

IMMATERIAL

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Sample translation «The Mirror Black»
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Prologue – 2090

The soil feels cold between her fingers. Damp and slightly claggy. She sits up and drags the back of her hand across her face. Her arm is a grey shadow in the dark before her eyes. The air smells like forest floor and something else – a metallic tang that lingers in her nostrils. The smell arouses a sense of discomfort in her.

‘Hello?’ Her voice is contained by the walls, sinking down through the floor and fading away. In the ceiling, out of her reach, she can just about make out a hatch made of roughly hewn wood. Grey light filters down through the cracks.

How did I end up here?

The thought is difficult to formulate. It comes and goes in her mind, like a log thrown high in an explosion, ready to fall again.

She runs her hand over the floor in front of her. Her fingertips brush against something soft. Her hat. The military green felt hat. She picks it up and strokes the coarse material. The sensation triggers a memory. The first pearl on the string of recollection. She remembers sitting in a boat on her way up the river along the border. Drammen fading into the smoke from the coal power stations behind her. The town is the only enclave in the *Quarantine Zone* – the area separating the rest of the world from Oslo. A base for adventurers, charlatans or

tradesmen looking to make quick money. Souvenirs from the Quarantine Zone and Oslo go for astonishing prices in the illegal auctions in the allSphere. But she assumes the town is used first and foremost as a listening post. The canary in the coal mine. The first place that will be in trouble if something happens in Oslo.

The frost mist rolled across the surface of the water, making fluid, ethereal shapes that were reflected in the shiny silver surface. The wind bit like the edge of a knife, the cold current stinging her cheeks. She shivered and pulled her collar up around her throat. She wasn't used to this damp frost. Ice floes cracked beneath the keel in a sort of Arctic Morse code only those who lived out here understood.

The guide cut the motor around an hour after they had cast off and let the boat glide in towards the eastern bank. He was an older man with grey-streaked hair and eyebrows so fair you could barely see them. 'I don't go any further.' He took a swig from his hip flask and offered it to her. She declined. Offered him more money instead. The man shook his head and refused, even when she doubled the amount. 'I'm happy to take you back to town for free. Only the Shadows walk out here.'

The Shadows.

She shook her head, irritated by the guide's superstition. The stories about the Shadows were just some of several fanciful yarns that had taken root in the areas around the Quarantine Zone in recent years. The Shadows were described as being hazy apparitions with yellow eyes. Lightning quick and brutal. Capable of tearing the foot from an adult man with their bare hands. Utter nonsense, of course. The Shadows and the other creatures in these new myths were nothing more than a modern variant of the Loch Ness Monster or the Abominable Snowman. A primitive way of dealing with the fear of what had happened in Oslo.

The guide tied the boat to a tree root and carried her bag and tent ashore.

'You're sure this is what you want?' He touched her hand. Presumably in an attempt to seem fatherly. She didn't like it. She pulled her hand away.

'Quite sure. And you'll pick me up here at the same time next week?'

'Same place, same time,' the guide said with a fleeting grimace. As if taste-testing the lie. She knew he didn't expect to see her again.

She found a suitable place to camp close to the river bank and spend the afternoon preparing for the next day. According to reliable sources, the Night Wanderers has been observed in this area. Perhaps that was why the locals had made up the stories about the Shadows. The Night Wanderers were usually spotted at night. That in itself had made her curious about the small community that had chosen to settle in the Quarantine Zone, right up against the border with Oslo – Norway's former capital.

There were many theories about why they had settled here. Her theory was one of religion, that the Night Wanderers represented a new version of Pantheism – the notion that the world in itself is divine.

She was in no doubt that the place they had chosen had something to do with Oslo. The Norwegian capital had been a no-go zone since the outbreak of the gene plague in 2085. Now, five years later, the border between the Quarantine Zone and Oslo was monitored by the Masks' military robots and drones. No one entered the city without their permission.

Despite all of this the Night Wanderers had managed to establish themselves in the Quarantine Zone. A group of perhaps five hundred individuals who lived outside of a ruthlessly controlled and monitored society, not unlike the first pioneers in the Wild West – men and women who took a chance on clearing and cultivating the land close to the territory of the Native Americans. But the Night Wanderers' Native Americans were ghosts – Shadows

and other creatures who had apparently wandered out of Oslo and into the Quarantine Zone. It was also rumoured that commodities, services and information were exchanged across the border. If this was the case, the Masks' security network was a lot less secure than they were willing to admit.

