert, later, just in case.

Dr More tried to relax at her nice little private house on the RC complex. The Professor had returned to his College office to attend to academic matters. It would help to take his mind off things. Vaclav had woken up feeling poorly. Tara had tried to look after him; she was very fond of her mentor. However, he became worse and decided to take himself off home to the Director's mansion. There, he could be tended to by the Director's staff. Tara and she waved him off in the Director's private groundcar which had been dispatched to pick him up.

The rest of the day Tara never left her side. She had stopped being annoying. She asked no awkward questions. Thankfully, she did not mention the Woodend's name once. In fact, she said nothing unless spoken to first. She just stayed close to her. Whenever the Doctor glanced at her daughter, she found her staring back at her in a curious fashion. At least they were not arguing. It was peaceful.

In the evening they watched the vidscreen together. Here in the RC they did not have access to all the channels that were available in the Director's mansion. But they found enough to keep them amused. Time went by.

Suddenly. It seemed to her. It was midnight. Time to go to...
Time to go to... She was sure it was time for bed. But Tara stood by the door holding their coats. She was smiling at her.

"Come on mother, it's time to go," Tara said. Oh yes, she remembered now. Time to take a check on the probe again. Just a quick look to see if all was well.

They left the house and got into her groundcar. Tara wrapped herself up in a blanket she had brought from the house.

At the same time Paul awoke. He jumped up off the bed. He was wide awake. He looked around the room.

What's the problem?

It is time.

Time for what?

We are going to the probe.

He found himself putting his coat on and leaving the flat.

On his walk towards the mission building he was stopped by security. As he went through the motions, they asked him where he was going at that time.

"I need to check something in the mission control building."

"Is everything alright?" a guard asked him. "Only we stopped Dr More just now, and she was heading for the mission control room too."

"Was she?" Paul sounded surprised. "Well, perhaps it is a good thing I'm going that way myself. Just in case there is a problem."

"Shall we come with you?" the guard asked.

"No, you had better keep to your patrol," Paul replied, "I have my communicator. I'll let you know if anything's up."

"Thank you," the guard said.

"Don't forget to put all this in your report." Paul reminded him. The guard hardly needed the advice. He had logged most of it already in his handset.

When Paul reached the mission control building, he noticed the Doctor's groundcar parked near the entrance. He passed through the security on the front door. At the desk he signed in, watched by the night receptionist. He signed beneath the Doctor's scrawl. She was ten minutes ahead of him.

"Is Dr More alone?" Paul asked the receptionist.

"No, she was carrying her child all wrapped up in a blanket." He said it as if it happened every day. "How long will you be, Mr. Woodend?"

"Not long. I just want to look at something in my office." He informed him. "I think I will see if I can help Dr More while I'm here." The receptionist nodded.

Paul went down the corridor. But he passed the lift and went instead into the room where the monitor watchers were. There were two of them. In the daytime there would be double that. They were used to him popping in with the officer. Paul held their eyes in turn. He felt that tightening feeling. It was putting a great effort into something. One of them nodded immediately and turned back to the monitors. He flicked a switch on the panel in front of him. The other one was more resistant. He had a confused look on his face.

"There is no problem," Paul said quietly. He brought his face close to the man's. "I want you to concentrate on the control room monitors. Turn the camera, that watches the probe, full to the side and lock it in place."

Paul watched him do it. That was both the monitors in the probe's room taken care of.

"I will be back," he said to them. They did not turn around but nodded their heads slowly. Paul could see that the Doctor and Tara had left the mission control room and were heading for the lift. He went back and got in the lift. The receptionist was watching him. Paul knew that the man dare not leave his desk.

Paul quickly went to his office and went inside. The monitors would record that. Inside he logged on and quickly called up a layout of the probe. He left it on the screen and left the office. He went to the lift and descended a level. He walked rapidly to the clean area. They were waiting for him.

