

All the Stars That I
Can See
- Beginnings

Book 1 of the
All the Stars I Can See series

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DEDICATION

To Albert, my late father
– I wouldn't be who I am if it wasn't for
him.

To Prudence, my wife of over twenty years
- all my love and devotion.

To my sons Adam and Daniel
– I'm proud of you in every way.

To my grandchildren Zac and Seth
– the next generation is lookin' good.

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PROLOGUE

All the stars that I can see,
Shine in your eyes tonight.
Gloriously dancing across the sky,
While your words fill me with light.

A coloured display, all ablaze,
Endless patterns, swirling around,
I dream of you and fall into joy,
Into the peace that I've finally found.

Starlight breezes wrap me in light,
And carry me into your arms,
Soothing and caressing this tired old heart,
I'm washed in your healing balm.

All the stars that I can see,
Give me a heart of gold,
Then I remember that you're gone,
And my heart, like space, is left dark and
cold.

1 BEGINNINGS

Departure Control - CASS (Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies)

February 2nd, 2066

Even through the thick window the noise overwhelmed Joseph Reed, only his determination allowed him to stand. The giant ship roared by, streaking down the launch ramp. “Fly fast, luv” he whispered under his breath - not that anyone standing near him could have heard anything above the noise.

Barely had the first ship reached the end of the ski-jump shaped runway when the second’s engines roared to life.

“Shit, someone’s in a hurry!” Joseph said. He turned his back on the sight and went to the data terminal. Immediately he saw the reason for the rush - two unidentified blips closing at high speed from the south.

“Shit, shit, shit! Why didn’t they allow me to install defences? They knew these idiots were crazy!” Joseph said.

Logging into the control systems, he activated a set of systems that the leaders didn’t actually know about. He remembered the conversation when they’d almost been discovered and the fast talking he’d had to do. “Well,” Joseph mumbled, “strictly speaking they ARE fire suppression systems, just not the kind of fire they thought. Good, they’re coming in low.”

Joseph had congratulated himself at the time for the plausible explanation he’d given about being able to remotely monitor and extinguish any fires caused during launch operations. Joseph set the systems for ‘last minute’ and switched the external tracking cameras from the departing ships to the incoming jets. All he had to do was distract them – even an extra minute could allow the ships to escape.

Nestled in a north-south running valley, the Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies (CASS) looked like a child's toy set. The large administration building looked completely out of place - a large, featureless box unceremoniously dumped at the base of the valley with the road snaking in from the south-east. At the rear of the building, the large runway ran down from the crest of the western wall of the valley, across the bottom and climbed up the shallower eastern side.

A large building followed the runway from the administration complex to the western side of the valley where the complex completely engulfing the crest of the

hill. The recovery airstrip stretched out onto the plain to the south, with a wide, straight, road leading from there to an entrance in the base of the western hills. Originally, the complex had been built to allow for only one launch at a time. With the current crises, this had been hastily augmented with a second launch platform behind and above the first. Six months of frantic construction had completed it just three weeks ago. With these two ships launched, the facility was already automatically moving the third vehicle into position. This would be completed in just a few hours.

Alpha-Charlie Flight

Approaching low and fast, a pair of YK-60 attack fighters were heading towards the Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies. In the lead aircraft was Squadron Leader Barbara “Barbs” Nu, one of the most experienced fighter pilots in the defence forces. Her wingman for the day was Flight Lieutenant Nick Vlahos, a pilot she had casually met a few times but this was the first time working with him. This was another minor annoyance in a day full of major ones. Her normal wingman was fine, but the higher ups had selected a stranger that morning for some reason - probably another sign of higher ups not trusting anybody. Her instruments had registered the facility when suddenly they also picked up a flying object. As the object began a rapid ascent, the profile quickly settled down into something similar to one of the ‘ballistic objects’ that she had been briefed about. "Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-

Charlie-4. I confirm a valid launch from the Centre, over."

"Roger, Alpha-Charlie, ETA over?" replies the calm and slightly cheerful voice over the comms. A smile creased her face as she remembered the conversations over the mess table. How they'd joked about the training or drugs the controllers must use to be able to maintain that tone of voice. The real explanation she had finally got from her friend Nalini was a lot more prosaic. Nalini revealed that controllers typed in the message and a computer generated the voice. The smile disappeared as she remembered her mission, it seemed a lot less funny now.

At thirty-five, Barbara was one of the oldest pilots still on active duty. Her career was unblemished from when she first signed up at age nineteen. She'd married at twenty-four and had twin boys two years later. Between her husband, children and career she had considered herself as blessed as any person deserved to be.

