Of the seven that had gathered at the beginning, two remained. The other five had lost interest as entities of their kind were prone to do. They had, initially, concurred the transformation of this uman to be a remarkable event warranting detailed study and analysis. The high magnitude ripples had attracted their attention, acting as a beacon to those who were of a nature to notice and understand, strong enough to cause an assembly to observe, and if need be intervene. Disquiet arose among them due to a fundamental discomfort their kind experienced when engaging in conscious limitation. It rankled these supra-evolved entities and never lasted long; their mentality sought dispersal and engagement minus the constraints of centralised focus. The two who remained operated under the oppressive weight of need. For them, the participatory rush counterbalanced the pull to unravel and wander galactic trees and inter-dimensional transit halls. For truth, each had observed multiple transformations previously, though never such a voracious shift bypassing millennia and bursting to life like a super nova. This was a rarity and something worth savouring. The one who’d taken the name Octopod listened intently, not as a uman would, it tasted currents and caressed flows, sifting impressions in search of tonal irregularities that would reveal what cosmic pressures had coalesced and found an outlet through the actions of hand and foot. And more; in comparison to its counterparts, it knew the deepest measure and value of observation. The longer you looked with the keeneest of tools, the more layers peeled back to reveal what lay beneath.

Octopod sensed orchestration. It had wondered whether chance of this kind was truly possible; whether the fell of foot could compromise constituent matter to such a degree, fracture the real and not cause localised catastrophe; rather, initiate a transformation and deliver unto the multiverse a new Phantom. It welcomed this new counterpart, as it had done with each it had been fortunate enough to observe and aid. That was not the issue and never had been. If what it’s sensorium had begun to sense consolidated into something of greater substance it would force the question, ‘What entity had deemed it permissible to actively create a Phantom?’ The exquisite idea sent a rush coursing through itself. It firmly pushed appreciation of what these umanoids would term heresy aside and refocused. It would not indulge in the titillation of transgression, it would not!

The simplicity of its explanation contained a seductive beauty. A Phantom birthing a Phantom. There could be no other explanation and the currents held fluvial evidence. It knew sifting would detect presence. Discovery carried a deep pleasure; piercing confusion to find understanding a heady intoxicant, no matter the shocking nature of what it contemplated. Octopod paused. Creatures of its kind delved, yet the motivation to do so came from the simple need to encounter difference, not from a tainted drive birthed out of limitation, spurred on by a quota of days. The overtone of mortality connected to its current form was building influence. Life and death give rise to the idea of things allowed and disallowed, of experience good and bad. The new Phantom’s home world practiced religion, endorsing a framework of binary codification; be virtuous and do the right thing and upon death you enter Purity;
indulge vice and face the null void of Neverend. Altered states came with their baggage, and Octopod found itself in the thrall of one such: religious morality! It was in a giddy spin thinking of naughty things!

Structural release from its constrained modality would see these mental paradigms lose coherence and become so much nonsense. Mortals were attributers, over-layers, arbitrary network builders; and all to avoid honesty and the blunt nature of their environs and the cycle of life and death. With nothing more than a want and a need to believe, they built elaborate behavioural fantasies designed to lift themselves out of experiential certainties, and as Octopod had encountered so often in its cosmological gallivanting, hierarchical superiority over others of their own species. A contrast was established whereby there were ‘those’ who lived and believed incorrectly and were doomed to damnation, serving the equally important role of reinforcing the correctness of righteous believers and their reward tucked out of sight and never tasted. A dynamic of identify and vilify, of struggle and war, of hunger and satiation drove the psychological insecurity that made nothing worth anything unless it was attained and sustained through oppression and domination. It amounted to a simple statement and a consistent maxim throughout the galaxies: ‘there is but one truth and all others are false!’ Armed thus, umanoid species built their civilisations atop dead bodies and when cracks appeared, bled innocents to smooth over imperfections.

Disturbed by its morbid train of thought and just as quickly disturbed it had been disturbed, the Phantom addressed the other of its kind, seeking what the mortals so prized, distraction through chatter.

you too suspect our new comrade may well be more than a freak of nature so to speak?
dear octopod, he/it must be! try as i did i cannot see how such a thing came into being without a helping hand.
then you know by what kind of ‘hand’ it must be?
i can only assume you allude to the fact that it must be a ‘hand’ belonging to a Phantom?
your economy with words is most impressive.
well?
yes of course i allude in that damn direction!
oooww...calm please octo, i am beginning to think your allusion is what sent the others packing.

...........
and it means we’re the only ones audacious enough to go sniffing around after some transgressing renegade motivated by who knows what.
well, yes. it is an interesting choice we’ve made. alarming you might say.......sympathy
i have not for uman spectra. the craving for excitation is claustrophobic. our concentrations gravitate towards such experience.
when was the last time you did this octo?
what’s with this ‘octo’ business? first the ridiculous attribution to begin with and now the abbreviation. its making me doubt our course of action. in answer to your question, i cannot recall the last time i spent this much time in a devolved state.
hmmm....memory.....recollection......strange concepts. they seem to be highly prized by the umanoids. stars, nebulas, galactic spirals and the slipstream between here and there, not to mention the dazzling Filigree binding it all together. do any of these require the function of reversal to navigate and explore? we range, observe and occasionally interfere and never bother with a reaching back; it is barren wilderness.

for us who are creatures belonging to infinity.

infinite and immortal. we say either and believe Phantoms are both. besides memory, the umanoids possess doubt.

you doubt our sovereignty of the worlds and our inseparability from them? when do you recall a Phantom, what do they call it, dying?

we are turning in circles octo. i have no ‘recall’ of any such thing.

neither do i.

........

........

if you insist on us hanging around, i think action rather than talk is advisable.

we cannot interfere with his/it’s ongoing transformation.

i do not mean that octo. your belief a Phantom manufactured the initial and highly irregular shift indicates, and correct me if i am wrong, a desire to ascertain exactly who is responsible.

your deduction is accurate.

then where to start my eight-limbed friend?

friend?

why not?

these forms encourage odd behaviour.

and all in accordance with the devolution necessary to have tangible connection.

we shall test for residue.

where it began for our counterpart?

assuredly.

i tingle.

i don’t believe i’ve stopped since this came to our attention.

we have been so very fortunate. being the ones to discover a rogue Phantom will be a experiential feast. i will disperse and bask in the stimulation and let time dissolve.

please, while i share your excitement, there is the small matter of why a Phantom would choose to do such a thing and what it hopes to achieve. transubstantiation play and the rainbow of encountered experience in the cosmic arena have proven sufficient to occupy Phantoms. intervention of this kind tells us there is one among the host who has consciously sought new entertainment, the variety our kind should not be inclined towards. we find ourselves in the midst of strange currents and i feel.......i do not know what it is that i feel and that in itself is absurd. to approximate a mortal being is.....perverse!

did you ignore what the uman expressed while it writhed before us, breaking time? it was unpleasant i admit.
The one termed medusoid shared its incorporation of the event. Octopod took note and observed flagrant agitation, the uman projections violent in their accent and familiar in a way only as something that belongs outside oneself can be.

   i think you might be experiencing what the umanoids call 'fear'.

   fear? that i should be plagued by an emotional state belonging to a devolved creature makes this both more tantalising and – there it is again – alarming.

   are you still of the desire to continue in this enterprise octo? there is nothing stopping us from disengaging and seeking other distraction.

   i`m afraid that is out of the question good medusoid. these strange experiential tones seem to be stimulating another. if i contemplate leaving, this new most unpleasant one spikes, and i can foresee with an exacting degree of certainty it will not dissipate over time, quite the opposite, it will sink its disharmonious fangs into my constituency and make any consequent rewarding stimulation untenable. no medusoid; we stay, investigate, seek to discover and ultimately negate. empathy and its flood of feelings be damned!

   oh wonderful! you are a true champion of adventure octo. bravo!
What would Anastasia say? How would she react to such a scene? She liked excitement, chiding him for his limited sense of adventure. His perspective on things never wavered. Days off were few and far between for the head of Presidential security. A cup of tea, the paper and the company of his wife were his idea of bliss. If he wanted to be adventurous he asked for a piece of cake. No sky flying, rock walking or any other high-risk activity for Commander David Grayson. Thwarting neo-liberals and ultra-conservatives was more than adequate. He thanked his lucky stars Anastasia too enjoyed the quieter moments and was happy to indulge her excesses during his long absences. Keeping the planets most powerful man alive was not a part time affair.

Another of the intoxicated acolytes bumped his shoulder running past, yelling some unintelligible nonsense. He heard the word Zesus clearly enough but the rest was lost. They were a flood, flowing around him and his men, an unending stream of fanatics thinking salvation had finally come. He hadn’t seen it’s like before, hundreds converging to become thousands, pouring out Avenue One and crossing Pinnacle Boulevard, forming into a seething ocean of bodies united in their chaotic adoration, spewing irrationality upwards, a near visible river of worship. He felt someone move up beside him.

“They seem to care little about exploding copters Commander.”
“Little? Looks like a case of not at all Phillips.”

They’d seen the copter come down and explode in a fireball on their approach. The masses before them - the deranged worshippers - hadn’t cared a whit, storming up to and around the burning wreck to converge on Pinnacle Tower. The Head of Presidential security and his elite officers reduced to running with mad people through the streets of Aura City chasing their airborne President, held captive by a thing that could not be; flying men. Grayson forced himself to look up and behold the source of all this chaos. His timing was either perfect or unfortunate, he decided both. The tiny pairs of bodies hovering just below the peak of Pinnacle Tower disappeared. White light flared and wrapped itself around the flying men, glowing brighter by the second. Momentary silence settled over the plaza fronting the Tower, religious awe snatching hold of tongues and stilling their movement. Brighter still shone the spectacle, forcing Grayson to raise a hand against its viciousness.

“Unbelievable...”

Phillips whispered his reaction, echoing Grayson’s own. As it turned out, it was just the beginning. Without warning, the ball of light leapt across the meagre gap and engulfed the top floors of Pinnacle Tower. Grayson felt his heart pounding in his chest, the individual contractions spreading wildfire through his body. He’d counted five beats when the light shrouded mass tore free of the Tower.

“This can’t be happening!”?

It was happening. Grayson had no damn idea how or why. The world of imagination and make believe were springing to life before their eyes, mocking sense and order. What came next brought with it a flood of damning curses. That impossible mass exploded and
disappeared, leaving in its wake a cloud of glitter spreading out and falling on those below. They welcomed it as a portent of things to come, screams of wonder and joy indifferent to the lives snuffed out when the mass disintegrated.

“Time to move!”

An understatement by anyone’s measure, but a leader led. Safeguards and guarantees were for the world of rational measure. Here, this place, a place he knew intimately, had taken on a new life and installed the nonsensical as the norm. They were more than likely running towards death, plunging headlong into a boiling cauldron of stupidity. Duty made even the most rational men reckless. A hand grabbed his forearm and another belonging to the same body directed his attention off to their right. He found what Phillips had spotted in an instant, the cluster of suited bodies around three identical black cars. Slowing to a walk, he watched as Prime Advocate Deacon was ushered into the middle vehicle and all three accelerated off in a squeal of rubber. Even when the expected did exactly as it should, surprise was possible.

“It appears some things are running according to script. The apprentice visits the master. I wonder what orders the snake received…..A problem for the Keeper to handle, we have our own.”

Grayson led his men across the broad plaza, their pace taking them around the enraptured, their gazes locked on the spectacle above. The crowd thickened with each step, ending their circumvention and forcing the officers to physically open a channel to reach Pinnacle Tower, shoving delirious worshippers aside who paid no mind, lost as they were in rapture and excess. Using hand gestures, Grayson slowed his men and drew them in around his person as they neared the broad entrance into Black’s stronghold. He swallowed down hard in disbelief and kept his eyes fixed on the men around him, ignoring the pull upwards to gaze upon impossible things. How was Hector reacting? What would his response be? It wouldn’t be subtle. And here they were, about to plunge headlong into the hornet’s nest in what could only be described as a suicide mission. Speech to calm.

“Our objective is plain. Rescue the President at all costs. We ignore all else. Now is not the time for panic or rash action. We will be focused and deliberate, our actions methodical. What awaits us inside is a mystery. Hector Black will not take kindly to having his precious Tower treated this way, and he will be less than welcoming to government interference. Expect the unexpected and stay alert. Form up!”

The pep talk was necessary. He sensed their anticipation, an eagerness to be about the business of infiltration and rescue. If Keller was still alive this group of men might well represent the only chance of success. Who knew what the coming hours would bring? Sunshine and daisies, he thought not. If the madness grew and chaos spread, time would decree no more lifelines for the President. They must be cold and dispassionate to succeed. Hotheads would doom this mission to failure.

Particular, fastidious, officious; all these he knew himself to be. One thing he was not, was a coward. Standing at the head of their wedge, his weapon drawn, he moved them forward, activating the sensor field. The grand lenticular door opened. What he’d hoped to avoid presented itself the instant they passed inside.
“Stop! Pinnacle Tower is closed to visitors. Turn around and leave immediately!” The words were bellowed by one of Black’s Helix Corp. goons. Dressed in a perfectly laundered black suit with hand gun raised at a forty-five-degree angle, the agent watched and waited for compliance. Grayson counted seven more agents arranged in a fan behind the speaker, all with weapons raised and targeting the trespassers.

“Advise your men to lower their weapons. I am Commander David Grayson of Presidential Security. The Union’s leader is being held hostage at the top of Pinnacle Tower. We must and will go to his aid. We require your assistance to ensure the President does not come to any harm. This is not the time for a confrontation between the government and Helix Corp., both organisations are facing the same threat. Please, I say again, lower your weapons and let us pass, the clock is ticking and the President’s safety is at risk.” How to avoid catastrophe? With every word, he rolled the dice. His orders against theirs. Neither would compromise.

“The President, you don’t say? Well, that’s where we have a difference of opinion Commander. We here at Helix Corp. don’t consider ourselves part of the Union. And unsurprisingly, we don’t care two wits about your President. In fact, we have a particular dislike for that puffed up self-righteous prick! So, David, it’s time for you to leave. I’m going to count to five. One, two...”

“You have to understand we cannot leave.”

“Three...”

“I implore you to listen...”

“Four...”

“Please...”

“Five.”

The agent lifted his arm and fired. The semi-circle of agents followed suit, unleashing a hail of bullets. Officers fell, sprays of blood misting the air as metal slugs punctured bodies. Grayson lost five men in the onslaught. Even well-trained professionals were unprepared for such a callous attack. Those still standing returned fire and agents dropped. On both sides scramble for protection behind columns dotting the foyer. More were hit, ending their involvement. Grayson heard the grunts and gunfire as a one might hear far away echoes. His attention had but one focus, the instigator who’d opened fire. That first bullet had passed a hand width from Grayson’s head. Two more had done likewise and another holed his jacket. The fifth struck marble as he rolled behind a pillar and found cover. On the verge of stepping out the other side to return fire, he froze. A high-pitched whistle announced a bullet passing through the exact spot. Instinct had saved him. He waited. Two more shots came; one to either side, both at chest level. Dropping onto his belly, Grayson rolled back the way he’d come, sighted his adversary crouching in open space and fired. The bullet struck the target’s forehead and flung the agent backwards. A quick scan revealed stillness. The killing, for the moment, was at an end.

Remaining alert, Grayson rose to his feet and started a head count. To his right, he recognised Phillips and Anderson scanning the foyer, both men appearing injury free. He waited and watched. None of the other officers stirred nor made any sound, their bodies sprawled on the marble floor in unnatural positions, some haloed by pools of blood and gore.
Erikson over there, quick of wit and a constant source of humour to the other men, Beckford nearby, taciturn yet insightful, ever willing to help the younger men should they have a problem, and here, not two steps from his feet, twenty-year-old Hernandez, full of patriotic zeal and a burning desire to rescue the President. And the rest, each entrusted to his care as their Commander. A bitter pill to swallow losing so many in the blink of an eye, and for what; Hector Black’s unfounded belief in Helix Corps sovereignty. His mind ranged forward, he was powerless to stop it, to where all this madness ended and the families to which these men belonged grieved their loss. Right now, they knew nothing, and would not for some time. It was reality, hard and cold. His men were dead; and fathers, brothers and sons were no more. Anastasia’s eyes stared at him, willing him to come home alive. Duty drew a curtain across her face.

A raised fist told Phillips and Anderson they would move as one. A recent visit by President Keller and his security detail to Pinnacle Tower had schematics popping up in Grayson’s mind, setting their course across the foyer to the central stairwell. The lifts might be quicker but would leave them vulnerable. They encountered no resistance crossing the floor and he breathed easier once the door clicked shut behind them. Other agents would not be far off; Hector’s surveillance network ensured all who visited Pinnacle Tower were afforded no privacy during their time inside the stronghold. Their unlikely survival, let alone success in rescuing the President, lay in constant movement. Rest too long in the same spot and they became sitting ducks. Of necessity, he ran his gaze over the two men and found what he’d hoped to see; stoic determination in the face of madness.

“Time to rescue the President.”
Revisions and divisions, escalations and retractions. He fell and distended, the motion disallowing him any sense of orientation; pulling and compressing his body in every conceivable direction.

