

P O R T
S T A T E

WILLIAM BOWDEN

**P O R T
STATE**

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A FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR

The city of Bristol is located in the southwest of England, with a population of around five hundred thousand. It was founded at the confluence of two rivers over a thousand years ago.

Bristol is a university city; the campus is intertwined with the urban landscape. Close to the university is the city's cathedral, located next to College Green, a small parkland area set out before city hall.

The city's most prominent landmark is the Clifton Suspension Bridge, designed by the Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and is often used as an emblem for the city.

ARRIVAL

Minal takes a moment on the rope ladder. She's about halfway up, a blob of hi-viz and life jacket, set against the ocher of the vessel's hull, the smaller boat that had brought her here still on station below, bobbing around in the light swell, should she somehow manage to fall off.

Not far above her is the vessel's accommodation ladder, a sloping gangway clinging to the vessel's side and normally reaching down to the dock. Not today, though—the dock is full, and the vessel had to anchor out in the Bristol Channel, so the rope ladder is the only way on board.

It's 6 a.m. Minal had decided to take advantage of the early morning high tide, and as a result there would appear to be nobody in sight, so it looks like she will board unnoticed.

From where the vessel is anchored, there's a good view down the River Avon—past the bridge and all the way to Ham Green, where the river takes a sharp bend. As her gaze lingers, she notices what must be the tip of a mast, just disappearing behind the hill there.

Looks to be a really tall one. A catamaran, perhaps?

“Who the hell are you?”

The voice is from above, a gruff man having appeared at the end of the accommodation ladder. Looks like she hasn't gone unnoticed after all.

“Captain Papadopoulos? Minal Shah. I wonder if I might come aboard.”

* * *

Six in the morning is an early start for Harbor Master Fraser MacPherson, but there’s a couple of vessels arriving on the high tide. Not that he is complaining—it’s shaping up to be a beautiful summer’s day. The River Avon was like a mill pond when he drove into work.

Barely settled in with a mug of tea, and the radio squawks.

A little ahead of schedule, but it must be his first customer, Fraser reaching for the day’s schedule.

“Port State—this is the Cygnet.”

It’s not unusual for some of the private vessels to have an unconventional radio manner, though this one—the *Cygnet*—seems to have gotten their maritime terms mixed up.

“This is Bristol Harbor,” replies Fraser. “The bridge swing is not for another fifteen minutes. Did you say the *Cygnet*?”

Odd—there isn’t a Cygnet on the schedule.

“Port State,” squawks the radio. “This is the Cygnet on approach. Please be aware of my dimensions.”

Some of the transits into the floating harbor can be a bit of a squeeze when it comes to the lock gates. Fraser turns to the CCTV to take a gander. Got cameras all the way down the River Avon to Sea Mills.

* * *

Stanley Biggs, bridge attendant—*senior* bridge attendant—has settled in for his shift, but it’ll be another hour before things start to pick up. Then it will be the usual flurry of activity as the traffic starts to build at the toll barriers.

The runners are already out in force, though—a beautiful morning like this always sees the pretty young things of Clifton village pounding across the bridge a little earlier than usual.

Then there's the tourists this time of year, hoping to catch the bridge at a quiet moment, especially when there's a high tide and a chance of a boat coming in.

Still, got to keep a lookout for the jumpers as well. It's close to two hundred and fifty feet down—

“Stan!” squawks the walkie-talkie. *“Stan—pick up. We need to lock the barriers. Get everyone off the bridge!”*

It's the lad, Frank. At the village end. Fooling around again. Doesn't matter how early it is, he shouldn't be doing it. It'll be both their jobs.

Stan reaches for his walkie-talkie. The village-end tollhouse is well over eight hundred feet away, but he's going to give it a really good stare anyway —

Shit. The lad's out on the bridge. He shouldn't be away from the toll barriers like that. A vehicle might need assistance.

The walkie-talkie just won't cut it. Not for the earful he's about to give the lad. Stan is out of his own tollhouse and on the bridge in no time.

What the heck is he playing at?

Frank is pointing wildly over the side of the bridge.

Christ—must be a jumper about to go off the south side.

Stan is at the railing, peering over as best he can—the guard fence makes it difficult, but then, that's the whole point. So how the hell did they get out there—

Like some monolith, set on its side, it slides forward. A great expanse of black, stretching the full width of the bridge's central span, some six hundred feet.

It can't be more than fifteen feet down from the bridge deck.

Surely it's going to strike!

Whatever it is, the leading edge has already moved fifty feet or more away, enough of the structure now exposed to make out what must be construction detail—lines, curves, recesses—detail with *purpose*.

A great ship's horn blows, as if a cruise liner were passing underneath.

* * *

High office makes its demands, but Mayor Huxley Rames likes an early start, especially on a day like this. July, a piercing blue sky, and yet there's almost a chill to the morning, the crispness of it putting a spring in his step. But come noon it'll be in the seventies out there, and College Green will likely be packed with office workers taking picnic lunches.

Huxley's leather-soled brogues clack their way across the marble lobby of city hall, the security guard rising to greet him—it'll be the end of the guard's shift soon, so a bit of chat will be in order.

"Morning, Charlie," Huxley says to the fellow. "Beautiful day out there. Got any plans?"

"Reckon I'll be sleeping through most of it, Mayor Rames," he chuckles. "Hour or so on the allotment, maybe."

"Well, make the most of it," says Huxley, tapping his paper on the reception countertop.

But Charlie's face has dropped, the life sucked right out of it, shock taking its place, his gaze already shifted past Huxley to city hall's grand entrance.

The uncharacteristic demeanor now gripping Charlie sees a quizzical Huxley look back to the entrance, wondering what on earth—

A curtain of deep shadow, slicing its way down the brickwork, the Green beyond, darkening—both heralds to the wall of black now descending, and a background hum punctuated only by individual shouts and cries from the few who would have been out there.

MR DAY

Huxley strains to comprehend the dimensions, no one line of sight sufficient to take it all in. He's at the edge of College Green, the structure—whatever it is—having settled center stage on the pie-slice grassed area.

It might be loosely described as ovoid, occupying a good portion of the Green, but despite that, it doesn't dominate—what dominates are the two colossal spires attached to either side—needle-like cones, long and slender, set in a V formation that tilts back. They could be as much as three hundred feet long, and thirty across at the base, where each has some kind of collar; the collars had been spinning when the structure set down, but they are motionless now.

And then there is the color. Obsidian black, with gold tracery lending the only sense of construction, the various elements of the structure otherwise blending seamlessly.

The spires naturally draw the eye along their length, so much so that Huxley has not yet looked forward. Having meandered to one side to gawp at the starboard spire, he now sees it —what can only be described as the most slender of necks, rising at an incline from whatever it is that sits on the Green to a second structure both far forward and high above.

Could be two hundred feet above, and nearly as much away, sitting flat in the sky, its own dimensions only to be guessed at.

Huxley finds in himself no desire to run, the sheer scale of it all having suspended disbelief, like some great veil drawn over what should be terrifying, rendering it as merely a spectacle to be gawped at.

“Reckon I’ll be getting myself home, Mayor Rames,” says the security guard, gazing up at the wonder overhead. “No good will come of this.”

* * *

Huxley’s phone rings. It’s the harbor master—babbling like a madman, whatever it is he is trying to convey now somewhat moot, the gist of it being about some ginormous *thing* having floated down the River Avon.

The first police vehicles are arriving, shocked patrol officers spilling out.

The public are gathering, few in numbers. Most of the local inhabitants are either not up yet or just simply unaware of the near-silent arrival, even if the airwaves are already ablaze with wall-to-wall breaking news.

Assimilating what he sees, Huxley is reminded of a bird. An ovoid body, slender wings, long neck...the “body” doesn’t lie flat, but on its furthest tip, the whole thing tilted at an angle, and narrowing to become the “neck”—

A thunderous *BOOM* echoes around the Green, the body cracking open at the tip, the topmost edge of it lowering away on an arc, an otherwise silent mechanism that is dropping a ramp to the ground.

A few make a run for it, but most just stand there, transfixed; what horrors about to emerge, inevitable; the fate of all, sealed.

Huxley alone moves, placing himself center to the ramp as it comes to rest at a gentle incline. Inside is shrouded in deep shadow, with internal

structures barely discernible.

A lone figure steps forth from the dark.

Brown-blond hair, slicked back. Hollow cheeks, but not gaunt. Tall, slim but not thin, with an easy deportment, wearing what could be described as an Edwardian naval officer's uniform, but with a contemporary take on the style—a tailored fit, understated, authoritative.

"Top of the morning!" the fellow calls out, as he makes his way down the ramp to stride across the grass, passing Huxley by with a polite acknowledgement.

The police, uncertain as to what they should do, back off, as the fellow heads toward Park Street.

Reality reasserting itself sees Huxley jogging after the fellow to match his stride.

"So...what's this all about?" he asks with all the restraint he can muster. Surely this is some stunt being pulled by a big corporate brand. Or a movie promo—

"Fine morning, wouldn't you say?" says the fellow, his diction somewhat aristocratic.

Park Street runs up to the university and is steep enough to test a brisk pace, but the fellow takes it in his stride. Huxley finds it necessary to place himself out in front so that he might arrest any further progress.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" says Huxley.

"There's a coffee shop a little further up," the fellow says. "I believe it to be open."

"And...um...*that*?" balks Huxley, jabbing a finger skyward.

"The *Cygnets*," the fellow says, sidestepping a goggle-eyed Huxley. "Starship. Galaxy class. It's my private residence. I do keep a kitchenette on board, of course—"

“Kitchenette?”

“—but it’s just not the same as stepping out—don’t you find?”

They’re at the coffee shop, a lone barista still opening up, but ready to serve, oblivious to the giant spire inclined overhead and the incident unfolding.

“Hi!” says the chirpy girl, recognizing Mayor Rames. “What can I get you?”

“A large, black Americano, please,” says the fellow.

“Sure!”

“I have money,” the fellow says, in a reassuring tone.

“And for you, Mayor Rames?” says the girl, fawning over the city’s handsome mayor, even if he is looking a little jittery.

But before Huxley can splutter out a response, the girl’s demeanor collapses to one of abject fear. An armed response unit has arrived, with three semiautomatic carbines now pointing her way.

“Miss,” insists the fellow. “The Americano?”

The situation quickly escalates to a standoff, with the armed officers uncertain as to what to do, waiting as they are for orders from their leader, himself transfixed by the structure dominating the sky.

Sirens echo around the city. The girl is hyperventilating.

“I think you’d better serve him the coffee,” says Huxley, seeking to defuse the situation.

Shaking hands work the espresso machine—beans ground, portafilter pumped, takeout cup topped off with hot water, and drink delivered to the countertop.

“Thank you,” the fellow says, depositing the exact amount of coin required, before making his way back out onto the street.

“Don’t put that in the till,” Huxley says to the girl.

“Why?” she manages.

But Huxley has already made a hurried exit.

The fellow is waiting, but not looking Huxley’s way. Instead he is taking in the view, looking down Park Street. It is largely empty, save for the armed response team, ushering the terrified barista out of the coffee shop.

The lower end of Park Street is now a sea of emergency vehicles—police, ambulance, fire brigade. Looking back up toward the university, Huxley can see blockades going up. People are gathering but being held back.

The major incident plan has swung into action. They’ll be sealing the city center off and evacuating civilians.

“Is all of this really necessary?” the fellow says to Huxley.

“Yeah. It kinda is.”

* * *

The police have formed a line, blocking the street—a ribbon of hi-viz yellow, three deep. A lot more armed officers now—but they are keeping well back, their profile low.

A lone figure in the formal uniform of a high-ranking police officer stands out in front of it all. Huxley needs no introduction. It’s Chief Constable Derek Debeer. He would have come all the way in from Almondsbury. The harbor master must have called him first.

By now the chief constable will have been briefed with what scant detail there is. Some giant structure coming down the River Avon, making its way into the city, a single man exiting it to...to...buy a cup of *coffee*.

“How very tedious of you, Chief Constable Debeer,” says the fellow, taking Huxley by surprise. “But none of this is going to make any

difference.”

“You know who I am?” says Debeer, keeping his cool.

“Of course.”

“And who you might be?”

“Day,” says the fellow, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Well...*Mr. Day*. Perhaps you would be so kind as to explain what this pantomime is all about.”

“Are you going to prevent me from reaching my vessel, Chief Constable?”

“I’ve got half the city going into lockdown,” blusters Debeer. “No one is going anywhere until I get some kind of explanation. You just can’t pull a stunt like this.”

“Stunt?”

“We won’t be able to handle the crowds,” continues Debeer.

“Something like this will see us besieged. What is this thing, anyway—a space movie prop?”

“Prop?”

“I saw it land,” says Huxley. “I don’t think it’s a prop, Derek.”

“They make hot air balloons in all shapes these days,” scorns Debeer, a withering glance Huxley’s way. “Giant ones.”

“Balloon?”

“Well, it can’t be *real*,” blusters Debeer. “I mean, just look at the damn thing. How could that hold up under its own weight?”

“It depends on your understanding when it comes to the concept of weight,” says Mr. Day.

Huxley cranes a look at the slender “neck” leading up from the lower “body” to the great slab in the sky. Could it be just a giant dirigible?

“The Hindenburg was over eight hundred feet long, you know,” continues Debeer. “Checked with air traffic control—they haven’t seen anything. Reckon they took off from Ham Green and floated the thing down the Avon—did you hear that it went *under* the suspension bridge? Damn reckless—”

Without hordes of aliens having poured out onto College Green firing ray guns, Huxley has to side with the beleaguered chief constable when it comes to supposing a more earthly explanation as to what is going on. It doesn’t help that his mind is now flooded with visions of the giant structure crashing down on the city in a great cloud of flame.

They are caught in a moment, their only recourse to deal with what is right in front of them, even if that means conceding that the whole situation is more than just a little surreal.

The deep growl of a laboring diesel engine interrupts the proceedings, a battle tank appearing on the far side of the green. Huxley knows this tank by its insignia—it’s a Challenger Mk.2 from the artillery brigade garrisoned in the city. A real bruiser in its day, but now retired and used chiefly for military show days and training new recruits. Still, its gun is operational and can put a hole in pretty much anything.

Must have come down Jacob’s Wells, thinks Huxley. Then headed up past the library.

The tank takes up position, spinning its turret to point at the opening from which the fellow calling himself *Mr. Day* had emerged.

Seemingly, it is not unaccompanied, a commotion breaking out in the ranks of police, someone pushing their way through, someone with sufficient authority to be permitted passage.

Six foot three of khaki camo comes to a stiff halt before the group, hands clasped behind his back, his gaze steadfast. Huxley knows the fellow

—like the tank, he should have retired years ago.

“Colonel Brammers,” says Huxley, looking back at the tank. “I’m not sure this is entirely necessary.”

“We took the initiative,” says Brammers. “Command has been alerted.”

“Initiative?” scoffs Debeer. “It’s some kind of stunt, man. Mr. Day, here, was just about to explain himself.”

Mr. Day takes another sip of his coffee and steps forth, sidestepping the group, and heads to the line of yellow hi-viz.

“Where the hell are you going?” balks Debeer, with Brammers simply tracking the fellow’s progress.

Huxley can see that Mr. Day is making a beeline for whatever the *thing* is.

The police have locked arms and are already squaring up to the approaching Mr. Day, their demeanor oozing *no contest*.

And yet the sea of yellow parts before Mr. Day with little in the way of commotion, the startled police officers finding their locked arms simply slithering apart as if they were greased with goose fat.

“What the hell?” balks Debeer, heading after Mr. Day, Huxley and Colonel Brammers exchanging a nonchalant look before following.

The armed-police response units, of which there are now many, remain away from whatever the unfolding scenario is. The only actor in play is unarmed and posing no threat. So, despite the colossus towering over them, and the whole thing panning out as some crazy stunt anyway, they have no authority.

It’s a constraint that does not apply to Colonel Brammers’s unit, six of them having stationed themselves before the entrance to the structure, their hand weapons drawn and clasped across their midriffs.

Mr. Day comes to a polite halt, taking a sip of his coffee.

Police, army, emergency services, and now helicopters are overhead, Mr. Day surveying the scene—

A loud BOOM sounds from high above, startling all, save Mr. Day, into a collective jump—even impinging upon Colonel Brammers’s hitherto unshakable demeanor.

All look up to find a helicopter falling from the sky—no, not falling—*sliding down the side of something, its engine stalled*—what might be part of a great dome, all but invisible, manifesting only as something translucent where the helicopter scrapes along its surface.

The dimensions of the dome are such that the helicopter quickly disappears behind the city’s foreground skyline.

All weapons are brought to bear, army and police response units alike, any notion of some crazy stunt swept away.

“They flew too close,” says Mr. Day. “But I can assure you of their safety.”

Behind the line of soldiers, now pointing their handguns directly at Mr. Day, another barrier appears. Translucent like the dome, but permanently so, and barring the entrance to the vessel with a thick, red line, running horizontally to form an arc.

“You have no jurisdiction, Colonel Brammers,” says Mr. Day. “Nor you, Chief Constable Debeer. This city is a port state. When it comes to visiting vessels, the authority of the United Kingdom does not apply—”

“Bristol isn’t a port state,” says a shaky Huxley.

“It is now, Mayor Rames. I am declaring it as such.”

“The helicopter is down,” says Debeer, phone to his ear. “Queen’s Square. Emergency services on scene.”

“That’s a quarter of a mile away,” balks Huxley.

“*What,*” presses Colonel Brammers of Huxley, “is a port state?”

“A country with at least one international seaport—” says Huxley.

“Spaceport,” says Mr. Day. “And I am recognizing this city as the state that contains it.”

“Oh, for heaven’s *sake*, man,” barks Colonel Brammers. “We haven’t time for this *nonsense*—”

“Do not test me on this matter.”

“They’re out,” says an astonished Debeer, phone still stuck to his ear, gawping first at the structure towering overhead, then at Mr. Day, both now cast in an entirely new light. “Not a scratch on them.”

“I do, however, recognize that the situation is at something of an impasse,” says Mr. Day. “So, as a vessel docked in the port state of Bristol, I will submit to an inspection.”

“Inspection?” says Huxley.

“By Port State Control,” says Mr. Day. “The local maritime services will suffice.”

“To what end?”

“I need you to get past disbelief and speculation. Do not consider trying to pass off one of your own as an inspector. I will know it. I will accept whomever the duty officer is—and no other.”

“That’s Martin Beaufort,” says Debeer, scrolling through the contacts on his phone. “I know him. He’ll get to the bottom of whatever this damn thing is.”

“You’re not *actually* playing along with this,” balks Colonel Brammers.

“Now,” says Mr. Day, taking his leave. “If you will excuse me.”

With Debeer barking instructions into his phone, it is left to Colonel Brammers to take control.

“Can’t let you board,” he says.

“As I said, Colonel. Do not test me.”

Mr. Day heads for the line of soldiers, each stiffening to a firing stance. “He is unarmed,” says the colonel. “Pin him down.”

Pistols are holstered the moment the command is given, the line of six soldiers stepping forward to meet Mr. Day head on.

Huxley is reminded of a mime artist’s act, hands pressed as if against some invisible object, arms sliding around a frictionless barrier, a bubble, enclosing the enigmatic Mr. Day.

