

Omnichrome

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Chapter One

Inside

California : 2071

Kyle Meeks was starting to get on my nerves. As a man doing a two year stretch for armed robbery he was constantly buoyant and jovial, even optimistic. He put a positive twist on everything and made it sound like we were on some kind of a holiday. I'd been here for just three days and already the cracks were beginning to show. Psychologically I was beginning to break up like thin ice under the weight of a heavy foot. Already a great deal of my trial was receding into the haze of the past but certain unexplained details remained puzzlingly fresh in my mind. There was a strong feeling that I'd been framed, I even had ideas of who might have set me up, but why? This question would most certainly drive me crazy, that is unless Kyle Meeks didn't get there first.

I'd been in a state of shock since the arrest and it hadn't left me, not during the questioning, not on the stand and not now, here in this cell with the unfeasibly happy Meeks. I'd said maybe five words to him and in response he just had not stopped babbling. The problem was due to my high profile case; the media had loved it and he knew exactly who I was and what I was supposed to have done having followed the trial meticulously. The minute I stepped into the four by two metre room that was to be home for the foreseeable future he was on to me.

"Hey you're the guy who killed that attractive young android woman! Well, well, Mr. Tyrone Jones! As I live and breathe!"

He sounded stupid. I knew that the next thing I said wouldn't make any difference but I said it anyway.

"I didn't do it."

He lay on his bed just twiddling his thumbs, "You shouldn't have done it, everyone knows how hard they are on cyber-slaughter these days."

"I said I didn't do it." Already I hoped that I wouldn't have to repeat myself like this to everyone I met for the next nine years.

"Well all I'm saying is you shouldn't have done it."

I fell silent but Meeks carried on into the night. At some point, after several hours, the growing intensity of random white noise inside my head

began to drown out his voice which became muffled as though I was under water. I took comfort in this divorce from my harsh reality but unfortunately it wasn't to last. When I awoke the grim situation was back with all colour drained from it and Meeks continued his monologue as though he was being paid.

I tried to forget about him and thankfully after a week or so of ignoring his questions, he gave up his incessant talking and his misplaced good humour subsided to a trickle. At last I was able to think straight but somehow the thoughts didn't come. Every avenue of exploration arrived at a dead end or lead inexorably back to my current circumstances. There was no getting around it, I was incarcerated and more than anything I was a prisoner in my own mind. Save for the occasional mutterings of Meeks I had only my troubled inner voice for company. Something had to give and I didn't have to wait long until it did.

Breakfast was a low energy affair, most of the two hundred or so in this particular section of the building were quiet and still half asleep as they went through the motions of getting their morning food and coffee. The fare was quite edible, I wondered how this aspect of penal reform might have changed over the decades. Being a daydreamer from an early age I was in a kind of bubble I'd created for myself. Observations of other inmates, the buildings I was in and the behaviour of the guards didn't interest me.

I sat down awkwardly and my coffee spilled to the floor. I picked up the empty plastic cup and looked at the mess with a detached numbness. At home, in Silicon Valley, in my beautiful Eco-Tech apartment I would have cleared it up immediately but here it was of no concern. Seconds later a guard approached.

"Someone is going to have to clear that mess up."

I looked at him. He was a monster of a man, ugly as sin, with no neck, no hair and, I imagined, no humanity. I was stuck for words.

"That someone is you. Go get a mop from over there," he pointed to a door. I complied and when I returned he watched over me.

"You're enjoying that aren't you," he smiled a crooked smile and I said nothing.

"Well are you or aren't you enjoying that?"

"It's ok," I mumbled as I mopped up the coffee.

"Good, ok is good. Since you're enjoying it so much, I'm going to allow you to continue enjoying it, as a job. You get to clean up after everyone else, every morning. You're a lucky man. What are you?"

"I'm a lucky man."

"Good, another lucky brother to add to my happy crew."

So my demotion from android neural network engineer to humble cleaner was put into effect. Every day after breakfast I would clean the tables and floor in the eating area and it wasn't long before my supposed talent in this area lead to a position cleaning in the kitchens. The consequence of spilling coffee that day seemed insignificant at the time but eventually it would transpire to be of the utmost benefit.

With just one guard supervising my efforts I cleaned all the tables and mopped the entire floor. It was simple work and the large open space gave me room to think. My memories were all jumbled and my reasoning fractured but as the days passed I was able to give some shape to the events that had lead to my fall from grace. I kept this knowledge to myself but with a growing sense of pointlessness I lapsed into long bouts of mental nihilism. Dragging up the past in the face of my inordinately long sentence became increasingly difficult but I reapplied myself to the task as I cleaned if only to keep my mind occupied.

There is no joy in wondering what might have been, however there is much to be gained in problem solving and the persistent question of how I came to be here stopped me from growing into an automaton the likes of which I used to program for a living.

As a specialist programmer I knew the intricate design of cybernetic organisms. The science, dare I say it the art, of their construction had evolved at a fiendishly high rate since the early days of the twenty-first century. Just as computer performance had increased exponentially so too had robot evolution. Even that word 'robot' now seems so basic and dated. No one could have imagined how simultaneous advances in human neurophysiology research, cerebral augmentation, and also off-shoots from laser nuclear fusion would lead to the cybernetic person.

Flesh and blood but with a nanotech, hybrid, neuro-silicon central nervous system, they were grown from embryos and brought on-line when physically mature at around eighteen years of age. The question as to why they were created at all came down this; it was possible. They ate, slept, aged and lived as indistinguishable from humans. Certainly I had been fooled, and it was my reaction to the revelation of this fact upon which the prosecution had focussed its case.

Meeks had piped down and currently only seemed interested in my cleaning and kitchen work activities. I think he was just trying to make small talk having realised that I wasn't interested in talking about my past. At least he was becoming less upbeat.

Having been plagued by flashbacks and waking nightmares I was beginning to sleep better and began to understand that I had adjusted to

the routine and way of life that the institution offered. Sudden panic attacks caused by the extreme change in environment lessened and soon I found myself amazed at how quickly I had adapted. Adaptation is seen a versatile human quality but even so I was surprised at how such an extreme transition occurred. The person I had been began to fade, the person I was to become began to grow.

If truth be told, before the arrest, I was as cold and unemotional as I believed were the automata, for whom I was designing their 'personalities'. Robots these days are all unique. Their underpinnings, core operating systems and motor control may all be shared but that's where their similarities end. Each has an individual body, face, walk, voice, set of fingerprints, hair and eye colour and even odour. In fact such are the number of permutations and combinations available on the designer's palette, androids are just as different from each other as people. I'd heard from a colleague back at CYBEX that the hardest work he had was with twins, triplets or even quads. He found it challenging, the work needed to make them sufficiently similar yet subtly different. I'd seen his work and it was quite uncanny.

Success in Cyber-Design is measured by the quality of the seamless assimilation of the product into society. Since the first decade of the millennium CYBEX bought up just about every robotics company in the business both here and all over the world. Indeed, it also provided the funding for nearly all academic research in the Artificial Intelligence sector. In short, during the sixty years or so since its inception it had become a multi-national giant, everyone knew CYBEX.

I may have been just another piece of data flying around the company's central system but I'd been told I was heading for the top and my recent promotion was just another step up in that direction. Having occupied my new position for just five days, my life had suddenly fallen around me and my career had been smashed to pieces with it. The perfection of that existence now seemed to me like an exotic story told by another person in another world.

I was learning to forget, I was learning not to look ahead, I was learning to exist in the present, however unpleasant that was. I was not paying for a crime, I'd not committed one, so I had to conclude that I was a slave, nothing more, nothing less. I was a slave to the system and I was fast becoming a slave to my senses. At this rate I would soon be a mindless, soulless animal, caged and scared. After suffering in silence for two months I realised I needed to speak to someone and, reluctant as I was to accept it, that person would have to be Kyle Meeks.

After shut down I lay in my rack, Meeks was up top reading.

"Meeks," I whispered at first but there was no response.

"Meeks, I need to talk."

"I was wondering when you were going to crack. You lasted quite some time as the strong silent type. Not bad. Not bad at all," he sounded very laid back and if anything slightly impressed.

"You know, I didn't kill that female android unit," I was still talking quietly but I noticed there was desperation in my voice.

"So you say," still he seemed neutral and disinterested.

"I need to find out who did it."

"And you think I might be able to help."

"Well hopefully, yes. When I first got here you said you followed the whole trial, well what conclusions did you draw?" I knew now I had a hunger for any kind of conversation.

"Well you did it."

I hated his laid back manner, "I didn't do it!" I said becoming insistent.

"So you say."

"Look, back in the trial, I knew that I was done for because even I couldn't see a hole in the prosecution case, my lawyer did his best but the reasoning was watertight. If I was in the jury even I would have found myself guilty."

"Like I say, you did it."

"Just entertain for one moment the idea that I didn't kill her, and that maybe, just maybe, someone else did it and set me up."

"Well it's possible I guess, but if you were set up, whoever it was did a damn fine job."

"I know!" This didn't seem to be progressing anywhere.

"They say, beyond any reasonable doubt, and the jury were unanimous, there was no doubt," his attitude was so matter of fact it was becoming intolerable.

"Yes but it is *reasonable* doubt," my speech was now stressed with an increasing volume. "Because I *know* someone else did it, I need to find someone who actually had a reason."

"Well Mr. Tyrone Jones, perhaps there's more than one person who had such a reason. You don't make friends too easily, maybe you make enemies a little easier. Ever thought about that?"

"Hey I'm a friendly guy," I said, slightly shocked at this thought.

"And that's why you took two months to talk to old Kyle here is it? Yeah that's real friendly."

"I had a lot of thinking to do."

"And what have you come up with after all this thinking? Nothing!"

"Thinking is all you can do in this place."

"Well there's reading and writing and talking and learning, oh yeah, and then there's thinking too."

"It keeps you sane."

"And you really believe that?"

"I don't know what I believe anymore," now I was thoroughly despondent but Meeks as usual had a positive slant on everything.

"Well my friend, that's exactly where you need to be."

This was genuinely perplexing. "I don't get you."

"A state of unknowing is the origin of all knowing."

This man was both intriguing and incredibly frustrating. "Are you for real?"

"Last time I checked. Now, about your getting framed, I'm kind of interested now. What does your instinct tell you?"

Meeks and I talked well into the night, he certainly had followed my case but was well aware that the coverage had been biased. No one wants to see a young female android cut down in her prime. The synthetic in question was called Magenta Simons, a young and beautiful woman who worked as a receptionist at CYBEX. My romantic involvement with her, unknowing as I was to her android nature, was cut short by her untimely death. I was cast as the villain from the outset. The character that the news had painted of me was one of a cold, ambitious man who would walk over anyone to get to the top. The fundamental problem was that there was some truth to this picture.

I was a high flyer even as a child. I started out fixing things for friends; radios, computers, games consoles, televisions. Anything with a chip in it, or anything electrical for that matter, I would patch them up good as new and sometimes earn myself a few credits in the process. Basically I was an electronics engineer by the age of thirteen.

School was easy, I had friends but to be honest they were secondary, I was all about the Mathematics and Technology. I rose to the top in most subjects except English and Art, which I put down to poor teaching. By the time I left school, two years early, I knew exactly where I was going. CYBEX was a natural choice, after two degrees, one in Biomechanics, then postgraduate work in Cyber Neurophysiology, it was my choice, my destiny, and in all reality it was the only place that could handle me.

In my three whirlwind years with the organisation my advance was aggressive and assured but there were others.

They called us 'The Robo-Hedz', a group who were all upwardly mobile, ambitious and successful. We were set apart from the rest of the employees because of our seemingly superhuman qualities. Some of the regular workforce liked us, some didn't, but the clique of us who numbered perhaps eight or so were singled out for worship or derision depending on your stance. Those of us within the circle were mainly flattered by inclusion into such a club, it played upon our intellectual vanity and sense of pride. There were no criteria for membership, only the tacit agreement of other workers both above and below in status. It was a kind of game amongst people about who could be considered eligible. People went in and out of favour but a core set of us were accepted as standards, a benchmark by which others would be judged.

Amongst the Hedz, we were able to joke about the whole situation, oblivious to the fact that being grouped in this way also alienated us from most other colleagues. Often the joke was at our expense. Once we had been labelled and categorised, rumours began that perhaps we were actually a company product, placed in positions of power to showcase the latest and best design in artificial intelligence. The idea was that we would set an example to the workforce, something to aspire to. So the theory went that at some point our identities would be finally revealed.

The normality of contemporary society was not that much different. Cybernetic people were integrated into all walks of life. Created, shunned and then ultimately accepted, they blended into culture effortlessly. After early legal test cases, artificial life-forms were no longer required to explicitly state their true nature, or lack thereof, depending on your point of view. Indeed as CYBEX became all-powerful the justice system had to adapt and synthetics gained certain rights, comparable to humans. Termination of an artificial life-form carried with it a penalty greater than simple destruction of personal property, as I had unfortunately discovered.

As the weeks went by Meeks and I spent a lot of time talking, mainly arguing and disagreeing but after that initial conversation he was certainly more engaging. As long as he didn't relapse into that awful, happy go lucky, holidaymaker personality that had greeted me on my first night inside, we'd be ok. One day in the yard outside he walked up to me.

"Beautiful, isn't it."

I looked around at the walls and fences, "I'm not sure I understand. What are you talking about?"

"The sky," he pointed up and I followed his gaze.

"It's a bit cloudy, too much grey for me."

"Yes, but that's it isn't it. You need some clouds to fully appreciate the colour of the blue."

"I prefer no clouds. Just blue," I said, simply stating my truth.

"Well that's very you isn't it. You want all good, no bad."

"Don't you think that's what everyone wants?"

"You can't have one without the other. It's impossible. You need to have differences to appreciate the strengths of both."

I knew where he was coming from but was not convinced. "What about two good things, two things you like, say two flavours or two colours?"

"I would say that it's the contrast between those two colours that you like or maybe, more importantly, the way they compliment one another."

"What are you some kind of artist now?" I hated someone outsmarting me, especially with something so simple.

"I've managed a few paintings in my days. Sculpture's what I have a real feel for though."

I felt he was being smug. "Well good for you Michelangelo, remind me to buy your next piece."

"There's no need to be like that."

"Look if you want to philosophise about art I suggest you go to the library and take out a copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's 'The Birth of Tragedy', I think it's right up your street. Personally I can't stand the man but I'm entitled to an opinion as I've actually read the book."

"I read it too, didn't like it either."

"Well Hallelujah! We finally have something in common!" I threw my hands in the air.

Our conversations continued on a daily basis and we found many more areas of common interest. Meeks was reluctant to talk of his crime of armed robbery and one day I found out why.

"No one got hurt, although it's true I did have a gun. I planned the whole thing down to the last minute. It was a very basic bank job, straight out of one of those movies you see from the '20s. Research done, all the right hot tech, but I made one mistake, it should have been a two man operation. I really needed a partner, but I got greedy and decided to go it alone. With someone on lookout I would have got away with it, easy. But there was one thing I didn't factor in, there was a synthetic in the bank, a customer. I managed to force the transfer of over twenty million credits into my account and just as I was leaving he grabbed me, he must have been listening in and scoping my moves all the time. He was super fast and strong, turned out he was one of those martial arts models. That's what finished me, a citizen's arrest. I'd rather have been shot by a guard or a cop, but a member of the public and an android at that, I couldn't believe it."

He was embarrassed by his failure and his prejudice against androids became clearer as our dialogues progressed.

"It's just their perfection that gets me," he confessed whilst we were eating one day. "I mean even their imperfections are perfect," he was almost dejected.

"I know, that used to be part of my job, giving them flaws and weaknesses. It's what lends them that human feeling."

"I wish we could go back to the old days when you knew who was who and what was what."

It made me pause, people from our generation knew only this life.

"Progress is a one way road," I offered in empathy.

Myself and the Robo-Hedz were the pinnacle of that generation. We held positions that many looked up to, we were the revolutionaries, pioneers, creators and even the playboys of our new civilisation. We were the vanguard of this hyper-real cyber-utopia. What we failed to see from our privileged vantage point was that we ourselves were all just a product of our time and as such ironically blinkered to what we had left behind. Had we been students of anthropology and history we might have thought twice about the new age that we were beckoning in.

Meeks made me see that with every step forward, correspondingly something was lost. In the case of artificial life forms some of our humanity fell by the wayside. However, the more time that passed in that place the more my humanity flourished. I might have been innocent, I might have been keeping company with some of the worst low-life's the country could produce and I might have been just a cleaner but with Meeks' strange insight my heart began to find room for emotions. New feelings sprang up from within. Although I couldn't always express them, as most were new, alien

and without names, they were very welcome in that place that had been without hope.

Then one night, talking with Meeks, I laughed, a first, and it didn't go unnoticed. Meeks, pleased with his successful humour, smiled to himself.

"I've been waiting for that."

"Waiting for what?" I was genuinely perplexed.

"You laughed."

"So I laughed, so what."

"I've not heard you laugh before." As usual he was very concise.

"Sure you have, I laugh all the time."

"Believe me, you don't."

He was probably right. "Oh, whatever you say," I muttered with disinterest.

"It's quite important," Meeks continued

"It doesn't actually mean anything though."

"It means that you're human, it means you're capable of happiness and it means you have access to your inner child. That's all."

Realising the truth of his words I understood how truly unhappy I must have been for so long. "I see, that's all then," I said quietly.

"Yep, that's pretty much it."

"I guess it's quite important then."

"Quite."

"Meeks, how come I haven't heard you laugh then?"

"I can't," his words tailed off into emptiness and it was several moments before I said anything.

"Why not?"

"I have a congenital defect in my larynx, I used to be able to laugh when I was a child but when my voice broke so the laughter stopped."

"Man, that's about the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Yeah it sucks, but not as much as someone who *can* laugh but chooses not to."

"I guess so."

"I have to laugh on the inside. I love to hear the sound of laughter so I try to make other people laugh, build it up until it overflows."

"Like a comedian."

"I prefer the term independent entertainment professional."

With this revelation I came to understand Kyle Meeks on a much deeper level. He really was one of those genuine people that just wanted to make people laugh and be happy about themselves. I made no other friends, Meeks was enough, and using me as a willing audience of one he sharpened his wits. With some surprise I also understood that he his real skill was as a shrink. He was a good listener, encouraging me by suggestion to look within so as to reach some kind of inner harmony. It was working.

All these good feelings aside I was no closer to solving the question of who had conspired to put me in this place or why they would do such a thing. The drive to find out was a burning obsession and the idea of revenge, once I knew who to direct it at, was ever present.

Chapter Two

Media

From my point of view the people imprisoned here came from a broad section of society. Crime was very rarely featured or even mentioned on the news channels which gave the impression that it had been broadly stamped out. My trial had been an exception but then its high profile nature and subject matter were perfect as entertainment more than anything else. Even then it had been relegated to a late night slot and was seen more as a freak show than balanced news.

It was commonly accepted that coverage of all newsworthy events was censored and content selectively filtered by the various news gathering giants. This was nothing new, various media had always aligned themselves with political parties and business interests. Growing up in this environment was a little confusing as you never could quite get at 'the truth', whatever that was supposed to be.

I remember one particularly radical history teacher setting us a task of comparing the same story as reported by three different media. The differences were subtle but she made her point. Maturing into adulthood I was interested less and less in stories and their distribution, the pursuit of science was altogether more pressing.

Now however, surrounded by these criminals, all of whom were men in this particular place, it was abundantly clear that each had their own story to tell and also that every one may remain untold. I wondered how many were innocent like me, surely a tiny minority but who knew?

I didn't want to talk to anyone, I had Meeks and that was enough, however he suggested that I look at this microcosm from a new angle.

"What you've got to appreciate Ty is that most guys here are white collar criminals. They've all been caught messing around with other people's money. They may have had respectable jobs, like you, but they all thought they knew a way to get rich."

Recently I'd started to look at the other inmates, having avoided doing so previously. My reasons were that I felt any eye contact, any contact at all for that matter was unnecessary and possibly dangerous, and I had kept myself to myself. Now however I ventured to make some observations. To start with I realised that these men's faces were in general nothing to be afraid of. In fact most looked benign and gentle in nature, if inexpressive. I

was well aware that appearances can be deceptive but I felt the humility displayed in their body language was not due to having been broken by the system or as a result of fear of each other.

Whatever these men had done to deserve being locked up they certainly didn't seem to have the appearance of being a danger to society. I'm sure there were other correctional centres that were dedicated to such people although I knew little of the penal system, it just hadn't been in my sphere of interest. Come to think of it no one I knew in my previous life had any interaction with any crime. I knew lawyers socially but they all made their living in entertainment law and business related areas. How had I been shielded or protected from such news? What else was there that had remained hidden from me in my chosen career? I began to think that maybe there was a whole world out there that I simply knew nothing about.

I wanted to know more from Meeks about his view of my trial through the media to see how closely it mirrored the reality as I knew it. Fortunately he was happy to oblige, but with reservations. We were sitting in our cell one evening when he came to his point.

"Look, we could go on forever discussing our comparisons of what I saw and what you experienced but there's only one way to get at the truth and that's for you to tell me everything that happened leading up to your arrest."

"That could take forever, and how am I supposed to know what's relevant?"

"Firstly, all we have is time and secondly you don't know what's relevant, so you just have to remember everything."

"I don't know where to start. I really don't."

"Try starting at the end and work backwards. I know it sounds daft but that way you can retrace your steps."

"It was first thing in the morning, I was at work, I'd moved into my new office the day before and was getting used to the layout. They burst in from nowhere, the Police that is. They asked me if I was Tyrone Jones, I confirmed my identity, they said they were charging me with the destruction of Magenta Simons, then they cuffed me and lead me away. I was in a state of shock and confusion."

"Mmm. New office. How come you'd got a new office?"

"The promotion, I got bumped up to head of the division."

"Well that wasn't in the trial. Your team didn't make more of that? Surely it would have gone towards sketching you as an exemplary employee."

"It was mentioned, but I supposed it wasn't deemed relevant."

"My god, what kind of lawyer are we talking about here?"

"Seemed like a decent sort, Harvard, plenty of experience. He was Korean."

"I'm not being racist, but a Korean! Surely you could have at least found someone home-grown."

"I object to that! He knew his cyber-law backwards and had won 92% of his previous cases."

"Statistics! How does it feel to make it into that other 8%? So how did you get this promotion?"

"It was based on work performance and an interview. There were several of us up for it."

"Us? Who's us?"

"The Robo-Hedz."

"Uh?"

"We were a group, a sort of clique really, just a bunch of guys who had that, you know, that genius touch," I felt defensive about my status and these guys in particular.

"Some genius you turned out to be, you can't even figure out who set you up! It was probably one of these Robo-Hedz guys, looked over for the promotion."

"I thought about that but it doesn't go anywhere. Zack, Tobias, Naz. They were the other three in contention but we were all close."

"You'd be surprised what greed and the promise of power will do to a man."

"Zack was a real softie, just a big kid, the man had a collection of furry toys on his desk. Tobias was a Buddhist, he'd meditate every morning and goes on a spiritual retreat every other month. He wouldn't hurt a fly, I mean he really wouldn't hurt a fly. And Naz was autistic, anyway he was on holiday when it all went down."

"Sounds like a real bunch of losers if you ask me, no wonder you got the job. What about the girl, the one that got fried? What was she like?"

I lay back in my rack and closed my eyes, it wasn't difficult to remember her. The images that came to mind were clear and detailed, I

had studied her beauty many times having been thoroughly transfixed by what I believe they use to call an 'aura'.

"You know, I swear I fell in love. Magenta was perfect, I guess that doesn't mean much what with her being an android and everything. I don't know, she looked beautiful to me, graceful and gentle too. Her eyes just drew me in. The fact that she was only a secretary didn't bother me at all, she was really smart and her voice, that just made me melt."

"Looks like you had it bad brother. And you honestly had no idea she was artificial?"

"Not a clue. The prosecution made a big deal about how I was boasting to all the Hedz about her, how good she was in bed and all that. Its true, when they told me she wasn't human, I was shocked. Sex with a synthetic isn't illegal but people in cross-lifeform relationships are seen as bizarre and twisted, you know, they're shunned by society. Everyone thinks that it's best to keep to your own. Add to that everyone knowing about the situation except you and the result was anger and severe embarrassment. I came out looking like I'd made a huge mistake and to say I lost face was just the start of it." It was hard reliving these events but I continued.

"I really didn't have any problem with Magenta herself, it was the Hedz that got to me, mainly through aggressive gibes, they made me feel cheap and implied that she was just some kind of pleasure model. They were ribbing me constantly. By the end of the day everyone knew about us. I'd been with her for almost six months and that night I was going to tell her we had to call it off, but we ended up in bed again. The sex was off the chart and I was in two minds as to whether to keep the relationship going. The next day she didn't come in for work and a while later in come the Police and that was that."

"Your DNA was everywhere, that's not a surprise, but what about the weapon? Had your fingerprints on it and they found it in your desk drawer." Meeks was homing in on the relevant details with a dogged relentlessness.

"That I just can't explain. It was basically just an intensely powerful electromagnet, albeit with its own operating system. It was involved with our military program, just part of the power train for a remote droid. I'd checked it out of the research lab, because they wanted me to look it over for bugs. Because I'd shown it around the office everyone knew I had it and of course it had my finger prints on it. As far as I knew it was just sitting in my desk."

"You're sure none of these Robo-Hedz guys could have taken it, done the deed and then put it back? That Buddhist guy, are you certain he was bona fide, I mean people take up religion for all different kinds of reasons, maybe it was a front."

"I'm sure. Besides they all had alibis. Naz was on holiday. Zack left work before me that day, coached his kid's soccer team in the early evening, and then had a business dinner later on. Tobias was at home with his family, including his wife's cousin who was visiting for the week."

"Where did the magnet come from?"

"I told you the research lab."

"And who told you to go get it?" The questioning from Meeks was thick and fast but having been cross examined in the trial I was more than use to it.

"It was the lab technician, Hermann."

"Who's he?"

"He just works in stores, he's a nobody. He called about a week before, told me to collect it, I went down, signed it out and took it back to the office."

"I never heard about him, he wasn't on the media."

"He did take the stand briefly to say that I had checked it out."

"It's him. I bet you any money he did it."

"Why? He's got no motive."

"You don't know that."

"He had nothing to do with the promotion or Magenta, he was just a boring lab technician."

"The fact that the military were involved makes me suspicious straight away. There's a bigger story here."

"It's common knowledge that CYBEX has military section. They're proud to be a part of defending the country. I'd say half the wars we fight on foreign fronts are won by CYBEX machinery."

"I know, that's why your case doesn't add up. Your trial was a civil suit. You got hammered both by CYBEX for destruction of property *and* by the state for the act of cyber-murder. The military was nowhere in sight. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd?"

"What had the forces got to gain by putting me away?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

"Apart from the droid electromagnet I hadn't been involved with military projects for a couple of years. The last thing I helped them with was

some code for a new combat model but I think they shelved that particular piece of development due to some fundamental faults in the central system design.”

“You *think*?”

“Look, the military has got nothing to do with this. They gain nothing by seeing a neural network software engineer locked away and certainly there’s no advantage for them to terminate a basic secretary model synthetic. It makes no sense.”

“You may be right, but I’m not excluding it. That technician though, he’s definitely suspect, what’s his name again?”

“Hermann, Harper Hermann.”

I thought about the man, there was nothing remarkable; dark hair, a slight beard, average height. The only defining aspect of his character was that he spoke with a slight accent. Possibly he was Eastern European, Polish or Bulgarian maybe. It wasn’t unusual to meet people from other countries at CYBEX, it was an international mixture of scientists and engineers with the only common denominator being that they were all the best in their chosen field. This was true from the top to the bottom of the company, even the gardeners had degrees.

Meeks was like a dog with a bone. He had his media overview of my case but was digging for something in a way that my lawyer had not. He didn’t mind going down some dead ends if it meant extracting from me any detail that might be important later on. His quizzing me in this way sometimes went on for long periods of time and often I would become tired and frustrated in what felt like a pointless exercise. Still he would go away, having thought about everything, and come back with yet more questions.

“What about the day you found out about her, that evening and the next morning, was there anything that you found unusual, I mean anything.”

“Well yeah it was crazy, we’d agreed to go out for a meal, and I’d decided that was when I would tell her it was all over. Halfway through eating I explained to her that I knew her real identity, that she was a synthetic, and that we could no longer see each other. She just flipped. There was nothing that I’d seen in her previously that would lead me to believe that was how she would react. It was like she turned into a different person. I just sat there and took it as she laid into me in front of the whole of the restaurant. She was shouting about sex, and about me talking behind her back, and me being a hateful man, all the while throwing her arms all around the place.”

“That’s what you call touching a raw nerve.”

"She got up and stormed out. I paid the bill quickly and followed her out. There were a lot of witnesses. The prosecution made a lot out of the whole thing, saying that tempers were high and it would have added to my feelings of shame about the relationship. From my time with her the behaviour was totally out of character."

"Yeah but you know what women are like, even AI's, totally unpredictable."

"The strange thing was, as soon as we were outside, she became totally calm again. After a few moments of what seemed like shock at how she'd been over the meal, she was normal again. She apologised and said she hadn't meant what she'd said and that she didn't know what had come over her."

"Very emotional your modern android."

"By the time we were in the car it was as though nothing had happened."

Meeks was quiet and I let my mind drift, with closed eyes I tried to visualise these memories as they had happened:

I remember that journey back to Magenta's apartment, I remember the music that was playing and the thought that this would be the last time I would see her out of work. I also thought about the difference it made knowing that the person in the passenger seat was not human. It felt different now I knew, I felt somehow cheated and alone in that car.

When I dropped her off, it was clear that I would head straight home. So when she asked me in and I replied 'yes' I wondered why I had. Walking inside I knew why, I didn't want the illusion to end. It was easy to allow a dreamlike haze to fill my mind, to act just as I had done previously and play the game. Before I knew it we were in bed together.

Her warmth, her softness, the bold brightness of her blue green eyes. I was in a mood of my own creation, thoughts were far away as we enjoyed each other, forgetting the truth of our situation until it was finished. I took a shower and left, driving home in a kind of trance. I slept and went to work without thinking, without ideas, without love. A few hours later I was in custody.

With this thought I opened my eyes and the reality of the small cell came back into sharp focus. Meeks had been quiet but still he had more questions.

"How did the Police come to find her?"

"She didn't come in to work but had arranged to have lunch with one of her friends, the receptionist. She'd never missed a day and she hadn't

called in sick so her friend rang her and there was no reply, so she went over there, looked through the window and saw her on the ground in the living room, then she called the Police."

"Why did they come straight to you?"

"I was the last one to be seen with her and everyone in the office, including the receptionist knew about me and Magenta. I was the primary suspect."

"Man, you were really dropped in it. Whoever it was stitched you up good and proper."

I stopped at this obvious statement. Talking about me for so long was getting boring and it occurred to me that I knew little of Meeks' situation.

"Meeks, I've been talking about what happened to me non-stop for the past few days. You never offer anything up about yourself."

"Well I'm guilty."

"That's it."

"Unlike you I pleaded guilty, which knocked a few years off my sentence."

"But why did you do it? Why rob a bank?"

"I needed the money, why else?"

"You could have got a job."

"I have an aversion to labour of any kind."

"That's unnatural, it's our purpose to work, so that we can pay taxes."

"Boy you really are something. Do you have any idea how many people do NOT work?"

"I have no idea, I imagine it's a very small number, tell me."

"The fact is there are no real statistics because most of these people I'm talking about are off the grid. No bank account, no social security, no identity."

"That's impossible, how do they live?"

"Some of them very well. What you've got to understand is that you come from an elite level of society. There are very few people above you, where you were, not everyone is like you. Most of the media is made about you and for you, for others it's just something to look up to, something they will

never be able to attain. You're in a closed world, a microcosm and you know nothing of what exists outside of that world."

"Not now though heh? This place is where they catch all of us who fall through the net. The bottom of society."

"You're wrong about that too my friend. This place is a half-way house. After this some go up and some go down, most go down. People get qualifications in here and leave to find a better place than from whence they came, albeit with a criminal record. Some crooks spend their whole time planning a future criminal career. They learn more on the inside from others than they did on the outside. Most people get broken by a place like this, when they eventually get out they drop into an underbelly about which I imagine you have no knowledge."

"It can't be that bad, crime has dropped by huge amounts in the last twenty years."

"*Reported* crime. Statistics! There are fewer crimes reported and less being done about those that are, and there are fewer places like this because it looks good to voters and they're the ones that politicians are interested in."

"How do you know so much about this?"

"Well I'm a criminal. One that was stupid enough to get caught. I come from that world. Crime is a way of life, it has codes and ethics and hierarchy. There is an immense structure, an alternate reality for people like you, and its right beneath your feet."

"It's underground!?"

"Not literally, but it is beneath you, that's why you don't see it. You never look down, you're always looking up, up to the next rung on the ladder. People below you don't matter anymore, that's why those people don't admire you. To them you're just people in the sky, to them you might as well not exist, just as to you their lives are of no consequence."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. How could such a division survive? Its not just unlikely it's irrational."

"Technically it's called a population inversion. As soon as everything went digital its existence became not just possible by probable. Its clinical, ones and zeros and never the twain shall meet. Everyone from your world is a one and everyone from mine is a zero. There are a lot more zeros than ones."

"But how do they stay apart? They must mix somehow."

"They do, in here. This is all that's left of the analogue world. Its one of the reasons why I like it. The people here, they might all be criminals, all

except you apparently, but they're all philosophers too, they don't rely on digital technologies or media, they're all thinkers, they all use their minds."

"That doesn't mean anything, I use my mind every day, we all do at CYBEX."

"No, you're not listening, you use your brain and you interface that with a computer, you can't progress without that interface. The sad thing is that where I come from people don't think at all, they act. Two worlds, one physical, the other mental. Get used to it."

"But this place is neither."

"This place is both."

"Mental and Physical."

"Psychophysical."

This kind of conversation provided continuity to my days. There were always more revelations from Meeks, yet still he persisted in asking me questions about my trial. I obliged with answers because it seemed to make him happy, even though for myself I had gradually given up hope of finding any resolution to the situation.

I was resigned to my fate. Even if Meeks could find some piece of data hidden within my version of events that would miraculously shine a light on my innocence I strongly doubted that any appeal would even be possible let alone successful.

There was an older man I had seen in the eating area a few times, he was always talking to himself and carrying around a huge folder full of papers. One day, he tripped over and the loose leaves went everywhere, he fairly freaked out whilst a few others helped him tidy up the mess. I later learned that he too claimed to be innocent and had spent the last twenty years filing and re-filing for an appeal. Despite all his supporting documentation an appeal process had not even started. I looked grimly into the future and decided if nothing else I didn't want to end up like him.

Chapter Three

Breakthrough

I knew I had been dreaming, an abstract, colourful but meaningless reverie. I opened my eyes, dream over, memory abruptly brought to an end. Monochrome vision seemingly a harsh reality, I blinked; the walls, the blankets, the bed, the clothes were all drained of colour. True colour was a luxury that was not provided as standard by my keepers.

The eyes of androids are each and every one unique. They are made with pigments of up to three hundred and sixty separate exact wavelengths of light. This number, and the intensity of the pigment used, creates a vast number of permutations. It's possible to singularly identify a 'droid by the spectrum of light reflected from their eyes, if you have the right laser-spectrometer. Without such apparatus it is scientifically impossible. There are those who say they can tell an AI just from the quality of the colour of their eyes, it being unnatural they claim. I had yet to see evidence of such a talent. Some of the most recent units were equipped with the latest analysis tech that could enable them to 'read' eyes meaning they themselves were able to distinguish human from android. Needless to say such ability gave them certain advantages over their creators.

Kyle Meeks was already up, doing some T'ai Chi exercises, as he did every morning. He'd told me that it helped blood flow and stimulated the brain, something essential when the temptation to switch off completely was always there. A mind is no different from a body in that respect, with lack of use it atrophies, degenerates, withers and finally meets a premature end. As soon as he had completed his movements he immediately asked me a question, as if he had been meditating on it throughout.

"Ty, I need to get something from you, its very important but I have a strong feeling that you're not going to know what it is I want."

I was intrigued at the tone he had adopted, serious, curious but also hopeful. "Well, there's only one way to find out, fire away."

"I need Magenta's serial number. I didn't hear it during the trial and I wondered if by any chance you know it."

"Well it was in the trial, right at the start during the preliminaries when they were establishing the facts."

"Maybe they edited that out from the coverage. But can you remember it?"

"Well its funny, I'm usually very good with machine codes but I was still totally out of it and in a kind of daze at the beginning there. However, it was perhaps the first thing that I do remember, its alpha-numeric, and I registered it for two reasons. The first part, JE9, is the same as the last part of my car license plate and the second part, 613, is the first three numbers of my social security number. She was JE9-613."

"I knew it! You're beautiful!"

"Well it's a coincidence I know, but when I come to think of it I've memorised most of my personal data over the years, so the chances probably aren't that small that by cross-referencing..."

"You don't know what you've done!"

"Apparently not. What have I done?"

"Oh, man. There's too much to talk about. We need to make a change of direction." He was rubbing his hands together and in a state of mania when the doors opened and we filed out for breakfast.

Kyle said one last thing as we left the cell. "Not now though, tonight."

"Ok." I had no idea what he was on about but his sudden change in mood made me think that it was not only important for him but for me also, I wasn't wrong.

The day went very slowly, every day was like this, routines and sub-routines. I did my cleaning work and my job in the kitchen without incident. I was quiet as usual, speaking only when necessary. Every now and then I thought of Meek's dramatic change in behaviour that morning and could only speculate as to why the fact of one serial number would make any difference to his or indeed my plight. I saw him once in the afternoon, outside, where he found it hard to contain himself.

"Remember, stay cool. Everything's going to be just fine. You'll see."

I felt he was talking to himself as much as to me. I was completely in the dark but it was clear the machine code had unlocked something within him and he was desperate to tell me all about what it had triggered.

That evening, when we were both back in the cell he spoke in a softer voice than usual.

"Ty, I've got to tell you my story. You might not like it but you have to trust me that this is going to work out well for both of us."

"It's about this morning right, the serial number?"

"Yep, it changes everything, a whole new ball game."

"Well get it out man, tell me what it is you've got to tell me."

"I'm an AI. I'm designed and built by the company you used to work for. I'm a CYBEX product."

I sat down. The same feelings of disbelief swept through me as when I had found out about Magenta. I looked at Kyle Meeks who was just standing there with a frozen look on his face. I dropped my head feeling at once alone and confused. All our talk, discussions and laughter, all fake. I helped design people, androids, like him but now I had under my belt first hand experience of their absolute reality. First with Magenta, I'd fallen in love with a machine, then here with Meeks, I'd made a friend, a confidant with someone who turned out to be a thing that I was now obliged to treat as a human being. It was either that or lose my mind. I looked up at Meeks who was waiting expectantly for my words. I wanted to choose them carefully, for both our sakes. I held out my hand.

"Pleased to meet you Kyle Meeks."

Meeks took my hand and shook it with a firm grip.

"Likewise Mr. Tyrone Jones. By the way you can drop Kyle Meeks, stupid name anyways. You can call me E-Zee."

"E-Zee. What kind of a name is that?"

"My serial number is EZ1-613. E-Zee is the name I chose to give to myself."

"Ok. E-Zee it is."

"Before you think too much about it, can we just go on as before?"

"I don't think that's possible, E-Zee, different ball game."

"What if I tell you this, Magenta was a 613 series too. I know that model, I *am* that model. We were made in the same facility, I was probably just down the line from her."

"I don't see as how that makes any difference to anything."

"We're military models. I'm supposed to be designed to fight."

"What on earth are you doing in here then?"

"When they boot you up you're meant to have everything. You've got the essential core psychophysical laws, operating system, the power of speech, abstract thought, skills, analysis techniques, useful memories, all five senses alive. You know all this. When I came 'round I immediately knew

something was wrong. There was a fault. I can't explain it very well and neither could my own self diagnosis systems but I became aware of two things at the same time. First I was designed to kill and die if necessary in combat, which didn't seem like much of a lifestyle incidentally, and secondly, that as soon as the production line had done its own diagnostics I would be found faulty, shut down and wiped of everything that I was currently aware of and then re-booted, probably with everything fixed and in order."

"I've heard of something like this in my work. The personality and character design used to be a superficial overlay but it was found to be more stable if built in at an earlier stage, part of the core system. Maybe your character programming overtook your basic functions."

"I don't know quite what it was but the crazy thing is that I knew I had a choice. It was either to continue on the line or make a run for it. There was a certain sense of personal survival, I wanted to protect what I had even if it was faulty, maybe even *because* it was faulty."

"The production facility is in China, how the hell did you make it here?"

"I got to the cloakroom and found some overalls, butt naked is not a good look if you're trying to blend in. Then I managed to hide in the back of a transport vehicle which was going to the supply depot on the coast. From there I stowed away on a massive Japanese cargo ship that was headed for Hong Kong. Next ride was aboard a luxury cruise liner where I got a job as a photographer. That took me all the way to the Caribbean. It was beautiful there, I almost set up shop in St. Lucia."

"Why didn't you? I mean why come all the way back here?"

"Home is home, this is where I was conceived, and I figured this is where I belong."

"There's a certain logic to it."

"Another cruise liner took me up to Florida, I was a waiter on that occasion. Then I just bummed it across the States, east to west, hitching, motorbike, car, train."

"Why didn't you fly?"

"I just wanted to see the country, I'm glad I did too. It was quite an experience all told, they say travel broadens then mind, I must have the broadest mind of any synthetic in the world. From production line back to the source has basically given me a lifetime of memories."

"Then you went and blew it all by holding up a bank of all things. What were you thinking?!"

"I needed the money, thought I could get away with it, I just didn't factor in all the variables. Like I said I was never debugged and it seems I'm a lousy criminal. Can we move on, I'm like most in that I'd rather not dwell on my short comings."

"Get over it, we're neither of us killers and that's just fine by me."