Sharper than a whip crack, the universe imploded and his eyelids drew back and he sucked in air, his lungs bursting. The exhalation did not come. Finally the impasse ended, letting carbon dioxide shunt its way out his system. The in and out resumed.

Shimmering light made focusing difficult. He lay on his side, partially curled in a foetal position. Pushing up on one elbow, he dragged his free hand through his hair and blinked several times. The pervasive glow did not fade and memory stumbled. Flashes erupted in his head and he doubled over in agony, both hands clasp his skull. He tipped forward, rolled and sprang upright, screaming as successive fantastic images and scenes burst alive in his mind’s eye. None of them made any sense, and he wanted them gone. Lights, colours, and things, wild grotesque unnatural things surrounding him, watching him, and noises, speech? And worse, a fanged viciousness ghosting in and out of sight, weaving between the others, an invisible thing whispering a promise of unimaginable hurt. Zane howled, tunnelled inside himself and crushed the phantoms, banishing them he knew not where. The act sucked him dry and he collapsed, barely catching his fall with outstretched arms. Unbidden, he retched bile up his oesophagus and burned his mouth. He spat the foul liquid and surrendered. A wheezy laugh rose out his belly and descended into tears and back to laughter. Somewhere inside the mess that had become his mind, he wondered what was happening. The question, swirling and drowning in a cloud of competing voices, could not hold itself long and faded away. Mirth won out and he rolled over onto his back, shoulder blades and head thudding against polished regularity. There was no pain, just more laughter. From behind his closed eyelids he sensed and discovered the place in which he dwelt. Opening them changed the sight little, an accenting of what he’d already seen and wondered at. His it was, his creation surrounding him, crystalline splendour spanning three hundred and sixty degrees. Delicacy had come to his wild vision, softening the reflected and refracted rainbow composition, smoothing over differentiation. Delineation remained, giving him a sense of depth and separation, but it too seemed less pronounced and hinted at a fluid seamless world.

“Look! He’s back!”

The cry came from behind him. Rising to his feet, he turned around and discovered two men standing beside a third figure on the floor some thirty metres away. Familiarity tickled his brain and he recognised Edward and President Keller. The other was Emerald Green.

He flinched. The terrible dragon and her offspring were coming for him! Isabelle Black lay hidden far below; uman guinea pig, tortured matriarch, and demented prophet. She was also a monster, her nature stretched thin and crazed. Shoving the horrific thought aside,
he studied what he saw, the three interruptions on his sea of white, their bodies tense. Emerald stared at him, focused hatred flooding out her face, wave after wave pouring over him. She wanted him dead.

Up and along he shifted, skimming over the floor towards the three captives. Keller leaned protectively over Emerald and Edward drew back, collapsing in on himself. The President reached out, snared Edward’s arm and pulled him close, whispering fiercely in his ear. The scolding did no good, Edward mumbled something and broke loose.

Zane found the mixed reactions rather comical and instead of stopping, veered around the little group and began circling their encampment. Only Keller tracked his revolutions, Emerald stared off into the distance, no longer aiming her hatred at him directly, she let it leach out her body and form a perimeter around where she sat. Cowardly Edward dropped to the floor and hid his face, sobbing weakly.

“They’re coming for us. Our time of peace is at an end.”

Despite keeping his features smooth, Keller’s cold eyes projected the hostility stored in his breast, spoiling the facade. Every few seconds ocular muscles bunched and relaxed. Years of practicing restraint helped him maintain relative control. Zane’s statement fell on deaf ears.

“No just for me. They come for you too. I don’t think they have your best interests at heart. Me they want to turn into a pet; an attack dog. No, a beacon; or perhaps it is both.”

This time Keller couldn’t resist, Zane had revealed enough to overcome the President’s stoicism.

“You’re a monster and a madman. If your actions didn’t tell us so, your words certainly do. Go back whence you came and leave us alone.”

“Mad? Maybe just a pinch.” The idea did not seem altogether outrageous and failed to offend. Mad or insane, everyone flavoured their life one way or another. What mattered lay beneath their feet, the big game hunters. They were close.

“Yes, I could leave on a thought. Can you, Mr President? Apart from me, whose scalp do you think Hector Black prizes? Edward’s? Hmm, perhaps he should! Ha, madness.” Zane sneered. “What think you?”

“I think you’re trying to scare us, the way all lowlife’s do.”

“Don’t talk to him Armand, he’s playing with us.”

“Emerald, beautiful Emerald, you know I love you.” Underneath Zane’s skin the capillaries dilated, their contents full of bite. Violent acceleration plastered his hair against his face. Slowing, he came to an abrupt halt just below the cavern’s lofty apex. Why say that? Far below he spied their tiny bodies. Around his head the glowing structure gave a blurred image of the world outside. Unexpectedly the material started to vibrate and hum. Overlapping the atomic play came a deep rumble, infiltrating his refuge from outside. The volume increased rapidly and crescendoed. Drawn to its source he recognised an air-force jet flashing past in the setting sun, a blazing comet furnished with death. His embarrassment found an easy target. Tracking the aircraft, he identified connections and formed spears of electromagnetism around the jet. Quicker than thought he impaled the target, energy piercing metal and igniting fuel. The plane exploded. Sound waves struck crystal walls and made them sing. Tumbling down, the comet of spiking colours dipped and slammed into a nearby
building. The shocking impact sprayed debris in every direction and reverberations washed outwards.

Cathartic release. His capillaries were no longer engorged, the dilation had relaxed. Floating down, gentle eddies snuck up his jeans and sleeves, caressing hairs and tickling his skin. He had already dismissed the burning wreck from his mind. One foot and then both touched down on the spot he’d left moments earlier. His companions were no longer present. Attracted by the spectacle of fire and noise the captives had rushed over to the wall and were gazing down at the blurry aftermath. Their body language projected shock and woe. He listened to hear what they had to say.

“He’s completely flipped out. Look at him; it’s like nothing’s happened. How are we going to get out of this alive? He’ll kill us for sure. I should’ve stayed at home. Why do I love money so much?”

“Shut up you fool. We don’t even know if he’s responsible.” Keller extended an arm in the general direction of the burning building. “Even if he is, it doesn't mean he’s about to kill us.”

“What! Are you nuts? Have you forgotten what he did to Ms Green! He...he nearly killed her. What’s wrong with you? I bet you didn’t know he can read your thoughts and Zesus knows what? See, look, he’s listening to what we’re saying. He’ll probably torch us just because you said he wouldn’t.”

“I think it’s best if you stop talking.”

“Yes, shut up, you pathetic little worm! If he kills us, it’ll be because you can’t stop dribbling that incessant shit!” Emerald lashed out at the distraught Edward, poking him in the chest. Keller quickly interceded and none too gently pushed them apart. Noticing Zane’s sudden proximity quashed their complaints and made them focus.

“I can hear them tapping away underneath us. They’re eager to capture their prey. What are you going to do Keller, when the floor rips apart and a flood of storm troopers come pouring out, hungry for blood, your scent filling their nostrils?”

“You speak rubbish. Hector Black might be a powerful man, but even he wouldn’t dream of killing a serving President with the world’s attention focused on Pinnacle Tower. You’d do well to watch your back, it wasn’t me who laid waste to his home. He’s a touchy man when it comes to his possessions.”

Zane burst into laughter. They would learn, eventually. The floor was not about to do the miners any favours. Whatever equipment they had might well prove insufficient. He remembered pulling everything apart, including people, down to an atomic level, then mashing it all together. The compound was a mystery to him, naming it served no purpose. In his mind he could see the labyrinthine pattern joining the atoms, a splendid mosaic of rare beauty. Intuitively he knew it to be strong, exceedingly so; he was newly born and naive.

“It’s not Hector Black you should be worried about Keller. Even the strongest have a hand nudging them along.” Zane gave Emerald a pointed look, floated up into the air and began tracing lazy figure eights and loop de loops inside his cathedral.

“For the moment we seem safe from our lordships dementia.” They watched the aerial show with subdued interest, having become relatively accustomed to the unreal. “Should we believe him? Are we living on borrowed time? Black is an eccentric, a man who has lived too
long and dreams a dangerous future. Perhaps the aeronaut has given him the opening he’s been waiting for?” Keller voiced his thoughts as they gravitated back to their resting place, Emerald by his side and Edward a step behind.

“The Union’s lived in peace for many long decades Armand. Malcontents hide in every corner hungry for conflict. They are sick of prosperity and long for an excuse to shift the balance of power. In every heart lies greed. It is preyed upon. I fear what tomorrow will bring.” She addressed the floor and carefully avoided Keller’s searching gaze. His hand halted their progress. Cupping her chin, he sought her eyes, seeking to plumb her depths.

Twisting free, Emerald stalked off, pride fighting for restoration against the shame in her stomach, the conflict teasing muscles. In frustration, she extended and flexed her arms, bending wrists back and spreading fingers apart. The President watched her display and frowned openly.

“Do you believe him, Mr President?” Edward’s question surprised Keller despite the fool’s recent play for attention, not that he wished the man ill, just his absence from their lofty prison. Better yet Edward could stay and the lovers leave. Neither of them had hovered at the monster’s side during the Millennium Centre attack. Edward might well be an unwitting accomplice without any mystical powers, but the association lingered.

One eye on Emerald’s form, Keller began a distracted walk heading nowhere. Hearing no footsteps following behind, he mouthed a silent thank you.

Examining the polished floor, Keller pondered their impending capture at the hands of Black’s henchmen and what would follow. Beneath this bizarre floor, sappers were attacking its unnatural composition, the first step in an unparalleled strike on the established order; and he, the most powerful man in the world, could do nothing but wait.
Tilt 17

Two none descript individuals wearing very plain clothing stood on the golden sands of the Divine Stretch, the widest and longest beach gracing the face of Farillon, and where a day earlier Zane Foster had been assaulted and left unconscious.

“It fairly screams at you doesn’t it Octo.”

“He certainly is making a lot of noise for one so young.”

“Can’t we at least skip over there and have a quick look?”

“Dear friend, no. The temptation to become involved might overcome your restraint, not to speak of my own. I would much prefer it if we can avoid direct interference. Remember, we are here because we believe another like us, a fellow Phantom - or at least a shadow of one - has taken extreme liberties where they should not have.”

“Yes, yes, I know, but still, we’re dealing with one of the multiverse’s rarest gems, and you abstain from localisation! Surely we are fools Octo! So much vigour has this child of umanity.”

“Come Medusa, we have work to do and perhaps a – I will not say discovery, as we have our suspicions – but a verification of great import.”

“That creature is there too Octo, you know that as well as I.”

“She is Medusa. Our kind does not operate on suspicions, and what we pursue here will transform our speculation into certainty. If achieved, then relocate we will and watch the bonfire dance. Nothing is so sweet as immersion melded with truth. Unexpected developments are likely when you consider what her son has cooked up. This will be a spectacular convergence. The others will rue their absence.”

“I’ve become so horribly impatient. I apologise Octo.”

The recipient paused in its atmospheric evaluations and let humour course through its body, giving reign to umanness.

“Put it aside and join me in tasting the residue. The traces are fresh and fairly glow. I am ready to differentiate and isolate flows. We will see whose hand performed that most delicate surgery.”

“You have her signature from our play?”

“Yes Medusa.”

“Just checking.”

“Impatient? Should we add nervous to the mix as well?”

“Nervous? Don’t get carried away Octo. It wasn’t I who stumbled upon and failed to recognise fear.”

“Oh Medusoid, how cruel you’ve become! I was merely entertaining the notion of sarcasm with a gibe. This process of assuming forms reinforces the chameleon of complexity. Limitation institutes misunderstanding. How lower order sentient creatures raise themselves up through time defies logic. Surely it is what umans call, a ‘miracle’. “ Octo indulged distraction and observed the evening beachgoers strolling up and down the shoreline, some
holding hands and others enjoying solitude. It liked this expanse of sand, soft underfoot and shining under starlight.

“Oh my, you have become sentimental Octo! Speaking of miracles, no less. Give it a body and put it down on terra firma and voila; are you Phantom or uman, I’m beginning to have trouble determining which?”

The comments were light hearted as its own had been. Octo avoided delving too deeply of this nature it had devolved into, lest it detect what Medusa playfully suggested. Spend too long in a soft shell and the carapace hardened and trapped the occupant. Foolish thoughts borne of that very state it maintained for needs particular. It wondered; were they, Phantoms, so very different? What drove them through time? Experience. To experience, not just to be, but to be involved, create effect and be affected. They never ceased in their hunt for the rarest gems, those confluences and convergences yielding a once in a millennia event. How great the gulf separating their mightiness from these bipeds feeling the fine coarseness under their toes and sharing their thoughts, feelings, and hopes for tomorrow? How was what Phantoms sought so different; the scale yes, that much was plain. Ignore the magnification and the reward seemed alarmingly similar.

“Please Octo, my impatience rises once more. Should I lead, or do you think it wiser if we conduct separate analyses?”

“.....Separate? No, let us see together. These limitations incline towards an overabundance of separateness and isolated reflection. What errors they must make with their thinking thus confined? Intertwine we shall and see together what truth remains.”

Octo and Medusa acted in concert, their perceptions forming a single actuating awareness merging with localised space. Here Zane Foster had fallen and suffered blows of hand and foot and had his consciousness interrupted. To them, this place hummed, turgid as it was with impression. The stronger the press against reality - the attack registered and held by the Filigree – the longer it persisted before consequent events overwhelmed it and it faded out. What remained for umans was memory, and for Phantoms, incorporation. Once a thing was tasted by a Phantom, it became part of it, not to be recalled as umans did, events became constituent substance, thus their ever-growing enormity and tenuous delineations with their environs. Both visitors felt this spot keenly, its afterglow would remain strong for years to come. They touched it in its infancy, a newly emerged presence accenting the Filigree.

They watched him shamble across the sand mouthing unheard words, his fuzziness telling them he’d just ended an episode of extension beyond himself. It revealed Zane’s inherent inclination towards breadth. The impact of bodies and spoken obscenities came next. And there, ever so soft, the old crone, her aspect stretched far from her confinement, watching and poised to act. Her excitation betrayed the naivety of a mind acting minus the knowing of how, unaware of its absence. The crone sat perched on a metaphysical fence, consumed by anticipation, oblivious to her preposterous deeds, ready to launch and dive. That last blow fell and Zane wavered between, neither here nor there, conscious and un. A bright concentration engulfed the seat of Zane and bore against his locus of separation and passing between, of time here and never, holding and disappearance, the Filigree’s sidedness.

Shock!
Their unified aspect discovered what it had thought not to find. What the crone’s naive intent had been; the inevitability of direct imprinting between, subsumption of each by each, the abrupt and non-phasic union of halves, in this case the synthesis achievable in the Filigree structure dictating life and death, limiting consciousness to life and nothingness to eternity.

*She wanted this! To use him as the camel to cross the desert seas and achieve this never seen momentousness!*

Their unification traversed succession, each action timed, clock ticks, to reach an instant of nascent potential and her thwarted bid to claim it.

*He interceded and snatched it from her grasp! The infant saw and wanted and won its prize! And taste that; such profound resignation! Her forward reaching eye had seen her own failure and still she’d tried, thought it possible to negate her own precognition and become what she knew would be denied her! Exquisite!*

Her counter attack failed. The pointless attempt to dislodge and obstruct him, the vestiges of disbelief and a refusal to accept. Zane *became* when he folded over into and out of himself. Two became one and one was not as either and in control of both. And then came the deliberate suppression of expression and secure holding of the vessel to propagate a path into actualisation. Zane, as a uman, was unprepared for what he’d claimed. What he *became* began a controlled transition of what it found itself as into what it needed to be. Ordered sustained existence would encounter incompatibility until flesh transitioned and form lost the confines of boundedness. Unrestrained expression of its inherent transmutable characteristics would flash burn the molecules of Zane if it forewent restraint and a necessary weaning. The grandest caterpillar story in the multiverse’s vast fiction.

Aghast amid loss the crone withdrew, her recoil violent, howling inuman fury. Zane Foster swam in a limitless ocean lost to himself and unaware. Setting rays drew a line from head to toe, his length glowing. A few of his former kind approached, their hesitant steps over the shifting surface told of caution, their owners alert, unsure the danger had passed. His attackers yelled abuse from afar as they trudged off, unhurried.

*Why did we not understand what he is? We saw his turmoil, his transition; there is nothing else we could have thought he was/is becoming other than one of us? He will become an overlap of no seams, the eye that sees itself.*

*Is that not what we are? No Medusa, we are not. If he survives, he will be the pre-eminent creature inhabiting the multiverse. We have cause for concern. Surely you are not suggesting he will seek an end to us? I do not know what he/it will do once it has reached attainment. There are no guarantees in a game such as this. We may feel its demise at any moment. If it survives there can be no telling what expressions it will seek, what motivations might drive its decisions? Should we.....seek...an exit? We have given ourselves over Medusa. I wonder if an exit is now possible. The pull, the peril; we are on a pathway fated. May we go then? I wish to see this newness.*
Yes, we have seen what we came to see and seen our truth.

