



F.X.HOLDEN



**I N D O
C H I N E**



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FX Holden

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Security Fact Book, Gideon Security Services, 2217

Whole Truth

Whole Truth is an international scientific research and aid organization which originated on Gideon and which now has branches on over 50 planets. It has a program which includes teaching meditation, yoga and carrying out aid projects on developing worlds, blending a desire to improve the universe, with a desire to improve the self. Through these activities, it hopes to bring about a new framework for social and evolutionary balance (Liberation Theology). The core tenet of Liberation Theology is that quantum science offers humankind the opportunity to achieve enlightenment by transcending the limits of the physical universe.

Adherents or 'monks' and 'nuns' progress through the ranks of Whole Truth initially through financial contributions and service, and at higher levels by working on projects to further the organization's pursuit of applied quantum science breakthroughs. These elite scientists are rewarded by access to the benefits of medical and scientific technologies developed by the organization.

Apart from its central theology, the Whole Truth monks' insistence on ancient religious rituals, their leader's association with many dubious benefactors, its single minded pursuit of advanced applied science and pursuit of expansion to all colonised worlds contributes to a growing concern among planetary governments toward it. One of the reasons interplanetary intelligence agencies keep the organisation under a continual watch is the perceived threat to State power offered by its heady mix of theology, political persuasion, and selective violence.

2218 Prelude

Peter Kohler's eyes are still closed tight against the prayers, the incense, the small soft questions of a child in the row behind him, the memories. Not his memories, but memories he has assumed. Memories forced on him like rocks in hessian bags sewn into his skin. Rocks hammered from the ground by her. He wasn't even born when the bomb exploded on Indochine. How did that atrocity ever become part of his story?

His mind swirls ... Gottland, Hanmei, Ban Mé, ... places that all mean something new to him now. Are they his memories, or hers? Her story, or his? If he asks herself these questions now, he'll break and he doesn't want that. The others at the funeral are already staring at him, every look a question he can't answer.

Indochine before the shit went down, that is where he wants time to stop. He closes his eyes and remembers waking disoriented in the unusual quiet of a hotel room in a big river town on Indochine. The bed beside him was empty but that was often the way with her. She would not be far. Propped on one elbow, he could see through the drifting curtains to the night outside. Heavy clouds scudded across the sky and he could smell rain coming, again.

A crack of lightning and the curtains billowed with down-draughts as water dropped in a gelatine curtain onto their balcony. She had been sitting outside, and there was sudden movement as she stood and moved back into the doorway. Perhaps she sensed his eyes on her because she turned. There was a smile in her eyes but no words and he wondered what had woken her. They turned away at the same time, him to sleep, her to resume her contemplation of the flowing lava of the slow fat Cantho River.

He wasn't sleeping though. *I am a river barge*, he was thinking. *I am carbon and silica and sucking my energy from the heat below as I push upstream against a river of molten rock as if I don't know that one day it will burn right through me.*

He wanted to vault the balcony and run through the night, feet bare and padding silently past the sleeping stallholders in the market, across the still slippery concrete of the boat landing where the diamonds were cleaned, past the silk merchant, the apothecary, the karaoke bar and up the black rock road alongside the river and away. He wanted to wake naked and alone in a blanket on a forest floor somewhere cool. He wanted to lie in her arms again and listen to the city wake. He wanted to hear her speak again of normal things like shopping and food and love.

Outside their window, a 40ft tall statue of a local dynastic leader pointed dramatically downriver, toward the coast, toward Hanmei. She came to bed and snaked an arm around his waist as he lay

waiting for the release of first light and he felt her breathing slow to a soft sigh. He waited, her hold on him loosening, knowing she was not yet settled, and after a few minutes he felt her shake once, twice and then lie still. Her arm tightened.

I dream I'm falling, she told him the next day. *That's why I shake*. In his own sleep, he dreamed of scatterguns and was jolted awake by the memory of a shot that never came.

But no matter how he tries to stay in his memories of Indochine, the events of 2178 invade his mind.

He can recite the time, place and date like a mantra - 12:38 a.m., January 7, 2178, Hanmei. The planetary capital of Indochine. The files are burned into his retina now. In a wide city, street water lies still in the gutters, reflecting neon lights from rainbow streaks of hydrocarbon. Small dots prick its surface as flies pick at the scum. The street is dark and quiet and empty of traffic. Empty of life too, but for four dark ghosts, caped and huddled silent outside the hotel. Was it really wet, or is this just his own invention? If it wasn't, it should have been, he decides.

Dark rain capes, dark peaked hats, black boots, black stun guns in belts at their waists. Badges and stripes on their shirt sleeves and looking back from this time to theirs he knows that one of these officers will die, others will be scarred for life. These last minutes are a lottery as they break from their huddle, pocket their inhalers and walk towards, across, or away from the killing ground. Inside the hotel politicians, statesmen and their minders sleep safely with their guilt, remorse or conviction, protected by their tech and this frail human shield.

From down the road comes a prehistoric sound, the roar of a labouring engine, the whine of electric motors, the scrape of metal on metal and flickering yellow lights to warn off traffic that isn't there at this hour. It's a break in the monotony for the police officers and they all watch as the autonomous garbage truck lumbers into the street. Indochine is a frontier world, a mish-mash of past, present and future cultures. Two city workers trot alongside the truck, darting ahead now and then to lift the rubbish bins from their green metal cages and hoist them into the back of the truck as it grinds along. The compacting gears in the rear of the truck whirl constantly, crushing inhaler packets, drink containers and food wrappers into a tightly compressed biobrick that will be taken to a suburb in the inner west and repurposed. The garbos taunt the police, thinking that in an hour they'll be at an early opener having breakfast and coffee while the police are still stamping their feet on the humid sidewalk. Say their names, he tells himself. Name the dead so that they never die. Two thousand people died in the attack, but he has memorised the names of three. The two city workers, Colin Williams, 26, and Tran Ng, 19 - they have one minute more to live. Their eyes linger on the female constable near the rubbish bin. She will die later in hospital.

The bomb waits in the bin outside the arcade entrance to the hotel. It is tiny, the size of a tennis ball, but fuelled by anti-matter. To Kohler, it matters not how it got there, or when, or why. What matters is that it was live, circuits open waiting to close, stored energy waiting only for the timed collapse of its containment field to make it bloom and kill. Kill two thousand people including Colin Williams, Tran Ng, and a week later, Constable First Class Mie Hué.

And reach out forty years later to change his life forever.

2218 Contact

"We can stop here," Kirsten yells above the sound of the engine and rushing wind, "up here under the trees."

"Good, I have to check something," Kohler calls back over his shoulder but moves the heavy quadbike down through its gears until it rumbles to halt just after a bridge. He wheels them onto the side road and stops the bike in the shade of a house. They climb from the saddle and bend and smile with the achievement of four incident free hours on roads strewn with driverless '50s era trucks, long-legged chickens and children playing ball.

"Bread and canned fish?" he suggests and she nods, digging the water from their packs. They prop on a rock by a canal and watch two children fish for guppies with a butterfly net. He hands her a can and a metal can opener.

She turns it around, feeling its unfamiliar form, "Doesn't it strike you as just a little annoying you can be squirted through an Einstein Rosen bridge from planet to planet using a machine powered by a cell that contains the power of a small sun, but when you arrive, you have to open tuna cans with a metal key like your great great grandfather did?"

"If you wanted all the mod cons, you wouldn't have come to Indochine, right?"

"Look out, we have company."

A gathering has formed. A small group of men around the old quad looking at the heavy reinforced pack carriers Kirsten had fitted in Hanmei, a group of children just standing and watching them eat. From the house behind them, a woman brings juice for them to drink. Coconut milk with ice. Or what passes for it here. She hands it to them and stares as they take it, embarrassed and grateful. He is called over to the bike and she plays a game of knuckles with one of the small boys.

"I think they are telling me something about the fuel lead," he calls to her and she stands.

"Maybe that's the smell I told you about."

"Maybe." He bends down with a barefoot farmer with quick fingers and a broken smile, as the man tries to mimic the replacement of a delicate part. The man yells to the boy she has been playing with and he listens briefly before he disappears across the bridge, running fast. Across the canal a woman hangs her washing on long poles and watches intently, giving a running commentary to a man sitting drunk on their front doorstep.

"Hey, be careful! Shit. Oh man." He reaches for his earbud, flipping down the 'eyeglass' - the tiny holographic projector that can throw images up in front of his right eye - using it to flick through quadbike schematics.

She turns again to see liquid hydrogen drip from a broken line between the farmer's fingers and fizz into the air just as the boy comes darting back across the bridge with wire, gum and tape. The farmer waves his hands calmly at them both and takes the tape and gum from the boy, bending back to the bike. The man has no earbud, not even a holo-visor to guide him.

"Relax!" she calls to him, "He'll fix it, you know that."

"We better hope so..."

He does. They give the farmer a dragon fruit, cheese, a Norrlander flag in thanks. He holds the flag and asks them to take a holo with the boy. His arm around his son, proud. He runs to a nearby cafe and returns with a pen, giving them an address they can send the holodisc to. A world still in transition between pen, ink and quantum computing. They pull up a map and get advice about the road ahead. Good, not good, fast, slow, dangerous?

He is always first on the bike. The engine started, staring into the middle distance while she finishes talking, saying thank you, shaking hands, lifting her pack onto the rack. Never stop the bike. Never get off unless you have to. He sometimes thinks it would be nice to just ride if he could, stopping only for fuel until he had ridden every road and track from Rach Gia to Lao Cai, and then he would pick a border and ride across that, doing the same from landmass to landmass until he had circled this world. A destination is a jail sentence.

"Let's go," he says.

"Where? What is your hurry?" she gestures around her, "What about all this?"

"Let's roll, we have a long ride ahead." She feigns stubborn-ness and he sighs, "You're the one who wants to be in Ban Mé in three weeks."

And as she holds him around the corners and dips, her face pressed into his back to escape the cloying dust, he remembers how her gregarious nature helped him spot her in Hanmei. She walked into the Tin Tin bar with a couple speaking Norrlander, ordered coffee and eggs, went outside again and came back with a man who he guessed was a local bicycle dealer and left them talking while she sat, tired, watching her coffee drip from the tin filter in her glass. She put her bud in her ear, threw up the eyeglass and made a couple of calls. The couple came back in and there were smiles and handshakes and she sat hunched over her eggs before they all stood and hefted their packs, heading towards Hoan Kyem Lake and perhaps a hotel.

He was still there, reading when she returned and sat behind him. He leaned back so that their chairs touched and he turned to her.

"Excuse me, are you a tour operator?"

She looked confused, frowned a little, shut her eyeglass down.

"Only I just arrived; maybe you can recommend a cheap hotel near here?"

She said nothing at first, but he saw a light in her eyes.

"Have I said something funny?"

"No, sorry. It's been a long day. I'm no tour operator, but I've stayed a few places around here. How much can you spend?" Her hair was blonde, eyes green-blue, her accent spoke of snow.

As they talked he picked different scents off her that reminded him of his home world, Gideon; coriander, sandalwood, dried grassy mud. She pulled up a travel guide via her bud, sent it to his glass and circled the good hotels. She pushed his pack closer to the security of his feet without thinking. Her eyes flicked from him to the street outside, to the others in the bar, but she always watched him intently while they were talking.

"Can I get you a coffee? Or a drink. To thank you I mean? You've been very helpful," he said.

"A drink would be great. Juice. Thanks."

He ordered and sat again. "I feel like an idiot. You seemed to be organising those people before, so I thought you might be a guide."

"Ah. I get it," she laughed. "No, they were just a little...lost. I met them at the train station, they were arguing with the clerk, trying to get tickets for a train that had already left. I felt sorry for the clerk. Turns out they had arrived on the last shot in and got ripped off by a minibus that dropped them way over on the other side of the Red River. They walked for four hours."

"So you just felt sorry and found them a hotel? And bicycles?"

"Well," she shrugged, "this is such a beautiful planet, I'd hate to see anyone leave it in a bad mood."