A few steps and Mr. Day passes through the invisible barrier arcing across the vessel’s entrance, the thick red line turning momentarily green for him, his pace unabated as he casually strolls up the ramp, the soldiers finding that there is no such permitted passage for them.

“You know what, Derek?” Huxley says to Debeer. “This thing is starting to look real.”

SEEING IS BELIEVING

It's a somber affair, with grim looks all round, though Home Secretary Priscilla Bundt wonders whether it's simply the lack of biscuits.

"It's obviously some kind of stunt," says a prim woman halfway down the table, waving a dismissive hand the way of the video wall at the far end of the meeting room. "We shouldn't even have convened."

The eight-panel video wall is devoted to one image—what would appear to be a giant construction located adjacent to Bristol Cathedral, spreading out over the city center.

"And the incident with the helicopter, Pamela?" asks another, sitting opposite her.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Ian. The whole thing's being staged."

The two of them had been at it even before taking their seats, the dozen other committee members having kept quiet.

SAGE, the government's scientific advisory group for emergencies, is formed on an as-needed basis from a greater pool of academic minds, with those selected chosen for their specialisms only as the situation develops.

Like herding cats, reflects Home Secretary Bundt.

"I'm sorry," she asks of the two scientists. "Who are you again?"

With both combatants locked in a staring contest, it is left to the senior civil servant who had convened the meeting to make the introductions.

“Home Secretary,” he says. “If I may. Professor Ian Sooks of Cambridge University, and Dr. Pamela Campbell of Imperial College. Going around the rest of the table—”

“Never mind that,” barks the home secretary. “Go and find out where the biscuits are.”

“Biscuits?” replies the civil servant, glancing first at the video wall, then back at the home secretary, with the smoldering look awaiting him suggesting that seeking out a packet of chocolate Bourbons is, in fact, the imperative.

With the civil servant gone, it’s time for some questions starting with the answers they *do* have.

“So,” the home secretary begins. “What we are confronted with is ostensibly a situation that exhibits no malign elements yet defies explanation. There’s no sighting of the thing prior to its arrival, no radar data, and no satellite imagery. High-altitude reconnaissance shows no heat or radiation signatures—”

“Probably because it’s made out of plywood,” says Dr. Campbell, the interruption drawing scorn from the home secretary.

“It’s got to be three hundred meters long,” blusters Professor Sooks. “And over seventy high—it’d collapse under its own weight.”

“It does look a bit flimsy,” the home secretary observes of the skeletal neck.

“The dimensions can be deceptive, Home Secretary,” says Campbell. “The neck structure is around fifteen meters thick—and those...spires...are easily ten at the base.”

“Even so, Dr. Campbell—it looks like it should fall apart. So what *is* holding it up?”

“We all saw the helicopter slide down some kind of force field—” says Sooks.

“There are no such things as ‘force fields,’” says Dr. Campbell, air quoting her retort.

“That we know of.”

“The rescue team encountered no invisible barriers at the crash site,” counters Dr. Campbell.

“And the ‘invisible’ barrier at the structure’s access point?”

“Some trick, Ian. As for the helicopter pilot and news crew—they walked away without a scratch from a hundred-meter drop. The thing must have been lowered down on wires.”

“But they would’ve had to have been in on it,” says Professor Sooks. “And right now, all three are little better than babbling loons, incoherent with shock.”

“The undeniable fact of the matter is,” says the home secretary, “that this structure of dimensions measuring into the hundreds of meters set itself down on the lawn in front of Bristol’s city hall a little after six this morning —”

“It’s a *sham*—” interjects an exasperated Dr. Campbell.

“A *structure*,” labors the home secretary. “Over which no control can be exerted, nor access gained, and which has the appearance of a vast spaceship, the seemingly sole occupant of which is proving to be uncooperative.”

“The whole thing will probably turn out to be a Machiavellian marketing campaign by some tech entrepreneur upstart.”

“I’ve declared a major incident. Tell me why I shouldn’t be doing more.”

“Because,” sighs Dr. Campbell, “the fellow who stepped out of it went to buy a cup of coffee.”

PORT STATE

Debeer has been appointed incident silver commander. On the ground this is now Debeer's show, with Huxley and Colonel Brammers seconded by Debeer as operational bronze commanders.

Through Colonel Brammers, Debeer has access to the military—he'll need them if they are to keep order. As for Huxley, well, Debeer is quick to requisition one of the council's vast meeting chambers in city hall, one overlooking the Green. And as executive mayor, the city is still Huxley's to govern.

Their immediate problem is a likely tsunami of the curious—hordes descending on the city to gaze and gawp at the wonder that is already dominating social media, with conspiracy theories already in full swing.

The immediate area has been cleared of all civilians—ground and airspace alike—and the media kept at bay. But the thing is just too big. It can be seen from miles away.

Three hours in and the city center is now entirely sealed off, a mix of police and army blockades covering every route in.

But they know it won't be enough.

* * *

A police officer finds the command team looking over a large map of the city, pulled from a wall and sprawled across a collection of hastily arranged tables.

“Got the PSC inspector inbound.”

“About bloody time,” growls Debeer, heading out to the Green, Huxley and the colonel right behind him.

A convoy of five police vehicles, sirens blaring, races along Deanery Road to pull up in front of the cathedral.

“Martin must be shitting himself,” murmurs Debeer.

Huxley just hopes this Beaufort fellow is up to it. They’d had trouble tracking him down. Debeer hadn’t been able to get him on the phone.

A flurry of activity suggests he’s in the third vehicle, a police officer hopping out of the SUV’s front passenger seat to pull the rear door open, a figure in orange hi-viz within.

To Huxley, it seems like there is as much hi-viz as person, as the rather diminutive figure awkwardly alights from the high ground-clearance vehicle. Barely five foot tall, a tan face topped with jet black hair tied into a bun, eyes like dark coals.

“Who the bloody hell is this?” barks Debeer at the unit he had dispatched to the port.

Evidently not Mr. Beaufort, thinks Huxley.

“You wanted the Port State Control duty inspector, boss. This is her.”

“Who the bloody hell are you?” grumbles Debeer.

“Minal Shah,” she says, eyes agog at the sight above her. “Deputy PSCO. Martin’s on holiday. Fishing trip in Cornwall. His phone will most definitely be off.”

As she moves, so her voluminous hiz-viz rustles.

Rustle bustle.

Huxley can't quite suppress a scoff at what he sees as a somewhat ridiculous sight before him. It does not go undetected, the deputy PSCO returning a withering stare his way—

A cacophony of shouts draws their attention to the vessel's lower body—a figure has emerged, standing at its entrance.

* * *

Minal finds herself surrounded by half a dozen burly soldiers, each towering over her five foot and one half inch frame, and escorted to what purports to be the boarding deck of some kind of structure, one that has become the focus of every news channel on the planet.

She'd begun her day with an inspection of a container ship under the Greek flag. Captain Papadopoulos had summoned her to the bridge when the news broke. It had been there where the port police had found her, and from where she had refused to budge for fully one hour until some rational explanation was given. Unable to provide such, the police had, in the end, simply arrested her.

The fellow she now stands before also has the deportment of a captain, but even with no insignia, merchant or otherwise, could still be classed as—

“You are the master of this vessel?” she asks of the fellow.

She is to play along with whatever game is afoot—that is how the chief constable would have it.

“I am,” says Mr. Day. “This is the *Cygnets*. Starship. Galaxy class.”

“Uh huh. That right—”

“And you, I take it, are the Port State Control inspector—”

“*Officer*. Deputy PSCO. Name's Shah. Minal Shah.”

“Well...PSCO Shah...please, come aboard.”

“Are you out of your mind? I’m not stepping one foot on board this thing. It can’t possibly be safe.”

“This is why you are here, PSCO Shah,” says Mr. Day. “To convince the world that it is what it purports to be. That is your job, is it not? To inspect vessels arriving at the port. To ensure that they are fit for purpose.”

“And what purpose does this vessel have—beyond some stupidly dangerous stunt?”

“I really had hoped we had gotten beyond that,” sighs Mr. Day. “Like I said—Starship. Galaxy class.”

“Miss Shah—” says Debeer, leaning in to place his head uncomfortably close to her ear.

“*Miss?*” scowls Minal, her best withering look shoved right back at the chief constable’s face.

“*Officer* Shah—if you would be so kind as to get your ass on board whatever this bloody thing is—”

Colonel Brammers’s bedside manner, however, proves to be more affable.

“We just need to know what it is, Officer Shah,” he says, before turning his attention to Mr. Day, his tone now insistent. “Officer Shah is to be accompanied.”

“Very well,” says Mr. Day. “I’ll allow that. Choose one of your own, Colonel Brammers.”

“Hold on just a sec,” protests Minal.

“Corporal Jakes,” barks Colonel Brammers.

One of the burly soldiers steps forward in a quick military fashion.

“Sir!”

“You’re to escort Officer Shah as she inspects this structure,” instructs Colonel Brammers.

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Jesus,” mutters Minal, looking the six-foot-five hulk up and down.

* * *

The floating red-line barrier blocking the way had turned green for Minal, and having gingerly stepped through it and up the ramp, she finds herself on board what purports to be the *Cygnet*, looking back to watch Corporal Jakes follow suit, the barrier reasserting its no-entry stance afterward.

“I am going to allow your weapon, Corporal,” says Mr. Day. “Just know that it will be ineffective. Now, Officer Shah. How are we to begin?”

They are at one end of a large, and seemingly empty, space inside the ovoid “body.” There are structures, but they don’t occupy the bulk of the volume. Either side are what must be the anchor points of the spires attached to the “hull.” Minal can see that they are substantial—but surely not enough to actually support what is attached to the outside.

Further in is shrouded in darkness, the outline of various objects just about discernible.

Seeing no other route forward, Minal’s only recourse is to *actually* perform an inspection, even if it means playing along with some juvenile narrative. If nothing else, she will be able to determine how safe the structure is.

Minal has with her a day satchel—she fishes out her clipboard and pen.

“So,” she begins, filling in the first box of the inspection form. “The *Cygnet*? As in swan?”

“That is correct.”

“And what is the age of this vessel?”

“Approximately twenty thousand years.”

There isn't enough space for that many zeros, and Minal suspects most of the other boxes on the form will come up short as well. She unclips the paper form and flips it over to its blank side.

"The *Cygnets*," she says, writing the details down. "Twenty thousand years old."

"Approximately."

"Tonnage? Unladen—"

"The concept of weight is somewhat slippery when it comes to interstellar vessels, PSCO Shah."

"Unknown, then. Port of origin?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Where have you come from? Planet X?"

"Your sarcasm is unwelcome, but understandable, PSCO Shah. Perhaps if we were to focus on the physical aspects of the inspection?"

"Means of propulsion?" Minal shoots back at him. "I assume the two spiky things on the outside are the...umm...engines?"

"Gravimetric traction. And yes, the two towers are field generators, with stabilizers situated port and starboard of the residence."

"The residence?"

"The superstructure that can be seen at the vessel's foremost dimension."

"Fuel source?"

"What you might consider to be universal dark energy."

"Oookay, then. The *Cygnets*, twenty thousand years old, tonnage unknown, origin unstated, propulsion by means of gravimetric traction, powered by the universe. I have it right so far?"

"You do indeed, PSCO Shah."

* * *

From outside, PSCO Shah and Corporal Jakes are soon out of sight, leaving Huxley, Debeer, and Colonel Brammers to simply gawp at the structure before, above, and behind them

“I’m not entirely convinced we should have done that,” says Huxley. “We could be putting them both at considerable risk. What if he takes them hostage?”

“It doesn’t read as that kind of situation,” says Debeer.

“He’s got the entrance blocked with some kind of invisible barrier,” says Huxley. “What kind of situation *does* it read as?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” grumbles Debeer. “The whole thing is probably made out of wood. She’ll rumble the fellow in no time.”

“Jakes is a capable man,” says Colonel Brammers, seeking to reassure Huxley.

The thump-thump-thump of a military helicopter’s rotor blades draws their attention. It comes into sight over the city skyline, keeping a safe distance from the structure but clearly making some kind of inspection of its own.

“Christ,” mutters Debeer. “Now what?”

One of his officers, field radio to his ear, has the answer for him.

“Got gold command inbound, guv.”

* * *

Having made a play of looking over their immediate surroundings and scribbling down some initial notes, Minal is now left to wonder just how far the charade can play out, with only this lower structure being likely to be explorable. Perhaps she can force the issue...

“I will need you to escort us to the accommodation quarters,” she says.

“You have completed your survey here?” asks Mr. Day.

“There isn’t exactly a lot to see, now, is there. No moving parts as such.”

“Very well. But I must leave you to your own devices. A little orientation, and you will be free to roam the *Cygnets* as you see fit.”

“Hold on—where are you going?”

“There is business to attend to outside. Now—the first thing to know is that if you need any assistance, then just speak your question. The *Cygnets* has no voice of her own, but she will provide you with the relevant information. Try it.”

Not only can Minal see that her bluff is being called, but, perhaps more worryingly, a situation is being contrived whereby she and Corporal Jakes will be unable to report. Mr. Day is buying time.

“I’d like to see an all-decks map,” says Minal, a withering look for Mr. Day.

A schematic appears to one side, a projection floating midair, depicting a crisp “x-ray” view of the structure.

“Neat trick,” observes Minal.

“You may also communicate with the outside world,” says Mr. Day. “Just ask to do so, stating the name of the person with whom you wish to talk.”

Minal testily taps her pen against the clipboard.

“I wish to speak with Mayor Rames,” she says, keeping her gaze on Mr. Day.

The schematic vanishes, to be replaced by a TV-sized video feed, Mayor Rames in the act of jumping out of his skin, Colonel Brammers and Chief Constable Debeer similarly goggle-eyed at what is presumably Minal’s face appearing out of nowhere.

“Just checking in, Mayor Rames,” says Minal. “All is well here. We are about to commence with an inspection of the wider structure.”

“Jakes,” barks Colonel Brammers, pushing forward. “Report.”

“We are still on the lower deck, sir. Nothing suspicious as of yet. We have been given full access to the structure and are apparently free to roam.”

“What? Where’s that Day fellow?”

“He intends to step back out, shortly.”

“Very well. Carry on.”

“PSCO Shah,” says Debeer. “Are you sure it is safe to proceed?”

“Well, one thing I can say—whatever this thing is, its construction appears durable.”

All the three of them can do is exchange concerned glances, seemingly marking the end of the conversation as far as the *Cygnets* is concerned—the video link vanishes.

Minal’s gaze finds Mr. Day.

“So,” she says. “How do we get around? From the outside, the ascent looked pretty steep.”

“There’s an internal transit system,” says Mr. Day. “But that would be boring. Take one of the vehicles.”

Before Minal can inquire as to what on earth he is talking about, the lower deck brightens, what had been a gloom now fully illuminated. Smooth surfaces enclose the space, with the only form suggesting function being the two bulbous anchor points for the external “field” generators.

Her eyes find them—tucked away to one side at the far end, Jakes already heading off to take a closer look.

As Minal scurries after Jakes, what had appeared to be a bulkhead at the far end of the deck vanishes, revealing a service corridor some fifteen

meters across and perhaps more than five high.

The distraction is sufficient to have Minal gaze into it, finding smooth walls lining the way. After a short run, the corridor arcs upward—clearly the means by which one gets to the forward superstructure some seventy meters or more above them. The “residence.”

“Can’t be structural,” she says, Jakes having joined her. “Just some kind of connecting tunnel. Looks safe enough.”

With nothing more to be discerned, they turn their attention to the means of transit—two vehicles parked up, incongruous to their surroundings.

“You’re not actually thinking of using these, are you, ma’am?” says Jakes.

“Don’t ma’am me,” says Minal. “It’s either Minal or PSCO Shah. And what do I call you?”

“Just Jakes.”

“Jakes, I need two things from you—to be on point when it comes to our safety, and second, not to be a complete stiff. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” says Jakes, returning his attention to the choice before them.

“Most definitely the 911,” says Minal. “It’s an easier ride than the Lambo. I’ll drive.”

* * *

With the video call abruptly ended, Huxley can sense the well of worry deepening in Debeer’s mind. PSCO Shah hadn’t debunked the structure out of hand.

What had been a collection of supposed technological trickery is now rapidly assuming the guise of an impossible wonder.

“Just what the hell is this thing?” mutters Debeer.

CYGNET

With the most obvious landing spot “taken,” the military chopper had set down harborside, a fleet of police vehicles waiting, by command, to deliver its sole passenger to ground zero.

Debeer has decamped the three of them to the city hall meeting chamber so that they might receive whoever is now in charge, a meeting he prefers to have out of sight of those under his own command.

“I thought Gold Command was supposed to operate remotely,” says Huxley. “Not be on site.”

“It’s not mandated,” says Debeer, feathers ruffled. “They can be wherever they goddamn like.”

“A knight of the realm, no less,” quips Colonel Brammers. “Quite the poor cousin, aren’t we.”

“Gold is strategic,” says Debeer. “As silver commander, I still have tactical control on the ground.”

Double-breasted suit tailored to a thin frame, brown leather brogues clacking against the parquet flooring, a shaved head, and a crocodile grin to greet the three of them.

“Thaddeus Maine,” the fellow says, extending a courteous handshake to Debeer.

“Sir Thaddeus,” says Debeer. “Just what is it that brings you here?”

* * *

The bright yellow Porsche 911 turbo cabriolet purrs like a kitten as Minal makes some final adjustments to her seat position. A minute or so of fussing under the deadpan gaze of Jakes, and she is able to comfortably reach the foot pedals.

The two of them contemplate the journey ahead—the yawning maw of the corridor leading up to the residence. Without it needing to be said, both buckle up.

“Where’s Mr. Day?” asks Minal.

“He stepped out,” says Jakes.

Just the tiniest squirt of the accelerator and they are away, the tail-happy sports car cornering like it’s on rails, the punch of throttle in her back gratifying, the suspension of the surreal complete.

Truth be told, the Lamborghini would have been equally thrilling but, if it came to it, impossible for Jakes to drive—not in those boots. And besides, the open top afforded them a better view.

An instant, and they are in the “neck” corridor, heading up its slope, the 911’s rear-wheel drive more than capable of pushing them along.

While something of a blur, the corridor’s surface is uniform—surface, ceiling, and walls all as one. They could be in something of a rounded-rectangle tube, brightly lit, even if with no obvious light source, the only sense of motion coming from the 911, and curious markings that line the way—

“*S h i t!*” squeals Minal, hitting the brakes.

She has brought the car to an abrupt halt, some fifty meters along the tunnel, slamming them both into their seat restraints.

“What the *hell*?” barks Jakes, seeking some form of immediate explanation.

“We have,” puffs Minal, heaving in a great gulp of air, “a very serious problem on our hands.”

“What...problem?” asks Jakes, looking all about.

“*Seriously*?” balks Minal, regaining some composure.

PSCO Shah’s demeanor is enough to see Jakes unholster his sidearm.

“For Christ’s sake, Jakes. Put that thing away. Don’t you understand the gravity of our situation?”

“Okay, ma’am, let’s cut the bullshit. What the fuck are you talking about?”

“*Don’t* ma’am me.”

Jakes leans right into what Minal considers to be her personal space, takes a moment, and—

“PSCO Shah. Minal. Little miss what-the-fuck-ever. Please be so kind as to explain yourself.”