That had all come to an end twelve months previously when the puddle jumper her family was on crashed on the way home from a family holiday. She had been required to fly back two days previously, but had convinced Steve, her husband, to stay on a couple more days. The guilt from that had devastated her. Two days later the nightmares started. In them she was somehow on the plane as well, but was ignoring the cries from her family to save them, playing cards with her pilot friends instead. After two weeks of these she had come apart. The nightmares had taken two months to ease off. After

six months she had finally come back to active duty.

All of that recovery had fallen apart on the previous night. She couldn't believe the report that she'd been shown. It described how the plane had been purposely crashed to dispose of some 'undesirables'. Her Steve and beautiful twins Rohnan and Wesley all dead - as 'unfortunate collateral damage'. Then there was the second report, the one that detailed the crimes of these 'evil enemies of truth and right'. They had been involved in some 'unfortunate incidents' suppressing 'religious fanatics'. Some secret surveillance had caught them talking to each other, asking if what they had done was right.

She remembered the original incident, the death of more than fifty 'heavily armed insurrectionists' with miraculously only one death among the attacking defence forces. She now also remembered the rumours, that the fifty included twenty children, mostly less than ten years old, and that four of the 'heavily armed insurrectionists' were pregnant women. The rumour went on to say that the one fatality was because a soldier had balked at shooting one of the insurrectionists, a young woman breastfeeding her child when they burst in. His commanding officer supposedly shot him on the spot. She had laughed the stories off at the time. She wasn't laughing any more.

She had initially refused to believe the evidence; there was no way her beloved service would do something like this. Struggling to act normally she had attended the morning's brief, fully expecting to expose Nalini

Rodgers, who had given her the copies of those reports, later that morning. She remembered the term from the recent briefings, 'dangerous traitors' spreading 'sedition'.

However, that briefing changed all that. She could still remember the cold, emotionless 'suit' delivering the briefing. The Centre's 'divisive and socially undermining propaganda campaign' supposedly aimed to 'create a social anarchy' to 'further their own private agenda'. How this had been proved by their recent association with 'dangerous extremist groups' like the Mennonites and other religious extremist groups. The problem was that this was all high on accusations, but low on any actual facts.

He went on to explain how, for society's own good, no word of this must ever be talked about, even to their fellow pilots. The only thing that had stopped her falling apart at this point was the anger that burned within her at his 'suggestion' that 'for the good of their families' it was important that no rumour of this incident should ever start. "So," she said to herself, "they don't think we're professional enough to do what they want, they have to resort to blackmail and fear to try and control us. It's a shame for them that they have no cards left to play against me."

She glanced down at her tactical display and replied "Victor-Hotel, ninety seconds to the Centre, over."

"Negative Alpha-Charlie-4, what is your expected time till launch window for intercept, over?" replied Flight Control.

She went cold. Glancing down she took longer than

her training allowed, "Victor-Hotel, 2 minutes, over."

Her instruments recorded a second vehicle rising from the Centre so she said "Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-4, second launch, repeat, confirming a second valid launch, over."

Looking at the flight profile of the two ships - ships that the Suit had described as 'Unmanned secret space vehicles that the Centre had repeatedly refused to reveal the true purpose of to our reasonable requests for information' - Barbara realised that the flight profiles were wrong. There was only one type of vehicle that would have had that sort of profile; it must be the giant transport ships that the Centre had been building. There would be over ten-thousand lives involved in those two launches.

"Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-4, the flight profile does not match the expected targets. The profile is for a very large manned vehicle, over." she reported.

There was a delay of nearly ten seconds before Flight Control answered. "Negative, Alpha-Charlie-4, the Council has said that these are unmanned probes, your instruments must be faulty. Continue as ordered, over." That normally soothing sing-song voice the controllers used now grated like fingernails down a blackboard. "How could they be so sure?" she asked herself.

"Alpha-Charlie-4, authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-4, over."

Silence.

"Alpha-Charlie-4, repeat, authorisation, appearing on

your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-4, over.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, all systems are green, we can confirm that you can hear us, either respond or break-off and return to base for disciplinary action, over.”

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-4, you are ordered to respond. Failure to respond will be considered treason, Alpha-Charlie-4. Respond now, over.”

Silence.

Changing band, the controller contacted her wingman. “Alpha-Charlie-5, this is Victor-Hotel, do you copy, over?”

A coldness overtook Flight Lieutenant Nick Vlahos as he automatically responded, “Roger Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-5, over.”

“Splash Alpha-Charlie-4. Authorisation appearing on your screen now. Weapons hot, acknowledge, over.” That sing-song voice had its normal soothing effect on him. It was only as he started to obey that he realised what he’d just been ordered to do.

He feared to glance down, but his training forced him to.

“Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-5, over.” ordered the controller

“Acknowledged, Victor-Hotel, over.” replied Nick.

Knowing he would probably be facing court-martial, Nick switched to inter-plane comms as he slowed down his plane and slipped in behind Alpha-Charlie-4, “Barbs,

what are you doing? Respond! I've been ordered to bloody well shoot you down! Dammit, Barbs, respond!"