Her face was Norrlander too, with sharp cheekbones and a dimpled chin. She spoke English in slow practised tones and was careful with what she shared, the pendulum of the conversation never seeming to dwell too long in her quarter. But soon he was sure. After months of searching, he'd found her.

"You were at the train station? Are you leaving soon?"

"Well... I guess so. I haven't been to the Ban Mé delta and I've heard the lava flows are amazing. I bought an old quad but I discovered it isn't as easy to ride as I thought and it needs fixing all the time. So I need to sell it and get a train instead, or find someone who is part bike rider, part mechanic." There was a question in the comment, almost a challenge.

"How far is Ban Mé from here?"

"It's only 1800km, the round trip should take about two weeks."

"Sounds like a fantastic ride. I hope you find someone," he said.

She appraised him then. Her eyes moving from his clothes to his backpack, his Gideon flags still bright gold and green on the straps, then smiling while she looked behind his eyes. He felt

uncomfortable under the brief but intense interrogation, but before he could react, she picked up her things and stood. "It will be! I'd better go, thanks for the drink. Are you OK now?"

A slight touch on his hand. He nodded and said goodbye and she stepped from the bar into the harsh sunlight and disappeared.

Her judgement lay uncertainly upon him, whatever it was. Had he sounded too keen, or not keen enough? First contact with a target was always a challenge. Too little interest was as dangerous as too much.

As she walked away, he took her juice glass and dropped it into his backpack.

Around lunchtime the next day he was camped at a dirty sidewalk noodle stall, enjoying an animated discussion with half a dozen Indochine street workers as they ate their soup. It was a long time since he'd been on a world where flesh and bone were still used for manual labour. A little girl sat on his lap and played with the stylus in his pocket as he kept his eye on her hotel. She came out, turned his way but would have walked past if he hadn't waved, using the little girl's hand.

"Hello again," she said in her singsong voice, not warm, not cool, "Did you find somewhere to stay?"

"I'm at the Bi Bi," he replied, "You were right, it's small but it's good."

"OK, good, well..." She looked down the street. "I need to go and work out what to do with my bike."

"Hey, a favour for a favour. I know something about quads. Grew up on a farm. If you want, I can take a look at it, tell you what really needs fixing so you don't get ripped off."

She beamed, "That would be great! I have a couple of errands and was going there after that." She holds out her hand, "I'm Kirsten."

"Peter Kohler."

He stood up, the child still in his arms, content and relaxed as they spoke but when it became obvious he was leaving, the child's mother appeared from inside the kitchen and lifted the child from him. As they walked, she seemed happy to chat and he enjoyed her easy, composed aura. She had a glow, whether from sunshine and good health, meds or self-confidence, that made her easy to be with. They took a break and stopped at a market and bought fruit, eating it by the lake in the afternoon sun as they watched old bent-double men with their canes making their daily round of the water. He slept on a bench as she coded some discs to family at home and he stood with her in the grand old central post office as she paid to get them shot to Norrland. He imagined a day when data could flow as easily across the Einstein Rosen bridges as solid matter but doubted he would live to see it.

As they approached the bike dealer on the street behind the main police barracks they came upon a Whole Truth chapel, the evening service just finishing. They stood and watched as the congregation filed out into the square in front of the church, dominated by a large statue of The Father, garlanded with flowers. As he watched, the worshippers, perhaps 100 of them, formed a quiet circle around the statue and sang a hymn in strong lyrical voices. For a moment the constant background hum of the city seemed stilled, and the song eased into the summer air of Indochine as naturally as it would have on the Whole Truth homeworld of Gideon. When they finished singing the congregation made the Sign of Truth and broke into small groups, moving quietly away.

She had not stopped to listen but waited patiently for him further up the street.

“That was quite beautiful,” he said, catching her up.

“Hmm. They have a bird here that evolved from the falcon,” she replied, smiling to herself. “It is a mimic and sings the most beautiful songs.” She started walking again. “It sings to attract its prey.”

At the bike dealer, she showed him her quadbike. The fuel cell needed a new casing, which would not be cheap, but he showed her it could be coated with silicone as a temporary solution. Drive shaft, brakes and hubs were all fine and the chassis had only a minor crack in one of the stems.

“You get that cell professionally coated, it should hold. Take a can of silicone with you. If it starts leaking again along the way, just use the spray. The rest of the bike is in pretty good shape,” he told her.

She pulled on her lip, “I still need to find someone who can drive it. I tried but the traffic freaks me out and there’s no autonomous mode. But, hey, you...”

“Can drive a quad, yeah.”

“And you haven’t been to Ban Mé, right? So...”

“Are you inviting me?” he asked.

“Kind of slow on the uptake aren’t you?” she replied.

The fan above his bed moves lazily through the air, barely troubling it. It is 4 a.m. and he is awake. He has emerged from the dream again, the dream that is a memory, the confused images of sleep forcing him to remember with annoying clarity the events of a few months ago. Events that vaulted him from Norrland to Indochine.

His first inquiries had led him to the living quarters of a Whole Truth temple, or Gurdwara, outside Gottland on Norrland. The heat of Indochine and the way the air and the smells of the

street stuck to the skin were polar opposites of the crisp blue-skied cold of Norrland. If he had to choose, he'd probably choose an ice world over volcanic. If nothing else, ice kills you slower.

He was still smiling at the flight from Uppsala to Gottland, the crowd of family and friends in thermal jackets who greeted the people getting off the plane, the huge mural of a suntanned skier splashed across one wall of the airport. He sat next to an artist whose parents were Uppsalans, going back home for her holidays. *Pickled food and rednecks* she had said to him, shaking her head as the plane circled to land, *pickles and rednecks*. He took a hire car straight from the airport to the Gurdwara, a thirty-minute drive through white roads and grey hillsides flourishing with green and yellow lichens like the rocks were afflicted by a virulent fungus. The living quarters he was looking for were on a block behind the Gurdwara on a private road, and as his car pulled into the road he saw in his mirror of a group of women carrying laundry step into the road behind him, their talk animated. They screwed up their eyes as though trying to remember every detail of his car.

The car pulled itself to a halt in a cloud of snow powder at a series of prefabbed houses crackling in the wet sun as a sudden boost in temperature cracked the ice on their skins. Thermal inverters poked out of two or three windows of every house and thumped with a heavy rhythm, pumping cold air out at face height, adding to his discomfort as he checked house numbers. He saw a hand lift a curtain at the bungalow to his right, and then drop it again.

At number 32 he knocked. A small, slightly built Truther in a sari opened the door a few centimetres, her eyes flicking over him, and then into the road beyond. There was a heavy chain across the door and she did nothing to lift it aside.

"Amar? I'm Kohler. We spoke on comms..." he said, but she was still looking past him.

"I told you not to park outside," she said, flatly.

"I know, sorry. You want me to move it?"

She looked at him again, he saw her hand shaking as she held the door, "It's too late."

He tapped his earbud, called up his business card holo, and flipped it over to her. The fingers of her right hand were trembling slightly as she flicked up her own eyeglass and looked at it but he could tell she was not really reading. Then she took her hand away, lowered her glass and lifted the chain from across the door.

He stepped into the cool dry air inside and saw straight away that there was another person in the room. A dark-haired woman, in her mid-20s and also in a sari, sat with her legs crossed on a chair in the loungeroom. She drew heavily on the inhaler she was holding and then put it down but did not get up.

"Uh, this is Sue. She's a lawyer," Amar said, her hand scratching in her hair. She pointed to a kitchen chair which had been placed beside the sofa and indicated for Kohler to sit.

"Legal adviser actually," the woman said. "More of a community worker. I'm engaged by the Whole Truth community here."

"OK, look, I'm not police, I'm a contractor. I'm just..." Kohler said, taking the surroundings in as he settled in the chair. A kitchen door to their left was open and soft sunlight streamed into the room, giving the weak heaters some help. Behind him a green door, half closed, led off to another room, a bedroom he guessed, while another closed door probably led to the bathroom. Both women looked at him expectantly, a little nervous, impatient. Usually, he would spend some time easing into the conversation, but this was obviously not going to be one of those times.

"Looking for someone," the older woman said. "We got that much."

He pulled up a photograph on his glass, flipped it to them. "Kirsten Nygaard. Norrlander, from Uppsala. Arrived here about a year ago," he explained. "Works in finance. Disappeared two weeks ago. I was told she might have returned to her parents in Uppsala, but she isn't there."

"We know nothing about her," Amar said tersely, her jaw quivering just a little. Looking at the lawyer for support.

"Well, maybe a little," Kohler said. "She lived in this house, right?" He used his glass to bring up a recorder and initiated it verbally so they wouldn't think he was trying to hide anything. Then hesitated, sensing somewhere behind him a movement. But it felt like nothing, so he ignored it. Turned his attention back to the women. "Whole Truth is pretty big here, isn't it?" he asked. "I'm from Gideon, so I'm not really caught up yet. How many Truthers on Norrland?"

"About a million converts. Whole Truth is 'big' everywhere," she said predictably.

"And Kirsten Nygaard was what, a fundraiser?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'fundraiser'. She is ... or was, training to be a *vaishya*. A banker."

He nods, "And she had a boyfriend here, right? In the militia?"

Her eyes flick to her companion and back, "He is a *kshatriya*. What does he have to do with this?"

"*Kshatriya*, that's warrior, right?"

"Peace keeper."

"But militia?"

"We have many enemies," she said. "Even on Norrland."

He took out his earbud to show he had stopped recording, tapped it on his knee, "I'd like to have a chat with him. I'm guessing it wouldn't be a good idea to make an enemy out of a Whole Truth '*kshatriya*'..."

Amar looked past him, over his shoulder, "No, it would not."

There was a quiet footfall behind him. He turned but something hard and cold was jammed into the side of his jaw and a male voice growled, "Just you stay very still, friend."

The lawyer, Sue, looked first at Amar and then at Kohler and whoever was behind him, "There's no need for that Ben! Shit." She looked at Amar again, "You never said he had a gun!"

Kohler's legs were weak. He could feel the gun barrel, two barrels by the width of it, against his neck. He wanted to stand, but a long wet stain had darkened his thigh. He couldn't find his voice. He closed his eyes, steadied himself, then looked at the lawyer, said in a voice louder and calmer than he felt, "I don't have a gun. I'm not armed. I have a militia commission in my shirt pocket, check it!" He bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

She put a hand up to the man behind him, "Cool down Ben and back up. I'm going to look in his pocket, OK?" She stepped up to him, and even now, remembering, Kohler can smell the wave of sandalwood oil and cigarettes washing toward him. Her breath was fast and light, close against his face as she reached into his shirt pocket, her eyes on the man behind him. She found his wallet and pulled it out.

"The green card," Kohler said, head bent forward by the pressure of the gun barrels on the base of his skull.

"Is it legit?" Amar barked.

"Shut up!" the lawyer yelled. "I'm looking." She lifted the card to the light and checked the holo.

"Well?" Amar asked, trying to lean over her shoulder and look.

"I'm looking alright?!" she said and looked up at Kohler. He felt like a dog at the end of a trapper's rope and hung his head, but kept his eyes locked on hers. "Yeah. It's legit," she said at last.

"If you find her," the voice behind him grunted and the gun jerks against the base of his skull. "You tell me first, alright?"

"Put the gun down you idiot," the older woman said, "You think you're making things any better?"

The weight lifted from Kohler's neck and he turned around to see a huge bearded Truther, glaring at him from under a blue turban, an evil looking scattergun only half lowered by his side.

Amar stood, looking down at Kohler, "The fact you are here, they must know she's gone offworld or the militia internals would have come themselves." She looks at the card the other woman is holding. "But you don't know where do you? Could be any of 50 worlds."

"I have it narrowed to five," Kohler told her. "But I'm hoping you can save me some time."

Sue sighs, "It was our tithe money she disappeared with. We want it back too."