“Look behind you,” says Minal, her eyes so wide that they might pop out.

Jakes swivels around as best he can in the tight-fitting sports seat. But there’s nothing there—the corridor is empty. Nothing behind them. Nothing in front of them. Nothing above them. Nothing, except the corridor.

He returns his gaze to a still wide-eyed Minal.

“We,” she says, “are on a thirty-degree slope.”

Jakes shoots his gaze back behind them. Now he sees it—the lower deck, angled upward. And they...they are—

“Holy *shit*.”

But Minal isn’t hanging around and, despite dumping the 911’s entire power train into its rear wheels with a single stab at the accelerator,

manages to keep them on a dead straight line, the way before them no longer an ascent, but a level stretch to whatever awaits them up ahead.

“There goes gravity,” she says.

* * *

The city hall meeting chamber is undergoing a profound transformation, the semblance of a sophisticated operations center emerging all around them. Big screens, maps, meeting areas, whiteboards, communications—and a well-appointed, if somewhat makeshift, refectory, assembled by Colonel Brammers’s men.

Huxley has rustled up four espressos from a newly installed coffee machine and rejoins the command team—gold, silver, and bronze, of which he remains one.

“Our principal concern is an onslaught of sightseers,” says Debeer. “We’ve closed all the thoroughfares into the city, but foot traffic remains high. For now we’re managing to kettle them in pockets around the center.”

“We’ve got regular bulletins on radio and TV,” says Huxley. “Urging people to stay away. But the media are becoming as much a problem themselves. We can’t keep them at bay for much longer.”

The newly arrived gold commander, Thaddeus Maine, looks to one of several video walls that have lit up in the past few minutes. Wall-to-wall coverage across the globe.

“Whatever this thing is,” he says, “it’s certainly got the world’s attention. Likely that is their intent. But for now we don’t pander to them.”

“I suggest you go outside and take another look at it,” scoffs Debeer. “We are not in control here.”

“Them?” asks Huxley. “There’s just the one fellow—Mr. *Day*.”

“Come, now, Mayor Rames,” says Thaddeus. “Let’s not get sucked into whatever game is afoot here. As for the crowds, we need to clear the entire city—”

“*What?*”

“You are forgetting your Homer. A great wooden horse, led into Troy, and concealed within only death and destruction—”

“What exactly are you saying?” says Debeer. “That there are hordes ready to pour out of that thing?”

“It’s a spectacle, Chief Constable. A veritable honey pot set to attract great crowds. And when they have gathered—”

A fidgety police officer has joined them, keeping a few paces back so as not to incur the wrath of Debeer.

“What is it, Thompson?” says an irritable Debeer.

“It’s about PSCO Shah, sir,” says Thompson. “It seems she isn’t exactly who she says she is.”

* * *

At a mere two hundred meters long, the corridor delivers them in no time, Minal bringing the 911 to a graceful pause at some kind of terminus, with routes curving both to the left and right.

There’s that, and the fact that gravity has realigned itself once more.

Ahead is what might be a huge, curved door, embossed with a great “seal”—a collection of raised symbols arranged as a circular motif. Whatever it is, it is closed.

Minal takes the 911 to the left, following the curved path.

“Hold on,” says Jakes, grabbing a hand hold as the 911 turns sharply. “Shouldn’t we investigate this place? It looks important—”

But Minal is all buttoned up, Jakes finding only resolute determination on her face.

The curved path straightens to another corridor, same dimensions but far gloomier than the “neck,” the walls and ceiling forming a landscape of gunmetal gray, punctuated only by a series of equally spaced recesses, each suggesting a closed entrance to some space within.

At only one hundred meters, the journey is quick to end, bringing them to another great “seal” blocking the way.

Minal unbuckles herself and hops out, making straight for the seal.

She places the palm of her hand against what purports to be a huge bulkhead. It’s the first time she has thought to touch the fabric of whatever this gargantuan structure might be.

“Feels like metal,” she muses. “Neither cold, nor warm—ambient. Smooth but not frictionless.”

Jakes does likewise, only to jerk his hand away, before tentatively applying his palm once more.

“It’s got a hum to it.”

“*Cygnets*,” says Minal. “Open this door.”

In an instant, the bulkhead is gone—to where, Jakes cannot tell, there being no sign of any recess into which it might have withdrawn.

The space ahead is simply a short run of the same corridor—perhaps five meters or so—and bathed in a red light with no obvious source. At the far end is another bulkhead, plain and without any markings.

“We’re at the hull?” suggests Jakes.

“*Cygnets*,” says Minal. “Give me access to the port bow stabilizer.”

“The what?” says Jakes.

Another opening, one meter wide by two high, a rounded rectangle ringed with a glowing red strip. Beyond is bright—like daylight—but with

no discernable structure or boundary.

“Mr. Day said the drive system had gravimetric stabilizers to port and starboard of the forward superstructure. Given what we experienced in the neck, I’d say they warrant inspection.”

Minal steps through the opening—

“*W a i t!*” bellows Jakes, the reach of his arm unable to grab her.

She is gone, with Jakes able only to look on in horror.

* * *

A furious Debeer arrives at the operation center’s research desk, Brammers, Huxley, and Thaddeus in tow. He’d instructed his team to do a background check on PSCO Shah as a matter of routine. He hadn’t actually expected to find anything—

“An imposter?” he rages at the researchers. “Get me the team who brought her in. I want explanations. For Christ’s fucking *sake*, what is this? Amateur hour? If she’s a bloody journalist—”

“Sir,” interjects Thompson. “If I may. PSCO Shah isn’t an imposter as such.”

“*But you just said she was, man!* Is she a port state control inspector or not?”

“She is, sir. Been in the job over three years. And she is the duty inspector for today. And Inspector Beaufort really is on holiday in Cornwall—we managed to get through to him, and he’s validated PSCO Shah’s credentials.”

“Then what the bloody hell are you on about?”

“It’s...well, it isn’t *Miss* Shah,” says Thompson. “It’s Dr. Shah.”

“*Dr.* Shah?”

“Three times over—PhDs in chemistry, physics and theoretical mathematics. And, umm, she has been shortlisted for the Fields medal—twice.”

It’s the sound of china smashing on the floor that snaps Debeer out of it, Colonel Brammers having let his espresso slide off its saucer as he gawps open-mouthed at the far end of the meeting chamber.

It’s another video call, ostensibly from within the *Cygnets*, this time with cinematic dimensions, *Dr. Shah* floating center screen, a puffball of hi-viz suspended in a white world.

“I am in an artificially generated zero-gravity field,” she says. “Located in the port bow of the forward superstructure. It could very well be that the *Cygnets* is exactly as described. Starship. Galaxy class.”

* * *

The barrier controlling access to the *Cygnets*’s lower deck takes in a small area of College Green’s neatly clipped grass. A small table and two chairs have been arranged there, the tabletop covered with white linen, adorned with a tea service, and replete with a selection of baked treats.

Mr. Day is seated at the table, hands in his lap, an expectant gaze the way of the group standing at the barrier.

Thaddeus can’t help but jab a finger at the invisible barrier, his fingertip encountering its soft, yet unyielding, nature. A curious trick for which he knows there to be no scientific explanation. As if waiting on his curiosity to be satisfied, the portion of the barrier before him turns its red bar to green, while remaining red for Debeer, Huxley, and Brammers.

He steps forth.

“Sir Thaddeus,” says Mr. Day. “He of courageous heart.”

Thaddeus ignores the ingratiating onomatological remark and seats himself at the table.

“I thought we could take tiffin,” says Mr. Day, pouring two cups of tea. “Help yourself to lemon and sugar. And the petit-fours—please.”

“Alright, Mr. Day,” says Thaddeus. “You have my attention. For now, at least. I am here to negotiate.”

“Negotiate?”

“In so far as there have been no threats or acts of terrorism, the government wishes to understand the nature of this...event. Should you deviate from the status quo—”

“Terrorism? Just what do you think this is, Sir Thaddeus?”

“Let’s just get down to brass tacks, shall we—”

“Brass tacks? Is this to be a trial by idiom?”

“Just what is it that you want?”

Mr. Day takes a sip of his tea, lingering a moment to appreciate it, before lifting a cake fork and teasing apart a bakewell slice.

“A trade deal,” he says, popping the morsel into his mouth.

TROJAN

Jakes had managed to fish Minal from the port bow stabilizer, but not before seeing the call she had placed to Mayor Rames for himself. Now his charge has a new dimension to her—or many, depending on how you counted.

But rather than flip out with the mind-bending impossibility of it all, Minal had simply set about peeling off her hi-viz and scrunched down against the nearest wall.

“Inspection procedures require regular breaks,” she explains, rummaging around in her day satchel.

Jakes is struck not so much by her calmness, as her stature. Without the puffed-up appearance of the hi-viz, *Doctor* Shah is tiny—little more than a stick of a girl.

Minal fishes out a bundle neatly wrapped in catering paper, pulling at its folds to reveal a small picnic lunch within, and is quick to take a bite out of its scotch egg.

“Didn’t you bring anything?” she asks, pulling a bottle of water from her satchel.

“Wasn’t exactly expecting to be here all that long, Doc.”

Minal offers up a sausage roll, Jakes taking it and popping it into his mouth, knowing that nothing need be said on the matter, having acquired some measure of the depth and breadth of the character before him.

Jakes remains standing, vigilant as to their surroundings, which, as well as Dr. Shah, have taken on a whole new perspective.

“So, in *there*,” says Jakes, pointing back at what Minal had called the port-bow stabilizer. “What was that?”

“A zero-G space,” says Minal. “Pretty impressive, huh.”

“You mean like indoor skydiving? We use those for parachute training —”

“Did you feel an updraft when you pulled me out?”

“Well, no—so how’s it done, then?”

“I have no idea.”

“What the chief constable said—all those PhDs and whatnot—why aren’t you like some big-shot scientist?”

“Can’t be bothered with all the academia bullshit,” says Minal.

“Corporate bullshit’s worse. Port State Control pays well. It’s a good life.”

“Yeah, and I’m the king of England—”

“I’m Asian, female, and small. All admirable qualities, I can assure you, but something that male elites are unable to see past.”

“I’ll buy that,” says Jakes, taking the bottled water handed him. “We should think about heading back. Chief Constable’s got what he wanted, even if he doesn’t like it.”

“You’re kidding, right? We’ve only just gotten started. A vessel this size will take days to inspect thoroughly.”

“Days? Doc, we can’t stay here *days*—”

“You seem to have an aptitude for not seeing the obvious, Corporal Jakes. No offense intended.”

“None taken. The obvious being what, exactly?”

“Why, me, of course.”

* * *

Thaddeus has to agree that the bakewell slices are indeed delightful, not that he is going to let on. More importantly, partaking of the fare provided has given him a moment or two to consider Mr. Day’s remarks.

Clearly it’s all part of the charade, and he’s not going to bite. Not just yet.

“I’m curious as to the involvement of Dr. Shah,” Thaddeus says. “Not so much coincidence as deliberate?”

“It did dictate both the timing and the location. Quite a find, actually. Then again, the human race does have a curious ability to serve up the right individual for the moment at hand.”

“So you sought to make the innocent Dr. Shah your convincer.”

“A reference to the *modus operandi* of a confidence trickster. I am disappointed, Sir Thaddeus.”

“Please. Don’t be. Is the good doctor free to leave the structure?”

“She is,” says Mr. Day. “But it seems Dr. Shah has chosen to remain, the secrets of the *Cygnets* too tempting for her catlike mind, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“And the safety of both Dr. Shah and Corporal Jakes?”

“Assured.”

“An equitable arrangement, then,” says Thaddeus, popping a forkful of cake into his mouth. “For both sides.”

* * *

Much to the vexation of Debeer, Thaddeus had sat with Mr. Day for only a scant twenty minutes. Now the gold commander has insisted that they regroup at the operations center within city hall.

“Tea and *cakes*?” scoffs Debeer, as they gather in a quiet corner.

“It is to be the sale of advanced technology,” announces Thaddeus. “Even if illegally obtained.”

“Illegally?” says Debeer. “How do you know that?”

“I don’t. But the level of sophistication we have thus far witnessed can only be the product of state-sponsored research and development. And since no state would offer such for sale—”

“There must be more covert ways to pass off stolen tech,” scoffs Debeer.

“It is a deliberate spectacle, held in plain sight. One that prevents any coercion on our part or, for that matter, that of anyone else. So we must advance our plans to clear the city—to level up the playing field.”

“What about Dr. Shah?” asks Huxley.

“She is what you might consider an assayer of sorts, even if an unwitting one. For the time being, she will continue with her inspection.”

“What if she’s in on it?” says Debeer. “Just here to convince us.”

“That would be too obvious,” says Thaddeus. “For now, we must take her at face value.”

“Oookay,” says Huxley. “Then what about Dr. Shah’s contention that the structure is some kind of spaceship?”

“Mayor Rames,” tuts Thaddeus. “I mean, *really*. I was served *tiffin*, for heaven’s sake. There’s no denying the sophistication of the trickery, but it is unquestionably human in origin.”

* * *

This time it is COBRA—the government’s Civil Contingencies Committee. The same situation room, different group of people, with the attendance a reflection of the situation’s initial assessment—middling cabinet ministers peppered with the odd senior civil servant.

Home Secretary Bundt reluctantly takes a seat, having been “asked” by the prime minister to chair the meeting in his place, so as to play down the situation as some kind of silly stunt, despite Bundt’s contention that the rest of the world sees it differently. But the PM and foreign secretary had stood firm, passing the chalice her way.

She notes the lack of biscuits, with nothing needing to be said, just a glance, a civil servant scurrying off to rectify the oversight.

The video wall is alight with the latest events playing out.

Center stage is the barista from the coffee shop, being interviewed for what must be the zillionth time today. Bidding on the coins left by Mr. Day has reached seven hundred thousand dollars.

In Bundt’s mind, it simply underscores just how much the whole thing has become a circus.

“Every flight into the UK is booked,” says the transport secretary. “For the next three weeks. Same with the ferries—and the Eurotunnel.”

Bundt ignores the lack of respect for the chair, deciding instead to let the unsolicited initial overtures play out. It’s the science minister who picks up the baton.

“Every UFO crackpot there is in the world is set to descend upon us,” he says. “And the ones already here are making a beeline for Bristol.”

“Surely there can’t be that many,” says Bundt.

“The M4 is backed up to Swindon,” says the transport secretary. “Same with the M5, north- and southbound.”

“At this rate we’ll need sea patrols around the entire coastline,” says the immigration minister.

“And this is just day one.”

The group falls silent, all eyes Bundt’s way.

She trills a sigh.

“Gold Command wants to clear the city,” she says. “What are the contingency plans for this?”

“We have no precedent for evacuating an entire city—”

“We do now.”

“Doesn’t that play right into the hands of whoever is behind this?”

“The thinking is that they are using the city as a shield,” says Bundt.

“We can’t move on them with the world watching.”

“Practically speaking,” says a senior civil servant, “it is not possible to evacuate a city the size of Bristol in less than forty-eight hours.”

“Just the area around the structure, then. A mile in each direction.”

“Even then there are likely to be hundreds of survivalists hidden away, each ready to report what they see. But the military could sweep all buildings in the immediate area of ground zero—say, five hundred meters—and throw up a cordon. That’d be enough to keep prying eyes away from the lower structure.”

“The PM would need to declare an emergency to make any of that stick,” says another. “And if he does that—”

“We validate their agenda.”

* * *

The accessway to the port stabilizer had sealed itself as soon as they had stepped beyond it, leaving them back in the featureless corridor. Well, almost featureless.

Minal tosses her hi-viz in the back of the 911, eschewing her all-weather gear for the jeans and T-shirt underneath, but keeping her day satchel, slinging it across her chest.

Either side of the corridor are recesses—door-sized recesses—and Minal places herself in the nearest. Unlike the bulkheads before, the “door” vanishes without command, revealing a space beyond.

An empty space and, like everything else, walled with a dark gray material. The dimensions, however, are generous—Minal estimates seven meters square, by three high.

On the far side is a rectangular indent to the wall spanning its entire width, but not its height.

“*Cygnnet*,” says Minal. “Clear the windows.”

The rectangular space clears to transparency, the far horizon of the city visible to them.

“Jesus,” mutters Jakes.

“Stateroom,” says Minal. “Unfurnished.”

The next recess along the corridor is the same.

But not the one after that. It’s a stairwell, leading down, with tentative explorations suggesting the “residence” to have at least two decks, and with no obvious difference between them, Minal decides to stick with the one they had traveled along.

The entire deck length is quite walkable, but if they have to leave in a hurry, they’ll need the 911, so Minal drives it back at a walking pace while Jakes makes the occasional inspection.

Soon enough they are back at the circular hub where the deck corridor intersects with the *Cygnnet*’s neck. To their right, the neck descends; to their left, the great seal blocks the way.

Jakes jogs off toward the neck and, where it begins its descent, slows to a walking pace, the curve downward spanning some ten meters.

“Doc, you really need to try this,” he says. “It’s the freakiest thing.”

The 911 parked up, Minal has followed, and she stands at the edge of the hub to observe Jakes orientated at an angle to her as he jumps up and down in a gravity well that is bent around the curve of the neck’s lip.

“*Cygnets*,” says Minal. “Show me a map of this deck.”

A schematic appears before her, confirming what she had concluded from the survey—two rows of staterooms and two stairwells, evenly spaced arranged either side of a central hub, shown only as a circular space.

“So,” says Jakes, returning to her side. “Where is everything? No machinery, no pipes or ducting—no nothing.”

“Indeed,” muses Minal, looking over the plan view of the deck. “Rather like a cathedral, wouldn’t you say? With the neck as the nave, and this place the transept—and behind that seal, a chancel and...altar?”

“What makes you say that?” scoffs Jakes. “There aren’t any labels.”

“Cynicism.”

The deck plan dismisses itself. Ahead, the vast curved wall parts, splitting its seal down the middle, to create an opening three meters wide.

Inside, Mr. Day awaits them.

* * *

They are gathered at what is now simply termed “the map”—the most detailed ordnance survey of the city and its immediate environs they could put together, comprising a series of large maps laid out on an assortment of tables abutted together.

Huxley can’t help but wonder whether Debeer’s head might explode, given the level of contained anger. Sir Thaddeus, on the other hand, is a

picture of calm—the eye of the storm.

“A pretense?” Debeer spits out.

“The prime minister doesn’t want to declare an emergency,” says Thaddeus.

Judging by Colonel Brammers’s deportment, he couldn’t be more delighted. Action at last, supposes Huxley, a pit having formed in his stomach—the city is about to no longer be his.

“Silver Command has the prerogative,” says Thaddeus. “An on-the-ground tactical decision in response to an imminent threat.”

“Threat? What threat? All he’s done is serve tea and cakes.”

“We’ve not heard from Dr. Shah or Corporal Jakes for over an hour. The concern is that they have been taken hostage.”

“*No, they haven’t—*”

“Five hundred meters or thereabouts in all directions from ground zero.”

“The floating harbor forms a natural barrier to the south and east,” says Colonel Brammers, tracing out a boundary on the map with his finger. “We can follow it around to Castle Park, cut across to take in the university, and drop back down Jacob’s Wells.”

“Three sectors,” says Debeer, jabbing a finger at each so as to reassert himself. “We’ll evacuate the north via the M32, the eastern sector via train from Temple Meads station, and the western sector up the Portway.”