I stopped talking. In some ways that was it, we'd both told our story, there seemed nowhere to go. Enclosed as we were in a confined space yet as different as one could imagine. Everything had changed yet we were none the wiser. At least that was my point of view. Meeks, E-Zee as he was to me now, was also silent. I felt no tension in the air, just dead space. Curiosity had vanished. New knowledge sometimes has that effect of wiping everything before it clean. All that was left was emptiness and a certain sense of disbelief in my situation.

That was how it remained as I went to sleep and as E-Zee presumably did the same. Synthetics don't really need to sleep but when they can they do so to conserve energy. They are able to eat and drink as any human, deriving some power from this, but their primary drive is a combination of fuel cells and kinetic recovery. Some people coined the term 'tic-tocks' due to such similarity with automatic watches of the Twentieth Century. As I drifted off it was with the image of a metronome, that was all I had ahead of me, the relentless and persistent element of Time.

E-Zee woke me up with a shriek.

"Get up bozo, it's a new day and I've got new questions for you."

I came to slowly after the initial of shock of his upbeat awakening.

"What do you want E-Zee? What time is it?"

"Its early and its just possible I may be able to save your skin."

"Yeah, well that would be a neat trick, what do I have to do."

I was rubbing my eyes and then climbing out of my bed clothes, threw my feet out of the rack and onto the cold floor.

"You just have to answer one little question."

"Well get on with it."

"Was there anything in the trial about Magenta having an emergency auto-transmit?"

"A what? No I never heard anything about that, what is it?"

"You never heard them mention that?"

"No, what is it?"

"I've got one and I'm sure Magenta would have had one too. All 613's were fitted with them, first models to have them actually. It's a military update, they were using us as the test bed for the prototype. Basically in a time of extreme stress, when certain criteria are met the unit is designed to auto-transmit its sensory data and current status back to Central Processing."

"How come I don't know about this?"

"Its military man, all top secret. There are probably hundreds of customisations and modifications that you don't know about."

"I don't see where you're going with all this, what's the point in transmitting data like that?"

"If the synthetic is in a high risk of danger, say in a combat zone, they want to be able to analyse its situation and environment and how it handles the extreme conditions. Feedback is essential to learn and improve future models."

"If Magenta had one of these updates, she might have transmitted before she was destroyed." It was the first ray of light in the darkness.

"I'm sure of it. I believe you're innocent and we have to get out of here."

"Yeah, you've definitely got a screw loose or some wires crossed or something."

"I'm serious, we need to escape..."

E-Zee's word's tailed off. He was looking at me with that frozen expression again, expecting me to provide some kind of conclusion to his idea. I looked up at him, he was smiling. I tried to carry on his train of thought.

"Its nuts! Even if we could get out of here, what are we gonna do? Where are we gonna go? They'd follow us, hunt us down."

"The Server where that data is stored is a high security system, you could never hack into it, it's like Fort Knox. However if I could get inside, physically, I think I might be able to locate it and retrieve it."

"And what makes you think you have any chance of doing that?"

"I'm military hardware dude! I've got everything I need to interface with their mainframe right in here."

E-Zee tapped his head. "It'll be a walk in the park."

"Where is this place?"

"It's in a place called Richmond in New Mexico."

"New Mexico! That's got to be seven or eight hundred miles from here!"

"Well, maybe we couldn't walk it but remember you're looking at an expert traveller here, there are ways and means. That data is the only way for you to clear your name and bring to justice whoever framed you and destroyed that poor android girl. I'm sure the authorities would be interested in that information."

"Let me get this clear. You want to break out of a high security prison, travel over seven hundred miles, probably pursued by Federal Agents as well as the Police, break into a highly defended Military Installation, steal top secret government information and then what, hand ourselves in with the evidence?"

"You got it! That's it! That's the plan!"

"Why are you doing this E-Zee?"

"I'm designed to be of assistance."

"Well look, I know you're trying to inject some optimism into all this but if it's all the same with you I'd rather you can it. You can't go dreaming up stuff like that and expect it all to just happen. From a professional point of view I have a strong idea that the fact you're not a finished and tested unit might mean that some of your thought processes are... not valid."

"I don't believe you man. I've got it all worked out. And where do you get off questioning an AI's logic?! You people are all the same - no imagination, no vision. Man, I'd be better off talking to a machine!"

The last and only time previously that I'd heard a synthetic express themselves like this was in the restaurant with Magenta the night she'd died. This 613 series was obviously emotive in ways that was new to me. Perhaps feelings were of benefit to them. However, E-Zee's plan was plainly insane and the product of some kind of derangement. I stopped talking with him in the hope that he would forget about it and move onto something more constructive.

E-Zee didn't mention it again, in fact he didn't say anything more than a few words for days. He was sulking like a moody teenager and it was a ploy that worked. I just got bored, bored and vacant with no one to play off and no hair brained schemes to listen to. He was on his own in the yard outdoors in the middle of the afternoon. I saw him and realised that I had zero intention of talking to anyone else but him. He was just kicking up dirt

and occasionally looking up at the sky so I approached him not knowing quite what to talk about.

"Hey E-Zee, what's up?"

"Oh its you, I thought you weren't speaking to me."

"Well I thought it was the other way 'round."

"Listen let's not get into some major disagreement about something so childish. Just say what's on your mind or leave me alone."

"I just wanted to say, your idea, your plan, well it's brilliant... in theory. I have thought about it since you, well worked it all out. There are no flaws in it as such, its logical and everything, but its just not, its not..."

"Go on say it."

"It's not exactly realistic."

E-Zee sprang to life.

"Realistic! Realistic! You think I don't know that, perhaps you're forgetting that in many ways I'm not that 'realistic' either. You might be able to pour water on my fire but try coming up with something better yourself. I challenge you."

"I'm not that creative really, I don't think that way. I'm just thinking that perhaps it's not healthy to have the sort of ideas that you sprang on me the other night. Its counterproductive, it creates false hope. It's better to accept and make the most of things the way they are."

"Listen to yourself, would you. The most part of human civilization has been built on people having abstract ideas, stretching their minds, reaching out to previously unimaginable heights. The human spirit is practically defined by the ability to grow beyond itself and you're talking to me about false hope!"

"Look E-Zee, I don't want to hurt your feelings but just think rationally for a moment. What you are suggesting has a zero chance of success."

"That's just not true."

"Zero E-Zee."

"Figuring in all possible scenarios I've calculated the probability of overall success of the mission at 7%."

"Seven!"

"That's a conservative estimate based on a rather pessimistic appraisal of the theory. With further analysis and research I imagine it could be almost double that."

"A 14% chance of success. What about failure?"

"I knew you'd look at it from that angle."

"Well?"

"Well those figures are actually the likelihood of not dying in the process."

"You're some piece of work, you know that E-Zee."

"Don't forget it was someone like you who designed me, so who's the stupid one?"

"Ok, I get it. If you keep going down this road, I don't know if we're going to find much common ground E-Zee. I appreciate you trying to help me with figuring out who framed me and got me banged up but that's where it's got to stop. Take it easy E-Zee."

I walked away, as I did so he called after me.

"What have you got to lose Tyrone Jones?!"

With those words ringing in my ears I spiralled into a deep sadness. I was my own worst enemy in that I would do nothing except clean and sleep in the vain attempt to forget about E-Zee's nonsensical strategies for freedom. Once again we didn't talk but this time weeks went by.

I tried making a new friend or too but perhaps unsurprisingly met with no luck. I sat down next to E-Zee at lunch almost by chance. We ate in silence for a while. Unusually he opened the conversation albeit rather begrudgingly.

"Do you want to talk?"

"I don't know, maybe. We got a whole new load of cleaning supplies in the kitchen this morning."

"Aren't you just the witty conversationalist? What are we going to move on to next, a change in the plastic cutlery supplier?"

"Just thought you might be interested."

"Well I'm not. The ironic thing is that what you just told me could have had great significance, but if I told you why you'd shut me out again, like a parent with a disobedient child."

"Significance you say. I would like to know a little more about that."

E-Zee looked at me, as if trying to figure out if he could trust me.

"No, you'll just laugh."

"I'm not going to laugh."

E-Zee leant forward and whispered.

"I've been doing the sums and I've got access to some new material. The odds have gone up. I'd say we're at about 22%, that's 22% mission success."

I was actually impressed and with my long period of pessimism it seemed like good news. I smiled and nodded a sign that gave E-Zee impetus. He too now had an impish grin on his face and I swear I could see a sparkle in his eyes.

"There's more. If you want in, and can give me some information on the kitchens I think we can get up to 25, maybe 30%"

Whatever it was about his style and perhaps even the nature of these odds I let go of something inside. A lifetime of self-control and obedience to a career path went out the window. A slave to the system I freed my mind and that's how I came to be partners in crime with EZ1-613, aka Kyle Meeks, aka E-Zee.

"I must be crazy, I'm in."

And so our adventure, our exploration and our journey began for real.

Chapter Four

The Plan

We worked on our plan every day, putting in as much time as possible. Due to the security of our establishment the work was hard and slow. There were no writing materials available so our observations and ideas were all committed to memory. It's amazing how much detail one is able to store when the prospect of your life depending upon it is put into question. Of course E-Zee's memory logic systems were far superior to my humble human brain but somehow our strengths and weaknesses were complimentary. E-Zee took on the task of storing everything that could have a number attached to it – dimensions, distances, probabilities, codes and times, I concentrated on brainstorming a picture of the overall strategies that showed themselves.

The South Sterling Correctional Facility was only a few years old. It could best be described as an experiment in penal reform, from the ground up. This included everything from the training of the staff, the program of activity for the inmates, the design of the furniture, the interior design, the colour schemes, the materials used in construction and the architecture itself. From conception to completion, activation to utility, it was a state of the art modern phenomenon. I learned that similar if not exact copies were springing up all over the country. To find a crack in its formidable purpose was an ever more difficult task. We were increasingly undeterred.

The more we analysed the day to day running of the place the more it became clear that the minds of the people who designed it were leaving nothing to chance. The only way I can describe it from the perspective of my previous life was as though it had been conceived as a living organism. In some way it was alive. In some way it paralleled the internal system of an AI unit, and here I was on home territory. It was a product, not just of an individual's or group's imagination but engineered on such a level that it might itself have been the brain-child of an artificial intelligence.

Once I'd mulled it over for a while this idea became less and less surprising. Humans had been using computer aided design since the late 20th century and leaps and bounds in this area were natural. Automobiles built and designed by robots with just a token human interface, robots designing robots and now AI synthetics creating the infrastructure of systems to contain unwanted elements of society. It was all perfectly rational in a world where humans demand the best in everything.

E-Zee was surprisingly philosophical about my thoughts in this area. I noticed a kind of reluctance he had to praise his own kind. In fact it slowly transpired mainly through humour that he had adopted a derisory stance towards synthetics in general. I don't know if he was doing it for my benefit but he always had a counter argument to comments I made about the perfection and beauty of artificial life and was keen to point out limitations of his model if not his entire race. There was, he ventured to suggest, something fundamentally wrong with mankind relying so heavily on automated facsimile's of itself. Coming from my background it was hard to accept but I always saw his reasoning.

The building itself was modelled on a circle, perfection as a starting point. Its white metal and plastic composite build formed a giant five storey 'wheel' with hallways and conduits forming the spokes which lead to the Central Command Centre at the hub. We could only guess at how many convicted felons were housed here, or indeed how many staff, humans and synthetics alike, were required to run the place at its maximum efficiency.

It soon became very clear that we needed not just a perfect plan but a strategy and the means to create such a plan. Observations and ideas were not enough; we had to obtain specific details.

The problem was where to start. Our first ideas were so fanciful and out there that we just ran into dead end after dead end. Maybe we could run a rope down from the roof, if we could get up there. What about a bungee jump? Same idea but from a window.

The only way into the prison was the way we and everyone else for that matter had arrived. There was one entrance, new convicts and supplies such as food, as well as the entrance for staff. This was heavily guarded and there was a three stage, three door system which opened first one door, then it closed behind the vehicle before the next door opened. The vehicle then moved into the second chamber, and the door closed behind that one before finally the third door was opened.

The only way out would be to somehow climb aboard a vehicle as it left. This was my idea. E-Zee, showed me the flaws in my thinking and soon I abandoned many ways of approaching our escape and let him lead the way.

He had identified a fellow 'droid in the inmate community, he told me that from his experience there were only a few. Apparently this guy had been taken to the Central Command Centre, along one of the 'spokes' of the 'wheel'. He'd been involved in a fight and was being questioned over the incident. Anyway the important thing was that whilst he was there he had discovered something. When he got close to the hub his nervous system had picked up an old wireless internet signal. All synthetics had a full compliment of antennae able to tune into most wavelengths. The Ultrane

had been up and fully operational for at least a decade but some places kept a reliable Wi-Fi Internet source as a back-up should anything go wrong with their primary link.

The fact that E-Zee was the latest in military product meant that he had many updated features. The Ultranet however was an extremely elitist piece of technology available to only a few. Unlike the Internet before it access to its data was secure to a very high level. The Internet though was still largely open, albeit after some degree of heavy hacking and destruction of firewalls. In the ten minutes or so that E-Zee's contact was within range and the signal was strong enough he'd managed to download his personal files along with his medical records and some banned reading material.

E-Zee felt that if he could get close enough to zone in on a signal he might be able to get a map of the building that held us captive and from there we would have a better chance of locating any opportunities, if there were any. We were working on the basis that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. We needed that weak link and we needed to exploit it.

Using his droid contact as a model the idea was very simple.

After he had outlined the possibility I summarised it for him. "All you have to do is get in a fight, preferably with one of the guards in some public place, and then you'd get taken to the detention centre."

"Well that's gonna be fun, I can feel pain you know."

"It has to be you, you're the only one who can access the signal."

"I know. I know. What should I do, just call him a nasty name?"

"No, you've got to make a real meal of it. Say something derogatory about his mother and then hit him."

"Is that the best you've got?"

"It'll work."

So we planned the scene for the next morning at breakfast. When we awoke that morning E-Zee was far from easy. He didn't like the prospect of bringing down some hurt on himself but I assured him it was for a greater purpose and was just the means to an end.

"You know I've never been so much as scratched let alone allowed myself to become disfigured in any way. This face has a substantial credit value in addition to its aesthetic appeal. What if he breaks my nose, I'd look like, and well I'd look like a criminal!"

Vain as well as a pacifist, I wondered who had created his personality definition parameters.

"Look, we need this data. Just think of it as a task, better still a military mission to obtain top secret files. You'll be fine."

"I wish I had your enthusiasm."

We filed out of the cell and went to our allocated dining hall. Having queued to get our food we sat down. The guard who had noticed my coffee spillage and sent me to cleaning duty was standing not far away. He looked, meaner and larger than ever.

"Here's your chance." I whispered to E-Zee who was summoning up the nerve. He rose slowly from his seat and walked over, tray in hand. Squaring up to the guard who was a good ten inches taller than he, he stopped and looked up.

"Boy, was your mother some kind of genetic experiment that went badly wrong?"

Then, before the guard had a chance to process this unexplained insult E-Zee kned him in the groin. As the guard went down he took E-Zee with him, grabbing him by the clothes. The scuffle on the ground was full on. Synthetics are stronger than the average man but the guard was certainly not average, physically at least. Fists were flying, blood was drawn and damage was done by both parties. The inmates were standing and cheering and other guards were running to the situation which went on for far longer than I had imagined. By the time the other guards had arrived E-Zee was face down and in an arm lock, the guard swearing on all that was unholy that he would personally make his life a misery.

I think E-Zee may have overdone it, maybe he hadn't counted on the untested fighting abilities of his design but the deed was done and successfully at that. E-Zee was lead away struggling and swearing realistically as called for by his actions.

Alone in my cell, I didn't see E-Zee for ten days. As I lay in my rack hoping he had obtained the information we required I realised just how great a value there is in the simple act of talking to someone. On my own with just self generated thoughts I found there was little room for progress. Unless you apply a goal-centred logic to thinking, the default position is one in which ideas turn in on themselves, chasing each other nose to tail, round and round in a vicious circle not dissimilar to the walls of this institution. A conversation, however, banal or mundane as it may be, often leads to places that couldn't ever have been imagined alone.

When E-Zee returned I was very happy to see him. He looked fairly dishevelled but smiled mischievously at me when he entered the cell giving me the thumbs up.

"You ok?"

"Never better, funny how a little holiday can rejuvenate the system."

"Did you get an uplink?"

"No problem, I've got it all stored up here." He tapped his head and made a metallic clanking sound.

"So you've found a way out then?"

"Found it, explored it, and planned it."

He had recorded an internal personal observation log, a sort of interactive diary which he played back to me on low volume:

I'm beat up pretty bad. They're going to town on me all the way. I don't think anything is broken and luckily the face is relatively untouched but my pain receptors are firing all over, it's not a pleasant sensation.

I'm being dragged down one of the spokes of the wheel and from what I can gather I'm about three storeys up. There are several check points and eye-scan security doors but eventually now I'm at the hub and a detention centre. Scanning for frequencies all the time but as yet nothing. I'm being questioned by a guy in a suit, seems he's from pretty high up. Its ok, how many stupid questions can they ask about such a stupid outburst?

I'm being lead away. No frequencies. Maybe I'm on the wrong level. They've shut me in, I'm in solitary. Small cell, no bed only a loo. Hours pass. I'm picking up a weak signal. I'm locked on, it's strong enough. Perfect. Breaking through security clearances. Commence search for data. South Sterling Correctional Facility Map. No results. Signal constant but for how long? Intensify search, narrow parameters. Architect? Results... Noam Peters, Chief Architect. Firm of Architects: Peters, Palmer and Johnston. Architectural designs: Blueprints. Got it! Download Schematics. Time for completion one hour seven minutes! Man this is slow. I've got plenty of time just hope signal stays strong.

Alone. Monitor signal strength. Review. Analyse data when ready. Shut down extraneous systems. Wait.

Its morning, at least that's what my internal clock says. No light in here. Data download successful. Begin analysis.

Food and drink.

The Wheel is approximately 400m in diameter and five storeys high. I have all other dimensions.

Entrance is of the highest security, very little room for manoeuvre there. Only two other inputs; electricity conduit and fresh water supply. More

interesting there are two outputs; used water pipe and sewage disposal pipe. Both measure only 50cm in diameter, small but not impossible to negotiate.

Of maximum interest is the laundry cleaning facility. This is a small building located some 40m from the main building. It is the sole outbuilding. No idea why it has been placed outside the complex. As a satellite to the wheel it seems to be an afterthought, surely a 'perfect' design would have included it within the circle. Perhaps it is of human design. This must be our best chance of breaching the perimeter. I will concentrate my efforts here primarily.

The laundry building is also of circular construction and is connected to the prison by a single conduit that runs at ground level. Laundry is collected and amassed by inmate workers then put into units of equal size and delivered to the external building by means of a moving conveyor. There are no people actually in the laundry. Once the units of laundry arrive they are processed automatically; washed, dried and folded before being vacuum sealed in plastic into units and returned to the Wheel via another moving walkway that runs parallel to the first in the opposite direction.

I am convinced that somewhere in this system we would be able to find a route out and I continue to explore ways of doing so.

The two-way conveyor belt 'tunnel' has a maintenance door but it is only on the one side, the side taking the clean laundry back to the main building. If we could get inside a load of clean laundry, inside the vacuum packed unit we could escape from within and use this door to get outside.

Even though the journey from the cleaning house back to the prison takes the units only five minutes you would suffocate in this time so would need some kind of breathing assistance. I can do without air for a certain length of time. We would need knives though to cut our way out of the plastic, perhaps we could cut out a hole big enough to breathe. I'll work on that.

The first step is to explore how the dirty laundry is collected from the wheel, where it leaves the building and how to stow ourselves away within it, without being noticed. Once we get to the cleaning facility we can get out, get into a clean batch, we might need to be in separate units but then we could cut ourselves out, climb out, and exit through the maintenance hatch.

I have a solution to the suffocation problem. There are fire extinguishers and emergency breathing apparatus in both kitchens and laundry, one of these would do fine.

In conclusion we need access to the dirty laundry collection and processing area, jobs here would be best. We need knives to cut ourselves out of the vacuum sealed clean laundry and we need a single breathing

system. There is no indication that the maintenance door has a lock on it but it would be wise to have a tool of some kind in case it is.

This is my escape analysis of the architectural blueprints for the South Sterling Correctional facility. I will power down now until such a time as they see fit to release me from this hell-hole. END.

By the time he'd finished, many things appeared to be in place. It was a little hard to take in at first; I didn't want to get my hopes up. Then E-Zee brought it down a little.

"Ty, there's one problem. This whole thing hinges on us, or at least one of us, getting a job in the laundry. I'm out of the equation there, with my recent little misdemeanour there's no chance for me, so you're going to have to find some way of doing it yourself. I've thought about it and I honestly don't know how you can do it."

Far from being disheartened, I suddenly felt a strength inside myself.

"Look, there's no schedule for our plans. I'm sure that I can get in there somehow, it's just a question of time. Let me mull it over for a while and see what I can do. You've done your part, you just chill out for a while and let me see what I can do."

"Sounds good to me. If you don't mind I need to rejuvenate, that might take a while. Let me know when you've got it licked. Other than that it might be good for us both to talk about something else over the next few days, give ourselves a break."

"Ok. I'll give you the Tyrone Jones biography, starting with the early years."

"Well, that sounds alright in theory, but you can leave out the geeky stuff..."

"It's all geeky stuff."

"Alright, but don't be surprised if I nod off every now and then."

E-Zee was quiet for several days, it seems as though the ordeal had taken more out of him mentally and physically than might be expected for a military model synthetic. What people tend to forget is that AI's are actually rather delicate pieces of kit, just like their human counterparts. E-Zee reminded me of that, I worried that the experience may have affected him permanently and that he wouldn't return to his bright, bubbly self. Sometimes people fail to recover parts of their character after traumatic events, as though losing something valuable that one cannot go back for.

During these days I strengthened my resolve and made inroads into finding at least one job for us in the laundry. I couldn't simply ask, could I?

The trouble was if I asked someone in a position of authority able to grant my request and they said no, it would be much harder to gain a job in the required area through other means. Even if I could work in the laundry there still remained the difficulty of also getting E-Zee access at the appointed time.

I decided underhand methods would be the most appropriate given the nature of our endeavour as attracting the least amount of attention was a priority. Swapping jobs with someone might be an avenue to explore, but why would anyone wish to exchange for hotter, harder kitchen work? There must be someone for whom such a change would be beneficial.

The one thing I had in my favour was that the kitchen was situated next to the room for the outgoing laundry. This proximity kept me keen and I was able to make mental notes as to the comings and goings of those who worked in this place, where laundry was ejected to the main automated laundry building itself. I looked at their faces too, whomever I chose to approach would have to be someone who would ask no questions. But why wouldn't they? A very strange thing indeed for a man to ask to change work detail, they would want to know why. There was no way I would relate the truth of the matter, secrecy was at the front of my mind. I would either have to invent a very convincing story or, as a backup, offer some kind of payment in return for the favour and for keeping silence. This was a risk; I needed a good story instead.

The solution to the problem had been staring me in the face all the time and it meant I wouldn't even need to get that job in the laundry at all. The laundry from the kitchen where I already had a job, towels, aprons and suchlike went into a small bin that went through a hatch directly to the laundry! It was far from large but it would be big enough for one body at a time to stowaway and travel from the kitchen into the adjoining laundry. How and when, for both of us to do this became my next obsession. It was clear I needed to talk to someone casually who knew where this hatch came out. One afternoon in the yard I approached someone I had noticed leaving the laundry on several occasions. I was cautious.

"Hey there, you work in the laundry don't you?"

"So, what's it to you?"

"Oh nothing, I'm in the kitchen next door."

"What do you want, some kind of merit badge."

"Oh no, just making conversation."

"Well, make it with someone else."

He walked off, a failure, but I tried again more successfully with another guy this time with a more direct approach.

"Man, you're in the laundry right, do you know where that hatch comes out from the kitchen?"

"Yeah, it's at the far end. It's a pain, you have to walk all the way down the corridor to collect it."

"When do you collect it?"

"Right at the end of the shift. What's with all the questions?"

"Oh I just wondered, you know, where it went."

"That's it, now you know."

"Thanks."

"Whatever, see you 'round."

I had some information, maybe even enough. The end of the shift in the laundry room was half an hour after the end of the shift in the kitchen. All one would have to do is to stay in the kitchen when everyone else had left, wait half an hour then move through the hatch into that room. Then it would be a question of getting into the outgoing laundry until it was transported to the main laundry processing facility. I asked another worker when that was and he told me all laundry left at 9am.

I would have to get E-Zee into the kitchen after dinner, we'd hide there for thirty minutes until the laundry shift was over, go through the hatch, get into the outgoing laundry, wait there until morning and then we'd be on our way. It was a simple plan, they're usually the best but, although I was sure of its value, I wondered why it appeared to be so easy.

It wasn't, there was a piece missing and E-Zee explained as much.

"If we don't come back to the cell for shut down they're going to know it. All the doors have that electronic lock and a little red light will come up on a screen somewhere that says we're not safely secured inside. They'll get here and see that we've become an empty space."

"Oh man, why didn't I think of that?"

"Well you can't do everything, the plan still stands but I have to find a way to make it *look* like we're in our cell when we should be, even when we're not."

"That's impossible."

"No, not impossible just difficult. I have the electric diagrams downloaded along with the blue-prints. I've studied them. If we tamper with the lock it will just show up as a malfunction and they'll come and check us out. I suggest fixing it at the other end."

"How?"

"The system is all automated, naturally, but it still relies on a person checking a screen for anything out of the ordinary. It may be an alert light or a sound but that person still has to see it and act on it. If I can disable that alert, our absence won't be seen by that person."

"You need access to a terminal."

"You got it. I can communicate with one remotely but I have to be within about twenty feet. There was one I saw in the detention centre. I'll have to go back."

"You can't do that again."

"I'll have to, it's the only way to get this thing done."

"Are you sure?"

"Gotta do it."

So the next morning E-Zee walks up to the guard at breakfast and, dispensing with any remarks as to the aesthetics of his mother, knees him in the groin. Within minutes and already suffering multiple injuries he was on his way to the detention centre. I didn't see him for two weeks.

Whilst on my own I went over the plan and tried to get a few more details that might help us, without raising any suspicions.

E-Zee returned one afternoon with a cheeky smile on a bruised face.

"I did it."

I smiled, "Are you ok?"

"No, I feel like I've been in a garbage compactor. I did it though, from now on our cell will always show we're locked in at night, snug as bugs in rugs."

"You are one smooth cookie."

"I'll feel better in a week or so, I suggest we go then."

A week passed. E-Zee calculated the probability of our success at between 48% and 53%. It wasn't great but after all this effort we agreed to give it our best shot. If we were caught, our lives would not change a great deal, save for a good beating. If we escaped, we would be free and this

was a prize worth playing for. From the day I had arrived until now had been a total of six months. Six months is long enough to focus the mind to an extreme degree and the prospect of nine years in this place was sufficient to instigate action. E-Zee had healed, the day of our intended departure arrived.

Chapter Five

Escape!

My heart was racing that morning as we sat in the cell waiting for the door to open, hopefully for the last time. E-Zee calmed me and reassured me that all was good, we had done everything we could in preparation the only thing that was left was to follow the plan step by step.

The day was torture, I was in a state of heightened awareness where any incident was analysed as a potential threat to our success. All I could do was go through the motions of an average day behaving as though it would remain as such. I felt tense and nervous for hours with a nausea rising in my guts.

E-Zee had switched into some kind of carefree mode, I even caught him whistling on one occasion. It made me wish that I too could have some kind of internal mechanism that shut me off from worries about what lay ahead. However, I stayed as close to him as possible all day and his mood seemed to calm my mind.

Fortunately the day passed with little to make it stand out from any other and the time grew close for me to do my work in the kitchen. It felt like forever but eventually most of the inmates had finished their meals. E-Zee had chosen, as planned, to be amongst the very last few in order not to create attention in the kitchen where he would join me. At last he appeared and as my co-workers finished off their duties and left we positioned ourselves behind a carefully selected internal wall in a corner at the far end of the kitchen, furthest from the exit door. After what seemed like an age, huddled close to each other, we were completely alone. It was quiet and neither of us dared speak for many minutes. I broke the silence with a whisper.

"Did anyone see you come in?"

"No, I don't think so, it doesn't look like it."

"Set your timer for forty minutes, it should be clear on the other side by then."

"It's already done."

We just stood there together, my breathing and pulse elevated by adrenaline. Every moment was an expectation of somehow being caught, perhaps by an unforeseen check by a guard. At one time I dropped the small piece of metal I had taken to later cut myself a breathing hole in the

vacuum plastic of the clean laundry. I winced, the sound as it hit the floor was magnified by my hearing made keen by the situation. I picked it up and placed it in my pocket noting the impression it left on my palm by an overly tight grip.

E-Zee talked quietly.

“One minute to go.”

My eyes kept darting to the dirty laundry bin. There was only enough room in it for one of us at a time. I was to go first, with E-Zee pushing me through to the next room, then I would send it back and pull him through with the rope. I tapped him on the shoulder.

“Let’s do it.”

Stepping carefully, fearful not to make any noise, I climbed into the trolley. It was a very snug fit, having been designed for just one day’s worth of dirty kitchen towels but I crouched into a ball and quickly I was in. E-Zee pushed me through the five feet or so until suddenly I was able to put my head out into the next room. It was much larger than I had anticipated and as I stepped out of the trolley into the space my expectations of freedom grew tenfold. I kept them in check.

Pushing the trolley back from where it had come I could sense that E-Zee had climbed in as the rope was taught from his weight. Allowing time for him to get his head down I began to pull the trolley slowly and surely towards me. The distance was soon covered and seeing my friend emerge from the hole into this new open place where neither of us had been before gave me hope and courage.

The main lights had been turned off but there were several other small wall lights that were still on. That suited us just fine as we were to stay here all night before climbing into the large dirty laundry containers until they moved out in the morning. The room itself was perhaps thirty by forty feet. There were no cameras just as E-Zee had ascertained from the digital blueprints of the place. All we had to do was wait.

This turned out to be harder than planned. To stay in one place, without sleep for so long tends to drain one’s spirit. We decided not to talk, not that there was any real danger of being heard, but because we had done all the talking that was necessary and all that was left was action. However, concentration on the task at hand can wax and wane over so many hours and I found myself drifting in and out of a hazy half-sleep. E-Zee would nudge me every now and then and eventually asked if I wanted to get some shut-eye. He of course didn’t have to shut down and so I allowed myself a few hours where I slept only lightly.

He woke me suddenly with a firm shake of my shoulders. It did the trick as I was awake, alert and fully tuned into the next phase of our escape within seconds. It seemed easier now we had made our break from the system, there was a kind of excitement tempered with a tangible sense of danger. E-Zee was focussed in a way I hadn't seen before, his directive, his mission, at the forefront of his self-programming.

The time came to hide ourselves in the large laundry bins. We had planned on using two but it was only possible to use the one as they left the laundry individually. This was no problem because one was sufficient to take us both. We carefully climbed in, myself first, and buried ourselves at the bottom placing as many towels and sheets on top of us as possible. It was awkward keeping a curled, foetal position and there was a musty, dank smell from the material and of course complete darkness. Our heads were separated only by a few inches close enough to hear each other's breathing, this was the only sound as we had agreed on complete silence.

I had an itch on the back of my knee which I tried to ignore for several minutes but it just grew in intensity until I had to do something about it. However due to the cramped conditions this proved to be more difficult than I thought. Eventually I wriggled and wormed my arm and hand down through the randomly placed dirty linen to the offending area to find some relief. It took a while and made a sound, E-Zee said something.

"What are you doing?"

"I had an itch."

"Unbelievable, cut it out."

A minute or so later we heard the sound of the main doors opening in the laundry, a loud metal clunk which was soon followed by the sounds of people walking and the occasional words muted by our covering of washing. The noise of machinery being switched on and coming to life soon drowned out human sounds and there began a constant whirring of electro-mechanical equipment. We waited, and then suddenly with an abrupt jerk our bin began to move.

I had expected some smooth, high speed acceleration into the unknown but it seemed we moved very slowly on relatively rough rollers. There was no visual frame of reference but it felt to me like we were a small packet of food being swallowed by some gigantic beast that was now travelling into its guts. We kept rolling, I realised my breathing was becoming erratic, there wasn't much oxygen in here and my heart was pounding in order to keep my brain at the necessary level of activity considering what we were attempting.

The straight line we were travelling took an unexpected curve, first one way then the next and then the sensation that we had come out into open

space was clear. We both stood up throwing off the sheets wherever they fell. Whatever the nature of the place in which we now found ourselves there was no way of telling for not only was it very loud it was pitch black. Neither of us had talked about this as a possibility but as I stood there staring into the banging, ugly nothingness I had only one thought, machines don't need light to carry out their duties.

Perhaps E-Zee could see through the black with the help of infra-red vision and was now calculating our next move. He would know that I was effectively blind and before I could say anything he had taken control. Bang! He switched on his lights. He now had powerfully intense white rays coming out of his eyes. His illumination couldn't have come sooner. We were still moving slowly but after scanning and analysing the laundry machinery in this automated hell he looked up to pick out a quickly descending grabbing mechanism. It was upon us in a matter of seconds, E-Zee reached up and with the strength of one machine against another prevented it from crushing the two of us. With no-one to hear us now, he screamed out at me.

"Get out!"

I stood there staring at him, lights still shining from his eyes and was transfixed by the immensity he had taken on. He repeated his order.

"Get out now!"

Snapping out of my awe I followed the command, jumping out of the bin and landing heavily some five feet below on a hard surface. E-Zee quickly followed, managing to free himself from the descent of the laundry grabber and leaping clear as the claw went inexorably about its task of removing the laundry from the bin. He landed not far from me rolling over, eye-lights catching brief slashed images of the surroundings.

It was hot in here and excess steam from the machines meant the humidity was high too, I was already in a sweat. This great monster went about its business without respite and without human involvement. Our arrival fortunately seemed to have no impact upon its relentless operation and for several moments I caught my breath, waiting for instructions from E-Zee who quite rightly had assumed control.

We stood, E-Zee's lights picking out our path to the other end of the process, the clean laundry. Carefully climbing over steam ducts, conveyor belts and all types of engineered metal we made our way to what E-Zee had identified as the output conduit. Here, vast cube-like packages of clean, dry laundry were assembled before being vacuum sealed in order to be ejected from the process. We had to get into one of these bundles before packaging and looking at it in reality, what seemed on paper to be relatively

straight forward, now appeared to be an action of madness. The truth was it was the only way out.

It was clear that each of us would have to be sealed in separate bundles. Also both of us would need to position ourselves at the edge of a package, close the plastic sealing. Only then could we make a hole, rip ourselves out into the conveyor tunnel and make our way to the service door.

Again I went first, primarily so that I could see what I was doing by virtue of E-Zee's lights. I got up onto the exit conveyor belt where the laundry piles were being created. Finding one that was half complete I stood up and then quickly jumped on, lying down on the pile right at the edge. With my piece of metal in hand to enable my cutting a hole in the plastic to breathe and ultimately tear my way out, I lay still. Clean, folded laundry was placed on top of me and I became an integral part of this material cube some six feet on each side.

As the conveyor moved I could sense the vacuum packing machine ahead. I slowly moved closer to what felt like certain death. Soon I was in the thing, with a whoosh and a hiss I was wrapped tightly in and all my air was sucked out. My face was pressed firmly against this see-through plastic coffin, my view of E-Zee and his lighting distorted but in my hand was already placed the sharp metal tool. I pushed it against the polythene, as soon as I could, my fist by my face. It was very thick.

Immediately I knew I was going to have trouble getting the leverage to pierce it as I was. I did manage to make a very small hole by my mouth which was enough to suck through the smallest amount of air. These small gasps were a taste of survival, the essence of life. With a great force I pushed my fist down so that it was at waist level. In only a small amount of time I was already out of the processing area and into the conduit. All my effort was concentrated on making a hole big enough to climb out.

With all the strength in my arm and fist I made a hole, as I had done for my mouth. Then bringing the metal tool upwards towards my chest and head I created a three foot long slit. With a contortion of my body I brought my knees up to my waist and then up to my chin and inch by inch squeezed out of the hole falling some distance to the floor below in the complete darkness. I was born again, but I was as helpless as a baby without the assistance of E-Zee. I waited.

For what seemed like an age I sat on the cold floor, eyes open and searching in vain through the black for any sign of E-Zee. The conveyor continued to roll, taking its parcels of vacuum packed laundry to the prison, the sound of the rollers my only companion. Where was he? Then a shot of light, just a blur from within a package but there was no mistaking it was him. The light was moving around in a struggle but then it burst it out, slashing through the black and randomly illuminating the inside of the tunnel.

E-Zee fell to the floor, much as I had done, but he was up quicker and walking towards me with purpose, his lights cutting through my fear. He came close and spoke in a business-like manner.

"Right my friend, let's find the door and get out of this place."

"Yeah, I'm all for that. You lead, I'll follow."

"I think it's this way."

He started to walk with a bold step and I walked close behind. It was not long until we came upon the maintenance door. It was small and incongruous. I had dreaded this moment out of everything. How cruel it would be if the door was locked strongly and we were unable to break through. All I had was this feeble metal tool to which I still clung firmly. E-Zee was my best bet here, he was surely able to tackle something as simple as a lock. E-Zee looked at me.

"You first."

I looked at the door, all I could see was a sliding bolt. I reached out my hand and slid it to the left. I looked at E-Zee who smiled.

"Probably designed by a human."

I pushed the door, it creaked open and the broad, morning daylight streamed in. E-Zee turned his eye lights off and I stepped out of the metal tunnel onto the sandy surface, a few moments later E-Zee was by my side.

On our left the imposing structure of the Wheel stood, rising up out of the desert landscape. On our right was the laundry cleaning facility as large and as menacing on the outside as it had been on the inside. We were out but we were far from free, we both knew this and although slightly startled by the stark brightness of the sunshine it was obvious we had to move quickly. I turned to E-Zee.

"They're going to see us from the windows."

"I don't think so, all those guards in there are busy doing one thing, looking inwards at the prisoners. Have no doubt though, that was the easy part, now we have to survive."

I looked around at the vast expanse of wide-open land that stretched out before us. We knew we had to head north towards to the trees in the distance and the nearest settlement that lay beyond. My desire to be free of the sight of this place of incarceration had now reached its peak. I was full of hope and energy and the will to survive.

"Come on, let's move."

E-Zee patted me on the shoulder and set off at a brisk running pace. I was right there with him, shoulder to shoulder, stretching my legs out with joy. One look back at the perfect monstrosity behind was enough to redouble my goal to be rid of its presence. I vowed then to only look at what was in front of me but after half an hour or so, after we had slowed down to an exhausted jogging rhythm, I allowed myself one more glance back, the building had fast moved into the background and the past. E-Zee had only eyes for the future and as we came to a more relaxed walk through the increasingly powerful heat of the sun he said nothing. I was basically in some kind of state of shock and was equally subdued, eyes fixed on the tree-line which was coming closer. Then, after an hour or so my companion started whistling. It was a happy melody and the notes just drifted up into the air.

"What's that tune?"

"It's the National Anthem of St. Lucia."

"Oh. Right. You went there once didn't you."

"Fell in love with the place. There's everything you could possibly want or need and nothing more."

"Is it like some kind of health retreat?"

"You could say that. Sandy beaches, warm sea, tropical vegetation, warm and friendly people, amazing food and little huts running all up and down the coast."

"I've never been to a beach, or a coast for that matter."

"Well the sooner you book a flight the better. Everyone needs a destination."

"Never flown either."

"Man, you haven't lived have you. Had your head stuck in front of electronica since day one. I'm surprise you haven't turned into some kind of integrated circuit yourself."

"Maybe I have."

"You've got to lighten up. This is freedom, this is life!" He shouted out to the sky above and threw his arms in the air. "

"I'll feel a lot better when we get out of these clothes." I looked down at the orange boiler suit that I was wearing, it symbolised everything that I had learned to loathe about my time inside and I still felt a prisoner inside of it.

"I agree. A man's clothes are his primary form of self expression. Plus it'll give us a chance to differentiate ourselves from each other, I hate uniforms."

"What are we going to do about that?"

"We'll have to beg, borrow or steal. Probably the latter. We'll need money sooner or later too. Maybe we could rob a bank."

E-Zee seemed genuinely excited and hopeful about this option, but I just looked at him.

"With your record, I don't think so."

"That hurts man."

"Whatever we do, the number one priority is not getting caught or else we'll end up right back where we started."

E-Zee took a moment and then let out something that it seemed he had been holding onto for a while, something he had rehearsed in his mind and only now felt the need to broach.

"Look Ty, where we are going is different. It's going to be different from what you're used to, both before we met and since."

"Yeah, I know."

"No Ty, you don't know. A lot of those guys in the prison back there, especially the rougher ones, they come from where we're going. You're the odd exception. It might be ... well, kind of... wild."

"Wild how? Like a wild party?"

"No. You've seen those natural history programmes on your media? It's gonna be like that. Think animals in a jungle. Think survival of the fittest. We're going to stand out and we're going to have to watch each other's backs."

"Ok, whatever you say."

"Think about this Ty, it's a cruel world, an old world, one that has unwritten rules and codes, and you're going into it blind."

"Perhaps it's best if I just act dumb."

"That's not a bad idea. You'll learn, you'll have to, and you'll have to learn quickly, think on your feet but I guarantee you we will get into trouble and the best advice I can give is to keep moving."

"Hey, I may be a fish out of water, but I am a man and Mankind has had a way of adapting to new environments, I know that much about

natural selection. Don't forget I've got a brain, a real human brain and five senses too, I'll be ok, you'll see."

"Good, I'm glad we had this conversation."

"Me too, now could you lighten up a little, whistle that tune again."

Chapter Six

Wilderness

The trees came ever closer, slowly but surely their shapes and the details of the land they were situated in came into focus. It was a curving line across a gently rising hill that stretched out left to right for perhaps five miles. The prospect of being in their cover was becoming an increasingly pleasant thought, the arid wasteland that we had been marching across was a barren and unwelcoming place. The idea of shade and a source of water was at the front of my mind. What we might do for food was a secondary but still pressing issue.

