

**VIRTUALLY  
MARIA**



## PROLOGUE

### THE DEATH OF MARIA

Betrayal is an ugly word. It lurked in the dark corners of Maria Gilkrensky's mind like a spider, tugging at its web of suspicion. Theo had changed, ever since that bitch Jessica Wright had got him tangled up with the Japanese. Where his mind had been open to her, where they had once been friends and lovers, he was now closed. Everything was about "control" and "keeping ahead". Conversation was dominated by "strategy meetings", "risk minimisation" and of course, by that bloody Wright woman.

Maria's arm stretched out across the empty space in the big double bed, where Theo should have been, but wasn't. How long had it been since they'd last made love? A week? A fortnight? A month? It seemed the only time they talked was when they argued. And they did that every day.

Now there was nothing left, nothing except a cold, hard anger, like ice against her heart.

Maria lay alone in the darkness, listening to the ebb and flow of her own breathing. Then, when she could stand the silence no longer, she pulled the duvet around her like a cape and walked to the window.

The dull red glow of the sun rose to the east, blotting out the stars. As the dawn of the new day broke, she saw her valley spread out before her: the meadow, the heather, the forest near the pheasant farm, the brook and the old rickety bridge where Theo had taken her photograph on the day she'd agreed to marry him.

A new day? Or would it be just like all the others they'd lived together recently? The Theo she loved had died the night before, when he'd stormed

out of the dining room after her ultimatum. Maria looked across the courtyard and up to his workroom. The light was still on.

That bloody computer . . . ! Didn't he believe she'd meant what she'd said?

Maria felt the anger rise in her throat and let the duvet fall from her shoulders. Then she stripped off her night-dress and pulled on her clothes.

She was leaving.

The day sack she used on her solitary walks around the Wicklow hills stood by the wardrobe, packed and ready. She would stay with friends in Dublin until she found a flat near the practice, or until Theo came to his senses—if he ever would!

She looked around the bedroom for something to write him a note on, but there was nothing . . . nothing except the black slab of his old laptop computer on the low table next to the bed. She pressed the catch on the lid and opened it, manoeuvring the cursor until the red *Recording* light shone above the machine's internal camera. Then she pushed a strand of coppery hair out of her eyes and started to speak.

"Theo. You *knew* what I'd do if you went back to that bloody machine of yours last night. So I'm recording you a message on the only thing you ever listen to. I'm going, Theo. I'm leaving you! I can't take this any more . . . this being alone."

Her face turned away from the screen.

Her hand reached for the keyboard to end the recording . . . and stopped. She felt the tightness in her throat and tears welled up in her eyes

"Theo! I hate this! Why can't we just talk like we used to? I know we're so different, you and I. But I love you, Theo . . . I really do!"

The door of her old yellow Mini creaked as she opened it, threw her rucksack into the back and pulled herself into the familiar seat. In the light of the early morning, she had no trouble in pulling out the choke, or fitting the key to the ignition. The tired engine heaved and . . . nothing! She tried again, and again. After all these years and all the miles it had done, for it to let her down now!

All at once, Maria felt totally alone, as if her little car had somehow conspired to fail her, just as Theo had.

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This time the tears burst through, taking her by surprise. For a moment, she fought them back, gripping the steering wheel tightly, as if it was the only solid thing left in her universe. Then a great wave washed over her, and she collapsed, locked in the misery of her loss.

What could she do? Where could she go? Theo must not find her like this!

In her rucksack was a key to his sleek BMW. Maria hauled the bag from the back seat, slammed the little car's door with all the strength she could muster and ran across the courtyard.

In the stillness, the only sounds in the room were the regular rasp of breathing, and the low purr of the computer working tirelessly on the desk where Theo Gilkrensky was slumped asleep. His head rested in the crook of his right elbow with his long body sprawled awkwardly on a swivel chair. The debris of his night's work lay all around him: abandoned coffee cups, plates of congealed food and piles of computer manuals, flowcharts and spreadsheets that spilled onto the floor.

Then the strident electronic "beep" of an incoming message sounded from the machine.

Gilkrensky snorted and jerked upright, rubbing his fingers over the rough stubble on his chin.

Christ! Was that the time? Maria would kill him! She'd threatened to leave if he ever did this again . . .

Then the memory of what he had finally accomplished during the night burst upon him like the rising sun.

Minerva worked! After all the false starts and dead ends. After all the problems with the biochip, the neural net and the months of stumbling around in the dark with the software—Minerva *worked!*

"What is it?"

A crude caricature of a female face, barely more than a cartoon, flashed onto the screen. Its disembodied electronic voice said,

"You have a video message."

"Who's it from?"

"Your wife, Maria."

"Play it for me please."

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Gilkrensky watched as Maria's message told him she was leaving. But that was impossible! Didn't she realise how important this project was?

The sound of her car engine turning over and the slam of its door echoed up from the courtyard, bringing with it the sudden realisation of what life would be like if she was gone. Without waiting for the end of the message Gilkrensky rushed to the window, just in time to see her getting into the BMW. Her hand reached for the ignition.

The last thing he saw, before the explosion tore the car into a million flaming fragments, was her tearful face . . . looking up at him.

# 1

## THE CRASH

“This is Cairo Tower calling all helicopters on the field. We have an emergency. What is your flight status? Over?”

The call took a few seconds to register with Leroy Manning. In his mind he was a thousand miles and a quarter of a century away, at the beginning of his quest for the perfect woman. For him, it was the long, hot summer of sixty-nine, and he was in his father’s Buick on the way to Cape Canaveral with Patsy Martin. Alligators basked in the marshes on either side of the road and, shimmering on the horizon way ahead of them, stood the towering white rocket that would land a man on the moon.

It had been a week like no other, before or since.

All of Florida had sat with their eyes glued to their TVs for news from Mission Control. Offices had opened late, schools had closed early. And on the day Neil Armstrong made that “small step for Man,” Leroy Manning had made his own giant leap towards manhood in the darkness of a drive-in movie.

“I’m going to be an astronaut,” he told Patsy afterwards, as they lay in each others arms looking up at the stars. And she hugged him even tighter. A year later, he had joined the United States Army in the hope of learning to fly.

“Calling all helicopters! I repeat! This is Cairo Tower. Is there anyone out there who can take off? Over?”

Leroy jerked upright, swung his feet down from on top of the helicopter’s console, and squeezed the radio trigger.

“Cairo Control! This is Golf, Romeo Charlie! I’m almost done with refuelling. What’s your problem? Over!”

“We have a plane down! We must get medical teams out there. How soon will you be ready?”

Manning’s fingers flicked a circuit breaker, bringing the fuel gauge on line. Flood lamps snapped on at the military air base on the other side of the airport, lighting up the grey hulls of transport planes and the insect shapes of helicopters. Blue lights sparkled around the medical centre and rushing out across the runways. Above the normal whine of the busy airport, came the rising wail or sirens.

“Cairo Control! I’m all set to go right now! Over!”

“Thank you, Golf Romeo Charlie. We’re sending a medical team to you. Out!”

Manning slid back the pilot’s door and shouted to the man tending the fuel line.

“Hey, Ahmed! Cut the gas! I’m gonna crank her up!”

Ahmed raised his hands to Allah.

“Mister Leroy! You cannot leave without signing for this fuel!”

“To hell with it! Pull back the line, or I’ll break it off!” And he slammed the door shut.

One of the blue lights swerved away from the medical centre and raced towards the fuel depot. Manning glanced over his shoulder to make sure Ahmed had dragged the fuel line clear and was standing by with the big red fire extinguisher. Then he reached up and pushed the igniter circuit breaker above his head, rolled the throttle to the starting position and squeezed the starter trigger.

There was a shrill whine as the high speed starter began to move the fifty-foot rotor blades, painfully slow at first, and then blindingly fast as they blurred into a disc over his head. The main turbine fired. Manning watched the exhaust gas temperature gauge rush past the red line, steady and fall back into the green. Only then did he give a thumbs-up sign to Ahmed, who put down his fire extinguisher and turned to face the oncoming lights.

An old Mercedes ambulance skidded to a halt, just beyond the reach of the spinning rotors, and disgorged a medical team onto the tarmac. Ahmed slid back the rear passenger door of the helicopter and helped two orderlies load folding stretchers between the seats. Nurses slung black medical bags onto the

floor and climbed aboard. The front passenger door popped open and a doctor, wearing an unbuttoned tweed jacket and an expression like a frightened owl, hauled himself into the co-pilot's seat.

"Please!" he shouted. "We must go quickly."

Manning passed him a radio headset, so they could talk above the din of the machine.

"Where to?"

"Five miles to the west, beyond Giza. There were two hundred people on that plane!"

"Jesus!"

Manning twisted open the throttle on the collective as he pulled it upwards. The rotor noise changed to a heavy "whop-whop-whop" as the wide blades bit the air and big Bell 214 lifted off the tarmac. It hovered for a moment, and then slid across the airfield, gaining speed as it climbed into the darkness.

In a moment, the lights of Cairo were spread out below. There was the bright necklace of the motorway, the bracelets of stars on the Nile bridges and the dim lattice of the Cairo tower. Ahead of them, the dying glow of the sunset silhouetted the alien shapes of the pyramids on the Giza plateau, and a strange, dark cloud . . .

Manning thought it must be a thunder cloud, because of its size. Then he saw it dip and thicken into a single black column rising straight up out of the desert . . .

"Christ!" he thought. "They're on fire!"

Leroy Manning was no stranger to death. He had seen bodies before in Vietnam, men who looked as if they were just sleeping had it not been for the neat red holes in the head, or the chest. He had seen bodies that had died in explosions, strange twisted corpses with limbs and faces missing, and the oddly crumpled bodies of fallen air crews.

But of all the ways of dying Leroy Manning had witnessed in his thirty years in the air, fire scared him the most.

In Vietnam, Leroy and his buddies had been issued with pistols when they flew out over the jungle, big Colt .45 automatics with wooden hand-grips, in case they had to crash land in enemy territory and defend themselves. Leroy's

friends made a big show of these guns. They even practised shooting beer bottles off the wooden fence out past the canteen. But Leroy didn't need to. He knew what *his* pistol was for. When you're crushed inside your cockpit and the fire is coming to get you, you don't need marksmanship to put the barrel in your mouth and pull the trigger.

So Leroy shuddered when he saw the oily flames at the base of the great column. He saw the hard shape of the crashed aircraft, with its high "T" shaped tail, the entrails of escape chutes bursting from the emergency exits, and the reflection of fire on its wings. He imagined what was burning inside that fire, and his flesh crawled. God help them!

Leroy swung the helicopter round the nose of the smashed aircraft, away from the fire, and flicked on the spotlight. Then he played its brilliant disc over the sand, looking for . . .

Around the wreckage, standing singly or huddled in groups, were the dazed survivors of the crash, squinting up into the spotlight or shielding their eyes against the flying dust. Couples huddled together, parents tried to comfort crying children. He saw grown men and women in tears . . .

Manning lifted his eyes from the crowd to the smashed and burning aircraft.

"Jesus! There are hundreds of them! How the hell did they walk away from *that*?"

The doctor pointed to a man in a white shirt who was waving at them frantically.

"Put us down over there. Someone's badly injured!"

"Some-*one*!" shouted Manning. "They should *all* be dead!" The Bell settled onto the desert, throwing up dust and sand, whipping at the clothes of survivors and forcing them to cover their faces. Yet the man in the white shirt ran straight to the helicopter as soon as it touched down and tore open Leroy's door, flooding the cockpit with the sickly sweet stink of burning rubber.

"For God's sake, we must have a doctor out here now!" he shouted above the whine of the turbine. Leroy saw the epaulettes of a flight captain on his shoulders. The man was clearly in shock.

"Hey fella! *I'm* the pilot! *He's* the doctor!"

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Behind them, the rear doors of the Bell slammed back as the medical team tumbled out onto the sand. The captain ran around the nose of the Bell, grabbed the doctor by the arm and dragged him to the closest huddle of survivors. Manning stayed in his seat, watching as the flames licked up the tail of the burning aircraft from the smashed engines.

Then his eyes fell on the doctor's medical bag, resting between the rudder pedals on the co-pilot's side of the cockpit.

"Hey, Doc! You left your bag!"

"Over here!"

Manning climbed out over the skid, taking the bag with him. Above his head, other helicopters were arriving, playing their own searchlights over the crowd and whipping at the column of smoke.

"Over here! Quickly please!"

Manning pushed his way through the survivors and passed the bag to the doctor, who was kneeling over the body of a stewardess. The doctor peeled back her left eyelid and shone a torch into it. The black pupil did not shrink from the light. The doctor gave the torch to Manning and motioned for him to hold it steady. Then he gently lifted the blood-soaked hair covering the woman's right temple. Beneath the matted gold, glistening white bone showed through the slash of a deep wound.

"Hold the light still, *please!*"

The doctor gently pressed a field dressing over the gash, and wrapped the woman in a blanket, tucking it carefully under her chin. Then he supervised as the stewardess was strapped into one of the aluminium stretchers. The captain followed the stretcher party back to the helicopter. Manning saw him bend over and kiss the stewardess on the forehead as she was loaded aboard.

"Are there any other casualties?" asked the doctor.

A small, dark woman in a pilot's jacket stepped forward. Her hands were bound in blood-stained bandages.

"Just me. I cut them on the wreckage. There's nobody else. I've checked."

Manning stared over her shoulder at the shattered aircraft, the rising column of smoke and the crowds of dazed survivors.

"Are you sure?"

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**“No,” she said, “only Julie Maxwell. One of the kids in first class was out of his seat when the machine stalled the plane. She got up to grab him and was thrown against the bulkhead before she could get strapped in.”**

**She put out her hands for the doctor to examine.**

**The captain of the aircraft came storming back from the helicopter.**

**“I’m going to crucify the people who made us carry that bloody machine!” he said.**

**“What machine?” Manning asked.**

**The captain saw the logo on Leroy’s flight jacket and stabbed at it with his finger.**

**“The machine that crashed my aircraft of course! You know! You work for them! It was the Daedalus unit that brought us down. It gave us no warning before it went berserk. There was nothing I could do! I’ll kill the man who made us use that bloody robot if anything happens to Julie!”**

## 2

### JESSICA

In London, preparations for Christmas were well under way. Pearl strings of lights criss-crossed the streets, giant figures from the latest Disney cartoon hung outside Hamley's toyshop and at Trafalgar, the sparkling cone of a Christmas tree towered into the sky. From the top floor restaurant of the Olympiad Hotel in Grosvenor Square, the city was an ocean of stars, as far as the eye could see.

"Do you mind if I record this interview?"

The question hung in the air for a moment, threatening to shatter the fragile rapport that had built up between the man and the woman over dinner.

Then the chief executive of the Gilcrest Radio Corporation motioned to the waiter to pour the last of the Chateau Coutet into the journalist's glass and said, "Not at all. Whatever suits you best."

They were discretely hidden in a secluded alcove, well away from the few remaining diners. The woman was handsome rather than pretty, tall and in her early forties. She had rich, chestnut brown hair, a strong slim body and quick searching eyes that watched the world from behind a pair of dark-framed glasses. The man was large and avuncular, with a soft beguiling voice and a face that told of many such meals in fine restaurants. Both wore business suits, and both continued to circle each other in carefully guarded conversation, like two world-class chess masters.

The journalist produced a tiny digital recorder and set it down on the starched white tablecloth, where it sat like a malevolent insect amongst the glittering crystal. The "record" button was pressed, and the formal interview began.

“Ah . . . this is the third time in a row that GRC has won the medal of honour at the Hamburg electronics fair,” the journalist said. “How do you account for this string of success?”

It was an easy enough question—to start with.

“I like to think it’s because of our dynamic management team, our committed workforce and, of course, because of the new technology we continue to produce at the right price.”

So far so good. The chief executive was tired after a long day in Hamburg, where the award for GRC’s new SmartMate palmtop office had been presented, and would have liked nothing better than to slide into a long, luxurious bath with a decent glass of whiskey. But the corporation press office had insisted on this last important interview. The journalist was one of the most widely read business commentators in London, with influence enough to make or break the SmartMate. It had even been suggested that the CEO might take one along as a gift.

“And, of course, quite an achievement for a . . .”

The journalist paused.

“For a woman?” suggested the chief executive. “Really Robert, I’m surprised you can survive in this day and age with an attitude like that.”

There was an awkward silence.

“For someone so *young* my dear Jessica,” smiled the journalist, raising his glass. “Here’s to youth!”

Jessica Victoria Wright, chief executive officer of the Gilcrest Radio Corporation, raised her glass in return.

“Wine him and dine him, and give him the full press kit,” her people had told her. “But never forget, he has a mind like a steel trap.”

“I really am *awfully* sorry I couldn’t make Hamburg,” sighed the journalist. “But when you get to my age, flying is such a bore. Tell me, what *is* this new toy of yours everyone’s raving about?”

Jessica Wright took a flat, black case the size of a man’s wallet from her handbag, and put it down next to the journalist’s recorder. Then she opened the lid to reveal a screen, and fold-out keypad.

“This is SmartMate,” she explained. “It represents a new generation of personal business machines.”

“Oh, Jessica! Not *another* palmtop?”

“Not at all. Watch!” And she switched on the little machine, raising the words “Welcome to SmartMate” in white on a blue background, rapidly followed by a menu sheet.

“SmartMate contains all the elements of a modern office in a case small enough to carry in your pocket. It’s a five gigabit personal computer, with two SmartCard ports, video phone, e-mail and full broadband web access. It can operate anywhere in the world via satellite and,” she added, tapping the journalist’s digital recorder, “it has voice recognition software to translate the spoken word into written text—just the thing for a busy journalist like yourself!”

“Touché,” chuckled the journalist, turning the SmartMate to examine the screen more closely. “And I imagine that, since this must be the work of your brilliant chairman, the notorious Dr Theodore Gilkrensky, it’s way ahead of anything the Japanese have to offer.”

“Absolutely.”

“You say the video phone operates *anywhere* in the world?”

“Anywhere the satellites can reach.”

The journalist picked up the machine and turned it in his hands.

“I suppose it’s *terribly* expensive?”

“We intend to retail it at just under five hundred pounds sterling, including VAT. But, of course, you must accept this one with our compliments. To review for your paper, you understand.”

The journalist shut down the SmartMate and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

“My dear Jessica, what can I say? GRC has done it again.” Then he leant over and picked up a blue and white folder from the floor. “I suppose all the tedious technical specifications are in this press kit?”

“Indeed. Liqueur?”

Jessica, you spoil me! A large Hennessy, if you please?”

The waiter cleared the table, brought the brandy, and retreated.

The journalist opened the folder and spread its contents on the white tablecloth. Amongst the press releases, technical specifications and glossy brochures was a portrait photograph of a darkly handsome man. There was a

confident smile on his face and a twinkle in the hypnotic brown eyes. The journalist held up the photograph between his thumb and forefinger.

“And how is the good doctor these days, Jessica? Still in the pink?”

“Dr Gilkrensky is very well, thank you.”

The journalist slowly turned the photograph in his fingers for a moment, before laying it face down on the table.

“So all the stories one hears are untrue?”

Jessica stiffened. Images flashed in her mind: Theo in a hospital bed . . . in the rest home . . . on the island—in pieces.

“Stories, Robert?”

The journalist leant forward and pressed the “Stop” button on his recorder.”

“Jessica, off the record? There was a time when Theodore Gilkrensky personally launched *every* new product from GRC, and took great pleasure in doing so. This time last year we’d have had him hanging outside that window from one of those helicopters of his, with a glass of champagne in one hand and this SmartMate of his in the other. He wouldn’t be in hiding on some God-forsaken Irish island while GRC sends you out to have a cosy fireside chat with me. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Robert. It’s all there in your press kit. Theo is tied up with an important new project right now. But when it’s ready, I’m sure he’ll come back and announce it personally . . . like always.”

“Is this the priceless new super-computer? The one that’s supposed to save you from the Japanese?”

“That’s right.”

“The one he’s been working on for the past five years?”

“Ah . . . yes.”

The journalist swirled his brandy, watching the alcohol condense against the glass.

“Jessica. I’ve been watching you ever since Theo put you in charge of his father’s company. And to be honest, I never thought you’d survive. You were a one-product electronics manufacturer with nothing but Theo’s gadgets and his father’s money to keep you going. But, I have to hand it to you, you played it smart. You made your money on the electronics, and you spread your risks:

hotels, an airline, state-of-the-art research and development companies—and every year or two Theo would come up with some amazing breakthrough that would take the world by storm—the SmartCard, that robot pilot, the virtual reality video parks. How much is it all worth now?”

“About twenty billion.”

“But two years ago, you slipped up, didn’t you? Mawashi-Saito, one of the largest conglomerates in Japan, somehow managed to get its hands on a twenty-five percent shareholding. And what does the famous Doctor Gilkrensky do? Nothing, that’s what. Until this . . . this SmartMate of his. And even then, he doesn’t promote it himself. In spite of the fact that it represents the only good news from GRC in years.”

The journalist put his glass down on the table.

“I think the good doctor has lost it, Jessica. I know this business inside out and, frankly, this SmartMate is nothing more than a handful of all the usual features, miniaturised and cobbled together. Oh, you can frown at me over the top of your glasses with those beautiful brown eyes of yours but I think that since his wife was killed, Theo Gilkrensky has fallen apart. This mythical super-computer he’s supposed to be working on is nothing more than a smoke-screen to keep the other shareholders from selling out.”

Jessica pushed her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose, took a deep breath, and said, “Robert, there’s nothing wrong with Theo, or with GRC. Off the record, yes, Maria’s death did shake him up pretty badly. They were very close and, because of the circumstances under which she was killed, we had to be careful about Theo’s public appearances. But look at our financial performance since Mawashi-Saito came on board. It’s better than ever. So I don’t think any of our directors. . .”

An electronic chirrup warbled from the journalist’s jacket pocket.

“That’s not *my* cell phone!”

“It’s the SmartMate, Robert. Could you take it out please?”

The journalist slid the case out of his pocket and laid it on the table. Jessica opened the lid and pressed a key. The screen filled with the image of a young man with slicked-back hair. He peered anxiously at Jessica and the edges of the screen, as if to see if she was alone.

“Good evening Tony.”

“I’m sorry to call you at this number, Jessica. But your cell phone wasn’t answering”

“I had it switched off. Is there a problem?”

“Can you call me back straight away? Something’s come up.”

“Can it wait, Tony? I’m in the middle of an interview.”

“I’m afraid not. I’ve already rung the hotel to have your car brought round. Call me when you can, all right?”

Jessica smiled at the journalist, who shrugged his shoulders, then she shut the SmartMate’s lid and handed it back to him.

“Saved by the bell, my dear Jessica,” he said, turning the case in his hand. “And just when our interview was getting interesting. But don’t worry. Just to be patriotic, I’ll give you a good review on this little machine of yours, and hope you’ll pass on my regards to the good doctor. If there is ever any chance of a personal interview with him . . . ?”