A young couple out enjoying their amour noticed two pockets of strangeness hanging before them. Curiosity bade they come closer, hesitant feet bringing them within touching distance, scrutiny latching upon a half-seen horror show. The word ‘ghost’ whispered in their ears and taunted their vision, drawing them closer to the clouded forms seeking cohesion and certainty. Fingers a hairs breadth from making contact, the ‘ghosts’ vanished. The couple squealed in shock and stumbled backwards. Around them the air was as it should be, free of distortion. Hurried steps fought against the shifting sand, mocking their eagerness to be gone.
Commander Grayson and his two surviving officers crouched motionless behind a makeshift screen comprised of fallen debris and furniture. Eluding detection was their sole objective over the next thirty seconds. Outside the room, Helix Corp agents stomped past, not fussing their footsteps thundered down the corridor. Easing back against the barrier, Grayson succumbed for what must have been the twentieth time and tallied the cost. Two officers left from twelve; they were in freefall, plummeting towards outright failure. He pictured them, those ten families torn apart by this madness engulfing Aura City. He found it hard to believe anyone at Domain, especially Riley, spared much thought for the human price tag. Despite the Keeper’s pacifist ideology, or because of it, the man dealt in abstractions, rendering the world a chessboard and its inhabitants the pieces. Together they formed a game whose raison d’être was control. It engineered a docile public and left the ruling class free to enjoy the fruits of their questionnable labour.

Shaking his head, Grayson frowned at his cynicism and its traitorous tone. He was not one of the new anarchists cultivating upheaval. No, his life read like that of so many ambitious conservatives, a private education, university degree and enrolment in the Government Security Forces; parents made proud by his selection into the Presidential detachment and eventual appointment as Commander. Nothing in those years had prepared him for today, past the odd death marring an otherwise predictable career. Copters dropping like flies and his men falling under a spray of bullets. Today would be long remembered for all the wrong reasons.

“They’re gone Commander.”
“What?”
“I’d say to join the others.”
“How long have we been sitting here Phillips?”
“Close on two hours Commander.”

Keep moving and stay alive. That motto had fallen by the wayside. This dead spot in the buildings lighting and surveillance – created, he assumed, by structural damage – was the reason they were still alive. Outside, he imagined the evening sky, its deep beauty reinforcing his confinement. They were alone and stranded with only invention to fall back on if they were to rescue the President. Transmissions were being blocked, which meant charting their own course. They could either attack or wait for help. It would come, in some form or other, Riley’s loyalties guaranteed action.

Duty wanted him on his feet and running, spoiling Black’s party and liberating the President. Weight of numbers stilled his hand and kept his back against the barrier, a heroic sacrifice would do nothing to help the Union. In this instance virtue resided in patience and observation, no matter how much it galled.

After initially entering Pinnacle Tower, they’d survived an ambush by agents guarding the lobby through a mix of luck and instinct. Ignoring the compartmentalised lifts,
its first section topping out at level twenty-five, they’d taken the stairs which let them climb seventy flights before those same design specifics geared towards defensive measures forced a transfer. There were only so many exceptions the city planners were willing to overlook, or take a bribe to ignore.

The absence of agents during the climb was a merciful reprieve. A sudden cave-in was their next brush with death. Desperation saved them, all three diving down the previous flight and narrowly avoiding a hail of rubble. Shock stilled tongues as instinct dragged them into positions of relative safety. Structural weakness was unsurprising considering what they’d witnessed outside. Nothing changed despite the misadventures, their objective remained the same; press on in a bid to rescue the President. Grayson’s outlook hardened. What aid might they render their leader if they found him alive? No, it was more than the realisation the President was most likely dead that had him shadow boxing. He felt unmanned, emptied out and divorced of capacity; the ability to engage and control, to be consequent. What grand contradiction in the very nature of nature had occurred to create that creature perched atop Pinnacle Tower. One thing to know and witness such events; another altogether to integrate them into a well-worn and familiar understanding of life. Occurrences such as this did not merely unsettle, they turned life upside down. How long would it be until some semblance of normalcy returned? A long, long time; for he knew, deep in his gut, much worse was to come.

And squirming its way through it all, making itself heard against the rising tide of negativity, one insistent desire; he wanted to live. Why hadn’t he indulged Anastasia and ever gone sky sailing? He was a fool. Her wondrous face filled his mind. Here he sat, stranded in a collapsed stairwell, covered in concrete dust and panting from his brush with death. Grayson’s face told the story, his furrowed brow unsettling the two men in his charge.

“What? Yes, yes, I’m fine.” A necessary lie. He heard the need and pulled himself together. “Injuries?” Both Officers shook their heads in the negative; bruising and abrasions did not qualify. Grayson gave silent thanks. Leaving either behind, crippled and vulnerable, would have bit deep and made what came next that much harder. Stop him, no, but imagining a ball and chain of that kind cramped his innards. He ignored it and set them to moving, retracing their passage down one flight and out into the small foyer surrounding the central well of lifts and stairs they’d emerged out of.

The sight of three battered government security officers with weapons raised caught the huddle of Helix workers off guard. Their surprise vanished on the instant and indignation replaced it.

“Cassandra, notify Central the trespassers are on the 69th floor, quickly!” The speaker was a tall man, broad across shoulder and chest and in possession of an attitude synonymous with Helix Corp. “Stop where you are! I demand you surrender your firearms to me and stand against the wall. Your presence here is unauthorised and in violation of the corporate privacy act. Comply and Mr Black will reward your cooperation. Come, do as I say, give them to me.” If you signed on, you signed for life; they were devotees and comparable psychologically with cultists, viewing the world outside their corporate haven as
fundamentally flawed and hostile, to be guarded against at all costs. Hector Black expected a loyalty reserved for blood kin from his underlings and received it unanimously. Grayson began circumventing the suited cluster, his men close behind. Hector’s puppet stepped forward to block his path and Grayson raised his gun in one fluid motion, aiming it at the man’s forehead. Hands were raised and the head jutted forward. The gaze remained fixed on Grayson as he took the man stepped out of their path.

“You’ve been warned. Mr Black will learn of your defiance.”

“Pass on my regards.”

Moving on unmolested, they began searching for another stairwell. If his memory of the buildings schematics was accurate, there was one located in each corner of the tower. Twice more they encountered indignant loyalists as they radiated outwards, each contact requiring the threat of death to negotiate. Rounding the next corner, he spotted the entrance to what he believed must be the south-east corner stairs. Structurally sound, it took them as far as the eighty fifth floor where another cave-in halted their ascent. Back out into the hallways, they discovered walls scarred by deep fractures. Their cautious search continued and nearly ended in disaster when they blundered into a detachment of Helix agents. Reacting first, the trio fired and felled the enemy. They’d pressed on, found a section of the floor shrouded in half-light due to electrical failure and holed up in a room. A plan was needed before the next encounter ended hope and life. This latest detachment storming past had been the second band to storm past their refuge. Grayson knew their position would be discovered. Dying in a pool of blood behind stacked furniture served zero purpose.

Vibrations and noise started without warning. The buzz invaded his back and feet and spread into legs and torso. The high-pitched whine deepened into a biting growl.

“What do you make of that Commander?”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say someone’s using some heavy machinery. Sounds like a drill.” Heavy drilling inside a skyscraper seemed strange, but the day had been full of bizarre events that made the idea perfectly reasonable.

“Up or down Commander?”

“They’ve been able to haul machinery all the way up here, so I can’t see them doing anything but trying to go up. I think we know who or what it is they’re trying to reach.”

They’d witnessed first-hand the reason for Pinnacle Tower’s structural wounds. The Aberration who’d taken the President hostage and paraded him through Aura City like some prize had not liked Black’s home the way he’d found it and decided upon some renovation. After witnessing the Tower’s decapitation, they’d launched their assault.

One more complication had been added to the mix. There’d be no more creeping up stairs and shooting the bad guys, a block stood in the way and needed breaching. That the enemy was employing industrial measures to break through lent him heart. It let him believe the President lived, sequestered away on the other side. The enemy was openly hunting, their numbers massing, suggesting they were a hair’s breadth from victory or giving over to desperation, he couldn’t pick which.

“I’ve had enough of this. Let’s take a closer look at what Black’s henchmen are up to.”
“You sure Commander? Didn’t you say we should sit tight? The Keeper won’t leave us stranded.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second Phillips. Problem is, if Black’s people reach the President and we’re still sitting here sucking our thumbs, it’s game over.”

“Black means to assassinate the President?”

“Perhaps. The Old Man’s motives are his own. We do know his love of power supersedes all else. We must assume the President is being held captive by that Aberration and Black will see it as a golden opportunity to make a push for supremacy. The President’s living on borrowed time, it would be foolish to think otherwise. No more talk of ifs and maybes, it’s time we moved.”

“I need a second, Commander.”

“What? Damn it Phillips, hurry up, this isn’t a school excursion.”

With Phillips relieved, they left the room. The noise made it easy to track their quarry. Approaching a right turn, Grayson slowed their progress and signalled for quiet. Black’s agents knew Presidential security were in the Tower; their entry was not the kind to be forgotten.

Employing a small articulated mirror taken from his breast pocket, Grayson knelt and extended it past the wall junction to gain sight of the abutting corridor. He didn’t linger and withdrew the device, indicating to Phillips and Anderson there were two sentries posted at the corridor’s other end. Another signal saw Anderson extract a petite device from his backpack and hand it to Grayson. It looked like a small cylinder. Housed in one end were a pair of earbuds which he pulled free and inserted. From the other end he drew out a jointed pliable cord, its tip a microphone. Deployed around the corner, he listened.

Retracting his hand, he indicated they should retreat down the corridor and the three men returned to their safe room. Hidden behind the screen, Grayson shared what he had heard.

“Sure enough, they’ve been drilling. There were no access points from this floor to the new roof. They had no choice but to begin drilling here and work their way up. As I suspected, they hit a hardened barrier sealing off the roof. There are no prizes for guessing who created it.”

“That bloody monster.” Phillip’s disgust was genuine.

“After the Aberration ripped off the top floors, it must have performed some more magic and fashioned a new ultra-dense surface. There’s more. The President and Emerald Green are hidden behind a crystal spire which formed out of thin air, no doubt also conjured by the Aberration.”

Phillips and Anderson stared quizzically at Grayson, wondering if the Commander was trying to lighten the mood. They’d seen the craziness outside, but that made it no easier to ingest this new round of madness.

“For truth gentlemen. How can you still suffer from surprise after what you’ve seen? They’re minutes from breaking through the final floor. Then it’s the roof.” Grayson gauged their reaction and pressed on. “I believe we have some time to plan our next move. The agents spoke of a diamond bit to penetrate the unnatural material. It hasn’t arrived yet.”
“You have an idea Commander?” Phillips adjusted his thinking to accept the shifting sand beneath his feet.

“Not yet. I haven’t decided if sabotage or patience best serve our needs. You were right before; the Keeper won’t leave us to rot. Three against who knows how many protecting the drill are poor odds indeed. Surprise might hand us victory or more likely a quick death. For the moment, we sit and wait. Let us put our thinking caps on and devise strategy. Who knows when reinforcements will arrive.”

“How long Fergus?” Flannery watched from a distance, whispering the query into her comm. unit and by turn the man’s ear. She had no wish to tempt fate and alert the Helix Corp employees on the door’s other side. Using hand signals, Fergus indicated he was close.

“Too much longer and we’ll be attracting some unwanted attention.”

Her hushed reply received a nod in the affirmative.

Remotely corrupting the exterior camera had been the simple part. The door was requiring more attention. Located down a non-descript tunnel at the far end of the public platform, it appeared the entrance to a storage room. In truth, it was an access point for the Helix Corporation.

While this platform was used infrequently and provided discrete use for Helix employees, the infiltrators had to work fast to get the door open. Success equated with avoiding attention from all quarters; Helix surveillance and the average Joe. Flannery scanned up and down the platform and checked her watch. “Time stands still for no man Fergus. Next year would be good.”

Hot on the heels of her last word, Fergus indicated success.

“Good work. Arrow head centred on me lads. It’s time for action. On my mark.”

Tip toeing down the tunnel Flannery freed her hand piece and assumed an attack stance before the door. Behind her, the officers formed up as instructed. Using her empty hand, she gestured a silent count of three. Her third finger lifted and Fergus activated the door. Flannery shoved her way through and let off two rounds in quick succession. Coming in behind her the flanking officers found two bodies lying on the square floor, each side measuring less than three metres. Opposite the entrance a stairwell descended sharply down, accessing the Helix owned base-tube. Two chairs were positioned by the stairs, one on either side.

“Let’s move! Whatever other systems they have in place we negotiate on the run. On the double lads!” The infiltrators launched down the stairs and paused in the relative cover provided by a small alcove. They found a shuttle carriage sitting idle on the tracks, its engine off and a dozing driver slouched in a chair against the platform wall.

After Fergus remotely duped the platform cameras and those located inside the carriage, Flannery ordered the driver subdued and a physical scan of the shuttle’s interior. No nasty surprises were found and the all clear was given. Last one in was the driver, escorted by two officers, one on each arm. Stepping up to the portly man, Flannery slapped him square across the face.

“Do I have your attention? Yes? Good. You’re going to drive us to Pinnacle Tower and see us safely inside. No fuss, no bullshit or I cut off your balls, got it? And no fancy shit,
you take us out nice and steady; we top out at sixty klics.” Tapping her belted knife, Flannery let the message sink in and lifted an eyebrow. The driver understood and nodded mutely, sweat streaking his cheeks.

“Take him up and let’s get going, this isn’t a fucking picnic.”

Nudging him past the G.O., the officers took the driver to his compartment and set him to work. The carriage purred to life, sending gentle vibrations coursing through the shuttle’s floor and seating. Positioned strategically throughout its interior, Flannery and her officers went through checklists, adjusting strapping and checking weaponry. The real journey had begun and an eagerness to engage and rescue the President energised their bodies. Experience handled the tension as they ticked off the final items and prepped for the unexpected.

Surveying the men, Flannery ignored her body’s attempts at breaking her concentration. She was like a pit bull, fixed on her target and impossible to dislodge once her teeth were set. Seated outside the driver’s cabin gave her a clear view down the base-tube and let her monitor their reluctant chauffeur. Methodically she counted off the minutes, having calculated the journey would take thirteen minutes at sixty klics. If the driver stayed calm and followed regular protocol their arrival shouldn’t attract any undue attention. She often marvelled at the loyalty workers showed their faceless bosses, the big corporations ready to drop them at the slightest provocation. Why did they - like the moth - find the bright lights so attractive? Fly too close and you get burned. Early onset dementia was her only explanation, starting in the late teens and getting steadily worse as the years piled up.

There was no accounting for such things. If the driver chose rebellion at the last moment it would compromise their mission. Operations always went astray and you handled the challenges as best you could; nothing different this time round.

Five minutes left. She smelt the stink of unpredictability and welcomed it, the unfailing reminder why sane people became security officers. Four minutes. Just a train returning to Pinnacle Tower with guests, even if an unscheduled visit; certainly no cause for alarm. Three minutes. Every second counted. Once the train arrived and the doors opened, it was game on. Six armour wearing, gun toting security officers stepping out onto the platform would raise a few eyebrows, not to mention a thousand shrieking alarms. She couldn’t assume any less. Their Intel said the surveillance systems went off scale once the Tower proper was reached, making any remote duping impossible. Coupled with the number of agents that would be on duty, they were in for one hell of a ride. One minute.

“Lock and load girls!”

“Aye, aye G.O.!”

“This is no time for smiles and handshakes you sissy’s! We leave this carriage and spray it about at the first sign of resistance, you hear me!”

“Right you are G.O.!”

Out through the front window she saw the base-tube open out into Pinnacle Tower’s cavernous subterranean station, the termination point for all Helix Corp’s private traffic. Centrally located in the vast cavern was the circular hub where each line terminated and in so doing formed the spokes of a wheel if viewed from above. A wide central column connected the hub and vaulted ceiling. Drab grey in colour, the lofty surface radiated outwards and
curved down to became walls, rings of concentric lighting banishing shadows from the station. From her cursory scan, the central column seemed the only way up which supported their Intel. Fifty metres until the track terminated. The driver cooperated and the brakes were applied, slowing the shuttle and bringing it to an unremarkable stop. The platforms on either side were deserted. In the central hub, she sighted three bowed heads examining displays, and behind them, others afoot, moving about. Fergus’s handiwork would have the seated trio seeing an empty shuttle. They’d timed the operation as close to the prescribed shift change of drivers as was logistically possible, considering time restraints. She had to assume their arrival had fallen within acceptable parameters if the desk attendant’s expressionless faces were anything to go by. No alarms sounded, so for the moment, they were just another early arrival.

“Right lads, our priority is the hub. Make straight for it and secure all exits and personnel. Making it this far means nothing if we can’t reach the top. Immobilise the driver and form up in two’s.” That was enough; they already knew what to do. She took the lead with Fergus and let the others follow. Punching the exit button, the doors whisked open and they ran. Ten paces out from the hub and nobody had reacted. With five to go, one of the workers finally lifted his head and stared at them through the glass, transfixed by what she saw. It didn’t last long. Reacting, she gestured frantically and mouthed a series of silent curses.

Using her shoulder, Flannery helped the sliding doors part, scurried around the corner and lunged at the distraught woman. The butt of the hand gun struck her head and she collapsed in a heap. Similar sounds greeted Flannery’s ears and told the same story. Outside it appeared calm. It was impossible to tell if alerts were being raised in a place of this size. As a matter of course, they must be. The many base-tube platforms obscured from view on their arrival might well be teaming with Helix agents rushing headlong towards the hub. Right now, she didn’t care, stillness equated with capture, death and failure.

