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TULPA by DAVID BROOKES

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For information about the author please see the back page.

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TULPA

PART FOUR OF THE GAS GIANT SEQUENCE

DAVID BROOKES

PART ONE: RECOVERY

The man opened his eyes from a deep sleep. Rubbing his face, he surveyed his surroundings without much enthusiasm: a quiet room, furnished like the private office of a department store manager or a headteacher. He was sitting in a chair that had been pulled away from the oaken desk in front of him. He legs were stretched out with his ankles crossed, his heels resting in the thick shag pile that covered the floor of the room. He uncrossed them and flexed all his limbs. He was aching all over.

A sudden noise made him jump. There was a phone on the desk, curved and black like the shell of a beetle. It trilled persistently until he picked up the receiver.

‘Hello?’

‘Just confirming that you were awake. Be down in a minute.’

‘...Okay,’ the man said.

He patted the pockets of his jacket. There was something that felt like a wallet and something that felt like a box of cigarettes. He placed the objects on the table: he’d been right about the wallet. The smaller object was actually a memory stub for a computer, although it was surprisingly large. A printed tag on it said: *KARLSON ENTERPRISES – 8TB*. Eight terabytes of information. He could only think of a few uses for so much computer memory. At least the stylish logo recalled his identity for him. He was Michael Hudd-Karlson, a Director of Karlson Enterprises. He remembered everything at once, all of it returning in a cool, comforting wave.

There were 200 or so individuals who had adopted the name Karlson, working in the highest echelons of the vast corporation. Each of them had been trusted with unique specialised equipment and a tiny portion of the original Karlson’s brain tissue. That portion of tissue had been grafted into Michael’s own brain five years before, when he had been initiated into the Directorship.

He checked his head for his unique equipment. His headset was still there, a discreet pattern of thin copper that fit his skull beneath his dark hair. In fact everything seemed to be in order but for his shoes, which for some reason were muddy.

Before he had a chance to check his wallet – he’d always had the sneaky suspicion that medical staff in hospitals pilfered a patient’s cash when he was admitted unconscious – the door to the office opened and two strangers stepped inside.

One was a man about forty, five years older than Michael. He had a greying moustache and fashionably-untidy hair. The other was a woman who looked much younger, dressed in a close-fitting suit that made Karlson think guiltily of his wife.

‘Hi,’ the man said, approaching and pulling two chairs closer to the side of the desk opposite Karlson. ‘We would have been here when you finally woke up, but it’s been a few hours and we don’t have the staff to post a guard...’

‘Where are we?’ asked Karlson.

‘The Mission Control Centre, Global Space Program, beneath the Rocky Mountain range in Colorado. You’re from the States, aren’t you?’

‘Born in Maryland,’ he confirmed.

‘Right. Well, you’re here because your shuttle crash-landed nearby and we were tasked with checking for survivors. You are Michael Hudd-Karlson, is that correct?’

Michael looked into the expressionless faces of the man and the woman.

‘That’s right,’ he said.

'We took some blood while you were unconscious. We're sending the sample to Karlson Headquarters to confirm your identity. You'll need to sign a waiver to say that you agree with that testing, retrospectively.'

'I might sign it,' Michael replied guardedly. 'What about other survivors? Who else made it?'

The man took a sheet of paper out of his inside jacket pocket and unfolded it. Michael caught his nametag: it said "Britling". He'd not heard the name before.

'You came all the way from the moon,' the man read, 'right? You and a team were tasked with constructing that Farside lab there. That's some kind of big parabolic dish, right?'

'Something like that.'

'You weren't scheduled to come back for a few weeks yet. What happened?'

'We ran into some problems,' said Karlson.

He explained further, but he didn't go into too much detail. He and three others were on the surface of the moon to build a radar and its accompanying laboratory for astrological and meteorological purposes, but that hadn't gone entirely to plan. A lot of strange things had happened that Michael couldn't rightly explain. One man, Theo Callas, had been killed. Michael and the two other survivors, Maria and James Aylesworth, had taken off in a small craft, docked with the shuttle in orbit, and blasted homewards just as soon as they were able. And, if what this man Britling was saying could be believed, that shuttle had crashed after re-entry.

After giving a few answers, Michael began to ask some questions of his own.

'The others. Did they survive the crash?'

The female agent's tag said "Smitheson". She spoke for the first time in a low, even voice. 'We found a body, which has been positively identified as James Aylesworth.'

'What about Maria?'

'Aside from yourself, Mr Karlson, there was nobody else aboard the shuttle.'

'She was there. She was the pilot, for Christ's sake. You're saying she walked away from the crash?'

'No,' Smitheson said. She looked distracted. 'The shuttle was wrecked, but mostly sealed. Not airtight, but there was no way anyone could have crawled out of there. Maria Aylesworth was nowhere on the craft and definitely didn't walk away from it. Her brother was burnt to a crisp; the re-entry was too shallow.'

'So she disappeared,' said Michael.

'You don't sound like you find that unlikely,' observed Britling.

'No.'

'Here's a weird thing. You were encased in stone when we found you. Apparently tests came back saying that it was basalt. You hatched out of the thing like an egg. Care to explain that?'

Michael looked at his shoes. The carpet under his chair was stained dirty grey. At least that explained the mud.

'Well?' Britling pushed. 'That some kind of new nanite defence system Karlson Enterprises hasn't released to the public yet?'

'I can't discuss that,' Michael lied. The truth was, he couldn't fully explain it either. And, until he felt comfortable, he wouldn't be discussing his theories with anybody.

There was a knock on the door. Smitheson moved quietly to speak with the person on the other side, but she was pushed back. A young woman spoke urgently to Britling.

'I'm sorry, Administrator, but he wouldn't wait...'

Another visitor beckoned the young lady aside and entered the room. He was a man, smartly dressed, with black and grey hair combed back from his smooth face. He said, 'Administrator Britling,' and then turned directly to face Michael.

‘Mr Hudd-Karlson,’ he said.

Michael recognised him immediately. He was another Karlson Director; he could sense it like a kind of telepathy.

The Director handed Britling a slip of paper sealed with the Karlson *KE* logo. ‘Take this. I’m taking my man out of here.’

Then he turned back to Michael and smiled.

‘Let’s go,’ he said.

*

Karlson Enterprises had a branch just on the other side of the Colorado–Wyoming border, but the other Director seemed reluctant to head there. He gave the impression that he wanted Michael to stay nearby, close to the Mission Control Centre and the shuttle crash-site, and as such had the expensive car drop them off at a five-star hotel just a few minutes away.

The lobby gleamed with reflective floor-tile and flickering chandeliers. Michael could see his reflection in the check-in desk – the other Director did the talking – and saw that he looked positively haggard. He wasn’t surprised; it felt as though only a few hours had passed since Maria had announced the re-entry. His weeks on the lunar farside had been ... exhausting.

The two Directors took the elevator to the fourteenth floor, tapping their feet in time to the music that tinkled in the concealed speaker, and remained silent as they made their way to what the hotel called the Privileged Suite.

The moment the door was closed and locked, Michael spoke:

‘You’re Richard Karlson. The second.’

The other Director nodded. He’d already removed his jacket, and was in the process of relaxing the tiny bolts on the side of his copper headset. They weren’t designed to be removed, but could be loosened to make the influx of subspace messages that passed between every Director a little quieter.

He smiled widely as he rolled up the cuffs of his white shirt. ‘That’s right. Welcome home, brother.’

The two men embraced. It was Michael who broke away first, not wanting to push things. This was Richard Karlson II, the “true” Karlson, the original. He was the CEO of Karlson Enterprises, the man who had founded the corporation and made it what it was today: a vast conglomerate enterprise. It had a controlling interest in most prominent companies, including ones that made weaponry and technologies, ones that promoted scientific endeavours (morally-restrained or otherwise), ones that produced everything from artificial flowers to automobiles.

I have a piece of this man’s brain in my head, Michael thought. His cloned brain. I have received his thoughts, in the form of orders, every day for the last five years.

He’d only met the CEO once, and Michael had been five years younger then. Every Director, all 220-odd of them, had met him once on the day of their acceptance into Directorship. Richard met every one of them personally as a matter of principle; they were, after all, accepting a part of him into themselves. They would all undergo the grey matter transplant and various genetic and chemical therapies, to encourage the bonding process that allowed thoughts to be sent and received between individuals of the same ilk. The CEO had developed that technology himself, with his own home PC, as part of a new tech that would be so successful it would fund the initial corporate expansion of Karlson Enterprises.

‘Good to see you again,’ Richard said generously.

Michael nodded. ‘Thank you, sir. I have to say, I’m very surprised that you rescued me in person.’

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I’m here for more of a debrief, although that sounds very formal for what I have in mind.’

In the hotel suite, Richard approached a desk that looked like it was carved out of a single piece of solid slate. Out of one of its drawers he removed a heavy crystal decanter and two glasses, and poured them each a measure of Scotch.

Michael took his glass and sipped it. He was actually quite thirsty and would have preferred water, but he wasn't going to say that in front of the CEO.

'I checked over your reports from the lunar visit personally,' Richard said, replacing the stopper in the crystal decanter. 'You were stationed just beside the Daedalus crater, correct?'

'Yes, sir.'

'On the exact opposite side of the moon. Radio signals wouldn't normally be received from there – that was the whole point of the Farside project, to build an antenna that would be exempt from Earth's radio pollution. Did the dish and antenna get completed in the end?'

'Not entirely, sir. I'm sorry the report wasn't as complete as it could have been. There were some challenges.'

'I'm happy the subspace transmissions arrived at all, but then they were designed without the need for satellite relays, weren't they?'

Does he want me to fawn over his genius? Michael thought. *He's fishing for praise.*

But then, geniuses should be allowed to expect compliments; they were there to change the world for the better, after all.

'Tell me about these challenges,' Richard said.

As Michael began, the CEO strode over to the bed and hopped onto it, kicking his feet up onto the silk sheets. He didn't remove his shoes.

'A form of vaporous cloud appeared over the crater. It affected the nanite flow of the developing dish, and later caused some other physical phenomenon that I can't explain. I can't even describe exactly what happened. The Uncommon Materials Officer, Theo Callas—'

'Use real names please,' Richard interrupted. 'No nicknames.'

'Right. Of course, sir. *Nils* Callas, the Uncommon Materials Officer. He suffered some form of delusion and died, just a few minutes before we escaped. I ... remember a report that was redirected from Washington HQ. It said that the phenomenon we experienced up there was known to KE. Is that correct?'

Richard nodded. He'd finished his drink and glanced at the decanter on the desk, but made no effort to get up from the luxurious bed. 'That's right. Are you aware of the aquaforming project that was taking place on Europa?'

'Not just heard of. I applied for it. The changeover is every ten years and I wanted to be the next to go up there to oversee things.'

'Yes, your personnel file says that you've applied for all the field positions, or at least the best ones. The plantations in central Africa, the solar station that was completed last year, and of course Europa.'