“To make this work,” says Thaddeus, “we’ll need a certain amount of shock and awe.”

“We can do that,” says Colonel Brammers.

“We’re not using the bloody army,” says an indignant Debeer. “This is a policing matter.”

“We’ll need both,” says Thaddeus.

* * *

It's another empty space, though there is an altar. Or, supposes Minal—going by the look on his face—what Jakes takes to be an altar, she having placed the notion in his head.

The “altar” is in fact a low plinth toward the far end of what is otherwise circular in proportions, but brightly lit by way of a forward view through a single expanse of “window.”

With the presence of the window marking the foremost dimension, Minal assesses the space to span three quarters of the superstructure's entire depth—perhaps twenty meters or more.

“Not a lot to inspect,” says Minal, focusing on the plinth so as to keep her gaze away from Mr. Day.

“What were you expecting?” says Mr. Day. “*Doctor Shah.*”

“Let's not pretend that my presence here is anything but by design,” says Minal. “*Mister Day.*”

“Indeed.”

“So far it's looking like a trojan horse. All the appearance of *function*, yet without the *means*—save for enough accommodation to house a small army.”

“Except—no army.”

“Not that we have seen.”

“The whole thing is empty,” says Jakes. “Where the hell is everything?”

“The *Cygnets*' systems are integral to its structure, Corporal Jakes. Hidden within the walls, as it were.”

“So, what's the point of the inspection? If the doc can't see anything.”

“Everything Dr. Shah needs to see can be examined from here.”

Mr. Day looks about the space, and as he does so, the space transforms.

First the walls and ceiling take on a texture decorative in appearance, and, for the first time away from the port bow stabilizer, there is color in

this otherwise gray world, even if the subtlest of hues.

The empty air about the plinth lights up with a neon glow, a multitude of shapes and symbols resolving with sharp lines, only to be then eclipsed by another projection in the foreground—the arc of a ring, one meter high, floating midair, its circumference enclosing all three of them.

It is a sea of glowing information.

“This is the *Cygnets* bridge?” asks a dazzled Minal.

“If you want to call it that, yes. From here any aspect of the *Cygnets* systems can be controlled and examined.”

“We will require accommodation. So that I may continue with the inspection.”

“Of course.”

“And meals.”

“There’s a kitchenette,” says Mr. Day, motioning to an opening to one side of the space.

“Kitchenette?”

“A galley, of sorts.”

* * *

Stepping through to the “galley” reveals just what Mr. Day had described—a kitchenette, modern, compact and bijou, and as might be found in any high-end home furnishing magazine catering to the smaller, yet exclusive, space. And, set within the *Cygnets*, somewhat incongruous.

“We have to prepare our own meals?” says Jakes, turning to seek out Mr. Day.

But Mr. Day is gone, Jakes jogging back out onto the bridge, and then on to the hub outside.

“No sign of him,” he says to Minal, who has joined him.

“Must have used that transit system he mentioned,” she says.

“The one he talked us out of using? Yeah. I bet.”

Minal’s attention returns to the bridge and the glowing ring floating there. It’s a perfect circle, split into equal arcs, each a separate display, each dense with patterns and symbols. There must be a hundred or more, Minal and Jakes stepping inside the ring to examine the nearest.

“I’d like to see a full readout for the starboard field generator,” she says, addressing the ring.

“The starboard what?” says Jakes.

“That’s what he called them—the engines. Field generators.”

A thirty-degree arc of the ring flicks to a new set of images, each just as indecipherable as the next.

“This make any kind of sense, Doc?”

“We lack the nomenclature to understand it,” says Minal, focusing on one of the display segments. “Though these patterns—they look like they could be gradients. Power gradients maybe. Show me this readout as a time series—the last twenty-four hours.”

The gradient patterns change to extend into the display’s depth of field, creating a 3D topography, like that of a landscape rendered on a map.

“Not a power gradient,” she says. “See how the output diminishes leading up to the time of arrival—?”

Jakes stares back at her blankly.

“What time do you make it?” asks Minal, glancing at her own watch.

“Just gone seventeen hundred hours,” says Jakes.

“We should think about settling in.”

An inspection of the galley reveals a supply of prepared meals in a refrigeration unit—and what Minal can only assume to be a microwave oven to heat them up.

“Let’s figure out the accommodation first,” she says, looking back at the bridge ring. “Eat after. The rest of it can wait ’til morning.”

Leaving the bridge takes them back to the corridors. They’d explored the port side of the resilience, but not the starboard section.

“Could be an army hiding down there,” says Minal.

“My money’s on it being empty,” says Jakes.

Sticking with the corridor to port brings them to the first of the “rooms.” Like the others they had inspected, it’s just vacant space with a closed window. But that’s how the bridge had been—

“*Cygnets*,” says Minal. “Configure this space as a stateroom.”

The bed appears first, not so much rising out of the floor as extruding itself, first as a nondescript plinth, then accoutrements—mattress, bedsheets, pillows—morphing into being.

Form followed by function, closet space and furniture following suit.

“Doc...” mutters Jakes. “There’s just the one bed.”

“This,” says Minal. “Is *mine*. And you are *lingering*. Scoot.”

“We need to share,” says Jakes. “It’s the only way I can protect you.”

“From what?”

“From whatever it is that we haven’t found yet.”

“Take the one on the opposite side of the hall,” says Minal, shoving at two hundred pounds of Jakes, in the direction of the door.

COUP D'ETAT

It is to be a sudden strike—so sudden as to leave no room for protest or debate. And Huxley is to be the face behind it, the mayor of Bristol urging its citizens to evacuate the area, following the directions of the police and militia. If he hadn't complied, that would have been the end, with Sir Thaddeus threatening to remove him from bronze command and the incident.

The plan is to cut the phones, cell network, and internet, but not the power—they want compliance, not panic. There will be a single sweep of the area immediately surrounding ground zero during the night, with the larger area to be swept over the coming days.

By morning ground zero will be locked down with no line of sight to the structure's entrance, the tables turned on *Mr. Day*.

"Guv," calls out one of Debeer's officers, pointing behind him.

It's Dr. Shah, reporting in from the *Cygnets*, the background suggesting she is in something akin to a hotel room, her hi-viz removed and bun undone, glossy black hair hanging straight behind her neck.

"Where's Jakes?" barks Colonel Brammers.

"Jakes and I are bunking down in the main superstructure," she says.

"We found a large volume turned over to accommodation in the port wing,

all of it empty. We haven't inspected the starboard side yet."

"Anything else?" asks Debeer. "It can't be *completely* empty. What's holding the damn thing up?"

"Some means of stabilization to port and starboard. There's also what looks like a control room at the center of the structure. I'll examine that in the morning."

"Where is Mr. Day?"

"No idea. He was here briefly but left."

With the exchange derailed by lack of anything to discuss, Dr. Shah ends the call.

"Shah out," she says, the video feed vanishing.

"An empty structure with only space for accommodation," says Thaddeus. "A trojan horse indeed, welcomed into the city as a gift."

"And no sign of Corporal Jakes," says Colonel Brammers.

"A bit tenuous, isn't it?" says Huxley.

"It's all we need, Mayor Rames."

* * *

The flashing blue lights, the sirens, the swarms of police urging them on, past armed soldiers and military vehicles, megaphones blaring instructions—none of them dare stop. They just want to get the *hell* away from *there*.

There's no cell access or internet, just a constant emergency message from Mayor Rames, announcing that the immediate area is being evacuated. The stunt on College Green—that giant structure. It's become something terrifying, but the authorities won't say what.

Those to the east find themselves herded from one kettling point to another, and then onward to Temple Meads station, where they willingly

board waiting trains that are quick to depart amidst a cacophony of wailing voices and emergency announcements.

For a brief moment the platform is empty, not a soul in sight, Minal finding herself alone, looking across the tracks to the opposite platform, and the station clock—

A train races through the station, its horn sounding loudly, its carriages brightly lit, flashing by, a single face pressed against the window of one.

Then the train is gone, as quick as it had arrived, the platform clock advancing by one minute with a CLUNK of its mechanism—

Minal wakes from the dream with an intake of air, the room automatically brightening just enough so she might see the space around her.

She checks her watch and hops out of bed, making straight for the door that opens for her without command, across the corridor and into Jakes's room.

He's lying there, on the bed, still asleep.

Jakes is a righty, the watch on his left wrist the same as hers—a smartwatch.

CLICK

It's Jakes's Glock, cocked and pressed against the side of her head, the room lights brightening a touch.

"You couldn't knock, Doc?"

"You sleep with a gun in your hand?"

"Inside this thing?" says Jakes, withdrawing the weapon. "Yeah, I do."

"I need to see your watch," she says reaching for his wrist.

Jakes's wide-eyed gaze halts her midgrab.

"Doc—you're naked."

Minal takes a moment to expand her thinking beyond the immediate need to examine Jakes's smartwatch, seeing now that her actions have been somewhat single-minded. Scrambling over the bed to get to his wrist has left her atop him.

She arcs herself back, gathering her long hair with one hand, and drapes it over her shoulder so that as she rolls off, it brushes across his chest.

Coming to rest at his side gives her access to his left wrist, and she grabs hold of his arm to raise it, only to find that it is too much weight for her.

Jakes raises his arm, and Minal brings their watch screens together, tapping both to light them.

"Our watches would have synced with internet time before we boarded the *Cygnets*, and there's no signal in here for them to have resynced after that. But their internal clocks are accurate to the microsecond—"

Both watches show the current time down to the second.

Minal's is ahead by a second or so.

"*Shit*," she balks. "I wasn't expecting *that*."

"What? That they're different?"

"No—that it's *mine* that is ahead. It should be yours."

"You're not making a lot of sense, Doc."

"I had a dream," she says. "About a train—Einstein's train. Relativity. Time. The port-bow stabilizer..."

"Doc—"

"Either you have recently been accelerated close to the speed of light, or I have experienced...more...of the universe?"

"You're asking me?"

Minal pats Jakes's chest a couple of times.

"It was good for me, too."

And with that, she hops off the bed and pads her way back to her room.

DAY TWO

With the cat having been put among the pigeons, it hadn't taken long for Home Secretary's Bundt's diary to be completely reorganized for the day, with every diplomat in London having crawled out of the woodwork.

They should be speaking with the foreign secretary, but he's palmed every last one of them onto Bundt, with the *pathetic* excuse that the subject at hand is a domestic issue.

Most she will deal with by video conference, but when it comes to the US ambassador, well, there was never going to be any dodging Harry Harland turning up in person.

A brash man, entirely unsuited to the role of diplomat, who has dropped himself into the chair on the other side of her desk without so much as a by-your-leave.

"It's just a precaution, Harry," she says. "The whole thing is just some stunt. One that we cannot afford to go wrong."

"You've been peddling that story from the get-go," Harland fires back at her. "It was horseshit yesterday, and it's horseshit today. I mean, Christ, Priscilla—you're evacuating the city. Just what the hell is that thing?"

"We are concerned that it might collapse," she says.

“Right. And that would be why you’ve shut down the airspace for *ten* miles.”

“There’s been some difficulties with the media—”

“Yeah—we saw the video of that chopper hitting some kind of force field—”

“It wasn’t a force field—”

“My *ass* it wasn’t!” Harland barks, slapping the desktop. “Word is someone is trying to offload stolen tech. Super advanced sci-fi stuff out of North Korea or some such—”

“I really don’t think North Korea has developed force fields and spaceships,” Bundt says.

“Priscilla,” says Harland, leaning in. “The world ain’t going to stand by while the UK cherry-picks whatever tech is in that thing. *We* sure as hell ain’t. We want in on it.”

“In?”

“A piece of the *action*. Either you invite us to the party, or we invite ourselves.”

* * *

With the evacuation had come the requisition of all nearby hotels, with Huxley billeted in the Swallow Royale along with the other incident commanders. It puts them right next to the structure—but, mercifully, not under it.

It’s 8 a.m., the outside world finally piecing together the night’s events, the cat being now most definitely out of the bag and gobbled up by an insatiable media.

The area around College Green is eerily quiet, though Huxley knows extra police and soldiers are being bussed in to clear the rest of the central

area—and keep it clear.

Huxley makes his way to the structure's entrance to join Debeer and Brammers. The barrier is still in place with its red bar, but clearly not applicable to Thaddeus, who has already set himself up inside—at the small table and two chairs, Thaddeus seated at one, white linen topping off the table, with a carafe of coffee and selection of pastries.

All they can do is wait and watch.

* * *

Thaddeus makes a play of putting aside a newspaper as Mr. Day emerges from the darkness of the *Cygnets*' lower deck and seats himself at the table.

“Now,” says Thaddeus. “Where were we?”

“I am not going to disguise my disappointment,” says Mr. Day. “You’ve closed the coffee shops.”

“Yes,” says Thaddeus, pouring Mr. Day a cup from the carafe. “I have. And I am ready to do considerably more in order to resolve this situation in a timely manner.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Arabica beans,” says Thaddeus, replacing the carafe. “Freshly roasted and ground this morning. We need to bring the theatrics to an end.”

Mr. Day takes a sip of the coffee poured him and nods appreciatively.

“Delightful,” he says. “But not quite the same when lacking the experience. I cannot discuss a trade deal without complete transparency.”

“And just what is this ‘trade deal’? This shop of wonders that you have erected here? Everything we have seen thus far could be achieved with technological trickery and sleight of hand. Window dressing, designed to tease.”

“You must reopen the city.”

“Must?”

“Or it will be reopened for you.”

Minal finds Jakes standing-to outside her room, admonishing him with a withering hands-on-hips stare.

“How long have you been standing here?”

But Jakes’s focus is her outfit—a smart pinstripe trouser suit, tailored to a practical cut, over a crisp, white open-neck shirt, her hair pinned back to drape down her back.

“Nice look,” he says. “Shame about the boots.”

“You like it?” she says, giving Jakes a twirl. “I had the room make it for me.”

“It can do that?”

“It’s hard to find classy stuff in my size.”

Minal gives Jakes a bit of a sniff.

“My gear’s been freshened up,” he says. “By what, I have no idea. So what’s the plan, Doc?”

“We split up—”

“No chance—”

“You check out the starboard wing, and I’ll make a start on the control room. But first, breakfast.”

Minal trots off in the direction of the bridge, Jakes heaving out a frustrated sigh.

It’s going to be a long day.

“Coming, or what?” Minal calls back to him.

Jakes finds her in the kitchenette, rummaging around in a cabinet, from which she produces a packet of croissants, only to then inspect them

thoroughly.

“They’re shop bought,” she says, looking over the store-brand logo.

Minal rips open the packet to retrieve the croissants and sets about arranging them in the oven.

“We should call in,” says Jakes.

“Did that already,” says Minal, selecting the oven’s baking preset. “Be an angel and figure out the coffee machine—”

“I can’t make calls like you can—”

“Guessed as much,” says Minal, checking on the croissants’ progress through the oven’s glass window.

“For Christ’s sake, Doc. This isn’t exactly situation-normal—”

Minal’s scream cuts right through him, his Glock out in an instant as she screams again and again, her hands to her head, face contorted in abject terror, Jakes rounding on the galley’s entrance ready to punch out a succession of quick-fire shots—

Nothing and no one, the screaming abated, Minal’s withering gaze waiting for him.

“I’ve got a brain the size of a planet, Jakes. Don’t patronize me.”

Jakes makes his way back to her, gaze held elsewhere, Glock tapping against his thigh, until he is up close and personal, making a point to invade her personal space and glare down at her, jaw rippling, chest heaving, eyes full of anger, the lion ready to rip the fawn’s throat out.

Minal brings herself closer still.

“Did you like it?” she says, her voice a tease, the palm of her hand placed against him. “When we were naked together.”

Those big, brown doe eyes, the pouting lips, her silky black hair—there’s just no defense...all he wants to do is protect her—

PING

The oven, signaling the immediate availability of freshly baked pastries.

Minal snorts out a spluttering laugh, pushing herself away from Jakes, having successfully put him in his place.

“We split up,” growls Jakes. “I’ll check out the starboard section. You can take your chances here.”

“Lighten up,” says Minal, shoving a croissant his way. “And don’t be such a dick.”

* * *

The morning barely begun, and Home Secretary Bundt finds herself back in the situation room, the prime minister having continued to rise above it all, leaving her alone with the cabinet ministers for transport and defense, the attorney general, and a clutch of civil servants.

“So far we have amassed the equivalent of two battalions,” says the defense secretary. “Nearly two thousand soldiers to enforce the exclusion zone.”

“But large numbers of civilians are gathering at the perimeter,” says his attending civil servant.

“Right now we are outnumbered by five to one. By the end of the day that could be twenty to one.”

“We can’t bolster our numbers with more personnel,” says the transport secretary, “because all routes in are now gridlocked. Best we can do is chopper them in, but we are short on landing spots.”

“March them across the fields,” says the home secretary.

“We are, but they’re being confronted by large groups of protesters. We’ve got standoffs all over the place.”

“An activist group has launched court action to have the evacuation ruled illegal,” says the attorney general. “They’ll likely get a temporary

injunction within the hour.”

“So, ground zero is going to be overrun?” sighs Bundt.

“Within the next few hours,” says the defense secretary.

“Why is everybody converging on the *threat*?”

“Because it is not a threat—that’s how we initially cast it.”

“But we had the shock and awe of last night,” protests Bundt.

“Now fodder for conspiracy theorists.”

“*How so?*”

“Because of what happened at the beginning—a guy stepped out of the thing to go buy a cup of coffee.”

Jakes finds Minal standing dead center to the bridge ring—the glowing band of what he supposes to be informational displays floating midair, occupying almost the entire floor area.

The starboard wing of the main superstructure had proved to be an identical arrangement of empty rooms, all the way along to what must have been the starboard-bow stabilizer bulkhead. He’d made the same cursory check of the deck below as well.

And found nothing.

Which begged the question as to the location of Mr. Day’s quarters.

“Jakes,” says Minal, waving him forward. “Take a look at this.”

Their earlier bust-up seems forgotten, judging by the look on the doc’s face—she seems consumed by some revelation.

A second *inner* ring—no, just a segment, an arc—close to where Minal is standing, and much smaller in dimensions.

“So the main ring is basically everything,” says Minal. “And what you do is pick from it to create a personal workstation. Neat, huh?”

Minal makes a play of moving her segment display around, the floating mini display rotating about her with the movement of her hand. She takes a few steps to one side, and the arc of displays follow her. She is the axis about which they move.

“What’d you pick?”

“Engine readouts, structural integrity, and external cameras,” she says, pointing at each in turn.

“Doc,” says Jakes, waving his hand at the main ring. “You get that it’s probably just an Xbox generating all of this, right? The entire structure is empty.”

Minal places her palm in front of the external camera view and “drags” it center stage, expanding its size with a couple of gestures.

It’s a view from somewhere on the port bow, looking down on the city, at a location about a mile out.

“That’s the M32 motorway,” says Jakes. “Who...who are all those people?”

The four-lane main artery into the city center is solid with vehicles, any space in between filled by a standing mob, currently at a halt before a ten-deep army blockade to the south.

As Jakes gawps at the image, so its point of view changes, Minal having made a series of gestures.

“Whole thing stretches back to the M4 junction,” she says, the view showing a solid column of human and machine stretching over several miles.