Ten minutes later, Jessica was behind the wheel of her black Jaguar, rushing eastwards beneath the lights of Oxford Street. The return call to Tony Delgado, made from the privacy of her personal suite at the hotel, had shaken her—an air crash near Cairo, involving a plane flown by one of Theo’s machines. Tony didn’t have many of the details yet, but it was all over CNN, and the story was that the GRC autopilot was to blame.

Damn!

The heel of her hand ground down on the horn as a taxi tried to pull out in front of her.

Damn! Damn! Damn!

She’d spent years building up GRC with Theo—then months and months of holding things together after he fell apart. Just when she thought she’d won the other shareholders away from Mawashi-Saito, *this* had to happen. It would destroy Theo’s credibility and deliver GRC to the Japanese on a bloody plate!

She shot through Holborn and Cheapside, narrowly dodging a red light at the Bank of England, and swerved the XJ6 into King William Street. There in front of her, towering above the shop fronts and the grim stone buildings was a tall glass monolith showing lights in the office windows at its summit. On the

very apex of the building, standing proud against the night sky, were the glowing red letters “GRC”.

The man who had spoken to her on the SmartMate stood waiting as she stepped out of the lift onto the ninth floor. Tony Delgado, assistant chief executive, smiled nervously and ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair.

“Sorry about this, Jessica.”

“Any more news?”

“Only bits and pieces. I called Neil Martin and got him out of bed. He’s waiting for you in the board room. The press office is going crazy. We’ve recorded the latest CNN broadcast and all the networks are looking for a spokesman. I put out a covering statement, but I was waiting for you before I went any further.”

They hurried down the wood-panelled corridor towards the main executive suite. Jessica flung open a door to her right, marched across a reception area and past a desk where an older woman rose to meet her.

“Mr Martin’s waiting for you and we have the teleconferencing set up.”

“Thank you, Sheila. You’d better hold all calls for half an hour.”

They swept through another door and into the board room. Beyond the windows, the lights of Tower Bridge and HMS *Belfast* glittered on the Thames. Standing in front of the large plasma screen, which dominated the remaining wall, was a thin, worried man.

“All right, Neil. Let’s see it!”

Neil Martin, GRC’s press officer, fingered the remote control.

“You won’t like it.”

On the screen, a grim-faced reporter sat behind a desk. In the top left hand corner of the picture was a still photograph of a plane in flight. The words “Air Crash” formed a banner across the bottom.

“. . . and news just in from Egypt is of a plane crash involving an airliner belonging to the GRC subsidiary, Exair. The aircraft is reported to have smashed into the desert just minutes after take-off from Cairo, at around nine this evening local time.”

The still photograph of the plane expanded until it filled the screen and then dissolved into video footage of the crash site. Flames leapt from the tail

section and poured into the dark sky. The camera zoomed in to focus on the GRC logo.

“Shit!” Jessica said.

“As yet, casualties are reported to be light . . .” continued the reporter as the picture changed to show helicopters arriving at a hospital. “. . . with estimates of only a handful of fatalities amongst the two hundred passengers.”

“Thank God!”

“It gets worse,” said Martin.

“So far, there are no firm facts as to the cause of the accident, but early reports are of a failure in the Daedalus robot pilot system.”

The camera zoomed in on one group of arrivals and steadied on a stretcher carrying a blond woman. For an instant, it focused on her bandaged head, and then she was swallowed up by the bustle of reporters and hospital staff around the emergency room.

The picture was replaced by a close up of the reporter in the studio.

“The Daedalus auto-pilot was developed by the electronics tycoon Theo Gilkrensky, for GRC and fitted to all the jets in its Exair fleet two years ago. A spokesman for the corporation said this was the first incident of its kind in over a million flying hours, but that all aircraft using the system had been advised to switch to manual control pending an investigation. Dr Gilkrensky himself was not available for comment. Meanwhile, in the Chilean earthquake . . .”

Tony Delgado was scanning an e-mail.

“The news broadcast was wrong, as far as we know from our Cairo office. There have been *no* reported fatalities, and only one serious injury.”

“The woman on the stretcher?”

“She’s a stewardess. Nobody else was hurt, apart from a lacerated hand, a couple of cases of shock and a few sprained ankles from the escape chutes.”

“Well that’s *something*” Jessica said, clutching at straws. “All those safety features Theo built into that plane paid off in the end.”

“It’s still a public relations disaster, whichever way you try and dress it up,” Martin said.

“And nothing about the SmartMate award?”

“The crash will wipe it right off the map. Would you buy a computer from a corporation whose robots crash planes?”

“Shit!” hissed Jessica again through her teeth. “It couldn’t have come at a worse time. The board decision on the Japanese share offer is only a week away. What time do you make it, Tony? I left my watch in the suite.”

“One forty-five.”

“Right, I want VIP treatment for all the survivors—the best health care, hotel beds, the works—whatever it costs! And I want uniformed flight crews to make themselves conspicuous on all Exair flights until we have this problem with Daedalus sorted out. Neil, put a call through to that professor Theo has working over in Florida—the one who designed the plane—and tell him to get an investigation team together. Then have our people in Cairo dig me up as many hard facts as they can. I’ll meet you in the press office in ten minutes and we’ll see what we can salvage from this mess!”

Four and a half hours later, Jessica was back at her desk in the board room. Detailed statements had gone out to the national newspapers, with short interviews to all the main dailies and sound-bites for the radio stations. At least four television crews were expected before breakfast, to cover the morning news.

She felt the tiredness creeping up behind the adrenaline. She could have done with a few hours sleep in the overnight room, but there wasn’t time. Thoughts of Tony Delgado surfaced. She had left him downstairs on the phone to one of the radio stations. At least *he* was someone she could trust in a crisis.

There was a knock at the door and Jessica’s personal assistant set a large china mug of strong tea carefully down on the glass topped desk.

“Thank you, Sheila,” Jessica said, as she cupped the mug in her hands and tried to find comfort in its warmth, as she stared out at the darkened city, frightened and alone.

### 3

## THEO

Jessica Wright was not a sentimental person. Nobody could survive as chief executive of one of the largest corporations in the world by being sentimental. But she had spent a great deal of time in searching out that china mug.

Her father had drunk his tea from one exactly like it, as regular as clockwork, at half past ten in the morning and at three in the afternoon in the family sweet shop in Lowestoft when she was a little girl. Before her brothers had grown up, she had helped him behind the counter, knowing the price of all the sweets filling the big glass jars, and feeling the weight of the thick copper pennies in her hand. She learnt the basics of economics early, did Jessica. She learnt the difference between “wholesale”, the price you bought something for, and “retail”, the price you sold it at. But most important of all, she learnt that “profit”, the difference you kept for yourself, was the only measure of success that really mattered. She never stole sweets from the shop, the way her brothers did, because that would upset the profit. And she was always careful to take her time when giving change, putting large notes in a special clip on top of the till until the amount was agreed, so there could be no mistake.

Then, when Jessica was in her teens, her brothers started taking an interest in the business. Jessica fought her ground. She said they didn't care if the shop made a profit or not, as long as they could dip into the till now and then. There were scenes. Jessica was banished back to the flat upstairs to help her mother. Then more scenes, until her family packed her off to college in Norwich to study economics to her heart's content. It was no surprise to anyone when she

passed her exams with distinction and won a business scholarship to Harvard for her MBA.

And what had they taught her about crisis management at the Harvard Business School? Approach the problem logically. Gather all the information you can. Analyse it, with as much expert help as you can muster, then make your moves accordingly.

And there was only one expert in the world who could really help her now—Theodore Gilkrensky himself.

She had met him in Boston, towards the end of her first year at Harvard. Jessica had been determined to be at the cutting edge of business technology, and had exchanged a year's worth of canteen lunches for a primitive word processor, one of the first on campus. But there were problems.

"The screen keeps jumping," she complained to a classmate who was consuming a large salad in the cafeteria while Jessica watched. "It wobbles like an earthquake right in front of my eyes. If it loses my thesis, I swear I'll throw the bloody thing out of the window!"

"Have you checked to see if the hard disc is full?" said an English voice behind her. An English voice! After almost a year submerged at Harvard, Jessica was sure she must be slipping into a mid-Atlantic twang herself. She turned to see who the fellow expatriate might be.

Sprawled easily on a seat behind her was a young man in a brown leather jacket, with a crumpled white shirt, faded jeans and a pair of running shoes that had seen better days. His face was thin and pleasant, with a hint of mischief in his smile, and thick, dark hair brushed back over his ears. But what startled Jessica were his eyes. There was an unsettling energy in them—a directness—as if they could see right through her.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Computers only have a limited amount of space in their memory," he said leaning forward. "Once that memory gets full, the machine starts to overload and play tricks. If you're not careful you could overheat the chip and the whole system will crash. That's why I asked if you'd checked the hard disc?"

"I wouldn't know how."

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

The man gestured at the empty space on the table in front of her and smiled.

“If you’re not eating and the machine’s not too far away, I’ll do it for you,” he offered. “Computers are my thing. My name’s Theo, by the way. Theodore Gilkrensky. I’m working down the river at MIT.”

Jessica felt her classmate nudge her beneath the table. She, at least, had heard that name before.

Five minutes later, Jessica was watching Gilkrensky's long hands as they fluttered over the keyboard of her word processor. It was like watching a concert pianist perform.

At a loss for anything more intelligent to say, she said, “What part of England are you from?”

“I was born in Farnborough, where the air base is. My father has a factory there.”

“Your name doesn’t sound very English.”

“It’s not. My father was a Pole. He was working in Germany when the Nazis came to power and had to get out. He’d just married a gypsy girl, and could see what was about to happen. There look! Your hard disc’s full. Don’t you ever download anything onto floppies?”

“I just kept pressing ‘ALT SAVE’ all the time,” Jessica said. “I didn’t know there was a limit.”

For an hour they sat and talked while he moved files to and fro. She learnt he was working on something very advanced called a “neural net” computer, that his father was rich and that, like her, he was lonely.

That Saturday they met at the New England Aquarium on Central Wharf and strolled down the long spiral walkway around the four-storey glass tank.

“All the fish remind me of Lowestoft,” Jessica said. “When I used to go down and watch the fish market with my father.”

“Do you miss home?” asked Gilkrensky.

“Sometimes. My father bought a lobster one evening for a treat. It was the most luxurious thing I’d ever tasted.”

The following Saturday he picked her up from her apartment on an old Triumph motor-bike and took her to the Museum of Science, where they sat in

a steep row of seats in the OmniMax cinema. A helicopter flight unfolded before them with such vivid realism that Jessica said, “It must be fantastic to fly.”

The following Friday he called her and asked if she could meet him near the swimming pool in Charlesbank Park not far from the Science Museum.

“Be there at noon. And don’t be late,” he insisted. “It would be very awkward if you weren’t on time.”

Which left her in a state of curiosity, that carried her onto the south bank of the Charles River well ahead of schedule. It was unlike Theo to *insist* on anything. He was normally one of the most relaxed people she had ever met.

She heard the little helicopter before she saw it. She had been watching the long racing rowboats practising up and down by Harvard Bridge, and the panting joggers pounding the Charles River Esplanade. Behind her, in a playground, children whooped and laughed on the swings and slides.

Then suddenly, the thumping chop of the helicopter was very near—nearer than she had ever been to one before. The joggers on the footpath and the children in the playground looked up, and she was staring at the white underside of a bright blue helicopter that circled once, before settling in the centre of the park, scattering leaves and paper cartons in all directions. Jessica held her coat against the down draft, peering at the blurred image of the pilot behind the glassy nose.

Behind her, on Starrow Drive, a fat policeman was getting out of his patrol car and waddling across the grass to see what the matter was. It must have landed to bring someone to the hospital, thought Jessica. If Theo was here he’d know all about it.

The policeman was getting nearer.

A small crowd was gathering.

Then the pilot’s window slid back.

“Hurry up and climb in, Jess!” shouted Theodore Gilkrensky. “I’m not supposed to land here!” And he leaned over to open the passenger door, strapped her in and gave her a set of headphones. Through the Perspex she could see the joggers watching in envy, the open-mouthed children on the climbing frame, and the policeman calling frantically into his radio.

They flew up over the Charles Dam and out across the Navy Yard, passing the tall masts of the *USS Constitution* on their right. Jessica was grinning from ear to ear. It's like when I was a child, she thought, and my father took me on my first merry-go-round. She looked across at Theo. He was grinning too.

They flew out along the estuary, heading north-east over Mystic Bridge, Chelsea and Revere until they reached the ocean. Then Theo turned the helicopter to fly parallel to the coast, across the Nahant peninsular, out around the lighthouse at Lee Mansion, and over the fishing village of Marblehead. Below them, dozens of yachts and motor cruisers scratched white arrowheads on the sea.

"Just like Lowestoft?" shouted Gilkrensky over the noise of the engine.

"Yes," laughed Jessica. "Just like Lowestoft."

They landed at a small airfield outside Salem and spent the afternoon touring the town. Theo took a great interest in its New Age shops, explaining the origins and uses of all the crystals, pendulums and potions, before buying her a gold chain with a slice of brown agate on it. He said it matched her hair. Later they wandered down onto Pickering Wharf and Theo directed her gently to the small rustic inn, where he had booked a room. The smell of cooking wafted out into the air like the music of the Pied Piper.

"Hungry?" he said. "I've ordered lobster!"

"You can read my mind."

"It's the gypsy in me," Gilkrensky said.

Their affair lasted for his remaining nine months at Boston. Theo was exciting company and no two days were the same. There were walks around the book shops in the Faneuil Marketplace, whale cruises on the bay, weekend trips to Cape Cod on his old motor-bike and, best of all, long lazy Saturdays in bed. On those timeless afternoons, Jessica would lie amongst the crumpled sheets, looking up at the sunlit ceiling and wonder where their relationship was going. She told herself it wasn't love. She said as much, and he agreed. She was lonely. He was lonely. They were together. QED! But even though they were "just friends", it annoyed Jessica that he would not let her see inside his heart. Behind the energy and the drive, there was always part of his soul he kept

hidden away in reserve, but for whom? One Saturday, Jessica was determined to find out.

“What was your defining moment?” she asked, as she lay naked and warm in the afterglow of their love-making, with her head pillowed on his chest.

“My what?”

“The moment in your life that made you what you are.”

“How do you mean?”

So Jessica told him the story of her father’s sweet shop. About how she had been forced to watch her brothers run it into the ground, and how she had determined to achieve enough control in her own life never to let that happen to her.

“Now you,” she said, rolling over in the bed so that she could watch his face.

Gilkrensky stared at the ceiling for a long time. Then he said,

“I suppose it was at the Farnborough Air Show when I was about nine or ten. My father’s company had a stand at the exhibition, promoting some new gadget he’d invented. There were lots of business clients around and my father’s partner, Lord Rothsay, had his Japanese contacts at the show, all busily taking notes. My father wanted me on the stand, so that he could show me off to his customers, but there was also a fun fair just outside the exhibition hall and, more than anything, I wanted to ride on the chair-a-planes, the ones that make you feel as if you’re really flying. . . I’ve always loved flying. . .”

“Go on,” Jessica said.

“My mother was at the show as well, and knew what I *really* wanted to do. She took one look at me, one look at the fun fair and said, ‘Come on. Let’s go!’”

“So you went to the fair?”

“We never got there. We were hardly off the stand when my father came rushing over and asked us where we thought we were going. My mother said he was being ridiculous and there was an almighty row, right there in the exhibition hall, with me watching. They were going at each other, in front of all those people, as if nothing else in the world mattered. Finally, I couldn’t take it any more. I turned and ran outside into the crowd. The main air display was about to start and there were thousands of people, pushing forward to get a good view. When you’re small, all you can see are trousers, jackets and dresses, nothing else. And you can’t see where you are because the bodies block your

view. I was lost for two hours before they found me, just running backwards and forwards in the crowd, trying to see where I was. . .”

His voice tailed off and he stared into space, as if he was living it all over again.

“Funny,” he said at last. “The things you remember.”

Jessica kissed his bare shoulder.

“And why do you think that was your ‘defining moment?’” she said softly.

Gilkrensky was still looking up at the ceiling. Finally he reached down and stroked her hair.

“I don’t know. My mother and father were so different. He wanted me to work, and she wanted me to stop once in a while and enjoy myself. Then she died when I was twelve, and my father got his way. Perhaps that’s why I get so obsessive about work, and why I’ve been looking for someone to ‘take me to the fair’ ever since.”

“And do I?”

There was another long silence. And Jessica knew, if ever there was to be a “defining moment” for their relationship, this was it.

“We’ll always be friends. Won’t we, Jess?” Gilkrensky said at last.

The affair ended when he finished his research and left to take the results back to his father. There were no scenes, no tearful goodbyes. He even offered her a job with his father’s company back in England, which she politely turned down, saying that she was her own woman and would look him up when she’d made her first million by herself.

“I bet you’ll do it too,” he told her when they parted at Logan airport. “I’ll be watching out for you.”

And then he left.

Look at it this way, the logical part of her brain reminded her as his plane taxied onto the runway, it wasn’t love. We had an easy friendship born out of mutual convenience for as long as we were together—nothing more, nothing less. It was only when the aircraft finally disappeared into the clouds that the illogical part of her soul wondered what it might have been like to spend the rest of her life with him.

And from then on, wherever she was in the world, a single red rose would arrive on the anniversary of that night in Salem when they had first made love.

The roses used to annoy Roderick Thorpe, when she went to work for him as chief executive of his family's Olympiad hotel chain back in England. Jessica had had a number of jobs since Boston, gradually working her way upwards, but it was obvious to her that if she was to make that first million she had promised Theo, she had to be a shareholder, with a piece of the action.

And that was how she got involved with Roderick Thorpe.

His group had hotels all over the country and needed a manager who knew what they were about. Jessica already had a job with a similar group but, over coffee, Roderick Thorpe offered what Jessica wanted most—a five percent shareholding, subject to performance.

It had been a long hard slog. The Olympiad chain looked impressive on paper, until you examined the books. Every hotel seemed to be a law unto itself and nobody was managing costs. To bring the group into profit represented a definite challenge.

But Jessica did it.

She called in the accounts of each hotel and went through them in meticulous detail, ruthlessly pruning those that didn't pay. Then she put together a strategic plan to change the image of the group, concentrating on the more profitable conference venues in London, Birmingham and Manchester.

She only made one mistake.

She fell in love with Roderick Thorpe.

She knew it wasn't smart. Thorpe was married. He had a bad reputation. But Jessica didn't care. She was on top of the world, and life was as full and exciting as it had been in Boston with Theo. Only this time it was better. Jessica was in control . . .

Until Thorpe dumped her.

He said he was sorry, but the chain had not performed as well as the board of directors had hoped. They had decided not to renew her contract.

At first she thought it was a joke. She showed him the books, the bank balances, the brochures for the fine new hotels and conference centres. But he wasn't listening.

He had been using her to save the business. Now his wife wanted him back, and had rattled her father's share holdings to get her way. Jessica had to go.

That night in her flat in London, after a long evening's journey through rage and despair, Jessica lay on her bed, trying to drink herself to sleep. There had been no "golden handshake", no severance pay, no shares in the business and, of course, no first million.

She was pouring herself another stiff gin and tonic, and cursing because all the ice was gone, when the doorbell rang. Through the haze of alcohol, she noticed it was a quarter to one in the morning, and for a moment thought it might be Roderick, but then again he had a key. She stumbled from the bed, threw cold water on her face and staggered to the door, making sure the security chain was on.

"Miss Jessica Wright?" said a uniformed courier.

"Yes."

"Package for you. Sign here please." And he handed her a single red rose, together with a small parcel containing a mobile phone. There was a note attached.

"I'm thinking of branching out into the hotel business and need someone with experience to manage them. Please call me. Your friend, Theo."

"You should get some sleep before the television people get here," said Sheila as she laid a situation report on Jessica's desk.

"What time is it now?"

"Almost a quarter past seven. Abigail has just come in, so I'll go and get a few hours rest myself."

"Thank you, Sheila. Before you go, could you e-mail that to the island and tell the Chairman I'll call him in ten minutes to discuss it."

"Do you think he'll be awake? It's still very early."

"Don't worry. He'll be up."

Jessica put the china mug down gently on the glass of her desk. For a moment she allowed herself the memory of Roderick Thorpe's face on the day, some weeks later, when she had forced the sale of his hotels to Theo's new corporation, and the pleasure of replacing the nameplate on his private suite at the London Olympiad with her own. Would Theo be able to handle what she

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

was about to tell him? If she could be there when he got the news it would help, but there was no time. Bringing her eyes to focus on the paper in front of her, she leant forward to read her notes in preparation for her report to her Chairman, friend and former lover, Dr Theodore Gilkrensky.

## 4

### THE EIGHTH RICHEST MAN IN THE WORLD

In the grey twilight of the early morning, Major Jonathan Crowe could hardly tell where the sky ended and the sea began. Fat raindrops shouldered their way towards the sill on the other side of the bullet-proof glass, and the last wind of the dying storm shook the rhododendron bushes near the helipad.

We'll need to cut those back, he thought, and made a note on his checklist. All through the storm, the weather had played tricks with the new security system. Waves had given false echoes on the radar and the wind, rattling doors and windows, had kept Crowe up half the night as it broke the contacts on the alarms. The only things that hadn't given trouble were the microwave motion sensors, but it was early days for them too.

Crowe slipped the clipboard under his arm, picked up one of the radio headsets from the desk and made sure his own security badge was in place. Then he opened the guard-room door and walked down the corridor to the main office in the east wing. One of the secretaries was already up and scrolling through the latest crop of e-mails.

"How long does he usually run for?" asked Crowe.

"About an hour in the mornings. But it's very wet today. So I expect he'll cut it short."

Just so long as he doesn't go beyond the perimeter, thought Crowe, or he'll trigger the motion sensors and we'll have to reset those as well.

Crowe had been head of security for GRC for less than a year, and was acutely aware of his responsibilities regarding the chairman. Mistakes had been

made in the past, and the chairman's wife had died. Crowe was determined that no such mistakes would happen while *he* was in charge.

Sliding the battery pack of the radio link into his pocket, Crowe eased the headset over his left ear and spoke into the microphone.

"Gerald? Where are you? Over?"

"Just completing our second lap, Major . . . We'll be back in about five minutes . . . Over?"

"Carry on. Out!"

"Major!" said the secretary at the computer. "You'd better look at this!"

He looked over her shoulder at the screen as the document opened and started to read.

"Oh my God!" he said softly, and searched the windswept landscape beyond the office windows.

"Gerald? Tom? You'd better get the chairman back in here fast. There's an urgent report just been e-mailed in from London and they'll be calling him about it in a few minutes. Over?"

"We're coming up near the helipad now, Major . . . You should see us in a moment. Over?"

"Roger that. Out!"

Above the hiss of the rain, Major Crowe heard a regular slapping sound, like a slow hand clap. Three running figures in line abreast came round a curve in the path, each one dressed in an identical jogging suit with a waterproof hood and cape. From a distance, it was impossible to tell the figures apart—just one of the many security precautions on Crowe's list.

Crowe asked the girl to print out the report and to make sure it was in front of the chairman when London called, then he leant back against the desk and considered the security implications of what he had just read.

