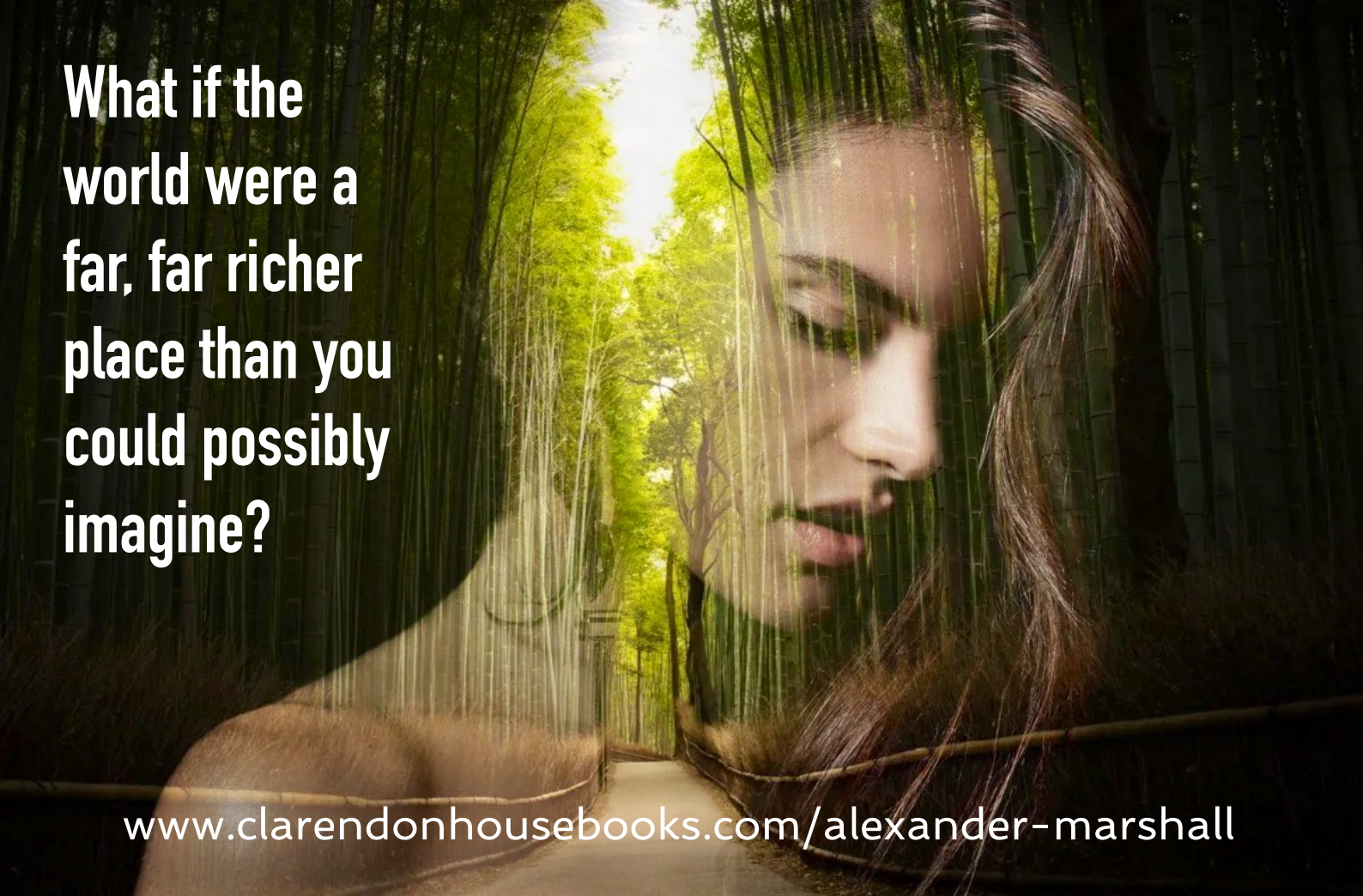




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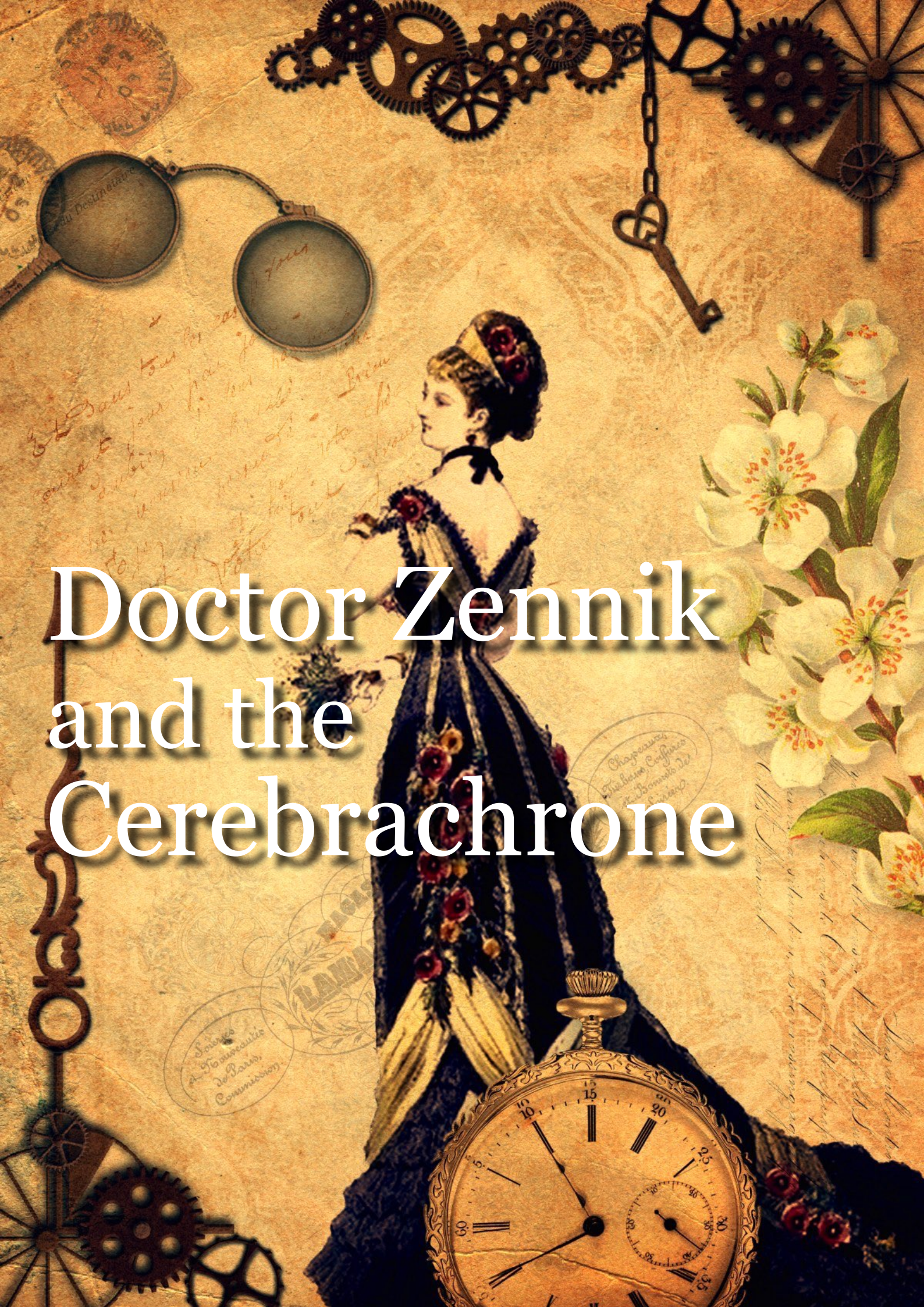
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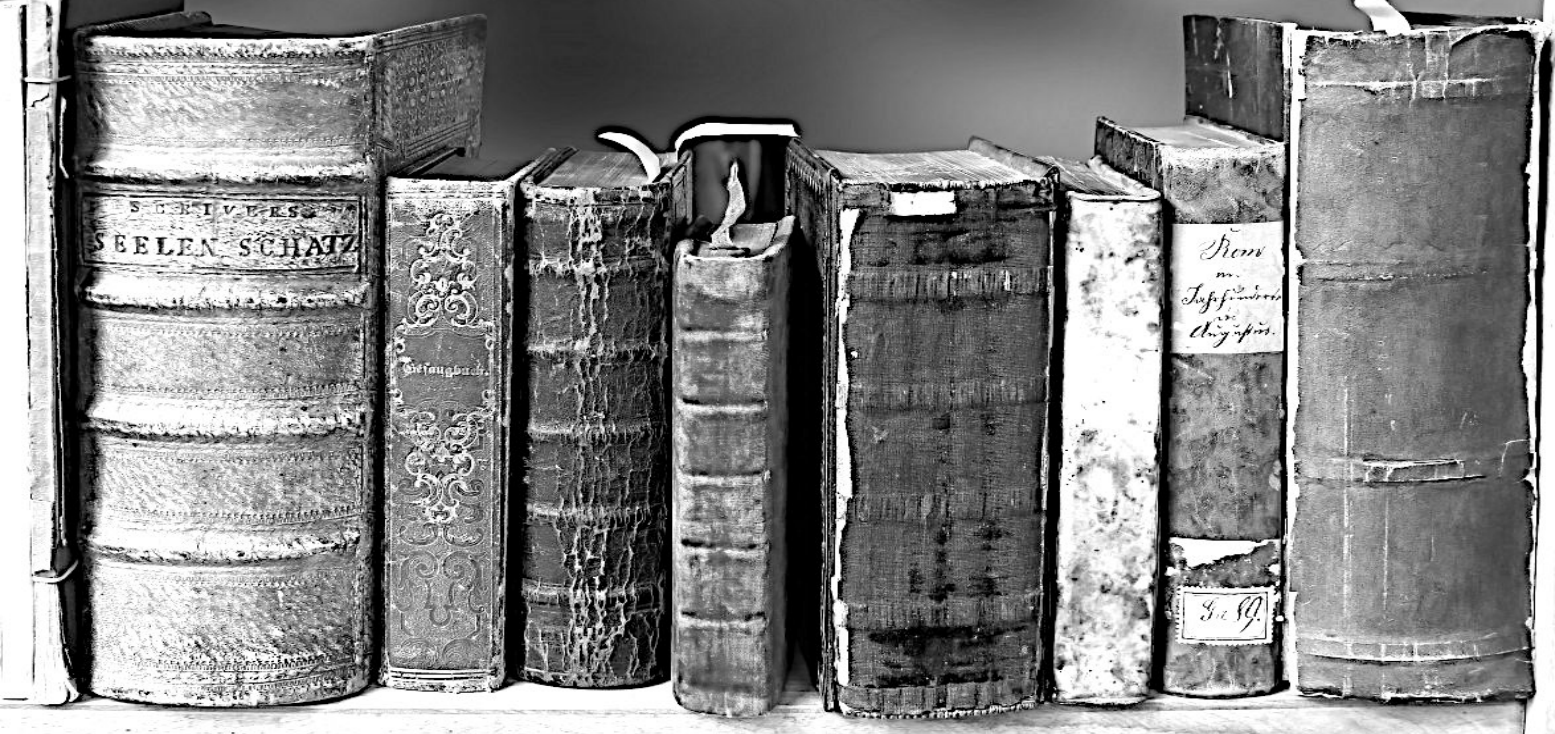


# Doctor Zennik and the Cerebrachrone



It was ten thirty by the time the chaise pulled up at the door of Dr. Zennik's rooms in Belgravia, and as the thick fog oozed about the pavement between myself and the shrouded light that glimmered above his porch I had to confess a certain reticence about tonight's meeting, a gathering of the Chronophile Club, an informal group of fellows from a variety of walks of life, all of whom shared a fascination with anything to do with time and time-keeping.

My reluctance to climb those mist-washed steps stemmed from vague and half-formed concerns about this evening's host: our society had been in existence now for two years, three days and seventeen and one half hours, but the doctor in question had joined only recently. Though we, as I have mentioned, were open to all kinds of members - and at the last meeting there had even been two women in attendance, the Lady Forsyth and her grand niece Ethel, who had expressed an interest in early Anglo-Saxon time-keeping, their delightful company in no way distracting us from the serious if insouciant purpose of our gathering - there was something about the doctor which set him apart from the rest of us, something about which I couldn't quite satisfy myself. He had a strange accent - but that alone was not it, as one of our most prominent members was the Russian scientist Pachowski, whose papers on chronolosis were widely known, and whose accent was at times as difficult to understand as his work. Doctor Zennik had dressed a little eccentrically on the few occasions when he had attended; his manner was perhaps a trifle foreign; his topics of conversation a touch risqué; his background a degree questionable or mysterious - but none of these factors alone precluded him from that set of men with whom I felt perfectly calm. Perhaps it was just the accumulation of these subtle oddities that worked on my imagination until the slight discomfort I had had on discovering that



tonight's meeting would be hosted by him developed by increments into almost a fear, an emotion which the foggy night and dim lights did nothing to dispel.

It was with trepidation that I rang the bell therefore, and with a brief but potent tremor of the heart that I crossed the threshold when the doctor's butler answered the door so swiftly that the thirteen point seven seconds I had calculated as the average response to any given sounding of a doorbell in the metropolis was sharply reduced, and I pondered suspiciously that the man had in fact been watching my approach and had intended to startle me in such a fashion as soon as he saw me climbing the steps. I resolved not to give him any impression that he had succeeded, and entered the hall in as dignified a manner as possible, half fearful that I would be the only attendee that evening.

My worst fears drew closer to fruition when I was shown into the library to find, I thought, no one else present. The room was large and dark, the flickering firelight from the healthy blaze in one corner of the sizeable hearth failing to make any lasting impression on the dusty, book-covered walls. The butler withdrew, after letting me know that the doctor would be along shortly. Apart from the distant clatter of traffic from the street and the gentle rush and sizzle of wood in the fireplace, it was very quiet. I noticed immediately, as should come as no surprise, I expect, that there was a distinct absence of clocks in the room. The presence of books dominated wherever I looked. Several had been scattered on a large table quite near the fire, and I held one up to the flames to read its title: 'The Unfathomable History of Humanity'. Another read

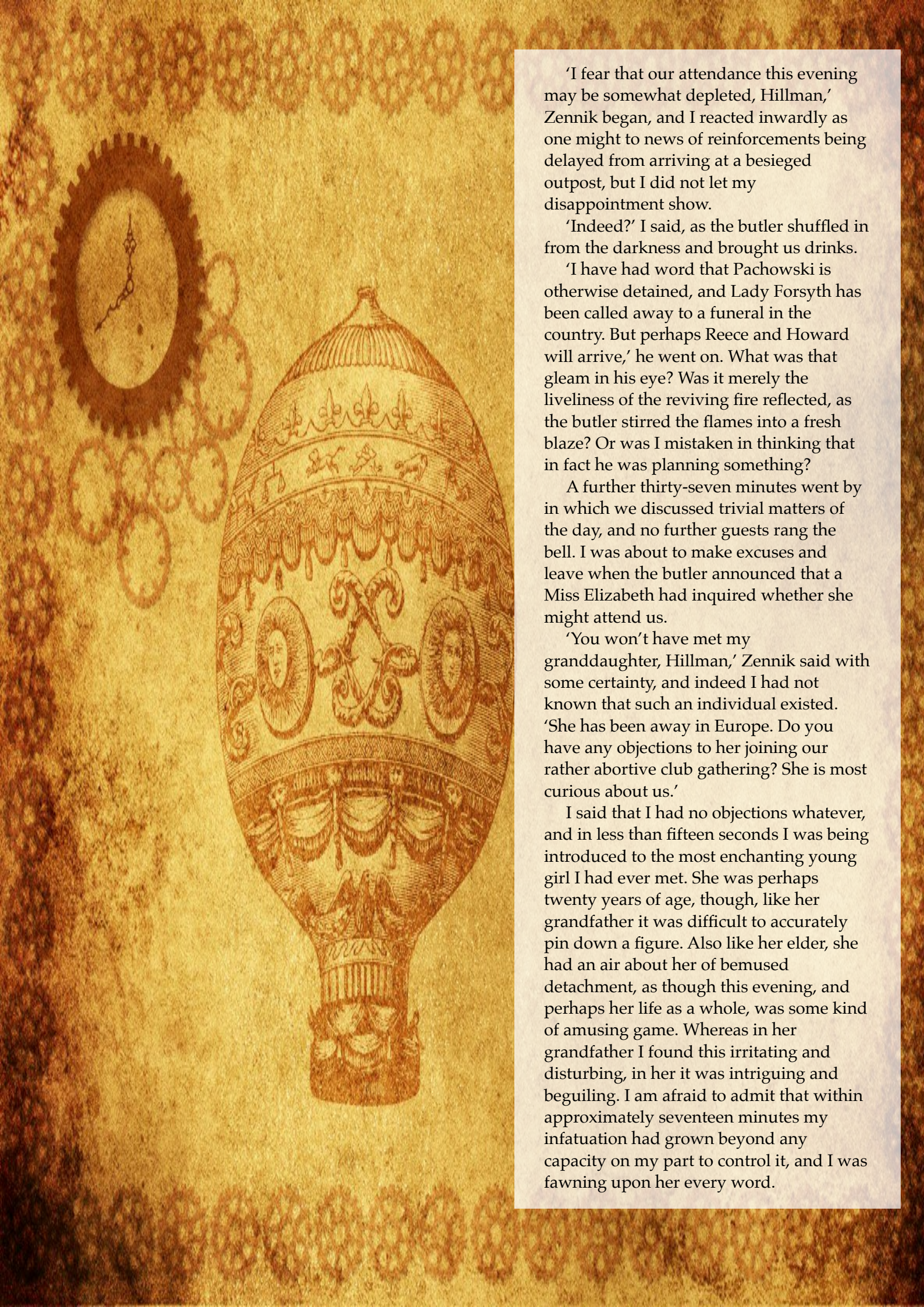
'Sidereal Timekeeping and Seasonal Variations'. Another proclaimed 'The Rest Is Silence - Ponderings on Fatalism as a Universal Philosophy', which echoed within me in that space as a log snapped in the hearth. It seemed to be some time since I had first entered. I took out my watch, an instrument of which I was rather proud. My uncle had been a watchmaker, and had made this particular timepiece with his own hands fifty years earlier. He'd told me that his own fascination with time, which he had passed on to me while I was still a boy, had begun when, in learning his trade, he had met a man in India or Africa or some such place, a mystic, who had told him that he had travelled the oceans of time in the same way that we, as modern men, traversed the oceans between Europe and the Americas. One day, my uncle told me the mystic had said, it might be possible to journey back into the time of the mighty pharaohs of ancient Egypt, or even to voyage into the distant future when perhaps the Empire itself had faded and some new world had taken shape in its place. As a child my uncle's tales fascinated me, enchanted me — as I grew older, however, I pursued my interests in a more serious fashion and read physics at Oxford. The watch that my uncle passed on to me was special, then, in that it reminded me of the roots of my own interests, but also in that, by an ingenious system of wheels and buttons, it could tell me the time in all of the Dominions at any given moment. I knew, for example, that as it drew close to eleven o'clock here in London, in the Antipodes it was in fact mid-morning of the following day, a fact which, although perfectly sensible to my scientific faculties, never failed to amuse me imaginatively.



I was smiling to myself at that thought yet again, and looking out of the window, which overlooked the street and the front door. I watched in a disconnected way as a man remarkably like myself emerged from the door and climbed into a cab. I was half-amused by the similarities between the fellow and myself, and was in a kind of semi-daydream about it, when I started as a hand fell gently on my shoulder.

'Forgive me, Hillman, did I startle you?' said Dr. Zennik, for of course it was he. I muttered some incoherent apology and greeting. The doctor looked in fine spirits, but it had indeed alarmed me that he had managed to creep up on me in such a way without me noticing him at all, like some kind of spectre. The door appeared not to have been opened, but perhaps there was some other way into the library — it was difficult to tell in the gloom.

I looked with more self-possession at my host: he was a tall man, perhaps in his mid-fifties, touches of grey about his otherwise sable and sweeping locks, a narrow but strong face, the lines of which spoke to me of many years abroad. His eyes were of that probing kind which I found unsettling, hovering as they did like those of a falcon over its prey, vacillating between hostility and amusement. I decided at that moment that it was his eyes, in fact, which were the key to my original and fundamental discomfiture — they looked me over now in a curiously dispassionate way, as I might scan over a slice of ham in a butcher's shop, seeking out any obvious deficiency. And yet I speak harshly — the impression conveyed was not altogether an unpleasant one, nor was it dominated by any sense of outright antagonism. With such a look, I daresay, a grandfather might probe a recalcitrant grandchild whose behaviour had already led one to be suspicious of mischief. But I was in no way contemplating wrongdoing of any sort, playful or otherwise, and after a rigorous moment, Dr. Zennik seemed satisfied of that fact himself and drew me more warmly to the fire where we seated ourselves in the heated leather of two great armchairs.



'I fear that our attendance this evening may be somewhat depleted, Hillman,' Zennik began, and I reacted inwardly as one might to news of reinforcements being delayed from arriving at a besieged outpost, but I did not let my disappointment show.

'Indeed?' I said, as the butler shuffled in from the darkness and brought us drinks.

'I have had word that Pachowski is otherwise detained, and Lady Forsyth has been called away to a funeral in the country. But perhaps Reece and Howard will arrive,' he went on. What was that gleam in his eye? Was it merely the liveliness of the reviving fire reflected, as the butler stirred the flames into a fresh blaze? Or was I mistaken in thinking that in fact he was planning something?

A further thirty-seven minutes went by in which we discussed trivial matters of the day, and no further guests rang the bell. I was about to make excuses and leave when the butler announced that a Miss Elizabeth had inquired whether she might attend us.

'You won't have met my granddaughter, Hillman,' Zennik said with some certainty, and indeed I had not known that such an individual existed. 'She has been away in Europe. Do you have any objections to her joining our rather abortive club gathering? She is most curious about us.'

I said that I had no objections whatever, and in less than fifteen seconds I was being introduced to the most enchanting young girl I had ever met. She was perhaps twenty years of age, though, like her grandfather it was difficult to accurately pin down a figure. Also like her elder, she had an air about her of bemused detachment, as though this evening, and perhaps her life as a whole, was some kind of amusing game. Whereas in her grandfather I found this irritating and disturbing, in her it was intriguing and beguiling. I am afraid to admit that within approximately seventeen minutes my infatuation had grown beyond any capacity on my part to control it, and I was fawning upon her every word.

'Do you travel far, Mr. Hillman?' she inquired. I was admiring the pinkness of her radiant face as she knelt at her grandfather's knee, her raven hair painted a glossy mahogany by the flames.

'A good three miles,' I replied, a little too keenly. 'I live in Bedford Square.'

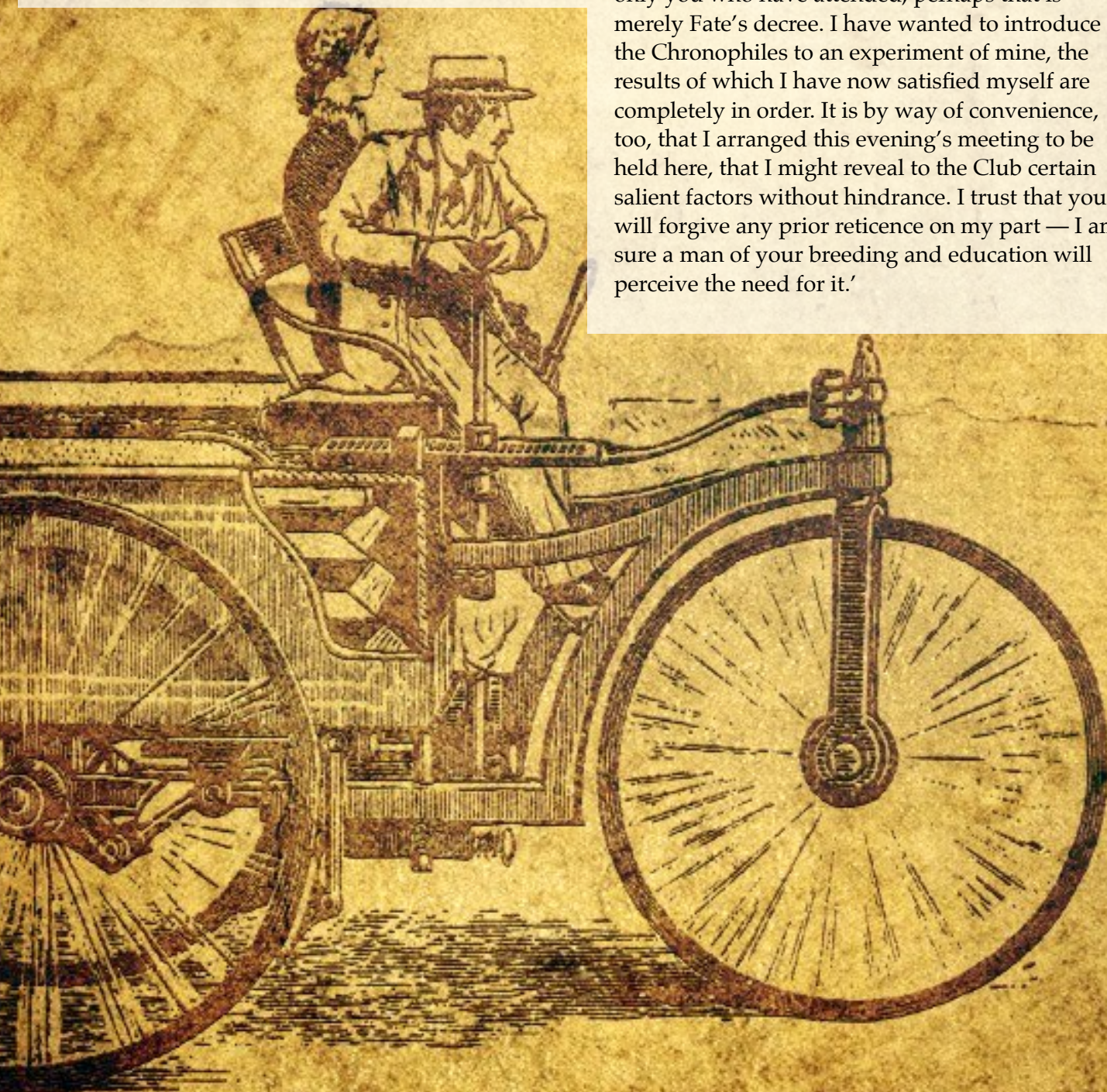
'Ah, yes. Is not the traffic frightfully noisy there?' she said, giving the impression, like her grandfather, of heavily restraining a desire to burst into uncontrolled laughter which I found peculiarly uplifting and charming. And yet I also detected an air of vague trepidation or uncertainty, as though she were not merely engaging in social intercourse but attempting a rather arduous task with attention to minute detail requiring rather intense concentration.