“Hold on,” says Jakes. “That view can’t be from the structure. It’s out over Stoke Park somewhere. That’s miles away.”

“Yeah,” says Minal. “Can your Xbox do that, Jakes? But I haven’t gotten to the freaky bit yet.”

The image zooms in—in and in and in, until it's up close and personal with a cohort of youths, each straining for some line of sight through the mass of people ahead of them. They are looking down on the city, which sits in a valley, the main superstructure of the *Cygnets* clearly visible.

One of the youths has his phone held up high, its camera recording the scene.

Minal zooms in on the phone display, the image rock steady.

“Check your watch, Jakes.”

The previous night's encounter is sufficient for Jakes to see where she's going with this. The youth's phone will have synced time with the internet and be accurate to the second, the date and time now showing on its display.

Jakes's smartwatch is a few seconds ahead.

He looks up from its display to find Minal looking his way.

“Still haven't gotten to the freaky bit yet,” she says.

* * *

Mr. Day has left his seat and is strolling back up the structure's lower access ramp, Thaddeus stepping through the barrier to rejoin his fellow commanders on the Green.

“We called his bluff,” he explains to the three of them. “He's called our bluff. It's a staring contest. But trust me—he'll blink first.”

“Check your phone,” says a despondent Debeer.

That the structure has some form of radio transmission suppressor is old news, and hardly a technological revelation—every secure site across the country has the same. The tech is as old as cellular networks.

But the look on their faces is enough for Thaddeus to fish out his phone. A slew of notifications covers its screen, with more scrolling upward as the phone catches up with the outside world.

“Good God,” mutters Thaddeus, as he stitches together the emerging picture.

“We have an hour or two at best,” says Colonel Brammers. “After which we can expect ten thousand to descend on this location.”

“So just who is it that’s going to blink first?” says a condescending Debeer, only to then unbuckle his folded arms. “*Christ—now what?*”

Thaddeus turns in the direction of their gaze, finding the face of Dr. Shah peering back at them, Corporal Jakes in the background, the two of them seemingly inside some kind of glowing ring—

“Colonel Brammers,” she says. “Would you be so good as to show me the time on your watch.”

Huxley observes Colonel Brammers to be strangely compliant, tapping the display on his smartwatch and holding it up for her to see.

Corporal Jakes leans into view, brandishing his wrist, the smartwatch he is wearing alight with its clock.

“What is this?” growls Thaddeus, looking at both watches. “We haven’t the time for mind games, Dr. Shah.”

“As you can see,” says Minal, “both watches show the same time down to the second. And that’s a really big problem.”

* * *

Minal ends the video call, with four pairs of wide eyes staring back at her, only to find Jakes’s eyes demanding an explanation.

“Your watch is synced with Colonel Brammers’s. That they show the same time means the area around the structure is affected the same way as in here. I reckon it’s those field generators.”

But Jakes’s body language suggests that he isn’t convinced.

“So Mr. Day has spoofed an internet connection and resynced our watches,” he says.

“And why bother doing that?”

“To fuck with us.”

BLINK

In the end it is a coordinated push, with activists located at four thoroughfare blockades making their move at the same time, ensuring the police and military are too thinly spread. By far the bigger mass is now surging through the city center, converging on College Green—ground zero.

“It’s like some kind of zombie movie,” says Debeer, watching the advancing crowds on the incident center’s big screens.

“Guv,” says one of his officers. “Got incoming.”

“You *think*?”

“Military chopper. Inbound. Got all the right clearances.”

“Christ. Now what,” mutters Debeer, before returning his attention to the big screens. “Send a car—we’ll need to get them here before that lot turns up.”

The only landing spots they have left are harborside, so whoever it is, it will be a quick round trip to city hall. Abandoning the video feeds of the mob about to engulf ground zero, the four commanders head out onto College Green ahead of their unannounced guest’s arrival.

They are met by the cacophony of advancing crowds reverberating around the city. The unseen mob is all but upon them as the marked police

car races up Deanery Road. Whoever it is, they will be known to Thaddeus, and he alone approaches the car.

It's the US ambassador, Harry Harland, who spills out of the vehicle, his gaze remaining transfixed on the structure towering overhead.

The mob surges into view, pouring out of every street to the north, those at the front running, almost tumbling over one another, a tumult of people, their collective roar enough to sink dread into those remaining on the Green, many having fled to some supposed safety within city hall.

Huxley stands firm, ready to reason with the leaders and assert some control over the situation. But the sheer momentum of the crowd looks to be unassailable, and there is nowhere near enough in the way of emergency services to deal with the inevitable crush injuries—

It comes from upon high, with all the gravitas of an ocean liner.

A great ship's horn sounding off, cutting into the soul of every living thing within half a mile.

It's enough to halt the crowd, its entirety looking to the sky—

All around the perimeter of College Green, a barrier three meters high blinks into existence, translucent at first, then clearing, with an unbroken red bar at its middle region the only indication that there is anything there at all—until the crowd advances, that is.

The arresting sound of the great horn has slowed the mob. Now it is left to the first intrepid few to reach out and find the invisible barrier with the touch of hands, the red bar encircling College Green marking the finality of their exclusion.

The crowds gather, the barrier now a great wall of people.

Shouting—to the far side of the Green, a group of young men are being egged on as they raise a ladder to the barrier, dropping it into place, one already on its first treads, ready to scramble over.

The ladder sinks through the barrier, hitting the grass with a dull thud, the would-be ascendants left to paw at something they cannot see, only feel.

“Okay,” says Harland. “Just what the hell is this damn thing?”

But he has only Thaddeus’s attention—the others are looking elsewhere.

Mr. Day has reappeared at the structure’s access ramp, stepping onto College Green and seating himself at the table and chairs that remain there.

Thaddeus abandons Harland with a grimace and determination, heading straight for the structure’s access barrier without breaking stride, knowing it will let him pass.

Harland, right on his tail, finds only the red barrier bar, and the rather disconcerting “spongy” feel to the invisible substance that blocks his way.

“Hey!” he calls out after Thaddeus, Debeer and Huxley arriving at his side. “Get me in there!”

“Sir Thaddeus is the only one of us that has been granted access,” says Huxley.

“I don’t give a *rat’s ass*,” barks Harland, only to return his attention to the individuals seated at the table. “I’m the ambassador to the United States of America. You need to be speaking to *me*.”

Mr. Day takes a moment to observe the muted protestations of the fellow outside, before greeting a somewhat indignant Thaddeus.

“Now,” says Mr. Day. “Where were we?”

* * *

The *Cygnets*’ bridge displays afford them more than a bird’s-eye view of what is going on in the city below. Minal can shift the viewpoint to any location, and they have spent the past half hour or so watching events unfold.

Now the situation seems to have settled, a new “barrier” having encircled the *Cygnets* at ground level. But the crowds are still building.

A few jumps with the viewing system and it is evident that the authorities on the outside of the barrier are now organizing themselves for crowd control, rather than abatement. Support vehicles are already pushing their way forward to set up emergency medical centers and the like.

“They’ll fill the entire city,” says Jakes, transfixed.

Minal’s gaze is elsewhere—through the ring display, past the “altar” plinth, and to the bridge “window.” It spans almost the full width of the bridge, and it is to the left edge that Minal heads, Jakes following her.

Just as with the rooms, and the port bow stabilizer, so an opening appears. This time it is a passage through the hull—to the *outside*.

They emerge onto an open deck that runs the length of the port “wing,” with a similar deck visible to the starboard side of the bridge window. Both are open to what must be a drop of more than two hundred feet, save for a single top rail suspended in midair.

Inspection reveals the space below the rail to be resistant to touch.

“Barrier field,” says Minal, looking down the length of the deck. “Each stateroom must have its own access.”

But Jakes’s attention has been caught by the view, and he leans over the rail to take a look straight down, a move not afforded Minal, not even on her tiptoes.

The area directly under them is a sea of people, many simply staring up, a few with cameras pointing as they spot Jakes’s head.

He is quick to pull back in.

“Guess this completes our inspection, Doc.”

* * *

The *Cygnets* extends out over the crowd. It is largely out of reach, but some nearby buildings offer a view of the twin “engines,” with the port side inclined relatively close to some city penthouse dwellings.

Whether they are original occupants now returned or interlopers, someone is profiting from an exclusive, and likely expensive, vantage point, those from the media who have made it this far having set up their cameras and reporters.

They have an excellent view of the bizarre event playing out at the base of the structure—a table set for two, one individual now identified as Sir Thaddeus Maine, the other known as the “occupant.”

“I think we should return to the subject of just exactly what this structure is,” says Thaddeus.

“Starship,” says Mr. Day. “Galaxy class.”

“You understand the difficulty with that as an explanation...?”

“Perhaps. Humanity has become so conditioned by Hollywood to suspend disbelief that the effect would appear to have escaped out into the real. Everything is a trick to you.”

“Dr. Shah alluded to some concern she had...something she has found but didn’t say what.”

“There are many things the good Dr. Shah has decided not to share with you, though I believe her intentions to be in everyone’s best interests.”

“Just what is it that you want?”

“As I said. A trade deal.”

“Trading what, exactly?”

“Technological and scientific advances.”

“In exchange for...?”

“The managed dissemination of the same.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” says Thaddeus.

“The process requires a singular and robust economy, but not one so large as to be placed in a position of undue leverage. The United Kingdom fits that requirement, as do a handful of similar economies, such as Japan and New Zealand. I chose...here.”

“Process?”

“In exchange for the informational assets given, I require that you then see their orderly distribution throughout this world. The United Kingdom may, in most cases, attach a premium to said assets—to cover your costs and so forth.”

“These scientific and technological advances,” says Thaddeus. “Would they include the barrier technology that you have employed here?”

“Yes. And much more besides. But I think we will begin with the common man.”

“The common man?”

Thaddeus’s phone buzzes in his pocket, and he instinctively reaches for it.

“A data package,” says Mr. Day, getting to his feet. “You are free to decide the manner in which it is made available to the world, but this particular informational asset is to be distributed without any attached premium. I expect to see results within the hour.”

“An *hour*? Is this...is this some kind of test?”

“Yes,” says Mr. Day, taking his leave. “It is.”

“Wait—I need more than that!”

“Let’s see where we get to with this, first.”

Mr. Day silently bids Thaddeus adieu and departs up the access ramp.

* * *

Minal has returned her attention to the bridge ring and her personal console still floating within it.

“This system seems intuitive,” she says, flicking through the displays. “Even if you have to look past the strange data symbols and whatnot. But you can’t control anything.”

“You could move the cameras,” says Jakes.

But Jakes can see Minal isn’t listening. And he knows that look on her face—her mind has wandered off topic.

“Mr. Day said the *Cygnets* is twenty thousand years old,” she says.

“Yeah, but that was a joke, right...Doc?”

“If the *Cygnets* is twenty thousand years old, then maybe this is a retrofit. Something easier for Mr. Day to use. Which would mean there should be an original control system.”

Her eyes seek the altar-like plinth set before the main window—and outside the ring.

There’s a circle marked out in the floor—not painted on top, but somehow part of the floor itself.

She steps inside. Nothing.

As for the altar, the display above it is quite different. Less intuitive than the ring.

Touching the display shows it to be orthogonal in nature—it has depth perpendicular to the primary two dimensions, and one’s *touch* moves what are ostensibly layers in the display back and forth.

It’s bewildering.

* * *

Thaddeus wastes no time at the table, but Harry Harland is waiting for him on the other side of the barrier.

“Harry,” he says, strolling on by.

“Hey, Thaddeus,” says Harland, matching Thaddeus’s stride. “Where’re you going, buddy? Thought we might catch up. Chew the fat over the starship parked on your lawn. You know—stuff like that.”

“Can’t talk now, Harry. Something’s come up. Time sensitive.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t give a shit. I want a full briefing—*right now*.”

Thaddeus has guided them both to a small unit of soldiers tasked with security on the Green.

“Please escort Ambassador Harland to the hotel and see to it that he is allocated accommodation.”

“The hell you will—”

“After that, the ambassador is free to roam. I imagine it won’t take long. An hour, perhaps?”

“Sir,” acknowledges one of the soldiers, placing himself between Harland and Thaddeus.

Harry Harland knows when he’s being “managed”. Besides, he does need to get himself set up, especially now that it seems that no one will be going anywhere anytime soon. And the coded message to the jarheads escorting him to the hotel means he is to be kept at bay for just an hour.

* * *

Thaddeus finds Debeer and Huxley in the city hall incident room.

“Where’s Colonel Brammers?” he asks.

“The new barrier,” explains Debeer. “It encloses the Green, city hall, the cathedral and the hotel, including all the tunnels. Brammers is off conducting a census of everyone inside and taking stock of supplies.”

“We should still be able to get stuff over the top of the barrier, though,” adds Huxley. “Just no people—it rises in height when we try that.”

“New news,” says Thaddeus, holding up his phone. “Mr. Day has placed something on this. We have one hour to work out what it is, and what to do with it.”

* * *

The techs that had set up the city hall incident room have been repurposed. It is a single data file that they find on Thaddeus’s phone, now plugged into an air-gapped laptop.

“It’s an e-book,” says one, with Thaddeus, Debeer, and Huxley looking on. “Just over five gigabytes.”

“And that’s big for an e-book,” says another.

It’s up on the big screen, an e-reader app flipping through the pages. For the most part, it is dense text, interspersed with vector drawings, but without any obvious subject matter.

“At least it’s in English,” says Huxley. “Any ideas?”

“Some of the references would appear to be biology related,” observes Thaddeus. “Beyond that...”

“We need to get some expert eyeballs on it,” says Debeer. “I’ll get a conference call set up.”

“No,” says Thaddeus. “I’m not risking this being hacked or copied before we know what it is. We need to find someone here.”

“Pretty sure we don’t have anyone—”

“Actually, we probably do,” Huxley says to Debeer. “The university. It’s a solid bet there’ll be a bunch of PhDs at the barrier. Get your officers to search them out. We can take the laptop to them. See what they make of it.”

“Too risky,” says Thaddeus. “There are ten thousand cameras phones out there, not to mention the media camped out in that penthouse. They’ll be able to see it.”

BOOK OF REVELATION

Jakes returns from the kitchenette with two coffees, only to wonder where he might set them down. The plinth is a little low, but it'll just have to do.

"Doc," he says, snapping his fingers in front of a mesmerized Minal. "Juice, for that planet-sized brain of yours."

The coffee is definitely welcome, Minal scooping up her cup. She's been at the altar-plinth display for what feels like forever, flicking through endless layers of the orthogonal display, each a collection of lines and shapes that clearly mean something—*but what?*

"Why don't we just ask the *Cygnets* what it means?" offers Jakes.

"Tried that while you were in the galley. Nada."

"Maybe it just doesn't work anymore. If the ring is a retrofit, then maybe they disconnected this."

"The only part that makes any sense are these shapes," says Minal, flicking the display forward several layers.

It's one of the less cluttered views.

"It's got to be a depiction of the *Cygnets*," she says. "Those lines in the inverted V arrangement are the engines—the aft field generators. That makes this vertical line the 'throat,' this big rectangle the residence, and either side of that the forward stabilizers."

She reaches out to touch one of the “engines”—

“But every time I try to touch something, it just pushes the layer into the background. We must be missing a gesture—”

“Or maybe an alien tendril—”

“Yes, very good, Jakes. Keep the informed insight coming.”

“Doc—”

But Minal doesn’t see the indignation on Jakes’s face. She brings the schematic of the *Cygnets* back into the foreground.

“Tendril...” she muses, taking a sip of her coffee. “I wonder if we are standing too close.”

Both look to the circle marked out on the floor. It’s set back some distance from the plinth. Too far for a human reach...Minal hands her coffee to Jakes.

Keeping an eye on the altar-plinth display, Minal steps into the circle.

A pillar of translucent green light envelops her, and she is quick to step out again, the light dissipating.

“Bingo.”

* * *

Ambassador Harland’s hour is up, and he has been let loose, heading out from the hotel and straight back to ground zero. Things have moved on. No wonder Thaddeus needed him out of the way.

A short distance from the structure’s ground entrance, and in full view of all, a large display screen is being erected—the kind used for public events. And it appears to have been deliberately orientated toward the media zoo camped out in a rooftop penthouse just outside of the barrier.

Not only that, but at the barrier itself is a tent—arranged so as to align with another tent located on the other side, in an area now cleared of people and guarded by armed soldiers.

The tent inside the barrier is not guarded, and Harland makes straight for it.

* * *

The far end of the tent is open to the barrier, as is the tent on the other side. Thaddeus, Huxley, and Debeer are crowded around a laptop perched on a table, while staring at the laptop screen from the other side of the barrier are a group of people who come across to Harland as “boffins” —academia types.

“The first hundred pages or so look like a primer,” says one of the boffins over a jury-rigged speaker system.

“Primer?”

“A means to interpret what comes next,” says another. “In this case it appears to be laying out basic biological prototypes—a means to describe an organism, right down to the cellular level.”

“What...organism?”

“Well...us. This is describing human DNA—just in a really weird way.”

“And the remaining thousand pages?”

“Give us a couple of years and we’ll let you know. But this is just a joke, right?”

“We are out of time,” says Thaddeus. “Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“The first dozen pages after the primer look like they might be talking about epigenetics—inheritance through cell division and the like.”

“I take it this is the time-sensitive something,” says Harland. “Let me guess—you got it from spaceship-guy, and it’s about to self-destruct.”

That the others simply ignore him suggests to Harland that another game is afoot.

“We don’t have to do anything,” says Debeer. “Let’s hold off.”

“But it might be *something*,” says Thaddeus. “And if it is, then there’s a lot more—but only if we broadcast *this*.”

“Are you sure he said that?”

“Supposing this is a weapon,” says Huxley. “Blueprints to make a deadly plague—a means for us to destroy ourselves.”

“If it’s *that*,” says Thaddeus, “then that *thing* out there is for real and could probably wipe us all out anyway. What would be the point of a stunt like this?”

“Hold on,” says Harland. “Did you say *broadcast*? Is that what the big screen is for?”

“We can’t risk the internet,” says Thaddeus, Harland’s presence finally acknowledged. “The contents could be manipulated—”

“You said we had an hour,” says Huxley. “We are well past that.”

“What did he say would happen if we don’t broadcast it?”

“He implied that we would fail some kind of test.”

* * *

Minal steps back into the circle, the pillar of light forming about her like it did before.

“Doc,” says Jakes. “I don’t know about this. Reckon we should leave well alone.”

But Minal is transfixed by her hands. As she tries to raise them, there is a resistance and a glow about them, like a bioluminescence, like a living

thing.

The inverted V on the altar-plinth display is flashing.

“Doc, look at me,” says Jakes, standing between Minal and the altar-plinth. It’s enough to snap her out of it. “Step out of the circle.”

She makes to step back, but something grips her.

Panic sets in, her eyes agog as she strains her muscles, trying to lift her arms against some invisible force, her limbs encased by a glow.

“I can’t move—”

Jakes lunges for her, his hands finding a spongy resistance that keeps him at bay.

Minal screams. Not the mock scream she had taunted him with before, but something far more visceral, something born from soul-gouging pain.

She screams again, and again, her body rising off the floor, writhing in agony.

* * *

What started with an all-pervading *hum* has brought them out onto the Green. Now there is motion at the base of the two spires either side of the structure, each a spinning ring of light, the hum now increasing in pitch.

