

Tina Palamac

Her Lives & Times: “Entanglement”
The Conclusion of a Century 21 Multiverse Story
by Clya Brown



Chapters of “Entanglement”

1	A Fateful Encounter in Foxley Woods.....	4
2	The Household of Foxley Heath Manor.....	9
3	Cassandra Creighton Engages her New Friend in Conversation.....	15
4	Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Discuss Cassandra’s New Friend	17
5	Cassandra Works a Sampler while Miss Palamac Prepares her Toys	22
6	Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Plan a Morning Walk	25
7	Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Make a Discovery.....	26
8	Cassandra Seeks to Educate her Younger Brother	29
9	Cousin Michael Arrives from London to Stay for a Few Days.....	32
10	Miss Palamac Returns Late from her Walk.....	34
11	Cassandra Ventures Downstairs in the Middle of the Night	37
12	Cassandra is Engaged in a Scientific Venture	39
13	Cassandra Learns of the Ship Beneath the Lake	41
14	New Arrivals Enter the Creighton Household.....	44
15	The New Arrivals Venture Outside in the Night-Time	51
16	A Grievous Altercation Takes Place in the Woods	53
17	Miss Palamac and Cousin Michael Provide Medical Assistance	57
18	The Remarkable Restoration to Life of the Man in Red	67
19	The Man in Red Enquires after the Health of Miss Almond.....	70
20	Miss Palamac Ponders the Cause of an Unexpected Dizzy Spell	73
21	Captain Metcalfe Insists Upon Seeing Miss Almond.....	75
22	Captain Metcalfe Learns the Fate of his Assailants	80
23	Miss Palamac is the Centre of Attention at the Dinner Party	83
24	Cousin Michael Returns to London.....	96
25	Miss Palamac Makes a Discovery in her Bedchamber.....	99
26	Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Venture into the Cellar	101
27	Miss Almond Expresses a Wish to Explore the House	103
28	Captain Metcalfe Seeks Information from Mr Harrison	105
29	Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Make a Discovery.....	107
30	Cassandra Recovers her Memory	110
31	Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Return to the Ship.....	111
32	Miss Palamac Confronts Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond.....	114
33	Captain Metcalfe and Miss Palamac Enter into a Dialogue	121

34	Miss Almond Contemplates the Prospect of Marriage.....	127
35	Miss Palamac’s Actions Result in a Race Against Time.....	130
36	Captain Metcalfe Seeks to Prevent a Catastrophe	133
37	Captain Metcalfe and Miss Palamac Discuss their Options	140
38	Miss Palamac Proposes a Plan to Captain Metcalfe.....	144
39	Miss Almond is Called Upon to Make a Journey to London	146
40	Captain Metcalfe and Cassandra Discuss her Hopes and Fears	148
41	The Production of a Gaseous Substance has Unintended Consequences.....	150
42	Cassandra Encounters Miss Palamac as She Returns to Her Room.....	157
43	Miss Almond Returns from London.....	158
44	Captain Metcalfe Makes a Request of Colonel Creighton	161
45	Cassandra is Invited to Visit the Operations Room.....	166
46	Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Exchange Views.....	170
47	Cassandra Takes the Initiative in the Resolution of a Crisis	173
48	Cassandra Seeks to Secure her Destiny by Forceful Means.....	178
49	Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Instigate a Plan	182
50	Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Put Their Plan into Effect	185
51	Cassandra Struggles to Resolve a Personal Dilemma	191
52	Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Discuss Their Respective Futures.....	193
53	Colonel Creighton, Miss Almond and Cassandra Set Out for London	196
54	Cassandra Makes Her Peace with the World	200
55	Epilogue – Foxleyheath Manor, England – 25th July 2073	202
56	Author’s Notes & Acknowledgements.....	212

1 A Fateful Encounter in Foxley Woods

Jack Parkins gazed upwards into the midnight sky, and under his breath cursed the brightness of the moon. Confident of his own ability to see in the dark, the moonlight merely provided the keepers with an advantage he would prefer they lacked – though that said, he did not expect to encounter any of them this night. Superstitious fools to a man, and probably too drunk to walk as well by now: he'd heard them talking in slurred voices of the terrible falling star and the evil it doubtless portended in the Poacher's Pocket not two hours since. Ha! Had they but known that Black Jack Parkins himself lay unarmed – and unclothed – in Fanny Stanton's arms in the straw in the loft not six feet above their heads... Well, probably better that they *didn't* know, not least because that miserly pig of a husband of hers, excessively violent and stupid in equal measure, was guzzling with his friends in the alehouse below. Jack smirked to himself at the memory and briefly pondered the wisdom of buying Obadiah a drink to toast his dear wife when he next saw him, but decided against it on the grounds that he'd already spent more than enough of his recently acquired ill-gotten gains availing himself of Fanny's services.

So what exactly *was* it the keepers had been babbling about down below, earlier this cold winter evening? That it fell out of the sky like a great ball of fire into these very woods bordering Creighton's estate? That it roared like a great dragon as it soared atop the trees before plunging earthwards? Aye, Jack himself fancied he'd heard some commotion outside perhaps two hours earlier, but he'd been attending to Fanny at the time and had thought little of it. Flying dragons laying waste to Creighton's land indeed! A pity the notion were so fanciful – he bore the colonel enough grudges to fill an ale barrel – but he was sober enough to recognise an opportunity when it presented itself: if the keepers were scared witless by stories of fire demons and hobgoblins from the sky above the woods, chances were that he'd have the place to himself until dawn. At least those were his thoughts as he disentangled himself from the still sleeping Fanny, silently donned his clothes, stuffed his pistol into the waistband of his breeches and slipped away into the darkness. Now he was not so sure. Not one sound had he heard – all was still and silent about him – and yet he could not shake off a feeling of disquiet that heralded danger nearby. Jack was not superstitious, but much experience gained since childhood had taught him to trust his instincts. Lowering his bag silently to the ground, he straightened slowly, turning his head this way and that as if sensing the air about him.

The low screech of an owl high in the branches of a tree affirmed his growing suspicion that he was not alone in the undergrowth. Feeling down for the butt of the pistol, he cradled its trigger instinctively with his forefinger as his eyes struggled in vain to pierce the darkness before him – and yet he did not draw it: for who else might venture abroad in the dead of night but one of his kin? The gamekeepers of Foxley might be cowards, but they were not fools.

An instant later the pistol was in his hand and levelled into the darkness: the crackle of broken twigs perhaps fifty yards away in the direction of the lake dispelled any notion that the intruder was any from his family. The ability of every one of his three sons to negotiate the woods in silence was every bit the equal of his own... no, the person approaching him now clearly felt no *need* for stealth. Jack blinked in surprise at the sudden but certain realisation that it was a *woman* who approached him – and not one whose footfall he recognised either – even though the faint crackle of but half a dozen steps had reached his ears. The merest trace of an unpleasant grin crept across

his mouth – out of her wits to be braving the woods in the dead of night thus she was for sure, but Jack Parkins had little concern for her state of mind. Of an insane man he might have needs be wary – was it not said that some of those confined within the pits of Bedlam possessed the strength of ten normal men? – but an insane *woman* was another matter entirely. Perhaps it was his lucky day...

Consciously breathing slowly to enable him to judge the distance between them more accurately, he sidled silently into the cover of the undergrowth bordering the glade, listening to every second of her approach from the direction of the lake. Of the obvious facts that she was no more than five-and-twenty years old, had no companion, wore either soft shoes or none and had almost perfect eyesight he was aware without conscious thought, though he frowned fleetingly at the lack of the sound of the hem of her skirt brushing against the undergrowth. He returned the pistol to his waistband and silently extracted his knife from its leather sheath, pressed himself tightly against the trunk of the tree and steeled himself to seize her by the throat to prevent her from screaming as she passed by.

A few seconds later the leaves parted, and he caught his first sight of her silhouette as she entered the glade. Emerging without pause from the undergrowth, she stepped into the moonlight and stopped, sensing the air as he had himself a moment or two previously. Her features were discernible now: an elegant, proud face with flawless complexion, her hair swept up in a bun, her posture and carriage speaking of one accustomed to giving orders and having them instantly obeyed – unquestionably a woman of noble birth... a *lady* no less. And yet for all that, her clothes spoke otherwise: the most debauched slut in a bordello could scarcely be more immodestly dressed – a fact that gave Jack pause, for she did not shiver despite the bitter coldness of the night. An inexplicable sense of foreboding passed down Jack's spine as her emotionless eyes swept without pause over his hiding place: despite feeling the confidence of one born and raised in the woods that she could not possibly have seen him, he nevertheless sensed that she was not even *interested* in the possibility of an ambush. Momentarily nonplussed at the strangeness of her clothing, he registered first her legs, clad in a skimpy kirtle the like of which he had never seen before above the knee, more with outright confusion than the covetousness that would normally accompany the sight of a woman so unclothed – but then his gaze swept over the garments above her waist which clung to her figure, accentuating the curves of her upper body... and in an instant the confusion was replaced by unbridled lust.

Launching himself out of his hiding place he hurled himself at her, trusting in his bodyweight to fell her to the ground beneath him. Nobody of her slender build could have withstood such an assault: as his flying body impacted with her own she was thrown violently backwards onto the grass with him landing on top of her, with one of his hands already around her throat to incapacitate and silence her while the other ripped open her tightly-fitting shift from her neck halfway down to her navel. Seizing the collar of the torn garment, he then wrenched it down over her bare shoulders and halfway down her back, pinning her arms behind her in the process. Straddling her hips to prevent any further movement, he took a moment to savour her terror before completing her humiliation - and yet even as he leered into her face while reaching down to rip her skirt asunder he was uncomfortably conscious of her apparent lack of fear or even surprise: the look in her eyes as they glared back into his own was not that of a terrified young woman but that of a... a...

A horrifying vision sprang into his head – a scene seared into his memory when he was but a child, when he was forced to watch his fifteen-year-old elder brother being hanged for sheep stealing. *That* was the look on the hangman's face while his brother died in agony on the gibbet – a look

that spoke of cold retribution exacted without mercy or pity. And in that moment Jack Parkins knew that he was a dead man – unless he killed this woman beneath him at once. His original intention driven from his mind by the inexplicable sense of foreboding that her emotionless gaze burned into his soul, he tightened his grip on her throat, leaning forward to bring up his other hand to finish the job. A mistake: without his full weight on her hips she was able to twist her body just enough to release one of her arms. One second later her hand was down his breeches and her fingernails sunk into his testicles. Howling with pain, the poacher instantly released his victim's throat and tried desperately to seize her wrist – but before his stinging sweat-filled eyes could focus on the task in hand he felt the pistol being drawn from his waistband. Desperately snatching it out of her hand, he rolled frantically away from her across the grass and struggled in agony to his feet, levelling the pistol at the body of his victim on the ground as he did so to blast her into eternity – only to discover that she was no longer there. Bewildered, he began to turn to seek her out – only to be met with a vicious kick from his side in the stomach, delivered with such force as to leave him doubled up and winded.

Her hand lashed out and seized the pistol's barrel, twisting it sideways as she simultaneously launched a perfectly-aimed kick upwards into his face, forcing him to slacken his grip on the weapon, which she instantly wrenched out of his hand. Tossing it into the air and catching it by the butt, she whipped the barrel across his face with a twisting motion of her body that ended with the heel of her right foot connecting with his unprotected throat. With a roar of pain the man was thrown off his balance; by the time he opened his eyes again he was flat on the ground, staring upwards into her eyes as she looked dispassionately down, first at him, and then at the pistol in her hand.

Weapon... metallic missile projected by exothermic reaction at high velocity through rotatable barrel containing six rounds, permitting up to that number of discharges without the need to reload. Crude and inefficient; probably of no value whatsoever at more than a dozen metres. But at this range...

Terror inexorably mounting in his throat, he watched transfixed as she slowly raised the pistol to bear down upon his head. A dainty hand, to be sure...

“Die, Earthman!”

Still desperately trying to understand the situation in which he now found himself, he thought his last thought, and in that instant died horribly in ignorance of the reason for it as his head disintegrated in a shower of blood, bone and brains.

For all the precision of the attack, she failed to anticipate the force of the recoil, and was thrown backwards off her feet into the patch of briars to her rear. Disregarding completely the stabbing pain of the needles, she converted the fall into a backwards roll with all the finesse of a seasoned athlete, landing on her feet with the pistol in her hand still trained on the body of her assailant in instinctive readiness for the delivery of a second shot should it prove necessary. Only when she had verified that it was not did she slowly begin to lower the weapon, only to raise it again instantly at the sound of a horse's whinny close by.

She glanced at the corpse at her feet, then knelt and pressed the butt of the pistol between the dead man's fingers. *His gun, his hand on the trigger, and no witnesses.* So much easier to explain events when the questions came, as they surely would.

Retreating to the other side of the dead poacher, she watched intently as the skittish animal, urged on gently by its rider on account of the proximity of the recent death which it could clearly sense,

emerged slowly out of the darkness. For a few seconds they regarded each other in silence; her expression composed but obviously still very much alert, while his was transformed into a study in astonishment.

“But what’s this?”

Noting the flintlock pistol that he had obviously already drawn beforehand, she spared the body lying on the ground between them one more glance to verify that the gun was retrievable should she need it, then returned her gaze to the new arrival, who was studying the tableau intently from his horse. Her expression relaxed very slightly as his features creased into a broad grin.

“I declare! What manner of education do they bestow upon young ladies in these restless times?”

She shook her head, frowning. “What?”

“A vagabond armed with both knife and pistol on my land in the dead of night – defeated and slain with his own weapon at the hand of an unarmed lady? It is impossible! I cannot comprehend it... and yet I see it before my eyes! Is it certain that he is dead? Nay... with such wounds, of *that* there can be no doubt – and yet you neither scream nor faint... could it be that your wits are frozen by fear? Come... walk to me, and I shall protect you.”

She regarded him coldly. “I don’t understand. Are you offering me assistance? I have no need of it.”

He peered down at her from the saddle, a perplexed expression on his face. “I think you *do*, lady! Gentlefolk do not walk the woods by moonlight, for it is a fearsome place. Were I myself not armed to the teeth and sorely concerned for the fate of my pheasants I would surely be safely in my bed. But I think the game birds will now sleep safely in their nests this night, eh?”

She shook her head slowly, continuing to watch him closely. “Your words make no sense, Earthman. Where am I? What is this place?”

“Earth man, you say? I am no man of the soil, madam – the heath adjoins my estate, in whose woods you now stand. The scoundrel who lies at your feet is Black Jack Parkins – may his carcass rot in hell. I’d have hanged him long since had my keepers been more watchful, but the knaves fear him also – they cower in their cottages when he and his kin are abroad. But now you save me the expense of dispatching him to join his father and uncles in Van Diemen’s Land! Lady, for this service alone you shall rest the night under my roof, for you cannot remain here unclothed and alone. My home lies to the east, just beyond the heath; you shall ride with me there.”

She spared her dishevelled attire a cursory glance. “I am not unclothed. Why are you offering me help?”

He gestured vaguely at her tattered garments, affecting not to notice how much bare flesh their state revealed.

“Is this the apparel of a lady? Ah! I have it - the dog tried to dishonour you ere he was slain, so your attire is torn and you have discarded it, though what manner of undergarments these be I could not guess – I never saw the like. No matter, we’ll see you clothed in a more befitting manner on the morrow... come – give me your hand and I’ll pull you up.”

“You still haven’t answered my question - what is this place?”

“In God’s name, madam! Shall we prattle here when even now his brethren may seek him out? To the north lies East Grinstead, bordering this estate to the south you will find Gallowstree Common, to the east lies Holroyd’s lands, and to the west there is Foxley. Now let us be *gone!*”

Tina evaluated her options rapidly. Obviously he’d not seen the ship come down, but if any part of it remained above the surface the light of dawn would expose it to the gaze of any who passed. Yet there were advantages: didn’t he say he owned this land? The privacy so afforded would enable her to recover her sample case with its miniaturised armoury that much more easily if she could swim out and dive to the ship, in the relatively short time that such a course of action would still be possible, without fear of being observed. She nodded, and accepted the proffered hand, swinging herself effortlessly into the saddle behind him as he pulled himself forward to create just enough space to accommodate her slender frame. Gingerly he steered the nervous horse backwards away from the bloody corpse, and then encouraged it into a slow canter back in the direction from which they had come.

2 The Household of Foxley Heath Manor

The distant screech of a cock crow awoke Tina. She sat up in bed instantly, her eyes instinctively sweeping the room for any sign of either aggressors or weapons, but there were none. Instead, she beheld a somewhat awkward-looking young woman standing in the corner of the room, a towel in one hand and a large porcelain jug in the other, with an apprehensive expression on her face.

“Is m’lady awake? I’ve brought water for m’lady to wash, and fresh clothes for her to wear. Beggin’ my lady’s pardon, the clothes are Miss Creighton’s, but the master says he hopes they’re a close enough fit.”

A servant... Tina blinked as the full realisation of having been transported to a different time and different place came home to her for the first time. The episode with the man in the woods she had dealt with instinctively in line with her USS training, and the ride on horseback to the large house with the male stranger had been reminiscent of a carefree vacation that she had undertaken in her teens while still in high school, but this was something new. Having someone waiting on her was an entirely unprecedented experience, and not a particularly endearing one. There was much to do, and the presence of servants could prove to be an unwelcome distraction. However...

She threw a disdainful glance at the pile of clothes which the servant had laid out at the bottom of the bed, presumably prior to her waking. Inconvenient and fragile, totally lacking in functionality: did these primitives routinely wear such garments? She was still considering her options concerning the situation in which she found herself when with a start of irritation she realised that the woman was still standing by the side of the bed, presumably awaiting either further instructions or a dismissal. She was about to tell her to leave when a thought occurred to her.

“What is your name, girl?”

The servant gave a small curtsy. “Carey, ma’am.”

“What year is this, Carey?”

The girl’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Does m’lady still feel unwell? Perhaps m’lady’s ordeal has... that is... well, we heard the master talking to old Reuben, and he said...”

The jumble of words was delivered in a broad rural brogue that Tina could barely decipher. The girl was clearly nervous, and Tina returned a convincing smile, though her eyes betrayed her irritation at the other’s apparent inability to answer a simple question.

“I appreciate your concern, Carey, but I’m feeling quite well. Tell me the year.”

The girl’s manner was uncertain and faltering as she sought to extract the information from the depths of her memory.

“They say... they say – ‘tis the fifty-first year of the king’s reign, ma’am.”

“Which king, Carey?”

Confusion flickered across the girl’s face. “M’lady?”

“*Which* king, girl? What part of the question don’t you understand?”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am... His Gracious Majesty King George, m’lady!”

“George? *Which* King George? There have been eight of them – or is it nine?”

“*No, m’lady!* I mean to say... begging your pardon, ma’am, but... there’s been but three! Does my lady not remember? Is she still beset by the frightful exper...”

“You’re telling me this is the fifty-first year of the reign of King George the Third, yes?”

“*Aye, m’lady!* Will that be all, m’lady?” The girl was almost hysterical.

“Yes, Carey – that will be all.”

The servant girl fled from the chamber, and Tina lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. George III, King of England since... when? She had no idea. But wait... her memory for military history had always been good... he’d been King of England for about 45 years at the time of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805... and now on the throne for 51 years, which would make it about 1811, with the actual date of his coronation contributing up to a year’s uncertainty either way. About 235 years before the date of the ship’s departure. *And the twin binary is just half that number of light years away...* The thought came back to her as if resurging from a dream that she’d thought long forgotten. *You know what you have to do? Yes, I know what I must do...*

She threw back the bedcover, swung her long legs sideways and stepped down onto the floor, immediately looking down at the unfamiliar feeling of polished wood beneath her bare feet. She glanced briefly at the tattered clothes in which she was still clad, then walked over to the window and looked out at the scene beyond. Save for the house and its immediate grounds, the skyline consisted entirely of trees in every direction visible to her, except for the faint outline of a distant range of hills rising above them to the north. Beneath the window in the flowerbeds below, an elderly man dressed in a strange garb was tending a bed of flowers, while a small male child of perhaps six or seven years of age played with a ball nearby under the supervision of a young woman, probably in her late teens.

She turned away from the window, considering her situation. Clearly returning to the lake and re-entering the ship was out of the question in the immediate short term. She was likely to need tools, and possibly help from the humans into whose house she had been taken, though how she would explain the nature of the assistance she would require she had as yet no idea. Best to try to find an excuse to remain within the house for the time being until such time as an attempt could be made... but to do that, she would need to gain their trust. And to do *that*, she would have to blend in with the occupants to a far greater degree than she currently did. She surveyed the contents of the room once more, looking for – and failing to find – a shower cubicle. The human body within whose physical form she resided might have grimaced at that point: of course – no electricity. Quite possibly no running water either. *Then how...?*

Her eyes fell on a tin bath in the corner of the room, and she walked over to it. Three large jugs of hot water had been deposited at its base. Primitive, but probably adequate for the task. She stripped without further ado, stepped into the tin bath and crouched down in it. Lifting the nearest jug, she began to pour the tepid water over herself, unexpectedly finding herself savouring the sensation as she did so. Frowning, she scooped up a handful of the water from the bottom of the tin bath, and regarded it closely. *What a peculiar substance... so precious on Mars...* She continued to wash herself for a few minutes more, pausing once more after a few seconds to allow the water to trickle through her fingers. *Such a strange feeling...* From the depths of her memory surfaced a faint recollection of having done something of the kind once before. Where was it? *So many years ago...*

a blurred, shifting mirage of herself as a young child, running down a beach into the warm sea, hovered just within her reach. She frowned and shook her head, dismissing the memory as of no relevance to her mission. *Her mission...*

She stepped out of the bath, picked up the towel that had been deposited nearby and dried herself down, then walked over to the strange garments that had been laid out at the foot of the bed. *Ridiculous clothes...* She picked up the white day-dress and inspected it critically. Bodice fashioned on classical Greek lines with long sleeves, high waist and low neckline; evidently designed specifically to display the bust to maximum effect; texture indicative of slightly damp muslin, clearly unsuited to the concealment of hand weapons. Clinging skirt; relatively light; possibly a silk/cotton combination; sufficiently long to trail on the ground – a serious obstacle to rapid movement, but leaving open the option of concealing a light pistol or hand laser in a holster secured about the calf. She donned the undergarments and then the dress, noting absently that the muslin actually *was* slightly damp.

She walked over to the mirror and inspected herself in it, then twisted her body through a quarter-turn and looked back at her reflection in profile over her shoulder. *Ridiculous clothes...* Raising her hand to the neckline, she straightened the lace *fichu* adorning the *décolletage*, and regarded the mirror intently for another few seconds before opening the door and walking out into the corridor, vaguely conscious of having forgotten something. Stepping over the threshold, her foot registered a fractional drop in the temperature of the floor. Yes, of course. Turning back into the room, she slipped her feet into a pair of shoes that had been left by the door, then stepped out onto the landing outside. At the top of the stairs she stopped and stood quietly for a few moments before walking silently downstairs.

To one side of the entrance hall in which she now stood, she could see through a partially open door a parlour, within which a maid was arranging the flowers in a vase by one of the windows. In the opposite direction across the hallway, a room whose many shelves of books around the walls clearly identified it as a library was visible through an ornate archway, and stretching away beneath the staircase she had just descended, a long plain passage leading towards the back of the house indicated the direction of the kitchens, scullery and the servants' quarters. The massive wooden front door leading out to the driveway beyond appeared to be bolted, and she took a few seconds to cast her eye over the mechanism for opening it before concluding that the task might potentially require more than merely the turning of a handle or a key. No doubt there would be a butler or a footman within call to open it should she require one, but deciding to explore a little first, she turned and started to walk slowly towards the passageway leading to the kitchens, spotting almost immediately a small garden door built into the wall some twenty metres down it. Upon reaching it, she tried the handle and finding the door unlocked, opened it and stepped out into the garden beyond.

The sunlight dazzled her momentarily, and instinctively she raised her hand to her eyes before realising that her pupils had already contracted to accommodate the abnormally high solar radiation level. She frowned to herself, pondering the point. Two errors in rapid succession... strange. Infallible she knew she was not, but even so... The effect of the substantial distance in the *ae'thera* that now separated herself from her Mentors? Perhaps.

She put the matter aside, and surveyed the scene that lay before her. The young boy she had seen from the bedroom window earlier was now peering dejectedly up into the bare branches of a nearly tree, while the young woman accompanying him looked upwards also. Following their gazes, Tina could clearly see the cause of the problem: the ball was lodged in the branches about five metres

above the ground. Though the tree in question was theoretically climbable, it was obvious that the boy was too small to attempt it, and his young female minder was inappropriately dressed for the task – a fact implicitly acknowledged by her words to the infant, which Tina could just make out.

“Come, William, dry up your tears. There is no use in them; they can do no good. The ball shall be returned to you presently, when Reuben has time to recover it.”

The child’s face screwed up in disappointment. “Why may not Reuben return the ball to us *now*, sister?”

“Reuben is busy. He has much to do; also the ball is high in the branches and he is too old to climb. I shall not call him from his work; Papa would not wish it. Come, we shall seek other amusement.”

She took the child’s hand and tried to lead him away, but with little success; the petulant infant wriggled and squirmed, quietly at first and then increasingly vociferously.

From her vantage point in the shadows, Tina continued to watch in silence, quietly analysing the situation. It would be logical to introduce herself to the humans inhabiting this house at a relatively early opportunity, and the young woman before her would be a good place to start, but the child who was evidently entrusted to her constituted a difficulty. It would be prudent to render the latter occupied – and the easiest way to do that would be to recover the ball. Sensing a rudimentary consciousness located within the tree, she looked upwards into the branches which were preventing the ball from falling, and waited. Sure enough, after a few seconds she spotted a tiny movement further up the tree as a small red squirrel that was clinging to the trunk shifted its position.

Turning her full attention to the little rodent, she watched as it first turned its head this way and that, then coming to understand that it needed to be situated within the foliage as opposed to on the bark, it began scrambling firstly further up the trunk, and then along the branch that would bring it into a position directly above the ball. Observing the rodent looking down onto the toy beneath it, she continued to watch closely as it lost its footing and fell from its perch into the branches below, knocking the ball out of the cradle of twigs that held it, out of the tree and down onto the ground. With a cry of delight, the young child ran over to the restored toy and scooped it up into his hands.

“Sister, see! It has fallen; I have it back!”

Watching her younger brother scampering off to play once more with his ball, his elder sibling frowned at a sudden sensation of not being alone, and turned to see a young woman walking towards her from out of the shadow of the wall of the house. Recognising the muslin day-dress as having originated from her personal wardrobe, she broke into a smile and stepped forward to meet the stranger.

"Good *morning* to you! I see you are up and about - are you well?"

The other looked at her closely, her expression open but unreadable, evidently considering her reply. When it came it was short and to the point, offering no clues.

"Yes... I'm well."

The young woman’s warm smile deepened. "I am glad of it! When Papa told me the tale of his discovery of you in the woods, I feared for you! How came you there? Was it the great noise and the lights that brought you out of your bed? Tell me, did you see what it was?"

Tina considered rapidly. A flat denial that she'd seen or heard anything would most likely not be believed, as it took no genius to deduce in the absence of other data that her new acquaintance might come to speculate that her arrival and the sound of the crash-landing could be connected in

some way. Best to feign incomprehension and try to determine to what extent these primitives understood the situation. Her facial expression consciously mirroring that of the other, she spread her hands in a gesture of innocence.

"I don't know... I'm still confused about exactly what happened. I looked up and saw an airborne light source – I've no idea what it was."

The other looked at her closely, her face showing evident concern.

"Are you certain that you are well? Your words are strange, though I *believe* I comprehend the sentiment... I trust that you will forgive the indelicacy, but I am sensible of your unspeakable experience at the hands of the ruffian, and fear it may have disturbed you..."

Tina blinked, suddenly comprehending what the servant in her room earlier was trying to imply.

"You suspect the man in the woods raped me? He didn't – I took his pistol from him and blew out his brains with it before he had the... is something the matter?"

Her companion had turned as white as a sheet.

"Oh, pray do not speak of it! It is too frightful!"

Apparently unaffected extreme reactions to descriptions of acts of violence committed against the person; euphemisms presumably required in conversation; further data required concerning acceptable terminology before attempting to address again...

"I'm unharmed – there's no need to be worried. I... thank you for your concern."

Her companion recovered some of her composure with an obvious effort.

"Forgive me... I have heard tales of the scoundrels that would take our game in the forest by night. They are terrible people – several of our gamekeepers have been injured most sorely! Papa is very brave to venture into the woods, do you not think?"

Formal mode of speech; minimal use of colloquial contractions; evidence of differences in shades of meaning in some phrases; best keep replies to as few words as possible for the time being...

"Yes – I am... I am sure you are right."

The young woman frowned. "But how came you to be in the woods? Do not you know of the vagabonds that poach by night there? Or did you take fright by the great noise and lights, and flee into the forest?"

"I... took fright, yes. Did you see what caused it?"

"I did not see it," replied the other. "I was awoken by a great roaring in the sky, and flares which lit my bedroom in a manner of which I have never seen the like. The sound was most disagreeable, and the room as bright as day – the house shook as it passed over, I swear it! I have heard tales of earthquakes from friends of Papa who have travelled far to the east; perhaps it was one of those. I shall see and hear it in my dreams, I declare!"

So - no concept of powered flight, and therefore no reason to speculate that she might be connected with the events of the previous night. So much the better...

"But I do not know your name. We have been conversing this last quarter of an hour, and I do not even know your name! Will you not tell it to me?"

"Tina. My name... my name is Tina. What is yours?"

“Oh! Forgive me... I am Cassandra – Cassandra Creighton. Over there you see playing with his ball my brother William. We live in the house you see before you... come, let me show you around – William will not miss us if we are not too long... indeed, will you not take tea with me... Tina? I would learn more of your adventure, if it is not too frightful.”

Her new friend regarded her closely. “Thank you... Cassandra. I will take tea. That would be most... agreeable.”

3 Cassandra Creighton Engages her New Friend in Conversation

“But *why*, dear Tina? To venture into the woods after sun-down? *Alone!* I cannot conceive of such folly whatever the inducement, for surely all the world knows the nature of the poachers’ trade and the brutishness with which they pursue it. Papa would never countenance it for anyone in his employ, much less his kin. Is the world so different whence you come that you can think nothing of such an enterprise?”

Tina raised the delicate china cup to her lips on the pretext of sampling the insipid brew while formulating her reply. The questions had been coming thick and fast for the previous quarter of an hour with little sign of abating, and although concocting a comprehensive fabrication was well within her capabilities, a web of half-truths and vague generalisations would require less effort to maintain.

“Where I come from things are not as they are in this land, it is true. My ancestors were explorers – they left these shores almost two centuries ago to seek freedom from persecution, preferring to face the unknown dangers of such an adventure to the known risks of remaining. In view of this, does it so surprise you to discover that the frame of mind appropriate to such an attitude should persist throughout the generations?”

“I suppose it does not,” replied Cassandra with a frown. “But even so, there is folly and there is absurd folly, would you not agree? Even the most fearless of explorers who value their safety go armed, and yet Papa tells me that you carried no weapon with you!”

“I am perfectly capable of protecting myself, as I have explained. Those who.... those who guide my fate sought enlightenment through hardship and physical challenge.”

“But... but even were you not fearful for your life, surely you were fearful for... for your virtue?”

Her companion’s eyes blinked at her over the rim of her teacup. “My what?”

Cassandra blinked back in bewilderment, regarding Tina for a further full second before realising that her companion’s seemingly incomprehensible question was genuine. Did this remarkable woman not *understand* the term? Rather than endure the embarrassment of attempting to elaborate – and indeed, she was not entirely insensible to the fact that she might have encountered some small difficulty in doing so – she merely shook her head in wonder.

“Dear Tina, how strange you are to me! Let it not concern you, for what innocent young woman would be burdened with an understanding of the darker side of men’s nature? But you speak of those who guide your fate – who are they? Have they foretold your future? Will you tell me what it is? I would know of such things!”

Tina put down her cup and regarded her through amused eyes. “You have an interest in knowing the future, Cassandra?”

Cassandra’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, who does not? I wish to know what my husband will be like! What shall be the colour of his eyes? How shall he dress? Such things are of great import, for I would know whether I shall be rich or poor...”

Her new friend nodded to herself, as though having a suspicion confirmed. “I think we are describing rather different manners of fortune telling, Cassandra. The future is not written in such

detail as you describe: I speak of the future of civilisations, while you concern yourself merely with the peripheral consequences. You need to broaden your vision.”

“But mystic seers from faraway countries – Romany and Gipsy I have heard say – are to be found who know such things as I describe, and for but a few pence will reveal such secrets as any young girl would know – all the world knows this!”

“All the world knows many things,” observed Tina dryly. “But the fact of it contributes nothing to their veracity or otherwise. People such as these practise deception for profit – and those who heed them are superstitious primitives. Those who guide my fate *create* the future.”

“To be sure, I never heard of the telling of fortunes dismissed so – nor such confidence expressed in the ability of one’s forebears to guide their offspring! And yet you speak in such forthright words that I cannot but listen and take note. Dear friend, are you sure of that of which you speak?”

Tina’s lips displayed a fleeting smile, though the expression in her eyes did not change.

“My dear Cassandra, you may depend upon it.”

4 Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Discuss Cassandra's New Friend

Mr Thomas Harrison glanced down the corridor into the dining room where the two young ladies were clearly engaged in some intimate tête-à-tête, then turned in his chair to resume the conversation with his companion.

“Miss Creighton seems very much more animated since I was last here – is it merely that she has grown so much in these last few months, or does her new friend inspire her?”

“A little of both, I fancy,” replied Colonel Creighton thoughtfully. “Had I but foreseen the effect Miss Palamac’s residing within our household would have upon Cassandra’s disposition and demeanour, I should have found her a companion long since. Her countenance and deportment also – I increasingly see her adopt the attitudes and mannerisms of her new friend in many things. She can but derive benefit from it: since the untimely death of her poor mother these seven years since, I had given up all hope that she might marry well on account of her descent into ways more reminiscent of a rustic than a lady, but I now find myself obliged to consider the possibility anew. She may yet attain a position worthy of her connections. I am hopeful of it, I confess.”

His companion raised an eyebrow. “And how does *she* view such a prospect, Creighton? For as long as I have known her she has regarded such considerations with something less than equanimity. I would describe her as a romantic, not a wife. She would be bored within a fortnight – you know it.”

Creighton dismissed the assertion with a shrug. “Wealth and position would permit her to indulge such fascinations as she would pursue. You yourself must acknowledge this, for would your circle of friends at the Royal Institution have made such wondrous discoveries as they have these last few years without being largely free of pecuniary constraints?”

“Of some that might be said,” acknowledged Harrison. “but for many more it has been the diligence and dedication with which they have pursued their careers that has brought them to the attention of those with the vision and foresight to sponsor and support them in their aims.”

“That is all well enough, but how might one such as Cassandra attain such a position, sir? You are a man, but she is a young woman: the worlds in which you live – and the opportunities pertaining to them – could scarcely be more different. Nay sir, she must marry. She may then immerse herself in such amusements as she will.”

Mr Harrison laughed good-naturedly. “*Amusements*, Creighton? Our very future lies in these ‘amusements’, sir! Allow her a year or two at least – she is barely out of childhood yet. Then... who knows? I might even be able to suggest an eminent discoverer of knowledge myself for her to marry at the end of that time.”

“You know of such a man?”

Mr Harrison adopted a speculative air. “He is not yet twenty years of age, and thoughts of marriage are the very last thing likely to preoccupy him at this time. But one day he will make his mark. My friend and colleague Mr Davy has said as much, for it was Davy himself who hired him... but of course, I forgot! You know him well, for you and he are related, are you not?”

Creighton blinked in surprise. “What – surely you do not mean young Cousin Michael? Is he now Davy’s assistant, then?”

“Indeed he is – had you not heard? You recall that accident with the trichloride of nitrogen of which I wrote to you late last year? It left my friend temporarily blinded, though through the grace of God he recovered speedily enough – but even so he was unable to continue with his work unaided for a further three months. Your relative was already familiar with Davy’s work at the Royal Institution, so he engaged him directly. I understand that since that time he has proven himself most capable – so capable indeed that there have been occasions upon which even Davy himself has not grasped the purport of his resear... Miss Creighton! And Miss Palamac also?”

Both men rose to their feet as the two young ladies entered the room, Cassandra instinctively taking a step towards the blazing fire before speaking.

“Mr Harrison – I was just telling Tina of your work at the Royal Institution when we heard your voice. But do we intrude, father? We can go outside, for the morning frost is now dissipated...”

Her father waved aside the implied apology with a dismissive gesture and a smile.

“I would not hear of it, Cassandra, for there is enough warmth here for all. We also were talking of Mr Harrison’s work, and that of Cousin Michael also – will you not join us? Hardly a month goes by without some amazing new discovery coming out of that place.”

“This age in which we now live will assuredly be remembered and revered by tomorrow’s historians,” agreed Harrison. “As I was saying but a few moments ago, that young relative of yours lays claim to an increasing degree of fame with his experiments, for they are more entertaining than are those of his seniors. Just a few months ago he made the legs of a dead frog twitch as if still alive for an instant by means of a flash of lightning conjured up within a glass jar... why, Miss Creighton! Do you not feel well?”

“Such matters are beyond me, sir – their contemplation is surely intended for the mind of the Lord, and His alone – so I think I shall retire and take tea. Will you join me, dear Tina?”

Her father raised an eyebrow. “Do you not want to hear of this, Cassandra? These matters concern us all, for they strike at our very understanding of what is life and what is death. For myself, I would hear more.”

Cassandra shook her head. “I think I shall not remain, Papa, for I can make nothing of it.”

“Have you tried and failed, then? Or have you not tried at all?”

“I should not know where to begin, and even were it not so I should not comprehend the import. Such matters are for men of learning, not young females such as I.”

Mr Harrison sought to stifle a snort, but failed. “Miss Creighton – do you claim inferiority of intellect by virtue of your sex, or your age – or perhaps both? For myself I do not accept it: it is my sincere belief that the limits of one such as yourself are determined solely by your own desire to define them. I say that you may do whatsoever you will.”

“My sole wishes in life,” replied Cassandra after a brief pause to collect her thoughts, “are to live a long and fruitful life, and to protect to the best of my ability those I hold dear to me from harm. Such tasks I may attempt to perform without the aid of such assaults upon the natural order; also I confess I do not like frogs, either alive *or* dead – but Cousin Michael may experiment with them as he chooses, as long as he does it somewhere else.”

“Would you not seek to gain knowledge for its own sake then, Miss Creighton? A great man once said that knowledge and power are one and the same, and which among us is not desirous of the ability to control their own destiny?”

Cassandra laughed. “I note that you say a great *man*, sir – not a great woman! How many great women throughout the ages have there been whose words of wisdom we may recite? Nay, sir – the theory and the practice are at odds in this matter; however such idealists as you would have it, a young woman’s destiny is not hers to shape. Nor does such contemplation trouble me unduly, for my physical destiny lies in the hands of Papa, and my spiritual destiny lies in the hands of the sweet Lord Jesus. What need I desire more than this?”

Harrison arched a disapproving eyebrow. “I am no idealist, Miss Creighton – and your words echo the creed of those who would see their lives destroyed by the folly or malice of others and do nothing to oppose it. I would have you set it aside, for it ill-becomes you; the good Lord to whom you commend your spirit gave you brains in the hope and expectation that you would use them. Shall you do this if you do not strive to comprehend the world He made for us to live in?”

“I perceive you to be cleverer than I, sir,” retorted Cassandra mildly, “and thus I trust you will educate me in such mysteries of the physical world that you *do* resolve. If I perceive that I may apply them to the benefit of those around me, you may be certain that I shall do it. Papa – you are amused! Have I said something foolish?”

The colonel shook his head with a smile. “Not a word, dearest daughter – not one single word. I was merely reflecting upon the extent to which your wit has sharpened in the space of a few short weeks. You may take the part of an innocent, but I think you may yet aspire to holding your own in any after-dinner debate – whether with the ladies *or* the gentlemen. What is your opinion on this matter, Miss Palamac?”

“*Papa!* It is indelicate to embarrass my friend by asking that she reports such matters!” complained Cassandra. “You present her with two options whilst I remain – either to tell the truth or to dissemble. The former can but lower your opinion of *me*, and the latter can but lower your opinion of *her*. Therefore I shall withdraw, so that she may speak freely. Dear Tina – I shall await you in the drawing room... where I promise not to question you about what you say about me after I am gone.”

She walked away with as much dignity as she could muster, after which her father burst into a hearty chuckle. “It is true... I sometimes forget she is no longer a girl. Such is the curse of a father, and I hope one day she will forgive me for it. But you are probably more sensible of her development recently than any other in this house, Miss Palamac. Would you not agree that she has progressed greatly of late?”

“There is little I can contribute,” observed Tina dryly, “that has not already been observed. My new friend possesses many virtues that would set her apart in any culture, and those she yet lacks will come soon enough. I would not recognise a stated unwillingness actively to seek knowledge as a virtue, it is true... but I sense that perhaps even this is something of a protective veil, for I fancy I perceive within her thoughts an instinct to present a less formidable aspect to an adversary than she actually possesses.”

Mr Harrison blinked in amused surprise at the sudden turn of the conversation. “*Adversary*, Miss Palamac? Is Miss Creighton to fight a war, then?”

“All existence is a war, sir,” replied Tina quietly. “Real or potential, it is all the same. For the most part we watch our adversaries from afar, for who can say when the battle might commence? For of one thing we may be certain: if we do not seek to join battle ourselves, then battle will surely commence when we least wish it, and when we are least prepared for it. If my friend has learned something of that truth from me, I think she will profit by it in due course.”

“Why, you speak with the authority of a seasoned military commander, Miss Palamac! Are there Amazons to be found whence you come?”

“I merely acknowledge the reality of life behind this cultural façade, sir. The tranquillity that those around you have come to look upon as natural to this style of life could be swept away in a single night.”

“I think you are mistaken in this belief, Miss Palamac,” retorted Harrison, shaking his head. “War may ravage upon the continent as it always does, but this land is at peace, by the grace of God.”

“I think I am *not* mistaken, sir. Death lies not two miles from this very house in the form of the poacher who sought to assault me – and had it not been his body that the good colonel’s men buried there, I fancy it would have been mine in its place. Let us not delude ourselves as to the nature of the peace that this land enjoys, for there are those who given the opportunity would destroy it in an instant. The poacher’s kin, for example – will they not seek vengeance for his death?”

The colonel snorted with just the merest hint of a scowl.

“Pah! My gamekeepers had to pry the pistol from his dead fingers when I sent them to recover his corpse the next morning. All saw that but a single shot had been fired – which I heard myself ere I came across his body with you yourself standing over it. None can doubt that his death was by his own hand, nor that his discreditable end was but a just reward for his crimes. All who live hereabouts know that his corpse was found upon *my* lands, where he sought to assail a young gentlewoman who now resides under *my* protection. With this weight of evidence – even should they attempt to dispute it – his kin can do nothing. We are well prepared against vagabonds such as they: every law in this land will support us should they seek to revenge themselves upon me for the loss of one of their unholy breed. It would be my word against theirs, and no right-thinking magistrate would listen to *them*.”

“Of that I shall defer to your opinion,” mused Tina, “but I would put it to you that such was the very point I was making. That which you so easily describe as ‘peace’ is based upon mutual suspicion and preparedness. In such matters the law is your ally, for it was fashioned by those in a position both to formulate and enforce it – and thus those who know they may never profit by appealing to it will seek other ways to obtain such justice as they consider is owed them. You should be wary when you venture abroad... but then you know this already, however you may dismiss the danger to others. But now, perhaps you would excuse me? Cassandra has expressed a wish to teach me the rules of some card games with which she is familiar, and I would not cause her consternation by my tardy arrival.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned away from the two men and set off at a measured pace in the direction of the drawing room. Each looked at the other in astonishment, and Harrison gave a hearty chuckle.

“I say – she’s a straight one!”

The colonel thoughtfully watched the young woman walk away. “The more I converse with her, the less I know her, Harrison. She fascinates me, I confess it. I shall be sorely grieved the day she chooses to leave us, as one day surely she must. But to what faraway shore will she go? And how will she pay her passage?”

His guest looked thoughtful. “I would guess that she hails from the Americas – she speaks strangely, as I have heard the ladies of that land speak. And it is said they are uncommonly direct, as again is she.”

“But surely she cannot be. Did ever you see such delicate skin? I have heard it said that folk who live in those climes are much browned by the sun – this is common knowledge in Portsmouth.”

The other shook his head. “The tars speak of those that live and work in the ports of the South, Creighton. The owners of the estates and plantations are our kin; they resemble us in every regard save in their allegiances – for which they have paid dear of late, I think. Perhaps she is the daughter of one of them, though why she might be travelling in this country I would not venture to guess. But I shall not be uncivil on account of the wars – she is both amiable and pretty, and her eyes and tongue betray no mean intellect. Speaking for myself, I would know her better. How came she here?”

The colonel spread his hands in a gesture of ignorance. “I cannot say. I chanced upon her in the woods in the early hours before dawn, upon the very night of the great light and noise of which I told you, these two months since. I feared for my pheasants, and was riding through the woods armed to the teeth when I encountered her standing over the body of that poacher of whom we were speaking earlier. I offered her shelter for the night, and she has remained with us ever since. Cassandra finds her company most agreeable, despite her somewhat stern countenance. As you surely know, Cassandra has had little companionship since her dear mother died seven years ago last spring, so I have bid her stay for as long as she might wish it. Though she says little, and I would not press her to speak of herself contrary to her wishes, I believe her to be without friends in England.”

“*Palamac* – is that the name of her family?”

“Yes – I confess I never heard the like of it before – to my ears it brings echoes of the Incas or the Aztecs. Perhaps she was born and raised in some such heathen place – I do not know. Since her arrival I have introduced her to our guests as a friend of Cassandra who is staying with us throughout the winter as my ward, and she has not seen fit to contradict me.”

“Then if I am ever obliged to introduce her to anyone when I have forgotten it, I shall call her Miss Ward, I think,” chuckled his companion. “It sounds to me more in keeping with her aristocratic bearing and demeanour, and less likely to evoke visions of blowpipes and poisoned arrows, eh?”

5 Cassandra Works a Sampler while Miss Palamac Prepares her Toys

By the flickering light of the fire that burned in the grate between them, Cassandra strove to insert the thread-bearing needle into the correct hole of the grid that was stretched over the small wooden circular frame in her hands. On the other side of the fireplace her companion, seemingly unconcerned by poor light, busied herself with the assembly of a small metallic device which uttered the occasional high-pitched clicking sound as she worked. Open at her feet lay a compact white carrying case, within which Cassandra could just discern an assortment of small artefacts which appeared to be secured by an array of clips.

“Will you have another glass of apple juice, Tina? I do not wish to boast of it, but it is made from the produce of our own orchard, and I think it is very fine.”

Her companion glanced up, raising her hand to place it briefly over the glass which Cassandra was about to replenish. “I shall not, thank you – it is just a little sweet for my taste. I confess I am accustomed to somewhat more... more potent substances.”

“But why did you not say so earlier! I would have called for the parlour maid to bring a glass of sherry...”

Again, Tina shook her head. “If you would like some yourself then by all means send a maid for it, but I would not suffer you to do so on my account. The activity with which I am concerning myself this evening requires attention to detail, and even one glass of an intoxicating beverage would both slow me down and increase the risk of my making a mistake.”

Cassandra giggled. “Papa says that Mr Harrison shows a greater predilection to sniffing one of his friend Mr Davy’s mysterious gases that he has discovered than to drink port like other guests to this house. It makes him laugh just like someone who has consumed an entire bottle; indeed Papa says that Mr Harrison is of the opinion that it is to be highly recommended, for it conveys all the benefits of intoxicating liquors without any of the drawbacks.”

Tina put down the device upon which she was working and regarded her friend closely. “This Mr Harrison, Cassandra – who is he? Clearly your father and he know each other well, for they have spent much time together this last week.”

“Mr Harrison is an old friend of our family,” replied Cassandra. “He is a most eminent mathematician, and as a student at Cambridge was awarded the highest honours. He thereafter entered the legal profession, retiring from that career only recently. Since then he has been engaged in a number of administrative tasks on behalf of the Royal Institution, which is greatly appreciated, but which occupies a great deal of his time. His diligence and dedication to this commission is such that Papa feared he might make himself ill, and invited him to stay with us awhile to recuperate. That was last spring, since which time he has visited us twice more. This then is his third visit to Foxley, and Papa has invited him to enjoy a few short weeks in the tranquillity of our home before returning to the arduous work that awaits him in London. However even for such a short time they will not leave him alone, for earlier in the week he received a letter to the effect that his attendance at a meeting of the council is requested the day after tomorrow.”

“Indeed? Did he not anticipate such an intrusion?”

“He did anticipate it, but he considered that the matters to be discussed would not require his presence. Indeed, he has said he will not go, and has written back to tell them to have the papers sent to him here instead, that he may study them at his leisure. A courier will arrive with them on the stagecoach tomorrow morning.”

She paused, and looked down at the work in her lap. “Do you like my workmanship, Tina?”

Tina frowned at the cloth and wooden device. “What are you doing? You appear to be interlacing coloured threads into a lattice, though to what purpose I cannot imagine. Whatever it is, I cannot but believe that a suitably fashioned mechanical instrument could easily be progr... devised to perform the same task both more rapidly and with greater accuracy.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes, grinning, then held up the piece of cloth she was holding so that her friend could see the whole design. “I am working a *sampler*, Tina! It is a hobby in which I indulge, not an industry! Have you not seen one before?”

“No, I have not.”

“Such pursuits are more commonly the diversions of younger ladies than I, but I confess I find the activity soothing – and of course the quality of my work is far better than that of any child. Many have complimented me upon it. Will you not tell me what *you* are making, Tina? I never before saw the like of it.”

Tina put down the device onto her lap and looked up. “It is a toy, Cassandra.”

“A toy? What manner of toy?”

“It is a Chinese puzzle box. It is an intricate construction which serves to confound its owner when he or she attempts to open it, for the means to do so is well concealed. This device also possesses certain secrets that hide the manner of its construction from prying eyes.”

“Is it for a child that you are making it?”

Tina shook her head. “I require it for the purpose of securing safely within it another toy which is particularly delicate, and which upon which I need to perform some adjustments. There was a time not so long ago when I worked with many toys, for I have a flair for such things.”

“What is the other toy? May I see it?”

Tina reached into her carrying case and extracted from it a large and somewhat bulky dark green brooch, fashioned in the form of a dragon. Its body and tail were tightly wound into a coil, of which its head stood proud by perhaps a centimetre. Cassandra took the beautiful ornament from the palm of Tina’s hand and held it up in front of the fire; its flames were just visible through the translucence, although heavily distorted.

“Oh, Tina - it is *delightful*! Is it jade? I have heard of jade – it is a precious stone, is it not?”

“It is not jade, though it is fashioned in the style of personal decorations that are made of that mineral. In common with all the toys in the case, the substance is artificial.”

“The eyes of the dragon are most fierce, for they are bright red! I think they are rubies...”

Tina permitted herself a wry smile. “The eyes are certainly fearsome – but once again, they are not precious stones. Regrettably however, I must take now the brooch back from you, for as I said a moment ago, it is most delicate – and the eyes are the most delicate part of all. Were it to be mishandled, it might cause an injury to anyone who might tinker with it – and the adjustments to which I referred earlier will render such an unfortunate occurrence less likely.”

She gently lifted the brooch from Cassandra's hand, and returned it to the carrying case. Cassandra leaned over to look more closely at the rows of other toys arrayed within. "Did you make all those yourself, Tina? I see a small model lighthouse there... and there is a toy butterfly – why, how beautiful it is! And is that not a tiny cannon there in the bottom left-hand corner? Why, William would be enchanted, for he loves to play with toy soldiers..."

She cast the sampler to one side and lightly skipped over to her friend, reaching down and lifting the little toy out of the case as she stepped over it.

"Oh! How intricately made it is! The workmanship is very fine, for I can feel the parts moving in my hands... might he perhaps borrow it?"

In less than two seconds, Tina was on her feet. Gently but firmly she prised the miniaturised disintegrator from her friend's fingers and returned it to the case, which she then closed and snapped shut. Dropping back into her chair, she shook her head regretfully.

"I feel perhaps that would be unwise, for the toy is intended for older children. It could be dangerous in very young hands, and I fear he might injure himself with it. But my work upon the puzzle box is now complete, and I may now put it aside while I concern myself with my main task for the evening. Would you like to inspect it? It might amuse William also."

Her friend peered at the strangely interlocked pieces of wood with obvious interest. "It is most intricate – you are so very accomplished in all things, for I now see that the pieces from which it is made move – I can slide some of them to and fro with my fingers! Why is it constructed in this fashion?"

"The component parts of the box are the means by which the box preserves its secrets. There is a cushioned empty space inside, into which I shall eventually place the brooch to protect it from knocks and bumps. The box cannot be opened unless all the pieces of the surrounding wall are arranged and oriented in a pattern which only I know – and before you ask, the answers to your next two questions are 'yes' and 'no' in that order. Yes, you may try to find it out if you wish, and no, I shall *not* tell you the answer when you fail."

"Oh, dear Tina – surely you shall!"

"I shall not. *Now* do you still insist that lack of understanding is a good thing? Here, take the toy and see what you can make of it, for I have other things to which I wish to attend."

She tossed it over to her companion, who began to fiddle with it eagerly. Secure in the knowledge that it would keep her young friend occupied for at least another hour, she then reached down into the sample case at her feet, extracted from it the model lighthouse that her friend had commented upon earlier, removed its power cells and pushed them surreptitiously into the embers burning in the grate. Hardly the most efficient of recharging procedures to be sure; it would be almost morning before they had attained their maximum capacity, but no matter – it would be at least that long before the device itself was needed. Settling herself back in her chair, she began the painstaking task of recalibrating the picowave emitters for underwater usage.

6 Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Plan a Morning Walk

Harrison lined up his knife and fork upon the now-empty plate with the precision of a draughtsman, leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes in a gesture of appreciative contentment.

“I do enjoy a well-smoked trout, Creighton! Were these caught from one of the streams that flow through this estate?”

The other nodded. “Aye, the lake is well stocked – in addition to the trout we also have salmon and striped bass: you must try them. The lake stretches away from the house to the west, some two miles through the woods, and is the westernmost border of these grounds, beyond which lies the village of Foxley. It is an exhilarating walk – I myself take a turn to Gallowstree Common, and thence to the northern shore of the lake and back most mornings before breakfast in the wintertime. I invite you to accompany me there upon the morrow if you will.”

“I should enjoy it, to be sure. When shall we leave?”

Creighton grinned, rolling his eyes in mock despair. “The maid who sets the fireplace in the entrance hall awakens me every morning without fail by the clatter she makes. The proximity of my bedroom to the top of the stairs renders the noise all the more acute for me, and I dare say it will awaken you in a likewise manner if you are expecting to hear it. Would you be ready a half-hour thereafter?”

“Oh, I am an early enough riser when I have good cause. I shall be there.”

“Splendid – then it is settled – and I can point out the covies of my finest pheasants on the way.”

He stifled a yawn, and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“It grows late – and by your leave I’ll retire to bed, my friend. And if we are to make that early start, I recommend you do likewise. The silence of the night hereabouts is particularly conducive to tardy rising in the morning.”

He glanced down at the two empty plates on the table before them, and grinned sheepishly at his friend.

“Especially the morning after a day concluded with a well-smoked trout.”

7 Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Make a Discovery

Mr Harrison breathed in deeply of the crisp early morning air, closed his eyes and stretched his arms upwards into the sky.

“I’ll say this for the life to which you were born, Creighton – there’s not a working man in London who would not exchange his daily toil in the stench and smoke for such a paradise as this, if he but knew that it was more than a daydream.”

Creighton chuckled. “To be sure... from what little I’ve seen of London’s squalor, that’s true enough. Strange to me then that migration between the country and the cities takes place overwhelmingly in the direction of the former to the latter. Yet the search for employment is indeed a powerful motivation. More’s the pity it does not better motivate the vagabonds hereabouts who steal in the night from honest folk, for protecting that which is mine costs me dear. Even this paradise is not free of its serpents, my friend.”

Harrison shrugged. “It is well said that he who has nothing, has nothing to lose. Miss Palamac observed as much but a few days since, and she was right enough. Only fear of the wrath of the gentry keeps them in check...”

He stopped in mid-sentence as his host suddenly held up his hand in a gesture for silence. Slowly he turned, scanning the woods intently.

“What is it, Creighton? What have you seen?”

Creighton shook his head. “Seen? Nay, I’ve seen nothing yet. It was that barn owl that drew my attention – did you not hear it?”

The other frowned. “What – the screech? Indeed I heard it, but thought nothing of it. Can you be so sure of the breed of bird without seeing it?”

Creighton stifled a snort. “That you are city born and bred is as much of a mystery as this, Harrison. I can tell you with certainty that it was a barn owl – *and* that it was unexpectedly disturbed by a stranger in the woods. The one remaining mystery is who that stranger might be. Not Parkins’ kin for sure – those vermin dare not show their faces after sunrise – and yet I know of no other within the village who is accustomed to partake of such constitutional exertion so soon after daybreak. But no matter – we may walk the full length of the shoreline without risk to ourselves. There’s scant cover to conceal an ambush, and as I said, men of ill intent in these parts are gone long since. Far too easy it is to recognise their faces in the light of day, and the word of *two* gentlemen would send any assailant to the gallows in less than two shakes of a mare’s tail.”

They strode forward together through the long grass, feeling the ground beneath their feet becoming increasingly pliable as the trees slowly began to peter out, giving way to reeds and rushes. Taking a few more strides towards the water that now sparkled and glistened before them in the morning sunshine, Colonel Creighton turned on his heel and gestured expansively toward the wood.

“Pheasants, sir! Pheasants aplenty shall we find within the undergrowth that now lies before us. What – can you see one? They’re not usually...”

The colonel's voice tailed away as he followed his friend's line of sight, which was focussed squarely at the highest branches of one of the nearby trees. Squinting, his companion shaded his eyes against the rising sun with one hand, and gestured towards the skyline with the other.

"Do you not see it, Creighton? Why, I'll swear the upper branches of those bushes are *burned*, man! Are you prone to forest fires in Foxley, then?"

Colonel Creighton blinked at him uncertainly, then peered upwards once more in the direction that his friend was pointing.

"The devil take me – you're right! And look there also... that branch upon the ground yonder is charred as though it were snatched blazing from a bonfire! Who has been trespassing hereabouts, and what mischief have they been making, eh? Do they seek to burn my woods to the ground?"

Harrison shook his head doubtfully. "If such a scheme were someone's intent then they've a damned uncommon way of setting about it, for what fool would climb a tree, set fire to it and then climb down again? Would they not build a bonfire about the *base* of the tree as opposed to within its highest branches? Nay, this theory does not satisfy me – I fancy we must seek elsewhere for an explanation. Tell me, Creighton – how long ago was this shooting star of which your maidservants were prattling when I arrived?"

"It was some weeks past – the same night that Miss Palamac came to lodge with us, for she was wandering alone in the woods that night when I found her. Why do you ask?"

"Is it not obvious, sir? Not six weeks ago a fireball was seen in the sky. We see before us the unmistakable marks of a fire that shows no sign of having scorched the ground. Can this be chance?"

"But shooting stars fly through the heavens – you said so once before, I recall. I never heard of one falling to the ground before."

His companion chuckled. "I never heard of sparks animating a frog's leg before until your young cousin showed me one not three months ago! These days I try to keep an open mind about such matters – and in this instance it behoves us to speculate where shooting stars might go after they have done sailing through the heavens. Birds sail through the heavens also, do they not – but I have seen many dead ones lying upon the ground when their flying days are through. Can we be so sure that shooting stars do not fall also?"

"You spoke of this before... sparks animating a frog's leg? You are not serious, surely?"

"I *am* serious! I have seen it with my own eyes – and the consideration that nobody has ever found a shooting star that has fallen to earth before does not in my opinion constitute proof that they do not do it. Perhaps they usually burn up in the sky – I know it not. But to pursue the notion further... if a shooting star *has* fallen to earth, I'll wager you fifty guineas that I know where it is now."

Creighton watched, intrigued, as the tip of his companion's finger slowly lowered towards the expanse of pondweed before them.

"You think it possible?"

"I do, sir! Where else could it be? Beneath that green slime yonder lies a fallen star, or what might remain of it – my life upon it. Already I am asking myself how it might be retrieved... for were it possible to accomplish such a feat, it would be the discovery of the age!"

Creighton let forth a lusty chuckle as he considered the implications of such an enterprise.

“What – drain the *lake*, would you? Well, never was it said of you that you shirked a challenge, my friend, but I’d have you know you would find it an uncommonly difficult task. The marshlands surrounding the lake are fed by two tributaries which flow through Holroyd’s estate some miles to the east – and that old devil would sooner sprinkle his morning porridge with brimstone than inconvenience himself on my account by damming one of his streams.”

He glanced up at the sun, now rising steadily into the morning sky. Suddenly conscious of having not yet eaten, he patted his stomach and grinned.

“Machiavellian machinations or whatever, I’m hungry! How about you, my friend? I say we make our way back, and talk as we go. Food for thought, eh?”

His companion blinked out of his reverie. “Aye - as you say, food for thought. Whatever lies down there, it’ll await our return – but as we walk, let me tell you of a notion I have that might address the question of how we might see what lies down there...”