We continued in this idle way for some time and from her conversation I was led to believe that her education had recently been completed in Paris and that she had returned to London to work as her grandfather's secretary and librarian.

'A daunting task!' I espoused, looking around the book-laden chamber.

'Yes, grandfather has a great many books from all around the world — and a good many other things besides,' she went on, this last remark being punctuated with a glance between the two of them as though a theatrical cue had been given.

'Indeed, Mr. Hillman,' Dr. Zennik began, leaning forward in a ponderous way, 'I must confess that I have been looking forward to this evening's proceedings and while I regret that it is only you who have attended, perhaps that is merely Fate's decree. I have wanted to introduce the Chronophiles to an experiment of mine, the results of which I have now satisfied myself are completely in order. It is by way of convenience, too, that I arranged this evening's meeting to be held here, that I might reveal to the Club certain salient factors without hindrance. I trust that you will forgive any prior reticence on my part — I am sure a man of your breeding and education will perceive the need for it.'







Why, I wondered as he spoke these words, were hairs rising on the back of my neck and why did I gain the distinct impression of a conspiracy between Elizabeth and the doctor in which I was the victim? I wondered fleetingly whether the butler too was part of a plot, and whether the library door had been locked.

'Do not be alarmed, Hillman!' the doctor said, raising the broad blade of his right hand in the red light. 'I sense that you are in some way apprehensive. The experiment in no way possesses sinister ramifications, though it might, I suspect, in the wrong hands. No, it is I think something that will be of great interest to you. I do not think for one moment that it is any accident that you alone of our compatriots are here tonight, and, as I do not intend to wait for our next meeting before unveiling my device, you may well be part of an historic event in a capacity as an observer and recorder.'

With these words, which succeeded only partially in calming my nerves, he rose from his chair and went with his granddaughter to a nearby bookshelf. He reached behind a row of leatherbound volumes and brought out a small casket, which he unlocked with a key from his

pocket. With great delicacy and the air of either a surgeon removing an abscess or a midwife delivering a child he took out an object shaped like a large but slightly squashed apple. It was a bright silver in colour and from its shining surface emanated stubby pins of various lengths and thicknesses. My first impression was that it was a rather bulky and awkward pocket watch, not entirely dissimilar to my own but with more complex workings. It was attached to a heavy silver chain which Elizabeth placed around the doctor's neck with the action of a princess bequeathing a mayoral decoration. I glanced at her face and saw a peculiar look of awe, adoration and apprehension which compelled me to regard the strange object in a similar manner.

'This,' pronounced Zennik, 'is the Cerebrachrone.'

He held it up in the firelight and its bright surface bent and refracted the red and gold of the fire until the image of a pin-stuck apple was almost complete. I understood from his tone at first that the name alone was supposed to convey something of the device's purpose and function. Unfortunately, it did nothing of the sort.





‘What exactly is it?’ I asked bluntly and perhaps a little forthrightly, my abruptness intended to dispel my own anxiety as much as to obtain data.

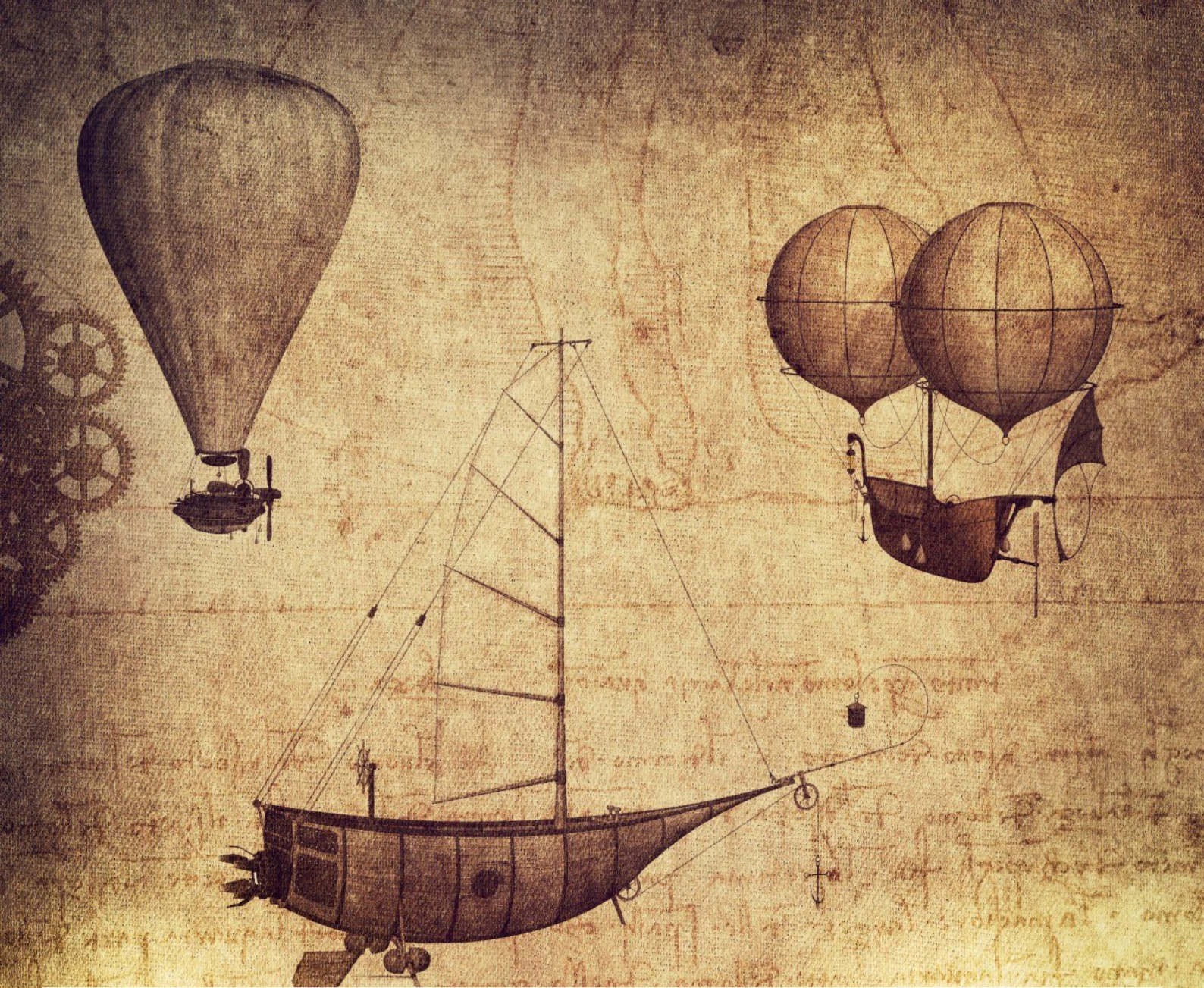
‘It is a Temporal Singularity Regulator. I use the indefinite article “a”, but as you must guess, no other such device yet exists, making it in effect The Temporal Singularity Regulator. Which means, my dear Mr. Hillman, that it is a device that can be used to control Time Itself.’

I took him to mean that it was an elaborate watch, and started to smile and relax and to become fascinated in a less mortified way — but he went on.

‘And it has been so used. You do not appreciate my meaning as yet, Hillman. It is used to travel in Time.’

I took the opportunity that the following eight seconds of silence offered to descend into my armchair, despite the fact that Elizabeth was still standing. For some reason I did not immediately fathom, I felt no impulse to flee but rather a strong desire to rest as though I had spent a long day in heavy exertion. Zennik went on.

‘I will return to your incredulity in due course. Let me first assist you with a few general facts. Time is the most subjective of the appearances of physics. Whereas it is easy for us to agree about and to measure space, matter and energy, these things having an objective and apparently independent reality outside ourselves, it is not always so possible with time. We would both agree that it is approximately twenty feet from here to the library door, for example — but on how long it takes to traverse that distance we might not easily agree. As a child we believed an hour to be an eternity in which to play and do and run and throw; as adults the same hour skips by in the same apparent time as a child’s minute. As we get older, years seem shorter — but are these things a seeming only, or is there a subjectivity to time which is part of its make-up in some fundamental way which can be both discovered and utilised?’



‘The answer, Hillman, is that Time is a variable between us. Somehow — and I have as yet very little theoretical basis but much experiential data — Time is linked to us, probably by the etheric field which surrounds our physical forms. This chain that I wear is not only for the convenience of carrying the Cerebrachrone, it is a medium through which my body’s electrical and spiritual energies engage with the Cerebrachrone’s delicate mechanisms and thus it enables me to become as one, as it were, with the device and able to direct it...’

The reader will forgive a moment’s incredulity on my part at this point. I felt a little light-headed, the room seemed rather unreal — Elizabeth’s bright face receded from me as though I were about to faint. I made some vague protesting motion with a hand, but Zennik again raised his own hand and went on calmly:

‘Please, Hillman, do not distress yourself — all will become apparent in time, if I may use the expression. You see, there is a special, personal

link between you and I which is why I consider it particularly favourable to reveal all this to you and I confess I am rather pleased that you are here alone after all.’

He went on, after this even more perplexing remark, to describe the inner working of the Cerebrachrone at greater length, details which I neither retained nor especially valued over my poetic apprehension of the thing. The device gleamed in his hand, and it was the play of light about it that fascinated me more than the science behind it.

‘And...have you yourself travelled in time?’ I ventured when he had come to an end. His face lit into a white grin that was more than a little frightening. Then his eyes turned inward as he reflected on some adventure.

‘Indeed — though you will think me mad,’ he said, glancing over at me, ‘indeed I have so travelled.’

'Think of it Hillman! To be at one moment walking down Baker Street on a frosty December evening, stepping across to Regent's Park, and then, with but a moment's adjustment of the Cerebrachrone, to be strolling in the primeval forest that flourished there before any Georgian wall was conceived! Or to be beside the sea at Brighton one spring afternoon and then with a mere twist of the dial to journey one hundred years into the future, take one of their astoundingly swift railway carriages back to London, travel beneath the earth in the veritable labyrinth of tunnels which our fledgling underground system is to become, and emerge into daylight at the Tower of London to see King Henry the Eighth himself pull up to the quay there in a gentle autumn rain! All this and much more have I seen, Hillman.'

'I presume these adventures took some preparation,' I said in a firm and steady voice, determined to suspend my incredulity at least momentarily. I glanced across at Elizabeth and saw her admiring eyes locked on her grandfather's face, and a feeling of pity and a

desire to rescue her from the power of this lunatic washed over me. But such savage responses were soon quelled as the doctor replied.

'Of course. One hundred years from now, for example, our currency has changed beyond recognition. The value of money has wildly varied, and pounds are issued as coins, if you can believe it. I was at first paralysed in the whirlwind metropolis of the future until I struck upon the notion of carrying with me items from my own house and selling them as antiques! I have amassed a tidy sum of twentieth century coinage of the realm now, enough to fund many journeys on their splendid mechanical vehicles! You cannot imagine, Hillman! They do not use horses as we do to transport either themselves or their goods — they have devices, like railway engines but with neither rails nor carriages, and in these they sit and pursue one another at high velocity through the streets! I am constantly bedazzled by them!'



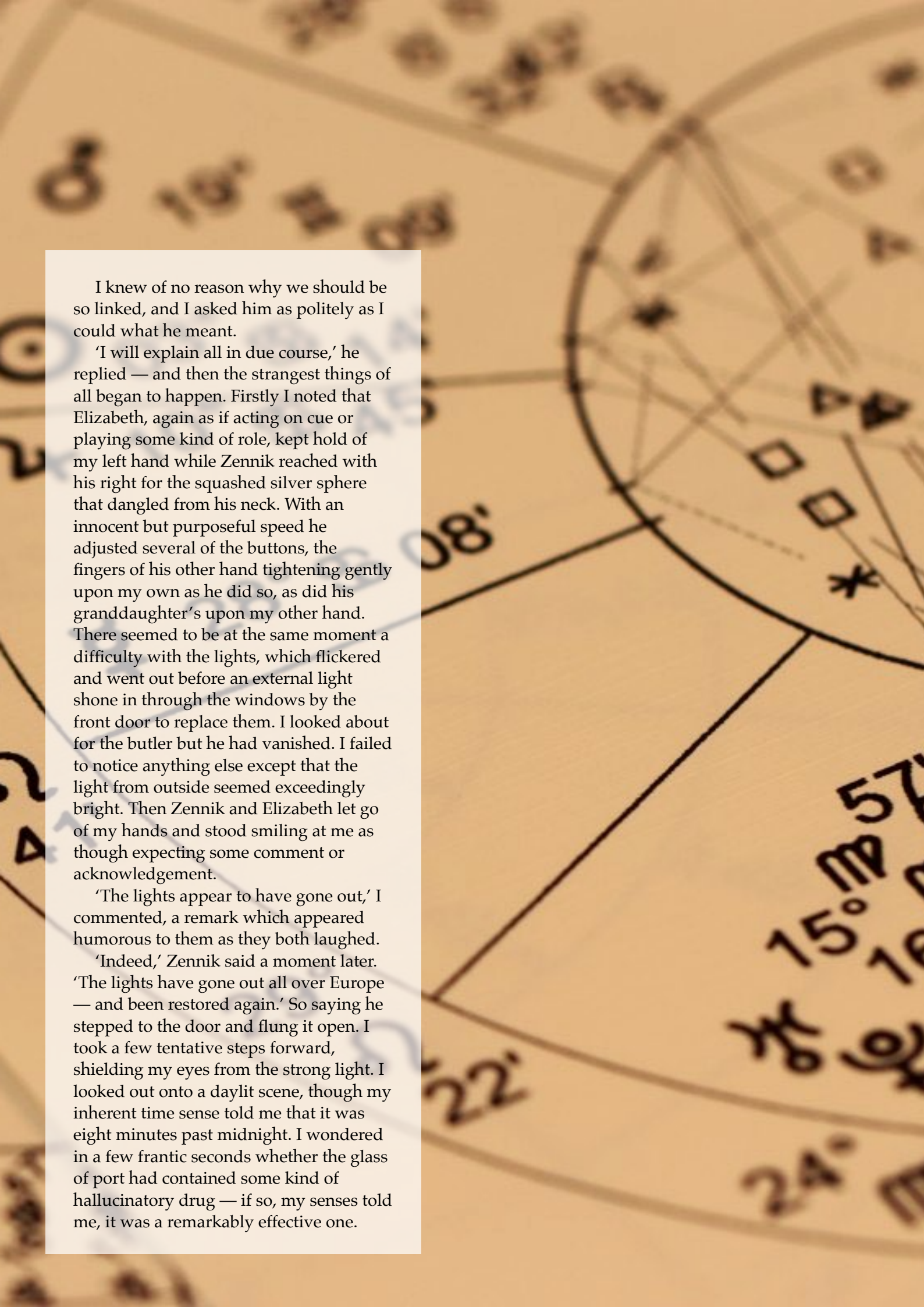
'I think Mr. Hillman is growing incredulous, Grandfather,' chimed in the sweet voice of Elizabeth, rescuing me from the good doctor's mounting manic monologue. I judged that it had to be close to midnight — seven minutes and thirty-five seconds to twelve, I fancied — and I felt an urge to leave now. But I was aware of the awkwardness which I had created by perhaps not being thoroughly attentive. I made some apology as I stood up, finding it easier to pretend that Zennik had said nothing at all about any adventure, temporal or otherwise, and that he had in fact never removed the device he was holding from its place behind the books. This habit of suppressing or mentally blanketing items, phenomena or incidents which the human mind finds too incredible to be rationally realised I believe has a pathological name, but that name escaped me for the moment. It was common enough, but I believe that evening I demonstrated a textbook case of it.

I half expected that Zennik, in his passion, would put some physical obstacle in the way of my leaving, but on my motion towards the door the butler was summoned, I was presented with my hat and coat and many kind words, and I was soon in the hall, with invitations to return at my earliest convenience.

That part of me that was interested in time in an analytical and scientific way was to some degree fascinated by the evening's events, but also revolted and deeply suspicious of the doctor's methodology; that part of me which was neither scientific nor logical felt an imaginative pull towards the adventures that had been described to me, but also a natural horror of the unusual which urged me to flee. As I stood there in the hall, therefore, making a hasty and ungainly getaway, I thought, I was a curious mixture of energies, a mass of contradictions. Zennik and Elizabeth, hands clasped, took one of my hands each and smiled welcomingly at me, as clearly I presented to them the visage of a disturbed and uneasy young man.

'I must apologise for this evening,' Zennik was saying. 'Clearly I have, in my eagerness, embarrassed you and made you ill at ease. It's just that I long for companionship of the intellect and there is a special bond between us.'






I knew of no reason why we should be so linked, and I asked him as politely as I could what he meant.

‘I will explain all in due course,’ he replied — and then the strangest things of all began to happen. Firstly I noted that Elizabeth, again as if acting on cue or playing some kind of role, kept hold of my left hand while Zennik reached with his right for the squashed silver sphere that dangled from his neck. With an innocent but purposeful speed he adjusted several of the buttons, the fingers of his other hand tightening gently upon my own as he did so, as did his granddaughter’s upon my other hand. There seemed to be at the same moment a difficulty with the lights, which flickered and went out before an external light shone in through the windows by the front door to replace them. I looked about for the butler but he had vanished. I failed to notice anything else except that the light from outside seemed exceedingly bright. Then Zennik and Elizabeth let go of my hands and stood smiling at me as though expecting some comment or acknowledgement.

‘The lights appear to have gone out,’ I commented, a remark which appeared humorous to them as they both laughed.

‘Indeed,’ Zennik said a moment later. ‘The lights have gone out all over Europe — and been restored again.’ So saying he stepped to the door and flung it open. I took a few tentative steps forward, shielding my eyes from the strong light. I looked out onto a daylight scene, though my inherent time sense told me that it was eight minutes past midnight. I wondered in a few frantic seconds whether the glass of port had contained some kind of hallucinatory drug — if so, my senses told me, it was a remarkably effective one.



The street down which I had travelled two hours and ten minutes ago had gone, or rather was so different as to be unrecognisable. Tall, plain walls rose sheerly to a height of several hundred feet directly opposite. Objects which I could not at first make out sped from left to right and from right to left on the thoroughfare before me. They appeared to be rounded metal casings of some kind. I caught a glimpse of someone sitting in one, and, as my eyes became accustomed to their shape and speed I saw that in each there sat what I assumed to be the coachman of these incredible vehicles, and in some there were passengers also. But they moved with no apparent cause for their motion — there was no horse to be seen. And they moved exceedingly swiftly, much more quickly than any sane man would have considered safe. Perhaps they somehow drew power from the sound which I now noticed emanating as a general low thunder from the road. Each possessed a distinctive roar but each roar was swallowed up in the broader cacophony of traffic. I put my hands to my ears involuntarily. I spun around to see Zennik and Elizabeth smiling down upon me like some kind of self-satisfied, twisted pair of heavenly emissaries come to collect my soul, or worse, like two demented phantasms from an asylum within my mind, for my only rational conclusion to all this was that I was going mad.

‘Be calm,’ Zennik stressed, reaching for my shoulder, but I shrank from him. ‘We mean you no harm, Hillman. But my estimation of your character was such that I felt you deserved to experience the subjective truth of what I have been saying for yourself, and that you were of a constitution sufficiently robust as to be able to cope with that experience. I trust that you will not disappoint my judgement of you? Do you see now the effectiveness of the Cerebrachrone?’

I stammered something unintelligible, and made to proceed down the steps, but drew back from this violent and manic traffic which as far as I could see was a menace to bodily existence with its noise and speed. Elizabeth collected me by the hand, and with the air of a nurse attending the sick, drew me back up the steps and inside the house. Zennik followed and closed the door, shutting out the spectacle of the street.



'How?' I began — and then ended with that lone word which seemed to distill into itself my full meaning.

'Your disorientation will pass, my friend,' he said. 'Come — there are one or two other wonders I want to show you, if you can manage it.'

Whether I could manage it or not, I was led upstairs — a staircase that looked decidedly different to the one I knew I'd seen when I first entered this house — and into a large room with immense windows which looked out from the back of the house. I found that, to my shame, I needed to be supported — my knees had deserted me in terms of solidity and I wavered on my feet like a drunkard.

As I sank into a chair from which I could look out of the broad and high windows through which the undeniable daylight poured, Elizabeth walked over to a box in the middle of the room and tapped it. It flared into colours and sound like a fireplace, but instead of flames, in this box there burned dancing shapes of men and women and images of rooms and movement. The thing was hypnotic. I had read of various experiments in cinematography, but this was far in advance of anything of which I had heard — these figures were like living and speaking dagguerrotypes. It was the box more than the daylight or traffic that finally prompted my, I suppose inevitable, question:

'What year have we arrived in?'

'This is 1960,' said Elizabeth, 'and we are both sorry to do this to you but we felt you would best appreciate the wonder of it all this way. Is it not wonderful? That Time itself surrenders to our will? That we can journey wherever we will at the mere twist of a dial?'

I had to admit to a certain amount of wonder; I also felt a degree of nausea and disorientation, the effects of a prolonged shock reaction which began to make me tremble quite severely. I thought perhaps I was on the edge of some kind of sensory breakdown, but I endeavoured not to let it show.

'This device,' said Elizabeth, indicating the picture box, 'is called a tele-vision — it receives invisible signals from the ether and translates them into pictures. It serves as a medium of entertainment in this era.' She reached down and tapped the box again and the pictures vanished.





## The Artificial Sphere.



'In this time,' the doctor continued, as fascinated and excited as his granddaughter, 'men have developed not only vehicles that operate without horses, but carriages that fly through the air. In under a decade from where we now sit, men will use these carriages to go to the Moon. Already they cross the Atlantic in them.'

'And in a matter of hours, we could be in New York, Mr. Hillman! In hours!' Elizabeth cried, clapping her hands together.

In their enthusiasm I believe they had failed to notice their guest's failing consciousness. The room had begun to spin, and I felt decidedly unwell. Within a matter of seconds, blackness rose up before me and took me away from this strange duo and the stranger world into which they had brought me.



When I opened my eyes, I was afloat in a sea of colours, a swirling pool of varying hues that held me mesmerised and on the edge of sleep for what seemed like a very long time, scarcely able to recall how I'd come there. I was lying down on a kind of bed or table. As I slowly recovered a fuller consciousness, I recalled vaguely how I had been at the home of Doctor Zennik, but my immediate memory was a mere blur. There was no sign of the doctor or his granddaughter.

Music of an almost inaudible but very beautiful kind hovered in the coloured air. I listened to it and in it there were voices whispering. I couldn't make out at all what they were saying. I slid off the bed onto my feet — my nausea and disorientation had faded completely and I felt very calm, as though I had been injected with some kind of narcotic drug, but it was a more soothing and natural sensation than that. I wanted to see Elizabeth's face again. As the thought coalesced in my mind, so was it projected at some incalculable distance from me onto a wall which seemed to waver in the air. My mind was very relaxed, and in a condition most unusual for me. I pondered Elizabeth more, and the face grew larger and became her whole body. As I continued to think of her, the image I had mentally conjured began to dance before me like a phantom — and then it began to undress, as I felt the stirrings of darker and more bestial impulses in my heart. I at once stamped my foot and cried out 'Enough!'

The music ceased and the room went dark then a pale white. It was a small chamber, devoid of any adornment but for the bed in its centre. A portal opened in the white wall, and Zennik stepped through.

'Please forgive me, Mr. Hillman,' he said, reaching and taking my hand. 'Elizabeth and I intended you no harm or inconvenience. Perhaps we were wrong to let you in on our little secret in quite such a forthright manner...'

'I don't know about that, sir,' I replied rather crustily, 'but I would be grateful if you could explain to me where on earth I am and how can I return to whence I came?'

In truth I was much relieved to see the doctor and my heart ventured that he was quite sincere in his apology and most remorseful about any discomfort I had endured — but I also felt agitated and put-upon, and it was this impulse which determined to be gratified. Zennik seemed most anxious to please.



'You are approximately twenty thousand years into the future from where you last recall being. But returning to your home time is a matter of a moment's adjustment of the Cerebrachrone. Come!' He helped me step forward, and we crossed the threshold of the small room and emerged through a glass foyer into a beautiful park under a gentle spring sunlight. 'We brought you here because of these healing chambers which are dotted across the landscape and freely available and easy to operate. It was the quickest and surest way of reviving you.'

I looked about me, seeing forest and, in the distance, low hills. The air seemed inexpressibly fresh and cool upon my face, and the absence of any kind of noise other than a gentle breeze in the trees was most invigorating in itself.

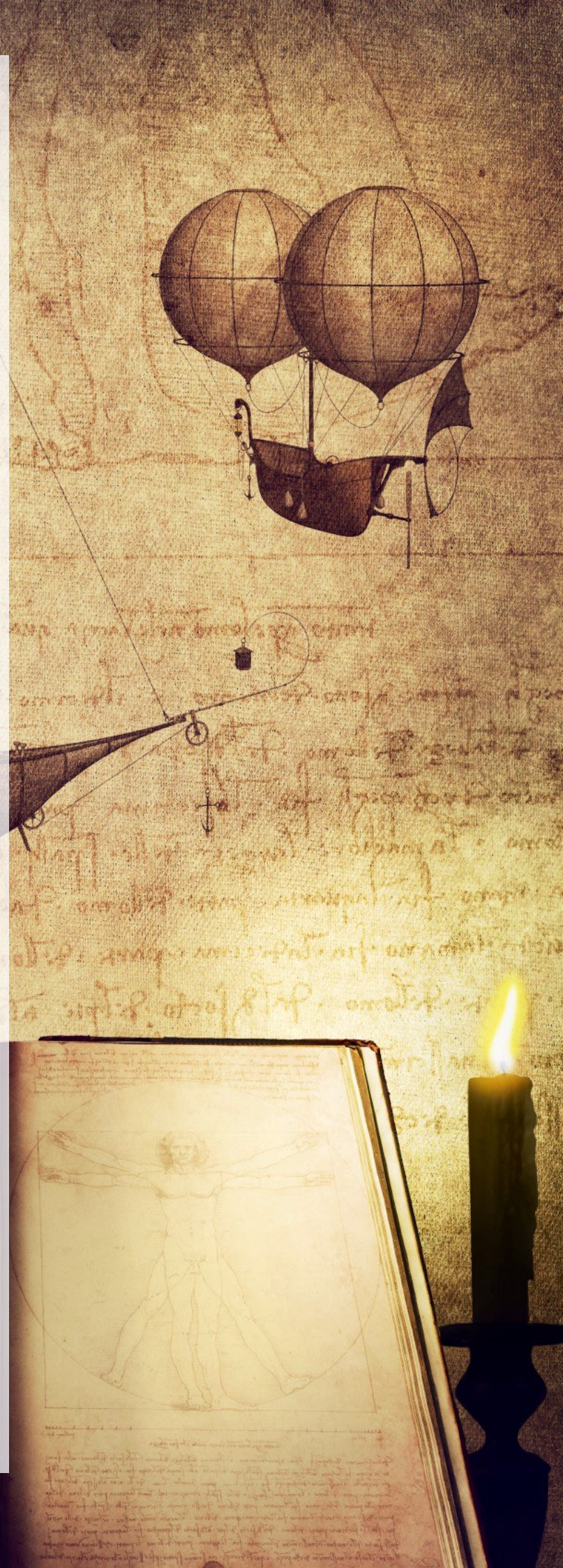
'This is the same locale,' Zennik said, in answer to my unspoken question. 'This is the Thames Valley, AD 22,000. The whole of what was once known as London has become this most majestic parkland. Every few miles, were you to travel in this era, you would come across one of these small domes.' He gestured back at the building from which we had emerged — it was a smooth, semi-spherical shape with a round open portal which served as an entrance. 'As far as we have been able to make out they are simply healing chambers, somehow deriving their energy and purpose from their incumbent, delving I expect into the subject's etheric field to produce a swift and effective mental and physical health — certainly they seem to invigorate both the body and the soul in a remarkable way.'