It had taken a long time for the University of Copenhagen to approve the project following her initial idea, but now she was finally on her way – the first anthropologist to do fieldwork in the Quarantine Zone. Did Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss feel the same excitement when they came into contact with hitherto unknown, primitive tribes in the twentieth century?

After erecting her tent, she boiled water on a simple spirit burner. While she drank her tea, she studied the map she had had printed on waxed, water-resistant paper. The link to the allSphere, the global data cloud, was unstable out here. Of course she had a version of the map stored in her own personal inner sphere, the iSphere, but having an actual map was something else. Actually having something that could be touched, that felt real between her fingers.

She decided to follow the original plan. Next day she would go to the lookout point at Tyrifjord. The lake's eastern shore was the extreme border between the Quarantine Zone and Oslo. She hoped she would be able to observe activity from the lookout point. Perhaps make contact with the Night Wanderers. Satisfied with her preparations, she settled in for the night... and woke up in the hole in the ground.

The memories from her trip up the river prompt the first jolt of fear. They must have taken her while she slept. Drugged her. But who were "they"? Bandits, the Night Wanderers or the Masks? The latter option sends an involuntary shudder through her body. She leans against the wall of earth, feeling the cold through the fabric of her jacket. The Masks only looked out for themselves. Since the outbreak of the gene plague, the once obscure security organisation responsible for hunting down deserters from the military had grown to be a global power. From their headquarters at the *Needle* in Paris, they keep their finger on the pulse of most of what is happening in the world outside of the enclaves. The Masks' new leader, Fernando de Torquemada, is rumoured to be particularly merciless. People disappear from their custody. Quite simply cease to exist. Would that be her fate? She wraps her arms around her knees and rocks back and forth. Concentrates on shutting out the fear while also trying to listen with her thoughts.

For as long as she can remember, she's had the ability to sense others with her thoughts. She has kept this ability secret, something that was particularly important when choosing her academic career. There is no scope for such things at a university, and during her first years of study she was ashamed of being different, of being thought scum. But now she listens. Exerts herself. Tries to permeate through the physical barriers around her using the power of her consciousness.

She is successful. In fact, it's surprisingly easy. She senses two of them. Not very far away from the hole in the ground. They appear as shapeless shadows; pillars of mist. A man and a woman. Both seem fired up... or, actually, anxious about something.

'Are you completely sure about this?' The woman's voice trickles into her head.

'Of course not. But what choice do we have?' the man snaps. His irritation masks an anxiety he is concealing from the woman. 'Don't forget he predicted when she'd come down to the exact minute,' the man continues. 'Showed us precisely where the boat would land. It's impossible to keep anything hidden from them.'

'They're freaks...'

‘Shh. Christ, Alidia. What if he hears us?’

‘So what?’ the woman, Alidia, snarls back. ‘Hasn’t it occurred to you that he might not let us live? The woman’s clearly important to them. Why would they risk us talking about this afterwards?’

‘Now you’re just being paranoid. He’s risking more than enough just by sneaking out of Oslo. Why risk drawing more attention to himself?’ But the man thinks the same. She can feel it. Are they talking about her? And did he really say “out of Oslo”?

‘I might be paranoid, but you’re way too optimistic. Who cares about a couple dead Night Wanderers?’

‘Someone’s coming,’ the man interrupts.

‘How many?’ Alidia asks.

‘Just one. Looks like a tramp. Worn-out shoes and a shabby habit with the hood pulled down over their face.’

‘You idiot, it’s...’

Down in the hole in the ground it’s as if a giant hand pushes her away, cutting her off from the rest of the conversation. The pressure against her own consciousness is brief and terrifying. Are there more people who have the same ability that she does? People from Oslo?

She’s never met anyone who managed to escape from Oslo after the outbreak. No wonder, really – those who outsmart the Masks’ surveillance are tracked down and imprisoned. People still fear coming into contact with people from Oslo in case they are infected, even though it’s been four years since the last case of the gene plague among those who managed to flee the city.

Warily she directs her attention back to the two people outside of the hole in the ground. Where she was previously able to look, there is now a blind spot in her mind. She concentrates. Focuses on this one point. Senses something hiding there. A dark outline. Formless yet stable. A foreign consciousness that knows exactly where she is. Flickers of their emotions make it through to her. Anger. Determination. Doubt. Decisiveness. She’s not sure, but she thinks she’s the reason for the emotions.