The printer whirred. The girl stapled the pages together and walked into the corridor. As she went, a closed circuit television camera observed her from above, and a scanner in the ceiling recognised the identification badge she wore above her left breast. At the end of the corridor she entered the guardroom, with its TV monitors, security controls and grey painted desks. One of the bodyguards was peering down into a monitor as he wiped the rain from his face. He looked up at her and grinned. It was Thomas, the blond one who tried

to chat up all the girls. The quiet one from Belfast, the dark man who never smiled, would be in the shower. They always worked like that when they changed shifts. One of them was always on watch.

“Good morning, Helen. Will you come and scrub my back for me when Gerald’s finished in the shower?”

“Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t. But right now there’s an urgent report to go straight to the chairman, if you’d be so kind?”

He was very good-looking. But Helen has seen him sparring with Gerald in the gym one evening, and it had scared her.

“You can go right in, Helen. Or would you like me to body search you first?”

“Ah! Would you ever grow up, Thomas? That attitude of yours’ll be the death of you one of these days!”

The door to the inner sanctum opened.

After the stark brightness of the guard-room, the study beyond was soft and dark, like a well furnished cave. The only light came from a lamp on the desk at the far end of the room and a bank of plasma screens facing it from beneath the window. In the centre of the room was a small conference table piled high with papers, and along each wall an odd assortment of books and computer manuals jostled each other on crowded shelves, spilling into roughly stacked heaps on the floor.

But the desk itself was perfectly clear, except for three items: the lamp, a slim black briefcase, and a simply framed photograph of a young woman sitting on the rail of an old wooden bridge against a green wall of sunlit trees. She wore a forget-me-not blue dress that set off the coppery red of her hair, and she was smiling at the photographer. It was easy to see the love in her eyes.

“What is it, Helen? Gerald said it was urgent.”

“It’s a report from Miss Wright in London. You’re to read it straight away, so she can call you in a few minutes to discuss it.”

The man who had been staring out at the rain stopped drying his hair with a towel, and turned to face her across the desk.

“Thank you,” said Theodore Gilkrensky and reached out for the report. In the light of the lamp, Helen saw the scars running like melted wax across the back of his left hand. There was a thin scar on his face too, from beneath the

dark tousled hair, over his left temple, and down into the closely cropped beard. For a moment, Helen watched the tired brown eyes scan the report, wondering what he was thinking as he read. Then she turned and left. It was a sad face, she thought as the door hissed shut behind her, but nothing remarkable. Hardly what you'd expect from the eighth richest man in the world.

Gilkrensky scanned the pages once, said "Oh shit!", and sank into the leather swivel chair. Then he read the report again, searching for any hope in the blunt businesslike wording. Finding none, he slapped the pages down on the desk and lay back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

The chirrup of an incoming call sounded from the bank of plasma screens. Gilkrensky ignored it. He felt the sweat rising on his skin and a buzzing in his ears.

The video warbled, louder this time.

Gilkrensky glared at the papers on the desk, willing them to go away. The video console bleated at him again. This time the sound was continuous. Gilkrensky sank back further into the chair, and raised his hands to cover his ears.

In London, Jessica waited for Theo to take her call. The first television crew was arriving at eight and time was running out. Tiredness was starting to get the better of her. If only Theo would bloody well answer!

"Is he *there*?"

"I'm sorry Miss Wright. He was in the study a moment ago. I'll try him again."

"Please do. It's very urgent."

There was a few moments' delay. Then Theo's face filled the screen in Jessica's office—a face she still found unfamiliar. The short beard, the tousled hair, and the sad haunted eyes were a far cry from the confident, handsome man she had built a business empire with.

"We have an emergency, Theo!"

"I can see that Jess. I'd say it was pilot error."

“That’s not what the pilot says. He’s all over CNN insisting it was your Daedalus that crashed the plane.”

“That’s impossible. You know the number of safety features Bill McCarthy and I built into that thing. Even the back-up systems have back-up systems, and the main neural net’s supported by three logic-based peripherals. Those systems have—”

“Theo. This isn’t about the machine. It’s about public confidence. If we can’t find a way to recover from this story in the next few hours our reputation is going to go down the toilet: the SmartCard, the computers, the SmartMate—everything!”

“Then get the press office onto it! Get Bill to fly over from Florida with a team! He’ll soon show them that- ”

“Theo! I wouldn’t ask you if this wasn’t so crucial, but I need you to come to a press conference in London right away and make a statement.”

“Get somebody else, Jess. Get Pat O’Connor from the lab here, or Gerry Ross from the Microelectronics Centre in Cork. They’d—”

“You’re the only one with all the facts on Daedalus, Theo. It’s *your* machine!”

“Jessica. I’m in the middle of very important work on the Minerva system. We have the interface perfected now.”

“But this is vital!”

“No way!”

“Theo! I need you!”

“No!”

Jessica glared at the image on the screen. It was five to eight. The television crews would be arriving at any minute. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Theo. I have to call an emergency board meeting to discuss this crisis anyway. That’s my job, and there’s still that vote of confidence hanging over our heads regarding the Japanese.”

Gilkrensky stared at her blankly from the monitor.

“I can’t leave the island, Jess.”

Jessica’s fingers curved around the handle of her china mug. Her thumb pressed against the rim.

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

“Jesus, Theo! You’ve got to do something! Offers have been made to the other shareholders by Mawashi-Saito, and if you’re not here I am *not* going to take responsibility for what might happen at the meeting. The whole fucking corporation might as well pack up and move to Tokyo!”

Gilkrensky shifted uneasily in his seat.

“All right, Jess. I hear you. Send the jet to Cork and I’ll get my notes together.”

“I’ll keep you updated. There’s material coming in all the time.”

“Whatever. Have the Dublin office requisition another chopper and contact Helen to tell her what time it’ll arrive. I’ll have to use the one we have on the island to send Major Crowe ahead to arrange security.”

“OK. I’ll see you later. Oh! And Theo . . .”

But Jessica was already looking at a blank screen.

The intercom on her desk buzzed.

“The BBC people are here, Miss Wright.”

With a tiny snap, the handle of Jessica’s china mug came away in her fingers.

Theo Gilkrensky slumped back behind his desk, staring into space. After all the months he’d spent trying to lose himself in his work after Maria’s death, he was being dragged back. Back from the security of the island, his study and his personal routines for coping. He ran his hand over the smooth black surface of the briefcase. After nine months of unremitting sweat since the explosion, the Minerva 3,000 was fully operational. He’d perfected a new biochip that could survive without a complicated support system, new software that would make the most of its unique capabilities, and the most sophisticated user interface the world had ever seen . . .

His eyes wandered to the photograph of Maria, and from there to the rows of books lining the room. Most of them were hers: everything from standard medical texts to works on astrology, Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the *I-Ching* Colin Wilson’s book on *The Occult*, El Fiky’s review on *The Pyramids of Egypt*, books on earth energies, ley lines, and the book on Celtic magic she’d been reading on the day they’d first met . . .

## 5

### MARIA

It had been in the old library at University College, Cork. Gilkrensky had been working at the new Microelectronics Centre down by the river Lee, and had walked over to the main campus to look up references on company law. Years before, after she'd been brought in to run GRC by Theo, Jessica had begun to suspect his father's old friend and business partner Lord Rothsay of passing research secrets to competitors in Japan.

It had started with little things: modifications to the SmartCard, improvements in the robot pilot systems. But nobody would believe her. Rothsay was a war hero, an old family friend and a founder member of the board. Then there was a scandal. Rothsay had been keeping a Japanese mistress behind his wife's back, and suddenly the mud started to stick.

The work Theo had done on neural net biochips was too important to let slip. The gurus at the Cork MRC had confirmed he could achieve a breakthrough in artificial intelligence in only a few months—a breakthrough as revolutionary as the transistor, the microchip, or the Internet had been! And it was all his—if only he could win control of GRC.

Lord Rothsay had to go.

Because the June examinations were due, every space in the college library was filled, and every computer terminal was in use. Then, off in a quiet backwater of the sea of earnestly bent heads, a machine became free and Theo claimed it, laying out his books while he went off to the main files to hunt for the references he needed.

He returned, only a few minutes later, to find his claim challenged. All his research material had been piled into a neat stack on the floor, and in their place were scientific papers on geomagnetism, reports on visits to early prehistoric settlements, a map of Stonehenge and a large photograph of a Celtic broach overlain with tracing paper. Gilkrensky glared around at the bent heads nearby, but none of them would meet his eye.

He was just gathering up the tracing paper, the photographs and the books, when he noticed the faint smell of patchouli oil and a voice behind him hissed, "And what do you think you're at?"

Turning sharply, he found himself transfixed by a pair of angry green eyes in a sea of coppery hair.

"I was using this machine. Those are *my* books!"

"And how could you be using that machine when you were away mooning about in the stacks?"

She was simply dressed, in a white cotton blouse, a denim skirt and sandals. Gilkrensky looked into her eyes and felt his resolve slipping.

"I . . . I was looking for a reference."

"So was I!" she said. "And now I come back to find you throwing me out of my place."

Heads were starting to rise all around them.

"Ssshhh!" hissed one of the older students.

"Isn't that exactly what you've done to me?"

"And why not? Everyone knows this is where I work in the evenings!"

Gilkrensky was floundering. Clutching at straws, he pointed to her picture of the Celtic broach and the swirling ink lines.

"This is the technical section," he said. "Arts' is up on the first floor."

"There's no space up there! And besides, who are you to tell me what research I'm to be carrying out. You mechanists are all the same. Your thinking never leaves the rails of your blinkered imaginations!"

"And your does, I suppose."

"Indeed it does. Do you know that the complete geometry of the solar system was laid out in the design of that broach, over two thousand years ago?"

"*Really!*" snorted the other student. "I'm going to call the librarian." Several other heads nodded.

“You can call the gardai and the Local Defence Forces for all I care!” retaliated the redhead. “But I’m not budging!”

The other student fought her ground.

“We’ll see about that, Mary Anne Foley! Everyone knows you have no business here anyway!” And she marched off in search of reinforcements.

Mary Anne crossed her arms defiantly on her chest as she watched her go. Then suddenly, when the student was out of sight she said, “Judas!” and bent quickly to snatch up her material. “Now look what you’ve done. My library card expired ages ago, and if that old bat of a librarian catches me again, I’ll be barred from campus.”

“I’ll help you,” offered Gilkrensky, and by the time the irate student had returned with the librarian, the computer terminal was empty.

“The least you can do is to buy me a cup of coffee,” Mary Anne said, once they had reached the safety of the college quad.

“And why should I do that?” said Gilkrensky with a smile, knowing full well he would have bought her almost anything in return for a few more moments of her time.

“Because I have no money, and because I know who you are,” she replied, softening slightly. “You’re that rich scientist that’s working on some sort of super-computer down at the Maltings. Besides, I want to talk to a scientist about a theory of mine.”

“And you are?”

“Mary Anne Foley. But my friends call me Maria.”

“I’m Theodore Gilkrensky. But my friends call me Theo. Where would you like to go?”

“I’ll drive,” she told him.

She drove a battered Mini, with paintwork pimpled by rust, bald tyres and the boot lid tied down with string to a pub on the west side of city, where grassy banks sloped down to the river Lee. As she drove past the greyhound track and down the Great Western Road, he learnt she had qualified in medicine at Cork and joined one of the Irish Third World relief agencies, because she wanted to “make a difference”. In Africa, she had seen poverty and hardship beyond

comprehension, but she had also seen the remote tribes deep in the bush, where the materialism of modern man had not yet reached.

“These were the people who never came to the relief camps,” she explained, once they had corralled the little Mini in the pub car park and found a table by the river. “They were in tune with the seasons, the natural energies of the earth, and the phases of the moon. They were happy. It was only when we forced our own values on them, and then failed to keep our promise that the real poverty set in. We have a lot to answer for in Europe. We think we have a better way of life and ram it down everyone's throats.”

Gilkrensky looked at the sleek cars lined up in the car park, and across at the sad curve of a willow as it dipped into the river. In the setting sun, the light caught the colour of Maria's hair and forged a coppery halo.

“And you're going to change that?”

“No. People aren't going to give up their cars and their semi-detached houses on my say so. I can only look after my own destiny, and show others the way.”

“And what way is that?”

She looked up from her coffee and fixed him with her green eyes. Suddenly he felt completely transparent, as if she could see every part of him. It was a feeling he had never experienced before, not even with Jessica.

“I want your opinion on that,” she said. “What with you being a scientist and all. But first I must be sure you seriously want to know?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Because I've been hurt before you see. If I tell you my theories and you laugh at me, I'll never speak to you again.”

“I promise I won't.”

Again the green eyes appraised him.

“No. I believe you won't. Very well then. You are scientist—somebody who believes in a mechanical universe and the laws of physics. You believe that electrons make atoms, atoms make molecules, molecules make proteins, proteins make flesh and flesh makes people. According to your way of thinking, the earth and everything on it are all part of a gigantic living machine. Am I right? When we die, our flesh rots back into proteins, molecules and atoms, and the whole process starts all over again.”

“And you mean there’s more?”

“Of course there is,” she insisted earnestly. “And you, as a scientist know it too, only you can’t see the truth right in front of your eyes. What *is* an atom? It’s just a ball of tiny sub-atomic particles that quantum physics tell us are nothing more than energy.”

“Yes,” Gilkrensky said, wondering where this was leading. “I understand.”

“But do you *really*? Do you actually understand that this means *everything* in the whole universe—you, me, the table we’re sitting at, the river and everything in this world we see around us—is nothing more than energy.”

“Of course.”

“Then what happens when you die?” She said triumphantly, springing her trap.

“My body rots.”

“Your *body* rots. But what about the real you—the real Theo Gilkrensky living inside that mechanical body of yours. What about *that*?”

“I suppose, if I’m lucky, I go to heaven.”

“Yes. And where is ‘heaven’, geographically speaking?”

“Aren’t we straying into religion now?”

Maria’s eyes sparkled.

“Exactly! That’s the very point of it. All the religions in the world speak of an ‘afterlife’—a reality after death. In China it’s called ‘Tao’. In Hinduism it’s called ‘Brahman’. In Islam they call it ‘al Haaq—the reality’, and in Christianity we call it ‘heaven’.”

“I . . . I suppose so.”

“I’ve had religion shoved down my throat ever since I was a child, but it’s only in the last few years I’ve really thought about it scientifically. Have you ever seen a baby born? Have you ever seen its face the very moment it opens its eyes?”

“No.”

“I saw it once, when I was in Africa. I delivered a little black baby, and for an instant, when she opened her eyes, I was looking into the face of the wisest, kindest person I’d ever met. It was a person coming back to live again on earth. She was coming back from energy into matter, to live on the material world all over again.”

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

“So when we die, our real selves leave the body behind and go back to being energy?”

“Yes. That’s what ‘heaven’ really is. Inside we’re immortal. We live forever, dipping down from the field of energy you call heaven into the material bodies to spend time on earth. You are not a body with a soul, you are a soul made of energy who is temporarily inhabiting a body.” And she sat back on her bench, minutely examining his face for the first trace of ridicule.

“So? What do you think?” she asked finally.

“About us being nothing but energy?”

“Yes. Doesn’t it explain everything? About heaven, and God and how Christ could rise from the dead? Doesn’t it explain why people sometimes feel they’ve lived before, how you can heal someone with nothing more than your hands, and why I saw the wise old person in that baby’s eyes?”

He knew his answer was vitally important to her, and something deep within him even understood, although the leaps in logic she’d made were way beyond anything he’d ever been taught.

“It . . . It sounds like something my mother would have believed,” he said at last.

Maria smiled.

“Why? Was she a philosopher?”

“No. She was a gypsy.”

Even before she spoke, he knew he’d committed a serious crime.

“You *were* making fun of me all along!” she said coldly. “I told you if you laughed I’d never speak to you again.”

“But it’s *true!* My mother *was* a gypsy. She believed in fate and the future, and ancient remedies, and all the things you’ve been talking about. I can’t rationalise what you’ve just said in terms of science, but I believe you! It does explain a lot.”

“And *my* mother was the Queen of Siam!” snapped Maria. “Come on. I’m getting cold. Where do you live?”

“I’m not living anywhere. I’m staying in a hotel.”

“Which one?”

“The big one next to the college,” he said, almost ashamed.

“I’m glad you paid for the coffee then.”

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Maria refused to believe his protests of innocence all the way back to Cork. She refused his invitation of a drink, to clear the air. She simply handed him his books and dismissed him with a crisp “goodnight”.

He watched her Mini bump over the speed ramps as it left the hotel, knowing he had to see her again. She had struck some chord deep inside him and suddenly, he felt incomplete without her there to talk to. For a long time he lay fully clothed on his bed, staring at the ceiling, puzzled at what he was feeling, unsure of what to do.

Then he looked up her name in the phone book. But she wasn't there. She must live in a flat, he thought, and was suddenly aware of an acute and illogical pang of jealousy that she might not be living alone. He'd never felt like that about anyone else before.

All through his work next day in the Microelectronics Centre, his thoughts kept slipping back to Mary Anne Foley. He even made carefully couched enquiries, but nobody seemed to know her. At lunch-time he visited one of the more serious book shops in the city, made a purchase, and contrived to be at the library again that evening.

She was nowhere to be seen. So he took his books outside and searched the campus, carefully examining the groups of students taking the evening air, until he saw the familiar shock of coppery hair.

She was bent over a file of papers, beneath a cherry tree on the far side of the quad, deep in heated conversation—with a young man.

Gilkrensky felt an unfamiliar cocktail of emotions just then. There was betrayal, that what he thought they had shared was not for him alone. There was fear, that this might be the partner he imagined she lived with . . . who understood her . . . and loved her.

And there was relief . . . that he had found her again.

For a moment he watched her face as she argued her points, seeing the green eyes flash and the sun pick out the highlights in her hair. Then he summoned up his courage and walked across the few yards that separated them.

“Hi!” he said. “Did they throw you out of the library again?”

Maria's face lifted from the paper she was debating.

“They did *not*,” she said coldly. “I chose to stay out in the sun. Besides, I wanted to discuss something with Liam here and, as you know from experience, they don’t let you talk in the library.”

“How’s it going?” said the young man and shook Gilkrensky’s hand.

“This is my friend Theo,” Maria said. “He says he’s a gypsy and yet he lives in a hotel. I was telling him my theory of the universe last night.”

“Good to meet you,” said Liam. “Do you think she’s mad too?”

“Theo did not laugh at me *once* throughout my lecture,” Maria said. “And he’s a rich gypsy. So he should know.”

“She has her family driven demented with this stuff,” Liam said, implying a familiarity with Maria that made Gilkrensky’s heart sink. “Ever since she came back from Africa, she’s been spouting on about magic and tribal dances and ancient mumbo jumbo. Her mother will hardly take her to Mass for fear she might scare the priest.”

“That is *not* so. I always respect other people’s beliefs.”

“Do *you* understand her?” said Liam. “I don’t think anyone else in the world does.”

“Not yet,” Gilkrensky said. “But I think this person would. It seems to me you both think the same way, and I know *he’s* not mad.” Then he took the book he’d bought that day and handed it to her. It was *The Tao of Physics* by Frithoff Capra.

Maria smiled up at him, and the light of heaven shone again.

“Ah Theo! You weren’t making fun after all! I’ve been looking all over for this book.”

“You must be someone special,” said Liam getting to his feet. “There aren’t many people who come looking for Mary Anne once they’ve been through her theories once. Let alone share them with her.”

“You did,” Gilkrensky said, needing to know. The young man smiled.

“I’m forced to,” he said. “I’m her brother. I’ll see you around, I’m sure.”

And he winked.

Gilkrensky saw Maria every day after that. They spent hours walking on the west Cork beaches, browsing in bookshops, or meandering through the woods talking about anything at all. Later they spent evenings alone in her top floor eyrie of a flat, overlooking the lights of the city from a Victorian tenement off

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Waterloo Road, eating pizza and drinking red wine. On the first night they made love, in the candle scented darkness of her bedroom, she held him to her with an urgency that surprised him. And then, when the last wave of passion had broken inside her, she cried softly in his arms.

Gilkrensky lay awake afterwards, watching as she slept under the soft glow of the candlelight, trying to solve the mystery of this wonderful, magical woman. The next morning, after they had made love again, he asked her about the tears. But whether they had been from the joy at having found him, or over some secret sorrow in her past, she would never say.

They were married the following spring, in the happy chaos of an Irish country wedding. Her father could hardly conceal his relief as he gave the bride away, her sisters only *just* kept their jealousy under control, and her brothers gathered up the more drunk and daring of the guests for a midnight swim in the sea.

When GRC diversified into Ireland, Theo made his base in a converted country house her family had once owned in one of the prettier valleys south of Dublin. Maria set up a practice in alternative medicine in the city, and seemed to adopt every charity under the sun.

And through all the ups and downs of their time together, through all the fights that came later, he had loved her. He had finally found someone to “take him to the fair.”

Gilkrensky sat and stared at her beloved face in the photograph for a long, long time, lost in those green eyes. Then, when this private meditation was over, he leant forward, opened the lid of the slim black briefcase on the desk and started to work.

## 6

### YUKIKO

“There is no place in the Sekigushi *ryu* for someone who does not honour tradition.”

Yukiko listened to the older man’s words with a sense of impending doom. Everything about the Sekigushi *ryu*, which had taught swordsmanship and other ancient skills for the past five hundred years, was based on tradition. Everything—from the monastic simplicity of the room in which she now sat, to the gruelling sessions with arcane weaponry—was rooted in tradition and *bujutsu*, the way of the warrior. Sekigushi *ryu* was the most exclusive school for swordsmanship in Japan, with an endless waiting list. There could be only one fate for a student who did not adhere religiously to its strict code of ethics—disgrace, dishonour and dismissal.

Suddenly, the sweat that had soaked Yukiko’s simple black cotton uniform since the beginning of the evening’s training session, felt cold on her skin.

“*Hai, sensei!*” she said.

The dying light of the winter evening, reddened to the colour of blood, played over the room. It lit the polished wooden floor, the simple brush paintings of birds and butterflies that the late Master Okuda had hung on the walls, and the single flower in a porcelain vase his son had placed on the desk to honour his memory. Outside the window, the roar of a jet landing at Narita airport sounded like the thunder of another age.

“Do you have anything to say?”

“No, *sensei.*”

Taisen Okuda did not look like an adept in a dozen ways of dealing death. He was a small man, with the thin, pinched face of a country priest, and misty eyes that always seemed to be fixed on higher things, even when they were probing an opponent's guard for the slightest hint of weakness.

"Tell me about your encounter with Hasagawa."

Yukiko chose her reply carefully. Hasagawa was Okuda's protégé, a strict traditionalist from one of the oldest families in Japan. He was a master of archery, *karate*, *aikido* and most of all *ken-jutsu*, the way of the sword. By many he was considered to be the best. But, like many of the older conservatives in Japan, he was a confirmed bigot.

Yukiko wondered how much Okuda knew, or suspected.

"It was merely a practice *karate* session, *sensei*," she suggested. "I asked Hasagawa if he could help me improve my sparring."

"Hasagawa tells me you challenged him."

So he knew.

"*Hai, sensei.*"

Okuda considered this response for a while, as his grey eyes tested hers.