'And the people?' I asked.

'Elizabeth and I have not yet completed our research into this period. It seems that at this point in history, however, the earth is completely deserted. Humanity has abandoned it, leaving only these structures in its wake. It appears to have left the world in good order.'

I breathed in deeply of the cool, clear air — quite the opposite of the choked street of 1960, or the fog-bound atmosphere of my own time. The healing chamber had not only removed my nausea but left me feeling stable and healthy. I began to see the possibilities of Zennik's device. My mind raced with them, in fact.

'What of the various puzzles and paradoxes?' I began, becoming quite animated. 'Have you never encountered phenomena such as meeting yourselves? Or changing the pattern of recorded history?'





Zennik smiled broadly as he saw in my countenance the effect I believe he had been hoping for.

‘Sir, you begin to see it! As for the puzzles, ponder a moment the position in which you find yourself — with a moment’s flick or turn of this instrument,’ and here he produced the bulging Cerebrachrone again from inside his jacket, ‘we can escape the confines of Time, of linear progression, of Cause and Effect in their classical sense — we are no longer bound by any concept or rule or axiom with which we are familiar: we walk in Eternity, Mr. Hillman, Eternity! Do you not see it? What does it matter whether we encounter ourselves or disrupt some apparently sacred pattern of recorded time? We have ascended above mortal trials and tribulations, we are free and immortal!’

He waved his arms about in a manner I found both fascinating and discomfiting, but I saw his point. There was a deep exhilaration mounting in me too, like a wave or a volcanic eruption which threatened to collapse my lungs and strain my heart with excitement. It was true — with the Cerebrachrone we were truly free of the constraints that made us subject to mortality. Perhaps we could even use it to find a way of defeating bodily death — certainly we need never again fall prey to need. Resources were now infinite, at our fingertips literally. I began to perceive the slavish state into which humanity was daily thrown by the pressures of Time, the stress of scarcity. Free from such bonds we swam in abundance, skipping through the universe in defiance of cosmic order.

But a little voice was telling me it was not right, that one could not expect all this without a price, that such an existence, though full of freedom, would somehow lack purpose, could somehow become dangerous to the soul. I was about to put these half-formed thoughts into words when the doctor’s granddaughter appeared from the edge of the woodland laden with flowers and radiating a smile which put the sunlight to shame and made me question whether there was any danger at all in what we were doing. I let the exhilaration sweep aside the doubts.

'Mr. Hillman!' she cried, handing me a bunch of the brightest wildflowers I had ever seen. 'Are you feeling better?' Zennik answered for me.

'He is, my dear, he is —and he begins to enjoy our own excitement!'

She looked at me with an innocence of shared joy that made me smile — not a shadow in that countenance of the bestial urges I had felt within the healing chamber when pondering her image. I felt ashamed, but also uplifted by her naiveté.

'Where — or rather, when — would you like to go, Mr. Hillman? Grandfather can simply adjust the clock and we can be any period in history!'

'This is not merely a toy, though, Zennik. Its applications are limitless; its ramifications huge,' I said, becoming suddenly stern and severe, but with an effort, as I was at the same time conscious of a desire not to deflate Elizabeth's enthusiasm.

'Indeed so, Hillman,' the doctor replied, mirroring my mood. 'In the short time in which the Cerebrachrone has been functioning, I have witnessed both wonders and horrors too great for me to describe. As a tool of science and enlightenment the Cerebrachrone is unmatched; as a weapon it is devastating. I daresay it would be possible to obliterate existence itself if the device were wrongly used. The responsibility is now ours, and it is one I take most to heart, believe me. Though I can become quite animated about what we are in the process of experiencing, I can also be most reflective about its consequences.'

His words and his manner did much to put me at ease, and I began to appreciate that he was perhaps more complex than I had at first thought — neither a lunatic, as I had initially concluded, nor a potential despot, but an old man whose experience of life was suddenly thrown into a lawless void by unexpected possibilities and perils.



We walked through lush grass along a river meadow where once had been the great houses of my generation. It was difficult to conceive that it was longer ago that they had stood on that spot than it was to the era of the Ice Ages from my own time, and in thinking that thought I had a sudden glimpse of what Zennik meant by eternity — for this green and empty land for us was the Present, and all of civilisation and the Empire was a distant and forgotten past. Similarly, had we travelled back to the beginnings of the world, all that was to come was the Future, and as yet unwritten. One could conceive of what a god must feel, looking down into an immense span of Time through a keyhole, as it were, or through a telescope which focused only on that segment called by its inhabitants the 'present', while all of Time stretched out from it, before and after, prepared either in some mythic pre- time moment or perhaps better conceived of as originating outside mortal planes altogether. The idea was staggering both intellectually and emotionally. To be that free of linear progression was to cast off the chains of the universe indeed, and to walk with the gods.

We continued to wander along the pathless valley under a cloud- dotted sky, all of us silent as the full dawning of realisation broke upon me, and the other two, sensing this, withheld any comment. It was a segment of my life like no other, a period I could not measure — a

transcendent experience against which all the rest of life needed to be related. It was Zennik who at last broke the spell.

'There is one last journey to make before we return to our own time, a few years that will never again be the same for any of us. One more destination and one more task,' he said, adjusting the Cerebrachrone.

'I have many questions,' I began, 'some technical, others spiritual...'

Even as the words left my mouth, Elisabeth and her grandfather had clasped my hands and the meadow had vanished. It was night, and we were walking along a street which glittered with lights stronger than gaslamps, like coloured gems sparkling on an ebony cloth. It was a place full of noise and movement, and I had scarcely made out any details when the doctor drew me aside and I found myself passing along a corridor plated with panes of glass. There were people everywhere, confusion, motion, but Zennik seemed to know what he was doing and kept on in a direction towards a coloured booth that glowed with lights. We waited in a queue of strangely garbed individuals — I averted my eyes as some of the ladies seemed only partially clothed — and then soon we were proceeding along a narrow passage and into a long room full of close-ranked padded chairs into which we all climbed. All this had taken only nine minutes and thirty-two seconds and I found it most disorientating.



'Where are we?' I began. The doctor leaned conspiratorially forward and whispered:

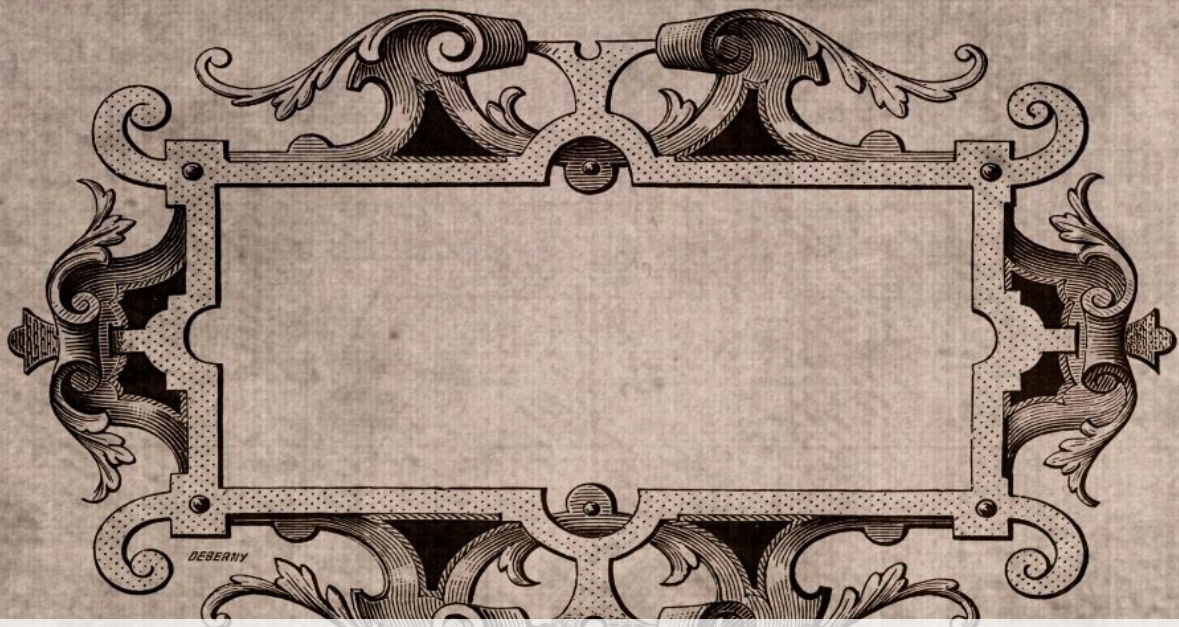
'Back in the Twentieth Century, Hillman. Aboard one of their astonishing air vehicles. We must travel to India, and this is the swiftest way there that is easily accessible. Direct transmission of matter wasn't developed until the twenty-third century, and its use was so restricted that I think it unlikely that we would have been able to gain access to a station, so I have opted for this — besides, this is an experience in itself!'

As he spoke, a charming but semi-clad woman assisted me in fastening a metal clip over my lap. I felt a wave of anxiety at this constraint, but saw that all the people — there were, I now noticed, over a hundred men and women in the long, low-ceilinged room — had similar belts and also that neither the doctor nor Elizabeth seemed particularly perturbed, so I made myself as comfortable as I could under the glare of the harsh lights, and waited. I judged that it was dawn — before we had entered the room I had seen through a large window the sky beginning to turn pale. But times of day now meant nothing to me.

The room was strangely like a theatre, I thought, as the young woman who had fastened the belt now proceeded, with her male companion in another aisle, to give some kind of demonstration to the accompaniment of a disembodied voice, a sequence of movements the purpose of which eluded me — but it was a theatre without a stage, for the room was quite enclosed and measured not twenty feet across with broad pillars blocking any view. I was momentarily entranced by the lighting, which seemed much like the gaslights with which I was familiar, but which burned steadily and without flame.

Then I sensed a lurching motion, as though the room itself were moving, and thought for a brief moment that I was having a physical after-reaction to my recent experiences, until Zennik and Elizabeth indicated to me a small porthole through which I glimpsed some large but nondescript shapes moving by, and I realised that the entire room was in fact rolling along, perhaps on gigantic wheels. I wondered what the airship in which we were to travel looked like and how long it would take to arrive at it — looking out of the window, it seemed that we were in a large field in which I could conceive a large balloon perhaps being moored.





Abruptly, I felt pressed back into my seat by a jolt and surmised that we had collided with some object. I expected, as no one was particularly concerned, that this was a common occurrence with such large vehicles, and that we would soon be released from our belts and permitted to proceed on foot to the balloon, but I turned back to the window as Elizabeth smiled and pointed.


The glass was quite thick and there were shreds of fog racing along outside. Through the mist I caught a glimpse of a model city which someone had cleverly and rather painstakingly built in the middle of the field. I looked back at Elizabeth and smiled — the thing was really most impressive and somehow the creator of this extravaganza had contrived to have little model vehicles of the same kind that I had encountered in 1960 speed along the model streets without any apparent motive force. Magnets under the ground, I concluded idly. I noticed at that point an odd pressure in my middle ear, perhaps another after-effect of these strange and wonderful experiences I was having. The mist grew thick outside and the model grew smaller, perhaps as the vehicle, clearly in motion again and labouring with its

thunderous engines pulling us up an incline, strived to reach the balloon. I was suddenly overcome with fatigue and leaned my head back into the soft pillow of the seat, and without a thought for my fellow passengers, as one does on a locomotive on occasion, I fell into a slumber.

'Welcome to Calcutta!' were the first words I recalled on being wakened by the doctor an indeterminate period later. It seemed to me that we were still in the same strange room, but, as people around me unbuckled themselves and filed out through a narrow door, I emerged into plainly different surroundings — the sun was blazing, the ground glaring, the air dusty and hot. We shuffled like a herd of sheep through into a large auditorium of some kind, not dissimilar to the one we had left in London, and then Zennik hustled us into a smaller horseless carriage, and my whole attention was absorbed in observing its driver controlling some unseen and incomprehensible motive force through the use of a large wheel in front of him. The image of a ship's bridge came to my mind, but the seat in which he sat seemed far too cramped, nor was there any visible means whereby he might control the speed of the machine.







I pulled out my pocketwatch, but instantly realised that its multiple time-keeping facility was useless as I had no idea anymore of any particular time with which to begin. I stared at the thing bemusedly for a moment or two, in a blankness of incomprehension.


I sensed Elizabeth's amusement at my distractedness, but became determined not to betray myself to her.

'It was most exhilarating, was it not, Mr. Hillman?' she asked as we sped at alarming velocities through streets crowded with colour and life. I indicated that I was not sure of her meaning.

'The journey through the air — the speed of it, the glory!' she said, and reclined in her seat in a fashion, I felt, designed to subvert my better impulses. 'Did you know, Mr. Hillman,' she went on when my lack of reply revealed my complete ignorance of the experience to which she was alluding, 'that in this century, society's morals have broken down to such a degree that love outside marriage is commonplace? And yet society continues to function in an almost godless state. Perhaps even those things upon which our world bases its entire strength can be questioned, changed. Time's chains, having been broken, may have unfettered us from more than we might at first believe...'

She placed her hand lightly upon mine and I felt a surge of heat rise to my face like a wave of some tropical sea. I drew my hand away, half-reluctantly, remembering the image of her that I had conjured in the chamber in what was now the distant future, and smiled politely at her as I attempted to concentrate my attention on something other than her enticing beauty.

'Zennik, please,' I said, turning to the doctor and unleashing my suppressed frustrations upon him, 'you have brought me on this voyage in a manner nothing short of an abduction — I have been subjected to sudden and alarming phenomena which may well have unhinged my senses — I have been transported, as far as I can understand without any grasp of the mechanics by which it has been achieved, halfway across the world to the Indian sub-continent, and you have made various hints as to some connection between all of this and our own relationship, but I must now insist that you reveal to me your full purposes and plan as my patience is drawing to its end and, despite the fascination I have shared with you on occasion in this last what to me appears as a few hours, I am growing considerably concerned by the continuing state of affairs.'



Zennik merely smiled calmly as we swerved on through the city beyond the vehicle's windows.

'Very well,' he said, folding his long fingers together delicately, 'you are quite correct to demand explanations from me, Mr. Hillman. Let me first say this — that at no point has my intention towards you been malicious. When I first struck upon the principle by which the Cerebrachrone accomplishes its small miracles, I determined then that its use must at all times be guided by a philanthropic morality of the highest kind. But what brings us on this voyage, and what connects us, Hillman, is the fact that we are bound in common to the co-creator of my device, Professor Stafford Hillman.'

He paused for me to absorb the information. Stafford Hillman was my uncle, the man whose fascination with Time had inspired my whole life and career. Zennik was nodding at me. He went on.

'Professor Hillman in his youth made a study of the ancient manuscripts of the Eastern religion of the Hindu. He brought to them his Western methodology and mathematics, and found that he had solved riddles of science that baffled his colleagues in the West. It was not long before he had glimpsed the mystical path to higher planes of which the Indian gurus speak, but with a certainty only to be achieved by the application of modern science.'

'Yes,' I interrupted him, somewhat stunned into a pensive curiosity by his revelation, 'he told me that he had once met a mystic who had assured him that travel in Time was possible.'

'Indeed. And before he died he left a legacy of breakthroughs the like of which no scientist in our civilisation is likely to equal,' Zennik went on. 'How did I become aware of this? I was his pupil, Mr. Hillman. When he knew that he was dying, he sent to me his notes and diaries, and I have made the fulfilment of his work my own life's ambition. The fruition of it all is the Cerebrachrone, and the triumph of that fruition is the fact that we are here now, doing what we have been given the power to do.'

He brought out the device again and it flashed and glimmered in the racing sunshine in an inanimate unawareness of its own fascination. I absorbed all this as quickly as my overworked mind was able, and quietly slipped my poorer cousin of a pocket watch back into my waistcoat.

'So why are we here? What is the precise purpose of this particular journey, other than to introduce me, his nephew, to the triumphs of his research?' I ventured, after a moment.

At that point the vehicle came to a sudden halt and we emerged from its hot and humid confines into some kind of Calcutta township. We quickly made for the shade of a large awning in front of an even larger and elaborately carved building that looked somewhat like a temple. I was anxious to continue our conversation, but Zennik insisted on first walking some way into the entrance of the temple and finding a cool seat on a stone bench from where he could observe an inner courtyard where coloured cloth basked in the sun.

'This temple,' he went on at last, but apparently commencing with another subject, 'has remained unchanged for centuries. Like most things of any substance in this great land, it has that numinescent quality of already being somewhat outside Time as we normally know it.'

With these words he took the Cerebrachrone and once again adjusted its complex dials and switches. The impression conveyed by the consequent transformation of the environment was that Zennik's fingers controlled the sun, moon and movements of the heavens themselves as the heat and light vanished and we sat in a moonlit courtyard, on the same stone bench, surrounded by identical walls, except that we were, he explained, approximately one hundred years earlier in time.

'The subjectivity of Time,' he further explained, 'means that we do not shift from our seats, even though, as you must have surmised, the entire planet rolls through space and if we were to manifest ourselves in precisely the location we had left we would no doubt appear in the void of darkness and be swallowed up. But by a magic and a mystery, and no doubt also through the complex interrelationships between our etheric fields and the environment, the Cerebrachrone enables us to orientate to the spot we left and experience no more than the flux of Time.'





He sounded remarkably like an Indian mystic himself with that pronouncement, and it was several moments before the wonder of our most recent transportation dissipated, enabling me to configure my thoughts. A bright and full moon swelled over us, its expression easily imaginable as one of wry amusement at our adventures below, and the notion occurred to me that I was looking up at a younger moon in a younger sky than that which had floated above us a few moments ago.

This notion brought on a sensation similar to that which a bird must feel in flight — there were no longer any stable rules, no longer any part of the world inaccessible — the gravity of Time and Space that had formerly clutched us so tightly to its bosom had relinquished us and we floated freely, drifting wherever we wished. With a twist of the dial, lights had changed, shadows had shifted, surrounding sounds had gone, but astonishingly we had remained much the same. The Cerebrachrone was more than a device for travelling in time, it was the bridge to the world of the gods.

Just at that instant, into our corner of the quiet, cooler, moon-filled square strode a man in his mid-thirties with a thick black moustache and wearing a white suit and helmet of the kind familiar to the Indian Civil Service. He wore an expression not unlike Zennik's — like that of a bird of prey, but in his case with an echo of a resemblance to someone. The man came nearer, browsing somewhat aimlessly through the stones and carvings. I noted how he seemed distracted, as though waiting for someone, or perhaps pondering something so deeply that he had lost all concern for his physical whereabouts. It was, I confirmed as he drew closer, my uncle Stafford, but as a younger man than I had known him. Zennik signed to us to wait, and then, as Uncle Stafford approached a well near the middle of the courtyard, we all stood and stepped forward into clear moonlight.

The effect on the newcomer, alone in a silent courtyard where ancient spirits haunted forgotten corners, and which seemed abandoned by all but the four of us as though a stage and its players had been long prepared and then left for destiny to direct, was not one which my imagination would have painted. Uncle Stafford neither flinched nor cried out, but simply stood still and removed his hat in the presence of Elizabeth, almost as though he was meeting us on Piccadilly for lunch in St. James, but with a certain awe or wonder in his face and eyes that was indescribable. We all stood quietly for some three minutes, neither greeting the other, until he bowed his head and said:


‘So, you come again, and I am relieved to find that you are much the same. If I am going insane, then at least my madness has consistency,’ he smiled wryly. I felt an impulse to rush forward and take his hand but Zennik, foreseeing this, turned to me and said in a low voice:

‘Let us avoid physical contact — we cannot risk too much in this most fragile of circumstances,’ and I concurred and held back. Stafford did not recognise me, but then I surmised that this meeting was taking place effectively some years before I had first met him as a young man, so that he would not be able to make any comparisons. Zennik now addressed him directly.

‘Indeed, Professor, we return as we said we would, this final time, to let you see that which your work has enabled me to build, and therefore that which has empowered us to journey here.’

The doctor then held up the Cerebrachrone, its silver band still encircling his neck, and its almost globular shape glittered like a tiny moon in the pale light. Uncle Stafford fixed his eyes upon it and squinted in its reflection as though it were both the key and the keyhole to the gates of Paradise, as indeed one might well argue was in fact the case — it slowly spun round in the still night air, unaware of the awe and amazement with which it was beheld. A few timeless moments went by — it was the eye of the spell, in which Stafford looked upon that which his dream had made possible, and which, I realised, his seeing at this time actually was in the same moment engendering that dream. His glimpse of this device now would fire him to spend his life putting down the foundations upon which it could be created — it was a bizarre yet eternally serene moment, and in the same instant I saw destiny naked and unravelled before me, and looked upon the uncle whose fascination with Time would spill over into my life, urging me through the years until, as a member of the Chronophile Club, I would visit Zennik’s rooms in Belgravia and wind up here, at the point which was the genesis of my own life-long passion.





This first transcendent moment passed. Stafford gave a little laugh, making no attempt to step closer as Zennik spoke, explaining to him in terms of a science I could barely begin to comprehend, the inner workings of the Cerebrachrone. The doctor's voice was like the intoning of a priest in these holy surroundings, invoking a convoluted wizardry. Shifting my attention, it was in that instant that my own thunderbolt struck — I looked at Elizabeth and found that she was looking at me with a curious expression of neither youthful desire, as she had done when we were in transit to the temple, nor childlike curiosity, but rather with some nameless and almost overpowering maturity that I could only later call wisdom. I suddenly saw that what little experience she had had of these time-transcending adventures had transformed her into a living embodiment of a mystical and profoundly senior nature, a cosmic force given living properties in the form of this naive and unspoiled girl, whose face now shone with a light like that of the stars above me. To say that at that instant I fell in love with her would be to compare the idle trickling of a scullery tap with the thunder of the Victoria Falls — her being swelled to encompass me, and I swooned before her gaze as Hindus may have swooned before the intricately carved, ancient and holy images of the temple in which we stood.

How long this scenario persisted I had no means of telling — my normally precise time-keeping habit had drowned in a subterranean sea of strange and labyrinthine wonder. It was, shall we say, a considerable period later that I turned my attention back to my uncle, whom I saw had been laughing hysterically and who held now in his hands his own pocket watch, which he glared upon with an intense and almost maniacal passion.

'Time, thou traitor, thou tyrant!' he ranted, growing increasingly heated and loud as he went on. 'No longer shall I be thy subject, thy helpless pawn!' And with that last outburst, a cry which echoed about the walls of that empty courtyard like the pronouncement of one of the millions of Hindu gods chiselled there, he tore his watch from his waistcoat where the chain had been clipped, and threw it violently into the dark maw of the nearby well where I heard it scrape against stone and then vanish into silence and the oblivion of the black waters far below.

Uncle Stafford then paused, having steadied himself against the well's crumbling wall, and tossed his disturbed hair back and into some semblance of order with his fingers, recovering himself and bowing to Elizabeth as he regained his breath.

'I do apologise,' he said to her. 'It is not normally my habit to permit such savage displays of emotion within myself, to say nothing of in such esteemed and admirable company,' he said. Elizabeth acknowledged him gracefully and he looked up at the doctor again. Zennik let the Cerebrachrone fall from where he had maintained it aloft during this exhibition.

'It is done,' he pronounced, and turned to me. 'You see now why I was so intent to bring you here, my dear Hillman. On my first visit here, I established our identity and arranged this encounter. The opportunity to bring you along clearly presented itself when I realised who you were at the Chronophile Club. I hope that you will forgive any impertinence on my part.' He laid a hand gently on my shoulder, but I was still watching my uncle in some vain hope that he would recognise me. He glanced at me, but was at the same time feeling through his waistcoat pockets for something.

'I am terribly sorry,' he said, smiling at us, 'but I wonder if I could trouble you for the correct time of night? In my folly I appear to have dispensed with a rather valuable and useful watch.'

I stepped away from the doctor's hand and closer to my uncle, and, guided by I scarcely know what impulse, I offered him my own device, the one he himself had given me.

'Here,' I said, 'please take this. Keep it. Perhaps you will in time find someone who would greatly appreciate it as a gift.' With these nervous words I handed it to him, our fingers touching briefly as he took it and a glance passing between us of something above recognition which words would struggle to capture or convey. He accepted the gift, sensing somehow that it was part of that night's magic, and I stepped back from him.

'Go forward, Professor,' said Zennik, raising his hand in farewell, 'forward to meet us again in your future, in the channel that is called Time, but in different incarnations, as pupil and nephew, and let this moment be consigned to your past. We have performed our midwifery to your destiny as you must now perform yours to ours. May God watch over you!'



His long fingers worked the dials in his hand, and the spectral night, the silence and Uncle Stafford were swallowed up in the sudden sunlight and noise of a much later day.