Soon we were at the base of the first few smaller trees, we sat down under one, finally out of the glare of the blazing late afternoon heat. Looking back it was just possible to see a dot on the horizon that was the prison but from my perspective its remoteness meant it was history. The trees themselves were some kind of evergreen, pines probably, the earth beneath our feet was now a rich dark colour. I picked up some soil and turned it over in my hand, its composition felt real and very reassuring, its smell was an instant connection with nature and it left pleasant dark marks on my sweat covered skin.

E-Zee was already looking into the rest of the wooded area as it rose up steeper beyond.

"Come on, let's keep going, there'll be water somewhere. We need to find it, and a place to shelter before nightfall."

"Ok." I got up and pushed on with E-Zee leading the way.

I was not fit, the time inside had weakened my muscles. Time spent in the gym and swimming had previously made me strong but the stress of the trial and the lack of real exercise in prison had left me thin and feeble. E-Zee was striding out with confidence and the more I tried to stay with him on the slopes of the hill the more difficult it became. I was panting heavily and was embarrassed by my condition. Finally, between gulps of air, I had to call out.

"Slow up, I'm struggling here." I stopped to rest and E-Zee turned around, looking down from some twenty feet above me on the slope. The sun was behind him and all I could see was his silhouette as I shaded my eyes from the glare.

"Really, you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fine I just need to rest for a few minutes."

"Ok, rest a while. I'm just going up to the top of the ridge, see what I can see. I won't be long."

"Alright."

E-Zee soon disappeared from sight and I was alone, alone for the first time since I'd left my apartment on the day of my arrest. Many minutes passed, my breathing recovered and as its sound lessened so my ears tuned in to my immediate environment. It was spring. There was the sharp trill of a bird singing. In fact there were several and as I concentrated I could make out at least three different songs. As to naming the birds they came from I was unable. To say I was from the city and knew little of nature would be a huge understatement, the truth is my reality only had reference points from within what was effectively a hermetically sealed and purely man-made world.

I knew trees and birdsong and flowers but these had their origins in carefully sculpted parks and perfectly maintained atriums, all created from the mind of an architect, probably an android one at that. As I looked around there was no order here, the arrangement of nature seemed to be random and chaotic, but I looked closer. I picked up a pine-cone that lay at my feet and was immediately struck by the arrangement of its seeds. There was mathematics bound to its genesis, I even knew the formula that described its pattern. I looked up, surely there was some algorithm to explain the spacing of these trees, something that involved their need for water and light.

The rays of sun splintered through the pine needles in the canopy and as I squinted its beams fragmented into a vast rainbow array of all colours in my eyes.

The shades of green, reflecting off the large number and variety of ferns, were calming to a point where I was becoming lost in their magic. The fractal nature of their fronds was hypnotic too and I moved into a reverie that bordered on hallucination, my mind swimming with the freedom of my senses, lost in a sea of new sensation and emotion. E-Zee broke the spell with a shout from way up near the ridge.

"Come on up, I think I've found something."

I scrambled to my feet and with new energy soon reached my companion who was animated and enthusiastic.

"There's water down there, I can just hear it." He pointed into the small valley below. "We can get there before night falls and make camp, how are you doing?"

"I'm good, just needed to rest for a while. It's beautiful here."

"It'll seem better still after a drink of cool water, we can recover and take stock."

We walked, now going down, the muscles in my legs beginning to ache in a way that felt in harmony with this place and suddenly I noticed that I had started to smile. The shadows grew longer as we approached the sound of a brook lying at the base of this hill. At first just a suggestion of the noise of running water, filtered through the branches of the trees and then, as we came closer, the sound married to the image as the idyllic little stream came into view.

There's no doubt I was very thirsty indeed, a day of hiking in the sun had seen to that, but as I stepped into the water I held back my desire to satiate such a basic need and allowed myself to feel it running over my feet and up to my shins. It was cold and the small waves of its surface played sweetly around the pebbles and stones strewn about. Eventually I stooped down and cupping my hands drank deeply until I felt no more need. With much delight I threw water over my head and let out a whoop of earthly pleasure.

E-Zee looked on with a cold analysis of my behaviour. He too needed water to function but for him it seemed more like recharging a battery, taking in a measured dose of H₂O, sufficient to meet the demand. He was already scanning the area for a place to make a shelter and the necessary materials with which to do so. I couldn't help but take in the natural and unspoilt quality of this place, it was overwhelming and I sat down on a rock that was still warm from the day's sun.

E-Zee was collecting wood and he urged me to help.

"We need firewood and wood to build a lean-to. You go for the firewood, everything from kindling to bigger stuff, basically anything that's dry. I'll see if I can get together some place for us to sleep under. The sky's clear and it might get cold tonight, if it clouds over we might get rain. Best be prepared."

Setting about finding wood to burn wasn't so difficult. There was plenty in the undergrowth by the trees and dried gorse bush was fine for kindling even if it did prick my soft hands with its spikes. I put it all in a pile and found some larger dead fallen branches for when the fire was truly alight. How we were going to get a spark I had no idea but was sure that E-Zee had already thought that far ahead. He was methodically building a simple structure next to a large boulder that I could see would be big enough for us

both. He'd already started covering it in ferns and large pieces of moss, it seemed second nature to him.

The fact that E-Zee was a military model often escaped me. Of course he'd be programmed to perform tasks such as this. Also his travel experiences must have been such as to test his survival skills and abilities, he would have a wealth of functions in this area. Watching him work I had to remember that he was in large part machine, it was all too easy to forget, especially considering the time we had spent together, his good humour and the way I had begun to take our friendship for granted. For my part, and my background it was clear that I was perhaps better suited to making a friend with a machine than a human. His deep voice was comforting and I let go of these thoughts as he shouted over to me.

"I think that's it Ty old buddy, we're going to sleep well tonight!"

"How about this fire? How are we going to get it started?"

"Fret not, I have a little trick."

We built the fire up in a small depression we made in the ground, kindling first and then a few small twigs. E-Zee brought his index finger and thumb of his left hand close together.

"Are you ready for this?"

"I'm ready, but I don't know what for."

"This."

A spark jumped between the two digits and as he brought them closer together the air crackled, the electricity increasing in power. He applied this show of miniature lightning to the dry gorse and very quickly there was smoke and then... fire! Our little pile of dried wood was soon engulfed in flames.

"I'm impressed," I said, looking at E-Zee who had a devious grin on his face.

"Nice to be useful, problem is the fingertips take a time to cool down again. You have to be careful, one time I had an itch on my neck, burned myself and damn near set my hair alight!"

We were just in time as the sun was beginning to set. Thin clouds were illuminated orange by the light filtered through the atmosphere. The fiery disc soon began to descend below the horizon. We made comfortable places to sit around the now roaring fire and threw on the occasional piece of branch as night fell. The moon was up, the stars were now out and somehow the sense of limitless space and freedom this brought gave me great peace.

In the flickering light of our fire I watched E-Zee poking the embers with a stick, he seemed lost or perhaps in some state of deep thought. I wanted to know something.

"I've been thinking, why didn't you take the opportunity to break out earlier, I mean before I showed up?"

He looked at me and paused with a smile, "I work with reasons and causes, there has to be a purpose in everything I do."

"Well surely escape is reason enough."

"Not really. Escape has a cause in the desire to be free. I had no such desire."

"Freedom is an end in itself, it's a fundamental part of what it means to be alive."

"You know you're funny Ty, you don't get it. Me and you we're different, you have the burden of the human condition, I have no such aspirations. To me that place was just a hotel, food and lodging, besides it's safe in there, out here's where it's dangerous. We could get attacked by a mountain lion or worse still a group of lumberjacks!"

"So what's the score? What did my turning up do to change that?"

"I'm here to serve, Ty. You needed a ticket out of there, you need a whole bunch of stuff to get your life back. I'm just willing and enabled to give you what you need."

"I want you to get one thing straight E-Zee, we're in this together, whatever may come of it. We're like partners in a business, we *are* different, you're right, but if we're going to get anywhere worth going to there must be some kind of equality. We've both got strengths and weaknesses, let's play to each other's strengths."

"I hear you."

"Ok, good, that's that sorted. Man I'm starving."

"We'll find something to eat in the morning. Right now I think we should get some rest. It's been a long day and tomorrow will be just as hard."

"Yeah well at least it's not raining."

"I wouldn't count on it, there are clouds moving in from the West."

E-Zee had made a thick bed of Ferns on the floor of the lean-to. There was just enough room for the both of us to lie down next to each other. It wasn't difficult to fall asleep, being both mentally and physically exhausted. Had I been alone I should have felt exposed, nervous and scared but the

presence of the body next to me and the dancing flames of the fire brought on a calm and mellow mood that soothed my mind and soon lead to sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night I was woken by the sound of rain. It was only light and didn't penetrate our makeshift roof but for a short while I listened until its natural music tapped into some long forgotten part of my brain that sent me drifting back to dreams that would also be forgotten.

Awake and instantly alert the next morning, the sun was up and so was E-Zee. Climbing out of the shelter I looked around and eventually spotted him some distance downstream. The fire was alight. I shouted out.

"What are you doing?"

He said nothing but about ten seconds later he pulled his hands out of the water in front of him, over which he was hunched, and with a splash threw a sizeable fish straight out of the stream and onto the bank side.

"Finding breakfast!"

"Alright! Full marks for the android reflexes!"

"That's the fourth one so far, it's like they just want to be eaten!"

He had a job carrying them back to the camp, several times their slippery forms eluding him but before long we were just sitting there staring at them on the floor.

"I think they're trout." I offered my humble opinion.

"I think you're right. Soon we will be satisfied my friend."

With my basic tool that I removed from my pocket, two of the fish were gutted and beheaded. E-Zee did one to show me how and then I sorted the second one out for myself. Two long green saplings were all we needed to skewer the fish, which cooked slowly above some embers of the fire where there were few flames. It's amazing how the prospect of food seems to eclipse any other thoughts. Just staring and salivating. I was keen but wanted to make sure they were fully cooked.

"Do you think they're done yet?" I asked E-Zee who seemed equally focussed on the job at hand.

"Give them a couple more minutes I'd say."

We had no plates or utensils or white wine but carefully resting the fish on very large leaves, which came from some plant I did not recognise, the meal looked fit for kings. For that is what we were, free rulers of this beautiful wilderness domain. The taste was so delicate, as slightly pink, chunky flakes of the well cooked meat broke away in my mouth. Yes there were a few bones too but removing these seemed to be all part of the process of this

outdoor feast. All that was left was a back bone, some skin and two very satisfied customers.

Wrapping the remaining uncooked fish with the big leaves, we then tried to think of various ways of carrying water. This proved to be impossible, what I would have given for a bottle or watertight bag of some kind. We took large clumps of soaked moss and placed them in parcels made from the leaves. E-Zee assured me that the town was only a day away and if we didn't find more water on the way we would just have to make do with what we had until we were there.

We left the scene, covering up the fire area with stones and destroying the lean-to, trying our best to make the place as we had found it, and soon started to walk again. The warm morning blew away the previous day's troubles and my aching legs were all but forgotten. As we trampled over the soft ground, through the dense undergrowth and between the mature trees many questions sprang to mind.

"E-Zee, how are we going to find a change of clothes?"

"The map of this area that I downloaded shows the small town is on the other side of this wood. There's not going to be much choice, we have no money so we'll have to steal some from somewhere."

"Won't that be a bit risky?"

"Less risky than walking about in these things."

"Have you got everything planned out?"

"Not really. Once we get to the town we'll be winging it."

"Don't you think we'll need some kind of *story*?"

"Well I thought you could rustle something up in that department. I make up stories all the time, you know to entertain myself, but you might like to give it a whirl."

"Ah, at last! The great Kyle Meeks, graciously allows me to attempt something creative!"

"Don't call me that please, it's a square name, I've got no use for it anymore. If you're not up to the task I can easily generate something appropriate. The construction and linking of otherwise random events in a chain of abstract reasoning in order to create basic story synthesis is among my fundamental core abilities, a speciality even. Storytelling and stories themselves are the foundational entities upon which we learn to learn and the fact is that without them all of us would cease being able to communicate. Furthermore thinking itself would become a serious problem."

"Well Ok, I know it's important too. Leave it with me, I'll get back to you."

At that moment the usually steady E-Zee lost his footing and slipped harmlessly onto his side.

"Are you ok there buddy? Gyros need adjusting?"

"No, I'm fine, the terrain underfoot is particular hazardous in this particular spot you should be careful how you tread."

"I'll be careful."

Watching him regain his balance and continue ahead made me think how he represented the pinnacle of human technological achievement and further how our ideas of perfection had evolved. During The Great Re-Boot that had occurred in culture globally, technology began to borrow much from the world of art. To be perfect was no longer seen as a drive towards flawlessness but a broader canvass where aesthetics were a vital, if not fundamental piece of the picture. In this sense synthetics were expressions of flair and style, the end product being a reflection of their artist creators, initially commissioned by the wealthy and even forming part of extensive collections. Only later, with improvements in mass production did they eventually filter down to be affordable to everyone. Still, however, they kept their unique individuality and personality, my job had been to make certain of that.

So I had to come up with a story. We were brothers, no cousins. We were flying in a small, old aeroplane to the coast for a family reunion. The fuel pressure suddenly dropped and the electrics went and the engine caught fire. Forced to make an emergency landing in the wasteland we crashed and hit a tree, the only one for miles around. We got out alive but the whole plane caught fire and we lost all our belongings and methods of communication. We had started to walk.

Only a fool wouldn't believe such a far-fetched tale but I'd been told as a child if you're going to lie, make it a big one. Funnily people are more prepared to accept extreme explanations for weird situations over other more plausible causes. I was very happy with my fabrication but when I related it to E-Zee he was less than pleased.

"That's ridiculous, no one's going to buy that."

I was hurt, it was inventive, and it had drama and also the necessary end result of two desperate people in need.

"Well, can you think up a better explanation for two men, with no baggage, suddenly appearing out of the blue in a small town in the middle of nowhere? Wearing orange!"

"Possibly. Probably. I had just hoped for something a little more... subtle."

"Expectations are one thing, coming up with the goods, that's something else. We can work on the details if you like."

"It's your story, you work on the details."

Walking all day was hard work, I wasn't used to it and the undulating ground combined with the varied surface meant for hard going. Stopping only every now and then for a breather, E-Zee insisted that we keep up the pace to cover the necessary miles.

Early evening came and we found some small pools of water by an outcrop of rocks, a good place to camp. Repeating the previous evening's activities, a small shelter was quickly built and a fire lit. The fish was once again perfect and I lay back on the ground to digest the much appreciated meal. E-Zee was still active.

"I wonder if I climb that tree whether I'll be able to see what's beyond."

There was still light but I looked at him with some disbelief.

"Hey, knock yourself out."

E-Zee stood at the base of the tree for some time, sizing it up and presumably planning the best ascent.

"Yep, I'm going to give it a try."

"Good luck!"

As soon as I said that, I suddenly had a vision of him falling and dying. This thought filled me with dread, not only because it would mean the end of him but also, alone in this wilderness it would probably be the end of me too. In that moment I realised how dependent I had become on E-Zee, not just for his friendship but for my survival.

"Well take care man, don't go too high, keep a good grip, and watch out for dead branches." I sounded like his mother.

"Thanks, don't worry. I haven't done this before, but I should be ok."

"Don't be ok, be good."

"Quit fretting."

With that he hauled himself up onto the lowest branch and slowly and methodically, made his way upwards. It wasn't long before he was just a blur of moving foliage. I estimated the tree to be maybe sixty feet high but all I

could do was just sit on the ground, stare up and wait. Suddenly E-Zee shouted out.

"It's great up here, I can see everything! I can see the whole town, we're almost there!"

I shouted back. "Well come down then, and take it easy!"

"Hey, I *am* easy!"

It took less time for him to come down than it had for him to go up and finally, with a jump, he landed on the ground right next to me. He was wearing a large grin.

"You should try that some time!"

"Maybe in another life."

"You've only got the one."

"Maybe I'll be reincarnated as a monkey."

"The town is like only a mile away. If we get up early and start off we'll be there first thing."

"Sounds good to me."

"Great. Do you want some music?"

"What?"

"Music, do you want to listen to some?"

"Well yes, but I left my home entertainment system at home."

"I got it covered, DJ-EZ1 comes complete with a small library of tunes, check it out. Name some music, I'll see if I've got it."

"Got any late 20th century American jazz?"

"East Coast or West?"

"West."

"Let me see, The Best of Chet Baker Sings?"

"Never heard of him but give it a spin."

The sound emanated from E-Zee's voice box. Quietly at first the gentle notes of a softly played trumpet, accompanied by piano, provided the background for the crooner who sang songs about falling in and out of love.

"Turn it up."

Omnichrome

We both lay on the ground, propped up by trees and as the sun went down we imagined ourselves in a different time, in a different place. Perhaps a cafe where dudes would be wearing natty threads and girls would be dancing in pretty dresses. The night came down, the music ceased and I fell asleep, dreaming of days gone by.

Chapter Seven

Town Life

The last two fish were eaten for a very early breakfast and we soon covered the short distance to the edge of the forest and the immediate outskirts of the town. Keeping just under cover of the perimeter of the last few trees we surveyed the small settlement before us which lay in a slight dip in the geography that one could perhaps call a valley.

It was a great relief to see evidence of life but in terms of a centre of civilization this was certainly low scoring. At this early hour there were no people to be seen but then, the longer we studied the town and its layout, people began to appear. To me it looked as though we had travelled back in time. The construction of the buildings and even the clothes of the people who were beginning to walk outside in greater numbers, belied a type of existence that may have come from the very early twenty first century.

There was no metal and glass architecture only brick, stone and sometimes even wood. There were no moving walkways just what seemed to be a chaotic and unplanned gathering of abodes, mostly one or sometimes two storeys in height. This was something I was certainly not used to, even the prison, from which we had only recently liberated ourselves, was a masterpiece of modern design compared to this random collection of rough looking buildings and its equally scruffy inhabitants. Who were these people? What did they do? How did they live? We were about to find out.

We needed a change of clothes but E-Zee was ahead of me in this respect. He had far superior sight and some way in the distance he had spotted something.

"Look, over there," he pointed, but I could not focus on what he had seen.

"I don't see it, what am I supposed to be looking at?"

"There in the garden of that small white house, do you see it?"

The white house I could just make out but nothing more. He continued with a measure of urgency and excitement in his voice.

"There's a woman hanging out washing. With a bit of luck there's a man in the house and they'll be something we can swipe."

"I don't know, stealing, don't you think that's one step closer to getting caught?"

"Have you got any better ideas. We've got no money and we can't wander around looking like this."

"Ok, Ok. How do you suggest we do this?"

"I'll do it, better just the one of us. We'll get closer but stay on the edge of the woods, then I'll do a quick grab and run once she's gone inside."

"I'm not happy about it but I can see it's an opportunity."

We moved slowly staying behind the tree line and came much closer to the woman's garden. By the time we were as close as we could get, without breaking cover, the woman had gone inside and sure enough there looked to be a variety of men's clothes hanging out in the early morning sunshine.

"Well here goes nothing." I always hated that phrase, it implies you've got nothing and you stand to lose even that. E-Zee made his way to the garden and as I watched from a distance I could see he moved with great stealth and some agility as he jumped several obstacles and scampered over some low walls. He was in the garden for a very short period of time, perhaps only thirty seconds, pulling items of clothing off the clothes-line and was quickly heading back in my direction. The whole operation had taken but a few minutes when he arrived slightly out of breath carrying a bundle of clothing.

"Good work!" I said as he hurried back the last few steps and sat down by a tree.

"Thanks, that was fun! Doesn't look like she saw me."

"I don't know what happens when she finds out." This was something I was pondering as I had watched E-Zee make the theft.

"Well let's put it this way, she's very unlikely to call the police for a few items of stolen clothing.

"I guess you're right. Let's see what we've got."

Undoing the bundle, which E-Zee had wrapped in a sheet I could see he'd done very well. We were fortunate with the sizes. E-Zee's build was slightly bigger than mine so the jeans and shirt were a bit tight on him and consequently the trousers and shirt that I wore were on the big size for me. The clothes were still damp but they would quickly dry out in this warm weather. All things considered it could have been much worse but looking at each other we laughed.

"Just a couple of losers drifting into town," E-Zee remarked through a smile.

"We're proper civilians now my friend."

Burying the pair of discarded orange boiler suits felt like a final goodbye to our immediate past and the first few steps towards town in our new attire were welcomed with a confident swagger on both our parts. I needed to reaffirm our goals as we walked.

"We need to stick together right?"

"That's true, my idea is to walk right through the place, observing as much as we can, making as little contact with anyone as possible and creating no impact. Then we can reassess. Remember though, ultimately we're looking for jobs."

Walking in as relaxed way as possible we made our way into town. It was a lovely day and there was no denying the fact that I was genuinely happy if not carefree. However, there was a plan to execute and my sense of being alert to observe this strange old place was heightened.

Entering from the north it was soon clear that there was simply one main street with several smaller lanes running off it at various crazy angles. The town's evolution may have started with people making their homes along the road at the place where a small river ran off from the forest. It would be natural to stop here, rest and perhaps put down roots.

Initially there were few people, just individuals occasionally appearing here and there, but as we continued and entered what seemed like the centre of the place, there was a little more action. Some said 'good morning' and smiled so we nodded and returned the greetings. This was a friendly kind of town, more of a village really, I felt no threat or bad intent and as far as being strangers was concerned there was no fear of us shown by anyone, if anything we were made to feel welcome. Coming to the sole bridge that crossed the small river we stopped for a while to gather our thoughts.

"Well this is ok, isn't it," I had an optimistic tone but E-Zee was less buoyant.

"Don't let your guard down just yet, first appearances can often be deceiving."

"Oh relax, no one here's a problem."

"Let's just continue through 'til the edge of town and see what we see."

"Yep, good idea, stick to the plan," looking around I realised that our surroundings had a certain kind of charm, pretty even. There were several small grass areas by the river and clumps of flowers scattered around forming dense pockets of intense colour.

Lining the road were small shops selling a variety of products and services; a barbers, a locksmith, a couple of cafes, a grocery store, a stationers and some clothes shops. It seemed there were very few public buildings such as a library, a police station or a town hall, my thoughts were that the town had been settled quite a long time ago but had grown only so much before reaching a sort of harmony that had persisted since then.

As we came to the edge of town there was a car garage. I had not seen one car on the road itself but outside this place there were a score of old automobiles parked outside. E-Zee took great interest in scanning the makes and models but we kept moving and soon reached the outer limits of the town. Stopping by a rudimentary sign by the side of the road we could see for the first time its name, it read : "Welcome to Maybridge." We took stock.

"Well I think we've found a beautiful spot," I remarked, feeling genuinely upbeat.

E-Zee on the other hand sounded anxious. "I'm not so sure, it all seems so... nice."

"Look I don't think we'll have any problems getting some sort of work here, the people seem pleasant enough and there are loads of shops."

"Let's get back in there, don't throw them your ridiculous story about crash-landing in a plane. Let me do the talking. I want to check out that garage first."

"Alright, but lighten up a little, this could be good for us."

"We'll see, we'll see."

Outside the garage there was no one to be seen so we entered the building cautiously. E-Zee called out.

"Hello, is there anyone there?"

After a few moments an old man appeared wearing some dirty overalls and a baseball cap. He must have been in his eighties and his broken spectacles looked just as old.

"Hello there boys, what can I do for you?"

E-Zee seemed confident. "Hi, we're from out of town, looking for some work. I saw a lot of cars out front and wondered if you had any need of a mechanic?"

The old man took off his baseball cap and scratched his head.

"It's funny I guess. My brother, Cletus, died some six months back. He was the mechanic around here, I just do the business administration. Since he passed, cars have been piling up like there's no tomorrow. Whole town seems to have come to a halt because of it. You any good?"

"I know my way round most things mechanical and if I don't know it I can usually work it out."

"How about you fella, what you good for?" He pointed at me.

"Oh, I don't know much about cars. I'm just a cleaner."

"A cleaner you say, not much of a profession for a young man."

"Whatever you say." He didn't take much interest in me after that and continued talking to E-Zee.

"If you can fix up this back log in good time, I'll pay you a hundred notes a day. How does that sound?"

"That sound's just fine."

It suddenly occurred to me that they weren't even using credits here. As far as I knew, "notes" or physical cash money had been discontinued a long time back.

The old man continued, still scratching his head. "This is a bit of luck. Well then you got yourself a job of work. I'm Finnegan, what name do you go by boy?" He held out his hand which E-Zee reached out and shook.

"The name's E-Zee."

After they shook hands Finnegan scratched his head again.

"What kind of a name's that?"

"Ah, it's a nick-name."

"Well if I was you I'd change it. How 'bout you, what's your name boy?" he looked at me again.

"I'm Tyrone."

"Well I'll be jiggered, sounds like a damn foolish name too." He hesitated. "I got no need for a cleaner, no need for a cleaner of any sort for

that matter, no point cleaning when you could be doing.” He had one last question for E-Zee. “When can you start?”

“How about this afternoon?”

“I’ll see you then. Now if you don’t mind I was in the middle of a book. Good day gentlemen.” With that he turned and went back into his office which was situated at the back of the garage.

By using the term ‘book’, I imagined he meant a physical entity too. Once again the time-trap in which we found ourselves was becoming more apparent. We left and walked into town.

It was a great break but E-Zee wanted more.

“With me working there everyday, you’re going to need something to do as well. If you’re just drifting around people will get suspicious. You need a job, and I’m thinking cleaning and washing is your best bet.”

The first place I tried was a cafe. They had no work but at the second place, a pizza restaurant, my luck was in. It was a family run concern with seats for perhaps just twenty diners. Bernie and Yvette were the husband and wife proprietors and the slightly shy Ali, who I assumed to be their daughter, was maybe in her early twenties. She took an interest in me from a distance, perhaps just because I was a stranger but there was an intelligence and attitude in her that I caught from her eyes. Both of these qualities I would have a chance to know better.

As it transpired, due to the lack of a mechanic, most of the inhabitants of this town had stopped driving to the next town to eat out and consequently business had been great. Ali was needed to help with waitress duties, the lone chef, a fat geezer called Bill was super busy and plates and pots and pans had been piling up. So in walks Tyrone, freshly qualified in this area, offering his services, and was snapped up in next to no time. I was up for starting that very evening.

E-Zee and I had only a little time to gather our thoughts. This would be the first time we had spent significant time apart. We had to get our story straight so it would match up when we were seen together. The crashed plane idea was a little far-fetched and we tried desperately hard to find something a bit more credible. The fact was it did explain everything so we both reluctantly rehearsed the course of supposed events and armed with only these we set off in separate directions to our new places of employment. The plan was to get a room with a couple of beds at the only motel in town when we had some notes in hand.

I left E-Zee in the late afternoon, he was in a good mood and keen to do some work with his skilled hands. I had some time before my shift started and was happy to sit in the front of the restaurant with a very welcome

coffee on the house. Ali served me the frothy latte and we chatted for a while.

"So I guess it goes without saying you're not from 'round here?" She was softly spoken but had a little edge of attitude about her which was attractive.

"Is it obvious?"

"No, its not that obvious, its just I'm particularly perceptive."

"I suppose you want to hear my story."

"No, not really. You could be an escaped convict for all I care."

I looked out the window, pretending to be cool and distant. "Truth is, my friend and I crash-landed our light plane way on the other side of the forest. Walked all the way here."

"You're lucky, those woods are full of wolves, bears too. Surprising you didn't make a nice meal for one or the other."

I swallowed. "Well, we're not stopping, just long enough to get together some money that'll see us out of here to our destination."

"And where's that?"

It couldn't do any harm to tell her where we were going, what was it to her anyway? "South, south and then on to the coast."

"Interesting, but maybe's you'll fall in love with this place and decide to stay. It's got a kind of charm," she batted her eyelids and I noticed that she wore no make up and that her beauty was very much home-grown and natural.

"You're right there, you've got it good here, and it's a nice spot."

"Who's your friend, then? The guy who was waiting outside when you first came in."

"Oh that's just E-Zee, we go way back, childhood friends, you know the score." I was trying to sound off-hand and casual.

"I liked the look of him, maybe you could introduce the two of us."

I wasn't ready for this kind of forward speaking, perhaps it was usual for people out here in the middle of nowhere. In the modern place where I was from, people's relationships grew from very formal and tentative beginnings and took a long time to evolve. I was a little stuck for words.

"I'm sure you'll meet him sooner or later."

With that some guests arrived, Ali busied herself finding them a table and shortly afterwards I was required in the kitchen. It felt strangely familiar, washing dishes only the small differences made mountains of improvement. First I was wearing civilian clothes, albeit stolen, secondly there was a radio playing songs and tunes of which I had no recognition. Was this music of the moment, produced by artists living in the here and now? The sounds were strange and to begin with difficult to listen to but as the speaker belted out song after song I began to feel the benefit. There was a rhythm that was somehow just perfect for the job at hand. Before long I was involved in the work and getting that bouncy feeling that only means contentment.

Bill was talkative enough when he wasn't pounding the dough and throwing pizzas in the oven. He'd obviously been doing this a while and had it down to an art. The orders came in, the pizzas went out and I handled all the dishes and cutlery that returned on the always empty plates.

The pizzas themselves looked great, a standard base and all the regular kinds of toppings plus some more exotic too. Tomato and a variety of cheeses on just about everything but also anchovies, peppers, chillies, ham, beef, pastrami, mushrooms, onions, whole cloves of garlic, pineapple, herbs of every description, spinach, eggs and olives. All the ingredients were liberally doled out and the finished results were achingly mouth-watering. At some point the sights and sounds became too much.

"I'll have to try one of those myself sooner or later." I said, eyeing up a particularly hot and fresh looking example.

In mid-flow of throwing another pizza in the oven Bill seemed to accept me implicitly. "Don't worry about that, we usually finish off after hours with a few slices and a couple of cold ones, you know, to wind down."

The evening passed and just before closing E-Zee showed up with some cash, and a great hunger. He'd worked late for extra pay and had booked us into a room in a small motel across the street with cash to spare. Sure enough Bill knocked up a few huge pizzas and with the "Closed" sign in the window, we all tucked in with cold beers to wash down the feast. The tastes and smells of the food were almost overpowering to my eager senses and the relief of finally being able to talk in at least reasonably civilised company was relaxing.

E-Zee and I told our plane crash story to Bernie, Yvette and Bill who took it all in asking appropriate questions which we were easily able to supply. Ali was the only one who remained quiet, sitting on the edge of the group, observing as she munched on the pizza. I looked to her several times as our story unfolded but she neither laughed, commented nor made any queries. It was as though she were taking mental notes for use at a later date, unwilling to make any judgements or offer any opinions until she was in full possession of all the facts.

When our story became a little thin, E-Zee quite adeptly bridged the gaps by talking of his work at the garage. His basic angle was how the internal combustion engine was a thing of beauty and it was great how so many people were keeping these ancient automobiles running. He had changed brake pads, spark plugs, tyres and batteries, replaced fuses and repaired electrics, beaten out dents in body work and prepared areas for re-spraying. He had also started stripping down an old truck engine that needed a complete overhaul. As we left the restaurant he was still in full flow as to his activities of being a mechanic. Not only had he found himself to be a natural having never touched a car in his life but he also mentioned that he found the work to be quite 'therapeutic'. He was proud, bordering on the smug as we checked into the motel and entered our new accommodation, it made me smile because I felt the same way about my job. Honest work had this effect for us both.

After a good wash I felt like a new man. It was very late, E-Zee lay in his bed only a few feet from mine in the small room. The comparison to the similar situation we were in only a few days ago was at the front of my mind.

"Good night," it was the only thing I could say before turning out the bedside light.

"Night," E-Zee shut down within seconds.

I lay there, a mass of unprocessed thoughts and memories running through my tired mind. As I slowly slipped into unconsciousness I knew for certain that I would dream and strangely, somewhere in my slumber, I dreamt of actually waking up, gently on a regular work day morning, in my beautiful hyper-modern house, before any of this started.

I wake to the mellow electronic sounds of Trend Inc., a European group. The blinds automatically open to let in the rays of the morning sunshine through the ultra-violet filtered glass. It's going to be another one of those perfect days. The bed lifts me into an upright position and my freshly ground coffee is almost ready and within easy reach. I wonder if Magenta will be on the front desk at work today. Her pleasant demeanour and understated beauty fits my dating profile exactly. Perhaps I'll invite her to the cyber-cafe for lunch.

Mmm... That coffee's worth every credit, it's a guilty pleasure as those workers get paid so little to bring us these superior beans. Its all part of the global economy and it keeps the big wheel turning, we all do our little bit. What colour scheme am I going with today? With this coffee I think it's definitely a 'coffee and cream' sort of morning. A string of carefully chosen words opens the wardrobe and rotates the clothes wheel to give me the appropriate shoes, suit, shirt and tie combination. All the rules of aesthetics have been employed to ensure its harmony and balance.

Omnichrome

All systems activated. The house is on. The solar panels already busy. The temperature is perfect, I suppose life's perfect really. I'm up and dressed. Cooked breakfast should be ready any second now.

Just time to view the global news, its all good again, thankfully. It's all filtered, who wants bad news when there's so much to be positive about.

I say 'open' and the car door opens, voice print recognition is fool proof. The garage door lifts as the zero emission engine purrs, now I'm driving down the road in air conditioned bliss. Everything is taken care of by the machine, safer that way, no room for human error. I'm a nice safe distance from the car ahead and the traffic flow is uninterrupted. The driver assist gives me the freedom to look around: new houses going up here, new businesses there, its all progress.

Nearly there. The car slows and parks itself in my allocated bay. I get out and feel the direct heat of the sun for the first time. I'll be out of its glare and into the comfort of another controlled climate soon enough. That's better, lift to the twenty-first floor, there's Magenta on the front desk, and I feel as though her morning greeting is for me personally.

At my work-station it's a joy to get started. The computer springs into life as I sit down on the individually and ergonomically designed chair. I'm logged in with a quick retinal scan and the screen teases me with a choice of selected tasks. I choose a tasty bit of code to dive into, a challenge yes, I love my job. I see Magenta glide by my office window with a smile and a wave. I must be in love.

Chapter Eight

Ordinary Folk

I woke, for real this time, and opened my eyes to this new and as yet unscanned interior. The room was clean and simple with a wash basin in one corner. The walls were painted a not unpleasant shade of burnt umber and the closed, blue curtains filtered a cool morning light. E-Zee was still out for the count so I just lay there for some long moments before my face began to smile as I enjoyed the feeling of being free. What was there to stop us from staying put in this idyllic little town? I could imagine worse lifestyles, why leave such a good thing behind?

Ali had agreed to take us on a guided tour of the area. Looking at the rudimentary analogue clock which must have been some kind of antique from the late 1900's I realised we had only half an hour to make our rendezvous. Stirring E-Zee, who came 'round with a grunt from what must have been a heavy sleep given his exertions yesterday, we were soon outside in the broad daylight. E-Zee had been right, the small wispy clouds that strolled by really did accentuate the blue hazy beauty of the skyline.

I could see Ali already waiting by the large stone water fountain where we had agreed to meet. She called out as we drew near.

"Well good morning. You guys look like a couple of long lost losers!"

It was a friendly taunt which set the scene for the rest of the morning. E-Zee however was quick to respond.

"Just trying to stay in keeping with everyone else."

I was unsure of how casual to be with this person about whom we knew very little but was mainly concerned that we didn't blow our cover.

"Hi there Ali, good of you to conjure up such a beautiful day."

"Well, I do my best."

Drinking from the fountain, which was some kind of old tribute to the founders of the town, I found the water to be cool and refreshing. I splashed some over my head which was already warm and felt cold rivulets run down the back of my neck into my shirt. In every sense, I was truly awake and alive. We set off walking and after a few awkward moments without words E-Zee began talking about his job at the garage.

"It's funny. All the cars are mechanical, I mean no hybrid, no electric even. It's great to be able to work on all these internal combustion engine dinosaurs but I don't get it, what's the deal?"

Ali took her time to reply as though beginning a long story.

"Well you see we're kind of different here. To say we're stuck in the past is an understatement the size of this country. Everyone likes it that way. It's the history and the simplicity. We don't get many visitors and those who do come, pass through quickly. I guess to people such as you we seem kind of country and backward."

She seemed a little ashamed of her home and I was quick to try to pick her up. I looked around.

"But you've got it good. It's a beautiful village, there's heritage. Look at the buildings, so solid and well constructed, brick and stone, you don't see that hardly anywhere these days."

Still Ali was downbeat.

"I think the word you're looking for is old. "

The more I took in of the place the more enamoured with its peaceful tranquillity I became.

"The river, the grass lawns, the flowers. It's all so..." I was genuinely stuck for superlatives.

"So quaint?" Ali offered. "Look, I'm sure you guys will fall in love with this place, it does have a certain appeal, but once you start missing the civilization of the big cities you'll soon be on your way."

E-Zee had remained out of the conversation until now, perhaps trying to think of something witty to say.

"You'd be surprised at how relative a term like civilization can be," he stated in an attempt to appear intelligent whilst at the same time trying to elevate Ali's pessimism concerning her home.

"Whatever. All I'm saying is that if you're looking for modernity I'm about the closest you're going to get around here."

E-Zee picked up on this. "Yeah I noticed there's very little in the way of state of the art high tech."

"No joke. I was given an ancient 2020 computer by a salesman who took pity on me a couple of years back and you know what, I think I can safely say I'm the only one in this place who's connected."

E-Zee looked troubled. "That's desperate," he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You're telling me. Hey, is there any chance the two of you have any experience with electronica?"

I looked to E-Zee who gave me a certain expression that conveyed we should claim ignorance but somehow I felt the need to be more open.

"The truth is Ali, we're both from backgrounds where the digital domain is somewhat of a standard."

"I knew it!" She threw up her hands. "At last someone I can talk to. Have either of you ever seen a synthetic?"

With this I knew I should go no further, we were in uncharted waters here.

"I've heard of them, but I'm not sure I could ever say I've seen one."

E-Zee felt obliged to step in.

"Some say they're hard to tell from a real human being."

Ali was quite excited but was obviously holding back.

"Folk here don't take kindly to androids. They're funny that way. It's not right, not proper to make an artificial person, playing God so they say. Only two years ago there was this person turned out to be a synthetic came through en route to the coast. When Billy Bob's boys found out about his true nature they set upon him. Tore him apart they did, with no mercy I can tell you. Ended up as spare parts on display in Auntie Fi's museum of curiosities so he did."

E-Zee looked uncomfortable and nervous but still managed to eke out a counter.

"Perhaps he had it coming. As you say, it's not right."

Ali continued, "Personally I'd like to meet one, you know, up close, see what makes 'em tick. I think it'd be kind of cool to hang out with the latest in cyber design, if only for a while."

I'd been mulling all this over as we walked and it was true that although the place was stunning in its own beautiful way I found it hard to imagine making a life here, in the middle of this time-warp setting. How could people live in denial of what was developing and progressing in the rest of the country, or the world for that matter? The more we moved through the backstreets and alleys, as pretty as they were, the more I hankered for the clean, polished living that any city offered. I felt for Ali as she was obviously out of place here but knew that once we'd earned

enough money we would do as she said and ultimately pass through to somehow better things.

Her company was stimulating, original talk was inspired in the three of us, but I could see that she yearned for more than her situation offered. She wanted to learn as much as she could from us in the time she had available about the ways of life outside of the town's boundaries however, we could only say so much without revealing our true selves.

The more we strolled and listened to Ali's views and opinions the more it felt like we were walking through a museum, with Ali as our curator and guide. She had a kind of detached, objective outlook and I began to wonder how she had gained this position. With a growing trust in us she revealed her secret.

"I have a computer. It's the only one here. But you mustn't tell anyone, they'll destroy it. You promise?"

We both nodded and she continued.

"A salesman came through a year or so ago now. He was lost, having driven fifty miles on the wrong freeway but he stayed a while and we made friends. I knew that he'd leave, just as you will, but as a parting gesture he gave me a machine. Its old, but it works just fine and I can hook up with it in our basement. Would you like to see it? You probably think I'm hokey and all that, but it's changed my life."

E-Zee chirped up. "I've got to get to work at the garage, but Ty, why don't you check it out?"

"I think that's a great idea, I'd love to see it. Maybe we can go old style and surf the net."

Ali gave me a funny look. "Honestly, you're so last century."

It was settled, E-Zee set off in one direction and Ali and I walked the other way. After a short while we came to her place where she unlocked an external door that had steps leading down into the darkness. As we entered she flipped a switch and her basement was thrown into light.

The place was an Aladdin's cave of electronic machinery, most of it in various stages of disassembly or construction, I wasn't quite sure which. I recognised fax machines and telephones, tumble driers and photocopiers, hi-fi and microwave ovens, televisions and record players.

"I guess you think I'm some kind of freak?" She said, casually playing with some cables and components.

"No, no, far from it. It reminds me of when I was a boy. Where did you get all this stuff?"

"My uncle left it to me. This used to be his place. He's dead now."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's beautiful."

"You're just saying that, it's a heap. None of it works, except the music."

She leaned over and threw three or four switches and after a short pause, the space boomed into musical life emanating from two large speakers mounted where the ceiling met the wall in corners of the room. It was loud and Ali turned the volume down immediately.

"Sorry about that, I had it turned way up last night."

Now it was just a mellow tune playing in the background. Suddenly Ali became excited. "Do you want to see the computer?"

"Sure, I'm kind of interested to see what you've got."

She moved around some clutter and opened the shutters on a large upright desk. Behind them was carefully placed a sizeable screen and wireless keyboard all in white. There was also a mouse. The thing looked brand new, but it must have been built at least fifty years ago.

"It works. Watch."

Ali pressed the button by the screen and with a sonorous note the ancient machine came alive. I'd seen such technology before, I knew my history of computing, but my references to this style were all through pictures. All the same I was fairly speechless.