'I feel that I've done my share of office-sitting,' Michael said, a little uncomfortably.

'Well, think yourself lucky that you never got the Europa position,' Richard replied brightly, putting his hands behind his head. 'The Director there died, along with everybody else. Europa broke into pieces barely a week ago.'

'You're kidding.'

'Not in the slightest. The moon just seemed to just shake itself to pieces. And, simultaneously, Jupiter began to spin itself free of its own atmosphere, or at least its upper layers. There are streamers of the stuff spread out between Jupiter and Earth, like it washed its giant hands and all the dirty water's running right towards the sun.'

Michael felt light-headed. What would this mean for the solar system? For Earth? 'Any explanations?'

'Not much. Some people have put forward a few notions about how it's been building up to it for centuries, but we don't really have any proven ideas yet. It's too early. However, we had an observation post in orbit around Jupiter, and the two operatives there saw it all happen.'

'There was a Director with them?'

'No, the station couldn't support more than a few people, and frankly we're spread a little thinly as it is. But the two scientists are on their way back with hard data as we speak, and are expected any minute.'

Michael decided that he could do with the rest of that whiskey after all, and emptied his glass. He coughed into his fist at the heat in his throat, and then asked, 'D'you have any images?'

'Try this.'

Richard projected a vague representation of the Jupiter discharge into Michael's mind: it was a satellite photograph, and it described a long, multi-stranded arc of gaseous material, orange-brown in colour but shot through with streamers of red and gold. It was exactly the same as the vapour that had descended upon the Daedalus crater on the moon, causing the inexplicable phenomenon that had led to their evacuation of the lab and the moon's surface altogether.

'It's all connected,' Michael breathed. 'With Jupiter as the source. What explanations are our experts offering?'

Richard swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

'Nothing satisfactory,' he said.

*

PART TWO: MISSION CONTROL

The car pulled up outside a grudgingly majestic mountain. The mountain was shallow, but massively tall. Its dark edges and blunt tip made Michael Hudd-Karlson think less of a mountain and more of a pile of grit, or photographs he'd seen of Victorian-era coal heaps.

The driver turned around in the front seat to speak to him. 'The CEO asks that you remember your confidentiality agreements when advising the military.'

'I will do that. I'm not about to give these guys any secrets. They just asked me back as a consultant, nothing more.' He peered out of the blacked-out window at the entrance to the Mission Control Centre. 'I don't think I'll be here long.'

'Right you are, sir.'

Michael vacated the car and stood in the dust it kicked up as the driver accelerated away. There was a cool wind blowing that smelled of pine trees and fresh water. It was relaxing, but the entrance to the MCC was anything but. It was a concrete mouth leading into the bowels of the mountain.

The guard at the high-security gate met him with a rifle in his hands.

'Director Karlson?'

'That's right.'

'Follow me, sir. We'll be going six storeys down, so you might find that your ... ah ... communication gear won't work effectively.'

He gestured towards Michael's headset. Michael nodded and beckoned for the guard to lead the way.

An elevator took them deep beneath the mountain, and deposited them in a wide corridor adjoined by several electronic doors. They had plastic seals around the edges to protect against harmful grit or germs carried down from the surface. The guard went back up in the elevator; another met Michael and took him to the operations room.

Administrator Britling, who had conducted Michael's fruitless interrogation the previous afternoon, met Michael at the top of a shallow flight of steps that led to a wide area filled with computer consoles and weary-looking technicians. This time, he shook Michael's hand.

'Director Karlson,' he said. He had a minor scar from a harelip operation, and his mouth navigated the name a little clumsily. It seemed to Michael that the Administrator had adopted the habit of growing red-brown stubble to conceal the scar and his slightly jowly jaw, which in all respects was unsuccessful. Michael had trouble respecting a man who took measures to hide such insignificancies; perhaps Michael had spent too long surrounded by the comfortable padding of subspace thought-transmissions to care about that kind of superficiality.

'Sir,' he said. 'You had something to show me?'

'Yes. The officers discussed the possibility of bringing you in on a little problem we've been monitoring and, seeing as you have some small experience of the matter...'

'The situation with Jupiter?'

'More specifically the cast off material that occupies the space between us and the source.'

You don't know anything about it, do you? Michael thought. You don't even know what to call it.

'This way please, Director,' the Administrator said.

Michael followed him down the steps into the wider area occupied by the white-coated staff. Two other officers were present, in crisp dark uniforms, but both looked haggard and frustrated.

One of the officers was the woman who had spoken to Michael alongside the Administrator. He remembered that her name was Smitheson. Now able to see her badge clearly, he saw that she was a government agent rather than a Global Space Program officer.

‘Hello again, Director.’

‘What’s this on the screen?’

He pointed to a curved screen that had been pinned to a partition behind the technician’s desk. On it was a bright image with the same colour scheme as the one that Richard Karlson has transmitted to Michael in the hotel suite. Shapes moved about amidst the coils of vapour, but they were too vague to be properly made out. They moved as though they were aware of the cameraman’s presence.

‘This is footage taken by a GSP staff scientist who has been working on the Jovian Satellite Station *Periphetes*,’ Agent Smitheson said. ‘He was submerged in the upper hydrogen layers of Jupiter when this was filmed, protected by a sealed exoskeletal suit.’

‘That station was built by my corporation,’ Michael said. ‘The two scientists were WTO-backed. Ashley and Sinda Havers, am I right?’

‘The footage you are seeing here was taken by Ashley Havers. He and his wife were due back planetside late yesterday, but much like your own re-entry, we’ve lost contact with them.’

‘Hardware problem?’

‘We haven’t come across it before. But that’s our problem, not yours,’ she told him firmly. ‘We want you to tell us if you recognise anything in these images from your time by the Daedalus crater on the moon.’

‘It’s a similar phenomenon,’ said Michael. ‘You’re saying that the emissions I saw, the vapour cloud over the Daedalus crater, were cast-offs from Jupiter’s atmosphere?’

One of the technicians interrupted. ‘Sorry sir, ma’am ... We have the audio report cleaned up. Shall I play it again for the Director’s benefit?’

‘Please do,’ Smitheson said. Then, to Michael, she said, ‘This is the more relevant part of a report that Ashley Havers transmitted to us a few weeks ago, during the return trip. Obviously before we lost contact.’

Michael nodded. ‘Go ahead and play it.’

The technician did as he was told, and opened an audio file on the computer. The sound played over the top of the incoherent, colourful footage of Ashley Havers’ descent in the Jovian atmosphere:

‘Listen. Jupiter radiates more heat than it receives from the Sun, a curiosity that no-one has ever really figured out. Most theories rely on the Kelvin-Helmholtz mechanism: the surface is cooling and the pressure’s dropping, meaning that the entire planet is compressing, okay? This causes the core to heat up. It also means that Jupiter is shrinking by a few centimetres each year, or at least it was. In the last twenty years or so this process has accelerated. Nobody could say why, but it was obviously leading up to this.’

‘He sounds worked up,’ Michael commented.

The Administrator stepped into the space between Michael and Agent Smitheson. He had a stack of loose papers in his hand that he was trying to organise, swapping individual sheets from front to back.

‘This was the last time we heard from him,’ he said. ‘It’s a recording he transmitted to us. It got through and we stored it, listened to it. By the time we’d prepared a message to acknowledge receipt of the report, we found that there was an area of radio silence around the craft. It hadn’t been due to enter our atmosphere for days. It was like they’d both just fallen asleep.’

‘Or were dead.’

‘Director, people don’t just die on shuttles. If there was a problem, the minor-class AI would report it and transmit as a matter of course. It wouldn’t be able to intervene, but it would tell us if there was some sort of medical emergency on board. Or it would at least inform us if there was a problem. Those kinds of transmissions are thrown out every couple of hours.’

‘Only the AI was silent too,’ Smitheson added. ‘We can’t explain it.’

Michael rubbed his temples. ‘And what does the report have to do with what we’re watching?’

‘Look closely,’ said Britling, pointing to the screen. ‘See those things there?’

‘Shapes...’ said Michael. ‘Just the *impressions* of things caused by the movement of gases. At that depth, the gas would be almost liquid, and at the juncture there would be some weird effects.’

‘These aren’t illusions, Director,’ Britling told him flatly. ‘These are what we call “atmospheric beasts”. Creatures, living things, that have evolved or were engineered to exist for sustained periods within the upper regions of gas-giant planets, however dense or pressurised. Extremophiles.’

‘You sound like you’ve been reading up.’

‘This is the predominant theory at the moment,’ Agent Smitheson put in, clasping her hands together. ‘We’ve *all* been reading up. This sort of extremophile has been theorized about, but obviously we’ve never come across anything like it. Similar things have been seen in the oceans, the Mariana Trench maybe ... weird things, but nothing off-world. But we suspect ... Well, we were considering asking you if—’

The Administrator had grown impatient. Evidently he wasn’t a fan of science-talk and was used to getting to the heart of the matter, and quickly. Michael had seen as much during his interrogation. He interrupted the agent.

‘What she’s getting at, Karlson, is have you seen anything like what we’re discussing here? Around or above the Farside lunar lab while you were there?’

Michael knew exactly what they were getting at. Both Maria and James Aylesworth had nearly been killed by such bizarre creatures, when the vapour cloud had first appeared above the still-developing antennae dish. They said that creatures like huge flukes, sort of giant, fat worms, had fallen like hailstones all around them, punching holes into the dusty lunar landscape. These things had fallen directly from the vapour cloud.

Before he made up his mind whether or not to answer the Administrator’s question truthfully, the lights in the room dimmed almost to darkness and then glowed deep red. A soft but persistent siren began to throb through the centre. All at once people were standing up at their stations and shouting orders into microphones. The security detail looked alert but fed-up, as though this happened far too often.

‘What’s going on?’ the Administrator snapped at the technician.

‘It’s the same as yesterday, sir. A report’s come through that an unidentified spacecraft has entered the atmosphere ... but it’s hours old. Just reported ... by the Peruvian government.’

‘It came down in *Peru*?’

‘Yes, sir. They gave us the craft number. It’s Ashley and Sinda Havers. They’re already on their way here, sir, according the Peruvians.’

Administrator Britling turned sharply to Michael and put his hand on his shoulder. ‘Bad luck, Director. We have guests, and you don’t have clearance. You’ll be restricted to staff quarters for a few hours.’

‘Like hell I will!’

‘Sorry Director. No choice.’

The Administrator’s grip on Michael’s shoulder was quite firm.

The room he was locked into was meant to serve as living quarters for one of the Centre's live-in staff. It had a desk, a bed, and a small *en suite* with a shower.