My mind was neither fully cognisant of, nor particularly inclined to take in the details of our return journey. We had shifted in time again to the twentieth century, where we made our way back to the flying vessel, a glimpse of one of which I this time caught as ours left the ground — but the human mentality has within it a mental muscle, upon which too much incredulity bears down like a weight, straining it beyond further use, and I was in such a state of exhaustion at that point that I could no more conceive of our return flight or the huge vessels in which we were carried as a miracle of human scientific achievement than I could lift a hundredweight boulder with one hand. I fell into a deep sleep while we were in the air, and recall little of our arrival in London or of our time-shift back to what I had once regarded as my own time.

Indeed, it was as I stood once more in the hall of Zennik's rooms in Belgravia that an awareness struck me of my own dispossession — I felt homeless in the universe, cast out from my own nest, flung from on high into a void of possibilities in which I had no wings and no direction. I felt for my watch as a habit, and it occurred to me as part of this realisation what a mystery I had by my own action created — for, if my uncle had in fact received that very device from my own hands, years before he met me, only to later pass it on to me as his heirloom, by whose hand had it originally been made? My watch was trapped in a circle of Time without beginning or end, in which it was neither made nor destroyed but travelled round and round eternally, like a leaf caught in the eddy of a stream.

My tired brain could not cope with the paradox or its ramifications. I shook Zennik's hand, and returned mere pleasantries for his enthusiastic leavetakings. I hardly knew what to say to Elizabeth, whose penetrating glance in the Hindu temple had pinned part of my soul to that moonlit courtyard for eternity. I could barely look her in the eye as I took her hand, but when I did so I saw only the same playfulness and charm I had earlier perceived, the goddess within her having withdrawn for another day, another plane of existence.

As I stumbled, spiritually inebriated by all that I had been through, down the steps outside Zennik's door, I looked up and saw my own self looking out of the library windows at me, and I realised that I had been brought back a short while before I had left. I clambered aboard a cab, not looking back, hungering for sleep in my own bed, and pondering, as I heard the comforting sound of the horse's hooves on the cobbled streets and felt the slow rocking of the coach, the elusive idea that this was perhaps only the beginning of my adventures with Doctor Zennik and the Cerebrachrone.

The End?





CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

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*Porphyrean's  
Choice*



Porphyrean turned, his idle gaze pervading the purple twilight of the overhanging emerald vineleaves and procrastinating in the pearly light from the wintrous beads of the many thousand chandeliers that clustered about the globing dome of the voluptuan ceiling. In those violet shadows stirred thoughts unmentionable, eddies in the pool of Porphyrean's divine mind.

Queen Scaramuthe stroked her lover's long and shining hair from the high and stony shelf of his thoughtful brow, her tracing fingers dividing his cascading locks right down to his reclining waist where the winding braids ended in jewels and lumps of chiselled gold. Her eyes flickered fancifully in the half-light, embers of thought fading and flaring in the deep and ash-choked grate of her ancient mind as she watched her lover lick the bitten flesh of a blue and green grape before dropping it whole with a delicate and miniature ceremony of fingers and lips into the ebony abyss of his gullet.

'Wondreth thyself, my full-bodied god of the fire of love,' said Scaramuthe, leaning her frame against him and turning her fingertips round about and round about in the ends of his mane, 'wondreth thyself whether thy darling and honeysweet daughter has yet put her hand to the Fruit of Knowledge in the Garden of the Nether Paradise afore the chiming of the Causator's Bell? For is not this day the Day of the Thousand Tongues, and is not the Dividing of Fruits the Seventh Ceremony of that day, and should not she at this very tick of Great Lucy's tock be prostrating herself at thy feet and presenting thee with the Apple of Horatius Himself?'

She had spoken so quietly, in a whisper like the wind waiting for a door to open, that Porphyrean had neither moved nor breathed for fear of missing a syllable from her worshipped throat — for, as well she knew, she had but to utter a sound, not even a word but only a primeval groan or even a squeak without significance, to send his whole mighty form trembling with the desires that gave birth and meaning to the world. He instigated a motion of muscles, a slow and thunderous stretching of his face, his grape-stained lips straining back across the skeletal stalactites of his teeth in a smile that betokened unspeakable pleasure in that sweet murmur of his lover's voice.

'Ah, my essence of the nectar of peaches,' he said, marking each word on the air as a painter caresses a canvas with his brush, 'thou speakest too little, and my poor and pleasure-starved ears, drowned in the silent music of the spheres, occupied with the frenzied clutter of the seventy-seven thousand palaces, pine to nothing in the absence of thy voice. Put thy licktacious lips to my own and let us abandon Burravish to her quest! Let us set fire to the stars themselves with our rampaging and unmitigatable passion! Let the darkness of heaven be dark no longer, but full of my seed and the crimson cries of thy receiving loins!'

The turning of Porphyrean's mighty form was like the upheaval of a craggy and gold-encrusted range of mountains by a tumult deep within the heart of the world; his bejewelled flesh sparkled in the mystic lamplight as his arms embraced slender Scaramuthe, her lithe and splendid shape overshadowed and all but eclipsed by the moon of his body coming between her and the splintered light from the overbrimming suns that hung delicately from the carven sky of the ceiling. But with one tiny, perfectly formed hand emerging from within her drapery of pale blue and silver, with one fragile, taut and curving arm protruding upwards, the diamonds of her gauze shawl twinkling like a galaxy in his shadow, she gave him pause, she ceased the downward bearing motion of his bulk, she halted the god mid-movement, and, smiling at him with the smile that shattered the Plinthmaster's heart and curdled the blood of a thousand sacrificial virgins, she forced him back, and untwined his mind from dreams, calling silently to the purpose of the day and dragging forth from the void of his idleness the intention not to fall upon her but to swing instead to his right, where, spilled with grapes and surrounded by ruby-cruled pillows, the Mirror of Manjle lay strewn as though no more than a toy, a thing to be tossed aside, a bauble. With the ringed talons of her left hand, the Hand Sinister, she drew a wide, dark line across the steam upon the glass, and leaned over it, feeling its crystal iciness upon her half-gauzed breasts, and such was her will that the gaze of the god was drawn thither too, his own powerful fingers stroking his long, brown beard as he peered into the reflecting shadows.





Therein, but a moment had passed and they saw the light-play of a figure dancing across a darkness, paddling naked through a forest stream, sharp and golden sunlight cutting the dawn air until it bled pale mist. It was a girl, a princess — though, as her white flesh pressed into the dripping bark of the massive trees she seemed a wormish thing, small and of no consequence. The trees frowned at her, they loomed at her, they resolved not to be disturbed by her as she plashed about in the dim domain at their feet, like some beautiful dragonfly, a colourful and fascinating but irritating insect that sought escape from their shadows into some brighter and freer world beyond — but try as they might, the tall trees of the ancient Tharlsigirdle Wood could not forget that fateful shape that tickled their beslimed trunks with her nakedness; nor could they put aside their wooden but no less certain knowledge that this day was the Day of the Thousand Tongues. Six of the Nine Ceremonies of that Day had been performed. Of those the trees of Tharlsigirdle Wood knew naught — but of the Seventh Ceremony they had an intimacy of knowledge, for in the west of the wood was the Garden of the Nether Paradise, and in the cleaving of that garden between two low hills was the Clearing of the Broken Spiral, and in the centre of that space, tall, proud and spilling over with silver in the morning sun, stood the Tree of Horatius Himself, and this was the special season when it hung heavy with red and glowing fruits like rubies that seemed lit from within by an fruitish fire: the Apples of Knowledge. It was these Apples that Burravish, glorious princess upon whose skin the sun and moon made love, the very sight of whom had split open the hearts of at least seven hundred mortals, was intent with more than a single portion of her youthful mind. She knew, and was enervated by the knowing, that one of those apples she needed to pluck before the chiming of the Causator's Bell. She glanced up at the whirling sun, and knew that, by its too-swift motion of madness across her heavens, not much mortal time remained.

What would happen to her young self if she failed to grasp one of those rubied fruits prior to the tintinabulation of those heavy bells, she did not dare to contemplate, nor did anyone know, for in the Five Ages of Snorcus-Snarrilus, no one had returned from the Garden of the Nether Paradise if the Bell had caught them out. Would she be burned by an out-reaching flare from her father's sun? Or would the green and wet earth which made her toes shiver as she flitted from shadow to shadow open up beneath her and suck her into its cold muddiness forever? She shook with fear and morning dew as she ran on, slipping on squeaky fronds of dampness and brushing aside the silvery nets of dawn cobwebs.

Then suddenly it was before her — not the slender trunk of the Tree of Horatius Himself, but the bowed-over shape of a man turned to stone. The grey gargoyle form faced away from her, bent as though in perpetual pain, a tall and exceptionally thin man. Anxious with the anxiety of a goddess, she stepped lightly about the dripping rock and looked upon this captive of chronosis from the front. She had to bend to see his face — it

was a twisted visage, its young and frail features spoiled by lines of agony. He had his arms clasped about his naked abdomen, as though frozen in the fraction of an instant when he had received a blow there. He was not beautiful — his arms were taut and bony, his eyes bulging, his nose far too large for his face. A small spider had made a webby home in one of his nostrils. Forgetful of the time, or dismissive of its passage as revealed by the creeping of black shadows across the vernal floor of the wood, Burravish put a delicate hand to the statue's creased brow and at the cold contact between fingertip and stone inhaled an upsurging pity which had already begun to trickle upwards with her hot and youthful blood from the ventricles of her divine heart. Who was this agonised boy? she wondered — and answered herself in the next breath: he was one of those who had come before her to recover an Apple, and this was what befell those who could not beat the Causator's Bell! Her hand jerked away, involuntarily, but that motion with its implication of fear shamed her innocence and she put her sweet fingers back upon that stony head and stroked it.



Then she leaned forward and put her pink lips to the grey and twisted stone mouth, feeling its rough icy grit against the yielding cushion of her own lips. She closed her beautiful eyes, and heard in that silent wood where even the birds were silent for the day of a Thousand Tongues, a sudden and very distinct crack, like the sharp and decisive breaking of a giant's bone, or the clean splintering of a rough diamond under the expert blow of a jeweller's hammer. She opened her eyes again, and keeled over like a fallen tree at her feet, writhing in a cacophony of coughing and rubbing a small spider's home from his face, was a tall and exceedingly thin young fellow who after a moment's collection of himself, noticed her standing there naked and utterly glorious before him, and immediately used his flat and splaying hands to cover his own youthful embarrassment.

No words were spoken, for what words could be found in such a circumstance as a boy lately a statue finding himself in the company of his unexpected saviour, a divine princess who

glistened before him like the offspring of a sun and a moon? He shifted from foot to cramped foot; she looked at him and away from him, her girlish curiosity seeking neither to avoid nor to meet his nervous gaze but looking him up and down as though inspecting a specimen in the late Plinthmaster's cabinets. Nor did she speak when she approached him and drew aside his hands as someone rising from slumber might draw aside a curtain to look through a window. He stood awkwardly as she peered at his exposed boyhood, her mouth a little tunnel of curiosity. Nor did he utter a word when she stepped closer, her small hands stroking his spindly arms, her small breasts touching his newly-restored skin, her staring eyes like a deer's only inches from his twitching face. He could make only an incoherent noise as she pulled him closer to her, and could yell only a meaningless squeak as she put her gentle and warm lips upon his protruding collarbone in





the same purposeful way in which a child puts a coloured bead to its mouth. Nor did he do more than draw breath when her teeth lightly grazed his neck, her nails testing the thickness of his flesh down his back. He trembled, no more than a fitful shake like a dog drying itself, when her hand stroked him intimately; he ground his teeth together when she took it upon herself to make him fall backwards onto the wet and slimy earth; he made no protest of movement or sound as she cleaned the rest of the cobwebs and dust from his face with her wonderful fingers; he fell silent as she bestrode him, her face empty of all lust or feeling, a blank and white canvas upon which a grandmaster might paint a passion, her eyes a staring and forgetful void as she took him in those fabulous and fairy-like fingers, her golden hair sharing something of the sun's morning sheen as she fell upon him.

And then they heard it. Over the tops of the tallest trees it came, defying height and distance with its chilling thunder; worming between the trunks of the forest, it approached like an ambushing army, falling upon their

helpless ears like marauding outlaws might savage a wandering and witless victim — the deadly and perfunctory chiming of the Causator's Bell. And there, not a hundred paces away, gleaming in the mid-morning shafts of shimmering sunlight, in the Clearing of the Broken Spiral, were the precious fruits of the Tree of Horatius Himself, bowing low upon slender branches, untouched, unplucked, unheld. And Burravish woke from her girlish and animal trance and was struck down by terror and guilt and realisation of mortal time, that passage of ticks and tocks that ate away always at opportunity. And the boy looked in her face and his unbidden and uninvited ecstasy ceased as swiftly as his stony form had melted again into flesh, as she leapt from him and pounced toward the Clearing of the Broken Spiral — too late. Even as her fleet foot touched the grass it was golden — there she was, frozen in a golden moment of terrible cognisance, golden rather than stone because of her divinity, the boy surmised, his mind, even with all that it had endured, being of that sort.





Scaramuthe smiled the smile that had tormented and destroyed the armies of the Spotted Witch as she pulled back from the Mirror of Manjle and the phantasmic images that it had shown them. She pulled at the trunk of supernatural muscle that was the arm of Porphyrean, her cosmic lover, and taunted him with her eyes.

‘But my delicacy,’ he protested, ‘my quintessence of the flowing juices of night’s bedlam, what of our daughter Burravish, she of the sparkling eye, the golden mane, the slender and beauteous outspringing of thine own loins? Turned to a frozen image of her former self, doomed for a thousand years to stand cold and unmoving in the heart of that dim dark wood? Thou canst not cast aside thine own with so little regard!’

‘Oh but I canst, and so canst thou, my nub of divine butter,’ replied the honied voice of the queen as she reclined before his overwhelming shape. ‘Come spread thy creamy substance across the dark bread of my unearthly beauty,

and let the adventurous reap the consequences of their adventuring!’ Porphyrean paused and contemplated: it was true that the princess had put herself forward for the Seventh Ceremony unbidden, and despite the perils of the race against the Causator’s Bell. And it was also true that, to a goddess, a thousand years of golden timelessness in a sunlit clearing was a trifle in the Scheme of Things. So he succumbed and heaved his ferocity upon his queen. ‘Let us commence the Eighth Ceremony,’ whispered Scaramuthe as he voyaged within her, ‘and then let us revel in the Thousand Tongues that await us!’

And she laughed an unholy laugh to herself as she pondered how very wise she had been when she had placed that stone-cursed boy in the path of her daughter on the way to the silvery Tree of Horatius Himself.



# Seed of Death

'Holy frag!'

I was making an impression on her. I popped another orgasm tablet into her glass of vodka and watched it fizzle away. She was still trembling a bit from the last one.

'You're serious aren't you? You're really going to break into the Tree?'

Drink up darling, I thought — I was dimly aware of the fact that I couldn't remember a damn thing about the last three days, so I wanted to keep her talking to give me a chance to recollect. All that I could remember was that I'd seen Jessica with some blond German thug driving away in his Turbo Mercedes heading for Haiti, before I lost my mind. Well, that was

last Tuesday, and Tuesday was our Frolic day when according to time-honoured custom, relationships didn't matter and promises of fidelity took a back seat to pure lust, so I supposed I couldn't complain. And now here I was at Frederick's Bar, picking up this animated ball of fluff whose name escaped me in my drugged haze. I shrugged in response to her amazement. So what if it was a Wednesday.

'That is sooo momentous. That's the most momentous thing anyone's ever told me they were going to do,' she blabbered on as she sipped her effervescent vodka and began making funny noises.



Yeah, I thought, momentous and fragging stupid too. I still couldn't figure out how I'd gotten involved. Dirk was the technician — he reckoned he could crack the code to the Time Bubbles, take a tour back to before the security perimeter went up around the Tree, actually step out of a Bubble into the early part of the Twenty-First Century and plant an undetectable hyper-explosive device right underneath it. Then he reckoned he could recreate the Bubble, bring us all back home and trigger off the bomb in the present, blowing the Tree up and thus crashing the whole World System. That was Dirk the Anarchist, Dirk the Druggie, Dirk the

Fragging Maniac — but what the hell? There wasn't anything better to do on a Saturday night and it was probably all a bunch of crap anyway. The Space tablets I'd been on for eight months — to get me off the Timers, you understand, 'cos they were really screwing me around, making me think I'd been sitting around doing nothing for thousands of years and shug like that — these new tablets made me kind of not have to think about anything, so I could listen to Dirk, even when he was trying to explain something technical, and not want to slit his throat or put his head into a turbo shaft.

It was the Time Bubble bit that worried me — whenever I was capable of being worried, I mean. Bubbles themselves had been around for ages, ever since McQuarrie had found out that quantum physics was a load of crap and that it was not only possible to travel back in time, it was easy. Since then, once the fragging government got a bit less rigid than a dead man's dong about it all, there had been thousands of excursions back into the past. The only thing was that you had to be contained in an energy bubble, so that as far as the past was concerned you didn't exist, otherwise the world could explode or something. The brains had since figured out that you could use the whole principle to generate more power in a second than the sun put out in a century, and so they solved the world's energy problems, and that was the end of war and poverty and all that crap, blah blah blah. Trouble was they never predicted that life would become so fragging *boring*. It was all a big thwank really — there was nothing left to do. With all this power available, tons more research got done, millions of people could do whatever they wanted, and people were discovering and inventing and creating and travelling and you name it — but there's only so much you can do, isn't there? A century after McQuarrie, humanity started to frag itself — Time Bubbles really came into their own, so to speak, and if there was still a thing called money by then someone would have made a fortune running the Time Tourism industry. I guess people were hankering after the times before McQuarrie when things actually *happened*.

I'd been on school trips, of course — the usual bullshug, Hastings, the Magna Carta, the American War of Independence, World Wars I to IV — but since then the whole thing had become much more sophisticated: when I was at school you had to sit still and watch everything out of a tiny window in the Time Bubble and not move, and most of us threw up on the way back home; nowadays you could walk around in a transparent envelope which moved organically with you, and actually go into shops and things and see things like dead bodies or naked women close up and then come back before you even had chance to feel queasy about it all — but woe betide you, brother, if you tried to burst the Bubble: not only would you fry like an egg, but the bottom-line non-particles which

make up the fabric of what they call reality would disperse — multi-level dissolution I think Dirk and the other brains called it — and it would be as though you never existed, like Time itself chewed you up and spat you out into some kind of void. That's what they told people, anyway — who the frag knows what would happen really? I mean, if they'd sent hamsters and stuff back there and burst their bubbles, did the hamsters cease to exist? How would you know? Some of the brains said you wouldn't actually cease to exist, just spin off into a parallel universe. There was another school of thought that said you'd be caught in a time loop, forever repeating the same set of events, over and over for eternity.



But who gives a frag anyway?

The second orgasm tablet was starting to really work on this chick — she was all over me like a bursting Time Bubble, and I suddenly remembered I was supposed to be round at Dirk's that night so he could go over his Master Plan. I thought to myself, why not take her and Jessica could go screw herself? So I grabbed her — her name was Jinky or Jocky or something like that, my brain was trying to tell me through the watery haze that sloshed around in my head — and we started down the street in the warm night air with her leaning on me and me leaning on her.

We got halfway down the street and her bleeper went off.

'Oh frag!' she said, after taking a few minutes to read the message through her own haze. 'My audition!'

'Audition?' I muttered. I vaguely recalled that she had said that she was an actress. That's right — she'd been a child celebrity, elected at the age of seven to the Kid's Parliament, one of the first Kid Members to resign during the Sugar Scandals. Then she'd made a fortune in the movies, but now, at twenty-one, she'd been considered past it for about five years and hung around in bars hoping jerks like me would keep her in a permanent semi-narcotic daze so she wouldn't have to handle life. The last thing she'd been in had been 'We Were Seduced by Godzilla', a B-grade classic holograph, two years ago.

She had a great body. I couldn't help noticing it more as she pulled out a phone disc and slurred some instructions into it and the street cameras rotated and lights came on and she started stripping off.

'Yeah, my audition,' she said, remembering I was standing there when she was down to her underwear. 'I've got an audition tonight. For the part of Ophelia in Jude Squinty's 'Hamlet'.'

'Jude Squinty? I thought 'Hamlet' was by that Shakespeare guy,' I said as she brushed her hair and patched the camera network through to London's theatreland.



'Well, this is the sex version,' she said, dropping her makeup bag and launching half-naked into a speech from the play which I must admit seemed kind of surreal there even to me, on the pavement under the street lights in Mexico City:

*And will not come again? And will not come again? No, no he is dead,  
Go to thy deathbed,*

*He will never come again.*

*His beard was white as snow, All flaxen was his head,*

*He is gone, he is gone,*

*And we cast away moan,*

*God have mercy on his soul!*

As she cavorted around under the harsh lights I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for her — you'd have to be pretty desperate to want to be in the sex version of 'Hamlet' enough to do

an audition for it while in Mexico City, patched through in 3D to London on the Worldwide. But then I mellowed and went all fragging philosophical on myself, which I hate, and I started to wonder how desperate we all were and what would become of us all — humanity I meant — and I knew that the sooner I got this girl back to Dirk's place and fragged the living shug out of her the better I'd feel about things. So I let her speak to the clowns who auditioned her on her Udisc as I piled her into the Turbo and took off. This is what Shakespeare does to my head, I thought. She wasn't in good shape — some bastard down in the city got a faceful of her vomit as we clipped cloud level and veered south. It was never a good idea to mix alcohol and orgasm tablets.



By the time we got to Dirk's place in Buenos Aires he'd reached Phase III. Dirk had three phases: mad maniac, serious mad maniac, and psychotically serious mad maniac. He'd forgotten to tell me — though he insisted with his fist in my face several times that he hadn't — that this was the Big Night, this was when we were supposed to Do the Deed and Save the World from Itself. I thought it was next week, but after I started to feel the pain of his punches even through the Space tablets, I concurred, and we tumbled into his cruiser with various large bits of equipment that I couldn't make out through the blood trickling down my eyes. I pulled the almost-naked Jinky in with us while she was still screaming at Dirk to stop hitting me, and we were away. In less than half an hour we were at the Atlantis Time Bubble Departure Centre and Dirk was getting past the entrance machine.

Time tourism was now so common that they hadn't even bothered with real security staff — I mean, with every inch of the planet's surface scrutinised by every man and his dog and cat through satellites or local and international camera networks, anything that anyone did could be on your lounge screens within minutes, so the live security trade took a dive. But then, in a world where anyone could do anything, who would choose to be a jerky security guard?

So Dirk stuffed all his gear into his pants and a big bag he carried and moved off down the silvery passageways. He looked at me kind of funny as we walked along. I could barely see his eyes through his long straggly green hair. But that look signalled his descent back into Phase II. I chanced a communication.

'So tonight's the night, hey Dirk? The night we blow up the world!' I said conspiratorially.

'Shut up, you stupid fragger!' he groaned, clamping a dirty hand over my mouth. 'Do you want to screw it up now? Do you think this place isn't miked? Come on, let's get into the ramp before some bastard stops us!'



I dragged the dishevelled Jinky down a long gangway and into a little car on rails that took us deeper into the unmanned complex. After a few minutes we emerged into a foyer where we could choose our destination. The possibilities were almost endless: Prehistoric Times, Ancient Rome, the Dark Ages, Mediaeval Europe, all the usual tourist bullshug, plus a host of research and academic times and locations which looked about as interesting as a six-week-old fried egg. Dirk entered 'Other' and specified 'Early Twenty-First Century' where it said, 'Please Specify'. When he tried to get 'North Yorkshire Moors' into the Location slot and it wouldn't go, he pulled out a thing that looked like a musical instrument and plugged it into the console and began grunting and looking around.

Dirk was a classic anarchist. He and I had spent our whole six months of school plotting ways of destroying the system. He had burned his house down at the age of ten and tried to blow up the Kid's Parliament before he was sixteen. Then he got into this thing about the Tree.

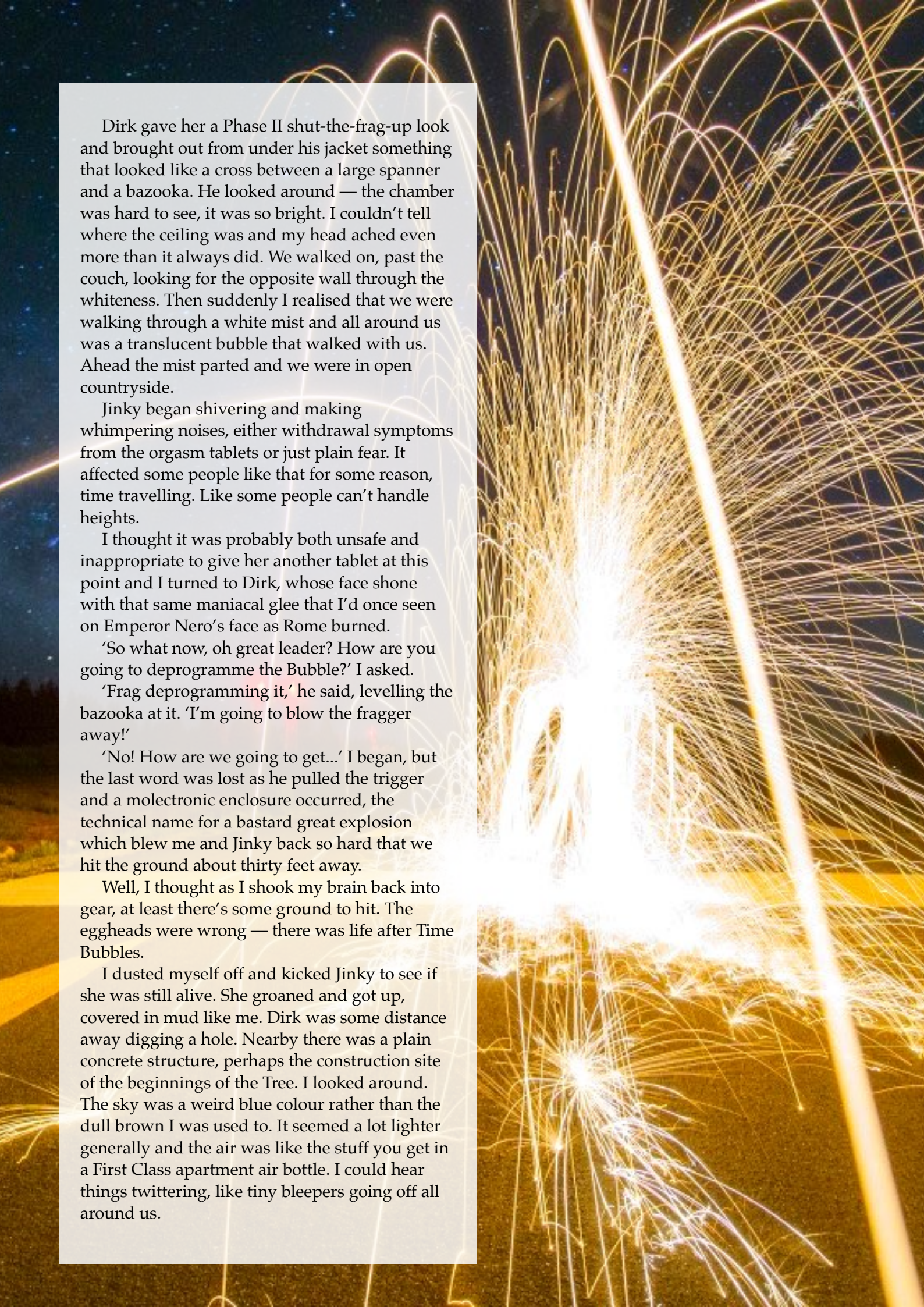
The Tree was, they said, the most important computer node in the world. From its banks, that sprawled across the Yorkshire Moors like some kind of weird organic growth, grey and silver and lit up at night like a crashed alien spacecraft, Dirk reckoned most of the world's computer systems were coordinated. Its sheer size meant that, with moletronics having reduced computer circuitry to submolecular level, it had the capacity to outthink the human brain. This made it Dirk's arch-enemy. And the fact that its destruction might plunge mankind into a new Dark Ages in which humanity would once again find some kind of meaning to life meant that I was behind Dirk all the way. At least, as long as I could keep taking Space tablets so that I didn't really have to think about any of it.