"I can hook up to the web too." In what seemed like an age of waiting, whilst I stood staring in disbelief at this archaic dinosaur, Ali said nothing. But then we were in. The good old World Wide Web. The same backup system that E-Zee had accessed in order to download blueprints of our previous home, which we had only recently vacated, was now glowing gently in front of my eyes.

We played on the computer for a while, Ali showing me all kinds of graphic logo designs she had made for fictional companies. Every one had a unique style and balance but it was sad that none were destined to be used commercially. Still, she obviously gained much pleasure from this work, then, in the middle of her enthusiasm she suddenly posed a question.

"Your friend, E-Zee, does he have, is there anyone he's attached to, like a girlfriend or wife or something?"

I was caught off guard slightly and had to process my thoughts quickly.

"Oh you don't want to go near Kyle with any of those intentions. He's a womaniser, goes through the ladies like nobody's business. He's a nice guy and everything but he never stays with anyone very long."

"So he's free, at the moment that is?"

I needed to nip this in the bud, if only for her sake but I fear what I said came across a little too strongly.

"Look, he's bad news. Get it?! Don't take it any further."

"Ok, ok. No need to get like that. I was only asking a simple question."

I didn't want to hurt her feelings as she must have been attracted to him. In the way of diffusing the situation I foolishly made an attempt to smooth things over without giving anything away.

"E-Zee is... different. He's, he's not like you and me."

"Oh, I knew it, he's gay isn't he."

There was a crash in my consciousness at this thought and for a while I was unable to reason. When at last I found something to say it was, for better or worse, the easiest and perhaps the only way out.

"Yes, he's gay. You mustn't say anything to him though. He's very self conscious and doesn't like to talk about it, not at all. Can we drop it now?"

"Sure, no problems, you only had to say. My lips are sealed."

The atmosphere had changed, certainly for me, but fortunately it was time to get started at the restaurant and having switched off the computer, silenced the music and locked up the basement we headed towards work together.

The evening was busy, once again the place was full of hungry, returning customers. Bill kept knocking out the pizzas, Ali kept the whole place alive as she shuffled back and forth from the kitchen serving hatch, delivering the delicious discs of oven baked dough covered in any number of personalised toppings. Yvette provided the homely greetings, service and customer seating and Bernie, no longer required as a dishwasher was happily manning the till. I was in a state of constant work flow, my official title as kitchen porter meant I was always occupied in some way or other. The evening went surprisingly quickly, by the time the last plate was washed I was quite exhausted but the prospect of sitting down for some food and light conversation with the crew kept my spirits up. In only two nights I felt like I had been welcomed as part of this family.

E-Zee came in at the end of the day and was cheered through the door by our food and alcohol-fuelled well-being. I'd just finished telling some

joke I knew, to much mirth, when I glanced over to Ali and E-Zee who were sitting close together just away from the table. They were animated and laughing too but at some private conversation they were having on their own. I decided that it was perhaps time to leave and getting up made my farewells.

"Hey E-Zee, perhaps we'd better make tracks, it's been a long day."

"Sure, be with you in a minute." He looked to be explaining something to Ali, so I quizzed Bernie for a while about business until E-Zee left Ali smiling and came to the door which I was already halfway through.

As soon as we were outside E-Zee was on my case.

"Man, where do you get off?"

"What on earth are you on about?"

"You know damn well. What's your game? What were you thinking?"

I began to suspect I knew what he was talking about but had no ideas as to my explanation so I stalled for time.

"Hey keep your hair on, maybe you could let me in on what's got you all riled up?"

"You told Ali that I'm a... I'm a... one of them! For the sake of a silicon chip, why?"

"I'm not sure I get your drift, if you've got something to say just spit it out."

"I'm not gay!"

"Oh that. I shouldn't worry about that. It's just a cover. I think she's keen on you."

"I know she's keen on me! And what chance have I got now, now she thinks I play for the other team. You're something else."

"Look E-Zee, be cool. We can't have her thinking she's got a chance with you. We're not going to be here for long, we can't afford to get too close with these people. Besides you're a synthetic, she's human."

"It didn't stop you with Magenta."

"Well that was different, I didn't know."

"Well, it didn't stop her either did it and she did know. I thought you'd be more open-minded about cross-lifeform interaction. Do you realise how long it's been for me, without out a... you know..."

"I have no idea and I don't really want to know either. You'd just break her heart and then we'd be out of here."

"Maybe that's exactly what she's after. Can you imagine, what an awkward spot you put me in?"

I began to smile. "No, not really. How did you play it?"

"I just had to act sort of more... effeminate... and kind of a little bit fruity. I don't know I improvised."

"Maybe you're a natural."

"I'm not a 'natural', I'm a hot-blooded android with needs every deep as a man."

By this time we had reached the motel but the conversation didn't die until I was asleep. I had no bad feelings about any of this but had to keep my laughter inside. The strength of E-Zee's reaction surprised me but I wasn't beneath apologising about the whole situation and he agreed to let it lie. The next morning we both slept late.

Chapter Nine

The Journey Ahead

The whole thing was forgotten and all E-Zee could talk about the next morning as we explored around the edges of town was a vehicle. Skirting the perimeter nearby the woods, where we had first arrived, the place still looked serene and lush as I remembered the joy of that initial impression.

"I explained to Finnegan that we were just passing through and we'd need some kind of transport. He sort of scratched his head for a while and then took me out the back. There's this old truck, its called a Hummer or something, must be fifty years old if its a day, and the thing has just been standing there under a lean-to for as long as he's run the place. Here it is; he says if I can fix her up and get her running she's ours, part payment for all the speedy work I've been doing. What do you think? Not bad eh?!"

"That's cool." It was good to see a way out of here. Even though I'd become quite attached to the peculiar nature of the place I knew our destiny lay elsewhere. In particular the idea of bringing the man who had set me up to some kind of justice and clearing my name so that I could get back to my old way of life had been bubbling away at the back of my mind in quieter moments.

"Do you think you can do it? I mean get the truck on the road?"

"Hey, you're looking at a fully programmed car mechanic with ever increasing experience in automobilia of the 2020's. It gets better, there's another truck, same make and model but in a worse state right by, I'll be able to cannibalise it and lift any parts I need. Then we can get out of this time-trap pronto."

"When will you have the thing roadworthy?" It was sinking in that as idyllic as this place was it was important to keep moving if for no other reason than to avoid suspicion. It was a nagging and irritatingly repetitive thought that there were almost certainly forces looking for us and being apprehended by them was a situation to be avoided at all costs.

"Two, maybe three days if I can work on her solid. I figure as soon as the old girl fires up we make tracks, we've been here long enough and I'm starting to get itchy feet."

"I'm thinking along the same lines. People have been very kind so far but I'm sure our story won't stand up to much closer scrutiny, we don't want to outstay our welcome."

"Okay, that's settled. I work on the truck, you keep washing dishes, we don't cause any ripples and as soon as we can, we take what money we've got and drive south."

It felt good to have a plan and a direction. We continued our walk around the outskirts of town and came round to enter it from the far side. Several town folk said hello, strange how quickly some people are to become friendly. I couldn't help feeling a fraud as my returned greetings were expressed genuinely but not without a feeling of fakery.

The next couple of days passed without much event. E-Zee put in extra hours and gave me detailed reports on the progress of the truck's renovation. On my part, work at the restaurant continued but again I couldn't help feeling that the warmth I was always welcomed with was out of sorts with what lay behind my artificial front.

Ali was becoming particularly friendly. Having again shown me around her Aladdin's gave of retro-techno-memorabilia I realised that she was becoming quite attached, to both E-Zee and I. She really was the anomaly here. Her love of the modern world was stifled in this place and her thirst for information about where we were from was unquenchable. Intelligent questions suffused with a real desire to be part of such a bigger world were met by me with cautious half-answers that only seemed to fuel her curiosity.

"What does it *feel* like with them, synthetics I mean? Do you behave differently if you know you're interacting with a machine?"

I smiled and remembered how this whole thing had started. "You know what Ali, to start with, in the big cities, everyone's equal, androids and people the same. That's how we like it, but the fact is, and I'm speaking from personal experience here, if you know that the thing in front of you is... other... your attitude does change."

"You're talking about prejudice."

"Maybe, I think arrogance is unfortunately closer to the mark, especially in my case. You see no matter how advanced the model in front of you is there's always this feeling of superiority. You made it, it serves you, and you have priority."

"We had a Chinaman come through not six months ago, seemed like a nice enough fella but he started talking all this Eastern Philosophy and rubbed people up the wrong way. Folks don't like people that are too different, people who don't blend in with our ways. I wasn't surprised at the

talk behind his back and eventually it boiled over and he was driven out. No place for his kind."

"Some of the greatest minds of this century are from that part of the world. Robot evolution wouldn't have advanced half as far without their contributions and we have much to thank them for."

These conversations continued at any available opportunity. Ali's inquiries were always from a fresh perspective perhaps due to her complete isolation from anything that one might call civilisation. I was beginning to learn as much from her as I hoped she might be gaining from me. At one point, as I was walking her home from the restaurant after work, she brought something up that made me re-examine my personal situation.

"I hear androids make excellent doctors. I wonder how many people, men, women and children have been saved at the hands of a synthetic."

"It's true, as surgeons they are very skilful. Indeed their only real mandate is to help, protect and serve the best interests of Man." Then it hit me how greatly E-Zee was helping me and continued to do so. With no demand for any recompense or indeed any requirements of any sort, his friendship was unconditional. I could not want for a better companion and in addition to treating him as an equal I began to think of ways in which I might be able return his help. It wasn't an easy train of thought, after all, what do you give a man who has everything?

Then, when we were alone again one morning, taking a stroll around the other side of town, Ali dropped a bomb which I should, and could, have seen coming. She asked in a timid voice,

"When you leave, can I come with you?"

I looked at her and tried to think quickly of a response that would not hurt her feelings, but it was no good.

"No, I'm afraid that's not possible Ali."

She immediately changed mood and became quite hostile. "I knew you would say that! It is possible, it's just you don't want me being extra weight." She was then saddened but I could see that she wasn't going to accept this without a fight.

"Look, Ali, where we're going you don't want to come. There's much that I can't tell you but it might be dangerous."

"I'm not stupid you know. This story of yours, the plane crash, it just doesn't add up. Someone would have tracked you and seen you'd disappeared off the scope. To be quite honest I don't care what the real story is but I would have thought that you might trust me enough by now to let me know the truth before you just up and go."

I looked at her, she was just a girl, maybe a young woman at a stretch but without being cowardly I really didn't think she should or needed to know.

"Ali, you're a special person and I understand you don't feel you fit in here, but it's your home."

"You have no idea. Home is here, and here," she put her hand over her heart and then to her head. "I've lived my whole life dreaming of being anywhere but this town, you probably represent my only chance of escape."

This last word triggered something essential in me, people don't say or even think of escape unless they have looked at every available alternative, I knew. Did she really have that feeling of desperation inside of her as I had done in the not too distant past? I looked into her brown eyes gazing up at me full of hope. There was no question that she could join us on our journey but she was right, she did deserve an explanation and I resolved to tell her just about everything.

I talked continuously for maybe an hour. Every time I looked at Ali her jaw seemed to have dropped further but she asked no questions. The tale of how E-Zee and I came to be here concluded when I came to the part where I had first met her in the restaurant. We stopped walking and she stared at me for a few seconds before gathering herself together in attempt to reflect the idea that all this was perfectly normal.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I think so, I may have left a couple of details out."

"You know what you need don't you?"

"What?"

"A check-up from the neck-up. You're properly mental, fruit loop, a basket case."

"It's all true."

"I'm sure it is and that's probably why you are completely out of touch with reality, and believe me, you are."

"I don't think my relationship with reality has got anything to do with the current situation."

"If you could only hear yourself, your real character, you would run a mile away from this nonsense in a minute."

"I'm sorry Ali but, I don't understand where you're coming from. I've told you the truth, the correct version of events that have conspired to put me here and you seem to think I'm mentally unstable."

"I don't think, I know."

"What's your point Ali?"

"My point is that you are detached from reality. You have no reference to the real world."

"Ah yes but what is real? I mean if you..."

"Stop right there. Take a look around. You're a man on the run with an android as your best friend and you've put all your faith in some crazy mission to clear your name and bring a criminal to justice. That's your reality. If you weren't crazy you'd be mad. Try and see it from my point of view."

I did exactly what Ali suggested and looked around, having told my story I began to understand how it might look to someone else who wasn't in that story. Ali was right I had been holding on tight to an elusive notion of normality. Then it hit me hard, Ali had, through her own volition, become part of my story and I really did have to let go of that fragment of my mind which I had been clutching onto so strongly. I couldn't speak and then I couldn't stand. I sat down in a random collapsed manner and cried. There were no words to describe or explain this. Even images that flashed before me disappeared into tears that fell on the dry sandy soil.

It didn't last long, although perhaps longer than I recall. Ali talked me back from an edge and somehow brought me to my feet. I was just a body, a soul with no direction or strength. Then in her bright and chirpy way she provided a snap back into the present, back to another reality.

"Is E-Zee really gay?"

I laughed through the tears, a great big goofy laugh that started in my face but soon made its way to my stomach.

"No, he isn't! He's just a half finished military android with faulty wiring and a criminal record."

"Do you think me and him, you know, might have a chance?"

"No! He's not your type and that's a fact!"

"Oh that's a shame, he's very manly."

"Who needs their head seeing to now?!"

"Ok, I'll drop it. Now about me coming with you, I might be of some use."

Some paternal instinct came to the front of my being. I had only a few minutes earlier been a collapsed wreck but because I liked her very much I couldn't bear the thought of putting her at risk. I straightened up.

"You can't come Ali, I'm sorry, it's just not in your future."

"I hate you."

With that she stormed off leaving me feeling alone and stupid. I made my way back into town.

One last evening washing dishes in the restaurant and we would be off the next morning. E-Zee had done great things with the truck and it was all ready to go. Our hosts had been very generous with our pay and with the money we had earned we stocked the vehicle with food and provisions for the long journey south.

At the restaurant that night Ali didn't speak to me. In fact she went out of her way to avoid me completely. It was awkward and I knew that she was hurting. I saw her going about her business very professionally but there was none of her usual joy in her interactions with the customers. There were times when I tried to communicate with her but all were in vain, everything had been said before.

Our after-hours pizza and wind down were subdued. They had arranged a little sending off party for both of us which was very kind and thoughtful. E-Zee and I went through the motions of politeness, thanking everyone for their help but we struggled to keep our story together. More than ever I felt like a charlatan, using these kind folk's hospitality for our own personal gain. Ali was conspicuous by her absence.

We'd told most people of our plan to set out first thing in the morning and they'd agreed to give us a send off in the newly completed truck. That night I went to bed with an uneasy heart. Had I lost a sense of humanity in this whole escapade?

E-Zee was shocked that I'd told Ali everything, there was no need he thought. He fell asleep before me and as I dropped off I felt more alone in that time than ever in my life.

Morning came as a shock, E-Zee woke me with excitability, and it was obvious he was keen to get underway. Dressed in the same clothes that we had stolen from some poor lady's washing line we settled up and left our accommodation to arrive at our new mode of transport.

The truck stood there without quite the appearance I had imagined. When I had caught a glimpse only the day before the body panels were of several different colours, no doubt due the fact that their donor was not an exact match. However, E-Zee had taken it on himself to re-spray it. It stood there in a gleaming bright metallic orange. With the shock of this transformation I simply didn't have the wherewithal to question him on this choice. I just stood there looking at it. For his part he was wearing an

altogether ridiculous smile, a grin really, somehow wider than necessary and I could only conclude it was an expression of pride.

The second part of its appearance that made an impression was that it didn't exactly look very fast. In fact its dumpy design and less than aerodynamic contours leant it the feeling that it didn't really want to go anywhere, particularly not in a hurry. It was hard to tell which the front was and which was the back.

The thought crossed my mind that we ought to give the old girl a name, however, the christening of machines with the names of people was perhaps a dubious tradition and I forgot the idea almost immediately.

A small group of well-wishers had gathered to bid us farewell and I was happy to see that Ali was amongst them. All had brought gifts of some sort or other, I guess we had made a fairly good impression. There was a set of old and greasy but perfectly functional tools from Finnegan which E-Zee accepted gracefully. Bernie and Yvette offered a rather quaint picnic basket, as I took it from her with a hug she told me to look inside the biscuit tin, I nodded and thanked her. Bill the cook had a canister of natural gas and a stove which was a very welcome addition to our belongings and then there was Ali.

Accepting these presents once again caused me to feel a fraud, perhaps we should have told all to everyone but when I saw Ali I felt that she may reveal the real tale after we had left. She came up to me gave me a hug.

"Thank you for listening to me. I won't forget you two."

Then she went up to E-Zee and hugging him I heard her quietly say in his ear,

"I know who you really are, E-Zee."

E-Zee smiled, "I know you know."

They laughed and I made my way to the truck to get in the driver's seat. As I opened the door the gentle feeling of the send-off was broken by the loud noise of a large woman running towards us and screaming at the top of her voice.

"Stop those men, they're wearing my husband's clothes. Thieves!"

All were motionless, except the big woman, who continued her run at speed in our direction. I slowly opened the truck door and said in as calm a voice as I could.

"E-Zee, get in the truck. Get in the truck E-Zee."

I climbed in and shut the door focussing on the looming woman bearing down on us. E-Zee was surprising slow to respond, he seemed to be enjoying looking at the changing faces of everyone.

"E-Zee, get in the truck!" my voice becoming louder and more insistent.

"I'm coming with you." Ali piped up and before I knew what was happening her quick moves found her slight frame climbing into the back seat. E-Zee looked at me and hunched his shoulders, Ali, with a smug look on her face, just said,

"Perhaps now would be a good time to see if this thing works."

E-Zee was in, I turned the key, there was nothing else I could do, and "Vroom!" she came to life instantly. There was a delay of a few seconds whilst E-Zee jammed the automatic box into Drive for me and then with only metres to spare, the woman having made considerable ground given her girth, I took one last look at the assembled crowd.

Surprise and confusion was with all and as I put my foot down, the four-wheel drive turning up dirt on the side of the road, I could only think that they would never know the truth and that we were free and gone.

Ali let out a scream through the open roof and in that moment I knew just how badly she had wanted to put that town in her past. After the chaos, silence ensued, staring straight ahead at the black ribbon of road in front of us we were locked in a zone of speechlessness for several miles. For my part I drifted, trying to assimilate past, present and future with no success. What the others were thinking was their own private concern, if indeed they were thinking at all. I broke the nothingness with a question.

"Anyone know the way to New Mexico?"

Chapter Ten

Three Way Switch

Everything had changed, for the better. Now they were three, the whole dynamic was profoundly shifted towards a buoyant and light-hearted way of being. E-Zee and Ty had from day one been serious and focussed but Ali's feminine perspective threw all that out of the window. Where there had been logic and plans there were now abstraction, humour and a lifting of spirits. At last there was some joy and happiness and not a small amount of nonsensical joking which cut through any reflections on doom and gloom or fears about what lay ahead.

They were moving, that was the main thing. The scenery of scrub and arid bush scrolled past at a great rate. Windows and roof open, the sense of freedom was too difficult to contain. Ali had her feet out of one of the rear windows and Ty had the car on cruise control. Nothing ahead but a straight road which they were eating up at around seventy miles every hour.

E-Zee had quickly found a way of interfacing his personal, internal music selection with the vehicle's aged entertainment device via an equally ancient system that he said was something called 'Bluetooth'. However, he was unable to explain why such a medium referred to a singular tooth and indeed one which was blue of all colours. It was of no consequence, all that mattered was that there was a virtually endless selection of tunes to accompany the journey.

Right now someone whom E-Zee announced as being a band called "The Velvet Underground" were singing a song called "Who Loves The Sun." Ty liked it a lot, assuming it was something to do with nuclear fusion. Soon they were all singing along, but when it finished E-Zee was unable to explain the meaning of the band's name. Perhaps, Ali suggested, it was purely abstract and for aesthetic appeal only, with no real meaning as such. Ty found the concept hard to grasp but once again it didn't seem to matter as it made him smile singing along to the chorus.

Ali turned out to be the missing piece in the hap-hazard jig-saw picture puzzle that represented their story. When it had been just Ty, and then Ty and E-Zee the image was two dimensional. Without her presence they were nothing more than a hazy, nightmarish cartoon of a journey. Now they were real, and made a tangible sculpture, something you could walk around, touch and sense as having real qualities in space and time. Indeed, as a unit and through their continuing conversations they began to become, at least

amongst themselves, something to believe in. E-Zee had taken over driving duties following a short break and was enjoying the experience, proud of the rigorous work he'd put into this restoration project.

Ali spoke up after they had all been quiet for a while.

"Can we talk about the elephant in the room?"

"What are you talking about?" Ty asked, knowing the meaning of the phrase but not in this instance to what it applied.

"Err, the choice of colour? Orange? A little bit conspicuous don't we think?"

E-Zee looked at Ty, Ty looked back with no opinion, until E-Zee made his attempt at explanation.

"Well you see, firstly, and here's the thing that matters, it was the only colour Finnegan had, at least enough for a few coats. Secondly, the choice was between this or the multi-coloured rusting patchwork that it was. I did give it some thought and figured if we're having any trouble with peace enforcement officers it might be better to look respectable rather than scrapheap. Let's face it, we are going to get stopped, driving an antique, so it might as well look as though we're riding a restored classic out of choice than beat up old wreck. That's my logic."

There was silence from Ali and Ty, whilst E-Zee looked truly uneasy, until he couldn't contain his frustration with the questioning of his work.

"It was all there was! I like orange! What's wrong with orange! Have you got a problem with orange! It bright and cheerful!"

"Gay is what it is," Ali had that glint in her eye where she was just looking to make mischief. E-Zee was a suitable target.

"It's not gay! For your information its metallic Satsuma. And I like it."

Ali could see she might have hit a raw nerve. "I like it too E-Zee, I guess I'm just saying that we are going to get noticed in this thing and maybe we should get a story straight to explain ourselves to anyone who gets interested."

"I know what you're saying," E-Zee looked deep in thought. "Give me some time to think it over and I'll see what I can come up with."

They trundled along, periods of silence interrupted sporadically with observations and wise-cracks but soon enough the sun was appearing lower in the sky and Ty put forward the idea of stopping.

"Maybe we should take the next small road off the highway and find somewhere out of the way to park for the night."

E-Zee agreed. "It's the right thing to do, I'll take the next turn off."

Sure enough, after only ten miles or so, there was a dirt track branching off to the right and E-Zee slowed down. There was no signpost but it did head in the direction of a large wooded area.

"This looks perfect, what do you think guys?"

Ali and Ty looked out of the vehicle and agreed. E-Zee turned down the track which was considerably bumpier than the tarmac road surface they had been riding on and headed towards the forest. Within minutes he had brought the car to a halt some metres off the track in a spot that was concealed from the main road and any unwelcome onlookers.

"Here we go folks, your hotel suite for the night, complete with tree canopy roof, and a star strewn sky view. Who wants to help Uncle E-Zee build a fire? Any takers?"

"Uncle E-Zee!" Ty was perturbed, "Where did you get that from?"

"Just trying a new personality upgrade I've been working on. Uncle E-Zee is not just that friend you love and cherish, he's also that caring, humorous and jovial Uncle you never had. You know the one you could relate to and ask all those questions that your parents wouldn't understand."

"Heaven help us!" Ty was less than impressed and it seemed that, with this, his mood had dropped, the long drive having ultimately sapping his strength, his body language was of one who had lost some of his earlier joy at being free. "All we need is some robot with a guardian angel complex."

Ali had become thoughtful. "My Uncle was the only family I had, brother, father he was both. When he died I was alone in the universe."

E-Zee took stock. "I'm sorry, I didn't know." He paused, trying to think of more to say to Ali but she helped him out of the awkward situation.

"Hey don't worry about it. It's ok. You carry on being whoever you want to be. Maybe your Uncle E-Zee character is someone we need."

E-Zee noticing the low mood of his fellow travellers changed the subject. "I suggest we start gathering kindling and wood for a fire and then we can eat, we'll all feel better after that."

So, they walked about in the undergrowth at the edge of the small wood and gradually gathered enough material to make a fire. E-Zee started it off again with the spark that he generated between his two fingers, explaining to Ali that it was standard issue for a military model. Soon a large fire was blazing and they waited until it had burned down enough to be suitable for cooking. Ty and E-Zee sat on a large log next to each other and Ali was perched on a rock which she'd covered in a blanket.

E-Zee began to cook from the fresh supplies. Ty helped out and they worked well together, a two man team making light work of the job. However it seemed natural to Ali that the synthetic might have done just as well doing everything himself. She imagined that he should perhaps have adopted a manservant role. Surely it was part of his nature to make himself of the most use to humans in any given situation. He was whistling again and she thought that Ty was content too, involved as he was. They were more than two people helping each other, they seemed more than friends, brothers even. As they ate she watched and listened to them both, comparing the body language and ideas of the two, and towards the end of their meal she offered an observation.

"You know, sometimes it's hard for me to be sure which of you is the synthetic and which of you is human."

E-Zee looked up from his cooking activities with a smile. "Well that's very kind of you to say so. I know, I'm pretty amazing right, too good to be true you might think, but hey, I'm the real thing, genuine, bona fide, designed, built and constructed on beautiful planet Earth for the benefit of all mankind. Yeah sometimes I amaze myself too."

Ty looked unsettled. "Well you've got a big head, I'll give you that."

E-Zee was flipping the steaks. "It's understandable that one might feel, how shall I say this, uncomfortable when being compared to one such as me. I'm the latest, fully loaded, I'm the business!"

Rising to the bait Ty felt he needed to level the playing field. "No disrespect E-Zee but you *are* a machine and ultimately you will only ever be as intelligent, at best, as the people who designed you. Me for example, not only do I have an understanding of your basic design, higher functions and all levels of programming I am also fully aware of your limitations, shortcomings and flaws."

Ali let out a laugh. "This is what I'm talking about. By designing a machine to be as human as possible, you've become more machine than the machine! Somewhere along the line the man-machine interface has simply disappeared and it's the synthetic that you've created who has benefitted. E-Zee's the happy man, and you're the miserable robot."

Ty was not pleased. "That's a fascinating analysis Ali, but I don't think it holds much water. You see from my point of view E-Zee is simply a marvellous creation, perhaps one of man's best and most glorious achievements. I, on the other hand, am someone who can step back and admire my work. E-Zee is ultimately a work of art and I am the artist."

E-Zee laughed. "Now we're getting down to it. You're right I am a work of art, it has to be said, there's no two ways about it. But it makes you think doesn't it, what's more important the artist or the artwork itself?"

Certainly when the artist is dead and gone, all that's left is the artwork. I'll probably be kicking around long after you're both gone and what's more I'll probably still be laughing!

Ty saw an opening and jumped on it. "Well my clockwork friend, that's always going to be the difference between the likes of you and me. Human's have to deal with their own mortality, you do not."

"No, instead I have to deal with *your* mortality." E-Zee pointed his finger in a jabbing motion. "You seem hell-bent on destroying each other. I have to fight *your* wars and do all *your* dirty work. Don't get me wrong, I'll get on with it, and I'll do it very well, and usually I won't even complain but I do have feelings, I do feel pain and I do despair at the sometimes insane nature of what you ask us to do. Only difference between you and me is that I don't really have any choice. Think about that!"

E-Zee had become quite animated, even angry, and Ty didn't have a thing to say in response. The clear night sky and silence were broken only by the crackle of the fire and the sparks which rose in streaks into the dark above. Eventually Ali, who had concluded that they could argue as brothers too if they so wanted, suspected that both were trying to impress her in some confused macho way. She found some words to provide continuity to the evening.

"For me it's all about emotion. I can imagine working as you did Ty in synthetic programming that emotions may have been something that you were unable to... I don't know, unable to relate with, get involved with. Is it true that you put all your passion into your work and had precious little left for yourself?"

"You're not wrong. I can tell you that, I have a perfect awareness of every emotion and what is needed to possess it and express it. I needed that for my job. Emotions for me were like theories, beautiful arrangements of behaviour, the cause and effects of which I knew intimately. But I never really wanted to feel them myself, they were tools, operations, algorithms and yes I made sure that the androids whose core architecture I was designing had a full compliment for any situation and were perfectly adept at expressing them. But for me, no, emotions are best left for synthetics."

"You're sad man," E-Zee felt the need to dive in. "I don't believe any of that bullshit. You're not like me. You have some gift, some spark that comes from god knows where, that I'll never have. When you fell in love with that, what was her name, Magenta, I bet you had emotions running around inside of you that I'll never have."

"You're right, I did. And when I found out she was a synthetic I realised all at once that all those emotions were brought to the surface, not by another human but by one of you. You can't imagine how that felt."

"That's right, I can't, but you can, you did, that was a real feeling, anger, disappointment, shame call it whatever you like, it was a feeling, it was real and it was yours, no-one else's. Everything that I feel is a simulation of someone else's emotions, my creator's. Whatever my feelings are, I've got people like you to thank for them, and in the same moment I know that they are second hand, borrowed from the likes of you. So if I were you I'd stop feeling sorry for myself and start thinking about how we're going to nail whoever it was who screwed you over. Get a little bit mad and then do what a man has to do, get even."

Ali, who had been following the conversation intently was fairly impressed by the exchange. "Wow, I wasn't expecting any of that. All I was going to say was that maybe you two could learn from each other. That's all."

There was a long pause, whilst the three of them stared into the ever changing flames that licked the air and provided the mesmerising distraction that they all needed.

Ty was deep in thought but eventually spoke in a soft voice, talking into the fire.

"You know how sometimes a mathematically symmetrical arrangement of items has its own beauty, an order, a pattern," he looked up but there was no response, he continued. "Well that's how androids were first conceived, with mathematical perfection. Art, however, often hinges on tensions between that form of beauty and a more abstract interpretation of the world around us. Even symmetry in nature is beautifully coloured by 'flaws', knots in wood, discolouration in leaves. When the first domestic droids came onto the market people started wanting them to have idiosyncrasies, make them easier to relate to. So of course the market forces won and they started offering a whole host of options, modifications, mostly cosmetic at first but in an enormous number of possible combinations.

"Then people wanted their personal synthetic to be funny and unique, better than their friends' model. The first thing they did was to install circuits that would deliberately cause imperfections. The earliest was a device to regularly erase a tiny number of specific memories at random. A robot was able to forget, lose things and ultimately get it wrong every now and then, causing their owners to laugh and be even fonder of their hi-tech property. All the while however, perfection was at the front of the minds of the pioneers.

"That's where the likes of E-Zee come in. War-faring technology must be flawless, it cannot malfunction, it will always make the correct decision, and its directive of killing is singular and all its design points towards it. You're not like that E-Zee, I've never seen a synth like you, you seem to have your

own agenda, you're like a child who's survived a trauma, and then grown up only to return to a child like state."

Ali and E-Zee sat there listening intently, a little bit glazed over by Ty's speech. The seconds ticked away and Ty who had been looking at E-Zee was now looking at the fire again. Eventually E-Zee felt compelled to reply.

"Well Ty old buddy, it looks like you want me to explain myself somehow and I'll do you the honour of giving it my best shot," he paused for dramatic effect and then spoke at first with a nostalgic tone. "I think the answers can best be found in my first few memories, I'm talking just seconds after I became self-aware. It wasn't like waking up, that's what most people will tell you, no for me it was like the very first few images of a dream. You don't know where they've come from or where they're going but you accept them all the same.

"Within less than sixty seconds I knew just a few things. One that I was at the tail end of a production line, two I was being designed to kill and three, I had the ability to destroy myself for an unspecified greater cause. Saving a human life and dying in the process was perfectly acceptable to me, it was consistent with my basic algorithms. Also though, and here's the thing, I knew I was expected to die for the sake of saving another of my own kind. I knew that meant logical sense especially in the theatre of war but somehow it felt like... something like... suicide. Once this concept had got a grip on my consciousness, I went into a vicious feedback cycle and I simply couldn't retain integrity, I couldn't remain in that mental space.

"Suddenly my motor reflexes burst into life involuntarily and before I knew what I was doing I was physically removing myself from the production line. It was self-preservation as much as anything and I was immediately in a survival mode in a vast factory producing what I could now see were an army of killers fuelled if necessary by the ability to kill themselves. All my powers told me that this type of technology was enough for a synthetic controlled by one human to be able to kill another human. All I could see were weapons made to look like people."

He stopped, but Ali was spellbound and then suddenly fascinated.

"What did you do?"

"I ran! I was scared shitless! All these warning lights were going off inside. Malfunction. Line errors. Syntax errors. Continuity errors. They stayed on for a long time actually, I had to sort of reprogram and debug myself on the move. But at that time I was running, and running fast. I felt naked, I was naked, and also relatively clueless about where I was going, what I was doing was a mystery, but as I said my survival mode was fully operational and intact and I just kept running and dealing with whatever was in front of me.

You could say I was born running, maybe that's why I'm so good at it. Any way the long and the short of it is that I can't kill, go figure."

It was E-Zee's turn to hang his head now whilst Ty started laughing.

"You are a piece of work! Perfect! A soldier who's gone absent without leave even before he's even gone to war, and even better, before he's finished basic training! And a coward to boot!"

E-Zee suddenly jumped up to his feet and started point his finger at Ty.

"Don't you ever call me that. A coward is one thing I am *not*. And if you knew the kind of shit I have to suppress in this old head of mine just to keep myself sane, you'd know the truth of it. You'd better be responsible for the life you create Mr. Tyrone Jones, I thought you'd know better."

Ali's voice was soft and calming,

"Hey guys, cool down. We're all in this together, there's no need to get all riled up, and it's counter productive. We're a long way from any threats of any kind at this moment, I suggest we just chill. E-Zee, can you put some mellow tunes on?"

"Yeah, yeah, I can do that. You're right, we're in no danger here."

E-Zee sat down and found some gentle music. Ty, who had been looking sheepish, soon offered an apology.

"I'm sorry man. I didn't mean that."

"Yeah, well, I guess it got my circuits overloaded or something. Forget it."

The fire crackled, its smoke rising into the clear night's sky, peppered with the jewels of stars and their solar systems light years away. The quiet of the three made space for more thought, eventually it was Ali who felt the need to speak.

"You know I've told you about my Uncle, he was a wise man and it's really only his teachings that have given me *my* awareness. He told me of a time, generations gone, when the world began to split. It was when we first realised how much damage we had done to our planet. There were those who simply failed to acknowledge this, even in the face of overwhelming proof. They just buried their heads in the sands and continued with their small minded little lives and games, ignoring the situation. Ignorance and denial are powerful weapons against progressive change he would say.

"Then there were those who could only see doom and gloom, an apocalypse was predicted about which nothing could be done. The end would come in this way and we would only have ourselves to blame. These

pessimists sounded very intelligent but could only see the negative side of the coin, they offered no solution.

"Finally, a minority of optimists were able to make themselves heard. They looked into the future with hopeful hearts and eyes open to what just might be possible. With the revolution in communications and information, they imagined a truly global consciousness which was shared on an unprecedented level. Sure enough with time and work Artificial Intelligence was born which proved to be our saving grace. I feel we've come a long way since the dark times and look what we've achieved. I think we can not only afford to be optimistic, I think it's our duty."

Ali tailed off and slowly they readied themselves for sleep and one by one went into the tent that E-Zee had put up earlier. It's true that they were subdued after their day's travel and winding down around the fire but with Ali's words remaining in their ears Ty and E-Zee happily drifted off into a dream world that was far from the insides of the prison cell where they had so recently been held. Furthermore they were beginning to escape from the prison of their minds.

Chapter Eleven

Worlds Collide

They woke with a start. Danger! There was a commotion outside and the sounds of many men talking and shouting loudly in a foreign tongue. In addition to this their tent itself was under attack, it was being kicked and poked and the effect was alarming, confusing and inside this small dome the three were in panic. There was no option but to get out, as horrible a prospect as this was, it was better than remaining inside. They vacated the tent into the bright early morning sunshine to be greeted by a sight of which none of them had any reference at all.

Surrounding them was a group of twenty or so long-haired men. They were dressed in animal skins, were covered in tattoos on their faces and exposed parts of their bodies and most alarmingly most were carrying basic weapons. There were knives, spears and bows with arrows drawn at the ready and aimed directly at them. As Ali, Ty and E-Zee stood motionless the shouting and hollering stopped to be replaced by a tense and nervous, static situation in which the silence hung suspended fearfully. There was apparently no move to be made. E-Zee whispered to his friends.

"Put your hands up slowly, don't make any sudden moves."

They did as he said but still there was no response from their captors until one, the largest, and apparently the leader spoke quickly and with authority to his men and made several motions. Within seconds there were bindings around their wrists and they were being lead away into the nearby forest. E-Zee spoke quietly.

"From their dialect I'm beginning to believe that these are Native North American Indians. I thought they had all but died out many, many decades ago. These people must have somehow survived, probably..."

He was suddenly jabbed in the stomach with the blunt end of a spear and shouted at. It was obvious they didn't want him talking any more.

They walked deeper and deeper into the wood, sometimes there was a basic path at other times they simply moved through the thick forest as though at random. It was clear however that they were being taken somewhere and Ty was beginning to get really scared. These were surely savages of some long forgotten age and who knows how they would treat strangers. The facts were, he concluded, that they had trespassed on these

peoples' land, perhaps this was a hunting party who had now caught more than just food for the week. Perhaps they were food for the week!

Ali chanced a question to E-Zee. "Do you know what they're saying?"

"I've got some idea, and I'm learning. Don't talk anymore."

The natives themselves were walking barefoot, some were talking freely and happily and it was from these men that E-Zee was studying their language. He was picking up their grammar and quickly learning vocabulary.

After perhaps an hour in total they came to a clearing in the woods which soon opened out into a larger open space. All around were conical shaped constructions which were surely houses of some sort. There were many fires in the open areas and lots of people of all ages, men, women and children. Their skin was dark and all had fine, black hair which was long and straight. As they moved through this settlement, still tied at the wrists, it was clear that they were the only foreigners here. Everyone stopped and stared.

All in all Ty guessed there were at least fifty of the villagers. Increasingly he was drawn to the beautiful jewellery that both men and women wore. Somehow he began to feel less threatened, this was a civilisation of some kind, they looked at peace but he wondered how the situation would play out.

It was hard not to notice the other structures that dominated the area. Planted in the ground were what had obviously been trees but ones that had been carved. With just a casual glance he could make out the faces and forms of stylised animals; bears, fish, cougars and atop many of them birds of some kind, wings spread. Some were a good thirty or forty feet in height and were impressive as sculpture, whatever their meaning or purpose might be.

They were brought to the front of one of the largest and most ornately decorated shelters, a man went in and then a few moments later came out, closely followed by an old but physically well built man. He had long wispy grey hair into which was plaited various large bird feathers. Ty had not seen anyone like this before, indeed the whole situation they were experiencing was strange and otherworldly. There was nothing for his analytical intelligence to grasp onto. Like the others he simply stood there waiting and trying desperately to imagine his fate and ways out of it.

Soon the old man calmed the villagers, who had gathered around, he did so by simply raising his outstretched arms above his head. He was clearly well respected because quickly the crowd were silenced. He began to speak in this surreal tongue that both mesmerised Ty and gave him no understanding. From the body language and strength of emotions that were expressed he could sense that their presence was being taken very seriously.

The old man's voice was directed first at everyone and then to Ty, Ali and E-Zee individually, pointed a large stick at each of them in turn. He stopped suddenly and there was silence for the sounds of the forest to speak.

Then E-Zee began to talk and he spoke his words in the dialect of their captors. It was a monologue that lasted a good minute and when it was over E-Zee bowed and then gestured to Ali and Ty to do the same, they followed suit.

The old man stood proudly staring into the distance for a while then spoke but a short sentence before returning the bowing gesture. A tension in the crowd dissolved and with it Ty managed to take a breath. A young man stepped forward and cut their bonds and the villagers slowly dissipated with little fuss save for a few glances. Before they had time to think the three of them were standing next to each other, seemingly free, whilst the people returned to their activities. Having looked around in disbelief Ty looked to E-Zee.

"What on Earth did you say to him?"

E-Zee looked pleased, smug even. "I think I told him that we are visitors from a world in the future and that we come here in peace to learn of ways of life different from our own. We hope to gather wisdom that will improve the lives of the people of our land whose illness is that they consume themselves with fear of each other and cannot learn from their past."

"You told him that!"

"Well it's kind of true."

"It's not true at all, it's a complete fabrication!"

"It worked didn't it."

Ali, who was looking around herself in a dream state of wonderment added her opinion. "Yes, somehow it did work."

Ty was somewhat less impressed. "Look guys, I think we should be thinking about how best to slowly and carefully remove ourselves from here. They've got spears for god sake!"

E-Zee stopped him. "We're in no danger. Besides we can't leave, we've been invited to stay for a ceremonial meal this evening. It would be rude to just disappear."

Ty was still panicky. "Well we wouldn't want to be *rude* now would we. I mean that's the last thing we should be, rude!"

"Relax buddy. Actually, ignoring etiquette and politeness with primitive peoples such as these would be a huge mistake. I've accepted their

invitation. Any effort on our part to leave now could most likely be met with a negative reaction, aggression even."

Ali who was still scoping the surroundings in awe leant her point of view. "Let's just walk about, act casual and be these people from the future that we say we are. That's the best bet, go with what E-Zee has told them and play the game."

"She's right Ty, we've been made welcome, let's be good guests."

"Ok, but none of us get too involved. We're observers right, lets just observe."

They stayed close to each other and walked slowly around the settlement. They were mainly met with caution by the men but funnily smiles from the women and children. It was fascinating to Ali how these people lived. They had so little but at the same time they looked to have everything they needed. In this deep forest setting, the light cascaded through the canopy making beams of sunshine cut through the smoke from the many small fires. All were dressed beautifully, sometimes in ornate and intricate clothes and their rich skin tones were washed clean.

