

MIND THE GAP

(online sample)

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Chapter 1

Park Royal

Darius Ibrahim heard a scream, muffled but distinct.

Then another. Darius lowered his newspaper. Around him, heads were turning to the rear of the carriage. Beyond it, he could dimly make out movement in the carriage beyond. A swirl of grey, then blankness as something covered the window on the other side. It was dark outside, and as the train sped along, the adjoining carriage windows constantly moved in and out of alignment with each other. *Like airlocks endlessly lining up but never quite meeting*, he thought.

There was an awkwardness in the air, as Tube etiquette was tested by the unexpected sound. Normally, it didn't matter how loudly you talked to a friend or pondered the *Guardian* crossword aloud, your neighbours would pretend to not notice. It was a kind of sanity survival strategy, but so was a heightened awareness of possible threats. These two opposing forces were now at work in the troubled minds of the carriage's occupants.

On an impulse, Darius got up. He'd been half out of his mind from boredom. *Might as well see what fate has dished up.*

Clutching at the overhead straps, he made his way to the carriage's end window. Beyond it he could see its counterpart in the next carriage, endlessly oscillating as the train moved on. It was blocked by something grey, maybe clothing. Then the obstacle suddenly swung away and he found himself staring at a face.

He jumped at the unexpected encounter. It was a plain, undistinguished face, closely shaved all round with a suggestion of fair hair from the stubble on top of the head. Green eyes peered into Darius' carriage and looked slowly

from one side to the other. There was something odd about the pupils - they seemed slightly elongated - but otherwise they were expressionless. Cold, hard, and not a smile or frown on the man's face. He stepped back a little, and Darius could now see he held a knife.

Darius froze. What do you do when you're enclosed within a small hurtling space, confronted by danger close at hand? *Fight or flight?* But the danger was in the next carriage. Nowhere to fly to, but no-one to fight.

He felt warmth returning to his limbs after the sudden shock. Darius swung around to see how others were reacting. Some looked startled, others were ignoring the next carriage with focused intent. He caught the eye of a middle-aged man in an anorak and brown corduroys.

"Did you see that?" he asked, after a moment's pause. His voice sounded louder than expected.

The man looked away. Others around him looked embarrassed.

"He's got a knife!" Darius yelled to the carriage in general. No-one moved, though some looked frightened. "Shit." Darius pulled his mobile phone from his pocket, intending to call the police. He'd started on the first "9" when he realised something: the train was slowing down. In a moment, they'd be at the next station and the carriage doors would open. Suddenly the danger was a little nearer. Would it be better to jump out to attract someone's attention, or stay where he was? He paused uncertainly, as the word "Alperton" came into view on a station sign.

The doors opened. *Stay or leave?* Darius let go of the strap and started hesitantly toward the opening door. Then the decision was taken away from him. There was a flash of grey along the platform. Then the overcoat-clad green-eyed man stood at the carriage threshold, looking slowly around.

He stepped in, and Darius stepped back, heart pounding. He found himself pressed against the end window as the man stopped just inside the closing doors. For a moment, he formed part of a tableau, motionless. Then the doors thudded shut and the train rolled away from the platform.

With that cue, the man started walking toward the far end of the carriage, away from Darius. He looked down at each face, peering intently at them, as if looking for someone. People were trying to ignore him. You could sense the common mental process: “Ignore him, don’t provoke him, just another nutter”. None of them had seen the knife, of course. The passengers at Darius’ end of the carriage were more alert, clutching bags and shrinking into their seats. A slim blond woman on Darius’ other side had followed through with his idea, speaking softly but urgently into a mobile cupped in her palm.

Then the stranger reached a couple of young men at the far end of the carriage. They were dressed in torn jeans, bomber jackets and chains, and had been drinking from bottles in brown paper. As a result, there was some space around them. When the grey man reached them, they looked up with surprise.

“What’s your problem, mate?” said one of them as the new arrival stared into his eyes. “Lost your boyfriend?” He laughed, and his friend joined in just a little too enthusiastically.

“Nah Gaz, it’s open day at the loony bin,” he added. “E’s done a runner!”. Then he slapped Gaz on the back and more laughter followed.

The stranger was unmoved by any of this. Having finished with Gaz, he moved to the second man and stared closely at him.

“Now he fancies you, mate,” said Gaz, angry now. He pulled off the thick bike chain that had been hanging over his shoulder, and slapped it into his palm for emphasis. He screwed up his face and spat at the grey overcoat. “Piss off, arsehole!”

The reaction was instantaneous. The stranger slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out the knife. The third man swore and jumped back, while Gaz made to swing his chain. Halfway through its arc, it was caught in the stranger’s left hand as he drove his right hand forward. There was an enormous yelp of pain, an animal cry. Then Gaz crashed to the floor, bleeding profusely from his stomach and apparently lifeless.

Ignoring the ensuing chaos as the passengers reacted to the sudden violence, the man turned, and started down to Darius’ end of the carriage. The silence was broken, and the train was filled with yells and screams. Passengers darted fearfully back from the man as he resumed his even tread, staring into faces as he held the dripping knife at waist height.

He reached Darius, pressed into the end window. Then he smiled. It was the most terrifying thing Darius had seen, the man’s muscles moving slowly as if being remotely operated. The eyes stayed ice cold, while the mouth set into a frozen sneer. Darius could see the man’s canines, long and pointed.

He dived to the floor unthinkingly, survival instincts taking over. He was slim enough to slip between the man’s knife arm and body, then dart for the centre of the carriage. What he was going to do there, he had no idea.

There was a snarl from the stranger. He was quick, but had been distracted at the moment of recognition. He twirled around noiselessly and raised the knife, advancing on Darius with his free arm outstretched. Darius saw a tattoo of some

type around his wrist: some kind of animal crouching for the kill. He cringed, waiting for the man's grasp or knife thrust.

Then there was a hiss behind him. The doors. They were at a station! He leapt out and ran for his life.

He had a second or two on his side, but not much more than that. His slimness might help though, he thought, and he weaved in and out of the relatively thick crowd. Behind him he heard a muffled shout, and raised voices. He dared not look back for fear of slowing down.

Stairs. *Up or down?* Then a roar came from his left as the knife-man thrust his way through terrified commuters, blocking the path upwards to the pedestrian bridge. Darius dived into the smaller, downward stairwell, clattering down the stairs. After just a few steps, he was confronted by a blank wall. To the left was a narrow grimy door, slightly ajar.

On impulse, he threw himself through the opening and pulled the door shut. He almost tripped as something hard knocked against his shin, and choked back a curse as he pulled his mobile from his pocket, ready to call for help. For the moment, however, he dared not make a sound that would give his position away.

A few seconds went by, Darius' heartbeat pounding in his head. Then, with mounting terror, he heard a steady tread descending the stairs. He dared a peek through a slat in the door - and looked straight into a murderous face.

"Christ!" Darius jumped back in surprise, tripping over the mop and bucket he'd bumped into before, and dropping his phone. It clattered away in the darkness, lost. The door was rattling now as the grey man thumped the lock in frustration.

Shocked, Darius felt his breath speed up as he crouched at the back of the cupboard. Without conscious decision, he closed his eyes and hunched over in a ball as the

thumping continued. His pulse grew louder, bright colours swam before his eyes and he felt a rising wave of nausea. Something tugged at him - or at his mind? - and he felt as if he were keeling over sideways.

Outside, the stranger gave one last thump and the flimsy lock gave way. He shoved the door open. The cupboard was empty.

The short dark man bent over the flower and inhaled. Its perfume was hardly noticeable against the thick spicy aroma of the nursery, but he enjoyed the ritual in any case. Turning, his gaze swept around the chamber. It was still impressive, even though he was intimately familiar with its contents from years of visits.

The nursery was housed in a structure that resembled a vast egg-shaped bubble, perfectly smooth and of an opaque greyish white. The curved surface seemed to glow slightly, emitting light. It was surprisingly soothing, this gentle glow. The man absent-mindedly fingered the metal badge on his robes as he looked over the greenery around him.

He turned back to the flower, and picked up a slender handled instrument from next to the pot. He lifted it toward the plant...

... and doubled over in agony as a wave of pain crashed through his mind. All sensation was blocked as he fell, not noticing the impact with the ground. His right arm toppled the table and the plant fell to the ground, its earthenware container smashed. The metal tool clattered along the wooden flooring.

Waves of colours were moving through the man's mind, and beyond them he could sense a shape, or concept. It

eluded him, but he felt drawn toward it. Just as it was starting to take form, the screaming stopped. Reality flooded back in.

Despite the residual pain, the man dragged himself to his feet and set the table back on its feet. Leaning against it, he touched his badge and closed his eyes. In a moment, he felt the Controller's mind. It, too, was tinged with shock and surprise.

"What was that?" came the Controller's mental reply, the niceties of formal address lost in the aftermath of the event. "I blacked out... we all did..."

The robed man gathered his swirling uncertainties together and hid them behind a mental shield of confidence.

"Notify all agents," he replied. "We have found him. This must be the one."

Hamila Laurent stood on the bank of the Nile, watching the fiery sunset. It was spectacular, great whorls of orange tinged with pink, a few bright stars showing through. Atmospheric conditions had been upset this year by an unexpected volcanic eruption in the Andes. It had killed many people through the flash flood caused by a rapidly melting glacier. It was ironic that the legacy of such a deadly event could be so beautiful.

Hamila stood on a small hilltop, her right arm holding an intricately carved staff which almost matched her height. She was dark-skinned, athletic, with black hair tied back behind her head. Her boyish, loose-fitting garments allowed for maximum movement. If the people working in the fields nearby had been able to see her, they would have picked her for a fighter.

She sighed, as the air around her subtly shimmered. In the distance she could make out the imposing bulk of the

Ahram, the ancient pyramids, glowing around their edges. Thinking of their alignment, she glanced up to find Sirius... then flinched in an explosion of pain.

Dropping to her knees, she grasped the staff for support as she squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated. In a moment, the pain receded to a background irritation. But it was still there, and she suddenly knew what it meant. Straightening up, she gasped involuntarily.

“It’s him. At last, just like they said. But...”

The pain shut off, as if it had never been there.

Hamila turned on her heel and ran toward the city.

Darius vomited.

“Disgusting,” said a voice somewhere in front of him.