"Why?"

"Hasagawa called me a '*gaijin*' and worse. He said there was no place for anyone of mixed race at the *ryu*. I have been a student here for many years, and was awarded the third scroll by your father before he died. It was my duty of honour to challenge him."

"And then what happened?"

Yukiko described the match carefully. It had taken place in the sparring square of the main *dojo* as if it had been a demonstration exercise. Referees had been appointed, and the contestants briefed. Yet the barely hidden anticipation of the students gathered to watch told a different story. Hasagawa was an adept, a master. Yukiko, the only woman ever to be admitted, was feared for her aggression.

There was blood in the air.

The first round had been over in less than five seconds. Both contestants had bowed and assumed the fighting stance. Each stared into the other's eyes—probing. Then Hasagawa exploded forwards with a loud "*kaia*" scream as he

flailed the air in a volley of knife hand strikes. Yukiko had hardly seemed to move. And there was Hasagawa, sprawled on the wooden floor.

The contestants moved to their corners and bowed again. This time, Hasagawa avoided Yukiko's gaze, testing her defences with carefully planned strikes before committing himself. But he was too slow. There was a flurry of movement, the slap of a body on wood, and once again Hasagawa was glaring up at Yukiko from the *dojo* floor. The referee in her corner raised his hand. The match was over.

For a few moments Okuda contemplated this account.

Then he said, "By what means did you defeat him?"

Yukiko saw the hidden danger behind the question, and knew Okuda already had the answer. It had really only been a matter of time.

"I do not understand, *sensei*."

"I think you do, Yukiko. I think you know very well. Tell me about your visits to Kyoto."

"I go there to further my studies, *sensei*."

"And you never thought to tell me, or my father before me, until now? What things do you learn there?"

Yukiko did not answer. She knew that masters of the pure form of *bujutsu*, as taught at Sekigushi *ryu*, frowned on the "black arts" she had been immersed in over the last two years. Perhaps Okuda had known for some time, and been waiting for a chance to lure her into the open, so that he might dismiss her. Today, his protégé Hasagawa had provided it.

"If you will not give me an answer, then I will supply one for you," Okuda said slowly. "The school you attend in Kyoto teaches skills of which nobody can be proud. That you feel the need to learn them, I can only put down to your sex and your ancestry. You have deceived me in this, and it has only been my father's debt to your uncle which has kept you here. In spite of my regard for him, I have no choice. You must leave now and never return."

"*Hai, sensei*."

There was nothing more to be said.

Yukiko bowed and rose from the floor, looking around the room for the last time. Sekigushi *ryu* had been the one rock in the swirling waters of her troubled

life. Her training sessions the metronome against which she had measured time.

She closed the thin screen behind her and walked around the sacred *dojo* floor to the locker room beyond, seeing the years of her training, from adolescence to womanhood, there in the polished wood.

Sitting on a bench close to her locker was a young man with a pleasant moon-shaped face. It was Sasaki, the student who had been her referee.

"I fear the worst," he said. "Is it so?"

"*Hai*. I have been asked to leave."

Sasaki considered this, while his head moved sadly from side to side.

"I thought as much. Did I not warn you, many times?"

Yukiko opened her locker, and was moving her few possessions into a black holdall.

"You did, Sasaki-san. But I had to go my own way."

"Why Yukiko? Were you not happy here?"

She gently took a slim bundle from her locker. It was about half a metre long and wrapped in oiled cloth. Carefully, reverently, she placed it inside the holdall and closed the zip.

"There is a great sadness in you," Sasaki said at last, "but also a great anger. We can all sense it, and I know Okuda *sensei* can too. That above all, must be why he asked you to go."

Yukiko turned and faced him.

"I am a woman and I am a *gaijin*—a half caste. Okuda has been waiting for an excuse to throw me out ever since he inherited the *ryu* from his father. And today I lost control and betrayed myself by beating his favourite student—a man like himself, who is obsessed with tradition and blinded by prejudice. *That* is why he told me to go!"

Sasaki shook his head.

"Once again you are angry," he said. "But you are right in one thing. Hasagawa is a traditionalist, and he will demand a traditional settlement. Would you like me to come with you to your car?"

"No, Sasaki-san. You have been a good friend. But I must face him on my own."

It was fully dark by the time Yukiko left the *ryu*. The cold white light of the moon had replaced the blood red glow of the sun, and it shone on the sea of carefully raked pebbles in the formal Zen garden, casting deep shadows around the rocky islands, the hedges beyond, and the narrow lane leading to the car park.

Yukiko sensed Hasagawa's presence in the darkness, as well as his intentions—they had taught her this in Kyoto. So she stood still and waited, until a short stocky figure stepped from the alleyway, blocking her path.

"We have unfinished business, *woman!*" snapped Hasagawa. "You used witchcraft against me, and I demand a rematch—*shiniai*."

He was still dressed in the black cotton *gi* of the *ryu*. Tucked into his belt on the left side was the gracefully curving sheath of his *katana*—a beautiful handmade sword of unbelievable sharpness—a priceless heirloom that would have been handed to him by his father on the day he reached manhood.

"I have no wish to kill you," Yukiko said, bowing her head. "I have been dismissed from the *ryu*, and all that is behind me now."

"I spoke the truth when I called you a half breed without honour," hissed Hasagawa. "You defile the memory of our late Master Okuda and the *ryu* itself by thinking you are above its teachings. Then you defeat me with trickery. I demand *shiniai*—a duel to the death."

Yukiko considered this latest in a lifetime of insults, feeling the familiar wave of madness rise, break, and fall back—under her control.

"We will move to the lawn then," she said flatly, taking her black holdall with her. "This is not the place."

The lawn was below Master Okuda's darkened window. Yukiko knew he was watching. She could sense his presence behind the half drawn blinds and, in that instant, knew Okuda had arranged everything: from Hasagawa's insult, to her own presence here on the lawn, to be this way. Now, Okuda *sensei*, she thought, we will see where tradition takes you. Then she reached down for the black holdall, and slid out the oil cloth package. Carefully, lovingly, she undid the string and unfurled the cloth.

Lying in its centre was a *wakizashi*—a smaller version of Hasagawa's *katana*—a short sword in a delicately inlaid scabbard bearing the cherry

blossom of the Funakoshi family. She pulled the belt of her cotton *gi* from her bag, wrapped it around her waist and tucked the short sword into it. Then she turned and faced Hasagawa, who sneered at her in disbelief across the moonlit lawn.

“What is this, woman? You mock me again! Where is your *katana*? Nobody fights with a *wakizashi*. That is a suicide sword!”

“It belonged to my parents,” Yukiko said. “You challenged me to *shinai* and I have chosen my weapon. If you do not want to fight me, you can always withdraw.”

Yukiko felt the swirling emotions of mistrust and contempt inside Hasagawa as he faced her. But stronger than any of these, she sensed Hasagawa’s supreme confidence in his own ability as a master swordsman. Hasagawa was a known *sensei* of *iai-jutsu*, the art of drawing a sword and striking an opponent in one blindingly fast movement. He would be certain of victory against any other student at the *ryu*, including her, in a traditional match.

That would be his undoing.

“As you wish,” Hasagawa said. “We will begin?”

“*Hai*.”

They bowed solemnly in the moonlight and knelt facing each other, on the tightly mown lawn with their right knees forward. Yukiko saw Hasagawa’s left thumb move his sword handle free of the scabbard, ready for the draw. Her body totally relaxed as her mind focused below her own navel, on the seat of her inner power. Her eyes fixed on Hasagawa’s, and in that instant, the two swordsmen became one.

Hasagawa was not afraid of death. As a true disciple of *bu-jutsu*, he accepted it as an inevitability. Far better to die in one glorious stroke, than to waste away without dignity inside a maze of tubes in a hospital bed, as Master Okuda had done. Therefore, having challenged the *gaijin* woman to *shinai* as Okuda *sensei* had suggested, Hasagawa welcomed her as an honoured guest in the duel, and focused himself on the task in hand. He bowed, knelt, and sought to calm himself with his breathing, so that he might reach that solid rock within from which to spring.

But it was gone!

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As his gaze was drawn into Yukiko's, all his composure and strength drained away. All the years of training were suddenly sucked out of him by those remorseless black eyes.

It was witchcraft!

At a stroke he had gone from warrior to child, alone and frightened in the darkness. And as a child, he lashed out artlessly with his father's beautiful *katana*—at empty air.

The last thing he felt was the piercing chill of her short sword deep inside him, as it slid through his solar plexus, his diaphragm and up into his heart. Then the great *katana* dropped from his hand as he fell forwards onto the wet grass, dead.

Yukiko stood above his body like a statue in the moonlight, as the madness ebbed away. Then she carefully wiped the *wakizashi* in the oil cloth before sliding it gently into its scabbard. Finally, she turned to Okuda *sensei's* darkened window, bowed, and walked off into the night.

## 7

### HOSTILE TAKEOVER

Jessica snapped awake in her chair at the discrete knock on the board room door. The morning had been hell—a minefield of media inquiries, order cancellations and reassuring calls to major customers. She had just closed her eyes for a second . . .

Standing in the doorway was a short, broad shouldered man with a thick set neck, dark brown hair in a military cut, and a neat moustache.

“You wanted to see me, Miss Wright?” Crowe said. His voice was clipped and precise, with the slightest West Country burr on the “r” of her name. Born in Dorset, or so it said on his file. He had served with the Royal Marines until seriously injured in a helicopter crash in Iraq and invalided home. From there he had set up his own security company, specialising in high-tech computer surveillance and had done contract jobs for GRC, until Theo had made him chief of security following Maria’s death. Crowe had been at the farmhouse in Wicklow, about to undertake a review of security systems, on the day she had died. It had been Crowe who had pulled Gilkrensky back from the bomb shattered wreck, saving his life.

Jessica tried to shrug off her tiredness.

“Yes Major. I’m sorry to drag you back here to London, but then again we have a crisis on our hands. Come and sit down.”

Major Crowe took a seat at the board table facing the window, while Jessica turned his file face down on her desk.

“How are you settling into the new job?”

“Very well, thank you, Miss Wright. I’ve insisted we upgrade the security on the island, and I was just checking everything out when the balloon went up.”

“Has there been any progress in the investigation into Maria Gilkrensky’s death?”

“I’m afraid not. The Irish gardai know very little, except that it was an explosive device, probably armed by radio, or triggered by the car’s ignition. They think it was an attempt on the chairman. Mrs Gilkrensky was only using his car because hers wouldn’t start.”

“And how is he . . . psychologically speaking?”

Crowe hesitated before he answered.

“The lads tell me he keeps pretty much to himself. Work on the new computer is going well, and the boffins from Cork are quite excited.”

“Any other visitors?”

“Nobody except the scientists, and a few other specialists from time to time. Dr Gilkrensky doesn’t leave the island, apart from the odd helicopter flight to Cork airport to fly the jet. And there haven’t been any séances for months.”

“Séances?” Jessica had heard rumours, but had never known if they were true.

“Just after Mrs Gilkrensky died and we set up the house on the island, there was a gaggle of spiritualists who had to be security cleared. Then the whole thing stopped at about the time he had the last breakthrough with the computer. It was as if he didn’t need them anymore. Good thing too, in my view. It used to spook the staff like mad. Only last week—”

“But I thought you said the séances stopped months ago?”

“So they did. But you know how people are, once word gets round. Only last week one of the girls claimed she heard the chairman having a conversation with his dead wife after everyone else was asleep.”

Jessica’s mind was wandering. She found herself staring out through the rain streaked windows into space as she thought about Major Crowe’s ghost stories. Well, if anyone had the right qualifications to be a witch it was Maria Gilkrensky she thought, and felt the old stirrings of jealousy rising up again. Jessica had only met her once, but once was enough—more than enough—to establish the rules of engagement between them.

It had been at the opening of the new GRC electronics plant in Cork. The event had been arranged with the usual Gilkrensky flair. Theo had arrived by helicopter, grinning and waving to the cameras. There had been a lot of speeches by local politicians. The Lord Mayor had cut the ribbon across the threshold, and pressed the button to start the machines. Theo was being asked all the right questions about job creation and investment. Everything was going beautifully.

Maria had arrived quietly by car on her own, parked well away from the VIP area and only shadowed Theo from a distance, as if she did not want to be part of the media frenzy around her husband.

Jessica had already made it her business to know a great deal about Theo's wife. Part of her excused this curiosity as simple interest in her friend's welfare. But she also had to admit to good old-fashioned jealousy. If Maria had been any other woman in the world, Jessica would have had the comfort of knowing that Maria had only chosen Theo for his money. But Maria was not interested in money, or anything to do with it. The car she drove was a battered Mini. The clothes she wore would not have looked out of place in a charity shop and, when Theo finally spotted her and dragged her into the limelight, her discomfort at the trappings of success was thinly disguised.

As Theo moved on with the main group of VIP's to tour the plant, leaving Maria on her own, Jessica took the plunge and introduced herself.

"Mrs Gilkrensky? I'm Jessica Wright."

"I know," Maria said, fixing Jessica with her green eyes. "My husband knew you in Boston."

That was it.

There were no pleasantries. No refined sparring with words. No attempts to build bridges or forget the past. The message was clear. You knew my husband once, but now he is mine. Stay away!

Maria turned, put down her glass of mineral water on the groaning buffet table, and walked back to her car, leaving Jessica to stew in the most intense cocktail of jealousy and loss she had ever experienced.

It wasn't simply that Maria was beautiful. Jessica herself was a striking woman, and other lovers since Theo had told her so. It wasn't that Maria was intelligent and accomplished in her own right. Jessica was the chief executive of

a major multinational corporation and handled transactions involving millions every day.

What galled Jessica--what ate at her deeply, at a level she hardly acknowledged existed--was that Maria had reached that inner sanctum of Theo's soul which she herself had longed to touch, and been denied.

That hurt.

Jessica had let Theo, the only man she ever really loved, slip through her fingers that day at Boston airport. Fool! She told herself. I should have swallowed my pride, left everything behind and jumped on that plane with him!

On the morning when news of Maria's death had come to her, as she ate her solitary breakfast in her Grosvenor hotel suite, that secret, lonely part of Jessica rejoiced.

"The bitch is dead," it said. "Now Theo is mine."

"In your capacity as head of security, I'd like you to sit in on the board meeting this afternoon, Major," Jessica said, snapping back to the present.

"And to do that I will need to brief you on the Japanese involvement in GRC. You know they have a twenty-five per cent shareholding. Do you know how they came by it?"

Crowe hesitated before he spoke.

"I heard there was bad blood about that," he said carefully. "A disgruntled shareholder called Rothsay sold out. But I don't know all the details."

"Then I should fill you in. GRC was originally formed as the Gilcrest Radio Company back in 1937. The original shareholders were Leo Gilkrensky the chairman's father, and this shareholder you speak of, the flier Lord Stephen Rothsay. Each of them held twenty five per cent, and a gentleman's agreement never to upset that balance of power. Then there was one of the major aircraft companies in Farnborough, with twenty per cent, a pension scheme consortium with another twenty percent, and an investment bank with ten. At the start, the company was very successful, particularly with the war coming when it did, but Lord Rothsay was a very high liver, with an eye for the ladies. After the war, he found he could make more money by selling Leo Gilkrensky's ideas to competitive interests in Japan."

“I see,” said Crowe.

“When old Leo died, his son Dr Theodore Gilkrensky asked me to take over as chief executive. Lord Rothsay was still up to his old tricks, but it was impossible to prove and I got nowhere convincing any of the other board members. Then there was a scandal. Rothsay was caught cheating on his wife and left the country. But that didn’t stop him selling GRC down the drain. Dr. Gilkrensky had to get Lord Rothsay out. And to do that, he had to have a majority shareholding. So I worked out a . . . er . . . scheme, to get it for him.

“Between us, we let it be known that work on the new neural net biochip was going nowhere. Without the biochip to keep us ahead of the pack, people assumed the Gilcrest Radio Corporation was doomed. And you can guess what happened to the price of the shares.”

“They fell,” Crowe said.

“Exactly. They fell so low that both the Farnborough aircraft company and Lord Rothsay got cold feet and dumped their shares. The aircraft company sold at a rock bottom price to a certain merchant bank in London, a bank which had been specifically instructed to buy those shares for a third party.”

“And that third party was Dr. Gilkrensky.”

“Yes, Major. With the twenty five percent holding his father had left him, that brought Dr. Gilkrensky’s shares up to forty five percent of the company, one step nearer to the majority shareholding he needed. Or so he thought.”

“And Lord Rothsay?”

Jessica stared at the rain swept window again, watching the fat drops race each other down the glass. The tiredness was really catching up on her now.

“That’s the irony of it all,” she said. “He sold out to the Japanese.”

They had sent no limousine or helicopter to meet Jessica at Narita airport that day on her first, and only visit to Tokyo. It had been a two hour journey by taxi to the Mawashi-Saito building in the Shinjuku business district, where she had been shown to a vast board room on the forty-second floor. The walls were bare, except for a simple ink drawing of a bird on a bamboo branch.

Across the city, through the haze, she saw Mount Fuji and Tokyo Bay to the east. But her eyes kept coming back to that picture. To her, it seemed crude, like something a child might have drawn. And she wondered why such a rich

and powerful company as Mawashi-Saito should choose to give it pride of place in this, their holy of holies.

“Do you have any idea what you are looking at, Miss Wright?”

Standing in the doorway to her left was a short, compact Japanese with iron grey hair. He was dressed in a dove-grey business suit, a brilliant white shirt, and a black tie of knotted silk. Beside him was a young woman, an “office lady” in a smart company uniform, with raven black hair tied in a tight bun and delicate, gold framed glasses. To Jessica, she seemed tall for a Japanese—head and shoulders above the man—and her eyes seemed red, as if she had been crying.

“You mean the picture?” asked Jessica.

The man could have been any age between fifty and eighty. His stern face was a mask that gave nothing away.

“That is precisely what I mean, the picture. Do you know what it is?”

“No. I don’t.”

The man and his assistant sat at the polished lake of the board room table. They did not ask Jessica to do the same.

“That picture is an original ink drawing by one of our greatest artists, Miyamoto Musashi. You have heard of him?”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

“Musashi was the greatest swordsman who ever lived. His masterpiece was his “Book of Five Rings”, the “*Go Rin No Sho*” as we call it. I’m sure you must know of this book.”

“I cannot say I do.”

“It appears there is much you do not know about Japan, Miss Wright. I am therefore surprised our chairman should send you on such an important mission, rather than coming to see me himself. Perhaps he is trying to send me a message?”

Jessica noticed that the woman in the office uniform had stopped taking notes, and was watching her for a reaction.

“There is no insult intended, Funakoshi-san,” Jessica said, pulling out a chair from the table. “I am the chief executive of the Gilcrest Radio Corporation, and as such the most important person in the organisation after the chairman.”

“You know my name at least,” Funakoshi said. “What else do you know?”

“I know you have succeeded in doing what no other businessman has ever been able to do, in merging two major Japanese companies together—in this case Saito Electronics and the Mawashi trading house. I know the Mawashi-Saito *keiretsu* is among the top five in Japan, which makes you one of the most powerful men in the country.”

“Look out of the window, Miss Wright, and tell me what you see.”

“I see the city, the mountain, and Tokyo Bay.”

“Indeed. In 1945 I stood on this spot and watched the great American battleships *Missouri* on which our surrender was signed. I was only ten years old at the time, starving and covered in lice, both my parents were dead, and my baby sister was lying sick at my side. Japan suffered three and a half million casualties, Miss Wright. A quarter of all the buildings were destroyed here in Tokyo. Now, look again.”

“Your country has done well.”

“It has. You are standing on the most expensive real estate in the world, where land sells for fifty thousand US dollars per square *metre*. Japan is the most powerful business nation on earth. Do you know how that was done?”

“Mr Funakoshi. What are you driving at?”

Funakoshi turned and pointed to the picture on the wall.

“*Giri*, Miss Wright, the code of selfless duty and obligation we Japanese live by, and the position you find yourself in today.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jessica.

“I did not expect you to,” replied Funakoshi. “Mawashi-Saito, and indeed everything in Japan, is built upon a code of ethics, the triumph of *giri* over *ninjo*, our personal feelings and desires. Dr Gilkrensky acquired his majority shareholding in the Gilcrest Radio Corporation by devious means, by ‘sharp practice’, as you would say. Such a thing is unheard of, here in Japan. There is no such thing as a hostile take-over. We call that a “hi-jack”, the word for it is the same. In artificially collapsing the price of your shares and acquiring a majority shareholding over Lord Rothsay, you not only broke the agreement he had with Dr Gilkrensky’s father, but also swindled him out of a great deal of money.”

“I understand that, Mr Funakoshi,” Jessica said, thinking of Rothsay’s own deception in selling Theo’s secrets. “But do you not have a saying in Japan that ‘business is war?’”

“Indeed we do, Miss Wright, and now Mawashi-Saito has won a twenty-five per cent interest in your company.”

“It is only a minority shareholding.”

“As you speak of war, I would draw your attention back to the works of Musashi. If you were familiar with them, you would recognise our tactics as what he called ‘crossing at a ford.’ Put simply, Musashi says that one should always attack an enemy at his weakest point. You say our seat on your board is a minority one. That is true. But it gives us access. And who knows, if the other shareholders decide to sell, it could become a controlling interest in time.”

“What is it you want, Mr Funakoshi?”

“Two things. Firstly, I am interested in Dr Gilkrensky’s neural network biochip. I hope we can come to some mutually agreeable licence arrangement whereby Mawashi-Saito can manufacture it here in Japan.”

“That will not be possible.”

“Why not?”

“Look at the experience of IBM. They granted licenses to manufacture their computers to Japanese companies and suddenly found themselves pushed out of the Japanese market. GRC will manufacture the biochip and sell it to you on our terms.”

“But I am part of GRC now, Miss Wright. I have a seat on your board of directors. Think on my offer. Discuss it with Dr Gilkrensky. We can work in partnership, or in opposition. In opposition, I will win. Please consider partnership.”

“And the second thing?”

Funakoshi leant forward. For the first time a trace of emotion sounded in his voice.

“I wish you to know that Lord Rothsay did not recover from the blow you dealt him over this matter. Early yesterday morning he was found at his apartment here in Tokyo. He had taken his own life.”

Jessica could no longer meet Funakoshi’s gaze, and glanced instead at the young woman by his side. For an instant, it was as if a mask had slipped.

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

Through the gold rimmed glasses the most intense look of animal hatred Jessica had ever seen, burned at her across the board room table, bringing with it a terrible, chilling realisation. Then the look was gone, and the woman was an “office lady” again, busy with her notepad.

“I’m sorry,” said Jessica.

“So am I, Miss Wright. He was my friend. I will see you at our next board meeting”

## 8

### CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The storm, which had caused so much havoc to Major Crowe's security systems on the island, had reached London. Rain lashed at the windows of the GRC board room, and on the sky line. Lightning flashed to the west.