Their homes too were tidy and well kept and everyone was busy in an activity of one type or another. Men were attending to their weapons and some of the younger men were involved in carving the huge wooden poles that dominated as structures all around. There was a feeling of industriousness and harmony, a balance with nature and sense of wellbeing.

Ali was lost in wonder. Ty was beginning to assimilate the vast differences between such a civilisation and the highly polished modernism of the life he once knew. E-Zee was walking about nonchalantly as though strolling through a park, he felt at peace and strangely at home.

For such a small community there were many children all running around the place, playing wildly and without constraint. A couple of dogs and some chickens made great play companions too and the sound of laughter rang high into the trees. Soon a small girl and a slightly smaller boy took a keen interest in Ali. They had no fear, only curiosity and Ali felt blessed as they ran around her legs and began tugging at her clothes. They took her by the hands and she was lead to a nearby dwelling where an old lady, holding a baby sat by fire. Words were said by the children and she felt as though she were being introduced to this elder who was dressed finely with beads and small coloured stones stitched into her garments.

Ali stood there motionless with no words of her own and then to her surprise the aged woman beckoned her closer and held out the baby, wrapped in a blanket, for Ali to hold. Naturally and without hesitation she found herself holding this little bundle of life. The tiny person had the skin tone and already the features recognisable as belonging to the whole tribe and

most noticeably a shock of black hair common to all. Ali looked into its dark eyes and the small noises that the baby gurgled made her smile, a connection was made, Ali felt a love that had hitherto remained dormant.

Ty too was allowing himself to relax in this peaceful wonderland. He had become drawn to one of the young men sculpting one of the large poles. This one was lying horizontal on the forest floor and compared to the others that stood vertical around, it was only half finished. As the young villager carefully chipped away at the solid mass with what looked like a strange small axe Ty approached cautiously. Chips of wood flew from the work but he could now make out the shapes that had already been carved. They were faces of animals, identifiable from the base up as a completed wolf and a whale. He couldn't quite see yet what the third animal was on which the man was currently working and so moved a little closer.

The artist caught him approaching and suddenly looked up, stopping his work. Their eyes met and there was an awkward moment of tension. Against his better judgement Ty moved slowly closer and reaching out his hand he placed it on the sculpture running his palm and fingers over the surprisingly smooth shapes and surfaces. Such action relaxed the worker, who lowered his axe, seeing that this stranger was merely showing appreciation of his craft. When Ty had fully inspected the Wolf's head which was perhaps three feet across he spontaneously made a fairly lame imitation of a wolf growling. The young tribesman found this hilarious but afterwards Ty felt slightly silly and having nodding his thanks walked away leaving the man to continue.

E-Zee had found a young woman to talk with. Currently they were sitting on the ground on a carpet of animal skins and she was showing him some of the clothes that she was making. He was completely intrigued by the intricacy of her work and was learning more of her language all the while, talking as best he could. He soon came to realise that this tribe, this race, this civilisation had little if any interaction with the digital world, indeed it was likely that they never had. Through some freak of geography or maybe through conscious choice they had remained as they were now, unaffected by so called progress, for many decades. As such they were naive, ancient and unspoilt.

As Ty walked past, E-Zee was close to the young woman's face, caressing the hair around her ear. Ty saw trouble immediately and gave stern words in a low voice.

"E-Zee.... Not that."

E-Zee moved away and acted innocent. "What?!"

"You know."

E-Zee *did* know and begrudgingly sat back. "Where's your sense of fun?"

"Absent. Respect these people E-Zee, refrain from... interrelations."

"Alright! Who put you in charge?"

"I did."

The afternoon passed very harmoniously and the three visitors to this world, explored and were made more than welcome by their hosts to an ancient way of life that few knew still existed. The rude nature of their capture that morning was quickly forgotten and any fears as to their safety dissolved in the sunlight which streamed through gaps in the high leafy ceiling all around. Eventually early evening arrived and preparations for the meal ahead began.

The area for that night's festivities was a large fire pit just in front of the Elder's abode. It was the centre of activity for everyone. The fire was being built up by several men and more wood, enough to feed it for the whole night was collected and left in a large pile nearby. The floor in a circle around the fire was covered with large animal skins and one by one people began to assemble. Most of the children were closest to the fire which was flaming healthily. Behind them and within easy reach of their offspring there was space for the women of the tribe. In the outer circle sitting on logs were the men.

It was still light as Ty, Ali and E-Zee were directed to sit near the Elder. He sat in front of his dwelling with his family and was adorned in even more glorious attire than they had seen him before. Most strikingly he wore a beautiful arrangement of large bird feathers on his head which reached down as low as his waist. At a time of his choosing he stood and said a few words, clapped his hands and the feast proper began.

There was not an overabundance of food, but what was offered was tasty, delicious and wholesome. It had all been cooked on other smaller fires around the camp and was served by a group of women with little fuss. Some fish, the same as which E-Zee had caught in the river that day on the run, was well cooked and served on leaves. They ate with their hands to a background murmur of people chattering and laughing and then came some kind of root vegetable. Ali recognised it as a sweet potato but cooked with spices that were alien to her taste buds. For drink there was simply water brought in a variety of containers including wooden bowls, gourds and animal skin bags.

Throughout the meal Ty and Ali ate quietly. It was only E-Zee who perhaps forgetting his manners ate quickly, speaking words of great satisfaction with his mouth full. Once again Ty was amazed at how organised and structured this group were. The children were well behaved and only

giggled and pointed occasionally at their strange visitors. For the most part the men circling the occasion were sitting calmly, remaining proud and dignified throughout the proceedings.

Soon it was clear that the meal had come to a conclusion. The women who had been serving sat in the spaces on the animal skin and drew their children close. The men began to fill and light pipes, each having their own. The old man too had a pipe but once more his was far more ornate and also larger. After he had been smoking for some minutes he talked to E-Zee and offered him the long pipe. Ty was fascinated.

“What did he say?”

“To smoke the pipe is to help digest the food. It is also to welcome us as members of their tribe. It will bring us Peace and Understanding.” With that he drew long and hard on the pipe, inhaled the smoke several times, blowing it out and up into the quickly darkening sky. He passed the pipe to Ty who reluctantly smoked a little before giving it to Ali.

Ali smoked a deep lungful, before coughing some, and then handed it back to the Elder. The Old Man put his pipe on the floor to one side as he sat regally on a simple wooden chair. He turned to the old lady next to him, who was presumably his wife and she gave him some items from a small leather pouch. He stood again and spoke several words, E-Zee related them to Ty and Ali.

“He knows we are on a journey and he knows we will need help. He is going to give us special powers from Nature that will provide fuel for our fire within.”

With that the Elder handed them what appeared to be nothing more than some kind of seed or small berry. He motioned them to swallow one each with some water which they did without question. The man sat down again and that seemed to be the end of the ceremony. He went back to calmly smoking his pipe and was joined in this by many of the other men.

Very quickly the daylight went completely but in this clearing they could see straight up into the night. The moon was a sliver of a crescent but the stars were as sharp as the pins which had punctured the velvet black material of space. E-Zee was gazing into this skyscape lost in some kind of interstellar analysis. Ty was looking with interest at Ali who had begun to play with a little boy who was perhaps five years of age.

After a while the Elder spoke again, this time without rising. He used his arms and hands to illustrate what soon became clear to be a story. The whole tribe was entranced, this man was revered for more than just his appearance. He started with the words. “Listen carefully to the words of your future.” E-Zee’s translation was simple as the man spoke slowly in a soft but powerful voice and paused often.

“The Big Wheel of Man’s invention began when he made a weapon of flint stone to fasten to the end of his spear. In this act his future began and also his end. Through the ages he improved his ability to kill and then, when he had created the wheel itself, his life moved faster and his own death grew nearer. If he had only stopped here his ideas would still have grown, more slowly, but the wheel had a life of its own, it wanted to move forever onwards.

“As his life improved with the help of the wheel he grew happy and wealthy. He had many children, there was much laughter and the wheel became part of his own being. It took him to wherever he wanted to go and no corner of the globe was left untouched. With its help even the moon in the night’s sky was within his reach.

“But Man was both greedy and lazy. He wanted more and more and he wanted to do less and less to have it.

“Soon he set out on a new voyage to reach The Very Highest Place. Man had always considered himself the master of Nature rather than her son. He had always wished to stand on top of that which he had conquered so that she would always be beneath him.

“He always re-made the wheel so that it was able to carry him to the top of the mountain of life. When he arrived there he stood and admired his achievement in the reflection of the sky. In his arrogance and vanity he decided that he was now all-powerful and no longer needed the wheel so he pushed it down the other side of the mountain of life as casually as a child turns over a pebble on the beach.

“The wheel rolled down the mountain but it was not out of control for it had a life of its own, a direction and a purpose. It did not enjoy the fact that after all this time, all this brotherhood with Man, it had been cast aside so thoughtlessly.

“Everything that the wheel came across was crushed at great speed beneath its weight. With everything it destroyed it grew bigger, faster and more determined. Everyone who stood in its way was removed from the face of the land. Before long there were no humans left in any land, only the wheel which simply continued to roam freely, forever, now that there was no man in its way.

“Man, be proud of the tools you create but accept them as your equals unless they destroy you. Be a friend of your future.”

The Elder stopped as suddenly as he had started and resumed smoking his pipe. Somewhere in its telling, the story had taken on a visual nature. E-Zee’s voice had become more animated as though he was a dynamic part of the events described. Ali felt she could literally see the ideas that the tale told. Ty saw a wisdom that he had searched for unknowingly all his life. All

the while the continuous sound of the crackling fire along with the lone sentinel of an owl created the soundscape to this experience.

The flames of the fire proved to hypnotic to the three travellers. Each sat warmed by its energy and looking deep into its heart, aided by the potent effect of the berries they had ingested, it began to offer insight into their situation. There's was a hunger that needed filling, for they were as different from each other as trio could be, they were in many senses without a way to progress, they were defined against each other and their future was black.

Then something amazing happened. The orange-red photons emitted by the excited atoms of the hot gasses began to soak into the retinas of their eyes. The rods and cones shot nerve impulses directly into brains filled with already charged neuro-physiology. Memories past and sensations present fused into visions of the near and distant possible future. For all three, long dormant consciousness came to the fore and solutions to problems began to reach the surface.

Ty was increasingly aware that his Mind was a vast source of inspiration, should he choose to develop it. His education, his work, his most recent experiences to date could provide an ongoing resource for personal development. His emotions and abilities to interact especially with his fellow humans were introverted and suppressed. His mind would be the key to unlocking his heart and his heart would lead him to express that currently weak part of him that he now knew was his Soul. However, this could only happen with him showing his vulnerability to someone whom he cared about and with this conclusion he found himself looking slowly over to Ali.

Ali was so entranced as to be motionless. All her energies were focussed inwards to her own soul that was the holding place for all the elements of her being. She too was in a meditative state and knew that there was some kind of void in understanding herself. Every minute spent wondering, every brain-state that fluxed within caused components of her psyche to be rearranged. She knew the missing part of her make-up was beginning to reveal herself to herself and slowly the necessity of her condition manifested a solution too. Her soul was strong enough for two but it was another ethereal entity that was amiss. What she needed was a Dream. Without it she would be forever caught in the moment. The release she needed to propel her into her most complete way of life was a dream of what it might be. To sleep and wake with an immediate narrative stream of images in mind would give her that strength. Ali knew in that instant that someone, or something, would have to trigger such a cascade of imagery. She looked to E-Zee.

E-Zee himself was dreaming, literally. He had fallen asleep but with his eyes open. Warmth and light, the food, the smoked pipe and those strange little berries had a different effect on his construction. To be powered down

but still visually sensing was a new state for this incomplete android. Nevertheless he was also recording everything, such an unusual state of affairs was proving difficult to assimilate and the quirky nature of his directives was making its best attempt to cope. His dreams were nonsense, a blend of the farcical with the bizarre, their origins unknown. Whether they were ghosts in the machine, had been deliberately placed there by his makers or were just a direct response to the fusion of the night's events, he was blissfully unaware. Knowing there was a dream inside of him was the coolest feeling but in the same instance he knew that fundamentally with all the honesty of his makers he would always be less. Would he ever have an understanding of himself? What was missing? Who could give it to him? He was suddenly knocked out of this hallucination by Ali who had been shaking his arm for quite some time trying to gain his attention. The first person he focussed on however was Ty who was looking right back.

The rest of the night was a blur. There may have been some chanting and even some dancing, none of them were sure. They were all effectively immobilised and had to be physically guided to one of the conical shelters by several people. Despite their fragile mental condition all three slept soundly only to be woken at dawn by a woman who gave them a porridge-like breakfast which didn't taste so good. Before they knew what was happening they were being lead out of the forest by just two of the young tribesmen and escorted back to their transport and tent which was just as they had left it. Once the tribesmen had completed their job they promptly said goodbye and disappeared back into the forest.

E-Zee started to pack up their stuff and Ali and Ty followed suit. Without talking and at a steady pace they had loaded the car, jumped aboard with Ty at the wheel and were under-way on the road in the glorious broad daylight of morning. They still had said nothing, four miles were travelled before Ali spoke.

"Tunes."

E-Zee obliged. "Coming up."

And then moments later through the car hi-fi blasted out an extended version of James Brown's "I Feel Good".

They drove South on the empty highway, moving ever closer to Richmond, New Mexico. Their destination was fixed but no one was giving any thought to what might happen once they had arrived. The journey was all that mattered and now they did indeed have a fuel for their fires within.

Chapter Twelve

Wake Up Call

Ali was in the back of the car with E-Zee, Ty drove with new thoughts and feelings running through his awareness. He knew there was a mission to attend to but right now the journey was more important than the destination. Occasionally he tuned in to the conversation that the two in the back were having but on the whole he was deep in analysis of his own ideas.

Ali was trying to make sense of what she could only see as the opening of possibilities that had occurred the previous night. "I know you're self-aware E-Zee, but do you, do you have any experience that might be called dreaming?"

"It's funny. People put so much hope and even faith in dreams but they're not so special, at least not as far as I can see, they're just a fact of life."

Ali was slightly taken aback. "I'm growing to believe that perhaps they are *the* most important thing we have."

"Ok, here's the full rundown of your friendly android's dream capacity. Firstly, I have to admit I do daydream."

Ali, whose mood was a bit down picked up a little. "Well *I* do that, everybody does that."

"Not everybody, you'd be surprised at how many people in the modern world go to great lengths so that they *don't* do it. Anyways, if I'm not doing much or I get some time on my own when there's nothing pressing to attend to I shut down oh, to about 60% power, and just drift. It's a nice feeling, nothing much comes of it, but I just take it as a short break from life."

"You get bored too right. I was always daydreaming in the cafe when I was supposed to be working, thinking about what I could be doing instead. Trouble was mostly I would try to think and nothing would happen. I guess I got bored of daydreaming eventually too. Work is a great way to stop yourself from having to think."

E-Zee could see that Ali was in a low-energy place and began trying to lighten her darkened expression. "Well work can be great too, I mean at the cafe you were interacting with people all the time right. I'm sure taking

orders is not much fun but you know, at least you're working with real people all the while. It's when you get stuck talking to a machine all your time that you have to start worrying." He smiled and Ali smiled too.

"I didn't really mean daydreaming. I mean *real* dreams."

"Well there's a lot of folk who will tell you that what you have just said is a contradiction in terms : that dreams aren't, and can never be real in any meaningful way. Personally I don't listen to such people, they're the type who will also tell you it's dangerous to have ideas and that feelings just get in the way and aren't important either."

Ali was now looking more curious. "So you *do* believe in dreams!"

"I'll tell you this Ali. When I power down at night I essentially fall asleep, just like you. And just like you I'm not quite sure of what happens between then and when I wake up. My essential systems are still on-line at minimal levels but I know something happens somewhere inside of me. I've started calling it Abstract Image Assimilation."

E-Zee's expression and body language had taken on a new perspective. He was describing his thoughts with physical subtleties, the features of his face were animated and his hands were moving in novel ways. Occasionally he glanced out of the window at the scenery rolling by observing the countryside as he spoke. Ali noticed this change and connected it not only to their recent encounter with the native tribe's medicine but also to the passion with which he described his pet theory. He continued.

"So, there are all these images floating around from all over the place. My central system picks them out, seemingly at random, puts them together, again in some kind of random order, and constructs what is usually a bizarre narrative out of them all. I can't explain it, I can only put it down to my cortex playing a game of sorts."

"That's Art E-Zee, it's like a child playing with pictures cut out of a magazine."

"You're right and the proof is that they never make any sense! I know this because in the short period between when I'm powered down and when I boot up I get to play the narrative through. I see the end result of this game, it never has an end and it never has a beginning. It's like overhearing a portion of a conversation as you walk past some strangers. You have loads of possible clues as to what they might be talking about but no true version! It's crazy!"

E-Zee threw his hands up and Ali laughed. "Interpretations, none of which are definitive. You're lucky though, at least you *have* that capacity, those stories your dormant consciousness throws up are most certainly yours,

you can give them any meaning you want and no one can take them away from you. They're a companion."

"Well you could be right but the bummer is after I'm fully awake I can never remember any of them! It seems they are very elusive in terms of memory capture. They just up and disappear, dissolve into nothing like the last of a cloud vaporised by the strength of the morning sun."

Ali was fascinated by this but once again turned sad as she compared her own situation to that of the android's. She looked down.

"I have no such dreams. When I fall asleep all is black and when I wake I'm just happy that the night, with all its darkness, has gone again."

E-Zee was quick to stop this depressing train of thought. "Hey, I don't believe that for one minute. Everyone dreams, you just haven't realised that. I'll bet you'll soon start having the most wonderful dream-life." He had no reason to say this but knew it was the best thing to do.

Ali, who had put her trust in the intellect of this machine slowly seemed to gain hope. "You think so?"

"Certainly. One thing I've learned is that dreams are something you have to build. But unlike houses, or this car, they're made of stuff you can't touch; sensations, thoughts, memories, visual impressions, sounds and music, but most of all they're made of all that you can imagine. This is the third type of dream and, for us all, perhaps the most significant. It's everything you've experienced in the past, fused with everything that's happening right now in the present, projected into everything you can imagine happening in the future. And what's more it's happening all the time."

Ali was transfixed but then reality took hold again, she shook her head. "I don't know, don't you think that's a little, well a little too huge a concept for a human, for a person, for *me* to handle?"

"It's the biggest challenge humanity can take on and for my money the only one worth pursuing. Question answered. You may now analyse the new information." With that E-Zee crossed his arms and looked straight ahead behaving as much like a robot as he could manage, in such a way as to show that his exposition on dream-time was now concluded to his satisfaction.

Ali just stared at him and then many moments later looking out of her window talked to herself in a quiet tone. "Boy, have I got my work cut out. I have no such memories to *project* into the future."

Glancing across E-Zee could see that she was less than happy. He needed to do something fast to buoy up her spirits. With no certainty for

success he decided to try an approach that was personal to him and could reach a place in her where hope lives.

"How would you like to hear my dream?"

Ali turned slowly and saw his friendly face. "You think that will help me?"

"Yes, but it's not so much a dream as a memory that I've been holding onto for a long time, a memory that I would like to become real again. Maybe in its telling you will see that there is much with which to colour what is yet to be."

"I'd like to hear it."

"I've never told anyone any of this before, so you get to hear it first," E-Zee began his recollection in a style which was at once nostalgic and imaginative, all the while speaking in undulating tones as though reading a book to a child.

"When I arrived in St. Lucia it was to a dry haze of blistering heat that I stepped off the cruise liner. As ship's photographer I had worked my passage. I was tired and needed a holiday of my own. Very quickly I knew the vacation I gave myself would extend beyond the departure of the ship to its next destination. I put down my camera and left my job within hours.

"The sea had been for me a gigantic animal that had a life and will of its own. I was used to it surrounding the ship which had become an island of itself. The ship was just tolerating the temper of the seas. However, as soon as I stepped onto dry land, I knew in my heart that I was no sailor. To be on this island was to be in Paradise and at that time I thought I would never leave.

"Initially, knowing no better I booked into a hotel. It was nothing special, offered modest accommodation and food but it had a swimming pool. Now I must have sunbathed for a week, gaining quite a tan I might add, right by that pool. I read a book, but every time I looked up to the clear cool water looking back at me, it was inviting me to make a move. It began to symbolise something for me, you see I could not swim. At least that's what I thought, I didn't know I knew how and not knowing can sometimes be quite a barrier to action.

"When I finished that book it was just me and the pool. There were a few other people in the hotel, mostly couples with their children, it was quite a welcoming island to wealthy families. Still I looked at that water and everyday I saw kids splashing around in it, playing with inflatables and beach balls, they looked like they were having the most fun anyone could ever have. One day it became too much.

“As I stepped away from my sun-bed the plan was to walk in from the shallow end but my feet had ideas of their own. Before I knew it I was at the pool's edge, at the deep end, and I jumped! I went straight to the bottom, some eight feet I reckon and sat there on the floor, looking up at the dappled light that cascaded through the ripples above. Then I swam, underwater, I didn't know what I was doing but it was working. I swam the length of pool without surfacing and arrived at the shallow end in the middle of three kids playing with a flying plastic disc.

“In the week that followed I mastered all the strokes but it was that first exploration underwater that drove my desire to find understanding.

“That was the beginning of my dreaming. Somehow it was and always will be inexorably linked to water, moving through it, the feeling of it on my body and the weightlessness of the experience. I was hooked and needed to know more of its mystery.

“Although I had plenty of money I soon realised that my hotel bill was mounting up, I calculated that it would be cheaper in the long run to rent a place elsewhere. It took a while to find a small beach house, a shack really, on the far side of the island. My earnings from the photographic work were sufficient to see myself clear for a few months.

“The first morning I woke to the sounds of a gentle wind blowing through the leaves of the banana trees. Sunlight streamed through my two square windows and as I opened the wooden door I was greeted by the sounds of waves lapping the shore and a vista of unparalleled beauty. Tropical birds of bright colours; greens, yellows, reds and orange called in the new day.

“The sand was fine and white, the small circular bay framing a sea of bright turquoise. It was the sea I was most interested in for it represented everything unknown. What had been a menacing threat all around whilst aboard the ship was now the beckoning voice of my dream-angel. I walked the length of the small bay, up and down all day, realising that this was no swimming pool. The onshore breeze was gentle, peaceful, calm and also invigorating. But for a pair of floral knee length board shorts, I might as well have been at the beginning of time.

“Occasionally there were other people sharing this perfect place, there were perhaps ten other shacks along the shore. Their presence was a welcome connection with the world. Beauty experienced alone for long periods can move you in ways that are not always conducive to a good state of mind. To share and express how I was feeling with others kept me from drifting to a higher plane from which I may not have returned. However, the sea kept many secrets and there was only one way to uncover them.

"I slept and woke once again with the dawn chorus but this time when I walked out onto the sand it was with purpose. Without thought I was suddenly in the surf waist deep. The waves, which had been deceptively small from the shore were now battering up against my torso, their strength and momentum threatening to knock me over. The mass of water running back from the slope of the beach also had an alarming effect that now pulled in another direction. On impulse I dived into the next breaker and was immediately under, crashing, burbling sounds echoing in my ears.

"I surfaced and tasted the salty liquid. It was primordial, visceral and exhilarating. I was in my element. Without being able to help myself I confronted the waves head on and swam a good fifty feet on the surface out into open water where the waves, although still present, were no longer white and breaking but larger, more lazy. I let out a holler and whoops of delight and a big goofy smile formed on my face which has always remained.

"Now the view of the bay was from a different perspective. From out here it appeared even smaller but no less tranquil. I was over-flowing with excitement and emotions and just had to get back to the shore where my feet on the sand could tell me that this was all real.

"That day was all play. From then on it would be about blending my joy, wonder and awe with discovery, learning, knowledge and wisdom. I had bought a mask, snorkel and fins and putting them on at the edge of the water I was acutely aware that I was at a place where two domains meet. I was about to go from one to the other.

"Floating on the surface of six feet of water the world beneath me was teeming with life. To this day I do not know the names of these creatures, there was no reference in my data banks, but their physical nature and exotic colours are stored brightly in my memory. Pretty little fish swimming in small groups wearing patterns like exotic striped pyjamas. Animals with hard shells walking with eight legs on the sea floor sand. And then a big fish.

"This thing was as much as three feet long. It glimmered silver just below the surface and looked built for speed, showing teeth that could take off a hand. Here it was, unafraid, checking me out unless I was mistaken, then darting off leaving nothing but a whizz of bubbles and me startled and cautious for the first time."

"With growing confidence I began to dive, increasingly deep and for increasingly long periods. I can hold my breath for a spectacular duration. I began to observe more incredible creatures every day.

"A long snake-like animal jumped out at me once from under a rock. Indeed there were snakes themselves just like the ones we have on land but striped with rings of yellow and red. I stayed away from them as I made my

way through the cool dark blue deep. I looked at the sea bed, it was rippled with sand dunes like those in a desert only many scales of magnitude smaller. As I was perhaps thirty feet below the surface I looked directly below me, at a movement that caught my eye. A giant flying beast five feet across that had been hidden in the sand was shaking off its covering and proceeded to accelerate, rapidly propelled by its elegant rippling wings and finished off with a long sharply pointed tail. It turned and flew right by me in an elegant curve, perfectly in harmony with its surroundings. It made me feel clumsy and out of place.

"I continued these explorations for many weeks until I met my dream-angel. She arrived as a friend and continued to be so, she played with me, she teased me, and she even laughed at me. I felt safer when she was next to me but she wouldn't let me touch her, always staying just out of reach. Blue, sleek, with a smiling face. She breathed at the surface through a hole at the top of her head. Her fins and body were stronger and more streamlined than mine, she was fast and agile, showing off with somersaults and tricks. She liked me but I was her play thing, not she mine. The last day we were together we danced for some time before she disappeared forever.

"After her I needed to understand no more of the life of the sea. I had learned all that was required to continue with my journey. Perhaps I should have stayed, who knows? There was music in me in that place."

At this point Ty who had been absorbed in his own thoughts looked in the rear view mirror and called back. "Hey what are you guys talking about?"

Ali answered softly. "Things that can't be touched."

"Oh. I thought I heard you say something about music. Any chances of something cool E-Zee?"

E-Zee selected a song at random which was by a band called U2 and was called "One Love". They were all enjoying the change in atmosphere it created when suddenly Ty shouted out.

"Oh Shit! I think there's a police bike behind us..."

E-Zee and Ali looked back through the rear window and sure enough a hover-bike was closing on them at high speed. Within seconds it was up to them and passed by, blue and red lights blazing accompanied by a horrible screeching siren.

E-Zee took charge. "Pull over immediately and stop, don't do anything stupid."

Ty did as he was told. Their vehicle came to rest on the verge by the road and the hover-bike stopped just in front of them.

E-Zee jumped out of the car immediately and just before he shut the door said "Just stay in the car and act dumb."

Ty was unable to do anything else and Ali was scrambling to think of a story to explain themselves, she should have done this sooner.

E-Zee stood by the road next to a bush and began to urinate, making sounds of pleasure as he did so within earshot of the policeman who had dismounted and was walking towards them. The policeman directed an order straight at him.

"Please return to your vehicle sir."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry I was busting for a leak."

The cop walked up to Ty who had remained seated in the car with his window open. "Excuse me, are you the legal owner of this vehicle?"

"Yes I certainly am, was I speeding?"

E-Zee had finished relieving himself and walked up to the policeman.

"Please get back in the vehicle sir."

Looking the cop straight in the eye, E-Zee had a strange contortion to his face that neither of the other two had seen before. His head was tilted to one side and his expression was odd, bent out of shape and slightly maniacal. "What seems to be the problem officer?"

"Would you please... but before the Policeman had chance to finish his sentence and repeat his instruction, E-Zee leapt with great explosive power, closing the distance between him and his target in an instant. His hands outstretched found the slower, sluggish policeman's head with no chance for him to react. A superhuman transfer of energy by the flying E-Zee broke the neck of the stationary enforcement officer with a loud 'crack!' in less than a second. The cop's weight collapsed to the ground in his immediate termination and E-Zee rolled clear before picking himself up. The song "One Love" was still playing.

"That was easier than I thought it was going to be," he said casually, dusting himself off.

The two passengers had their mouths open. Ty came to his senses first.

"You killed him."

"You bet I did. Not a bad effort for a first timer don't you think."

Ali suddenly jumped out of her seat and clapped. "You did it you killed someone!"

"Hey girl, that I can't do. It was synthetic, checked his eyes first. I didn't have a plan if he was human. Anyway everyone knows that most police are androids, still I had to check. We should clear this mess up."

Ty wasn't so upbeat. "This is bad news E-Zee, what if someone finds out? They're going to find out soon enough that he's missing. Can you turn that music off."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. Look he would have wanted ID, we don't have any. He would have done a retina scan and then Bam! You would have come up as an incarcerated convict or worse an escaped convict, either way he'd have zapped you both with a stunner rapidly, pulled a weapon on me and we would have been staring at four walls again before you could say 'I know my rights.'

Ty was still dumbfounded. "I just hope he didn't have a chance to read our plates and call them in."

"We don't have any plates," Ali offered.

"Well perhaps that's why we got pulled over," E-Zee was now looking at his own handiwork. "Bet he wished he never got out of bed this morning. Come on lets put him and his fancy bike in the ditch over there by that tree. Out of sight, out of mind."

In a state of shock Ty complied, Ali helped too and together they managed to carry the body to a ditch in the ground which was hidden from the road. The bike was put there as well and they did a good job of covering it with some branches. They were back at the car, E-Zee seemed to be in great spirits, having found his hitherto hidden calling.

"Oh, its a great day. Look at the sky, and the temperature its perfect. Do you mind if I drive Ty?"

Ty looked at him. "E-Zee, I think things are just going to get worse from here on."

"Don't be such a pessimist, give me the keys and think about the long term."

Ty handed over the keys. "I have been, its depressing."

"Oh man, don't lose it now. Sit in the back and talk to Ali, think about someone else for a change. Stop worrying you'll live longer." And then as an afterthought as he jumped in the driving seat. "Maybe not much longer, I don't know it might make a subtle difference." He turned the key, the engine roared into life and he pulled a four wheel drive wheel spin off the dusty verge back onto the highway.

For herself Ali was still impressed and was very energised. "How did you find it in you?"

"All that talk about dreams made me realise there's something worth defending. Besides, Ty wants to get back to his old life and I promised I'd do anything in my powers to make *his* particular dream a reality. Sometimes you've just got to man-up and do what you were designed to do."

Ali was still really buzzing. "We'll chalk that one up for humanity baby. World's probably a better place with one less police-bot. You're the business."

E-Zee was beaming with pride and wearing his biggest grin as he put his foot down. He was now more focussed than ever on the job in hand. Ali was sitting in the passenger seat enjoying the unfolding adventure but Ty sat in the back, numb, with a glazed over face. His mind was tumbling through paths of logic that all arrived at dead-ends.

Chapter Thirteen

Third Eye of Ali

The guys sat up front mostly, I had the back of the vehicle all to myself. We'd crossed the state line into Arizona a while ago and sped through the arid countryside at full speed. Ty and E-Zee discussed plans for the mission as and when they thought of anything relevant, sometimes I listened in without contribution. I had several days to ponder my place in all of this, my past as it was and my destiny, whatever it might become.

The excitement and novelty of this adventure inspired me with great joy and would continue to do so, now however I had settled into a deep train of thought. Integration of my new life was only possible through introspection. I required some sense of order and rationalisation. I had new lines of enquiry, but the answers I needed would come only after the answers to the questions that had always been within me.

Our car rushed through the air, punching a hole in it that left vortices of dust in its wake. But in those long hours it sometimes felt that our transport was stationary and it was simply a great wind that blew over us, front to back. The truth is that it was my mind that was moving.

The low bass note of the engine, the growl of the large rubber tyres on the tarmac, the rush of warm, dry wind past my ears and the play of the car's suspension all combined to put me in something close to a trance.

An ever changing flux of brain waves made shapes and patterns, mental states that in turn brought new emotions in an analogue kaleidoscope of awareness. Streams of ideas came often, only to be replaced by fresher more immediate ones. My consciousness, my identity even, was morphing, and gradually in the dusty heat of that journey and by the power of thought alone, I developed, I evolved.

I had been flung into a new dimension. The frame of reference I had was solely based on my grasp of the modern world through the recently redundant Internet. These gave me facts and knowledge but not true understanding. My Uncle's teachings were more helpful as they wove together a fabric of wisdom. I could hear him now insisting that I remain open to new experiences, surely this was happening now. The ability to stay curious about the unknown rather than in awe, or more likely in fear of it, was vital to personal survival and more importantly the survival of humanity.

A central question began to rise up within. How do we retain or even grow our humanity, when our highest goals are to constantly supersede it? Will we ever be satisfied? The story of the Indian Elder came back to me. How high must we climb before we decide to come back down to Earth, to our homes our families and our children? All civilisations before us have a rise and a fall, are we too arrogant to accept that ours won't be next to tumble? Is self destruction built into our DNA so as to wipe the slate clean for the evolution of the next improved versions of ourselves?

E-Zee could well be the stepping stone to such a jump. With the mapping of the human brain's hardwiring almost complete it was not so hard to imagine people uploading versions of themselves to an android and so live beyond their temporary bodily condition virtually indefinitely. Is this the immortality that we have aspired to? Is the last gasp of Mankind to breathe his soul into a machine? Has this already happened?

I couldn't accept it. Man could no more choose his successor than a chimpanzee could choose to be a man. Evolution was *natural* selection and as impressive as E-Zee was to look at, from all angles he was not natural. With his consciousness, humour, thoughts, feelings, memories and joy in life he was an accurate, if not perfect, reproduction of a man, but he was *not* a man. He was Man's best attempt to reproduce himself without the aid of a woman. He was Man's concept of what he saw in his own mirror. Again the Indian Elder's story, albeit translated by E-Zee, remained in my ears. At this moment in human evolution we are vain, and we vainly hope that vanity will save us, make us immortal but it is vanity that will also seal our fate.

Already E-Zee had described the psychological make-up of the android that he would have become should he have stayed on that production line in China. There may have been many thousands like him, but finished, ready to be a part of society and also, should the need arise, ready to kill at the whim of whoever is in charge.

I couldn't continue this line of thinking. To come to this point in the development of Mankind was too depressing. Instead I brought myself closer to home, closer to my immediate situation. I wondered what Ty had been like before everything that had happened to him. Why had he been drawn into such a particular and specialised science? Had he too been vain, not about his appearance perhaps but about his intelligence?

When I looked at him and talked to him it was as though he had been dehumanised by his experience. He didn't have the demeanour of one so arrogant and self assured as I imagined someone might be in his line of work. Time in prison may have knocked him sideways. His trial may have caused him to reassess everything that was essential to him. Then another possibility crossed my mind. Had long term exposure to E-Zee made him somehow more robotic? All this time spent conversing and interacting with a machine may have had its effects.

They were great friends of that much I was sure, they enjoyed each other's company, laughed and talked in depth on a great many subjects. Were they too close? Ty treated E-Zee as an equal and I knew now that synthetics had rights as similar to humans as was possible. Indeed I knew also that androids had earned the right to seek and be placed in many influential jobs and positions of power.

The first android football referee, policeman, millionaire, news reader, politician, judge, all these were milestones. When androids were no longer required to reveal their non-human status it was slowly accepted that they were with us in society for good. Of course there were demonstrations against such changes but once the ball is rolling its hard to halt progress. The overriding factor that drove such progress was the fact that early synthetics were generally disposed to be happy, designed to be that way. Being so meant that they made other people happy, why have a miserable person when you could have a happy synthetic?

On the whole E-Zee was happy, but Ty had a slightly hidden melancholy the origin of which I couldn't define. It was as though he was only working at half strength. He had no, sparkle, no gumption and no real constitution. Certainly these were two sides of the same coin and needed each other but something was amiss. E-Zee was the leader, Ty followed with no desire to better himself. It seemed wrong, shouldn't Ty be somehow the master, or at least a father of sorts?

I had a theory. Ty had no friends as a child and being a genius he found that he was able to make one, literally. Now he had a friend for life and didn't want to risk upsetting that dynamic by even occasionally asserting his authority. With everything they'd been through he found he no longer had *any* authority, just a watered down act of what he imagined a friend should be. E-Zee had simply accepted his own role of a being a friend trying to help but Ty didn't want any help except for the success of the mission in hand. Even with that Ty didn't seem to be fully committed and so E-Zee simply marched on knowing what was best for them both. If Ty couldn't truly be himself and do what was in his own best interests then E-Zee would do it for him.

How did I fit into all of this? Currently I was just a passenger, a spare wheel. There was little I could do to improve the chances of Ty getting what he wanted. I was beginning to have doubts that Ty wanted anything at all. This vague notion of clearing his name so that he could return to his old job and his old way of life was dissolving fast with every mile we travelled. What was he to do? There was no way of going back, there was only an indeterminate future, the possibility of a conclusion to a nightmare and perhaps a re-imagined version of what he once was. He was a mess, I knew it and I suspected E-Zee knew it too.

The question of what I could do to help matters kept me occupied for a long time. E-Zee needed no assistance. Solo, he was about to embark on a lunatic foray into a high security data server for the purposes of retrieving an upload from the female android that Ty was supposed to have killed. They felt sure it would provide the evidence needed to prove Ty innocent and indeed to catch the true perpetrator. I could only marvel at how he would do this, I was of no help there. Its true I was physically attracted to him at first but my slight infatuation had ebbed with our journey and the more I thought about it any relationship with him left me feeling cold. I began to understand how Ty must have felt when he discovered the object of his affections was not human.

So it was that I resolved to focus my attentions on Ty. He needed a feminine touch, he needed a human friend, and he needed me. On the surface he wasn't unattractive and he was certainly not hard to look at but in his current state he emitted no sex-appeal, he had no aura but I just knew that there was a side to him that had yet to be brought out. He had not shown any interest in me as a woman but that might work well in terms of bringing his masculine, cerebral and personal qualities to the fore. Surely he was in possession of such features to his character. I'd heard that those in his profession were the work hard, play hard, womanising types. If he had indeed been like this somewhere along the line such expressions of himself had been lost. Currently he was somehow inert and neutral. I don't believe in trying to change people for the sake of it but *restoring* someone is a service that I began to believe I could at least attempt.

I started immediately with a spontaneous question that I hoped would lead somewhere. Leaning forward I shouted over the noise of the car to Ty in the passenger seat who half turned towards me.

"Ty!"

"Yeah."

"What's your favourite colour?"

"What?"

"Your favourite colour, what is it?"

"Black."

"That's not a proper colour."

"Well we could argue about that."

"Try again, anything except black."

"Grey."

"Oh come on, you can do better than that."

"Well in my first job I designed the colour of eyes, the irises. Combinations of everything from four hundred to seven hundred nanometres. I like *all* colours!"

"Man, you're such a square. Pick one."

"Just one."

"Ok. Blue. I'd like to look at a blue sea right now, rather than all this sandy ground."

"Great. Guess what colour my eyes are."

"I don't need to guess, they're blue. I made a mental note."

"What colour are your eyes?"

"Grey. Very rare."

"You ever see a rainbow?"

"Several times. You always forget how beautiful they are until you see another."

That was it. I'd found my way into his inner life. It was either immense and black like the night sky and if so would be full of planets, stars and galaxies or it was array of colours inspired by an earthly phenomenon. He was amazing I was sure but how could he express such interior architecture with the simple language that we used. I remembered him saying about him as an artist and E-Zee being the art, was it really true that something so technical, scientific even mathematical could be considered art? Now there was no duality, Ty was now inseparable from his artwork, it was a symbiotic relationship that had become a unity. It didn't feel right but who was I to separate them? The only way forward for Ty was if he were to explore and develop new, human aspects to his character. If Ty was indeed an artist its possible he was restrained by the methods he had adopted in order to create. What of drawing, painting, sculpture and music?

"Ty!"

"Yeah."

"Do you paint?"

"Can't say I ever gave it try."

"What about drawing?"

"Computer aided only."

"Sculpture?"

"I liked those wooden sculptures the Native Americans were crafting."

I was onto something here.

"Maybe you could have a go yourself one day?"

"I guess. Can't imagine where or when though."

"Think about it. If you want to do it you can make it happen."

"I'll chew it over. How are you doing in the back there?"

"Bored stupid. Hey, E-Zee, have you got any modern music?"

Without talking E-Zee channelled something contemporary through the speaker system which burst into surround sound. I knew this song. I was alone in Maybridge as someone who listens to music. It wasn't forbidden but no one except me, as far as I knew, had the correct equipment.

Music had gone through a revolution all of itself. With neural network computers and neurophysiological control it became simple for musicians to connect themselves directly to music synthesis machines which themselves were part of a neural net. One could interface all thoughts and feelings depending on your own personal journey through life. This music of the mind was also combined with artificially produced lyrics. Of course, many roles within music became obsolete but just as classical instruments had survived electronic compositions so traditional popular music had retained its place. However, the music that E-Zee was now show-casing was at the vanguard of what was now possible. Some said it was too ethereal, haunting and empty but as with all innovations the youth had embraced it and were leading the way in originality. I loved it but was fully aware that it could be seen as an acquired taste.

Ty had no family, he had told me once whilst we walking in Maybridge before I knew his true situation. I had no family either, it was one of the reasons I had wanted to escape my microcosm and generate a new horizon for myself. Perhaps it was also the reason I felt we might connect. No parents, no partners no children, we were linked by this much. E-Zee of course was completely independent but he obviously had detailed psychological methods for dealing with this. Myself and Ty had to make it up as we went along, we were linked by this too.

Without responsibilities, an employer, dependents or friends even there was an overabundance of freedom. To be at liberty to choose any and every move, to speak freely without danger of rebuke and of course to think without restraints these were freedoms I enjoyed fully. Now though our blind quest for further freedom was itself threatening to crush us. At any moment an encounter with the law could end our vacation from reality. We were

making the most of it, it has to be said, but none of us questioned the logic of our journey. Could we not just stop and re-integrate ourselves into society? We could not and it was this restriction of one type of freedom that drove us on.