Darius slowly looked up, needles of pain shooting through him as he completed the action. His vision was blurry, but he could make out dark shapes moving across his vision a few metres away. None of them came very close.

“What the...?” He tried to stand, but a wave of dizziness convinced him to stay on his knees for the time being.

What had happened? He remembered fear, a rapid, rising anxiety, then a strange squeezing sensation deep within him. It was followed by a rushing sensation in his chest, a blur of colours behind the eyes, and then he had found himself here.

Here. He had only just realised that he was no longer in the cupboard, no longer hunched over, leg against a cold metal bucket, listening to violent thuds against the door, waiting for death.

The blur suddenly cleared and Darius shot to his feet, powered by adrenalin.

“Shit!” The stranger, the knife, the pursuit. He had been trapped, but... what had happened next?

Newly alert, he backed against a wall for support. Cool tiles against his hands suggested he was still in the station. But no-one looked panicked, he realised, as he glanced at the dark shapes which were now revealed as people. At most, they cast nervous or disapproving glances in his direction then strode onward slightly more quickly.

Darius pushed down residual nausea as he tried to get his thoughts in order. How had he escaped?

“I must have... I must have...” he mumbled.

Nothing came to mind.

Then, “I must have got past him somehow, ran for it, blacked out... I guess”.

It didn't seem entirely satisfactory, but the problem remained: was he still in danger?

Breathing more easily now, he tried to remember where he had begun. They'd arrived at Alperton station... *No, wait, that was the one before. The next one was, um... Park Royal.*

But now he thought about it, this place didn't feel right. Park Royal station was far enough from central London that it was largely an above-ground station, the platforms open to the air. The corridor he was in was claustrophobic, rounded, tiled in an old-fashioned style like the underground stations in the centre of the city.

Puzzled, he followed the tunnel onward, passing a few other people on the way. Then he stepped out onto what was clearly an underground station, with its distinctive circular tunnel. Opposite him was a large poster for a Salvador Dali

exhibition. Even in his weakened state, he could see the humour in that.

Next to the poster was a large sign reading “Regents Park”.

Darius felt dazed. For a moment he forgot the threat of violence, and sank onto a bench against the platform wall. There were few people on the platform at present, as a train had just left. A little further down, two young teenagers were thumping a chocolate bar vending machine. With a burst of expletives, they kicked it, then gave up and walked through the exit.

Darius sat staring at the sign opposite, suspended above the tracks.

Regents Park. Not Park Royal.

He closed his eyes, and tested his head against the cool tiles behind him. Beneath the immobility caused by confusion, Darius could sense a welling panic, an anxiety born of the fear that he was losing his grip on reality. He *had* been on the Piccadilly Line, he *had* been at Park Royal station, he must have been. But this was Regents Park, on the Bakerloo line, right across London. Had he blacked out, somehow got onto a train that ended up here? But he would have had to change lines to do that.

And there was the locked cupboard at Park Royal. How had he got out of that?

Adrenalin surged again. Whatever had happened, it would be better to be outside. He got up, and headed shakily for the exit.

Central London was a hectic location, but it held calm places, and Regents Park was one of these oases. A swathe of green

cut through the centre, punctuated here and there by lakes and paths. It was a place to feed the ducks or to take a brief lunch-hour stroll.

Madeleine Taylor had been walking the park as usual, a golden Labrador tugging against the lead in her hands. It was her employer's dog, but she was fond of it. Being a live-in housekeeper was tiring work, and Dalrymple gave her an excuse to get outside for a while. Sometimes she wondered if she'd done the right thing in moving from Swindon to London, but a walk in the park helped to elude these doubts.

Madeleine eyed the ducks as she walked along a path leading to a bridge across the water, feeling Dalrymple's ever-enthusiastic pull. Then suddenly he stopped, and she almost fell over the dog as he stood stock still, staring into the trees beyond the shallow lake.

She walked past him and tugged the lead gently to get him moving again. Dalrymple didn't budge.

"Come on," she said, lightly. "We haven't got all day."

Then the dog began to growl.

She started to speak again as she followed his line of sight, then stopped, speechless. There was a glint of metal in the trees, then an explosion of activity as three figures burst from the trees and began running toward her. Each of them carried a long black cylinder strapped to one arm.

Dalrymple jumped forward with a jerk, and Madeleine felt the lead snatched from her hand. She watched in silent horror as he leapt at the closest figure and grabbed it by the leg. Casually, only momentarily stopping his forward motion, the figure swung the cylinder down in contact with the dog's head. There was a flash of light and the animal crumpled to the ground.

Madeleine started screaming. And she was still screaming when a beam of light from the second stranger's weapon struck her. As she collapsed, falling into unconsciousness, she dreamily noted the profile of Anubis on the gleaming black surface of the leading figure's mask.

“I've a good mind to rub your nose in it, mate!”

Authority had caught up with Darius. While he had been recovering on the platform, puzzling over what had happened while the steel cylinders of Tube trains rattled past, a concerned passer-by had reported his presence to the station officials. Usually you could rely on Londoners staying reserved and uninvolved, but today one had felt pushed just a little too far. Which was unlucky for Darius. For everyone, as it turned out.

He was standing in the station concourse, collar in the grip of a man in a uniform. Red-faced and middle-aged, he was taking out the frustrations of the day on this likely looking target. His attention had been drawn to the vomit down below, and he wasn't happy about it.

“Give him a break, buddy.” A voice broke in, American, self-assured, from over the official's shoulder. Darius could see a tall dark-haired young man standing there, backpack slung over one shoulder.

Darius found his voice. “Yeah, what he said... I'm not having a good day, y'know?”

The flustered officer looked one way then the other, uncertain on who to focus his rage.

Then they all heard shouting from above, and turned to face the exit.

“What the...?” Darius felt the station officer’s hand slip from his collar as he gaped in astonishment at the stairs leading up to the street. Or more precisely, at where the stairs had been. For the entrance to the stairwell was now blocked by a wall of light, a dimly glowing pearly screen.

The backpacker strode across to it and held his hand out, close to its surface.

“Don’t!” yelled Darius, and the American jerked his hand away, staring back.

“I don’t know why I said that,” said Darius in a lower tone. “There’s just something *wrong* about it... it feels...”

“It’s cold,” said the backpacker. “But it doesn’t look solid, exactly. Like a freaking science fiction movie eh, a force field or something?”

“Just leave it alone, eh mate?” Darius glanced around. The station official had retreated to the ticket office, and another two people were standing over to one side, looking worried. One was trying to use a mobile phone, but seemed to be having problems with it.

“You know what we oughta do?” said the backpacker, turning to face Darius. “We oughta...”

His sentence remained unfinished. With a loud crack, three black-clad figures burst through the pearly shield, as it re-formed around them. One of them knocked down the backpacker with a sidelong blow from the weapon he carried, and he fell to the floor. Then they saw Darius and turned toward him as one.

Darius ducked and ran, plunging back down the stairs to the lower concourse. He felt a burst of heat above his head as he scuttled downward. Glancing up, he caught a glimpse of a beam of light hitting the roof of the stairwell. The brown tiles glowed brightly where it struck. He could hear the muffled voice of the station official above him, then silence.

He looked around desperately. The stairs to the right led straight onto the northbound platform. No train there yet, no escape. He ducked to the left down the stairs to the southbound platform, where he'd found himself after his blackout earlier. He'd have to hope a southbound train would come through, or that he could hide somewhere until it did.

Behind him, heavy footsteps clattered down the stairs.

Darius reached the platform. No train. *Damn!* He darted a look at the display: five minutes till the next one. Running down the length of the platform, he noticed an elderly woman sitting on a bench at the end. She half rose, alarmed, as he ran toward her.

"Get away from me!" she said, eyes wide with fright. "I haven't got anything worth stealing!"

"Get down!" he yelled, pushing her back onto the bench. As he did so, a beam of pearly light struck her body, beneath her left arm. She collapsed beneath him. As time seemed to slow around him, Darius noticed she was still breathing.

He laid the woman down upon the bench and turned slowly, his back now against the platform's end wall. The tiles cooled his back through his sweat-laden shirt as his fear rose again. At the end of the platform, the three figures stood facing him. He realised now that their uniforms weren't just black, they were smooth and reflective. They seemed more like polished stone than cloth, and it was impossible to spot the seams. Over their heads were helmets of the same material, shiny and alien.

The lead soldier stepped forward, his weapon still raised. He reached up and touched his helmet. Incredibly, it dissolved into thin air, revealing a close-cropped dark-haired man with a grim countenance.

Darius pushed closer against the wall. The numbed sensation of unreality he'd been experiencing since Alperton was washing over him now that he'd stopped moving. He couldn't see what else he could do now. What did it matter anyway? Was any of this actually real?

Then, as the soldier came alongside the nearest exit that led back to the stairs, a figure shot out of the passage with tremendous force. There was a loud crack as it connected with the soldier's head. His weapon flew from his hand and clattered along the platform as the force of the blow carried him off the edge, onto the tracks. Darius watched in horror as the two figures crashed onto the far side of the tracks, then began struggling. Then there was a cry, a thrashing of limbs, and a thump as the soldier's lifeless body was thrown back onto the platform by his opponent.

The two other soldiers had recovered from their initial shock and were running along the platform, taking aim at the new arrival, ignoring Darius.

Darius felt his limbs come back to life as he realised the brief chance he had been given. Without thinking twice, he jumped off the platform and ran into the southbound tunnel.

Behind him he heard dulled blows and raised voices, receding as he ran. He glanced to his left at the tracks. He had to be careful to avoid the farthest of the four rails, the one that carried the electric current. If he happened to step on that at the same time as the return rail in the centre, he'd be dead meat. For the first time, he was grateful for the uninvited lectures his Uncle Bob, a Tube driver, had given him on the intricacies of the system.

He stumbled as realisation hit him. The soldier must have bridged the two rails in the struggle and been killed by

the current. Was that luck, or deadly skill on his assailant's part?

No time to think about that now. Just run for your life.

As he started off again, he tried to picture where he was heading. South of Regents Park... next station... Oxford Circus? How far could it be? Some of the Tube stations were closer together than you'd imagine. You could easily walk from Leicester Square to Covent Garden underground, he remembered.