"I realise both of you have been made substantial offers by Mawashi-Saito for your shares in GRC," Jessica said, "and that, in the normal run of events, you were to give me your decision in a week's time, on Christmas Eve. But we have to set that aside and concentrate on the crisis in hand. It's in all our interests to exonerate the Daedalus unit and restore confidence as fast as possible. I've suggested one practical strategy for doing so, based on advice from our technical people and the press office. I've outlined it to you in advance of the meeting to get your reactions, and to make sure I have your support before we're joined by the Japanese."

"And the chairman?" asked Sir Robert Fynes, whose pension fund represented ten per cent of GRC. "Have you discussed it with him?"

Sir Robert was an impressive man, with a broad honest face. His grey eyes appraised Jessica minutely, reminding her that he had not approved of her appointment as chief executive by Theo, or the way she had masterminded the Lord Rothsay affair behind his back.

"I spoke to the chairman early this morning," she said. "But he may've been too concerned about the crash to take in all the details. That's why it's important we know what we want to get out of this meeting. Tony, have there been any more developments?"

Tony Delgado combed his fingers through his hair. Jessica knew he had been without sleep for at least as long as she had, and it was beginning to tell. There were grey rings under his eyes.

“We’ve had a whole flood of problems in the wake of the crash,” he said. “Many of the advance orders for the SmartMate have fallen through, and that deal we were doing with the Taiwanese to install Daedalus in their commercial air fleet has been put on ice pending an enquiry.”

“The cost of all this is mind-boggling,” said Giles Fulton of the investment consortium who owned the remaining shares in GRC. He was a small, neat man with a large balding head, thick glasses and the sharpest business mind Jessica had ever come across.

“And those costs will go on rising, if this isn’t settled,” she said. “If GRC can’t regain the ground it’s lost over this Daedalus incident, you’ll both lose out whether you sell to the Japanese or not. The value of your shares will plummet and the Japanese may reconsider their offer. I’d say that *any* amount of money we spend, or any action we take, that succeeds in exonerating us, is well worth it.”

“Anything?” Sir Robert said, reminding Jessica of her proposal.

“We’re losing money hand over fist as it is,” offered Tony Delgado, coming to her aid. “The adverse publicity has already completely eclipsed the launch of the SmartMate.”

“I see your point,” said Fulton. “But why should the Japanese support the proposal? Surely they could just sit back and let GRC fall apart. Then they could pick up our shares for a song?”

“They might,” Jessica said. “But don’t forget that Mawashi-Saito own a valuable parcel of GRC shares themselves. If they let this crisis go too far, and confidence tumbles, their own shares will become worthless too. It all depends on the corporate strategy their board of directors adopts. We’re taking a gamble, gentlemen. It could go either way.”

“Excuse me, Miss Wright,” said Sir Robert, pointing to the window. “But I think the chairman is about to arrive.”

Everyone around the table followed the direction of Sir Robert’s hand through the rain-dashed window, to where a blue and white helicopter was climbing upwards over the Thames to the helipad above their heads.

Gilkrensky unclipped his seat belt, took the black briefcase from the man behind him, and peered out through the windscreen. Through the driving rain, he saw four men in yellow oilskins, each guarding a corner of the helipad, and Major Crowe directing operations from the shelter of the stairwell. Tony Delgado stood holding his coat tight against the wind.

Gilkrensky stepped out over the skid, ducking under the spinning rotors as he ran to the stairwell.

“Good to see you in the flesh, Tony. It’s been a long time.”

“Too long, sir. It’s great to have you with us again.”

“I suppose you haven’t met my new baby sitters yet. This one is Gerald Maguire. Gerald, meet Tony Delgado.”

Delgado offered his hand.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure sir,” Maguire said. His voice was soft and controlled, but his hand remained deep in the pocket of his bulky anorak, as if he was holding something.

Gilkrensky leant forward and grinned.

“Whatever you do Tony, don’t make any sudden moves,” he said, moving down the stairs into the warmth of the building.

Since his retreat after Maria’s death, Jessica had not met Theo face to face. In spite of the many video calls, she still found it hard to accept how much he’d changed. The thin, bearded figure in the worn leather jacket who greeted her in the board room bore little resemblance to the man she had once loved in Boston. His eyes, which had held such fire, now had a haunted look and the wonderful hands she had once admired were rippled with scars.

“Hello, Jess,” he said. And deep inside, Jessica wept. Had she not been in the corporation board room, in front of half a dozen directors and staff, she would have hugged him.

“Mr Chairman,” she said at last, holding out her hand. “I’m glad you could come.”

“Let me take your coat, sir,” said Sheila Browne, and turned to hang the leather jacket on the coat rack near to door. It was protocol at board meetings, for Sheila to take the minutes and manage any videoconferencing that needed

to be done from the master terminal to the left of the chairman's seat. But when she turned back from hanging up Gilkrensky's jacket, she found he was already sitting in her place. She frowned at Delgado, and he leant over Gilkrensky's shoulder.

"Would you mind sitting at the head of the table, sir?"

"I'd rather sit here, if that's all right with Sheila?" Gilkrensky said. He placed his briefcase on the floor next to the master console and connected it to one of the communications ports with a thick grey cable he had taken from his pocket. Tony Delgado watched him for a moment, and then shrugged.

"I'll sit in the 'hot seat' for today then, shall I Tony?" offered Jessica. "I'm sure Sheila won't mind."

She took Theo's place at the top of the table, facing the plasma screens. To her right sat Major Crowe, scanning the nearby rooftops over Tony Delgado's shoulder.

"Very well then," Jessica said. "Could we have the videoconference links please, starting with Japan?"

Sheila Browne had already started to lean across Gilkrensky's left arm to press the appropriate key on the master console for him. But before she could touch it, the key lit up of its own accord. She drew her hand back in surprise.

On the wall at the far end of the boardroom table, the largest video monitor blinked into life. The scene was almost a mirror image of their London board room, with a long table totally clear of paper, surrounded by a dozen earnest Japanese. Jessica saw the ink drawing by Musashi, on the wall behind them.

"I thought we were just speaking to Funakoshi," she hissed to Delgado.

The familiar figure, in the seat of honour furthest from the door at the table in Tokyo, could be heard as clearly as if he had been in the board room with them.

"I hope there has been no misunderstanding, Miss Wright. In view of the seriousness of the situation, I thought it would be wise to have my colleagues on the board of Mawashi-Saito here to participate in the meeting. Ah! I see we are honoured by the presence of our distinguished chairman! How are you sir?"

Gilkrensky bowed his head to the Mawashi-Saito board. They bowed back in unison.

“I am well, Funakoshi-san. Would you please introduce us to the members of your board?”

Funakoshi obliged. Each Japanese bowed individually as his name was called.

“Now,” Gilkrensky said. “Could we have Bill McCarthy in the plane, please?”

Once again, the keys on the master console moved of their own accord and one of the smaller screens, flanking the main monitor, came to life—catching a big-boned man with dark, curly hair and a heavy moustache in the act of lighting a pipe. He swatted the resulting cloud of smoke away from the screen and peered into the room through a pair of half-rimmed steel glasses.

“Well, well! Look who made it to the party. How are you, Theo? I like the beard . . . suits you.”

“I’m fine, Bill. But you of all people should know it’s unsafe to be smoking a pipe on an airplane.”

Professor William McCarthy, formerly of MIT and the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and currently head of avionics research at the Gilcrest aerospace facility near Orlando, Florida, scowled at the videoconference lens.

“Yeah, you’re right. But hell! We don’t arrive in Cairo for another hour and a half and if I can’t have a smoke I’m gonna go crazy. I’ll have one of the flight crew stand behind me with a fire extinguisher if it’ll make you feel any better.”

“I trust you, Bill. Have you read the reports?”

“Sure have. Read them over breakfast. It seems to me, ladies and gentlemen, that the outcome of this incident simply emphasises the safety of the ‘Whisperer’ aircraft design. After all, how many low altitude crashes do you remember where ninety nine percent of the passengers actually walked away from the wreck?”

“That might be the case with the aircraft itself, Professor,” Jessica said. “But our problem is with the Daedalus autopilot, which is accused of crashing the plane in the first place.”

“I agree with Miss Wright,” added Sir Robert Fynes. “As a damage limitation exercise, we could well emphasise the low casualty rate and the safety of the plane. But GRC is in the business of making computers—safe, reliable

computers—and customer confidence will continue to fall until we prove we still can.”

Tony Delgado looked up from his papers.

“Sir Robert’s right,” he said. “As Professor McCarthy knows, there’s a massive contract hanging in the balance to supply Whisperer jets to Virgin Atlantic. We know Branson’s people are looking elsewhere now, and word’s out we could lose the deal to Boeing. So it’s imperative we find out if, and why the Daedalus failed as fast as we can.”

“The central core of the Daedalus unit, the part that contains the main memory and the neural net chip, is protected by a titanium casing and is virtually indestructible,” Gilkrensky said. “If we can get access to that core with a computer powerful enough to interpret the data, then we can find out what caused the crash.”

“And we assume that finding such a powerful computer to take to Egypt will be no problem for GRC,” Funakoshi said from Japan. “How is work progressing on the new Minerva prototype, Mr Chairman? Is there any chance of having it ready in time to meet this emergency?”

Jessica glanced suspiciously at the briefcase on the floor, and then at Gilkrensky, who showed no reaction other than to place his hands palm down on the table in front of him.

“I’ve had difficulties in writing appropriate software to allow the operator to interface with such a powerful system, Funakoshi-san,” he replied. “In the meantime, I will make arrangements to have a 2,000 model available.”

“With respect, Mr Chairman, that is exactly the response your people in Ireland gave us six months ago, when we inquired as to the progress of the Minerva project. And we have still not been allowed to view even the schematics of the 3,000 biochip design.”

“New developments take time. As to the security arrangements, I’m sure your board of directors can appreciate that a project with the revolutionary potential of Minerva must be carefully protected. If it were ever to fall into the hands of a competitor, GRC would lose all control of its development, as well as the huge profits that would certainly accrue. We’re merely protecting your twenty-five per cent investment in our corporation Funakoshi-san. That’s all.”

“A system with the promised capabilities of the 3,000 model would have been invaluable in recreating the events of the crash using the new virtual reality system your scientists have developed for the theme parks,” persisted Funakoshi.

“That’s true. But I’m sure the 2,000 model can cope with the interface well enough. Now, Sir Robert and Giles, do you have any points you’d like to make?”

The board meeting had moved to its most sensitive issue—the unveiling of Jessica’s plan. Neil Martin joined the meeting from the press office, and laid the groundwork. The point he stressed, over and over again, was that any public relations campaign to restore confidence in the corporation, however skilful, would be a total waste of time unless the GRC auto-pilot could be proved blameless.

“So I think it’s clear to everyone that exonerating Daedalus is our top priority,” said Jessica.

“And we can start on that as soon as we get access to the unit itself, the flight recorder or both,” cut in McCarthy. “One should corroborate the other. And we’ll need to talk to the flight crew . . .”

“I was thinking the chairman should join you in Cairo,” Jessica said, taking the plunge.

Gilkrensky’s head snapped up from his console. Major Crowe looked at her in surprise. But Jessica avoided their eyes, addressing her remarks to the group.

“We’ve agreed that exoneration of the Daedalus is our prime concern. A full investigation of the crash might take weeks, during which the corporation could find itself bankrupt, even if the unit was proved to be blameless. But if the chairman takes a personal interest, and flies out to Cairo in an aircraft fitted with a Daedalus unit then . . .”

“I’m not going!” Gilkrensky said.

“Theo! Let me finish!”

“Jessica. It’s no use you springing this on me in front of the whole board. I’m not going and that’s final!”

“Excuse me, Miss Wright,” said Crowe. “But it will be impossible to guarantee the chairman’s security in Egypt.”

“Why don’t we put it to a vote?” Sir Robert said, ignoring him.

“But Miss Wright!” insisted Crowe. “The security implications are . . .”

“You are here only to observe, Major!” snapped Jessica, cutting him dead.

“We will discuss security later. Sir Robert, you were saying?”

Sir Robert Fynes glanced at Crowe. Then he said,

“I think it’s a good plan. You’ve heard your PR man. Our shares will be worthless if confidence in the Corporation continues to slide.”

“Here, here!” said Giles Fulton. “Let’s put it to a vote.”

Gilkrensky turned on him.

“You’ll lose! I own forty-five per cent of the shares!”

“Mister Chairman,” Funakoshi said softly. “We have not voted yet.”

The board members of Mawashi-Saito were conversing rapidly in Japanese. Gilkrensky turned to Jessica, but she just kept looking straight ahead at the video screen.

“Listen, all of you!” he said. “I can’t afford to go. Bill McCarthy’s already on his way to Cairo in a jumbo jet packed with experts and equipment. He can do a far better job than I can. Then . . . there’s the Minerva project. How can I complete it if I’m out there grubbing around in the desert?”

Funakoshi returned to the screen.

“With all due respect, Mr Chairman, it is our opinion that GRC can ill afford for you *not* to visit Egypt. By going, you are demonstrating your deep personal interest in solving this problem, which is essential for the image of the corporation. To the world, Dr Gilkrensky, you *are* GRC. So it occurs to us, as it obviously has to Miss Wright, that if you travel to Egypt in a plane flown by the Daedalus system, you are showing the world you have no hesitation in trusting your life to it? We support Miss Wright’s proposition, and we would vote for it. I believe that would give fifty-five per cent in favour.”

Gilkrensky sat slowly back into his seat. His hands were trembling.

“It looks as if I’m going to Egypt,” he said.

Following the adoption of Jessica’s plan, the board meeting descended into a simple discussion of logistics. Professor McCarthy was listing the equipment he would need to interrogate the Daedalus. Neil Martin and Tony Delgado were full of ideas to extract the maximum publicity from the chairman’s flight. Only

Gilkrensky was silent, as the conversations ebbed and flowed around him. Jessica caught Major Crowe's eye and knew he would be seeking an interview with her once the meeting was over.

By six-fifteen the discussion was drawing to a close. McCarthy was knocking out his pipe ready for landing in Cairo, and Tony Delgado had finished giving Sheila Browne detailed instructions regarding the GRC executive jet.

"Would anyone like a drink now that's settled?" he said, opening one of the concealed cupboards in the oak-panelled wall.

"I'd like a word in private with the chief executive," Gilkrensky said, in a tone that silenced all other conversation in the room. Sheila Browne looked at Delgado. Sir Robert Fynes and Giles Fulton exchanged glances, and Jessica stopped gathering up her papers.

"Would you like us to wait outside, sir?" said Crowe.

"If you'd be so kind, Major."

"I can't believe you did that!" Gilkrensky said, when he was sure they were alone. "You engineered the whole bloody thing and then got the Japanese to back you up. Funakoshi hasn't made you an offer, has he?"

Jessica sat motionless in the chairman's seat with her hands clasped tightly in front of her, staring at the empty plasma screens. When she thought Gilkrensky's anger had subsided enough for her to reply she said quietly, "I'm sorry it turned out this way, Theo. But it had to be done. I'd been meaning to speak to you about it before the crash happened."

"What had to be done? Talk about what?"

Only then did she turn to face him. Her eyes were very bright, as if she were on the verge of tears.

"Theo, you're rotting away on that island. And we've had nothing worth a damn out of those laboratories of yours for the last two years. Funakoshi is right. To most of the world you are the Gilcrest Radio Corporation. And look at you! You're falling apart!"

"What about the SmartMate, Jess? And the Minerva?"

“I was talking to that journalist Robert Stark last night. He said SmartMate was just a collection of old ideas . . . miniaturised and cobbled together . . . and . . . he’s right! The Japanese will have something better within months!”

“But the Minerva Jess. It’s ready to go!”

“Is it Theo? You’ve been working on it for five years now. And every time I ask for a production schedule, so we can organise a sales campaign, you tell me it isn’t ready. It’s either the biochip, or the software, or the user interface . . . or some damned thing!”

Gilkrensky lifted the briefcase up from the floor and laid it gently on the boardroom table.

“This is it,” he said. “It’s ready now.”

Jessica eyed the case with suspicion.

“Then show me!”

“I . . . I’d rather not. Not here.”

“Why not?”

“It’s just that . . .”

“*Why* can’t you show me? You say it’s ready! It’s on the bloody table right in front of us!”

“Jess. Don’t ask me to . . .”

Suddenly all the pressure, all the frustration and all the anger of the past twenty four hours burst through Jessica’s worn-down barriers. She lashed out with her arm, sweeping the Minerva along the length of the table, sending empty water jugs and half filled glasses spinning and spilling on the polished wood.

“I’ll tell you why you can’t show it to me!” she screamed. “Because it doesn’t bloody well work, *that’s* why! I’ve been breaking my heart trying to keep this corporation afloat, buttering up the shareholders, fending off the Japanese and taking God knows what risks to protect our investments. And all you’ve been doing is moping around on that bloody island of yours lighting candles to Maria! She’s *dead*, Theo! She’s been dead for almost a year! And I need you *now!*”

Gilkrensky ran to the other end of the boardroom table, where he wiped the spilled water from the Minerva casing.

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

“Do you hear me, Theo? You can’t turn me off! I’m not on some bloody teleconference like I was this morning. I’m right here in the room with you . . . and I need you, Theo. I need you to go to Cairo and fight for what we’ve built together. I need you . . . I *need* you!”

Gilkrensky looked back, to see her slumped forward on the table with her head in her hands, sobbing. Gently, he laid the briefcase on one of the boardroom chairs, and walked back to sit beside her.

“Jess? Jess, I’m sorry. But Minerva *does* work. It works better that you could ever imagine. The reason I can’t show it to you is personal to me, but I’ll fix that as soon as I get back from Cairo. Perhaps you’re right. I do need to get off the island for a while. It’s just that I wasn’t ready before now. Jess?”

Jessica lifted her head. Her dark chestnut hair had fallen across her face. She swept it away. There were tears in her eyes.

“I was very jealous of Maria,” she said softly. “She made you so happy. I never did, did I? Not in any way that really mattered.”

Gilkrensky could feel her pain. He reached forward and took her hand.

“We’re very much alike, you and I,” he said. “Both ‘Scorpios’. Far too intense for each other.”

“But still friends?”

“We’ll always be friends.”

She lifted his hands in hers, remembering the way they had touched her in Boston. She ran her fingers over the scars for a moment, and then kissed them gently.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For picking me up when Thorpe threw me out. For having confidence in me, and for standing up to all those people who said I couldn’t handle this job.”

“They didn’t know you like I did. And besides, it’s easy to call the shots when you own the company.”

“Well, forty-five per cent of it anyway,” Jessica said, forcing a smile.

“Perhaps.”

In the distance, they could both hear the purr and chop of the helicopter returning from refuelling.

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

“Are you sure you want to go through with this, Theo? It’s not too late to call it off.”

“I’m sure.”

Gilkrensky bent over and kissed Jessica gently on the forehead. Then he picked up the Minerva and went out, leaving her in the chairman’s seat at the head of the board table.

Jessica remembered Logan airport.

“What *have* I done?” she said.

## 9

### INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

Yukiko watched the small screen on her desk as the Board of Mawashi-Saito signed off from the teleconference with GRC. Then she shut the small black case in front of her and slipped it into the jacket pocket of her grey office uniform, stood up and walked to the window. From there she would be able to watch the sun rise over Tokyo bay while she waited for the call to come.

She did not have long to wait. The call from Miss Deshimaru came just as the first glow was reddening the sky. Yukiko felt the familiar churn of conflicting emotions, as she stood before the man who had been her guardian and task master for most of her life.

“Good morning uncle! You wished to see me?”

Gichin Funakoshi returned her bow.

“*Hai*, Yukiko-chan. You saw the teleconference?”

“I did, from my office.”

“And what is your opinion?”

Yukiko thought carefully before she answered. She was aware of her unique position within the *keiretsu* and of the value her uncle placed on her opinion regarding western competitors.

She owed him a huge debt of obligation—of *giri*—and could not disappoint him now.

“With the greatest respect, uncle, I wonder if you were wise in supporting Gilkrensky’s trip to Cairo. Surely, it is in the interest of Mawashi-Saito to see GRC’s crisis deepen and their share prices fall?”

Funakoshi smiled.

“It is not the shares I want. They are merely a means to an end. Was I right about the Minerva project? Does Gilkrensky have it ready?”

“Yes uncle, he does.”

“You are sure?”

Yukiko reached into the pocket of her jacket and laid a brand new GRC SmartMate on the desk between them, opening the lid to reveal the screen.

“I received this unit a few days ago by courier from my agent in London. You will see from this latest message that Gilkrensky lied to you when he spoke of problems with the Minerva software. He was actually using a working prototype, small enough to fit inside a briefcase, to control the videoconference just now.”

Funakoshi nodded slowly as he recalled the board meeting, searching his own memory for clues.

“Is your agent reliable?”

“Both reliable . . . and very highly placed.”

“Are you sure? I do not want a repeat of that regrettable incident in Ireland last March.”

“There will be no mistake this time, uncle.”

Funakoshi nodded slowly.

“Then I was right to support Dr Gilkrensky’s expedition to Egypt. If Minerva *is* working, and portable enough to carry with him, then he has no choice but to take it to Cairo. It is his best chance of interpreting the data from the Daedalus in time to save his corporation. You realise how important Minerva is to us, Yukiko?”

“I do uncle. Its neural net should allow it to actually ‘think’ as a human being would, making associations and value judgements beyond the reach of conventional computer systems.”

“Quite so. It represents the next generation of computers, and as such is quite priceless. Up until now, GRC has not allowed us to view the device or be involved in any part of its development, in spite of great pressure exerted from this office. To make matters worse, that botched attempt at industrial espionage last spring forced Dr Gilkrensky to replace his security staff and move his whole laboratory to an offshore island facility, making any further . . . ah . . . intelligence gathering impossible.”

“I understand, uncle.”

“You still have no explanation as to what happened that day?”

“No uncle, I do not. I chose my agent unwisely. It appears they had a personal agenda of their own. I will not let it happen again.”

“I hope not, Yukiko. In honour of your mother’s memory, I have watched over your advancement here at Mawashi-Saito and, as you know, your father was my friend for many years before he died.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“But since his death I sense a change in you. Is your mind on your work, Yukiko? Can I trust you as I always have?”

“You can.”

“In that case, let us examine the situation together and decide what we must do. Miss Jessica Wright has presented us with a unique opportunity. Dr Gilkrensky is about to step outside the walls of his fortress, bringing Minerva with him. He will be travelling to Cairo, a city where there has been an increasing level of terrorism in recent years.”

“We have contacts there, uncle.”

“Indeed we do. For the past few years an Egyptian electronics company, which is little more than a front for one of the lesser known Islamic fundamentalist groups, has been begging me to sell them satellite communications technology, so they can broadcast their message to the world. We might be able to operate anonymously through them.”

Yukiko hesitated.

“Are you sure that is wise, uncle? Such groups can be very unreliable. Would it not be more effective for me to simply steal the biochip from Gilkrensky myself?”

Funakoshi pondered this for a moment.

“No, Yukiko, I would prefer not to involve you directly. Should you fail, you might be traced back to the *keiretsu*. That must not be allowed to happen. Therefore, I expect you to contact this group and arrange for them to steal the machine for you. Can you do this?”

“I think so. But to be sure of success I would need to go to Cairo and speak to their leaders myself.”