Dirk entered a few figures on his keyboard thing and the console obligingly gave in — we could specify our own location. He typed in the location of the very heart of the Tree, and a date just before the site of its construction was cordoned off. The circular doors ahead of us slid open obediently. We walked through into a white room, empty of anything but a white couch and, rather disconcertingly, a white hatstand.

'What's a fragging hatstand doing here?' said Jinky, and she started to shake.







Dirk gave her a Phase II shut-the-frag-up look and brought out from under his jacket something that looked like a cross between a large spanner and a bazooka. He looked around — the chamber was hard to see, it was so bright. I couldn't tell where the ceiling was and my head ached even more than it always did. We walked on, past the couch, looking for the opposite wall through the whiteness. Then suddenly I realised that we were walking through a white mist and all around us was a translucent bubble that walked with us. Ahead the mist parted and we were in open countryside.

Jinky began shivering and making whimpering noises, either withdrawal symptoms from the orgasm tablets or just plain fear. It affected some people like that for some reason, time travelling. Like some people can't handle heights.

I thought it was probably both unsafe and inappropriate to give her another tablet at this point and I turned to Dirk, whose face shone with that same maniacal glee that I'd once seen on Emperor Nero's face as Rome burned.

'So what now, oh great leader? How are you going to deprogramme the Bubble?' I asked.

'Frag deprogramming it,' he said, levelling the bazooka at it. 'I'm going to blow the fragger away!'

'No! How are we going to get...' I began, but the last word was lost as he pulled the trigger and a molectronic enclosure occurred, the technical name for a bastard great explosion which blew me and Jinky back so hard that we hit the ground about thirty feet away.

Well, I thought as I shook my brain back into gear, at least there's some ground to hit. The eggheads were wrong — there was life after Time Bubbles.

I dusted myself off and kicked Jinky to see if she was still alive. She groaned and got up, covered in mud like me. Dirk was some distance away digging a hole. Nearby there was a plain concrete structure, perhaps the construction site of the beginnings of the Tree. I looked around. The sky was a weird blue colour rather than the dull brown I was used to. It seemed a lot lighter generally and the air was like the stuff you get in a First Class apartment air bottle. I could hear things twittering, like tiny beepers going off all around us.

'Listen,' I said, coming up behind Dirk, 'what's that noise? Maybe they're onto us!'

'That's birds, you shughead! Haven't you been on a Time Trip before? They had birds remember?'

I remembered. You can't hear too much through a Time Bubble, and I'd never paid much attention at school, but now there was no bubble between me and the reality of it all and this wasn't school. I looked back at Jinky — she was about twenty yards away throwing up. I could hear that fine too. And now something else — something that sounded familiar but out of place.

'What's that?' I said, and Dirk looked up with the look I'd once seen on Charles Manson's face before he killed Sharon Tate — but then he heard it too.

The three of us ran around the concrete structure and saw three figures drilling into a wall with molectronic drills, which might not have been so unusual except even my foggy brain told me that molectronics hadn't been discovered until a hundred years from when we were supposed to be.

'Shug!' Dirk exclaimed eloquently as the strangers turned and saw us. They wore face plates but looked strangely aggressive even through the black opaqueness. Dirk ran for an ancient machine that stood unattended nearby. To my horror, he looked even more scared than I was and I realised I'd been using his courage as a substitute for mine and that the sudden disappearance of his nerve exposed mine for the charlatan it always had been. I swallowed another Spacer to compensate, and ran so fast that I beat him to the vehicle, some kind of excavator, and clambered on. Looking back as Dirk started the thing up I saw Jinky stumbling after us.

'Quickly!' I shouted, but Dirk had trouble with the old electric/diesel driven motor which gave Jinky time to catch up. She gave me a look like a bucket of shug and then we were jerked forward as the thing started to move. The three strangers with their anachronisms were nowhere to be seen as we trundled away.

Dirk was fiddling with his bazooka.

'What do we do now? Who were those people?' yelled Jinky above the noise of the motor.



‘What we do is we come back — before now. Before they get here,’ he muttered, and fitted something into his weapon.

‘But how do we get back?’ I asked the obvious question even though this, I knew, was always unwise with Dirk.

To my surprise he didn’t smack me across the jaw with the barrel of the bazooka, he actually answered me.

‘I didn’t blow the bubble,’ he said with a childlike grin on his hair-matted face, ‘I sucked it.’ And, as if that was somehow significant and highly amusing, he chuckled to himself, revealing a cavernous absence of teeth, and patted the cannon that he clutched so possessively to his chest.

When we were about a mile from the original landing site Dirk switched off the excavator and we climbed down. He pointed the bazooka at a piece of ground about four feet in front of us and pulled the trigger. I flinched, expecting an explosion as before, but there was a very undramatic slurping sort of noise and a huge bubble appeared at the end of the cannon and slowly grew. It was kind of hypnotic — before I understood how or when, it was all around us and we were in a white space again, but this time Dirk was frantically at work on his keyboard and we didn’t appear back at the Departure Point but in his apartment. The man might be a complete psychotic, I thought to myself, but he was also a genius of magnitude. He’d basically built a portable Time Bubble Generator complete with guidance system.

Dirk raced around his Hiroshima-like apartment in a frenzy of activity. While he did so, I approached Jinky. She shrank back.

‘Keep away from me, you spineless jerk!’ she snapped. ‘If I had any clothes, I’d be out of here!’

‘Put these on!’ ordered Dirk at that moment and we climbed inside black uniforms and put tight-fitting helmets over our heads. Dirk then handed us molectronic drills, and before I could ask any questions he’d fired the gun again and we were away, travelling back in time from an apartment on the thirtieth floor of the San Marco-Ramirez building in downtown Buenos Aires to the North Yorkshire Moors of a couple of centuries ago. We stepped out at exactly the same point we’d appeared at before, and everything looked exactly the same. Even the same birds were singing.





So the brains must be wrong, I thought again. It must be possible to step out of Time Bubbles with no ill effects because we were doing it.

'I can't handle much more of this,' muttered Jinky, just managing to lift the black opaque headshield on her helmet in time to expel another stomach load of something she'd eaten earlier.


Dirk and I walked off to the concrete structure and I tried to understand what he was saying.

'See, if we plant the bomb *inside* the concrete, they'll never find it. They won't be able to detect molectronic drill traces for another two hundred years and by then they won't be looking here. It's kind of majestic, isn't it? They are going to build the whole Tree around this little bit of concrete, and inside that concrete is the seed of its destruction all the time!' He laughed, a sound reminiscent of Jinky throwing up, and indicated to me where I should drill.

Jinky caught up with us and followed my lead in a kind of brainless fog a bit like my own.

Yeah, majestic, I thought. How things contain the seeds of their own death. Frag me, there was that Shakespeare crap again. I concentrated on dispelling the atoms of the wall in front of me.

We'd been drilling away for about five minutes, a high-pitched whine like the sound of a descending V2 rocket in World War Two, when the strangest mind-frag of all happened. Round the corner of the building who should appear but a tall, thin guy in black jeans and a loose jacket, sort of good-looking in a rugged sort of way, followed by a shorter, dirty guy with straggly green hair and arms full of equipment, and then a young half-naked girl with frizzy hair. These three stood gawping at us for a few seconds and then ran off and climbed onto an excavator that was standing nearby. They started it up and drove off.



It was like déjà-vu or something — I couldn't quite figure it out. It was Jinky who put it all into words.

'That was us, wasn't it?' she shouted above Dirk's drill. 'Those guys we saw when we went back into the past — they were us now, dressed in these outfits!'

Dirk shrugged his shoulders and kept drilling. I followed his directions and soon a large hole had been made in the ten-foot-thick wall. Dirk took out another device from his pocket, like a large, spiky egg, and placed it lovingly into the hole. Then we slammed the drills into reverse and filled the hole from a molecular level upwards, covering the egg and leaving no trace that we had even scratched the surface.

Dirk began to laugh again, but I dragged him away.

'Let's go,' I said. For some reason I'd grown unaccountably nervous. This was all too easy. Stepping in and out of Time Bubbles, interfering with history, it was all supposed to be impossible. It was all building up in my head like a wave at a Hawaiian beach and I

started to feel sick. I fumbled in my pocket for a couple of Spacers and swallowed them dry.

'Let's go!' I shouted again, clutching Dirk's arm.

Jinky was scared suddenly too — she grabbed my arm and hung into me tight as Dirk pointed the bazooka and created another bubble. We were soon in the white space again.

Dirk sat on the floor of the bubble giggling to himself. I suppose he had succeeded. All that remained was to get back and trigger the bomb. The Tree would go up, Worldwide would crash, and human civilisation would never be the same again, all because of this hairy creep sitting sniggering at my feet. He started to fiddle with his control keyboard.

'They said it couldn't be done,' he kept muttering to himself.

I looked at Jinky. She'd raised the faceplate of her helmet and she looked kind of sweet with that anxious little face peering out at me through those curls. Frag Jessica, I thought, I'll spend some time with this chick instead. I made to step closer to her when Dirk said something that made me freeze.

'Something's wrong, man,' he said quietly as his fingers raced like madly dancing spiders across the keys.

'What do you mean, you green-haired little shug?' I said, my untraceable fear mounting suddenly to a crescendo.

'I mean something is fragging wrong, dildo-head! I'm gonna have to crash us.'

'What's happening? Can't we get home?' said Jinky, kneeling by Dirk.

'I don't get it. I've lost control,' Dirk said to her.

'You lost fragging control about twenty years ago, you charmless flurd. Get us back home or I'll put that fragging bazooka...' I couldn't think where to put the bazooka that suitably reflected my fury, and just at that instant there was an explosion. I remember thinking about Jessica and the German, about Dirk and his smile, about this whole fragged-up, boring little world and Hamlet and his last line 'The rest is silence', and I reached out to Jinky and shouted 'Let's meet up!' and then it all went blank.

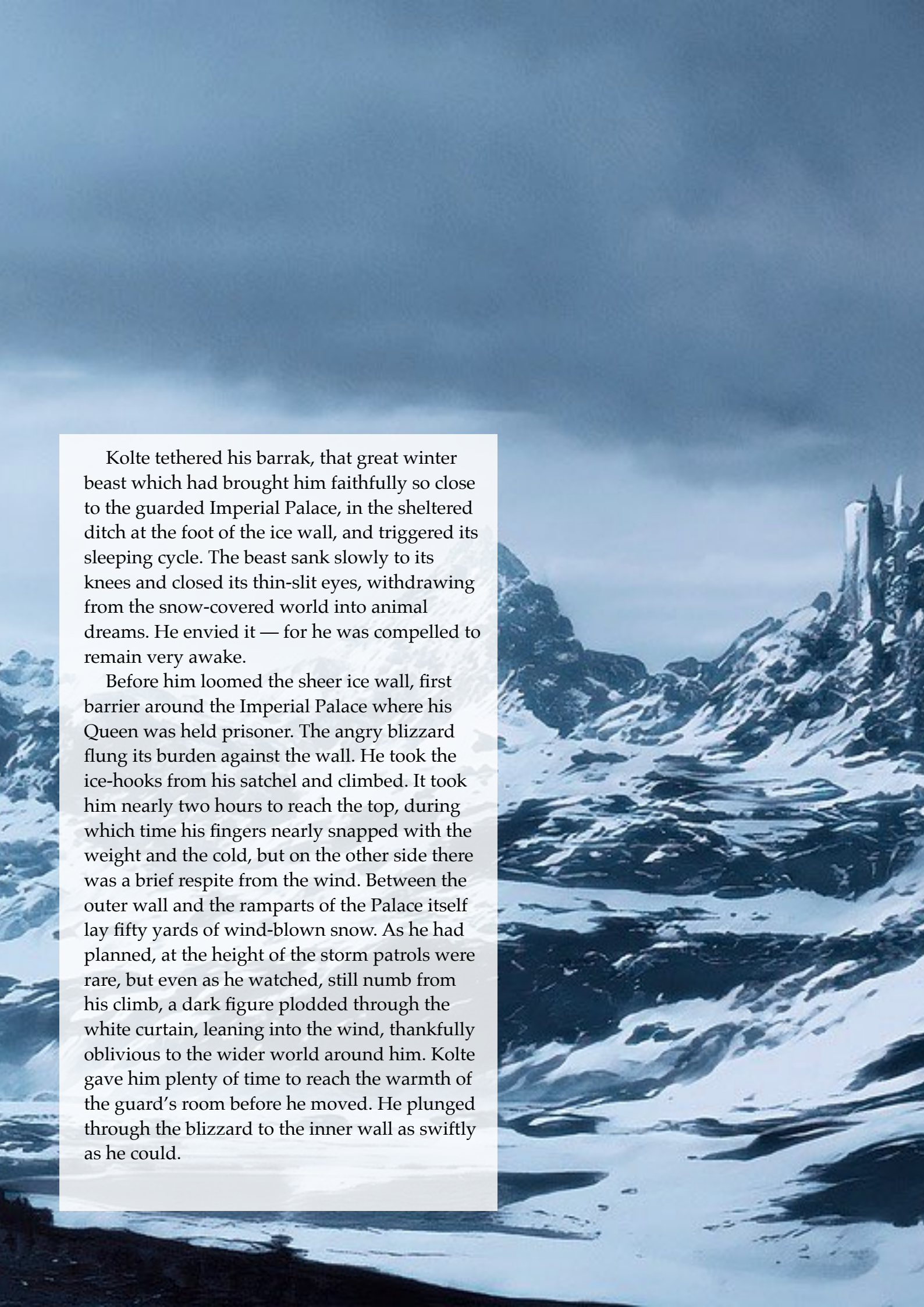
'Holy frag!'

I was making an impression on her. I popped another orgasm tablet into her glass of vodka and watched it fizzle away. She was still trembling a bit from the last one...





THE DRAGON IN  
WINTER



Kolte tethered his barrak, that great winter beast which had brought him faithfully so close to the guarded Imperial Palace, in the sheltered ditch at the foot of the ice wall, and triggered its sleeping cycle. The beast sank slowly to its knees and closed its thin-slit eyes, withdrawing from the snow-covered world into animal dreams. He envied it — for he was compelled to remain very awake.

Before him loomed the sheer ice wall, first barrier around the Imperial Palace where his Queen was held prisoner. The angry blizzard flung its burden against the wall. He took the ice-hooks from his satchel and climbed. It took him nearly two hours to reach the top, during which time his fingers nearly snapped with the weight and the cold, but on the other side there was a brief respite from the wind. Between the outer wall and the ramparts of the Palace itself lay fifty yards of wind-blown snow. As he had planned, at the height of the storm patrols were rare, but even as he watched, still numb from his climb, a dark figure plodded through the white curtain, leaning into the wind, thankfully oblivious to the wider world around him. Kolte gave him plenty of time to reach the warmth of the guard's room before he moved. He plunged through the blizzard to the inner wall as swiftly as he could.





The snow had mounted high and was packed hard against the stone, and it was a simple matter to scale, but the battlements at the top were filled with it, looser and deeper, and Kolte sank to his shoulders as he tried to get across to the other side. With some difficulty he pushed and swam and crawled along, and, just as a head poked around a stiffly-opened shutter in the nearby tower, he plunged into the empty darkness over the inner wall, landing heavily in a shallow drift in the courtyard. The shutter closed again.

As Kolte lay bruised and buried in the snow, thankful that the cold was numbing most of his pain, a clustered group of guards, shivering, marched by, hastening to shelter. In their wake he gathered himself and dashed across the courtyard.

The stone door to the secret way thankfully opened to his touch and he was suddenly in the strange and windless silence beyond it. The air seemed almost warm. He rested there in the hidden passage for a few moments while the pounding blood of his youth found its way back into his limbs and fingers, carrying with it the sting of cold bruises and the unbearable tingling of reviving flesh. He moved on, slowly and painfully, into darkness, chanting the directions to himself in his mind. Only the Royalists knew of the secret passages in the Palace — he was hoping that they had remained hidden from the agents of the accursed Rebellion, who held his Queen.

Light at last glimmered through a thin slit along the bottom of an inner door, and Kolte drew breath to listen through the thickness of stone.

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Somewhere a gong struck midnight.

Tua Vespria, Empress of Teshring, Monarch of the Margin, snuffed the candle's flame between finger and thumb, and the room was dark but for a shadowy, shifting paleness from the high window slit, and silent but for the distant howling of the storm through the stone.

Tua stood in the night for some time — she dared not hope again that someone would come, but prepared for her nightly ritual without emotion. Taking her cane she moved to the wall and paused again, head bowed as though listening. Suddenly, sweeping a tapestry aside, she rapped her cane sharply three times against the wall. Then she turned to her bed.

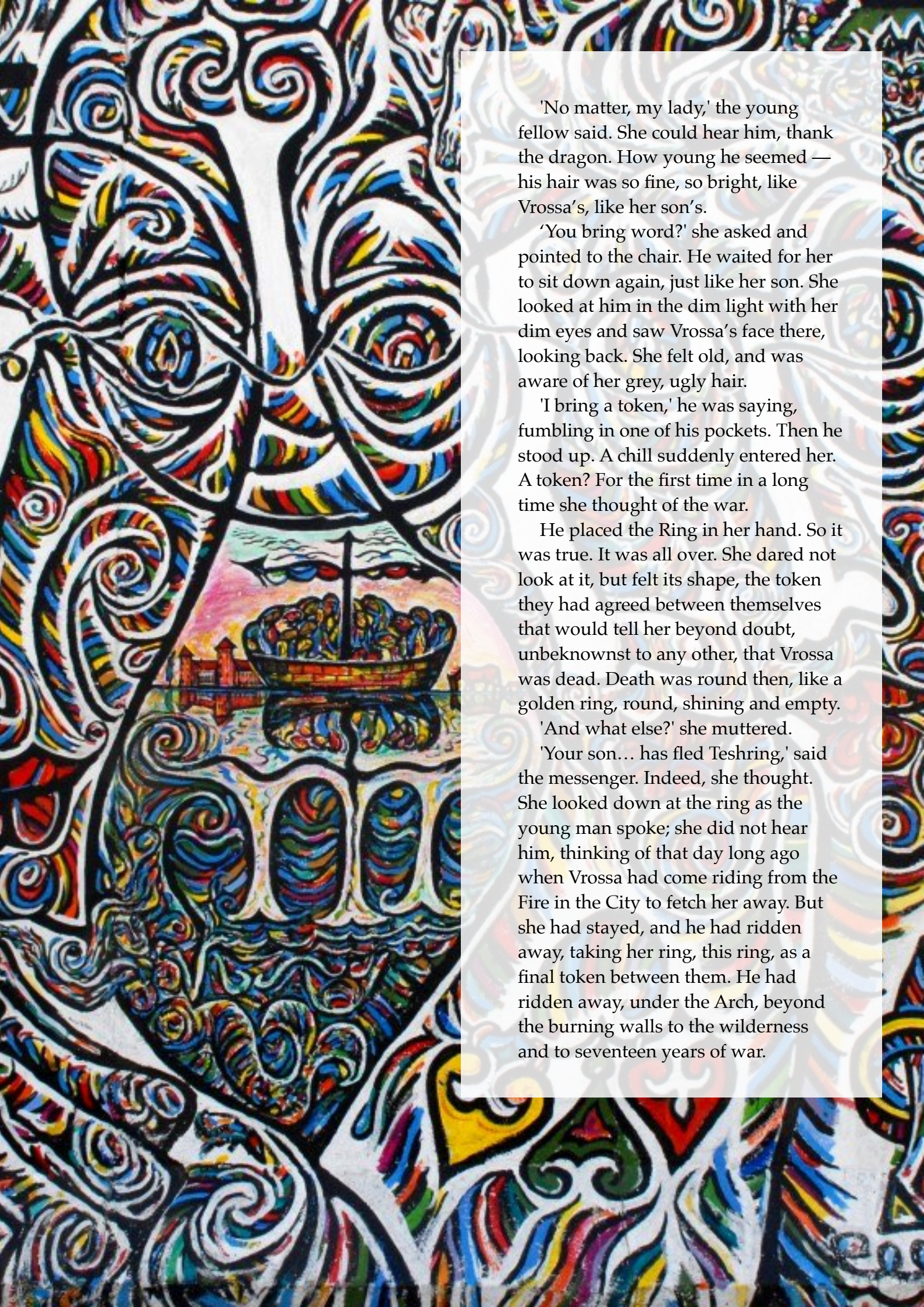
It became cold as the wall opened and a shape stepped into the room, a young man. She drew her cloak around her.

Tua turned up the light from the lamp, but no light other than the sun's own could bring things clear to her old eyes now. The young man was a blur. He knelt down. That meant she had to stand up. Her bones were still trembling with the shock of his sudden appearance; she cursed her age. She stood and walked to him as gracefully as she could manage; after all, the boy had risked his life to get here to see an old woman who was no doubt the subject of many rumours and fears outside, the great Empress of Teshring, whom they were afraid to kill. Ha!

He was young. His hands were cold.

'Rise,' she said, her voice croaking deeply. 'Speak softly. I am alone, but a guard may come to the door. I have no fire — you are cold.' She hoped he would not speak too softly — she could barely hear anything these days.





'No matter, my lady,' the young fellow said. She could hear him, thank the dragon. How young he seemed — his hair was so fine, so bright, like Vrossa's, like her son's.

'You bring word?' she asked and pointed to the chair. He waited for her to sit down again, just like her son. She looked at him in the dim light with her dim eyes and saw Vrossa's face there, looking back. She felt old, and was aware of her grey, ugly hair.

'I bring a token,' he was saying, fumbling in one of his pockets. Then he stood up. A chill suddenly entered her. A token? For the first time in a long time she thought of the war.

He placed the Ring in her hand. So it was true. It was all over. She dared not look at it, but felt its shape, the token they had agreed between themselves that would tell her beyond doubt, unbeknownst to any other, that Vrossa was dead. Death was round then, like a golden ring, round, shining and empty.

'And what else?' she muttered.

'Your son... has fled Teshring,' said the messenger. Indeed, she thought. She looked down at the ring as the young man spoke; she did not hear him, thinking of that day long ago when Vrossa had come riding from the Fire in the City to fetch her away. But she had stayed, and he had ridden away, taking her ring, this ring, as a final token between them. He had ridden away, under the Arch, beyond the burning walls to the wilderness and to seventeen years of war.

The messenger was describing the battle: some detail of interest to the world but nothing to her, not anymore. They had fought their way to a river, he was saying.

'Frozen?' she asked, without listening to him — nor could her eyes see anything now but the darkness, the great swirling snow-filled darkness of time which rushed to meet her. How could she live now? Her throat burned. The young man was asking her something, wanting her to command him.

'What do I know more than the commanders of the army? More than you? I am old — too old for this wind that howls about me. Too old for this snow which falls upon me,' she said abruptly.

She laughed then, a harsh, ringing laugh which sounded fey to her. Life then, indomitable even in her own heart, even in the face of death, put words in her mouth still. Her own blood burned her. How she longed for an end! But, like the ring, there was no end. She crushed it in her hand, turning away from him. It would be better for him not to see her weep, she thought.

'You want guidance from me? Fight on! Tell them to fight on. There is no ending. Fight to the last!' she said. And when she looked again — who could tell how much later? — he was gone, and she was alone in her own darkness.





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Tua stood in the night for some time. Then, taking her cane, she moved to the wall and paused again, head bowed as though listening. Suddenly, sweeping a tapestry aside, she rapped her cane sharply three times against the wall. Then she turned to her bed.

The wall moved. A faint grating of stone against stone, an almost imperceptible darkening of shadow, a light movement of air. Tua drew her fur cloak around her and at once lit her lamp.

A young man stepped into the light. He peered into the room, and stood there staring at her like a blind man restored to sight.

There, to his eyes, on the edge of the bed, sat the Empress Tua Vespria, Empress of Teshring, Monarch of the Margin, the royal heroine whose undying spirit he worshipped as though she were a goddess, and to whose cause he felt he could give his life. Tall, graceful, an image in the light of the lamp of majesty itself, she waited for him to deliver his message as she waited every night for word from beyond the walls of the Palace where she was held prisoner by the Rebellion's forces. He found he could not speak — darkness had no place here.

'My lady,' he whispered at last, and knelt. She did not move at first, then rose and drifted towards him in her long furs.

'Rise,' she said. Her voice was deeper, older, than he had expected — but the strength was there. He slowly stood.

Her face was in shadow, the lamp behind her. 'Speak softly — I am alone, but a guard may come to the door. I have no fire — you are cold.'

'No matter, my lady,' he said. There was a silence. She waited for him.

'You bring word?' she asked at last, signing for him to move to a chair. He waited for her to sit again on the bed, then sank gratefully into deep cushions.

Her face was lined with wisdom to his eyes, the cares of a kingdom in torment. Her hair was a silvery cascade about her thin shoulders; her eyes saw through him.

'I bring a token,' said Kolte, and brought from its place in his jacket the Ring. He stood and gave it to her — she did not move. She said nothing, looking at him, ignoring it.