Kohler turned around, looked hard at the man called Ben, "I want him out of here. But the gun stays." The man hesitated, but Amar looked up from her hands and said wearily, "Go Ben. It's OK." He ostentatiously powered the gun down and pulled the energy cells, leant it against the wall and tossed the cells in his hand as he left. The message in his parting glance was clear.

"Let me guess, he's the boyfriend, right?" Kohler went to stand, then sat again. "Find me a towel," he said to Amar. "And tea. Make us all a bloody cup of tea."

In his bed in Indochine he falls asleep again, the ghost of the scattergun against his neck. *Indochine*. It made sense she ran here. It was the only one of 53 settled worlds where Whole Truth's self-styled 'Peace Militia' was outlawed. Coming here guaranteed it would be almost impossible for the Norrland militia to send their people after her, and it was pretty sure any local militia cells would have other priorities than a runaway from Norrland.

When she'd asked him to join her trip to Ban Mé he'd said he'd look at his Bridge booking, his funds, talk to some others he was planning to meet up with and get back to her. But he'd played hard enough to get. He didn't want to overdo it. He'd called her the same night and they met up to have dinner and plan the trip. The Ban Mé Delta had the largest volume of free flowing lava on the planet, channelled into high banked earthwork canals and mined for the diamond-like chrysalis pods of the indigenous 'fish' that live in the molten rock. They agreed to head for the capital, try to catch a ride on a lava boat and see how far up into the Delta they could get before heading back to the capital again.

As they were climbing back onto their hired bicycles, she had put a hand on his arm. "Just one thing we need to be clear on. I'm not looking for a love affair," she had said. They were standing under the Ngo Mon Gate, as though entrance to the old city was a border in their new relationship and she needed to sort out protocols before they stepped across it.

His hand was deep in his pack as he sought out his water bottle to soak the handkerchief around his neck. He poured the cool water through his hair. "Well, I guess it makes life easier," he said with a wry smile, "to know what you *don't* want."

Sometimes he wishes there was a team of crack ex-military operatives he could just call. They'd grab her, get her to an ER Bridge and shoot her home. She'd be in Uppsala by tomorrow evening explaining herself to the militia. But there's a reason people commission him and not a team of mercenaries. Because porting a combat team across the universe is a waste of resources if one man can do the job. Because it's ten times less risky and attracts less publicity if people can be persuaded to do things of their own free will.

But he can already see patience is going to be his biggest challenge. Each time she takes a step toward him, she throws up a new wall.

Now he stands on a lava bank in a town called Huwai in north-central Ban Mé state, watching gen-modded cattle walk the temperate zone like beachcombers drifting for shells. Honey brown, their hips sticking out under the leather like poles under a tent, swaying as they make their way from here to there, perhaps from field to milking yard, the riverbank the shortest route. She looks around at the locals for someone who might be shepherding them, but no-one else is paying any attention. Perhaps they set their watches by the daily passage of the cows beside the lava flow. He can see how a true traveller could lose themselves here.

As he has lost her. He woke on the roof of the Faifo Hotel to the sting of a mosquito and because of the shuffling noise coming from her bunk. As he lay on his own bunk only semi-aware, she packed something into her day-pack and knelt beside him.

"Hello," he said. "Going somewhere?"

"I was going to leave you a note..."

"But we don't have to get up yet," he said.

"No, you don't. I'll see you." She brushed aside the hair covering his forehead, a gesture he took as an intimacy, then stood and left. It seems he was wrong.

He fell asleep again and in his dream he saw a huge blue sky and sand as red as he imagines Mars to be. The horizon makes an unbroken circle around him. He is digging a hole in the sand and telling her to stay away, but she climbs a tree so that she can see what he is doing. Inside the hole is blue like the sky and he sees her falling through.

When he wakes after another three hours she is gone and so is the bike she says she can't ride. There is no note.

He is not really looking for her, knowing that three hours on the bike could have got her to the Capital, deeper into the Delta or even inland to the highlands. He must have scared her away somehow and he feels a door closing, but what is his next step? Track her down and try again? She'd either get suspicious or write him off as a stalker. He remembers again the look she gave him in the bar in Hanmei - thinking now that it meant not "Can I travel with this guy," but rather, "Can I dump this guy if I have to?"

He sits on a low ridge of dunes looking over the flow. A boy walks toward him with cold drinks to hawk, and he takes a can from his ice bucket, handing over a few small coins, and then rolling the can up and down his thighs and arms to cool them. He is despondent, but not distressed. It's not the advance on his commission – even with the cost of the Bridge shot he can afford to pay it

back. It's the thought she saw through him so quickly and he hadn't even started trying to nudge her toward home.

He walks back into town from the riverbank and the monkey outside the Pagoda in Tran Phu St screams at him as he passes and he looks casually inside. It is cool and calm beneath the trees in the courtyard and he longs to sit but is thirsty again. He has one lead. She was an easy conversationalist and had befriended an old white-haired man called Thuc at a cafe further down the street on the day they arrived. Thuc greets him now as a lifelong friend and he takes a table in the sun, squints at a kitten lying dead beside the road.

The old man sits beside him and gestures to his daughter to bring tea. "Your beautiful friend has gone..." he says.

He nods, half smiling, cutting him short, "I know. Do you know where she was headed?"

"Yes. But I promised her if I saw you I would keep you busy," he says with a wink. "Give you Thuc's tour of Huwai – things the tourist never sees."

"Thank you Thuc," Kohler sighs and the old man pours the tea into thimble sized ceramic cups and stares out into the street with him.

"You can meet her here afterwards," the old man says.

"Sorry?"

"I mean, after our walk. You can wait here. Eat something."

He frowns and asks, "She's still here?"

"Of course, with my son, the policeman. They drove to the forest and then to his house. But we meet, here, after."

He is too impatient to follow her agenda. "I have an idea," Kohler says. "How about we take the special Thuc tour of Huwai and then we surprise her at your son's place?"

Thuc takes him to a bicycle factory, a robot assembly line fed parts by sweating human labourers. Then a gallery, to watch a woman with long elegant fingers paint designs for saris. They eat at a café made of reinforced concrete suspended precariously over a gorge of flowing lava. Beside the food stalls in a market selling rice paper parcels of bamboo shoots and cultured meat, they approach the seamstress shop Duc has described to him. The bottom floor is open to the market and a young girl sits at a thermal seamer with a bolt of pink silk in her lap and it buzzes through her hands. She does not even look up as Thuc and Kohler take the ladder at the back of the shop up to the family's living space. A big open room with cane furniture leads onto a large balcony over the market, but he hears her voice on the roof and climbs another ladder.

Kirsten sits holding rice wine in a small tin cup amid a forest of bonsai trees watching as a young black haired policeman in uniform, squatting on his haunches, snips a single leaf from a tiny, gnarled tree. He looks up and smiles at Kohler then goes back to his trimming.

"Hi! Amazing aren't they?" she says. "He cheats though - he finds the trees up in the cold lava fields where they bonsai naturally because there are only tiny pockets of soil. Then he transplants them here. Sells them in Hanmei for big bucks." She looks at him with a smile, "How was the tour?"

"Why are you here Peter Kohler?" she asks. They are lying on separate recliners on the roof of their hotel. Above them, a cloudy and brooding summer night sky is threatening to soak them, but the release never comes. It just builds.

"Here on Indochine or travelling across Ban Mé with you?"

"Start with Indochine." She sounds curious, not suspicious.

"The same reason as anyone, I guess. Tropical rainforests, rivers of lava, locally evolved wildlife...it's a wild place."

"A Bridge shot from Gideon to Indochine isn't cheap."

"Not much more expensive than from Norrland."

"Still. I'm spending the inheritance I got when my grandparents died. You don't strike me as a spoiled rich kid."

"Well, I have a pretty nice business back on Gideon."

"Food design."

"Yeah. Bots can make your food, but AI sucks at creating new recipes."

"We've been on the road for days, you haven't cooked us anything," she complains.

"I'm on holiday. Besides, how am I supposed to get inspired by my own cooking?"

They each lie under their own mosquito nets. Mosquitos buzz confused and hungry against the mesh of the net and he can feel the heat of her body through the gauze. She's close, and comfortable being close.

"What do your parents do?" he asks, though he already knows. Not only does he know they are former Truthers but judging by their images he is willing to bet they were *sadvipra*. One of the seductions that lures people to Whole Truth is its monopoly of advanced BAE technology, Biometrically-engineered Allotopic Expression. Only senior converts, the *sadvipra*, have full access to the expensive life-prolonging treatments. If her parents were long-term Truthers, they were probably granted several courses of BAE, with even one course able to boost your life expectancy

by a decade. Converts were theoretically free to leave the sect but BAE wasn't cheap and recidivists were labelled outcasts and then pursued through courts to recover the cost of the anti-aging therapy, a process which could be ruinous since the Whole Truth coffers ran deep thanks to the generous donations of a coalition-wide congregation desperate to win *vipra* status. There were also rumours that where the courts had failed, the Whole Truth militia's assassins despatched a different form of debt collection.

"Nothing dramatic," she dissembles. "My mother was a scientist, my father a lawyer. They are retired now." She rolls onto to her side toward him and though he cannot see into her eyes through the two layers of netting, he can see her close her eyelids slowly and then open them again. "They lived all their lives on Norrland and by the time they were free to travel it was too late, they couldn't pass the medical. It made me realise I'd never been offworld in my life. So I decided I'd come here. It was the cheapest shot to the furthest place I could go."

"That's sad for them, but lucky for me," he says. He reaches under the nets, takes her hand and holds it a moment. She doesn't pull it away, but after a second he slips her free and rolls onto his back. "Goodnight."

He has always believed that you never really know a person until you travel with them, living in each other's skin and sweat for a few weeks, and he is learning a lot about Kirsten Nygaard. His more direct approaches, the blunt personal questions he usually gets some response with, seem to slide right past her. He has to invest time with her to earn small rewards, small insights that more crude attempts at intimacy would not bring forth.

The thermal glass-walled hotel moored on the lava flow blasts red and yellow light along Tan Duc Thang street as they cross, and he steps around a small boy at the kerb, naked in a bucket of soapy water, grinning at him through the bubbles. They are wandering without purpose, full of good food and comfortable with Huwei in all its insanity. A bicycle rider veers onto the kerb straight for her, and he grabs her hand to pull her out of the way. She doesn't let go. A short way further along the street she pulls him to a stop in a doorway.

"I lied to you," she says. "I might not be *totally* against a love affair."

He stops walking, steps back still holding her hand, and looks at her, "Let me guess. You've got a boyfriend somewhere."

She hesitates. "No. I don't really do attachment."

"I do," he says. "And I'm pretty good at it."

She laughs, “Wrong answer. You’re supposed to say, ‘me either, so let’s just keep this casual’. Now I’m starting to worry you’ll morph into some kind of creepy leech I can’t get rid of.”

“I don’t do casual,” he says. “I only do full-on wild passionate attachment that either takes hold, or burns out, and nothing in between.”

“Burned out a lot of attachments have you?” she asks.

“A few. But I’m still on talking terms with most.”

She pulls him in closer and kisses him, “Just talking terms I hope.”

There is a shout from across a small dusty square. A fight breaks out among a group of men who’d been standing around idly smoking under streetlights in front of a large red tin shed.

“Maybe we should keep moving,” he says.

“Or maybe we should see what the fuss is about,” she counters, pulling him across the square toward the ruckus. Most of the men have disappeared into the dark doorway leading into the shed and she steers him toward it. There is more shouting inside, the smell of straw and faeces, animal noises. One of the men still standing outside gestures to her, *go in, go in*. His friend laughs.

He is curious but nervous as he steps through the dark square of missing tin that is the door, and the smell and heat inside push against him like a dry, hot towel. There is a glut of smells and he has trouble picking anyone out, but as his eyes adjust to the darkness, he has the feeling he has walked into a circus tent. He picks out a sawdust smell, and more animal shit, sees the shape of people shuffling up and down a single corridor, puts his hand against a wall which seems made of steel mesh. Kirsten leans in front of him and gently lifts his hand off the wire again and looking down at it now, his eyes adjusted at last to the gloom, he sees it fronts a small dirty cage of proto-primates. They huddle on a crudely made wooden tree at the back of the cage, babies and mothers shivering in each other’s arms, singles picking fleas from each other and glancing fearfully at the wire. In the cage opposite, on the other side of the corridor in which they stand, two magnificent birds of paradise squat on a sawdust floor, seemingly asleep.