As they marched away in the direction of the manor house the reeds bordering the lake parted to reveal a pair of unblinking blue eyes regarding their departure thoughtfully. So... burn marks on the bushes bordering the lake – probably caused by the lateral thrusters attempting to stabilise the ship during the final descent. No matter: they would make nothing of that, though talk of the phenomenon might possibly result in unwelcome expeditions by other members of the household. Perhaps it might be prudent to postpone further visits to the ship until any resulting interest in the discovery had abated....

No, that was unwise. During her last excursion she had succeeded in reducing the strength of the seal on the main escape hatch to just five percent of its nominal value before the power supply on her makeshift molecular disruptor had been exhausted. If the water pressure were to force the hatch in her absence she would have to drain the command section before proceeding with the next stage of the operation – and that could take weeks, to say nothing of the possibility of the ship’s main lasers incurring damage in the meantime. No... the plan would have to proceed on schedule, and possibly speeded up. She divested herself of all her clothes, and wrapped them into a neat bundle which she concealed beneath an easily identifiable bush, then walked slowly and deliberately into the icy lake, her naked body sinking lower and lower in the water until only her head was visible... and then even that was gone, leaving just a faint concentric trace of ripples expanding outwards on the surface.

8 Cassandra Seeks to Educate her Younger Brother

Cassandra sat up in bed, blinked several times as she stretched her arms, and then frowned once more at the little puzzle box which lay on her pillow beside her. She picked it up and peered closely at it, then spent a further ten minutes applying every possible contortion of the fingertips to it before throwing it down onto the pillow again in a petulant gesture of frustration. A night's sleeping on the problem had clearly done nothing to suggest a path that might lead to the solution. She sighed, threw back the sheet, swivelled her body to position her legs over the cold wooden floor, and then braced herself for the dreaded moment when her bare feet would first come into contact with it.

A sharp tap on the door provided her with an excuse to delay the dreaded moment, and she rolled back into the bed before calling "Enter!" The door opened and Carey stumbled in, with a jug of hot water in one hand and a warm towel in the other. Cassandra acknowledged Carey's quizzical expression with a nod, and she stepped over to the basin to fill it with water.

"Where is Miss Palamac, Carey? Is she about?"

The servant shook her head. "I don't think it so, ma'am. I seen her first thing in the morning while I'm making the fire, but I've not seen her since. I'm thinkin' maybe she's out a-walking, for she often goes out afore anyone else in the house rises – even meself!"

Cassandra nodded, unsurprised: her friend had taken herself off for several solitary walks in the grounds of late, sometimes for hours on end. If this was one of those expeditions, the mystery of the infuriating little box would not be solved before the afternoon at the very earliest, and possibly not before sundown. She sighed, and dismissed Carey with a wave of her hand before finally braving the floor with her bare feet. Dressing herself quickly, she stepped out into the corridor and descended the stairs, wrinkling her nose at the faint smell of a familiar assortment of breakfast dishes from the dining room. Two of the three occupants of the room looked up as she entered, her father pointing to the empty plate in her usual place with a quizzical look on his face, and Mr Harrison rising to his feet in acknowledgement of her arrival before settling himself back into his chair once more. The third person at the table was her brother William, whose mouth at that moment was full of porridge, and who barely glanced up as she sat down.

"I perceive you have been up and about for some time, Father! Have you and Mr Harrison been taking the morning air?"

Harrison swallowed the last piece of ham on his plate, and put down his knife and fork. "Your father has been giving me a tour of the grounds, Miss Creighton. I had not previously appreciated that they were so extensive: the walk gives one an appetite."

"Indeed! Tell me, did you see Tina in the course of your travels? Carey tells me she also was up and about early."

The colonel shook his head. "No... we saw no-one. A deuced strange thing down by the southern shore of the lake though: the upper branches of some of the trees along the shoreline were burned. Harrison here has a theory about it: we were discussing it when you entered."

Cassandra frowned. "Strange that you should not have seen Tina – but as you say, the estate is large. Perhaps she went to the east. Shall we go and see if we can find her after breakfast, William?"

The youngster pulled a face. "Go if you wish, sister. I shall play while you search."

Cassandra's frown deepened. "I think you play too much, William! The house is full of books – and despite my earnest attempts to interest you in their contents, I never once saw you pick one up and open it of your own accord. How shall you make your way in the world if you have no knowledge of the words of wise men? I am sure Mr Harrison will support me in this."

The other nodded sagely, though Cassandra noted the twinkle in his eyes momentarily before he adopted an appropriately stern countenance to address her younger brother.

"Assuredly, it is so. You will not see a single man speak at the Royal Institution who has not availed himself extensively of all literature pertinent to his discourse. Reading is the bedrock upon which all knowledge may be founded."

Cassandra shot him a thankful glance. "There, William – pay heed to one of the most learned men in the land, and consider yourself honoured that he deigns to advise you. And take from it this noteworthy advice: *'That the more one learns about that which one knows nothing of, the more one gains in wisdom.'*"

She paused for dramatic effect. "Now tell me, William – who said that?"

The boy wrinkled his nose. "You did, sister."

Cassandra rolled her eyes and glared at him. "Oh, William - wilful ignorance is unworthy of you! You know perfectly well that I am asking you who said it *first*."

Conscious of the unwanted attention he was now attracting, the lad's expression tinged with a hint of truculence. "I do not know. May I go and play now?"

Cassandra regarded him closely, and sighed. "You *may* go and play... but before you do, you will fetch me the little blue and gold book that is next to the ormolu clock on the sideboard in the drawing room. Fetch it now, please."

The lad scampered off, and Cassandra turned to her father in exasperation. "I teach him what I can, Papa, but sometimes I struggle. He lacks the dedication that is incumbent upon anyone who would commit himself to serious study."

"Aye – I can see it myself," agreed her father. "Notwithstanding your own commitment to his education – and I truly believe that none could have done it with greater diligence than you, Cassandra – the boy now needs a firmer hand to lead him into adulthood. Perhaps I should have engaged a governess to undertake this task, for she would also have provided companionship for you. Indeed, I did consider it most seriously a year ago, but I was sensible of your wish to tutor him yourself, and held back. The decision may have been wrong... but that is now water under the bridge. Nay, he must go to school. I shall make enquiries to see what can be done – perhaps you will help me with this, Harrison?"

A moment later, William came running back from the drawing room, clasping the requested book in his hand. Taking it from him, Cassandra turned to her father. "I shall teach William one quotation today, Father, if I do nothing else!"

She opened the book at a well-thumbed page, and showed it to her younger brother.

"*This* is the author of that quotation, William. Hildegard of Bingen – born in the closing years of the eleventh century, and one of the most learned women of the western world this millennium. She was an abbess, also a writer, composer, philosopher, mystic and visionary – and many other things besides. So there – you have learned something! *Now* you can go and play."

They all watched the boy run away into the garden, and Colonel Creighton peered at the little book with interest. “I never saw that book before, Cassandra – is it new?”

Cassandra opened it at a random page, and ran her fingers over the text with an air of reverence. “No, Father – Tina found it for me in the library, where it was buried deep in a stack of old volumes that most likely have not been touched in over a decade. It has become my favourite book of late: each time I open it, I find something new to contemplate. One day it is music, the next it is philosophy, the day after that it is poetry. I feel it is trying to tell me the answers to so much – if only I could grasp the questions...”

She frowned as if in a reverie for a moment, then her face cleared as a course of action arranged itself within her mind.

“I think I shall study it more this afternoon – but this morning there is work to be done in the organisation of dinner tonight. See, Father – on this page here: is this passage not beautiful?”

She handed the open book to her father, indicating the paragraph in question, and then with a purposeful air set off in the direction of the kitchen. Colonel Creighton read out the passage aloud for the benefit of his friend:

“She is so bright and glorious that you cannot look at her face or her garments for the splendour with which she shines. For she is terrible with the terror of the avenging lightning, and gentle with the goodness of the bright sun; and both her terror and her gentleness are incomprehensible to humans.... But she is with everyone and in everyone, and so beautiful is her secret that no person can know the sweetness with which she sustains people, and spares them in inscrutable mercy.”

“Beautiful, to be sure – but what does it *mean*, Thomas?”

The other shook his head. “I confess I have not studied the writings of Hildegard. There is no context apparent in this brief quotation, but I fancy it has a religious interpretation. She was a cleric first and foremost – as indeed were all polymaths at that time. The religious institutions were the principal centres of learning throughout Europe; indeed, in most countries they were the *only* centres of learning. Some modern seekers of knowledge overlook the place of religion in the history of enlightenment, but others – and I would count myself among them – maintain that the failure to acknowledge it is itself a crime against scholarship.”

Creighton frowned, lost in the phraseology of the passage. The picture of a strangely-clad youthful woman so recently standing calmly over the dead body of a poacher in Foxley Woods floated unbidden into his mind, chased away a moment later by the more recent image of a refined young lady of learning tutoring his daughter in the ways of the world as they walked together in the crisp morning air. He chuckled.

“Why, it might almost be a description of Miss Palamac herself!”

9 Cousin Michael Arrives from London to Stay for a Few Days

The end of the morning came and went, and still Tina had not returned. Alone in the study, Cassandra put down the letter she was composing to one of her friends and, becoming suddenly conscious of a subtle change in the smell of the air, rose from her chair at the writing desk and stepped across the room to the door to take a deeper breath. Suddenly hungry, she returned to the writing desk and carefully lifted the unfinished letter to verify that the ink was dry before placing it in the drawer. A movement outside the window caught her eye, and she glanced up just in time to watch the London stagecoach disappear from view at the end of the drive, absently noting a solitary figure striding towards the house with a moderately-sized holdall bag in each hand. The courier, no doubt... after depositing Mr Harrison's papers he would catch the London coach later that afternoon; Cassandra made a mental note to ask Mrs Herrick to give him a meal in the servants' quarters before his departure. Sighing, she retrieved the letter from the drawer again and took up the pen once more, wracking her brains for few more morsels of gossip to include before posting it, but could think of nothing to add. No matter; the afternoon would bring several more hours of leisure...

Cassandra jumped as William came scampering into the room, waving wildly in the direction of the front door. "Sister, come quickly! The coach has brought Cousin Michael! He is come from London, and has brought Mr Harrison's documents with him. Come at once, for he is at the door!"

Cassandra mouthed an exclamation, then hurriedly returned the letter to the drawer, dropped the pen back into the inkwell and ran out of the study to the main door, and threw her arms around the young man in delighted surprise.

"Cousin Michael! What a wonderful surprise! We were expecting Mr Harrison's documents to arrive by courier; we were not told the courier would be *you!*"

The young man returned the hug with a broad grin. "Cousin Cassandra – you are well? You *look* well, I declare! My visit was unplanned, for I was working at the Institution yesterday, and was fortunate enough to have overheard the instruction for Mr Harrison's documents to be dispatched to Foxley. My work was all but complete, and there was nothing else pressing to keep me there for a few days, so I volunteered to take the documents myself. I gathered together what equipment I might need to permit me to further my current researches while I was away, then returned to my lodgings to pack a few things, and set off late yesterday afternoon. The coach was one of the less direct – last night was spent at an inn near Reigate. My parents are visiting family on the south coast, so if it is inconvenient for me to stay overnight here, I can easily..."

Cassandra silenced him with a little squeak of protest. "Dear Cousin Michael – of *course* it is not inconvenient! We would not *hear* of you leaving us so soon!" She turned to her father, who had just descended the stairs to greet the new arrival. "Papa – it is Cousin Michael! He has brought Mr Harrison's documents all the way from London, and already he speaks of leaving us, but I will not have it. He may stay as long as he likes – may he not, Papa?"

The colonel shook him warmly by the hand. "*Certainly* he must stay! Cassandra speaks for us all: he is always welcome here, as I trust he knows. Cassandra – tell Carey to prepare the second guest bedroom... Have you brought much baggage with you? Ah – I see you bring your work, for I recognise those boxes in that bag of yours... Harrison does not exaggerate then, for he speaks often

of your dedication. Have you eaten, sir? No? That is good, for luncheon is about to be served, and it seems we are a guest short with which to consume it. You will meet her later – quite possibly *much* later, if she runs true to form. Luncheon will be served in perhaps another ten minutes, so Cassandra can show you to your room when she returns, to wash and to brush the journey’s dust from your clothes. Herrick will call a servant to take the bags to your room: shall we see you after that in the dining room?”

The young man grinned once more. “Thank you, sir – it *has* been a long journey, and I am hungry... but I’ll carry the larger of the bags to the room myself. It contains instruments that require care when handling – please understand that I would not in any way wish to impugn...”

Creighton waived aside the intended apology before it was delivered.

“But of course – the protectiveness with which your community looks after the tools of its trade is well understood within this house. A mother hen could scarcely mind her chicks more so than they. Cassandra? Ah, you have returned... would you find Mr Harrison and ask him to join us in the dining room? We shall have much to talk about over luncheon, I think! That is, if Cassandra can endure the subject of dead frogs’ legs...”

10 Miss Palamac Returns Late from her Walk

The evening meal was served and eaten, and the plates cleared away before the sound of a light but confident footfall in the hallway heralded the return to the manor of Cassandra's friend. Cassandra blinked in surprise and threw her father a questioning look, to which he returned a surprised shake of the head: no bell had been rung, much less Herrick enter the room to announce an arrival. Cassandra scrambled to her feet and stepped lightly over to the door to admit her friend.

"Tina – you took us by surprise! We did not hear the opening of the front door."

Tina's reply took the form of an apologetic open-handed gesture.

"I did not wish to disturb you all by ringing the doorbell, so I let myself in quietly by the garden door. I did not startle you, I trust?"

Cassandra shook her head. "No, to be sure – for we knew you were out walking and would return in due course... but you must surely be starving! We have just eaten, but there is still some soup in the kitchen which we can heat up; also quail and asparagus..."

Tina shook her head. "Thank you, but I am not hungry. I returned to the house early in the afternoon briefly to take a few morsels from the larder, and these have been enough to sustain me."

Cassandra's eyes widened in astonishment. "A whole *day* without a proper meal? It cannot be so – I do not believe it! Come with me to the kitchen: the quail..."

Again, Tina shook her head. "I assure you, I have no appetite. And yet it has been a long day, and I am tired. If you would perhaps tell Carey to bring a glass of water to my room, I would be grateful."

Cassandra nodded with a resigned smile, born of previous experience of her friend's declarations of intent, which she had long since come to recognise as being unalterable.

"I shall attend to it... Oh! And we have a new guest, who arrived while you were out walking! It is none other than my dear Cousin Michael from London, who has brought Mr Harrison's papers for him. He has now retired to catch up on his sleep after his long journey, but you shall meet him tomorrow. Cousin Michael makes frogs' legs twitch with the apparatus he has built – do you remember we spoke of him? You and he will have much to talk about..."

They left the room together, parting company at the base of the stairs as one began her ascent of them while the other set off towards the kitchen in search of Carey. Once they were both out of earshot, Colonel Creighton shook his head in amused bewilderment.

"She must live off the air itself, Harrison! How she keeps body and soul together is a mystery, I declare."

His friend looked pensive. "All the more so when I add that I was on the front lawn enjoying the sharpness of the winter air most of the afternoon. The walkway from the gate that leads to the kitchen is in clear view from there. Strange then that I did not see her."

Creighton raised an eyebrow. "You are not suggesting she might seek to deceive us, surely?"

His friend rolled his eyes in mock bewilderment. "I cannot imagine – the ways of womenfolk are always a mystery to me! But if you are of a mind to tackle a mystery, try this one for size. Did you

observe her shoes when she first entered the room just a few moments ago? No? *I* did: there is a small patch of sticky black fluid on the sole of her left shoe, which has left a tiny trail of speckles upon the floor where she has stepped. If you look closely you can just see it – there... there... and also over there. Those marks that lead away from us were made by the shoe as she walked to the staircase a few moments ago. Now – had she come through the garden door earlier, would we not have expected to see at least one similar mark on the stone slabs over which that door opens?”

Colonel Creighton reached down, wiped his finger over one of the little marks, raised it to his nose and frowned. “I do not recognise the odour. Do you?”

His companion smelt the proffered finger, then dipped one of his own in the little patch on the floor, touched it to his tongue, and grimaced.

“Unctuous... it has the texture of an oil, but is no vegetable extract that I recognise. This is acrid – almost tar-like. Whatever it is, I am not familiar...”

He broke off in mid-sentence, and narrowed his eyes. Raising his finger to bid his friend to wait a moment, he walked slowly over to the spiral staircase leading down from the alcove into the wine cellar below. Grunting as if to confirm a suspicion, he returned to his companion.

“Yes, I thought so. Well, Creighton – we appear to have not one mystery, but two.”

Colonel Creighton looked at him uncertainly. “*Two*, sir? What is the other?”

His friend pointed in the direction of the spiral staircase. “You recall what I said about the absence of a mark by the garden door a few moments ago? Look over there – on the floor, just by the top stair. Do you see it?”

Creighton squinted, and nodded. “That black mark upon the floor? Yes, I see it now.”

“And there is another on the third step down – I saw it just a moment ago. But we know she did not walk anywhere near the steps leading down to the cellar from the time we saw her in the hallway to the point at which she walked to the stairs.”

“And your conclusion is...?”

“That she did not come through the garden door. She came up from the cellar.”

Creighton pulled an amused face tinged with incredulity. “The *cellar*? But why... there is naught down there save shelves for storage and some old wine casks – what would she want with those? And even if she were exploring, why would she not want us to know of it? She has the run of the house.”

“I cannot say – and yet I also cannot doubt the evidence of my eyes.”

The colonel considered the point. “Then she returned just as she said, descended into the cellar out of curiosity, and then forgot. Yes, that is it.”

Harrison pondered the suggestion for a moment, then inclined his head in a gesture of approval. “Yes... that I can believe, for she possesses both the inquisitive nature of a true savant, and the energy to explore a speculation. Many of my colleagues at the Royal Institution would heartily approve of the attitude. It may be that she heard something down there, and sought to investigate.”

Creighton grimaced. “What might be down there – rodents? I trust not! We were subjected to an infestation of rats down there three years since: if their descendants have returned to reclaim their ancestral seat I shall be *extremely* displeased.”

“I do not doubt it!” chuckled Harrison. “But we need not speculate when we may settle the matter by direct observation - *solvitur ambulando*, what?”

“Aye, but on the morrow, I fancy,” replied Creighton. “Best that we prepare for the assault with more potent illumination than that provided by what little remains of the daylight. To your quotation I’ll add the caution that *in absentia lux tenebrae vincit* – so I think we’ll find ourselves some means of illumination first.”

11 Cassandra Ventures Downstairs in the Middle of the Night

In the dark, swirling maelstrom of her dreams, Cassandra spun helplessly amid the clouds of hot, black smoke that billowed up from the extinguished candle, the acrid smell of the charred wick assailing her nostrils as she tumbled helplessly down into the pool of molten wax that lay beneath her. Falling headlong down into it, she snatched back her hand as her fingers touched the boiling gluey surface, instantly awake with wide eyes, momentarily disorientated and puzzled as to the reason for her awakening.

An instant later the reason for her waking became apparent: the flickering of a candle accompanied by the soft but unmistakable tread of bare feet passed slowly by her slightly open bedroom door. She frowned – a sleepwalker? No, not a sleepwalker; even though she could not have identified the reason for believing it, she knew with certainty that this was the footfall of someone with a definite purpose. Silently she threw back her bedclothes, slid out of bed, tiptoed to the door and peered out into the corridor, just in time to see the silhouette of a young woman framed against the candlelight, descending the stairs.

Recognising at once the distinctive hairstyle of her friend, she opened her mouth to utter a greeting, but then unaccountably shut it again as her passage around the curvature of the staircase brought her face into view, and Cassandra caught a glimpse of her expression; one glimpse of which was sufficient to persuade her that her friend would not wish to be discovered at this time... *But where....?* A nocturnal pursuit of an amorous nature, perhaps? Cassandra found herself blushing at the speculation, but no... her friend was clearly headed for somewhere on the ground floor. In search of a little food from the kitchen, then? Maybe... in fact, now that she thought of it, Cassandra realised with a guilty start that she was more than a little hungry herself. Perhaps if she were to wait in the shadows until Tina had returned to her room...

But by the time the grandfather clock in the hall had chimed the next quarter-hour, her friend had still not returned. Curiosity and hunger in equal measure overcoming her reticence, she stepped back into the room, returning a moment later with the candle from her bedside in her left hand.

Shielding her eyes from its glare for long enough to acclimatise them once more to the darkness, she made her way noiselessly along the landing and down the stairs to the lower storey, then left and along the narrow corridor to the entrance of the servants' quarters, where once more she stopped and looked all around her, her eyes seeking in vain any sign of the candle carried by her friend. She frowned, confused: the kitchen lay at the end of the passageway before her, and no flickering of a candle flame could be seen emanating from it. Save for the faint dull glow of the dying embers in the fireplace behind her, the rooms were in darkness. *So where on earth...?*

The faintest sound of a solitary tone not unlike a single depression of a key in the upper octaves of a musical instrument made her start; had not all her senses already been straining in search of a clue, she would have missed it. But the direction... She frowned in confusion: the sound came from the direction of the cellar – off down the short passageway to her left and down the spiral staircase built into the alcove at the end of it. The squeak of a rat, perhaps? She shuddered. But before she had time to think further on the matter, she heard it again – the same tone, and of the same short duration. Not a rat... but then, what? Notwithstanding the clarity of the high-pitched note, she knew it did not originate from any musical instrument with which she was familiar.

Noiselessly she padded down the passageway, stooped down and placed the flickering candle on the floor, then looked down through the rungs of the rickety little staircase into the darkness. And sure enough... a faint glow far below satisfied her that she had tracked down her friend at last – at least, she *assumed* that she would find Tina in the cellar below... for who else could it be? Silently she picked up the candle once more, stepped onto the topmost rung of the stairs which led down into the little cellar, then slowly and carefully descended to the bottom, where she paused to take in the strange scene that met her eyes at the far end of the vaulted passageway that stretched out front of her.

Of her friend there was no sign – the cellar contained no-one. Instead, she beheld a metallic structure at the end of the passageway, the like of which she had never seen before. Frowning in puzzlement, she raised the candle a little higher and walked towards it, her eyes never leaving the mysterious object by the far wall, within which several rows of tiny coloured lights winked and flashed, some in conjunction, others apparently entirely haphazard. It was perhaps the height and bulk of a small writing-desk, and was mounted on four castors, a chair positioned in front of it – clearly placed there to enable a person to sit at the desk, if indeed that was what it was. Directly in front of the chair, a dark grey glass oblong was mounted within the metal frame.

Intrigued, Cassandra approached the little desk, stretching out her hand towards the pretty lights to feel their warmth, but she felt none. Nearer and nearer her fingers approached the surface, until they touched one of the red ones, but still no heat did she perceive. She shook her head in confusion and began to slide herself into the chair to admire the craftsmanship of the desk in closer detail. The instant she did so a movement underneath her caused her to utter a tiny squeak of fright, before she realised a second later that the chair, apparently set in motion by her own movement, was actually rotating beneath her and was twisting her body through roughly a quarter-turn.

Experimentally, she lowered her feet to the ground and gave a little push with them sideways... sure enough, around it went again, this time through several complete turns before almost coming to a halt with her facing the desk again. Reaching out to steady herself, she laid her hand on one of the protrusions on the front of the desk beneath the grey glass oblong... and almost fell out of the chair in terror as a bright flash of light deep within the darkened glass momentarily dazzled her.

“What *is* this? Tina... help me! Where *are* you, Tina?”

But no reply answered her call, and within a few seconds she had composed herself once more. The flash had given way to a steady glow of white light within which some form of pattern was discernible, and she peered into its depths, trying in vain to comprehend it. The image reminded her of a room... yes, that was it... a room, as if it might be painted in light – but no room the like of which she had ever seen before. A room of glass and metal, with strange decorations on the wall, and more flashing lights not unlike those mounted within the desk before her. She shook her head in bewilderment – and then froze into fascinated silence once more as the lights in front of her *changed*... Blinking rapidly at the painting of light, she stared at the new pattern as it suddenly sprang into sharp relief to display the image of a female human face staring back at her... an instantly recognisable face that *moved* within the glass; the face of her friend...

It was too much – the last thing that Cassandra remembered before she fainted was the sound of Tina’s voice speaking to her from within the metal desk...

12 Cassandra is Engaged in a Scientific Venture

From the depths of her oblivion, Cassandra struggled to free herself, frantically twisting this way and that as she sought to reorient her body into an upright position, only partially conscious of a pair of hands about her arms preventing her from standing. Suddenly she was fully awake, and staring into Tina's eyes – and with the memory of her most recent shock rushing back into her mind once more. She gripped her friend's shoulders in terror, almost incoherent with fright.

“Tina! But you are alive – is this possible? Do not leave me, Tina – I have seen a ghost... No! But it cannot be, for you are here... Tina – I have seen *your* ghost, please believe me! I did not believe it possible – Papa has told me that such things are but fantasy and fable, but I have *seen* it! It... it spoke to me from the looking-glass of light, just yonder... see... it was just there, within the metal desk...”

The other regarded her enigmatically. “Calm yourself, Cassandra. You have not seen a ghost.”

“But I *have*, I swear it! Oh Tina, how may I convince you that I am not mad! But perhaps I *am* mad! I do not know what to believe...”

Her friend's expression did not change. “I assure you that you have *not* seen a ghost, Cassandra. You have seen but an image, as it might be viewed from a distance. The... looking-glass of which you speak resembles a telescope in some ways; you have seen a telescope, have you not?”

Cassandra frowned uncertainly. “I believe Papa has a telescope, but he has never shown it to me. Is this a telescope?”

“It... performs much the same function as a telescope – that is, it serves the same purpose as such a device. You need not fear it, for it will not harm you. But what of you? Why are you here?”

Cassandra cast down her eyes in embarrassment. “I followed you. I was awakened by your walking past my room, and I thought... I thought perhaps you were hungry, as was I, so I followed you downstairs. Tina, what are you *doing* in the cellar? There is no food in this place, to be sure – did you become lost? But I see you have found a glass of water... might I perhaps take a sip?”

Tina regarded her friend speculatively. “Yes... I brought it with me from... from the place I was working. It is a *seda*... a sleeping draught – a little more powerful than most. I thought perhaps you might be desirous of it. But on second thoughts, I see you are much improved, so perhaps it would be better if you did not drink it after all, for I think you may assist me.”

Cassandra looked at her uncertainly, replying with a confidence that she did not feel.

“To be sure... but in what way may I aid you?”

“There is a... a room not far from here. You saw it yourself just a little while ago on the mon... in the looking-glass. There are many things I need to do in that room. I would value the presence of someone in this cellar to supply the readings to me from instruments linked to this console – it will save me the time and effort required to establish an automatic relay.”

Cassandra shook her head in bewilderment, her total incomprehension clearly audible in the tone of her voice.

“What ‘readings’ would you have me supply? What is a ‘console’? Or an ‘automatic relay’? I fear I do not understand – dear Tina, what would you have me do?”

Tina smiled reassuringly and nodded, and stepping forward to take her hand, led her over to one of the banks of flashing lights. Stooping down, she opened a small compartment within the cabinet, and extracted from it a metallic frame, roughly the size and shape of a skull cap. Holding it up as if she were about to place it on Cassandra’s head, she looked directly into her friend’s eyes.

“But you *will* understand, Cassandra. You will listen to me, and you will understand...”

13 Cassandra Learns of the Ship Beneath the Lake

The snap of Tina's fingers startled Cassandra, and she blinked rapidly, guiltily conscious of having become somewhat sleepy and distracted while her friend had been talking to her. Tina did not however appear to have noticed, pointing as she was at one of the displays on the console while she was speaking.

"The refractive index of the water in the lake surrounding the ship's firing mechanism has resulted in a six point eight one percent deviation in the primary projection alignment sequencer. We need to compensate for the misalignment by the differential calculated from the position of this console in relation to that of the central processor located within the ship's control cabin. Do you understand what you have to do?"

An instant of unreasoning panic swept over Cassandra, before she realised that her friend was pointing to the very solenoid whose voltage fluctuations she would need to monitor when bringing the two waveforms into phase. Yes, of course... a somewhat arduous but relatively straightforward task. She nodded with a confident smile. Tina's gaze swept over her, her expression still unreadable.

"Excellent. We still have almost four hours until daybreak, but with your assistance we should be able to cut the workload by more than half. You will give me fifteen minutes to return to the ship, then we shall begin."

Tina stepped over to the entrance to the passageway and operated the mechanism to release the entrance. Cassandra watched, strangely unsurprised as the brickwork slid back to reveal a pitch-black passageway beyond, though she frowned to herself while trying in vain to remember the last time she had seen it. When *was* it...?

"Tina – excuse my forgetfulness, but may I ask a question?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"I do not believe I have ever seen the tunnel that leads to the ship before – and yet somehow I feel I have always known that it is there. I am confounded; how can this be?"

Tina frowned with mild irritation... not a perfect transfer, then – but probably good enough. She spoke softly and concisely to reiterate the details.

"The memory trace was placed within your mind just a few moments ago. The tunnel was created shortly after I arrived, using the ship's onboard laser to melt a subway link between the house and the edge of the lake, and then joining the tunnel entrance to the ship with one of the flexible boarding tubes. The purpose of it is to facilitate the task that we are about to perform, since reaching the ship by any other means is unnecessarily time-consuming, and will also enable us to move the ship to a safe distance from the house before initiating the final phase of the project, while still retaining the means to board it again afterwards. You were also told that you must never reveal the tunnel's presence to anyone else within the household. Do you remember now?"

Cassandra blinked and then smiled, the elusive memory suddenly springing into sharp focus.

"Of course – forgive me. I shall await your signal on the monitor."

Tina nodded with satisfaction, then stepped into the passageway and was gone, the wall sliding back into place behind her as she vanished into the darkness. Cassandra sat down in the revolving chair, made herself comfortable, and then activated the monitor once more in readiness for her friend's arrival in the ship's control room.

Slightly over fifteen minutes later, a shadow passing across the screen indicated the arrival of her friend in the control room, and Tina's face appeared in front of her. She sat up in the chair, instinctively adopting the posture of an experienced keyboard operator, her hands already extended to enter the commands into the console that she knew were about to follow.

“Cross-check primary guidance circuits, Cassandra.”

Cassandra's fingers flickered across the keys almost before she was aware of it, and she read off the outputs back to her friend with effortless expertise.

“Primary circuits one, three, four and six all operating at nominal; circuit two is registering two percent paranormal; no response on circuit five.”

“Reconfigure circuit two to compensate; isolate circuit five – prepare to receive download of patch to reconfigure internal subroutines...”

Throughout the exercise, Cassandra was acutely aware of a duality present within her mind; one part of her consciousness committed to the task in hand while another part looked on at the inexplicable actions being performed by her hands and mouth, utterly bewildered and relieved not to be called upon to intervene and assist – for she knew that it could not. For over an hour the rapid verbal exchanges of information continued, until at last the speed of the data flow began to ebb, and she realised with a vague sense of relief that the operation was almost complete – though as to what the purpose of that operation might be she still had absolutely no idea.

“Tina... I would like to ask another question, if I may?”

“One moment. Please confirm that the secondary alignment verification sequence is in activation mode, and that power to the exterior servo-couplings reads nominal.”

Cassandra's gaze swept over the array of instrumentation before her. “Secondary alignment activation mode confirmed. Tracking all power readings within acceptable tolerances. Are all the checks now completed, Tina?”

“Affirmative. I shall now return to the cellar prior to activation. Please await my arrival, and do not make any further adjustments in the intervening period. The console at which you are seated is now acting as the primary power coupling to the laser target sequencing control: an error made at this stage in the activation cycle would be... unfortunate.”

“Upon my honour, I shall touch nothing at all.”

The image on the screen faded, and Cassandra settled back into her chair to await her friend's return. To pass the time she found herself playing mental games with the tiny flickering lights, watching their patterns as they chased each other around the panel, while another part of her mind looked on in bewilderment at the display that was so far removed from all her previous experiences as to be incomprehensible.

A faint sound behind her made her jump, and she swung the chair around just in time to see Tina emerge from the darkness of the tunnel into the cellar. Instinctively she stood to allow her friend to take her place at the console. Tina's fingers flickered across the keys for a few moments, and then withdrew as she glanced over the settings one last time.

“Good – all systems are now online. I see no reason for further delay.”

Leaning forward, she reached out towards a small switch on the far right-hand side of the console; paused for a second, and then threw it.

“Laser pulse generator activated at strength nine point four terawatts, test firing duration two point three seconds. Test pulse has successfully penetrated the Van Allen belt; all systems remain fully functional... phase one of the mission is complete.”

She looked across at her bemused friend.

“Thank you for your assistance, Cassandra – we have made good time. I am now going to return to my bedroom to configure an upgrade to this console. The earlier data transfer to your cerebral cortex was only just accomplished within acceptable tolerances, and I wish to be confident that the misalignment will not recur. Your assistance a second time will cut several days off the time needed to complete the project, but there can be no errors whatsoever during the next phase. We will then move the console to the other side of the tunnel entrance and reactivate the screen before retiring to our respective bedrooms. The reconfiguration will take upwards of an hour, but the night is long, and I believe both tasks can be completed before daybreak. You will now return to your trance and remain here until I return.”

14 New Arrivals Enter the Creighton Household

In the armaments cabin in the tail section of the ship, a brilliant, swirling flash momentarily enveloped and dazzled two Spectrum officers who had not been there a second previously, then slowly faded away into nothingness. The man in the deep red uniform rolled off his slightly-built female companion, whom he had been trying to shield from the blast when they were both thrown against the wall, struggled to his feet and gazed at the empty room, disorientated and confused.

“Where’s he gone? And what’s happened to the control panel? It was on fire just a moment ago...”

At his side, Lieutenant Almond took a deep breath, expelling the acrid stench from her lungs and savouring the fresh air, shook herself down and frowned.

“I do not know... Captain Blue was in that corner – just over there. No doubt we have been unconscious and he has been rescued. It is strange – I do not feel as if I have been unconscious. But why have they not taken us also? Obviously much time has passed: this console appears to have been fully repaired. No doubt whoever has taken Captain Blue will return shortly.”

Scarlet frowned, and then shrugged. “No doubt... well anyway, the hatch is open now, so I don’t see any reason to wait for them to arrive. Can you walk, Lieutenant?”

“Thank you, I can walk perfectly.”

The two officers stepped through the open bulkhead – and stopped dead at the sight of a brilliantly illuminated pristine corridor on the other side. Scarlet’s eyes narrowed.

“Just a little while ago this entire section of the ship must have been at least two metres deep in water – if it wasn’t completely flooded. Now it looks as if it’s never even been wet! What’s going on here? We can’t have been out for *that* long...”

Together they walked slowly along the corridor towards the front of the vessel, Scarlet stopping every few moments to inspect an instrument panel here or a hatchway there. Once again, he shook his head.

“I’m not even certain this is the same ship, Lieutenant. Everything just looks so much... well... *cleaner* than when we last saw it. It’s almost as if...”

He stopped in mid-sentence, looking at the escape hatch through which they had originally entered the ship.

“That settles it. We blasted this hatchway just a few hours ago with that miniature tank or whatever it was that you found, Lieutenant. Now there isn’t a scratch on it. Either someone’s replaced it while we’ve been unconscious, or this isn’t the same ship. And yet it *looks* like the same ship, doesn’t it? Everything’s just where I remember it when we first came on board. I wonder how long we were actually out...”

He glanced down at his wrist and frowned. “Lieutenant – what’s the last time you can remember before the explosion?”

She shook her head. “I cannot recall – everything was very hazy for a long time before I woke up a few moments ago. Perhaps you have a better memory, yes?”

Scarlet nodded slowly. “Yes... I remember thinking that we had no more than a few minutes of air left in the compartment just before you collapsed at the keyboard, and I looked at my chronometer. I’m sure it was no more than ten minutes before the time it’s reading right now – which is pretty much as long as we’ve been wandering around since we woke up. Which is obviously impossible, unless somebody’s reset it – but why on earth would anybody want to do that? What’s that you’ve got there, Lieutenant?”

She straightened up, holding a small object which she had just recovered from underneath a nearby console.

“This is certainly the same ship. See - here is the toy tank that we use to try to escape! I must have dropped it...” Her expression changed to one of confusion. “No – I am sure I did not drop it. One moment please...”

She handed Scarlet the small object, and walked quickly back to the armaments chamber which they had just left. A few moments later she re-emerged, carrying a second toy tank in her hands.

“*This* is the toy I use to blast the escape hatch. It seems there are two. They are very similar, yes?”

Scarlet took the toy from her, and held up the two side by side. Squinting at them, he frowned.

“They’re *astonishingly* similar. Look at the two gun turrets – they’ve even got identical scratches on them... and look down here on the left-hand side... there’s a slight fading of the paintwork that’s duplicated exactly on the other one. The only real difference is that the one you’ve found under that console a few moments ago is cleaner. This gets more mysterious by the minute...”

He put the two toys down on the floor and walked back to the escape hatch.

“Whatever the explanation is, it can wait. First things first... let’s get out of here and back to the basement of the house – we need to report all this back to Cloudbase, and we know can’t do that from inside this structure. Let’s see if we can get this hatch open, shall we?”

He stepped up to the control panel and punched the activation button. Immediately a red light began flashing on the panel, accompanied by a sharp buzzing sound. Repeating the operation resulted in the same response. He frowned.

“It doesn’t look as if it wants to open. I wonder why not? A safety precaution, perhaps... what haven’t I done, Lieutenant?”

Almond joined him at the control panel.

“If it is a flying machine, I think the crew would not want people opening a hatch from the inside when it is in flight. Perhaps it is locked from the captain’s cabin.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Could be. Shall we go and take a look?”

The two officers walked away from the hatch and made for the control room, stopping in front of the partially melted door that they had encountered when they first entered the ship. Scarlet paused in front of the bulkhead, reached out and touched the edge of the blasted hole.

“Well, *that* hole’s still here, anyway – at least it saves us the trouble of having to force this door open manually. I’ll lead the way, Lieutenant... stay close at least until we find out what’s going on here.”

Together they eased themselves through the bulkhead, and out into the cylindrical tunnel that stretched away into the darkness before them – and then stopped dead in their tracks at the sight.

Scarlet stared into the distance, bewildered. “But... *this* isn’t right... the tunnel we used to reach the ship was metallic! This section of it looks like it’s lined with some sort of synthetic polymer... it can’t be the wrong tunnel, can it? No, that’s not possible... it *can’t* have been... what the *hell* is going on here?”

Perhaps the first fifty metres of it were visible, faintly illuminated by the dim glow emanating from behind the blasted hole in the bulkhead, before it faded away into the darkness. Still shaking his head in confusion, but satisfied of the absence of any obvious immediate danger, Scarlet took a dozen slow steps down the tunnel before turning and motioning for Lieutenant Almond to follow.

“Do you have a torch on you, Lieutenant? I don’t... and it looks as if we’re going to need one if we’re to reach the other end.”

Catching him up, she squinted into the darkness behind him before replying. “I have no torch, but we may perhaps not need one. My eyes are now beginning to become accustomed to the darkness – and it seems to me that the walls of the tunnel seem to possess a low level of phosphorescence. If we wait a few more moments, I think it is possible that it may be enough for us to see by.”

Scarlet turned to follow the direction of her gaze down the tunnel, waited a moment or two for his own eyes to acclimatise, and realised she was right: there *was* just the faintest level of illumination present, just sufficient to allow them to walk, albeit slowly, onwards without undue fear of stumbling into any obstacles that might present themselves.

Scarlet glanced back at the ship, then stared once more into the darkness that lay before them, and frowned.

“I don’t like this. If anyone comes down this tunnel from the other end - and they can see better than we can - we’re going to be sitting ducks. But I don’t see that we have a choice, given that we don’t appear to be able to get out of the ship any other way. Oh, well... let’s make a start, shall we? Keep your gun handy, Lieutenant.”

Fifteen minutes of slow walking revealed no evidence of the tunnel having an end. Each time the two Spectrum officers turned at periodic intervals to check on their progress away from the ship, a very slight curvature in the tunnel began to become apparent, and after the third such pause, Scarlet was becoming distinctly uneasy.

“This isn’t right, Lieutenant. When we came through this tunnel last time it was less than a kilometre long. Now *I’d* say we’ve walked at least twice that distance already, wouldn’t you? And there’s something else, too: just once or twice, I’m almost certain I’ve felt a very slight movement beneath my feet. It was barely perceptible, but I don’t think I imagined it – and unless this place is subject to earth tremors, that’s just not *possible* in a tunnel through rock...”

“Captain Scarlet – I think maybe the tunnel becomes metal only now!”

Lieutenant Almond pointed at a change in the composition of the wall just ahead of them, at which point the phosphorescent plastic shell within which they were still just standing gave way to the type of sheet metal cylindrical structure they’d seen when they originally boarded the ship. Scarlet nodded thoughtfully to himself, as an idea that had been gradually forming in his mind over the previous few moments began to crystallize.

“You know what *I* think, Lieutenant? I think we’ve been walking through a boarding tube of some kind... a long, flexible and extendible tube that passes *through* the lake, connecting the ship to the metal tunnel that ends in the cellar. *That* would explain both the increased length of the tunnel *and* the slight movement I felt. What do you think?”

“It is possible, perhaps,” replied Almond slowly, “but then, how was it assembled so quickly?”

“I’ve no idea! Unless...” He paused for a moment. “Unless of course it was *always* here, but just not extended as much. But then, wouldn’t *that* suggest that the ship can move?”

He shook his head. “Too many questions and not enough answers, Lieutenant! Let’s put it to one side until we’ve got some more data, and just keep moving, eh?”

Another five minutes had passed before a dark circular shape began to emerge out of the gloom as they approached it, eventually coalescing into the form of a solid sheet of dark grey metal before them. Delineating the end of the passageway as it clearly did, it was obvious that there was no other possible exit – and yet not a mark that might indicate the presence of a handle, lever, keyhole, button or control panel of any kind could be seen anywhere on its surface.

Having spent another five minutes painstakingly and methodically running his fingers over every visible square centimetre of it, Scarlet grunted in irritation, then thumped it with his fist in frustration.

“Now *this* wasn’t here before! There was a wall with that trick opening mechanism – those two bricks... How could anybody have replaced it with this thing in the time since we first entered the tunnel? And how do we open it to get back into the cellar?”

Lieutenant Almond frowned thoughtfully. “I wonder if... just suppose...”

Stepping up to the metal plate, she tapped smartly on it twice. Nothing happened. After waiting a few seconds, she again tapped on it, adding a third knock to the first two. Still nothing. At the third attempt she tapped four times in rapid succession... and was just turning away in defeat when the metal plate slowly and silently slid into the rock to one side, to reveal a small chamber beyond.

Scarlet looked at his companion in astonishment. “How did you...?”

Lieutenant Almond grinned. “Know? I did not, but it seemed there was a good chance – even though it was what you call a ‘long shot’, yes? What is the primary purpose of the door? Is it to allow somebody to enter the ship, or to allow somebody to leave it? Probably both – but if someone wishes to *leave* the ship, what purpose would be served by making the door difficult to open? But the passageway is several kilometres long, so if some form of key were required – and the key had been forgotten, or it did not work – they would have to walk all the way back to the ship again. No, getting into the ship might be difficult, but getting *out* of the ship would have to be easy. What could be easier than not needing a key at all?”

Scarlet returned the grin, then stepped through the doorway into the room beyond.

An array of computer consoles of varying shapes, sizes and designs met his gaze; all were laid out around the walls, with each of them accompanied by a functional swivel chair, but all were unoccupied.

Save for one.

Scarlet peered in astonishment at a solitary figure, seated at the farthest console from the door through which he had just entered, and looking weirdly incongruous among the battery of computer technology, dressed as she was in what looked like a flimsy and ill-fitting nightgown.

“Hello! Who are you?”

Lieutenant Almond joined him at the entrance. “Captain?”

Scarlet drew his gun. “Keep behind me, Lieutenant – there’s somebody here. You! What are you doing here? Are you one of the people who’ve taken Captain Blue?”

He slowly entered the chamber, the gun still raised and aimed at the solitary figure, sitting motionless in one of the seats.

“I asked you a question – what are you doing here?”

With still no response, he motioned for Lieutenant Almond to join him, then walked up to the occupant of the chair and waved his hand in front of her face, but to no effect. He looked at his companion and frowned.

“In a state of shock, perhaps? I don’t think she’s unconscious, but she’s obviously unaware of our presence. Have you ever seen her before, Lieutenant? I don’t think she’s one of Her Ladyship’s employees – so who is she?”

His companion bent down and looked deep into the other’s eyes.

“I think maybe she is hypnotised, yes? But who has done this? And why?”

Scarlet looked once more at the young woman’s face, and then glanced down at the solitary garment she was wearing – a rough white cotton shift that had obviously not been bought from any reputable clothes shop.

“Why indeed! And while we’re on the subject of mysteries, Lieutenant, what on earth is this ridiculous thing she’s wearing? It looks rather like an antique nightdress – something out of a museum...”

He reached down and touched the fabric.

“Not exactly Laura Ashley... a fancy dress, perhaps? Though who would want to wear something this crude I can’t imagine. We seem to have a lot of unanswered questions here... come on, let’s take a look around: that looks like a set of steps over there.”

They both climbed the little spiral staircase up to the floor above, finding themselves in a narrow corridor which in turn led into an expansive entrance hall, where the smell of a log fire beneath a badly-ventilated chimney instantly assailed their nostrils. Bemused, Scarlet and Almond stood in the middle of it and peered into the gloom about them, their eyes becoming increasingly accustomed to the darkness about them. The faint glow of the dying embers in the fireplace provided the only illumination available to them, the moon and stars evidently concealed behind an invisible bank of cloud, though out of the window a tiny flickering speck of light was just perceptible in the far distance.

“Something’s definitely not right. I mean, this isn’t even the same house, obviously. Her Ladyship’s home was filled with expensive furnishings, whereas *this* place is long overdue for a visit from the local chimney sweep and looks more like an antiques shop... I’m sure we’d have noticed that chest of drawers over there, for example – and the 18th century dresser in the corner, to say nothing of that stag’s head over the doorway...”

“No – it is clearly not the same house. And yet...”

Something in his companion’s voice made Scarlet turn.

“And yet what, Lieutenant?”

“And yet I think the room resembles one of our host’s rooms in some ways. I do not mean in decoration, but structurally, if you see what I mean... See, here we have the fireplace – and if I

stand *here* in front of the fire but looking into the room, I see on my left the main staircase, and on my right the passageway leading to the servants' quarters, yes? And above us we see a gallery – which is not a common feature of houses these days, you agree? But I was standing in a room with just this feature earlier today: it was Lady Penelope's main living room. And look there – down the passage to the right is an alcove. In such an alcove in the other house was a videophone where now is located those two vases of flowers and the walking stick. These are many coincidences."

"So what are you saying?"

Lieutenant Almond paused before replying. "I am not sure what I am saying. I just say that..."

"Shhh! Quick – over there!"

Propelling his companion towards the wall, Scarlet barely had time to push her behind the dresser and follow suit before the source of the noise emerged from the one of the doorways on the landing above them, carrying a flickering candle in one hand and a small container in the other. Holding the candle aloft, she slowly turned this way and that, scanning the ground floor intently, and frowning slightly as she did so. Then, evidently concluding that she had been mistaken, she slowly descended the stairs. Upon reaching the bottom she swept the darkness with her gaze once more, then silently crossed the hall in the direction of the little staircase from which the two Spectrum officers had themselves risen earlier. What little light was offered by the candle she carried faded away as she did so, and a moment or two later they could just make out the sound of her footsteps on the metal rungs of the spiral staircase, after which the eerie silence that Scarlet had commented upon earlier descended upon the house once more.

Scarlet gently pushed the curtain aside and leaned over to whisper in his companion's ear. "Just how many creepy people do you think there *are* wandering around here in the middle of the night? What *is* this place, for heaven's sake?"

Lieutenant Almond shook her head slowly. "I was not able to see very much from my position behind the curtain as she passed by; little more than that it was a woman, and that she was wearing a long white gown. It looked strange... it was not modern, I think. A theatrical costume, maybe?"

"Perhaps... but that candle she was carrying suggested something else to me that seems rather strange about this place. It could be that I'm missing them in the dark, but I can't see any electric light fittings in this room – or any electrical appliances at all for that matter. Can you?"

Lieutenant Almond's eyes flickered around the room. "No – I cannot. And yet obviously electricity *is* supplied to the house, unless that console in the cellar or whatever it is has its own power supply. Could this room be a movie set?"

Scarlet took a deep breath, and wrinkled his nose. "With a real log fire, perhaps... but with a real chimney that needs sweeping as well? No – that's taking realism a bit too far, wouldn't you think? So many questions: first a vanishing Captain Blue, then the repaired console and the missing water; then the two toy tanks..."

Lieutenant Almond frowned, deep in thought, then glanced up sharply.

"Captain Scarlet... do you remember the items that were found in the alcove in the cellar with the body that looks like you? *They* were exact duplicates of pieces of equipment on Cloudbase... and we think they are left in the cellar for several hundred years! Is it possible that these two toys are... well... the *same* toy?"

Scarlet looked at her uncertainly. "What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

“I wonder if perhaps *we* are in a different time. Perhaps an earlier time – before we bring back the toy to compare it with itself!”

“You’re talking in riddles, Lieutenant – I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

By way of a reply she gestured upwards towards the landing from which the strangely-clad young female had just a few moments ago descended on her way to the cellar.

“I think maybe that girl’s dress is *not* a theatrical costume. I think maybe we have been teleported through time. This would explain the two toys... and where all the water in the ship has gone! The main hatch is not blasted because we are in a time before we blasted it... and Captain Blue has disappeared because he has not entered the ship yet.”

Scarlet peered at her incredulously. “You’re saying that we’ve travelled into the past – is that it, Lieutenant?”

“Yes - that is what I say! I think that we travel into the past – to the time when the body that looks like you is put in the bricked-up hole in the wall. It is logical – after all, how will you get in there if you do not make the journey?”

“So you’re saying that other person really *is* me, right?”

“Of course! Or we should say it *will* be, as obviously you are not there yet.”

Scarlet shook his head in bewilderment. “So... what you’re effectively saying is that perhaps Captain Blue was right after all? *He* was talking about time travel during that briefing on Cloudbase, remember? I thought he was talking nonsense at the time!”

“I did not ever believe he was talking nonsense,” replied Almond with the merest tinge of reproof in her voice. “From the moment the body plus those items of Spectrum equipment were discovered in Lady Penelope’s cellar, the likelihood of such an extraordinary explanation was to be expected. The only other explanation that would have been possible was that the entire discovery was an elaborate hoax – and your revival effectively eliminated that possibility.”

“But... if you’re right, Lieutenant – what’s that spaceship doing here? I mean, people of this era didn’t have *spaceships*, for heaven’s sake?”

Almond shook her head. “I am sure I do not know. But if it was not made by *us* – and all we have seen of the technology indicates that it was not – then is such a thing any stranger than such a vessel being found in *our* era? It is a mystery – and I think we must try to solve it, yes?”

15 The New Arrivals Venture Outside in the Night-Time

Scarlet nodded slowly. “Well... if you *are* right, I also think we have an immediate problem to solve – one which involves explaining away our uniforms to whoever’s asleep in those rooms upstairs. Because unless we’ve managed to find some alternative clothes by the time they start getting out of bed then we’re going to look extremely conspicuous.”

Lieutenant Almond frowned. “The logic is inescapable, yes – but where are we to find such clothes? The obvious course would be to leave the house before we are discovered, but where are we to go? We could perhaps return to the ship, but this would only delay discovery, and anyway, I do not recall seeing any clothes there. We cannot simply take clothes from within the house – they would surely be recognised, and we would be treated as thieves...”

She stopped in mid-sentence as a faint sharp crackle was carried to their ears from somewhere outside the house. A second later another followed it, and she looked at Scarlet with questioning eyes.

“Were those not gunshots, Captain Scarlet?”

“Maybe,” muttered Scarlet. “I suppose they *might* have been a car backfiring out there somewhere, but I came to the conclusion some time ago that whenever Her Ladyship’s involved in whatever you’re doing, it’s a good idea to assume the worst....”

The sound of a door being opened noisily and carelessly rent the air from somewhere in the upper storey of the house, closely followed by the sound of running footsteps and a heartfelt string of sulphurous invectives. Scarlet grabbed the curtain once more and pulled his companion behind it, from whence they peered out. A few seconds later a tall, powerfully-built, middle-aged man descended the stairs at speed, attempting to finish dressing himself in a strange-looking jacket around his shoulders as he did so. Simultaneously a door on the ground floor opened, and the silhouette of a somewhat stocky young female figure waddled out of the darkness, clearly struggling under the weight of a heavy metal container. Spotting the man, she immediately dropped the bucket on the floor and straightened herself, evidently awaiting from the other some orders... which weren’t long in coming.

“Carey! Ah, Carey... you heard that? Damn them to hell - they’re abroad again! Thought we’d be asleep as before, did they? Not this time, I think.... not this time! Carey – fetch Herrick and send him to the cottages to rouse the keepers: I want those scurvy layabouts out of bed, dressed and back here within a half-hour – sooner if possible! Do it at once! Then open the armoury and fetch the guns – I want them all loaded and primed by the time they get back here. Have Reuben show you how – old he may be, but he saw action in his youth. Then rouse Mr Harrison: thump upon his door and tell him the woods are beset by vagabonds once more... dear God, do they *never* learn? This time I’ll ensure that they learn – oh, *this* time they shall – I swear it! Go, girl!”

The servant girl scurried away, and the man strode purposefully towards the main door, unbolting it and throwing it wide open in a fit of temper. After staring out into the darkness for a few seconds, he slammed it shut again, turned on his heel with a curse and marched smartly back up the stairs once more. A few seconds later the sound of an upstairs door opening and then being slammed shut floated down the stairs.

Upon hearing the sound, Scarlet drew the curtain aside and darted over to the main door. Quickly verifying that it hadn't automatically locked itself once more after having been slammed shut, he returned to their hiding place, urgently beckoning Lieutenant Almond to come out as he did so.

“That settles it. I don't know what the hell's going on here, but whatever the reason might be, it looks like this house will be swarming with armed men very soon – and that man looks like someone who's angry enough to shoot first and ask questions later. We're going to find it impossible to explain ourselves here if we're discovered... so we need to get out while we can. I'm guessing that he's gone to finish getting dressed before the action starts, in which case we've got two or three minutes at most before he comes back – and thanks to that display of temper, we've now got a way out. Let's go!”

Together they ran lightly across the hallway and out of the open door. Gesturing towards the undergrowth that lay on the other side of the lawn, Scarlet paused briefly to pull the door shut behind them once more, then sprinted after his companion across the lawn and followed her into the bushes beyond. At last protected by the cover offered by the shrubbery into which they had concealed themselves, they peered out back at the house, silhouetted against a cloudless starlit sky, and faintly illuminated by a full moon. Two windows in the upper storey bore faint signs of illumination, though clearly not of an electric nature: the localised yellow glow was obviously generated by a solitary candle in both instances. In one of the windows a solitary figure passed in front of the light as they watched. Taking in the architectural details, Scarlet nodded to himself.

“Again – somehow it *resembles* the Manor without actually being the same house. The main doorway is the same – I remember that carved lion over the arch – but there was an entire wing to the right of the main residential block which isn't there now... just over there behind that privet hedge – in fact, it's a row of stables, isn't it? And look... that barn between us and the wood: I'm sure Her Ladyship never had one of those. I'd have noticed – it would have looked *completely* out of place. So are you saying that this is Foxleyheath Manor *before* we first knew it, Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant Almond nodded vigorously. “That is what I say. Here we have the house as it was many years ago. Somehow we have been transported into it – and if we interpret the events we have already seen correctly, it is from here that you will return to the 21st century, frozen by that gas in the cellar.”

Struck by a sudden realisation, Scarlet glanced at his companion in alarm... only to find her looking back at him with an expression on her face which instantly told him that the same thought had already occurred to her also – and therefore that maintaining a tactful silence on the subject was pointless.

“What about *you*, Lieutenant? Only my body was found there... not yours. So what happened to you?”

Almond shook her head slowly, with just the merest hint of trepidation detectable in her expression.

“I do not know, Captain Scarlet. I do not know...”

16 A Grievous Altercation Takes Place in the Woods

The first faint red and white streaks of dawn were beginning to adorn the eastern sky by the time the two officers had worn themselves down trying to understand all the implications of what they had seen and experienced, by which time the house was perhaps two miles behind them. All about them stretched the woods; the anticipated discovery of the lake within it that Scarlet and Blue had flown over in the magnacopter seemingly just a few hours ago having shattered any lingering doubts that the whole incredible affair might have a simple explanation. With no obvious plan to initiate and a wealth of time to take stock of the situation, they had talked over the question of the incredible discovery of Scarlet's body in the cellar at length. *Was* the failure to discover Lieutenant Almond's body alongside Scarlet's own indicative of a tragedy that was yet to unfold? After maintaining something of a brooding silence on the subject for a while as they continued to explore the wood in the early morning air, Almond was becoming increasingly upbeat.

"I do not think the absence of my body is necessarily an indication that I shall die here, Captain Scarlet. On the contrary: it may be a good thing – for who else in this era knows how to prepare an organism for cryogenic stasis? Perhaps the person who performs this task is myself... and if so, then logic suggests that I will survive this affair – even if I do not return with you to the 21st century. Perhaps I will live out the rest of my life here – who can tell?"

Scarlet shook his head in puzzlement. "But why would you *do* that, Lieutenant? Surely if you had the choice you *would* return, wouldn't you? After all, you already know that the process for placing my body into suspended animation was successful, so there's no reason not to use it on yourself when the time comes. And anyway, what about that old paradox of changing history by killing your grandfather? You *can't* stay here – you've no idea how your presence might change history! Perhaps you find another way to leave... maybe you get that spaceship operational again..."

"No... I think it is more complicated than that," replied Almond. "I do not have the choice of whether to join you in the cellar, for we already know that I did not. Only the reason for not doing so remains unclear – though perhaps we may come to understand it in time. Also we must assume that whatever becomes of me, I do not escape in the spaceship beneath the lake – because the ship is still there in the 21st century. No – the fact is that I do *not* return. We cannot assume that paradoxes about changing history will necessarily create impossible problems, because until this incident occurred such a situation had never actually been experienced before! We speculate in works of fiction, it is true – but in reality we do not understand these things at all."

She paused briefly, collecting her thoughts before continuing.

"Also I think we do not need to worry too much about killing ancestors, for we must assume that history *has* been changed by our presence already. Not in so dramatic a way, but changed nonetheless. For example, we have left an unbolted door behind us. What if a burglar were to break *into* the house through that unbolted door? What if that burglar were to injure, or possibly even kill, one of the people in the house? If such a thing were to happen, entire *families* would disappear from existence in our world. Suppose either you or I came one of those families. Would that not create a paradox just as serious as killing an ancestor?"

"It seems to me that there are an awful lot of 'if's there, Lieutenant..." began Scarlet, frowning, but Almond was now in her element, and swept the objection aside.

“It does not matter how many ‘if’s. The point I make is that *anything* we do here changes history. And we have done that already, simply by being here. It may be that the world we knew no longer exists because of something that we have done – or it may be that the world we knew will *only* exist because of something that we have done... or will do. Who can tell? Certainly *we* cannot!”

“You’re saying that we have no way of knowing what our presence here will do – right?”

“That is what I say,” replied Lieutenant Almond in her most affirmative voice, “and we can therefore only trust our instincts and do what we believe to be the right thi.... *What was that?*”

A volley of ear-piercing shots rang out from the nearby trees. Instantly both Scarlet and Almond hurled themselves to the ground; one glance at the young lieutenant was enough to tell Scarlet that she was unharmed, and he rolled himself over to join her. Together in the long grass they waited silently – all senses on alert – for whatever was to follow, but at least another two minutes passed before a rustling of the undergrowth on the fringes of the woods ahead of them became discernible. A moment later and the rustling had become an increasingly loud disturbance, suggestive of a group of people beating the bushes with sticks.

The two officers glanced at one another, then instinctively wriggled to conceal themselves better in the undergrowth as the crashing noises grew ever closer. Increasingly conscious of the sparseness of the cover in which they had taken refuge, Scarlet peered intently into the darkness from which the source of the noise would shortly emerge. As it did so, he grunted and shook his head.

“Three of them... all with long guns of some kind. Probably shotguns, though the shots we just heard didn’t sound quite like anything I’ve ever heard before – and in a few moments they’re going to find us. We could probably shoot them down before they could return fire, but I don’t think we’re their target: if they were anticipating a fight they’d be making a lot less noise. No – I think they’re looking for something else... and whatever it is, they’re not expecting it to retaliate. If that’s right, they’ve no reason to want to harm us.”

“Better that we surrender now than be discovered, yes? At least we shall not be killed.”

Through the long grass Scarlet scowled at the slowly approaching trio, whose features were becoming increasingly easy to discern in the moonlight. All were in their late teens or early twenties; all three wore filthy clothing which was reminiscent of rags that had been sewn together, and their expressions were both purposeful and alert. The nearest had a long cord slung over his shoulder, at the other end of which several objects about the shape and size of deflated footballs could be seen hanging as they swung from side to side behind his back. A long vicious-looking knife was dangling from his belt, and Scarlet’s frown grew deeper.