“Daughtry and Milligan stay here. If you’re able, follow us up in five.” She received begrudging nods from the two men. Just as much as the other three, they longed for the glory waiting above. Disappointment did not correlate with insubordination, and they quickly took up defensive positions to best cover the entry points.

“Maintain radio silence unless critical.” Minute nods acknowledged the order.

A silent gesture from her hand and they plunged down a corridor running off the hub’s periphery, passing numerous doors to arrive at the column’s square core. One quick circuit revealed four lift entrances. She chose one at random and let her finger hover beside the access button while Fergus worked his magic. Once inside, she selected the highest available floor, level twenty-five. They would have to switch lifts to reach the President. These ones went no higher; security measures broke the Tower into a series of defensible blocks.

Watching the floor numbers rise, she indulged hope. They needed the commotion to have drawn whichever Helix employee was monitoring security away from their station, or at the very least to have been distracted long enough so they hadn’t noticed the glitch when Fergus jacked the feed. Incredibly unlikely of course, these Helix weasels were freakishly dedicated and abnormally attentive. How long to shut down the lift if it’d been noticed?
Notify a superior, receive the order and punch the buttons. Thirty seconds? One minute? Two?

The weasels missed their chance. A gentle chime sounded and the doors slid open. Staying with Fergus, the G.O. exited, covering the left side. Their luck was in; the immediate space around the lift was empty. Forming an inner square, the core shafts were bounded by another square set back some five metres, inset with more lifts – their ticket up. Fergus repeated the same visual hijack and they piled into the closest lift. Watching the LED readout count off the floors, Flannery felt her heart racing and did nothing to dampen its beat.

Another transfer waited at the rides end. These lifts terminated at floor seventy-five and formed a second defensible block. Above the door, the counter ticked over to sixty-three and their luck ran out. Emergency brakes squeezed on connections between lift and shaft, the box shuddered violently, ending their ride.

“EVAC!” Flannery boomed the command and received immediate satisfaction. The overhead service hatch flung open and Fergus disappeared, followed by Ryan and Wong. By the time she was through, Fergus had made it up to the sixty-fourth floor and was tapping away at a keypad pulled from his chest pocket.

“Bingo.” Parting medially, the door opened. Replacing his keypad, Fergus let Ryan and Wong roll out, weapons at the ready. Unseen gunfire greeted their exit and stopped just as quickly. A face appeared at the doors edge, a grinning Wong, signalling the all clear. Flannery discovered three dead and a bleeding Ryan wrapping a bandage around his head.

“Just a graze G.O.”
“Getting sloppy Ryan. I wouldn’t advise deflecting bullets with your head.”

She got a wolfish grin in reply. A hasty check found each agent downed by a single head shot. Suits, earpieces and trademark Raygar hand guns identifying them as Helix Corp.

“All yours Ryan? Not so sloppy after all. Let’s hit the stairs. Fergus, instruct Milligan and Daughtry to do likewise.” Located adjacent to the lift, the stairs were still accessible and the quartet stormed inside and up their staggered incline three at a time. They encountered no one until they reached the seventy-first floor. Descending the stairwell were two Helix agents indistinguishable from those Ryan had just felled.

Wong heard their approaching footsteps which facilitated a neat ambush and they continued on. Twice more Helix agents slowed their progress, the second meeting causing considerable delay. Both parties detected the others presence at distance and quickly established secure positions, readily defensible inside the stairwell. A classic piece of Flannery bravado broke the stalemate and their ascent resumed. Standing up from behind cover, the G.O. casually crossed the gap separating the two parties and caught the Helix agents in a moment of inattention. She explained it as they pressed on, proclaiming that it was only the foolhardy and the brave who can upset the balance in such situations and secure victory. Pure Flannery logic.

Twice cave-ins necessitated they back track and seek out an alternate route. The third stairwell proved relatively undamaged and they climbed rapidly, encountering no resistance. They finally slowed as the summit approached. Structural damage had increased, deep cracks and debris complicating their passage, clear evidence of the unprecedented attack on Pinnacle Tower.
Stopping at the juncture between floors eighty-one and eighty-two, Flannery sent Ryan up alone to scout. Their presence was no secret, making them both the hunters and the hunted. He returned ten minutes later and described three agitated agents located at the exit to the eighty fifth floor, a collapsed wall blocking any further climb.

Flannery motioned her team back down a flight and they planned the assault. Commands issued, the attack began. Surprise played its part, sparing them any losses and granting the agents clean deaths. Trained indifference let the victors step over the spatter patterns and exit the stairwell, vision set forward. Encountering no external resistance, the team - once more led by the G.O. and Fergus - began their search for a route upward toward their ultimate goal.

Still bunkered down in their hidey hole, Commander Grayson and his two surviving officers sat and listened. The drilling had stopped a few minutes ago and they were waiting to see if it would recommence. Grayson had gone out twice more during the last two hours, checking its progress and gauging the mood among the agents. Their numbers were greater on each occasion and there had been talk of intruders penetrating Pinnacle Tower. He detected a nervous edge in the talk, fuelled by what lay above and stalked below.

Discussing the information with Phillips and Anderson, they agreed the intruders were most certainly a security team sent by the Keeper. Their decision to wait had been vindicated. Attacking in greater numbers increased their chances of success, not only in rescuing the President but their survival. Critically, time called for action. With the drilling seemingly completed, the President now faced a secondary threat; one they knew and understood.

“It’s time to act. We split up. Spread out and search for whoever Riley’s sent. I’ll head back and see if they’ve broken through. If so, I’ll break radio silence and we storm them, reinforcements or no.”

Grayson’s men did not respond immediately, they weighed their orders and conferred before agreeing.

“Wait for us Commander; don’t do anything rash.” The statement crossed the line but Grayson only heard concern and respect in the words. Strange times grew stronger ties.

Nodding to one another, they exited the room and dispersed. In minutes Grayson was resting his shoulder against the familiar corner, listening carefully. On this occasion, his mirror revealed an empty corridor and the microphone detected indistinct chatter, too distant to be heard clearly. Another visual check confirmed the same thing. He steeled himself to act.

Hand piece drawn, he rounded the corner and danced lightly on his toes down the maddeningly long passageway, his heart beating faster with each step. Reaching the corridor’s end, he relaxed into the wall and held his breathe, straining hearing. Talk and the bang of things being moved greeted his ears, but no drilling.

Crouching down, he put his mirror to use. He couldn’t recall if the corridor he viewed resided on the Tower’s east or west side. It didn’t matter, they both formed the Tower’s longer sides and the passageway reflected as much. More than halfway down its length stood a cluster of Helix agents facing an enlarged doorway, their mouths moving in animated discussion, hands pointing into the room’s hidden interior. He’d found the drilling site and his gateway to the President.
Instinct snatched at the reins and Grayson stood, unclipped a tear gas canister, pulled the pin and flung it down the corridor. The canister tumbled end over end through the air, hit the floor and skidded to a halt some metres from the Helix agent. Gas billowed up and obscured the guards. Shouts of alarm filled the corridor and were stifled by coughing fits. Already moving, Grayson activated his radio and hollered into the mic embedded in his inch-high collar, “I’m going in, they've made it through!” Definitive proof was absent. In the here and now intuition fed his belief. The Commander let patriotism drive love and common sense out the window as he descended on the agents, bellowing like a madman.

Both Phillips and Anderson heard the Commander’s declaration and cursed. Abandoning the search, they ran, desperation taking control and driving weary legs back whence they’d come.

Conducting a room by room search on the other side on the eighty-fifth floor for a way up, Flannery and her men heard the transmission and froze. Hastily re-converging, the team discussed their options.

“That’s Grayson, sounds like he’s mounting an assault. He said ‘through’. I can only assume that means up. What do you think lads?”

“Makes sense G.O. Should I hail.”

“No, not yet. Black and his boys know we’re on this floor, but not where. Let’s keep it that way for the moment. Did you get a location on that Fergus?”

“Limited trail to follow G.O. Best guess puts it on the other side, south-east.”

“By pairs. Ryan and Wong, take the east quadrant, we’ll take the south. We both set a course to intersect in ten. Keep an eye on the time and maintain silence. If the Commander’s taken the plunge, we need to move quickly. Let’s go!”

Setting off at a good pace, the pairs continued their search, this time with the knowledge security force members were alive and engaging the enemy. Things were about to get toasty and Flannery savoured the building tension. Hearing Fergus’s steady gait behind her was reassuring, he wouldn't buckle in the coming shit storm.

An agent rounded the distant corner and Flannery squeezed the trigger, letting off two rounds. One missed and the other hit home, flinging the man backward. She noticed a leg recede from view. She signalled and they took cover. Sneaking a look, the G.O. waited. The gun appeared and she pulled back. Rounds were let off and flew past harmlessly. Returning fire, Flannery dashed for the next door-frame and wedged herself into its scant cover. The encounter told her they were headed in the right direction. Now all they needed to do was stay alive and reach Grayson. Of course, he was most likely dead, which was no reason to stop. The Commander’s death only made success twice as critical; no, a categorical necessity. If she failed, if they all failed, the sun would rise in the morning and find Aura City in the hands of madmen.
"Move it, you hopeless ingrate! Get that damned machine out of the way. Father wants the President secured now, not next century."

"Calm down Peter. The men are working as fast as they can. You can’t expect miracles from them." Celine shared her sardonic smile around the room, lavishing especial attention upon the men Peter was berating.

"He’s so close Sister, the morning star; our future key." Peter’s expression slipped, and for a moment, reverence shaded tyranny.

"My humble apologies Mr Black. We’ll have the drill dismantled as soon as possible. I’m afraid it was the only way to get it up here Sir, in pieces I mean, what given the entrances and the lifts and everything else. Moving it whole is next to impossible, weighs close on two tonnes. By itself the motor stacks in at..."

"Worm, shut up! Get back to work!" The despot had returned. Oft confused with a wax statue, Peter had become overwrought; the grand catalyst lay within arm’s reach. The drill operators – non-Helix Corp. employees – worked under the valiant assumption they toiled to save the President. Peter and his sisters had only a passing interest in the Union leader, they were fixated upon the creature, the anomaly who’d slain common sense and brought destruction into the heart of Aura City. The President represented a stepping stone, a welcome and whole heartedly appreciated boon, but not the prize. Delusion had Peter in its grip, and somehow, he envisaged the creature’s powers being transferred to him after it was captured. Becoming realities arbiter, its elemental manipulator, had wooed him completely. His mind could not imagine a future where he was anything less. Fantastic scenes of an almighty Peter ruling Farillon as a living god consumed his imagination. Involuntary chills coursed throughout his body and made thinking of anything else nigh on impossible.

Secure in his private quarters far below, Peter’s father – the infamous Hector Black – believed their mother had spoken prophecy many years ago, foretelling a grand arrival. The patriarch had waited patiently for this day, and it had come, delivering unto the world a natural wonder, a flesh and blood uman in possession of miraculous power, one whose very presence mocked superstitious belief and paved the way for radical change. Black wanted the monkey’s crutch gone, once and for all. The fanatical masses outside Pinnacle Tower believed otherwise. Unsurprisingly, the Puppet Master ignored their fervour. After so many long and singularly focused years, Hector had but a single eye through which to see.

Unlike his son, Hector did not covet the power on such a narcissistic level; he wanted absolute control over the Union and more importantly, death itself. Only majesty on that scale could wholly free immortality, shattering the door he’d nudged open. Given his beliefs, Mr Black was in no rush to taste death.

Outside the room a loud popping noise interrupted one of Peter’s outbursts. Talk ceased, and the occupants stared at the broad entrance, widened earlier to accommodate the transfer of equipment. A persistent hissing was explained by clouds of white gas billowing
into the room. Agents emerged out the gas, donned gasmasks and plunged back in, weapons raised. Those few agents who’d remained behind hastily set about sealing the widened entrance, cannibalising transport trays and whatever else they could source, the sound of nail guns firing off making the drill operators flinch as they scrambled to fit gas masks in between coughing fits.

“Sir, it appears the intruders have mounted an attack on our position. They’re using tear gas.”

Standing well back from the barricade, three mirrored faceplates shifted in unison, dumping scorn on the speaker. The closest moved and came within touching distance of the underling.

“Tell me you have a brain? You must, for how else could you speak!” seethed Peter, leaning over, curved mirror reflecting back the agent’s face, an alien from afar come to torment the simple terran.


“Come Peter, this way. Let us practice caution while we secure our safety.” One of the sisters laid a gentle hand on his arm and led him around behind the drill’s bulk, placing it between them and the zone of immediate danger. Peter’s cooperation failed to dampen his spirits.

“How have they managed to get so close?! Father pays these idiots too much money; they’ve grown fat and lazy. How many were there to begin with, a bare handful? A want answers....NOW!”

Celine and Evelyn drew in closer and squeezed his hands. Confronted by their hard beauty, the man-child gave them his full attention as they moved towards the back wall and conferred; wayfarers from strange shores hatching secret plots.

“Little Brother, focus on what waits above. Do not let these trivialities worry you so. These men are trained professionals; they will protect us as best they can. Father has said it is less than ten intruders inside Pinnacle. We have twice that right here, and more are coming. They will be eliminated shortly and cause no more trouble. Remember, Celine and I will always protect you, we are hardly mewling lambs sweet Peter.” Evelyn spoke her words in a melodious deliberate voice, a hypnotic appeal that cut through Peter’s feverish need. Gently caressing him, the women quashed his desperation and calmed the storm. His cold demeanour resurfaced. Visibly relaxed, he pulled free of his sisters and confronted the technicians. Noticing the heir’s return, nervous fingers fumbled tools and dry throats swallowed, craving moisture.

“How long until you get the drill out of the way and the Cage through the hole?” The question lacked emotion. Gone were the frothing anger and flying spittle. Standing closest to Peter, the lead technician spoke, licking his lips.

“No...no more than another five minutes to move the components aside Sir. Give...given the Cage’s relatively light construction, once the hole is clear, it should be through in ten minutes at most.”
“Installation?” One word spoken, barely above a whisper, and the man dropped his spanner. Flopping onto his knees, he replied while conducting a search for the missing tool, angling his head up to sight the overlord, fear swelling in his breast.

“Barring any electronic malfunction...” Swallowing hard, he snatched up the tool and stood. “....we’ll be ready in another fifteen minutes.”

“Any longer....” His face concealed beneath an inhuman facade of mirrored plastic and rubber, Peter uttered the two words and work intensified; every technician hungry for a taste of tomorrow. Turning around, the psychopath scanned the room for his next target; the agent in charge of security. Finding the unfortunate man whose jacket sported two lightning bolts on the shoulder, he descended.

“What’s happening outside? Is it going to be a problem?”

“No Sir. I’m quite sure it’s just one, possibly two causing trouble. He’s using tear-gas to mask the hopelessness of his position. We’ve contacted the reinforcements and they’re circling around behind him to resolve the situation. The threat will be neutralised in minutes.”

Peter gave the agent a frosty stare. Need momentarily sated, he re-orientated and watched components aggregate on the floor, counting seconds, emotion coiling around the move of arm and hand toiling under duress. At regular intervals his gaze pierced the double holes above, scanning the alien environment for its unique inhabitant. On his fifth survey, he saw something flash across his line of sight. Muscles tensed and eyelids retracted. The Creature, the one who would grant him his birthright was airborne inside the crystal cavern. Did it know he was coming? Peter lost all interest in the feverish preparations and searched for another glimpse of his deliverance.

Side by side, the two sisters watched their brother stare rapturously up through the opening, his body expressing what his hidden face concealed. Both understood the subject of Peter’s fascination and felt the attraction. Ever their Father’s daughters, they resisted and remained vigilant, the operations success outweighed curiosity. Peter was incapable of detachment with the carrot dangling so close. Ensuring Father’s grand scheme secured a new dawn rest with them.

Near enough twins, the sirens inspired dreadful devotion in their knee-high boots and skin-tight jumpsuits; their long white hair and pale skin mostly hidden beneath masks and gloves.

“Father is concerned he may cause problems. The way he stares at our prey makes me wonder.” Being the eldest, Celine led conversations and made final decisions for the pair.

“He does seem quite overwhelmed. What does he think will happen? Father only has vague assurances the lab rats will find answers. Brother dearest thinks he too will be taking flight. He wishes for the impossible. Do you think we should be worried?” Following good form, Evelyn provided the necessary questions, voicing any doubts both pondered.

“We both know he’s always been different. Father has reservations about his little boy. Despite his best intentions and those of the lab rats, it is plain to see fate did not spare our Brother as it did us. Our genesis came some years before Peter’s, perhaps Father’s personal treatments impacted unfairly upon his son. Considering Mother’s age, I suppose it is a wonder all three of us did not emerge into the world with two heads.”

They smiled and joined hands.
“Sister, we are more than an outcome borne of chance.”

“You are so very wise Evelyn. We are a new beginning and represent a branching, a necessary divergence from these monkeys with their swollen brows and hairy fingers. Disgusted they might be by our origins, but its uniqueness has made us extraordinary.”