She takes Kohler's hand and pulls him down the corridor. They push past a throng of people haggling for animals, sellers grabbing their shirts, pointing out to them the sad and sloe-eyed things in cages and bottles and dishes that they have on offer. The full spectrum of both living and preserved DNA of an Asian rainforest seems bound and tagged for sale in here. She even spies a living tree sloth, hanging wide-eyed and watchful on a tin rainwater pipe. Snakes and Komodo dragons, their jaws tied with the snaplocks used on recycling bags, are thrust into their faces as they walk. One hawker hangs a python around her neck and laughs hugely at her discomfort as she shrugs herself free and thrusts it back to him. But there are dogs and kittens here too, not the mongrels of the streets, but purebred labradors and persians and she watches as a Vietnamese

businessman and his wife bargain for a small, terrified pup. It takes just a few minutes to walk the length of the shed, and in that time she sees more animals that she has ever seen outside a zoo, in a space that would struggle to house a passenger bus.

Kohler walks quickly ahead of her until he is outside again and standing next to a tree. He is breathing heavily after holding his breath for as long as he could while they were inside.

"Can you imagine what the price tag would be for that sloth?" she asks. "Every earth animal there would have to have been shot through a Bridge, even if it had been bred offworld."

"They might be locally bred," he offers.

"Those were endangered species. They'd have labs for the common ones. Cloning programmes. Not live animals in cages – it's primitive. Brutal."

"You're right. They must have some factory sized clone labs here, the variety of birds and animals we've seen. At the Bi Bi there were even rhesus macaques in a cage in the courtyard of the hotel. About five of them," he says.

She leans into him and looks out past a fallen fence to the slow flowing river as he talks, shadows on her face flickering in the red glow.

"The staff used to torment them, poking sticks into the cage just to make them scream. They would make them so angry they would fight with each other. I guess there was nothing else for them to do with their anger.

"This little kid, a tourist, snuck out and opened the door of the cage at night and the monkeys were running around the courtyard, screaming and yelling and going through recycling bins, throwing shit at each other. Woke everyone up.

"The staff came out and tried to catch them but they ran up a big lotus tree in the middle of the courtyard and hid up the top. It was too high to reach and too light to climb, so the staff just gave up and went back to bed, and all night we had monkeys running wild in the courtyard.

"I got up early to walk along the river – before I saw you in the street that time. It was just light enough to see. The courtyard was quiet and there was no movement so I thought the monkeys had run off, but as I went past their cage, I saw four of the five monkeys huddled in the corner of the cage, sleeping. The door of the cage was still wide open. As I looked at them, one of them opened his eyes and made a little hissing sound at me. But when I didn't do anything to him, he just went back to sleep."

She pulls his arms around her, "That's so sad," she says, "But they had nowhere else to go, did they?"

"No, maybe not," He holds her tight and leans back against the tree, taking her with him. "I guess we all have things we want to leave behind, but we can't let go of them."

She looks up into his unfocused eyes, "You sound like you relate to them."

"Don't you?" he asks.

"No," she replies. "I'm the fifth monkey."

In Sa Dec they mistake a wedding for a restaurant and ask to see the menu. In the boiling hot sun of a town called Long Xuyen, a group of addicts bar them from the cool refuge of a Whole Truth temple until a monk, bald and brown, steps into the fray and guides them into the peace and safety of the sanctuary. In Mytho she spends an evening speaking Norrlander with a quantum engineer who has lived eight years on Indochine.

Chao Doc is their last stop before the provincial capital, Ban Mé city. It is famous for a forest covered volcano called Sam Mountain, ringed by a dozen Whole Truth temples reachable only by foot. They park the quad in the shade of a bellflower tree and a young boy in a saffron robe, his head still pale from shaving, comes from behind a rock and stands looking at her. Kirsten smiles and looks past him to a track leading up the mountain, then takes a step but finds him standing in front of her again, blocking their way. She bows to him and makes the Sign of Truth.

He bows back then takes her finger in his small brown hand and leads her up the path, Kohler trailing, on a steep climb around trees and behind rocks, pausing to help her with his skinny arms over the bigger steps. After 20 minutes they come to an unremarkable pagoda, perched against the side of the mountain's crest, and the boy leads her inside. Windows in three walls look out over a vista of rivers and rice fields for a hundred kilometres in each direction. He can see quads and pilotless trucks racing or crawling along the long straight roads below, but no sound reaches them.

"How did you know to do that?" he asks. "The thing with the sign?"

"My parents were Truthers," she says and shrugs. "It just comes automatically." It's the first sliver of honesty she's given him.

The boy shows her a statue of The Father crouched behind glass in the centre of the prayer room, expecting her to remark, and when she does, receives it with a nod as though he understands. He takes her hand again and leads her through a door in the back, to a warm yellow room lit with sunlight in which two nuns sleep soundly on cane beds. One lifts an eyelid to regard her when they enter, but closes it straight away and rolls over sleepily, waving off a fly. They go through into the kitchen, where a woman is laying out rice paper circles for drying on a bamboo

frame. She smiles and mimics the making of spring rolls, rubbing her stomach and laughing, pointing at her toothless mouth.

Then the boy leads them outside again, through a garden at the back of the temple and they climb another ten minutes to a spot near the peak. A wide flat rock has been worn smooth by the backsides and feet of a thousand monks and travellers over the years and the boy sits with them in the sunlight and says nothing. From here the flatness of the land around is even more evident and Kohler feels himself to be at the hub of a huge wheel, the roads and canals of the lava Delta radiating out like spokes from Sam Mountain, ten million people farming energy, sleeping and cooking under his gaze.

She crosses her legs with her feet sitting on her thighs, rests her wrists upward on her knees and tilts her face to the sun. She closes her eyes and sits perfectly still, breathing slowly. He studies her face in the bright light as though for the first time. It is perfectly smooth, almost flawless. Too perfect? Vitamin D receptors bind specifically to the gene sequences used in Whole Truth BAE treatments. In Gottland they said she was in training to be a *vaishya*, but only intellectuals or militia cell leaders qualified for BAE. After a short time, he is hot and restless but she shows no sign of moving so he and the boy go back into the kitchen.

They share some water and bread. In two hours the boy says only one thing. From a window he points to a spot about 20km away where the spiderweb of roads and lava canals comes to a sudden halt and green forest stretches off over the horizon, marking the border between Hanmei and Ban Mé provinces.

"Hanmei," he says, and points to his head, "Bam." Then he resumes his contemplation.

Crossing borders seems so easy, he reflects. One moment you are here, the next you could be there. But if you are a Truther, between here and there, an entire world can change. Safety becomes danger. The Peace Militia are banned on Indochine, the religious movement is barely tolerated. In Ban Mé, here on Sam Mountain this boy can live in peace, in Hanmei he could be dragged into an alleyway and beaten. Which side of the line is right, and which wrong?

When they ride back into town and climb off the bike, she looks tall, calm, rested. She showers and the room smells of chamomile soap. A candle burns on the floor next to some flowers she collected. He lies on the bed and she walks into the room as she towels herself.

She lies down beside him, running her fingers through his hair. "Get dressed. Let me show you something," she says.

Behind their guest house is a field, beyond it, rainforest. They make love on a bed of green shining leaves. As she straddles him, he opens his eyes to see a dazzling orange and blue Kingfisher dive overhead.

“I promised my parents once that if I ever got to Ban Mé, I would look up an old friend of theirs. It was just one of those things you say, I never thought I would.”

“Sure,” he says. “It would be nice to meet a local.”

Her eyes flick across her glass as she calculates dates, distances, money, transport. Her sun-brown arm slides over his shoulder and she leans her head on it, “No, you don’t need to. Stay here another couple of days, I’ll get a lift in, look him up and do the whole catch-up thing. It’ll just be a lot of ‘I remember when’ blah blah blah...”

"You sure?" he says. “It would be nice to meet someone from your mysterious Uppsala past.”

“Soooo mysterious,” she says. “I was born there, went to school there, studied college there and now I’m here. Big mystery.”

"OK, I’ll kill time here. Work on my meditation up on Sam Mountain.”

She rolls onto her stomach, turns off her glass and looks at him with her head cocked, “You’re joking, but maybe it wouldn’t hurt.”

“You’re suggesting I join Whole Truth?”

“No, I’m suggesting simple meditation. I grew up around Truthers, you’d never get past Level 1.”

He takes a chance, “Sounds like a dare. How far did *you* get?”

She doesn’t even blink, “Junior mentorship. My parents pushed me. Then they quit and pulled me out too.”

“And this old friend of your family, he’s a Truther too?”

“He was. But he got out not long after them, years and years ago.”

“Getting out isn’t that simple is it?” he asks.

“Depends on your status,” she says, twirling her earbud in her fingers. “If you’re a *shudra* or worker, or say a *vaiśhya*, a business person, you’re putting resources in, not taking them out, so you owe them nothing. You can keep it at that level as long as you want, but if you want to convert to *vipra* – an intellectual – that takes training and education in Liberation Theology, and you start building up real debt. My parents were in nearly twenty years and converted all the way to *sadvipra*; they got quite a few courses of BAE therapy, so when they quit they had to find serious money to

clear their debt or the gurdwara lawyers would have come after them. But they paid, and there were no problems.”

“What if you can’t pay?” he asks.

“Everyone pays,” she says simply. “One way or another.”

Kohler puts his stylus behind his ear and bends to the keyboard in front of him. The cavernous hall of Chao Doc’s hundred-year-old post office is a connected hub now, but if he closes his hands over his ears, he can look at the walls around him and fall back through the centuries. It is a typical perimeter world mishmash of old and new tech. Keyboards for connecting to people’s buds are tied to desks by thin metal cables so they can’t be stolen. In the centre of the room old fashioned writing tables stretch in three long rows, each nearly fifty feet, catering to a public that doesn’t like to trust their secrets to the ether and will only commit them to paper.

At the bench opposite him sits a reed-thin gentleman with a white goatee and a beret. He and Kohler have spoken a little. In front of the man, protected between stiff plastic, sheets of quality paper, gossamer thin, made from rice flour and cotton and used for intercontinental mail. Under that, thicker stuff, hardier, for local letters where the weight doesn't matter so much. For this, he uses a mix of scrap paper collected by his grandchildren, bleach, a little rice flour to bind it and the more coarse shreds of cloth not hardy enough to stand rough treatment. Each sheet he presses in a frame between two bricks, and when it dries, he wets it and presses it again.

Sitting over the paper are his pens, only two, both with gold plated nibs. Inks blue and red. And at his elbow, several dictionaries, covers well worn. Finally, there are his proforma, an untidy and incomplete pile of assorted blue, pink and green government forms, shoddily printed on shoddily made paper. License applications, identity papers, requests for connection of electricity and water, birth, death and wedding notifications. Kohler notices that he seems to have a sliding scale for payment, with some customers paying him nothing at all.

The scribe is busy writing a birthday card for an older woman who waits patiently beside him on the soft-wood bench. Kohler overhears that it will cost her 1 coin.

The woman pays and leaves with her card, and the old man sighs. He sees Kohler watching.

“Not so much business as there used to be,” the man shrugs, looking around. “Too many shot discs, not enough love letters.”

“I agree,” Kohler says, watching the old woman walk away, “Why does she send a paper card for a birthday?”

“It is for her boyfriend. But he is married, so it needs to be a secret.”

"Ha. It's nice to see infidelity knows no age."

"Yes ... tell me young man, do you think it is wrong to lie for love?"

"Perhaps, but then it's a lie in a good cause, right?"

"Yes, but whose cause? And still, it is a lie."