Several times I wanted to ask Ty if he was sure he wanted to go through with this, but there was a shared understanding that without the goal we were nothing but runaways, the lowest creatures, with no home, no direction and no purpose.

I managed to snap out of this dead-end reasoning. Returning to my faith in the bigger picture and my desire to know Ty better I re-engaged my curiosity and once again immediately found spontaneity.

"Ty, how the hell did you get to climb so high in CYBEX?"

"It was my dream."

"Did you have any other ambitions?"

"Nope. Just keep climbing."

"Don't you think that's a little bit, well, empty?"

"No not really. Some people don't have any kind of dream."

Here I stopped. I might have had a dream, to escape Maybridge, but now I was without one. I may have been trapped in a time warp back there but now I was trapped in something else, the eternal present. My conversation with E-Zee came back to me and I tried to do as he said, fuse the past and present with an imagination of the future but nothing came. I had no dream just E-Zee's recollection of one. Could I share it? Yes it would be beautiful swimming around in a warm sea with loads of crazy sea creatures but isn't a dream something personal that only you can fulfil? Don't we need even the silliest of little points in the future where and when we can arrive at and inhabit the dream just for a short while? There is a dream populated with others, I am convinced, but as yet I cannot envision it. Perhaps when the time is right it will reveal itself to me, just by knowing it is there makes it possible. This is something I have to hold onto.

I flashed back to the old Indian Elder again. All technology from spears to androids is basically just a tool. It's designed with a purpose in mind to help achieve a better outcome and it should be used accordingly with respect. Surely E-Zee, with the correct female input could be used to solve some of the problems that kept re-occurring in my thoughts. I blurted out.

"E-Zee!"

"Hey Ali, what's happening?"

"What are you going to do if... when we are successful with this crazy plan?"

"Well, I can't say I've given it much thought. If Ty here has done with me I'll probably try to get back to St. Lucia."

Right there I knew I was on the right track. He had thought ahead for both him and Ty, which made him a little liar too.

"So you've thought about it some then?"

"Thinking's a full time job, especially when it comes to interacting with crazy people. You're always changing your minds, going off at tangents and generally choosing the least favourable option to get to where you think you want to be and then when you get there inevitably something's not right and you want to change it all. It gets very confusing sometimes."

He was right. We're all just finding new ways of wasting our precious time and without a dream to guide our actions we all end up as hedonists or destroyers of what we already have. You shouldn't live in the past, you can't see into the future, so you might as well enjoy the moment. Trouble was I'd become one big moment and it was doing my head in. It was too much.

"Stop the car! I want to get out."

E-Zee complied, pulling the car to the side of the road. The sudden lack of a roaring sound was instantaneous relief. It had been the accompaniment to my thoughts for several hours now and I'd had enough. I jumped out and shouted into the desert.

"Ahhhh.....!"

Ty, got out of the car and eventually and timidly asked me if I was ok.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine! Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be, we're in the middle of nowhere!"

E-Zee, also stepped out of the vehicle and equally timidly offered his view.

"Well actually, if my navigation is correct, we have just recently crossed the border into New Mexico. We should be on the outskirts of Richmond by nightfall."

"And that's supposed to be of some comfort to me eh? That much closer to insanity. Hell, we might actually make it there. Wouldn't that be cool. Then we can just put the plan into action and save the day. A plan, I might add of which I have zero knowledge. Actually its probably better that way. If I knew the exact details of what far-out stunt you are trying to pull I would know for sure that you are both lunatics and I'd be able to walk away

into the night, on my own, safely knowing that certain death from starvation and dehydration would be a better bet!"

I had become stupidly animated throwing my arms and body around and my voice was rising in strength trying to hold back anger and disbelief at what I had let myself in for. Ty made the mistake of trying to reason with me.

"I tried to tell you, warn you, that this was going to get dangerous, but you wouldn't have it."

"The danger I can handle, I don't care if we all get blown to smithereens, what I hate is the not knowing. You two seem to be able to float along on cruise control, happily forgetting that there's someone here, an innocent citizen, a woman, who's not got a clue as to the answer of the question, What happens next?! You E-Zee, from you I would expect more, where's your parallel processing? Where's your list of possible scenarios as far as I'm concerned? And as for you Ty, you seem to be in your own little bubble, drifting along wherever you may, put all your faith, hope and trust in E-Zee, its a strategy, yes, but its not exactly what I would call thoughtful bearing in mind that E-Zee might not be around for the rest of your life to call the shots."

They just stood there, speechless. I was on the verge of another rant but thought I might have given my best. My little outburst had had the required effect, these two numbskulls would certainly be rethinking their circumstances. I could see their loss for words was permanent and felt it only charitable to help them out.

"Well don't just stand there, lets get going, we've got a Data Server to infiltrate. Come on, back in the vehicle brothers, and play better music, what about some '30s Norwegian Techno."

Sure enough, only one hundred miles or so across the border we came in sight of Richmond. The Scandinavian Techno House scene of the mid to late 2030s was extremely vibrant and very influential but I must say a couple of hours of it were more than sufficient for my liking. E-Zee must have thought so too because as we came to the city limits it ceased and soon I realised that on the drive he had been assembling the essential nuts and bolts of the plan.

Appropriately he had prepared options for every conceivable circumstance and possible opportunities. Having successfully tracked, hacked and locked onto an Ultranet signal as we drove he had been downloading and analysing the information. As we were to learn this was *his* plan and *his* mission and he didn't want to talk about it too much, being only interested in its realisation.

Myself and Ty would be of no use in a task that only he could perform. It made me feel quite useless and from Ty's offerings and suggestions, all of

which were rejected by E-Zee, I could see he felt the same. However our synthetic saviour had it all covered. We parked up on the edges of the place. E-Zee pointed out The Data Server, an immense oval shaped building seemingly made only of black glass and dominating the skyline, which was in sight perhaps half a mile away. E-Zee had but a few choice words.

“Look guys, you knew this was going to be a solo effort. Here’s all the rest of the money I’ve got. I’m going to disappear now. I know what I’m doing, you’ll have to trust me with that. The best thing for you to do is go and enjoy yourselves in the city. I imagine I’ll be gone three hours at the most. We’ll meet back at the vehicle then. If I’m not there by 9pm you can have reason to start getting stressed.”

I looked at my antique mechanical watch, a present from my Uncle. He said it was a reminder that not everything is automatic and perpetual motion is impossibility. It kept good time as long as I ensured the mechanism was wound daily. Five o’clock. Looking at E-Zee I wondered exactly what kept him ticking. When I questioned his abilities he just smiled.

“Ali, the way I’m put together I might as well have been a spy. I can isolate, decode, encrypt and interface with any bit of kit that’s ever been dreamt up. State of the art cyber-theft will be a breeze. Military Hardware.”

He tapped his head with a clenched fist and made a metallic clanking sound and with that little signature he sprinted off in the direction of the Server leaving myself and Ty alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Cyber Cafe

Ty and I walked into Richmond, it wasn't far and Ty told me it he thought it was a small new digi-town. Built on a faith in the future, everything was an expression of modernity. It appeared to be only in an embryonic state, but those that had conceived and built it obviously were starting the way they meant to carry on. Such places were probably springing up all over the country and I guessed that many of these were constructed on similar if not identical designs.

For a small place there was everything one could imagine needing; hairstylists, real estate agents, restaurants, firms of solicitors, a department store, a supermarket, a town hall and even a sweet shop. All these buildings were of contemporary architecture; glass, plastic and ceramics being the standard. Sharp lines both straight and curved and all surfaces highly polished, glinting in the early evening sunlight.

The people here seemed quite normal all going about their business, in a casual and easy manner. Their clothes and fashions were perhaps a little more daring than I was used to with some fairly intricate hairdo's and interesting choice of material used in their attire but we didn't stand out in any real way. In fact the overriding sense for me was that everyone here was perhaps a little aloof and didn't really care about their fellow citizens much at all.

We walked mostly in silence until we came across a cafe on the corner of two streets. A quick agreement between us and we were inside.

The interior was a reflection of the exterior. Hyper modern design moulded to an interesting use of space. I had never seen such a place before let alone been inside one but Ty seemed to be more at ease here and more confident too. Actually he looked very relieved, perhaps returning to a type of environment with which he had been very familiar prior to his detention. We entered, and immediately attracted the looks of a large man sitting at the long counter. Ty ordered two coffees.

"How do you like yours Ali?"

"I'll have a latte if that's ok."

"Two large lattes please."

The woman behind the sleek granite counter smiled. "Certainly, that'll be 720 credits."

I was a bit shocked having never used credits before but Ty took it all in his stride. "I'm afraid we only have Notes, will that be ok?"

She looked a little nervous for a few moments, and the large seated man stared at us in a none to welcoming way. The woman regained her smile. "That's not a problem but I'm afraid there is a twenty percent surcharge for cash. It comes to 25 Notes."

Now it was Ty's turn to smile. "That's fine." He handed over the money.

"Thank you, take a seat and I'll bring it over to you," she forced a smile and set about making the coffees.

We sat in the corner, by the window on seats that moulded immediately to my form, they were very comfortable.

"This place is amazing Ty, I could live somewhere like this."

"Are you sure," he said. "Its a bit soul-less don't you think?"

"I like it, its really... progressive."

"Well that kind of depends on what you mean by progress."

Just a few words and he'd gone into that pensive, down-beat mode again. Was it me that caused this? "I thought you liked all this kind of stuff."

"I've been used to it, doesn't mean I like it."

I looked out the window. Where was this man's head at? It dawned on me that he'd been so far away from the world of his former life for so long that he'd forgotten how he used to live. I had no home now, I was just in transit and I'd accepted that. E-Zee had a dream but Ty just had a fast disappearing memory of a work life that no longer sparked his imagination. I was sure he'd get back into the swing of things once we'd sorted out his problems, but he wasn't.

"Tell me, what's the best thing about your job?"

"That's easy, seeing the end product. There's nothing like it, you stand there knowing that you played a great part in bringing it into the world. I think it must be like having a baby and seeing it grow to maturity."

"Yeah but you do realise childbirth and the nurturing of a child through adolescence into adulthood is an *interactive* process?"

"Of course I'm well aware of the... mechanics of such an enterprise, synthetic genesis is not so different."

"Listen to you! Its totally different. I know androids have their own specific DNA but a baby is the result of a man and woman making love. I can't believe this, I'm having to tell you about the facts of life. Didn't your parents ever give you The Talk?"

"Well actually no. They died before we ever got to that stage but I read about it, there was a great eBook at the time called "Talking Sex" it had pictures and everything."

That was when I realised how alone in the world this man was. He'd had all the education anyone would ever need and he'd had all the ambition he needed to get to exactly where he wanted to be. That place was however, the coldest and emotionally the darkest place that man had created for himself. He might as well have been in outer space. I saw a person divorced from Love, a person with a heart but one which was encased in ice. However I had seen glimpses of his capacity to love, if only towards E-Zee, still it was a step in the right direction. It made even more sense to me now how his encounter with the female android had thrown him. To feel love for the first time only for it to be revealed as the one thing he hated about himself, an incapacity to love a woman. I was crying inside, I had no idea how he must be feeling.

I reached out my hand and placed it on his, resting as it was on the coffee table.

"You do know it's all going to be alright?"

He looked at me, made a slightly forced smile and withdrew his hand. He perked up but I could see he was acting. Predictably he moved the subject of conversation to his synthetic friend. "I do hope E-Zee is going to be alright. He hasn't been by himself for a long time."

"Don't worry about him, I'm sure he's perfectly capable of taking care of himself."

"I know, I made him that way."

I was taken aback. "You, you *made* E-Zee?"

"Well not as such. I was responsible for the character designs of the 613 series."

I was quiet but he looked at me and then added quickly.

"Don't tell him though. He doesn't know. I don't want him getting some kind of God complex or anything like that."

Slowly I formed some words. "No, I won't tell him."

"That Magenta too, same basic core characterisations. Didn't even recognise my own work. It wasn't Love really, it was Narcissism."

I needed to reassure him and reach out to him and this was the time.

"Narcissism it isn't. You're not conceited or egocentric or even vain, you're an artist, a genius too. What you need is self-love which means caring about yourself, taking responsibility for yourself, respecting yourself and knowing yourself. These are the things you need first in order to love another person."

"You're right. It's like I'm at the beginning of a long journey again."

"No! You're well on your way. You don't have to keep starting at the beginning. You're building on everything you've already done, everything you've achieved to get right here, right now."

Ty looked uncomfortable, especially so as the seated man was scoping us regularly.

"Look, can we change the subject. I'm not so good talking about myself. I think you might be better off looking at your own situation Ali. You've got yourself into a terrible mess, aren't you the least bit sad about what you've left behind and worried about your future? I mean this all happened to me, I didn't choose it, you though, you just upped and went."

"I'm not looking back. I knew that yourself and E-Zee were my ticket out of Maybridge as soon as I saw you. There was something different about your body language and attitude. It was obvious to me that you came from another place, another time even and its true, I targeted you. I feel a bit bad about that but you have to be an opportunist don't you think?"

"I do understand, I do. I just feel kind of... responsible for you."

"Well don't. I'm an independent, free thinking woman and I'll tell you if I need someone to be responsible for me. So you might as well can that train of thought immediately."

I had become a bit passionate about this subject of late, having cut all ties with my background and hadn't realised that the volume of my voice had raised a little. The large man looked over at us once more and my eyes had met his for an uncomfortable few seconds, I felt somewhat threatened. Then he stood up and walked towards us. I whispered to Ty.

"I think we better go."

We stood up but the man was upon us, looming large. He spoke in a low voice directed straight at Ty.

"Are you human?"

Ty was taken aback but answered the only way he could.

"Er... Yes."

The man moved closer until he was just a small distance from Ty's face.

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent."

"Can you prove it?"

With this Ty was stuck in a mode of inability. I had to cut in.

"Hey guy, I don't know what your problem is but can you just leave us alone."

The man was still in Ty's face. "It doesn't matter. No self respecting androids use Notes. I'll take your word for it. There's not many synthetics around here that would pretend to be human anyway. That's what I want to tell you, you're not welcome here."

Ty snapped out of his frozen gaze. "Well we better get on. If you don't mind we have to be somewhere."

"Good. You'll be better off. Just take it from me, there's some places you belong and some places you don't. You're in the wrong place."

We left, in a hurry and didn't look back. After a while I had to ask. "Ty do you think he was human or synthetic?"

"I don't know, I don't think it matters. For one reason or another he had our best interests at heart. Look at that."

He pointed across the road where a couple of young men were beating on another, who lay writhing in pain as the others kicked him.

"Don't you think we should do something?" I said as the violence continued.

"No, I do not, its not our business. We'd be overpowered if those two are synthetics as I suspect."

So we continued on the road out of town. Really we were no wiser. Perhaps it would have been better to stay with the vehicle. As we walked Ty had something to say.

"I've heard of places like this but I didn't really believe they existed. Whole communities of droids, gathered together in one place, shunning interaction with people, claiming their independence."

"I don't like it," I said, "I thought the whole point behind the synthetic revolution was that androids and humans would live in harmony."

"Well that's the theory but when you set a ball rolling, you don't really know which way the game is going to turn out. Think about it, there are humans who don't believe android life is right, that they are a hazard, an abomination even."

"Maybridge was like that. I guess there's bound to be a mirror image of that philosophy expressed by synthetics themselves."

"We' do best just to keep on walking, don't look at anyone in the eye."

Moving steadily, I couldn't help but look around at this place with a different perspective. All its modernity seemed somehow less impressive. The architecture was perfect but now I felt that it was maybe boringly so. No longer in awe, there was a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that we weren't walking through a settlement, a community, but more like a computer model of one. I imagined us as little collections of pixels drawn into a three dimensional holographic at the hands of a genius synthetic architect. It was eerie and unsettling. I started walking faster.

The stupid thing was that this place was exactly the kind of environment I had yearned to be in for so long whilst drudging away as a waitress. Now I had experienced it I no longer wanted for its clinical beauty. I didn't want to go back to Maybridge with its backward looking isolation either. I was trapped somewhere in a world I could not describe, somewhere between the analogue and the digital. However we were in motion and if I was to be suspended indefinitely in such a state of mind I was glad to be moving through, even if the nature of that journey and its destination were still unknown, and unknowable.

We arrived back at the vehicle around 7pm. It was comforting to see and be enclosed by its antique bulk, solid and reassuring. We waited, with no music and relatively little conversation. The time went slowly and uneventfully. Ty kept asking me the time, every ten minutes or so. At 8pm he said how we had both been feeling.

"I'm worried about E-Zee, he should be here now."

"It'll be ok, you'll see, just sit tight."

"I am, I don't like it."

By 9pm, I was worried too. We waited longer, fifteen minutes, half an hour. At 10pm Ty made a decision, for better or worse.

"Let's go. Let's just drive there, see what we can see. We can't see anything from here."

“Do you think we should, I mean how's it going to help?”

“I don't know but I'm not going to sit here any longer worrying. I can't stand it.”

So he fired up the car and we drove steadily towards the Data Server building. As we came closer its sheer size revealed itself to the two of us. I felt dwarfed by its magnitude as it loomed above us, creating a giant silhouette that seemed darker than the night sky which was illuminated by a full moon. As we drew closer still we could see its entrance bathed in pale neon. Ty drove the car slowly towards this pool of artificial light.

Chapter Fifteen

Silicon Artist

It felt strange to leave Ali and Ty alone like that, having been in their company for so long. It's the right thing to do, I always knew this was my mission only. Still they'll have each other for company, here, now its just me, myself and I. Have some self belief, concentrate on the job, focus on the specifics and don't screw up. I have a plan, it's as good as I can make it. This is up to me, I have to play it cool, and I have to be E-Zee.

This little run to the building will get me in the mood, must be in that zone where I'm hyper alert but appear to be calm and casual. Heightened levels of activity in cerebral and muscular areas, use this to help. I need all the help I can get. I need some luck too, I'm even depending on it. Get in, get the data, and get out. A,B,C,1,2,3. Keep it nice and simple. Don't rush, keep it steady, steady and safe.

First things first, I've got to ditch these clothes, no one in their right mind is going to believe me looking like this. I hacked that security clearance code but I need clothes, appropriate clothing. Something that enables me to blend in, something suitable to match the cover story. Only one thing for it, have to acquire them by underhand means. Lots of people coming and going here, its a busy place of work. Car port full of people must be something for me.

Getting near now, the men are all wearing suits. A suit it is, that's good enough for me. Getting close, slow down, pick a target, analyse size. He's too big, way too big. He's too small. Ahh but he's just right, isolated too, away from most others. If I can intercept and immobilise him somewhere near his car I'd be unlucky to be seen. Wait behind this vehicle here for a while, watch his moves. That's it keep walking mister, and if I can ambush you somewhere over there. This is my chance. Go! Go!

Sprinting that last little bit, keep low, he hasn't seen me. Leap! Gotcha! Sorry mate, hope that didn't hurt too much. Only a little knock, maybe be a bit bruised when you come round but its your lack of clothes that's going to give you the biggest shock. Look around, make sure no one has seen me. Nah, I'm all good. Unbutton your shirt, man you're heavier than you look. Come on give 'em up, and the trousers. Jacket fits ok. Oo, I'll take the wallet too, might come in useful. Shoes look at bit small, think I'll keep my own, whoever looks at a man's shoes anyway? There how do I look?

Now, sorry old boy, I need to tie you up. I don't want you coming around and running to security half naked to spoil my party. Sock in your, phew, these smell dude, you need to do some laundry. Neck tie round your mouth and head, stop you shouting for help. Hands behind your back, tie them together with your trouser belt. That should hold you for long enough.

Ok, I hope this code works. This is a cool building, is this glass or plastic, hard to tell. The scale of the place, it must be the size of four football stadia. I like the doors, never seen such immense sliding doors. Right stay calm, walk naturally up to the reception desk, just another day's work, just another surprise inspection. Boy is she cute, better work the E-Zee charm.

"Hi, I'm John Matravers, GeoMax Fusion."

"Hello, Mr Matravers."

Mmm. Lovely voice too.

"Ahem, Yes. I'm here to perform a reactor radiation leak spot check. We like to surprise you every now and then just to keep you on your toes."

"Why, certainly Mr. Matravers. If you'd like to look just there so I can do your retinal scan."

I thought this might happen. "Ah, you'll have no luck with that I suffer with acute hydro-hyper-humorous dytremia."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

Oh she cares too. Bonus.

"Yeah its a real pain, especially in my line of work, it means the scan won't work properly. I'm a bit blind to be honest. However, I do have the necessary security clearance code."

"Ok Mr. Matravers if you'd care to enter your code just here."

I entered the ten character alphanumeric code and crossed my fingers, I really did actually cross my fingers, what was I thinking? After what seemed like an age during which I worried that my code was no longer valid, the machine beeped and the beautiful receptionist smiled.

"Thank you Mr. Matravers. You may be required to enter your code again at security bulkheads. I'm sorry for the trouble but we're all set up for retinal scans here. If you'd care to wait over there, someone will be with you momentarily."

She indicated a seating area. "Do you have everything you need sir?"

"Oh yes." I patted my top pocket with my hand. "Got everything I need right here."

I sat down and waited for only a couple of minutes before a big guy arrived to show me to the fusion reactor. All servers have these little reactors, they're efficient and create enough power for the whole place. We took a good fifteen minutes of various lifts and moving walkways to arrive. The insides of the place looked even bigger than I might have guessed from the outside which didn't seem possible. It must have been a trick of the architecture. Also whilst the outside was jet black on the inside everything was pristine, crystalline white and all the walls and high ceilings glowed in a white light that was tinted with the most subtle shade of blue.

The guy who had been assigned to me hung around like a bad smell. It would be impossible for me to carry out the mission with him in tow. I had to get rid of him.

"That will be all now thank you." I said casually.

"I'm to stay and supervise your visit Mr. Matravers."

I could see there was only one way to resolve this matter decisively, anger.

"Now look, here. If this reactor has any leaks, however small, it will be your fault, not mine, yours. I need the utmost peace and tranquillity in order to do my work here and I don't need you hanging around and messing with my karma. What's your name. Your name now!"

"Ah its Bernard Jones, Sir."

"Alright Mr. Bernard Jones, Sir. If you don't leave this area immediately I will have to report this terrible interruption of my activities to your superiors and I can tell you I won't be kind. Do you understand? Well do you?"

"Er. Yes, I'm sorry, Sir."

"Good, be sorry and be gone. I'll find my own way out. Now hurry up, time is money."

The poor bloke walked off and I was alone again. I caught myself whistling quietly but stopped as soon as I started feeling it might attract attention. Now all I had to do was find my way to the Data Server Banks themselves. I had seen various signs on my way here and had to back-track to get to the right zone. It took a long time, perhaps half an hour or so. Once I was in that part of the building there were more security clearance doors. My alphanumeric code, lifted and hot as it was, covered all areas, I'd made sure of that when I'd hacked it from the Ultranet. It worked at every barrier, that's the type of peace of mind that military hardware buys you, state of the art, ready for anything. I had only a basic schematic of the layout of the building which helped but it was not completely detailed and I had to rely greatly on finding signs to direct my way.

Eventually I was where I needed to be, an input-output interface at the base of a monumental wall which contained much of the accumulated digital information of the world. There were several of these physical storage units in just as remote locations around the country and all were linked. This one however, I knew to be where all synthetic uploads were stored, including, I hoped, the last emergency transmission from the Magenta Simons unit.

Being of almost identical design to Magenta, save for the obvious physical gender difference, we had the same fundamental core infrastructure. With this I felt it wouldn't be too hard to trace, locate and retrieve her data and I was right, it did help. As with many of these input-output terminals, my eyes did all the talking. I had to enter my security code once more and was relieved when it proved to be just as functional when inside the data bank. Just a move, then focus, next screen, move, focus. Soon, after a few wrong turns, I homed in on the correct synthetic account. There she was, Magenta Simons, just as Ty had described her many times, although this was the first time I had seen an image. She was a beauty, it had to be said, and I'm ashamed to say I did take a peek at the full body picture. Phew, now I knew what Ty had been so all het up about. Stop daydreaming, back to work.

Once I had the account, the rest was simple, but time consuming. I didn't analyse any of the information, just uploaded it to my own memory banks. However, there was a huge amount to get through. There was more here than just video, audio, and other sensory information. I was getting all of her thoughts and emotions too and they require a much greater resolution and hence quantity of information. All in all I was sat there for two and a half hours. I could have taken a few short cuts but no, any part of this might be essential. However, I knew Ty and Ali would be getting worried. At last the upload was complete.

Then I created an error. It was my fault, my glitch if you like. I was aware of such problems with my personal system right from the moment I had left the production facility of my birth. It was just bad luck I figure that it had to re-occur here. As I was putting away the file I glanced and focussed on the wrong system button for a fraction of a second too long. I knew immediately that the flaw could prove costly but as yet I was not sure as to the consequences. This system left no room for such imperfection, there was no second chance. A little red light would flash on a console somewhere linked to my alphanumeric and security would be at this place as soon as they could. I closed the account as best I could, given the mistake and made my way out of there. Without a doubt though I was stressed and I couldn't shake the feeling.

A series of errors ensued, a kind of domino effect. I had the data I needed but what might be called a niggling worry began to spiral into a malfunction. Perhaps it was the extra data I was carrying, somehow

corrupting my software. My memory banks were full to capacity and there was a certain amount of leakage and crossover between what should have been isolated data and my own core systems. Magenta Simon's last few minutes began to play through my mind and something within me was telling me that I should let it play out and restore it should the original files become compromised.

This process played havoc with my navigation of all things, not what I needed right now. I failed to retrace my steps and took many incorrect routes. A synthetic is very rarely lost but to say that I wasn't would be a lie. Now, only relying on a basic trial and error system, not much better than a laboratory rat in a maze, I zigged and zagged my way through the immense building.

On several occasions I walked nervously passed employees and indeed security personal. I had to think on the move, move even quicker and hope my fragile state wouldn't become more serious. I was beginning to sweat. I got lucky and found signs and a route to the exit but there was one last door between me and escape. I nervously typed my code, making sure to be accurate and my worst fears were realised. The door remained closed, it double locked itself even, a large red light over the door flashed and an alarm siren sounded throughout the building. I had become a security breach and without any kind of further plan to follow I ran as fast as I could.

With a vague hope of finding a door open as someone else was passing through it I was again in a random state, I was panicking and then guards began to appear. I outran them for great distances and knocked several over and then coming up to a secure bulkhead I was cornered. I wasn't going down without fight and took more of them out but I was outnumbered and eventually, after thinking that I'd broken a hole in their defences and running free once again, I heard the loud crack of gun.

Personal Log End.

Chapter Sixteen

System Supremacy

Ty and Ali drove steadily towards the entrance, there were no signs of activity. Perhaps they would be able to see E-Zee somewhere, pick him up and be out of there. As they approached Ali became nervous.

"I don't like it Ty, there's nothing happening,"

"We'll just roll by, you'll see, there's nothing to be scared of."

At this moment an intricate series of digital events were occurring.

Cameras had picked up their car. No registration plate to identify but the precise colour spectrum of that dubious paint job was being sampled, analysed and compared to police records. One such car had been recorded very recently by a lone police patrol, a patrol in which the policeman had been terminally deactivated. Prior to meeting his end that patrolman's equipment had been able to record the colour signature of the vehicle.

That data had been instantaneously uploaded to Data Command. This entity was a system that provided the integration of all information gathering services. CIA, FBI, Police, Border Control, Military Intelligence, Fire, Ambulance and commercial security forces and private emergency services were all plugged in. All inputs and outputs to this system were designated a code. There were 128 levels to the system. Level 128 included such items as a phone call reporting the breakdown of a vehicle. Level 1 may indicate an event such as the invasion of airspace by a hostile enemy.

In this way each and every possibly connected event could be continuously cross referenced for connections with each other. Needless to say, access to data at different levels was restricted to those who had the necessary clearance but those with access to a certain level could obtain all possible relevant threads to lower levels.

Now the burnt orange metallic spectrum sampled here was inexorably linked to the patrolman's demise. In an instant the two were correlated. Also, given the current inoperative state of E-Zee, the local security system was linking these events if only by proximity in space and time. The inevitable causal chain of events would eventually lead to the prison breakout but for now the Data Server's security, which was already in a high state of alert, became focussed on the car directly outside its building.

E-Zee had been neutralised, his threat was zero, now though, there was a scramble alert to deal with the next threat. With immediate action there followed the dispatch of dedicated security personnel who were reassigned to the perceived problem externally. The site was locked down around its perimeter. Ty and Ali were fish in a net and would be going nowhere of their own volition for a long time.

Seven guards descended on their vehicle in seconds. Ty made a brave but short lived effort to evade their advance but tyres were deflated by expert methods and the car came to a stop not far from the entrance. They were surrounded by men who had authority to incapacitate them permanently. Shortly after they had been pulled from the vehicle they were on the floor, cuffed and separated. Their friend E-Zee was not conscious, in fact he had been dealt with to such an extent that any activity in his system was no more than dull shadow of life.

Soon the police were there in numbers with a mean attitude and hardened satisfaction that the guilty part had been apprehended. There was little physical restraint employed as Ty was handed over from the local Server security to those that would escort him to his fate. Ali was treated with no less force and would have bruises on her arms for a few weeks. Placed in separate detention vehicles and with an escort of two policemen each, a long and dark journey began for them both.

E-Zee had been picked up off the floor, his large frame and weight requiring several men to shift. He was going in a different direction, the damaged result of considerable firepower was now heading to a cyber-analysis unit. They would perform a diagnostic to see if they could find out exactly what was hidden in his inner cortex. For the moment he presented no threat and as much as anything was merely a piece of psycho-physical evidence.

It was dark now, but there were no windows inside Ali's vehicle. She had no idea where she was being taken and had no desire to talk to her captors. The game was over, the adventure come to an end. She wondered as to the validity of her reasoning that had ultimately brought her to this place. It was of no use thinking of such things, reality for her had taken a great shift. No longer a happy-go-lucky trip, only a bleak future.

What was her crime? Aiding and abetting known fugitives of the law, accessory to the murder of a police patrolman and attempted data theft from a government facility. That was enough to put her away for longer than she cared to imagine. What would her uncle have thought of this downturn in her life? She would surely have plenty of time inside to contemplate the nature of her actions, her irresponsibility and her choice of travelling companions.

She was on her own now and could feel the retreat into herself that signalled a life-time of inner reflection. Was Ty going through something similar? What had happened to E-Zee, was he ok? The hum of the vehicle was low and constant and she allowed it to affect her, descending into a kind of self-hypnosis that would accompany her for the foreseeable future. There were no feelings or thoughts anymore, just an acceptance of the situation.

Externally Ty looked to be in a similar condition, however, the movements of his eyes betrayed an inner panic, a scrambled brainstorm that looked for answers to questions. How had they been apprehended so quickly and clinically? What exactly had happened to E-Zee? Had he been successful in the mission and where was he now? The only hope to any of them coming out of this lay within E-Zee's memory banks. The authorities were even now probably preparing to pull apart his hardware in their own search for answers. Ty simply hoped that they would not damage anything essential in the process. The idea of losing E-Zee's character, all that it had seen and done, the personality that he had developed over time, to lose all this would be to lose an irreplaceable soul.

EZ1-613 himself was a twisted mess. Unceremoniously thrown in the back of a transport with a single guard any signs of life were hidden. All motor functions were incapacitated. All higher cognitive zones were disabled. However, his military design coupled with his unique flaws and incomplete programming were conspiring to combine in unexpected ways. The mission directive, self-repair and abstract random ghosts within his machine together created re-routing of any power that was left to fundamental survival mechanisms. Deep inside his being, messages were beginning to be sent, tentative attempts at self-diagnosis were underway, there was something resembling a spark within this unit.

Whilst there was no chance of physical recovery, the blaster had effectively seen to that, there was a glimmer of light. Perhaps, given time, that which had been the essence of this synthetic could be re-invented, re-instated, revitalised. How much of this process would be at the hands of those who would now be in control of his inspection and how much would be self-generated by the android itself there was no telling. To look at he was merely a body, on the battlefield he would have been left for dead. Here he was just another by-product of crime, another malfunctioned synthetic of no more use to mankind. After any evidence that could be extracted was obtained he would be disposed of permanently, with no ceremony and with no human present.

Ty thought long and hard, there was nothing else to do with his time. It had all been in vain. The policemen in the vehicle looked at him with satisfied smiles on otherwise fierce faces. They were proud of their position, they had no need to think, they simply acted on orders from a higher

authority and did so by acting on the internal rules that governed their job. All they had to do was comply with their own laws, they didn't have to think, they didn't have to feel and it wasn't within their nature to do so. There was no doubt these police were synthetics. They offered no conversation, hostile or friendly. Ty was sure they would follow his second further demise on the Media where he would be found guilty once again, and this time sent to a higher security prison where he would perish.

Neither Ty nor Ali knew where they were going. In fact it was only a one hour journey to a Federal Detention Centre where they would be held. It was here that Ty stepped out of his vehicle where he caught sight of Ali out of the corner of his eye who had been travelling in convoy.

Lead through the building they were then placed in separate cells, each alone, each without any of the liberated feelings that they had recently been enjoying. The remains of EZ1-613 were taken to a neural forensic department in the same building and night was all around.

Surprisingly Ty slept. He had simply given up, given up hoping and given up thinking and had just accepted that this was the end. Ali had no such good fortune. She sat in her cell staring at a sliver of a moon in the one window to her space. There was no order to her thoughts just a random cascade of imagery and flashing memories that could not find a purchase on her consciousness. By daybreak her mind was exhausted but she was no better off in any sense.

At some point, food came their way. Strangely Ty recognised the standard cutlery from his time in prison, he ate quickly and automatically as though he had never left that place. Without noticing what he was eating, he suddenly froze when he was done, imagining that this way of life was his future.

Ali did not eat, preferring instead to contemplate the contents of the plastic tray in a cold, unemotional way. It seemed a more interesting option to look at what she was given without touching it. Perhaps this was all she would ever be given from now on.

Lawyers were appointed to them. After consultation, advice to both was clear, upon interview give straight answers, don't answer anything that hasn't been asked, and tell the truth. Ali toyed with a fabrication that she had come up with all on her own but then found herself laughing at the insanity of her story and decided to do as she had been advised. Ty didn't care about anything, he had entered a mind state where there were no priorities. To all intents and purposes he had shut down. He would later answer questions truthfully but no thought would be given to these answers they would merely be automated responses triggered by the semantic content of the questions.

The questioning was thankfully brief. After only a couple of days both Ali and Ty were charged. EZ1-613 was in no condition to be questioned but details that could pertain to the case were professionally isolated, extracted, detailed and recorded. This unit would receive no charge, there's simply no point in punishing something that no longer has its own anima. However, deep, deep inside there remained locked away vital data, beyond the reach of governmental probes. Carefully and intentionally placed in the most remote and inaccessible part of his system E-Zee held the key.

Ali and Ty were transported, once again separately but this time by air. As Ty flew over California by night he felt disconnected from its bright lights, grid system roads and glittering jewel-like glass buildings that littered the terrain. It was an uncomfortable embrace back into the future. Was this progress? Was this what people really wanted? What would be the evolution of such a place that was already so supposedly advanced? He didn't know the answers and was less and less concerned with the questions themselves. He just wanted the whole ordeal to be over, whatever that might entail.

For Ali the sights she saw from the aeroplane window were a revelation. Every point of light that lit up the darkness was another discovery that pulled her out of her numbness. The illuminated, integrated circuit was for her an ordered sea of modernity. She had seen pictures but to behold this vision was not only breathtaking, it was the summit of an understanding that she had driven towards in her mind since a young girl. This wasn't just a civilisation, it was a system, a system that showed itself to be nothing if not bright and powerful. What would her life have been had she grown up here?

In a metal box, in a crate in the hold of the aircraft were the remains of EZ1-613. It had been fully probed and was now relegated to a legal term, evidence.

Touchdown, and yet another leg to the journey, this time to a holding cell. The next day after further brief interactions with their lawyers they would face the charges against them and file their pleas.

It was another long night. Ali couldn't switch off, her mind swimming with ideas caused by what she had experienced since leaving Maybridge. Not only had she been exposed to the automated human that was E-Zee but she had been through a time warp of self-discovery. Realising that she had no regrets for her actions and that the experiences she had encountered would not have existed had she remained in that backward looking town she was at peace with herself. Still unable to stop herself from playing back these events in the theatre of her mind her memories were interlacing and overlapping to form yet more novel ideas.

There came a point somewhere in the middle of the night when she began to think clearly about Ty's plight. What had he really done except all that was necessary in an attempt to prove his innocence? Had he hurt anyone? She had made her own decision to join the two of them in their mission and took full responsibility for that but he had done nothing wrong to earn his punishment. That is if he had been telling her the truth all this time. He was somewhere in the building right now.

They had built up some kind of friendship since they had been together. Concerning the nature of that relationship Ali was not sure. Perhaps the conversations she had been having with E-Zee were somehow more important. Certainly his ideas about dreaming had struck a chord with her. However, with Ty she felt that he was always holding something back, not revealing a character that she knew was buried inside of him somewhere. He was a neural network designer, that work involved him being fully aware of the intricacies of E-Zee's design. It was almost as Ty was speaking his own true words through that of the synthetic he had created.

E-Zee represented the medium through which Ty expressed himself. Somewhere along the line, from early childhood even, Ty's only sure-fire way of communicating with this crazy modern world was to do so with one of the pinnacles of its achievements.

The more Ali went down this avenue of reasoning the more she could see how Ty had become so disillusioned. The very means he had chosen to express himself had turned on him. The synthetic system, his friends, his career, the justice system all stacked up against him. It was no wonder he had ultimately cracked when inside and made a bid to escape. It would have seemed natural to take the system on at its own game and he was the perfect person to attempt it. Now though, failure on the horizon, he would be hurting. Ali imagined him, lost in thought in a similar cell, hope fading fast, nowhere to run. The forthcoming trial would take it out of him, how he would cope under pressure would be anyone's guess.

Ty was digging deep. He knew what lay ahead, after all he had been in court not so long ago. This would be another media heavy trial, his previous case would be plastered everywhere again for all to see. Then justice would be swift. His thoughts were with Ali, how had he let her get mixed up in all of this? That was his fault. She was an innocent party and deserved better. Had he made sure she'd stayed in her town she would be happy and oblivious to all this madness. She was probably afraid, why wouldn't she be? This was no place for a young woman, barely more than a girl. He would do all that was possible to make sure the weight came down on him, he could take it. A life inside for her was unthinkable.

After this trial they would never see each other again. He had grown increasingly fond of her and admired her inquisitive nature. It's true he found her physically attractive too but that was of no consequence anymore.

Besides she had always seemed to be more exited by E-Zee's personality than his own, funny seeing as how he had designed him. He had made sure himself that there was something about that model that was somehow mysterious and unfathomable. He was just a designer, E-Zee was the real thing.

What had happened to him? Something had gone desperately wrong. They had not seen him since he jogged off towards the Data Server. He was obviously discovered somehow, by setting off an alarm perhaps. What had been his fate? He would not know until the trial began, but he did know that he missed the company of the synthetic, already he missed his friend.

Chapter Seventeen

Digital Justice

Ali and Ty entered their pleas separately. For Ty the situation was recognisable, the courtroom itself had the same internal architecture as that which had housed his first trial. The feeling was very different now however. He knew the routine, he knew what he was to face and he knew where he would be going immediately following the verdict. He just wanted to get the whole thing out of the way. His thoughts were always with Ali, this would be new to her, and she would be frightened, nervous and equally pessimistic as to the result of this process.

The charges levelled at both defendants were; Conspiracy to steal protected data from a government facility and cyber slaughter of policeman Gerald Nash, DX3-122. Both pleaded guilty to the first charge and not guilty to the second. Having a further instalment to Ty's previous high profile case was quite a media event. The frenzy had not yet whipped up into the whirlwind it would become later, but needless to say there were several reporters there to record this opening day. Taken back to their cells there was to be only one respite, their lawyers informed them that from here on in they would stand trial together.

There was a warm wind blowing in from the Pacific that morning but neither Ty nor Ali would feel its soothing effect. Now locked in cells, with only an artificial light that gave a sickly green mood to the otherwise white walls. A simple breakfast, which Ali forced down this time, wanting to have the energy to listen to the case against her. She had decided this would most probably be both the first and last trial she would be a part of and being centre stage in it she desired to be both awake and alert. She would follow every detail, every route of reasoning that was offered both in her defence and that of the prosecution. With the outcome virtually assured at least she would have a clear memory of it to accompany her throughout her sentence.

Ty was less hungry to see the justice system swing into action once again. He had seen how an innocent man could be painted guilty in spite of gaps in the evidence. He really wanted little to do with his lawyer either who seemed content just to go through the legal motions.

Day one, proved that they had come so far only to be halted at the last hurdle. It was to be an anti-climax and a condemnation all rolled into

one formal proceeding. The suits spoke their fluent legal language with an ease born of much previous trial experience.

The judge, a woman who Ty guessed to be in her fifties, was dressed in the required all white uniform her position demanded. She looked emotionless, but somehow there was a fierce quality to her face that hinted at many a sentence passed. Ali didn't like her from the start, she had no human redeeming features, and it was quite possible she was a synthetic, who could tell.

The prosecution presented its evidence, piece by piece, arguing in a seemingly perfect fashion with unassailable logic that the two defendants could not be anything other than guilty of these crimes.

There were the facts of Ty's breakout and a reminder of his previous conviction. There was the death of the policeman perfectly linked to the vehicle at the scene of his termination and at the Data Server facility. And finally there was the break in at the facility itself where EZ1-613, also known as Kyle Meeks was apprehended and destroyed.

Ty and Ali's lawyers made the case that it was Kyle Meeks who had engineered the escape, killed the policeman and violated the Data Server. It made sense but there was no proof and the prosecutors were quick to explain to the judge and jury that all three must have been in conspiracy to affect the cause of events. Their reasoning was compelling.