“I don’t like this at all. They’re all heavily armed and those guns look lethal, but they’re obviously not military. Security guards? No... if they’d just shot at an intruder they’d be reporting the incident to somebody. *This* sort of behaviour in the middle of the night suggests to me that they’re up to no good – all of which means I wouldn’t care to double-guess their reaction to our sudden appearance. Having said that, if they catch us on the ground like this and are in as much of a temper as those expressions of theirs suggest, we’re dead. Under the circumstances I agree – we’ll surrender – but be careful how you show yourself. Keep your hands visible to them... but be ready to go for your gun instantly if things look as if they’re going to turn unpleasant. I’ll do the talking.”

Very slowly, the two Spectrum officers rose out of their place of concealment. Scarlet took two steps forward, raised his hands and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter even the

first word of a reassurance to the three young men, a cacophony of wild shouts in a thick rustic accent from he could barely make out the words rent the air. The one coherent sentence that his ears were able to interpret was...

“Seth... SETH! It’s Creighton’s damned keepers – over there... under the trees – they’re *here!* They’re *here*, damn them! Flee, brothers – flee for your lives!”

The closest of the three to Scarlet instantly ripped the cord hanging over his shoulder from his body and hurled the booty tied to it far away into the undergrowth. Whirling, he ran frantically back to his companions, who themselves had turned to run towards the woods from which all three had emerged a few moments previously. Before any of them had run half a dozen steps however, two sharp crackles shattered the air from the trees whose shelter they now sought. Seconds later, a group of six or seven men could be seen running out of the woods towards them, shouting incoherently and brandishing guns. Realising that they were now trapped, the three young men frantically flailed around, each of them staring into the darkness both fore and aft before concluding as one that their only chance of escape lay in overpowering the two strangely-clad strangers who now stood directly in their path.

Abandoning any hope of a peaceful conclusion to the ensuing battle, Scarlet launched himself towards their leader, who instantly snatched the knife out of its sheath on his belt. But before he could hurl himself into the full-frontal assault on Scarlet that he clearly intended, Lieutenant Almond had drawn her machine pistol and fired two precisely-aimed bullets into their assailant’s arm. Howling with pain the vagabond dropped the knife to the ground, but his companions had now caught up with him – and instantly identifying the source of the volley that had incapacitated their leader, they both swung their rifles around from their backs and levelled them at the young lieutenant.

“*Down, Almond!*”

Desperately Scarlet tried to draw his own pistol to shoot at least one of them down before they could fire, but his assailant had seized up his own rifle by the barrel with his remaining good hand, and used it as a club - firstly to smash Scarlet’s pistol to the ground, and seconds later to be brought down with lethal force over his head. An ear-splitting volley of explosive cracks rent the air as both the leader’s companions discharged their firearms simultaneously, both shots taking Lieutenant Almond full in the chest. The force of the blast hurled her backwards through the air, landing in a crumpled bloody heap in the undergrowth... through which her murderous assailants now raced in a desperate attempt to shake off the men hunting them.

His head still reeling from the blow from the rifle butt that had been used to incapacitate him, Scarlet stumbled to his feet, only to find himself standing in the path of the enraged pursuers – three of whom had raised their rifles and were preparing to shoot him down, assuming him to be one of the fugitives. Opening his mouth to call to them, Scarlet found himself strangely unsurprised to discover that no words came out... and then suddenly he was looking at the moon in the sky, his nose assailed by the stench of torn and burning flesh, and his body wracked with such agony that the sky swirled and twisted into impossible contortions above him. And then the moon slowly faded away...

Burning pain assailing every nerve in his body, and slipping continuously in and out of consciousness, Scarlet was barely aware of the passage of the next few hours. Once he seemed to hear the furious tones of an argument boiling around him, the indignant tones of an older man arguing with several frantically apologetic younger voices.

“Bungling imbeciles... damn your incompetence... *these* are not of Parkins’ clan! I fear the man is beyond help... blasted with three flintlocks, but the girl clings yet to life... send for poles and sheets... servants to carry them... bring them to the Manor at once, for it is the nearest... hurry, man! Run ahead... tell them to prepare...”

The world span and dissolved once more, and he lapsed back into oblivion.

17 Miss Palamac and Cousin Michael Provide Medical Assistance

Cassandra awoke to find her body being shaken violently by Carey. Feeling strangely light-headed as if she had only just been asleep a few moments, she peered through the locks of her hair at the agitated servant with a questioning gaze in her eyes.

“What is it, Carey? What’s the matter? Calm down – tell me what is the matter!”

Carey continued to fidget fretfully while wringing her hands. “If you please, Miss Cassandra – wake up, Miss! You must get up, for the master insists that you join him downstairs at once – oh, Miss – there’s been a terrible accident in the woods!”

Cassandra continued to peer at the servant for two or three seconds more while trying to shake off the most perplexing of dreams – an incomprehensible maelstrom of flashing lights, of strange mirrors with moving pictures within, and impossible polysyllabic words... and Tina – yes, she was sure that Tina had been there too... Cassandra shook her head furiously and stared at Carey, managing to bring the servant’s tense features into focus with an effort.

“What sort of accident, Carey? Has someone been hurt?”

The chambermaid shook her head violently. “I dunno how it ’appened Miss, but the keepers say there’s been murder done by the Parkins boys... and there’s another at death’s door – oh, Miss, they say it’s a young girl! They’ve carried them both back to the house, but they don’t know if she’ll live to see the dawn! Oh, please Miss, come quick!”

Cassandra continued to stare unblinking at her for a further full second, then scrambled out of bed and hurriedly threw on a long shawl over her nightdress before following Carey out of the bedroom and along the corridor. Together they hurried down the stairs into the hallway, where a small band of young men whom she recognised as casual workers on the estate were bearing a makeshift stretcher through the main door, all the time being harangued in the strongest language she had ever heard from the lips of her father – who was clearly beside himself with fury. Upon seeing his daughter he strode away from the men, crossing the hall to meet her as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Cassandra... has Carey told you what has happened? Good – I’ll not repeat it then. Suffice to add that I was still awake in the early hours when I heard shots in the woods, and myself rose to turn these worthless shirkers out of their cottages. *Gamekeepers?* Pah! I’ll not besmirch the word by applying it to these loafers... Great God in Heaven! – the Parkins clan shall hang for this, I swear it!”

He turned on his heel and strode back to the little band of men surrounding the stretcher.

“We must get her into a bed, and quickly. *You!* And you two... take up the poles and carry her up the stairs to the empty room on the old wing, closest to the far window – Harrison, show them the way! Carey – where are you? Carey... run to the scullery and have the maids bring hot water! As many jugs and bowls of it as they can find, and bring them to the room at once! Turn old Reuben out of his bed and tell him to boil more, for we shall have need of it! Go now!”

As Carey scurried away into the darkness a thought struck him, and he looked up at his friend, who was now directing the stretcher-bearers as they carried their burden up the stairs. “Tom – has Cousin Michael been awakened by the commotion?”

His friend looked down, briefly scanning the hall below him before shaking his head. “He is not here, but he surely cannot be unaware that something is amiss. Shall I bid him join us?”

Creighton shook his head. “I see no reason to call him from his bed – but when you have directed those layabouts where to take the woman, I would ask you go to his room and make him aware of what has happened.” He looked about himself and frowned. “I do not see Miss Palamac here either... maybe she is also wakeful and wondering what is happening.” He turned to his daughter. “Cassandra – return to your room and dress yourself, then go to Miss Palamac’s room. If she is awake, tell her what has happened. Tell her there has been an accident in the woods, but that she need not be alarmed... and then join us in the old wing as quickly as you can.”

Cassandra drew her shawl around her shoulders and ran up the stairs, then in the certainty that her friend would not have time unnecessarily wasted by such trivia, she disregarded her father’s instruction to dress first, and instead made straight for Tina’s bedroom. Having knocked lightly on the door she waited a few seconds for a reply, but none came. She turned the handle and pushed the door ajar just enough to be able to peer around it into the room, but found it empty.

As to the fact of her friend’s absence, Cassandra found herself both unsurprised and not unduly concerned, for during the weeks that she had become an integral part of the household at the Manor, Tina had acquired something of a reputation for disappearing for hours at a time. That said, it did not escape her notice that her friend’s bed had clearly not been slept in – and Cassandra frowned at that. Where on earth might she be? Tentatively concluding that she had probably already heard the commotion downstairs and gone to investigate, Cassandra put the matter of the freshly-made bed out of her mind and returned to her room, where she quickly dressed before hurrying down the corridor into the old wing, and thence to the room into which the stretcher had been borne. Opening the door, she found three persons – Carey, Mr Harrison and her father – now surrounding the bed onto which the injured young woman had been lifted from the stretcher. Even as she entered, Mr Harrison reached down to remove the blood-soaked sheet which covered her.

A horrified cry escaped Cassandra’s lips as the sheet was lifted away, revealing the full extent of her injuries. Turning to bury her face in her hands, she found herself face to face with her friend, who had silently entered the room behind her, and was studying the writhing young woman lying before her with an air of detached curiosity. Cassandra saw the look, and was shocked.

“Oh, Tina! How can you *bear* to look at such suffering and not be moved to tears! I cannot... it is so terrible...”

Her friend took her hand. “I have seen violent death many times, Cassandra; indeed, I have been the cause of it more than once. The experience is new to you, so it is natural that you are distressed when it confronts you – but you must accept it. And yet...”

She walked slowly towards the bed, and bending over the young woman’s body, reached out and gently touched her face, frowning to herself and shaking her head slightly as she did so. After a few seconds, she straightened herself with an effort, and slowly returned to Cassandra’s side. Shaking almost imperceptibly as she did so, she addressed herself quietly to her companion.

“Cassandra, something is not right here... it is not her time. This woman cannot die – she *must* not die. Dry your eyes, for we shall have work to do shortly.”

She turned to Colonel Creighton. “What of the other – the man? Is it certain that he is beyond help, Colonel?”

The colonel nodded gravely. “No-one could live with the injuries he sustained. I have seen men killed on the battlefield whose bodies had suffered less than his before their end came. He breathed his last before the stretchers arrived, and his body lies now in the outhouse. Our duty now lies with the living - so let us do all we can, although I fear it may be very little.”

“Time is of the greatest import,” observed the other gravely. “I will do whatever I can for her, but her injuries are grievous indeed, and I am no physician. Where may the nearest be found?”

Creighton’s reply was immediate. “Old Doctor Jobson in Crawley is the closest. It is but a quarter-hour’s ride; I shall start out at once – but the return journey will of necessity be in his carriage, which will be slower.” He turned to his companion. “Do whatever you can, Tom.”

The other nodded gravely. “On that you may depend – but it may be precious little. Bid your man bring every instrument he could possibly require both to remove the pellets and tend any emergency that might arise subsequent to their extraction, for we cannot risk his having to return to collect them... also be sure you apprise him of the urgency. God speed, my friend.”

They gripped hands briefly, and then the colonel was gone, leaving Harrison and the two young ladies alone in the room with the woman in the blood-soaked sheet. No sooner was the door closed than Tina had stepped over to the patient and taken her wrists in her hands. Seeing the gesture, he nodded sombrely. “A sentiment we all share, Miss Palamac, though I fear she will need more than tender administrations to save...”

Tina cut him off irritably with a wave of her hand. “I *know* that, sir! Her pulse is erratic – I fear there may be damage to her cardiovascular system.”

Mr Harrison’s brows furrowed. “Her cardio... *what?*”

“Later - my immediate concern is that we may have less time than it will take Colonel Creighton to return. You know as well as I that if her heart is injured she will most likely die; it is therefore imperative that we determine the reason for the irregularity and attempt to stabilise it if possible.”

Cassandra frowned with incomprehension. “But... how can we give back what only God can take away? If He sees fit to take this poor creature from us...”

“Cassandra, this philosophy of subservience to the whims of fate requires remedial action,” retorted Tina. “Her body is injured – but like any other mechanism it may be repaired. The woman’s death is not inevitable.”

“But surely it *is*! Only the Good Lord may bestow the gift of life, as it was restored to Lazarus – it would surely be sacrilegious for such as we to presume...”

Tina silenced her with a look. “What does any physician do if not attempt to restore people to health? Would your father send for one if it were otherwise? I repeat, this fatalism is misplaced and ill-becomes you – now help me remove these blood-soaked garments: Mr Harrison and I need to see the full extent of her injuries.”

Mechanically, Cassandra began to do as she was commanded, uttering a sharp intake of horrified breath at the sight that revealed as the young woman’s undergarments were peeled away. “Dearest Tina, of what *possible* help may we be? She is surely but moments from death...”

She looked up, as if struck by a thought. “But wait, Mr Harrison - Cousin Michael is here... and he has made frogs come back from the dead! Perhaps *he* may aid us in this matter!”

Harrison shook his head with a wan smile. “You misunderstand his achievements, Miss Creighton, remarkable though they may be. He does not bring back frogs from the dead. He has but demonstrated how an electrical charge which seems to exist within many living things may be put back into them after death for a moment or two. The device comprises a glass jar within which a voltaic pile is used to transfer the charge into the limbs of the creature. No man knows the secret of keeping it there – only the good Lord knows...”

Tina looked up sharply. “And... he does this by connecting a wire to each end of the core? And then by attaching them to different parts of the dead animal?”

“You have *seen* his experiments at the Royal Institution? But then you must know already that there can be no medical value in these matters – it is but a glass container fashioned such that...”

“And yet such a device might aid us... is the apparatus here in this house?”

“He may have brought it, for he is a studious young man with a fascination for all things technical.”

“Fetch him immediately, please. We must know what tools we have at our disposal.”

Harrison regarded her for a second, then nodded and left the room. Tina watched him leave thoughtfully, then turned her gaze on her friend.

“Cassandra – there is a likelihood that I am going to need at least one very sharp narrow blade, about *so* long. I believe I saw you using such an instrument recently: it was the occasion upon which you and I were talking while you worked your sampler. Do you still have it?”

Cassandra nodded her head vigorously. “Indeed – I have *several* such blades! They are all in my workbasket – there are two gimlets, a stiletto, an awl... no, *two* awls... and a...”

Tina cut her short. “Just bring me the workbasket, so that I can examine its contents. Do not spend any time looking for anything else until I have done so. Please do this immediately.”

“Surely – but will you not tell me...”

“When you have returned with the workbasket! Please bring it to me *at once*.”

Cassandra slipped away as Mr Harrison re-entered the room, accompanied by the young man who had arrived by stagecoach earlier in the day, burdened with several cases and boxes. The shock on his face at the first sight of the bloody woman lying on the bed begged an explanation, but Tina wasted no time enlightening him, instead launching immediately into the reason for the summons.

“You are Cassandra’s cousin, yes? Mr Harrison has spoken of a device that you use during the course of your experiments which stores electricity. Do you have it with you?”

The young man frowned. “Why yes, it is in my room – I always travel with it, for there is so much to learn... Why do you ask me about this?”

Tina gestured to the gasping woman writhing on the bed. “There is no time to explain; suffice to say it could make the difference between life and death for this young woman, who has been sorely injured in a shooting accident. Please bring it here immediately.”

“But... but how might a glass bottle containing naught but a stack of metallic plates soaked in brine aid in this matter? And much work is required before the plates...”

Tina turned and looked directly into the young man’s eyes. “Would you condemn our patient to death by your interrogation of me, sir? No? Then do as I ask – *at once!*”

The peremptory tone with which the order was delivered had the required effect: the young man merely swallowed and fled the room at a run. Within under a minute he was back, carrying in his arms a large bottle out of the top of which protruded a metal rod topped with a small copper ball.

“The jar needs to be filled with water for it to perform the function for which it is constructed, but I have discovered that if one adds a hydroxide compound such as....”

Tina cut across the impromptu lecture with impatience. “... salt, yes, and since salt is used to preserve food here there must be a substantial quantity of it in the house.”

She switched her attention to the chambermaid. “Carey – we shall need as much salt as you can easily and quickly lay your hands on... pay *attention*, girl! You will bring as much of it as you can find as quickly as you can – and there are also some other items that I require. First among these, you will bring me two saucepans or frying pans, both of which must have wooden handles...”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am... the pans don’t *have* wooden handles, ma’am!”

Tina blinked in astonishment. “What – *none* of them? How do you pick them up when they’re hot, girl?”

“With the pot holders, ma’am! They’re made of good thick cloth so Mrs Herrick don’t get her hands burned...”

“Bring at least four pot holders. You will bring me also a ball of twine – the finest you have – and I shall also need several metres...no... that is... at least ten feet of wire in no fewer than four separate sections. Can you get all of these things quickly?”

“Aye, ma’am.”

“Then *do so!* No... wait...”

She threw a glance at the torn remnants of the girl’s tunic which now lay in a blood-soaked pile in the corner of the room, and frowned in thought for a few seconds. “When you return, take those garments away. I wish to have them preserved but not stored near clean linen, so deposit them in the old cellar beneath the back stairs. Now *go!*”

“Yes, ma’am! Right away, ma’am!” The girl quit the room at a run, and Tina turned back to the woman lying on the bed, experimentally running her fingers over her blood-stained torso and noting her reactions to the pushing and prodding. After a few moments she stepped back, considering.

“Nine or ten pellet fragments, possibly more, with two lodged close to the aortic artery. Those two at least must be removed at once, or she will most likely die within the hour. You will assist me in this, Mr Harrison. Ah – Cassandra... you have brought the workbasket, yes? Good – open it, and take out the gimlets, the stiletto and any large needles you have: find the pot or jug containing water closest to the boil, and put them all in it – ah, wait... I see that will no longer be necessary. Thank you for attending to that, Mr Harrison... you are clearly already ahead of me, sir.”

Harrison looked up from the pot of steaming water into which he had just dropped the sharp instruments, and shook his head in consternation.

“This water is insufficiently hot for such work as this, Miss Palamac. It should be boiling, and these instruments should be left in for some time.”

“I appreciate and fully share your concerns, Mr Harrison – but we have no immediate means to hand of increasing the temperature, and almost no time in which to apply them even if we did. To put it bluntly, sir, we have no choice. Please hand me the stiletto when I ask for it.”

She swung round to face her friend. “Cassandra – I shall need you to staunch the blood, and also to prevent the girl from injuring herself, for she may go into convulsions...”

“I? But I cannot! *I dare* not! I would faint, I know it!”

Tina walked smartly around to the other side of the bed, and took her friend by the shoulders, speaking gently but forcibly to her.

“Cassandra – you *can* and you *will*. You have strengths and resources within you that you have not yet called upon to aid you, but *I* know you possess them, for I would not ask this of you otherwise. I need you to perform these tasks for me – and I know that you will not fail me. Now, I ask you again. Will you aid me in this matter?”

Cassandra swallowed, then forced a faint smile, replying in a tone that sounded supremely false even to her own ears. “Of course, dear Tina. Tell me what you would have me do.”

Her friend took her hands and squeezed them gently. “There is much blood – and there will be more. You must clean it away so that we can see what we are doing, for we must remove the bullets from her chest as quickly as possible. Use only boiled water and change the cloth you use frequently – it is most important that you do this. Do not concern yourself with her cries, for the speed at which we can work is of greater importance than her comfort. She will feel pain, so try to prevent her from making violent movements by which she may harm herself. Secure her wrists if you must.”

She turned to Mr Harrison. “I will take the stiletto now, sir. I know that my fingers will bear the heat, but yours may not – so be careful how you handle it. Are you ready?”

A brief nod met her query. Without further ado, she took the stiletto from him and with delicate precision began to insert it into the writhing woman’s chest. Cassandra caught her breath and bit her lip, forcing herself to watch at first in horror and then with fascination tinged with growing admiration as the two of them began to move the instruments from side to side, probing for the elusive bullets that lay trapped within. One by one, a small pile of the bloody pieces of shot began to accumulate on the table as Tina’s fingers prised them from the young woman’s torso, and Cassandra found herself starting to speculate on the number that might adorn the table when all had been found and extracted.

A sharp cry from the patient brought her back to her designated task with a jolt, and she hurried to apply yet another cloth to the woman’s heaving chest. Cassandra’s young cousin also looked up from his designated task, and drew his breath at the pile of lead.

“So *many* pieces of shot! Are there yet *more*, Miss Palamac?”

“I believe but two remain,” replied Tina curtly, “and I shall endeavour to remove them at once. Please be ready with your device, sir – we may have need of it very shortly.”

She snatched Cassandra’s cloth and re-inserted the stiletto deep into the wound, while the young man continued to busy himself with the task of dissolving the remaining salt.

The woman on the bed suddenly shook with a violent spasm, taking both Tina and Cassandra completely by surprise. Cassandra frantically grabbed her arms and sought to bring her arched body

back down to the bed once more, while Tina glanced up at the bowl into which the young man was still dissolving the last of the salt.

“She is going into convulsions – is that solution ready, sir?”

“It is almost ready, Miss Palamac! But I still do not understand...”

Tina extracted a compact device from her bosom and held it out for him to take. Automatically he did so, then peered at it, frowning with incomprehension.

“What is this, Miss Palamac – and what would you have me do with it? It is a toy, is it not?”

Tina blinked with irritation, then instantly recognising that an explanation was essential regardless of the extremity of the situation, took a breath.

“Sir – it is an ionic supercharger with which you may extend the capabilities of your device, so fill the jar with the solution and prepare it as you would for one of your experiments. Then attach your wires to the connections *here* and *here*, and use it to charge the plates. Once supercharged, the jar will be capable of sustaining a far greater electric charge than that with which you are familiar - so upon your life do not touch the terminals with your bare hands. Tell me as soon as this is done, for we shall most likely have need...”

A desperate gasping cry from the woman on the bed made them both turn, even as her back arched in agony before she collapsed back onto the bed. Even as they watched, her eyes lost their focus, and began to glaze over.

Uttering a low groan of despair, Mr Harrison seized her wrist, desperately searching for a pulse. After a few seconds he placed her hand gently on her lap, and stood back, shaking his head sadly. “It is too late. She is gone.”

Silently he crossed himself, then moved to close the dead woman’s staring eyes. A slim white hand instantly descended from the other side of the woman’s body, firmly catching his wrist between its fingers. Looking up in outraged astonishment, he found himself staring into Tina’s ice-cold eyes.

“We will conclude this operation when I *say* that we shall, sir!” She swung to face the young man, still fiddling with one of the connections. “We need that charged jar *now*, sir!”

The other looked up in bewilderment. “I have it ready – but our patient is *dead!* Of what possible use can it...”

“Connect the electrodes to the saucepans, one at a time – and then stand back!”

“But I still do not...”

“*Just do it!*”

The young man snatched the wires and deftly twisted them around the handles of the two pans. Pushing him away from the makeshift device, Tina flicked a switch on the ionic supercharger and thrust its barrel into the heart of the voltaic pile. Wrapping her hands in the cloth pot holders, she snatched the handles of the two saucepans and brought both down simultaneously onto the woman’s now lifeless chest. A sharp crackle emanated from the apparatus as her body arched upwards, then collapsed back onto the bed.

“Again!”

A second later another jolt wracked the young woman’s body, and Tina stepped forward smartly to lift the metal pans clear. Suddenly comprehending the purpose of her actions, Harrison reached

forward and wonderingly took the patient's wrist in his hand. Two seconds later his eyes widened in abject disbelief.

"There is a pulse! Oh Great God in Heaven, I swear there is a pulse!"

Tina pushed him aside, then in rapid succession confirmed both the presence of the pulse and a faint but erratic heartbeat.

"Yes – there *is* a pulse, but the crisis is not over: we have merely gained ourselves a little time. We must now ensure that her cardiovascular system continues to function while we complete the operation. Mr Harrison, I need you to hold the electrodes against the patient's chest: I will program the ionic supercharger to help maintain the rhythm of her heartbeat while we apply stitches to the wound. Cassandra, you will assist me in this task."

Already stunned into obedient silence by Tina's earlier rebuke, Harrison meekly stepped forward to take the saucepans from her, while Cassandra, managing to maintain an outward air of confidence she still did not entirely feel, acknowledged with a perfunctory nod.

"Of course. Instruct me, and I will do it."

Tina reached over the table, took Cassandra's hands in her own before lowering them towards the patient's chest.

"I need you to place the index and forefinger of your left hand around the woman's heart... *here...* and *here*. The fingers of your right hand, you will hold on her wrist... *so*. I need to know precisely when a heartbeat registers at any of these three sites. I will ask you to concentrate on each of them in turn, and to say 'Now' as you feel the heartbeat. The processor within this device will calculate the blood flow rate, and initiate an appropriate circulatory enhancement pattern. You will need to discriminate between what your fingertips are sensing in the patient and the beating of your *own* heart, so it is imperative that you free your mind of all distractions: doing this will enable you to commit yourself absolutely to the task in hand. We will begin. Left hand, index finger please."

As the two men watched in bewildered fascination, Cassandra closed her eyes and willed her breathing rate to drop as she forced herself to commit the entirety of her concentration to the detection of the faintest of sensations in the tip of just one of her fingers.

"Now... now... now..... now... "

"Stop. Right hand, wrist."

"Now... now..... now.... "

"Stop. Left hand, forefinger."

"... nothing – no, wait..... now... now..... now.... "

As the singular dialogue alternated back and forth between the two young women, Tina's fingers flew over the tiny set of keys built into the side of the little device as she watched a melee of complex vibrating waveforms darting across the tiny screen, at first seemingly haphazard, and then after a few moments slowly beginning to stabilize into a single unmoving image. She closed the panel, and held out the device to the young man at her side.

"Please press the ionic device down on the patient's heart while I attempt to insert stitches to close the wound. Use as much or as little pressure as is commensurate with minimizing her discomfort as you perceive it from her reflexes; the electrodes that Mr Harrison is holding to her chest will amplify or dampen the signal to the strength required."

From the nearby pot of steaming water she extracted the roll of twine, and began to thread it through the eye of the needle. Suddenly comprehending what her friend was about to do, Cassandra's eyes widened – first in alarm and apprehension, then a few moments later in simple astonishment, and then yet a third time in ever increasing wonder and admiration as the operation proceeded. No amount of working a sampler could ever have prepared her for this! She continued to watch, enthralled, as her friend finally closed the wound and stood back from the bed upon which the young woman was now slowly, but surely, drawing measured breaths unaided. Tina turned and regarded the team thoughtfully.

“Her condition appears to have stabilised, but this is not yet over. The makeshift enhancer I have assembled must remain functional for at least another few hours while she sleeps, so Cassandra – you will occupy this room throughout that time. You must be wakeful, and look for any change in her condition. I must return briefly to my room to complete some tasks that were interrupted by these unfortunate events, but I shall be sufficiently close for you to be able to call out for me if there is any change, either for better or worse.”

She turned to the young man at her side. “You have done well, sir – there is nothing more you can do at this time, so I recommend you return to your room and get what sleep you can, for it is likely that we shall be busy tomorrow. Mr Harrison, you should do likewise – but when he returns, please ask Colonel Creighton to retain for at least a further two days the services of the physician whom he rode to seek out. I place little value on his opinion regarding the patient's condition, but we may have need of whatever pain-relieving substances he might possess.”

Harrison acknowledged the request with a formal nod of the head and an expression on his face of undisguised admiration. “I will remain up until Creighton returns to ensure he receives your entreaty, Miss Palamac. This is the very least I can do, for it is not *I* who have earned the rest. You in contrast have earned it one thousand times over.”

He quit the room, leaving Cassandra's cousin peering at the ionic supercharger which he had now withdrawn from the patient's chest. Raising it to his eyes he squinted at it, shaking his head.

“I do not know what to say. I simply do *not* know what to say... for today I have seen a miracle! There is so much I do not understand... what *is* this device? Whence does it draw its power? Can it have anything in common with my own paltry investigations with the legs of dead frogs? I confess this night I feel very small.”

Tina turned to face him. “The device in your hand projects a high-voltage beam of artificially supercharged ions for the purpose of incapacitating an assailant. The capacitor *you* created converted that stream of ions into a regulated discharge of pulsed bursts – which we employed to re-start the woman's heartbeat after the myocardial infarction she suffered a few moments ago. Your creation has just saved her life, sir – so perhaps it would be prudent for me take back the supercharger before you kill her again with it.”

Still in a daze at the outcome of the sequence of events in which he had just participated, the young man numbly handed over the little device. Tina deftly flicked her fingers over the buttons on its base to deactivate it, and dropped it into her sleeve.

“Thank you, Mr...”

Cassandra jumped. “Oh! Good heavens – I forgot! Cousin Michael, you have not yet been introduced to my friend; nor she to you! I had expected that you should meet at breakfast tomorrow

morning, but that now seems rather inappropriate, do you not think? This then is my friend Tina Palamac – is her family name not strange, cousin? Tina... this is my cousin, Mr Michael Faraday.”

The young man straightened himself and bowed his head in a formal nod.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Palamac.” Conscious that the response sounded somewhat inadequate to his ears, he hesitated for a second while choosing words more fitting to the circumstances.

“No – more than that... *much* more than that. I am honoured.”

He opened the door to leave, to find himself face to face with Colonel Creighton, who almost fell forward into the room in his haste. His eyes fell instantly on the young woman lying on the bed, and upon perceiving a slight movement of her chest, breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hah! I see she still lives – thank God we are not too late then! I have brought with me Doctor Jobson from Crawley. He is coming up from the carriage below, and will be here almost instantly... he has given instructions to Herrick that the servants are to bring his surgical instruments to this room directly, whereupon he will attend the young woman alone...”

“You may calm yourself, Colonel,” interrupted Tina quietly. “Our patient’s condition is less critical now than it was but a short time ago in consequence of the ministrations of Mr Faraday and myself, and I recommend that the good doctor allows me to speak with him before...”

“Your concern for our patient’s wellbeing is of course to be commended, but that will *not* be necessary, madam!”

The portly figure of Doctor Jobson had appeared in the doorway, his corpulent head festooned with a wig of a style reminiscent of an earlier decade, and his expression set with an air of business-like formality.

“You may now rest at ease, madam, for I am here.” He turned to face the others. “And I would ask you all now to leave the room, that I may examine the patient.”

Standing slightly to one side, Cassandra did not miss the tiny flicker of her cousin’s eyes towards her friend, who almost imperceptibly nodded her head. Satisfied that the situation was in hand, he left the room with the colonel, leaving Tina and herself in the room with the patient and the physician, who began to look around the room, noting with an approving grunt the many towels and jugs of water that had been delivered earlier. Glancing up, he turned to Cassandra.

“Miss Creighton – might I impose upon you to ensure that once my instruments have all been brought to this room, the servants are made aware that I am not to be disturbed?”

“Of course, Doctor. I shall do so at once.” Cassandra turned to leave, and acutely conscious that Tina had made no move to follow her, steeled herself for the battle of wills that was plainly about to commence. She reached forward to open the door, and was almost knocked sideways as it flew open and Carey rushed in, panting heavily.

“Where is Doctor Jobson? I have been sent for Doctor Jobson... ah, you are here, sir! Thank God, sir! Oh, sir – please come quickly, sir! It’s the dead gentleman downstairs in the outhouse, sir! Oh sir... he’s *breathing*, sir!”

18 The Remarkable Restoration to Life of the Man in Red

“I cannot fathom,” confessed Colonel Creighton, “how the extent of his injuries could have been so ill-judged, Jobson! Not merely by myself, but by all who attended him immediately after the shooting. Two of those men saw action under my command in Hyderabad and Travancore; the hand of death in all its manifestations is no stranger to them. It was clear to all that he was beyond hope before we bore his body from the woods – and yet upstairs he now lies sleeping as a babe while you and I take breakfast together! How *can* this be?”

“Sir, it is beyond my comprehension,” admitted the other with a shake of his head as he reached for another hot roll. “I will but observe that during the course of my long life I have seen many things that I could not explain at the time, and which I cannot explain now. Those we have healed would insist that those that treat them are masters of their art – and indeed such a belief is not to be discouraged. Many years ago, when I was a young apprentice serving in His Majesty’s Navy, the ship’s surgeon once told me after a few glasses of rum that an essential component of a patient’s successful restoration to health was his own belief that he *would* recover. Aye, we know more of how the human body works than do those we treat – but those who know the most would be the first to acknowledge that the extent of such comprehension is dwarfed by that which remains obscured from us. Perhaps that is as God intended – I know not, and yet I must believe that He gave me whatever skills I have learned with the intent that I should put them to good use.”

Doctor Jobson pushed his plate to one side, and wiped a smear of butter from his lips with his napkin.

“Do you wish me to remain, sir? I will do so for as long as you might think fit, but what I *can* do for him, I have done – and in view of Mr Harrison’s report upon both their diligence and competence, I am confident that I may now leave him safely in the care of Miss Cassandra and that young ward of yours. Indeed, I am more concerned for the welfare of the young woman who was also so grievously injured – and yet Mr Harrison told me shortly after we arrived that she was administered aid by your ward the nature and efficacy of which he had never seen before, and that she is therefore...”

“And that she is therefore in good hands, Doctor Jobson. Indeed, I am gratified to be able to acknowledge that this is so.”

“Miss Palamac!” Both men rose smartly to their feet as Tina entered the room, and Colonel Creighton tried to clear his head long enough to recall enough of the sequence of events earlier that morning to work out whether an introduction was necessary.

“Miss Palamac... you have of course met Doctor Jobson when he and I returned from Crawley in the small hours, but if you will permit me...”

“We *have* already been introduced, Colonel,” interrupted Tina gently. “I’m sure the good doctor will agree that the circumstances were unusual, but the formalities have nevertheless been observed. You need not concern yourself that a breach of etiquette has occurred, for it has not.”

She made her way over to the sideboard and cut herself a small piece of cake. “Doctor Jobson, no doubt your first thought will be to wonder about the state of our two patients this morning – and I am able to assure you they are both faring well.”

“I do not doubt it,” replied Jobson with an appreciative chuckle, “for now that we meet once more in the light of day, Miss Palamac, I perceive that Mr Harrison did not exaggerate when he informed me last night that you have a certain talent for making things happen that would *not* happen otherwise! Creighton – speaking of Mr Harrison, shall we see him this morning?”

The Colonel spread his hands. “It has been a long night – he may yet be sleeping. Have *you* seen anyone else about this morning, Miss Palamac?”

“After it was clear the woman’s life was no longer in danger,” replied Tina, “I recommended that both Mr Harrison and Mr Faraday avail themselves of the opportunity to catch up on a few hours’ sleep. That was somewhat *less* than a few hours ago – and I would therefore venture to presume they took the recommendation seriously.”

“Then after I have seen both patients once more and satisfied myself of their well-being, I think I shall make my way back to my practice, Creighton. Would you lead me to their rooms, please?”

“Allow me to do this, Colonel,” interjected Tina gently but firmly, “*I* will take the doctor to see our patients. Please come this way, sir.”

Without waiting for Creighton to acknowledge the offer, she ushered Doctor Jobson out of the room and up the stairs. Upon reaching the room in which the woman had been installed, she tapped perfunctorily on the door, waited no longer than two seconds merely to ensure that there was nobody else in the room, and then entered.

Leading the way to the bed, she pulled back the bedclothes and stood back to allow the physician access to the sleeping woman. Jobson began gingerly to peel away the nightdress in which she had been wrapped, then stopped as soon as the extent of the lacerations – both those effected by the original assault upon her person and those subsequently inflicted to save her life – became apparent once more. The darkening of the extensive bruising in the intervening hours served only to render the spectacle even more distressing than previously, and Jobson visibly blanched before turning to address his companion.

“Perhaps it would be best if you were to leave the room while I examine her, madam. Her injuries may distress you, for they are grievous indeed.”

Tina regarded him without emotion. “Sir, I *know* they are grievous – for it was I who first treated them. I shall remain.”

No more than half a minute was required to convince Jobson that his earlier conviction of the woman’s certain and rapid convalescence was premature, and he straightened himself before assuming the severe countenance he reserved for the imparting of grave news to anxious relatives.

“Miss Palamac – I fear that now that I look upon the severity of these wounds once more, I am persuaded that my earlier diagnosis, influenced in part by the account I received from yourself and others within this household, was insufficiently informed as to reflect the true gravity of this woman’s condition. I therefore cannot but insist that my personal attention will still be required in the treatment of the patient for many days yet...”

Tina positioned herself directly opposite him on the other side of the bed, and addressed him quietly in the same placid tone she had used with the colonel a few moments earlier.

“Surely there is no need of that, Doctor – for having now seen her once more, are you not satisfied that she is in safe hands, and that her speedy recovery is assured?”

Jobson frowned back at her in astonishment for a moment, contemplating how to phrase an appropriately dismissive reply – but fortunately just managing to prevent himself from uttering a patent absurdity as he recognised in a moment of dawning revelation that the young woman in whose calm gaze he now found himself transfixed was of course perfectly correct. There *was* no need... there really wasn't... He nodded slowly.

“Yes... yes, of course you are right...”

His expression cleared, and he beamed back at her. “Indeed... I believe you are quite right! Having now seen her once more, it is clear to me that she is in safe hands, and that her speedy recovery is assured.”

“And I am sure you would agree,” continued Tina mildly, “that the other man is no longer in need of your attention at all – would you not?”

“Yes... I would undoubtedly agree,” affirmed Jobson sagely. “It would serve no purpose for me to disturb him, would it?”

“To be sure, those were my very sentiments also,” replied Tina affably. “Indeed, much as we would obviously wish to enjoy your company a little longer, there would appear to be little purpose in our detaining you – is that not so?”

“I fear it is, madam,” replied Jobson thoughtfully, “for much as I wish I could remain a little longer, there would appear to be little purpose in your detaining me.”

“In that case, allow me to escort you to your carriage, Doctor.” She shepherded him out of the bedroom and led him along the corridor and down the stairs, at the bottom of which Colonel Creighton was patiently awaiting their return.

“Well, Doctor? What is your opinion?”

Jobson nodded confidently. “They are in safe hands, Creighton – and their speedy recovery is assured: on this matter you may trust my judgment. But tell me... is it your intention still to host that dinner party of yours at the end of the week, or shall you now postpone it on account of this tragedy?”

Creighton blinked. “Confound it! I had not thought... is it so soon? By God...yes, it is!” He shook his head to clear it, lapsed into silence for a few seconds, and then looked up again with an air of resolution.

“I shall *not* postpone it, Jobson. It would appear as if we had been dealt a mortal blow – and I will not have the people hereabouts saying that we may be covered by the criminalities of such as the Parkins clan. No – it must proceed as planned: you may tell any of our mutual friends that if you see them, and I shall write to the three or four who live far from the town but who might hear gossip concerning the events of last night. Indeed, it may be that one or two who might otherwise have sent their apologies will now come anyway, to assure themselves of hearing the tale personally. If so, then if our patients continue to recover at their present rate, our guests may yet be treated to an elucidation from the mouths of the victims themselves!”

19 The Man in Red Enquires after the Health of Miss Almond

Alone in the darkened room, the man in red, as he had become instantly and universally known within the household, twisted himself painfully around in his bed in an effort to align his eyes with the window at the far end of the room, and was not surprised to fail. Abandoning the attempt at the sound of a door quietly opening just out of his line of sight to his right, he instead tried to roll over to reposition his head in such a way as to give his eyes less work; this time with a modicum of success. A girl had entered the room; in her outstretched hands she bore a tray upon which he could see a china jug and a porcelain bowl with a spoon in it.

Forcing his body to disregard the searing pain so caused, he managed with a supreme effort to lift his head a centimetre from the pillow.

“How... how long...?”

His young nurse reached out and gently but firmly pushed his head down onto the pillow once more. “Three days, sir – it’s been three days. You are fortunate indeed, sir; after they brought you back, they gave you up for dead.”

The man in red closed his eyes once more and sighed quietly. “Yes... that happens. Doesn’t make it any less painful, though. Three days... long time... strange... must have been really bad...”

His eyebrows knitted into a frown, and he opened his eyes once more to look closely at the girl’s face. After a second or two the frown grew a shade deeper.

“You... it’s you, isn’t it... you’re the girl in the cellar...”

The girl reached out and pulled the sheet back over him. “Hush, sir – you need to regain your strength. I’ve brought you some chicken broth, but if you are unable...”

“*Almond!* What’s happened to Lieutenant Almond?”

“Sir?” The girl looked nonplussed.

Increasingly agitated, the man in red’s head shook violently from side to side. “Lieutenant Almond - the young woman I was with... Rodica... what happened to her? Tell me – I need to know...”

“*Oh!* Yes, of course... you may calm yourself, sir – she is recovering even now, thanks to the ministrations of my friends.”

The man in red collapsed back onto the bed, obviously much relieved. “Thank you. Thank you... Miss...?”

“I am Cassandra Creighton... and the name of your friend is Rodica Almond, yes? What a strange name it is! I think I like it – yes, I like it very much.” Her face clouded briefly in puzzlement. “But why do you ascribe to her a military rank?”

The man in red sighed gently, and briefly closed his eyes. “It’s a long story. Please tell me what happened after the gun battle in the woods. Who were the three men, and why did they attack us? We meant them no harm...”

Cassandra’s easy demeanour evaporated. “Your assailants were the Parkins boys – and they were poaching, sir. My father heard them shooting our pheasants earlier in the night, and had sent our gamekeepers to seek them out. Our men were following them through the woods when you came

upon them, and no doubt they panicked when they realised they were trapped. After they assaulted you and your companion they made to escape into the common that lies to the south, but were taken by my father's men upon their arrival. Tomorrow they stand trial at the assize for their crimes."

The man in red blinked in astonishment. "Isn't that moving things a little fast? Public opinion against them will still be at fever pitch..."

It was Cassandra's turn to register astonishment. "I would certainly have thought it so, for they sought to *murder* Miss Almond and yourself, sir! And they would certainly have done so had not my father and his men intervened, for Miss Almond's injuries were so severe that we feared for her life..."

"*Why didn't you tell me that!* You said she was recovering..."

Cassandra gently pushed his head back down onto the pillow once more. "As indeed she *is*, sir! Be still and do not fret – even now her strength grows by the hour, and my friend assures me that her recovery will be complete in a matter of a few short weeks. When you yourself are well enough to walk, you may see her."

"I'm well enough *now*..."

"You are *not*, sir! Resign yourself to waiting until you are a little stronger – and to assist in this matter, I have brought you this broth to help build up your strength. Do you wish me to feed it to you, Mr...?"

"Thank you, no – I can manage. Sorry... it's Metcalfe. Paul Metcalfe."

"Then I will leave you now to drink it, Mr Metcalfe. Please try to finish it all, for it is one of the few tasks that we may safely entrust to Carey while Mrs Herrick is engaged in the preparation and cooking of all our other meals – and I find myself much occupied at present with the care of your companion."

Recognising the passable imitation of a seasoned family doctor demanding obedience from one of his more strong-willed patients – and indeed, it was as well done as Doctor Fawn could have done it – the man in the bed managed to affect an appropriately subservient wan smile.

"Thank you, Cassandra – I'll try to remember that... and do something for me, would you? Please get a message to whoever sets the dates of these things about getting the appearance of those poachers at the... assize? ... delayed until I and my companion can give evidence in person. We're key witnesses to what happened, and the speed at which events are moving concerns me. Putting the intent of the three of them aside, the fact remains that neither of us was actually killed."

Cassandra looked at him uncertainly, her manner marginally frostier than previously.

"I will speak with my father as you ask, Mr Metcalfe, for he goes to see the magistrate at his lodgings in East Grinstead later today – but I can tell you at once how he will reply. He will say that justice must be swift, sure and seen to be done, or it is not done at all. As strangers hereabouts you may not know it, but this outrage is but the latest of a several assaults upon us by that tribe of cutthroats. The vagabond who sired them lost his life when preying upon us these three months since, but his kin have continued to plague us with their villainy... and the good people of this parish will tolerate it no longer."

She picked up the tray and made to leave the room. At the door she turned. "I will look in on Miss Almond and ascertain that she continues to regain her strength – as indeed she has almost by the hour since she was so sorely injured. Your progress is also little short of miraculous, Mr Metcalfe

– can it be that everyone from whence you come is so prone to good health? You will be up and about very soon, I think.”

“Aha... you’ve just reminded me – do you know what happened to our... our clothes? The ones that Miss Almond and I were wearing at the time of the attack...”

“Oh! The red tunic and the one like it in light brown? Yes, I believe Carey took them after you were brought back to the house, and put them down in the cellar. They were most sorely damaged by the gunfire, Mr Metcalfe, and there was much blood to sully them! I am sure they can never be worn again; indeed, what remains of them may already have been thrown away.”

Mr Metcalfe grimaced. “Cassandra, if they *haven’t* been thrown away...”

Scarlet’s perception of the air temperature in the room dropped another fraction of a degree, and having suddenly perceived the reason for it, he hurriedly abandoned the sentence and started again.

“Miss Creighton... if they *haven’t* been thrown away, can you get what’s left of them back? There’s some... metal jewellery among the various items – it will look rather strange, but it means a lot to us, and we’d like it returned if possible.”

The room temperature stabilised once more, and Cassandra inclined her head approvingly.

“Of course, Mr Metcalfe – I shall speak with Carey.”

She closed the door behind her, and Scarlet reached for the broth. The flavour was surprisingly intense, and he found himself feeling more resilient almost by the mouthful. After a few seconds however, he found himself suddenly and quite unexpectedly overtaken with a mild wave of nausea. Dropping the spoon into the plate, he carefully put it down on the little table beside the bed and waited patiently a few seconds for the sensation to pass – and indeed, within a further fifteen seconds it was gone.

He reached for the broth once more, pondering upon the unexpected turn. “*Strange... didn’t anticipate that. Maybe she’s right – might have to give it just a little longer...*”

20 Miss Palamac Ponders the Cause of an Unexpected Dizzy Spell

At the end of the corridor, Cassandra looked on in concern as Tina steadied herself against the bannister of the main staircase. Dropping the tray, she hurried to take her friend's arm.

"Tina! Are you unwell?"

Tina frowned abstractedly, evidently more surprised than beset by any incapacitating pain. "Yes... it is nothing. I assure you it is nothing at all. It will pass – indeed, I feel it passing even now."

Cassandra found herself less than convinced by the denial, suddenly realising with full force that this was the first time throughout the entire period of their acquaintance that she had seen her friend in anything other than absolute control of her own situation. And yet almost before she had had time to reflect upon the thought, Tina was extricating herself from the support of her friend's steadying arm.

"Tina – you have been working too hard, to be sure! Come and rest – I can attend to both patients at least until you are recovered."

Tina appeared to consider the point. "Perhaps you are right. I shall go to the study and sit down for a few moments. There is the change of bandages that I was about to apply to the young woman to attend to – you may deal with that in my place."

Even as she listened, Cassandra understood that her friend was merely indulging her to shorten the discussion and save herself the tedium of a pointless argument – she would have brushed Cassandra's concern aside with a wave of her hand had she felt like it, given her absolute certainty of her own ability to handle the situation... and she would have been correct in that belief. Yet knowing that, when once upon a time Cassandra would have chided her friend for dismissing her own health so recklessly, now she said nothing. With a wry mental smile, Cassandra noted that her friend's talents both for employing the most subtle of subterfuge to get her own way, and also for initiating *very* direct action in support of it whenever she considered it necessary, were beginning to rub off on her.

"To be sure... Oh! I have learned her name – it is Rodica Almond. And the man in red is called Mr Metcalfe – he told it to me himself a few moments ago when I took him his broth."

"Mr Metcalfe, the man in red – and Miss Rodica Almond, the young woman wearing light brown... interesting. There is much that I wish to ask them about both their ordeal and the circumstances preceding it, but that can wait until they're fully recovered – which given the daily reports concerning their improvement will be soon enough. Meanwhile, I shall leave Miss Almond in your very capable hands, Cassandra."

Tina turned, and walked away in the direction of the study. Still musing upon the nature of the sudden and as yet unexplained attack of nausea that had assailed her on the stairs, she found herself reflecting on the two strangers... and in particular of the mysterious Mr Metcalfe – the man in red – whom she had seen only briefly before being shepherded out of the room containing his unconscious bullet-ridden body by Doctor Jobson. Unlike the time she was first confronted by the injured young woman, she had felt no impulse to intervene, and was content to leave his fate in the hands of the elderly physician – not because of any healing skills he might or might not possess, but merely from her inexplicable conviction that this particular man *needed* no help. And indeed,

she had since heard it said by all around her that his injuries were healing with such alacrity as bordered on the miraculous. And she thought “*Can it be possible? If so, the plan might need to be reviewed...*”

21 Captain Metcalfe Insists Upon Seeing Miss Almond

“Two patients? Do *all* visitors within your household make a habit of getting themselves shot, Creighton? Or are your pheasants so lacking in girth this year that you dare not offer them as targets for your guests?”

Colonel Creighton grinned, and reached for the port. “There’s nothing wrong with my pheasants, Mr Perham – they’re the finest in the county! This at least you may attest for yourself, for you ate one of them in its entirety not an hour since – and I fancy you’d have tackled a second had not Harrison over there snaffled it. But to address your earlier insinuation, they were not visitors, but strangers in the woods. And such strangers you never did see in your life – the *clothes* they wore! Each of a single colour – his bright red and hers a light brown, both of similar style and manufacture – why, they might almost have been uniforms before they were rendered into bloody shards of fabric in consequence of the incident. The young lady’s recovery is slow but sure: another week in bed may see her up and about. The speed of the man’s recovery however borders upon the miraculous: I swear I never saw anything like it! It may be that you will meet him this very evening when the last of my guests have arrived, for Cassandra tells me he has been pacing his room since this morning. I asked him if he would join us for dinner: he pleaded fatigue, but I left the invitation open should port and cigars draw his inclination. Cassandra is most attentive to his welfare, and she may yet persuade him.”

“Oh? Does she think him handsome?”

Creighton rolled his eyes. “Perham, you are an incurable romantic! Nay, I sense naught but the good Christian charity which Mr Brookes over there extols with such forthright enthusiasm in his sermons, perhaps tempered with a touch of guilt that the pair of them were almost slain upon this very estate. But speaking of our mysterious stranger...”

Perham followed his gaze to the door, where stood the object of their discourse, dressed in one of the colonel’s own sets of jackets and breeches which Creighton had instructed Carey to take to his room earlier in the day. They were a fraction too large, albeit not ridiculously so – but he nevertheless evidently felt uncomfortable wearing them, for self-consciousness was clearly written in his features.

“I... I was looking for Cassandra... sorry... I mean, I was looking for Miss Creighton – do you know where I can find her? I need to ask her...”

Colonel Creighton strode up to him, an expression of sincere relief on his face.

“All in good time, sir! May I say at once how *very* glad we are to see you up and about: when we first saw you, I’d not have given you a chance in a thousand of living another hour. And yet here you are showing not even the wounds that must have surely been inflicted – you must be the luckiest man alive!”

The other shrugged enigmatically. “My doctor tells me I lead a charmed life.”

Colonel Creighton shook his head in wonderment. “I have to confess that I most emphatically agree with him! The speed of your recovery is surely unprecedented, Mr Metcalfe.”

“And my young female companion - how is she?”

“Ah, this would surely be Miss Almond - the young lady who had the misfortune to become...”

“She was injured, yes. Is she now completely out of danger?” The frailty was gone in an instant, and the tone peremptory.

“Aye, sir – she is well, and most certainly in good hands, for she is waited upon not only by my own daughter...”

“I wish to see her, please.”

His host started at the abrasiveness of the tone, then recognising an instinctive air of authority tinged with genuine concern in the other’s voice, bowed his head as a gesture of assent.

“Of course, Mr Metcalfe. Come with me, please.”

Colonel Creighton led his new guest away from the chatter and cigar smoke of the drawing room, and up the main staircase in the direction of the bedrooms. Glancing sideways at his companion, he noted the other’s eyes darting about as if trying to get his bearings. Several times the stranger’s gaze settled upon some apparently random artefact – a vase on the windowsill, a carriage clock on the bookcase, a small portrait hanging on the wall – and his expression changed subtly for an instant, though Creighton could not interpret it. Eventually they came to a heavy door at the end of a long corridor, and stopped in front of it. Reaching forward, the colonel gave two sharp knocks.

“Miss Almond? It is I, Colonel Creighton – I have your companion Mr Metcalfe with me. He wishes to see you: may we enter?”

A faint scuffling from within the room was just audible, followed by what sounded like an acknowledgement. Creighton hesitated for an instant, and then cautiously opened the door and entered, closely followed by his companion.

“Captain Sc...!”

Taking in at a glance the warning shake of her commanding officer’s head as he walked through the door, Lieutenant Almond instantly swallowed the rest of her greeting, but the damage was done. Colonel Creighton nodded to himself as if in confirmation of a suspicion.

“Hah! You are a military man... *Captain Metcalfe*, eh! I knew it from the first – tell me, sir, with which regiment do you serve?”

“Forgive me Colonel, but could that wait until another time?” Scarlet paused with his reply for just long enough to recognise that any answer he might venture would merely create more problems that it could conceivably solve. Without waiting for a reply, he strode over to the bed where Lieutenant Almond lay, and took her hand.

“How are you... Rodica? They tell me you’re on the mend - do *you* feel that too?”

Once again she recognized the warning look in his eyes that told her not to reveal her Spectrum rank in the presence of their host. She gestured vaguely at the bedclothes and forced an encouraging smile.

“As you see, er... *Captain... Metcalfe* – I am making good progress.”

“That’s *really* good news... Rodica. You’re obviously in good hands, and I’m looking forward to seeing you on your feet again. There’s a lot we need to talk about, I think.”

“I think this also, Captain! I am looking forward to telling you of the many things that have happened while these good people look after us. All the time they come to see how I get better, so

I am never lonely! Cassandra comes to see me several times each day: she says that her friend Tina *knows* that I will recover... and I think her confidence is infectious! I think I am most fortunate, am I not?"

Scarlet caught the look in her eye, rapidly considered his options and concluded that there was realistically only one way to proceed.

"Colonel Creighton – might I ask for a few moments alone with my companion?"

The other hesitated for just a fraction of a second, then nodded with an air of formality.

"Of course, Captain Metcalfe. I shall wait for you outside."

He clicked his heels, strode to the door and closed it behind him. Scarlet waited until a few seconds after the latch clicked, and then moved closer to the bed.

"I think I may have offended his sense of decorum, but there was no other way to get him out of here. Quickly then... we may not have much time. What do they know about us? They'll obviously compare notes, so until you're up and about we need to make sure our stories agree. From what I've picked up they believe your name is Rodica Almond, and they're now under the impression that I'm Captain Paul Metcalfe of an as-yet unidentified regiment: I'll bluff that one out until I can get some clues regarding what might sound credible. I'm assuming they have no idea where we came from, or why we're here. Does that sound like a fair assessment so far?"

She nodded. "They heard me use the name Almond several times when I was still delirious. If I told them I hold the rank of a lieutenant - and I have no idea if I did - they would not have believed me. They may have heard me refer to 'Captain Scarlet' also while I was still delirious, but I do not think they would have understood anything from that, as red is the colour of officers' uniforms of this period, is it not? Anything else I might have said would almost certainly have been incomprehensible to them."

She leaned forward earnestly, instinctively lowering her voice.

"Captain Scarlet, I am convinced that we *have* been transported - somehow - into the early 19th century. Everything I have seen and heard while being confined to this room supports that view. I believe we are in the house that will in the twenty-first century become Foxleyheath Manor. I have heard talk among the servants of the current threat posed to the country by Napoleon Bonaparte, of a great sea battle a few years ago off the coast of Portugal which must have been Trafalgar, but nothing of any decisive land battle with the French that might be Waterloo."

Scarlet grunted. "That would put us between 1805 and 1815, then. Which would tally with the style of dress that we've seen... assuming the very few Jane Austen dramatizations I've seen over the years are accurate – but never mind about that. We need to understand what's going on here: how the *hell* did a spaceship manage..."

Lieutenant Almond gave a little gasp. "The spaceship – of course! I had forgotten: the servants have spoken about a recent event that might be related to this. Some weeks ago a strange moving light was seen in the sky above the house. It was accompanied by a great roaring sound which terrified all the people living in the neighbourhood, and which has been the subject of gossip many times since. They do not know what it was, but I am thinking..."

Their eyes met, and Scarlet nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it does sound plausible, doesn't it? We need to talk to anyone who might have seen it – though it might be difficult to phrase any questions in a

way that they'd be able to relate to. I seem to remember that hot-air balloons were invented in the late 18th century, but the concept of powered flight would probably seem like witchcraft to them."

Lieutenant Almond shook her head. "Only to the uneducated inhabitants of the local villages, I think. The people who live in this house have enquiring minds and much scientific knowledge. They might not understand, but they would not dismiss such ideas as fantasy. The young man and the American lady who saved my life are clearly very familiar indeed with electricity and the uses to which it can be put."

"Interesting," mused Scarlet. "Which reminds me... I've asked for our uniforms to be returned. That girl – Cassandra – thinks that chambermaid of theirs put them down in the cellar. I want to get them back before she either destroys our communicators or kills herself with something, so you'd better ask too. I want them tracked down and returned to us – and I want to get back down into that cellar again anyway as soon as possible. *We* know what's down there... so it seems very strange that *they* don't appear to. I find it difficult to believe that nobody *ever* goes down there."

He snapped his fingers. "Oh – and one more thing – they're bound to ask us sooner or later what we were doing wandering round their woods in the middle of the night, so I propose we say that we were on our way to the south coast, a wheel fell off our coach just before nightfall, and it was obvious it couldn't be repaired until the next day. We'd heard tales of highwaymen stalking the roads in these parts, and decided to seek shelter while we could still reasonably expect to find an inn for the night. We got hopelessly lost in the darkness, and were still wandering around when we were attacked. What do you think – does that sound plausible?"

"It sounds believable to me," agreed Almond, "and obviously you know English history better than me, so I will tell this tale also."

Scarlet pulled a face. "Lieutenant, I'm afraid my knowledge of English history – apart from some of the military aspects of it – is very poor indeed. What I'm suggesting sounds like a piece of cheesy romanticised fiction even to *my* ears, but it's the best I can do. Obviously we both try to say as little as we possibly can – so if they press you for details, just say you're feeling ill and you don't want to talk about it. I get the impression that usually works around here."

He frowned, conscious of the length of time they had been talking. "We'd better wrap this up for now. I think I'll risk joining the colonel and his guests downstairs to see what else I can find out. In the meantime, you look after yourself – and keep your ears open for anything else that might be useful to us."

Almond nodded, and with a parting gesture Scarlet strode over to the door and opened it, to find Colonel Creighton staring out of one of the windows further down the corridor, patiently waiting for him to emerge.

"Thank you for letting me see her, Colonel – my companion is obviously in the best of hands. I can't express my gratitude enough to you and your family for looking after her with such devotion..."

Colonel Creighton waved the compliment aside. "Not another word, Captain Metcalfe - it is the very least we can do, given the terrible circumstances under which we came upon you both. You are our guests until such time as you choose to leave us – which I hope will not be for some while yet. My daughter is sensible of your companion's delicate state of health, and is most anxious to ensure that it shall be fully restored ere you bid us farewell. Come, sir – now that your anxiety is allayed, will you now join the rest of my guests over port and cigars?"

Scarlet assented with a nod and a fleeting smile – the first in several days. “Thank you, Colonel. I shall.”

22 Captain Metcalfe Learns the Fate of his Assailants

“I thought I might take a walk around the grounds tomorrow, if I might borrow a member of your household to accompany me to make sure I don’t get lost? Miss Creighton tells me that there are many walks.”

“An excellent idea,” agreed Creighton. “I can recommend several, Captain: the walk around the lake is my favourite, being perhaps two miles there and back. Eastwards of here lies Holroyd’s lands – the walk is a pleasant one, but I advise against approaching the farm. Old Holroyd is a cantankerous misanthrope with the temper of a demon, and would set his dogs on you – and he has several – as soon as look at you. The border between our estates has been the subject of endless disputes these last ten years, and my family’s solicitor in Horsham has grown rich at my expense defending us against his interminable petitions. To the south you will find Gallowstree Common: you will know it when you reach it by the tree from which it takes its name, for it is a twisted and gnarled old oak of perhaps two hundred years age – perhaps more.”

Scarlet cast his mind back to the tree he had seen below from the Spectrum magnacopter, seemingly such a long time ago, and yet from his point of view no more than a few days. “Would that be a tree that has a long thick branch that bends and twists in a kind of spiral?”

“Aye, that’s the one. No-one who sees it ever forgets it.” Creighton looked at him speculatively. “You never did tell us how you and your young companion came to be walking on these lands in the dead of night, Captain. What *did* bring you here?”

Scarlet reeled off the tale of coaches, broken wheels and highwaymen that he had composed earlier and shard with Lieutenant Almond, and the colonel listened without interruption throughout, evidently accepting it at face value.

“Indeed – there’s truth enough in those tales... though you’ll not encounter too many gentlemen of the roads hereabouts these days, I fancy. Most are footpads, for vagabonds are plentiful in this county – as of course you yourself can attest.”

“Yes indeed... the poachers, of course. What has happened while Miss Almond and I have been recovering?”

“They escaped while my men were tending Miss Almond’s wounds and carrying her upon a stretcher back to the manor on my orders. In the case of yourself, all of us – myself included – made a grave error of judgment, for we sincerely believed you to be already dead. We carried your body back also, it is true, but did not for one instant imagine that there was yet life in you! I can only offer what apologies I may for the indignities that your body suffered on that journey.”

Scarlet had no wish to dwell on the subject, and merely brushed aside the apology with a shrug. “No doubt the darkness deceived everyone. Whatever happened, I’m unable to remember a thing about it, so I’m in no position to complain. As far as I’m concerned, it’s enough that I’m alive. Which reminds me – I asked Miss Creighton if we might be able to have our tunics returned to us: she told me she thought that chambermaid – Carey, is that her name? – might have taken them away...”

“Yes, Captain – my daughter mentioned it to me, and I made enquiries. Carey says she consigned them to the old wine cellar upon concluding that they were both unwearable and unrecoverable – I dare say you will find them there. Do you know where it is?”