“Then do so. I understand it would suit you very well to be out of the country just now. That little upstart Okuda, from the Sekigushi *ryu*, contacted me last night. An ‘unfortunate accident’ he calls it. He can hardly admit to himself that his prize disciple was beaten by a woman, and blames the defeat on secret training you have been undertaking at a . . . less conventional *ryu* in Kyoto. Is this something you should have been informed me about before?”

“I am sorry I did not tell you, uncle. I took on the extra training merely to broaden my range of expertise, so as to serve the *keiretsu* better.”

Funakoshi nodded slowly, but his eyes never left hers.

“I see. In any event, it would be useful if you were not available for questioning. Miss Deshimaru will make the necessary flight arrangements.”

“At once, uncle.”

Funakoshi leant forward.

“Nothing is to happen to Dr Gilkrensky,” he said slowly. “Is that clear? I am aware of your deep personal interest in him, as you must be of mine and frankly, I am still far from satisfied with your explanation concerning past events in Ireland. Success comes from putting *giri* before *ninjo*, in everything, Yukiko! Without Dr Gilkrensky, GRC and our future in this new technology of his is dead. You *will* obey me in this! Even if it means losing the Minerva, Dr Gilkrensky is not to be harmed. Do you understand me?”

“*Hai*, uncle.”

Yukiko thought of Hasagawa, the last man who had stood before her. She remembered how her father and mother had died, and a debt of *giri* she herself had vowed to pay. Then she bowed to her uncle and made her way to the door.

## 10

### LEROY

Leroy Manning was angry and hot. Angry, because he and his helicopter had been pulled in from the crash site outside Cairo to ferry a gaggle of Corporation fat cats to their plush hotel. And hot, because they were keeping him waiting.

He had spent most of the first night after the crash flying survivors either to the University Hospital or, if they were luckier, to complimentary suites at the Corporation hotel. Boy! Was GRC ever going to take a bath over this!

Then the next day, the big jumbo jet from Florida had arrived, spewing out men, equipment and portable cabins that had to be flown out to the wreck. Leroy had felt a pang of homesickness just talking to the technicians. One old guy, with a lumberjack shirt and a thick moustache, had even worked on the space programme in Florida . . .

Leroy remembered Patsy Martin and the long, hot summer of sixty-nine. He had been very innocent then, and so had she. Making love had been a wonderful adventure, a magical conspiracy. He remembered the first time—the breathtaking sight of her as she lifted her sweater over her head, the feel of her nipples as they hardened in his hand and the soft warmth between her legs as he fondled her awkwardly in the back seat of his father’s car. She had been his first love, and he thought she might be his last, until her letter reached him in Vietnam.

With Su Lin, it had been nothing more than sex. She had been one of the bar girls down at the officer’s club in Saigon and had dazzled him with the energy and imagination she brought to the bedroom. After the sweet fumbings

of Patsy Martin, and all her pleadings to him to be gentle and make sure he was “protected”, Su Lin was a revelation. He remembered the feel of her oiled fingers on his chest, as she massaged him, the heat of her breath on his belly as she slid down the bed and the sweet, sure, stroke of her tongue . . .

The closest he had come to marriage was with Sarah Jane, the tall, blonde Texan who worked as secretary in the helicopter company he’d joined when he came home from Vietnam. Sarah Jane loved horses, helicopters and sitting naked with a glass of mulled wine in front of the fire. If there was ever a woman he felt a friend to, it would have been her. Leroy needed a friend just then. He was waking up in the middle of the night covered in sweat, and losing his temper at the smallest things for no reason at all. She told him to get help on the day he broke her nose.

Rosalie had been a nurse at the centre where Leroy had gone for treatment. She had seen a lot of “Vets” by then, but something about Leroy’s sense of loss troubled her greatly. For a while it had been easy to simply let go and be smothered by her cotton wool kind of love. It was only when she started telling her friends about “her man Leroy” and hinting about engagement rings, that alarm bells began to sound. To escape her, and the velvet trap he was falling into, he had moved out and signed up with an old army buddy who flew tourists over the game reserves in Africa.

That was fine for a while. But the tourists wanted to go lower and lower, and it wasn’t always a camera they were shooting with. One hot afternoon, when the air was thin and the updrafts were at their most treacherous, a rich German had decided he wanted to chase a lion with a helicopter.

That had been Leroy’s first serious crash. Afterwards he had lost his taste for dangerous flying.

To make ends meet, while he got his nerve back, he had started doing “milk runs” for a guy he’d met on an aircraft carrier off Vietnam. The man was now a big wheel in a multinational corporation with interests all over Africa. There were lots of nice, safe jobs to do around Cairo, or flying people and equipment up and down the Nile Valley. When Leroy had started with the Gilcrest Radio Corporation he’d only meant to stay for six months. That had been eight years ago.

Leroy twisted in his seat to pull a crumpled packet of Marlboros and a lighter from his pocket. Across from the helipad, the brown concrete stretched past the feeder lane to the main runway. Beyond that, a sombre row of transport planes squatted in the late afternoon heat, sullen beasts of the field compared to the brightly painted airliners that shimmered on the commercial runway.

Thinking of women and looking at the planes, Leroy's mind went back to the crash out in the desert and the way the pilot had bent over to kiss the injured stewardess, before threatening to kill someone if anything happened to her. What had that been about? Had there been something between them, or was the pilot just concerned? Perhaps if Leroy had treated the women in his life with a bit more respect he wouldn't be crippled with alimony payments now.

"I do not think you should be smoking."

Standing on the tarmac was an army officer with dark glasses resting on his hooked nose and a neat black moustache. Leroy took in the State Security emblems on his uniform and his rank badges.

"Come off it, Colonel. I've been flying these things since I was eighteen!" Then he lit the cigarette and took a long drag, blowing the smoke into the tired air.

"How long will it take you to start up?"

"About two minutes. Why is State Security interested in my passengers all of a sudden?"

"You do not know?"

"I was just told to ferry a bunch of executives to the Nile Olympiad. They didn't say who."

The portable radio in the colonel's hand buzzed. He raised it to his ear, listened, and then spoke in Arabic, far too quickly for Manning to understand.

"You will start your engines now, please," he said at last in English. "The jet is about to land."

"OK. You're the boss. Hey! Ahmed! Get the fire extinguisher while I crank her up!"

Manning went through the start up procedure, pressed the starter button and heard the turbine fire. In a moment the great blades were slicing the air in great whooshing sweeps, forcing Manning to shout above the din.

But the colonel was speaking into his radio again.

Outside, on the airfield, two things happened at once.

From the military air base on the far side of the field, three black Land Rovers crossed the main runway and took up position around the end of the feeder lane in front of Manning's helicopter. The canvas hoods at the rear were not fully fastened, and Manning could make out the dull reflection of sunlight on gunmetal.

At the same time, a beautiful blue and white executive jet flashed into sight and hurtled down the runway past the transport planes. The sun glinted on the wing tip fuel tanks and the tinted windscreen.

"Why all the firepower?" shouted Manning. "I thought Howard Hughes was dead!"

"So did I, but I do not think he worked for GRC."

"No. I mean, who is it?"

"Since you will meet him shortly, I do not see any harm in telling you. It is your chairman, a man called Gilkrensky."

"No shit?"

"Definitely 'no shit', I assure you."

Leroy stubbed out his half-smoked Marlboro and threw it out onto the tarmac while he watched the approaching aircraft manoeuvre onto the feeder strip ahead of him.

Wow! Only Mister Theodore, Jesus H Christ, Gilkrensky—the "G" in GRC!—coming for a ride in this little old helicopter of mine.

The plane was fifty yards away and moving closer.

Now that was definitely *the* way to travel—air conditioning and champagne all the way.

The nose of the executive jet was close now. It slid delicately into the circle formed by the helicopter and the waiting Land Rovers. As the whine of its jets died, the colonel barked an order into his radio. The rear flaps of the waiting vehicles were thrown open, and a score of black uniformed state security police moved into a tight cordon.

Each one carried a Kalashnikov assault rifle.

Airport security gone mad, thought Leroy. He peered into the cockpit facing him to see who his opposite number in the jet might be.

It was like looking into a mirror.

Behind the tinted window a tall, bearded man in a loose, white shirt was pulling off his headphones and shutting down his engines. As Manning watched, the man slipped on a worn leather jacket and disappeared back into the cabin. Manning immediately felt a kinship. The man was an obvious rebel like himself. It'd be a pleasure to make his acquaintance.

"Please be ready to take off straight away," shouted the colonel.

Manning watched as a short, stocky man in a neat suit, peered out of the passenger door of the jet, examined the security cordon around the waiting helicopter, and ushered out two heavily set guys who Leroy immediately recognised as ex-military, followed by the bearded pilot. The group moved quickly beneath the churning rotors and were ushered into the helicopter by the colonel.

There was a rush of introductions, which Manning didn't hear. Then the short, stocky guy, who was obviously the "big man" himself, started to get all steamed up that the jet pilot had slipped into the co-pilot's seat next to Manning.

There was a clicking of seat belts and the thud of the passenger door slamming, cutting out some of the din from the rotors.

"OK, Colonel?" shouted Manning. "Where to?"

"The Nile Olympiad Hotel, as fast as you can!"

Manning smiled at the man with the beard and leaned closer to him, so that he could be heard. "Do you ever feel like a goddamned taxi driver?" he said out of the corner of his mouth.

The man smiled in sympathy as Manning twisted the throttle, pulled up the collective pitch lever, and heaved the big helicopter into the air above the watchful eyes of the security police.

Fifty feet below, and a hundred yards to the right, Yukiko watched the helicopter from the observation deck of the arrivals hall—just another Japanese tourist in a light blouse and skirt. The binoculars she was using were unremarkable, but anyone watching the index finger of her right hand would have seen the slightest movement, as she pressed a concealed button next to the focusing ring. And had the noise of aircraft not been so overpowering, anyone

listening closely might have been able to make out the faintest “click” as the digital camera inside took picture after picture in quick succession.

Leroy Manning watched the man in the co-pilot’s seat run his eyes over the control panel.

“You’re running a bit thin!” he shouted to Leroy above the noise of the engines. And yes! Goddammit! He was right. Leroy had set the choke to “manual” while he had been idling at the airport and had forgotten to reset it when he took off.

He passed the stranger the only other radio headset in the helicopter and motioned for him to plug it in. There had been no time to refit the others following the stripping out and hurried replacement of the passenger seats after the airlift from the crash. Without them, nobody in the back would hear a word above the clatter and whine of the engines.

“Thanks. Have you flown one of these yourself?”

“Not for some time. We use JetRangers at home, but we’re thinking of changing to Aerospatiales because the spares are easier to get from France.”

“I’ve been flying Hueys like this for the past thirty years. They’re a peach! A bit heavy on the controls compared to the smaller choppers, but you can live with that. Want to try?”

“Sure. Whenever you’re ready.”

The man settled his feet on the dual-control rudder pedals, reached forward for his joystick and took the collective from Manning. The old Bell shimmied slightly as the stranger got used to the feel of the machine. But Manning didn’t notice. He was staring at the burn scars on the back of the man’s hands, feeling his own skin crawl. God! That must have hurt.

They flew on in silence for a few minutes, while Manning tried to think of something to say. Finally, he jerked his thumb at Major Crowe, who was sitting behind him in one of the fold-down seats, glaring at Leroy’s new co-pilot.

“What’s it like flying with him?”

“It has its moments. I think he’d rather have me sitting back there in the cabin than riding up here with you.”

“Yeah?” Manning said, puzzled. “Just follow the road there at about a thousand feet.”

“You got it!”

The grey and brown “Z” of the airport runways slid beneath them as the man followed the tall security towers along the new Suez Road motorway towards the city. The helicopter skimmed over scatterings of shanty town dwellings that gradually congealed into the outskirts of Cairo. Soon the view below them was dominated by domes, minarets and television aerials. Cars jostled each other like coloured corpuscles in clogged grey arteries. Ragged tatters of clothes hung from makeshift lines on the rooftops.

Manning took back the controls, opened the throttle, and the helicopter gained height above the city. Among the confusion of packed buildings along the east bank of the Nile, Leroy could make out the grey oasis of Tahir Square, the forbidding statue of Rameses by its own lake, and the endless flow of traffic: red and white buses, black and orange taxis, trams, cars, motor scooters laden with goods, and the generous sprinkling of cyclists and pedestrians, all managing to avoid each other in the whirlpool, as if by magic.

Beyond the square, rising like a block of shimmering ice above the confusion of other buildings on the Corniche, was the tower of GRC’s Nile Olympiad Hotel. The painted letter ‘H’ was clearly visible on each of the rooftop helipads.

“Nice piece of real estate!” shouted Manning into his radio microphone.

“It’s not my favourite. The one in Vancouver’s far better. I had them build it from scratch down by the aquarium.”

Manning looked the bearded pilot up and down, taking in the faded jeans, the worn leather jacket and the scuffed jogging shoes. Since when did GRC ask its pilots where to build their hotels? Nobody’d ever asked *him!*

“They must think a lot of you to let you dress like that,” he said.

The man grinned broadly.

“It’s one of the advantages of being chairman,” he said. And Leroy Manning had the sickening feeling of having made a terrible mistake.

Nobody spoke for the remainder of the flight. Leroy’s flying suddenly became stiff and precise, a departure from his normal fluid style. When the helicopter touched down on the southern helipad of the Nile Olympiad Hotel, it was in the exact geometric centre of the marked circle.

“Can you come back here in an hour?” shouted Gilkrensky, taking the Minerva from Major Crowe and stepping out onto the roof. “I’ll have to visit the crash site.”

“No problem,” Manningsaid.

“Great! And don’t forget that auto-choke!”

The two bodyguards, Thomas and Gerald, ran smartly to check the stairwell, followed by Gilkrensky, Crowe and the Egyptian army colonel. At the bottom of the first flight of stairs, away from the noise of the departing helicopter, the Egyptian officer turned and offered Gilkrensky his hand.

“I’m sorry we did not get the opportunity for proper introductions.” he said. “My name is Selim, of state security. Your safety here in Egypt is my responsibility.”

“Outside this building, perhaps!” said Crowe.

“Everywhere, Major. And in the meantime you will find this southern section of the penthouse floor has been sealed off, with access only by these two lift shafts and the stairs to the helipad. You, Dr Gilkrensky, have the presidential suite at the end of the corridor, with Major Crowe and your other two bodyguards to the left. The board room, should you wish to use it for conferences and such, is to the right. Now, if it is convenient, I would like to talk to you about security arrangements outside the hotel.”

“Could you give us five minutes?” Crowe said. “We need to unpack some things.”

Colonel Selim frowned. “If that is what you wish.”

“Thank you,” Gilkrensky said.

Crowe lead the way to the end of the corridor, opened the door of the presidential suite and went in, followed by Gerald Maguire carrying a heavy suitcase. Beyond the door was a small reception lobby leading to a short corridor, with the main lounge to the right and the bedroom to the left. At the end of the corridor was a fire escape.

“That’ll have to be sealed off and alarmed for a start,” said Crowe. “Gerald, you and Tom get the machine set up around the front door while I check out the rest of the suite. Dr Gilkrensky, you wait here in the corridor for a moment, please.”

Gilkrensky watched through the lounge door as Crowe pulled a flat, black box, the size of a cigarette packet, out of the suitcase and began running it over the pictures and fittings. Thomas and Gerald were busy arranging a cable around the door frame leading to the corridor.

“Can I come in now, Major?”

“I think it’s clear, sir. I noticed before we landed that the window glass is mirrored on the outside, so nobody will be able to see in.”

“Hmmm,” Gilkrensky said and walked to the window. Below him lay the broad stretch of the Nile, with Tahir Bridge, the Cairo Tower, and the exclusive Gazirah sporting club. On the horizon, he could make out the clean, hard lines of the pyramids beyond the soft jumble of domes and minarets.

“Ah. . . Please try not to stand in one place too long, sir,” Crowe said. “I don’t think the glass is bullet proof.”

“But how could anyone shoot me if they can’t see in?”

“Thermal imaging. They might not be able to tell who they were shooting at, but they could still kill you.”

“That’s a comfort,” said Gilkrensky and sat down on the plush sofa.

A knock on the outer lobby door was followed almost immediately by a loud “buzz”.

“Metal detector works anyway,” Crowe said.

Colonel Selim stood in the doorway, sliding his dark glasses into his breast pocket. His heavy automatic pistol was being held for him by Gerald Maguire. Selim did not seem too pleased about it.

“You will excuse me, Colonel,” said Crowe. “But I insist that no firearms enter this suite. It’s nothing personal you understand? Purely a precaution.”

Selim’s eyes narrowed slightly. Then he smiled.

“I understand perfectly. But in return, I suggest you move your metal detector and your guards back closer to the lift. If an enemy managed to get this far, there is very little else to stop him. Purely a precaution, you understand.”

It was Gilkrensky’s turn to smile.

“Thank you, Colonel. Would you like to come in? You wanted to talk to us about local security.”

“That is correct. No doubt you are aware of the activities of extremist groups here in Egypt? Such activities date back to the time of the English

occupation, but they came to a head when President Sadat angered the fundamentalists by aligning Egypt with the West to get American aid. These people protested against him. He in turn threw over fifteen hundred of them in jail, and then paid for it with his life when he was shot.”

“Why hasn’t there been an Islamic revolution here, like there was in Iran?”

“Because the level of violence employed sickens the majority of Egyptians, so that extremists have no popular support. Some years ago, a fourteen year old girl was killed in an assassination attempt against the prime minister. And in a motor cycle bomb intended for the minister of the interior, four innocent people were killed and nineteen bystanders injured. Then there was that incident outside the museum, not far from here, when a busload of tourists was machine gunned and, of course, the terrible massacre at Luxor. Normal people do not condone such activities in a civilised society.”

“Do you see these extremists as a national threat?” asked Crowe.

“No. I do not. They are merely a handful of gangsters in the pay of Iran. The main threat is to our tourist industry, since their activities inevitably attract press coverage.”

“And in my case?” Gilkrensky said.

“Your case is different, sir. You are an internationally known figure, the head of a multibillion dollar corporation and a very rich man. Anywhere in the world, you would represent a target for kidnap or assassination.”

“I’m flattered.”

“The honour is a double-edged sword, I’m afraid. Therefore we must take reasonable precautions. I will station a team of men in the lobby of the hotel, and another on the roof, guarding the helipad.”

Crowe frowned.

“I can’t allow any man I cannot personally vouch for onto the roof of this building onto this floor, or anywhere near the chairman.”

Colonel Selim sat back in his chair.

“You are in my country. It would be wise to take my advice.”

“I’m fully aware of that, Colonel. But, as I understand things, we may be dealing with an enemy who might walk right into this suite with their pockets packed with explosives and blow us all to hell, in the belief that they would be assured of a place in heaven.”

**“That is correct, Major.”**

**“And such an assassin could be anyone. Remember, President Sadat was killed by men from his own army, officers from good families, who believed they were doing the right thing. With the greatest respect, Colonel, for all I know you could even be such a person yourself!”**

**Selim grinned.**

**“I suppose I should be shocked, Major. But for once it is refreshing to deal with a man who has done his homework. I will confine my activities to the lower floors of the hotel, as long as I can be sure you have sufficient staff to secure the presidential suite itself. Can I ask what your travel plans are outside this building?”**

**“In general terms, you may. We plan to limit such travel to the wreck of the aircraft itself, the airport, and whatever government offices it might be necessary to deal with in order to investigate the crash. Wherever possible, the chairman will travel by helicopter. It will be returning in a few minutes to take us to the crash site.”**

**“Good. If you need an escort for your flight, I can provide one. We have two armed helicopters, which are part of the regular city patrol.”**

**“Thank you, Colonel. But that won’t be necessary.”**

**“Very well. Now that we understand each other’s position, there are formalities, such as visas and registration with the authorities. I can be dealing with these while you wait for your helicopter to arrive.”**

## The Fundamentalist

Yukiko was dropped by taxi next to the bus station in Tahrir Square. When she was sure that the taxi had pulled away, she walked inside, found an empty toilet cubicle in the washrooms and, ignoring the smell of stale urine, opened her red travel bag and pulled out a heavy *burka* robe that covered her from head to toe. Then she turned the bag inside out to reveal the blue lining, stuffed the binoculars inside, and went to hail another taxi.

This taxi took her further to the west, across the Nile on Tahrir Bridge and onto the exclusive Gazirah island, which is home to many museums, embassies, and some of the most expensive residences in Cairo. The taxi turned north along the bank of the river, passing the Cairo Tower and the Sixth October Bridge, the bowling greens and croquet lawns of the sporting club and on towards the Marriott hotel. There were more fine hotels on the other side of the Nile, including the Olympiad, which Yukiko glanced at briefly.

Just south of the Twenty-sixth July Bridge the taxi dropped Yukiko, who once again waited until it was out of sight. Then she walked past several fine apartment blocks with names dating back to the British Empire—“Park Lane”, “Nile View” and “Dorchester House”—until she came to the address given to her by her contact, stepped up and rang the bell.

The man who answered the door could have been a successful athletics instructor at any of the smart sports clubs on the island. He was tall and muscular, with jet black hair, olive skin and a neat moustache. He had been described to Yukiko as a top fashion photographer and his luxurious apartment, overlooking the river to the east, contained a complete darkroom

and photographic studio. It was no surprise then, to find an expensive Nikon camera with a powerful telephoto lens, sitting on a tripod just far enough back from the window to be invisible from the outside. Yukiko's gaze followed the direction of the lens. It was pointed at the top floor of the Nile Olympiad.

She opened the travel bag and handed him the binoculars.

"These pictures were taken at the airport less than an hour ago. They show the target and the men in his security team. You know how to extract the memory card?"

The man turned the binoculars in his hands.

"I'm surprised they sent a woman on such an important mission as this. But yes, I know how to take the card out."

Yukiko said nothing, but watched as the man twisted the barrels of the binoculars apart. There was a "click", and nestling inside the black metal was a neat two-gigabyte digital memory card containing the photos she had taken at the airport. He handed the binoculars back to her.

"I will download these and assemble the group," he said. "Then I will call you to confirm."

He smiled, but his eyes remained cold.

They were the eyes of a fanatic.

Once the Japanese woman had left, Zaki El Sharoud made sure his apartment door was securely locked. Then he took the memory card to his darkroom, switched on his computer and slid the card into the reader. Photography had come a long way over the years of Zaki's career. What would have taken him hours to accomplish with photographic paper and chemicals could now be accomplished in minutes with digital technology. He manoeuvred the cursor through the various steps needed to bring the images the card contained up onto the screen and stared at them carefully. It was strange—after the many thousands of photographs he had processed in his time—that he could never develop a film, or look at an image on screen, without thinking of that unique set of pictures he had taken on that fateful October day so long ago.

He had been twenty-three then, and just appointed to the Cairo newspaper *Al-Ahram* as a junior photographer—ideal cover for what he *really* wanted to do.

None of the old hacks on the paper minded when the new hot-shot, fresh from university and his compulsory army service, asked to be assigned to the predictable and tedious ritual of the Sixth October parade. They even joked that Zaki might as well take the rest of the day off and send in last year's photographs instead. The parade was always the same they said, nothing will change.