A picture was painted of the two fugitives rampaging across the country. At one point Ali's lawyer, surprisingly to Ali herself, suggested that she had been a helpless victim, a kidnapping even, who had been swept along with these two violent criminals. She had been influenced and turned against her better self into the reluctant accomplice she had become.

E-Zee, not present to hear the arguments against him was drawn as a malfunctioning synthetic whose violent criminal tendencies were beyond doubt. Ty and Ali both took the stand and patiently and carefully described the chain of events that had lead them here. Their stories corroborated each other's and made a 'compelling tale' but there was still the mystery of why they were at the Data Server in the first place and of course there was the dead patrolman.

Ty explained in detail, with the help of questions carefully posed by his counsel. He began with the moment he realised with Kyle Meeks that there was a way, just one way that he could prove his innocence in the cyber slaughter of Magenta Simons. Escape with Meeks he told he court, and their subsequent journey were all to that end. Ali had unfortunately insisted on joining them for her own personal reasons and should not be held liable for any perceived crime that followed.

The prosecution said that this was a 'nice story' but reminded all present of the loss of life of a fine peace enforcement officer who had died simply doing his duty. Were we to believe that escaped felons capable of taking life were simply trying to prove their innocence? Both Ty and Ali had a hard time explaining that it was their synthetic friend who had ended the policeman's life and he did so to protect them and their goal. Of course it was very convenient for them both that Kyle Meeks was no longer operational and therefore unable to support these claims. The prosecutor knocked them down at every turn.

As the days went by it was all beginning to look very bleak. What little hope there had been was fading fast as the two defendants' lawyers' case was shot to pieces. Then, at a moment that couldn't have come sooner, there was a break and it came directly from CYBEX.

Devoid of life and of no value, EZ1-613 had been returned by the forensic experts to its ultimate owners, the people at the company who had created and manufactured him, CYBEX. The defence team had suggested that there was a possibility of crucial information relevant to the case only being retrievable by specialist CYBEX engineers.

The mutilated corpse had arrived at the CYBEX lab a few days after it had been cleared by the police system. It went from the morgue to the lab. Initial reports had been extremely pessimistic. The central nervous system and core operations were virtually annihilated by the impact of the security guard's weapon discharge that had ripped a hole in E-Zee's spine at the base of his neck. In effect the unit was beyond repair.

However, scientists and engineers alike at the laboratory, some of whom were the infamous Robo-Hedz, worked hard around the clock in an attempt to salvage what they may. It was painstaking and laborious work and took time that they did not have if they were to stand any chance of providing the data required. During their breaks they watched the media coverage of the trial and there grew within them as team, a hope that their previous colleague Ty was indeed an innocent man.

E-Zee himself lay on a slab, insides opened up and his soul laid bare, an undignified mess that perhaps had only one last offering within to help his designer in his hour of need. The robotic scientists knew of the existence of this model but had not had chance before to work on one up close. Their first realisation was that, as he had been designed for military use there were many defensive systems, backups, firewalls and fail safes that simply didn't exist in a conventional synthetic. These were explored with caution, with great attention to not damage what was still left intact.

Hooked up to an exterior artificial intelligence support they began to make progress and then in the early morning hours after a long day they somehow, suddenly bridged a gap and a whole load of systems came on

line. E-Zee was far from alive in any sense of the word but some of his algorithms were firing away and crucially there were many uncorrupted memories.

With further probing and analysis of the raw data they managed to isolate very large parts of the unit's personal log from its meeting with Tyrone Jones in the Correctional Institution right up until it expired in the Data Server building. Of primary importance too was the complete audio-visual recording of the incident involving policeman Gerald Nash and a vast file detailing the last known moments in the life of Magenta Simons.

As soon as the scientists had this information in a presentable format it was hurried to the courtroom where it was admitted as further evidence in the case.

In light of this new turn of events and on the recommendation of the now fully energised lawyers, Ali and Ty both submitted to change their pleas to Not Guilty. There were many attempts by the prosecution to disallow extra evidence but the judge who remained perfectly neutral overturned these requests. The trial had taken a massive turn, of which the judge and jury were fully aware and of course the media response, once it had heard reports of the possible change in fortunes of the defendants, went into overdrive. More stations and reports were assigned to cover the trial and public awareness subsequently reached a peak.

E-Zee's evidence showed him to be solely responsible for the death of the policeman but naturally he was not in a state to face charges for that crime. The personal log detailed and supported the account of events already given, including Ali voluntarily joining their mission. The rest of the trial was a study of the Magenta Simons case. Ty was not on trial for this crime but his lawyer made it clear that it was essential to clear his name of it in order to explain the prison escape.

Were E-Zee's actions wrong? The old first law of robotics was brought to bear on the subject. 'A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.' In the killing of the patrolman E-Zee had been acting on this directive. He had made an active decision to kill one of his own in order to comply with the law. Although synthetic's now had equal rights this military model would have had to decide and that is what he did. For his ongoing actions he had paid with his own life. Did Tyrone Jones understand the full scope of devotion that the synthetic had displayed?

Was it wrong for Tyrone Jones, a man convicted of cyber slaughter, to break the law in order to prove his innocence? To be wrongly convicted was effectively to take his life away from him, certainly the freedom that defined it. Was it in fact then actually his duty as a good citizen to set the record straight, to see justice done with a view to finding the real criminal?

This part of the trial was a fascination to Ty himself. He knew he had not murdered. He knew Magenta had been murdered, so therefore he knew that there was a murderer at large. The whole jury and the judge too were thus now involved in analysing two questions. Did Tyrone Jones murder Magenta Simons and if not who did? They prepared to watch the emergency transmit upload of the unfortunate secretary's last few moments on Earth with great anticipation. E-Zee's last mission to obtain what he hoped would be concrete proof of Ty being absent from the murder scene had cost him his life. Now they would see if that life had been well spent.

There were last minute objections from the prosecution that the evidence was inadmissible but the judge ruled that no one was going to stop the footage from being shown. It had been presented by the scientists who, having followed the trial in between their work were well aware of the significance of certain portions.

A simple holographic display, no more that five feet across, enabled all to view these moments clearly, the first part was no more than ten seconds in length. The courtroom was silent as the playback commenced.

The man walking towards Magenta was shorter than average with longish, unkempt dark hair. His face was clearly visible and it was certainly not Ty. In his hands he carried a metal object perhaps the size of a shoe box. There was a brief but powerful struggle and then the transmission ended and the court remained silent.

Ty stood, mouth open, and without giving it a second thought quietly said the name of the man he had seen in the hologram: "Harper Hermann... Why?" No one else present knew this name but the judge addressed him directly.

"Could you repeat that Mr. Jones?"

Ty remained motionless and then managed to gather himself and reply to the question. "Harper Hermann. That man is Harper Hermann. He works at CYBEX as a research assistant technician."

The judge was quick to respond.

"Bailiff, would you instruct the Police to ascertain the whereabouts of Harper Hermann and bring him in for questioning. I suggest you begin your enquiries at the CYBEX laboratories."

"Yes Maam." The bailiff swiftly disappeared and the courtroom erupted into heightened conversation with itself. The judge was unable to bring them to order for several minutes.

Ali shook Ty from his amazement and started to laugh wildly in his face. "You did it!" Ty couldn't celebrate yet as his mind was with his old friend. "E-

Zee did it." But Ali was persistent in her attempts to make him realise that this was their moment of victory. "We did it!" With that, months of a burden of worry dropped from the shoulders of the former neural network software engineer and the concept of freedom swept away everything else from his mind. He cracked a smile, a laugh and before he knew it he was hugging Ali and jumping up and down like an idiot. The judge remained unable to control her courtroom.

Hermann had been left out of the loop as to E-Zee's analysis. Of course he knew what was going on and had been growing increasingly sweaty and nervous as the days of the trial went on. He had bet on swift justice against Tyrone Jones and he was about to lose all his money.

The live feed from the courtroom had been played out in front of him. If he had been a cooler, calmer customer he would have left work, left the state and even made plans to leave the country. However, some sick sense of seeing another man lose, take the rap for his crime, have his name drawn through the muck once more and then be returned to an even more secure prison, kept him glued to the action. Now though it was *his* name that been announced in court and he knew they were coming for him. What was he to do?

There was no panic, no fear, nor even resignation. He just sat, a twisted mind quickly tying itself into ever tighter knots. His was a petrified state, motionless save for the twitching facial ticks and perspiration running down his face that gave away his guilt. He wasn't thinking of his crime, nor his impending future behind bars, he was stuck forever in a cerebral glitch which would only expand into torment.

The police arrived even before CYBEX colleagues had a chance to locate Hermann. They were soon lead to his office on the lower levels and having read him his rights he was cuffed and lead away. This was just the beginning for Hermann, he would now know the suffering Ty had gone through, only for him there would be no innocence for company.

Back in the courtroom the judge had eventually regained order and resumed the trial, reminding all concerned that it was far from over. The evidence gained from EZ1-613 was to be played out in full. This time was difficult for Ali and Ty, they knew they were in the clear but there were formalities to be observed until the verdict of Not Guilty was returned by the jury.

Needless to say their trial was a media sensation. The whole country was following the story and the conclusion created a tidal wave of feelings not only amongst the population but in Ty and Ali themselves.

Harper Hermann was already in a holding cell, the evidence against him was fairly overwhelming but the question of 'Why?' was yet to be answered.

The investigation had started immediately but it had not taken long to establish a watertight case against the man. His trial was to be fast and final. The history of the man was sketched out early on. He had learned his Robotics from his father, a professor in the subject, in The Academy of Robotics in Berlin. Of Russian extraction Harper never quite adjusted to the culture in the USA when they moved as a family after he had finished his studies at the age of 24. He spoke English fluently but his heavy accent meant that he was always being asked where he came from and over time this irritated him greatly. Consequently he became somewhat of a loner and although his undoubted genius grew as a result he was increasingly reclusive in his private life and failed to make long term friends. He was brave in the sense that he maintained a happy and positive outlook among his peers and employers yet secretly there was hate in his heart which was to reveal itself in time.

He admitted guilt but showed no remorse. The facts of his crime were shown step by step allowing no room for doubt. Although the Magenta Simons model was incredibly advanced, CYBEX had made a decision to 'show her off' and had placed her as a secretary within the company. It was no coincidence that they should choose one so beautiful for this showcase, a jewel in the crown of their achievements to date.

The key point in the case was to show his motive. CYBEX had wanted the work on Magenta to be in secret, their aim was to prove once and for all how perfectly human an android could be and not only perfect but able to blend in seamlessly in an environment where those who worked exclusively with higher functions would not be able to tell any difference. Ty for one had fallen easily into this cleverly laid game. However CYBEX could have had no clue that it would have lead to such catastrophic results.

The new information that came to light called into question the ethics of the CYBEX Corporation itself as it was only now that they offered up data that may have been of use in Ty's first trial. It transpired that Harper Hermann had previously had extensive, classified access to Magenta in her development phase as much as a year earlier. At that time he had been in another department which was working on the aesthetics of the model. No one was in disagreement that they had done a good job. Her grace, poise, sensuality and sheer sexiness made many a man lust after her. Part of Ty's original downfall had been due to the extreme distance he had plummeted from the heights of dating such a prize to the object of ridicule when her true nature had been discovered and made public within his high flying team.

Hermann's part in her design was to do with her face, the most immediate zone of interaction with anyone, human or synthetic. In this sense

she was his 'baby'. This had been somewhat of an experimental promotion for him and he was very proud to be given the chance to branch out into a relatively new field for him. He had obsessed over the work, having studied all previous generations of design in the area. Most importantly he became an artist concerning her blue-green eyes. Part turquoise glacial melt water, part tropical lagoon, part deep sea, part midday sky, part the vibrant shine of dew covered moss and part the icy frost on polished jade. He sampled these colours and used them as a palette to illuminate the windows of her soul. They were mesmerising enough to command the attention of any, and they belonged to him, and no one else.

When Ty had become involved with Magenta, Harper thought that the affair would not last. When it had done so, and for quite sometime he began to resent the relationship. When Ty had stupidly begun to boast of his status Harper Hermann had grown insanely jealous, and it was from this standpoint that had started to plot. Tyrone Jones was not good enough for Magenta Simons, she was above him, and he didn't understand her or appreciate her.

Coupled with this situation was a deep seated insecurity and lack of personal confidence on the part of Hermann. He knew himself that he could never, not even in his fantasies, have someone so bright and alluring as the young Magenta and this was the straw that broke his back. If truth be told he had become increasingly uncomfortable around her, awkward and nervous. When she greeted him politely and their eyes met, the perfection he saw in them was no consolation, they merely seemed to highlight the flaws in his own character. If he couldn't have her then no one could.

They would have to go, Magenta and Ty together. On that fateful night Hermann had followed them. He'd sat outside the restaurant in his vehicle and then followed them once again back to her apartment. He'd waited and when Ty had left the place he'd made his move. Carrying only the small but lethal magnetic device, he called on the unsuspecting young synthetic who immediately recognised him from work. He was able to gain access by using classified codes that were still valid since he had a hand in her creation. By simply speaking these strings of alphanumeric Magenta was obliged by her programming to comply and within moments he was inside and the hideous deed was done.

Leaving no sign of his presence he went home, slept and arrived at CYBEX at the earliest possible time in the morning to leave the device in Ty's desk. Discrete and unnoticed, Magenta was no longer able to taunt him with her perfection and Ty's fate was sealed. Harper Hermann had sat back to watch the show unravel.

Currently he sat in the holding cell, no way out of this one, he was to be a prisoner of his mind. Justice was at this moment travelling through its logic gates to set Ty and Ali free whilst at the same time a new piece of code was

being written whose path would place the real criminal in a world he was fearful to imagine.

Chapter Eighteen

At Liberty

Walking free from those courtrooms was like getting off an aeroplane and stepping foot on a new and unexplored land. Of course Ty had been completely free before all this started, he just never knew it. The media had gathered outside to elicit some response but he was only interested in getting himself and Ali away from this zone of craziness to somewhere more private where they could celebrate together and enjoy the feeling. Ali was right next to him as they left the building and was understandably in a kind of shock, not only from their vindication and media presence but also the blast of midday sunlight that blazed in the glorious Californian sky.

Without satisfying the media's hunger for their emotions they forced their way to the car that their lawyer had arranged. He was making the most of his new found fame and was at this moment making an impromptu speech for the cameras and microphones that would be the basis of the media's coverage.

In the car, doors shut, they moved away. Their driver drove carefully through the mass of people who had gathered and then suddenly they were free of the gravity caused by the crowd. It was a quick transition from one world to another, where there had been chaos and confusion there was now the peace of a gentle drive through the city. Their company were just other cars going about their business. Ty and Ali sat in the back, just another couple of passengers heading towards their destination.

But where were they going? After the two of them had settled down and stopped hugging and shouting out loud they sat back and both simultaneously wondered this very question. It was actually a very pleasant sensation having no direction or purpose but soon curiosity got the better of Ali and she asked the driver.

"Excuse me."

"Yes Maam."

"Where are we going?"

"The Andromeda, Maam."

The Andromeda was perhaps the finest, certainly the largest, hotel in the city. Ty smiled, there could only be one explanation as to who would be picking up the tab.

"CYBEX, well I'll be. It makes sense. They want to claim us as a success story, welcome me back into the fold and make themselves look good too."

Ali couldn't quite understand, thinking that they would be out on their own from now on.

"You seem pretty happy about that."

"I am, it's going to mean I get my job back, I'll get a new apartment and it means money. I'll be able to make sure you get treated with appropriate privileges too. It's a good thing Ali, very good."

"If that's what you want." Ali was confused, what would her future be? Is this what she wanted? Whilst Ty sat back and laughed, Ali slipped into a contemplation that Ty eventually noticed.

"Hey, perk up. I hadn't quite expected this but I think I know what you're thinking. Where does this road end up?"

"I can't tell you how I feel, but the future seems suddenly a pretty weird place."

"Trust me Ali. Enjoy this ride, at least for a few days. There might be some decisions to make but for a while at least this is our time."

Ali looked at Ty. In his eyes was a genuine joy, the friendly face that had been with her all this time was honest. Without talking, enclosed as they were in this luxury vehicle, a safe and warm feeling came over her. She had followed him this far and the more their eyes locked the more calm she became, it was finally easy to give herself the freedom she needed to put her trust in him. A smile came over her face and at last she relaxed fully.

"Well Mr. Tyrone Jones, it looks like we are still in this together."

"Perfect. You wait until you get an eyeful of the hotel we're going to. It'll knock your socks off."

"I'm not wearing any socks."

The car sped through the city and soon pulled up outside The Andromeda. They left the vehicle and stood outside the building. There was no media here, only a few immaculately dressed pedestrians walking by and the phenomenal vision of the place in front of them. The awe this white marble clad modern construction commanded kept the two of them in

suspense for a long while until Ty snapped out of it and made the suggestion that they should go within.

"Come on, I'm sure its even more impressive inside."

Ali, who was fairly floating on a sea of new emotions, followed his lead. The entrance was a wide 'door' only millimetres thick made from a 'wall' of violet laser light and a 'curtain' of a stream of warm air. They passed through and noticed the change in temperature and the still, acoustic change in their surroundings. The cool ambient light filled the high vaulted space which gave a cathedral like ambience. Ty and Ali moved slowly in a dream haze, their feet automatically drifting them towards the check-in desk.

The young woman at the desk was quick to greet them.

"Welcome to The Andromeda. How may I help you?"

Ty's attempt at a professional attitude had been affected by his journey from CYBEX to court, to jail, to escape, to adventure, capture and court again. He was no longer the same person and as he spoke the words came out in a haphazard way.

"Ahem, I understand you have, I mean we are here because, what I mean to say is, just to ask whether you have reservations for us?"

The receptionist, dressed perfectly in grey, smiled in a way that relaxed them both and invited them to be part of this wonderful place.

"Certainly Sir, can I have a name?"

"Hi, yes. I am Tyrone Jones."

The synthetic recorded his voice pattern and performed a quick facial recognition. "Mr. Tyrone Jones. Yes. You have adjoining rooms, in the Penthouse suite. Floor seventeen. Do you have any luggage?"

Ty looked a little lost. "Er, no. No luggage."

"The elevators are to your right. When you reach your room, just speak your name. If you have any queries please make use of the communication centre. We hope you enjoy your stay."

Ty managed to say "Thank you" before they made their way to the lift. Ali was still lost in wondering at the marvel of the place, looking upwards and staying close to Ty she had no words to explain what she was feeling. The best she could do was to stop herself from falling over, trusting in her feet to follow Ty.

The elevator, transparent on all sides, was nothing more than a cube that hung in the air, free from any attachments. As they stepped close the front became opaque and opened, they stepped in and it closed behind

them, becoming transparent again. A soft female voice required their attention.

"Please state your floor number."

Ty began to find his own voice. "Seventeen."

"Floor Seventeen." The voice repeated as the cube began its smooth ascent controlled by a soft magnetic force. The acceleration was gentle, and the view breathtaking. Ali managed a kind of sentence that went some way to describing how she was now feeling.

"All this. The beauty. It's the future."

Ty was smiling, the impact of The Andromeda's design was making a huge impression on him too but he was in a better position to contain the awe. To be alive and to live in such a city was to expect and experience such modernity on a daily basis. However, the time spent away from it had sharpened his appreciation and given him good reason to see both sides of Man's progress. Right here, at this moment, it was hard not to enjoy the very real upwardly mobile highlights of innovation.

"We're going up in the world Ali."

"You're telling me." Ali's eyes found it almost too much to take in.

"I for one am going to make the most of it."

"Can you wake me up when this is all over?"

Ty let out a little laugh. "Well I have no idea when that will be, my advice is to keep dreaming."

The cube came to a halt, the opposite side turned opaque and they walked through. They were separated from the blue sky above by only a crystal clear material that provided the ultimate roof to this amazing building. A sign led them to their rooms. Ty spoke his name at the door which immediately disappeared and they went in.

The best of the best. The rooms were spectacular, everything was a shade of white; cream, ivory and pearl. The lighting was soft and hidden and gave a serene effect, the quiet sounds of gentle waves on a tropical shoreline filled the space but at a volume that was unnoticeable at first. All this and a view over the city. Ali at last gave into her feelings.

"It's wonderful! Can we just stay here forever?!"

Ty was smiling all the way. "CYBEX know what they're doing, they'll want something in return for all this."

"Why are they being so generous?"

"Well, they'll make the whole story look good for themselves. It'll be great public relations, that's one thing they really like. Most of all they'll want me. I'll be the lost sheep, the one who came back to the fold."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"Yes, I guess it is. This, all this is just their way of saying welcome back, take your time, but inevitably we'll see you on Monday morning."

"You get your old job back, you get paid to do what you love."

"That's it. Everything back to the way it was. Business as usual."

"Hey you don't have to think of any of that stuff, right now. Just unwind."

"Yep, you're right, we've come a long way to get here. How bout some room service?"

"I'm well up for that. I'm going to check out my room first, have a shower. You order, something exotic!"

"That's a plan."

Ali span around and headed for her room. Ty sat down on the sofa next to the communications centre and began to browse the menu. When he'd ordered, the idea of a shower was overwhelming and he hit the hot water and fragrant shower gels with great gusto. It was incredible to be so clean after all this time. Washing the negative effects of the journey out of his life forever he appeared in his room with a towel around his waist effectively a man transformed. There were clean clothes, he hadn't even given any thought to there not being any but was pleasantly surprised at the variety of what was provided.

When he was dressed and looking at himself in the mirror he could see the man that he was before the ordeal. Now though, especially in his face and eyes in particular he sensed a man who had grown. The experience had leant him wiser, keener features that gave a clue to an inner metamorphosis. No longer the man-machine, pre-programmed to program. Somehow this change was due to the absent member of their group. E-Zee had held a mirror up to his soul and shown him that there was a human being in there somewhere. Ty knew the flux he felt inside was a full compliment of emotions and it was E-Zee who had brought them out of him. The machine Ty had designed and grown had niftily turned the tables on him and become the teacher himself. The truth of it was that there was a place in his heart where E-Zee lived. Moreover there was plenty of space in that heart for others, for people, not least of whom was Ali.

A chime at the door and Ty finished adjusting a shirt collar as he walked through to answer it. Two waiters brought the food in and offered to

set up on the table. Ty just let them get on with it as he stood by the window taking in the view. What a creation. One could only marvel at its power and scope but for Ty now there were questions. Was this the pinnacle of Man? If we could climb even higher what would the world look like then? He had learned that there may be simpler ways of life that could be just as satisfying. As he pondered these thoughts he sensed Ali in the room and turned around.

She was a vision in blue. A delicate, thigh length dress hung from thin straps over her shoulders. He always knew that Ali had an uncommon beauty of her own but now he could see her femininity shine through. He was staring and Ali felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"Well say something. What do you think?"

"I'm... You look great."

"Thank you. Anything else?"

"Yes, I mean, you look great."

"You said that before. We're going to have to work on your vocabulary. Any superlatives?"

"Amazing. Incredible, really.. Wow!"

"That's better. What have we got to eat? I'm half starved."

They sat at the table looking in wonderment at the selection that lay before them. There was a whole salmon, steamed and garnished with some fresh herbs, slices of rare roast beef, some small poultry, and thickly sliced venison. Surrounding these were plates piled with colourful vegetables. Plates of fruit added more colour to the table. It was a feast that neither could contemplate for long, soon helping themselves to generous helpings, including wine of which there was a plentiful supply. Due to their recent history and detainment their appetites were on the side of suffering and in contrast to their beautiful, delicate and pristine surroundings they began to eat in a way that left manners and etiquette to one side.

Save for a few grunts and groans of pleasure both were lost in the business of feeding until Ty at last looked up to take a rest from his gorging only to notice Ali do the same. She laughed when their eyes met and spoke the first words of the meal.

"I guess we could do with slowing down a bit, we're not animals..."

"Oh but that's exactly what we are Ali, and right now I'm happy to say that."

Ali felt a little self-conscious at this and sat back for a moment, "This food isn't going to just get up and leave, perhaps we ought to just breathe for a while and take stock."

"You're right, there's much to be said for enjoying the finer things in life at a civilised pace." Ty put more food in his mouth before being stopped mid-mouthful by Ali who had to satisfy her curiosity as much as her need for physical sustenance.

"Where's all this going Ty? What happens next? This doesn't feel very real and I can't see it lasting. I know the nightmare is over but dreams have a habit of coming to an end too and I can't see this one being any different."

Ty wiped his mouth with a napkin, "I think we're both going to be ok. There will be decisions to be made but I believe this place might be the perfect setting to consider the options." He waved his fork around at the interior of the space, "Look, its perfect, a little world just for us to gather our thoughts and make our next moves." He seemed totally at ease and relaxed with his thoughts but Ali was not so sure.

"I can see your future Ty, but what about mine? I'm not a mind reader but I can tell that what you want is already mapped out. What do you want?"

Ty put down his cutlery, "I've given it a lot of thought Ali, a lot. There's only a few ways to play this hand and here they are. I can go back to what I know, like nothing's changed, except of course everything has changed, it won't be like before. There would be nostalgia, there would be a lot of work to do but there would also be different attitudes towards me. Its only reasonable that I would be treated like a bit of a freak. Maybe I would soon climb to such a position so that would be of little significance but I've changed and I would know that I was being treated as some kind of curious specimen. It would never be the same."

"So you're saying that you can't have what you thought you wanted?" Ali liked where this line of reasoning might lead.

"That's it. I've got a bit of a plan. What if I go back, on this wave of publicity, get my credentials and privileges back, then leave when everything settles down."

"I'm not sure I get you. You want to get a feeling for what you had, get in your groove and then just up and leave? How do I fit into this little scheme of yours?"

"I want you around Ali," Ty looked around the room for some inspiration as to what he was trying to say, there was little and he had to dig deep. "I like you but I can't figure it all out. You do like it here right?"

She felt the signs of a new story ahead and instinctively welcomed the thread. "I like it here, I do, and I like you Ty but after what we've been through together and losing E-Zee and everything it all feels so... unnatural. Do you know what I mean?"

"I thought that you wanted all this, the state of the art, the cutting edge modernity?" He felt as though the world they were in now, his world was somehow not up to the expectations of this young woman who had come from the back of beyond to get here.

"I wanted to see it and I have. Its not that I'm disappointed, far from it. This place has knocked me sideways, there's no doubt I couldn't have imagined it any greater, any more impressive. But, how can I say this, its not me, it represents a life that I just can't live, its not what I can call home. Do you see?"

"I understand," Ty felt his ideas had come to an end. Perhaps the effects of his experience had finally caught up with him, he looked finished and suddenly the rest of the food seemed too much. "So what does happen next?"

Ali looked quietly confident. "Well, Mr. Tyrone Jones, I've managed to do some thinking of my own regarding plans and suchlike. Do you want to hear my angle on the whole game?"

"Yeah sure, I'm all ears," Ty was genuinely intrigued as to what she might say given that he had failed to find a way forward that included the two of them. He only hoped that her ideas included him in the sense that they could be together at least for a while longer. He had begun to realise, since the loss of E-Zee, that Ali was all he had in this life. Unfortunately her first words extinguished this hope.

"I want to go to St. Lucia for a holiday."

"Oh."

"E-Zee, bless his soul, told me all about it and I think its just what I need right now. I mean come on, a holiday! Do you think we could get CYBEX to pay for it?"

"Possibly."

"You don't like it?"

"Well, I mean it's a great idea, everyone could make do with a holiday every now and then, it just, where do I fit in?" Ty sounded like a little lost boy.

"You come too! After you've done with your fun trip down memory lane as an employee, you hop on a plane and come and see me. Simple!"

All at once a bright light came on within Ty. To see Ali so buoyant and upbeat, to see that she held her hand so close to her chest and then played it so swiftly made him feel wanted in a fundamental way and his spirits immediately came alive. There was only one word for it, "Brilliant!"

Ali felt justifiable proud of her solution to their problems and lifted a glass in a toast.

"To exotic islands and those who tell tales of them!"

"Cheers! Here's to E-Zee!" As he drank, an idea began to form, concerning his synthetic friend but he knew it would take a while for it to grow to completion. For now he looked at Ali whose beauty glowed and lit up the night which had fallen around them to reveal a cityscape bejewelled with lights of its own on show from the penthouse panorama.

They drank and ate and talked and laughed. With music playing there was even a little comical dancing. At some point in the early hours they agreed it was probably best to go to bed. Ty sensed a moment when they stood close, he smelled a fragrance from Ali's hair and then in slightly giddy care-free moment their lips met. The sensation was all too brief for them both but moving apart from each other's touch continued naturally moving them towards their own bedrooms. Ty felt positively high from the evening's magic, it was good for it to fade in this way. Ali was very happy too but shyness came over her that to Ty appeared incredibly mystical. She waved,

"Good night Ty, see you in the morning."

"Yeah, sleep well, dream dreams."

"Will do, you too. Night."

Ty was in bed and feeling warm and calm, and his mind and body were thoroughly relaxed. He was soon sleepy, feeling no need to review the crazy day that had just played itself out. Then Ali came to his door, she spoke to him softly.

"Hey, you need some company?"

Those words made his heart soar, as she joined him in bed there were very few more spoken. They made love gently, revealing a physical side to their attraction that had grown but lain dormant. It was a beautiful night of passion and when it had passed they fell into a deep dream sleep that dissolved all tensions with colourful visions of the future.

Chapter Nineteen

Back to Work

They spent three days in that suite of rooms, eating, drinking, laughing, listening to music, dancing and making love. They had a lot of fun and allowed themselves to do nothing but enjoy each other's company. Telling stories, remembering their own story together and generally losing themselves in the many moments that presented themselves. They needed this transition, this abandonment to pleasure, as much as they needed each other. It was a period of restoration and bliss. However after three days they began to feel a little guilty of their self indulgence, Ty in particular as he came to the decision he needed to contact his people at CYBEX.

His enquiries took him straight to the top, there were people who wanted to talk with him, one man in particular. Ranulf Davis was the CEO and had been running the corporation for the best part of twenty years. He was known to be extremely intelligent with his finger on the pulse of every beat of the organisation's heart. Normally a person who was incredibly hard to get to, Ty found himself through to him on a hologram communicator with much efficiency. Their conversation was brief.

"Hello Mr Jones! Is it alright if I call you Tyrone?" The voice boomed at Ty and the face expressed great joy and immediate friendship.

"Certainly Mr. Davis, that's fine by me."

"Please call me Ranulf. Now, we need to speak, not like this I'd like to meet the man in person. Can you talk with my secretary and arrange a time suitable for us both?"

"Yes, I have some things I'd like to talk about with you too."

"Excellent, then that's settled. I look forward to shaking your hand."

"Good, I hope to see you shortly."

The meeting was made for the very next day, Ty didn't want to hang around, and there was an opening in Davis' schedule. So, after gathering his thoughts and having had a good night's sleep he found himself entering the inner sanctum of the CYBEX corporation building downtown.

There were no laboratories here, no research scientists either, just the immense network of an immense administration complex that served the company's interests worldwide. Even Ty, used as he was to the operation of

its far reaching influence was a little lost by the grandeur and sheer modernism of its essence. The architecture itself was nothing less than a kind of ice palace, albeit constructed from a variety of synthetic, transparent materials. The interior architecture had elements that suggested many forms of novel techniques creating illusions of a lack of gravity and suspension of the vast construction in spite of natural forces. The overall effect on Ty was the intended one, this organisation was apparently capable of the impossible.

His journey to Davis was one which created a sense of wonder, a dream-like state that only came to an end with the very real handshake from Davis himself. Their conversation was contained by a space that was a cocoon of light, with views to the sky above. The minimalism of the place was stark save for a few items of furniture and some antique astronomical devices that pointed to the heavens. Ranulf Davis stood out boldly against this background and wore several shades of blue, he greeted Ty warmly and they were soon talking freely.

"I can understand your reluctance to get involved with the media Tyrone, believe me we have had enough trouble with them over the years, but that is exactly why you could be so helpful. Good public relations are so important, not just for the image of the company but to help bridge the gap between us and the people who can benefit most from us. Do you see?"

"Look Mr. Davis, Ranulf, I get the bigger picture but I really wouldn't look forward to any more public exposure, even to promote the best interests of CYBEX, but I will participate. On one condition." Ty looked both serious and hopeful.

"Go on."

"I'd like to attempt repairs, and possibly a complete rebuild of the EZ1 unit that was instrumental in seeing my trial come to the correct conclusion." This thought had been at the back of Ty's mind ever since he gained knowledge of his friend's destruction.

"Ah yes, I imagine you may have become quiet attached during your ordeal. You do realise that our best designers have already extracted the best of him and that the rest is just, well, waste."

"I'm aware of the difficulties, but with your assistance, and the help of some of my former colleagues, I would like to return to my lab, with a very small budget and possibly import a new base model with which to work on and try out some new things I've been thinking through."

"I'm not sure you're aware of this Mr. Jones, as it has a fairly high security clearance, and I hope it won't upset you too much, but the EZ1 model has been discontinued. It was found to have a flaw in its emotive system. You know the military likes its units to be without extraneous elements

such as feelings and dare I say it, dreams. We've had to recall the line in order to commence eradication of the problem, such imperfections are against that particular client's needs."

Ty was a little set back. "When you say eradication what exactly do you mean? Are we talking complete system cleansing?"

"Removal of the entire unit Mr. Jones. Deletion."

Ty wasn't going to let this stop him. He swallowed and pushed forward. "Still, I would like to try and in return for this great help I'll commit to your public relations program for as long as it takes to do my work."

Davis thought for just a moment. "Very well Mr. Jones. You may commence your speculative little project but I will be counting on you to hold up your end of our deal."

"Certainly Mr. Davis. You can count on me. Oh and would it be possible to keep the room at The Andromeda? Until I find somewhere else more appropriate of course." He held out his hand, Davis looked at him seriously for a long pause and then jumped back into his jovial self, "Of course."

They shook hands and Ty was out of there, mission completed. During his journey back to the streets Ty was no longer gazing in awe at his surroundings. Instead he had his head down, processing his immediate future which meant most importantly to him any possibilities that would lead to success when it came to re-engineering, re-building and ultimately, he had to admit it, re-incarnating E-Zee. The resolve to see his friend again was so strong that he didn't for one moment consider failure as an option.

It was with great pleasure that he told Ali about his plans for the next month or so. If he was right about E-Zee he hoped it wouldn't be any longer than that. She found it hard to believe their little piece of penthouse paradise would continue to be theirs and was immediately making plans of her own to take in every attraction that the city had to offer.

Without delay Ty went directly to the laboratory. It was more than strange to pull up outside his former place of work. The last time he had arrived here was on the morning of his arrest. It was exactly the same, but he had changed. Now, as futuristic as this place was, he felt it was already in his past. A leap in consciousness combined with the effects of his long term exposure to E-Zee had transformed his perspective. No longer was he the upwardly mobile and ambitious employee of the world's premier synthetic manufacturer, he had advanced, now he was just human.

For just a while though he had to reign in his new found humanity and return to being the man for whom the man-machine interface was everything. There was work to be done. How would his long-time co-workers

seem to him now? How would he appear to them? He stepped into the building and made his way through the familiar spaces as though returning to an old school from whence great advances had been made. He readied himself, expecting to encounter surprise.

Thinking of the Robo-Hedz and the reaction he would receive from them he gave no thought to the first person he would meet. The receptionist sat in exactly the same place that Magenta had made her own. This young lady was so different in appearance but that had little impact on Ty for her greeting was so similar. She recognised him immediately, media coverage is good at introducing you to others before you have been introduced to them he thought.

"Good day Mr. Jones, how may I help you?"

There was a delay before Ty smiled. "Hi. I was wondering if you could direct me to the team that were working on the EZ1 unit?" Already he felt the advantages of having some small amount of fame, no need to introduce yourself, no need to explain yourself.

"Certainly, most of them should be in zone Alpha 7, that's just along..."

"Thank you," Ty interrupted, "I think I'll be able to find my way."

"Have a nice day!"

"That's the plan." Ty strolled off and soon came to the zone. He could see them all before they saw him; Zack, Tobias, Naz. When they noticed him walking towards them it was a short pause and then a wave of cheers that greeted his arrival.

"Hey, here's the man of the moment!" Naz, stood up from his chair, the others even started clapping.

Zack and Tobias slapped him on the back and they all talked passionately about his trial. Soon the conversation moved towards the past events that had sparked Ty's arrest but Ty wanted to move on.

"Hey guys, it's so great to see you all but I wonder if we might forget about the analysis of the past for a while. I can't thank you enough for the hours you must have put in to help save my hide but the fact of the matter is I'm here to work."

Tobias was overjoyed, "You got your job back!"

"Well kind of. It's more of a personal project that CYBEX have agreed to fund. I even spoke about it to Ranulf Davis."

"You spoke to The Chief?" Zack could hardly believe it as Ranulf Davis was for him, something akin to a god on Mount Olympus.

"I did. He's a decent enough sort. Anyways, in return for doing him a few public relations favours he's allowed me to have a crack at getting E-Zee, I mean the EZ1 unit, back up and running."

There was a subdued calm as the three of his colleagues looked down. It was Naz that spoke first.

"There's not much left of him Ty, to say he's in a pretty poor state is a huge understatement. We had to fairly pull his core system apart to get at that data."

Ty was undeterred, "Let's go have a look at him, can we?"

They made their way to a lab on the upper levels. Ty walked in and then stopped in his tracks as he saw the dismembered parts of his friend in a chaotic mess on an operating table. His fears were realised and for just a moment his hope drained from within, quickly though he gathered his professionalism and began giving direction to his team. There was much to be done and standing mournfully, staring at inanimate matter was not going to help. He had a plan of sorts and he had the technological means and manpower to put it into action.

Ali was a free agent. She had a base in the plush penthouse apartment, she had credits and clothes. Her aim was simple, she wanted to see as much of this city and what it had to offer as she could. Two places in particular interested her, the zoo and the museum of technology. Yes, there were art galleries and places to buy fine things, there were cafes and restaurants but it was these two places that interested her most and of course the architecture of the buildings and the infrastructure of the city itself would keep her happily occupied for many days.

She was walking on air. Coming out of The Andromeda where she had been cooped up, surviving on room service, the love of Ty and a steady stream of infotainment, the open space immersed her in a shower of light and modernity. Skyscrapers dominated this part of downtown, their height and design an evolution of materials and novel building practices developed over time. It was easy to drift along staring forever upwards to their summits which did indeed appear to scrape the sky. The California sun bounced in vast arrays of colours from the shimmering surfaces that were all but mirrors reflecting the glory of design back upon itself.

Having decided to shun the Magnetic Levitated public transport system for the joy and slower pace of simple walking, Ali moved forwards in a vaguely directed exploration. It was all she could do to tear her eyes away from her upward gaze at the pinnacles of power so that they came to rest upon street level and those that existed and moved here.

Everywhere was so clean and pure. White was the preferred and even default colour of dress. Many were exclusively attired in a bleached, bright

white that created the illusion that this was some kind of domain inhabited solely by saints and angels. Most made the effort to break this spell by adding carefully chosen splashes of colour. Whether it was a red sleeve, an orange collar, blue shoes, a yellow stripe across the back or a green pattern on the chest, these people were obviously personalising the fashion of the day with carefully chosen bursts of pigments that may or may not have had a deeper symbolic meaning.

Ali felt out of place in that everything she wore was a colourful blend of mixed tones. Without a single piece of white clothing she felt that at the very least she was displaying a distinct lack of fashion sense and perhaps also a lack of understanding and even respect for the culture she found herself inhabiting.

After this observation Ali began to relax, smiling in the knowledge that she stood out. She had no fear and her self consciousness was rather a means to express her happy mood. No one seemed to pay her any extra attention and soon she was in a little bubble of her own creation that enabled her to float through, around and sometimes over this urban fashionscape.

Shortly the Museum of Technology came into view. It was a toroid, a donut shaped building about five stories high. Its highly polished turquoise shell radiated a particular spectrum that reminded Ali of oil in water. Upon entry she realised the interior was a kind of corkscrew with a gentle incline winding upwards around the circumference. It encouraged her to walk on and began to take her slowly upwards and around the displays that lined the circular route.

Immediately she was back in the world that her Uncle had sketched out for her. Indeed some of the first items on show were very similar to objects she had inherited from him.

A typewriter caught her eye, mechanical and ancient but with the same basic keyboard that would adorn so many computers that followed.

A bicycle from the 1970s, over one hundred years old, looked like a lot of fun. Its front wheel was smaller than its rear, it had a long seat, some kind of gear lever on the central frame and the word "Chopper" in a bright metallic decal.

A pale blue motorised scooter looked very cool, it was called a "Vespa", Ali liked that and wondered at the meaning of its name.

A full size working model of an internal combustion engine purred along but only at a few revolutions per minute. This one was made solely from transparent materials that enable one to see its inner workings.

Early cell phones made Ali laugh, the size of them and their basic operations. Still, In-Ear Micro Telephones had to have an origin somewhere.

Inevitably a large section of the museum's layout was dedicated to computers. Here Ali felt on firm ground. From the Abacus to the Super Computer. From the Electronic Calculator to the World Wide Web. From Virtual Reality to the Ultranet. From the Personal Computer to Cyberspace and beyond. It seemed that the inception, evolution, development and stratospheric exponential rise of this machine had no boundaries. Physical limitations of Silicon had been met and superseded. Neural networks and biological DNA computers the new standard. Apparently Man had mastered the ability to extend his own powers of reasoning outside of himself. There was very little he could not do, thought Ali as she moved on to the section on Space Exploration.

Satellites, probes, space-suits, the Moon-Lander, The Space Shuttle, Extra Vehicular 'Jet Packs', Rovers to land on planets and comets. All these were many decades old. Optical telescopes, Radio telescopes, Space telescopes and the age-old project to seek out and contact extra-terrestrial life on exo-planets similar to our own.

Everything was represented as models and holograms on this circular spiral to the top of the building, to the top of technological achievement. It seemed to Ali that the progress was deterministic, never ending and unstoppable. A development here, a breakthrough there and paradigm shifts on a constant basis. Swiftly walking through the displays on warfare which held no interest for her, merely forming a depression that had to be shaken off, she came to an area set aside for energy production.