Michael tapped his earpiece. The node was fixed into his ear like a hearing aid, constructed of minute crystal circuitry and foamed plastic so that it didn't affect his hearing. It also acted as the hub for his communications visor, which unfolded when he gave the instruction. A translucent screen unrolled across his right eye. Tapping the node again, Michael attempted to dial out to contact other Directors nearby, but there was no radio signal. Of course: he was several storeys underground and wouldn't be able to phone out. *Stupid!*

Instead he felt with his fingers under his hair, until his fingertips came into contact with the copper grid that laced his outer skull. Faint electric tingles danced up the inside of his perspiring fingers to his palms. Concentrating, he began to thump messages into subspace with his thoughts, transmitting a brief signal to any other Karlson Directors. Perhaps, if Richard Karlson II himself was still in the near vicinity, the CEO might be the first to respond to his call for assistance.

Michael remembered how, on the surface of the moon, his broadcasted thoughts had taken on a visual presence. They had lit up the air around him like dazzling strokes of luminescent paint on an invisible canvas. Back then, he'd known that the vapour cloud was responsible. He now knew a little more: that mystifying and dangerous phenomenon had come from Jupiter, and in fact was a percentage of Jupiter's gaseous atmosphere itself.

With his message sent, Michael decided that while he waited he might as well have a shower. The underground centre had only average air conditioning, most of that energy used merely to recycle the air rather than introduce fresh oxygen from outside. The whole place was stifling, and the unusual sense of impending danger he'd had whilst viewing the footage from Jupiter's atmosphere had compounded the feeling of pressure and suffocation.

He took his shower whilst he waited for a response. The subspace reply came not from the CEO, as he had hoped, but from another Director who was visiting family in Colorado and was just as close as any of the others:

Sorry for delay. Can help with access codes for MCC. Details follow—

Excellent. Michael rubbed the shampoo out of his hair and got dressed again, resentful of being forced to don the same shirt and pants he'd been wearing before instead of clean garments. He wondered what his father would say about his picky attitude and wastefulness.

By the time he'd tied the laces on his shoes, the access codes embedded in the subspace transmission had settled firmly into Michael's short-term memory. He made an effort to remember them properly, unlocking the door to the room as he did so. The codes worked.

The corridor outside was empty. A map of the Control Centre had also been downloaded into his mind via the headset, and so Michael knew exactly where to go to eavesdrop on whatever interrogations were taking place with the MCC's latest visitors.

He glanced through a plastic window in a door at the end of the long corridor. Past the door was an office. There were two chairs behind the desk, one seating a young man and the other a young woman: they were Ashley and Sinda Havers, the scientists who had been funded by both the Global Treaty Organisation and the World Space Program to monitor Jupiter's unusual behaviour.

Administrator Britling and Agent Smitheson were in attendance, along with a doctor who was busily examining the returned scientists.

The door was soundproof, as any interrogation room should be. Michael entered the room next door, a small janitor's closet, and quietly unclipped a small vent from the wall. He felt with his hand in the dark hole behind the vent until he felt the wool-like soundproofing, and then tore pieces away until he could hear the conversation taking place in the adjacent room. Through the net of torn sheets, he could just about see the two scientists.

‘We understand that you’re unsettled and probably exhausted,’ Agent Smitheson was saying calmly, ‘but we need your full and immediate co-operation. We may be facing some form of a crisis here.’

‘I’m not interested in what you’re “facing”,’ Ashley Havers said venomously. He was sweating inside the atmospheric suit he still wore. The helmet had been removed and was placed on the desk in front of him. The doctor now picked this up and began taking swab samples from the inside of its visor.

‘And tell him to get away from me! We’re not sick!’

‘We don’t think you’re sick, Mr Havers,’ Smitheson said. ‘Otherwise you’d be in quarantine. We just need to make records of every aspect of your return here, as a matter of urgency. Just as we need to know about every minute you experienced on the *Periphetes* and in Jupiter’s atmosphere.’

‘What else do you want to know? You got our report, didn’t you? We descended into the first and second layers of the planet. We encountered moving shapes that may or may not have been living extremophiles. We made it back to the station before the magnetosphere broke and the planet’s atmosphere began to be spun away. That’s it.’

‘What is left of Jupiter now?’

‘Scans showed a very small metallic core surrounded by a few hundred kilometres of liquid hydrogen. That’s it.’

‘No gaseous atmosphere?’

‘None at all.’

‘What about the life-forms?’ General Britling said. ‘Did they communicate?’

‘If they *were* life forms, they’re almost certainly dead now. They acted more like mindless cells in a Petri dish than anything I know of. They swarmed around me like antibodies attacking an invading germ. That’s what they made me feel like. A germ.’

‘Did they touch you?’

‘No,’ Ashley said. ‘They didn’t.’

‘What about Sinda?’

Administrator Britling now stepped into view, approaching the desk. The doctor obligingly moved out of his way; he had been checking Sinda Havers’ pupils with a small penlight.

‘She appears to be in a state of shock,’ the Administrator commented coarsely. ‘That right, doctor?’

‘Totally unresponsive,’ the doctor replied.

Ashley reacted violently, even going as far as getting out of his chair. In his weak state, however, he didn’t look like he could do much else.

‘Get away from her! She’s not a pet, she’s my *wife*!’

‘Sit down. Please,’ Agent Smitheson said kindly.

Ashley obliged and sat in his chair. He tugged uncomfortably at the neck of his suit, and then removed both his gloves and threw them onto the table beside the helmet.

Smitheson continued to speak. ‘Sinda went down into the atmosphere of the planet just like you, didn’t she? If that’s right, why did she emerge in so different a condition?’

Ashley crossed his arms.

‘This is serious, Mr Havers. You’re being petulant when we need you to be very specific. We’re not your enemy, we’re your government. The GSP hired and financially supported you and your wife to help the scientific community and, by extension, the whole race. And now you cross your arms and fall silent?’

Ashley seemed to receive Smitheson’s reproof in the way that it had been intended. He realised that he really had nothing to lose by telling the truth. Ashley took a deep breath and then ran his hand through his ragged head of hair.

‘All right. We decided that we needed to take another dive to confirm some readings we found. It was perfectly safe; we used the right suits, the exoskeleton that would protect us from the pressure and the winds, and the normal energy shields. Everything was in place.’

‘You both descended at the same time?’

‘No. Sinda went first, and I watched from the station. She said that everything looked normal. The atmosphere was thicker than we were used to, but then she’d gone a lot deeper than we’d needed to in the past. She descended to about twenty thousand kilometres. There was atmospheric lightning, but again that’s normal. The wind was moving at extreme speeds but that’s normal too.’

‘And then she saw the shapes?’

‘Yes. She said that they were moving around her and that they were touching her through the suit. Then she ... I thought she’d died. It sounded like she’d been torn apart by the winds, as though the energy fields had failed. So I made to descend too. I got as far as she got, and then further. I saw the shapes but they only brushed against me, like they were thoughtless, just testing to see if I was dangerous. You know how those anemones in the deep sea have fronds that touch fish? And if the fish moves in the right way, they grab it instinctively? There’s no thought or intent at all, just reflex. They moved like that, like thoughtless creatures, like cells. Then the winds picked up, and the liquescent gases started rushing away, upwards away from the core. I got caught up in it, but made it back to the station. And Sinda was with me when I got there.’

The Administrator looked at him incredulously. There was a period of silence. Michael still couldn’t see Smitheson, but he saw the uncomfortable look on the face of the doctor, who must have been government staff and had probably not heard anything like that at all in his life. He was looking from Ashley, to Britling, to Smitheson, his old lips slightly parted, waiting for somebody to speak.

‘So...’ the Administrator began, hesitantly. ‘So how the hell did you make it back to the station? You were conscious, I take it?’

‘Not that I remember,’ Ashley said, shaking his head. ‘I must have been in a daze, or maybe I blocked it out.’

‘And Sinda – the Sinda Havers sitting here, your wife – she had just materialised on the station as well?’

Ashley’s wife hadn’t moved or spoken the whole time. She was like a doll, or an animatronic storefront mannequins waiting for a routine to be programmed into her.

Ashley nodded at the Administrator.

‘She just appeared, as perfect as ever. I don’t know what to tell you.’

*

Things begin to add up, thought Michael. He climbed down from the unsteady shelf he’d been using to get a good view through the vent. *It’s starting to make sense...*

After refastening the vent, Michael left the janitor’s room and began to make his way back to the little apartment he’d been locked in. He didn’t use the map; he thought that he could remember the way easily enough.

He knew exactly what had happened to the Havers couple. He knew what had happened by the Daedalus crater on the moon. Michael now understood what had happened to Maria Aylesworth who, before Michael had been mysteriously encased in basalt, had been piloting the shuttle that had taken them all home. The GSP was saying that she had never been on the craft; Michael knew better. She’d been there all right. And then she’d disappeared.

It boiled down into the simplest explanation. It was all about manifestations: objects brought into being through thoughts, and then – just as quickly – snatched out of existence again.

At the Lunar Farside Lab, after things had begun to get weird, Maria Aylesworth had *fallen through* a solid wall. She hadn’t been protected by her energy shield. Her body fell through the wall, which had been weakened by a mere

thought, that power unknowingly granted by the phenomenon to everybody there. She had emerged into total vacuum, a place where no human could survive for more than a few seconds. But then, according to her brother James, she had been found soaking wet and confused on the floor in one of the lab's other rooms. Magically transported from a lethally hostile environment into a place of safety, just as Sinda Havers had been.

Both women had been reborn, and both had re-entered the world exhibiting strange behaviour. Maria not so much – she'd been blunt and offhand for as long as Michael had been acquainted with her – but Sinda definitely. She'd come back mute and unresponsive. The difference came not from the way that the phenomenon had manifested itself, but from the sources of the girls' rebirth. James had mentally resurrected Maria, a sister that he depended upon and knew inside and out. Ashley had resurrected Sinda, his wife. However his unconscious attempt to bring her back, through the power of the Jupiter vapour cloud, had been either flawed or interrupted. She wasn't all there.

Both women were just figments, pure manifestations. The real women were dead. When James Aylesworth had been killed in the shuttle crash, "Maria" had disappeared. The manifestation no longer had a psychic bank of information to anchor her to physicality. She'd vanished instantly. Similarly, having suspected that such manifestations were the cause of the chaos that had taken place in the lab, Michael Hudd-Karlson had unknowingly protected himself from the impact. He'd constructed a stone shield around his body, which had safeguarded him until the danger had passed. And then, as Administrator Britling had put it, he'd "hatched like an egg".

'Unbelievable,' Michael said to himself. He was feeling suddenly exhausted.

Believing that he'd found the door to the office he was supposed to be locked in, he entered the next room. He stopped, realising his mistake. He was in a cramped communications room, where two men sat at a bulky computer terminal deciphering communication bursts. From the looks of things, they also had a video link to one of Earth's geosynchronous satellites: one of the screens displayed a blindingly bright image of the Jupiter vapour cloud, clearly reproduced on-screen in twists of orange-brown and dirty red.