Not a single word from Celine’s mouth betrayed a practice in self-convincing. Relativist delusion warped the sisters, distorting their self-image far beyond any realistic assessment.

“Our understanding is profound, my beautiful princess.” Evelyn raised her hand and stroked Celine’s upper arm, light and delicate. None of the nearby men dared watch the exchange. Others had done so in the past and regretted it dearly. “They are just as Father says, mindless and lost, needing our guidance. Of no surprise they perform their tasks so diligently; they are no more than children overcome by wonder and desperate to please.”

Their brother had not moved throughout the exchange. Picturing his future, transported the man/child out of the here and now. The technicians silently rejoiced at noticing their overlord’s distraction. Still, they were careful to keep their distance. Foolhardy these men were not, they knew their wellbeing depended on avoiding notice.

“Ok, that’s it, get it out of the way and move the Cage into place.” The lead technician made the announcement, satisfaction fat on his lips, his squared off shoulders an unfortunate reflex. Evelyn smiled at his simple nature. Having pleased his masters, he puffed up, waiting for a pat on the head. She glanced at Celine, who she knew would be thinking the same, and felt love roll through her body. Having someone so incredible with whom to share life, made it a truly wondrous experience. Celine would take charge now, she always did.

“Take Peter aside my sweet, so I can organise the men.”

Nodding her assent, Evelyn crossed the floor and spoke gently into Peter’s ear. Startled, he found his bearings and complied, letting his sister lead him away.

From a good distance back, the siblings watched their sister direct the monkeys about with no more than a glance or a gently spoken word, her comments bowing their heads in assent and fear driving their eagerness. The drill parts were piled against the back wall, no longer needed. The diamond tipped device had broken through the bizarre material composing the roof of Pinnacle Tower half an hour ago.

Technicians already up on the eighty-sixth floor had attached pulleys at equidistant intervals around the initial breach under whose guidance the Cage would be raised up and there await its final elevation. Minutes later the contraption was shifted into place on the floor below and lines lowered and connected. Celine gave the signal and synchronised winches were activated, their whirring motors removing slack. Taut lines lifted the Cage and raised it through the first hole to their maximum height. Cargo safety locked in place, the winch motors went on standby and hydraulic legs on the eighty sixth floor were manoeuvred underneath the load and attached, their angled arms reaching out from the hole’s rim and assuming responsibility for the final lift. The order was given, and the Helix Corp designed and made god catcher rose into the crystal cavern above.

“Come Brother, come Sister, it is time to go hunting.”

Responding to Celine’s words, Evelyn and Peter joined her beneath the hole. Each took their turn climbing the ladder the technicians had been quick to position once the
contraption had completed its elevation. One after the other, the three modern aristocrats slipped between Cage and hole’s edge to step out onto the floor above.

Non-verbal instruction initiated the next phase, the central and eldest head among the three nodded. Standing together, the Black’s watched the Cage ascend as thin traces of tear gas diffused upwards and twined around their bodies, Celine a picture of serenity as she addressed her siblings, her steady words outlining the consequences facing them.

“Should our enemies storm the door before we have the Cage in place, Father will strike with everything he has at hand. Little care will he show to safeguard the lives of his children.” Celine’s face betrayed no anxiety, it was quite rightly the price of delay. Neither Evelyn nor Peter contradicted their sister and nodded their agreement.

In the background, hydraulics hissed, marking time. On both floors, the Helix faithful watched the rectangular box making its ascent, urging it on. Devoid of warning, an explosion shook the floor below and sent dust and debris billowing up, obscuring everything within arms distance. The blast had destroyed the hastily erected screen blocking access into the staging room below. Amid the chaos, voices cried out in pain and others bellowed orders.

The Black’s refocused their attention. Luckily the explosion had not destabilised the Cage. Unfazed, they climbed a ladder attached to the base of the contraption to reach comparative safety above. Their plan for remaining below until the creature was secured inside the Cage was no longer a viable option.

Crackling gunfire rent the air. Hands and feet responded. One by one, the siblings squirmed through the tight gap between hole’s edge and Cage, each head passing through confronted by a pale blue glow suffusing the air. Quite a distance off sat three people, two close together and the third hunched over, separate from the pair.

“There!” Peter exclaimed, uninterested in the seated trio.

Removing masks, the sisters searched and discovered the subject of Peter’s excitement, a lazy serpent wheeling left and right, soaring up and diving down, arms spread outwards as his flight repeated a complex pattern through the shimmering blue.

“Peter, the Cage, it must be activated before the creature thinks to crush us.” Celine fought against the rapture filling her mind, knowing full well decades of planning were balanced on a knife edge.

Arriving moments after Phillips and Anderson, Flannery’s insertion team found the Commander pinned down at a corner junction exchanging fire with Helix agents.

“Found a spot of trouble Sir? Mind if we lend a hand?”

“To think the day has finally arrived Flannery.”

“I’m an acquired taste, usually enjoyed by a female palate.”

“Charming as usual.” Grayson scowled at the woman famed for her insubordination and the expression slipped, morphing into a grin. “Our target is the third room on the right, it’s heavily guarded. Despite my grand intentions, all I managed to do was scare a couple off and draw others out. They’re well equipped; I gave them some gas to breath and out came the masks and a hail of bullets. Somehow I survived the retreat.” Grayson fingered two holes in his suit, both down his right side. Beside Flannery’s armour-clad team, the Commander and his two men looked almost comical wearing their finely cut jackets and dinner pants. Having
had no time to change after the catastrophe at the Honourarium, the Presidential officers and their leader had followed their charge through the streets and straight to Pinnacle Tower. None of the cultural elite wanted battle garb on show when celebrating their grand achievements.

“How bout a little flanking manoeuvre Commander? If we send a couple round back, we’ll blindside these scumbags. Much better than fighting our way through a hail of bullets.”

“Right you are; not much use playing follow the leader here. Take your men Flannery and notify me when you’re in position.” Hot on his words, bullets peppered the end wall and particulate erupted, causing all concerned to duck and cover. Phillips returned the compliment and sent a volley back down the corridor. When it failed to receive a response, Grayson picked up where he’d left off. “We’ll lay down some suppression fire which should give you a window to rush their position. It’s at least ten metres closer at that end. Get moving.”

Flannery rose and headed back down the corridor, men in tow. The Commander had changed. His usual fastidious ways had been replaced by decisive action. Gone was the unnecessary debate. She approved thoroughly. He’d taken her suggestion and run with it, rather than calling her down for exceeding her authority. And that grin, he’d seemed genuinely happy to see her. Conflict affected people, it had the power to strip away habit and reveal otherness.

Rounding the second corner, she swore under her breath and dropped, landing on her stomach. Coming toward her at a trot were three agents, guns raised and ready to fire. Her vision locked onto the lead agent’s trigger finger. She watched the tongue of metal depress and heard the first clack and the others that followed. A grunt from behind and something wet struck her face as she returned fire. The first, second and third agent fell backwards and hit the floor. They didn’t move. Spinning about, she found a very still Ryan lying on his back, half his face missing. Behind him knelt injured Wong, grimacing as Fergus cut away a shirt sleeve to reach the wound beneath.

Sloppy, overeager and stupid. She punched the wall and felt nothing. Of course agents would be doing the same thing; circling around and flanking the enemy. Flannery struck the wall a second time, giving her anger space, revving herself up with recriminations.

“G.O., I need your help.” Fergus spoke truly.

Looking down at her team, she hit the wall one last time for good measure and did as asked. Wong’s injury wasn’t life threatening – a flesh wound to his upper left arm – but enough to hamper his combat ability.

“Give him the tech Fergus, he can manage that.”

“Yes G.O.” Liberating the various paraphernalia from around his body, Fergus loaded up Wong, giving him a few tips on best use. Trained in their operation, Wong would have no trouble using the equipment, though every team had a nominated officer whose ability exceeded the rest.

“Get back to the Commander. You’ll be better off there during the next ten minutes.” Wong saluted and set off.
“I’m sorry Ryan. Today, you were the first. Most likely the rest of us will be joining you soon enough.” Purposefully forgetting the screw-up, Flannery refocused on the task ahead and set off at a walk, Fergus one step back, his weapon peeking past her sleeve.

Reaching the target, they crouched down and notified Grayson. Nodding to the response coming through her earpiece she gestured to Fergus; one minute. Forty-five seconds later they heard staccato gunfire break out. A few bullets travelled the length of the corridor and hit the end wall. Five seconds. The agents returned fire. Zero!

Bursting around the corner, Flannery and Fergus sighted the agents and opened fire. Their aim was good and three targets dropped. From the corridor’s other end Grayson and company joined the charge. Seconds later the officers had the barricaded doorway surrounded. The Commander was handed a magna-charge and slapped it in place. Flannery produced another and did likewise. Grayson raised three fingers and began a countdown. When the last dropped, they armed the charges and withdrew. Ten seconds grace was all they had.

The explosion shook the building. Noise thundered down the passageway. Emerging from their scant cover, the security officers descended on the room. A sizeable blast hole provided easy access inside. Sounds of distress and panic filtered out to meet them. Flannery held one fist in the air and brought it down. Weapons were raised and the assembled officers opened fire from multiple angles. Uman vocal cords replied in kind as the metal slugs bit home. Two fingers pointing forward from the G.O. indicated a caution. Inside the dust filled room they discovered bullet ridden bodies and blast victims, some missing limbs, the maimed and dead littering the floor. Glossing over the grotesque scene as their training dictated, the team pressed deeper in, the mission objective their sole focus.

Through the haze they glimpsed the hole in the ceiling. Faint rays of blue light shone down from the floor above, courtesy of the recently breached roof. Not much else could be seen through the dust and smoke.

More hand signals directed activity. Furniture was stacked below the hole to aid the first body up. Fergus mounted the pile, cleared the lip and dropped a line down for the others. Inside two minutes six bodies stood in a ring around the hole, hands inspecting the four hydraulic arms supporting a square shaped platform blocking most of the second hole penetrating into the cathedral above. Seeking cover in the room’s weak shadows, the stranded technicians waited, wondering if their end had come.

Pointing upward through the slim gap, Grayson indicated clear space around the raised box. His next gesture made Flannery release the ladder and move around to join him.

“We go up Commander?” Flannery whispered, her eagerness clearly evident.

“Yes, but now is the time for delicacy. We must put aside the methods that have brought us to this point and employ a different skill set.” His subtlety made Flannery fidget harder and grin. What she heard was ‘This is not the time for a loose cannon running around, guns blazing.’

“I agree Commander. Careful steps will ensure the President’s survival.” Her affirmation pleased Grayson, he needed six heads working together, not time wasted arguing every decision.

“What do you make of this contraption Flannery? What’s Black up to?”
“Your guess is as good as mine Commander. I’m not much one for technology, I leave that to Fergus. But you’d have to assume it has something to do with the freak. They hardly need such a thing to deal with the President, whatever it is?”

“No, they don’t. There’s more afoot in the Black camp than we first thought. Either way it doesn’t change why we’re here, everything else must be judged in relation to whether it helps or hinders our cause. We mustn’t forget that.”

“Yes Commander.”

“Alright, too much talk. We go up and assess the situation on the run. I can’t see any other option. Flannery?”

“Indeed Commander. Every second could prove the difference for the President.” Her lips spread. When things heated up, the funnies hitched a ride, especially when an old dog tried kicking old habits. Grayson and procrastination; two peas in a pod.

“Take point Flannery.” He swallowed another plea for austerity and indicated the ladder.

Flannery signalled Fergus and took the lead. By hand and foot, she reached the slim gap between hole and box. Scanning the floor, she found three people standing close by, heads raised and staring at something in the heights above. Tracking their line of sight, she spotted the freak showing off his aerial prowess, wheeling and diving in a languid display.

Seizing the opportunity, Flannery squeezed her way through the gap and unlimbered her fire arm. Such was their captivation, the three onlookers heard nothing. Fergus slipped through and as Grayson was doing likewise, one of the women finally noticed their presence and informed her comrades. Unfazed, they waited, happy to let the new arrivals speak first.

“Where’s the President?” Grayson directed his request at the woman standing in the middle. Her carriage suggested command. Contradicting dynamics, the man on her left stepped forward and answered the question.

“Presidential security, I presume. Commander Grayson, isn’t it? Didn’t Prime Advocate Deacon make it clear to Riley that Pinnacle is off limits? My Father will be most upset at your presence here. Why is it you people worship law and order, yet at the first opportunity you tear it to shreds and become anarchists. Your beloved President is over there. By all means, go to him, I’m sure he will welcome you with open arms.”

The Commander recognised the speaker and the women standing with him. Weapons raised and trained on the siblings, Grayson led his troops past Peter Black’s queer face and the equally disturbing spectacle of the white-haired sisters. Elegant and refined in a very particular fashion, the women were of an order of beauty unto themselves. Jarring stares gave the impression they were boring holes through the world, slicing up reality with high powered lasers.

Once past, the security officers broke into a trot and headed directly towards their goal. President Keller watched them approach unperturbed, his intrigue at seeing the Black’s emerge meant he’d spotted Flannery’s head the moment it sprouted from the ‘ground’. Each emerging Officer should have raised his hopes and steeled his resolve; instead, Keller counted six more lives teetering on the brink. Stepping forward to meet them, he extended a hand to Grayson and nodded politely to the others.
“Good to see you Commander. What took you so long?” Tongue in cheek, he shared a smile with Grayson.

“The odd bullet or two, courtesy of the Helix Corporation Mr President. Hector Black has made a clean break from the Union.”

“It was always going to happen David. These events have proven too great a temptation for Hector. Here I stand, sealed off from the world, a virtual pauper in his own backyard. I can hardly blame the old hermit for his audacity. He won’t get a better, or more theatrical chance than this. What are the Children up to?” Keller looked over Grayson’s shoulder and nodded at the genetic oddities. They were ignoring the reunion and discussing the contraption atop its hydraulic platform, evidenced by a lot of finger pointing and staring.

Peter Black stepped across the gap, both feet finding purchase on a lip of metal running around the contraption’s base. One hand grasped a handle at head height, while the other set about pressing a series of buttons and switches.

“Activating their machine, Mr President.”

“Thank you, David.” Keller’s dry tone made it obvious he hadn’t received a particularly insightful answer. “I can only assume it’s for the air-show. Do you agree?”

“We came to the same conclusion Mr President.”

Completing his ministrations, Peter Black pushed himself off the machine and received congratulatory praise from his sisters. Together they moved aside, putting a good twenty metres between themselves and the faintly humming device. Their attention turned skyward.

“Mr President, I’m getting a feeling it might be a good time to leave now.”

“I agree with the Commander Mr President. Obviously the shit’s about to hit the fan, and I don’t fancy getting sprayed.” Stepping around Grayson, Flannery placed herself squarely in Keller’s line of sight.

“And you are?” Keller arched a silvery eyebrow and waited for clarification.

“G.O. Flannery, Sir.” Stock still and upright, she saluted the President.

“We have superior forces at our disposal David. There is no immediate threat to my safety. We have survived thus far. For the moment, we stay. I too have a feeling, and it whispers to me what happens in the next few minutes will shape our future. If we leave now, we can influence nothing. Somehow, with that machine, Hector aims to control the Creature. We cannot turn our backs and walk away. I will not forsake the Union to ensure my own survival. There are billions under my care. If Hector succeeds, he will attack society at every level. People will live in a state of fear, terrorised by a madman and his leashed creature. Step down Flannery. If you wish to protect me, fine, but you will do it here.” Flannery glanced upwards, over at the Black’s and the machine, and settled on the President.

A chime, full and rich, emitted from the machine, ending any further debate on the matter. Collectively they turned and faced the box. They watched as it opened from the centre, the tips of four triangular panels lifting and folding out, much like a flower greeting the world. The flat plates reached a position parallel to the floor and stopped. From inside the box rose a circular column, no more than a metre in height and less than half that in diameter. Clearing its container, the column stopped and separated into four vertical arms, each a quartered division of the whole. Incrementally the arms drew apart, staying upright,
connected centrally at their base by telescopic extensions. Imagined as corner posts, the four struts formed an open-sided quadrilateral. Viewed from above, the tips were the corners of a perfect square, its sides two metres in length.

It was not complete. From each vertical arm, down the flat sides facing both neighbouring uprights, a multitude of triangular protrusions popped out. At the top and base the protrusions were half that of the others, a perpendicular edge extending out from the highest and lowest points on the arms. Without warning, the edging of the pointed teeth ignited, the light producing an angry hiss.

Murmurs rose among Keller’s entourage. Intrigued, Emerald sidled through the bodies and stood beside the President. Composed once more, she raised a steady hand and placed it on Keller’s shoulder. Unmoved by the gesture, Keller remained focused on the machine.

Huddled behind the newly formed crowd, Edward edged further back, overwhelmed by all the commotion, his face reflecting an increasingly fragile psyche struggling against the strangeness unfolding around him.

Building upon its already impressive display, the machine entered its next stage of activation and made Edward yelp. An electrical net burst to life between the four uprights, a criss-cross pattern of intersecting lines extending out from the triangular teeth, three per tooth besides the ones at top and bottom. Fizzing and hissing, the wicked blue enclosure overwhelmed the much softer crystalline glow emanating from the cathedral walls.