"These aren't drones; they're the Centre's transport ships. Do what you have to, Nick, I'm sorry this will all be on your conscience, I just couldn't live with it on mine – it's too full already."

"Alpha-Charlie-5, fire, I repeat, fire!" ordered the controller.

Nick was torn. He'd heard of Barbara since he'd started out in training 6 years ago. She'd been like a hero to him. But his training seemed to have a mind of its own. He slowed his aircraft to give enough separation for the missiles to activate; the finger flipped the selection to air-to-air-thermal and pressed twice. "Pickle one thermal, pickle two thermal, over" he said into the microphone.

Maria heard the alarms go off as the missiles launched. She almost flicked her wrist to send the plane off on a wild turn to break the lock the missiles had. Instead she thought, "Why bother? At least this will be an end to the nightmares." Too late she wondered if drawing it out may have helped the ships escape.

Departure Control - CASS

Back in Departure Control, Joseph was intently watching the monitor when he saw the two flashes from one of the jets and realised that it was launching missiles.

"What! They're too far away!" Joseph said.

Five seconds later the closer plane exploded in the air.

"It's started. Damn them! Damn them all! Everything

they touch is poisoned by their filth”, Joseph said.

Alpha-Charlie Flight

“Alpha-Charlie-5, what is your status, over?” asked the controller.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, repeat, what is your status, over?” asked the controller again.

Shaking himself, Nick said; “Victor-Hotel, this is Alpha-Charlie-5, I confirm Alpha-Charlie-4 has been splashed, over.” Nick surprised himself by matching the sing-song tone of the controller.

“Roger, Alpha-Charlie, ETA? Over”, asked the controller.

He glanced down at his tactical display and replied “One minute to launch for target two, two minutes for target one, over.”

“Authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie, over”, said the controller.

Silence.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, repeat, authorisation appearing on your tactical now, weapons hot, cleared to fire. Acknowledge Alpha-Charlie-5, over”, said the controller.

Mentally shaking himself, Nick finally responded in his normal voice, “Acknowledged, Victor-Hotel, over.”

It was all happening too fast for him to process. Even with all of his training, he couldn’t skip ahead of the current situation to get the mental space he needed to figure out what is happening.

“Alpha-Charlie-5, this is Victor-Charlie, confirm that there were only 2 valid launches from facility, over.”

"Confirmed, Victor-Hotel. Over", responded Nick.

"Damn this voice!" Nick thought. "Why did they pick that particular voice?"

Increasing speed, Alpha-Charlie-5 turned slightly east and sped towards the retreating targets.

Having a moment of silence, he suddenly realised what Barbara had said. “Transport ships? What transport ships?” Nick thought to himself. "The briefing had been about unmanned drones, not any transport ships."

Departure Control - CASS

Something was bothering Joseph - a nagging little mental itch he couldn't scratch.

Stilling his mind, he closed his eyes for a moment and allowed his thoughts to wander. After a few seconds his eyes snapped open and went straight to the tactical display. "Of course!", he thought, "The fighter's target won't be the Centre anymore." He confirmed on the screen that the approaching fighter was now on an oblique angle to intercept the launched ships.

"Damn it! It's not going to fly over the Centre!" he mumbled out loud. "Shit, Shit, Shit!"

Quickly accessing the computer systems, he changed the defence mode from 'last minute' to 'now'. "God, I hope I'm in time." he thought.

From the Centre the flare, chaff and electronic hell-raiser launchers came to life and launched little missiles that immediately started streaking towards their targets.

The jammers started analysing the signals they could detect and then started jamming every signal they found.

The chaff and flare missiles raced to get ahead of their target so they could launch their payloads.

Alpha-Charlie Flight

In the approaching jet, Nick was intently watching his HUD (heads-up-device). He finally crossed an imaginary electronic line and used his fingers to change his missile selection to 'radar' and pressed the trigger twice. "Pickle one radar, pickle two radar." He reported over the comms link as he launched his missiles.

Nick's HUD suddenly became very busy as all sorts of warning lights went off. Running on training, his mind prioritised the threats and announced over his comms "Centre launching countermeasures, over."

The two missiles dropped off the rails and their engines kicked to life, accelerating them away, well ahead of any interference. The pilot saw the tell-tales indicating that both missiles had acquired their target. He automatically switched them to 'fire and forget' freeing himself to concentrate on the interference coming from the Centre.

The electronic interference turned many of his screens white. Automatically switching to 'random agile' mode, his systems randomly changed frequencies many times a second. This reduced his resolution, but allowed his systems to restore most tactical information.

Departure Control - CASS

"No, No!" Joseph pounded his fist into the desk so hard that he split the skin and started to bleed.