“I think perhaps I do,” replied Scarlet, a little surprised at the coincidence. “Would it be reached by the spiral staircase leading down from the little corridor joining the entrance hall with the scullery?”

“That’s the one. There is a long corridor some twelve feet wide down there that spans the breadth of the house: it is disused, and has been so for years – so if you go down, take a light and beware the cobwebs, for there are sure to be many.”

“Thank you, Colonel – I shall. But you were telling me about the poachers – do you know what became of them?”

“Oh, certainly. It was but a simple matter to send forth a band of armed townsfolk from Foxley to take them as they returned to their den. There’s not a man in this parish who could not recognise them by sight, including all of the workers on my estate. They were rounded up and safely under lock and key less than two hours after daybreak.”

“So... what happens next?”

Colonel Creighton peered at Scarlet with a quizzical expression on his face. “Why... *nothing* happens next, sir! Justice has been served, and we shall see them no more.”

Scarlet blinked in surprise. “What... the trial has taken place *already*? But the shooting was just a few *days* ago! I asked Miss Creighton...”

“Aye, I know of your appeal to my daughter, for she spoke with me before I set out for East Grinstead. The judiciary does not rearrange its calendar to suit the whims of such supplicants as you or I, Captain Metcalfe. The judge was in residence at his lodgings, and the assize was accordingly held upon its appointed day. Both you and Miss Almond were unable to bear witness on account of your injuries; but there were gamekeepers enough to testify; also Mr Harrison and myself. The judge thus ruled that the trial should proceed. It has done so: the verdict has been passed down, and sentence passed. Earlier today it was carried out.”

Scarlet was on his feet in an instant, glaring at the colonel in outraged astonishment.

“But... this is appalling! The only people who could possibly have given evidence on which of them fired the shots that incapacitated Lieut... I mean Miss Almond – were Rodica herself and me. We were *there*, Colonel! You were not – and at the time the shots were fired, your men were too far away to be able to see anything!”

The colonel glared back at him. “My men gave the magistrate a clear account of what happened, *Captain Metcalfe*! By the time they reached you, Miss Almond had already been shot down. Granted that we may never know which of them fired the shots, for under questioning each of them naturally accused the others... but this is of no consequence, for in law the doctrine of common purpose is clear in such matters: if one is guilty then so are all. Together in their efforts to escape justice for the crimes of poaching and earlier offences more numerous to mention, they sought to kill Miss Almond. Fitting then that together they were tried, and together they were condemned.”

“But Miss Almond was *not* killed! She’s still alive, dammit...”

“Irrelevant, Captain! The point of law upon which the case turned was whether the man – whichever of the three Parkins brothers it was – who fired upon Miss Almond intended to kill her. The jury was satisfied that he did.”

The colonel leaned forward in his chair and lowered the tone of his voice slightly.

“Do not think me entirely without compassion, sir. My daughter told me of your concerns relating to the effects of public outrage upon the conduct of the trial, and I in turn conveyed them to the judge before sentences were passed upon the three. The younger two of the three were sentenced to transportation in consequence of your concerns.”

Scarlet’s eyes narrowed. “And the eldest?”

The colonel looked at him dispassionately. “For a military man you have tender sensibilities, Captain Metcalfe. Local fury at the savagery of this murderous assault upon a young lady within the grounds of this very estate was such that retribution was demanded to assuage the righteous anger of the community – and also to serve as a warning to any who might in future believe us unable to uphold the rule of law hereabouts. In view of this, I recommend that you plan to take your walk in a direction *other* than that which leads to the common tomorrow.”

He rose from his chair and strode over to the sideboard to get himself a drink of port, leaving Scarlet staring after him in shock.

23 Miss Palamac is the Centre of Attention at the Dinner Party

“You’ve got to get a grip, Paul. The past is a foreign country... they do things differently there. Who was it said that? Oh yes...”

Scarlet had never read ‘The Go-Between’, but he knew enough of the plot to understand that one of its central messages related to the impact of social class on the way people could expect to be treated in the past – and that in many instances, that class was sufficient to determine whether they lived or died. Concluding that he had to avoid falling into the trap of adopting a benignly nostalgic view of early nineteenth century life based purely on his own experiences while enjoying the hospitality of the Creighton household, he approached the prospect of an evening spent in the company of the local gentry with more than a touch of trepidation.

Notwithstanding the absence of any danger to his own health, Scarlet found himself unexpectedly somewhat taken aback at the quantity of both liquor and tobacco in evidence around the drawing room: the air was thick with cigar smoke – so much so that he found it stinging his eyes – and many of the gentlemen present were clearly the worse for wear on account of the copious quantities of liquor in circulation. He found it easier than he’d expected to adapt his phraseology to mirror the local mannerisms of speech, and only occasionally found it necessary to qualify a word or phrase in response to a bemused or quizzical expression.

Even after the passage of two months or more, the mystery of the lights in the sky over Foxley Heath Manor was evidently still a matter of considerable interest, and he found no difficulty joining an animated discussion concerning its nature. Might it be a natural phenomenon? Some were emphatically of the view that it was, others equally emphatic that it was not. One inebriated gentleman stated that his brother-in-law’s cousin once knew somebody who claimed to have invented a device whereby the distance cannonballs might be fired could be tripled or even quadrupled by the application of a revolutionary new formulation of gunpowder, and that the incident in question was undoubtedly a test of such a device – however when pressed for further details, he declined to elaborate lest the secret ever reach the ears of the accursed Bonaparte.

Colonel Creighton did his best to stifle a guffaw when confronted by the tale. “I think we may dismiss the machinations of that Corsican devil, sir! I have the honour to count several men of learning among my acquaintances, and they insist that this was a meteorite, albeit probably one of the largest ever to fall to earth. One of them has spoken of the strange irregularity in pitch of the sound that it emanated as it descended: he asserts that it was caused by the vaporisation of such molten lava as resides within the stars that adorn the firmament.”

Scarlet pricked up his ears. “You heard this yourself, Colonel? What sort of irregularity – can you describe it?”

The colonel nodded vigorously. “Certainly I heard it! It was a great throbbing and pulsing, like a raging dragon falling upon its prey! Even as the sound grew in strength the pitch rose to a crescendo, as if it might devour this very house, so much so that we threw ourselves to the floor in terror, and were all obliged to cover our ears to shut it out. Then even as we feared that the end of the world was upon us, the sound began to fall away once more. Quieter it became as the pitch lowered, till it became but a dull droning – and then suddenly it ceased, leaving us to gather our

wits once more. By the time we had picked ourselves off the floor and run to the window there was nothing to see.”

Probably a critical failure of the drive mechanism as the ship made its final descent, thought Scarlet: the occupants of the house were probably lucky to be alive. Another thought struck him. “This pitch fluctuation, Colonel - could you hazard a guess at the difference between the highest and the lowest sound?”

Colonel Creighton blinked in surprise. “What a question, Captain Metcalfe! But I think I might venture an answer if you will give me a moment to recall it. I think I would have said the best part of an octave if I were to attempt to reproduce it on the pianoforte.”

“In which case it was certainly moving very quickly,” remarked Scarlet. “Probably several hundred miles an hour.”

“*That* would not surprise me, Captain Metcalfe! Why - how else should a star fall?”

“Also it would be reasonable to suppose that it didn’t fall directly out of the sky. It would have flown low over the house.”

“What is this? You *saw* our star, Captain? Come sir, tell us all you know!”

Scarlet shook his head. “I didn’t see it, but the explanation is surely simple enough. The change in pitch you referred to would not have occurred had it been falling towards the house. That effect would only be apparent had it been moving quickly *towards* the house, and then rapidly away again. So - obviously it flew over it. The real question is what happened to it afterwards...”

Scarlet stopped in mid-sentence, conscious that an eerie silence had descended upon the table. It was broken by an explosive cough from the direction of an elderly cleric wearing a sombre black suit and a tightly-fitting white cravat, followed by a sharp intake of breath which was exhaled in indignant staccato bursts.

“*Fly*, Captain Metcalfe? What is this? Stars do not fly – they fall! And what of the sound that changes its pitch? Do you say that stars decide when to change the sounds they utter?”

Scarlet turned to face the man who had spoken, whose glass of port had become suspended halfway between the table and his lips, and whose already florid face had turned a slightly deeper shade of pink. He grinned.

“There’s no mystery, I assure you. As an object approaches you, the pitch of the noise it emits is increased by the compression of the sound waves resulting from its own forward velocity. Once it has passed you the reverse occurs – the sound had to travel an increased distance in the same time, resulting in a lowering of the pitch: surely you’ve noticed it yourselves when...”

He stopped himself in mid-sentence. *No, they wouldn’t have noticed it*, he realised. *Not when the fastest object they’ve ever seen or heard is probably a galloping horse. Shut up, Paul – if there’s a mystery here, you’re going to have to solve it on your own.*

The gentleman at Scarlet’s side regarded him speculatively. “What are you saying, Captain Metcalfe? That sound changes when that which makes it *moves*? How then shall it know how fast it moves, that it might change the song it sings?” He raised his voice to address the cleric on the other side of the table. “And are the stars angels that chant and sing as they traverse the firmament, Mr Brookes?”

The other regarded his colleague with expressionless eyes. “What earthly man knows what songs the angels sing, Mr Perham? Yet one day we shall hear them, of that you may be assured!”

Perham raised his glass of port and peered over the top of it at the blue-eyed young man opposite. “An interesting notion, to be sure. You say the sounds about us change with the speed of their source?”

“Or the speed of the observer,” added Scarlet. “The relative speed is the key.”

“Then... why may we not hear the change? You might walk to one end of the drawing room, speaking all the while, and I to the other listening to your words. I am sure I should not be aware of such a variation.”

“You would if the speed were great enough, and the pitch constant such as a tuning fork might produce. At perhaps forty miles an hour a change would be perceptible.”

“You speak with a certainty you cannot feel, for you describe an experiment that cannot be performed. How can your belief be this strong?”

Scarlet found himself contemplating the launch of one of the Angels from the Cloudbase flight deck, and suppressed a smile. “Oh, I... just know.”

“Then perhaps your belief outweighs the evidence of your senses,” observed Perham. “There are many such men within my profession. It is a feature of which the passing years have made me wary, for it is my experience that those men who are most certain of their opinions are the very men who have least reason to be. The wisest of men will always doubt, and in doubting, they shall ask questions. It must be so, for how else are we to make ourselves worthy to be the children of our Lord?”

The clergyman put down his glass and waggled a finger at him.

“Have a care what you say, Mr Perham! Were not Adam and Eve sent forth from Eden for seeking knowledge?”

“Eden was the bliss of ignorance,” retorted Perham. “Eve tempted Adam to take from the tree of knowledge, it is true, but did not God create Eve also? The urge to seek knowledge is a part of our nature – we cannot deny it, for we are the children of Eve. Is it not better to use that knowledge to comprehend the true majesty of the Maker of all things?”

“But Eve was led from the path of righteousness by the serpent – was this not the work of the Evil One?”

“If God made all things,” retorted Perham mildly, “then did He not create the serpent also? I choose to believe that in that glorious ancient time Mankind was given a choice. To remain in the paradise of ignorance in the valley of Eden, or to climb the path up the eternal mountain of knowledge. The path is beset with thorns and briars, but we are set upon it, and cannot turn back. For this purgatory we may blame the actions of the Devil and a temptress – and I for one would have it no other way.”

He glanced at the empty bottle of port, raised his serviette to his lips and leaned back in his chair.

“Speaking of temptresses, gentlemen, shall we join the ladies? There is a young filly whose opinion I should value on the subject of our flying star, Captain Metcalfe. I never encountered a woman so knowledgeable in matters of natural philosophy – let us see what she has to say upon the subject.”

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. “You’re referring to Miss Palamac perhaps, Mr Perham?”

“I am. I find her breadth of knowledge quite invigorating – she is a rare bird indeed.”

The room slowly emptied as its occupants gathered up their drinks and made their way as part of a general melee into the parlour, in which were now congregated perhaps a dozen wives and daughters of the gentlemen with whom Scarlet had spent most of the previous hour socialising. The sound of a piano and a song could clearly be discerned above the chatter, and upon entering the room, Scarlet was unexpectedly surprised to discover that the singer and the pianist were the same person – namely Cassandra herself – and that the quality of her performance was clearly in the same league as any professional rendition from within his own era. The song was instantly identifiable as ‘Richmond Hill’, and he found himself humming along to it almost immediately, even though the lyrics he could recall from his army days prior to joining Spectrum were considerably bawdier than those now being sung by Cassandra. Spotting her father also listening close by, he moved to join him.

“I never heard it performed more sweetly, Colonel. Your daughter is exceptionally talented.”

Colonel Creighton smiled wistfully. “I have no doubt she would appreciate the compliment, Captain – though I fear the death of her dear mother these seven years past has deprived her of much valuable tuition. I should have engaged a master after her death, but ours was a household beset by melancholy at that time, and the opportunity is now lost. Since then we have seen interest in the sciences waxing as that in the arts wanes – and I am unsure whether this is a good thing, for the arts at least bring us beauty. The sciences seem to bring us chaos and confusion – what do you say to that, Harrison?”

Mr Harrison stopped in his tracks and joined the discussion with a snort. “Chaos and confusion, sir? Not a bit of it; science brings us order from chaos and confidence from confusion – but then you know this already, for I perceive you are but flying a kite for me to shoot it down. Order and confidence are the order of the day, Creighton! I nevertheless acknowledge that not all the gentlemen gathered here are as enamoured of its progress as you or I... for example, that old clergyman over there in the corner seems to take a delight in defaming every new discovery as the work of the Devil.”

“Where? Oh! Mr Brookes – yes, he is very much of the old school. He is the rector at St Sebastian’s in East Grinstead and Perham is the warden... and between them they administer the tythes paid by this estate to the parish. Brookes is difficult at the best of times, so try not to irritate him more than is needful, eh?”

“I shall do better than that, sir – I’ll not irritate him at all, for here is more agreeable company... Miss Palamac! Will you join us? You at least do not share the distaste shown by some of the older members of our little gathering for discourse pertaining to the pursuit of knowledge.”

“Thank you, Mr Harrison – and you are correct,” agreed Tina. “While playing whist earlier, I was lectured at length by the ecclesiastical gentleman to whom you introduced me this afternoon on the subject of science in general, and the role of women in the advancement of it in particular. Oh, Colonel Creighton, I have just left Cassandra: she wished to ask you whether she should play again for the guests after she has finished her current piece. She thought they might have had enough.”

“Why, *certainly* she should play again! Thank you, Miss Palamac – I shall tell her so. And... might I impose upon you to accompany me, Captain Metcalfe? Cassandra seldom receives appreciation for her endeavours outside her immediate family, and I would have her know that her talents are recognised further afield.”

Creighton shepherded Scarlet away, and Harrison waited for them to leave before resuming the conversation.

“Before I say anything else, Miss Palamac, please will you allow me to apologise most sincerely for erroneously introducing you as Miss Ward to Mr Brookes earlier – indeed, you would have been perfectly justified in admonishing me instantly, for it was an *unpardonable* error...”

Tina waved the apology aside. “You make too much of a trifle, Mr Harrison! It is nothing, I assure you; unfortunately however, the name ‘Ward’ now appears to be irretrievably lodged within Mr Brookes’ memory, for he repeated it on at least three separate occasions during the several games of whist in which he and I subsequently crossed swords earlier in the day. I do *not* however believe this will concern me unduly.”

She stopped speaking while murmurings of praise for Cassandra’s latest piece of music rippled around the room, then turned to him once more.

“The colonel is justifiably proud of his daughter, though he rarely speaks of it, Mr Harrison. I believe there is little to which Cassandra cannot aspire, for I have found her an apt pupil in all matters since my arrival here – and I can attest personally to her abilities in the arts of music and song, for she practices both most diligently when she believes there to be nobody within hearing distance.”

“What are *your* accomplishments, Miss Palamac?”

Tina permitted herself a small smile. “I think perhaps you would not appreciate the nature of my accomplishments, Mr Harrison.”

“Come, Miss Palamac! Let me be the judge of that – do you sing? Do you play?”

“I do neither, Mr Harrison. But if you were to widen the definition of an accomplishment somewhat, you might conclude that there are certain areas of endeavour in which I have my strengths, but they are by and large confined to the sciences.”

“I suspect we share enough common interests there to sustain a debate lasting the remainder of the evening, should circumstances permit,” observed Harrison with a smile. “I was telling the colonel just now about my experiences of trying to discuss matters of science with those who will have none of it.”

“I sympathize,” admitted Tina, “for I find it all too easy to become personally involved in discussions of this kind – to the inevitable detriment of my composure.”

“Indeed – I perfectly comprehend the sentiment,” noted Brand with a wry grin. “One must seek to tranquillize oneself in such situations.”

Tina regarded him closely, her normally neutral but supremely confident expression betraying the merest hint of confusion. “How might one tranquillize oneself, sir? This culture knows naught of chemotherapy.”

Harrison blinked. “There you go again, Miss Palamac! – what *are* these words that you bring with you? What are we to make of them?”

“You do not understand the term? Of course – you would not. Chemotherapy comprises the attempted drug-induced enhancement of the physical state of a biological organism.”

“A *biological organism*, Miss Palamac? Is an invalid in need of medical attendance to be described thus? I never heard of it so, though I suppose such a phrase might be applied... and might perhaps these drugs include gases? I ask because much has been discovered of the manner in which gases may affect the body – why, only at the turn of this century, my friend and colleague Mr Davy

recommended the use of nitrous oxide to advantage during surgical operations on account of its capacity for confounding the senses – and I cannot doubt that he is correct.”

“Such a procedure would be crude and inefficient,” observed Tina dismissively. “Rendering the subject entirely incapacitated for the purpose of conducting invasive surgery is both unnecessary and dangerous. The selective isolation of the synaptic conduits connecting the relevant organs to the central neural cortex is all that is required to prevent adverse react...”

She stopped in mid-sentence, suddenly conscious of the expression on Mr Harrison’s face, in which both shock and incomprehension were present in roughly equal measure. Instantly she adopted an air of apologetic embarrassment.

“Forgive me... I cannot imagine what you are thinking! Of course you are right, sir – surely the benefits cannot be overstated. Your colleagues are of course to be congratulated and supported in their work. But I see Captain Metcalfe is returning to join us once more from his mission to persuade Cassandra to continue with her recital. Music is so much more conducive to good humour than debates on medical procedures, is it not?”

Harrison frowned with a sudden realisation. “Although Captain Metcalfe has been resident in this house for a few days, I *believe* you two have not yet been properly introduced! Am I right, Miss Palamac?”

“You are, Mr Harrison.”

“Then we must rectify this oversight at once – and this time there shall be *no* mistakes!” He motioned to Captain Metcalfe to join them, and adopting an appropriately formal air, addressed himself to Tina.

“Miss Palamac, may I introduce Captain Metcalfe? The captain is the gentleman who was grievously injured in the recent shooting accident, and who effected a most rapid recuperation even without the miraculous life-saving aid applied by yourself to his young female companion. Captain Metcalfe, Miss Palamac is Colonel Creighton’s ward.” He beamed at them both. “There – I got it right this time!”

Tina inclined her head in a classic acknowledgement of the introduction.

“Captain Metcalfe – you are now fully recovered, I trust?”

Though her expression did not change, her eyes swept over him in what Scarlet perceived as an instinctive cursory inspection: without knowing *how* he knew, he was conscious that in less than a heartbeat she had formulated a comprehensive assessment of him, and had concluded that he was not an immediate threat to her. Then as suddenly as the impression had surfaced in his mind it was gone again, and he found himself wondering whether he had imagined it. He returned an appropriately polite smile.

“Thank you... I’m at least as well as I was before the accident, Miss Palamac. No doubt the extent of my injuries has been exaggerated. My young companion was however not so fortunate – and I understand we have you to thank for the saving of her life. I can only add my own expression of gratitude to her own, and to that of everyone else – so thank you so very, very much.”

“It is my pleasure to have been of assistance to your companion, Captain Metcalfe. I hope and trust that she will soon be well enough to join Cassandra and myself in the...”

“Miss Palamac! Ah – *there* you are!”

Tina blinked as Cassandra's young cousin came hurrying across the room.

“And Mr Harrison and Captain Metcalfe also – so it is *you* who have stolen her away from us! Miss Palamac, I thought you might have retired for the night, but it seems I am in luck. Mr Brookes and Mr Perham have requested that I engage with them in a game of whist, but somewhat to my surprise I can find nobody who will condescend to be my partner! It is my understanding that you encountered them in this capacity earlier this evening, for I infer from Brookes' muttered griping that you play a strong game – so I would be *greatly* honoured if you would assume that role once more.”

Tina smiled wryly. “I have known many who play stronger games than I, Mr Faraday, but what modest skill I possess in this matter I shall place at your disposal – if only for the amusement of seeing Mr Brookes get my name wrong for the fifth time today. And as Captain Metcalfe and Mr Harrison are now able to resume the discussion that I myself interrupted earlier, so perhaps now is a good time for me to withdraw. Mr Harrison... Captain Metcalfe... would you excuse us?”

She allowed herself to be led away by Mr Faraday, and Scarlet watched her leave.

“Tell me, Mr Harrison – who *is* she? You described her as the Colonel's ward a few moments ago, so she's not a member of the family, right?”

Harrison shook his head. “She is not a member of the family, that is true – but that is almost the extent of the intelligence that I can offer you. But I see your glass is empty, as is mine – come with me back to the dining room; we can refill them there, and I'll tell you what little I can.”

The two men made their way out of the parlour and through to the dining room, in which despite the passage of time since it was created after the conclusion of dinner, the pall of cigar smoke still hung in the air. At the sideboard and inspecting the array of bottles stood a single elderly man who was evidently embarked upon the same mission as the two new arrivals, and Mr Harrison strode forward to greet him.

“Doctor Jobson! Creighton told me you would be here this evening – how *are* you, sir? It is indeed a pleasure to see you in less austere circumstances than the last time we met...”

The older man peered back at him through his thick spectacles. “Aha! It is Mr Harrison, is it not? *How* long has it been since the nocturnal tragedy that first brought us together? It seems like but a few days... but I am not unaware that my sense of time is sometimes not entirely precise, so I shall beg your forgiveness in advance if I have erred on this occasion.”

“Your sense of time is most precise indeed on this occasion, Doctor,” grinned Harrison. “It *is* but a few days – but see how your patient has fared within that short period, and be amazed! Captain Metcalfe, please meet the good doctor who treated you that night...”

Scarlet stepped forward and shook Jobson warmly by the hand. “Doctor Jobson – they told me Colonel Creighton rode through the night to fetch you the night I and my young companion were shot! Clearly I owe you much, sir – for which I thank you.”

Jobson squinted back at him, his expression metamorphosing into a state of abject incredulity before his eyes. “*You*, sir? It *cannot* be! When last I saw you, you were at death's door!”

His brow furrowed, and he lapsed into silence for a moment before continuing with an air of uncertainty.

“And yet surely that cannot be not right... for the next day when I would have seen you again, it was so clear to me that you were well on the way to a speedy recovery that I knew at once such a

visit would serve no purpose! Dear me... it is most perplexing... yes indeed, it is *most* perplexing..."

His face slowly began to clear once more, and he beamed at his erstwhile patient in obvious delight.

"But then, it is of no consequence – for now that I see how quickly you have recovered from your ordeal, I am most sincerely gratified to have had my diagnosis confirmed in every detail!"

He leaned towards Scarlet conspiratorially, lowering his voice. "There was a young woman attending your wounds when I arrived, sir. She'd have had me believe you were far more sorely injured than was truly the case – you know how easily deceived these flighty young chits can be – but I'd have none of it. There's no substitute for *experience*, sir! Knew you were in fine fettle the moment I saw you, I did – and as I look at you now, my confidence in my own judgment is confirmed anew."

Scarlet suppressed a grin. "As you say, Doctor – there's no substitute for experience. On which point, do you have a recommendation to make on the subject of refills?"

"Rum's my drink, sir – it's been so ever since my naval days, when I was less than one third of my present age. Today's young coxcombs just embarking upon the military life might find it a little strong, but you're clearly made of sterner stuff. The bottle's at the back. Delighted to have made your acquaintance now that you're hale and hearty once more, sir!"

Jobson picked up his glass, and strode off in the direction of the parlour, while Harrison walked over to the sideboard and inspected the array of half-full bottles with the air of someone spoiled for choice.

"Will you have another glass of port, Captain? There's brandy here also – or there's sherry over there... and Jobson was right – the one at the back's a bottle of rum. Which shall it be?"

"I think I'll stay with the port," replied Scarlet. "I'm guessing that the good doctor's *'flighty young chit'* is none other than Miss Palamac herself, even though everything I've heard about her to date suggests that such a description couldn't be further from the mark. But you were just telling me about her, Mr Harrison."

"Ah yes - so I was, Captain! She is the quintessence of an enigma, sir. Ask her any question, and she will reply with every civility – and yet by the end of the conversation you will have discovered nothing of consequence. She fits no mould that I ever saw that was appropriate for a young lady of refinement, despite clearly having hailed from that very class. Just a few moments ago she claimed to have no knowledge of the musical arts, but she is unquestionably not without her accomplishments – foremost among which must surely be the depth of her interest in all she beholds. Every person who has conversed with her will attest to both her willingness and her ability to argue to distraction. If you would squabble on almost any subject, you will find her a most capable adversary."

"I know several young ladies to whom I would ascribe that ability," observed Scarlet dryly, as they carried their drinks back into the parlour. "I thought it was strictly a contemporary phenomenon."

Confusion flickered across the other's face. "Contemporary? Surely not – most young unmarried ladies of my acquaintance would not argue for the world. Prospective husbands of consequence would not regard it as a desirable trait. It surprises me, for she is in possession of a keen intellect, and I therefore cannot believe that she is insensible to the offence that she might so cause."

Scarlet threw a glance at the young woman, who was now seated with three others around a small table in the corner of the room, and was inspecting the hand of cards she had just been dealt.

“Perhaps she is not looking for a husband.”

“Perhaps. But I think she would be well advised not to frighten away such young men as would try to engage her affections – and there have been a few among Creighton’s various guests these last few weeks. She has no fortune that I am aware of, notwithstanding her bearing and manner, which I fancy speak of superior breeding, though what her connections might be I cannot say, for she does not discuss it. I would warn you, Captain, she is intimidated by no-one, and in conversing with you will give no quarter, save when she deems it convenient for reasons of her own.”

“She sounds fascinating.”

“That’s what they *all* said. Shall we see how that game of theirs is progressing?”

He led Scarlet over to the card table, where the object of their discourse had just put her fan of cards face-down on the table, and was contemplating their opponents – whom Scarlet recognised as the irascible clergyman and his companion – each in turn with an abstracted air. Upon their approach, she blinked out of her reverie and opened her mouth to speak, but Scarlet cut in first with an apology.

“Please – do not let us interrupt your game, Miss Palamac...”

Before Tina could react to the implied apology, Mr Perham waved his hands as if to clear the air.

“Not a bit of it, Captain Metcalfe – your intervention is timely! This was to be our last game in any event, but if the expression on Mr Brookes’ face reflects the state of his hand, I fancy we might as well cede at once. Have I read you correctly, Mr Brookes?”

The elderly clergyman grunted, and tossed his cards onto the table in a gesture of disgust.

“You have, Mr Perham. Even with the few decent hands we were dealt earlier this evening did we find ourselves soundly thrashed, and I think this last would have but added insult to injury. Such an incomprehensible run of bad luck I never saw – but perhaps a glass of port from the dining room would suffice to soften the blow. What do you say, sir?”

The other nodded grimly. “I say yes, Mr Brookes. To be sure, I say yes! You will excuse us, Miss Palamac?”

Tina acknowledged the request to withdraw with an appropriately genteel inclination of her head, and the pair set off in the direction of the cloudiest corner of the room.

Scarlet waited until the two elderly gentlemen were well out of earshot, and then grinned.

“All of us are subject to more than a fair share of ill fortune occasionally, but those two do seem to be taking it a little personally! Has the evening *really* been such the run of bad luck for them that they feel the need to recover, Miss Palamac?”

“The hands were more evenly balanced than Mr Brookes implied, with luck playing only a minor part in their defeat,” retorted Tina. “Neither of them kept track of the play of the cards, and therefore neither was able to evaluate the odds.”

Scarlet regarded her closely. “And you could?”

“I am blessed with a good memory, and the calculations are not unduly complex.”

Her young partner stirred, shaking his head in a display of admiration at the feat. “Not unduly *complex*, Miss Palamac? You should write a paper on the subject – it would become the gamester’s bible in no time!”

He turned to Scarlet. “It was clear to me that my partner was applying a strategy to make best use of the data available when deciding how to play her hand, Captain Metcalfe. I fancy however that I could not have done it myself – at least, not to the same level of competency. Miss Palamac is a true practitioner of natural philosophy, and would be welcomed into the Royal Society if women were admitted to its fellowship. Perhaps one day they shall be. Who can say?”

Scarlet suppressed a grin. “Oh, I don’t imagine that will happen within our lifetimes, Mr Faraday.”

The young man considered for a moment, and then nodded. “Well, perhaps I am being fanciful... and yet I cannot doubt that it will happen one day. What do *you* say, Mr Brookes? You must have seen a great many changes in the world over the years – shall we see women being admitted to the great institutions of London?”

The old clergyman who had just returned with his glass of port harrumphed. “Does it matter, sir? Even should they be so, the scriptures teach us how they should behave in the company of men. *‘Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak’*. St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter fourteen!”

“I was not speaking of the churches, Mr Brookes,” replied the young man, clearly somewhat taken aback by the severity of the response to his enquiry. “I refer to the great institutions of learning.”

“Pah! It is all the same. There is but one truth – and an institution either teaches it or it does not. If it does, then it but supports and extols the word of the Good Book, and so may be tolerated even though it is clearly redundant – but if it does not, then what purpose does it serve other than to confound?”

“That seems a somewhat specious argument, Mr Brookes,” remarked Tina mildly. “You appear to be suggesting that if God had meant us to think, He would have given us brains.”

“Have a care, Miss Ward!” The clergyman wagged a finger at her with a gesture not unlike that of the circling of a dagger prior to a deadly strike. “It is not for us to question the works of God, but to praise them!”

“Do you not wish at least to *understand* the works of God, sir? Do you not think God would wish you to strive to do so?”

“How can we hope to understand the works of *God*, madam? The very first chapter of the Good Book reveals to us that Heaven and Earth were created in but six days – how may we ever comprehend this?”

“You might at least *try*, sir,” replied Tina reprovingly. “It is some time since I read the Book of Genesis, but I recall that whilst the technical details pertaining to the creation of the Universe are regrettably omitted from the text, the chronology is explicitly stated, is it not?”

“Indeed, madam! Light and darkness were created on the first day. The firmament was created on the second; earth and water were separated on the third; the sun and the moon were created on the fourth; fish and fowl on the fifth. Mankind was created with all the other beasts of the earth on the sixth day, then on the seventh day did the Lord rest from all his work...”

“Then perhaps we may seek a clue within this frame of reference. Tell me, sir – how long was the first day?”

Brookes looked at her uncomprehendingly. “What do you mean, madam? A day is the length of a *day!*”

“No sir – not if it is the *first* day. The length of a day is the time taken for the Earth to rotate once on its axis relative to the sun, would you agree?”

There was a brief pause while Brookes sought to identify the trap into which he sensed he was walking. “Yee...eess – what of it?”

“You told me a moment ago that the sun was created on the *fourth* day, sir. So the length of the *first* day is undefined – as is the length of the second and the third. The first day *might* have been twenty-four hours long, but it might equally well have been just one... or it might have been one hundred. Or it might have lasted countless millions of years. Or to put it another way, the question cannot be answered without recourse to an alternative frame of reference.”

“God has stated that the world was created in six days, madam – and therefore it *was!*”

“God did not write the text to which you refer, sir. An unidentifiable person at some unidentified time in prehistory *reported* that God created the world in six days – and that unidentifiable person made an elementary logical error which invalidates the conclusion drawn.”

“That so-called unidentifiable person was *inspired* by God, madam! How therefore can he be at fault?”

“Sir – how many cataclysmic wars have been fought in which luminaries on both sides believed themselves to be inspired by God? You are confusing truth with faith – and when that faith is sufficiently intense it becomes your reality – for you will then perceive a threat to your faith as a threat to your person, and will contemplate taking the most extreme measures to defend it. I have sufficient faith to sustain a reality of my own, sir – but I think you would be the first to affirm that it is not the same as yours.”

“You are saying that *my* reality is not *your* reality? Are you *deluded*, madam?”

Tina regarded him closely for a long second, then leaned forward and deliberately blew out the candle on the table in front of her. As the flame flickered and died, a long wisp of acrid dark smoke curled upwards from the gutted candle into the air, and as it did so, she once more blew gently through it, causing the strands of smoke to billow and swirl even more.

“This smoke is reality, Mr Brookes – and we are but miniscule embers swept up in it. One strand of the smoke is my reality, another strand is yours. They interact as they drift, sometimes in concurrence, sometimes in adversity. Those wisps of smoke may be transmuted into other forms by creating tunnels of turbulence in the air through which they pass; some similar, others wildly different. *That* is reality – as ephemeral and as mutable as one of these strands of smoke. If there is a universal Truth, it is the medium through which the smoke passes. I would call that medium the *ae'thera* – and the luminaries that reside within *my* frame of reference teach that if you would seek that Truth, look there.”

In the space of just five seconds, Scarlet watched in morbid fascination as the old boy's face turned an alarming shade of red.

“Upon my soul – I never heard the like of it! In what coven were these heresies hatched, girl? I think it fortunate that we no longer burn the likes of folk who speak thus!”

Tina watched him through amused eyes. “Mr Brookes, your unselfconscious failure to perceive the self-evident, when it is laid out before you in such terms as a child could not fail to comprehend, is most diverting – as is the implied threat to me from persons less civilised than yourself.”

“You would not find it so had you lived during the era of Good Queen Bess, madam! Even God’s infinite mercy was insufficient to save heretical thinkers from the flames in those glorious times!”

“I infer from your words that you have a certain respect for the principle of terminating the existence of those who do not share your beliefs, sir. Am I correct?”

“How else may one deal with those that wilfully reject the truth?”

Tina sighed wearily. “Mr Brookes, if I were to tell you that everything I said was true, would you believe me?”

“I most certainly would *not*, madam!”

“And if I were to tell you that everything I said was false, would you *then* believe me?”

“Madam, if *you* said that everything you said was false, I would have no difficulty *whatsoever* in believing you!”

“In which case you would be affirming that I spoke the truth, would you not?”

The elderly clergyman opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, frowned, frowned a little deeper, then snorted dismissively in disgust.

“Pah! I’ll have none of this... linguistic parlour games such as these serve but to amuse people with more leisure on their hands than the Good Lord intended. You’ll not entrap honest men with such riddles!”

“You are saying that an honest man may disregard logical paradoxes with impunity?”

“I am saying that logical paradi... parado... whatever you said... are but playthings of the Evil One that are sent to test us, madam! We shall not be drawn from the paths of righteousness, neither to the left nor to the right shall we stray...”

Scarlet found himself briefly speculating as to how many references to ostriches could be found in the Bible, while Tina stifled a yawn and with an air of resignation, repositioned her legs as an evident precursor to quitting her chair.

“Sir, I would put it to you that faith is that which may not be demonstrated, but which is believed absolutely even when confronted with irrefutable reasoned argument. This being so, I fear that even reasoned argument cannot be an appropriate vehicle to resolve the issue – let alone that which passes for reasoned argument on *your* part. But I grow fatigued of this discussion, and wish to retire. I will bid you goodnight, gentlemen.”

Mr Brookes glanced at the two other men seated around the table, then sank back into his chair with twinkling eyes and just the merest suggestion of a smirk on his lips.

“I think it best that we not detain you, Miss Ward, for I doubt not that sleep will clear your head of these fantastical notions. I pray that you will not have your dreams sullied by candle smoke, for truth is as steadfast and as solid as the doors that shall keep it from following you into your chamber!”

Disregarding the taunt as completely if she had not heard it, Tina rose gracefully out of her chair and walked to the door. Upon reaching it, she placed her hand upon the handle to open it, then

slowly withdrew it, felt the wooden panel to its left and tapped it. She spared the clergyman a speculative glance, then turned back once more to face the door, adjusted her stance to leave her body square with it, and then extended her right hand to touch the handle. Swivelling her hips in a tight movement, and uttering a sharp explosive cry, her left fist flashed forward in a direct movement towards the panel – and continued straight through it in a shower of splinters. In less time than it took for any of the three men present to question their senses, the door possessed a hole in it that had been absent less than a second previously. One second later, a glass of port lay shattered on the floor, dropped by the clergyman, his face several shades more florid than previously.

“What devilry is *this*, madam!”

“It is faith, sir – *my* faith. And I would put it to you that my faith sustains a reality in which this steadfast and solid door now has a hole in it.”

She reached through the hole and turned the handle on the other side, quietly pulled the door open and walked through, leaving three of the four men staring open-mouthed at the shattered panel, while the fourth contemplated it thoughtfully.

24 Cousin Michael Returns to London

“For permitting me to stay as long as I have, I cannot thank you enough, sir!”

Colonel Creighton silenced him with a wave of his hand. “Not another word, Cousin Michael! You would remain another month if I were to have my way – is it certain that you cannot?”

The young man shook his head sadly. “Alas, my return to town is unavoidable: my patron has summoned me, and I must go. I had thought to remain a day or two at most while Mr Harrison attended to his correspondence, but it has been almost a fortnight – and so much has transpired within that time that my head reels! I wonder if perhaps a short holiday back in the laboratory is what I now need.”

He donned his coat and picked up the last of his bags, then broke into a delighted grin as he saw Tina walking towards them from the direction of the kitchens.

“Miss Palamac! You also have come to see me off?”

“Indeed, sir. I would have brought Cassandra also, but she is attending Miss Almond, and cannot be spared. She hopes you will understand, and has asked me to bid you adieu. May I walk with you to your carriage?”

“I would be honoured!” With one final wave to Colonel Creighton, the young man began to make his way down the drive with Tina at his side.

“You are a woman of many talents, Miss Palamac! After last night I ask myself: is there *nothing* you cannot do?”

Tina regarded him with barely concealed amusement. “The list would be a very long one, sir... but perhaps even *that* not as long as one assembled by men who have closed their minds to anything they cannot fit into their own limited experiences. Keeping an open mind is everything.”

“And yet you did not save the life of Miss Almond by appealing to possibilities disseminated by an open mind,” he replied, frowning. “You *knew* that life might be restored to her by those means that we applied. I wish to understand better *how* you knew that life might be restored to Miss Almond, and how you perceived the means by which it might be effected.”

“You need not ask it, Mr Faraday – for you are already close to the answer yourself. Does not your own experiment with the application of an electrical charge to the legs of a dead frog furnish you with all the clues? I would add just one observation: that I have most likely seen more of life and death than you – and I would surmise that the line that divides them is more blurred and nebulous than you might think.”

Faraday considered the point. “We do not understand what life *is*, of that at least I am certain! For are we not more than skeletons, over which a concoction of chemicals has been arranged like so many layers of a wedding cake? My patron understands more of such matters than any other man living - and yet I have heard him declare that he himself has but taken a few steps into this wonderous realm of natural philosophy. I can never aspire to the heights to which he has risen, but yet I perceive the wisdom of those words. There is so *much* that we do not understand! Maybe we never shall... I know not.”

Tina regarded the young man closely. "Is not the recognition of one's own limitations is the first essential step to be taken when striving to extend them? I say you should not underestimate yourself, Mr Faraday. You will achieve great things if you can but find the right questions to ask."

The young man shook his head in exasperation. "There you go again, Miss Palamac! Your words convey the impression of such perspicacity as to make me wonder whether you are but playing with me, for something within me says that you already know what those questions are – and maybe the answers to them also! Now, how can that be?"

"Why do you believe that your own search for truth should be any more successful than that of the countless generations of truth-seekers that have preceded you? The universe made sense to the ancients, as did their own place within it – and yet each and every one of those civilizations perceived it differently. Why should their interpretation be any less valid than yours?"

Her companion frowned. "We know more than they, and thus we may postulate a more appropriate model to describe that which we observe. Is this not obvious?"

"And yet you recognize that the model is still incorrect, do you not?"

He nodded. "Oh, to be sure! For even as we make more and yet greater discoveries, it is incumbent upon us to modify the model accordingly. Such is the nature of the work upon which my patron and I are engaged - but what is the point you are making?"

"The point I am making is that the search is a never-ending process. You will never discover 'the truth' - whatever that means - because every culture will perceive it differently. Indeed, even within every culture different individuals will perceive it differently. If you would have proof of that, I put it to you that your perception of 'the truth' and mine are a case in point."

"Then you are saying that the search is futile? I cannot accept that. There must be truth, and it must be sought."

"Why?"

The young man flushed. "What sort of question is that, Miss Palamac? It is obvious!"

"Sir, it was obvious to the ancient Israelites that following a surfeit of rain a magnificent hunting bow would be placed in the sky by God. It was obvious to the ecclesiastical detractors of Galileo that the Earth lay at the centre of the universe. And it was obvious to you but a few days ago that Miss Almond was dead."

Faraday frowned in thought. "I cannot dispute it. And yet there is a common thread here, is there not? In each case, an inaccurate belief was corrected in the light of new evidence - and that new evidence was discovered in consequence of the passage of time."

The frown on his face cleared, and he beamed at his companion in delight. "I have it now! That is why we must seek the truth - for the search moves forever forward by virtue of the passage of time. Time moves inexorably forward, and the knowledge we seek accumulates as it does so."

"And... you are certain of that, Mr Faraday?"

He stared at her defiantly. "Why, yes! It is obvious!"

Her eyes met his, and something inexplicable in her expression slowly melted the defiance, to replace it with just the hint of a quizzical frown.

"It *is* obvious... is it not? Miss Palamac – if I cannot believe *anything*, what is there left?"

“There is the quest, Mr Faraday – and I think we may agree that the quest is real enough. I suggest merely that the *object* of the quest might never be found.”

“I shall spend my journey back to London thinking on what you have said – though I fear that to do this in full, no journey could be long enough.”

He scrambled into the carriage, and quickly ran his eye over his hand-luggage to ensure it was all there. “Goodbye, Miss Palamac – and please convey my good wishes to Miss Almond for a speedy recovery. Indeed... would you tell her that I should very much like to meet her once more in town when she is well enough to undertake such an expedition?”

“I will tell her, sir.”

She took two steps back and nodded perfunctorily to the coachman at the reins, then turned to walk back to the house as the coach moved off.

25 Miss Palamac Makes a Discovery in her Bedchamber

Tina returned to her room to find Carey changing the sheets of her bed. The door of the wardrobe was open, and assorted piles of pillowcases, towels and various garments littered the floor.

“Oh! Beggin’ your pardon, ma’am... I didn’t know you was comin’ back to your room so soon, ma’am – else I’d have changed the linen another time! Does you want me to go away and come back later, ma’am? I can do Miss Creighton’s room now, and then after that I can strip Mr Faraday’s bed, ‘cos I knows he’s left to go back to London, and that’ll keep me busy at least till Mr Herrick does tell me he wants me to see to the master’s smoking jacket, which is to be cleaned on the morrow...”

Tina held up her hand to terminate the rambling soliloquy. “It’s all right, Carey – please continue with your present task. The current state of the wardrobe will make it that much easier for me to find some items I shall be requiring later in the day.

“Very good, ma’am – I promise I’ll be quick. Be out of ‘ere in no time, I shall.”

Carey continued to busy herself with the change of linen while Tina stepped gingerly over the piles of clothes on the floor towards the now half-empty wardrobe, where she stood for a moment, contemplating it thoughtfully. More than a dozen portable electronic devices were presently stacked up at the back of it on account of their requiring some minor adjustments to be made, and even though Tina had issued strict standing instructions to Carey on no account to touch them, she still feared that they might be damaged by a simple act of carelessness – and watching the somewhat awkward parlour maid now restocking the wardrobe with the freshly-cleaned linen that she had brought up with her from the laundry, she concluded that an alternative repository would need to be required.

She duly removed the components from the wardrobe and lined them up against the wall under the window, while Carey finished her task and hurriedly removed herself from the room, closing the door behind her. Storage space within the room was limited to two small cupboards, a wooden trunk in one corner, and three narrow shelves mounted in a vertical stack on the far wall. Tina inspected each in turn before concluding that the least unsatisfactory would be the trunk, only to discover when she opened it that it was full of old blankets. Turning her attention to the shelves, she found herself speculating as to why the stack terminated just under one metre short of the corner of the room, when it would clearly have been more logical for the shelves to cover the full length of the wall.

Wondering whether the gap in the shelving had been necessitated by the presence of a large piece of furniture that had since been removed, she began to inspect the dark wooden panelling that covered the wall behind the shelves, becoming conscious as she did so that the pattern into which the panels had been assembled was actually not perfectly regular, but underwent a barely perceptible change at the same distance from the corner of the room as the shelves stopped. Intrigued, she moved a little closer to allow herself to make a more detailed inspection – and suddenly perceived that the minuscule irregularity in the pattern of the panelling actually traced out a vertical rectangle, roughly the size of a small door.

Having at last identified it, she now found it impossible *not* to see it. It obviously *was* a door... and given that a door would necessarily require a mechanism for opening it, she set about tracking it

down - which took very little time indeed. In roughly the position where a door handle would normally be found, she found a small hollow knothole in the wood – and one look into that knothole was sufficient to identify the means by which the door could be opened. Stepping over to the dressing table, she picked up a hatpin and returned with it to the door. Pointing the hatpin slightly downwards, she inserted it into the knothole as far as it would go, then used it to lever the small latch inside off its cradle – whereupon the door creaked a few millimetres outwards.

Prising it fully open with her fingertips, she found herself looking into a narrow opening, no more than two metres deep, which was then blocked by a second door. She pushed the first door closed once more, stepped out of her bedroom, and walked the few steps down the corridor to the door of the adjoining room. Although she already knew the room was presently unoccupied, she nevertheless knocked before entering, noting instantly the massive wardrobe occupying a position that now rendered the passageway unusable for its original purpose – which, given that both rooms were bedchambers, was not difficult to guess.

She returned to her own room, pulled open the secret door once more, and nodding absently to herself with satisfaction, began to move the electronic components she had so recently extracted from the wardrobe into the space between the two doors.

26 Colonel Creighton and Mr Harrison Venture into the Cellar

Mr Harrison held up his candle, and waved it about experimentally at the top of the little spiral staircase to satisfy himself that it would not gut at the first suggestion of a breeze.

“It seems to withstand movement well enough – and of course you have yours also, Creighton. Will you not speak some philosophic offering in the Latin tongue with which to herald our foray into this underworld of yours?”

“I would, if I could but think of something appropriate – but I cannot,” confessed his friend. “Let us instead confine ourselves to ensuring that we have fully addressed the practical – and I think we have, for our needs are few indeed. We have light, and we have the courage of the righteous on our side – so if the place be infested, I think we are prepared.”

Candle in hand, Colonel Creighton led the way slowly and carefully down into the cellar below. At the bottom he turned, and held up the candle for his friend to descend the final few steps to join him, then gestured around him with the air of a guide conducting a tour.

“A grim little cubby hole, is it not? I’ve not been down here myself in many a year, but it seems to have changed little.”

Together they walked slowly the full length of the cellar. In the flickering shadows to either side of them, perhaps a dozen old and decaying wooden casks could be discerned stacked against the walls. A pile of rusty garden implements lay long-since abandoned in one corner, and a short ladder was propped up against another – but nowhere any sign of wildlife, either living or dead.

Holding the candle high above his head, Colonel Creighton peered through the gloom at the far wall of the little cellar, and frowned. “Now there’s a strange thing, Harrison! Before we came down, I’d have sworn that the cellar was longer than this. Though I’ve not been down here for many years now, when I was a young man I would sometimes come here when I sought a little solitude – and as I recall, I imagined this passageway to stretch the full length of the room above. And yet it assuredly does not. Remarkable how one’s memory can deceive, is it not?”

His friend snorted with a grin. “Doubtless you were smaller then. Can it be surprising that the world seemed a little larger?”

Creighton shrugged, but his eyes betrayed a lingering morsel of doubt.

“Younger indeed I was, but not *that* much smaller. And yet... no – I remember clearly that far wall. The pattern of the bricks there – and that broken cornerstone where the arch of the roof meets the supporting timber. No... my recollection is at fault, or else this chamber has shrunk – and were I a gambling man, I know how I would place my bet.”

His face cleared. “But let us rejoice: we need not join battle tonight, for there are surely neither mice nor rats here – nor any other living creature. I say we quit this crypt and return to the land of the living.”

He turned on his heel, and slipped as his foot slid sideways, his fall being broken only by the timely reaction of his friend, who caught him just in time. Smiling his thanks, he lowered the candle to the ground and knelt to investigate the cause of the near-accident. Straightening up again, he beckoned to the other.

“See here, Harrison – on the floor.”

Together they peered at the oily black puddle that lay beneath their feet, from which two pairs of tracks could be discerned leading away from it – one back towards the spiral staircase, and the other in the opposite direction directly to the far wall, ending at its base.

His companion frowned. “You did not walk all the way over to that wall just now, did you?”

Creighton shook his head, understanding the implication immediately. “You know I did not... and I know that neither did you.”

The other chuckled. “Well then, it would seem your ward also takes a keen interest in it! I wonder why? What say we ask her, if she has not already taken herself off for the day?”

Together they retraced their steps to the base of the spiral staircase, and climbed up to the drawing room above, from whence they ascended the main stairs to the upper storey and their respective bedrooms. Had either of them turned round, he might have been puzzled by the sight of just the faintest of rhythmically pulsing red glows emanating from the entrance to the little subterranean chamber behind them; faint enough to render it invisible in the presence of candlelight. But neither of them turned round.

27 Miss Almond Expresses a Wish to Explore the House

“Are you quite certain you are sufficiently recovered to attempt this excursion, Miss Rodica? I recommend at least another week in your bed before...”

Lieutenant Almond impatiently waved the admonition aside. “Cassandra... if I cannot walk even a little each day, I fear I shall forget how to use my legs! There is so much I want to see here, and so much I have to do: I *must* make the effort. I will admit to you however that the stairs *are* difficult – perhaps will you help me, please?”

“Of course! Come... I shall take the weight of your body while you place your foot upon the next stair, like so...”

Arm in arm they descended the staircase together, slowly and carefully, step by step. By the time they reached the bottom stair the young lieutenant was beginning to sweat a little, but one look at the determination on her face was sufficient to make Cassandra abandon any last hope of trying to get her to return to her room. Casting her mind back just a few short weeks to the day she had first seen Rodica, covered in blood and on the very point of death, Cassandra now found herself marvelling at her new friend’s evident resilience and commitment to the task in hand. Clearly not for *her* any suggestion of helplessness on the grounds of her femininity, any more than for her mentor – who had once again taken herself off alone for the day.

Lieutenant Almond took a deep breath, and smiled her thanks to her new friend.

“There – I think that is the most difficult part, yes? Things will now be easier... and so I would like to explore this house: will you show me around, please?”

Cassandra’s eyes betrayed just a hint of concern. “To be sure – but... should you not rest first? It is almost three o’clock; we could take tea a little early in the drawing room...”

Almond appeared to ponder the offer for a second, but then shook her head decisively. “I wish to stay on my feet some time longer, if I may. I love old houses, for architecture is a hobby of mine. You show me all about the house, and then perhaps we take tea an hour from now?”

Cassandra nodded agreeably. “To be sure – even though this house is perhaps not so old as would interest you! But where would you like to go? What would you like to see?”

For the first time, Lieutenant Almond seemed a little uncertain. She gestured vaguely around the room, her eyes darting here and there, almost as if she were looking for something.

“Oh, I would just like to see everything! What is in that room over there? And in the one beyond? Where does that passageway lead? Let us walk...”

Cassandra laughed at her new friend’s evident inquisitiveness. “I surmise that you will not be satisfied until you have explored the entire house from its attics to its foundations, Rodica! Is it so?”

Lieutenant Almond’s eyes swept over the entrance to the little spiral staircase leading down to the cellar, barely concealing her satisfaction at having located it in such short order. Adopting an air of almost childish curiosity, she pointed to the top of the staircase and nodded excitedly.

“Certainly it is so... let us start with the foundations! What is down there?”

Cassandra blinked, and then frowned to herself as if at an elusive memory. She shook her head decisively.

“But... but there is nothing down there. You do not want to go down there, for there is nothing to see. There is nothing to see at all! Come, Rodica – the sun is shining outside, let me show you the orangery...”

Having found the entrance to it, Lieutenant Almond wasn't going to be deterred from making at least a cursory inspection of the cellar below on an apparent whim on the part of her friend.

“But I *do* want to go down there! It is *mysterious*...”

She stopped in mid-sentence and frowned in puzzlement as her friend moved to stand between herself and the top of the little staircase, as if intent on physically stopping her – and indeed, Cassandra's expression began to take on an air of panic.

“*No!* We must not! That is, I mean... that is to say, we should not...”

The edge in her voice was unmistakable, and Almond regarded her with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

“Are you all right, Cassandra? You seem very agitated – is something the matter? Is the room at the bottom of the stairs dangerous, perhaps?”

Cassandra shook her head violently. “Of course not, dear Rodica – what could make you think such a thing! No... it is just that... it is just that...”

She frowned to herself once more, and then shook her head as if to clear it. “It is just that... there are other places to see that I know are much more interesting! There is nothing down there. I *know* there is nothing down there.... come – I shall show you the orangery. And after that I shall show you the concealed passage between two of the bedrooms! I discovered it myself just a year ago, and I have never told anyone in the household, for I thought I might find it useful one day as a hiding place – so you must promise me you will keep my secret! But first, we shall go to the orangery...”

Taking her friend by the arm, she set off with her in the direction of the garden door with an air of determination. Lieutenant Almond spared the entrance to the little staircase one final glance over her shoulder to assure herself that she could find it again unaided, and then without offering any further protest allowed herself to be led away.

28 Captain Metcalfe Seeks Information from Mr Harrison

“It’s my understanding that there’s a cellar underneath the house, Mr Harrison – do you know where it is?”

Having already become accustomed to his companion’s somewhat stolid demeanour throughout their admittedly short acquaintance, Harrison’s eyes twinkled at the prospect of enjoying a minor jibe at his expense.

“I do, Captain Metcalfe. It is underneath the house – but I think you know that, yes?”

“Yee... es, I *did* rather invite that,” admitted Scarlet with a grin. “But I’m sure I need not now ask where the entrance to it is.”

“You need not, for I’ll withhold that intelligence not a moment longer, Captain – it is just down the hallway over there and along the passage that leads to the kitchens – but would you indulge my curiosity and tell me the reason for your enquiry? I ask because there has probably been more interest shown in the place over the last few days than in as many of the last few years – indeed, Creighton and I were down there just the other day. He thought the manor might have been invaded.”

“*Invaded?* By whom did he think it might have been invaded, Mr Harrison?”

Harrison chuckled. “Oh, any of a dozen species of undesirable creatures – but there was nothing there: the place has the aspect of lying in a state of dereliction for decades. Some tables, a few bundles of hay, the remnants of some old barrels and nothing else.”

Scarlet looked at him closely. “What – nothing else at all? Are you sure?”

Harrison laughed out loud. “Most certainly, Captain! We both walked the length of it from one end to the other. I suppose it might have been used to store wine and other beverages in the past – perhaps you suspect Creighton of concealing a secret supply of port down there, eh? It is true that the corridor is *just* about wide enough to swing a cat, but even if the cat in question were of the feline variety there’s nowhere that a mouse on the run from it might be concealed! Nay, sir – there’s naught to be found down there. Why do you ask?”

Scarlet shrugged. “Oh, Rodica and I were talking about it the other day; we understood that some garments of ours had been put down there.”

“Aha – yes, of course! I remember now: Carey was told to put your companion’s light brown tunic down there, and she might well have later added your red one to the bundle after you were admitted into the house and your wounds tended. But there’s nothing down there now – of that I can be quite certain, for we surely would have seen it. There’s little enough space to put things down there anyway: Creighton thought he remembered it as being somewhat larger when he was a young man, but his memory was deceiving him.”

Scarlet looked speculatively at him, opened his mouth to say something, then abruptly closed it again. When he eventually did speak, it was to change the subject.

“Well, obviously we were mistaken – but talking of Rodica, I said I’d meet her in the library half an hour ago. I’d better be on my way, Mr Harrison: she’ll be wondering where I am...”

“Wondering no longer, I think,” interrupted Harrison with a grin, “for I fancy she has come to find *you*! Good morning, Miss Almond – I trust you are well?”

“Thank you, Mr Harrison – I am very well, and feeling even more so each day. And you have found Captain Metcalfe – this is excellent!”

Harrison looked a little shamefaced. “I confess I have been the reason for his failure to find you first, Miss Almond. I will leave you two together, Captain – perhaps I shall see you both at supper?”

Scarlet waited until he was out of earshot, and then turned to his companion. “Sorry, Lieutenant – that went on rather longer than I’d expected. Did you get anywhere with Cassandra?”

Lieutenant Almond frowned. “I am not sure, Captain. There is something she does not want me to know about the cellar – of this I am certain. She almost dragged me away from the little staircase to make me walk with her round the orangery instead, and in the end I only managed to get away by insisting that I had arranged to meet you, for otherwise she would have made me go and look at something else. And yet I feel I have come to understand her very well in the short time I have known her, and I believe she would never try to deceive me. She is very loyal to her friends, and would consider such a deception dishonourable. It is almost as if...”

She paused, as if trying to muster her thoughts. “It is almost as if she *cannot* tell me something. But if this is so... then there must *be* something that she cannot tell me! Do I make sense, Captain Scarlet?”

Scarlet nodded grimly. “Yes, you make perfect sense. Do you remember the first time we saw Cassandra, sitting down there at one of those consoles in some sort of trance? Well... I’ve just had a very interesting talk with Mr Harrison. He tells me that Creighton hasn’t been down there for years, but that he remembers the cellar from that time as being somewhat larger than it is now. So... isn’t it obvious that part of it – namely the part that contained the entrance to the tunnel leading to the ship plus the consoles we saw – has been bricked off or something? Don’t ask me how that could have been done in such a way that Harrison and Creighton were unaware of it when they went down there, but it must be something like that. Also, Harrison just told me that Carey was told to put our uniforms down there, just after the shooting... but he says they’re not there now. You and I are going to have to go down there, Lieutenant. After dark, I think...”

29 Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Make a Discovery

Scarlet stared at the blank wall ahead of them and frowned in puzzlement. Not only was there no sign of the tunnel leading to the ship beneath the lake, but the wall that now stood where the entrance should have been had clearly not been built recently. A thick layer of grime and cobwebs covering the ancient grey bricks could be made out in the flickering candlelight, which revealed also the rotting remnants of a timber beam supporting the roof at its height.

He reached out and experimentally trailed his fingers through the cobwebs, which were evidently thick enough to offer a substantial measure of resistance to the passage of his hand along the wall. He grimaced and withdrew once more, wiping his hand on the cuff of his other sleeve and shaking his head in confusion as he did so.

“I don’t understand this at all, Lieutenant. This doesn’t make sense. We *know* it’s here. How can this be possible? There aren’t *two* of these cellars, are there? No... that’s not possible – I recognize the spiral staircase we came down. It’s definitely the same place.”

Lieutenant Almond nodded thoughtfully. “Yes – I am certain of this too. I also recognize parts of it from the day we first arrived: those old barrels in the corner, and that broken scythe on top of one of them. And yet... somehow it seems smaller, does it not?”

Scarlet nodded slowly. “Yes, it does. And that’s an interesting observation, because that’s just what Mr Harrison told me that Creighton had said also. The obvious conclusion would be that part of it has been bricked off since we arrived – in which case we might perhaps have expected to find the uniforms too – but there’s no sign of any recent work to support such a notion. Everything’s covered with the filth of ages. Talking of which, I daresay I’d better try to get at least some of this muck off this shirt before Carey sees it...”

His voice trailed away as he looked down at the spot where he’d wiped his hand a few moments previously, and he frowned.

“Lieutenant – would you move that candle closer to my wrist... just here, please?”

Almond raised the flickering candle closer to Scarlet’s sleeve, and together they peered at the cuff – which, impossibly, was as clean as the moment Scarlet had donned the shirt that same morning. Their eyes met, and each recognised in the other’s the faintest glimmer of dawning comprehension. Lieutenant Almond strode back to the wall, and replicated Scarlet’s earlier action by trailing her fingers through the cobwebs. Inspecting them, she beckoned for Scarlet to join her at the wall, and held up her hand.

“There is nothing on my fingers – but I *definitely* felt the drag of the cobwebs as I passed my fingers through them. It’s almost as if... could the cobwebs be an *illusion*, Captain? A hologram, perhaps?”

Scarlet slowly shook his head, more in doubt than denial.

“If it *is* a hologram, it’s being generated by more advanced technology than anything Spectrum could produce. We could project an image sufficiently convincing to deceive a casual observer, but it wouldn’t possess any physical characteristics. Whatever this thing is, it seems to be able to interact with our sense of touch as well. Let’s see...”

He pushed his hand straight through the cobwebs, and although in the flickering candlelight he could just about see the tips of his fingers disappearing into the wall behind them, he could also feel them being pushed back with a force at least equal to that being applied by his arm. Three more attempts delivered with steadily increasing pressure delivered the same result. He shook his head.