Panic is already in full swing on the other side of the barrier as the terrified public try to scatter, the all-pervading sound instilling in them a collective sense of dread, the pitch of it such that the *machine* might be about to blow itself apart—

With a single sonic reverberation, the noise plateaus out to a deafening whine.

The air, the ground, the very bones in their body—all is alive with an inescapable resonance, a depth to it that might come from hell itself—

Behind them, the windows of city hall start to blow out—

“Broadcast!” screams Thaddeus. “Broadcast *now!*”

The techs hook the laptop up to the giant display screen, their hands shaking.

A couple of taps at the keyboard and the e-book starts playing out, one page at a time, a split second each.

* * *

Jakes sees Minal pass out, the pillar of light’s grip on her unabated, every muscle in her body now in spasm—

The light blinks out—

Minal drops, Jakes catching her—

Mr. Day—at the altar plinth display, pushing the *Cygnets* schematic into the background—

Jakes isn’t waiting for explanations. He scoops up an unconscious Minal and heads out of the bridge, to the parked 911, dropping Minal into the passenger seat.

An instant and he’s behind the wheel, engine started, boot slamming down on the accelerator, but he’s unprepared for the kind of power the 911 can punch out, the first second or so seeing the tail-happy drivetrain slide all over the place until the on-board computer decides to take control.

The walls of the *Cygnets*’ “throat” blur by, the solitary figure of Mr. Day now distant in the rearview mirror.

* * *

The engines—if that’s what they are—have begun to die away, with those remaining on the Green now rising from their reflex cowering positions.

Huxley takes in a quick survey. The outer barrier is largely deserted, with only a few brave souls having awaited some assumed fate.

The “book” is still playing on the giant display screen, and across the way, high up on the penthouse patio deck, what remains of the media enclave have their cameras pointed squarely at whatever is being pumped out.

“What the fuck was that?” wails Harry Harland, gesticulating like a madman at the structure—

A blur of yellow bursts out from within, down the ramp and through the entrance barrier, smashing the table and chairs on the way, its tail spinning out to cut a swath in the grass as it slides to a halt, its engine cutting out.

“*Medic!*” shouts Jakes from the 911.

THE HOUSE OF GOD

It's an ashen-faced junior who places the plate of chocolate Bourbons to Home Secretary Bundt's side. She doesn't blame him—they'd been through the mill this past twenty-four hours, not one of them having had a wink of sleep.

And while all the biscuits in the world are unlikely to help, Bundt still takes a moment to snap one in two, before dunking it into her cup of tea and savoring the taste.

This time, the situation room is rammed, all seats taken, each backed by senior civil servants ready to do the bidding of those seated at the table.

"Where's the prime minister?" asks the chief of the defense staff.

"Placating an alarmed planet," says Bundt, before seeking the two SAGE members. "Professor Sooks and Doctor Campbell. Perhaps you'd like to kick us off. We can skip over the bit about force fields and the like—we've had quite enough of that this past day or two. This... 'book'—what do we know about it?"

A contrite Dr. Campbell defers to Sooks.

"Basically, it's a medical textbook," says Sooks. "Theoretical in nature."

"Theoretical?"

"As in it...differs...from current thinking. But principally, it covers epigenetics—umm, cell mechanics—with a specific focus on oncology."

“Oncology? As in cancer?”

“Yes. That is correct, Home Secretary.”

“Are you trying to tell me that the thing is a cure for cancer?”

“No,” interjects Dr. Campbell. “It’s not a cure for cancer. But it is everything you would need to make one.”

“Assuming,” says Sooks, “that the thing isn’t hokum.”

“Home Secretary,” interrupts another seated at the table. “The stock market—we can’t delay much longer.”

“That’s a matter for the chancellor,” says Bundt.

“Yes, yes. But he said we had to wait until we had some steer from this COBRA meeting, you see.”

“Where the hell is he, anyway?” asks another.

Sufficiently out of reach of any poisoned chalice that might be handed him.

“Busy elsewhere,” says Bundt. “What’s the current state of the markets?”

“The entire pharmaceutical sector is down close to fifty percent. Tech is down forty. Everything else dropped twenty. If there are any further disclosures like yesterday’s—”

“But this whole thing is a stunt, right?” says another. “It is actually hokum, right?”

“The whole world has seen the contents of that book,” says Bundt. “And has had over twelve hours to make up its own mind.”

“Have you seen the internet? It’s ninety-nine-point-nine percent nutjobs—half of them are saying it’s the second coming—”

“And point one percent are experts, not one of whom has yet been able to expose the information disclosed as anything other than what it purports to be.”

“With everything else we have seen...” muses Dr. Campbell, “if the contents of that book pan out, then ergo—”

“Then *ergo*, there’s a giant starship parked in front of Bristol’s city hall.”

* * *

Minal wakes to the comfort of pillows and bedsheets—her *Cygnets* stateroom, a new day of exploration awaiting. But where’d they gotten to?

Can’t quite remember—

It all floods in, gripping her in a panic, as she heaves in great gulps of air and thrashes at the sheets.

Jakes appears at her side, and she grabs hold of him, wrapping her arms about his neck as she struggles to hang on to reality, his arms about her—

“Don’t let go,” she wails. “Don’t let go. Don’t let go—”

“Doc,” says Jakes. “We’re safe. Got us out of there.”

“Don’t let go. Don’t let go—”

She’s shaking uncontrollably, Jakes doing what he can to comfort her, as others appear.

“Who are they?” wails Minal, terrified at the sight of those approaching.

“They’re here to help, Doc,” says Jakes. “We’re out. You’re in a hotel.”

Minal screams—she screams and screams, until the medics are able to knock her out with a sedative, Jakes having to pin her down.

* * *

It has been agreed that Thaddeus would enter alone. After all, he has been the only one allowed passage through the structure’s barrier—aside from

Dr. Shah and Corporal Jakes, that is. No sign of any barriers here, though, other than the one encircling the entire area.

The cool interior of the cathedral is a welcome respite from the summer heat outside, but they had not been using it as such. Before the outer barrier went up, it had been cleared of all but a few clergy.

Now those same clergy stand witness, dotted about the transept, their collective gaze locked on the single occupant seated to one side of the nave.

Mr. Day.

It is not clear how he had gotten in. Under the cover of night, perhaps.

Thaddeus takes the next seat but one, observing Mr. Day to be transfixed on the view ahead.

“Do you believe in God, Sir Thaddeus?” says Mr. Day. “One can’t help but sense some presence here.”

“The crush injuries in the crowd were only limited because of the measures we had taken,” says Thaddeus. “It could have been much worse. Dr. Shah remains traumatized. The stock markets are reeling...It’s all starting to add up to real damage. Time to bring whatever this is to an end.”

“The requirement,” says Mr. Day, “was for a managed dissemination of the supplied information. And in this regard, the outcome on your part was unsatisfactory. But none died, nor were any badly injured.”

“Dr. Shah—”

“She has experienced something quite profound,” says Mr. Day. “In time she will come to accept it.”

“And you let that happen, didn’t you. It was your intention all along.”

“A necessary step.”

“To what?”

But Mr. Day is not forthcoming. To Thaddeus, he seems lost in some thought, his mood quite different than when they first met. A worrying

development should his motives prove malign.

“We debriefed Corporal Jakes,” says Thaddeus. “There are a number of details that Dr. Shah withheld from us.”

“I imagine that you can hardly blame her, given their nature.”

“Jakes said there were things he could not account for,” says Thaddeus. “Inside the structure—to do with gravity and time.”

“One cannot travel the universe without there being some side effects.”

“Except that the....*Cygnets*....is stationary.”

“The same principles apply when it comes to standing still.”

“You told Dr. Shah that the *Cygnets* is twenty thousand years old.”

“We needed—”

“We?”

“We needed the familiar. Or, as close to the familiar as might be reasonably procured. Something that humanity could relate to. Something that would not appear too otherworldly.”

“It is *empty*—Shah and Jakes found all but nothing.”

“Just like a magician's hat—”

“I see no value in maintaining this pretense,” says Thaddeus. “We accept that you have scientific advances at your disposal. We have witnessed that which we cannot explain. But now lives have been put at risk, injuries inflicted, and damage sustained. Let us withdraw from the theatrics and negotiate in good faith from a position of mutual trust and safety.”

“Perhaps we should pray,” suggests Mr. Day.

Thaddeus's response to that is to simply stand, step out onto the nave, and, by way of a gesture, usher Mr. Day to join him in departing.

“Not a believer, then,” observes Mr. Day.

* * *

They exit the cathedral to a fluid situation. The barrier crowds are back, with some sense of self-assembly when it comes to avoiding further crushes. Colonel Brammers has returned from his census and has manned the tank with a squad of soldiers. All others who are armed, military and police alike, have grouped close to the structure's entrance, Harry Harland having convinced Debeer that they now have Mr. Day at a disadvantage.

It is Mr. Day who sets the pace and direction of travel, those awaiting him now squaring up, Harland standing out in front.

"You know who I am?" barks Harland as Mr. Day comes to a halt before him.

"Of course I do, Ambassador Harland."

"This circus you've got going on here—it is at an end."

"I'm afraid I cannot recognize any representation that you may think you have."

"Take a look around, pal. I've been invited to the party."

"My negotiations remain solely with the United Kingdom, Ambassador. You must negotiate with them in kind. I am sure they will be most amenable to your requests. Now, if you would excuse me."

Mr. Day steps forward, the line of men in his way slip-sliding against some invisible bubble only to then simply peel apart as a group—

"For Christ's *sake*," wails Harland. "*Stop* him."

"Told you," says Debeer.

"Best you see it for yourself," says Huxley.

Mr. Day is inside the entrance barrier, Thaddeus, Huxley, and Debeer nonchalantly looking on as Harland aimlessly paws at it—

Shouts and cries—from the barrier crowd, some commotion having gripped them at the north east corner, the outer barrier's red bar flashing there.

Whatever it is, Huxley can see it has caught Mr. Day's attention and, for the first time, there is an expression of concern on the man's face.

Mr. Day's casual stroll up the entrance ramp becomes an uncharacteristic and purposeful stride back down it, the line of police and military parting for him of their own accord as he heads toward the center of the disturbance at the outer barrier.

All are in tow as Mr. Day approaches, the crowd on the other side of the barrier having already made way for something...or someone.

A girl is fast approaching. She is pushing a wheelchair, its occupant an unconscious child, thin with whatever ails her, the oxygen mask on her face being fed from a cylinder resting in her lap.

Behind them, others are being kept at bay by the crowd—others wearing hospital scrubs, the look of desperation about them matching that of the girl.

Huxley motions those in scrubs to the barrier tent and heads off to talk with them, leaving Debeer and Harland with Mr. Day.

The girl brings the wheelchair to a halt right at the barrier, Mr. Day silently looking on as she launches into what is evidently some form of protest, one muted by her proximity to the barrier, but not obscured by it.

"Good God, man," barks Debeer at Mr. Day. "Let them pass."

"I cannot," laments Mr. Day.

The lack of reaction is quick to weigh down on the girl's shoulders, crushing her protest into a silent pleading wail.

"Cannot, or *will not*? We can't leave them out there."

When all that is left is hopelessness, the girl steps out from behind the wheelchair to slap her hands hard against the barrier—

She falls straight through it with a squeal, flopping down on the grass, but quick to prop herself up, the shock on her face a reflection of that on

Mr. Day's, the rest pure attitude clothed in ripped jeans and a T-shirt that reads *The Lord Shall Heal*.

The girl scrambles to her feet, rushes back through the barrier, and pushes the wheelchair forward, both being permitted passage through what Harland finds to be still impenetrable for him.

"Help her!" she wails at Mr. Day. "*Help her.*"

"She let you pass," mutters Mr. Day, still frozen to the spot, unable to take his gaze off the sick child.

But the girl has sought another target—Huxley, running back from the barrier tent.

"Mayor Rames!" wails the girl. "Tell him to help us!"

"I know who these two are," says Huxley, barely able to puff the words out. "We need to get the child back to the hospital immediately—"

"No," wails the girl. "She'll *die* there. *He* can cure her—"

"Pasha," says Huxley to the girl. "There's nothing here that can help—"

"It's a *spaceship*—"

"It's empty, Pasha. There's nothing inside. We need to get Simone back to the hospital—*now*."

"But the book," she pleads. "We've all seen the book of miracle cures."

The medical staff from the hospital have gathered on the other side of the barrier, the crowd having parted for them.

Huxley grabs hold of the girl's shoulders to gently shake some sense into her.

"You *must* go back through the barrier. They're bringing an ambulance forward. Go. Now."

"No," insists the girl.

Debeer, shifting to Huxley's lead, moves to grab hold of the wheelchair, the girl getting to the handles first, both struggling for control as Huxley

tries to pull the girl back—

The roar of the crowd surges over the barrier, bouncing off the buildings all around, as the unseemly tussle plays out—

All three lose control of the wheelchair, spilling the child out of it, and into the arms of a crouching Mr. Day.

The child's eyes open just the tiniest bit, tracking to Mr. Day's gaze.

"I cannot save the world," he says to the child. "I am not here for that. But, it seems, she does want me to save you."

As he stands with the child still in his arms, so she floats up and away from him, rising quickly above the trees and the buildings to head out over the city toward the main superstructure that is suspended there.

"Oh my dear God," mutters Debeer, the others straining in muted awe.

The girl, Pasha, makes a bolt for it, Harland right on her tail as she heads for the structure's entrance, the barrier there letting her pass, Harland finding only the spongy nothingness barring the way as the girl pounds up the access ramp and disappears within.

WONDERLAND

Minal wakes to a profound sense of calmness, her mind as clear as it could ever be.

She is in a hotel room. The Swallow Royale, judging by the letterhead on the bedside notepad, and where she had been brought when...when—

Jakes had been here before. And medics. They had sedated her.

Now she is alone.

The bedside clock says 3:30 p.m.

Pulling back the bedsheets and hopping out, she finds herself clothed only in a hospital gown. The room has no other signs of occupation other than her own. And no other means of clothing herself. The bathroom looks to be unused, fresh towels and wrapped soaps where housekeeping would have set them.

The corridor outside is deserted.

“Hello?” she calls out.

Nothing and no one.

She takes the stairs, not wanting to risk the elevator. Two flights down and she is in the main lobby. It too is deserted.

Outside is College Green, and landed there is the *Cygnets*.

But not a soul in sight, nor any sign of anyone. No vehicles, no equipment—the whole place had been littered with stuff...before.

“Hello?” she calls out, her voice echoing around the lobby.

CLINK. CLINK-CLINK.

The sound of cutlery on a china. It’s coming from the dining area. Minal pads her way in. It is spacious, bright, and laid out with small tables, each set for afternoon tea.

Except, no patrons.

No patrons...save *one*.

She is seated on the far side, next to a window overlooking the Green, her attention held by a butter dish and knife, Minal approaching with deliberate assertiveness.

“I know it is the English way,” the woman says, spreading the knife across a scone, “but find cream to be too rich.”

Her accent is heavy with a European lilt to it, her clothes in a style similar to Mr. Day’s.

“Mrs. Day, I presume?” says Minal.

“No,” says the woman. “And you will not be here long enough for names to matter.”

“Here?”

“A place where we could unscramble your mind.”

“This place isn’t real, is it,” says Minal.

“Of course it is. It is as real as can be.”

“Then where is everyone?”

“I suggest you sit down and help yourself to tea and cakes.”

Minal seats herself but has no intention of partaking in afternoon tea. Instead she leans back into her chair with a self-measured expression of

contempt for the person opposite. Similar in age to Mr. Day. Could even be his sister. Same retro-navy garb. Short, dark hair, slicked back—

“So,” says Minal. “If I am not going to be *here* for long, then *where* am I?”

“In an alternate scenario—one adjunct to where you were.”

“Scenario?”

“Think alternate history. It is not, but given the short amount of time we have, such concepts are a useful approximation.”

“Uh huh,” says Minal, applying the contempt liberally. “So, like, we’re in a parallel universe.”

“As I say—not really. But if it helps to think about it that way—”

“Can we cut the crap,” says Minal. “I get that I am drugged up somewhere and probably plugged into some kind of mind machine. I just want to know why.”

“You interfaced with the *Cygnets*’ control system—”

“As you always knew I would—”

“Indeed. We just hadn’t anticipated the outcome. But then, that is the whole point—to observe the outcomes. Do you remember what you saw?”

“I didn’t see anything.”

“Good. It is a difficult business...undoing a shift...stitching you back together again.”

“What...shift?”

“A shift from one scenario to another. That’s what the *Cygnets* does. Unless, of course, it is anchored in place.”

The juvenile narrative playbook she had expected from the beginning is still being troped out, as if she might somehow come to believe it all, to believe through seeing, courtesy of some admittedly clever technological trickery.

Still, one must be mindful of the situation, and right now Minal finds herself undoubtedly at a disadvantage that leaves no recourse other than to play along—

“The *Cygnets*’ drive system moves it from one parallel universe to another?”

“As I say, not really,” says the woman. “But if it helps, then yes. Except that when anchored, it is the controlling mind that shifts instead, passing through a multitude of possibilities, all bleeding together, a primitive mind such as yours unable to cope, which is why you woke up screaming.”

“I don’t remember any of...that.”

“I should hope not.”

“But you just let all that happen anyway,” says Minal.

“You hold three doctorates, yes?” asks the woman. “Physics, chemistry, and mathematics?”

“Yeah. I do. So what?”

“And you have been shortlisted for the prestigious Fields medal. Twice, no less.”

“Deservedly so—”

“And yet you work as a port state control inspector at a relatively minor port.”

“I like the work,” says Minal. “It’s a good life.”

“But one that was never meant to be, Minal. Though, crucially, one that *could* be. An unlikely alternate history of one Minal Shah, mind extraordinaire, happily living a simple life.”

“I don’t know about that,” scoffs Minal. “They never gave me the Fields —”

“I didn’t say it was a perfect reality. I just said it was never meant to be. A series of improbable events unlikely to occur, but which could occur,

resulting in an alternate scenario. One that can be traveled to.”

“So where are we now?”

“In an even more improbable scenario. The bizarre is allowed, providing the laws of the universe are not violated.”

“You mean that there is an actual sequence of events that leads to this? An empty city—?”

“Yes,” says the woman. “And by bringing you here, we have interrupted the shift loop you were stuck in.”

“Yeah,” says Minal, leaning in with mock sincerity. “And, umm, why would you do that—if the whole point was for me to hook myself up to the *Cygnets* in the first place?”

“We use the alternate scenarios to stage tests. We need yours to last a little longer.”

“Last...longer?”

“The alternates are inherently unstable,” says the woman. “It is their very improbability that makes them so. Staging a test can lead to a collapse. The final straw, as it were.”

“Improbable?” scoffs Minal. “Unstable? There was nothing wrong with my world until you and Mr. Day turned up.”

“It just seems that way. Your reality is based on a deviation from the true path. And you, Minal, are that deviation.”

“My world only exists because of...me?”

“Because of the choices you make. And yours is a reality that results in a dead end, an accumulation of improbable outcomes that, over time, will lead to a reality that is so nonsensical as to have no way forward.”

“Then what happens?”

“Nothing *happens*. That’s the point—it’s a reality that ultimately doesn’t manifest. It collapses in on itself, as if it never had been.”