They were wrong.

Zaki arrived early and set up his equipment directly opposite the presidential viewing stand, with a clear view of the parade route up and down the Sari El-Quasr El-Aini. Around his neck hung two cameras, a Nikon with a 500 millimetre catadioptric lens, and a Pentax with a normal telephoto. In his pockets were roll after roll of fast Tri-X film and, taped to his chest beneath his clothing, with its throat microphone and ear-piece hidden by the hood of his light anorak, was a miniature radio.

The day was fine and bright, ideal for photography. The crowd gathered, as it always did, and the VIPs arrived. Zaki raised the Nikon and started to take portrait shots from long range. There were the ministers, important officials, representatives from other countries, Vice President Hosni Mubarak and, in the centre of the viewing stand, magnificent in his Cardin uniform with the two gold lotus blossoms on the collar, was President Anwar Sadat himself.

Zaki trained the powerful lens of his camera down the line of the parade, past the oncoming artillery, towards a single approaching truck. Then he turned back to the presidential stand for any signs of alarm or increased security.

There were none.

"It is clear," he said softly into the throat microphone. "God be with you!" Then he raised the Pentax, and began to shoot again.

Click!

Sadat sits smiling and clapping, almost half-heartedly, as a flight of air force jets roar overhead.

Click!

The single truck stops, directly in front of the presidential stand. Four soldiers jump out. They are firing Kalashnikov assault rifles.

Click!

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

**Sadat thinks this is part of the parade. He actually rises to applaud.**

**Click!**

**The soldiers continue to advance on the President. Their guns are levelled. Sadat realises his mistake.**

**This is an assassination!**

**Click!**

**Sadat is hit! He falls to the ground! Mubarak is sprayed with blood and hit in the hand by a ricochet. He throws himself down as the assassins advance.**

**Click!**

**A grenade is thrown. It fails to explode. In the shooting, the Omani ambassador and a Coptic bishop are killed.**

**Click!**

**The shooting stops. Sadat is dead! With a bullet hole between the embroidered lotus blossoms on the collar of his beautiful uniform.**

**Click!**

**In the terrible silence that follows, the leader of the assassins shouts, "I am Khalid al-Istambuli! I have killed Pharaoh, and I do not fear death!"**

**Zaki El Sharoud scrolled through the images the Japanese woman had taken quickly and then examined each one in fine detail, using the software to zoom in on the faces she had recorded at the airport. Finally, he selected an image of a tall thin man in a leather jacket. The man had a sparse beard, and was carrying a black briefcase.**

**"I have you," said Zaki El Sharoud, and set up the printer to make a hard copy.**

## 12

### CRASH SITE

Gilkrensky had never experienced anything quite like the desert before. Its horizon with the sky split the world into just two colours—blue, and a swirling yellowy brown that rolled in frozen waves beneath the scurrying helicopter.

The crash site began with a strange gash in one of the larger dunes. Further on was another furrow, surrounded by twisted shards of metal. Then a long wide tear in the smooth sand, littered with scattered luggage which had burst on impact or been torn open by looters, spewing clothes out over the desert.

Finally, rising hard and crooked above the rolling sand, was the giant metal “T” of the aircraft’s tail fin. Below it was the wreck. Gilkrensky saw the black stains of fire damage, spreading from the engines under the tail and collapsing the fuselage roof to just behind the cockpit. Only the forward section of the hull lay intact, and that was being picked clean by the milling ants of the investigation teams.

“Well done, Leroy!” he shouted into his radio microphone. “How did you find the wreck so quickly?”

Manning had been on his guard for most of the flight out, trying furiously to think what he might have said to Gilkrensky before he’d realised who he really was. But, what the hell! If he’d said something wrong, he’d be out of a job by now.

“No problem! I just followed the investigation team’s satellite beacon. The boys from Florida fixed themselves an up-link last night after I flew them in.”

On the sand below, just off the port wing of the crashed airliner, sat two portable cabins linked by thick cables to a mobile generator. As the helicopter

touched down, a big man in a lumberjack shirt and denim slacks shuffled out, shielded his eyes against the flying sand and ambled over to meet them.

“Theo!” he roared above the engine noise. “Good to see you, son. Pity it isn’t under better circumstances, but there you are. Hey! Is that what I think it is?” And he pointed to the black case containing the Minerva.

Gilkrensky nodded.

“Yes, Bill. But don’t say it too loudly, or everyone will want one!”

“Point taken. I can’t wait to see it in action. Have you brought the virtual reality gear?”

“I have. Who’s here on site?”

“Well, the official investigation team has arrived. Then there’s a whole bunch of Egyptians, representing the country where the crash happened. Then there’s me wearing two hats, one as a representative of the state of manufacture and, of course one as the company who made the plane. There’s an English guy from the Ministry of Transport in London, and a guy called Malone from the Civil Aeronautics Administration. Now, who’ve you got with you?”

“This is one of my bodyguards, Gerald Maguire. And this is our new head of security, Major Crowe.”

“Security eh? There’s no shortage of that around here. I had some colonel out here giving us the once-over the minute we arrived. He put a cordon of troops around the aircraft last night, claimed it was to protect it from looters.”

“That would be Colonel Selim,” Crowe said. “We had a long talk with him earlier.”

“Cold sort of a fish, eh? But, he seemed to know what he was doing. Do you want to get a look in the cockpit, Theo?”

“Yes Bill. I do. Have they found the ‘black box’ yet?”

“No, they haven’t. I’d say the radio beacon crapped out when it was ejected onto the sand during the crash. And I’ll tell you something else that’s worrying. The Daedalus unit is smashed. I don’t think you’ll get any information out of that either.”

“Smashed?” asked Gilkrensky. “But that’s impossible!”

“Yeah. I know. It’s impossible during a *normal* crash. But it looks as if some looters got into the cockpit before Selim arrived and went crazy with a fire axe.”

“The titanium casing should have protected the memory chip.”

“You’ll see for yourself in a minute. The Egyptians are very wary about me going anywhere near it and, by the same token, I’ve insisted they stay out of the cockpit in case they might screw anything up. I thought I’d wait until you got here before I tried to access the Daedalus’s memory, just in case. Come on, let’s take a look.”

McCarthy led them to a light aluminium ladder propped under the cockpit door. Gilkrensky followed him into the fuselage, the darkness, and the smell.

“Pretty damned awful, isn’t it,” McCarthy said. “Fire started in the rear after the passengers got clear and ate its way towards the nose. As you know, we only use special gelled kerosene instead of standard aviation fuel, because it doesn’t explode as easily when it’s spilled. Then the internal extinguishers killed the fire, just aft of the cockpit. See the way the seat covers are still intact? All fireproof material, but it doesn’t stop them smouldering.”

Crowe stepped forward and touched a shapeless object on the cabin floor with his foot. It was a child’s doll. McCarthy bent down and picked it up, running his thick fingers through its blackened hair. For a moment he was a million miles away. Then he said, “Don’t worry, Major. The little girl who owned this walked away from the wreck. Aircraft safety is a kind of obsession with me, and I designed this plane to be the safest in the world. You see the seats? They all face towards the rear of the plane. In a crash all the impact is absorbed by the seat itself, instead of firing the passenger forward like a bullet out of a gun. You’ll notice from the crash report that the only serious injury was to the stewardess who was out of her seat when the incident happened.”

“You saved a lot of lives with this plane,” said Crowe.

McCarthy gently sat the doll in the first passenger seat, facing aft.

“Pity I didn’t do it years ago,” he said sadly. “Then my eldest daughter Angie, and her kids might still be alive. OK, Theo. Do you want to . . . Theo?”

Gilkrensky had vanished into the cockpit and was sitting crossways in the pilot’s seat, hunched over the smashed casing of the Daedalus.

“Somebody really went crazy in here,” he said, shaking his head. “Why the hell would they do that?”

All around him were the empty eye sockets of smashed VDUs and ripped out panels. The plastic throttle controls were broken off, exposing the metal bars underneath, and the simple joysticks were shattered. One had been torn

right out of its panel, leaving a trail of coloured wires on the cockpit floor. As Crowe stepped onto the flight deck, his shoe crunched on broken glass.

“Here’s your culprit,” he said, pointing to a heavy fire axe lying between the pilot’s rudder pedals. “I wonder why they didn’t take it with them, if they were looters. It must be worth something.”

“Looks like there was a fight!” McCarthy said.

The fabric of the co-pilot’s seat was smeared with the unmistakable stains of dried blood. There were drips of it on the control panel around the Daedalus unit. Gilkrensky lifted what was left of the shattered cover. Someone had struck it very hard, splitting the plastic so that it came away in two sections. Beneath the cover, the unit was wrecked. The screen was smashed in, the keypad hammered into a confetti of shattered plastic, and the inspection cover had been peeled back like a half-open can. The jagged metal was smeared with blood.

“Looks like someone tried to pull the memory core out of the Daedalus and the inspection cover jammed on them,” Gilkrensky said.

“Industrial espionage?” suggested Crowe. “Perhaps they were after the neural net chip?”

“No point. The 1,000 model we use in Daedalus is available commercially. The Japanese and the Americans have been copying it for years.”

“Perhaps the looters thought it was a radio?”

McCarthy laughed.

“Aw, come of it, Major! This is a multi-million dollar airplane we’re talking about here, not a stolen car.”

Gilkrensky pulled a penknife from his pocket and prised open a thin plastic panel, low down on the pilot’s side of the Daedalus.

“We could sit here and speculate all day,” he said. “But I think it’d be more useful to extract the information we need from the main memory chip and get out. Would you two mind making sure I’m not disturbed for a minute or two?” Then he pulled a grey plastic cable from his pocket, attached one end to the port he had just uncovered, and the other to the Minerva.

Crowe and McCarthy stepped out of the cockpit into the cabin. At the far end, a pair of Egyptian officials were picking their way towards them through the cremated seats. ,

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

**“Copy input and commands from master unit and all peripherals for the last forty-eight hours,” Gilkrensky said.**

**“What’s that, Theo?”**

**“Nothing, Bill. I was just talking to myself.”**

**McCarthy stepped forward behind Crowe to meet the two Egyptians. He heard Gilkrensky’s voice dictating another command to the Minerva in the cockpit behind him and, for an instant, McCarthy could have sworn he heard a woman’s voice answer.**

## THE CREW

“The Egyptians seemed pretty upset that I was in the cockpit,” Gilkrensky said, after they had returned to McCarthy’s main caravan. He laid the Minerva gently on the fold-out table next to the metallurgical X-ray machine and looked back out of the doorway at the wreck.

“I don’t think it was that,” said McCarthy. “Under the Convention, we have the right to examine the wreckage, to have full access to all the evidence, and to question witnesses. What I think really pissed them off was that you wouldn’t let them see what you had in the briefcase.”

“I can’t let them see the Minerva. It’s one of only two prototypes in existence.”

“Did you manage to extract the information?”

“I won’t know until Minerva processes it. The main Daedalus chip may have been too damaged to recover anything useable. Why don’t you take one of the other laptops up there and see if you have any luck. Better still, do it in front of the Egyptians, so they can see it’s all above board and we can use it in the official enquiry.”

“So why take your own copy with the Minerva?”

“Because, if the information from the Daedalus autopilot is useable, I want to analyse it well ahead of anyone else. I don’t like surprises, Bill. Did you say we had the right to question witnesses?”

“I did, and we do. But if you’re thinking of questioning the flight crew, I suggest you ask that CAA guy Malone, or another independent witness to sit in with you. Otherwise it’s going to look like you’re trying to intimidate them.”

“OK. Let’s go and find Mr Malone. Have someone call the hotel and ask them to have the pilot and his crew meet me in the board room in an hour. There’s a few things about this incident which just don’t add up.”

The helicopter landed on the roof of the Nile Olympiad at just after five that evening. Anyone watching it closely would have seen its tail wag slightly on the final approach. Gilkrensky had persuaded Leroy Manning to let him take the controls again, and he was still finding them difficult to master.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Manning. “That’s called the ‘Huey Shuffle’ and everyone flying one of these babies for the first time does it. Did it myself. It’s because the pedals are sensitive. They make it easy to over-control.”

“Thanks,” said Gilkrensky. “I’ll try it again later.” And with McCarthy, Crowe and Martin Malone, he ran to the stairwell of the hotel and down into the corridor of the presidential suite. Thomas Hargreaves was there to greet him.

“The flight crew are waiting for you in the board room.”

“Thank you,” Gilkrensky said, and opened the door.

Facing him across the table, with their backs to the Nile and the western city, sat five people in clean Exair uniforms. They all rose as he entered, and looked at him nervously.

“Ah . . . Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Theo Gilkrensky. This is Professor Bill McCarthy who designed the plane, and Martin Malone from the Civil Aeronautics Administration.”

The man in the centre of the group put out his hand.

“I’m Robert Danvers,” he said. “And this is Margaret Spalding my first officer, Brian Griffiths our engineer, and Sarah and Melanie our cabin staff. Julie Maxwell, our chief stewardess, cannot be with us. She’s still in hospital, as you probably know.”

“I’m sorry. How is she?”

Danvers glared at him. He was about to speak when Margaret Spalding cut across him. She was a small, neat woman with black hair and a thick Liverpool accent.

“She’s going to be all right,” she said flatly.

For a moment there was an awkward silence. Then Gilkrensky said,

"I'm glad. Please sit down everyone."

There was a scraping of chairs around the table.

"I'd like to thank you all for coming here today at such short notice, and to say I wish we could have met under different circumstances. This is not an official enquiry, you understand, simply an initial investigation into the circumstances of the crash, particularly in light of what's been said in the media about the . . ."

"I take it you're referring to my statement, Mr Gilkrensky?" Danvers said. He was a large man with a ginger moustache, freckles and bright blue eyes that glared across the table.

"That's right. I . . ."

"What I told the reporters is true. Your machine crashed the plane and that's all there is to it." His hand went to his jacket pocket and pulled out a small digital recorder, which he placed in the no-man's-land of the table between them. "Now I know this is not an *official* enquiry, but I have to protect myself and my crew by insisting there's a record of this conversation."

"Aw, come off it fella . . .!" began McCarthy. But Gilkrensky said,

"That's OK. Can you run through the events leading up to crash for me, please?"

"There's very little point," Danvers said. "It was all routine. We'd punched the flight co-ordinates into that machine of yours, and it took us up as sweetly as you please at first, heading for London. Then, out of a clear blue sky, the collision and low altitude warning alarms went off and the machine put the plane into a steep climb, so steep that it stalled. If you know anything about aerodynamics, you'll know that stall situations are particularly dangerous on planes like your 'Whisperer' with high 'T'-shaped tails. If the plane climbs too steeply, the turbulent air-flow from the wings causes the engines to surge and interferes with the tail's ability to lift the rear end of the aircraft. So she literally falls backwards out of the sky."

"It's called 'deep stall'," offered McCarthy.

"I know what it's called," Danvers said. "I also know that when you're sitting up there with the lives of two hundred passengers in your hands, you don't have time to debate it academically—you just act! And that's what I did."

"What *did* you do?" asked Gilkrensky.

“I switched off the bloody robot for a start! The stall warning gong was going crazy and I could feel the tail dropping away. So I did the only thing that would bring lift back to the wings.”

“Which was?”

“I hit the emergency parachute we use for braking. That snapped open, pulled the tail up, and suddenly I had control again. But we’d fallen too close to the ground to regain lift, and there was nothing I could do but crash land.”

Gilkrensky nodded.

“You did very well.”

“And how would you know?”

“I’m a qualified pilot—fixed wing and helicopters. When exactly was Miss Maxwell injured?”

One of the stewardesses said, “It must have been when the parachute opened. All the passengers were still strapped into their seats from take-off. But this little boy got up to go to the lavatory as soon as the seat belt sign went out. The alarms sounded, and Julie got up to save him. She had him in her arms when the nose went down and she was thrown against the bulkhead.”

“What about the child? Was anyone else injured?”

“No,” said Danvers sharply. “The kid was OK.”

“But there was another crew member hurt. It’s in the accident report.”

“Just a few bumps and scrapes. Nothing to write home about.”

Gilkrensky looked at Danvers, and then at the digital recorder between them.

“So you’re telling me Daedalus suddenly put the plane into a steep climb, stalled it, and then failed to recover control?”

“That’s right,” said Danvers.

“Miss Spalding?”

“That’s what happened.”

“And there was no interference with the Daedalus unit?”

“I only switched it off when I was sure it wasn’t going to recover the plane,” Danvers said slowly. “I gave it every reasonable chance, considering I had two hundred lives on board.”

“So you’ve said. Do you still insist the machine was at fault?”

Danvers leant forward across the table.

“I object strongly to the word ‘insist’, Mr Gilkrensky. I am not ‘insisting’ anything. I am, along with the other members of my crew, simply stating the facts as they happened. Your machine failed, and the plane crashed. That’s all there is to it.”

Gilkrensky stared back at him.

“Technically, I still find that hard to believe. Daedalus would have compensated for the deep stall through its back-up systems in less than five seconds. It . . .”

Danvers exploded.

“For God’s sake man! We’re not talking about a theoretical exercise here! I was *not* going to gamble with the lives of two hundred men, women and children while I waited to see if your bloody machine would get its act together! You and your precious corporation have tried to take the human element out of flying, and you’ve failed. Your bloody robot doesn’t work and your aircraft is unsafe! As far as I’m concerned this interview is over until the official enquiry!”

Danvers jerked to his feet so fast that his chair toppled backwards onto the floor. Then he stormed out of the suite. His crew exchanged glances. One by one, they followed their captain out of the room.

The last to go was Margaret Spalding, who reached forward to retrieve Captain Danvers’s digital recorder. Her hands were heavily bandaged so that she couldn’t turn it off. Gilkrensky reached forward and pressed the button for her.

“You’ve hurt yourself, Miss Spalding”

“I burnt myself on the wreckage,” she said. “Now sir, I think we’d be grateful if you left us in peace until the enquiry.”

“That is understood,” said Martin Malone.

“Thank you,” she said, and went to join the rest of her crew.

“If you don’t need me anymore, I’d like to get back to the crash site,” Malone said.

“Yes. Of course,” said Gilkrensky in a distant voice. “Leroy will fly you back.”

McCarthy opened the door for him and then turned back into the room. Gilkrensky was still slumped in his seat, staring out at the setting sun.

“That Captain Danvers really hates me, doesn’t he, Bill?”

“They’ve all been through a lot, Theo. An investigation brings out the worst in people. You’ve got to expect that.”

“Is there any way this thing can be proven, one way or the other?” said Crowe.

McCarthy drew a deep breath and sighed.

“The ‘black box’ flight recorder is the only officially admissible evidence. But it might be damaged, or have only basic information that wouldn’t give enough detail to figure out if Danvers’s story is true. Conversation in the cockpit is recorded, but the tape is usually recycled so that only the last thirty minutes before the crash are retained.”

“So it all boils down to what’s on the Daedalus memory chip,” Gilkrensky said, “and whether or not the official enquiry will admit it as evidence.”

“That’s right, Theo. And we’ve never had to use it this way before.”

Gilkrensky seemed lost in the view to the west, towards the desert, and the wreck.

“Of course not. I developed that system so we’d never have another plane crash. And now look at us! Danvers was right. I tried to remove human error. Isn’t that what Dr Frankenstein said when he made his monster? His wife was killed too, wasn’t she?”

“Aw, come off it, Theo! You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Did either of you notice how Danvers hogged the whole interview?” asked Crowe. “It was almost as if the crew had rehearsed it in advance and agreed that he’d do all the talking.”

“He *is* their captain,” Gilkrensky said.

“But you saw Miss Spalding’s hands, didn’t you, sir?”

“I did. She said she’d burnt them on the wreckage.”

“Perhaps,” said Crowe. “But just to be sure, I’d like to have a few words with your helicopter pilot, Leroy Manning. I understand he was first on the scene at the crash. I might also drop in at the hospital and see how the injured stewardess, Julie Maxwell, is doing, if that’s all right with you?”

At that moment, on the other side of the Nile four men and a woman, who would have been coveted guests at any cocktail party in the city, were arriving

at a fashionable address, The owner of the fine apartment took a heavy brown envelope from the top drawer of an antique bureau, and spread the contents on the low coffee table. It was a collection of professional colour photographs, each printed from a high resolution digital image and showing excellent detail.

“As you all know,” said Zaki El Sharoud, “there was a plane crash outside the city two nights ago, which caused considerable embarrassment and immense financial loss, to the company which owned it. Yesterday, that company flew in a whole army of technicians in a specially fitted out transport plane. This afternoon they interviewed the flight crew at the corporation hotel. But of greatest interest to us is this . . .”

Zaki pointed to the first photograph, which showed a group of men disembarking from an executive jet.

“This morning, there was a great deal of security activity at the airport. Nothing ostentatious, as there might be for a visiting dignitary or head of state, but serious activity for all that. The whole operation took less than five minutes, but it was not fast enough to stop us obtaining these pictures. Look at this one carefully. The tall man with the beard is none other than Theodore Gilkrensky himself, the chairman and majority shareholder in the Gilcrest Radio Corporation, one of the eight richest men in the world.”

El Sharoud looked around the group for a reaction. The men nodded. Only the woman had a question.

“Why is this man so important to us?” she asked. “There are many rich men in Cairo who would be easier targets.”

El Sharoud went to a carved bookcase and pulled out an international business directory, opened it at a marked page and handed it to her.

“This man is important to us, not so much for what he is worth, but for what he controls. The Gilcrest Radio Corporation is essentially a holding company with interests in computers, airlines and aerospace, a chain of hotels, recreational facilities, food companies and, most importantly, a communications group. Gilcrest Communications has been involved in smartcard development, virtual reality theme parks, digital phone and video systems, and the launch of numerous communications satellites. It is this last area which holds the key to a great victory for Islam.”

“How?” asked the woman.

El Sharoud smiled.

“Because mass communication is today’s most powerful weapon. During the invasion of Iraq, when a single Muslim power opposed the combined forces of the West, who controlled the satellite news?”

“The West of course.”

“And because of this, only one side of the story ever reached the world. Yet, during the successful Islamic revolution in Iran, the voice of Ayatollah Khomeini reached the ears of thousands of his followers, who could not even read, on smuggled audio cassettes.”

The woman nodded.

“Satellite television is the fastest growing news medium in the world,” continued Zaki. “It can reach anywhere that a person can set up a ‘devil dish’. All over Islam, western consumerism, profane images, political propaganda and even pornography are being beamed directly into people’s homes by satellite TV. It is destroying their faith. Yet if we had access to a dedicated satellite channel of our own, think of what we could accomplish! We could spread the word of Allah across the globe. Our masters have decided this man is the key to a new dawn for Islam, and we have been chosen to bring that about.”

The woman looked up from the book. Then she pointed to one of the photographs on the table, showing the armed cordon of state security guards around Gilkrensky’s plane.

“He will be a difficult target.”

El Sharoud settled himself into a white leather chair.