Later the monitors would record that the three of them entered the room where the technicians changed into the clean clothes. The Doctor carried her daughter inside. You could not see the child; she was well hidden inside the blanket. Judging by the hand signal that the Doctor gave Woodend as he approached, the child was sleeping.

There were no monitors in the changing room. People had complained. After all there was no other way in or out. From the room you either came out into the corridor or you went into the workshop where the probe was being put together. Whichever, you were on the monitors.

Twenty minutes after entering the changing room Woodend came back out into the corridor. He had not appeared in the probe room. The tapes showed that he made his way back to the observation room. Meanwhile the Doctor was seen inside the probe room. On the tapes she suddenly appeared to the one side of the probe. She was changed. Then as she slowly moved around the probe, inspecting the outside closely, she passed out of view. Only to reappear in the other monitor a short while later. To the operators who studied the tape it was obvious that both the monitors had become stuck facing their respective walls.

Normally from their positions either side of the doors to the probe room, they could see all the room except for a swathe underneath them, and to their sides about three metres along the wall. In the middle their views overlapped but at the sides only one monitor could see right to the back wall. Usually these monitors would not be moved. But somehow that night they had been locked in the wrong position for a short time. Neither of the operators could explain later how this had happened, even under sensor pad testing. With both monitors turned away from each other it left a section of the room down the middle not covered. It was that area that the Doctor disappeared into for about twenty minutes. When the monitors moved back to their correct positions the Doctor could be seen in front of the probe. She stood there staring at it before she left the room. Then, minutes later she came out into the corridor, holding her child, still hidden and asleep, in her arms inside the blanket. The monitors showed that she took the lift to the ground floor and swept out of the building. She ignored the receptionist's request to sign out. His mouthed curses were easily visible on the tapes.

As they got inside the changing room the Doctor lowered Tara down to the floor. She handed the blanket to Paul.

"Get changed mother," Tara said. The Doctor started to undress, she said nothing. Paul was aware that both the prokaryotes were working on her. Tara turned to face Paul.

It is time, Paul.

Time for what? But he knew what.

Transference. We must leave you now. We thank you for your assistance in our purpose.

But how are you going to get to the probe? Are you going via the Doctor?

No.

Can you leave me and pass across the room into the probe?

That is not possible from here. We also need a way into the probe.

The Doctor was changed. Tara glanced at her. Dr More went into the room and walked towards one end of the probe. Paul was confused.

We will need someone to take us to the probe.

I had better get changed then.

No, Paul, you are not the one.

Paul was even more confused. Tara smiled at him. Suddenly he knew.

You are not serious? He was amazed.

She will die. How can she survive? He was shocked as the full realisation, of what the prokaryote intended, came to him. Tara was starting to take her clothes off. The smile never left her face. The prokaryote explained to Paul how it would work.

There was room to fit the child's body into the probe. Once inside, it would take over. Some of them would infiltrate the control systems. Probably by drops of blood. The child would be put to sleep. The destruct system would be disengaged. The body would not be allowed to deteriorate. Rather the opposite was going to happen. On the journey her body would slowly join with the probe's structure. The outer skin would diffuse into the surrounding metals, slightly.

It gave Paul an impression of what it meant. Paul was more fascinated than appalled. But he could not see how she would survive.

How will she breathe? What will she eat?

Perhaps because of Tara's influence its voice inside his head became more human sounding. *We have been working very hard within her body. She has been adapted. There is no longer a need for oxygen alone to power her energy chemistry. She is beyond the need to breathe. We shall slow her body right down. Effectively she will be put into a severe hibernation. Her heart may beat once a day. Or slower even. All we really want is to bring*

the working brain back. The rest of the body is less important. We will draw current from the probe's power supplies to work the necessary parts of the body system. She will be preserved, either way.

I see, now, your interest in the flight plans. Paul looked at the naked small child in front of him. She was smiling still. Paul dug a nail into his thumb. Blood appeared. He held his hand out to Tara. She grabbed it and sucked his bloody thumb. Then she whispered.