She breaks into a sweat, which runs down her forehead and onto her nose. She breaks the mental contact as a small voice grows strong inside her: *I need to get away from here. Away from here. Away from here.*

She looks for the allSphere. Hopes to find any sign of a connection so she can send a cry for help. But the ether is empty. No signal at all. She’s as alone as the American pioneers she so idiotically romanticised the day before.

Half an hour later the hatch in the ceiling opens and a wooden ladder is lowered down into the hole. The bluish grey daylight hurts her eyes. Hesitantly she climbs up. What other choice does she have?

PART I – THE QUARANTINE ZONE

CHAPTER ONE

The rain drummed against the tarp. A steady, insistent tapping. Marko peered out of the back of the lorry through an opening in the tarp. In the dim light he couldn't see anything other than rotting trees in something approximating rows. He pulled the flap shut and leaned his head against the wall. Stretched out his legs and massaged his stiff muscles.

The trip out to the airport, where they planned to steal a German transport plane from the Second World War, had proven more challenging than anticipated. They'd had to turn around three times because the road had collapsed or was blocked by fallen trees. In the cab up front 2038 and Olga were navigating from memory and using an extremely old map. Connecting to the allSphere wasn't an option. Following the events in Berlin the Masks were monitoring traffic in the global data cloud.

I'Ree sat next to him with her eyes closed. Circumstance had driven them together in New Berlin, and now the Masks suspected that she and Marko were partners. That they had been partners since the beginning. He studied her face. Her prominent cheekbones. Almond-shaped eyes either side of a straight nose.

Will she turn on me if she gets a chance?

Marko didn't think so. But he couldn't completely rule out the possibility. Of those now travelling with him, only Lenny had earned his full trust. But even that was fragile. His friend had struggled with the bottle over the last decade and might suddenly prove useless. Despite this Lenny had got Thalia back on her feet and given Marko a glimpse of the doctor he'd once been.

Thalia...

He surreptitiously studied the woman. Marko remembered the first time he had seen her, climbing out of the strange mirror beneath the streets of Berlin. She had had a message from Lieutenant Stenthon, the officer and colleague he had seen die with his own eyes in Tbilisi several years previously. A confused, troubling message that had prompted Marko to travel to Oslo.

Under different circumstances Marko would have dismissed the message as the

madness it undoubtedly was. But Stenthon was also his ticket out of this mess. A man called David Belial had promised him and Lenny both money and a new identity in one of the free enclaves if Stenthon was captured and delivered to him. Did Stenthon know there was a price on his head? Marko thought so. Stenthon and Belial knew each other. They had worked together for a while, but Marko didn't know what exactly that cooperation had involved. All Marko knew was that Stenthon had at some point betrayed Belial.

Now Belial wanted revenge. The restoration of his honour. A balm for his wounded pride. It was a motive as old as mankind.

Marko had decided to share Belial's fees with the people now accompanying him to Oslo. The money, but not the identity papers. The documents meant a new life for him and Qielle, the little girl he had saved from a dumpster in Tirana.

Have you considered you're only being generous because you know you won't make it?

Marko ignored that thought. As a soldier he knew the key to survival was concentrating on what he *could* do. Stay in the present. Stop your thoughts wandering. But it wasn't easy, a lot had happened in a short space of time. Marko felt like a cork bobbing on a black, stormy sea. Unresistingly tossed around by the waves, ignorant to what was happening in the deep beneath him.

The lorry moved down a gear and stopped. I'Ree opened her eyes and looked around. The hatch between the trailer and the cab was pushed open. Olga's craggy face appeared. 'Meet me outside the lorry.'

Short and to the point as always, Olga.

'The museum with the old transport planes is down there.' Olga pointed down between two dry pine trees. The tree trunks framed the hangar. The building was around a kilometre away, in the bottom of a wide valley. The runway next to the building was a patchwork of cracks and lines, and Marko could see holes and dips in many places. 'Is the museum still open to the public?'

'I don't know,' Olga replied. 'It's been five years since I worked there. Back then the caretaker lived in a small annex connected to the exhibition area itself. Considering the state of the roads, I don't expect many people make the trip.'