No noise from behind now. Then Darius noticed a hum building in the tunnel. He stopped, horrified, as he realised the sound was coming from the rails beside him.

The train! In his flight from the killers behind him, he'd forgotten about the more obvious danger of running down an Underground tunnel in the near-dark. It must be almost five minutes now since he'd glanced at the platform display.

Darius looked around wildly for a way to escape the oncoming juggernaut. There was nothing. He stood rooted to the spot in fear.

Then, as he saw the lights approaching in the distant reaches of the tunnel, something struck him with tremendous force and lifted him off his feet. The breath was knocked out of him, and as he began to struggle he realised he was being carried over the tracks to the other side. He saw the dull gleam of the electrified rail just centimetres below him.

As they landed on the far side of the tracks, he felt the arm around him loosen slightly. Darius took this as the cue to struggle in earnest. While this was happening, the rumbling was getting louder and the Tube train's lights looming closer.

They swung round, his captor still gripping his waist from behind. As the lights of the oncoming train blinded him, he felt his strength surge up in desperation.

Suddenly he heard a voice, partly drowned by the noise in the tunnel.

“I’m trying to help, you idiot. Stop moving or we’ll both be killed!”

Instantly, he felt a sudden pressure on the side of his neck. Firm, forceful, but strangely soothing at the same time.

Darius stopped struggling. As the train rushed toward them, he passed out.

(continued on the next page)

Chapter 2

British Museum

An ibis swooped overhead, its wings flapping loudly as it made headway against the breeze. Tiny particles of sand struck Darius' face as he knelt on the ground, his head half-lowered and his legs tucked in beneath him.

As if waking from a sleep, he felt consciousness flow back into him. He opened his eyes, and noticed he was kneeling in fine white sand, his hands partially sunken into its mass. It was warm, almost uncomfortably so.

He staggered to his feet, and was startled by the sky. So bright! A dome of blue surrounded him, seeming solid enough to be touched. There were no clouds.

"It is the gifted one, as the Prophecy foretold. Welcome, boy."

Darius experienced a wave of dread at these words. They came from behind him, and he knew he should turn, but he felt rooted to the spot. Something about the voice had penetrated his soul, echoing through his mind and body and leaving him chilled.

He struggled with his immobility. Suddenly he felt the weight lift, his muscles responded, and he turned in a half circle.

Darius gasped and staggered back. Before him towered a creature, glowing in the sunlight. Its body was human, and covered with a kilt around the waist. On its arms were bracelets and bands. But its head was its most shocking aspect. A black, dog-like snout protruded from the face, red eyes framed by tall dark ears.

The creature leaned forward suddenly. Darius stumbled into a half-crouch.

The pervasive rumbling voice began speaking again.

“Run, little one. Run as fast as you can. You have no idea what you are, or who searches for you. Your captors will find you, no matter what help you are given. So run!”

Darius ran. Scrambling to his feet in the shifting sand, he started forward. As he ran, his legs lost their immobility and obeyed his mental urgings. Ahead of him, through the distorted heated air above the desert floor, he could see the dark bulk of a massive building.

Looks familiar. No time to think. Just run.

As he increased his pace, Darius dared a glance over his shoulder. The creature was still standing, its sinister eyes trained on his progress. But not moving. He turned back to his path, and promptly stumbled on a rock.

Darius fell onto the sand, arms braced to stop his fall. When he glanced up, he noticed a pair of sandalled feet in front of his face.

“He is not the only one to take an interest in you,” boomed a new voice, echoing through Darius’ mind.

Fighting his fear, Darius lifted his head to see what confronted him this time.

Then he woke up.

The smell of smoke drifted into Darius’ nostrils as he opened his eyes. He was seated against a wall, its edges rough against his skin. It was a dark space. *Still underground?* As he turned and tried to stand, he realised his hands were tied behind his back. He half-fell and ended up back on the floor.

From this angle, he noticed the light. Ten metres away, a woman was crouched over a fire. She was dangling something over the flames. Suddenly she turned her head to look directly at him. She smiled. It should have been cheering,

but it made Darius think of the bared teeth of a big cat about to pounce.

“Awake at last.” It was a statement, not a question. The woman stood and strode swiftly over to Darius, who flinched at her approach. Instead of violence though, she thrust forward the meat she had been cooking. “Try it,” she said in a mellower tone. “You must be hungry by now.”

He wrinkled his face in disgust, but his body had other ideas. As the food’s aroma reached him, Darius’ stomach rumbled. *How long has it been since I last ate?* With surprise, he found himself chewing hungrily at the proffered meat, as the woman held it. It was awkward eating without hands, but he managed it. Gulping down the last fragments, he wondered for the first time what kind of meat it was, Definitely not chicken, but not really like anything else he’d eaten. The remnant bone looked unfamiliar as well.

His throat moistened by the fat and his stomach at rest, Darius at last found speech.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “And who are you?”

She smiled and stood up, regarding him with an appraising downward glance. Darius had never seen anyone so supremely confident. No, not just confident - poised. The big cat impression again. This dark stranger with the athletic stance, exotic features and distinct musculature looked as though she could lift off the ground with a single effortless spring.

They look at each other... then the moment was broken by a glare of light and a loud rumble that swallowed the silence. Metal and light flashed by a few metres to Darius’ left, and he threw himself to the right to avoid it. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the stranger hadn’t moved. She stood erect, dark hair flying as displaced air whistled through the space.

Looking beyond her, Darius was startled to see squares of light flashing by. Within them were people's faces - men's, women's, children's.

"Help!" he yelled, struggling with bonds behind his back. "Help me!" Then the noise and light were gone.

The woman smiled. "They would not have noticed you in any case," she said, with a slight smile that lifted her left cheek upward. "I've taken care of that."

Darius felt anger displace the shock. "That was a train, wasn't it?" he yelled. "We're still in the bloody Tube! What's going on?"

"Introductions first, I think." She knelt and lifted Darius' chin with her hand, strong enough to resist his attempts to shake his head free. "I am Hamila, agent of the Horus Alliance. I saved your life a few hours ago, so there's no need for this hostility."

"The *what* alliance? What the hell happened back there? What has it got to do with me?"

A frown creased Hamila's brow. "That was an answer I was hoping you would supply. Why were the dog soldiers so intent on capturing you?"

"Dog soldiers? The blokes in the station with the shiny helmets? What makes you think I'd know? I was supposed to be visiting a friend, then all this drops on my head like a ton of bricks!"

Hamila stood, eyeing him again with a detached stare that held back more than it revealed. "You really don't know, do you? Then we really do have problems. At least there's one thing you can tell me: what is your name?"

Darius was surprised by the absurd simplicity of the question. "Darius," he said. "Like the Persian Emperor. Mum and Dad had a thing for Middle Eastern history. We're from

Egypt originally, at least my Dad...” He stopped as he noticed the startled look on her face.

“Egypt,” she whispered. “Then you’re the one? It doesn’t seem likely, but...” Her voice trailed off.

Darius had a strange feeling he’d been insulted. “The one what? And where are we anyway?”

“We’re still in the underground transport system, the tube as you call it.” She glanced around. “This is a disused area. After I got you out of the way of that vehicle, I carried you here. It makes a good refuge, hard to locate and away from strangers’ eyes.”

“Disused area?” Darius craned his head as far as he could, trying to see beyond the woman. He received the impression of a narrow platform, with less width than those of the usual Tube stations. Hamila’s fire still glowed faintly, casting flickering light on the remnants of old posters and signs on the walls. “Do you mean a ghost station? I’ve read about those, looked at some stuff on the Web. There’s one near Hyde Park, and um... a few others.” As the food calmed his stomach, Darius was feeling calmer. With panic receding, he took an interest in his surroundings.

“I have more questions, Darius,” said Hamila, following his gaze. “I’m not familiar with this city, and not clear on what should be done with you. I have no desire to harm you if you help me. Will you?”

Darius narrowed his eyes slightly. He was in no position to resist, but if he cooperated he could at least get back to the surface. And he didn’t mind answering questions. But first...

“Untie me.” He looked her in the eye.

Hamila didn’t move.

“Untie me and I’ll help,” he said. “I’ve got nothing to lose either way, so help me and I’ll help you.”

Hamila sighed. “Please promise not to try to escape, Darius. You might get killed trying to leave here on your own.” She smiled. “And I’d catch you anyway.”

“It’s a deal”.

Turning Darius so she could reach his bonds, she untied them and slipped the ropes into a light pack slung over her shoulder and across her body. As they vanished from sight, Darius thought he saw them twisting slightly, as if alive.

He stood, rubbing his hands and dusting down his trousers. Then, eyeing her warily, said “My turn first. Where are we?”

Hamila touched his arm lightly and led him to the long wall running parallel to the rails. Moving stiffly, he joined her and glanced upward. By the flickering light of the dying fire, he read a dust-caked inscription: “British Museum”.

Tarik Oleakos rubbed his forehead wearily. He stood within a simple chamber, lined with shelves of books, scrolls and rows of small pyramid-shaped objects held within open racks, gleaming dully as the light caught them. In the centre of the room was a large desk, with a few papers on its surface.

Tarik sighed, smoothed his brown robes and sat down at the chair behind the desk. The opposite wall was dominated by a large image of Anubis. It was taken from an ancient papyrus but glowed with a sheen that suggested a hidden light source. The colours were bold, the dog’s head seemingly alive with a glinting eye.

He touched a section of the desk and a round disk lifted off its surface into an upright position. Tarik muttered a few words under his breath, and images appeared on the screen. His frown returned as he studied them.

Suddenly the luminescent door to the chamber dissolved, as a young man burst into the room. Tarik noted that he'd dressed somewhat quickly and without due care; his robes were twisted to one side of his neck, and his Anubis badge was upside down.

"The squad has failed, Seer!" he burst out, without greeting. "Two dead, one injured... we only managed to retrieve them just before the local lawmen arrived."

"Some would see that as sacrilege, Settar," replied Tarik calmly, nodding toward the inverted badge. "Even in these debased times."

The young Settar looked confused, then glanced down and realised the fault. He quickly rectified it, hauling his robes into balance as his straight brown hair fell across his eyes.

A spasm of anger crossed his face, then disappeared as he controlled his temper.

"I don't know how you can worry about such things now," he said. "The time has come, and everything's falling apart!"