"Goodbye, Paul. Do not worry about me."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. Paul felt the last vestige of her humanity in that embrace. He watched her walk through to the probe. Paul could see that the Doctor was opening the probe. He could not watch. Besides, he had things to do. He picked up Tara's clothes and packed them inside the blanket to give it some semblance of shape. He left it for the Doctor to pick up.

Without looking back, Paul left and returned to the observation room above. On entry he asked the operators where Dr More was. It was the signal they needed. He watched them flick the switches back. Seconds later the monitors returned to their intended positions. The Doctor appeared standing before the probe. They watched her stay there for a minute then she turned and headed back to the changing room. Soon she was seen leaving the changing room carrying her child with her.

Paul went back to his office. He managed to miss the Doctor on the way. He sat staring at the screen. In his imagination he pictured Tara inside the probe.

"Good luck to you both," he said to himself.

He had felt nothing when the transfer had occurred. He felt no different now. But there was no doubt that the prokaryote had left him. He should be happy. Finally, he was free. He was himself, entirely, again. Now he was in total control of himself. Well as much as he

was before it invaded him. But he felt uncertain and quite vulnerable. How would he fare without it to look after him? Then he remembered something it had told him. He would be left with more than he had before. He concentrated and saw the endless lines of information stored in his memory. It had told him that he could still fool the sensor test if he wanted. He was thinking about the Doctor, what had it left in her mind? What memories would she be left with? Such thoughts occupied him when he sensed someone coming.

The officer found Woodend sitting in front of his computer, staring at a picture of the probe. Paul didn't seem to realise he was there. Then, suddenly, he swung round in his chair.

"Anything wrong?" he asked Paul.

"No, nothing," Paul relaxed. "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd come and play on the computer."

"You've seen the good Doctor?" the officer asked him.

"Yes, she was here when I got here. I checked up on her. She was having another look at her probe for some reason. She had Tara with her, fast asleep in a blanket."

The officer nodded at Paul, "yes, I saw her. She was putting the kid in her groundcar when I arrived. I called over to her. But she just scowled at me and drove off."

Paul smiled, "she's nothing but consistent, I'll give her that."

"Stupid cow!" the officer said with feeling.

"What brings you out at this time?" Paul asked him.

"That patrol you met reported to me. They decided to risk it rather than wait until the morning."

"Very efficient of them." Paul logged off and switched off the computer.

"Have you checked the probe since she left?" the officer asked.

Paul raised his eyebrows at him. "You don't seriously think she would do anything to..." He left the question unfinished.

"Well, now we are both here, we might as well give it a once over." Paul realised he was serious.

"Anything you say." They left Paul's office.

The tapes would later reveal Paul and the officer, dressed appropriately, examining the probe. They could only see the outside of course.

The following day the probe was put into place. The operation went very smoothly. The officer sent guards to escort the probe on its journey underground on the track. One of them held a portable monitor which allowed the officer and Paul to watch on the vidscreen in the officer's groundcar. They waited at the launch pad for the probe to arrive and then to be lifted into position on top of the rocket. By early afternoon it was over. The probe had been secured and the true shape of the thing soon to be flung off the Earth was now discernible. The officer doubled the security and made sure the patrols beyond the perimeter were alive. Paul noticed that the officer became much tenser now. If anything happened now, right at the end, they would be for it. The end of his career. Paul was not at all sure what it would mean for him. They stayed at the launch pad throughout the evening and night. Snatching the odd hour of sleep as time crawled into Friday.

Dr More did not make an appearance on Thursday. Everyone in the mission control room, including the control room director, was glad. There was nothing specifically for her to do that day. Or even on launch day for that matter. She had really been getting on everyone's nerves in the last few days. The strain was obviously making her more cantankerous than

usual. When she failed to turn up, the director breathed a sigh of relief. He decided against making a call to see if she was coming in. The only person likely to want to find out where she was, the Professor, was expected to stay in the College that day. He would be back for the launch the next day. The Professor had also had enough of Jane for a while. He was looking forward to a day away from the tension of the mission. The mission control room staff assumed that Dr More was having a rest. Despite her, they agreed it was well deserved.