Marko handed back her binoculars. 'Great. Well, as long as we get in the air before someone notices anything. I don't see any other buildings down there. As soon as we're airborne, we should be safe.' At least, Marko hoped that would be the case. According to Olga, the old Junkers were in the same condition as when they had touched down in 1945; without the technology or sophisticated components that today's drones, radar and satellites sought tirelessly to detect.

Marko climbed up into the cab of the lorry where 2038 sat ready at the wheel. Marko looked through the hatch into the trailer. 'All good back there?' Thalia leaned towards him. Her face was pale, but her gaze was no longer febrile, and the red patches had disappeared from her skin. A cocktail of quatro-histamine and amphetamine was keeping her on her feet, but Lenny couldn't say with any certainty how long the effect would last. 'Are we there?'

'Very nearly. We're going to park half a kilometre from the building. Then Olga, 2038, I'Ree and I will scope the area. You'll wait in the lorry with Lenny.' Thalia swallowed. Undoubtedly with a protest on the tip of her tongue. But eventually she just nodded and leaned back again.

'Worry about what you *can* do,' Marko whispered to himself.

'What?' 2038's face was as neutral as his voice.

Marko shook his head. 2038 shrugged and concentrated on driving.

They parked in a small clearing a few metres away from the road. The wheels sank down into the soft earth. Grey pine trees bereft of their needles reached up into the sky.

Bleached pillars with skeletal branches. It was as if the bottom of the valley had been underwater and recently drained to reveal an army of dead trees.

Marko pulled the tarp aside. I'Ree jumped down with her gun hanging from her belt. She was soon joined by Olga and 2038.

'Listen up,' Marko said to the others. 'No one opens fire unless absolutely necessary. Right now neither the Masks, Darkwell Corp. nor Berlin's security police know where we are. Let's try to keep it that way.'

None of the others spoke. Marko interpreted their silence as confirmation. There was a faint whispering in his head as the Omega, the weapons system coiled around his left hand, moved. It felt as if the weapon's avatar wanted to protest the notion of proceeding with caution. As if it were encouraging him to think more offensively.

Marko rebuffed that idiotic thought. 'I'Ree will come with me into the hangar itself. 2038 and Olga, you search the caretaker's annex. Only short messages via the iSphere's local link, and only if it's absolutely necessary. Questions?'

Silence again. They were all top soldiers with experience from both campaigns and private assignments. Not the type of people who used words needlessly.

'Then let's get to it.'

From a distance the building looked like a cargo ship that had run aground. The longitudinal wall facing the forest was the same shape as the keel of a boat; oval and huge. I'Ree and Marko stayed where they were until 2038 and Olga reached the western corner of the hangar. Then they started running towards the main entrance.

There was a double door in the middle of the longitudinal wall, a meter above the ground. The steps up to the door had collapsed and were lying on the ground along with the planks from a slanting roof. A clear indication of a lack of maintenance at the museum. Marko hoped the aircraft weren't in equally bad shape.

'Locked,' I'Ree whispered after trying the door handle.

'What's the mechanism?' Marko asked.

'Standard locking bolt. Titanium.' I'Ree took out a small can and sprayed a fluid into the narrow space between the two door leaves. Marko heard a faint fizzing noise before the smell of chemicals reached his nostrils.

I'Ree opened the door. Marko jumped up onto the ledge and went in first.

'There's someone nearby.' Thalia's disembodied voice surrounded Lenny in the dark trailer.

'I don't hear anything,' Lenny whispered back.

'Of course you don't.' Thalia moved closer to the opening and moved the tarp aside. Lenny couldn't see anything outside apart from the trunks of the nearest trees.

'They're not far away. We need to get out of here.'

'Calm down. Marko will be back soon.' Lenny reached out to stop her, but in one fluid movement Thalia pulled the tarp aside and jumped down onto the ground.

'What the...?' Lenny followed. He landed right next to Thalia. The woman was crouched down, her breaths coming in short puffs. 'You're not well enough for this. I'll contact Marko through the iSphere.'

'No!' Her voice went straight through him; low but intense. 'No comms. They're listening. Looking for us.'

'Who the hell are *they*?'

Thalia shook her head. 'No time. Here, take this.' She put a metal box the size of a lighter in his hand. 'Crawl under the lorry. Attach this to the fuel tank.'

'What the hell is-'

‘Just do it. Now.’ Thalia pushed him towards the lorry. A surprisingly hard shove considering the shape she was in.