Tarik raised a hand. "You can't expect everything to just fall into place," he said. "The Prophecy is the Prophecy, but the rest must be achieved by fallible people like us. Things can go wrong. The important thing is how we go about fixing them."

Settar sighed, and slumped into the opposite chair at a wave of Tarik's hand. "I know Seer, I'm sorry. It's all been a bit much". The tall young man looked as though he'd had little sleep recently.

"Yes indeed. Too much for some." Tarik regarded his subordinate with disapproval. "What is your report?"

Settar straightened. "The squad met with unexpected resistance, Seer. No doubt from an agent of the enemy."

"An agent? Do you mean one person?"

“Ah, yes Seer, our preliminary reports suggest a single woman...”

“Remarkable,” cut in Tarik. “I can guess who that might be.”

Settar looked at his superior quizzically, but went on. “The target is still at large, and presumably in the possession of the enemy. But we know they haven’t left London.”

“How so?”

Settar smiled with a dash of pride. “The recruitment we carried out for the Net is paying off, Seer. There are several mentalists on station within the grounds of the Ahrum at all times. We have enough of them to replace their numbers whenever they need to rest or... ah... burn out.”

“Have many of them... ‘burned out’, as you put it?”

Settar winced. “Three, my lord. The first detection of the target was far more intense than anticipated, as was their relayed mental signal to yourself and the other Circle members. They pass on their apologies for the discomfort,” he continued weakly. “But they believe future detections will not be so intense.”

Tarik favoured Settar with a weak smile, remembering the piercing pain of the moment which had caught him in the citadel’s arboretum. “That’s good to hear.”

Settar continued quickly, keen to become the bearer of good news. “However, our transfer surveillance is definitely working. No-one has been able to transfer back without our knowledge, while it’s been in operation.”

Tarik rose. “Then our expensive investment has paid itself back. The Controller will be pleased.”

“But what should we do now the snatch has failed and the target is lost to our sensors?”

Tarik walked to the door, then turned to face the seated Settar. “Have you ever encountered the Oracle?”

Settar turned white. “No, of course not!”

Tarik smiled. “Then it’s time you did.” He motioned Settar to rise, and together they walked through the door.

Tarik paused outside, laying a hand on Settar’s shoulder. “The mentalist ‘burn outs’, Settar... they’re to have the full funeral honours.”

Settar nodded. “Understood, sir”.

Tarik patted him lightly on the back. “Good. Now, my friend, we’re off to see the wizard!”

Tarik strode on, leaving a puzzled assistant in his wake. *Such an odd way he has of putting things...* Then Settar realised he was being left behind, and hurried on.

“Now I remember!” said Darius as he wiped the dust from the station sign and the remnant tiles beneath it. “There was a station here as well. Closed down because it was too close to one of the others.”

“It makes a good base,” said Hamila from over his shoulder. “Hidden away, accessible to the tunnels, deep enough to shield from their scans.”

“They?”

Hamila looked seriously at Darius, as he turned to face her. “Do you really not know why they want you?”

“I find it hard to believe that they do want me at all, Hamila. I really don’t know why.”

“Hmm.” Hamila gestured to the fire. “Come sit here, Darius. I’ll give you some answers, for your own benefit and everyone else’s.”

They sat on the dusty platform, on opposite sides of the still-burning fire. A train rumbled past, as had happened

every few minutes while they'd been talking. Somehow, its noise seemed more distant while looking into these flames.

For the first time, Darius noticed the artificial nature of the fire before him. The flames flowed up like petals of a flower, regular and warm. It looked less like a campfire than a Hollywood special effect. And what was it burning? He looked across at Hamila.

She saw the question in his eyes. "It renews itself from a source of energy in the spaces between the real. I suppose you'd call it magic." Hamila waved a hand above the flames in a gentle undulating motion, and they changed pattern for a moment.

"Hamila..." Darius' voice dropped to a whisper. "Where are you from?"

She smiled. "Not from this world. I come from the Heavenly Realm."

Darius laughed, a short snort. "So you're a goddess sent down to earth? Aphrodite, eh? Or Artemis?"

She scowled. "It does sound rather pompous in your language," she said. "Have you another name for your world?"

Darius felt that reality was slipping away from him, but he'd had that feeling all day. "Earth, you mean? Umm, the world, the globe, Terra, Gaea maybe..."

Hamila smiled in recognition. "Terra. My world is Terra. All you need to know is that it intersects with your own."

"Intersects? What are we talking about, orbits? Are you the Cat People from Beyond the Sun?"

She smiled. "You take refuge in cultural references, don't you? What is it, a means of avoiding the awful truth?"

He smiled back. “I thought I was just a pop guru. But you were talking about intersections...” Darius waved her on with a wave of his hand.

Hamila continued. “Our worlds are twins in a way, or so we are taught. It’s hard to explain the similarities and differences. Our globe... ‘Terra’... is a place where images, dreams and the mind are the fulcrums of power. It’s a less... solid... place than this.” She rapped the hard floor beside her. “Mental ability is the true source of power there, aided by incantations, talismans and other objects that focus it.”

Darius gave a short laugh. In spite of the real danger he’d experienced, it was hard to take this seriously. “Sounds like you’re talking about magic. Not quite Halloween yet.”

Her eyes blazed. “I am talking about magic! This is where the worlds meet. We refer to your world, Earth, as ‘The Real’. This is the concrete realm, the solid place bound by physical laws and hard forms. Do you know how strange it all looks to me?” She glanced around at the walls, and up at the ceiling. As she did so, another Tube train shot past a few metres away.

Hamila waved at the departing carriages. “Everything here is so... so real. It’s oppressive sometimes, but comforting in a strange way. At home, landscapes change in response to moods, walls and barriers shift and form...”

Darius started. “Like the barriers in Regents Park! We couldn’t get out of the station! A kind of glowing shield.”

She nodded. “Exactly. Such a world is dangerous to live in if you’re not an adept, probably more dangerous if you are. There’s a basic structure to things, but it can change in response to...”

She stopped, and Darius looked puzzled. “Go on,” he said.

Hamila started again, hesitation in her voice. “I’ve said too much.”

Darius felt anger rise again. “Look, whatever it is, I’m up to my neck in it! I deserve to know! And if you want my help, you’ll tell me.”

Silence fell. The two faced each other across the flames, their soft glow casting moving shadows across the platform and tunnel. An eastbound train shot past and vanished.

At last, Hamila leaned back to support herself on her hands, staring up at the roof. Then she lowered her head to meet the other’s gaze.

“Very well,” she said. “I can’t see how it will make things worse.

“Understand, Darius, that this shifting world of mine is subject to struggles for control, just as yours is. Great adepts rise to become rulers, extend their power, crash again as alliances form against them.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“No doubt. But there is something new in this familiar scenario. It has always been felt that our two worlds were connected in some fundamental way. People from Terra have visited Earth over the millennia, at least those whose powers allowed them to make the journey.”

“Magicians? Witches?”

“These are your terms. Maybe they were seen as such. The important thing is this. Five decades ago, after much research and conjecture, the connection was finally unravelled. Our worlds are connected, deeply connected, in a way which calls the nature of reality into existence.”

Darius held his breath, then exhaled as she paused. “You’re not boring me,” he said.

Hamila ignored the comment. “It seems, if you believe the theory, that our world is a product of yours, and yours a shadow of ours. Terra is formed, shaped and moulded by the unconscious imaginings of all the inhabitants of Earth. You could say that we are the land of your dreams.”

“Whenever I want you, all I have to do is dream. Dream, dream, dream...”

“I beg your pardon, Seer?”

Tarik coughed. He had been singing the words under his breath as they walked the corridors. They came to him, these tunes, often as he slept. Sometimes they entered his mind during work hours. They calmed him usually, but it would be no good if Settar thought he was losing his grip.

“Nothing of importance, Settar.” He paused, and ran a finger along the curved wall of the passageway they were walking along. It felt rough under his touch, and was a light tan shade. “Has this changed, Settar? It seems lighter in colour than yesterday, and not as smooth.”

“It is to be expected,” Settar replied, slightly stiffly. “The moulding charm remains strong and impenetrable, but nothing can be held completely in place. There are bound to be fluctuations.”

“True,” replied Tarik. “But small loopholes can also be exploited. But this is not our field.” He walked on.

In a few minutes, they passed through a glistening black shield, into an ovoid room about twice the height of a man. Patterns of colour shot through the shiny silver walls at intervals, and light gleamed all around them in a pearly glow.

Settar shivered. “Is this...”

Tarik shot him a stern glance.

Settar went on. “Is this necessary, Seer? What can we hope to discover?”

“Not his whereabouts, I fear. But we may be able to discover where he will go next. According to the Prophecy, the target has the ability to move ‘beneath the earth’. I don’t know what this means, it may be false, but the Oracle may be able to predict where he’ll appear next. She predicts things, remember?”

Settar bridled at the tone. “Of course, Seer. But it... she... is unpredictable. Remember what happened to Norsden in Tibet?”

Tarik smiled grimly. “Actually, I’ve studied that case. The Oracle’s prediction was correct in every element. Norsden’s team just didn’t know how to interpret it. That’s the tricky bit, Settar, the interpretation.”

“If you survive hearing the prediction in the first place,” muttered his aide.

Tarik reached up and patted the taller man on the shoulder.

“It’s true,” he agreed. “That’s the really tricky bit.”

Ahead of them, a section of the wall darkened, then dissolved. Without a word, they stepped through into the darkness.

Another Tube train rumbled past. Its vibrations died away. The flames flickered as it passed along the tunnel.

Darius spoke. “Dreams? Figments of the imagination?”

“Much more than that, Darius. Terra is every bit as real as your world, only more fluid. Structures move, shift in response to mental power, charms and special artefacts. It’s

always been so, it's the world we live in. But these new theories are suggestive.”

“In what way?”

“Armed with them, researchers and theoreticians examined the histories of the two worlds anew. Your world had never been seen as particularly important...”

“Mostly harmless?”

“... and it was difficult to visit. But now, resources were focused. Your history was charted and compared.”

Dust particles swirled through the flames, setting off tiny bursts of green light as Hamila paused to gather her thoughts.

She continued. “What they found was startling. The period you term 1914 to 1918 was a time of great upheaval.”

Darius nodded. “The First World War.”