Helpless he watched the missiles streak towards the rapidly departing ships.

Alpha-Charlie Flight

Nick gave his attention back to flying his plane. "Another thirty seconds until I'm in position", he thought.

Twenty-five seconds later, a group of flares went off right in front of his plane. He reacted immediately, but they were just too close to avoid them all, one was ingested into one of his engines. Immediately all sorts of alarms and warnings assaulted his ears. Running on pure training he simultaneously hit the extinguishers for that engine and checked his tactical display. "Pickle three radar, pickle four radar, distance marginal. Mayday, mayday engine two on fire from flare, breaking off pursuit." The engine was still on fire so he shut it down completely. He realised it was too late as his plane exploded in a giant ball of flame.

His final thought was "What have I just done?"

Departure Control - CASS

Joseph saw the ball of flame and wondered what had just happened. He almost missed the twin trails of the missiles streaking away. "No!"

The scene was now so far away that he had lost radar contact with the players. He counted down the seconds

while watching the remote cameras, knowing that if the missiles didn't catch the departing ship within another fifteen seconds they would be out of fuel.

Counting out the seconds, Joseph saw the explosion as the second ship was destroyed.

The third missile was closing fast on its target, five thousand meters away, when it ran out of fuel and didn't have the speed to carry it close enough, so it just spiralled into the ground far below.

The first ship was still accelerating but the air resistance was stopping it getting to its full speed. As the altitude increased the ship automatically increased its thrust, continually pushing the envelope, clawing its way to safety.

The second missile also ran out of fuel, but it had chosen a different attack vector.

Flight Control Centre - Regional Air Base

The suit in the corner spoke, "So much for their supposed pacifistic stance." The controller's blood ran cold as she realised that the pleasure in that voice was the first real emotion to come from that suit wearing official all day.

The Controller throughout this incident had been Flight Lieutenant Nalini Rodgers. She didn't trust herself to look up from her screen as she reported "Receiving confirmation of explosions. Target two is confirmed destroyed. Alpha-Charlie-4 and 5 are both destroyed as well."

She almost said something when she realised that anything she said right now may well be the last thing she ever said. Another chill ran through her at the realisation of how close she was to death in so many different ways. It took all her will not to start shaking as she realised how likely she was to become another ‘unfortunate’ casualty of today's exercise. She risked a glance to her commander and years of working together allowed her to read him like a book.

Fortunately it looked like he'd also realised that both their lives were probably hanging by a thread.

For the first time, she stopped and thought through the current situation. What was really going on here? The suit's automatic reply about the ships being drones was just too quick. It had to be a planned response. Why did he expect that the ships would be detected as other than what they were, mindless, unmanned drones? Unless they weren't? What had Barbara called them? Something like ‘very large manned ships’? “Oh, God, no!” she said to herself. “Not the new giant shuttles that the Centre had been testing? That would mean something like ten thousand people between the two ships!” What if they really were those transport ships? It would explain the immediate reaction from the suit to have Barbara shot down. She still didn't know how she had managed to type that message into the console, to order her friend's death.

At least after the talk last night Barbara finally knew the truth about her family. The controller had half expected Barbara to report her, to wake this morning

with guns pointed at her head. The added stress was making it difficult for her to control her feelings. The fact that most of the information she had given Barbara was from her boss just made this whole situation even more tense.

Departure Control - CASS

Continuing to count, Joseph breathed a sigh of relief, the last missiles must have missed, Mary and little Frederica were safe.

The missile, however, was the new Mark-15, just off the production line two months previously. If the missile had a conscience, it would have felt guilt that it was trying to destroy many of the people that had worked so hard to create it.

Physically, the Mark-15 was not a radical change, just a large number of minor improvements. Some redesign had extended its range slightly and increased the g's it could handle. A complete rewrite of the targeting software, however, made it a much more cunning adversary. If the missile could have felt satisfaction it would have. Determining that it would miss, its on-board systems had calculated that the best likelihood of success was to have altitude and let the target come to it. Its engine sputtered to silence as the missile clawed for every metre of altitude it could get. In the end, the missile was above its target and the missile started a shallow dive towards the approaching ship. Five seconds later the missile was just within attack range, at the closest point it would ever be, so it exploded. Most of the pieces missed

completely or got burnt up in the hot exhaust gases. One small piece, however, struck, rupturing a fuel tank.

A moment later there was a huge explosion.

Flight Control Centre - Regional Air Base

Flight Lieutenant Nalini Rodgers had thought that the last missiles had missed, but a couple of seconds later she detected a huge explosion. "Target one is also confirmed destroyed."

"Good" was the only response Nalini heard from The Suit. With another chill she realised all of what he meant. He obviously considered this an optimal outcome.