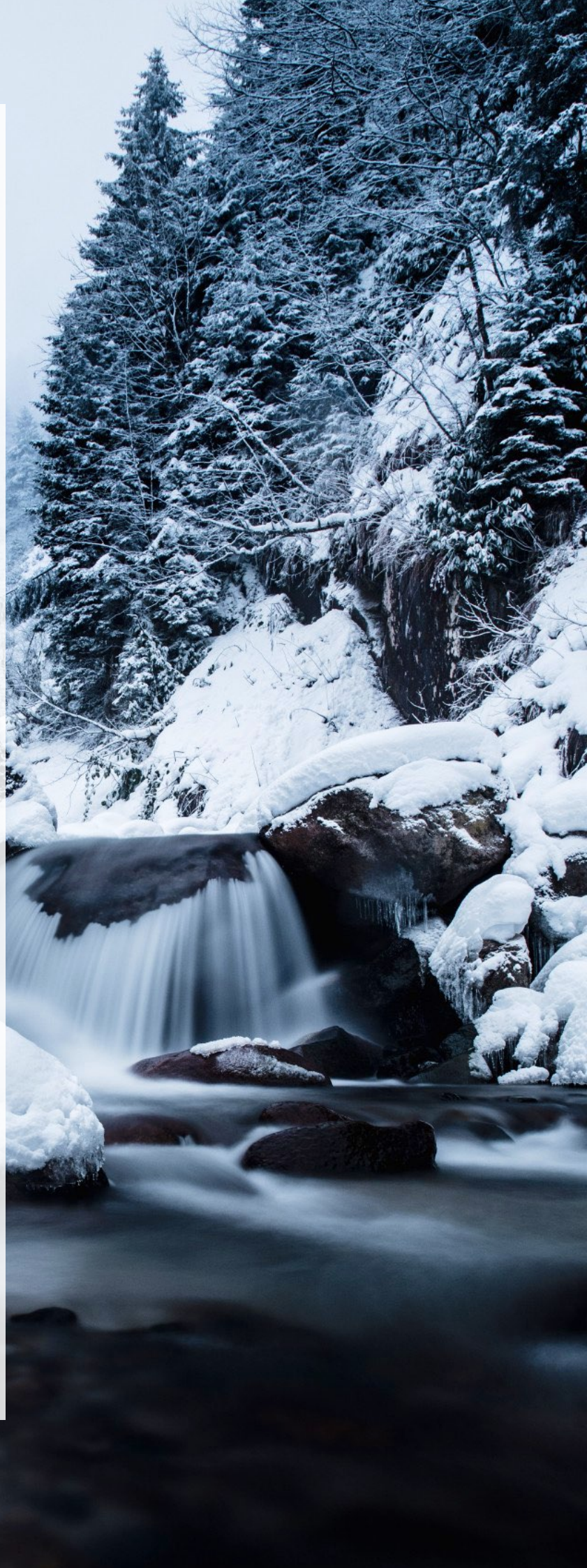
'And what else?' she said at last.

How could he tell her that Vrossa, her son, captain of the Royalists, was dead?

'Your son... has fled Teshring,' he said.

She looked down at the Ring.

'He led a company into the North. They fought long and hard this autumn, but the Rebel Imperium is too strong now in the North. He was driven out — but hope will return with the spring.'





She looked up at him.

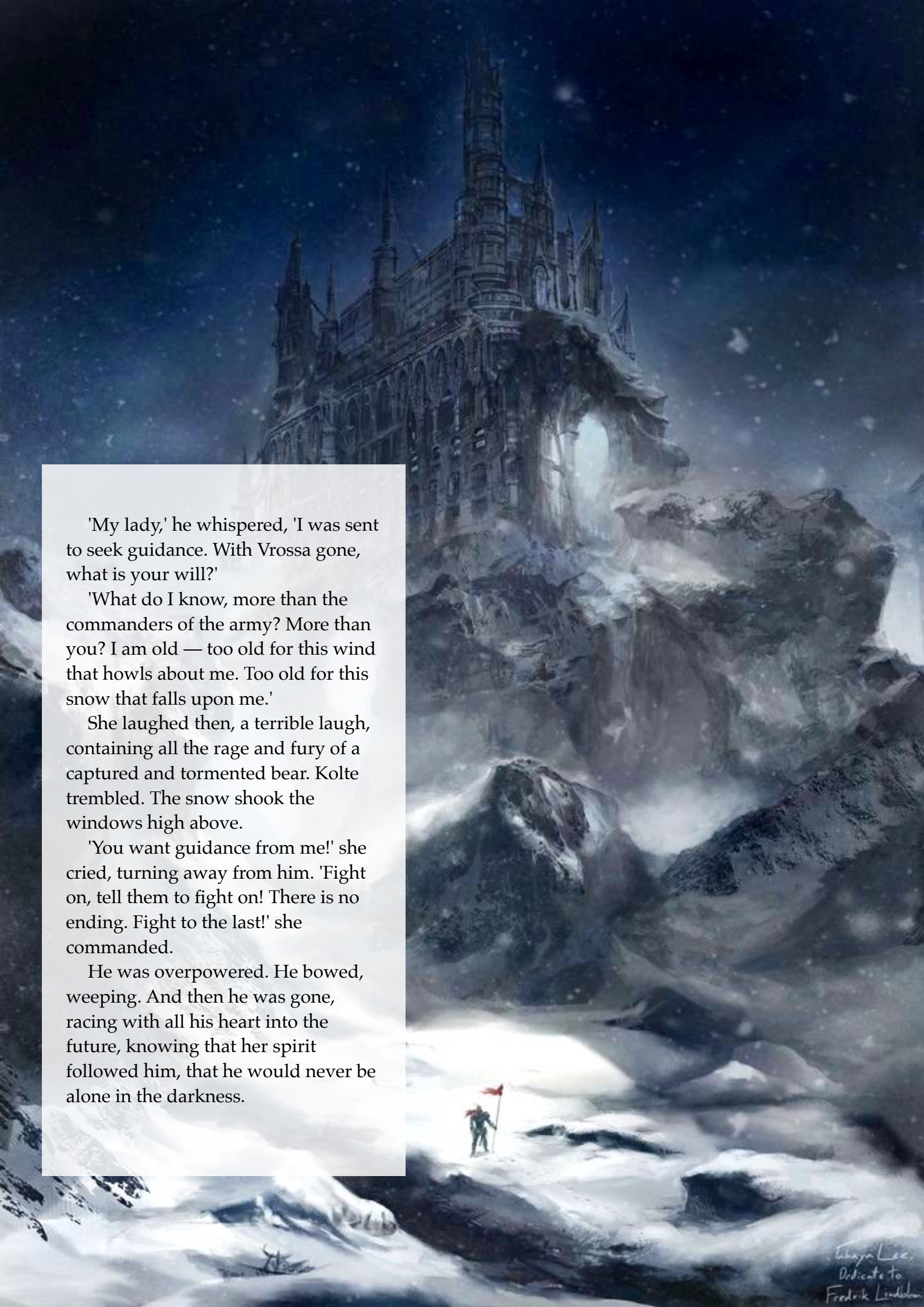
He was talking nonsense, he knew — but it was as though he had stepped into the world of stories, speaking as he was to the Empress herself at last. She listened, she believed, she was patient with him; fleetingly he was reminded of his own mother.

'There was battle at Koralvan,' he went on, drawing near to the terrible truth. 'It was a hard meeting. Vrossa, captaining the Shard, was cut off, but the company of Heressal, coming from the east, hacked a way through their troops towards the Banner of the Flame, rescuing the captain and pushing towards the river.'

'Frozen?' she asked, looking up, but her face was still in shadow.

'At this time of year, yes, but only just beginning to freeze at the time of the battle. Many were lost. But Vrossa escaped, into the mountains,' he lied.

Again she said nothing — but this was the way of the great, he thought, to speak only at need. Sitting there in the pale glow of the lamp, surrounded by shadows, Kolte felt the burden of events lifting from him, passing silently across the room to her. What would she now bid him do? How would she command those forces still loyal to her beyond the palace which was her prison?



'My lady,' he whispered, 'I was sent to seek guidance. With Vrossa gone, what is your will?'

'What do I know, more than the commanders of the army? More than you? I am old — too old for this wind that howls about me. Too old for this snow that falls upon me.'

She laughed then, a terrible laugh, containing all the rage and fury of a captured and tormented bear. Kolte trembled. The snow shook the windows high above.

'You want guidance from me!' she cried, turning away from him. 'Fight on, tell them to fight on! There is no ending. Fight to the last!' she commanded.

He was overpowered. He bowed, weeping. And then he was gone, racing with all his heart into the future, knowing that her spirit followed him, that he would never be alone in the darkness.





# ALBATROSS

In 1951, I was interred at the School for the Afflicted, a former farmhouse on the outskirts of Barnsley, where children who were abnormal or deformed in some way lived and attended classes, well away from prying eyes of their peers or the rest of society. My abnormality was that I only had two fingers and a thumb on my right hand — no one knew why, I had simply been born that way. As it happened, it made me particularly good at calligraphy: something to do with the additional attention I had to pay to how I held a pen and the muscular movements involved in forming letters with it.

The School for the Afflicted was a cold and uncomfortable place, but it was all I had known. I couldn't remember who my parents were, or any other home, and so I quickly became used to the place's routines and methods. These were not so much harsh as simply thoughtless: there was no one to give us much love or attention, and those who worked there did so largely because

they had been unable to find a better job caring for 'normal' people rather than 'freaks'. We were a mixed bunch: some had obvious diseases, some were mentally troubled, while some merely had a missing appendage and were otherwise healthy. Marsh (we always referred to each other by our surnames there, it was a rule) had been born without legs below the knees; Hardcastle didn't have any eyes. Several were deaf; others had disfiguring birthmarks. The main thing was that our afflictions tended to bind us together. There was usually someone worse off than you, and bullying, apparently prevalent among the Normals, as we called them, was minimal at the school. But close friendships were likewise rare. We slept in big dormitories and had little time to play as many of us struggled to keep up with the workloads we were given, not only academic assignments but menial tasks like cleaning and gardening.

In that year, as the National Health Service got underway, and sick people all over Britain came down from bedrooms where they had been hiding, or were ferreted out by doctors doing rounds of remote homesteads, more and more Afflicted came to light, and so, towards the end of that year, we had a large influx of new pupils. There was barely enough room for us as it was, but beds were pushed closer together to squeeze in more and more boys. Eventually, there was only about a six-inch gap between bed frames.

That's how I got to know Ross. He was one of the new arrivals and was put in the bed to my right. He was a hunchback — he had an enormous lump all down his back, not so much on his shoulders but all over. He stooped forward a little to walk, and I wondered how heavy the lump was.

One night, the full moon poured in through a high window — the nuns who looked after us on the weekends had forgotten to close its curtains, and it was so bright that I had trouble sleeping. Ross was restless too. I think I was just about to drop off to sleep finally when I heard him whispering and realised that he was talking to me.

'Kershaw...' he whispered. 'Kershaw. Are you awake?'

I rolled over and faced him.

'I want to show you something,' he said.

Immediately, I had a sense of dread. I didn't want to do anything sinful — the nuns had installed in me a terror of going to Hell, and there was an odd sound in Ross's voice which made me quiver.

'I don't want to see anything,' I replied and rolled onto my back, looking up at the tall ceiling.

'Please,' he whispered. 'I can't sleep. I'm getting up.'

He stood in the narrow gap between our beds and started taking off his thick pyjama shirt, which, I saw, had been especially enlarged to cover his back.

'Don't,' I said in a tiny voice.

He had the jacket off and I could see in the bright moonlight that, underneath, he wore a thick and heavy harness, like a set of interlinked leather belts with large clasps, wrapped around his shoulders and back. 'No wonder he stoops,' I thought.





He fiddled with the clasps for a while and I was sure he would wake up the other thirty or so boys who shared the dormitory, but no one else stirred. After a minute or so, the whole tangled apparatus fell away onto his bed and he grunted with relief.

'Oh god,' he said, 'that's good to be having that off.'

He sounded Irish, like the man who brought the coal. Ross then stretched his arms and the lump on his back started to grow bigger. In the moonlight it was all shadow at first. But it kept on growing and widening out impossibly, like a cloak in the wind. One side of it touched the wall on his left; the other arched away into the aisle down the centre of the room. As the moonbeams caught it, I gasped.

Wings.

Ross had wings.

The moonbeams hinted at the wings' size rather than revealed them fully. Ross crab-stepped out from between the beds and opened the wings up as wide as they would go, sighing with pleasure as he did so: I reckoned they spanned sixteen feet altogether, trembling and moving like pale ghosts in the dark dormitory.

'Can you fly?' I whispered.

'I've never tried. I've never been able to, you know...be on my own and jump off somewhere or anything like that...'

Everyone in the dormitory knew that the fourth window from the main door had a loose latch and could be opened easily, though no one had ever been brave enough to climb out of it in the night. Suddenly determined, I jumped out of my own bed and crept across to that window, lifting aside the heavy curtains. It was a moment's work to push it open and slide the casement upwards. It creaked mightily and I felt certain that at any moment someone else would wake, and the alarm would be raised. But Ross came over and folded his wings right down. Looking like a pyjama trousered angel, he stood there, grey in the moonlight, as I clambered out. He followed, with a struggle — for a second, he was caught and I had to grab both his hands and pull. Then we were both standing outside in the cold dew, looking up at the slow-moving clouds drifting across the moon, both with no idea of what we were doing.

The school was set in about ten acres of open countryside. Its bordering wall was about ten feet high — we could just make it out in the shadows about a hundred yards away — and just beyond it were the outlying trees of a wood. Ross ran across the wet grass, his white wings extending fully again. He ran up a slight rise in the ground and, right in front of my eyes, glided twenty feet or more towards the wall. I heard him laugh with joy. He ran again, and this time he swept into the air, above the wall, narrowly missing a tree and vanishing momentarily behind foliage. Then he was above the trees, silhouetted against the moon, and I wondered if I were dreaming.

Then he was gone.

I thought he was gone forever. I sat, forlorn, on the grey paving under the window, the cold stone chilling me through my pyjamas. I didn't want to move; I didn't know what to do. Then Ross was standing by me, breathless, beaming, liberated.

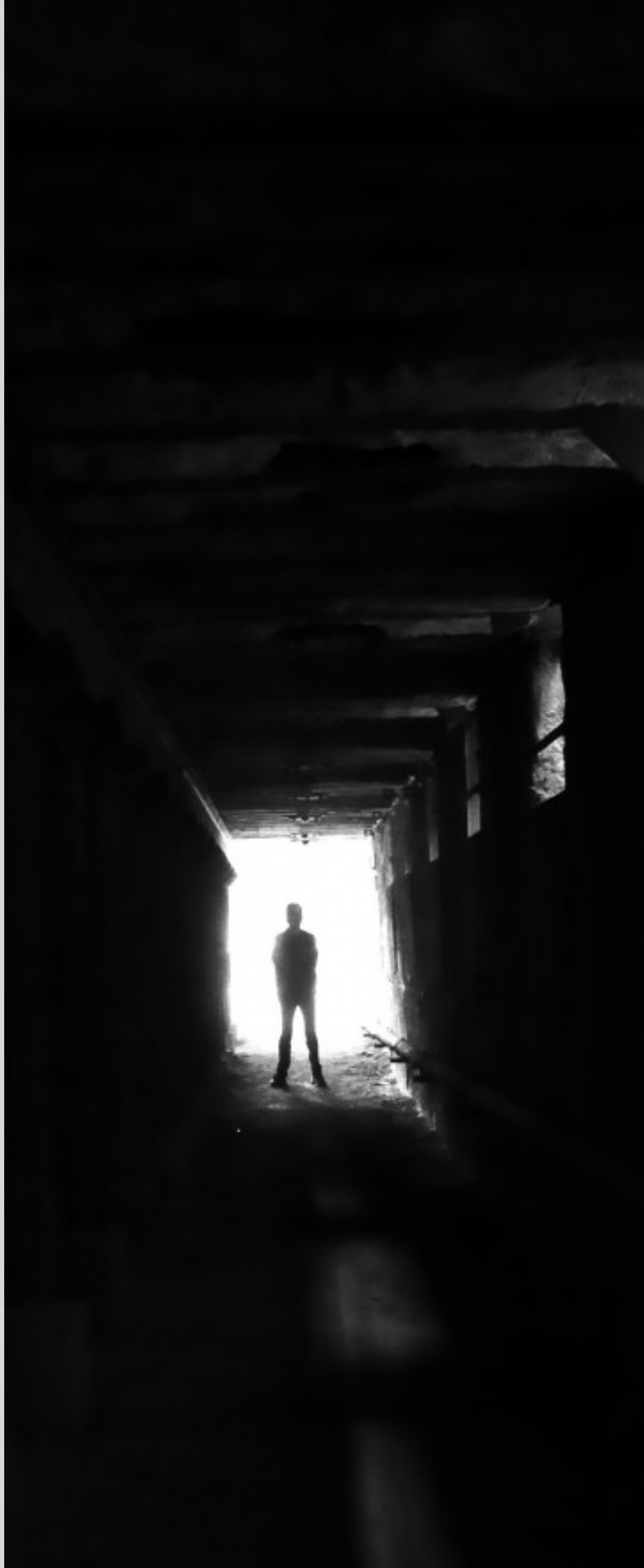
'They called me Albert,' he said. 'My parents. Called me Albert. Albert Ross. Do you see? Albatross. I don't know if they knew about the wings. Not really. They were just lumps when I was a kid. But the last few years...'

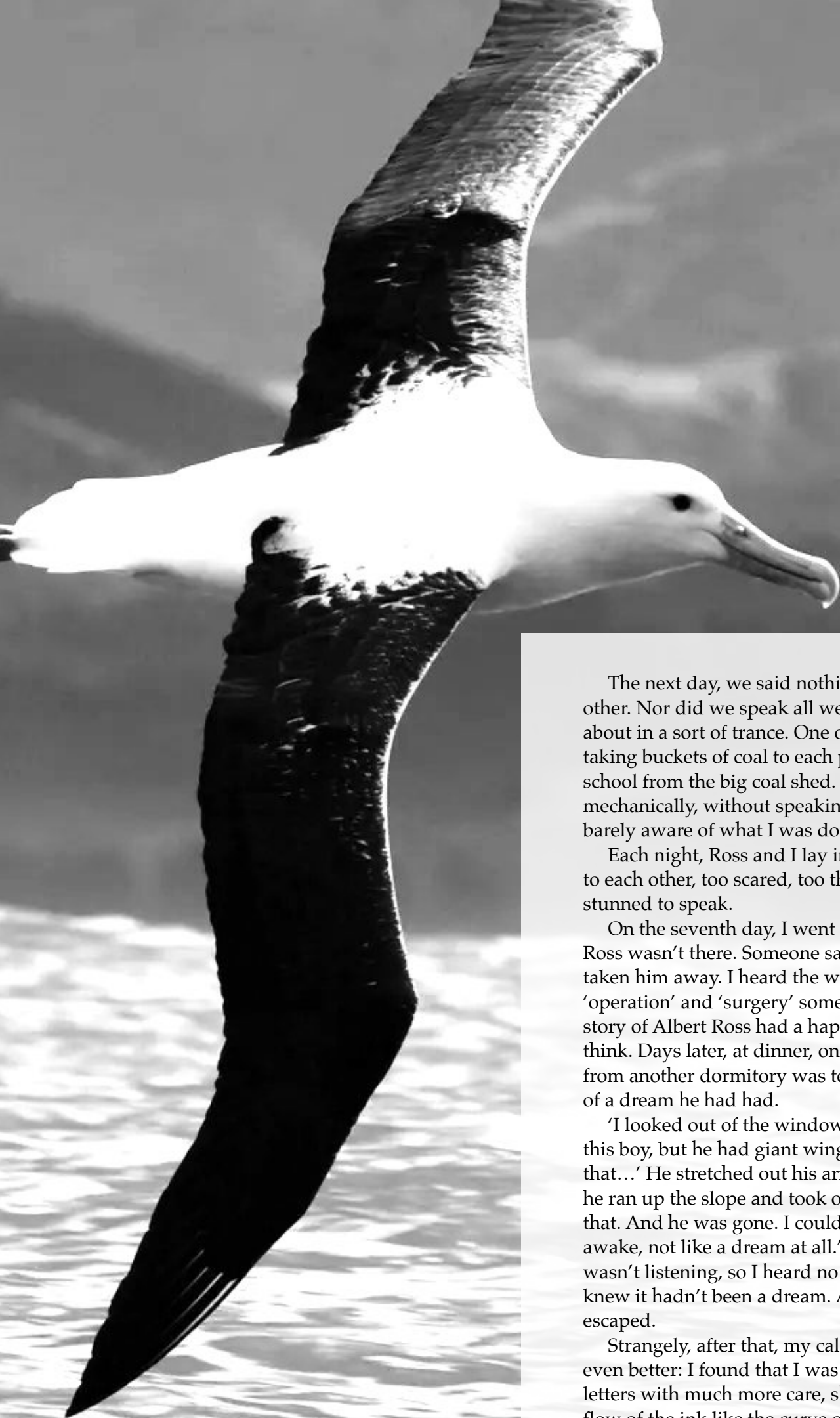
Sister Margaret had said, 'Silence is sometimes the best answer,' and so I said nothing.

'We'd best get in,' he said after a while.

'I'm David,' I said.

We shoved ourselves back in through the window. He folded his wings down as far as they would go, and strapped himself in as tightly as he could with his harness; I had to help him at one point, as the wings wouldn't shrink back into their former lumpish shape. Eventually we did it and lay there in our own beds, wide awake, for hours, not speaking, hardly thinking.





The next day, we said nothing to each other. Nor did we speak all week. I wandered about in a sort of trance. One of my tasks was taking buckets of coal to each part of the school from the big coal shed. I did it all mechanically, without speaking to anyone, barely aware of what I was doing.

Each night, Ross and I lay in our beds next to each other, too scared, too thrilled, too stunned to speak.

On the seventh day, I went to bed and Ross wasn't there. Someone said that they'd taken him away. I heard the words 'operation' and 'surgery' somewhere. But the story of Albert Ross had a happy ending, I think. Days later, at dinner, one of the boys from another dormitory was telling someone of a dream he had had.

'I looked out of the window and there was this boy, but he had giant wings, see? Like that...' He stretched out his arms wide. 'And he ran up the slope and took off, just like that. And he was gone. I could swear I was awake, not like a dream at all.' His friend wasn't listening, so I heard no more. But I knew it hadn't been a dream. Albert had escaped.

Strangely, after that, my calligraphy got even better: I found that I was forming the letters with much more care, shaping the flow of the ink like the curve of wings.

# DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Write it down.

God, it's still all clear enough in my mind.

Thursday, May 16, 2075. Morning after the night before. Door bell goes. I stumble downstairs, nauseous as I glance at myself in the hall mirror — hair like a petrified forest, face a moonscape of smeared make-up, but aching in all the right places from a long night of intense sex.

I get to the door and see the shape of two guys through the glass. Cops — we've been tailed from the Clandestine Club, where women who like women meet in violation of Commandment 214 which makes lesbian life a living hell. But my stupid body keeps going towards the door, opens it with the momentum of inertia. I mentally will Tanya upstairs to wake up and get out.

Then it all starts happening too fast, and it doesn't stop.

I click the bolt; I'm slammed into the wall; door smashes open with enough force to crack the glass; three faceless hulks tear up the stairs like they're on fire. Before I can yell anything, hands close over my mouth and I'm pushed to the floor with a needlegun pressing into my breast.

Explosion upstairs. Something hits the house hard enough to make it shake like a flimsy TV set. Two of the guys who disappeared up there crash over the bannisters with a bone-breaking crunch which makes me impulsively puke, but the hand over my mouth keeps the bile in. Can't see the guy who's holding me but I hear him swear and tighten his already suffocating grip — his attention isn't on me, though — he's watching the stairs. This isn't what he expected or wanted, and he's jumpy as hell.





So am I — I wet myself. Another crunch. Screaming. Shouting. Who's beating up who? Can't think straight, head is too full.

Suddenly Tanya's at the top of the stairs, naked, her long, black hair tangled and sweaty —she's breathing hard, holding a needlegun to a guy's head, her arm around his neck, his eyes closed, his body drooping, a dead weight.

'Let her go, freak,' Tanya says, her eyes like lasers, to my guy. I feel him trembling, his muscles are going watery, he starts to breathe differently.

'No way, slut,' he says, but he's a mess of quivering terror, 'no way! I'll blow your little friend apart! You drop him first, and the needle.'


'Okay,' says Tanya simply, 'he's dead anyway,' and she throws her right arm out and the body she's holding heads towards me, a blunt missile of bone and muscle. My guy yelps and tries to shoot up at her but the body hits us hard and he loosens his grip. I look out from under a tangle of dead flesh and clothes and Tanya is gone.

It's all happened in less than a minute from me opening the door. I involuntarily curl up under this corpse and want to die. Noises, swearing, flashes of something like gunfire. My guy gets out from under me and he's out the door, screaming and cursing, using words I've never heard before. I open my eyes — I'm dribbling and shaking like a wet dog. I slide up the wall in time to see Tanya, still naked, flash past me. She hits the door frame, using it to stop her body's momentum, then steadies her aim and fires the needlegun. Sound like a discharge, but not a bullet, some kind of white light.

There's a shriek like a dying cat outside. She rolls back inside, rips off one of the dead guys' coats, throws it over herself.

'Come on,' she snaps at me and grabs my wrist with a hand like a steel clamp, her fingers a mess of drying blood.

'Jack off!' I shout, pulling away, my knees like wet cardboard, my nightgown soaked in something I hope is sweat.

A close-up profile of a woman's face, showing her nose, lips, and chin. She has dark hair and is wearing bright red lipstick. The background is a soft, pinkish-purple glow with several bright, jagged white lightning bolts striking across it. The woman's face is in the foreground, partially obscuring the background.

She gets real close, breathes into my face so I can smell her urgency. 'Don't give me any jip. You need to come with me or you'll die,' she spits.

'Don't kill me!' I start to cry — the look in her face is not the look of love and lust I saw last night, it's a completely alien detachment. It freezes me somewhere above the groin, makes me want to shrink into the woodwork like a beetle.

'I'm not going to kill you, you stupid bitch,' she says, softening, kissing my cheek lightly, using her gun hand to stroke my hair while she keeps hold of my wrist with the other. It's not quite detachment, then — she cares, but there's a steel sheath around that caring and I can't take that. 'I like you,' she says. 'It's the Freaks who will kill you.'

'The Freaks?' I whimper, slowly sliding back down the wall, begging her with body language not to hurt me.

'Yes — the Structure guys, these pieces of male meat,' she says, kicking one of the bodies on the floor with her bare foot. I notice there's blood all over her toes, too. Looks like she stabbed them with her foot, like in the old Kung Fu movies.