“History is about to unfold before our very eyes. Stand ready.” Keller’s words were meant to consolidate their purpose. One mind had other ideas.

“Unfold?! Like Neverend! It’s time to make a little.” The G.O. stepped forward, raised her pistol and fired. Time stood still.
Tilt 20

After Riley left he went to work, tearing strips off them in wild abandon; cowing and belittling; direct personality assassination. Why should a heavyweight tolerate mediocrity, let alone utter stupidity? He’d often imagined his life in the private sector. Even now, it made him laugh. What fun he’d have. Straight to the top inside a year and then bang! Heads flying everywhere, weeping imbeciles running home to mummy. Utter carnage. A corporate apocalypse.

Why politics; to control, to steer the course? What nonsense. He knew why, to have the largest forum for the aggrandisement of his intellect, so all knew and remembered. Who, in all the wide Union, possessed a mind without peer? Only one man saw through every ruse, pierced hearts and peeled open minds: Michelangelo Deacon. There was only one true intellectual despot in this world.

A good two-hour workout it had been. When the door swung shut, he left a room exhausted and bankrupt, fifty odd idiots stumbling about blindly, brains vitamised and more than a few openly crying. The kind of outcome that sped the fearless onto their next enterprise with accomplishment swelling the chest.

Reining in his smirk, he chastised himself for getting carried away. He always did when toying with the stunted. The admission pleased him greatly. Restraint around feeble minds was pointless. They never stopped offering themselves up for his spoiling pleasure. Ending his self-congratulation, he projected ahead. His next opponent had no such deficiencies and had been left unmonitored far too long considering the unpredictability of events unfolding at Pinnacle Tower. This individual’s insidious reach had to be stymied.

Quickening his step, he reached the lift and punched the button. With a calculating mind, he waited for the door s to part and stepped inside. Elevation matched his self-congratulatory plotting. When the halves separated a second time, he exited and made a beeline for the rooftop copter.

“Domain, and make it quick.” Pleasantries were reserved for the select, not those who served.

“Yes Sir, Prime Advocate.” The pilot complied instantly. Reputation either helped or hindered. When coupled with power, nastiness usually had people jumping out of their skin at the slightest request.

Feeling his stomach lurch as the copter banked, he studied the odd spectacle presented by Pinnacle Tower. Glowing with its own internal light, the crystalline head jumped out from surrounding architecture and screamed interference. Only visual confirmation made such a thing real. Around it swarmed jets and copters, haranguing one another in a ridiculous stand-off, the latter testing the patience of the former.

Behind those magnificent walls, the Union’s future was being shaped and he had no say in the form it took. Blind trust in Hector Black made him taste acid, sulphurous and hot. At the beginning, relinquishing his destiny had been a hard swallow; independence and self-
governance defined Deacon’s personality. The very first overtures from Black had made it clear he was being groomed for some elaborate plan, seduced with the promise of influence and a fast track to the top. In the end, signing on had made logical sense. Circumventing impositions and indignities dished out by esteemed men who monopolised the political machine, their positions entrenched inside a ridiculous set of connectives and honours earned, despite their lack of discernible intelligence, was impossible to refuse. Black had swept aside roadblocks with ruthless aplomb, threat working where influence failed. The obstructionists bowed their heads and rolled out the red carpet, gifting Deacon the Prime Advocacy and placing him one step below what he coveted most, the Presidency. The prospect of removing that final obstacle made him shiver. Having the population assume him inferior to Armand Keller, that silver haired sophisticate, rankled deeply. Glorious to know the knife was edging ever closer; Hector had the stumbling block trapped and cornered.

“Faster!”

“Yes Sir, Prime Advocate, Sir.” The last word came out as a squawk.

First, he needed Argyle Riley bound and gagged; metaphorically speaking. The arthritic wretch was famed for his golden touch; intuitively rescuing even the most desperate situation from catastrophe. Beside Keller, Riley represented the only other major impediment hampering Deacon’s rise to glory. Neutralising the Keeper would require acumen and psychological dexterity. Once achieved, he would ascend to power and exult in his victory parade; destination, Spire One. After Riley, no one was left. Who, apart from the everyday rabble hollering their vacuous worth to the world, could stand in his way? Anticipation built as the copter descended.

“Power down and wait.”

“Yes Sir, Prime Advocate.”

He smirked. Robots were everywhere; driving him, flying him, organising every mundane aspect of his life. They were quite valuable in their own precious way.

Springing from the copter, Deacon headed for the circular platform outlined in red, his long strides buoyed by the knowledge Riley despised impromptu visits. The old man let it be known any and all incursions into his territory were unnecessary and disruptive to Domain’s operational effectiveness. Deacon did not dispute the claim, on the contrary, he agreed. It gave this incursion the necessary edge he needed in confronting, and hopefully nullifying the Keeper’s influence. He pressed and held the intercom button.

“Good evening Prime Advocate Deacon, how can we be of assistance?”

Remarkable. Did this reprobate think he needed directions to the nearest toilet? Robots found backbone when incorporated into a neat cohesive structure. For certain there would be no red carpet for the lowly Prime Advocate; that only ever saw the light of day when dandy boy Keller visited.

“Let me in, I need to speak to the Keeper.”

“One moment please, Prime Advocate.”

Involuntarily he smoothed his jacket, breathing in time with the downward sweep of hands. Intolerable. The word rolled across his mental stage in a continuous reel, building momentum.

“The platform will activate in ten seconds Prime Advocate.”
Slowly the letters faded and clarity returned. The allotted time passed and the
platform began its descent, his feet sinking and lifting his surrounds. His hands sought a quiet
place behind his back, one to cup and hold the other. Not being fond of Domain meant he
visited only when necessary. Certainly, the gracious treatment he received on such occasions
in no way influenced his desire. Recalling the dungeon’s general layout during the
identification process, he readied himself to move. When the curved facade opened, he burst
down the passageway and left the bumbling fool posted to receive him scrambling to catch up
as he made a beeline for Command.

Following the long, curved corridor, he reached the clear glass doors behind which
the Analysts delved and pried into the world above. Stepping between the parting halves, he
came up short, blocked by the sudden appearance of Argyle Riley’s dishevelled frame.
“What are you doing here Deacon? You should be at the Ministry; the Advocates are
in no fit state to be left to their own devices.”

Deacon frowned, leant forward and tested the air. Riley stepped back. The
unmistakable scent of hard liquor hung around the Keeper. What was one more impossibility
among so many others? Everyone knew Argyle Riley had had a drinking problem a million
years ago, and by the same token, everyone knew the stoic Keeper had not touch a drop
since. Well, until now. Rickson’s law of cascading potential sung true, handing him a most
wonderful gift.

“Fear not Riley, I steadied their weak knees and braced their spines, they won’t put a
foot wrong, nay, even lift a finger without my express permission. The weak need support to
negotiate the foaming rapids.” He got nothing for his trouble. Despite his flustered
appearance, the Keeper met his stare with a measured look.

“Come to my office. Better we talk in private away from the Analysts, they do have a
habit of listening. It is both a hazard and benefit of their training; depending upon the
situation and your relationship to it.” In an overly familiar gesture, Riley sought Deacon’s
elbow. Shock, distaste and amusement played across the Prime Advocate’s face as he side-
stepped the advance and ushered the Keeper past.

Unperturbed, Riley walked on, not checking to see if Deacon followed. Two turns and
they arrived at the Keeper’s office. Once inside, Deacon was not invited to sit and remained
on his feet, content to pace the floor in front of the desk. Having already flopped into his
leather-bound chair, Riley began shifting sheets of paper between two neatly stacked piles.
Glancing up, the Keeper gave a hint of surprise at seeing Deacon and looked back down,
intent on his handiwork.

“Have you sent a team in Riley?” Best to unsettle him further if he could. Pose the
direct question and tug at the carpet beneath his feet. If that odour was anything to go by,
there were cracks in the Keeper’s veneer.

“Team? The decisions I make and those of Domain are independent of the Ministry. I
have no obligation to share such information.” Picking up the mug from the desktop, he
began raising it to his mouth, stopped halfway and set it aside. The gesture shouted
uncertainty and he spoke gruffly, openly embarrassed. “Stop that damn pacing Deacon and sit
down.”
The Prime Advocate smirked and continued his pacing. “Above all else, to safeguard the President’s life and ensure the stability of the Union.’ Or something like that. I’m not too far off am I Riley? Really, I would have thought every last security officer, trainee and Domain cleaner would have been rallied, suited and sent on their way.”

Staring at the paper in his hands, Riley’s eyes touched the mug and settled on the heckler. “Please don’t lecture me on Domain’s mission statement; I helped write the damn thing. Rest assured the President’s safety remains our top priority. Attend to the people Deacon, they have need of your generous and caring heart.” Dropping the papers, Riley eased back from the desk and turned around, one hand extending toward the cupboard. He froze. An affected casualness brought his knees back under the desk. Snatching up the nearest sheet of paper, he made a concentrated show of reading its contents.

Deacon pounced on the opening and sauntered around the desk, his movement open and direct. The Keeper’s lumpy knuckles crumpled the white rectangle and a sweaty brow helped confirm Deacon’s suspicion. He needed it not, considering the show of need he’d just witnessed.

The Keeper made no attempt to block Deacon. Staring straight ahead, Riley heard the cupboard door open and close over his beating heart. He heard the stopper pop free and glass kissed ceramic. Defeated, his chin dropped and he listened while velvet beauty filled the mug. Sitting the bottle down, the tormentor placed the everyday chalice beneath Riley’s nose, letting vapours waft up and work their magic. “Drink.” The solitary word was barely audible. Around him the room became insubstantial, lacking sensory weight. Inside his nostrils the perfume diffused its way into his mouth and he tasted precious comfort. Automatically his arm lifted off the desk, picked up the mug and brought it to his mouth. Drinking deeply, he closed his eyes and savoured the liquid sliding down his throat. The door clicking shut went unnoticed.

When his eyes opened the room was empty. He poured another drink and downed it before thinking otherwise. He hadn’t heard from Flannery in over two hours, or was it three, his mind couldn’t recall which. Out in the streets there were riots flaring up, people filling the streets proclaiming Zesus’s return. Anarchy prowled Aura City. If that thing remained atop Pinnacle Tower much longer, order would collapse. Despite all that, he sat with mug in hand, half drunk, trying to convince himself everything was under control, that he was not a powerless spectator counting the hours until the world imploded and a new order came into effect, one decreed and created by the Union’s enemies, old and new. He couldn’t decide which would be worse, the magician floating down Avenue One tearing the city apart, worshippers at his feet; or Hector Black commanding the empire’s army and laying siege to Spire One, Deacon standing ready to assume the Presidency.

Madness was the order of the day and he had the perfect companion for the occasion. Consciously and deliberately, Riley set about emptying the bottle, one slug at a time.

Stretching his arm out across the vacant seat, Deacon watched the majestic architecture of Aura City flow past. Groups of malcontents, large and small, wandered the
avenues and streets searching for things unknown. They were of no concern. When this storm passed the army would have little trouble in cleaning up the mess. Wisdom lay in restraint and moderation, so a slap or two, in circumstances such as these, helped remind the sheep who steered the ship and purged confusion. If the rabble started embracing any socialist rubbish, the caring ruler reacted and reinstated correct order, allowing normal life to resume with minimal interruption.

Of necessity, control belonged in the hands of distinct individuals, those possessing great qualities, particularly intelligence and objective ethics. They were the pre-ordained ruling class. To endorse the opposite insulted logic; how could a half-wit administer the intelligentsia, the meat head determine social norms, or the pacifist safeguard global order? It beggared belief. Many and varied were the qualities needed to climb that mountain of bodies and stick the flag of mastery into their common flesh. Reality was never something the masses considered in their calls for political, economic and cultural equality.

Those poor vagrants below, who had, just for the moment, lost their way, would soon have a new leader, one worthy of worship who belonged among umanities ultra elite. Deacon’s self-aggrandisement caused him not the least embarrassment; he was simply acknowledging the nature of truth as it pertained to him. These fabulous and unexpected circumstances meant his immortal glory stood one step closer. The Keeper’s meltdown had cleared one of two remaining blocks. Deacon wondered at its reason, found no obvious motivation, and gave thanks nonetheless, particularly as Riley was answerable to none save the President. Fundamentally an independent organisation, Domain and its leader were a rogue force; no one policed the operatives charged with the final watch.

Groveling beside his satisfaction at Riley’s unexplained capitulation, he noticed the wretch named regret. The ultra-elite were connected by a shared brilliance that demanded some degree, however impoverished, of mutual respect. Who among them was left? Grudingly he accepted Keller into the mix and opened the door wide to let Hector Black in; attempting to exclude the patriarch would be a wish born of pride. Arguments could be made for a few others, but they lay on the periphery of events.

The Keeper’s demise stroked his curiosity; it was a puzzle worth solving. A solitary creature, Argyle Riley dedicated his every waking hour to ensure the Union remained cohesive and viable and the President safe. Convenience hollered it was not Keller’s abduction that had pushed the Keeper into seeking comfort. The President had survived numerous assassination attempts - one resulting in a long convalescence in hospital - and each time Riley had captured the perpetrators, an unwavering pillar weathering each storm. Whatever the reason, it served Deacon well removing the one formidable opponent from the board positioned to stifle his influence.

Stomping on overtures of premature victory, he pondered the one loose thread that could yet unravel the weave. Riley had deployed someone to rescue the President. Where and what were they doing? Simple observation said it made no difference, how could a few pea shooters challenge that Monster roosting in its lair? Dismissing worry, he urged the pilot on. Riley spoke true; leaving the Ministry and the headless chickens unsupervised was unwise. Given enough time they would begin the process of sewing them back on. That must be his focus now, Hector and the Children controlled his ultimate destiny. Given their obsessive
drive and unwavering purpose, Deacon could scrub Keller off the list. The incumbent President was doomed. Ultra-vigilant by nature, Deacon indulged in a moment’s respite and began formulating his inauguration speech. The future; his to shape.
What a show! Death and mayhem on the loose, and all for him! Was he really so incredible? In their minds, the answer was clear. Rummaging through those close by he found great variety in their sentiment toward him; revulsion, marvel, adoration, hatred and envy. Envy indeed, especially from the spindly boy he had seen in that room, feminine cheeks and fine nose stuck in the air. The sentiment explained the machine sitting above the hole. Plain and none descript, he saw beyond its modest exterior to the ingenious device hidden beneath, wicked enticement engineered specifically for him. Fools they were to think him the kind to be held.

And these new arrivals, ready and righteous in their desire to rescue Keller, each practicing restraint lest their trigger fingers unleash a firestorm upon Black’s offspring. What a motley crew invading his playground. Enemies, one and all, a petty and vindictive gaggle, even the siblings. Strange that he had not pushed down and added them to the floor. White and pure and free of interruption; simple elegance.

Air caressed his face, gentle currents seducing focus. Probe deeper of the rabble he would later, not now. Amongst the milling figures, one captured his imagination and blotted out the rest whenever his sight touched her – Emerald Green – lean and elegant standing beside Keller. He considered her as innocent as any could be, and nothing he picked from the air, all the murmurs projected from their collective fatty tissue indicated she faced any immediate danger. Just as well. Simplicity beckoned an incontestable end to everything and everyone. Wiping the slate clean would remove doubt, end worry and make him free. She had no right to stake a claim on him and befuddle his mind. Centred on her, his attention spiralled out and counted the billions, their lives, his to ignore or end; possibility feeding desire.

Distance meant nothing, his vision extended without end. What it had once been, its paltry spectrum of colours and gradations, mapping space around him was a thing of the past, quaint recollection he scarcely believed. Now, the world sang, coherent perfection accessible from every possible angle, near or far, open and obliging. Simple thought rendered knowledge his and observation opened flowers where secrets hid. Beauty battled seduction and the destructive urge receded.

Molecular clatter of an altogether interesting kind announced action. Gliding to a stop, Zane orientated his body vertically, head bowed to look down at the box. He spied Hector’s son stepping back from the machine and joining his sisters. Together the three siblings moved well back. Shoulder to shoulder, they watched the box intently. Zane did likewise and looked on fascinated as it opened and unfolded, revealing its guts. A vertical column elevated and separated into four sections that drew apart, forming an empty cube of no sides.

He felt the electrical system ignite before seeing the four uprights fizz to life. Goose bumps popped out down his arms, signalling the first gentle tugs of attraction. Spellbound, he started his descent, unable to look away from the strange machine. Examining its construction, his focus drifted down the vertical arms, savouring the power sizzling around
each triangular tooth. Curiosity pulled him deeper inside the machine, seeking its energy source, a circular Lithium-Ion battery storing a prodigious amount of electricity, enough to power a small city, and finally at its centre, what he had glimpsed earlier, the viper and its one eye, craving all. Knowing he would encounter it did not alter his reaction, he recoiled, an involuntary response. Retracting his extended sight, he found the gap had halved, ground and machine still a good thirty metres away. Staring at the trap he felt a sensation he recognised as fear and shoved hard, wanting it gone. Persistent and aggressive, the feeling did not oblige and sat in his head, heavy and sharp, stinking of iron.