The man in the suit flipped open his phone and a moment later spoke. "Sir, I am pleased to report that two ships were launched and both have been intercepted. Both attacking planes have also been destroyed... Yes, sir... No sir... Well, if they had not forced our hand, both pilots would still be alive, so yes we can say that they killed both pilots... Yes I can confirm that there were only two launches... If there's nothing else sir, I will leave... Sir? All of them?... No sir, of course not sir."

Closing his phone the Suit walked over to the Commander's desk. "Commander, you realise that there are to be no... leaks about what happened here, don't you?"

"Yes, Mr Habi", answered Wing Commander Wo Leung.

"Can your assistant be... trusted?" asked the Suit.

The controller had thought that she was as scared as

she could be. She discovered that she had been wrong.

"Yes, sir, she knows where her duty lies", responded the Commander after a moment's pause. His voice indicated a lot more confidence than he actually felt - either in his assistant's reliability or their collective chance of living through the next forty-eight hours.

"I'm sure you wouldn't want the pilot's families to be... shamed by the atrocious behaviour of those two pilots today, so why don't we just say that the Centre shot them down? We wouldn't want their families... 'affected' by any, shall we say, 'negative findings', would we? It's always distressing for the military when one of your supposedly 'trusted' people betrays their country. This comment by her about a 'manned' ship obviously shows some... mental imbalance, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, sir, I will put that in the log and lock all of the records in secure storage." responded the commander.

"Hmmm, maybe not. Let's put them all into 'no storage' - I think that would be safer, don't you?" replied The Suit in a pleasant voice.

The controller was relieved by the slight pause she detected before her boss responded "Yes, of course, you are correct, sir - my mistake."

"Good." The man in the suit paused then continued in a very false, jolly tone. "By the way, I've had one more instruction. The second flight that's currently on its way, have it stay in the area with the close support vehicles that are due to arrive as well. Have then stop any unauthorised... visitors to the site. Security forces will be in attendance, but all other vehicles are to

be...discouraged. Also, if the third ship launches, terminate it. At exactly 3:30 this afternoon, all air vehicles are to be withdrawn to base. Do you understand?"

"But sir, that would leave..." started the commander.

The man in the suit interrupted him and leant on his desk, all hint of Mr Jolly were gone in an instant. "ALL vehicles, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mr Habi." replied the controller.

As the man in the suit left, he said in his jolly voice, "Have a good day and thank you for all your help."

The controller risked a look at her boss. He shook his head and for a moment allowed the despair he felt to show.

"You heard your orders?" asked the Commander

"Yes, sir", responded the controller.

"Then carry them out", He said.

He then pulled up the recorded flight profile of the 'unmanned drones' and immediately saw what Barbara must have. They were staying at about the maximum g-force profile for a manned craft with g-force suppression. Also, the turns had been very sluggish, indicating a large craft. Had they been unmanned they would have be accelerating far more. He copied a complete record onto his real thumb drive. The accident eight years ago that had ended his flying career and claimed his left thumb had provided far too good an opportunity for his sense of humour. He had a high-capacity 'thumb' drive installed in the prosthetic thumb. The large thumb-ring everyone thought hid the scar actually hid the drive from security scanners. He'd had a

second version built that included a concealed camera and microphone that he used to record 'first-release' movies. He had become infamous for his bootleg copies he'd posted on-line. As a complete log was copied off firstly to his station then to the thumb-drive he had the first opportunity to really think over all that had happened today.

In too much of a whisper for anyone to hear he said; "May God have mercy on all our souls".

He indicated to Nalini that he was going on his break and walked out of the control room.

Rail Gun Launcher - CASS

During the actual ship launch, the massive rail gun launcher shut down its operations in case it inadvertently interfered. With the ship launches completed, the automated systems restarted the launcher, adding the new luggage capsules to its program.

To cut down on the launch weight of the maned ships, the passenger luggage and everything else that would not be needed over the next six days (and could survive high 'g' forces) was automatically loaded into a series of special capsules. These capsules were now lined up, waiting for their turn to be launched into orbit on the massive rail gun.

Each capsule had the required electronics and sufficient fuel to be able to rendezvous with the colony ship.

This rail gun was the original purpose for the Centre being built where it was. It was used initially to re-supply

the Centre's orbiting stations and moon bases but proved to be so reliable and cost-effective that soon it took over resupplying the various civilian stations and military bases in orbit around the earth and on the moon for most of the world. With the establishment of the anti-matter production facility on the far side of the moon, the returning capsules (full of anti-matter fuel) allowed the Centre to create a virtual monopoly - supplying virtually all of the world's energy.

With the income from that, the rest of the facility was built and the Centre started manned launches as well.

The giant launch ramp constructed for these launches used a combination of rocket and mass driver technology to allow for better payloads and more efficient missions.