'Structure?' I whimper, knowing what it means. She must be one of the Conception, the lesbian resistance. I should have known.

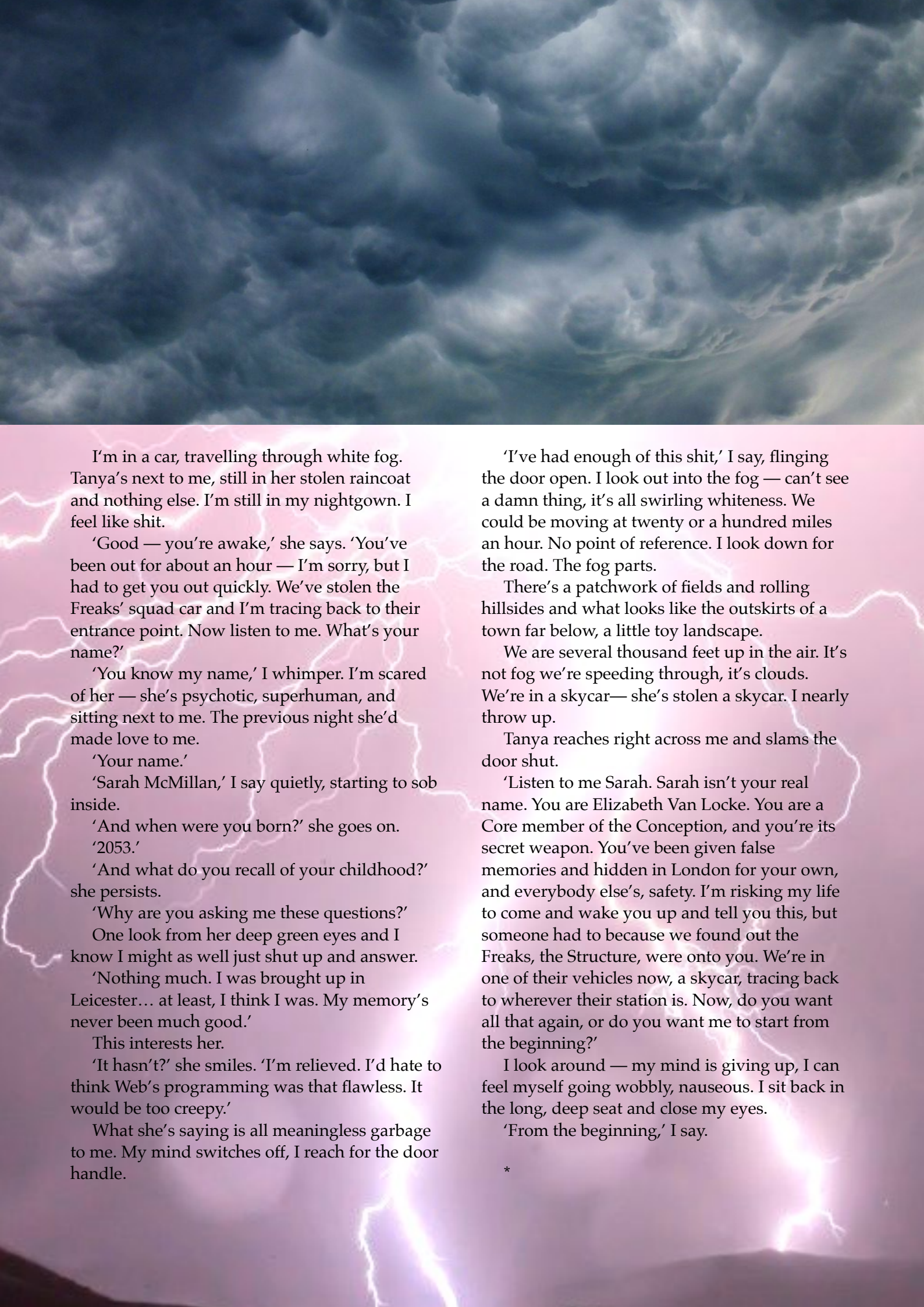
'There's no time,' she says, dragging me up. 'We have to get out of here.'

She drags me through my own door.

'No!' I scream. 'No! I don't want to go with you, leave me alone!' Next thing I feel is a pressure somewhere on my neck and I try to scream again but black out instead.

\*





I'm in a car, travelling through white fog. Tanya's next to me, still in her stolen raincoat and nothing else. I'm still in my nightgown. I feel like shit.

'Good — you're awake,' she says. 'You've been out for about an hour — I'm sorry, but I had to get you out quickly. We've stolen the Freaks' squad car and I'm tracing back to their entrance point. Now listen to me. What's your name?'

'You know my name,' I whimper. I'm scared of her — she's psychotic, superhuman, and sitting next to me. The previous night she'd made love to me.

'Your name.'

'Sarah McMillan,' I say quietly, starting to sob inside.

'And when were you born?' she goes on.

'2053.'

'And what do you recall of your childhood?' she persists.

'Why are you asking me these questions?'

One look from her deep green eyes and I know I might as well just shut up and answer.

'Nothing much. I was brought up in Leicester... at least, I think I was. My memory's never been much good.'

This interests her.

'It hasn't?' she smiles. 'I'm relieved. I'd hate to think Web's programming was that flawless. It would be too creepy.'

What she's saying is all meaningless garbage to me. My mind switches off, I reach for the door handle.

'I've had enough of this shit,' I say, flinging the door open. I look out into the fog — can't see a damn thing, it's all swirling whiteness. We could be moving at twenty or a hundred miles an hour. No point of reference. I look down for the road. The fog parts.

There's a patchwork of fields and rolling hillsides and what looks like the outskirts of a town far below, a little toy landscape.

We are several thousand feet up in the air. It's not fog we're speeding through, it's clouds. We're in a skycar— she's stolen a skycar. I nearly throw up.


Tanya reaches right across me and slams the door shut.

'Listen to me Sarah. Sarah isn't your real name. You are Elizabeth Van Locke. You are a Core member of the Conception, and you're its secret weapon. You've been given false memories and hidden in London for your own, and everybody else's, safety. I'm risking my life to come and wake you up and tell you this, but someone had to because we found out the Freaks, the Structure, were onto you. We're in one of their vehicles now, a skycar, tracing back to wherever their station is. Now, do you want all that again, or do you want me to start from the beginning?'

I look around — my mind is giving up, I can feel myself going wobbly, nauseous. I sit back in the long, deep seat and close my eyes.

'From the beginning,' I say.

\*



It was like this: the Structure, the male faction, had developed vicious and devastating energy weapons with the intention of wiping out the growing lesbian community once and for all. Their whole philosophy depended on the total control and subjugation of women generally. The Conception, on the other hand, in true feminine style, had concentrated on defence and research into higher forms of awareness.

Then things got really crazy.

Conception science developed the Angels, enhanced women who were no longer quite human. But the Structure hit back hard, wiping out Conception's home base and imposing a totalitarian state planetwide. The Conception was on the run, forced to live like animals, hunted down mercilessly.

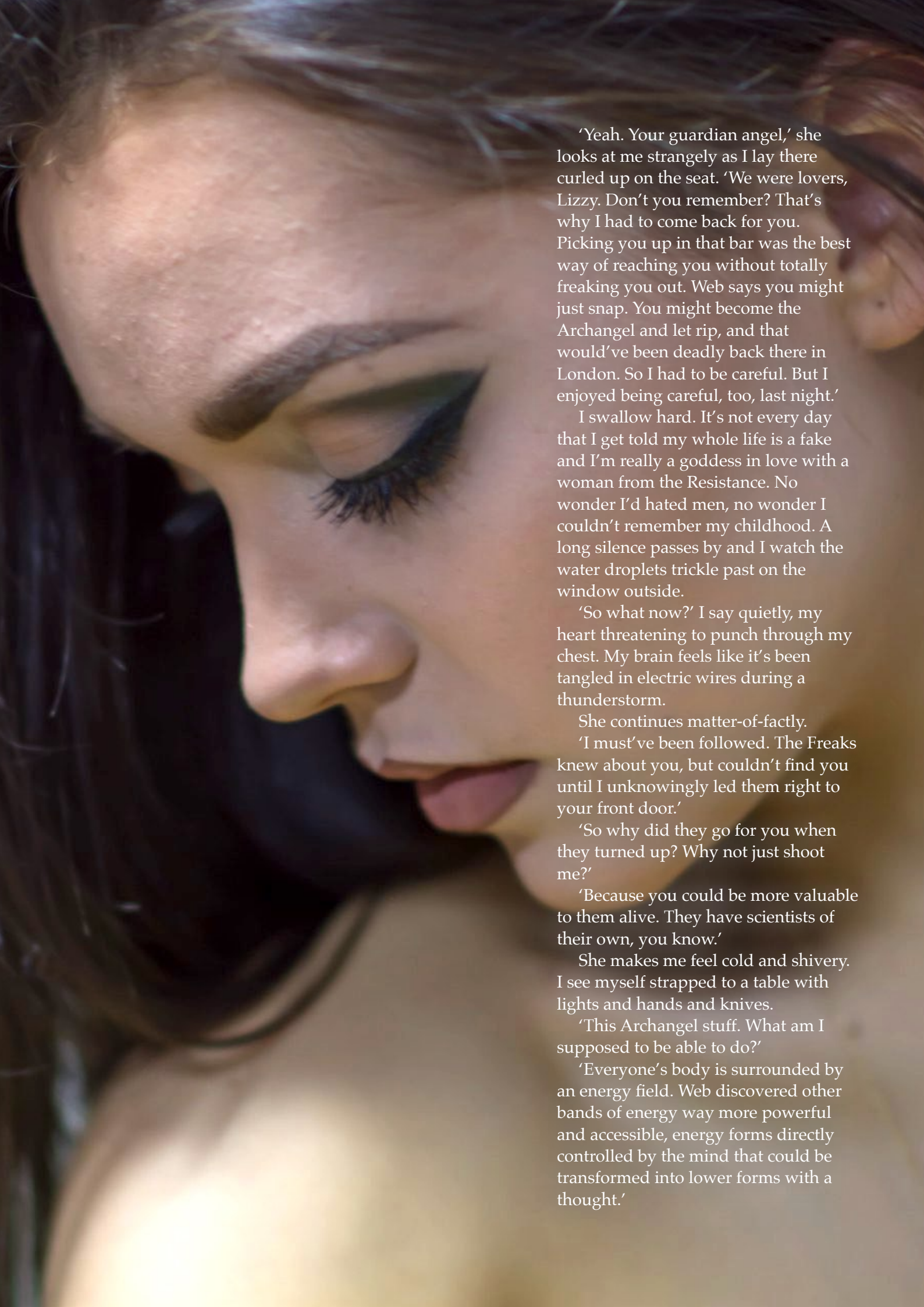
That's where I came in, according to Tanya: I

was Conception's secret weapon: an Archangel, artificially enhanced so much that, once I'd learned how to use my power, I might singlehandedly have turned the tables on the Structure, and become a walking, breathing goddess. But the Structure tracked me down — and Web, Conception's resident genius, had to quickly programme me with fake memories and send me back into London where I would be undetectable until they could bring me back safely.

So far, so good. At least it made a kind of sense. I couldn't argue with what I'd seen — there was the skycar, and the needleguns, and Tanya's strength. The way she'd thrown that goon's body down the stairs was frightening. But nothing else was coming through.

'You — you're an Angel?' I ask as we plunge on through a raincloud, wipers going on the windscreen.

She smiles.



'Yeah. Your guardian angel,' she looks at me strangely as I lay there curled up on the seat. 'We were lovers, Lizzy. Don't you remember? That's why I had to come back for you. Picking you up in that bar was the best way of reaching you without totally freaking you out. Web says you might just snap. You might become the Archangel and let rip, and that would've been deadly back there in London. So I had to be careful. But I enjoyed being careful, too, last night.'

I swallow hard. It's not every day that I get told my whole life is a fake and I'm really a goddess in love with a woman from the Resistance. No wonder I'd hated men, no wonder I couldn't remember my childhood. A long silence passes by and I watch the water droplets trickle past on the window outside.

'So what now?' I say quietly, my heart threatening to punch through my chest. My brain feels like it's been tangled in electric wires during a thunderstorm.

She continues matter-of-factly.

'I must've been followed. The Freaks knew about you, but couldn't find you until I unknowingly led them right to your front door.'

'So why did they go for you when they turned up? Why not just shoot me?'

'Because you could be more valuable to them alive. They have scientists of their own, you know.'

She makes me feel cold and shivery. I see myself strapped to a table with lights and hands and knives.

'This Archangel stuff. What am I supposed to be able to do?'

'Everyone's body is surrounded by an energy field. Web discovered other bands of energy way more powerful and accessible, energy forms directly controlled by the mind that could be transformed into lower forms with a thought.'

'And in English please?'

'According to Web, you could fry living things at a hundred yards with a glance; punch through steel plate like you were opening a plastic wrapper; blow holes in concrete with a sneeze. And that's only the beginning. You're about a thousand times more powerful than me, and I'm the best of the Angels.'

I smile to myself, for the first time since I'd gone to sleep the previous night.

'I bet you are,' I say, and tentatively I reach over and touch her arm, half afraid that I'll burn her with my fingers. She smiles back.

'Web says that your potential is possibly unlimited. You could maybe create a whole world, or destroy it.'

'And how am I supposed to access all this shit inside me? Meditate? Have a bad day? Have a huge orgasm?'

'I don't know exactly. That's Web's department. She's ready for you now— we've just got to get you back.'

But before Tanya can open her mouth to say anything else, the rainclouds part, a red light flashes on the dashboard, and ahead of us is the biggest airship I've ever seen — a floating submarine hanging about half a mile long above the white cloudscape, impossibly silent, like a knife slash in the sky.

'Oh shit! I don't believe it! I knew they were desperate, but...'


'But what? What is that?'

'It's a Shard, a Structure battlecruiser.'

Can't stop the car and get out. Remorselessly the ship gets bigger and bigger and blots out the light. We're sucked into its bowels. Tanya screams, and that frightens me more than the darkness.

\*





It's later. Someone is holding something under my nose. It smells exquisite — not a perfume, not a food smell, something between, something vaguely, then intensely, arousing.

I open my eyes. It's all so dark that I wonder if I have. Can't tell up from down. Head doesn't ache anymore but feels sort of empty and dazed. I breathe in that heavenly smell, and recognise it as Tanya's sexual aroma. As sensation returns to me I feel her pressing into me — she's perspiring all over me, breathing rhythmically and deeply.

'Thought that might do it,' she whispers. 'I've been trying to bring you round for ages. Are you okay?'

'I can't tell whether I'm okay or not. Where are we?'

'Don't know. In a box of some kind, only just big enough for both of us. I've been conscious for about two hours. What's the last thing you remember?'

'My life falling apart.'

'Specifically. Could be important.'

'Big thing in the sky.'

She's quiet for a minute.

'So — you were blanked at the same time as me. We must be inside the Shard.'

I twist around — we're tied together inside a coffin-like box. Muscles start to cramp all over and my heart starts to panic again.

At that instant, we get tipped up and fall sideways — light pours into our little cubicle and I blink and try to make out where we are. We both fall forward onto a soft surface out of a thick metal coffin which has been stood on its end.

'The Renegades, Councillor,' says a faceless voice. I open my eyes and stare at a foot about two inches from my nose — a sandalled, male foot, joined to a leg which extends upwards under a kind of toga.

'Thank you, Bridlington. You may retire.'

'The brunette is very dangerous, Councillor. Four of our best fragments...'

'I'm well aware of what happened to them, Bridlington. But as you can see, both the brunette Miss Bolt and her charming female, shall we say, companion, are perfectly restrained. I'm sure I can look after them myself.'

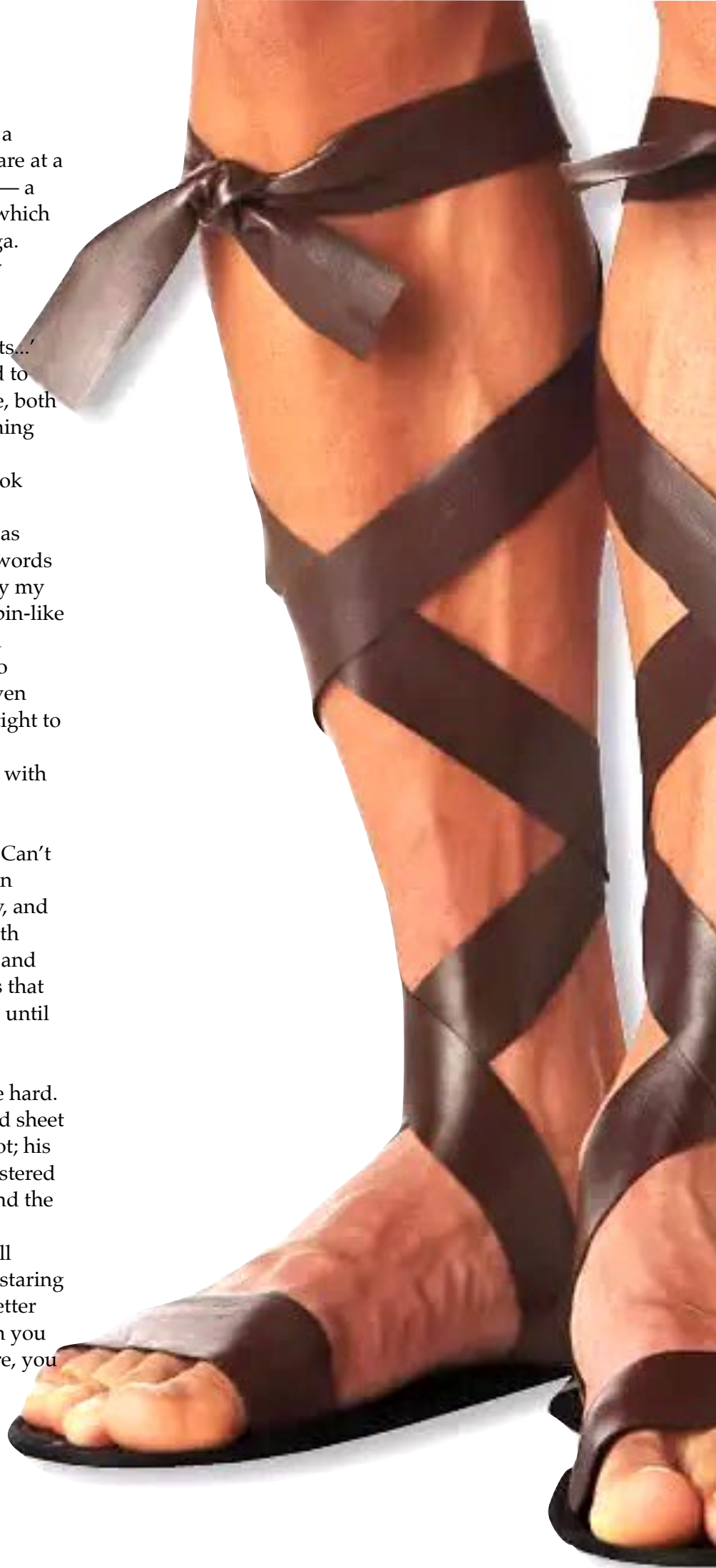
The voice connected to the foot is as smooth as shaven ice, and at its last words the tip of a steel cane taps the floor by my nose. I look up its length to see tiny pin-like protrusions all the way to the frosted handle. I feel like throwing up. I'm so scared again that I start struggling even though I know that I'm strapped so tight to Tanya that I can't move.

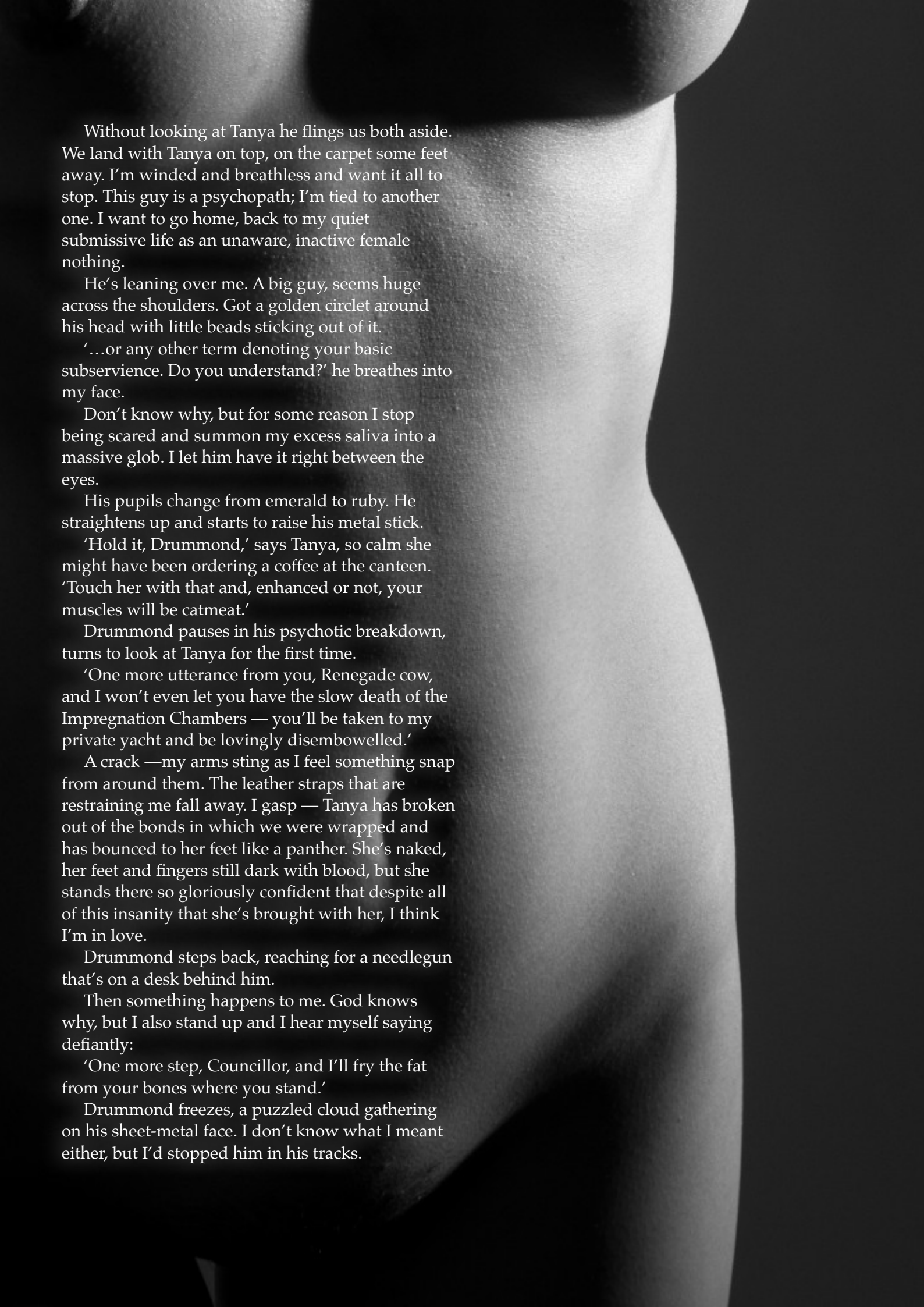
Voice chuckles and prods my face with the cane.

'And your name is?' it says.

'Sarah. Sarah McMillan,' I stutter. Can't quite see his face. He's dressed like an officer of the elite Structure hierarchy, and we are in a round, white chamber with very little furniture. He bends down and with startling strength lifts the straps that wrap us both around with one hand, until he is staring right into my eyes with Tanya's only inches away. I'm nearly choking, the straps are biting into me hard. His face is flat, buckled like a battered sheet of metal, brown as a sun-dried apricot; his eyes are like hard emeralds. He's mastered hatred as an expression. He smiles and the expression warms into contempt.

'Well, Miss McMillan,' he says, still holding us right up off the floor and staring at me, 'I hope to teach you to keep better company. And better manners. When you address a Component of the Structure, you will use the appellatives, Sir, Lord or Controller.'





Without looking at Tanya he flings us both aside. We land with Tanya on top, on the carpet some feet away. I'm winded and breathless and want it all to stop. This guy is a psychopath; I'm tied to another one. I want to go home, back to my quiet submissive life as an unaware, inactive female nothing.

He's leaning over me. A big guy, seems huge across the shoulders. Got a golden circlet around his head with little beads sticking out of it.

'...or any other term denoting your basic subservience. Do you understand?' he breathes into my face.

Don't know why, but for some reason I stop being scared and summon my excess saliva into a massive glob. I let him have it right between the eyes.

His pupils change from emerald to ruby. He straightens up and starts to raise his metal stick.

'Hold it, Drummond,' says Tanya, so calm she might have been ordering a coffee at the canteen. 'Touch her with that and, enhanced or not, your muscles will be catmeat.'

Drummond pauses in his psychotic breakdown, turns to look at Tanya for the first time.

'One more utterance from you, Renegade cow, and I won't even let you have the slow death of the Impregnation Chambers — you'll be taken to my private yacht and be lovingly disembowelled.'


A crack — my arms sting as I feel something snap from around them. The leather straps that are restraining me fall away. I gasp — Tanya has broken out of the bonds in which we were wrapped and has bounced to her feet like a panther. She's naked, her feet and fingers still dark with blood, but she stands there so gloriously confident that despite all of this insanity that she's brought with her, I think I'm in love.

Drummond steps back, reaching for a needlegun that's on a desk behind him.

Then something happens to me. God knows why, but I also stand up and I hear myself saying defiantly:

'One more step, Councillor, and I'll fry the fat from your bones where you stand.'

Drummond freezes, a puzzled cloud gathering on his sheet-metal face. I don't know what I meant either, but I'd stopped him in his tracks.



'Take off your band, Drummond — now!' Tanya snaps, leaping to the desk and grabbing the needlegun before Drummond sees what's happening. He reaches to his forehead, plucks off the gold circlet.

'What are you going to do, you Renegade filth? You're on a Structure Shard, you won't last five seconds outside that door.'

Tanya smiles, taking the headband from his sweating hand.