Kohler shrugs and the old scribe looks at his pen as though it has a well in it for guilt. "She asks me to write a birthday card in Kolkatese to a businessman whom she says she loves. She asks me to invite him to share New Year celebrations with her and her family. And she asks me to write that she loves him deeply and hates the thought of being so far from him."

"Is she lying?"

"Oh no, she has a very strong affection for him. Perhaps it is love. No, the lie is mine. I tell her that it is done, I hand her the card and she pays me and she will send it, no doubt."

"What did you really write?"

He pauses and looks down between his knees, "I wrote that she wishes him all the best for his birthday. And to his parents as well." His hand rests on a dictionary like he is in court taking a serious oath, "And that is all I wrote."

"Why?"

"Because I love her and she is wasting her life waiting for him. But I am too weak to tell her."

Kohler studies him; the skin on his hands and neck is nearly transparent, his dark suit neatly pressed, his collar and tie loose around his thin neck, his body at least unable to lie about where it has been, or where it is going.

"Not really a lie," he suggests.

The man smiles, "Thank you young friend, but we both know it is not the truth."

Kohler turns back to his eyeglass and runs his fingers across the keys of the keyboard. It is more comfortable than banging away at thin air using a holo keyboard thrown up by his earbud and he can't dictate his message in this public space. He is due to report back to the Norrland Peace Militia and has waited for the content of his report to make itself clear to him. After the dead ends in Uppsala, the Truthers with their scattergun in the Gurdwara in Gottland, after the Bridge shot and all the other crap of the last few weeks chasing her shadow across Indochine until finally he found her, his resolve seems stuck now between fingertips and keyboard. He lowers a finger to the keys but presses too hard and a single letter scrolls across the screen. He pushes the keyboard away.

The old man looks over at him and smiles, hands him two sheets of paper and one of his pens.

"At the desk they'll put it on a disc for you if you need to shoot it offworld. I regret the pen is only my red one, can you use it?" he asks.

"Thank you, that's fine," Kohler says and uncurls the paper in front of him. An old map of Indochine is painted smoky and brown across one wall of the post office, the imperfect names of continents and cities reflecting the visions of a long dead terraforming engineer. Underneath it he feels small, impermanent, unimportant. He thinks of Kirsten's description of herself as the fifth monkey. He primes the pen and a single red drop falls onto the back of his hand, spreading out across his skin like a thin spiderweb of blood. He looks to the door, pictures himself walking outside, leaving his pack and his ID, and into one of the nearby houses as though it and the children, dogs and chickens inside were his own. He imagines swapping his life for that of the man opposite.

How close together are the two words; life and lie. In most dictionaries, the only words that sit between them are lien, and lieu. Lie, lien, lieu, life. They flow one into the other, their meanings tripping over. Lie: deception, lien: a promissory note, lieu: debt, life: the condition of being alive. He could drop this commission, but then what?

He leans back, looks up at the smoky ceiling. *Kirsten Nygaard located on Indochine.* And then what? *Persuading her to go home will not be simple.*

Without writing, he hands back the pen and paper to the old man with thanks, hoists his pack onto his back and listens to the sweep of his feet on the dusty tiles as he walks to the door. Back towards the cage.

...the disclosure of information that a particular person has or has not been employed by, or carried out an investigation for, the Organization and the disclosure of information as to whether any investigation has or has not been carried out by or for the Organization could, in general, and would certainly, in specific circumstances, be a crucial breach of the security and confidentiality which is required for the effective operation of the Organization: moreover, the disclosure of the identity of an officer of or person employed by the Organization may, in addition, place that person, his family and his property in danger...

Excerpt from an affidavit sworn by the Director General of the Indochine Intelligence Bureau, Naveed Golkar (08.2212)

2218 Akhroda

Bob Harrison sits in his hotel room in the dark. Fifty years old and slightly breathless, in the chair where his wife Susan used to sit with her glass up reading a book, drinking tea. The room still echoes with her voice, the too brief years of visits by friends and children. In the dark, she is still here.

The blinds are drawn, his fingers aching to pull them aside and keep a watch on the street but to do so would alert the world that he was inside. It can't be a coincidence, it can't be! He looks at the images he took with his eyeglass, the small dirty yellow cab with a single passenger, passing his hotel Monday, Thursday and then today. Who knows how many other times the man had been past before Harrison spotted him. By cab, on foot, lurking, watching.

Saadhaka. Andrew Chen. A Whole Truth militia *kshatriya* in a world where just saying the name of the Peace Militia can get you jail time. Coming out the door of his hotel, when Harrison first saw Saadhaka's face gliding by in the cab he did a double take, stepped back into the doorway. Convinced himself it could not be him. A face from a continent away and a decade ago, a lifetime past. But then he had seen him again, and again. It was Saadhaka without doubt, the face almost exactly as he remembered it, hardly aged at all. Was he still a Truther? Did a *kshatriya*, in his case a Peace Militia warrior and cell leader, ever *stop* being a Truther? He had never heard of it happening.

The whole week, every time he stepped outside, he would scurry along from door to door. To his shop, to buy groceries, shoulders hunched, waiting for someone to call out his Truther name, "Brother Akhroda!" His minders had told him that unless he went offworld, it was almost inevitable they would find him. 'And what if I did go offworld?' he'd asked. 'Can you guarantee I'll be safe on Gideon, on Shinwa?' Of course they couldn't, so he'd stayed on Indochine, hiding half a world away from Hanmei. And then Susan grew sick and going offworld was suddenly a moot question; the Bridge shot would have killed her. The years passed, there were a few false alarms, they relocated him twice just to be sure, but for the five years since Susan passed away, nothing but daily life. It was inevitable he would outlive her – he had been a *vipra*. She wasn't even a Truther. He'd received ten of the BAE treatments before he was pulled out, enough to add nearly a hundred years to his lifespan. But knowing it was inevitable didn't mean he was ready to say goodbye when she went.

An endless stream of quads and scooters hums past outside. The street is well lit, burning brown through his blinds. His room is lit in sepia. He wrote down as much as he could remember - the make, the model, the first few letters of the cab ID. He started tagging all the cabs going past,

trying to see if there were any patterns and stopped when he realised he was headed down the road to madness.

Absently he puts his hand up to his bud. It buzzes and by reflex, he hits the call button. He left a message with his IIB minder to call him. He just listens.

"Hello, is that Bob?" A young woman's voice - the wrong voice, the wrong voice. He hangs up. Runs his hand across his face.

Bob Harrison swims in his memories of thirty years ago: 2187, May, Hanmei.

"They want us to go to Norrland," Rahasi had said to him as they lay beneath her grubby bedsheet in the sect's Hanmei temple.

"Why?"

"There is a brother there who has been giving information to the Indochine Embassy. One of the Gottlander Sisters was arrested when she came in by Bridge last week and they tortured her."

"Shit. Is she OK?"

"They never do anything that shows. They put a cloth bag full of pepper over her head and tied it around her neck. It doesn't leave any marks. They tied her hands over her head and hung her by the hands from the ceiling. And they beat the soles of her feet with metal rods." She presses a thumb on the ball of her own foot experimentally and it turns white. "Brother Shivartha says the soles of the feet are the only part of the body that doesn't show bruises. You scream when you walk afterwards, and they make you walk."

"Why her? Was she militia?"

"No, but they don't care. They were asking her about the antimatter bomb ten years ago."

"What? The Convention Center? They tried and executed three brothers for that!"

"And they know they didn't get the ones who did it. They won't stop until they find them, and when they do, they will kill them."

"It's just symbol politics," he said. "They're trying to scare us."

"It's more than that," she said. "They're talking about banning the militia. We'll be defenceless here - that's what the Indochine government wants. They've already turned their mobs loose on us. Their police and security forces look the other way whether it's a beating, rape or even murder."

He was silent a moment, "What are we supposed to do on Norrland?"

"I guess we'll find out when we get there," She rolled to look up at the ceiling and pulled on an inhaler, the vapour flowing in a musk-scented cloud from her nostrils, "If you want to convert to

vipra, your loyalty must be absolute Akhroda. Traitors are *suduracharab*." She spat the word, "Abominations."

Eyes closed in his ground floor hotel room thirty years later he can still see the line of her ribs, the scar traced from armpit to hip that she got in a street fight. He remembers what others told him she did to a plain-clothes policeman who had been beating a Sister with his staff. Sister Rahasi. Her name meant 'one who lives in a secluded place'. Rahasi the loner, one of the first Indochine *kshatriya*. Passionate, fearless, ruthless.

"Sometimes I can't decide whether to kiss you or kill you," she once said. "You lie to me, I know you lie. But I will love you until the day you betray me."

He doesn't want to speak loudly so he drops his eyeglass, pages through his contact list and calls the number of his IIB minder again with shaking fingers. The familiar voice answers and he speaks, "I need to talk to Neeraj Mehotra, urgently!"

"Who is calling please?" the AI voice at the other end is smooth and calming.

"You already know that from the voiceprint. Stop pissing about and get him on the line."

"Yes sir, one moment please." jangling music replaces the voice. A minute drags past. Another. Neeraj Mehotra ... probably not even his real name.

A click on the line, "Are you still there Mister Harrison?"

"Yes."

"I have a message from Mister Mehotra. He's at home but he asked you to get a taxi as soon as you can to the Hotel Windsor Bay and meet him in the cafe in the foyer."

"Can I talk to him?"

A pause at the other end, then, "Sorry, he's not in the office, I called him at home and I can't patch you through."

"Give me his direct number then."

"Sorry Mr Harrison. I can't give out personal numbers. He just said he wants you to meet him at the Hotel Windsor Bay. Can I tell him you will?"

In ten minutes he has packed an overnight bag and sits once again in the chair by the window, glass down, logged into the small surveillance cameras he has set up in the window frame. He rests his hand on the bag as once he would have rested it on his wife's hand. As a black and red taxi pulls up outside, he picks up the overnight bag with its printed photos of Saadhaka. He has already sent the digital copies to Mehotra but wants to have print originals with him. At the door he turns

and goes back to the desk in the bedroom, taking from it his ID, a spare earbud and his coinstack, and printed photographs of two women.

He just has to make it from the door of the hotel to the cab. The cab has to make it from his hotel to the Hotel Windsor Bay. He has to make it from the cab into the café and meet with his minder. He has to survive the meeting without deadly interruption and get to a place of safety. He closes his eyes, opens his hotel door and takes the first step.

Neeraj Mehotra (his real name) waits for Bob Harrison (also his real name) in the cafe of the Windsor Bay. Around him staff fuss quietly, bringing tea and rolls. He rushed here and had to leave without an encrypted comms set, flinging the recorder and transmitter onto the bench next to an exasperated technician still searching for a charged fuel cell. Now they have to rely on standard comms. His men are in place and wired up though - one team on the street to watch for Harrison's arrival, the other at a table nearby.

They are not concerned about Harrison, but about whether anyone is following him. Though he hasn't told Harrison so as not to spook him, they have confirmed that the man in the cab was Peace Militia cell leader Andrew Chen. Saadhaka. Since Harrison's photographs started ticking through, the IIB has been on alert. They have put Chen under multi-level surveillance but haven't pulled Harrison out because they aren't even sure he is Chen's target. They have been following Chen for three days and the man appears to be looking for a place to rent. He's staying in a hotel two blocks from Harrison which could explain why cabs keep taking him down Harrison's street. It could be pure coincidence. But it might also be the first step in a takedown.

Chen is someone else's problem. Monitoring the activities of a Peace Militia cell leader is way above his pay grade. But protecting the IIB's highest placed former mole in Whole Truth, that is very much his problem.

Mehotra waits, wondering why he chose this place to meet. Then he remembers it was one of the first places he had ever been alone with his wife. A conversation comes back to him, as he got their bags and she stood looking up at the entrance.

"It seems smaller, but more perfect than I thought."

Jolted back to the present, his earbud starts vibrating discretely, breaking Mehotra from his reverie.

"Yes?"

"He's on his way in. Blue trousers, green shirt. Looks clean," his outside team reports. "Not radiating on any known frequencies either. Enjoy your tea, bastard," they add.