Through careful management and reasonable price margins, the Centre had encouraged near universal adoption of anti-matter technology for power production. This centre had now become vital to the whole world's economy.

Despite ten years of work, no other organisation or government had been able to duplicate the Centre's advances to be able to compete. This coupled with the 'reasonable-price' strategy had enabled the Centre to stay fairly politically neutral in an increasingly volatile world.

Until now.

2 IT'S COMPLICATED

Departure Control – CASS

The explosion was visible on the monitor, even that far away.

The emotion broke down the walls Joseph had been holding in place for the last thirty-six hours. Too broken even for tears, he sank down to his knees.

After a few minutes of silence his phone chirped. Stirring himself, he looked at the message:

"Hey friend, on my way! Isn't this exciting! ETA in about an hour or so." The excitement in that voice made him angry. The fact that it had been sent in the open only made it worse.

He punched the floor in anger and frustration, but this time the pain made it through his concentration. He suddenly realised that his hand was covered in blood. His blood.

Flexing his hand, he realised that nothing was broken. Going across to the first-aid station, he coated his hand in a 'skin coloured' protective film to help it heal. "With all of the advances in medicine you think that they would have come up with one of these that adapts to the colour of the person's skin." he thought. As his skin was a deep black, the patchy pink "skin" over the back of his hand looked leprous.

Taking a mild pain-killer he went back to his workstation and took a moment to focus himself. For the sake of the kids, he couldn't afford to lose it yet. There would be time for that later. Using his phone, he then triggered a set of four, coded messages, which would find their way eventually to the appropriate person. Once decoded, they would read: 'flirts', 'barry', 'evanescence', 'alabama'.

Checking the displays, he noted that two more jets had arrived on scene, but that they seem to be just orbiting. Checking the security cameras he could see a lot of 'official' traffic coming up the road escorted by armoured personnel carriers and some battle platforms flying in from the west. "This could get tricky", he mumbled to himself.

His phone chirped again. Sighing he looked at the display. "Opps, sorry, I forgot! Speaking of forgot, can I have that address again? I can't remember where I put it."

On his phone he scrolled through his premade plans and found the one he was after. He triggered two coded messages to a different recipient. If anyone had been able

to break the layered encoding they would be faced with nothing more than ‘manifest’ followed by ‘barry’.

He could feel his anger, his rage against those bastards in the Council. It burned within him like some pit of acid, building up like a volcano. He could feel it eating away at his core. He welcomed it, contained it and let it simmer, to reduce down to a thick essence. He knew its feel, almost welcoming it because he knew it would sustain him through the decisions he’d need to make over the next few days. He’d thought all that was behind him, that Mary had purged all that and restored his humanity. He realised now that she hadn’t been able to remove it, just to quiet it with a raft of love. Now that they had chosen to strip her away from him, he would strip them away. They had forfeited their right to live.

"Now to plan the reception party." he muttered to himself. He pressed his thumb to the activation spot and entered his code phrase. Six large screens came to life and most started reporting the current situation from all over the complex. One of the others immediately started to monitor all news sources. He started his favourite classical music selection and started typing on the console. ‘Rolling in the Deep’ from early in the millennium came up as the first track. Somehow it seemed appropriate.

As an engineer he'd spent many hours thinking over the scenarios and planning for the impossible. He brought up his ‘master plan’ and selected the options that applied. Most of what would happen over the next few days would now happen automatically.

It started with the trolls. Those servers that scoured the 'net twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and recorded all of Man's discoveries and thoughts. Progressively they shut down and then the whole room was flooded with nitrogen filled foam. Setting harder than concrete, it would protect the equipment for hundreds of years - mothballed in case some future generation clawed its way back from the coming disaster.

Many systems were wiped, wiped and wiped again. The really sensitive systems were then electronically destroyed and auto-ejected into the waiting vats of acid. Overkill for the current situation, but it was easier to put in place the worst-case scenario then to take the time to change the middle-of-the-road one.

Once everything was gone, the next scripts ran. A complete, but false, set of systems were restored. Some of these systems were designed to look like they were in the process of being destroyed, so some government hacker could 'save the day'. He thought that this was a particularly clever addition of his. Any interference with the systems would start what looked like a security wipe. Any fairly competent computer expert would be able to circumvent and 'save' the data. Once that happened, their pride would mean they would then fight any idea that the systems were false. They'd be his best ally without knowing it. Sun Tzu had been right those two and a half thousand years before – use an enemy's strengths against them. And when you don't know their strengths, you can usually rely on their pride to betray them.

Next the security systems were segregated. The false set would operate fine and anyone breaking into the system would not realise that they did not have complete control, nor would they realise that they only saw a fraction of the complex. The video footage not destroyed would only confirm what people already knew. The 'recoverable' information would exactly paint the picture he wanted. So long as people found what they expected and so long as it wasn't too easy, people would believe the lie.