Eagerness insisted he depart and resume his lazy flight in the untainted air above. He felt the cage ignite and beheld a crackling lattice form between the uprights, its stable pattern hissing intent. Automatically he drew on the energy around him, sucking in charge permeating the atmosphere, taking from without. His protective measure met surprise. A gossamer skin settled over his body and ever so gently pulled him toward the blue walled box. Tickling his throat, the beginnings of panic played a merry dance through his body. If calm had prevailed, it would have helped him not. Failing to understand his peril, he widened the siphon and drew in more power, flinging the accumulated charge at the machine, knowing it responsible for his bondage.

The white-hot blast plunged into the machine and vanished. Dispersing itself into the blue net, the charge surged down the uprights and disappeared into the machine’s undercarriage. Again, and again he flung hammer blows at the unassuming box and each yielded the same result. Distantly he heard shouting and gunfire; irrelevant noise.

Sucking in air, he laboured to escape, his toes inching toward the cage’s top rung, four fizzing blue lines kicking up towards their prey. Desperation took hold and Zane thrust the gates wide open, clawing far and wide for every scrap and morsel, generating a gargantuan charge dwarfing the load hurled at Pinnacle Tower hours earlier. From brain to tapered tail, his spine glowed like a molten river, illuminating his body and saturating the air. Around him the onlookers winced in pain and shielded their eyes against the supernatural light. At a cellular level, his body screamed for release and he obliged, hurling the tempest coincided with his toes hitting ground zero and he entered the box.

Electric blue tendrils lunged inwards and snapped about his legs and torso, pulling him downwards while it absorbed the shocking load dumped upon it a millisecond earlier, swallowing the meal in an efficacious display. The microscopic black hole housed centrally inside the battery ring gorged on the energy. Restrained by magnetic forces generated from ceramic superconductors, the hole formed the perfect neutralising agent against Zane’s electro-magnetic storms.

Held directly above this world eater, the prisoner struggled against the net shrouding his body. He continued to suck power from near and far, unable to accumulate any reservoir of energy. An open channel had established itself between him and the hole, ensuring immediate drainage. Cloaked in a blue webbed skin, he struggled against its constriction to raise his arms, defiance feeding the siphon ever smaller meals, nothing he clawed and claimed and flung at the machine posing it any threat. Anguish - a trap which existed for the
poor little ones - pulsed inside his heart and found an oral outlet, erupting in mournful howling assaulting crystal walls.

Disturbed by the tormented cry coming from Zane Foster, the President stood, rubbed at his eyes and blinked repeatedly, trying in vain to wash away the after-image left by the terrible glow from seconds earlier. His desperate lunge had stopped Flannery from unloading her weapon into the machine and destroying their chance of seeing the Monster brought under control. Right now, he didn’t care in the slightest the Blacks were responsible for the intervention. Their machine had removed the first hurdle forestalling his exit off this monolith of concrete and steel and back where he belonged, with the people. He shuddered to think what was happening outside and how the populace was handling the turmoil. An imbecile might think Deacon would have the situation in hand, calming the people and restoring order. The man was a monster of another kind, an intellectual egotist without peer, hunting for global reverence. Ironic that he should be held hostage in the home of a third monster, the one responsible for Deacon securing the mantle of Prime Advocate. It would never have come to pass otherwise; Michelangelo’s narcissistic verve and scorn for others were not the usual attributes the Ministry sought in their elected leader.

They were concerns for a later date, if he survived that long. Technological madness ground itself into his brain. Before him, shrouded in corded tongues of blue light floated the Monster, projecting pain and anguish, an image in which he found no joy. Despite what it had wrought upon Aura City, its people and the Union as a whole, uman torture was a grotesque sight to behold. Directing his sight elsewhere did not remove the discomfort, the terrible moaning continued, one long visceral dirge welling out the Monster’s stomach.

Off to his right he found more agony. Lying motionless on her back, Evelyn Black stared vacantly into space. Deflecting Flannery’s pistol had saved the machine and wrought unpleasant consequences. Peter Black crouched over his dead sister’s body, weeping openly. The sight twisted Keller’s empty stomach. He did not like being partially responsible for the woman’s death, however incidental it may have been. Standing beside the heartbreak, the other Black regarded the pair with what appeared cold detachment. Perhaps sadness lay behind the blank facade, but he wagered grief figured well down the order in her priorities. She leached a definite mix; reassess, reconfigure, and forge on.

Behind him, he could hear Grayson discussing matters with the officers. Flannery remained quiet. He understood her actions; thwart Hector in his scheme to harness the Monster, but what then? And where had this technology come from that so perfectly fulfilled its purpose? Something of this kind would take years, if not decades of R&D to create, not the handful of hours that had passed since this aberration announced itself to the world. It defied the most extreme permutations of logic. Pointless it would be to try ferreting out answers, the Monster was trapped, writhing uselessly, no longer an immediate threat. The problem rest in a vengeful Peter Black seeking retribution. Keller knew his fate had largely rested in the hands of the Children prior to the Monster’s ensnarement, but now everything, the floor, the walls, even the air seemed made of fine china, set to shatter at the slightest provocation. His decision to stay had become somewhat problematic.
He felt his feet moving, away from the officers and past the grief-stricken Peter Black, drawn toward the abject spectacle feeding his growing nausea; closer and closer until he stood directly below the flailing warlock. He heard footsteps behind.

“Just another victim like the rest of us now.”

Keller tensed at hearing the words.

“Do you always have to be so fatalistic Emerald?”

“I appreciate life’s horrific beauty Armand. I have not and will never sugar coat this world.”

“Beside that angelic face, I love your honesty. Heaven forbid I should ever, for a second, innocently delight in a simple flower and not see it wilted and black.”

“I can’t see any flowers here Armand, just a freak draped in electricity, ready to tear the world apart.”

Above them Zane forcibly tilted his head down and met Emerald’s unwavering stare. An electrical net fizzed over his skin, leaving red after-shadows in their wake. The marks merged and faded and were replaced by others in quick succession, creating a shifting pattern. Every muscle in his face and body screamed tension. Gritting his teeth, he extended one arm out in agonising increments toward the woman he had so nearly killed. This time he pleaded, mutely appealing for help from the well of desire that had brought him here, proud and mighty; now a prisoner at the mercy of others.

The entreaty did not sway Emerald. An expressionless face regarded Zane and turned itself back to Keller.

“Are we leaving Armand? The boy won’t be harming anyone else now.”

“Leave? And why do you think we would let you do that, pretty Emerald?”

Unfazed, the pair regarded Celine Black, imperious Queen on the mountaintop.

“Nothing has changed for you both. Prisoners before and prisoners you shall stay, though in your case little gem, it’s a case of two worlds combine. I suppose you’re still as innocent as a new born lamb?” Celine posed the question to Keller. He countered swiftly.

“Take your games elsewhere Black. We mean to leave. We are the ones in control now. I advise you to dig deep, find that thing called a heart and console your brother.”

Taking Emerald by the arm, Keller began walking back to his people.

“What perfect timing.”

Regrettably it wasn't just Celine’s triumphant tone that made Keller freeze; his ears had detected the tell-tale sounds of activity coming from inside the hole. Kicking into a higher gear he hastened to reach Grayson and the officers. Flannery’s enthusiasm might infect others and provide Hector a justifiable excuse to get rid of the President sooner rather than later. He reached the others in time to forestall any heroics. Out the hole spewed twenty odd heavily armed Helix Agents. They were quick to form up into a sweeping arc, weapons trained on the prisoners, hope of escape dashed.

The flashing light caught Hector’s attention. Anticipation made his heart flutter which in and of itself was not something he welcomed. Hard as it was, he pulled his gaze from the feeds coming direct from that improbable cathedral far above. More than one screen gave him a clear view of his prize. Those images possessed a hypnotic power near strong enough
to make him forget his desire to journey up, stand face to face and behold living transcendance.

His children were in attendance, had secured for the family, what Mother had delved forward and discovered; a catalyst contradicting order. Mighty it was and mightiness held it in check; a grand convergence of two parts, one foretold, the other devised, both the property of Helix Corp. Tomorrow would be his, one way or another.

Intrinsic need bade him stand. Hector grinned; his body was of two worlds, light as a feather and heavy as lead. Not since Ivan’s farewell had he twice inhabited with such distinction, cognition a relentless thrum inside his skull. The walk to his personal elevator revealed nothing of his excitation to any who might have watched, not that any could, considering the guardedness of his cave.

Upon his exit one, he found two agents waiting. They saluted and fell in behind. By the time they arrived at the maintenance elevators he fancied himself commanding a small platoon. Fools, he’d have to send them back down to bring Mother up. There were already enough above to ensure his safety. He demurred, his sense of grandeur and paranoia demanded they remain. Polished steel slid aside, an imposing self-consuming partition. Muted light inside the oversized lift left the corners and rear wall in shadows. Hector half heard an agent mention structural damage and electrical systems failure. He sensed his feet carry him forward and his mouth form orders for them to be underway. The last word he spoke came to his ears as a muffled whisper. Nostalgia and sentimentiality had crashed over him like a tsunami, strong enough to wash away the years and deposit him before Ivan Black, his long dead father.

“I want you to feel it Hector. You need to stand on the precipice and look down. It has no bottom and there is no light. Inside you will find an inexhaustible supply of blankness, infinite emptiness to which you will join and become inseparable from. Think not of the Neverend the priests salivate over, replete with its endless tortures and oceans of pain, they are fairy tales for children. The nightmare of death is negation. All that is ends and nothing, not even supernatural manifestations of wild pain will spring forth out the shadows to tease apart your illusory soul. Wrestle with it boy, choke on it, take it deep down into your belly and feel it poison your insides. This you must do if you are to free yourself of their wickedness and see what men are and what we may become.” Laughter turned to coughing and hacking, hacking. The man, aged in his late fifties looked thirty years older. Sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, and a mouth missing half its teeth, presented the ‘boy’ a ghoulsh spectacle. Their knees were separated by mere centimetres; son on a wooden stool, and father deep in a leather armchair. Before no other did the boy, Hector – a man of twenty years – pay such respect or display so great a deference.

“Time, Hector. Of it, you must become King. It has beaten me. See, I have committed myself, I have said it.” Ivan’s pupils caught light from the solitary lamp resting on the coffee table at his side. Shadows were thick around them. A body pressed against the wall behind Hector shifted and settled, making the slightest noise.

“You do not like hearing that, do you Mother? Well, you can see what I have become, I am the living dead. My nemesis crept up on me unawares and delivered a fatal blow; and to
think, so early in my days. What has it been since it truly began........five months? All the money in the world, and to no avail. Priorities Hector, priorities. How easy it can be to err, even in the face of utter clarity.”

Hector kept his head still and resisted the urge to turn and search out his mother. It would never take her, never.

“Good boy Hector, I see the fire stirring inside you. Be on your guard against arrogance. Time is a monster, too great in size to know. You must always think yourself the servant, it the master. Only then will you find the chance that does not exist, and make it bend knee to you!”

The son nodded, he found it hard to speak in the presence of his father. Ivan Black was a giant amongst men, not physically, in that regard he was of middling size. The wasting had taken the patriarch’s body and made of it a hollow shell. No, the immensity stilling Hector’s tongue resided in Ivan’s cranium and the twin extensions sighting the world. How else could a man cross the seas and come to a place like Aura City, raise himself up and join the corporate plutocracy. It had not been an easy ride; no one prised apart those locked doors and found a seat at the table without the incumbent’s fighting tooth and nail to prevent it. Ivan had succeeded where so many others had failed, using his business acumen and extraordinary willpower, never relenting no matter the type or amount of resistance encountered.

“You have at your disposal an empire in its infancy, my boy. Handle it with care, it is but young and needs much nurture to see it mature. Our competitors have yet to let go of resentment and would love nothing more than to see what I have made wilt and die once my last breath escapes these wretched lungs.”

Ivan’s chin dropped. The skeletal hands poking out his thick woollen sleeves tensed. Seconds passed and fingers relaxed. The head raised itself and black caverns regarded Hector.

“Do what you must. There is nothing you should not do to conquer Time and avenge me. So, so arrogant. How big a fool I was. Tomorrow is death Hector, hearken my words. The past will shackle and the future will tear out your heart. Take from them themselves and destroy them, make of our breath eternity!” Fingers had clutched armrests and his emaciated frame shook. From places of concealment descended white uniformed medical staff, one in pants and long jacket, the other a dress. The jacketed woman took Ivan’s wrist and counted off beats.

“Your heart rate is at a dangerous level Mr Black. I would ask for your son and wife to leave so we may stabilise your system.”

“Be quiet woman, I am not a machine.....” Hand pulled free, Ivan made a weak attempt at pushing his attacker aside. The limb stilled, then leapt out to grasp the doctor’s arm.

“Forsooth, she speaks true! Hector, Mother, the good doctor sees with unblinkered eyes. My systems have decayed; disease has corrupted their function and will see them collapse irrevocably. Become a mechanic Hector, unlock the riddles of the genome and repair each mishap and falter. There can be no obstacle that cannot be overcome!” Ivan travelled back in time.
“Such a project will require great investment. This edifice I have built will provide that which you will need. Great is the irony. A lifetime, or most of one, to stack bricks and make a house. Only now is there wealth enough for true seeking, the overcoming which is denied to me. How it laughs Hector! Fuel its amusement I will, long after this wretched body has broken down and gone to nothing.”

The son regarded his father. Pain and bitterness made him nauseous. To Hector, Ivan was a mountain. Contrary to everything, he’d been forced to watch greatness crumble.

“Blood of me you are Hector. Perhaps for you it is not too late.” Ivan shifted his focus past the son to the mother.

“What of you my dear? Strong you remain, unlike me.”

Isabelle Black remained silent. Her shadowed head remained still. Fear flowed out her shadowed concealment.

“Save her if you can. Half of her you are. Perhaps that half will see you through. Combinations reap newness Hector. Weed out weakness and bolster strength. To succeed you will need to be mighty. If you cannot find it in yourself, find it elsewhere and use it.”

Hector closed his eyes and nodded. He felt guilt at blocking out his father. The reprieve gave him precious seconds apart, enough space to tuck away what had been said and locate himself. He’d known from his earliest years he was not his father. A strange and seemingly obvious statement, but very few children could have negotiated the wilderness of self in the presence of such a man, one whose personality spread a weighted umbra over those near and dear, claiming them as extensions of himself in an instinctive and necessary process of self-affirmation. Blinds raised, he let the world back in. He found Ivan Black staring past him once more towards where his mother stood, meek and quiet, a question mark skewing his father’s haggard face. Hector reviewed the last sentence and found a puzzle – ‘find it elsewhere and use it’. He was half his father and half his mother, and his father sat before him on the threshold of death. By contrast Isabelle Black was vigorous and healthy. Hector hated Time, how could he not. Every cell in his body screamed his father’s death would not be his. Rational thought whispered, if he wished to sidestep evolution, he best hope his genes favoured the maternal.

Accustomed to Ivan’s outbursts, the doctor freed her wrist and reclaimed the patriarchs to take a second measure. Startled by the reversal, the patient regarded his physician and lost himself in pointless appreciation, recalling and feigning his attraction for women of oriental appearance, an action of no consequence to him in his palliative state. He used it to disconnect and reclaim, finding in it a handful of delusional seconds where young potent Ivan surveyed a new conquest for the taking. It never really achieved suppressive clarity, death lay terribly close and would not be ignored, quietened or cowed.

“We live Hector. To live is to drink of forever. Even now I can taste it, bitter though it has become. This breaking down screams at me and shakes me from head to toe. Its message is clear, there is no forever and my end has come. Rage Hector, rage long into the night and find a way to defeat this filthy beast!” Ivan’s anger drew him forward and he overbalanced, feeble arms powerless to halt his momentum as he collapsed onto his son.

“Father.” Disheartened was Hector’s weak exclamation. Too many days spent in like conversation characterised by such debilitating excesses were wearing tolerance thin. He
caught the wasted frame and restored Ivan Black to his cradle. Hector rose off the stool and stared down at his father.

“I have work to do. You need to rest. Time is our enemy father, and I will do everything within my power to slay it.” He delivered the words devoid of emotion. They were a statement of fact. Time was the enemy, that much was clear. Hector had the dispassionate ease of youth and vigour; Ivan had neither.

“Sit down! I have not finished, there is so much more I have to tell you!”

“I do not doubt that father, but the ‘good’ doctor is right, you must restore your equilibrium, you are overexcited. Do you wish to hand Time your death because you chose stubbornness over moderation?”

This was not the first such standoff between father and son. It was inevitable. The father hovered at death’s door and the son dreamt of ultimate power. At every turn Hector was summoned here to this room or the rooftop of Pinnacle Tower for the same diatribe delivered against Time. Ten years of slow decline before this rapid descent, throughout which a natural inclination in Ivan’s psychology had become an irrational obsession. A young impressionable mind embraced the father’s hate. Now the tempered mind yearned for release and the end to hammer blows.

Drawing inwards, Ivan regarded his son and ceded hope for the renewal of his genome to the boy. This cold wish found space after his surfeit of rage had burnt itself out. Thoughts of a future tomorrow failed to shield his psyche from its imminent extinction. No words would forestall or divert the approach of that too close hour. How many guaranteed years had been ripped from his hands by disease? Letting go of injustice and facing death a humble petitioner as demanded by the priests did nought but fan his anger. They could choke on their fairy tales. Time was mindless.