“It’s not *quite* a perfect illusion – but credit where it’s due: it’s certainly good enough to fool anyone from *this* era. Having said that, I don’t think this is going to work. We’re going to have to find a way to turn it off. There must be a mechanism somewhere... let’s see if we can find it, shall we?”

Ten minutes of close inspection of the walls of the passageway revealed nothing, though progress was slow on account of the lack of a second candle – and yet, when the breakthrough finally *did* come, it was the candle itself that provided the clue. Lieutenant Almond had placed it on top of one of the barrels to illuminate the corner of the room, and was hunched over it while studying the wall when she heard a grunt of satisfaction behind her. Turning round, she could just about make out the shape of her companion striding towards the opposite corner, which on account of her body shielding the only light source in the room was now in almost complete darkness.

Or rather, it *should* have been.

“I think I might have found it, Lieutenant. Can you put that candle down behind one of those barrels, and then come over here? Be careful where you step.”

Almond moved the candle as directed and joined him, where together they peered at one of the ancient crumbling bricks halfway up the wall of the passageway, from which just the faintest of red glows was emanating in slow rhythmic pulses.

Scarlet chuckled. “We’d never have seen it in the candlelight – the moving shadows created by the flame mask it perfectly – but then, who would ever come down here without a candle? There’s no guarantee it controls the hologram of course, but I think if you asked me to bet...”

He reached out to touch the brick, and then gave a low whistle as his fingers passed through it and connected with what felt like a switch behind. They both turned just in time to watch the far wall silently dissolve and fade away into nothingness.

“Yee...ees!” Scarlet grinned, and delivered a short punch into the air. “Shall we proceed, Lieutenant?”

They walked slowly through the archway into the chamber beyond, into which they had first stepped when quitting the tunnel. It was laid out much as it was at the time of their earlier encounter, with a semicircle of interconnected consoles occupying half of the room, and the portal leading to into the tunnel on their right. Directly ahead of them lay the *real* far end of the cellar: a cobweb-covered crumbling stone wall to which the image generated by the recently disabled hologram had been superficially identical.

Lieutenant Almond stepped over to the nearest console and inspected the various displays, peering closely at the readouts but touching nothing. After a few moments she shook her head.

“I cannot interpret these readings, Captain Scarlet. Some of the displays appear to suggest that a power build-up has been taking place somewhere near to this location over a period of several hours, but the levels they register appear to be impossibly high: some of the dials indicate power levels in the petawatt range.”

Scarlet looked blankly at her. “I beg your pardon, Lieutenant? That means nothing to me... what on earth is a ‘petawatt’?”

Almond squinted down at one of the readouts once more, and frowned. “If I am right, Captain, it is very likely *nothing* on earth... certainly not in the early nineteenth century, and maybe not in the mid twenty-first century either! A petawatt is one thousand terawatts. One terawatt is one thousand gigawatts – and one gigawatt is comparable in magnitude to the amount of energy generated in one second by a bolt of lightning. Maybe however I make a mistake...”

Scarlet raised an eyebrow and grinned. “I’m going to work on the assumption that you *haven’t* made a mistake, Lieutenant – because in my experience you usually don’t! A million bolts of lightning, eh? And the only thing in the early nineteenth century that might conceivably be related to these readings is on board that ship at the other end of that tunnel... I think it’s time we understood once and for all what all this is about – and I have to believe that the answers lie down there. Shall we take a walk?”

Meanwhile, a tiny camera mounted into the vaulted ceiling above them silently adjusted the settings of its lenses to keep them both within its focus range as they stepped through the portal and into the tunnel beyond.

30 Cassandra Recovers her Memory

Cassandra awoke with a start and looked around her room wildly, half expecting to see her friend standing beside her bed in the darkness, in the full awareness that the incomprehensible and bewildering dream had returned to assail her consciousness once more, stronger and more intense than ever. Sweating profusely, she peered frantically into the gloom, her eyes seeking out whatever metallic cabinets adorned with pretty coloured lights might be arranged about the walls of her bedchamber, and finding herself strangely disappointed to fail. Smiling introspectively, she silently chided herself for her foolishness, then frowned once more in puzzlement as one of the impossible phrases from her dream suddenly surfaced in her mind once more... *cross-check primary guidance circuits*... now, where on earth had she heard *that* jumble of incomprehensible words before?

Shaking her head to clear it, she reached for the oil lamp she had left standing on the table by her bedside the previous evening. It still burned with a low flame, and she gave the tiny wheel at its side a quarter-turn to expose a little more of the wick. Lifting it up, she scanned the room for any clues that might point to the reason for her sudden awakening, but she could see none. The dream still vivid in her head, she threw the sheets aside, scrambled out of bed and quickly donned her dressing gown. Then with a view to collecting her thoughts in an orderly fashion, she let her body collapse once more into the chair from which she had just taken the garment. On an insane whim she tried unsuccessfully to swivel the chair around with her feet, conscious once more of a sense of disenchantment when it failed to move.

Cassandra frowned to herself, closing her eyes in intense concentration as she reached out in her mind to recapture the sensation of the room spinning around her. She began to savour the giddiness as she imagined the chair rotating beneath her, carrying her with it as it turned. Yes... *that* was the feeling! But there was something else... something important. Cassandra closed her eyes even tighter as she tried to recall the elusive memory.

A looking-glass... an oblong looking-glass – *that* was it! An oblong looking-glass showing an illuminated face returning her stare... but the face was not her own. The face was... the face was that of her friend. And then suddenly the looking-glass was gone... and in its place stood Tina. Yes... it was Tina standing before her, talking to her...

Cassandra took a deep breath, and composed herself in the chair as she sought to reach into the depths of her mind and extract from it Tina's words... the *exact* words, because the words were important...

"You were also told that you must never reveal its presence to anyone else within the household. Do you remember now?"

Cassandra's eyes snapped open, and she stood up, silently mouthing the words to herself. Suddenly feeling more awake in that moment than she could remember almost since the time she first met her friend all those weeks ago, she set about dressing herself with an air of grim determination, for there was something she had to find out – and she knew it could not wait until morning.

"Yes, Tina... I remember now. I *do* remember now!"

31 Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Return to the Ship

Scarlet ran his fingers lightly around the edges of the open hatchway which now constituted their entrance to the ship, and frowned.

“This is an airlock. When we first left the ship, we had to climb through a hole which had been blasted in this door. It’s obviously been repaired since then – which is an interesting enough development on its own – but it’s also been left open, as has the inner door. I wonder why.”

Lieutenant Almond nodded thoughtfully. “You suspect a trap?”

Scarlet grimaced. “It would be foolish to discount the possibility. It *could* be that whoever carried out the repair didn’t anticipate that anyone would ever discover the hologram and manage to disable it... but even if that were true, when did *you* last leave the means of access to a military installation completely unguarded? Even the bulkheads on Cloudbase can only be opened by authorised personnel by application of the correct security protocols – and there isn’t supposed to be any way that someone who wasn’t authorised could even *be* on the base. Let’s be wary.”

They stepped through the doorway, and Lieutenant Almond turned to look back down the tunnel they had just left. Abandoning any hope of penetrating more than a few tens of metres into the darkness with her stare, she turned her attention instead to the panel on the wall to the side of the hatch, and noting a solitary pair of controls contained within it, nodded absently to herself. Experimentally, she flicked one of the switches: the door slid shut. She flicked the other, and it opened again.

“The control panel on this side consists of a functional open-and-close mechanism. We can close the hatch behind us, Captain Scarlet – shall I do so?”

Scarlet turned, considered for a moment, and then shook his head.

“No... better to leave it the way we found it, I think. If whoever repaired the door comes along the tunnel from the cellar while we’re still inside, they’ll realise someone’s here... and if on the other hand this *is* a trap, we might need to get out again in a hurry.”

They stepped through the open inner door, and walked silently down the corridor into the ship’s interior. As their eyes slowly adjusted to the low level of lighting that pervaded the ship, they began to become aware of subtle variations in the intensity as they moved between the various sections of the ship.

Suddenly, Scarlet stiffened. Raising his hand, he motioned for his companion to move closer before whispering in her ear.

“There’s something down there, Lieutenant – a slightly stronger light source, and... I thought I heard something. *Very* faint... I might have been mistaken, but tread carefully – don’t make a sound.”

They moved silently down the corridor, eventually entering at last into a compact but relatively spacious cabin. An array of visual displays adorned the walls, seemingly operating at very low power levels, and below them were arranged a neat semicircle of six consoles, within each which was embedded a complex battery of switches, sliders and dials. A chair accompanied each of the consoles, but not one of them was occupied.

Scarlet and Almond approached the cabin slowly, both of them automatically sweeping the room for any potential hiding places that might conceal anyone before moving through the door and into the room. Once inside, Scarlet motioned for Lieutenant Almond to move to the left of the room while he himself stepped over to the right. Without a word being spoken, each of them spent a moment running their eyes over each of the three consoles in turn before meeting again in the middle of the room. Scarlet nodded towards the side of the room just inspected by his companion.

“Any conclusions as to their purpose, Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant Almond frowned. “I *think* navigation – but I do not understand the readings they show. The notation is in English, but the displays do not relate to any geography I recognise. The second console appears to show a flight path, and contains a name – ‘*Kahra*’ – that looks as if it might be an airport or perhaps a city, but I do not know this name. What of the other instruments?”

Scarlet indicated the consoles to the right. “The first two seem to be showing environmental data – see there, those two readouts show air pressure and oxygen content, possibly in this room, perhaps elsewhere on board the ship – whereas the third appears to be some kind of security monitoring station. This control looks like a selector for any of a set of video channels – probably closed-circuit TV cameras. One of the monitors is showing what looks like an empty storeroom somewhere, though the image is a little too small to make out the details. Navigation, environmental control and security. Yes, I’d say this is the ship’s bridge...”

He motioned towards the large blank screen between the two banks of consoles in front of them. “... in which case that’s probably the forward viewer.”

He looked around the room thoughtfully, noted the position of the solitary chair facing the central view screen, and nodded to himself.

“The ship’s captain would be sitting *there* – and the captain would want to be able to monitor everything happening on board the ship, wouldn’t he... so it ought to be possible to transfer the signal from any of the monitors to the main viewer. But the captain wouldn’t leave his chair to do that. He’d order whoever was manning the station to reroute the image – and he’d expect that to be done immediately upon command, so it should be a very quick and easy thing to do. Let’s see...”

He inspected the console for a moment, then experimentally ran his fingers over the controls one by one, alternately rotating dials and flicking switches in short sequences. At the third attempt, the image on the small monitor within the console changed, replacing the empty room with another image, this time a long view of one of the ship’s corridors. He nodded to himself again.

“Good... now, let’s see if we can transfer this to the main viewer... that would most likely be a single control separate from the channel selection array... ah, how about *this* one...”

An audible burst of static turned both of their heads in the direction of the large screen, which now displayed the same image as the monitor on the console. Returning to the channel selection controls, Scarlet began replicating his earlier sequence of switch and dial settings, each time pausing and looking up to join Lieutenant Almond in inspecting the resulting image on the main screen. He flicked through a dozen views in rapid succession before pausing.

“Well, they all look like sections of the ship to me... and not one of them has shown any people in it. That’s good news for us, I suppose – but it doesn’t get us any nearer to finding out the *reason* for all of this. It’s starting to look as though we just might have to take this ship apart – but let’s just make quite certain the ship’s deserted first...”

He selected the next image in the sequence, which comprised a panoramic view of a chamber containing an array of consoles, in which some barrels could just be discerned in the barely-lit background. Scarlet grunted to himself as he suddenly recognised it.

“That’s the cellar in the house, Lieutenant! The angle of the view suggests that the camera is mounted in the roof, close to the tunnel entrance – look... there are the old barrels on the left, and on the right of the picture there’s part of the curved wall. All of which means...”

He looked sombrely at Lieutenant Almond, who in turn looked back at him, echoing his thoughts.

“... which means that if anybody *was* here in this room, they could have watched us entering the tunnel. In which case, they would know we were here.”

Scarlet frowned. “Well... in that case, it looks like we were lucky – because there’s obviously nobody here now. And yet... this room appears to be fully functional. That doesn’t make sense. Everything we’ve seen indicates that this is the ship’s nerve centre – and these stations are all operational. But no responsible captain of a ship would ever leave the cockpit unmanned - so where’s the crew? They can’t be far away...”

“Perhaps closer than you think, Captain... Scarlet?”

Startled, they turned...

32 Miss Palamac Confronts Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond

Tina regarded without emotion the two Spectrum officers who, having instantly put aside their frustration at having been taken completely off-guard seconds after having correctly perceived the imminent nature of the danger, regarded her likewise. The Grecian-style muslin frock that she habitually wore about the manor had been replaced by a functional dark blue utility jumpsuit, and a small, slightly translucent, green device held in the palm of her hand was levelled at a point midway between their heads. It was clear to both that she could target either as quickly and easily as it would take to flick her wrist – and yet she did not. Motioning them to step back against the far wall, she seated herself in the captain’s chair.

“No doubt you’ll try to get a better view of the device with which I’m covering you before you attempt to seize it, Captain Scarlet – so I’ll save you the trouble.”

She opened her hand and lowered it for an instant to give both officers a good view.

“Yes – it looks like a brooch in the shape of a dragon. That it should resemble one is intentional; however the innocuous appearance can sometimes deceive an adversary in its firing line to take a gamble with a stupid risk – and I’ve no wish for that to happen on this occasion.”

She raised her arm and flicked her finger over the dragon’s tail, causing a searing pencil-thin beam of energy to lance out of its twin red eyes into the ceiling above, then instantly lowered the weapon once more to cover the two officers.

“The device projects a synaptic distortion pulse: the highest setting would kill you outright, but even the lowest would render either of you unconscious for half an hour, after which we would have to start all over again – so I ask you in all sincerity not to do anything rash, but just listen to what I have to say.”

She glanced at one of the monitors that adorned the walls of the cabin, as if to remind herself of something she’d overheard while watching the two officers earlier in the cellar.

“Captain Scarlet and Lieutenant Almond... two colours... coded identities? If so, then a trifle pretentious in my view, although I’ll concede that ours are little better – although perhaps fractionally less imaginative. We need to talk, Captain – but I recognise that your training might prompt you to attempt to incapacitate me at the first available opportunity. Something tells me that you and I are not so very different... and if our positions were reversed, *I* would certainly do so – hence the weapon.”

For himself Scarlet had no undue concern other than the time required for him to recover should Tina carry out her implied threat, but the danger to the young lieutenant standing at his side was obviously real enough. He merely nodded slowly, his features a study in belated recognition of the answer to a puzzle he now realised he should have solved long ago.

“Yes... of course. We really have been rather slow, haven’t we – this is *your* ship, isn’t it? Did you pilot it here yourself? Or are you one member of a larger crew?”

If the discovery of her secret gave her any cause for concern, Tina characteristically showed not the slightest sign of it. She merely shook her head.

“The crew did not survive the crash. One of the propulsion units malfunctioned as the ship was descending; I was able to effect a controlled crash-landing into the lake, where it sank shortly after I had escaped through one of the docking ports. I was only able to access the ship thereafter by diving to it through the lake, which I did several times. Anchoring the ship in the silt proved impossible, and the underwater currents began to drag it in the direction of the house – a complication I was able to turn to my advantage by burning a tunnel partway through to the cellar with one of the short-range combat laser batteries. I then connected the ship to it with one of the extendable boarding tubes, and pumped the water out from the ship. With the ship now effectively tethered, and a dry environment in which to work, I was able to burn the remainder of the tunnel through to the cellar with comparative ease.”

Lieutenant Almond’s eyes widened. “But... that tunnel has been cut through solid bedrock over a length of almost one kilometre! What you describe is *impossible!*”

Tina shook her head. “For technology native to your trajectory through the *ae’thera*, Lieutenant, this might be so. Not for the technology native to mine. The armaments of this ship possess sufficient firepower to blast a crater in the moon: adapting them to excavate a tunnel by volatilizing the rock layers that lie between the lake bed and the foundations of the house was a straightforward exercise in subterranean engineering. The tunnel walls that maintain the structure are cast of liquefied rock re-integrated with thermal condenser rays: the dissolution and retro-crystallisation processes are virtually simultaneous.”

Scarlet and Almond exchanged glances, and Scarlet turned back to Tina, frowning in obvious confusion.

“What you seem to be describing means nothing whatsoever to me – and my companion’s expression suggests to me that I’m not the only one. Just how far ahead of our time *are* you, Tina?”

A ghost of a smile flickered across Tina’s lips. “I’ve no idea, Captain Scarlet – but we can establish it easily enough. Immediately before you and the lieutenant were dispatched to this location in spacetime, what was the year?”

Scarlet hesitated briefly before replying, but could see no obvious reason to withhold the requested information.

“It was 2073. And I’d say from what we’ve seen of this ship and the equipment within it that you’re from a time at least a century in advance of that – would I be right?”

“You would be wrong. This ship was built in the year 2044, and at the time of its separation from my timeframe had been in service for three years. *You* are some twenty-six years ahead of *me*, Captain Scarlet.”

“*What?* But... but, that’s...”

“You need to understand that you are not a product of my reality, Captain. To me, you and your companion are the products of an alternate reality to my own. To you, *I* am the product of an alternate reality to *yours* – and appearances would indicate that technological progress within your reality has evolved more slowly than in mine. And I find that most fortunate – because it suggests to me that my mission has been... or rather will be... a successful one.”

Tina rose from her chair, her brooch-like weapon still covering the two Spectrum officers. Stepping over to one of the control panels, she ran the fingers of her other hand lightly over an array of switches. Sparing a glance at a table of figures superimposed over the schematic, she nodded

absently to herself, evidently having verified her own recollection of the data summarized within it.

“On the night that you and your companion were drawn back to this era, Captain, the ship’s laser had just projected a highly-focussed energy trace into deep space. That energy trace distorts spacetime to provide a furrow along which a substantially more intense concentrated burst will very shortly be fired to establish a trans-ae’theric conduit – a rift in spacetime that will be projected towards a binary star system that lies over 117 light years from this planet. When it arrives, it will be redirected by the combined effect of the gravity of the twin stars in that system onto a new trajectory that will bring it back to this system once more, 235 years from now.”

“Excuse me... this trans-ae’theric conduit thing – is that a wormhole?”

Tina shook her head. “That term conveys nothing to me. I’ve used the terminology with which I’m familiar to describe it. What *you* might call it – assuming your technology is sufficiently acquainted with the phenomenon to have given it a name at all – I have no idea.”

“All right – let’s put that aside for the time being and try something else. *Why* are you doing this?”

Tina smiled to herself, as if at a private joke. “Why? To enable me to come here, of course.”

Scarlet peered at her uncertainly. “You mean... you created this conduit thing *yourself*? After you arrived? So you would be able to use it to come here?”

“Yes.”

“But... that’s impossible! *Isn’t* it?”

“Patently it is not. I *am* here – and I could *not* be here had not a conduit intersecting the Earth’s orbit in the year 2047 of my universe enabled me to travel back to the conduit’s point of origin, which is this strand of the *ae’thera*. Since humanity of this era lacks the technological knowledge to project such a conduit into space, it was obvious that I would need to use the ship’s technology itself to create the conduit in the first place. Your being swept up in its wake would appear to have been an accident: one which I can only assume was caused – or rather, *will* be caused – by the reactor powering the ship’s weaponry system not being shut down after the creation of the conduit.”

Scarlet shook his head in bewilderment. “But... this is completely circular! You travelled back into the past just so that you could create the means for you to make the journey! That’s ridiculous!”

She regarded him with amusement. “Have you forgotten the candle and the swirls of smoke, captain? You are still thinking in linear terms of cause and effect: the circle turns, and we turn with it. But you’re mistaken in believing that the sole purpose of this journey is merely to make the journey possible. What would be the point in that? Your own presence here should have made you realise by now that there is another intention – a far more important one. You don’t originate from my reality, Captain – and that fact alone is sufficient to satisfy me that my other intent has been achieved.”

“You came here... to change history?”

“In terms you would understand, yes. I’ve been sent here by the *mi’Astra’hani*, Captain. They are fugitives from a race whose existence is unknown to the Earthmen of your timeframe. They settled within this star system thousands of years ago to seek their destiny – but even separated from the Unbelievers on their homeworld by more than one hundred light-years, the Unbelievers still sought them out with the aid of the Earthmen of my reality. I have been sent here to create a *new* reality – one more conducive to the well-being of my mentors, Captain.”

“And these... *mi'Astra'hani*... they are your mentors?”

“Yes – they are the disembodied consciousness of a philosophical order that was exiled by the Astran Empire into deep space thousands of years ago. Within my reality, the Astrans believed them extinct until very recently – when their final resting place was discovered....”

“...discovered on Mars.” Scarlet quietly finished the sentence for her. “You’re talking about the Mysterons, of course. Do they have counterparts in other realities, then?”

“The quest of the *mi'Astra'hani* was to seek Truth, and thence in physicality and consciousness to commune with it. Truth transcends reality, Captain Scarlet – you heard me try to explain this at Creighton’s gathering, much to everyone’s bewilderment... including yours. You call them Mysterons, do you?”

“They call *themselves* Mysterons,” corrected Scarlet acidly. “Why would they change their name?”

Tina gave him a look. “The term is being interpreted by your own consciousness, Captain. You are confusing the concept with a descriptive label – and they are not ‘counterparts’ in your reality. They are one and the same in *every* reality... but the reality from which you originate is technologically less advanced than mine – and is more conducive to their purpose. They are peaceful beings, and wish merely to be left alone.”

Scarlet shook his head in disbelief.

“No. No, no, *NO!* I can’t believe this, Tina! I strongly suspect that you’ve made the most appalling mistake – I really do.”

Her eyes flashed. “What mistake?”

“Tina – in my universe, the Earth is at *war* with your people. The first contact between Earthmen and the Mysterons came just a few years ago. It was a disaster... a catastrophic error of judgment by a fellow officer of mine resulted in the destruction of the complex on Mars. It was immediately reconstituted using your people’s powers of retrometabolism, and its occupants been waging a war of nerves against the Earth ever since. If that’s the alternate reality you’re going to create, I think you’ve got *big* problems, Tina.”

She remained impassive as she absorbed the new information.

“The people of Earth consider themselves to be at war with the *mi'Astra'hani*?”

“For more than three years.”

“Then I pity you.”

A flash of irritation passed across Scarlet’s face. “Don’t. We’ve given as good as we’ve taken. The Mysterons aren’t infallible – we only have to hold our own until we manage to convince them that we aren’t the belligerent species they think we are.”

She looked directly into his eyes, her expression unreadable.

“Indeed? And why should they believe you in this matter?”

“I told you, Tina – it was a *mistake*.”

“A mistake only a belligerent species could make. The history of my reality is at variance with your own only from this time forward. I am as familiar with the history of Earth prior to this era as you – and it is a bloody one. No, Captain... they understand you perfectly. They communicate with you in the only terms that the human species understands – with violence that is pitched precisely

to illustrate the extent of your own weakness. You should consider yourself fortunate that they haven't chosen to escalate the conflict between you."

"The security organisation of which I'm a serving officer isn't without resources with which to defend the Earth against extra-terrestrial aggressors. Don't underestimate us, Tina."

"I don't. I perceive your capabilities exactly as they are – and I repeat, you're incapable of harming them. If you believe otherwise you are deceiving yourselves: they're playing with you, Captain."

"Why are you so confident that we can't harm them? Possibly even destroy them?"

"Because your species does not understand what life *is*. Its view of what constitutes life is parochial, and materially inaccurate. Life is not yours to give or take. You expect to terminate it by increasing the entropy of the atomic particles that constitute its physical shell. You might as well try to extinguish the sun by placing your hand in front of your eyes."

"And the Mysterons *do* understand what life is, I suppose?"

"If not, then they at least understand it better than *you*."

"Then would you be so kind as to bring us up to speed?"

"It would be pointless. You too were entertained by the expostulations of that ridiculous cleric at the dinner party, but in truth you're little better equipped to comprehend the reality of the situation than he. You are of the same species – and your own existence is intertwined with that which you are trying to perceive. You cannot view it objectively."

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"Can a fish understand the nature of the water in which it swims? Its reality exists totally within that pond – but a creature that lives outside the pond can see it for what it truly is. Think of the smoke from the candle, Captain. You exist within the fabric of that smoke. Whatever you do, wherever you go, you are trapped within it – you cannot escape. The smoke can be shaped, blown, twisted into all manner of forms... but not by you. *Now* do you begin to understand? No – I can see from your expression that you don't."

Scarlet frowned with concentration. "Wait a minute... let me try to get this straight. You're telling me that you have been sent from an alternate reality – a different reality from the one I know – to change history? And that Lieutenant Almond and I are a part of the reality you created? Or *will* create, rather?"

"Expressed in terms that you would understand, yes – that's an accurate summary."

"And you are... a Mysteronised construct? But not a construct like the ones we've been at war with for the last three years of my time?"

"I am a projection of the *mi'Astra'han* consciousness. If I've interpreted your earlier remarks correctly, I have as little in common with the entities you describe as an erudite student of a philosophical doctrine does with a group of over-zealous militant fanatics."

"And yet these... *mi'Astra'hans*... killed you? They took over your body?"

"They recognized an opportunity and availed themselves of it. Life is not destroyed by a crude assault upon the physical shell that hosts it. To enable me to understand what had happened to me, they educated me. My consciousness believed that I was dead – it was necessary to correct that error."

“But... obviously you aren't the same person you were before you were killed!”

“Essentially I am, Captain. My memories of my previous life are intact; the skills I had acquired at that time are still available to me. I remain what I was. I am merely... more.”

Scarlet grimaced. “Not so much more that you've suppressed a very basic human instinct to talk to your enemies about your plans. Just a little risky, wouldn't you say?”

“We are only enemies if you choose to make it so, Captain – and I've told you just as much as I need to persuade you that co-operation is in both our interests. Nevertheless, we must proceed with caution now. Everything I hope to achieve here depends upon events that are yet to unfold – and my knowledge of history from this era onwards relates only to my own perspective. It is therefore unable to inform my actions... but whatever those actions might be, *you* are a product of the future that will be called into being. It may be that you or your companion possess within your memories knowledge relating to the consequences of the actions that I shall take. I need that information.”

Scarlet regarded her without emotion. “We might or might not be enemies, but your counterparts in my universe *are* my enemies. Why should I help *you*?”

“Enemies in one strand can be allies in another – there's no reason to suppose that animosities transcend realities. Conflicts are a consequence of circumstances: didn't you tell me yourself that the war you yourself are waging is the direct consequence of an isolated but critical error? But putting that aside, there is a far more potent imperative. Do you wish your future to exist? If so, it is very much in your own interest to help me create it.”

“And if I *were* to believe you, how do you propose to obtain this information you want? I don't *know* what you want – and it seems to me that neither do you.”

“The equipment installed in the cellar of the house incorporates a neurosynch. I used it once before to program Cassandra with a familiarity with the circuitry of this ship sufficient to assist me in the alignment of the pulse delivery system. It can be adapted to download the current status of your neural cortex into the ship's central computer. Contained within that download will be countless millions of details of your reality between this era and your own: these will enable me to predict with high probability the consequences of amending them.”

“You appear to be saying that that you can reach into my mind, and take a copy of my memory – which you will then be able to read. Have I understood you correctly?”

“Yes.”

Scarlet shook his head decisively. “No deal, Tina. You've deceived us consistently and comprehensively since the moment we arrived here; we've no reason whatsoever to believe you now, and even less to trust you. There's no way either of us is going to cooperate with you in submitting to such a procedure.”

The only change to Tina's expression was a barely perceptible tightening of her jawline.

“I don't *require* your co-operation, Captain Scarlet. In truth I would prefer that you give it freely, since that would save me the somewhat tedious necessity of re-integrating your synaptic lattice after your demise, but I can see that further debate on this subject would serve no purpose. It seems we will have to do this the hard way after all.”

She rose from the command chair, and turning to face them, adjusted a setting on the tail of the dragon-like brooch with a flick of her thumb and raised it.

“I will ask just once more, Captain. I can extract the information I require from your brain in its conscious state, or I can download it from your unconscious body – or even from your corpse. Which shall it be?”

Scarlet shot a sideways glance at his companion to verify that she was ready for anything that might happen within the next few seconds, but the action wasn't lost on their captor, who instantly levelled her weapon at him and tightened her finger on the rear of the device.

“Do *NOT!* - I *beseech* you!”

Taken completely by surprise by the admonition screamed from directly behind her, Tina involuntarily turned her head as she discharged the device, projecting a bolt of energy harmlessly into the wall fractionally to the left of Scarlet's head. Simultaneously, Scarlet launched himself forward and seized the weapon, snatching it out of her hand and tossing it across the cabin in a single slick movement to Lieutenant Almond, who neatly caught it. By the time Tina had managed to recover her balance, Scarlet had her left arm locked firmly behind her back, and from the other side of the cabin, Almond had the device aimed squarely at her head.

Scarlet took a deep breath. “Thank you, Cassandra...”

33 Captain Metcalfe and Miss Palamac Enter into a Dialogue

Mindful that his captive was perfectly capable of overpowering him if he were to make even the smallest error of judgment adjusting the armlock in which he now held her, Scarlet threw Tina away from him towards the side of the cabin, deliberately pushing her body into an indecorous spin as he did so to disorientate her for the two seconds he needed to put a suitably safe distance between them.

Satisfying herself that the change of fortunes that she had initiated was both complete and permanent, Cassandra stepped forward fully into the cabin, her expression nervous and flustered.

“Forgive me, dearest Tina! Please do not be angry with me, but I feared for Captain Metcalfe’s life, and did not know whether you meant good or ill by treating him so – indeed, I could not even be certain it was you from the back, for you look so different in those strange clothes! There is much that I have remembered of our undertakings that you have sought to conceal from me – but there remains so much more that I must learn before I can understand all... for now I *must* understand all. Please help me, for I am so confused!”

Betraying the merest hint of sadness in her features, her friend nodded in understanding.

“Yes, of course... the imperfectly aligned neurosynch. But for the turmoil surrounding the captain’s unexpected restoration to life immediately after the operation on Lieutenant Almond, I would have rectified the misalignment. Regrettably in the commotion it was overlooked – and for that act of carelessness I owe you an apology, Cassandra.”

Rubbing her arms to restore the circulation, she threw a glance at Lieutenant Almond. “Do you mind if I stand up, Lieutenant? I pose no threat to anyone while you’re covering me.”

Scarlet gave her a look. “With all due respect, Tina, I haven’t forgotten that little demonstration of yours with the door panel. But yes, you can stand up.”

He glanced across the cabin at his companion. “Don’t lower that weapon of hers for an instant, Lieutenant: she’s every bit as dangerous with her bare hands.”

“Yes... allowing myself to be goaded into providing that little display was a serious error of judgment,” she agreed equably as she rubbed her arms to restore the circulation. “That ridiculous cleric was begging to have his pomposity pricked, and I obliged. All too easy to lower one’s guard when one is surrounded by fools – and fools who know far less than they think can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from imposters who know considerably more than they pretend.”

She stopped rubbing her arms, and began flexing her shoulders. “That you come from the future of this era was obvious, Captain – but until very recently I had only an imperfect idea of *what* future. I knew that you were not aboard the ship when it crashed, but little more than that. A chemical analysis of your uniforms revealed the presence of several compounds that are unknown in this era – and interestingly, two of which are unknown even in mine. It was such a detail that initially confused me as to your true point of origin.”

Scarlet and Almond exchanged glances at the mention of the uniforms, both realising that *that* little mystery had just been solved, but said nothing while Tina continued.

“I assumed that your reality lay either before or after mine, and therefore directed my research towards determining which of the two it was. What I had *not* anticipated was a broadly parallel but diverging reality, but with a substantially slower rate of technological development.”

Scarlet held up his hand in protest. “One moment, Tina... you’re going too fast. Can we start with a few basics, please? Who *are* you?”

“I’m an agent of the World Government. In *my* reality, the organization of which I was an operative conducted intelligence gathering by clandestine means. Doubtless it has its counterpart in the reality from which *you* originate, but the means by which ours concealed its true nature from the uninitiated was probably unique: its public face was that of a toy manufacturing company, based in the city of Kahra on Mars.”

“In what you’ve described as ‘our reality’, there *are* no cities on Mars,” observed Scarlet. “Any plans for colonisation would have been shelved indefinitely in the light of the Mysteron menace. But putting that aside, the military organisation in which Lieutenant Almond and I both serve – Spectrum – controls all aspects of security for the World Government. I’ve never heard of an intelligence-gathering operation like the one you’re describing.”

“Even within the *same* reality, there’s a significant likelihood that you wouldn’t have done,” observed Tina in a matter-of-fact tone. “That a global administration exists in both realities is interesting, but irrelevant within the context of this discussion. Yours has evidently taken a different form, that’s all.”

She gestured towards one of the consoles, where a compact white case could be seen connected to one of the ports in its side.

“Our operatives pose as marketing personnel, and are equipped with sample cases with which to carry around our company’s wares. I have one myself – it’s plugged into that console over there. And given that you now have the distorter, and could therefore take the equipment in this cabin apart with impunity should you so wish, I’ll volunteer some advice before you start. *Don’t* attempt to tamper with it, as there’s not a single device inside that isn’t lethal in inexperienced hands. Several of them are more than capable of destroying this vessel and everything aboard it – and quite possibly taking the house with it – so both for your own good and mine, I recommend most earnestly that you leave it alone.”

“Very well... let’s suppose that we all accept that it’s as dangerous as you say it is. Would you be so good as to reduce the tension in here a little by disabling it?”

Tina raised a disdainful eyebrow. “I think not.”

“*Why* not, for heaven’s sake! You said a few moments ago that we’re not even enemies – so wouldn’t it be constructive just to show a little good faith?”

“Think it through, Captain,” replied Tina patiently. “We may or we may not be enemies, but our respective circumstances dictate that we *are* adversaries. Before events that are still unfolding have been played out, it might become apparent to me that I have to kill you... or you might discover that you must kill me. For that reason alone I will no more disarm the sample case than you would instruct Lieutenant Almond to lower the distorter. Regrettably the tension will have to be maintained until the situation becomes clearer – so for all our sakes, I hope Spectrum has trained both of you well in the art of keeping a cool head in claustrophobic situations.”

“The lieutenant and I have seen enough claustrophobic situations to be able to assure you categorically that we can cope,” retorted Scarlet grimly. “For my part, I’d like to believe that case

of yours doesn't have any booby-traps built into it... because if I *do* have to kill you, we'll need to find a safe way to dispose of it after you're dead."

The ghost of a smile flickered across Tina's features. "Then you had better hope you *don't* have to kill me, Captain. The anti-tampering mechanism incorporated into it is lethal: the nature of the devices it contains demands nothing less."

She turned to Cassandra, who had been silently watching with keen interest, albeit tinged with more than a small measure of bewilderment, the increasingly intense verbal exchange from the other side of the cabin.

"You once expressed disappointment when I declined to give William the little miniature cannon with which to play toy soldiers, Cassandra. The reason was that the three main sections of the muzzle rotate – and one of the combinations of settings would have resulted in his being vaporised had he been looking down the muzzle at the time. Would you be so good as to confirm to the captain that the case does indeed contain such a device, and that I took it from you recently before you could attempt to tinker with it yourself?"

Scarlet looked at Cassandra questioningly, who assented with a sullen-faced nod.

"Thank you." She turned back to Scarlet. "Captain, I tell you it is *imperative* that the pulse is projected on schedule – because my analysis of the situation strongly suggests that the existence of both my reality *and* yours depends upon it. I had hoped to put the matter beyond all doubt by probing your memories - admittedly either with or without your consent – but Cassandra's untimely intervention and the resulting change in our respective fortunes appear to have made that impossible. It would be futile to try to appeal to your better nature by simply asking you to believe me, so I can therefore only lay out the argument to you, and trust to your reason. Please listen carefully to what I have to say.

"The trans-ae'theric pulse that is to be projected from this ship will execute a slingshot through the Zeta Aquarii double star system, 117 light years from Earth. It will return to Earth 235 years from now, where a starcruiser – *this* starcruiser in which we're now standing – will intercept it in Earth's orbit, and be drawn back through it to the pulse's point of origin in the *ae'thera* - which is here and now. For me, these events have already taken place; indeed, I coordinated the interception myself.

"Your reality and mine diverge from this focal point, but the ship itself lies crippled at the bottom of the lake in both. In circumstances that haven't yet occurred, the projector beam was imperfectly shut down. In *your* reality, you discovered the ship and accidentally reactivated the beam at full strength. You and the lieutenant were pulled back here to this same focal point, providing strong evidence to me that my mission had indeed been successful. *Your* reality is the product of my efforts: a reality less technologically advanced than my own, and therefore more conducive to the survival of the *mi'Astra'hani*, who fear discovery and persecution not only from humans of my era, but also by an interstellar empire whose existence is unknown to you."

"All of which sounds like the very best of reasons to ensure that you're stopped," interrupted Scarlet coldly. "The Mysterons *we* know are vindictive, vicious in the extreme, and so technologically advanced compared to us that they constitute an existential threat to all life on Earth – which they explicitly stated at the start of this war of nerves they intend to annihilate utterly. Any opportunity to prevent that has to be seized with both hands..."

"An understandable reaction, Captain – but bear with me. Now suppose the pulse is *not* projected. I said a moment ago that *your* reality is the product of *my* efforts. Have you considered the

implications of that statement? If the pulse is not projected, this ship will not be dragged back to this time and place. My mission to slow down the rate of technological advancement on this planet will fail, because I will not be here to initiate it. Scientific technology will develop at its intended pace...”

“You can stop right there, Tina,” interrupted Scarlet sharply. “I’ve absolutely *no* problem with that scenario: putting a stop to this blatant tampering with history *has* to be our top priority...”

“... in which a unified electromagnetic field theory was published in 1824, the first paper describing relativity appeared in 1839, the first moon landing took place in 1889, the first colonists arrived on Mars in 1916, and the headquarters of the world government agency in which I was an operative was constructed in the Martian capital of Kahra in 1934...”

“*What?* What are you *talking* about, Tina? What you’re describing is the sort of rubbish that used to appear in 1930s pulp fiction magazines – a perversion of established history...”

Tina shook her head. “No, Captain Scarlet. What I’m describing *is* established history – the established history of *my* reality. It is *your* history that is a fantasy.”

“*Nonsense!* How on earth *could* scientific advancement move at such a pace? It’s so ridiculously fast as to be unreal... I don’t believe you - you’re just making it up...”

Tina looked back at him with the air of a schoolteacher admonishing an otherwise promising pupil for making an elementary mistake.

“I might with equal justification ask *you* how the rate of scientific discovery during your 19th and 20th centuries came to be so inexplicably retarded – but we need not trade insults in such matters: the computers on board this ship contain a comprehensive library of all areas of human knowledge – including history – which I can retrieve in a few seconds... *if* you will permit me?”

Scarlet considered for a moment before slowly nodding. “All right... based on what you’ve already told us, I agree that we need to try to clear this up – but *you* will tell Lieutenant Almond what to enter, and *she* will do the actual typing...”

Tina cut him short. “Unnecessary. All information retrieval systems in the command section are voice-activated; they are however keyed to my voiceprint alone – and before you ask, no; I will *not* relinquish voice control of it, either to you or to anybody else. If I attempt to instruct it to perform any action to which you might take exception, you can shoot me down before I can finish the sentence.”

“Very well,” replied Scarlet slowly after a moment’s pause, “but I *strongly* recommend you don’t think for a second that I won’t.”

Tina inclined her head by way of an acknowledgment, turned to address the screen, and rattled off a string of staccato instructions.

“Acknowledge USS Special Agent 23, Security Protocol Hummingbird... accept instructions... item bring information retrieval systems online... item access scientific and technological history library... item display twenty scientific innovations deemed most impactful on technological progress by consensus of world government cultural advancement evaluation committee between 1800 and 1947... item initiate... stop.”

Scarlet leaned forward and peered intently as a list of discoveries and their associated dates appeared on the screen before them, noting with a feeling of mild trepidation the similarity between the information displayed and the offhand list that Tina had reeled off from memory just a few

moments previously. Relativity appeared close to the top of the list, as did nuclear fusion, the determination of the speed of light and the Uncertainty Principle, though the names of the scientists associated with them were unfamiliar to him. Intrigued, he noted at least three developments within the final two decades of the requested range that meant nothing to him at all, but the name associated with the discovery that topped the list reassured him at least that the world had not gone *completely* mad – for that name was that of Michael Faraday.

The makings of a faint grin began to creep across Scarlet's features as he remembered the young man's fascination with frogs' legs, and his apparently sincere belief that nothing of value would ever result from the discovery that he could make them twitch. A fraction of a second later the grin evaporated, as Scarlet read the discovery with which Faraday was primarily associated, namely splitting the atom...

Angrily, he turned to Tina. "This is a joke – it has to be! Faraday invented *electricity*, for heaven's sake! Atomic power was discovered by Ernest Rutherford during or just after the First World War..."

Tina looked back at him with eyes devoid of any suggestion of guile.

"Electricity was the first of Faraday's discoveries, Captain Scarlet, but it is the advent of the atomic age for which he is primarily remembered. His subsequent work in the fields of integrated circuitry and applied quantum theory was required reading during my USS training in Langley. I remember reading that his contributions to neutron communications theory and exospatial holography were so advanced that they were still being evaluated at the time of his death in 1867. However, to address your comments just now – I have never to my knowledge heard of anyone by the name of Ernest Rutherford, and I'm unaware of any conflict that might ever have been described as the 'First World War', unless perhaps it refers to the Austro-Hungarian Conflagration of 1852 and 1853."

"But... this is... I don't *understand!* How can all this *possibly* have..."

"How can all this possibly have happened? This is history, Captain... how does *any* history happen? Nevertheless, we have right here the means to study and better understand the motivations underpinning it..."

She turned to the console once more, and addressed it a second time.

"Accept additional instructions... item retrieve official authorised biography of Michael Faraday... item retrieve all notation relating to author's perception of external influences on directions of his research... item arrange same in chronological sequence... item display first page of said notation... item initiate... stop."

They looked up as a page from the requested volume flashed up on the screen, the relevant paragraph duly highlighted in luminescent amber while the remainder of the page was dimmed:

"The effusive commendation of his friends and family for providing both inspiration and encouragement on productive days, and for substituting commiseration and solace on unproductive ones was a constant feature of Faraday's life throughout his career. His interest in electricity having been firmly established before his 20th birthday in consequence of a practical demonstration of its therapeutic utility in the saving of a life, he thereafter never shied away from attributing his undeniable creative brilliance to the support and assistance of those around him; most especially to that first of his wife, to whom he invariably accredited the foresight and vision that sustained him in times of darkness and self-doubt, and thereafter to that of his children, two

of whom grew up to become eminent savants in their own right, upon several occasions developing and expanding upon their father's many discoveries as they reached maturity..."

"Evidently he grew up to become a doting family man," observed Scarlet. "Having seen him at close quarters in social situations, I can't say that surprises me. Easy manner, unassuming, loved by his kids and adored by his wife – lucky man. She must have been quite a woman to have inspired him like that... do we have anything on her?"

Tina turned to the console again to issue yet a third sequence of commands.

"Accept additional instructions... item retrieve all notation on the wife of Michael Faraday... item arrange same in chronological order... item display first page of said notation... item initiate... stop"

Once more they looked up at the main viewer, where a paragraph providing a detailed chronology of the Faradays' marriage was accompanied on the right-hand side of the page by an early 19th century drawing of a diffident, simply-dressed young blonde woman wearing a modest lace mob cap.

The image had been on the screen for less than a quarter of a second before Tina and Scarlet both reacted, she throwing herself violently sideways out of the chair to get herself out of the immediate line of fire, while he in turn tried to keep the weapon trained on her as she moved. Breaking her fall with an expertly executed roll across the floor, she lashed out with one of her long legs at his ankles, sweeping him off his feet and sending him crashing down on top of her. Pushing back his head with one hand under his chin, she tried with the other to snatch the synaptic distorter out of his hand; an action very effectively countered by his own kick to her midriff, propelling her body across the floor towards the sample case. Swivelling herself round on the floor, she snatched up the case and clutched it to her stomach, flicking it open with a deft movement of her fingers and reaching inside."

"*No!* Captain Scarlet – you will *not* be allowed to prevent this! You cannot..."

The sentence was never finished, as a sizzling burst of energy from the ruby-red eyes of the dragon-like brooch in Scarlet's hand shot her down. Tina's body was hurled away from the sample case and across the cabin by the force of the blast, landing in a crumpled heap underneath the main viewer, while from the antique drawing in the biography on the screen, the sketched face of Lieutenant Almond looked demurely back at them.

34 Miss Almond Contemplates the Prospect of Marriage

Scarlet removed his jacket, quickly folded it up and put it down on the floor, then slipping his hand underneath Tina's neck to support it while he moved her, he gently laid her head down on the makeshift pillow. Then, after rapidly running his hands over her arms, legs and midriff in a rapid perfunctory examination, he stood up and addressed himself to Cassandra, who was still recovering from the shock of seeing her friend so unexpectedly shot down in front of her eyes.

"You don't need to worry about her, Cassandra: there are no bones broken, and she's breathing normally. Though if this device really *does* scramble synapses like she said, I suppose she might wake up with a bad headache. Assuming her metabolism is anything like mine – and I've got good reasons to believe it is – she'll recover in due course. What's worrying me right now is that I have no idea how long that might take."

In a sudden burst of temper he swore under his breath, and aimed a kick at one of the legs of the now empty chair in front of the console.

"That was *unnecessary*, dammit!"

Cassandra had knelt at Tina's side, and was now looking up with tearful eyes. "I do not understand what happened, Captain! *Why?*"

Scarlet looked back at her sullenly.

"I'm very sorry, but I had no choice, Cassandra. We both realised in the same instant what the key event that led to the creation of her reality *was* – and she already knew from our earlier exchanges that I would do just about anything to prevent that. She anticipated how I'd react, and gambled everything on being able to put the whole plan into operation before I had a chance to stop her. She almost succeeded too... probably another couple of seconds with that sample case and she would have done."

"I still do not understand, Captain. *What* would she have done? And what is the '*key event*' to which you referred?"

For an answer, Scarlet merely gestured towards the main viewer. "There's your answer, Cassandra. The young lady that your cousin is destined to marry."

Cassandra turned to look at the screen for the first time – and took a sharp intake of breath.

"*You*, dear Rodica? You and Cousin Michael are to wed? But this is a most unexpected joy, for then you and I shall be sisters – oh! When is the wedding to be?"

Cassandra's instinctive outpouring of pleasure at the prospect of matrimony slowly descended into confusion at the darkening expression on her friend's face. "But why have you and he not spoken of it? You do not look happy..." She leaned towards her friend conspiratorially, and lowered her voice. "Is it a *secret* engagement? Do not be alarmed, for I shall be silent..."

"*Just* one moment, Cassandra..." interrupted Scarlet quickly. "Unless Lieutenant Almond hasn't told me something I'd expect to be informed about *instantly*, I strongly suspect the reason she doesn't appear to be overjoyed at the prospect of this marriage is that until a few moments ago she wasn't aware of it. Am I correct, Rodica?"

Lieutenant Almond drew herself up to her full diminutive height.

“Indeed you *are*, Captain Scarlet! There has been no suggestion at any time of a romantic relationship – or of any other kind – between Mr Faraday and myself! I cannot explain this – it makes no sense to me at all! The only possible conclusion I can draw is that the extract from the computer’s records from which we are reading is incorrect!”

The tone of outrage in the young female lieutenant’s voice was palpable, and Scarlet cursed himself as the full implications of what he was about to say hit home. He shook his head slowly.

“I’m afraid it makes a lot of sense to *me*, Lieutenant – as it also did to Tina. The inescapable conclusion from what we’ve just seen is that you *are* going to marry him... because it’s going to be *you* who’s going to inspire and encourage him to invent and develop the futuristic technology that underpins Tina’s reality – and if that doesn’t happen, Tina’s reality won’t exist. *That’s* what Tina and I both realised simultaneously when this image appeared on the screen. She knew my first reaction would be to prevent you from supplying him with any more futuristic foreknowledge, perhaps by simply ordering you not to speak to him, possibly by employing more draconian means – and she decided to try to ensure that the matter was resolved by initiating the pulse transmission sequence immediately before I could stop her. I realised how she would react in the same instant, and acted accordingly. Talking it through with her wasn’t an option under the circumstances – she moved too fast.”

He took a deep breath. “*We* did it, Rodica. *We’re* the ones who are responsible for this mess – because it’s *our* presence here that kick-started the events leading to the creation of Tina’s universe. Faraday is more than capable of developing the technology – we already know that from his life’s work in *our* reality – but it looks like it’ll be *you* who will supply the vision that will enable him to avoid wasting time on fruitless avenues of research, because you’ve already seen – and extensively used in your capacity as a Spectrum-trained technical expert – the practical realisations of his discoveries. *That’s* what enabled the scientific advances within Tina’s reality to move at such a breakneck pace. The conclusion’s inescapable.”

“But Tina herself told us earlier that *she* was responsible for bringing us here!” objected Lieutenant Almond. “She told us that our being swept into the conduit was an accident caused by a mistake *she* made! This situation is surely at least as much her responsibility as ours! And anyway, I have a career in Spectrum which I love, and which I do not wish to give up. The great Mr Faraday he may be – or rather he may *become* – but I do not *want* to marry him, and nobody can force me to. Suppose I choose not to! What will happen then? I will tell you. Tina’s universe will never have existed – so the ship will not crash into the lake, because the *ship* will never have existed. You and I will therefore never discover it, and we will not be transported back here. None of this ever happened, and we are once more living our lives back in the middle of the 21st century. There – the problem is solved!”

“Not solved so completely as to eliminate the Mysteron menace from it,” observed Scarlet thoughtfully, “Although having said that, it’s starting to look as though they feature in more than just *our* plane of existence – so maybe that’s just too much to hope for.”

He stepped over to the computer console and re-read the biographical notation accompanying the portrait. “What you just said seems logical enough to me, Lieutenant... although strange as this might sound, I’d feel a lot happier if Tina herself were available for comment right now – even though she herself is an integral part of the problem. As we’ve just seen, she thinks *very* fast - there’s far too much about this whole insane situation that we’re still struggling with...”

He broke off and peered at the bottom of the screen, glanced up at the main viewer and then looked down at the screen again. “Lieutenant – come over here, would you? The main viewer is only mirroring one of the two windows open on this screen: what do you make of the other one? It seems to be displaying a countdown of some kind – initially thirty minutes, now just over fifteen to go.”

Almond joined him at the console. “I am completely unfamiliar with this system, Captain. It is unlikely that I could interrogate it effectively without much study – but...”

She looked up at him and frowned. “... but was it not about a quarter of an hour ago that Tina was shot? And if so, could it be that...”

She stopped abruptly in mid-sentence as Scarlet visibly stiffened, then stepped smartly over to Tina’s sample case, which was still plugged into one of the other consoles and lying partially open where she had dropped it earlier in the struggle. Raising the lid, he found built into its interior a compact flat screen monitor, upon which was steadily ticking down the same countdown he’d seen on the other screen just a few seconds previously. And then he swore...

35 Miss Palamac's Actions Result in a Race Against Time

“The pulse activation sequence – it *has* to be! She must have started the countdown from the sample case just before I shot her. We need to find out how to shut it down – and *fast*! Lieutenant Almond, is there any chance...”

Almond shook her head. “There is no time for me to learn how to use this computing system, Captain. Even if I could gain access the system from the keyboard, Tina has locked us out of voice control. I would be still trying to discover what the keys do by the time the countdown reaches zero... assuming I had not committed some irretrievable error by then. We have to find another way.”

Scarlet stepped over to the sample case, and with a sharp tug on the cable linking it to the console, wrenched it free. More than a little surprised to discover that it hadn't instantly exploded, he shot a quizzical look back at Almond, who glanced at her monitor and merely shook her head. He picked up the case and stood it on top of a nearby console, and swung it round to face him.

“Then I'm going to have to try to shut it down from here. We know Tina was able to activate it in less than two or three seconds, so hopefully it ought to be possible to stop it in a similar time – *if* we can just find the right controls. You two – leave *now*! Get out of the ship and as far down the tunnel as you can go: this thing's probably booby-trapped, so there's a very real risk that I'll...”

“It is not here!”

The two Spectrum officers swung to face Cassandra, each of their faces a study in astonishment. Cassandra screwed up her eyes in concentration, trying desperately to recover the elusive knowledge from the depths of her mind. As the seconds passed the look of concentration began to fade, though her eyes remained closed.

“It is not here. I do not know *how* I know, but I know that the mechanism that will stop it is not here. Yes... you are right – the information you need is here inside me – though when I try to recall it, it is as if a veil has been drawn across my memory... it is as if I am moving through a cloying mist...”

Her eyes opened and she turned to Scarlet, speaking falteringly at first, then with increasing confidence.

“The *conduit*... is that the word? Yes... the conduit must be directed from... from the cellar. That is why the triangulation and orientation controls are located there, and not here on the ship's bridge, for the intensity of the pulse is so great that anyone remaining within the ship would be killed at once when the power build-up is completed. The ship must be vacated before that happens – but there is no memory concerning for how long it must remain so. It may be that Tina herself does not know.”

Scarlet stepped over to the guidance console, taking in at a glance the chronometer's display which was ticking down the seconds – of which there were now just under 800 left. A little over thirteen minutes...

“We're going to have to get back through the tunnel to the house. There's no time to work out how to activate the escape hatch into the lake, and there's no guarantee the water in the lake would

protect us anyway. Cassandra – do you know how to close the sliding door at the far end of the tunnel when we reach it?”

Cassandra closed her eyes briefly, then nodded confidently. “Yes... a single press of one of the buttons on the console nearest the door.”

“Good. Rodica – take Tina’s sample case and bring it with you. Use your fingers to prevent it from snapping shut while you’re running – it could easily be booby-trapped to prevent someone opening it again – and anyway, we can’t risk not being able to reopen it at the other end because we don’t understand the locking mechanism.”

He strode over to Tina’s unconscious body, stooped to lift her up by the waist, and then threw her unceremoniously over his shoulders in a classic fireman’s lift. “This goes against my better judgment, but for all we know she might just recover in time to help us stop this thing. Now let’s *move*, everyone!”

They quit the cabin at a run, Scarlet motioning the two girls to take the lead while he brought up the rear with the unconscious Tina over his shoulders. Waiting for the girls to squeeze through the partially open escape hatch into the tunnel beyond, he unloaded Tina once more to enable him to pull her body through the hatch after him, speaking urgently to Lieutenant Almond as he did so.

“Rodica – I’ll probably need to fall back a little before we get to the other end of the tunnel. She’s not heavy, but given the distance we’ve got to cover, her weight will still slow me down. Get Cassandra back to the cellar as quickly as you can, have her show you the control to seal the sliding door as soon as you reach it – and then leave it open for as long as you can. If it looks like the countdown is going to reach zero before we catch up, you *close* it – is that clear? Tina and I will take our chances.”

“But Captain Scarlet – if this pulse is electromagnetic, or perhaps of a type of energy entirely unknown to us...”

“No arguments – there’s no time! You know I’m right – so just do it, okay?”

The lieutenant nodded, and set off at a run to catch up with Cassandra while Scarlet scooped up Tina’s body once again and made after them. Initially hampered by the darkness and the risk of falling over obstacles in their path, the three managed to increase their speed slightly as their eyes slowly became accustomed to the faint phosphorescence covering the tunnel walls. After a while however, the distance began to impact upon the pace, not only for Scarlet and the burden on his back, but also to a lesser extent for Cassandra, to whom the relentlessness of the exertion required to maintain their speed was a new experience. Given the extent of her life-threatening injuries at the hands of the poachers, Scarlet found himself marvelling even as he ran at the lieutenant’s evident powers of recuperation as she repeatedly stopped and turned to help her friend negotiate the rocks and other debris that littered their path, and then urge her onwards once more. On several occasions he saw her double back to throw her arm around Cassandra’s waist and physically lift the girl into the air as she stumbled, always managing to keep the two of them running ahead of himself. Increasingly conscious now of the dead weight about his shoulders, his mind flew briefly back to the 30-kilometre runs in full kit that he’d endured during his training, seemingly so many years ago. Had such unspeakable ordeals been easier in those days? It certainly felt like it now...

By the time the door leading into the cellar could be dimly perceived in the gloom, Scarlet was falling some one hundred metres behind the two young women. Still running towards it, he watched as the panel slid aside to admit them into the brightly-lit room that lay beyond... then realising that

the young lieutenant would have checked the time on one of the consoles the instant she was through the door, he redoubled his own efforts to reach it himself. Surely there were just a few more seconds left...

Even as the door loomed up in front of him there was a loud click, followed by a low whirring as the panel began to roll slowly across the tunnel entrance. Just fifty metres to go... and Scarlet realised that he wasn't going to make it. He also knew almost without conscious thought that there was no way Almond would have pressed the button to seal the bulkhead had there been any leeway at all – and *that* meant...

He hurled himself to the ground, twisting his body as he did so to allow the unconscious woman over his shoulders to land on top of him, then instantly rolled himself over her to cover her body with his own to shield her from the pulse... and then the world around him suddenly dissolved into a dazzling cascade of blue and white shards, leaping and dancing as they seared through his brain. Entire worlds, stars, solar systems and galaxies flashed into existence for a split second within his consciousness, instantly dissolving once more into seemingly impossible amorphous shapes, which themselves twisted and turned within a glittering animated tapestry of intertwined paths which stretched out around him to infinity. His senses were simultaneously assailed with both a deafening cacophony and a silence more absolute than that of the grave, by luminescence of intolerable brilliance and terrifying darkness void of any form, and by an expanse so great as to be unmeasurable, but which he sensed somewhere deep inside himself was confined to the single miniscule entity that was his own consciousness. All around him a universe of universes sprang into existence and died of old age within less than a fraction of a microsecond, while another enveloped them all like insects trapped in amber for an eternity of eternities. The insects mutated into tiny apes, the apes in turn mutated into humans, and the humans mutated into... Scarlet tried desperately to look away, but discovered that the vision was etched into his consciousness with the solidity of granite, which then melted and dissolved around him like butter within an inferno. Increasingly free of the amorphous entity that had held him transfixed while reality lived and died both around and within him, he began to sense himself being slowly pulled in a direction that lay nowhere he could point to, because he knew it did not exist...

36 Captain Metcalfe Seeks to Prevent a Catastrophe

Scarlet opened his eyes to the sight of Lieutenant Almond's own staring back at him from a distance of a few centimetres, an expression of obvious relief tinged with concern etched upon her features.

"Cassandra? Captain Scarlet appears to be regaining consciousness... is there a sign of any recovery from Tina?" Almond's subtle change of expression, coupled with the silence that followed her question, caused Scarlet to conclude that there was not.

He forced himself to flex his fingers and then his toes, discovering to his mild surprise that he was now propped up between two of the consoles inside the cellar. Lying prostrate on the floor to his left he could see the unconscious woman he had carried over his shoulders from the ship, to whom Cassandra was now attending with a makeshift cloth which she had evidently torn from the hem of her dress. A quick glance towards the entrance to the tunnel was enough for him to confirm that the doorway had been closed.

"How... how did you...?"

Lieutenant Almond pressed his head down again. "Please, Captain... you must recover your strength, so I ask you not to move more than is necessary. The pulse was discharged when the countdown reached zero as we anticipated – but the projector is still operating, for we do not know how to shut it down. The instrumentation here appears to indicate that it continues to operate at a fraction of its original power level – that is why I chose to risk reopening the sliding panel long enough for us to pull Tina and yourself out of the tunnel. Captain Scarlet, I am so very sorry I was unable to keep the entrance panel open, but by the time I reached the control there were just eight seconds left. You would not have reached it in time."

With an effort, Scarlet smiled back at her with a small sideways shake of his hand to indicate that no apology was necessary. "I know, Lieutenant... I know."

He struggled painfully to his feet, stepped over to the projector control panel and frowned at the controls. "So... how are we going to make this device safe, then?"

Almond joined him at the console, and he pointed at one of the scales upon which a small but not insignificant response was registering. "I'm guessing that this scale here records the current power output, yes?"

The lieutenant nodded confidently. "That is what I think, yes... and that display over there logs previous fluctuations in the level, for we can clearly see recorded on it the moment at which the device was activated." She gestured towards an array of controls beneath the monitors, waving her hands about and pulling a face as she did so. "But the shutdown procedure could be controlled by any combination of these controls *here*... and we have no understanding of this technology. The knowledge implanted in Cassandra's mind is not detailed enough to recall anything that might help us with this task – she has tried several times – and we cannot experiment, for fear of blowing it up. In my view we dare not touch anything without a better understanding of what it does."

"Agreed," replied Scarlet. "It's far too dangerous – we need the help of someone who's a lot more familiar with it than we are. Unfortunately, the only person who *does* know anything about it is lying unconscious on the floor over there..."

He stopped himself in mid-sentence, looking across the room thoughtfully. “No – wait a minute... maybe right now she’s *not* the only person who knows anything about it. There just might be one other... Cassandra – would you leave Tina for a moment and come over here please?”

Cassandra gently let Tina’s head fall back to the side of the console against which she was lying, and rose to her feet, stumbling slightly as she did so. Stepping over to join Scarlet and Almond at the projector control, she looked at them questioningly. “What may I do?”

Her voice sounded slightly strained, and Scarlet looked at her in concern. “First things first, Cassandra – that run left you completely winded. Your voice is hoarse, and your breathing’s still erratic – so get yourself to bed as soon as you can after this, and make sure you look after yourself for the next couple of days, will you?”