“That is true. According to my research, there has already been one unsuccessful attempt on his life, and so now he employs his own private army of bodyguards, led by an ex-major of the British commandos. The presidential suite of his hotel is a sealed fortress and the lower floors are swarming with state security troops. Today, he ventured outside the hotel. But this was in a private helicopter, which is kept under guard at the airport and flown by a corporation pilot. Yes, he is a difficult target. But for the power he can bring us, he is worth the risk.”

Gamal, a short powerfully built man who had served with Zaki during his time in the army said,

“Have our masters given you a plan?”

“This is where you, and Abdul and Sarwat must advise me. Gilkrensky’s obsession with security is also his greatest weakness. You see how all his defences are designed to prevent an attack from below? Now please tell me if this is feasible . . .”

Zaki’s plan to kidnap Theo Gilkrensky was both daring and well researched. Like all good plans, it made full use of the special talents of each member of the team. By the time El Sharoud had finished, none of the men had any doubt that it would work.

When they had gone, the woman said,

“You have convinced them. They will follow you.”

“And you?”

“You know I will.”

“Even though yours is the most difficult task of all?”

She was Abdul and Sarwat’s sister Farida, the most beautiful of the fashion models who came to his studio—tall and slim, with shining black hair that flowed to her waist, and eyes so dark that Zaki thought he might drown in them. Of all the women he had known, and there had been many, she was the one for whom he had the most respect. There had been times when he had looked into her eyes, and dreamt what it might be like to forget the past and begin again with her. But the Holy War, the *Jihad*, was everything to them both.

“I will do what must be done,” Farida said. Then she left.

Zaki gathered up the photographs, put them back in the envelope along with the memory chip from the Japanese woman’s camera, and placed the package on the fire, where it flamed and spat into ashes.

Behind him, the door to the bedroom opened slowly.

“You briefed them well,” Yukiko said. “But you forgot to mention the briefcase.”

El Sharoud looked up from the fire.

“I do not lie to my people,” he said. “If they are to believe this is a simple kidnap, then I must be free to explain the mission as I see fit. Surely your masters in Tokyo told you that. When we are successful, who is to know if the communications satellite I promised them came from Japan or from this man’s company . . . as long as it comes?”

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

**“You will have your satellite when my company has the briefcase,” Yukiko said. “But you must deliver Gilkrensky to me. That is my *personal* condition.”**

**“You will have him,” said Zaki El Sharoud.**

## CABARET

The helicopter touched down on the roof of the Nile Olympiad at 10.35 pm, after its last trip of the day. Leroy Manning gingerly removed his headset as the engine idled, massaged his scalp with his fingers and waited for his passengers to disembark.

Next to him, Gilkrensky popped the buckle on his seat belt. “Tired?” he shouted above the engines.

“You know how it is. The last few days have been hell!”

“Then why don’t you switch off the chopper and leave her here for the night. There’s bound to be a bed for you in the hotel somewhere. That would be OK, wouldn’t it, Major?”

“I don’t see why not,” yelled Crowe. “Just get Hargreaves to fix you up with a security badge.”

Manning flicked off the engine and waited for the blissful silence as it died.

“And if you’re not tired, there’s always the night club!” Hargreaves said as the rotors ground to halt. “I saw a belly dancer in Turkey once. Gave me a hard-on for a week.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” Manning said as he pulled the dew covers for the engine out of their lockers. Still, as long as he was in the hotel anyway . . .

The night club, on the far wing-tip of the hotel from Gilkrensky’s penthouse, was tacky and touristy . . . and empty. Glass walls on three sides looked out over the city, while the wooden dance floor was a deserted island in a sea of tables.

It must seat three hundred, thought Manning. And there's less than a dozen people here!

"Are we too early?" Hargreaves said.

"You're always too early for Cairo cabarets. They're night birds. Here, let's get a table over by the stage!"

A uniformed *maitre d'* intercepted them, saw the security badge and corporation logo on Manning's flight jacket, and stopped in his tracks. Then he removed the "reserved" sign on the table they had selected, wished them a pleasant evening, and slid off to get the menus.

"I'll order," Manning said when they came. He ran his eyes down the ornately scripted lists, picked what he thought might be acceptable, and ended with, "Two bottles of Stella Export beer, with the blue label."

"It's dearer, but it's stronger than the local brew," he said.

The beer arrived, along with a selection of small bowls of shrimps, strips of meat, chicken wings, hummus and stuffed vine leaves.

"It's called 'mezze'. Here, you can dip your bread in it. What do you think of that meat?"

"S'OK!" Hargreaves said with his mouth full.

"It's deep fried brain. That's OK! Spit it out into this," and he held out an ash tray.

The main course was beef and veal, served with a sauce and vegetables, which were more to Hargreaves' taste. All around them, people started to arrive. Manning ordered another pair of Stella Exports. What the hell! The company was paying! He lit a Marlboro while he waited for the dessert. A group of German tourists eyed them suspiciously, then took the other reserved tables on the far side of the dance floor.

Things started to move at around 1.00 am. An thick-set Egyptian singer, who reminded Manning of a bit player in a gangster movie started to grind his way through a medley of Dean Martin songs, each worse than the one before.

"It gets better," Manning said. "Trust me!"

At half past one, a wedding group arrived from a reception downstairs. The guests clapped as the bride and groom danced nervously in front of the stage. The singer was getting into the swing of his act. More and more people came

in. A large group of Japanese took the remaining tables around the dance floor. By two o'clock the place was full.

"I told you," Manning said. "Night birds!"

The singer bowed and left. A large band moved in, taking up most of the stage.

"That'll be for your belly dancers. They're a really big deal around here."

"So who's on tonight?" Hargreaves said, draining the last of his beer.

"No idea. Just enjoy, eh?"

The new orchestra tuned up noisily. The lights dimmed, and the spotlight fell on the singer, who had returned to act as Master of Ceremonies. For a moment he spoke in rapid Arabic. There was a round of applause and the bride and groom stood up, happily embarrassed, and sat down again.

"Ladies and gentlemen for overseas," the singer said in English, "I would like to welcome you to the Rooftop Club of the Nile Olympiad Hotel. Without further ado, may I introduce you to our star of the evening, the one and only . . . Mirium!"

"Oh shit!" Manning said, who'd seen her before.

Miriam was a large and energetic woman, overflowing with personality. She teased the bridegroom mercilessly, gyrated in front of his table and ran a silk scarf around his neck. The German tourists loved it. The wedding party applauded. The Japanese shot picture after picture.

"You'll notice she's wearing a body stocking, so that nothing shows," said Manning, when there was a lull in the music. "Something we have the fundamentalists to thank for."

"Yeah, I did. Service to mankind if you ask me, given the size of her."

"It's an art form. Not a strip show."

Miriam finished her act to rapturous applause, waving and laughing at the crowd as she mopped the sweat from her face with a handful of paper tissues from a box at the side of the stage.

Then the singer returned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is not often that an old hand like me has the chance to introduce you to a great new talent. But tonight, I have such an honour. Making her debut here at the Rooftop Club, I present . . . Camille!"

## VIRTUALLY MARIA

The lights dimmed. The singer withdrew, and there was a single drumbeat, cutting short the applause.

To the left of the stage, a bright disc of light picked out a veiled face peeking innocently around the curtain. Above the veil were the largest, darkest eyes Manning had ever seen. Their eyelids fluttered.

Another drumbeat.

The girl stepped lightly out onto the stage, with the spotlight still only on her face. The dark eyes blinked.

Drumbeat! And the spotlight drew back.

Standing proudly in its glare was a long, lithe figure wrapped in strips of coloured silk over an electric blue body stocking. Her shining black hair, held by a jewelled clasp, flowed in a river to her waist.

There was silence in the room.

Drumbeat.

The girl began to dance, in graceful fluid movements, as her hands rose above her neck. Between the finger and thumb of each hand she held a tiny pair of brass cymbals that tinkled as her body flowed to the music.

Dom, dom, dom—dom dom dom!

She was a beautiful butterfly dipping across the dance floor in her own pool of light, raising her arms, elbows bent, lifting her breasts against the taught material of her costume. Her hands slid through her hair to the back of her neck. A strip of silk fluttered to the floor. Manning watched it go, mesmerised.

The music swelled and flowed on. Camille stood less than six feet away from him on the dance floor. The cymbals tinkled. Her hands fluttered around her slim waist, just above her groin. Another strip of silk fell away. Manning looked up at her eyes, and imagined himself with her, in a private room . . . dancing . . . holding . . . touching . . .

The body stocking hid everything, and nothing. It clung to Camille like paint, revealing her high, perfect breasts, her flat belly, and the tantalising valley below. Leroy Manning, who had watched every belly dancer from Pyramid Row to the Nile Hilton and been bored by them all, had never seen anyone like her!

Camille spun in front of him, bright eyes flashing, long hands teasing at knots.

Another flash of falling silk.

And another, and another . . . She was in a frenzy now, sweeping across the stage from table to table in a whirl of dazzling blue and flowing hair.

Another strip of silk fell to the floor.

My God! She's good!

Leroy was sweating. It was like being a kid again, in the back seat of his father's Buick with Patsy Martin, touching the warm globe of her right breast for the first time. He felt himself getting hard and moved his chair closer to the table. Hargreaves was hypnotised. The German tourists stared, open mouthed. The Japanese hadn't taken a single picture.

Camille knelt in the centre of the dance floor in front of him, with her legs spread. Her open fingers combed her hair, caressing it as a lover might—as he might. Her belly writhed in waves, slowly at first and then building, until she was gripped by a passion that reach out and sucked him in, faster and faster, until . . .

The last strip of silk fell away.

Leroy Manning stared into the most beautiful face he had ever seen. There was the innocence of Patsy Martin in the liquid brown eyes, the sexuality of Su Lin in the full moist lips, and the magic of Sarah Jane in her smile. The very essence of every woman he had loved and lost, right there in front of him—his perfect woman!

"I've found her!" he said out loud. But his words were swept away by the frenzy of frustrated energy that exploded in a thunderous round of applause. The Germans leapt to their feet. A ripple of lightning burst from the Japanese camera flashes. The wedding guests clapped and shouted. The bride eyed the groom suspiciously.

Camille bowed before him. Her shining hair kissed the ground—and she was gone.

"My God!" breathed Manning.

"Yeah! You're telling me," Hargreaves said. Beads of sweat were running over his large face. He rubbed the cold bottle of Stella on his forehead and crossed his legs. "What wouldn't I do for a few minutes alone with her right now?"

“She’s Muslim,” snapped Manning a little too quickly. “You haven’t a hope.”

“Yeah? I suppose a classy bit of stuff like that’s not for the likes of you and me . . . still, I wouldn’t mind seeing what’s under that body stocking.”

Manning stared at the stage curtain while his pulse returned to normal. She probably had some rich sugar-daddy somewhere, who kept her in the life . . . Then he thought of the face he had seen when the last veil fell, and the innocent look in her eyes.

No! She was his “perfect woman”—beautiful and unreachable. She probably lived with her Muslim family somewhere in the city and honoured her mother and father by putting herself through college. When she was ready, she would find a perfect Muslim man and settle down to a happy Muslim life.

He wished that for her.

“Shit! Look at the time!” Hargreaves said. “It’s nearly three. If I’m not back on duty when my watch starts, the Major’ll have my balls for breakfast!”

“Whatever floats your boat,” said Manning, still staring at the centre of the dance floor.

Hargreaves got up, signed the bill, and hurried to the exit. All around Manning, the club dissolved into happy chaos as members of the band, wedding guests, and tourists mingled at the tables, swapping jokes with the bride and groom. The voluptuous Mirium had adopted the group of Germans, who were laughing at the tops of their voices.

Manning reached down and pulled out his packet of Marlboro’s, but it was empty.

“Shit!”

All at once, he felt painfully alone. There were the bride and groom, about to start a new life together. There were the other wedding guests in twos and threes—couples, families, uncles and aunts. There was Mirium, laughing and joking with a table of people she didn’t even know.

And there was his perfect woman . . . gone!

Leroy Manning crushed the empty cigarette packet in his fist and dropped it into his beer glass. Then he stood up, walked to the door, and closed it on the laughter behind him. Nothing left really, but to hit the sack—on his own.

Then, in the quietness of the corridor, he heard a woman's voice raised in protest. There was a man's voice too, insistent and slightly slurred, coming from behind the side door leading to the backstage area. Manning reached out and pushed it open.

The voices stopped.

Glaring at him, above the turned head of a woman, was the tough-looking singer from the cabaret. His slick black hair was ruffled and his bow tie was undone. His strong hands gripped the woman's shoulders tightly, pulling the material of her loose *burka* robe down over her shoulders, revealing the electric blue body stocking.

She turned, and Manning was once again staring into the eyes of his perfect woman. For a moment, he stood paralysed. Then he said,

"Are you having a problem?"

The singer swore rapidly at him in Arabic. Then he saw the security tag on Manning's jacket.

"There is no problem, sir! It is a personal matter!"

The woman pulled the singer's hands free, and flipped the hood of the *burka* back up over her head.

"What do *you* say?" Manning asked.

"I think I need someone to see me to a taxi. This man is drunk."

Once again the singer's eyes darted to the logo on Manning's jacket. Then he snorted, threw up his hands, and staggered back into the din of the club.

The woman watched him go. She turned to Manning and offered her hand.

"Thank you. He is a pig. Did you like my dance? It was my first time."

Manning shook her hand and took the duffle bag she handed him. Together they walked towards the lift.

"Er . . . I thought it was fantastic. My name's Leroy. And you're Camille?"

"Oh no," she said, smiling at him. "That is my stage name. During the day I work as a model. My real name is Farida."

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## VIRTUAL REALITY

“I’m sorry to call you so early Jess,” Gilkrensky said. “But we have an important meeting here in the hotel in ten minutes. We might even be able to push the Egyptian authorities for a preliminary hearing to examine new evidence from the crash.”

Jessica hugged her dressing-gown tighter around her naked shoulders and switched her cell phone to her left ear. She stared out at the thin sleet falling against the darkened window overlooking Grosvenor Square and peered at her watch. It was six forty five in the morning.

“What new evidence?”

“They found the ‘black box’ flight data recorder from the wreck last night, Jess. It had been taken by looters and buried deep in the sand, so its radio tracer was impossible to detect until our people were right on top of it. Bill’s been through its recordings with the investigation team, but it’s not going to tell us very much.”

“Why not?”

“Because it was only set to record time, speed, altitude and acceleration. It won’t tell us whether Daedalus made an error, whether it was switched off during the flight, or even if it was ever switched on at all!”

Jessica was groggy with sleep. She had difficulty taking everything in.

“Why wouldn’t it be switched on?”

“CAA regulations require flight crews to do an obligatory number of flights on full manual control, even if they have Daedalus aboard, just to keep their commercial licenses. But such flights are always notified in advance. This one wasn’t.”

“I thought you said Daedalus recorded all its own flight information.”

“It does, and I managed to recover all its data, even though the unit was badly smashed up.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I had to use Mar. . . I mean Minerva to do it. Even the upgraded 2,000 computer Bill McCarthy brought wasn’t powerful enough to handle the data linkages.”

“And?”

“Well that’s it, Jess. If I use the Minerva 3,000 prototype to display the data, then everyone will see it. Can you postpone the board meeting for a couple of days until after Christmas?”

“Surely you can demonstrate the data without people seeing the computer that’s driving the presentation?”

“It’s not that, Jess. It’s just that I need a couple of days to reprogram the interface, all right? I didn’t have time to remodel it before we left, and . . . and it’s highly personalised to me. It could be embarrassing.”

“Theo! We’re losing millions every day over this crash. The shareholders are breathing down my neck. If I try and stall the Board meeting they’ll lose confidence and sell out to Funakoshi. Show it to the enquiry *now*. Minerva’s only going to be seen by half a dozen people at most.”

“I just need a couple of days, Jess!”

“We don’t have it, Theo. If the information exonerates Daedalus, use it now. Then we can tell the world and stop ourselves sliding into oblivion!”

Gilkrensky looked beaten.

“All right, Jess. You win.”

“And call me when the enquiry is over. All right?”

But he had already signed off.

The door to Jessica’s bedroom opened and a man peered into the lounge. He was dark and good-looking with deep brown eyes and ruffled hair.

“Who was it?” he said, walking over to her.

“Theo, from Egypt. He’s obsessed about some modification he made to that precious computer of his. He probably has it talking like Donald Duck or something.”

“You worry about him too much, Jess,” Tony Delgado said, as he slipped the dressing gown from her shoulders. “Come back to bed.”

There was a knock at the door of the presidential suite. Gilkrensky shut the black case of the Minerva.

“Come in!”

“I have the results of my little investigation,” Crowe said, handing him a thin folder. “I’d recommend you read it carefully before you go next door and meet the flight crew.”

“We’re supposed to start in five minutes,” said Gilkrensky.

“I know, but the stewardess who was injured, Julie Maxwell, regained consciousness last night and I managed to talk to her. She gave me a possible motive for what might have happened. I also have the hospital report on what really happened to Margaret Spalding’s hands.”

“Thank you,” Gilkrensky said, and started to read.

“Before we consider the evidence presented by the Corporation, I think it would be valuable to recap on what we have heard so far,” said Colonel El Wassef, the chairman of the enquiry. “We have heard from the crew of the aircraft that they made a normal take-off from the airport here in Cairo on the evening of Wednesday the eighteenth of December, assisted by the Daedalus auto-pilot. We have also heard that, shortly after take-off, the autopilot malfunctioned, and threw the plane into a stall.”

The crew of the plane nodded.

“The evidence from the aircraft’s official flight recorder confirms the testimony of the crew, in so far as it is able,” continued the colonel, “and voice recordings from the cockpit also confirm an emergency took place. But I understand the manufacturers of the aircraft have new information they wish to submit.”

“We do, Mr Chairman,” Gilkrensky said after a moment’s silence. “We can prove that Daedalus did not fail.”

He was sitting at the far end of the conference table from El Wassef. To his left sat Bill McCarthy, and to his right were Major Crowe and the flight crew of the aircraft—Danvers, Peters and Spalding. Martin Malone of the CAA sat at the head of the table next to the chairman.

The black case of the Minerva 3,000 lay on the table in front of Gilkrensky. A thick cable reached back from it to a squat box on the floor and, from this box, smaller cables stretched to blue and white plastic headsets on a small table near the door.

“And how do you intend to prove this?” asked El Wassef.

“With data from Daedalus itself.”

Gilkrensky saw Margaret Spalding turn to face him, but he continued.

“The unit was badly damaged, but the basic memory chip was not so fragmented that we couldn’t recover enough material for a simulation of the events leading up to the crash.”

“I protest,” said Danvers. “We already have the official technical information we need from the flight recorder, and *that* corroborates the facts!”

“But Daedalus has much more,” Gilkrensky said. “Even though it was not switched to autopilot mode, it . . .”

“Daedalus was switched on!” insisted Danvers. “You’ve already had three people, *and* the official flight recorder data tell you that!”

“As I was saying,” Gilkrensky continued evenly. “Even though Daedalus was not controlling the flight, it still recorded every action of the flight crew, and more importantly, every word spoken in the cockpit since they entered it!”

Danvers looked hunted.

“I wasn’t aware we were being spied on! This evidence is inadmissible!”

“I’m afraid not,” said Martin Malone. “A whole new set of regulations were drawn up regarding cockpit voice recordings when Daedalus first came in. You’d have got a notice about it.”

“Bloody cheek,” Danvers said, and glanced at Spalding.

“Please, ladies and gentlemen,” insisted El Wassef, looking at his watch. “I would like to get on. You mentioned a simulation, Dr Gilkrensky?”

“I did, Mr Chairman. I’ve combined the data I extracted from the Daedalus memory chip with the flight simulation programme we use to train pilots on the Whisperer jet. The result has been loaded onto this computer, and can be displayed to you using an advanced virtual reality system through those headsets over there, as well as on the plasma screen of the video conferencing system. Major, Bill, if you’d be so kind.”

Crowe and McCarthy handed a headset to each of the flight crew, to El Wassef and Martin Malone. Danvers turned the thing in his hand before he put it on. It was like a baseball cap, with headphones over the ears and eyepieces fitting snugly from below the peak. In the darkness, he heard Gilkrensky’s voice over the headphones.

He was afraid of what he might see next. How much had that damned man found out? Margaret had said . . .

All at once, Danvers was looking at a soft blue background. A white sign flashed up onto the blue, saying,

“Gilcrest Communication Systems: Simulation Programme 33, Whisperer 106. Standard Daedalus Flight. Prepared in conjunction with GRC Aerospace, Florida. Copyright GRC. All rights reserved.”

Then the sign vanished, to be replaced with the words,

“Modified for Minerva 3,000 interface: TIG/Maria.”

Danvers heard Gilkrensky say,

“If you pull the blinds, Bill, you and Major Crowe can follow the simulation on the wall monitor. Now, ladies and gentlemen, could I ask you each to state your name please, so that Minerva can recognise you?”

Danvers spoke first, followed by Spalding and Peters. El Wassef and Martin Malone followed suit.

“Right then,” said Gilkrensky, with what sounded to Danvers like a resigned sigh. “Can we start the programme please?”

All at once, Danvers was back in the pilot’s seat of the Whisperer!

The realism of it took him by surprise. It was so lifelike! There was none of the cartoon quality he was familiar with from other VR demonstrations. He saw the shadows beneath the controls, the displays on the cockpit VDUs and the lights of Cairo airport beyond the cockpit window. Even the heads of individual screws on the control panel and the textured material of the seat were real.

“Wow! That’s some detail,” McCarthy said.

“It’s a new system we’ve developed for the theme parks,” said Gilkrensky. “We did a lot of work on it with NASA and Chapel Hill.”

“The resolution must be phenomenal!”

“It is. The best conventional television eyepieces on the market only give 480 by 640 scan pixels. These headsets use twin lasers to project an image directly onto the back of the eye. That gives us 6,000 by 4,000! It’s as if . . .”

“Do you mean there are laser beams being fired into my eyeballs!” gasped El Wassef.

Danvers heard him pulling off his headset. He was about to do the same, when a woman’s voice beside him said,

“Don’t worry about that now, Captain. It’s perfectly safe.”

Danvers turned his head sharply. The image moved with him instantly. There was none of the time-lag motion sickness he had experienced with other demonstrations.

A beautiful woman in a forget-me-not blue dress sat next to him in the co-pilot’s seat. Her coppery hair fell in a cascade over her shoulders, and her brilliant green eyes fixed him with a concerned smile.

“Oh my God!” Crowe said.

Danvers heard a sharp intake of breath.

“Aw Theo!” gasped McCarthy. “You didn’t.”

“I told you I didn’t want to use Minerva, Bill,” Gilkrensky said.

“Is there a problem, Theo?” the woman asked, turning in her seat.

“No,” said Gilkrensky. “Ladies and gentlemen, before we continue, I should explain that the computer I’m using to drive this simulation is a very advanced biochip prototype. It has the option to programme the ‘help’ menu into the image of any person, or thing, that the user might be comfortable to dialogue with. If I’d had time, I would have deprogrammed this particular image out of the machine. But I hadn’t. So I’m sorry. I hope you’ll excuse me.”

“She’s lovely,” said Malone. “Who is she?”

“She was my wife,” Gilkrensky said.