“Yes, but I was referring to my world. Conflicts, disease, mental disturbances all peaked in those years. The balance of power shifted dramatically and many lives were lost. Structures were particularly unpredictable, breaking charms and causing disasters.

“In late 1945, your time, a gigantic whirlpool opened up without warning in one of our cities. It was uncontrollable, sucking up matter and reducing it to nothingness. It killed two hundred thousand people by the time it subsided.”

“The bombing of Hiroshima.”

“These are major events. The same holds true for smaller ones. Each occurrence on Earth that causes major mental unease has a direct effect on the structure of Terra. The most recent of these occurred in September 2001.”

Darius frowned. “God. I know what that was.”

“Indeed. And we think the effect works the other way. Major power changes or imbalances on Terra may feed back into psyches here, sparking trends or tendencies. Probably not

so dramatically, since your world is fundamentally more stable.”

Darius stood, troubled. He brushed the dust off his trousers and walked a few paces along the platform to stretch his legs. He looked up at a poster on the wall, a faded promotion of the delights of the Lakes District. Such languid delights contrasted heavily with the here and now.

He turned to Hamila. “It’s all very unlikely, but so are you and everything else that’s happened today. But this is the big question... what’s it got to do with me?”

The woman stood, unfolding her long legs gracefully. “We don’t know,” she admitted. “But we do know the dog soldiers are searching for someone of this world. There’s a prophecy... we don’t believe in it... but we’re not taking any chances.”

“What sort of prophecy?”

“It predicts the coming of someone from your world who acts a key to domination of ours. Someone with an unusual power that allows him to move in unexpected ways.”

“You’re looking for Ricky Martin,” muttered Darius.

“Pardon?”

“It doesn’t matter. Hamila... am I supposed to be the one in the Prophecy?”

Her face became impassive. “Possibly,” she replied. “I don’t know. We just want to keep you out of their hands for the moment.”

Move. The significance of her words suddenly struck him. He had moved, somehow, between Park Royal and Regents Park stations. How had it happened? He tried to remember his thoughts in the broom cupboard. Fear, panic, and... something else.

Hamila interrupted. “And now my questions, Darius. Do you know why the dark ones are after you? What is it you can do?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “I can tell you all the World Cup winners for the past twenty years, but as for special powers...” he trailed off.

Hamila strode briskly to him, grasping his face firmly under his chin so she could look directly into his eyes. “There *is* something!” she cried. “I knew it.”

Darius backed out of her grasp. “Calm down. I just... something odd happened earlier, when I came across the first bloke with the knife. It was right across London, and I don’t know how I got from there to Regents Park.”

“What do you remember?”

“Being shit-scared, mostly. Shut up in a cupboard, a dangerous loony outside, then I felt nauseous... then a kind of rising feeling, a wave of colours inside my eyelids... it’s hard to describe.”

Hamila placed a hand gently on his shoulder. “This is important, Darius. Sit over here by the fire.” They returned to their seated positions.

“We must discover what you can do before they do,” she said. “Please... concentrate, stare into the flames, and try to identify whatever lies within you. I’ll be here, standing guard, ready to help. If it feels overwhelming, pull back.”

Darius looked uncertain. “If you’re sure...”

“Believe me, this could be life and death. For more than the two of us.”

“OK. What have I got to lose?” Darius shivered slightly, despite the warmth of the flames. “Here goes.”

He crossed his legs, bowed his head and looked directly into the fire. Rather than being too bright, it had a soothing quality to its light. After a few moments, the world

around him seemed to recede. Hamila, the walls, the floor, the rushing trains, all floated away to the edge of consciousness. And as they did so, he felt the rising feeling once more.

Surprised, he tried to pull back from the sensation. But it would not be released. It grew, overwhelming all other sensation with its insistent flow, feeling like a cross between floating in warm water and being happily stoned.

Darius felt his mind being borne along by a strong current. Then the colours arrived, a shifting rainbow that filled his mind. The river of colour broadened, narrowed and then climbed toward a point. The intensity grew, then reached a crescendo like an explosion of whiteness.

Hamila Laurent was caught completely by surprise for the first time in a long while. She stood on the abandoned platform, flames flickering silently at her feet. She was completely alone.

Darius Ibrahim had disappeared, leaving not a wrack behind.

(continued on the next page)

Chapter 3 Melbourne Central

Darkness surrounded them, utter and complete. This was more than the absence of light, it was darkness that flowed over eyes and face and body, seemingly liquid and tangible. It was alternately soothing and claustrophobic.

“Seer,” whispered Settar. It came out in a near-squeak, constricted by fear.

“Silence, Settar,” came the reply. “The Oracle will not manifest itself in the face of fear. Use the meditation techniques you were trained in, calm yourself, open your mind.”

“But...”

“That’s all I will say.”

Silence fell again. Even the sound of their breathing seemed muffled by the oppressive nothingness in the room.

Settar fought back his uneasiness and assumed the meditation position. There was a faint sensation of his limbs moving, but they felt like distant, tele-operated tools. He understood this chamber enhanced the powers of the mind over the physical, he just hadn’t realised how strange it would feel.

How does Tarik do it? he wondered. *The coolness, the calm, the flippant remarks.* Resentment and admiration mingled in Settar’s mind as he thought of his mentor. Then he forced himself back to the task at hand. Breathing steadily, he emptied his mind.

For some time, they sat in the chamber, focusing their consciousness on the moment, on breathing and thinking of nothing at all. Then, slowly, a presence filled the room. Shapeless, nameless, it flowed through their bodies and the air between them. It existed in the floor and inhabited the dark

spaces. For a few moments, Settar had the impression of being squeezed empty of air, and of being unable to breathe. Then, before he could cry out, the sensation passed and he drew a deep breath to submerge his rising panic.

Then the Oracle spoke.

Settar and Tarik floated on a sea of the Oracle's mental presence, part of it and buoyed by it. Revelations, and fragments of revelations, flowed thick and fast through their minds as it interacted with them.

"Energy and matter were once thought to be differing forms of the same thing. The truth is much stranger..."

"... for the first few years of their lives, children's dreams are dominated by animal images. These avatars are significant in that..."

"... binding charms are dependent on the psyche of the binder. The key to success is mental visualisation..."

"... O the lady! She must rise from the sands once more..."

"... the downfall of the Mayan regime's colonies across the Pacific was not attributable to disease, as once thought. Their terminal demise was linked to..."

"Sirius is the dog star the dog fights the hawk the hawk swoops to conquer the dog rises up the end is near..."

There was a moment of calm. Settar could sense Tarik attempting to direct the Oracle. At this level it was akin to a gigantic pool of data, drawing information from multiple sources and channelling it according to the direction of the minds tapping into it. But they intended to go much deeper, into the heart of the Oracle. Not many had the mental resilience and skill to cope with this, but Tarik was one. Also Settar, if his training held true. At his physical level, Settar shivered.

He also marvelled at the link with Tarik. Partly mingled as they were with the Oracle, he could sense the Seer's inner being. It was remarkable. Tarik was a being of strong mental force, determined and structured. Around this central core played his sense of humour, his flexibility, his emotions. But the central core was solid. Settar felt great admiration for him, love and respect mixed together. And a distinct dose of fear.

Tarik shared the link with Settar. As he guided them into deeper layers of the Oracle, he spared a moment to examine the essence of his assistant. *Unfocused, uncertain, as they all are at this stage. But there's a core there to build on.* He felt love, contempt, a fatherly compassion, impatience and responsibility wash through his mind. The Oracle forced honesty upon you. It could be a little too much for some to accept.

Then the darkness grew thicker. They entered the heart of the Oracle. At this level, the entity was able to process the knowledge, information and emotions it absorbed from the world around them, along with data about Earth. A prediction would hopefully result.

Tarik pictured the young man, Darius, in his mind's eye, drawing on the image sent back by the interception squad before they were removed from the game. A frightened expression, no doubt taken in the course of the chase. But it was an interesting face, full of character. He added his knowledge of the man's movements, other factors noted by the squad, and his detailed studies of the Prophecy. And then the crucial question: Where will he appear next?

After a moment, the answer flowed into his mind. It seemed clear, certain and precise. And very unexpected.

The Oracle withdrew as Tarik mulled over its prediction. He couldn't know exactly how it had been

reached, but the Oracle was an authority he trusted implicitly. He glanced up as the entrance to the chamber dilated. Reaching a hand out, he helped Settar to his feet and the two walked stiffly back into the world they knew.

Settar looked exhausted but exhilarated. “I never imagined it, Tarik! It was overwhelming, the physical sensation, the knowledge, the power, the...”

“It was the Oracle,” interrupted Tarik, releasing the hand clasped tightly in his. “And the answer. Do you remember it?”

Settar’s brow creased. “No,” he replied. “Yes! But...”

“Yes. Unlikely, isn’t it?”

“That’s half a world away, Seer. The target would need at least a day to get there via their air transport, probably more. How can he be there...”

“Within a few hours? It’s a good question.”

“Seer, could...” Settar glanced back toward the chamber’s location and dropped his voice. “Could the Oracle be wrong?”

Tarik looked affronted. “Wash your mouth out with soap, Settar. If the Oracle says that’s the location, then it is. It’ll take several hours for us to open a new portal there, so let’s get started. We have a second chance to catch him. Let’s not waste it.”

Tarik strode down the corridor toward his office.

Settar watched him go. “With soap?” he muttered, puzzled. Then he followed.

Darius kneeled on the hard floor, hunched over in pain. Not the harsh stabbing pain that had accompanied his return to

consciousness at Regents Park, more like pins and needles. But uncomfortable, nevertheless.

He stood up, leaning against the cool tiles of the wall. Then he opened his eyes, and gasped in surprise at the bright light flooding his vision. He closed them again.

“Hamila?” No reply.

Think, Darius. It’s happened again. This isn’t Regents Park, this isn’t the abandoned station underneath the British Museum, it’s... where is it?

He dared another glimpse, shielding his eyes. The squeezing, nauseous feeling in his stomach was subsiding, and his vision was back to normal. Not nearly as bad as last time.

Last time. What was happening to him? He kept waking up at different Tube stations, without any memory of getting from one place to another. Were these memory lapses, selective amnesia, or something worse?