The two men had headsets on, and they hadn't noticed Michael's intrusion. They continued to talk frantically amongst themselves, jabbing buttons on the consoles. Something was blipping on one of the other screens.

'Christ,' one of the men said. 'No way.'

The other man opened up a communications line to somewhere else in the centre. It was Administrator Britling that answered.

'Yes?'

'Sir, there's been a significant development with the Kelvin-Helmholtz model.'

Britling sighed. 'I'm passing you over to Agent Smitheson.'

There was a pause, then Smitheson spoke through the radio.

'What is it?'

'Ma'am, new readings from the probes indicate further changes to the new structure of Jupiter.'

'What kind of changes?'

'It's ... pulsing. And the dislocated atmosphere that was previously suspended above the far side of the moon is now moving more definitely. The whole nebula is shifting towards the sun.'

'Is that a problem?'

The other man slapped his colleague on the arm with the back of his hand, and then redirected the microphone so that he could speak into it.

'Ma'am, it isn't conclusive that the dislocated atmosphere is heading towards the sun.'

Smitheson sounded irritated. 'Well is it, or isn't it?'

‘The moon is currently in Earth’s shadow. It means we’re directly between it and the sun. It’s possible that the nebula is actually heading towards *us*. Either way, it’s going to make contact with our own atmosphere very shortly ... Two hours, if it continues to accelerate at its current rate.’

Michael backed out of the room and steadied himself against the wall of the corridor. He found himself out of breath, the skin of his face clammy. Was he nervous? Was he *afraid*? He’d seen Maria Aylesworth fall through an apparently solid wall to her death. He’d seen Theo Callas, their Uncommon Materials Officer, go insane and sprout wings, then soar impossibly through the vacuum until his wings broke and he toppled headfirst into a white landscape of liquid rock. He might still be there, frozen in the now-solidified stone. His body would rot away, leaving a man-shaped hollow. His bones would rattle around in there, probably forever, until they turned to dust. *Yes*, Michael admitted to himself, *this must be fear. I am afraid.*

He sent a transmission:

Jupiter phenomenon approaching our atmosphere. Please advise. Recommend any and all immediate prevention methods available.

He had barely got back to the right room when the response came, as clear as day:

No prevention. Probable enterprise opportunity. Don’t do anything, brother. Await further instruction.

Had he heard that right? There were no two ways about it: the message had been embedded in his mind as though he’d conjured the thought himself. *Probable enterprise opportunity.* This couldn’t be the CEO’s choice, not after Michael – a Director, no less! – had been nearly killed! *No prevention?* What did they expect him to do? Allow a deadly threat to approach Earth? If the phenomenon manifested itself in the greater population, there would be pandemonium. The world would turn into a nightmare place, where every stray thought became a horrific reality. People would be killed, or would kill themselves unwittingly as Theo Callas had. The planet would be overrun by ghostly replicas of loved ones or imagined beings, just like Maria Aylesbury and Sinda Havers.

There was no choice. Michael strode past the door to the room he had been confined to and up a steep ramp leading to the operations room. Administrators heading in every direction knocked shoulders with him, spilling papers and apologising breathlessly. The report that the phenomenon was reaching towards Earth’s atmosphere, like the grasping hand of a diseased stranger, had been transmitted to the ops room. It seemed as though people were as concerned as Michael.

Pushing himself further into the centre of the surging confusion, he spoke directly to the Administrator.

‘Sir, have you contacted the military yet? And Washington?’

Britling scowled, a little pink in the face. ‘What? Aren’t you supposed to be confined? No, I haven’t contacted Washington! There’s no evidence to suggest that this is anything more than an odd weather formation.’

Michael looked disbelievingly at the Administrator, and then pointedly examined the huge curved screen that took up most of the front wall of the operations centre. It displayed an out-of-atmosphere camera feed, showing the gentle curvature of the blue planet and its white waves and skeins of cloud. Just beyond, illuminating the darkness of space like burning branches, the wispy tendrils of vapour approached.

He turned back to Britling.

‘With respect, Administrator Britling, you have a scientist in there who says he can’t explain it—’ He pointed back the way he had come, towards the corridor and its adjoining rooms. ‘—and you have a Karlson Director in *here* who’s saying that he’s witnessed absolute chaos first hand as a result of this phenomenon. And, since sixty-four percent of the GSP is funded by Karlson Enterprises, I expect you to at least take my advice into consideration.’

‘My only consideration is this operation right here,’ Britling said, pulling back his shoulders.

What a child he looks, Michael thought. *What a juvenile.*

‘Don’t be confused by my title, Karlson. I’m the most senior person at this MCC, I will do whatever I can to make sure that this is dealt with properly,’ Britling continued. ‘But right now I don’t have time for pissant little businessmen who think they understand GSP ops just because they’ve been to the moon and back.’

Michael turned suddenly as somebody touched his arm. It was Agent Smitheson.

‘Besides which,’ she added softly, ‘we’ve already consulted your superior on the matter. He has advised us to take no hostile action, merely prepare counter measures should it appear that the vapour might survive dissemination into our atmosphere. Prepare but not deploy. Our calculations also say that the vapour, which is mostly hydrogen and helium, which burn up or disassemble as soon as it makes contact. So there’s nothing to worry about, Director.’

Michael felt his incisors pinch the inside of his bottom lip with anger. He unclenched his fists but made no other effort to hide his disapproval and the offence he had taken at being spoken to in such a manner.

‘And you won’t be taking into account Ashley Havers’ statement of events, which is so full of questions, holes and unknown variables as to cause myself and the other Directors great concern, despite the orders the CEO has relayed to you?’

‘What would *you* know about Havers’ testimony?’ the Administrator said abruptly.

Smitheson interceded. ‘Director, you’re free to leave if you wish, seeing as you’re out of your temporary quarters already. But please don’t expect us to waste more time speaking to a Director when his superior, at the highest level, has requested that we proceed.’

She was quite softly spoken, despite her blunt manner. Michael, even in his mounting frustration, could find no real fault with what she was saying.

‘Fine,’ he said.

As much as he disliked her, and as much as he would quite like to invert the Administrator’s cheekbone with his fist, Michael decided that it would be wise to leave. Neither of the two individuals in front of him invoked as much rage as the thought of having his authority there countermanded by Richard Karlson II.

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PART THREE: AGGRESSIVE CONSUMERS

It took him a few hours by aircraft to arrive at the nearest KE HQ, on the Colorado border. Michael was certain that the CEO would be there. He arrived and stood on the forecourt in front of the forty-storey building, which was constructed of white ribs of concrete around huge plates of plasti-plex curving to a Corinthian dome. The design was similar but not identical to the headquarters all across the country, and every one of them sported a dome as a fundamental part of the structure. Michael remembered that the architects had been coerced into signing confidentiality agreements about certain aspects of the buildings' design.

Michael offered his skin cells to a small device mounted on the front gate. The gate swung open, glinting bronze in the low sunlight. Beyond a second gate, inside the main lobby, he introduced himself to a mechanical guard that whirred its chrome limbs, logging his arrival on both digital files and paper ones.

'Is the CEO currently staying here?' he asked it.

'Yes. The Wyoming Director is on leave until Wednesday and invited the CEO to reside here temporarily. Would you like me to alert him to your arrival?'

'No, thank you,' Michael said, smiling thinly at the intelligent machine. 'I'll make my own way up.'

'Yes, Director.'

He took the elevator. Four dozen storeys swept by in a few moments, and the elevator cab then admitted him to the penthouse office. Michael was a roving Director and has such hadn't been assigned an HQ to preside over, and so the luxury of the office both surprised and disgusted him. It was even more opulent than the hotel suite. The furniture was antique. He half expected a massive chandelier dripping with crystal. Instead there were indiscreet rows of strip lighting all the way up the ridged copper interior of the dome, culminating in the glass peak that allowed the evening sunshine to pierce the room in rays.

Richard Karlson II was standing near his desk, selecting a paper book from a rich oaken bookcase situated between a pair of the larger copper girders. The CEO was half-turned, surprised at the silent and unannounced access to his temporary office, with the book in his hand.

'Michael?' he uttered, caught a little off guard.

Michael nodded. 'Yes, sir. Sorry to arrive without notice.'

Richard smiled and gestured to a long leather couch beneath the broad windows. 'Nonsense, it's always a pleasure. Would you like a drink?'

Michael shook his head. It seemed the CEO was always drinking. There was another bottle of whiskey, evidently his favourite tippie, opened and a quarter empty on his desk.

Richard sat on the edge of the desk. His jacket was on the back of his chair, but he kept his cigarettes in his waistcoat pocket. Removing one from its unlabelled foil packet, he took out a matchbook and then gestured that Michael should take one.

'No thank you, sir.'

'You aren't worried about the legal implications? The Europeans haven't imposed their ridiculous impositions here yet; they're quite lawful in one's own premises.'

'I've never had the inclination, sir,' Michael said.

Richard lit his cigarette. The match he flicked into a metal bin by his feet. He said nothing, and was guarded; Michael guessed that the CEO must have realised he was there to dispute his orders.

Michael decided that he would have to be the one to turn the conversation to business.

‘I thought that I was in charge of the lunar opportunities,’ he said slowly. ‘Even now that I’m back on-world.’

‘Yes,’ Richard replied laconically.

‘You countermanded me. I understand that it’s not my place to argue against your wishes when it comes to KE matters, but I find myself undermined.’

‘I got the impression from our last encounter that you weren’t too thrilled with the notion of the Jovian discharge approaching Earth. I sensed that you intended to stop or divert it, if you could. Presumably as a result of your experiences on the moon.’

Smoke curled around his face, thick and grey-blue.

‘Your impression was on the mark,’ Michael replied.

He stood under the pretence of fetching himself a drink, something he guessed the CEO wouldn’t deny him considering his own growing list of vices. Richard didn’t move as Michael filled the glass on the table with whiskey. He didn’t mind using an unclean glass; despite being spread across the globe and even off-planet, all Karlson Directors shared almost exactly the same germs.

He continued. ‘I feel that to allow the phenomenon to enter our atmosphere would be ill advised. In fact, it would result in utter anarchy. We must do everything that we can to prevent it, sir, in our own best interests if not humanity’s.’

‘Our interests lie in business enterprise,’ Richard replied. ‘I feel that the unique properties of the discharged Jovian atmosphere – properties that you have helped to identify with your reports – would more than reassure the aggressive consumers we have to satisfy with a range of new products.’

‘And that would include military applications, I suppose.’

‘You’ve never voiced a concern over such applications before, Director Hudd-Karlson.’

‘I’ve never seen a weapon that could harness such potent and unpredictable energy. I don’t wish to ever see one that could.’

‘Not even if you were the only person who stood to profit from it?’ Richard asked lightly.

‘Not even a little.’

‘Nor if you had complete control over its design, development, its production, its distribution ... If you had the authority to say who could wield it and who could not?’