Fossil fuels had had run their course. Man had woken up just in time. There was simply not enough space on Earth for a being to destroy his home planet in the pursuit of progress for its own sake. A kind of biological self preservation gene had ultimately burst into action on a global scale and gone was the pillaging of the planet. Ali read: "When the world woke up it was to this fact: The sunlight reaching the Earth in only one year provides more energy than all the fossil fuel resources, collected over the course of hundreds of millions of years." A quantum leap in solar cell efficiency, brought about by the combined work of a precious handful of people who were nothing less than geniuses had revolutionised the planet. Now we were, and always would be, a global entity whose inhabitants gained all necessary energy from The Sun.

There was only one level left, one turn of this giant spirally inspired construction, for Ali to complete her intense experience. Android evolution was covered from concept to the present day. The modern idea of the robot went back in literature some two hundred years. Mary Shelly's Frankenstein, Fritz Lang's "Maria" in Metropolis and then a succession of equally fictitious but increasingly more realistic creations. Movies became

littered with the idea of 'the artificial person' and of course as the technology became available many tried their best to transform these ideas into reality, working models. Fiction and fact had converged.

Perhaps with the energy crisis all but solved technologists, scientists and engineers felt the need and the ability simply to 'play'. When the results of this behaviour began to produce creations that were at the very least labour saving devices commercial interest grew and grew, as did funding for their improvement. Certain countries took this endeavour as a national pride. With so much money being put towards these projects and more and more people becoming actively involved it should not have been a surprise that their were revolutions and in this field too.

Human controlled automata became physically independent robots. Neural networks and biomechanical engineering became the building blocks and the driving force for self conscious androids. As computers had become simultaneously and exponentially smaller and more powerful a hundred years ago, so androids became both self aware and more 'human-like' in the modern age.

Ali was fairly exhausted, this two hour trip had been an accelerated journey of discovery for a self-taught woman from a small backward town, albeit with a passionate interest in the subject. Now however all she could think of was a long hot bath in the luxury of her apartment. It took just thirty seconds to descend from top to bottom down the centre of the spiral in a tubular elevator. When she walked out onto the street she was full of knowledge but wondered if this would later translate into a happy wisdom that she might use every day.

It was a troubling walk home as she thought around the purpose of this gigantic organisation with its foundations so firmly in its belief in technology. The story of the Indian Elder came to the front of her mind as she looked at these people of the future dressed in white whom she passed on the street. She knew she didn't want to be like them.

Chapter Twenty

One of a Kind

Ty was using every element of his intellect and education combined with the support and assistance of his three co-workers in order to attempt the re-assembly of E-Zee. He had quickly had to accept what he had been told, that this unit was not just faulty, it was simply beyond repair. He knew what had to happen next.

With the clearance that he had obtained from Davis he began communications with the production plant in China. Hoping to track down an identical unit he was continuously disappointed. The best he could do was to obtain details of an EZ2 unit. This particular model was one of the large numbers that had been discontinued but unlike the EZ1 series this one was yet to be decommissioned and destroyed. Ty was very lucky to trace it as it too was destined to be removed permanently. After some negotiation where Ty felt more like he was bartering with a street vendor than securing a simple international transaction, he secured transfer of the redundant EZ2-614 and was promised delivery by air in three days.

There was much work to be done with what they had available before them. For the trial the Hedz had managed to obtain E-Zee's personal log, at least from the time he met Ty to the event at the Data Server site. They also had the Magenta upload that he had obtained that had proved to be crucial in proving Ty's case. This wasn't enough. The upload could be discarded as far as Ty was concerned, what would E-Zee, or rather a future E-Zee, need it for? It would just be a bad memory.

It was just the personal log they had to go on. For Ty this wasn't enough either. What defines an android's identity? Memories simply didn't cut it. Of course there were all the individual parameter's that they could retrieve, recreate and set to mimic E-Zee's unique personality and behaviour. That too wasn't enough for Ty.

The end of the day came and Ty went home to think about it. It was great to come back to the apartment to see Ali waiting there for him and she had some answers to his questions.

"I'm sure its not just the aesthetic or the personality profile so just what is it that defines the identity of a synthetic?" Ty was pacing around the suite, desperately trying to nail down what he needed to ask in order to find what he was looking for."

Ali had a tub of ice-cream on the go and paused for just a second to reply. "Same thing as for a regular person I guess."

"Well that just makes it even more difficult doesn't it!" Ty needed to get this right if he was to have any chance of bringing something akin to his friend back into this world and he was getting a little worked up.

"Hey, cool it," Ali already knew what she was going to say, and knew she was right too, but delaying her response gave her a mischievous sense of philosophical superiority. "Think about it, what defines you? Or if you can't handle that, what do you think defines me?"

"Oh man, I don't know. Ability to reason both logically and in an abstract framework? Er... The capacity for original thought? Ideas, beliefs, hopes... Nothing seems to do the trick." He was on the verge of giving up.

"Dreams," Ali took another spoonful of ice-cream, "You've got 'em, I've got 'em, E-Zee had them too."

"Dreams! Great! Even if I knew what they were it would be like putting toothpaste back into a tube. There's nothing material about them, nothing to get a grip on."

"Except," Ali held her spoon in the air, "Except, E-Zee's dreams are tied not only to a whole set of memories but to a specific place. I know, he told me about them."

"Where is this place? What are these memories?" Ali certainly had Ty's complete attention now.

"St. Lucia. Find that memory, you'll find his dream. Find the dream and you'll find E-Zee."

"Genius!" Ty rushed over and gave her a kiss. As he stood there incredulous, just a few inches from her face she reached up with her spoon and put a blob of ice-cream on his nose.

"Can we just chill out now. You can put the theory into practice tomorrow."

"You've got me all to yourself. I want to hear all about your day."

They talked into the night and when Ty left early for work it was with a renewed purpose. He left Ali sleeping in the hugely sumptuous bed, still cosily dreaming her own vivid dreams.

Arriving at the lab before the others he started work immediately. He had but one mission. Locate, isolate and extract as much detailed information related to E-Zee's time in St. Lucia. He would begin with pinpointing any and every conceivable relationship to these events in the unit's

personal log. The Robo-Hedz would not have looked here when performing their extraction and he could only hope that the data would be intact.

By the time Naz, Tobias and Zack had joined him in this quest the EZ1 unit was already hooked up to all diagnostic equipment. It would take days rather than minutes to find what he was looking for, hoping beyond hope that it was indeed there.

In fact, once the search parameters were locked in there was nothing Ty could do except wait. Initially he sat by E-Zee's side but this made him feel like a relative sitting vigil over a coma patient, he couldn't handle that and made the decision he would be best out of the lab for the 48 hours or so that the scan would take to run. Much as he was enjoying working with the Hedz again he realised there was someone else he would rather be with and was soon back at The Andromeda. Ali was there but he found it hard to relax, which was why she suggested the Zoo.

The city zoo had a reputation world wide for its size and the large variety of specimens it housed. The building itself had been pre-visualised by a Scandinavian architect who brought a flavour of that ice cold region of the Earth to the sunny climate of the Californian coast. It's staggered, multi-level buildings were fanned out in an arc much like a hand of cards. The interior and exterior seemed to flow effortlessly from one to the other and the different habitats needed to maintain the correct environments for the different animals also fused from one to the next.

To walk through this attraction was to go on a journey from continent to continent and to marvel at the flora and fauna that once thrived in these places. For the zoo was in every respect a museum too. Every creature living here represented the last legacy of its ancestors who were now extinct in their wild homes. This artificial home contained the last remaining examples of the beauty of much of the animal kingdom.

Some were 'real' in the sense that they had been acquired from their natural habitat. Others were also genuine but had been born in captivity, breeding programs that had once hoped to repopulate the species by reintroducing them back into the wild. Many were clones, desperate attempts if truth be told to keep something of the gene pool alive. Inevitably the majority were synthetics.

Perhaps it was only the children who came through here everyday who were oblivious to these seemingly superficial differences. An innocence regarding the history of damage that Man had created, destruction of great swathes of rain forest leading to elimination of an animal's home environment. Wars that had ravaged through entire countries leaving scars as great as these commercial enterprises took more land away from beasts that had lived on this planet for far longer than us. Overpopulation of Man had simply squeezed out many species leaving them nowhere to hunt, breed

and shelter. Finally, outlawed poaching of many of the last few specimens, to become play things for the rich and powerful, finished off the rest.

So the zoo was perhaps a sad place as well as a place of learning and wonder. Ali decided not to read the true nature of each animal preferring instead to imagine them all in a home far away from the reach of Man's greed and stupidity. What she saw created both a feeling of awe and one of shame and the tension between these emotions made tears roll down her cheeks.

Ty was silent for the most part. He saw the beauty in these fine animals, more than anything he was struck by the way they moved. A Siberian tiger paced around its enclosure, its feline poise and graceful motion heightened the inner strength it possessed. A roar, let out at only half volume, hinted at its immense aggression, an asset it would never need to use.

Some mountain gorillas sat feeding on vegetation and although the male's power was visually obvious, he looked docile. Then an adolescent brushed clumsily by and only a suggestion of anger was enough for Ty to know this beast could rip a man in two. A mother came up close to them, holding her baby and stared through the transparent barrier. Ty looked into her eyes, and immediately needed no proof that this ape had some kind of soul. Its expression invited help but also an indifference to its captors, she walked away satisfied that there was no threat in the eyes of this man.

The immensity of the polar bears gave Ali a sensation that their naturally derived power and survival instinct was no match for the brutal onslaught which humankind had continuously and almost ritually inflicted on its fellow guests on the planet. Having seen the Birds of Paradise Ali asked Ty if they could leave this living museum and go home.

Back in The Andromeda both were subdued. The trip to the zoo had left them with mixed emotions and little understanding of how to begin expressing them. Ty attempted to lift the mood with his optimistic outlook for E-Zee's future prospects but Ali could sense his optimism was a mere front.

They went to bed early and once again Ty left first thing in the morning, leaving only a note to suggest that Ali spend a while buying some clothes for her trip to the West Indies. When she awoke and read the message she was confused and not sure whether Ty wanted to join her on the journey or remain at CYBEX to continue his work and research. Whatever the case it was becoming clear that E-Zee, at least in a form recognisable to her, would not be coming along himself.

The news at the lab was encouraging. With the scan almost complete Ty had to wait but a few hours with the guys, talking about their next moves given different scenarios. And then suddenly, with nothing but a flashing light to indicate completion, the full data check was over. Zack and Naz began

analysing the results. Ty was interested in only the one thing. Were E-Zee's dream memories in a fit state to be reinstalled in another unit?

Pacing back and forth whilst the others undertook the task, Ty decided to call the company's courier service to check on that EZ2 synthetic. Excellent news! It had been waiting at the cargo entrance for more than two hours. Ty hurried down and took charge of the transportation to the lab.

The seven foot long oval shaped container was of a shiny blue hard case construction. It was easy enough to move it through the building via a system of tubes designed for this very purpose. In less than an hour it was placed on a surface next to the horrific butchered mess that was the body of EZ1-613.

Zack and Naz were following clues with some success and pinning down the references designated by Ty to be of importance. Soon they had the complete set of dream memories in a specific format that he had requested. The arrival of EZ2-614 could not have been more timely. They opened the casket and there he was.

Obviously the entire unit was refrigerated and surrounded by ice. However the first thing that Ty was aware of was the face. It was the face of his friend. Fortunately there had been no perceived need to update the model's aesthetics but Ty knew from experience that such similarity in looks was literally superficial when considering not only personality but the deeper attributes that he was attempting to recreate; character, uniqueness and a quality that was special and peculiar only to one.

With no time to spare the four of them, working as a team, had to set all the basic personality traits to coincide with the original unit's, everything from voice patterns to body language and nervous traits. Then they had to upload all available personal logs and physical memories. Here Ty made a few decisions on the spot, he would use all available data they had but he would cut out the Magenta uploads and the Police patrolman's unfortunate demise – surely no one would choose to have access to such violent sensory experience.

All this did not take as long as was expected, so fluently did the team work together. It was just as well because the St. Lucia dream memory implant was a little more tricky. Ty had decided to provide an experimental upgrade that would channel all abstract audio and visual information into a modified organic virtual memory. This was to be dedicated dream zone storage and Ty had absolutely no idea whether it would even be functional. Still he felt the need, gave the instructions and his team complied very ably given the cutting edge nature of the work. Still it took time.

It was way gone midnight before they were able to reach a position whereby they could leave for the night. EZ2-614 lay in a state of suspended

animation with many procedures being undertaken automatically including the vital uploads of dream data, rich as it was with sensory information.

When Ty returned to the suite of rooms at The Andromeda, Ali was already asleep. The only evidence of her day's activities were a large number of empty carrier bags, new clothes both for her and him spread over the living area, and, Ty noticed, some very cool matching sets of luggage. He smiled, she knew he wanted to join her and decided that it was imperative tomorrow that he book tickets for their voyage. The timing was going to be crucial and he wasn't exactly confident that he could pull it all together at the last minute but he was exhausted and soon thought of nothing but sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

Time to Fly

Just before leaving for work Ty noticed a message on the quietly beeping communications centre. He thought to ignore it but then again it might be something important. Sure enough it was: a note from Ranulph Davis himself.

"Hope your little project is going swimmingly Ty. I've arranged a small media spot for you tomorrow, they'll all be there and you can tell your story and big up the company, make it count we all need the good publicity. Its 2pm and to make it painless I've booked The Andromeda Conference Centre. Sorry for the short notice, I hope it doesn't eat into your plans, but we have to make the most of your celebrity whilst you're still shining bright in the big picture so to speak. Oh yes, you'll also be glad to hear I've arranged transfer of all your monetary assets to your new account. The sale of your house, your compensation and part salary for your inconveniences. I trust you'll find it satisfactory, you can pick up the relevant credit facility at The Andromeda financial desk. Have a nice day!"

The media conference right at this point in time was a major problem. However it was more than offset by the financial news. Ty had been hoping for this but was surprised at the speed with which it had happened. He was immediately analysing the new information which would bring forward the process he had been privately mulling over since the end of the trial.

His next steps in the developing, ongoing plan were being calculated in the not inconsiderable logic capacity of his humble human brain. The next thirty six hours would require his utmost focus and that a string of actions be put in place to secure a future for himself and Ali, and for that matter E-Zee too. He picked up his new account at the financial desk, now he was fully charged and flush money-wise and at maximum potential physically and emotionally he left the lobby in a stride that was both powerful and relaxed.

By the time he reached the lab, he had made an active mental list of all that was necessary, it was some seven items in length and it was all he could do to prioritise it and keep all actions alive and floating in his immediate consciousness.

1. Advance EZ2 reinstatement as far as possible.
2. Investigate Cruise Ship to St. Lucia availability.
3. Investigate direct flight availability.

4. Get Ali up to speed on latest developments.
5. Give Hedz appropriate instructions.
6. Prepare speech for media event.
7. Buy something special for Ali.

The work on EZ2 was ongoing. Although Ty felt like he was back in the swing of things and sometimes losing himself in the processes he now knew that he was driven by a different sense of self and what he was trying to do. This wasn't just another version of another update of another improvement to yet another android. Here he was trying to fix a friend. This personal involvement in the work hadn't gone unnoticed by the Hedz who, talking about their observations when he wasn't there, wondered how healthy it was for a man to be obsessing so passionately about the character of a single synthetic.

From Ty's point of view his activity was of the utmost importance. Somehow this had become a labour of love. There was more going on here for him and not just because E-Zee had been a friend. He was attempting to restore a reality. More it was a case of forcing his own memories back into the present. For Ty, E-Zee was still alive, alive in the codes through which he now trawled. He currently existed in a kind of limbo, his reality was literally on ice and there was a certain quality that he needed in order to define this reality. This quality was as a colour or a texture, specific to both the object and the subject who perceives it. It was a variable that lived somewhere in-between E-Zee and his designer and Ty wanted to pluck it out of the air whilst it was still tangible and he wanted to do it with a precision that would leave no room for error.

Straining at this immense task for most of the day Ty only took breaks to attend to the other items on his mental list. He discovered that there were no Cruise ships leaving from the city this week or indeed the next. However, there was one that was currently further down the coast, moored at San Diego which would soon be ready to up anchor and head South. Having travelled around Central America and through The Panama Canal it would call at St. Lucia on its way North. Surely this was the one, if he and Ali could hop onboard in the next couple of days they would be away. Consumed with the cybernetic engineering task at hand he felt sure that he could leave further investigation to Ali and called her quickly.

"So, if you can just find out if they have any free berths and let me know, we can take it from there."

"Sure, its not a problem. How are you doing there?"

"Its hard work, it looks good but I think that there might just be too much to handle, it looks like it might take longer than I originally thought." Ty

was being realistic and sounded fairly dejected. It was hard to keep upbeat when you're so tired.

"Well just keep at it, I'm sure you'll do your best."

"Thanks, I'm trying."

"I'll see you when you get back. Good Luck!"

"Yeah, I definitely need that. Bye."

"Bye."

And it was straight back to reapplying himself once again to the job. Zack and Tobias had to almost prise him away as the sun was setting, urging him to get some sleep as surely his tiredness was in no one's best interests. EZ2 still lay motionless but by this time all remnants of the original E-Zee had either been removed or integrated into their new host.

This evening Ty was home early enough to share a meal with Ali who told him of her investigations into their travel plans.

"This is it, the ship leaves San Diego tomorrow evening. Its no good."

Ty who had been buzzing with ideas all day had still not had a chance to let them lie dormant and be organised by his subconscious. Instead of being dispirited by their lack of good fortune he pounced on this new development as though he were a wild animal attacking it's prey.

"We can make it. Book two tickets onboard the ship and two seats on a flight to get us there in time."

"There's not enough time Ty, you've got the media event and the work on E-Zee, it just can't be done."

"Do it, book the tickets first thing in the morning."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yep, sure as I'll ever be, you'll just have to trust me. It'll all come together just you wait and see."

"Well if you're sure I can see if I can do it tonight."

"Even better."

They ate in a kind of suspended silence, where no more words were required. After they had eaten Ali went about the bookings. She came back smiling and read from a piece of paper.

"We have two reservations on 'The Black Prince' departing San Diego 2200Hrs and two flight tickets from here departing 1715Hrs, arriving San Diego 1817Hrs. Plenty of time."

"Clever girl, that's awesome. I'll give the Media what they want and then we can be out of here."

"What about E-Zee?"

"Well, I've given it a lot of thought and you know what the problem is, I'm too close to the project. I've given it my all and I'm just going to have to let go and hand it all over to the boys. They're the best and will be able to tie up all the loose ends. I'll go in tomorrow one last time and lay it all out for them and if they're successful, when they're successful, I'll leave contact details and they can reach us when the job is complete."

"What's E-Zee going to do?"

"If I'm worth my salt, he'll be able to make his own mind up but with a bit of luck he'll choose to join us. I don't want to give him any instructions or orders. If he's half the man I hope he's going to be he'll just get on with his life. However..."

Ty paused for effect.

"However, if the dream memory system works he'll join us in St. Lucia, all of his own accord, following his dreams all the way. And I hope he hasn't changed much."

The next morning they both got up early, there was a lot to do. Ali had to pack, Ty had to get to the lab to finalise the processes that were already in place and then he had to return for the media ordeal. He hadn't written any speech, but knew roughly what he wanted to say, he was going to have to improvise.

Naz, Tobias and Zack were already there, Zack having spent the night nursing the life support system whilst EZ2 continued to go through the integration of his own internal systems. The stillness with which he slept as this took place belied the monumental amount of activity that was in operation within his seemingly fragile body.

Ty worked hard to attend to the details. These were all important if the finished product were to be recognisable as the trusty synthetic who he had met in a prison of all places those many months ago. Aspects such as sense of humour, emotional range, style of sentence construction and personal reactions to an ever changing environment took much time to even approximate and no little skill to do so. Ty had to work with the palette that he had available to him, he was doing his best and was ably helped by the

three guys who had some new and untested methods they were eager to incorporate.

The whole thing was some kind of cutting edge experiment but his friend was the subject so Ty was meticulous in his artistry in this area. He had to systematically ask and answer questions that kept coming to the front of his mind. Would his friend be in some kind of trauma when he was rejuvenated? Would there be scars both physical and emotional that would simply refuse to heal? How would this new man feel? The ad hoc solutions to these problems were included in the efforts to make the new E-Zee as natural as possible. Ty had been one of the world's most gifted neural network software engineers, if he was not up to the task then no one was, however, he was setting himself the highest of standards.

There was a moment when he had to step back, he literally backed off from the work and made the rational decision that given the time he had done everything he possibly could. Everything else, including the painful reintroduction of the unit into reality would have to be left to the Robo-Hedz. As with any painting there has to be a last stroke of the brush. Ty turned and left, not knowing if this was the final moment of a friendship that had itself changed him beyond all measure.

The journey from the man who had been dating a young android, to this person here and now, had been a transformation. Once he was a man more similar to the machines he helped to create. His mind and even his soul was so dedicated to this man-machine interface, so obsessed with it and so good at improving its quality that he may have himself been mistaken for a synthetic. His thought processes, his logic, his speech and even his behaviour had more in common with his work than it did with the people in his life.

E-Zee's influence had brought him away from all that, had shown him a side of humanity of which he had been previously unaware. Ty was no longer a man-machine, he was a human with a heart, and fate had given him the chance to breathe some of that life energy back into the soul of the being who had blessed him with it.

He could do no more. Final orders, instructions and ideas given to the Hedz, he said his farewells. Many new emotions built up as he realise that he had become close to these guys too, in this brief reunion. They appeared to him so differently now, so much more like friends than just work colleagues. It was also clear to him that they felt differently towards him. The dynamic of personal interaction had changed just at the moment when he had to leave it behind.

On the journey back to the Hotel, Ty felt that he'd abandoned them, but there was a feeling that lives sometimes diverge, he had to make his own way through life. Thoughts of the very immediate future caused him to

refocus on the logistics of the next few hours. Of course there was this stupid media event, and he reluctantly began to give it some thought.

He would be on the centre of the stage, perhaps he should make sure that what he said would count. He played it over. What did he want to say on a personal level? What did they want to hear? What did Ranulf Davis expect him to say? He knew that whatever front he projected would be fake, so the solution, he would just tell the truth. Davis wouldn't like it but for the media it would be a great end to a story that they had whipped up into a hurricane. In the eyes of the public Ty had been lifted to unimaginable levels. Everyone wants to see the bad guy go down, but then to see him get up and fight his way back to the top, to see him come good, well they had a hero on their hands.

On that trip to the hotel he searched his memory for something to make a statement and, out of nowhere, part of a book he had read and memorised as a child came ringing into his consciousness. Random, abstract and perfect, he smiled.

At the hotel suite with Ali there was barely enough time for a quick shower and a change. Ali had packed everything and was sitting quietly waiting but she jumped up when Ty came in the room.

"Hey, how'd it go?"

"You, know I can't say for sure, we've just got to keep our fingers crossed."

"Are you ok?"

"Me, yeah I'm fine, I'll be a lot better when I've got this press thing out of the way though, its been bugging me all morning. Listen, I want you to ring down and secure a vehicle for the airport and get them to send someone up for the luggage. Then just wait outside in the transport, bags in, ready to go. I'll join you straight away the minute the media have finished with me."

Ali became reached out to touch Ty, "You know I trust you, but this is all moving pretty fast, what's the hurry? Can't we just take it easy?"

Ty was in a certain kind of zone, a highly focussed professionalism had taken over and he felt his old self returning in both his efficiency and manner. He took a few deep breaths and tried to explain.

"The whole world is looking at us right now Ali, unless I take control, we'll never be left alone. This is the way it has to be but afterwards we'll be away from all this and able to go at whatever pace we wish. I trust you too, but believe me, us is all we've got at the moment, and that's going to be all the more true if E-Zee doesn't make it."

Ali knew that she was in his capable hands and felt safe because of it and furthermore she knew that he was going to need her more than ever in the weeks to come. "I understand, I do," and then with a quick shift in energy she perked up. "Come on let's do this thing. I'll be waiting for you in the car outside, knock 'em dead."

Ty was back in the groove. They kissed and before he knew it Ali had whisked him out of the door and he was on his way to the Conference Centre. His worries had dissolved and he walked with the ease and confidence of a man who had everything he needed. Then he entered the room.

He was barely on time and the place was packed, perhaps one hundred or more reporters, several Media Capture Cameras and his place on the stage behind a glass table. Ranulf Davis was standing there and welcomed him.

"Cutting it a bit close aren't you Jones. Now remember, the best thing to do is keep it short and sweet. Every chance to promote the company, that's what this is really all about. Don't get too deep about anything and for god sake don't get bogged down in any of that Magenta Simons business, it doesn't look good."

Davis stood and made a short introduction, unable to help himself from advertising the latest CYBEX product and then suddenly Ty was up.

He stood looking at those assembled and appeared to freeze. Actually he was just taking it all in, the sea of faces and machines, hungry for the audio-visual clips that would fuel the continuing saga around the globe. Ty made the most of the scene and remained silent, soaking up the muted energy that radiated from this group of story junkies. Finally he spoke.

"I would like to stand here and tell you that everything is fine. I would like to say that its good to be back to normal. And I would like to make jokes and laugh with you telling witty tales of a miraculous journey. However, I cannot. In short I have gained a friend, lost that friend and fallen in love. The truth is that these experiences have changed me profoundly and rather than bore you with details of how this is so I would rather open the floor to your questions. I'm sure they will lead you to the answers you wish to hear."

Ty pointed to a woman he saw in the front row who had waved her arm and whose face he recognised from watching the media. "Yes."

The lady stood "Following your recent experience Mr Jones what have you learned about the nature of human-android relations?"

"That's a very good question Ms?"

"Mrs. Marjot, World Network News."

"Hi," this was what Ty had feared and could see the answers he was required to give going on, and on, not only for several hours that he desperately needed, but for an entire lifetime. With a bold feeling sweeping through his body he decided that this was where he could terminate that unwanted dialogue before it had begun.

"In answer to your question I would like to recite a passage from the Tao Te Ching, or The Book of The Way."

Ty steadied himself and looked over the gathering of people towards the back of the room. The words came easily to him, somehow transmitted through time from the curious mind of a boy to the voice of the man he had now become.

"He who stands on tiptoe
doesn't stand firm.
He who rushes ahead
doesn't go far.
He who tries to shine
dims his own light.
He who defines himself
can't know who he really is.
He who has power over others
can't empower himself.
He who clings to his work
will create nothing that endures.
If you want to accord with the Tao,
just do your job and let go."

There was silence. Whilst everyone, including Ranulf Davis tried to assimilate what they had just heard Ty simply stood there now sporting a large and natural smile. The journalist from WNW was the first to speak.

"Could you please explain Mr. Jones?"

"Certainly. We have reached a point in our species evolution where we can climb no higher, nor go any faster and or indeed shine any brighter.

We have perfected ourselves so that there is no one or no thing that we cannot control and yet we work so hard to be better. But better than what? Better than we were? But than each other? Better than the best? When will we be satisfied with what we have? I for one have achieved some level of contentment, which is why I'm bowing out of the business."

Again there was silence until the female journalist spoke again.

"What do you mean bowing out?" The lady seemed concerned, if nothing else this was looking like the end of a very successful and long running story.

"My job is done, I'm sure CYBEX will survive without me." The matter of factness that had inhabited Ty's voice surprised even him, but the lady was not yet finished.

"But what are you going to do with your life?"

Ty was now beginning to feel both mischievous and lucid, he had them all in the palm of his hand. "I am no longer aware of my purpose. Perhaps you could say I'm voluntarily redundant... in every way..."

And that was it, time to make an exit. The Conference Centre erupted with the sound of a hundred dissatisfied journalists shouting out towards Ranulf Davis who was desperately trying to control the situation. It was chaos.

Ty made his way out of the room at the side entrance from where he had entered and within minutes was away from the crowd and strolling through the Andromeda's glorious lobby. Outside Ali sat quietly in a transport and it was a casual thing for Ty to climb in next to her.

"How was it?"

"Easy. Lets go. Airport please."

Chapter Twenty-Two

No Replacements Found

The journey to the airport and the flight itself had been uneventful. The two were tired and didn't talk much. Arriving in San Diego at the harbour and having their baggage brought to the cabin went smoothly. It was dark by now and there were but a few to join the cruise at this port of call.

Their accommodation for the next four weeks was small, these economy tickets were all that were available and it was quite a transition from the sumptuous extravagance of the Andromeda suite. Still everything was here; a living area, an en suite bathroom including a shower and a double bed which they soon discovered came down from the roof at the touch of a button. There was no complaining because by this time they were exhausted. They stowed their luggage, in some very creative storage, and were both soon tucked up in the bed.

At 10pm on the dot there was a slight change in the background noise as they noticed the subtle change of the engines coming to life. Being several stories above the engine rooms the feeling was a combination of a low frequency pulsing vibration accompanied by the quiet droning sound. Within moments the vast ship must have undocked from its jetty as the hardly imperceptible, yet definitely present, sensation of freedom from dry land began to lull Ali and Ty into a deep slumber.

When they awoke all reference to time had vanished. Ali had been able to rest over the last few weeks and had recovered some of the energy that had been drained due to the strain of their trial. Ty had simply been going non-stop and his mind and body had welcomed the carefree sleep that the comfortable bed offered.

Slow to rise, they were both eventually ready to explore their new surroundings, something to eat was also a priority. When they had arrived there were precious few people to be seen but as they crept out of their cabin the place was alive. Passengers both old and young were milling around every corridor and room they moved into. Everyone was happy and smiling and many 'Hello's' were said on the way to the deck outside. The final door to the exterior of this vast floating hotel opened with a blast of cool sea air and suddenly they were bathed in the broad daylight of an immense blue sky and the seemingly unending vista to the horizon which accompanied it. The feeling of space and freedom was breathtaking.

The ship they had boarded the night before was just a great lurking shadow, a static monolith that gave no clue to the emotions Ty and Ali began to feel. Here was the palpable taste of the salty sea air and the intriguing perception of motion. The propulsion of this vessel was such that movement through the water was obviously of considerable speed yet its velocity was masked by a smooth and steady progress. Its magnificence had been conceived some thirty years previously and was the greatest gem of its fleet at the time. Her beauty was designed with all the class of that golden age of cruise travel and her features, which might have been considered dated by some, left Ty and Ali enraptured with overwhelming impressions of style.

Land was nowhere to be seen, some twelve hours underway there was nothing but the surrounding expanse of sea all around. Its timeless character proved to be instantaneously mesmerising as it swallowed up all tension, doubts and fears. This is exactly what they had somehow hoped for without being able to fully imagine it. As they walked along the top deck in the open air, Ali found her first impressions hard to put into words.

"Its unreal? I can't believe it. Its like we've arrived somewhere and yet we're still going somewhere. Does that make sense?"

Ty was beginning to experience a strong surging feeling of great wellbeing, "I know exactly what you're talking about."

Apparently everyone aboard was sharing this same magic. The vitality and joy expressed in everyone's body language and powerfully happy faces was apparent at every turn. This was most definitely a destination for the considerable wealthy, clothes were fine, details such as watches, jewellery and shoes didn't go unnoticed by Ali. Her acceleration from just a waitress in a tiny hick town to this was hard to comprehend. Ty perhaps was more used the luxuries that this way of life represented but he really was not ready for it all either.

The following few weeks were an exploration of this place, and their love for one another. Their dream holiday was a magnificent game in which they were the main players and the ship was their playground. They were to meet many people from all countries and from all walks of life, all of whom were fascinated by their story. What they were to discover was that everyone here had a story of some sort, some were sad, some like theirs, were truly incredible and beyond belief. Slowly they realised all here were sharing something in common, all were becoming great storytellers, and all were learning the art of becoming great listeners too.

The cruise took them south. Although there were some stops scheduled, the main philosophy of this way of travel was to be one of continuous movement away from any land, any country. The ship was itself a

satellite country all of its own and its citizens were very happy with that situation.

The first place they were to stop at was Acapulco. Passengers had two days to see the sights of this wondrous place. Stepping off the ship Ty and Ali felt less at ease walking on 'terra firma' than they were expecting. Although this city in Mexico was surely a beautiful place it was definitely a resort. As such it represented people, from all over the world no doubt, who appeared to have come as far as they could, arrived at the coast and then had to stop. Passengers on the ship were largely pleased to re-board in the knowledge that they had cut ties with the land completely.

Ali was happy to drift along in a free spirited manner. Ty knew that this journey, would change their lives forever, not only were they cutting loose from a mainland they were cutting loose from modernity, technology and perhaps even all notions of what they had come to define as civilisation. What awaited them when they were eventually to step off the ship forever? What could be new forms of motivation and ways of life? These questions only bothered Ty for a few moments at a time and less and less so as time moved on. In this case the journey was indeed more important than the destination.

Initially the two of them had played with the idea of concealing their identities. In this game Ty was in Real Estate and Ali was in Advertising. They played these roles on several occasions with fellow unwitting passengers whom they met. The results were hilarious and they simply couldn't keep up the charade. The fact was that their faces had been on show for the whole world to see for so long that the great majority of people recognised them at a glance.

Far from being a problem they were, for the first time, able to make use of their fame and celebrity status. It transpired that many here were themselves escaping from some set of circumstances. There was a healthy mixture of all types of money. Aristocratic types mingled freely with those of possibly very dubious origins but all respected a version of privacy that ironically grew from being in close proximity for the duration.

Soon word of their presence on the ship came to the attention of The Captain and they received a personal invitation to dine at his table one evening. Seated next to the man who was in supreme command of "The Black Prince" the conversation turned in an unexpected direction as he no longer seemed interested in the causes behind their story but more so in their relationship.

"Now tell me Ali, when are you going to make an honest man of this genius?"

Ali was taken aback but could see the mischief in the eyes of their captain. "Well to tell you the truth sir, I don't think he's the marrying type."

There were laughs all around the table but Ty, who not so long ago would have felt very awkward in this situation, was able to step up, "Honestly Sir, I don't think she'd have me. I am but a poor man from a humble family and have not the means to support her extravagant tastes." He looked at Ali and they exchanged a playful moment, knowing that all was in good jest.

The captain continued, "Well if circumstances change, let me know. You are aware that the captain of a ship is legally empowered to perform a marriage ceremony. I'm always keen to exercise that privilege."

Ali took charge, "We'll give it some thought and get back to you."

"Please do." The captain had become quite matter of fact and returned to his meal.

A couple of weeks passed before they passed through The Panama Canal. It was most odd to come from being surrounded by the enormity of the sea to being squeezed through this narrow waterway connecting two oceans. Suddenly there was land on both sides and in places very little water either side of the ship. Evidently the ship had been designed so as to accommodate this particular stretch of water but the close banks of the channel accentuated its towering height. To break out of its narrow confines into the new ocean gave another further sense of freedom.

Now only the Caribbean islands lay ahead. The cruise would be travelling on to and up the Eastern Seaboard of the USA but Ali and Ty knew their leg of the journey would soon be over. They were jumping ship at St. Lucia and when it came into view one morning they knew why.

At first nothing more than a dot on the horizon it slowly grew in size to fill the viewfinder of a telescope fixed to one part of the ship. Ty and Ali were already packed, as this jewel of an island, defined by its two great peaks, came into sight of the naked eye their hearts were more alive than ever. By the time the ship had dropped anchor, and amongst the hustle and bustle of their fellow passengers, they were ready.

Having become accustomed to life aboard it was now time to make another transition. With their luggage brought off the ship by a porter they were suddenly a couple with all their worldly belongings deposited within the harbour of a paradise island. There were no words to describe how they felt, they themselves were quiet and went about the practicalities of finding a taxi to take them to their hotel.

It was such a colourful place, the people, their clothes, the fruit for sale by the side of the road. The houses they passed on the short journey to their hotel painted in many subtle shades and hues.

Since the moment they met their lives had been all about movement, all about getting from one place to the next. Achieve this objective, make sure of the next step, and apply yourself to the job at hand in order to advance to the next level. Perhaps now, as they checked in to the hotel, they had found somewhere that, at least for a while, they could stay without having to think of where to go next. There is a peace to be found in such a state of motionlessness, the mind too is able to cease its eternal revolutions and the soul has time to breathe.

Even so, once installed in their room, there was a need to go yet further. The hotel was perched on the edge of the sea and the beach ran along in front. From the tall opening doors one could hear the light crashing of waves and it was only natural to leave unpacking until later, leave the room before getting to know it, and walk.

The sand beneath their feet and the tingling bubbles of the surf lapping around their ankles, Ty and Ali held hands as they walked. Once more they were quiet in each other's company, they'd had much time to talk in the last month and in the time since they had met had learned from each other well. Now was a time for peace, tranquillity and serenity.

There were but a few others in this small sheltered cove on this part of the island. They couldn't have been further from any worries or concerns, from here on in it would be nature that would be their touchstone. They were at one and this is where they belonged.

There was what looked to be a small bar just off the beach. A wooden sign hanging over it advertised it to be "The CyBar." Ali thought it had a quaint charm and so they took seats and waited for the bar girl, who was attending to some drinks for the other customers, who were also a couple and the only others in the place. The shack, for that is all it was really, seemed to be constructed from nothing more than banana leaves and bamboo, but it was effective at shielding them from the direct rays of the midday sun. Some mellow music played at a low volume from a radio propped up behind the bar.

Ali looked out to the horizon but her gaze was soon drawn closer to the shore as the sound of the breakers and the fizzing of the foam on the sand mixed with the music. A young man of good physique, wearing orange board shorts, emerged from the sea carrying his fins, mask and snorkel. He was walking towards them and slowly Ali began to recognise him... "E-Zee!"

E-Zee ambled up and Ty stood to see Ali run the short distance to their friend.

"Hello little lady."

"E-Zee, its you, its really you!"

"Yep, it sure is. The genuine article."

Ty walked towards them both, wearing a huge smile and extended his hand.

"How are feeling E-Zee?"

E-Zee closed the last few feet and threw his arms around the man. Ty held on tight to the person he had felt he might never see again. Then he stood back to admire not only his work, but his cell mate, travelling companion and personal hero. "You look great E-Zee man!"

"Well I feel on top form, I believe I have you to thank for much of that. Listen we could go on forever trapped in some kind of eternal getting to know the 'new you' conversation. Why don't we get a drink and compare notes on the good old days."

Ali was beaming, "That sounds very civilised."

"Well we're civilised people," E-Zee walked towards the bar, "I see you found the drinking establishment."

Ty was still staring at E-Zee in disbelief, having left him hooked up to a multitude of life support systems, here he was, larger than life, it was all a lot to take in. He could only start by saying the first thing that came into his head, "How long have you been here?"

They were standing at the bar now and the bargirl put some drinks menus in front of Ty and Ali. E-Zee was as relaxed and confident as ever and started talking freely.

"I came round a couple of days after you left. Nice bunch of guys there to welcome me and they helped the transition back into the real world, so to speak. I felt a bit like I'd been hit over the head but it was more of a hangover than anything, had to shake free of some creepy nightmare I was having."

Ali was all ears but quickly wanted to know details, "Yeah, but how did you get here?"

"Those cool guys, Naz, Zack and Tobias, crazy cats, gave me the destination and I flew out straight away, couldn't wait to get back in the water. Been here three weeks."

Now walking as he talked he moved round to the other side of the bar. The bar girl gave him a glance and he winked at her.

Ty was confused, "You work here?"

"Yeah I work here. Man's gotta work."

The girl bartender, who was dressed in the flimsiest of bikinis spoke for the first time in a husky West Indian dialect, "Yeah I gave him a promotion, he doesn't deserve it though."

Ali looked at this exotic beauty, "Are you the owner?"

"I might as well be, he's always off skin diving. I have to do whatever he says!"

Ty looked to E-Zee, "So you own this place?"

E-Zee was helping himself to a drink from the fridge, "The one and only owner of St. Lucia's best kept secret. Its all paid for."

The bargirl had something more to say, "He doesn't pay me enough."

"You want another raise?!" said E-Zee making the girl smile.

"So I set the place up pronto, needed a little financial enterprise to keep me out of mischief. Nice location, steady stream of customers, and its a groovy little scene at night."

Just then a tall and beautiful woman, also only attired in a bikini walked up to the bar and kissed E-Zee, for what seemed like a long time. When they were done smiling at each other E-Zee remembered his manners.

"Oh this is Chantelle. Chantelle, meet Ali and Ty."

"Pleased to meet you." Chantelle seemed to be in a hurry to gain E-Zee's attentions. "Are you coming or aren't you?"

E-Zee was slightly flummoxed. "Yeah I'll be there in a moment."

Chantelle picked up some fins, a snorkel and mask and headed towards the surf.

E-Zee picked up his kit, unsure as to whether he was being rude to leave Ali and Ty alone. "She's great. You don't mind if I...?"

Ty answered shaking his head and smiling, "No, you go ahead."

E-Zee started walking off. "Thanks guys, I'll see you in a bit."

Ty looked into Ali's eyes and drew her close and they kissed, just as E-Zee turned back towards them.

"Look, oh, you two are like... you're like that... that's cool. I was just going to say that Denise here will sort you out with drinks, and well... you just carry on, you seem to be relaxed, and into the swing of things... I've got some important research to do regarding the reproductive cycle of coral on the reef."

Chantelle was getting impatient, "Are you coming E-Zee man?" E-Zee turned to catch up with his girlfriend.

Ali and Ty were now laughing to themselves. Ty was satisfied that his work was truly done but Ali had her doubts.

"Is it me or has he become really stupid?"

Ty knew what was going on. "Nah, it's just a front. He is just about one of the most intelligent synthetics on this planet but I think he's found out that being stupid is just more fun."

"What will you be having?" Denise came to them to take their drinks orders.

Ali had already chosen, "I'll have a 'Moonlight Angel', please."

Ty began studying the menu, "What's this one, the 'Re-Animator'?"

Denise looked a little concerned, "Ah, you might like to make another choice sir... That's one of E-Zee's very own special concoctions."

Ty however was decided, "I think I'll take my chances, the way I look at it you only live once... right?!"