Friday dawned with the promise of a fine day. Perfect conditions for launching were forecast. As Paul tried to massage himself awake, he thought about how weather had affected the rocket launches in the previous century. It seemed that any sign of a raincloud would cause cancellation. These new rockets and their far more sophisticated guidance systems, with direction compensator boosters, could launch in far more difficult conditions.

The launch pad area was cleared of all but essential personnel. They would move a safe distance away nearer lift off time. The officer stayed on the ground near his security vehicles which had been moved to the edge of the launch plain. He stayed there until the rocket had disappeared into the blueing sky. Paul joined the mission control staff. He sat in the seats well behind the rows of terminals and monitors. The Professor joined him. He had brought Mark and a couple more of his research team with him. Together they watched the show along with many other guests.

With half an hour to go Dr More had not showed her face. The Professor made a call to her RC house. He returned shortly, a little concerned.

"Where has she got to?" Paul asked. He had told the Professor of her nonappearance yesterday.

"Says she doesn't feel well," the Professor replied. "She sounds a bit out of it. I couldn't get a lot of sense out of her. She said she'll watch the launch from her window."

"Fair enough," Paul said. "She has done a lot of work lately. It's bound to take it out of you."

"Yes," the Professor agreed. "I'll go see her afterwards and tell her to take a holiday."

"Good idea." The ever-considerate Professor, Paul thought.

They settled down to follow the launch procedure. The blast pit plates opened correctly. All systems checked out ready. The excitement and tension grew inside the room. Slowly and surely all the checklist was covered. The clock held their eyes. Then the countdown began.

Ignition.

The ground rumbled. The RC felt the vibration.

The rigging held the eager rocket down.

Paul could see the majestic exhaust firing into the pit.

Then the rigging released its grip.

The rocket left the ground. Slowly, it accelerated into the morning sky.

Cheers and cries of joy filled the room. Relief and satisfaction shone in people's faces.

Paul found himself hugging the bodies around him and shaking their hands. Everyone congratulated each other regardless of who they were.

Out on the plain and around the perimeter the guards shouted and cheered. Throughout the RC complex workers stopped and watched the blaze of light rise in the sky. Their faces filled with pride. On the campus and in the College the rumblings were felt and heard. People there stopped, too, and watched the spectacle in the distance.

There was much still to do. The mission control room director soon called his team back to task. Paul watched the various stages of the rocket be completed successfully. It was

soon in its designated orbit. They had kept the last stage burning a second or too longer than planned to achieve this. But nobody was bothered. The computer had handled it. While, what was left, the probe and its rocket, completed its set number of orbits of Earth, final checks were made from a distance. All telemetry was working perfectly.

The officer came in to the room to watch the final orbit. He sat down by Paul.

"Everything going ok?" he asked.

"Very smooth," Paul answered.

The rocket burn began on time. It was timed for 23 seconds. The probe left orbit and headed into interplanetary space. The direction was checked and then 5 mins into this stage the rockets were fired again. It was supposed to last 20 seconds. 22 seconds later the rocket burn stopped. The mood in the control room changed dramatically, and suddenly. Now there was concern and uncertainty. What would this glitch mean? Would the probe be travelling too fast? Would it miss its rendezvous with Io? Would it miss Jupiter completely? A slight change now, could mean a big difference, months from now.

There was an anxious wait of over an hour. The direction and speed of the probe was checked and double checked. It was travelling at thousands of kph now, into the void. The path of the probe on its slightly different trajectory was computed. To everyone's surprise and relief they found the direction not significantly changed, within parameters. The speed was faster than desired. The combination of these effects was not going to affect the mission badly. A little adjustment, nearer Jupiter, and they would be in the right position. They had the time to work it out.