Richard was smiling now, but that wasn’t what had drawn Michael’s gaze. Intermingling with the smoke from Richard’s burning cigarette were strands of colour, rising like steam from his head. As Michael watched, words spelled in the Roman alphabet began to draw themselves into existence, each one flickering in and out of hazy images that hung suspended in the air.

Michael matched the CEO’s smile, and put down the glass.

‘You’re transmitting,’ he said. ‘Stop it.’

Richard followed Michael’s gaze and looked up. He was astonished to see his own thoughts manifested visually in the still air above him. He had no way of knowing that this was the same as what Michael had seen when transmitting from the lunar laboratory: his thoughts made real by the vapour cloud.

‘What is...?’

‘The Jovian discharge has reached our atmosphere,’ Michael said flatly. ‘It has the power to affect our thoughts. I believe that it’s drawn to them, and to the objects that hold the imprint of man’s thoughts and designs. It was attracted directly to the parabolic antenna that had just been constructed in the Daedalus crater. From there it moved straight to the laboratory, where the group and I were working. It was drawn to our thoughts and made them physical, just like your transmission is being recreated physically now.’

Richard was far too smart to let something distract him, not when Michael's diatribe held the tone that it did. His gaze snapped down towards his subordinate and he stood straight against the desk, his cigarette still burning between his lips.

'Stay where you are, brother.'

'You were warned, sir,' Michael said, and as he spoke he raised his hand.

Coloured mist coiled out of his fingertips. Shadow bled into the room, rolling from Michael's tacky palms and dripping from his fingers. Shapes began to develop within the misty streams, some almost too small to recognise, others no bigger than lizards. They jumped and slithered through the air, which began to froth with unidentifiable outlines.

The CEO's transmission died before it hit the inner surface of the dome. The room was designed to amplify mental subspace transmissions. The copper struts and girders, in most other buildings a lightning hazard, had been constructed to carry the subspace transmissions into clear airspace. This time they acted as they would have any other time: as electric conducts, now crackling with the energy that was being poured into the room from Michael's own mind.

'You were never right for Directorship,' the CEO spat, trying to shield his eyes from the brightening light. The fuzzy-edged shapes scrambled all over him. 'You always acted like people thought a Director should, cold and profit-driven. But that never sat right with you, did it? What was it, your family? Your father who disapproved from the beginning? It's all on file, brother, I've examined every minute of your life...'

'I won't take any more of your insults,' Michael said calmly. 'I'll be assuming the role of Chief Director.'

The creatures of the mist writhed over the CEO, biting and clawing at his clothes and flesh, nipping through the skin with sharp teeth. They were agile yet formless, shifting from long-legged to winged, scaled to furred. Each of them had jaws and talons that they used to tear the CEO to pieces. He was being devoured, at least as much as the semi-corporeal manifestations could manage. They tore skin away in strips, aggressive little voices crying out as they did so. The outer layers of Richard Karlson II were mostly consumed within the space of sixty seconds. Then, fighting his own nausea at the revolting remains, Michael lowered his hands and summoned the monstrosities back, satisfied that his aggressive little consumers had dispatched his superior in the most suitable way.

Before he sent the signal to the entire roster of Karlson Directors around the globe, telling them that he had forcefully but necessarily taken control of the corporation, he vomited against the closest wall. He hadn't the murderous nature that Richard must have been born with, but he had spent the whole journey thinking how best to displace the CEO, and violence was the only permanent, risk-free solution. He'd meant to forcefully but temporarily subdue Richard, but the manifestations had gotten away from him.

He'd had no time to waste, not when so many lives were at stake. He imagined the power of the manifestations infecting every unconscious mind in the country. It could destroy everything.

He threw up again, this time having to step back as he did so to avoid being splattered by the spreading pool of vomit. His left eye could see the pool reaching the closest of Richard's bloody limbs. Let him soak in it: the man deserved no less.

*

Not all of the two hundred Karlson Directors agreed with Michael's methods or explanations. Many were actively appalled and shocked at the event, particularly how someone who had passed all the psych exams to reach Directorship had been capable of killing the man who they were all essentially part of.

Michael noticed that a portion of his brain seemed to shut down upon Richard's death. The tiny chunk of cloned grey matter was dead now, unusable. The thought of a piece of the man inside his skull made him feel ill, but he held his stomach this time. The other Directors, via subspace, were complaining of the same problem, and of course held Michael accountable. Who else? He gave up justifying his actions after an hour.

There were times when he wished that he could remove the headset completely and throw the thing down, segregate himself from the thoughts of the other Directors completely. That was how he had lived as a child, and as a young adult before his Directorship. Happily cut off from the thoughts and orders of profit-driven individuals – were they individual? Or echoes of the man he had just accidentally killed? Michael had never wanted anything but to be successful, to make something of himself in the way that his parents had never expected or encouraged, and develop into somebody worthy of respect. A large part of him knew that he had been more than successful in that regard.

That wouldn't last for long. He would most likely be ousted the moment the other Directors could decide on a rightful replacement for the CEO. He had only a short time to protect everybody from the unanticipated danger that was even now integrating itself with the minds it touched. Michael's only request to his brothers was that as many of them as possible meet him at the Mission Control Centre ASAP.

*

The guard at the concrete entrance to the MCC at first tried to stop him from entering. Michael altered the streaming information from primary Karlson HQ to all the subsidiary partners, which included the KE-sponsored Global Space Program. Michael granted himself the proper security clearance owed to the Chief Director.

The guard tipped his cap to scratch his head. 'Not a problem now sir, it looks like the information was out of date. I'll escort you inside.'

They took the elevator as before, travelling down the operations room. As they descended Michael connected again via subspace, altering records and details to suit his purpose, connecting with individuals with access to computer and NewNet servers to further entrench his authority within the corporation. They were temporary fixes, patch jobs at best, but he wouldn't need full authority for long.

Administrator Britling met him amidst a flurry of activity. Groups of people were dashing from one side of the operations room to the other, talking rapidly in pairs, or frantically bickering down the phone to somebody who didn't seem to understand the problem.

'Having a little trouble getting things organised, are you?'

'It's chaos, not that it has anything to do with you,' Britling said sharply. 'And you'll have to forgive my frankness, but I don't have time for conversation.'

Michael saw a series of images arrayed in a line across the largest of the main screens. They were images of a type of aircraft – or a sleek, streamlined spacecraft designed to be flown by only two people. He accessed the aeronautics division of the corporation to see if they'd had any hand in designing such things. There was a match: a craft designed to fly in low orbit through the Earth's thermosphere and exosphere. Michael didn't even know what that meant, but knew that they weren't intended for deep space travel and definitely wouldn't be up to the task that the Administrator probably had planned for them.

'You're sending craft to intercept? The Jovian atmosphere won't be communicated with, or be susceptible to damage. Not with conventional weapons.'

'We're still acting on orders from your superior,' Britling replied. He turned to yell at the room in general. 'Smitheson! Get over here.'

Agent Smitheson arrived. She looked pale-faced and tired, but this didn't affect her direct attitude.

'Director Hudd-Karlson, we're overworked here. I'd ask you to keep interference to a minimum. I mean this with all due respect.'

'The both of you may check the datastream from Karlson Enterprises. It will have updated now to include new command orders.'

The agent of course had a node; she touched the spot of metal that protruded from the small lump behind her ear. The implant connected her, presumably, to the MCC computers.

The Administrator, who didn't have the benefit of a node implant, spoke with irritation. 'What's he talking about?'

Agent Smitheson opened her eyes. She ignored Britling completely. 'How can we help you, Chief Director Karlson?'

'Firstly you can detain Administrator Britling, under the Sponsorship Arrangement's second codex.'

The Administrator visibly bristled, not just at the insulting tone Michael had given the request, but also at being spoken about, rather than spoken *to*.

'Son,' he said, 'I understand that you're a big shot in the business world, but in reality you're really just—'

'The codex was printed in paper and ink and signed by your superior at the highest level, Mr Britling. It says that if the Chief Director even suspects that you aren't acting in the best interest of the GSP *or* Karlson Enterprises, or any of the partners or subsidiaries of such, then I'm granted the power to displace you for a period of up to six hours, pending investigation.'

He turned to Agent Smitheson, who remained impassive, and said, 'The room that I was held in before should be fine.'

She nodded. 'As you wish.'

The Administrator allowed himself, surprisingly, to be led away, but he didn't go quietly. The clause of the second Sponsorship Arrangement codex was one he remembered and had actually never forgotten, because it was the only thing that weakened his otherwise absolute power. He was fully aware that if the Director hadn't established a firm case against him, then the Director himself could face charges.

Michael knew this, and watched grimly as Administrator Britling was escorted to his holding cell, roaring his outrage. He was a difficulty that he would have to tackle when the time came. For now:

'Agent Smitheson, I'd like to address the centre's staff.'

She nodded and approached a console. It blipped the alert siren for a second, drawing the attention of everyone present.

'There's a mic at this console, sir.'

He approached it and flipped a switch. When he spoke, his words were amplified around the operations room and the rest of the centre.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, feeling a touch embarrassed at being the centre of attention. 'We are in a unique situation. The vaporous discharge that is approaching the planet will have unprecedented effects on the population, and will likely strike our geographical region first. Any unusual experiences, including visions, the discovery of unfamiliar objects, or physical changes of any kind are to be reported to me immediately. Any efforts currently in place to prep and launch any atmospheric craft must be stopped immediately and diverted to finding a way to safely disperse the vapour cloud as soon as possible. That's all for now. Thank you.'

He stepped away from the microphone and turned to receive Smitheson's hard stare.

'Way to scare the shit out of everybody, Director,' she said.

'There's no way around it. Strange things will happen and they need to be forewarned.'

'An explanation might not have been amiss, sir.'

'You want to hear my explanation?'

'If you have one, sir. Things are already pretty odd around here, anything worse would just be a disaster. The more answers we have, the better chance we have of ignoring those "strange things" of yours.'

He examined her quietly. Perhaps it was time that government employees from whatever branch Smitheson was attached to played a larger part in controlling and protecting Karlson assets.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You’ve been briefed on everything that I have, but you don’t know the facts about what happened on the lunar surface. The Jovian discharge touched down immediately above the parabolic dish we had just constructed. It killed the live nanites that were building it and turned them to dead metal. It was drawn, in my opinion, to the residual consciousness that lingers around every man-made object.’

‘Far-fetched,’ she said simply.

‘But true. It then moved towards the laboratory. It turned the rock to liquid. It built a wall out of nothing around the lab, and that wall curved and formed a solid dome. The dome began to rain, filling the space within it. The rain was partially liquid and partially gas, and the gas often formed shapes and faces, and whispering noises. I discovered that it all correlated to a private, shared experience held only in the memories of the other members of my group. The water, the dome, the whispers.’

‘You’re saying these manifestations were drawn from their minds?’

‘Yes. I also found that my mental subspace transmissions manifested physically in the air above me, and, upon trying to escape, I used that knowledge to puncture a hole in the stone dome just by thinking about it. I also unconsciously protected myself with the shell of stone when the shuttle crashed.’