“But I was *there*—so it *has* been—it *is*.”

“It exists in superposition. Do you know what I mean by that, in this context?”

“That my reality is one of an infinite number of possibilities, all coexisting, until a singular outcome occurs. One reality, out of many.”

“With the rest of the *many* still being possible destinations.”

“I see,” says Minal. “So, let me get this straight. You and Mr. Day buzz around the multiverse in that interdimensional spaceship of yours, looking for junk realities that you can muck about with—just to see what happens. To test how the human race will react to various scenarios.”

“A crude interpretation, but yes.”

Minal sputters out a laugh, before breaking down into a fit of giggles, the woman waiting patiently and politely until it subsides.

“This whole thing is a setup, isn’t it?” Minal finally manages. “The Green has been cleared, the hotel emptied. Where are the cameras—?”

It has a distinct sensation, does a gravity tilt. Minal remembers the feeling from the *Cygnet*, and she feels it now. But not the subtle tilt of before. Some invisible hand is tugging at her, its motion a swirl.

Out on the Green, the *Cygnet*’s two engines are spinning up, their drive rings already a blur of motion and a screaming whine.

“I feel it,” says Minal. “Tidal forces from the field generators. The *Cygnet*’s lifting off?”

“What you feel is not the *Cygnet*,” says the woman. “It is preparing for a shift.”

“Then what—?”

It rises like the moon, but much faster. A dead world, ocher red, close enough that major geological features can be made out.

The planet Mars.

“Slung out of its orbit by a rogue star,” says the woman. “And sent inward, on a collision course with Earth.”

Already the tidal effects are increasing, Earth’s gravity undermined by that of Mars, what was holding the planet together now a rug being pulled from under it; some distance away, one of the city’s taller buildings collapses as its structural integrity is sucked away.

“Our presence here is doing this?”

“No. It was always going to happen in this alternate.”

“But you said that it is staging something that leads to a collapse.”

“A collapse can be inevitable, but staging a test can hasten it, which is what happened when you connected with the *Cygnets* and got stuck in the shift loop.”

A tremor shakes the hotel’s foundations, windows shattering as their frames warp under the movement. Minal imagines that soon a storm will engulf them, as the planet’s atmosphere is ripped away, taking with it anything and everything.

“When you end, so your alternate ends. It is built around you, you see. We need yours to last a little longer, at the expense of this one—”

“Where is everyone?”

“Seeking a quicker end, at the very end.”

A siren. Not just any siren. Minal knows that sound—it’s an air-raid siren, echoing around the city outside. Something that shouldn’t exist in this day and age—

“It would seem that we are out of time,” says the woman, the siren dying away.

Minal leaves the woman to her afternoon tea, heading outside to the Green. It is as deserted as it had seemed from the hotel—except for... singing. She can just about hear it over the whine of the *Cygnets*’ engines.

It is coming from the cathedral, Minal heading there, finding its doors open to the world. Stepping through to the far end of the nave reveals it to be packed with a congregation, their voices a chorus to a hymn—

Outside, the pitch of the *Cygnets*' engines has leveled off to a desperate sound, the sense of it being the heralding of something imminent.

The engines cut out. Except that, Minal reminds herself, they aren't engines as such. Field generators. That's what Mr. Day had called them. The sound they make—is it a charging-up?

Now it's the turn of the congregation to climax, some exultation in the hymn set to pivot them to the divine—

A blinding flash whites out everything, Minal left only with the sense of intense heat burning the skin from her face—

* * *

Minal wakes, heaving in gulps of air, gentle arms coming to her aid, comforting and reassuring.

"Where am I?" mumbles Minal.

"You're in the hotel," comes a familiar voice. "They've had you knocked out for quite a while."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Minal, it's me, John," says Jakes, finding her gaze.

"John?" manages Minal, after a moment or two of reality reasserting itself. "John Jakes? *That's* your name? Seriously?"

* * *

Home Secretary Bundt snaps a Bourbon biscuit in two, the crack sufficient to signal the start of the briefing, even if that had not been her intention.

“Pasha Vasquez,” says the minister for immigration. “Nineteen years old and granted leave to remain as ward to her younger sister, Simone, aged eleven.”

The situation room’s big screen is dominated by images of the two girls, their mug shots taken from immigration records.

“Simone Vasquez was being treated at the children’s hospital for a rare form of an autoimmune disease. Her condition became terminal a week ago.”

“Why aren’t the parents here?” asks Bundt, finishing off the biscuit.

“Neither speaks much English, and the family is quite poor. The trip was crowdfunded by Miss Vasquez.”

“Get them here—”

“Home Secretary—”

“I don’t care—just *get* them here by whatever means.”

The mood in the room is somber and has been so from the start. The revelations from Bristol are spinning the world like a top. So much so that the foreign secretary has put in an appearance, though it remains Bundt’s show, with the prime minister nowhere to be seen.

“The images of the child’s...ascent,” says the foreign secretary. “And those of this...Mr. Day...emerging from the cathedral. It has the world whipped up into a religious frenzy.”

“And where is the archbishop of Canterbury?” asks Bundt.

“Besieged, at Westminster Abbey.”

“Has the girl contacted anyone from within the structure? As Dr. Shah was able to?”

“Not that we know of,” says Professor Sooks. “She might not even know that she can.”

“And we still cannot get inside?”

“Well, Dr. Shah presumably can. But she was sedated. After she woke up, umm, screaming.”

“And Corporal Jakes?”

“He tried to go after the girl, but it would seem he can only enter with Dr. Shah.”

“And where is Mr. Day?”

“Right now he is taking tea on the Green with Sir Thaddeus.”

Bundt snaps another Bourbon biscuit, popping one half into her mouth.

“Anything else?”

“Anything *else*?” scoffs another. It’s the defense secretary. “Oh, just one or two things. A Russian aircraft carrier is heading for the Channel, two destroyers in escort. A Chinese carrier has departed its Djibouti base in eastern Africa and is steaming toward Suez. Both countries have moved to a state of heightened alert.”

“They are accusing us of withholding information,” says the foreign secretary. “That we are not passing on everything given to us and are securing technological advances that pose a threat.”

“And the Americans?”

“Still talking to us. But it’s becoming fraught, even with Ambassador Harland on the ground. As for Europe, well, Brussels is having kittens.”

“Fortunate that we are not actually in Europe, then,” muses Bundt.

“Unfortunate that we stand alone,” retorts the defense secretary.

* * *

The Green has the appearance of a chessboard, the people standing like pieces, not clear what to do as the world outside reacts.

Huxley notes that the grass is still quite lush. No sign of wear, despite all the activity—

A commotion to the south, a crowd exiting the hotel.

It's Dr. Shah, suited and booted, followed by some anxious-looking medics being kept at bay by Corporal Jakes.

Christ—now what?

Minal isn't going to bother with Mayor Rames and Chief Constable Debeer. Not this time. Not after what she's seen.

"Doc," says Jakes. "You need to slow it down a bit."

Mr. Day and Thaddeus have seen her approach, Mr. Day already stepping through the *Cygnets*' entrance barrier.

Minal comes to a halt to confront him, hands clasped behind her back.

"So glad to see you recovered, Dr. Shah."

"You chose to declare Bristol as a port state," she says. "And submit to a port state control inspection."

"I did."

"I have completed my initial inspection. I am now detaining this vessel by the authority afforded me. If necessary, a pilot will be assigned to navigate these waters, should the vessel need to be moved to another location."

"On what grounds are you detaining this vessel?"

"I am not satisfied with the safety of its operation and need to determine the appropriate flag state rules that apply. I shall obtain these from the control room. Are you willing to comply?"

"Of course."

"My authority in this matter is absolute."

"How long do you anticipate the detention to last?" asks Mr. Day.

"There are certain time constraints—"

"So I am given to understand. But it may take a while to process the, umm...paperwork."

“Very well, then.”

And with that he simply departs, heading back through the entrance barrier and up the ramp.

“What was all that about?” asks Thaddeus.

For the first time since departing the hotel, Minal takes stock of the surrounding Green, noting the heightened tension and the uncharacteristically solemn crowd at the barrier.

“Has anything usual happened while I’ve been out of it?” she asks.

“Unusual?” says Debeer. “I’ll say.”

“You don’t know about the girl?” Huxley asks Minal.

“Girl? What girl?”

LAZARUS

Attendance is easily double of all that went before, the situation room barely able to accommodate everybody, with most having to stand. And yet it is still left to Home Secretary Bundt to chair the proceedings, what with the prime minister and foreign secretary locked in tense discussions with the United Nations Security Council.

The two of them had departed for New York amid an increasing clamor for full disclosure over the structure that has appeared in the city of Bristol, now the center of unexplained and alarming events.

The proceedings are playing out on one half of the situation room's big screen, the sound eschewed for closed captions. The gist of it is clear enough, though—the United Kingdom is clearly withholding information, while the prime minister is adamant that everything that is pertinent has been disclosed.

It is, of course, simply the rest of the world catching up with what has been playing out behind the scenes for days, and the focus of the situation room is firmly held by the other half of the big screen.

There are displayed the contents of a second data message to Sir Thaddeus's phone, received not twelve hours ago.

“Like the book before,” says Professor Sooks, “it is more theory than application.”

“But more in the way of pictures,” observes Bundt, before allowing Sooks to continue.

“It suggests a means to achieve some form of non-electromagnetic broadcast.”

“Radio?”

“Not radio.”

“Which is impossible,” says Dr. Campbell.

“You said that about the force fields,” sighs Sooks, before continuing. “If interpreted literally, then what we are looking at here is point-point instantaneous communication. Totally secure, and faster than light—”

“Which is *impossible*—”

“And this time we are not required to disclose?” asks Bundt.

“We are, but in a managed way.”

“And we can attach costs,” says another. It’s the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Summoned forth by the whiff of money, observes Bundt.

To her, the two sides of the situation room’s big screen could not be more juxtaposed. On one side are the prime minister and foreign secretary, lying to the United Nations Security Council; and on the other, some new truth, set to transform the world.

And somewhere, betwixt and between, is a precarious path that all are being made to follow.

For such technology, in the wrong hands, would be profoundly disruptive—and yet, properly applied, would yield benefits on an unprecedented scale.

They could sell it for hundreds of billions of dollars.

Or keep it for themselves.

* * *

US Ambassador Harry Harland smells a rat. Sir Thaddeus has had a series of table meetings with Mr. Day since the incident with the girl, the stated intention to secure immediate and comprehensive assurances as to the well-being of both her and the sick child.

The assurances had, seemingly, been forthcoming, but without any actual proof.

But what Harland had observed through the barrier, on each occasion, was Sir Thaddeus being more than a little attentive when it came to his smartphone, even though one of the few things Corporal Jakes had disclosed was that there was no signal of any kind beyond the structure's barrier.

That had been going on for *hours*. And now, wouldn't you just know it, Dr. Shah has returned from the dead to reenter the structure with Jakes once more.

This time, however, she is to take others with her.

Two others, besides Jakes.

And wouldn't you just know it, one of them is Sir Thaddeus, the other being Mayor Rames.

"If you can let these two through, why not the rest of us?" wails Harland from the barrier, the line remaining red for him.

"We need to be able to exit in a hurry, if needs be," explains Minal, from the driver's seat of the Porsche. "And the Lambo only seats two."

"The...the *Lambo*? There's a Lamborghini in there?"

"Follow us through," Minal says to Thaddeus and Huxley. For Debeer she has different advice. "Look out for anything strange."

“Anything strange,” says Debeer. “Right.”

And with that she takes the Porsche forward at walking pace, Thaddeus and Huxley apprehensively strolling behind, the barrier line remaining green for them, as requested of it by Dr. Shah—now, seemingly, the master of the *Cygnets*.

Once through, Huxley cannot help but to look back, finding Ambassador Harland marching off in a highly animated manner.

The access ramp takes them inside the structure. It is as described—empty, save for a mauve Lamborghini sports car parked to one side at the far end.

Thaddeus defers to Huxley when it comes to the driving, he himself more accustomed to *being* driven. It’s a bit of a squeeze for them both.

* * *

The two cars arrive at the hub, having stopped only for a minor freaking-out on the part of Thaddeus and Huxley as the gravity tilt had become apparent.

Ahead, the control room is open, the giant ring display still up and running. It’s just as Minal and Jakes had left it. Same-old for them, more freakery for the two newbies, who can only gaze upon it, mouths agape.

It’s the kitchenette that brings them back down to earth.

For a moment or two, that is.

“Hi!”

It’s the girl, Pasha, seated at a small pullout table, a bowl of noodles in front of her, chopsticks in hand.

“You would appear to be remarkably calm, Miss Vasquez,” observes Thaddeus.

“Uh huh,” says Pasha, gobbling up another mouthful of noodles.

“Anything we should be concerned about?”

“Noop.”

“Pasha,” says Huxley, his tone harsh. “Where is Simone?”

“In the medical room.”

“What...medical room?” says Minal, looking to Jakes.

They’d both explored the port wing, and Jakes had conducted a more extensive search of the main superstructure while Minal researched the control room. There *had* been nothing.

“It’s on the deck below,” says Pasha. “At the far end of the garden.”

“What...garden?”

* * *

It hadn’t been all that difficult, Ambassador Harland’s only real concern one of being discovered, which they had not, the distraction of the colossus on the Green providing all the cover they had needed.

That and the eagerness of the Brits to placate him.

Soon after his arrival, after the outer barrier went up and he had been let loose, he had requested, and been furnished with, a high-end laptop and internet access so that he might communicate effectively. Help keep the situation stable, with a back channel to the US government.

The NSA had gotten to work immediately.

With the city hall Wi-Fi network cracked, they had access to all the phones connected to it, including Sir Thaddeus’s. That one had proved to be a tough nut, but not unassailable, courtesy of certain information that had come into their hands in the past by various and nefarious means.

That had given them the first “book,” before it was broadcast.

Now they had not only the second, but also the three others that had come after it.

But with Sir Thaddeus now inside the structure, his phone was truly off the radar, and with it any new books.

And that's not all.

"GCHQ's on to us," says the NSA agent.

They're on a secure conference call, Harland in his hotel room, the rest split between DC, Langley, and Maryland, two dozen in all, from the NSA, CIA, and the White House.

"Do they actually know it's *us*?" asks another.

"They do not. We left signatures suggesting the Chinese, and intel says they've fallen for it. But now they've locked down the local network with some serious crypto. We won't be getting anything more out of the phones."

"And now they have the tech in book two."

"Yeah...and so do we."

"Oven ready, uncrackable, instantaneous communication. If they roll *that* out, we'll be completely in the dark. Where are we on books three through five?"

"They're all a primer," says another. "Dense stuff that we're only just getting our heads around. Some form of foundational molecular physics. It looks incomplete, but what we have suggests high-density energy storage at a massive scale."

"We already have that," quips Harland. "It's called the 'hydrogen bomb.'"

The quip falls flat, two dozen ashen faces staring back at him.

* * *

Access to the deck below is via one of the stairwells Minal and Jakes had seen before. What they *hadn't* seen before was the *garden*.

After the stairwell and corridor, the space opens out into what might be better described as a biome, an enclosed area sunk lower than the deck itself, and entirely given over to plantings, large and small, interspersed with neatly clipped lawn.

“This wasn’t here before?” asks Thaddeus.

“I only found a bulkhead,” says Jakes. “Must have opened up.”

Pasha leads the way, trotting down some steps.

“The planting looks subtropical,” says Huxley, only to find a bewildered group staring back at him. “Started out as an apprentice in the city’s parks department,” he explains. “We planted this sort of thing during the summer months.”

Pasha heads off to one side, the others following her along a grass path that takes them through a patchwork of growth to a clearing. There sits a brilliant white, ribbed, dome-like structure.

Aside from the color, Huxley is reminded of an armadillo shell.

One end is open to the garden. The interior is brightly lit, something floating there—something that is gently rotating in midair.

Pasha is already heading inside, the others following her, eyes fixed on whatever it is that the dome is home to, there being nothing else to distract, the walls and floor blending seamlessly from one to the other to form a cocoon of pure white.

It’s the body of a child, gently tumbling head over heels, the movement not that of suspension, but the absence of gravity.

“Simone?” Huxley asks Pasha.

It’s hard to tell. The face is obscured by a misty substance, as is the rest of the body, enveloping it in a barely perceptible cloud of what look like tiny droplets of liquid.

A voice, from behind them.

“There will be side effects,” says Mr. Day, all finding him standing at the dome’s entrance.

“Side effects to...what?” asks Huxley.

“The unavoidable consequences of this treatment,” says Mr. Day.

“He explained everything to me,” says Pasha, her stance defensive. “I am Simone’s legal guardian. I had the right—”

“What is being done to this child?” says Huxley, struggling to contain his anger.

“She is being conformed to an idealistic genetic template,” says Mr. Day. “One based on her own genome, but with all the errors corrected. The cure is holistic. All or nothing.”

“You are curing her, by rebuilding her?”

“And why would there be side effects?” add Minal.

“Simone will not have the imperfections that humanity at large has. She will not age like you. As I said, unavoidable consequences—”

“How long will she live for?” asks Thaddeus.

“I have no idea,” says Mr. Day. “But barring accidents and communicable diseases, Simone can expect in excess of one hundred and seventy-five years of high-quality life. The financial implications alone may well prove profound for her.”

“Except that’s not going to happen,” says Minal. “Is it, Mr. Day?”

“Indeed it won’t,” says Thaddeus. “We will see to it—”

“I’m not talking about her finances,” Minal barks back at him. “She won’t last that long, because nothing will.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

But Minal has rounded her attention back to Mr. Day.

“Is she here?” asks Minal.

“Yes, she is,” says Mr. Day.

“So she’s real, then. Why doesn’t she show herself?”

“Okay,” says Jakes. “*Who* are we talking about now?”

“She?” says Huxley, joining Minal in confronting Mr. Day. “He mentioned someone—just before the *Cygnets* took Simone. He said ‘she’ wanted him to save Simone.”

“There’s two of them,” says Minal. “I met the other one after connecting with the *Cygnets*.”

“Hold on,” says Jakes. “You were with *me* the whole time.”

“She took me somewhere. While I was out of it. And our Mr. Day, here, has just confirmed both her and the experience to be real.”

“I was there, Doc. In the hotel room. You didn’t go anywhere.”

“My body didn’t,” says Minal, eyes boring into Mr. Day. “But my mind did. She used the *Cygnets* to move me to an alternate reality.”

“Dr. Shah,” splutters Thaddeus. “For heaven’s sake.”

“Still not buying it, huh? A giant structure appearing out of nowhere. One that should collapse under its own weight. Force fields. Gravity manipulation. Time being bent. What’s it going to take?”

“So, you would have us believe that this thing really is a starship?” says Huxley.

“Yes, except that it travels from one parallel universe to another. Mr. Day and his pal are zapping themselves from one reality to another—”

“Dr. *Shah*—” insists a vexed Thaddeus.

“Do you deny it, Mr. Day?”

Mr. Day has no response for her other than to tilt his head quizzically. It’s enough to bring the whole group together, a semicircle of wide-eyed faces, save for Minal’s, which remains resolute in its interrogation.

“They seek out junk realities,” says Minal. “Unstable alternates that last just long enough for them to conduct tests. We are in one of those realities, and they are testing us.”