He remembered Hamila, and looked for her again. All he could see was a long platform, with some people waiting at the other end. He appeared to be at one end of the station, in a deserted section separated from the main concourse by a wall. A glance upward revealed an escalator framed by the barrier.

Darius thought about Hamila, an uneasy feeling in his gut. Could he have imagined her? Battles in the Underground, a ghost station, unlikely stories about a world in the shadow of ours. But he remembered the man with the knife, the pursuit, it all seemed real in his mind.

“Am I losing it?”

“Sorry, mate?”

Darius jumped. He hadn’t noticed the cleaner approaching along the platform, broom and pan at the ready. He stepped aside so he could finish his work.

“Thanks, mate,” said the man, smiling to reveal a capped tooth. “Not everyone’s so helpful.”

Darius looked at the man. He was short, with dark skin, maybe in his fifties. He wore a blue uniform with a yellow-green safety vest over the top. He looked like an Indian or Pakistani.

His throat felt dry from whatever had happened, but Darius rasped out a question. “No problem. Umm... what Tube station is this?”

The cleaner laughed, a short dry chuckle. “Tube station? You must be one of those English backpackers, eh? You’ve been away from home too long, mate.”

Darius frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This isn’t much of a Tube. But you’ve got yourself lost, have you?”

“Sort of.” *If only you knew.*

“Yeah, no problem. This is Melbourne Central.”

“What? I’ve never heard of that one.”

The man’s demeanour changed. “Don’t take the piss, mate,” He said. “Just look at the sign.” He jerked his thumb toward the central platform, then moved on.

In a daze, Darius walked slowly along in the direction indicated, past an open space connecting another platform on the other side. The tiles were a bright red, alternating with white to form angled patterns.

“This doesn’t even look like a Tube station,” he muttered to himself. “More like the Paris Metro. Maybe it’s one of the new ones on the Jubilee Line.” He looked up. The curve of the roof was all wrong for that. It was flat, and had... *What the...?* He glanced down quickly at the track. There were no powered rails, making sense of the electric cabling on the roof.

Slowly, Darius raised his gaze to the wall in front of him. White lettering on a blue sign informed him that this was Melbourne Central station.

A disturbing idea began to dawn. Darius walked along to where a group of schoolkids stood in school uniform, blazers and ties. Some looked East Asian, others were white kids.

“Um... excuse me guys,” he said, causing their circle to break up as the focus shifted to him. “What city is this?”

They eyed him suspiciously. A kid with red hair replied “What city? What shit are you trying to pull?”

He grabbed one of the Asian kids by the arm, and he pulled back in surprise. Darius felt the desperation rising. “No really, I have to know. Is this really Melbourne?”

“Yeah, of course.” The redhead sneered as the others backed away. “You should go lighter on the drugs, mate.”

Casting wary glances at him, the students moved away as a train rumbled into the platform. Silver and blocky, it bore a destination sign saying “Alamein”.

Thoroughly confused now, Darius thought of Alamein in Africa, in Egypt. *Egypt again!* It kept coming back to Egypt.

But first things first. He approached a woman working behind a coffee stall in the middle of the platform. Behind her was a sign with the different types of coffee available: “flat white”, “short black”, “long black” and more. More of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Darius caught her attention. Her blue eyes looked at him expectantly.

“Look, this is going to sound barmy,” he said. “But do me a favour eh? Are we... I mean... is this Melbourne, Australia?”

She laughed. “Too right,” she said. “Where else would it be?”

“You’re joking.”

“Not last time I looked. Do you need some help?”

“Do I need some help?” Darius began to laugh. The laughter poured out of him in sheets, till the woman in the coffee stall was laughing too. Then it started to become hysterical, and Darius forced himself to stop.

“I’m sorry,” he said. I’ve just had a... funny day.”

She smiled. “I know about that, working down here.” She wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. “Anyway, do you want a coffee with that bit of info?”

Darius suddenly turned serious, frowning. Australia. Ten thousand fucking miles away. In his heart he knew it was true, but he had to get out of here and see it for himself.

“No. But thanks,” he said, turning toward the escalator at the far end.

“No worries,” came the reply.

Darius stepped onto the escalator. “No worries,” he repeated, then laughed. It was one of those short, bitter ones.

Shortly, Darius was outside, under a bright blue sky bathed in afternoon sunlight. His spirits lifted. It had been a hell of a day, but at last he was out in the open again.

He felt like his luck had turned a corner at last. He’d been worried about getting through the ticket barriers below, but he’d managed to slip through behind an exiting commuter. There hadn’t been any officials around, and no-one else had seem worried about a fare dodger in their midst. Peak hour was like that anywhere, people just wanted to get home.

And this sunlight was a good omen, bright and clear, so warm compared to the cold grey day he'd left behind in London.

In London. Darius shook his head and smiled. He still found it hard to believe he'd travelled so far in an instant. Whatever was going on, it could revolutionise travel if they could bottle it, he thought.

He glanced around. Behind him was the station and the shopping mall above it. The street - Swanston Street, it said on the sign above him - seemed to lead through a busy commercial area into the city centre. And across the street...

Darius jumped as a large vehicle suddenly trundled past directly in front of him. He stepped back and followed its progress with his eyes, as the white tram pulled to a stop at the next intersection. He now noticed the tracks in the centre of the road, and the overhead wiring. Further down the street, he could see more trams on their way up the rise. People were getting on and off as the trams paused at stops.

"Trams, eh? Just like Croydon. I think I've had enough rail transport for today."

Darius looked directly across the street, at an imposing Victorian building with statues out the front, and lawns dotted with dozing students. The chiselled word "Library" stood out above its entrance.

His euphoria began to ebb away as the seriousness of his situation occurred to him. Alone in a foreign country a long way from home, without a passport or belongings. Not a good position to be in. Darius pulled out his wallet and checked that his credit card was still in place. At least he'd be able to get some money with that. *But what next?*

His gaze was drawn back to the library building. "State Library", he read. Reference library, probably. Could he use this time to his advantage? Somehow, despite the

distance, he had a feeling that the people seeking him would eventually discover his whereabouts. Maybe he could figure out what was going on before then, or at least find some clues.

Hamila had said he had an unexpected power, obviously something to do with travelling under his own steam. If he could find out how it worked, he'd be able to use it to escape. Sounded crazy, but so was everything else at the moment.

“About time to take my life back, I think,” he said aloud, as people swarmed by him into the shops and station. “Here I come, ready or not.”

Whistling a jaunty tune, Darius crossed the road. Cheerily greeting the statue of Saint George and the Dragon at the library entrance, he strode inside.

The Controller was angry.

“We cannot allow this chance to fall through our fingers, Tarik,” he growled over the vid-link, his dark eyes angry above his narrow, arched nose. “You know where he is, so get him!”

Tarik sighed and drummed his fingers discreetly on the desk. “With respect, Controller, it’s not that simple. It’s never easy to create a portal to a specific location on Earth. Today, for some reason, there is a large amount of interference around that area. It may be connected to the target, it may not. But we’re finding it hard to get a fix.”

“So send someone anyway! Once there, they can activate a beacon.”

“We have tried that, Controller. So far, we have lost three agents to the void. I’ve no intention of losing more. We’ll monitor the situation and send a squad when we can.”

The Controller conceded the point. His image frowned, then “Surely there’s something you can do in the meantime to track him?”

Tarik looked thoughtful. “Possibly,” he said slowly. “I’ll let you know.”

Before the Controller could respond further, Tarik nodded his head and cut the link. He turned, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

Darius stared up at the roof, far above the desk he was seated at. It was impressive. It was a large dome, lined with several levels of bookshelves and narrow walkways, with light entering at the top through skylights. Around him there was a reverent silence broken only by footsteps and the occasional shuffle of a chair on the polished wooden floor.

He returned to the book in front of him. He was just following a hunch, but he’d wanted to find out more about the stations he’d visited. There was something about their names, something hovering at the edge of his conscious mind. If he could find a link...

He turned more pages. Then he found it. A long and rather dry account of the construction of the underground stations in Melbourne’s central city area, over twenty years before. There were three of them: Flagstaff, Parliament and... *Oh! That’s it!*

Darius slammed the book shut and stood up abruptly, earning stern glances from the people seated near him. His mind was in a whirl as he walked out of the library, piecing fact and theory together in his mind.

He was so preoccupied, he almost walked into a young woman as he crossed the road from the library steps, back to

the station entrance. “Sorry,” he said automatically, stepping onto the footpath.

She stopped too, and smiled. “Hello again.”

Darius was startled. Who did he know here? Then he looked again. Short blonde hair, a wide smile, blue eyes, dangly spiral earrings. *The girl from the coffee stall!*

“Hi,” he said, beaming. “Sorry about that. Been a funny day.”

“So you said before,” she reminded him. “Still funny, then?”

“Yep. Just found out something I need to know,” he replied, jerking a thumb in the direction of the library.

“Knowledge is power, eh?” She made no move to go, meeting his eyes and holding her bag in front of her, idly dangling it between her hands. Darius noted how much more attractive she looked when not wearing a uniform. But that probably held true for everyone in the fast food business, he thought.

“Yeah...” He had a thought. “Hey, do you want a coffee or something? May be I could pick your brains about Melbourne. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

She fell silent for a moment, as if considering. “All right,” she replied. “Though not coffee, I see enough of that at work. I could do with a drink, though. Got anywhere in mind?”

“No, I’ve... I’ve only just arrived. And I need to get some money out,” he added. *If I’ve got enough credit on it.* Darius crossed his fingers hopefully. “Lead on, Macduff,” he added, sweeping a hand in the direction of the city centre.

She laughed. “Literary, eh? Gotta watch those ones.”

They stepped closer together simultaneously, only to be suddenly separated by a stranger heading toward the station. He was wearing a tropical-themed shirt that looked

absurdly bright among the bustling crowd of shoppers and besuited office workers.

The unexpected interruption covered their joint awkwardness, and they laughed with relief as they walked off together. Trams trundled by as they made their way down the street.

“This is very cool.” Darius looked around the bar she’d led him to. They’d walked through a Chinese district, past bright and shiny restaurants with young women in *cheongsams* promoting the virtues of their menus to passers by. The buildings were mostly old, the facades Victorian. Darius liked what he’d seen of Melbourne so far, it was a bit like London but a lot sunnier. And it was damn good to see the sun again.