Lenny wriggled under the lorry, grabbing at tufts of grass to pull himself forwards. The moisture seeped through his trousers. The forest floor smelt rotten, and crumbled between his fingers. Earth to mud. *Bloody women*. Lenny rolled onto his back and stared up at the belly of the lorry. What did a fuel tank look like? He was a doctor, not a mechanic.

Slightly to the left of the centre of the undercarriage he spotted a square box. It smelled of diesel. Lenny pressed the box against it, hoping it was the tank. Metal attached to metal with a hollow clang.

Thalia was gone. Lenny got to his feet and looked inside the trailer. No one there. There was no one in the cab either. Lenny snatched the torch from the door and squinted in the direction of the forest. Had she left him behind? Lost her patience and headed after the others? He didn’t have night-vision binoculars or bioapps. Should he turn on the torch? Just for a moment so she could see him?

‘Thalia?’ The skeleton forest amplified the sound. Made his voice ring in his ears. Quiet rumbling.

Lenny rubbed his thumb over the switch. Just a quick flicker.

The beating of wings. The hoarse screech of a raven. The bird flew down from the crest of the hill and soared just above his head in the direction of the museum. Lenny squeezed the torch so hard his hand cramped. *Christ, Lenny. Relax. It’s just a bird.*

He swallowed. Took a sip of water to loosen the lump in his throat. Walked around the lorry once more. No Thalia. No sign of tracks on the wet ground apart from his own.

Then he heard it. The faint but nevertheless recognisable hum from four powerful servomotors.

The sound of a *Fenris*, the Masks’ military robot.

CHAPTER TWO

Now the concert was over, Victoria Karamatzov started to doubt whether seeing it had been worth the risk. Irritated, she broke through the crowd still waiting outside the exit of the Tirana Rock Hall, hoping in vain to catch a glimpse of *Clockwork Angels*. Tirana was the second last stop on the band's European tour, and the three musicians in CA had seemed both uninspired and exhausted. She should have watched the concert live via the allSphere instead. At the very least the sound would have been better.

Victoria crossed the small square in front of the northern entrance to Shanty Town and slipped into the alley leading to the poor neighbour. Shanty Town wasn't a place many people went at night, but Victoria had grown up here, living with Aunt Iris on the lower ground floor of a condemned building near the collapsed Olympic stadium. The winters were the worst. The building didn't have central heating and the electricity supply was unreliable. But at least they had a roof over their heads and food on the table thanks to Iris' job as a cook at one of the bars in Shanty Town. Victoria's aunt promised to get her a similar job as soon as she turned sixteen. Victoria was happy with that plan. That changed the day one of the transhumanists stopped her in the street to preach about the Guide. Victoria listened to what the man had to say and was converted.

Well, "converted" was laying it on a bit thick. Victoria seized the opportunity to get out of the slum. But the transhumanists must have seen something in her, because it wasn't every day that people were picked up off the street and offered training and lodgings in the transhumanists' pagoda.

Unfortunately, such an opportunity came with its own obligations: daily studies of the Guide's texts, and when she wasn't reading, various tasks around the pagoda. Everything from looking after the children at the children's home (which she liked) to kitchen duties and cleaning (which she hated). The main focus was on preaching – the transhumanists' duty to lead the uninitiated away from their chaotic lives towards a state of harmony and balance.

To start Victoria didn't understand how to convince others when she herself doubted the Guide's message. But she quickly realised that didn't matter. Preaching was like selling drugs – the people who let themselves be converted were already looking for something, you just needed to point them in the right direction.

She only had free time on Saturdays, and even then she had to be back at the pagoda by eleven. It was ten past one now. If she were discovered, the worst thing that could happen was that she would be told to leave. Abbot Xar had been clear on that precise point the last time the night watchman had caught her coming back late.

The alley along which Victoria was walking emerged into an open square strewn with piles of old car tyres. Rancid smoke rose from a couple of the rubber towers up into an indifferent sky. Shanty Town's chaotic architecture pierced the night before her. It was dark enough here during the day. At night, often the only light sources were the bluish gas flames from hotplates, and occasional coils of LED lights outside of the bars lining the pavements.

Victoria jogged down the *Blind Passage*, the main street which divided Shanty Town in two. She slipped into an alley just before a gang of five men came out of a side street. The stench of cheap, synthetic spirits reached her before they staggered past. The men weren't talking, just moving unsteadily yet purposefully through the slum. A five-headed shark

looking for prey. Victoria waited until she could no longer hear their footsteps and continued on along the main street.