“I see she gave you the simplified version,” says Mr. Day.

“Turned out we didn’t have a lot of time,” says Minal. “Things...ended soon after.”

“Ended?” balks Huxley.

“The unstable reality we were in collapsed—as if it had never been. And if this is an unstable alternate as well, then it hasn’t much longer to go. Simone isn’t going to live for one hundred and seventy-five years. She is going to wink out of existence along with the rest of us.”

“What *utter* poppycock,” wails Thaddeus. “The universe can’t just...end.”

A voice from behind them.

“Unfortunately, it can,” says the woman, joining Mr. Day from the garden.

“Who the hell are you?” bleats Thaddeus.

“That’s the other one,” says Minal, with only contempt for the woman. “Why did you save the child?”

“I didn’t, Dr. Shah,” says the woman. “You did.”

COLLAPSE

The emergency working group Home Secretary Bundt had brought together, and what remains of the cabinet, have been escorted down into the warren of subterranean bunkers under Whitehall, with the prime minister and foreign secretary somewhere over the Atlantic on a Royal Air Force C-17.

Things had not ended well in New York, the Security Council confronting the United Kingdom with evidence of highly advanced weapons of mass destruction. There had been a very real chance of being detained, had they not left when they did.

The communications with the C-17 via satellite are shaky, but they have managed to get a video conference call going, it being projected on one end of the concrete vault that all now find themselves in.

“How the hell did they get the other books?” bleats the foreign secretary.

“The NSA hacked the city hall network using Ambassador Harland’s laptop,” says one, a fellow Home Secretary Bundt understands to be a spook out of GCHQ. “They tried to make it look like the Chinese.”

“Is everything locked down now?” asks Bundt.

“We control all comms in and out of ground zero, but Ambassador Harland’s are of a level of encryption that we can’t break.”

“For now, we leave things the way they are,” says Bundt. “Harland can’t do any more damage, so let him carry on.”

“But it was the Americans who sold us out to the Security Council,” says the defense secretary.

“And they are the only ones talking to us right now. Friendly or not friendly, we need an open channel.”

Bundt’s formally in the hot seat now, the prime minister having put her there, given that he and the foreign secretary are in the air on the end of an unreliable and vulnerable communications channel.

“Any word from Sir Thaddeus?”

“All four are still inside the structure,” says the spook. “We have no line of communication with them—”

The video conference has abruptly blanked out, the comms channel with the C-17 disconnected.

“Get onto the pilot,” says Bundt. “Check that they are still there.”

It’s probably just a glitch, and there are more pressing matters at hand.

“What’s going on at sea?” Bundt asks the defense secretary.

“The Russian carrier’s anchored in the Channel, and we expect the Chinese tomorrow. The United States has two carriers headed our way as well. Got two Russian subs in the North Sea, with Chinese and American subs out in the Atlantic. All of them with a ballistic missile capability. There have been suborbital spy planes since yesterday—”

“Whose?” demands an indignant Bundt.

“Well...everybody’s.”

* * *

The demand for intelligence is unrelenting, but there's just simply nothing Harland can give them. The group of four are still inside the damn thing, and nothing else is happening. Nothing else at ground zero, that is. Plenty is happening everywhere else.

"What do you mean they know it's us?" demands Harland.

"We thought they'd fallen for the fake Chinese hacker signatures," says one of the nameless faces staring back at him. "But it's pretty clear now that they've been playing us all along."

"Which means they know I'm in on it," says Harland. "When's zero hour?"

"In about twenty minutes. So...you're sure all looks quiet there?"

Harland gazes out of his hotel room at the Green below. Colonel Brammers and his unit remain on station with their tank. Debeer has the few police that there are inside the barrier patrolling it. The rest of the Green is largely empty, most having retreated either to city hall or the hotel.

"They won't know what hit them," says Harland.

* * *

Any further discussion on the matter had been curtailed by Dr. Shah's departure for the *Cygnets* bridge, leaving Huxley and the others torn between following her and staying with the child. It was Pasha who had decided the matter, being already satisfied as to her sister's safety, by heading after Dr. Shah.

Regrouping on the bridge—the control room, as Dr. Shah had called it—sees Mr. Day and his companion look on as Huxley and Thaddeus seek to corner Minal for what they consider essential information.

"What is all this?" asks Thaddeus, waving at the ring display.

“A retrofit,” says Minal, casually observing Huxley passing his hand back and forth through the floating display. “The *Cygnets* is ancient—twenty thousand years old. This is a means for humans to access its alien systems.”

Thaddeus slides a look the way of Mr. Day, looking for some response, some chink in the man’s emotional armour that will betray Dr. Shah’s utterings as falsehoods. Thaddeus finds nothing there, nor with his companion.

If enough speak it, then it becomes the truth.

“A starship,” he says. “Twenty thousand years old. Capable of passing from one reality to another as part of some grand experiment, with the human race as lab rats.”

“Yup,” says Minal.

“To what end?”

“They sought to discover the worst in us,” says Minal. “To lead us unto temptation.”

“With what?”

“Miracle cures and supertech.”

Minal steps into the ring, passing through its floating curved display, Jakes following her, their lack of trepidation enough to encourage Thaddeus and Huxley to follow suit.

“How is that a temptation?” says Huxley. “Everything we have seen is a force for good.”

“Or destruction,” says Minal. “Depending on how you apply it. Battery or bomb. The end of all known disease, or a terrifying plague.”

“Where are you getting all this from?” says Jakes.

“From there,” says a solemn Minal, pointing forward at the low plinth structure and the circle marked in the floor.

Minal's gaze seeks Mr. Day's companion, the woman standing next to him, blank expressions on the face of each, both having silently stepped into the ring.

"I remember," Minal says to her. "Or, rather, I remember *now*."

"And what is it that you *think* you remember?" says the woman, testily.

"Everything the *Cygnets* showed me. When I was connected to it. Too much at first, but *now*—"

"You remember nothing," the woman retorts. "I saw to it personally."

"I sense another dimension," says Thaddeus. "To whatever is going on here—"

"Doc," calls out Jakes. "Think we might have a problem here."

He's at one of the ring's display segments, the others crowding around as Mr. Day and the woman look on.

"Christ," mutters Thaddeus.

* * *

Colonel Brammers and Chief Constable Debeer are at the *Cygnets*' entrance barrier. Mayor Rames and Sir Thaddeus have been inside for over an hour, and there's been no report, not from any of the away party.

"What if they don't come out?" says Debeer. "Then what?"

"I could try shelling the barrier. Punch off a round from the tank's fifty-five caliber."

"You know—we never thought to try digging underneath it."

It's the outer barrier crowd that reacts first. At first just a few shouts, and not enough to draw attention, but the commotion quickly builds, Debeer and Brammers seeking its origin.

There is none. Something has spooked the entire gathering all around the barrier, many now looking, and pointing, *up*.

Overhead, and in each and every direction, the sky is peppered with black figures, suspended under parachutes, descending on ground zero. They're avoiding the superstructure, heading instead for the open space of the Green, and the rooftops of the buildings inside the barrier.

The first are already down and surrounded by armed police.

But there's just too many, too fast.

* * *

The sheer force of Home Secretary Bundt's fists slamming down on the tabletop is enough to scatter the Bourbon biscuits everywhere and rattle the defense secretary's teacup in its saucer. And Bundt doesn't need him to tell her what she's looking at on the big screen.

Navy SEALs. The Americans are making a preemptive move.

"The SAS are at readiness?" she barks.

"Yes, ma'am," says another.

"Get them in there *now*."

* * *

Jakes has fully one quarter of the *Cygnets*' bridge ring lit up with live video feeds. Events outside are moving quickly.

"We can expect a swift response," says Thaddeus. "It's going to get ugly out there."

"No, it isn't," says Minal. "Because we are going to take the wind right out of their sails."

"And how do you propose we do that—?"

But Minal is already headed out of the ring—forward to the plinth, Jakes scrambling after her.

“Doc! You need to stay out of that thing. If it screws with your head again—”

“It’s not going to, John,” she says, already stepping into the plinth circle. “Not this time.”

The green bioluminescence of before forms around her, filling out to a cylindrical volume, Minal moving her hands about in it, transfixed with wonderment, Thaddeus looking on in horror.

Jakes looks to Mr. Day and the woman, finding their expressions polar opposites of each other, his relaxed, hers a scowl.

A mesmerized Huxley gawks at Minal, her body now risen from the floor, the enveloping green light pulsating in response to the movement of her limbs, a hum of increasing intensity pervading the bridge as its display ring boils with indecipherable information.

“Why aren’t they stopping her?” bleats Thaddeus, flicking his gaze between the Days and Dr. Shah.

“They can’t,” says Minal, her voice cutting through the audiovisual riot. “This reality—it’s an alternate that would not otherwise be. And it’s my reality, built around *me*.”

“Christ,” wails Thaddeus. “She’s gone mad.”

“Whatcha gonna do, Doc?” says Jakes.

“I’m going to put a stop to all this.”

“What...this?”

“This experiment,” says Minal. “I’m going to end it.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Got me one of these,” she says, drawing both hands upward, the action purposeful, the hum filling the bridge laced with a profound sense of sheer

power. “Anchors away.”

* * *

For Harbor Master Fraser MacPherson, it’s been a sleepless few days, what with the giant spaceship and all. Now it’s all falling apart, the end game seemingly playing out on the office TV.

What looks like special forces have stormed College Green. Two different lots, as far as he can work out. And now those great big spiky things have fired up.

“Gotta be the damn thing’s engines, right?” he says to the terrified office secretary, a young slip of a girl—

Something has her attention. Something behind him.

She screams, and screams again, her hands mindlessly grappling at the door handle, before she manages to flee the office, leaving Fraser alone with the apparition now filling the entire wall at the far end of his office.

“Harbor Master,” says the figure. It’s that Asian woman who’s been all over the news. “This is the *Cygnets*. We are departing the port state of Bristol. I shall not be observing harbor speed.”

* * *

The SAS had swept in so quickly that the Navy SEALs had been caught off guard. Nevertheless, Debeer and Colonel Brammers are cut off from their respective units. All they can do is stand their ground at the entrance barrier.

Overhead the twin spires are spinning up, the noise deafening. That alone would have been enough to scatter the crowds, but they had fled when armed special ops started dropping out of the sky.

The initial skirmish appears to be ending, with the Americans having gained the upper hand, and some sense of control crystallizing at the edge of the Green. It's Ambassador Harland—he's gathering a small unit of Navy SEALs together.

As the armed unit trots forward, Harland out front, so Debeer and Brammers can't help but edge back. Just as the imminent threat appears to be right on them, so the *Cygnets*' engines reach a sonic plateau, a resonance that somehow seems in tune with the universe—

It's Debeer who trips first, the heel of his boot catching the lip of the access ramp, Colonel Brammers toppling after him, both hitting the ramp's deck. They'd stepped back through where the barrier field had been.

The fall has knocked the wind out of Debeer, but he finds a helping hand: Colonel Brammers, on one knee, extended arm ready to haul Debeer up after him.

A moment and they are both standing, the view before them decidedly different—they're some fifty meters above the city, city hall and the Green receding below, a wildly gesticulating Ambassador Harland eclipsed by trees as the *Cygnets* banks away.

As the city tilts before them, the two men can see how perilously close they are to the edge, and yet something has them.

Gravity, but not that of the world below.

* * *

Home Secretary Bundt watches as the *Cygnets* rises—with the feeds they've got playing out on the big screen, it's an immersive experience, an audiovisual spectacle that sees the two great engines lift the colossus effortlessly away from the city.

It has everyone in the room mesmerized.

Well, almost everyone...

“We have launch-readiness signatures,” says the defense secretary. “From the Russian and Chinese subs. If they get a hit, it’ll likely come down in international waters.”

“Take it out,” says Bundt. “Take it out now. I want that thing down on UK soil.”

“If it hits an urban area—”

“If Russia and China get salvage rights, it won’t matter.”

* * *

The *Cygnets*’ bridge has truly come alive, its display ring now the poor cousin, set against the alien displays that had lit up as the starship lifted away.

A bedazzled Thaddeus finds himself standing inside a rendering of the Earth-moon system, and a slew of indecipherable glyphs. But if that curved *line* is what he thinks it is, then they are headed for orbit.

But before he can draw the attention of the others, it comes to *his* attention that they are no longer nearby.

Mayor Rames and Corporal Jakes have headed forward to the giant viewport—there’s... there’s a *doorway* to one side, and they are both stepping *outside*.

Thaddeus joins them, finding himself standing on an external deck, the world beyond tilted on its axis as the *Cygnets* banks across the terrain below. They are headed west by the looks of it. Thaddeus seeks the others, finding Mayor Rames pinned back against the *Cygnets*’ hull, gripped by the terror of it all.

Ahead is the Clifton Suspension Bridge, the gateway of the *Cygnets*’ arrival, now that of its departure, the starship sliding effortless underneath it

with what Thaddeus can only imagine as the closest of tolerances.

The transit complete, the *Cygnets* rises and banks to the south.

“Where’s the girl?” Huxley manages.

It grabs the attention of all three of them, and they head back inside.

The bridge is empty, save for Dr. Shah floating in the green pillar of light, her arms outstretched as her hands manipulate some supposedly invisible controls.

No Pasha, and no Mr. Day. The woman has gone as well.

“Look away from the windows,” booms Minal, her voice filling the space. “They’ve launched against us.”

“Launched what?” wails Huxley.

“I’m tracking two ballistic missiles. Nuclear warheads.”

“The Americans have fired nukes at us?” says Jakes.

“They’re local,” says Minal. “The UK wants to keep hold of the *Cygnets*—bring it down before we leave sovereign territory.”

“Madness!” wails Huxley. “What are they *thinking*? They could kill tens of thousands—”

“Not mad,” says Minal. “Just improbable—all part of this of this reality’s instability.”

“We need to find the girl,” says Jakes. “They’ve taken her.”

RAPTURE

For Minal, it is an unending moment of clarity, the universe laid out before her, time slowed. Time to think. That she is a mile up, somewhere over the southwest of England, and at the controls of an ancient starship is of no consequence.

All she sees are the *alts*.

A myriad of alternate realities set out as if a cosmic rolodex, there for her to casually flick through.

She can see a way.

Right now, the *Cygnets*' two field generators—its engines—are operating as gravimetric tractors, hauling the starship out of Earth's gravity well.

But that's not all they can do.

The woman at the hotel—Mr. Day's companion—had said that while the *Cygnets* remained anchored, so it is the pilot that shifts. Minal had dropped those anchors to make their escape.

Now, with the tiniest blip of the brakes, she can explore the *alts*.

But it's not enough. She can't get far enough away from the alternate reality that they are already in.

And yet the *Days* had taken her to an alternate far from this one—a world with the planet Mars rising. How had they done that?

The *Cygnets* has the answer for her, even though she had not asked the question of it.

She can see the truth of it in the cosmic rolodex of realities—a seemingly infinite number of alternates, but each almost identical to those around it.

All those within reach are the next likely to happen.

It will take a colossal amount of energy to make a shift of any significance.

Energy and...something else.

An *event*...one that closes off the routes to the otherwise next-likely realities.

An improbable event. No—a *bizarre* event.

For every *action*, there is an equal and opposite *reaction*. And the bigger the action...

Minal flicks through the cosmic rolodex once more—not *forward* but *backward*, seeking out that which could have been.

* * *

Debeer and Colonel Brammers have made it up the *Cygnets*'s neck on foot, Brammers having had them jog the whole way. They are at the top—or far end—the freakery of the gravity tilt distorting any sense of *position*.

No time to adjust, though—Sir Thaddeus, Mayor Rames, and Corporal Jakes have appeared out of some open space up ahead. But instead of it being a welcoming committee, the three of them are heading off to one side, with barely a glance the way of Debeer and Brammers.

* * *

The two ballistic missiles in flight are from a UK Trident submarine on station in the North Sea, a thousand miles away. While the *Cygnets* could outrun them, even survive their blast, Minal sees only a means to an end—a path to a finality of which the warheads are an inevitable part, as if it could have been no other way.

This reality is built around her, and when she ends, so all will end.

Already the necessary sequence of events are playing out.

Minal flicks through the rolodex once more.

The choices are so much more interesting now.

But which to choose?

Wait.

Is that...is that *singing*?

* * *

Jakes gets there first, the others right on his tail, Debeer and Colonel Brammers making up the rear with no time to stop and wonder why they are racing through a garden.

All stop short of the bright white armadillo-shell dome.

Inside are the *Days*—Mr. Day and the woman—they're with Pasha and the child.

Simone.

She is on her feet and alert, the frailty gone from her.

But it is not this that has them all gawping.

It is that Mr. Day and his companion are helping Pasha and Simone into what can only be described as spacesuits. Not the bulky affairs of earthly spaceflight, but sleek one-piece suits of some glossy black metallic fabric, laced with gold tracery, and topped with tight-fitting helmets.

Just as the helmets silently close, their visors crystal clear and expansive, so all about is lit by two brilliant flashes, the world they are in whiting out.

* * *

It is, it would seem, simply a matter of widening the reach of the *Cygnets*' two giant engines, and dropping the anchors, bringing the *Cygnets*' transit through reality to a halt so abruptly as to shift all within to wherever they are destined to be in the universe.

That, and dropping the force fields.

For Minal it will be a new beginning.

As for the others...well, Minal can only suppose that they will simply spill out into the next available alternate reality. Pick an alt. Any alt.

But for Simone it will be a profound salvation, her sister at her side. Minal had made sure of it, reaching back to save Simone—save her so that she might be thrust forward.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

For every improbability, there is an equal and opposite improbability.

And with any luck, it'll be *just about enough*.

* * *

A pillar of brilliant white light bursts into being with a crack of thunder, reaching from the roof high overhead, down to the transept, all but blinding the few that there had been in the congregation, their singing muted in an instant and replaced by terrified wails.

Most are already fleeing the cathedral.

Not so the truly devout.

For tumbling out of the pillar of light, gracefully rolling head over heels in midair, are two figures, their space-suited bodies floating in an absence of gravity.

FLAG STATE

Minal takes a moment on the rope ladder. She's most of the way up, just short of the accommodation ladder, the port's pilot boat still on station below. Normally she'd board from the dockside, but there's no space at Portbury Docks this week, so the inspection is taking place out in the Bristol Channel. This is to be a flag state inspection, with Minal required to apply the rules of the country the vessel is registered with. Greece, in this particular case.

She has a clear line of sight down the River Avon, past the bridge and all the way to Ham Green, and as her gaze lingers so she reflects on the new path she has decided to take.

Academia had been unfulfilling, the corporate application of her abilities, distasteful, and so she had pursued a more practical vocation. But a void still lingers within her. Something is missing—something or *someone*.

There's an evening social event in town, a mixer arranged by city hall for public service singles. Police, fire brigade—even the military.

It's not normally her sort of thing, but perhaps she'll meet someone there.

“PSCO Shah?” It’s the vessel’s captain.

“Captain Papadopoulos? I’m here to carry out the flag state inspection. Might I come aboard?”

“I have some news from shore,” says the captain, as Minal climbs the final leg to the accommodation ladder. “It seems you have been awarded the Fields Medal for mathematics.”

“Well, now, Captain, that is good news.”

“A prestigious award, yes? Welcome aboard the *Cygnets*.”

THE END

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