The mission was pronounced a success. So far. The action was over. Plans were made to celebrate. Paul decided to go to the bar used by the launch pad workers. The Professor said

he would join him after he had visited Dr More. The officer went to thank his men and reorganise the patrols and general security.

Paul had been in the bar over an hour. The atmosphere was brilliant. He found he was not drinking heavily. He wondered if the alterations the prokaryote had made to his body, to help him cope with alcohol, would persist. He also found himself staring up to the heavens and wondering about the prokaryote and Tara. The Professor failed to arrive. Instead, Paul was surprised to see the officer come into the bar with some of his junior officers. He paid for drinks for them and spent some time talking to them. The officer eventually caught Woodend's eye. He gestured to him to go outside. Paul slipped out into the midday sun, glass in hand. It was cold, still.

"Well, that all seems to have gone off ok," the officer said as he joined Paul. "Well done, and thanks for the help." He offered his glass. Paul tapped his glass.

"Thank you," he responded, "but I don't think I did much really."

"Although, I must say, we are no nearer finding who was responsible for the attack." The officer said. "We must make our reports in the morning."

"Yes," Paul sounded thoughtful. He looked at the officer. He was not a bad man, for a guard, Paul thought. He cared for his men and was obviously well liked and respected.

"I don't think we were expected to find anyone, if there was really anyone in the first place." Paul began.

"What do you mean?" the officer asked him. "Someone set that mortar off."

"Oh yes," Paul nodded, "someone set it off. But not the resistance. Maybe there is no resistance."

The officer said nothing but stared at Paul. You know, too, Paul thought. He explained his theory. None of these attacks lately had caused serious damage to anything. Yes, the mission had been delayed but not stopped. It would not have taken much more effort to stop it. A few more shells. True, people had died. But life was still cheap these days. The fact that no real evidence was found and that nothing turned up on the sensor pad tests, the ability to slip through the nets so easily. Other things. It all pointed to a conspiracy alright. But not by some shadowy elusive resistance. No, to carry off these incidents and not to leave anything significant behind. No one caught out in the sensor pads. This required the resources of people high up - to get the mortar in the first place. No, he believed they were the victims of a campaign to stir up the people. Keep them on their toes. Keep the security on their toes. Smoke out any anti-authority sympathisers. Reinforce the control of the security forces.

"You know it's something like that," Paul turned away to look at the launch pad structure in the distance. They certainly were not going to let anything happen to the mission. It was too important.

The officer said nothing. He had come to the same conclusion himself. He suspected a small secret group of men working for the Director, the RC controller and probably Roland Agen. He agreed that it was probably being orchestrated nationally from very high up. But he was not going to admit this to anyone, especially not Woodend.

"What are you going to say in your report?" he asked Paul.

Paul looked at him and smiled, "I shall say that we could find nothing or anyone to go on, and that I hope it does not happen again. I'm not stupid." Paul realised that saying what he thought to anyone else could prove fatal.

"Want a drink?" he asked the officer, who nodded, yes, and with a brotherly arm cast briefly around Paul's shoulders, they went back inside the bar.

Chapter 16

Paul and the officer gave their reports the next morning. The Director and Roland were on the vidlink, the RC controller in the room with them. They were thanked for their efforts. The Director instructed Paul to meet him the following day. The officer was told to report back in the afternoon. Another case for him to deal with. The officer took Paul back to the campus in his personal groundcar.

"Good luck, Paul Woodend," he said finally, and offered his hand. Paul shook it. "Take care here in academia."

"Hopefully, I can stay here, this time," Paul told him. "I would rather not get involved in any more of these cases. If you don't mind."

"I'll see what I can do," the officer smiled.

"Goodbye." Paul set off for his apartment. Funny he had hardly been there long, yet he had missed it. After all it was home now. It would be good to see his few friends and find out what they had been up to.