He gestured towards the controls. “Of more immediate concern, however – you have some of Tina’s memories inside your head, don’t you... so do those memories include any knowledge of how to work this machine?”

Cassandra frowned at the console, then closed her eyes for a moment. Opening them again, she looked doubtfully at the two Spectrum officers. “The memory *is* there – I know what it is – but there is a word deep inside my mind that I do not understand... I know it is important that I understand the word... but I cannot grasp it...” A wave of panic swept over her, and she took a step back from the console with abject terror burning in her eyes.

“*No!* I cannot do it... there is so *much* that I do not understand in this place! There are lights that sparkle within cabinets of metal... and mirrors that show the faces of people who are far away... how can *anyone* comprehend these things? My friend possesses weapons that destroy not a man’s body but his *soul*, and toys that dissolve little children into empty air... and now she herself lies at death’s door – is this the wages of sin of which the Good Lord speaks? In truth this place is surely *accursed!* I cannot...”

Lieutenant Almond threw her arms about her and buried her friend’s head in her shoulder as she sobbed uncontrollably for a few seconds – then as quickly as it had started, the panic attack died away. She dried her tears and frowned to herself, then with as much dignity as she could muster, she disengaged herself from Almond’s embrace and resumed her inspection of the console. After a moment or two she abruptly straightened her dress and turned to the two Spectrum officers once more.

“I apologise. I do not understand what came over me... please forgive me.” She turned back to the console and indicated the panel. “I know that the memory *is* there, at least in part. I know the purpose of the device, and I possess a superficial understanding of how it works... but the configuration of the controls eludes me. I sense that the information is buried too deeply within my mind for me to be able to retrieve it.”

Scarlet, finding himself unexpectedly feeling rather self-conscious, stood to one side while Lieutenant Almond gently took Cassandra’s hands in her own and spoke softly to her, looking directly into her eyes as she did so.

“Hush, Cassandra – it is not you who should apologise to us, but *we* who must apologise to *you*. You have been subjected to experiences that do not lie within your understanding – and your ability to cope with those experiences has been made possible only by means of a technology which *itself* you cannot understand. That you have done this is amazing – and we are all very much in your debt because of it.”

“It’s beyond amazing,” added Scarlet quietly. “That you haven’t complained once throughout this insane enterprise – and I think you’ve realised already that none of us truly understands what’s happening, or knows how it will end – is itself a feat worthy of someone very special indeed. You could have told us all to go back to wherever we’ve come from and to just leave you alone, but you didn’t. You kept faith with us all the way, even when you can’t know who we were or why we’re here. You’re a *very* remarkable young lady, Cassandra... and if we could leave you now in peace, we would – but I’m afraid we still need your help. The projector inside the ship at the other end of that tunnel must be shut down – and unless we can revive Tina, you’re our only hope. Will you help us once more... please?”

Cassandra’s eyes met his own with an expression of quiet determination.

“Anything I can do, I will – I give you my word, Captain... Scarlet?” Her face clouded. “And yet we have already tried and failed to recover the information you require from my mind. What then is to be done?”

“I’m not sure... but I think it’s *just* possible there might be a way,” replied Scarlet slowly. “But I’ll be the first to admit it’s a long shot, and it could be dangerous. The device that Tina originally used to implant her knowledge into your consciousness is presumably still here, yes?”

By way of an answer, Cassandra stepped over to the console in front of which stood a chair on a set of castors. Seating herself down she sent it into a slow spin with her feet, savouring the sensation once again as it rotated for a few seconds. Then rising out of it once more, she stooped down, opened a small compartment in the side of the console and extracted from it the metallic skull-cap her friend had placed on her head two weeks earlier.

“This is the device, Captain. The cable attached to the cap is inserted into that socket *there*... on the top of the console – but I am not certain which controls Tina used to activate it. It *is* your intention to attempt to replicate her actions, is it not?”

“It is,” replied Scarlet evenly. “The *problem* is the same as before, namely that we don’t know the correct operating procedure... but *this* time the risk of getting it wrong will be only to one person... so for reasons that would take rather a long time to explain, that person has to be me.”

He sat himself down in the chair adjacent to the console, and held the little skull-cap. “Cassandra, I’m going to ask you to try to throw your mind back to what Tina did when she first used this thing on you. Don’t worry if you can’t remember exactly: if you get it wrong we’ll have lost nothing – but it’s worth a try. So... this metal cap is plugged in *here*, right?”

“One moment please, Cassandra.” Lieutenant Almond had been listening quietly to the exchange, but with increasing agitation. “Captain Scarlet – may I speak with you please?”

Scarlet looked up, mildly taken aback at the earnestness of the tone. “Of course, Lieutenant. Problem?”

Almond lowered her head and spoke urgently in a low voice. “Captain Scarlet – I have a concern, for we do *not* know what effect the process could have upon your brain. The use of it on Cassandra has left her with imperfectly retained memories for several days, and the experience has unquestionably left a mark upon her mental state, as we saw just a moment ago. For all we know this might be permanent. If so, your *own* mental condition might be affected in the same way – in which case your indestructability would not save you. I therefore urge you to reconsider.”

“Believe me, Lieutenant, I wouldn’t be attempting this if we had an alternative,” admitted Scarlet. “However, we don’t... and there’s something else that may give us reason to be optimistic. Back

in our own time, the World Intelligence Network is known to be experimenting with a device that's able to transfer memories and skills between their operatives. The success rate is apparently exceptionally high, with no recorded side-effects. The work's classified, but Colonel White referred to it in an unguarded moment at one of our briefings a few months ago. I admit I thought he was being a little fanciful at the time, but if this technology actually *works*...."

"That it works is not a matter for debate," retorted Lieutenant Almond with just a hint of reproof in her tone. "We *know* it works; the question is now whether we can operate it, for there is no World Intelligence Network that we can call upon in the early nineteenth century to assist us, I think."

"True enough," acknowledged Scarlet. "But it's still worth a try. You're probably not aware of this as it was before your time, but it won't be the first time my brain's been scrambled in the line of duty – and yet I'm still here to tell the tale. So thanks for your concern, but..."

He left the sentence unfinished, and placed the cap on his head. "In your own time, Cassandra."

He watched as she pondered the controls at her fingertips for a few seconds before reaching forward and flicking a switch... and then inexplicably found himself lying on the floor listening to a strange high-pitched scream, which he only realised a full half-second later was emanating from his own mouth. Dazed, he looked up in confusion as Lieutenant Almond reached down and deftly tore the cap from his head, glaring at him as she did so.

"That was *stupid*, Captain Scarlet – I will *not* let you try to do that again! Are you injured? Please tell me that you are not injured!"

He waved her away while trying to decide whether the roof was above the floor or vice versa. "It's all right, Lieutenant – I'm okay... God, I feel like I've just been dropped into a spin dryer..."

He hauled himself to his feet, clutching into the side of the console for support while Almond and Cassandra both looked on anxiously. Peering at the bank of switches in front of him, he screwed up his face in concentration.

"Wait a minute... something's changed... it's becoming clearer now... these controls... I know what the problem is... I don't know *how*, but I know... the *word*!"

He shook his head and looked directly at Cassandra. "That word you were trying to find in your mind, Cassandra – the word that you knew was important. The word was '*calibration*' – am I right?"

Cassandra's eyes opened wide in astonishment, as the word suddenly broke the surface once more within her head like the belated recollection of a half-forgotten dream. "*Yes! Yes – that was it!*" She stared at Scarlet as if he had just performed a magic trick. "But how did you know? How could you possibly *know*?"

Scarlet grinned. "I managed to grasp just about enough of Tina's experiences before I blacked out just now to understand the reason this thing isn't working properly. I know what it means, and I know why it's important – but *you've* probably never heard the word before."

"I think you are right," agreed Cassandra, after silently mouthing the word to herself a few times. "What does it mean?"

"It means that this device will only work correctly if it is used by *you*, Cassandra. The concept of calibration doesn't exist yet in your world, and probably won't for a few more decades to come... but you still knew it was important – because *Tina* knew it was important! *That's* why this device

almost gave me a brainstorm when we tried to use it on me just now – she’s calibrated it for use by *you*. It would need to be *recalibrated* before anyone else could use it. However, since neither of us knows how to do that, we have a problem.”

Cassandra looked at him questioningly. “But why, Captain? There is no longer any problem, for you have just resolved the matter. It is *I* who must submit to the device.”

“*No!*” Lieutenant Almond was at her side in an instant. “You must *not!* Captain Scarlet – you will support me, please!”

She turned to her friend imploringly. “Cassandra – you saw what happened to Captain Scarlet a few moments ago. He is protected from death because of something our enemies did to him long ago, and for this reason he was prepared to try to use the machine in your place. You have *no* such protection – and if his reasoning is at fault in any way, this could kill you! It is not right that you should risk your life on our account, for this is *our* problem, not yours.”

Cassandra stepped forward to meet her, and looking directly into her eyes, took both of her hands in her own.

“Dearest Rodica, I understand that,” she replied gently, “but I understand also that there is great danger to all who are precious to me if I do *not* do this. I may not know who you are, or whence you came – perhaps I never shall – but I *do* know that you are my friends. Your lives are precious to me... and I will do whatever I have within my power to protect them, now that they are placed in my hands. I could not live with myself afterwards were I to do otherwise.”

She sat down in the chair, placed the cap on her head and turned to Scarlet with a look in her eyes uncannily reminiscent of Tina’s, betraying just the merest hint of a strength of will to transcend any conceivable scale of measurement. And yet when she spoke, her voice was the quintessence of calmness and composure.

“Please activate the device, Captain Scarlet. I am ready now.”

Scarlet threw a glance at Lieutenant Almond, took a deep breath, and then flicked the same switch he had seen Lieutenant Almond use a few moments earlier. Cassandra’s face slowly relaxed, the previous look of quiet determination morphing gradually into a picture of pure serenity. After a few moments her eyes opened, and she blinked rapidly several times. Reaching up to remove the cap from her head, her expression changed once more into a broad grin.

“Everything is clear to me now – this is *wonderful!* Such clarity of thought... such a sense of purpose... Tina is truly a remarkable woman, is she not? This will take but a moment...”

She rose out of the chair and moved to one of the adjacent consoles, where she seated herself down and stretched her hands over the keys, then started typing at speed. After less than twenty seconds she paused to inspect a complex diagram that had appeared on the screen in front of her, then nodding silently to herself, she entered another short set of instructions before turning round in her chair.

“The shut-down sequence for the pulse projector has now been keyed in, and has been authenticated by the ship’s central processor. We can now power down the projector at any time. Do you wish me to do so?”

Scarlet and Almond looked at one another, and the latter nodded emphatically.

“I can see no reason to delay. Whatever the consequences for Tina’s reality might be, we have concluded that the consequences for our *own* reality can surely only be beneficial – and in any case,

the projector remains a threat to anyone who might tamper with it from this time forward. It must be deactivated.”

“Yes... it certainly looks that way,” agreed Scarlet after a short pause. “I’d *prefer* to wait until we’ve had time to consider every possible implication, but you’re right – it’s dangerous. Let’s do it.”

He turned to face Cassandra once more. “Cassandra – please shut it down.”

Cassandra acknowledged with a nod, and turned back to the screen. Her finger was descending on the button, when...

“*No!*”

Scarlet’s hand shot out and caught Cassandra’s wrist in mid-air. She uttered a tiny squeak, and looked up with a quizzical expression.

Scarlet took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. “I can’t explain... I’m not quite there yet, but something’s been bothering me ever since we returned from the ship – and it’s *still* bothering me. I’m not sure... so I want to talk this through with you, Lieutenant, okay? If you can satisfy me that I’m missing something here, we’ll proceed as planned.”

“Of course, Captain.”

Scarlet paused for a second, collecting his thoughts.

“Do you remember the notation that accompanied that lithograph of you in Faraday’s biography, Lieutenant? We were all looking at the sketch itself for obvious reasons, but there was a sentence in the accompanying text about him discovering early in his career how electricity had *medical* applications – I think the phrase used was ‘therapeutic utility’ or something like that – and how he attributed the direction his life should take to that event.”

“I will have to take your word for this, Captain. I confess I was too startled see my picture on the screen to pay much attention to the writing.”

“As I think we all were,” agreed Scarlet. “Now... Rodica – I *believe* it said the ‘therapeutic utility’ he was referring to there was the saving of a life. Because we know that he *did* help save a life when he was young... he helped save *yours!* The biography said this happened before he was twenty years old – what *else* could it be referring to?”

Lieutenant Almond frowned. “This seems likely, yes – but I do not yet see how this is relevant to the action we are about to take. At present the ship is a danger to anyone who enters it, and it will remain so until the projector is made harmless: our duty on this matter is clear...”

Scarlet raised his hands and waved them back and forth in a ‘bear with me’ gesture.

“What I’m saying is that your presence here has *already* determined the future of his life. We’re now about to prevent the circumstances that resulted in your coming here in the first place... but we *can’t* do that! You might marry him or you might not – and yes, we reckoned that would probably impact on Tina’s reality – but if we take you out of the equation *completely* then for all we know he might never develop his interest in electricity at all... and the consequences of *that* would be nothing short of cataclysmic – not only for Tina’s reality, but for ours too.”

He looked at Lieutenant Almond with sombre eyes.

“Do you see it now? We *can’t* disrupt the sequence of events now, even if we wanted to. Because if we do, we risk destroying *everything...*”

A low sigh from behind them caused them to turn, and Cassandra leaped up from her chair with an exclamation of delight.

“Tina! Dearest Tina – you are recovered! How are you feeling – do you hurt where you fell? Oh, dear friend... I have been much concerned...”

Tina ignored her completely. “Captain Scarlet – have you deactivated the projector? It is imperative that you do not: if you do, the damage that will be caused to the ...”

She broke off as her face contorted with pain, and Scarlet knelt down at her side, cradling her head in his hands as she sought to focus on his features.

“We have *not* deactivated the projector, Tina. Yes... we *did* work it out in the end – so give us some credit where it’s due, will you?”

He positioned his right arm around her shoulders while slipping his left beneath her thighs, and lifted her gently off the floor.

“There’s still an hour to go before dawn, so I’m now going to carry you back to your bedroom where you can recuperate in relative comfort. I’m sure Cassandra can find you another dress to replace that jumpsuit, and we’ll worry about reactivating the hologram in the morning – don’t concern yourself with anything at all right now, because it’s been a *very* long night, and I think we *all* need to get some sleep.”

37 Captain Metcalfe and Miss Palamac Discuss their Options

“An excellent repast as always, Creighton! But I did not ask – where are Miss Creighton and Miss Almond today? I had hoped to bid them farewell before I left.”

Colonel Creighton arranged his knife and fork to match those of his friend, then downed the last of his glass of wine. “Miss Palamac and Captain Metcalfe over there tell me that Cassandra has been taken to her bed with a chill, though how she caught it I cannot guess, and Miss Almond is attending her even now. But surely there can be no *need* for you to return! Let them send their paperwork down here as they did before – if that young cousin of ours will consent to bring them, it will give us an excuse to see Cousin Michael once again...”

Harrison shook his head sadly. “No, Creighton – it pains me sorely, but my mind is made up and I’ll not be dissuaded from it. What makes the journey a necessity on this occasion is the honour that will shortly be done to my friend and colleague Mr Davy: it would be unfitting for me to be absent in person when it is made public – and that day will come soon enough, I cannot doubt it. I’ll take the coach up to town tomorrow afternoon; it will give me time to prepare, and perhaps to enjoy one final smoked trout in your company... if I might impose upon you to grant me that last wish?”

Creighton laughed out loud and clapped his hands in delight. “Scarcely an imposition, my friend! I’ll instruct Mrs Herrick – it shall be served at tomorrow’s luncheon. But for now, come with me into the study and savour a glass of cognac with me one last time. Will you join us, Captain Metcalfe? And you, Miss Palamac – your own knowledge of spirits is without equal among your sex, I think! Cassandra’s mother would have fainted at the scent of anything stronger than a glass of warm wine and water, and Cassandra herself rarely drinks anything other than the occasional glass of port, but your ability to distinguish brandies by their aroma and the merest sip is surely worthy of the Empress Josephine herself! Where did you learn it?”

“My senses of smell and taste are somewhat acute than is normal in someone of my age, it is true,” admitted Tina. “I was once obliged to familiarise myself with a range of alkaloid poisons whose sensorial properties were difficult to distinguish, and the experience gained with the brandies proved most beneficial when faced with the task in hand. But I found the brandies no more to my taste than I did the poisons – so thank you, Colonel, but we will not join you and Mr Harrison. Captain Metcalfe and I have one or two things we need to discuss, so perhaps we shall see you later in the evening?”

“Miss Palamac – over three months you have resided with us, and I still do not know whether you make it up to entertain us, or you are simply the most remarkable woman I have ever met – but I cheerfully confess that I do *not* allow it to concern me! Come, Harrison – let’s see to the cognac, eh?”

Scarlet waited until the pair of them had left the room, then broke the silence with a short guffaw.

“No - I don’t *believe* it! Did you *really* learn how to distinguish the tastes of poisons by practising on varieties of brandy, Tina?”

“Certainly. I did however lie about not developing a taste for them – the brandies, not the poisons – as I have learned from Cassandra that admitting to a partiality for alcoholic beverages

transgresses the social norms of this era. My partner within the USS was something of a connoisseur, and I found it a useful topic for engaging in conversations at formal events that he and I were required to attend.”

“*He?* Am I to understand that there *has* been a man in your life?”

“He was my partner, not my lover – *not* that it’s any of your business, Captain. I realised early in my career that if indeed there really *is* a handsome prince to be found, the search would most likely entail the kissing of a considerable number of toads. I opted to save myself considerable wasted time on a lost cause.”

“I’ve never met a Mysteron with a sense of humour before,” observed Scarlet, “let alone one exhibiting a cynical streak the equal of yours.”

“In moderation, cynicism is considered a mark of culture within the aristocratic stratum of Astran society,” replied Tina conversationally. “In contrast, vulgar facetiousness and the propensity to voice gratuitous personal insults are entirely unknown characteristics.” She adjusted her posture to face him directly, her expression openly speculative. “When did *you* acquire them, Captain?”

Scarlet took a sip from his glass of port to mask the smirk he could feel creeping across his lips. “These ‘Astrans’ – you’ve mentioned them before. Who *are* they, Tina?”

“The Astrans control an interstellar empire bordering the region of space that in my timeframe falls under the jurisdiction of Earth and its colonies,” replied Tina. “Physically they resemble light greenish-blue cylinders with hemispherical ends – the term ‘jelly bean’ has been applied in an abusive capacity in the past – which move with the aid of levitation collars. Diplomatic relations with the Astran Empire fluctuate to the same extent as you might expect between any superpower and another that seeks to rival it; for which reason there is a drive within the World Government to establish a space fleet capable of matching that of the Astrans in both firepower and fire-control. The *mi’Astra’han* consciousness anticipates that this fleet will be operational within a decade, by which time relations between the Terran colonies and the Astran empire are expected to become increasingly fraught. The *mi’Astra’han* consciousness is concerned lest it become a pawn in that emerging conflict. For that reason it sought to slow the rate of Earth’s technological advancement.”

“To do which it co-opted *you* as its agent?”

“Yes – my training as a USS operative rendered me particularly well suited to undertake the mission. I believe the consciousness was correct in that appraisal.”

“I infer that you weren’t hampered by any sense of false modesty,” noted Scarlet dryly. “But it seems to me that there’s still more work to be done – because this mission isn’t over for you yet, is it? The pulse projector on board that ship is still operational, albeit on reduced power, and the ship itself is now effectively inaccessible – certainly to anyone of *this* era. Do you know how long the sliding panel in the cellar can hold back the effects of the power leakage?”

Tina shook her head. “The panel was not constructed to withstand a continual bombardment of rays from the projector. The emanations would slowly disintegrate it, much as an underground river can carve its way through bedrock – and the tactile hologram that conceals the entrance to the operations room in the cellar offers no protection at all. Even if it did, its power supply is limited. It would cease to function in a matter of weeks, leaving the panel at the tunnel entrance visible to anyone who went down there. No... the operations room at the tunnel entrance must be sealed off permanently.”

“Oh? And how do you intend to do *that*? You can’t blow it up – somebody in the house might just possibly notice.”

“The tactile hologram projects an image of the original far wall,” Tina continued, disregarding the facetious observation completely. “That wall must be reproduced in bricks, stone and mortar in place of the hologram – that is to say, we need to build a *real* wall. Naturally occurring minerals offer substantially better protection against the rays than manufactured metals and other synthetics; also the end result will be less likely to attract the attention of casual observers. The hologram will remain in place while the construction work is being conducted behind it, then upon completion it will be deactivated.”

“Why bother creating another wall to replace the hologram? Wouldn’t it be easier simply to brick up the tunnel entrance itself?”

Tina shook her head. “All communications between the operations room and the ship are enacted using conventional radio transmissions, Captain: when I established the operations room in the cellar I had no reason to believe a hard-wired connection might be required. A physical barrier at the tunnel entrance of the strength required to block emanations from the projector would also cut the communications link.”

Scarlet leaned back in his chair, watching her closely. “You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you? Although I didn’t hear anything just now about the manual labour you’re presumably going need to build the wall – that is, unless you intend to build it all by your...”

He stopped himself in mid-sentence as the expression on Tina’s face suddenly made sense to him. “What – are you *serious*, Tina? I don’t know how to build a wall! And even if I did, where are we going to get the materials from? And how are we going to get them down there without anybody noticing? It’s impossible!”

“The raw materials are already down there,” observed Tina. “The walls of the tunnel close to the entrance will be mined with the projected energy weapons in the sample case for what we require: several of the devices possess the necessary blasting power, and can be modified to perform the task in hand. Each of us can enter the tunnel for short periods to use them: we’ve already established that you and I will suffer no long-term effects from doing so. As to expertise in the construction of a wall, Reuben possesses it: I spoke with Colonel Creighton earlier today about his duties around the estate, and it seems that maintenance of the stone walling is one of them. He will be brought to the cellar on some pretext, his knowledge will be uploaded into the neurosynch, after which his memory of the experience will be wiped. You and I will move the mined stones into position; the same toys that will perform the mining operation will be programmed to seal them in place with molten sand and rock fragments. No, Captain – it is *not* impossible.”

“So just remind me *why* should I help you with all this, would you?”

“You already know why, Captain. Ensuring that events unfold as we now both know they must is as much *your* mission as it is mine... and this phase of it is time-critical, because the panel covering the tunnel entrance will not hold indefinitely. It will fail soon enough – and that wall must be completed before it does.”

“Yes... I’ll admit I *was* rather expecting you to say that,” sighed Scarlet. “All right, Tina – but I note that it’s *your* technology that’s going to make this possible, so this is *your* show. I’ll defer to your expertise on this.”

“I would have insisted upon unconditional autonomy in all such matters in any event,” replied Tina evenly. “The integrity of the protective panel currently covering the tunnel entrance is giving me cause for concern, and I shall therefore be running a series of tests on it this evening as a matter of urgency: all other operations are suspended until those tests have been completed. I would however prefer to leave more routine matters of personnel management in your hands, Captain: you are Lieutenant Almond’s superior anyway – and to put it bluntly, I would not include ‘people skills’ among my accomplishments. My file in Kahra records at least two instances of inter-personal disputes that ultimately resulted in a fatality...”

“Yes, I take your point,” interrupted Scarlet hurriedly. “Very well... in that case, I think we have the basis of a workable project structure – and... if we can manage to resolve any remaining issues *before* they acquire the status of an inter-personal dispute, I’d be very grateful.”

38 Miss Palamac Proposes a Plan to Captain Metcalfe

The grandfather clock in the entrance hall had just chimed nine when Tina reappeared from her investigation, immediately intercepting Scarlet as he was walking though the hall in the opposite direction.

“A moment of your time, Captain?” The upward inflection at the end of the sentence was appropriate to a question, but the tone brooked no refusal. Scarlet merely nodded and led her into the library, where he quietly closed the door behind them.

“Problem?”

“Yes, Captain. I’ve just spent the last two hours modelling the dissolution rate of the panel covering the tunnel entrance under an extensive range of assumed molecular configurations. All simulations conclude that the panel is breaking down at a faster rate than was originally predicted... and the reason for *that* is that the pulse projector on board the ship is starting to overheat. It must be cooled down – but the ship lacks enough coolant to counter the temperature rise. The tanks are already severely depleted, and will be completely exhausted within two weeks.”

“So we just need some more coolant, yes?”

“We need a *lot* more coolant, Captain. The projector is a substantial piece of equipment: the coolant will need to be deployed on an industrial scale.”

Scarlet raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that going to be what one of my friends back at base would have called a show-stopper? We’re not going to find any facilities capable of manufacturing something like that in *this* era...”

“The ship already possesses the necessary facilities, Captain,” replied Tina. “Access to them is however restricted to what we can do remotely, as we can no longer enter the ship. We should be able to *program* the ship to replicate any specified chemical structure from the operations console at the tunnel entrance, but the projector is interfering with the ship’s ability to transmit data back to the console – so we cannot initiate any on-board experimentation. The coolant formula transmitted to the ship must be correct first time, or we risk triggering a cascade reaction inside the projector’s fusion reactor core – and the consequences of *that*...”

“There’s no need to elaborate,” muttered Scarlet darkly. “I get the picture.”

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds. “So... if I’ve understood this correctly, any experimentation we *could* do would effectively be limited to laboratory bench work at *this* end of the tunnel... after which the results of it would have to be transmitted to the ship’s production facilities from the console in the cellar. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“In which case what’s to prevent us from doing just that? I’ve no doubt Creighton would provide us with facilities if we asked him.”

For the first time since the start of their conversation, Tina looked less than sure of herself.

“We need chemical compounds with which to experiment, Captain – and we don’t have any.”

Scarlet looked at her in surprise. “What... you’re saying that we can’t create them – even with all that technology of yours down in the cellar? After that business with Cassandra and the neurosynch, I’d almost concluded that there was *nothing* that equipment couldn’t do!”

“*That...* is not only a gross oversimplification,” retorted Tina stiffly, “but also a wildly inaccurate one. Tell me, Captain – if I were to ask you to supply me with a small bottle of concentrated hydrochloric acid, using only the facilities currently available within this house, could you do it? No? Potassium dichromate, perhaps? Strontium hydroxide? And we haven’t even *started* to talk about organic compounds yet.”

She looked at him steadily. “Even with remote access to the technical libraries on board the ship to describe the *processes* involved, the actual *production* of many of the basic compounds we might need would probably be beyond our capabilities. It would *certainly* be beyond our capabilities within the current time constraints.”

“Yes... I see what you mean,” replied Scarlet thoughtfully. “It’s not so much a matter of knowledge as it is of resources, right? What we *really* need is somebody to have done the donkey work for us already.”

He looked back into her eyes, then abruptly stood up. “If she hasn’t already retired for the night, I’ll see if I can find Lieutenant Almond. I think *she* may be able to help us find a way out of this...”

39 Miss Almond is Called Upon to Make a Journey to London

“You wanted to see me, Captain Scarlet?”

Scarlet found himself reflecting on the incongruity of briefing a fellow Spectrum officer who was presently dressed in an early nineteenth century, white, long-sleeved muslin day dress, and managed – albeit with an effort – to keep a business-like demeanour throughout the briefing.

“Yes. I know it’s late, but there’s something I need you to do, Lieutenant – and it’ll probably need some rather hurried preparation tomorrow morning.”

He rapidly took her through Tina’s assessment of the precarious state of the pulse projector, the potential consequences of it and the options open to them regarding its repair, given the constraints on materials and facilities.

“We can’t manufacture the stuff from scratch – we don’t have the necessary equipment in the cellar, and we can’t board the ship to get it – *but* if we can lay our hands on enough samples to enable us to create a viable finished product, we can *then* clone it remotely on board the ship to produce as much as we need. And we now know enough about scientific discovery in this era to be able to make a good guess where to start looking for it.”

“So... this is the plan, Lieutenant. Mr Harrison is returning to the Royal Institution in London on the stagecoach tomorrow afternoon – and I want you to go with him. Cassandra can ask her father to provide you with the fare plus as much spending money as you’re likely to need: on past experience of his generosity he’ll volunteer before you ask. Harrison’s going because of work pressure – so when you get there, find Faraday and get him to help you. We know he’s working there right now, and we can rely on him to look after you when you arrive, so ask him to find you lodgings for three or four days. Best that he does that for you: for one thing he’ll know his way around, and for another you won’t want to waste time fending off unwanted male attention – because I’m afraid as a young woman lodging alone in London for any length of time you’re likely to attract it.”

He held up his hand before she could reply. “Yes... I *know* you’re more than capable of handling it, but we’re going to be working to a timetable – so we can do without any unnecessary complications.”

Scarlet paused for long enough to take a sip from his glass of water before continuing.

“What I need you to *do* there is to acquire samples of as many experimental substances as you can that could form the constituent components of coolants. At least 50 millilitres of each; anything and everything that looks promising, okay? From what Harrison’s told us about him, Faraday’s a rising star in the place – so he can probably introduce you to people who will be useful. An obvious first target will be his boss, Humphry Davy – who probably knows more about what we’re trying to achieve right now than anyone else alive in this era. Get an audience with him if you can, and describe in general terms what we’re trying to do – if he’s anything like our researchers back home he’ll give you all the time and resources you need. Obviously you don’t mention the ship or any of Tina’s equipment – he’d think you were insane – but you should be able to use your own chemical knowledge from your higher education days to satisfy him that you know what you’re talking about. Aim to spend three or four days up there, then take the stagecoach back here at the end of

the week, bringing back with you everything you've managed to get your hands on. Faraday was able to bring quite a lot of equipment down here with him in those two holdalls of his, so see if you can borrow them, or get something similar.

“Tina and I will be assembling the replication equipment in the cellar while you're away. She's calculated that the ship's remaining stock of coolant will be exhausted within six days, so we need you back here before then – at which time we want to attempt to clone anything and everything you can bring back with you. Clear?”

“Perfectly, Captain.”

“Good. Any questions?”

“I have just *one* question,” she replied hesitantly. “If there is perhaps a little free time at the end of the day... am I allowed to go shopping?”

40 Captain Metcalfe and Cassandra Discuss her Hopes and Fears

Scarlet looked up from his chair as the study door opened a fraction, and Cassandra's face peered around it. "Captain Metcalfe! I am so glad to have found you, for Rodica has just spoken to me. I just wanted to reassure you that I shall be delighted to help her with the preparations for her journey up to town; indeed, we have just been looking for suitable clothes for the trip. Oh, how I wish I might go with her! But alas I cannot, for I have acquired something of a chill, and Papa will not let me go. Oh – it is *so* vexing!"

"Put it out of your mind, Cassandra," replied Scarlet as he invited her to sit in the other chair with a wave. "She's going to be quite busy on my behalf while she's there, so you won't be missing very much. And she'll be back here at the end of the week – so look after yourself in the meantime, eh? She will want to see you well again when she returns."

"Oh, she will enjoy herself very much in town, I have no doubt! Perhaps she will have so much to engage her that she will forget all about us!"

"She won't forget you for an instant," countered Scarlet with a wry smile. "She cares for you very much. As you do for her."

Cassandra nodded. "That is true – for although she has been here for so little time, she has yet become my dear friend. As have you all."

She lowered her voice, and looked at him earnestly. "It may be that when I am old, I will look back on these days as the most exciting time of my life, Captain Metcalfe. More has happened here in the three months since Tina came to stay with us than at any other time I can remember – and though I may not comprehend it, I feel such exhilaration that I cannot now bear the thought of my life being otherwise."

Her expression clouded, and her eyes lost something of their sparkle. "Until last Michaelmas, there was so very little for me to look forward to here. Life has been quiet and uneventful since Mama died; the days came and went, as did first the weeks and then the months. There has of course been young William for me to look after – and it has been my joy to watch him grow – but this last year Papa began to speak of sending him away to school, and I was resigned to the loss of my only companion in life. And yet not a twelvemonth since that time I have not just one new friend to fill my days, but three."

She looked directly into his eyes as her own filled with tears. "So please tell me, Captain – why is it that I am afraid? My reason tells me that I should not be – and yet I am. Why should that be?"

"You already *know* why, Cassandra," replied Scarlet gently. "You're wondering how and when this will all come to an end. You know that one day it *will* come to an end – and you're afraid that day might not be far away. Even if you don't understand the incomprehensible situation that Rodica, Tina and I find ourselves in, you *do* realise that it must be resolved."

"Yes, you are right of course," acknowledged Cassandra with a wry smile, reaching for a handkerchief to dry her eyes. "How did you know that this was my concern?"

"Only because I'm wondering the same thing myself," replied Scarlet. "And I'll admit to you that my *own* concern is at least as pressing as yours." He gestured vaguely around the study. "Delightful as all of this may be – and I admit I'm rather beginning to like it very much indeed – this world is

not my home, Cassandra. The world that Rodica and I come from lies centuries in your future – and as matters stand right now, we don't know if we will ever see it again.”

Cassandra looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. “Then surely my worries are insignificant in comparison to your own, for the prospect of never seeing one's home again would be a misfortune indeed! Forgive me, Captain – you must think me a silly girl for making such a fuss, and you would be right to do so.”

She paused before continuing falteringly. “Captain Metcalfe... does Tina also come from your world in the future?”

Scarlet shook his head. “She comes from the future, yes – but it's a *different* future.” He grinned at her apologetically. “Please don't ask me to explain that, because I can't.”

“Does she want to return to her world?”

“I don't know,” replied Scarlet simply. “Perhaps you should ask her.”

Cassandra looked at him uncertainly. “I think I would not *wish* to ask her. I would prefer to live in the hope that she will stay with us here always, than have to endure the knowledge that one day she might leave and never return. Oh, Captain – I do not *want* her to leave!”

She forced back tears with an obvious effort, and took a few measured breaths to compose herself once more. When she addressed him again, it was in a manner both collected and business-like.

“Captain Metcalfe... will you bestow upon me a favour? At this moment I retain within my memory a knowledge of experiences with which Tina herself is familiar. I do not understand the means by which this has been accomplished, but I know it is so nevertheless. And yet I know also that should Tina wish it, these experiences might be removed from my mind with the same facility as they have been placed there, for she has that power. Captain – please promise me this: that should Tina leave us – whatever might be the circumstances of that leaving – that you will implore her not take those memories from me, for the thought of losing them is more than I could bear. Will you do this for me?”

Scarlet hesitated for a second, then nodded. “I will.”

Cassandra's eyes regained their sparkle. “Thank you, Captain. Though I am sensible that I would never know if your word *were* to be broken, yet I hope it will not be, for I believe you to be a good man.”

She straightened herself up, and took a step towards the door. “And now I must help Rodica with her wardrobe! And then when the coach has taken her away to London with Mr Harrison, I dare say my father will order me back to bed – so when Tina returns from her constitutional exertions in the countryside, would you ask her to come and see me?”

“Yes, of course,” acknowledged Scarlet as she quit the room, closing the door behind her. As soon as it was shut, Scarlet's valedictory smile faded into a concerned frown as he contemplated the moral ambiguities implicit in weighing the qualities required of a good man with those of an honest one. Would he be *able* to keep his promise to Cassandra, even if he wanted to? He had absolutely no idea.

41 The Production of a Gaseous Substance has Unintended Consequences

Scarlet turned a small dial on the panel in front of him to its lowest setting; then bent over a small tube that he had installed into the side of the console at which he was working earlier in the day. Steeling himself, he positioned his nose close to the end of the tube and took the briefest of experimental sniffs, and instantly recoiled in a spasm of coughing. Waving the air to clear it, he reached over to twist the dial in the opposite direction once more, and then moved round to the front of the console to review the display on its screen.

“Spectrophotometer readings indicate presence of nitrogen trichloride, projected purity after refinement is a fraction under seventy-two percent... contamination with cuprous oxide still exceeding twenty percent... also small quantities of manganese and zinc present. The probability of a chain reaction being initiated within the central core of the alignment sequencer is now being estimated at...”

He squinted at the tiny readout underneath the toy bloodhound that was connected to the console by a thin interface cable, and cursed under his breath. “Probability estimated at sixteen percent, within tolerances of seven percent either way... which is nothing *like* good enough.”

He looked up at the vaulted roof of the little chamber and counted slowly to five before addressing his comments to his companion, who was working at one of the other consoles a few metres away.

“This is hopeless... we’re simply not going to get there. These simulations aren’t going to cut it – we need those samples of the *real* molecules to replicate before we can expect to get anything like a purity high enough to reduce the risk of a catastrophic failure in the venting system to an acceptable level... which I’m hoping will be zero percent, plus or minus zero.”

Tina looked up with an expression of mild irritation on her face. “You’re hoping for too much, Captain Scarlet. There will *always* be a non-zero risk; the object of the exercise is merely to minimize it.”

She walked over to join him and peered at the readout on the toy bloodhound.

“Please bear in mind that I was never hoping for much at this early stage, Captain. This exercise is intended primarily to verify that the ship’s circulation system will ultimately function correctly *when* we are able to program it with the correct formulae. Anything else we can learn in the process will be a bonus.”

She leaned over the console, inspected the display on the monitor critically for a few seconds, and then keyed in an amendment. The schematic of the complex molecule rotating on the screen in front of them promptly rearranged itself to reflect the modification to the formula, and she nodded thoughtfully to herself.

“This variant should lower the risk. The shielding on the thermal condensers should be less likely to interact adversely with this arrangement of the primary elements than with an ammonia derivative; also this permits the use of either hydrazine and hydroxylamine at a concentration of at least ten percent – which would be advantageous, given that the mixing of acetaldehyde and ammonia at room temperature and atmospheric pressure would result in the formation of a cyclic trimer in the ship’s propulsion system. Such a reaction is highly exothermic.”

“I didn’t understand one word of that,” remarked Scarlet dryly, “but your tone suggests to me that such an outcome would be less than desirable.”

She shot him a dark look. “Given the presence of at least three concentrated population centres plus most of south London within a fifty-kilometre radius of this location, I would venture the opinion that your observation is something of an understatement, Captain.”

An insistent beeping sound from the console caused her to look down with a gesture of impatience. Rapidly scanning the readout, she typed in a short additional amendment to her earlier instruction. The schematic of the molecule instantly disintegrated into a shower of pixels, and then resurrected itself into a completely different configuration before resuming its inexorable rotation as before. She waited a few seconds for a sample of the newly-programmed compound to be manufactured, took an experimental sniff at the outlet pipe at the side of the console, grimaced, and slapped the top of the console hard with the palm of her hand.

“*Shit!*”

“*What the hell...?*” Scarlet physically jumped in astonishment at the completely unexpected outburst. “Good grief, Tina - I thought expletives had been completely expunged from the dictionary in your universe!”

“Spare me your affected outrage, Captain!” she snapped back. “I haven’t heard all that much heart-felt invective coming from *your* lips these last few days either – merely a seemingly endless stream of sarcasm which you appear to mistake for humour. I could match you for obscenities *any* day of the week if I wanted to, believe me!”

She returned to her console, leaned over the keyboard, assaulted it with a viciously punched-in sequence of formula amendments, and then sat down once more with her back to him.

Scarlet’s lips twitched with a wry smile. “Tina... apart from when I carried you from the ship back to this cellar – and on *that* occasion you were unconscious – I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen you in anything other than in a state of perfect composure. If I’m honest, I rather like it. It makes you a little more... human.”

She swung her chair round and glared witheringly back at him. “If that’s intended to be a compliment, I ask only that you spare me your insults, Captain!”

Scarlet gave her a theatrically pained look. “Oh, *come* on, Tina – anyone who’s ever managed a project knows that conflicting personalities are the single biggest obstacle to making progress: egos need to be massaged, shy contributors need to be encouraged, wheels need to be oiled – otherwise they just plain don’t go round. Surely even *you* recognise that?”

“What you refer to as a ‘conflicting personality’ is merely a measure of an individual’s lack of synchronization with the collective purpose,” retorted Tina dismissively, “and yet you say you regard such a trait when you perceive it in *me* as endearing. What you *mean* is you find me more to your taste when you understand my vulnerabilities – from which I infer that regardless of any potential damage to the collective purpose, you wish to exploit those vulnerabilities for purposes of your own. Any human female could tell any human male as much if she chose, but very few would ever do so. What makes this *particular* exchange of insults interesting is that I’m not human... and neither are you.”

Scarlet’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And just when did you realise *that*, Tina?”

“I sensed an asynchronous presence during the period of your convalescence following the shooting in the woods. It could only have been you, for while Lieutenant Almond’s injuries were clearly life-threatening, yours were not – and yet previously Creighton and several others with him had in all sincerity believed otherwise. Had your consciousness and mine been as one we would have known communion, and yet for a few seconds I was disorientated. The conclusion was obvious: the Truth was once resident within your physical shell – but that shell is now discarded and barren.”

His eyes narrowed just a fraction more, and Scarlet leaned back in his chair, eyeing her coldly.

“Just for the record, Tina, I don’t *see* it that way.”

“Obviously not. How *could* you formulate an objective view? You are what you are – which under the circumstances is unfortunate in the extreme.”

Scarlet thumped the pedestal at which he was sitting so hard that the keyboard jumped. “God, you can be an insufferable little bitch when you want to be! What *you* need is a damn good hiding...”

“And who’s going to administer *that*? You? Come close enough to touch me and I’ll break both your arms!”

Scarlet stifled a guffaw. “You didn’t exactly manage to do much damage the last time I got hold of you, did you? As I recall, you ended up as an uncoordinated pile of aching joints on the floor – and *that* was only because I was being gentle with you...”

“Spare me the condescension, Captain! I’ve heard it all a hundred times before from as many supercilious male prigs – precisely *once* from each of them – with an overblown sense of their own masculinity and more brains in their underpants than in between their ears, so don’t imagine *you’re* going to be the exception...”

She broke off, took a deep breath and pulled a face. “What the hell have you got coming out of that machine *now*? I can smell the oxidising components in it from over here... it’s supposed to be a thermal inhibitor, not a rocket propellant! Can’t you get *anything* right?”

“It wasn’t *me* who just reprogrammed it!”

“Obviously you incorrectly defined the initial configuration! Oh, just move away from that keyboard, Captain – *I’ll* do it!”

She launched herself out of her chair and strode purposefully over to his console. As her fingers descended towards the keys, his hands flashed out and caught both of her wrists. Without giving her time to react, he simultaneously released the left wrist and jerked the right one violently forward, throwing her into a spin which ended with one of his arms around her neck, and the other pinning both of hers to her chest. The tableau held for at least five seconds before Scarlet opted to break the impasse, which he did with deliberate calmness.

“No, Tina - you *won’t* do it. There was *nothing* wrong with the set-up, and the modifications you keyed in made perfect sense: I’d have done exactly the same if you’d let me. You’re getting as irritated as I am by the lack of progress, but you’re just too proud to admit it, that’s all. Now calm *down* – agreeably comfortable though this enforced act of intimacy might be for both of us, we’re not going to be able to maintain it all day.”

She managed to twist her neck just enough to be able to glare over her shoulder at him with undisguised fury. “You’re *enjoying* this, aren’t you!”

“It makes a change from being maimed or killed in the line of duty,” conceded Scarlet mildly. “So how long do you want to keep this up? An hour? Two?”

“Let me go this *second*, damn you!”

“Oh, stop squirming, for heaven’s sake! You *won’t* get out of this neck-lock unless I release you – you know that as well as I do – so just make things easy for yourself and stop struggling. I’ll let you go when you’ve calmed down... and you haven’t yet. Just take several long, deep breaths – I’ll relax the grip just enough for you to be able to get some air into your lungs. Go on... take your time. I can wait.”

“I don’t doubt it! But whatever’s coming out of that pipe *stinks!*”

“Oh, come on... it’s not *that* bad, Tina. It’s actually quite mild compared with some of the concoctions we’ve had coming out of it in the last few hours – so if I can work right next to it without suffering any ill effects, I dare say you can handle a few seconds of the stuff. Deep breaths, now.”

“It’s not pointing at *you*, Scarlet! Oh, the hell with this...”

She closed her eyes, and began to regulate her breathing, inhaling and then exhaling deeply several times. After a little while her limbs began to relax, and her forbidding countenance gradually started to morph into an air of detached drowsiness.

“All right... I’m feeling a *lot* better – so you can let go of me now.”

“*When* I’m satisfied you won’t try to kill me the second I release my grip. Another three or four more breaths, please.”

She frowned, then arched her back and peered over her shoulder at him lazily.

“What would I want to kill you for? *Somebody’s* got to run this wretched machine, and I’m damned if *I’m* going to do it. But never you mind what *I* want – you just carry on feeling me up for as long as you like, why don’t you? I’m damned if I care...”

Guiltily conscious that he actually *was* beginning to appreciate the contours of her upper body just a little more than appropriate given the immediate task in hand, he released the neck lock and hurriedly stepped back to get himself out of the range of either her hands or her feet. She arched her back lazily, then stretched upwards with both arms towards the roof, seemingly oblivious to his watchful gaze.

“That’s better. And yes... the deep breathing *does* help – even if this godforsaken room is beginning to smell like candyfloss spiked with magnesium flares.”

She blinked, and peered at him as if having just remembered his presence.

“What’s the matter, Captain? Still wondering if I’m going to break one of your ribs, or are you just admiring my chest?”

“A bit of both,” admitted Scarlet. “You’re all woman under that frock, aren’t you?”

“I’d *like* to think that question’s purely rhetorical,” she murmured mildly, as she rearranged the neckline and then straightened the lines of the bodice. “This seems to have been an occasion for a little explicit honesty from both of us, Captain. Perhaps that’s a good thing, as honesty is a prerequisite in the eternal search for Truth.”

She gestured languorously about the room, her expression bearing a vague suggestion of distaste.

“This reality is flawed, Captain – for you and I are part of it. *You* are flawed, for you waste time in idle fantasies when there’s work to be done. Irrespective of my own sensibilities, *I* am flawed for tolerating it. We’re both malefactors in the eyes of the Supreme... and yet, all realities exist within Truth – which transcends reality, and therefore *cannot* be flawed. So *why* is this reality permitted to exist?”

Scarlet peered up uncertainly at her, not quite sure whether she was being serious or facetious.

“If you’re going to stand there asking questions like *that*, it seems to me you’ve got one spectacularly high opinion of yourself, Missy! What makes you think that God’s got any time to spare passing judgment on the likes of *you*? But if it’s any consolation, most of the religions of *my* reality have been asking themselves pretty much the same question for as long as they’ve been able to squabble about it...”

He broke off, suddenly bored with the discussion. “Oh, who *cares*? As they used to sing during the First World War, we’re here because we’re here because we’re here! Look, maybe we were all created to provide entertainment to some almighty clever-clogs out there with a warped sense of humour – like maybe this reality is just one of an infinite number of comedy channels on some great intergalactic video subscription service. Have you considered *that* possibility?”

Tina stared at him blankly for a couple of seconds, and then unexpectedly hiccupped. Steadying herself with an effort, she squinted in Scarlet’s direction and glowered at him.

“Are you suggesting that the Supreme needs to be *amused*, Captain? The Supreme can do anything – and therefore *needs* nothing!”

“In which case,” retorted Scarlet with a slightly affected yawn, “don’t you reckon it’s just possible that your Supreme is bored stiff? Maybe your Supreme thinks we’re *funny*.”

She shook her head vigorously, took a step closer to him and waved her finger in his face.

“Tut-tut, Captain silly red colour – that’s not right. Logical flaw there. Things are only funny if the reality doesn’t make any *sense*. The Supreme created every reality, so the Supreme must know how they all work. Obvious.”

Scarlet peered muzzily back at her and tried to shake his head, but found it too much of an effort.

“No... didn’t follow that. What are you talking about, Missy Smart-Arse? Do I care what you’re talking about? I *think* I care what you’re talking about, so what *are* you talking about? Your Supreme doesn’t think something’s funny, is that what you said? So what makes something funny, then?”

“Are you asking me what makes something *funny*? Well, I’ll tell you... I’ll *tell* you what makes something funny, Captain... you see, what makes you *laugh* is the *juxta*... the *juxta*...”

She frowned to herself, gazed dreamily upwards as if searching for the word somewhere in the air above her head for a few seconds, then positioned herself directly in front of Scarlet’s chair and adopted the air of a lecturer about to impart a pearl of wisdom to an unruly student.

“What makes you *laugh*, Captain... whatever shade of red you are, is the juxtaposition of a *conflict* and a *resolution*. You manufacture the *conflict* by encouraging somebody to create an incomprehensible reality inside their head... and then you *resolve* that incomprehensible reality right at the end by showing them how it works. That’s... that’s what you *do*... and it makes them *laugh*! Isn’t that *amazing*?”

She squinted at Scarlet's bemused expression and frowned.

"I don't think you're very amazed... Look, just listen... Why does an elephant paint its toenails red? You don't *know*, do you? But now you've got this weird reality inside your head in which elephants paint their toenails red, right? And *now* you need me to explain the logic that rationalizes the incomprehensibility, don't you? Go on – admit it!"

"All right... I admit it," muttered Scarlet warily. "Why *does* an elephant paint its toenails red?"

"So it can hide in a cherry tree. Flawless logic... there – now that's funny, isn't it?"

Stone-faced, Scarlet shook his head slowly, and Tina frowned for a moment, obviously nonplussed by the lack of the anticipated response. Then slowly, the frown faded.

"Ah... you're not convinced that the logic's flawless yet! So consider this... have you ever *seen* an elephant hiding in a cherry tree?"

With considerably more effort than he felt ought to be necessary to answer the question, Scarlet frantically searched his memory. "Er, no... I don't think so..."

"Which just goes to prove what a good disguise it is. *Now* are you convinced that the logic's flawless? Captain? Captain Scarlet?"

She watched in curious fascination as Scarlet's face slowly began to crease up. Slowly he got up out of his chair, and with an obvious effort stood up to face her with tears beginning to run down his cheeks.

"Why are you laughing, Captain? I don't understand why you're laughing!"

"Because it's *funny*, dammit! It's just so bloody *funny*... Why aren't *you* laughing?"

"I never said *I* thought it was funny! But if I had any doubts about the reality *your* consciousness lives in..."

She lurched forward in a disorientated fall towards him, and his arms shot out in an equally uncoordinated attempt to catch her, with one hand ending up underneath her right armpit and the other cupped awkwardly around her left breast.

"This isn't... this isn't *appropriate*... move your hand, sir!" She frowned to herself as he attempted with limited success to comply. "*That's* not right... I *meant*, move it somewhere *else*! Oh, for heaven's sake... I'll do it myself... men... can't get anything right... stand up... got to stand up straight again... right and proper... not funny..."

"Oh, for God's sake, Tina – do you *never* have a good laugh? I mean a *real* one – not the airs and graces that you put on for the people up there? I mean... what is it about being an agent – because you're an agent, aren't you... a *secret* agent... that's it... you're a *secret* agent... that means you can't have a good laugh every now and then... eh?"

Tina frowned as if she were having difficulty focussing on him... and then inexplicably uttered a little giggle. "What makes you think that *secret* agents can't laugh, Captain Scarlet? You know... that's such a *shilly* name, isn't it... I would think it was *very* funny if I had a name like that... I would, you know..."

She shook her head furiously and peered in obvious confusion at the monitor where the multi-faceted image of the molecule was still slowly rotating on the screen.

"What's *happening*? God... this really *isn't* funny! I mean...it *really* isn't..."

She put her hand out towards the console's chair to steady herself, missed it, and promptly collapsed into a heap on the floor. Peering upwards at Scarlet, she frowned while trying to focus on him. "What does it... what does it *say* on that screen, Captain? What is that... that thing? I mean, it was nitrogen trisomethingorother a minute ago, wasn't it... but... you know what? I don't think... I don't think it's nitrotrisomethingorother any more. That's what I think... God... my head! Tell me what the bloody formula is, will you?"

With an extreme effort, Scarlet tried to read from the screen the formula accompanying the rotating molecule.

"It says here... it says... nitrous oxide, projected purity after refinement fifty-six percent, contamina... contamination with zinky-winky chloride at seven percent, also manganese dioxide four percent..."

He broke off in mid-sentence as something about the first two words began to chime inside his head. Desperately he leaned over the console and twisted the dial controlling the sample gas outlet pipe back from maximum to its off position, before collapsing on top of Tina on the floor, tearing her dress clean off her shoulders and pulling it halfway down her upper body as he fell. Landing in her arms, they rolled helplessly away from the console across the floor, the stonework shredding what little remained of her dress and much of his shirt also. The last thing he remembered with any degree of clarity was the sound of her shriek of laughter as she reached under his shirt to pull him down on top of her once more.

42 Cassandra Encounters Miss Palamac as She Returns to Her Room

Cassandra peered out of her bedroom window at the cloudless twilight sky above the woods to the south, and found herself wondering which twinkling speck of light among the myriad of stars that were just becoming visible was the home of her friend – for though Tina had never discussed it with her, somehow Cassandra knew with certainty that she came from one of them. The knowledge had seeped unbidden into her mind the very first time she had assisted Tina in the cellar, and her more recent connection to the neurosynch had merely served to reinforce it, providing her with fleeting subliminal impressions of Tina’s life before she came to Foxley Heath. She had glimpsed Tina’s office at Century 21 Toys in Kahra, a joke shared with one of her colleagues, a fleeting smile on the face of her partner, an argument with a security guard, an overpowering sense of dread upon approaching a group of men in an anonymous corridor within a nameless building. And Cassandra had briefly sensed the realisation and acceptance of impending death that Tina had once felt, as well as the wonder of salvation and rebirth that had followed it – and the wondrous realisation of having been *chosen*... Cassandra had just begun to appreciate that her friend was exceptional in ways that she could not hope to understand, let alone put into words.

Hearing the faint sound of Tina’s footfall outside her bedroom, Cassandra had already half-opened her door to call out to her before the realisation dawned that something about the sound of her footsteps had been out of the ordinary – and the moment she saw her, Cassandra realised what it was: Tina had removed her shoes, and was padding past her door in bare feet. Too late to stop herself from starting to speak, she belatedly realised that this was one occasion on which Tina had clearly hoped not to encounter anyone.

“Tina... I heard you approaching, and wondered whether... Oh! Oh, my goodness... *forgive* me! I had not realised that you were so... that is... your dress! ... Your *clothes* – they are surely in need of... of repair! Shall I call Carey to... to take them from you? She is most proficient with needle and thread, and... *oh dear*... perhaps it might be better if I just...”

Tina cut her short with a look that would have frozen hell. For the first time in Cassandra’s experience, the aristocratic facade that Tina normally presented to the world had somehow been stripped away, revealing something raw and primeval underneath – and Cassandra realised instantly that this was a facet of her friend’s personality that she did *not* wish the world to witness.

“Cassandra... you will please tell Carey to bring me hot water – a *lot* of hot water. You will tell her to knock when she brings it, and not to enter my room until I admit her. I shall then take a bath – a *long* bath – during which I do *not* wish to be disturbed. She may see to the dress at some other time, for I shall find another to wear at dinner. Please go and find her *now*!”

“Of course, dear Tina... I shall have the water brought to your room directly!” Cassandra fled in the direction of the stairs, while Tina slipped inside her room and closed the door. Tossing her shoes into the corner of the room, she peeled off the remnants of the dress and dropped them into an untidy heap on the floor, then added the remainder of her undergarments to the pile before scooping up one of the bedsheets and wrapping it around herself. Arching her back, she let an exhausted yawn escape her lips before making her way slowly around the bed to the other side. She then promptly collapsed backwards onto it, closing her eyes in a completely uncharacteristic gesture combining exceptional fatigue with serene contentment that would have left her young friend more than a little unsettled, and *very* confused.

43 Miss Almond Returns from London

Lieutenant Almond entered the study still wearing the travelling coat and shawl that Cassandra had given her earlier in the week, followed into the room by Herrick, who was struggling slightly under the weight of a large holdall in each hand.

“Thank you, Herrick – you will put them in the corner, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He deposited the cases carefully by the door, then straightened himself up. “Will that be all, ma’am?”

“That will be all, thank you.”

Scarlet waited until the butler had closed the door behind him before stifling a guffaw. “You know, Lieutenant, if he *had* a forelock, I genuinely believe he’d have tugged it! I admit I still haven’t got used to this lifestyle, although *you* seem to have adapted to it easily enough – in fact, I could almost believe you’d been taking lessons from Lady Penelope for dealing with Herrick just now. I’m not *absolutely* certain she’d have thanked him before dismissing him – but even if I’m wrong about that, obviously etiquette would change a *lot* in a couple of centuries. Style doesn’t go out of fashion though – and that outfit you’re wearing is very fetching, I have to say.”

Almond looked down approvingly at her dark green velvet spencer jacket, and daintily brushed a speck of mud off one of its sleeves.

“Thank you, Captain! The colonel still has many of the clothes that used to be worn by his wife. He told me of her good taste; she was of a similar size to myself, and so Cassandra helped me to choose suitable apparel for the journey. Mr Faraday also complimented me on it. He is very much a gentleman, I think.”

She delicately removed her gloves and took her place in a chair that Scarlet had deliberately positioned facing the door so that the pair of them could talk quietly together without being unexpectedly interrupted.

“I have returned with just over fifty chemical samples, Captain Scarlet. At least half of them were prepared in Mr Davy’s own laboratory: he was *exceptionally* helpful, just as you anticipated. We got on very well indeed after I made the mistake of addressing him as *Sir* Humphry Davy when we were introduced, for he has not yet been awarded a knighthood – even though *he* believes he deserves it, I think!”

“If he hasn’t already been given the knighthood then he soon will be,” commented Scarlet. “It must have been sometime around now, so I daresay he knows it’s in the offing. No damage done by letting him know he’s already got a fanbase rooting for him, I think.”

Almond nodded emphatically. “This is true – for he is not what I expected at all! He is very much a... what is the expression? A *ladies’ man* – is that right?”

“So much for the popular notion that our greatest heroes are above such things,” remarked Scarlet with a grin. “Yes, I remember reading somewhere that he had quite a considerable female following – *that’s* one talent that wasn’t invented by rock stars. Go on, Lieutenant.”

“We met in his laboratory twice during the day, and once in his rooms after work,” continued Almond. “I believe I was able to keep up with much of what he was saying, and the parts that were

beyond me I just nodded my head. If he realised I was not understanding, I think he did not mind because he liked to talk! I did however find it difficult to discuss with him matters that he was very familiar with, so whenever that happened I tried to change the subject to things that *I* understood better than *him*. Certainly he was very pleased with our conversation, for he gave me everything I asked for the next day. I hope I did not do wrong in this, but it was necessary to get the cooperation I wanted.”

“No, I suppose not,” replied Scarlet after a short pause. “What *sort* of things did you talk to him about?”

“We had a long talk about what light is,” she replied. “He was very interested in finding out how fast it travels – so I described as much as I could remember about the early experimentation to determine it.”

“And that experimentation was done... when?”

“In the late 1800s, I think. I do not know the exact date.”

Scarlet’s frown grew a little deeper. “Wasn’t that a bit dangerous, Lieutenant? I mean, we’re already worried about Faraday finding out too much before his time...”

“I thought about it afterwards when I had returned to my room, and was also concerned,” admitted Almond. “The next day when we met again in his laboratory for the last time, he had his notebook with him – and when he left the room for a few moments I took a look inside it, and found that he had written about our conversation in it, so...” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “... so I tore out the pages! I have them here...”

She got up and walked over to the bags, reached inside one of them and extracted a sheaf of handwritten notes which she handed to him. “I left the Institution soon afterwards to catch the coach. I hope he does not realise they are missing for a long time!”

Scarlet looked down the top page, and rapidly scanned the first paragraph:

“Spent evening last in company of charming young woman of foreign extraction. Most knowledgeable on many subjects; held forth with her at length upon possibility of devising means by which speed of light might be determined. Proposed creation of intricate arrangement of mirrors upon cliff or other high place in neighbourhood of lighthouse, that might be fashioned the conjunction of rays emanating from the same source but cast upon two paths of differing lengths...”

“Yes – I hope he doesn’t realise they’re missing for a long time too!” observed Scarlet with a wry smile. “Well done, Lieutenant – but I think we’d better hope he also doesn’t have too good a memory, eh?”

He pocketed the sheaf of notes and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Cassandra told me earlier that dinner will be at eight, so I suggest you go to your room and find a change of clothes. Tina’s down in the cellar making the final adjustments to equipment we’ll be using to stabilise the ship’s coolant system, so we’ll aim to start work on cloning those samples first thing tomorrow morning – after which we need to identify the optimal blend, and then program the ship to mass-produce and deploy it. Tina will have a better idea how long it’s going to take than I do, but I suspect we’re talking about a couple of days’ intensive work for both of us – and quite possibly for you too, Lieutenant. The cellar is likely to become quite a hive of activity.”

“I would expect this,” agreed Almond, “but I do not see how we can conceal what we are doing from the rest of the household. You and I now realise that Tina was able to spend much time down

there when everybody believed she was taking long walks around the estate, but *three* people cannot just disappear for days at a time. It is surely inevitable that others will notice.”

“Yes, I know,” admitted Scarlet, “That point had occurred to me too – but I believe there’s a way to deal with it. I’ll need to have a word with Tina about how we should proceed – and I’ll speak to her about that before dinner tonight – but I think she’ll agree.”

He glanced at the clock, then rose to his feet. “Good work, Rodica. Let’s meet in the dining room in about an hour from now, shall we... ouch!”

Almond looked at him with concern. “Is something the matter, Captain Scarlet?”

Scarlet shook his head. “It’s nothing, Lieutenant – just a twinge in my back, that’s all. Probably been sitting down too long. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Of course, Captain.”