They’d reached a small streetfront church, then she’d led him into an alleyway which twisted at right angles behind the rubbish bins and the aromatic kitchens of restaurants. He’d balked at following her for a moment, but the sky was still light and she didn’t seem at all threatening.

At a final dead end, they stepped through a door into a bar. It was painted in institutional grey-green, lined with scientific instruments and oversized test tubes. Anatomical charts hung off the walls. At a long bench mounted with gas jets, a barman was mixing drinks.

They ordered, then sat on a soft couch against a wall. She smiled. “Yeah, this is the in thing at the moment. Bars down alleyways off alleyways, past bins.”

“So how do they get business?”

“Word of mouth. Everyone who comes here can’t wait to show their friends how clever and sophisticated they are to have discovered it. It’s all ego. Quite silly, really.” She

laughed and sipped her drink, a cocktail stuffed with mint leaves, lime and rum.

“Still, it’s cool. I don’t know if I’d like to walk down that alleyway after dark, though.”

“All part of the fun,” she replied. “Will I be mugged before or after my *mojito* tonight? Adds a... what’s that word?”

“A *frisson*?”

“Oh, good one. Yeah, a *frisson* of excitement.”

They fell silent for a moment.

Darius glanced around the bar to cover the break in conversation. *Not many people here, bet it’s jumping later on though.* He reflected on what he was doing there. He had thought of it as an opportunity to talk to a local, maybe find out something else to flesh out the theory that was forming in his mind. But he had to admit, it was nice to just have contact with another human being and escape the craziness.

With that thought, he realised he’d forgotten something important. “Oh god,” he said, slapping his forehead. “What’s your name?”

She didn’t seem put out by the belated question. “I was wondering when you’d ask,” she said. “That jet lag’s really done a number on you, hasn’t it? I’m Vivien.”

“Nice name,” he replied. “I’m Darius.”

“Cool. So what brings you to Melbourne?”

I wish I could answer that. “Um, just felt like a change. I was under a lot of stress. I needed to get out more,” he finished lamely.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, as if she were sizing him up. “Yes,” she said. “I know how that feels. Loads of crazies coming up to me in the station and giving me hassles.”

Darius blushed. “Like me? Sorry about that, Vivien. I’d had a difficult day.”

“Call me Viv if you like.”

He smiled at her, then swallowed another gulp of his vodka-laden drink. She was very attractive. Good looking, of course. But her personality was just Darius’ speed: forthright, positive, able to hold her own in a conversation. He liked that.

“What are you doing in that job, Viv?” he asked, then added “Damn, that didn’t come out right. I mean...”

“What’s a smart girl like me doing in a shit job like that?”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“I’m studying psychology at Melbourne Uni,” she replied. “That just pays the rent.”

“Oh sure, I’ve done jobs like that. At least it isn’t McDonald’s.”

“I do have standards,” she said, glancing at him sharply while swirling her cocktail with a straw.

Darius opened his mouth, then shut it. He felt himself blushing again.

Viv took another sip of her drink. “So what was it you wanted to ask me about Melbourne?”

Darius was glad of the change of topic. “This is pretty boring, but I’m wondering about the train system. You see, at home, I’m a... a transport engineer.” *Liar!*

Viv stopped sipping. “Really?” she said, looking steadily at him over the rim of her glass.

“Really.”

“Interesting job?”

“It has its moments. But those stations... do you know if they ever had any other names?”

She looked thoughtful. “What, the City Loop ones? I don’t think so, the underground ones aren’t that old. But I wouldn’t know. The others have been there forever.”

“I was mainly thinking about Melbourne Central. Tell me,” he continued. “Was there ever a museum around there?”

Viv looked down in concentration. Then her eyes brightened and she glanced up. “Yes! I remember Mum taking me there when I was young. We were never great museum-goers, I think I only went there once.”

“Where was it?”

“Right behind the State Library, in the same building. It’s moved now, up to Carlton.” She gestured vaguely out the window.

So that tallies with what I discovered in the library, thought Darius. *Just need to check one more thing.*

“Does that help?” asked Viv.

Darius smiled, running a hand through his unruly dark hair. “It does, Viv, it helps a lot. Hey, do you know where I can find a cybercafe? I’ve gotta check something on the Web.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.” He put down his drink, and noticed a quizzical expression on her face. Then it resolved itself.

“I can do better than that,” she said. “You can use the computer at my flat. Clunky dial-up access right at your fingertips.”

Darius hesitated. There was more than Internet access taking part in this conversation, and felt the distinct chemistry between them. But could he afford to think of anything but the people pursuing him, the unresolved danger?

Viv’s fingertips brushed his as she collected her sunglasses from the table top near his hand. The touch felt electric, human warmth bonding for just a moment. Their eyes met as Darius rose to leave.

What the hell, he thought. *Life goes on.*

Tarik looked sternly at the face in the vid-link.

“What do you mean, several hours?”

The engineer, a bronze-skinned man with jet black hair and a small goatee, returned the Seer’s gaze. “I apologise for the delay, Seer, but they’re not usually encoded for this kind of mission. I have three adepts forming the necessary charm now, but it will take time.”

Tarik rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Put six adepts on it, and damn the expense. I’ll guarantee your budget.”

The engineer looked unimpressed. “Six adepts? It’s hard enough to handle three.”

“Just do it,” replied Tarik firmly. “Many have already died in this exercise, Khan. I trust you won’t be added to the list.”

“I don’t need threats to do my job,” responded the other man sourly. “I’ll inform you when we’re ready.”

The image flicked to black. Tarik tapped the desk, and glanced at the ornamental hourglass on the shelves opposite his desk. As its sands ran out, the glass automatically inverted itself. The grains started flowing again.

“If only time could be manipulated like that,” he said to himself.

Tarik waited.

Darius clicked on the search results, looking for details to cement his theory. On the screen, a map of the London Underground was unfolding as the computer downloaded its

details. He was struck by its organic appearance as it slowly grew in front of his eyes.

“Like a multi-headed beast,” he muttered. “The Hydra. Or maybe Jonah’s whale.”

He smiled at the thought. He’d certainly felt lost in the belly of the beast.

Viv leaned over him, close enough for Darius to feel the warmth of her skin. It was distracting.

“What are you looking for?” she said.

“Something to do with names,” he said, vaguely. “Trying to match them up.”

She nodded, then walked into the nearby kitchen to make coffee. Outside the living room window, it was dark at last, unfamiliar stars shining in the sky. Viv had pointed out the Southern Cross to him before he began on the computer.

The map completed downloading, and Darius scrolled down to the list of station names. Yes, he’d started at Park Royal. Then moved his finger over to Regents Park. One unexplained jump. Then Hamila had carried him to the old British Museum station. Then another jump to Melbourne Central, which had begun its life with quite a different name. He could see the pattern now. But what he needed was a site on other underground railways.

Thank god for search engines. Within a few minutes he’d found a website dedicated to undergrounds, or Metros, or whatever the locals called them. More proof that the Web was invented for people with too much time on their hands. Darius smiled as he glanced through Tube maps from cities around the world. One of them must have what he wanted. Occasionally, he scribbled notes on a scrap of paper on the desk.

He was so involved in this task, he overlooked the cup of coffee Viv had placed by his left hand. When he did finally see it, it was cold.

“Oops, sorry Viv,” he said, then turned back to the screen.

He was interrupted by two arms sliding over his shoulders from behind, under his shirt. Warm hands against his chest, warm face against his cheek, hair brushing his shoulder.

“Enough computer for now, train boy?” she asked, as he slid out of her grasp and turned to face her.

They kissed, then smiled.

“Oh yeah,” he said.

They walked into the bedroom. The open window revealed the silhouettes of palm trees down by the bay, the sand a thin white strip in the distance. The warmth of summer was in the air, and the dim bedside lamp cast soft shadows on the walls.

Then the lamp went out. The warm air swirled through the room as they fell into each other’s arms.

Darius dreamed.

He stood in a cool place. The air was dry and dusty, and swirled around him as a thin breeze stirred it from the hard floor beneath his feet.

He could see nothing at first, just an inky darkness giving no sense of distance or orientation. Although he usually suffered from mild claustrophobia, Darius felt no fear. He reached out and felt a stone wall ahead of him. His fingers moved over the stone, tracing deep grooves chiselled into its surface.

Then, as his fingers moved on, the grooves glowed into life. Emitting a soft fluorescence, they revealed deeply embedded symbols. Hieroglyphs, thought Darius. Birds, waves, people, gods, all glowed softly as the illumination spread.

Darius stepped back so he could see the entire wall as it came to life. The hieroglyphs now appeared to be moving, the animals moving between the people, scarabs crawling by, and water flowing into streams.

Then he backed into something hard, and yelled out. Abruptly, the symbols stopped moving and light flared up from torches around the perimeter of the room. Panicked, Darius turned swiftly and lost his balance, ending up in a crouch. He stared up. Above him towered a statue of a hawk-headed Egyptian god, his features picked out in subtle, faded colours. Turning, he saw the statue was facing another of equal height, the two framing a dark exit from the chamber. The second statue had the head of a dog.

Darius felt a faint sense of déjà vu. Can you have déjà vu in a dream? he wondered.

Then he felt himself lifted off the ground by a firm grip behind his neck. He twisted in panic, trying to shed his jacket, but it was impossible to discard. The grip moved, and he felt himself turning in its grasp. He now faced the head of the statue. Its eyes blinked, and the massive beak snapped shut.

As he stared, the head turned so that one massive eye faced him squarely. It was etched around with delicate swirling markings that highlighted its shape.

A voice boomed suddenly within his head. So you are the portal. Can so mighty a weapon be housed within so fragile a frame?

Darius tried to speak, but his throat was bone dry.

What are we to do with you, little one? *continued the voice.* Are you a threat or a tool? Does your meaning justify your end?

Darius felt fear shoot through him as the eye drew closer.

Are you prepared to die so your world can live?

Darius opened his mouth to reply, but a loud creak behind him interrupted. He darted a glance over his shoulder. The other statue had come to life.

He must live, brother, *came a voice from the dog's head. The canine eye held Darius', and he heard a whispered voice inside his head. Somehow, he knew it was unheard by the hawk.*

Do not trust the hawk's followers, *it whispered.* The woman is dangerous, and means to kill you. Tell her nothing. Do not resist our attempts to rescue you. Stay where you are, and we will come for you. Soon.