Smitheson shifted her weight uncomfortably. She no doubt had the same worries that Michael had, that unrestricted access to one’s unconscious – magnified by the number of people on the planet, over eight billion – would destroy everything that humanity had spent millennia working to achieve. The human mind had multiple rooms and caverns, many with dark or dirty secrets locked inside, and to unlock those spaces and loose them on the world would be disastrous.

Michael sensed that Agent Smitheson agreed with him on the only important point: that they had to prevent such a thing coming pass, to nip apocalypse in the bud.

‘It’s a lot to swallow, sir.’

‘Believe me, I know. But we have two other people to corroborate the story. I’d like to see them now. Would you take care of things in here, make sure these folk don’t spin themselves into a froth?’

Oddly, Smitheson gave him a brief salute. ‘As you wish, sir.’

*

He went straight to the room where Ashley and Sinda Havers were detained. He found that, in his absence, they had been confined to a military standard holding cell, sealed and further protected by shimmering energy fields. Michael had to deactivate the shield before he could access the door controls, and it fizzed out of existence as he entered the correct security code.

Almost at the same time he heard muffled screams from behind the door. Without thinking of his own safety, he entered the digital code on the number pad by the door and pressed his thumb against the plate to confirm his clearance.

A red light blinked on the number pad. He’d been denied access.

The yelling continued, hoarse and insistent, but the door wouldn’t open for him. Michael accessed the server again, and as quickly as he could ran over all of the changes and security amendments he’d made upon his ascension to Chief Director. Forcing himself to focus despite the terrible noises from behind the door, he ran over every trail he’d followed to make those changes and—

There. He’d missed something, a single order that would give him unrestricted access to this corridor and two others that adjoined it. He corrected his oversight and immediately yanked open the metal door to the holding cell.

He saw Ashley Havers pressed up against the wall on his backside, pushing himself away with his legs from a dark figure that didn’t immediately register with Michael’s eyes. Ashley saw him and yelled, ‘*Help me!*’

The black shape, hunched like an ape, turned in the thick shadow. Forelimbs, hung from bulky spined shoulders, steadied the creature against the wall as it swivelled, moving uncertainly as though it had only just learned to walk. Michael saw a large, blue maw and small bright eyes glinting in the shadow of the cell, then the impression of bristling spines and hair.

The creature opened its mouth to roar soundlessly, thumped its massive clawed hands against the wall as it rushed to divert its rage to Michael. Mid-flight, it vanished into a surging twist of black smoke. Michael staggered back with the surprise of it, but regained his composure straight away. As calmly as he could manage, he offered his hand to Ashley. A sharp, gassy odour lingered in the air.

‘Are you all right?’

‘That thing...’ Ashley said.

‘Where is your wife?’

Ashley had half risen to his feet, but now slumped back. Michael had to catch him under his arms to stop him from crumpling to the floor again.

‘Where is she?’ Michael pressed.

‘She’s gone.’

‘Where?’

‘She’s gone.’

‘Turned to smoke, like that monster?’

Ashley nodded slowly. Then his face creased in the purest form of grief that Michael had ever seen. Unashamed tears rolled down his face and off his chin as he pushed the heels of his hands against his eyes, blocking out the world.

‘You knew that she wasn’t right,’ Michael said, as tenderly as he could manage. He was surprised to find himself unembarrassed by the weeping man in front of him. ‘You *knew*. You heard my announcement, right?’

Ashley didn’t respond.

‘I found hundreds of references online to beliefs involving things like Sinda. They’re often called “tulpas”, or “thoughtforms”. Sinda was a tulpa. From the moment she fell into Jupiter’s winds, the real Sinda was destroyed. Only your survival and interaction with the atmospheric phenomenon allowed her to be recreated.’

‘It felt like a miracle.’

‘In a sense,’ Michael said, ‘I suppose it was. The real miracle is that you survived your own descent at all, but life is funny that way. Sinda was a thoughtform created from your own memories and emotions. That is why she didn’t speak or react the way you expected. That’s why she was like a doll. It’s not your fault.’

Ashley sniffed and dried his eyes. ‘How do we stop it happening to somebody else...?’

‘It’s already happening. The monster you just created. You recognised it, right?’

Ashley nodded shakily. ‘Yeah ... From a storybook when I was a kid. The book was called “Mister Lee”, about a friendly monster who had a speech impediment. He was really called “Mystery”, but he just couldn’t say it right. And he had a monster nemesis he called “Evily Day”. That ... *thing* just then was Evily Day, but not like how he was in the book ... It was...’

‘It was how he was in your imagination,’ Michael finished.

‘Yeah. That thing made me feel how Evily Day made me feel when I was four years old.’

It seemed that his fear had temporarily overcome his grief, and he now looked merely shaken. Michael knew that he’d been right about Ashley already knowing that the Sinda he had returned with was not the real Sinda. If there was any higher power at all, he would have spent that time of semi-delusion unconsciously mourning for his wife, so that now the spell was broken he could move on.

Michael stepped back, and Ashley stood under his own weight. He looked wretched, but his eyes were already developing the stony, defensive look that Michael had seen in others. The first time had been his father's eyes after his mother had finally given up a long struggle against bowel cancer. After that, every instance had seemed more like the normal way of dealing with things: close oneself up, shut oneself away, and turn to stone.

He guided Ashley by the shoulder out of the cell, making sure to not move too quickly. Ashley was unsteady on his feet; it looked like he hadn't been fed since his arrival. He followed quietly, allowing himself to be supported, but halted as they turned right into the corridor.

In front of them was a security desk adjoined to the corridor. A woman in air force uniform had been assigned to guard the secure area – Michael had passed her on the way in – and she had a particularly dour look on her face.

'You opened the cell door, you must have clearance...' Ashley said.

They needn't have worried. The expression that Michael had mistaken for seriousness turned out to be a form of shock; the guard barely even registered that there were two men in front of her until Michael reached out and touched her cold hand.

'Are you okay?'

The guard looked up. She had her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, but many of the strands had slipped loose about her face. She was stocky and very pale, her jaw set slightly to one side as though her state of shock had left her without control over her own body.

'I saw her,' she said. She had a low voice that, over the phone, could have sounded either male or female. It had a throaty quality that Michael again attributed to shock.

'Saw who? A family member?'

The guard nodded, then she shook her head slowly. It turned into a slow diagonal zigzagging that didn't help either way.

'Rosie,' she said, barely moving her lips. 'She was knocked down a few years ago. She was alive but the vet had to put her down.'

'A dog?' Ashley offered.

The guard nodded. 'But she was just here. I saw her, I swear ... But she didn't look ... at all well ... and she ran away before I could catch her.'

'It was just a figment,' Michael said firmly. 'Do you understand? You heard my announcement? You might witness strange things, but they aren't *real* okay? Don't worry. Rosie's right where she belongs. Okay?'

The guard nodded. She released a long breath of air that she probably hadn't realised she was holding. Shakily she said, 'Yeah, yeah I guess you're right,' and rubbed at her face like she was washing it.

Michael turned to Ashley. 'Come on.'

The operations room still had a sense of urgency and trepidation, though now everybody was focused on the large screen that curved around the front of the room.

The images of the small spacecraft and curved edge of the blue planet were no longer displayed. Instead there was real-time footage of the Rocky mountain range, dark and sharp-edged against the afternoon sky. The foot of the valley was in view, brown scree rolling under a ridge of richly green grass and pine trees. It was the landscape that Michael had crashed into, his last memory before the collision, before the darkness had swamped him.

Above the peak of the mountain, pushing invisibly through the upper atmosphere from the cold emptiness beyond, was a growing construct of light. Pus-yellow, tan like the hide of a lion, creamy white; these were the colours the light was made of, the colours of the Jovian atmosphere. The twists of light, which glittered with the refracted glow of the fine vapour, moved in rings and belts as though locked in the routines of the planet they were once part of.

As the cloud rolled forward like a storm bank, ammonium crystals glittered and melted, depositing a fine rain upon the mountain. It was a brief, heavy downpour that darkened the stone and scree. Then the rain stopped, and the vapour thickened and surged down the mountainside like Tibetan fog.

‘Oh my god.’

‘Is that on us? Is that where we are?’

‘It moved in so fast,’ Michael said. ‘It didn’t move like that on the moon.’

‘The moon’s almost total vacuum,’ Agent Smitheson said, joining them. She put a cold-looking mug of coffee onto the nearest desk.

The cloud was already beginning to settle at the base of the mountain range like soup, filling in the valleys between the peaks. Everybody watched on the screens as the cloud descended further, compacting into a dense tower of crackling fog.

‘Oh.’

Agent Smitheson, who Michael had seen only as a sort of moving statue up until that moment, put her hand to her forehead and went slack. Her skirt was of a style that restricted her above the knees and she couldn’t steady herself by widening her stance; she bent and half-crouched, her eyes scrunched shut beneath her fists. Suddenly the agent looked human to Michael, who moved immediately to her side.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Can’t you feel it...?’

Michael did feel something; it had been building since the moment he saw Ashley’s monster explode into smoke. It began as a kind of uneasiness and quickly developed into an unpleasant tingling under his skin, as though his bones were vibrating. He’d dismissed it as unease, but the sensation hadn’t left him, and there’d been no time to think on the matter.

‘I feel it,’ Ashley said. He was already comforting Smitheson in a way that Michael didn’t think he himself would ever have been able to do. What did that mean? Had his time with the firm detached him that much?

Michael nodded. The centre wasn’t exactly shaking, but it seemed to tremble – *no*, Michael thought, *resonate* – in a way that made everything seem mildly blurry.

The first inbound subspace transmission thumped into the air around Michael’s head. The others sensed it as a kind of pressure in the ears, but unlike Michael they couldn’t hear the content of the message.

Michael stood straight wearily to pass on what he’d learned. ‘The other Directors are on their final approach. Two aircraft expected in the next five minutes, one a few minutes later.’

Ashley helped Smitheson to stand. He was being unusually protective over a person who was a total stranger to him. Michael attributed that to his recent loss, and let it go.

‘What are they going to do?’ Ashley asked him. ‘They can’t get in here.’

‘They don’t need to. I’m going out, and I think you should come with me.’

‘I get the feeling that walking into that cloud wouldn’t be good for my health.’

‘Your experience of the phenomenon has lent you a sensitivity to it,’ Michael said, ‘and, for my sake and everybody else’s, maybe an ability to help you sculpt the phenomenon it creates. You, me, and maybe a few other individuals who are naturally sensitive to it. And of course, the other Directors.’

‘Your headsets?’

‘It’s partially down to that, yes. It may also have something to do with the shared tissue we have, and the genetic therapy we undergo regularly. If one of us is sensitive, then all will be.’

‘So, what? We all stand out in that glowing fog, hold hands and wish it away?’ Ashley laughed.