It was not until some days later that Paul heard about it. The Professor told him. He had called him up to his office. Paul knew something was happening. A guard had visited him and taken a sensor pad test of him. They chose the wrong questions.

"Had he seen Dr More bring her child into the mission control building?"

"No."

"Had he seen the Doctor and her child inside the building?"

"Yes."

"Had he seen the Doctor and her child leaving the building?"

"No."

"Where were they when you saw them both last?"

"They were in the changing room."

"You did not see them on the monitors leaving the changing room?"

"I saw Dr More on the monitors. She held her child wrapped in the blanket. But I could not actually see the child itself clearly."

"Thank you. You may be required again."

The Prof had gone to see Dr More after the successful launch. He found her alone and in a disorientated state of mind. She was a little dishevelled in appearance. She was not sure where Tara was. She thought Tara was at home with Vaclav. The Professor found Tara's clothes in the back of the Doctor's groundcar. He had an awful feeling in his stomach. He said nothing to anyone but drove the Doctor home to the Director's mansion; he was later criticised for this by the enquiry. There he found Vaclav recovering from his sudden illness. He had not seen Tara. Jane had not been back there either. The Professor rang the Director in a panic.

From there, the Director handled the matter personally. He got in touch with his friend the RC controller. The officer was put in charge of the search and investigation in the RC, Roland handled matters outside. The officer searched long and hard for any incriminating evidence to nail the hated Doctor. But he found nothing, and the body failed to materialise. Likewise, Roland discovered nothing despite the extensive searches made by the large numbers of guards drafted in.

The doctor slipped more and more into a confused state. Her sensor pad test caused concern. It was attended by the three big guns and run by the best operator they had. She remembered taking Tara into the building and down to look at the probe. But she could not remember taking her back to her groundcar. The whole area underground was searched but nothing was found. Not a single hair. She could not account for the clothes. Her responses showed someone in the throes of shock and mental breakdown.

The enquiry was not happy. The missing tape footage where the monitors had gone on the blink was unfortunate. The sensor pad tests of everyone concerned threw no light onto the tragedy. The Doctor was in a bad way. Her friends, Professor Smitdt and Vaclav Brloh had testified that relations between mother and child had deteriorated recently. The child prodigy was behaving awkwardly Vaclav admitted. They both vehemently rejected the notion that mother had harmed her child.

There was no evidence and more importantly no corpse.

The enquiry formerly indicted Dr More with suspicion of murder. They acknowledged her present mental state and allowed her to be placed under the care and supervision of the Director. She would be kept and treated at his home.

The Professor and Vaclav were very shaken by the experience. Even the Director had been upset by the business. Paul tried to do his best for them.

Only the sickest people at the time suggested the Doctor had stuck her child inside the probe. But others suspected it.

At first, they thought they had control of the probe. It was functioning properly. All the instruments deployed, as they were meant to, on the way to Jupiter. They were producing

valuable data and it was being sent back to Earth without a hitch. The main computers were playing up slightly. But it was not affecting the mission. Things like this had happened before. They usually sorted themselves out. The calculations had been made and checked through the computers. They knew when to fire the thrusters and rockets, and how long, to bring it back to mission parameters.

They never got the chance.

Somewhere beyond the asteroid belt as the probe sped towards Jupiter, they lost contact with it. Information was being sent back to them. But the probe's systems refused to accept any control signals. They tried to switch off the computers, but they did not respond. Somewhere near Jupiter the probe fired its rocket for a few seconds. It flew straight past Io. The lander and the orbiting satellite were released and, amazingly, they survived and operated for a short while. Their weak signals were not amplified and sent on by the probe. But astronomers on Earth were able to adapt their receivers to get something out of the signals.

The probe tore around Jupiter, receiving a slingshot input to its velocity, and headed off in the direction of the outer planets and the edge of the Solar System. No more signals reached Earth. It was lost.

When Paul was told the news, he surprised the students around him. They thought they heard him say quietly to himself.

"They made it."