The hawk rippled with anger. What are you telling him, brother? *it boomed.*

Suddenly, Darius felt the grip on his collar released. He fell awkwardly to the floor, then scurried out from beneath the two statues. They were moving toward each other, about to come to blows.

As the first titanic crash echoed through his mind, Darius woke up to find his head pressed firmly against the pillow and his hands clenched. Beside him, Viv slept.

The sun was shining again over Melbourne. Darius walked hand in hand with Viv through Flagstaff Gardens, a city park with a slightly shabby look about it. He liked it though, he decided, it looked lived-in.

Across a stretch of grass, a man was playing with a dog, throwing a frisbee for it to fetch. Beyond them, glass and steel office blocks towered over the line of trees at the edge of the park.

Darius smiled. He'd allowed himself to be distracted from the events of the day before by Viv's presence, the warmth of her personality and the physical pleasure that swamped the memory of fear. They'd caught a tram into the city, walked through the Carlton Gardens and visited the museum in its current home. Then they'd strolled around the sprawling Queen Victoria Market.

At Viv's insistence, Darius had eaten a bratwurst sausage in a roll, served up from a stall that looked like it had been there since Victoria reigned over her namesake colony. It was good but a little too filling, and now he felt a strong urge to lie on the grass and sleep. But there was business to be done. He frowned at the thought.

At least he'd been able to email friends and family, to let them know he was out of town for a while. It'd buy him some time while he thought his situation through. Probably no-one had missed him yet, since he was between jobs, except the friend he'd stood up two nights ago. He'd probably cursed Darius for forgetting, and had left a message on his voicemail, but thought nothing more of it.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Viv was looking sideways at him as they walked, slightly concerned.

"Oh, sorry," he rejoined. "I was a million miles away."

"Or ten thousand? Feeling homesick for the Mother Country?"

"No, it's..." He hesitated.

"Try me."

He sighed. "Nah, you wouldn't understand."

Her eyes flashed and she withdrew her hand. “Secret men’s business, eh?”

Darius was puzzled. “Sorry?”

“It’s an expression.” She smiled, relaxed again. “Something’s worrying you though, isn’t it?”

Darius sat on the grass, folding his thin legs under him and looking up at her. “Yes,” he said. “I’ve got big problems.”

She sat down beside him, as Darius lay on his back and shaded his eyes with a hand.

“So can I help?”

Darius sneaked a glimpse of Viv through his fingers. He felt a surge of affection toward her. He’d met some Australians in London, and liked their openness and straightforward way of talking. Viv was all that, with a wicked sense of humour rolled in. But how could he explain what had happened, without her deciding he was mentally disturbed? And did he have the right to involve her in the potential danger?

She thumped him on the shoulder, hard. “Ow!” he yelped, rolling over.

“Tell me what’s up or you’ll get more of that,” she threatened, laughing. Darius nursed his shoulder and burst out laughing as well.

Then, as they both lay on their backs in laughter, he glanced up at the sky. Far above them, a silver disc punctuated the expanse of blue. *Is that the moon?*

Then sunlight glinted off its silvery surface, and Darius realised the disc had moved position and grown larger. In a flash, the events of yesterday returned to the forefront of his mind.

“Hell!” Darius leapt to his feet, staring into the sky. The cheap sunglasses he’d bought at the market didn’t filter

out much sunlight, but he could still make out the object in the sky. He was sure it was larger.

Viv was up too, looking concerned. “What’s wrong?” she said. She followed his gaze and gasped.

Darius grabbed her hand. “Run!” he shouted, and they set off across the park toward the city towers. The surprised frisbee-chasing dog reared back and yelped as they ran straight across its path.

Dodging across the street, Darius thought furiously. *What have I been doing, playing tourist here when I know they’re after me? He knew the answer immediately. I didn’t want it to be true, did I? Wanted it to be the nightmare it seemed after a good night’s sleep.* He dodged an oncoming tram and they arrived in one piece on the opposite pavement.

What’s that saying? he thought as they ran. *‘Denial isn’t just a big river in Egypt’.*

“Darius!” shouted Viv, pulling at his hand and dragging him into the portico of a nearby building. “Where are we going?”

He glanced around. They were in a busy street with lots of pedestrians, lined by imposing stone and modern buildings that looked like law courts. Police around, lawyers in black gowns on their way to cases.

He thought about approaching the police. But what could they do against a threat like this? And it would slow them down while that thing caught up. He glanced up, but couldn’t see the object.

Continuing to check out his surroundings, he noticed a sign indicating an underground station. “Flagstaff,” he read. *Shit!* He hadn’t done any research on that one, hadn’t realised he might need it.

He whirled around and grabbed Viv by the shoulders. “Viv, can you show me the way to Melbourne Central from here? Is it far?”

She squirmed out of his grasp. “Hey, watch the threads. Sure, it’s down this way. But why...?”

He started running in the direction indicated, dodging across the road and tram tracks to the other side.

Viv watched him beckon from the other side. She sighed. “Why do I always get the cracked ones?” she said aloud. Then she followed.

Above them, the silver sphere, the size of a basketball, had reached the height of the taller city buildings. Humming quietly, it rotated on its vertical axis. Then it stopped, and darted instantly down to street level. It zipped rapidly along the centre of the roadway, above the tram cables, moving with certainty as it locked onto its target.

Viv and Darius hurtled down the slope of Little Lonsdale Street, a narrow lane between two major thoroughfares. There were fewer pedestrians here. People stared curiously at their headlong rush, but usually stepped aside to let them through, and they were able to run along the roadway occasionally to avoid collisions. No-one else had yet spotted the threat above them, it seemed. Pausing at an intersection to catch their breath, Darius glanced behind him. At a distance, he could see the sphere, heading in their direction.

Viv saw it as he gestured. “Let’s go!” he yelled.

As they reached the bottom of the slope, Viv jerked Darius to the left. “Down here,” she said, gasping. “Might confuse it.”

They ran into a narrow alleyway between nondescript red brick buildings, old warehouses by the look of it. Thick electrical cables snaked above their heads between the

structures, and the occasional parked car slowed their progress as they diverted around it. They turned right again, then skidded to a halt. Ahead of them, just a few metres away, was the silver sphere.

Before they could move again, it darted toward them and stopped about ten centimetres from Darius' face. Clicking faintly, it darkened for a moment. Then, glowing brightly, it shot into the sky beyond view.

They stood, startled. "What the...?" began Darius.

Viv grabbed him by the hand and pulled him forward. "Come on, the station's just around the corner."

They stumbled out of the alley, onto another major street. Crossing via the traffic lights, fortuitously green, they reached the entrance of the station. Pushing their way down the escalator through grumbling travellers, they reached the underground concourse.

"You're supposed to walk down on the right while people are standing on the left," gasped Viv, catching her breath.

"It's the other way round in London," replied Darius, darting glances around the concourse.

"Now what? Why are we here?"

"We've got to go down," replied Darius, pointing in that direction.

Viv thought about it. "Okay, I've got my monthly ticket. I'll buy you a two-hour one."

As she negotiated the ticket machine, Darius pondered the strange sphere that had tailed them. Rather than threatening them, it had disappeared once he was located. *Could it be a scout of some sort? Then...* Darius felt his stomach turn cold as he followed the thought through.

“We’ve gotta hurry, Viv,” he said as she returned and they passed through the barriers. “Get down as deep as we can.”

“Here then,” she said and guided him down the escalator to Platforms Three and Four. “But what train do you want to catch?”

“I don’t,” he shouted, then turned in response to shocked cries behind him. The area on their side of the ticket barriers had suddenly been sealed off by a glowing shield of pearly light.

“Oh no,” said Darius, shocked. “Not again.”

He grabbed Viv’s hand and they ran down the escalator to the platforms below.

“What was...?”

“Trust me!” he said as he looked around the platform. He suddenly realised that this was the place he’d arrived. He hurried down the far end of the platform to the quiet spot where he’d encountered the cleaner.

He held Viv’s hands as he faced her. “I’m sorry, Viv. I just wanted you to show me the way, then I’d get out of your life. Now I’ve landed you in it too.”

She swept her wayward fringe out of the way with one hand, then looked directly at him. “Kiss and run, eh? Should’ve known.” She smiled, but there was fear beneath it.

Above them, screams and shouts broke out. Darius cursed, then instinctively lunged forward and held Viv in a tight embrace. She returned it in a tight grip. As they held together, Darius forced his mind to return to the sensations he’d felt before, the swirling, nauseous feelings that provoked the sea of colours within his mind.

Above him, the concourse was in chaos. Soldiers in black reflective suits fired their weapons at the mouth of the escalators, as more of their number joined them through the

pearly barrier. People fell as they were hit by the beams, or ran toward the far end of the station. Satisfied that the way was clear, the squad leader waved his team members forward. They began to run down the escalator, weapons at the ready.

Darius could dimly sense his surroundings, but his mind was focused on invoking the strange sensation he'd felt twice before. This time it seemed clearer, stronger, with less nausea attached. Holding tight to Viv, he felt them sliding away from the reality represented by the cold concrete and tiles around them. Sliding away from Melbourne.

The squad leader reached the platform and swung around to face Darius. The target was locked in embrace with a local, but that didn't change his orders. He raised his weapon... just in time to see Darius and Viv vanish from the platform. The space where they'd stood was empty, as if they'd never been there.

(continued on the next page)

Chapter 4

Muzeum

Metallic walls glowed a dull green under the glare of fluorescent lighting. There was no presence here, no noise other than the faint whistling of the air as it moved through the space.

Then, instantly, two people appeared, holding each other. It was impossible to actually see the transition, instantaneous as it was. One moment you couldn't see them, then you could.

The two separated, mouths open and eyes wide.

Viv gasped. "What... where...?" she stammered.

Darius darted away from her, scanning the walls. "Brilliant!" he yelled, punching the air. He turned to face Viv. "Yes! I did it!"

"Did what?" she managed, faintly.

Darius didn't reply. Instead, he gestured at a sign set into the metallic wall behind him.

Viv moved to look at it. In large capital letters, it said "Muzeum".

Then she passed out.

**** End of preview ****

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