Mehotra spots Bob Harrison as he walks uncertainly into the hotel and asks the concierge for directions to the cafe. Mehotra has taken a corner table behind a column where he can see but not be seen, and lets the man settle at a table nearby and get a coffee in front of him. The other man lifts his cup with steady hands but looks around himself with darting glances. His hair is a little thinner and his girth a little broader than any of the pictures on his file.

Mehotra sips his tea, watching to see if anyone else is taking an interest in Bob Harrison. They have sensors in the room that should pick up if anyone has planted a tracker or listening device on him. The tea helps with that sinking feeling Mehotra got as he saw the holographs of Andrew Chen tick across his vision with the label: MATCH. DO NOT APPROACH. ARMED AND DANGEROUS. They had been warned by a source inside the Ban Mé militia that something was going down. But the intel was too vague. No names, dates or places, just a heightened level of secrecy, an increased frequency of leadership meetings. Was it a planned attack, an influence operation, or just internal politics? Mehotra's earbud had been buzzing all week with requests for him to tap the former Truther sources that were his responsibility, but he hadn't tapped Harrison. The man had been the IIB's highest placed source inside Whole Truth ever, but that had been nearly a decade ago. His relationship with his future wife, a non-Truther, had given them the excuse they needed to pull him out without exciting suspicion and allowed him to gradually cut all contact with them until it was safe for IIB to relocate him completely – a new identity, a new city, a new continent. They'd had two aborted relocations before they brought him here, set him up with a media shop and left him in peace except for Mehotra and his regular welfaring contacts to make sure Harrison was OK.

As Harrison stirs sugar into his cup, Mehotra stands and approaches him, "Hello Bob."

The man looks up, then around, then back to Mehotra, taking in his white shirt, floral tie, Oxford jacket. Mehotra knows he is seeing a short, portly, dark-skinned man who has probably visibly aged in the last year while his own body clock has only ticked over by a few months. Bob is terse. Wary. "You got that last image?"

"I got it, I was just waiting for your call. Can I sit?" Harrison nods and Mehotra brings his own tea and rolls over. "Help yourself if you're hungry. The important thing is that we not panic Bob."

There is a long silence. Mehotra watches the other man's hands as he lifts his coffee cup, slow and steady, drinks from it and replaces it again. A labourer's hands, rough, callused, but a voice that would be at home in a boardroom. Deep and rich.

"You're alone?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Then I've wasted time coming here," Harrison says and stands. "I need real protection, but they sent you - a glorified babysitter. I can look after myself."

Mehotra holds his sleeve as he tries to walk away, "We're exploring the sighting, checking cab records, trying to identify the individual. It could be a chance sighting. Coincidence. Give us time to..."

Harrison looks down on Mehotra without a trace of sympathy, "I saw a Peace Militia *kshatriya* in my street three times in the last week. Once is chance. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a threat." He jabs his finger in Mehotra's face before storming off. "You people taught me that."

As he reaches the swinging doors to the hotel's exit Mehotra taps his bud to contact the team outside. "He's in transit again, don't lose him. I think he's going to run." When Harrison reaches the door, the surveillance officers at the table next to Mehotra also stand, and without a word to him, sweep across the foyer and out the door behind Harrison.

"That went well," Mehotra mutters to himself and looks down at his cold tea. He knows there will be nervous men and women waiting for the outcome of this conversation, such as it was. Glorified babysitter? Perhaps that's all he is after all. Looking after the handful of IIB agents who had been given new identities and relocated to Ban Mé to disappear among the throng of tourists, dropouts and offworlders living the frontier lifestyle of the lava Delta. He pays their bills, sorts out their civil fines or more serious transgressions, moves them on again if they can't settle. Looking through the glass outside, Mehotra can see heavy clouds building again, feeling like a different storm altogether is getting ready to break.

The rain starts to hit as Bob Harrison walks down Calangute Canal road to the riverbank where the mist is starting to rise above the banks of the river as the rain hits the molten rock. The timing is good. He doesn't even try to spot the IIB watchers around him, though he guesses they are there. He spent years of his life under this sort of pressure, and though he had thought them gone, the fast beating heart and the dry mouth aren't unwelcome guests.

Rentabike shopfronts, icecream parlours, restaurants and bars, each a threat. He imagines the surveillance teams boxing him and remembers the old lessons again. He has practised his escape, run this route a dozen times while they weren't bothered about him, doubts they will know it. They are probably young and lazy. He walks to the end of the road where there are no adjoining streets, no way to flank him, as though he is going to the riverbank to clear his head or watch the mist rise. At the end of the road, he steps quickly into the back door of Lobo's café, walks casually through the toilets and kitchen corridors, into the main restaurant, out into the next laneway and straight

into Souza Lobo, someone singing Portuguese and playing an acoustic guitar, badly. Then out onto the high riverbank again, cool and relatively quiet below the heatline, a hundred metres before heading up into the trees by D'Silvas bar and up a winding path to the Alfa Guest House.

If they have two teams of three on him – the lazy minimum - he will probably have split them, leaving one back on Calangute Beach road, another in Lobo's and one or two runners sent to scour the riverbank. He doesn't think they would have brought more, because they would have been expecting him to run to them, not away from them. The bastards.

At the guest house, he takes a room for two nights and pays in coin. Desk, cupboard, fan and a bed with an insect net. He lies down, but then on a whim he goes back out to the corridor, tries the door at the end and it opens. He can picture the runners outside regrouping now. They will do the laziest thing possible, head for his hotel, wait for him there. Send one man to wait outside the small media shop IIB bought him further down the riverbank, near Osho. He starts climbing the stairs, trying fire doors on the way up, all locked.

He reaches the top floor and the door opens, leading out to steel fire escape steps and up to a platform around the old red tiled roof. The mist will give him cover from drones. He just needs a moment to think. To plan. Tickets, IDs, finances. A startled bird leaps into the air from the railing, and he walks slowly out to the edge, tasting the air. From here he can see down over the treetops to the river, jacketed in a thick fog now as the heavy raindrops vaporise over the lava. On the other side of the Delta is Hanmei, the Bridge offworld. He has memorised the booking code for a prepaid shot he bought five years ago, for just this type of situation. It's an open ticket, any one of ten worlds. He doesn't have to call ahead, he can just turn up, show his fake ID, choose a world, lay back and wake up in a new life. Yes, there's only one Bridgeport on Indochine. Yes, they have facial and DNA recognition at every gate. He's got a plan for all that too, has been putting money in the right pockets.

He sits, his back against the warm brick of an air-conditioning shaft and waits. Outside they will be getting on quads, or into cars. They'll set up outside his hotel, sit in the lobby smoking, sleeping. In the morning they will give up, but he'll stay here another day, just to be sure. The rain eases off and water pools at his feet, throwing his reflection back at him. Tired and shabby.

He blinks water from his eyes and watches the bird strut along the railing toward him, unconcerned at his presence now as it looks for a roost for the night. If Saadhaka has come for him after all this time, it means they found out what he did, who he was. And if Saadhaka knows, Rahasi knows. It is ten years since he bought himself out and his old network inside Whole Truth is gone. The last he heard, she was in Kolkata, but she could be anywhere now. A sect with 50 million members paying dues in a pyramid scheme where the ultimate payoff was longevity had the

resources to send its assassins anywhere. And if she knows that the man who was Brother Akhroda, the man who she loved and fought with – that all through their time together this man had betrayed her, betrayed them all? Even after 10 years, he knows she *will* come for him.

From the edge of this roof he could vault into darkness, into oblivion. He closes his eyes against the urge. As the heat-masking fog begins to dissipate an IIB infrared drone spots him and the surveillance team finds him there 90 minutes later. He does not move as they approach him, but stares straight out over the edge, rocking back and forth on his heels.

Later that night, 80 kilometres south at Agonda tributary in a glass-bottomed cube suspended by wires ten metres above the lava, Kohler and Kirsten are naked, drinking in the cooler air pumped through the roof of their room by inverters.

In these two short weeks, she has subtly transformed him. He was clean and bare and functional when she met him. The first thing she does is to dress him. Gideons have no style she says. In the tropics, white linen. She teaches him to find her flowers. She links their buds, puts an inhaler between his lips, and makes love to him bathed in the primal heavy metal vibes popular on Norrland.

She stands, looking over the enclosed balcony to the river below, "I feel like I'm flying. I feel like I could reach down and touch the lava from here."

"I had a place by a beach once. Sometimes, if the world got too much, I would sit there for hours," he says, "I'd sit with a bottle of wine and just watch the waves washing in and out, the yachts going down the coast, people walking on the sand. There was no sound at all."

She turns to him, "That sounds very sad."

"No, it was peaceful, magical."

"Are things too much for you now?" she asks.

"No," he says, leaning his head into her neck, "Things are just fine."

She turns back to the view and slowly spreads her arms wide, fingertips fluttering in the cold air from the inverters. He does the same and it feels like flowing water. He imagines that if he could find a delfin edge within himself, he could slide through it and into the air outside. He hears her breathing slow, sees her breasts rise and fall, and as she breathes in the soft curve of her backside pushes gently against the tops of his thighs. He rests his chin on her shoulder, staring down into the red and black flowing rock.

"Make love to me here," she whispers, not taking her eyes away from the play of the fire and shadows on the river below.

He is gentle, a hand either side of her shoulders to brace them both as her stomach slides up and down against the cold glass. She pushes back, not caring if the window can bear the weight of them both, and he feels that delicious fear too, feels as though he is held in the air by an invisible hand. He slowly feels himself slipping away from her, from the room and the river and the gleaming wash of moonlight on the mist and flying out into the air, out and over the Delta, over the million blinking sparks of red and yellow fire stretching away to the horizon, whirling up into the night.

He sees her eyes close and her fingers arch against the glass as though it's a silken sheet she can clench.

Two children on the riverbank run as close as they can to the lava and loose a water bomb tied to a hot air trap into the air. He watches it dance and bob in reflected moonlight as it climbs up over the lava before the trap catches fire and drops the water bomb into the middle of the river releasing a ring of steam in a perfect, rising 'oh'.

He leans into her, his face in the soft, warm down of her hair. With his eyes closed, he imagines the balloon climbing through the burning night and out. Away. Free.

"We completely refute any suggestion that Whole Truth was behind yesterday's Convention Center atrocity. Any suggestion that we were is an offensive attempt to destroy the good reputation of Whole Truth in Indochine. Whole Truth is currently the subject of planet-wide persecution by security authorities and political parties, which has seen our members attacked, jailed and even killed. We embraced this meeting of the heads of government as a chance for us to reverse the persecution of Whole Truth on Indochine and in our opinion the role of the police and intelligence services in sabotaging the meeting should be closely examined in the wake of this bombing. We had nothing to gain from these tragic deaths, and everything to lose."

Media statement by Whole Truth spokesperson, Brother Bodishvara, January 8, 2178

Thirty years earlier: Bridge Shot

Ban Mé province, a stinking tropical summer. "We will be training with rifles at the camp this weekend," Rahasi tells Harrison as they tend tomatoes in the big garden beds of the Hanmei Gurdwara. Picking the grubs off by hand because Truthers won't use chemicals on their crops.

"For what?" he asks without thinking.

She just looks at him. Then says, "We need fuel cells, PEMs, 250 kilowatts. You served in the military reserve, where could we get that sort of gear?"

"Anything over 100KW is tightly controlled," he says. "Offworld import, licenses, paperwork. What the hell is going on now?"

"Hanmei is setting up a new cell in Ban Mé," Rahasi moves closer, "A small core only. Brother Sinhartha asked me to lead it, six people. None of the militia leadership there is to know. Hanmei feels that they have lost heart, can't be relied on." There is cold purpose in her brown eyes and her oiled black hair, tied over the top of a simple cotton top is clear of her face, showing a dusky redness on her chocolate skin that she has earned from long days in the gardens. "The government is going to outlaw the militia Akhroda, war is coming."

"The Father himself has called for the violence here to end, Rahasi. 'I do not condone what some have done in my name' he said." He speaks slowly and carefully, holding the spiritual leader's words up to her like a talisman, but she shrugs them off.