Michael flexed the fingers of his right hand. The odd vibrations were getting to his joints.
'I'll go first,' he said.

PART FOUR: THOUGHTFORMS

The tunnel that led from the interior of the mountain into the valley outside was sealed by energy barriers and several inches of plasti-plex. The material was transparent, showing a stony, cavernous throat leading away from the sixth sub-basement beneath the Mission Control Centre.

‘And this leads directly outside?’ Michael asked, peering through the plasti-plex. ‘How long is the tunnel?’

‘A few hundred feet,’ Smitheson said. Ashley stood to her right, uninterested by his surroundings.

Of course he is, Michael thought. He’s a scientist – an astrophysicist. And he’s been further than the moon: he’s been past Mars, around Jupiter. He was in orbit around the thing before it decided to unravel. He saw Europa crumble to pieces. An underground tunnel must be boring by comparison.

He knew that he was kidding himself, though. Ashley Havers must be as terrified as he was.

‘That’s the airlock,’ Smitheson said. ‘Never had cause to use it before, but it’s the same as the upper entrance. You’ll have to go in one at a time. Open the first door, get in, wait for the light. The second door will open for you.’

‘Okay.’

Michael approached the airlock first. The door was cylindrical, fixed and sealed into the centre of the transparent wall. The cylinder itself was opaque, the strong translucent material infused with blue colouring that only showed an impression of what was inside, cast in shade and light.

He pushed the button to open the airlock. There was a hiss as it opened, releasing air that had probably been trapped in there since the base’s construction. It tasted stale and warm.

Michael stepped inside. His presence within the wide cylinder activated a mechanism that closed the door automatically behind him. He then heard the whir and hiss of machines scrubbing the air clean, making him sanitary. At least he didn’t require a chemical shower, like when he’d entered the base.

As the process continued, he checked his belt. There was a small box fixed there that contained a micro generator that would wrap him up in concentric magnetic fields, and then fill them with burnt ions. The thick semi-liquid would act as a perfect barrier from anything up to, but not including, a speeding bullet. The personal energy shield would be more than enough for any vapour, provided the said vapour didn’t cause a mountain to collapse on top of him.

Satisfied, he looked up. The air scrubbing process should have been completed by now. He checked the light: still pinkish-red.

‘Agent Smitheson,’ he said into the radio mic fixed into his node.

There was no reply, not even static. He turned and tried to see through the opaque inner curve of the airlock, back to where he knew Smitheson would still be standing. He couldn’t see anything, not even an outline. The interior lights of the cylinder meant that even vague shadows were being cast away from the airlock, rather than against it.

Sighing, he turned to face the blinking pink-red light that he was still waiting to turn blue. He locked eyes with a man, six feet tall, who stood immediately in front of him.

‘Jesus!’

The man remained motionless, his square-set shoulders looking out of place in the round airlock. He wore a brown cap that perfectly matched his ruffled head of short hair, and what looked like an old-style life preserver. It was in fact reasonably high-tech; it had various features built in, including powdered pharmaceuticals, a radio, and a small filter to strain the salt out of seawater, making it safe to drink. His boots looked huge compared to Michael’s own. Michael stared down at the boots. He had bought them as a present five years ago, when he had first started making real money at KE.

‘Dad?’

‘Your mom had tits, so I guess I’m your dad,’ the man in the boots replied gruffly. He had stormy blue eyes that held little joy – hadn’t done, in fact, for almost as long as Michael could remember.

‘That,’ the man finished, ‘and your mom’s been crab bait for half a decade.’

Michael looked at the man in disbelief. It was his father, down to the last detail. But, being as he was trapped in an airlock, it couldn’t be. His father was back at the family home in Laurel, Maryland, or at his retreat in Baltimore, probably chewing stale No-bacco or fixing his lobster traps.

‘I take it back. I’m not going to call you dad.’

‘Ya, you’ll call me Henry like every other day since you was nineteen! Always thought that made you sound grown up, didn’t you, calling a man by his given name?’

Michael watched the old man crease his already wrinkled face, leathery from being held against the East Coast wind for so long. Henry Hudd had spent more time throwing traps from his boat than he had sitting in his own living room drinking, like the fathers of all Michael’s old friends. Henry Hudd submerged himself into his work, which made talking to him all the harder.

‘You never talk to me,’ Michael told him once, ‘because you aren’t even used to my company.’

He saw that the emotion in the face of man in front of him was genuine. He just didn’t believe the man *himself* was genuine. He was a fraud, whipped up from his own mind and memories. No wonder he seemed like a caricature of what the man had really been like.

‘I’m not going to waste time talking to a figment,’ Michael said out loud.

‘Look at you, in your suit,’ his father rumbled. He slapped his knuckles against Michael’s chest. ‘Think you’re all *that* now, do ya? A made man?’

‘I’ve never called myself that. Go away.’

‘Too good to be a fisherman’s son, ey?’

‘You ran your business into the ground, Henry. There was nothing left to fish for back home. Nineteen out of twenty traps came back empty. And the lobsters you did catch, you had to throw back because they were protected.’

‘It was *an honest job!*’

‘You’re right. It was. And then you couldn’t afford to clothe me, so you didn’t bother. So *I* got a job. A paying one. And I got a degree and eventually got to Karlson Enterprises where I could use my skills.’ Michael looked at his watch. ‘If we could wrap this up quickly, I’d appreciate it. I know we’re probably waiting for some psychological release here so that I can move on, so let’s not waste time.’

The old man grit his yellow teeth. He clomped forward half a step with that big boot of his. ‘*You forgot your proper name. You’re not a Karlson, you’re a Hudd!*’

‘I’m both.’

‘You’re my *son!*’

‘You’re not even real.’

‘More real than the “money” you have in that bank account of yours. Just ones and zeroes sitting in a machine somewhere! I got *paid*, in *metal and paper*, and *that* was a real job.’

‘Until there was nothing to be paid for,’ Michael replied tiredly. ‘Then you were broke. They offered you the job, that good job, at the fish farm, but you were too proud to take it. So I left and made my own way. I’ve not forgotten your name. I’m Michael Hudd-Karlson. I’m both now.’

‘I’m alone,’ the figment said.

‘I know.’

'I'm dying!'

'You're just getting old,' Michael said, 'as we all are.'

He adjusted his headset, taking comfort from the feel of cold metal against his fingers. The metal was always cold, even though copper was one of the best conductors around. It came from having its physical substance rubbed against subspace almost constantly; the space beneath space sucked energy into it like a black hole.

Concentrating, Michael forced the manifestation of his father's memory to disappear. There was no twist of vapour this time, not like Ashley's storybook monster. Henry Hudd was there one second and gone the next. The instant this happened, the seal on the airlock door released with a hiss, and Michael stepped into the cave tunnel.

'All right,' he sighed into his mic. 'I'm through.'

'There was a delay – everything okay?' Smitheson radioed back.

'Nothing unexpected. Tell Havers to catch up, I'm heading off now. We don't have a lot of time.'

'Yes, Director.'

*

Ashley Havers caught up with him a few minutes into the tunnel. He was out of breath, but still managed to expel a string of questions, theories and undeveloped trains of thought.

'The energy shields we're wearing might protect us against the vapour physically, but if it stimulates cognitive notions into physical manifestations, then it's likely the shields won't protect us. We have no idea what we're walking in to, Director – how do we know this cloud's not going to eat us alive, having been catalysed by our atmosphere?'

'Ash, are you an astrophysicist or a chemist?'

'Just because I specialise in one field doesn't mean I'm not well read in another,' he replied. His hand was resting on his belt, as though he was worried the energy field might short out at any time. If it did, he probably wouldn't have enough time to register the fact, let alone do anything about it.

Michael fought hard not to break out into a run. The other Directors were still a few minutes away from landing, and according to Smitheson the tunnel would take he and Ashley right to the secondary base on surface level, where the landing pad was situated.

'I'm talking about widening your perspective,' said Michael. 'I'm talking about focusing on your specialist topic. You were drafted into WTO partly as a consultant, right? So you must know a lot more about Jupiter than I do.'

'Right, right...' He sounded like he'd forgotten that Jupiter, that massive, gravitationally-hungry monster, was responsible for the chaos here and on the moon, and for the death of Sinda Havers.

'Well,' Ashley began, 'Jupiter's a gas giant. It began to contract as per the Kelvin-Helmholtz model. The layers of gas that the planet is made of moved at different speeds, causing instability, which in turn caused the planet to shrink, or rather contract. Somehow something triggered the explosive release of the compacted gas and vapour.'

'And in astrological terms, what could cause that?'

'Well, combustion could, but theories of a combustion core in Jupiter were abandoned ages ago in favour of a dense liquid core. They were true: that's all that's left. It's basically a dead "water" planet now.'

'And its moons?'

'Well, the gravity yield of the planet was reduced so significantly that all the moons were flung out into space. Jupiter couldn't hold onto them anymore. Though, some of them had already broken apart prior to the final stage of the contraction, like Europe and Callisto.'

'And the pieces were drawn into the planet, I presume?'

'That's right. If you're suggesting the pieces of the moons triggered that final stage, then it's possible but highly unlikely. Europa was miles of ice around a watery core. Callisto was about fifty percent ice and fifty percent rock.'

There was nothing to suggest, even from your own European aquaforming team, that there was anything unusual with the moons.'

'I have evidence to the contrary,' said Michael. 'The Director we had placed on Europa was killed, but he sent a transmission before he died. They had found a strange life form there that lived in the ice. It was like a gigantic fluke, he said.'

'That's a kind of leech, right?'

'A parasitic worm. They were destructive towards the machinery and the team on Europa, but otherwise seemed to need no sustenance. It was like they were there to defend the ice against invaders.'

Ashley stopped. He grabbed Michael's sleeve and stared hard at his faint smile. The vapour coloured the air between them; they were close to outside.

'You're saying like antibodies.'

'I wasn't saying as such, but I was thinking it. They were my Director's thoughts exactly. Why do you react like this?'

'Because I'd half considered the destruction of the moon to be a kind of heuristic churning. Like how a stomach breaks up food for digestion. Jupiter wrenched its largest moons apart, and absorbed the pieces.'

Michael nodded solemnly. 'A frightening thought, isn't it?'

'You think the planet has some sort of consciousness.'

'Maybe not consciousness. Maybe a reactive behavioural pattern, like how a fly just reacts mindlessly when you swipe at it. No thoughts; no goals. It just is, like a huge body. It has a stomach. It has antibodies. It even has a huge red eye,' he added, smiling childishly.

'And, what? It's invading?'

'No. It seems to be drawn to human thought patterns and human creations. The flukes were destructive on Europa, and they fell out of the vapour cloud above the moon as well, but they were kind of defending the displaced Jovian atmosphere. I don't think the atmosphere itself meant us harm. But by natural or supernatural means, it could make our thoughts manifest physically.'