Almond quit the study, stopping briefly at the door to pick up the cases. Scarlet waited until she was out of the room, and then twisted his body round to enable him to rub his back, upon which he could still feel the marks left by Tina’s fingernails. Never mind, he thought... his enhanced powers of recuperation would deal with *that* problem soon enough. He smiled to himself wistfully – rather a shame really...

44 Captain Metcalfe Makes a Request of Colonel Creighton

“I think we are all but finished, so shall we conclude with some tea in the drawing room? Darjeeling is my own favourite, and Mrs Herrick therefore has standing instructions that we should maintain a stock, though we also have Bohea, Assam and Masala Chai – and there may well be others also. Cassandra – would you ascertain everyone’s preferences, please?”

“Of course, Papa.” Cassandra rose from the table to ring the bell, then started to solicit requests while her father resumed his earlier conversation.

“Was this your first visit to London, Miss Almond? I had never thought to ask before, but your accent has a Germanic quality to my ears – I therefore wonder if this is perhaps your first visit to England?”

“I am Transylvanian Saxon from Brasov, Colonel Creighton,” replied Lieutenant Almond proudly, “but it is many years since I last visit my country – and since then I have come to England several times. Also this is not my first visit to London – but it is very different to the London I remember from the last time I was there! If I compare them, I think I prefer the London I see now. It is less smoky, and I do not fear to be run down by the traffic so much.”

Creighton raised his eyebrow. “Indeed? I’d thought it to have become *less* desirable since I was last in town – there are horses and carriages everywhere these days – but I dare say it depends on the neighbourhood, eh?”

He glanced up as Cassandra dismissed the maid after a whispered conversation at the other end of the table. “Is there a problem with the tea, Cassandra?”

“The most trivial of problems only, Papa,” replied Cassandra. “I understand that Mrs Herrick cannot find the blue teapot, and therefore asks that she may use the grey service instead of the blue. I have told her that we shall not complain provided the tea is served directly, regardless of the colour of the service used to deliver it.”

Creighton grunted as he reached for a napkin. “No matter, though I always preferred the blue. It was your mother’s favourite, so if one of those maids has broken it I shall be most displeased. Captain Metcalfe – will you join me for a game of backgammon after dinner?”

Scarlet looked up. “I’m sorry? Oh... yes, certainly. You might need to remind me of the rules, Colonel – it’s a long time since I last played.”

“Oh, they’re simple enough, Captain – and easily learned. These days I shy away from any game of such complexity as to interest Miss Palamac over there, for I swear she is far too good at them all – is that not so, Miss Palamac?”

“I merely apply the rules to best advantage, Colonel,” replied Tina. “I have observed that some of your guests here – in particular the male ones – approach a game as if playing it were merely a social formality. Yet they still complain when they lose – as they inevitably do –especially if they lose to *me*. It is a conundrum I have yet to unravel.”

“It is because they *are* treating it as a social formality,” remarked Cassandra tartly. “They expect a woman to lose gracefully so they can revel in their own innate male superiority – and then they get

upset because they don't get an opportunity to enjoy her simpering and fawning over them when they win. That is what Mary has said in my correspondence with her – and I believe she is right.”

“Mary but voices the sentiments of her parents,” grumbled her father. “Even at fourteen, that Godwin girl is too precocious for her age. She'll change her tune before she's of an age to marry, you may mark my words. I *do* wish you would stop exchanging letters with her, Cassandra – that family finds fault in everything.”

“Her family is merely *interested* in everything, Papa,” protested Cassandra. “Mary was enthralled to hear of Rodica's wonderful recovery after the shooting, and the part played in it by Cousin Michael and Tina – she said so.”

“Well... that the tale should rightfully enthrall anyone who hears it is indisputable,” agreed her father. “I had thought your journey up to town was perhaps too soon, Miss Almond, but I evidently underrated your powers of recovery – for they are formidable indeed.”

“Did you observe Rodica returning from London this afternoon, Papa? I lent her Mama's green velvet travelling dress as you suggested, and she wore it when calling upon Cousin Michael in town. I thought it made her look very fine.”

“Aye... I saw her arrive from my window; she wears it well,” remarked Colonel Creighton approvingly. “And speaking for myself, Cassandra, I was glad to see it in the light of day once more. It was your mother's favourite, and I cannot doubt she would have approved, for she was never one for such sentimentality as would see it consigned to a dusky wardrobe for the rest of its days. If you would like to have it, Miss Almond, it is yours.”

Lieutenant Almond's eyes opened wide. “But it is surely most expensive... This is far too generous – I could not accept it!”

Creighton brushed the protest aside with a wave of his hand. “Nonsense, Miss Almond – it is demonstrably your very size, and who else is there among us to do it justice? I will ask but one favour in return – that you wear it when you next accompany me on a walk about the grounds. Tomorrow maybe, or perhaps the day after?”

“Forgive me, Colonel,” chipped in Scarlet quickly, “I'm afraid Miss Almond is likely to be indisposed for the next two or three days. Do you recall the large bags with which she returned? They contain some chemical samples that I asked her to collect for me while she was in town – and I find myself in need of her help in the preparation of them, for they will not keep long.”

The colonel raised an eyebrow. “*Chemicals*, Captain Metcalfe?” He turned to address the lieutenant directly. “I fancied you would return with something a little less serious, my dear! Is everyone who passes through these grounds engaged in some research or other?”

“Miss Almond and I spent some time with Mr Faraday during his recent stay here,” continued Scarlet, keen to press the advantage. “His enthusiasm for his work is infectious; indeed, Rodica's journey up to town was prompted in part by our discussions. But now we need a little secluded space somewhere that we can turn into a temporary laboratory – and we were wondering, might we borrow that little cellar down the steps from the entrance hallway for the purpose?”

Colonel Creighton pulled a face. “What – *that* shabby little den? I'll not hear of it, Captain – why, we can instruct Carey to clear some space within the house...”

“I’m afraid these chemicals could potentially be somewhat odorous when mixed, Colonel,” interrupted Scarlet apologetically. “Better that we take ourselves far away from other people, I think. I took a brief look down there earlier today, and concluded that it would suit us admirably.”

The colonel shrugged resignedly. “As you wish, Captain – but if you find it insufficiently suited to your requirements, be sure to let me know. Alternative quarters can be certainly made available to you, should you require them.”

“Excellent, Colonel – *many* thanks, on behalf of both of us. Tina – you also expressed an interest in Mr Faraday’s work, as I recall. Perhaps you would like to pay us a visit down there at some time or other?”

“I would very much,” replied Tina promptly. “I shall make a point of doing so. Thank you for the invitation, Captain Metcalfe.”

Colonel Creighton rose from the table. “Let’s move to the drawing room while the table is cleared, shall we? Carey can bring the tea to us there... and Cassandra, will you play for us? And let’s look to that game of backgammon, Captain.”

Scarlet raised a hand. “Perhaps Tina, Rodica and I might join you shortly, Colonel? I’d like to take just a few moments to plan the first of our experiments tomorrow, and this seems a good opportunity. We’ll not keep you waiting long.”

“Of course, Captain – Cassandra can set up her music, and I’ll find our table.”

Scarlet waited until Cassandra and her father had left the room, and then quietly closed the door behind them.

“Well played, everyone... I think we’ve covered all the bases – or at least as many as we can under the circumstances. It goes without saying that the colonel thinks we’re being ridiculous not to take up his offer to find us somewhere more spacious, but that can’t be helped. Perhaps we could also generate some pungent but harmless fumes by the staircase to dissuade anyone entering the cellar while we’re working down here – would *that* be feasible?”

“I don’t need sophisticated analytical equipment to be able to assemble the constituents of a crude stink bomb, Captain,” observed Lieutenant Almond wryly, “although having access to it would probably speed up the process. Given the range of compounds I brought back from London, the creation of an unpleasant smell should be well within our capabilities.”

Scarlet nodded approvingly. “Good... make that one of your first priorities, though please don’t make it *too* strong, Lieutenant – we’ll have to live with it too.”

He leaned back in his chair thoughtfully. “We may need to be able to get in touch with one another quickly when we’re not all together, either up here in the house or down in the cellar. Tina - Lieutenant Almond and I used to have personal communicators built into our uniforms, but you told us you acquired them from Carey to put them through a chemical analysis shortly after the shootings. Do the uniforms still exist?”

Tina shook her head. “The chemical analysis rendered the uniforms unwearable, but the electronic components were removed beforehand for an evaluation of their circuitry. Your communicators and transponders should therefore still be functional, and are at present located in a drawer beneath one of the consoles in the operations room. If we replicate one of each and patch them both into your frequencies, that should enable all three of us to communicate with and locate one another at all times.”

“Would that not require a terrestrial or orbital repeater network?” asked Almond, frowning. “There are no such facilities in this era, for they have not yet been invented...”

“Not a problem, Lieutenant,” reassured Scarlet. “Those devices are powerful enough to talk to one another directly within a twenty-kilometre radius without needing to access Spectrum’s global communications network – and even if they weren’t, we could easily rig up a local area network to cover the house.”

He leaned forward and glanced round the table. “Basic security precautions, then. We all need to make sure nobody *sees* us descending that spiral staircase – because it wouldn’t do for anyone to follow one of us down there, only to discover when they reached the bottom that the cellar was apparently empty. The sensor by the staircase will warn us if we have any unwanted visitors while we’re working on the other side of the hologram, so we shouldn’t need to worry about being seen leaving the operations room. We’ll also set up some makeshift tables in the passageway in front of the hologram and put some bottles on them, just in case anyone *does* get nosy and comes down – and in any event we’ll probably find it useful to have some extra storage space outside the concealed chamber.”

He tapped the table smartly with his fingertips. “Can anyone think of anything else?”

Tina looked up. “Cassandra, Captain. Her younger brother can be ordered to stay away – and he will most likely do so if a device such as the lieutenant’s proposed olfactory deterrent is suitably noxious, but Cassandra is both curious and headstrong by nature. As of this moment she still retains the memory of the ship and the sequence of events that took place in it and afterwards, even though we know she will not speak about them to anyone. With all three of us occupied in this exercise, it is inevitable that she will want to know what we are doing.”

Scarlet hesitated a second, acutely mindful of a recent conversation he had with the object of their deliberations, but conscious also that there was no way to avoid what he was about to propose. He leaned forward in his chair.

“We can wipe her memory, right? So why don’t we do just that?”

“I don’t believe such an action would solve the problem,” replied Tina. “She is young and impetuous, and we are her companions – and she feels that bond very strongly. Deleting her memory of recent events would not affect her perceived relationship with us; it would merely deprive her of any logical basis with which to frame her actions. She would become confused and dispirited at what she would regard as her unwarranted exclusion – which itself could be dangerous both to us and to herself.”

“Lieutenant Almond – what do you think?”

“I concur, Captain,” replied Almond. “If *your* friends were engaged in a mysterious exercise about which for some inexplicable reason you could remember nothing, would *you* not insist on being included in that adventure? I believe Tina is correct: merely erasing her recent memory would cause more problems than it solves.”

“All right then... could we use the neurosynch simply to give her an order not to enter the cellar? Or make her afraid to do so?”

Tina shook her head. “Again no, Captain. She can both be given information and instructed not to reveal that information to other people, but the device will not modify her innate personality traits. If she wants to find out what we are doing down there, she will do so – and since Colonel Creighton knows precisely where we can be found, we cannot conceal the same information from her. If

matters were not so pressing, I'd have recommended that Lieutenant Almond engage her in another pursuit for as much of the duration of the exercise as possible, even though that would leave us short-handed – but time is short, and we need the lieutenant's skills here. I admit I don't have a solution.”

“Well... in that case I *do* have a solution – even if it *has* been arrived at only by a process of elimination,” replied Scarlet after a few seconds' silence. “If we can't dissuade or prevent her by any other means... we'll bring her along for the ride.”

45 Cassandra is Invited to Visit the Operations Room

The grandfather clock in the entrance hall was just striking ten o'clock in the morning when Lieutenant Almond helped Cassandra step off the bottom rungs of the little staircase and onto the stone floor of the wine cellar. The daylight filtering down from the top of the staircase was just sufficient to preclude the need for a candle or a lamp, and they made their way slowly to the other end of the dark passageway. Cassandra watched in rapt fascination as the lieutenant stretched out her arm towards the side wall, then took a sharp intake of breath as her hand passed through it into the brickwork to activate the concealed control. Opening her mouth to ask how the trick was performed, the words died in her throat as the bricked-up end of the passageway dissolved in front of her eyes, and Almond gently took her hand to lead her forward, utterly entranced, into the alcove beyond.

Scarlet glanced up from one of the consoles as they entered, and raised his hand in a friendly wave. "Hello Cassandra – I'm glad you could join us... you'll recognise the room, of course, but obviously the hologram wasn't enabled when you were last down here: if it had been, you'd never have found the tunnel. It's an impressive piece of technology, I'll admit – even in *our* future we don't have anything quite like it. Do come on in – it's a little cramped in here right now with all of Rodica's samples scattered about the place, but I think we can manage. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Cassandra opened her mouth to speak once more, paused, and then closed it again before stepping over to the blue porcelain teapot perched precariously on top of one of the consoles. Conspicuously less bemused by the bank of computer consoles than by the teapot, she reached over to touch the black interface cable that connected the base of it to a small socket in the side of the console.

"This... is this not the teapot that Mrs Herrick could not find in the scullery earlier in the week?"

"Er... well, actually yes, it is," admitted Scarlet guiltily. "We didn't anticipate that she would miss it at the time, so we... we borrowed it. We're *very* sorry about the hole we melted through the base to install the power cable, but naked flames are rather dangerous down here because of all the chemicals, so we're running it directly from the console instead. The tea tastes the same though – would you like some Darjeeling? I'm just about to brew myself a cup."

Cassandra shook her head slowly, her eyes still staring in stupefied bemusement at the technological lash-up in front of her on top of the console. "Thank you, Captain, but it is a little early in the day for me..."

She stopped in mid-sentence and peered in bemusement at the activity just beyond the last of the consoles in the direction of the staircase.

"Captain Metcalfe... there is what appears to be a little toy soldier engaged in the cementing of a brick into a half-built wall over there – in front of where the *other* wall was before it disappeared a few moments ago."

"Yes," agreed Scarlet as he poured his cup of tea, "that *is* what it's doing."

Cassandra waited a further five seconds before raising a modest eyebrow. "Er... may one ask why?"

"Oh... sorry! Yes, of course."

Scarlet put down the cup, and led her over to a long rectangular alcove in the side of the original cellar wall, into which an assortment of fairly regularly-shaped stones and rocks had been piled.

“We used Tina’s toys to mine a lot of useful stones from this section of the wall to start the new one. It’s been useful as an open-plan store cupboard ever since, initially for the chemical samples that Rodica brought back from London, and now for any regularly-shaped pieces of masonry that we want to avoid tripping over until the time they’re needed.”

Stooping down, he picked up a sizable rock from one of the piles, lifted it out of the alcove and carried it over to the half-built wall, then placed it in position next to the one that the toy was cementing into place. Reaching forward, he picked up the small toy and relocated it next to the newly-positioned rock, then stood back as it projected a tiny blue incandescent ray into the gap between the rock and the top of the wall upon which it had just been placed. As he and Cassandra watched, the underside of the rock began to bubble and froth, before dissolving into a boiling amorphous paste that began to drip down into the crevices beneath.

“Tina tells me this process renders any other substance capable of cementing stonework together obsolete,” remarked Scarlet conversationally. “The end result will apparently be as solid and as durable as the rock itself – so we won’t need to worry about it collapsing or crumbling in years to come. Let’s go and sit down, Cassandra – and I’ll explain what this is all about.”

He led her over to two of the ship’s executive chairs, and Cassandra promptly seated herself down, giving the chair a gentle push as she did so. Scarlet waited until she had enjoyed a couple of rotations before reaching out and bringing it to a stop once more.

“Cassandra – the ‘wall’ you saw disappear a few moments ago wasn’t real. It was an illusion, like a conjuring trick: Tina created it shortly after she arrived here to prevent anyone from discovering the entrance to the tunnel. But the device on board the ship that we didn’t shut down a few days ago has now developed a fault – and because of that fault, it constitutes an increasing danger to the house and to everyone in it. We’re using the chemicals that Rodica brought back from London to try to make it safe again, but we still can’t allow the ship to be discovered: it’s quite simply too dangerous to allow anyone who doesn’t understand its capabilities to tamper with it. So we’re now building a *real* wall in front of the tunnel entrance – both to protect the house and to prevent anyone from ever finding the tunnel. *That* is the reason we’re here now, and that is what we’re doing.”

“As once before, I find myself strangely unsurprised by what you are telling me,” replied Cassandra with a frown. “It is... it is as if you are relating to me the contents of a dream – a dream from which I have now awoken and which I had already half-forgotten. I cannot doubt the truth of it – and yet there is another voice within my mind that seeks to convince me that all of this is impossible! That will surely be in consequence of the action of the neurosynch, will it not?”

“It is,” agreed Scarlet. “Tina tells me that it has never been used on a subject with so little familiarity with concepts that are taken for granted by the source of the memory transfer – which in this case was Tina herself. That’s not surprising under the circumstances, given that she has a working knowledge of 250 years of technology that you don’t! Your experience is something of a first, Cassandra.”

“There appears to be an oblong hole in the wall, presumably to enable a door to be inserted there, Captain,” observed Cassandra. “If one of the purposes of the wall is to conceal the ship, might the creation of a door within it not be somewhat irrational?”

“I asked Tina that question myself,” replied Scarlet with a grin, “and she conceded that the objection was a fair one. Nevertheless, her reason for incorporating it was very persuasive: she reminded me that once the wall has been completed, we still have to be able to get out.”

He led her over to the gap in the wall. “Tina’s designed a way to prevent the door from being opened – or even discovered, for that matter – by anybody who isn’t *exceptionally* clever. What she calls a holographic force-field envelope will make even the existence of the door almost impossible to detect from the cellar by blending it into the surrounding wall - and even then, there’s a code that needs to be cracked before it can be opened. Once that door is closed, only Tina herself could re-open it – and even *she* would need access to computing power of a kind that would stretch even the technology of *our* era to the limit. The plan is that anyone with *that* level of knowledge would understand the danger that the equipment aboard the ship presented, and would be able to take the necessary steps to make it safe.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Cassandra wanted to know.

“We had no choice,” replied Scarlet simply. “We couldn’t explain the absence of all three of us from the house for the time we would need, so we agreed that we’d bring you down here to show you what we’re doing. We know you won’t betray our trust, and we need you to protect us from prying eyes until this is all over. You can help us by preventing your father and brother from interrupting our work, and by telling the other members of the household to stay away from here – because what we’re doing is very dangerous. Will you do that for us, Cassandra?”

“You know I will, Captain,” she replied quietly.

“Yes, I do,” acknowledged Scarlet. “But now, it’s probably best that you go back to the house. Too many people vanishing all at the same time will inevitably cause questions to be raised upstairs, so one or perhaps two of us will take short breaks as the workload ebbs and flows – during which we’ll support anything you have said about what we’re doing. We’ll also make a point of letting you know by early afternoon which of us will be able to attend dinner in the evenings: as the work proceeds it will become increasingly difficult for more than one of us to be away from the cellar at any one time. And... Cassandra?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Thank you – from all of us.”

She acknowledged the expression of gratitude with a demure smile and a graceful inclination of her head, and then took her leave, pausing briefly to touch the top of the half-built wall on her way out.

Scarlet watched her leave, and then walked slowly over to Tina’s console. She looked up as he approached, watching Cassandra ascending the little staircase in the distance.

“People skills, Captain Scarlet?”

“Just oiling the wheels a little,” agreed Scarlet. “From my experience of managing teams in the past, I’d say her association with us has begun to affect the way she thinks... and one consequence of that is that she’s becoming just a little bit more difficult to read.” A ghost of a smile flickered across his lips. “She’s becoming more like *you*, Tina.”

Tina considered the observation without emotion. “It is incumbent upon every diligent pupil in Japan to strive to surpass their teacher. In which case, bearing in mind your own perception of me and my mission here, it might be pertinent to ask whether you doubt her trustworthiness. Do you?”

Scarlet shook his head. “No – she’s made us a promise, and I’m satisfied she won’t break it. But her commitment to us is contingent upon *our* commitment to *her*. She will give us everything *we* want provided we give her everything *she* wants.”

“And... is that a problem, Captain?”

Scarlet hesitated. “She and I had a conversation a few days ago, Tina. Through no fault of her own, she’s been obliged to lead a life that she’s come to recognise as unfulfilling ever since her mother died several years ago. Since that time, raising her younger brother has been her only interest in life – but she’s only too aware that even *that* will soon be taken from her. I’m guessing that as the only son, *he* will inherit the estate – and she’ll have to be content with the usual prospect of marriage to some young man of means to secure her own future. From I’ve seen of her, that prospect doesn’t appear to interest her at all, though she probably would have come to accept it as inevitable in time.”

He paused for a moment before continuing, choosing his words carefully.

“But now our arrival here – and most especially *your* arrival – has opened her eyes to possibilities that she couldn’t possibly have imagined, and which she still doesn’t properly understand. What she *wants* is to be allowed to continue to enjoy this... this dazzling, incomprehensible world that we’ve inadvertently introduced her to. She simply can’t get enough of it – and to that end, she asked me to promise that I would intercede with you to ensure her memory would not be wiped when this is all over.”

“And *did* you promise to do that?”

“Yes, I did.”

Tina’s expression did not change. “I think we both know that it might not be possible for us to keep that promise, Captain.”

“Oh yes, I knew that quite literally as I was making it on behalf of both of us,” replied Scarlet. “Some pangs of conscience aside, that doesn’t unduly concern me, given that the ship must be concealed from prying eyes for as long as possible – which means that *nobody* of this era can be allowed to know of its existence. The long-term safety of millions of lives on this planet outweighs any personal commitments that might have been made to secure that safety – we both know that. What *does* concern me is that she *knows* we could break that promise at any time without any repercussions to ourselves – because right now she possesses an understanding equal to your own of the neurosynch and its capabilities. All of which adds up to the fact that she knows we can’t be trusted.”

“Then we had better make sure that if the time ever comes that the promise *must* be broken, she isn’t in a position to *cause* any repercussions, had we not?”

“Yes,” agreed Scarlet quietly. “Perhaps we should.”

46 Captain Metcalfe and Miss Almond Exchange Views

Lieutenant Almond peered around the door into the gloom of the library as the clock on the mantelpiece above the fire chimed midnight. The solitary candle in the room had been extinguished long since, and the few remaining glowing coals provided the only light as she entered, then padded noiselessly over to the armchair closest to the fire to enjoy a few moments of solitude before making her way to bed. Only when she had collapsed into the chair and was stretching herself out to savour the opulence of its upholstery did she realise she was not alone, as a tiny movement caught her eye from the chair on the other side of the fire. Its occupant rearranged his legs and raised his arms high into the air, suspending them motionless there for a few seconds before speaking.

“You too, Lieutenant? It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, Captain Scarlet – I feel I have been on my feet for a week! And yet it has been only since lunchtime: perhaps there is something in the air down there that does this. Cassandra feels it also, I think, for she left the cellar in the late afternoon and I have not seen her since, for she did not come to eat any supper. Tina I think feels neither the cold nor the damp: perhaps it is the Mysteron... what is the word I am looking for... *heritage*?”

Scarlet pulled a face. “If the Mysterons *have* a heritage, they didn’t leave any trace of it in *me*, Lieutenant: I feel the cold and damp as much as anyone. Maybe she’s just tougher than the rest of us. Or maybe just more cold-blooded...” He smiled to himself as if recalling a memory. “No, that’s not fair. Somehow I don’t think she’s more cold-blooded. ‘*Honi soit qui mal y pense*’, as the expression goes.”

She frowned at the phrase. “That is very strange French! Is it another language *like* French?”

“It’s mediaeval French. It means ‘*evil be to him that evil thinks*’... or to put it another way, having a dirty mind isn’t nice. It’s the motto of an ancient order of English chivalry called ‘The Order of the Garter’.

“What is a garter, please?”

Scarlet pointed to Lieutenant Almond’s leg. “It’s a narrow band of fabric that’s fastened around your leg just below the knee to keep stockings from slipping. Tina has one on her left leg under that long white morning-dress of hers.”

“But Tina does not *wear* stockings,” objected Almond.

“True,” agreed Scarlet. “It’s the holster for her synaptic distorter.”

“Oh! I have never seen her draw the distorter.”

“Neither have I,” muttered Scarlet.

Almond glanced at him questioningly, but even though Scarlet appeared not to notice the enquiring look, she nevertheless sensed that he might not be completely averse to opening up just a little about how he perceived their newly-found ally.

“You think very highly of her, do you not?”

Scarlet smiled an introspective smile. “She’s like nobody I’ve ever met before, Lieutenant. Most people you can characterize – and it gets easier the older you get – but she simply doesn’t fit into

any category I've ever come across. She's in a class of her own, in more respects than one. Something tells me I'm going to miss her very much when the time comes for all this to end."

"You have not told her, have you?"

It was more of a statement than a question, and Scarlet didn't bother to pretend not to understand. He merely shook his head.

"No, I haven't."

"Why not, Captain? You and I both already know how this will end – so why should she not know also? Would it not make it easier for *her* if she were to know what must happen?"

Scarlet regarded her silently for a moment, and then frowned.

"Are we *certain* that it must happen, Lieutenant? Suppose I'm *not* left frozen for over two and a half centuries in that cellar when all this is over. What would be the *consequences* of that? None of this would ever have happened, that's what. Without the discovery of my body in the cellar in the second half of the twenty-first century, you and I would never have been sent to Foxleyheath in 1810 in the first place. In Tina's more technologically advanced universe, her plan would have *succeeded* – and the slower-moving alternative future that *we* recognise would have been brought into being. Is that a problem to *us*? I don't think so."

Almond shook her head vigorously. "We have already discussed this, Captain Scarlet! Without *my* presence here, Mr Faraday might never have developed his interest in electricity beyond it being a mere curiosity to him – and that would threaten *our* future! You said this yourself."

"I know," sighed Scarlet. "But I *also* agreed with you during the same conversation that we couldn't seem to unravel the issues of cause-and-effect. They're like... what's that thing called? You know - two sides of a long strip of paper that's given a half-turn before being stuck back together, so there's really only one edge and only one side."

"Yes... a Möbius strip," agreed Almond. "And this analogy is a useful one, I think – for it illustrates very well the problem we face! We are like ants walking round and round the strip, first on the one side of the paper and then on the other, always wondering why we cannot ever find the end..."

"In which case," interrupted Scarlet sharply, "given that we *can't* solve this insane puzzle, why *shouldn't* we just do whatever we want, and just see what happens? Who's to say that what we do is right or wrong? Not us, surely! To use your own analogy, we're just a couple of ants..."

His voice trailed away, and he sat looking into the blackness at the last two or three dying embers in the fireplace, lost in thought for a few moments. Eventually he looked up once more.

"It's not an oversight, Lieutenant; I've thought about this a lot over the last few days. I haven't told her because if I do, I could be irrevocably sealing *all* our fates – Tina's, yours *and* mine – because all three of us will then strive to ensure that what is *supposed* to happen actually *does* happen. At least this way there's a chance that things might turn out differently. That's the way I see it, anyway."

"But, Captain Scarlet! Do we not have a duty to protect our own future?"

Scarlet regarded her speculatively. "Do we, Lieutenant? Who's to say that the future that *we* know is any better than Tina's? Or better than any other future that might emerge if this sequence of events plays out some other way that we haven't even considered? For all we know, *our* future – the one in which we're stretched to the limit trying to defend the planet against the Mysterons –

might be the nightmare scenario that should be avoided at all costs! How are *we* to know what might happen if...”

He frowned and stood up, his eyes attempting to pierce the coal-black darkness on the other side of the room. “Is that you, Tina?”

He took a couple of steps towards the door, then shook his head and returned to his chair.

“Sorry, Lieutenant... I told her when I left the cellar earlier this evening that I might stop by the library to read a little before going to bed, and I thought I heard the swish of a dress just now. Forget it: I must have been mistaken... probably just the curtains.”

He stifled a yawn and stretched once more. “Tomorrow’s the big day, so I’m guessing she’s double-checking everything before she calls it a night. When I left earlier she wasn’t satisfied with the integrity of some of the communications relays, so she could well be working on that now. I offered to stay and help, but she told me I’d just be in the way – and given the technological gap between her reality and ours, I can easily believe that. So I’m going to catch up on a few hours’ sleep now, Lieutenant – I suggest you do too, unless you intend to re-light the candle: you’re not going to get much reading done in here otherwise.”

Almond shook her head. “I shall do nothing more tonight, Captain Scarlet – I would be unable to *find* a book in here, let alone read it. Perhaps I shall see you at the breakfast table tomorrow morning?”

She rose out of her chair and paced slowly and carefully out of the room, stopping briefly at the door to raise her hand as she left. Scarlet took a deep breath, and then followed her out, closing the door as he did so. A full minute passed after the sound of his footsteps faded away down the corridor before the door opened quietly once more, and the young woman whose rustling skirt Scarlet had heard a few moments previously stepped quietly outside, then paused to stand in silent contemplation in the darkened corridor for a few moments before setting off after them in the direction of the bedrooms on the upper storey.

47 Cassandra Takes the Initiative in the Resolution of a Crisis

“Initiation of coolant deployment to commence in ten minutes... mark!”

Scarlet inspected the display for the third time, noting at least half a dozen discrepancies between what he had read on the previous two occasions and what he was seeing now.

“It’s not looking good, Tina – we need to do better than this. I’m no longer able to trust the waveform synchronisation data that’s being compiled by the ship’s online monitoring system – and without that, we won’t be able to time the transmission of the coolant formula to coincide with the start of the production cycle.”

“I’m aware of that, Captain,” replied Tina in a tone that was sufficiently unemotional as to trigger alarm bells inside Scarlet’s head. “I am also experiencing issues with the communications relay: if the data stream continues to fragment at the current rate, we could lose the means to transmit the formula at all. We could also lose the ability to maintain the ship’s distance from the house, as a communications break would sever the boarding tube’s deployment controls.”

She spun her chair round. “Lieutenant Almond – please double-check the carrier strength on the back-up frequency: we may need to switch channels at short notice.” The chair spun a second time. “Captain Scarlet – I require a data feed from the monitoring system directly to the replicator as soon as you can establish a link, please. I will program an automated transmission of the formula in the event of an estimated sixty percent likelihood of a terminal communications failure.”

Scarlet’s fingers flickered across the keyboard. “Data feed established. Tina – you should be able to access it from your console... now.”

Tina swivelled her chair back to face her screen, and rapidly typed in a short sequence of commands. “Link confirmed.”

Scarlet looked up as the hologram shielding the entrance to the alcove dissolved, and Cassandra entered the room. Cursing under his breath, he stood up and moved to intercept her.

“Cassandra – we have problems, and we’re busy trying to resolve them. You should leave the cellar and return to the house immediately: it isn’t safe in here right now.”

She looked back at him with an expression uncannily like Tina’s just a few moments before.

“Captain – I retain enough of Tina’s memories to know that if it is not safe here in the cellar, then it is no safer in the house. Please allow me to remain; I shall not interrupt your work or interfere in any way.”

Scarlet opened his mouth to protest, abruptly closed it again, and then nodded.

“All right, Cassandra – as you wish. But be aware that this situation is serious. If it looks as if it might deteriorate any further, I’ll *insist* that you leave – because I may need you to get everyone in the house *out* of it. Even if the ship itself isn’t destroyed, all the consoles in this room are fitted with their own power units – and between them they constitute enough combustible hardware to start a major fire. If I *do* order you to leave, you will do so immediately and without question – is that absolutely clear?”

“Perfectly, Captain.”

Scarlet turned back to his console. “Tina – I’m seeing a substantial phase shift on two channels, and it is widening as we speak. I believe we should abort this operation *now*.”

Tina shook her head. “Not possible, Captain. The coolant must be deployed before the projector overheats to the extent that we risk losing all communications with the ship – and that point will now be reached within the next nine hours. Shutting down the deployment sequence would take at least four of those hours, after which a complete recalibration would be required. We will *not* get another chance.”

She rapidly keyed in a sequence of commands, then turned to face him. “I am amending the coolant formula to attempt to minimize the risk of the losing the comms link at a critical stage of the transmiss...”

An insistent beeping suddenly erupted from the console, and she instantly swung back to face her monitor once more.

“I’m reading a container breach, Captain! The coolant is escaping into the interior of the ship: I’m trying to establish the rate as we speak...”

“Can we shut it down, Tina?”

“Negative. We must *increase* production of the coolant to compensate for the seepage away from the projector. There is however a strong likelihood that the coolant will shortly begin to seep into tunnel – and the panel at *this* end of the tunnel was not built to contain it...”

The commentary died away, and she typed furiously for several minutes before speaking again.

“The coolant has now started to enter the tunnel, Captain. The boarding tube deployment controls have shut down, and the tube is being slowly retracted back into the ship: this will in turn drag the ship closer to the house, increasing the danger further. We will need to withdraw to the other side of the wall before the coolant reaches the panel – but the formula must be modified and transmitted first. I’ve keyed in a series of amendments, but there appears to be a power overload building up in the communications relay which is preventing me from...”

The sentence was never finished, as a luminous arc lanced out of the keyboard and bathed both of her arms in a nightmarish purple glow for a second before dying away as quickly as it had appeared – by which time Tina was lying prone on the floor. Both Scarlet and Almond jumped out of their chairs and joined Cassandra, who had already run to her side, Scarlet feeling her neck while Almond held her wrist. Their eyes met briefly, then Almond ran back to her console while Scarlet took Cassandra’s hands and spoke to her urgently.

“She’s still breathing but she’s unconscious, Cassandra. You and I will move her away from the console, but you must look after her while Rodica and I try to complete this operation – do you understand? There’s no time for us to try to revive her, because if we fail within the next ten minutes, this room will be flooded with coolant – in which case we’ll be forced to abandon the operation... and you know what *that* means, yes?”

Cassandra nodded. “I understand, Captain – I will do what has to be done.”

Together they dragged Tina’s body to the back of the room, whereupon Scarlet left her lying in Cassandra’s arms and ran back to his console. “I’m going to try to reroute the data feed from Tina’s console to mine, Lieutenant – are you able to access her login details? My link to the server was severed when her console exploded... I can’t re-establish it without her password.”

Lieutenant Almond typed furiously for a few moments, then swore under her breath.

“I still have a functioning link, but this console believes she is still logged on, Captain Scarlet – and I do not have the necessary privileges to override her session! One moment... I will try to download the central registry settings to this console... *Ach!* I am now locked out! Can you invoke any executive privileges that will override the lockout and re-initialise the login sequence, Captain?”

Scarlet shook his head in mounting frustration. “No good... access to all administrator rights is protected by Tina’s password! This is hopeless, Lieutenant!”

He half-turned in his chair and called over his shoulder. “Cassandra – we have to evacuate this room immediately. I need you to get Tina out of here at *once* – drag her body into the outer cellar, then stay there until Almond and I can join you!”

He swung round in irritation in response to the silence that followed his order, only to see Cassandra walking purposefully towards him, and he stood up angrily to intercept her. “Cassandra – I just told you to get Tina *out!* This room is *not* a good place to be right now...”

“No, Captain... you are mistaken. For the sake of all of us – and everybody in the house, this room is the *only* place for me to be right now.”

She stepped lightly over to Lieutenant Almond’s console, motioned for Almond to vacate the chair, then dropped down into it herself. Flexing her hands, she reached forward and began to type rapidly at the keyboard, deliberately speaking abruptly and concisely as she did so.

“I have just rerouted control from Tina’s console and am amending the coolant formula in accordance with her revised computations now, Captain. Please return to your console and disable the automatic override that Tina requested earlier: I shall need to enter the corrections manually. When they have all been keyed in, I will require you to transmit the amended formula directly to the production sequencer. We will have to take our chances with the waveform alignment: I estimate approximately an evens chance that the ship’s onboard sequencer will be able to compensate.”

“But... what the *hell...*?”

“We have no time left, Captain,” she interrupted sharply without looking up. “There will *not* be a second chance, so please be ready. I need you at your console *now.*”

Not only were the words Tina’s, but so was the tone in which they were delivered. Scarlet blinked, then nodded abruptly and turned on his heel – to see Tina’s unconscious body still lying on the other side of the room, but now propped up awkwardly against the console housing the neurosynch, her dishevelled appearance suggestive of having just been dragged rapidly and very inelegantly across the floor. The silver skull cap lay discarded on the floor beside her, and Scarlet shook his head with a mental grin of admiration at Cassandra’s proactive attitude to problem-solving as the penny suddenly dropped. He sat himself down and disabled the automatic override, then checked the integrity of the data stream.

“Data stream integrity is at nominal, Cassandra – awaiting input now.”

“Final modifications are being entered now, Captain...” She continued to type rapidly for a few more seconds, then hit one last key and withdrew her hands from the keyboard.

“Done. The amended file has been forwarded to your console, Captain: please transmit it to the ship immediately.”

“File transmitted... no, wait... data stream integrity is breaking up, Cassandra – I’m unable to verify that it’s been sent, and we have no way to confirm receipt...”

“Acknowledged.” She swung round in her chair and stood up.

“Lieutenant Almond – I have just logged out: please log on and activate the secondary data transfer channel from your account immediately, then confirm carrier strength.”

Almond immediately sat down and began typing. “Secondary data transfer channel is online, Cassandra; carrier strength is sub-optimal but holding... Captain Scarlet, please would you... disregard that last; on my screen... transmitting... now!”

Scarlet waited a few seconds, then shook his head. “Nothing yet... are we certain it’s gone, Lieutenant?”

While waiting for a reply he shot another quick glance in Tina’s direction, and found himself marvelling at the speed with which Cassandra had managed to connect her to the neurosynch in the short time available: her skirt had evidently been torn during the manhandling, and her bare legs were scratched in several places – and for no reason he could put a finger on, he found himself slightly unsettled at the sight. A faint sound which heralded a screen update brought him back to the task in hand with a jolt; he digested the contents rapidly, and then grunted to himself.

“We’re beginning to receive incoming data from the ship, Lieutenant – which suggests the interference to the ship’s outward-bound communications is receding. And I’m guessing *that* would only happen if it’s working... would that be a reasonable assumption?”

“It is encouraging,” agreed Lieutenant Almond cautiously. “One moment, please...”

She turned to face her console once more and continued to type for a few more minutes. After a few moments she looked up. “A temperature reduction of two hundred degrees is confirmed, and it is continuing to drop as we speak. If the replicators continue to function, the ship should now be out of danger; *however*, the damage already done by the overheated projector to the panel shielding this chamber is now considerable. Our sensors on the other side of the panel became inoperative just over fifteen minutes ago – and *they* are made of more durable material than the panel itself. I do not believe it will hold for more than a few minutes at most, Captain.”

Scarlet strode over to the panel and stretched out his hand... and then snatched it away with an oath. “I’d say you’re absolutely right, Lieutenant! Can you recommend any corrective action *whatsoever* that we might be able to take?”

Lieutenant Almond shook her head. “I do not believe so, Captain – there is very little time left. We must evacuate this chamber and retreat to the other side of the wall.”

“That sounds like good advice to me! Lieutenant – take as much of the equipment as you can carry and get it out of here. Start with Tina’s sample case plus anything else we have by way of weaponry or cutting tools – we may need them to get back in again if this whole thing goes up – then the neurosynch if possible: dismantle it if necessary, but only if there’s time. Once Tina’s out of danger I’ll try to buy us a few more seconds if I can. Cassandra – you will leave the cellar *now*: that’s an order!”

He immediately left his chair and strode over to Tina’s body, scooped her up in his arms and threw her over his shoulder, then headed for the spiral staircase. At the base he stopped and turned in anticipation of telling Cassandra to climb up first, but she was nowhere to be seen. Mildly irritated at her absence, he began his own ascent with Tina over his shoulder, striving to minimize the

inevitable collisions of her body with the protective spiral handrail as they rose into the corridor above. As he laid her down on the ground her eyes opened falteringly, and she reached up and clutched urgently at his head, pulling it down to her own as her lips quivered. Suddenly realising she was trying to speak, he stopped trying to disentangle himself from her grip and leaned forward to listen. The words came falteringly and slowly as she drifted in and out of consciousness, trying all the time to focus on his features as she spoke.

“Touched... her mind... touched *my* mind... Captain... it is... she *knows!*... must stop her... you must...”

Her body went limp in his arms and her head fell back, her eyes beginning to lose their focus. Scarlet hurriedly laid her down on the tiles once more and frantically started feeling for a pulse, but before he could find any sign of life, a sound behind made him turn back to the staircase, where Cassandra was just stepping away from the top of it. Breathing a sigh of relief, he beckoned her over to him.

“Cassandra – come here quickly! Tina's been badly injured by whatever it was that knocked her out down there – I've no idea how serious it is – and I have to go back for Rodica. Do everything you can for her while I'm down there, will you?”

“Do not concern yourself, Captain! I will attend to her – but please hurry back to Rodica, for all was in confusion when I left her. She told me to tell you there may be very little time.” The tone of Cassandra's voice was even more forced now than it had been while she was directing the operation to deploy the coolant, and Scarlet found himself struggling to identify the emotions she was all too obviously trying to conceal. Almost as if she sensed that he was trying to read her, she ran away from him to crouch down with her back to him beside her unconscious friend, spreading her dress under her head to protect it from the stone slabs.

Scarlet ran back to the little staircase and hurried down the steps into the cellar once more. The equipment housing the neurosynch was gathered together with an assortment of associated peripherals in a neat pile at the end of the passageway in front of the newly-built wall. At its base he could see Tina's sample case, but of Lieutenant Almond there was no sign. He ran on into the chamber to look for her there, but found it empty also. One glance at the panel covering the entrance to the tunnel was enough to tell him that the little time remaining was almost used up: the panel was now cracked and bubbling, and fragments of it were starting to peel away and fall to the floor.

“Rodica – where are you? We need to get out of here...”

Suddenly aware that he was not alone he turned on his heel, expecting to find her there – but saw instead to his astonishment Cassandra walking slowly towards him.

“Cassandra? What are *you* doing back down here again? Where's Rodica?”

“Rodica is no longer here, Captain – she is in the library. I sent her to look for you there, then followed her and rendered her senseless with Tina's device.”

“You did *what?* Cassandra – what the *hell* is going on...!”

His voice died away as he saw the synaptic distorter in her hand. A bell chimed belatedly in his head as he suddenly realised what it was about the sight of Tina's bare legs a few moments earlier that had made him uneasy – the brooch had no longer been strapped to her calf. Even as everything came together, he realised that if there was any way the situation could be retrieved, it would need to be achieved by means of some exceptionally persuasive arguments presented *very* quickly...

48 Cassandra Seeks to Secure her Destiny by Forceful Means

“Cassandra... we don’t have *time* for this! Please put that thing down – we can talk about it on the *other* side of that door...”

Cassandra shook her head with unfeigned sorrow, and her eyes filled with tears. Looking at her closely, Scarlet could see that she was quivering with emotion as the tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

“No, Captain – that will *not* be possible! Rodica had already moved the neurosynch into the corridor outside this room before I sent her away to safety, and Tina will recover soon enough. Even if the mechanism was damaged as it was moved, she would be able to repair it. I am already sensible of her proficiency in the arts of warfare, and I cannot doubt that both you and Rodica also possess such skills. In a struggle with any one of you, I would be powerless.”

“What are you *talking* about, Cassandra? Why on earth would *any* of us want to...”

“I *beg* of you – do not attempt to deceive me! I have come to know you as my friend, and I wish always to remember you so – but I am in possession of Tina’s memories, Captain! You spoke with her about my knowledge of the ship and its contents – your words are here within my mind: I know of them and their portent as surely as does she... and as you do yourself. You intend to break your promise – you cannot deny it!”

“It’s for your own *good*, Cassandra! If you know Tina’s thoughts, you must also know how dangerous that ship is! In the wrong hands it could destroy the world – you *know* this!”

“I *do*, Captain! But in what manner of world would you have me live? Having glimpsed the future I desire, I know that I *cannot* live as I have before... for I would sooner die! I will *not* allow anyone to take it from me!”

She rotated the dial on the underside of the distorter to its maximum setting, and slowly tightened her fingers the dragon’s tail.

“Cassandra – *wait!* If you value your own life so much, can you value the lives of others so *little*? Even if you get rid of me, how are you going to explain your actions to Rodica and Tina afterwards? Do you honestly believe *they* will see things your way? Or do you intend to kill them too?”

“You know already that I do not bring you death, Captain – for although you yourself have not spoken of it, I know that you *cannot* be killed. You will but sleep, even if that sleep be of a hundred or even a thousand years! As to my dear friends, I will never harm them so long as I live, Captain – this I swear to you now, for I love them as the sisters that I know they will be to me in the years to come. And I know also that they will accept the path I have chosen.”

Tears were streaming down both of her cheeks, and her words came in choked gasps – but the distorter’s aim never wavered for an instant.

“It was the rustle of *my* dress that you heard in the library when you spoke with Rodica, Captain! I heard your voices as I walked past on my way to bed. I entered the room while you and she were talking together, and I listened in the darkness... I heard you speak of your fate, which is to lie asleep within the cellar for two and a half centuries, enshrouded by the coolant. You spoke also of

your desire to *cheat* that fate – to remain here, whereupon you would surely take my own dear friend from me...”

“Cassandra – this is *insanity!* I would *never* take Tina away from you – she cares for you deeply and truly...”

“As I do for her, Captain! She is *everything* to me, and yet I would still lose her! This is most assuredly true – for when our minds touched in the machine, I came to know what you and she did together when you were both afflicted by the intoxicating fumes of the manufactured gas, here on the cold stone floor of this very chamber when you were alone...”

She struggled to fight back her tears as she tried in vain to purge the terrifying imagery from her mind. “Do you not understand? Perhaps you cannot – for although you have possessed her body, I have touched her *soul*... and from this I know that were you to remain here, she would have come to love you with a passion you could not begin to *comprehend*...”

She took a deep breath. “You cannot be allowed to cheat your fate, Captain Scarlet... for were you to do so, you would surely cheat me of mine! Farewell – and sleep long!”

Sobbing uncontrollably, she shot him down at point-blank range, uttering a shriek of horror as his body was hurled violently across the room, coming to rest in a tangled heap up at the base of one of the consoles. Then steeling herself with an effort, she reached down to take his wrists in her hands, and slowly dragged his body over to the little alcove at the side of the chamber. Throwing out the few stones that remained within it, she then laid him out on the slab at its base. Taking a step back, she wiped away her tears with her sleeve, and then regarded him for a few seconds in silence before stepping forward one last time to take his head gently in her hands and kiss him on the lips.

Raising her head from his, she dried her tears once more, lifted the hem of her skirt and slipped the distorter into its makeshift holster around her calf. Looking quickly around the room, she picked up the tiny model tank and carried it to the doorway, adjusting its settings as she did so. Upon reaching the door, she turned, trained its turret on the rapidly disintegrating panel covering the entrance to the tunnel, and fired. What little was left of the panel dissolved instantly into a puddle of molten polymers on the floor, allowing a pall of dense luminescent blue fog to begin flowing slowly but inexorably into the chamber. It began to engulf first the remaining consoles, and then the alcove in which she had placed Scarlet’s body, and she watched quietly as it was parted from her sight for the last time. Only then did she quit the chamber herself, pulling the door closed shut behind her and listening for the clicks of the bolts as she left. Facing the door, she contemplated it in silence for a few moments, noting the intricacy with which the false stonework covering it blended into the surrounding fabricated rockface.

Fighting to prevent her emotions from overwhelming her ability to think clearly, she next stepped over to the console housing the neurosynch. She spent the next few minutes gathering together the assortment of portable devices that Lieutenant Almond had earlier removed from the operations room and piled up around it, and moved them all as far away from the console as she could. Finally, she picked up Tina’s sample case from its position on the floor close to the console, and added it to the new pile.

Satisfied that she had salvaged as much of the technology as she could, she then moved to a position as far away from the console as she could find, raised the toy cannon once more, trained its turret on the console and fired. The console instantly disintegrated in a coruscating explosion of flames which showered the room in shards of glass and melting circuitry, and she shielded her eyes until

the flying embers had all fallen to the floor. Only when she was satisfied that the device was destroyed beyond any possibility of repair did the emotion become too much for her, and she collapsed, weeping hysterically, onto the floor.

How long she lay there, huddled and shivering, she would never know – and yet after a time she slowly became conscious that she was not alone. Looking up, her eyes met those of her friend, who was standing quietly at the foot of the ladder, contemplating her with expressionless eyes. Slowly and unsteadily rising to her feet, she forced herself to walk the few steps separating them before collapsing once more into Tina’s arms.

“Tina – help me please! Help me... *please!* Oh, Tina - what have I *done?*”

Tina cradled her gently, stroking her hair. “Hush, Cassandra... be at peace, little one. It’s over now. You have but done what you *had* to do... what you were *destined* to do. You have saved the world.”

She drew Cassandra closer to her, and waited in silence for her shivering to subside a little before speaking once more.

“More than that... you have saved *two* worlds – you have saved *his* world, and you have also saved mine. Now you and I must go forward together, and *create* those worlds.”

She gripped the sobbing girl closely around her waist and dragged her to the spiral staircase, motioned for her to ascend, and then followed her up to the top. Taking her arm, she then guided her down the passageway into the entrance hall and towards the stairs, but Cassandra held back.

“We must attend to Rodica; she is lying insensible on the sofa in the library, and must be carried to her bed.”

Tina surreptitiously reached down and lightly touched her leg through her dress, but made no allusion to the missing weapon. “Then I shall carry her to her room, if you will open the door for me.”

Cassandra shot her a penetrating glance, but with Tina having not asked the obvious question concerning the *reason* for Lieutenant Almond’s incapacitation, she found herself at a loss as to how to respond – and found the silence increasingly oppressive as Tina lifted the unconscious lieutenant up in her arms and carried her up the stairs towards her bedroom. By the time they had reached her room, she could bear her guilt in silence no longer.

“I would *never* knowingly hurt her, Tina! You must *know* that I would never knowingly hurt her! I used the lowest possible setting... there was no other way! She would have stopped me – you cannot *doubt* that she would!”

“Yes, I know.” Tina looked at her inscrutably, then reached out and gave her hand a little squeeze. “You don’t need to justify your actions to me, Cassandra. I *do* understand... perhaps more than you think.”

Upon entering her room, they laid Lieutenant Almond down in her bed and pulled the sheets over her, then silently quit the room and continued towards Cassandra’s room. Upon arriving, Tina pulled back the sheets of Cassandra’s bed and motioned her to crawl in between them. Her eyes still wet with tears and her body shivering with emotion, Cassandra did as she was bidden without protest, whereupon her head instantly sank deep into her pillow. She opened her mouth to speak, but Tina stopped her with a raised hand.

“Not now... you are exhausted, and you need to sleep. We will talk about all this tomorrow.”

She seated herself down by the side of the bed, and watched in silent contemplation as Cassandra drifted into unconsciousness, then waited a few more moments while her breathing became progressively deeper and more regular. Then lifting the bedclothes once more, she pulled Cassandra's skirt up above her knees and gently removed the synaptic distorter from its holster around her leg. Holding it close to the little oil lamp by the side of the bed, she deftly disengaged the trigger mechanism from the underside of the green brooch, and reconfigured several of its settings before placing it on the pillow beside Cassandra's head. Standing back, she waited a few moments more while the sleeping girl's alpha waves were reconfigured, then having satisfied herself that Cassandra would not wake for several more hours, she reassembled the trigger, dropped the distorter into her sleeve and quietly left the room.

49 Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Instigate a Plan

Suddenly conscious that she was not where she believed she ought to be, Lieutenant Almond's eyes snapped open. A split-second later she realised she was not alone, and she screwed up her eyes attempting to locate the intruder in the darkness. When the intruder spoke however, it was from a position directly behind her head.

"Please be calm, Lieutenant – you are in no danger. I have just neutralised the after-effects of the distorter and awoken you because I wish to talk to you."

"Tina! I... I was shot – she had the distorter... it was Cassandra! Cassandra had your distorter! Captain Scarlet – I must tell Captain Scarlet..."

"You cannot tell him, Lieutenant. I do not believe in delaying the imparting of serious news, and I will not do so now. Captain Scarlet's body has been sealed inside the operations room – and it must now remain there. Cassandra shot him in the knowledge that he would survive, and that he would be ultimately be restored to life once more in his own reality. He will awaken in your mid-twenty-first century – and you will not see him again. You must resign yourself to this."

Almond stared back at Tina in disbelief for a full five seconds before scrambling to sit bolt upright in bed.

"But *why*? Why did she *do* this? And why did she shoot *me*? Is she *insane*?"

"No, she is not insane," replied Tina, shaking her head. "She *is* however at this time both extremely confused and tortured with guilt. During the crisis in the operations room she took it upon herself to connect my unconscious body to the neurosynch to avail herself of my most recent experiences, to enable her to complete the tasks upon which I was engaged when I was incapacitated. In this matter she succeeded... but she *also* downloaded into her consciousness my recent personal and emotional experiences. One of those experiences lies outside of her understanding, and she cannot come to terms with it."

"But..." asked Almond hesitantly, "*why* cannot she understand an emotional experience?"

"Because," replied Tina evenly, "she has never loved a man."

There was a silence lasting several seconds, during which Almond's mouth opened and closed three times in rapid succession as the implications of Tina's simple statement hit home.

"She *has* however developed an exceptionally strong emotional bond with a *woman*," continued Tina, "and that woman is me. I believe she came to see Captain Scarlet as a rival, and with a level of ruthlessness which – most regrettably – she learned from me, she neutralized that threat adroitly and efficiently."

"But... we must put an *end* to this madness – and we must do it now! Captain Scarlet is not dead – he still lies in the cellar – we must go back and bring his body *out*! Cassandra must not be allowed to get away with this – it is not right that rivals in love should try to *kill* each other!"

"No, Rodica," replied Tina gently. "We cannot change what has been done – we *must* not change it. The captain did not discuss it with me before this happened, but I understand now that his being entombed in the cellar was always an integral component of this endless loop of cause and effect. If we interfere with this sequence of events now, we put the future of *two* realities at risk – both

mine *and* yours. I will not allow that to happen, regardless of the personal cost – either to you or to me. The mission must come first.”

Lieutenant Almond shook her head in baffled fury. “Do *you* not care, Tina? How *can* you not care after what you and he have done – does it mean so little to *you*?”

Tina’s eyes betrayed a hint of the intensity of what she was feeling for just a fraction of a second, and then it was gone.

“Do you suppose that just because I keep my emotions in check it means that I *have* none? Cassandra glimpsed my unshielded emotions when she connected herself to the neurosynch – and the situation in we now find ourselves is the result. Do *not* attempt to tell me this is a good thing, Rodica! Instead, put your *own* emotions aside and analyse the situation critically yourself. You cannot enter the chamber, for the coolant that now entombs Captain Scarlet would kill you instantly. You cannot be allowed to die here and now, because *you* will create the reality into which *I* was born... and from which *I* will return to this time and place to save *your* life. Our destinies are intertwined, Rodica: I now realise that in some strange way I do not understand, I sensed this the day I restarted your heart. You cannot now separate your destiny from mine without my assistance, which – even though it breaks my *own* heart to say it – I cannot give.”

Lieutenant Almond sat up silently in bed for a few minutes while Tina patiently awaited her response from the chair close by. She recognised she’d already come to accept the logic of Tina’s reasoning – indeed, she’d applied it herself when talking to Scarlet in the library just a few days previously. But she recognised also that accepting an abstract argument was a relatively easy task, whereas making herself an active party to its implementation required a substantially greater level of emotional commitment – and looking at Tina sitting quietly in the corner of the room, Almond realised that Tina already knew what was going through her mind, and she sighed.

“Even if I *do* agree to this, how are we to explain the disappearance of Captain Scarlet? He cannot just vanish without questions being asked! Cassandra might confess to killing him when questioned – but if so, his body must surely be produced! Even if she does not, she still knows where his body *is* – and could reveal the location of the concealed door while trying to lead others to it. These problems must be solved!”

“Not just those,” replied Tina. “After locking the captain’s body in the operations room, Cassandra destroyed the neurosynch to ensure that we could no longer wipe her memory – for even while taking extreme measures to safeguard her relationship with me, she still recognised that I would not hesitate to do precisely that. She also attempted to preserve as much of the other hardware as she could before destroying it: these devices are part of the future she has come to crave, and she does not intend to be deprived of them. This *cannot* be allowed to happen – the discovery of twenty-first century hardware in this era would cause a cataclysmic acceleration of technological progress that would threaten *both* our realities. I will take any steps whatsoever that might be necessary to ensure that does not happen.”

Almond looked at her sombrely. “You would be prepared to kill her?”

“If there were no other way,” replied Tina quietly. “However, I believe – and most sincerely hope – that there may *be* another way. It is likely to cause Cassandra considerable distress in the short term, but by destroying the neurosynch she has forced our hand – which brings me to the reason I came to your room and awakened you. I will require your help with this, Rodica... are you prepared to give it?”

“Yes,” replied Almond steadily after a long pause. “If this is the only way to ensure her life will be spared, I will help. What do you want me to do?”

“Please go back down to the cellar, where I shall meet you shortly. I need to return to my room to secure the distorter somewhere I know it cannot be found, after which I shall join you. There are just under three hours before sunrise, and the work we have to do is likely to occupy most of that time.”

50 Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Put Their Plan into Effect

The sound of a distant cock-crow was sufficient to awaken Colonel Creighton to the extent that he opened one eye, peered sleepily at the window and promptly closed it once more. The very much louder sound that followed it a few seconds later had a substantially more potent effect, resulting in his springing out of his bed and scanning the room for a weapon almost before his brain had processed the thought – and ten seconds after that he was out of the door and running for the stairs.

Halfway down, he almost collided with Carey who was running up them in a state of obvious panic. Reaching out, he grabbed her by the arm and swung her round to face him.

“Carey! What was that noise? What in God’s name has happened?”

“Sir, all’s commotion downstairs! There’s clouds of smoke and dust and flying plaster and all manner of stuff billowing all over the place – please come quick, sir!”

The colonel shook his head in bewilderment. “Are we on fire, then? No – surely more than a fire... I’ve not heard a blast like that for nigh on fifteen years – and *that* was on a battlefield! Has something been detonated down there? *Speak, girl!*”

“Aye, sir! An explosion – that’s what it is, sir – a terrible explosion! Down in the old cellar – there’s flames and all comin’ up from the...”

Instantly the blood drained from Creighton’s face. “Oh my God – surely this cannot be one of Metcalfe’s experiments with his chemicals? Quickly, Carey – tell me who is down there!”

The chambermaid waved her arms in panic. “I *dunno*, sir! I’ve only just learned of it meself – I came as quick as I...”

“Then we must find *out* who is down there, girl! At *once* – rouse the household! Go to all the bedrooms – awaken everyone, if they’re not already up! Bid them descend at once – I care not how they are dressed... or indeed *if* they are dressed – we must account for everyone as quickly as possible. Do it now!”

“Aye, sir! At once, sir!”

Carey scurried frantically away, and the colonel raced on down the stairs into the entrance hall, into which a pall of thick, black smoke was billowing out of the little corridor leading to the scullery. Snatching his handkerchief from out of his jacket pocket and holding it over his nose and mouth, he attempted to march onward into the corridor, only to be forced back a few seconds later by the acrid stench.

While still contemplating the feasibility of making a second sortie, he found himself pre-empted by the outline of a slightly-built young woman emerging from the smoke with a handkerchief held over her nose and mouth, her torn dress dishevelled and heavily soiled with soot, as was her face. Stumbling out of the smoke, she had fallen forward into Creighton’s arms almost before he was able to recognise her.

“Miss Almond! Thank God you are safe... what has happened – tell me at once!”

“The... ammonia and... the acetaldehyde... highly exothermic... we... we could not... could not... control the reaction...”

The colonel shook his head violently. “Miss Almond – never mind the chemicals! There are more pressing matters to which we need to attend: we must know *who* was in the cellar when the explosion occurred – do you understand? *Who* was down there?”

“Who... yes, who...” She continued to cough violently for a few moments longer while the colonel fidgeted anxiously.

“Captain... oh, God... the roof... could not... terrible...”

Her eyes opened wide, and she stared wildly at him for a few seconds. “The *roof*, Colonel! The roof has collapsed... it collapsed on top of them... no chance... no chance at all...”

She descended into semi-consciousness for a few seconds before the coughing spasm shook her back into wakefulness. Now slightly more lucid but clearly traumatised, she clutched at him desperately and again tried to focus her eyes on his face as she continued to relive the aftermath of the explosion.

“It was *terrible*... Cassandra...”

The colonel started, and shook her violently. “*What* of Cassandra? You *must* stay with us, Miss Almond – it is of *critical* importance! *What* of Cassandra?”

“Struck down... struck down by falling timbers... concussion... dragged to safety... Tina... saved her...”

“Miss Almond – RODICA!” The colonel shook her once more. “Are you saying that she is *safe*, Miss Almond? Is that what you are saying? *Please* answer me!”

“Safe... safe...” Lieutenant Almond’s voice faded away as she drifted into unconsciousness, and her body slumped in the colonel’s arms. Creighton gently lowered her to the ground, and then covered his face with his handkerchief once more and launched himself into the smoke-filled corridor with renewed determination.