Her laugh is hollow, mocking, "Don't you quote The Father to me! Do you think the violence against us is ended? Your brothers rot in jails in five cities, accused of crimes for acting in self-defence. Here in Hanmei, the IIB gangsters are inciting mobs to burn our members alive. Theology will not make prison bars go away Akhroda, and it won't win the war."

He turns again to the plants and feels her eyes between his shoulders. "I'm not a *kshatriya* Rahasi, I'm an accountant. I joined to devote myself to *Atma Mokshartam* and *Jagat Hitaya* - self-liberation and service to humanity - not some holy war," he says.

"I know what Atma Mokshartam is you fool. I understand the principle better than you ever will, and what must be done to attain liberation. I don't think you should come to Norrland after all," she replies sharply, "The Father preaches peace in public, but demands action in private. You are gutless."

The military grade fuel cells are no problem. He can get them from his handlers in the IIB. They'll be chipped so they can be tracked and probably crippled so that they can't be recharged. He turns to look at her again, "I can get your fuel cells through my old army contacts. I'll come with

you to Norrland. I can get you the supplies and the coin you need, but I'm never going to join your militia."

Indochine to Norrland – that was Harrison's first ever Bridge shot. Indochine's Hanmei Bridgeport is divided into two separate complexes on different sides of the city, to help ensure at least one might survive in the case of natural or man-made disaster. A third is being built in Kolkata in the southern continent but construction stalled by lack of resources, then political lethargy. The two ports in Hanmei are also divided by function, one is for trade and commerce, the other for human traffic.

He is sweating as he passes through the iris checks and swipes his DNA at the entry gates. His IIB handlers have told him he has nothing to fear, but he trusts no-one. He nearly panics and backs out when a woman ahead of him steps into the organic sampling booth and her sample triggers a lockdown. But the woman looks strangely calm, so he stays in line. Security agents, a man and woman, walk wearily from their observation posts and tap the intercom on the booth.

"You are over the recommended limit for 4-methyl methcathinone. How long since you last used an inhaler?"

"Yesterday, about lunchtime," the woman replies.

The male agent consults his glass and taps the intercom again, "I'm required to recommend that you reschedule your shot and allow at least 48 hours between the use of any proscribed drug and travel via Bridge," he says in a flat monotone. "If you decline you will be required to sign a waiver."

The woman has obviously been here before, "I decline," she says. And holds her hand up to the DNA scanner again.

"Wait," the female agent says, watching a readout on the booth. "OK, swipe now."

The woman in the booth swipes the reader again, and the booth unlocks. She walks unconcerned toward the next security check.

Harrison steps into the booth, watching the woman hand over her hand luggage to a customs agent and take a call, all while checking her eyeglass for messages. What kind of person finds it routine to be shot through an ER Bridge? Not only is the idea of being disassembled at a molecular level terrifying to most people, but the cost is also ruinous. He clears the booth, the customs officer, the ticket agent and finds the departure lounge for transits to Norrland.

The shotpod, when he boards, looks like the inside of a subway car lined with coffins standing on end, tilted at 30-degree angles. It is two decks high, two hundred meters long, and holds 400 people plus their baggage, and light freight like data discs. He finds his recliner, stows his hand

luggage and waits to be strapped into the gel mattress by the crew. A small infomercial runs on a screen overhead reassuring him it is perfectly possible to exist in two places simultaneously while squeezing through a wormhole thanks to the science of entangled particles. He wonders if anyone watching it thinks to themselves at this point ‘hell no...’

“Would you like to sleep now or wait until five minutes before the shot?” the attendant asks him after she’s double checked he’s secured.

“Now please,” he replied.

“Happily,” the girl smiles. “Head back, I’ll just close the lid and open the viewing hatch. If you have any kind of claustrophobia we recommend you just close your eyes and focus on your breathing,” she says in a singsong voice. “If you experience any distress or need to urgently leave the recliner, there is a button on each armrest here, and here.”

He closes his eyes as the lid clicks shut and keeps them closed as he recites a mantra. Not from any latent claustrophobia, but...

He wakes in the recovery lounge at Norrland’s Uppsala Bridgeport. Still lying on a gel mattress, but this time horizontal. He’s been lifted from the shotpod by medical attendants and already had his vital signs measured. A printout of his vitals lies on a desk next to him, together with a chilled protein shake he can flavour himself with any of ten different flavours. An attendant approaches in a clean white medical uniform, forty and sensible, “Welcome to Norrland Bridgeport. How are you feeling?” She picks up his printout. “Your first time. Your vitals look fine, any questions?”

He just wants to get outside. “No, I feel good, thanks.”

She hands him the printout, “There’s a cognitive test on the ticketing tab in your earbud. We recommend you take it now and again after 24 hours. If you don’t see any improvement in your score, there is a number you can call to speak with a personal cogtech.”

“Got it, thanks.”

“Enjoy your time on Norrland.”

Norrland was terraformed and colonised hundreds of years before Indochine, and the jarring edges between old and new are absent. It is a world run by AI, with bots doing all manual and repetitive tasks and humans in creative or business positions unless they choose otherwise. There are still those who enjoy working with their hands or feeling the dirt under their fingernails. Or religions like Whole Truth which required it.

After clearing ID control, he exits the terminal and finds Rahasi waiting for him at the transit station. She hugs him then guides him wordlessly to a ticket machine. The subway ride from the Bridgeport into Uppsala city centre sees him calm and detached because in the toilets of the Bridgeport, he dropped a tab of 4-MMC. Rahasi sits beside him as they wind toward the Langebro

bridge, following a map on her eyeglass. She is watching the streets and bus stops intently, but he is drifting, fatigued by the bridge shot, senses fried by the drug. Rahasi hands him money, local ID. The address is here in Uppsala. He doesn't know why, perhaps they are not going to Gottland after all? *None of this is real*, he tells himself. *I am not here*. He stares at the backpackers, tourists and migrants who are sharing the transit in from the airport. Some look nervous, lost, and he wants to lean over and touch them, tell them not to worry. This is not really happening, he would assure them.

He feels an arm on his sleeve, but his eye is caught by the bright green copper dome of the parliament on the other side of a canal. Another tug on his sleeve and he turns to see Rahasi, her eyes just centimetres from his. He can see the eyes of the other passengers drawn to her, her deep brown skin and long black hair so exotic in this blonde world.

"Are you stoned again?" she hisses, her breath a mix of herbs and inhaler smoke.

"No, tired," he replies, "Just bloody tired."

"Well, wake up, we're here."

They hop from the subway car, and she leads him down to the harbourside in bright sunshine, checking house numbers as he drags their two green overnight bags with him. A long road with docks on one side and park on the other. More water. Canals right and left. She stops once to ask directions, turns right into a street running along a long canal filled with houseboats and automated fishing boats, and he wearily catches the name high on a corner building: Christianshavn Kanal. Then they are leaning over the edge of a houseboat, talking to a man in a cable knit sweater who is sucking on a green bottle of beer. Harrison doesn't like this sense of helplessness, is not used to being without control. They are telling him nothing, and it feels like Rahasi knows just a little more than nothing. She accepts it, embraces it, and turns his uncertainty back on him. *Why do you want to know?* she asks. *Why so many questions? We will be told when the time is right.* He knows she doubts him, so why did she bring him? *You are gutless.*

He has a comms number in his head which he repeats over and over to himself like a calming mantra. A Norrlander security agency number IIB gave him to call when he finds out the who, how, when and where of this operation. But it is a Gottlander number, not Uppsala – will it even connect? Something is wrong and his IIB handler is not here. But operating offworld was out of the question for them, his handler had said. "You'll deal with the Norrlanders, it's their jurisdiction." Well, maybe. Or maybe the IIB don't trust him either. Maybe they think he's making it all up. Maybe they just don't care what happens half a universe away. Maybe he doesn't need them anyway. And maybe he's sick of their whole damn game.

Rahasi turns from her conversation and calls him closer, "We sleep here, it's all arranged."

"On this boat? For how long?"

"No hotel, no check-in buddy," the Uppsalan says in accented English. "Good for you I think."

Rahasi fixes him with a cold smile, "No one cares what you think."

He looks at Harrison, who shrugs, then back at her, "Sure lady. I've been paid. It's your boat. Three days."

He disappears below deck and reappears in a moment with an expandable sports bag, throws it over his shoulder and waves to them, walking away whistling. They climb over the rails and onto the gently bobbing deck. Harrison sees it is an old but well-loved boat, ropes coiled and stowed, metal fittings clear of rust and fish guts, buoys and fire hoses patched but clear for use. He ducks his head as he leads them down the stairs where he has seen the fisherman disappear, and they emerge in a small crew space. Next to a tiny cupboard are the heads, a cooker and refrigerator and opposite these a fold-down table and two bunks. He throws the two duffel bags on the top and lies down on the bottom bunk. He can feel the fatigue after the Bridge shot leak from his back and his legs.

She climbs in beside him, "I'm sorry about that, I shouldn't have been tough on him, that was dumb," she says. "It might make him say something to someone."

"He probably knows even less than me, which is saying something," Harrison says and sighs, "Man, am I tired."

She scratches her fingertips through his beard and under his chin, then lays her head on his chest. Outside he can hear a tourist boat moving down the canal, its guide babbling on a loudspeaker, and the wake rocks them gently off to sleep.

Rahasi and he wake when the sun is low in the sky, dropping over the west of Uppsala in a soft red fog. Lights are just starting to come on in the houseboats up and down the canal, and in the door of the convenience store across the road from them two Gottlanders, faces broad and cracked by harsh weather, argue over a crate of what passes locally for fish. Harrison watches from the deck of the boat as they take their argument inside and the canal falls silent for a moment.

He marvels at how quiet this Thursday night in the centre of the city can be. Cyclists move almost soundlessly along the cobbled streets in a parade of white lights, red lights. Their mopeds flock autonomously like fish, matching velocity, direction and distance automatically based on destination. The retro look is in vogue; they are red and black and green and look like something from Earth 1940s - sturdy and practical. None of the flashy, lightweight piloted frames he sees

slicing suicidally through the inner city traffic in Ban Mé, these are bicycles built for daily life; carrying shopping, bags and babies around the town.

He had arrived on a mild spring day, but with darkness, the temperature falls quickly and Harrison feels the deck beneath his bare feet creak as it cools. He knows he didn't bring enough warm clothes. He walked the malls of the Bridgeport for an hour trying to find a cheap winter coat, but the security staff just gestured outside to the sun burning a hole in the smog and rank humidity and laughed at him. He disappears back below deck to where Rahasi is towelling herself dry after a wash, and puts his arms around her, shivering a little. She shakes her hair and covers him with a fine spray of water and steps away laughing.

She regards his skinny, cold frame for a moment, "We're going to have to find you some clothes aren't we?" She points to the bunk they had been sleeping on, "Lift that up and look under there. That's where I found this towel."

He lifts the bed, which is hinged and hangs over a large wooden crate. Without great enthusiasm, he paws through the slightly damp mound of old towels and thin shirts inside it before his rummaging turns up a grey cable-knit sweater that looks like it did service in the pursuit of the ancient Moby Dick.

Rahasi sniffs it suspiciously then shrugs, "Smells like fish gone off, but it seems like an adaptive fabric ... why don't you give it a wash and hang it outside to dry?"

He lays the wet, still soapy sweater on a chair aft of the wheelhouse and looks again at the lights of the convenience store. Grabbing the ID Rahasi got him, he jumps up onto the railing of the boat, then up to the level of the street and walks over to the store for beer. Huge breasted women stare at him from posters for media products in the windows, and for a moment he feels angry and uncomfortable. But more than that, he feels thirsty, so he pushes his way through the door and into the smoky warmth of the kiosk. It is empty except for the security officer, who smiles at him thinly, and points out the prices for him when he asks. He swipes his ID, fills a basket with a few of the more familiar items and hears someone else bustle through the door, but pays no attention. He looks at a product that might be cheese, or could just as easily be a cleaning sponge, and asks the security guy what it is when a hand taps his shoulder.