A little further along the ruins of the Olympic stadium emerged like a ship without lanterns. The stadium, along with half of Tirana, had been destroyed by the earthquake in 2067. This mastodon of iron and concrete was now Shanty Town's geographical centre, with the illegal gene laboratories and nanofactories concealed beneath the debris. Cold production halls where nameless slave workers died without ever having seen the bluish grey daylight of Tirana. The workers formed the core of the underground economy controlled by Caliban, Tirana's unopposed Mafioso.

Victoria stopped and looked in the direction of the lopsided apartment building she had lived in only a few months earlier with Aunt Iris. No lights on. A void in the night. If she hadn't known better, Victoria wouldn't have thought there was a building over there at all.

'Looking for some fun, my girl?' The hoarse voice was followed by the nauseatingly sweet stench of synthetic liquor. The cheapest type, a rum variant.

Victoria tipped her head back to look up at the man she had inadvertently let get close to her. An older guy. Huge; at least 6 foot 2. Broad shoulders, the beginnings of a beer belly and a scarred face. A retired *betejë* fighter or a bouncer weary of life? Perhaps a combination of the two.

'No, thanks.' Victoria took a small step back. Maintained eye contact. The man leered, revealing two rows of steel-plated front teeth. *Definitely a betejë fighter*, Victoria thought, backing up another step. The man followed, steadier on his feet than she had expected.

'Quit playing games. You want it. Need a real man in you. We'll do it here. In the alley behind you.' The man stuck his hand in his back pocket and pulled out a hip flask. Uncorked it and took a swig. 'What do you say, my girl?'

Victoria looked over her shoulder. She couldn't see where the alley led. Worst-case scenario: it was a dead end. She could see how that would end – it was no stretch of the imagination. She'd heard it described often enough: if she tried to run and he caught her, he'd beat the crap out of her and then rape her. And then? Perhaps leave her lying there. Or maybe he would close one of his huge fists around her throat. Squeeze until her larynx cracked like an egg. Victoria made up her mind.

'You'll pay, right?' She pushed her T-shirt down over her left shoulder. Ran her index finger over her bra strap.

'Depends how much I like the wares.' The man licked his front teeth. The metal gleamed, even in the faint light.

'At the very least give me a sip of your liquor.'

The man handed her the flask. 'Of course, my girl. Have as much as you'd like. There's more where that came from.' He scratched his shiny bald head. His nails made a rasping noise against his skin – like rough wood against sandpaper. 'We'd make a nice couple, you and I. What do you say? You can work for me. I'll protect you from the assholes.' Victoria weighed the flask in her hand. Let the man talk. It was perhaps half full. 'Bit flat-chested for my taste,' he continued. 'But lots of people like that. Makes you seem young. Inexperienced. How old are you, anyway?'

'Sixteen, almost seventeen.'

'Sixteen, almost seventeen,' the man repeated. 'With a bit of make-up on and different clothes people might think you were fourteen, maybe younger.'

'If you say so.' Victoria raised the flask to her mouth and drank. Felt the lukewarm liquor fill her mouth. It made her gums sting. The alcohol pricked at her tongue.

'That's my girl.' He reached out for the flask. Victoria handed it to him – and spat the liquor in his face.

The man bellowed and stepped back, rubbing his eyes frenetically. Victoria followed

up with a kick to his groin. A muffled ‘oof’ escaped from between his steel-plated jaws. His eyes rolled back into his skull and he collapsed.

‘Fucking asshole!’ The yell came from somewhere deep inside her, expelled by fear and rage. Victoria kicked him again, in the temple, slipped out of the alley and ran along the Blind Passage.

She didn’t stop until the oval shape of the pagoda hove into view above the treetops in the park. The rare green area was a few hundred metres south of Shanty Town. Victoria slipped through a hole in the fence and leaned against a tree trunk until she caught her breath. Her life among the transhumanists had made her careless. When she lived in Shanty Town she was always on the alert. Back then she would never have ended up in such a situation.

By some stroke of luck the night watchman still hadn’t noticed she was late. They – usually one of the older brothers – were on what was called “resting watch”, something which meant that if nothing out of the ordinary happened, they might sleep all night.