“Go about your business son, Helix will not run itself.”

“Yes father, I will call on you later.”

There was no physical touch of familial love. Hector turned and exited the room, leaving his mother behind to endure another round of recriminations and attacks once Ivan’s rage swelled enough to overcame fatigue and restraint.

The numbers ascended. Hector’s focus returned and so too did the ache of his aged joints. He despised these contraptions and their power to remind. They were halfway, moving closer to wonder. Excitement gripped him, doing its best to distract. Never did it succeed completely. How could it when the one so gripped had long passed expected limits; his use by date. The count of years sat at thrice what his father had lived. He pitied poor Ivan to have died so young, a babe in truth. Hector wheezed his inimical laugh. To call Ivan Black a babe!
Hecto

His father had reached fifty-seven. Young, yes, not weak. For every one of those years Ivan had been formidable, a force of nature. Those who earned his father’s ire regretted it without exception. Hector had been ground down many times, struck dumb by the ponderous flow pouring out those burning charcoals housed deep in Ivan’s skull, searing away whatever resistance it struck. In those last days, the fire had dimmed and given Hector firmer ground on which to stand. He’d pressed back and found his father suspect. The balance tipped and the son discovered the will to resist and dominate. It had let Hector formulate and create his
perception of Ivan’s end and those days thereafter; the weak died and the strong lived on. Years of subjection to hard discourse condemning time and dissecting nothingness had shaped Hector. Emotionally demented, he’d embraced cold logic and constructed his father’s inevitable and irreversible death as a necessary stepping stone on the path to ultimate freedom. Dissolution attacked the confines of the lift and he returned to what had ever been the only possible way for the young Hector to leave the past behind.

The twenty-year-old strode the last few steps to join his father at roof’s edge, understanding heavy inside him, prescient in tone. Darkness held and would for an hour or more. Out before him spread Aura City, its illumination obscuring many a galactic light overhead. Two of Farillon’s moons were no more than slivers, the third, sight unseen. Traffic down Avenue One had struck its solitary hour of relative quiet, the odd taxi or shift worker the only interruptions to this brief respite in CBCD activity. His attention pulled back to what lay before him. There were no others in attendance and Hector wondered if that was indeed the case. Ivan Black surveilled everything inside his domain. Was privacy possible in Pinnacle Tower? Even seen from behind like this, Hector could not fail to notice the dying man’s shrivelled form, the loss of flesh over bone partially hidden by thick garments and protective blanket draped across shoulders. Drawing adjacent, he felt certainty settle over him, the junction between histories, the one known and the other nebulous and obscure, waiting its turn.

“You came?”
“Yes father. You asked and I obeyed.”
“This will be the last time Hector.”
“I understand father.”
“Well that you do my son. I could not stay my hand and let the enemy choose the hour; one last show of defiance, a necessary grab at mastery.”
“Yours is the right to determine father.”
“Good, good. It seems all my talk has not been in vain. We are Kings Hector, the staring back and seeing; universal flag bearers, realities lungs.”
“If I am not to be forever, forever shall come to me.”
“Thank you, my son, they are powerful words. Help me to my feet.”
Reaching behind the invalid, Hector lifted what remained of his father into a standing position. He failed to hide his surprise and a snort of air escaped his nose.
“The living dead I have become; the ghost who breathes. Does it make you uncomfortable Hector?”
“No father.” He did not say anymore. He could have expanded upon his simple response and told Ivan that it was as it had to be; no other outcome was or had ever been a possibility. Ivan’s genes had decreed an early death, decided a short life for its actualised form and consciousness. There was no condescension in the sentiment, just acknowledgement of hard facts. Hector would devote his life to extension and pour untold wealth into overcoming his paternal half. He would fight against that fraction seeking to drag him into an early grave, like the thousands so condemned fading to nothing each day. For
how many years would it be possible to cheat the eternal enemy of life? Hector would find out in the long journey he was about to embark upon.

“Bend your knees father. Brace yourself. Ready?” A nod in the affirmative was given and Hector lifted Ivan’s skeletal frame up onto the ledge giving out onto the drop below.

“I helped build this city into what it is. If not for my firm hand directing the others it would not have become the crown jewel. They know nothing of beauty. How could they when their minds are infected; clogged and stymied by fantasy and myth. Who has the vision to see majesty, taste perfection, and understand the wonder that confronts them? Oh, world of exultation, a day will come when goodbye dies. You have the samples Hector. I trust in you. To see the world again through new eyes! Eternal joy awaits!”

They were Ivan Black’s last words. His hands relaxed their grip and he tipped forward, his son guiding him as he fell into hazy half-light. Arms and legs remained perfectly still during his descent, his body caught in slow tumble. Perverse calm came over Ivan in his final seconds before death. Visions of a future where he once more trod the streets of Aura City, mentality bright inside a young and vigorous body were not signs of a panicked mind seeking safe harbour; they were distant tomorrows skipping backwards to replace this shocking choice and grant him freedom. Those seconds elapsed and his flight terminated, body striking ground face up with awful and resounding force. Awareness of death was absent; deep he’d been in resurrection, new and splendid and full of power.

Far above watched replacement, the younger Black not dwelling in an imagined fantasy. Hector waited; thinking of emotion rather than feeling it. He’d heard the impact, sharp and distinct even at this remove. When nothing of any weight coalesced inside him he let expectation die. Ivan Black was dead, and Hector, his son, lived. One thought formed where grief had failed and he nodded as words found substance and the night heard his declaration.

“I vow you will not return father. Your vision was left wanting. What is needed is new blood, not a repetition of failure.”

Hector turned his back on the holding darkness and re-entered Pinnacle Tower, his first act as overlord, the cremation of Ivan Black’s body, and every blood and tissue sample held in cold storage. Cloning was still a theoretical science, and when it finally matured, there’d be no disembodied King awaiting resurrection.

The spread of doors ended recollection. Hector shuffled out the lift and turned where the waiting agents directed him. Not once since that day had he felt a moments regret. Nothing had changed. He was the sun beside Ivan’s candle. He thanked his father for laying the foundations that had given Hector these many years, but not a single piece of the puzzle had Ivan set in place to help solve the mystery and break the stranglehold the enemy had over life. The elder had contented himself with bitter rants and lectures decrying the injustices of Time.

Rounding another corner brought Hector in sight of the access room. He ignored the agents guarding the gaping entrance and made straight for the cradle hanging at the room’s far end, his and Mother’s means of access up to the Cage and its captured prize. Taking a seat at the table readied for his arrival, he drank in the wonder displayed on the three screens
before him and set to waiting. The spectacle was ludicrous and of the right tone to induce reflection. Hector pondered madness and what claims it had on his mind; to have lived as long as he had, to have suffered as a child and later caused untold suffering made it inevitable the taking of what others would deemed deviant pathways. It was irrelevant; for who other than he, had briddled the enemy and brought it this close to its end? For what else was the dissolution of death other than the destruction of Time?

While Hector waited for his mother to be painstakingly manoeuvred out her place of hiding and up the maintenance lifts to join him, preparations for their appearance were in full swing. The caged prisoner, moved from above the hole and sited centrally on the floor, had become the focus of intense study and analysis. Materials and equipment ringed the marvel. Technicians poured over devices, bringing them online to gather data and monitor the delicate balance keeping Zane Foster beholden to the Cage. President Keller and his entourage had been liberated of their weapons and herded into a corner compound far from the opening. The gracious Hector Black intended them to live a little longer it seemed. Watching from their confinement, the prisoners waited. Hours passed and night gave way to morning.

Rainbow light sparkled in the air. Fierce and proud, the sun sent out its rays and they split apart upon striking crystal walls, bedazzling the bleary-eyed denizens and mocking their confinement. The remaining hours of the night had passed without incident. Everyone except the President had managed some sleep on improvised bedding.

Seated on a fold out foot stool, one of the few conveniences supplied, Keller stole discrete glances at Emerald Green sitting a short distance off, rolling over in his mind Celine’s not so cryptic words from the night before. ‘Two worlds combine?’ Political chicanery condemned the statement, declaring his lover in bed with the enemy. It left him feeling hollow. The blows were mounting up, a steady barrage testing his resilience.

Racking his fingers through thick silver hair, Keller stood and approached the invisible line designating the encampment’s boundary. Two Helix agents, dressed in suits and sporting earpieces and clear glasses, watched his approach. Their comrades were spread out over the entire floor, though none ignored the little prison tucked in one corner. Keller’s weary mind dismissed them and settled on the main attraction, the bustling hive of frenzied activity dominating the floors central space. Around the Monster an army of technicians, scientists and doctors milled about conversing, exchanging opinions and information, operating a plethora of scanners, instruments and computer equipment, each anxiously focused; understanding and control their intentions. Faces he examined showed the tell-tale signs of fatigue and fear despite their work only having just begun. While they were motivated by an epistemological imperative, they worked under a cynical dynasty; harsh disciplinarians not interested in failure. Circling around the covey of workers strode the Emperor in waiting, smooth of skin and old in years. He drove them on, demanding they achieve the impossible.

Peter Black looked every inch the autocrat, dressed head to toe in stark black, his lank hair greased flat against his scalp, smoothed constantly by a severe hand. He glared at the men and women he stalked, urging them on in a high-pitched voice. Madness fouled that
contradictory face, the maelstrom of mental dysfunction on open show, his quagmire of
debilitation heightened by having witnessed his sister’s death the night before. Whenever
Keller caught sight of Peter’s eyes, he felt queasy. A man who does not blink and shows his
teeth so often, makes himself appear other than uman.

Sighting Keller, the commandant froze and glared ravenously at the President, hunger
contorting his features. Swelling his chest, Peter tore his gaze free and continued pacing,
venting his fury on unfortunate workers in a stinging verbal spray loud enough to be heard
over the entire floor. Bodies stilled and prisoner and captor alike regarded the ranting
madman. Too painful for most to watch, the audience disconnected and Black’s outpouring
diminished.

Held above it all was Zane Foster, his form shrouded in an electrical net that instantly
siphoned off any charge drawn from the atmosphere. Even at Keller’s remove it was obvious
Foster’s skin shone various shades of red. The blue strands coursing over his body were
designed for seizure and restraint, not a comforting embrace.

A defeated light shone out from Foster’s eyes. While he gave the outward appearance
of struggle, his fight lacked conviction. Perhaps he knew escape was impossible, appreciated
the machine holding him had won the battle many hours before when the invisible hooks had
snagged his skin and pulled him down. Still, the guttering flame refused extinction and fought
for air, a declaration all was not lost.

Abandoning the desperate scene, Keller ambled back to his stool and the problem
awaiting him there. She hadn’t moved, and he felt her stare
as he sat.

“You need to sleep Armand. What good is it if the others see you collapse from
exhaustion?”

Sufficiently distant, Keller ignored
Emerald and resumed his study. Crystal walls,
rainbow light and a prisoner god. And beside him a snake in the grass. Each a contributor to
the insanity crowding his mind he wanted gone from the world. What chance of salvation and
order restored when the cavalry sat behind him, their mission a failure, nothing more than
company for the interesting hours ahead. How long would Hector Black keep them alive? So
far the knives were sheathed. Black’s coyness surprised him; he had expected a summary
execution and cremation. If the old man intended a coup d’état, didn’t he know the streets or
at least some rooms needed a splash of red.

“Armand, talk to me. You need to rest. We still have no plan of action. If Black hasn’t
killed us yet, he must have something else in mind. There could be room to negotiate.” Her
second appeal was met by the same stolid resistance, Keller acting as if she hadn’t spoken.
She hissed frustration.

“Let me try Ms Green.” Coming around on her far side, Grayson moved to place a
hand on her shoulder and snatched it back; looking at his hand as if at it belonged to someone
else. Catching sight of her face he thanked the sun and stars for his retraction.

“Knock yourself out, he’s in one of his ‘mood’s.’” Rising off the stool Emerald strode
deeper into the makeshift prison and lay down facing the wall, her back stiff, a rolled-up
jacket propping up her head.

Drawing a stool over beside the President, Grayson sat and waited. He’d seen his
boss in this state numerous times, overly introspective and negative, tossing things around in
his mind, searching for solutions. Usually the great man found one and emerged from his gloom empowered, ready to act. Perhaps this scenario was too obtuse; its weave defying his powers of analysis. Surprisingly, Grayson found himself coping, navigating the chaotic twists and turns, his mind relatively stable. That he was assessing the President’s disposition concerned him, they didn’t need their figurehead losing heart in these dire circumstances; any lower and morale would be non-existent.

“What do you think Mr President, Sir?” He couldn’t come up with anything else. Unarmed and held prisoner by a small army, there were no obvious physical solutions. Emerald Green spoke wisely; negotiation might just see them get off this forsaken stump. The alternative painted a bleak picture for the Union and its people; a corporate future administered from a dark bunker, where the bizarre whims of an arcane fossil shaped life.

“Right now, its checkmate and we need our opponent to turn a blind eye so we can remove a piece or two.” Keller’s face betrayed the irony in his words. A sweeping gesture took in the scene around them. “Unlikely, I think. You played a good waiting game before, and that is all we can do now. The victorious are prone to lapses in concentration. Vigilance will be our weapon in the coming hours; we have nothing else left. Talk to the officers and instruct them accordingly, and make sure Flannery understands the concept of restraint.”

Keller evaluated Grayson’s bearing as the Commander made his way back. Had it been enough? What else had he to give, their situation teetered on utter capitulation. His back ached, but he paid it no mind, stretching out would effectively admit defeat. Emerald counselled he seek rest and employ words in the combat ahead; intelligent advice from a double agent who should have nothing to fear when the knives finally came out? Strange she had not already abandoned a lost cause and crossed the line.

Stifling a yawn, Keller resumed his study, ingesting the bustling activity, probing for a weakness, any opening; the smallest window of hope. The technicians and scientists ignored the prisoners absolutely, they were viewed as a perilous distraction and acknowledging them was somewhat low on their list of priorities. No help would be found among the white coats; indeed, one not so dissimilar sat within reach, her corporate complicity a painful barb under his skin.

Around the Monster nothing had changed. Peter Black continued ranting, periodically launching unprovoked attacks on his underlings, injecting fear where calm was needed. Every brow Keller spotted glistened wetly under the barrage. Mistakes came from urgency driven by the whip; one chink in the Helix armour, an exploitable opening if circumstance came knocking.

Inwardly, he thanked Celine Black. She’d left the cathedral an hour ago, relinquishing control to her younger brother. Her absence explained the marked increase in the expletives and spittle escaping his mouth. She must have forbidden his killing Keller, most likely an order passed on from Hector. The Keeper had once told him the boy would listen to none save his sisters and father, umanity was to be treated with disdain. Rumour abounded concerning the various proclivities the youngest Black indulged in, soirees where guests had more to worry about than the drink list. More than one tongue branded him a deranged sadist.

Losing interest in the commandant and assorted lackeys, Keller’s survey was once more lifted above their heads and found the Monster, gripped tight, emblazoned by suffering.
Intermittently those arms strained against their electrical bonds and lifted. They never reached past shoulder height and snapped back down. Mimicking the same struggle, the Monster’s head craned backwards and howled its fury. An ordinary uman would have died instantly had that much charge so much as touched their body. This man had moved on to become something else altogether, but how? A shocking mystery explained in fantastical terms. A wand had been waved by universal tides to conjure a creature of disproportionate means, psychologically suspect and lacking the moral elevation such anomalies most surely needed, lest uman emotion spiral out of control and create a demon. Utter rubbish; but how else to explain it?

Lost in his deconstruction, the President failed to notice the commotion building around the drill hole. Eventually the numbers and noise caught his attention. Bone weary, he rose from his stool and searched for a better view. The winches were hard at work hauling more equipment up, new tech for the Monster’s laboratory. Given the amount of interest surrounding its arrival, Keller assumed it must be an item of vital importance. He wondered at its purpose.

Technicians continued gathering around the hole; late arrivals at the back vying for a better view, calling out unheard requests for those at the front to move aside. Through a momentary split in the crowd he spotted two figures standing between armour clad agents. He shivered involuntarily at seeing Hector Black’s stooped figure on the rooftop. Beside him stood Celine, an ear tipped ever so slightly over towards her father, her unnatural beauty a nauseous vision.

The volume spiked and Keller heard exclamations issue from the onlookers, shock and awe ringing out. Tensing under load, the crane arms activated and he watched spellbound as cables pulled their latest cargo up. Jostling the crowd back from the edge, the ring of agents formed a perimeter around the hole. Eventually the load cleared the lip, just fitting through the opening. What came through resembled a flotation pod minus the lid, its mass encumbered by a spray of tubes, screens and other paraphernalia. Several agents guided it onto solid ground and detached the cables. Accompanied by Hector and Celine, they wheeled the pod through the laboratory into the Monster’s holding area. Through a parting of bodies Keller caught sight of a face just clearing the pods lip. Even at this distance he discerned extreme age, not the kind belonging to the elderly but something altogether different, antiquity substantiated. Instantly he knew what this was; whose cheeks resembled ancient parchment: Isabelle Black, mother of the Helix aristocracy. Shocked gasps told him he was not alone in reaching his conclusion. Emerald and Grayson stood to his left and right, the others ranging out to either side. On every face, he saw the same look of abject shock. Madness was sanity. The matriarch lived.