He turns to see a uniform, heavy black jacket and shoulder badges and though he hasn't seen one before, he knows he is facing an Uppsala police officer. As the recognition dawns, a shock travels down his neck, guilt warm in his blood like a shot of whisky and his hand jerks involuntarily, one of the beers falling to the floor and he bends quickly down after it, mumbling an apology.

The cop looks him up and down, registering his accent, taking in his bare feet, thin shirt and woolly beard. "You are an offworlder?" the officer asks, his voice and face neutral. But the question is there, *'how the hell could a loser like you afford the fare?'*

Harrison realises his ID is local, doesn't have a ready answer for this one, starts to stutter, "No, well, I..."

The cop frowns, and then a voice behind them says in perfect Norrlander, "He was ... but I married him anyway." The cop turns and now Harrison can see Rahasi standing there. He didn't even notice her come in. She turns a bright white smile on the policeman, "Starting to regret it."

The cop smiles back, "You could at least teach him to dress for the climate."

"Ssh. I only married him for the insurance," Rahasi says, playing up to the cop now. "Hoping he'll die of frostbite." She's standing next to Harrison, a hand on his elbow, a light pressure guiding him to the door. "Come on you."

"Bye," he manages to say to the cop, then they are through the door and Rahasi leads him, more roughly now, around the corner and away from the canal and their boat. She says nothing as they take one small street after another, walking slowly. They round a corner and come to the green copper of Knippels bridge, stroll slowly across, turn right along the waterfront and come to another canal, Nyhaven, this one bright and busy and lined with restaurants. She leads them to a low rail and takes a beer from him as they sit. Banging it open on the rough iron she takes a long swig from it. He hadn't planned to be out in the cold air this long, he really is freezing.

"Not a performance to inspire great faith, Akhroda," she says without looking at him.

"He freaked me," Harrison replies, ripping the top from his beer too, "I just wasn't expecting to deal with a cop the first time I hit the streets in Uppsala, alright?"

"He was probably just in there buying candy..."

"Yeah? So how was I to know? My backstory is for Gottland, not Uppsala, what are we still doing here?"

"Meeting our connection. Chill will you, it was just a random cop."

"How was I supposed to know?" he repeats, but she is silent and his embarrassment at the episode is sour in his mouth, "What were you doing in there anyway?" he asks her.

She shrugs, "I saw you go in, and then I saw *him* go in. I just wanted to see that you were alright."

"I'm touched."

She leaves her place on the rail and comes to stand in front of him, feet between his, and arms around his neck. At least she is warm. "I love you Akhroda. And I need you to help me with this."

He hangs his head, "Why? I told you, I'm a finance guy, not a *kshatriya*. Why am I here?"

She lifts his head with a finger on his chin, "You are here because you need to prove something to yourself."

"Like what?"

"Like, are you really Brother Akhroda? Or are you just Bob Harrison, going through some sort of temporary Truther phase?"

"Don't, Rahasi..."

"Middle class, middle-aged accountant, treating the temple like it's a holiday camp, still paying the mortgage on his little flat in Hanmei, wearing his Truther name like a fashion item he can just take off again at the end of the day..."

He pushes her away from him, "Forget you! How can you talk like that? Like I've just been turning up to weekly prayers and paying my *shudra* tithe ... our finances have never been stronger. I've given years of my life..."

She regards him coldly, and takes another pull from her beer, "I'm not talking mere years of your life, Bob Harrison, I'm talking all of it, all the rest, your whole lifetime. Our Way is *sarvabharah* – all or nothing - there is no place for the half-hearted."

The ice-hard passion in her voice touches something deep in his gut. Fear, or excitement, he can't tell. "Stop calling me Harrison," he tells her, "I am Brother Akhroda. I took the name knowing exactly what I was saying yes to."

She steps toward him again and takes his head in her hands, mouth pressing into his, a burning passionate kiss that robs him of air, of thought. Then suddenly she bites his bottom lip hard, and as he tries to pull away, she holds it until he can taste his own blood in his mouth before she lets him go.

"Never, ever forget you said that," she tells him, "Because I will not."

The next morning is crisp and bright, the kind of icy blue sky that only Norrland can produce. He woke, as he had expected, to find the boat empty, Rahasi gone with the first light to pick up their instructions for the day. He looks over to her bunk, still a little puzzled by her alternating intimacy and distance. As he'd reached for her hand last night in the dark, and gently stroked it, she had pushed his hand away, "There is a time for fucking, and a time for fighting Akhroda, and this is not the time for fucking."

He lay quietly for some time after that, not exactly hurt but wondering at the machinery beneath her skin.

"I've just realised I never asked you why, Rahasi."

"Why what?"

"Why you are so angry."

Her words, sleepy but considered, "What you call anger, I call energy."

He had heard stories about her childhood that until now were enough of an explanation. Of an attack on her village by some IIB hired thugs in which her father was beaten and humiliated in front of his children. And, from a woman who had been in the volunteers with Rahasi five years ago, an intimation of rape. But her constant projection of strength seemed a barrier to discussion of any of these things. Finally, tired and alone and disgruntled by her distance from him he said, "I think you've been hurt, but you won't tell me. Maybe something in your childhood. It makes you hard."

She took in a sharp breath, as though to speak quickly, but then after a moment let it out again. When she did speak it was in a voice he had not heard before.

"*Hurt?* Hurt is a word for intellectuals, Akhroda. An abstract concept. People today claim they are 'hurt' if someone calls them a rude name. 'Hurt' is so inadequate.

"The world I grew up in . . . my brother, you would not believe how much I envy you your soft-bread, cool-house childhood. Holidays on the poles and school days where a cut knee made you cry? I grew up in poverty, misery, disease and filth, torture and abuse, debt and crime, with death like a bushfire, picking off a brother here, a sister there, no survivor who wasn't carrying scars. That was my schoolyard. You were playing games with your nanny while I fucked landlords and shopkeepers for rent and food.

"I lived a different life until Whole Truth rescued me Akhroda, but now we are here at the same place, together. You don't have to have lived my past to love me, and I don't have to talk about it to show you I love you. I don't mean to be hard. But don't ask me again."

He felt one finger brush against his forearm in the dark, and then she turned her face toward the wooden wall and left him among the wreckage of her words.

Outside now, alone with the morning, he can hear the strain of ropes against wood, and the deeper groan of a big ship sliding up and down against rubber buffers a few hundred metres away. Despite the simplicity and ease of pilotless boats, the romanticism of canvas and rope still lures man onto the water in sailboats. It is still early, but he has an errand of his own to run. He pulls on his rough hemp shirt and cotton pants, then pads onto the deck to find the adaptive jersey he had liberated the night before. It sits steaming slightly in the sunshine, but he pulls it on anyway, hoping his body heat will finish the drying. It still smells of the sea and far ports. Back in the cabin he rummages through his backpack and pulls out a thick black grease pencil and slips it into his pocket. From the lining of his duffel bag he pulls a bottle of headache tablets and extracts one,

marked with tiny dots. He taps it on his earbud, looks at the small city map that appears on his glass and decides he has time enough. Writes some hurried words and fits the paper back in the capsule. Thank the Gods that be that IIB at least had the forethought to arrange dead letter drops in both Uppsala and Gottland, just in case.

He dictates a message, holds the tiny tablet up against his ear again and the message is transferred, with no record at all left on his bud. If he needs to, he can swallow the tablet just as he would a normal headache tablet and his stomach enzymes will destroy it in seconds.

Looking at the map again he finds the location and is relieved to see that he will not have to walk too far. It's a well-travelled tourist spot. A natural place for him to take a walk.

Off the boat, strolling and stretching as he loosens his muscles, he ticks the short streets off in his head as he walks: Christianshavn kanal, Wildersgade, Annaegade. At the bottom of Annaegade he rounds a corner into a small lane with the sign he is looking for: Lovens Bastion, an old interplanetary defence site. The lane emerges suddenly at a grassed hill and on top of that, a view over a broad icy river. To his left the walls of the old defences stretch away, lined now with trees, peopled by joggers and dog walkers. He sees the empty bench beside an old fountain, in the sun and facing the water, and sitting on it, draws his feet up beneath his crossed legs, hangs his hands down by his side, and closes his eyes. He starts deep and steady breathing, clearing his mind in the way the monks have taught him, finding the centre of himself. His sense of himself starts to dissolve and he feels his awareness of the world around him start to fog, the momentary whiteness as he chants to himself, before the fog suddenly lifts and he is the centre of all. Eyes shut, he delights in the small chirps of the finches, feels the delicate pressure on his face of their flight, feels the ground beneath him rumble as a heavy freighter moves through the water somewhere offshore, feels the steady hum of city traffic like blood in his own veins. He hears no human movement, no footsteps.

He has been holding the capsule up his right sleeve with the ring finger of his hand, and now he lets it drop slowly and evenly into his fingertips. Arms moving slowly, his breathing still strong and steady, he lowers his hands to his sides and taps the capsule between the first and second planks on the bench, downloading his message. He waits for a subtle buzz indicating the download has been completed. For safety, he repeats the arm action two or three times, then stands on the bench, swallows the tablet and then begins his morning exercises in earnest.

He learns later that from the bridge at Torvegade, Rahasi is watching him at his meditations. Waiting for him to wake, she tracked him through the harbour streets, had to stop at the small lane, too quiet, but managed to pick him up again on his way to this park bench, and from the bridge a hundred metres away she waited to see if anyone would join him. He meditated for half an hour,

then with one last, luxurious stretch, he stood and smiled, and turned to walk back to the boat. Rahasi was one corner behind him the whole way back, and as she rounded the bend from Neden Vandet, she saw him stepping back onto the boat.

They are wrong about you, she told him later when she admitted she had been ordered to follow him if he went anywhere without her. I told them if there is a traitor among us, it is not my simple, earnest man, she said. *Rahasi, you are like one half of a pair of scissors, The Father had once told her. Alone you will only hack and chop and make rough wounds. You must seek the other half within yourself, and if you cannot find it there, seek for it in those around you. Only then will you be able to slice through the bonds of the world and free the truth.*

When she came back aboard, he was sitting in the prow in the sunshine with a cup of tea. She sat beside him and tousled his hair, looking at him like an art lover appraising a sculpture.

“What?” he asked.

“You,” she said. “You are my shambling, bearded, peace-loving man, my fool still living in two worlds”.

“Is that good or bad?” he asked.

“Neither. You will help me find balance, or you will destroy me. There is a line within yourself which you have yet to cross, a high tide mark at the point where your love and commitment to Whole Truth, and to me, will spill over and your life will change forever. You are almost there, I can feel it, I know it, but it is this last hesitation of yours that others mistake for disloyalty.”

“So that is what this trip is about. Another in your endless series of tests.”

“No, this trip is not about you Akhroda. Or me. But the next few days will take you over your inner line. And you will know The Way, or you will be lost, and me with you.”

The sky is their limit

by Malabika Bhattacharya in Hanmei

THE airdropping on May 17 of deadly arms and ammunition over Ban Mé province, has once again put the Whole Truth paramilitary arm, the Peace Militia, under the microscope.

According to the Government, investigators and political parties, the boxes containing the arms and ammunition were meant for an organisation familiar with the Ban Mé terrain and the use of firearms for its cause. They are stopping short of formally charging Whole Truth with the sinister airdropping of the arms.

They are attaching importance to the presence of the Peace Militia associated contact coordinates in the now seized drone that was used for dropping the arms; a sudden step up in the activity of the monks in the organisation's Ban Mé office on the fateful day and the growing availability of intelligence about their desire to acquire sophisticated firearms like energy weapons over a period of time.

Till yesterday authorities had recovered 215 scatter gun rifles, 15,582 kW of reloads, 78 anti-tank penetrators, 59 guided anti-personnel munitions, 3,840 kW of channel disrupter, 877 one-time drones, seven kinetic ammunition pistols, 17 concealed weapon holsters and other security defeat devices, besides four self-degrading parachutes.

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