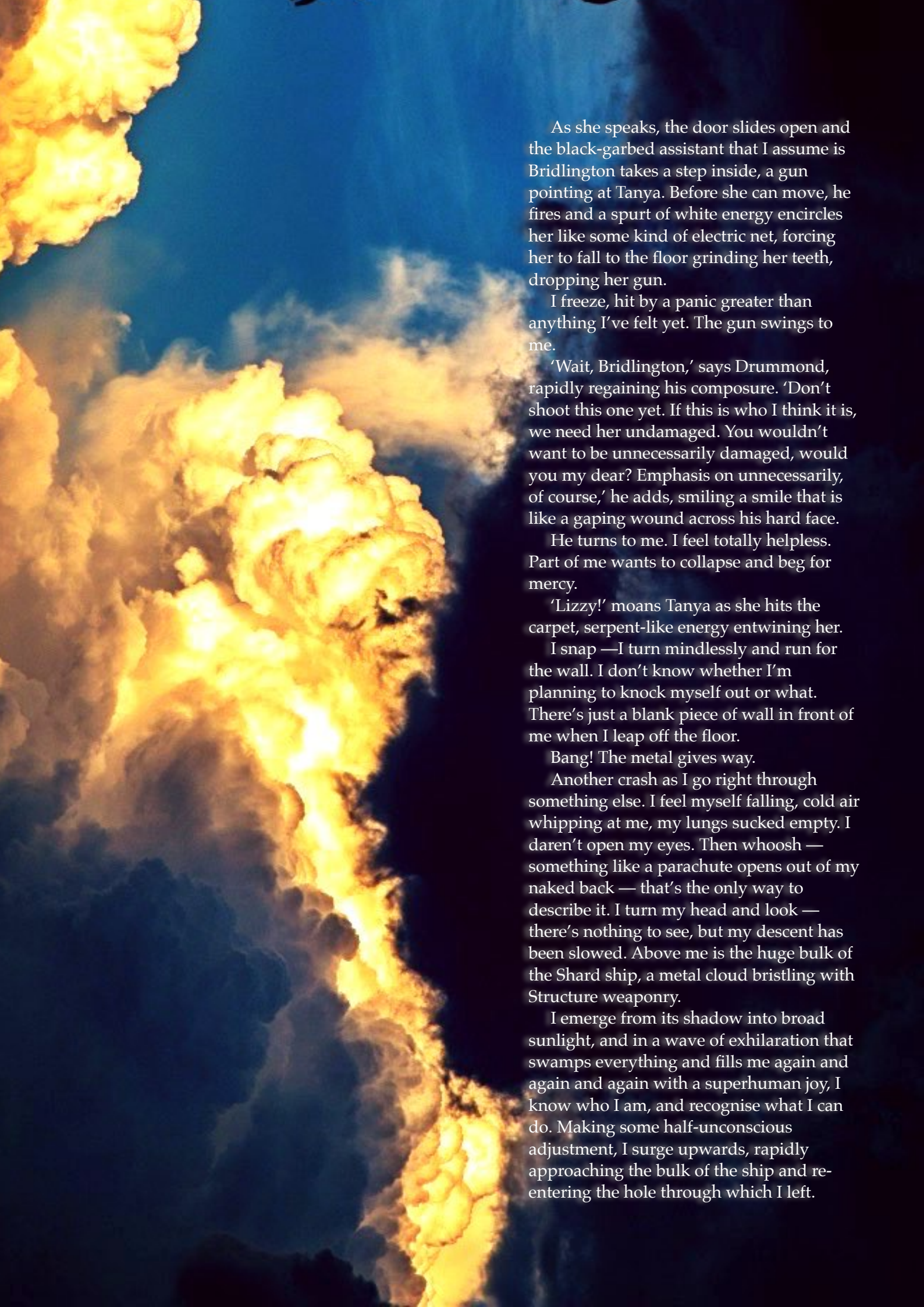
'I'm not going outside the door, you musclebound sack. Here, Lizzy, keep him covered.' She tosses me the needlegun. My fear is coming and going in waves. I don't know what is going on, then somehow I do, but before I can get a grip on it, it's gone again and I'm a shaking wreck. I point the thing at Drummond and watch as Tanya fiddles with his headband. She puts it on — the only thing she's wearing — and starts talking.

'Web! Web, can you pick me up? Come on Web, you're supposed to be the technical genius, pick me up!'

'You'll never get a signal to your filthy friends,' Drummond says, fingers squeezing his cane nervously. 'I told you, you're on a Shard — we are in orbit by now, with our defence screens at maximum. Your pathetic toys can't reach us here.'

'Drummond, if you speak again, your amputated tongue becomes a wet and very bloody bracelet for my wrist. Structure scientists have mis-estimated the Conception for years. Males always misestimate females.'





As she speaks, the door slides open and the black-garbed assistant that I assume is Bridlington takes a step inside, a gun pointing at Tanya. Before she can move, he fires and a spurt of white energy encircles her like some kind of electric net, forcing her to fall to the floor grinding her teeth, dropping her gun.

I freeze, hit by a panic greater than anything I've felt yet. The gun swings to me.

'Wait, Bridlington,' says Drummond, rapidly regaining his composure. 'Don't shoot this one yet. If this is who I think it is, we need her undamaged. You wouldn't want to be unnecessarily damaged, would you my dear? Emphasis on unnecessarily, of course,' he adds, smiling a smile that is like a gaping wound across his hard face.

He turns to me. I feel totally helpless. Part of me wants to collapse and beg for mercy.

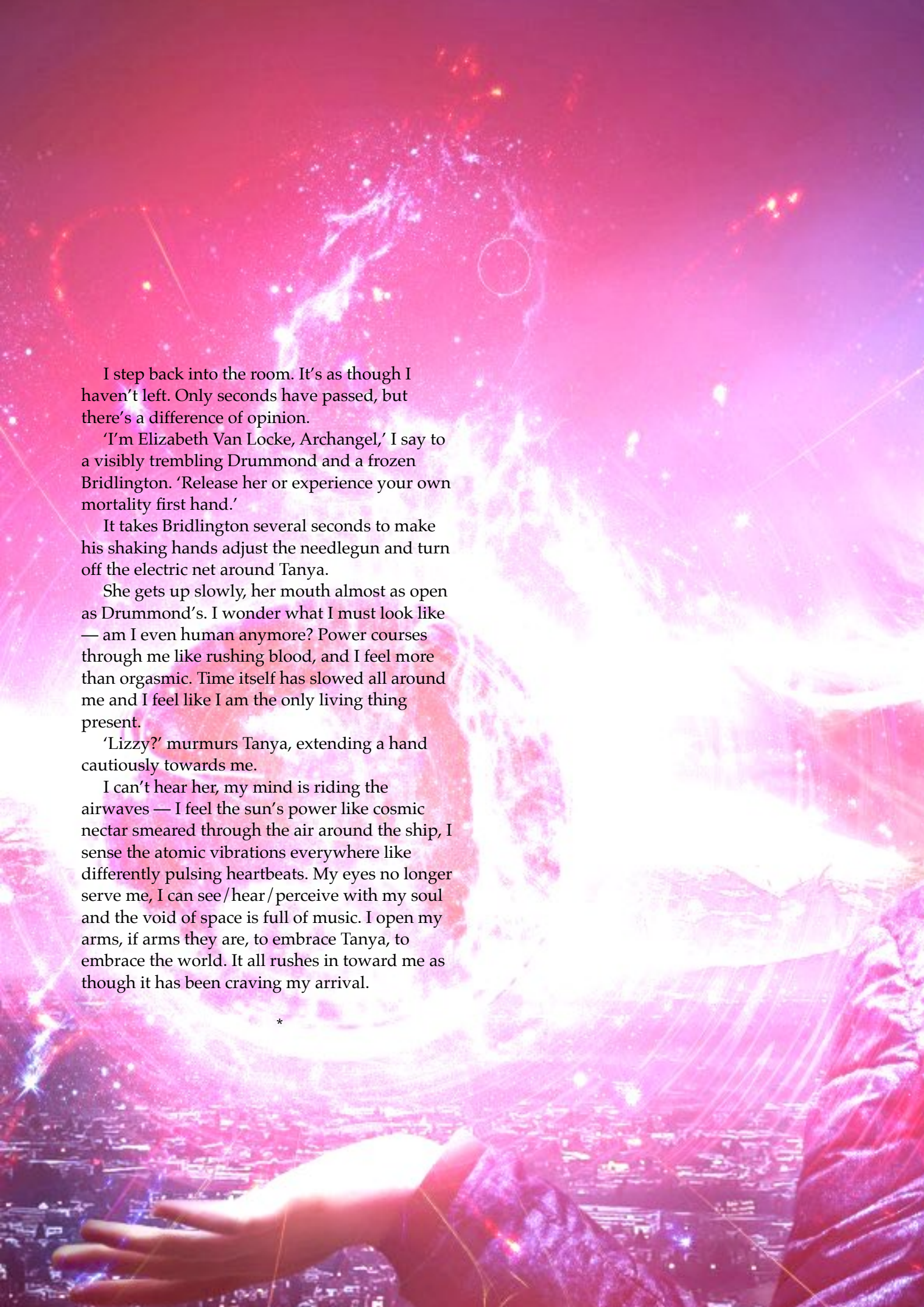
'Lizzy!' moans Tanya as she hits the carpet, serpent-like energy entwining her.

I snap—I turn mindlessly and run for the wall. I don't know whether I'm planning to knock myself out or what. There's just a blank piece of wall in front of me when I leap off the floor.

Bang! The metal gives way.

Another crash as I go right through something else. I feel myself falling, cold air whipping at me, my lungs sucked empty. I daren't open my eyes. Then whoosh—something like a parachute opens out of my naked back—that's the only way to describe it. I turn my head and look—there's nothing to see, but my descent has been slowed. Above me is the huge bulk of the Shard ship, a metal cloud bristling with Structure weaponry.

I emerge from its shadow into broad sunlight, and in a wave of exhilaration that swamps everything and fills me again and again and again with a superhuman joy, I know who I am, and recognise what I can do. Making some half-unconscious adjustment, I surge upwards, rapidly approaching the bulk of the ship and re-entering the hole through which I left.



I step back into the room. It's as though I haven't left. Only seconds have passed, but there's a difference of opinion.

'I'm Elizabeth Van Locke, Archangel,' I say to a visibly trembling Drummond and a frozen Bridlington. 'Release her or experience your own mortality first hand.'

It takes Bridlington several seconds to make his shaking hands adjust the needlegun and turn off the electric net around Tanya.

She gets up slowly, her mouth almost as open as Drummond's. I wonder what I must look like — am I even human anymore? Power courses through me like rushing blood, and I feel more than orgasmic. Time itself has slowed all around me and I feel like I am the only living thing present.

'Lizzy?' murmurs Tanya, extending a hand cautiously towards me.

I can't hear her, my mind is riding the airwaves — I feel the sun's power like cosmic nectar smeared through the air around the ship, I sense the atomic vibrations everywhere like differently pulsing heartbeats. My eyes no longer serve me, I can see/hear/perceive with my soul and the void of space is full of music. I open my arms, if arms they are, to embrace Tanya, to embrace the world. It all rushes in toward me as though it has been craving my arrival.

\*



And that's that.

Now I've written it down.

I understand that the experience has unbalanced me, disoriented me. But I'm not mad. I'm Elizabeth Van Locke, not Sarah McMillan. I belong here with the Conception, fighting the Structure before they destroy everything.

Do you understand now? Now that I've written it all down? All I need to do is remember how to reach inside, how to become the Archangel again, then you'll see.

I'm looking out of the window now, waiting for Tanya to come to me, waiting for Web to send her back to me again, waiting for my angel...

# **MISSING NOTES**

## **A Slovakian Tale**





‘Now listen, girls,’ father began, in that cold tone to which we were used, as he turned in his seat to briefly face Sofia and me sitting in the back of the moving car (before turning back, his token eye contact accomplished) ‘when we get there, you should remember that there’s another guest, a man called Ivan, with whom you should have as little to do as possible. There’s nothing wrong with him as such, I’m told — just that he likes to run away, they say. He probably has mental health issues. While I’m discussing the project with Delphine and Boris, try to keep yourselves entertained as much as possible and leave everyone else alone, understood?’ I was 28 and Sofia was 18, but we answered ‘Yes, Father’ as though we were both eight, knowing what was expected. To protest even slightly, to ask questions, would have resulted in subtle consequences, tiresome tirades, a straining of the atmosphere beyond its usual limited elasticity. We were both tired after the plane flight and didn’t need any of that. Instead of asking, I tried to recall why we were there: Father was an international music director; Boris was someone high up in the Eastern Europe classical music scene; they were getting together to prepare a series of concerts; Sofia

and I were there as window dressing. And I almost said ‘widower dressing’ because in part that’s what we were: two forlorn daughters, brought along for the ride to make the point that Father was single now after mother’s death. We underlined the point in his life continuum: he was alone and burdened with children.

As he had spoken, I’d seen a robin flashing along by the side of the car - red, brown, flit, gone. It reminded me that it was still the middle of winter.

Boris was indistinguishable from every other high-ranking musician — big, bearded, boring. Delphine paced towards us as the car pulled up and seemed more like a snow leopard, each paw carefully placed in the snow, her body tensed and ready to pounce. Inside, warm, drinks, chatter — I stood by a long window looking out onto the frosty forest, snow smothering the gaps, yearning for the silence outside.

Lunch was dull: too little food, too much chat. Sofia barely ate anything. I drank a little too much. Ivan, a lank, long-haired spidery sort of man with his head wrapped in what looked like twine and his clothes all grey and brown and twisted, sat off to the side on a seat all his own. When Delphine — I presumed she was his





mother or an aunt — invited him to the table he snapped back, 'I sit here!' I thought it odd that I had understood what he had said, even though it was in another language. His eyes were half-closed, his face in constant motion, twitching, smiling, scowling. We were not introduced. It was as though the family had a moody dog that spoke.

'Damn!' my father muttered, looking through his briefcase in the corner of the room when we had finally finished eating. 'Some of my notes are missing!' He wasn't talking to me. I don't recollect him ever talking to me. I just happened to be there to hear him. A search ensued, to no avail.

That night, lying fully dressed on top of a huge, soft bed, looking up at a large skylight which was half-covered in snow, I grew more and more tense, until my body was as rigid as wood. I got up and went out through a back door. Almost lost in the trees, Ivan was already running away, his long, thin body stalking through the snow at a pace neither quick nor slow — a studied pace, as though he walked to irregular music. I followed him through the trees, sure that he could hear the crunch of my boots. Losing sight of him, I crunched faster and then stopped: there he was, sitting with his back

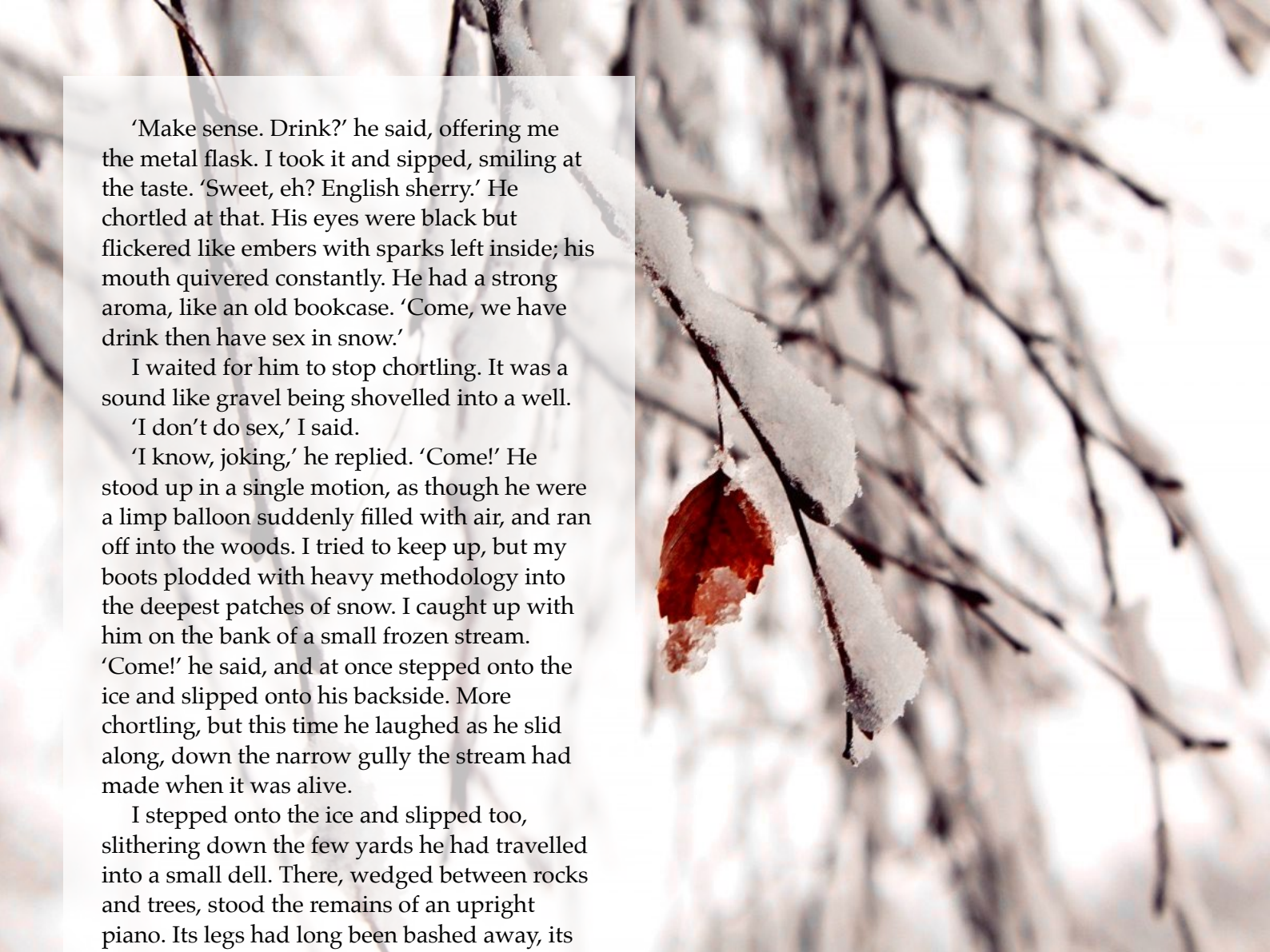
to a tree, looking at me. No, not at me, but over my shoulder, staring into space.

'Christmas legend,' he said suddenly, glancing at me then returning to look at space — no, not at space, as I saw when I looked over my shoulder for a second: at a robin, which was sitting on a snow-painted bough a few feet away. 'Robin rested upon shoulder of Christ on cross.' Ivan nodded and sipped something from a flask he held in mittened fingers. His whole body seemed to flicker and move, alive with itches. 'Sang to relieve Christ's suffering. Blood from crown of thorns stained chest; since then, all robins red-breasted.'

'It's actually orange,' I replied, walking over to him and squatting at his side. 'A robin's red-breast is actually orange. The English language didn't have a word for the colour "orange", so things that were really orange were often called red instead.'

'What you call oranges?' Ivan asked, smile alternating with scowl.

'We did have the word for "orange" as a fruit. The colour orange was not named as a colour in English until the 16th century. The name for the colour comes from the fruit.'



'Make sense. Drink?' he said, offering me the metal flask. I took it and sipped, smiling at the taste. 'Sweet, eh? English sherry.' He chortled at that. His eyes were black but flickered like embers with sparks left inside; his mouth quivered constantly. He had a strong aroma, like an old bookcase. 'Come, we have drink then have sex in snow.'

I waited for him to stop chortling. It was a sound like gravel being shovelled into a well.

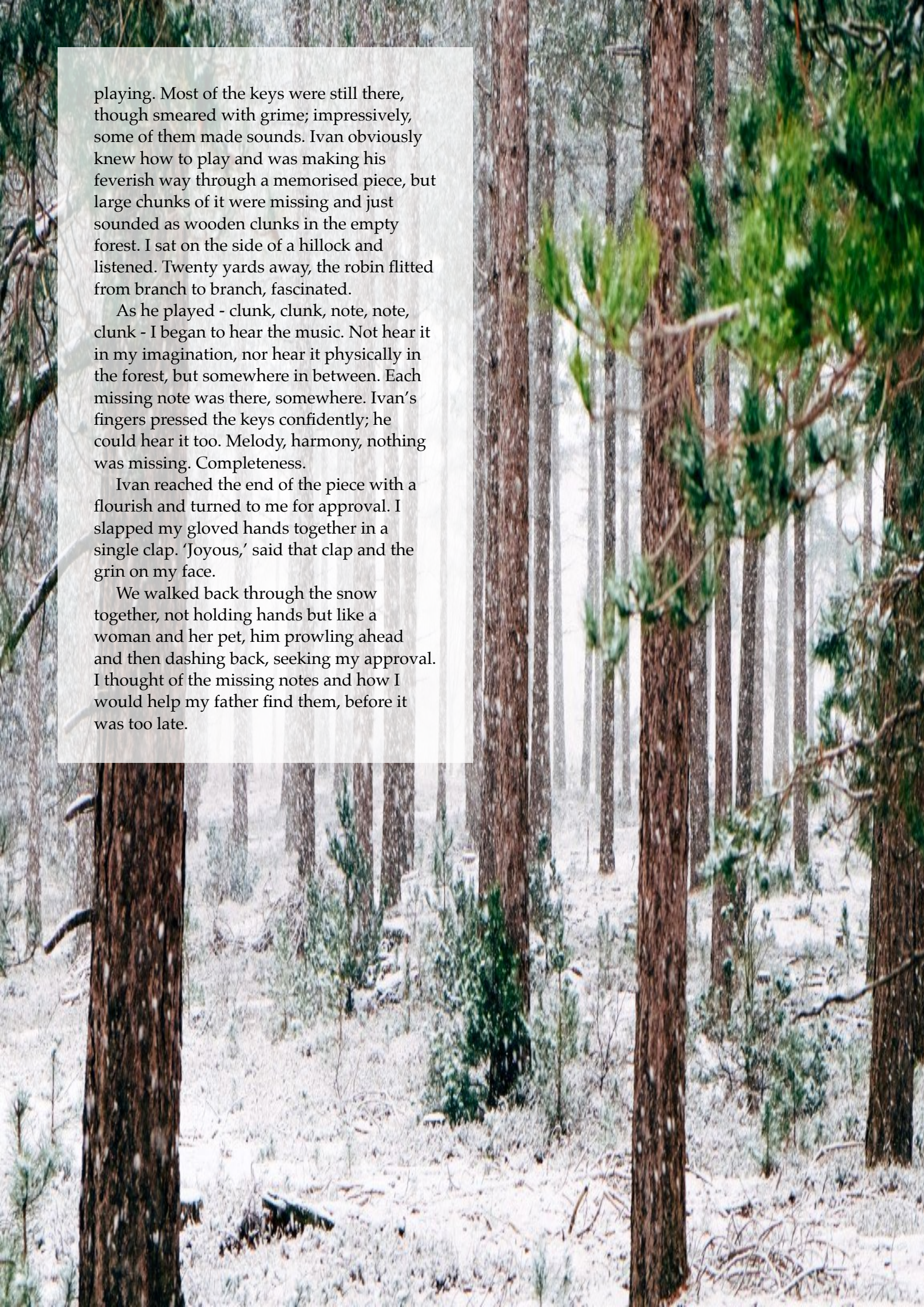
'I don't do sex,' I said.

'I know, joking,' he replied. 'Come!' He stood up in a single motion, as though he were a limp balloon suddenly filled with air, and ran off into the woods. I tried to keep up, but my boots plodded with heavy methodology into the deepest patches of snow. I caught up with him on the bank of a small frozen stream.

'Come!' he said, and at once stepped onto the ice and slipped onto his backside. More chortling, but this time he laughed as he slid along, down the narrow gully the stream had made when it was alive.

I stepped onto the ice and slipped too, slithering down the few yards he had travelled into a small dell. There, wedged between rocks and trees, stood the remains of an upright piano. Its legs had long been bashed away, its varnish eroded until it looked almost as though the tree had extruded it from its core. Ivan sat on a rock which either he or someone else had placed in front of the keyboard and opened it up. Without looking at me, he plunged into





playing. Most of the keys were still there, though smeared with grime; impressively, some of them made sounds. Ivan obviously knew how to play and was making his feverish way through a memorised piece, but large chunks of it were missing and just sounded as wooden clunks in the empty forest. I sat on the side of a hillock and listened. Twenty yards away, the robin flitted from branch to branch, fascinated.

As he played - clunk, clunk, note, note, clunk - I began to hear the music. Not hear it in my imagination, nor hear it physically in the forest, but somewhere in between. Each missing note was there, somewhere. Ivan's fingers pressed the keys confidently; he could hear it too. Melody, harmony, nothing was missing. Completeness.

Ivan reached the end of the piece with a flourish and turned to me for approval. I slapped my gloved hands together in a single clap. 'Joyous,' said that clap and the grin on my face.

We walked back through the snow together, not holding hands but like a woman and her pet, him prowling ahead and then dashing back, seeking my approval. I thought of the missing notes and how I would help my father find them, before it was too late.



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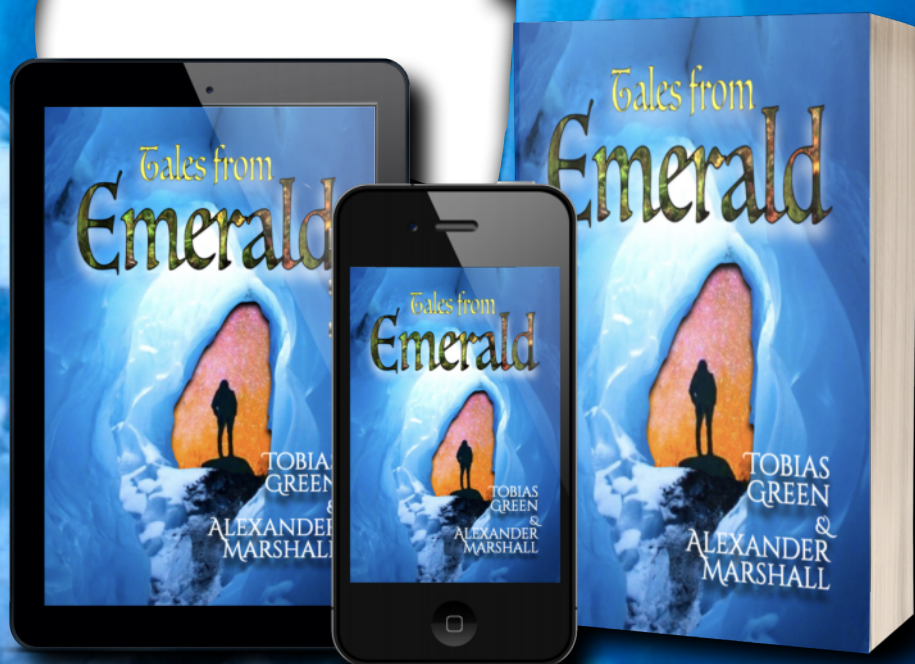
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