Ashley laughed nervously. 'You're nuts.'

'The theory's nuts; I just came up with it.'

'So how do we stop it?'

Michael began to move towards the exit of the tunnel again, and gestured that they should hurry.

'There's only you and me. But luckily there are about thirty other "me"s on their way right now.'

Sixty seconds later, they stepped out into mist-softened sunlight.

*

The rough-cut tunnel opened up at the foot of the mountain, on a shallow slope where the rocks were taller than the two men who walked between them. There was a kind of kissing gate built into a chain-link fence, which surrounded the surface base. Michael entered the base first, and Ashley second.

Red mist rolled across the flat tarmac. Domed barracks loomed out of the coloured fog. Michael knew that all the barracks were empty; the surface base had once been in use, but had been decommissioned a generation ago when the country stepped down permanently from international terror alert, so the temporary structures were left to rust.

Ashley checked his energy shield nervously, running his fingers over it. However, his fingers and his chest were covered by the barely visible plasma barrier, and the two things never touched. He felt a little numb, but he also felt confident that the roiling waves of vapour couldn't touch him. He wouldn't have to breathe the stuff in. It looked positively toxic.

Through the fog, swathes of clean air rotated from behind one of the closer buildings. Turning the corner, Ashley and Michael saw the helipad and the helicopter that had landed on it. Its rotors still spun at full speed, cutting through the vapour. Out of the rear hatch stepped six suited men, two at a time. They joined a complement of two dozen other individuals, all but two of them male.

‘Jesus,’ Ashley said. ‘They all look like you.’

‘It’s the gene therapy,’ Michael replied. ‘Mainly superficial, but I suppose we all share a resemblance. We are siblings, after all.’

‘We were,’ one of them said, stepping forward and shaking Michael’s hand. ‘You killed our father though, didn’t you? But I suppose I can’t blame you, brother. Had we known, I think some of us might have done the same.’

‘It *was* an accident,’ Michael tried to reassure him, over the noise of the rotor. Behind them, another helicopter was coming in to land.

The other Director nodded. To Ashley, the two men did look like brothers: both dark haired, almost the same height, both with large hands and identical suits. Every one of them had the glint of the copper Karlson headset through their hair. Some of them had chosen to shave their heads, to display the elite device more proudly. Of the twenty or so people there, Ashley couldn’t spot one who he could envision playing with his dog in the park, or enjoying a movie at the cinema with friends, or cheering with a beer in front of the TV set. They all looked like *businessmen*. Every one of them was a Karlson Director, through and through.

The tarmac beneath Ashley’s feet was vibrating ever so slightly, just as the underground centre had been. It hadn’t let up, but now he was feeling something of the light-headedness that had caused Agent Smitheson to collapse. A headache began to push against the back of his skull. He also began to feel a form of *throbbing* in the air, like somebody punching Morse code directly into his mind.

He’d never felt the sensation before, but he understood what it was. The Directors were communicating with each other, using the headsets.

Shimmering pictures developed in the space above his head. They looked like photographs held under running water. Mostly they were colourless, or painted with the hues of the thickening vapour around them. Watching, Ashley saw that they were the pieces of the story that Michael had pieced together, some of them involving Ashley himself, others including snatches of Sinda and the *Periphetes* satellite station. The story played out like a badly edited film, and then duplicated itself, each reproduction siphoning into the air around each of the Directors’ headsets.

Distracted by winking lights up where he assumed the peak of the mountain would be, Ashley peered into the turgid yellow-brown mists. The winking lights flickered in a higher concentration. They were like stars. They shot overhead, glittering, and then slowed almost to a crawl. They were sparkling droplets of ammonium rain, which fell harmlessly amongst the crowd of Directors, spotting the tarmac. The droplets left dark rings around dusty white smudges, like chalk or dried bird droppings.

Distracted by the beauty of it, Ashley didn’t notice the rise in wind speed. It was only when his energy shield began to react with the rushing gases that he realised, and when he did he gaped at the vast shapes formulating amongst the vapour. They were wide and diamond shaped, like giant stingrays. Others snaked through the air in evanescent ripples, making him think of the Arctic Northern Lights.

‘Director...’ he said slowly. ‘Ah, Directors ... whatever you’re doing, unless it’s strictly necessary...’

Michael turned to face the mountainside. The other Directors also peered upwards, some shielding their eyes against the falling ammonium. More shapes swept through the vapour, but most hung around the mountain’s peak as though afraid to come down, or perhaps unwilling to leave something behind.

‘They’re what I saw when I took the dive,’ Ashley said, becoming breathless. ‘Extremophiles; living entities.’

‘Can they cause physical harm?’ Michael asked.

‘I have no idea.’

Surges of bile-coloured mist began to thicken within the upper layers of fog. It rose in an arc away from the mountain peak, becoming an almost solid shape. A central capsule shape rounded and fattened in the centre; far-reaching limbs grew rapidly out of the sides.

Both Michael and Ashley saw the developing monster in the same way. At one moment it appeared to be a gargantuan winged *thing*, gaping jaws attached to a head that lolled at the end of a long ropey neck. The next moment it was a flickering image, familiar to everybody that looked at it: a sort of hulking man-shape, a giant formed from the swirling gases, its bulging cranium sheltering twin pits that could have been eyes. The protruding waves of vapour that might have been wings were then more akin to arms, flat but long, splitting into clumsy fingers at the ends.

It lurched, steadying itself with a powerful limb. It ducked slowly as the much smaller forms spiralled around it, and swatted the insect-like extremophiles away. Thrumming sound, as much vibration as it was actual noise, radiated from the giant in waves.

Grey-blue objects began to plummet towards the disused military compound. They were the flukes, alive but useful to the giant only as projectiles. They crashed into the split tarmac like unexploded bombs. The Directors scattered. Michael yanked Ashley aside and ducked behind the nearest half-barrel structure.

‘I had no idea...’ Ashley began.

‘Stop it. Whatever it is, we can figure it out later.’

‘But the planet ... It must *always* have been this, *alive* all this time, a single organism...’

‘I’m not sure it’s alive, *or* an organism. I think it’s taking on whatever form it can glean from us.’

‘It looks quite real to me.’

The extremophiles were not the only smaller shapes developing within the currents of vapour folding over the tarmac. Out of the thicker areas lumbered stranger things, sometimes recognisable and sometimes not. Ashley saw a cluster of cats trotting away from the disturbance, their tails pointing arrow-straight towards the sky. Something large – maybe a horse, although the noise that came out of its heavy-set throat didn’t sound much one – galloped right into a group of Directors only to veer away at the last second, and disappear. Some scattered in surprise; one Director was torn in two by a huge fluke lurching out of the mist, its sphincter of teeth gouging all the meat between his hips and his ribs.

‘The thought-forms,’ Michael panted. ‘Ignore them...’

‘I can ignore cats, but the other things...’

He watched as the barracks they were sheltering behind sagged like a lump of flesh, and then began to ooze brown fluid like liquidised liver.

‘We’ve got to get together.’

‘We’re trying,’ Michael snapped.

They stumbled towards the nearest group of Directors. The others were hidden by the fog, which in places was as thick as storm clouds. Together the gathering made twenty. Michael hoped that would be enough.

‘*Concentrate,*’ he yelled over the noise of the giant’s rumble. ‘*Make your own thought-forms ... Use them against the giant.*’

The air next to Ashley’s ears thumped. The Directors were communicating again, though this time it was not with each other. They were communicating with the displaced Jovian atmosphere, forcing it to adopt the shape *they* wanted. Their tulpas co-ordinated like a swarm, each bird, bug, reptile, beast, relative, friend, corpse, keepsake and talisman co-operating with its neighbour. The Directors managed their unconscious thoughts with a degree that a normal person

could never achieve without years of meditation. The headsets acted as filter and funnel, roping each manifestation to the next to create a weapon, pseudo-conscious and semi-alive, which rushed towards the gaping giant.

The giant acted like a child plagued by winged ants. It swept a massive hand at the collected tulpas, but did little damage. Once manifested, the thought-forms were easily maintained by the Directors and their apparatus. Piece by piece the vast entity was dismantled, its arms – or was it now a wing, striated and vast, pushing all the air and vapour before it like the leathery appendage of a monstrous bat? – flailing ineffectually.

'Keep going!' one of the Directors screamed. *'Don't let up!'*

A furious spiral of bird-like thoughtforms tore through a cluster of Directors, knocking three off their feet and carrying another two up into the air, spasming in the hurricane of tiny mouths. Tatters of their clothing twisted through the air.

Despite their small victories, the defenders of the giant were unorganised. The Jovian extremophiles were not an invasion force, but lost fauna from an unravelled planet. They scattered around and through the gas giant as it roared at the heavens. The fog thinned; it was sucking in the displaced atmosphere to reconstruct itself, even as it was torn apart.

Ashley could do little to assist with the onslaught. All could only think of his Sinda, his deceased wife, and all that he saw before him was her face painted in the colours of Jupiter. She held out a hand, maybe beckoning, maybe motioning for him to come no further. She was swept up in a red gale that formed around the disfigured forehead of the multi-form giant. The gale swirled on a central axis, circular and increasing in size, until it eclipsed the head of the giant. It drank up the vapour, the thought-forms, the extremophiles, the black twists of sinuous flesh that were the immune system of the vaporous entity. All was sucked into the spinning red mouth, which was at the same time a steadily closing eye, and then – as the vision of Sinda disappeared into the retreating mists – the redness was only a split circle without edges, and then nothing.

*

The air was clear. The sky filtered pale sunlight through its blue layers from the vacuum beyond. A soft wind curled around the feet of the exhausted Directors, scattering fragments of broken chain-link fencing and shards of metal wrenched from the upturned military vehicles that littered the compound.

Finding Michael, Ashley collapsed beside him, lying face-up on the ground. The Chief Director smiled and sat next to him, picking at the tattered edges of his shirtsleeves. His clothes had been torn ragged by the winds, which had reached dangerous speeds during the conflict.

'Tough win,' he said.

Ashley only nodded. He was staring at the sky.

A few of the other Directors were close enough to hear. They gathered around Michael naturally, as though the network of Karlson Directors had their CEO as a central point of gravity towards which they were all drawn.

'I can't see any remnants, sir,' one said. His bald head was dripping with sweat, and his strained headset was crumpled like tin foil around his skull.

'If there are any, they're widely dispersed and won't be coming back. We defeated it quite thoroughly,' Michael promised.

The others agreed. Ashley knew that, a few hours before, the Directors had sensed the approaching entity. Now they could sense its absence. There was nothing left of the displaced Jovian atmosphere, and not a sign of the giant. It hadn't crumbled or collapsed, but evaporated completely. It had existed for four and a half billion years as a planet, and lived – if alive it had been – for only a duration of days. Whatever it had been, it was gone now, so many broken particles of gas. If a few wisps had survived, then they were dead wisps, spreading and thinned out by the Earth's winds.

*

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