Finally, the propaganda machines were primed. Footage of the attack and what really happened was prepped and preloaded onto systems all over the world. He set the crypto computers the task of cracking the transmissions between the planes and the ground. They might just succeed in time.

Meanwhile Joseph had three more jobs to do. Firstly, he composed a final press release and secondly he selected his new job to be inserted into the system. "Hmmm, 'Launch Attendant' sounds innocuous enough", he said to himself.

Once more he closed his eyes and started to think. The third one would take some thought.

Launch Bay 1 - CASS

As soon as the ship had cleared the launch area, the automated systems started the cycle for another launch. Checking its electronic schedule it noted only one more launch scheduled for today and none scheduled for the rest of the week. It immediately sent a series of electronic

reminders to various people noting that no launches had been scheduled.

A launch cradle was automatically moved into position and the dividing wall began to descend into the ground as the massive ship began its journey the five hundred metres to the waiting launch cradle. Simultaneously the cradle was fuelled and prepped, ready to descend the runway.

As each of the launched ships had cleared the end of the runway, the wheeled part of the launch cradles had separated from the ship and deployed first their drag chutes and then their parachutes to slow down and finally splash into the large lake in the next valley. Automated systems handled the recovery and within thirty minutes both were trundling their way back to the base.

The other part of the cradle stayed attached for another three and a half minutes, providing the fuel for the massive ship engines during this part of the launch. Thanks to the missiles, neither of these units would ever return to the base.

Departure Control - CASS

Chirping from the media monitoring system broke Joseph's concentration.

"New Flash"

"An unprovoked attack by the divisive forces of the Centre for Advanced Scientific Studies has destroyed two Defence aircraft on a routine patrol. Details just in report that while on a regular patrol, the jets detected two

unauthorised launches from the Centre's Space Facility. When they queried the Centre, the supposed 'purely civilian' facility launched an unprovoked attack on the jets resulting in their destruction."

"The brave pilots, ignoring their own safety, managed to shoot down the two unauthorised launches before succumbing to the cowardly attack."

"The Council has released an official statement; 'condemning this cowardly attack on the brave pilots of the defence forces'. The statement goes on to say: 'We can only speculate on what dark plan was thwarted by the brave pilots. Probably another attempt to cause fear among our people with these lies of imminent disaster. The full council will be traveling to the site to once and for all confront the so called leaders of the Centre and restore peace.' This is Marty McCoy, Channel 14 reporting."

Joseph watched the scenes of the council getting into National Defence vehicles and driving off. "I wonder how they're going to talk to the leadership when they're now scattered all over the ocean." He almost laughed, until he remembered who else was now scattered over the ocean.

"Let's just confirm that they are the sick bastards Trobe thought they were", Joseph muttered to himself.

He hacked into one of the official surveillance networks. Quickly skipping to the addresses of two of the Council senior leadership and then to one of the main schools their children attended, he confirmed that the families of the leadership were all being picked up

from home and school and being rushed off to somewhere. Somewhere like here.

Another chime sounded on Joseph's News Monitor and glancing over, he saw it was from the security forces. Opening up the app he quickly scanned the 'items of interest' that the system had noticed. "OK, they've discovered a whole school is missing and are trying to figure out how. Hmm, an 'all stations' that the monitoring systems are troublesome." he mumbled, a smile creasing his lined face as he remembered that little piece of mischief.

"What's this?" he said out loud. A series of reports were coming in via the social pages from various prisons, institutions and medical facilities indicating the transferal of a large number of inmates into the care of the Special Security Forces. He set the computers to extracting the details and performing an analysis. He also targeted the surveillance systems onto intercepting any communications traffic in and out of those centres and collating phrases.

"This place is going to start getting real busy, real soon" he mumbled to himself. Adding all of this footage to the media releases and some colour commentary, he prepped it for release later that day.

Just as he was finishing, the report came back. 'All inmates female, aged from fifteen to twenty seven years old, all in reasonable health.' Checking the surveillance system he noticed that there were already statistical anomalies around the phrases 'just barged in', 'no severe medical problems'. The secondary collations were even

more revealing, showing that in four cases a staff member had queried the Security Forces as to why they needed to know if there were any fertility issues. In all cases the staff member was shot on the spot. There seemed also to be some references to the security forces ‘screening the candidates personally’ and not taking ‘the ugly ones’. A rough tally came up with around a thousand inmates. The rest of the statistics lined up reasonably well with society, except that there were a large number of ‘conformal inmates’ (a code Joseph new all too well, meaning that the person or their parents had been arrested for ‘dissent’), orphans (explained by the targeting of these institutions by the special security forces) and psychological conditions. Cross referencing, he soon realised that the violent and dangerous had been rejected, but the depressed, withdrawn and ‘manageable’ had gone. “They’re after breeding stock”, he mumbled to himself. Quickly creating a wraparound story for all this, he added it to the propaganda package.