A dozen steps further down the corridor, he realised that the acrid smoke through which he had just walked was now beginning to disperse – and one glance at the devastation wrought by the explosion made the reason clear. Much of the floor and part of the exterior wall had collapsed down into the cellar, leaving several large piles of rubble in the cellar’s walkway and its far wall completely obscured by fallen masonry. Two of the window panes from the floor above had evidently also been blown out by the force of the explosion, which had been directed upwards out of the cellar through the spiral staircase, which though still climbable had nevertheless been twisted and distorted out of shape by the blast. And pressed close to the wall some distance from the bottom of the staircase, the outlines of two motionless bodies could just be discerned through the swirling clouds of dust and plaster. Groaning with despair, the colonel began to scramble down what remained of the staircase, jumping down over the final two steps in his haste to reach the ground.

As he ran towards the two huddled figures, their wretched and pitiable state became even more apparent to him; their dresses were blackened and torn, and their bodies covered head to foot in dust and ash. One held the other tightly in her arms, and the colonel cried out in anguish as he recognised the one who now lay limp and silent in the other’s arms as his daughter.

“*Cassandra*! Am I too late? Miss Palamac – I beg you, please tell me I am not too late!”

Tina stirred, and opened her eyes slowly. “Colonel... Colonel Creighton – thank God! Did... did Rodica get away? She went to seek help... we did not know if the stairs would bear her weight...”

“Yes... yes, she did – she succeeded... I met her at the top of the stairs... what of Cassandra, Miss Palamac? Does she yet live?”

Tina’s measured breaths became even more laboured as she spoke. “There is life in her, Colonel – there is undoubtedly life in her, for even now I feel the beat of her heart... but we must get her out of this place! I trust you will assist...”

She broke off in a violent fit of coughing, and the colonel reached out and held her in his arms until she had recovered her composure once more, whereupon she endeavoured weakly to detach herself from the embrace. “I trust... that you will assist me in this matter, sir?”

The colonel laughed out loud in his relief. “Assuredly – most assuredly! Here... let me take her from you...”

He swept Cassandra up in his arms, and wiped away some of the grime that besmirched her face and hair. He then assured himself of her regular pulse, and then rapidly satisfied himself that no bones were broken – at which point he broke into a relieved grin.

“She will recover – I know it! And *you*, Miss Palamac? What of you?”

Tina leaned back against the wall, her face betraying the exhaustion that now assailed her.

“I am unharmed, Colonel. Get Cassandra to safety, then if I might impose upon you to return...”

“Aye! I shall come back for you, Miss Palamac! Conserve your strength but a few moments longer...”

Clutching Cassandra’s inert frame in his arms, he began to ascend the stairs as quickly as he dared, ever conscious of the risk of the collapse of the structure beneath him as he made his way upwards. Upon reaching the top, he slid Cassandra’s body onto the floor of the corridor and peered into the clouds of smoke that still billowed and swirled.

“Ho there! I require help at once – I have Cassandra here... she is injured, and must be pulled to safety! Is there anyone there? Answer me!”

Immediately there was a scurrying of feet, and two figures emerged from the gloom at the run, both holding dripping wet cloths over their faces.

“Miss Almond! And Herrick also – and you have prepared masks! Your resourcefulness knows no bounds, Miss Almond... I have Cassandra – please take her from me and get her out of this hell! She needs clean air to breathe and water to drink – will you see to this for me, Miss Almond?”

“Fear not, sir – we will care for her!”

Creighton stayed just long enough to see Cassandra’s body pulled away and out of his sight by the two rescuers, then instantly turned and descended into the cellar once more. Hurrying back to where Tina had previously lain, he now found her rising unsteadily to her feet.

“Do you require assistance, Miss Palamac?”

She took an experimental two paces, then shook her head sombrely as she surveyed the devastation.

“I believe I can walk, Colonel – but I shall take your arm to the staircase if I may, for I fear there is nothing more that can be done here. Cassandra has been taken to safety, I trust?”

“Aye – Miss Almond is caring for her even now. I owe you both much, Miss Palamac.”

He helped her to the stairs, whereupon she began to climb them with an obvious effort. He waited at the bottom, ready to catch her if she fell, and then quickly ascended after her as soon as she reached the top. There, he wrapped his arm around her waist and propelled her through the smoke into the entrance hall, where she gently but firmly disentangled herself and looked at him steadily, her tear-stained eyes starkly etched in the blackness of the grime that covered her face.

“It is well indeed that you need not grieve the loss of your daughter, Colonel... and yet grieve you must – as must we.”

The colonel stared at her in incomprehension for a moment, and then his eyes opened wide in horror, and the blood drained from his face as he suddenly understood the import of Tina’s words.

“*No!* Oh, God... not Captain *Metcalf*? Was he here also?”

“The captain was down there in the cellar, Colonel – and his body lies there yet. He saved us all, for when the chemicals ignited and it was clear that an explosion was but seconds away, he shouted a warning to us that we should quit the cellar directly. We ran for the staircase, but he remained behind to ensure that we reached it in time. The roof caved in even as we sought to escape; alas, there can be no doubt that he died beneath it as it fell.”

“And yet I must leave you and go back, Miss Palamac! If there is even the slightest hope...”

“You may be certain that there is none, sir,” replied Tina quietly. “I say this so you will not hold out any false hopes, for the devastation is truly terrible: you might search for a month under the rubble and still not find his body. I shall not seek to stop you, for I know you will go anyway; I will ask merely that you take no unnecessary risks that might cause your own name to be added to the list of the fallen, for Cassandra would not forgive me.”

“I shall be most careful, Miss Palamac. Meanwhile, go you to Cassandra and Miss Almond, and have the servants attend you with whatever ministrations you may require. I shall join you when I have exhausted every possibility that he might be recovered alive.”

He straightened himself up and turned on his heel to take his leave, then paused and turned back to look at her once more.

“There were moments when I feared we might have lost *you*, Miss Palamac. I find myself greatly relieved that we have not, for the thought that you might have been taken from us this day is more than I could bear.”

He bowed his head to her smartly, and set off briskly in the direction of the cellar once more, loudly summoning assistance from the servants as he did so. Tina sighed, and made her way into the nearby kitchen, which had by now taken on the semblance of a field hospital. Sheets lay strewn all over the floor, and items of bedding hurriedly brought down from upstairs to accommodate the casualties. Cassandra lay prone and unconscious on a mattress, while Lieutenant Almond was busily fending off proffered assistance to herself while trying to ensure that Cassandra received as much of the attention being bestowed upon her by all around her as possible. Tina’s eyes flickered rapidly from one to the other, noting with satisfaction that notwithstanding the copious quantities of dirt and filth that covered all three of them from head to foot, nobody in the room seemed to have realised that the few actual injuries they bore were almost entirely superficial.

With the scene now set for the final act, she climbed wearily to her feet as the colonel entered the kitchen, and beckoned him over to the mattress on which Cassandra lay.

“You were right, Miss Palamac – there is no hope for Captain Metcalfe, and we can but hope to recover his body in due course. What of Cassandra – how is she?”

“As you can see, she is receiving every care, Colonel – and I cannot doubt that she will recover fully in time. When the roof collapsed upon us we attempted to shield one other from the falling woodwork and plaster as it rained down. She was not as fortunate as I, for she was struck a glancing blow on the head by one of the beams as it fell - and as you can see, she still sleeps under the influence of the concussion. I fear that her memory might be affected by this trauma, and would urge you to have her committed to her bed as soon as possible, where she may recuperate at leisure and in peace. I shall be pleased to attend her throughout her recovery – indeed, I insist upon it, for I owe her this much. She has shown great fortitude in this terrible ordeal, and you may be very proud of her.”

“Miss Palamac – she has a friend in you like no other,” replied the colonel warmly. “I will be happy to accept your offer, for I know Cassandra could not be in safer hands. Alas – if *only* Captain Metcalfe could have been saved also! Did you see him fall, Miss Palamac? It is already clear to me that the reconstruction will take months to accomplish, and I would know where we may seek his body, so that he might be given a Christian burial.”

“It is my regret that I did not see him fall,” replied Tina sadly. “The smoke and dust was everywhere when the roof collapsed, and we could not see a foot in front of our faces. That his body lies hereabouts somewhere under the *debris* I cannot doubt, but I can offer you no clues as to where it might be found.”

“Then I shall warn the workmen to be on the lookout, for the rebuilding must begin soon. We cannot live in this part of the house until the work is completed – indeed, perhaps it might be prudent for us to move out while the noisiest and most boisterous tasks are being performed. Would you consent to journey with us to stay up in town for a few weeks at some time soon, Miss Palamac? I cannot doubt that Cassandra will insist upon it in any event, and I would consider it an honour to continue to enjoy the pleasure of your company for as long as I can. Indeed, should you *ever* choose to leave us, I confess I would regret that day most sorely...”

A low moan from Cassandra’s lips made them both look down. Tina immediately cradled her friend’s head in her hands, and moved her own head closer to catch the words Cassandra was attempting to utter as she struggled to waken from her slumber.

“Tina... *Tina!* Why... where am I? What has happened? Why am I covered in dirt and grime?”

“You have been rescued from the cellar, Cassandra. The explosion caused the roof to fall on us, and you were injured... but you are safe now.”

“But... but – I am confounded... I was in my *bed!* You comforted me after I destroyed the neurosynch, and you helped me to my bed! You were *with* me, dearest Tina – do you not recall this?”

Tina motioned the colonel to one side, and spoke to him quietly. “It is as I feared – her memory has been affected by the onset of trauma induced by the explosion. We must be gentle and understanding with her until she has regained all her wits, for she may well be confused and befuddled for some time. I think it best in particular that we do not discuss Captain Metcalfe’s sad fate, at least not until she is very much improved.”

“Of course,” agreed the colonel understandingly. “Perhaps it would be better if we do not discuss any of these matters now, eh? If she may be moved safely, might I impose upon you to go with

Cassandra up to her room, to help her wash and change out of these clothes? There is much to do here, and I fear it may distress her.”

Tina nodded. “I will take Rodica with me also, for she too is much in need of clean clothes, as indeed am I. Come, Cassandra – let me help you up. I think we shall require a *very* great deal of hot water in the coming hours... Herrick! Where are you, man? Gather the servants and maids that are within call, and set them to work stoking the fires – much will be required of them before the day is through!”

51 Cassandra Struggles to Resolve a Personal Dilemma

“Cassandra? I wish to come in and talk to you. May I be admitted?”

There was a brief scuffling sound, followed by the noise of a pile of clothes being unceremoniously thrown onto the floor.

“I have nothing to say to you, and you will say nothing that I wish to hear! Go away!”

Tina sighed, and admitted herself to Cassandra’s room. Her bed had clearly not been slept in, and Cassandra herself was huddled in the chair beside it. She glared with cold eyes at Tina as she walked in, her expression having more in common with that of a trapped animal than a human being, and shrank further back into the chair as Tina approached.

“I do not want to talk to you, Tina! What is it that you want? No, do not tell me, for I do not *care* what you want!”

Tina sat down quietly on the bed in front of her. “This cannot go on, Cassandra. It has been three days now, and the house is still in much disarray. Your father requires your help in the running of the household, while he assesses the damage caused by the explosion. You may assist us all by relieving me of some of the tasks that I have assumed in your absence.”

“Then do *not* assume them! What is it to me? This is all a deception to distract me – you are seeking to persuade me that all may yet be well if I will but play your game! Well, I shall *not* play it! I shall stay here until you admit what you are doing and give it up!”

“And yet you have been to my room while I have been busy downstairs, have you not? The clothes on my chair are disarranged – and Carey, although thoughtless, would not have left them so. Why did you do this, Cassandra?”

Cassandra glared back at her in defiance. “I went to remonstrate with you, but you were not *there*! I sought a clue to tell me where I might find you, but there was none! I think you heard me leave my room to seek you out, and you took yourself off – for you would not face me. I believe you *dare* not face me! Do you think I do not understand what it is that you are about?”

Tina took a step forward towards her friend, her expression calm and unassuming.

“You are in error, Cassandra,” she replied quietly. “You must believe me when I tell you that you are mistaken. You must *trust* me in this – for you know that I have your best interests at heart... I *always* have your best interests at heart, do I not? You can believe me... you *must* believe me...”

With a scream of rage, Cassandra launched herself out of her chair at Tina, her arms outstretched and hands twisted like claws, with the clear intention of seizing her by the throat. In the same instant, Tina rose from the bed and parried the clumsy attack with effortless ease, twisting her body sideways into Cassandra’s headlong rush to sweep her gracefully head-over-heels into the air and over her shoulder. Less than a second later, Cassandra was lying flat on her back on the bed and wondering in bewilderment and mind-clouding fury how she got there, even as Tina sat down at her side and cradled her head in her hands, her eyes filled with both compassion and sorrow.

“The conflict that rages within you no longer serves any purpose, little one. You must put it behind you, and you must move on. It is the only way – you will do harm to yourself if you continue to deny the reality that everyone else has accepted. The captain is dead; he died saving us all, and he

will be remembered as a hero. You are *blameless*, Cassandra! It is *over* – you must accept that this is so.”

Cassandra burst into tears, her body shaking with raw emotion.

“He is *not* dead! You know this as surely as I! I am *not* blameless – for he has been condemned to a fate *worse* than death... by *my* hand! You know this yourself, and yet you deny it, for you are trying to protect me! But you *cannot* – for when the time comes for all secrets to be revealed, I alone shall answer for it – if not to any mortal then to the Almighty himself! I *know* that I have sinned – I *accept* that I have sinned! I have sinned, and I *repent* of it, do you *hear* me? You must let me confess – you *must* let me atone for my crime! I cannot *live* with what I have done!”

“You *cannot* confess, Cassandra... for there is nothing *to* confess, nor anyone to hear your confession. This is the reality in which you must now live. You have but to accept it, and you will know peace. Is that prize not important to you?”

“Peace? At what *price* shall I have peace, Tina! Is the value of my acceptance in this mortal world greater to me than the cost of my *sanity*?”

“What is sanity, Cassandra? Is it not just the harmony of your own reality with that of those around you? Those you would describe as insane merely inhabit realities that you do not recognise – and they would describe you likewise.”

“Then surely I *am* insane, for I am but one and they are many! Yes... that is it – I am mad! I know things... impossible things... and yet I *know* that they are true! The wall at the far end of the cellar... it opens, and beyond it lies a secret room – the secret room in which I shot him down... but which is now filled with the cold blue mist that will envelop his body for hundreds of years...”

She broke off, weeping uncontrollably, as Tina continued to hold her close.

“There are two realities within your mind, Cassandra, and they are engaged in a conflict for the possession of your soul. In your anger you cannot pick a side, for the rage you now feel is directed equally towards them both – and yet you must, for you will never know peace in a world that does not think as you do. It cannot be done, any more than a tiny burning ember can fly away from the smoke that carries it from the candle. You must see that it is so.”

She turned away, and walked slowly towards the bedroom door.

“I urge you to reflect on what I have said, Cassandra.”

Cassandra gritted her teeth, and glared furiously at the door as it closed.

“You will *not* do this to me, Tina! I shall not *let* you... I know what you are doing, and I will not *allow* it!”

She seized one of her pillows and hurled it at the door in frustration, then reaching under the other one, she snatched up the puzzle box from where she had frantically thrust it the second before Tina had entered the room. Feverishly clawing at it, she once more began to push and pull the intricately carved little segments of wood from which it was assembled, muttering to herself as she did so.

“I *shall* open it! In the name of God, I *swear* I shall, if it takes me ten years or more – for whatever secret you have chosen to conceal from me can be *nowhere* else! If there is no secret hidden within, then surely I am insane... but if there *is*, it can only be in *here*...”

She shot one more murderous glance up once more at the bedroom door.

“If I *am* to sell you my soul, I shall at least extract a fair price!”

52 Miss Palamac and Miss Almond Discuss Their Respective Futures

Colonel Creighton finished off his slice of pound cake, pushed the empty plate to one side and reached for the cup of hot chocolate with which he had decided to conclude his breakfast.

“Does she continue to insist upon her fantasies, Miss Palamac?”

“Alas, Colonel, there are still rare occasions when she will not hear of any other version of events,” admitted Tina sombrely, “but these become fewer as the days pass. The day after the explosion she was all but delirious in her insistence that she was herself responsible for the captain’s death, and it was as much as Rodica and I could do to prevent her from injuring herself, such was the intensity of her grief. Eventually she ceased to argue with us – I believe more from fatigue than lack of conviction, for the following night and two thereafter, I could hear her pacing her room and muttering to herself in the early hours. Once we both went to comfort her, but she would brook no discussion on the matter, insisting merely that she wished to be left alone. Since that time she has however been more restful, and I am of the belief that she will be reconciled soon, for we continue gently but earnestly to persuade her that her recollections are at fault, and she will eventually come to see that further protestations are futile. I am satisfied she does not resent our persistence, for she understands that every one of us loves her, and means her well. I believe rather that she has a decision to make – and she will not be easy until she has *made* that decision.”

“And what *is* that decision, Miss Palamac?”

“That she will choose to believe us, Colonel. To her it is an act of will, and it is one that we cannot force upon her. It is something she must do alone. Rodica – would you pass the butter, please?”

Lieutenant Almond lifted the little platter and handed it to her. Tina spread a little on the hot roll that she had just taken from the sideboard and added a dollop of marmalade. “How does the reconstruction progress, Colonel?”

“The workmen have now dismantled the most perilous structures that overhang the cellar, and are shortly to begin clearing the fallen masonry within it,” replied Creighton, brushing the crumbs from his napkin. “I have therefore advised them that they must be prepared for a terrible discovery as the stones are taken away – but they are sturdy men who have seen many grievous injuries in the course of their work before, so I believe they will not baulk from their terrible task. I am however *very* glad that William has now started at Eton: we were most fortunate that a place could be found for him at such short notice, for I would not have him hereabouts when the captain’s body is discovered. Even so, I am mindful that Cassandra will miss her brother sorely – and I have therefore concluded that it is in everyone’s interests that we do indeed embark upon that trip up to town of which we spoke briefly after the tragedy. Cassandra must certainly come, for it will be primarily for her benefit that we shall go – and both of you ladies are most warmly invited to accompany us.”

He pushed back his chair, and addressed himself to Tina. “Miss Palamac, might I impose upon you to inform Miss Almond of the contents of the letter that I received from Cousin Michael a few days ago? I must attend to the workmen and give them their instructions for the day, and I would not wish her to feel under any obligation to commit herself either way immediately – so I will leave you now to explain the situation to her. Miss Almond, Miss Palamac... if I might be excused?”

He stood up and placed his napkin on the table, then turned and left the room, leaving the two young women together. Lieutenant Almond looked at Tina quizzically, and the latter swallowed the last morsel of her toast.

“Just over a week ago, Lieutenant, Colonel Creighton received a letter from Mr Faraday. In this letter he extends an invitation to me to journey up to London and to lodge with his family as their guest throughout the summer – for he expresses his wish to collaborate with me in the writing of three scientific papers on the subject of electricity and its therapeutic benefits...”

“One moment, please!” interrupted Almond. “Why does he write to the colonel if the invitation is to *you*?”

“I have learned since my arrival here that it is considered improper in this era for an unmarried man to correspond in writing with an unmarried woman,” replied Tina dryly. “Indeed, Mr Faraday acknowledges himself that the invitation *itself* would undoubtedly be perceived as improper, and he therefore proposes that I reside with an elderly aunt of his with her two daughters, and that we meet only under their auspices – and given that we have both come to know him well during his stay here, I have no doubt that he is sincere in all he writes. Nevertheless, I intend to decline the offer.”

“But Tina,” replied Almond in astonishment, “do you not value the opportunity to spend time in the company of one of the greatest scientists who ever lived? Most people would give *anything* to take advantage of such...”

“I will not accept his offer because in my reality he does not *marry* me, Rodica. He marries *you* – and I am therefore telling you this because I wish you to go in my place.”

“*Me*?” Lieutenant Almond looked at her in bewilderment. “You are *serious*?”

“I am perfectly serious,” replied Tina in her most matter-of-fact tone. “The historical archives we reviewed on board the ship were explicit on the matter. But it clearly cannot happen unless you become more intimately acquainted than you are at present. Is it not obvious that this is the opportunity you will require to do just that?”

“Has it not occurred to you,” replied Almond slowly, “that by encouraging me to take this course, you ensure the creation of the same reality you wish to change?”

“I am myself a native of that reality, Rodica. I was charged with the task of replacing it with another, more conducive to the well-being of the *mi’Astra’hani* – and the reality from which *you* originate offers such conditions. The *mi’Astra’hani* transcend reality, Rodica – and will therefore regard this outcome as, if not optimal, then at least favourable. In contrast, if I am prevented from ever having existed – as will most likely be the case if you do *not* fulfil your destiny as it is written in the chronology of my reality – the outcome will become completely unforeseeable.”

Tina paused, mindful that she was about to offer her friend an insight into her mission that could easily change the nature of their relationship irrevocably.

“Rodica... when I was sent here, it was accepted that such an outcome was all but inevitable, for I would necessarily become the instrument of my own erasure from existence – and I was resigned to that fate. Had the mission taken its anticipated course, I would have familiarized myself with the state of technological development in this era, and then taken any and all steps necessary to prevent it from continuing at the rate recorded in our chronology. Mr Faraday himself would have been an obvious casualty of those steps, but there would unquestionably have been many others. The

destruction of the Royal Institution itself would have resolved the issue most efficiently – and my personal armoury at that time was more than sufficient to accomplish it.”

Almond regarded her with an uninterpretable expression. “And the beings whose orders you take consider themselves to be peaceful?”

“They believe their survival to be at stake in *all* realities, Lieutenant. To what lengths would humanity itself be prepared to go when faced with a threat of that magnitude? However, the unexpected appearance of Captain Scarlet and yourself offered a solution that could not have been foreseen... but which goes at least part of the way towards achieving their original objective. When I began to understand who and what the captain was, I re-evaluated my original plan of action. Which is better, Rodica? To accept partial success with a likelihood that can at least be estimated, or to risk everything on a random throw of the dice in which the probability of a favourable outcome is unknowable?”

“The captain spoke to me also in such terms,” observed Lieutenant Almond. “He favoured the random throw.”

“Interesting,” murmured Tina thoughtfully. “Do you know why?”

“Because,” replied Lieutenant Almond quietly, “such a course might perhaps create a reality in which he could at last be happy... with someone who came to mean more to him in the end than he would ever acknowledge, even to himself. The path he must now follow ensures that he cannot.”

Tina looked at her for a long moment.

“Just a few moments ago, I told you how I would have set about completing my mission if you and he had not been brought here. *That* is who I am, Rodica... and if he did not know it already, he would have realised it soon enough. Even if both of us still *existed* in that new reality – which itself must surely be improbable in the extreme – I would have brought sorrow to us both. No – it is better this way.”

Almond shook her head sadly. “I am convinced that he believed this is not so! *Ach*, but this discussion can go nowhere – for I see now that you will not acknowledge it.”

She regarded at her friend with an air of resignation, and sighed.

“I will accept the invitation that he makes to you – that is, if he will accept me in your place – for Mr Faraday is a gentleman, and I like him very much. But... I do not want to marry him! At least, I do not *think* I do!”

“Then you would decline his offer of marriage, should he make one,” replied Tina. “But either way, as you yourself observed a few moments ago, most people would give anything to become the friend and confidante of one of the greatest scientists in human history. And I believe you should also consider this. You cannot now return to your own reality. The rest of your life will be lived here in the early nineteenth century, as will mine. This invitation offers you an opportunity to *build* that life – and at the very least to position yourself to advantage within the scientific community at a crucial time in its development. Will you not avail yourself of it? What have you to lose?”

“I will give this matter some thought,” replied Lieutenant Almond after a long pause.

53 Colonel Creighton, Miss Almond and Cassandra Set Out for London

“Tina – there is something I must ask you to do for me,” said Lieutenant Almond as she reached the bottom of the stairs with two copious bags of clothes, one in each hand. “I cannot leave before I know that it will be done, for I do not know when I will return. I have drawn a design which I would like you to place upon the door of his... his tomb.”

She extracted from her sleeve a small piece of paper, upon which she had sketched a circular insignia in the form of a stylised “S” within a set of concentric circles.

“You will please have one of the masons chisel this design into the face of the rock at the end of the cellar – for it is the means by which his resting place will be found, more than two hundred and fifty years from now.”

Tina took the piece of paper, glanced at it and nodded. “Yes... I recognise this device from the caps of your uniforms: it is the insignia of the organisation in which you both served, is it not? Of course, Lieutenant – I will ensure that it is done.”

“I know how important it is that we do nothing to cause Cassandra to think too deeply about the events leading up to the captain’s death,” continued Almond, “but I do not think this could cause her any distress – is it so?”

Tina shook her head. “No... the insignia itself will mean nothing to Cassandra. If she asks, I will simply tell her that it is a mark of respect to commemorate the actions of the man who saved our lives – she will not question that.”

“Tina,” asked Lieutenant Almond quietly, “what will happen when the workmen fail to find Captain Scarlet’s body? Even if it takes many weeks for them to clear all the debris from the cellar, they will certainly do this eventually! What will Colonel Creighton say when he is not found? And what are we to tell Cassandra?”

“It will be a mystery,” replied Tina thoughtfully. “It will be a mystery that will never be solved... but I suspect there will be rumours that he did not perish in the cellar after all, but that he managed to escape. Doubtless he will have been traumatized, in which case he may have wandered away into the surrounding countryside while still suffering from amnesia, never to be seen again. There may even be rumours that he was seen in the days that followed by people on the nearby estates. I have to say I think it is very likely.”

Lieutenant Almond frowned. “But... why do you think it is likely there will be these rumours?”

“Because,” replied Tina tartly, “I shall start them. But in the meantime, I have a small dilemma of my own on a matter also related to Cassandra’s well-being of which I want to make you aware – because I want you to write to me if you observe any deterioration in Cassandra’s mental state while you are with her in London. It may impact on a decision I have to take.”

“I was most careful to ensure that all the remaining deadly toys and the sample case were both utterly destroyed by the explosion,” she continued, “but the synaptic distorter was taken from me by Cassandra prior to that, and was used by her to incapacitate the captain. I retrieved it from her person afterwards while she was sleeping, and have now concealed in a place I know she cannot access. I retained it to leave myself the option of scrambling her synaptic pathways irreparably had

she continued to insist upon her version of the events leading up to the captain's incarceration in the cellar."

"Then what is the dilemma?"

"The distorter," replied Tina, "is the last remaining artefact that could persuade Cassandra that the tangled morass of memories that we are striving to erase from her neural cortex is anything other than a vivid fantasy. Fortunately, she *does* appear to accept the narrative that you and I have striven to construct – so the extreme measures I feared we might have had to take are no longer necessary. I'm reluctant to destroy it, just in case she shows any sign of regressing – but eventually I must do so. I've decided to wait until after she returns from her holiday in London before making a final decision – but here is the colonel, so we had best not speak of this any further... promise me you will write, yes? Good... Are you ready to set out, Colonel Creighton?"

Colonel Creighton put down the case he had just carried into the entrance hall, and rubbed his hands with obvious relish. "Indeed I *am*, Miss Palamac! I look forward to this holiday more than I expected to, I confess – even if it *has* been imposed upon us by circumstances! We shall travel in the chaise and four – I have called for it to be brought around to the front, and it should be here shortly. How is Cassandra today? Is she fit to travel?"

"I have been both pleasantly surprised and greatly encouraged at her progress," replied Tina. "Her memory lapses and bouts of confusion have all but dissipated, and she only rarely speaks of the captain's tragic demise. I believe she is coming to terms with his death at last."

"I hope and trust that it is so," replied the colonel gravely. "There was a time a few short weeks ago that she insisted to me that she was herself responsible for it, and would not hear any opinion to the contrary. On yet another occasion she insisted that if we could but clear the wreckage and break down the cellar's far wall, we would find him alive there! It broke my heart to hear her speak so in her delirium, and I am greatly heartened to hear you think these delusions may soon be forgotten."

"I shall not be content until I know that they are consigned to the past, Colonel – and I cannot doubt that your excursion to London is the very thing to ensure that we have seen the last of them. The journey will invigorate her, and upon your arrival in town she will have so much to engage her attention that her recent experiences here will become as a dream that fades even as the sun rises. But you may ask her yourself if she is prepared for the journey, for here she comes... Cassandra! Is everything packed and ready?"

Cassandra stepped lightly down off the bottom stair, deposited two large hatboxes on the floor and looked up with a mischievous grin.

"There are so many clothes to bring that I fear the carriage will not bear the weight, Tina! Is it all right, Papa? I must look my best when we meet all of Cousin Michael's eminent colleagues at the Royal Institution, must I not?"

"They are men of *learning*, daughter!" replied her father with a chuckle. "Were you presented to them wearing the garb of a gypsy they would most likely not notice – but I will not impose such restrictions on your wardrobe as might make it impossible for you to play the part, for you would resent it. Your mother was just the same, and you remind me more of her every day, Cassandra."

He turned to Tina. "I ask you once more, Miss Palamac – will you not come with us?"

"I thank you, sir," demurred Tina, "but I shall not. I have come to love the peace and serenity of the countryside hereabouts, and look forward to the prospect of enjoying its delights in the spring

while you are away; also it is my hope and expectation that under my guidance the restoration will be completed by the time of your return.”

“And I cannot doubt that your expectation is well-founded,” laughed Colonel Creighton. “Even were we to advertise for such a position within the household during our absence, I could not hope to engage a better-suited chatelaine to oversee the work. What do you say, Cassandra?”

“I think Tina will see it completed in half the time, Papa! Indeed, I fear she may summon us to return before we have enjoyed the diversions of London society to the full! They say Mr Humphry Davy actively supports female education and women’s involvement in all manners of scientific discourse, and that women attend his lectures in great numbers... but of course – I forgot! Rodica has *met* him... are his lectures as entertaining as they say, Rodica? Will you introduce me to him?”

Lieutenant Almond grinned. “He already knows of you, for when we spoke I told him of the part you played in my recovery after the shooting – and I do not doubt that Mr Faraday will have spoken to him of this also. I think it may be that *he* will want to meet *you*, Cassandra.”

“Oh, Papa! May I? *May* I?”

“Of *course* you may accept an invitation to meet him, Cassandra! He is the toast of all London at this time, and the granting of his knighthood a mere formality – it may be that you will never meet a more auspicious man in your life. Cousin Michael has said this with much conviction, and I have learned to trust his judgment in these matters. One restriction I *will* impose however – and we may thank Harrison for this advice – you will *not* be attending any demonstrations of his so-called ‘laughing gas’, for which he has attained more than a measure of notoriety of late. Harrison informs me it is conducive to allowing those who inhale it to make public spectacles of themselves, and I will not have you subjected to it. Do you concur, Miss Palamac?”

“I could not agree more, sir,” murmured Tina quietly. “Please make every effort to ensure she goes nowhere near the stuff.”

“And... here is the carriage!” announced the colonel as the horses turned the corner of the house. “Let us board at once, for if we depart immediately we can be in Dorking in time for a hot luncheon at the White Horse before the pangs of hunger begin to gnaw. Herrick! Ah, Herrick – secure Miss Creighton’s and Miss Almond’s cases on the roof; I shall see to my own luggage, of which there is less. Ladies – in the meantime, will you enter the carriage?”

One by one they climbed into the coach and arranged themselves within its confines, Creighton himself being the last to board. Before closing the door, he twisted himself round in his seat and leaned out one last time.

“Goodbye, Miss Palamac – do write to us to let us know how the renovation is proceeding, and we in turn will write to you to tell you of our adventures in town. The first of our letters to you will supply you with our address, though I doubt not that a letter sent to the Royal Institution will find us, for we shall certainly be spending considerable time there.”

“I shall indeed write, Colonel. I wish you all a pleasant and safe journey.”

She acknowledged their waves as the carriage moved off, and watched from the door as it sped away, eventually disappearing out of sight behind a row of trees at the end of the drive. She then turned and walked back into the house, whereupon she ascended the stairs and went to her room. Having closed the door to ensure she would not be observed by any passing maid, she first picked up a pencil from the little table by the side of her bed, then walked over to the far wall and ran her fingers over the oak panelling that covered it. Locating the small knothole she sought, she inserted

the pencil far enough inside to trip the latch, then opened the concealed door just wide enough to enable her to reach inside. Lifting out the Chinese puzzle box, she contemplated it in silence for a full half-minute before shaking her head and returning it, still unopened, to its hiding place. With Cassandra away up in London for a minimum of several weeks, there would be time enough to make a final decision about the fate of its contents when she had returned.

54 Cassandra Makes Her Peace with the World

Cassandra leaned out of the window and breathed in the air with palpable delight as it rushed past.

“I had quite forgotten the exhilaration of travelling in the chaise, Papa – it seems so long since we last journeyed in it!”

“That is true enough,” agreed her father. “This winter past has brought little cause for its use since last year, and even then we made few enough excursions. This summer we shall endeavour to make amends, eh? It is clear you are quite reanimated by the experience – and it is a joy to see you so.”

“Perhaps this journey is the turning of the last page of a chapter before embarking upon the next,” replied Cassandra thoughtfully. “It is here and now – in this very place and time – that the solidity of the known ends and the fluidity of the potential begins... and yet, is not all of the book real? Rodica will spend the summer with Cousin Michael’s family, and doubtless this visit will change her life in ways that she cannot at this moment guess. Who is to say that the ways in which her life *will* have been changed are any more real than those in which it *might* have been changed, but which are not?”

Her father grinned approvingly. “You philosophize well, daughter! I fancy there are those at the Royal Institution who would take a delight in debating such matters with you – would you not agree, Miss Almond?”

“I *do* agree – for this philosophy is very... *deep!*” replied Lieutenant Almond. “For when we come to question the nature of reality itself, by what standards may we quantify our conclusions? To do this, we must assume that *we* are real, yes? But what of everything else? Perhaps there *is* nothing else! Who is to say what is real... for there may be nobody else to argue with!”

Colonel Creighton chuckled. “Until very recently I would have proposed that we abandon this discourse for fear of upsetting Cassandra, for the distinction between the real and the unreal has been of much concern to her of late. I had feared lest the juxtaposition of the two within her mind should have driven her to distraction! But it is palpably not so, for I never saw you more at peace with the world, Cassandra.”

The sparkle in Cassandra’s eyes betrayed the interest she was taking in the discussion.

“At peace? Perhaps, or perhaps not – but...”

She turned away from the window and addressed herself to her father and her friend directly.

“But it is enough that I do not fear it. Life is a ship of reality sailing upon the sea of potentiality, is it not? The waves cast it about, and yet we strive to steer it – and for the most part we arrive at last not so far from our intended destination. But if the ship founders, and we sink into the depths of a stormy ocean in which reality and fantasy are blended as one, we can but cling to whatever driftwood might float by upon the surface of that ocean – for how else shall we be saved?”

She stretched her legs, and then pulled them up with her hands clasped around her knees to offer her arms the same manner of exercise, while surreptitiously taking the opportunity to brush her dress, lightly touching the outline of her garter beneath it.

“All around me the storm has raged, Papa! And some have been cast ashore onto land while others sink into the depths. Then the storms rage anew... and the saved are washed back into the sea to

become the lost, while the lost are thrown back upon the shore to become the saved. But I need no longer let the passage of the storms concern me, for I have my piece of driftwood – and I think it will bear my weight.”

55 Epilogue – Foxleyheath Manor, England – 25th July 2073

Lady Penelope Creighton-Ward delicately added a splash of milk to her cup of Darjeeling and leaned back in her chair thoughtfully, while the two Spectrum captains each helped themselves to a biscuit from the barrel on the little table between them. Both the barrel and the table were early Georgian in style, and Scarlet found himself wondering if they had been there in the house some 260 years earlier.

“Even though we obviously *knew* about your body in the cellar, Captain Scarlet, we didn’t dare remove it from the envelope of coolant in which we found it preserved – because we didn’t know your unique recuperative powers would restore you to life had we done so. Indeed, we didn’t even realise you were a Spectrum officer at all until Dianne discovered you and identified you: we regarded your body as an inexplicable curiosity from a bygone era, and assumed that one day we would find a way to examine it properly to try to discover who you were and why you had been placed there. Listening to your tale now makes me appreciate how very little we really *understood* about the mysterious spaceship at the bottom of our little pond, even after Brains had managed to discover enough of its secrets to lay the foundations of the International Rescue organisation. So... it’s the product not only of another time, but of another *reality* – is that it?”

“Apparently so, Your Ladyship – unbelievable though I know it sounds,” replied Scarlet. “A reality in which a more technologically advanced Earth than ours is squaring up for a potential showdown with an extra-terrestrial power called the Astran Empire, from which the ancestors of the Mysterons fled as refugees thousands of years ago. From the way Tina described them, they were some kind of philosophical sect that wanted to find the ultimate Truth by transcending reality in some way that’s completely beyond our comprehension. She insisted that they’d succeeded, and that the *mi’Astra’hani*, as she called them, and our Mysterons are all projections of the same consciousness – whatever *that* means.”

Captain Blue frowned in puzzlement. “But – which reality is... well, the *real* one, Paul? Ours or theirs?”

Scarlet had begun to feel slightly embarrassed at the tone of condescension that had crept into his stock reply, acutely mindful that he’d asked himself the same question countless times – several of them *after* he’d convinced himself that the answer he was about to give was the correct one. He shook his head in an appropriately erudite manner.

“They’re *both* real, Adam. Or at least, each is as real as the other.”

Captain Blue wasn’t prepared to let it rest. “Okay, Paul... let’s look at it another way. Which one came *first*? I guess the one that came first must be the real one, in which case the one that came second must be the fake, right?”

Scarlet took a deep breath.

“Okay, Adam – how’s this for an explanation? Suppose we call Tina’s reality ‘Cycle Alpha’, and let’s call *our* reality ‘Cycle Beta’, yes? Right... so how did Cycle Beta come into being? Well, Cycle Beta was created deliberately by Tina herself – who was a native of Cycle Alpha, and who was persuaded that her mission *would* ultimately be successful by the unexpected appearance of Lieutenant Almond and me shortly afterwards. But then, how did Cycle Alpha come into being?

Cycle Alpha came into existence in consequence of a collaboration between one of the greatest scientists who ever lived and a young woman who had already seen the practical applications of the discoveries he would make – because she came from a future in which those discoveries were in everyday use. That young woman was Lieutenant Almond... and she was a native of Cycle Beta. So can *you* tell *me* which one came first? Or whether any single element of this insane sequence of events could have been changed without risking the destruction of *both* realities?"

"Is it possible," ventured Captain Blue hesitantly, "that it might have been better if both realities *were* destroyed, Paul? I guess the answer to that one depends on the ultimate outcome of the War of Nerves, given that the Mysterons' stated objective is to wipe us out completely when they get tired of playing games with us."

"I asked myself that very same question," replied Scarlet quietly, "and you know something, Adam? I believe I might have done it too, if things had worked out differently. In the event, I just didn't get the chance: *that* particular throw of the dice was made by a very confused young girl with an intense devotion to her tutor, who in turn taught her how to look after her own interests just a little too well."

He lapsed into silence with a far-away look in his eyes for a few seconds.

"But you know, maybe we didn't come out of it so badly. *Assuming* they've survived over two and a half centuries of neglect, there's a treasure-trove of data to be extracted from that ship's memory banks – and somewhere in all that data we should find details of a civilisation that *might* just one day be able to help us put an end to this senseless war with the Mysterons – if only because the Astrans understand them better than we do. It was my impression from what Tina was saying about the Astran Empire that even if the Mysterons aren't afraid of us, they *are* afraid of *them*."

"It sounds to me," retorted Captain Blue, "like we'd better be on our best behaviour when we eventually meet these guys. A race that can scare the Mysterons ought to scare the *hell* out of us – and didn't you say you reckoned Tina's scientific understanding was at least a century ahead of ours, Paul? I'd say we need to do some catching up – and fast."

He turned to their host. "I'll guess you're going to lose sole exploration rights to that spaceship of yours, Lady Penelope: as soon as they understand its significance, the security services in the World Government will most likely insist on taking it apart, piece by piece. And I've got to believe that'll impact kind-of negatively on your... your other activities."

Her Ladyship's only response to the threat of having her home descended upon by hoards of military intelligence experts was the merest flicker of an enigmatic smile, and if she felt any embarrassment at the oblique reference to her friends in the South Pacific, she showed no sign of it.

"Oh, Jeff Tracy always recognised that International Rescue wouldn't be able to function as a privately run operation indefinitely, Captain Blue – and if Captain Scarlet's assessment of their capacity to worry the Mysterons is even remotely accurate, I would concur with your appraisal of the potential threat posed by the Astrans themselves. I can imagine the politicians at the United Nations calling for some sort of global defence force to be established in readiness for the planet making its first contact with an interstellar power."

"We already *have* a global defence force," opined Scarlet stiffly. "We don't need another one."

Her Ladyship peered over the rim of her teacup at him in a gesture that took him back with a jolt to a time, so long ago now, when another lady of his acquaintance would look at him in much the same way.

“I dare say the World Navy said something very similar when the WASPs were established as an autonomous branch of the armed services, Captain – and yet here we have them both spending at least as much time sniping at one another as they ever did protecting the international shipping lanes during the Titanica campaign. Which reminds me... I owe the Pacifican ambassador to the UN an email. She’s a friend of mine, and as the only amphibian on the Security Council, she’s probably feeling rather isolated right now.”

She raised her cup to her lips and took a small sip.

“Speaking of emails, Captain Scarlet... after I received yours, I got in touch with a friend of mine at the National Archives at Kew in Richmond. They hold a wealth of documentation relating to the Foxleyheath estate there, so I made some enquiries based on the information you sent me. In particular, I asked my friend to send me copies of anything from the first two decades of the nineteenth century in which feature one or more of the names Tina Palamac, Cassandra Creighton, William Creighton, Rodica Almond or possibly Rodica Oлару, and Paul Metcalfe... yes, I included your name in the search criteria also, Captain Scarlet. I wasn’t able to include Colonel Creighton because you didn’t supply me with his first name.”

“That’s because I never knew it,” admitted Scarlet with an apologetic smile. “Incredible though it sounds now, I never once heard his first name spoken by anyone, and it never occurred to me to ask him what it was. It simply wasn’t necessary to know such things in those days. The past is a different country, as the expression goes.”

“Well, no doubt we could find out what it is from contemporary sources if we needed to,” replied Lady Penelope, “but it probably wouldn’t add much to what we’ve already managed to amass. One sad discovery I made quite early on was that young William Creighton only barely survived into adulthood. He was killed in action as a young subaltern serving under Sir Charles MacCarthy during the First Ashanti War, and was one of the many casualties of the Battle of Nsamankow. He had no offspring at the time of his death, leaving his father with no male heir unless *he* remarried – but I’ll come back to that later. First, let me show you the contemporary documentation I was able to borrow from the National Archives. I’m afraid there’s not really very much of it, but I think what there is will interest you.”

Placing the box on the table in front of them, she lifted out an antique tome with a grey hardback cover and opened it at the first page.

“This is a book of accounts from the period in question, which contains details of numerous invoices from, and payments made to, workmen throughout the second half of 1811 and the following three years, in connection with renovation work carried out on the house. The work was initially concerned with the making safe of two supporting walls which were apparently severely damaged by an explosion in the cellar beneath the east wing – that’s the cellar where Dianne found your body, Captain – but it seems the scope of the work was subsequently broadened to encompass a major expansion of the manor house and its facilities. Even though the house superficially retains its eighteenth-century style for aesthetic reasons, much of the present infrastructure dates from that reconstruction work – and in fact we’ve modified some of it ourselves relatively recently to incorporate an assortment of architectural upgrades over the years that would have unquestionably given the original builders pause for thought. For example, Captain Blue, the chair in which you’re

sitting right now is located directly above the entrance to a vault beneath this room that's capable of withstanding a five-megaton nuclear attack – no, please don't get up – and there's a surface-to-air missile silo built into the wall just behind that Georgian fireplace over there. We try not to use it very often because the vibrations make the vases rattle... but I digress."

She turned three more pages, stopping at a block of handwritten notation laid out in a style seemingly at odds with the apparent age of the book itself.

"This is a note relating to a surveyor's report on the structural integrity of the cellar, in which he concludes that the far wall should be left intact, but that the walls of the passageway leading to it require substantial reinforcement. That would appear to corroborate Tina's observation about the strength of the binding agent used to seal the wall surrounding the concealed operations room, wouldn't you say, Captain Scarlet?"

"It seems likely," agreed Scarlet. "And I think we can also make an educated guess as to who *wrote* these notes, given that this style of presentation looks far too modern to have been written by anyone native to the period. I wonder what *caused* that explosion? I suppose we'll never know now... but whatever it was, I've absolutely *no* doubt that Tina was involved somehow: it's got her fingerprints all over it." He grimaced. "Unless it was Cassandra, of course – she was certainly crazy enough to do something insane when the mood took her! God, I hope nobody was killed."

"It seems that no bodies were recovered in the aftermath of the explosion, Captain," observed Lady Penelope. "There's a record of an instruction being issued to the workers telling them to be wary of finding casualties under the rubble, and another dated several months later expressing surprise that none had ever been found. I also contacted the county archives to see if *they* had any documentation relating to the incident: apparently the same story was reported in the local press, alongside another reporting the sighting of a strange man wandering confused and alone in the woods nearby shortly after the explosion. The story was however uncorroborated, and the man was never identified."

"Interesting," mused Scarlet. "I wonder who that could have been?"

He frowned. "You know, I've love to know what became of Cassandra. My last memory of her was very much that of a young girl displaying signs of acute schizophrenia and heading for a nervous breakdown, for which I'm afraid Tina herself was largely responsible. That piece of kit she used to transfer some of her technical skills to Cassandra might have enabled her to carry out maintenance work on the ship more efficiently in the short term, but in the long run it caused no end of trouble – and yet Cassandra idolised her. She was absolutely terrified of having Tina taken away from her, and when she caught a glimpse of what was going on inside Tina's mind, she realised that there was a very real prospect of just that happening – so with all the desperate passion of a young woman who saw her life about to be torn apart, she took drastic steps to try to ensure that it wasn't."

"Yes, the swearing of an allegiance is a serious commitment," murmured Lady Penelope. "Entreat me not, and all that."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Penelope?"

Her Ladyship blinked. "I'm sorry, Captain? Oh, I was just thinking of Naomi's declaration of her loyalty to Ruth. I believe I can still recite it from memory – it was always one of my favourite passages."

She closed her eyes, and intoned softly:

“Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee - for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.”

She opened her eyes and smiled. “You know, that passage always brings tears to my eyes. The devotion of one woman to another is a very powerful and moving thing, Captain Scarlet.”

Tell me about it, thought Scarlet sombrely. “Lady Penelope – are there any records relating to anyone called Cassandra in the family from around that time? It’s not a common name, is it – although I’ve been told it was Jane Austen’s sister’s name.”

“Actually, yes... there *is* something,” replied Lady Penelope thoughtfully, “though there’s nothing in writing. It’s more in the line of an old family tradition – indeed, I’d completely forgotten it myself until I received your email. When I was very young, my grandfather once told me a story about an elderly woman called Cassandra whom *his* grandfather met just once when *he* was young. She told him that she had spent her life telling people things that she knew to be true, only to find herself dismissed by everyone as a harmless crank – just like her namesake in ancient Troy was ridiculed when she correctly foretold the fall of the city to the Greeks. I assumed that he’d just got his memories all mixed up with a little mythology, but from what you’ve been telling us this afternoon, I’m not so sure now.”

“Can you remember anything about *what* she said she knew, Lady Penelope?”

Her Ladyship frowned in thought. “You know, I believe I can... it’s many years since I last thought about it, but there was just *one* tale I can still remember. She told him a story from a time when she was a young woman, about a man everybody believed was dead, but whom she knew was still alive... and sleeping in a secret place underneath the house that only she knew about, and which one day would be discovered...”

She stopped and blinked, her expression instantly transformed into a delighted smile.

“Good *Lord!* That’s *it*, isn’t it – that man must have been *you*, Captain! So, in answer to your original question, yes – Cassandra *did* survive to old age. What a strange feeling it is to have a long-forgotten childhood memory like that put into an historical context after all these years! I wonder what happened to her?”

“If I wanted to start looking for historical evidence,” replied Scarlet thoughtfully, “I’d probably start with Colonel Creighton’s connections with the Royal Institution. I read up on his friend Thomas Harrison soon after my recovery on Cloudbase: he was both a mathematician and a lawyer, becoming the Institution’s Honorary Secretary in 1813 – and of course Faraday’s association with the Royal Institution is legendary. Both Lieutenant Almond and Cassandra already knew both men personally – and of course Rodica knew Davy himself – so I’d be surprised if they didn’t continue to frequent the place. Cassandra’s father would certainly have encouraged them to do so, assuming Rodica continued to live with the family after my time. On top of that, we know Cassandra took a personal interest in female emancipation, and Davy’s support for making the Institution’s activities open to men and women alike is a matter of public record. She’d have been in good company there, and I’m sure the pen-friend of hers that she told us about would have approved – I got the impression that her family was very modern-thinking in such matters.” He frowned to himself. “Now what was *their* name? I remember it came up over dinner once – Creighton obviously disapproved of them. Godwin, I think it was.... Yes, that was it – Mary Godwin.”

Lady Penelope looked up with interest. “Not *the* Mary Godwin, surely? How old did Cassandra say she was, Captain?”

Scarlet frowned. “I’m not sure... no, wait a minute – I think Cassandra said she was a few years younger than herself... so I suppose she would have been about fourteen or so. Why do you ask, Lady Penelope? The name means nothing to me.”

“Well, if she’s the girl I *think* she is, that’ll be because she was still known by her maiden name, Captain. About two or three years later she married a young poet called Percy Shelley... and I imagine you know what happened when the pair of them subsequently went to spend the summer of 1816 with Lord Byron, John Polidori and Claire Clairmont in a villa on the shores of Lake Geneva?”

Scarlet blinked. “Good grief – yes, of course! But... that would mean...”

“Yes, it would, wouldn’t it? It would mean that we owe one of the greatest works of modern literature to Tina’s saving of Lieutenant Almond’s life with the aid of an improvised defibrillator powered by a 21st century ionizer supercharging a crude voltaic pile created by a very young Michael Faraday. How very interesting – perhaps you should write it up for the History Channel. Would you care for another cup of tea, Captain?”

Captain Blue leaned forward. “*Did* Lieutenant Almond marry Faraday, Paul?”

Scarlet shook his head. “Not in *our* reality, Adam – that’s for sure. Again, I read up on him during my recovery: he married a young woman called Sarah Barnard in 1821. There’s plenty of documentation relating to who she was and where she came from, so it’s difficult to see how she could have been Rodica under an assumed name. But in *Tina’s* reality, who can say? The information in the ship’s database was quite specific, and the young woman depicted in the lithograph was undoubtedly Rodica. If she *did* marry him, she’d certainly have been able to complement his inventive skills with her own technical expertise gained from our reality – and the result could easily have been a technological fast-tracking like the one Tina described in her reality’s chronology.”

He peered at the collection of envelopes and parcels still contained within the box. “What else have you got in there, Lady Penelope?”

Her Ladyship pulled out a small pile of envelopes in an assortment of shapes and sizes, and spread them about on the table top.

“There are several incidental documents here that will probably be of more interest to me than to you, Captain – but I’ve brought them along anyway for you to see because they contain references to some of the people you mentioned when you first contacted me after your recovery. For example, there’s some legal documentation here on the poachers who attacked you and Lieutenant Almond in Foxley Woods. I have the county archivist to thank for finding this – and our local history society will be *very* interested to hear that the incident took place almost on our doorstep, so to speak. The case was widely reported at the time on account of their being three brothers who were tried and condemned together, in consequence of which two of them were sentenced to transportation. The eldest of the three was hanged, in what was widely perceived as an exceptionally severe warning to others – just as you told me in your email. It seems that the incident evoked such highly-charged emotions at the time that it found its way into folklore; indeed, they tell me you can still hear it sung about at any folk club where the performers know their history.”

She picked up a bound pile of documents, and carefully unknotted the ribbon that held them together.

“These are the deeds of an establishment called ‘The Poachers Pocket’, which has a chequered history as an alehouse of questionable repute just outside one of the villages a few miles down the road from here. I’ve brought these documents here to show you because you mentioned a Mr Herrick and his wife in your narrative: you told me that Herrick was Colonel Creighton’s butler, and Mrs Herrick was the family’s cook, I believe. This then provides me with some *fascinating* material for our local history society’s next meeting, given that one of Mr Herrick’s descendants now owns and manages the present incarnation of The Poacher’s Pocket. The place is starting to acquire something of a local reputation as *the* place to go for an enjoyable evening out, and I’ve therefore booked us a table for this evening in the hope and expectation that you’ll both be able to join me there for dinner. The present Mrs Herrick prepares the finest coq-au-vin you’ll find *anywhere*, and I’ve no doubt she’ll be intrigued to discover where her early nineteenth-century counterpart perfected the art of quality cooking.”

She took another sip from her cup of tea and regarded Scarlet speculatively for a moment.

“One letter in particular is *very* interesting, because even though it bears no date, it was obviously written by Tina to Lieutenant Almond sometime around the year 1814. That the letter was actually found within our own archive suggests to me that the lieutenant continued to maintain contact with her friend, unless of course this is merely a draft that Tina retained.”

Scarlet leaned forward with obvious interest. “Well, this is *certainly* reassuring! Good to know that she at least managed to make a life of some sort for herself there: I’ve wondered about her many times...”

“Just a minute, Paul,” interjected Captain Blue, “I’m still having trouble getting my head around this. Is this the Lieutenant Almond who married Faraday, or the one who didn’t?”

“It’s the Lieutenant Almond who *didn’t* marry him,” replied Scarlet after a moment’s pause. “It has to be... because it was in *our* reality that she didn’t marry him – and the *letter* exists in our reality.”

Scarlet’s expression contained just a suggestion of smugness as he settled back into his chair once more. “*Do* try to keep up, Adam! What does it say, Lady Penelope?”

Her Ladyship reached into the box and extracted a transparent folder containing three sheets of thick white writing paper held together at the top left corner with a red silk ribbon. Passing it across the table to her guest, she hesitated briefly before handing it over.

“It’s probably best that you read it yourself, Captain Scarlet. I wanted to leave this document until last... for reasons that I think will become apparent shortly. I have of course read it myself, and I feel it incumbent upon me to tell you in advance of your reading it that it makes reference to a matter that is somewhat delicate. I ask you to forgive me for having inadvertently stumbled upon an incident that you will no doubt regard as highly personal, but I fear under the circumstances it is difficult to see how I could have done otherwise. The letter also helps to explain why our search for Tina’s most distinctive surname failed to return any matches within the National Archives database.”

Eyeing Lady Penelope with a quizzical expression, Scarlet took the folder and extracted the letter, which he then laid out on the table. Peering at the faded handwriting, he began to read quietly to himself:

I now, my dearest friend Rodica, resume my pen not touched these two years since. I beg and beseech you will forgive me the tardiness with which this letter is writ and dispatched—believe it not my purpose to leave you in ignorance of my situation, my own true friend and companion, for such could not be further from my intent. Indeed, I own, I know not still whether the path I walk which now twists and meanders with such divers alacrity might ever straighten and lead me from this tangled wood of novelty through which I yet struggle. Even so, the manner and speech of those about me loses its strangeness with each new day, and it is this discovery in part that persuades me to write you this spring in the hope and expectation that I may sufficiently express myself in the knowledge that you, my dearest friend, will understand the sentiments and intelligence I would hereby impart.

Three years and more are now passed since he was taken from me. My son is well, and though he cannot yet know it may be assured of a better station in life than might have seemed destined by Providence in the weeks and months directly after the explosion, for the following autumn Colonel Creighton did me the honour of asking for my hand, and I was greatly pleased to accept him. If the truth be told, I confess I could have with ease believed, my own friend, that my dear husband, being sensible of my predicament was persuaded to this course uniquely by the goodness of spirit which I know to lie deep within him, being inseparable from the magnanimity of his nature, but I have come now to perceive that whatever the truth of the matter, it can be naught but love in its unsullied purity that now binds us, and I am content.

That phantom world of intrigue in the firmament into which I was born, of which I spoke often to you upon such times as we walked beneath the oaks which border upon the heath grows ever more surreal. Such occasions as I think upon it become less frequent with each passing year, and I discover that I am now able barely to countenance such belief within me that the world of my birth may lie beyond the sunrise, or perchance within the twilight, but to be sure it no longer may be sought within this mortal plane. Upon occasion I take refuge in telling of such things to my son at the closing of the day, for he loves to hear my tales as he falls asleep—I would tell him of giants and ogres as other children hear but he finds my quarks and antiparticles more agreeable, and he sleeps all the sounder for it.

You might perhaps be surprised by the name I have taken upon my marriage. My surname is all but unknown at this time, for it is but a sobriquet that was born in the manner I shall now confide. My mother, who was French, voiced the opinion on numerous occasions when I was young that I did not possess the qualities necessary to make my way in the world, expressing her view with the words ‘Tu n’as pas la marque,’ which may perhaps be translated as ‘You do not have the making within you’. I however thought the phrase most poetic, and did not complain when others addressed me so, and thus Tina Palamac I became to all, for the name is most distinctive and therefore rarely forgotten. I was therefore most diverted when Mr Harrison forgot it completely, and mistakenly introduced me to Mr Brookes by a name suggested by my perceived status as Colonel Creighton’s ward – and all the more so when Mr Brookes, who himself married us at St Sebastian’s in East Grinstead some two years afterwards, inscribed that very same name in the parish register the day we were wed. For him to make a mistake of such magnitude, I am obliged to believe that upon the occasion of our original meeting I made some considerable impression upon him, either for good or ill – but it is fortuitous, for indeed I feared lest the inexplicable appearance of my sobriquet within the historical records of this era might serve to provoke unwelcome scrutiny by the intelligence services of my own, for I can surely attest to their efficiency in such matters. A new name having been imposed upon me by virtue of a compounding of errors, and mindful that soon I

shall have progeny who may one day ask who I was and whence I came, I have therefore elected to adopt it in perpetuity.

As I draw this letter to its conclusion, I now find myself obliged to write with greater haste than formerly on account of the imminent arrival of Mr Lawrence, who is come from London this month to work upon my portrait. His recent likeness of Lord Ludlow is much spoken of, and the Colonel says we are fortunate he has consented to undertake our commission, for it is made possible only by the recent indisposition of Marianne, Countess Spencer. Mr Lawrence is a very fine man, but is easily made impatient and irritable if his brushes are not to be found where he believes them put the day before. He will take the work back to London upon the morrow to complete it, but from that which he has painted this far I can tell that it will be very like. Do not ask me, dear friend, what impulse possessed me to accede to my husband's desire that the work should be undertaken; it is not vanity for my part but merely a wish that he whose name I may no longer speak with such affection that yet lightens my spirit and gladdens my heart might one day see it and remember me with such fondness as I remember him, for his love has given me my son, and for this I shall endure even the imprecations of the irascible Mr Lawrence and his errant brushes.

My dearest friend, I would have you be the first to know, if you will but refrain from communicating the intelligence abroad until perhaps a fortnight hence, that I am again with child. I seek the delay only on account of the Colonel's being beset by a most frightful chill this last week end which has taken him to his bed, and would await the recovery of his good health before apprising him of my condition. The servants have bid me send for a physician on his account but I shall have none of it, for they cannot but worsen the affliction with their leeches and quackery. I will admit to possessing a limited knowledge of herbs, though I confess it to be elementary, but which I am confident is sufficient to the task, and cannot doubt that a daily infusion of penicillin will have him once more upon his feet before the hunt ball on Saturday.

I am, remain and always will be, your affectionate and faithful

Tina Creighton-Ward

Scarlet looked up with tears in his eyes, and smiled.

“She’s happy. That’s really all that matters, isn’t it? And evidently pretty well suited to the lifestyle by the sound of it – though what on earth any reader other than Lieutenant Almond herself would make of that last sentence, I can’t imagine.”

He picked up the letter, glanced over it again and sighed.

“I have a son, Adam. I have a son who was born in the grounds of *this* house over two hundred and fifty years ago – and I had absolutely no idea at all until this moment. An unbelievable end to an unbelievable chain of events – and her mother thought she hadn’t got what it took to make her way in the world? Some parents just don’t have a clue...”

He gazed at the letter for a few seconds more, then smiled wistfully and turned back to their host.

“You know, seeing her again in that painting of yours was as much a revelation as a shock. The artist has captured the essence of her personality perfectly – I can certainly attest to that – *but* I believe he could also see something that I never once sensed throughout the time I knew her... and which I’d never have imagined she would ever find. The word for it is ‘contentment’.”

He found himself contemplating the minuscule chances of either of them being content had their relationship continued, and the wistful smile slowly began to fade.

“Lady Penelope – I wonder if I might ask a small favour of you?”

“I rather thought that you might,” replied Her Ladyship with a twinkle in her eye, “so I took the liberty of anticipating the nature of your request, and of undertaking a course of action to comply with it.” She reached out, picked up the teapot and raised it to her lips.

“Parker – would you bring it in now, please?”

A few seconds later the butler opened the doors, and entered the room carrying a large portfolio briefcase.

Parker placed the case into Scarlet’s outstretched hands with due formality.

“With the compliments of ‘er Ladyship, Captain Scarlet. It’s h’indistinguishable from the h’original – which ‘er Ladyship felt would be h’appropriate in view of the subject matter of the painting.”

“A perfect Mysteron facsimile,” mused Scarlet. “Yes, I think I’d agree that describes the subject matter of the painting very well indeed.”

< THE END >

56 Author's Notes & Acknowledgements

I am making no profit from my use of the concepts or characters that have appeared in any of Gerry Anderson's television series or publications, including TV21, from which the Anderson universe as depicted in this trilogy has been created.

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