Victoria followed the inside of the line of trees around the building to the rear of the pagoda. Relieved, she saw that the ground-floor window into the reading rooms was still ajar. Victoria sprinted across the open area, lifted up the frame and climbed in. Then she quietly closed and bolted the window. She stopped in front of the door out into the hall. From here it was only a few metres to the stairs up to the bedrooms on the first floor. Victoria pressed her ear against the door and listened. Not a peep, just whirring from the ventilation system. She pressed the handle down.

The door opened. Victoria took off her shoes and walked barefoot across the cold marble. The night watchman’s room was next to the main entrance to the pagoda. The door was closed. Relieved, Victoria crept over to the stairs – and stopped.

A low, deep hum could be heard from the closest room. The children’s room. The sound wasn’t unpleasant – it made her gums tickle. Really more a vibration than anything audible.

Was the noise coming from a compressor or some other machine in the basement of the pagoda? No, Victoria was sure the source of the noise was inside the children’s room. She was actually responsible for looking after and feeding the children that very morning – in only five hours. She had to make sure nothing was wrong.

Victoria put a hand on the door handle. The metal thrummed against her skin, and a jolt of static electricity shot up her arm. The noise changed from a hum to a steady rumble. It made her bones tingle. Victoria had felt something similar a couple times before, in Shanty Town when the riot police sometimes came in and blocked off an area using an electromagnetic field. The night watchman should have been alerted – this wasn’t normal. Not at all. But before Victoria could push down on the handle, the decision was made for her. The handle moved down and the door swung open.

A dim nightlight made the white bedclothes in the children’s room shine. The children were sleeping. She could see their small heads on their pillows. But her attention didn’t stay on the sleeping children for long. It was drawn to what was happening in the air above the beds.

Victoria heard a sharp gasp, then realised it had come from her. Various objects were floating in a circle above the sleeping children: soft toys, building blocks, a dummy and a pair of mismatched shoes. The circle rotated slowly around the room. It reminded Victoria of the rings of Saturn; a silent spectacle.

‘What on Earth...’ the feeble question made the objects stop their slow spinning. They froze in place for a few seconds before gravity intervened and they fell to the floor.

They didn’t make a lot of noise when they hit the floor, but in the quiet of the night it was deafening. A couple of the smallest children woke up and started crying. Thomasz, a boy of four, saw Victoria in the doorway and called for her. The other children followed his lead.

Victoria tried to hush them, but it was no use. A door slammed open behind her. Then the light in the hall was switched on before the voice of the night watchman asked: 'Miss Karamatzov, what *are* you doing?'

CHAPTER THREE

The hangar was a large space under a vaulted ceiling. In the evergreen light from the "Exit" signs Marko glimpsed the outline of old planes; row upon row of German military aircraft: Junkers, Messerschmitts, Focke-Wulfs and Dorniers.

'Someone's rolled half the Luftwaffe in here,' I'Ree groaned. 'How are we supposed to find the only one that can actually fly?'

'I bet Olga knows what we should be looking for.' Marko moved between the rows,

running his hand over the cool aluminium fuselages. Something about these machines soothed him. Maybe it was their permanence, the fact that they weren't anything other than what they appeared to be. They were tools, like a hammer or a saw – objects intended to execute their user's will. Not like the Omega.

'What do you think this is?' I'Ree walked towards a rectangular display case about four by six metres. The case was positioned in the middle of the spacious hall. I'Ree pulled to cord hanging down from the light fitting over the table. One of the four fluorescent tubes came on and threw yellow light across a map of Europe. A topographical model made of plywood and papier-mâché and then laboriously painted – Europe in 1941. Europe during the Second World War.

The hangar and the airstrip were located in the centre of the map, and lines were drawn from this point in the form of black threads to various destinations. Former Yugoslavia, Sicily, Brest, Stalingrad, London and tens of others.

'Look.' I'Ree pointed at one of the threads, the only one coloured red. The thread thrummed, sending vibrations all the way up to Oslo.

'This airstrip must have been one of the Luftwaffe's bases during the war,' Marko suggested.

'But why is only the thread to Oslo red?'

'I don't know. I'm sure it doesn't mean anything,' Marko said, not really believing himself.

'Sure...' I'Ree repeated as she studied the blood-red thread connecting their planned departure and arrival points.