Taking a moment to still himself, he brought up his master checklist and quickly scanned it to make sure he was on track. A couple of minor changes and everything was nominal.

He sat down, closed his eyes, relaxed and started running through scenarios to make sure the options he was putting into place were optimal for the developing situation. He was aware in the back of his mind that his music selection had switched to another classic, the first movement of Mozart's ‘Eine Kleine Nachtmusik’. With minor annoyance he realised that this was the version

where the slap-bass ran just a little behind.

Central Clinic for Special Needs Children

Moria Stone's world had come crashing down - again.

All of the long and painful small steps she had made over the last six months, destroyed in one violent incident.

The trauma of being forcibly separated from her mother and father at six had been the first blow to her fragile self. Seeing her dad beaten to a bloody pulp as he tried to stop them taking her away had been the only memory of her dad that her hurt mind had allowed herself to have for most of the intervening years. This had kept her cut off, retreating more and more into her own world. When she was eight, she discovered that everything that had happened had been her fault. She realised then, that the new game that her teacher had started playing with her class was designed to discover any children that had been exposed to 'forbidden teaching'. Realising that the feelings of happiness she felt at finally being accepted and good at something were at the core of her betraying her parents filled her with shame and guilt. It wrapped her heart, choking off any hope or joy. Her ability to 'show off' had alerted the authorities that her parents were 'illegal' religious leaders and had resulted in their arrest and her removal from them 'for her protection'. She had withdrawn further and further into herself.

The only life-line her mind held onto over these years

had been her foster parents. They'd started looking after her just after she'd turned eight. She'd thought of them as caring people who took a real interest in her wellbeing. Certainly the nightmares started to stop.

On her twelfth birthday they raped her. Attracted by her screams a passing off-duty police officer had intervened and arrested the foster parents. After the assault by her foster parents - the betrayal by the only people she had been able to trust since she was six years old - she'd retreated back into her own world.

Passed from institute to institute she slipped further and further into her own world and away from reality.

Six months ago, on her fifteenth birthday, she had been transferred to a specialist institute for children with severe psychological issues. She had accepted all this with no reaction, safe within her little world.

Over that intervening six months she had learnt to care again. The staff, especially Dr Frow, had carefully reached in to her world and encouraged her to come out and visit their world more and more.

That all came to a crashing end with the security officer smashing Dr Frow's face with the butt of his rifle when he'd demanded to know what they would be doing with the children. When he'd stood up, missing a number of teeth, and again demanded to know, he was shot, dead.

"What's up with this one?" the security officer asked a staff member, pointing to Moria.

"No, not her, she's just too broken." One of the other staff had said putting herself between the security staff

and Moria.

The Security Officer shot her and pointed the gun at another staff member and repeated the question.

Moria looked down and saw all of the blood on her clothes and switched off, retreating into her mind.

The frightened staff member had then rattled off a quick summary of her condition. "Moria has complex post-traumatic stress disorder marked by recurrent, extended dissociative episodes."

The security officer hadn't understood anything so, shaking his head he tried another tack. "Is she dangerous – yes or no?" he asked, pointing the barrel of his gun to the staff member's head.

Shaking his head the staff member said "No."

"Right." responded the security officer, "Is she fertile – yes or no?" he asked.

The staff member balked at answering this question so the security officer gave an exaggerated sigh and charged the weapon.

The staff member broke down at this point and said, "Yes, she's fertile".

Smiling the security officer said "one" and pushed Moria to another member of the squad who escorted her out to the waiting vehicles. He then went on to the next female patient.

An hour later, the convoy of vehicles stretched out into the distance, heading towards the isolated Centre.

Over the next hour Moria was stripped and groped. When one of the security forces had moved to rape her, the head of the detail growled and reminded them of

what they had been told would happen to anyone doing that to any of the girls this time. When they had finally tired of her, they threw her in the corner where she huddled and just silently rocked. One of the other girls had tried to comfort her, but could not get her to respond. She was, however, able to get her at least partially dressed again.

Central Control - Central Security Centre

"So the whole school is deserted?" asked Detective Thames.

"Yes, sir - it's kind of eerie, like completely deserted." replied Constable Tsu.

"What about the Reception?" asked Detective Thames.

"Completely automated and, before you ask, the surveillance system has been totalled. Nothing since midnight last night." replied Constable Tsu.

Calling across the Incident Room, Thames said, "Lewis?"

"Yes sir?" responded Senior Constable Joan Lewis, head of surveillance.

"Tell me we haven't lost that many people." asked Thames.

After a moment, Senior Constable Lewis replied, "Sorry, sir, but we seem to have. I'm looking at it personally now."