While they waited for Olga and 2038 to join them, they looked for the opening mechanism for the hangar door. I'Ree started over by the eastern short wall, while Marko took the western wall. The wall was covered in chalk boards in a somewhat sorry state. Patches of damp climbed from the floor up towards the ceiling. A couple of the boards halfway up the wall had fallen away, revealing the brick behind.

Marko found neither junction boxes nor cables. Then as he turned to continue his search along the longitudinal wall facing the runway, he had the sudden sensation of being watched. By someone just behind him. Marko heard them move – the sound of their trouser legs rubbing together.

The Omega awoke inside him. In a way Marko couldn't refer to as anything other than "cocksure", the avatar presented his choice of ammunition and shooting patterns – all in a fraction of a second.

If the sound was anything to go by, the person wasn't more than five metres away from him. So Marko chose the flamethrower. The avatar hummed in acknowledgement and the Omega's plastic flexible steel vibrated slightly to confirm the adhesive napalm was ready to use.

Marko spun around.

2038 put his shoulder against the door and gave it a shove. The rotting wood around the lock splintered. He entered the caretaker's annex with Olga behind him.

The small flat consisted of four small rooms that clearly hadn't been used for a while. The wallpaper hung in strips from the walls in the hall, and black mould covered the cheap pine panelling in the living room.

'They must have closed the museum just after I left,' Olga sighed.

'Yeah, looks like,' 2038 conceded. 'We're in trouble if the planes are just as neglected. The gaskets and filters crumble over time, regardless of whether they're used or

not.'

Olga nodded without saying anything. 2038 realised he could have left that last part out – of the two of them, Olga was the expert. Of course she knew what happened to a machine that wasn't used.

'But at least the key's where it should be.'

'The key?' 2038 asked.

'To the underground garage where the tanker's parked.' Olga took an oversized iron key down from a hook on the wall and weighed it in her hand. 'At least we used to park it down there when I worked here,' she added as an afterthought.

'Only one way to find out.' 2038 opened the door and waved her through. 'After you, madam.'

Olga jogged ahead of him towards a mound of earth that turned out to be an overgrown concrete wall. The mound was right next to the runway. On the other side of the barrier, a ramp led down to an aluminium door. 'This was probably a shelter for ground crew and pilots during the war, in case the runway was attacked while they were working,' Olga explained. 'When the museum opened it was converted into a makeshift garage.'

She shoved the key into the lock. The click from the lock cylinder mingled with the hoarse screeches of a raven somewhere above them. 2038 gripped the handle and opened the door. Several oval wall lights switched on inside.

A red tanker sat in the middle of what had once been a shelter. A veteran tanker from the same era as the planes in the hangar. The word *BENZ* was stamped onto the chromium-plated grill, followed by the registration number *LF25*.

'The tanker was part of the attraction, you see.' Olga opened the door on the driver's side and climbed in. 'The key's in the ignition, but there's no power. Can you check the battery?'

2038 lifted the bonnet and was pleasantly surprised. The engine was much newer than the body. The battery cables had been removed from the poles. 2038 attached the clamps and closed the bonnet. 'Try now.'

Olga flipped a switch. The diesel engine's preheater started humming as a yellow bulb on the dashboard switched on. After a few seconds the light went out. Olga flipped the switch back and turned the key in the ignition. The dinosaur of a tanker rumbled to life. Black smoke shot out from the double exhaust and gathered up by the ceiling.

'Thank the Lord for German technology,' 2038 exclaimed. He climbed up onto the footboard and was about to sit in the passenger seat when he noticed something in the wing mirror: a number of small, red points of light on the wall behind them. Lights that seemed familiar but which he couldn't quite place.

'What's that there?'

Olga looked in the mirror. 'I don't remember seeing that before.'

Olga switched off the engine and followed 2038 further back into the garage. The points of light were shining at them from a small screen and flashing as a timer counted down.

00:04:23.

00:04:22.

00:04:21.

When they were half a metre from the screen a text field appeared in the air in front of them.

'Please confirm your identity,' it said, followed by an open field where you could enter a code via the iSphere.

'A security sensor,' 2038 confirmed neutrally. 'Identical to the model Darkwell Corp. uses. That's why it's communicating with us. I expect a hidden sensor's already scanned our

retinas.'

'If that's the case the operators know who we are and exactly where we are,' Olga chimed in.

2038 stared at the screen. Caught a glimpse of himself. Saw something he recognised.

Something he didn't like.

Black uniform. Closed face.

00:03:59.